

DARK PASSIONS - ALPHA
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A STEAMY DARK REGENCY ROMANCE

LORDS OF PASSION
BOOK ONE



WREN ST CLAIRE



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CHAPTER 1



ROSCARRON CASTLE, PENWYTH, CORNWALL,
EARLY MARCH 1813

“*H*ave you ever been in love?” asked one of the three gentlemen sprawled in armchairs, drawn up before the fireplace. Only the crackle of the flames met his question. All three men were dressed in shirt, breeches, and stockings. All three were more than above par; it was well past midnight, and they had been drinking steadily since the sun went down, taking its meagre early spring warmth with it. A gust of wind howled round the ancient sprawl of Roscarron Castle and made the room, a modern addition, seem cosier.

The interlocutor, their host, sat in the middle, his legs stretched out to the fire, its heat warming his stockinged toes. The glow from the fire threw shadows on the wood panelled walls and provided the only light in the room, the candles having long since guttered and gone out. The speaker raised his glass of amber liquid and swallowed, his

dark hair fell heavily over his forehead. His handsome face wore a brooding expression, dark eyebrows drawn down, shadowing his eyes.

On his right, the blonde man stirred, as if waked from a doze. "What's that Marrek? Turning philosophical?" He lay with one leg over the arm of his chair and twisted a quizzing glass in his long fingers.

"Answer the question," Lord Harlyn Marrek Penwyth, 6th Earl of Tremayne, sipped his whisky.

The blonde man raised an eyebrow. "Very well. No, love's a fairy-tale for children."

"Aye, I have," said the third man, his voice had a soft Scottish burr. He sat up, his roan-coloured hair a burnished copper in the firelight. The blonde man jerked with surprise. "That's news, Rome, when?"

A log fell out of the fireplace and Jerome Viviane Lucas Dalgleish, Viscount Lidney, got up somewhat unsteadily to put it back. This took three attempts with the fire tongs, but eventually he got the log to remain in the flames and sat back down with a flop.

"So, what is the story?" prompted the blonde man.

"It's not a happy tale, Aretas," responded Rome with a sigh.

"They never are. Love doesn't last my friend." Aretas Carlyon, 7th Marquise of Dunmore, stretched. "Still tell us, your tale of woe, Rome."

"I was very young. Nineteen or twenty, I forget. I hadn't attained my majority at any rate or things might have fallen out differently. The lady was barely sixteen. She was the most beautiful lass I'd ever seen. She was trying to catch her hound and stepped out from the curb into the path of my curricule. I narrowly escaped running her down. As it was, her dress was ruined, and she sprained an ankle. Her dog got clean away too, though I retrieved the scallywag later. Not

much more than a pup and no sense in its heid, but she loved that animal to distraction.”

“Who was she?”

“A Methodist minister’s daughter, mores the pity. Her family was as set against the match as mine. My father forbade me to see her and sent me packing to the continent. By the time I returned she was married.” Rome sighed.

“Have you seen her since?” Aretas tossed and caught his quizzing glass.

“No, once I learned she was married, I thought it best to leave her in peace. Twas her feelings for me were not as strong as mine for her, or surely, she would have kept her wee promise and waited for me.”

“There, I told you. Love doesn’t last. Women are faithless whore’s the lot of them.” Aretas sat up. “All’s well that ends well my friend, you’re well out of parson’s mousetrap. Just think, if you’d married her, you would be saddled with a parcel of Methodist relations and a quiver full of brats in that draughty, haunted mausoleum of yours.”

“What’s made you such a cynical son of a beesom, Aretas?” countered Rome.

“Experience, Rome.”

“Fanny Lane.” Marrek remarked.

Aretas flushed. “You are forgetting the Duchess of Haldane and Lady Letitia Moore, among others.”

“There’s no end of your conquests,” Marrek poured himself more whisky. “But it was Fanny Lane you fell in love with. If I remember, you were fifteen at the time.”

“A young boy’s fancy, nothing more,” scoffed Aretas. He bent his gaze on Marrek and went on the attack. “So why all this interest in affairs of the heart of a sudden, Marrek? Have you been pricked by cupids’ arrow again? I thought you’d sworn off love after Heloise?”

“Not likely,” Rome laughed. “I’ll wager he’s been doin’ a

mite of pricking!” He went off in gales of laughter at his own joke.

Aretas threw a cushion at him, which he caught and set behind his head with a contented chuckle. Aretas returned his gaze to Marrek. “Have you fallen in love?”

“You’re right Aretas, I had sworn off after Heloise. But I have fallen victim to a kind of madness, I don’t know if you would call it love, or just obsession.” Marrek rested his head against the wing of his high-backed armchair.

“And the object of this obsession?”

“The niece of a neighbour.” Marrek moved restlessly in his chair. “Her name is Miss Erylin St John, and she is the most enchanting, bewitching, elusive and passionate creature I have ever met. I want her so badly I’ve scarcely slept since I first set eyes on her a month ago.” Marrek ran his hands through his already dishevelled locks and stared broodingly at the fire.

“Have your well-versed seduction techniques failed you, Marrek?” prodded Aretas.

Marrek got up and prowled to the fireplace staring down into the coals. “It’s not like that. I want more than a tumble with her. I want -” he paused as if searching for the right words. “I want her, all of her. Body, soul, and heart. Her very spirit.” His eyes glittered in the firelight with molten passion. “I want to possess her and the very thought terrifies me.”



A MONTH earlier

Erylin St John, let the mare have her head, hooves thundered across the moor towards the rugged coastal cliffs. The wind was fierce and cold, slicing through the heavy green velvet of her riding habit and thick woollen cloak of dark red. The icy air made her throat and ears ache, but the exhilaration of the ride was too much for her.

aration of a good gallop was worth the bracing cold. The sheer breathtaking beauty of her surroundings was an added attraction. Since she had arrived with Papa at Boscowen Manor less than a week ago, she had been enthralled with the majestic wildness of the Cornish coast. She had taken every opportunity to explore moor, cliffs and pockets of sandy beach and rock pools. The salt air, the thunder of the surf on the rocks and wild winds drew her like a magnet. Never in all their travels had she felt so instantly at home. Perhaps it was because she had been born here, even though she left before she could remember any of it, that Cornwall was in her blood. Whatever the reason, she fell instantly and violently in love with Cornwall and knew in her heart that she never wanted to leave.

Today she headed for the rocky outcrop she had glimpsed at a distance for several days, determined to explore its secrets. As she drew closer, she realised that part of the shape she had seen at a distance and assumed was cliff, was in fact the sprawling outline of a huge stone ruin, half fallen into the sea. She was approaching it from the rear and as she slowed the mare to a walk, she took in the broken stone towers and parapets of the ancient keep. Empty slit windows in the towers stared sightlessly out to sea. The broken wall stopped abruptly where the land had crumbled away taking the wall with it. As she came up to the grey stone, she saw that there were other, newer buildings beyond the ruins separated by an expanse of open untended grass. Letting the mare pick her way carefully among the tumble of stones and uneven ground, she skirted the ruin, looking up at the parapet jutting out from the tower and overlooking the cliff below it. The background rumble of the surf pounded the rocks beneath the cliff. The clouds parted and let a beam of sunlight through, warming her back and a flurry of wings and a seagull's cry, pierced the air, startlingly her. "Oh!" she

looked around for the source of the disturbance and found a rider watching her from the lee of the tower.

“This is private property you realise,” he said, moving towards her. His horse was a chestnut gelding, eighteen hands, a fine horse. But no less fine than his rider. The gentleman, for he was a gentleman by the quality of his dress, and voice, had dark wavy hair, worn slightly longer than was fashionable and a strikingly handsome face that bordered on harsh. His riding coat showed broad shoulders and his breeches a set of powerful thighs. As he got closer, she discovered that he also possessed the bluest most penetrating eyes she had ever seen. They widened as he took in her appearance and she felt suddenly breathless.

“I- I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I shan’t do so again.” She wheeled her horse and galloped off, her heart thumping madly in her chest. What made her flee so precipitously she couldn’t say, but something in his demeanour sent shivers over her skin and a clamour of warning in her heart. She heard the thunder of hooves behind her and glanced back, he was following her. She leaned over her mare’s neck and urged her faster, with a kick of her heel. The sounds of pursuit got closer, and she looked back again, this time seriously frightened by this dogged chase. She attempted to zigzag over the ground, but it didn’t help, he kept with her and his geldings longer stride meant that he soon drew abreast of her and reaching out with a large, gloved hand, brought both horses to a steaming halt.

The beasts’ sides heaved as they snorted cloudy breath in the cold air, steam rising from their coats. She was breathing hard herself, her heart thumping madly. Whether it was nerves or exhilaration, she couldn’t tell, but she laughed, as he brought his horse around, alongside of her, nudging her with a knee. His eyes burned with blue fire and his pale Celtic skin was flushed above the dark stubble of his beard,

his hair hung loose and wild about his face. Despite his gentleman's attire, he looked like a Celtic warrior and her pulse quickened with something other than the thrill of the chase.

"Why did you run?" his voice sent another shiver over her skin. His hand still held her rein. His horse sidled closer and his thigh brushed against her legs, hooked over the side-saddle, beneath the thick velvet skirt of her habit.

"I-I don't know," she admitted with a shrug and a smile. There was a crackling energy about him that had her caught in its spell. She could guess that his shirt and coat concealed a muscular torso and arms, judging from the flex in his bicep as he held the reins of both horses with one hand. She was conscious of never before having met a man who overwhelmed her with so much masculine power. It was breathtaking and mesmerising. Terrifying and thrilling.

"You can certainly ride," he transferred the reins to his left hand and reached out to cup the back of her skull with his other hand. He brought his head closer to hers, his mouth hovered over hers, his impossibly blue eyes bored into her as if he would read her soul. Her breath stopped, her skin tingled and heat flushed her body in spite of the cold wind that danced around them. Slowly his intent penetrated her mind, for one breathless second, she wondered what those beautifully curved lips would feel like pressed to her mouth.

In the next she pulled back, raised her hand, and slapped his face, hard. He uttered an oath, his cheek flamed under the slap of her gloved hand, and he jerked back, his expression going from molten to startled, his hold on her rein slackened and his horse sidled restlessly backwards. She edged her horse away, her heart still thumping wildly and her breath puffing in the crisp air.

"Sir I think you've mistaken me for a light skirt. I'm no such thing! Good day to you!" She kicked her horse and

bolted away from him back towards the village of Gwithian and Boscowen Manor. She feared he would pursue her again, but her slap seemed to have jerked him out of whatever folly had possessed him, for she glanced back and saw him watching her, his hand still held to his cheek. But he made no move to follow her this time.

She kept riding at full pelt until the curve of the land hid him from view. Slowing the mare, she rode at a more sedate pace back to the village and the manor, wondering who her wild Celtic warrior was and what madness had seized him and, she reluctantly admitted, herself. For she had come within a hairsbreadth of letting him follow through on his clear intent to kiss her. A complete stranger, a man whose name she didn't even know.

HARLYN MARREK PENWYN, sat his horse dumbfounded as the most bewitchingly attractive woman he'd ever met, rode pell-mell away from him for the second time in less than a quarter-hour. His cheek still stung, a reminder of his momentary lapse of reason. From her dress and her manner of speech he should have known she was a lady, despite being out here on the moor without a shred of a chaperone or groom in sight.

He had watched her for some minutes as she moved around the tower, her red hair curling down her back, her face raised up to regard the ruined stones. Even at that distance he had felt a tug of attraction; when she turned startled by the birds who betrayed his presence to her, he was impelled towards her to discover if the distant promise would be honoured up close.

It was, she was young and lovely, a slender curvaceous figure set off to advantage in a tailored green velvet habit and an oval face of clear milky skin, slightly freckled over the

bridge of a small straight nose, a well-formed mouth and most captivating of all, deep green eyes that sparkled with life.

When he startled her, and she took off the first time, before he could really speak with her, he gave chase from sheer instinct. When he caught her and she laughed, her face flushed her eyes alight with her passionate nature he lost his head. And she slapped him for his impertinence. He frowned and set his horse for home. He should forget her, but he could not. He must discover who she is and where she lived.

CHAPTER 2



No doubt the Vicar was gratified to see the Earl in his pew that Sunday morning. An unlooked-for circumstance. Marrek, after some debate with himself, had concluded that the best way to discover the identity of his mysterious rider would be attendance at Church. If she was a guest of the local gentry, which seemed most likely, then she would almost certainly be among the congregation on a Sunday morning. Thus, The Reverend Hugh Barkley was able to nod benignly at his patron, the Earl of Tremayne, from the vestry and the Earl bowed politely back.

The Tremayne pew was positioned opposite the pulpit and perpendicular to the rest of the pews, the purpose being to enable the congregation to see its local noble family when they graced the church with their presence. Since Marrek was the last of his family and he hadn't been to church in years, his extraordinary visit was bound to cause a stir.

The arrangement of the pews, was, in this instance, to his advantage since he was able to watch the congregation of the village of Gwithian as they filed into the small stone Church, with its narrow stained-glass windows on this chill morning

at the tail end of winter. And his patience was rewarded as he noted the Baron and Baroness Lyndhurst enter, with his lovely red head and a middle-aged man in tow. The man was likely a relative, perhaps her father, from the slight resemblance in the set of the jaw. The Baron and his lady and their guests, settled themselves at one of the front pews and Marrek had leisure to observe his quarry as she assisted the Baroness to her seat and having deposited her reticule and prayer book beside her, knelt briefly to pray before taking her own seat.

She was dressed today, in a dark blue woollen dress and matching spencer, both embroidered with white flowers, this ensemble complimented by white gloves and brown pelisse dressed with fur and a matching muff. Her glorious hair was covered by a bonnet, with matching blue and white ribbons. The poke on the bonnet was not fashionably high, but the style of her gown was not so shabby as to be noticeably dowdy. However, it was worn enough to show that even her Sunday best was not new. Seated, she took up her prayer book and opened it to the appropriate page for the service. She had not so much as glanced in his direction and he fancied she didn't know he was there, yet. How would she react when she discovered his presence?

The Vicar and Deacon emerged from the Vestry, the organist started up and the congregation rose as one to sing the first hymn. The whispers in the church behind prayer books and the more overt pointed fingers of children, caused by his presence, created quite a stir. The Baroness opened her eyes wide and lifted her prayer book to hide her whispered colloquy with the Baron, who, less subtle than his wife raised his quizzing glass and regarded Marrek with unabashed curiosity. Then smiled and nodded genially in his direction. Marrek inclined his head in acknowledgement. The Baroness spoke quietly to her pretty guest and his lovely

redhead raised her face enough to peek at him and her disconcerted look was everything he could have hoped for. She flushed and dropped her eyes instantly and kept them down. She had just learned that she had slapped the face of the local lord.

He suppressed his own smile but kept his eyes on her for the rest of the service. She studiously kept hers off him. Marrek was forcibly reminded why his didn't attend church when an hour and a half later, the service eventually came to its tedious end. Following the Vicar and Deacon out of the church, he shook the Vicars hand and responded to his hearty welcome with a murmured platitude. He was thus perfectly positioned when the Baron and his lady and guests came out.

"Tremayne!" the Baron held out his hand with jovial bonhomie. "You know my wife, Mary, I fancy, but you'll not have met my guests, Mr Kieran St John and his lovely daughter Miss Erylin St John."

Erylin, an unusual name for an unusual girl. He took the small, gloved hand offered to him and bowed over it. "Miss St John, a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"My lord," she murmured, dipping a curtsy, and keeping her eyes down. Which was a vast pity. He wanted to see those green beauties again. Preferably flashing at him with humour or passionate joy or even fury. He had seen all three in their first brief encounter.

"Erylin's my sister Damaris', girl, you know," the Baron rattled on with a proud smile, "Ain't she a beauty? The spit of her mother, eh Kieran?" he dug his brother-in-law in the ribs and St John nodded with a proud smile of his own.

"She is that, Henry."

"Are you making a long visit in Cornwall, St John?" asked Marrek, addressing the father.

"Not long enough I fear, my lord. My business will likely

take me off again soon, but Erylin's to make her home with her uncle and aunt for a while."

"A gratifying circumstance," Marrek smiled.

"For me or Cornwall?" asked the lady, looking up with a barbed smile.

Marrek laughed, surprised by this sudden attack of wit. "Both I should hope, but Cornwall most definitely."

"Ah I see you share my niece's wit, Tremayne. She's a clever girl as her father will tell you."

"No doubt. What do you do St John? What business will take you away so precipitously?"

"My father is an archaeologist, my lord."

"I'm not familiar with the term, but my knowledge of Greek suggests the study of ancient things?" Marrek hazarded a guess.

"An excellent definition my lord," St John said. "I spend my days grubbing in the dirt looking for treasures and writing about what I find. I've been invited to Egypt by a friend who has been living there for some time. But the climate is insalubrious, to say nothing of the uncertain nature of the natives. I felt it was unsafe to take Erylin with me."

"And I have told you Papa, that if it is unsafe for me, then you shouldn't be going either!" Miss St John threw her father a gloriously heated look from those magnificent eyes, and Marrek's pulses stirred.

"Well said, my dear," interposed the Baroness. "Henry, I fear it is too chilly to be standing about all morning. My lord, it was a pleasure to see you, do call upon us. We are at home to visitors most mornings."

"I will be certain to do so, ma'am." He bowed over her hand and strolled with them to the carriage the ladies had arrived in. Lyndhurst and St John would ride. He handed both ladies into their carriage and bowed low enough over

Erylin's hand as she seated herself to just brush her glove with his lips. She snatched her hand away with a glowering look and a tinge of pink to her cheeks. He smiled and stepped back, as their driver clicked the horses into motion and the carriage drew away. Their men fell in behind and Marrek strolled over to collect his own horse from his groom, who had kept the animal warm for the duration of the service. "You can go home Kerwyn, I've a mind for a gallop along the cliffs before I head for home," he said swinging up into the saddle.

"Very well my lord."



RETURNING to the Manor after Church, Erylin slipped upstairs to change into her riding dress and out to the stables to harness and saddle the mare. She wanted a gallop along the cliff tops before the midday meal. The realisation that the man whose face she had slapped was none other than the local lord and an Earl to boot had shaken her more than she cared to admit. Or perhaps it was the dratted man's undeniable attraction that had her so agitated. Whatever the cause, a good gallop seemed the best medicine for what ailed her.

She gave the mare her head and let the wind pull her hair from its demure knot. The mare's stride ate up the slight undulating green expanse of the moor, and she pulled up at the cliffs edge. She dismounted and peered down at the tossing waves dashing on the rocky foreshore of the beach below. The tide was out, revealing rock pools and a stretch of sandy beach. A steep sandy path was too tempting to pass up. Tethering the mare to a nearby, salt and wind twisted tree, she set her foot on the path and made her careful way down. Reaching the rocky foreshore below, she tucked her skirt hem into her waistband and picked her way across the rocks

with her sturdy kid boots, stopping to crouch down and investigate the contents of the rock pools. Removing her gloves and stuffing them in the pocket of her riding habit, she plunged her hands into the cold water, picking up pretty shells and worn pebbles in interesting shapes. She was so engrossed she didn't hear anyone approach over the background sounds of the waves and cry of gulls.

"Digging for treasure, Miss St John?"

She started, almost losing her balance on the slippery rocks and Tremayne put out a hand to grasp her arm and hauled her up right and into the sheltering circle of his arm. "Take care, I didn't mean to startle you." He was an effective wind brake and the muscles of his arm flexed to hold her carefully as he guided her back to the stability of the sandy beach.

"Thank you," she stepped away from his arm, flustered and red-faced, but glad to observe that he didn't try to hold her against her inclination.

He gave her a little bow. "At your service Miss St John. I owe you an apology for my behaviour when we first met. It was not appropriate."

Recovering her equilibrium, she untucked her skirt from her waist band and flung him a minatory look, "No it was not. I'm relieved to discover you know how to behave like a gentleman. Should you forget yourself again, I'll take leave to tell you that I have methods for deterring unwanted attentions."

"Really?" He looked fascinated, which wasn't the response she had been expecting. "Do tell me what they are?"

"I shall not, unless your behaviour requires me to demonstrate them." She spoke with dignity. "You must know that following Papa about the world necessitated such measures. Unfortunately, many of your sex are not gentlemen, my lord."

“Yes, we’re a depraved lot, I grant you.”

“Indeed, were you attempting to atone this morning?”

“This morning?”

“At Church. I understand there hasn’t been a Tremayne in the pew for over ten years. Your presence was quite a topic for gossip round the village, sir.”

“Ah yes, I imagine it might well have been. It was the only thing I could think to do you see.” He smiled and her pulse skipped a beat and was followed by a rapid tattoo against her ribs. The man was too good-looking for his own or anyone else’s health. “The only way I could think of to discover who you were,” he added.

A sudden gust of wind tore at her cloak, lifting her tumbled hair across her face and she shivered.

He glanced up at the sea behind her. “The tide is coming in. Let me show you an easier path up than the one you came down by,” he offered her his arm. Perforce she took it and let him lead her up the cliff, by an albeit easier terraced walk. She did her best to ignore the sensation of muscles beneath the sleeve of his coat. By the time they reached the top, their footprints on the sand had disappeared beneath the froth and churn of the returning tide. She was somewhat breathless but warmed by the exertion and a bubble of laughter for the sheer joy of this place burst out of her as she stared out at the surging blue-green water dashing against the rocks.

“Is it not marvellous?” she said looking up at him. “So beautiful and wild. It makes me wish I could fly like those birds up there!” she waved at the gulls soaring on the winds above their heads.

“Yes, I’ve often felt that myself,” he looked down at her and a for a moment she lost herself in the intensity of his molten blue eyes. A bolt of heat coursed through her body and pooled low in her belly. This was a dangerous man. Her nerves jangled, part terror, part temptation. She knew better

than to trust this feeling. Yet this was a stronger pull than she had ever felt before.

Tearing her gaze away she said breathlessly, "I should be getting back, I'll be late for dinner." She strode towards their horses, both tethered to the tree, and he kept pace with her, but made no attempt to touch her, for which she was grateful. She was not quite sure what she would have done if he had, for her judgement was, of a sudden, quite upset.

He reached for the mare's bridle and untethered it for her and then knelt to boost her into the saddle. She set her hand on his shoulders and her foot in his cupped hands. He lifted her easily and she settled herself with her leg over the hook of the side-saddle. He rose and held the mares face strap looking up at her.

"I plan to call at Boscowen Manor, I hope I will find you at home, Miss St John?"

"That will depend upon when you call my lord," she said with a dip of her head and a small smile, that she hoped covered her level of agitated delight. Never had she felt so charmed and upset by a man's attentions. So tempted to ignore the hard-won lessons she had learned at sixteen.

He bowed and let go the strap. She flicked the bridle, turned the mares head, and kicked her to a trot and rapidly to a gallop. She didn't look back, but her fancy had his gaze on her until the rise and fall of the land hid her from his sight.



THE WIND WHIPPED round the ruins of old Roscarron Castle sending goosebumps over Marrek's skin as he ascended the steps of the last remaining tower to the parapet overlooking the sea below. Clouds scudded across the face of the moon, obscuring then revealing it, between flurries of buffeting

wind and rain. It was on a night like this, that Heloise jumped. The moon emerged from cloud and shone bright on the black waters below as he leaned over the parapet and stared into its inky depths. Below, the waves dashed themselves to foam on the rocks, boiling up the cliff, eroding it from beneath. One day this parapet and its tower would crumble into the sea, like the rest of the old castle.

The salt spray in the air seared his lungs and a night creature cawed at the moon, broad wings flapping to get uplift on the thermal draft. He watched it climb and clenched his jaw with envy at its effortless flight. He looked down again into the maelstrom below, pulled by the promise of an end to ceaseless pain and gripped the cold stone, letting the icy wind slice through his shirt as he relived the moment when she went over the edge into the water. The moment he couldn't stop her. The moment her screams were taken by the wind and her name tore from his throat in despair. The moment his guilt became indelibly etched on his soul.

Erylin St John. Her laughter rang in his head, chasing out the darkness. Her eyes, so full of life, tempted him. Mocked him. Called to him. His body shook with the ache of longing. What he wouldn't give...

He took in a breath of icy air and blinked. He would dare to try, at least. If he did not, he might as well cast himself into the sea too. For living like this, tethered to the past by guilt and fear was a living death of sorts. But now Erylin had appeared, conjured as if from his dreams, and there was a thread of hope. Perhaps. Perhaps he was mistaken. Perhaps she was not the solution he craved. Perhaps she was not what she appeared to be. Perhaps she would run from him in fear and loathing when she knew the truth. But he had to find out. He had to try. He had to know.

CHAPTER 3



Erylin selected a blue floss to thread through her embroidery needle and began to set stitches carefully into the cloth. The pattern was inspired by the tiles of a Mosque she had visited with her father in Istanbul. The morning sun slanted through the French windows of the back parlour, adding to the warmth afforded by the fire in the grate. The prospect of the garden through the windows was very pleasant, the first taste of spring.

“What do you think of this pattern my dear?” Her aunt held out a copy of *La Belle Assemblée*, showing a plate of a willowy lady in a morning gown. “Remove the bows and the veil on the hat and change the colour, to blue instead of that unsightly purple and I think it would become you excellently well.”

Erylin nodded, reviewing the illustration. “Yes, I think you’re right. Are you proposing I make it up myself? I’m not sure that my pattern cutting skills are up to that.”

“No of course not my dear. There is an excellent seamstress in the village. She is not up to London standards of

course, but you need some additional gowns to tide you over until we go to London.”

“London, ma’am?”

“Of course, didn’t your father discuss it with you?”

“There was some talk of visiting the Museum and St Paul’s...”

“Good heavens no! We are going for the Season, your Season, my dear. I confess I cannot wait to see you decked out in a ball gown, with a little town bronze. You will be stunning. It’s eight years since we fired off my Georgie, it will be tremendous fun to dress you and take you about.” She stopped and leaned forward to pat Erylin’s knee. “Don’t look so my dear, I thought your father discussed this with you.”

“No, ma’am, he did not. I am overwhelmed with your generosity. But what purpose can such activity accomplish?”

“Why the securing of an offer of marriage of course. We need to get you settled as advantageously as possible.”

“I see, and Papa agreed to this?” Erylin’s throat tightened.

“It was his request my dear. Which is only right and proper. He has left it a little late, twenty-two is almost on the shelf, but you are so beautiful it won’t be a problem, and a little maturity will lend you confidence and grace.”

Erylin bowed her head blinking the sting of tears from her eyes, “I didn’t know that Papa wished to be rid of me.” She wiped a tear off her cheek.

“Oh, my dear no!” Aunt Mary got up from her seat and came to sit beside her on the couch and put an arm round her. “My dear it’s not like that at all. He was most reluctant to part with you. He confessed to selfishly wanting to keep you with him, but he acknowledges that it isn’t fair to you. How can you find a suitable husband if you are traipsing round the world in his train? So, he agreed with Henry to bring you to us so that you may have a Season and the opportunity to meet some eligible gentlemen.”

Erylin dug a handkerchief out of her reticule and wiped her face. "I see, why do you think did he not discuss this with me?"

"I think he may have been afraid to my dear. You know what he is. Never wanting to confront anything unpleasant of an emotional nature." Aunt Mary hugged her.

She nodded. It was true. Papa always preferred to get over heavy ground, as he phrased it, as lightly as possible. "You have been so kind to me," Erylin smiled a watery smile. She wasn't normally a watering pot, but the prospect of Papa going away without her, combined with Aunt Mary's kindness was like to undo her. She wasn't accustomed to feminine support. It had been her and Papa for so long. Just the two of them. It was the end of her life as she had known it. As if divining the trend of her thoughts, Aunt Mary added, "It is the beginning of a whole new chapter of your life my dear. A natural change."

"Of course. I suppose I couldn't go on forever with Papa, but -" she swallowed. "I wish I had a little more time to prepare and get used to the idea."

"Oh, you do. We won't be going up to London until the end of the month and the Season proper doesn't get underway until May. There will be time to buy you a whole wardrobe of dresses and to find your feet in society before the really fashionable balls and routs begin. I will hope to secure you a voucher for Almack's too. It is the most exclusive club, run by a group of appalling women, though do not ever repeat that my dear, because their approval is essential to your success."

"I see," said Erylin, not really seeing at all. It sounded bewildering. Very different from the life she was accustomed to. Could she really find a life's companion in the ballrooms of London's Haute Ton? It seemed an odd and artificial way to find a mate. But it was true that finding a suitable husband

had not come her way in the last seven years. Oh, plenty of men had propositioned her, she had been offered every inducement to offer up her virtue and several, as she had indicated to Tremayne, had attempted to take what she didn't offer willingly. And one who... she pushed the thought firmly away. She would not revisit that dark moment, what was done couldn't be undone. Then there was Tremayne...

As if conjured from her thoughts, the door opened and Forbes, the Baron's excellent butler, announced, "The Earl of Tremayne, ma'am."

Erylin stuffed her handkerchief down the side of the couch and took up her embroidery hastily as Aunt Mary rose to her feet and the Earl of Tremayne stepped into the room. "Tremayne, how kind of you to call," Aunt Mary stepped forward to welcome him into the room, giving Erylin a moment to compose herself. Tremayne, handsome as ever in a blue coat that did nothing to hide the powerful set of his shoulders paired with russet-coloured breeches and top boots that showed his equally powerful legs to advantage, bowed over Aunt's hand.

"Baroness, I hope I find you well?"

"Very well thank you."

He bowed in Erylin's direction as she put aside her embroidery and rose to give him a curtsy. "Miss St John," he took her hand. It was the first time they had clasped hands without gloves, and she was shocked by the bolt of electricity that washed through her at his touch, bringing a distinct flush of heat in its wake. She felt herself blushing and dropped her eyes in confusion, unable to meet that molten look from his impossibly blue eyes. "A pleasure to meet you again Miss St John, I am fortunate to find you at home."

That brought her head up, and she suppressed a smile, recovering her hand she reseated herself and took up her embroidery. "Indeed, you are my lord."

He took a seat beside her while Aunt rang for tea and enquired politely what her project was. "A pair of slippers for Papa," she glanced sideways at him conscious of his bulk taking up a good half of the three-person settee.

"You set neat stitches, Miss St John,"

Her lips twitched as she suppressed a smile. His lordship was on his best behaviour today.

"Thank you, my lord," she said demurely.

"Erylin has a number of unusual accomplishments, Tremayne," Aunt Mary reseated herself in her armchair.

"I'm sure she does." She could feel him looking at her, and she concentrated very hard on her stitches. "Do you care to tell me what they are Miss St John?"

She stuck her needle in her work and set it aside. "Certainly, my lord. I can read and write in five, no six languages: English, French, German, Spanish, Latin and Greek," she counted them off on her fingers. "My mathematics is more than passable, I can pitch a tent, shoe a horse, draw and paint in watercolours with reasonable accuracy, cook over an open fire, set broken bones and oh all manner of trivial but useful things if one is grubbing in the dirt looking for artefacts, in foreign countries, as Papa is wont to do." She smiled at him mendaciously and added, "And I cannot for the life of me sing or play a musical instrument. I'm not sure that I can dance either, at least not the fashionable sort. I can manage a jig, but that won't do at Almack's will it Aunt Mary?"

Poor Aunt looked thrown into disorder by this recital, but Tremayne was grinning like a satyr. She couldn't resist an answering smile.

"Accomplished indeed. Where did you learn all this?"

"Traipsing round after Papa of course. He is quite unworldly you know. One of us had to be practical. I don't know how he will go on without me. It quite concerns me Aunt Mary."

The door opened to admit the butler with the tea tray. Aunt Mary asked her to pour, and she handed his lordship a dish of tea and a plate of cakes, with a barely suppressed smile. He took them with a murmured thank you and set the tea aside to cool. "If you are planning to take London by storm Miss St John, might I offer my services in showing you the way of things? I believe I'm passable on the dance floor."

Aunt Mary interposed, "That's very kind of you Tremayne. I was planning to hold a small dinner dance here, not above eight couples, so that Erylin might find her feet a little before London. I can count on you to attend?"

"I would be delighted." He smiled at Erylin with that molten look that set her pulses fluttering, and she sat down hastily, bending to pick up her bag of embroidery silks that had fallen on the floor, in an attempt to cover her flushed cheeks. She sat and sipped her tea, while Aunt discussed the invitation list with his lordship.

When he had finished his tea, he waved at the French widows. "A lovely vista you have here, might I persuade Miss St John to take a stroll around the garden with me?"

"I don't see why not. Fetch your wrap my dear." Aunt Mary nodded at her. Erylin looked from one to the other and bit her lip. His lordship had contrived to have private speech with her in full view of her aunt. What was it he wanted to say to her, out of Aunt's hearing?

She rose and slipped upstairs to fetch her wrap, arranged it around her shoulders and checked her hair. It was dressed in a simple chignon on the nape of her neck, not fashionable but practical. A few ringlets had escaped to curl round her face.

Descending the stairs, she discovered that her heart was beating rather fast. A little bubble of excitement sat beneath her breastbone. Tremayne spelled danger, she knew it, yet, like the dizzying drop from a cliff top, something in her

longed to throw caution to the winds. She had been so careful for so long...Taking a calming breath she turned the parlour door handle and entered the room.

MARREK ROSE to his feet as soon as Erylin re-entered the parlour. She had draped a soft green cashmere wrap around her shoulders over the simple cambric gown she wore. Neither of these items were new, her hair wasn't dressed fashionably, yet she was as beautiful as the wildflowers that grew along the cliff edge, as beautiful and natural as the sea itself. With an approving nod from the Baroness, he offered her his arm and opened the French window onto the garden. It was a large rectangle of grass edged by flower beds and surrounded by a hedge. The grass was crisscrossed with paths in the centre of which sat a fountain featuring a muscular Greek God with a nymph draped round him in suggestive fashion. At one end there was a garden seat under the branches of a tree. It was a fine day, fluffy white clouds scudded across the blue sky and rare spring sunshine warmed the slight breeze that stirred the branches of the trees. The hedge provided some shelter, and it was pleasant without being too hot. "A lovely day," he remarked, and she glanced up at him with a slight smile.

"It is an exquisite day, quite the best we have had since we arrived here."

"Do you like Cornwall?"

"I love it," her face broke open in that passionate enthusiasm he found so attractive and his pulse thudded. She was like to make him drunk on her sheer presence. Just when he concluded she was demure and dull she would say something witty or outrageous or show him a glimpse of the passionate soul that lived behind the mask of a lady. Erylin St John was no ordinary girl.

“Do you like Cornwall?” she countered.

Jerked out of his reverie he stepped them round a puddle in the pavers. “I was born here. It is my home.”

“I was born here too, although I don’t remember it.”

“This is your first visit as an adult?”

“To England? Yes, I have lived abroad all my life. This feels like a foreign country to me. My childhood was spent in Italy and Greece. The late troubles in France kept us away from that region. We have spent the last eight years in Turkey and Mesopotamia. Papa has longed to go to Africa forever. This latest opportunity seemed too good to pass up. I am sorry to not be going with him.”

They had reached the fountain, and she looked up at it and remarked, “Does the male anatomy truly have that many muscles or has the sculptor taken licence to invent some?”

He laughed. “Yes, he does look a little over developed.”

“She on the other hand, seems boneless.”

“You have an acute and critical eye, Miss St John.”

“I have seen a great deal of Greek statuary. Some of it very good, this one isn’t. In fact, it’s quite appalling. Hercules and a nymph.”

They continued their leisurely stroll towards the bench. “When does your father leave, Miss St John?”

“Soon, I think. Before we go up to London at any rate.”

“I will make it a point to call upon him, before he does so.”

He watched her intently as he spoke and saw her cheeks flush. An answering heat surged through his body.

She glanced up at him and away, her tongue licked her lower lip with apparent apprehension. “How should I understand that my lord?”

They had reached the bench and stopped. His heart thudded heavily in his chest, his mouth was dry. Was she afraid? He swallowed. “I would seek his approval to continue our acquaintance, Miss St John. If that should be pleasing to

you?" He wanted a great deal more than that, he suppressed a shudder of longing to have her so close and not to touch her...

She still wasn't looking at him and the suspense of waiting for her answer had his muscles taught as bow strings. "Miss St John?" He touched her jaw lightly with fingers that trembled, turning her face up so that he could see her eyes. And they blazed with a light and longing that took his breath away and flooded his body with aching heat.

"Oh my, what a lovely garden!" The voice cut through the moment of connection and Marrek dropped his hand as Erylin pulled away, and they both turned to confront the sight of Mrs Caldecott, with her daughter Miss Alice Caldecott in tow and the Baroness following them. Miss Alice, was a shy pale creature who did not appear to advantage in her mother's vicinity. Mrs Caldecott, with three other daughters to establish, had made no secret of her attempts to match Miss Alice with Marrek.

"My lord, how delightful to see you. It is such a fine day we just had to call upon dear Mary. Of course, you know my little Alice don't you. And you must be dear Mary's niece that we have heard so much about."

Erylin blinked at this barrage and Marrek, hid his annoyance with difficulty behind a smile that was more a baring of teeth. Catching sight of Miss Caldecott's mortified expression, he felt a very mild stab of sympathy for the girl. Not sufficient however to prompt him to shield her from her mother's appalling tactics. With a nod to all four ladies, he excused himself on the grounds of another appointment and left.

CHAPTER 4



The next day Marrek returned to Boscowen Manor, this time to call upon Mr St John. He found him with the Baron, in the library. Both gentlemen had obviously been enjoying a postprandial nap brought on by lunch. Roused by the butler's announcement of his presence, the Baron struggled to his feet and held out a hand.

"Tremayne, come in. Brandy please Forbes. You'll join us in a snifter my lord?"

Marrek shook hands with both men and took a seat in the third chair the room boasted. The fire was welcome, for the day, unlike yesterday was grey, overcast, and chilly. He accepted a brandy from the butler and the Baron raised the topic of the tin mine, which kept them occupied for ten minutes. Marrek contrived to turn the conversation to St John's travels and learned something of the man's adventures. He was wondering how to raise the topic he most wanted to discuss, when the Baron did it for him.

"Good of you to call yesterday on the ladies, Tremayne. Mary tells me you've accepted an invitation for the little

dinner dance she is planning to introduce Erylin to the neighbourhood.”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll be glad to come.” He paused turning his focus to St John. “I confess sir I am very taken with your daughter.”

St John looked at him thoughtfully over his glass. “I thought as much. She’s a rare pearl, my Erylin.”

“I concur. I understand your intention is to allow her a season in London?”

“Aye, Henry and Mary have been kind enough to offer her the chance.”

“I venture to suggest she will enjoy an uncommon success.”

“Of course, I would expect nothing less.” St John sipped his brandy, his long legs stretched out before him. “What’s your interest in my daughter my lord?”

Marek took a breath. Well, there was the opening he’d been looking for. “I’d like to marry her.” Marrek’s heart thumped uncomfortably as he said the words.

“Would you?” St John’s cool response took him aback. “Well let us see how you feel after she’s had a season, shall we?”

Marrek stiffened and frowned. “I’m not a nobody, Sir.”

“I don’t care about your title, or even your wealth for that matter. It’s your character I’m concerned with, and you’ve not the best of reputations I hear.” St John regarded him with cool detachment. “I care about my daughter my lord. I’d like to know her husband does too.”

“I do Sir.” Marrek clenched a hand on his knee. This was not the reaction he had expected.

“Do you? I’ll wager you’re attracted to her. She’s a beautiful girl, but you’ve only known her a matter of days, less, hours, by my calculation. That is not enough time to have formed a lasting attachment. And there are her feelings in

the matter to be considered. It might be odd of me, but I would like her to be happy."

Marrek silently cursed the local gossip. The Baron was watching this exchange with interest, bordering on amusement and Marrek's temper spiked. "So would I. I can assure you Sir that whatever you have heard of my reputation-

"Save it, my lord. You can assure me all you like, I want proof. Proof that you've changed your ways, proof of your feelings for my daughter, and most important of all, her feelings towards you." St John sat forward.

"I see. You would forbid me from speaking to her?" He spoke through clenched teeth.

"You've my permission to court her certainly. But you'll do so in a proper manner under Henry and Mary's eye. And you'll not speak to her of marriage yet. It's too soon. In any case she's a sensible girl and would send you to the right about if you did at this juncture. I know my daughter, Tremayne. Speak to me again on this matter when you do too. If your feelings remain constant, and you are able to attach her, I'll consider your proposal then."

Marek put down his glass with a decided snap, rose and gave both men a stiff bow. "I'll bid you good day then." As he closed the door, his temper wasn't improved by hearing the Baron remark, "Well said Kieran. He didn't expect that."

"No, that was patently obvious. I'll look to you Henry to keep an eye on him, make sure he don't overstep the line. I've met men like him before, handsome and entitled. Think they can have whatever they want for the lifting of a finger. Well, he'll do more than lift a finger to win my Erylin. She'll see to that. My girls got spirit, and she needs and deserves a man who can handle her and who will love her, care for her, respect her."

Marek stepped away from the door, his spurt of temper draining away. St John was right. A pall of melancholy doubt

fell on his shoulders as he left the house. Erylin St John might be the right woman for him, but was he the right man for her?



ERYLIN WAS in the stable brushing the mare Uncle Henry had given her to ride. It was chilly and a bit damp, but her restlessness needed a physical outlet. She had been unable to sleep or settle to anything since Tremayne's visit yesterday. She was still turning over the conversation in the garden in her mind and trying to decide what he had meant when they were interrupted by the advent of the Caldecott's. His abrupt exit at that point, lead her to believe that he had regretted his words.

"I thought I'd find you here."

"Papa!" she looked up startled out of her reverie. Her father leaned against the stall, his hands in his pockets. She smiled at him affectionately, she had been trying very hard not to think about him leaving, because every time she did, she wanted to burst into tears. "Isn't she a beauty?" she stroked the horse's nose.

"She is. Almost as beautiful as you."

"Papa, you're full of nonsense. And I'm not sure that I care to be compared to a horse, either."

"I didn't say you look like one," he said mildly. "But the comparison holds well. Spirited, practical and beautiful."

She shook her head at his nonsense and went on brushing.

"You know I will miss you Erry."

She nodded, blinking back tears. "I'll miss you too."

He looked at his boot. "I want you to be happy, sweetheart. You know that don't you?"

"Of course!" Her voice was husky. "We talked about this. I

know you want to see me settled. I can't go on following you about forever." She wiped a tear off her cheek.

"Oh, darling don't cry!" He wrapped his arms round her, and she dropped the curry comb to lean her head on his shoulder.

"I'm not crying — much. I just -" She stopped, swallowing. "I'm all right." She lifted her head, putting a brave face on it.

"What do you think of Tremayne?" The question was so abrupt it took her unawares and she flushed. Stepping back and picking up the curry comb, she turned back to the mare to gather her thoughts.

"I think he is a man used to getting his own way."

"Yes, that's my reading of him too. Do you like him?"

"I hardly know him," she fenced.

"Have you heard the gossip about him?"

She swallowed. "I heard the tales of his unsteadiness. And that his wife died in strange circumstances."

"I don't have to tell you to be careful, do I?"

She stopped brushing. "No Papa. I am always careful. You know that." She bit her lip and resumed brushing.

"He's an attractive man and experienced. He's used to having women fall into his lap."

"Yes, I know!" She spoke sharply and then cursed herself for what that might reveal to her father. She had not spoken of the two encounters with Tremayne on the cliffs. Better that her family not know of them or his lordships arrogant assumption that she was a light skirt for being out riding on her own.

"Good. Remember that. No doubt he can be very charming when he chooses. His manners are very polished, but they don't quite cover his uncertain temper."

"You are very acute Papa, and yes, I see the same thing you do. Don't worry about me, I won't lose my head." And

she wouldn't. Papa's reminder was timely, and she was glad her maid, Ginny, had told her the stories. As much as she didn't want to hear them, they gave her armour against the attraction she felt towards him.

"I'm very proud of you Erry. And I'll miss you like the devil."

"Yes, I don't know how you're going to go on without me," she said lightly to cover the flush of pleasure his words gave her.

"I don't know either, but it's time I grew up and learned to manage for myself," he spoke lightly too, but she didn't miss the note of sadness in his voice. This was as hard for him as it was for her. Perhaps harder in some ways.

She dropped the comb again and turned to hug him. The familiar smell of his jacket a mix of camphor, tobacco and dust, and its scratchiness against her cheek made her feel six years old again. When his arms came round her in a reassuring tight squeeze, she thought for a moment she wouldn't be able to bear his leaving. In the next, she took comfort from his arms and wondered if she would ever find a man to equal her father, or would they all fail to compete with a bar set so high? Not that he was perfect, far from it, but could any man measure up against Papa? Especially a man with a reputation for wildness? And perhaps worse...



LEAVING Boscowen Manor in an uncertain temper, wavering between anger and despair, Marrek wondered at his own naivety. How could he not have realised that St John would have heard the stories. Boscowen would have told him anyway, the Baron and his wife had been in Cornwall for twenty years. But he had been so wound up in getting himself to the sticking point, he hadn't considered the possi-

bility of St John refusing to consider his proposal. Which made him a cockscomb to boot.

Leaving the village behind, he set off across the downs for the cliffs and the tower. It was his lodestone, drawing him with its melancholy associations even though he knew it wouldn't help. There was a twisted satisfaction however in punishing himself. And right now, that was what he felt he deserved, punishment. For being seven kinds of a fool, among other things. He reached the tower and tethered his horse in the lee of the stones, out of the wind.

Setting his feet on the crumbling stone staircase he climbed the tower to the parapet. Stepping out of the shelter of the ruined tower, the roof had gone long ago, leaving the shell open to the weather, the wind buffeted him, cold and squally with damp. He stepped to the parapet and gripped the stone wall looking down at the boiling waters, splashing and churning on the rocks.

Spray and rain hit him in the face and the wind sliced through his coat. He closed his eyes, lifting his face into the wind and breathed in the salty air, his chest ached, but that was nothing new. His bouts of melancholy always began with this ache. It was sharper today, fed by disappointment, frustration, and despair. Sharper, deeper, more acute. For he had a concrete focus for his melancholy state: Erylin St John.

Salt spray soaked into his clothing, chilling him to the bone, and as the painful cold increased, his determination rose. He wanted Erylin, and by God, he would have her. It was just going to take time. He was sick to death of this pall of misery he had been living under. She had given him a taste of something better, brighter, and more precious than he had ever imagined was possible. He would fight for her, do whatever was necessary. Every man deserved a second chance surely?

He shuddered with the cold, pushed off the parapet with

determination and ran down the tower steps to set his horse for his draughty lonely castle. The house was huge and empty for one man. There were the servants of course, without them it would truly be a mausoleum. But servants couldn't offer him companionship.

Leaving his horse in the stable with his groom, he requested a hot bath before the fire in his bedroom to thaw out. Washed, refreshed and warm, he sat in his dressing gown and dashed off a letter to his best friend.

Aretas, I beg you, if you have a kindness for me, you will come at once to relieve my boredom. I've precious little entertainment to offer you beyond a little rock fishing and billiards, and the society of my sorry self, but I am in dire need of your salty wit my friend. Yours in all faith,

Marrek

He then sent for his Steward and spent several hours attending to the affairs of the estate. Something he had been neglecting for weeks. The work kept him busy and kept the melancholy at bay, but by late evening he was feeling it again as the whisky got lower in the bottle and the fire settled to a red glow of embers. He knew he should stop, all he would get was a pounding head and sour stomach in the morning but thinking about Erylin and the possibility that she was beyond his reach, made the spectre of his past mistakes more painful than usual.

CHAPTER 5



Erylin was sitting at her dressing table while Ginny brushed her hair ready for bed on Sunday evening. It was a week since Tremayne had walked with Erylin in the garden, and she had not seen him since. She had gone out riding a few times in hopes she might run across him, but she had the downs and beach to herself. He wasn't at Church on Sunday, and he had not been seen in the village either. Not that she spent every waking moment thinking about him or wondering where he was, for she was caught up in dress fittings and shopping and helping papa put his notes in order, but it seemed strange that no one had seen him and the rumour was that he had left Cornwall. She stifled her disappointment with the thought that she was well rid of such an unsavoury character, no matter how attractive he appeared. His words were hollow, and she felt a little besmirched by his apparent intense interest in her and its abrupt and unexplained ending. But it was difficult to ignore the annoyance she felt with herself for being so taken in.

"You have such pretty hair, Miss Erylin," Ginny drew the brush through it.

"Thank you, Ginny. I wish it didn't curl quite so much in the damp."

"Oh, it's lovely Miss, don't wish it to be something it's not. Below stairs, we all thought it was your hair that his Lordship liked so much."

Erylin stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"Well, when his Lordship comes to call upon your Papa -"

"Wait! When did Tremayne call upon my father?"

"The day after he had tea with you and Lady Mary." Ginny gathered her hair in one hand and ran the brush underneath. "It were that, that set everyone off dragging up the old tales."

"Old tales?"

"His wife had red hair you know. But more strawberry blonde than yours. I'd say this was more coppery."

"Oh," Erylin didn't know what to say to this piece of information.

"She were a beauty too, but like a fairy, tiny and whisper thin, she was. Fragile she looked."

"What was her name?" She wanted to know more about this mysterious woman. Why and how had she died?

"Heloise Kerry, one of Lord Moncton's brood, he has six daughters. He were mightily glad to marry her off to Tremayne."

"Who is Lord Moncton?"

"An Irish peer, dirt poor, in spite of the title and the Estate in poor nick. Tremayne did a lot to help him out, but the old buzzard wasn't a bit grateful."

"When was all this?"

"Oh, it must be five years since Tremayne brought her home here. But she never liked the Castle. Kept running back to London or to Ireland to visit her family. Then she fell pregnant and everyone thought she would settle down after that. But she lost the babe in the last trimester and Mrs

Dwight says she was never right in the head after that. Three years this Michaelmas since she flung herself off the tower. Some say he pushed her, but I don't believe that. All the same he might as well have. The Tremayne's are all wild. Or they were. He's the only one left now."

"So, he was wild before he married her?"

"He weren't steady like, but if anything, he was worse after the first year. The gossip was he was in love with her, but his infatuation didn't last past the first six months."

Erylin swallowed. "I see. Was she in love with him?"

"Stands to reason she was, doesn't it? When his playing up sent her over the edge."

"I see. It's a sorry tale, Ginny."

"It is that Miss." Ginny bustled about tidying up her clothes and Erylin sat in a chair by the fire thinking of all that Ginny had told her. Her thoughts were in a whirl, but she kept coming back to the fact that Tremayne had called upon her father, as he had said he would do. What had they talked about, and why hadn't Papa told her? Ginny bade her good night and left Erylin continuing to stare into the fire. Finally, she got up, put on a dressing gown, and went in search of her father. She found him in his room writing in his journal.

"Erry?" he looked up as she closed the door behind her. "My dear what is it?"

Her consternation must have shown on her face. She came closer to the fire, before which he had drawn up a table and chair. "Papa, is it true that Tremayne called upon you last week?"

"It is. Who told you?"

"My maid."

"Of course, servants do gossip." He spoke ruefully.

"What did he have to say to you?"

Papa sighed and waved her closer. "Come and sit."

She drew up a second chair and sat opposite him, her heart thumping uncomfortably.

“He came to ask if he could marry you.”

Her vision narrowed for a moment and a flush of heat raced through her body. “And you told him no? Outright? Without asking me?”

“No. I told him to come back when he could prove to me his feelings for you were real and constant.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He wasn’t best pleased. In fact, I think he was angry.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She leaned forward, her heart thumping hard.

“I didn’t want to influence your thinking.”

“What do you mean?” She stopped. “You came to speak to me in the stable afterwards, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“To gauge my thinking?”

“Your feelings yes.” He rested his clasped hands on the table. “I wanted to know if he had succeeded in making you feel something for him, on the strength of two days acquaintance.”

She felt her cheeks flush and dropped her eyes unable to bear his warm and understanding gaze. “I told him that he had my permission to court you, but not to speak to you of marriage. Not yet. It was too soon, in my opinion, for either of you to have formed a lasting attachment.”

She looked at her hands. “And he’s not been seen since.”

“I’d noticed that.”

She blinked and a tear splashed onto the back of her hand.

“Oh, sweetheart don’t cry.” He reached across the table to clasp her hands.

“I’m not,” she said, wiping her eyes.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, I’m trying to protect you.”

"I know Papa. I'm just disappointed."

"In me?"

"No!" She got up and came round the table, slipping onto his lap, like she used to do, as a little girl. Resting her head on his chest, she sighed. "I am annoyed with myself for being taken in."

"How have you been taken in?"

She kept her head down, suddenly shy. "You are right Papa, he is an attractive man. With a terrible reputation."

"Yes, he was unhappy about having that thrown in his face. I told him I was more interested in his character than his title and my one priority was your happiness."

"Oh Papa!" she flung her arms round his neck. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Erry. More than anything. You know that don't you?"

"Of course, Papa."

"I'm sorry it has turned out this way. I had a small hope that he might prove to have a backbone and a degree of integrity."

She sat staring at her clasped hands, letting this sink in. Something in the region of her heart hurt, which was ridiculous. She barely knew the man and what she did know wasn't good. She was well rid of such an unsavoury admirer.

"You are a beautiful woman, my dear." Papa clasped her hand and squeezed it. "In London you will find many men attracted to your beauty. But physical attraction doesn't always translate into lasting love, and that's what I want for you."

"The kind of love you had with Mama?"

"Yes. It is rare and special, and I want you to have that."

"And you think I will find it in London?"

"I don't know my dear, but I wanted you to experience a Season at least. If at the end of it, you haven't met a man you

can love, then we will resume our travels together and perhaps in time we will run across a suitable fellow. What I don't want is for you to compromise, to settle for half a loaf, or to choose a man of questionable character."

"I won't Papa."

"Good." He kissed her forehead.

She kissed his cheek and got off his lap. "Thank you, Papa, good night."

"Good night Erry."



"COFFEE MY LORD?"

Marrek stirred and grunted. The sound of liquid pouring and the rattle of a cup on a saucer held in a slightly shaky hand, told him that old Barrow had taken his grunt for a yes. He wondered muzzily where his valet was and why the butler was bringing him coffee in bed. He rolled over heavily and squinted at the wrinkled face above the trembling coffee cup. Struggling to a sitting position he took the cup before its contents ended up all over the coverlet. "Thank you," he managed out of a raspy throat.

His head pounded, but the smell of the coffee reminded him that there were things still left to enjoy in the world, and he took a large mouthful of the hot, bitter brew and sighed. Leaning his head against the pillows he closed his eyes. They were gritty and his head ached as if someone had clubbed him with a cricket bat.

"Your correspondence my lord." He cracked one eye open to see Barrow holding out a pile of envelopes. Several days' worth by the look of them. He took them, letting them spill across the coverlet while he downed the rest of the coffee. Barrow trod across to the window and opened the curtains

sending a flood of sunshine into the room. Marrek winced. "Bloody hell what time is it?"

"Just after midday my lord."

"Damn it Barrow why are you here? Where's Heron?"

"Mr Heron is indisposed my lord. After you threw your boot at him."

"I did?" Marrek stared at him, trying to recall the event, and failing. "Why?"

"I believe he tried to take the whisky away my lord."

"Oh. When was this?"

"Two days ago, my lord."

"Well tell him I'm sorry, will you? No, I'll tell him myself. Did I hurt him?"

"The boot heel hit him above the eye my lord. It bled."

"God." Marrek closed his eyes. "What day is it?"

"Tuesday my lord."

"Shit." This bout had gone on longer than usual. He had lost a week.

"Precisely my lord. Would you like some breakfast?"

His stomach roiled at the thought and for a moment he thought he would lose the coffee. He swallowed.

"Not yet," he managed.

"Very well my lord," Barrow, gauging the situation nicely, moved the chamber pot closer and with a little stately bow, left him alone.

Having mastered his stomach, he opened his eyes and his gaze fell on the jumble of envelopes. He sorted through them, a number of them were bills, which he would pass to his steward to deal with. One was a complaint from a tenant, which he would also pass to Nolan. The remaining one was in thick cream paper, turning it over he found the address Boscowen Manor on the back. He turned it back over. There was no postmark on this, it had been hand delivered. How

many days ago? He broke the seal and took out the card inside. It was an invitation.

The Baron and Baroness begged his attendance at a dinner dance on Friday evening. The RSVP date was yesterday. Damn it! He flung the bed clothes back and rose too quickly. Clutching the newel post to stop himself falling over, he waited until the blackness receded.

Ringing the bell, he used the chamber pot to empty his over full bladder and poured water over his head in the basin in an attempt to clear it. Heron appeared in answer to his summons, with a sticking plaster over his left eye.

“God I’m sorry Heron.” Marrek examined the plaster and Heron blushed.

“That’s all right my lord. I’ll mend.”

“No, it isn’t all right. I don’t employ you to be treated by me or anyone else in that fashion. I’m a brute.”

“No, no my lord, I should ’av ducked.”

“I’ll see you compensated.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Don’t thank me, just organise a bath will you. I feel like the devil.”

“Aye my lord.”

Three hours later, washed, dressed, fed, and restored to something close to normality, Marrek mounted his horse and set off for Boscowen Manor. He went via the village, trotting down the main street where he attracted the usual number of greetings and nodded politely. Mrs. Caldecott, with three daughters in tow waved to him and tried to get him to stop but looking ahead he spotted the Boscowen carriage and the Baroness and Miss St John descending from it, preparing to enter the dressmaker’s shop. He spurred his mount forward to intercept them.

. . .

“GOOD DAY BARONESS, MISS ST JOHN.” Erylin stiffened at the sound of his voice and her skin prickled. Turning from helping the Baroness out of the barouche, she watched his lordship descend from his horse. He was handsomely dressed as usual, but he looked pale and there were dark circles under his eyes.

“My lord.” She gave him a stiff little curtsy and refrained from smiling. Her heart beat quickly however, and she couldn’t refrain from wondering if he had been ill, that would explain both his haggard appearance and his absence for the past week. Perhaps she should not have been so quick to judge?

“Tremayne,” Aunt Mary held out her hand. “We thought you must have gone up to London.”

“No Ma ’am, I -ah have been indisposed. As soon as I was able to leave my bed, I came to advise you that I would be delighted to accept your invitation. If I’m not too late?”

“No of course not. I’ll admit I was wondering how we were to make up the numbers. You will be most welcome.”

“Splendid. Well, I shan’t keep you. I look forward to Friday night, Miss St. John.” He offered her a formal bow and an enquiring smile, as if to beg her forgiveness. For what?

She nodded in return and felt her lips twitch slightly with the desire to return his smile. She ducked her head to hide it. Really the man was too handsome for his own good and her peace of mind.

“I hope you recover swiftly my lord.”

“I am all the better for seeing you, Miss St John. May I secure a place on your dance card?”

She glanced at Aunt Mary for guidance who nodded encouragingly. “Very well my lord.”

“Are you waltzing, Miss St John?”

“Yes, we are allowing the girls to try all the dances,

including a waltz," Aunt Mary smiled and patted Erylin's arm affectionately.

"May I have a cotillion and a waltz, if it pleases you, Miss St John?" his lordship added to her confusion by giving her one of *those* looks when he made this little speech and set her heart fluttering and her cheeks blushing. Drat the man he needed a set down. But she couldn't summon the will to refuse him and merely nodded like a schoolgirl ninny. Swallowing she found her voice.

"Good day my lord, come Aunt Mary, we have a lot to do this morning." Turning on her heel she set her back to his lordship and would have grasped the door to the shop and opened it for her aunt if his lordship hadn't reached round and done it for her. With another stiff little nod and a murmur of thanks, she stepped into the shop and resolutely ignored him, and the pounding of her wayward heart.

MARREK LET the shop door close on the Boscowen ladies and remounted his horse, well pleased with the accidental encounter. By her blushes, Miss St John knew that he had spoken with her father, equally her cool manner told him that she had heard the rumours and was not best pleased with him. He had work to do, to restore himself in her esteem. The melancholy despair of the past week, banished, he set his horse for a gallop across the downs, more determined than ever to win Miss Erylin St John's elusive approbation.

CHAPTER 6



Erylin was surprised to find herself nervous waiting for the guests to arrive. Arrayed in her new gown of white muslin its plainness relieved by tiny blue forget-me-nots, her hair caught up on the top of her head with ringlets allowed to fall on either side of her face, with new slippers on her feet, new gloves, shawl, reticule, and fan, she knew that she was more than presentable. Aunt Mary had fussed over her until she was satisfied and Ginny had grinned with pride.

“Miss Erylin, you look beautiful.”

“Yes, my dear, you do. Your dance card will be full in the first five minutes.”

Erylin took one last look at herself and turned away with a determined smile. Aunt Mary had put such effort into planning this evening’s festivities, she was honour bound to enjoy it. Despite the quake below her ribs. Descending the stairs, she found her father waiting for her. His face lit up at the sight of her and when she reached the bottom, he came forward to kiss her hand and hug her with a husky, “Lovely, Erry.” She hugged him back.

“Thank you, Papa.”

He stepped back, his gaze running over her, head to toe. “I wish your mother could see this, she would be so proud of you, as I am.” He wiped a tear off his cheek. She squeezed his hand.

“Don’t Papa, you’ll make me cry.”

“No, no. No tears tonight, sweetheart, you must enjoy yourself.”

She nodded.

MARREK ARRIVED ten minutes past the time on the invitation, a nicety of punctuality, neither early nor fashionably late. It was a provincial affair, not a London squeeze. It was the kind of evening he would normally avoid like the plague. And if Erylin wasn’t here he would never have come. The doors between the drawing room and the dining room had been opened to accommodate all the guests and allow room for dancing later. He cast an eye round the room and recognised everyone. But of his quarry there was no sign, much to his annoyance. Where was she?

He spotted her father standing with the Baron and made his way towards them but was waylaid by Mrs Caldecott flanked by two daughters, Miss Alice, and Miss Lydia. The latter, who took after her mother, was seventeen and of the two them by far the most attractive, being possessed of glossy chestnut brown hair, a round face and a generous bosom, well displayed in white muslin. Her less fortunate sister also wore white muslin, but the colour made her skin sallow and pale and showed to disadvantage her thin, flat bosomed figure. “My lord, how gracious of you to lend your presence to dear Mary’s little function. So, kind of her to give the girls a chance to practice among people they know. You will be dancing tonight?”

“Yes Mrs Caldecott.” He smiled and tried not to grit his teeth.

“Are you familiar with this newfangled waltz, my lord?”

“Yes, I am, and I am already promised to Miss St John for the waltz and the cotillion, but perhaps a Country dance each ladies?” The Misses Caldecott blushed in unison at this condescension and wrote his name down on their cards for Country dances two and three respectively. Miss Lydia deferring to her sister in precedence. That didn’t stop her throwing him a sideways look that told him Miss Lydia was going to be a handful before she was much older.

Extricating himself from Mrs Caldecott’s clutches he continued his trajectory towards the Baron and St John, on the lookout for Erylin. He had just reached the gentlemen, when the large figures of the mayor and his son moved and revealed Erylin in conversation with Delia Eversleigh and her brother Captain Neil Eversleigh. Miss Eversleigh was the fourth debutante here tonight, and after Erylin the prettiest, being blonde and winsomely slender, she wore pink silk with a net over skirt. The captain was fair like his sister, tall and well-made and easily the best-looking man in the room; and a bachelor to boot. Recently returned from the peninsular war with a bullet in his shoulder he was well enough to be out of bed and gallanting his sister to a ball. Marrek ground his teeth to see him in such close proximity to Erylin, and when she laughed at something the captain said, Marrek took a step in their direction, only to be arrested by St John holding out his hand.

“Good evening, Tremayne, good of you to come.”

Dragging his eyes away from the little group across the room, he schooled his face into a smile and nodded, shaking St John’s hand. “Good evening, Sir, Baron.”

He offered his hand to his host. “You have contrived to fit the whole of Gwythian in your drawing room Boscowen.”

“Nothing to do with me, it’s all Mary.”

“The gossip was, you had left Cornwall my lord, but I understand from my daughter that you have been ill. I trust you are fully recovered?” St John quirked an eyebrow and Marrek clenched his jaw. St John couldn’t know of his bout of melancholia, yet he felt exposed by the man’s penetrating look. Biting back the retort that he shouldn’t listen to so much gossip, he forced a smile.

“Yes, I am fully recovered thank you.”

“Glad to hear it, there’s a nasty head cold going round,” the Baron said heartily. The Baroness appeared at his elbow and held out her hand to Marrek.

“Welcome my lord, you are in good time for dinner, we will be seating sixteen guests, will you be so good as to lead Erylin into dinner?”

“I would be delighted,” Marrek smiled, nodded to St John, who gave him a cryptic look and headed over to claim his prize, well pleased with the Baroness.

THE BACK of Erylin’s neck prickled, and she turned her head, distracted from the captain’s tale of a fellow officer’s dog, and saw Tremayne bearing down on her with one of his molten smiles. She had begun to think he wasn’t going to show up and couldn’t decide if she was relieved or disappointed.

A flush of apprehensive delight washed through her, and she concluded she was glad in spite of herself. Which was quite provoking. She was becoming addicted to his melting gaze being fixed upon her. There was no denying it was flattering, and pleasurable in ways she didn’t care to contemplate.

“Miss St John, you look enchanting this evening.” Tremayne took her hand and bowed over it, almost, but not

quite, grazing her gloved hand with his lips. She recovered her hand and her complexion, while he turned his attention to her companions.

“Miss Eversleigh, another rose.” He bowed over her hand too, but not as deeply. “Eversleigh, I trust you are fully recovered?” Tremayne and the Captain shook hands.

“Well enough, thank you. Yourself?”

Tremayne’s lips compressed momentarily and he nodded. “Fully thank you.” He turned his attention back to her. “The Baroness has instructed me to take you into dinner, Miss St John,” he smiled and another of those rushes of heat coursed through her. Really the man was impossibly handsome.

“I believe it is a few minutes yet until dinner will be announced my lord, you are precipitous.” She realised the words sounded quelling, but she was desperate to repress his outrageous flirting, lest her companions notice and draw the wrong conclusions.

His lordship seemed to have no such qualms, tucking her arm into his with proprietorial aplomb and positively compelling her to walk with him. “All the better for us to speak before dinner then, you’ll excuse us Miss Eversleigh, Captain.” And he dragged her away to the other end of the room.

“My lord, don’t you think that was a trifle abrupt?”

“Probably, but I really don’t care what the Eversleigh’s think Miss St John, it is of far more importance to me, what you think.”

“I don’t believe I follow you, my lord.” Her cheeks were burning, and she plied her fan hastily, unable to look at him, but fully conscious that his searing gaze was fixed on her. She felt like a chicken in the sights of a wolf. Really the man was outrageous. “Our last conversation was interrupted, before you could give me your reply.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about, my

lord." Her heart fluttered and her pulse raced. And then contradicting herself, "Besides Papa forbade you to speak of such things to me, and you know it!"

"I am not speaking of them Miss St John, you are," his lips twitched, and she suddenly wanted to box his ears and laugh at the same time. Fortunately, the dinner bell rang and saved her from having to say anything at all.

He was a perfect dinner companion, engaging her and the Baroness who sat on his other side, in unexceptional conversation. All the same, his mere presence beside her kept her pulse fluttering. In an attempt to calm her nerves, she drank rather more sips of wine than she should have, which certainly restored her confidence but did little to dissipate her disgraceful desire to have him kiss her. Which shocking revelation hit her with the strawberries and almost made her choke. He served her some of the fruit and asked if she preferred them with or without cream. It was an innocent enough question, but the heat in his eyes as he said it was anything but.

"W-without thank you." She resolutely turned her attention to the gentleman on her right, Captain Eversleigh, who despite being quite handsome, was far less alarming than Tremayne. With a smile, she spooned up her strawberries and listened with wrapt attention to the captain's tale of a bull fight, which he had witnessed in Spain. This terrifying sport was a national pastime in Spain and had been the death of many young men. This left his lordship with no option but to entertain her aunt. She wished that she was able to say she didn't know what they were speaking of, but her wretched attention was claimed when she heard him say, "I will certainly call upon you in London, and I look forward to an invitation to Miss St John's debut ball."

Dessert concluded, the ladies rose and left the gentlemen to the brief enjoyment of their port. Uncle Henry was under

strict instructions to keep this gentlemanly indulgence short. The main focus of the evening was the dancing to follow. During dinner the drawing room had been cleared of furniture for the dancing and the musicians set up to provide the music. The curtains of the French windows were uncovered to show the pretty lights illuminating the gardens. If the room grew too hot the door could be opened to allow guests to walk in the garden and let fresh air into the room. The cold snap they had been having had broken and the evening was much milder than it had been so far this year. An advantage of the southern climate.

While they waited for the gentlemen, the ladies sat in the chairs set against the walls and gossiped. Erylin found herself next to Mrs Eversleigh, a comfortably round woman with kind eyes. "You must be glad to have your son home, madam."

"Yes, I am. The worry is that he will be off again, once his shoulder is mended, and Mr Eversleigh insists I cannot say anything to keep him." She sighed. "He was very brave, risking his life to save that boy, and I am very proud of him."

"I haven't heard that tale ma'am. He was full of stories of Spain. But nothing about his own exploits."

"No, he won't talk of it. He is very modest. Delia admires him greatly."

"They seem very close."

"Yes, despite the age difference, they are, I am very blessed in my children. We plan to take Delia to London for the season also."

"Indeed, she told me, it will be very nice to have a friend in London, if I may call her such."

"I think she will count herself lucky to do so, my dear."

Just then the doors to the dining room reopened and the gentlemen joined them. A little time was now allowed for the gentlemen to fill up the ladies' dance cards. Erylin only had

two spots left and these were soon taken by the vicar and the mayor, the two middle-aged cronies vying with each other good-naturedly over who should have the Scottish reel over the country dance. She smiled at their nonsense and was boyed by the knowledge that she would not be forced to sit out one dance.

The first dance was an old-fashioned minuet, it was danced by four couples only, simultaneously. Which was a bending of the rules, but the minuet was so seldom danced now, it was a sop to the nostalgia of the older generation to perform it at all. The Baron and Baroness led off and were joined by Tremayne and the mayor's wife, Sir Edward, and Mrs Eversleigh and Erylin and Papa.

Erylin was exceedingly nervous, for though they had practised, it was an exacting dance and to perform it in full view of an audience was nerve wracking. She had told Tremayne that she couldn't dance in a fit of levity, which wasn't entirely true. She had no difficulty mastering the steps, but the rhythm of the music did not come naturally to her, and she had to concentrate to get it right. Papa smiled at her as he bowed and winked encouragement as they stepped and pointed and twirled their way through the figures in stately fashion. Taking her cues from him, she hoped she managed not to disgrace herself. One fortunate aspect of the need to concentrate, she was able to forget about Tremayne.

The second dance was one of three country dances, which she performed with Uncle Henry, who showed more energy than precision in his execution, but it was an excellent warm up. Tremayne was not in her set. His partner was Miss Caldecott. By the end of it Alice was abnormally flushed and smiling. Erylin was pleased that Tremayne showed her such courtesy.

The third was a polonaise, which she danced with the

captain who was energetic and fun, executing his steps with enthusiasm and precision.

Then came the vicar and the mayor with the second country dance and the Scottish reel respectively. The last country dance she was partnered by the mayors clumsy big-boned son, who turned beet red from exertion and twirled her with more energy than grace.

After all that energetic jumping about, the guests were served refreshments to recruit their strength for the final two dances of the evening. The cotillion and the waltz. The two dances she had promised to Tremayne. He appeared at her elbow with a glass of lemonade for her and one of those smiles that made her shiver. She was exhilarated by the dancing and decided to enjoy his lordships attention, rather than try to dampen it. After all they were in a crowded ballroom. He couldn't do anything improper in such surroundings.

"At last," he handed her the lemonade. "I've been looking forward to this all night."

She smiled, accepted the glass, and drank. She was thirsty. "Surely a country ball is insipid compared to a London rout, my lord?"

"If it weren't for your presence, I wouldn't have come Miss St John. But the temptation to dance the waltz with you is something no man could resist." She was wrong. He could say improper things in a ballroom full of people. She flushed but was wholly unable to drag her eyes away from his molten gaze. His voice when he spoke was low enough that she hoped fervently that at least no one else could hear it.

The musician's started up, and she put aside her glass. She placed her hand on the arm he offered her, and they joined the set for the Cotillion. As they stepped and moved through the dance, he kept that gaze fixed on her, and she was unable to break free of it. As they drew closer in the steps of the

dance, he murmured, "You look more delicious than a bowl of strawberries, Miss St John."

Her heart lurched and thumped wildly and a wave of heat rushed through her. Could he have read her mind at dinner? Did her wicked thoughts show on her face? The dance movement pushed them apart again, and she tried to calm her jangled nerves and smile as if she hadn't had her secret thoughts exposed.

As they drew closer again, she rallied. "I prefer raspberries, my lord, they have more bite."

He raised an eyebrow and the molten look was disturbed by a smile of appreciation. "Touché, Miss St John. Well done."

She laughed, partly to relieve her nerves, and they parted again. Coming back together, he spoke softly so that truly only she could hear, "You are right Miss St John, your lips are like raspberries, will you bite my tongue or suck upon it like a peach?"

Her face flamed red, and she stumbled in her steps, her pulse skipping and tumbling with shock. He caught her with a strong arm and guided her into the rondeau. Her body stiffened in his brief embrace, and she glanced up at him and away, her mouth compressing. "You go too far my lord."

"On the contrary Miss St John, not far enough." His voice was low, the note rough and the expression in his eyes ravaged her. She went to pull away, but his grip was firm and tight, and she remembered where they were. She couldn't make a scene in her aunts drawing room by slapping his face as she longed to do. The last movement of the dance parted them once more and when they came together again it was simply to bow and curtsy to one another. He led her off the floor to chairs near the window and obtained two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter. Taking a seat beside her, he offered her the glass and a silent toast. She took it and

drank, refusing to look at him. "I have offended your sensibilities, Miss St John?"

"You have my lord," she said repressively. She took another swallow of the champagne, her heart was still thumping wildly and her body trembling from his verbal assault. Her desire for him to kiss her was stronger than ever. How was she going to survive a waltz with him?

"I am a man of strong passions, Miss St John, and you rouse me to such a fever pitch I lose my head in your vicinity. I apologise for my lack of temperance."

She finished the glass of champagne in desperation, searching for something to say to that. Never had a man turned her inside out like this one. The champagne wreathed round her head and paradoxically calmed her nerves and gave her courage.

"Do you speak to other young ladies thus, my lord?"

"Of course not."

"Then why do you persist in insulting me?"

"I am not insulting you."

"You have, from the first moment of meeting me, persisted in treating me as if I were a woman of questionable morals."

"I have, from the first moment if meeting you, been so entranced by you that I cannot think clearly in your presence. I mean you no insult." He rose and offered his arm as the musicians signalled the final dance of the evening. She rose and allowed him to lead her towards the other couples forming for the waltz. Her heart thumped dizzily as he clasped her hand and placed his other hand in the middle of her back. His touch was warm through the light fabric of her gown. She placed her hand on his upper arm and stared resolutely at his cravat, which was beautifully tied, she noted with nervous distraction. The proximity of his body as he

took a step and compelled her to follow the rhythm of the dance, made her pulse race all over again.

They completed a full circuit of the room before he spoke again, softly for her ears alone. "At the beginning of this evening I asked you a question which you have steadfastly refused to answer, Miss St. John. To be plain, I asked your father for your hand, and he refused me. He told me he would not give you to any man until you had experienced a London season. Bluntly, he told me that I needed to prove myself to him and to you, that he wouldn't prevent me from courting you, but that I must show the steadfastness of my desire for you."

"Why are you telling me this?" Her breathing was quick, which she hoped he would attribute to the exertions of the dance, not to the overpowering effects of his proximity and his words, which were playing havoc with her heart. How could any woman resist such a frank avowal of feelings?

"Because I wish to know if my attentions are repugnant to you."

"And if they are?"

"I will desist. I am not the kind of man to force myself upon a woman who doesn't want me, whatever notions my past behaviour may have given you." His hand tightened on hers as he spoke, as he swung her in a circle, his execution of the dance flawless. Which was a good thing, since his words had so upset her senses, she had no idea what her feet were doing. Her knees were trembling so much, she must have fallen, were he not holding her up. As her silence lengthened, he lowered his head. "Well Miss St John, will you answer me?"

"I hardly know how to," she glanced up at him. Which was fatal. He had that molten expression in his eyes again, and she missed her step. His arm tightened round her, bringing her closer into his chest as he almost lifted her off

her feet in the swing of the dance. She licked her lips, and she heard the intake of his breath. "The manner of your address is, as you have said yourself, intemperate. If you are serious, and not merely trifling with me -"

"I am deadly serious, Miss St John."

She swallowed. "Then you will attempt to win my trust as well as my — esteem." She looked him in the eye as she said it, and watched his eyes widen and darken. Her pulse thundered, and for a moment she thought that he would forget where they were and kiss her. The yearning for him to do so, must have been written on her face, for his head lowered towards hers, and she arched her neck, her lips parting on a hitched breath.

The music ceased and applause cut across their shared reverie breaking the moment. She lowered her head blushing, and he reluctantly released her and bowed to her. She curtsied on shaking legs and allowed him to return her to her seat. He took her hand, kissed it with another bow. "I will see you in London, Miss St. John."

Then he turned and walked away. She saw him speak briefly to Aunt Mary and Uncle Henry before he left.

CHAPTER 7



Marek stood before the fire in his room and rid his body of the raw desire her presence roused in him. Several swift strokes of his hand were sufficient to bring sweet relief, but limited satisfaction. He wanted her, not his hand. As her name died in his lips and the sweat dried on his skin, he propped an arm against the mantle to hold himself upright as the trembling in his legs subsided and his breathing and heartbeat returned to normal. How he had the strength to resist kissing her when she raised her head, looked him in the eyes and asked him to win her trust as well as her esteem...The look she gave him then, the arching of her neck, the parting of her lips.

He groaned aloud. She would drive him to madness if he wasn't already there. This obsessive desire was far, far worse than anything Heloise had provoked in him.

He turned away to the basin and washed himself, then grabbing up his banyan he flung it on taking a seat by the fire. Staring into its depths he relived the exquisite torture of having her within the circle of his arm and unable to do so much as kiss her and drank three glasses of whisky in rapid

succession. He had gone too far with the raspberry comment. He sighed and rubbed his face. She was leaving for London in three days. Would he have the strength to stay away, or would he pursue her? Try to find an opportunity to be alone with her? To taste those raspberry lips. But could he stop at one kiss? Did he trust himself? She would surely slap him if he went too far. He smiled, she had come close to that when he dared her to bite or suck his tongue like a peach. If they hadn't been in a drawing room full of people, she would have, he was certain of it. She was entirely magnificent and he was besotted. He rose, flung off his banyan and climbed into bed, hoping the whisky wreathing round his head would let him sleep.



HE SLEPT until ten as a result of his late-night potations and was in the middle of a late breakfast when Aretas arrived, bringing Jerome with him. Jerome had been staying with Aretas when Marrek's letter arrived begging for his company and Jerome had willingly accompanied him on the rescue mission.

"I always forget how truly medieval, this sprawling pile of yours is," said Aretas, coming into the converted solar where Marrek was breakfasting. The stone walls had acquired modern windows, but the large fireplace was still a feature along with the high ceilings. Warmth had been added with tapestries on the walls and a thick Aubusson carpet on the stone floor. The large oak table and breakfast buffet with matching square-made chairs with high carved backs, dominated half the room, the remainder was given to a large trestle drawn up to the fire. The hearth was big enough to take a whole pig.

Marrek rose to hug his friend. "You came, thank you. And you Rome, welcome, have you eaten?"

"We ate at some godforsaken early hour. I'm famished," declared Aretas, his eyes running over the buffet with eager delight.

"Dig in, there's plenty." Marrek waved them to the buffet where both men seized a plate and piled it high, joining him at the table.

Jerome forked up some ham and remarked, "For all its lofty proportions Marrek, your Castle is a wee less draughty than mine. I'd give something for the modern fittings your father installed. Himself's never had the spare pennies to spend on Lidney."



AFTER BREAKFAST they set off for the beach with nets, lines, and bait to do a spot of rock fishing. Several hours later, wet and numb with cold, they scrambled back to the cliff top with their creel full of fish and headed back to Roscarron for hot baths. After an excellent fish dinner, they repaired to Marrek's library to play cards. They abandoned the cards at midnight and sat drinking round the fire. They had fallen into a sort of melancholy stupor when Marrek posed his question about love.

"Don't tell me you're thinking about marriage again Marrek. Didn't you learn the first time?" Aretas frowned at him.

Marrek shifted in his chair. "This is completely different. Heloise was fragile and insecure, broken. Although I was too blind to see that until it was too late. Erylin is strong, confident, and whole. She is everything that Heloise was not." He sighed. "It makes no odds though, her father sent me to the right about and she — well she's keeping me at arm's length."

Aretas' frown deepened, and he glanced over at Rome, who raised an eyebrow.

"When do we get to meet this paragon of yours?" drawled Aretas, catching his quizzing glass.

"We can call upon her tomorrow, she leaves for a London the day after." He leaned back against the wing of the chair. "She is the most exquisitely beautiful woman, and she rides like the devil."

"How old is she?" Probed Jerome.

"I'm not precisely certain, early twenties, I think. She's not a schoolroom chit at any rate."

"I look forward to making her acquaintance," Aretas smiled at him sleepily.

Marrek struggled to his feet and stretched. "On that note, I'm going to bed my friends. Thank you for coming." He bowed to them and left the room on slightly unsteady legs.

WHEN THE DOOR had shut on Marrek, Aretas looked across at Jerome. "What do you think?"

Jerome shrugged. "Hard to tell until we meet her. Seems the lass has a good heid on her shoulder's if she's not succumbed to Marrek's seduction technique. Devil of a fellow with the ladies, Marrek. The worse his reputation gets the more they seem to want him. No sense, women."

"And the father didn't jump at the title, so that suggests a lack of ambition."

"Or care for his lass. Not knowing him as we do, would you welcome Marrek as a son-in-law?"

"There's a thought...on the face of it, no. Who'd want their daughter wed to a man accused of driving his wife to suicide?" Aretas sat forward. "Sounds like the girl is well guarded. Likely she is a different proposition from Heloise. Old Moncton was a lax father."

“Aye. More interested in the title and Marrek’s money, than his daughter’s wellbeing. The rumour was she begged him not to send her back to Marrek, the last time she ran away.”

This lowering thought led to a few moments of contemplative silence. “I’m surprised Marrek would consider marriage again.” Aretas rubbed his bristling chin.

“He has to have an heir. We all do,” added Jerome with a certain air of resignation.

“Your sire’s still alive and kicking Rome, you’ve time enough. I on the other hand -” he shuddered. “Mama and my sisters are getting mighty persistent on the subject. I figure I’ve one or at most two seasons left before I’ll be forced to tie the knot.”

“Who will you choose?”

“I don’t much care as long as she’s not hideous. Someone well enough brought up not to give me trouble. That’s all I ask.” He yawned. “Bed for me, I think, Rome.”

“Aye, I’ll away to my bed too.”



ON THEIR LAST full day before leaving for London, Erylin was surprised to find the Manor’s drawing room filled to bursting with callers. The Eversleigh’s and Caldecott’s, the mayor, his wife and son, the vicar, and his wife, and half the guests from Aunt Mary’s dinner dance trooped through the house to take their leave and wish her all the best for her season. Many of them saying they hoped to see her in London, not least the Eversleigh’s who planned to go up the following week. She was seated between the captain and his sister when the butler announced loudly enough to be heard over the drawing room chatter, “the Earl of Tremayne, Viscount Dunmore and the Marquess of Lidney.”

All of a sudden, the room was over full of tall handsome men. Tremayne was followed into the room by two elegantly dressed gentlemen in top boots and coats fine enough for Bond Street. The second gentleman, whom Erylin gathered was Dunmore, was taller even than Tremayne and as fair as Tremayne was dark. The third gentleman had a head of glossy chestnut hair cut fashionably long and mildly dishevelled. He was the shortest of the three, but only by a finger width or two. All three were impressive in manner, dress and looks. Erylin felt winded. Was this what awaited her in London?

The captain rose to shake their hands, seemingly he was acquainted with Dunmore and Lidney. "My lords, let me present my sister Miss Delia Eversleigh, and our hostess' niece Miss Erylin St John."

Erylin and Delia rose to curtsy to the new guests, who bowed with proper punctilio. Tremayne was talking to Aunt Mary, Erylin glanced at him and returned her attention to Viscount Dunmore, who gave her a dazzlingly smile. "Miss St John, I am delighted to make your acquaintance. Marrek tells me you're an excellence rider."

Startled she glanced back at the Earl. "Really?"

"He's a devil of a fellow in the saddle you know. Admires a woman who can ride well, as do I."

"Well riding is essential on dig sites," she smiled. "It is that or walk everywhere, and that is frequently not practical, when there are significant distances to be covered and no carts to be had."

"Dig sites?" Dunmore looked nonplussed.

"My father is an archaeologist, my lord."

"An archaic-what?"

"A scholar of ancient things."

"I see," but his expression suggested that he didn't see at all. She reflected that he wasn't as quick as Tremayne, who

was bearing down on them, she could feel him from across the room. Which made her shiver and straighten her spine, determined that he shouldn't see how much his mere presence disturbed her.

“Miss St John, I see you have met my friends.

CHAPTER 8



The first two weeks in London were taken up with shopping and dress fittings, which left no time for the sight-seeing that Erylin longed to do. She couldn't believe the number of gowns and accessories Aunt Mary thought were essential to a lady's wardrobe. Her generosity was overwhelming. Erylin was convinced Papa's finances couldn't possibly stretch to cover it all, and she protested at the expense.

"My dear part of your mother's dowry was put aside for just this purpose, no need to fret. And besides I am enjoying myself enormously, don't spoil my fun. It is such a very great pleasure to see you decked out in beautiful gowns, the memories of my youth are made fresh seeing you." Aunt Mary patted her hand and asked if she preferred the blue satin or the ivory silk?

With the bulk of the shopping done and Erylin's wardrobe overflowing with dresses for all occasions Aunt Mary instituted a daily walk in Hyde Park, which Erylin enjoyed, although she watched the riders hacking about the grounds with envy and silently resolved to ask Uncle Henry

if there was a horse she could ride. She longed for a gallop and the fresh open air of Cornwall. She missed it already.

Aunt Mary also sent out notes to all her friends appraising them that she and her niece were at home to visitors and began a series of morning calls, which paradoxically were all accomplished in the afternoon. It seemed that town hours meant no one rose until noon.

“Because they are all out dancing until three my dear. You will be too soon.” Explained Aunt Mary with a smile over the breakfast cups. “Now my dear what do you think of pink roses or white lilies for your come out ball?”

Erylin opened her mouth to protest at the expense and shut it again. Visions of hundreds of pink roses in the ballroom filled her head and she suppressed a shudder. She wasn't a pink roses kind of girl. “Lilies?” She suggested tentatively.

“Yes, I think you're right my dear, pink can be insipid. And the lilies will match your gown.”

Erylin had been in London a month when the Earl of Tremayne appeared. They were entertaining visitors, among them the Eversleigh's and Caldecott's, as well as a smattering of town acquaintance and the drawing room was quite crowded when the Earl was announced. Erylin had tried not to think of him too often, nor to wonder when or even if, he would appear. She was not convinced that his lordship's passionate avowals would survive her absence from Cornwall. Did he mean any of the nonsense he had so ardently spoken? She was inclined to dismiss it as a bored aristocrat amusing himself with a naive miss. Less easy to dismiss or forget was the effect his presence and touch had upon her senses.

But distance and time had made her question whether this was not some artefact of his general air of stormy mystery. The Cornish atmosphere had no doubt contributed

to that. Here in the metropolis, should he appear, that effect would no doubt be diminished. She had after all met several titled gentlemen since arriving in London, he was no longer the only gentleman of substance in her acquaintance. Admittedly none were so impressively handsome as the Earl. But then looks we're not everything. Of far more importance was character, she reminded herself firmly.

Thus, she was not prepared for the rush of gratification the sight of him entering Aunt Mary's drawing room brought her. She was standing in a circle of young ladies near the window and a gasp and a giggle went round the circle, at his name. She felt herself colouring and bent quickly to fiddle with the tie on her slipper to cover it. Rising she saw him bearing down upon her with that fixed look of determination she was becoming accustomed to and deliberately turned her shoulder to address Alice standing next to her.

"Have you read *Sense and Sensibility*? I thoroughly recommend it." Her bald statement startled Alice, for they had not been speaking of books. But it was the first thing that came into her head. Anything to hide her consciousness of Tremayne's presence. From both him and the others in the room. If he was going to behave badly; she would be quite cross with him. Aunt Mary had made it clear that a young lady on debut could not afford a hint of scandal, and Tremayne seemed to bring scandal in his wake.

"Miss Caldecott, Miss Eversleigh, Miss St John." Tremayne bowed to each of them in turn and received two murmured, my lord's, in response. Erylin gave him her hand and smiled with determined friendliness,

"Tremayne, how delightful to see you again. Can I introduce you to Miss Leaham and Miss Wells?" She nodded at the two other young ladies in the circle, assuming the manner of a seasoned hostess. Not for nothing had she entertained scholars and archaeologists for her father for a

number of years. She was older than the other young women, and it was time she showed her mettle. Tremayne was not going to rattle her here in London. Surrounded as they were by others on all sides, there would be less opportunity for him to get her alone and say outrageous things to her.

He took her hand, squeezed it slightly and raise it to his lips. "It has been an age since we last met, the London air agrees with you, Miss St John, your cheeks are in high bloom." Letting her hand go slowly, with his eyes still fixed on hers, she felt her colour rise and her breathing quicken. She was wrong he didn't need to get her alone to say things to discompose her, he did it with a mere touch and a look from those smouldering blue eyes. She was faintly aware of the reactions of the other young women and snatched her hand from his grasp. "Certainly, London is more diverting than Cornwall my lord."

"It must be, your colour is quite as high, as when you were tearing across the moor on your mare Miss St John."

Erylin had a sudden savage desire to stab him with a hat pin. Unfortunately, none was to hand.

"Erylin was just bemoaning the lack of a good ride in London, my Lord," tittered Miss Wells.

"I'm not surprised. Miss St John has an excellent seat. Has the Baron not found a mount for you in London?" His full sensuous lips curled in a slight smile.

"I was resolved to ask him, but it slipped my mind."

"If he has no suitable horse, I would be happy to mount you, Miss St John." Erylin's cheeks flamed and the stifled gasps and giggles from the assembled ladies made her long to slap him. Hard. How dare he embarrass her so. "Come let us ask him," he tucked her hand into his arm and pulled her gently but firmly away from the circle of young women across the room to where Uncle Henry stood by the fire

conversing with a rather portly middle-aged man with side whiskers.

“How dare you!” she hissed through clenched teeth. “You may think it amusing to embarrass me -”

“Not at all, Miss St John. I am merely staking my claim. It will be all over London by night fall that you are mine.”

“You will ruin me before I have even made my debut. What is your intent, my lord?” She stopped short and glared up at him.

He bent his head lower and spoke softly. “My intent, Miss St John, is that you shall marry me.”

“When hell freezes over!” She pulled her hand from his arm and stalked over to Aunt Mary where she offered to pour tea, turning her back resolutely on his outrageous Lordship. If he thought these tactics would work in winning her hand, he was mightily mistaken.



ERYLIN'S DEBUT ball was everything any young lady making her curtsy to the polite world could hope for. The ballroom was stuffed to the brim with London's haute ton. All come to see the young woman who had become the object of the notorious Earl of Tremayne's attention. Erylin was well aware that this was what had drawn them all to the house in Grosvenor Square but hadn't the heart to tell Aunt Mary so. The Baroness was very well pleased with the turnout and delighted with Erylin's success. For her part Erylin was doing her best to hide her chagrin from the eyes of the interested, but within, she raged against Tremayne's tactic's and desired nothing so much as to flee the glittering, hot ballroom for the sanctuary of her room. Of course, she could do no such thing, and being neither selfish enough to ruin her hostess's obvious pleasure, nor so lost to propriety to let her

feelings appear on her face, she smiled, laughed, and danced with all the eligible men who put their names on her dance card.

She missed her father with an aching heart, wondering between bouts of dancing and conversation where he was. The only saving grace of the evening was that Tremayne had not appeared. It was approaching supper time, and she was just beginning to think she could relax and stop scanning the room surreptitiously for his tall broad-shouldered form, when the stentorian accents of the Lyndhurst's butler, Forbes, announced, "Viscount Dunmore and the Earl of Tremayne."

The Marquese of Lidney had claimed her for a dance earlier in the evening, and she had been glad enough to grant it. He kept her laughing at his witticism's, and she felt relaxed in his presence. He seemed a much nicer man than his two friends. She was, at the moment of the announcement, just coming off the floor from a country dance with Captain Eversleigh. The captain must have felt her start because his hand covered hers on his arm in sudden concern.

"Did you trip, Miss St John?"

"No, I ah — I may have caught my hem. Thank you." She smiled up at the captain, grateful for his concern. He smiled down at her and kept his hand over hers a fraction longer than necessary. "Shall I fetch you a lemonade?" he asked.

"Oh no!" she clutched at his arm, not wishing him to leave her alone, prey to Tremayne, who would no doubt swoop upon them as soon as he located her in the throng. "Supper will be served soon, I would prefer a breath of fresh air, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," he smiled and led her to the open French doors that gave onto the gardens, where many of the guest's had congregated to cool down after the exertion of the

dance. The captain guided her through the throng of guests to a quieter spot away from the doors. "Is this better?"

"Yes, thank you. It was very warm in there."

"Indeed, a veritable squeeze as they say. You are quite the success Miss St John."

"Oh no." She sighed. "They didn't come for me. Or at least they did, but not in the sense you mean."

"I don't follow you, Miss St John."

"Surely you have heard the gossip?"

"I don't listen to gossip, Miss St John." The captain smiled gravely.

"Then you must be the only person in London who doesn't." Erylin spoke bitterly. Before the captain could ask what she meant by that comment, the bell for supper rang. Erylin allowed the captain to escort her back into the house, and they were headed towards the supper room when the skin on her nape prickled.

"Thank you Eversleigh, I will take Miss St John into supper." Tremayne, of course. Her heart turned over and thumped wildly. She cast a look of entreaty at the captain who, turned and frowned at Tremayne.

"Miss St John is promised to me for supper my lord."

"None-the-less she will go with me." Tremayne glowered at Eversleigh over her head. Feeling like a sapling between two oaks, she said somewhat louder than was wise.

"It is kind of you my lord, but Captain Eversleigh is correct, I am promised to him for supper." She tugged the captain's arm and swept away leaving the Earl behind them.

The captain lead her to a table and seated her, as he bent over her to push her chair in, he said quietly, "Is Tremayne forcing his attentions on you?"

She glanced up and coloured. "The Earl is somewhat overbearing, yes."

The captain nodded, his lips folding tightly. He fetched

her a plate and a drink and then joined her with his own. She was relieved to find that he did not allude to the Earl again, instead he engaged her in a lively discussion of books, which she enjoyed. The captain was altogether a most pleasant companion, and handsome to boot. True he didn't make her pulses race the way Tremayne did, but he didn't embarrass her either or make her a subject for gossip. She was sipping her glass of champagne when she chanced to glance across the room and saw Tremayne escorting Miss Eversleigh to a table in the opposite corner. She frowned momentarily and the captain caught her expression and turned his head. When he turned back, his brow was quite black. "Captain -"

He looked down at his plate a moment and then up with a determined smile. "Do not fear Miss St John, I am quite capable of protecting my sister from his unwelcome attentions. And you may call upon my services whenever you have need. Blackguards such as Tremayne should not be permitted in polite circles. Unfortunately, his birth is impeccable and his wealth considerable. The ton cares little for his lack of moral fibre."

Erylin's mouth fell open at this bitter speech. She knew the rumours about him but surely, they were just rumours? Admittedly he had not behaved as a gentleman should towards a lady such as herself, but honesty compelled her to wonder how much she had brought on herself? She should not, after all, have been out riding alone when they met. "Is he so very bad?" she murmured.

The captain compressed his lips. "I will not repeat slander, nor sully your ears with the details of his depravity, but you may safely take it from me that Tremayne is not a man I will permit my sister to form any intimate acquaintance with."

"Yet you didn't object to him in Cornwall." She pointed out.

He flushed. "I did not know the full extent -. I had heard some rumours as we all have in Cornwall, but it wasn't until I came to London that I was apprised of Tremayne's full history. I can assure you it is not a tale fit for a lady's ears."

Erylin lowered her head to hide a flash of irritation. How was she to judge the truth of Tremayne's crimes if no one would discuss the details with her? She sipped her champagne and said with as careless an air as she could conjure. "Is it true that he murdered his wife then?"

"That is hearsay." The captain twisted his lips in an ironic smile. She couldn't help but admire his scrupulous honesty. "If there was proof, he would have been charged and tried by his peers."

"So, it is his -" she hesitated, to find the right words. "His way of life?"

The captain nodded. "I see. Thank you for the warning, Captain."

CHAPTER 9



The next day the many calling cards, invitations and bunches of flowers delivered to the house for Miss St John, confirmed Aunt Mary's conclusion of the success of the evening. "My dear you are the toast of the season! I never thought to see such quick success for you." Aunt Mary sifted through a pile of invitations and cards. "Look an invitation from the Countess Lieven, she is one of the Patroness's of Almack's my dear. Lady Sefton spoke to me briefly last night and said she would recommend you. We have so many invitations you may attend several events in one evening."

Erylin looked up from her plate. "Good heavens is that normal."

"Quite my dear, at least if you are a success. And you most definitely are a success."

Erylin flushed and looked down at her plate, reflecting that Aunt Mary would not be so sanguine if she knew the reason for her success.

"You met a great many eligible gentlemen last night. Any in particular that you liked?"

"I hardly know, there were so many."

“Well, you did begin with an advantage, having met Tremayne, Dunmore and Lidney before even coming to London. I’m convinced that has not hurt you one whit, my dear.”

“Perhaps Aunt.” Erylin smile perfunctorily. “I like Lidney and Captain Eversleigh of course.”

“Eversleigh is a man of principle I am sure your father would approve of, but he can’t compare to Lidney in birth, his father is the Duke of Carlisle, you know.”

“Is he?” Erylin looked up startled. No one had mentioned Lidney’s father in her hearing. A surprising fact considering the propensity for young women to speculate about young men.

“I don’t want to put notions in your head my dear, but it would be something indeed to attach a future Duke. However, his family are a very old Scottish line and I fear they would not consider you a worthy match. Lidney can look as high as he chooses.”

“I don’t look to make a match with a titled gentleman Aunt. A man of character is far more to my taste.”

Aunt Mary poured herself a cup of coffee and raised an eyebrow quizzically. “Well, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive my dear.”

Erylin laughed. “I suppose not.”

“And what of Tremayne? He has been most persistent in his interest.”

Erylin flushed. “The Earl of Tremayne is persistent to the point of annoyance. I have repeatedly attempted to depress his pretensions.”

“I am glad to hear you say so. Your father did not favour his suit.”

“I am aware of that Aunt and I assure you I have no intention of doing anything Papa would not approve of.”

"You know that Henry and I have your best interests at heart, don't you?"

"Of course, Aunt Mary." Erylin smiled and put her hand over her aunt's. Mary turned her hand and clasped Erylin's firmly. "The Earl has a reputation to give any woman pause. But he is also undeniably attractive."

"Aunt!"

"I was young once my dear." Mary said with a smile. Erylin burned to ask if Aunt Mary believed he had killed his wife but admitted to herself she was afraid of the answer. She didn't want to believe him a murderer, but his behaviour last night had not reassured her.

After supper he had cornered her, there was no other term for it, and constrained her to go out into the gardens with him. Quite exactly how he did that, she wasn't afterwards able to fathom. But his earnest entreaty to take a stroll in the gardens had seemed at the time impossible to refuse.

With her hand tucked into his arm they walked, in full view of other guests also taking the air. It was perfectly respectable, yet she felt her heart racing as it always did in his company. "Have you succeeded in persuading your uncle to provide you with an adequate mount, Miss St John."

"Yes, thank you."

"Then will you ride with me tomorrow in Hyde Park, at three o'clock?"

"I hardly know what I shall do tomorrow. For all I know, Aunt Mary has plans."

"I shall be at the main entrance at three and hope to see you there."

She bit her lip looking down. "Will you never take no for an answer, my lord?"

"Where you are concerned, no, I will not."

"Why?" She looked up at him, his face was partially in

shadow, it gave his features a harsh and slightly sinister cast. Her pulse quickened, could he murder someone in cold blood? More likely in passion. She swallowed. He turned his head and looked down at her. His eyes glittered in the dark and she shivered. He stopped and picked up her other hand. Turning it so that it lay palm up, he touched her palm with a finger, tracing it lightly, his touch tingled and made her knees weak, her body trembled in response. "From the first moment I saw you," his voice was low, its timbre passed through her like the beat of a drum. "You captured my soul. You hold it in the palm of your hand." He closed her fingers over her palm and enfolded her fist within his larger one. "I cannot live without my soul. I must repossess it, by possessing you."

She swallowed, staring up at him, mesmerised and terrified at once. He raised her hand to his lips and pressed them, soft and warm to her fingers. His touch sent a flush of heat through her body and she swayed slightly, her other hand, still caught in the crook of his arm tightened in reflex. He released her hand slowly, and it broke the spell. She shook her head and stepped away from him, withdrawing her hand from his arm. "I am not an object to be possessed, my lord."

"You are more precious than any object, any material thing. I expressed myself badly."

"I am not a woman to be won over by pretty speeches nor will I be cowed by your high-handedness." She lifted her chin and looked him in the eyes, determined that he should not see the extent to which he disturbed her.

"You constantly surprise and delight me. If I am not permitted to pay you compliments or compel you to spend time with me, tell me, I entreat you, how I am to win your heart?"

"A little levity would be a great relief. All this brooding passion is exhausting." Her tone was perhaps more caustic than she intended, but she was thrown into disorder by his

mentioning of hearts. She glanced up at him and wondered with a momentary panic if she had gone too far.

To her surprise she caught a twitch in his cheek and a smile broke out across his face, lightening his expression. "I am put thoroughly in my place. Meet me at Hyde Park and I will endeavour to bring some levity to our encounter."

"I doubt you are capable of it." She said falling into step with him once again.

"I'm no jokes-smith, but if I've given you the impression I have no sense of humour that is false. I stand rebuked, for my sombreness, Miss St John."

"I cannot say what I shall be doing tomorrow, my lord. I fear you will wait in vain."

"I didn't take you for a practised flirt." His tone this time was lighter, as if he strove to lift the heaviness of their previous conversation.

"I am not," she glanced at him to gauge if he were teasing. It seemed out of character. His face was in shadow, and she was none the wiser. "I am no dissembler, sir, I say what I mean and do what I say."

"I am relieved to hear it. Such candour, jibes well with my reading of your character."

"I didn't think you were interested in my character." Her tone had an edge, what was he at now?

"Assuredly I am. You will be aware that my first marriage was unfortunate. I've no desire to repeat the same mistakes."

Her heart thumped, and she longed to ask him for the truth, but her tongue cleaved to the roof of her mouth. She swallowed. Taking a steadying breath she gripped her fan, playing with the sticks. "Yet your impetuous behaviour towards me argues the opposite."

"I am a man of strong passions, Miss St John. You arouse the most powerful responses in me. I am endeavouring to exercise restraint."

“Heaven help me if you did not!” Her pulses raced again at the picture his words painted. “Ah you give me hope.” He murmured.

“I do not!” She shut her fan with a snap. “You are baying at the moon, my lord. I have no interest in a man with a past such as yours.” She walked away rapidly towards the ballroom, leaving him standing on the lawn.

MARREK WATCHED her walk away from him with mixed emotions. He was doing this all wrong. He knew that and couldn't seem to help himself. He resolved over and over to woo her with patience and rectitude, and every time he was in her presence, he lost his head and his control over himself. She surprised him constantly with her responses. Yet he knew that for all her denials she was not indifferent to him. She felt the same pull of attraction, he was sure of it. If he could but get her alone...

He sighed and walked back into the ballroom. He scanned the room automatically for her, unable to prevent himself from seeking to locate her in the sea of bodies. She was standing in a circle of acquaintance, among them Captain Eversleigh. He ground his teeth. He had not appreciated the captain's pithy command to stay away from his sister. He had no designs on Miss Eversleigh, his whole focus and desire was Erylin St John, he had merely selected her as a supper companion because her brother was with Erylin. That she might favour the captain over him was unbearable. But in weighing the two of them through the lens of Miss St John's eyes he could see how the captain would be preferable. The captain was a war hero, a man of principle, handsome and while not as well-born as himself, his lineage was respectable. St John had made it clear he was not seeking an

advantageous marriage for his daughter. The captain would no doubt find favour with him, should Erylin choose him.

“Come away my friend,” Aretas spoke quietly at this shoulder. “You are wasting your time here.”

Marrek turned his head and regarded his friend with sombre eyes. “I fear you are right.”

“I know I am. Let us collect Rome and go get drunk, I assure you it will be more profitable than this. She is not worth it Marrek.”

Marrek compressed his lips. “In that you are wrong Aretas. She is worth every ounce of effort I can bring to bear. But I agree that I can do no more tonight.”

ERYLIN KNEW the moment he left the room. Her heart skipped, and she was conscious of a slight ache in her chest. Which was ridiculous. She didn't even like the man.

CHAPTER 10



She had resolved firmly overnight that she would not meet him at Hyde Park at three o'clock, yet when Aunt Mary went to lie down for a nap, she found herself putting on her riding habit and calling for the mare Uncle Henry had provided her. Thus, she left the house with the groom assigned to her and headed for the park, arrayed in the blue velvet riding dress she had fallen in love with. It was new and paired with the matching hat set at a rakish angle on her head, she was confident she looked her best. For some reason that was important. She needed all her confidence to deal with the Earl. It was time she told him once and for all to cease and desist. With this firm resolve, she approached the gates of Hyde Park, trailed by her groom.

IT WAS ten minutes past the hour and Marrek was convinced she was not going to keep the appointment he had thrust upon her last night. She had, after all, given him no assurance she would keep it. In fact, her parting words had been disappointing in the extreme. Yet he hoped against hope that she

would appear never-the-less. He loitered around the entrance, conscious that he was conspicuously making a cake of himself. But he didn't care for that. People gossiped about him all the time. What was one more oddity to add to his dish?

He was considering how much longer he could stay, when he spied a flash of blue and with a jolt recognised her. She was breathtakingly beautiful in a stunning blue velvet habit. He recalled with vivid clarity how lovely she looked on the moors, riding hell-for-leather away from him. She was always walking or riding away from him. Today she was riding towards him. His heart lifted with a surge of joy that was hard to contain. She came through the gates, trailed by her groom and he brought his mount alongside hers.

"Well met Miss St John." He reached for her hand and bowed over it, just touching the back of her glove to his lips. "Good afternoon, my Lord." She inclined her head, every inch cool, regal, and enticingly untouchable. He longed to pull her from the saddle and ravish her with kisses. Their circumstances and the palpable knowledge that his advances were not welcome were enough to curb the urge. He would not win this woman by behaving like a barbarian. The park was crowded at this time of day, and they wended their way through the press of carriages, riders, and strollers, to a less densely populated thoroughfare. "Thank you. I didn't think you would come." He glanced at her, as they swayed gently forward.

"I almost didn't," she said with her devastating candour.

"What changed your mind?"

"I thought it time we spoke frankly to each other." She glanced at him, and he caught and held her gaze, his heart thumping heavily in his chest. She was so beautiful...

"Gallop with me," he spoke impulsively. He knew she was

about to tell him to leave her be, and he wanted to delay the inevitable.

She hesitated, glancing around. "Can we, here?"

He nodded at the straight before them. "I will race you to that tree." He glanced back at her groom. "Wait for your Mistress here."

The groom, a young spindly fellow, nodded his head. And he kicked his horse, Midnight, into a canter. He glanced back and found her following suit. He grinned. He knew she couldn't resist that challenge. He let Midnight have his head and thundered down the straight. She kept pace with him, to his delight. He laughed for sheer exhilaration as they drew closer to the tree, and she pushed the mare to pass him. They rode neck and neck and he neither knew nor cared which of them nosed the finish line first. She was flushed and laughing with him as they reached the tree and brought their mounts to a halt, walking them easily around the tree. He dismounted and went to the mare's head.

"Walk with me," he reached up to lift her down from her saddle. She kicked free of the stirrup, lifting her leg from the pommel to slide from the saddle into his arms. To hold her thus suspended a moment against his body, to feel her light frame and smell her scent, set his body aflame. Her hands rested on his shoulders and she smiled, her cheeks still flushed, her eyes alight with laughter and happiness. He set her slowly on her feet, his hands still round her slender waist. It took every ounce of his self-control not to kiss her.

The moment held for an aeon, as she stared up at him, her eyes wide and the pupils slightly dilated. Surely if he kissed her now, she would not reject him. Yet he could not, without causing a massive scandal. And that she did not deserve.

The tree was a huge fig, with a massive trunk and spreading branches. He tucked her hand into his arm and led her around the tree away from the immediate vicinity of

prying eyes. They were not entirely alone, but they had left the fashionable throng behind. The tree's thick trunk provided a modicum of privacy. "You wished to say something to me Miss John?"

She cleared her throat and looked down as she stepped over a tree root protruding from the ground. "Yes I -"

"Do not say it," he interrupted her. "Do not tell me to give up my quest to win your heart, for I cannot. Give me the chance to prove myself constant and worthy of your regard. That is what your father challenged me to do. Please tell me that you will afford me that opportunity."

He stopped and turned to face her. The dappled shadow of the tree branches overhead played over her face as she lifted it towards him. A slight breeze wafted a curl come loose from her hat, and he tucked it behind her ear, his fingers lingering on her neck.

"Please," he murmured and lowered his head and kissed her lips softly, lightly. Her hands gripped his jacket and he thought for a moment she would push him away. The touch of her lips was molten magic, flooding his body with heat and a desire so sharp and so sweet it took his breath away. He slid an arm round her waist to draw her closer against him as her lips moved under his, pressing closer with a tentative exploratory movement that sent a bolt of joy through his heart. He responded with an equal pressure, the moment seemed to last an eternity, his senses swamped in warmth.

Afraid his control would snap, and he would frighten her, he lifted his head, breathing deeply, his body trembling. Opening his eyes, he found her staring up at him, a dazed expression in her eyes. Like him, her breathing was elevated. It had been a brief kiss, but its effect was searing. A child's loud squeal broke the spell, and she jerked herself out of his arms, her fingers going to her lips. She looked about and turned away from him, taking a hasty step towards the

horses. "If someone were to see us -" She took a step and tripped over a root. He put out his hands and caught her up against him.

"No one saw. Watch your feet." He looked down into her face, her body pressed against him. Oh, to feel the pleasure of her mouth again. He lowered his head to recapture her mouth and she evaded him, pulling away.

"Erylin!" She ignored him and ran towards the mare, flinging herself into the saddle, she swung the mare's head around and kicked her to a trot and then a canter. He went to Midnight's head, mounted, and followed. He kicked the horse to chase her down, but she was ahead enough that she reached her groom and headed into the crowded milieu of Rotten Row. If he pursued her there, he would make a spectacle of both of them. She would hate that, and likely it would undo the progress he had made in kissing her. One thing he now knew, she was not indifferent to him. It was something.

ERYLIN REACHED the sanctuary of her room half an hour later, having escaped the park and made her way home in a kind of daze. Fortunately, Aunt Mary was still in her room and she was able to enter the house and make her way upstairs undetected. Shutting the door, she moved to the generous four-poster bed with its heavy old-fashioned curtains and tester and sank down on the soft comforter. She had gone out with the express purpose of depressing Tremayne's pretensions and ended by kissing him.

A hand stole to her cheek and the side of her neck where he had touched her. The trace of his finger had left a trail of tingles over her skin. She touched her lips. And his mouth on hers had unleashed a burning heat that threatened to buckle her knees. Even now, her body ached with an unaccustomed

fire. Tears stung her lids and she swallowed the lump in her throat.

“Papa, I don’t know what to do. Why must I be attracted to a man with such a history?” She addressed the air, despair in her heart. For she recognised that Tremayne’s attraction was something she was ill prepared to deal with.

She took off her hat, fought her way out of her riding habit and crawled under the covers, weary with the strains of the last twenty-four hours. Falling into a heavy sleep she found herself dreaming. She was wandering in a ruined building. It was dark, and she knew there was someone behind her. The conviction became stronger as she quickened her pace. She rounded a bend and ran slap into Tremayne. She knew it was he, although she couldn’t for some reason see his face clearly. Then he kissed her and a heat engulfed her body as he pressed her against a wall and kept kissing her. The kisses continued and pleasure, sharp and sweet began to grow in her body, he pressed hard against her, and she moved her hips in answering need, wanting...

The stench of donkey dung filled her nostrils. The man pressed her into the hot hard dusty ground, his arm across her throat, as he forced her legs apart with his knees. Her head pounded as she scrabbled at his arm trying to prise it away from her throat. His other fist connected with her jaw and her head jerked back as pain exploded behind her eyes. Terror raced through her, and she knew she was dreaming, fought to wake herself up.

She opened her eyes, drenched in cold sweat, her heart racing, her breathing ragged. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the tester above her head, tears gathering in her eyes and spilling from the corners. Penwyth’s kisses had raked up memories she had kept well buried. She shuddered. She could never let him touch her. Never again.

CHAPTER 11



*I*t was two long days before Marrek found an opportunity to see Erylin again. Her ardent response to his kisses, brief as it had been, had given him hope and increased his level of frustration seven-fold. He wanted her and no other. The ghosts of Heloise and his father haunted him, and he wavered between hope and despair almost hourly. His moods so unstable his servants stayed clear of him unless summoned.

By the end of two days of inner torture his state of mind was fragile to say the least. He felt on the one hand that Erylin held the key to his escape from the past and on the other that she deserved someone who could come to her without the terrible baggage that he brought with him. Yet despite his fits of nobility where he swore, he would give up this impossible quest to win her heart, he knew that he couldn't give up, because to do so would be to give up on his life altogether.

He might as well return to Cornwall and cast himself into the sea as Heloise had done, for there was no escape from his past without Erylin. This conviction was so strong it solidi-

fied his determination to continue his assault on her will. She might try to pretend that she was unaffected by his desire for her, but he knew she was. It was a weakness he was willing to exploit for his own ends.

Rome and Aretas invaded his town house on the evening of the second day. They had come from Brookes where they had dined. They found Marrek in shirt sleeves and breeches drinking scotch and staring morosely into the fire in his sitting room.

“Are you still brooding over that wench?” demanded Aretas, throwing himself into a chair. He was immaculately attired in evening dress and looking devastatingly handsome with his blonde hair brushed into a fashionable Brutus. Rome, more carelessly dressed, but also in evening kit, took up a place by the hearth, leaning an arm on the mantelpiece. Marrek eyed them sourly and sipped his whisky. “What if I am?”

“Aye, I sympathise, really, I do man, but you’ll do yourself no good, nor her, by sitting here brooding on it. You’ll do better to straighten yourself out and woo her proper. After all you’ve no husband in the way of your desires. But if you tarry too long you may find yourself gazumped my friend. The captain is the favourite in the clubs.”

“Don’t listen to Rome, he’s a romantic. You’ll do better to forget her, Marrek. She’ll break your heart as soon as look at you. Come out with us and forget her.”

Marrek surveyed his friends through a fog of whisky and despair. “I’m in no fit state to go out. Stay here, and we’ll play cards and get drunk. That fits my mood better.”

“Nay,” Jerome peeled himself away from the fire and came towards Marrek. “I’ll not see you throw away this chance. She’s worth the effort man. A rare prize, and you’ll lose her else you get off that couch and pull yourself together.”

Marrek regarded his friend with frowning eyes and swal-

lowed a sudden lump in his throat. Jerome was right. If he gave up — he shuddered, closing his eyes momentarily. Opening them again he stood up, swaying a little. He'd drunk more whisky than was wise. Jerome caught his arm and steadied him. "Ring for coffee, Aretas, and his lordships Valet. We'll have you sober and cleaned up in no time." Rome smiled, making his uneven features suddenly endearing.

Marrek clutched his arm and then hugged him. "Thank you, my friend."

Jerome shrugged and hugged him back. "You'd do the same for either of us, wouldn't he Aretas?"

Aretas rose from his chair and put his hand on Marrek's shoulder. "He has done already." His tone was sombre and his look heart felt. He was recalling a time that Marrek had pulled him from an uncharacteristic bout of despair. Lady Letitia Moore had much to answer for. Marrek clutched his hand and squeezed it.

"Alright, you are good friends, I'll try not to disgrace you tonight. Give me an half hour, and I'll be respectable."

"It seems I can't dissuade you from your course in pursuing this infernal woman?"

Marrek turned at the door and regarded his friend.

"She holds my soul. I cannot give her up."

Aretas nodded slowly. "Very well my friend. Then we shall have to work to help you in your quest."

Marrek smiled, a rare thing these days and went upstairs to make himself presentable, conscious that he had the two best friends any man could ask for. Perhaps life was not so dismal after all?



ERYLIN SAT ENTRANCED in the box of the New Royal Opera House, in Covent Garden, watching a performance of

Macbeth starring Phillip Kemble and Mrs Siddons. She had not seen a theatre performance to equal it. She wished Papa could be present to see it and for the thousandth time she wondered where he was and what he was doing. It was over two months since he left. Was he in Egypt by now? He had expected to arrive within a month of leaving or at the latest six weeks. If that were the case, she might hope to hear from him in the coming couple of weeks allowing for the time for a letter to reach her. But then she knew how unreliable communications could be in such countries. Realistically she might not hear from him for some time.

His objective had been to obtain a concession to dig in Luxor, a southern city some considerable distance from Cairo. He had shown her on a map. It seemed an awfully long way away and her heart ached with missing him. They had never been separated for this long. She shook her head to rid herself of the megrim and concentrated on the drama unfolding before her. The curtain came down for the intermission to thunderous applause.

Erylin sat back in her seat and turned to Aunt Mary, "Wasn't that thrilling? I don't know when I have enjoyed a play so much."

"Yes, indeed nothing surpasses Kemble and Siddon's together. They have a certain alchemy, that cannot be matched." Aunt Mary rose, "Do you want to take a walk, my dear, refreshments should arrive shortly, I arranged for tea and cakes to be delivered to the box. Henry will you be so kind as to escort us?"

Sir Henry, who had been dozing comfortably in his chair, sat up, rubbing his face. "Of course, my dear, delighted."

Erylin hid a smile and groped for her reticule which had slipped from her wrist during the performance and fallen down beneath her chair. She was thus bent over with her

back to the door of the box when it opened to admit three gentlemen.

“My Lords, how delightful to see you. Henry, you know my Lords Dunmore, Lidney and Tremayne.”

Erylin, having snatched her reticule up, rose hastily and turned, conscious of her flaming cheeks both from bending over and from embarrassment at having been caught in such a compromising attitude. Fortunately, Aunt Mary had had the foresight to position herself to block the visitors view of Erylin. She turned now to draw Erylin forward. “My dear I don’t need to introduce you to these gentlemen.”

Erylin held out her hand and each of them bowed over it with punctilious correctness. Only Tremayne, who came last, held it a fraction longer than protocol required and chose to press his lips briefly to the back of her hand. The shock she always experienced when he touched her, raced up her arm and she wished that she had not removed her gloves. The tingle was compounded by the usual molten look he gave her as he straightened. She snatched her hand away, her heart thumping and tuned to address Viscount Lidney, who of the three, was the least alarming. “How have you found the performance so far, my lord?”

“I confess we arrived late and missed most of it.” Lidney spoke with his soft Scottish burr and an engaging smile that made his uneven features most endearing.

“Then you missed a treat,” Erylin tapped his arm with her fan. Conscious of Tremayne standing behind her engaging Aunt Mary and Uncle Henry in conversation she turned slightly to draw Dunmore into the conversation. “Are you fond of the theatre, my lord?”

Dunmore smiled ruefully, “I prefer comedy to tragedy I must say. Does that make me a frivolous fellow?”

Erylin raised an eyebrow and considered him. “I think frivolity is a mask you use for your own purposes, my lord.

Behind the mask lies something of greater substance I warrant.”

Dunmore raised both eyebrows in surprise. “Very perceptive of you Miss St John.” He glanced over his shoulder at Tremayne and Erylin couldn’t resist following his gaze. She immediately regretted doing so, for the Earl immediately stepped towards her.

“May I take you for a walk along the corridor Miss St John?”

She could think of no reason to refuse him and found herself swept out into the corridor, willy-nilly. His Lordship seemed to have that effect. Each time she resolved to hold him at a distance, he invaded her proximity and swept away her scruples with one look from those impossible blue eyes. The intensity of his gaze was equally impossible to sustain without falling victim to it. She resolutely kept her gaze forward as they walked slowly along the corridor. There were other couples walking in the corridor, it wasn’t exactly private. But his Lordship guided her easily into a room off the corridor that gave onto the gallery and stairs below. To the left was a door into another smaller room, and he led her there.

The room was furnished with a settee and a rather alarming statue of a Roman helmeted naked woman, sporting a shield in one hand and sword in the other. Staring at this outlandish vision distracted her from the fact that his lordship had closed the door and come up behind her.

“Bellona, Roman Goddess of War.” He spoke over her shoulder and made her jump. She looked round at him and realised that she was alone with him in a locked room. Her heart thumped wildly and her breath caught in her throat.

“My lord this will not do. Return me to the box immediately.”

He took her hands in his and caught her gaze, so that she

could not look away. Her body trembled. "I will take you back presently, and I assure I mean you no harm, neither your person nor your reputation shall be sullied by me. Please trust me just a little?"

She found herself nodding in spite of her herself. He drew her to the settee, where she sat gratefully, her knees were trembling. He kept hold of one of her hands but let her pull the other free, where it curled into a small fist on her knee.

"My dear Erylin -"

"I have not given you permission to use my name sir." She spoke stiffly, her heart still beating rapidly in her breast.

His mouth, that beautifully sculpted mouth whose lips she wished desperately to feel again, twitched slightly up at the corners. "Erylin, you gave me permission when you returned my kisses with such ardent desire. You cannot continue to deny the attraction between us."

"Physical desire is not everything my lord. It is certainly no basis for marriage."

"I beg to differ. Without it a marriage must be barren indeed."

"I meant that it alone is not sufficient to sustain a marriage. There must be other elements present also."

His habitual dark stormy expression was disturbed by a lightness, a smile, and a gleam in his eyes. "Such as?" he probed, gently.

"Such as a meeting of minds and spirit. I know nothing of your mind my lord, nor you of mine. I am not a frivolous ninny with nothing in my head but entertainments and clothes you know. I do not desire a life as a social butterfly."

"I did not think it." He spoke quickly, with an earnest tone that made her look up and get caught in those eyes again. It really wasn't fair, how could any woman defend herself against an expression of such naked desire. "You have had a most unusual upbringing, I am fully aware of your equally

unusual accomplishments, you were at pains to apprise me of them, if you recall?"

She blushed, looking down, which made him reach out and force her chin up. "There is nothing to be ashamed of in that Erylin, your accomplishments, your intelligence and spirit are as attractive to me as your undeniable beauty."

"My lord you hardly know me. We have not conversed on any topics of serious thought, we have not spent sufficient time in each other's company to form an opinion beyond the superficial. That might be sufficient for you, it is not for me." She rose, pulling out of his grasp. "Please take me back to the box."

He rose, his stormy expression returning and her heart quailed. Something of her disquiet must have shown in her eyes because he touched her cheek with a gentle finger. "Do not fear me, please. Yes, I have an uncertain temper, but I would never unleash it on you." He caught up her hand and kissed it. A rush of heat, raced through her body, and she swayed towards him with a little gasp. His arm came round her, crushing her to his chest and his mouth came down on hers. The will to resist the tide of desire, evaporated under the gentle insistence of his lips coaxing a response from hers. Tingling desire coursed through her body from the sharp pleasure of his mouth moving on hers, persuading her lips to part and let his tongue invade her mouth. She pressed herself closer to him, avid for his hardness and heat. She shuddered, a muffled groan in her throat as his hands roamed over her back, as she lost herself in his deepening kiss, giving back with ardent, passionate abandon.

WHAT MADE him pull back he could not afterwards fathom unless it was the imminent terror of disgracing himself by a complete lack of control. For whatever reason he ended the

kiss that was scorching his body and sending him rapidly towards a precipice he couldn't pull back from and instead rested his face in her hair, pressing hers against his shoulder. Her hands had somehow found their way beneath his jacket and clung to his waistcoat, her face was buried in his shoulder and he could hear her recovering her breath as he was. Her body trembled in his arms. Slender, yet womanly through the thin fabric of her blue silk gown, everything to drive a man wild with desire.

"Erylin, my darling," he murmured kissing her hair, stroking her back. He had kept his hands off her bottom by sheer force of will. She lifted her face, and he resisted the temptation to kiss her again. That way lay madness and a point of no return for them both. To say nothing of the scandal. He had enough scandals attached to him. He did not intend to bring any down on her innocent head.

She pulled away from him reluctantly, putting up her hand to her hair. He let her go with equal reluctance. "I suppose I cannot pretend there is not an — attraction between us." She spoke in a low voice, her head turned away.

"No, I don't think you can, if you are being honest with yourself and me."

She took a breath and let it out slowly, straightening her shoulders. "Never-the-less," she glanced over her shoulder at him. "I ask you that you forget it. There can never be a — a relationship between us, respectable or illicit. I cannot permit it."

"Erylin -" He watched her walk away from him towards the door, stunned by her words.

"I must ask you to forgive me. My behaviour is outrageous. I am fully conscious of it. There are reasons. But I cannot tell you what they are -"

He strode towards her and seized her shoulders. "No, you will not put me aside with hollow words. Whatever scruples

your think you have can be overcome. Is it my past? Is that what makes you hesitate? I swear to you my way of life is reformed. I have learned my lesson, I swear that I will not make the same mistakes again. You are not Heloise, no two women could be more different. History will not repeat itself. It cannot. I- Erylin please believe me.” His voice cracked on the words.

He felt like his heart was breaking. She couldn't walk away from him now. He wouldn't let her. His hands tightened on her, and she stared up at him her eyes wide, the pupils still dilated with the heated desire of their love making, her lips still red and full from his kisses. He pulled her close and kissed her hard, expecting her capitulation.

What he got was a wild struggle. A noise in her throat, not of desire, but terror. She pushed her hands against his chest and then beat at his face with her palms, her fingers curled, and she scratched his cheek as her knee came up and dealt him a sharp and agonising blow. He let her go with a groan of pain, and she fled the room. Leaving him doubled over in nauseated agony.

ERYLIN WRENCHED the door open and ran out of the room too driven by fear to think of what others might think if they saw her. She fled across the outer room and spied the screen to the ladies retiring room and fled there. Collapsing onto a velvet covered couch she fought to compose her breathing and stop the tears flooding her eyes. She pulled out her handkerchief and used it mop up the tears, gasping for breath, trying to stifle the sobs that rose unbidden in her throat and threatened to tear from her body in wracking cries.

His forceful attempt to kiss her had triggered for fear and sent her into unthinking terror. The horror washed through

her in waves, making her skin clammy and her stomach sick. She gulped for breath, trying to slow her heart rate and calm her breathing. Focusing all her efforts into her breath, she managed to push the terror back into the locked box she kept it in. With hands that trembled, she wiped her face and blew her nose.

When she had herself under control she ventured out of the room, thankful that no one had burst in upon her, the intermission must be over. Heavens what would Aunt Mary be thinking? She made her way back to the box and slipped inside, the visitors were gone and Aunt Mary turned from the stage as soon as she heard the door open.

“My dear are you all right? I was about to send Henry in search of you.”

“Yes I — my dress got torn, and I had to pin up the hem.”

Aunt Mary gave her a searching look, but the light was dim in the box so Erylin hoped her flood of recent tears was not obvious. Of his lordship there was no sign, much to her relief.

MARREK’S HUMILIATION was complete when the door pushed open to reveal his two friends catching him bent double in agony.

Rome stared at him, shutting the door behind him, and leaning against it. “She kicked you in the cods, didn’t she?”

“A knee was the implement used,” responded Marrek, straightening slowly, and breathing through his nose.

Aretas made a choking sound behind his hand then cast himself onto the couch and went off in gales of laughter. Rome doubled up, roaring with mirth.

Straightening with difficulty Marrek eyed them with a stormy frown, raising his fingers to the sting on his cheek and finding them red. Fishing a handkerchief out of his

pocket, he dabbed at his cheek and tried to ignore the pain in his groin. As Aretas' and Rome's laughter petered out to sniggers and hiccoughs, Marrek felt his lips twitch as the picture he must present formed in his mind. But the flash of humour soon faded as he recalled the expression of sheer terror in Erylin's eyes as she hit out at him. He had seriously frightened her, and that had not been his intention. His heart plummeted, for every step forward, he seemed to suffer at least two or three back.

"The lass surely knows how to look after herself," remarked Rome wiping his eyes with a handkerchief.

"She warned me that she knew a trick or two," murmured Marrek. How often had she been forced to employ them? Often enough, judging from her reaction tonight. He frowned.

"Come away my friend, you'll do no good tonight." Aretas rose from the couch and linked his arm with Marrek's. "I prescribe supper, a few drinks and a round of cards."

Marrek allowed himself to be led away, but he was haunted by that look of fear in her eyes. Yet another burden to his load of guilt. So far from winning her trust he had destroyed it.

CHAPTER 12



The rest of the play had been ruined for Erylin, despite her best attempts to concentrate upon the drama unfolding before her, she had been unable to shake off the effects of her encounter with Tremayne. Yet she had been forced to dissemble lest Aunt Mary suspect something untoward. After all, she had brought his lordships behaviour on herself. It was her fault for her wanton response to his kisses. Even though he had begged her to trust him, she could not, because she could not trust herself.

Alone at last in her bed, she wondered if she had finally managed to convince him to leave *her* alone. Her violent response must surely have made him wary of coming near her again. The thought that she might have finally achieved her ends in getting him to cease and desist, was paradoxically depressing. Her reaction had been instinctive, his forceful attempt to kiss her had triggered her dormant fear. She had kneed him and scratched him, like some common street brawling whore. She had hurt him. How could she ever look him in the face again?

Her chaotic emotions set her tossing and turning until

the sheets were tangled and the coverlet half on the floor. She fell into an uneasy doze in the small hours and woke not much refreshed mid-morning, with an uncharacteristic headache and a heavy heart. Feeling quite unequal to facing Aunt Mary's searching gaze over the coffee cups, she rang for breakfast in bed, planning to keep to her room for the remainder of the morning. When she did eventually emerge from her room, Aunt Mary saw nothing amiss to her relief, ascribing her wan appearance to fatigue.

"You are worn out, and no wonder. We have scarce been home one night in a sennight. I'm quite exhausted myself. We shall have a quiet night in my dear and recruit our strength, for we have vouchers for Almack's my dear, they arrived in the post this morning. We shall attend next Wednesday night."

Aunt Mary gave Forbes instructions that they were not at home to visitors, Erylin settled to her latest project, copying out her father's diary notes in a fair hand and adding illustrations as appropriate. She was determined that the manuscript would be finished in time for his return. She was deeply engrossed when the door to the parlour opened and Greg the footman appeared holding an enormous bouquet of flowers.

"Scuse me ma'am, but these arrived just now for Miss Erylin."

"Good heavens, is there a card?" Aunt Mary looked over her spectacles at the great bunch of blooms.

"Aye ma'am." Greg shifted the flowers to rest in the crook of his arm and held out a folded and sealed envelope. Erylin rose and took the envelope, breaking the seal. Taking out a card she read the words *Forgive me*.

Her heart skipped and beat a rapid tattoo in her breast and she felt her cheeks flush. There was no doubt who had sent the flowers. "Who is it from my dear?"

"Tremayne, Aunt."

"Well, you should thank him prettily my dear, they are quite lovely."

"Indeed, they are." Erylin returned to the desk at which she had been working and drew a piece of paper towards her. Dipping her quill in the ink she sat letting it dry on the nib wondering what to say, while Aunt Mary instructed Greg to find a vase, "no, several vases, for I swear the bunch is too big for just one."

Finally, she wrote. *Thank you, they are lovely. E.*

It was an ambiguous response, but what could she say? *I forgive you.* Was clearly untenable. As was, *It was my fault.* Or *Forgive me!* She hesitated over folding the paper and added in haste lest she second guess herself yet again. *PS: I trust you took no lasting hurt.*

Folding the paper quickly she sealed it with wax and Uncle Henry's stamp and rising she ran downstairs to leave the note on the hall table and found his lordship sitting on the settle by the front door, like a common lackey. "Oh!" She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, staring at him and flushing. He rose at sight of her and bowed. "Miss St John, you received the flowers I trust?"

"Yes I —" she held out the letter to him. He took it, and she turned and ran back up the stairs. "Erylin!"

She shook her head and continued up the stairs, returning to the sitting room.

MARREK BROKE the seal on the letter and read the words on the page. He looked up as the footman reappeared. "Pen and ink, fellow."

"My lord?"

"Pen and ink!" He waved the piece of paper under the fellow's nose.

“Oh, in here my lord.” He held the door of one of the ground floor rooms open and Marrek strode past him into a book lined room, with a desk by the window. Seating himself he composed several lines, dusted them with sand and resealed the letter, stamping it with his own seal. Returning to the hall he handed the letter to the footman.

“See that this is delivered to Miss St John’s bedchamber. No one else is to see it. Understood?” He passed over a sovereign.

The footman goggled at the coin, gulped, and pocketed it. “Yes, my lord.”

Marrek turned and left the house a slight smile on his face.



RETURNING to her room to dress for dinner, Erylin found the folded and sealed sheet resting on a pillow, with her name scrawled across the front.

Examining the seal, she recognised it. As if there could be any doubt. What was he about now?

My dearest Erylin, I would bear a great many more hurts if the carrying of them could elicit your care and concern. It is nothing more than I deserve for frightening you. Please believe that was not my intention. I have suffered much greater pain from the thought that I have been the cause of your discomfort than the mild distress of the blow you inflicted upon me. It is my earnest wish to be the man who has the right to protect you from all harm, past, present, and future. Should you have need of my services in any capacity I hope that you know you can call upon them. I remain, my darling, your servant to command.

Marrek

Sinking down onto the comforter she read the words over several times, a lump rising in her throat as something

in her chest melted. A tear spilled over and ran down her cheek. She had carried this fear within her for six years, too ashamed to confess what had happened. Papa would have been devastated. The idea that she might share her burden with another...

She wiped the tears away, she couldn't of course. It would be completely improper for a single lady to share such confidences with a man outside of her family. The only circumstance in which she could do so with Marrek, would be if he were her husband. And of course, confession of such shame would make her instantly unsuitable as a wife. Was there any greater irony than this? The more she came to care for him, the less eligible a bride she became, because the more she cared, the less she could in good conscience deceive him. If he truly cared for her, this knowledge would hurt him far more than her careless knee had done. And in turn, his rejection would be a cruel blow indeed. Her heart quailed at the thought. She didn't think she could bear that.

CHAPTER 13



She next encountered him at yet another ball but not in the ballroom. She had gone to the ladies' room and was returning via the mezzanine gallery that overlooked the ballroom, it ran around two sides of the room below it, from which the sounds of music and conversation floated upwards. The candles in the great chandelier flickered throwing shadows against the wall and the strong scent of beeswax hung heavy in the air. The gallery was empty, so she stopped to look over the balustrade at the guests below, glad of a little respite from the social whirl. She was just preparing to resume her walk along the gallery when she saw him. He had entered the ballroom with his friend Dunmore, the two men, both taller than the average, and more than averagely good-looking made excellent foils for each other, one fair as an angel the other dark as the devil. Dunmore was a target of all the matchmaking mama's and the ideal of many swooning damsels if the conversations Erylin overheard in his vicinity were anything to go by.

Thinking herself safe from detection she continued to watch the two men move around the floor of the ballroom,

stopping to speak to various acquaintance. Marrek moved with the grace of a large cat, and she realised after a moment that he was scanning the room. Was he looking for her? He turned his head and as if sensing her regard, he looked up and stared straight at her. His gaze, skewered her to the spot, making her pulse flutter and her body flush with sudden heat as the memory of their last embrace flooded through her. Standing transfixed she watched as he moved swiftly towards the stairs that would take him up to the gallery where she stood, his gaze still pinned on her.

Breaking out of the trance his gaze had inflicted she looked around for somewhere to hide and bolted towards an open door behind her. Whipping inside the room she shut the door swiftly seeking a further hiding place, it was a small sitting room with window seat framed by long velvet curtains. Hearing footsteps approaching she flew to the window seat, loosening the curtains and leaping up on the cushioned seat she stood leaning against the window embrasure her heart thumping wildly, trying to suppress her rapid breathing.

This was ridiculous, but she couldn't face him, not again. The man was impossible. She stood still, her ears straining. The door opened and she stood stock still, trembling in place, her hands pressing against the glass, the coldness detectable through her gloves. The thick carpet muffled any footsteps as she waited with bated breath for him to leave. The seconds tick by, it felt like an aeon. Surely, he must leave soon. She chewed her lip feeling quite foolish.

The curtain tweaked aside, rattling on its rings, and she squeaked in alarm, her face flushing with embarrassment.

"There you are!" He smiled at her, his dark eyes glittering with delight. He reached for her waist and swung her around setting her on her feet. "What a delightful game of hide-and-seek my love." He spoke softly lowering his head.

She stared up at him mesmerised. He was going to kiss her again and for some reason she couldn't move. His hands were warm on her waist sending tingles through her body and instead of pulling away, instead of telling him to let her go, she found herself leaning towards him. He slid one arm around her pulled her against him and kissed her. And she let him. Worse she encouraged him. She had lost her mind truly.

His lips teased her, his tongue taunted her. Her body melted against his, unable to resist the fire building, burning, turning her limbs to water. Her heart raced, her body trembled. His arm across her back pressed her sinfully close, she could feel the heat and hardness of him against her belly, the evidence that he was as roused and lost as she. As swept away with desire as her wanton self. This was madness, yet she couldn't stop. Her traitorous hips pressed closer, anything to assuage the aching, burning fire between her legs.

A mewl of longing escaped her throat as his lips found her neck and sent shivers down her spine. Her back arched, pressing her breasts against his chest, her nipples tight and sensitive inside her shift. His mouth returned to capture hers as his hands moved lower, pressing her closer and his thigh shifted, pushing between her legs, pressing on that spot that burned and ached so fiercely. His other hand found her breast and she jerked when his fingers grazed her taught nipple through the fabric of her gown.

HER SOFT MOAN when he touched her breast almost undid him. He pressed his thigh harder into the vee of her legs. Her trembling body captive in his arms, pressing closer, moulding her soft womanly form to his, was everything he had ever dreamed of and more. She could not deny or hide her attraction towards him, it was strong enough to overcome the very real fear she had felt the last time he

attempted to kiss her with force. His hands squeezed her delectable bottom and her hips moved against his, dragging a groan from his throat. He was aflame with desire, yet cautious of frightening her again.

He slid a hand up from her bottom to cup one breast, squeezing and massaging it through the fabric of her gown, his fingers found the sharp peak of her nipple and caressed it, making her body jerk and eliciting a moan as his lips grazed her neck. She smelt divine, her scent of honeysuckle and rosemary made his head spin. He pressed his thigh more firmly into the vee of her legs, his hand leaving her breast to slid down her ribs to her hips and gather up her gown. Bunching her gown, he reached beneath it; moving his thigh away, his questing fingers found the sweet sticky honey between her legs. His body reacted to that with a shudder. He was so hard it hurt.

Holding her tight with one arm round her waist, his mouth travelled up her neck to find her mouth as his fingers traced a delicate line down the seam of her nether lips, parting them to touch the velvet wet flesh within. Her body rippled and the low moan in her throat, made his impossible stiff cock leak and throb with unbearable desire. He wanted desperately to lay her down on the carpet and have her here and now, but some vestige of self-control kept him still, kept his hips from thrusting roughly against her flank, where the burning heat of his erection pressed with agonising need. Holding himself in check by sheer force of will, he rested his face against her hair and breathed in her scent, drowning in the lush fresh delight of her.

His fingers traced up and down the slit between her swollen lips, gently, gently he swirled them around the nub of her exquisite desire, his arm round her waist squeezing her close to hold her up as he felt her knees give way. Her hands clutched at him, her breathing chaotic and hoarse as

he drove her swiftly towards the precipice of release with the gentlest and lightest of touches. He was stunned at how rapidly her passion rose, how ready she was. He swallowed a groan, concentrating all his effort on her pleasure. Determine to give her this at least. Bind her to him forever with the sweet bonds of love.

Her body shuddered and went rigid, her breath caught in her throat and she turned her head to muffle her cry of delight in the cloth of his coat. He held her tight through the paroxysm and soothed her gently with his touch in the aftermath, withdrawing slowly, he let her skirts fall round her ankles and wiped his fingers discreetly on a handkerchief in his pocket. His lips grazed her temple and his arm held her close against him, his other hand coming up to stroke her hair.

AS THE SHARP pleasure ebbed into peaceful bliss, and she slowly came back to herself, her tight grip on his waistcoat loosened and her breathing and pulse rate stabilised. The fabric of his coat beneath her cheek and the spicy scent of him filled her nostrils, she sagged against him with a deep sigh. His arm tightened round her, and he murmured against her hair, "I have you. You're safe." Why he said those words in particular she didn't know, but they fit, and she nuzzled her face against his coat instinctively. She wanted to stay forever in the dark cocoon of his arms, her eyes closed, shutting out the reality of what had just transpired and what it meant.

But her mind was operating again, and she couldn't hang onto that peaceful oblivion any longer. She raised her head slowly and blinked up at him. He was smiling down at her with such a tender expression her heart turned over in her breast and thumped hard against her ribs.

"I love you," he said softly and kissed her mouth tenderly.

Then he released her slowly and stepped away. Turning towards the door he reached it in a few strides unlocked it and was gone, closing it quietly behind him. She staggered backwards onto the window seat and dropped her head into her hands, her heart thumping wildly her thoughts chaotic and disordered.

MARREK STRODE AWAY from the room in which he had left her at a fast clip and descended the stairs to the ballroom. He threaded his way rapidly through the crowds towards the doors that gave onto the garden and burst out into the night air, fleeing down the shallow terrace steps into the garden's proper.

He plunged into the shrubbery seeking a place in shadow away from prying eyes. He pushed through the bushes and came out in a darkened space dominated by a large tree. Leaning against the tree his breathing erratic, his shaking fingers scrabbled at the buttons of his falls. His rigid cock sprang free from its confines, and he whimpered as he took himself in hand, stroking rapidly. His head back and eyes closed, he thrust his hips violently in time with the motion his hand. He raised his other hand to breathe in the scent of her, engulfing him in a rush so powerful he swallowed the groan that threatened to tear from his throat.

"Erylin!" he whispered on an agonised exhale. He choked on another groan as he thrust forward violently into his fist, his balls pulled tight, and he lost his seed in a rush of searing pleasure. Stifling his gasps of repletion he sagged against the tree, letting the lassitude flow through his limbs, threatening to weaken his knees. He took several deep breaths to stabilise his breathing and heart rate and opened his eyes. His body still trembled with residual tendrils of pleasure, and he gave himself a few more moments to come back to himself

completely before he used the handkerchief to tidy himself up, rebutton his falls and head back to the ballroom.

Erylin was treading a measure with some jackanapes in shirt points too high for him to turn his head and he watched her with a peculiar wrench in his chest. He wanted to storm across the room and tear her away from the sprig, but of course he couldn't do anything so medieval without causing the kind of scandal that had dogged his entire career.

"Still pining?" said Aretas in his ear.

"She's mine," he said softly. But this time he spoke with conviction. She was his, after what transpired above stairs, she could no longer deny it.

CHAPTER 14



*A*lmacks was a disappointment, the rooms were stuffy and small, the refreshments appalling and Marrek wasn't there. When had she started thinking of him as Marrek? Since he tore her soul from her chest with pleasure...

She sighed and tried to smile and flirt with the gentlemen who claimed her hand for a dance. She was even approved to waltz by the patronesses, but no waltz could compete with the one she had shared with Marrek. She wondered at his defection and then learned that he was banned from Almack's because of his reputation. It was truly that shocking.

It had been three days since that fateful encounter in the upstairs room of Lady Galehurst's ball, and she had heard and seen nothing of him. She should be glad of that, but she wasn't. She realised with a shock that she missed him. Every event that she attended where he was not present, felt flat and boring. She was addicted to the excitement he generated. She was enthralled by his adoration and melted by his avowal of love. And her body was a seething mass of desire

to pick up where they had left off. His abrupt departure from the room and his consequent departure from the ball itself still rankled and confused her. What was she to think when he left her so precipitously and had made not further contact? Was he disgusted with her? Had she proven herself a light-skirt after all? That must be it. Having got what he wanted he had abandoned the chase. He was a hollow creature if that was all this was, a game.

And yet he had said that he loved her, was that a lie a throwaway line? She couldn't credit it. Perhaps he was ill or called away to attend a matter of urgency? But if so, wouldn't he have sent word to her? He would surely know she was anxious after what happened between them. He might have sent flowers or a note, something to reassure her. But nothing. Silence. She swallowed her throat tight with unshed tears. She would not wear her heart on her sleeve. He had so little thought for her feelings it made a nonsense of his words of love. He didn't mean them, he was shallow and selfish, a cur of the worst sort, and she had fallen victim to his charm like a schoolroom ninny!

Should she regret it? She tried to but failed abysmally. Instead, she craved more of the pleasure he had given her. Did that make her a whore in truth? She sighed, angry with herself and him. But all the anger in the world couldn't mask the ache in her heart. She feared he had done more damage than just bruise her pride.

MARREK WAS AT WHITES, playing cards with his friends and acquaintance. And losing. His heart wasn't in it. All he could think of was her. The taste of her lips, the smell of her skin, the feel of her fragile form in his arms, her breasts pressed against his chest, her...

He hadn't been near her in three days. It had taken all his

self-discipline to stay away, but he didn't trust himself near her, and he was in a quandary what to do. Her father had made it clear an offer for her hand would not be considered until the end of the season and that was weeks away. What he wanted was to swoop in and take her to Gretna, marry her and be done with it, but she would never forgive him for creating such a scandal, and it would make a nonsense of his promises that he had changed and left the excesses of the past behind him.

He threw his hand in and stood up. "I'm done gentlemen," he said.

"What?" Aretas blinked owlishly up at him. "Nights young man, sit down!"

Marrek shook his head and turned away to be brought up short by the sight of a slender middle-aged man with a face lined by dissipation and a shock of unruly brown hair going grey at the temples, standing in the doorway of the card room.

The man weaved towards him, his arm pointing accusingly, "That's him the blaggard!" His two companions, also middle-aged and the worse for drink, tried to recapture him and pull him away. But he shook them off and staggered towards Marrek coming to a weaving stop in front of him and poking him in the chest with a finger. "Found you! Did you think you could hide from me?"

"Moncton!" Marrek regarded his erstwhile father-in-law with distaste. "Go home and sleep it off, you're drunk."

"Oh no!" Moncton shook his head, hair flying. "You won't escape me that easily. I have something to say to you."

"Do you? Well, you may say in private, tomorrow, when you're sober!" said Marrek between his teeth.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Keep it all hush, hush, pretend it didn't happen?"

Marrek glared at him and went to step round him, but

Moncton grabbed his arm pulling him round to face him. "I'll have justice for my girl! You'll not get away with it!"

Marrek pulled out of his grasp and walked away, his shoulders pulled back tightly, his head up and his gaze fixed squarely in front of him.

"I'll see justice done! You'll hang for what you did! Murderer!" the man screamed at his back.

Marrek kept going until he was out in the street. The cold air struck his heated body, and he shuddered, he turned and walked blindly to the end of the street, turned the corner into a blind alley and came to a stop against a brick wall where he bent and heaved up his dinner, his skin sheened in cold sweat, his guts twisting. When the paroxysm finally passed, he straightened, staggered out of the alley, and crossed the street, no very clear idea of where he was going except away. Away from here. Away from the words of accusation that followed him like a shadow. He found a tavern, pushed the door open, staggered inside and ordered a drink to wash his mouth out.

But Moncton's words kept jangling in his head and he rose and left as soon as he had downed the pint. He struck out down another street and came up short at a shout from behind him.

"Marrek!" He closed his eyes.

"Marrek, for God's sake man, hold up!" Aretas and Jerome came up with him panting. "Looking for you all over!"

"God's blood you look like shite!" said Jerome. "Come on we'll take you home."

Marrek blinked at them. He should shake the off, tell them to go fuck themselves. But he didn't. He let them lead him back to his London residence. By the time they arrived there, he was sufficiently himself to give orders for coffee, scotch, porter, and a fire in the grate of the library. His skin felt clammy and his shirt clung to his back inside his jacket.

“Make yourselves at home,” he said waving them into the room. “I will just go and change.”

They looked at him warily and nodded. He left them, went up to his room and removed his jacket, waistcoat, neck cloth and shirt. Washed his face and ran a damp towel over his chest and back and donned another shirt and a banyan over the top. He returned downstairs and paused as Aretas’ voice reached him across the hall.

“He can’t let it stand, he’ll have to challenge the man, his honour demands it.”

“Aye, but will it help? Nothing’s going to quash the scandal.”

“Nothing but the truth,” he said entering the room and shutting the door behind him.

“What is the truth, Marrek?” asked Aretas.

Marrek poured himself a scotch and flung himself into one of the leather chairs drawn up to the crackling fire. He stared into the flames for a bit and Jerome asked gently, “what actually happened Marrek?”

‘She flung herself off the tower onto the rocks below.’

“Did you push her?” asked Aretas harshly.

“God no! I tried to stop her, but I was too late.” he said wretchedly. He swallowed the scotch and slumped back in the chair. “But I might as well have. It was my actions that drove her to it!”

“How so?” asked Jerome quietly.

“My drinking, my womanising, my foul temper. She hated me! She was afraid of me.” His voice dropped at the last, and he swallowed the lump in his throat. And he’d made Erylin afraid of him too, the expression of terror in her eyes came back to haunt him. He wasn’t fit to touch her slippers. Just as he had begun to think he could win her, his past had to come back to haunt him. This scandal would put paid to any hope he had of winning her families approval of his suit,

or her consent. She must recoil from him in the face of this. What would a woman of Erylin's quality and integrity want with him? She would be right to reject him, he had no track record that would give her any hope to the contrary. Erylin deserved better. Heloise had deserved better. The old nightmare resurfaced, the horror of the blood on Heloise gown, her pale face wracked with pain and terror as her body lost the child... His child... He closed his eyes, the tears of loss and self-recrimination seeping out under his lids.

"She was mad with grief. We both were, and I made it worse for her. You don't understand the pain of losing a child until it happens to you. I couldn't cope with it. It was *my* fault she jumped!"

The silence that greeted this outburst made him open his eyes and stare blearily at his friends. Jerome looked appalled, Aretas blank, shuttered. He closed his eyes again. Eventually Aretas said,

"You should challenge him. You can't let it rest, if it isn't true, your honour demands you make him take it back."

"But don't you see it *is* true?" he said voicing his horror. "I didn't push her, but I might as well have. She jumped *because* of me! To get away from *me!*"

"No," Jerome said gently. "She wasn't in her right mind Marrek. That wasn't your fault."

"It was! If I'd comforted her, been there with her -" he swallowed. "If I'd been a man about it, instead of a selfish, unfeeling, brute -!"

Jerome sat back, letting out a breath, as if defeated.

Marrek glared at him for a moment and then slumped back in his seat. "It's not a bad idea letting Moncton put a bullet through me, it would solve a lot of problems in one hit."

"Fuck no!" Arestas sprang to his feet. "This has gone far enough." he reached over and hauled Marrek to his feet by

his shirt and slapped him hard in the face. "Stop this maudlin bullshit and get a grip on yourself!"

Marrek flicked his head back shocked and a red wave rose before his eyes. He raised his fist and took aim at Aretas' jaw. Aretas grinned and ducked.

"Good, try to hit me you big thug!" they closed with each other, and they were back at school scrapping in the yard, punches flying and blood splattering. Until Jerome threw the porter over them. The shock forced them to disengage and they both stood breathing hard, dripping porter and blood on the carpet.

Aretas grinned and laughed. "God, you look a mess!" he gasped between guffaws.

Marrek shook his dripping head and straightened. "You don't look much better." He cracked a smile, and then he was laughing too.

"You're cracked in the heid both of you!" said Jerome. Marrek mopped his head with his shirt and gave Aretas a thumping hug. Then he waved at Jerome and pulled him into a hug too.

"A man never had better friends than you two." he said thickly.



MONCTON'S OUTBURST was all over London the next day. It even made the papers. Uncle Henry choked on his kippers when he saw it.

"What is the matter my love?" asked Aunt Mary looking up from her correspondence, a slice of toast in her other hand.

"N- nothing my dear!" said Henry hoarsely wiping his streaming eyes as he tried to recover from a coughing fit. But

his eyes kept straying to the paper and Mary reached over and tweaked it out of his grasp.

“Good heavens!” she said dropping her toast.

“What is it?” asked Erylin putting down her coffee cup.

Mary seemed to be struggling with something, and eventually she held out the newspaper for Erylin to read for herself.

Erylin took it with dread and found the paragraph Aunt Mary was pointing to.

A certain Irish Peer caused a stir at a select gentleman's club last night by accusing Lord T of murdering his daughter. No proof was offered and the Peer in question was decidedly in his cups. Lord T, who had been playing cards with cronies when rudely accosted, did not respond to the accusation. However, his silence on the matter will not be sufficient to quash the matter, it must be addressed and soon. It seems the Irishman will not be easily satisfied or silenced. This is a grievance that goes back several years, but why the accuser has waited until now to address the matter, and so publicly, with the supposed perpetrator, is not clear. Perhaps he is short of funds? He is frequently known to be in dun territory. We will be following this story avidly and will keep you apprised of developments as they come to hand.

Erylin's heart thumped uncomfortably hard, and she felt sick. If she had needed further proof of the undesirability of Tremayne as a suitor, this was surely it. Yet the writer seemed to suggest that Moncton, for there could be no doubting the identity of the accuser, was perhaps driven by a need for money. But if that were the case, would he not have approached Marrek in private and attempted to extort funds from him? Making a public accusation was hardly in his interest if that was his motive.

She put the paper down and rose from the table. “I feel a little unwell Aunt, you will excuse me?”

“Of course, dear, such a shock...”

Erylin nodded blindly and left the morning room where they had been partaking of breakfast and returned to her bedroom, where she sat at the desk under the window and tried to think what she should do. Which was nonsensical, because of course there was nothing she could do. She couldn't even write to him to ascertain if there was any truth to the accusations, or offer support, as she realised with a shock, she truly desired to do. Despite his silence of the last few days since their illicit encounter, she could not think ill of him. She could not believe it was true, yet there must be something behind the rumours and Moncton's accusation, he could not manufacture such a heinous suggestion out of whole cloth. She uttered a sound of frustration and clutched her head in despair.

The man was intemperate and given to strong outbursts of emotion, he had admitted as much and indeed she had seen ample evidence of it herself. It is possible she supposed that in a fit of passion some accident may have befallen his wife, but she could not reconcile herself to accept that he would set out to murder her in cold blood. If she died at his hand, it must have been an accident, surely?

She paced about the room restlessly, her mind darting this way and that arguing with herself, a fruitless and frustrating exercise. Finally, she abandoned her pacing and rang for her maid to help her change. She would take the mare out for a ride and knock the fidgets out of herself. She simply could not remain in her room and the thought of sitting with Aunt Mary and plying her needle was intolerable. No doubt they would be inundated with visitors later who would be full of this news. How to feign disinterest in a matter that concerned her so?

CHAPTER 15



*M*arrek was woken by the shriek of the new housemaid who apparently took fright at the sight of three gentlemen in various states of undress sprawled in the chairs of the library. He sent the girl away with an order for breakfast to be served promptly and a mental note to speak to Stibbons, the butler, about the need to brief the maid better on what to expect in a bachelor establishment. He then offered his friends rooms in which to attend to their toilet, before breakfast. It was the least he could do in the circumstances, they all three of them looked considerably the worse for wear for having drunk until the small hours and fallen asleep fully clothed in their armchairs.

Aretas and Jerome being happy to accept his hospitality, motivated, he was fairly certain, by a reluctance to let him out of their sight, repaired to the rooms assigned to them, and he went to his, to wash, shave and change. Restored to something approaching humanity, he joined his friends for a substantial breakfast, his stomach grumbling loudly to be fed.

It was Jerome who found the report of last night's doings

and Aretas repeated his advice of the night before, "You must challenge him Marrek, it's the only way to quash it."

Marrek smeared mustard on a slice of ham and put it in his mouth. He nodded chewing and when he could speak, he said, "I agree." He waved at them. "As my seconds, I charge you with running Moncton to earth and issuing my challenge. I'm guessing he'll nominate Stern and McAllister. I'll leave it with you to sort the details."

"Thank God you've seen sense," said Aretas raising his porter, then lowering it as another thought occurred to him. "You're not still bent on letting him put a bullet in you, are you?"

Marrek shook his head, reaching for the coffee pot. "No. I have a very good reason for wanting to clear my name and Moncton's outburst may in fact have given me the opportunity to do it. While ever the rumours swirled about in the shadows, I could not address them. This has pushed them out into the open. I now have the chance to reclaim my honour, you had the right of it, Aretas, I was an addle-pated fool."

"Well then!" Aretas said with a smile and raised his porter in a toast and drunk. Marrek raised his coffee cup and Jerome his tea in response. Aretas enjoyed a long draught and put the pot down with a resounding bang. "Leave it with us, we will sort Moncton out. I assume you want pistols?"

Marrek nodded mopping up egg with a slice of bread.

"And what will be the terms of satisfaction?"

"I'll aim to wing him."

"You don't mean to kill him then?"

"God no! The man is unpleasant but, he is also a grieving father and even if he was a negligent sire in Heloise' lifetime I'd be a murderer in truth if I killed him. Honour shall be satisfied if I blood him. And hopefully it will get him off my back. If not, I'll have to buy him off. He

was always more interested in my coin than his daughter's welfare."

"The reason wouldn't have anything to do with Miss St John, would it?" asked Jerome spreading marmalade generously on a slice of toast.

"It has everything to do with her." Marrek put down his cutlery and eyed his friends a tad belligerently. "I mean to marry that woman, but I cannot in all honesty prosecute my suit further until this matter is resolved and put to bed."

MARREK'S SECONDS left to issue his challenge and he sat down to write a letter. After much deliberation, crossing out and rewriting he settled on a final draft and wrote it out fair, folded, sealed, and directed it. He then composed a second letter and then took both to Stibbons with specific instructions. He then requested that his curricule be brought round, and he took himself to Tattersall's for the afternoon. He could not sit at home waiting, and he didn't quite feel up to facing his fellow men at the club. Time enough to face the fall-out from last night when the matter was settled between himself and Moncton.

Returning home in time for dinner he was pleased to see a note from Aretas laying out the particulars for the meeting on the morrow. He took himself to bed early and was up betimes to meet his seconds who were both in fine fettle. Aretas was positively gleeful, Jerome a little more sombre.

ERYLIN RECEIVED her letter with her breakfast. Staring at the hand-writing her stomach turned over. She had been right that their morning callers would be full of the gossip. It had been an agony to sit and listen to it, and she had a headache by supper time and took herself to bed early and spent the

night tossing and turning. She rose heavy eyed but determined to shake off her megrim's and focus on her own concerns. To be confronted at breakfast with a letter.

She placed it in her lap with trembling fingers and finished her tea, before excusing herself. Aunt Mary threw her a sympathetic look and reminded her that they were to go shopping later.

"Yes Aunt." She hurried up to her room, closed the door and broke the seal with trembling fingers.

MY DEAREST ERYLIN,

You no doubt have heard some disturbing news regarding me. I assure you that the worst of it is not true and trust to your steadfast belief in my innocence. I am taking steps to resolve the matter and will hope to do so swiftly. Until then I remain your devoted and humble servant. Should things not fall out as I hope please know that you hold my heart and I commend my soul into your keeping eternally.

Marrek

A sob escaped her, and she covered her mouth with her hand, sinking down on the bed. Wild thoughts of going to his lodging entered her head to be dismissed immediately, even if she knew his direction, such a thing was impossible. Staring at the clock on the mantelpiece she registered the time as ten past ten. If she was right in interpreting his words correctly his meeting would be over by now, and he could very well be dead. Her hands felt numb with shock. At best, he could be injured and any injury could easily turn fatal... Her mind whirled with horror and panic.

And she had not told him that she loved him! What if it were too late?

Tears welled in her eyes as she flung herself back on the bed and whispered, "Papa, where are you? I *need* you!"