



Margaret
McPHEE

The
Regency
Season

GENTLEMAN ROGUES

Margaret McPhee
The Regency Season:
Gentleman Rogues
Серия «Mills & Boon M&B»

Аннотация

Rebels with no rulesThe Gentleman RogueIn the middle of a Mayfair ballroom two apparent strangers stand in amazement. Ned Stratham and Emma Northcote never thought they would see one another again – this rogue's charm once captivated her but now she's a different woman. Their pasts are full of secrets and Ned realises he can't rekindle their romance because, if Emma discovers how deep their connection is, it could ruin everything...The Lost Gentleman Kate Medhurst's days on the high seas are numbered as she's ruthlessly chased by the fearsome Captain North! Once captured Kate knows she should fight him, hate him and challenge him – but she cannot. This Captain is no longer a gentleman and when he confronts Kate, North realises his lost honour is a small price to pay to save the woman he loves...

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The Regency Season



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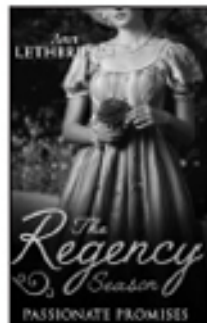
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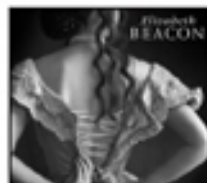
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*The
Regency
Season*

GENTLEMAN
ROGUES

MARGARET MCPHEE

MARGARET McPHEE loves to use her imagination — an essential requirement for a scientist. However, when she realised that her imagination was inspired more by the historical romances she loves to read rather than by her experiments, she decided to put the stories down on paper. She has since left her scientific life behind and enjoys cycling in the Scottish countryside, tea and cakes.

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[The Gentleman Rogue](#)

Margaret McPhee

INESCAPABLE, UNDENIABLE AND IMPOSSIBLE TO RESIST!

In a Mayfair ballroom, beautiful Emma Northcote stands in amazement. For gazing at her, with eyes she'd know anywhere, is Ned Stratham—a man whose roguish charm once held her captivated.

But that was another life in another part of London.

With their past mired in secrets and betrayal, and their true identities now at last revealed, Ned realizes they can never rekindle their affair. For only he knows that they share a deeper connection—one that could make Emma hate him if she ever discovered the truth....

"It's witty, wicked and wonderful!" —RT Book Reviews on *Mistress to the Marquis*

For Gran & Grandad and For Agnes & John With love

[Chapter One](#)

London—August 1811

Emma de Lisle watched the man covertly from the corner of her eye. He was sitting at his usual table, over at the other side of the room, his back to the wall, a clear view of the door. On the

table before him sat his pint of porter, his almost-finished plate of lamb chops and, beside it, his faded leather hat.

He moved the small ivory disc over the back of his hand, just as he always did, the trick making the disc look like it was magically tumbling one way over his fingers and then all the way back, forward and back, forward and back in that slow easy rhythm. He sipped from the tankard and seemed comfortable just sitting there on his own, eating, drinking, watching—a part of the bustle of the taproom of the Red Lion Chop-House, and yet not a part.

‘All right?’ A short brown-toothed man muttered as he passed, giving a sullen nod of his head in the man’s direction.

The man gave a nod in return and the little disc disappeared from his fingers into his jacket. Emma had noticed him before. Just as she noticed him now. Because of the way he ran the small ivory circle over his fingers. Because a slice of one dark-blond eyebrow was missing, a tiny scar cutting in a straight line clear through it, and because the eyes beneath those brows were the colour of a clear summer sky. But most of all, she noticed him because he intrigued her.

The faded brown-leather jacket he wore was cracked with age. Beneath the table she knew he wore scuffed boots that matched the jacket. His hat was leather, too, worn smooth, smoky-brown, dark beside his hair. Clothes that had lasted a lifetime, ageing with the man that wore them. Yet beneath his jacket was a shirt that, in contrast to most others she saw in here, was good

quality, white and freshly laundered, and his fingernails were clean and trimmed. He kept to himself and was always on his own. And there was something about him, something of self-containment and strength, of intelligence and power. But all of it understated, quiet, kept beneath the surface. He did not seem to care what others thought of him. Unlike the other men in Whitechapel he did not make any effort to either intimidate or impress. Never tried to make conversation, just kept his thoughts to himself. He was clean-shaven, handsome too in a rugged sort of way, although handsome men should have been the last thing on Emma's mind.

'Three mixed-grill platters!' Tom, the cook, yelled, jolting her from her speculation.

'Coming, Tom.' Emma dragged her eyes away from the man, her moment of respite gone. She hurried up to the kitchen hatch, and, using the cloth dangling from the belt around her waist, quickly shifted the scalding plates on to her large wooden tray. In a much-practised move, she hefted the whole tray up to balance it on her shoulder, before bustling across the room to make her delivery.

'Here we are, gentlemen. Three of our very best mixed-grills.' She presented each of the three men round the table with an enormous platter.

On the way back to the bar she cleared two tables, took two orders for more beers, and noticed a new party of men arriving to be fed.

‘I’ll see to the new boys, Em,’ Paulette, the Red Lion’s other serving wench, said as she passed Emma.

‘Four pints of ale ready over here, Emma!’ Nancy, the landlady, called, setting the last of the pints down on the bar with a thud that sent the froth of their heads cascading in a creamy waterfall down the outsides of the pewter tankards.

Emma bustled over. Collected all four on to her tray and went to deliver them to the table nearest to the front door.

‘Thanks, darlin’.’ The big black-haired man leered down the cleavage that her low-cut chemise and tight-laced bodice of her scarlet work dress exposed. She disliked this dress and how much it revealed. And she disliked men like him. He grinned, revealing teeth that matched his hair as his hand slid against her hip.

She slapped his fingers away, kept her tone frosty. ‘Keep your hands to yourself.’ Wondered if she would ever get used to this aspect of the job.

He laughed. ‘You’re a feisty one and no mistake. But I like a challenge.’ His hand returned, more insistent this time, grabbing her buttock and squeezing as he hauled her close. ‘Just as much as I like that fancy rich accent of yours. Makes you sound like a real lady it does. And I’ve never had a lady. Come on, darlin’, I’ll make it worth your while.’ The stench of ale and rotten teeth was overpowering. His friends around the table cheered and sniggered.

Emma fixed him with a cynical and steely stare. ‘Hard though it is to believe, I must decline. Now unhand me and let me get on

with my work or you will have a bar full of thirsty, hungry men waiting to be served to contend with.'

Black-Hair's grin broadened. He pulled her to him, wrenching the tray from her hand, and dropping it to clatter on the floor. 'The other wench can see to them. You can see to me, darlin'.'

Oh, Lord! She realised with a sinking heart and impending dread that he was not going to release her with nothing worse than a slap to the bottom. He was one of those that would pull her down on his lap and start fondling her. Or worse.

'I will see to nothing. Release me before Nancy sees your game and bars you.'

She was only dimly aware of the shadow of the figure passing at close quarters. She was too busy trying to deal with the black-haired man and extricate herself from his grip. So when the deluge of beer tipped like an almighty cascade of brown rain over the lout's head she was as shocked as he.

Black-Hair's grin was wiped. Emma was forgotten in an instant. He released her, giving an almighty roar of a curse.

Emma didn't need an invitation. Making the most of her opportunity, she grabbed her tray and backed clear of the danger.

Black-Hair was spluttering and wiping beer from screwed-up eyes with great rough tattooed hands. His hair was sodden and glistening with beer. It ran in rivulets down his cheeks and over his chin to drip its tea-coloured stain on to the grubby white of the shirt that covered his barrel chest. The shoulders of his shabby brown-woollen jacket were dark as rain-soaked earth.

Even the front of his grey trousers was dark with it. He stank like a brewery.

His small bloodshot eyes swivelled to the perpetrator.

The hubbub of chatter and laughter and clank of glasses had ceased. There was curiosity and a whispered hush as everyone watched.

Emma shifted her gaze to follow that of the black-haired lout and saw the subject of her earlier covert study standing there. Tall, still, calm.

‘Sorry about that. Slip of the hand.’ The words might have offered apology, but the way the man said them suggested otherwise. His voice was the same East End accent as theirs, but low in tone, clear in volume, quietly menacing in its delivery.

‘Oh, you’ll be damn sorry all right!’ Black-Hair’s chair legs scraped loud against the wooden floorboards as he got to his feet. ‘You’ll be pissing yourself, mate, by the time I’ve finished with you.’

The man let his gaze drop pointedly to the dark sodden front of Black-Hair’s trousers, then rose again to meet his eyes. There was a glimmer of hard amusement in them. He raised the eyebrow with the scar running through it, the one that Emma thought made him look like a handsome rogue. ‘Looks like you got there first.’

The crowd sniggered at that.

Black-Hair’s face flushed puce. His little piggy eyes narrowed on the man like an enraged bull. He cracked his knuckles as he

made a fist.

By some unspoken command Black-Hair's four friends got to their feet, making their involvement clear. Any trace of curiosity and amusement fled the room's atmosphere. It was suddenly sharp-edged with threat.

The hush spread. Every man in the chop-house was riveted on what was unfolding before Emma.

The nape of her neck prickled.

'Settle down, boys,' said Nancy. 'There's no harm done. Sit down and drink your pints before they get warm.'

But not one of the men moved. They all stayed put, stood where they were, eyeing each other like dogs with their hackles raised.

'We don't want no trouble in here. You got a disagreement, you take it outside.' Nancy tried to come closer, but two men stepped into her path to stop her progress, murmuring advice—two regulars intent on keeping her safe.

No one heeded her anyway. Not the black-haired villain and his cronies. And not the man.

In the background Paulette's face, like every other, was lit with excited and wary anticipation.

The man's expression was implacable. He looked almost amused.

'I'm going to kill you,' said Black-Hair.

'And there was me thinking you were offering to buy me a replacement porter,' said the man.

‘You ain’t gonna be able to hold a pint of porter, let alone drink one, I swear.’

Emma’s blood ran cold. She knew what men like this in Whitechapel did to one another. This was not the first fight she had seen and the prospect of what was coming made her feel queasy.

The man smiled again, a smile that went nowhere near those cool blue eyes. ‘You really want to do this?’ he asked with a hint of disbelief and perplexity.

‘Too late to start grovelling now,’ said Black-Hair.

‘That’s a shame.’

There was not one sound in the whole of the chop-house. The silence hissed. No one moved. All eyes were on the man, Emma’s included. Staring with fascinated horror. Five ruffians against one man. The outcome was certain.

The black-haired man stepped closer to the man, squaring up to him, violent intent spilling from every pore.

She swallowed. Felt a shiver chase over her skin.

The man did not seem to feel the same. He smiled. It was a cold, hard smile. His eyes showed nothing of softness, not one hint of fear. Indeed, he looked as if he welcomed what would come. The blood. The violence. Five men against one. Maybe he really did have a death wish after all.

‘Someone stop them. Please,’ she said, but it was a plea that had no hope of being answered.

An old man pulled her back. ‘Ain’t no one going to stop them

now, girl.'

He was right. She knew it and so did every single person in that taproom.

The black-haired brute cracked his knuckles and stretched his massive bull neck, ready to dispense punishment.

Emma held her breath. Her fingers were balled, her nails cutting into her palms.

The man's movement was so fast and unexpected. One minute he was standing there. The next, he had landed a head butt against the lout's nose. There was a sickening crunch. And blood. A lot of blood. Black-Hair doubled over as if bending in to meet the man's knee that hit his face. The speed and suddenness of it shocked her. It shocked the men in there, too. She could tell by the look on their faces as they watched the black-haired giant go down. The ruffian was blinking and gasping with the shock of it as he lay there.

Emma watched in disbelief. Every muscle in her body tensed with shock. She held her breath for what would happen next.

'Too late to start grovelling,' the man said.

Leaning one hand on the floor, Black-Hair spat a bloody globule to land on the toe of the man's boot and reached for a nearby chair.

'But if you insist...' The man stepped closer to Black-Hair, his bloodied boot treading on the giant's splayed fingers, his hand catching hold of the villain's outstretched hand as if he meant to help him to his feet. But it was not help he offered. He gave

the wrist a short sharp twist, the resulting crack of which made Emma and the rest of the audience wince.

Black-Hair's face went ashen. He made not one sound, just fainted into a crumpled heap and did not move.

In the stunned amazement that followed no one else moved either. There was not a sound.

'He might need a little help in holding his porter,' said the man to Black-Hair's friends.

'You bastard!' One of them spat the curse.

The man smiled again. And this time Emma was prepared.

The tough charged with fists at the ready.

The man's forehead shattered the villain's cheekbone while his foot hooked around his ankle and felled him. When the rat tried to get up the man kicked his feet from under him. This time Black-Hair's friend stayed where he was.

The other three men exchanged shifty glances amongst themselves, then began to advance. One slipped a long wicked blade that winked in the candlelight.

'Really?' asked the man.

The sly-faced man came in, feigned attack, drew back. Came in close again, circling the man.

'Too scared?' asked the man.

A curl of lip and a slash of the blade was his opponent's only response.

But the man kicked him between the legs and there was an ear-piercing scream. Emma had never heard a man scream before.

It made the blood in her veins turn to ice. She watched the knife clatter to the floor forgotten while the sly-faced villain dropped like a stone, clutching himself and gasping.

The man looked at the two remaining thugs.

For a tiny moment they gaped at him. Then they turned tail and ran, pelting out of the chop-house like hares before a hound.

The man stood there and watched them go.

But Emma was not looking at the fleeing villains. Rather, she was looking at the man. She could not take her eyes off him. There was what looked like the beginning of a bruise on his forehead. The snow-white of his shirt was speckled scarlet with blood from Black-Hair's nose. His dark neckcloth was askew. He was not even out of breath. He just stood there calm and cool and unperturbed.

The slamming of the front door echoed in the silence.

No one spoke. No one moved. No one save the man.

He smoothed the dishevelment from his hair, straightened his neckcloth and walked through the pathway that cleared through the crowd before him.

They watched him with respect. They watched him with awe. Soft murmured voices.

Fists and feet were what gained a man respect round here. Standing up for himself and what he believed in. Physicality ruled. The strongest, the toughest, the most dangerous. And the man had just proved himself all three.

Some regulars from the crowd half dragged, half carried the

injured away.

The man returned to his table, but he did not sit down. He finished the porter in one gulp and left more coins beside the empty tankard than were needed for payment. He lifted his hat and then his eyes finally met Emma's across the taproom.

Within her chest her heart was still banging hard against her ribs. Through her veins her blood was still rushing with a shocked fury.

He gave her a nod of acknowledgement and then turned away and walked out of the place, oblivious to the entire crowd of customers standing there slack-jawed and staring at him.

Emma stared just as much as all the others, watching him leave. And even when the door had closed behind him she still stood there looking, as if she could see right through it to follow him. Six months in Whitechapel and she had never seen a man as strong, as ruthless or as invincible.

'Don't think he'll be having any trouble for a while,' said Nancy, who was standing, hands on hips, bar cloth in hand, watching.

'Who is he?' Emma asked in soft-voiced amazement.

'Goes by the name of Ned Stratham. Or so he says.'

Emma opened her mouth to ask more, but Nancy had already turned her attention away, raising her voice loud and harsh as she called out to the taproom audience, 'Show's over, folks. Get back to your tables before your chops grow cold and your ale grows warm.'

Emma's gaze returned to linger on the front door and her thoughts to the man who had just exited through it.

Ned Stratham.

A fight seemingly over a pint of spilled porter. And yet Emma was not fooled, even if all the others were.

Ned Stratham did not know anything about her other than she served him his dinner and porter. He was a man who had barely seemed to notice her in the months he had been coming here. A man who kept to himself and quietly watched what unfolded around him without getting involved. Until tonight.

It had not been fighting in any sense that a gentleman would recognise, it had been raw and shocking and, if she were honest, much more effective. It followed no rules. It had not been polite or genteel, nor, on the surface of it, honourable or chivalric.

'Backlog of chops in the kitchen, Emma,' Nancy's voice interrupted.

Emma nodded. 'I am just coming.'

Seemingly a taproom brawl over a clumsy accident and yet... In her mind she saw again that blue gaze on hers, so piercing and perceptive.

'Emma!' Nancy yelled again. 'You want it in writing?'

Lifting her tray, Emma headed for the kitchen. Ned Stratham's table had been nowhere near Black-Hair's and any man who could tumble a disc over his knuckles had no problems with balance.

And she knew that, despite his method, what Ned Stratham

had just done was chivalric in every sense of the word. She knew that what he had just done was save her from Black-Hair.

* * *

Ned Stratham saw the woman again a week later on his visit to the Red Lion. His meal had been delivered by the other serving wench, but it was Emma who came to collect his cleared plate and empty tankard.

Her dark hair was clean and pinned up, her pale olive skin clear and smooth, unmarked by pox scars. Her teeth were white and straight. She was too beautiful for Whitechapel. Too well-spoken, too. It made her stand out. It made her a target for men like the dark-haired chancer last week. He already knew that she wore no wedding band upon her finger. No husband. Unprotected in an area of London where it was dangerous for any woman, let alone one like her, to be so.

‘Do you wish another pint of porter, sir?’ Her voice was clear, her accent refined and out of place on this side of town.

‘Thank you.’ He watched in silence as she shifted his plate, cutlery and tankard to sit on her empty wooden tray. But once the table was cleared she did not hurry off as usual. Instead she hesitated, lingering there with the tray in her hands.

‘I did not get a chance to thank you, last week.’ Her eyes were a dark-brown velvet. Warm eyes, he thought as he looked into them. Beautiful eyes.

‘For what?’ he asked.

‘Spilling your drink.’

‘A clumsy accident.’

‘Of course it was.’ She smiled in a way that told him that she understood exactly what he had done. The hint of a dimple showed in the corner of her mouth.

It made him smile, too.

She was always polite and professional, and friendly with it, as if she genuinely liked people. But unlike most other serving wenches he had never seen her flirt with any man, even though that would have earned her more tips. She did her job with a capable efficiency and sense of purpose that he liked.

He turned his gaze to focus on the tumble of the small pale-ivory token across his knuckles. No matter how beautiful she was, there was a part of him that wanted her to just walk away as she had done all the other times, to attend to other punters on other tables. There were things on his mind more important than beautiful women. Things he had spent a lifetime chasing. Things upon which he had to stay focused to bring to fruition. He did not want distractions, not of any kind.

And the truth was he had not wanted to intervene last week, but he could not have just sat there and turned a blind eye while a woman was forced against her will, whatever the level of it. He had known men like the black-haired tough all his life. What started out as ‘fun’ soon escalated to something else.

He watched the rhythmic smooth tumble of the token over the fingers of his right hand. It was a movement so long practised as to no longer be a trick but a reflex, a part of himself.

‘I will fetch your porter.’ He didn’t look up at her but he knew she was still smiling. He could hear it in her voice.

Ned said nothing more. Just kept his focus on the token, effectively dismissing her.

He heard her turn and walk away. Shifted his eyes momentarily to her retreating figure, to the soft sway of her hips. The smallest of glances; no risk to the ripple of his fingers that was as instinctive and easy to him as breathing. And yet, in that moment, for the first time in years, he fluffed the move like a novice. The token tipped from his hand, straight off the table, landing edge up on the floorboards to roll away with speed.

His heart skipped a beat. He was already on his feet and following, but the token was way in front and heading for the crowded bar. But Emma, as he’d heard her called, reached a foot forward and, with the toe of her boot, gently stopped it, balanced the tray on her hip and retrieved it from the floor.

Ned watched as she rubbed the token against the bodice of her dress, dusting off the dirt that marred its smooth pale surface. Her gaze moved over the worn ivory, studying it.

She turned to him as he reached her.

Their eyes held for a tiny second before she passed the token to him.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘For what? I trust the inadvertent and clumsy tread of my boot did your property no harm.’ Her eyes held his.

He couldn’t help himself. He smiled.

And so did she.

Her eyes watched the token as he slipped it safely inside his jacket. 'What is it?'

'My lucky charm.'

'Does it work?'

'Without fail.'

Her eyebrows rose ever so slightly, but she softened the cynicism with a smile that did things to him that no other woman's smile ever had. It kept him standing here, talking, when he should have walked away.

'You don't believe me.'

'A lucky charm that works without fail...?' She raised her eyebrows again, teasingly this time. 'Perhaps I should ask to borrow it.'

'Are you in need of good luck?'

'Is not everyone?'

'Emma!' Nancy shouted from the bar. 'Six pints of porter here!'

'Ned Stratham.' He did not smile, but offered his hand for a handshake.

'Emma de Lisle.'

Her fingers were feminine and slender within his own. Her skin cool and smooth, even within the warmth of the taproom. The touch of their bare hands sparked physical awareness between them. He knew she felt it, too, from the slight blush on her cheeks and the way she released his hand.

‘Emma!’ Nancy, the landlady, screeched like a banshee. ‘Get over here, girl!’

Emma glanced over her shoulder at the bar. ‘Coming, Nancy!’

‘No rest for the wicked,’ she said, and with a smile she was gone.

Ned resumed his seat, but his eyes watched her cross the room. The deep red of the tavern dress complimented the darkness of her hair and was laced tight to her body so that he could see the narrowness of her waist and the flare of her hips and the way the material sat against her buttocks. There was a vitality about her, an intelligence, a level of confidence in herself not normally seen round here.

He watched her collect the tankards from the bar and distribute them to various tables, taking her time en route to him. His was the last tankard on the tray.

‘What’s a woman like you doing in a place like this?’ he asked as she set the porter down before him.

Her eyes met his again. And in them was that same smile. ‘Working,’ she said.

This time she didn’t linger. Just moved on, to clear tables and take new orders and fetch more platters of chops.

He leaned back against the wooden panelling on the wall and slowly drank his porter. The drift of pipe smoke was in the air. He breathed it in along with the smell of char-grilled chops and hoppy ale. Soaking up the atmosphere of the place, the familiarity and the ease, he watched Emma de Lisle.

He had the feeling she wouldn't be working here in the Red Lion for too long. She was a woman who was going places, or had been to them. Anyone who met her knew it. He wondered again, as he had wondered many times before, what her story was.

He watched how efficiently she worked, with that air of purpose and energy; the way she could share a smile or a joke with the punters without it delaying her work—only for him had she done that. The punters liked her and he could see why.

She didn't look at him again, not in all the time it took him to sup his drink.

The bells of St Olave's in the distance chimed eleven. Nancy called last orders.

Ned's time here for tonight was over. He drained the tankard. Left enough coins on the table to pay for his meal and a generous tip for Emma de Lisle, before lifting his hat and making his way across the room to the front door.

His focus flicked one last time to where Emma was delivering meat-laden platters to a table of four.

She glanced over at him, her eyes meeting his for a tiny shared moment, and flashed her wonderful smile at him, before getting on with the job in hand.

He placed his hat on his head and walked out of the Red Lion Chop-House into the darkness of the alleyway.

I trust the inadvertent and clumsy tread of my boot did your property no harm. He smiled. Emma de Lisle was certainly one hell of a woman. A man might almost be tempted to stay here

for a woman like her. Almost.

He smiled one last time, then set off through the maze of streets he knew so well. As he crossed the town, moving from one parish to the next, he shifted his mind to what lay ahead for tomorrow, focusing, running through the details.

The night air was cool and his face grim as he struck a steady pace all the way home to Mayfair.

Chapter Two

‘Is that you, Emma?’ her father called at the sound of her key scraping in the lock. She could hear the wariness in his voice.

She unlocked the door and let herself into the two small rooms that they rented.

‘I brought you a special supper—pork chops.’

‘Pork?’ He raised his eyebrows in surprise. ‘Not usual for there to be any pork left.’

There had not been. Pork was expensive and the choicest chop they offered. It was also her father’s favourite, which was why Emma had paid for them out of her own pocket, largely with the generous tip Ned Stratham had left, the rest covered by Nancy’s discount. ‘Happy Birthday, Papa.’ She dropped a kiss to his cheek as he drew her close and gave her a hug.

‘It is my birthday? I lose track of time these days.’ He sat down in one of the spindly chairs at the bare table in the corner of the room.

‘That is what happens with age,’ Emma teased him. But she knew it was not age that made him forget, but the fact that all the

days merged together when one just worked all the time.

She hung her cloak on the back of the door, then set a place at the little table, unwrapped the lidded plate from its cloth and finally produced an earthenware bottle. 'And as a treat, one of the finest of the Red Lion's porters.'

'You spoil me, Emma,' he chided, but he smiled. 'You are not having anything?'

'I ate earlier, in the Red Lion. And you know I cannot abide the taste of beer.'

'For which I am profoundly thankful. Bad enough my daughter chooses to work in a common tavern, but that she would start drinking the wares...' He gave an exaggerated shudder.

'It is a chop-house, not a tavern as I have told you a hundred times.' She smiled. Although the distinction made little difference in reality, it made her father feel better. But he would not feel better were he to see the Red Lion's clientele and her best customers. She wondered what he would make of a man like Ned Stratham. Or what he would say had he witnessed the manner in which Ned had bested five men to defend her.

Her father smiled, too. 'And I suppose I should be heartily grateful for that.'

'You know the tips from the chop-house pay very well indeed, much better than for any milliner or shop girl. And it will not be for ever.'

'Perhaps not,' he said thoughtfully.

'No perhaps about it, Papa,' she said sternly. 'Our savings

begin to grow. And I have made an application for a position in Clerkenwell. It is not Mayfair, but it is heading in the right direction.'

'Managing a chop-house.'

Managing a tavern, but she did not tell him that. 'One step at a time, on a journey that will eventually lead us back to our own world.'

He smiled. 'My dear girl, have I told you that you are stubborn as a mastiff?'

'Once or twice. I wonder where I might have acquired such a trait? I do not recall my dear mama having such a defect.'

He chuckled. 'Indeed, I own the blame. The apple does not fall so very far from the tree.' He gently patted her hand. 'Come, take a seat. You must be tired after working all evening.'

Emma dropped into the seat opposite. 'Not so tired at all.' And although her feet were aching it was the truth. She thought of Ned Stratham and the interaction that had passed between them earlier that evening and smiled. He was a man without an inch of softness in him. Probably more dangerous than any of the other men that came to the chop-house, and the men that came to the Red Lion were not those anyone would wish to meet alone on a dark night. Definitely more dangerous, she corrected, remembering precisely what he had done to Black-Hair and his cronies. And yet there was something about him, something that marked him as different. Pushing the thought away, she focused her attention on her father.

‘How were the docks today?’

‘The same as they ever are. The good news is that I managed to get an extra shift for tomorrow.’

‘Again?’ The fatigue in his face worried her. ‘Working a double shift is too much for you.’ Working a single shift in a manual job in the London Docks’ warehouses was too much for a man who had been raised and lived as a gentleman all his life.

‘What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander,’ he said. ‘Do not start with your scolding, please, Emma.’

She sighed and gave a small smile. It was his birthday and she wanted what was left of it to be nice for him. There would be other days to raise the issue of his working double shifts. ‘Very well.’

‘Fetch your cup. I shall propose a toast.’

She did as he bid.

He poured a dribble of porter into her cup. Raised his own tankard in the air. ‘God has granted me another year and I am happy and thankful for it.’ But there was a shadow of sadness in his eyes and she knew what he was thinking of. ‘To absent loved ones,’ he said. ‘Wherever Kit is. Whatever he is doing. God keep him safe and bring him home to us.’

‘To absent loved ones,’ she echoed and tried to suppress the complicated swirl of emotions she felt whenever Kit’s name was mentioned.

They clunked the cups together and drank down the porter. Its bitterness made her shudder. Once it had been champagne in

the finest of cut-crystal glasses with which he made his birthday toast and the sweetest of lemonades, extravagantly chilled with ice. Once their lives had been very different from the ones they lived here.

As if sensing her thought, he reached his hand to hers and gave it a squeeze. Her eyes met his, sombre for a moment with shared dark memories, before she locked the memories away in the place they belonged. Neither spoke of them. It was not their way. She forced a smile to her face. 'You should eat those pork chops before they grow cold.'

'With pleasure, my dear girl.' Her father smiled in return and tucked into the meal with relish.

* * *

Across town the next day, within the dining room of a mansion house in Cavendish Square, a very distinguished luncheon was taking place.

The fireplace was black marble, carved and elaborate. The walls were red, lined with ornate paintings of places in Scotland and overseas Ned had never been. Above the table hung an enormous chandelier from which a thousand crystal drops danced and shimmered in the slight breeze from the opened window. There were two windows in the room, both large, bowed in style, both framed with long heavy red damask curtains with fringed swags and tails. Both had blinds that were cream in colour and pulled high.

Out in the street beyond, the sky was bright with the golden

light of a summer's afternoon. It glinted on the silver service and crystal of the glasses on the polished mahogany table stretched out like a long banqueting table from kings of old. Enough spaces to seat eighteen. But there were only five men dining from the sumptuous feast. Seated in the position of the principal guest was the government minister for trade. On his left was the minister's secretary. Directly opposite the minister was the biggest mill owner in the north and one away was a shipping magnate whose line was chief to service the West Indies and the Americas. A powerful collection of men, and seated at their heart, in the position of host, was Ned Stratham.

He fed them the best of fine foods and rich sauces prepared by a chef who had once been employed by the Prince Regent. He ensured that his butler and footmen were well trained enough to keep the men's glasses flowing with expensive French wines. A different one suited for each dish.

Ned knew how to play the game. He knew what was necessary for success in business and influence over policy.

'I can make no promises,' said the minister.

'I'm not asking you to,' replied Ned.

'And the source of the figures you quoted?'

'Sound.'

'You really think it would work?'

Ned gave a nod.

'You would be taking as much a risk as us, maybe even more so as it is your money on the line.'

‘Maximum gain comes from maximum venture.’

‘If the vote were to go against us and the bill fail...’

‘You would survive it.’

‘But would you?’ the minister asked.

‘That’s not your problem.’ Ned held his gaze while the seconds stretched, until eventually the minister for trade nodded.

‘I will set the necessary mechanisms in motion tomorrow.’

‘Then, we’re agreed.’ Ned held out his hand for a handshake.

The minister swallowed. A shadow of unease shifted through his shrewd eyes. It was one thing to say the words, but another to shake on it. A handshake for men like him placed their honour on the line.

There was a silence that was awkward for them all save Ned. He took a sort of wry pleasure in such moments; using gentlemen’s discomfort of him and his dubious breeding to his own ends.

The other three looked nervous, waited to see what the minister would do.

Ned kept his gaze on the other man’s. Kept his hand extended. Both were steady.

The minister smiled and finally shook Ned’s hand. ‘You have convinced me, sir.’

‘I’m glad to hear it.’

* * *

It was after six by the time the luncheon finally ended and four of the most influential men in the country left Cavendish Square.

The butler and two footmen returned to the dining room, standing with their backs against the wall. Faces straight ahead, eyes focused on some distant point. Ned marvelled that gentlemen discussed the details of confidential business before servants, as if they were not men, as if they could not see or hear what was going on. Ned knew better. He never made the same mistake.

He sat alone at the table, the wine glass still half-full in his hand. The sunlight which streamed in through the windows lit the port within a deep ruby-red and made the monogram engraved on the glass's surface sparkle—S for Stratham.

The minister had squirmed, but in the end the deal had been done. It would be good for much more than Ned. He felt a sense of grim satisfaction.

The butler cleared his throat and came to hover by his elbow. 'More port, sir?'

'No, thank you, Clarkson.' Ned wondered what Clarkson would do if he were to ask for a porter. But gentlemen in Mayfair did not drink porter. Not in any of their fancy rich establishments. Not even in their own homes. And Ned must keep up the guise of a gentleman.

But porter made him think of Whitechapel, and the Red Lion...and Emma de Lisle. With those perceptive dark eyes, and that vitality and warm, joyful confidence that emanated from her.

He glanced out of the window, at the sunlight and the carriage that trundled past, and felt the waft of cool air break through the

cigar smoke that lingered like a mist within the dining room.

He had other business to attend to. But it didn't have to happen tonight.

Ned set the fine crystal goblet down upon the table. Got to his feet.

The butler appeared by his side again.

'I'm going out, Clarkson.'

'Very good, sir. Shall I arrange for the carriage?'

'No carriage.' Not for where Ned was going. 'It's a fine evening. I'll walk.'

Ned went to change into his old leather jacket and boots.

* * *

The heat from the kitchen mixed with that that had built up in the taproom through the summer's day to make the air of the Red Lion stifling. The chop-house's windows and doors were all open, but it made little difference.

Nancy had taken advantage of the heatwave and had her staff carry some tables out on to the street, so that the chop-house's customers could sit out there in the cool shade and drink their beer.

'Three pitchers of ale!' Nancy yelled and Emma hurried to answer.

Emma could feel the sweat dripping down her back and between her breasts. Never had a shift seemed so long. Her legs were aching and her feet felt like they were on fire. She lifted the tray, tried to blow a hair away from where it had escaped her

pins to dangle in her eye and made her way across the taproom, hurrying out of the doorway, just as Ned Stratham was coming in.

She collided with him, almost dropping the tray. It was Ned who steadied it, stopping the slide of the pitchers and the ensuing disaster.

‘Ned Stratham,’ she said, and inside her stomach felt like a flock of starlings taking off from the fields as one to swoop across a sunset sky. ‘Two nights on the trot? This is a first.’ Sometimes weeks passed between his visits.

Those blue, blue eyes met hers and held for a second too long. ‘You’ve been counting.’

‘As if I would have time to be counting.’

She saw the hint of amusement in his eyes as he moved aside and let her pass through.

Emma did not look back. Just got on with serving the tableloads of customers that were outside in the alley. But all the while she was conscious that he was inside. Too conscious. She smiled wryly to herself and got on with clearing the outside tables before returning to the taproom.

There was not a seat to be had inside. Ned was leaning against the bar, comfortable, already sipping a porter. He looked unconcerned by the crowd, by the heat, by not having a chair or table.

‘Six porters, two small beers and a stout, Emma!’ Paulette shouted and thumped the last of the tankards down on the

wooden counter beside Ned.

Emma continued her quick pace to the bar and, while unloading her tray, slid a glance in Ned Stratham's direction.

'Busy in here tonight,' he observed.

'There's a schooner in at the docks. We've had the full crew in since lunchtime.'

'Good business.'

'But bad timing. Tom did not come in today. Nancy is in the kitchen, cooking in his place.' She started loading up the fresh porters while she spoke.

'Bet that's made her all sweetness and light.'

'You know her so well.'

With impeccable timing, Nancy's face, beet-red with heat and running with sweat, appeared at the hatch as she thumped three plates down. 'Three mixed grills!' She flicked a crabbed gaze in Emma's direction.

'Where's me bleedin' platter?' someone shouted from the other side of the room.

'Any more of your lip and it'll be up your bleedin' backside,' Nancy snapped in reply and riveted the man with a look that would have blistered paint on a door.

Emma's and Ned's eyes met in shared silent amusement. 'Enjoy your porter,' she said and then she was off, collecting the platters on her way to deliver the porters.

'Come on, wench! My stomach thinks my throat's been cut! How long's a fellow got to wait in this place for a drink?' a punter

shouted from the table in the middle of the floor.

‘We’re working as fast as we can!’ screeched a flustered Paulette from behind the bar, her face scarlet and sweaty.

‘Five porters, gentlemen.’ Emma’s voice, although quiet in comparison to the rowdy conversation, shouts and laughter in the place, stood out because she sounded like a lady. She worked quickly and efficiently, setting a tankard on the table before each man before moving on to deliver the rest of the drinks from her tray.

Ned watched her bustle across the room to the big table in the corner where the crew of the schooner looked three sheets past a sail. He felt himself stiffen as one of them copped a sly grope as she leaned across the table with a drink.

Her movement was subtle and slight, but very effective. The contents of the tankard ended up in the worm’s lap.

The sailor gave a yelp, followed by a curse, staggering to his feet and staring down at the sodden stain rapidly spreading over his trousers. ‘Look what the hell you’ve done!’

His crewmates were all laughing.

‘I am so sorry,’ she said without the slightest bit of sincerity. ‘I will fetch you another porter. Let us just hope it does not go the same way as the first one.’ And there was the steely hint of warning in her eye as she said it.

Grumbling, the man sat down.

‘I wonder where you got that idea,’ Ned Stratham said when she returned to the bar. He kept his focus on the token tumbling

over his fingers.

‘I wonder,’ she said.

He moved his gaze to her. The strands of her hair had escaped its pins to coil like damp ebony ivy against the golden skin of her neck. The swell of her breasts looked in danger of escaping the red bodice. He could see the rise and fall of it with her every breath. Her cheeks were flushed with the heat and her eyes, sparkling black as cut jet, held his. They shared a smile before she hurried off across the room again. She was so vivid and vital and alive that the desire he normally held in check surged through him.

Ned wasn’t the only one, judging by the way the sailors were looking at her. After months away at sea most men had two things on their mind—drink and women. They were tanked up on the first and were now seeking the second.

‘What you doing later, darlin’? Me and you, we could step out for a little drink.’

‘Hands off, Wrighty, she’s coming home with me, ain’t that right, Emma darling?’ another said.

‘Neither is possible, I’m afraid, gentlemen. I’m meeting my betrothed,’ she said without missing a beat while clearing empties from their table.

‘Shame.’

The other looked less than convinced. His gaze meandered with greed and lust over the length of her body as she returned to the bar. He wasn’t alone. A man would have had to have water

in his veins not to want her. And what was flowing in the veins of the sailors was far from water.

One drink, Ned had told himself. And yet he couldn't walk away now. Not even had he wanted to. He ordered another porter from Paulette.

* * *

It was an hour before the bustle waned and another two before Paulette rang the bell for last orders.

Half an hour later and what remained of the Red Lion's clientele had emptied into the alleyway outside.

Emma leaned against the edge of a table, taking the weight off her feet, while fastening her cloak in place. The taproom was empty. The tables had been wiped down, the stools upturned on the tabletops. The floor had been swept ready to be mopped the next day. Ned Stratham had gone some time while she had been in the kitchen helping Nancy scrape the grills clean. Gone without saying goodbye, she thought, and then realised how stupid that thought was. He was just a customer like all the rest. And if she had any sense in her head she should be glad of it.

'Ned Stratham's got his eye on you, Em,' Paulette teased with a sly face.

'Nonsense.' Emma concentrated on fastening her cloak and hoped the dimness of the candlelight hid her blush.

'I saw the way he was watching you. Asking questions, too.'

'Too much time on his hands,' said Emma dismissively.

Paulette smirked. 'Don't think so.'

‘What a night!’ Nancy swept in from the kitchen. ‘Tom better show tomorrow or there’ll be trouble.’

Nancy unlocked the front door to let Emma and Paulette leave. ‘Watch yourself, girls, we got a few stragglers.’

Emma gave a nod as she and Paulette stepped out into the alleyway.

The last of the evening light had long since faded to an inky dark blue. The day’s heat had cooled. Behind them the kitchen door closed with a slam. A lone sailor stood waiting before them.

Emma met Paulette’s eyes.

‘It’s all right, Em. George said he’d wait for me. He’s the boatswain off the ship that’s in,’ explained Paulette.

Emma lowered her voice. ‘Paulette—’

‘I know what I’m doing, honest, Em. I’ll be all right,’ Paulette whispered and walked off down the alleyway with the boatswain.

Behind her Emma heard Nancy slide the big bolts into place across the door, locking her out into the night. The only light in the darkness was that from the high-up kitchen window.

Emma turned to head home, in the opposite direction to the one that Paulette and her beau had taken, just as two men stepped into the mouth of the alley ahead.

Chapter Three

‘Emma, darlin’, you’ve been telling us porkies.’ Through the flicker of the kitchen lamps she recognised the sailor who had asked her to step out with him for a drink. He was unshaven and the stench of beer from him reached across the distance between

them. His gaze was not on her face, but lower, leering at the pale skin of her exposed décolletage. Her heart began to thud. Fear snaked through her blood, but she showed nothing of it. Instead, she eyed the men with disdain and pulled her cloak tighter around herself.

‘Good job we came back for you, since there’s no sign of your “betrothed.” Maybe now we can get to know each other a bit better.’

‘I do not think so, gentlemen.’

‘Oh, she don’t think so, Wrighty. Let us convince you, darlin’.’ They gave a laugh and started to walk towards her.

Emma’s hand slid into the pocket of her cloak, just as Ned Stratham stepped out of the shadows by her side.

She smothered the gasp.

His face was expressionless, but his eyes were cold and dangerous as sharp steel. He looked at the men. Just a look. But it was enough to stop them in their tracks.

The sailor who had done the talking stared, and swallowed, then held up his hands in submission. ‘Sorry, mate. Didn’t realise...’

‘You do now,’ said Ned in a voice that for all its quiet volume was filled with threat, and never shifting his hard gaze for an instant.

‘All right, no offence intended.’ The sailors backed away. ‘Thought she was spinning a line about the betrothed thing. She’s yours. We’re already gone.’

Ned watched them until they disappeared and their footsteps faded into the distance out on to St Catherine's Lane. Only then did he look at Emma.

In the faint flickering light from the kitchen window, his eyes looked almost as dark as hers, turned from sky-blue to midnight. He had a face that was daunted by nothing. It would have been tough on any other man. On him it was handsome. Firm determined lips. A strong masculine nose with a tiny bump upon its ridge. His rogue eyebrow enough to take a woman's breath away. Her heart rate kicked faster as her gaze lingered momentarily on it before returning to his eyes.

'What are you doing here, Ned?' she asked in wary softness.

'Taking the air.'

They looked at one another.

She's yours. The echo of the sailor's words seemed to whisper between them, making her cheeks warm.

'I didn't think you'd be fool enough to walk home alone in the dark through these streets.'

'Normally I do not. Tom lives in the next street up from mine. He usually sees me home safe.'

'Tom's not here.'

'Which is why I borrowed one of Nancy's knives.' She slid the knife from her pocket and held it between them so that the blade glinted in the moonlight.

'It wouldn't have stopped them.'

'Maybe not. But it would have done a very great deal of

damage, I assure you.'

The silence hissed between them.

'You want to take your chances with the knife? Or you could accept my offer to see you home safe.'

She swallowed, knowing what he was offering and feeling her stomach turn tumblers within. 'As long as you understand that it is just seeing me safely home.' She met his gaze, held it with mock confidence.

'Are you suggesting that I'm not a gentleman?' His voice was all stony seriousness, but he raised the rogue eyebrow.

'On the contrary, I am sure you are the perfect gentleman.'

'Maybe not perfect.'

She smiled at that, relaxing a little now that the shock of seeing him there had subsided, and returned the knife blade to its dishcloth scabbard within the pocket of her cloak.

'We should get going,' he said. And together they began to walk down the alleyway.

Their footsteps were soft and harmonious, the slower, heavier thud of his boots in time with the lighter step of her own.

They walked on, out on to St Catherine's Lane. Walked along in silence.

'You knew those sailors would be waiting for me, didn't you?'

'Did I?'

'You do not fool me, Ned Stratham.'

'It's not my intention to fool anyone.'

She scrutinised him, before asking the question that she'd

been longing to ask since the first night he had walked into the Red Lion. 'Who are you?'

'Just a man from Whitechapel.'

'And yet...the shirt beneath your jacket looks like it came from Mayfair. And is tailored to fit you perfectly. Most unusual on a man from Whitechapel.' He was probably a crook. A gang boss. A tough. How else did a man like him get the money for such a shirt? Asking him now, when they were alone, in the dark of the night, was probably not the wisest thing she had ever done, but the question was out before she could think better of it. Besides, if she did not ask him now, she doubted she would get another chance. She ignored the faster patter of her heart and held his eyes, daring him to tell her something of the truth.

'You've been eyeing up my shirt.'

She gave a laugh and shook her head. 'I could not miss it. Nor could half the chop-house. You have had your jacket off all evening.'

'But half the chop-house would not have recognised a Mayfair shirt.' Half in jest, half serious.

Her heart skipped a beat, but she held his gaze boldly, as if he were not treading so close to forbidden ground, brazening it out. 'So you admit it is from Mayfair?'

'From Greaves and Worcester.'

'How does a Whitechapel man come to be wearing a shirt from one of the most expensive shirt-makers in London?'

'How is a woman from a Whitechapel chop-house familiar

with the said wares and prices?’

She smiled, but said nothing, on the back foot now that he was the one asking questions she did not want to answer.

‘What’s your story, Emma?’

‘Long and uninteresting.’

‘For a woman like you, in a place like this?’ He arched the rogue eyebrow with scepticism.

She held her silence, wanting to know more of him, but not at the cost of revealing too much of herself.

‘Playing your cards close to your chest?’ he asked.

‘It is the best way, I have found.’

He smiled at that. ‘A woman after my own heart.’

They kept on walking, their footsteps loud in the silence.

He met her eyes. ‘I heard tell you once worked in Mayfair.’ It was the story she had put about.

‘Cards and chest, even for unspoken questions,’ she said.

Ned laughed.

And she smiled.

‘I worked as a lady’s maid.’ She kept her eyes front facing. If he had not already heard it from the others in the Red Lion, he soon would. It was the only reasonable way to explain away her voice and manners; many ladies’ maids aped their mistresses. And it was not, strictly speaking, a lie, she told herself for the hundredth time. She had learned and worked in the job of a lady’s maid, just as she had shadow-studied the role of every female servant from scullery maid to housekeeper; one had to have an

understanding of how a household worked from the bottom up to properly run it.

‘That explains much. What happened?’

‘You ask a lot of questions, Ned Stratham.’

‘You keep a lot of secrets, Emma de Lisle.’

Their gazes held for a moment too long, in challenge, and something else, too. Until he smiled his submission and looked ahead once more.

She breathed her relief.

A group of men were staggering along the other side of the Minories Road, making their way home from the King’s Head. Their voices were loud and boisterous, their gait uneven. They shouted insults and belched at one another. One of them stopped to relieve his bladder against a lamp post.

She averted her eyes from them, met Ned’s gaze and knew he was thinking about the knife and how it would have fared against six men.

‘It would still have given them pause for thought,’ she said in her defence.

Ned said nothing.

But for all of her assertions and the weight of the kitchen knife within her cloak right at this moment in time she was very glad of Ned Stratham’s company.

The men did not shout the bawdy comments they would have had it been Tom by her side. They said nothing, just quietly watched them pass and stayed on their own side of the road.

Neither of them spoke. Just walking together at the same steady pace up Minories. Until the drunkards were long in the distance. Until they turned right into the dismal narrow street in which she and her father lodged. There were no street lamps, only the low silvery light of the moon to guide their steps over the potholed surface.

Halfway along the street she slowed and came to a halt outside the doorway of a shabby boarding house.

‘This is it. My home.’

He glanced at the building, then returned his eyes to her.

They looked at one another through the darkness.

‘Thank you for walking me home, Ned.’

‘It was the least I could do for my betrothed,’ he said with his usual straight expression, but there was the hint of a smile in his eyes.

She smiled and shook her head, aware he was teasing her, but her cheeks blushing at what she had let the sailors in the alleyway think. ‘I should have set them straight.’

‘And end our betrothal so suddenly?’

‘Would it break your heart?’

‘Most certainly.’

The teasing faded away. And with it something of the safety barrier between them.

His eyes locked hers, so that she could not look away even if she had wanted to. A sensual tension whispered between them. Attraction. Desire. Forbidden liaisons. She could feel the flutter

of butterflies in her stomach, feel a heat in her thighs. In the silence of the surrounding night the thud of her heart sounded too loud in her ears. Her skin tingled with nervous anticipation.

She glanced up to the window on the second floor where the light of a single candle showed faintly through the thin curtain. 'My father waits up for me. I should go.'

'You should.'

But she made no move to leave. And neither did he.

He looked at her in a way that made every sensible thought flee her head. He looked at her in a way that made her feel almost breathless.

Ned stepped towards her, closed the distance between them until they were standing toe to toe, until she could feel the brush of his thighs against hers.

'I thought you said you were the perfect gentleman?'

'You said that, not me.' His eyes traced her face, lingering over her lips, so that she knew he meant to kiss her. And God knew what living this life in Whitechapel had done to her because in that moment she wanted him to. Very much.

Desire vibrated between them. Where his thighs touched to hers the skin scalded. In the moonlight his eyes looked dark, smouldering, intense. She knew that he wanted her. Had been around Whitechapel long enough to know the games men and women played.

Emma's breath sounded too loud and ragged.

Their gazes held locked.

The tension stretched until she did not think she could bear it a second longer.

He slid his strong arms around her waist, moving slowly, giving her every chance to step away or tell him nay. But she did neither. Only placed her palms to rest tentatively against the leather breast of his jacket.

He lowered his face towards her.

She tilted her mouth to meet his.

And then his lips took hers and he kissed her.

He kissed her and his kiss was gentle and persuasive. His kiss was tender and passionate. He was the strongest, fiercest man she knew and yet he did not force or plunder. He was not rough or grabbing. It seemed to her he gave rather than took. Courting her lips, teasing them, making her feel things she had never felt before. Making her want him never to stop.

By its own volition one hand moved up over his broad shoulder to hold against the nape of his neck. Anchoring herself to his solidity, to his strength and warmth.

He pulled her closer, their bodies melding together as the kiss intensified. Tasting, touching, sharing. His tongue stroked against hers, inviting hers to a dance she did not know and Emma followed where he led.

He kissed her and she forgot about Whitechapel and poverty and hardship.

He kissed her and she forgot about the darkness of the past and all her worries over the future.

He kissed her and there was nothing else in the world but this man and this moment of magic and madness, and the force of passion that was exploding between them.

And when Ned stopped and drew back to look into her face, her heart was thudding as hard as a blacksmith hitting his anvil and her blood was rushing so fast that she felt dizzy from it.

‘You should go up now, before I change my mind about being the perfect gentleman.’ He brushed the back of his fingers gently against her cheek.

With trembling legs she walked to the front door of the boarding house and let herself in. She did not look round, but she knew Ned Stratham still stood there watching her. Her heart was skipping in a fast, frenzied thud. Her blood was rushing. Every nerve in her body seemed alive. She closed the door quietly so as not to wake the neighbours. Rested her spine against its peeling paint while she drew a deep breath, calming the tremor in her body and the wild rush of her blood, before climbing the stairwell that led to her father and their rented rooms.

‘It is only me, Papa,’ she called softly.

But her father was sound asleep in the old armchair.

She moved to the window and twitched the curtain aside to look down on to the street.

Ned Stratham tipped his hat to her. And only then, when he knew she was home safe, did he walk away.

Emma blew out the candle to save what was left. Stood there and watched him until the tall broad-shouldered figure

disappeared into the darkness, before turning to her father.

Even in sleep his face was etched with exhaustion.

‘Papa,’ she whispered and brushed a butterfly kiss against the deep lines of his forehead.

‘Jane?’ Her mother’s name.

‘It is Emma.’

‘Emma. You are home safe, my girl?’

‘I am home safe,’ she confirmed and thought again of the man who had ensured it. ‘Let me help you to bed.’

‘I can manage, my dearest.’ He got to his feet with a great deal of stiffness and shuffled through to the smaller of the two rooms.

The door closed with a quiet click, leaving Emma standing there alone.

She touched her fingers to her kiss-swollen lips and knew she should not have kissed Ned Stratham.

He was a Whitechapel man, a man from a different world than her own, a customer who drank in the Red Lion’s taproom. And he was fierce and dangerous, and darkly mysterious. And she had no future here. And much more besides. She knew all of that. And knew, too, her mother would be turning in her grave.

But as she moved behind the partitioning screen and changed into her nightdress, in her nose was not the usual sweet mildew, but the lingering scent of soap and leather and something that was just the man himself. And as she pulled back the threadbare covers and climbed into the narrow makeshift bed, in her blood was a warmth.

Emma lay there, staring into the darkness. They said when the devil tempted he offered a heart's desire. Someone tall and dangerous and handsome. She closed her eyes, but she could still see those piercing blue eyes and her lips still tingled and throbbed from the passion of his kiss.

When exhaustion finally claimed her and she sank into the blissful comfort of sleep she dreamed of a tall, dangerous, handsome man tempting her to forbidden lusts, tempting her to give up her struggle to leave Whitechapel and stay here with him. And in the dream she yielded to her heart's desire and was lost beyond all redemption.

* * *

Tom did not come to the Red Lion the next night, but Ned Stratham did.

Their gazes held across the taproom, the echoes of last night rippling like an incoming tide, before she turned away to serve a table. Butterflies were dancing in her stomach, but she knew that after what had happened between them, she had to rectify the matter. She emptied her tray, then made her way to where he sat alone.

Those blue eyes met hers.

She felt her heart trip faster and quelled the reaction with an iron hand. Faced him calmly and spoke quietly, but firmly enough that only he would hear.

'Last night, we should not have, I should not have... It was a mistake, Ned.'

He said nothing.

‘I’m not that sort of a woman.’

‘You’re assuming I’m that kind of a man.’

‘Lest you had forgotten, this is a chop-house not so far from the docks. All the men in here are that kind of a man.’

He smiled at that. A hard smile. ‘Not gentlemen, but scoundrels.’

‘I did not say that.’

‘It’s what you meant.’

He glanced across the room to where Paulette was working behind the bar before returning his gaze to hers.

Nancy’s curses sounded from the kitchen.

And she knew he knew that Tom had not come in again, that there was no one to see her home.

Ned looked at her with eyes that made no pretence as to the man he was, with eyes that made her resolutions weaken.

‘Emma!’ Nancy’s voice bellowed.

‘It is not your duty to see me home.’

‘It is not,’ he agreed.

As their gazes held in a strange contest of wills, they both knew it was already decided. Ned Stratham was not going to let her take her chances with a kitchen knife through the Whitechapel streets tonight.

‘Get yourself over here, Emma!’ Nancy sounded as if she were losing what little patience she possessed.

Ned did walk her home. And he did kiss her. And she gave

up pretending to herself that she did not want it or him.

* * *

He came to the Red Lion every night after that, even when Tom had returned. And every night he walked her home. And every night he kissed her.

* * *

Ned tumbled the token over his fingers and leaned his spine back against the old lichen-stained stone seat. St Olave's church clock chimed ten. Down the hill at the London Docks the early shift had started five hours ago.

The sky was a cloudless blue. The worn stone was warm beneath his thighs. His hat sat on the bench by his side and he could feel a breeze stir through his hair. His usual perch. His usual view.

His thoughts drifted to the previous night and Emma de Lisle. Two weeks of walking with her and he could not get her out of his head. Not those dark eyes or that sharp mind. She could hold her own with him. She had her secrets as much as he. A lady's maid who had no wish to discuss her dismissal or her background. She was proud and determined and resourceful. There weren't many women in Whitechapel like her. There weren't any women like her. Not that he had known across a lifetime and he had seen about as much of Whitechapel as it was possible to see.

Life had not worn her down or sapped her energy. She had a confidence and a bearing about her comparable with those who came from a lifetime of wealth. She had learnt well from her

mistress. A woman like Emma de Lisle would be an asset to any man in any walk of life; it was a thought that grew stronger with the passing days.

And he wanted her. Ned, who did not give in to wants and desires. He wanted her with a passion. And he was spending his nights and too many of his days imagining what it would be like to unlace that tight red dress from her body, to bare her and lay her down on his bed. Ned suppressed the thoughts. He was focused. He was disciplined. He kept to the plan. It was what had brought him this far.

The plan had never involved a woman like her. The plan had been for someone quite different. But she was as refreshing as a cool breeze on a clammy day. She was Whitechapel, the same as him, but with vision that encompassed a bigger view. She had tasted the world on the other side of London. He had a feeling she would understand what it was he was doing, an instinct that she would feel the same about it as he did. And part of being successful was knowing when to be stubborn and stick to the letter of the plan and when to be flexible.

His gaze shifted.

The old vinegar manufactory across the road lay derelict. Pigeons and seagulls vied for supremacy on the hole-ridden roof. Weeds grew from the crumbling walls.

Tower Hill lay at his back. And above his head the canopy of green splayed beech leaves provided a dapple shelter. He could hear the breeze brush through the leaves, a whisper beside

the noises that carried up the hill from the London Docks; the rhythmic strike of hammers, the creak and thud of crates being moved and dropped, the squeak of hoists and clatter of chains, the clapping of work horses and rumbling of carts.

A man might live a lifetime and never meet a woman like Emma de Lisle.

Ned's fingers toyed with the ivory token as he watched the men moving about in the dockyard below, men he had known all of his life, men who were friends, or at least had been not so very long ago, unloading the docked ship.

Footsteps drew his attention. He glanced up the street and recognised the woman immediately, despite the fact she was not wearing the figure-hugging red dress, but a respectable sprig muslin and green shawl, and a faded straw bonnet with a green ribbon hid her hair and most of her face. Emma de Lisle; as if summoned by the vision in his head. She faltered when she saw him as if contemplating turning back and walking away.

He slipped the token into his waistcoat pocket and got to his feet.

She resumed her progress. Paused just before she reached him, keeping a respectable distance between them.

'Ned.'

Last night's passion whispered and wound between them.

He gave a nod of acknowledgement.

Once, many years ago, he had seen a honeycomb dripping rich and sweet with golden honey. In this clear, pure daylight her eyes

were the same colour, not dark and mysterious as in the Red Lion.

Their gazes held for a moment, the echoes of last night rippling like a returning tide.

‘It seems that destiny has set you in my path again, Ned Stratham. Or I, in yours.’

‘And who are we to argue with destiny?’

They looked at one another for the first time in daylight.

The road she was walking led from only one place. ‘You have come from the dockyard.’

‘My father works there. I was delivering him some bread and cheese.’

‘He has a considerate daughter.’

‘Not really. He worked late last night and started early this morning.’

But she had worked late last night, too, and no doubt started early this morning. A shadow that moved across her eyes and a little line of worry etched between them. ‘Delivering his breakfast is the least I can do. He has a quarter-hour break at—’

‘Half past nine,’ he finished.

She lifted her eyebrows in unspoken question.

‘I used to work on the docks.’

‘And now?’

‘And now, I do not. Cards and chest,’ he said.

She laughed and the relaxed fascination he felt for her grew stronger.

‘Five o’clock start. Your father will be done by four.’

‘If only.’ She frowned again at the mention of her father. Twice in five minutes; Ned had never seen her look worried, even on the night when she had thought herself alone facing the two sailors in the alleyway. ‘He is on a double shift in the warehouse.’

‘Good money, but tiring.’

‘Very tiring.’ She glanced down the hill at the dockyard with sombre eyes. ‘It is hard work for a man of his age who is not used to manual labour.’

‘What did he do before manual labour?’

She gave no obvious sign or reaction, only stood still as a statue, but her stillness betrayed that she had not meant to let the fact slip.

Her gaze remained on the dockyard. ‘Not manual labour,’ she said in a parody of his answer to her earlier question. She glanced round at him then, still and calm, but in her eyes were both defence and challenge. Her smile was sudden and warm, deflecting almost. ‘I worry over my father, that is all. The work is hard and he is not a young man.’

‘I still know a few folk in the dockyard. I could have a word. See if there are any easier jobs going.’

The silence was like the quiet rustle of silk in the air.

‘You would do that?’

‘There might be nothing, but I’ll ask.’ But there would be something. He would make sure of it. ‘If you wish.’

He could see what she was thinking.

‘No strings attached,’ he clarified.

Emma’s eyes studied his. Looking at him, really looking at him, like no woman had ever looked before. As if she could see through his skin to his heart, to his very soul, to everything that he was. ‘I wish it very much,’ she said.

He gave a nod.

There was a pause before she said, ‘My father is an educated man. He can read and write and is proficient with arithmetic and mathematics, indeed, anything to do with numbers.’

‘A man with book learning.’

She nodded. ‘Although I’m not sure if that would be of any use in a dockyard.’

‘You would be surprised.’

They stood in silence, both watching the dockworkers unloading the ship, yet her attention was as much on him as his was on her.

‘Whatever you do for a living, Ned, whatever illicit activity you might be involved in...if you can help my father...’

‘You think I’m a rogue...’ He raised his brow. ‘Do I look a rogue?’

Her gaze dropped pointedly to the front of his shirt before coming back up to his face. It lingered on his scarred eyebrow before finally moving to his eyes.

‘Yes,’ she said simply.

‘My Mayfair shirt.’

‘And the eyebrow,’ she added.

‘What’s wrong with the eyebrow?’

‘It does give you a certain roguish appearance.’

He smiled at that.

And she did, too.

‘And if I am a rogue?’

She glanced away, gave a tiny shrug of her shoulders. ‘It would not affect how I judge you.’

‘How do you judge me, Emma?’

She slid a sideways glance at him. ‘Cards and chest, Ned.’

He laughed.

‘I should go and leave you to your contemplation.’

They looked at one another, the smile still in her sunlit eyes.

‘Join me,’ he said, yielding for once in his life to impulse. His eyes dared hers to accept.

He saw her gaze move to his scarred eyebrow again, almost caressingly.

He crooked it in a deliberate wicked gesture.

She smiled. ‘Very well, but for a few moments only.’ She smoothed her skirt to take a seat on the bench.

He sat down by her side.

A bee droned. From the branches overhead a blackbird sang.

Emma’s eyes moved from the dockyards to the derelict factory, then over the worn and pitted surface of the road mosaicked with flattened manure, and all the way along to the midden heap at its far end.

‘Why here?’ she asked.

‘I grew up here. It reminds me of my childhood.’

‘A tough neighbourhood.’

‘Not for the faint of heart,’ he said. ‘Children are not children for long round here.’

‘Indeed, they are not.’

There was a small silence while they both mused on that. And then let it go, eased by the peace of the morning and the place.

‘It is a beautiful view,’ she said.

Ned glanced round at her, wondering whether she was being ironic. ‘Men in gainful employment are always a beautiful sight,’ he said gravely.

‘I was not thinking in those terms.’ She smiled. ‘It reminds me of a Canaletto painting.’ Her eyes moved to the old manufactory. ‘It has the same ruined glory as some of his buildings. The same shade of stone.’

‘I wouldn’t know. I’ve never seen a Canaletto painting.’

‘I think you would like them.’

‘I think maybe I would.’

Her gaze still lingered on the derelict building as she spoke. ‘A ruined glory. There are pigeons nesting in what is left of the roof. Rats with wings, my father used to call them,’ she said.

‘Plenty good eating in a rat.’

She laughed as if he were joking. He did not. He thought of all the times in his life when rat meat had meant the difference between starvation and survival.

‘One day it will be something else,’ he said. ‘Not a ruined glory,

but rebuilt.'

'But then there will be no more violets growing from the walls.'

'Weeds.'

'Not weeds, but the sweetest of all flowers. They used to grow in an old garden wall I knew very well.' The expression on her face was as if she were remembering and the memory both pained and pleased her.

Emma looked round at Ned then and there was something in her eyes, as if he were glimpsing through the layers she presented to the world to see the woman beneath.

'I will remember that, Emma de Lisle,' he said, studying her and everything that she was. A man might live a lifetime and never meet a woman like Emma de Lisle, the thought whispered again in his ear.

Their eyes held, sharing a raw exposed honesty.

Everything seemed to still and fade around them.

He lowered his face to hers and kissed her in the bright glory of the sunshine.

She tasted of all that was sweet and good. She smelled of sunshine and summer, and beneath it the scent of soap and woman.

He kissed her gently, this beautiful woman, felt her meet his kiss, felt her passion and her heart. Felt the desire that was between them surge and flare hot. He intensified the kiss, slid his arms around her and instinctively their bodies moulded together, as their mouths explored. He was hard for her, felt her thigh brush

against his arousal, felt the soft press of her breasts against his chest, the slide of her hand beneath his jacket to stroke against his shirt, against his heart.

And then her palm flattened, pressed against his chest to stay him.

Their lips parted.

‘It is broad daylight, Ned Stratham!’ Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes were dark with passion and shock. ‘Anyone might see us.’

He twitched his scarred eyebrow.

She shook her head as if she were chiding him, but she smiled as she got to her feet.

He stood, too.

A whistling sounded and a man’s figure appeared from the corner, trundling his barrow of fish along the road—Ernie Briggins, one of the Red Lion’s best customers. ‘Morning, Ned.’

Ned gave a nod.

Ernie’s eyes moved to Emma with speculation and a barely suppressed smile. ‘Morning, Emma.’

‘Morning, Ernie.’ Emma’s cheeks glowed pink.

Ernie didn’t stop, just carried on his way, leaving behind him the lingering scent of cod and oysters and the faint trill of his reedy whistle.

Emma said nothing, just raised her brows and looked at Ned with a ‘told you so’ expression.

‘I better get you safely home, before any more rogues accost

you.'

'I think I will manage more safely alone, thank you. Stay and enjoy your view.' Her eyes held to his. 'I insist.' She backed away. Smiled. Turned to leave.

'Emma.'

She stopped. Glanced round.

'I'm going out of town for the next week or so. I have some business to attend to. But I'll be back.'

'Developed a compulsion for the porter, have you?'

'A compulsion for something else, it would seem,' he said quietly. 'We need to talk when I return, Emma.'

'That sounds serious.'

'It is.' He paused, then asked, 'Will you wait for me?'

There was a silence as her eyes studied his. 'I am not going anywhere, Ned Stratham.'

Their eyes held, serious and intent, for a second longer. 'I will wait,' she said softly.

They shared a smile before she turned and went on her way.

He watched her walk off into the sunlight until she disappeared out of sight.

A man might live a lifetime and never meet a woman like Emma de Lisle. But not Ned.

A fancy new dress and Emma wouldn't be out of place in Mayfair. Ned smiled to himself and, lifting his hat, began the long walk back across town.

* * *

The letter came the very next morning.

Emma stood in the rented room in the bright golden sunshine with the folded and sealed paper between her fingers, and the smile that had been on her face since the previous day vanished.

It had taken a shilling of their precious savings to pay the post boy, but it was a willing sacrifice. She would have sold the shoes from her feet, sold the dress from her back to accept the letter and all that it might contain.

Her heart began to canter. She felt hope battle dread.

The paper was quality and white, her father's name written on the front in a fine hand with deep-black ink. There was no sender name, no clue impressed within the red-wax seal.

She swallowed, took a deep breath, stilled the churn in her stomach. It might not be the letter for which her father and she had both prayed and dreaded all of these two years past.

The one o'clock bell tolled in the distance.

She placed the letter down on the scrubbed wooden table. Stared at it, knowing that her father would not finish his shift before she left for the Red Lion, knowing, too, that he would probably be asleep by the time she returned. She was very aware that the answer to what had sent her mother to an early grave and turned her father grey with worry might lie within its folds.

Kit. She closed her eyes at the thought of her younger brother and knew that she could not get through the rest of this day without knowing if the letter contained news of him. Nor would her father. He would want to know, just the same as Emma.

Whether the news was good...or even if it was bad.

She pulled her shawl around her shoulders, fastened her bonnet on her head and, with the letter clutched tight within her hand, headed for the London Docks.

Chapter Four

Emma knew little of the warehouse in which her father worked. He had spoken nothing of it, so this was her first insight into the place that had become his world as much as the Red Lion had become hers.

All around the walls were great racks of enormous shelving stacked with boxes and bales. The windows in the roof were open, but with the heat of the day and the heavy work many of the men were working without shirts. She blushed with the shock of seeing their naked chests and rapidly averted her gaze, as she followed the foreman through the warehouse. Eventually through the maze of shelving corridors they came to another group of shirtless men who were carrying boxes up ladders to stack on high shelves.

‘Bill de Lisle,’ the foreman called. ‘Someone here to see you.’

One of the men stepped forward and she was horrified to see it was her father.

‘Papa?’ She forgot herself in the shock of seeing his gaunt old body, all stringy from hard labour.

‘Emma?’ She heard her shock echoed in his voice. In a matter of seconds he had reclaimed his shirt and pulled it over his head. ‘What has happened? What is wrong to bring you here?’

‘A letter. Addressed to you. I thought it might contain news of...’ She bit her lip, did not finish the sentence.

‘If you will excuse me for a few moments, gentlemen,’ her father said to the men behind him. ‘And Mr Sears,’ to the foreman who had brought her to him.

Her father guided her a little away from the group.

‘Bill?’

‘It is what they call me here.’

She gave a small smile. The smile faded as she passed the letter to him. ‘Maybe I should not have brought it here, but I thought...’ She stopped as her father scrutinised the address penned upon it. ‘The writing is not of Kit’s hand, but even so... Someone might have seen him. Someone might know his whereabouts.’

Her father said nothing, but she saw the slight tremble in his fingers as he broke the red-wax seal and opened the letter. He held it at arm’s length to read it since his spectacles were long gone.

She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry with anticipation. Rubbed her clammy palms together and waited. Waited until she could wait no more.

‘Is it good news?’

Her father finished reading and looked up at her. ‘It is the best of news, Emma...’

The breath she had been holding escaped in a gasp. Her heart leapt. The terrible tight tension that held her rigid relaxed.

‘...but it does not concern your brother.’

The warm happiness flowing through her turned cold. She glanced up at her father. 'I do not understand.'

'The letter is from Mrs Tadcaster, who was second cousin to your mama. She writes to say that the Dowager Lady Lamerton's companion has run off with one of the footmen.'

'Why is that good news?'

'Because, my dear—' he smiled '—the dowager is in need of a new companion, a woman of gentle breeding who would understand what was required of her and might start in the position with immediate effect.'

The penny dropped. Emma suddenly realised why her mother's cousin had written to impart such trivial gossip. She knew where this was leading. And she should have been glad. Indeed, had it been only a few weeks ago she would have been. But much had happened in those weeks and the feeling in the pit of her stomach was not one of gladness.

'Mrs Tadcaster had spoken to her ladyship of you and Lady Lamerton has agreed to take you on as her companion.'

Emma could not say a word.

'Such sudden and surprising news after all this time. Little wonder you are shocked.'

She was shocked, but not for the reasons her father thought.

We need to talk when I return.

That sounds serious.

It is. Will you wait for me?

Ned's words and all they might mean had not left her mind

since yesterday. Her stomach felt hollow.

‘I cannot go.’

‘Why ever not?’ He stared at her

How could she tell him about Ned? Not a gentleman, but a Whitechapel man. A man who was tougher and more dangerous than all he had warned her against. A man who could best five men in a tavern fight and who had worked on these same docks. A man who made magic somersault in her stomach and passion beat through her blood. Whose kiss she wanted to last for ever...and who had implied he wanted a future with her.

‘I could not possibly contemplate leaving you here alone.’

‘Nonsense. It would be a weight off my mind to know that you were living a safe, respectable life with the Dowager Lady Lamerton. Do you not think I have enough to worry over with Kit?’

‘I understand that, but you need not worry over me.’

‘You are a serving wench in a tavern.’

‘It is a chop-house, Papa,’ she corrected him out of force of habit.

‘Emma, chop-house or tavern, it makes no difference. Do you think I do not know the manner of men with whom you must deal? Do you think there is a night goes by I am not sick with worry until Tom sees you safely home and I hear you coming through that front door?’

She felt guilt turn in her stomach at the thought of him worrying so much while she enjoyed being with Ned.

‘Were you with Lady Lamerton, I could find lodgings closer to the docks. There are always fellows looking for someone to share the rent on a single room. It would be easier for me. Cheaper. More convenient. And they are a good enough bunch in here. Tease me a bit, but that is the extent of it.’

‘Lady Lamerton will see this as an opportunity to glean every last detail of our scandal from me. You know she is chief amongst the gossipmongers and has a nose like a bloodhound.’

‘Clarissa Lamerton likes to be queen of the ton’s gossip, not its subject. She will grill you herself, but protect you from all others. What is this sudden change of heart, Emma? This argument is usually the other way around. You have always been so strong and committed to returning to society and tracing Kit.’

Emma glanced away.

‘Lady Lamerton’s ability to discover information is all the more reason to accept the position. You would be well placed, in one of the best households in London, to hear news of Kit. Lady Lamerton’s son has an association with Whitehall. Rest assured young Lamerton will hear if there is anything to be heard and thus, too, his mother. You have to take this opportunity, Emma, for Kit’s sake and mine, as well as for your own. You know that without me telling you.’

She did. That was the problem. She understood too well what he was saying and the truth in it.

‘If you stay here, you are lost. It is only a matter of time before one of these men makes you his own. Indeed, it is a miracle that

it has not already happened.'

She glanced down at the floor beneath their feet so that he would not see the truth in her eyes.

But he reached over and tilted her face up to his. 'You are a beautiful young woman, the very image of your mother when I met and married her. I want a better life for you than that which a husband from round here could offer you.'

She wanted to tell him so much, of Ned and all that was between them, but she could not. Not now, not when her duty was so pressing.

'As if I would have a husband from round here.' Her forced smile felt like a grimace.

Will you wait for me? In her mind she could see that soul-searching look in Ned's eyes.

And hear her own reply. I am not going anywhere, Ned Stratham...I will wait.

'I am glad you have not forgotten your vow to your mother, Emma.'

'How could I ever forget?' She never would, never could. Family was family. A vow was just that, even if it was at the expense of her own happiness. She felt like her heart was torn between her family and the man she loved.

She told herself that Ned might not love her, that she might have misunderstood what it was he wanted to talk to her of. After all, he had made no promises or declarations, and despite all those late-night conversations and all their passion, they knew so

little of each other. But in her heart, she knew.

She knew, but it did not change what she had to do.

‘You know you have to take this chance, Emma.’ Her father’s eyes scanned hers.

‘Yes.’ One small word to deny the enormity of what was in her heart.

‘I will go past the mail-receiving office on the way home, pay for paper and some ink and write to Mrs Tadcaster.’

She gave a nod.

‘Let me escort you from this place.’

Emma placed her hand on his arm and walked with him, without noticing the shirtless men who stopped working to watch her pass with silent appreciation.

She was thinking of all the days and nights she had worked so hard to escape Whitechapel, of all the times she had prayed for just such an opportunity. And now that her prayer had finally been answered she did not want to leave.

She was thinking of a man whose hair the sun had lightened to the colour of corn-ripened fields and whose eyes matched the cloudless summer sky outside; a man who had captured her heart, and to whom there would be no chance to explain.

* * *

On the afternoon of Ned’s return from Portsmouth, he went straight to a meeting in White’s Club. But now the meeting was concluded, the necessary introductions made and ideas discussed. He shook hands with the Earl of Misbourne, Viscount

Linwood, the Marquis of Razeby and Mr Knight.

‘If you will excuse me, gentlemen?’ A nod of the head and he and his friend and steward, Rob Finchley, were out of the room and walking down the corridor.

Further down the corridor, he saw the small group of men who knew his secret. Men who were bursting with longing to take him down, to expose his real identity, but could not. They knew what would happen if they did. He met each of their gazes in turn across the distance, held them so that they would remember why they could not tell what itched upon their tongues to be out. And in return they glowered with all their haughty disdain.

Rob cursed beneath his breath. ‘They look at you as if you’re a gutter rat in their midst.’

Ned smiled at the group of arrogant young noblemen. It had the desired effect, twisting the knife a little deeper. ‘But remember what it costs them to stand there and suffer my presence.’

Rob grinned. ‘I feel better already.’

They were still smiling as they crossed St James’s Street and climbed into the waiting gig. It was a top-of-the-range model, sleek, glossy black exterior, cream leather seats; a small white circle enclosing a red diamond shape adorned the front plate. Ned did not look back. Just took up the reins and drove off.

‘I think you hooked Misbourne.’

‘Let’s hope.’ The wheels sped along. Ned kept his eyes forward concentrating on the traffic. ‘I can’t make Dawson’s ball tonight.’

‘Not like you to miss a big event like Dawson’s.’

‘I have a commitment elsewhere.’ His face was closed and impassive, his usual expression when it came to dealing with friend and foe alike.

‘All the bigwigs are going to be there.’

‘I know.’

There was a small silence before Rob said, ‘Must be important, this other commitment.’

‘It is.’ Ned slid a glance at his friend, let his eyes linger for a moment, in that quiet confrontational way, and smiled.

Rob smiled, too. ‘All right, mate. I get the hint. I’ll stop fishing about your mystery woman.’

* * *

A few hours later, Ned walked alone into the Red Lion Chop-House. Some heads nodded at him, recognising him from the weeks before. Ned felt the usual comfort and ease that sat about the place, felt it as soon as he crossed the parish boundary that divided the East End from the rest of London. The taproom was busy as usual, the tables and rowdy noise of the place spilling out into the alleyway in front. His eyes scanned for Emma, but did not find her.

The first suspicion stroked when he saw that it was Paulette who came to serve him.

‘Your usual, is it?’

He gave a nod. ‘Emma not in tonight?’

‘Thought you might ask that.’ She smiled a saucy knowing

look. ‘Emma’s gone. Landed herself some fancy job as a lady’s maid again. An offer she couldn’t refuse apparently, lucky mare. She left a message for you, though. Said to tell you goodbye. That she was real sorry she couldn’t tell you in person. Said she hoped you would understand.’

He dropped a coin into her hand for passing on the message. ‘Forget the lamb and the porter.’ He didn’t wait.

There were other chop-houses in Whitechapel. Other serving wenches. But Ned didn’t go to them. Instead he made his way up along Rosemary Lane to Tower Hill and the ancient stone bench beneath the beech trees. And he sat there alone and watched the day shift finish in the docks and the night shift begin. Watched the ships that docked and the ships that sailed. Watched until the sun set in a glorious blaze of fire over the Thames and the daylight faded to dusk and dusk to darkness.

Had she waited just one week...a single week and how different both their lives would have been.

Loss and betrayal nagged in his gut. He breathed in the scent of night with the underlying essence of vinegar that always lingered in this place. And he thought of the scent of soap and grilled chops and warm woman.

He thought of the teasing intelligence in her eyes and the warmth of her smile.

He thought of the passion between them and the sense that she made his world seem a better place.

He thought of what might have been, then he let the thoughts

go and he crushed the feelings. Emma de Lisle had not waited. And that was that.

Ned was not a man who allowed himself to be influenced by emotion. He had his destiny. And maybe it was better this way. No distractions, after all.

He heard the cry of the watch in the distance. Only then did he make his way back across town to the mansion house in Cavendish Square.

* * *

Along the Westminster Bridge Road in Lambeth, the evening was fine and warm as Emma and the Dowager Lady Lamerton approached Astley's Amphitheatre.

'I say, this is really rather exciting,' her new employer said as they abandoned the carriage to the traffic jam in which it was caught and walked the remaining small distance to the amphitheatre's entrance.

'It is, indeed.' It was only Emma's third day returned to life in London's high society, albeit at a somewhat lesser level to that she had known, and already she was aware that there was a part of her that had settled so smoothly it was as if she had never been away—and a part that remained in Whitechapel, with her father...and another man.

She wondered again how her father was managing in his new lodging. Wondered if he was eating. Wondered if Ned Stratham had returned to the Red Lion yet and if Paulette had passed on her message.

‘In all of my seventy-five years I have yet to see a woman balancing on one leg upon the back of a speeding horse,’ said Lady Lamerton. Her walking stick tapped regular and imperious against the pavement as they walked.

Emma hid her private thoughts away and concentrated on the dowager and the evening ahead. ‘I hope you shall not find it too shocking.’ She tucked her arm into the dowager’s, helping to stabilise her through the crowd.

‘But, my dear, I shall be thoroughly disappointed if it is not. This latest show is quite the talk of the ton. Everyone who is anyone is here to see it.’

Emma laughed. ‘Well, in that case we had best go in and find our box.’

As being seen there was more important than actually watching the show, Lady Lamerton and Emma had a splendid vantage point. There was the buzz of voices and bustle of bodies as the rest of the audience found their seats.

‘Do look at that dreadful monstrosity that Eliza Frenshaw has upon her head. That, my dear, is what lack of breeding does for you, but then her father was little better than a grocer, you know,’ Lady Lamerton said with the same tone as if she had just revealed that Mrs Frenshaw’s father had been a mass murderer. Then had the audacity to nod an acknowledgement to the woman in question and bestow a beatific smile.

Emma drew Lady Lamerton a look.

‘What?’ Lady Lamerton’s expression was the hurt innocence

that Emma had already learned was her forte. 'Am I not telling the truth?'

'You are never anything other than truthful,' said Emma with a knowing expression.

The two women chuckled together before Lady Lamerton returned to scrutinising the rest of the audience with equally acerbic observations.

Emma let her eyes sweep over the scene in the auditorium before them.

There was not an empty seat to be seen. The place was packed with the best of the ton that had either remained in London for the summer or returned early. Ladies in silk evening dresses, a myriad of colours from the rich opulence of the matrons to the blinding white of the debutantes, and every shade in between. All wearing long white-silk evening gloves that fastened at the top of their arms. Their hair dressed in glossy ringlets and fixed with sprays of fresh flowers or enormous feathers that obscured the view of those in the seats behind. Some matrons had forgone the feathers in favour of dark-coloured silk turbans. There was the sparkle of jewels that gleamed around their pale necks or on their gloved fingers that held opera glasses. Like birds of paradise preening and parading. Only two years ago and Emma had been a part of it as much as the rest of them. Now, beautiful as it was, she could not help but be uncomfortably aware that the cost of a single one of those dresses was more than families in Whitechapel had to survive on for a year.

There were many nodded acknowledgments to Lady Lamerton and even some to Emma. Emma nodded in return, glad that, for the most part, people accepted her return without much censure.

Her eyes moved from the stalls, up to the encircling boxes and their inhabitants. To the Duke of Hawick and a party of actresses. To Lord Linwood and his wife, the celebrated Miss Venetia Fox. To the Earl of Hollingsworth, and his family and guest.

Lady Hollingsworth did not nod. The woman's eyes were cool, her nose held high in disdain. Emma met her gaze boldly. Refused to be embarrassed. Smiled with amusement, then moved her gaze along to Hollingsworth's daughter, Lady Persephone, with her pale golden-blonde hair and her perfect pout, and the way she was flirting with the gentleman by her side, no doubt the suitor Hollingsworth was hoping to land for her. The gas lighting dimmed just as Emma's gaze shifted to the man, but for one glimmer of a second she saw him. Or thought she saw him. And what she saw made her heart miss a beat and her stomach turn a somersault.

The music started. The ringmaster, red-coated and waxen-moustached, the ultimate showman, appeared, his booming voice carrying promises of what lay ahead that drew gasps of astonishment from the audience. The performance was starting, but Emma did not look at the ring. Her focus was still on Lady Persephone's suitor. On the fine dark tailored tailcoat, on the gleam of white evening wear that showed beneath. On the

fair hair and face that was so like another, a world away in Whitechapel, that they might have been twins. And yet it could not be him. It was not possible.

Her eyes strained all the harder, her heart thudding faster. But in the dimmed light and across the distance she could not be sure.

As if sensing her stare his eyes shifted to hers and held for a second. She moved her gaze to the stage, embarrassed to have been caught staring.

Six white horses galloped with speed around the ring while the scantily clad women on their backs rose in unison to balance on one leg.

There were gasps and applause.

'Heaven's above,' muttered the dowager, but she applauded.

Emma clapped, too, but she was barely seeing the horses or the women on their backs.

It could not be him, she told herself again and again. But every time she stole another glance in his direction the man was watching her and her heart missed a beat at the uncanny familiarity. She stopped looking, aware that she was giving a strange man altogether the wrong impression. The lights would come up at the interval and she would see she was imagining things.

Ned was too much on her mind. The touch of his kiss. The feel of his strong arms around her. The promise in those last words between them. But I'll be back... We need to talk when I return, Emma.

I am not going anywhere, Ned Stratham. I will wait.

Guilt squeezed at her heart. She wondered what he had said when he discovered her gone, wondered if his heart ached like hers. Had she stayed he would have bedded her. Had she stayed he might have married her. She closed her eyes at that. Reined her emotions under control. Was careful not to look at Lady Persephone's beau again.

* * *

The interval arrived at long last.

The lights came up.

'Tolerably interesting, I suppose,' pronounced Lady Lamerton with a sniff. 'Would you not say?'

Emma smiled. 'I would agree wholeheartedly.'

Then, as Lady Lamerton's footman arrived to take her drinks order, Emma's eyes moved to the Hollingsworths' box.

Both the earl and the suitor were gone, leaving only Lady Hollingsworth and Lady Persephone surveying with smug arrogance. Emma's heart dipped in disappointment.

What if he did not return before the lights dimmed once more?

It was not him. It could not be him. It was ridiculous to even think such a thing.

The moments stretched with an unbearable slowness. She focused all her attention on the dowager. Only when the bell sounded for the end of the interval, only when she knew the dowager's gaze engaged once more on the melee of bodies

returning to their seats, did she look again at the Hollingsworths' box.

The man was there, looking directly at her. But this time she did not avert her gaze.

She could not move, just sat there and blatantly stared.

Her heart was hammering fit to burst, her breath was caught in her throat. Something constricted around her chest and squeezed tight at her heart. She felt as though all the world had rolled away to leave nothing in its wake, save Emma and the man at whom she stared.

Only Emma and Ned Stratham.

Chapter Five

In those tiny seconds that stretched between them to an eternity Ned knew that fate was playing tricks with him. He saw a reflection of his own shock in Emma's face. And with it was hurt exposed raw and vulnerable, there for a heartbeat, and then replaced with accusation and angry disbelief. Her eyes flicked momentarily to Lady Persephone by his side before coming back to his.

Ned's gaze lingered on Emma even after she had turned her face away.

'Is everything all right, Mr Stratham? You seem a little preoccupied.'

'Forgive me, Lady Persephone.' He forced his attention to her rather than Emma.

He could feel his blood pumping harder than in any fight, feel

the shock snaking through his blood.

‘Such a pleasure that you agreed to accompany us tonight, sir.’ Lady Persephone smiled and struck a pose to show her face off to its best. She was pampered, self-obsessed and with the same disdainful arrogance that ran through most women of her class. Her figure was plump and curvaceous from a lifetime of good living. Pale golden-blond ringlets had been arranged artfully to cascade from her where her hair was pinned high. Her dress was some kind of expensive white silk edged with pale-pink ribbon. Her shawl was white, threaded through with gold threads that complemented her hair. A fortune’s worth. Little wonder that Hollingsworth needed an alliance.

‘The pleasure is all mine.’ He made the glib reply with a smile that did not touch his eyes.

She fluttered her eyelashes, but as the lights went down, his eyes were not on the earl’s daughter or the sleek black stallion that had galloped into the amphitheatre ring, but on the woman who sat by the Dowager Lady Lamerton’s side. A woman he had last seen walking down a deserted sunlit road in Whitechapel on a morning not so long ago.

He watched her too often during the remaining performance, but she did not look at him again, not once, her attention as fixed with determination upon the ring below as the smile on her face.

The performance was long. Very long. He bided his time.

* * *

The end came eventually. He escorted Lady Persephone and

her family out.

Across the crowd in the foyer he could see Emma and Lady Lamerton making their way towards the staircase.

Emma glanced up, met his gaze with icy accusation before she turned and was carried away with Lady Lamerton and the crowd.

‘If you will excuse me,’ he said smoothly to the Hollingsworths.

‘But, Mr Stratham!’ He heard the shock and petulance in Lady Persephone’s voice.

‘Well, I never—’ Hollingsworth was beginning to say, but Ned did not stay to hear the rest. He was already weaving his way through the crowd towards the staircase down which Emma had disappeared.

He caught up with her in the crowd on the ground floor, came up close behind.

‘Emma,’ he said her name quietly enough that only she would hear as he caught a hold of her arm, unnoticed in the crush that surrounded them, and steered her into a nearby alcove.

She tried to snatch her hand free of his grip, but he held her firm. ‘Do not “Emma” me!’

Her spine was flush against the wall. He stood in close to protect her from the sight of passing eyes. So close he could smell the familiar enticing scent of her, so close that his thighs brushed against hers.

Anger was a tangible thing between them, flushing her cheeks, making her dark eyes glitter.

‘Not a Whitechapel man after all, Ned Stratham.’

‘Always a Whitechapel man,’ he said with unshakeable steadfastness. ‘Not a lady’s maid after all, Emma de Lisle.’

She ignored the jibe, held his gaze with a quiet fury. ‘Tell me, upon your return to Whitechapel, was it of your courtship with an earl’s daughter that we were to have “talked”?’

‘Had you waited, as you said you would, you would know.’

They were standing so close he could see the indignation that flashed in her eyes and feel the tremor that vibrated through her body.

‘Know that all those nights you were not walking out with me in Whitechapel you were here, in Mayfair, paying court to Lady Persephone? Know that there was more than one woman on the receiving end of your charms? Know that you were lying through your teeth to me when you implied you had a care for me, for your care was all for another?’ Her breath was ragged. ‘I am glad I did not wait to hear you spin more of your lies.’

‘I am not the one who lied.’

‘And yet here you are in high society.’

‘With good reason.’

‘Oh, spare me, please!’ Her breasts brushed against his chest with every breath she took.

‘No,’ he said in a low voice. ‘You will have your explanation, Emma, and I will have mine.’

Where his hand still held hers he felt the sudden leap of her pulse.

‘I do not think so, Ned. You should return to Lady Persephone. I am sure she will be wondering where her suitor has got to. Just as Lady Lamerton will be seeking me.’

The accusation rippled between them.

He pinned her with his gaze, but she did not falter, just held it with hot hard defiance.

‘We will talk, Emma.’ He released her and stepped aside.

She held his gaze for a moment longer. ‘Hell will freeze over first, Ned Stratham.’ She stepped out into the flow of the crowd just as Lady Lamerton, who had almost reached the front door, peered behind.

He stood where he was and watched until Emma had negotiated her way through the bodies to reach the older woman. Only once they had disappeared through the front door did he step out into the crowd.

* * *

‘I look forward to hearing more of your news. Yours with affection...’ Within the drawing room of her Grosvenor Place home the Dowager Lady Lamerton finished dictating the letter. ‘Compose another one in the same vein to Georgiana Hale. Not a straight copy, you understand, in case the unthinkable happens and they see each other’s correspondence.’ Lady Lamerton gave a shudder at the thought.

‘Of course.’ Emma passed the letter to Lady Lamerton for her signature. ‘And the part about Dorothy Wetherby... I believe that Mrs Hale and Mrs Wetherby are cousins.’

‘Good lord, I had forgotten. You are quite right, my dear. No mention of Dorothy Wetherby’s latest exploits.’ She smiled what Emma had come to call her mischievous smile. ‘That would certainly put the cat amongst the pigeons.’ She chuckled as she signed her name and passed the paper back to Emma.

‘We had quite the time of it last night, did we not?’ demanded Lady Lamerton.

‘Indeed.’ Emma busied herself in blotting the letter dry and finding the sealing wax. She did not want to speak of last night. She did not want to think of it. Not when she had already lain awake half the night thinking of nothing else.

‘I do not see what all the fuss was about. It was not as shocking as was implied.’

‘Some aspects of it were very shocking,’ said Emma, although those aspects had not occurred within the ring.

‘Perhaps to you with your innocence and naïvety...’

She smiled at that, but it was an ironic smile. Oh, she had been naïve, all right. Naïve to trust Ned Stratham. Even after all she had learned in these past two years. Pretending he was a Whitechapel man. Pretending he was considering a future with a serving wench when he was serious only about landing himself a title. Liar! Damnable liar! She was so angry, at him, and at herself for believing him. When she thought what she had felt for him...what she had done with him... When she thought how close she had come to turning down the opportunity to return to society and all it might allow her to do for Kit...and all for a

man who had deceived her. She wondered if anything of what he had said had been true. But then when she had thought about it during those long hours of the night, how much had he actually told her of himself? Answering questions with questions. And in her efforts to protect her own secrets she had not pressed him.

‘But not to a woman of my position and experience of life and the world.’

Emma gave another smile, but said nothing.

‘How was it seeing so many familiar faces again, my dear?’

‘Most interesting.’

She thought of Lord Hollingsworth and his family in the box at the amphitheatre, Ned sitting beside Hollingsworth’s daughter, and felt something twist in her stomach.

‘I could not help notice the appearance of some new faces amidst the old. Faces I do not know.’

‘We have had a few new arrivals since you were last in society, Emma.’

‘And some betrothals and weddings, no doubt.’

‘Oh, indeed. And some most scandalous. The Earl of Misbourne’s son, Viscount Linwood, married the actress Miss Fox and was caught up in the most appalling murder scandal. And Misbourne’s daughter, Lady Marianne, a meek and mild little thing who wouldn’t say boo to a goose, was married with rather suggestive haste to a gentleman who, let us just say, was the antithesis of what one would have anticipated Misbourne to have chosen. But then there always has been something rather

shady about that family.’ She leaned closer, her eyes sparkling as she relived the gossip.

‘Lady Persephone must have made her come out by now.’ Emma hoped she was not being too obvious in what she wanted to ask.

‘Indeed,’ said the dowager. ‘She came out this Season and took very well—very well indeed.’

Emma felt nauseous. ‘She is betrothed?’

‘Heavens, no! Hollingsworth has pockets to let and needs her to make an alliance to rectify the problem. All the interest in Lady Persephone was from other titles or gentlemen with insufficient funds for Hollingsworth’s liking. He is angling to catch her Mr Stratham.’

Just the mention of his name made her stomach squeeze a little tighter. She swallowed.

‘Mr Stratham,’ she said lightly as if the name meant nothing to her. ‘I do not believe I have heard of that gentleman.’

‘One of the ton’s new faces. Made his money from trade overseas amongst other things.’ The dowager could not quite keep the censure from her tone. ‘A self-made man, but enormously wealthy.’ She paused for effect and met Emma’s eyes to deliver the golden piece of information. ‘Lives in a mansion in Cavendish Square.’ One of the most elite addresses in London.

‘He must be wealthy indeed.’ Yet he had pretended to live in the Whitechapel streets the same as her. Had walked her home to the shabby boarding house in which she and her father had

lodged. She closed her eyes at the memory of those nights and all they had entailed.

‘But Hollingsworth is not the only one seeking Mr Stratham’s money. Devonport, Longley and a number of others are, too. Stratham is in a strong position to negotiate the best deal.’

‘A host of earl’s daughters to pick from,’ she said and hoped the dowager did not hear the bitter edge to her voice.

‘Quite.’ Lady Lamerton nodded. ‘Although in the past month it has to be said he seems to have been rather distracted from the marriage mart. No doubt making the most of his bachelorhood before he makes his decision and commits himself.’

‘No doubt,’ Emma said grimly. ‘And his pedigree?’ She wanted to know more of this man who had duped her so badly, this man who had lied to and betrayed her.

‘No one knows quite where Edward Stratham came from, although his accent betrays something of common roots.’

Whitechapel. The word whispered through Emma’s mind, but she dismissed it.

‘He is a member of White’s Club, but according to m’son does not attend much. And other than his steward, Mr Rob Finchley, Stratham has no close friends or confidantes.’

‘Even you have been able to discover nothing else of him?’

Lady Lamerton puffed herself at Emma’s subtle acknowledgement of her prowess in the gleaning of information from persons of interest, as she liked to say.

‘Stratham keeps his own counsel and when it comes to

discussing matters he has no wish to discuss...how can I put it?' She thought for a moment and then said, 'He is not a man whom one can press.'

Emma understood very well that Ned Stratham was not the sort of man to be intimidated.

'But for all he is trade, he is a handsome devil and such eyes as to have half the ladies in London in a swoon.'

Emma felt the tiny clench of the muscle in her jaw. 'And what news of Miss Darrington? How does she fare?'

'Now there is a story and a half.' Having exhausted the available gossip on Ned Stratham, Lady Lamerton was more than happy to move on to another subject. 'There was the most dreadful scandal concerning Miss Darrington and the Marquis of Razeby.'

Emma finished sealing the letter and settled comfortably in her chair to listen.

* * *

It was later that same day, at half past two, when Emma and Lady Lamerton arrived outside the circulating library for the dowager's weekly visit. Emma waited as Lady Lamerton was helped down the carriage step by a footman. A rather saucy romantic novel hidden between two books on art, as per the dowager's instruction, was tucked under Emma's arm. Lady Lamerton deemed it perfectly acceptable to be reading erotic art books, but heaven forbid that she be seen with a racy romance.

'How did you enjoy the novel?' Emma asked.

‘Absolute poppycock,’ the dowager pronounced as she leaned upon her walking stick. And then added with a smile, ‘But immensely enjoyable poppycock. A rather wicked story all about a devilishly handsome, if rather dangerous, gentleman.’ She gave a little amused chuckle and Emma smiled.

She was still smiling as she glanced along the pavement they were about to cross to reach the library door and then the smile vanished from her face. For there, strolling towards them, was Ned Stratham.

Those blue eyes met hers.

Her heart missed a beat before racing fit to burst. She deliberately shifted her gaze, ignoring him, as if he were not there.

Please God... But her prayer went unanswered. Lady Lamerton saw him at once. ‘Why, Mr Stratham. We were just talking of you.’

Emma felt her face scald.

‘Only good things, I hope.’

‘Is there anything bad?’ enquired the dowager sweetly.

Ned smiled. ‘Now, that would be telling.’

Lady Lamerton gave a laugh. ‘La, sir, you are quite the rogue.’

‘Indeed, I am, ma’am.’ His smile painted the words of truth as those of jest.

Then his eyes moved to Emma and lingered.

She held her head high. Feigned a calmness she did not feel. Inside her heart was beating nineteen to the dozen, but she met

his gaze coolly.

‘I do not believe you have met m’companion, sir.’

‘I have not had that pleasure,’ he said. ‘I would have been sure to remember.’

No insinuations that they had met before. No hints over Whitechapel.

Their eyes held.

She swallowed.

‘May I introduce Miss Emma Northcote,’ Lady Lamerton said.

Ned seemed to still and for the flicker of a second Emma saw something that looked like shock in his eyes. Then it was gone and he was once more his quiet assured self.

Only then did she remember that he knew her as de Lisle.

Her eyes held his, waiting for him to make some comment on her change of name. Her breath held, waiting as that tiny moment seemed to stretch. The atmosphere between them was obvious.

‘I am pleased to meet you, Miss Northcote.’ His voice was as cool as his gaze. He gave a curt bow.

‘Likewise, Mr Stratham.’ She dropped the smallest curtsy.

There was a deafening silence, which Ned made no effort to fill.

‘We are for the circulating library, sir,’ said Lady Lamerton. ‘Are you?’

‘No.’ He did not elaborate.

The dowager inclined her head, dismissing him.

‘Your servant, ma’am.’

His eyes moved to Emma’s again.

This time there was no perfunctory smile on his lips and the look in his eyes made her shiver. ‘Miss Northcote.’ The slightest emphasis on her name.

She gave a nod and turned away to escort the dowager into the library.

There was no sound of his footsteps upon the pavement and she had the feeling that he was standing there, watching her. It made her feel nervous. It made each step feel like an eternity. But she did not yield to the urge to glance behind. Not until Lady Lamerton was through the door and Emma, too, was safe inside the library.

He was still standing there, just as she had thought. And there was something in the way he was looking at her, something focused and hard, as if he were seeing her for the first time, as if he were scrutinising her. Something of accusation that made her uncomfortably aware that she had not been entirely honest with him.

Only then did he dip his head in a final acknowledgement and turn and walk away.

* * *

Rob was waiting for him in his study when Ned got back to the mansion in Cavendish Square.

His friend and steward glanced round from where he was examining the arrangement of swords and sabres mounted upon

the wall. 'I came early. Wanted to check over a few things before we left for Misbourne's.'

Ned gave a nod, and passed his cane and hat to Clarkson. Then peeled off his gloves and did the same.

The door closed with a quiet click behind the departing butler.

Ned walked straight to his desk and, ignoring the crystal decanter of brandy that sat there on the silver salver, opened the bottom drawer and took out a bottle of gin. He poured two generous measures into the matching crystal glasses. Passed one to Rob and took a deep swig from the other.

He could feel his friend's eyes on him and knew it didn't look good, but right at this minute he didn't give a damn.

'You all right, Ned?'

'I've been better.'

'You look like you've just seen a ghost.'

That was certainly one way of putting it.

'Business deal gone bad?' Rob asked.

Nothing so simple. 'Something like that.'

'Not Misbourne. Not the—'

'No.' He cut Rob off. Took another swig of the gin, relishing the raw kick of it. 'Not Misbourne.'

'That's a relief, at least.'

'Yes.'

There was a silence. Ned's mind was whirring. His blood still pumping hard as if he'd just floored ten men. He could feel a cold sweat on his upper lip, a clamminess on the palms of his

hands. He took another gulp of gin to numb the tremor of shock that still ran through him.

‘If you need to call off with Misbourne...’

‘I don’t.’ Ned met his friend’s gaze. ‘I need Misbourne on board. And missing a lunch he’s arranged will set him against me.’

‘It’s just a lunch.’

‘Nothing with these men of the ton is just a lunch.’

‘If he asks about any of the details...’

‘Leave the details to me.’

Rob gave a nod.

Ned finished the rest of the gin and set the glass down on the desk.

‘Let’s walk. I could do with some fresh air.’ To calm the pound of his blood and shutter the disbelief that was coursing through his body.

Rob nodded.

Ned rang the bell for his butler. There would be time to think later and there was much riding on Misbourne.

Ned was well practised at putting emotion aside. He did it now, coldly, deliberately, and got on with the task in hand.

* * *

‘More tea?’ Emma asked, teapot poised in hand to refill the dowager’s delicate blue Sèvres teacup.

The afternoon sunlight filled Lady Lamerton’s little parlour, making it bright and warm. Dust motes floated in the sunbeams

to land on the circulating library's latest romance novel on the embroidered tablecloth of the tea table before them.

On the sideboard at the other end of the parlour, a book on antiquity and a heavyweight tedious literary novel had been discarded until they were required for next week's return visit to the library.

'Thank you, my dear.' Lady Lamerton gave a small nod.

Emma poured the tea.

'So what did you make of our Mr Stratham?'

'Tolerable enough, I suppose.' Emma managed to keep her hand steady and concentrated on adding a splash of cream and three lumps of sugar to the dowager's cup, just the way she liked it.

'Tolerable?' The dowager looked at her aghast as she accepted the cup and saucer from Emma. 'With those eyes?'

'A pair of fine eyes do not make the man.'

'So you did notice,' said the dowager slyly. 'And I must say he seemed rather struck by you.'

'Hardly.' Emma took satisfaction in her calm tone as she topped up her own teacup.

'Indeed, I do not think I have seen any woman make such an impression upon him.'

Emma remembered again that expression on his face outside the library. The intense scrutiny in his eyes. The force of something that seemed to emanate from him. Something angry and accusatory that he had no right to feel. She took a sip of tea

and said nothing.

‘I wonder if he will be at Hawick’s ball tonight,’ the dowager mused.

Emma felt a shiver ripple down her spine. ‘Is it likely?’

‘Most likely, indeed.’

We will talk, Emma. She thought of the cool promise that had been in his eyes and the utter certainty in those quiet words. She swallowed and resolved not to leave the dowager’s side for the entirety of the evening.

* * *

The Duke of Hawick’s ballroom was heaving. It seemed that the entirety of the ton had returned early to London, and were here, turned out for the event since the rumour had got out that the Prince Regent himself might be present.

It was as warm as an evening in the Red Lion, even though there were no adjacent kitchens here that fanned the heat. No low ceiling or small deep-sunk windows, and bricks that held the heat in summer and the cold in winter. It was a huge room of wealth and opulence that would have been beyond the imagination of most of those who frequented the Red Lion Chop-House. The massive chandelier held a hundred candles whose flames made the crystals glitter and sparkle like diamonds. The windows were numerous and large, the sashes pulled up to allow a circulation of fresh air. At the back of the room were glass doors that opened out on to a long strip of town garden similar to that at the back of the mansion house in Cavendish Square. All of that open glass

and air and yet still the place was too warm because of the throng of guests.

‘Another fine evening,’ Lord Longley said and lifted a glass of champagne from the silver salver that the footman held before him.

‘Indeed.’ Ned accepted a glass of champagne, too. Took a sip without betraying the slightest hint that he hated the stuff. He was all too aware of the way Longley ignored Rob’s presence. ‘You have met my steward, Mr Finchley.’

Longley could barely keep the curl from his upper lip as he gave the smallest of acknowledgements to Rob before returning his attention to Ned. He thought Rob beneath him. And Ned, too, but swallowed his principles for the sake of money.

‘Harrow tells me you were at Tattersall’s saleroom the other day looking at the cattle.’ Tattersall’s was the auction house where the ton went to buy their horses. Ned could hear the slight sneer that Longley always had in his voice when he spoke to him. Felt the edge of anger that he always felt amongst these men born to titles and wealth and privilege and who lived in a world far removed from reality.

‘Browsing the wares.’ Ned’s eyes were cool. ‘Were we not, Mr Finchley?’

‘And fine wares they were, too,’ said Rob.

‘Matters equine take a knowledgeable eye.’ Which you do not have. That patronising air that Longley could not quite hide no matter how hard he tried. ‘And experience. I would be happy to

teach you a thing or two.'

'How kind.' Ned smiled.

The sentiment behind the smile was lost on Longley.

'Where do you ride?'

'I don't.'

'I did not know that,' said Longley and tucked the tidbit away to share with his friends in White's should matters not work out between him and Ned as he was hoping. 'I suppose I should have realised, what with your not having come from—' He stopped himself just in time.

Ned held Longley's gaze.

The earl glanced away, cleared his throat and changed the subject to why he was standing here in Ned's company tonight. 'Lady Juliette is in good spirits tonight.' Lady Juliette, Longley's daughter for whom he was seeking a match with new money.

'You must be pleased for her.' From the corner of his eye he saw Rob struggle to stifle a grin.

'Do not need to tell you that she was quite the diamond of this year's Season. I am sure you are already aware of her.'

'Very aware.'

Longley smiled.

'Quite the horsewoman as I recall,' said Ned.

Longley's smile faltered as he realised the mistake he'd just made. He squirmed. 'Not so much these days.' He cleared his throat again. 'Excuse me, sir. I see Willaston and have a matter to discuss with him.'

A small bow and Longley took himself off, leaving Ned and Rob standing alone.

There was a silence before Ned spoke. 'There's something you need to know, Rob. The Dowager Lady Lamerton has a new companion.'

'You think I'm in with a shout?' Rob grinned.

Ned did not smile. His eyes held Rob's. 'Her name is Miss Emma Northcote.'

Rob's grin vanished. 'Northcote? I thought the Northcotes were long gone. Moved away to the country.'

'So did I.' Ned thought of the truth of Emma Northcote and her father's circumstance—the nights in the Red Lion Chop-House; the narrow street with its shabby lodging house; and the London Dock warehouse—and something tightened in his throat. He swallowed it down. Gave a hard smile. 'It seems we were wrong.'

'Hell.' A whispered curse so incongruous in the expensive elegance of their surroundings as the shock made Rob forget himself. 'That's going to make things awkward.'

'Why?' Ned's expression was closed.

'You know why.'

'I did nothing wrong. I've got nothing to feel awkward over.'

'Even so.'

'It isn't going to be a problem. She isn't going to be a problem.' Not now he knew who she was.

Both men's gazes moved across the room as one to where Lady

Lamerton sat with her cronies...and her companion.

Northcote, not de Lisle, the worst lie of them all.

He looked at the long gleaming hair coiled and caught up in a cascade of dark roped curls at the back of her head, at the sky-blue silk evening dress she was garbed in, plain and unadorned unlike the fancy dresses of the other ladies and obviously paid for by Lady Lamerton. She wore no jewellery. He knew that she would have none. The décolletage of her dress showed nothing other than her smooth olive skin. Long white silk evening gloves covered her arms and matching white slippers peeped from beneath the dress.

She had seen him the minute she entered the ballroom. He knew it. Just as he knew she was ignoring him.

‘No,’ said Rob quietly. ‘Knowing you, I don’t suppose she will.’

Ned’s eyes shifted from Emma to Rob. ‘Would you hold this for me?’ He passed his glass to Rob. ‘There’s something I have to do.’

‘You can’t be serious...’

Ned smiled a hard smile.

‘Tell me you’re not going over there to get yourself introduced?’ Rob was staring at him as if he were mad.

‘I’m not going over there for an introduction. Miss Northcote and I have already had that pleasure.’

Rob looked shocked.

‘But the lady and I didn’t get a chance to talk.’

The music came to a halt. The dance came to an end. The

figures crowded upon the floor bowed and curtsied and began to disperse.

Ned glanced across the floor to Emma once more.

‘This won’t take long.’

‘Ned...’ Rob lowered his voice and spoke with quiet insistence.

But Ned was already moving smoothly through the crowd, crossing the ballroom, his focus fixed on Emma Northcote.

Chapter Six

‘Oh, my!’ Emma heard Miss Chichester exclaim as she stared in the direction where Ned Stratham stood talking with Mr Finchley and Lord Longley. ‘You are not going to believe this, Miss Northcote, but Mr Stratham—’

Emma resisted the urge to look round. ‘I do not understand why Mr Stratham is of such fascination to the ladies of the ton,’ she interrupted. ‘He is just trade, for all his money.’ It was a cruel and elitist remark, but after what he had done he deserved it.

Miss Chichester’s eyes widened. Her pale cheeks flushed ruddy. She gave a soft, breathless gasp and pressed a hand to her décolletage.

‘Indeed I am, Miss Northcote,’ Ned Stratham’s voice said. That same soft East End accent, that same slight edge underlying the quiet words.

Emma’s heart stuttered. Her stomach turned end over end. She froze for a second before turning to look up into those too-familiar cool blue eyes.

‘Mr Stratham,’ she said with a controlled calm that belied the

trembling inside. 'You surprise me.'

He smiled. 'Evidently.'

She held his gaze as if she were not embarrassed at being caught out and ashamed of her words, but the seep of heat into her cheeks betrayed her. However, she offered no apology.

The silence stretched between them.

His eyes never faltered for a moment. He stood there, all quiet strength and stillness, with those eyes that knew her secrets and those lips that had seduced her own. 'I am here to ask you to dance, Miss Northcote.'

Her stomach gave a somersault.

Beside her she heard Miss Chichester give a quiet gasp.

'I thank you kindly for your magnanimous offer, sir.' Emma held his gaze with a determined strength, knowing that, in this battle of wills, to look away would be to admit defeat. 'But I am obliged to refuse. I am here as Lady Lamerton's companion, not to dance.'

His mouth made a small dangerous curve, making fear trickle into her blood at what he meant to do. Too late she remembered that one word from his mouth could destroy her. One word and her return to the ton and all that meant for her brother would be over. Her mouth turned dry as a desert.

He turned his attention to Lady Lamerton. Only then did Emma notice that all of the ladies around them had fallen silent and that Lady Lamerton and her friends were watching with avid interest.

‘I am sure that Lady Lamerton would be able to spare you for some small time.’ He looked at Lady Lamerton with that quiet confidence in his eyes. Cocked the rogue eyebrow.

All eyes turned to the dowager, like a queen with the presiding vote over a court.

‘Mr Stratham has the right of it, Emma.’ Lady Lamerton turned her focus to Ned. ‘I trust you will return m’companion to me safely, sir.’

‘Safe and sound, ma’am.’ Ned smiled at Lady Lamerton.

Safe and sound. The very air around him vibrated with danger.

All of the tabbies watched in rapt amazement.

His eyes switched back to Emma, the bluest blue eyes in all the world, so cool and dangerous, and filled with the echoes of shared intimacies between them. ‘Miss Northcote.’ He held out his hand in invitation. ‘Shall we?’

Her eyes held his for a tiny moment longer, knowing that he had manoeuvred her into a corner from which there was no escape. Then she inclined her head in acknowledgement.

He might have won the battle but it did not mean he would win the war.

She placed her hand in his, rose to her feet and let him lead her out on to the dance floor.

* * *

They joined the nearest set for a country dance that was neither progressive nor too fast for conversation.

‘What game are you playing, Ned Stratham?’

‘No game. We need to speak with a degree of privacy. This provides the perfect opportunity.’

She glanced around to all the pairs of eyes fixed upon them, to all the murmurs being whispered behind fans and into ears. ‘You call this privacy? Our every move is under scrutiny.’

‘Indeed. Apparently I am a source of fascination for the ladies of the ton.’

She blushed and eyed him with anger. She was very aware of the warmth of his hand around hers, of the proximity of his body. ‘I have already told you I will not listen to more of your lies.’

‘But I was not the one who was telling the lies, was I, Emma?’

‘Given what you did, I do not think I owe you any explanation as to why I did not wait. And as for a lady’s maid, I have undertaken such duties in the past. For a month.’

‘A month.’ He paused. ‘As the daughter of the maid’s master.’ He looked at her.

‘Strictly speaking it was not a lie.’

‘Strictly speaking.’

She pressed her lips firm. Glanced away.

He leaned closer, so that she felt the brush of his breath against her cheek, felt the shiver tingle down her spine and tighten her breasts.

‘And as we are speaking strictly, the little fact of your name, Miss de Lisle...’ His blue eyes seemed to bore into hers.

‘It was not a lie. De Lisle is my mother’s name.’

‘Your mother’s name. But not yours.’

She swallowed again. Her mouth was dry with nerves. He was making it sound as if she were the one in the wrong. ‘My father and I could hardly admit the truth of our background. That we were fallen from society. That we were of that privileged class so despised in Whitechapel. Do you think we would have been accepted? Do you think Nancy would have given me a job in the Red Lion?’

‘No.’ His eyes held hers, unmoved by the argument. ‘But it does not change the fact that you lied to me, Emma Northcote.’

‘Small white lies that made no difference.’

Something flashed in his eyes, something angry and passionate and hard. Something in such contrast to the cool deliberate control normally there that it sent a shiver tingling down her spine and made her heart skip a beat. ‘They would have made all the difference in the world.’

The dance took them apart, leading them each to change places with the couple on their right. She took those few moments to try to compose herself before they were reunited once more and his hand closed over hers, binding her to him. And to this confrontation she had no wish to conduct upon a crowded dance floor.

‘Do not seek to turn this around,’ Emma said. ‘You made me believe you were something you were not.’

He raised his eyebrows at that. Just as she had made him believe she was someone she was not.

It fuelled her anger and sense of injustice.

‘All those nights, Ned... And in between them you were here, living in your mansion, dancing at some ball with the latest diamond of the ton hanging on your arm. Seeking to ally yourself with some earl’s daughter while you played your games in Whitechapel.’

He said nothing.

‘You would have bedded me and cast me aside.’

‘Would I?’ His voice was cold, hard, emotionless. There was something in his eyes when he said it that unnerved her.

Had she waited, she would know for sure.

Had she waited it would have been too late.

The dance played on, their feet following where it led. There was only the music and the scrape and tread of slipper soles against the smooth wood of the floorboards. Only the sound of her breath and his. Given all that was at stake, she had to know. She had to ask him.

‘Are you going to tell them the truth of me? That I was a serving wench in a chop-house in Whitechapel? That my father is a dockworker? That we lodged in one of the roughest boarding houses in all London?’

‘Are you going to tell them that I was a customer in the same chop-house?’

They looked at one another.

‘You they would forgive. Me, you know they would not.’

‘They would be a deal less forgiving of me than you anticipate.’ He smiled a hard smile. ‘But do not fear, Emma. Your secret is

safe with me.'

She waited for the qualifier. For what he would demand for his silence.

He just smiled a cynical smile as if he knew her thoughts. Gave a tiny shake of his head.

It made her feel as though she was the one who had got this all wrong. She reminded herself of the shabby leather jacket and boots he had worn—a disguise. She reminded herself of what had passed between them in the darkness of a Whitechapel alleyway while he was living a double life here. For all his denials he was a liar who had used and made a fool of her.

'Now that matters are clear between us, there is no need to speak again. Stay away from me, Ned.'

He smiled again. A hard, bitter smile. 'You need not worry, Emma Northcote,' he taunted her over her name. 'I will stay far away from you.'

'I will be glad of it.'

He studied her eyes, as if he could see everything she was, all her secrets and lies, all her hopes and fears. Then he leaned closer, so close that she could smell the clean familiar scent of him and feel his breath warm against her cheek, so close that she shivered as he whispered the words into her ear, 'Much more than you realise.'

Her heart was thudding. Her blood was rushing. All that had been between them in the Red Lion and the alleyway, and at the old stone bench, was suddenly there in that ballroom.

They stared at one another for a moment. Then he stepped back, once more his cool controlled self.

‘Smile,’ he said. ‘Every eye is upon us and you wouldn’t want our audience to think we were discussing anything other than the usual petty fripperies that are discussed upon a ballroom floor.’

He smiled a smile that did not touch his eyes.

And she reciprocated, smiling as she said the words, ‘You are a bastard, Ned Stratham.’

‘Yes, I am. Quite literally. But I deem that better than a liar.’

His words, and their truth, cut deep.

The music finally came to a halt.

The ladies on either side of her were curtsying. Emma smothered her emotions and did the same.

Ned bowed. ‘Allow me to return you to Lady Lamerton.’

She held his gaze for a heartbeat and then another. And then, uncomfortably aware that every eye in the ballroom was upon them, she touched the tips of her fingers to his arm and let him lead her from the floor.

* * *

Ned and Rob were in Gentleman John Jackson’s pugilistic rooms in Bond Street the next morning. At nine o’clock the hour was still too early for any other gentleman to be present. After a night of gentlemen’s clubs, drinking, gaming and womanising—which were, as far as Ned could make out, the chief pursuits of most men of the gentry and nobility—gentlemen did not, in general, rise before midday. After a bout of light sparring

together, Ned and Rob were working on the heavy sand-filled canvas punchbags that hung from a bar fixed along the length of one wall.

Rob sat on the floor, back against the wall, elbows on knees, catching his breath. Ned landed regular punches to the sandbag.

‘What the hell was that about with Emma Northcote last night?’ Rob asked.

‘I wanted to speak to her.’

‘About what?’

‘To verify her identity.’

‘And you needed to dance with her for that?’

‘I had to put all those lessons with that dancing master to use at some time. I paid him good money.’

Rob raised his eyebrows. His expression was cynical. ‘I take it she is who we think.’

‘What gives you that impression?’

‘Maybe the fact that you’re knocking two tons of stuffing out of that punchbag.’

Ned raised an eyebrow, then returned to jabbing at the sandbag, right hook, then left hook. Right hook, then left. ‘She doesn’t change anything. We go on just as before.’ He landed a left-handed blow so hard that it almost took the punchbag clear off its hook. He ducked as it swung back towards him, punched it again, and again. Kept up the training until his knuckles were sore and his arms ached and the keenness of what he felt was blunted by fatigue.

Rob threw a drying cloth up to him and got to his feet, gesturing with his eyes to the doorway with warning. 'That it, is it, Stratham?' he said, reverting to a form of formality now that they had company.

Ned caught the cloth and mopped the sweat from his face as he glanced round to see who it was that had entered.

There was only the slightest of hesitations in the Duke of Monteith and Viscount Devlin's steps as they saw who was in the training room using the equipment.

Ned met Devlin's eyes. The viscount returned the look—cold, insolent, contemptuous—before walking with Monteith to the other end of the room.

Ned and Rob exchanged a look.

'Your favourite person,' said Rob beneath his breath.

'It just gets better and better.' Ned smiled a grim smile, as he and Rob made their way to the changing rooms.

* * *

Within the dining room of Lady Lamerton's town house a few streets away, Emma and the dowager were at breakfast.

'It is just as I suspected, Mr Stratham dancing with you at Hawick's ball is all the gossip, Emma,' Lady Lamerton said as she read the letter within her hand.

The clock on the mantel ticked a slow and sonorous rhythm.

'I cannot think why. It was only one dance.' Emma did not speak while the footman moved from Lady Lamerton's side, where he filled her cup with coffee, to Emma's and stood waiting,

coffee pot in hand.

She gave a nod, watching while the steaming hot liquid poured from the pot into the pretty orange-and-gold-rimmed cup. The aroma of coffee wafted through the air. She added a spot of cream from the jug and took a sip of the coffee.

Sunlight spilled in through the dining-room window, sparkling through the crystal drops of the chandelier above their heads to cast rainbows on the walls.

Lady Lamerton set the letter down on the growing pile of opened papers and reached for the next one. She glanced up as she broke the seal. 'Because, my dear, Mr Stratham has not previously been seen upon a dance floor. He does not dance.'

Emma took another sip of coffee and tried to smile, as if what had happened upon the dance floor last night was nothing. 'That must be somewhat of a disadvantage when he is at an Almack's ball.'

'Hardly,' said the dowager. 'If anything it is the opposite. It has created rather a stir of interest. The women see it as a challenge. The Lewis sisters have a sweepstake running as to who will be the first to tempt him upon a floor. It is considered to be an indicator of when he has made his choice of bride.'

Emma smiled again to hide the anger she felt at that thought. 'Well, last night certainly disproved that theory.'

'Indeed, it did. And will have made the Lewis sisters a deal richer.' The dowager paused and looked at the letter in her hand. 'They are all positively agog to know of what he spoke.'

If they only knew. ‘Nothing of drama or excitement. I already told you the details.’ Last night in the ballroom when there had been a subtle questioning which Lady Lamerton had parried with the air of a hawk, with its wings shielding its food for its own later consumption. And in the carriage on the way home the hawk had eaten...although not of the truth.

‘The weather and other trivialities are hardly going to satisfy them, Emma. Especially as the pair of you appeared to be having quite the conversation.’

Emma took another sip of coffee and said nothing.

Lady Lamerton held her spectacles to her eyes and peered at the letter again. ‘Apparently they are taking bets on whether he will dance again. And if it will be with you.’

Emma suppressed a sigh at the ton’s preoccupations. An hour’s walk away and the preoccupations and world were very different.

‘Fetch my diary, Emma, and check when the next dance is to be held.’

‘It is next week, on Thursday evening—the charity dance at the Foundling Hospital.’ Emma knew the line of thought the dowager’s mind was taking. ‘And even if Mr Stratham is there, I made it quite clear to him that my duty is as your companion and not to dance.’

‘Much as I admire your loyalty, my dear, you are quite at liberty to dance with him. Indeed—’ she glanced with unmistakable satisfaction at the unusually large pile of letters the morning post had brought ‘—it would be quite churlish not to.’

‘He will not ask me.’ Stay away from me, Ned.

You need not worry, Emma Northcote. I will stay far away from you. The echo of their words rang in her head. And she remembered again, as she had remembered in the night, the look in his eyes—cool anger and other things...

Emma smiled as if it were nothing and led the conversation away from Ned Stratham. ‘What are you wearing tonight for dinner at Mrs Lewis’s?’

Her tactic worked. ‘My purple silk and matching turban. I thought you could wear your dove-grey silk to complement me.’

‘It would match well,’ Emma agreed and listened as Lady Lamerton discussed a visit to the haberdashery to buy a feather for the turban.

Ned would stay away from her. And she would be glad of it. More glad than you realise.

And a tingle ran over the skin at the nape of her neck at what those strange words might mean.

* * *

‘I see Mr Stratham is here,’ Lady Lamerton said sotto voce not five minutes after they had entered the drawing room of Mrs Lewis’s Hill Street house that night.

‘Is he? I had not noticed,’ Emma lied. He and his steward, Rob Finchley, were over by the windows talking with Lord Linwood and another gentleman, one whom Emma vaguely recognised but could not quite place. Ned was smartly dressed in the best of tailoring, his fair hair glinting gold in the candlelight. He looked

as at ease here as he had in Whitechapel. Beneath that polished surface emanated that same awareness, that same feeling of strength and danger held in control. His eyes met hers, hard, watchful and bluer than she remembered, making her heart stumble and her body shiver. She returned the look, cool and hard as his own, and curved her lips in a smile as if he bothered her not in the slightest, before returning her attention to Lady Lamerton.

Their hostess appeared, welcoming them, telling Lady Lamerton how wonderful she looked and asking which mantua maker was she using these days.

Emma saw some of the women who had been friends of hers in what now seemed a different life. Women who had attended the same ladies' educational seminary, who had made their come-outs at the same time, and against whom her competition in the marriage mart had necessitated spending a fortune on new wardrobes. They were dressed in the latest fashions, immaculately coiffured, safe in their little group. Emma knew how penniless ladies' companions were viewed in their circle, the whispered pity; she, after all, had once been one of the whisperers. Not out of malice, but naïvety and ignorance. But who her father had been, and who she had been amongst them, still held influence for, despite her reduced status, most smiled and gave small acknowledgements. Only a few turned their heads away.

'Lady Lamerton, how very delightful to find you here.' Mrs Faversham arrived, all smiles and politeness, but with the barely

concealed expression of a gossip hound on the scent of a story. 'And Miss Northcote, too.' Her eyes sharpened and lit as she looked at Emma.

'Mrs Faversham,' cooed Lady Lamerton and smiled that smile that, contrary to its softness, indicated when it came to gossip she was top dog and would be guarding her object of interest with ferocity. Emma's father had been right.

'Such a shame I missed Hawick's ball. It seems it was quite the place to be. I heard that Mr Stratham finally took to the dance floor. But one can never be sure with such rumours.'

'I can confirm the truth of it, my dear Agatha.'

'Indeed?' Curiosity was almost bursting out of her. 'You must come to tea, dear Lady Lamerton. It has been an age since we visited together. Would tomorrow suit?'

'I am taking tea with Mrs Hilton tomorrow. My tea diary is quite booked these days. But I might be able to squeeze you in at the end of the week...if that would be agreeable to you.'

'Most agreeable.' Mrs Faversham smiled and could not help her eyes straying to Emma once more. 'And will Miss Northcote be there?'

But Emma was saved by the sound of the dinner gong.

* * *

The table was beautifully arranged with a central line of squat candelabras interspersed by pineapples. In the middle was a vast arrangement that involved the head and tail feathers of a peacock. Emma tensed, worrying that she would find herself seated beside

Ned, but, for all his wealth, in the hierarchy of seating at a ton dinner table trade was still looked down upon and Ned and his steward were seated further down the table. A lady's companion, effectively a servant, was deemed higher because her family had once been one of them.

Lord Soames, one of her father's oldest and dearest friends, took his place by her side.

'And how is your papa fairing out in rural Hounslow, young Miss Northcote?' he bellowed on account of his deafness.

'He is well, thank you, Lord Soames.' She nodded and smiled, aware that the volume of Lord Soames's voice was loud enough to be heard all around. Loud enough for Ned to hear those few seats away.

'Glad to hear it, m'dear. You must tell him when you see him next that his presence is sorely missed.'

'I will.' She smiled again and smoothly changed the subject. 'Such uncommonly good weather we have been having.'

'What's that you are saying? Speak up, girl.'

'I was merely commenting upon the pleasant weather of late.'

Lord Soames held his ear trumpet to his ear. 'Did not catch a word of it, Miss Northcote.'

'Miss Northcote was speaking of the good weather,' a man's voice said from close behind. It was a voice that Emma recognised: aristocratic, educated, with a slight drawl of both careless sensuality and arrogance. She stiffened.

'Splendid weather indeed,' agreed Lord Soames with a nod

and sat back in his chair to await his dinner.

‘Good evening, Miss Northcote,’ the voice drawled and its owner sat down in the vacant chair to her right.

The blood was pounding in her temple. She felt a little sick. Took a deep breath to steady herself before she looked round into the classically sculpted face of Viscount Devlin.

‘I think you are mistaken in your seat, sir.’ Her eyes looked pointedly at the small white place card with the name of Mr Frew written upon it.

Devlin lifted the place card and slipped it into a pocket of his dark evening tailcoat. ‘I do not think so, Miss Northcote.’

Emma blinked at his audacity, met his gaze with a fierceness and flicked her focus a few seats along to where Mr Frew was sitting meekly. The gentleman had the grace to look embarrassed before rapidly averting his eyes.

She returned her gaze to Devlin, her face as much a mask as his, even if her heart was still pumping hard with anger and loathing beneath. She knew that she could not start causing a fuss, or refuse to sit beside him. Guests were already sliding sly glances their way. Everybody would be watching to see her reaction to him. Everybody remembered her mother’s very public castigation of him and his friends. Everybody knew the history of him and her brother.

So she smiled, even if her eyes held all the warmth of an arctic night, and kept her voice low. ‘What are you doing, Devlin?’

‘Enjoying an evening out at dinner.’ He smiled, too. That lazy

charming smile of his she had once thought so handsome.

Across the table Lord Fallingham had taken the seat beside Mrs Morley. His eyes met hers. He gave a nod of acknowledgement before he turned to Mrs Morley and engaged her in a conversation that had no room for anyone else.

She did not glance round at Lord Soames. She could hear Mrs Hilton on his left shouting a conversation with him.

Devlin smiled again as if he had known her thoughts.

She did not smile, just held his gaze and waited.

‘So how have you been, Miss Northcote?’

‘Never better...’ Her mouth smiled. Her eyes did not. ‘Until a moment ago. And you, sir?’ A parody of politeness and sincerity.

His smile was broader this time, lazier, more charming. ‘All the better for seeing you.’ And yet there was something in his eyes that gave lie to his words.

‘I cannot think why. Given your interchange with my family before we left London, I did not think that there was very much we had left to say to one another.’

He made no reply, just leaned back in his chair, and took a sip of his champagne as he watched her. ‘How did you find Hawick’s ball the other evening?’

By its own volition her gaze moved to Ned further down the table. His glance shifted to hers at the very same time. She looked away. Lifted her glass with a rock-steady hand.

‘It was a pleasant enough affair.’

Devlin flicked a glance towards Ned before coming back to

her. 'Pleasant enough to tempt Mr Stratham on to the dance floor so I hear. A hitherto unheard-of feat.'

'I would not know, having been absent from society for so long.'

He smiled at the barb, a smile that did not touch his eyes. Took another sip of his champagne. 'It is quite the accomplishment, I assure you.'

'I will take your word for it.'

He smiled again.

'He's new money,' he said in that same disparaging tone with which all of the ton viewed self-made men.

'So I have heard.'

'Men like Stratham do not play by the rules of our world. Some of them do not play by any rules at all.' He paused, then added, 'Especially when it comes to women.'

'That is rather rich coming from you.' The whole of London knew that Devlin was an out-and-out rake.

'Maybe.' Devlin smiled. 'But my affairs are conducted with those who know the score.'

There was a silence and in it lay his unspoken insinuation over Ned. He held her gaze.

'Why are you telling me?'

'For the sake of my friendship with your brother.'

'Friendship? Is that what you called it?' She raised her brows.

'And even if it were not so, given Stratham has expressed such an...interest in you, I would not be a gentleman were I to keep

quiet and say nothing.'

'One dance does not constitute an interest.'

'I think, in this case, it rather does.'

'I am sure you are well intentioned, sir.' She kept her voice quiet and light, as if they were in truth discussing nothing more than the weather or the latest summer theatre show. 'But what I do, and with whom, is not your concern.'

'Maybe not.' Devlin's gaze flicked down the table to Ned and when he looked at her again there was a strange, almost possessive expression in his eyes. 'And then again maybe it is more of my concern than you realise.'

The expression was gone so quickly that she doubted she had really seen it. She stared at him, wondering if he had just actually said those words.

He smiled again, that charming smile that had so many women fluttering their eyelashes and hoping to be the one that tamed him.

There was the clatter of dishes, the scrape of cutlery, the chink of glass and glug of wine being poured as the meal was served. Footmen were moving between them, offering dishes for their serving. All around was the hum of conversations and small laughter.

Emma felt the slink of unease in her stomach.

But when the footmen moved on, Devlin's attention was across the table. 'How was your chicken, Mrs Morley?'

'Superb as ever can be expected from...'

The conversation played on. The seconds ticked slow.

Emma's eyes moved down the table to where Ned was talking to Mr Jamison. He glanced up and met her eyes with cool speculation, before returning his focus to whatever it was Mr Jamison was saying.

Chapter Seven

The morning sky was a yawning blue. The air was fresh and perfect. Ned's gig, sprung for sport and speed, and dark and sleek as the panther rumoured to be kept by the Prince Regent in his Tower menagerie, skimmed smooth and light over the roads towards Hyde Park.

'Did you see that Devlin was seated beside Miss Northcote?' Rob spoke loud enough to be heard above the noise of both the gig's wheels and the horses' hooves.

'Devlin was not seated there. He intimidated Frew into swapping seats.' Ned kept his attention on the four matched-black horses trotting smartly before them.

'I wonder why.'

'I would guess that he wished to speak to Miss Northcote.'

'You think he's sweet on her?'

'Maybe. But she's sure as hell not sweet on him.' Whatever it was Emma felt for Devlin was more akin to dislike and anger judging by the look on her face when Devlin had first sat down. Certainly not a prearranged meeting and not one she wanted to be a part of. It shouldn't have made any difference. She was nothing to him. But it did make a difference.

‘She does not like him. That’s why he had to wait until she was at the dinner table before he approached. Because she would have walked away otherwise,’ Ned said.

‘Strange that she should dislike him so much.’

‘Is it?’

He could feel the glance that Rob flicked his way. ‘Maybe he didn’t like you dancing with her.’

Ned smiled. ‘I’m sure he didn’t like me dancing with her.’

Rob chuckled.

There was the whir and rumble of the wheels, the clatter of the horses’ hooves, the noise and hubbub of the traffic all around them. They stopped at the junction behind a queue of carriages and waited while a road sweeper darted out ahead, sweeping the fresh pile of steaming horse manure up into his shovel ahead of the two city gentlemen who followed and receiving a tip for his trouble.

The carriages in front moved off. Ned gave a flick of the rein and his team followed.

‘You’re getting too good at this carriage driving,’ observed Rob with a grin. ‘Lessons paid off well.’

Ned smiled.

They lapsed into silence as they sped past the buildings.

When Rob spoke again it was in a voice not to be heard by any others. ‘Do you think Devlin said anything to her about...?’

‘No.’ Absolute. Categorical. ‘Whatever Devlin feels about me, he will not drag Emma Northcote into it. It’s more than his

honour is worth.'

'You'll forgive me if I don't set so much store by gentlemen and their honour.'

Ned smiled a hard smile.

'Miss Northcote—she's not what I thought she'd be. Not spoiled and pampered like the rest of them.'

Ned made no comment, but he thought of her in the red tavern dress dealing with the men in the Red Lion. He thought of her in his arms in the darkened alleyway, her mouth meeting his with passion and sweetness. He thought of the warmth of her smile, of her irrepressible spirit and strength of character. And how he had wanted her in his bed, in his life...in his future. He pushed the thoughts away with a will of steel. 'Whatever she is makes no difference to us.'

Rob smiled and leaned back in his seat to enjoy the view of the fine town houses.

Ned drove the carriage onwards to Hyde Park.

* * *

Emma stood alone by the window in the dining room of the dowager's Grosvenor Place town house, watching London wake to another day.

The Fortnum and Mason cart was passing, the delivery boy perched high on the back ready to spring down and run in with the groceries ordered by housekeepers and wives. Two milkmaids were on the other side of the road, wooden yokes across their shoulders, balanced like a weighing scale with large

wooden churns. There seemed a never-ending stream of coaches and carts and gentlemen on horseback taking their mounts for exercise in the park. A clamour of activity, which was the reason that Lady Lamerton had chosen the house.

The sky was blue, but mired with that slight haze that would burn off as the earliness of the morning advanced and the sun climbed high in the sky. It was going to be another hot day. Emma could feel the clammy warmth in the air already. She massaged a hand against the tightness nipping the nape of her neck.

She was thinking about last night and Devlin...and Ned.

An uneasiness still sat upon her over Devlin's veiled suggestion that he had an interest in her and over his implication about Ned and gentle-born women.

How Devlin could even think that there could be anything between them... Devlin, after all, was one of the men responsible for Kit's downfall and the financial ruin of her family. And even were he not, he was a rake, a man who lived a life devoted to empty hedonism and lavish luxury. He had no thought for anything serious or meaningful. He spent his time bedding women of the demi-monde, gaming and drinking. After her months in Whitechapel she could not like a man like him.

She thought of Ned seeking his pleasures on the other side of town as much as Devlin. She thought of Devlin's hints and wondered what it was Ned had done with another gentle-born woman. The thought made her chest tighten with a heavy rawness

and sent a bitterness pumping again through her blood. Had he lied to her as he had lied to Emma? Had he deceived Emma as to what was between them? And over his offer to help her father? She closed her eyes at the thought of that small unnecessary cruelty.

And in her mind she saw again her father that day at the warehouse.

‘Oh, Papa,’ she whispered soft as a breath and that ever-present nagging sense of worry over him stole out from where it lurked in the shadows to fill her mind. And she thought, too, of what he would say if he ever discovered what she had done with Ned Stratham.

‘Ah, here you are, Emma.’ Lady Lamerton’s voice made her start. She hid away those feelings. Took a breath and turned to face her employer.

‘I did not mean to startle you, my dear.’

‘The fault is all mine. I was wool-gathering and did not hear your approach.’ She smiled and, moving from the window, directed the dowager’s attention elsewhere. ‘Cook has quite surpassed herself with the ham and eggs this morning.’

‘She has a temperament that requires handling with kid gloves, but...’ Lady Lamerton smiled and lowered her voice to share the confidence ‘...she is worth her weight in gold. Worked for the royal household for years. When she left, Amelia Hilton tried to snaffle her, but I got in first.’ The dowager leaned on her walking stick and gave a very satisfied cat-that-got-the-cream smile that

made Emma smile in earnest.

Emma lifted a plate from the heater and helped Lady Lamerton to a selection from the breakfast dishes before they both took their seats.

Lady Lamerton peered at the empty space before Emma. 'I trust you have eaten?'

'I have, thank you.' She knew how precious food was. How hungry a person could get. So she had eaten whether she had appetite or not.

'I see Mrs Lewis seated you beside Devlin. Hardly the most sensitive of seating arrangements given the history of your families.'

Emma made no comment.

'Did he upset you?'

'Not at all,' she lied and thought of Devlin's insinuation about Ned.

Lady Lamerton glanced across at Emma as she ate. 'And yet you have something weighing upon your mind.'

The butler appeared with a fresh pot of coffee and set it down on the table between them, sending wafts of steam and its rich roasted aroma through the air. By unspoken consent both Emma and Lady Lamerton waited until he had departed again before they resumed their conversation.

'I was thinking of my father,' Emma admitted, aware that the older woman was no fool. It was the truth, just not all of it.

'Wondering how he is faring in Hounslow without you?'

In his small comfortable cottage living a quiet but respectable life in Hounslow. So many lies. Emma met Lady Lamerton's gaze. There was a formidable kindness in it. She wondered what Lady Lamerton would do if she knew the truth? Of Whitechapel and the hardship of life there, of the dockyard warehouse and the Red Lion Chop-House. Part of her wanted so much to tell. To unburden herself. To cease the dishonesty. But Emma knew she could not. She was under no misapprehensions. Lady Lamerton had a kind heart, but she would not understand. And she certainly would not have a woman who had been a serving wench living in her house, acting as her companion. So Emma just smiled in reply.

'I am taking tea with Mrs Hilton this afternoon. There is no need for you to come. Take the day off. Travel out to Hounslow and surprise your papa with a visit.'

And discover for herself the truth of how he was coping. 'If you are certain...'

'Quite certain. I would not say it were I not. As long as you are returned before evening. Remember we have agreed to a card evening at Lady Routledge's.'

'I will be back long before evening.' No woman wanted to be walking the Whitechapel streets at night. And that made her think of the night that Ned Stratham had stepped in to save her from the two sailors. Of his walking her home...and all it had led to. She stopped the thoughts. Closed her mind to them. Thought of her purpose in being here.

'I have been meaning to ask you whether Lord Lamerton has yet had word of Kit?' she asked.

'It is early days, Emma, and m'son continues with his enquires. We must leave the matter in his capable hands.'

'I am most grateful. My father will be, too.' It would be the first thing her father would ask.

'If there is word to be had, Lamerton will be the one to have it.'

'He will.' Emma smiled, but as she sipped her coffee the question on Emma's mind was what that word would be.

* * *

It was a couple of hours later when Emma made her way across town, walking at a brisk pace. The new olive-green walking dress, cream spencer, bonnet and gloves, all part of the wardrobe Lady Lamerton had bought for her upon her arrival, allowed her to belong in Mayfair. But not so in the East End. It was only when she got into Spitalfields and then headed further east into Whitechapel that she was aware of the way people were looking at her.

Before, in her own old and shabby attire, or the serving dress lent to her by Nancy, she had fitted in, drawn no notice. Now her new and expensive clothing proclaimed her from another tribe, an intruder from another world. The further she trod into Whitechapel the more uncomfortable she became.

Streets that only a couple of weeks ago had been her home, her locale, seemed threatening. Men, lurking in doorways, eyed her with sly speculation. Women, sitting upon their steps, did not

recognise her as Emma de Lisle, one of Nancy's girls from the Red Lion, but as someone who should not be here, someone who did not fit in. Only two weeks had passed, but already she had forgotten the depth of the darkness, the stench of the dirt and the cutting danger of this place.

Five miles separated Whitechapel and Mayfair. It might as well have been five thousand. They were worlds apart. Little wonder Ned changed his clothes to come here. She wished she had done the same.

But although her clothes were all wrong, she knew these people. She kept her head up, maintained her confidence and stayed true to herself.

It was with relief that she eventually reached the London Docks.

In the warehouse was the same foreman she had met before. He did not recognise her at first. Did a double take when she apologised for inconveniencing him and asked him if she might speak to her father.

'Of course, miss.' He gave a nod. 'Come right this way for Mr de Lisle.'

Not Bill this time, but Mr de Lisle. It struck her as odd, as did the fact he led her into an office at the front she had not noticed before.

Her father was not shirtless and glistening in sweat. The clothes he wore were new—a fine fitted tailcoat and matching breeches, pale shirt and stockings, dark neckcloth and waistcoat.

His grey hair was cut short and tidy and combed neat. A new pair of spectacles was perched on the end of his nose. He was the very image of respectability, sitting there at a large desk in the middle of the room writing within a ledger. Like the gentleman he had once been. So many emotions welled up at the sight. Surprise and relief, pride and affection. She pressed her gloved fingers to her lips to control them.

‘Emma!’ He set the pen down in its wooden holder. Got to his feet, came to her and embraced her.

She heard the office door close behind the foreman.

‘Oh, Papa! How on earth...?’ She looked him up and down before gazing around them at the change in his environment.

‘It is a miracle, is it not?’ He laughed. ‘The very day that you left the company deemed they had a need of someone who could manage the accounts in-house rather than farm it out to an office on the other side of town. A money-saving venture they said. They seemed to know that I had something of an education and offered me the job. Fate has dealt us both good fortune, Emma.’

‘It seems that it has,’ she said quietly.

‘And the vast increase in wage means I can afford some very fine rooms not so far away in Burr Street, although I have not yet had a chance to write to Mrs Tadcaster so that she could inform you.’

‘And you are eating?’

‘Like a king. There are some splendid chop-houses in the vicinity.’ There was a twinkle in his eye as he said it.

Her smile broadened. It was so good to see him like this.

‘Now tell me all about how things are with you, my dear girl. I have been worrying over you.’

‘I accepted the position with Lady Lamerton so that you would not worry.’

He smiled. ‘Ah, it is true. But I confess that my worry is a great deal less than it used to be. And besides, it is a father’s duty to worry over his daughter.’

‘And a daughter’s duty to worry over her father.’

They laughed and talked some more. She told him that young Lord Lamerton was making enquiries as to Kit’s whereabouts. She told of her life with the Dowager Lady Lamerton, of what was the same in the ton and what had changed. But she made no mention of the newcomer Mr Stratham.

‘You see,’ said her father. ‘Am I not proved right? Accepting the position was the best thing to do.’

‘It was,’ she said, but she did not smile.

Her last view of him as she left was of him sitting at the big wooden desk, a contented expression on his face, as he dipped his pen into the inkwell and wrote entries into the large ruled ledger open before him.

Emma left the London Docks and headed west towards Mayfair, walking with a hundred other people across roads and along pavements. All around was the hurried tread of boots and shoes, the buzz of voices, and, louder than all, the clatter of horses’ shoes. But what she heard in her head as she walked were

the words that Ned had spoken to her on a morning that seemed now to belong to another time and another world.

I used to work on the docks... I still know a few folk in the dockyard... I could have a word. See if there are any easier jobs going.

And she knew that it was neither fate that had rescued her father from hefting crates upon the warehouse floor, nor a miracle, but Ned Stratham.

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