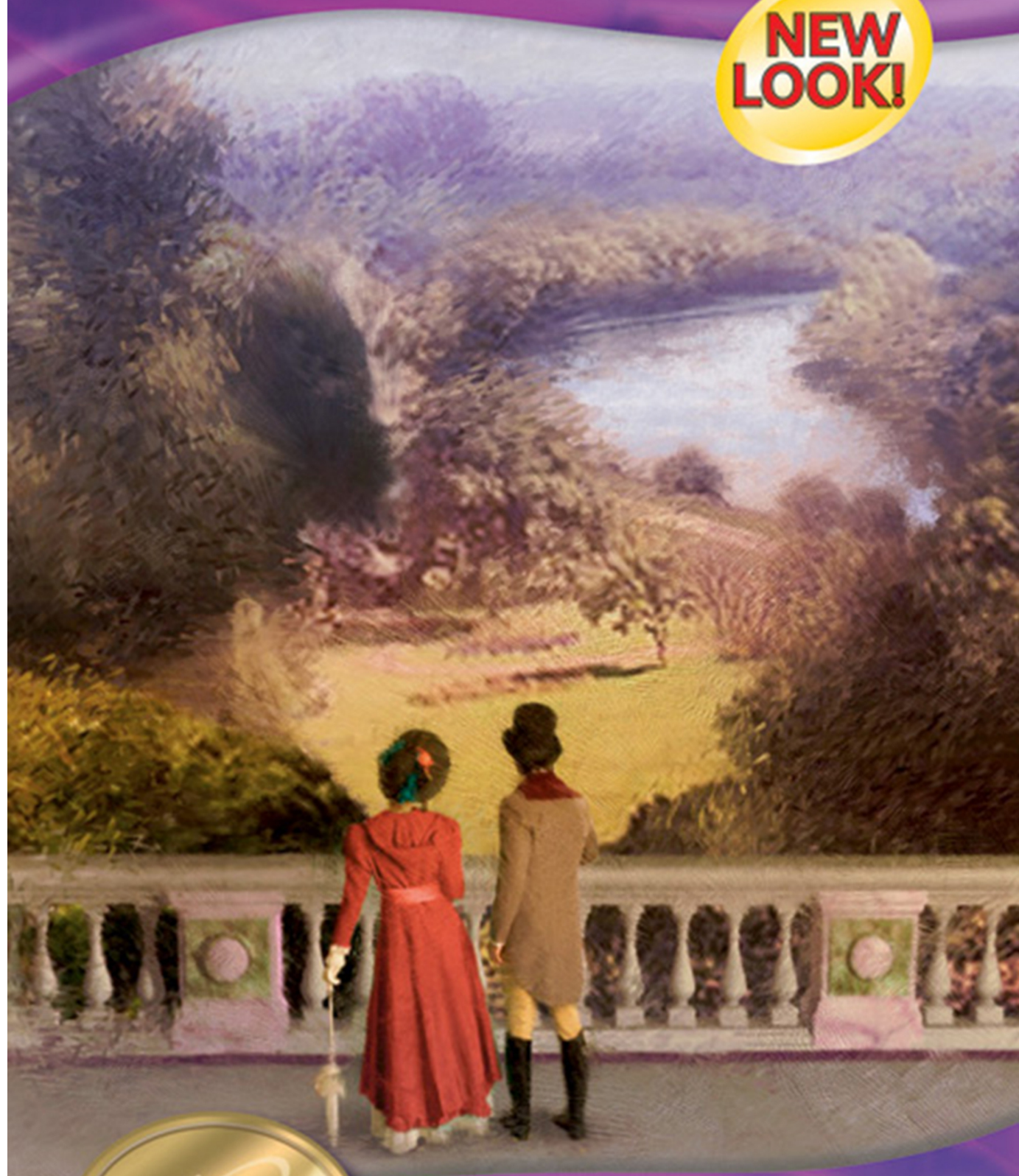


Dishonour and Desire

Juliet Landon

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Having run from two previous engagements, Caterina Chester knows that marriage cannot be avoided for much longer. But to be parceled off as part of a wager to clear her family's debts? Sold to society's most disreputable rake? Caterina is outraged at the proposal. Yet Sir Chase Boston, for all his impeccable manners and charm, reveals an undeniably exhilarating wild streak that taunts and teases her. She has kept her passionate nature tightly confined. Now it seems that this most improper husband may be the only man who can free her!

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‘I know what it is you want

‘Something you’ve never been offered, something deep inside you waiting to be used. It’s called passion.

‘I heard it in your voice when you sang,’ Sir Chase Boston continued, ‘and I can see it in your eyes. I felt it as we drove together, wildly. You were breathless with it, and guilty with it, too. You are angry with men, your father, your brother, those pathetic creatures who offered for you, and me in particular, because you’re interested, for once, and you dare not say so because you’re insulted by the urgency of it all.’

His arm lay along the back of the couch. One forefinger touched the bare skin of her upper arm just below the petalled sleeve, sending a shock through Caterina’s body that instantly washed away the snub she would have liked to deliver. The finger bent, caressed, and withdrew, leaving its memory behind to linger upon her arm.

Juliet Landon’s keen interest in art and history, both of which she used to teach, combined with a fertile imagination, make writing historical novels a favourite occupation. She is particularly interested in researching the early medieval period and the problems encountered by women in a man’s world. Her heart’s home is in her native North Yorkshire, but now she lives happily in a Hampshire village close to her family. Her first books, which were on embroidery and design, were published under her own name of Jan Messent.

Dishonour and Desire is a sequel to *A Scandalous Mistress*. They feature descendants of characters you will have met in *One Night in Paradise*.

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DISHONOUR AND DESIRE
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Chapter One

1812—*Richmond, Surrey*

Still smiling at some absurdity, Miss Caterina Chester and her sister rode into the stable yard behind Number 18 Paradise Road, patting the damp glossy necks before them and fully expecting the usual smiles of welcome from the grooms eager to help them dismount. This sunny morning, with steam rising from the tiled rooftops, the stable yard was busy with lads sluicing mud off the wheels of a coffee-and-cream-coloured crane-neck phaeton while another groom in an unfamiliar green livery held the bridle of a large grey hunter in the shade of the covered walkway. No one came running to meet them.

‘Father has a visitor,’ said Sara.

‘That’s Aunt Amelie’s phaeton,’ said Caterina, coming to a halt. ‘Why is it covered in mud? Joseph,’ she called, ‘what’s all this?’

Joseph lowered his dripping broom and turned, shading his eyes. ‘Sorry, Miss Chester. I didn’t hear you coming,’ he said, wiping his hands down his apron.

He came forward to take the bridles, but Caterina threw one leg over the pommel and slid to the ground before he could reach her. ‘Help Miss Sara,’ she told him. ‘I can manage. Who’s been out in the phaeton?’

‘Master Harry,’ said Joseph, leading Sara’s horse. ‘He borrowed it last evening and—’

‘*Borrowed it? Without asking?*’ Angrily, she looked up at her sister. ‘Did you know of this, Sara?’

‘Certainly not. Aunt Amelie lent it to you, not to Harry.’

‘So why didn’t you mention this to me when you brought the horses round this morning, Joseph?’

The groom stared apologetically at the grimy phaeton, blinking in surprise at the sudden deep waters. ‘Well, because I thought you knew, Miss Chester. Master Harry told me he’d had permission to use it, and to be quick and get it ready.’

‘Ready for what?’

‘He didn’t say for what, miss. But whatever it was, I don’t think Lady Elyot would’ve liked it much. Just look at it, caked with mud and splashed all over. We’re having to scrub every last inch of it.’ He scowled at the shining areas of panelling just showing through runnels of water. ‘It only came back a half hour ago.’

Pretty Sara did not intend to dismount by herself as long as there was an attractive groom to help. Bouncing lightly onto the cobbles, she removed her hands from Joseph’s shoulders but, even then, was not able to get her question in before her sister’s. ‘Back from where?’

The stable yard grew quiet at Caterina’s razorsharp tone.

Joseph let out a breath. ‘It’s been over at Mortlake all night, Miss Chester. In Sir Chase Boston’s stables. That’s Sir Chase’s groom over there. They brought it back this morning. Shall I ask him...?’

‘No, I’ll find out the rest for myself.’ The hem of Caterina’s dove-grey riding habit skimmed over the wet cobbles as she strode away to the steps that led up to the house, her slender back curved like a bow, both hands raised to unpin her veiled hat. Before her sister had reached her level, a mass of dark copper curls came loose with the net, tumbling onto her shoulders like a fox-fur cape, glinting with red highlights in the sun. Her slender figure appeared to pour through the door with a fluidity that typified all her movements.

‘So that’s her,’ said Sir Chase Boston’s groom, smirking.

‘Aye, that’s her,’ said Joseph, leading the two horses away. ‘Now for some fireworks.’

The man grinned. ‘Should be interesting, then.’

Joseph glanced at the big grey. ‘I shouldn’t bother unsaddling him. Your master’ll be out in five minutes with his ears afire.’

‘Want a bet?’ the man said, settling himself onto the mounting-block.

In the elegant white-and-gold hallway, Caterina paused only long enough to glance at the table where a beaver hat, a pair of pale leather gloves and a silverbanded riding whip lay where the butler had placed them. A row of calling-cards marked the exact centre of the silver tray, and the reflection in the ormolu mirror above received not even a cursory acknowledgement in passing. From the upper landing came the slam of doors, a woman’s faintly commanding voice, the sirenwail of infants, nurses cooing and strains of a distant lullaby. Wincing at the cacophany, Caterina just failed to hide the grimace before she opened the study door.

Not usually minding her interruptions, her father stopped his conversation abruptly, sensing the arrival of a minor whirlwind. ‘Ah, there you are,’ he said, turning to face her. ‘You received my message?’ Middle-aged and lean with the look of a harassed greyhound, Stephen Chester did his best to smile, though it did not come naturally to him.

‘No, Father. There appears to be a breakdown in the system somewhere. I received no message about the phaeton, either.’

‘So you’ve seen it. Well, Sir Chase has ridden over from Mortlake to explain the situation. I don’t believe you’ve met. Sir Chase Boston. My eldest daughter, sir.’

There was a movement behind her and, to her discomfort, Caterina realised that her father’s guest had been lurking behind the door, watching her without being noticed. Well, perhaps not exactly lurking, but one could not help thinking that he had positioned himself there on purpose.

Like her father, Caterina was tall and there were relatively few men who came near to dwarfing her so that she had to lift her chin to see their faces. This man was not only tall, but broad and deep-chested, too, which she did not think was due to padding. She had heard of him; everyone in society had heard of Sir Chase Boston’s on-off *affaires*, his nonsensical wagers, which he always seemed to win, his amazing exploits in the hunting field and his phenomenal driving skills. There was little, apparently, that this man had not attempted at some time. Except marriage.

She had expected to put a more ravaged face to a man with such an intemperate reputation—deep creases, muddy complexion, that kind of thing. What she saw instead was a pair of very intense hazel eyes that held hers with an alarming frankness, a well-groomed craggy face with a firm dimpled chin, and thick black hair raked back untidily off a broad forehead and curling down the front of his ears.

Yes, she thought, even his looks were excessive, though his dress was correct in every detail, spotless and well fitting. Looking down at the toes of his shining black-and-tan top-boots, she felt herself blushing like a schoolgirl, having seen in his eyes something more than mere politeness. The bow of her head was accompanied by the tiniest curtsy. ‘Sir Chase,’ she said, ‘may I ask how you come to be returning my aunt’s phaeton in such a condition?’ Her eyes, golden-brown and very angry, were not having the effect upon him that she had intended.

‘I won it,’ he said. ‘The horses, too. From your brother.’ His voice was deep, as one might have expected from such a well-built man.

‘My aunt’s dapple-greys? Harry took those?’

‘A good colour. Goes well with the brown.’

She suspected he was not talking about the phaeton and pair. ‘Father,’ she said, stripping off her gloves, ‘will you tell me what’s going on, please? Aunt Amelie lent them to me, you know, and—’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Chester, ‘and young Harry’s returned to Liverpool on the early mail this morning without saying a word about this ridiculous wager. It appears that Sir Chase and he had a race round Richmond Park last night and Harry lost. Hadn’t you better sit down, my dear?’

‘Harry lost with property that was not his to lose. I see,’ snapped Caterina. ‘No, I *don’t* see. Sir Chase, if you knew it was not my brother’s, why did you—?’

‘I didn’t,’ interrupted their guest, pushing himself off the wall and going to stand by his host’s side from where he could see her better. ‘He led me to believe it was his when he made the bet.’

And I won. He was obliged to leave the phaeton at Mortlake. When I looked, I found this tucked into a corner of the seat.' His hand delved into his waistcoat pocket as he spoke, then pulled out a very delicate lace-edged handkerchief, which he handed to Caterina. 'The initials A.C. in the corner suggested the young man's aunt, the former Lady Amelie Chester, now Lady Elyot. And in case she particularly wants the phaeton back, I have offered your father the chance to redeem it. I dare say it's worth about two hundred or so. One of the great Felton's, I believe. Five years old, one owner, patent cylinder axle-trees, and the horses...well...they're worth—'

'And my brother walked back from Mortlake, did he? Or did you offer him a lift?'

His eyes sparked with scorn. 'Your brother owes me money, Miss Chester. I don't offer lifts to people in my debt. Do you?'

'The point is, my dear,' said Caterina's troubled father, 'that Sir Chase has every right to expect his winnings to be paid promptly. It's extraordinarily decent of him to return the phaeton and horses, but a wager is a wager, and—'

'And it would be even more extraordinarily decent if Sir Chase were to draw a line under this silly nonsense and write his loss down to experience, wouldn't it, Father? After all, I don't suppose Sir Chase is lacking horses, or phaetons, is he? Harry is twenty, not yet earning, and tends to be a little irresponsible at times.' Her heart beat a rhythm into her throat, and she could not quite define the singular hostility she felt towards this man. Was it simply his claims? His uncompromising directness? Was it his attitude towards her father? Or to her? Was it that she had heard of his many and varied love affairs?

'Your brother's lack of funds, Miss Chester, is his own problem, not mine,' Sir Chase said. 'If he makes a wager, he should have the resources to back it without embarrassing anyone else. His irresponsibility is farcical, but when I win a wager I tend not to draw lines under the debt until it's paid. Nor do I pretend that I've lost. I'm not a charitable institution, and it's time young Mr Chester learned a thing or two about honour.'

'I would have thought, sir,' said Caterina, 'that in a case of this kind, a phaeton and *pair*, for heaven's sake, you might have waived the inattention to honour. I realise that my brother is at fault for gambling with something he doesn't own, but surely—' She stopped, suddenly aware that there was something yet to be spoken of.

Stephen Chester had never been good at concealing his thoughts, and now his long face registered real alarm, with a hasty doleful glance at Sir Chase that spoke volumes and a twist of his mouth before he spoke. 'Er...ahem! It's not...oh, my goodness!' He sighed, casting a longing glance at the two glasses of brandy, just poured.

'Father, what is it? There's something else, isn't there?'

He nodded, abjectly. 'Harry owes money, too,' he whispered. 'Sir Chase was just about to tell me as you came in, but I really don't think you should be hearing this, my dear. I didn't know all this when I sent a message for you to come. Perhaps you should—'

'How much?' Caterina said, flatly. 'Come, Father. Sit down here and tell me about it. You cannot keep this to yourself.'

'I don't know how much,' he said, weakly. 'Sir Chase?'

'He owes me twenty thousand, sir.'

Mr Chester's head sunk slowly into his hands, but Caterina stared with her lips parted. She thought she saw stars until she blinked them away. 'Twenty *thousand*?' she whispered. 'Pounds?'

'Guineas.'

She gasped. 'And how in heaven's name did he...oh...Good grief! And he's left you to repay a debt like that? How could he...how *could* he do that, Father?'

Sir Chase seemed remarkably composed, as if they were talking of pennies rather than guineas. 'I have your brother's IOU for that amount, for which I gave him twenty-four hours' grace. He assured me he would bring the money to me yesterday morning, but when he arrived at my house in London,

he proposed that we should race a team round Richmond Park, the debt to be written off if he won. I would not normally accept such a wager, but he begged me for one more chance and I could see he was in Queer Street. Even so, I saw no reason why I should entirely forfeit the blunt for his sake. As I said—'

'Yes, we heard what you said, Sir Chase. Did my brother say how he would get the money? Money-lenders?'

'It's not my business to ask, Miss Chester, but I don't think he'd found a way of raising the wind, otherwise I would not be telling your father about it.'

'So you came here this morning expecting to find him?'

'As you say. And to return Lady Elyot's phaeton.'

Mr Chester's hand groped blindly across the table for his glass of brandy, and Caterina pushed it towards him, then went round to support it as he sipped and sighed noisily, her anger at her brother's lack of principles combining with sympathy at the shock of such a crippling debt.

Her father had done nothing to deserve this. Twenty thousand guineas was a vast sum of money for which he would almost certainly have to sell this house here in Richmond as well as the one he owned in Buxton, for the income from his late brother's estate which he had inherited was already being stretched to its limits, and he was not allowed to raise capital by selling anything that had been entailed on him. That would all go to Harry, eventually.

Her father's second and much younger wife, Hannah, had presented him with two pairs of twins in six years, and now their handsome house on Paradise Road, which had once been Lady Elyot's, was bursting at the seams. For the sake of comfort, Harry's month-long holiday had been spent mostly in London, about two hours' drive away. And Sir Chase had clearly come here for full recompense, not to negotiate.

Hoping to put him out of countenance, Caterina went in with both barrels blazing. 'Do you then live off your earnings, Sir Chase?' she asked.

'Caterina!' he father spluttered. 'My dear, you may not ask a man questions of that nature. Please, it's time you went. Sir Chase and I will discuss this and find a way, somehow. The debt will be paid. You had better go and see how Hannah does. She's been asking for you.'

Sir Chase reached the door ahead of her and, with one hand on the brass knob, would have opened it but for Caterina's hand placed firmly over the join. 'One moment, if you please,' she said, tilting her head to look scathingly into his eyes. 'I understand the meaning of honour as well as any man, Sir Chase, but if I may not ask you about your winnings, then perhaps I may ask if you truly believed it was honourable to challenge my brother to a race you must have known he could not win when he already owed you money he could not pay? What exactly was your purpose in encouraging him into such folly that could only end in my father's embarrassment?'

Her heart-shaped face was held up to the light, showing him the full opulence of her loveliness, the luxuriant waving chestnut hair touching the silken-sheened skin, amazing golden-brown eyes framed by sweeping lashes, a straight nose and wide lips full of sensuous beauty. Her eyes blazed with the kind of passion that would respond instantly and without inhibition to any situation, and Sir Chase doubted very much that she would have obeyed her father if she had not already decided to do so. Perhaps she wanted him to see her as submissive, but he could see in her eyes, in her very bearing, that it was not so. This one would do as she pleased.

Mischievously, he incensed her further by allowing his eyes to roam briefly inside the frilled collar of her habit-shirt and then over her firm high breasts. 'But I have already told you, Miss Chester,' he said, unsmiling, 'it was your brother who challenged me, not the other way round. So if you understand honour as well as you say you do, you'll not need any further explanation, will you?'

Though she sensed there was more to be said on the subject, there was a limit to the time she wished to spend in the company of this arrogant man, so she took her hand away from the door and waited for him to turn the knob. When he did not, she looked up to find him regarding her from

between half-closed eyes that were difficult to read, and it was being made to wait until he was ready that made her realise he was telling her something about her manner. When he *did* open it, very... very...slowly, she was not allowed to whirl out as she had whirled in.

Out in the hall, she found that her heart was beating a hollow thud between her shoulder-blades, and the desire to sweep his accessories off the table on to the floor was only curbed by the sound of a high-pitched infant tantrum. With a sigh, she turned and went upstairs.

The same sound reached Stephen Chester's ears before the door closed behind his daughter, making him look up, ruefully. 'Sorry about that,' he murmured.

Assuming he meant the noise, Sir Chase took the seat opposite, sampling his glass of brandy while looking round him at the beautiful Wedgwood-blue room overlooking a large garden at the back of the house. A wellexecuted painting of a ship under sail against a background of some distant harbour hung on the wall behind Mr Chester's desk. Through the new green of the trees, he could see the distant sparkle of the River Thames, alive with wherries and their passengers. There were no signs of poverty to be seen, but the discrepancy in the ages of his host's family was intriguing, and obviously a cause of expense. And although Sir Chase had not come here intending to negotiate, there was now a new factor in the equation that had not been there when he arrived: Miss Caterina Chester.

'You have an interesting family, Mr Chester,' he said, replacing his glass on the table. He rested one boot across his knee and held it there. 'I understand Mrs Chester is your second wife.'

Stephen smoothed a hand over his thinning dark red hair from the back of his head to the front, nodding. 'My wife is one of the Elwicks of Mortlake,' he said. 'You will probably know them. Been married almost six years.'

Sir Chase's dark brows moved. 'Oh, indeed I do, sir. Near neighbours of my parents. I believe the eldest son died a couple of years ago.'

'Mrs Chester's brother Chad. Yes. I lost the first Mrs Chester ten years ago, and with three grown children of my own I didn't quite expect so large a second family so soon. If I'd known there were going to be nine of us instead of five, I'd not have moved from Buxton. My Derbyshire home is a good deal larger than this one, plenty of rooms, woodland and paddocks, and orchards. But my wife is a Surrey woman, and Caterina and her sister wanted to stay near London.' He smiled at last, softening with fatherly pride. 'Caterina lived here with her aunt, Lady Elyot, who was still Lady Chester at that time. It was perfect for the two of them then.'

'Ah, your daughter. May I ask her age, sir?'

'Twenty-three, Sir Chase.' Suddenly, Stephen's hand slapped the table as he stood up, shimmering the remaining brandy in his glass. 'Twenty bloody three, and not married. And not likely to be, if she can't be more agreeable than that.' He strode to the window, staring out into the distance. 'I hope you'll excuse her forthright manner, sir,' he said, more quietly. 'She can be quite difficult to handle at times, but we've all been under a bit of a strain, one way or another, and unfortunately Caterina has a mind of her own. My other daughter,' he said, lightening his tone, 'Sara, is just the opp—'

'Tell me, if you will, about Miss Caterina Chester, sir.'

'Eh?' Startled, he turned to look. 'I thought you'd have heard by now.'

Sir Chase smiled, but made no reply.

Stephen sauntered to the table, studied the remaining brandy and gulped it down in one go. Then, moving from one piece of furniture to the next and sliding his fingertips over the surfaces, he hopped through what he saw as the main events of Caterina's twenty-three years in a verbal hotchpotch that reflected his own needs more than hers. 'Well, I allowed her to come down here from Derbyshire to live with my brother's widow. Caterina and her aunt are very close. She lives up at Sheen Court now, since she became Lady Elyot.'

'Yes, I know Lord and Lady Elyot and his brother Lord Rayne well.'

‘Oh, of course. Well, Caterina was seventeen when she came out. Made quite a stir at the time. Very much sought after. You can imagine.’

‘I can indeed, sir. Offers of marriage?’

‘Oh, Lord, yes. Plenty. She accepted the Earl of Loddon first.’

‘Then what?’

‘She cried off at the last minute, the minx. Heaven knows what the real cause was. And what a fuss that provoked!’ He stroked his hair again. ‘Second engagement to Viscount Hadstoke. We told her she was fortunate to have an offer after that, title, wealth, big...er...well, anyway, she ducked out of that one with just two days to go. I was sure that would be the end of her chances. High risk, you know. A non-starter. She didn’t seem to care, but I did, and so did her sister.’

‘Why is that, sir?’

Stephen stopped pacing to spread his hands, helplessly, though he did not answer the question regarding Sara. ‘Well, how does it *look*, I ask you? Talk...gossip...plenty of offers of *carte blanche*, but no more offers of marriage after that. Well, that’s not quite correct. The Earl of St Helen’s offered for her last week, but she won’t even look at him. It’s her last chance. I’ve told her so, but she refuses to set her cap at any man, and that’s that. An *earl!*’ He glared at the ceiling.

‘I see. And she doesn’t give you any particular reason?’

With a snort of derision, Stephen’s retort was predictable. ‘Oh, girlish dreams of love and all that silly stuff. No doubt her reasons make sense to her, but really, Sir Chase, who can afford to pass up offers of that sort? Her sister is ready for marriage right now, but until Caterina is off my hands she’ll be disappointed. No self-respecting father would allow the younger one to marry before the elder one. That’s the way round it should be. That’s the way it’s always been.’

‘I’ve known it to happen.’

‘Maybe. But not in my family.’

‘Then the pressure on Miss Chester to marry must be quite intense.’

‘It is. Well...er...what I mean is...yes. To be quite fair, I don’t suppose I’ve helped much by filling the house with four squalling bairns. Don’t get me wrong, Sir Chase, I’m fond of my family, all of them, but four infants in a house this size is enough to put any young woman off unless she’s the motherly sort. And I don’t think that Caterina is. She wants to practise her piano and her singing. Did I tell you she has a fine voice?’ Not stopping to notice the expression on his guest’s face, he continued. ‘Oh, yes, she’s invited to sing in all the great houses, you know. Takes it very seriously. Yes, indeed.’

‘And your son, Harry? You mentioned he’d returned to Liverpool.’

‘This morning on the early mail, back to his uncle. He’s learning banking. My late brother’s business, you know. Lady Elyot’s first husband.’

‘That’s not quite what he told me when we met in London, sir.’

Stephen Chester’s expression sharpened, his eyes suddenly wary. ‘Oh? What did he tell you?’ he said, coughing between sips of brandy.

‘That he owned two banks in Liverpool. Money no object.’

Stephen stopped his pacing and slammed down his glass. ‘Wait till I get my hands on him,’ he muttered. ‘He’s determined to see me on the rocks. As if I didn’t have problems enough.’

There was an uncomfortable silence during which both men saw these problems from rather different angles, Sir Chase concentrating more on Caterina than on her siblings. She kept rejecting totally unsuitable marriage proposals, yet was desperate to regain the peace she had once known in which she could develop her talents. This was no place for a woman of her sort.

Her father, in his blinkered state, had done less than justice to her talents by not explaining how, in her years of living in Richmond, her voice had been trained by the finest singing teacher in the country, the Italian Signor Rauzzini, until his death last year. That had been a terrible blow to Caterina, for he had nurtured her voice, proclaiming it to be the finest mezzo-soprano he’d heard in one so young. She still had singing lessons and was greatly in demand, but the pressure of having

to find a husband to please her parents and sister was having a noticeable effect on her. Her Aunt Amelie had offered to lend her the prized phaeton so that Caterina could escape more often from the domestic pandemonium.

Sir Chase Boston doubted very much that young Harry Chester would be the ruin of his father, but he did not intend to let Chester off the hook when the debt was so substantial, for debt-collecting was what he had come for, not to offer sympathy. The father would deal with his son as he thought fit and the fright of it might help to knock some sense into both their heads. But he himself was beginning to see that there was perhaps more to be gained from Chester's misfortune than twenty thousand guineas plus the price of the phaeton and pair. 'Well, then, sir,' he said, glancing at the inferior brandy, 'shall we do a few sums to begin with? For the carriage, I would say about...'

'Er...' Stephen Chester put out a hand as if to ward off the sound of debt '...do you think...er?'

Impassively, Sir Chase waited. He had learned how to be patient, how not to show his hand too soon, as this man did.

'Er...that there might be another way? An alternative?' It was as if he was talking to himself. 'I simply don't have that kind of blunt, any more than my birdwitted son does. The Buxton house would not sell for anything like enough. To be honest, it's far more than I would have *believed*.' He looked around him, anxiously chewing at the side of his finger. 'And I'm not sure what I can do about it. Let me think. The dowry, Caterina's dowry. Well, it looks as if that may not be needed after all, although I shall need something for Sara—but then, if the dowry is reduced, her chances will be even less, won't they? In fact, they may even disappear altogether,' he added, habitually accepting the darker side.

'This dowry. Is it substantial, sir?'

'Hah! Anything *but* substantial,' said Mr Chester, gloomily. 'So far, Caterina's face and family have been her fortune, but that won't always be the case, will it? I'd say *her* chances have all but slipped away unless she finds somebody to fit her exacting requirements.' There was more than a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

'And you would not consider making an exception by allowing your younger daughter to marry first, simply to take the cost of her off your hands? You must admit, sir, it would make a difference.'

'No, Sir Chase. I could not do that. It would not be proper. Besides, it would acknowledge that I have given up hope of marrying the elder one off, wouldn't it? She'd be well and truly stuck on the shelf *then*.'

'At twenty-three, sir? Surely not.'

'At twenty-three, my first wife had a family of three,' he replied, sharply. 'No, if Caterina is going to be so difficult to please, I may be obliged to make up her mind for her. She could do worse than accept St Helen's, if he's still interested. But he may not be, without a dowry, and I can hardly bear to think what Caterina herself would have to say about it, though I might be able to hazard a guess. She might be persuaded to see it as her duty, but I dare say it would go ill with her to see her sister marry a man of her choice when *she* was not allowed to. Still...' he sighed '...a duty is a duty, though that won't find me all of twenty thousand guineas, will it? Do you know, I could *kill* that son of mine. He must know that a man cannot turn his back on a gambling debt. His tailor is a different kettle of fish, but never a man who wins his wager.' Then he rallied. 'Oh, do forgive me. I should not be talking to you like this, Sir Chase. Not the done thing at all, is it?'

'And would your wife's family not—?'

'Help?' Mr Chester yelped. 'Good grief, man, no! I would never let Mrs Chester hear a *whisper* about all this, or I'd never hear the last of it. Besides, she has enough troubles with four of her own bairns. Absolutely not!'

'So Miss Chester would not tell her?'

'That my son has got me under the hatches and cleared off to Liverpool?' Stephen Chester looked at Sir Chase as if he'd taken leave of his senses. 'I should think not. His stepmother has little

enough good opinion of him as it is. And I can't say I blame her. This would only add fuel to her sentiment that he should have been packed off into the navy.'

'There are liabilities in every family, sir.'

'Hum! Glad to hear it. However, the problem is mine and I must be left to deal with it as best I may. Leave it with me, Sir Chase, if you will be so good. I shall call on you tomorrow with my proposals. Are you staying at Mortlake?'

'I wonder... ' said Sir Chase, glancing out of the window.

'Eh?'

'I wonder if you would care to hear my suggestion, sir.'

'If it's about borrowing from some cent-per-cent you know, forget it. I never borrow anything.'

'It's not that.' Sir Chase stood on the opposite side of the table with his arms spread like buttresses, drawing the older man's attention to him by the force of his considerable presence. 'You want your daughter married, and you believe her chances are dwindling. Well, I may be able to help you there.'

'You know somebody, do you?' said Stephen Chester, despondently.

Sir Chase thought his host was the dourest of men, though his excuse was certainly a valid one. Not for one moment did he himself think that Miss Caterina Chester's case was as serious as her father appeared to believe. At the age of twenty-three, many *débutantes* were already married, that much was true, but this one was obviously looking for something not on her father's list and was prepared to wait for it. Nor did he believe that she was on the shelf. Not even approaching it. She was, in fact, the most prime article he'd ever clapped eyes on, but even a Johnny-*Raw* could see that her father and stepmother between them were handling her more like a child than a grown woman with a mind of her own. That being so, Chester might jump at his offer, and he himself would have to take a different route to achieve his aim. 'Yes,' he said. 'I know somebody. Me, sir. Myself.'

'Eh?' Mr Chester said with a quick frown. From what he'd heard, bang-up coves like Sir Chase Boston did not marry, they took mistresses. His face immediately registered distrust. 'Oh, I could not agree to that, Sir Chase. She's had offers to be a man's mistress before, you know. Only last month, the Duke of—'

'No, not as a mistress, sir. As a wife. I'm talking about marriage. If I can persuade her to marry me, I am prepared to give you the IOU to tear up, and the cost of the phaeton and pair, too. You'll be in the clear again.'

'And what if you can't? She doesn't *want* to marry, Sir Chase. And you could see for yourself that she would never accept *you* as a husband. Not even as a friend,' he added, sharpening the barb.

'Well, then,' said Sir Chase, straightening up. 'It was simply a proposal. No offence meant. I'll expect you at Mortlake tomorrow morning, sir.'

Mr Chester waved a hand, unfurling himself from the chair. 'No...er, don't rush off. Have another...oh, you haven't...well. Now, may I try to understand you correctly? You're making me an offer for my eldest daughter. Of marriage. Is that correct?'

'Correct.'

'And I get the debts written off. That's part of the deal?'

'Correct.'

'There must be something else, surely? What do I lose?'

'Nothing, unless I am unable to win Miss Chester, after all. Then we shall be back to square one.'

'Then she must be *told* that's what she's going to do. But...' he searched the shining tabletop as if for information '...I know very little about you, you see, and although I'm very tempted, and...er...gratified by your offer, I would like to know that Caterina would be—how shall I put it?'

'Well cared for?'

'Yes. In short, well cared for. But if you'll forgive me, Sir Chase, there are some fathers, you see, who would look a little askance at your reputation in that department.' And in plenty of other

departments, too, he thought. There were some fathers who would not see this man as a suitable husband for their daughters under any circumstances, though their daughters might harbour sweet fantasies about it. However, the temptation to solve two major problems in one fell swoop was too great to be dismissed on the spot. 'And if you don't manage to persuade her?' he said, still negative.

'Then I'm afraid, as I said, the debt will stand. You fear I might not?'

'Sir Chase, I cannot see how *anybody* could recommend himself to her as she is at the moment. Well, you've seen, haven't you? Nevertheless, if you can recommend yourself to *me*, I shall do everything in my power as a respected parent to show her where her duty lies. I still have that authority, although I have not so far exercised it. Perhaps I should have done.'

'I would rather take my own time, sir. In my experience, a lady like your daughter would not take kindly to being rushed over her fences.'

Neither man saw anything inappropriate in the analogy.

'In your experience. Yes, you've had quite a bit of that, haven't you?'

'I'm thirty-two years old, sir. What man hasn't, at that age?'

Stephen Chester hadn't, for one, though his elder brother had. 'And your parents are at Mortlake?' he said, avoiding the question.

'Boston Lodge. Sir Reginald and Lady FitzSimmon. Sir Reginald is my stepfather, and I am their only son. My own dwelling is on Halfmoon Street in London, sir. I've lived there for the last few years, and sometimes in my other properties in the north.'

Mr Chester had no need to ask what he'd been doing over the last few years, with pockets as deep as his, his parents swimming in lard, houses scattered all over the country, friend of the Prince Regent, nothing to do but win more money this way and that. He'd heard as much from Lord Elyot and his brother, who appeared to like him. They had also told him that Sir Chase belonged to the Four Horse Club, which he wished his son Harry had known before he took him on a wild-goose chase round Richmond Park.

'Your name, Sir Chase? Is it an abbreviation of something?'

'A childhood name that stuck, sir. My father and uncles used to call me Chase Anything after my first adventures in the hunting field. That became just Chase. My mother always calls me Charles, quite properly.'

Chase Anything, Mr Chester thought, would properly describe what he himself had heard about the man. 'Any light-o'-loves on the go?' he asked, looking to catch any confusion.

There was none. 'No one who matters,' said Sir Chase, callously.

'Any side-slips?'

Again, not a flicker of embarrassment. 'Absolutely not, sir.'

'And where would you expect my daughter to live, if you managed this miracle?'

As far away from her family as possible, would have been Sir Chase's reply if he'd been less diplomatic. 'That would not cause any kind of problem, Mr Chester. I can purchase a place somewhere if Miss Chester doesn't like the ones I have.'

'Well, that's a juicy carrot if ever I saw one. If I've learnt one thing about women it's that they have likes and dislikes about where they want to live. Still, you're an unconventional kind of chap, are you not?'

'I would have thought,' said Sir Chase, borrowing Miss Chester's own phrase, 'that your daughter would be very little interested in the sober, plodding, narrowminded kind of man as husband-material. She strikes me as being a high-spirited kind of woman who needs a man who can keep up with her. You need not fear that I shall drag her into gaming-hells or be unfaithful. Nor would I allow her to fall into any kind of trouble. When I make the effort to win something, sir, I don't mistreat it. As for my age, how old are the men she was engaged to marry? Loddon is a middle-aged ninny tied to his mother's apron-strings in deepest Cornwall. Hadstoke is fifty, if he's a day, with a grown family

at each other's throats. And as for St Helen's...well, a woman would have to be desperate to accept that old tup.'

'Wealth and titles. That's important for any woman.'

'For any father, sir, if I may say so. I have a baronetcy which my heir, when I get one, will inherit with my estate. And I have youth and vigour on my side, also. And if, as I believe, Miss Chester enjoys driving that crane-neck phaeton out there, my kind of life might suit her very well.'

'Oh, I wish Lady Elyot had not lent it to her. It's far too dangerous.'

'For your taste, perhaps. Now, have I put your mind at ease?'

If Stephen Chester's mind was not completely at ease concerning this overpowering man's suitability to be his son-in-law, he did not let the fact stand in the way of his decision, which he had already made well before the cross-examination. That had been a mere formality for the sake of appearances. Caterina must be married, come what may. 'You've never been married, I take it?' he said, trying not to appear too eager.

'Never offered for a woman until today.'

'Then it's a great risk you're taking. You'll need luck on such an impulsive gamble. But then, you have nothing much to lose, do you?'

The man's crassness, Sir Chase thought, was astounding. 'It's a risk, sir, I agree. But I stand to lose *what I want*, as do we both. I shall need your full cooperation, and that of Mrs Chester.'

'Oh, of course. You can rely on that, if nothing else. Caterina's stepmother will use every persuasion to—'

'No, sir. I would rather be the one to use persuasion, if you please. Mrs Chester will have to approve of me, naturally, but if you could leave the means to me I would be more than grateful. I imagine Miss Chester could dig her heels in if she felt she was being pressured.'

Miss Chester had done nothing *but* dig her heels in, of late. What was more, it was going to be difficult, if not impossible, to keep Hannah calm about the glad tidings that Caterina's hand was being sought yet again, after so many disappointments. 'You may depend on it, Sir Chase,' he said.

'Then I shall leave you to tell Miss Chester that I have made an offer for her. There can be no harm in that.'

'No harm at—oh...wait a moment.' Mr Chester's hand went to his forehead. 'Might it...?' he said, whispering his thoughts.

'Might it what, sir?'

'Well, this weekend she'll be away at Lord and Lady Ensedale's house party. She won't be back till Tuesday. Might it be better if I were to delay speaking of this until after her return? She'll be singing, you see, and apparently her voice doesn't work too well when she's angry...upset...you know?'

A lesser mortal would have quaked against such a prophecy, but Sir Chase had begun to expect any kind of tactlessness from this man. At least he'd had the grace to consider the timing. 'I understand perfectly,' Sir Chase replied, wondering if she needed to be told at all, in view of the most unusual circumstances. Perhaps they could judge the situation better after this coming weekend, though he was inclined to disagree with Chester that the lady's voice would not work well once the idea was put to her. He believed it would work very well indeed, with himself in the firing-line. 'One more detail,' he said, bracing himself. 'You mentioned Miss Chester's dowry. I believe, sir, now that my suit is being considered, that I have the right to know what to expect in dowry, settlements and jointures.' He did not intend the man to escape without feeling the sting.

Holding his long jaw in a tight fist as though it might otherwise dislocate, Stephen Chester sighed through his nose, preparing himself for the next few uncomfortable minutes. He did not enjoy giving money away any more than he liked borrowing it. 'Shall we sit, Sir Chase?' he said.

Inevitably, the question of a time limit was raised, though Mr Chester was in favour of a delayed deadline that would assist Sir Chase's success. The suitor preferred more of a challenge. With what he

had in mind, six weeks might be unrealistic, but it sounded better than six months. In the end, it was agreed that Sir Chase would need all summer, the situation to be reviewed at the autumnal equinox.

Soon afterwards, the two men walked to the stable yard to look at the phaeton from where Mr Chester was called to attend his wife rather urgently. Returning to the house, he had just enough time to gulp down the remainder of his guest's brandy before picking up the gold-edged calling-card, putting it in his waistcoat pocket, smoothing his hair and, adopting an expression of false cheer, going upstairs to Hannah.

Waiting until her father had disappeared into the noisy baby-scented nursery, Caterina tripped quietly downstairs to the back of the house from where a path led to the door in the high brick wall between the garden and the stable yard. Here, she hoped to take another look at the cleaned phaeton and to examine Aunt Amelie's dapple-greys. If Harry had damaged them, there would indeed be trouble.

To her surprise and irritation, the grey hunter and its green-liveried groom were still there. Worse still, Joseph and Sir Chase Boston were sauntering through the double door of the carriage house from where they could see her easily, standing in the full glare of the sun. The temptation was to return to the house, but the snub to her father's guest would have been unforgivable when he was already walking to meet her. 'I came to see my aunt's horses,' she said, wondering why she needed to explain herself. 'They're my responsibility,' she added unnecessarily, hearing the sharp tone of her voice.

Sir Chase's soft laugh reached his eyes. 'So they are, Miss Chester,' he said as he reached the bottom of the steps. 'Your groom and I have been saying the very same thing.'

'They'll need to be hosed down,' she said, avoiding his eyes, 'if you brought them back in the same state as the phaeton.'

'I didn't,' he said, holding out his hand as she reached the bottom step.

Obliged to accept his courtesy, she felt the instant warm grip of his fingers and the unresisting strength of his arm that reminded her of what she'd heard of his legendary fencing skills, his boxing and horsemanship. She was also reminded of the enormous debt he had lured her brother into. If the tales that circulated about him were to be believed, this man was dangerous to both men and women.

She reached the cobbles, removing her hand from his without thanks. 'You had them washed down?' she said.

He appeared to find her question and manner amusing. 'It's one thing to return a carriage in a filthy state, Miss Chester, to show how it's been misused, but quite another to leave horses like that. It took my grooms hours to get the muck off them last night. If I were you, I'd lock them up next time your brother comes to stay, or you may have a broken leg or two.'

'Thank you for your advice,' she replied, icily. 'Next time my brother comes to stay, we shall probably lock *him* up, away from men who accept his childish wagers.'

'Then you might also teach him how to be more accurate with the truth while you're about it. It doesn't help matters to spin yarns about one's circumstances.' He kept pace with her as she walked quickly towards the stable, his strides worth two of hers.

'So you've never spun yarns about yours, Sir Chase?'

'Never had any need to. Others might have, but not me. Shall we go and take a look?' He stopped by the door, holding out an arm to usher her in.

This was not at all what she had intended, nor could she contain the feeling that Sir Chase had the knack of manoeuvring people into situations they would not have chosen for themselves. He had obviously done the same to her foolish brother.

Well lit by tall windows, the stable's oak stalls were topped by black-painted grilles, each black post topped by a golden ball. Layers of straw muffled the stamps from a forest of legs, and glossy rumps shone like satin, swished by silken tails. The aroma of hay and leather warmed Caterina's

nostrils, and the occasional whicker of greeting combined with the scrunch of hay held in racks on the walls.

The two dapple-greys belonging to Lady Elyot were draped with pale grey rugs monogrammed in one corner, spotlessly clean, their charcoal manes rippling, hooves shining with oil. No effort had been spared to remedy the effects of their bruising drive last evening, yet Caterina withheld the thanks that were overdue.

Without comment, she went alongside the nearest horse, ducking under the cord that roped it off, peeping under the rug and stooping beneath its neck to return along the other side, patting the smooth back as she passed. ‘Good,’ she said, fanning the long tail.

‘It was the least I could do,’ he replied.

‘No, Sir Chase. The least you could do would be to spare my father the distress of having to find the money to pay my brother’s debt. Twenty thousand may be a trifling sum to you, but I can assure you that my father’s circumstances do not accord with the way it looks. He will not have told you how difficult his finances are at the moment. He’s too proud for that. But I’m not, sir. Believe me, he cannot afford it.’

‘By no means is it a trifling sum, Miss Chester. If it had been, I would not be taking the trouble to claim it. Apart from that, your feckless brother should be made to learn that a man does not walk away from a debt of honour without serious consequences. I would have preferred it if he had been hurt a little more. As it is, only his pride will suffer.’

‘As it is, sir, my father is the one to suffer. And me, too, I expect.’ Immediately, she wished she had not allowed him to push her into a snappy retort, for now she would be asked to explain what she meant by that.

‘You, Miss Chester? How does the debt affect you?’

‘Oh, indirectly,’ she waffled. ‘Nothing that need be spoken of. Indeed, I should not have said as much. Please, forget it.’ She began to move away, but Sir Chase’s long stride took him ahead of her and she was stopped by his arm resting on the next golden ball. Frowning, she scowled at the perfect white folds of his neckcloth, aware that this time she had backed herself into a corner.

‘I am intrigued,’ he said, looking down at her with those half-closed eyes that held more challenge than persuasion. ‘What is it about this business, exactly, that affects you personally? Are we talking of dowries?’

Her eyes blazed darkly in the shadowy recess, a small movement of her body telling him how she chafed at being held to account, unable to avoid a confrontation as she had before. ‘That is something I cannot discuss with you, sir. Indeed, it is a subject that will *never* be discussed with you, thank heaven.’

‘Ah, so we *are* talking of dowries, and of yours being lessened quite considerably if your father decides to use it to pay me what he owes. Well, that’s too bad, Miss Chester. How he chooses to pay—’

‘He doesn’t have a *choice!*’ she snarled. ‘Now let me pass, if you please. This conversation is most indelicate.’

‘Come on, woman!’ he scoffed. ‘Don’t tell me your delicate sensibilities are more important than your father’s so-called distress. I’ll not believe you can be so missish, after what I’ve seen. Talk about the problem, for pity’s sake.’

‘I cannot, Sir Chase. You are a stranger to me.’

‘I am the one to whom the money is *owed*,’ he said, leaning his head towards her, ‘so if you can’t discuss it with me, who *can* you discuss it with? Do you have need of your dowry in the near future?’

‘No. Not in the near or the distant future,’ she whispered. ‘There, now, you have your answer. Let me pass.’

He did not pretend to misunderstand her, nor did he immediately respond, but stood looking at her while the soft sounds of munching and the jingle of chains passed them by without recognition. Then he broke the silence. ‘Why not?’ he said, quietly.

With a noticeable effort to keep her voice level, she replied. 'If my father and stepmother find it difficult to understand my reasons, Sir Chase, I can hardly expect you to do any better.'

'Do *you* understand them?' he whispered.

The staggering intake of her breath told him that he had found the weakness in her defence, and that she had no ready answer except a sob that wavered behind one hand. 'Oh!' she gasped.

The barrier of his arm dropped as she bounded away, half-walking, half-running out of the stable yard and up the steps leading to the garden door. It closed with a bang behind her. In the stable, Sir Chase leaned against one of the posts, his hand smoothing the dapple-grey coat beside him. 'Well,' he said, 'that makes an interesting change from the usual run of things, my beauty. How long have we got? Five months, is it?'

Caterina stood with her back pressed against the door in the high wall until the beating of her heart slowed to a more comfortable pace and her breathing eased. Cursing herself for allowing the dreadful man to catch her off guard so soon, she listened to the sounds from the stable yard, a deep voice, the clatter of hooves and Joseph's whistle as he went on with his polishing. Angrily, she had to admit that Sir Chase was more perceptive than a stranger had any business to be, for he had been right to ask if she understood her own reasons when they were so contradictory, so fatalistic and uncompromising.

She was not by nature as pessimistic as her father had become, nor was she anything like her two siblings, who cantered through life certain that the future would smooth itself out reasonably enough if they didn't think too deeply about it. But Caterina did think deeply and with passion about what life was offering and whether she had the right to satisfy her own needs or put them aside in order to please her parents. In recent years, the two viewpoints had become more incompatible, the conflict over her future creating more of a barrier than any of them could have foreseen when her father married Hannah Elwick.

Caterina and Hannah had been on friendly terms well before her father first came down to Richmond from Derbyshire. With an age difference of only six years between the two women and only a few miles across the Great Park to separate them, Caterina had been pleased when the gentle Hannah had accepted Stephen Chester's offer of marriage, seeing years of friendship ahead for herself and Sara. None of them, not even Hannah herself, had expected such an explosion of productiveness and the ensuing need to rearrange the town house on Paradise Road into nurseries and dayrooms, extra bedrooms and a study for the head of the family. No longer was there a music room or a work-room-cum-library or anywhere for a guest to sleep. No longer did she have a room of her own.

Caterina did not dislike the children. Far from it; she was happy that Hannah's parenting skills had been employed so promptly and that Mr Chester had the companionship he had craved for years. What she had found increasingly hard to bear was the way that Hannah's mothering had engulfed the smooth workings of the whole household from morning till night and beyond, for Hannah was not one to hand over her duties completely, as some did. Nurses dealt with the peripheral chores, but Hannah's constant rota of breast-feeding seemed to take over their lives and, although she invited the interest of Caterina and Sara on the basis that it was excellent grounding for them, neither was ready for maternalism on that scale.

Sara would rather have been visiting friends and learning her dance steps, and Caterina would rather have been practising her singing. Now she practised at Sheen Court in Aunt Amelie's music room where she and her teacher could work in an atmosphere of understanding. Aunt Amelie herself had given birth to three delightful children, but Sheen Court was substantially larger than Number 18 Paradise Road, and there Caterina could escape the stifling environment she had grown to dislike.

She had not tried to dissuade Harry from spending his month's holiday in London, and she saw now that, as the eldest, she was partly responsible for what had happened. She had been thinking more of her own and her sister's comfort instead of encouraging him to sample the delights of Richmond. The truth remained, however, that Hannah's brand of domesticity had not sent Caterina hurtling into

the arms of the first man to offer for her. If anything, it had the opposite effect by creating a scene of such discomfort, Hannah looking ill, distressed and tired, her father short of sleep and temper, that might well be Caterina's lot within a year or two.

The Earl of Loddon had made it clear, *after* their engagement had been announced, that his future wife would live in Cornwall with his aged mother while he spent his time in the city. Viscount Hadstoke had also damned himself after his first attempt at a kiss, for the idea of spending her nights in bed with *that* was worse than life in her incommodious home. Title or not, she could not do it.

It had been of little use to explain to her parents about needing to feel love when they both insisted that such emotions grew *after* marriage, not before. Caterina knew otherwise, though unfortunately the examples she quoted were the exception rather than the rule and therefore carried little weight. Aunt Amelie and her husband, Lord Nicholas Elyot, had been lovers before their marriage, and Nick's brother Seton, Lord Rayne, had been the object of Caterina's infatuation six years ago. She had recovered, after a fashion, but six years was barely long enough for her to forget the elation and the anguish of that time, the wanting and the madness. And the foolishness. She had discovered what she thought were the depths of her ability to love, and she wanted it again. Anything else would be second-best, a compromise, and that would be far worse than no marriage at all.

Nevertheless, as she leaned against the garden door, she wondered why her heart was beating to an old familiar rhythm, and why that man's image was impressing itself so forcefully upon her mind. She saw his thickly waving black hair, his wicked roving eyes, the impressively wide shoulders and narrow hips. No detail had escaped her, though she had not wanted to be seen observing. How ironic that a man of his repute, a man so dangerous to know, should have been the only man to ask her about her reasons for not wanting to marry. After such a brief acquaintance, what could it possibly matter to him?

Stephen Chester, Caterina's father, was not entirely without a conscience, though it might have appeared that way during the wager with his daughter's future that morning. But it was rarely that a man was brought bad news *and* a way of righting it in the same visit, and Stephen had wrestled with the problem of his eldest daughter for years now, falling deeper into despondency. Surely he could be forgiven for snatching at this solution with so little soul-searching and so few qualms. And at no cost, either.

It was true he had aimed high, at first perhaps too high. Dukes, earls, viscounts and lords had all shown an interest, to Caterina's amusement and very little cooperation. They had retired, licking their wounds, and he had begun to wonder whether it was her bright sparkling beauty they wanted or her dowry which, if not exactly prodigious, might have lured some of the more threadbare titles. But this man, Sir Chase Boston, had been less interested in the dowry than the idea of a challenge. It was strange, Stephen thought, that there were men who did not mind losing twenty thousand guineas.

Conscience *did* smite Mr Chester, but not very hard and not where it hurt. He knew Sir Chase to be a notorious roué, a womaniser, a gambler, a hard-living hardplaying gallant: one could hardly ignore any of that. But he also had a title, of sorts, and wealth, and had offered to care for Caterina correctly, hitting the nail on the head when he'd suggested that a conventional husband might not be to her taste.

It was hard to know, these days, what would be to her taste, but since she could not bring herself to marry an upright run-of-the-mill duke, then perhaps she might be won over by an extrovert baronet.

Fingering the pattern on the crystal decanter, he sighed deeply. As for not putting any pressure on his wilful daughter to do her duty, well, Caterina knew all about the debt, and if she could be made to regard her future with Sir Chase as a duty to her family, then she might be persuaded to enter into the spirit of the affair with more seriousness than she had previously shown. Compared to an unhealthy IOU hanging over one's head, what was a little fatherly pressure?

Holding up the decanter by its neck, he tilted it this way and that against the light, wishing that Hannah had not, for once, watered his brandy down. No wonder Sir Chase had not been impressed.

Nevertheless, he poured himself another tumblerful and carried it over to his magnificent burr-walnut desk, bought only recently at great expense.

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