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SIGNET REGENCY ROMANCE

A Perilous Journey

Gail Eastwood



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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

Chapter One

“Devil take it, Rafferty! The woman’s blind, or we’ve suddenly become invisible,” the Honorable Archibald Spelling grumbled to his companion. The two young Corinthians sat in the taproom of the Ram’s Head Inn with empty tankards on the stained cloth in front of them.

Julian Rafferty de Raymond, the Earl of Brinton, glanced up from the newly dealt cards in his hand with a sigh. “You can’t expect normal service under these conditions, Archie. I rather imagine that what we have here is a barmaid’s idea of hell.”

In the hours since the two friends’ arrival, the venerable Ram’s Head had become a madhouse. In the taproom every conceivable excuse for a seat had been called into use; people perched on trunks and baskets and even packing crates dragged from the storerooms. They leaned against the wainscoted walls and stood in the spaces between tables. The heat and the noise were nearly unbearable, and the stench of spilled ale overwhelmed all other smells. Through the smoky haze that filled the room, Brinton spied the barmaid struggling through the crowd, mugs aloft, looking remarkably like a frigate foundering in a storm.

Spelling had already tossed down his cards. “I confess I have a prodigious thirst, and I’m hungry enough to eat the elephant in the Tower menagerie.”

“How fortunate we are not in London, then,” Rafferty teased, setting his own cards aside in a deliberately tidy stack. Only intense concentration on their card play had allowed him to ignore his own discomfort. “The odds on food or drink reaching our table appear to be slight,” he added, his words trailing off as his voice suddenly tightened.

He pressed his fist against his chest as a deep, painful cough racked him. He waited for the spasm

to pass before attempting to speak again, shrugging off Archie's sharp look of concern. "I think I shall test my invisibility by trying to get into the kitchen," he finished finally.

"Perhaps I should—" Spelling began, but the earl cut him off with a shake of his head. Foraging for food might not be a normal occupation for a peer, but social standing at the Ram's Head had deteriorated to an animalistic survival of the fittest. Brinton was taller, leaner, harder, and tougher than his friend, despite his bad lung. His aristocratic features and confident bearing could communicate a cold air of authority that was seldom challenged. He preferred to take matters into his own capable hands. Grateful for the chance to stretch his legs, he rose from his seat and began to make his way through the crowd.

The state of affairs at the Ram's Head was not immediately discernable from the outside. Porters, ostlers, and patrons alike had been driven under cover by the heavy spring rain, and the sound of water splattering from roof corners and gable ends echoed through an empty courtyard.

In truth the Ram's Head was bursting at the seams like every other inn in Taunton. The first of the early season horse races had been planned to coincide with the usual Saturday market, and a profitable amount of crowding had been expected. The avaricious gleam in the innkeepers' eyes had dimmed in dismay, however, when the morning's drizzle had thickened into a driving downpour. As the turnpikes became quagmires, the steady stream of coach travel through Taunton had stalled there. The inns had quickly filled beyond capacity and beyond any innkeeper's ability to cope.

The earl and Spelling had claimed their space at the Ram's Head early enough in the day to obtain sleeping quarters, although no private parlor had been available. They were a striking pair, the earl's dark coloring and angular features contrasting with Spelling's round face and sandy red hair. Immaculately attired in tight-fitting buckskin and superbly tailored superfine, they exuded wealth and the careless confidence of the aristocracy. They had passed the hours playing piquet, watching and speculating about the steady accumulation of other guests.

Now as Brinton shouldered his way into the front entry hall of the inn, he could see that it was

every bit as crowded as the taproom. The place reeked of wet wool and warm bodies. He could not catch his breath in the close, thick air, so he hurriedly pushed on toward the back of the passage.

As he did so, a sudden gust of wind set the candle flames dancing, and cool, fresh air steadied him. The thundering of a new downpour on the cobbles outside became momentarily louder, announcing the arrival of more pathetic souls to join the crush. Curious, he glanced toward the front door, wondering what sort of person would still be journeying on such a dismal night.

He glimpsed a tall, fair-haired youth, who turned to an even younger lad, Brinton guessed, judging by the shorter height and the cap that were all he could see of the second traveler. No servant or older person appeared to be with them.

Poor devils! he thought. They seemed so young to be traveling alone, and to be confronted with such a situation! As he turned again toward the kitchen, he wondered how they would manage. The unpredictable challenges of traveling could be difficult to bear, even for someone as seasoned as himself.

In the kitchen the earl easily rescued a haunch of mutton from the fire while the cook was busy berating a luckless stable boy who had been ordered to help her. Not one of the servants collected in the kitchen paid Brinton any notice. He hacked off a sizable chunk of the meat with a nearby kitchen knife and, skewering it neatly on the blade, carried it off, amused by his success even though he had not managed to find any beverage.

Brinton had never expected to be foraging his own fare now that he was home from the war against Boney. Service in the military, following his family's tradition, had hardened him to inconvenience and discomfort, but his friend Spelling had not shared in those experiences. Archie was probably suffering much more from the present difficulties than he was, the earl reflected as he retraced his steps. The sound of raised voices in the entry passage brought him to an abrupt halt.

"I've got no place left to put you," the formidable innkeeper was booming at the new arrivals. Although the blond youth was taller, the man's girth could have encompassed the lad three times at

least. Brinton was impressed that the lad stood his ground. As he positioned himself for a better view, he realized with surprise that the boy was nearly his own height.

The innkeeper waved a pudgy hand helplessly and continued in his rumbling tone, "I've got people everywhere—in the stable, in the cellar, even under the stairs. I've got fifteen people in each part of the attic if I've got five, and that's packing 'em in like pickled herring."

"We won't be turned away," the tall youth replied in a firm and obviously educated voice. "We have been to three other inns already and have traveled a great distance today."

Brinton heard courageous desperation in that voice. He watched in fascination as the young man locked his eyes on the innkeeper and ignored the rude, unsympathetic noises coming from the crowd close by.

"Well, I don't know what you expect me to do," the innkeeper responded uncomfortably. "I'm no magician."

Hoots of derisive laughter met this observation. A large, pasty-faced woman pushed up close to the young travelers. "There's no room here—get on wi' ye and let this man tend to the rest of us, wot's got 'ere first!" She coughed, adding the vile smell of blue ruin to the foul air already around them.

The smaller lad sagged noticeably, and the taller youth slipped an arm around his companion for support. They were so wet the water from their clothing was draining into a puddle at their feet. The tall one, clad in a stylish greatcoat of brown wool broadcloth, held his head high and glared defiantly at the innkeeper. The short one could hardly be seen, muffled up in a voluminous green wool traveling cloak that must have been a crushing weight now that it was thoroughly soaked. A dripping lock of reddish brown hair hung over his forehead.

The earl remembered how it felt to be that wet. He and Archie might be hungry, he thought, but at least they were warm and dry. He was aware of the calculating looks directed toward the meat he was carrying, and he consciously tightened his grip, torn between the drama unfolding in the hall and his duty to his famished friend in the next room.

More ugly noises came from the crowd. He had no desire to be caught in the middle if the scene he was witnessing turned nasty, yet somehow the pair of young lads had engaged his sympathy. As Brinton continued to watch, the tall youth leaned close to the innkeeper.

“We will pay you double—triple—your usual rates,” he said in a low voice that nonetheless could be heard clearly by everyone. Then his proud posture crumpled as his companion very deliberately stuck a sharp elbow into his side.

The smaller lad looked away as he did so, by chance casting his glance in Brinton’s direction. The shock of meeting those eyes rattled the earl considerably. They were the most remarkable blue-green color he had ever seen, and they seemed to reflect the most profound distress. They widened slightly as awareness of his own gaze registered, and then the small face abruptly turned away again.

Brinton made a decision at that moment. He knew he was intrigued beyond resisting, and he wanted to do something to help. He forced his way back through the crowd into the taproom where Spelling still waited.

Brinton placed the chunk of mutton on the table with a flourish. “Here, Archie, dinner!” He grinned and, after carefully extracting the knife, cut a few pieces off the meat. He and Archie began to eat them with their fingers.

“Raff, you are admirably resourceful. How did you get this? Seduce the cook?” Archie said with his mouth full. “On second thought, don’t tell me. You have more deuced luck than anyone I know. But you have my eternal gratitude.”

The earl half listened as he considered how to introduce his new idea to his friend. “Eternal, eh? I hope so,” he managed to say between bites, “because what I’m going to propose we do next may not suit you so nicely, and I already consider myself in your debt for providing this escape from my visit to my uncle.”

“O-ho, that’s rich, considering the chaos we’ve found here. Must have been bad in Devonshire. And here I’ve been feeling blue-deviled for bringing you into this. I’m sure I’m game for anything you

might suggest, Raff.”

Brinton had been summoned to his elderly uncle’s Devonshire estate to hear the old man announce plans to remarry. As the heir-apparent, he knew he was supposed to be shocked and chagrined, but he had refused to give the old fool such satisfaction, bestowing his blessing instead. If the union by some miracle produced a new heir, he would toast the child’s health. He had no need of his uncle’s estates and titles, and no interest in becoming leg-shackled himself any time soon.

He grinned at Archie and watched his friend’s face betray belated second thoughts. The two had shared a number of scrapes and misadventures in their schooldays and later in London.

Archie sighed. “You wouldn’t propose we give up the race tomorrow, would you?”

“Never fear, my friend. I truly do wish to view these so-called prime goers, assuming the mud after this monsoon doesn’t prevent it. My stables need new blood.” Rafferty gazed thoughtfully toward the hall. “No, what I have in mind is more immediate—quite pressing in fact if we want to prevent a riot. I want to offer to share our room.”

Spelling choked on the mutton he was chewing, and the earl had to get up from his chair to pound him on the back. While his friend was recovering, Brinton continued. “I recognize the imposition, Archie, especially when we’ve already been denied the privacy of a separate parlor. But we are among the very fortunate few who actually have a room to ourselves. What harm could it do?”

The ridiculously innocent expression on the earl’s face nearly sent Spelling into another spasm. “Harm? Why no harm at all, unless you count robbery, murder, and mayhem. To whom do you wish to make this offer, and why should we help them?”

The earl sighed. Archie always did have a talent for cutting right to the bone of a matter. “There is a pair of half-drowned pups who have found themselves in difficulties—two youngsters as green as they come. I take them for gentry at the very least—the older one speaks well, and they are dressed in quality that shows despite how wet they are.”

“And?”

“I doubt we would be at any risk from them—they offered the innkeeper triple his price, if you can credit it, in full hearing of all that mob.”

Spelling whistled.

“I admit they are a puzzle. They shouldn’t be traveling alone. There is something definitely amiss; that is part of what intrigues me, Arch.” He did not mention an elfin face with huge blue-green eyes that refused to quit his mind.

“Think they’re runaways?”

Brinton lowered his voice. “If you really want to know, I would wager they are on their way to Gretna Green.”

Archie’s mouth dropped open as he digested this unexpected twist. Then he slapped his thigh and roared. “A female? Eloping? If that don’t beat all!” He stopped to look sharply at Brinton. “How much would you wager?”

“Now, now. I didn’t mean it literally. I didn’t get a very good look at the smaller one. Whether I am right or not, they would still be better off with us than where they are now or back out in the street.”

“Where’s your gaming spirit?” Archie persisted. “Stake you a hundred pounds!”

“No, Arch. Save your money for tomorrow. There’s a pair of ‘legs’ over there that will be happy to take it from you then.”

In the end the earl prevailed. “Bring that, if you would,” he said offhandedly, pointing back to the remains of the mutton and the kitchen knife as he and Spelling quit their table. Archie dutifully scooped them up, ignoring pleas from the new occupants of their seats. He followed Brinton toward the hall, where ominous rumblings could be heard among the crowd.

They found the young travelers still in a stalemate. The innkeeper had given up arguing, dismissing them with a cold challenge to curl up in any vacant corner they could find. The inn’s entryway was so jammed, the two had not even been able to move away from their place at the booking desk. They stood there looking thoroughly miserable, with a large portmanteau and a leather satchel between them.

The earl used his voice and presence to clear a path just wide enough to squeeze through, leaving Archie to follow in his wake. "I believe we might be of some service," he said, inclining his head as he approached the pair.

They turned to him, the tall one's face eager with hope and surprise, the short one's frowning with suspicion. Brinton thought they were as mismatched a couple as he had ever seen.

"I realize we are not known to one another, but my friend and I have decided we should place our room at your disposal."

"Your room?" responded the blond youth in some confusion. "You are very kind, indeed, sir! But will you not be needing it? Surely you are not thinking to venture out in this maelstrom!"

The earl chuckled. "I am not sure whether the maelstrom outside is any worse than the one in here, but I can assure you we are not going out. I meant that, as gentlemen, we could manage to share our quarters!"

Brinton couldn't help the slight emphasis on the word "gentlemen" any more than he could resist stealing a quick look at the smaller traveler to see if there was any reaction. Those blue-green eyes were fastened on him for a moment, and he thought he saw the cheeks pale before the face turned away.

The tall youth stretched out his hand with enthusiastic gratitude. "Would you really do that, sir? That's uncommonly kind!" He was interrupted by a sudden jerk on his arm that pulled his hand down. His small companion was attempting to become a barrier between him and the generous gentlemen, shaking his head vehemently.

"What's the matter?"

"We cannot do this, Gilbey." The voice was low and soft.

"Yes, we can," the blond traveler hissed back.

The two stared at each other for a moment, locked in their dispute and unmindful of their audience.

"Why on earth not?" insisted the tall youth. He was attempting to whisper. "Do you want to spend the night in this hallway or back out on the street? It is our only other choice."

The one called Gilbey turned back to the earl and Spelling with an apologetic look. His heightened color betrayed his embarrassment. “My brother doesn’t like to accept charity,” he said quickly, dropping his eyes. He fidgeted with a button on his coat. “He didn’t realize that of course I mean to pay for our share of your hospitality—oww!” He cringed and cast an agonized look toward his companion, who had quite deliberately kicked his shin.

The earl hid his amusement. These two were a far cry from the usual besotted lovebirds who sought marriage over the border.

“Why don’t we remove ourselves from this rather public situation,” he suggested, inclining his head toward the stairs. “I am sure we can come to an agreement over the details.”

Without waiting for an answer, Brinton began to move off in the direction he had indicated.

In two hundred years of service the Ram’s Head had acquired a weary but comfortable crookedness that permeated everything from the window frames to the wall timbers. Spelling led the way down a dimly lit passage as narrow and twisted as the stairs.

“Aha! At least we have a fire,” he exclaimed as he unlocked and flung wide the door to their room. “Perhaps you’ll believe me after all when I tell you this inn is usually top notch.”

The little procession filed into the room with Brinton in the rear. Depositing their burdens, they regrouped around the welcoming warmth of the hearth.

The room was small, with a low ceiling, a large fireplace, and one small diamond-paned window. Candle braces on the mantel supplemented the flickering light from the fire. Most of the space was taken up by a huge, heavily ornamented canopy bed swathed in blue damask. Not very generously endowed with quilts or pillows, it was at least neatly made. A small table and two chairs stood in one corner. The room smelled mostly of candle wax and stale pipe tobacco, but from somewhere there was also a scent

of lavender.

“They always scent the beds here,” Archie disclosed proudly. “It’s one of their trademark touches.”

“Beats changing the linens,” Brinton commented under his breath. Addressing their guests he said, “This may be a bit cramped, but it is definitely a more suitable setting to make one another’s acquaintance. However, I think our first order of business should be to see you out of those wet things and warm by the fire.”

The smaller traveler had turned toward the hearth and seemed to be soaking in the heat, hardly aware of anyone else. The fire threw its rosy glow on a delicately pointed chin and cheeks that were like flawless ivory.

Brinton was certain now that his guest was female. Coming up the stairs he had positioned himself behind her in order to better observe her. Although the heavy traveling cloak concealed its wearer admirably, it could not disguise her posture or the way she moved, which seemed decidedly feminine.

Shivering and wearing gloves far too large for her, she had also had trouble carrying the meat and the kitchen knife Spelling had handed to her when he had picked up her leather satchel. Now she had removed her wet gloves and was rubbing hands as small and white as Rafferty had suspected. At his words she clutched at her cloak and pulled it closer around her.

The one called Gilbey seemed relieved that introductions were not going to be the first order. He, too, was warming his hands and shed his coat gratefully. As if sensing his partner’s reluctance to follow suit, he turned to assist her.

Brinton studied the two carefully. *His hands don’t linger the way a lover’s should—the way mine would*, he caught himself thinking. As soon as the thought crossed his mind he chastised himself for it. But the young man’s tender concern seemed to meet hostility that was almost as tangible as if the girl had slapped him. She glared and pulled away from his touch.

The earl couldn’t help smiling, although he wasn’t sure why that amused him. As the girl’s cloak slipped from her shoulders, he exchanged a telling look with Archie. Wet, her ill-fitting male clothing

only emphasized her unmistakably female shape.

As if he could cover her by conversation, her partner turned to Brinton. “With all due respect, sir,” he ventured, “couldn’t our first order of business be to have a bit of that mutton?”

Rafferty opened his mouth to reply and promptly closed it. Damned if the boy’s eyes weren’t an exact match for the girl’s! He hadn’t noticed it before, but now he looked closely to be sure it wasn’t a trick of the poor light. “Of course, forgive me!” he said, covering his thoughts. “I thought you would be hungry—that’s why we brought it along.” Yes, the eyes were that same aquamarine. The lad’s blond and alabaster coloring differed from the girl’s as dramatically as their opposite statures, but on close inspection his face showed a finely sculptured nose and chin very much like hers.

Ha! Not lovers at all, the earl thought happily. *They are some sort of relations*. But he could not reflect then on why this discovery put him in such good humor. “Sit, eat,” he said, gesturing toward the table where Archie had placed the meat.

The tall youth took the shivering girl by the hand to lead her to the table, but she snatched her hand away. As they sat down, he glanced back at the earl with a wry grin. “You must forgive my brother. He’s not prone to indulge in small talk.”

Brinton replied to the boy with an impishly raised eyebrow and a sidelong glance that included Spelling as coconspirator. “We are not offended, are we, Archie? We have noticed your brother has his own less subtle way of communicating with you, and I think I may say we are glad to be spared!”

Both Spelling and the young man laughed. The girl, who had already tackled the mutton hungrily, stiffened her spine and turned her back to all three men.

“Allow me to make the introductions, since we have no one else to do it for us,” Brinton said more seriously. “I am Julian de Raymond, Lord Brinton.” Only his closest friends knew him as Rafferty. He bowed, an impeccably correct and graceful movement. “This is my associate, Mr. Spelling. We are at your service.”

The young man called Gilbey paused before answering. “Lord Brinton, Mr. Spelling,” he repeated.

“It is an honor indeed, my lord, and I’m quite sure it is we who should be at your service as we are most certainly in your debt.” He did not, however, offer his own name or that of his companion.

Brinton decided not to push. He thought the tension in the room fairly crackled. He stopped Spelling from speaking with a very readable eyebrow movement and said instead, “Some cheese and port would be an admirable accompaniment to that mutton. Mr. Spelling and I were just thinking we would go in search of some. It shouldn’t take us long.”

With a slight bow he turned to the door, ushering Spelling ahead of him almost forcibly. They gained the hallway before Archie could utter a syllable. “Forgive me for hastening your steps,” Brinton whispered. “I could feel the heat rising, and I quite believe we were sitting on a powder keg!”

Chapter Two

The door had barely closed behind the two gentlemen before Gillian Kentwell rounded on her twin brother.

“Thank God they have gone! I thought I should explode with trying to stay silent! What are we doing here, Gilbey Kentwell?”

The girl was furious, trembling as much from her anger as from hunger and cold. She snatched the wet cap off her head and shook it in her brother’s face. “Do you want Uncle William to catch us? You deliberately ignored all my protests, Gilbey! We are in a fine coil, now, thanks to you!”

Gilbey took the cap from his sister’s hand and set it on the table. “You can become amazingly irrational when you are hungry,” he said cheerfully. He cut off another piece of meat and held it out to her. “Better eat some more, Gillie.”

Gillian’s eyes flashed deep turquoise and two spots of color stained her cheekbones. “I am not irrational, thank you. I am thinking more clearly than you! Whatever possessed you to take up this offer? The last thing we needed was attention from strangers! I doubt their intentions are honorable! And how long did you suppose I could continue this charade in such close company?” She accepted the meat and bit into it. “We cannot stay here, Gilbey!”

“Did you know of better accommodations elsewhere? You really should have said so.” Gilbey signaled his intention to stay by calmly inserting another piece of mutton into his own mouth.

Gillian jumped up and paced angrily away from the table. Her toes squished against the wet spare stockings stuffed into Gilbey’s old boots along with her small, cold feet. Men! Sometimes her brother

was as bad as the rest of them! Men had created this problem, men were complicating the problem, and if she herself could have been a man, none of it would ever have come up in the first place.

“Fine! Sit there chewing.” She made a face at her twin from the unthreatening distance of the fireplace. “You are lucky I don’t grab that carving knife and run you through with it, I’m that angry! A fine protector you turned out to be!”

Gilbey was stung into replying. “All I have done is get us a warm, dry place to spend the night against impossible odds. If you prefer to sleep in the gutter, next time perhaps I should let you!”

Gillian crossed back to her brother, bracing her hands on the table and peering intently into his face. “I would rather be hungry and wet and cold than be hauled back to Devonshire,” she pronounced with dramatic emphasis. “At least in that hallway, or even in the street, no one would have noticed us—especially if you had not raised such a fuss.”

Instead, she thought, she was sharing a room with a strange man whose attention seemed never to leave her. She had felt Brinton watching her from the moment they had started up the stairs. Every time she risked a glance at him, she met his deep-set eyes. They were a warm, distinct hazel.

She thought she detected a hint of amusement in them that was not revealed in his other carefully controlled features. Had his inspection penetrated her disguise? If so, what was he planning to do? She found his ceaseless scrutiny unnerving. She was almost equally discomposd by her own compulsion to look at him.

“We ought to leave now, Gilbey, while they’re not here.”

Her brother stopped sawing on the mutton to wave the knife toward their belongings by the door. “What we ought to do is change into dry clothes. The last thing either of us needs is to take a chill. And there’s no sense in making an awkward situation worse.”

“Awkward! Of all the rattle-brained schemes! This is a worse scrape than anything I ever got us into at home.” Gillian went grudgingly to the portmanteau and began rummaging in it. The muslin she had bound around her breasts so tightly that morning now felt like a cold, soggy bandage that was

loosening with every breath. Her head ached and her limbs were still shaking, but she knew the food and dry clothes would help.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t start a debate over who got us into this coil,” Gilbey said with an edge of irritation in his voice. “Whose idea was it to run off to Scotland?”

“I didn’t invite you to come along,” Gillian replied. She had prepared to leave without even confiding in her twin. Gilbey had argued with her when he had discovered her intentions, deciding to go with her when he could not dissuade her.

“I hate to think where you might be already if I hadn’t. How had you planned to manage? Did you really think you could pass for a male all the way to Scotland—alone?”

Gillian pulled out a shirt that was obviously too large for her and, scrunching it into a ball, threw it at her brother. Breeches and stockings followed. Finally, she gathered up the smaller-size castoffs that made up her current wardrobe and moved to the fire.

“I wouldn’t be sharing a room with two strangers who I don’t doubt have designs on our purse, if not our persons! Those two have probably gone to summon their accomplices and will pretend to be robbed along with us when they come back, figuring that we are no match for their men.” She pulled off one boot and held it up, letting a stream of water pour out onto the floor.

“Why are you so convinced they want to rob us?” Gilbey’s voice was muffled as he pulled his wet shirt off over his head.

“I don’t know another reason for them to get involved with two waifs as wretched as we must appear,” Gillian said. She and Gilbey had turned their backs to allow each other some privacy. “Did you not wonder why this so-called ‘Lord Brinton’ stepped in so quickly to take charge of us?” She raised her voice a fraction. “He was standing right there when you advertised our fat purse to the innkeeper and half the population of Taunton.”

She had not forgotten that strangely charged moment when she had first looked up, straight into Brinton’s eyes in the middle of the crowd. As she had stared, suddenly spellbound, she had seen the odd

expression that slipped across his face. When she tried to analyze his unorthodox behavior and the peculiar way she kept reacting to him, that moment took on great significance in fueling her distrust. Why didn't Gilbey see?

For a moment the heartache she was trying so desperately to ignore threatened to break through her overlaying anger. Didn't they have enough trouble already without borrowing more? Despite her pose as the Great Adventuress, she would not have left home if there had been any other way to escape her uncle's plotting. She and Gilbey had tried everything else they could think of to scuttle the ill-begotten betrothal their Uncle William had arranged. She was homesick already, yet she and Gilbey had not even been gone a full day!

Where was the excitement she had felt in the morning when they had first set off? *Washed away in the cold rain*, she thought miserably. At this moment doubt and fear weighed on her in place of that eager anticipation. Could she and Gilbey elude their guardian long enough to reach Scotland? She was no longer sure they had wits enough to make it to their second day.

Gillian got herself in hand with a little shake. She would not give way to the megrims any more than she had given in to her uncle's bleak plan for her future. She looked at the heap of wet things by the fire and sighed, wishing they could stay long enough to dry them. She hated the thought of putting her feet back into the heavy, wet leather boots. But the thought of Brinton and his cohort prodded her. She and Gilbey must not let anyone stop them from getting to Scotland. She padded back over to the portmanteau.

"Are you finished?" asked Gilbey, still with his back politely turned. Gillian wasn't sure if he meant her toilette or their halted conversation.

"Near enough," she replied. She searched the bag for her stockings and the short stable jacket she knew must still be in it. She felt comforted when her fingers came in contact with the soft silk of her Spitalfields shawl, wrapped around the square shapes of her mother's Scottish songbooks. She wondered if Gilbey suspected why the portmanteau was so heavy.

She found the stockings and jacket just as her brother moved to the hearth and began spreading out his clothes to dry.

“Gilbey, you don’t truly expect to stay the night!”

“Of course I do Honestly, Gillie, don’t you trust my judgment at all?”

Gillian frowned. She avoided his gaze by concentrating on buttoning her jacket. “Don’t you think those two have guessed that I’m a woman?”

Gilbey returned to the table and reclaimed his chair. “‘Those two’, as you keep calling them, happen to be gentlemen. They can’t openly dispute my word when I say you’re my brother. They’ll go along with it.” He began to work on the mutton again, cutting the meat into small pieces.

Gillian gave a most unladylike snort. Brinton’s incessant staring could hardly be considered gentlemanly behavior. It was rude at best and would have been shockingly forward if she was supposed to be female. But Gilbey obviously had not noticed.

“I expect they think we are easier marks than ever if they have already guessed. I say we pack up our things this moment and be on our way.”

Gilbey said nothing. The expression on his face was mulish.

“If you will not do this, Gilbey, at least tell them we have a pistol. Perhaps if they think we are armed, they will not be so quick to chalk us.”

Brinton and Spelling had headed straight for the kitchen upon leaving the twins.

“I thought service to my country had hardened me, Archie,” the earl said as they made their way down the narrow stairs. “Now I find it is not so.”

“You weren’t thinking of giving them the bed?” Archie responded in mock alarm.

Brinton laughed. “Would I do that? I was not referring to creature comforts, actually. I meant my heart—either it or my head is still soft after all.”

“Better those than a certain other part of your anatomy,” Archie teased. “You were always the man for a lady in distress, Raff! But I can’t see where your interest will get you if she’s already headed for

Gretna Green!”

“I no longer think that is the case,” the earl answered.

“What?”

“I doubt they are lovers, Archie. More likely relations. Did you not notice the resemblance between them? And I think they are quarreling up there even as we speak.”

“Relations don’t signify,” Archie argued. “Cousins marry all the time! As for quarrels, what better proof of love could you ask for?” He laughed. “I think you’ve developed a case of wishful thinking! I’ll wager my matched grays they’re headed for Gretna Green. But I’ll not settle for anything less than your Tristan against my famous grays.”

Brinton hesitated. He seldom gambled without a good sense of the odds, although his luck was almost legendary. He took pride in the reliability of his instincts, yet what did he know? Nothing for certain. Could Archie be right about wishful thinking? Were emotions clouding his judgment?

He wondered again when he felt the pleasure sparked by the mere sight of the girl as he and Spelling returned to their room, laden with bounty salvaged from the kitchen.

“We were successful beyond our wildest dreams,” Spelling announced cheerfully, brandishing a decanter of ruby port and a tray with glasses and a large wedge of cheese.

The girl had been standing bareheaded near the fire, her luxuriant curls fully exposed. At their entrance she clapped a hand to her head and sent an agonized look to her companion, who promptly tossed over the cap she had left on the table.

The exchange amused the earl. He noted with satisfaction the wet clothes spread before the hearth and the drier ensembles that now clothed his guests. The tension in the room seemed at least reduced.

“I’m pleased to see you have both found something dry to put on,” he said, nodding in approval.

“A further bit of refreshment and you will feel much more the thing.”

He moved close behind the girl and, stopping there, gently removed her soggy cap and tossed it onto the hearth. “There is no need to be uncomfortable,” he said softly.

Her hair was a magnificent color, touched with red where it gleamed in the candlelight, but dark where a wet tendril lay against her ear. He could smell the rain-washed freshness of it. The urge to touch it was so strong, he could not allow himself to move at all for a moment.

“Your brother here needs to know that he is quite safe with us,” he said, addressing his remark to Gilbey.

The lad nodded, but the girl stood absolutely rigid in front of Brinton. She was so small! She came no higher than his shoulder. He could tell she was holding her breath, and he felt a little twinge of satisfaction to know that he could affect her.

“You may have difficulty convincing my brother of that,” Gilbey confessed, nervously clearing his throat. “It shames me to tell you, after all your generosity, but it seems he is convinced the two of you have designs on our purse.” Gilbey’s face was nearly scarlet. “He felt it only fair to warn you that we are armed with a pistol, and are in such desperate need of our blunt we would be quite prepared to defend it. . . .”

Brinton and Spelling exchanged amused looks, then the earl threw back his head and laughed loudly. It was not quite the cool behavior expected of a fashionable gentleman.

“And now that you have so gallantly warned us,” said Brinton, restoring some of his polite control, “would that stop us from robbing you if, indeed, that was our intent?”

Gilbey flushed even deeper and looked down at the table. His silent partner stared stonily into the fire as if she hadn’t heard at all.

“If I might offer some friendly advice,” Brinton went on, “don’t let anyone know you have a weapon.” A smile was playing at the corners of his mouth. “That is almost as foolish as letting them know you have a heavy purse! Preserve the advantage of surprise.”

Brinton put his hands on Gillian's shoulders and turned her toward the table. "Come, sit down and eat and drink. I'm sure you need to be warmed on the inside as much as the outside."

Gillian in fact felt as if she was on fire from his touch. If he hadn't wanted her to feel uncomfortable, why had he stood so unbearably close? His proximity had created a warm tingling in her bones that numbed her mind. She had not dared to breathe. Now she felt foolish and confused as well. She stumbled toward the chair and sat down opposite her brother, accepting a glass of port with trembling fingers.

"A toast," proposed Brinton, once Spelling had filled glasses for all of them. "To a journey safe from scoundrels and cutpurses. May your rest be easy this night."

The twins would not hear of using the bed. They gratefully accepted their hosts' dry cloaks for bedding, but were astonished to see the earl take up the big kitchen knife and attack the bed hangings.

"Imagine mistaking good coverlets for curtains," he said wryly, neatly slitting the loops at the top. He offered Gillian his coat to use as her pillow, and raised an eyebrow at Spelling, clearly expecting his friend to do the same for her brother.

"No, please!" protested Gilbey. "The very thought of ruining such fine tailoring would keep me awake!" He went to the portmanteau and opened it, searching for something else he could use. He discovered Gillian's shawl and, pulling on it, dislodged the leather-bound volumes she had wrapped in it.

"Gillian, what the—?" he exclaimed in astonishment, quite forgetting for a moment where they were.

He held up one slim volume, then another. "Songbooks." He looked accusingly at his sister. "I thought you said you would leave them behind."

"I couldn't do it." Gillian shook her head, making her voice gruff and hoping no one had noticed Gilbey's use of her name. She struggled for composure as she felt tears starting. Gilbey was her twin. Why couldn't he understand? She had left so much else behind. The books were her most prized

possessions—her legacy from their beautiful Scottish mother who had died when they were eight. The small collection of books had served Gillian as solace and inspiration, comfort and hope. Not trusting her voice and suddenly mindful of the two strangers watching them, Gillian stared at Gilbey, willing him to read her mind.

“I can’t believe I have been lugging those all day,” he complained, but he laid the two volumes carefully back in with their companions. He left the shawl covering them.

Brinton and Spelling tactfully said nothing during this exchange. When Gilbey came up empty-handed, Spelling reluctantly handed over his coat. The earl and his friend went to bed in their clothes, stripped down only to their shirtsleeves and pantaloons.

Gillian could not sleep, despite her exhaustion. Every time she closed her eyes, she could feel again the swaying, bumping motion of the coach roof where she and Gilbey had spent hours in the rain. The sound of Gilbey’s soft snoring was punctuated periodically by loud snorts from Lord Brinton’s friend. From Brinton himself she could make out no sound except an occasional cough or rustle of bedclothes. She wondered if he, too, lay awake in the darkness.

He truly was a striking man. His broad shoulders and slim hips had shown to advantage as he had shed his waistcoat and neckcloth, preparing for bed. She felt again the burning of her shoulders where he had touched her so briefly. Was that what it was like between women and men—fire? From her parents somehow she had imagined something gentler.

She shifted, trying to position herself more comfortably. Her muscles ached from tension and fatigue. Despite the layers under her, the floor was hard.

She began to drift off, her mind replaying scenes at random from an intensely emotional day. She worried about her uncle’s anger and how he might deal with their household staff. How long would the

servants have put him off before revealing the twins' disappearance? How soon had he started the search for them? A seemingly endless array of delays and obstacles aside from the weather flashed through her memory—slow market wagons, mud, and vast flocks of sheep, not to mention slow ostlers and missed coach connections. Was their attempt all in vain? The thought of what she would have to endure if they were caught brought a little cry from her throat.

Gillian turned her face into Brinton's coat, fighting the tears that threatened again. The fabric held a musky masculine smell and a pleasant hint of lime. She buried her nose in it and inhaled deeply, focusing her thoughts on Brinton again.

She didn't know what to think of him now. He had made it clear that he saw through her ruse, yet had said nothing. He had laughed at her notion he was after their purse, but he still had never quite denied it. Could she possibly have misjudged him? She tried to imagine meeting him in London, attending the theater, dancing at a ball. She shook her head. If only fate had been kinder! She would likely never see London.

As Gillian suspected, Brinton, too, lay awake, uncomfortably aware of her restless turnings. He had forgotten Archie's unfortunate tendency to snort in his sleep, but he knew that was not the cause of his wakefulness. It was the confounded girl.

The embers of the dying fire cast just enough of a glow by the hearth for him to make out her shape under the bed curtains. The moments he had stood behind her, fighting his urge to touch, came flooding back with a vivid image of her hair. How he had longed to sink his fingers into those satiny, chestnut curls! As he listened to her stirring in the semidarkness, his imagination was delivering quite unexpected, uninvited images and sensations he struggled valiantly to subdue.

He was out of control, clearly. How could he be attracted to a little chit hardly out of the

schoolroom? Was she such an innocent she had no idea how revealing her boy's clothing had been? What was the matter with him that his usual cool resistance had disintegrated so easily?

Rafferty was not a notorious rake. What dalliances he allowed himself were pursued with the utmost discretion and selectivity, to the disappointment of the gossipmongers and a string of London beauties who would have been willing partners. At least half of England knew the Earl of Brinton was not looking for any entanglements. Between the cadres of ambitious mothers and daughters on the matrimonial prowl and his own mother and five sisters, Brinton quite believed his own half of the species to be endangered.

He wondered what made him so certain this girl was the gently bred innocent he took her for. What sort of breeding led a girl to go haring about the countryside dressed as a boy? *I should never have gotten myself involved with her and her young man*, he thought. Yet he had to admire her courage and spirit. None of the females in his acquaintance could have brazened out the awkward situation in the room with him and Archie, not even his sisters. Who was she? Who or what in her life was so terrible that she had been forced to run away? Who was the young man with her?

His desire to know went beyond all reasoning, but then he seemed to have lost what little sense he'd ever had. How could he have wagered Tristan—his favorite mount, his glorious black stallion—against Archie's grays? How the devil was he to prove that he was right? He had not the slightest inkling of how to postpone parting with his guests in the morning, or of how to learn what he needed to know. *I would never have made a good spy*, he thought ruefully.

Finally, he must have slept, for some unknown disturbance awakened him later. As his eyes adjusted in the gloom, he saw that his guests were gone.

Chapter Three

The darkness in the room had lessened only slightly when Gillian roused her twin. Stealthily they had gathered their belongings and slipped out, closing the door softly behind them.

“This is the best way,” Gillian whispered in the hallway. “They will never know who we were, so no one’s reputation will be in question.”

“I can hardly credit that the champion hoyden of all Devonshire is suddenly worried about reputations!” Gilbey teased her. “I would more likely believe you are just relieved they cannot go to the constable.”

As he struggled with the portmanteau on the stairs, Gillian touched his shoulder. “I apologize for being in such high dudgeon last night,” she said. “I think perhaps you were right . . . about everything.”

It was a sweeping admission, but Gilbey decided he would let it go, at least until later. It was enough to know she trusted him and admitted her error. He answered with a grin he wasn’t certain she could even see in the darkness of the stairwell.

The ripe smell of the unwashed multitude still snoring in the passageway downstairs hit the twins like a slap in the face. They stood for a moment, unsure how to proceed. Spaces vacated by some early risers offered a winding path through the semidarkness to the door, and the pair followed it, stepping carefully. They were not prepared for the thick wall of fog that greeted them when they opened the door. All recognizable traces of Taunton had disappeared in the eerie grayness.

“How in blazes are we to find The George in this?” Gilbey asked, more to himself than in expectation of an answer. To his and Gillian’s surprise, the innkeeper materialized behind them.

“Eager to quit us, eh?” the man inquired with an ironic twist to his voice. “Accommodations not to your liking?” His blustery tones had been reduced to a whisper, and lines of fatigue showed in his face.

Gilbey bit back the smart retort on his tongue. He pitied the man. After all, the circumstances of the previous night were not of his making. “We need to get to The George,” he stated instead. “We are booked on an early coach.”

The hosteller snorted. “You’ll not find them running in this. T’ain’t fit for ducks, nor man nor beast.” He shrugged, and told them the way.

Navigating by feel, sound, and instinct rather than sight, the twins set off, baggage bumping at their knees. With a care for their footing on the treacherous wet cobbles, they slowly progressed up the narrow street, using the walls to guide them.

At the first cross-street they experienced the disorienting sensation of being adrift, with no point of reference except their feet on the ground. The looming outline of a street-lamp, still flickering faintly with the remains of the night’s oil, marked a corner for them, and they proceeded, thankfully anchored once more against ancient solid walls. They were cautiously negotiating the open space of the second cross-street when someone crashed into Gilbey from behind.

“Ho, there!” Gilbey cried, dropping the portmanteau. He was preparing to excuse himself when he realized that there were hands on his arms and inside his coat, and there were more than one pair. He struggled against a strong grip, trying to extricate himself from one set of fingers as he tried to grab at the others. “What the devil?” he cried in confusion.

Strong arms attached to a hulking shape also grasped Gillian. Incensed beyond caution, she fought back. “You bullying blackguard! Unhand me! Vile, base-born, brandy-faced guttersnipe!”

Her language befitted a stable boy, but unfortunately she forgot to disguise her voice. Her assailant turned her roughly for a closer inspection. “B’God, it’s a little vixen!”

When Gilbey heard Gillian cry out behind him, he became desperate to free himself. He used his shoulders, elbows, and anything he could against his attackers. Finally, he threw all his weight away

from the arms locked around him. Unfortunately, whoever was holding him chose that moment to let go. Gilbey pitched headlong onto the wet cobblestones.

“Clear out!” called one ruffian to the others. As the man holding Gillian turned to join them, she managed a sharp kick to his shins and watched him hobble in obvious pain for an instant, before the fog swallowed them. Then she rushed to Gilbey’s side.

“Are you hurt?”

“Are you?” Sitting on the pavement, he brushed gravel from his coat and inspected his sleeves.

She shook her head mutely. “I asked you first.”

Gilbey appeared dazed and shaken, but amazement filled his voice as he responded. ““Base-born, brandy-faced guttersnipe’? My word, Gillie, where on earth did you pick up such language?”

At the Ram’s Head, Brinton lay motionless in bed for a moment, straining to recapture whatever sound it was that had awakened him. All was silent in the dim grayness, however. He wasn’t even sure it was morning. He could not tell if his guests had been gone for hours, or if the closing of the door behind them had startled him awake.

They could already be miles away, he thought. He made a little grimace of self-derision. So much for all his ponderings and lost sleep. He had never anticipated this turn of events. The depth and bitterness of his disappointment surprised him.

He eased himself from the bed carefully, not wishing to wake Archie. He almost immediately stumbled over his boots. Cursing softly, he looked back at his friend. Except for the barely perceptible rise and fall of the covers, Archie gave every appearance of being dead.

It seemed extraordinarily dark, and Rafferty moved to the window as he made a fumbling attempt to arrange his cravat. At least the darkness prevented him from seeing how dismally rumpled he must be

after sleeping in his clothes! He had been wise to leave Tyler, his valet, behind for this trip.

He pushed the window open, only to discover the fog hanging like a curtain on the wrong side. No wonder it was so dark! There was not a breath of air, nor even the usual dawn chorus of birds, as if the fog had effectively muffled all other signs of life as well as the light.

The earl searched about the room for his coat, finally discovering it neatly folded on the chair with a small purse of coins and his hat beside it. The foolish pair had left payment for their night's shelter. He swore under his breath, snatching up the hat and purse and shrugging into the tight-fitting garment as he hurried out the door.

At the bottom of the stairs he was confronted by the same scene and stench as had greeted the twins. A few more people were stirring groggily, and he threaded his way between them. It was still dark enough to require candles, and he noticed fresh ones had been lit. He could make out the scent of coffee and followed its trail to the taproom. The innkeeper was supervising some attempt at breakfast for such guests as were awake.

"Any likelihood you saw those two lads this morning?" Brinton asked him with studied casualness.

"Steal your purse, did they, my lord?"

Brinton's face darkened. "More like they left one behind," he said in cold, clipped tones that made the man regret his impudence. "Did you see them?"

"Aye, milord, I did. They wanted The George and asked me the way. 'Tis no fit morning to be out, but they were insisting."

"I can imagine. How long ago was that?"

"Not long at all—not above ten minutes, I'd guess."

The earl clapped his beaver onto his head and showed every sign of going out. The innkeeper looked at a loss.

"Coffee, my lord?"

"Later, my good man." Brinton's humor had improved immensely. "Just tell me the direction of

The George.”

Gillian blushed at Gilbey’s reference to her language. She knew a proper young lady should never even have heard such words. “I suppose I have been spending too much time in the stables. But, really, Gilbey! Didn’t you think it was perhaps appropriate to the subject?”

“Dash it!”

She had not expected an oath in reply to her intended humor. She looked at her twin with renewed concern as he attempted to rise, unsuccessfully.

“You *are* hurt!” she cried.

Gilbey subsided with a grimace. Pushing the wet folds of his greatcoat aside, he uncovered a large rent in his pantaloons and an angry, raw knee showing through. With Gillian’s help, he again tried to get up, but when he put weight on his knee he was rewarded with a sharp protest of pain. The weight he put on Gillian was more than she could bear, and they both sank back onto the pavement.

“Now we are in it, aren’t we,” Gillian said gloomily. Gilbey just looked at her and blinked.

Gillian needed to know the full extent of the disaster, although she suspected she was beyond solutions. “Did they get everything?” she asked gently.

Gilbey groaned in reply, feeling his pockets as if somehow it was all a mistake. “Purse, tickets, the lot.”

Gillian looked at her noble brother, sitting indecorously in the middle of the wet street, and suppressed a bubble of hysterical laughter. How had she ever supposed things could get no worse? Gilbey could not walk, and she could not even get him up. They had no money and no coach tickets—no way to leave this abysmal city she hoped never to set eyes on again. She regretted the coins she had left in the room at the Ram’s Head now. She considered trying to retrieve them, but Lord Brinton might

be awake, and how could she leave Gilbey here alone?

“What time do you suppose it is?” she asked, wondering if they were still in danger and trying to think what to do. When Gilbey did not answer, she followed his glance down to the torn and empty pocket of his waistcoat. “Father’s watch,” she realized numbly. They stared at each other in mournful silence.

Almost as if summoned by her thoughts, Brinton’s tall figure suddenly loomed out of the fog, nearly tripping over the twins.

“What the devil has happened here?” he exclaimed, so surprised he gave no thought to his language.

Gillian felt indignant at his tone. *It would have to be him*, she thought irritably. *Why couldn’t it have been anyone else?* But a little voice reminded her that she would have been far more distressed to see her uncle.

“We’ve been robbed,” she said in a flat voice, making no attempt to disguise her natural tones. “We don’t normally indulge in street-sitting, especially at such an early hour.”

He ignored her sarcasm. “Are either of you hurt?”

“Yes, my lord,” Gilbey answered, showing a spark of life at last. “I am. Could you give us a hand?”

“Where is the problem?”

“My knee.”

Brinton looked carefully at Gilbey’s injury. “Will it not stand your weight? Sprained, then, most likely, in addition to being scraped and bruised.”

“You sound like a surgeon who has seen a hundred such knees,” Gillian couldn’t resist commenting. Was the man really such a know-it-all, or did he just always take charge of everyone and everything?

The earl did not reply at first. He held out a hand to Gillian and helped her up from the stones, motioning her to one side of her brother. “I have seen enough of these to know,” he said finally.

Something in his stern tone forbade further remarks.

He moved the twins' baggage into the recess of a door-yard, promising to send someone back for it. Then he took up a position on Gilbey's other side and helped him to his feet.

Gilbey groaned.

"You have hurt more than your knee, haven't you?" Gillian said in alarm.

"What you need is a warm bath," Brinton declared.

The earl and Gillian provided very unbalanced support for Gilbey as they hobbled back along the road. The difference in their heights made it difficult for Gilbey to help them and Gillian needed to stop and rest every few steps.

She found she was quite distracted by the feel of Brinton's muscled arm, linked with hers to brace her brother. What kind of lord had such muscles, she caught herself wondering. Her hand could not span the hard forearm she gripped. Warmth radiated along her own arm from the spot where his hand grasped it. She tried to catch a glimpse of Brinton's face to see if he was suffering any similarly odd sensations, but he stared straight ahead into the fog.

They had stopped twice for her to catch her breath when Brinton suddenly stopped again, his face ashen. He deposited Gilbey on a conveniently placed mounting block and turned away, seized by a spasm of coughing.

"My lord, are you ill?" Gillian realized that Brinton had been trying to ease her load by supporting most of Gilbey's weight himself. She took a step toward him, uncertain as to which helpless man needed her more.

Brinton shook his head. He stood quite still, slightly stooped with one hand braced against the shop wall beside them. After another moment he straightened and turned back to the twins.

"Forgive me," he said, returning to Gilbey's side. "It is just an occasional inconvenience," he added when Gillian looked at him hesitantly. "Let us proceed."

They took Gilbey back to the Ram's Head.

"You two again!" the innkeeper exclaimed as a group of curious onlookers made way for the trio. "What has happened, my lord?" He waved them into the coffee room, which was less crowded now with the arrival of morning, and pressed a few people to give up their seats.

Depositing Gilbey into one chair, Brinton and Gillian sank gratefully into two others.

"A cloth and some water," the earl commanded, "The lad's been hurt. And coffee now, if you would be so kind."

Amid the hubbub and questions of the surrounding crowd, Gillian was impressed to see how quickly his orders were carried out. Nervously aware of this new attention focused on them by their mishap, she let others minister to Gilbey's injury, lest she appear too sisterly. She slouched a little in her chair, pulling at the collar of her cloak and adjusting her hastily retrieved cap to cover more of her hair.

"Attacked by cutpurses!" Gilbey moaned. "I feel so foolish!"

Gillian risked a glance at Brinton. He appeared less than perfect this morning, and she found it disturbingly appealing. He had not shaved and a dark morning shadow ran along his jaw and upper lip. His hair looked hastily arranged and his neckcloth was tied in a simple style that was slightly askew. He looked vulnerable, she thought, quite in contrast to his autocratic behavior. He showed no sign of being ill. In his rumpled disarray he looked more like a charming rogue than anything else, and she felt herself softening toward him.

He really had been very helpful. She didn't know how she would have managed this morning if he had not come along. Already he had dispatched two stable hands to retrieve their baggage; he had dealt with the inevitable questions of their welcoming committee and had seen that Gilbey's needs were tended. Even now he was deep in conversation with the innkeeper again. But in the midst of her

newfound appreciation, something was nagging her. How was it that Brinton just happened to be the first one to come along after the robbery?

Lost in this thought, Gillian hardly noticed that most of the crowd in the room had slipped out until she suddenly became aware of Brinton's hazel gaze upon her. For a moment she could not look away, staring back fully into the myriad smoky colors she found there. Her pulse quickened, and flustered, she finally pulled her eyes to her lap where they belonged.

What must he think of her? *Brazen and forward must surely head the list by now, not to mention vulgar.* She felt a warm flush creep up her cheeks. Had he been near enough in the street to have heard her shocking language? She had always enjoyed being something of a hoyden, but suddenly her pride in not being "missish" was curiously dampened.

"It is fortunate that neither of you was hurt more seriously," Brinton said, frowning. "I cannot fathom what you thought you would do out there in the murk at this early hour!" He shot a reproachful glance at Gillian.

She bristled in response, quite forgetting the fluttering butterflies she had been feeling moments before. "We thought we would catch our coach, if it is any business of yours!"

"I suppose it never occurred to you that any team venturing out so early in this would break their necks before it got light enough to find the road?"

He was scolding her like a father, and she resented it. What right had he? Yet what could she say? That she was eager to get away from him? That they were fearful of pursuit and distrustful of his assistance? That her reactions to him puzzled and frightened her? "We have urgent business," she said defensively. "We need to be on our way as soon as possible."

To her relief, he did not press the subject further.

"I have ordered some breakfast brought to you," he said simply.

She felt his eyes still on her, although she knew he was addressing her brother as well.

"I trust you will excuse me while I repair to our former quarters. Mr. Spelling may have awakened

by now, and besides, I really must attempt to make a more presentable appearance.”

Gillian still did not trust him, but the prying eyes of the other inn patrons who might return at any moment seemed an even greater threat than he was.

Perhaps her face betrayed her misgivings, for he smiled and added, “I have also made arrangements that you are not to be disturbed.” With a bow he picked up his hat and left them.

A maid brought them a large Staffordshire basin and pitcher, soap, and towels. Not long after, the innkeeper delivered breakfast to the twins himself. No one else attempted to join them in the coffee room.

As the man set the dishes before them, he gave Gillian a calculating look. “Your friend the earl seems very ready to put himself out for you,” he commented. “There’s not many as would go so far.”

Gillian and Gilbey exchanged startled glances. An earl? Brinton had never said he was an earl. Then again, they had never asked about his title, no more than they had volunteered their own identities. Gillian flushed to her ear tips when she thought of the suspicions she had harbored. Yet a little voice in the back of her mind said ungraciously that even an earl could fall from the right path.

“You’re lucky his lordship went after you,” the man continued. “There’s no one abroad in this soup so early that’s up to any good.” His expression made it clear that he included them in this unwholesome group.

Gillian thought she might scream if she heard one more reference to their foolhardiness in venturing out. She glared at the innkeeper while Gilbey thanked him curtly in dismissal.

“Well! We have certainly made a fine impression on him,” Gilbey commented. “He thinks we are no better than the footpads who accosted us!”

Gillian had fallen ravenously upon the proffered breakfast and was in the act of passing a plate of thickly buttered toast to Gilbey. She set the plate down abruptly.

“We have managed to make an impression of some sort on nearly everyone we have met,” she said sharply. “I had so hoped we could just pass along our way, unnoticed and untraceable.” Anxiety made

her voice husky as she asked, "Do you think Uncle William could track us to Taunton?"

Gilbey sighed. "Nothing would please me better than to set your mind at ease, Gillie, but in truth I have no more idea than you. We did our best not to leave a clear trail. Perhaps he isn't even trying to come after us."

"You know how set he was that I should marry Lord Grassington. We appealed to both of them, and what good did that do? Uncle William flew even higher into the boughs, and the earl wouldn't even receive you. If only we could have learned the reason! Oh, I've no doubt that Uncle will be after us."

She eyed her brother doubtfully. She had no wish to add to his discomfort, but her impatience with their delayed departure was difficult to conceal. "Does your knee still pain you? Is there any chance that you could walk on it today?" Before he could protest, she explained, "I just thought if we could take to the footpaths, no one at all would know where we had gone!"

Gilbey bit his lip. "Perhaps if I can just rest it a little while longer. But what about Lord Brinton?"

Gillian's earlier charity with the aggravating earl had quite disappeared. "He returned the purse we left for him, did he not?"

"Yes, He did not want us to pay for his hospitality."

"Well, then. We are quits with him. As far as I am concerned, the sooner we are far away from him, the better."

Upstairs, Brinton squinted into the small shaving mirror and stroked the razor carefully under his chin. "It goes without saying there's not a conveyance left to be hired anywhere in this town today," he said to Archie, swishing the blade in the basin and wiping it on the cloth provided.

Spelling was tucking his shirt into his tight-fitting pantaloons and did not reply. A tray of partially eaten breakfast perched on the bed beside him. The smell of the thick ham slices mingled with the scent

of shaving soap.

“They could probably still catch their coach at The George,” the earl continued, thinking aloud. “They must be listed on the waybill, and the agent might remember them. But they will still be short of funds for tips and meals if they are going any distance.” It occurred to him that he might at least learn the young pair’s destination if he offered to loan them the money.

“Might I make a suggestion?” Archie interrupted. “You have your own vehicle here, and you have horses bespoke for today. Why not offer to convey them yourself?” He aimed an uncharacteristically wicked grin at his friend.

Rafferty paused before answering. “Assisting runaways is a pretty serious business,” he began, but even as he spoke he knew he liked Archie’s idea. What better way could there be to prove his bet? Beyond all else, the very adventure of it appealed to him.

On the other hand, he knew he should do nothing more to encourage the connection. He had felt the spark of desire the girl triggered in him as he had watched her sip her coffee. When she had looked up into his eyes, he had barely managed to stop himself from going to her. Instead, he had spoken to her like an insensitive dolt, just because he was angry at the thieves and dismayed by what could have happened to her.

“What about you, Arch? What about the race?” He felt like a sinking swimmer grasping at sticks.

“Oh, pish,” said Archie. “Don’t leave till after the race! As for me, I’ll just go home after. S’posed to head up to London in a few days, anyway. I’ll see you there.”

“My curricule seats only two,” Rafferty protested weakly.

Archie laughed. “You know you want to do it. Indulge yourself. I know you want to spend more time with her. Maybe they’ll let you be best man at the wedding!”

Brinton gave up the struggle. “All right, I will do it. I shall prove to you yet this is not about marriage. You’ll not get your hands on my Tristan so easily! Perhaps the lad can ride on the tiger’s perch.”

Chapter Four

The trio in the curricule had passed nothing in the fog for quite a few minutes. After miles broken by occasional lights and other signs of habitation, the emptiness of the barely visible landscape was eerie.

“We have not mistaken the way, have we?” asked Gillian with more than a trace of anxiety in her voice.

Brinton sighed and handed the ribbons over to her. He had discovered soon after setting out that she had not the slightest fear of handling them. Clearly, her confidence in his own abilities was far less certain. He shook his head as he clambered down from the curricule to look for the signpost that would reassure his passengers. This attempt to travel in the morning fog was a far greater folly than he had thought to take part in.

When they had first set out, he had not been able to see more than a few feet ahead of the horses. The fog had surrounded them like a wet cocoon, glistening in beads on the horses’ broad rumps and dripping from their harness. He had needed to walk along at their heads, watching for unseen obstacles and listening for the occasional farm cart that would suddenly loom before them out of the gloom. He glanced down at his boots, encrusted beyond repair with red Taunton mud. At least under his care the carriage had suffered no mishap.

The girl had chafed at their slow progress, he knew, although she had made an effort to hide it. He had been able to observe her in odd moments when the fog lifted slightly, allowing him to climb back up beside her. Underneath her nervous anxiety he thought she was afraid. He suspected she had been awake all night, for he could see the shadows of fatigue under her eyes.

How he wished she would look at him with trust instead of the guarded expression that was always

in those beautiful eyes! Miss Kendall, she had said he might call her, back at the inn. She and the lad had claimed to be cousins, both by the same name. He was not convinced, however. They had seemed so tentative. They hadn't even agreed on their destination when he had asked it.

"I may be in a position to offer you some further assistance," he had said earlier after rejoining them in the coffee room at the Ram's Head. He had felt far more confident then, freshly shaved, fed, and attired in a handsome ensemble that hadn't been slept in.

"You have done quite enough for us already, *my lord*," the girl had responded, without sounding the least bit grateful.

"We are already greatly in your debt, my lord," the lad had said with far more sincerity.

"I have at my disposal a curricule and pair," Brinton had continued smoothly, refusing to admit that the girl's attitude wounded him. "But before I offer you conveyance, I must inquire where your coach would have delivered you?"

"Brist—"

"Gloucester."

The two had looked sheepishly at each other, then the girl had turned to Brinton with a determined toss of her head.

"North," she had said in a tone that defied argument.

Brinton had carefully schooled his features to reveal neither surprise, skepticism, nor amusement. "It happens I have business that would not take me too far out of the way to accommodate you," he had responded. Somehow he had agreed not only to take the couple part of their way north, but to leave this very morning, while the fog was still virtually impenetrable.

Forgoing the races left him with extra money in his purse and an unfulfilled mission to acquire some prime horseflesh. Archie would let him know what he missed in Taunton. If he recollected rightly, Worcester's spring cattle fair was on Monday. Perhaps he would go there.

Brinton found the road marker at last and went through the motions of checking it. "We are only

two miles from Bridgwater,” he said, returning to the carriage, “*If* you have enough faith at least in my ability to read signposts.”

He couldn’t resist darting a quick glance at the girl. She had the grace to blush at his remark, and the heightened color in her cheeks set off her eyes. Those eyes were stirring up the devil in him. He quickly reclaimed his seat and the ribbons.

Riding next to her was distracting, he had to admit. They both seemed to be making an excruciating effort not to touch each other—preserving the tiny space between them at all costs. This was difficult as they navigated the various dips and curves in the road that often came upon them quite suddenly in the fog.

Rafferty wondered impishly what she would do if he relaxed and allowed his thigh to press against hers. Would she not jump like a frightened rabbit? Perhaps it would distract her from her other fears and worries, but he stifled his urge to do it. Instead, he fixed his gaze straight ahead on the narrow tunnel of lane visible between the hedgerows.

“If it is any comfort to you, no one else on the road this morning could be making any faster progress than we are,” he said. He could think of no other comfort to offer her, short of throwing down the reins and pulling her into a strong, warm, protective embrace.

Gillian heard Brinton’s reassurance through a brain numb with fatigue. Her sleepless night combined with her anxiety over her uncle’s pursuit and the frustration of their slow rate of travel had taxed her nerves to their limit. The added stimulus of dealing with Brinton’s close presence had pushed her over the edge into her own personal fog of exhaustion.

She had not wanted to accept Brinton’s offer back at the Ram’s Head. She hated being in the position of requiring his aid yet again. He had looked elegant and aloof once more, neatly groomed and clad in immaculate cream-colored pantaloons and a bottle-green riding coat. He had looked every inch an earl, and she still did not trust him.

Still, what alternatives had they? They had no funds to hire their own transport, even if there had

been some available. They dared not reveal who they were, nor send home for more funds. Staying longer in Taunton would have been like the hare sitting still for the poacher to set his trap. Goaded by desperation, she had convinced the earl to set off at once, only to creep along at no better pace than a cautious walk.

The fog had enveloped them in a ghostly world limited to sound and sensation. The motion of the carriage and the constant creak of the harness formed a counterpoint to the rhythm of the horses' steady breathing. The sound of the animals' plodding steps was occasionally muffled by sodden drifts of spent apple blossoms, blown from trees unseen beyond the hedgerows, filling the air with their scent.

Lulled by the soporific effect of the rhythms on her tired brain, Gillian kept starting to drift into sleep. She caught herself slumping against the leather squabs, leaning perilously close to Brinton. She hastily pulled herself upright, hoping he hadn't noticed. *Two more miles to Bridgwater?* She tried to summon back her fear or frustration to keep her awake, but they seemed to have deserted her. Moments later, Gillian was asleep, resting securely against Brinton's shoulder.

The isolation in which they traveled the last miles to Bridgwater began to break as the trio drew nearer the town. Brinton knew he must awaken Gillian, much as he might regret doing so. Sleeping, she looked like an angel, stirring curiously protective and noble feelings within him. A lock of hair had escaped her cap to rest wetly against his arm, but he was content to let it stay. He marveled at the sweep of her long lashes against her pale cheeks.

Driving had been more challenging with her slight weight against him, but he had enjoyed the closeness, no matter how unintended it was. He guessed she would be angry when she awoke—angry at herself and embarrassed. Perhaps he could forestall that if he could find an inn right away. The need for action would rob her of the opportunity to fume at him.

Even in the fog Bridgwater appeared to be a substantial town with a fine, wide central street. The road took them past the church in St. Mary's Street where the Duke of Monmouth had looked out toward Sedgemoor and failed to foresee his own doom. Beyond the church fashionable houses lined the street and the side roads as well. One was advertising itself as "The Monmouth Arms." Gratefully, Rafferty turned his horses into the stable yard and gave Gillian a gentle shake.

"Awake, Sleeping Beauty. Your castle awaits." When he saw her begin to stir, he addressed her in a firmer tone of voice. "Miss Kendall," he began, "we will stop here briefly to rest and dry ourselves."

Gillian straightened up and opened luminous eyes still clouded with sleep. The earl watched in amusement as realization of what had happened dawned on them and they then focused sharply on him. Gillian opened her mouth to protest, but the earl held up his hand.

"Think of your faithful cousin, riding in the back, with no doubt the greatest discomfort. We will not stay long. But for pity's sake, do not talk, do not remove your cap, and above all, do not look anyone in the eye—I mean, anyone." Especially the last, he said to himself, thinking of his own first meeting with her. If she were discovered now, traveling like this, the scandal would be beyond disastrous.