

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-curled 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 Katel!" 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 beauteous 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 Pyncheon 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

thread on the bodice and along the hem; tiny emeralds winked amid the embroidery.

More emeralds swung at her ears, and her hair was drawn up and crowned with an emerald and topaz tiara of an unusual, spiked design—Russian, no doubt.

That tiara would probably keep Fair Oak going for a year.

Yet Alex did not see the splendor of her jewels. He saw only that she was lovely, that her smile was warm and wide and sincere as she greeted him. Unlike the silly simpers and smirks that had greeted him since he arrived in Town.

Her smile did not say, "Oh, grand, here is a *duke*." It said only that she was happy to see him.

He hoped.

"We should be thanking you," she continued as she advanced into the room and paused at his side. "Not one man in a hundred would have done as you did. You saved Lady Kate's life."

Alex's breath released then, and he was able to reply. "It was entirely my pleasure, ma'am. I have been quite a useless fribble since I returned to England; I was glad to have a mission again. I trust that, er, Lady Kate has suffered no ill effects from her swim?"

"Indeed not. I am happy to say that she is quite recovered."

As if summoned by the sound of her name, Lady Kate came bounding through the drawing room door. She took one glance at Alex, and dashed to his side, dancing up on her hind legs in order to plant her front paws on his immaculate breeches. She grinned in doggie delight.

"Oh, no!" Georgina cried. "Lady Kate, do get down from there!"

"I thought you had shut her in your room for the night, Georgie," said Elizabeth.

"I did, but she must have escaped. She does so hate to be excluded from any excitement. Come away, Lady Kate!"

"It's quite all right, Mrs. Beaumont." Alex leaned down to pat Lady Kate on the head and rub her silky ears. "I like animals very much. When I was a lad, I had a dog much like this one, but it was black."

Georgina watched as Lady Kate's stubby tail quivered in ecstasy. Such an effect this man had on females, both of the human and the canine persuasion! "Most of her type of terrier are black, I believe," she answered distractedly.

"However did you come across a white one, then, Mrs. Beaumont?"

"She saved Lady Kate from certain doom!" Elizabeth cried.

"Indeed?" Alex looked up at Georgina. "I should love to hear the tale of the rescue—the *first* rescue—of this admirable lady."

Georgina laughed. "It is not a very engrossing tale! Elizabeth, Nicholas, and I were on holiday in Scotland last autumn, when we came across a farmer about to drown a poor pup, because she was white."

"A horrid man!" said Elizabeth. "He said the 'wee beastie' was of no use, because she was too bright to be hidden from the game she was meant to be hunting."

"Yes," said Georgina. "She looked at me so imploringly. I could not leave her to her fate, so I bought her from the farmer for a shilling."

"A well-spent shilling, I would say," said Alex.

"I think so. Though you might not think her quite

so 'admirable,' if you were to look down now and see her eating your flowers!"

Alex looked, and saw that Lady Kate was indeed munching on an orchid. He laughed, and held the bedraggled bouquet out to Georgina. "Actually, they are *your* flowers! In thanks for such a grand tea this afternoon."

She accepted the flowers with a smile, and buried her nose in their exotic perfume. "They are beautiful. Thank you, Lord Wayland."

Elizabeth watched them, a suspiciously smug smile on her face. "Well, then," she said. "Shall we have some sherry before we depart? Or perhaps some tea? We do want to hear of your time in Spain, Lord Wayland. Both my husband and my brother were there, you know . . ."

Chapter Five

Lady Beaton's ball was indeed a "dreadful crush," just as predicted. The line of carriages went around Grosvenor Square, and the receiving line of those guests that had already arrived went through the front doors and down the marble steps.

Georgina did not mind the delay, though. It only meant that she had more time to sit in the warm darkness of the carriage with Lord Wayland, without the distractions of a crowded ballroom.

As Elizabeth had whispered in her ear while they gathered their cloaks, he even liked small dogs and brought flowers *before* a ball.

Lud, was the man *perfect*?

So Georgina set herself now to find a fault with him, as she studied him where he sat across from her. His nose was a tad crooked, as if it had once been broken. His cheekbones were rather sharp, and the lines about his eyes were too deep for his youngish age, as if he had been squinting into the Spanish sun too long. He did not possess the smooth olive beauty of so many of her Italian friends. Or the golden perfection of her first husband, Jack.

No, Alex possessed something much more interesting than mere bland beauty. His features spoke of intelligence and experience, of pride.

And there was certainly nothing wrong at all with his figure. His shoulders required absolutely no padding, and his breeches fit his long legs like . . .

Georgina turned away, fanning herself. Very well, then, so there were no faults there. She looked back to him, turning her study to his attire. His cravat was simply tied, with a stickpin of a tiny, insignificant diamond in its snowy folds. His waistcoat was of plain ivory satin. Not very stylish, compared with the pinks of the *ton*. But Georgina, who loved flamboyant fashions for herself, rather disliked it in men. And, having a wide friendship with artistic sorts of people, she had seen some flamboyance!

She much preferred Lord Wayland's quiet elegance.

So, he was handsome, he dressed with good taste, he liked her dog, he had a nice laugh, performed great deeds in the park, was a war hero, *and* a duke.

Georgina conceded with a sigh. He *was* perfect. Probably too perfect for her own flawed self. However, that did not mean she could not enjoy his company while she had the chance.

"I do believe we have arrived at last!" said Elizabeth.

Georgina shifted her attention to the carriage window to see that their wait was indeed over. *Thank the gods*, she thought. She could certainly use a glass of champagne. And had it suddenly become overly warm in the carriage?

A footman opened the carriage door, and Alex stepped out first to assist Georgina and Elizabeth. Georgina was quite touched to see the care he took with Elizabeth; Lizzie thought her condition was still

hidden, but it was really becoming quite apparent beneath her lacy sash. It was clear that Alex had apprehended this, and he held her arm tightly to help her ascend the steep front steps.

Georgina left her cloak with the Beatons' footman and joined Alex and Elizabeth at the end of the receiving line, at the foot of the grand staircase. This was always one of her favorite moments of a ball; the chance to look ahead and behind her, and see who was in attendance. To see if there was anyone who might need to have their portrait painted, or if there were any friends to greet.

Tonight, though, there could be no one more fascinating than the person she was with.

Alex detested balls.

They were always overly warm, overly scented with the perfumes of the guests and the masses of flowers, and full of uninteresting conversation. He was also a rather poor dancer, which could often prove quite embarrassing.

He could see, as he and Georgina and Elizabeth at last greeted their hostess and entered the ballroom, that this particular rout would be scarce any different from those he attended since his return to London.

The dancing had not yet begun; the musicians were tuning up behind a bank of potted palms, and the crowd was milling about waiting for the opening pavan. It all seemed very aimless, with ladies exclaiming over one another's gowns, gentlemen inquiring after one another's latest acquisitions at Tattersall's, couples claiming one another for the dances, and footmen moving about with full trays of champagne glasses.

Yet he knew it was not at all aimless. Reputations were made and broken on the whispers behind fans,

the gentleman-to-gentleman asides. It was a precarious, expensive world, one that some people, such as Alex's brother, would pay anything, do anything, to stay in. In the end, the gambling and the spending had broken Damian, and all their family.

And Alex had been far away, unable to stop any of the madness and unhappiness.

In the midst of these renewed pangs of guilt, he felt the light pressure of Georgina's fingers on his arm. He turned to look down at her.

She smiled at him, and went up on tiptoe to murmur in his ear, "Absolutely horrid, is it not? Like a gathering of clucking chickens."

He laughed. "Horrid."

"Ah, the things we go through for our art, Georgie," Elizabeth sighed. Then she drifted off to greet a group of friends.

"Indeed," Georgina said. She tugged at his arm. "Shall we join the fray, Lord Wayland? I do believe people are beginning to stare."

Alex looked down at her, at her inquisitive green eyes, and he knew then that he could never be the cause of another person's unhappiness, as he had been with his family, being far away and unable to curb Damian's excesses. He had only known Georgina Beaumont for a very brief while, but he knew that she would be very angry, and very hurt, if she found out about his friends' silly wager, and his own secret temptations toward her.

He had no wish to see those eyes full of anger. He wanted them to laugh at him, to sparkle and smile—to fill with admiration, as he was certain his did now as they looked at her.

He turned back to the ballroom, and saw that they were indeed attracting attention. As a new duke, with

a scandal for a brother, he had become accustomed to the attention, even though it still made him most uncomfortable. Yet now he found that a new duke with a beautiful, famous woman on his arm was an even greater object of interest than a duke alone.

Mamas glared at Georgina, even as they urged their daughters to stand up straighter and smooth their hair. Some of the gentlemen, obviously admirers of "La Beaumont," looked crestfallen; others took out their quizzing glasses and eyed the two of them speculatively. Sophisticated young matrons and widows studied Georgina's gown, then looked down at their own lesser creations in chagrined comparison.

The elderly Lady Collins, a notorious eccentric, said, loud enough to be heard even over the large crowd, "Is that that artist chit with young Wayland? I would wager that hair of hers is *died*! Never saw that red in nature."

Georgina giggled.

Alex frowned. "What an old harridan that Lady Collins is."

"Nonsense!" Georgina replied. "I plan to be just like her when I am seventy; I will say what I please, and care for none. Is that champagne I see over there? Shall we force our way through the masses and get a glass?"

"What a grand idea, Mrs. Beaumont. I was just thinking the exact same thing myself."

As they ventured into the crowd, Alex looked about for Hildebrand and Freddie. He intended to ask them to call off that silly wager as soon as possible; he did not care two straws if it was "ungentlemanly" to cancel a wager once it was made. He wanted to become friends with Georgina, and he did *not* want such nonsense hanging over them like a dark cloud.

Yet they were nowhere to be found, and he soon found himself in the midst of a large circle of Georgina's acquaintances, all of them eager to be introduced to him. In the middle of their conversation and laughter, he quite forgot about Hildebrand and Freddie and any wagers at all.

"What a handsome fellow your duke is, Georgina!" whispered Lady Lonsdale, a very stylish lady whose portrait Georgina had once painted, and who had become a friend. "I am quite envious."

Georgina laughed, and looked to the dance floor, where Alex was engaged in a country-dance with Elizabeth. "There is no need to be envious, Harriet! He is not 'my' duke. Lord Wayland and I only met this afternoon, and he kindly offered to escort Elizabeth and myself this evening, since Nicholas is from Town."

"Hm. Only out of the kindness of his heart, I am sure." Lady Lonsdale fluttered her feathered fan. "Tell me, how did you and the duke meet?"

"He jumped into the river after my dog."

"Ha!" Lady Lonsdale laughed most heartily. "Are you telling me a corker, Georgina?"

"I assure you I am not! Lady Kate escaped from her lead and went for a swim. Lord Wayland very gallantly rescued her from being carried off, and Elizabeth invited him to take tea with us at her house in thanks."

"Oh, my dear! Such an *on dit*. One of the great heroes of the Peninsula ruining his attire rescuing the dog of a famous artist! It will be in all the papers tomorrow, you know."

"I only hope that the scandalmongers do not imply that I am on the hunt for a new husband."

"Your appearing here with him tonight *will* be sure to cause talk."

"There is always talk. I am quite accustomed to it."

"And you do nothing to discourage it!" Lady Lonsdale's tone was gleeful.

Georgina shrugged blithely. "It is good for my career to be noticed! As long as there is no true scandal. That would be quite disastrous."

The dance had ended, and Alex was leading Elizabeth toward them, the two of them happily laughing and chatting.

"He is very handsome," said Lady Lonsdale. "And he does seem to like you a great deal."

"His lordship has been very kind . . ."

"No doubt." Lady Lonsdale lowered her fan, and smiled as Elizabeth and Alex reached them. "Lady Elizabeth! How very radiant you are this evening. Marriage must certainly agree with you."

"It does indeed!" Elizabeth replied merrily.

"When shall we have the pleasure of seeing your scamp of a husband again?"

"Very soon, I am sure, Lady Lonsdale. There was a bit of an emergency at our country estate, which he went to look in on. But may I present his worthy substitute this evening, His Grace the Duke of Wayland? Lord Wayland, this is our friend, the Countess of Lonsdale. Georgina painted her portrait last year, and she is a great patron of art!"

"So you must be certain to be nice to her!" Georgina laughed.

Alex grinned, and bowed to Lady Lonsdale. "I shall endeavor to do my best, Mrs. Beaumont. How do you do, Lady Lonsdale."

"You must not listen to their fustian, Lord Way-

land! They will have you believing I am an ogre who does naught but sit for portraits all day, and lord it over poor, groveling artists," said Lady Lonsdale. "I am very glad to meet you, though, Lord Wayland. I have heard that you performed quite a dashing feat in the park today. I am sorry I missed it."

"Yes, well, rescuing fair damsels in distress is a specialty of mine."

"So I understand." Lady Lonsdale smiled at him over her fan.

The orchestra struck up the lilting strains of a waltz, and Alex turned to Georgina. "Mrs. Beaumont, would you do me the great honor of dancing with me?"

"Thank you, yes." As Georgina accepted his arm and went with him to the dance floor he had only just vacated, she said, "I feel I should warn you, though, that I bring more enthusiasm to the dance than grace."

"I will confess in turn—my feet are of the two left variety." One of his hands slid into hers, and the other landed warmly at her waist. "But I daresay we shall rub along well enough together."

"I daresay we shall."

Indeed they did. Their steps seemed well matched, and soon they were swaying and swooping amid the other couples, taking the corners in dashing executed spins that sent Georgina's emerald green skirts swirling.

She laughed merrily after one especially energetic turn, bringing the gazes of the other dancers in their direction. "I cannot recall when I had such fun waltzing!"

"Nor I! Dancing is usually a bit of a chore, something I had to do with my sister at country assemblies when I was a lad. But this is quite nice. Quite—different."

"So the evening has not proved to be so tedious as you had feared?"

"How did you know I feared it would be tedious?" Georgina smiled slyly. "I have my ways!"

"Well, I never expected that *your* company would be tedious. And this ball has not been at all, thanks to you and Lady Elizabeth."

Georgina hummed a bit to the music as they turned and swayed. "I do believe this is an Italian song. I could almost think myself home again!" She closed her eyes, and smiled at the blissful moment of music and Alex's warm arms about her.

All too soon, the music ended.

Georgina found herself quite unaccountably disappointed.

"Shall we take a stroll on the terrace?" Alex asked. "It is sure to be cooler outside."

"Oh, yes, what a lovely idea!"

There were several couples gathered on the Beaumonts' terrace, walking, talking quietly, or watching the brightly lit ballroom through the open doors. A few bolder guests could be glimpsed slipping about the garden beyond.

It was quite an extension of the ball, but much cooler, and lovely beneath the stars.

Georgina leaned against the marble balustrade, and sipped at the glass of champagne she had caught from a footman's tray on the way out of the ballroom. It was truly a beautiful night. The London sky was uncharacteristically clear, lit by an almost full, pale silver moon. The scent of early roses from the garden hung sweet in the air. The champagne was cool and delicious as it slid down her throat.

And Alex's arm was warm and delicious when he leaned on the balustrade beside her.

"Do you miss your home in Italy very much, Mrs. Beaumont?" he asked quietly.

Georgina smiled at him. "Dreadfully."

"Will you tell me about it? I have been to Spain, and France, and Belgium, but never to Italy."

"Are you certain you wish me to speak of it? Once begun, I often cannot stop!"

"I am certain. Tell me, please."

"Well, I have two homes in Italy. One is a small villa at Lake Como, which I purchased after my second husband passed away. It is quite old, sixteenth century, and something is always falling to bits. The plasterer has to be called in almost every year!" Yet even as she complained, her face lit with a small smile.

"Were there no more modern houses available in the area?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. But this particular one boasts a very fine fresco in the room I use as a dining room, a lovely work of a classical party group eating grapes and dancing. There is also a very good view from the terrace, where I often have luncheon parties when the weather is especially fine. And there are endless vistas for sketching!"

She paused to sip at her champagne, and Alex did the same. He turned her words over in his mind; they had conjured for him a vision of not only a beautiful place, but of a life lived beautifully, with friends and parties and endless vistas of loveliness.

He so envied her in that moment.

He drained his glass, and said, "What is your second home?"

"That is my city home, in Venice. A very small place, also very old and crumbling, but not without its own charms! Elizabeth and her husband have pur-

chased a house just across the canal, and they visit me there in the winter."

"I am truly jealous, Mrs. Beaumont."

She laughed brightly. "Jealous, Lord Wayland? Of me? Why, you are a duke! Surely you possess far finer properties than my small homes."

Alex thought wryly of the large town house, and the hunting box in Scotland, both lost to his brother's profligacy. "I think what I am jealous of is your freedom. It is obvious that you love your life, that you love what you do."

Georgina tilted her head, gazing up at him quizzically. "I do. I think there is nothing more wonderful in life than to have a blank canvas before me and a paintbrush in hand, with an Italian scene to paint. And I have the best of friends, who share that passion. But what is there in your own life, Lord Wayland, that you would wish different? What would you wish to put in its stead?"

He looked down at her, standing there beside him in the moonlight. A tiny frown of concern pleated her ivory brow. He wanted, more than anything he had ever wanted before, to kiss her. He wanted to kiss away that frown, to hold her against him, and lose all his troubles in her warmth and happiness.

He even lifted his hand a tiny bit toward her, but he was saved from his own folly by Elizabeth's voice calling to them from the open terrace doors.

"There you two are!" she said. "The last dance is about to begin, and then of course there shall be a mad dash for supper. You would not wish to miss Lady Beaton's lobster patties."

Alex's hand fell back to his side.

Georgina laughed, and placed her empty glass on

the balustrade. "Certainly not! I have heard such glorious things about those lobster patties."

"As have I." Alex held out his arm to her. "Shall we?"

Her hand was as light as a bird on his sleeve. "Thank you, Lord Wayland!"

As they reentered the ballroom, Alex at last caught a glimpse of Hildebrand and Freddie, just as they were departing. They saw him, and sent him laughing little waves before they left, their heads together as they whispered gleefully.

"Was that not your friends? Mr. Marlow and Viscount Garrick?" said Georgina. "Do you not wish to go after them and bid them good evening? I could save you a seat in the dining room."

Alex took one last glance at Hildebrand and Freddie's departing figures, then shook his head. "Anything I have to say to them can certainly wait until tomorrow. The lobster patties, however, cannot wait."

Chapter Six

"Was the ball last night not a crush? I vow all the *ton* must have been there," Elizabeth sighed.

It was very nearly noon, but they were only just beginning their morning toast and chocolate in the breakfast room. All the morning papers were spread across the table, as they perused them for mention of their names and descriptions of various gowns and *on dits*.

"Hm, quite," Georgina replied as she spread marmalade on her toast, almost dragging the ribbons of her morning gown through the stickiness. She was not yet entirely *awake*, though she did notice, with much gratification, that they were mentioned several times in papers. "Even that funny old Lady Collins was there."

"And everyone seemed quite interested in your handsome escort!"

"*Our* escort, Lizzie!" Georgina protested. "Did Lord Wayland not escort both of us to the ball?"

"Well, yes, of course. Most proper. But anyone could see it was *you* he was there for, *you* he was

interested in. How could he not be? Every young buck in Town is at your feet."

"Lord Wayland is hardly a young buck. He is quite the most distinguished gentleman I have met this Season."

"Oh, yes. Quite." Elizabeth grinned mischievously. "Perhaps even the most distinguished gentleman you have seen in—years? I know I have not seen anyone so distinguished."

"Are your husband and brother not so, Lizzie?"

"I love Nick with all my heart, and in my eyes he is the finest man in the world. Yet *distinguished* is not the first word that springs to mind when one thinks of him. Peter, of course, is quite distinguished in his own fashion, and is much less formidable since Carmen and Isabella came into his life." Elizabeth frowned in thought. "But Lord Wayland has an openness and amiability that I fear my dear brother often lacks. His manners were very charming, as I'm sure you must agree, Georgie."

"Yes," Georgina murmured. She stared down into her half-empty cup of chocolate. "Very charming. You are right in saying that it has been a long time since I have met such an amiable man."

"Not since—Jack?" Elizabeth suggested gently.

"Lizzie!" Georgina protested. "Jack has been gone for almost ten years. I have met many men since then. I even married two of them."

"Old men you married out of desperation and pity," Elizabeth argued. "Have you never thought of marrying again for affection or even love?"

Georgina laughed. "My dear friend, it is good of you to try to matchmake for me! But I only met Lord Wayland yesterday, and here you have us wildly in love and off to Gretna Green."

"Not Gretna Green! St. George's, Hanover Square."

"Lizzie . . ."

"Oh, all right! I won't say another word. But, Georgina, I do only want your happiness."

"I *am* happy! I have everything I have ever wanted. I have my work, independence, wonderful friends, and a lovely home. I am quite content."

"All those things are delightful, Georgie, as I well know. My own work is so vital to me. Yet a good marriage can make all those things even more splendid; it can make life complete!"

Georgina shook her head. "Good marriages are few and far between. I have ample proof from the horrid things my clients have told me of their husbands, as they sit for portraits."

"I, too, hear dreadful things. Not every marriage, though, is like that. Nick and I are very happy, as are Peter and Carmen. You and Jack . . ."

"Marriages like those are rare. I had my one love. And I will never give up any portion of my delicious freedom for anything less!"

"No," Elizabeth said quietly. "Of course you will not. You *should* not."

"Excellent. Then, may we cease to discuss my matrimonial prospects, and decide what we want to do this afternoon?"

"We must plan my *salon*, of course! It is to be *next* Friday, and I have not begun a thing. But first, will you tell me one thing, Georgie?"

"What is that?" Georgina asked warily.

"Will you at least *see* Lord Wayland again?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, he is calling at four to take me driving in the park."

Elizabeth caught up the folded copy of the *Gazette* and tossed it at Georgina's laughing head. "Horrid

girl! Not to tell me, *me*, your bosom bow, and let me rattle along like that!"

"Oh, Lizzie!" Georgina giggled. "I am sorry to keep it to myself. You just looked so very earnest and dear, arguing for matrimonial bliss."

"Hmph." Elizabeth looked over at Lady Kate, who was perched in the window seat, waiting for the day's excitement to begin. "Do you see how shabbily we are treated, Lady Kate? After all our good attempts to assist!"

"Lizzie! I will cry peace. I will keep you informed of all my social engagements from now on. Now, I have something very important I should like your advice on."

"Oh, yes? What is that?"

"What should I wear on this drive?"

Georgina studied the array of garments laid out across her bed, all of them neat and fashionable muslins and silks in every color of the rainbow. She held up first one then another in front of her, twisting about before the mirror.

"What I really need is something new," she mused as she tossed another rejected gown onto the pile. "Something stunningly original!"

Except that a *modiste* would take at least a week to fashion something "stunningly original," and Lord Wayland would be calling for her in an hour. And Georgina was already possessed of a wardrobe that was original, and overly vast to boot.

She flopped down before her dressing table. "Why am I being as fidgety as a schoolgirl?" she asked Lady Kate, who was peering out from beneath the hillock of frocks.

The dog's ears perked up, and she tilted her head as if considering.

"I am thirty years old," Georgina continued. "This is hardly the first time I have gone driving in the park with a handsome gentleman. And I have never thought twice about what to wear before!"

Lady Kate whined.

"Yes, quite! I suppose Lizzie has a point. There must be something unusual about this Wayland. Something—special."

Lady Kate barked.

"Exactly! Therefore, I must spend more time with him. Either he shall prove himself to be no different from any other charming man of my acquaintance, or he will show what it is that makes him so special."

Lady Kate's tail wagged vigorously.

Georgina knelt down beside the bed to receive a doggie kiss on the nose. "You are the best conversationalist I have ever met, Lady Kate. Most understanding. Best of all, I know you will never tell anyone of my cabbage-headed behavior today! Will you?"

Lady Kate sighed.

"You are not going to wear *that* coat, are you?" Hildebrand said, around a mouthful of Alex's leftover luncheon beefsteak.

Alex look down at his completely respectable, as he had thought, green coat. "What is wrong with it?"

"My dear fellow, what is *not* wrong with it?"

"The color is bilious," offered Freddie.

"The cut all wrong through the shoulders," said Hildebrand.

"And the length . . . !" sighed Freddie.

"Oh, very well!" Alex tore off the offending coat and tossed it onto a chair. "What do you suggest I wear in its place?"

"Where are you going?" asked Hildebrand.

"Not that it is any of your business, pup, but I am going driving in the park."

"Alone?"

"With a lady," Alex growled.

Hildebrand and Freddie glanced at each other speculatively. "Mrs. Beaumont!" they cried.

"My dear fellow," clucked Hildebrand. "You cannot escort such a dashing lady dressed like a country curate. Where are your other coats?"

"There." Alex pointed at an abandoned pile on the carpet.

Hildebrand left his steak and went to poke at the pile with the toe of his boot. "Do you mean to say that you tried on every coat you own, and that that green *thing* was the best you could find?"

Alex's jaw was taut. "Yes," he answered shortly.

Hildebrand clucked in dismay. "Wayland! You must hie to Weston immediately, at once!"

"Hildebrand. Even if I could fly out the door and land at Weston's doorstep, it would not help me this afternoon. I am due to call on Mrs. Beaumont in less than an hour."

"If only he could still wear his regimentals!" Freddie lamented. "Ladies find them demmed attractive."

"If only. It looks as if you've had these shabby bits since before you bought your commission, Wayland!"

"I have. Most of them," Alex said.

Hildebrand shook his head. Then he plucked up the blue coat from the top of the pile. "Wear this one, then. The color at least is good, and it looked fine the other day. Then tomorrow, Freddie and I will take you to the tailors ourselves."

"Yes," said Freddie. "Can't be shabby if you're going to dangle after an heiress."

Alex froze in the act of shrugging into the blue coat, and turned a glare onto the hapless Freddie. "I am not *dangling* after anyone. I am merely going for a drive in the park with a lady."

"Of course, of course," Freddie stammered. "N-no insult meant, Wayland. None at all."

Hildebrand turned Alex toward the door, away from the hapless Freddie. "Well, Wayland, you should be going! You will be late, and ladies do not like us to be late. Do they, Freddie?"

Freddie took a gulp from his wineglass. "Not at all!"

Alex glanced at his watch, and saw that he was indeed about to be late. He gathered up his hat and gloves, and turned one more stern glance onto his friends. "Very well. Just try not to drink *all* my wine while I am gone."

"No! Of course we would not do that."

"Of course." Alex paused at the door. "And one other thing—I want to have a talk with the two of you about that ridiculous wager you concocted."

"Wager? What wager?" Hildebrand cried, all innocence. "You *really* should be going now, Wayland."

"Very well. I will speak with you later, then." Then Alex left, closing the door softly behind him.

Hildebrand and Freddie ran to the window, to grin and wave as Alex's curricule drove away.

"D'ye think he fell for it all?" Freddie asked anxiously.

"Of a certes," said Hildebrand in great satisfaction. "We will be toasting our friend's health at his wedding breakfast before the Season is out!"

Alex glanced up once to his window before he guided his curricule into the traffic, and saw his friends waving and smiling like a pair of bedlamites.

They were up to something, he could tell. Ever since the three of them had first met at Eton, Freddie and Hildebrand had always behaved like the silliest clunches when they were concocting a scheme. Sometimes it had been smuggling a toad into a don's bed or coaxing a larger allowance from their fathers, or trying to catch a pretty opera dancer's attention.

Now, it obviously had something to do with him.

But right now, Alex had weightier matters to consider than what those loobies were about. Matters such as Georgina Beaumont. And why he was so very anxious to see her again.

Perhaps it was only that he had been gone from England for so long, and then immured at Fair Oak when he did return. He had been in company with his fellow officers' wives in Spain, of course; and in Seville there had been a lovely innkeeper, Concetta. Yet it had been a long time since he had spent any amount of time with a pretty, unmarried *Englishwoman*.

Yes! he thought in relief. That would account for it. He had simply formed an infatuation for the first lovely woman to smile at him. In the clear light of a respectable afternoon drive, without the excitement of a swim in the river or the glitter of a ball to distract, he would see that really she was quite ordinary. Then there would be no more hours of anxiously thinking about her, of waiting until he could respectably see her again.

And he could get on with more businesslike and unpleasant matters—such as trying to raise some blunt.

Alex drew up his curricule outside Lady Elizabeth's town house and leaped down, much relieved by his

thoughts. Now he and Georgina could enjoy their afternoon, without any silly romantical thoughts interfering!

Then he saw her again.

She emerged from the house before he could even ascend the front steps. She was wearing an afternoon dress of sunshine-yellow muslin, with sheer, gauzy white sleeves and a gauze Vandyke collar. It seemed she was *made* of light today; the late afternoon sun reflected on her brilliant hair and the yellow of her gown, and Alex's eyes dazzled as he looked at her.

She put on the bonnet she held, a white straw confection tied with wide yellow ribbons, and then came toward him, her hand outstretched. Her merry smile could have eclipsed even that sun.

Alex knew then, with a desperate, sinking sensation, that the feelings that had struck him when first he saw Georgina had not been mere gratitude for her attention, or his long deprivation of female company.

Those feelings had come from *her*, and her alone. From the sheer force of her beauty and her vibrant personality. She was unique, she was—special.

"Oh, Lord Wayland!" she said, taking his hand in her own gloved one. "How very good of you to rescue me from madness."

Still much struck by these new and strange emotions, Alex assisted Georgina into his curricule and climbed up beside her. He had never been so glad of anything than he was to have the reins and the driving to distract his thoughts. "Madness?" he asked.

"Yes. You see, Lizzie has decided to launch her own *salon*. Every Friday evening she will invite painters, writers, singers, what have you to her drawing room."

"It sounds delightful."

"Oh, yes! No doubt it will be. But she intends to hold the first one next Friday, and this afternoon she is in an uproar trying to decide exactly *who* to invite, and what food to serve." Georgina sighed. "Right now, the butler, the cook, little Isabella, and Lady Kate are all gathered together, offering their opinions, and Elizabeth is nay-saying them all. I tell you, I escaped only just in time. Perhaps, if we are gone a *very* long time, all will be settled by the time I return."

Alex laughed, his heart lightened, his doubts forgotten. As he had the day before, he quite forgot all his worries the moment he was in her company. Money, marriage, his family—there would be more than enough time to worry over those when he was deprived of her presence.

"Then, Mrs. Beaumont, I shall endeavor to take the long way about the park," he answered with a grin. "If there is a long way."

"If there is, I am certain we can find it."

"And, when the *salon* does come off, I am sure Lady Elizabeth will have a mad crush on her hands, and invitations will thereafter be highly sought for her Friday evenings."

"Of that I have no doubt. Certain high sticklers do not entirely approve of Lizzie, but she is the very center of a younger, more dashing set here in London. The *salon* will be a great success, and fun as well." She smiled at him. "You will be invited, of course. As will your friends, Mr. Marlow and Viscount Garrick."

"Now, that invitation I happily accept! I cannot speak for my friends, though. They are good enough fellows once you get to know them, but not precisely what one might call artistically minded."

"So I have gathered, from our very brief acquaint-

tance!" Georgina laughed. "But I'm sure they would add an interesting element to the guest list."

"Then I will pass the invitation on to them."

Alex watched Georgina from the corner of his eye as she laughed and turned her face up to the warmth of the sun.

"You really are very lovely," he blurted, before he could even think.

Then he felt his face burn.