

Chapter One

London Late May 1814

Over the past five years, Sebastian Carr, Viscount Langley, had come to the conclusion that there was no catastrophe so great that its impact could not be blunted with an excessive amount of brandy, and he was not about to let this morning's disaster negate that theory. His lack of available libations, however, might prove to be a problem.

The viscount tried to focus on the meager amount of amber liquid remaining in the decanter on the sideboard. Devil take that Corsican upstart. If not for this damned inconvenient war, Sebastian would have had enough of the exquisite French nectar to keep himself happily oblivious for days. As it stood now, yes, he might be drunk, but not nearly drunk enough. He'd have to start in on the blue ruin after this; if he'd had any foresight at all, he would never have polished off the last of the claret two nights ago. Ah, well. Foxed was foxed, no matter how one got there. He reached for the bottle.

Light glinted mockingly off the cut crystal, flinging rainbows of pain into his tortured eyes. He winced, shielded his gaze, and squinted toward the window. Bloody hell! Had nature itself decided to conspire against him as well? What had begun as a fittingly gloomy day had somehow metamorphosed into a veritable ode to spring. A very bad ode, from the look of things, complete with brilliant sunshine, trilling birdsong, and flowers popping up everywhere. Egad, the only thing it lacked was a few frolicking nymphs. Come to think of it, nymphs would be a definite improvement. Sebastian grinned at the thought.

The gesture, however, quickly wilted beneath the sun's dazzling onslaught. His eyes began to

water. This would never do. He thought about ringing for Grafton, his long-suffering valet (come to think of it, he had never known a valet who *wasn't* long-suffering, especially in his service), then remembered he'd sent the man out on a mission of vital importance. No matter. He could do this small task himself.

The viscount turned, and the room turned with him. Turned—and tilted at a rather alarming angle. He halted, swaying, palm pressed to his suddenly clammy forehead. Hmm. Perhaps he was more disguised than he thought; he seemed to move with all the grace of a pregnant rhinoceros. True, he did not have far to stumble in order to yank the draperies shut, but he did not trust the perfidious floor not to spin and deposit him on his backside. It certainly wouldn't do to greet his guests from that rather inelegant position. Not that they hadn't seen him that way many times before, of course, but according to the strict rules that governed Society, one could collapse in a sodden heap *after* they were gone, but not before. A pity, that, especially since he would be obliged to pay closer attention to those rules from now on. Sebastian swerved back to the sideboard, then with unsteady hands managed to drain the contents of the decanter into his glass.

He stared into the depths of his drink for a moment, brought the glass to his lips . . . and hesitated. No, the voice was still there. He had not managed to drown it out, though not for lack of trying.

If only you were more like your brother . . .

The words ricocheted through his muzzy mind with all the subtlety of cannon fire. Very *loud* cannon fire. The deliverer of those words had never possessed anything resembling diplomacy or tact, much less sensitivity, and this latest utterance was true to form. As far back as the viscount could recall, the only time his father had deigned to speak to him at all was to deliver some form of scathing criticism—with the exception of the last five years, when the man seemed to have forgotten about his heir's very existence. Not that Sebastian had minded, of course. For the first time in his life he had been free to live as he pleased, and he had made the most of it, if he dared say so himself. But that had all come to a crashing halt this morning when the earl had appeared, unannounced, on his doorstep.

If only you were more like your brother . . .

The words persisted, delivered in his father's clipped, disdainful tones. More like his brother . . . Sebastian made a rude noise. He would never be anything like Alexander—or should that be Saint Alexander? Given the reverent manner in which his father pronounced the name, divinity was a distinct possibility.

He knew full well he would never attain Alex's level of perfection. Not that he hadn't tried, mind you. Tried and failed time and time again, until he had grown weary of making the effort. Alex had been and always would be the handsomer, the more intelligent, the more accomplished, the more athletic, the more anything-you-couldpossibly-name of the two. His father never missed an opportunity to remind Sebastian that he would stand forever in the shadow of his older brother, even when that brother was five years dead.

The corners of the viscount's mouth twitched. Actually, he had come to this conclusion on his own years ago; it had been painfully obvious to his then ten-year-old self. The revelation had been liberating, for only then did he discover how much easier it was for him to be a scoundrel than a paragon. Why make the attempt when he could never be something he wasn't? After all, one could not expect a leopard to change its spots, a fact that seemed to annoy his father to no end.

But Sebastian could not bring himself to say it. He had tried, wanting to fling the words at his father's expressionless face, to provoke some response—any response—but one glance from the earl's cold blue eyes and his tongue stuck fast to the roof of his mouth. He had stood in silence, face flaming, body tense, jaw clenched until he thought his teeth would shatter, while the earl pronounced sentence over him.

If only you were more like your brother . . .

Blast and damnation! Determined to silence the hateful voice, or at least muffle it into unintelligibility, the viscount tossed back a heady gulp, then coughed as the liquor blazed a fiery path down his throat.

A sudden burst of noise intruded on his maudlin musings, a combination of the violent creaking of unoiled hinges and a torrent of invective delivered in a patrician accent. Sebastian cocked an ear.

“I am not traveling one more step, you beastly little toad, until you tell me what the bloody hell is going on!”

The viscount chuckled. Nigel sounded rather out of sorts this morning.

“Calm yourself, my lord,” Grafton cajoled in a soft, soothing tone. “As I told you, Lord Langley will explain everything. This way, please.”

“Well, all I can say is that he had better have a deuced good explanation for rousing me out of bed at this ungodly hour,” grouched Nigel.

“My dear fellow,” said a third man in amused tones, “to you, anything earlier than noon is an ungodly hour.”

“And it is now half past eleven,” Nigel huffed. “Barbaric, I tell you!”

Help had arrived. Good. If anyone could steer him in the right direction, they could. After all, what were friends for? With a lopsided grin, Sebastian propped himself against the sideboard and watched as two gentlemen made their way into his shabby, Lilliputian drawing room.

Lord Nigel Barrington shuffled in, appearing more like a figure from the *commedia dell'arte* than the younger brother of a duke. His straight, guinea-gold locks drooped over his forehead, and dark smudges shadowed the skin around his bloodshot blue eyes. His cravat, an intricate waterfall of pristine linen under normal circumstances, appeared as though he'd tied it in the dark. Wearing mittens. Sebastian tried to hide his widening smile; he knew the signs well. His friend was paying the price for the four—or was it five?—bottles of the questionable vintage he'd consumed at the gaming hell they had patronized last night. It was hoping too much, though, that an excess of spirits would improve the young man's taste in dress; this morning's combination of a mulberry jacket over a blue-and-lime-striped waistcoat made Sebastian want to draw the shades over Nigel as well.

Mr. Jason Havelock, on the other hand, appeared every inch the young Corinthian in his coat of

midnight-blue superfine, buff inexpressibles, and tasseled Hessians polished to a mirror finish. Although he was not as tall or as handsome as Nigel (well, Nigel when he was in looks, that is), his tanned skin and dark, striking countenance garnered him more than his share of feminine admiration. And it appeared that he was the only sober one of the three. Well, at least someone had a clear head.

“Good day, Nigel, Jace,” Sebastian said with forced good humor. He lifted his glass in salute.

“Well, aren’t you cheerful?” grumbled Nigel. He collapsed none too gently into one of the worn high-backed chairs by the fireplace, which creaked in protest.

Sebastian wagged a finger at him. “Cup-shot, my good man, cup-shot,” he corrected. “The only cheer in this room is the sort one pours from a bottle. I would offer you something, but I fear I’ve already drunk it all. Unless you’re partial to blue ruin, of course.”

Nigel turned vaguely green and shook his head.

Jace leaned one shoulder against the cracked marble mantelpiece, his brow creased in a thoughtful frown. “Your man said the matter was urgent, Sebastian. Am I correct in assuming it has something to do with why you’re drunk as a lord? What happened?”

The viscount observed the curiosity on his friends’ faces. He had known these two since they were at Eton, when the three social outcasts had little recourse but to band together against the bullying of the older lads. Black sheep, the lot of them, but their loyalty to each other had never wavered. Although they had had no secrets between them ever since their school days, it rankled that he had been put in this position.

Before he could say anything, however, Nigel blurted out, “Oh, Lud, you lost to Fairleigh. That’s it, isn’t it?” His lips curled in disgust. “The fellow’s a Captain Sharp! I knew you were in the suds the moment you accepted his challenge.”

“I think your words were: ‘Devil take it, man, your wits have gone begging,’” Sebastian drawled. “But I did *not* lose to Fairleigh, and you would have known that had you stayed to watch, rather than sporting with that improbably red-haired Cyprian.”

“You won? By Jove! How’d you manage it?” Nigel sat up in his chair, suddenly attentive.

Sebastian raised a laconic eyebrow. “You seem to forget that I cut my teeth at piquet. Fairleigh’s method of marking the cards is so obvious even a child could make it out. He didn’t seem to realize I was on to him until the very end, and the look on his face was worth more than all his vowels put together.”

“Then why didn’t you call him on it?” Nigel demanded.

“I could have, but I do not fancy grass for breakfast, thank you very much. Besides, the possibility that I might let this knowledge slip should be enough to prevent him from gulling anyone else—for a while, at least.” Sebastian frowned and glanced down at his brandy. He was no longer slurring his words, and the pleasant, fuzzy sensation he’d cultivated seemed to be wearing off. Without another infusion of spirits, in a few hours he’d be sober as a parson on Sunday. Blast.

Jace cleared his throat. “Forgive me for being such a doubting Thomas, Sebastian, but you win and lose fortunes at the drop of a hat. Care to tell us what is this really about?”

“Very well, I shall come to the point.” The viscount made a grandiose gesture with his glass. “My friends, I stand before you a condemned man. My esteemed father, the all-powerful Earl of Stanhope, has declared that I must marry before my twenty-fifth birthday or be cut off.”

A moment of stunned silence greeted this pronouncement.

Jace recovered first. “Your birthday is but two months hence!”

“Exactly so. Two months to find a suitable bride, or I shall be left without a feather to fly with.”

“But you bested Fairleigh last night,” Nigel blustered. “And that was hardly for chicken stakes.”

The viscount shook his head. “What I won is not nearly enough to make up for my string of reversals over the past six months. My father has me over a barrel and he knows it.”

“You’ve suffered reversals before and come out on top,” Nigel pointed out. “He’s bluffing.”

“Would that he were.” Sebastian contemplated the last of his brandy, then finished it off with one convulsive swallow. Try as he might, he could not block out the echo of his father’s derisive statements

and the thread of steel that ran beneath them. “He is deadly serious, I assure you.”

“Why now?” Jace wondered. “Forgive my impertinence, ’Bastian, but I find it odd that your father ignores you for the better part of five years, then suddenly barges into your life and makes this astonishing demand.”

“No more so than I. I can only tell you what he said: that he has grown weary of paying my debts, and that it’s high time I turned my attention to my responsibilities, namely, marrying and producing an heir.”

“There are scores of unmarried ladies in London at this time of year,” Havelock pointed out, “any one of whom would be happy to secure the title of viscountess.”

Sebastian rubbed his forehead; his temples pulsed in rhythm with his heart. Was it his imagination, or had the close confines of his drawing room grown uncomfortably warm?

“Scores of unmarried ladies,” Nigel muttered darkly, “*and* their mamas.”

“How many of them come with a fortune?” Sebastian’s voice grew rough. “I know what my father is doing—he has set these conditions in the hope that I will fail, allowing him to regain control over me. If I must marry, then it must be to an heiress; I’ll be damned if I allow myself to be dependent on him for anything any more.”

Nigel loosed an inelegant snort.” ’Pon rep, if you’d gotten leg-shackled to that wealthy widow when you had the chance, you wouldn’t be in this pickle.”

Jace’s booted toe shot out and clipped him across the ankle. “Stubble it, you oaf,” he said with a growl, then shot a significant glance in Sebastian’s direction.

“Ow!” Nigel shoved his chair beyond his friend’s reach. “Well, it’s true. She and her fortune would have been his for the asking, had Bainbridge not stolen a march on him.”

Jace’s scowl darkened; he and Nigel glared at each other until the viscount held up a hand.

“Cease and desist, you two—I have no wish to dredge up ancient history. And you need not concern yourself with my tender sensibilities, Jace. I have long since forgotten about Mrs. Mallory.”

Sebastian set down his glass, careful to school his features into a bland mask so his friends would believe the out-and-out lie. Kit—Mrs. Mallory—the Marchioness of Bainbridge, he should call her now—had been the first woman in a very long time whose company he actually enjoyed. Her wealth and unusual beauty had attracted him at first, but the few weeks he had spent in her company gave him an appreciation of her as a woman. But she had not loved him. Oh, she regarded him as a friend, something most properly brought up females would never consider, but nothing more than that. When he went so far as to propose marriage (a mad gesture if ever there was one!), she had hesitated. Perhaps she had even considered his offer for a second or two. But in the end she had graciously refused, even though the arrangement would have saved her reputation—not to mention his finances.

The news of her marriage to Lord Bainbridge last September had not surprised him; Kit had been head over heels in love with the dashing marquess. She still was. God's blood, anyone with eyes in his head could see that. He had spotted her in Town a few weeks ago, happy and smiling on her husband's arm, her belly beginning to swell with pregnancy. A strange, hollow sensation spread beneath his breastbone, but he shrugged it off. He could never have made Kit happy. Ultimately, a rogue like him cared for no one's happiness but his own.

"So, what is your plan?" Jace prodded.

Sebastian shoved his hands in his coat pockets, heedless of the way the fabric strained at the shoulders. "Gentlemen, I intend to take a logical approach to this dilemma. I need blunt, lots of it. And, somewhere in London, an heiress has her eyes set on a title. I propose a fair exchange."

"Egad, the thought of any of us leg-shackled to some simpering miss curls my liver," Nigel stated, shuddering.

Jace waited.

Sebastian paced a few steps from the sideboard, turned—and grabbed for the back of the threadbare sofa as the room seemed to wobble a bit. So much for sobriety! "Believe me, if I thought there was another way out of this dilemma, I would take it in a heartbeat."

Nigel leaned forward and stroked his chin. “What about the moneylenders?”

“I am already deep enough in debt without throwing myself headfirst down a well,” replied Sebastian with no little sarcasm.

Nigel slumped. “Just a thought.”

“Then what do you need from us?” Jace asked.

The viscount flashed a sardonic smile. “I have not had much contact with polite Society of late, so I need the names of heiresses in Town for the Season.”

“I say,” Nigel interrupted, “what if you were to marry a Cit’s daughter? Plump in the pocket, but completely *outré*. Oho, wouldn’t that send your pater into the boughs? Er . . . no offense, Jace.”

“None taken. After all these years, you would think I’d be used to it,” Havelock muttered.

Sebastian’s hand tightened on the back of the sofa, his fingers digging into the thinning fabric. “No, not a Cit. I do not wish the earl to take exception to my choice of bride; that would be too obvious. No, she must be well bred in addition to well inlaid.”

“Is the magnitude of the lady’s fortune your sole consideration?” Jace wanted to know.

The viscount thought a moment. “She should be a comely chit—no diamonds of the first water, but no antidotes, if you please. I should hate to have to consummate the marriage in the dark.”

A half-smile tipped Havelock’s mobile mouth. “Anything else?”

“A sweet, biddable disposition would not be unwelcome.”

Nigel guffawed. “Then for God’s sake, stay away from Lady Blythe Daventry. She has fifty thousand pounds, but you couldn’t pay me enough to put up with that shrew. Gives you her opinion on everything, then expects you to thank her for it. She cornered me at Lady Rowland’s ball last week, and I barely escaped with my life.”

“I would have paid good money to see that,” Jace quipped, snickering.

Nigel ignored him. “There’s also Lady Amelia Winthrop; she has fifteen thousand pounds, but she’s a shy little dab of a thing. Can’t say boo to a goose. And Miss Gray is fetching enough, but I doubt

if she has two thoughts to rub together.”

Jace rolled his eyes. “When did you become such an expert on heiresses?”

Nigel spread his hands. “Can I help it if ladies find me irresistible? After all, I am everything a woman could want: charming, handsome, gallant, well bred—”

“—vain, pompous, conceited, and ill dressed,” Jace finished dryly.

“Ill dressed?!” Nigel echoed in outraged tones. “You wound me, sir. I’ll have you know I am considered quite a Tulip of fashion.”

“By whom? The desperately nearsighted?” Jace grinned at him.

Sebastian folded his arms over his chest and sighed. “Gentlemen, if you please . . .”

The two men exchanged one more good-natured glare and subsided.

“I have one last requirement,” he continued. “I require the lady’s fortune to be in excess of ten thousand pounds.”

Nigel gaped. “Ten thousand? You *are* dipped.”

“Yes, but not that badly. Once I have paid off my debts, the remainder will allow me to live quite well indeed.”

Havelock remained skeptical. “A fair countenance, good breeding, a sweet nature, and ten thousand pounds—are you certain you can find this paragon in only sixty days?”

“I will find someone, Jace; if I have to sacrifice one or more of my requirements, then so be it. Beggars cannot be choosers and all that, but if such a paragon exists, I will make a go of it before I am forced to lower my sights. Within the next sixty days, I will find an heiress, wed her, bed her, and hopefully get her with child as quickly as possible. She will remain in the country to raise our offspring, while I reside in Town. I shall be flush in the pocket; she will be Viscountess Langley and eventually Countess of Stanhope. An even trade, wrapped up in a very neat package.”

“An even trade, if a cold-blooded one,” Jace mused.

“Cold-blooded? Highly sensible, I’d say,” Nigel countered. “You may not have been born to the

upper ten thousand, Jace, but you've seen enough of Society to know that among the *ton*, most marriages are nothing but contracts. In such cases it's far safer not to know one's spouse too well. Have you ever seen my brother, the Duke of Wexcombe, with his wife? Brrr. Now *there's* a chilly arrangement."

Havelock's dark gaze remained on the viscount. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I cannot change what I am, Jace. The less time my wife spends in my company, the less chance we have to make each other miserable. So . . . will you help me?"

Jace's clouded expression did not waver. "All right, Sebastian; I'll help you. But I still think you're making a dreadful mistake."

"Oh, for God's sake, man, leave off your harping," Nigel scolded. "The situation is bad enough without you playing the role of the Greek chorus. You can count me in, Sebastian."

The viscount relaxed enough to smile. "Excellent. Now, before we begin in earnest, I suggest you get me out of this stuffy little hole in the wall and into a bottle of brandy."

"Jane."

What am I doing here? I don't begrudge Pen her Season, but I do wish Mama had not been quite so insistent that I come along to acquire some "Town bronze." Whatever will I do with it anyway, when I am going to do nothing but return to Leicestershire and marry Augustus? If she had been able to find a suitable chaperone, I suspect she would have left me back at Wellbourne. I should have preferred that. "Town bronze." Hmph. It sounds as though Mama wants to turn me into a statue. Well, she's too late. I'm already bored stiff!

"Jane?"

If only something interesting would happen! I vow we have done nothing but go to silly balls and

parties where women simper and flutter their eyelashes at any remotely eligible man unfortunate enough to come within range of their claws. Last night I all but expected Miss Torrence to shout “tally ho!” and sprint off in pursuit of poor Lord Rockhurst. Life in London is a farce—if only it were half so entertaining. Drat it all. I would much rather be back home; there is so much work to be done. . . .

“Jane Honoria Rutledge!”

Jane jumped.

Penelope’s peal of laughter echoed through the confines of the small town house garden. “Honestly, dearest, you might at least try to *pretend* some interest in the conversation. La, my own sister thinks me dull as dishwater.”

For the first time that afternoon, Jane was grateful for the brisk spring breeze; at least it would cool her burning ears. She ducked her head and made a great show of smoothing the wrinkles from her poplin skirt. “That’s not true. Don’t be ridiculous.”

Penelope’s laugh subsided to an indulgent chuckle. “You have always been a terrible liar. You were thinking about home, weren’t you? Dearest, Mr. Finley can manage just fine without us for a few months.”

“I was not thinking about Wellbourne.”

“It is no use, dearest, you may as well confess—you have not heard a single thing I’ve said, have you?”

“Of course I have. I . . .” Jane hesitated when she noticed her older sister’s amused I-dare-you-to-deny-it look. She bit her lip and smiled a sheepish smile. “Not a word. I’m sorry, Pen. What were you saying?”

Penelope sighed. “I was asking you what you thought of Lord Heathford.”

Oh . . . the List. Jane snugged her wool shawl more tightly around her narrow shoulders and tried to bring some order to her jangled thoughts. Heathford, Heath-ford . . . which one was Lord Heathford? Lud, she could not possibly keep track of all her sister’s admirers. “Well . . .” she hedged.

Seated next to her on the stone bench, Pen looked up from the small leather-bound book, pencil poised. She lifted one delicate eyebrow in a knowing arch. “You remember. The talkative gentleman with whom I danced the allemande last night at Lady Allenby’s.”

“Oh, *him*,” replied Jane, and rolled her eyes. “The looby whose cravat was so tight it cut off the

circulation to his brain. If only it had cut off circulation to his tongue as well.”

Her older sister tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle her explosive giggle. “If you are trying to spare my feelings, dearest, it won’t fadge.”

Jane wrinkled her nose and grinned back. “Well, you wanted my opinion.”

“Which is as brutally honest as ever,” Pen acknowledged, still fighting her laughter. “But I had hoped for something a little more specific.”

“All right, specific it is. Merits: Viscount Heathford is rather well favored, I will admit. He has very fine blue eyes. Drawbacks: he chatters like a magpie about the most trivial matters imaginable. While you were dancing with another partner, he proceeded to quiz me on your preferences for a gentleman’s style of cravat. He then launched into an incredibly long-winded discourse on the advantages of tying one’s neckcloth in a *trone d’amour* as opposed to *à oreilles de lièvre*, or some such nonsense. I had to plead a megrim in order to escape; it was either that or run shrieking from the ballroom. Anyone who marries that idiot will never get a word in edgewise.”

Pen made a few scribbles in her book. “So noted.”

“And what did *you* think of him?”

“I?”

Jane snorted. “You are not getting off so easily, Pen. I know you dislike to speak ill of anyone, but we agreed when we started this that we each must voice an opinion, even if that opinion is not entirely flattering. You have already heard mine—now it is your turn.”

Her older sister shifted on the hard bench, her pretty features contorted in a grimace of distaste. “Of his merits—yes, I also found him handsome. His eyes are very fine indeed. But his drawbacks . . . he trampled my feet black-and-blue during the allemande and talked about nothing but himself and his tailor the entire evening. As much as I hate to say this, dearest, Lord Heathford has to be the greatest clunch I have ever met!”

“Oh, well,” Jane murmured. “Another one out of the running.”

The older girl finished writing and turned the page. “But enough about him. What about Lord Camden?”

Jane started. “Stay away from that one, Pen! The way he looks at you, the way he follows you with his eyes . . . he reminds me of a fox stalking a prized pullet. He makes me dreadfully uneasy. I cannot even give you anything for the Merit column.”

A tremor shook Penelope, and she rubbed her palms briskly along her upper arms. “I agree. The last time I encountered him, he frightened me with the intensity of his regard. And I cannot overlook his terrible reputation as a rake and a spendthrift.” She made several more notes. “I think we can take Lord Camden out of consideration.”

Jane leaned over to look at her sister’s scribbblings. “Where does that leave us?”

“See for yourself,” Pen replied, and handed her the book.

Ever since their arrival, Pen had kept a catalog of her beaux, complete with a column for the perceived merits and shortcomings of each, in order to make a more rational choice of a husband. And every afternoon the two of them sought out a quiet place in the house, well away from the curiosity of the servants (and the especially prying eyes and ears of McBride, their mother’s dresser), to go over what they called the List. Today the lovely May weather had enticed them into the tiny garden behind their rented town house; dappled sunlight filtered through the leaves of the knobby elm under which they sat, and a lovely profusion of jonquils and crocuses bloomed in the sunny spot toward the center of the garden. The playful breeze twitched at the edges of their skirts and rustled through the elm’s burgeoning cloak of green leaves. But all this vernal splendor could not distract Jane from the fact that so far their search was a dismal failure. She scowled and gave the List back to her sister. “This cannot be all the eligible bachelors you have met in the past six weeks.”

“Well,” Pen sighed, “these are all the *titled* ones I have met. Botheration. If only Mama were not so insistent that I marry a lord. I have made the acquaintance of several amiable, untitled gentlemen, but Mama would fly up into the boughs if I even considered a mere ‘mister,’ or even a younger son.”

Jane noted the dejected droop of her sister's lips. Pen was right—and their mother's temper was legendary. She took Pen's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "We have been in London little more than a month, and we have over a month left. Give yourself time. I am certain you will find someone to your liking before then."

"You mean, find a *lord* to my liking. Why have I not hit upon the right gentleman? Something must be wrong with me, Jane. Or am I being too particular?" Penelope's anxious gaze searched her sister's face.

"Of course not," Jane replied with asperity. "It would be easier if you could select a potential husband like you would a horse—check the soundness of his legs, look at his teeth, judge his gait and his disposition—but in this case you're perfectly justified in being particular. After all, you will be joined to this man for the rest of your life, so you may as well hold out for someone whose presence you can at least tolerate."

"But what if I do not find anyone who wants me for who I am and not for my money?" Pen's question came out as a thready whisper.

"Stop talking nonsense. Goodness, you have half of the men in London at your feet already! Dozens of your beaux crowd into the drawing room almost every afternoon, and they send you flowers by the greenhouseful. You have to all but fend off the admiring throngs with your parasol when you venture out of doors. You are this Season's Incomparable, Pen. You will meet someone soon, I am sure of it."

And if she did not, Jane would eat her new bonnet, ostrich feathers and all. Penelope was an acknowledged beauty; her ebony curls, perfect oval face, and stunning green eyes attracted men by the score . . . as did her dowry of twenty-five thousand pounds. But she was also sweet, demure, and even tempered, if a little on the shy side. At twenty, she was perhaps a trifle old to be making her debut, but that could not be helped. Besides, her age seemed to matter only to the jealous misses whose suitors Pen bewitched. Although he possessed no title himself, their late father was the younger son of a viscount,

and their family name went back to the age of Queen Elizabeth. Pen *would* make a suitable match. It was simply a matter of finding a suitable gentleman.

Pen closed the ledger with a small sigh. “You are right, Jane. I must not let myself become blue-deviled. Still, I wish I might meet at least one lord who meets all our criteria. I am beginning to think no one like that exists.” She paused, tilted her head to one side, and regarded Jane with a searching gaze. “But I still hold out hope for you.”

Oh, no. Not this again. Jane averted her eyes. “Don’t, Pen.”

“Have you even thought about it? You have, haven’t you? You’re blushing.”

Jane fought to extinguish the heat blooming in her cheeks. “Stop talking nonsense. I am betrothed to Augustus.”

“That addlepatte,” Pen muttered. “And you are *not* yet betrothed, not formally. He has not come right out and asked you to marry him, has he?”

“He asked me if I would consider it.”

“And what did you say?”

“That I would.”

“Nothing more?”

Jane fidgeted. “Well . . .”

Pen’s eyes rounded. “What did Mama say?”

“She looked me up and down and wondered why any man would ever want me.”

“Oh, Jane.” Her sister reached out a consoling hand. “Why did you not tell me?”

She shrugged. “Because I knew you would try to talk me out of it. I cannot afford to be a romantic, Pen.”

“Perhaps, but that does not mean you must settle for the first man who offers for you! Especially a man who indulges in gossip and delights in ruining reputations.

There is still time to change your mind. Mama will not approve Mr. Wingate’s suit until I am

married off.”

Jane concentrated on twirling a lock of her stubborn, straight-as-a-pin hair around one finger. Seeing her eldest daughter married to a count, a marquess—or even, in her wildest flights of fancy, a duke—was Lady Portia Rutledge’s fondest wish. Her hopes for Jane, however, were another matter entirely. “With Augustus I shall be well settled, and with a minimum of effort.”

“Oh, what fustian,” Penelope persisted. “We are in *London*, dearest, and surrounded by some of the most illustrious bachelors in England! We have dreamed of this for years. You can do so much better than an overpadded, gossipmongering oaf like Augustus Wingate.”

“It’s not as though I have suitors throwing themselves headlong at my feet,” Jane replied, more sharply than she had intended. She saw her sister flinch, then softened. “I’m sorry, Pen, but you must understand. Papa wanted me to wed a man who would maintain the stables as they are and help me to run them. I cannot marry someone who would do as he pleases with the land and destroy everything that Papa worked so hard to achieve. Wellbourne means the world to me, and I would do anything to keep it . . . even marry Augustus.”

“Will you be happy with him, dearest? Truly?”

Jane shrugged. “Happy enough.”

“Can you be certain of that?” Pen demanded. “Dearest, Mr. Wingate wants to marry you because his lands march with yours. He wants nothing more than to expand his holdings and line his own pockets.”

“I know.” The skin around Jane’s eyes tightened, and her fingers curled convulsively around the smooth edge of the bench. Her sister had not meant the comment to be hurtful, but it stung just the same. No one glanced twice at a drab little thing like her when Penelope’s beauty blazed so brightly. She realized from the moment he had proposed that her lands, not her looks, had attracted Augustus Wingate. “I am not looking to make a love match, Pen. My marriage to Augustus will give us both what we want. He will gain ownership of the property, but he has agreed not to interfere with my

management of the stables. He barely knows a cart horse from a race horse.”

A worried frown creased Penelope’s brow. “Can you trust him to follow through, dearest?”

“We have an understanding.”

“I wish you would reconsider; I hate to see you hold yourself so cheaply. There are other fish in the sea more amiable and broad-minded than Mr. Augustus Wingate.”

Now that she thought about it, Augustus, with his slightly receding chin and round-eyed stare, did bear a rather pointed resemblance to a brown trout; it wasn’t too difficult to imagine him with gills and fins. Not the sort of husband she had imagined for herself, but she must be practical. As plain as she was, she doubted she would receive any other offers.

Jane swallowed around the lump in her throat, then tried to smile. “We hardly need fret over my prospects, Pen, when we have our hands full with yours. At any rate, Mama would have my head if she thought I was trying to compete with you for a husband.”

Penelope was not convinced. She frowned. “But—”

“Please, Pen,” Jane entreated, “we have been over this before. Arguing serves no purpose; I have quite made up my mind.”

“But at least consider someone else—”

Sudden movement caught the corner of Jane’s eye; a prim, scowling visage disappeared behind a window on the ground floor. She held up a warning hand to stem the flow of Penelope’s indignation.

“We had best go inside,” she said in low tones. “McBride is becoming suspicious.”

Pen’s eyes widened with alarm. “Do you think she knows what we are doing?”

“I’m not sure, but I caught her eavesdropping outside your chamber door yesterday. She suspects we are up to something, and, knowing her, she will not rest until she discovers exactly what it is.”

Pen paled. “If Mama finds out about the List, she will have fifty fits; she is still upset that I did not accept the Earl of Haydon.”

Jane made a moue. “Even though he is seventy years old, gout-ridden, and smacks his lips

whenever he sees you. For shame, Pen. He was such a catch, too.” Observing her sister’s distressed expression, she quickly added, “I was joking, you goose. All right, here is what we shall do: give me the List, then go back in the house. McBride is sure to follow you, so I will hold onto the List until it is safe to return it to you.”

“Oh, dearest,” murmured Penelope. She surreptitiously slipped the small journal to Jane. “You are the best of sisters.”

“Make haste, before she notices we have made the switch,” Jane murmured. “I will follow in a few moments.” Turning her back to the house, she tucked the book snugly into her sleeve.

Penelope rose and took her leave; Jane watched her make her way back into the town house. She breathed a sigh of relief. The List was safe, for the moment. She rose, shook out her skirts, then wandered over to admire a patch of fragrant hyacinths that grew by the garden wall. She would stay outside a little longer so that Pen might send McBride on a merry chase. Rather like playing hunt the slipper, only with a slipper that would never—could never—be found.

Then a voice intruded on her solitude.

“Dammit, Alex, why did you leave me alone with him?”

Jane recoiled; her heart knifed sideways in her breast. Who was that? Heavens—the voice sounded like it came from right in front of her! She retreated several steps.

“He was never this bad when you were here,” continued the voice, “but now . . . God’s blood, I never thought he would go this far.”

Jane gulped. The voice, hard, brittle, and definitely male, emanated from the other side of the garden wall. Who was this man, and who was he talking to? She edged closer to the brick partition.

“But I think I have found a way to get the better of him. He will never suspect. You’d be proud of me, I know you would.”

Jane waited for another voice to reply, but the only thing she heard was the sound of the breeze rustling through the branches of the elm tree. She frowned. How very peculiar. When they had rented

this house for the Season, Lady Arnholt had mentioned in passing that the place next door had stood empty for the last five years, something about a terrible tragedy. Obviously it was not empty now. Her heart slowed its frantic pace as curiosity overcame her alarm.

“I would never have had to resort to such drastic measures if you were here.” The stranger sighed. “I miss you, Alex. I only wish I had had the courage to tell you sooner.”

Who was this man? Did he have anything to do with the tragedy Lady Arnholt mentioned? Jane’s better judgment told her to go back into the house, but something—perhaps mere curiosity, perhaps a reckless response to all the talk of marriage to pompous, trout-like Augustus Wingate—made her stay. Not only that, it made her want to catch a glimpse of the speaker on the other side of the wall. She had been responsible and dependable even before her father’s untimely death; for once, she longed to do something—well—adventurous.

Lifting her skirts, she stepped up onto the stone bench beneath the elm tree. But even when she stood on tiptoe, she still was not tall enough to see through the decorative ironwork at the top of the wall. Drat.

Jane glanced back toward the house; she could see no one at the windows. McBride was busy trying to glean information from Pen. Their mother was not due back from her afternoon calls for another hour. Even so, remaining unseen would be tricky. She would have to move swiftly.

Several of the elm’s branches stretched from their property into the garden next door. After tying her shawl around her waist so it would not get in the way, she took hold of the lowest limb, then used the knobby growths on the trunk like stepping stones and clambered her way up and onto the slender bough that arced over the wall. The branch bent and swayed beneath her weight; she lay there a moment, breathless, the rough bark digging into her hands. Twigs poked sharp fingers through the fabric of her dress. She ignored them and peered through the concealing veil of leaves to catch a glimpse of the mysterious stranger. Movement caught her eye. Her breath quickened.

As far as she could see, only one man occupied the overgrown tangle of vegetation that passed for

a garden on this side of the wall. Had he been talking to himself, then? How odd. He stood several paces away from her hiding place, his back to her, his hands clasped behind him. From what she could see, he was tall, but not overly so, with thick, wavy, golden brown hair that brushed the top of his collar. His shoulders needed no padding, judging by the precise cut of his jacket. Biscuit-colored inexpressibles outlined his muscular legs so closely as to be almost indecent. His Hessians gleamed. Athletic, well dressed, and probably wealthy, to boot—all the hallmarks of a Corinthian. Who was he?

“Gads, I am getting maudlin in my old age. I had better get on with this before I lose my nerve . . . or my stomach,” he muttered, and turned as if to leave.

If only she could see his face . . .

She edged herself a little farther out onto the bough. The branch trembled. A colossal CRACK! split the air, followed closely by Jane’s shriek. And then the tree limb, with Jane aboard, crashed into the rhododendrons on the other side of the wall.

Chapter Two

The earsplitting CRACK! brought nerve to life. The subsequent shriek nearly sent him out of his skin. By the time the crash registered in his befuddled brain, Sebastian's body had already taken the initiative and spun him around to see what sort of catastrophe had landed in his lap this time.

No, not a catastrophe. A woman.

And she hadn't landed in his lap, but in Alex's rhododendrons. *His* rhododendrons, now.

Egad, had the Almighty heard his desperate prayers and taken to throwing women at him from above?

No, not a woman. He peered at her. A girl. Damnation. The figure struggling out from under the greenery appeared far too small to be a lady of marriageable age, and her serviceable gown more suited to the schoolroom than the drawing room. So much for divine intervention. The viscount studied first the injured elm, then the fallen branch. The chit had probably been playing in the garden next door, overheard his one-sided conversation (next time he would remember to temper the volume of his vehemence!), and climbed the tree to spy on him.

His jaw tightened. After the events of the last fourand-twenty hours, an underdeveloped, overinquisitive little hoyden was the last thing he wanted to deal with. The ache behind his eyes increased to a full-fledged pounding, as though some demented Eastern monk had mistaken his head for a temple gong.

He straddled the branch, then held out a hand to her. "Are you all right?"

“Y-yes. I believe so.” After a moment’s hesitation, she slipped her scratched and reddened fingers into his.

Sebastian pulled her from the tangle of branches as though she weighed no more than thistle-down. Gad, the top of her head barely reached his shoulder. He could not get a clear view of her face; her long hair, loose from its pins and hopelessly snarled, veiled her features. No matter. From her lack of stature alone, he’d wager she was no more than thirteen. Fourteen, at most. He leaned over her and scowled. “Good. Now you can tell me *what in the bloody blue blazes you think you are doing!*”

The chit backpedaled, slipping like a minnow from his grasp. “You need not shout at me.”

The viscount’s lips settled into a grim line. “Oh, no? First you have the temerity to spy on me, then you crash into my garden—which is private property, I might remind you. You trample my rhododendrons and cut up my peace, and I have no cause to shout? You could have gotten yourself killed and me along with you!”

“I’m sorry! I did not mean any harm,” she protested, her hands bunched around fistfuls of her skirt.

“God forbid I should be in the vicinity when you do,” he snapped. “Do you realize the trouble you could have caused me—caused us both? What if someone were to see us together? My servants have orders not to disturb me, but for all I know, your father, or perhaps a very large, very overprotective older brother, will come charging through the garden gate at any moment and demand my head on a platter for compromising you.”

She lowered her head. “You have nothing to fear on that account, sir.”

“Do I not? How fortunate.” Sebastian didn’t bother to temper the sarcasm in his voice. “You did not even stop to consider the potential consequences of your actions, did you? Zeus’s beard, I’ve a good mind to do your governess a favor and paddle your backside here and now.”

She gasped. “You would not dare.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you so sure of that?”

She retreated another few steps, nearly tripped over a heretofore undamaged rhododendron,

wobbled, but managed to stay upright with no further damage to either herself or the hapless shrubbery. What pins remained in her hair came undone; she brushed the loose mass away from her face with an impatient hand, then stared at him with wide, wary eyes. Sebastian stared back. Lud, what a strange little thing. Daubed in mud, with twigs and leaves in her disheveled locks, she seemed more fey than mortal. Her enormous eyes, gray-green like the sea before a storm, all but overwhelmed her heart-shaped face. Her nose was a trifle too long, her mouth a trifle too lush, her chin a trifle too sharp. She could not be considered beautiful, for her features were too irregular for beauty, but neither was she plain. Well, not exactly. Something about her drew the eye. The more he thought about it, the more she resembled one of the sprites from the illustrated edition of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he'd had as a boy. If he pushed aside that tangle of walnut brown hair, he fancied he just might find a set of small, delicately pointed ears.

His assessing gaze wandered downward. The insistent breeze snuggled her gown against her body, and though she was small and fine-boned, Sebastian could see now that she was no child. Outlined in dirt-smudged gray poplin, her figure was that of a woman, slender and lithe, with a waist so narrow he could span it with both hands. Small, firm breasts rose and fell with her rapid breathing. Sebastian's pulse lurched into an erratic gallop.

"Well, imp," he drawled, "it seems I was mistaken. You are too old to have a governess after all."

A rosy blush stained her cheeks. Suddenly self-conscious, she folded her arms across her body. "You are no gentleman."

Sebastian allowed a wicked smile to lift the corners of his mouth. "You should have thought of that possibility before you invaded my garden."

She raised her sharp little chin. "I did not—! You, sir, are nothing but a rogue and a scoundrel, and I take my leave of you." She lifted her skirt and began to walk toward the garden gate.

Sebastian stepped sideways to block her path. "And you, my dear, are a meddling minx who should be more wary of strange men."

She halted, her back ramrod straight, her slender body taut as a drawn bowstring. “Let me pass.”

The viscount’s smile broadened. “In a moment. We have something to discuss.”

Distrust shadowed her eyes. “What would that be?”

“There is the matter of payment for the damage you caused,” he replied lightly.

She glanced back to the twisted, truncated tree branch, guilt written on her elfin features. “What sort of payment?”

He heard the worry in her voice and almost regretted what he was going to do, but not quite. After all, someone had to teach this woefully naïve little country miss to be more circumspect in her actions.

“Don’t worry, imp—

I am not after your pin money.”

“Then what do you want?”

“A kiss.”

She blinked. “A what?”

“A kiss,” he repeated.

“Why?”

“Why not? At present I can think of no better form of currency.”

She stared at him with patent disbelief “You must be joking.”

“I never joke about so serious a subject.”

“You want to kiss me,” she said slowly, as if she had not heard him correctly.

Sebastian fought back a stab of impatience. Egad, from the look on her face he would swear the plaguey creature thought him all about in the head! “I believe I just said that.”

“Then I shall ask you again—why?”

“And I shall give you the same answer: why not?” he countered.

“That is hardly a valid reason, sir.”

He planted his fists on his hips. “Well, then, why should I *not* want to kiss you?”

“Because I am not pretty.”

“Are you so certain of that?” He imbued the question with all the persuasion at his command.

She flushed. “Come now, sir, let us speak plainly. You do not wish to kiss me because you find me attractive. No, no—please do not try to refute it or attempt to salve my feelings with flattery. You would be lying, and we both know it.”

The viscount, who had opened his mouth to do just that, closed it again without saying a word. Lord help him, this was the most unusual female he had ever met!

“I suspect you know a great many beautiful women who would gladly kiss you without protest,” she continued, “so you must have another reason for wanting to kiss me. If I were to hazard a guess, you want either to frighten me or to punish me, or both.”

Sebastian’s brows rose toward his hairline. Most young chits, their heads filled with all sorts of romantic nonsense, would thrill to receive a kiss from a handsome lord, even though they had neither the wisdom nor the experience to recognize the possible motivations behind it. So how in the name of heaven had this one read him so easily? Perhaps she was a bit fey, after all.

“Did I guess correctly?” she prodded. She hesitated a moment, then grimaced and said, “Or have I just added insult to injury?”

“Well . . . yes, but I deserved it,” he admitted. “And, yes, I was going to teach you a lesson, but now the point seems rather moot.”

He thought he saw the barest hint of a smile slide over her lips, but he might have been mistaken. She met his gaze, transfixing him with a forthright stare. “Then I beg you, spare us both any further ignominy, and let me leave with what remains of my dignity intact.”

His mind may have been flummoxed, but his instincts were still in perfect working order. Before he could stop himself, he said, “Very well. I will let you go for now, but you will still owe me that kiss.”

“It is a debt you have no chance to collect, sir, for I sincerely hope we never see each other again.”

Sebastian chuckled. “I would not count on that,” he replied. “We are neighbors, after all.”

Again, that half-smile shaded her mouth. “You need not remind me. Good day to you, sir.” With gazelle-like grace, she sidestepped him and hurried toward the garden gate.

“Wait!” Sebastian called after her. “Will you at least give me your name?”

She opened the gate and paused long enough to glance over one shoulder. “I think it best if I did not. I apologize for intruding upon your privacy and for damaging your rhododendrons. I have learned my lesson about eavesdropping, sir; you made your point most eloquently. I shall not trouble you again.”

Then she vanished into the alley.

Sebastian stared after her, totally and thoroughly baffled. That had not gone at all the way he intended; she had seemed affected by neither his looks nor his charm. Was he losing his touch with the ladies? Gad, what a lowering thought!

Such a strange day this had been. He had awakened early—a little past nine o’clock—with gritty eyes, a wretchedly unhappy stomach, and a head that felt as though someone had wrapped it in wool and pounded upon it. Actually, considering the amount of brandy he had consumed last night, he felt better than he expected. Or he had until his father’s man of business arrived, after which the morning took a decided turn for the worse.

With a superior sneer, the pompous little weasel informed him that he had been instructed to make sure Sebastian followed the Earl of Stanhope’s orders to the letter, and to tell him the earl would brook no delay. The viscount had tried to reason with the chap but to no avail. Then he had tried ranting, swearing, and even threatening to be sick on the fellow’s shoes, but the officious prig would not be put off.

Once Grafton managed to get him bathed and shaved—no small feat, considering his rather miserable condition—Sebastian had made the journey to Hanover Square. Thankfully, as far as his woozy stomach was concerned, the drive had been brief. There he had taken possession of Langley House in order to fulfill the last of his father’s stipulations. At which point he’d had the great

satisfaction of ushering the little weasel out the front door and slamming it behind him.

Sebastian stared up at the rear façade of the town house. Cavernous and elegantly furnished, especially when compared to his shabby rooms in Half Moon Street, Langley House was just as he remembered it . . . except for the ghosts. His brother's presence lingered everywhere, from the portrait on the drawing room chimney-piece to the vague smell of cheroot smoke in the study. Everything had been preserved just as it had been before Alexander's death—a minimal staff had been kept on to maintain it with the greatest of care. Sebastian's lips tightened. This was his father's doing. He'd turned the place into a shrine to his dead son.

And now he expected Sebastian to live here.

The garden, at least, provided some solace. Alex had loved this place; he had called it his London oasis, a respite from the worst of the city's noise and the dizzying press of activity. This was the side of Alex that no one but Sebastian had been allowed to see, not even their father. Especially not their father. Though he had not much space with which to work, his brother had cultivated an array of flowers and shrubs that would provide color all season long, along with taller trees and bushes that would give shade on blistering summer days. A gravel-lined path snaked between the flower beds like a narrow, serpentine river. Like his brother, Sebastian felt at peace here. Or he had until *she* had tumbled into his life.

A most unusual day. The officious weasel, his dead brother's house . . . and now the irritating, intriguing, contradictory creature who lived next door. What else did Fate have in store for him?

Gravel crunching beneath his boots, the bemused viscount wandered back to the bed of bedraggled rhododendrons and knelt to survey the damage. Blooms, buds, and leaves lay scattered everywhere, but only two bushes appeared to be irreparably damaged. The gardener could easily clear away the branch, and replace—

A patch of periwinkle blue caught his eye, incongruous against the dark earth and shiny green rhododendrons. He drew it out from beneath a bush and realized it was a soft wool shawl. Hers, obviously. He brushed away the twigs and leaves, then noticed the soft scent that clung to it. Lilacs. The

scent suited her. He chuckled, imagining the expression on the girl's face if he were to appear at her front door to return her property. But to do so would put them both in an awkward position, so he would have to find some other way to get it back to her. He fingered the material, then returned his gaze to the flower bed. Had she left anything else behind?

He looked more closely, remembering where he had found the shawl, then groped around in the damp mulch for several moments; his fingers closed around a small, rectangular object. He brought it out into the light and examined the cover. Some sort of journal by the look of it, although no identifying imprint marked the cover. The viscount rose and shook the last fragments of mulch from the book's surface. Perhaps whatever was inside would tell him the imp's name.

His conscience pricked him, but he shrugged it off. Once the girl realized that her diary was in his possession, she would be forced to see him again—and he could collect that kiss. Or at least he would tease her with the prospect. Sebastian grinned at the thought. What harm would a little flirtation do?

He opened the book. And frowned. What the devil . . . ?

On each page, written neatly in pencil, was a gentleman's name, along with a column labeled "Merits" and one labeled "Drawbacks." Some gentlemen had an equal number of entries in both columns, but for the most part their disadvantages outweighed their merits. He cringed at a particular turn of phrase; she had not been kind in her descriptions. His frown deepened as he flipped through the pages. Viscount Heathford, the Earl of Albermarle, Viscount Plimpton, the Marquess of Camden . . . all titled, to a man.

It seemed the girl was in the market for a husband, and she had set her sights quite high indeed. Sebastian closed the book and tapped it thoughtfully against his palm. Strange, then, that she had not played the coquette with him. She must not have known who he was. Yes, that had to be it; she had addressed him as "sir," not "my lord." Even so, his status should have been obvious . . . shouldn't it?

He glanced down at himself but found nothing objectionable about his appearance. He *looked* like a lord, one handsome enough to fulfill a girl's ambitious matrimonial dreams. So, even considering the—

ah—unusual circumstances of their acquaintance, one would think she would have tried to take advantage of the situation; most of the marriage-minded females of his acquaintance certainly would have. Yet she had attempted none of the traditional methods of flirtation—no maidenly blushes, no fluttering of the lashes (although her lashes had been long and dark and eminently suited to fluttering), no demure lowering of the eyes. Curious.

Sebastian wandered back toward the house, still deep in thought. Who was this girl? And was there any chance she was an heiress? He snorted. Not likely; she had not been dressed in the first stare of fashion, nor, fortunately for him, had she been guarded by a dragon of a duenna. She seemed to be after a title, which might very well mean she was after a fortune, as well. He could not help her there. At any rate, she met none of his criteria for a advantageous match, so he should not even consider her.

He might not want to marry the imp, but she intrigued him enough to want to know more about her. He studied the neighboring town house. A few discreet inquiries would give him her name. She was in the market for a husband, which meant she would be out in Society; perhaps he might even see her at one of the many balls or parties scheduled this week. Seeing the expression of surprise and shock on her elfin features would be compensation enough for enduring the endless rounds of inquisitive stares and appraising glances from eligible ladies and their marriage-minded mamas.

As soon as the viscount passed through the back door, Grafton hurried across the empty kitchen to meet him.

“Is everything all right, my lord?” the valet asked, lines of worry etched in his narrow face. “I heard the noise, but you gave strictest orders that you not be disturbed . . .” He trailed off, his sharp dark eyes focused on the items the viscount held in his hands. “What on earth has happened?”

“Never mind. Grafton, my good man,” replied Sebastian with a smile, “come with me. I have a job for you.”

Jane hurried home, through the alley, back through her own familiar garden, and, after pausing long enough to ensure that none of the kitchen staff would see her, dashed headlong up the servants' staircase. She reached her room, closed the door quietly behind her, then leaned her forehead against the cool, painted wood. Her shallow breathing thundered in her ears. The scratches on her hands throbbed to the rhythm of her heart. An image of sardonic, deep blue eyes taunted her, no matter how tightly shut she squeezed her own.

She had never imagined that the branch would give way beneath her. Give way and throw her at the feet of a handsome, infuriating man. What on earth had possessed her to take such an absurd risk? The stranger had been right to scold her; she had not thought about the consequences of her actions. She butted her forehead gently against the door. Fool. Idiot. Addlepate. She could have gotten herself killed, injured . . . or worse. So much for her adventure.

Her whole body trembled as though her bones had turned to pudding. This would never do; she needed to regain her composure before her mother came home. Jane wobbled over to her dressing room table and sank into the chair set before it. She stared at her reflection in the looking glass and gasped. Heavens, she was a mess! Twigs and leaves stuck out at haphazard angles from her wild mass of hair, and a splotch of dirt mottled one cheek. She looked even more unattractive than usual . . . yet the stranger had still wanted to kiss her. Part of her had almost let him.

She shivered. Was it wrong to want to be kissed? Well, it was if the gentleman offering to do the kissing was someone other than one's betrothed. Besides, there was more to this stranger than an athletic form and endlessly deep blue eyes. Jane remembered the fine lines around his mouth and the puffy, slightly discolored skin beneath his eyes; she had seen such hallmarks on her father's face in the months before his death.

What vices and secrets lay concealed beneath the stranger's handsome exterior? And he was nothing if not handsome. Handsome—and arrogant and condescending and vexatious. Emphasis on *vexatious*. Yes, he had every right to be angry with her, but what sort of man kissed a woman to teach

her a lesson? Whoever he was, she would do well to avoid him in the future; she did not doubt for a moment that, if they saw each other again, the rogue would attempt to claim that kiss, and how in the world would she explain *that* to her mother?

Jane picked up her comb and began to disentangle the bits of wayward greenery from her mousy locks. If she were careful, no one would have any inkling that anything untoward had happened to her. She would rearrange her hair, put on a clean frock, then go about the rest of her day as usual. She'd give the List back to Pen, and—

She stared down at the cuff of her sleeve, which was torn, dirtied . . . and empty.

The List was gone.

Her heart beating at a frantic pace, she searched her room, but nowhere did she see any sign of the small leather-bound journal. Where could it be? Had she dropped it during her flight back home? She dashed to the window by her bed, the one that overlooked the garden, threw open the sash, and leaned out. Was that it over by the rose bushes? No, that was merely a shadow. She scanned the garden pathways below until her eyes began to smart. Nothing.

Then the realization struck her. She knew exactly where the List was—it must have slipped out of her sleeve when she'd fallen into the garden next door. It was probably lying beneath that elm branch. Or . . . Her blood turned to ice. Or did *he* have it?

In a daze, Jane returned to her dressing table. How could she have been so careless? Oh, Lud, to think that she had lost something so important. If the List fell into the wrong hands, Pen's reputation would be in shreds by tomorrow morning. She shuddered and thrust the awful thought aside. She had to concentrate on finding the journal and getting it back.

But how? She could not very well march into the fellow's house and demand that he return Pen's List. Nor could she sneak in during the day and risk being spotted by one of his servants or, worse yet, McBride. Given the hawk-like way the dresser was keeping watch on both her and Pen, Jane would have no opportunity to slip out alone. If she were careful, she might have a chance to retrieve it tonight,

after they returned from the Symingtons' ball. That is, if it was still in the garden . . .

She leaned her elbows on the table's surface, her hands clasped in fervent prayer. "Lord," she said softly, "I know I have not been myself of late, but please let me retrieve Pen's List, and I swear I will never, *ever* do anything forward or unconventional again. I shall marry Augustus and settle down to a quiet life at Wellbourne and never do anything the least bit adventurous!"

She had no way of knowing whether the Almighty heard her heartfelt plea, for at that moment a commotion from downstairs distracted her. Jane started; her mother was home. She swallowed hard. No one must see her like this, but especially not Lady Portia! Galvanized by a pressing sense of dread, she hurried to make herself presentable.

When she arrived downstairs fifteen minutes later, Jane tried to slip unnoticed into the drawing room where her parent sat chatting away with Penelope, but no sooner had she crossed the threshold than her mother's icy blue glare skewered her where she stood.

"And just where have you been? I vow you are the oddest creature, Jane, forever disappearing when I—" Lady Portia Rutledge paused, then inspected Jane from head to toe. "What on earth happened to you? Oh, do not tell me you were racketing about in the stables again. You're not a groom, Jane, but a young lady, and while we are in London I will thank you to at least make an attempt to act like one."

Jane bit back the angry retort that sprang to her lips; she had learned long ago not to provoke her mother. Instead, she gave a curt nod. "Yes, Mama."

"Were you in the stables?" her mother persisted.

"No, ma'am."

"Then where were you?"

Jane studiously avoided Penelope's curious gaze. "I . . . I was upstairs."

"I called for you a quarter of an hour ago. What were you doing that was so important?" Lady Portia demanded.

Jane bit her lip. As much as she hated to lie, no one could know the truth. "I was writing a letter."

“A letter? To whom?”

She blurted out the first name that came to mind. “To Augustus.”

Her mother’s eyebrows shot skyward. “That Wingate fellow? Do you not think that a trifle forward?”

Jane cringed. If only she had named someone else! Now she had to play through the charade and hope her mother believed her. If not, both she and Pen were in the suds. “We are all but betrothed, Mama.”

“You are not engaged until I say you are,” stated Lady Portia, her lips pursed, “and until that time I must remind you to conduct yourself with a modicum of restraint. No more billets-doux—do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You are but eighteen, and Penelope, as your elder sister, must marry first. I will not tolerate any more willful disobedience, my girl. I am your mother, and I know what is best. Do not question my authority again.”

“Yes, Mama,” Jane repeated, her expression wooden.

“Come and sit next to me, dearest,” Penelope entreated, patting the vacant stretch of striped sofa beside her.

Jane sat, then accepted the cup Pen offered her. The unspoken question remained in her sister’s eyes, but she ignored it and sipped cautiously at the hot tea.

Lady Portia sighed. “You must learn to be more punctual, Jane. It is quite rude to keep people waiting, especially when it involves such a vital piece of news.”

“Indeed, ma’am?” Jane inquired over the rim of her cup. Not that she needed to ask; gossip had become part of their daily ritual, and, judging by the impatient way her mother tapped one slipped toe on the carpet, she must be ready to burst with the need to reveal the latest tidbit.

“You girls should consider yourselves fortunate; you are among the first to hear this. I had it from

Mrs. Ormsley, who had it from Lady Penworth, who in turn heard it directly from Sally Jersey herself, so it must be of the utmost importance.”

Jane and Penelope exchanged a skeptical glance.

Lady Portia leaned forward and lowered her voice as if she feared being overheard. A smug smile curved her mouth. “A gentleman of great standing has moved into the house next door.”

Jane’s cup slipped from her fingers and rattled noisily against its saucer.

Her mother ignored the interruption. “From what I was told, Lord Langley may be only a viscount at the moment, but he is heir to the Earl of Stanhope, who is one of the richest men in England.” Her tone oozed satisfaction. “Think of it, Penelope—we may well be living next door to your future husband!”

“But Mama,” Pen protested, “we know hardly anything about the man.”

“Oh, fiddlesticks,” retorted Lady Portia. She stirred another lump of sugar into her tea with abrupt swirls of the spoon. “He’s handsome, he’s young, and he’s the heir to a great fortune. What more do you need to know?”

“I would prefer to learn something of his character *before* I reach the altar,” Pen said, a hint of reproach in her voice. “What is he like?”

“Well, from what I have heard, Lord Langley had quite a wild youth—he was quite fond of gambling and won and lost fortunes on the turn of a card. But Mrs. Ormsley said that the earl now expects his son to marry, settle down, and live the life of a respectable gentleman. That is quite enough for me.”

“Then perhaps she should marry him,” Jane whispered to Penelope. Pen giggled.

“Do not be pert, Jane,” snapped Lady Portia.

Jane concentrated on her tea. “No, ma’am.”

“Look at the hour!” Lady Portia gasped. “Come, girls, we have no time to waste. I am told that Lord Langley will be at the Symingtons’ ball this evening. Penelope, you shall wear the white satin with

the silver net, and I shall instruct McBride to dress your hair *à la grecque*. And you must wear no jewelry but your pearl necklace; the viscount must notice you, not your adornments.

Everything about your appearance must be perfect.”

Pen turned toward Jane and rolled her eyes.

Lady Portia set down her teacup. “Everything *must* be perfect,” she repeated for emphasis. “Jane, go upstairs and help McBride press and lay out Penelope’s things. That should keep you out of trouble and out of the stables.”

“Mama, there is no need—” Pen began.

Lady Portia cut her off “Nonsense. Jane has nothing better to do, and I’m sure she wants to see you make a successful match as much as I do.”

“But—”

Jane laid a hand on Pen’s arm. There was no use quarrelling about this; their mother’s word was law.

Lady Portia patted the very fashionable, very expensive lace cap that graced her still jet-black hair. “As for you, Penelope, you should go upstairs and rest. You cannot hope to catch the viscount with those dark circles beneath your eyes.”

“I do not have dark circles beneath my eyes, and I do not need to rest,” Pen stated, her expression rebellious. “Honestly, Mama, I am no longer five years old!”

Lady Portia’s regard turned frosty; she pressed her thin lips together. “When I was your age, Penelope, I was a renowned beauty and could have had any man I wanted as a husband. But I was forced to make a great sacrifice for the sake of my impoverished family: I married a wealthy man far beneath my station. Wealth, however, signifies nothing without a title to go with it. I cannot tell you the humiliations I endured—the cuts, the condescension, the laughs and sniggers behind my back. I, the only daughter of the Marquess of Ware, forced to marry a—a farmer!”

Jane took a hasty swallow of tea, lest she give free rein to the angry, reckless words jammed in the

back of her throat. Her father had not been a nobody; he may have been a younger son, but he was very well off and very well respected both in the neighborhood and in equestrian circles. But no matter how good a man he was, and no matter how good a husband, Lady Portia had never forgotten his lack of a title. Oddly enough, her father had doted on her mother—at least, he had until her indifference, combined with her flagrant disregard for his honor, had broken down his good nature and driven him to drink.

Lady Portia raised her head at a proud angle. “I have done everything in my power to make sure you have the advantages I never possessed, Penelope, and I refuse to see you waste your time on gentlemen who are not worthy of your beauty. You deserve to be the wife of a peer, and you will be if you follow my instructions. I am doing this all for you, can you not see that?”

Penelope ducked her head, but not before Jane glimpsed the tight set of her sister’s jaw and the tears glimmering at the corners of her eyes.

She hastily set aside her cup and rose. “Come, Pen. I shall walk up with you.”

As they ascended the stairs, Penelope linked her arm through Jane’s. “Thank you, dearest. I do not know how much longer I could have listened to her go on like that. Please do not think me a goose, but if I dare say a word against her she will be in an awful pet for the rest of the week and make life miserable for both of us.”

“I know,” Jane said with a sigh. “She wants you to marry well, which is in itself a noble intention. I cannot be as complimentary about her methods.”

“She is so resolute; she frightens me at times. Oh, Jane, sometimes I feel . . . well . . . trapped. As if I have no control over my life any more.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Pen,” Jane remonstrated. “Of course you have control over your life! Mama can throw all sorts of titled ninnies at your head, but ultimately you will choose which one you want to marry—if you choose anyone at all.”

Pen’s fingers tightened on Jane’s sleeve. “I have been thinking about that, dearest, and the most

awful notion has occurred to me: what if she decides to pick a husband for me? I am not yet of age, so I would have no option but to marry the man she selects!”

Even though they had not been in London for very long, Pen had already refused two offers of marriage, much to their mother’s displeasure. Given Lady Portia’s determination, Jane would not put it past her mother to arrange a marriage for Penelope.

“Then we must find you a husband before the Season is out,” she stated. “Surely there must be *one* titled bachelor in London who is neither ill favored nor ill mannered and has more weighty matters in his brain-box than the style of his cravat.”

A thin smile appeared on Penelope’s face. “I suppose we shall have to keep attending all these balls and parties so that I may add new names to the List.” She leaned closer to Jane and added, “Is it safe?”

“McBride will never find it,” Jane replied, with what she hoped was an air of confidence. Given the probable location of the List, that much was true, certainly. She gave Pen’s arm a gentle squeeze. “I will return it to you tomorrow, I promise.”

Pen smiled, then glanced downward and gasped. “What did you do to yourself, dearest? Your poor fingers are all scratched.”

Jane resisted the impulse to thrust her hands behind her back. At least none of her bruises was visible! “I fear I was rather clumsy; I tripped on a paving stone and fell onto one of the rose bushes. I’m not sure who came off the worse for the encounter—me or the bush,” she replied lightly. “That was why I was late; if I hadn’t picked the leaves out of my hair, I would have received yet another lecture about my unladylike appearance.”

Penelope hugged her. “Oh, my dearest Jane. Once we are married, neither of us will have to worry ever again about Mama’s good opinion.”

Jane smiled back, trying to keep the worry and heartsickness from her face. Pen had entrusted her with the List, and she had let her sister down. She could not bear the thought of exposing Pen to censure and ridicule, much less Lady Portia’s wrath. She had to get the List back before tomorrow afternoon.

She *would* get it back, even if it meant the possibility of encountering the roguish Viscount Langley once more.

That is, she would if nothing else went wrong.