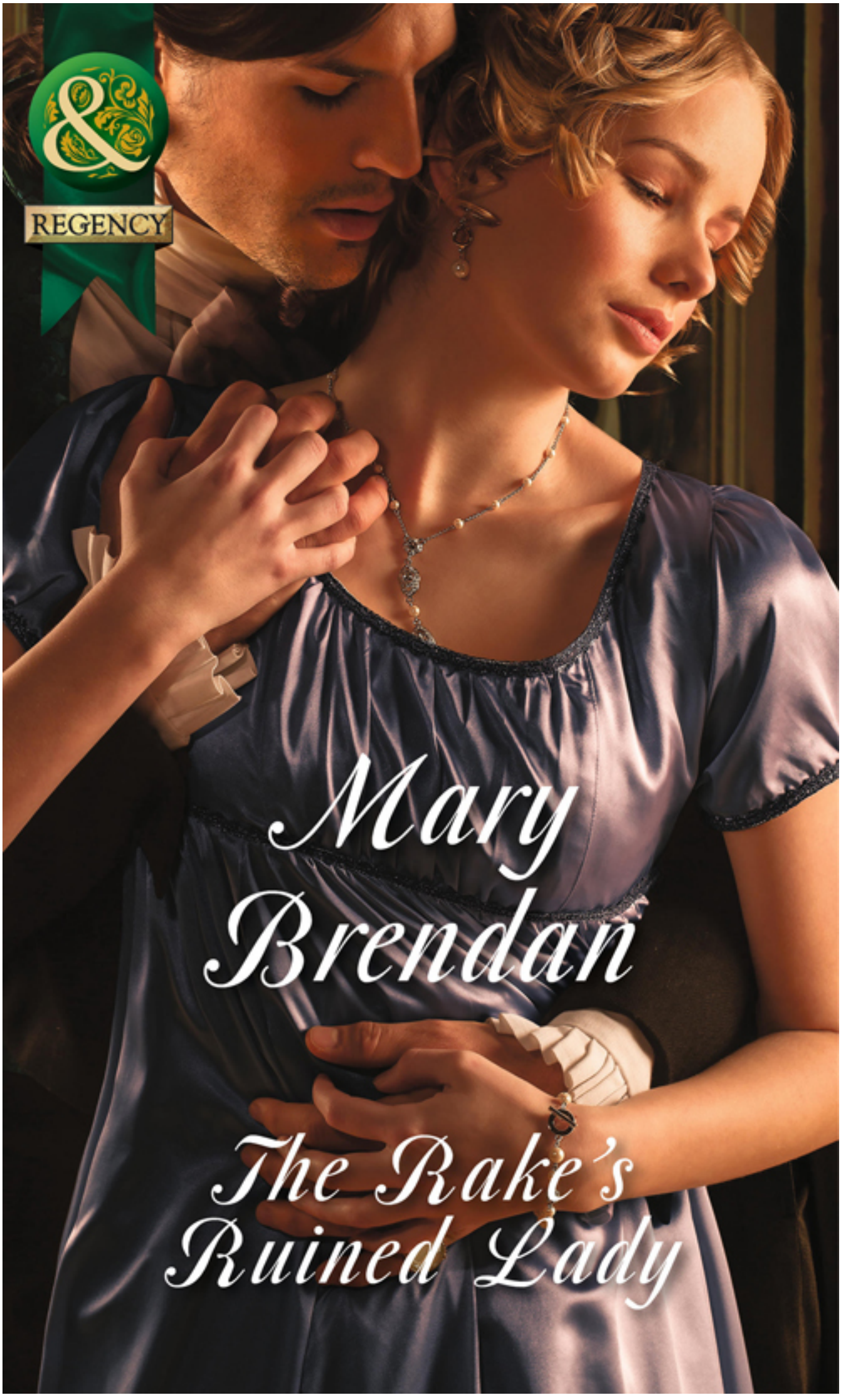
REGENCY
Mary Brendan
The Rake's Ruined Lady

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The Rake's Ruined Lady

«HarperCollins»

Brendan M.

The Rake's Ruined Lady / M. Brendan — «HarperCollins»,

Dishonourable intentions on his mind!Beatrice Dewey keeps falling for unsuitable men… She believes the man she loved, Hugh Kendrick, is lost to her for ever, and now her new fiancé has cancelled their wedding!But then Hugh re-enters her life, trailing rumours of illicit love affairs in his wake. Instead of marriage he offers her a very public, passionate kiss! To succumb to his skilful seduction would be the ultimate road to ruin, but is there enough of the old Hugh left to convince Bea to give him another chance?

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Содержание

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 30

‘I regret that we parted before I knew you as well as I would have liked.’

‘I cannot echo that sentiment, sir.’ Hugh’s amused tone had deepened the colour staining Beatrice’s porcelain complexion. ‘*My* only regret is that I ever became acquainted with you at all.’

Stolen kisses and caresses, snatched during their brief moments alone, were at the forefront of her mind, putting a disquieting throb low in her belly. Bea feared he might also be recalling their passionate moonlit trysts, and his next soft comment proved her intuitive.

‘I don’t believe you wish we’d never met when we had such a delightful time.’

‘Then you should curb your conceit because it is the truth,’ Beatrice retorted, avoiding the sultry glint in his eyes. ‘Once again I must ask you what you want. I cannot believe you have simply come to see me to reminisce …’

AUTHOR NOTE

In Regency England it was the accepted way of things for the firstborn daughter of a gentleman to be married off before the younger became a bride. In this duet of books featuring the Dewey sisters unfortunately the opposite is the case. Elise is the first to find her soul mate in my novel A DATE WITH DISHONOUR, while her elder sister Beatrice remains a spinster ensconced in the countryside with her father.

Beatrice would readily admit that in the past she has jeopardised her reputation by behaving wildly in affairs of the heart, thus spoiling her chances in the marriage mart. In THE RAKE’S RUINED LADY Bea stars as a heroine who is sure she has learned from her mistakes with scoundrels. At twenty-five she knows she is past her prime, but is confident of finally settling into wedded bliss with her fiancé … until the upstanding doctor jilts her for another woman.

Following this setback Beatrice is ready to give up on love altogether, until an old flame, cognizant with her youthful folly, bursts back into her life.

Hugh Kendrick is not the man he once was. The modest fellow with whom Bea fell head over heels in love has been transformed into an arrogant diamond magnate, recently returned from India. Now wealthy and distinguished, Hugh can have his pick of society beauties—yet he seems to favour women of a different class … and adding to his infamy are whispers of an exotic concubine abandoned overseas.

Beatrice knows that this time round she should avoid the handsome rogue at all costs, fearing she could easily be tempted to disgrace herself with him again. And when Hugh pursues her, with very dishonourable intentions on his mind, Bea realises she must resist his skilful seduction or risk joining his harem of doting mistresses …

I hope you enjoy reading about Bea’s inner dilemmas and the challenges she faces on her rocky road to love as much as I have enjoyed writing her story for you.

The Rake's Ruined Lady
Mary Brendan

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MARY BRENDAN was born in North London, but now lives in rural Suffolk. She has always had a fascination with bygone days, and enjoys the research involved in writing historical fiction. When not at her word processor, she can be found trying to bring order to a large overgrown garden, or browsing local fairs and junk shops for that elusive bargain.

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Chapter One

‘Of course I do not understand!’ Beatrice Dewey’s blue gaze was fixed on her fiancé’s face in shocked disbelief. ‘How is any woman supposed to comprehend that the man she believes will shortly be her husband must marry another?’ She pressed pale, quivering fingers to her brow. ‘Repeat to me your news, please, and furthermore tell me why I should accept it.’

Colin Burnett’s deep sigh displayed his regret. He stretched a hand towards Beatrice but she evaded his comfort in a swish of pastel muslin.

‘Tell me, Colin! An explanation—a dozen explanations if I wish to have them—is the least you owe me.’ Beatrice turned back to him, eyes sparking icy fire.

Ten minutes ago Mrs Francis, the Deweys’ housekeeper, had interrupted Beatrice’s letter-writing to announce that Dr Burnett had called on her. Beatrice had joined her fiancé in the front sitting room with a sunny smile, proving her gladness at this unexpected visit. Her happiness had started to wither before he’d uttered a single word: she’d read from Colin’s demeanour that something was dreadfully wrong.

Not for a moment had she believed him jesting when he had quietly informed her that their wedding must be called off. Colin was not one for levity; neither was he a man who liked a drama. Beatrice could tell this predicament was causing him equal embarrassment and sorrow, but was conscious that he seemed nowhere near as wounded as was she at the idea of them parting.

‘You know if there were any other way around this I would take it. I want you as my wife, Beatrice. I love you—’

‘I don’t see how you can love me...not really,’ Beatrice interrupted harshly, ‘if you are prepared to jilt me because you’d sooner have money.’

‘It is not just about the money, my dear.’ Colin sounded pained, and a trifle exasperated by her accusation. ‘My family’s reputation and estates are founded on the baronetcy. The Burnetts were granted the title as long ago as the Norman Conquest and it has passed through our male line ever since.’ He cast his eyes heavenwards, seeking inspiration. ‘If I reject the title and estates everything will be returned to the crown. How am I to explain that to my relations?’

Beatrice gave an impatient shrug. Her fiancé’s logical reference to history and his kin, when her heart was breaking, was simply increasing her indignation.

‘My uncle was not an easy man to fathom,’ Colin continued doggedly, thrusting his fingers through a shock of auburn hair. ‘He was known as an eccentric, but had I for one moment realised

what madness he planned I would have privately set lawyers the task of finding a loophole to wriggle out of his stipulations. As it is, I must bow to his whim or lose everything.'

'So instead of forfeiting your birthright and choosing to remain much as you are: a country doctor of modest means—which is the person I fell in love with—you would dance to a dead man's tune to have his fortune and his title?'

Now her shock was receding anger was bringing Beatrice close to tears. She wouldn't beg the man with whom she'd planned to spend her life to honour his proposal, neither would she attempt to shame him into doing so. If he went ahead and married his cousin Stella instead of her then Beatrice knew she would have learned something vitally important and deeply upsetting about Colin's character. And also about her own: she had previously believed she'd become a reasonable judge of people.

'If you have chosen to comply with the terms of your uncle's will, then there is nothing more to be said,' Beatrice whispered. 'All I would ask before you leave is that you find the courtesy to explain to my father why he has wasted his money on my wedding day.' Hot brine squeezed between her lashes and she averted her face.

'I will of course make any financial reparation necessary,' Colin vowed stiltedly.

As he took her elbow to turn her towards him Beatrice flinched from his touch as though scalded. 'I think you should go now, sir.'

'Please don't hate me, Beatrice...I couldn't stand it...'

'I have a lot more to stand than you, I think.' Beatrice gazed stormily into eyes that were pleading for compassion. 'Please do not beg me for anything. Especially that I should not hate you for squandering three years of my life and destroying my future happiness.' She distanced herself from him, an odd lethargy enveloping her. 'In truth I do not hate you, Colin...I am coming to realise that I pity you for allowing a person you barely knew to dupe you and dictate to you.' She smiled sourly. 'I've let you kiss and caress me, yet despite our intimacy I never really knew you. I'd not imagined you capable of acting in such a callous and selfish way.'

Beatrice noticed the faint colour rising in his cheeks at her wounding criticism.

'It is because I refuse to act selfishly that I must give you up.' Colin cleared his throat. 'I have a family duty to uphold...'

'What about your duty to me?' Beatrice cried. But she knew it was too late. If he were to change his mind and refuse his birthright to marry her instead things would never be right between them. She could never recapture the person she'd been just twenty minutes ago, when excitedly smoothing her hair and gown before speeding down the stairs to joyfully welcome her fiancé and ask him to stay to dine with them.

He too would be different: outwardly Colin might claim to have forgiven her for making him forfeit his inheritance. Inwardly his bitter disappointment might fester and grow until it destroyed the love he professed to still have for her.

'I made a mistake in giving you my heart, but in time I will appreciate you handing it back to me. The pain will pass now I have come to understand your character better.' Beatrice paused, a part of her relishing the hurt she had brought to his eyes with that brutal comment. But she was not by nature spiteful and the feeling soon faded. 'My father is in his study. Please call on him before leaving and do the honourable thing. He is not a wealthy man, as you know, and has scrimped to buy my trousseau.'

'My uncle was fifty-five and if he knew he was not long for this world he kept it to himself. Had he been old and infirm I would have had more cause to check on the terms of my inheritance.' Colin strode to block Beatrice's path as she made to exit the room.

'I've had explanations enough,' Beatrice rebuffed coolly. 'There is no need for you to tarry longer. I hope you find your new wealth and status make up for what you and I have lost.' She withdrew a small garnet ring from her finger and held it out. 'Yours, I believe. Now, please let me pass.'

Colin's lips tightened at Beatrice's frosty tone but he took the gem and pocketed it, standing aside. 'I've suffered too...I'll never forget you...'

Beatrice heard his plaintive farewell as she closed the parlour door. With her eyes filled with burning water she approached the stairs. She would wait in her bedchamber till Colin left, then go and see her father.

Beatrice knew her papa would need comforting over this calamity as much as she did. Walter Dewey had liked Dr Burnett as his physician and as his future son-in-law. Colin had promised financial reparation and she hoped her father would not be too proud or too angry to accept the cash.

Her sister, Elise, would be shocked to discover she was not shortly to be a matron of honour. Elise lived in Mayfair and had done her best to persuade her kin to join her as permanent house guests following her marriage to Viscount Blackthorne. Alex had a fabulous mansion on Upper Brook Street. But Walter Dewey had insisted a quiet pastoral life suited him. Beatrice had also been happy to remain in bucolic bliss in Hertfordshire as her physician fiancé was living and working in the vicinity of St Albans.

Now Beatrice wondered if Colin had always wished to improve his prospects from that of country doctor, and if so whether he might immediately move to town with his intended wife to enjoy what remained of the season.

At twenty-five, Beatrice accepted that in the eyes of the world she was past her marriageable prime. Most of the friends she'd made during her debut were now married with children. Colin's future bride was not known to Beatrice—unsurprisingly, as she'd just learned her rival was some seven years her junior and had just made her come-out. Bea had digested that much about Stella Rawlings before shock had snatched away her senses, leaving her momentarily deaf to the horrible details of Colin's visit.

* * *

The light tap on the door brought Bea's head up off the pillow. She had been dozing on her bed's coverlet while waiting for the sound of the doctor's departure from her house, and her life. Beatrice knuckled her tired eyes as she went to the door, realising she'd cried herself into a deeper sleep than she'd wished to have.

'Papa!' Beatrice frowned in consternation. 'You should not have come upstairs!' She sent a searching glance over her father's stooped shoulder. 'Did Mr Francis help you with the climb?'

Walter Dewey waved away his daughter's concern as he made slow progress into her bedchamber assisted by a wooden walking stick. 'Norman is out hunting rabbits for our dinner.' He explained the manservant's absence. 'My small struggle is nothing to the pain I know you must be suffering my dear.'

Walter eased himself down into the armchair by the window. Raising his tired eyes to his daughter's wan face he shook his head to indicate he felt lost for words.

'Dr Burnett has gone?' Beatrice croaked.

'He has, and with my opinion of him ringing in his ears.'

Beatrice dropped to her knees by her father's chair and took a dry, withered hand between her soft palms. 'Please don't be upset over it, Papa,' she whispered, fearful for his health. She could hear his laboured breathing and see a greyish circle outlining his lips. 'My heart will mend...'

'You have a resilient ticker, then, my love,' Walter remarked wryly. How many times now has it been broken in two by some fellow?'

Beatrice knew her father was referring to her past romances that had foundered—usually because the gentleman involved had no money and could not afford to get married. How ironic that this time she must remain a spinster because the reverse were true. Her fiancé had recently received his inheritance and with it a demand to jilt her.

'Had this confounded Sir Donald not died when he did, leaving his odious terms and conditions, you would shortly have been Mrs Burnett.'

Walter gazed levelly at his daughter's upturned face. Beatrice had always been a beauty; some said she was fairer than her younger sister, who had bagged herself a nobleman three years ago. Walter thought them equally wonderful, in their own ways, although he wished Beatrice resembled her younger sister in one aspect: Elise had chosen to give her heart just the once, and very wisely.

Two previous rogues—besotted by Beatrice's golden-haired loveliness, Walter was sure—had encouraged his elder girl to think they would propose, then bitten their tongues at the last minute. In both cases it had transpired that they must fortune-hunt for a bride, being penniless.

Out in the sticks and cut off from the cream of polite society he might be, but Walter was cognizant with marriage mart standards: Beatrice's chances of finding a spouse diminished with every failed romance and every year that passed.

In Walter's opinion Beatrice was as lovely at twenty-five as she'd been when half a decade younger. Her creamy complexion was smooth and unblemished and her blonde hair appeared as shiny and abundant as it had been when she was a teenager. Her figure was enviably slender, yet curvaceous enough to catch a man's eye, and her vivacity made people take to her instantly. Yet still his elder girl remained at home with him because he'd never had the means to provide either of his daughters with a dowry.

Elise had married a millionaire who'd stated bluntly that the privilege of marrying Walter's daughter was payment enough. Unfortunately a similar good and generous fellow had never crossed Beatrice's path, catching her eye.

Colin Burnett had come closest to walking her down the aisle, and thus Walter despised him the most.

'Do you think Burnett truthfully had no idea of the clause in his uncle's will?'

Beatrice gave a little nod. 'I believe him sincere on that; as for greatly adoring me and never forgetting me, that I now find harder to swallow.' Her father's thin fingers closed comfortingly on hers. 'Did Colin offer to pay back the cash you spent on wedding preparations?' Bea asked huskily.

'He did,' Walter confirmed, bringing his daughter's hand to his cool lips.

'It is only fair you are not left out of pocket because of him. You will take what is due to you, won't you, Papa?' Beatrice used the heel of her hand on her cheek to remove a trickle of tears.

'Indeed I shall!' Walter forcefully concurred. 'I admit there was a moment when I felt like telling him to take himself and his money off to rot in hell...but I didn't.' He rumbled a chuckle. 'He might be getting off scot-free from a breach of promise suit but he won't wriggle out of my expenses so easily. Mark my words, my dear, Burnett will get his comeuppance for treating you so shabbily.'

* * *

'Letters for me?' Elise Blackthorne jumped up from her dressing table stool as her maid approached, proffering a silver salver.

Excitedly the viscountess rifled through the post, ignoring elegant cards inviting her to society parties, to find what she was looking for. She frowned; it was from Hertfordshire but bore her father's spidery script rather than her sister's neat slanting hand.

'I shall not need you for an hour or so, Maria.' Before the maid left her bedchamber Elise asked, 'Is the viscount eating breakfast?'

'He has gone to the stables, my lady. Shall I send one of the boys to give him a message?'

Elise shook her head, satisfied she would see Alex before he went about his business for the day. She still felt sated from his lovemaking that morning and knew she should get dressed. If he came back to find her in a lacy negligee they might once more tumble onto the silk sheets, limbs entwined. Elise wanted to get to Pall Mall early today because the dressmaker there had recently given her a fitting and she was impatient to see the beautiful blue satin gown she would wear when matron of honour at Bea's wedding.

Elise corresponded regularly with her sister and relished reading about all the wedding preparations. A local seamstress was making Bea's gown, although the bride to be was keeping the

style of it a secret. Mrs Garner had a workshop based in St Albans and had served the Dewey family for over a decade. Walter had never had the means to provide his daughters with many new clothes when growing up and their debuts had thus been modest affairs.

‘What have you got there?’

Else twisted about at the sound of her husband’s husky baritone.

Alex came closer and dropped a kiss on her bare shoulder. His fingers continued to caress his wife’s satiny skin as he glanced at the parchment in her hand, recognising the writing.

‘Your father has sent you a letter.’

Elise twisted about in the circle of her husband’s arms. ‘I’m just about to read it, Alex, so don’t...’ Her breathy plea was cut off as his mouth slanted over hers and he drew her closer.

‘Oh...Alex...’ Elise giggled, but her protest was half-hearted as she melted against him.

‘It’s your own fault,’ he growled. ‘What’s a man to do when his gorgeous wife parades about half naked?’

‘Whatever he likes, I suppose,’ Elise breathed against his preying mouth.

‘Right answer, sweetheart...’ Alex purred and, swinging her up in his arms, headed for the bed.

Chapter Two

‘There was a time when it was hard to shake you off my shoulder; now I need to make an appointment to see you?’ Alex Blackthorne’s ironic comment drew an apologetic grin from his best friend. However, the fellow’s narrowed gaze remained fixed on the razor sweeping a path through stubble towards a lean cheekbone.

Hugh Kendrick swirled the implement in a china bowl filled with soap-floating water before turning to face the viscount. ‘You know I’d sooner come to watch the fight with you, but I’ve promised Gwen a trip to Epsom races this afternoon.’

Alex sank into a hide chair in his friend’s bedchamber. Obligingly he shifted to one side, allowing Hugh’s startled valet to rescue an elegant jacket that his master had discarded over the back of the upholstery.

‘Besides, if your wife wasn’t out of town you wouldn’t want my company, would you?’ Over the top of the towel mopping his face Hugh hiked a dark eyebrow at Alex.

‘True...’ Alex sighed, flicking a speck from a thigh breeched in fawn cloth.

He was feeling at a loose end since Elise had gone to Hertfordshire to visit her family. It was puzzling that Walter Dewey had written a letter containing a coded message that he would like Elise to visit as soon as she was able.

Alex felt rather guilty now for distracting his wife from immediately reading her note on the morning it had arrived. It had been some hours after the post was delivered that Elise had finally retrieved the paper from amongst their warm, crumpled bed sheets. Mere moments after breaking the seal she’d thrust the letter beneath Alex’s nose, announcing that she’d deciphered her father’s few odd sentences and was certain that a crisis had occurred. Elise could never bear to be parted from her infant son, so Adam had gone to Hertfordshire too, and at Alex’s insistence Maria had accompanied mother and child in one of the luxurious Blackthorne travelling coaches.

‘You look browned off,’ Hugh remarked, shrugging into his shirt. For several minutes he had been contemplating Alex’s frowning expression as he stared into space with his chin resting atop fingers forming a steeple. Hugh guessed his friend was already missing his beloved wife and son.

The two men had been friends for decades, despite the fact that for most of that time their statuses had been poles apart. Hugh had been the underdog, with nothing much to claim to his credit other than his popularity and his family connections. His late father had been an upstanding fellow, a minor peer of the realm who had seen the best in everybody. Unfortunately that blind faith had been particularly strong where his heir was concerned. Others, however, could see what a corrupt, calculating character was Toby Kendrick. On taking his birthright following his father’s demise, Hugh’s brother had become even more of an unbearable wretch.

But Hugh no longer had reason to feel resentful over the bad hand life had dealt him as the second son of a gentleman who believed in primogeniture. Neither had he reason to feel lucky that Viscount Blackthorne had chosen him as a life-long comrade. Hugh might not have a title to polish, but he now had every other advantage that his illustrious friend enjoyed, including a fortune that his acquaintances coveted and that dukes would like their debutante daughters to share in through marriage.

'It's odd for my father-in-law to call Elise home.' Alex finally stirred himself to answer while standing up. The last time his wife had been summoned in such a way Beatrice had sent word because their father had fractured his collarbone in a fall. Naturally Walter had wanted to have both his beloved daughters by his side...just in case the injury had proved fatal.

'Do you think some harm might have again befallen him?'

'Walter wrote the letter himself, so I doubt he's bedridden.' Alex shrugged. 'It's probably all about Beatrice's wedding day. Elise is matron of honour...' He grimaced bewilderment at the workings of the female mind.

Hugh glanced up to find his friend's eyes on him. 'Yes...perhaps it's just about the wedding,' he muttered, resuming buttoning his cuffs.

'You don't ask about Beatrice any more.' Alex began adjusting his cravat in the mantel glass now Hugh had left the space free.

'Does she ask about me?' Hugh countered, picking up his jacket and pegging it on a finger over a muscular shoulder. He preceded his friend towards the door.

They were heading towards the top of the stairs before Alex answered. 'You can't blame Beatrice for wanting to forget all about you after the way you behaved.'

Hugh's mouth tilted sardonically. 'Indeed...so it seems a bit pointless asking about her, doesn't it?' He plunged his hands into his pockets. 'A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then...'

'And for you...most of it flowed in India...' Alex remarked dryly.

'So it did...' Hugh said in a similar vein. 'I hope everything goes well on the big day.'

He moved ahead of Alex, descending the stairs at quite a speed.

On reaching the cool marble vestibule of Hugh's grand town house the friends waited for the butler to announce that the curricle had been brought round. A moment later they clattered down the stone steps, then stopped to exchange a few words before going their separate ways.

'Come along to Epsom with us if you're kicking your heels. You might back a few winners and cheer yourself up by raising your bank balance.' Hugh was speaking ironically; he knew very well that his friend's accounts were in no need of a boost. It was his spirits that were flagging.

The startling change in his own fortunes still gave Hugh cause to smile inwardly. Just two years ago he'd had reason to watch carefully every penny he spent. Now he could purchase a stable of prized Arabs and watch them race at Epsom—or anywhere else—if that was his whim. Yet Hugh realised that his enthusiasm for a day out with his favourite mistress was waning and he felt oddly deflated.

'You expect me to play gooseberry to you and the lovely Gwen?' Alex scowled. 'I don't think I will, but thanks for asking.' He clapped a hand on Hugh's shoulder. 'See you in White's later in the week, I expect.'

'It's a bit late to let Gwen down with an excuse.' Hugh sounded irritated by his conscience.

'Quite right...keep the lady happy,' Alex mocked.

Gwen Sharpe was a celebrated Cyprian known to select as lovers affluent gentlemen who could provide her with the finer things in life. Hugh certainly fitted the bill, following a bizarre stroke of luck that had made him one of the wealthiest men in the country.

'I'll be back before ten tonight. Do you fancy a visit to the Palm House to cure your boredom?' Hugh called over a shoulder as he approached the kerb to take the curricle's reins from his tiger.

Alex snorted a laugh. 'I'm a married man...are you trying to get me hung?'

Hugh shook his head in mock disgust. 'You're under the thumb...that's what you are.'

‘And I’ll willingly remain there...’ Alex returned, grinning.

The Palm House was a notorious den of iniquity where gambling and whoring went hand in hand. Men of all classes—from criminals to aristocracy—could be found mingling in its smoky environment from midnight till gone daybreak. At early light the club would spew forth its clientele, the majority of whom would stagger off with sore heads and empty purses.

Hugh set the greys to a trot, wishing he could shake off the feeling that he’d sooner return home than go to Epsom with Gwen. His mistress was beautiful and beguiling, if gratingly possessive at times. Any man would want to spend time with her... And yet Hugh, for a reason that escaped him, wanted solitude to reflect on a romance that had long been dead and buried. The woman he’d loved three years ago was now about to become another man’s bride, so what purpose would be served by brooding on what might have been?

With a curse exploding through his gritted teeth Hugh set the horses to a faster pace, exasperated by his maudlin thoughts and the fact that his friend had chosen this morning to remind him that his sister-in-law’s marriage was imminent. Beatrice Dewey was firmly in his past, and Gwen and Sophia, the courtesans he kept in high style, would serve very well for the present. If in need of deeper emotion he could head out to India and spend some time with somebody he’d grown to love...

* * *

‘What do you want?’

‘That’s a nice greeting, I must say.’

‘Are we to pretend I’m pleased to see you?’ Hugh folded the newspaper he’d been reading whilst breakfasting and skimmed it over the crisp damask tablecloth. He lounged into a mahogany chair-back, crossing his arms over the ruffles on his shirt. Sardonically, he surveyed his older brother.

Uninvited, Sir Toby Kendrick pulled out the chair opposite Hugh, seating himself with a flourish of coat-tails. He then stared obstinately at a footman until the fellow darted forward.

‘Coffee—and fill a plate with whatever is over there.’ Toby flicked a finger at the domed silver platters lining the sideboard whilst giving his order. He turned sly eyes on his brother, daring Hugh to object.

The servant withdrew with a jerky bow, a fleeting glance flying at his master from beneath his powdered wig. Hugh gave an imperceptible nod, sanctioning his brother’s boorish demand to be fed.

All of the servants knew—in common with the ton—that Hugh Kendrick and his older brother did not get on.

Sir Toby’s dislike of his younger brother had increased since Hugh’s wealth and standing had eclipsed his own. Toby had relished what he deemed to be his rightful place as loftiest Kendrick. Now he’d been toppled, and in such a teeth-grindingly, shocking stroke of luck for his brother that Toby had been apoplectic when first hearing about it. Knowing that he wasn’t alone in being bitter was no consolation to Toby. His brother was popular, and more people had been pleased than jealous of Hugh’s success.

Their mother and their sister had been overjoyed—no doubt because they’d both benefited from Hugh’s generosity. Toby had received nothing from Hugh other than a bottle of champagne with which to toast his luck. In the event Toby had refrained from smashing the magnum to smithereens on the step and downed the prime vintage at record speed, drowning his sorrows.

‘No broiled kidneys?’ Toby used a silver fork to push the food about on the plate that had just been set before him.

‘I don’t like kidneys,’ Hugh replied. He sat forward in his chair. ‘Neither do I like being disturbed by visitors at his ungodly hour of the day.’ He got to his feet. ‘Are you going to tell me what you want? Or have you just turned up for a free breakfast and the opportunity to try my patience?’

Toby shoved away the plate of untasted splendid food, a curl to his lip. ‘All that cash and you can’t find yourself a decent cook?’ he chortled.

‘As you’ve no appetite, and nothing of moment to say, it’s time you went on your way.’ He addressed the footman. ‘My brother is leaving. Show him out.’ Turning his back on Toby he strolled to the huge windows that overlooked Grosvenor Square, idly surveying the busy street scene.

The servant attempted to conceal his satisfied smirk on springing forward to do his master’s bidding.

‘You’re getting a bit too high and mighty, aren’t you?’ Toby barked, his cheeks florid.

‘Perhaps I spent too long studying you when growing up,’ Hugh drawled over a shoulder.

Toby whacked away the footman’s ushering arm, stomping closer to Hugh. ‘Very well...I have something to discuss,’ he snarled in an undertone.

‘Go ahead; but be brief. I have an appointment with my tailor.’

‘Might we repair to your library and be private?’ Toby suggested sarcastically.

Hugh glanced back at the servants clearing the breakfast things. He sighed. ‘If we must...’ He strode for the door without another word and once in the corridor approached the library at the same exasperated speed.

Toby trudged behind, his footsteps muffled by the luxurious carpet. Inwardly he squirmed at having to come here, cap in hand, and beg his brother for a loan. Not so long ago he had been the one the others in the family came to when in need of cash. It had given Toby immense pleasure to make them dance to his tune for their coins; even his mother had had to humble herself to extract her allowance from him. But now she had no need to because Hugh had provided her with a generous pension—something her dear late husband had omitted to do.

Sir Kenneth Kendrick had relied on his son and heir to provide fairly for his successors, proving that he might have doted on Toby but he had never come to know his eldest son’s true nature.

‘I need two hundred pounds urgently,’ Toby blurted as soon as the door was closed behind him.

‘Is that a request for a loan?’

‘You know damn well it is,’ Toby spat. He swiped a hand about his mouth, aware he’d need to control his temper if he was to get the cash and keep the duns at bay. Hugh might be open-handed where his mother and sister were concerned, but his generosity to Toby was a different matter.

Hugh leaned on the library table that almost spanned from one end of the oak-panelled room to the other. He drummed his long fingers in slow rhythm on the leather-topped furniture. ‘I’ve already handed over a thousand pounds in less than six months.’ Hugh watched his brother’s lips whiten in anger at that reminder.

‘I didn’t realise you were keeping a tally of the paltry sums.’ Toby flung himself down in a chair, affecting ennui.

‘As I recall, one thousand pounds wasn’t a paltry amount when I came to you many years ago and begged for your help in securing Sarah’s future.’

Then Toby’s meanness had run so deep that he’d denied his only sister the cash she desperately needed after she’d been compromised during her debut. With their father gone it had fallen to Hugh, impecunious at that time, to rescue Sarah’s reputation. He’d managed to scrape together a dowry—the majority of the cash borrowed from Alex Blackthorne—thus tempting a decent chap, lacking prospects, to put a ring on his disgraced sister’s finger.

Inwardly Toby railed at himself; he’d laid himself wide open to that barb. ‘The little madam deserved to be taught a lesson for acting like a strumpet.’

‘Our sister did nothing wrong other than to trust one of your friends to act as a gentleman. She was seventeen and not worldly-wise,’ Hugh coldly reminded him.

Toby snorted derision. ‘Well, she was worldly-wise after her folly...so a lesson well learned about promenading after dark with randy men. You—and she—should thank me rather than criticising.’

Hugh moved his head in disgust. ‘I wonder sometimes if we are related. You really are the most obnoxious character.’

‘Are you questioning our dear mama’s virtue?’ Toby guffawed. ‘She’ll not thank you for hearing that repeated. Perhaps I might tell her.’

He eyed his sibling calculatingly, feeling confident that Hugh would relent rather than risk upsetting their widowed mother. The dowager was approaching sixty-five and would be distraught to know her elder son risked a spell in the Fleet because his debts were out of control.

‘I’ve had enough of you...take yourself off...’ Hugh snapped in exasperation, turning for the door.

‘What’s wrong? No money left? Sent too much out to India, have you? Toby’s voice was low and sly and he concealed a smirk at the look of intense hatred he’d brought to his brother’s face.

‘I’ll arrange for a bank draft later in the day,’ Hugh said, just before quitting the room. ‘Now, if you don’t mind, I need to be elsewhere...’

Toby strutted after him, looking exceedingly pleased with himself.

‘If you come again demanding me to bail you out of gambling debts you’ll be wasting your time. I won’t care what you say...’

‘Won’t you, now...?’ Toby drawled provocatively. ‘Gambling debts?’ He smoothly changed the subject. ‘It’s nothing so vulgar, my dear fellow. Serena has expensive tastes in jewellery, if you must have the details...’

Toby wasn’t referring to his prospective fiancée’s taste but to that of his mistress. Hugh knew his brother had set up Serena Worthing in a smart apartment, and even with a marriage contract under discussion it seemed Toby had no intention of putting her off to concentrate on his future wife.

‘Well, whatever it is...whoring, drinking, gambling...you’ll pay for it yourself in future.’

‘If ever our positions return to what they were...what they should be...I’ll remember this conversation and all those others where you’ve had the damnable cheek to moralise.’ Toby pointed a stout finger at his brother. ‘Before you got rich and Blackthorne got married the two of you were constant petticoat-chasers. Blackthorne might have eased off now, but you’re worse than ever since you got back from India.’ Toby thrust his face close to Hugh’s jaw. ‘Tell me...what it is about an exotic beauty that fires a man’s blood so...?’

‘You sound jealous of my popularity with the ladies.’ Hugh shoved his brother away and strode on along the corridor. ‘Show yourself out.’

Chapter Three

‘I’m sorry Papa worried you enough to bring you racing to Hertfordshire yesterday. I had no idea he’d summoned you home just because the wedding is off.’ Beatrice bounced her baby nephew on her knee. ‘Of course it is wonderful to have you visit, Elise, and this little chap has grown so big since I last saw him.’

Elise had been pouring tea into bone china, but on hearing the quaver in her sister’s voice she put down the pot and crouched down by the side of Bea’s armchair. ‘You don’t need to be brave with me, my dear. I know how dreadfully hurt you are.’ She pressed Bea’s fingers in comfort.

Beatrice avoided Elise’s astute gaze, blinking rapidly at the window to one side of her. ‘It is all right...really it is...it has been nearly a week now since...’ She tried to name the person who’d caused her heartbreak but found his name stuck to her tongue.

As her nephew gurgled, giving her a gummy smile, Bea fondled his soft pink cheek with a forefinger.

‘Another few days and I will be right as rain—won’t I, Master Adam?’

‘Well, I know I would not be, if it were me who’d been so cruelly jilted,’ Elise announced pithily. She shook her head in disbelief. ‘I’d never have imagined Dr Burnett to be a callous or a fickle fellow.’

‘I’m glad I wasn’t the only one who mistook his character.’ Beatrice sighed. ‘I can’t forgive him for abandoning me in favour of family duty, yet since I’ve had time to calm down I understand why he did so.’

‘Then I think you exceedingly over-obliging!’ Elise exclaimed. ‘Love should override all else in my book.’

‘In a perfect world...perhaps...’ Beatrice returned philosophically. ‘I think matrimony and Beatrice Dewey are destined to remain strangers.’

‘Never say so! There is a husband for you...he just has not shown himself yet.’ Elise attempted to draw her sister from her glums with a provocative comment. ‘As I recall, there was nobody more determined to be a wife and mother than you.’

Beatrice chuckled wryly at that reminder. Indeed, there had been a time when she’d driven her poor sister to distraction, so keen had she been to settle down with a nice fellow and raise a little family of her own. After several false starts she’d met Colin and finally thought her ambition was within her grasp. Now, for some reason, she felt tired of struggling towards that particular dream...

‘You girls are up early.’ Walter Dewey entered the sunny front parlour, supported by his stick. He gave his daughters an affectionate smile, thinking it nice to have them both together again at home, and with the added bonus of his handsome little grandson.

In Walter’s opinion the child was a perfect blend of his parents: he had the viscount’s brown eyes and sturdy build and his mother’s sharp chin and fair hair.

‘Did you sleep well?’ he asked Elise. ‘I heard young Adam having a grizzle just before dawn broke.’

‘He was wet so I changed his nappy,’ Viscountess Blackthorne said, as though it were the most natural thing in the world to tend to her baby herself rather than give Adam to his nurse.

Following their parents’ acrimonious divorce, Elise and Bea had been reared by their papa in straitened circumstances, so were accustomed to being useful and practical in mundane matters. Both young women were quite happy to dress themselves and knew how to cook and clean. When younger, the sisters had taken to painting their bedrooms and made a capable job of it, much to their papa’s surprise and delight.

‘Don’t look at me like that, miss,’ Walter mildly reproved, having caught Beatrice frowning at him. ‘I know you believe I’m at fault because your sister has better things to do than commiserate with us that you’ve been put back on the shelf—’

‘I certainly do not!’ Elise cut across her father. ‘There’s nothing more important to me than being here with you, although the reason for it is upsetting.’ She gave her sister’s cheek an affectionate stroke. ‘Bea is certainly not on the shelf, Papa! How can she be when she is so pretty and looks not a day over eighteen...?’

‘Oh...Elise!’ Beatrice choked. ‘A very nice compliment but it really is too much.’

‘Perhaps I exaggerated just a little. You could pass easily for twenty-one and that is certainly not over-egging it.’ Elise cocked her head to assess her sister’s countenance. Beatrice was still one of the loveliest young women of her acquaintance, and in the haut monde Viscountess Blackthorne certainly came into contact with some vaunted beauties.

For the first time in days Beatrice chuckled with genuine amusement. ‘Papa’s right: I might be on the shelf...’ she pulled a little face ‘...but I’m not sure it worries me; at present I’m fed up with gentlemen and romance.’

‘That will pass.’ Walter flapped a hand. ‘Every young lady craves her own home and family.’

‘Are you trying to get rid of me, Papa?’ Beatrice teased her father.

‘You know I am not! You may stay with your old papa for as long as you wish...but to tell the truth I was looking forward to walking you down the aisle before these old legs finally give out on me.’

‘And so you shall, Papa,’ Elise reassured him, getting up from her place by her sister’s chair. Having tested the tea that she’d abandoned in the pot, Elise found it now unpalatably lukewarm.

‘Your Aunt Dolly will be very sad to have this news,’ Walter muttered, sinking into a seat.

‘She loves a wedding,’ Elise reflected, settling by her papa on the sofa.

'She travelled here to attend your nuptials uninvited, as I recall.' Walter dredged up a chuckle at the memory of his widowed sister turning up out of the blue on the eve of the wedding, expecting to be housed and fed.

'And Mrs Vickers accompanied her,' Elise chipped in, fondly dwelling on her countryside wedding at the local church. It had been a quiet, yet wonderful occasion, with just her family about her. She glanced at her sister, wondering if Bea was musing sadly on the fact that Colin Burnett had acted as Alex's groomsman that fine afternoon.

'I rather liked Edith Vickers,' Beatrice remarked brightly. She had indeed been thinking of Colin's role in her sister's happy day and pounced on the first thing that came into her head to chase memories of him from her mind. 'How is Mrs Vickers? Do you ever see her?'

'Oh...of course...you would not know for I've not had a reason to mention it.' Elise frowned. 'Sadly, Mrs Vickers passed away.' She leaned forward to impart an exciting titbit. 'There was quite a brouhaha when it came to light that she had not been as hard up as she'd believed herself to be. When Edith's husband died his creditors pounced and left her in very reduced circumstances. But they left alone the deeds to a strip of land in India because it was deemed to be barren. Mrs Vickers bequeathed it to her nephew, Hugh.'

'Hugh Kendrick?' Walter snarled.

He recalled that name. When Beatrice had gone with her sister to London several years ago Mrs Vickers's nephew had shown undue interest in Beatrice, raising her hopes that he might propose. Walter had been enraged to know the fellow hadn't the wherewithal to take on a wife so must fortune-hunt for a bride. He'd been angry at himself, too, knowing that if only he had put by a dowry for his daughters his elder child might have been settled before the younger, as was the proper way of things.

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear of her passing.' Beatrice wiped dribble from her nephew's mouth with her hanky. 'I expect Aunt Dolly misses Edith. They were good friends, weren't they?'

'So...the land was not worthless?' Walter guessed, returning to the crux of the matter.

'It was not,' Elise confirmed, clapping her hands in glee. 'Alex was delighted for his friend when he found out about his good fortune. Of course there were many green-eyed people not so pleased at the turn of events, and Sir Toby Kendrick led the pack—'

'What happened?' Walter butted in impatiently, his gnarled hand clutching tightly at his stick, turning the knuckles white. Walter loved a good tale of Lady Luck turning up unexpectedly. Many a time over the years he had wished that elusive minx would smile on him when his marriage and his business had crumbled, leaving him desolate with two teenage girls to bring up alone.

'The strip of land contained some mines, long ago abandoned as dry. Hugh went to India and had them reinvestigated from curiosity and they turned up a seam of fine diamonds. So now Hugh Kendrick is very rich, and I for one am overjoyed for him.'

Beatrice blinked in astonishment at her past love's extraordinary stroke of luck. 'Yes...good for him...' she said quietly.

'Good for him?' Walter barked. 'Another fellow who broke your heart, as I recall.'

'I do seem to attract rogues.' Beatrice's tone was rueful rather than bitter. 'I'm sure it's my own fault,' she added with a twinkling smile. 'You have warned me not to be so impetuous, haven't you, Papa?' Bea knew that in the past, especially in her pursuit of Hugh Kendrick, she'd been not only impetuous but foolhardy.

Walter glanced at his jilted daughter. He'd been right to call Elise home, he realised; just a few days ago Beatrice's low spirits had worried him. Now, with her sister close by, she was recovering far better than Walter had dared hope. It had always been a great comfort to him that his girls were good friends as well as close kin. He knew of families where siblings resented one another—especially when one child did better than the other. But Beatrice had only been happy for her younger sister when she had caught herself a handsome aristocrat to wed, and Elise with her open, sweet nature never attempted to lord it over her less fortunate sibling.

'It's a shame Edith didn't pop off a few years ago,' Walter said. 'Her rogue of a nephew would have received his bequest earlier and been in a position to call on me for your hand.'

'Papa!' Beatrice cried, half-amused, half-outraged. 'Poor Edith! I am sad to hear of her demise no matter what benefits it turned up.' She gestured airily. 'Besides, it all turned out for the best; after that little sojourn in London ended, and with it my friendship with Mr Kendrick, I had only been home a few days before I was feeling relieved that he'd thrown me over.' She tickled Adam, making him giggle, while adding self-mockingly, 'I quickly met Colin and fell in love all over again.'

'On the rebound,' Walter muttered darkly. 'And look where that got you.'

'Hugh is still a bachelor,' Elise piped up, subtly siding with her father.

She had also thought at the time that her sister had transferred her affection to Dr Burnett far too quickly after Hugh's rejection. Not that Hugh had carelessly withdrawn his suit; at the time he had confided in Alex to feeling mortified at not being in a position to propose to Bea. Elise had thought him brutal in making a clean break with her sister, yet had come to realise it had been the decent thing to do. The couple's mutual affection had started stirring gossip, and the town tabbies loved nothing better than to amuse themselves shredding an innocent's reputation.

A girl who too obviously set her cap at a gentleman, then failed to get him to put a ring on her finger, invited opprobrium. Worse still, if it had been discovered that Beatrice had advertised for a husband in a gazette, like a vulgar hussy, the Dewey sisters would have been hounded out of town during the season they'd been house guests of the Chapmans. In the event a scandal had broken, but Elise and Alex had been the butt of it and it had quickly died away when Elise received Alex's marriage proposal.

'I understood Hugh Kendrick had set his sights on Fiona Chapman's inheritance.' Walter had been reflecting, as had his daughters, on the drama of three years ago.

'Fiona deterred him from proposing, I believe, knowing as she did that his heart wasn't in it.' Elise glanced at Beatrice, who seemed oblivious to the hint and continued playing pat-a-cake with Adam.

'That young woman must have been kicking herself ever since.' Walter growled a laugh. 'I expect she has had the scolding of her life from Maude.' He mentioned Fiona's mother with obvious fondness. The Chapmans were good people and had remained loyal to the Deweys through good and bad times over the decades.

'Verity is increasing with her first child.' Verity Clemence, née Chapman, was a very dear friend of Elise's. 'I have only just found out!' She answered Bea's unspoken question, flashed by a pair of expressive blue eyes. 'I believe the babe is not due till late autumn.'

'She must be thrilled, and so must be Mr and Mrs Chapman.' Beatrice sounded wistful. 'It will be their first grandchild...'

A bang on the door caused the room's occupants to abruptly cease their lively conversation and look at one another in surprise. Elise jumped up to peer discreetly out of the square-paned window. 'We are on the point of having a visit from Mrs Callan and Victoria,' she groaned.

'The grapevine has done its work, then,' Beatrice acknowledged wryly.

'Would you sooner I sent them away?' Elise feared that her sister was right: the vicar's wife and daughter had come to pry about the broken engagement rather than politely socialise.

'Everybody will know sooner or later, so I must get used to the idea of facing down the stares and whispers.' Bea stood up, handing Adam to his mother. 'Let's get it over with now, while I'm feeling ready to deflect any amount of sly comments.'

Elise's smile combined admiration and encouragement for Bea. 'I'll tell Betty to show them in.'

A few minutes later Elise was back with her family in the front parlour, exchanging a resigned smile with Bea as they heard voices in the hallway heralding their visitors' imminent appearance.

'We came as soon as we heard,' Mrs Callan announced with theatrical sympathy, surging into the room. She halted abruptly, causing her plump daughter trailing in her wake to collide with

her. Nudging Victoria, to alert her to the presence of aristocracy, Mrs Callan bobbed low to the viscountess, who was rocking her son in her arms.

'We are indeed honoured to see you today, Lady Blackthorne. Ah...you have brought your little son to see his grandpapa.' Ethel Callan fluttered a hand to her throat to indicate her regret in what she was about to say. 'Of course it is a shame that such calamitous news brings you back to Hertfordshire.'

'I come to Hertfordshire gladly, for good or bad news.'

'Oh...of course...' Mrs Callan approached Beatrice, taking her hands in a thin, dry grip. 'Shocked! It is not too strong a word!' She gave Bea's fingers a vigorous shake. 'Deeply disappointed also, to discover that nice Dr Burnett would heartlessly abandon you like that.'

'We have discovered he is not so nice, have we not, Mama?' Victoria piped up.

'Dr Burnett had his reasons for doing what he did and I have accepted them, so that is that.' Beatrice's voice was cool and held an air of finality as she firmly withdrew her hands from the older woman's clutch. She was not about to be drawn into complaining about her loss. Whatever she said would be repeated ad infinitum in the village.

'Do take a seat, madam, and you also, Miss Callan.' Walter's fist was quivering on his stick as his annoyance increased. Just as he'd been daring to hope Beatrice seemed more cheerful these two were likely to overset her again with their false pity. He knew for a fact that Victoria had done her utmost to snare the doctor herself. It had gone round the locality that the minx had concocted ailments simply to get the fellow to make a house call. Her father had moaned to Walter that he owed Burnett a tidy sum on account of his spinster daughter's antics, and no gain made from it.

Ethel Callan settled down, with much smoothing of skirts, in a vacant chair by the fireside, and her daughter perched on the sofa next to Walter.

'We were just about to have some fresh tea,' Beatrice announced. 'I'll ask Mrs Francis to bring two more cups and a fresh pot...' Her voice tailed off as another rata-tat on the door was heard. Inwardly she groaned, fearing yet more ladies had come to gleefully commiserate with her. 'I'll go this time.' She sent Elise a subtle wink that conveyed she'd sooner her sister fielded questions for a short while.

Chapter Four

In the hallway Beatrice spied the comforting figure of Mrs Francis ambling towards her from the direction of the kitchen.

'I'll attend to the door.' Bea gave the housekeeper a smile. 'Would you make some tea for us, please, and bring it along directly? The sooner we have been hospitable the sooner our guests might decide to be on their way.'

Betty Francis twitched a smile, understanding the quip. 'Don't you worry. I'll be quick as I can with the refreshments, but maybe I'll just dawdle a moment and see how many cups we might need.' The woman's grey head pointed grimly at the door. Betty knew very well why people were calling on them, and wouldn't be surprised to see Squire Thaddon's wife outside with some of her friends, keen to join the inquisition that was taking place in the front parlour.

'I suppose that might be wise,' Bea said wryly.

'The rumour mill's been grinding overtime, no doubt about that,' Betty muttered darkly. 'Might be you'll open up and I'll need to break out another tea service.'

Betty Francis and her husband Norman had been with the Deweys for approaching twenty-five years and felt very protective of the family. Betty had been like a mother to the girls when the hussy Mr Dewey had married ran off to her lover. If she bumped into the doctor Betty would cheerfully wring his neck for breaking Miss Beatrice's heart. But she'd heard from the butcher's boy, who'd pedalled over earlier in the week, that Colin Burnett had wasted no time in upping sticks and moving away.

With one hand Beatrice smoothed her sprigged muslin dress, while the other tucked blonde tendrils behind her small ears. Forcing an insouciant expression, she opened the door. Extreme astonishment caused her smile to freeze on her full pink lips.

'Hello, Beatrice; you look well...'

'Why...Mr Kendrick...I...that is...we were expecting somebody else,' Beatrice finished faintly, having finally snapped herself to attention.

'You remember me...I'm flattered.'

Beatrice attempted to rouse herself from her stupor. Her heart had begun to thud erratically and the pearl buttons on her bodice were quivering with every breath she took. But if her visitor noticed her bosom's alluring movement he gave no sign; Hugh Kendrick's eyes were politely fixed on her blanching face.

'I'm sorry to startle you, and hope I've not arrived at a bad time...'

'No...not at all...' Bea fibbed. 'Please...do come in, sir.' She belatedly remembered her manners and drew to one side, aware that Betty was hovering behind, watching and listening to their strained conversation.

'Just one more cup, then, please, Mrs Francis.' Beatrice was thankful to have a reason to turn to the housekeeper and compose herself, simply to avoid a pair or relentless hawk-like eyes.

She had recognised Hugh straight away, yet marvelled at having done so. The person before her little resembled the gentleman she had fallen in love with three years ago. His thick hair was still conker-brown, worn rather long, and his eyes were deepest hazel, fringed with ebony lashes; but there all similarity ended. Once he'd had an appealing fresh-faced demeanour and had worn modestly styled attire. Now his lean, angular face was sun-beaten and bore lines of dissipation. His elegantly tailored suit of clothing, dusty and creased from the journey, proclaimed him a man who could afford to be carelessly indulgent.

So far they'd exchanged few words, all of them polite, yet Bea felt unsettled by his lazy confidence. Once Hugh Kendrick would blush endearingly the moment she entered a room; at present she found his hooded amber gaze intimidating rather than flattering. As Beatrice pivoted about to again invite him into her home she sensed a pang of regret that he was no longer a charming young fellow but an aloof stranger who possessed an alarming virility.

'I expect you're busy with wedding preparations.'

His quiet comment caused Beatrice to snap her darkening eyes to him, wondering if he was being deliberately sarcastic. His tone had been as unemotional as were his features, but she quickly realised it was unlikely he'd yet heard her bad news. Her sister had only found out a few days ago on reaching Hertfordshire, and Elise's husband remained in ignorance of what had gone on.

'It's none of my business, I know. My apologies for mentioning it.' Hugh had sensed her frostiness increase at the mention of her marriage. She had good cause to dislike him, and he'd often cursed the reason for it.

But not any more. He'd been too broke to have her—the only woman he'd really wanted—and following several humiliating and vain attempts at fortune-hunting a bride he'd done with love and marriage. Now he could buy himself all the female company he needed, and renew it when he grew bored with the women in his life.

Hugh's mouth slanted in self-mockery as he recalled that a joyful wedding reception had been taking place the last time they'd been in one another's company.

Alex Blackthorne had been married in Hertfordshire at a country church with few people in attendance, but he had bestowed on his bride an extravagant party when they arrived back in Mayfair. No expense had been spared and the lavish affair had seen ambitious society brides emulating it ever since.

During the celebration Hugh remembered Beatrice and her father keeping their distance from him. He had taken against the fellow escorting Beatrice even before Alex told him that Beatrice Dewey had become engaged to Colin Burnett.

'What do you want, sir?' Bea asked coolly, although her complexion had grown warm beneath his relentless scrutiny. She felt wound as tightly as a spring, but the thrill of being so close to him,

enveloped in his musky sandalwood scent, was not easily conquered. If he'd just stop staring at her, she thought crossly, she might manage to calm down and stop turning over in her mind what had happened between them years ago.

At Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, Hugh had singled her out, paying her such attention that a crowd of envious women had closed in on them to eavesdrop. The giddy elation of that warm midsummer evening and the following days, anticipating her next meeting with Hugh, were not easy to forget. Neither was the memory of her happiness disintegrating when he bluntly told her he couldn't see her again.

'We have some neighbours visiting. I do not want to seem inhospitable, sir, but it might be better if you do not join us.' Mrs Callan's hoarse laugh had jolted Beatrice to the present. 'My father has not forgotten or forgiven that once we knew each other...that is, he recalls that our brief friendship turned sour,' Beatrice hastily amended, blushing. They had most definitely not known each other—in the biblical sense or any other. She had mistaken this man's nature and sincerity just as she had with Colin.

'I regret that we parted before I knew you as well as I would have liked.'

'I cannot echo that sentiment, sir.' Hugh's amused tone had deepened the colour staining Beatrice's porcelain complexion. 'My only regret is that I ever became acquainted with you at all.' Stolen kisses and caresses, snatched during their brief moments alone, were at the forefront of her mind, putting a disquieting throb low in her belly. Bea feared he might also be recalling their passionate moonlit trysts, and his next soft comment proved her intuitive.

'I don't believe you wish we'd never met when we had such a delightful time.'

'Then you should curb your conceit, because it is the truth,' Beatrice snapped, avoiding the sultry glint in his eyes. 'Once again I must ask you what you want. I cannot believe you have simply come to see me and reminisce—'

'I won't keep you long from your friends,' Hugh interrupted smoothly. 'Nice as it is to see you, my dear, it's a far more vital matter that brings me here uninvited.'

Bea was aware of the arrogance in his tone and felt her hackles rise. No doubt now he had increased his prospects he felt she should feel flattered by his attention. Before she could step away from him he'd strolled back towards the door as though he might leave.

'I have some urgent news for Alex. Would you fetch him, please, so I might speak to him?' Hugh's exasperating thoughts made him sound harsh and domineering. Beneath his breath he was cursing himself for finding her country freshness sweetly appealing after Gwen's cloying presence. Once he'd touched and caressed Beatrice often, and with her full consent. Any sudden move from him now was sure to result in a swift slap, so he'd distanced himself to avoid temptation.

'Alex?' A small frown crinkled Bea's brow. 'Why, I cannot get him, sir...he is not here. Elise arrived a few days ago with baby Adam but we have not seen Alex. Is he on his way, then?'

'I imagined he would have arrived by now. He left before me. His butler said he'd travelled into Hertfordshire so I came directly here, assuming he'd be with Elise.'

On the long hard ride towards St Albans he'd been wondering how he'd feel again when he saw Beatrice. In his youth he'd been infatuated plenty of times, impoverished just as frequently, by pert beauties with expensive tastes. But he'd put all of them from his mind. Beatrice Dewey he'd not been able to forget. He'd explained it away by blaming mutual friends for keeping the winsome blonde haunting his thoughts. But Hugh suspected that what presently occupied Beatrice's mind was her brother-in-law's safety. She was no doubt imagining that Alex had come a cropper on the road, and Hugh naturally wanted to soothe her fears on that score.

'If he'd broken an axle, or one of his horses had gone lame, I would have passed him en route,' Hugh softly reassured her. 'Alex might have taken a break at a tavern.'

A furrow appeared in Beatrice's smooth brow, testament to the fact she was not entirely convinced by that argument. 'I shall let Elise know you are here; she'll want to speak to you if you've come on her husband's account.'

Swiftly Hugh moved to apprehend her, catching her wrist in a firm grip. 'It might be best not to tell her anything till I locate Alex. I don't want to unduly upset Elise if there is an easy explanation for the viscount's absence.'

'Yes...I understand...' Beatrice croaked, her skin heating beneath his clasp. She'd proof now that Hugh Kendrick had kindly sought to allay her fears over her brother-in-law's tardiness, despite suspecting all might not be well. But it was the sensation of Hugh's touch—far more assertive than she remembered it to be—rather than anxiety for Alex that was making her captured flesh quiver.

Slowly Hugh withdrew his hand, and this time Bea heard a syllable of the oath he emitted as he jammed his hands in his pockets and walked off.

'Oh, there you are, Bea...I wondered where you had got to...'

It was too late to prevent Elise knowing the truth: Bea's prolonged absence had prompted her sister to nip out of the front parlour in search of her. With Adam cradled against a shoulder, obscuring her view, Elise hadn't at first noticed the gentleman by the door.

'Hugh!' Elise hurried towards him. 'What a lovely surprise to see you! Why have you not joined us in the parlour?' she burst out. Elise's sparkling gaze veered between the couple, lingered on Bea, wordlessly enquiring what had brought about this unexpected and exciting turn of events.

'Mr Kendrick has come here with important news for Alex.' Beatrice didn't want to worry Elise, but knew her sister would eventually discover the reason behind Hugh's visit. 'We expect he'll turn up soon, having stopped for a drink.'

'Alex didn't say he would come after me but I won't be surprised if he does.' Elise smiled contentedly. 'He's probably at the Red Lion. He doesn't like Papa to fiddle and fuss and spend his money on unnecessary comforts just so he might bed down here for a night or two.'

'Of course...that's where he is.' Beatrice sighed in relief. When Viscount Blackthorne had been courting her sister he would often lodge at the inn at St Albans.

Elise was swaying her drowsing son while frowning at Hugh. 'If you've come all this way it must be bad news. Please tell me what it is for I shall only fret if you do not. Has something awful happened in the few days I've been away?'

'I'm afraid that your mother-in-law has scarlatina.' Hugh comforted Elise with a sympathetic smile as one of her hands flew to cover her shocked gasp. 'The physician thinks she will recover well but at her age there is an obvious risk...' His voice tailed off. 'She has been asking to see Alex.'

'Of course...he must go immediately to her side. I should return too.' Elise was very fond of her mother-in-law and knew the woman doted on Alex, her only child.

'It has been wonderful to see you, but Papa will understand why you must cut short your visit.' Beatrice strove to remove Elise's worry over leaving so soon after arriving in Hertfordshire.

The doorknocker was again loudly employed at the same moment that Betty reappeared, shuffling towards them, bearing a tray laden with a silver tea set surrounded by some delicate bone china.

'If it's more nosey Parkers here to tattle they can come back another time,' the housekeeper stated with salty directness. 'We're right out of tea anyhow, till Norman gets back from town with the provisions.'

Being closest to the door, Hugh did the honours, opening it to find Alex on the step.

The viscount gave his chum a quizzical look while proceeding inside, but was prevented from asking the most obvious question. His wife hastily handed her precious burden to her sister, then launched herself at him to hug him about the waist in a show of welcome and comfort at the news she must soon break. Gently Elise urged her husband towards a small alcove by the stairs so they might quietly converse.

‘What’s it all about?’ Walter demanded waspishly, emerging from the parlour and pulling the door shut behind him. ‘You’re not going to abandon me with those two, are you?’

Leaning heavily on his stick, he fished out his spectacles and put them on so he might get a closer look at what was occurring. He peered from one to the other of the people crowding his narrow hallway. ‘Ah...capital! I see my son-in-law has dropped by to join us...why are they whispering?’

Walter didn’t wait for a reply to his question about Elise and Alex huddling together a yard or so away. His attention had already moved on to a person he felt sure he recognised. When the fellow’s identity popped into his mind his gaze narrowed angrily on Hugh Kendrick’s tall, distinguished figure.

‘Ha! I do know you! So you’ve heard, have you, and come to speak to my daughter and me? Well, Bea won’t have you now, no matter how much money you’ve got from your diamonds. And neither will I. You had your chance years ago, so be off with you.’

In the ensuing silence Betty shuffled forward with the heavy tea tray, and never before had Bea felt quite so grateful for their housekeeper’s peevishness.

‘Is some kind person going to open the door?’ The woman huffed out. ‘My arms are giving out with the weight of this lot.’ Betty rested a hip against the wall for support.

Courteously, Hugh unburdened the elderly servant, allowing her to enter the parlour. She gave him a wide smile when he carried the tray inside and put it down on the table, causing the two seated ladies to gawp admiringly at him. Hugh nodded politely before retracing his steps, leaving Betty behind the closed door setting the cups and Mrs Callan and Victoria frantically burbling in low voices.

‘You may quit my house, sirrah.’ Walter pointed his stick at Hugh. ‘Beatrice, come into the parlour, do. I’ve exhausted every topic of conversation I can think of that avoids mentioning a fickle scoundrel upsetting my daughter.’ Again his rheumy eyes settled accusingly on Hugh.

Walter beckoned to Elise and Alex, then disappeared inside the parlour, oblivious to his elder daughter’s mortification or Hugh Kendrick’s cynically amused expression.

‘I’m sorry my father was so rude just then.’ Beatrice’s voice was hoarse with chagrin and she found she could not meet his eyes. She feared he’d understood her father’s oblique reference to her having been jilted. Eventually it would all come out and Hugh Kendrick, along with other acquaintances who resided further afield, would discover Beatrice Dewey’s wedding had been cancelled, but she didn’t want his pity, or his questions, today.

‘I’ve poured the tea if you want to go in and drink it before it goes cold,’ Betty announced, still sounding tetchy as she closed the parlour door and stomped off down the corridor.

‘Just take tea with us, Alex, before setting off to see your mother; Papa will like it if you do.’ Elise tenderly removed her drowsing baby from Bea’s embrace. She’d seen the wisdom in her husband’s argument that he could travel faster alone to London. ‘I can explain all about the dowager’s illness to Papa when the ladies leave.’

Elise gave Hugh a look of heartfelt gratitude, then the preoccupied couple joined Walter in the parlour, leaving Beatrice behind and in two minds as to whether to follow them. But running off and letting Hugh Kendrick see himself out would be rude and cowardly. Beatrice hoped she was neither of those things. Today Hugh had acted as a true friend to her brother-in-law; the least he deserved in recompense was a little hospitality before setting again on the road.

‘I’ll go to the kitchen and get you some refreshment. You should have some tea at least...’

Hugh caught at her shoulder as she turned to go. ‘Your father’s churlishness doesn’t bother me, but I’d like you to explain to me what caused it.’

Beatrice tipped up her chin, met his eyes squarely. ‘I have already told you that he has not forgotten or forgiven you for pursuing me when I was younger.’ The sensation of his long fingers again restraining her was making her skin tingle and burn. She glanced significantly at the tanned digits curved on rose-sprigged cotton. ‘If you don’t mind waiting in there I will fetch your tea.’ Beatrice indicated a door further along the hallway.

‘Am I to be held in solitary confinement?’

Hugh sounded less amused now—haughty, even, Bea realised as his fingers fractionally tightened on her before dropping away. But though her defences were rising she knew he had a point. ‘I admit it is unfair treatment, sir, when you have performed a mission of mercy for your friend. I beg you will tolerate my elderly father’s foibles. It is not just you he is set against; he is protective of his daughters and hostile to any person who might have harmed us.’

‘Is Dr Burnett such a person?’ Hugh asked bluntly.

‘I will explain to Papa how generously you have behaved when our visitors have gone.’ Fearing he might repeat his question about Colin’s role in all this, Beatrice quickly took two backward steps before carrying on towards the kitchen.

Chapter Five

‘Who’s the handsome stranger?’ Betty asked in her forthright way, having assessed Beatrice’s tortured expression. ‘I’ve not seen him here before but I reckon he knows you...and rather well in my opinion.’ She wiped her damp hands on her pinafore then plonked them on her ample hips.

Beatrice had closed the kitchen door and then her eyes while leaning against the panels, her head tilted up in an attempt to control her whirling thoughts. She pushed away from her support and with a sigh took a seat at the floury-topped table. ‘He’s a good friend of the viscount’s,’ she finally answered, picking up a warm biscuit from the dozen or so cooling on a rack. Beatrice loved a freshly baked treacle biscuit and usually would have taken a greedy bite and got a ticking off from Betty for not letting it set properly. But she put it back, unable to quell the queasiness in her stomach spoiling her appetite.

‘So...this fellow is also a friend of yours, is he, Miss Beatrice?’ Betty crossed her arms over her chest, awaiting a reply.

‘Once he was...or I thought as much. But I was wrong about him as well.’ Beatrice frowned at her fingers, clasped in front of her on the table. She’d banished Colin from her mind and refused to mention his name. ‘Would you put the kettle on, Betty? Mr Kendrick has done the viscount a good turn by conveying news from London. He deserves some tea before setting off home.’

The housekeeper gave Beatrice an old-fashioned look. ‘I’ll do that for him, and I’ll even bring him along a few of those.’ She tipped her head at the biscuits. ‘No matter what your father thinks of the fellow, I took to him— ’cos he’s a gentleman not too high and mighty to give a hand to the likes of me.’

‘He hasn’t always been a wealthy man, so I expect he is used to fetching and carrying for himself,’ Beatrice murmured, almost to herself.

‘Sometimes them that comes late to luxury are the worst sort, with their penny-pinching and lording it. They don’t want to go back to scrimping and scraping, and doffing caps, you see. He’s not like that. I’d stake my life on it.’ Betty imparted her wisdom on the subject of upstarts.

Bea planted an elbow on the tabletop and sank her sharp little chin into a palm. She couldn’t agree with Betty’s estimation of Mr Kendrick’s modesty. She’d seen a very imperious glint in his eyes earlier that had impressed upon her, almost as much as had his cool tone of voice, that he was no longer the ordinary man she’d once known...and loved.

‘Off you go, then, and keep him company and I’ll be along directly.’ The housekeeper nodded at the door.

‘I think I’d sooner stay here with you and wait till the tea’s brewed.’

‘I know you would,’ Betty said. ‘That’s why I reckon you should go and sit with him and show him what you’re made of.’ She wagged a finger. ‘You, Miss Beatrice, are not a coward. If I can tell he frightens you I reckon he already knows.’

‘He does not frighten me!’ Beatrice asserted, sitting straight in the chair and blinking at Betty.

‘In that case you’ll remember your manners and have a nice chat about the weather with him while the kettle boils,’ Betty returned bossily. ‘I’ll be by in about ten minutes with a hot pot of tea and

a plate of biscuits.' She turned away. 'But those two in the front parlour aren't getting any; Vicar's wife maybe, but not a charitable bone in her body by my reckoning. And the daughter's not much better.'

Betty glanced over her shoulder as she heard the chair scrape back. Her puckered features softened in a smile as she watched Beatrice marching towards the door, a determined set to her full mouth.

'Tea won't be long...do sit down, sir.'

Beatrice had entered the morning room to find Hugh standing by the unlit fire, contemplating the view through the window. His long fingers were drumming on the oak mantelpiece, making him seem impatient, and Bea wondered if he'd decide to leave without waiting for refreshment. The idea that he might depart before she'd proved to him her indifference to his arrival prompted her to burst out with some conversation.

'I hope that the dowager will soon recover. I have only met her once or twice but found her to be very nice,' Beatrice rattled off. She had decided to steer their chat in the direction of mutual concerns. In that way she might avoid his hard stares and lazy mockery. 'My father will be sad to hear that she's ailing. He also likes Alex's mother...'

'I'll attempt to find out how she managed to charm him,' Hugh remarked dryly. He strolled to an armchair and sat down.

Beatrice perched on a seat opposite, inwardly sighing that she'd suffered an early defeat. 'How are your family keeping, sir?' she asked brightly, recollecting that he had a younger married sister. 'Have you nephews or nieces?'

'One of each,' Hugh replied, sitting back and planting a dusty boot atop one knee. His fingers curled close to his mouth and he regarded her through dropped lashes. He knew she was anxious to avoid answering personal questions but, vulgar as his curiosity might be, he wanted to hear from her own lips that her wedding was off.

Elise's urgent summons to the countryside, taken together with Walter Dewey's recent bitter comments about scoundrels upsetting his daughters, pointed to the fact that Beatrice was not after all getting married. Hugh wanted her to tell him herself, because in that way he could judge her reaction and whether she had instigated the break-up with Dr Burnett.

'How old are your sister's children?' Beatrice doggedly continued, keeping an eye on the clock. Betty had said she would bring the tea in ten minutes; Bea was sure that five must already have passed. Yet the hands seemed to have crawled only fractionally about the face of the timepiece ticking on the wall.

'Luke is seven and Lucinda five.'

'Such nice names,' Beatrice remarked, on realising he wasn't about to add anything to the drawled information. Abruptly she got to her feet. 'I should open the door wider for Mrs Francis or she will struggle entering with the tray. Indeed...I should carry it for her...'

Bea had a plausible excuse to escape the strained atmosphere, but Betty's warning about acting cowardly rang in her ears, holding her on the spot. Today there'd been nothing in Hugh Kendrick's behaviour to which she might take serious offence. So far he'd been unfailingly civil... And yet she knew Betty had spoken the truth: she was fearful of him, and not simply because he might at any moment launch an unwanted question at her.

The fever on her flesh where his hands had been, the butterflies circling in her stomach, all were indications that she was not immune to this man, and she dearly wanted to be. It might be three years since they'd kissed and caressed one another but the memory of it was strengthening with every minute that passed. There was an unbearable tension between them and she knew he too was dwelling on that shared intimacy.

Never had Colin Burnett kissed her so hard and long that a vivid colour had stained her lips for hours. Never had he, during their long engagement, pulled open her bodice and drawn whimpers of delight from her when his mouth teased her breasts.

In a brief courtship Hugh Kendrick had done those things and more before it had all turned to ashes.

But he was different now, and she must be too. Behind the screen of his long lashes amusement was competing with lust in his hazel eyes. He might still desire her but he no doubt found his younger self—and hers—risible in hindsight. He now possessed riches...and power and influence. She could tell that from his every mannerism and utterance. He was no longer a man used to being denied what he wanted, whereas once everything...even she as his wife...had been out of his reach. Now, of course, he could pick and choose from society debutantes for a bride.

Well, she wouldn't want him as a husband now! Beatrice inwardly exhorted herself. Her papa was right: even had he raced here on hearing she was free, to beg her to accept his proposal, she'd not have him! He'd had his chance and could go away, back to his fine life, and leave her in peace. She had earlier said to her father and sister that she'd done with men and marriage and she'd meant it. The idea of living out her days as a spinster, doting on her nephew rather than her own offspring, was not a vastly depressing future.

She moistened her lips, feeling calmer and ready to force out a little more conversation. 'I shall no doubt hear Betty approaching.' Beatrice returned to her chair and sat down. 'There is no need to leave you alone again.'

'Thank you...'

Beatrice shot him a look, noting his ironic tone, but if he wanted to interrogate her, let him. She now felt prepared for any challenge he might throw down.

'The weather is cool for the time of the year.' Bea again broke the silence, irked that she was the one making all the effort to be sociable. 'Have you a little conversation about your journey?' she suggested with faux sweetness. 'For instance...did you drive here or come on horseback?' She again glanced at the snugly fitting dusty jacket encasing his broad shoulders. She imagined his valet would be horrified to see the state of it.

'Horseback; it seemed the quickest way to travel with urgent news.'

'And did it rain during the journey?' Beatrice asked, causing him to smile.

'Just a few spots...'

'Oh...well, I'm glad you kept dry at least.'

'I appreciate your concern.'

Again Beatrice flicked an acid look at him from beneath her lashes, then glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes had passed. She hoped Betty was not deliberately hanging things out because she had taken to Hugh Kendrick and wanted him to stay a while...

'Do I make you nervous, Beatrice?'

Bea snapped her sapphire eyes to his watching gaze. 'Of course not! What makes you think that, sir?'

'I fear you are about to wrench apart that handkerchief.' He jerked a nod at the scrap of linen, taut between her rigid fingers.

She'd unconsciously been twisting it for minutes. Quickly she tossed aside the thing that had betrayed her.

'I should leave and let you get back to your guests.' Hugh stood up.

'No!' Beatrice jumped to her feet, instinctively stepping towards him. 'Please—' She broke off, unsure of what she had been about to say but realising that she honestly did not want him to go yet. 'I could not in all conscience allow you to journey home without something to drink. Would you prefer a glass of port? You have come a very long way with unpleasant tidings.'

'I believe you were already dealing with an unpleasant matter and I've made things worse.' He drove his hands into his pockets, tilting his head to watch her averted expression. 'Were you, Beatrice, dealing with a family crisis when I turned up?'

'No...' She swung a beautifully poised mien towards him. 'I am no longer marrying Dr Burnett, so there has been something for us, as a family, to discuss, but it's done now.' She fluttered a gesture. 'No crisis at all...far too strong a word for the situation...'

Hugh stared out of the large casement at the garden. 'The man's a damnable fool.'

Beatrice moistened her lips, mortified that from her casual explanation he'd easily deduced that she'd been jilted rather than the other way around.

He pivoted on a heel, gave a self-deprecating laugh. 'You seem unlucky enough to attract such types and I'm sure you don't deserve to, my dear.'

'You know nothing about me now. Please do not feel obliged to embroider your condolences.'

Beatrice realised it was high time to show him out before the annoying lump in her throat choked her. Why was she feeling close to tears because he'd said something nice about her and offered his sympathy?

Without asking if he would oblige, the housekeeper came in, holding out the tray for Hugh to carry to the table. She also gave him a smile and, Beatrice was sure, a wink. A moment later Betty had withdrawn, leaving a silence that was shattered within seconds by the clock chiming.

Beatrice busied herself pouring tea. 'Please be seated again, if you wish.' Suddenly voices in the hallway drew her attention. 'The vicar's wife and daughter are leaving...'

'I'm sorry I kept you from them,' Hugh murmured, choosing to prop himself against the mantelpiece rather than take a chair.

For the first time since he'd arrived they exchanged a proper smile.

'Please don't apologise, sir, for their company was no loss on my part, I assure you.' Bea put a cup of tea near the five bronzed fingers splayed on the mantelshelf.

'I'm certain your father and sister did sterling work on your behalf.'

'They are both protective of me and will see off the tattlers.' Beatrice sipped tea, placing down her cup with an unsteady hand that rattled together china. 'Mrs Callan and her daughter wished to let me know how shocked and sorry they are to hear I'm to remain a spinster, so are bound to be disappointed to have lost my company after just a few minutes. But I would not have our neighbours...or anybody for that matter...think that I am hiding away, embarrassed and heartbroken, so must go over to the vicarage later in the week to allow their sympathy full rein.'

Hugh smiled. 'And are you? Heartbroken, I mean? You're too fine to allow that dolt Burnett to embarrass you...'

'Why bother asking how I feel now? You didn't care before!' Bea cried, before sinking her small teeth in her lower lip to stem the list of accusations ready to be launched at him. Abruptly she turned and snatched up the plate of treacle biscuits, bitterly regretting that she'd let her suppressed anger at his defection, rather than Colin's, simmer and boil over. 'Please, have a biscuit. Betty would like you to...' She slid the plate next to his untasted tea on the oak mantel.

'Of course I damn well cared!' Hugh gritted out, curving his fingers over her forearm to keep her close when she would have swished away. 'Did you believe me that callous?'

Bea prised away his fingers from her body, flinging him off when he would have kept her hand imprisoned in his. But there was a smile pinned to her lips when she said, 'I'm sorry, sir...please think nothing more of it. I'm just a little on edge after recent events or would not have spoken so.'

She made a concerted effort to still her madly drumming heart. She would not allow him, or any man, to make her act like a hysterical harpy. She had, just an hour or two ago, felt relatively at peace with the prospect of returning to her life as a spinster and living at home with her father. Now, since Hugh Kendrick's arrival, old yearnings and emotions that she'd thought she'd successfully conquered were again pricking at her mind, making her feel restless.

'I must not keep you any longer,' she blurted. 'I expect you will want to speak to Alex before he heads off to see his mother...'

A skewed smile was Hugh's reaction to being summarily dismissed. 'Perhaps I should not have made my presence known to your guests earlier,' he said quietly. 'Will our absence from the parlour have given rise to more speculation and added to your troubles?'

Bea had been occupying her nervous fingers by shifting crockery to and fro on the tray. Now she turned about with a frown. 'I admit I had not thought of that...' And I should have. The phrase rotated slowly in her mind. She'd concentrated on the Callans being absorbed by her jilting, but of course they'd also be intrigued to have the details of what had kept Miss Dewey and Mr Kendrick elsewhere in the house during their visit. Mrs Callan was renowned for an ability to craft a salacious rumour from little other than her own imagination...

'Your family are sure to have explained the situation,' Hugh reassured her. 'It would indeed be a travesty if you were to be the subject of conjecture because of me when nothing at all exists between us...does it?'

'Nothing at all,' Bea fervently endorsed. 'And, as you say, my sister and father would have made that quite clear when explaining that I was attending to your needs...your hospitality,' she quickly amended, managing a fleeting smile despite his amused expression acknowledging her infelicity. 'Besides, in a short while people will no longer be interested in me but chasing new and more interesting tales.'

Unfortunately Beatrice knew that was not strictly true in this neck of the woods: London might boast fresh scandals every week, but in the sticks it might be six months or more before the old biddies found something as entertaining as Beatrice Dewey's being jilted to chew over at their afternoon get-togethers. They'd also be intrigued to know that soon after the cancellation of her wedding to Dr Burnett she'd been having a private talk with a handsome stranger.

Bea raised a hand to her throbbing brow, realising she was not quite as indifferent to cruel gossip as she'd believed herself to be. If a rumour started, and travelled to London, that shortly after being jilted she'd tried to charm Hugh Kendrick, she'd be mortified...especially if he got to hear of it...

'I'm setting off in a moment. Do you fancy a lift back to town? You can tether your mount to the curricle.' Alex had given a cough to herald his arrival before fully entering the morning room and addressing his friend. Behind him came his wife, using a knuckle between Adam's soft lips to pacify him.

'He is hungry, and wet too. I shall take him upstairs.' Elise gazed into her husband's face. 'Promise you will come and say goodbye before leaving.'

Alex cupped his wife's cheek with a loving hand. It was answer enough for Elise and she went off, content.

'So...you are still here, Mr Kendrick.' Walter limped into the room. 'I believe I mistook the reason for your arrival, sir. I've learned you have done my son-in-law a good deed and for that I'm grateful.'

Hugh bowed, accepting the oblique apology for his host's earlier brusqueness.

'Drink your tea, then, and stay to dine if you wish. I can see that Beatrice has been keeping you company and holds no argument with you. So I cannot either, I suppose,' Walter grumpily concluded.

'Thank you, but I am setting on the road again.' Hugh graciously declined Walter's off-hand invitation.

Walter shrugged and ambled off towards his study.

'I shall also take my leave,' Beatrice said. 'I wish you both a safe journey, and please give the dowager my best wishes for a speedy recovery.'

Her brother-in-law received a spontaneous hug, Hugh a formal bob. A moment later she was slipping from the room, only fleetingly hesitating at the door to discover if Hugh was watching her.

He was. And it hadn't gone unnoticed by Alex either.

'Don't even think of a dalliance there, or you'll have me to answer to this time, not her father.'

Hugh dispassionately met his friend's steady gaze. 'I get the distinct impression that Miss Dewey finds it difficult to tolerate my company. There'll be no repeat of what went on, trust me.' He hesitated, then strolled to the window. 'Does she know about my life in India?'

'I've not had reason to tell my wife all of it, so I doubt Bea knows much at all other than that you're now rich from your Indian mines. Neither, I hope, is she interested in any of it.'

Hugh nodded slowly, lips thinning in a grim smile.

'Are you thinking of cutting off your ties abroad?'

Hugh's sharp glance answered Alex before he heard his friend's reply. 'My ties in India are permanent and non-negotiable.'

'That's what I thought...' Alex said deceptively mildly. 'So I repeat...stay away from my sister-in-law or suffer the consequences...'

A moment later it was as though no tense exchange had taken place between them.

Alex said, 'I want to get going. Norman Francis will bring your horse round from the stable and we can be on the road in ten minutes...'

Chapter Six

'Why don't you come with me to London?'

While speaking Elise continued folding a lawn petticoat, then packed it away in readiness for departure later that morning. Her maid was attending to the baby's things, neatly piling them alongside her mistress's garments in the travelling trunk.

When Beatrice continued cooing at Adam, Elise renewed her effort to persuade her sister to have a sojourn in town. 'You'll enjoy the shops in Oxford Street and I'll introduce you to some nice people.' She waved aside Bea's dubious frown. 'There are some nice ladies, I swear. In fact I'd say some of the matrons in this neighbourhood are worse tattlers...'

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