



THE EARL'S  
PREGNANT BRIDE

Christine Rimmer

 Cherish™

**Christine Rimmer**  
**The Earl's Pregnant Bride**  
Серия «Mills & Boon Cherish»  
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**Аннотация**

THE STICK TURNED (ROYAL) BLUE...And now the princess is in a pickle. Because the night that Genevra Bravo-Calabretti and the new Earl of Hartmore, Rafael DeValery, turned to each other, it was for comfort upon the death of his brother—the man who was about to propose to Genny. It was not supposed to change their lives forever. But it had. For Rafe, it cemented his awareness that he'd been in love with Genevra since forever. And for Genny, it made her realize that Rafe was not the second-chance brother, but the one who'd held her heart all along...now all she had to do was convince him of that. Hopefully before the new heir(ess?) to the estate arrived...

# Содержание

The Earl's	5
MILLS & BOON	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	52

*“I’ll take care of everything.” His gaze never wavered.*

Her stomach lurched. “What does that mean?”

“We’ll be married.” He said it without a pause, without the slightest hesitation.

And she wanted to cry again—partly from another, stronger, wave of relief. And partly because, really, it was all wrong.

Once, she’d dreamed of marrying his brother. It had to be beyond inappropriate simply to switch brothers. And since those four magnificent days two months ago, Rafe had made something of an art form of avoiding her. A man you marry shouldn’t spend weeks dodging you—and then, at the mention of a baby, drop right to his knees and propose.

\* \* \*

**The Bravo Royales:** When it comes to love, Bravos rule!

# The Earl's Pregnant Bride Christine Rimmer



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**CHRISTINE RIMMER** came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she'd been everything from an actress to a salesclerk to a waitress. Now that she's finally found work that suits her perfectly, she insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Christine is grateful not only for the joy she finds in writing, but for what waits when the day's work is through: a man she loves who loves her right back, and the privilege of watching their children grow and change day to day. She lives with her family in Oregon. Visit Christine at [www.christinerimmer.com](http://www.christinerimmer.com).

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For Tom and Ed.

I miss you both so much.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Excerpt](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Epilogue

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

Genevra Bravo-Calabretti, princess of Montedoro, heaved the lightweight ladder upright and braced it against the high stone wall.

The ladder instantly tilted and slid to the side, making way too much racket as it scraped along the rough old stones. Genny winced and glanced around nervously, but no trusty retainer popped up to ask her what she thought she was doing. So she grabbed the ladder firmly, righted it and lifted it, bringing it down sharply to plant it more solidly in the uneven ground.

Breathing hard, she braced her fists on her hips and glared at it, daring it to topple sideways again. The ladder didn't move. Good. All ready to go.

But Genny wasn't ready. Not really. She didn't know if she'd ever be ready.

With a very unprincesslike "Oof," she dropped to her bottom

in the dry scrub grass at the base of the wall. Still panting hard, she wrapped her arms loosely around her spread knees and let her head droop.

Once her breathing evened out, she leaned back on her hands and stared up at the clear night sky. The crescent moon seemed to shine extrabright, though the lights from the harbor below obscured most of the stars. It was a beautiful May night in Montedoro. She could smell roses, faintly, on the air.

A low moan escaped her. It wasn't right. Wasn't fair. She ought to be out with friends in a busy café or enjoying an evening stroll on her favorite beach. Not dressed all in black like a lady cat burglar, preparing to scale the wall around Villa Santorno.

Useless tears clogged her throat. She willed them away. She'd been doing that a lot lately, pulling herself back from the brink of a crying jag. The worry and frustration were getting to her. Not to mention the hormones.

She didn't want to do this. She felt ridiculous and pushy, in addition to needy and unwanted and more than a little pathetic.

But seriously, what choice had he given her?

"I am not going to cry," she whispered fiercely as another wave of emotion cascaded through her. "Absolutely not." With the back of her hand, she dashed the moisture from her eyes.

Enough. She was stalling and she knew it. She'd dragged that damn ladder all the way up the hill. She wasn't quitting now. Time to get this over with.

Gathering her legs under her, she stood and brushed the bits

of dry grass and dirt from the seat of her black jeans. The ladder was waiting. It reached about two-thirds of the way up the wall, not quite as far as she might have hoped.

But too bad. No way was she turning back now.

She put her foot on the first rung and started to climb.

A minute later, with another low moan and a whimpery sigh, she curled her fingers around the ladder's highest rung. The top of the wall seemed miles above her.

But she made herself take the next step. And the next. Until she was plastered against the wall, her hands on the broader, flatter top stones, her black Chuck Taylor All Stars perched precariously on that final rung.

"Bad idea," she whispered to the rough stones, though there was no one but the night to hear her. "Bad, bad idea...." Right at that moment, she wished with all her heart for the superior upper body strength of a man.

Her wish was not granted. And there was nothing to do but go for it or go back. She was not going back.

With a desperate animal grunt of pure effort, she boosted herself up.

It didn't go all that well. Her feet left the ladder and the ladder swayed sideways again, skittering along the stones, this time with no one to catch it before it fell. It landed with a clatter at the base of the wall.

Could her heart pound any harder? It bounced around madly inside her chest.

Had they heard the ladder fall in the villa? Would someone come to help her? Or would she hang here until her strength failed and she fell and broke her silly neck? Rafe would have to come and collect her limp body. Serve him right. She grunted and moaned, praying her quivering arms would hold out, the rubber soles of her shoes scrabbling for purchase against the wall.

And then, miracle of miracles, she figured it out. The trick was to simply hold on with her wimpy woman arms and use the sturdy muscles in her legs to walk up the wall. She swung her left leg up and over with way too much undignified grunting and groaning—and then, there she was, lying on top of the wall, legs dangling to either side.

Safe.

For the moment anyway. She rested her cheek on the gritty stone and took a minute to catch her breath again.

Through the night-dark branches of olive and palm trees, she could see the villa. The lights were on. But apparently, no one had heard the racket she'd made. The garden surrounding the house was quiet. She lifted up enough to peer at the softer-looking grassy ground on the garden side. It seemed a very long way down there.

She probably should have thought this through a little more carefully.

Maybe the thing to do now was to start shouting, just scream her head off until Rafe or the housekeeper or *someone* came outside and helped her down.

But no. She just couldn't do that, couldn't call for help and have to be rescued. She refused to be that pitiful and ineffectual. She'd gotten up here on her own. She'd get down the same way.

*Dear Lord, have mercy. Please, please be kind....*

She eased her left leg lower, swung the right one over and down. Now she was dangling on the garden side of the wall, holding on for dear life.

She squeezed her eyes shut. *Let go, Genevra. You have to let go....*

Not that she had much choice at that point. Her instincts had her trying to hold on, but her strength was used up.

She dropped like a rock and hit the ground hard. Pain shot up her right heel, sang through her ankle and stabbed along her calf. A strangled scream escaped her, along with several very bad words.

"Ugh!" She crumpled to her side and grabbed her ankle. "Ow, ow, ow!" It throbbed in time to her racing heart. "Ow, ow, ow, ow..." She rubbed and moaned, rocking back and forth, wondering if there was any way she was going to be able to stand.

"Gen." The deep familiar voice came from just beyond the hedge to her left. "I might have known."

She whipped her head around. "Rafe?"

Rafael Michael DeValery, earl of Hartmore, stepped forward through a break in the hedge. And her silly heart leapt with hopeless joy at the sight of him, huge and imposing and as still as a statue, standing in the shadows a few feet away. "Have you

hurt yourself?”

She shot him a glare and kept rubbing her poor ankle. “I’ll survive. And you could have simply let me in the gate the times I came knocking—or maybe, oh, I don’t know, taken one of my calls?”

For a moment, he didn’t answer. Even in the darkness, she could feel his black eyes on her. Finally, he spoke in a rueful tone. “It seemed wiser to keep the agreement we made in March.”

Those humiliating tears rose again, thickening her throat, burning behind her eyes. She blinked them away. “What if I needed you? What if I need you right now?”

He was silent again, a breath-held kind of quiet. Then, finally, “*Do* you need me?”

She couldn’t quite bring herself to say it. Yet.

And he spoke again, chidingly. “You never said so in the messages you left. Or when you came to the gate.”

She had the tears under control for the moment. But still, her pulse galloped along, refusing to slow. Her cheeks were burning red. Memories of their four-day love affair seemed to swirl in the night air between them, dizzying. Glorious. Yet awful, too, in the sense of loss and hopelessness that dragged at her. “Yes, well, I do have some pride. I’m not telling your housekeeper I need you. I’m not putting it in a text or leaving it on your voice mail.”

He took a step closer. “Gen...” What was it she heard in his voice? Longing? Pain? Or only her own wishful thinking? She couldn’t tell, not with just that one syllable to judge by. Whatever

emotion might have gripped him, he instantly banished it and added with his customary quiet control, “Come inside.”

“Fine.” She braced her hand against the wall, put most of her weight on her good foot and staggered upright. Her bad ankle didn’t give out, but it wobbled beneath her. She winced and let out a moan.

He was at her side in an instant. “Let me help.” Eerie, the way he could move, that magical swift grace that so completely belied his size. One of his legs had been broken in the accident six months before. Two months ago, he’d still had a slight limp. The limp was gone now.

But when the moonlight fell across the right side of his face, the scar was still there, puckered and angry, though not as red as before. It started at the corner of his eye, curving around his cheek in a shape that echoed the crescent moon above them, the end of it seeming to tug at the side of his mouth, as though trying to force him to smile—and failing. Rafe rarely smiled. Two months ago, she’d asked if he’d checked into the possibilities of plastic surgery. He’d said no, he hadn’t. And he didn’t intend to.

“Here.” He took her hand. His touch slammed into her, making him suddenly so real to her again, so warm and solid. And why did he have to smell so good? It wasn’t the least fair. He’d always smelled good to her, even when she thought of him strictly as a friend—so clean, so healthy, like new grass and fresh air and sweet, just-turned earth.

And please. What did it matter that he smelled good? She had to put all her concentration on the task before her, on telling him what he needed to know.

He guided her arm around his huge, hard shoulders. His heat and strength seared along her side. Together, with her leaning on him to keep her weight off her right foot, they turned to go in, taking the stone path through the hedge and across a stretch of lawn to the wide patio shaded by jacaranda and carob trees and through the open French doors into the combination kitchen and family room.

“Here...” He led her to a wide white chair.

“Maybe not,” she warned. “I’ve got bits of grass and dirt all over my jeans.”

“It’s all right. Sit down.”

“Your call,” she said resignedly, easing her arm from across his shoulders and sinking onto the soft cushion. “It hardly looks like the same place.” The large room had been redecorated and updated, the living area with light-colored fabrics and modern oversize furniture. The kitchen now had chef-quality appliances and granite and wood countertops.

“Tourists with fat billfolds don’t appreciate heavy draperies and an ancient fridge. They want comfort and openness to go with the view.” He gestured toward the terrace opposite the French doors. On that side, the villa needed no garden walls. It touched the edge of the cliff. From where she sat, she could see the crowns of palm trees and farther out, the harbor

and the blue Mediterranean. The DeValerys were English, of Norman descent, but Montedoran blood also ran in their veins. Villa Santorno had come down through the generations from a Montedoran-born DeValery bride.

“So.” She tried not to sound wistful. “You really do plan to make it a rental?”

“I do.” He towered above her, the scar pulling at his mouth, his eyes endlessly dark and way too somber. Two months ago, he’d come to Montedoro to make arrangements for the villa’s renovation. At that time, it had been four months since the accident that took his older brother Edward’s life and gave Rafe the earldom as well as his crescent scar. Genny had essentially run him to ground then—just as she was doing now.

Two months ago...

They’d made love in this very room. But then the curtains had been heavy, layered, ornate velvets over floral damask, the sofas and other furniture a gorgeous mash-up of baroque, rococo and neoclassical.

He asked low and a little gruffly, “Do you have to look so sad?”

“I liked it the way it was, that’s all.” Now and then during her childhood, various members of his family would come and stay at the villa to enjoy the Montedoran nightlife, or attend some event at the palace. Occasionally during those visits, her family had been invited to dine or have tea here. She could still remember her ten-year-old self perched on a velvet-seated straight chair beside the French doors to the garden, holding a Sevres teacup

and saucer, scheming to get his grandmother, Eloise, aside and wrangle herself another invitation to Hartmore, the DeValery estate in Derbyshire. To Genny, Hartmore had always been the most beautiful place in the world.

He knelt at her feet and her breath caught at the suddenness of the movement. "I'll have a look, shall I?" Before she could decide whether or not to object, he had her foot in one big, gentle hand and was untying the shoelace with the other. He slid the shoe off, set it aside and then began probing at her ankle, his touch warm and sure, making her heart hurt. Making her body yearn. "It doesn't seem to be broken. Maybe a slight sprain."

"It's fine, really. It's already stopped hurting."

He glanced up, caught her eye. "Just to be safe, I think we ought to wrap it."

Harsh, angry accusations pushed at the back of her throat, but she only said firmly, "Leave it, Rafe. It's fine."

"Fair enough." He lowered her foot to the floor and rose to his considerable height.

She tracked the movement, and found herself staring up the broad, strong, wonderful length of him. Struck again with longing, her breath got caught and tangled somewhere in the center of her chest. How strange. She'd always loved him as a person, but found him hulking and coarse, unattractive as a man.

What a blind, childish fool she'd been.

"Tell me what's brought you here," he said, his eyes so deep and dark, seeing everything, giving nothing away. The man was

like a human wall, always quiet and watchful and careful, as though wary of his own strength among mere mortals. “Tell me, Gen. Please. Whatever it is.”

“All right, then.” She drew in a fortifying breath—and suddenly, contrarily, she ached to delay the inevitable. But what was the point in that? He needed to know and she’d almost broken her neck climbing the garden wall to get to him and tell him. “I’m pregnant. It’s yours.”

Did he flinch?

She wasn’t sure. Most likely he hadn’t. He never flinched. That for a moment it had seemed so was probably only her imagination working overtime.

“My God, Gen.” He said it softly, almost reverently. “How? We were careful.”

“Not careful enough, evidently—and if you want a paternity test, I’ll be happy to—”

“No test is necessary. I believe you.”

*I believe you.* The soft-spoken, calm words echoed in her head.

And she knew relief, just a hint of it, like a slight breeze in a close room. So, then. She had told him at last. And he hadn’t denied her, hadn’t turned away from her. He was still standing there right in front of her, still watching her patiently without a hint of rancor or accusation.

Letting her head drop against the soft back of the white chair, she closed her eyes and released a long sigh. “Well. There. It’s out at last.”

“Are you well?” His voice came from down at her level again.

She opened her eyes to find he had dropped to his knees in front of her once more. “Perfectly,” she told him.

“Have you been to your doctor?”

“Not yet. But I took four home tests. They were all positive. And the instructions on the box promised that the test was completely dependable.”

“You should see a doctor.”

“I know. I’ll do that soon—but I’m perfectly healthy.” She frowned. “Or maybe you somehow think I’m not pregnant after all.”

“I told you, I believe you. But I think a visit to the doctor is in order.”

“I... Yes. Of course. All right.”

“I’ll take care of everything.” His gaze never wavered.

Her stomach lurched. “What does that mean?”

“We’ll be married.” He said it without a pause, without the slightest hesitation.

And she wanted to cry again—partly from another, stronger wave of relief. And partly because, really, it was all wrong.

Once she’d dreamed of marrying his brother. It had to be beyond inappropriate simply to switch brothers. And since those four magnificent days two months ago, Rafe had made something of an art form of avoiding her. A man you marry shouldn’t spend weeks dodging you—and then at the mention of a baby drop right to his knees and propose.

“Rafe. Honestly. I don’t know if...”

“Of course you know. It’s the right thing.”

She should be stronger. Prouder. And seriously. Nobody married just because there was a baby coming, not anymore—well, except maybe for her brother Alex. And possibly her sister Rhia.

And come to think of it, both of those marriages were turning out just fine.

And she had such a *thing* for him now. Plus, their baby had a right to be the Hartmore heir, and to be the heir required legitimacy—or at least, it would all go much more smoothly, if the baby was legitimate. There would be absolutely no question then of who should inherit.

And then there was Hartmore itself. Her beloved Hartmore...

*Mistress of Hartmore*, temptation whispered in her ear. She could have her dream come true after all, though she’d been so certain it was lost to her forever with Edward’s death.

*Edward.*

Just thinking his name made her heart heavy with guilt and confusion. She really had thought that she loved him, that she was only waiting for him to make a move toward her so they could begin to forge the life they were born to have together.

Now, feeling as she did about Rafe, she wasn’t so sure about Edward, about all those plans she’d had to be Edward’s bride. She wasn’t sure about *anything* anymore.

“Say yes,” the giant, seductive stranger who was once her dear

friend commanded in a tone both tender and merciless.

She stared at him, trembling. “Are you sure?”

“I am. Say yes.”

The word was there, inside her, waiting. She simply pushed her guilt and confusion aside and let that word get free. “Yes.”

## Chapter Two

Before Genny left the villa that night, they agreed to be married at Hartmore on the following Saturday. He said he would call his grandmother first thing in the morning; Eloise would make all the arrangements. He also got her to promise that they would face her mother and father, the sovereign princess and prince consort, right away.

“And we will face them together,” he added, dark eyes determined, that wonderful soft mouth of his set.

It really wasn't necessary and she tried to tell him so. “Rafe, you know how my parents are. They're not going to disown me or anything. They'll be on our side and they'll just want to be sure we're making the right choice.”

“We *are* making the right choice.” He said it flatly.

“I'm only saying that you really don't have to—”

He put up his big hand. “Yes, I do.”

As he seemed so inflexible on the subject, she agreed—after which he called a car and sent her home.

Home for Genny was the Prince's Palace, perched high on Cap Royale, overlooking the Mediterranean, where she had her own apartment. She was up half the night worrying, second-guessing

her decision to marry Rafe, feeling guilty and confused. Very late, she finally drifted off.

The phone rang at eight, jarring her from much-needed sleep. It was Rafe, calling to remind her to set up the talk with her parents. “And don’t tell them about the baby, or that we’ll be married, until I’m there with you.”

She grumbled at his bossiness. “I already said I wouldn’t.”

“Excellent.” He made the single word sound almost affectionate. And that made her feel a little better about everything.

“Did you call Eloise yet?”

“I’m doing that next.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe you should wait. We should tell her together.”

A pause on his end of the line, then, “Gen, the wedding will be Saturday. I’m sure your parents will want to be there. Someone has to make the arrangements.” He was right, of course. And his grandmother was a rock. She would take care of everything.

Genny answered with a sigh. “All right.”

He instructed, “Call me as soon as you’ve set up the meeting.”

“I will, yes.”

They hung up and she showered, ate a light breakfast and was waiting in the reception area of her mother’s office at the palace when her mother arrived at nine.

Her Sovereign Highness Adrienne, looking ageless and elegant as always in one of her classic Chanel suits, smiled at her

fondly, agreed to the meeting with her and Rafe and then asked, “Darling, what is this meeting to be about?”

Genny knew that her mother would understand. She longed to just get it over with, to tell all. But she’d told Rafe that she would wait. He would soon be her husband. She wanted him to feel he could trust her to keep her agreements with him.

*Rafe. Her husband...*

Dear Lord. Was this really happening?

Her mother touched her arm. “Darling? Are you all right?”

“Yes. Absolutely. I’m fine. And we’ll explain everything when Rafe is here, I promise.” She asked that her father be there, too.

And her mother asked again what exactly was going on.

Genny hugged her and whispered, “Two o’clock. We’ll tell you all of it then.” And she escaped before her mother could ask any more questions.

Back in her apartment, she called Rafe and told him when to be there. He arrived at one-thirty and came straight to her rooms as she’d asked him to do.

She gestured him in. “It’s good you’re here early. We’ll have a little time to plan.”

“There’s more to plan?” He sounded doubtful.

She stepped back to get a good look at him. “You look...terrific.” She felt oddly breathless suddenly. Because he did look wonderful in a fine lightweight jacket and trousers. Wonderful in a completely feral, un-English way, with his thick black curls, full lips, black velvet eyes and huge, hard body.

A savage in a suit. The scar only added to the impression of otherness.

“And you are beautiful,” he said in that carefully controlled, formal way he had.

She wasn't, not really. Her mother was beautiful. And her four sisters, too. Genny was the most ordinary looking of all of them. With wispy blond hair and brown eyes, she was pretty enough, but nothing spectacular. She smoothed her hair and adjusted her fitted white jacket, which she'd worn over a simple jewel-blue shirtwaist dress, an outfit she'd deemed demure and appropriate for this particular meeting. “Thank you—did you reach Eloise?”

“I did.”

“Did you tell her there will be a baby?”

“Yes.”

Genny gulped. “How did she take it?”

“She was pleased on all counts.”

“She wasn't surprised...you know, that you and I were, um, lovers?”

He looked at her with infinite patience. “Nothing surprises my grandmother. You should know that.”

“I...” She started to say something vague and dishonest. But why lie about it? “Yes. I suppose I do.” Eloise had never made a secret of her desire to have Genny join the DeValery family and had openly encouraged a union between Genny and the lost Edward.

Not only did Genny adore the DeValerys and Hartmore, she

had money. Pots of it—and giant old places like Hartmore needed serious infusions of cash on a regular basis. The lion's share of Genny's money came down to her from her godmother and namesake, Genevra DeVries. Aunt Genevra had never married. She'd had no children of her own and had always considered Genny the daughter of her heart.

Now that Edward was gone, the supremely practical Eloise would see nothing wrong with Genny marrying her other grandson, the new heir. Genny only wished that she could be half as indomitable as Eloise.

“Grandmother loves you,” Rafe said. “Never doubt that.”

“I don't. Of course I don't....”

He watched her steadily. She had that feeling she too often had with him. That he could see not only through her clothes to her naked body beneath, but even deeper, right into her heart and mind. And then he said, “Now. What are these ‘plans’ you need to discuss with me?”

She stared at him, chewing her lip, trying to decide how to begin.

He shook his head. “You had better just tell me.”

“Ahem.”

“I'm listening.”

“Well, I've...I've been thinking that we shouldn't actually come right out today and tell my parents that I'm pregnant.” He arched a thick black brow, but said nothing. She added airily, “I'm thinking we can do that later.”

“When is later?”

“Oh, well. You know, after we’ve settled in at Hartmore. One thing at a time, I was thinking...”

He gave her one of his deep and oh-so-patient looks. “You don’t think they’ll wonder why the rush to the altar? Why you’re suddenly marrying me, of all people?”

“What do you mean, ‘of all people?’” she demanded sourly, as though she didn’t know exactly what he meant.

*Edward.* She was supposed to have married Edward.

Rafe regarded her solemnly. “You know exactly what I mean.”

She could almost become annoyed with him. After all, he was the one who’d asked her to wait until he was with her to speak of the baby. If she’d just gone ahead and told her mother that morning, it would all be out in the open now. Her mother would have told her father and it wouldn’t really be necessary to say much more about it.

Now Rafe would be there for the big reveal. And her father, too. Dear Lord. She should have thought this through earlier. Because she realized now that she just wasn’t ready to sit in her mother’s office and look in her father’s face and tell him about the baby.

He was a wonderful man, her father. He was the best. She couldn’t bear to think he might be disappointed in her.

Rafe caught her arm and she realized she’d been swaying on her feet the tiniest bit. “Gen. Do you need to sit down?”

She blinked up at him, all too aware of his touch, of the heat

of him so close, of his tempting scent. Of the velvet darkness of his eyes. Carefully, she eased her arm from his grip. “Really, I’m fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. I’m fine. I just want you to let me do the talking, let me handle it with my parents.”

He studied her from under the heavy shelf of his brow. Evidently, he believed that she wasn’t going to faint, because he didn’t try to steady her again, but only lifted one huge shoulder in a shrug. “You don’t want me to ask for your hand?” He was teasing.

Or was he?

She really couldn’t tell. “I... No, of course not. It’s already decided. We’re just sharing our plans.” For that, she got another unreadable look, one that had her waving a nervous hand. “More or less. Can we not overthink it, please?”

He captured her hand as it fluttered between them and pressed his lips to the back of it. A warm, delicious shiver danced up her arm. For such a giant rock of a man, he did have the softest, supplest mouth. “As you wish, love,” he said.

Love. He’d been calling her that forever—at least since she was thirteen or so. She’d always liked it when he called her that, and felt as cherished as a dear friend.

Now, though, it only reminded her that she *wasn’t* his love in the way that she ought to be as his bride.

She cleared her throat. “Ready?” He offered his arm. She took

it. "All right, then. Let's get this over with."

\* \* \*

In her mother's private office, there was tea served in the sitting area with its long velvet sofa and priceless old wing chairs.

At first, they endured the obligatory small talk—gentle condolences from her mother about the lost Edward, questions about Rafe's injuries, inquiries about the health of Rafe's family. He told them that his nephew, Geoffrey, whom Genny adored, had been sent up to boarding school in London "under protest." Geoffrey's mother, Rafe's sister, Brooke, was getting along fine. His grandmother, he said, was in good health and as busy as always about the house and the gardens.

Too soon, it seemed to Genny, the small talk ran out. Her parents looked at her expectantly.

And she realized she had absolutely no idea how to go about this. She'd purposely *not* planned what she would say, telling herself not to make a big deal of it, that the right thing to say would come to her naturally.

Wrong.

All that came was a frantic tightness in her throat, a rapid pounding of her pulse and a scary generalized tingly feeling all over, a full-body shiver of dread. And her stomach lurched and churned, making her wonder if she was about to experience her first bout of morning sickness.

"Gen." Rafe said it so gently. His big, hot, strong hand covered hers.

She looked at him, pleading with her eyes. “I...”

And he took over, turning to face her parents, giving a slow, solemn dip of his large dark head. “Ma’am. Sir. I know this may come as a bit of a surprise. But I love your daughter with all my heart.”

*Loved her with all of his heart?* Had he actually said that? Her throat clutched. She swallowed, hard, to relax it, and tried to paste on a smile.

Rafe continued, so calmly and clearly, still clasping her hand, engulfing it in his heat and steadiness. “And Genevra has done me the honor of consenting to be my wife. We’re here today to ask for your blessing.”

Genny stared across the coffee table at her parents. They both looked surprised. But not in a bad way, really—or was that just desperate wishful thinking on her part? The two of them shared a long, speaking glance. What exactly that glance said, well, she just couldn’t tell.

And her mother said, “We had no idea.”

Rafe squeezed her hand. She knew she really *had* to say something. But she couldn’t for the life of her think what. Once again, poor Rafe had to answer for her. “It’s sudden, I know. And we’re...” He seemed to seek the right word. “We’re eager to get on with our lives together. So eager that we’re planning to marry in Saint Ann’s Chapel at Hartmore on Saturday.”

Her father frowned. “Saturday is four days away.”

“Um, five if you count today,” Genny put in helpfully.

“So quickly,” said her mother, drawing her slim hand to her throat. She looked at her father again.

Her father didn’t catch that glance. He was busy watching Genny, frowning. “Genevra, are you ill?”

And Genny knew she couldn’t just keep sitting there like a lump, trying not to throw up and letting poor Rafe lie for her. It wasn’t right, wasn’t fair. So she opened her mouth—and the truth fell out. “We were together for four days in March, when Rafe came to arrange renovations at Villa Santorno. I, um, well, I’m pregnant. And, er, Rafe insists on doing the right thing and marrying me.”

Rafe corrected stiffly, “We *both* feel it’s the right thing. And of course, I *want* to marry your daughter.”

There was a silence then. An endless one.

Finally, her mother said softly, “Oh. I see.”

Her father turned his gaze on Rafe and said in a carefully controlled tone, “You know we think the world of you, Rafael.” He went on, with growing heat, “But what in the hell were you —?”

Her mother cut him off by gently murmuring his name. “Evan.”

Her father shot her mother a furious glance—and then sighed. “Yes. Fine.”

Genny just ached for them—all three of them. Her mother and father because they’d already been through this with two of her siblings. Genny hated that she was putting them through

it again. It really shouldn't be that difficult to practice proper contraception in this day and age.

And she *had* practiced it. They'd used a condom every time. But then, there had been a *lot* of times....

And poor Rafe. He thought so highly of her parents. It had to be awful for him, to have to face them with this news.

"Of course, you're both adults and this is your decision, between the two of you," said her mother, and went on to add exactly what Genny had known she would say. "We only want you to be sure this is the right choice for you."

"It is," Rafe said in low growl, not missing a beat.

Her mother's legendary dark eyes were focused solely on Genny. "Darling? Is it the right choice for *you*?"

The right choice...

Genny went through her list of reasons in her mind again: the baby, who deserved the right to claim his inheritance. And her fondness for Rafe. Surely they should have a good chance to make a successful marriage together, with friendship as a basis. And being intimate with him wouldn't be a hardship—oh, who was she kidding? Sex with Rafe was amazing.

And Hartmore.

Yes. She would have Hartmore. And, fair enough, she was a little ashamed that Hartmore mattered so much.

But the plain fact was that it did.

"Genevra?" her father prompted gruffly.

She wove her fingers more tightly with Rafe's. "Yes," she said.

It came out firm and wonderfully sure sounding. “Marrying Rafe is the right choice for me.”

\* \* \*

After three days jam-packed with shopping and preparations and endless visits with lawyers to hammer out all the legal and financial agreements, they flew to East Midlands Airport on Friday. There was Genny, Rafe, her mother and father and Aurora, whom they all called Rory. The wedding would be very small and private, only family members, just the bride and groom in the wedding party, with Genny’s father to give her away.

Rory would be taking the pictures. She was the baby of the family, a year younger than Genny—and everything Genny wasn’t.

There was nothing ordinary about Rory. Rory loved the great outdoors. She thrived on adventure. She had a bachelor of fine arts in photography from the School of the Arts Institute of Chicago and she’d already had her pictures published in *National Geographic*, *Country Digest* and *Birds & Blooms*. Genny found her baby sister a little intimidating.

But then, Genny found all of her siblings intimidating. They seemed larger than life to her, somehow, each of them not only knowing what they wanted, but also going after it with passion and grace. True, Genny had always known what she wanted: to be a DeValery and mistress of Hartmore. But her sisters’ ambitions were so much grander than hers. Compared to them, Genny sometimes felt like a plain gray pigeon raised in a family of

swans.

At East Midlands, two cars were waiting to take them to Hartmore. Genny, Rafe and Rory rode together. Genny's and Rory's bodyguards sat in front, one of them at the wheel. The ride took about an hour. Rafe was mostly silent and Genny didn't feel much like talking, either. Rory, always full of energy and plans, tried to keep the conversation going, but eventually gave up. They rode in silence through the English countryside and Genny drifted off to sleep.

She woke suddenly, her head on Rafe's shoulder, as they pulled to a stop at Hartmore, the North Entrance, so stark and spectacular. Open parkland, designed two hundred years before by Capability Brown, rolled away into the distance dotted with giant old oaks and beeches. A masterpiece of Georgian perfection in its day, the house was composed of a central block joined by single-story links to three-story wings on either side. Six Corinthian columns supported the central pediment.

The façade remained magnificent. But inside, Genny knew, more than a few of the two hundred rooms had been water damaged due to roof leaks. So much needed doing in the months and years to come. But right now, all she could think of was the first time she'd seen the house. Her mother had brought her and her four sisters, Arabella, Rhiannon, Alice and Rory, for a visit when Genny was five.

For Genny, that visit had been a revelation; at the tender age of five, she'd suddenly known what she wanted, known where

she fit in. Now, twenty years later, she felt exactly the same. She was coming home—home to stay, at last.

“We’re home,” said Rafe so softly, echoing her thoughts.

She smoothed her sleep-flattened hair and gave him a smile that only trembled a little.

\* \* \*

An hour later, after her mother, her father and Rory had been properly greeted and shown to their rooms, Genny and Rafe met privately in one of the East Wing drawing rooms with Rafe’s grandmother, the dowager countess, Eloise.

Tall, with the proud posture of a much younger woman, Eloise had a long, heavily lined face, pale blue eyes and wiry, almost-white hair that she braided and pinned close to her head. She lived in old trousers and wellies, her tricolor rough collies, Moe and Mable, trailing in her wake.

Genny loved Eloise—absolutely and unconditionally. An amateur botanist, Rafe’s grandmother ruled the grounds and gardens. And she ruled well. Overall, the estate lands were in much better shape than the house—especially the West Wing, where roof leaks had necessitated the removal of many of the furnishings.

“Moe. Mable. Go.” Eloise pointed to a spot by the fireplace and the collies trotted right over there. “Sit.” They sat. She lowered her hand, palm down, toward the floor. “Down.” The dogs stretched out obediently. Then she turned a glowing smile on Genny. “My dearest girl.”

With a low cry, Genny ran to her.

Chuckling, Eloise gathered her up in those long, capable arms. She smelled of lavender and lemons. Genny took comfort from the beloved, familiar scents. "So. We shall have you as our own after all."

Genny hugged the old woman closer. "It's so good to see you."

"Let me have a look at you." Eloise took Genny by the shoulders and held her away. "A little pale, perhaps."

"I'm fine. Really."

"That's the spirit. We'll soon put pink in those cheeks and fatten you up." She pressed a rough, heavily veined hand to Genny's cheek. "I'm deeply gratified that you will be my own granddaughter at last."

Genny bit her lip and nodded and didn't really know what to say. "It's all a little overwhelming...."

There was a noise in the hallway. The dogs perked up their ears and the door flew open. "Genny!" Dressed in his school uniform, complete with blue vest and striped tie, eight-year-old Geoffrey came flying into the room. "You're here! You're really here!"

"Slow down, young man," Eloise commanded, hiding a grin.

Genny held out her arms.

He landed against her and hugged her good and hard. "They let me come from school because of the wedding," he said. "And Great-Granny says you will be my aunt Genny."

"Oh, yes, I will."

Then he scowled. "Mum's sending me back on Sunday."

Genny smoothed his tousled sandy hair. "I'm so glad you could make it."

He beamed her a big smile and she saw that he'd lost two baby teeth in front. "I'm so glad to be home." Then he turned and flung himself at Rafe. "Uncle Rafe!" Rafe chuckled and lifted him high.

"Put him down, Rafe." Brooke DeValery Landers, Rafe's sister and Geoffrey's mother, stood in the open doorway looking stunning as always in turquoise silk leggings, a big-collared white tunic, ballet flats and a look of disapproval. "He's way too excited, behaving like a savage. No manners at all." She raked her long sable hair back from her forehead and turned her angry sapphire eyes on Genny. "Lovely to see you, Geneva." Her tone said it wasn't lovely at all. Brooke was divorced from an American, Derrick Landers. Her ex lived in the States. He'd remarried and had two more children.

"Hello, Brooke." Genny and Brooke had never really gotten along. The best they ever did together was a kind of cool civility. Genny put on a smile and went to her. They air-kissed each other's cheeks. "You look well."

Brooke stared past her at Rafe. "I understand congratulations are in order."

"It's true," Rafe answered without missing a beat. "Gen has made me the happiest man on earth."

"Genny." Geoffrey tugged on her hand. "Samson had kittens, did you know?" He gave her his jack-o'-lantern grin.

Genny widened her eyes. “But how is that possible?”

“Because Samson turned out to be a *girl!*” He chortled with glee.

“Geoffrey, come along now,” Brooke cut in sharply. She held out her hand, snapping her fingers. “I want you out of that uniform before you get something on it.”

His laughter died. He slumped his small shoulders. “But I want to take Genny out to the stables and show her—”

“Geoffrey. Now.”

Dragging his feet, he went to his mother. Herding him out ahead of her, she pulled the door closed as she went.

Genny stared at the shut door and promised herself that she’d steal a little time with Geoffrey before he had to return to school on Sunday.

\* \* \*

They had dinner at eight in the State Dining Room, with its Chippendale sideboards and urn-topped pedestals and the glorious old table that could seat forty.

Geoffrey didn’t join them. Brooke said he was overtired and already in his room. The conversation was, for the most part, innocuous. Rory whipped out a camera and took several pictures right there at the table before the meal was served. She said she was headed to Colorado on Monday, to the town of Justice Creek and a long visit with Clara, her favorite Bravo cousin. Eloise spoke of her bedding plants and the vegetable border in the walled garden, which she couldn’t wait to show Genny. Genny’s

mother and father were charming and agreeable.

And Rafe was his usual silent, watchful self. He ate slowly, with never a clink or a clatter. When he set down his delicate crystal water goblet after taking a sip, the water within hardly stirred. Genny tried not to stare at him, not to get lost in inappropriate fantasies of those four days two months ago.

Or in distant memories of the feral boy he'd been once, roaming the gardens and grounds, unkempt and unsupervised. His mother, Sabrina, had doted on him and refused to rein him in. His father, Edward II, had little to do with him, except to punish him for what the earl considered Rafe's uncivilized behavior, punishments which were frequent and severe.

Genny had met Rafe during her first glorious visit to Hartmore, when she was five and he was thirteen. He was still running wild then. He'd dropped out of an oak tree practically on her head and she'd run off screaming. The next day, when he'd popped out from behind a topiary hedge into her path, she'd somehow managed to hold her ground. Before the end of that visit, they were unlikely friends: the earl's big, wild second son and the five-year-old Montedoran princess. Her mother, who had always encouraged her children to get out and explore the world, had allowed her to roam all over the estate as long as Rafe was there to look after her. He'd told her that he hated his father. And she'd admitted that she wished she could stay at Hartmore forever.

That fall, strings were pulled and Rafe went away to St Paul's

in London. He shocked everyone by doing well there. After St Paul's he attended Emmanuel College at Cambridge, where he'd finished at the top of his class. More than once in recent years, Eloise had confided in Genny that Rafe had a brain to match his giant body and an aptitude for money management. He'd taken a modest inheritance from a great-uncle and made some excellent investments with it. Now he was doing well for himself. Before Edward's death, Eloise had even once let drop that Hartmore would be better off had Rafe been the heir.

Across the table next to Rafe, Brooke let loose with a brittle laugh. "Genevra, what *are* you staring at?" Of course she knew. She even turned a mean little smile on Rafe to drive home her point.

Genny ordered her cheeks not to blush and spoke up fast, so Rafe wouldn't feel he had to step in and defend her. "Why, at you, of course, Brooke. Love that dress."

Brooke made a scoffing sound and lifted her wineglass high. "To marital bliss, everyone. Though God knows in my experience it's not all it's cracked up to be."

### Chapter Three

The State Rooms at Hartmore were open to the public Thursday through Sunday from noon to four in the afternoon, April through October. One small-budget film of Jane Austen's *Emma*, as well as a couple of BBC specials, had been shot there.

Hartmore was also available for weddings. There were two wedding parties scheduled for the next day, the first at one in the

afternoon and the second at four, both in Saint Ann's Chapel, with receptions to follow in the State Dining Room and on the grand terrace, respectively.

By five-thirty, the second party had left the chapel. Hartmore staff got right to work switching out the flowers and hanging a fresh set of lace and floral swags from the ends of the gorgeous old mahogany pews.

At a quarter past six, Genny walked down the red-carpeted aisle in the six-hundred-year-old sandstone church on her father's arm. She wore a sleeveless white-lace creation bought three days before in Montedoro and carried pink roses from Hartmore's rose garden. Rafe waited for her at the altar dressed beautifully in a charcoal morning coat, buff waistcoat and gray trousers. To her, the whole experience had an air of unreality.

She was on her father's arm and then, as if by magic, she stood at the altar with Rafe, beneath the stained glass window depicting the crucifixion and ascension of Christ. There were vows and she said them, obediently and a little bit breathlessly.

Rafe kissed her, his soft lips brushing hers for the first time since he'd kissed her goodbye after their brief time together two months before. She shivered a little at the contact and her body ached. For him.

So strange, really. She'd been at his side constantly in the five days since she'd climbed the villa wall to tell him she was having his baby. But they hadn't really talked, not about anything beyond their plans to marry and what had to be done next.

And they hadn't made love. He'd been distant and carefully gentle with her. Attentive, but in no way intimate.

Right after the ceremony, as she posed with Rafe and the family and Rory flitted about snapping picture after picture, she wondered if, just possibly, she might have lost her mind. Pregnant. Marrying Rafe, her dearest friend, who was now like a stranger. Mistress of Hartmore.

It didn't seem real. It was all like some weird, impossible dream.

They had dinner, just the family, in the small dining room in the East Wing, where the family lived. For the occasion, Genny would have liked to have used the State Dining Room again. But it wasn't to be. The paying wedding parties were still going on in the heart of the house. After the meal, they moved to the East Solarium. There was wedding cake, as well as champagne that she pretended to sip while Rory took more pictures.

At eleven, she found herself in Rafe's bedroom, the East Bedroom, as it had always been called, though there were many more bedrooms in that wing of the house. The East Bedroom had its own sitting room, a dressing room and bath—and a second bedroom beyond the dressing room. The East Bedroom had been part of the original design of the house, back before the turn of the eighteenth century, and was revolutionary in its day. An en suite bath was rare at the time. Even the very wealthy went down the hall—or even out the back door—to the loo.

The bedroom itself was furnished with Chippendale lacquer

furniture and an enormous, ornately draped canopy bed. Wearing the white satin, low-backed bit of silky nothing she'd bought the same day she bought her wedding gown, Genny sat at the lacquer dressing table and stared at her wide-eyed reflection in the slightly streaky antique mirror. She worried that he might not be coming to join her.

She started to chew her lower lip over it, but made herself stop. And then she leaned close to the glass to whisper furiously at her own reflection, "If he doesn't come, you are not going just sit here and wish that he would. You are getting up and going to find him."

And when she found him, she would insist that they sleep together as man and wife.

Because they had to start somewhere to build a real marriage. And since the sex had been so good with them, she couldn't help hoping that lovemaking might be a way to break through the wall of emotional reserve he seemed to have erected around himself.

"No need for that, Gen. I'm right here."

She gasped and whirled to find him standing there, not six feet away. "Rafe! You scared me to death." Frantically, she tried to remember just how much of what she'd been thinking she'd actually said out loud.

He stood absolutely still, the crescent scar pulling at the side of his mouth in that perpetual false hint of a smile, his black eyes watchful. "Forgive me."

She thought of the wild boy he'd been once, tormented by his

own father, wary of everyone—except her. And nowadays, he was wary of her, too. She had no idea what he might be thinking.

His thick brows drew together. “Are you all right?”

“Of course. Yes, fine.” Dear Lord, this was awful. They really were like strangers, with the long, awkward silences followed by stammered-out reassurances. She rose and faced him, feeling way too uncovered in the revealing nightgown.

He blinked and announced gruffly, “Good, then. I’ll just be a few minutes.” He went through the door to the dressing room and bath, closing it behind him.

She realized she’d been holding her breath. Releasing it in one hard gust, she let her head droop and stared down at her bare feet on the gorgeous old Aubusson carpet. Would he actually come back? He’d said that he would. But there was that other bedroom in the suite accessible through the dressing area. Great lords and ladies, after all, shouldn’t have to actually share a bed if they didn’t wish to. Should she follow him, make sure that he...?

No. Time enough for that later if he failed to return. She drew her shoulders back, spun on her heel and turned off the lights, all but the one at his side of the bed. Then she climbed in between the heavy bed curtains, got in under the covers and sat up against the pillows to wait for him.

She pressed her hand to her chest. Her poor heart pounded away in there with a sick sort of dread. She feared that he wouldn’t come and she would either have to go after him—or know herself for the coward she was.

But then the door opened and there he was, huge and muscular and marvelous, really, in a pair of dark silk boxers—and nothing else. He strode right for her. Her heart pounded hard, but with excitement now rather than dread.

He turned off that last light before climbing in next to her. She sat there in the dark against the pillows, acutely aware of his presence beside her, of his size, his heat. And his silence.

About then, it became too ridiculous. The unreality of it all was too much for her. A silly, hysterical little laugh bubbled up in her chest. She tried to swallow it down.

But it wouldn't be swallowed. It burst out of her, a breathless, absurd, trilling sort of sound. She slapped her hand over her mouth, but it wouldn't stop.

“You think it's funny, do you?” he asked from the darkness beside her.

She laughed some more. “I... Oh, God, I...”

And then she heard it, a low, rusty rumble. It took her a moment to realize that the sound was coming from him. He was laughing, too.

They laughed together, there in the dark, and she remembered...

How they used to laugh together often, over the simplest things—the antics of Moe and Mable when they were pups, or the way he would pop up out of nowhere, bringing a shriek of surprise from her. In the old days, they could laugh together at anything, really. She'd always felt so proud that he would laugh with her.

He never did with anyone else. With her, he didn't feel the need to be constantly on his guard, to hold himself in check.

In recent years, though, he'd become more distant, more careful with her. And she'd missed the playful times they used to share.

The laughter faded. The room was too quiet. Still, she realized she felt marginally better about everything.

And then he shifted beside her, moving closer and even wrapping his big arm around her. He pulled her against him.

She sighed in sudden, lovely contentment and leaned her head on his rock of a shoulder. "I think I've become hysterical."

"Must be the hormones." His wonderful huge hand moved on her bare arm, a tender stroking motion.

This was more like it. She snuggled in closer. "That's the advantage to being pregnant. Anytime I behave badly, I can just blame it on the hormones."

"You haven't."

"What?"

"Behaved badly." His lips brushed her hair.

She rubbed her cheek against the hot, smooth flesh of his shoulder and wished it might be like this between them always. "Have you forgotten what happened when we told my parents we'd decided to get married? The way I made you promise not to tell them about the baby—and then went right ahead and blurted out the truth when you were trying so hard to keep the secret for me?"

“That wasn’t behaving badly. That’s just how you are.”

“Unable to stick with a plan of action?”

“No. Not wanting to disappoint your parents—and yet never quite able to hide the truth.”

“I’m honest to the core, am I?”

“Yes.” He said it so firmly, without even having to stop and think about it. His belief in her cheered her.

But then she thought about their marriage, which wouldn’t have happened except for the baby. Now, because of the baby, she had achieved her lifelong dream: to be countess of Hartmore. “But I’m not,” she said miserably. “Not honest at all.”

“Shh.”

She dared to lift her head. “Rafe, I—”

“Shh,” he said again. And then his hand was there, at her throat, caressing, brushing upward to lift her chin. “Gen.” His breath warmed her cheek. She drank in the familiar, exciting scent of him.

And then, light and questioning and heartbreakingly tender, his mouth touched hers.

A real kiss. At last.

She sank into it, parting her lips for him, welcoming him in.

He accepted her invitation, dipping his tongue in, making her whimper low in her throat as he pulled her closer, turning his big body toward her. She moaned in pleasure at the glorious feel of her breasts pressing into his broad, hard chest. Claspng his giant shoulder, she melted into him.

They sank down into the bed, still kissing. She pushed at his shoulder then, urging him over. He gave to her will, stretching out on his back so that she could ease her leg across him.

Her nightgown had slithered up. It was a crumpled knot at her waist. She didn't care. She was lying on top of him, her body pressed along the length of his.

His big hands were on her hips, pulling her closer. She could feel the hard, wonderful ridge of his arousal through the thin silk of his boxers.

He wanted her.

And she wanted him. Surely they could make things good and right between them, now, tonight, on their wedding night.

She reached up to caress his face and felt the curving, puckered shape of the scar. And she moaned deep in her throat, in excitement. In pleasure. And also in sympathy for all he had suffered.

And then, out of nowhere, he froze. She made a soft, soothing sound. She stroked his shoulder, urging him to relax, to stay with her, to keep kissing her, touching her...

But he only shifted stiffly beneath her, tugging on her nightgown, smoothing it down to cover her. He eased her off him and gained the top position once more.

“Rafe, what—?”

He put a finger against her lips. She stared up at him through the darkness, waiting for him to explain himself, to tell her what had gone wrong.

But he didn't explain a thing. After a moment, he stretched out beside her, pulling her close again, settling her head on his shoulder. "Let it alone for tonight," he said quietly. "It will be all right."

She wanted to believe him. But she didn't, not really. And that had her thinking of Edward, for some reason.

Edward, slim and tall, with blue eyes and golden-brown hair. Edward was always so elegant, as sophisticated and charming as Rafe was stoic and tender. Edward had been the hero of her earliest fantasies. He used to flirt with her shamelessly. And she had thoroughly enjoyed every teasing glance and clever compliment.

Edward...

Maybe what they needed, she and Rafe, was to talk about the hardest things—like Edward's death, which he seemed to have a real aversion to discussing. Two months ago, at Villa Santorno, when she'd tried repeatedly to bring it up, he'd only refused over and over to go into it.

She went for it. "Is this about Edward somehow?"

"Go to sleep, Gen."

"I touched the scar on your cheek...and it all went bad."

"No."

"Rafe, I think we really need to talk about it."

"Leave it alone."

"No. No, I'm not going to do that. I know what happened that night, the facts of the situation. Eloise told me. She said that

you were driving home from a party at Fiona's." Fiona Bryce-Pemberton was a longtime friend of Brooke's; they'd met as children, Brooke and Fiona, at St Anselm's prep school in nearby Bakewell. At the age of nineteen, Fiona had married a wealthy banker. The banker had bought her Tillworth, a country house not far from Hartmore. "I know that it was two in the morning and Edward was driving. Brooke had stayed the night at Fiona's. There was only you and Edward in the car when he drove off the road and into an oak tree. Eloise said that the investigation absolved you of any wrongdoing, that it was simply an accident, one of those terrible things that can happen now and then."

Rafe lay very still. At first. And then, with slow, deliberate care, he eased away from her. They still lay side by side, but their bodies were no longer touching. "So, then. You know what happened. There's nothing to talk about."

She sat up, switched on the lamp by her side of the bed and turned back to look in his hooded black eyes. "There's everything to talk about. There's how you feel about what happened. How you're...holding up. And there's the question of why you won't let a good plastic surgeon have a look at that scar."

His eyes flashed dark fire. "I feel like bloody hell about what happened, thank you. I'm in one piece, in good health and I'm now the earl of Hartmore, so I would say that I'm holding up just fine. As to my face, it may not be pretty, but I really don't give a damn. If you don't want to look at me, then simply look away."

"Oh, Rafe, that's not fair. You can't just—"

He cut her off by reaching for her, yanking her close and smashing his lips down on hers in a hard, angry kiss.

She shoved at his shoulders until he let her go. “What is the matter with you?”

“Leave. It. Alone.” Each word came out as hard and cold as a stone.

Her lips still tingled from the force of his kiss. She pressed her fingertips to them, soothing them. “This isn’t like you.”

“I mean it, Gen. Edward is dead. There’s nothing more to say on the subject.”

“Of course there is. There’s *everything* to say. I know you loved him, as he loved you. I know it has to be killing you, that he’s gone, that—”

“Enough.” He threw back the covers and got up. “Good night.” And then he left her, just like that.

She watched him stride through the door that led to the other bedroom, pausing only to close it behind him so carefully, hardly making a sound.

She longed to jump up and go after him.

But no.

She’d tried. It hadn’t gone well. She needed to let it be, at least for now. She settled back against the pillows, sliding her hand under the blankets, resting her palm on her belly where their baby slept.

*It will get better.*

They would somehow work through all the awfulness.

Somehow they would find each other, as friends. As lovers. As husband and wife.

She absolutely refused to admit that she might have made a terrible mistake, that she'd married a man she no longer even knew.

\* \* \*

It was after three in the morning when she finally fell into a fitful sleep.

She woke at a little past nine, feeling exhausted, as though she hadn't slept at all. But she couldn't stay in bed forever. So she rose and showered and dressed and resisted the temptation to check the other bedroom.

Finally, at the very last minute, before she went down to breakfast, she went to the door of the other bedroom and gave it a tap.

Nothing.

She knocked again. When he still didn't answer, she went ahead and pushed it open. He'd already gone. No one had made the bed yet; the sheets were in tangles. She couldn't help taking selfish satisfaction from the evidence that he hadn't slept all that well, either.

Out in the hallway, her bodyguard, Caesar, was waiting. He followed her to the Morning Room, positioning himself just outside the door, ready in case she might need protecting.

Which she did not. But after her brother Alex's kidnapping and four-year captivity in Afghanistan, everyone in the family

had security whenever they traveled outside the principality.

Her marriage to Rafe changed that. Now she was part of Rafe's family and as such allowed to choose whether she still wanted security or not. She chose not. Caesar would be going home with her parents. Nothing against him. He was quiet and unobtrusive and easy to have around. But she looked forward to getting along without a soldier following her everywhere.

In the Morning Room, the staff kept a buffet breakfast on the sideboard until eleven. The room was empty, the table set, the silver chafing dishes lined up and waiting.

Her stomach felt a bit queasy. Pregnancy and a wedding-night argument were not a good combination. She took toast and apple juice and sat at the table.

Rory came in as she debated whether or not to try the raspberry jam. "Any news?"

Genny glanced up from the jam pot. "News about what?"

Rory got some coffee and took the seat next to Genny. "No one told you?"

"Apparently not. What are you talking about?"

Rory set down her china cup without taking a sip. "Geoffrey's disappeared. Brooke went to his room at eight to get him ready for the drive up to London. He wasn't there. He'd left a note on his pillow saying he hated school and was running away and never coming back."

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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