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Francis William Arden, fourth Marquess of Warne, entered the breakfast room of his house on Upper Brook Street on a wet March morning, knowing he would find Cornelius Bellaby ahead of him and wondering how he was to tell his friend that he had decided to marry.

Bellaby looked up from the *Chronicle* at Warne's entrance. "Raining is it?" he asked.

Warne nodded. "Buckets."

"Thought it would" was Bellaby's reply. He bent his ginger-colored head to the paper again without further comment, as if the sight of a peer of the realm, unshaven, sweating, and dressed in a sleeveless shirt and white stockinet breeches, was no more remarkable than a flying pig.

Warne smiled. There was hope for Bellaby after all. At first his friend had objected strenuously to Warne's habit of taking a morning run. "You'll pollute your lungs and shrink your privates," Bellaby predicted. In time, however, as neither Warne's health nor his manhood had suffered, Bellaby had been compelled to accept the eccentricity. Now Warne hoped his friend would accept his decision to marry.

He picked up the fresh towel draped across the back of his usual chair and applied it to his wet hair. He rubbed briskly for a moment, then discarded the towel and wrapped a forest-green robe around his white running clothes. He chose an orange from a plate on the sideboard and crossed to the window.

Beyond the rain-dappled glass an old soldier shuffled by to take up his post at the crossing.

Warne had first noticed the man several days before and had given him a shilling for performing his self-appointed sweeping task. It was these old soldiers returning to take up lives interrupted by the long war with Boney that had started him thinking about marriage. His war, too, was over. This season he could take a wife.

“Warne, here it is, just the opportunity we’ve been looking for.” Neil Bellaby stabbed the small advertisement in the *Chronicle* with his forefinger and lifted his gaze from the paper, but his friend appeared not to have heard him.

Warne was staring out the window apparently deep in contemplation of some object visible only to himself. Bellaby noted his friend’s inattention. It reminded him that it was an accident that he and Warne were friends—the corn merchant’s son and the peer. He clenched his jaw firmly shut. He wanted to plead with Warne—*don’t change*—but of course, he would do no such thing.

For nearly ten years they had begun the day perusing the papers, making sense of the details of shipping, trade, and foreign affairs that revealed economic principles at work and showed them their next venture. Warne’s breakfast room—the idea room, Bellaby liked to call it—had become their meeting place after a successful venture had allowed Warne to purchase a town house. It was Warne’s quick intuitive flash that spotted the opportunities that had made them both rich. Bellaby was the detail man. Now, however, something was distracting Warne from the pursuit of wealth. Bellaby felt a moment of cold fear that his friend would never play the game again with the brilliance that had been so exciting to watch over their years as partners.

Outwardly, Warne looked the same. His auburn hair hung loosely about his face, carelessly toweled and still damp. He ran regardless of weather. The tall, powerful body retained that look of leashed energy that made women of a certain stamp eager to bed the marquess. But Warne’s face had changed. The blue eyes were more often amused than angry. He laughed more readily. He pushed his enemies less hard. He looked younger than he had a year ago. Warne was no longer at war.

It had been Warne’s hatred of his father that had fueled his drive for wealth, that much

Bellaby understood. When they first met, Warne had been penniless, living by his wits and his athletic prowess. Bellaby had had a fortune in furs from Canada and boundless admiration for the disinherited young peer with his quick fists. They had become partners. Then on the very day Wellington had beaten Napoleon, the old marquess had died.

Since then Warne had assumed his father's title. He had taken his seat in the Lords and made his maiden speech, a speech in which he had painted a vision of England's manufacturing might. He had told the peers of his father's era that with their investment England could produce steel as she now produced muslin and then all the veterans of the war could be employed. For his pains he was dubbed "The Iron Lord," and a caricature appeared in print shop windows showing Warne's dying father borne into the streets on an iron bed.

Warne turned and caught his friend staring. "Sorry," he said. "You found a mill for conversion?"

Bellaby blinked and allowed a slow grin to stretch his mouth wide. Warne had been listening after all. "Paper mill, seven acres, not far from Kennet's canal. Price is right. Shall we go take a look?" He thrust the *Chronicle* into his friend's hand, and stood. On the wall behind him several sheets of the *Ordnance Survey* had been pieced together. The huge map was dotted with pins indicating the location of various Warne properties and businesses belonging jointly to Arden and Bellaby. Whenever he could, Warne had purchased property adjacent to one of his father's estates and bettered it. Bellaby searched for something near the mill in question and found a small property near Wincanton that could serve as a headquarters. He put his finger on the spot.

Warne studied the few lines describing the advertised mill. They had been looking for an enterprise that could be run entirely by steam. This could be it, but the conversion would mean spending months in Somerset, overseeing the work of engineers and craftsmen. After a pause, he suggested, "You go, Neil."

Bellaby's wiry frame tensed. "I will, of course, but I thought you were particularly interested in this project."

“I am, but I have another . . . project here in town.”

His friend’s face fell, and Warne realized he had blundered badly. “Not a business project,” he hastened to explain. “I would never act without you in business, Neil.”

“Well, what then?”

Warne met his friend’s piercing blue gaze. “I am going to . . . marry.” He almost said *remarry*, but he had never told Bellaby the story of his first marriage and the tale was best forgotten now.

“Marry!” Bellaby’s mouth fell open, and his right hand, raised to point out some spot on the map, fell. He took a few purposeless steps as if to distance himself from the idea, whirled, and strode back. “Who?” he demanded.

“I don’t know,” said Warne. “I’ve got to pick somebody. That’s the project.” He reached for the bellpull and rang for his butler.

“Why?”

Warne had to laugh at the utter incomprehension expressed in the one syllable. “Why marry? So that when I pass to my immortal reward or punishment as the case may be, four hundred years of Warne lands go to a Warne instead of Prinny or his heirs.”

“You have a point there,” Bellaby conceded. “Prinny never could handle money. In his hands even your fortune would dry up.” Bellaby was pacing in earnest now.

When the butler appeared, Warne asked, “Do I have any cards of invitation lying about, Pedrick?”

“Of course, sir. Would your lordship care to see them?”

“Straight away, thank you.”

“Sir,” said Pedrick, “may I mention that there is a gentleman waiting to see you, a Mr. Inkson from Lett’s.”

“Lett’s? The stationers?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Send him in.”

“Marriage . . .” Bellaby said with a shudder. “This is what comes of your damned monkish habits. Running, celibacy.”

“Celibacy?” By the standards of the day Warne knew himself to be restrained, but his lapses had earned him a reputation that years of abstinence would hardly erase.

Bellaby snorted. “Well, how you manage without a mistress, I don’t know. I’d say you’re as randy as the next fellow.”

“As the proverbial goat at any rate,” Warne acknowledged. He tossed the paper on the table and helped himself to coffee.

“That’s my point, Warne,” Bellaby insisted. “Make an arrangement with some accommodating piece and leave it at that.”

“As you have with the patient Alice?”

“Exactly. Alice could find you a prime article.”

Warne shook his head. His distaste for such arrangements went beyond his rebellion against his lecherous father.

“A widow then, an improper widow, one who knows what’s what under the sheets.”

“No, it’s a wife I want.”

“You aren’t thinking of some chit right out of the schoolroom! You’ll be obliged to come to her in the dark, keep your nightshirt on, and apologize for offending her sensibilities when you enter her.”

“Bellaby, trust me to pick a bride who will welcome my attentions.”

“You’ll never find one at that temple of dullness—Almack’s.” There was a moment of silence. Both men knew that the Iron Lord would not be particularly welcome at Almack’s.

“You’d do better at the Mansion House. Let a few plump aldermen parade their daughters before you. Look at their teeth as well as their bosoms and demand thirty thousand in the bargain.”

“With all due respect, Bellaby, I want a wife with better manners than you have.”

“You want a paragon, then?”

Warne sipped his coffee. He had considered this. He could not go looking for a girl like Ellen Kirby, the girl he had married when he was seventeen. “Wit and goodness, passion, a little beauty will do for me.”

“Lord.” Bellaby ran a hand through his hair. “You want to fall in love.”

Warne tried to recall Ellen Kirby’s eyes. For years he had remembered his love with painful clarity, and then inexplicably, when he was winning, when he was finally repaying his father for her death, the memories had faded. “I doubt I can,” he told Bellaby.

A knock on the breakfast-room door cut off Bellaby’s further objections to Warne’s marriage plans.

Pedrick ushered in a thin gentleman with a wide brow sparsely covered with fine yellow hair. The gentleman rolled his head from side to side as if his thoughts were too weighty to be supported by his slender neck. “Mr. Inkson, my lord,” Pedrick announced, stepping aside and discreetly setting a silver salver of cards at Warne’s elbow.

Mr. Inkson looked from Warne to Bellaby, and Warne followed the visitor’s gaze. Bellaby, magnificent in a blue coat, yellow waistcoat, and white inexpressibles, looked every inch the Bond Street Exquisite, while Warne sprawled in a chair in his green robe. His visitor’s mouth opened, but no sound came out.

“He’s the peer,” said Bellaby with a laugh and a nod toward Warne.

“Seat, Mr. Inkson?” invited Warne.

“Yes, thank you, my lord,” Mr. Inkson replied. He sank into a chair as if his legs had just that moment given out.

“Coffee?” Warne asked.

Mr. Inkson shook his head. He had retained his hat and turned it around and around in his hands by the brim. Warne waited.

Mr. Inkson cleared his throat and rolled his head to the right. “My lord, I came to report a most curious circumstance. Most curious, indeed.”

“Yes, Mr. Inkson?” Warne prompted.

“It came to my attention this morning that our shop had been robbed during the night. A person or persons unknown removed a pane of glass from one of the windows at the rear of the shop, turned the latch, and contrived to enter.” Mr. Inkson’s heavy head listed to the left.

“An unfortunate occurrence. Have you suffered a severe loss?”

Mr. Inkson’s head came upright, and he opened and closed his mouth like a fish. “In fact, your lordship, no monies were taken and only one item is missing from our stock, and that is why I have taken it upon myself to wait on you.”

“Yes?”

Mr. Inkson’s heavy thoughts caused his head to lean to the right again. “My lord, your cards have been stolen. I assure you we can print a new order immediately and have them to you within three days, but I wanted to advise you of the theft lest someone perpetrate a fraud in your name. One of the cards was left behind.” Here Mr. Inkson paused, laid his hat upon his knees, and reached into an inner pocket of his coat. He drew out a small creamy card bearing the marquess’s name and title and handed it across the table to Warne.

Below his name was written in the neat hand of a very careful student—*With my father’s compliments.*

Bellaby saw Warne’s eyes assume the iron look that had not been there since the old marquess died. He came around the table and peered over Warne’s shoulder. “Someone’s playing a joke,” he said.

“A nasty joke,” said Warne. He rose, and Mr. Inkson popped up like a cork on a fishing line.

After some pointed questions about Lett’s handling of the matter, Warne requested Mr. Inkson’s discretion and offered him the customary parting civilities.

Mr. Inkson bowed and backed from the room. In the hall Pedrick could be heard directing

the visitor to the door.

“Queerest theft I’ve ever heard of,” said Bellaby.

Warne studied the message on the card left behind by the thief. He could swear he had seen the handwriting before.

“You don’t think it’s a joke, do you,” Bellaby said.

“Revenge, more likely. *No score left unpaid* was my father’s motto.”

Bellaby frowned and slowly circled back to his side of the table. “Could be one of your father’s men. They went down with him, you know.”

Warne was thinking the same thing. His father’s man of business, his solicitor, his bailiff were all men who had remained loyal to the old marquess. They had suffered with him as Warne succeeded. Probably, Jopp, his father’s banker, felt sufficient enmity on his own to act against Warne. He would investigate Jopp first.

“Bellaby, this episode is another reason for me to stay here. The thief can hardly use my cards while I’m in town.”

“Very well,” Bellaby replied. “I’ll look into the paper mill, but I ask one thing of you.”

Warne raised an eyebrow.

“Before you get yourself leg-shackled, I want to meet any lady you are considering.”

“You’ve never presented me to the fair Alice.” Warne named the young woman Neil had in keeping in a house in Kensington.

“Of course not,” said Bellaby from the door. “While my lady swears she’s partial to freckled fellows with ginger hair and wiry builds, I’d rather not put her to the test, Warne.”



Susannah Lacy kept her mittened hands folded and her eyes respectfully lowered, grateful that she had put on her bonnet and pelisse before Uncle John had sent for her. She watched a little puff of her own breath rise and drift away on a current of cold air. At least there would be rugs in the chaise. And, in London, Lady Lacy would overheat all the rooms of her house. Uncle John often complained that his estranged wife was guilty of just such extravagances. *No fires before nine, no fires after nine* was the rule in Baron Lacy's Berkshire seat, even here in the library where her uncle was frequently at work on estate matters as early as seven.

She heard the scratch of his pen stop and felt his gaze on her. Her glance shifted briefly to the folds of her dove-gray kerseymere skirts and the intricate swirls of the crimson Turkey carpet underfoot.

"Now miss," Uncle John began. Susannah did not look up. "You will wear your cap at all times."

"Yes, Uncle John." A needless reminder. When had she been tempted to remove her cap?

"Any vanity of person or dress ill becomes a woman in your position."

"Yes, Uncle John." Susannah tried to picture herself in silks and diamonds, flaunting her beauty before the *ton*, and failed. Skinny and brown, with dark hair and eyes, an overwide mouth, and no bosom to speak of, in a ballroom she would hardly draw the notice of her fellow chaperones.

“You will remember your duty to your charge and your indebtedness to this house.”

“Yes, Uncle John.”

“You will remember who sheltered you in your hour of disgrace and who has provided your support for ten years with no other return for my charity than such small services as you have been able to render this house.”

“Yes, Uncle John.”

She would be more grateful if Uncle John congratulated himself less often for the charitable impulse that had led him to take in his ruined niece as an unpaid governess to his children.

She heard him rise and come around the large desk that dominated the dark room. He stopped in front of her, and that was her cue to look up. Uncle John was a spare man and not overly tall, and though she was not tall herself, not as tall as her cousin, Juliet, Uncle preferred to have Susannah seated looking up at him rather than standing and meeting his gaze.

“I do not scruple to tell you, miss, that chaperoning Miss Lacy will be a difficult task. Your charge will be reluctant to heed your advice, as the young inevitably are reluctant to hear sense. And her mama . . .” Here Uncle John paused to control his temper as he always did when he spoke of his estranged wife. “. . . her mama will want to indulge the girl’s every whim and encourage dangerous romantic notions. London itself induces folly in all but the most prudent of natures.” He frowned. “You have the list of Miss Lacy’s eligible suitors?”

“Yes, Uncle John,” Susannah began counting. She rarely escaped an interview with her uncle before a dozen *Yes, Uncle Johns*.

“The three gentlemen I have approved will call upon you. I have asked Lady Lacy to prepare a list of suitors she favors for Juliet as well. Get those names to Drummond and Drummond immediately. I want the fortune hunters and fribbles eliminated as quickly as possible.”

“Yes, Uncle John.” Susannah was surprised that he had thought to ask his wife’s opinion at all, but, of course, he did not intend to consider any men Lady Lacy thought fit for her daughter.

“And, if my cousin, if Miss Lacy, finds some young man not on the list to her liking?”

“See that she does not. Submit all her callers’ names to Drummond and Drummond at once. They will know how to expose the mercenary motives of prospective suitors.”

“Yes, Uncle John.”

He looked sharply at her as if he suspected her of irony. “No doubt some would say that sending you to oversee Miss Lacy’s come-out is the height of folly, but I think not. I think you know the frailty of woman so well and have paid so dearly for your own sins that you must be the most vigilant guard of Miss Lacy’s reputation and the most ready to insure that she fixes the attention of a man of rank, fortune, and steady character.”

Susannah took a deep breath. “We do have an agreement, Uncle, and I will fulfill my end of the bargain. Have you written up the terms as I requested?”

Uncle John said nothing to her. His icy blue eyes, pursed lips, and rigid stance answered Susannah’s boldness. He turned and reached for a paper on his desk, which he held out to her for her inspection. The document promised that Susannah Lacy, also known as Mrs. Susannah Bowen, would upon the day of Miss Juliet Lacy’s marriage to a suitable *parti* receive one thousand pounds and title to Shady Lane Cottage, Wincanton, Somerset. Susannah noted with relief that in witness thereof Mr. Kilvert, the vicar, had signed his name. “Thank you, Uncle John,” she said.

He waved away her thanks with an impatient hand. “It is all very well to make provision for your success, niece, but mind you, I make no provision for failure. Should Miss Lacy’s reputation suffer in any way, should her mother’s influence lead her astray, should you succumb a second time to the weakness of your own nature, there will be no refuge for you here. And do not imagine that either of your brothers will be willing or able to take you in.”

Susannah bit her tongue and dropped her gaze. It would be senseless to make the rebellious reply she was longing to make. Whatever the difficulties of chaperoning her lovely young cousin through a season, at least in London she would be spared Uncle’s priggishness.

A knock sounded at the library door. “Papa,” came a sweet voice from the other side, “may I

come in?"

The door opened even before Baron Lacy gave his consent, and a young woman in a celestial-blue cloak and matching bonnet entered. Juliet Lacy favored her mother in appearance. She was taller and fairer than her cousin and endowed with a magnificent bosom. Titian curls framed an oval face. Blue eyes passed curiously over Susannah as they had more and more often of late.

To Uncle John's credit he had never once mentioned Susannah's disgrace to his children. To her charges she was their widowed cousin, Mrs. Bowen. But Juliet, admitted at eighteen to adult gatherings, showed a new consciousness of what had not been said about Susannah. With the instinctive sense of the young for any weakness in those placed over them, Juliet had begun asking questions about Susannah's past.

"Am I interrupting?" Juliet asked now, with another sidelong glance at her cousin.

Susannah rose and smoothed her skirts.

"Not at all," said the baron. "I was just giving your cousin some instructions about your suitors, miss."

Juliet frowned, her sweet mouth contracting in a pout. "How tiresome for you, cousin."

"Entirely necessary," said the baron. "Your cousin is to see that you remember what you're about, my girl. Your mother will have you dancing 'til dawn and haring off to one rout after another, but see that you pay attention to the gentlemen that count."

"Oh, Papa, trust me, I'll have my pick of the best, I know it."

Susannah lowered her eyes lest they give away her opinion of that bit of conceit.

"Now, Papa, it's raining, and the horses are standing. Coachman says we must be off. Do let us go," Juliet pleaded.

Her papa's face softened, and he took his daughter's arm and led her out. Susannah followed, firmly closing the library door

“Susannah,” said Juliet, breaking a silence that had lasted since luncheon, since Susannah had refused to allow her charge to observe a mill in progress across from the inn where their horses were being changed. “Do you think this is Hounslow Heath?”

Susannah pulled her hands from under the lap rug, rubbed a clear spot in the condensation on the glass, and peered into the gloom beyond the carriage windows. Though the rain had stopped, clouds still covered the sky, bringing an early dusk. The carriage lamps threw a moving patch of light across the road, illuminating little more than the ruts of other coaches. “I can hardly see a thing,” Susannah confessed, “some gorse, I suppose, and a copse or two. It could be.”

“Don’t you think that’s famous?” inquired Juliet. “To be passing such a notorious spot on such a dark, forbidding evening?” She gave a little shiver. “What if we should meet a highwayman?”

“I trust Coachman and Tim Datchet will know what to do,” said Susannah. “Tim Datchet’s pistol will discourage any villains from thievery.”

“I swear, Susannah Bowen, you were never young,” Juliet complained.

“Possibly not,” Susannah replied, as if it were not the most profound lie. She tucked her hands back under the warm rug.

“Possibly not, nevertheless, I trust so—you don’t even argue properly, Susannah. How am I to endure the season in your company? You’ll spoil everything, I know it.”

Susannah pressed her hands together. If she wished to have any success in managing her charge, she must be patient. “What exactly will I spoil, Juliet?” she asked.

“Everything . . . my reputation for fashion. How can I be seen with you? You are always in brown or gray. You never have the least neckline, always a ruff or a tuck, no jewels, and those hideous caps.”

“Then you may be certain that the eyes of all the gentlemen we meet will be on you,”

Susannah replied, refusing to be drawn.

“Hah, and what will these gentlemen say to me with you sober as a funeral hovering near? No one will flirt or laugh.”

“Neverthe—”

Coachman called out some imprecation, and the coach rocked with a sudden slowing of the team. Susannah braced herself, and Juliet grabbed for the strap, turning first to one window, then the other in a plainly futile effort to penetrate the darkness.

“Do you think we are being held up?” Juliet asked.

“Apparently, and I don’t think it’s the least romantic,” said Susannah. She could not be seriously alarmed. Tim Datchet was a stout fellow, and he had protected them all day, even in the crowds of unruly gentlemen about the mill.

Abruptly the coach halted. They could hear the gruff voice of Coachman, and before the carriage had stopped swaying, Juliet pushed open the door and poked her head out into the night.

“Juliet, don’t,” Susannah cried.

“Juliet, do,” said a male voice.

And Juliet did, pushing the steps down with her foot, and descending from the vehicle in a rustle of skirts.

“‘Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon . . .’” said the stranger, in a deep, rich voice that an actor might envy.

“Fair sun?” Juliet asked.

Susannah laughed in spite of herself. Apparently they’d been stopped by a highwayman as romantic as her young cousin. With a sigh Susannah threw off the lap rug and stepped out into the raw evening after her cousin. She looked up at the highwayman, who was staring at Juliet. “Your lines are wasted on the young lady, sir, as she was wont to rebel against memorizing in the schoolroom.”

“Oh,” said Juliet to the stranger, “you’re quoting. What is it?”

“*Romeo and Juliet*, of course.” The highwayman sounded a bit surprised and younger than Susannah had first thought.

Susannah could just make him out now, a cliché in a great coat, mask, and tricorne hat, sitting astride a fine black horse. She could not see a weapon in the dark, but that did not mean he was unarmed. She turned to their protectors and saw only Uncle John’s old coachman.

“Coachman?” she called. “Where’s Tim?”

“Fool Tim Datchet’s gone and fallen off the box,” came the reply.

“Where? How shall we find him?”

“About a hundred yards back, ma’am,” the stranger told her. “Actually, I assisted him a bit in the fall. I dinna’ wish to have him fire that great pistol of his. He landed in the gorse, and I suspect he’ll catch up to us in a moment. So I must beg a boon of you while I can, ladies.”

“A boon, sir?” Susannah replied. “After such a rude interruption of our journey, after knocking our protector off the box? A boon would be appropriate had you rescued us rather than inconvenienced us.”

“My apologies for any inconvenience, of course, but haven’t I rescued you? Have you not been rolling along dull as a Sunday sermon since Staines, hoping for an adventure, which I have been so kind as to provide?”

“Oh yes, however did you guess?” asked Juliet. “We have been wishing for an adventure all day, but I have no boon to give you.”

“I can think of a fair one—a kiss.”

Susannah gasped. The clouds parted slightly and a bright moon outlined the figure of the man on horseback and the girl staring up at him in open admiration. And suddenly Susannah saw the true danger of the situation, for she remembered being just as young and foolish as her charge. “Juliet, no,” she ordered.

“Don’t be stuffy, Susannah,” said Juliet. “It’s just a kiss, and I am not afraid. It’s an adventure, after all.” She stepped up to the stranger, and the highwayman leaned down. Susannah

could think only of putting an end to this dangerous association at once. She strode forward, raising a hand high to slap the rump of the young man's horse. But the highwayman guessed her intent and drew back, urging his stallion into a quick side step.

He laughed, and told Juliet, "You are well guarded, my lady."

The sound of approaching hooves made them all turn.

This would end it, Susannah thought. The company of other travelers would dispel the romantic aura that seemed to have caught both Juliet and the stranger. Susannah called out at once, "Halloo, help, a highwayman!"

The hooves pounded closer, and the masked young man, after only the briefest hesitation, said, "Adieu, my lady Juliet," whirled his horse, and galloped into the copse.

Two men also in greatcoats and tricorns rode up immediately, but when they halted at the Lacy carriage, Susannah felt her relief give way to cold fear. The newcomers reeked of ale.

"What have we here, Dick?" said one rider to the other, over the blowing of their lathered horses. "Sport or goods?"

"Looks like sport to me, George," said the second rider.

Susannah decided to ignore the implications of this exchange. She had often surprised her charges into good behavior simply by stating with conviction her expectation that they meant to be good. "Gentlemen," she said, "as you can see, our coach has been waylaid. We would be grateful for your assistance and would be happy to repay your kindness when we reach London."

This speech was greeted by harsh laughter that sounded ugly on the empty heath. "That's what we like. The work done for us." The first man drew a pistol while the second slid from his horse and advanced on the two ladies.

Susannah took Juliet's hand and pulled her back from the approaching ruffian.

"This one looks plump as a partridge, George," said the man. The strong smell of sour ale washed over them as he spoke. "You fine ladies have any jewels about you?" he asked.

"No pearls to cast before swine, if that's what you mean," Susannah said.

“Hah, Dick, pearls afore swine, a wit that one,” said the man on horseback, and he went off into his peculiar harsh laugh.

“Crack your wit on me, will you,” said Dick. “I’ll crack you.” He raised his arm.

“I wouldna’ if I were you,” came the first highwayman’s voice from the shadows behind the two robbers. Dick’s hand froze in mid-air and the robber on horseback swung his gun toward the voice. A shot rang out, and the rider shrieked and dropped the pistol. “I’m hit, Dick, let’s give it up. It’s a bad lay.”

Dick stared at Susannah and Juliet, apparently undecided. Then a new sound caught their ears, a long, low groaning, like a lion in pain.

“Come on, Dick,” urged the injured robber.

Dick hesitated a moment longer, then spat as if to mark the scene with his contempt. He snatched up his partner’s fallen gun and scrambled toward his horse. The two would-be robbers rode off as fast as they had come.

The low groan came again, and Juliet and Susannah turned to the sound.

“Tim Datchet, is that you?” Susannah called.

“Ooooh, me head,” came the reply. There was a rustle in the bushes, and Mr. Datchet staggered toward them, holding his head.

For a few minutes Susannah and Juliet ministered to their injured protector, offering their handkerchiefs to wipe the cuts and scrapes on his face. Coachman grumbled at Tim’s lack of wit, but gave him a restoring sip from his flask.

Then the highwayman spoke again. He had emerged from the shadows as they tended Tim and now stood in the road, holding his horse’s reins. “Ladies, I’d like to see you on your way. Can your guard regain the box?”

“Sure I can, no thanks to you,” said Tim roughly.

Juliet whirled toward the stranger. “You did save us,” she whispered fervently.

Tim Datchet squared his shoulders, swayed slightly, and staggered toward the box.

The young highwayman stepped up to Juliet, though Susannah noticed that he avoided the pool of light cast by the carriage lamp. "I think your friend . . ."

"My cousin, Mrs. Bowen . . ."

"Your cousin would say that I brought you into danger in the first place. I beg your pardon. That was not my intent."

"Of course not. You intended something high and romantic, a rescue from tedium," Juliet assured him.

Susannah groaned, and the highwayman laughed. "I will claim that boon of you then, Miss . . .?"

"Lacy," Juliet told him candidly. "I will gladly give you the boon for which you asked, sir."

"No," Susannah protested. She stepped between her cousin and the young highwayman. "Sir, think what you are about. You may harm Miss Lacy much more by stealing a kiss than by robbing her purse."

"Susannah," wailed Juliet. "You don't understand."

"Pardon me, Miss Lacy," said the highwayman. "I mean neither harm nor disrespect." He reached inside his cloak, and Susannah tensed, wondering if he meant to draw his pistol again. "If the proprieties won't allow me a kiss, let me leave you my card." He held out a small white card that showed faintly against the black of his clothes. Juliet stepped forward, but the highwayman held the card out of her reach.

"Into the coach with you, Miss Lacy," he urged.

Susannah did not need daylight to recognize the sulky cast of Juliet's features, but the girl complied and Susannah followed.

The highwayman doffed his hat and presented the card with a bow. Juliet snatched it and held it close. The young man closed the door and sprang back on his horse, and Coachman cracked his whip.

"Adieu, my lady Juliet," came the highwayman's voice drifting back to them from the heath.

Juliet breathed a soft sigh, and Susannah knew it for the first breath of love, against which reason, propriety, and regard for worldly advantage, all that she was charged to keep in her cousin's mind, would be powerless. It was going to be a dreadful season.

3



On the evening he began his search for a bride, Warne dined at White's with his brother-in-law, the Earl of Rumsford. Rumsford, twenty years Warne's senior, had married Lady Cassandra Arden when Warne was ten, and their marriage had produced a degree of felicity with which neither found fault.

With the covers cleared and a good claret to sustain them, Warne revealed his intention to marry.

"Ah, that explains the satin knee breeches," said Rumsford referring to Warne's evening clothes. "Going to look over this year's crop, are you?" he asked.

"I thought I would try the Duchess of Somerset's ball," Warne replied. He had called on his sister's friend Maria Sefton that afternoon, and she had recommended the duchess's ball.

Rumsford nodded approvingly. "Too bad Cassandra is in Bath. She could tell you about this year's girls. Remarkably good information she has. Daresay Maria will look after you."

Unspoken was the awareness that Warne's welcome in society would not be warm. "Thanks, Rumsford, but I will manage," he replied.

"Or some gel will manage to snare you, Warne," said his brother-in-law with a chuckle.

“Did I tell you about my Alice? Picked Moreton out at a Venetian breakfast. Might have been buying a bonnet.” At a slight smile from Warne, the earl launched into the anecdote.

He had hardly reached his point when another man stepped up to their table with an abrupt movement that cut Rumsford off mid-sentence.

“Maitland,” Warne said, acknowledging the newcomer, a tall man with sleek dark looks and the tight-lipped intensity of the offended.

“What is the meaning of this, sir?” demanded Maitland. He threw a card at Warne, and the stiff rectangle of white paper landed face down on the table.

“Evening, Maitland,” said Rumsford, quietly reminding the newcomer that civility was called for.

After a pause Maitland managed a curt, “Evening.”

Only then did Warne pick up the card and turn it over, though he knew what he would find—his own name and the enigmatic message—*With my father’s compliments*.

“Where did you get this, Maitland?”

“Where did I . . . where did . . . as if you did not know, Warne. I will have satisfaction for this,” Maitland said grimly.

“For a card?” said Rumsford. “Surely a gentleman may leave his card without giving offense.”

Maitland glared at Warne. “Not in the bedroom of another man’s mistress.”

Warne tried to recall whether he had heard the name of Maitland’s current *cher amie*. The man consumed partners with the same voracious appetite for sensual indulgence that had marked Warne’s father.

“In this instance, Maitland, I am as puzzled as you are. Who is it you have in keeping these days?” Warne asked.

“Do you deny a connection with Diana Ferris?”

Diana Ferris. Warne had not seen the “Fair Ferris” for years. It was a shocking measure of

her decline that she had taken up with Maitland, who no doubt beat her. Warne felt his muscles tighten and the hot bitter taste of anger on his tongue. For a mad moment he considered giving Maitland the satisfaction he demanded. With one shot Warne could free Diana. But he was done with bitterness. With a bank draft he could probably do as much for his former lover.

“My connection with Miss Ferris is past, Maitland, and that someone has had the bad taste to remind her of it is not grounds for a duel.”

“Someone!” Maitland was choking with his rage. “This is your card, Warne.”

“My dear Maitland, this is *Warne*,” Rumsford interposed, as if he had explained everything. He raised his brows and shook his head at the younger man, as if to say, *This is the Iron Lord, the man who ruined his own father.*

Maitland appeared struck by Rumsford’s expression and for the first time seemed to waver in his conviction that Warne had poached on his preserves. Warne had to admit there were certain advantages to his reputation. Carefully he put the card on the table.

“Did Miss Ferris tell you I left my card with her?”

Maitland’s glance shifted away. Warne could see that the other man wanted to conceal whatever had happened between himself and the woman. Diana Ferris was most likely laying compresses to her bruised face even as they talked. Warne’s hands closed in fists.

“The card arrived with a bouquet of roses for Miss Ferris this morning,” Maitland said tightly.

“That’s what she told you?”

There was a silence as Maitland apparently weighed his next words. “That’s what her maid said.”

Warne rose without ceremony. “Then very likely, it’s true. Excuse me, Maitland, I have an engagement this evening.”

Warne turned to Rumsford and took a cordial leave of the older man. Without a backward glance he left the club.

“You had best watch where you leave your cards, Warne,” Maitland shouted, but too late. Rumsford could not be sure the marquess heard the other man at all.

By the time Warne reached the Duchess of Somerset’s, he had decided on a sum he thought Diana Ferris would find useful and a friend who could be trusted to convey a bank draft to her without arousing Maitland’s suspicions. He found himself sobered by the thief’s rapid and malicious use of the stolen cards and perplexed by the strange message.

In the duchess’s receiving line he tried to resurrect the optimistic spirit in which he had set out to find a bride. He bowed over Her Grace’s hand, accepted her austere delight that he had come to her ball, and moved with the press into the ballroom.

His sister’s friends acknowledged him, but he was conscious of the distrust of most of his fellow guests. He had initiated an economic battle against one of their own, and his success had brought down many. The print shop caricatures of him suggested the Iron Lord used unfair tactics. No one seemed to understand how he had marshaled his money like troops against his father’s interests. Small sums at first, then as the wealth had increased, he had wanted it to produce things as land produced crops. He had sown money and reaped cloth and paper and iron. And the iron had gone to fight Napoleon, but now he could do with it as he wished, and he wished to build bridges and buildings and machines, great engines that pulsed with life and never tired.

Two hours into the ball he was wondering whether he might simply advertise for a bride and interview likely candidates. Or perhaps Bellaby was right, and he should seek an improper widow for an affair. He had seen many *ton* beauties this night, but none had moved him. They seemed like his hostess’s hothouse blooms, showy and forced. If another young woman said, “La, sir!” to him, he would not answer for his actions. He lifted a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing footman and took a stand with his back to a fluted Corinthian column.

A touch on his arm caused him to turn. At his side stood a handsome brunette in willow-green silk. Widowed in her twenties, Margaret Court had taken him to her bed briefly at the end

of her year of mourning. Her indiscretion, and their affair, had been indiscreet but had freed her, she claimed, from the importunities of men she found priggish and mercenary. She had since married the Earl of Wilton, a man Warne had known at Oxford.

Briefly Margaret's green eyes met his, and both looked away.

"That's a comfort," she said after a pause. "I thought when I saw you here moving about among the nursery set that the fire had gone out."

Warne laughed. "It might among the nursery set," he admitted.

"Well then," she said, "you mustn't linger there."

"But I must if I am to find a wife," he told her.

Her smile did not dim except in those green eyes, which turned from a fiery emerald to a cooler jade. Someone near them gasped, and Warne turned a cold gaze on a handsome blonde in a feathered peach toque. The woman's mouth had dropped open in a little circle of astonishment, but she quickly recovered her composure and moved away.

"Oh dear," said the countess, with a delicate undulation of her ivory fan. "Lady Lacy. You did want your matrimonial ambitions generally known I hope, Warne?"

"I won't need to advertise?" he asked lightly.

"Consider it done," said the countess. "But seriously, Warne, *you* marry?"

"It's time." The irony was that he had felt himself married for years, had considered each brief affair a breach of faith, and only now considered himself free.

"Then what am I to make of the roses that came this morning?" Margaret asked quietly.

Warne tensed and turned to her. "My card was with these roses?"

"Yes, and the—"

"—strangest message," he finished.

"You did not send them I take it?"

"No." He took a deep breath. "Margaret, I am sorry if you were . . . inconvenienced by their arrival."

She waved her hand, dismissing any awkwardness at receiving a floral tribute from her former lover. "They were delivered by a young gentleman this morning," she told him. "Apparently the florist's boy."

"Which florist?" Warne asked, conscious of a slight edge to his voice. He did not wish Margaret embarrassed now by a scandal nearly five years old. She did not know the florist, but she promised to find out and send word to him. With that Warne had to be satisfied, but he felt certain he was going to need a long, long run in the morning to keep his temper in check.

He left the duchess's ball puzzled. His affairs with Diana Ferris and Margaret Court had lasted no more than a few heated weeks, and while he had made no effort to conceal them, they were old scandals now. Yet someone had remembered and chosen to remind his former lovers of their connection with him. He could not think why.

He had set out to find a bride, and now it appeared that he must find a thief.



At Lady Lacy's Duke Street residence, Juliet dashed ahead of Susannah and rang the bell with insistent vigor. Her efforts produced a small, white-haired butler, with a goat-like beard, whose cravat was decidedly askew. Juliet brushed past him, leaving the man tottering and gripping the doorknob to retain his balance.

An instant later a decidedly unladylike shriek rent the air, and Juliet reappeared in the doorway holding aloft the highwayman's card.

"He's. . . . He must be an earl. His father's a marquess," she shouted.

Susannah turned to Tim Dachet with instructions about the luggage. Silently she cursed the young highwayman, whom she suspected of reading Minerva Press novels. *An earl? More likely an understudy in a melodrama.*

"Here now, Miss," said the little butler to Juliet. He was holding his head with both hands as if in pain. "Who are you to come bursting in at her ladyship's door, shouting so a man's head would split?"

Juliet drew herself up with haughty dignity. "Who are you?" she demanded. "Where is my mama?"

"I'm Chettle, Miss," said the little man. He peered more closely at Juliet. "Your mama's out."

"Out? She can't be out. She knows we arrive tonight." Juliet gave Susannah a puzzled look.

Susannah came up the steps and put out a hand to calm Juliet. “Mr. Chettle, no doubt her ladyship made arrangements for Miss Lacy’s arrival,” she said quietly.

Under her gaze the little butler straightened his shoulders. Then a second carriage drew up. Chettle muttered a *pardon me* and, abandoning them, descended to aid the new arrival, leaving in his wake the unmistakable odor of spirits. From the second carriage Lady Lacy alighted. She accepted her butler’s unsteady arm and began speaking to him at once in low, quick tones.

“That’s my mother?” Juliet whispered with a trace of wonder.

Susannah nodded. Evelina Lacy had changed little in ten years. Tall and golden-haired with beautiful blue eyes and a generous bosom, she looked little older than her daughter except for a softness under the chin. And she dressed with a degree of elegance Susannah had never seen in Berkshire. This night Evelina was attired in peach and cream from the feathers on her toque to the slippers on her feet.

When she saw Juliet, she stopped speaking and shook off Chettle’s arm. “Juliet, dearest. Is it really you? My little girl?”

“Mama?” Juliet stood still. Whatever memories she had of her mother, she was clearly adjusting her thinking to the elegant reality before her.

Evelina came forward with a rustle of silk and touched her cheek to Juliet’s. “How pretty you are!”

She stepped back, and mother and daughter regarded each other silently. With an awkward little laugh, Evelina spoke again. “I hope you don’t mind me being out when you arrived. I never miss the Duchess of Somerset’s ball.”

“We only just came, Mama,” said Juliet.

Evelina tugged at her long kid gloves and gave Susannah an assessing glance.

“Mama, this is cousin Susannah. Mrs. Bowen, that is,” said Juliet.

“Ah, Richard’s daughter. Lacy mentioned you, didn’t he? Widowed?”

Susannah nodded, and a crashing thump behind them punctuated her unspoken lie. The three

ladies turned to find Tim Datchet standing sullenly over Juliet's trunk.

"Chettle," said her ladyship, assuming a sudden command. "See to your duties, and ring Mrs. Chettle for me, please."

Mr. Chettle wobbled off, and his wife appeared in his stead. A stern-faced matron in stiff black skirts, she ordered the footmen about with surprising authority and settled the ladies before a warm fire in an elaborate parlor.

As they sipped tea, Evelina studied her daughter frankly and proclaimed her delight with Juliet's beauty. "How fortunate that you favor me and not your father. We will have no trouble finding you a splendid husband. Why, only tonight there were dozens of eligibles at the duchess's ball. I must tell you all about it."

Susannah observed her aunt as she spoke. Evelina, it was plain, liked everything that her husband did not—warmth, comfort, extravagance, fashion, and talk. Susannah recalled that her aunt came from a large family, and that before her marriage Evelina had enjoyed all the popularity that prettiness and a substantial dowry could secure. She had not been happy in her marriage, and in the very season that had been so disastrous for Susannah, Evelina and Uncle John had agreed to live in separate residences—hers in town, his in the country. She had surrendered her children to her husband's care.

Juliet, too, watched her mother closely and took in her mother's description of the ball with obvious interest, but she had hardly forgotten their encounter with the highwayman. She turned the small white card over and over between her fingers.

At one of Evelina's pauses, Juliet said, "Now, Mama, you must hear our adventure. We met the most dashing highwayman." In a few breathless sentences she recounted the episode. "And it's all a disguise because he gave me his card, and he's the son of a peer."

"What?" said Evelina. "A titled highwayman?"

"Well, look at the card, Mama." Juliet held out the card and Evelina reached for a pair of reading spectacles.

“Francis William Arden, Marquess of Warne,” she read. “Warne? You cannot have met Warne for I saw him tonight at the ball, and heard the most intriguing *on dit*—”

“Not the marquess, Mama,” interrupted Juliet. “Our highwayman was quite a young man. You must read the handwritten note.”

“‘*With my father’s compliments*,’” she read. “Well, what does that mean?”

“It means,” said Juliet patiently, “that the highwayman is Lord Warne’s son. It is romantic beyond anything. I wonder why he must go in disguise holding up coaches on the heath?”

Susannah thought the name Warne familiar and tried to recall where she might have heard it. If the highwayman was truly a young lord, perhaps he had been acting on a wager. She accepted the card Juliet now thrust in her hands. Its message was written in a neat schoolboy hand by someone who had mended his pen well.

A new thought occurred to Susannah.

“You know, Juliet, a marquess or any father may have several sons, and, of course, all cannot inherit equal wealth. Perhaps our highwayman is a younger son.”

“But, my dears,” said Lady Lacy. “Lord Warne is not married. He has no sons at all.”

Susannah and Juliet both stared.

“But he must have, Mama. Our highwayman was a gentleman.”

Evelina shook her head. “I’m sure he’s no connection of Warne’s.”

“Perhaps an impostor, acting on a wager,” Susannah suggested.

Juliet turned on her. “Susannah, you do spoil everything. He must be Lord Warne’s son. He had his card.”

“If your mother is right, he can be neither Lord Warne’s son, nor a gentleman,” Susannah countered. “And you are not likely to see him in town.” She knew Juliet was thinking the young man would find them. Confound him for being mysterious. Nothing could be more appealing to one of Juliet’s temperament.

“Well, I will look for him. You have no sense of romance, Susannah. In some ballroom he

will find me.”

“It might be wise to listen to Susannah, Juliet dear,” said Evelina. For the first time she looked uneasy about their story. “You must not offend Lord Warne. He’s a dangerous man, quite implacable. You know he’s called the Iron Lord. He drove his father to an untimely death.”

“How?” asked Juliet.

“Well, I hardly know the details. Warne has avoided the *ton* for years, but he is utterly merciless. He bought up his father’s vowels and gave them to the moneylenders. The older marquess was quite unwell and in no shape to flee. It ruined dozens of families when the old man went bankrupt.”

Again Evelina cast a speculative glance at Susannah. “Wasn’t your father one of the men who was ruined when old Warne’s West Indies bank failed?”

Susannah flushed. She had heard little of her family after they cast her off. “Yes, I think so.” Uncle John must have mentioned Warne in connection with her family’s ruin and her parents’ death in a carriage accident.

“Still,” Evelina pointed out, “Warne is rich as Croesus, and tonight I heard him say that he will choose a bride this season. It could be you, Juliet dear. Imagine a daughter of mine a marchioness and rich as an empress.”

“Oh, I’d never want to meet someone that old,” said Juliet.

“Old?” said Evelina. She straightened her chin, pressing her hand up against its softness, and Susannah suggested a new topic, diverting her aunt’s attention to Juliet’s well-cut wool gown.

“Did Lacy give you enough for your clothes, dear?” Evelina asked. “We should see a modiste tomorrow.”

Later, by the fire in the comfortable room that had been assigned to her, Susannah took stock of the day. She stretched her toes toward the coals. If the highwayman did not seek Juliet out, if Evelina did indeed know some acceptable gentlemen, and if no word of their adventure came to the ears of the implacable Lord Warne, Juliet might marry wisely yet.

Susannah thought of her uncle's list of suitors. Lord Warne's name was not there though he had greater rank and wealth than any gentleman on the list. Apparently, Uncle John had remembered what Warne had done to Richard and the others. A dangerous man her aunt had said, a man who terrified the *ton* and yet meant to pick a bride from among them. Susannah suddenly pictured a sneering dandy moving down a line of white-gowned misses shaking his head. Did the man think choosing a bride was like . . . choosing a hat?



Kirby switched the valise from his right to his left hand and let himself into the lodging house. Though it was well after midnight, lights were burning in several rooms. The residents were theatre people who hardly kept shopkeepers' hours. He made his way up the open oak stair, a relic of an earlier era of elegance, past number one where Draycot, the actor, was obviously entertaining a large party, past number two, where the sounds suggested a more intimate gathering, and up to the landing he shared with Mrs. Hayter. Light seeped from under her door, and he prepared himself for the likelihood that she would call to him. It was through her kindness that he'd got the room.

They had met at the theatre, where she was one of the backers of the company. And without asking what his other business in London was, she had helped him find the masks, wigs, and cosmetics he needed to put his plan into action. No, she would not scold or nag him; she would probably want to be sure that he'd had something to eat. He *had* eaten at Staines, hours ago, but now his stomach grumbled at the thought of food.

Until this very moment he had forgotten. Tonight he'd felt that rush in his veins like one felt at the opening of a play. He had delivered the first two cards, and soon word would get to Warne. The plan was going to work.

And the plan had led him to Juliet Lacy. He had seen her at the edge of the crowd at Staines, seen the bright curiosity with which she looked about her, her eagerness for life and adventure,

and her dismay at being restrained by her strict companion. On the spot he decided that she would be the next recipient of a card and had followed them out of Staines, waiting for the opportunity to hold up their coach.

The other robbers had never been part of the plan, but the thrill of thwarting them, of rescuing Miss Lacy and giving her cause to think well of him went beyond anything he had anticipated. He wanted to be alone with it.

Mrs. Hayter's door opened.

"Mr. Kirby," she whispered. "We have not seen you all day. You must be needing a bite to eat."

Kirby faced his own door. His stomach growled again, not a polite anticipatory note, but a full, rolling rumble. He thought of Odysseus in the hall of King Alcinous. "Belly must be filled," the hero had said. Kirby laughed and turned to face his neighbor.

She stood in the entrance to her suite looking quite unlike her daytime self. Her deep red hair, usually elaborately curled, was pulled back in a loose braid under a lacy cap. A jade silk wrapper heightened the white of her skin, and her gray eyes sparkled with tears. For a moment he simply stared. Though he knew her to be close to his mother's age, she looked young and hurt, and the heroic impulse that had come to life in him earlier made him step forward. "Mrs. Hayter, what is it?"

"Oh dear," she said. "You must not note these tears. It's . . . it's just a novel I've been reading. Do come in, Mr. Kirby." She brushed her cheeks with the back of a small white hand and stepped aside, pulling the door open for him.

Kirby entered her apartments, set his valise on the floor, and shed his greatcoat. Mrs. Hayter's two little maids came forward to take the coat, and his hostess led him to a seat in her sitting room, a room furnished with the opulent remains of a more splendid time in her life. Kirby thought about her tear-brightened eyes.

A maid brought a tray with a supper of claret, bread, and cold meat pie, just as if he'd been

expected. When they were alone on a gold damask sofa, he turned to Mrs. Hayter. "You've not been reading in here," he said. "The light's too dim. Can't you tell me what's wrong?"

She shook her head. "First, you must eat." She poured some claret and put the glass in his hand. To please her he drank a long swallow of the wine and ate a few bites of the meat pie.

She sat at the other end of the low backless sofa with her feet tucked under her, toying with the end of her braid, watching him politely. At last she began, "You will think me very foolish, Mr. Kirby—"

"Kirby," he corrected her. "It's my given name." In truth it was his mother's name, but as all *his* names were his father's, too, he refused to use them.

"Kirby, then," Mrs. Hayter said. She straightened a little and adjusted the tie of her wrapper under her breasts. White, full breasts, Kirby noted. He took another swallow of wine and felt it loosen his limbs.

"How very unconventional," she said. "I like that."

"So you will tell me what's troubling you?" he asked.

She nodded. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she groped for the pocket of her dressing gown. Kirby put down the wine glass, scooted across the space that separated them, and offered his handkerchief, which she accepted with a tremulous smile, pressing the linen to her eyes.

"Do you ever miss your parents?" she asked, her wet gray gaze catching his.

He straightened abruptly and looked away. Mrs. Hayter had spoken of Warne as if she knew of him, and no one must guess his connection with the peer before his plan had time to work.

"My mother," he said.

"She must miss you and worry to think of you in this wicked city alone." Mrs. Hayter reached out and gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

"She's dead."

His companion gave a little gasp, and the hand holding his tightened. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I did not mean to grieve you."

“It’s been three years,” Kirby replied. “I can speak of her.”

“Tell me,” his companion invited. She pulled his hands into her lap and held them between her own.

Kirby thought fleetingly that it had been his intention to comfort her, but it would be a pleasure to tell someone about his mother, and Mrs. Hayter was looking at him with such sympathy and interest in her shining gray eyes.

So he told her about Ellen Kirby, the vicar’s daughter, the scholar, about her love of Homer and Shakespeare, about her quick laughter, her determination to provide for him, and her years of humiliation at the hands of cloddish employers.

“She was widowed young, your mother?”

Kirby nodded, letting the lie stand.

“So you did not know your father?” Mrs. Hayter looked at his hands, which she stroked lightly with her own. “But your mother told you of him, how fine he was and how much like him you are?”

Kirby looked sharply at her, but her head remained bent over their hands. He supposed it was a guess. Any mother would tell her son that about an absent father. Hadn’t Penelope told Telemachus how like he was to the missing Odysseus?

But Ellen Kirby had said nothing of her husband until she lay dying. Then she had shown her son clippings and letters, a history of his father’s life. Her Odysseus, she called him. She made her son promise that he would present himself to his father in London. Well, Kirby had made the promise, and he would keep it, but in his own way. He wanted nothing from the highborn lord who had abandoned them to live in luxury and sin, indifferent to his wife’s suffering, his son’s powerlessness—except revenge. He would leave a trail of cards, exposing every episode of his father’s infamous conduct.

“I am not at all like him,” he told Mrs. Hayter.

At that she raised her glistening gray eyes to his and lifted her soft white hand to his face.

With one finger she traced the sharp peak of a brow and the narrow blade of his nose, and touched the corner of his mouth.

Looking down at her, Kirby could see the tops of her breasts, white against the green silk, like foam against the sea, and he had the oddest feeling that she wanted him to pull the dangling ribbon that held her wrapper in place, to spill the soft white flesh into his hands.

His pulse pounded and his male flesh rose. She had withdrawn her hands from his, and his were lying in her lap. He stood abruptly and realized that even in the dim light she could not mistake the state he was in. He had meant to offer comfort and was about to offer insult.

Her head was bowed again as if to spare him any embarrassment.

“I beg your pardon,” he whispered, and turned and fled.

As soon as the door closed behind her guest, Molly Hayter rose and took a candle into the little vestibule and knelt beside the valise her maids had moved to one side. With swift, silent efficiency she explored its contents. There was nothing there to surprise her except a bit of brown paper wrapped around some cards. She opened the little package and removed one of the cards.

“What a very poor liar you are, my friend Kirby,” she said. “I knew you for his son the minute I saw you.” She restored the remaining cards to their package and the contents of the valise to good order and strolled back to her sitting room.

She stopped before the large gilt mirror that dominated the wall above the mantel and gave a little tug on the ribbon that secured her wrapper. The silk slipped away, revealing full white breasts with rosy peaks. Molly studied them dispassionately. She turned the small white card over and looked at it again.

“So you mean to pay your father back, young Arden. Well, I can help you, truly, I can.”



Evelina insisted on a full round of social engagements for their first day in town, including an appearance in the park at the fashionable hour. Talk had filled the day, idle malice masquerading as solicitude, and Susannah welcomed the clop of hooves and the rumble of carriage wheels that accompanied their progress through the park.

Somewhere between Lady Banks's and Miss Elphinstone's she had developed the tiniest bit of sympathy for Uncle John. Whatever Evelina heard in one drawing room she was sure to repeat in the next. Susannah only hoped her aunt had not made any indiscreet revelations about Juliet's encounter with the young highwayman. Any coupling of Juliet's name with Lord Warne's in an *on dit* was sure to reach the ears of the Iron Lord. And all the gossips agreed he was a dangerous man to offend.

Still Susannah thought they had done well for their first day. If Juliet seemed incapable of forgetting the stranger, she would soon meet eligible gentlemen whose air and manner were certain to impress a girl making her come-out. This happy thought lasted until the driver brought the landau to a stop abreast of another carriage so that Evelina could speak with her particular friend, Mrs. Trentfield.

Susannah recognized her at once. Widowed now, Ann Trentfield had made her come-out with Susannah, and the sharp glance Susannah received from her seemed to say that she remembered something of that other season. Susannah lowered her gaze. She had thought her ruin

so old and so insignificant a scandal that no one would recall it. Now she realized she would have to practice all the lessons in humility that she had learned in Uncle John's house. She kept her hands folded in her lap and smiled with polite interest as Evelina repeated an anecdote about Byron she had told a score of times already.

But Susannah's rebellious spirit soon stirred, and she turned away from the talk. The rain of the day before had passed, and the sky was blue with light clouds in high thin lines like the furrows of a new-planted field. The paths invited walking, and she vowed to escape to the park for an early morning ramble. For the moment, however, she must be content to sit quietly and let the wind blow her aunt's voice away. The breeze tugged at her bonnet, and she touched the ribbons to check that they were securely tied.

Juliet, too, was ignoring her mother's conversation, her eyes glancing at gentlemen of a certain height in the passing throng. "I don't care what you think, Susannah," she whispered. "We are in his debt, and I will acknowledge him wherever we meet."

"In that case," Susannah replied, "I hope he has the prudence not to appear in town."

Juliet made a face. "Mama says I needn't fear to speak to whom I please," Juliet asserted. Unspoken was Juliet's awareness of her own beauty. In a blue spencer over white muslin and with a bonnet trimmed in white roses, Miss Lacy looked as fresh and appealing as the March sky above them.

Susannah bit back an intemperate reply and lifted her gaze. Tall elms rose above them with puffs of pale green buds. For a moment, Susannah allowed herself to think of the cottage in Wincanton that would be hers if she could keep Juliet from imprudence. But that pleasant vision of freedom faded when Mrs. Trentfield's tone suggested a confidence of a particularly sensitive nature was about to be revealed.

"Is it true, dear, that your daughter has met Warne's *natural* son?" Ann asked. "A highwayman, is he?"

Susannah gasped. Evelina cast her a quick sheepish glance. They had not called upon Mrs.

Trentfield earlier, but evidently she had heard the story, which meant that Evelina *had* been telling it. Dozens of people might have heard it by now, even the haughty Lord Warne himself. And, of course, the truth had been distorted already.

“Really,” Evelina protested, “we have no idea who the man is, though he claimed a connection with Warne. My daughter . . .”

At that moment a gust of wind hit them and lifted Juliet’s bonnet from her head, wafting it over the horses’ backs to the grass beyond and sending it tumbling across the green expanse. Instantly Juliet swung open the carriage door, let down the steps, and descended.

“Juliet,” Susannah cried, but her words were snatched away by the breeze as Juliet charged headlong in pursuit of the tumbling bonnet.

Susannah rose and stepped down to follow her cousin. As she touched the ground, she felt herself under scrutiny and looked up. A tall gentleman in a blue coat and buff inexpressibles was watching the little episode. The intensity of the gentleman’s gaze made her pause and check a defiant impulse to release her anger. His eyes were as cold as the wind.

At Maria Sefton’s urging, Warne joined the *beau monde* for the afternoon ritual of passing one another in the park. Lady Sefton assured him that the park was the place to impress young ladies with his interest or lack of it. And besides she had said, “Your figure shows to advantage on a horse, Warne.” She was teasing him, of course, but she knew the ways of the *ton*, and he would do well to heed her advice. At the Somerset ball he had realized how hard it was going to be to overcome the *ton*’s distrust of him. He wondered if he had the patience for it. He was used to spending his afternoons pushing himself to accomplish some necessary work for one of the businesses he and Bellaby ran, and he found this amble through the park as tedious as a minuet on horseback.

“That *was* Warne, was it not?” he heard one gentleman say to another as they passed.

He was relieved to encounter the Countess of Wilton with her husband. There could be no scandal in his greeting his friends together as a couple.

Lord Wilton introduced the topic of the Lavalette affair, and Warne agreed that the French were a damned unforgiving lot. He glanced at Margaret and found her watching him.

He had received a note from her about the delivery of roses with his card, and he had interviewed the florist. Apparently, a young gentleman had made the purchases and taken the flowers with him. The florist could not say whether the man was fair or dark, well heeled or shabby, but he did recall that the lad had a touch of a Scot accent. The fellow was not one of his father’s men then, but a hireling.

“You are the subject of the latest *on dit*, Warne,” Margaret told him.

His hands clenched, and his mount danced uneasily. He checked the animal. “With my search for a bride?” he asked.

“That, too,” said Margaret, a hint of laughter in her green eyes. Then she sobered. “There is a story going about that a highwayman held up two young ladies of fashion and left them with one of your cards. You know the message it bore. The speculation, of course, is that you have a natural son.”

Warne straightened, momentarily forgetting his surroundings. It was too like an exploit of his. He had held up his father’s mistress once, relieved her of a necklace his father had given her, and sent the bauble to his mother with his father’s compliments. Who but his father would remember and avenge that act? “Who’s telling this tale?” he asked.

“Lady Lacy,” said Margaret. “The blonde you startled at the Somerset ball.”

“Flows as steady as the Thames,” said Lord Wilton. He made a gesture with his hand to indicate a mouth opening and closing.

“Her daughter and niece met the man, who handed them your card,” Margaret added.

“What did he take from them?” he asked curtly.

“Nothing that I’ve heard of.”

“Who are they?” He had to know.

“The baron is a miser, I think, keeps to his estate, never comes to town. His lady delights in gossip. I can point her out.” Margaret lifted her chin and surveyed the park. “There, in the black landau.”

Warne turned to see an odd tableau—the fair but full beauty he remembered from the Somerset ball, frozen in mid-speech, a lovely younger version of the woman tumbling out of the carriage, and a slim woman in a dark brown cape, leaning out after her. The fair-haired girl, her golden curls shining in the afternoon sun, moved as if quite conscious of the pretty picture she made.

The woman in brown now descended from the carriage, as lightly as had the other, but with more dignity. She glanced at him briefly, as if aware of his scrutiny, and paused, catching his gaze on her. A defiant spark flashed in the dark eyes and was instantly veiled. Warne thought it a trick of habit. He had a moment to note the straight, slim figure in the brown cape. Then with a quick, purposeful stride the woman set off after the girl chasing the bonnet.

Warne was sure they had no connection with him, had never been part of his life, yet the fellow with the cards, the man who seemed to know Warne’s past, had given them his card. It made no sense, and it certainly was nothing his father would have planned. But they had met his thief and would know whether he was young or old, tall or short, fat or lean, well-bred or an oaf. So Warne must meet them.

Kirby leaned upon the cane he had borrowed from Draycot. He felt he had the hang of it now, and tapped along the path quite confidently. He had had another success. He had managed to purchase a fine new beaver on the strength of his father’s card, and he had come to the park to seek his

father out and tip the new hat to him. For once Lord Warne was providing for the son he'd fathered and forgotten.

The only difficult moment in the whole scheme had come when the haberdasher, looking up from the card, had addressed Kirby as "my lord." He had been obliged to drop one of his packages in order to conceal his surprise. He realized then that he had not been clear-headed about the long list of Warne's titles. The entry in *Debrett's* applied to his grandfather, and he had not considered that now that his father had inherited, Dovedale would be his son's title, if that son were acknowledged.

It was that realization as much as anything that had drawn him to the park to look upon the *ton*. He had donned a gray wig and beard and now leaned upon a cane, but he wore the curly brimmed beaver he had purchased at a jaunty angle. He was or should be one of them, one of these idlers, at leisure to drive or stroll through the park, admiring each other in clothes they would soon change for their evening attire while lesser mortals sewed and pressed and fetched and cleaned to keep them in style.

He told himself he was not seeking Juliet Lacy. His embarrassing encounter with Mrs. Hayter had recalled him to his purpose. He had no business pursuing a girl no matter how fresh and lovely she seemed, no matter her courage and eagerness for life. He would fulfill his promise to his mother, and his own plans for his father's humiliation, and leave London. Falling in love had no part in his plans. Still he found himself searching for that one face in the crowd, and when he found it, he could not help fixing his gaze there.

She, too, was looking at passing faces. He could see how little attention she gave to her companions. The woman in the brown cape must be her sensible cousin from the night before. And there was no mistaking the other woman. She could be none other than Juliet's mother. He passed them once, then turned and doubled back, passing again, inches from Miss Lacy. Another turn and he was facing them once again, moving as slowly as he dared, prolonging the occasion. Then fortune favored him. The wind lifted Miss Lacy's bonnet and sent it scudding across the

grass. The young lady herself descended from the carriage with the same impulsive quickness he had seen the night before. Kirby was already in motion. The wind was blowing the bonnet his way, and he had only to step off the path a few paces and wait for the breeze to bring it to him. A playful gust dropped it within reach, and Kirby planted his cane upon the ribbons.

The girl came to a breathless halt before him. "My bonnet, please, sir," she said, her eyes on the object in question.

"May I ask a *boon* of you then, Miss Lacy?" he answered.

Her head came up abruptly, and her startled eyes sought his.

"You?" She was studying him, trying to penetrate the wig and beard.

"At your service," he said with a slight bow. He bent down to retrieve the bonnet.

"Why are you in disguise?" she asked. "Are you in danger?"

He nodded, holding out the bonnet.

"Then you can't come to call?"

He shook his head. Speaking slowly, he told her, "You must not let anyone know you've seen me in London."

"Are you really Lord Warne's son?"

"I must go, Miss Lacy. Your cousin approaches. Tell no one we met here."

She looked so downcast at this ending of their conversation that he added, "Do you ever go to Lackington's?"

"No."

He turned away.

"But I will," she called, and the wind carried her voice to him.

When he was safely hidden in the crowd again, he turned back to see her mother's footman helping her into the carriage. Beyond her on horseback, studying the scene, was his father. At the sight, Kirby's hand did shake upon his cane, as if he were indeed the palsied old man he'd pretended to be. His father, titled, wealthy, and free, could court any young lady in London, and it

was plain Miss Lacy was here for the season.



Susannah wore her lace cap to Lady Shalford's ball, and when their hostess greeted them with a cold, tight smile, Evelina frowned. On the threshold of the ballroom she paused to whisper, "It's your cap, Susannah. I begged you not to wear such an article to a ball. You have no sense of fashion, dear."

Susannah's fingers clenched around her fan. Below them, the *ton*, formidable in its careless elegance, glittered and shimmered in the radiance of a thousand candles. How had she dared to come among them again? Beside her Juliet let out her breath in an exclamation of unabashed delight.

"There's Esther," said Evelina. "Come girls." She led them into the crowd, apparently unconcerned by the curious stares that followed them.

Susannah and Juliet trailed after her, Juliet's eyes searching the crowd. "Do you think he's here?"

Susannah shook her head. "It's doubtful," she said mildly. "Young men have endless resources for entertainment in town, and you can hardly expect your highwayman to attend anything so tame as a ball."

"He must be here," Juliet insisted.

"Not after you've made him notorious with your story of meeting him," Susannah pointed out.

At that, Juliet stopped glancing about. She looked a bit stung, but recovered at once. "I hardly told anyone, just Mama and Mrs. Garthe, and besides he could come . . . in disguise," she said, resuming her search.

Susannah decided the tale of their encounter with the highwayman must be in wide circulation. No one gave them the cut direct, but no one greeted them either. The eyes of the gentlemen did tend to linger on Juliet, a white satin gown on her striking form, a crown of white roses in her golden hair.

Esther Pemford, Evelina's sister, met them before they had advanced very far into the room. Tall, elegant, Titian-haired, with a dark, haughty gaze, she planted herself squarely in their path.

"Evelina, dear," said Mrs. Pemford. "You've done it this time." She nodded to Susannah and shook her head, looking at Juliet. "And such a pretty child."

"Done what?" asked Evelina, her gloved fingers making delicate adjustments to the curls at the side of her face.

"Why chattered too much, of course."

Evelina opened her mouth to protest, but the other woman cut her off with a snap of her fan.

"It's no use, Evie. Look about you. By now everyone's heard that your lovely daughter received Warne's card from a highwayman. What were you thinking to allow such a tale to get about?"

"What's the harm in it? Surely my Juliet did no wrong."

"No? She's landed in the middle of a bumble broth. Whoever this fellow with the card was, he can't be a friend of Warne's. Evie, you do not want an enemy in Warne. And, as you can see, nor does anyone else."

"But what are we to do? The tale's out."

"Put a bold front on it. Stick to the family. Cousin Clara is here. She can introduce the girl to Brentwood. Everyone else will wait to see what Warne does, I expect."

"Warne comes here tonight?" Evelina's gaze again swept the ballroom.

“Don’t be a goose, Evie. Of course he does, he’s looking for a wife, isn’t he? Not that it will be easy for him with his reputation. Even if Maria Sefton is sponsoring him.”

“Maria Sefton?” asked Evelina faintly. “I was counting on her for vouchers.”

“The more fool, you, Evie. Though I think Maria will have better luck with Warne than she’s had with Byron,” she added.

“Is Lord Byron here?” asked Juliet.

“I should hope not,” said Mrs. Pemford, giving Juliet a quelling glance. “The state that man’s affairs are in. Come, ladies.”

She led them to a diminutive brunette with a loud ready laugh and constant toothy grin. Cousin Clara dismissed their difficulty with the reflection that, “No one’s above the taint of gossip. Lord, not even Wellington, and the entire country’s in his debt.”

Having made this assurance, Cousin Clara promptly abandoned them to pursue a flirtation of her own, and for several sets, Juliet and Susannah were obliged to stand by while other girls danced, and Evelina pointed out her particular friends, lamenting their inattention to her plight.

Juliet complained of the heat and glitter, the din, and the warm confusion of powerful scents. Her shoulders sagged, and her smile faded.

Susannah said what she could to keep Juliet’s spirits up, but she, too, found watching the dancing unbearable. The only music in Uncle John’s house had been Juliet’s earnest renderings of familiar ballads on the pianoforte, nothing to stir the spirit or urge the feet to move. How had Susannah imagined she could endure a ball? She who had always been complimented on her dancing. Even her seducer had praised her light feet and easy movement, but for ten years her steps had been no more than tiny, even stitches across a tight frame of duty and penance. Only her walks had freed her to move unconstrainedly, and she had not walked for days.

As a third set formed, Juliet turned to Susannah. “He’s not here, and I am never to meet anyone. This is too humiliating. I want to go home.”

Just then the flirtatious Clara found a moment to present them to Lord Brentwood, who

would take them in to supper. A viscount in his early thirties, Brentwood was one of the three men Uncle John considered most eligible for Juliet's hand. Brentwood was a handsome, solid-looking gentleman, a little ponderous in his speech, and undoubtedly aware of the attractions of his rank and purse.

He seemed indifferent to the undercurrents of gossip and doubt swirling about them. He smiled at Juliet at once and pronounced what he apparently considered must be her sentiments. "Miss Lacy, I daresay you find yourself impressed with your first London ball. Don't find such society in Berkshire, do you?" He looked about the ballroom as if admiring his own splendid domain.

"There are not so many people at a country ball, to be sure, my lord," Juliet answered.

"No, of course not," his lordship replied. He went on to explain in considerable detail the distribution of the population as reported in the most recent census. His hands moved expressively as he talked, and he gave the least question a full answer.

Indeed, at the supper interval, Lord Brentwood only interrupted his population treatise just long enough to offer his arm to Evelina. His gaze remained on Juliet. "Daresay there's five hundred in this room alone. Shalford always draws a crush. French cook, you know. Prinny . . ." He paused to let the name sink in. ". . . tried to hire the man away. Couldn't."

They advanced with the crowd in little shuffling steps that reminded Susannah of sheep passing through a narrow gate. The press squeezed them into another long high-ceilinged room, where a generous buffet drew most of the guests. Lord Brentwood steered them toward a cluster of little tables and gilt-edged chairs.

"Does a cook make such a difference at a ball?" Juliet asked Brentwood as he drew out one of the elegant little chairs to seat Evelina.

It was then that the gentleman from the park entered the supper room. Susannah felt the change in mood immediately and turned. He seemed to be looking straight at her, and then his gaze shifted to Juliet. Around them a hundred conversations hushed, suspended by the talkers'

awareness that some curious drama was about to be played out before their eyes, and Susannah understood that the gentleman must be Lord Warne.