



REGENCY

*Elizabeth  
Beacon*

*Lord Laughraine's  
Summer Promise*

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## **Аннотация**

A Vow to Heal the PastNine years ago beautiful Callie Sommers eloped with wild young Gideon Laughraine. But their passionate romance ended in tragedy. Now, at the behest of his godmother, Gideon has promised to reclaim the wife he loved and lost. Callie never thought she'd see Gideon again, but his return reminds her of how she blossomed under his touch. With her husband fighting for a second chance, now could be the time for Callie to forget scandal and trust in the man she once held so dear...A Year of Scandal: a Gentleman For Every Season!



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# Elizabeth Beacon

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*Lord Laughraine's Summer Promise*

## AUTHOR NOTE

Welcome to *Lord Laughraine's Summer Promise*, the third part of *A Year of Scandal*, in which Lady Virginia Winterley has left a quest for each of my four heroes to solve, one season at a time. It all began with winter in *The Viscount's Frozen Heart*, and then there was spring with *The Marquis's Awakening*. Now my third hero and heroine are struggling with a passionate attraction under the English summer sun.

Sometimes a quiet man has the deepest secrets, and I knew Frederick Peters had plenty of those the moment he strolled into action in *The Scarred Earl*—part of a different series of books altogether—and made himself at home. Under his true identity, Sir Gideon Laughraine has the hardest task so far: to persuade the woman who once loved him so much that he really is still her hero and that they deserve a second chance.

I really hope you enjoy Gideon and Callie's story as much as I did writing it, and I thank you for coming with me through this vintage year for Lady Virginia's beloved band of heroes.

Lord

Laughraine's  
Summer Promise  
Elizabeth Beacon



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**ELIZABETH BEACON** has a passion for history and storytelling and, with the English West Country on her doorstep, never lacks a glorious setting for her books. Elizabeth tried horticulture, higher education as a mature student, briefly taught English and worked in an office, before finally turning her daydreams about dashing piratical heroes and their stubborn and independent heroines into her dream job: writing Regency romances for Mills & Boon®.

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[Chapter One](#)

‘So where is this Cataret House School you might recall if you weren’t feeling “quite so mazed” by the heat?’ Sir Gideon Laughraine, otherwise known as Mr Frederick Peters, asked the pretend idiot he’d hailed for directions.

The idler scratched his grizzled head and shrugged as Gideon

bit back a curse and wondered if anyone else would be about on such a sweltering afternoon. Unless he found a field being worked close to the road, there was probably nobody who wasn't at work or staying inside out of the sun within hailing distance, so he dug in his waistcoat pocket for a small coin and held it up to encourage the man's memory.

'That's it over yonder,' the man finally admitted with a nod towards a farmhouse on the opposite side of the valley that looked as if it had delusions of grandeur. 'Likely you'll find the old girl in, but young miss went down the track to Manydown a half hour ago.'

Gideon bit back a curse and flipped the coin to the knowing rogue before turning his weary horse and following in young miss's footsteps.

'I wouldn't want to find the old besom in a hurry either, mister,' the knowing idiot told him before slouching off to spend his windfall in the local ale house.

'Needs must when the devil drives,' Gideon muttered grimly, not much looking forward to that encounter either, then he forgot the 'old girl' by wondering what the young one might be up to.

Would she blench at the very sight of him and look as if the devil was on her heels, or give him that delightful smile he still remembered with a gasp of the heart all these years on? Who knew? Lady Virginia Winterley was right though; he had to find out if his wife would ever smile at him again outside his favourite dreams.

*Dear Boy*, his late patroness and friend began the letter that heralded the third quest on her list, left in her will to chime with every new season of the year after her death. He'd had no inkling he was one of the unfortunates she'd decided to do good to until that demand he do as he was bid for the next three months was put in his hand by the new Lady Farenze.

*I am quite sure it will come as a great surprise to you when dear Chloe tells you that you have the next quest on my list.*

*Well, yes, you're quite right there, my lady*, he thought with a shake of his dark head to admit she'd outfoxed him once again.

*It should not be*, she continued, as if she were standing at his shoulder and could see the sceptical expression on his face when he finally realised why Luke Winterley's new wife had sought him out to hand him the letter from Lady Virginia.

*You are my beloved Virgil's secret grandson, and it is only out of consideration for your cousin, Lord Laughraine, that we have not been able to claim you openly. If we did so it would take away the only legal heir he has left to carry on his titles and estates and we both love and respect Charlie Laughraine far too much to do that to him or you. I know the true facts of your birth have been a trial to you ever since you were old enough to realise what the gossips had to say about your father's true parentage, but they are a great comfort to me.*

*I shall always be glad I had time to watch you grow from the haunted, unhappy boy I first encountered into the fine man you are today, even though I've had to do so without my darling Virgil*

*at my side. It has been such a pleasure to see you make your own way in life, much as I know Virgil would have done if he wasn't born the heir to vast estates and the Farenze titles.*

*I don't have words to say how much I loved my husband, and finding a way to drag you into my life was a selfish act, since you resemble him so closely in ways that go beyond a purely physical likeness. You do have that, of course, although I think James favours him more in outward details than you do, dear Gideon. You also have a true heart and a kind nature to balance that sharp mind of yours and it has been a delight for me to come to know you so much better these last few years than Virgil ever could while he was alive, for all his pleading with your father to let him at least know his grandson.*

*I think Esmond would have done anything to hurt his true father and withholding you from him was a way to show he had the power to hurt the man he blamed for ruining his life.*

Gideon stopped and stared into the middle distance. He refused to think about his vexed relationship with his father and both Virgil and Esmond were beyond his intervention now, so he could worry about his wife instead. Callie had gone a determined distance from her aunt's house on this devilishly hot day. He managed a rueful smile at the thought of what she would have to say about his heart and even the faith in his kindness Lady Virginia made so much of in her letter, not much to his credit he suspected. Once again he wondered what was so urgent Callie needed to walk out to find it on such a sweltering afternoon. Was

she meeting a lover? A jag of hot jealousy made him gasp and a shaft of pain clutched at his gut.

After her last arctic-cold letter telling him never to contact her again, then nine years of silence, she wasn't going to welcome him, but Lady Virginia was quite right, drat her. He checked the inner pocket of his coat where it lay across his saddle brow and heard the reassuring crackle of hot pressed paper against silk lining. An unconventional lawyer like him often needed a safe place to keep important letters, but this one was a very mixed blessing and its contents were already imprinted on his mind.

*I know what I am going to ask of you is more than I demanded of dear Luke and my beloved godson, Tom Banburgh. I hope you have come to know them as a true kinsman and a stalwart friend these last six months, by the way, for you have lived without either for far too long.*

*So, your quest is to find your wife, my darling boy, and ask her for your heart's desire. I can't tell you if she will listen or be generous enough to give it to you, but you have to find out if there is any chance for your marriage, or between you make an end to it with dignity. If you go on as you are, you will be a haunted and lonely man for the rest of your life and I do so want you to be happy.*

*I was lucky enough to find the man I could love with everything I am, even luckier to live with him as long as I did, but you two children managed to love and lose one another before you should have been out of your schoolrooms.*

*Seek out that unlucky girl of yours with an open heart and discover if you can live together, Gideon. If you cannot, then agree on a separation and make some sort of life apart. I believe two such stubborn and contrary people were made for one another, but there's no need to prove me wrong for the sake of it.*

*What you choose to do about Raigne and the splendid inheritance you are legally entitled to, as the last official Laughraine heir, is up to you. My advice is to stop being a stiff-necked idiot and listen to your cousin. Charles Laughraine has never been in the least bit like your supposed grandfather and his uncle, and I thought Sir Wendover Laughraine one of the most soulless and heartless men I ever came across, but his nephew is a very different man. As you have called him your Uncle Charles ever since you were old enough to talk I have to suppose you realise he is very happy to consider you part of his family, whatever the true facts of the case may be.*

*No doubt your wife will go her own way, but as you and I both know her to be Lord Laughraine's natural granddaughter, she owes him a hearing even if she won't listen to you. The future of such a large estate and all the people who depend on it must be decided before many more years go by. I wish it could be otherwise and please believe Virgil would have been delighted to openly claim you as his grandson, even though your father hated any reference to his own irregular birth and would never hear of it.*

*Charlie Laughraine is nigh as old as I am now and time will outrun you three stiff-necked idiots if you are not careful. All I*

*have to add is a warning never to take anything that aunt of hers says at face value and look deeper into why that young romance of yours went so badly awry.*

*Don't you shake your head at me again, Gideon Laughraine, I know you long for the love of your young life with everything you have in you a decade on from losing her. Admit it to yourself, then all you need do is find out if your wife suffers the same burden and do something about it.*

Gideon almost wished he could forget the last letter from his friend and one-time mentor and ride back to London as fast as this unlucky beast would go. He could carry on with the nearly good enough life he'd made without his wife and the family they might have rejoiced in by now. What a fool he was to have agreed so readily to act as an extra pair of ears and eyes during Lady Virginia's year of discovery for her four victims, though.

How had he thought he could stay uninvolved, even without this latest bombshell? No, a strong sense of justice made him corrected himself; they weren't victims. The first two quests made Luke Winterley and Tom Banburgh the proud husbands of much-loved new wives. Two triumphs chalked up on the slate for the Lady then and, if he knew anything about himself and James Winterley, the score would be levelled by two lone wolves beyond redemption. Would Lady Virginia had wasted her energy on a more worthy cause and let him and Winterley go to the devil in their own way.

\* \* \*

When she set out so determinedly this afternoon Callie intended to get to Manydown as fast as possible, so she could get back before anyone noticed she'd gone, but this clammy heat was defeating her. She slowed down but carried on, despite the nagging suspicion she should go back to Cataret House and give up on her dream for today. The sad truth was she couldn't face another afternoon of idle boredom now her pupils were with their family or friends for the summer. After a week of this heat and being at the beck and call of her aunt with no excuse to be busy elsewhere, she felt she must leave the house before they livened up a dull summer with an argument that ended in tears and days of stony silence.

It was quite wrong of her to feel like a virtual prisoner at Cataret House when the school wasn't keeping her too busy to notice. Aunt Seraphina had been quite right—they'd both needed to start their lives anew nine years ago. They were let down and betrayed by two very different husbands at the time, so why not pool their limited resources and hire a house big enough to start a school? It had seemed a wonderful idea back then; they could live modestly on the profits and she could help fifteen young girls of mixed ability and middling birth learn about the world, or as much of it as young ladies were permitted to know. Her life had felt blank and hopeless at the time and Aunt Seraphina's idea was inspired, but now a little voice kept whispering *is this all?*

No, she wouldn't listen. She had experienced the storm and lightning of her great love affair and all it turned out to be was

a mistake that hurt everyone she had ever cared for. The school made enough and their pupils were happy. If future wives and mothers were better informed people for having passed through their hands, maybe in time the world would change and ladies would be more highly valued by a society that regarded them as the legal chattels of their husbands, fathers or brothers. Here she was busy and useful and known as spinsterish Miss Sommers, and that was enough, most of the time. Nine years ago it had been impossible to drag the failure of her marriage about like a badge of stupidity so she reminded herself why she had wanted to leave youthful folly behind and shivered even in this heat.

Living in genteel poverty as her true self somewhere out of her husband's orbit would have been worse than waiting on her aunt when the girls were away and feeling shut into this narrow life. Most of the time she enjoyed helping other people's daughters learn about the world; and they employed a visiting dancing teacher and music mistress to add to Callie's more academic teaching. Knowing her niece had absorbed the late Reverend Sommers's scholarship far more eagerly than his daughters had, Aunt Seraphina let Callie teach the girls some of the lessons their brothers could expect to learn as a matter of course and where else could she do that? She reminded herself she was always a stranger to herself during the summer when there was little to distract her from the life she'd chosen. At this time of year she must fend off memories of passion and grief that were best forgotten; the secret was to occupy herself and this was as good

a way as any.

Her mind was racing about like a mad March hare this afternoon, so even tramping the hills on a blazing hot day obviously wasn't distraction enough. Perhaps it was time to escape into daydreams then. They gave her a way to ignore all but the worst of Aunt Seraphina's scolds even as a small child and now they took her to places she hadn't even thought of back then. The hope of living a different life firmed her resolution to find out if her writing could lead to more than she dared hope when she first put pen to paper.

It was probably best not to speculate on the reply she might find waiting for Mrs Muse at the receiving office in answer to her latest correspondence with a maybe publisher. She had to distract herself from this wild seesaw of hope and dread. So she gave up looking for wildlife to identify on a day when it was asleep and wondered idly how ladies lived in more exotic countries where it was like this much of the time. She was sure high-born women rested during the burning heat of the day and did not walk alone when barely a breath stirred grass grown lifeless as straw against her bare ankles. Right now she could be lying on a silk-cushioned divan, saving her strength for the cooler night to come and dreaming of her lover. The contrast between such an idle and slumberous afternoon and this one snatched her back into the present. She sighed and wished she could ignore questions about where she was going on such a sultry day, so she could order the gig and drive herself to Manydown.

At least her ancient straw bonnet kept the full force of the sun off and Aunt Seraphina couldn't accuse her of ruining her complexion, but she dreamt wistfully of airy silks, made to whisper against her limbs as she strolled about her fantasy palace. It would feel sensual and pleasantly wicked to go barefoot on a satin-smooth marble floor and for a moment she felt as if silky stone was under her feet and wriggled her toes in sensual appreciation, which made her jolt back to reality again to hot, sweaty and gritty English feet tramping through a baking landscape.

It was nearly nine years now since Grandfather Sommers had caught the fever that killed him from Aunt Seraphina's late and unlamented husband. When Reverend Sommers followed his unworthy son-in-law to the grave there was nothing to keep either of them in King's Raigne, and leaving the village where she grew up meant Callie could be herself again. It was a common enough name and nobody was going to look for her, so she went back to being Miss Sommers, spinster, and Aunt Seraphina became Mrs Grisham with an imaginary husband to mourn when their new neighbours came to gossip. They were less than twenty miles away from Raigne and it felt a world away from that famously grand house and the tightly knit Raigne villages.

Better not to think about her old life, she decided, dreading the hurt and sorrow those memories threatened even after nine years away. Where was she? Ah, yes—going without stockings, partly for economy and partly because it was too hot to endure

them. Perhaps the old, impulsive Callie was alive under the schoolmistress, after all, so she concentrated on walking and her quest, but it was too hot and familiar a walk to distract her for long.

Anyway, it was impossible to feel bold and sensuous and longing to be shameless with a handsome lover when you were weighed down by chemises and corsets, petticoats and a sternly respectable cambric gown. Somehow she couldn't force the fantasy of that longed-for lover back into the dark corner where she kept her deepest secrets today, but nine years on he wasn't the man she had fallen in love with, anyway. If her husband stood in front of her now she probably wouldn't recognise him, and the thought of the painful arguments and angry silences before they parted made her happy to dive back into the life of a fantasy Callie, who longed for a very different lover from her one-time one, so where had she got to with that?

Ah, yes, she was languorous with longing to see him again after spending mere hours apart. There would be cooling fans waved by unseen hands to stir the heavy air and cleverly devised cross-draughts in that marble palace under a merciless sun. She drifted away from the court ladies idling away the scorching afternoon with gossip as they waited for the world to stir again. When it did the scent of exotic flowers and rare spices, the flare of bright colours and wild beat of music and dancing would light up the night with an urgent promise of excitement and passion and longing fully sated at long last. It was too exciting to allow her

to worry about who was in and who was out at court. Of course, they would all be weary again the next day and doze through the hot afternoon, so they could dance when night fell, but it would be worth sore feet and all day waiting for the thrill of being totally alive again in her lover's arms when darkness fell.

Something told the real Callie if she had to live such a life she'd rage against rules that forbade a lady contact with the world beyond the palace walls, but flights of fancy weren't meant to be realistic. She sighed and knew she was hot and sticky and unpleasantly dirty once again, so what would the eager Callie Sommers of seventeen make of her older and wiser self? Not much, she decided, wishing she could go back and warn the headlong idiot not to dream so hard or passionately so that her today could be different.

Shrugging off memories that wouldn't change for all the wishing in the world, she resisted the urge to throw her bonnet into the nearest hedge and be less suffocated by the life of a confirmed spinster. She untied the shabby ribbons instead and felt the faintest trace of a breeze on her damp skin. It was the gritty unpleasantness of grey dust changing to mud between her sweaty toes that made her escape into a dream of walking naked into a wide pool full of rose-petal-scented water this time. Imaginary Callie felt coolness and luxury surround her and knew she was loved and valued above riches by the prince of this splendour.

Now that was the most dangerous fantasy of all. She shook

her head to refuse it and felt a brief thunder of blood in her ears. Aunt Seraphina's dire warnings about females who recklessly strode about the countryside with no regard for the conventions might come true if she was overtaken by dragging heat on a public highway. Wondering if her aunt ever looked at her, Callie tried to be amused by the idea plain Miss Sommers could excite ungovernable passion in any male who found her sprawled on the road.

She needed to keep her wits about her if she was going to walk to the receiving office and be home before she was missed, so no more daydreams until she was back in her bedchamber, where she could work on her next book in peace. Today even her aunt had succumbed to the heat and left Callie free to do as she pleased for once. So she couldn't let another day go by without finding out if the novel she had laboured over so hard in secret might be published. So, yes, it was worth being hot and sticky to get word Mr Redell might agree to publish it at last.

Despite the heat she managed an excited hop and skip at his opinion her work showed promise. He had suggested changes and refinements, of course, but it wasn't a flat refusal. Perhaps she could earn enough to rent a little cottage one day and mix with friends she chose, get ink on her fingers whenever the fancy took her, then dig her garden and cook whatever she wanted to eat out of it. It was such a heady daydream she didn't hear a hot and weary horse coming up behind her until the animal was close enough to shy at her modest bonnet.

His rider cursed him for a jingle-brained donkey and consigned him to the devil even as Callie's thoughts span back with a sickening jolt. Shocked to her toes by the sound of that particular male voice, she froze as if an enchanter had put a spell on her. No, she wouldn't look round, but he was taking in her unfashionable bonnet and faded gown as he fought to control the skittish beast, because he realised he was blaspheming in front of a lady. Callie was far too busy coping with absolute shock to take note of his apology. She was wrong; she must be. Gideon was miles away, probably in London, and this was a stranger. Turning to reassure herself she was imagining a nightmare, Callie found out exactly how wrong she could be.

'Oh, the devil,' she said flatly.

All the blood in her body seemed to have drained from her head into her hot, dusty feet and taken her panic-stricken heart with it. Black spots danced in front of her eyes and now her fickle heart was thundering a tattoo so loudly her head was full of the relentless beat. Panic raced over her skin in shudders of cold on the hottest day of summer so far.

'How missish of me,' she managed in a fading murmur, but neither willpower nor vanity could stop her reeling—the truth of him beating against her hastily shut eyelids, as if he was stamped on them like a brand. This *was* Gideon.

After all the years of wanting him night after night—so much useless longing—then wishing they had never met, he was back and there was only so much abuse a woman's body could take.

Callie let the darkness suck her in so he didn't matter any more.

## Chapter Two

Gideon fought to hold his much-tried horse back from bolting. The woman Lady Virginia ordered him to seek out and come to terms with had wilted like a faded lily at the sight of him and made the wretched beast panic even more as she fell to the ground. As he tried to soothe the beast his heart thudded to the beat of iron-shod hooves too close to her contrary head.

'To think I was afraid I wouldn't find you here,' he murmured between curses as he finally fought the animal to a weary standstill.

Nobody could accuse the Calliope Sommers he knew of being vapourish and his heart ached. Sir Gideon Laughraine must be a worse rogue than he thought if his wife fainted at her first sight of him in nine years, so what hope was there for his sooty soul?

'And a very good afternoon to you, too, Lady Laughraine,' he muttered, wondering what his noble clients would think of 'Mr Frederick Peters' under his real identity.

He almost laughed at the idea; this name was hardly a true one, but it *was* the one he had to call himself when all aliases were stripped away. Too late to gallop back to town and save her from confronting her worst nightmare now, so he quietened his hack and avoided looking at his wife until his breathing calmed as much as it was going to today. The bitter knowledge that she once told him not to bother her again as long as he lived made him gasp as if she had written it a moment ago. She hadn't replied

to a single letter he sent since so she still thought their woes were his fault. Still, he'd be damned if he'd ride off and leave his wife sprawled in the road for any fool to trip over, so he couldn't leave again yet.

Gideon jumped from the saddle of his weary horse to crouch over his wife with a fast beating heart and a gut-deep fear for her safety that told him he still cared. He frowned at the shadows under her eyes, then his gaze lingered on the dusky curve of her eyelashes as he recalled how they felt blinking sleepily against his own skin. No, that wasn't a road he could travel and stay sane. Compared to the skinny girl she was her face was softer and yet more defined; his coltish Callie had grown up and he hadn't been here to watch it happen.

Of course, the old Callie was vital and lovely, her glossy dark hair always tumbling out of whatever style she tried to tame it with. Her dark brown eyes were full of life and often brilliant with mischief, or passion, as she urged him recklessly to match her, as if he needed urging. Of course, the young man he was must be flattered, but he'd truly loved her. No other woman could rival her even now. He'd met accredited beauties and numbered one or two as true friends, but they didn't hold a candle to the Callie he first fell in love with. His young love was as lively and adventurous as she was lovely and it tore at his heart to see so little of her in the contained and outwardly staid woman lying in his path.

He watched her slavishly for signs of returning consciousness,

or was that a story he told himself so he could gaze at her? Her lush curves were accentuated by the tiny waist he used to span when he lifted her off her grandfather's steady grey horse when they met secretly. He could only see it because gravity defeated her high-waisted gown and was it foolish or wise of fashion to conceal such a figure from the gaze of hungry male predators like him? he wondered. Considering the allowance he'd struggled to make her in his days as a clerk, then an unconventional lawyer, and the increases he'd made since, he wondered what she spent his blunt on, though, because it sure as Hades hadn't gone on clothes.

Her gown had been washed so many times the white of the base cotton was yellowed and a simple print of gold rosebuds faded. It was hard to pick out pattern from background and he doubted it was in the first kick of fashion when it made its debut far too long ago for her to be wearing it now. Shock at the sight of her dropping to the ground in a dead faint might be making his attention swerve to unimportant things, but it was a puzzle he intended to solve as soon as she felt well enough. It *was* infernally hot, though, so maybe she didn't want to mire a good gown on a tramp through a sweltering countryside.

'What the devil are you up to, Callie?' he murmured as he settled his hack by a nearby tree and frowned as if he might read answers on her pallid face.

She looked heartbreakingly vulnerable lying in the dust as he strode back to her. The rise and fall of her bosom told him she

was breathing steadily, but she had been unconscious far too long. He wanted to pluck her up off the dusty road and guard her from any threat life could throw at her, even if he was the worst one she could think of. For a breath-stealing moment he wondered if she had a terrible illness. No, he could see no sign of prolonged ill health in her smooth skin and unwrinkled brow, so she hated him so much she lost her senses rather than meet him face to face.

He checked her breathing, then stood over her so his shadow would shield her from the sun. He watched her aching familiar heart-shaped face for a long moment, then averted his gaze. He was too much of a coward to watch her wake up and see revulsion tighten her features when she realised he wasn't a bad dream. His wife lay unconscious at his feet and now he was lusting after her like a green boy as well and it shamed him. He also felt fully alive for the first time since he left her, despair biting harder with every step he took. She was smiling faintly in her sleep next time he looked, as if drifting happily in a world that didn't have him in it. He suppressed the urge to howl like a dog at her latest rejection and went back to brooding over a past that couldn't be altered.

\* \* \*

Callie was drifting on a thick cloud of feathers while angels whispered benedictions in her ear. For a moment she really believed Gideon had come back for her, so it was perfectly rational to hear angels, but why did this one sound so angry? And did they really carry tall ebony canes and have masses of snow-white hair and piercing dark-brown eyes? Her grumpy angel

frowned and remarked it was little wonder she was bad-tempered with two idiots like her and Gideon to worry about when she had better things to do.

*Acting like a die-away miss never solved anything, young lady. A fortnight of Gideon's three months has already been used up with his shilly-shallying. Best to let sleeping dogs lie indeed—whatever is the boy thinking of? It doesn't make sense to do anything of the sort when they're only sleeping their lives away as if that's all there is for them to worry about. Just you wake up this minute, my girl, and stop being such a ninnyhammer. You haven't been happy without him since you sent him away, so get up and face him and a few facts at the same time,* the spectre ordered her with a stern look and Callie frowned as waking up suddenly seemed a good idea.

Her airy cloud deflated and she felt far less comfortable avoiding Gideon than she had when she welcomed unconsciousness with a sigh of relief. She wrinkled her nose as a bit more reality crept in; this was a hard resting place with too many stones for a lady to lie about on as if she had nothing better to do.

'Go away,' she croaked, hoping to reclaim her quiet cushion of feathery peace instinct warned her not to relinquish as the dragon-angel ordered. She might be lying on a dusty road dreaming impossible things, but she didn't want to face real ones right now.

'Would that I could,' Gideon's voice replied and a heavy thump

of her heart reminded her why she'd welcomed an attack of the vapours in the first place.

At last she gave in and blinked her eyes open, because she didn't want to dwell on the regret in Gideon's voice. He sounded absolutely here and far away all at the same time and wasn't that trick typical of him?

'What *are* you doing here?' she murmured with an unwary shake of her head. Dark spots wavered in front of her eyes and warned her some shocks weren't to be got over lightly and she lay down again until they went away.

'Straight to the nub of the issue, as usual,' her husband said wearily.

She glanced up at him looming over her and saw worry and frustration in his grey-green eyes, but still couldn't stand up and face him. Maybe in a moment or two she'd find the right blend of courage and calmness, *and maybe never*, a sceptical voice whispered and she wasn't sure if it was hers or belonged to the forceful spectre she dreamt up just now.

'If you can endure me carrying you, you'll recover far better in the shade.'

'Be quick then,' she ordered, waving her dusty hand imperiously as a defeated queen.

'Your wish is my command, Highness,' he joked as he lifted her up as if she were made of fairy dust.

Callie knew perfectly well that wasn't so and felt the power of him when he plucked her from the ground without a hitch in his

breathing. Was it right to be insulted by his rock-like composure? The Gideon she remembered was slender as a lath and she could read him as easily as a child's primer, yet this man was a closed book to her. Her body responded to his as if it recognised him and that would never do. Callie the lover—the wife, came alive again in a hot flash of fiery need. Horrified to feel so aware of him, she squirmed and he told her testily to keep still lest he drop her.

Once upon a time he was the sun to her moon; the reason she got up in the morning and slept at night, if they could spare time for sleeping. Surely she had more sense than to fall under his spell twice? Of course she had. The moment she could set one foot in front of the other without falling over, she'd march away and prove he meant nothing to her.

'Put me down, Gideon,' she demanded in a breathy voice she hardly recognised.

'You'll fall over if I do.'

'Nonsense, I'm perfectly well.'

'Of course you aren't.'

'I wish you'd let me walk, I'm not a child,' she complained, even though she sounded like a pettish one to her own ears right now.

'Stop behaving like one then,' he said in a preoccupied tone, as if he had more important things to do than tidy his inconvenient wife off the King's Highway.

'I'm not. I feel sick,' she said querulously, wondering what had

come over her. Gideon had, of course, and he was as calm as a rock while she felt as if her whole world had been turned upside down.

‘Then I’m definitely not putting you down.’

‘It’s a lie,’ she confessed with a blush she hoped he couldn’t see under the liberal coating of dust miring her cheeks. ‘I thought such a neat gentleman as you wouldn’t want that fine silk waistcoat spoilt and you’d put me down.’

‘You really can’t wait to get out of my arms, can you, Wife?’ he said with a quirk of his mouth that might pass for a smile in a dark room.

‘No more than you can to ride off and forget me for another nine years,’ she retaliated childishly, unable to stop her tongue saying things she’d rather it kept quiet about.

‘You do me an injustice, Calliope. How could I ever forget you?’

She distrusted his words, took them as mockery. Tears stung her eyes for a perilous second, but the thought of tear tracks in the dirt made her wince. She blinked hard and stared into the little wood he was carrying her towards until they dispersed. She should dismiss him from her life as lightly as an old gown, but perhaps she could lie about a lover to disgrace him with and persuade him to go away. Except she’d never met a man who made her feel the way he did. If she wasn’t careful she’d become the sort of female who lay about on sofas half the day and wafted about like a low-lying cloud for the rest of it. Or hoped

for impossible things, and wouldn't that be a waste of time?

'I *can* still walk, you know,' she said crossly.

'Of course you can,' he replied, a hint of laughter in grey eyes that had an inner ray of green round the pupil only a lover would know about.

The thought of long-ago intimacy with this man caught at her heart. Now he looked and sounded almost familiar it made her recall times when they looked and looked at each other for what felt like hours, or simply lay close marvelling at one another until desire was too hot for peace and they peaked into the sort of earth-shattering climax that made her shiver even over such a chasm of time. That wasn't the way to be cool and armoured while they agreed terms. It was good for him to hide his true self now; it would make life easier while she waited for him to go again.

'And I wish to do so right now,' she told him emphatically.

'I may not be much of a husband, but I'm not going to watch my wife stagger about the countryside half faint in this heat like a drunkard.'

'Nonsense, I can cope with the sun perfectly well.'

'Of course you can,' he said indulgently.

How come she could hear him smile as he soothed her like a fractious infant again? 'The shock of seeing you made me faint, but I would be perfectly well if you hadn't taken me by surprise,' she claimed with a frown that was clearly wasted on the barbarian.

‘You were so overcome with delight at the sight of me you lost your senses then?’

‘That wasn’t delight,’ she snapped.

‘I know.’

‘And what the devil are you doing here, Gideon?’

‘Now *that* sounds more like the outspoken Callie Sommers I know. I thought I’d mistaken you for someone else for a moment back there.’

‘I *am* someone else,’ she told him gruffly, doing her best to believe that was good.

‘Not from here you’re not,’ he teased as he shifted her slightly in his arms and they finally reached the little wood that ran alongside the road. ‘You feel exactly like her to me.’

‘Well, I’m not,’ she said crossly. She hadn’t been since Gideon put his ring on her finger and the blacksmith at Gretna pronounced them man and wife.

‘No, you’re Callie Laughraine,’ he said blankly and she told herself that was a good thing. One of them should have their feelings under control and hers were anything but.

‘I spent a long time forgetting her and manage perfectly well without a husband to tell me what to do and how to do it nowadays,’ she insisted.

‘As if I ever could awe, persuade or bully you into doing a thing you didn’t want to. You were always your own person and even as a silly stripling I never wanted you any other way, Calliope.’

‘I have no idea why my mother gave me that ridiculous name,’

she said to divert them from the memory of how much he'd loved her when they eloped to Gretna Green. It hurt to linger on the past and wonder if they could have built a wonderful marriage together, if life was a little less cruel. 'She might as well have put a millstone round my neck as named me for one of the Muses.'

'Lucky you have a beautiful voice and a love of poetry like your namesake then, isn't it? Perhaps she simply liked it. I always did.'

'Yet how you used to taunt me with it when you were a repellent boy. If I had the gift of epic poetry, would you stop carrying me about like an infant?'

'Because you're named after a goddess?'

'No, because I asked you to, although I should like to be a bard, if we lived in better times and women were taken seriously as such, but I never wanted to be a goddess with so many unpronounceable sisters to quarrel with.'

He wasn't to know how serious she was, so she supposed it was unfair to stiffen in his arms when he chuckled. At least now she felt icy and remote again and he'd almost done it—he'd nearly disarmed her with flattery and wasn't that another warning to be wary? Best to remember he was a professional advocate now, a pleader for apparently lost causes, and that they could never be friends. At least then she would hurt less when he walked away again.

'You can put me down over there,' she ordered, pointing at a convenient tree stump.

'I'll drop you in the stream if you're not careful, Your Majesty,' he muttered darkly.

She shot him a glare as he set her down as if she was made of bone china, then stepped back with a mocking bow. 'Now go away,' she said sternly.

'I wouldn't leave your aunt stranded in the middle of nowhere ill and prey to any rogue who happened along and I never liked her, so how can you imagine I'd leave you, Callie?'

'I'm not my aunt,' she defended herself absently.

'Something I thank God for on a daily basis, my dear.'

'Don't call me your dear and don't blaspheme.'

'But I'd hate to be wed to your narrow-minded and joyless relative, my dear.'

'She stood by me when nobody else would and I told you I'm not your dear,' she told him shortly and wondered if it was worth standing so she could stamp her foot and show him she hated that false endearment on his lips. Deciding it wasn't a good idea to stand up and wilt, then sit down again before she proved anything, she tried to look serenely indifferent instead. Clearly it didn't work; he was having a job to conceal a grin at her expense.

'Perhaps you'll allow me the one freedom a married man can safely claim, which is the privacy of his own thoughts?' he said with a pantomime of the henpecked husband that made her heart ache for all they'd lost.

'And perhaps I won't,' she snapped.

'Afraid you won't like them, Calliope?'

Terrified if he did but know it. She sniffed and tossed her head to let him know she was completely indifferent, then regretted it immediately as the wild thundering in her ears told her she hadn't recovered enough to flounce off and leave him standing like a forlorn knight spurned by the damsel he'd got off his horse to rescue.

'If I was I'd have no wish to know, would I?'

'As well if you don't, perhaps,' he told her gruffly as he turned from rummaging in the pack of his weary horse and removing a flask.

'Please don't try and force brandy down my throat, Gideon,' she protested.

'I don't indulge in alcohol now,' he said as he handed her a flask of clear water lukewarm from its journey.

He drank too much wine during the latter days of their marriage and the memory of him drunk and bitter as gall made her shudder. Not that he'd laid violent hands on her, but the thought of all that darkness and despair chilled her to the bone.

'Never?' she was startled into asking as his words sank in.

'Only when a cook puts it in a sauce or some fanciful dessert when I dine away from home, but not otherwise. I drank too much and made things much worse between us. So you see, I've managed to put one of my baser impulses behind me,' he said with a rueful smile that did unfair things to her insides.

'Abstain from alcohol for your own good, but don't pretend it's got anything to do with me. If you set any store by what I

wanted, you wouldn't have come here and cut up my peace like this,' she told him disagreeably to disguise it.

'I can't leave yet, but the drunken, headlong boy I was back then was repellent and I promise you I've done my best to kill him off. I doubt anyone mourned him.'

*I did, argued an inner Callie who refused to be silenced. I wept myself to sleep for the lack of him by my side every night for far too long. Until I realised he was never coming back and I was the one who told him to go, in fact.*

'Devil take it, but I'm a rogue to plague you when you're as unwell as a person can be without being carted about on a hurdle,' Gideon exclaimed and she couldn't stop a wobbly smile at the sight and sound of him as familiar to her as her own face in the mirror at last.

There—he was her Gideon again; a quick-tempered and passionate young man who could turn her knees to water at the very flicker of that self-deprecating smile or a sudden urge to wild action that made living with him such a clash of surprise, dread and delight. 'Come, Wife, let's get you home before you drop unconscious at my feet for the second time today,' he added masterfully and she frowned at him again, wondering if she could ever bring herself to live with a gentleman who was so used to getting his own way, then shocking herself with the idea she might like to try, if things were different.

'If you arrive on her doorstep, Aunt Seraphina will have the vapours even if I don't,' she warned him, and he actually paled

at the thought of her aunt, who hadn't liked him even before he ran off to Gretna with her niece.

'She has plenty of experience,' he said darkly and turned towards his hitched horse.

'You could simply ride away again, nobody would know,' Callie suggested desperately. Being lonely and a little unhappy was a state she knew so well that the idea of changing it in any way looked strange and frightening from here.

'We would, wouldn't we?' he said as if that decided the issue.

'Yes,' she admitted with a sigh, 'so we would.'

### Chapter Three

Simply getting Callie to ride his horse while he led it caused an argument. Gideon wondered if they could stop carping long enough to put the fragments of their marriage together and called up all the patience he'd learnt during his years without her. He should have remembered that aspect of marriage better and the magical glee of loving her less, he supposed grimly. Still, they were talking, even if it was in snaps of irritation. The odd moment of rediscovery made this all seem heartbreakingly familiar then strange by turns and he almost wished he'd slung his unconscious wife across his saddle brow and ridden off with her like a pirate with a princess.

'Comfortable?' he asked after the silence had stretched so thin he couldn't endure it any longer.

'What do you think?' she challenged. 'You should have let me ride astride as I asked instead of perching me up here like a doll.'

‘And have half the yokels in Wiltshire looking at your legs? I think not,’ he managed to say as even the idea of it made him rampantly jealous.

‘I doubt they would bother when they saw the rest of me,’ she said with a sweep of her hand at her dusty person that set his steed dancing and set Gideon’s overstretched nerves on edge. He tried hard to rein himself in at the same time as he clamped a firm grip on the bit and forced the idiot horse to stop wasting its energy, as well.

‘They would. You look magnificent,’ he told her tersely and surely that wasn’t a pleased little smile she was doing her best to hide behind that hideous bonnet? ‘As a girl you were lovely, now you’re beautiful, Callie,’ he added and heard her snort of disbelief with mixed feelings.

If she thought herself an antidote, would it make his task as her jealous and fiercely protective husband easier? If he ever managed to win her back, of course. Yet if she was blind to her own attractions she would draw in wolves the moment she set foot in a ballroom at his side. So, on second thoughts, his life would be hell if she had no idea how potently her lovely face and fine figure and that firm disbelief in her own charms could affect a man. He groaned aloud at the idea of following her about like a possessive stallion for the rest of his life in order to make it very clear she was his mate and he didn’t share. No, that really was putting the cart before the horses and he had to hold back all this hope in case it crashed to the ground around him again.

‘Are you hurting in some way, Gideon?’ she asked innocently, and what was he to do with such an odd mix of *naïveté* and sophistication as his estranged wife?

‘It’s been a long day,’ he said with a shrug.

‘It’s probably about to get a lot worse,’ she warned as Cataret House came into view again and she was quite right, just not in the sense she thought.

‘Aye, your aunt never could abide me, could she?’ he replied as if that was all that troubled him right now when even the thought of her as his true wife again was rendering him unfit for any company at all, let alone hers.

‘No, she’s deeply distrustful of all men and, considering the one she was wed to for so long, I’m not at all surprised.’

‘So why *did* she marry Bonhomie Bartle, Callie? They never had children, so I doubt they were forced to wed for the sake of a child as my parents were. It always puzzled me what those two saw in one another as they seemed to hate each other every bit as much as my mother and father did.’

‘Grandfather told me she insisted on marrying him, although he begged her not to go through with it, so I suppose she must have loved him once upon a time. Nobody forced her to wed the man and I never knew what she saw in him, but why do any two people wed each other when they don’t have to?’

‘Because they want to spend the rest of their lives together, I suppose,’ he said and cursed his clumsy tongue when she refused to meet his eyes. Finally they had reached the sloping drive and

he and his weary mount slowed in deference to the day and the incline and at least despair was having a dampening effect on his foolish manhood.

‘Mr Bartle was heir to a wealthy baronetcy, before his great-uncle took a young wife and began producing heirs in his old age.’

‘So they ended up poor and disappointed?’

‘Yes, but I don’t think either of them ever thought the world well lost for love.’

‘Perhaps not,’ he agreed and refused to make the challenge her averted gaze and tight fists on the reins told him she expected. *But we did once*, his inner idiot argued all the same and he told it to be quiet before it drove the rest of him mad.

‘Nobody will answer the front door, you might as well lead this unlucky animal to the stable.’

‘Where are your outdoor staff?’ he said with a frown at the sheep-cropped turf and the faintly down-at-heel air of the whole place.

‘Aunt Seraphina says the war has made everything so expensive it’s impossible to keep a handyman and a groom. We have maids and a good cook she insists we employ to keep our young ladies healthy.’

‘And her liking for fine dining has nothing to do with that, I suppose? What have you been doing with the allowance I make you, Callie? You certainly haven’t spent it on yourself, so I hope you haven’t been learning your aunt’s nip-farthing ways.’

‘As senior schoolmistress I take a small stipend out of the fees,

but it's not enough to turn myself out in the sort of style you seem to expect, Gideon,' she said as if he was being deliberately obtuse and the notion of who gained most from their estrangement took firm root in his mind as Virginia's warning about Callie's aunt rang true yet again.

'At first I could only send enough to clothe you decently and live in modest comfort, but now the money I pay into an account in your name every month could easily run a house twice this size and still allow you to dress in style without penny pinching.'

'It would? Why don't I seem to be receiving any of it then?'

'An interesting question, don't you think?'

Callie looked thoughtful as they rounded the corner into a modest stableyard and he saw two good carriage horses and a trio of fat ponies looking curiously back at them from a nearby paddock.

'You keep a pair of carriage horses, yet I see no riding horse? How do you endure it, Callie?' he asked as the memory of her riding like the wind at his side slipped into his mind and made him wonder what other privations she suffered while he had been coward enough to take her at her word and stop away all these years.

'I'm not a wild young girl now, I grew up.'

'Did you? Have you ever taken a good look at what you prefer to a life with me, Callie? By heavens, you have a very effective way of making me humble for all the sacrifices here seem to be yours and the luxuries your aunt's.'

‘She stood by me. She made a home for us both and at least we had each other—there was precious little else to be glad about at the time.’

‘A far more comfortable home than she could afford without you.’

‘No, Gideon, you don’t understand. The school produces a reasonable income, but I have no desire to cut a figure in local society. My aunt likes to pay calls and it keeps our school in the minds of potential clients. She sees to the business side of our enterprise while I tend to the girls in our care. We do well enough without you.’

‘So you must always believe her before me?’

‘No, of course not,’ she argued half-heartedly.

Gideon had to bite his lip as he helped her out of the saddle, then steadied her, because she had endured a great shock today and, if his suspicions were right, there were plenty more of those to come.

\* \* \*

‘The household has been at sixes and sevens since we found you gone,’ Aunt Seraphina scolded benignly as she bustled towards them as soon as she and Gideon walked out of the baking stableyard and into the cool of the stone-flagged hall of Cataret House by the garden door. ‘How could you wander off on an afternoon like this, Calliope? You should be resting or keeping yourself occupied indoors during the heat of the day if you really must be busy.’

‘I felt restless and miss the girls, Aunt, but you must see we have a visitor. I’m sure you don’t mean to scold me in front of him,’ Callie said.

Gideon was right here and Aunt Seraphina knew her niece had come home on a hired horse led by a stranger in shirt sleeves, because the maids were on pins at the sight of any man in this out-of-the-way place. One as handsome as Gideon would set their hearts aflutter and their tongues wagging nineteen to the dozen, but Aunt Seraphina was stalling while she took stock of the situation. Callie knew her aunt a lot better than she had when Aunt Seraphina was a rather aloof figure during her childhood and she had seen that look before. The sight of Gideon had unnerved her and she was turning over ways to turn the situation to her advantage in her mind before she acknowledged his presence. A little while ago Callie would have blamed him for the unease between him and her aunt, but now she wasn’t quite so sure all the faults lay on his side, after all, as she sensed a mighty fury kept under iron control in her apparently calm relative.

‘I considered it best to pretend you are not here, young man. You have more cheek than I thought you possessed to walk in here and expect to be welcomed after what you did,’ Aunt Seraphina said as if he was a naughty schoolboy.

‘My husband has a right to be here, Aunt Seraphina,’ Callie surprised all three of them by asserting.

One of the maids listening on the stairs let out a gasp and another nudged her to be silent so they could keep listening, but

Callie knew they were shocked Miss Sommers was claiming a husband at all, let alone one like this.

‘The man isn’t fit to black your boots, let alone saunter in here as if he has a right.’

‘Since I’m not one to wash my dirty linen in public, I suggest we adjourn to a less public space for the rest of this discussion, Mrs Bartle,’ Gideon said smoothly, and it said much for his new air of authority that all three were inside the drawing room with the door shut before her aunt protested his use of her true name when she was known as Mrs Grisham here.

‘Now, how do you explain yourself, young man? As if that’s possible,’ Aunt Seraphina said in a voice that made schoolgirls tremble, but didn’t affect Gideon at all.

‘Later. Now your niece needs peace and a cool bath after her exertions and if you had half the real concern for her welfare that you managed to fake all these years you would stop arguing with me and see she is cared for.’

For a moment there was such tension in the carefully gentrified parlour that Callie fancifully wondered if it might become visible as a lowering mist in the overheated air. She blamed this odd sense of detachment on her faint. Her aunt’s gaze fell under the chilly challenge in Gideon’s and she waved a long-fingered hand to concede a skirmish, but not an entire war.

‘Calliope is very pale, but you insisted we come in here to argue over the matter whilst she could have been resting before her bath, so you can ring for the maids and see if you can get them

to do anything sensible now your arrival has set them atwitter,' her aunt said as if recovering from the sight of Gideon walking in through her garden door as if he had every right to be here.

'You're giving me carte blanche to reorganise your household then, ma'am? Rather reckless of you, don't you think?'

'What does a man know of domestic economy?' Aunt Seraphina scoffed and Callie reminded herself they always brought out the worst in each other.

'Enough,' Gideon said wearily and surprised Callie into staring at him again.

Once upon a time he would no more have dreamed of running a household than he would of swimming to the Americas. Now he rang the bell, ordered tea and a bath for her and approved a light menu for dinner in an hour's time before Aunt Seraphina could regret her dare and take back the reins of her household. Callie had made him into this self-sufficient man by refusing to be any sort of wife to him, so why was she feeling nostalgic for days when he would look helpless and wait for her to correct his feckless bachelor ways?

'Well, I'm ready to admit you have changed in that aspect at least. It proves nothing about the rest of your life,' Aunt Seraphina told him severely.

'I have no need to prove anything to *you*, madam,' he replied shortly and they waited in stiff silence for news that Callie's very necessary bath and tea were ready for her.

\* \* \*

‘There we are, miss. No, I mean madam, don’t I?’ Kitty the upstairs maid told Callie as if she might not be able to see the bathtub and waiting tea tray herself.

‘Thank you, Kitty. I can manage very well by myself now,’ she said quietly and refused the silent invitation to confide her secrets. ‘You may go,’ she added as the inquisitive young woman stood as if expecting to outwit her mistress’s unassuming niece by sheer persistence.

‘Don’t you want your back soaped, ma’am? Oh, no, of course you don’t. You’ve a fine husband to do that for you, don’t you?’ the girl said impudently.

‘If you don’t want to be turned off without your wages, I suggest you think about that and do as you’re bid, Kitty,’ Callie said and met the girl’s bold gaze serenely.

‘I dare say the mistress would have something to say about that,’ the brassy piece said as if she hadn’t a worry in the world about being dismissed.

‘I doubt it. She didn’t want to take you on in the first place and I suggest you consider which of us is the teacher and Mrs Grisham’s niece and which one the maid,’ Callie said so quietly the pert creature looked away as if there was a lot she could say but she didn’t choose to right now.

The girl managed an insultingly small curtsy as she left to prove she wasn’t cowed. Kitty had turned up here all but destitute and begging for work, then managed to go from maid of all work to head housemaid in a matter of months. Callie wondered

if she had a hold over her aunt to manage such a rapid rise at the same time as it occurred to her she should have been more aware of what was going on around her. Lately a few of the schoolgirls had come to her with tearful claims that Kitty took their secrets to Mrs Grisham after she snooped to find them. Aunt Seraphina claimed Kitty was doing her duty and punished the girls, not the maid. Absorbed in writing her book at nights and teaching the girls all day, had she been making herself too busy to miss Gideon? And had she let her pupils down by being so preoccupied?

It had hurt to even breathe without him near her in the early days when she began to come alive again and had to live without him. As she undressed and slipped into the unheard-of luxury of a bath before dinner, Callie let her thoughts drift. How were Gideon and her aunt to coexist under the same roof even for one night? They had always loathed each other and it disturbed her that Aunt Seraphina made no effort to hide her dislike. She'd better hurry down before they came to blows. Of course, then her thoughts must veer back to Gideon and the power he seemed to exude now as she sighed blissfully at the kiss of cool clean water on her overheated skin.

Her cheeks flushed ridiculously as the idea he would once have insisted on climbing into this tub with her and done all sorts of sensuous things to persuade her it didn't matter if they slopped bath water on the floor. Had he been tortured by such wanton longings all this time, as well? No stern lectures from

her sensible side could kill off the little sensualist who recalled how hot and passionate a bath with the man you loved could be, but he had all the skilled beauties of the *demi-monde* to choose from whenever he wanted to slake his lust, hadn't he? The idea of such a virile young man enduring nine years of tortured celibacy, because he'd wed in haste and repented at leisure, was laughable. That blush of hers went places he would have followed with hotly fascinated eyes in the old days as her whole body overheated with remembering what a passionate and driven lover he was.

She shook her head at the very idea he'd burned and cursed the lack of a wife in his bed all this time as she had the loss of her one and only lover in hers. No, it was simply impossible for him to have lived like a monk for the sake of a woman who'd told him to leave and now she shivered and told herself not to be a fool. He would keep his mistress in comfort and lavish all the fiercely focused passion he'd once saved for his wife on a beauty who couldn't demand a joint share in his life. Her hands clawed at the vengeful thought of how she'd like to use them on his mistress and it took more force of will than she liked to make them straighten again at the idea of another woman in thrall to her husband, her lover, and hadn't she needed him far more than some beauty who could take her pick of keepers and chose Gideon?

Yet if he made love to the confounded woman half as ardently as he had to her, the wretch must simply live for the next time he felt in need of a woman. Even when he must have hated her more

than he loved her after their first flush of wild infatuation, he'd still wanted her very urgently indeed, she recalled with a feral shiver of heat that reminded her how much she had longed for him all these years all over again. And wasn't it ridiculous that here she was, lying in her bath, dreaming of her one and only lover, when she should be busy arming herself against his lies.

She couldn't pretend he'd ever forced her. Most of the reason she made him go was her endless need of him and his passionate lovemaking. It was destroying her self-respect and making her hate her dependency on a physical act that no longer bonded them like twin souls. Instead, it made the chill between them when they were not making love more arctic. Squeezing her eyes tight shut, she forced herself to remember all the reasons why Callie Laughraine couldn't need her husband and let out a stuttering sigh. There, she was rational again now. It was folly never to dare risk carrying his child again, but it was what kept her tightly hemmed inside the closed world her aunt decreed since the day Gideon rode away, in return for pretending her niece never married him in the first place.

'I'm not a silly little girl in thrall to a lone wolf any more, Gideon Laughraine,' she muttered into the sultry air. 'Don't you dare dream of pulling the wool over my foolish eyes and enchanting me into thinking the sun rises and sets in your eyes ever again.'

'Of course not, Callie, why would he think you a passion-led fool when you're sitting here dreaming of him, as if every

moment he's not close to you is wasted as far as you're concerned?' she chided herself. 'And I refuse to be that girl again. She hurt too much to dare it twice.'

Galvanised into action by the dread of dreaming her evening away like a besotted girl, until someone came to find out why she was still sitting in her bath like a very odd exhibit in a museum, she washed the dust out of her hair, then soaped herself vigorously until even the memory of her sweat-streaked face and mired feet was gone. She stood up and used the rosemary-and-cider vinegar rinse she made to tame some of the wild curls her dark hair sprang into if she let it. It would soon dry in the heavy warmth of this July evening and she sat on her bed to comb it out, reluctant to put the practical petticoats of Miss Sommers on over her cool, clean skin.

The weight of her long hair as it began to dry against her bare back felt sensual and a little bit decadent now Gideon was in the house. Yesterday it would have been a damp nuisance against a workaday body she did her best to ignore; today Callie Laughraine was alive again and waking up after her long hibernation felt almost painful. A wary inner voice whispered it was better for her darkest secrets if she slept on, but her lover was nearby and she squirmed against the plain bedcover in a rush of hot anticipation she hadn't let herself feel so powerfully in years.

Even before she knew what love was she'd felt that forbidden flash of excitement at the very sight of Gideon Laughraine, she recalled guiltily. She and Bella from the Grange and Lottie from

the Home Farm used to run wild over the Raigne estate as girls. She recalled with a wistful smile the chance of meeting Gideon busy with some boyish mischief was the highlight of her day back then. As a girl she secretly adored that gangling half-wild boy and when she began to grow to what she'd thought a woman, her feelings ran much deeper. She loved him; no point pretending it was a girlish obsession she would have grown out of.

That girl thought she'd been put on earth to love Gideon Laughraine and there didn't seem much point pretending she had never done so. It didn't matter—she didn't love him now and hadn't done for years, had she? Idealistic, dreamy Callie Sommers put an angry boy on a pedestal. It was as much her fault as his that he wasn't the hero she thought him. She stopped combing her hair and stared at nothing in particular as if it might tell her why she committed all she was to him at seventeen to his eighteen.

The truth was that lonely, uncertain girl was ripe to fall headlong at the feet of an unsuitable young man. Perhaps that was why her grandfathers connived at the union they wanted and Gideon's father did everything he could to stop it. Of course, the legal heir and the last real heir's bastard child marrying each other would set the succession right and secure the future of Raigne once and for all, but she and Gideon were real people with hearts and souls who deserved to make such life-changing decisions for themselves.

Except they conveniently fell in love with one another and

what would it have taken for them *not* to back then? More than they were capable of, she decided, as the huge power of that feeling threatened to remind her how little this life away from him was. The enormity of it, as if a pent-up dam of emotion was about to wash her along in a great flood, echoed down the years. Instead of wild passion it threatened huge sadness now, though, so she built the dam back up and pretended it wasn't there as best she could.

Even so she donned her lightest muslin gown and pinned her hair up loosely, because it was still damp and she couldn't bring herself to screw it into the tight knot her aunt thought proper tonight. She wasn't a spinster schoolteacher, she was Lady Laughraine, and what was the point pretending now Gideon was here? Feeling a little more like a baronet's lady, she went downstairs and could tell her husband approved of the small changes in her appearance from the glint of admiration and something more personal in his grey-green gaze as he rose to greet her.

#### Chapter Four

'Hmm, I'm not sure about that hairstyle, my dear, and white has never suited you, but I'm glad to see you look better than when you came in this afternoon,' Aunt Seraphina said as soon as Callie joined her and Gideon in the sitting room that evening. She caught a glimpse of Gideon's quick frown and it made her think about her aunt's words a little more deeply.

'I prefer my hair like this,' she said calmly. 'It feels cooler and

all those pins were making my head ache.’

‘And I hardly recognised you in that governess’s bonnet and tightly bound hair this afternoon,’ Gideon said, as if they had been parted only a few weeks and he was marking a few subtle changes in his wife’s appearance.

‘I suppose a married woman is permitted a few liberties that would be folly in a single lady of your advancing years, Callie, my dear,’ Aunt Seraphina conceded doubtfully.

‘I will never aspire to the extremes of fashion that lead fast young matrons to damp their muslins and crop their hair, Aunt, but Sir Gideon Laughraine’s wife cannot dress like a schoolteacher.’

‘You were content to dress modestly until he arrived.’

‘I should have found the line between modest and frumpish sooner than,’ Callie said, feeling rebellious when she thought of all those long nights inventing characters and living her life vicariously so she could pretend it was enough.

‘You do seem to be longing tonight for the very life you begged me to take you away from the day he left you alone and bereft, don’t you?’ Aunt Seraphina asked, the thought of all her niece was risking by doing so clearly paining her.

‘I’m not sure,’ Callie said, but for a moment she thought her aunt’s gaze was hard when it met hers this time. She was wrong, of course she was. They couldn’t have lived and worked together all these years if her aunt secretly hated her, even though her aunt was so distant and disapproving when Callie was a child.

'I shall always be grateful to you for standing by me when I needed you to so badly, Aunt Seraphina, but I'm a relatively young woman and can be permitted a little vanity on occasions like this,' she teased, but Aunt Seraphina's lips tightened and her hands clenched before she managed a polite titter and an airy gesture to deny she was a killjoy.

'Of course, my dear, you will have to excuse an anxious old woman who wonders if you're playing with fire.'

'I'm hardly flaunting myself like a *houiri* because I left a few hairpins out of my toilette tonight,' Callie protested because she couldn't imagine how anyone could see her plain gown and simple hairstyle as provocative.

'I'm glad to see you looking more like yourself, but Mrs Bartle obviously takes her duties as chaperon and mentor seriously, my dear,' Gideon said silkily.

Her lamentable wardrobe and lack of a riding horse might be behind his suspicion her aunt had not been acting in Callie's best interests all these years. She thought of his assertion that he had sent large sums of money to her over the years and noted a bead of sweat on her aunt's upper lip. It was very hot, perhaps even she couldn't stay cool and composed in such weather.

'Of course, Calliope is my niece,' the lady said stoutly. Once it would have been a huge concession to call Callie *niece*, as she was the by-blow of Mrs Bartle's younger sister. The fact she owned up to her now persuaded Callie this was all a misunderstanding.

'Thank you, Aunt,' she said sincerely.

‘And therefore you must want her to be happy,’ Gideon said so smoothly that Callie really didn’t know why her aunt shifted under his steady gaze, ‘must you not?’

‘Of course, which is why I never encouraged Calliope to get in touch with you,’ Aunt Seraphina countered as if it were war.

‘Or to reply to any of my letters, perhaps?’

Callie had difficulty not gasping out loud at the implication he had written more than once. A single letter would have soothed some of the jagged places in her heart, but more than one? That would have been like a bridge between the old Callie and Gideon and the new world she had no map for after he left. She eyed them both warily and wondered who was lying now.

‘I have no idea what you mean,’ Aunt Seraphina said smoothly, but Callie saw a few giveaway signs under her front of unruffled confidence that her aunt was less sure of herself than she pretended.

‘What a convenient memory you do have, ma’am,’ Gideon countered.

‘A very *inconvenient* one as far as you are concerned, young man. Time has not wiped out any of your past sins for me even if my niece seems to have lost her memory of them tonight. I might have kept one or two letters from Callie when we came here, but she was in no state to read your self-serving excuses for what you did at the time.’

Memory of exactly how painful that period of her life had been made Callie glare at her husband and wonder why she

doubted the one person who stood by her. ‘Thank you, Aunt Seraphina. I don’t think there was any excuse for what you did either, do you, Gideon?’

He held her gaze as if he had nothing to be ashamed of and suddenly Callie felt weary half to death and wished he would simply state his business with her then go.

‘Of course there isn’t,’ her aunt answered for him.

He was about to deny it, but Kitty came in to say dinner was ready before either of them could say another word and then they only exchanged small talk. The maids were in and out with this and that and Kitty’s busy ears were always on the alert for gossip. Tonight they must be aching with the need to know more about the handsome husband Miss Sommers had brazenly owned up to as if she had never lied about him in the first place.

Somehow Callie got through the meal without blurting out something indiscreet through sheer tiredness. She felt horribly confused every time she glanced at Gideon and wondered if he was right to jolt her out of the settled life she had made without him. Maybe Aunt Seraphina had got carried away by a desire to protect Callie. If she had to walk the line between protecting a close relative or telling the strict truth, how would *she* cope with the dilemma her aunt faced?

The idea she would have preferred to make her own choice slipped into her mind. She had a right to know Gideon had tried to contact her or even win her back. At first she would not have listened, of course, but what about later? Maybe, she let herself

know. She wasn't quite sure if she should despise herself for being weak or add another reason not to trust Aunt Seraphina as unquestioningly as she had for too long to the list.

'I believe we may have a thunderstorm tonight,' her aunt announced once it was clear none of them could take another bite of whatever it was Cook had served them.

Callie had no idea what she ate while she struggled with her confusion in silence. Grandfather would be appalled by her lack of manners tonight and she wondered if either of her dining companions had noticed. The other two were probably too busy eyeing each other suspiciously to note that conversation wasn't flowing merrily tonight.

'Your stableman assures me the weather won't break for another day or two. I agree it feels clammy enough to whip up a storm at any moment, though,' Gideon said, as if trying to pretend there wasn't an atmosphere of sticky tension in the room that was nothing to do with the summer heat. He shot a concerned look at Callie and she realised he was doing his best to stop more worries adding to her growing pile of them tonight.

'I don't fear thunder and lightning as I used to, Gideon,' she said calmly enough, for if she had gone pale it was out of weariness and not her old terror of storms. After their baby, Grace, died at birth the weather was the least of her worries and since then she'd comforted so many terrified schoolgirls she could endure the worst storms without flinching.

'I'm glad to hear it, but you do look weary, my dear. Perhaps

we should all retire early to try and sleep as best we can, despite this ridiculous heat?’ he suggested.

‘Where will you sleep?’ she asked unwarily, then blushed at the impossible notion a husband might expect to share his wife’s bed.

‘Apparently there are plenty of rooms that lie empty here over the summer,’ he said as if the idea had never occurred to him.

‘I will ask Kitty to have a bed made up for you then,’ she said stiffly. She wouldn’t have welcomed him if he’d made a move to share her bed, but it felt a little bit unforgivable that he hadn’t bothered to try.

‘No need, the kitchen maid found me bed linen and we sorted it out between us. I shall be sleeping in one of the pupil-teacher’s beds tonight, since none of the younger ladies’ accommodation is big enough for a full-grown male,’ he said with a shrug that told her he understood her inner conflict about his sleeping arrangements and wondered why she thought he was so insensitive as to demand his marital rights when she was so pleased to see him she lost her senses this afternoon.

‘Then can I be rude and retire betimes, Aunt? I am very tired.’

‘Of course you must do so, my love. Little wonder you feel exhausted after such a shock as you suffered today, although I still have no idea what you were doing wandering about the countryside alone?’

It seemed a good idea to pretend she hadn’t noticed it was a question, not a statement of exasperation. Callie placed a dutiful

kiss on her aunt's expectantly raised cheek and gave Gideon a look that challenged him to demand the same. Surely he couldn't expect her to take up marriage where they left off, even if he was willing to sleep elsewhere tonight?

'I can't do right for being wrong, can I?' he whispered when he opened the door for her, then lit her a candle from the store in the hall, despite the fact it only ever seemed to get half-dark at midsummer.

'No,' she said as she went past him with as much dignity as she could manage. 'Goodnight, Gideon.'

'Goodnight, Wife,' he murmured and the shiver that softly spoken challenge sent down her spine sped her upstairs more swiftly than her weary feet wanted to go.

\* \* \*

Gideon wished his reluctant hostess goodnight and retired to the narrow room a girl who wasn't rich enough to continue her education without acting as an unpaid teacher to the littlest members of this school warranted in this household. He was sure Callie tried to prepare her for life as a governess or schoolteacher as best she could, but all her aunt would care about was that she cost next to nothing.

He shivered at the thought of any daughter of his enduring such a regime at this school without Callie here to soften its hard edges. He must be very weary, because the idea of his lost child made tears stand in his eyes. They lost so much when their little Grace died before she was born. His little girl wouldn't be so little

now. Nine years old, he thought, as he stripped off the stifling correctness of summer coat, neckcloth and waistcoat. He could almost hear her furtive giggle as she peeked into her father's room to see if he was asleep yet and might not notice if she crept downstairs now the house was settled for the night.

Perhaps she would be leading the rest of her parents' brood astray by now, as well. Encouraging the little ones to join her illicit feast of whatever leftovers sat in the larder from dinner, or daring them to join her in the gardens by moonlight to pick strawberries and peer at a nest of kittens in the gardener's bothy. He missed her so much tonight. Now he and her mother were under the same roof for the first time in years he felt she should be here, too. Even the slight chance of being properly married again made their daughter seem so alive he could almost hear and touch her. The one ghost he desperately wanted to see was never quite there to be marvelled at; his little girl was always just outside his field of vision, hinted at in the odd little whisper and gleeful laugh his imagination allowed him to know of her.

'Ah, Callie, we would have loved our little angel-devil so much, wouldn't we?' he whispered to the still hot air and called himself a fool.

Hope was almost as bad as despair in the still silence of this sultry night. Yes, there was a slim chance he and Callie could try again, but it wouldn't work if she carried on relying on her aunt to tell her what to think. He *could* force himself on his wife; take her away from here and show her how skewed her aunt's view of

him and the rest of the world was. Legally he could make her take him back into her life. It wouldn't feel much better than enduring life without her if she didn't want to be with him, though, and he sighed bitterly at the very idea of such a hostile and empty marriage.

Impatient with himself for wanting the whole loaf when half a one might be all he could have, he opened the window as softly as he could on to a listening sort of night. He'd learnt years ago there were far worse terrors lurking in the darkness than the suggestion of a breeze. Too on edge to undress fully, he heeled his evening shoes off and pulled back the covers on the pallet-like bed, so he could let his body rest while his mind went round in circles like a spit dog on a wheel.

\* \* \*

'Good morning,' Callie greeted Gideon the next day.

She wasn't fully awake yet, after swearing to herself she wouldn't sleep a wink, then dropping straight into it as if she hadn't done so for a week. Still she felt her heart flutter at the sight of him so vital and handsome as he strode into the breakfast room. Part of her had missed him every hour of every day since they parted. That Callie saw the world in richer colours now the love of her life was back in it; the rest was deeply sceptical about his return and eyed him warily.

'Is it? I thought we might have slipped into afternoon while I was waiting for my lady to leave her chamber,' he teased and she made a face, then took a closer look under her lashes.

‘Where on earth did you get that bruise?’ she asked, suddenly more wide-awake and able to stare right at him.

‘You might well ask.’

‘I am doing so,’ she said with a stern frown that told him she wasn’t going to be fobbed off with a rueful shrug this time.

‘I’m staying in a house I don’t know,’ he said as if that explained everything.

‘And...?’

‘And I walked into a door in the dark?’ he offered, as if he didn’t think it was a very likely story, either.

‘A door with a fist?’

‘It wasn’t a fist, it was a ewer. I suppose I should be grateful your upstairs maid didn’t have a chamber pot in her hand at the time.’

‘What on earth were you doing chasing the maids round the house in the dark?’

‘I’d as soon pursue the Gorgon with lustful intent as that sly minx, even if I was given to preying on servants,’ he said quietly and stepped over the close the door, clearly aware Kitty would listen if given the slightest excuse.

‘I heard someone creeping about the house in the small hours of the morning,’ he admitted as if he hadn’t wanted her to know.

‘Kitty might be sly and untrustworthy, but she has access to any room in the house by daylight, why would she steal about in the dark?’

‘Apparently she heard whoever was tiptoeing about and

decided a housebreaker was searching the attics. I admire her courage, even if I abhor her curiosity.’

‘She left her room in the middle of the night to pursue a burglar with only a water jug? I’m not sure if that’s brave or reckless.’

‘Neither am I,’ he said with a preoccupied frown. ‘But she was a damned nuisance either way. Whoever was creeping about the house heard us and got away while Kitty was using her weapon on me.’

‘Yet it was a bright moonlit night and almost too hot to sleep, surely someone would notice a felon running from the house into the countryside?’

‘So you would think.’

‘And if they didn’t, the prowler you were both chasing must have come from inside the house,’ she said it for him, so he couldn’t pretend not to know.

‘Possibly.’

‘You have a suspect?’

‘Maybe,’ he answered even more cautiously.

She wondered if it was possible to box your husband’s ear at the same time you were making it clear he meant nothing to you. Probably not, she decided, and plumped down in her accustomed seat at the breakfast table after gathering up her breakfast more or less at random. It was an occupation and she had to eat if she wasn’t to risk another attack of the vapours.

## Chapter Five

‘How odd that nobody bothered with us before you came here,’

Callie said once she had chewed a corner off a piece of toast and sipped a little of her tea to force it down.

‘Hmm, or that my arrival caused it to happen,’ he countered.

‘Why are you really here, Gideon?’ Callie asked, weary of dancing round such an urgent topic and eager to get back to real life. This whole situation felt far too dangerous to her peace of mind and she simply wanted him to go, didn’t she? ‘If you have met another woman and wish to marry her, I must disappoint you, I fear. I won’t take a lover so you can sue him for criminal conversation, then divorce me.’

‘Well, I certainly didn’t come here for that,’ he said fastidiously, as if the very idea was unthinkable and a bit offensive.

‘Then why *are* you here? There’s nothing to interest a man like you here.’

‘Of course there is, there’s you.’

‘No, there isn’t. I won’t be used because you suddenly find yourself in need of a wife and I’m the one you have.’

‘That’s never how it was between us and you know it, Callie.’

‘Oh, really?’ she asked scornfully. ‘So our silly little love story wasn’t a plot to put the broken parts of our families back together, after all, then? I must have imagined those furious accusations you threw at me after we got back to Raigne from our hasty flight to the Border. Miss Calliope Sommers dreamt a fine young buck carried her off to Gretna so they could wed for love. His father forbade it and her grandfathers schemed to help them elope,

oh, yes, it's obvious now—you must have been right all along, Gideon. That naive seventeen-year-old girl obviously planned every step of the journey with your furious father pursuing us to spur you on. What better way to be my Lady Laughraine one day and rule the place my illegitimate birth cut me off from? Wasn't that how your neat story to absolve you of guilt and pile it on me went? Such a shame I didn't know who I really was until you told me, don't you think? Or are you still convinced I'm lying about that and wed you because Lord Laughraine's son died without legitimate issue and he wanted his great-grandchildren to inherit everything I couldn't lay claim to without you?"

'No, although I don't doubt Lord Laughraine and your other grandfather schemed to marry us to each other and tidy up two mistakes at one go. I still can't believe they thought it a good idea,' he said with a bitter grimace. 'No need to remind you I'm the son of Virgil Winterley's bastard and have no right to Raigne, but I wonder your grandfathers didn't see what a poor bargain they were offering you.'

'And I was such a good one? The by-blow of a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl and the artful young rake who refused to marry her? Don't make me into someone I'm not, Gideon.'

'You bear no responsibility for them, Callie. You're a fine person in your own right and I was as deeply honoured you agreed to marry me back then as I am now,' he said as if he didn't regret their hasty marriage over the anvil, but how could he not?

'Thank you, but if that's true you should stop blaming yourself

for your father's and grandfather's sins,' she said with a wry smile at his false view of her as some sort of paragon she shouldn't find flattering. 'I've been told your real grandfather was nothing like his son in temper, even if your father was his spit in looks, so you must follow him. I deplored your hasty temper and love of danger, but I was never afraid of you. Even when you were in your cups I knew you would never hurt me or our child.'

She saw him flinch at the mention of their lost baby and wished she'd minded her tongue. It was too soon to revisit that sore place again, so Callie remembered Esmond Laughraine raging how he'd kill Gideon before he let them wed instead and wondered how a good man was fathered by an angry bully. Had Esmond suspected who she really was and hated the idea a future grandson of his might truly inherit Raigne? Such a bitter man might do everything he could to prevent the marriage for that very reason.

She was as puzzled by his furious opposition as Gideon at the time, but she supposed selfish jealousy could explain it. At the time she knew she wasn't a brilliant match for the grandson of a baronet and a peer of the realm's great-grandson, but even she knew Gideon wasn't quite that. She recalled the love in Lady Virginia's eyes when she talked of her late husband and knew a lady of such character and spirit could never love a man who was anything like Esmond Laughraine at heart. Her Gideon must be like his grandfather in more than looks then and shouldn't that possessive worry a wife who expected him to leave as soon as

he'd told her what he'd come for?

'I would cut my own arm off rather than hurt you, but I managed it, didn't I?' Gideon said at last. He watched her lower her eyes, then stare out of the window to avoid his gaze and sighed as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. 'Sooner or later we must talk about it, Callie. If either of us are ever to be father or mother we can only be so together with any honour, unless you'd rather stick the carving knife in me and risk the next assizes?'

'Don't joke about murder,' she snapped, shaken to her core by the very idea.

'I think I must, Wife, or sit and howl for what you don't want us to have.'

'Now you're being ridiculous and where were we with this sorry tale of loss and betrayal, and why you're bothering me with it now?'

He sighed and poured himself a cup of coffee to wash down the breakfast he seemed to enjoy about as much as she did. 'I admit when your maternal grandfather told me the true tale of your birth, I only saw concern for your future and the Raigne inheritance behind his plot with Lord Laughraine to set the succession straight again. I never stopped to see you had no idea who your father really was until I told you. Little wonder you didn't defend yourself against my wild accusations when you must have been shocked to your core by the news and never mind the interpretation I put on it. Hasty boy that I was then, I felt more

like a stallion put out to stud than your proud husband and lover all of a sudden and I came home and accused you of ridiculous things in the heat of temper, then made things worse by refusing to back down after I'd cooled off, even though I knew I was wrong to suspect you of being in on their plans. I never really considered how you must have felt when you found out who your father really was from a furious young idiot. It was that crack in our marriage that finally opened up and ruined everything we had wasn't it? I ruined it all simply because I was too proud and arrogant to admit to being wrong,' he said bleakly.

'You were very young,' she heard herself excuse him.

At the time it seemed inexcusable, yet it must have been agonising for the boy he had been to wonder if his wife married him to get the heir Raigne needed so badly. Sir Wendover Laughraine's three legitimate sons were dead from fever, accident and battle by then and the current Lord Laughraine's only child, her father, had died before she could even remember him. So why on earth had Sir Wendover still refused to admit his wife had imposed another man's bastard on him as his youngest son? Because that bitter old man was too proud to publically admit the truth, Gideon was heir to a huge fortune and vast old house he didn't want or believe he deserved and she was the last true Laughraine. Except she wasn't a true one at all, was she?

'You were even younger,' he replied, 'and already carrying my child so it was unforgivable to storm and rage at you like that, even if there was any truth in that tale I made up to make myself

feel better. I was so afraid you didn't love me at all, you see?"

'Why wouldn't I?' she said with a reminiscent smile for the handsome, brooding boy he was at eighteen she hoped didn't look as tender as if felt.

'Because I'm not a lovable man. All my life my father cursed me as the reason he had to marry my mother. He'd call her a sanctimonious prig one moment and whore the next because she let him seduce her. Heaven knows he could be charming when he wanted to and she had a reputation for being far too proper for her own good, but she was a naive and sheltered young woman who believed him when he said he loved her. She said a lot less than him about how much she hated being trapped in a marriage neither of them wanted because I was on the way, but I doubt she could put her hand on her heart and swear she loves me even today. We meet once or twice a year now my grandfather has taken her back into the fold, but so far we haven't managed to like each other very much.'

That confession of how bleak his childhood really was almost broke her heart. How could they not have blamed themselves when he was the innocent party? That disgusting bet Esmond Laughraine had made to seduce a bishop's daughter no other man would dream of even trying to get into bed without a very public ceremony and a wedding ring was appalling, but the bishop's daughter had succumbed of her own free will and Gideon had no choice about the matter at all. He wouldn't quite believe her if she championed him now, because she had turned away his love,

as well. Despite all the good reasons she thought she had at the time for doing so, how much damage she had done by taking the easy option? Yes, it was simpler to cut out the despair and hurt from her life and go on without him, rather than patch up some sort of marriage between them. But none of that would put things right between them now and make him believe he was a deeply lovable and honourable man, despite his shocking betrayal of her when she was at her most vulnerable.

‘You make me sound so meek and mild, Gideon—as if I sat and softly wept all the time you were accusing me of luring you in with my witchy wiles,’ she chided lightly, because it was better than weeping and letting him see she pitied the boy who grew up with parents who didn’t deserve him.

‘You gave as good as you got, didn’t you, spitfire?’ he said with a wry smile, as if he remembered those furious rows and their making up afterwards with affection.

‘And will again if you’re not careful,’ she said, chin raised to warn him she was no doormat nowadays, despite her nun-like existence since they parted.

‘Good, because I wouldn’t have you any other way,’ he said with a boyish grin that did something unfair to her insides.

‘It’s just as well I have no intention of changing then,’ she said.

Was she secretly conceding that, for the right incentive, she might be tempted to try again? No, she didn’t want to be a convenient wife, primped and perfumed and ready to oblige her lord in the marriage bed as part of a cynical bargain. If they

resumed their stormy marriage it must be as equal partners. Yet he was so self-sufficient he looked as if he didn't need anyone nowadays, let alone a wife who would demand a place in every aspect of his life she could get a toehold into.

'What will happen to Raigne if we remain apart?' she asked abruptly, the thought of being with him for the sake of a huge inheritance sour in her mouth as she tried to swallow it down with cold tea. 'I dare say you would be accepted as the heir without me.'

'I might be the legal heir, but you're the true one.'

'Yet you love Raigne and nobody else will keep the place as you will.'

'You could if you wanted to.'

'I'd be laughed out of court. I'm your wife, so everything I own is yours.'

'And what if Prinny decided to challenge me on the strength of some old gossip and the wrong family resemblance? You can see why they were so keen for us to wed, can't you? Still, at least when we eloped we simply wanted to be wed and never mind anything else.'

'We should have known better,' she said sadly.

Her husband stared out of the window at another cloudless morning as if he was unable to feel the warmth and she tried not to care. 'Indeed we should,' he said at last in that clipped, carefully controlled voice she was learning to hate.

'I'm sure Grandfather Sommers wanted us to be happy,' she

said as if that made the gulf between those young lovers and now a little less.

‘I wish you’d believe Lord Laughraine does, as well, Callie. It’s not his fault we looked for reasons to hate each other when our baby died. I wish you could find it in your heart to forgive me for that, even if everything else I did and didn’t do is beyond it.’

He looked as if memory of the quarrels and furious silences that marred their marriage had been a hair shirt to him ever since. Memories of long, hot nights of driven passion after they found out what her grandfathers were up to slipped into her mind and whispered they couldn’t have felt such endless need for each other if all they had was lust. Then she thought of their baby and shivered. Nothing had mattered to her but the terrible space their little girl left behind her in the dark days after that terrible journey from London to King’s Raigne to bury their child in Grandfather Sommers’s recently dug grave.

She simply hadn’t any emotion left over for Gideon or anyone else after that. Even the irony of hearing her real mother invite Gideon, Callie and Mrs Willoughby’s sister, Aunt Seraphina, to stay with her whilst they considered what to do next, since they had nowhere else to go at the time, was wasted on her. For the first time her true mother opened her life to her secret child and they might as well have been on the moon for all the difference it made to Callie. Her withdrawal from the world was a way out of heartbreak and she’d dived into that grey nothing as if not feeling anything was all that mattered. No doubt Gideon felt desperate

for comfort, painfully young and bereft as he was, as well. It wasn't an excuse for what he did, but she wasn't as blameless as she liked to believe at the time.

'First I'd have to forgive myself,' she said with a sigh, and half-heartedly pushed a slice of cold bacon round her plate so she wouldn't have to meet his intent gaze.

'You must, Callie, there won't be a pinch of happiness for either of us until you do.'

'I'd have to look past a lot more than petty quarrels and grief for there to be an "us" again, wouldn't I?' she challenged him.

'Ah, and there's the rub. You don't want to see past that farce, do you?'

'No,' she admitted bleakly. 'There's no excuse for what you did that day.'

'Yet even in a court of law a person is innocent until proven guilty. You didn't bother to wait for niceties like that before you condemned me, did you?'

'I expect that's why you like them. I prefer to believe my own eyes,' she said bitterly.

'You still want to think I was unfaithful, don't you? Whatever I said fell on deaf ears because you had already given up on us. It was a good excuse to finally push me out of your life and you've certainly done your best to forget I exist ever since.'

'How could I? We had a child,' she said with the sadness of losing her daughter still raw in her throat after all these years, and her absence seemed all the more savage now they were in

the same room and she wasn't here.

'Yes,' he said bleakly, '*we* did.'

\* \* \*

'Ah, there you both are,' Aunt Seraphina said as if she had been looking everywhere for them before she breezed into the room.

Anyone else would feel the tension and leave them in peace. Callie caught herself out being disloyal and managed to smile a half-hearted welcome.

'I thought you two had broken your fast and gone out long ago,' Aunt Seraphina remarked blandly, although the door would hardly have been shut in that case, so why lie?

'I had a disturbed night,' Gideon said, reverting to unreadable again.

Callie felt as if some golden opportunity to understand all they'd lost and gained had been brushed out of the room like house dust.

'Poor Kitty is mortified she mistook you for a burglar in the dark last night, Sir Gideon,' her aunt went blithely on. 'We can't sleep safe in our own beds of a night any more. I really don't know what the world is coming to,' she added, shaking her head as she poured herself coffee and refused anything more substantial as if it might choke her.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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