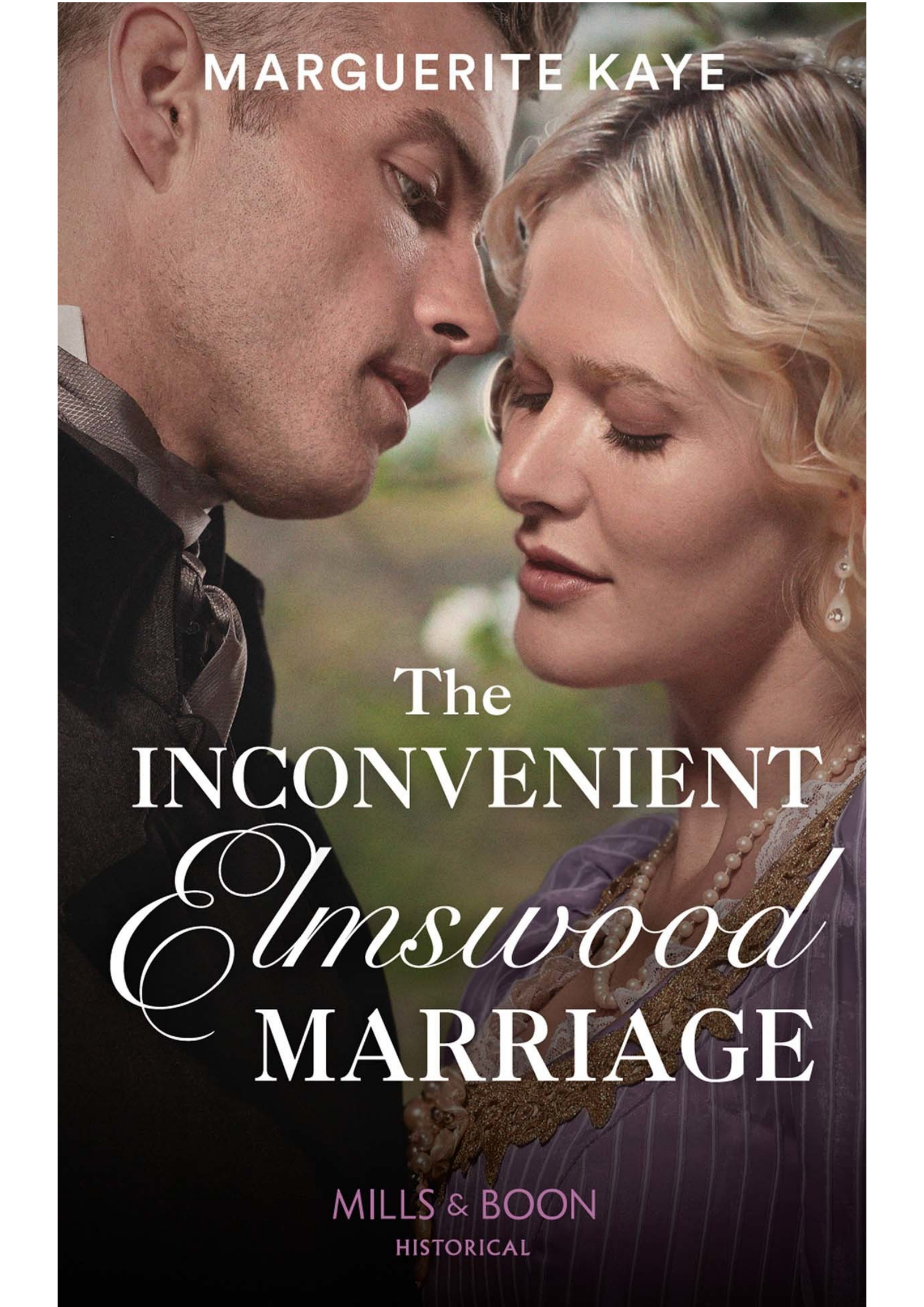


A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The man is on the left, looking down at the woman on the right. The woman has blonde hair and is wearing a purple dress with a gold lace collar and a pearl necklace. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with greenery.

MARGUERITE KAYE

The
INCONVENIENT
Elmswood
MARRIAGE

MILLS & BOON
HISTORICAL

Marguerite Kaye

The Inconvenient Elmswood Marriage

«HarperCollins»

Kaye M.

The Inconvenient Elmswood Marriage / M. Kaye —
«HarperCollins»,

Their marriage was a solution... Until passion turns it into a problem! Lord and Lady Elmswood's convenient marriage has allowed them to live separate lives for years. Until larger-than-life Daniel almost dies and Kate must nurse the husband she barely knows back to health...and discover how maddeningly attractive he is! With the clock ticking on his departure, they disagree on everything – except the impossibility of resisting each other!

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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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Marguerite Kaye

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THE INCONVENIENT ELMSWOOD MARRIAGE

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Prologue

Elmswood Manor, Shropshire, April 1820

Kate glanced nervously at the tarnished mantel clock. Like everything else around here it had seen better days. It told her that it was fifteen minutes to the allotted start time of what she hoped would be her life-changing appointment. One minute less than when she had last checked.

She adjusted the blotter so that it sat perfectly in the middle of the desk, then straightened the ledger so that it sat square on the blotter. Next, she placed the annual accounts summary she had drawn up on top of the ledger. Finally, she ran a hand nervously over her hair, which she had pinned tightly up in an attempt to project a mature, businesslike demeanour, though her bedroom mirror had reflected something more reminiscent of a frightened rabbit. Then she glanced over at the clock again.

It didn't seem to have moved. Had it stopped? But she'd wound it up yesterday evening, as she did at the same time every night, as Papa had been in the habit of doing, and she could hear it ticking slowly and softly, just as it had always done.

She felt sick. Was she really going to put her outrageous proposition to a virtual stranger? No, not outrageous. She mustn't think of it in those terms or she'd come over as an irrational fantasist. It was actually a common-sense suggestion rooted in practicality, one she had evaluated from every angle in the long weeks spent awaiting this much-heralded return, while her future, her father's security and the fate of every one of the estate's tenants and those few staff that remained were left hanging in the balance.

Pushing back the worn leather wing-backed chair, Kate edged out from behind the huge desk that dominated the Estate Office to risk a glance out of the window. The office was located at the far end of a row of outbuildings, behind what had once been the kitchen gardens, with an excellent view in all directions. If he was coming from the stables, walking around from the front entrance or any of the rooms that opened onto the terrace at the rear, she'd see him approach.

And he would turn up, she reassured herself, he had asked for the appointment himself, hadn't he?

Though the appointment had actually been made with her father—for the new Lord Elmswood seemed to be uniquely unaware that his lands were being managed by his estate manager's daughter.

Kate returned to the desk and retrieved the note from under the blotter, but the brief informal scrawl told her nothing more than she already knew or had surmised.

Sir,

With regard to the settling of my late father's estate, which I have perforce returned to England to oversee, I anticipate that I will have completed all necessary business with my lawyer in London by the sixteenth of this month. I will then travel to Shropshire, arriving at Elmswood on the seventeenth.

I assume it will be convenient for you to meet with me on the eighteenth in the Estate Office at ten o'clock that morning, with a view to formally resolving the issue of your continued stewardship and any residual outstanding business.

I would appreciate it if you could do everything possible to expedite matters, as I am extremely eager to return to my own pressing business abroad.

Yours respectfully,

Daniel Fairfax

Fairfax, she noted. He didn't use his new title. He had clearly returned reluctantly, for the briefest period possible. How would he feel, knowing he would never see his father again? There was no trace of any emotion in that note save impatience. Her own dear papa's slow decline over the last few years had forced her to face the reality of his mortality, but she didn't for a moment imagine that when the time came it would be anything other than a terrible blow to lose him. It seemed to be a

very different matter for Daniel Fairfax, who could probably count on one hand the number of weeks he'd spent as an adult in his father's company.

He was twenty-eight years old. She'd known him—or of him—all her life, for, like him, she had been born on the estate, though, unlike him, she had never had any desire to live anywhere else. He was six years her senior. Though she knew from her father that he had been a sickly child, and educated at home as a little boy, by the time she'd been old enough to perch in front of Papa in the saddle as he rode around the estates on his regular inspections, or sit here in this office, drawing happily while he attended to estate business, Daniel Fairfax had been a boarder at a prestigious school.

As a result, for most of the year, Kate had been able to pretend that the grounds of Elmswood Manor belonged exclusively to her. When he came home for the school holidays she would catch the occasional glimpse of him, swimming in the lake or setting out on his pony from the stables, but those encounters had been rare. She'd had no idea what he did all day, or where he went, and his awareness of her had been confined to an absent, uninterested nod as he'd passed purposefully in the opposite direction. Though he was, in effect, like her, an only child, he'd seemed perfectly content in his own company. She couldn't recall him ever having friends to stay, save once, and that hadn't been a school friend but some sort of tutor.

During the last school holiday he had spent at Elmswood he'd left, before it was over, when he was sixteen to Kate's ten, not to return to school but to go to London to take up a position at the Admiralty. When he'd next returned, on reaching his majority, after an absence of five years, he had left both the Admiralty and his youth behind. The deeply tanned young man she had encountered one morning, staring grim-faced at the lake, had been a rather intimidating and fiercely attractive stranger who'd left Kate embarrassingly tongue-tied.

Where he had been in the intervening years not even Papa knew, and it had only been after he'd left—a long time after he'd left—that Lord Elmswood had revealed his son was off 'exploring the world'. And, the world being a very big place, it had seemed unlikely that he would return any time soon.

'Any time soon' had turned into never. If there had been letters, old Lord Elmswood had kept the contents to himself. On his death, it had seemed like a minor miracle when his lawyer had revealed that he knew how to contact the heir, and a miracle of considerably larger proportions when he'd sent word to Elmswood to inform Papa that the man himself had actually arrived in London.

But, regardless of the fact that he'd inherited an estate and an earldom, Kate was willing to stake her life on Daniel Fairfax, nomadic explorer, heading back to his life of wandering the far-flung corners of the world as soon as he possibly could.

In fact, she thought wryly, she was banking on him doing exactly that, even though she knew almost nothing of him. She was taking a leap of faith, but he was Lord Elmswood's son, after all, and she'd heard nothing to suggest he was in any way of dubious character or unsavoury temperament. In any event, if her plan came to fruition she wouldn't have to put that assumption to the test, since she was unlikely to see hide nor hair of him for the foreseeable future.

'Excuse me, I have an appointment to meet Mr Wilson.'

'Lord Elmswood!' Kate scrabbled to her feet.

Daniel Fairfax, for it was unmistakably he, stood in the doorway, eyeing her quizzically. 'This is still the Estate Office, I assume?'

'Yes, you are in the right place. I am Mr Wilson's daughter, I—'

Kate broke off, blushing. Dammit! Cool, calm and collected was what she needed to be, not a simpering miss! Daniel Fairfax might be a self-confident man of the world, and she might be a country hick, but she was a country hick who knew his estates like the back of her hand, and he needed her—even though he didn't know it yet.

'Lord Elmswood. You clearly don't remember me. I am Kate Wilson. How do you do?'

‘Miss Wilson? Well, I never! The last time I clapped eyes on you, I’m sure you had pigtails and freckles.’

‘I was almost fifteen the last time you were home, and I have not worn my hair in pigtails since I was ten.’

‘Really? Good Lord, that makes you—what?—twenty-two? How did that happen?’

‘By the simple process of aging. It affects us all, unfortunately.’

‘Well, the passing years have certainly done you no harm, if you don’t mind my saying so. I hardly recognised you.’

‘Since you have, in all the years I’ve lived here, barely acknowledged me,’ Kate retorted, flustered, ‘that is not really surprising. I’ve not changed so very much in seven years.’

‘You’re quite wrong. But I can see I’ve touched a nerve. I hadn’t thought myself rude, not even as a sulky youth, but clearly I was. Please accept my belated apologies.’

‘You were not rude. It’s not surprising that I barely registered with you, given that you were six years older than me and—’

‘I still am.’

‘The gap is more of a chasm when one is younger.’

‘True, but I apologise for my ill-mannered younger self all the same.’ Daniel Fairfax glanced at the clock. ‘I thought your father was expecting me? Didn’t he receive my note?’

‘He did,’ Kate said, belatedly remembering her carefully rehearsed plan for this meeting. ‘On behalf of my father and myself, Lord Elmswood, may I offer our condolences on your loss?’

‘You’ve already done so—or your father has, in a letter. I understand I have him to thank for organising the funeral too. I’m told it was very well-attended. I’m sorry I wasn’t here, but by the time I had word of my father’s accident he was already dead and buried, and it took me the best part of six weeks to get myself back to England. Is Mr Wilson intending to meet me this morning or not?’

‘I’m afraid he is indisposed, but I believe I can settle all the necessary business on his behalf.’

‘Without wishing to be rude, Miss Wilson, my business is with Elmswood’s estate manager. Perhaps it would be better for me to return when your father is feeling better—tomorrow, perhaps?’

‘Lord Elmswood, when I said my father was indisposed, I’m afraid I did not mean he was afflicted with some minor ailment. Would that it were so! Unfortunately his condition is both long-standing and irreversible. I take it you are unaware that I have been acting in my father’s stead? Clearly you are,’ Kate continued, in response to his blank look. ‘In fact I’ve been helping out for some years now, but in the last eighteen months or so I have been obliged to take on almost all of my father’s duties as his health has failed.’

‘I am deeply sorry to hear that. But, with respect, I am surprised to learn that he delegated the management of the estates to you. No matter how competent you are, you are a female, and that alone, in my father’s book, would make you quite ineligible. Your father must have known that.’

‘The arrangement was of an—an informal nature.’

‘Ah. So my father was blissfully ignorant of the fact that his estate manager’s daughter was running things.’

Kate bristled. ‘I was born and raised here, and have been helping my father ever since I was old enough to ride a horse. With the greatest of respect, and with no offence intended, my lord, I know your estates a great deal better than you do.’

‘That would not be difficult, for even the cows in the fields could claim that.’

‘I love this place, my lord, even if you do not.’

‘There’s no need for those raised hackles. I am not questioning your competency. In this, as in everything else, I have nothing in common with my father, and I have no issue at all with having a female estate manager.’

‘In that case, perhaps you would care to take a look at the summary of accounts.’

Kate pushed the ledger forward, but Daniel Fairfax gave it only a cursory glance. 'I won't pretend to have any grasp of the financial ins and outs, but I know from that London lawyer fellow that the lands are in good hands.'

'Relatively, all things considered. Unfortunately your father was reluctant to invest either his time or his money. Frankly, he seemed uninterested in his estates.'

But once again Daniel Fairfax seemed to have no interest in pursuing the subject of his lands. 'I really am sorry to hear that your father is so gravely ill. If there is anything I can do...'

'As a matter of fact, there is.' Kate wondered fleetingly what he would say if she simply blurted out the outrageous proposition she had for him, and was so amused by the idea that it calmed her. 'If you would care to take a seat, Lord Elmswood...'

'I really wish you wouldn't call me that.'

'It's your name now.'

'No, it's not. I don't plan on making use of any of it—the lands, the title, or indeed the house, which my father seems to have allowed to go to rack and ruin.'

'Yes, that is one of the topics I wish to discuss with you.'

'Only one? I have a list of my own, you know, and a limited amount of time.'

'Of that I am perfectly well aware.' She hadn't meant to snap, but her nerves were stretched to breaking point. 'Please, if you will sit down I will explain everything.'

Kate indicated the seat on the opposite side of the desk from her own and to her utter relief he did as she'd asked. The legs of the chair had been shortened by some shrewd previous estate manager, intent on ensuring that he loomed over whoever sat opposite, but Daniel Fairfax was very tall and her own stature so diminutive that when she sat down she was still looking up at him.

She straightened her back. He stretched his long legs out in front of him. His hair was cut very close to his head, as if he had taken a razor to it, showing off a slight widow's peak. His face was tanned to the point of swarthinness, strong-featured, with sharp cheekbones and jaw, a nose bordering on the assertive. Despite the fullness of his lips it was a very masculine face, and one that bore testament to a life lived in a very different climate. The grooves which ran from his nose to his mouth, the fan of lines at the corners of his slate-grey eyes, spoke of a life lived at a pace that made hers seem positively sedentary.

Those eyes were now focused intently on her. She resisted the impulse to check her hair for any escaped locks.

'How long had my father been living as a virtual recluse?' he asked. 'From what I've seen of the house, he seems to have been living in two rooms, with only his manservant and a couple of kitchen staff to look after him.'

'His withdrawal from society was gradual. It was only in the last two years or so that he became almost completely cut off from the world.'

'Making it easy for you to take over your father's duties without his realising?'

'We did not hoodwink him,' Kate retorted angrily. 'Once a month Papa submitted the books to Lord Elmswood, via his valet, and if your father required to consult him on any matter he sent Papa a written note. The authority remains formally invested in my father. To be perfectly frank, I don't think your father cared who actually did the donkey work and—without wishing to offend you, Lord Elmswood—'

'You offend me every time you use that title. I wish you'd call me Daniel.'

'Daniel.' It felt strange saying his name...intimate. 'It wasn't only that he was uninterested in the detail, he seemed indifferent to the fact that only the bare minimum was being done. I'm afraid that you've inherited an estate in dire need of modernisation.'

He dug his hand into his coat pocket to retrieve a small, brightly coloured precious stone, which he began compulsively to turn over and over in his hand. 'I made it perfectly clear the last time that I was home that I wished to relinquish my claim to Elmswood.'

‘Relinquish! You mean you wanted your father to disinherit you?’ Kate exclaimed, shocked to the core to hear the place she loved so passionately dismissed so summarily.

Daniel smiled thinly. ‘Don’t worry. As ever, he completely disregarded my wishes.’

‘But—but can you really mean you want nothing to do with Elmswood—ever?’

‘Never. Though that does not mean I am pleased to see the place so run down. I could barely locate the door into the walled garden.’

‘I know, and that is a subject close to my heart, believe me,’ Kate said, diverted. ‘It’s been a dream of mine for years to be able to restore Elmswood Manor and the gardens to their former glory.’

‘To say nothing of modernising the farms? It’s a strange ambition for a female to have.’

‘I have inherited my father’s love of Elmswood.’

‘Is Mr Wilson likely to recover? Forgive me for being blunt, but...’

‘I would much rather you were. I’m extremely aware that time is of the essence to you. Papa is frail, and, while not in any immediate danger, his days of estate management are well and truly over.’

‘Does he have everything he needs to make him comfortable? You said there is something I can do for him? What was it?’

It was the perfect opening. Kate’s throat was dry, her heart thumping in her chest, but she might not get another opportunity. She owed it to Papa as much as herself to take it. And of course to Elmswood itself.

‘My father is concerned about what will happen to us now that he is not fit to continue serving you.’

‘I’m not sure what you mean?’

‘I mean, where will we live and how will we survive? Our house is tied to your estate, as indeed is our income, save for a small legacy your father left in his will. Our circumstances would be severely straitened were you to appoint another estate manager. I don’t mind for my own sake, but Papa...’

‘There’s no need for that. You are currently acting as *de facto* estate manager. I see no reason for that situation to change. I will formalise the arrangement before I leave—you have my word. I came here with the intention of investing complete authority in your father to allow me to resume my foreign travels. Circumstances have changed, but now I shall invest my authority in you instead. You are clearly trustworthy—better still, you obviously cherish this place. I consider you a very safe pair of hands.’

Daniel smiled, looking as much relieved as pleased.

‘There, I hope that puts your mind at rest. So, let us turn our minds to what I need to do in order—’

‘I’m very sorry, but I’m afraid it won’t work.’

His smile faded. ‘You don’t want the position?’

‘I’m extremely flattered that you should offer it to me, and I can say, hand on heart, that I would do my very best to ensure that you would never have any cause to regret placing your faith in me. Believe me,’ Kate said earnestly, ‘if I thought for a moment it would work in practice I’d leap at the chance. It’s not that I can’t do the job—the accounts prove that—but the reality is I’m a female of modest background, and you would not be here to underpin my authority, or indeed be available to make important financial decisions. Though it pains me to admit it, that is a fatal combination. It would be doomed to failure.’

‘But what is the alternative? I don’t want to employ a stranger and throw you and your father out onto the street, and even though I don’t give a damn about this place, I don’t want to let it go any further down the road to rack and ruin.’

‘You could look to offload it. I’m sure you could find a willing purchaser.’

‘That would make your situation perilous.’ Daniel began to turn over the stone in his hand again, frowning down at it. ‘No, I need a caretaker I can trust implicitly. My sister in Ireland has a son. It seems to me that he is the obvious person to hand the place over to, when he comes of age. Lock

stock and barrel, as they say. Of course I can't pass on the title, but I see no reason why my nephew shouldn't make use of that too.'

Kate's mouth dropped. 'You have a nephew!'

'So I've been informed.'

His tone was one of insouciance, but he could not possibly be indifferent to such news. Or perhaps she'd misunderstood.

'You didn't know that your sister had a son? His birth is a recent event, then?'

'I believe the boy is seven or eight, so it will be a good few years before I can hand the reins over to him.'

'Seven or eight! Did your father know of his existence?'

'I have no idea. There was no mention of the boy in his will.'

'And your sister? What does she think of your plan?'

'I don't know. I haven't discussed it with her,' Daniel answered impatiently. 'I am no more interested in her life than she is in mine, and I would be obliged to you, Miss Wilson, if you would resist asking the many questions I can see you are desperate to ask, because I have neither the time nor the inclination to discuss the matter further. I would rather my nephew did not inherit an encumbrance. You are the ideal person to ensure that he does not, and yet you're telling me that, much as you'd like to take on the job, it's impossible. We both want the same thing here. Surely there must be a way of making the impossible possible.'

There was, and she must speak now or for ever hold her peace, but her head was swimming with the revelations Daniel had so callously announced. But they were all grist to her mill, she reminded herself.

Her hands were clammy. She wiped them surreptitiously on her gown under the desk. She cleared her throat. 'I do have a plan, as it happens, which will restore the fortunes of both this house and its lands, and make them a fit inheritance for your little nephew.'

Daniel set his turquoise stone down on the desk. He sat back, his hand curling around the crudely polished stone. He smiled suddenly. 'What a very surprising young woman you are. What is this cunning plan of yours?'

His teeth were very white and even. When he smiled, his eyes lit up. It was a very infectious and unexpected smile. The kind that she suspected one would do a great deal to earn. It changed him, that smile, and it made her uncomfortably aware of him as a very attractive man.

Kate allowed herself a very prim smile in return, but now she was coming to the point her stomach was starting to churn again.

'It's a little radical.' Perspiration prickled her back. 'In fact it will take a bit of a leap of faith on both our parts.'

'Now I am thoroughly intrigued. Take a deep breath and spit it out.'

'Very well. What I'm proposing resolves both our dilemmas—your desire to live abroad unencumbered by responsibility, and my desire to live here with Papa while he is still with me. It would provide me with the natural authority to make whatever significant decisions need to be made without referring to you, including financial ones. It would allow me not only to maintain your lands but to improve them, and to restore the house and gardens too, while you'd have nothing to do save return to your life in darkest Africa, or wherever it is. And then when the time came, you could make the lands over to your nephew and I could—well, I don't know what I'd do, but we can worry about that when the time comes. What do you think?'

'To be honest, I think it sounds too good to be true. And when something sounds too good to be true, it is my experience that it usually is.'

Kate shuffled her feet under the desk. She picked up the polished stone, turning it over in her hands as Daniel had done. It was elliptical in shape, smooth and not quite flat, and had a very soothing effect. 'Is this turquoise?'

‘Yes, it is, Miss Wilson.’

He held out his hand. Embarrassed, she surrendered it. ‘Kate. You may as well call me Kate, since—if we are to—and after all I’m already calling you Daniel.’

‘You’ve come this far without equivocating. Don’t falter now. What is your devilishly clever plan, Kate, and what is the catch? For there must be one.’

‘I suppose you might say *I* am.’

‘You really have lost me now.’

She took a deep breath. ‘I think we should get married.’

He looked as if he wasn’t sure whether to laugh or have her committed to a Bedlam. ‘Right! Anything else I should know?’

‘There is, as it happens,’ she said breezily. ‘In order to protect my father’s pride, I’m afraid it has to be your idea.’

Chapter One

Elmswood Manor, June 1831

With a heavy sigh, Kate pushed aside the letter she had been attempting to compose to Eloise. Her husband's eldest niece, she had just learned, had given birth to a daughter. She had, it seemed, embraced motherhood with an enthusiasm that was staggering, considering that she had originally wed Alexander with no intentions of consummating the marriage, far less of conceiving a child. But Eloise's marriage of convenience had turned into a true love match.

Her obvious happiness leapt off the page of the letter Kate had just received, and she was desperate to accept the invitation to her home in Lancashire to meet baby Tilda for herself. For the moment, however, that was sadly completely out of the question.

She had missed so much while she'd been away. How long would this very strange state of affairs continue?

Pushing her chair back from the desk, Kate prowled restlessly over to the window. The morning room faced out to the back of the house. The expanse of lawn had been neatly mown and trimmed, revealing a vast swathe of verdant green. Leaves covered the huge, ancient oak which Eloise had been so fond of climbing when she'd first come to live at Elmswood. On the still waters of the lake a pair of swans were gliding effortlessly.

Had it really been last October when those two distinguished gentlemen had turned up unannounced on her doorstep? 'Colleagues of her husband', was how they'd introduced themselves, and she'd thought they were bringing her some long overdue letters. She'd served them tea and cake, and they'd talked about the weather, and the shocking state of the roads, and there had been mention of them having met Eloise socially, she recalled, before they had revealed the real purpose of their visit by informing her that Daniel's wellbeing was a matter of grave concern.

She'd still been wondering what connection the pair of them might have with Eloise, and why Eloise had never mentioned it, when she realised that their polite smiles had been replaced with another expression entirely.

Then the interrogation had started, with questions being flung at her one after the other in rapid succession, until finally she'd startled them by demanding that they stop bombarding her with demands for information and start providing her with answers. What they told her and what they had proposed had sent her reeling.

They'd given her no time to recover her composure before the younger of the two, Sir Marcus, had started issuing her with a series of concise instructions, including what she was permitted to say to Estelle, whom she'd had no choice but to press-gang into holding the fort. Within three hours of their arrival they had been gone, taking Kate with them, on the start of a journey that had taken her through the end of one year and well into the next.

In the end, she'd been abroad for all of winter and spring, arriving home yesterday with the beginning of summer.

Looking around her now, smelling the sweet perfume of the rose she'd picked only an hour ago, Kate had to remind herself that she really was home, for Elmswood Manor didn't feel in the least bit familiar. The Elmswood Coven was no more.

For the first time since her husband's nieces had arrived, more than nine years ago, she was alone, all her beloved wards gone, embracing their own lives without any further need of her.

Eloise had a husband and now a child. Phoebe had not only opened a restaurant in London while Kate had been away, but also married a man Kate had never heard of, never mind met. A man she would not meet for the foreseeable future, and a restaurant she wouldn't be able to visit, no matter how much she longed to.

For this next, wholly unexpected and hopefully brief stage of her life she would be without the company of any of her husband's nieces, for even dear Estelle, who had stepped into the breach and held the fort at Elmswood for nine long months, had been obliged to leave.

Not that she'd objected, thank goodness. Quite the contrary, in fact. She'd embraced her freedom and the chance to embark on a long-planned Continental trip, loyally refraining from asking awkward questions or from making what in Kate's opinion would have been perfectly reasonable demands under the circumstances.

And what circumstances!

Kate sank onto one of the chairs, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. Had the last nine months really happened? She had told the girls only the bare bones. Not the story that Sir Marcus had constructed for public consumption but the truth—or a fraction of it. What they truly made of it she couldn't begin to imagine, but they were fiercely loyal, and she knew that if they talked it would only be amongst themselves.

Now it was over, and it felt like a dream—or should that be nightmare?

However she chose to describe it, it wasn't over yet. Upstairs, in one of the guest bedrooms, was a very real, lurking reminder of that fact—a simmering volcano which could erupt at any time.

Daniel, her husband of eleven years. The girls' nearest living relative. A man Kate barely knew and whom his nieces had never met.

The sound of the handle of the morning room door being turned made Kate's eyes fly open. She was on her feet when the man in question appeared, larger than life and, if not actually bursting with health, very far from death's door and most certainly not a figment of her imagination.

'So this is where you hide yourself away.'

'Daniel!'

Instinctively, Kate rushed to help him, but the fierce frown she received made her sit straight back down again. He was dressed oddly, in a somewhat exotic-looking tunic and loose pantaloons, over which he had donned a rather magnificent crimson silk dressing gown emblazoned with gold dragons and tied with a gold cord. A matching pair of slippers covered his bare feet.

'Chinese,' he enlightened her, noting her stare. 'It seems the powers that be managed to get my luggage back to England ahead of me. Considerate of them, don't you think? That they moved heaven and earth to make sure my effects were delivered? A small consolation for you, dear wife, in the event that you'd been forced to return here alone.'

'Don't say that!'

To her horror, tears welled up in her eyes. Kate blinked them away. There had been more than enough opportunities in the last nine months to shed tears, but she'd rarely taken them.

'Well, at least you'll have something to wear, then,' she said, forcing a smile. 'I don't know how long it would take to send to London for a new wardrobe of clothes, and you'd struggle to find anything more sartorial than a fleece shirt and brogues in the village. There's your father's clothes, of course, they are packed up in the attic, but—'

'I would rather dress as a farmhand,' he snapped.

There were so many questions raised by that one sentence—questions she'd asked herself over the years since they had married—but now was hardly the time. Perhaps there would never be a time.

The last time he'd been home, eleven years ago, Daniel had remained at Elmswood barely long enough for her to promise to love, honour and obey him. They'd married by special licence, because technically, he'd been was in mourning, though she had known he hadn't been able to bear the thought of waiting another six weeks for the banns to be read.

This time she hadn't exactly dragged him back to England kicking and screaming, but if he'd been strong enough to do more than protest weakly then she doubted he'd be here—despite the orders he'd received.

How long would he remain? Lord, look at him—he was hardly in a state to go anywhere. The florid dressing gown was far too large for him. He had, she suspected, put it on in an attempt to disguise his loss of weight, not realising that it merely drew attention to the fact. He had shaved too. She wasn't surprised. As she had tended to him on their protracted journey from Cyprus to Crete, then on to Malta and Gibraltar, Lisbon, Portsmouth and finally home, one of his biggest bugbears, in the intervals when he had been lucid enough to have bugbears, had been his unkempt beard.

He had not permitted Kate to wield his razor for him, and she had not allowed him to try to use it himself, having visions of him accidentally slitting his own throat, so she had been forced to beg the services of a weird and wonderful assortment of stand-in barbers on his behalf.

'What? Have I nicked myself?' he asked her now.

She realised she'd been staring and shook her head.

'Then you're thinking that I look like death warmed up.'

'I'm thinking that you look remarkably well, all things considered.'

Which was true, and if anything an understatement. He looked gaunt, and there were shadows under his eyes, new lines on his brow, but somehow they suited him. It was unfair, for the lines she'd acquired in the last few months simply aged her, while with Daniel the changes served to accentuate the fact that he was a lethally attractive man. Dammit!

'I didn't expect to see you up and about so soon,' Kate said, her tone made acerbic not by his presence but by her reaction to it.

'You can't keep me secreted away in my bedchamber, no matter how much you'd like to.'

As he closed the door behind him and made his way carefully over to the chair opposite hers by the empty grate Kate remembered that behind the attractive façade there was an extremely infuriating man, and gritted her teeth.

'I don't know why you are so convinced that I want to imprison you here.'

'Not you—them.' He showed his teeth. 'The irony is not lost on me that I've been sprung from one gaol only to be forced into another. I will concede that you are a reluctant warder, but you are charged with keeping me here nonetheless.'

'I trust you won't put me to the test. Having travelled halfway across the world to bring you home, I'd rather not chase you halfway across Shropshire to drag you back.'

'Would you really do that?' He grinned. 'I'd rather like to see you try.'

'I won't have to,' Kate replied tartly. 'Go on—why don't you leave right now? Walk down to the village...hire a post chaise.'

'I have no need to do any such thing. I have horses and a post chaise of my own.'

'Actually, you don't. There's a carriage, but it's not been used in heaven knows how long, and aside from my mount, and the pony who pulls the trap, and the farm horses, the stables are empty. So you'll just have to walk. Please, don't let me stop you.' She smiled sweetly at him.

For a moment she thought he might actually call her bluff, but then he gave an exasperated sigh.

'You know as well as I do that I'm under orders to remain here. Hopefully it won't be for long, for the terms of our marriage did not anticipate any form of cohabitation. I'm sure you don't want me here, getting under your feet and treading on your toes, and I assure you that I have no intention of doing so. This is your domain, not mine.'

'This is your home, Daniel.'

'No, it's your home and my gaol, albeit a considerably more comfortable one than the last. I wish to hell they hadn't embroiled you in this diplomatic mess.'

'I'm your wife,' Kate said tightly, 'the most obvious person to become *embroiled*, as you put it.'

'My wife in name only. I married you to look after Elmswood, not me.'

'You were at death's door, for heaven's sake!'

Kate gazed down at her hands, counting slowly to ten. It was the same refrain he'd uttered on and off since he'd first recovered consciousness in Cyprus almost two months ago, and it was beginning to grate. Seriously grate.

'I won't apologise for doing what was asked of me. You're my husband, and it's my duty to take care of you to the best of my ability. That's what I did, and as a result you are alive to berate me for it. If that is the price I must pay for what I did, then so be it.'

A tense silence followed, in which they both glowered at each other, and then, to her surprise and relief, Daniel laughed. 'I've married a despot! And I should know—I've met a few!'

She didn't know what to make of that, so instead said, 'If you would be a little more co-operative and conciliatory then I wouldn't have to fight you every step of the way.'

'Ah! So you admit that you have been imposing your will on me? In my book, that's a despot. Or a tyrant, if you prefer.'

'I prefer—' Kate stopped short, narrowing her eyes. 'Are you teasing me?'

Daniel grinned. 'Only a little. Do you mind?'

She smiled reluctantly. 'I suppose if I say yes it will only encourage you.'

'Which would be extremely churlish of me. I rather think it's me who's been the tyrant.'

'You've been very ill.'

'That doesn't mean my temper is obliged to follow suit. You're a diplomat, as well as a despot. Have I said thank you at any point?'

'There's no need to thank me. We are married, I was doing my wifely duty.'

'And your duty to your country, as they doubtless pressed upon you,' Daniel said, rolling his eyes. 'But there are very few wives who would have done what you did. Diplomat, despot, whatever other qualities you have, you are a very remarkable woman.'

'Thank you. I think.'

'Oh, it is a compliment—you must not doubt it. And as to thanks—it is I who owe you profound gratitude,' Daniel said. 'I wish you had not been involved, but I do understand that the powers that be gave you little choice in the matter. I wonder—' Daniel broke off, shaking his head. 'It doesn't matter.'

'You wonder how they came to decide that I could be trusted to do what they asked? I have wondered the same myself. I had plenty time to fill, after all, as they shifted me from pillar to post to preserve my cover story. I decided that they must have sounded Alexander out. He would be the natural choice. I presume I am right in thinking his previous position at the Admiralty masked the fact that he was in the same line of business—do you call it "business"?—as you?'

'What do you know about my line of business?'

'Next to nothing. They told me you were incarcerated. They did not tell me why or even where you were being held.'

'Good. The less you know of that business or any future business of mine, the better. I won't be here long, Kate. Before you know it I'll be off and you can resume your life as if nothing has happened.'

'That's all very well, but while you're here, Daniel, what on earth are we to tell people? What are you going to do? How will you occupy yourself?'

His expression hardened. 'I won't be here long enough to have to worry about any of those things. They'll come calling, Sir Marcus and his sidekick, believe me.'

'You've only just got here! I'm surprised you made it down the stairs without help. They can't possibly expect you to return to whatever duties you perform for them already.'

'I've no idea what they expect,' Daniel slumped, looking suddenly tired. 'Do you think I could have a cup of coffee? I could sorely use one.'

'Of course you can—this is your house. Only—do you think coffee is a good idea? Why don't you go back to bed and rest? I could bring you...'

He shuddered. 'No more healthy, nourishing broth, I beg you. And I'm not going back to bed. Just coffee, please.'

'I'll fetch it myself.' Kate jumped to her feet. 'I won't be long.'



She was gone before he could suggest ringing the bell for a servant, and on reflection Daniel was glad of the brief respite. He felt as weak as a kitten. The act of dressing and making his way from his bedchamber to the morning room had been a comically exhausting struggle. Until he'd put his clothes on, he hadn't realised just how much weight he'd lost. Shaving had almost defeated him. He'd had to stop and start so many times due to his shaking hand that the water had been cold by the time he'd finished. But he'd done it.

It was a small triumph but a victory all the same.

He stretched his legs out, wriggling his toes in his boots, for they had gone quite numb. He was cold. He could see that the sun was shining outside, and he knew it was June, the start of summer, but he'd become accustomed to much warmer climes. He would not ask for a fire to be lit, though. Kate would be bound to blame his chill on his various sicknesses. Gaol fever, the ague, and heaven only knew what else had laid him low. She would doubtless be right, but he was damned if he'd admit that to her.

She was so capable! He'd thought her unflappable too, until this morning. He'd enjoyed teasing her. She had a reluctant smile, but when she did smile—yes, it was worth waiting for. He'd seen it very rarely, that smile, on their protracted voyage back to England. Truth be told, he couldn't really make cohesive sense of that journey, for each time he'd thought his fever gone for good it had returned with a vengeance, making it difficult for him to distinguish between his torrid dreams and reality. It sat ill with him, the way he'd been forced to rely on Kate, but in his heart he knew he wouldn't have made it without her. He would not go so far as to say she'd saved his life, but she had probably saved his health.

He had pins and needles in his feet again—a recurring nuisance even though the wounds caused by the manacles had healed months ago.

Heaving himself upright, Daniel wandered over to the little rosewood escritoire which was positioned to look out of one of the two tall windows. It was neat and tidy, with a fully replenished inkstand, a selection of newly sharpened pens, a fresh sheet of paper in the blotter, various letters and papers in the dockets, neatly filed, a stack of blank paper, a seal and wax, all sitting in readiness. There was a single yellow rose in a silver vase, clearly just picked, for the bud was only partially unfurled.

Was there a rose garden at Elmswood? He couldn't recall. It hadn't been the sort of thing to interest him.

There was a comfortable-looking chair positioned in the other window, so he sat down and gazed out at the view. There was the oak tree he'd climbed countless times as a boy, and the lake where he'd taught himself to swim. Over to the left, behind the rose garden—yes, he remembered now that there was one—was his old sanctuary the walled garden. The place where he'd first dreamed his dream of escaping the claustrophobic confines of Elmswood and travelling to far-flung places.

But when he tried to remember the dreams he'd dreamed, tried to recall the experience of climbing, diving, swimming, he could not. It was as if he'd been told the stories by someone else. But then, wasn't that the case with most of his past life—or should that more accurately be *lives*? It was one of his strengths, the ability to put one persona behind him and assume another, never looking over his shoulder, wiping one slate clean before he started to write on another. No memories, no ties, no pain.

Daniel shook his head impatiently. It wasn't like him to be so fanciful. He would rather not be here at Elmswood, but he was, and he'd have to find a way to endure it. Hopefully it wouldn't be for long.

He leaned his forehead on the glass, which had been heated by the gentle English summer sun. There had been trout in the lake back in the day. He wondered if Kate kept it stocked. She would

have told him if she had, in one of the letters she'd sent to him regular as clockwork every other month, since they had married, but it was the sort of detail he chose not to remember.

They'd come into his possession sporadically, those carefully penned epistles, usually in bundles of two or three at a time, and as the years had passed, contained less and less detail. She had asked him to approve decisions in the early days, had on occasion asked his opinion on a decision still to be made, but his silence on both counts had led to silence on her part. She'd realised without him having to say so bluntly that he simply didn't care.

But, from the little he'd seen of the house and gardens, it was clear she did. His acceptance of her astonishing proposal all those years ago had been one of the best decisions of his life.



'Sorry I was so long.' Kate set the tray she was carrying down on the table by the fireside. 'Coffee, and there's some spiced biscuits fresh out of the oven.'

Daniel re-joined her, sitting down with a relief that he tried to disguise. Kate made no comment, but that didn't mean she hadn't noticed. Without asking, she poured a small cup of thick black coffee into a familiar-looking cup.

'I brought them back from Cyprus, along with the coffee pot,' she told him, proving his suspicions that she could read his mind too accurately for comfort correct. 'I brought a supply of Turkish coffee too. I acquired a taste for it.'

'*Sketo*,' Daniel said, taking a sip. 'You don't want sugar with it?'

'You mean *metrio*?' she answered. 'No, I like it like this, and I assumed that you—'

'You assumed correctly.' He took another sip. 'This is good.'

'*Efcharistó*.' She smiled, shaking her head. 'Before you ask, that is almost the limit of my Greek. I was fortunate to have Paniotis, my guide, to assist me with shopping and obtaining supplies. Do you remember him? Or Larnaca?'

Larnaca. Cyprus.

It was when he took another sip of the coffee she had poured that he had a sudden flash of memory. The distinctive aroma of it, brewing on a stove, rousing him from the depth of oblivion. A cool cloth gently wiping his brow.

Was it a fevered dream? He didn't know, but he remembered it so clearly.

He'd kept his eyes closed. He'd heard the swirl of water as the cloth was rinsed, the drip as it was wrung out, the soft exhalation she gave as she settled back on the stool or chair she sat on. She—for he had known instinctively that his angel of mercy was female—smelled of English meadows and cool English summer. When she'd leaned over to wash his shoulders her bare arm had brushed against him, and he had sensed the rest of her hovering over him, tantalising inches away. She had washed his chest and his belly, his arms and his hands. Then she had pushed the sheet lower. He had given himself over to the soothing delight of her touch, cast adrift from the struggle to escape and survive, from the endurance test that his life had been for the last year, to float in an alternative world of tender feminine care.

It could only have been Kate. He knew that, and he knew that she had performed heaven knew what other intimate tasks, but he'd managed not to think about any of it. So why think of it now, dammit?

'No,' he said tersely, 'I don't really remember being in Cyprus.'

'I'm not surprised. You were quite gravely ill. It's a lovely island, though, and the people were so friendly. I saw a little of it while I was waiting for you to arrive, but I'd like to have seen more. The ruins of Ancient Kition—'

'Save your rhapsodies, if you please,' Daniel interrupted brusquely. 'I know there are some who enjoy hearing travellers' tales second-hand, but I do not count myself among their number.'

‘I had never travelled beyond London before. I would of course have preferred the circumstances to have been different, and I would have liked to have spent a great deal more time at the various stops they prescribed for me,’ Kate said, looking as if he had slapped her, ‘but I was surprised—extremely surprised, actually—by how much I enjoyed the experience. When I was not worrying about you, that is.’

‘Then perhaps you’ll take yourself off again once you’re rid of me?’

‘My life is here, Daniel. It’s why you married me—to ensure that Elmswood is fit for its future heir. Though who that is to be now that poor little Diarmuid is no more...’

‘The boy died almost ten years ago and neither of us ever met him.’ He hadn’t meant to sound so harsh, but it was true, and Kate had no reason to look so—so hurt! Daniel drained his coffee. ‘The terms of our marriage didn’t require you to regard Elmswood as the limit of your world, you know,’ he said more mildly. ‘You’ve been away a few months...’

‘Nine, actually.’

‘Nine! What the devil...?’ Far longer than he had imagined. ‘Well, the place doesn’t look as if it has suffered much during your enforced absence.’

‘That is because before my “enforced absence” it was running extremely efficiently, largely thanks to Estelle. Though how you are able to comment at all is beyond me, unless you’ve been wandering about the estate in the middle of the night.’ Kate gave an impatient sigh. ‘Sorry, I don’t know why I’m so edgy—it’s not like me. Would you like a biscuit?’

Daniel took one, because it was easier than refusing and because it was clearly a peace offering—though he wasn’t sure he deserved one. Taking a small bite, he discovered to his surprise that it was actually very good.

‘One of Phoebe’s recipes,’ Kate said. ‘Phoebe is—’

‘Despite what you might think, I *do* note your updates on all my nieces’ progress. Phoebe is the youngest, and the one who is currently in Paris, with aspirations to become a chef.’

‘Not any longer. She’s in London, not Paris, she has opened her own restaurant and she is married.’

‘Married! Wasn’t the whole point of my eldest niece’s marriage...?’

‘Eloise, to Alexander.’

‘I *am* aware, Kate. I set that match up, if you recall.’

‘What I recall is that you almost never replied to my letters.’

‘It doesn’t mean I wasn’t aware of what was going on in your life—or at least what you told me of it.’

‘I told you about as much as you were interested to know. Which was not very much.’

‘You knew how little I was interested in the estate itself when we met. It was the reason we married.’

Kate set down her cup and folded her hands primly on her lap. ‘Yes, it was.’

Daniel refrained with difficulty from rolling his eyes. There was an essay in reprimand in those three words. ‘I’m not going to pretend an interest now. I won’t be here for long.’

‘You won’t be properly well for at least a month, more likely three.’

‘I am damned if I’ll stay marooned in this place for three months.’

‘Why not? You could take the time to get to know Elmswood a little. You might even come to appreciate it. It is your home after all, Daniel.’

‘Once and for all, this place is not my home and never will be! I hate the very—’

Daniel bit his tongue, taken aback himself by his tone. He needn’t panic. No one was going to force him to remain here permanently. It wasn’t like him to snap. He was not usually so irrational. It was his illness making him weak, that was all.

‘This is more your home than mine,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘You are doing an excellent job of filling your father’s shoes. I will concentrate on getting fit to return to active service, and it won’t take me three months, I assure you.’

‘Perhaps not.’ She picked up the coffee pot to refresh their cups. ‘Though I imagine that Sir Marcus will also have a say in how long you remain here, since it was on his orders that you came in the first place. Do you really think we should expect him imminently?’

He was surprised the man hadn’t been waiting on the dock at Portsmouth, but Daniel wasn’t about to say that to Kate. His memories of his planned escape were still hazy, but the events leading up to his capture were etched in his mind. That life—the life he’d been leading for the last five years, the life that he’d worked so damned hard to establish—was over. The man he’d been was no more, and yet he couldn’t get to grips with that—for he *was* that man, and he was still here, wasn’t he?

Kate was eyeing him quizzically. She was waiting for an answer, he realised, though he couldn’t remember what the question had been. This woman was his wife. As far as she was concerned he was Daniel Fairfax. She had no idea of the many other men he’d been required to be in his life—so many that right at this moment he wondered if he knew how to be himself. And he was her husband. He’d never played a husband before. He wasn’t sure he would relish playing it for any extended period, but for now...? Behind that diminutive, and extremely attractive façade there was a very strong and determined woman. A brave one, whom he suspected would give as good as she got.

Daniel managed a smile. ‘Shall we call a truce? You’re right. I’m here now, and there’s no point in my constantly lamenting the fact.’

She narrowed her eyes. ‘What will you do instead? I don’t know you very well, but I do know you’re not the type of man to sit about patiently and wait to be told what your next move will be.’

Daniel laughed. ‘Don’t worry. I meant what I said when I promised I wouldn’t interfere or stand on your toes. We’ve been married ten years, yet we’re to all intents and purposes complete strangers. Don’t you think it’s time we got to know each other?’

‘It was eleven years last month, actually—and don’t you think it would be a better use of your time to get to know your nieces instead? You’re their closest blood relative, Daniel, and you’ve never met them. Eloise has just had a baby—a little girl—I only found out this morning. We could—’

‘No.’ Daniel’s smile faded. He heaved himself to his feet. ‘I can tell by your expression that’s not what you want to hear, but I see no point at all in meeting any of them.’

‘Why ever not? I know they would very much like to meet you, and will be devastated if you shun them.’

‘No! I have not the time to involve myself in their lives...’

‘Not even to write them the occasional letter?’

‘Even if I had the time I have not the inclination.’ His words would hurt her, and he regretted that, but it was better that than give rise to expectations he could never meet.

‘Are you seriously saying that you don’t want to meet your nieces *at all*?’ Kate said now, looking outraged. ‘Never?’

He reminded himself that to all intents and purposes they were her children, and just for a moment considered whether he should do as she wanted. Gillian’s daughters were no longer girls, but young women with lives of their own. Did they look like his sister? She’d been a beauty. A selfish, utterly self-centred beauty, with no interest in anyone, and especially not her much younger brother.

He’d gleaned enough from Kate’s letters to know that her daughters had not inherited her capricious nature. Kate’s doing, no doubt. They were Kate’s girls, and that was how they must remain. He couldn’t risk acquiring any fresh emotional attachment. Recent events had provided a bitter lesson in the folly of displaying that weakness.

‘What would be the point?’ he said, more gently. ‘They won’t see me again, and it would be cruel to risk any sort of attachment or raise expectations. Best I remain faceless to them.’

‘You mean it’s best that they remain faceless to *you*,’ she snapped. ‘You’ve never given a damn about them, have you? When we married you told me you had a nephew, but you didn’t think to mention that your long-lost sister had already given birth to three girls.’

‘I didn’t think they were relevant. I certainly did not envisage that within two years they’d be orphaned and homeless, and I don’t know what the hell I’d have done about either if you hadn’t been here to step into the breach.’

‘I’m eternally grateful that I was in a position to do so.’

‘I believe you—though at the time I confess I had serious misgivings about burdening you with them.’

‘I remember. You said that you’d get your lawyer to find someone to take them on. As if I would dream of doing anything other than taking them in. I’ve often said if we had not already been married I would have married you for that reason alone. And I have *never*,’ Kate said vehemently, ‘told the girls that you considered any other outcome.’

‘Thus awarding me a great deal more credit than I deserve. I am sorry, Kate, but I won’t be swayed.’

‘Aren’t you even curious to see how the marriage you arranged turned out? You say you know nothing of the girls, but you gleaned enough from my letters to know that Alexander and Eloise would suit very well.’

‘I don’t respond to emotional blackmail, you know.’

Kate flinched. ‘You’re right, that was unworthy of me.’

‘You care a great deal for them. You think it’s in their interests to know me. I’m telling you it’s not. You need to trust me to know best.’

Her throat worked as she mulled this over. ‘Your work is a great deal more dangerous than you ever led me to believe, isn’t it?’

Until the recent debacle, from which he was still recovering, Daniel had never considered his own mortality, but he wasn’t a man who needed to be taught anything twice. He had come close to death. The next time—and he was bloody well determined to be given the chance of a next time—he might not be so lucky.

Which reminded him—whatever else he did while he was in England he must sort out the provisions of his last will and testament. Now that he no longer had a nephew to inherit Elmswood, he had no clue as to who would currently be his next of kin. Some distant cousin, no doubt. But he was damned if Elmswood would be taken from Kate if he had anything to do with it.

‘Kate...’

‘Was it always dangerous? Even when we first married?’

‘Kate, I can’t—’

‘Can’t answer that. Except you already have. I wonder that you suggest we get to know one another better. You’re not afraid that *I’ll* become too attached, I take it? Are you imagining that I’m longing to be a merry widow?’

‘I think the last nine months have proved rather conclusively otherwise, don’t you?’

She sighed, her shoulders sagging. ‘I’m not usually such a shrew, you know. I’m sorry you don’t want to meet the girls, for their sake, but I can’t force you, and I do understand, though I’m not looking forward to explaining it to them.’

‘I’ll likely be gone before you see them.’

She got to her feet. ‘Then I suggest you utilise the time you have to recuperate. I’m heading over to the Estate Office to make a start on catching up. I’ll have Cook send up some soup for you—or is there something else you’d prefer? What do you like to eat?’

‘It doesn’t matter. I’m not hungry.’

‘You should go to bed and rest. No...what I should say is *don’t* go to bed, I suppose, and then you will.’

He surprised them both by taking her hand in his. 'This situation is as strange and awkward for me as it is for you.'

'But, as you have pointed out several times, at least I'm on home turf and, unlike you, happy to be here,' she said with a wry smile. 'Your hand is freezing. I really do think you should go back to bed and try to get some rest, Daniel.'

And get out of her way. She was right. There was as little point in him getting to know his wife as his nieces. Yet he was strangely reluctant to let her hand go.

'I'd better not detain you any longer.'

She hesitated, her wide-spaced blue eyes scanning his face as if she was trying to read his mind, before giving him a brief nod, disentangling her hand, and quitting the room.

He listened out for the oddly familiar scrape of the front door on the flagstones—one thing in the house she hadn't remedied—before sinking back into the fireside chair, closing his eyes, and falling into a sudden deep sleep.

Chapter Two

Alone in the Estate Office, Kate found it impossible to settle. Just over eleven years ago she had proposed to Daniel here. She'd been twenty-two years old and the future, as far as she had been concerned then, had stretched a year into the distance, two years at most.

She'd been far more interested in the present, eking out every available moment with dear Papa and, when he'd finally passed away, hurling herself into planning the modernisation of the estates and the renovation of the house and gardens.

Then had come the unexpected arrival of the girls into her already busy life and the years had sped by, leaving her no time to worry about what lay ahead.

But now Elmswood Manor and the grounds were fully restored, the estate was a model of modern farming, and the girls had flown the nest. Kate was thirty-three years old and the future loomed—a vast, unpopulated space that she had no idea how she was going to fill. Eleven years ago thirty-three had seemed to her the age of an old crone, but now, despite her newly acquired lines, she felt every bit as young and untested as she had done when sitting here watching the clock all those years ago, waiting for Daniel to arrive.

Of course that was nonsense. The girls—young women! She really must stop thinking of them as 'the girls'!—would testify to the passing years, as would Elmswood Manor itself. She allowed herself a mocking smile. Both had blossomed under her care. But while she'd been tending to her husband's nieces, and Elmswood's gardens, she'd neglected herself.

Who was Kate Fairfax?

The last nine months had taught her that she was more intrepid than she'd imagined. Until Daniel's masters had called on her she'd always thought Elmswood the beginning and the end of her world, but having perforce seen a great deal more of the world since then, she would now like to see still more—though under more auspicious circumstances!

She was naïve, she was far from worldly-wise, but years of managing the estates had given her a confidence and a shrewdness that had helped her navigate many potentially daunting aspects of foreign travel. If she was honest, she envied Estelle her freedom now. It wasn't that Elmswood was a burden, exactly, but it was no longer a challenge.

Kate closed the ledger, where the numbers had been dancing about in front of her eyes, and got to her feet to gaze out of the window. Time to put her pragmatic head on again. Why worry about the future when she had the present to deal with?

She had never forgotten that she was married, but her experience of marriage had been husband-free. Until now. She had been too impatient with Daniel. It wasn't like her to be so easily riled, but there was something about him that set her on edge.

It had been different when he was ill—easier, in a sense—for she had known how to care for him, had been clear about her role as his nurse. And while he had not been lucid,—which had been most of the time—she had been able to tend to him without embarrassment, thinking of him simply as a patient in need of care.

Only when he had become conscious had she become *self*-conscious, aware of him as a man.

A very attractive man. There, she could admit that. She'd always found him attractive. Yes, but from afar. Nursing him had brought her into intimate contact with him, and though at the time she'd thought herself detached, later—yes, later—there had been aspects of her nursing that had made her decidedly uncomfortable.

The feel of his skin as she'd washed him, the smoothness of his shoulders, the rough hair on his chest, the ripple of muscle that his illness had not wholly wasted when he moved. His hair was soft, despite years in the sun. He was deeply tanned in places, pale in others. And there were some places where modesty had prevailed, from which she had looked away when she'd washed him, but she'd

touched them, all the same. Places which her imagination had lingered on as she'd lain sleepless, listening to his harsh breathing.

Did he remember? She sincerely hoped he did not.

It was bad enough, the effect those memories had on her, arousing all sorts of unwelcome feelings, stirring desires she'd always repressed so easily before. Eleven years of celibate marriage hadn't been endured without vague longings, but now her longings were not vague—they were quite specific.

Was this what Eloise felt when she looked at her husband? And Phoebe? Was her marriage passionate? In the sphere of intimacy they had so much more experience than her, and they always would, for no matter what the future held Kate was married to Daniel very much in name only.

Though if he remained here at Elmswood to recuperate, what then? They were husband and wife—a man and a woman past the first blush of youth and beyond any of the silliness of fluttering hearts and fevered longing. Daniel was a very attractive man, and she wasn't yet an old crone—in fact, she had every reason to believe that he found her attractive, for there had been times when she'd been nursing him... Though of course he'd had no idea who she was.

She was being foolish—very foolish—to be considering an *affaire* with her own husband. A very temporary *affaire*. That no one would know about. An *affaire* that might be her one and only chance to discover what it was she was missing out on.

Though how on earth she thought to propose it to Daniel...

Daniel was an invalid, for goodness' sake! A very cranky invalid. Though the way he'd looked at her earlier, when they had been drinking coffee, hadn't been cranky. If she did suggest they indulged in an *affaire*, then she doubted he'd turn her down. Not that she would dream of doing such a thing.

The sound of a carriage on the driveway made her jump to her feet. Four horses, attached to a very smart, if dusty post-chaise. Surely they had not come for him already? Her stomach sank.

With a start, she realised that was the last thing she wanted. Purely, she told herself as she sped out of the office and across the lawn, which was the quickest route to the house, because Daniel was far from well, and not at all because, despite the fact that he was infuriating, she wanted very much to get to know her husband better.

Mrs Chester, of all people, had emerged from the kitchen to answer the front doorbell herself by the time Kate arrived, breathless.

'We're a bit short-handed,' she explained, 'for I have sent Sylvia off to the village for provisions, and Mary is up to her neck in suds, it being laundry day.'

'And I can see that you are making pies,' Kate said, eyeing the cook's floury hands and apron with amusement. The doorbell clanged again. 'Don't worry. I'll get this.'

'Can't imagine who it will be. Someone for the master, no doubt? Shall I call him?'

'No need.'

Daniel appeared at the top of the staircase. He had changed into country dress of breeches and boots, and was shrugging himself into a coat, looking decidedly heavy-eyed.

'I think we both know who it is, Kate. And it's for the best, don't you think?'

Was it? What purpose could be served by prolonging his stay, if he remained determined to keep his distance from the girls? But what about *her*? Kate thought, panicking. He'd said he wanted to know her better, and she wanted—she didn't know what she wanted.

The doorbell clanged again.

'Isn't there a footman to answer this?' Daniel asked impatiently.

This rather ludicrous question went a long way to restoring her equilibrium. A footman, indeed!

Drawing him a quizzical look, she fixed a smile on her face and hauled open the door. 'Sir Marcus, what a delightful surprise. And Lord Armstrong too. Won't you come in?'

'Lady Elmswood. It is a pleasure to see you again—and none the worse for your travails, I am happy to see. On behalf of His Majesty's Government, allow me to thank you profusely for your

sterling efforts. Your gracious co-operation has spared our country a great deal of embarrassment, I don't mind telling you.'

Sir Marcus Denby made a flourishing bow. A tall, elegant man, immaculately turned out in town dress, he stood aside to allow Lord Henry Armstrong to precede him.

'I'm sorry to call without notice, but we thought it best to make sure we all understood the lie of the land, so to speak, in this delicate matter. Fairfax, allow me to tell you that you are looking a great deal better than I expected.'

'Sir Marcus. Lord Armstrong.' Daniel made a very small bow. 'I was, in fact, expecting you. Shall we talk in the—?'

'The drawing room,' Kate said.

'There is no need for you to join us,' Daniel said.

Sir Marcus and Lord Armstrong exchanged a look at his tone. 'Perhaps your husband is right,' the former said. 'If you will excuse us, Lady Elmswood? The drawing room is this way, I think? I remember it from our previous meeting.'

Sir Marcus claimed to be from the Admiralty. Who Lord Henry Armstrong was, and what interest he had in whatever business Daniel had been involved in Kate had no idea, and was, it seemed, destined not to know, for within the hour she was surprised to hear the grate of the front door opening.

Abandoning her letter to Eloise for the second time that day, she jumped to her feet and rushed out to the hallway, thinking that Daniel was leaving without even saying goodbye, and was just in time to see the two visitors clambering into the waiting coach and her husband, white-faced, slamming the door closed behind them.

'What...?'

'I am to stay, apparently,' he snapped. 'Until the dust settles politically I am to kick my heels here, disporting myself as Lord Elmswood, in the company of my lovely and very faithful little wife, enjoying the fresh country air and my neat and tidy little estate, and be grateful that I am still alive. All to satisfy Sir Marcus's insistence that our carefully constructed cover story be maintained.'

'Daniel...'

'I won't do it! I will not step into my father's shoes.' He turned on her. 'It's your fault! You colluded with them to return me to this blasted place. The hounds of hell wouldn't have dragged me back here if I'd had the strength to resist. But I won't stay. I won't—I can't.'

'Daniel! For heaven's sake, you sound like a three-year-old having a tantrum. Stop throwing accusations and clenching your fists and for goodness' sake calm down. I have no idea what those men said to you...'

'Plenty! I'm apparently a liability at the moment! Me!' He stared at her sightlessly for a moment, his mouth tightening, and then a raking shudder shook his whole body and he deliberately unfurled his hands. 'I need some fresh air.'

He looked, in her opinion, as if he needed to lie down with a cold compress on his forehead, but she suspected if she suggested such a thing he might well explode.

'Then why don't I show you the walled garden?'

It was warmer there, and she'd noticed already how cold he permanently was. There were some convenient and comfortable benches scattered around too. Most importantly it would serve as a convenient distraction.

Daniel let out a juddering sigh. 'I don't suppose there's any point in my saying that I'd rather be alone?'

'Please do say so, if you'd prefer me to follow twenty paces in your wake.'

'I'm not about to collapse, you know.'

'No, you're not,' Kate said, daring to take his arm, 'but if you do I'll be here to catch you.'

He laughed gruffly. 'I'm tempted, just to test you, but I am pretty sure there's a woman of iron inside that dainty front you present to the world. Come on, then, let's see what you've done to the

walled garden. I seem to recall some excitement in one of your letters a few years back over some plans you recovered from the attic.'

'Estelle found them—they were your mother's original drawings.'

She nudged him towards the door. The town coach wheels had left big gouges in the carriageway.

'Sir Marcus and his sidekick must have been anxious to get back to London,' she said, for Daniel was staring at the tracks.

'Lord Henry Armstrong.' Daniel made his way down the steps and after a brief hesitation took the correct turn to the right. 'He is one of Wellington's most trusted men, if you believe what he says of himself. Personally, I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. He has two daughters married to desert sheikhs in neighbouring Arabian kingdoms, and it's through them that he wields what influence he has in trade.'

'What has that to do with you?'

'As of today, absolutely nothing. My role in that arena has been played out.'

'Daniel, what *was* your role?'

'I'm afraid there's no point in you asking me questions about the specifics of what I was involved in because I won't be able to answer them. So it's better not to ask, and then I won't offend you by my silence.'

'Very well, then, I will curb my curiosity.'

'I'm sorry. For not being able to satisfy your very natural curiosity and for behaving like a spoilt child too,' Daniel said awkwardly. 'It's not like me.'

'We're neither of us behaving like ourselves. The circumstances are rather unusual, to say the least.'

He laughed dryly, running his hand over his closely shaved head. 'I had been working on an assignment for five years. Let's just say that my assumed identity was compromised and I was captured. I'm not sure exactly how long I languished in prison—it was probably the best part of a year before the British government got me out.'

'So for the last five years you've been pretending to be someone else?'

'I *have* been someone else.'

Semantics, it seemed to her, but she decided not to say so. 'And when this was discovered by the authorities they imprisoned you for it. So what you were doing was illegal?'

'That depends very much upon who is defining the terms.'

'Were you the only one on this—assignment? Were there others captured with you? Did Sir Marcus help anyone else escape along with you?'

'As far as Sir Marcus is concerned,' Daniel said, his lips thinning, 'everyone save his blue-eyed boys are considered collateral damage. It's one of the reasons I'm in his bad books.'

'Because you saved someone?'

'Because I ensured they did not become collateral damage,' he said sardonically. 'And broke with protocol by risking the mission and ultimately compromising it.'

'To save someone!' Kate exclaimed indignantly. 'Are you seriously saying that Sir Marcus is punishing you—?'

'Asserting his authority,' Daniel said grimly. 'He knows damned well that I hate this place, and how little I relish being told what to do.'

'For heaven's sake, you make him sound like a school bully. Surely he cannot be so petty?'

'More like a school prefect. He is a stickler for the rules.'

'But in the circumstances...'

'Kate, I've told you far too much already. If Sir Marcus had overheard this conversation he'd extend my sentence. It's over. Whatever happens next, I won't be going back there. Time to draw a veil over it all—save for my report and the debrief that will follow it when I'm well enough.'

‘How long did he sentence you to?’

‘Three months. I’m sorry.’

‘It’s not your fault. And this is your...’

Home, she had been about to say, but Daniel had made his thoughts on that extremely clear.

‘This is the walled garden,’ she said, though that fact was rather obvious. ‘I had the door rebuilt, as you can see.’

Daniel visibly relaxed at the change of subject. ‘I have only the dimmest of memories of being able to get in this way. I usually climbed over the wall. No one ever came here save me.’

‘The girls—I mean Eloise, Estelle and Phoebe—were fascinated by this place when they first came here. Eloise, especially, was a great one for climbing trees. But there’s something about a walled garden, I think, that captures everyone’s imagination, isn’t there?’

‘It’s because of the enclosing walls—and even more so when the door doesn’t open. It feels like a secret place. It used to be mine.’

‘Really?’ Kate let go of Daniel’s arm to allow him to step through. ‘I hope you approve of what I’ve done, then. What do you think?’

Daniel was standing stock-still, staring around him. ‘Would you mind if I took a few moments to myself? I promise I’m in no danger of a relapse, but I’d like to—I’d like to be alone for a bit, that’s all.’

‘It’s fine. I am happy to do the same. Where will I...?’

‘I’ll come and find you.’

He waited, clearly wanting her to move on, so she did, planning a clockwise circuit.

The air was distinctly warmer within the walls, perfumed by a complex and distinct bouquet that for the first time made her feel that she had come home. She could hear the industrious drone of honey bees from the hives which were over in the far corner.

She stopped on the path for a moment, closing her eyes, the better to sift through the various scents: grass, new mown, from the central lawn around which each of the other garden ‘rooms’ were set out; the moist, peaty smell of rich earth from the vegetable and flowerbeds; honeysuckle, always distinctive; the sharp, almost tangy smell of fresh foliage from the trees.

This was home.

This garden that she’d worked so hard to restore and to enhance had always been her own special project, her sanctuary, and dearer to her than anything else at Elmswood, from the restoration of the house to the modernisation of the farms.

Forgetting Daniel for the moment, she gave herself over to the charms of the garden, which had always been able to restore her equilibrium. It was laid out in discrete areas, separated by gravelled paths, with the kitchen garden on her left and the soft fruit trees opposite, peaches espaliered on the south-facing wall. Next came the flowerbeds, and the little pagoda she’d had built beside the succession house for arranging and drying. The beds were a riot of colour, with phlox and sweet peas, larkspur and delphinium, scabious and snapdragons and campanula. Clematis rioted over the trellising, and the borders of alternating mint, lavender and thyme gave off a delicious scent as her skirts brushed against them.

The windows and doors of the succession house were wide open. Oliver, who had first started work here as a young man around the time she had married Daniel, and was now responsible for all Elmswood’s grounds, had left his tankard on the bench outside the tool shed, as he was prone to do.

The nascent vineyard, about which he’d been so sceptical, was starting to take shape, she noted with quiet satisfaction, though it would be a few years yet before it would become productive.

The area the girls called ‘the wilderness’ occupied the south-west corner of the garden, with the orchard behind it in the north-west corner. Consisting of trees and a flower meadow, it was a lovely cool space, though Kate had often felt it was rather wasted. Now that the girls were no longer here to protest, she might make something of it.

Sinking onto her favourite bench, she let out a long sigh and rolled her shoulders, watching Daniel as he made his way slowly towards her a few moments later.

‘I’d currently come second in a foot race with a tortoise,’ he said ruefully, lowering himself onto the bench beside her. ‘You’ve totally transformed this garden. I barely recognised it.’

‘Restored, really, with a few innovations.’

‘The vineyard?’

‘Yes, that was my idea. I’m thinking of doing something with this expanse of unkempt wilderness too.’

‘I actually like it as it is. I used to climb the trees here, though they’ve grown a great deal taller since I last saw them.’

‘So tree-climbing runs in the family, then? The girls...’

‘You mentioned they liked to climb trees. An activity enjoyed by most children, I imagine—hardly an inherited trait.’

Which was perfectly true, Kate supposed, though why he felt the need to point it out quite so harshly! She folded her arms, refusing to be hurt.

‘I like this wilderness,’ Daniel said, breaking the silence in a more conciliatory tone. ‘A little chaos in the midst of order is no bad thing.’

‘Somehow I don’t think you’re referring to gardening.’

‘Perhaps not.’ He stretched out his legs in front of him. ‘When I was a boy I used to imagine this garden was a jungle, full of lions and tigers and even the odd elephant.’

‘When I first started working here it was so overgrown that there might well have been all three lurking in the undergrowth. Well, maybe not the elephants. Did you spend a great deal of time here?’

‘When I wanted to be alone—which was most of the time.’ He took the turquoise from his pocket and began to roll it between his fingers. ‘Sometimes it wasn’t a jungle but a tropical paradise, with palm trees. At other times that tree over there was the main mast of a sailing ship that I’d climb in the hope of spying land after weeks at sea. At others...’ He caught himself, shaking his head. ‘What nonsense.’

‘I think it’s fascinating. Even as a boy your ambition was to explore the world.’

‘My ambition was to be anywhere but here.’

‘And you fulfilled that ambition rather spectacularly.’

His expression hardened. ‘Only to come full circle.’

‘Only for three months, Daniel, it’s hardly a life sentence,’ Kate said. ‘You know, if I was the type to take offence, I rather think I would.’

‘You know perfectly well that it’s not you.’

No, it was Elmswood—the place he’d said the hounds of hell wouldn’t have been able to drag him to. Why did Daniel dislike Elmswood so vehemently?

‘You don’t think that Sir Marcus might relent?’ Kate asked.

Daniel was studying his hands, frowning heavily. There was a sheen of sweat on his brow. ‘Beneath Sir Marcus’s urbane veneer lies a ruthless streak. He left you feeling you had little choice, no doubt, other than to go along with his plan to facilitate my safe return to England.’ He lifted his head, smiling at her grimly. ‘Tell me, if you don’t mind, exactly how they recruited you.’

‘Sir Marcus and Lord Henry turned up out of the blue, just as they did today. I had no idea who they were. My first thought, as I’ve already told you, was that they might have some letters from you. When they announced, in the middle of tea and cake, that they had a grave matter to discuss with me, I thought they were going to tell me you were dead. It was almost a relief to hear that you were in a foreign prison, but it was also a huge shock. I couldn’t take it in.’

‘And I’m guessing they didn’t give you time to ask too many questions?’

‘No, they did not. They spent their time very effectively emotionally blackmailing me. I was left with the impression that if I did not co-operate you might well perish. They barely gave me time

to pack and to offload Elmswood onto poor Estelle. It was only later that I began to think a little more rationally, and by then I was on my way to Portsmouth, under escort. The escort simply gazed at me blankly, no matter what I asked. I couldn't understand the need for so much subterfuge and secrecy... Daniel, are you a spy?

He gave a bark of laughter. 'That's a wildly romantic term for it. Not one, I'll wager, that Sir Marcus used?'

'No. He said that you'd got yourself into a "*tricky situation*" while assisting the government with some "*sensitive business*". He said that they weren't quite sure of your whereabouts, but that they planned to "*extract you*"—I am pretty sure those were his exact words—and they needed me to escort you home. I couldn't make sense of it at first. Why had he used such language? Why couldn't he simply have said that you were in gaol and they were going to get you out? But I reckon Sir Marcus would cut his tongue out rather than talk in such simple terms.'

'Oh, believe me, he can call a spade a spade when required,' Daniel said grimly. 'What else did they hint at?'

'They did say that you would be in a bad way when they brought you to me—though they did not say quite how bad.' Kate shuddered. 'I barely recognised you. You were so thin, and that beard you had... and your hair!'

'To say nothing of the lice that were living in it. Did I look like some sort of cave man? I wonder if I'll ever be able to bring myself to grow my hair again.'

'I like it short. You have excellent bone structure.'

'Thank you kindly, ma'am. Go on—what else?'

'Their biggest worry was that once they had *extracted* you it might trigger some sort of diplomatic incident. In fact they seemed very concerned about that, and about your being recaptured too—because, they said, whatever you'd been involved in was in a very "*warm*" part of the world. I thought at first they meant the weather,' Kate admitted ruefully.

'Ha!' Daniel shook his head. 'Volatile is the word I'd have used, but I'm no diplomat.'

'No, but you must have been very valuable to them for them to have risked so much to extricate you.'

Kate waited, but Daniel, unsurprisingly, had nothing to say to this.

'So they didn't want to lose you again, and they didn't want anyone to know where you were,' she continued. 'It was important to get you home safely unnoticed, which is why they needed me. I mean, they knew you'd need nursing, and they were concerned that you might be indiscreet in your fevered state, so were reluctant to send a regular doctor. But the main point of my being there was to play Lady Elmswood, the dutiful wife, bringing home her sick explorer husband.'

'So I was playing the Earl, was I?' Daniel said, his lip curling. 'I'm glad I was blissfully unaware of *that*.'

'Well, it was a first for me to play the Countess, and though it wasn't a role I thought I'd relish, any more than you, it did ease the journey considerably. I think I became rather good at it.'

Daniel laughed. 'I can just see you, all five foot nothing of you, looking down that very nice little nose of yours and demanding service *now*!'

'Well, that's what I did,' Kate said, willing her cheeks not to flush—because it was a very small compliment, really, and she was thirty-three, and thirty-three-year-old women did not blush. 'I arrived in Cyprus via Paris, Marseilles, Lisbon, Naples and Athens—as I think I've told you, though you might have forgotten.'

'I remember. Lady Elmswood's lightning tour of Europe's ports.'

'They are also, with the exception of Marseilles, very popular with English travellers who would, if required, be able to testify that they'd seen Lady Elmswood on her European tour which was rudely interrupted by her explorer husband having been taken ill while investigating an ancient site on Cyprus. Personally, I thought it a quite unnecessary embellishment.'

‘That would have been Sir Marcus’s idea—he loves that sort of subterfuge.’

‘If I hadn’t been so wrought with worry I’d have enjoyed it. When I set sail from Portsmouth, though, I had no idea I’d be away for so long. I thought they would extricate you immediately, but when I arrived in Cyprus in February it was another two weeks before they finally brought you to me. Why did it take so long?’



Daniel shifted uncomfortably on the bench, refusing to meet Kate’s steady gaze. ‘I imagine they were obliged to bring me out by a circuitous route. But it doesn’t matter how I made it out. I made it. And you were waiting. And now I’m here. And I’m to remain here until I accept the error of my ways in disobeying protocol, and until the fuss over my last assignment has died down, and they’ve decided I’m fit enough to be put to use again.’

Or at least that was what he bloody well hoped. Sir Marcus had, dismayingly, been vague on the subject, committing only to a review. But he’d persuade them when the time came—he knew he would. He was good, one of the best they had, and they knew it.

‘I think,’ Daniel said, ‘we should concentrate on the present and not worry too much about the future. I have no choice but to remain here for now. Sir Marcus, being extremely attached to the cover story he has concocted, insists that I cannot recuperate elsewhere. Though who he imagines will be checking up on me—But there’s no point in going over that. I am obliged to stay here, so we’re going to have to find a way of brushing along together for the next three months without murdering each other.’

Kate smiled uncertainly. ‘I’m sure it won’t come to that. Despite what you think, I’m a very easy-going type.’

‘Are you? I’m not. I’m used to living on my own, on having everything my way and, more importantly, not allowing anyone else a say.’

‘Good grief—and you call me a despot!’

Daniel grinned. ‘I prefer to think of myself as self-sufficient.’

‘I prefer to think of myself as practical and pragmatic.’

‘Now, that I know to be true, for I’ve seen you in action. You managed to keep me fed and watered and washed on ships where I’m pretty sure the crew were living off ship’s biscuit and had not seen a change of clothes, let alone a change of bedsheet, in weeks.’

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