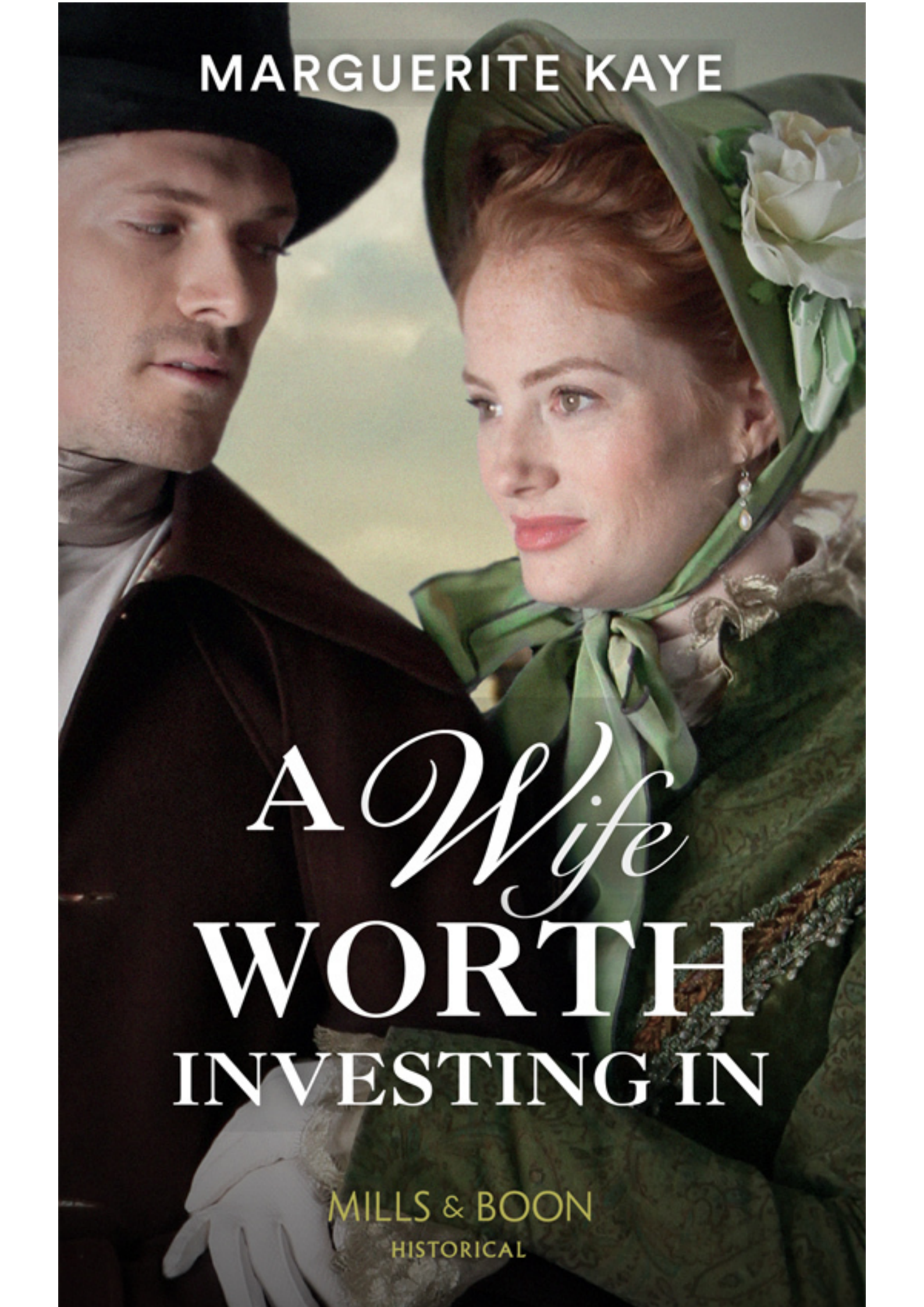




MARGUERITE KAYE

A Wife
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Marguerite Kaye

A Wife Worth Investing In

«HarperCollins»

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A convenient proposal... Makes a scandalous match! Part of Penniless Brides of Convenience: Knocking on Owen Harrington's door, impoverished and desperate, Miss Phoebe Brannagh wonders if London's most eligible catch will recognise her. But injured and reclusive, Owen is no longer a carefree man. And he's in urgent need of a convenient wife! Owen's shock proposal allows Phoebe to fulfil her life's ambition to open a restaurant...but his heated kisses tempt her to hope for a new dream – marriage, for real!

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MARGUERITE KAYE writes hot historical romances from her home in cold and usually rainy Scotland, featuring Regency rakes, Highlanders and sheikhs. She has published over forty books and novellas. When she's not writing she enjoys walking, cycling—but only on the level—gardening—but only what she can eat—and cooking. She also likes to knit and occasionally drink martinis—though not at the same time! Find out more on her website: margueritekaye.com.

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A WIFE WORTH INVESTING IN

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Chapter One

Paris — August 1828

Though it was long past midnight, the oppressive heat of the day had not dissipated, having been trapped by the tall, elegant buildings which lined the street down which Owen Harrington wandered aimlessly. He was not exactly lost, but nor was he quite sure where he was. Having crossed to the Rive Gauche at Notre Dame some time ago, the Seine should be somewhere on his right. He thought he'd been walking in a straight line, assumed that he was headed west, but the streets of Paris, as he had discovered to his cost several times in the last week, were not laid out in a neat grid. Instead they veered off straight at an imperceptible angle, often arriving at an unexpected destination. Rather like the locals' conversation.

He had been away from London for less than two weeks, but already felt disconnected from his life there. It had been the right decision. He was not trying to avoid the commitment his late father had made on his behalf, he planned to honour it, but he could not embrace it as his sole role in life. He still had two years' grace, time to be alone to be himself, free to do as he pleased, to discover a sense of purpose that would also accommodate his father's wishes. He had no idea what form this might take, but he was already excited by the endless possibilities waiting to be explored.

Above him the sky was inky, the stars mere pinpoints. The air, redolent of heat and dust, felt heavy, forcing him to slow his pace, encouraging him to dally. A faint beacon of light caught his attention. The lamps from a café tucked down a narrow alleyway flickered. Intrigued, for most establishments had closed their shutters hours ago, thinking a very late *digestif* might be just the thing, Owen decided to investigate.

The main room of the Procope Café was dark-panelled, smoke-filled. Two men were frowning intently over a chessboard cleared of all but five pieces. Around a large table, another group of men were disputing their bill, while a bored waiter looked on, answering Owen's mimed request for a glass of something strong with a shrug, pointing at the ceiling. He returned to the foyer and began to climb the rather elegant staircase. The first floor was silent, the doors of the rooms, presumably private dining salons, all closed, their customers either long departed or wishing to be very private indeed. A burst of laughter lured him to the top floor. The room was built into the eaves and stretched the full length of the café. Black and white tiles covered the floor, the narrow windows were flung open to the Paris night, the red-painted walls lined with banquettes which were crammed with late-night drinkers. Lamps were hung from the rafters, their muted light giving a rosy glow to the café's clientele—though perhaps that was the wine, Owen thought, which was in plentiful supply, with large earthenware jugs jostling for space on the tables.

No one paid him any attention as he stood in the open doorway. It was one of the things he liked about this city, being entirely anonymous and quite alone, lurking on the fringes, listening and watching. The French were so much more garrulous than the English. They conducted conversations at top speed, using their hands expressively, talking over each other, spinning off at tangents, around in circles, but never quite losing the thread.

There were no free seats. Disappointed, he was about to leave when two young men got up from their table. He stepped out of the doorway to let them pass, but they had stopped at another table where a woman sat alone. She had her back to the room, facing one of the open windows, and had been writing in a notebook, head bent, making it clear that she had no wish to be disturbed. Though not clear enough, it seemed. The two late-night revellers were hovering over her. He could see her shaking her head forcibly. Her posture gave the impression of youth, though he couldn't say how. Was she a courtesan? In London, there would be no doubt about it, but in Paris it seemed to be

acceptable for women to dine in the cafés, to enjoy a glass of wine or a cup of coffee. Though alone, and late at night? Surely even Paris was not that decadent.

Owen looked around, but the waiter now was engaged in an altercation with one of the bill-hagglers and no one else was taking any notice of the woman's plight. One of the men took a seat beside her. She gesticulated for him to leave her alone. The other caught her arm. She leapt to her feet to try to free herself and was roughly pushed back down on to her chair. Owen was across the room before he was aware he'd made any decision to intervene. It occurred to him that he might well be embroiling himself in a dispute between a *demi-mondaine* and her clients, but it was too late to stop now, and whatever the relationship, it was clear the men's attentions were unwelcome.

Though he didn't doubt his ability to see the pair of them off, he was not particularly inclined to get into a fist fight. Hoping that the fair damsel—exceedingly fair, he noted as he arrived at the table—would instinctively follow his lead, he greeted her with a broad smile.

'I have kept you waiting,' he said in French, 'a thousand apologies, *ma chérie*. *Messieurs*, I am grateful to you for keeping my little cabbage company, but now I am here, you understand that you are *de trop*?'

He allowed his smile to harden as he stood over them, making sure that they could see his clenched fists but making no other move. There was a moment when the decision could have gone either way but Owen knew to wait it out, and sure enough, the man at the table shrugged and got to his feet, clapping his friend on the back and nudging him toward the door.

'*Bon nuit, messieurs*,' Owen said, standing his ground, keeping his gaze fixed firmly on the men until they had left, before turning back to the woman at the table. 'Will you allow me, *madame*, to keep you company just for a few moments, in case they return?'

'Please, sit down. Thank you very much, *monsieur*. May I offer you a glass of wine? Unless you prefer to drink alone?'

She smiled up at him tentatively, and Owen found himself gazing down into a face of quite dazzling beauty. Her hair was a rich burnished gold threaded with fire. Her eyes, almond-shaped, thickly lashed, seemed also golden, though he supposed hazel was the more prosaic term. She had a pert nose, a luscious mouth, and the hint of equally luscious curves under the demure neckline of her dress. If he'd had a poetic bone in his body, now would be the moment to spout some verse.

He did not spout poetry and he didn't gawk! 'No,' Owen said, rallying, 'it is merely that I did not wish to intrude, *madame*, since *you* clearly do prefer to be alone.'

'I'm waiting for someone, actually.'

'Then with your permission, I would be delighted to act as your chaperon until they arrive,' he said, taking a seat. 'Allow me to introduce myself. I am Owen Harrington.'

'Ah, you are English?'

'As English as you are, judging by your French, which is excellent but not without accent,' Owen said, reverting with relief to his native language.

'My name is Phoebe Brannagh, and I'm actually Irish.' She poured him a glass of wine. '*À votre santé*, Mr Harrington.'

'*À la vôtre*, Mrs Brannagh.'

'It's Miss Brannagh.'

'Miss Brannagh.' He touched her glass, taking a sip of the very quaffable wine. Her voice was cultured. Her clothes were expensive, as was the little blue-enamelled watch she was consulting. Miss Phoebe Brannagh was most certainly not a member of the *demi-monde*, which made her presence here rather shocking. 'You are waiting for a friend, a relative?' he hazarded.

She snapped shut the watch, rolling her eyes as she returned it to her reticule. 'He is very late. As always,' she said ruefully. 'I'm waiting for Monsieur Pascal Solignac.'

She enunciated the name with such reverence, Owen was clearly expected to know who the gentleman in question was. 'I'm sorry, I'm afraid...'

‘The celebrated chef. Perhaps you’ve not been in Paris long?’

‘A week.’

‘And you have not dined at La Grande Taverne de Londres? My goodness, where on earth have you been eating?’

‘At places like this, by and large.’

‘Oh, the Procope is all very well if you like honest hearty fare, but really, Mr Harrington, one comes to Paris to dine, not to eat. Have you heard of Monsieur Beauvilliers, the author of *L’art du Cuisinier*, the bible of French gastronomy? My sister bought me one of the first English editions. Monsieur Beauvilliers’s restaurant closed some years ago, following his death, but La Grande Taverne de Londres has reopened with Pascal at the helm—Pascal Solignac, I mean. He has elevated cooking to another plane and is the talk of Paris, Mr Harrington, I can’t believe that you have not heard of him. Perhaps you prefer to drink rather than eat?’

‘I eat to live, I’m afraid I don’t live to eat, which probably makes me a culinary philistine in your eyes.’

She gave a burble of laughter. ‘I love food with a passion. If it were not for the heat of the kitchen and all the running around, and being on my feet for fourteen or fifteen hours at a stretch, I should be as fat as a pig at Michaelmas.’

‘Good lord, are you a chef?’

‘Not yet, but I hope to be some day. I’ve been incredibly fortunate to find work in Pascal’s kitchen for the last nine months. I’m on the patisserie station at the moment.’

Owen hardly knew what to make of this. ‘I’m no expert, but I’m not aware of any female chef working in a restaurant kitchen in London.’

‘It’s very unusual, even in Paris. In fact, I am the only female in the brigade.’

‘And how do the other staff react to having a beautiful woman in their midst, and English to boot—I beg your pardon, Irish—my point is that you are not French. Do they see you as a interloper?’

Once again, she laughed. ‘I have earned my stripes the hard way, peeling sacks of potatoes and chopping mountains of onions—that is a rite of passage in a professional kitchen, Mr Harrington. Fortunately, my eyes don’t water, for I’ve been chopping onions and peeling potatoes since I was this height,’ she said, touching the table top.

‘You astonish me. It is obvious from your accent that you are well born.’

She gave a pronounced Gallic shrug. ‘Oh, I’m born well enough, I suppose, though what matters to me is not the colour of the blood in my veins but my determination to live life to the full. In that sense, I take after my mother.’

‘So she approves of your being here?’

Her face fell. ‘I believe she would, if she were alive, but I lost both my parents and my little brother six years ago. I hope she would have been proud of me, for I’ve already achieved far more than I expected in such a short time. In a restaurant kitchen, you know, a strict hierarchy exists. You have to earn your place, and any promotion. To reach patisserie in just nine months is almost unheard of. To be honest, there are days when I have to pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming.’

There was pride in her voice and a gleam in her eye. ‘You are obviously passionate about your chosen vocation,’ Owen said, a little enviously.

Miss Brannagh beamed. ‘It is all I’ve ever wanted, all I’ve ever dreamed of—and that’s all it was, until last year, a pipedream. Were it not for my sister’s generosity, I wouldn’t be here, learning from Pascal.’

Pascal. It was not only admiration that he could hear in her voice, Miss Brannagh was in thrall to her mentor. Lucky man, Owen thought. He hoped Monsieur Solignac, who he had already irrationally and instantly taken a dislike to, appreciated his protégée and did not take advantage of her obvious reverence for him. ‘The same sister who gave you the famous recipe book?’

‘Yes, Eloise my eldest sister. The Countess of Fearnoch.’ Miss Brannagh chuckled. ‘Goodness, I still find it quite strange, calling her that. She made a most *excellent* marriage just over a year ago, which allowed her to settle a small fortune on myself and Estelle.’

‘Another sister?’

‘My twin.’ Miss Brannagh’s smile softened. ‘We were a such a close-knit little group until recently—the Elmswood Coven, Estelle called us—myself, Eloise, Estelle and Aunt Kate—she is Lady Elmswood and our aunt by marriage. She very kindly took us in when we lost our parents and there we lived, cosily and very contentedly for five years, until Eloise’s wedding.’

‘I presume that the appeal of cosy and contented began to wane?’

Miss Brannagh chuckled. ‘Though I love Aunt Kate with all my heart, why on earth would I choose to stay in the wilds of Shropshire when I could come to Paris and chase rainbows?’

Chasing rainbows, wasn’t that exactly what he was doing, Owen thought, utterly charmed. ‘What pot of gold lies at the end of your rainbow, may I ask? Becoming the top chef in Paris?’

‘I aim to become the *second-best* chef and part-owner of the pre-eminent restaurant in Paris, along with Pascal.’ Miss Brannagh’s smile faded slightly. ‘The proprietor of La Grande Taverne de Londres is just a little too traditional in his thinking for Pascal, you see. Our intention is to buy him out, so that Pascal’s genius can flourish unhindered, and if he will not sell, then we will buy new premises and start from scratch together.’

‘You will not mind playing second fiddle to Monsieur Solignac, then?’

‘It will be an honour! I will never supersede Pascal, he is a—a maverick genius and what’s more, he enjoys being in the public eye—whether it is chatting to diners or talking about his menus to the press. Estelle, my twin, would excel at that sort of thing, and even Eloise—for she is so confident, and takes after Aunt Kate. But I much prefer to avoid the limelight, and am happiest behind a stove.’

‘As a lone female in a kitchen though, you must have to fight to hold your own.’

‘Oh, that is a different matter all together, for the kitchen is my milieu. But I have never been confident among strangers.’

‘I am a stranger, and you seem—forgive me—perfectly at ease with me.’

She flushed. ‘You are my knight errant. Besides, there is something about you—but you’re probably thinking I have talked too much. I have. I do beg your pardon.’

‘I am very much enjoying our conversation. I have never met anyone like you, Miss Brannagh, you are quite unique.’

‘I’m a twin, so actually one of a pair.’

‘Are you identical twins, you and your sister?’

‘Oh, no, though we look very alike. Estelle is much more talented than I. As well as being an extremely accomplished musician, she is a bit of an actress—a mimic. I’m not any sort of performer.’

‘What does she think of your ambition to become the *second-best* chef in Paris?’

‘Estelle—oh, Estelle, I have lately realised, has a much more conventional outlook on life than I, but she’ll come round.’ She took another sip of wine, frowning slightly. ‘Do you have any sisters or brothers, Mr Harrington? No? Well, the thing about sisters is that they think they know you better than you know yourself, and in a way they do, but they can also—they assume things, you see. I am younger than Estelle by twenty minutes, which makes me officially the baby of the family, since we lost our poor little brother. They think, Estelle and Eloise, that I need protecting, that my cooking is just a hobby. They have not said so outright, indeed Eloise never would for she was determined her gift came without strings, but I know they both believe my coming here is a mistake.’

‘But you hope to prove them wrong? By the sounds of it, you are already doing so.’

‘Do you think so? I tell myself I’m doing well. In fact I know I am doing so extraordinarily well, I’ve astonished myself. I wish my sisters shared your confidence in me, but in time, they will come to see that I’ve made the right decision to flee the comfort of the nest.’

‘All the same, for one who hasn’t been abroad much in the world, to come to Paris on your own must have been a daunting prospect.’

‘A baptism of fire—the kitchen was, at any rate. But as for Paris—oh, I fell in love with Paris almost from the first moment. The way of life suits me, it is so very, very different from England. I love my sisters and Aunt Kate, but they are such strong women. I have always lived in the shadow of their low expectations, you know?’

‘I do,’ Owen agreed wholeheartedly. ‘Though I don’t have any close family, I have a reputation which I’m rather tired of living down to.’

‘My own feelings exactly! I hope that Paris suits you as well as it does me, Mr Harrington. It is the most beautiful city one could ever imagine. I spend every Sunday exploring, following my nose, drinking coffee in cafés, sitting in the parks just watching people stroll by. I play a game with myself,’ she said sheepishly. ‘I like to guess what their favourite foods are.’

‘And what would you guess mine would be?’

‘*Rosbif* is what any Frenchman would immediately say, but you are very far from being a typical Englishman.’ She studied him, her hazel eyes gleaming like gold, her chin resting on her hand. ‘I’d say you prefer breakfast to dinner. Eggs, coddled or perhaps scrambled with cream, delicate but delicious. A ham, boiled in spices and served cold. Fresh rolls and salty butter. Coffee. Am I right?’

‘Even if you were wrong, you make it sound so delicious that I would change my preference for a dinner of venison stew immediately’

‘Now it’s your turn. What do I like to eat?’

He took the opportunity to study her as she had him, struck afresh by her lush beauty, which so perfectly complemented her charm. ‘Supper,’ he said, smiling, ‘definitely supper, at the end of a long day when you have finished serving dinner to your clientele. Asparagus with a hollandaise sauce and perhaps a lightly poached egg, and a glass of champagne. Essentially English, but with a soupçon of French flair—though I know you’re Irish. How am I doing?’

She laughed. ‘I shall return the compliment, Mr Harrington. Even if you are quite wrong, you make me long to have it. You see, it’s a good game, isn’t it? I can while away hours playing it and don’t mind at all sitting by myself to do so. I love the fact that no one knows who I am, far less cares. In Paris, for the first time in my life, I can be completely myself without having to consider anyone else—on my Sundays off, at any rate.’

‘You wander Paris alone?’

‘Yes, and I love it. Pascal spends his Sundays either experimenting with dishes or catching up on his sleep. Even if I wanted company, I have no acquaintances outside the kitchen, there’s been no time to make friends. But I don’t need them. It is—it is *liberating*, being alone after always being Estelle’s other, younger half. That sounds terrible, I love my sister—both my sisters—with all my heart and I know they are only being protective but they smother me a little and patronise me just a little too.’

‘So you want to cast off the shackles?’

‘Yes! Exactly! You do understand.’

‘I do indeed. I was thinking something similar just before I stumbled upon this café. And I’m very glad I did stumble upon it. Very glad too—if you will forgive my saying—that Monsieur Solignac is so tardy.’ Monsieur Solignac, who by the sound of it was more than just a friend to the beguiling Miss Brannagh, Owen thought, his animosity towards this *maverick genius* increasing.

‘I take it he does not have the wherewithal to set himself up in business?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Miss Brannagh answered sunnily, entirely unaware of his scepticism. ‘Pascal has the reputation, I have the financial means. That is what I call serendipity.’

Almost too good to be true from the Frenchman’s perspective, Owen thought as she took out her watch again, frowning at the time.

‘He has clearly become absorbed while practising a new dish. It is only after service has finished that he can try out his ideas. Though the dishes he serves are exquisite, they are in essence traditional

receipts tweaked with his own flourishes. Classic cuisine with a twist, so to speak, but when we have our own establishment, we will serve food such as the world has never imagined, never mind tasted.'

'And while he creates, you must wait here patiently?'

'Genius must be indulged,' she said, bristling slightly. 'And nurtured too.'

To be nurtured by Miss Phoebe Brannagh was an appealing prospect, Owen thought, regretfully. He had not felt so drawn to a woman in a long time. If only they had met under different circumstances, he'd have made a concerted effort to get to know her better. Captivating, that was the word he'd been looking for, not only in her looks, but in her outlook. She had a true *joie de vivre*, as if she was reaching out and embracing life—a feeling he had lost. He felt jaded, and had travelled abroad to rediscover a sense of purpose, a zest for life, a freshness. She was brave and she was bold. He admired her audacious attitude.

'I wish you every success,' Owen said, raising his glass. The words were a hackneyed toast, but he found that he meant them.

'Thank you.' Miss Brannagh touched her glass to his. He noticed her hands for the first time, the nails cut brutally short, the skin work-roughened, scored with tiny cuts and burn marks. Catching his eyes on them, she snatched them away, hiding them under the table. 'Testament to my trade,' she said, clearly embarrassed.

'Testament to my lack of purpose,' Owen said, holding up his own.

'Goodness, you have a sculptor's hands. Such beautifully long fingers.'

'I don't have an artistic bone in my body. I prefer more physical pursuits.'

Miss Brannagh sipped her wine, smiling. 'It is so nice to converse in English, and though I love being in Paris, I do miss chatting with Estelle and Eloise and Aunt Kate. But I have talked far too much about myself. Tell me what brings you to my adopted city, Mr Harrington.'

'Let me see if I can attract the waiter's attention first and order us another *pichet*. The man seems determined to ignore me. Excuse me, but I think it might be quicker if I go and buttonhole him.'

* * *

Phoebe watched the Englishman cross the room and accost the waiter. Had she been indiscreet? Had he guessed that she and Pascal were lovers? Her affaire was so very recent, so much part of her new life here in this exciting city, she hadn't thought how it might appear to anyone else. Had she betrayed her feelings for Pascal in her enthusiasm for him? Mr Harrington had said nothing, but now she wondered what he'd thought of her, sitting alone drinking wine in a café in the early hours of the morning. He had treated her with perfect courtesy. He was certainly surprised to discover her reasons for being here, but he seemed intrigued rather than shocked.

Most people would think her affaire was scandalous. It was why she'd been very careful in how she described Pascal in her letters to Eloise and to Aunt Kate. She had been much more frank with Estelle, thinking that her twin would understand, but to her astonishment, Estelle had taken the very same attitude that she'd guessed Eloise would, if she knew the truth. Instead of lauding Phoebe's daring, she had been appalled, drawing some very unflattering parallels with Mama.

Poor Mama. Phoebe had always known that Eloise didn't understand her, and to be fair, their eldest sister had borne the brunt of Mama's rather careless attitude towards her children. But Mama was a free spirit. Eloise couldn't see how trapped she must have been, by the bonds of matrimony and the expectations of society. It was tragic, for the terrible mismatch that was their parents' marriage made both Mama and Papa very unhappy, and it could not be denied that their children suffered too, but Mama was such a very bright and particular star, it was quite wrong to judge her by the usual standards. To keep such a glamorous, wild creature confined was like imprisoning a beautiful butterfly in a bell jar. Eloise had never understood this but Phoebe had, and she'd assumed that Estelle did too though they never discussed it, out of respect for their elder sister's views.

But Estelle's response to Phoebe's shy confession of her affaire with Pascal had made her position very clear. She imagined Phoebe was in thrall to Pascal rather than in love with him, as if she

was blind and had no mind of her own. And she had been rather scathing on the subject of Pascal's involvement too, to the point where Phoebe had even begun to doubt whether he could really be in love with her. She had never in a thousand years expected Pascal to notice her, yet from the first he had seemed to rate her in the kitchen, and he'd made it clear that he found her attractive. She had been hugely flattered, had expected his interest to wane with time, but it had increased. Estelle was wrong. The bond between them was special. It hurt, that her twin didn't understand that, but Estelle obviously hadn't inherited any of Mama's free spirit, so there was no point in trying to sway her. When she came to Paris and saw for herself how deliriously happy Phoebe was, and what a success she was making of her life, she would stop trying to persuade her to come home, but until then, they'd have to agree to differ.

In future, she would be a little more careful in her letters to Estelle. She would definitely not be telling her of this encounter for a start, Phoebe thought, smiling back at Mr Harrington as he returned, armed triumphantly with a new *pichet* of wine. Even though she had eyes only for Pascal, she was not blind to the Englishman's attractions. Although his dark blond hair and cornflower-blue eyes made him look more Norse god than English gentleman, an impression initially formed by the way he'd strode across the room to her rescue earlier, heedless of the fact that he was outnumbered. He was dressed with the kind of careless elegance that only the very rich and the supremely confident can carry off, and there was in his smile a kind of devil-may-care recklessness. Was she being fanciful? No, the term dangerously attractive might have been invented for him.

In fact, if it were not for Pascal, she would be very tempted to spend more time in Owen Harrington's company, while he was in Paris. He had none of Pascal's Gallic flamboyance, a characteristic which Phoebe very occasionally and most disloyally felt teetered over into arrogance. She certainly couldn't imagine Mr Harrington waxing lyrical in the middle of a market over the first ceps of the year, or tearing his hair if they had already sold out, but then she couldn't imagine Pascal rescuing her with such finesse from those two men who had accosted her. Pascal would have come charging over waving his fists and shouting, drawing the attention of everyone in the room to her plight. If he actually noticed she was being harassed in the first place, that is. While Mr Harrington had acted with a quiet self-confidence that was far more effective and infinitely more discreet. Though he was very far from being the stuffed shirt that the Parisians imagined all English gentlemen to be, he was clearly very much a gentleman. Paris would take to him, and he to Paris, Phoebe reckoned. It was a shame, she thought, as he sat back down beside her, that she would not be party to it.

'*Santé*,' Phoebe said, touching her fresh glass to his. 'Now, you were going to tell me what it is that brings you to Paris?'

'To quote the dictionary man, Dr Johnson, when a man is tired of London he is tired of life.' He stared down at his wine, swirling his glass. 'I'm here because I'm sick of both London and my life there, but that makes me sound like an over-indulged, arrogant narcissist.'

'What is the truth?'

'That I'm chasing rainbows, like you, though I don't have any particular pot of gold in mind as yet. I want to—not so much discover who I am as who I might become. Lord, that really does sound pompous.'

'No, it sounds exciting.'

He laughed wryly. 'Excitingly vague. I envy you your certainty and your verve. You know what you want, and you don't care if you have to flout convention to achieve it. I can't tell you how refreshing that is, and how much I admire you for it.'

'You make me sound like a rebel.'

'I think you are, even if you don't realise it. I have always thought myself a bit of a rebel, but I simply behave badly in the conventional manner of spoiled, rich young men. You have widened my horizons already, Miss Brannagh. Until now, I've never had any ambition other than to enjoy myself.'

'Goodness, how lucky you are to be able to indulge yourself.'

‘I inherited a fortune from my father, who died ten years ago when I was sixteen. Since I came of age, I have been the toast of society, both high and low. If one pays heed to the scandal sheets I am the richest, the wildest, the wittiest, most handsome, most daring, man in London. My presence can make or break a dinner party or a ball. I never refuse a dare and have never suffered anything worse than a broken wrist in doing so. In a nutshell, for all of my twenty-six years, I’ve lived a charmed existence. Or so my best friend, Jasper, tells me. What I’ve come to wonder, these last few months, is whether what I’m living is actually a feckless and shallow one.’

‘Good heavens,’ Phoebe exclaimed, taken aback and extremely intrigued. ‘Are you being entirely serious?’

‘I am never serious, unless it’s regarding something trivial.’

‘Estelle, my twin, does that,’ Phoebe said. ‘Resorts to sarcasm when she’s embarrassed, I mean, or when she’s talking about something that she cares deeply about.’

‘My problem is that I don’t care very deeply about anything.’

‘That can’t be true!’

‘No less an authority than *John Bull* magazine described me as “a dedicated hedonist with a penchant for death-defying dares, who cares for naught but funning.”’

Was he teasing her? There was an edge to his smile though. ‘Save that you are bored with having fun and have come to Paris to—I’m sorry, I still don’t know what specifically you hope to gain from your visit?’

‘No more do I, Miss Brannagh, save that it is a very different city from London, and I am already glad that I decided to visit, since I have made your acquaintance. If only you lacked the funds for your restaurant, I would offer to go into business with you, but sadly for me, you can already finance your dream.’

‘Then fund your own dream. You must have one, Mr Harrington. Everyone has a dream.’

‘Do they?’ He threw the contents of his glass down his throat in one gulp. ‘I am living most people’s dream, and it bores me rigid. I am carefree and I couldn’t care less. I’m an *ungrateful* over-indulged, arrogant narcissist, for there is a part of me that wishes I had not been so blessed, then I may have had something to live for.’

‘You should be careful what you wish for, Mr Harrington,’ Phoebe retorted, ‘and grateful for what you have.’

‘Well said, Miss Brannagh. You are quite right, of course. I need a purpose in life. Though what form that will take, and whether I will discover it in Paris, or Venice, or St Petersburg or Vienna, I have no idea.’

‘Why look so close to home? If you are as rich as you claim, you could try the Antipodes, or Brazil, or Argentina.’

‘Or China, perhaps? I’ll tell you what, why don’t we meet here in—say, a year’s time, and I shall unveil the new, improved Owen Harrington to you, and you can then invite me to dine at your new restaurant, which by then will be the toast of Paris.’

‘I’m not sure that a year will be sufficient for either to have happened.’

‘Two years then. Are we agreed?’

His smile was infectious. ‘Two years to the day,’ Phoebe said, smiling back. ‘You have my word, Mr Harrington.’

He took out a gold case, handing her a card from it. ‘And you have mine. Take this, in the unlikely event you need to get in touch before then, to break our assignation, which I sincerely hope does not happen. Otherwise I look forward very much to seeing you again.’

She put the card in her reticule, smiling at the absurdity of it. He poured the dregs of the wine. They raised their glasses in a toast, and their eyes met, and the oddest thing happened. It felt as if time stopped. As if the room and the people in it melted away. And there was only the two of them.

‘Phoebe!’

She leapt to her feet, spilling her wine. 'Pascal!'

'Who the hell is this?'

Mr Harrington was on his feet, making a bow. 'Owen Harrington. I met Miss Brannagh quite by accident, but it was a happy coincidence, for I was able to bring her news of her sister, the Countess of Fearnock, with whom I am acquainted. How do you do, Monsieur Solignac.'

Pascal gave a short bow. He was frowning suspiciously at Mr Harrington. 'Mr Harrington didn't like the idea of my sitting alone so late at night,' Phoebe said. 'He was kindly keeping me company until you arrived.'

'I am grateful to him, but I am here now.'

Mortified by his aggressive tone, Phoebe would have remonstrated, but Mr Harrington was already taking his leave. '*Monsieur*,' he said, making a brief bow. 'Miss Brannagh,' he said, pressing her hand briefly. '*Adieu*.'

He threw some notes on to the table, enough to have paid for all the wine for the entire room for the evening, then with a curt nod, he left.

Despite her lover's arrival, Phoebe was suddenly despondent, and disappointed to have her encounter with Mr Harrington cut short in such a brusque manner. 'I am tired,' she said. 'It's very late, I've had more than enough wine and I want to go home.'

Chapter Two

London —October 1830

Phoebe stepped out of the hackney cab that had transported her from the posting house and gazed apprehensively at the imposing town house. The front door was painted a glossy black, the brass knocker and bell pull brightly polished. She shivered, pulling her cloak around her. It had been sunny when she left Paris, but the rain had set in at Calais, and had poured down relentlessly ever since, reflecting her mood.

She checked her watch needlessly. It was just after ten in the morning. Far too early to be calling on anyone. The shutters of the town house were not closed, which meant someone was in residence, but not necessarily the person she sought. So much could have happened in the intervening two years. He might have changed address. He could be married and settled. It was perfectly possible he was still travelling the world.

He could even be dead, for all she knew. After all, he hadn't turned up at the Procope café in August as arranged. She'd told herself that it was ridiculous of her to expect him to, that their so-called assignation had been light-hearted banter, nothing more, but she'd gone anyway, three nights in a row. When each night ended without him making an appearance she had been bitterly and quite disproportionately disappointed. She had been so eager to hear what he'd made of his life, fervently hoping it would counterbalance the disaster which constituted her own. She had tried hard not to attach undue significance to his failure to turn up, but it had felt like the last straw, a signal to cut and run. Though she had struggled on for another few weeks, in her head, his non-appearance marked the end of her dream.

Which was one of the reasons why she was here, hoping against hope that Mr Harrington had succeeded where she had so signally failed. Though he probably wouldn't even remember their brief encounter in Paris, she thought despondently. If by some miracle he was in residence and did agree to see her, there was every chance that he'd look straight through her, as if confronted by a complete stranger. Which, in essence, she was.

A footman was eyeing her cagily from the steps of a house across the street. She probably looked suspicious loitering in this genteel locale unaccompanied. Phoebe climbed the first step. If Mr Harrington was not here—oh, God, no, she couldn't bear to think of the alternative. *Please let him be here*, she whispered to herself. *Please*.

The footman was making his way across the street to accost her. Phoebe climbed the remainder of the shallow steps and rang the bell.

The door was opened just a crack by a stern, elderly servant. 'May I help you?' he asked, making it clear that he thought it very unlikely that he could.

She held out the worn card which had lain in the recesses of her reticule for over two years. 'Does Mr Harrington still live here?'

'Yes, but I'm afraid he does not receive visitors.'

Startled, she was about to ask why ever not, when the man made to close the door in her face. 'Please, will you ask him if he will make an exception for me?' Phoebe said urgently. 'My name is Miss Phoebe Brannagh. From Paris, tell him, the young lady from the Procope Café.'

* * *

'Phoebe Brannagh,' Owen repeated.

'The young lady wasn't sure if you would remember her,' his butler informed him, careful to keep his expression bland. 'You met in Paris, apparently.'

Not long before his life had changed for ever, in fact. 'Our paths did cross,' Owen said, 'but I can't possibly see her.'

Propped up in bed, his hands hidden under the sheets, he rubbed the extensive scarring on the backs of them compulsively. Phoebe Brannagh! His thoughts often drifted back to their encounter in the Procope. Beautiful, passionate, ambitious and determined, she was unforgettable. He had left the café that night inspired, invigorated, full of optimism for the future, not exactly full of plans but certainly full of determination. He had recalled, many times since, her words of caution when he had so foolishly bemoaned his privileged lifestyle. *'You should be careful what you wish for, Mr Harrington,'* she had said, *'and grateful for what you have.'*

Such prescient words. In the months which followed, in the aftermath, how often he had wished he'd heeded them earlier, returned to London, satisfied with his lot. He might have remained feckless and shallow, but at least he'd have still been himself.

'No,' he repeated, 'I can't possibly see her, it is out of the question.'

'Very well, sir. Shall I convey the usual message?'

The usual message. That Mr Harrington was not at home to callers under any circumstances. Owen hesitated on the brink of assent. What on earth was she doing here, in London? He had wondered, back in August, if she had honoured their assignation. Though it was impossible for him to make the journey he'd still felt guilty, picturing her sitting on her own up in that top room of the Procope sipping wine and waiting for him, just as she had waited patiently, night after night, for Solignac. Had she realised her dream of opening her own restaurant? Were she and the chef who had her under his spell still sharing both a kitchen and a bed? For his part, he fervently hoped not the latter. The little he'd seen and heard of the man had made him certain Miss Brannagh deserved a great deal better.

Why was she here now? It was ludicrous to imagine her concern for him, sparked by his failure to turn up in August as agreed, had brought her all the way to England, though if the boot had been on the other foot, he might well have done just that, for he had imagined their second meeting countless times. During the darkest days, when the memory of her zest for life had been a small beacon of light, he had imagined himself well, fit, successful. Happy. He had dreamed up endless versions of how his life had turned out, picturing himself recounting them to her in the cosy light of the Procope, a *pichet* of wine and two half-empty glasses on the table.

What had she achieved in the last two years? Now he had the opportunity to find out, was he really going to pass it up? He was genuinely curious, which was a refreshing change from his increasing indifference to the world and its inhabitants. *Miss* Phoebe Brannagh, she had declared herself, though that didn't necessarily mean she wasn't married, merely that it was the name he would recognise. The chances that she had abandoned the kitchens for an easier, more prosaic life were high, but Owen hoped Phoebe had remained true to her highly individual self, and beaten the odds. The more abjectly he felt he had failed, the more fervently he had hoped that she had found success in Paris.

Though if she had, then why was she here? Her family lived in England, he recalled. It could be that she was visiting, and on a whim had decided to look him up. But why hadn't she written to ask if she could call, if that was the case? And why call at such an early hour? In the old days, he'd have been up since dawn, would have gone for a ride or a run with Jasper while the roads were quiet, or he'd have had a fencing lesson, a shooting lesson, put in some time sparring or at the gymnasium. He could barely recall those days now. When he did, it was as if it was a dream, as if it had all happened to a different person.

Which it had. He was utterly changed in every way. His accident had destroyed him physically. He had battled back for a while, regaining some measure of mobility, but the slough of despond he was sinking into of late was like a pool of black tar, slowly smothering him. His world was muffled, devoid of any feeling, and not even on his best days, when he could just about recognise the importance of not throwing in the towel, did he feel any inclination to take action. He couldn't possibly let Miss Brannagh see him in this sorry and broken state.

Though he wanted to see her. Hearing about her success might just act as a balm for his malaise. It was a ridiculous notion, to imagine that her triumph could offset his disaster, but it might, it just might make him feel a tiny bit better, even give him the kick up the backside he required. And if he didn't see her, he'd always wonder, wouldn't he, what had become of her?

'Wait,' he called to Bremner, who hadn't in fact moved. 'Have her shown to the breakfast parlour. Light the fire there, and in the morning room. Offer her tea. Food. She likes food. Offer her breakfast. Tell her I will join her presently. I need a bath.'

His butler rushed to do his bidding, failing to hide his astonishment, for visitors, Miss Braidwood's dutiful calls aside, were unheard of these days. Owen slumped back on his pillows, already having to fight the urge to change his mind. It hadn't been one of his better weeks. He'd barely crawled out of bed since that last depressing visit from Olivia. He rubbed his jaw, averting his eyes from his un-gloved hands. He needed a shave. He was going to have to work a minor miracle to make himself look even halfway respectable.

Pushing back the bedclothes, Owen placed his feet gingerly on the ground, gritting his teeth as the familiar searing pain shot through his right leg. He had abandoned the exercises prescribed by his doctors. The regime had succeeded to a point, but he'd long ago hit a plateau. He'd been an athlete once. Those simple, tedious stretches, which were the limit of what his doctors thought he could manage, reminded him that he never would be again.

Dammit, he was not using his stick. It was always worst first thing, he simply had to endure it. He took a faltering step, cursing the grinding pain in his hip, forcing another step and another, slowly making his way to the new bathing room he'd had installed, locking the door securely behind him. It was an unnecessary act, as he had no valet, and all the household knew not to intrude on him on pain of death, but it made him feel better all the same.

* * *

The breakfast served to her was good plain fare, but though she had not eaten properly for days, Phoebe could only manage a few desultory forkfuls of eggs and ham. She drank an entire pot of tea though. Tea didn't taste the same in Paris, somehow. The different water probably accounted for it. She was gratefully accepting a boiling kettle to brew a fresh pot and wondering what could be keeping Mr Harrington, and why on earth he did not receive visitors, when the door to the breakfast parlour opened and he finally appeared.

She was so shocked that for a moment she couldn't move from her place at the table. He looked as if he had aged ten years. His hair had darkened, he wore it considerably longer than before, and he had lost a good deal of weight. Lines were etched between his nose and his mouth, and more lines fanned out from the corners of his eyes, which were darkly shadowed. Nature had given him excellent bones, and the loss of weight, instead of making him look gaunt, drew attention to his razor-sharp cheekbones, and to the clean lines of his jaw. He was still a very handsome man, but missing the ready smile and easy charm that had previously complemented his looks, the impression he now gave was forbidding, almost intimidating.

Belatedly, Phoebe got to her feet, making her way to the door where Mr Harrington remained stationery. 'Good morning. I'm so sorry to intrude on you so early.' Her smile faltered. 'I wasn't even sure that you'd remember me, until your butler offered me breakfast, which he wouldn't have done if I was a complete stranger.'

'Miss Brannagh, I have never forgotten that night, or you.' Her host sketched a bow. 'Please, finish eating.'

'I have done, thank you, but I am happy to sit while you partake.'

'I have ordered coffee, that will suffice for me.'

She had preceded him back to the table. Only as she resumed her seat did she notice his pronounced limp and the spasm of pain that crossed his face as he put his right foot down. 'You're hurt. Here, let me...'

He yanked a chair out and sat down heavily. 'Thank you, but I prefer to manage for myself.'

The stern butler arrived bearing a silver pot of coffee, which he poured immediately before leaving them alone, and which Mr Harrington drank back in a single gulp, without bothering to add either sugar or cream. He was wearing gloves. Tan gloves, tightly fitted, so she hadn't noticed them at first.

'Would you like some ham? Eggs?' Phoebe said, making a conscious effort not to stare.

He poured himself a second cup, this time taking a smaller sip. 'Thank you, no. I find I do not have much of an appetite these days.' He eyed her half-empty plate. 'Not up to your exacting standards, Miss Brannagh?'

'I'm not very hungry either.'

His complexion was pale. The man she remembered had been glowing with health. This man looked careworn, the lines on his face, she deduced, carved by pain.

'You look shocked. Aren't you going to ask what happened to me?'

'I get the strong impression you'd much prefer that I didn't.'

He drained his cup. 'I had an accident. My recuperation has been prolonged. As you can see for yourself, I am not the man I once was. And that is all there is to be said.'

Or at least, all that he *would* say. He wanted neither pity nor curiosity, that much was clear. Phoebe bit back her questions, opting instead for frankness. 'As you have no doubt deduced from my appearance at your door at this most unfashionable hour Mr Harrington, my circumstances have also changed since we last met.'

'Really?' He pushed his saucer to one side, wincing as he shifted in his chair to stretch his leg out, before turning his attention back to her, his frown deepening as he did so. 'Actually,' he said, 'I can see that you are different. It is as if the light has gone out of you. You can have no idea how sorry I am to see that. I had hoped that at least one of us would have been toasting their success in August.'

'You remembered!'

'Of course I did, and would have been there if it had been humanly possible, but as you can see, I'm in no condition to travel to the other side of the street, far less Paris.'

'I went,' Phoebe admitted sheepishly. 'To the Procope. I hoped—' She broke off, colouring.

'You hoped as I did, that at least one of us would have something to toast. I take it then, that you do not?'

'No.'

'What happened?'

The sheer magnitude of recent events threatened to overwhelm her. She could not possibly ask him for help, not when he was so obviously enduring his own private hell. Phoebe got to her feet. 'I wish you well with your recovery, but I really shouldn't intrude any longer.'

'Miss Brannagh, please wait.'

She was at the door, about to open it when a crash and a shouted oath made her whirl around. Mr Harrington was on his feet, but only just, clutching the edge of the table. His cup and saucer and the coffee pot were on the floor.

'Spare me the indignity of having to call my butler to prevent you leaving.'

'You have troubles of your own. I have no wish to further burden you with my tale of woe.'

He held out his hand, his voice softening marginally. 'Then distract me from mine by recounting yours. If you can bear to.'

* * *

Miss Brannagh stepped reluctantly back into the room. Stooping to pick up the shattered fragments of crockery and the coffee pot, she paused, cast him an enquiring look, then completed the task when Owen reluctantly assented. His servants would see yet more evidence of his clumsiness, albeit neatly stacked on the table and not abandoned on the floor, but they were used to it by now.

At least the coffee pot had been empty. 'Thank you,' he said as she sat back down across the table from him.

'You haven't eaten anything. It's not good to start the day on an empty stomach.'

'The food won't go to waste, the kitchen staff get any leftovers.'

'I am pleased to hear that, but it wasn't my point.'

'I am not a child who needs cajoled into eating, Miss Brannagh. You cannot fix me with coddled eggs.' He regretted the words as soon as they were out, but it was too late to take them back. Owen sighed, exasperated. 'Very well, I will take some of the damned—dashed eggs.'

She smiled at him encouragingly. 'And perhaps just a sliver of this lovely ham?'

Lacking the will or energy to deny her, he shrugged, studying her as she set about creating a plate of breakfast for him that he had no appetite for. Her smile had momentarily lit up her face, reminding him of the glowing beauty he'd met in Paris, and making the changes in her so much more stark by comparison. She was dressed simply and elegantly in a grey travelling gown, but it hung loosely on her slender frame. He remembered her laughingly telling him how much she loved to eat. He remembered her figure as generous, like her smile. She had lost weight, and he was, unfortunately, willing to bet that it had not been down to working in the heat of the kitchen. As she handed him his plate—like an offering, he thought—smiling at him tentatively, pleadingly, it struck him that what she'd lost most was her confidence. Exactly as he'd said, the light had gone out in her. Ironically, since their paths had parted they had arrived at the same destination, not success but despair.

He eyed the dish she presented him with, the wafer-thin slices of ham curled elegantly into rosettes, the eggs topped with a knob of melting butter, two slices of bread, the crusts removed, cut into delicate triangles. He really didn't want it, but he didn't want to seem churlish by refusing. 'Thank you, Miss Brannagh, this looks most appetising,' Owen said, awkwardly picking up his knife and fork.

'They say we eat with our eyes. Presentation is much underrated by most cooks. It is one of the first things I learned from—shall I have your butler bring fresh coffee?'

He shook his head.

'In Paris, the juice of freshly squeezed oranges is often served in the morning, but the French don't really take breakfast seriously as a meal the way we do. Are you sure you don't want some fresh coffee with that? Or perhaps—perhaps I should simply be quiet and allow you to eat. I talk too much when I'm nervous.'

Her mouth trembled. When she poured herself some more tea, her hand shook. What the devil had happened to her! He'd wager her revered Solignac had some hand in it. He had already taken against the man before he'd finally turned up late at the Procope, and his appearance in the flesh had simply confirmed Owen's dislike. An ill-mannered bully with an inflated sense of his own importance who took his lover for granted.

He forced the last mouthful of breakfast down, and was rewarded with a smile.

'You see, you were hungry after all.'

'Apparently,' he said drily.

'The eggs were a little over. It is very difficult to keep eggs from spoiling, but the simple solution is to add a little knob of butter, I don't know why more people don't realise it. Forgive me, the last thing you need is a culinary lecture.'

Owen pushed his plate away and eased himself carefully to his feet, biting the inside of his cheek as the anticipated fierce stab of pain shot through his damaged hip. 'We'll retire to the morning room, if you are finished with your tea. It is the second door on your left.'

Ushering her ahead of him, he followed her slowly, resisting the urge to use the wall for support, mortified by how vulnerable he felt without his stick. He would not fall over. He bloody well would *not* fall over.

Lowering himself into the wing-back chair by the fireside, he felt as if he'd completed an epic journey, closing his eyes, taking a moment to get his breathing under control, wondering if the

doctors had been right after all, and that the pathetic and rudimentary exercise regime at least served to prevent his health from deteriorating further. The footstool was just out of reach, but as Miss Brannagh made to help, he nudged it towards himself with his good leg.

‘Thank you, but I’m not entirely helpless.’

He waved her to the chair opposite, where she sat, hands clasped tightly, on the edge of the seat. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Stop apologising. Please.’ Adjusting his foot on the stool, he tried to force a smile, but it felt strained, and probably looked more like a grimace. ‘Now, Miss Brannagh, that we are more comfortable, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?’

‘Well first of all—I know it’s silly—but when you didn’t show up at the Procope I wondered why. I hoped that whatever your reason for not being there, that you had fared better than me.’

‘Then you have been sorely disappointed, I’m afraid. I assume you are on your way to visit one of your sisters or—did you say you had an aunt?’

‘Aunt Kate. Lady Elmswood. She lives in Shropshire.’ She gazed down at her hands, which were white at the knuckles, she was clasping them so tightly together. ‘I’m not planning on visiting family just at the moment.’

‘Then may I ask what has brought you to England—assuming that your concern for my non-appearance at the Procope in August is not the main reason.’

She took a visible breath. ‘The truth is that I have lost absolutely everything, including almost every penny of the settlement Eloise made on me. I could not have failed more abjectly and I can’t—I simply cannot face my family until I’ve found my feet again.’

‘Good lord! What on earth happened?’

‘Exactly what my sister Estelle predicted.’

‘Monsieur Solignac,’ Owen said, fatalistically.

‘You don’t sound very surprised.’

‘I wish I had misjudged him, Miss Brannagh.’

‘You cannot wish that more fervently than I.’

‘Tell me.’

She winced. ‘It sounds as if you have already guessed. I was dazzled by him. Everyone was, who came into contact with him—everyone that is, save Estelle and by the sounds of it, yourself. I thought myself the luckiest woman in the world to have been taken under his wing as his protégée, to be allowed to train under him, and I thought that I was progressing well.’

‘I remember,’ Owen said, ‘you had reached the dizzy heights of patisserie. I had no idea what that meant, but it seemed to mean a good deal to you.’

‘Yes, it did. And I kept progressing, or so I thought. Pascal even permitted me to introduce a few of my own dishes to the menu. The rest of the kitchen brigade treated me as a fellow chef, not a woman. I thought I was earning their respect too. Perhaps I was, but it was more likely they knew me for Pascal’s—Pascal’s lover.’ She coloured violently. ‘I expect you will think that a shocking admission—my sisters were both shocked to the core.’

‘Miss Brannagh, I guessed when we met that your—your heart was engaged.’

‘You did? I thought at the time that I had been discreet, but I should have known better. I’m not very good at disguising my feelings.’ She stared at him, her face set defiantly. ‘I’m not ashamed of them, or what I did. They view affaires of the heart very differently in Paris.’

‘And you were very much in love with Paris.’

‘And with Pascal—or so I thought,’ Miss Brannagh replied, looking mortified. ‘It is probably difficult for you to understand, but in the kitchen, passions run so very high, and Pascal—he was—he is—the most passionate of all.’

‘But your feelings were not reciprocated?’

‘I thought they were. Perhaps they were a little bit, for a time. Or perhaps I’m just fooling myself. You’ve guessed what happened, haven’t you? I don’t suppose it’s difficult. Anyone but me would have seen it coming. That’s what Estelle said.’

‘You were living your dream,’ Owen said. ‘That stayed with me, your sheer determination, the way you embraced it all, the way you defied convention to do so. Living life to the full, that’s what you said you were doing.’

‘Did I? That was what Mama used to say. She was rather more successful at it than me.’

‘What happened?’

‘Oh, it turned out that Pascal didn’t covet me at all, only my money. From the first, when Monsieur Salois—he is the Duke of Brockmore’s chef—recommended me to his kitchens at Eloise’s behest, Pascal knew I was rich. He was so—so—I couldn’t quite believe that I was actually there, in La Grande Taverne, working for Pascal Solignac. Not only working for him, but—he singled me out. He admired my work. He admired me—he seemed as fascinated by me as I was by him. Even at the time, I thought, why would a man so famous, so charismatic, with all of Paris at his feet would fall in love with me. I was enormously flattered, and I suppose it went to my head. I should have known better.’

‘Miss Brannagh, you do yourself an enormous injustice. If anyone had Paris at their feet, I’d have thought it would have been you.’

She shook her head vehemently. ‘Only because I gave you that impression, because when we met, I was still deluded enough to think that I was what I imagined myself to be. Living life to the full,’ she said sardonically. ‘I don’t have what it takes to make a success of that. I should have known better. I was simply basking in Pascal’s reflected glory.’

‘I think you underestimate yourself. When I saw you...’

‘As I said, when you saw me, I was deluded. We shared a common dream, Pascal and I, but only one of us would achieve it, and the other one would pay dearly. You can guess which was which. We spent hours after service talking of our restaurant, planning the menus. Pascal felt his genius was wasted, having to conform to the dictates of La Grande Taverne’s owner. Only in our own place would he be free to unleash his true artistry. And I would be there at his side, Paris’s best and most inventive *sous-chef*. That is what we agreed. That is what he promised me.’

‘But when he had your money, his promises proved to be empty?’

She shuddered. ‘The premises were purchased in his name. As a foreigner, I could not own property. As a woman I was apparently not permitted a bank account in France. I don’t even know how much of what he told me was true, I never thought to check. I trusted him implicitly. The new restaurant opened in June this year. What should have been the best night of my life turned into the worst. I had always admired Pascal’s burning ambition but it hid a ruthless streak, as I found out to my cost. He didn’t even wait until the staff had gone home. When the doors closed and the opening-night party began, he took me to one side and told me that he didn’t need me any more. I had served my purpose, and he cast me off like a dirty dish rag.’

She curled her lip. ‘I had been incredibly naïve not to realise that all he had ever wanted from me was my money, but I didn’t take it lying down. I didn’t fight for his affections, though I thought my heart broken, but I fought for what was mine. It was futile. Pascal can do no wrong in Paris’s eyes, and he wields a great deal of influence. No one would believe the word of a deluded, scorned Englishwoman, against Paris’s new culinary king. He made sure of that.’

Her eyes sparked with anger. ‘According to Pascal, he took me in as a favour to Monsieur Salois and tolerated me for far too long because as everyone knows, who has ever met Pascal, he is such a soft-hearted fool, beguiled by a pretty face and a well-turned ankle! Also according to Pascal, he covered up my many mistakes in the kitchen, and took me into his bed because I made it so difficult for him to refuse. The fact that it was my bed in my apartment—but that too, he claimed was my idea. Then when my inflated opinion of my own abilities caused me to demand that I had a place

in his new venture, he had no option but to disillusion me. And to ensure that every other restaurant in Paris was similarly disillusioned.

‘So there you have it, my full, sorry and pathetic tale. I tried, heaven knows I have tried to secure gainful employment in another kitchen since. But no one would take me on, and the only offers I received were of a—a very different nature. Paris is a wonderful city when you are happy, when you feel that nothing is impossible, that the future is bright. But when your dreams are shattered, when you dare not look into the future for fear of what you might see, then Paris feels like living in a nightmare. I could hardly bring myself to stay in that apartment when he moved out, but I had nowhere else to go. Now the lease has run out, and I am quite penniless. If I started as a kitchen maid, perhaps I could scramble my way back up, but not in Paris. I love that city so much, but it is tarnished for ever for me now.’

Though her eyes were over-bright, she had not shed a single tear in the telling of this appalling tale. Owen would have given a great deal to throttle Solignac’s scrawny, arrogant neck, but Miss Brannagh was determined to take the blame for the man’s ruthless ambition and callous, abominable treatment of her. In fact she seemed to think she deserved it. Not content with stealing her money and her heart, Solignac had also stripped Miss Brannagh of her self-confidence. ‘And was he right,’ Owen asked tentatively, ‘about your culinary ability—or lack of it?’

Her shoulders slumped. ‘That is the hardest thing of all for me—he’s made me question just that. All I’ve ever wanted to do is to cook, and it’s the only thing I’ve ever thought I was good at. I was astounded by how well I did under Pascal’s tutelage, but I truly believed it was because I was learning fast, that my promotions were all merited. When he told me that I hadn’t earned any of it, that he wouldn’t ever have promoted me beyond peeling potatoes—I don’t know, Mr Harrington, perhaps I was out of my depth. Perhaps I am simply a competent domestic cook. I’d like to think not. I’d like to think that I can cook to a professional standard, but all I know for certain is that I still want to cook.’

‘Bravo, Miss Brannagh, you are bowed but unbroken,’ Owen said, though he was furious, for it was clearly far from the truth. As he suspected, Solignac had knocked the stuffing out of her.

‘I thought I was broken. I hope that I can put myself back together.’

‘I am very glad to hear that. You have taken some appalling and undeserved knocks, but your spirit has not been completely extinguished.’

‘We’ll see. I’m absolutely determined to try again, which is why I’m here. I got myself into this mess and I am determined to get myself out of it without falling back on my family.’ She paused to take a visible breath. ‘When I met you in Paris, you told me that you were the toast of society.’

‘Once upon a time, but I’m afraid I no longer go out in society, Miss Brannagh, and I’m not quite sure—’

‘You still have contacts, influence?’ she interrupted. ‘You see, I need a job, Mr Harrington. I need work. If I have to start at the bottom I will, though I would prefer—but I know I am not in a position to make demands. Only a request. Does anyone of your acquaintance need a cook?’

‘You want me to find you a position in domestic service?’ he exclaimed, astounded.

‘I would be for ever in your debt if you could.’

Undoubtedly he could. His influence was such that he could find her a position in any of the best households in London, if he chose to exert it. ‘Why not ask your sister for a recommendation? The Countess of Fearnock...’

‘No! No, no, no. It’s not that I can’t, Mr Harrington, it’s that I won’t. I won’t be pitied. Eloise would never say I told you so, but it would be worse than that, she’d blame herself for letting me go abroad in the first place. She was very shocked, when she and her husband came to Paris back in April last year, and discovered—I’m still not sure how—my affaire with Pascal. She did not tell me that I was making a mistake in investing the money she had given me in the restaurant, she promised both Estelle and I that we could spend our settlement as we pleased, but I could see she was very concerned. I tried to persuade her she need not worry, but she obviously did, for she sent Estelle to

talk sense into me at the end of last year. My twin had no compunction in making *her* feelings known. We parted on very bad terms.'

'And Estelle would say I told you so, if you went to her now?'

'Probably, and she'd have every right to, but she'd reserve her vitriol for Pascal. It may be perverse of me, but I don't relish the idea of being seen as a witless victim. It was my decision to go to Paris, a gamble that didn't pay off. Pascal exploited my passion and ambition, but I—oh, I was easily duped, let's face it. He told me what I wanted to hear.'

For the first time, a tear escaped her eye, though she wiped it hurriedly away. 'I can't get in touch with Estelle. She'll be furious with me for keeping her in ignorance, but she'd drop everything and come running regardless, if she knew I was in such dire straits, and I don't want her to do that. I've never been at odds with her like this before. We have been out of touch ever since our argument. I miss her so desperately, but I can't—I absolutely *cannot* make up with her until I've redeemed myself. Do you think you can assist me to do that?'

'Mr Harrington?'

Owen blinked. Judging by the concern on her face he'd had one of his episodes, where his mind froze and went blank. But for how long?

'Mr Harrington, are you in pain?'

Not too long, by the sounds of it, or she'd have rung for help. 'I've been sitting still for too long, that's all,' he said brusquely, removing his leg cautiously from the footstool. Pins and needles made it numb. He had no option but to wait until they passed before standing up. 'You were saying?'

'Are you sure you are—can I get you anything?'

'No, I thank you,' he said, hauling himself upright. 'I need to think about what you have told me.'

'Oh. Yes. Indeed.' Miss Brannagh got to her feet. 'I expect I'll stay at the posting house tonight, until I can make other arrangements. You could send a note to me there, if you think of a suitable position.'

She held out her hand, and he took it in his gloved one. Though he had lost some of the feeling in his fingers, her touch still sent a jolt through him, conjuring the fleeting memory of the last time they had held hands like this, and the way time had seemed to stop. He looked down at her work-roughened hands, the tiny healed cuts, the result of constant chopping, the outline of old blisters from cooking on a hot stove. A permanent reminder, as his scars were, in a very different way, of her broken dreams. He no longer dreamed, but if he could help Miss Phoebe Brannagh to pick up the pieces of her life, then he would have rescued something, for her if not for him. It was scant consolation but it was better than nothing.

The kernel of an idea began to form in his mind. It was an outrageous idea. No, he couldn't possibly—or could he? 'You can't stay in a posting house. I'll have Bremner organise a hotel for you.'

'Mr Harrington, I'm afraid I don't have the funds...'

'You can pay me back.'

'I can't possibly...'

'What you need is a good dinner and a night's rest in a comfortable bed,' Owen said firmly, ringing the bell to summon his butler. 'You'll wake up refreshed, and much more prepared to face whatever the day may bring. I will brook no argument.'

'Very well, if you insist, but I will refund you as soon as I can.'

'Fine. Now, I'm going to hand you over to Bremner. Eat well, Miss Brannagh, and sleep well. I will send my carriage for you in the morning.'

She smiled tremulously. 'I don't know how to thank you. You are very kind.'

Not kind, determined, Owen thought, and already feeling a hundred times better than when he'd woken up this morning. 'Until tomorrow,' he said, releasing her hand as Bremner appeared, his man listening with well-disguised surprise to his clipped instructions.

The door closed on the pair of them, and Owen dropped heavily into the nearest chair. It was only just noon but the day, which usually stretched like a vast empty desert in front of him, seemed too short. He had a great deal of thinking to do.

Chapter Three

Confounding her expectations, Phoebe slept soundly in the hotel's huge, extremely comfortable bed. It was delightful to be able to stretch out her limbs, find a cool spot when she was too hot, without worrying she would disturb anyone. *Anyone* being Pascal, a light and fitful sleeper who thought that beds were primarily intended for lovemaking.

She couldn't really remember exactly when and why Pascal had come to move into her apartment. She dimly recalled him mentioning a dispute with his landlady, who wished to charge him for laundering sheets. He had refused to pay, and as a consequence found himself homeless. Why waste time looking for new lodgings which could be more usefully be spent in the kitchen, he'd said, especially as Phoebe's rented apartment was so large it was wasted on just her. Since there was no landlady on the premises to object to their scandalous domestic arrangements, and as the other occupants of the building kept themselves to themselves, Phoebe had come to view their living together as perfectly acceptable. Until Estelle found out.

Estelle had been shocked and furious when Phoebe had finally confessed that she and Pascal were living under one roof—and that Pascal was not paying a *sou* for the privilege. Nothing Phoebe said could convince her sister that such arrangements were acceptable in Paris, nor that the situation could end in anything other than disaster. And Estelle had been proved right.

Right about Pascal, and right about Phoebe's ambition too? Estelle simply couldn't understand why Phoebe was putting herself through the rigorous training and unrelenting hard work of a restaurant kitchen. She couldn't understand why Phoebe wasn't content to cook for her loved ones, why she would put herself through all the effort of serving up food to an unknown public who would have no compunction in deriding it, if it didn't please them. Estelle thought that Phoebe would be much happier spending her settlement on building her dream kitchen in her own home, rather than cooking in someone else's kitchen for complete strangers. Estelle simply didn't understand Phoebe's passion, and this was very difficult to bear, especially since Phoebe completely understood her twin's love of music.

Estelle had a very special gift that elevated her playing above the ordinary. Phoebe had hoped that she had such a gift too, for cooking. Estelle didn't understand that, but she'd hoped Pascal, a culinary genius, would. He'd seemed to, at first, but ultimately she'd either failed to prove herself or he'd been lying to her from the first. Either way, the net result was the same. She had set her sights too high, and she had—predictably—failed. All that was to be done now was to try again, with her sights set lower, to make her own way. Though her heart ached at the wedge which the argument had driven between herself and her twin, she was determined to find a way to re-establish herself before the rift between them could be healed.

What would she do if Mr Harrington could not recommend a suitable post? If he could, she would work night and day to prove herself. *Please*, she said to herself, crossing her fingers, *please let him know of someone*.

Her tummy clenched with nerves. She should enjoy the luxury of having her tea and bread served in bed, ask the maid to have a bath made ready, and make the most of her time in this fabulously indulgent and expensive hotel, not waste it fretting.

* * *

She had succeeded in this small ambition, but when a message arrived informing her that Mr Harrington's town coach awaited her convenience, Phoebe was immediately assailed by anxiety. Even if he could not help her, she was glad of the opportunity to see him again. The conversation yesterday had been focused on her plight. She had learned little of his own travails save the sketchy details he had told her. His accident seemed to have made a recluse of him. When had it happened? How far had he got on his travels after he left Paris? Pain had changed him, but she found it difficult to

believe that the charismatic man she had met two years ago would have given up on the world so completely. He appeared, on reflection, to be a man without hope. Though perhaps she had simply caught him on a bad day.

* * *

‘Miss Brannagh, how do you do today?’ Owen asked, indicating the chair at the fireside she had occupied yesterday. ‘You slept well?’

‘Very well, thank you.’

She sat down, making a fuss over the arranging of her skirts, thoughtfully allowing him time to settle gingerly in his own chair before looking over at him expectantly, and Owen was immediately assailed by doubts. What right had he to ask so much of one so young and so utterly beautiful? She was unhappy now, her pride and her confidence had both taken a severe blow, but she would recover in time. What had seemed so clear in the early hours of the morning, was now clouding in his mind. The enthusiasm which had kept his pain at bay all morning waned, and he became aware once more of the dull, dragging ache in his hip. One step at a time, he reminded himself, as he had so often in the last two years, though this time the steps were metaphorical and not physical.

‘If you had the chance to open your own restaurant here in London, would you take it?’ he asked.

Miss Brannagh’s eyes lit up. ‘My very own establishment, with my own menus, my own dishes. A place where men and women can dine together, as they can in Paris. Just imagine!’

‘That would certainly be unique in London.’

‘Exactly. Aside from private dining rooms, which are the province of the rich and titled, there is nothing like it at present.’

It was a strange thing, but while his accident had left Owen almost completely numb emotionally, he had discovered that something akin to excitement took hold of him when he sensed a good business deal, a sort of tingling in his belly like an attack of nerves. He felt it now. ‘Combine that idea with a female head chef, and you have, if you’ll forgive the pun, a mouthwatering opportunity,’ he said.

Miss Brannagh’s face fell. ‘If only, but that will never happen. It’s probably just as well too, for I’m not at all sure I am good enough to preside over such an establishment.’

‘Not good enough? What happened to being bowed but unbroken?’

‘Nothing happened, I’m simply being realistic. It makes much more sense to aim for what I know I can achieve than to even dream of the impossible. I’ve failed once, I don’t want to fail again.’

‘Solignac seems to have done an excellent job of cutting you down to size, that’s for sure. What if he’s wrong?’

‘He didn’t *cut me down to size*. I was too big for my boots. And it wasn’t only Pascal who thought so, it was...’

‘Your sister, the musician.’

‘Yes.’

Clearly the twin was a very painful subject, Owen, thought to himself. ‘She too could be wrong,’ he offered gently.

‘I’ve already wasted all my money and two years of my life trying to prove that, and look where it’s got me.’

The same two years he had wasted, trying and failing to recover what he had lost. Owen was now utterly determined to help her, if only to prove her superior twin wrong, never mind Solignac, regardless of whether or not in doing so she could help him. ‘Am I right in assuming you would not consider applying to your elder sister for the necessary capital? The Earl of Fearnoch, her husband, is a very rich man...’

‘No! Absolutely not. I would not dream of it. I would rather peel potatoes for the rest of my life than do that. I thought you understood, Mr Harrington.’

‘Owen. Please, call me Owen.’

‘Owen.’ She leaned forward earnestly. ‘Although my sister is wildly in love with her husband, in fact her marriage was arranged. Eloise never wished to marry, she did so in large part to provide Estelle and I with the means to make anything we wanted of our own lives. The fact that she is so happy is wonderful, but it could easily have been otherwise. Though she swore she would not have married Alexander if she had disliked him, to be perfectly frank, I believe it would have taken a great deal to dissuade her. Eloise has done more than enough for me already. I would never ask her under any circumstances, even if our relationship was not at present strained.’

Owen shifted uncomfortably on his chair. The footstool eased the pain in his hip, but if he sat still too long, his damned foot went to sleep. ‘So what you really need is an investor.’

She laughed bitterly. ‘The chances of my finding one are about as high as Pascal begging me to come back to Paris. I may not be a *maverick genius*, but I still think I can cook. But Pascal, who is undoubtedly a maverick genius, says otherwise, and which one of us would the world believe, do you think? I am about as risky a business proposition as you are likely to encounter. I have no references, I’ve been sacked from my one and only position, and I’m a woman. Would you invest in me, Mr Harr—Owen? I don’t think so.’

‘I believe I told you, the first time we met in Paris, that I would and happily.’

‘In jest, when you knew that there was no possibility of my accepting.’

‘I’m not jesting now, I’m perfectly serious.’

Her eyes widened. Her cheeks flushed and then paled. ‘Thank you, you are very kind, very generous, but no, absolutely not.’

‘I’m offering to be your backer, Miss Brannagh, not your protector. Believe me, the last thing I’m in the market for is a mistress. I am not Solignac, beguiled by your *pretty face and well-turned ankle*.’

‘Forgive me, but no one in their right mind would take such a risk with me, and you know nothing about food—in fact I recall you told me that you are a culinary philistine. If you are not offering me a *carte blanche*, then I can only assume that you must feel sorry for me. The answer in either case is the same. I can’t take your money.’

Her refusal didn’t surprise him, but his conscience insisted that he press his point. He had to be sure that she believed his final proposition was her best and not her only option. ‘Miss Brannagh...’

‘Phoebe. Please, call me Phoebe.’

‘Phoebe. Just over two years ago, I realised that I was bored with my feckless existence. As fate would have it, my travels were cut short, but my desire for some sort of occupation is one of the few things I didn’t lose. Circumstances left me with a lot of time on my hands. I don’t sleep well, I rarely go out and I fill a great many of the empty hours with reading. I subscribe to countless periodicals, I read every newspaper, and all the Parliamentary reports. The net effect is that I know what’s going on the world I no longer inhabit, and I have discovered that I have an instinct for investment opportunities. It’s like a sixth sense. I have a nose for making money. My father left me very wealthy. By investing that money wisely I’ve made myself rich beyond most people’s wildest imaginings. Which is a long-winded way of saying that I have a hunch that you are worth investing in.’

‘But you have no evidence to support that,’ Phoebe said, becoming agitated. ‘I could have a completely inflated opinion of my own abilities. And even if I don’t, you are underestimating how *radical* my venture would be. Eating in a restaurant is a much more established tradition in Paris than it is in London—in restaurants such as Le Grand Véfou for example, the clientele is mixed. But as far as I know, the only similar place here is Crockford’s and that is for gentlemen only. Imagine the scandal, Owen, if a restaurant were to open in London which served food to both sexes, and had a woman running the kitchen.’

‘What you call scandal, I would call priceless free publicity.’

‘No, no, no. I want my food to speak for itself, I don’t want people to come to gawk at me.’

‘Phoebe, your idea is as you said, revolutionary. I hope that your customers would return for the food, but initially, you are going to have to accept that many of them will want, as you put it, to gawk at you.’

‘Then it’s as well that it’s all just a pipe dream,’ she said, once again becoming dejected. ‘I need to earn my living, not accept charity, no matter how well intentioned.’

Here was a gilt-edged opening. Owen braced himself, taken aback to discover that his heart was hammering, though perhaps it wasn’t so surprising, with no less than three lives at stake. ‘There is another way,’ he said carefully. ‘An arrangement which would allow me to invest in you, and for you to legitimately earn my backing.’

‘What arrangement could that possibly be?’

Get on with it, Owen urged himself, but now it came to the crux, he was loathe to reveal the true extent of his suffering, and not at all sure he could even explain it without sounding like the madman he had for a while imagined himself to be. His instinct was to get to his feet, to pace, to *move*, but moving entailed pain, and pain interfered with his concentration and induced those lost moments.

‘Bear with me,’ he said, for Phoebe was starting to look concerned. ‘What I have to say is—it is difficult.’

‘More difficult than confessing that you are penniless, heartbroken and humiliated, as I yesterday?’

‘Are you heartbroken?’

She shook her head. ‘I thought I was at first, but I think my pride and my self-esteem were far more damaged than my heart. It’s not possible to be in love with a man who loves only himself. If I loved Pascal, truly loved him, I’d want him back, wouldn’t I? And I don’t.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. Wouldn’t you like to prove him wrong though, Phoebe? Wouldn’t you like the chance to prove yourself right?’

‘I don’t know. Yes, of course I would, but—’

‘Let me help you,’ he interrupted before she could once again denigrate her abilities. ‘There is a way to secure the funds you need to open your restaurant in an entirely respectable and above-board manner.’

‘How?’

‘Marry me. As my wife the marriage settlement I would make would be legitimately yours to do with as you saw fit.’

Her mouth fell open. ‘You are not serious.’

‘I am, deadly serious.’

She looked utterly taken aback. ‘You can’t be.’

‘Hear me out,’ Owen said urgently. There was no time for dissembling any more, for Phoebe was making moves to leave. ‘It would not be charity, you would be doing both Olivia and myself a huge service. Olivia Braidwood,’ he added in response to her blank look. ‘The woman I’m going to be obliged to marry, unless I can find a way out of it.’

‘You are engaged to be married!’

‘I *have* to find a way out of it Phoebe,’ Owen said fervently. ‘I’ve already destroyed my own life, I won’t destroy hers.’

‘You are engaged to be married,’ Phoebe repeated, sounding stunned. ‘Yet you made no mention of it yesterday. I did wonder if you might have married. That was one of the many possible reasons why you missed our assignation. You are a very attractive man. You are extremely wealthy, you have—I remember when we met in Paris, thinking if it were not for Pascal, because there was something between us, wasn’t there? I wasn’t imagining it?’

Her words brought such a pang of yearning that it took Owen’s breath away. Talk about impossible dreams!

‘I am so sorry,’ Phoebe said, jerking him back to the present. ‘I have embarrassed you. I was simply surprised that you had omitted to mention something of such import.’

‘I am not betrothed, not formally,’ Owen said, regaining his focus. ‘There has been no announcement, though it is well known that Olivia and I have an understanding.’

‘An understanding that you think would destroy this Miss Braidwood’s life? Why on earth would you think such a thing?’

* * *

‘Owen?’ Phoebe eyed him with some concern. This was the second time it had happened, this odd blank stare. ‘Is there something wrong?’

He started, blinked. ‘It’s nothing. Nothing serious. I lose concentration, drift off for a few moments now and then.’

‘Because of your accident?’

‘My doctor told me when I first came back to England that such episodes would pass, given time. I see no point in disillusioning him.’

‘Have you also led him to believe that the pain in your leg has passed?’

He shrugged. ‘I’ve tried everything the doctors have to offer. They can’t do any more for me.’

His words stirred her compassion. ‘Is that why you’ve shut yourself away from the world, because you believe you won’t get any better?’

‘I did not make a conscious decision to *shut myself away*. I have a world of my own now, this one, right here, and I’m perfectly content with that.’

‘Forgive me, but you don’t look very happy.’

‘I am not unhappy,’ he responded testily. ‘I have simply accepted that this is how I am and how I will be. Which is why my proposal requires you to be my wife in name only.’

‘Good grief!’ Phoebe exclaimed. ‘My aunt’s marriage is just such an arrangement. My sister Eloise’s marriage was also intended to be another such. It seems to run in the family.’

‘And are they happy, your aunt and your sister?’

‘Yes, though Eloise fell in love with her husband after they married. Their marriage has turned out very differently from the one they intended.’

‘But they were happy to sign up to the original agreement?’ Owen persisted.

She pursed her lips, recalling the weeks before Eloise was married and the excitement with which she had embraced her changed circumstances. ‘Yes, even if they had not subsequently fallen in love—yes, I believe it would still have been a successful match.’

‘So are you willing to consider my offer?’

‘I still don’t understand what it is you are offering and why.’

‘But you’ll listen? And you’ll consider what I have to say? I am, as I said, deadly serious.’

Phoebe hesitated. His words sounded sincere but his demeanour was strangely unemotional, almost detached. His accident had changed him radically, that much was certain, and their entire acquaintance consisted of two brief encounters more than two years apart. But it surely couldn’t have changed the essence of him. He was still the honourable man who had come to her rescue at the Procopé. A man she could trust. A man now under extreme duress. What on earth had she to lose by listening to him? In fact she’d be a fool not to.

‘I remember,’ she said, ‘when my sister Eloise was considering her now husband’s proposal, we talked about it endlessly. We felt, all of us, including Aunt Kate—and she ought to know—that it was extremely important that Eloise went into the marriage with her eyes wide open.’

‘You mean you want to know exactly what you’d be getting yourself into?’

‘And why. Why do think you would be destroying Miss Braidwood’s life if you did marry her? Why must you marry someone else in order to avoid marrying her? And why me?’

‘These are big questions.’

‘It’s a very big decision.’

‘It’s an outrageous idea, I know, but it is—I truly believe that it could be the answer to both our problems.’ Owen shifted on his chair, wincing as he moved his injured leg from the footstool to the floor. ‘My accident occurred a little over two years ago,’ he said. ‘In Marseilles. Not long after we met in Paris, as a matter of fact.’

‘Just when you were setting out on your travels! Oh, Owen, how awful. What happened?’

He went quite rigid, staring down at his gloves. ‘There was a fire. That’s all I know. I remember almost nothing of it and don’t want to either. My hands were badly burned. Something heavy, a beam I think, fell on top of me. My hip was shattered. I was unconscious for some weeks afterwards. It was three months before I was well enough to face the journey back to London. Six months before I could walk again.’

Though she could see from the way he held himself, completely still, that saying even this much was an immense effort, his tone was oddly cold, as if he was recounting something that had happened to someone else. Phoebe yearned to comfort him, but she couldn’t hug him, and in any case, it was clear the last thing he wanted was sympathy.

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