

Chapter One

"So that is it, then? That is all that is left?" Alexander Kenton, late of His Majesty's army and now the new Duke of Wayland, stared out of the library window at the bedraggled garden beyond. Yet he did not see the overgrown, rain-soaked bushes and trampled flower beds. He saw only the great tangle his life had suddenly become.

The solicitor, seated at the desk behind him, rattled papers and coughed uncomfortably. "I fear so, my lord."

Alex laughed bitterly. "Well. You have to admire a brother who can manage to leave such a thorough mess in such a brief time."

"Indeed, my lord," the solicitor answered, in a small, uncertain voice.

Alex pushed back from the window and returned to his seat before the fire, stretching his booted feet to its meager warmth. "Tell me, then, Mr. Reed, what we have to live on, Mother and Emily and me, once all of Damian's debts are settled."

Mr. Reed consulted his papers again. "Fair Oak, the house and the farm, of course. And the Kenton

Grange. Those are entailed. Aside from your personal belongings, and the few family jewels now in the possession of the dowager duchess, I fear there is little else."

"Emily's dowry?"

"Gone, my lord. Long gambled away."

"Damn," Alex cursed softly. "The farm has not been worked in years! Not since my father's time."

"I do believe that Lady Emily has managed to keep some of the fields under cultivation. Much of the land, though, has lain fallow since your late father's time. Your brother was not—not much interested in farming."

"Damian was not much interested in anything but gambling and whoring."

The solicitor blushed.

"Forgive my bluntness, Mr. Reed," Alex said. "Years in the army will do that to a man."

"Quite understandable, my lord."

"So, in effect, all we have to restore this old pile and give Emily a proper come-out is my army pension."

"There is a small income from the tenants still left, my lord, and Lady Dorothy has an annuity of her own. But, in essence, yes, you are right. I fear so." Mr. Reed gathered his papers together and stood. "If you have no further questions of me at this time, my lord, I will leave you to your supper."

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Mr. Reed."

Alex turned his gaze back to the flames as the library door clicked shut, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

They were not happy, tranquil thoughts.

"I should have stayed in the army," he muttered.

"Spain and Belgium were simpler than this."

But then, with the war ended, there had been no point

in staying with the army. He had longed for home, for the green coolness of Fair Oak, for the company of his family. His excellent father had died almost five years ago, when Alex had been in the heat of the fighting. His older brother had died last year of a fall from a horse, during a race. Alex had not wanted to be the duke, but he had come home prepared to do his duty.

He had not known until just now how badly Damian had bungled things.

In less than five years, Damian had managed to gamble away a very comfortable fortune. He had spent so recklessly on mistresses, parties, horse races, and cards that everything that was not entailed had had to be sold to pay for them.

What was Alex to do now? He himself could live comfortably, if frugally, on his pension. His mother, though, was aging, and not in good health. His sister, who had held the household together for so long, deserved a fine Season, a good match. His ancestral home was collapsing about his ears. Even now, he could see plaster loosening from the ceiling, damp seeping down into the carpet and the draperies.

Yes, he should have stayed in Spain.

The library door opened, and Emily's golden-curved head popped inside. "Alex? Has Mr. Reed gone?"

Alex looked around at her, and smiled. Even in such dire circumstances, his sister could not fail to cheer him. She was a bouncing, elfin little thing, seemingly always laughing. Even in a faded, mended blue muslin frock, she shimmered.

"Yes, angel-puss, he has gone."

She came and sat in the chair next to his, stretching her own feet to the fire. "It is very bad, is it not?"

Alex could not lie to her. Not when she turned her wide, guileless blue gaze onto him. "Yes."

Emily sighed. "I knew it. I had hoped, though, that there would be something. Even Farmer Ellis, who sells us our butter and eggs, won't want to give us credit any longer!"

"What do you know about butter and eggs, angel?" Alex laughed.

Emily's lips pursed. "A great deal as it happens, brother. Our housekeeper left above six months ago, and someone had to deal with such things. Mother is not able."

Alex grew somber again. "I am sorry, Em. You should not have had to take on such tasks."

"I do not mind. But now I shall not have to, as you are here, and will no doubt conceive a great plan for our salvation!"

"I do not have a plan as yet, Em," he warned. "Damian left us in a very great mess, and it will take time to sort it out."

"Hm, yes. He was very naughty. Not at all like you, Alex."

"You do not think me naughty?" he teased.

"Of course not, how could you be? You have all those medals for bravery, and valor, and good deeds, and who knows what else. Earning all those would not have left you much time for anything else."

He laughed. "Quite right!"

A companionable silence fell between them. They sat and listened to the crackle of the fire, to the soft patter of the rain hitting the windows.

Then Alex said, "You may have to wait until next year for your Season, Em."

She shrugged. "I like it here at Fair Oak. Much more than I would in London, I'm sure. Who needs balls and routs?" Her face was wistful, despite her lighthearted words.

"You must have a proper Season!"

"So I shall. When things are better for us." A bell rang out from the direction of the drawing room, and Emily rose and smoothed her skirt. "That will be Mother, summoning us to supper. Thank goodness Cook is still with us! I fear I would be quite hopeless in the kitchen."

Alex caught her hand in his, and kissed it gently. "Things *will* be better for us soon, Em. I promise."

She smiled down at him. "I know. *You* are with us now; how bad could things be?" The bell rang again. "But come. Mother will be becoming impatient."

As Alex took her arm and led her from the library, she said, "What will you do now?"

"I think, sister dear, that I will go to London. Perhaps the solution to our troubles is there!"

Chapter Two

"Does it always rain in London?" Mrs. Georgina Beaumont leaned her forehead against the cool glass of the morning room window, watching the endless silvery sheets falling down on the small, beautifully manicured garden.

Lady Elizabeth Hollingsworth, seated before the fire with her feet up and a blanket tucked about her cozily, laughed.

Georgina's new dog, Lady Kate, a small white terrier Georgina had saved from being drowned by a farmer in Scotland, looked up at the sound of laughter. Then she yawned, stretched out on her satin cushion beside the fire, and went back to sleep. For once she was not barking and running about like a tiny bedlamite.

"Georgie," Elizabeth said. "It rains just as much in Venice as it does here."

"Hm. But it seems a much warmer rain there. Romantic. Here it is merely dreary."

"Then come away from the window, and sit here by the fire. What do you think we should do this evening? The Beaton ball? The Carstairs musicale?"

Georgina left the window and sat down on a settee next to the fire. She eyed Elizabeth worriedly. "Should you not stay home tonight, Lizzie? We were out so very late last night."

"I am *enceinte*, not ill!" Elizabeth protested. "I am barely showing as yet. I must have fun while I can, before I grow as big as a house." She tugged the blanket aside to peer down at her belly, only a bit rounded beneath her pale green morning dress.

Georgina laughed at the vision of her petite friend as round as a full moon, waddling about Bond Street. "I shall have to paint your portrait when that happens!"

"Don't you dare!" Elizabeth protested. "But I promise that if I grow fatigued I will say so. And no doubt you, under Nicholas's orders, will drag me home immediately."

"What a proud papa Nicholas is becoming! I vow one would think he had done it all himself, the way he has been preening about."

Elizabeth smiled softly at the mention of her husband. "Yes, he will be an excellent father. It seems we have waited an age for this, and now it is upon us!"

"I am so happy for you, Lizzie."

"Well, you, I am sure, will be the most excellent of godmothers."

"Oh, yes! I shall teach him or her to paint pictures and run wild."

"You will teach them to be true to themselves, to enjoy life. Those are the most valuable lessons of all, you know."

Georgina's laughter sounded a bit sad, even to her own ears. After three marriages, she remained childless. She had thought it all for the best; her life as an artist, racketing about the Continent, was not a very

stable one. But now, seeing her friend's radiance, she could not help but be a bit regretful.

"Well, it was very good of you to come stay with me now, Georgie," Elizabeth continued. "I know how you miss Italy."

"I would not miss this time with you for the world! Besides, we are having a marvelous time, are we not?"

"We are! I am only vexed that Nicholas will not let me ride with you in that curricule race next week."

"I would not have let you in any case! You can watch safely from the side of the road as I trounce that arrogant Lord Pyncheon."

"And I will make a great deal of money from wagering on you!" Elizabeth turned her head as a single ray of yellow-white light fell from the window across the carpet. "I do believe it has stopped raining! Shall we go out? I need to visit the lending library."

Lady Kate sat straight up, her ears perking at the mention of the word "out." She leaped off of her cushion and trotted over to the cabinet where her leads were kept, barking her sharp "go for a walk" bark.

"I think Lady Kate is in agreement," said Georgina. "We should take her for a run in the park, as well."

"What a good idea! And let us call at my brother's house and see if my niece Isabella would like to accompany us. We could take her to Gunter's for ices after. She is rather lonely, with Peter and Carmen still on their wedding trip."

"Oh, yes, let's! We shall make a day of it."

The first thing Alex saw was the hat.

It was wide-brimmed, fine-milled straw, with fluttering streamers of pale green and white satin. Perhaps

not precisely appropriate for London in early spring, but certainly fetching.

Then his gaze lowered to the lady beneath the hat, and he very nearly fell from his saddle in startled admiration. She was—well, she was very *vivid*. Quite a contrast to the giggling young misses his friends had taken to hurling in his direction since his return to London.

She was not very tall, but her posture, her manner of walking, made her seem almost Amazonian. She wore a pelisse of a green that matched the streamers of her hat, and the hair that fell from beneath that hat could only be described as red. Not a fashionable auburn, or a demure dark blonde, but the very red and gold of flames. Or—or a sunset.

Good gad, man, he berated himself. *You're beginning to sound like some deuced poet!*

Yet if he were to turn to poetry, surely a woman like this one would be all that was needed to inspire him.

She was strolling alongside the river with a petite female companion and a little girl. Looped about her gloved wrist was the braided lead of a small white dog, who was darting about in a most unpredictable manner and barking at every unsuspecting passerby. The woman laughed merrily at the dog's antics. Not a ladylike simper or giggle, but a full, deep, rich, laugh.

Alex could not help but smile at the infectious sound of it.

"Why, Freddie! I do believe Wayland is ogling La Beaumont."

Alex's two companions, his old Etonian friends Mr. Freddie Marlow and Hildebrand Rutherford, Viscount Garrick, pulled up their horses on either side of Alex's, and followed his gaze to its object.

"I say, I do believe you are right, Hildebrand! What excellent taste you show, Wayland. Mrs. Beaumont is extraordinary. Though, I must say I rather prefer her friend, Lady Elizabeth Hollingsworth, myself. I always had a weakness for pocket Venuses!"

Alex scarcely glanced at his friends. The dog and the little girl were walking down to the edge of the river, and the two women followed. A breeze threatened to carry away that fanciful hat, and she clutched at it with one gloved hand.

"The woman with the red hair is a Mrs. Beaumont?" he asked.

"Mrs. Georgina Beaumont, the artist. Surely you have heard of her?" said Freddie.

Alex feared he knew little about art. Or artists. "Is she married?"

"A widow!" Hildebrand said with a certain glee. "Three times over. That is even better, eh? Good sport, what?"

Alex turned a glare onto him, and Hildebrand stifled his chortles behind a gloved hand.

"As I said, she is an artist," offered Freddie. "A deuced successful one, from what I hear, though I'm a complete bacon-brain about painting and music and such."

"She's come from her home in Italy to stay for the Season with Lady Elizabeth," said Hildebrand, now recovered from his giggling fit. "It's quite the fashion to be in love with one or the other of them. Though Lady Elizabeth *is* married, more is the pity."

A thrice-married artist. Alex almost laughed at the thought of the looks on his family's faces if he brought such a woman home to the Grange! Not, of course, that Mother and Em were such high sticklers as all *that*.

They just maintained certain standards, despite their straitened circumstances.

But then, Alex had always had a great weakness for red hair.

He looked from one of his friends to the other speculatively. "I take it, then, that one of you has been introduced to the lady?"

"I haven't," Freddie said, his wide brown eyes looking positively downcast at this fact. "Hildebrand has."

"At Lady Russell's card party a fortnight ago," Hildebrand preened. "Should you like me to do the honors, Wayland?"

Alex gave him a long look, and Hildebrand coughed uncomfortably. "Er, yes," he said. "Just so. Most happy to perform the introductions, I'm sure."

They had only just turned their horses in the direction of the ladies, when disaster struck.

The small white dog, who had been regularly menacing any and all unwary pedestrians, now broke free from the lead the little girl held, and bounded away down the riverbank after an errant duck. In a swift white blur, it became airborne, and landed with a great splash in the murky river. Only its pale head was visible as it drifted off, carried inexorably away by the current.

"Lady Kate!" Mrs. Beaumont cried. She lifted her skirts indecently high above her ankles, revealing green kid half boots and an inch of white stocking, and dashed off after her dog. Her hat fell from her head to dangle down her back by its ribbons.

The little girl followed, shouting, "Be careful, Georgie! You'll fall in the river!"

The petite woman, Lady Elizabeth, ran after the girl, crying out, "Help! Help!" to no one in particular.

Mrs. Beaumont nearly slid down in the mud at the edge of the river, tottering precariously on those half boots. "Lady Kate! Come back, darling!"

Alex was already sliding from his saddle, and striding away across a busy thoroughfare and a wide green-sward that separated him from the rather bizarre party of ladies.

He had faced many a dire situation in Spain, when he had had to think and act quickly, decisively, and calmly. To be sure, he had never seen a situation quite like this one in Spain, but he knew at a glance what had to be done to save the dog.

He stripped off his coat and boots, pushed them into the arms of the beautiful Mrs. Beaumont, and jumped in after the dog.

Georgina watched in astonishment as the man—a man she had never seen before in her life!—dove into the murky waters after the escaping Lady Kate.

It had all happened so very quickly that she felt all in a daze. One moment she had been strolling along with Elizabeth and little Isabella, laughing and enjoying the day. Lady Kate had been frisking about, as usual; she was quite the most curious and excitable dog Georgina had ever seen. Then, all at once, Lady Kate had twisted out of her lead, scampered down to the river, and splashed right in!

And the man, whose coat and boots Georgina now held, had appeared seemingly out of nowhere and gone in after Lady Kate. Like some sun-bronzed guardian angel.

Georgina bit her lip in anxiety as she watched the man seize Lady Kate about her torso and pull her along toward the bank. The dog struggled mightily in his grasp, howling and frightened that her adventure had ended

so badly, but the man hung grimly on. Finally, they both stood before Georgina, dripping with great quantities of dirty water but safely on *terra firma*.

"I believe, madam," the man said, his voice brandy-rich, rough with laughter, "that this belongs to you."

Georgina laughed, hiccuped really, with embarrassment and consternation and a dawning realization of the utter absurdity of their situation. "Yes, indeed, it does! Thank you so much, sir. You have gone quite above and beyond the call of gallantry! I do not believe I can thank you enough."

"He is a *hero*, Georgie," little Isabella Everdean piped up. She gazed up at their rescuer with adoring chocolate-brown eyes.

Georgina very much feared she was doing the same. Gaping at him like the veriest moonstruck half-wit! It was just that he was so very *beautiful*, even dripping with mud and odd plant life, his light brown, curling hair plastered to his head. Her artist's eye skimmed over his high cheekbones and firm jaw, lightly shadowed with afternoon whiskers. His nose was straight as a knife blade; his lips firm but strangely sensual. And his eyes, alight with laughter, were a clear, sweet, heavenly blue.

And they were looking directly into hers as she gaped at him.

She looked down, startled. Which was not at all like her! She was never startled by any man; she had met too many, had married three, and been propositioned by a numberless horde. She had thought herself rather *blasé* about men.

This one, though, had her *blushing*. She could feel the heat creeping up her throat into her cheeks, no doubt clashing horribly with her hair.

Elizabeth was looking at her rather peculiarly, so

Georgina knew that her odd behavior was not going unnoticed.

She forced her gaze back up to meet his, and she smiled. "How very rag-mannered you must think us, not even introducing ourselves after your heroic actions! I am Mrs. Georgina Beaumont."

He bowed, rather awkwardly with his arms full of wriggling terrier. "Alexander Kenton, at your service."

"And this is Lady Elizabeth Hollingsworth and Lady Isabella Everdean, her niece," Georgina continued.

"Lady Elizabeth, Lady Isabella." He bowed again in their direction. "How do you do."

Isabella giggled.

"Bella," Elizabeth chided. "Say how do you do."

"How d'ye do," said Isabella.

"It was so good of you to rescue Lady Kate," Elizabeth said. "I have told Georgina that she needs a stronger lead."

"You may be assured she will now have one!" Georgina snorted.

"May I carry Lady Kate now?" beseeched Isabella, going up on tiptoe to pat the muddy dog.

"You will get your frock all dirty!" cried Elizabeth.

"Why don't we wrap her in my coat?" Alexander suggested. "Then perhaps I could escort you to your carriage, and make certain she is safely stowed aboard?"

"Oh!" Only then did Georgina notice the interested crowd they had gathered. Many a quizzing glass was turned in her direction, and two gentlemen in particular, a Viscount Garrick she had already met and a man she had not, had edged their horses in closer to their little scene.

Ah, well. Georgina shrugged philosophically; she was quite used to people gawking at her escapades.

"You *have* gotten yourself into a scrape, Wayland!" said Viscount Garrick.

Alexander frowned at him, and shifted Lady Kate in his arms.

Elizabeth looked over at the two horsemen. "Are they with you, sir?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Alex murmured.

"Well, then, you must all come to my house for tea! We will have you dry and warm in a trice, sir. I am certain my husband will have some garments you could borrow."

"That is very kind of you, Lady Elizabeth, but . . ." Alex began.

Elizabeth lifted her hand, forestalling all protests. "No, I do insist! We want to thank you properly. Is that not so, Georgina?"

Elizabeth smiled at Alexander, and, slowly, like sun coming from behind the clouds, he smiled back. "Quite so, Elizabeth." Georgina said. "Quite so."

Chapter Three

Georgina had been wrong about Alexander Kenton. He was not beautiful.

He was otherworldly.

Dry and clean, his hair was a light brown, tinged gold by the sun. Tiny lines radiated out from the corners of his eyes, which were vividly blue against the bronze of his skin, every time he laughed. His shoulders were very broad beneath his borrowed coat, and his bearing was quite poised and straight and correct. He must have been in the army, like her first husband, Jack.

Georgina thought he looked like a Caravaggio painting.

He was also a duke.

A frown pulled at her brow at the thought. *That* was a bit problematic. Peers, especially dukes, seemed the very worst of lechers, always cornering her in dim corridors or dark garden bowers, always thinking she would be full of gratitude for their ham-handed attentions. Her trusty sharp-tipped hair ornaments had quickly disabused them all of such notions.

She would have so hated to use one on this particular duke!

But thus far there seemed no danger of that. Alexander Kenton was a very charming duke. He had taken the entire Lady Kate situation with such good humor, as no other man of her acquaintance would have done. He even fed the dog, now dry and clean and not a bit sorry for all the trouble she had caused, bits of his tea cakes and sandwiches. He conversed with Isabella quite as if she were grown-up. He laughed and joked, and did not once try to flirt with Georgina in any but the lightest and most respectful way.

His two friends, Viscount Garrick and Mr. Marlow, were a bit sillier. They told horrifyingly bad jokes, and obviously thought themselves quite the wits for it. Occasionally, one or the other would cast her provocative glances. Or rather, they would simply roll their eyes and wiggle their eyebrows in what they obviously fancied passed as provocative ways.

But Alexander; ah, now, he could easily prove far too attractive for her own good.

“. . . Is that not so, Georgina?”

Georgina's attention snapped back to Elizabeth, from whence it had wandered into the clouds. “I beg your pardon?”

Elizabeth's gray eyes were slate dark with concern. “Are you quite all right, dear? You look flushed. Did you catch a chill by the river?”

“Indeed not! I am quite well. It should be Lord Wayland we are concerned about catching chills.”

Alexander laughed. “Not I, Mrs. Beaumont! I am healthy as a horse.”

“Perhaps I should give you both a dose of castor oil,” Elizabeth mused.

"No!" Georgina and Alexander both shouted.

Lady Kate barked riotously, quite as if she also had been offered a dose.

"You must forgive Elizabeth," Georgina said. "She feels it her bounden duty to nurse and cosset everyone who comes into her sphere."

"Indeed I do not!" Elizabeth protested.

"You must remain healthy for this evening, Wayland," Freddie Marlow said. "You would not want to miss Lady Beaton's ball."

"We are also attending the Beaton ball!" said Elizabeth.

"It is predicted to be a dreadful crush," Freddie answered, obviously delighted at the prospect.

"It always is. It is simply a great pity that my husband is in the country this week and will have to miss it!"

Georgina glanced at Alexander over the rim of her teacup. "Perhaps we shall see you there, then, Lord Wayland. That is, if you have not caught a chill."

He grinned at her. His smile was very wide and white against his tanned skin. "I could wish the same for you, Mrs. Beaumont. But perhaps you would allow me to escort you and Lady Elizabeth to the ball? In the absence of your husband, Lady Elizabeth."

Yes, yes, yes! Georgina's mind shouted. Aloud she said, "How very kind of you! Have we not imposed on you quite enough for one day?"

"Nonsense! I have not had so much fun since I returned to England. Please, do allow me to escort you."

Georgina exchanged a look with Elizabeth, and nodded. "Then, we would be honored. And I promise you, we will leave Lady Kate at home!"

Alexander laughed. "I thank you for that! I should

so hate to have to fish Lady Kate out of Lady Beaton's Italian fountain."

"Why, Wayland! You sly rogue," Hildebrand exclaimed as they rode away from Lady Elizabeth's house. "You have solved all your difficulties most neatly, all in one afternoon."

Alex frowned. He would never have told anyone of his family's troubles, if he could help it; crying of misfortunes was not at all his style. But Hildebrand and Freddie had been his friends since they were boys, and when they had come upon him completely foxed one day after dealing with five of Damian's creditors, he had told them everything.

Yet Alex could not see that anything much had been solved by their afternoon. They had had a very nice tea with three very lovely ladies—one lovely, red-headed lady in particular. He had also ruined a quite fine coat by wrapping it about a muddy dog; a coat he could ill-afford to replace at present.

He expressed this to his friends, and added, "How tea and a ruined coat can solve my troubles, I fear I could not say, Hildebrand. Perhaps you would enlighten me?"

"You nodcock! Don't try and cozen me. I saw how bent you were on charming Mrs. Beaumont."

Alex shrugged. "She is a very beautiful woman."

"And a very *rich* one! She has widow's portions from three husbands, as well as a rather handsome income from her dabbling in painting."

"She is perhaps not entirely *respectable*—not with the highest sticklers, anyway," Freddie chimed in. "Racketing all over the Continent by herself."

"All the better!" said Hildebrand. "She wouldn't

expect you to live in her pocket. You could do worse, Wayland."

Alex was so startled he pulled up his horse right in the middle of the road, causing quite a muddle of the traffic behind them. He stared at his friends, his jaw tight with displeasure. "Are you suggesting," he said very quietly, "that I pursue Mrs. Beaumont for her money?"

Hildebrand sputtered. "Why . . . is that not what you were thinking of?"

"It could not be Lady Elizabeth," Freddie said. "'Old Nick' Hollingsworth is an absolute jealous fiend when it comes to his beloved wife."

"I was not thinking of either of those ladies in such a way," Alex answered, still quiet.

"Oh, well, I just thought . . . when you offered to escort them to the Beaton ball . . . but I . . ." Hildebrand broke off in a state of utter confusion.

"Oh, look!" cried Freddie in relief. "Here is Wayland's lodgings."

"Indeed it is!" Hildebrand replied, in equal relief. "Well, we shall leave you, then, Wayland. See you at the ball, what?"

Then the two of them dashed off, leaving Alex alone in front of the narrow town house, where he rented the second floor while he was in London. Clifton House in Grosvenor Square had been lost long ago by Damian.

He left his horse at the mews at the foot of the garden, and went up to his small sitting room to pour himself a brandy and settle in for a good brood.

He, marry that lovely Mrs. Beaumont for her money? Distasteful in the extreme.

Not that he had not thought at all of marrying for money. Really, in the eyes of many, it would be an

eminently suitable solution. A wife of means could not only restore Fair Oak, buy a new proper London house, and finance Emily's launch; she could also guide that launch and help Emily make a good match.

The wife, of course, in turn, would get to be the Duchess of Wayland. Not a shabby return on investment, some would say. He had even noticed many women eyeing him speculatively at balls and routs.

Alex had made and discarded many other, less feasible plans to recoup his family's losses. Some, made in the midst of sleepless nights, had been positively bizarre. He had half made up his mind to look about this Season for someone suitable. Not a young miss, but perhaps someone older, a spinster or a widow. Someone kind and practical, who understood what was expected of her in the marriage and what she could expect in return. Someone he could be friends with; perhaps even admire.

Someone like—Georgina Beaumont.

Alex tossed back his brandy, and reached out to pour himself another.

He truly had not thought of such a thing when he met her that afternoon. He had heard of her, of course; every lady of fashion clamored to have her portrait painted by Mrs. Beaumont. No doubt they paid handsomely for the privilege.

But all he had thought when he saw her was how lovely she was, how vibrant, how confident, how *alive*.

After years of the dust, death, and boredom of war, followed by the strain of his family's situation, that vivid life had been intoxicating. He had been drawn to her, as to a roaring fire on a bitterly cold winter night. He had wanted to stay longer in her presence, to throw aside the polite platitudes they were actually voicing and ask her how she came to be an artist. Did

she enjoy living in Italy; did she love her husbands? What did she like to eat for breakfast?

Would she let him sit near her and kiss her, just once?

Alex laughed bitterly at himself. She, no doubt, would find him a very dull fellow. A military man, crusty and cynical, with no deep knowledge of art, could not possibly interest a woman such as her.

If he were to make her such an offer, the use of her money for the use of his title, she would no doubt treat it with the contempt it deserved, and laugh him from the room.

But . . .

But if she *were* his wife, he could make love to her. Maybe even more than once.

"Alex, you old idiot," he remonstrated aloud. "You have spent far too many years in the Spanish sun. Your brain is baked for even thinking such thoughts of a woman you met only two hours ago!"

And he had gone his own way for too long. He could not rely on a woman to solve his difficulties now.

A soft knock sounded at his door. Alex, so caught up in visions of Georgina Beaumont, thought for one insane instant that perhaps it was she at the door. Then reality returned, and he sank back into his chair.

No doubt it was some other creditor of Damian's, come to collect his due.

"Enter," he called out, suddenly weary beyond belief.

Yet it was not creditors. It was Hildebrand and Freddie, looking equal parts wary and shamefaced.

"I thought you two were going home to change for the ball," he told them. "What brings you back to my humble abode?"

At his easy tone, they broke into smiles, coming into the room to seat themselves and help themselves to the brandy.

"We came to apologize," said Freddie.

"Apologize?"

"For our—misconceptions of your intentions toward Mrs. Beaumont," Hildebrand said. "We truly didn't mean to offend, Wayland. Just want to be of assistance, looking about for suitable heiresses and such."

"What we really want," Freddie added, "is to find *three* heiresses, one for each of us."

"But a man is lucky to find one such in a Season," sighed Hildebrand. "So when we find her, we shall concede her to you."

"Very kind of you." Alex laughed. *Now* he remembered why he was still friends with these two after all these years, despite their silliness—they could always make him laugh.

"Yes. But we can see now that you are absolutely right about Mrs. Beaumont."

"Am I? How so?" Alex said, still laughing.

"She would be most unsuitable. Despite all her money, she is so dashed independent," answered Freddie. "Living alone in Italy and all. They say she even works with *male* models there!"

"Does she indeed?" said Alex, growing more interested by the moment.

"She is going to race her curricule against Lord Pynchon next week," Freddie said. "The betting book at White's is full of nothing else."

"What are the odds now?" asked Hildebrand.

"Three to one, in her favor."

"Hmm. There, you see, Wayland?" Hildebrand said. "She would not be a good duchess at all."

"She probably would not have him at all," commented Freddie. "She has often said she intends never to marry again. If he *did* make her an offer, she would no doubt turn him down flat."

Hildebrand nodded sagely. "No doubt you are right, Freddie."

Alex looked at them in astonishment. "Are you suggesting that if I made an offer to Mrs. Beaumont—which I have no intention of doing!—she would not see the advantages of it? That she would turn me down flat?"

Hildebrand and Freddie looked at each other. "Yes," they chorused.

"Hmph," said Alex.

Hildebrand shook his head. "But then, you are a handsome fellow. The ladies giggle over you wherever we go. Even Miss Pym has dropped poor Freddie quite flat since you appeared and danced with her at the Merritt rout."

"Here, now . . ." Freddie began, only to fall back silent at a glance from Hildebrand.

"Mrs. Beaumont seemed rather taken by you," Hildebrand continued. "She did not even laugh at my jokes! Perhaps she would be tempted by your own self, even if she has no desire to be a duchess. What do you think, Freddie?"

Freddie, still stung by the reminder of the defection of Miss Pym, said, "I still say she would have none of him."

"Well, I say she would!" cried Hildebrand. "I wager you fifty pounds they will be betrothed by the end of the Season."

"Done!" answered Freddie.

They looked expectantly to Alex, who raised his hands in mock surrender. "Do not look at me! I want nothing to do with any of your ridiculous wagers. Besides, I have only just met Mrs. Beaumont; the two of you are being extremely presumptuous."

Hildebrand smiled smugly. "We shall see, Wayland."

Chapter Four

"Lord Wayland is very handsome, is he not?"

Georgina looked up from brushing her hair at her dressing table over to where Elizabeth was sprawled across Georgina's chaise. Elizabeth was already dressed for the evening, in a lovely pale blue silk, but she was eating a box of sweets, and the sugary, sticky smears threatened her lace-trimmed bodice.

Lady Kate was fast asleep on the bed, utterly exhausted after all her adventures.

"Lizzie," said Georgina, "were those four cakes at tea not enough for you?"

"I know, I know! I could scarce lace myself into this gown as it is, but I cannot quite forgo eating sweets. The babe must be a girl. My old nanny always said women bearing sons craved salty foods, daughters sweets. But you are quite avoiding my question."

"Oh? Which question is that?"

"The question of whether you prefer lobster patties or goose liver paté, of course," Elizabeth scoffed. "It is the question of whether or not you consider Lord Wayland the handsomest man we have come across

so far this Season! Excepting my darling Nick, of course."

Georgina drew the mass of her curly hair up off her neck and turned her head this way and that, studying the effect in the mirror. She was hesitating, and that was not at all like her. Usually she and Elizabeth chattered endlessly about anything and everything, from difficulties with their art and their careers to their romances (until Elizabeth married, that is!). Now, though, she did not want to *talk* about Lord Wayland; she only wanted to *think* about him for a while.

Why should that be?

She dropped her hair, and smiled at Elizabeth's reflection in the mirror. "I did not notice," she said indifferently.

"You! Not notice a gentleman's handsomeness, or lack thereof?" Elizabeth cried around a mouthful of sweet. "Ha! You are an artist, Georgie. It would be positively unprofessional of you not to notice."

Georgina smiled wryly. "You know me too well, Lizzie. Yes, Lord Wayland is quite handsome. By far the handsomest man we have met this year. Much more handsome than that Lord Percy, who every young miss has been sighing over."

"Hm, quite. Lord Percy is a young puppy, who lacks distinction. Unlike Lord Wayland. And those blue eyes . . ." Elizabeth sighed.

"Lizzie! You are a married woman."

"So I am," Elizabeth said unrepentantly. "And a very happy and faithful one, too, as unfashionable as that is. But you are not married, Georgie."

"No, and I intend to remain in that blissful state."

"Hm. Suit yourself." Elizabeth shrugged. "No one ever said you had to *marry* Lord Wayland. Just—be friends with him."

Georgina laughed. "Lizzie! You utter rogue!"

"I? A rogue? Oh, no, dear. I fear you claimed that title long ago. Lady Rogue!"

"Lady Rogue?" Georgina rather liked that. She preened a bit in the mirror, pursing her lips and batting her lashes. She and Elizabeth giggled. "Well, this rogue would like to be alone now, so she can bathe and change for the evening."

"Of course." Elizabeth stood up, and crossed the room to kiss Georgina's cheek before leaving, still in firm possession of the box of sweets. "You will want to look beautiful for Lord Wayland!"

Georgina shook her head at her friend's retreating figure, then turned her attention back to the mirror, reaching for her enameled powder pot. She had never considered herself beautiful, or even pretty. Her slanting green eyes were too widely spaced; there was a sprinkle of freckles across her too-small nose. And her hair, the despair of her youth, had never been any color but *red*. So unfashionable.

Yet she knew, without vanity, that many considered her beautiful. She had a hard-won air of confidence in herself, a fearless carriage that gave off such false impressions of height and loveliness. She liked that; it increased her fame and furthered her career. Yet *she* did not think herself beautiful at all.

She wondered if Lord Wayland thought her so.

For she certainly thought *him* beautiful. Those sun-touched brown curls and brilliant blue eyes would be such a joy to paint.

He was kind, as well. No other man, with the exception of Elizabeth's Nicholas, would have jumped into a muddy river after Lady Kate like that. And afterward, when other men would have railed about ruined pantaloons and the undoing of neck cloths, he had

laughed. He had treated it all as a lark, as one of those silly, strange adventures that could beset one in the course of life.

"What a very unusual man," Georgina murmured. She fiddled with a scent bottle, lifting and dropping the jeweled stopper aimlessly as she thought about this man and their most strange meeting.

She wondered if he would like to have his portrait painted. In thanks for saving Lady Kate, of course.

Her musings were interrupted by the arrival of Daisy, Elizabeth's lady's maid, and two footmen bearing the bath.

"Oh! Now, just look at you, Mrs. B.," Daisy cried. "You've not even begun to get ready, and the carriage is ordered for nine."

"I am sorry, Daisy. I was woolgathering."

"I see that. Well, you just get in your bath, and I'll see about getting your gown pressed and ready." Daisy threw open the vast wardrobe and rifled through the myriad of colorful silks, satins, and muslins hanging there. "Which gown would you like to wear?"

"Oh, I don't know, Daisy. Something very dashing, I think!"

"Well, I think we won't have any problem finding something like *that*, Mrs. B.!"

It was a much-sobered Alex that presented himself on the Hollingsworth doorstep at half-past eight, immaculately attired for the evening. He bore a bouquet of roses for Lady Elizabeth, and a very large mass of very expensive orchids for Mrs. Beaumont.

He looked down now at the large purple blooms guiltily. They could be nothing but an apology, albeit

a feeble one, for even thinking of—whatever it was he had been thinking of.

He almost turned and left, sure his guilt must show on his face for all to see, when he was forestalled by the butler answering his knock.

Lady Elizabeth was waiting for him in the drawing room, seated beside the fire. Alex had the fleeting, distracting thought that those flames were the exact color of Mrs. Beaumont's hair.

Elizabeth coughed delicately to catch his attention, and said, "Good evening, Lord Wayland."

Alex bowed quickly. "Good evening, Lady Elizabeth."

"Are those lovely flowers for us?"

"Indeed they are." He handed her the pink roses. "I know it is more the usual thing to send posies *after* a ball, but I wanted to thank you and Mrs. Beaumont for your kind hospitality this afternoon."

"You wish to thank *us*?" a voice cried behind him. "We should be the ones thanking you, Lord Wayland!"

Alex turned, and saw Georgina just entering the drawing room, fastening an emerald bracelet over one gloved wrist. He had read about one's breath "catching" in one's throat, but he had never experienced it before. Now he found that it was exactly as described; his breath lodged halfway up his throat and refused to pass any farther.

His impressions of that afternoon had been entirely correct, and not his imagination at all. Georgina Beaumont was a stunning woman. She wore a gown of brilliant green satin, draped low across her shoulders and, he couldn't help but notice, across her magnificent bosom. The gown was embroidered with gold

