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His Duty, Her Destiny

Juliet Landon

Vintage Historical

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London, 1473The time had come…duty called. Bound by his word, Sir Fergus Melrose would honor his betrothal, but first he must claim his betrothed….His task wouldn't be easy. Lady Nicola Coldyngham was no longer the young lass who had worshipped his every move. Nor, since he'd spurned her childish love, was she willing to give up her heart so easily again.Her defiance became his challenge–a challenge he was unable to resist. Spurred on by the promise of her fiery beauty, this was one contest Sir Fergus Melrose had every intention of winning.

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This intruder was not exactly a stranger.

His slow scrutiny of her from head to toe and back again was exactly what Nicola remembered from their first meeting. He pushed himself away from the open doorway, unbuttoning his velvet jerkin. “Try me,” Fergus said quietly, describing circles with his rapier point.

Her reply was to put her sword at arm’s length and to touch the point of his with hers, locking her deep brown stare with his hard gray one, but knowing in her vitals that this would be no pushover.

The end came well before she could score a hit. She could see the fearlessness in his eyes, which, as a child, she had both admired and found intimidating.

“Well,” he said, watching the torrent of dark brown hair fall across her face, “some things have changed for the better, but not the temper, it seems. You’ll have to deal with that, my lady, if you want to play men’s games.”

Praise for Juliet Landon

The Knight's Conquest

"A feisty heroine, heroic knight, an entertaining battle of wills and plenty of colorful history flavor this tale, making it a delightful one-night read."

—Romantic Times BOOKclub

His Duty, Her Destiny
Juliet Landon

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Chapter One

F linging her thick brown plait over her shoulder, Nicola picked up her rapier and turned to face her opponent with a disarming smile. 'Ready?' she said, sweetly. The young man had put himself on the line by telling her she knew nothing about the Italian style of fencing, not thinking that she could produce a pair of rapiers she'd been using for years. He should have known better.

'What do I do with it?' she asked, innocently.

The young man smiled. 'Your best, my lady,' he said.

'Shall we take these silly guards off the points, then?'

The smile disappeared. 'It's not usual, in practice.'

'Oh, then let's be unusual, for a change.'

'Are you sure, my lady?'

'Quite sure. There, that's better. Now, on guard. Is that what they say?' He had been a nuisance for weeks, this young man: it was time to get rid of him. He could not be more than her own twenty-four years.

Fencing with an unprotected point obviously concerned him, for he was defensive, extremely wary and immediately rattled by her obvious familiarity with the weapon. Only aristocrats took this kind of fencing seriously, and most of them had learned in either France, Germany or Italy; very few in England. But women, never.

Nicola, however, had fenced with her four brothers since she was old enough to stand; she was naturally nimble, graceful, quick-thinking and, most of all, had learned from an early age to hold her own against men. In a house full of them, there had been no place for a faint-hearted woman.

Clearly taken by surprise at her sudden swift attack, his defence came a split second too late and his rapier went flying through the air to slide across the stone-flagged floor of the hall well before he'd had time to settle into a rhythm. It was a very undignified beginning.

'Oh, dear,' said Nicola. 'D'ye want to try again?'

'You've had some practice,' he said, accusingly, picking up his rapier. 'You might have said.'

'I did say, last evening. You didn't believe me. On guard.'

He started the next bout with more determination, but with a heavy chip on his shoulder, wondering how this lovely woman, whom men held only in their fantasies, could have learned how to best him at a man's game. His lack of concentration did him no favours, and almost immediately he was being forced backwards again under a charge that for sheer speed left him no time to recover.

Then, for a second time, his rapier took wings, clattering across the almost deserted hall to settle at the feet of a tall man whose powerful shoulders propped up the door-frame and whose expression was less than sympathetic. He looked at the swordsman pityingly and placed a high-booted foot upon the long narrow blade, shaking his head.

Without a word, the young man aimed a snappy bow in Nicola's direction and stalked off to the end of the hall, banging the great door behind him.

The point of Nicola's rapier had touched the floor in slow decline before it dawned on her that this intruder was not exactly a stranger and that his slow arrogant scrutiny of her from head to toe and back again was exactly what she remembered of their first meeting when she had been a mere eleven-year-old and he an uppity sixteen who had made no effort to endear himself to her then, either. On the contrary, she could still recall his frightening incivility, despite the protection of her brothers.

He pushed himself away from the open doorway, unbuttoning his velvet jerkin and sloughing it from his arms like a discarded skin, then dropping it to the floor. Picking up the rapier, he came to stand in a puddle of light from the large bay window, his eyes remaining on Nicola, but giving away nothing of his surprise at the change in her. 'Try me,' he said quietly, describing circles with the point. 'I don't use a guard either. Not even in practice.'

In the intervening years his voice had changed from that of a wobbling Scots-accented baritone to a rich bass, though he made the invitation sound more like a command, which, Nicola remembered, had always been his style. No matter that her family could boast an ancestry to rival any in England, this man's family had exceeding wealth, which, he had been led to believe, gave him the edge. She would show him how wrong he could be.

Her reply was to put up her rapier at arm's length and to touch the point of his with hers, locking her deep brown stare with his hard grey one, but knowing in her vitals that this would be no push-over like the last. This man was five years older than her, for a start. She was tall for a woman, but Sir Fergus Melrose was taller, with the physique of an athlete and the healthy tan of one who had caught the sea breeze and seen the world. She was slender, too, but her opponent's wrists were twice as thick as hers, and his lithe, tautly muscled body was better practiced in the arts of warfare, even the less usual ones.

She had dressed in men's doeskin breeches, a shirt and short padded jerkin in order to do justice to the young man's challenge issued last night at supper, and though she had given no thought to the indisputable fact that she was just as fascinating in this garb as in her finest gown, neither did she realise that now there was an androgynous element about her that any man would find unsettling. As had been proved. Her abundant dark hair was still contained within one plait, but no one would have been fooled into mistaking her body for that of a lad when her unbelted jerkin swung open at each move and the roundness of her hips filled the breeches as no man's ever could.

The sleeves of Sir Fergus's linen shirt were rolled up to reveal his wrists, and now he pulled at the cord of his neck to open the front, a trick her brothers had tried in the past to deflect her attention. She was not caught off guard as he had intended, and although she made no headway at all in the first few moments, nor did she allow him through her defence.

As she had done, he held back, hoping to lure her into a false confidence, though she knew this to be a ploy too, and would not be drawn. But soon she began to tire as the bout continued and, as his pressure became more intense, perspiration began to run into her eyes and stick her soft linen shirt to her chest. She found his style intimidating, his skill with a sword far superior to hers, his energy phenomenal, for he was not even perspiring, and instead of anticipating his next move as she should have been doing, she could not help but wonder how much longer she could continue before her rapier would go the same way as her previous opponent's.

After a vigorous exchange, she allowed her point to lower and saw to her surprise that he was changing his rapier over to his left hand, tapping the point of it under hers to make her lift it again, goading her, telling her that he could beat her left-handed. It was a disconcerting move, and the end came well before she could score a hit or even remove the patronising smile from his face.

Panting, and aching with fatigue, she made a mistake at last and felt the fierce sting of his point catch beneath her jerkin and slash like a razor through the thin stuff of her shirt. She leapt backwards, dropping her rapier and holding her breast with one hand, fending him off with the other as he closed in too quickly for her to evade him. Backing her against the panelled wall, he held her there with his body, his face so close that she could see the steel-grey fearlessness through his eyes which, as a child, she had both admired and found intimidating.

'Well,' he said, watching the torrent of dark brown hair fall across her face, 'some things have changed for the better, but not the temper, it seems. You'll have to deal with that, my lady, if you want to play men's games.'

Her eyes blazed fiercely into his while she chafed at the shameful closeness of him and at her own stupid helplessness, her voice betraying her agitation. 'What right have you to walk unannounced and uninvited into my house? And how would you know what's changed?' she panted through a curtain of silky hair. 'My temper is none of your business either. Get off me!' She heaved at him, but he was as solid as a wall and, instead of moving, he prised the hand away from her breast, turning her palm over to reveal a sticky patch of blood upon it.

He moved back quickly to inspect the vertical slash on her shirt and the red stain that oozed through the fabric, and it was clear to her then that he had not known of this, not perhaps intended it. It had been the same when she was younger, getting hurt while trying to keep up with her brothers and him not caring of her damage, nor of the silence she had kept about her injuries, particularly to her pride.

Their fathers, close friends for years, had promised the two of them as future man and wife, but who could expect an eleven-year-old tomboy to understand or accept the implications of that? And what brash sixteen-year-old would not be more interested in the child's brothers than in her? Fergus had felt no need to pretend, having more pressing things on his mind than parents' promises.

Clutching at herself, Nicola tried to turn away, but already her legs had begun to shake with fatigue, making her stumble as he caught her quickly under her knees, tilting her body into his arms. She saw the bright window swing away over her head, then felt the sudden sting of her wound and another rush of anger that forced a strength into her arms. 'Put me down! Let me go, you great clod! I can manage without you. My steward will…'

But his hands and arms tightened and there was nothing she could do but suffer him to carry her, writhing and fuming with humiliation and her undone plait hanging over his arm, down the length of the hall, up a narrow staircase and through two doors. Finally, he lowered her on to her own tester bed with his arms on each side of her to prevent her from rolling away, ignoring her protests that she could manage well enough without him after all these years.

His face was at first in shadow, so she was only able to guess at the degree of concern in his eyes, or otherwise. But there was little doubt in her mind about his intentions when he caught both her wrists and, transferring them to one large strong hand, held them easily above her head and pressed them down into the soft brocade coverlet. His grip held her tight, and her breast had begun to sting like a burn.

This was as bad as anything she had suffered as a child. 'No!' she gasped, almost voiceless with fear. 'Please…no!'

'Hush, lass,' said Sir Fergus. 'I've a right to see what damage I've done, and I doubt ye're going to show me willingly, are you?'

'You have no right. You are not welcome here. Who asked you?'

'Your brother George invited me. I came early, that's all, and as your intended husband I claim the right to inspect the goods beforehand. Hold still.'

As he spoke, his hand was moving her jerkin aside, then the bloodstained slash of her shirt so that the whole of her right breast was revealed, scored lightly across the surface by a bright red line on the inner curve. The blood had already begun to congeal as if a string of rubies had been laid around it.

Speechless, mortified, Nicola watched his eyes in the vain hope of seeing him shamed, but what she saw was not the obnoxious young stripling of her earlier memories. Instead, here was a grown man impervious to shame whose arrogance was beyond anything she had encountered from any of her suitors. Not one of them, she thought, would have dared do such a thing to her.

He had grown even better looking in the last twelve years, his contours more chiselled, his bone structure more sculpted under the bronzed skin, the cheeks lean and blue-shadowed around his square jaw. His cap of short, almost black hair made a peak on his forehead, and a pale scar line ran beneath it, almost touching one angled eyebrow. He wore a gold ring in one ear, and he smelled of the outdoors and a hint of woodsmoke. And he had better say no more of intended husbands. Or intended wives.

'Tch!' she heard him say. 'Not too badly marked. I expect I'll still have ye, scar and all.'

'That you'll not, sir!' she snarled. 'Not if you were the last man alive in England. Now get out. This is my house. Get out!'

He did nothing to cover her up again. 'Then 'tis just as well I'm of Scotland, lass. Isn't it?' As if knowing that she would bound up like a spring to attack him, his release of her was cautious, his

move backwards catlike, taking him well out of range and halfway to the door just as her two maids entered, alerted by the sound of voices.

Fortunately, they were too late to see her roll off the bed and pull her shirt across herself, but further investigations showed that there were unusual drops of moisture hanging along the lower lids of their mistress's eyes, prevented from falling only by the thick fringe of black lashes. And then they saw the blood, and Nicola had to do some very quick thinking, in spite of feeling faint.

But the two maids could recognise a sword wound when they saw one. And so it was that only a very few people ever knew exactly what had transpired on that early morning in mid-June in the year 1473 at Lady Nicola Coldyngham's London home on Bishops-gate.

After a twelve-year absence, this was perhaps not the best way for Sir Fergus Melrose to reintroduce himself to Lady Nicola, though it typified their brief encounters in the past when invariably she had been the one to come limping home. She had been a nuisance then, a scruffy little hoyden with a too-large mouth and eyes that tilted upwards at the corners, like an imp. Now, her face had grown to accommodate the mouth more comfortably, and the pointed impish chin was the neatest he'd ever seen. But the eyes…ah, those eyes. He'd had a hard time concentrating on the sword-play with those great dark-lashed orbs sending out beams of hostility and rivalry at him, which he had purposely called temper, just to rile her more. They were eyes he could have drowned in.

It was not temper, of course, but passion and some fear, commodities he'd seen plenty of during those early days when keeping up with her adored brothers meant everything to her. Even at sixteen he'd been aware of problems, for Nicola was the product of Lord Coldyngham's third wife who had found the demands of mothering too great for her after Patrick's birth. The following years of being motherless from the age of three had had an effect on the daughter, which she had handled in the only way she understood, by being one of the sons. Fergus was both astonished and relieved to see that the strategy had done no obvious damage, though some traits still lingered, apparently.

He retraced his steps down to the great hall, though not nearly as great as the one at her family home in Wiltshire where big windows held stained glass coats of arms and heraldic crests that the Coldyngham brothers knew by heart. Though well known and respected, his own family could boast only four Scottish generations that had acquired wealth by the usual dubious means and by the shrewd business flair common to all the Melrose elders. And now he had come, at last, to make good the promise to his father last year, just before his untimely death. Nicola's eldest brother, the new Lord Coldyngham, had said he would meet him here, and Fergus felt certain Nicola would never tell her brother how she had just lost a contest. She had never been one to cry for sympathy.

I can manage without you, she had said to him. And how would you know what's changed? Again, he felt the soft weight of her in his arms and saw the forbidden fruit of her breast with its shocking stripe of red, the most beautiful and strangely moving sight he could ever remember. In twelve years it was to be expected that changes would have occurred, but never in his life would he have believed how such an unkempt and boyish lass could turn into the ravishing and fiery woman able to accept his challenge to a bout of fencing.

Her unusually physical and competitive childhood had kept her sharp and trim, yet there was now a heart-stopping vulnerability to go with the luscious curves of her body that, as a brash lad of sixteen, he had not had the wit to expect. The hardest part of the contest had been to ignore the element of sheer feminine loveliness, the slender sway and graceful dancing steps, the pull of the linen shirt across her breasts, but it was also why he had prolonged the contest when he could have ended it in seconds. Perhaps that vision of the captivating Nicola, the swanlike, pristine, unknown Nicola, was the reason for his stupid mistake at the end.

She was, naturally, still as angry and contrary as she'd been as a young lass when she had refused to conform to anyone's ideals of ladylike behaviour. Not even at eleven and twelve years old had she made the slightest effort to show him the docile good manners and obedience of a wife-in-the-

making. He had never intended to oblige his father on that score, but she had done nothing to make him change his mind. Not then. Nor had he commended himself to her as he'd been instructed to do.

But if he had known how she would blossom like an exotic flower, would he have felt differently about his father's wishes? Would he have anticipated taking her to bed as he did now? Would he have looked forward to contests of fighting and loving, subduing her, making her yelp with pleasure instead of anger? God, how he wanted her. How he was intrigued by the tangled facets of her womanliness. Come what may, he would have to show her that he was not the unkind, unlikeable lout he had been all those years ago. And he had better make out a good case, here and now while he still had a chance, or she'd do something desperate rather than accept him.

Picking up his patterned velvet jerkin with the fur-trimmed sleeves, he slipped it on, pulling its lower edge down over his hips. His feathered felt hat lay upon the cushion of the window-seat where he had left it earlier, so he sat down beside it to wait for George, knowing that he'd not be long. He would want to settle this business once and for all. They had promises to keep to their fathers, George's being to see his sister taken well care of. But Fergus had been away on the high seas for some time, then up in Scotland to see to his own family affairs, and only recently had he been able to return to his house in London where his late father's ships were docked. It would have been useful, he mused, if her father had been here to help persuade her, for she would take some persuading now.

Behind him, a clatter of hooves in the courtyard announced someone's arrival, and Fergus leapt to his feet, his face beaming for the first time that morning. The door swung open. 'George…no, Lord Coldyngham now, isn't it? Well met at last, old friend,' he said.

'Fergus! No, Sir Fergus now, eh? Well met indeed, man. You're looking disgustingly fit. Were you not even wounded?'

They hugged and back-slapped, sizing each other up as they had done since they were lads with more rivalry than friendship in mind. 'Yes, I was,' said Fergus, tapping the tawny velvet sleeve. 'My left arm.' She had not liked it when he had changed hands, for it was less than courteous. 'I try to exercise it as much as I can. It's mending nicely.'

'Good. And the steward let you in, did he? Nicola not down yet? That's unusual. She likes being her own mistress now, Ferg.' Whether he intended it or not, there was the hint of a warning in his remark. 'Sorry to hear about your father,' he added. 'Buried at sea, was he?'

'Yes. Pirates. Last October. My lady mother sends her regards. And our condolences to you too, George. I see your father left his town house to Nicola.'

'This place?' George looked around him at the small but elegant panelled hall with a large tapestry at one end and two bay windows along one side. Above them, timber beams were painted in multi-coloured patterns, and underfoot a drop of red blood showed brightly on the stone-tiled floor. Quickly, Fergus placed his foot over it. At one end of the hall, a long table had been laid with pewter, silver, polished wood and a set of bone-handled knives. As they spoke, servants entered bearing jugs of ale, bread rolls and a dish of scrambled eggs, butter, cheese and a side of ham.

'Yes,' George said. 'Father always used it when he came to sit in parliament. He left it to Nicola for her use instead of a dowry. I suppose he thought it would give her the independence she likes, but we really didn't think she'd come to live in it full time, as she does. Oh, she has a complete household to look after all her needs,' he went on, catching Fergus's glance of mild surprise at this unusual arrangement, 'and living next door to a priory gives the place an air of respectability but…well…you know the impression people get when a young woman lives independently. Especially in this kind of style.' He looked across the table at the gleaming dishes reflected on the shining surface. 'For all her ways, Nicola certainly knows how to manage a household, but neither Lotti nor I are too happy about the way she keeps open house as Father did. She doesn't appear to see the dangers, and I can't even get her to think about finding a mate. I suppose she's enjoying herself too much the way things are.'

Fergus cleared his throat, hearing a kind of warning in George's words. 'And Daniel?' he said. 'And Ramond?'

'Daniel is running the Wiltshire estate for me while I'm in London, and Ramond is studying law at Gray's Inn. I expect he'll be a diplomat in a few more years.'

'And Patrick?'

'Ah…Patrick.' George led the way to the table, taking the bench opposite Fergus and settling himself with the air of a prosperous London merchant about to negotiate a deal. Which was not far from the truth. As the eldest of the Coldyngham family, he was but one year older than Fergus, and whether his inherited haughty Roman nose had helped or not, he had become both noble and successful. With a large house and business here in the city, a lovely wife and two children, George had been his father's pride, honest, sober, well liked and respected, wealthy and as darkly handsome as Fergus. Indeed, the two had occasionally been taken for brothers during their student days at Cambridge. 'Young Patrick's still at Oxford, but heaven knows why,' he said. 'I doubt he attends more than one lecture a week, and he's spending money like water. He won't come into his inheritance until he's twenty-one late this year, so until then I'm having to advance it in bite-sized pieces.'

'What kind of debts?'

'Oh…' George grinned '…he's doing all the things that we did, only more so. But I don't remember costing my father as much as Patrick does. As for Nicola—well, that's why you're here, isn't it?' He poured ale into two wooden beakers and passed one to Fergus. 'I have to tell you, Ferg, that she prefers not to recall the agreement your father and mine made all those years ago, so I thought it was about time we made a decision one way or the other. I don't really understand the reasons behind this promise of theirs. I suppose there must have been one. Wealth. Connections. Perhaps just friendship. I don't know. But none of us can expect an old arrangement like that to stand unless you both want it. It's not legally binding, after all.' He looked at his friend over the top of his beaker before taking a long swig. 'Well?' he said, wiping his mouth and reaching for the ham. 'Want some of this? Pass your plate.' Deftly, he carved, trying not to notice Fergus's lack of response.

Absently, Fergus held out his plate and watched each pink layer pile up before he remembered to say stop. These were questions he could have answered, but chose not to. 'Is there anyone else?' he said. 'Suitors?'

'Oh, good lord, man, dozens,' said George. 'They're here first thing in the morning till last thing at night. She has…' he laughed '…her own way of getting rid of them. You know Nicola.'

Yes, he had known how, as a child, she had been well able to deal with the local lads, beating them at most things. 'What?' he said.

George took a bite of food and answered with his mouth full, which he would not have been allowed to do at home. 'Trials and tests,' he said, munching. 'If they don't come up to scratch, they're out. Not much change there, Ferg.'

So that was what the contest had been about earlier. Fergus could not help a flutter of concern that, although he had passed the first test with flying colours, it might have cost him too dearly. 'But no one in particular?' he insisted.

'Not that I know of. Why?' George stopped eating and looked at his friend intently. 'You really interested, after all this time?'

'I promised my father before he died.'

To George, this pronouncement lacked conviction. 'Ferg,' he said slowly, 'putting promises aside, for a moment. With your wealth you could get any woman. This agreement…promise…call it what you will, was conditional upon a contract when you both reached the age of consent, and while I've done my best to get Nicola to commit herself to my father's wishes, she's never been one to have her mind made up for her. You remember what she was like as a little 'un. As stubborn as hell and kicking over the traces even then.'

'Vaguely. I must admit my contact with her over the years hasn't been good.'

'No, it hasn't. And she's grown up. She's made an impression.'

'Then there is someone else, isn't there?'

'No one that matters, no.'

'Then I have first call. And I'm calling, George. I intend to honour the agreement. It was my father's last wish, and I promised him.' Not for a moment did he expect George to be taken in by that, knowing what he did of Fergus's resistance to his father's control. They had not seen eye to eye until recently.

As he suspected, George was not easily duped. He put down his knife and leaned forward. 'You've seen her, haven't you?' he said in a low voice. 'Why else would you be so insistent, eh?'

Fergus's stillness was all the answer he needed.

There was a silence between them as George, ever the merchant, assessed the balance of trade. 'I suppose you know,' he said at last, 'that you'll be starting at a disadvantage?' When Fergus merely looked straight ahead, George felt it his duty to remind him. 'For one thing you've left all this a mite too late. If you'd come when she was fifteen, Ferg, you might have found her easier to deal with. As it is…'

'She's been courted. Yes, but she'll have to forget them, won't she?'

George leaned back and took a deep breath. 'I think, my friend, that you are forgetting something. Nicola is not your average young miss with stars in her eyes, waiting for the masterful swain to sweep her off her little feet. Far from it. She's quite capable of keeping herself on ice until she sees exactly what she wants. And considering how she used to hate your guts when you took us all away from her on your wild goose chases whenever you came to stay, I'd say you have as much chance of winning her as you have of flying. I know she's a beauty, Ferg, but you'll have to do more than pull her hair and hide her pet rabbit if you want to get her into your bed. She has a long memory you know.'

Though his jaw tightened, still Fergus said nothing.

'Did you think it was all cut and dried?' said George.

'No, I know I have my work cut out for me, but I have to try. I realise I want her, George. Will you help me?' He dared not trust himself to say more, and for a moment, Fergus thought his old friend was going to refuse, so long was the pause before he replied.

'I shall not see her hurt, Ferg. She may occasionally adopt the lad's role when it pleases her, but that's for a reason that's gradually losing its validity. It doesn't mean she's tough or insensitive to pain. She's not. She's a woman now, with all a woman's needs, and she'll not be easily won over. The decision will be hers, believe me.'

'I do believe you.'

'So, you still think you have a chance?'

'As I said, I have to try. You know my ways, George.'

George, Lord Coldyngham, leaned forward intently, placing his hands palm-down on the table. 'Yes, I know your ways well enough, Ferg,' he said. 'And they may have worked on Scottish lassies or even on Cambridge whores, but they'll not do for Nicola. She's different.'

'I want her, George,' Fergus insisted. 'I have to find a way forward. I think she'll respond to my way, eventually.' She was different, he knew. In every way she was rare and priceless, and the sight of her half-naked on the bed, below him, wounded, was something that would stay in his mind for ever. Heaven knows what might have happened if the maids had not returned at that moment.

'Oh? You've spoken, then?'

'Briefly.'

'She's still afraid of you?'

'She'd not admit it, even if it were true. She still dislikes me, yes, but I cannot blame her for that. I gave her no reason to do otherwise, did I?'

'Then, yes, you will have your work cut out. But I'll help.'

'Thank you. It's the most I can expect after all this time. The rest is up to me.'

'Er…no, Ferg. The rest is up to Nicola, wouldn't you agree?'

Wincing at his own clumsiness, Fergus nodded. ‘Yes, I do agree. But never fear, George, I shall win her even if it takes for ever.’

George leaned back to watch his friend pour two more beakers of ale from a large jug with a smirking face modelled on its side. Fergus’s expression, he noted, was anything but amused, but held that grim determination he had shown as a youth when it was woe betide anyone who got in his way. Then, he had habitually won whatever he set out to win; now, George was not so sure. Nicola, he thought, might be in for a rough ride. And Fergus too.

Fergus’s thoughts went along much the same lines, though it also crossed his mind that he would be expected to pay very dearly for that string of shining rubies he had placed upon Nicola’s beautiful breast only an hour ago.

Chapter Two

I n the cosily panelled solar hung with tapestries and filled with morning light from a large pointed window, the sound of bells from St Helen's Priory next door drowned out the constant thudding of Nicola's heart as the two young maids went about the task of tending her wound. The thick oaken door had been locked and bolted since the departure of the unwelcome guest more as a gesture of defiance than necessity, for none of the three expected him to return, though the locks and bolts of Nicola's heart could tell a different story.

For many years, the thought of marriage into the house of Melrose had seemed too remote to be real, especially during her father's long absences from home when, motherless, Nicola had been left to run wild with her brothers, cared for by a large household and one aged nurse. Eventually, he had sent her to York to join the household of another noble family, there to learn the manners and graces required of all such women aspiring to good marriages. Nicola's aspirations, however, were to avoid one marriage at all costs, the one to Fergus Melrose that her father was set on. When her father had died fourteen months ago, leaving her a sizeable income from property and his comfortable house in London, she believed that at last she would be allowed to manage her own affairs.

Stripped of the lad's clothes and sitting almost naked on her bed, she gritted her teeth at the next application of the maid's special salve, letting her breath out slowly. 'Mannerless churl!' she hissed. 'Still as full of himself as ever. I should have worn my dirk and stabbed him with it. That would've wiped the smug look off his face. Ouch!' She grabbed at Rosemary's hand. 'Stop now.'

'And didn't ye notice his fine figure, then?' said Lavender, rinsing out a pink-stained cloth in a bowl of rosewater. 'There's many a maid would like a wee while in the dark with such a one, mistress. I didn't see any in York with a face as comely as that. Nowhere near.'

'Nor in London, either,' said Rosemary.

'Handsome is as handsome does,' said Nicola, pulling the fine linen chemise over her head and sucking in her breath at the touch of it upon her skin. 'There's nobody you've seen who'd have done this to me, either, and then walked away.' The part in between was too shameful to speak of.

Yet she remembered only too well his eyes and the flood of excitement and heat that had suffused her face and neck at his shameful scrutiny, and that almost imperceptible moment when she saw him struggling to stop himself from touching, when his voice had thickened like deep velvet even while saying something stupid about a scar. It was not only her wound his eyes had examined. She knew. She had been watching them. She had seen them widen, and his lips part.

Slowly, carefully, she eased her chemise into place and then sat so still and quiet that Rosemary had to look hard to see if there were tears again. She was not weeping, but in answer to the gentle enquiry, Nicola kept her hands close against her breast while a frown deepened in the centre of her lovely brow. 'He meant it,' she whispered. 'He meant to hurt me. Again. Nothing's changed, has it? Except that now he's bigger and stronger than ever.'

Lavender and Rosemary, their partnership being one of life's coincidences, had been with Nicola for ten years since they were fifteen and eighteen respectively. Now they came to sit upon the soft coverlet at the end of her large curtained bed to offer their mistress some advice.

'Of course things have changed,' said Lavender, settling her large open blue eyes solemnly upon Nicola's hands. 'You're obviously not the scruffy little lass you were when he last saw you, eleven… twelve years ago, are you?' She reached behind her for the burnished steel mirror and passed it to Nicola. 'Take a look. That's a woman he'll not have seen the like of in all his…what…thirty years, is it?' It was twenty-nine, but addition was not Lavender's strongest subject.

Nicola grimaced, pushing the mirror away. 'Oh, you're prejudiced,' she said. 'But it's made no difference, has it? And if my brother has invited him here to revive all that marriage nonsense, he

can think again. He knows perfectly well what I feel about it. There was no formal betrothal and I'll not be bound to him. Nor will I ever be. Not for his father's sake, or mine.'

'So now,' said Rosemary, smoothing her white apron seductively over her thighs, 'you have to show him how you've changed, even if he hasn't.' Privately, she doubted that Sir Fergus had cut such a dash at the age of sixteen, but there was no way of knowing. 'You have fine manners now, and you know how to give a man the cold shoulder when he doesn't please you. And if you were to wear your finest kirtle when you go down to meet them, he's going to get the message, isn't he? Perhaps it was the lad's clothing that made him behave so badly. So what will it be, the grey satin? The red? The green silk with ribbons?'

'Not green. That's the colour of hope. Sanguine, I think.'

Lavender's wide blue eyes met Rosemary's hazel ones long enough to transmit a shadow of alarm. Blood-red might be appropriate, but it was hardly the colour of compromise, was it? 'Sanguine it is, then,' she said.

'And may the best man win,' murmured Rosemary to herself.

As both Nicola and her two maids had intended, the preparations of the last hour stopped the two men's conversation in mid-sentence, though George might have predicted the sheer amazement that Fergus betrayed before managing to marshall his features once more into the customary inscrutable mask.

The plaited hair was now quite hidden beneath an extravagant confection of floating veils that fluttered like a massive butterfly around Nicola's head, kept in place by dagger-long pins and scattered with seed-pearls. The tomboy clothes had been replaced by a blood-red damask gown with wide floor-length sleeves and fur linings that touched the hem, sweeping the ground behind her. Beneath her breasts, a wide velvet sash revealed the contours of her lovely body and, because she had something to conceal, a richly jewelled collar covered her bosom, winking with diamonds and rubies. And for the second time, Nicola could feel Fergus Melrose looking at her without the usual disdain.

She smiled at George, holding out her arms for his greeting. 'Lovely to see you,' she said. 'How are Lotti and the children?' With a graceful arc of her body she put up her face to be kissed, touching her brother's mulberry-brocaded arm and approving his cote-hardie with an up-and-down glance. 'This is nice. Is it new?'

George understood the snub to their guest, exerting a gentle reproof. 'Nick,' he said, 'you know why Sir Fergus has come today at my invitation. I believe you've already met this morning.'

She had not greeted him then, and she would not do so now. 'Oh, I know what this is all about, George dear,' she said, 'though you should have given me some warning. I could have been out.' Purposely ambiguous, she left it to them to decide on her meaning. 'As it is, I have no intention of discussing plans for my betrothal before strangers. I'm sorry you've spent your valuable time for so little reward, Sir Fergus, but perhaps you'll take a glass of malmsey before you go, and tell us all about your adventures. You must find London so very dull.'

'Nicola,' said George, firmly, 'Sir Fergus is hardly a stranger to either of us and I think he deserves your consideration, now he's taken the trouble to appear. Surely we can discuss this like adults?'

Until then, she had avoided looking at Sir Fergus, though she could have described his fashionable attire from the peacock-feathered hat down to the soft kid boots decorated with bone toggles, the jewelled dagger and the tasselled pouch at his belt. He disturbed her now as much as he had ever done, and though she had been rehearsing what to say for the past hour, the tightness in her lungs robbed them of the power she had intended. Now, she was aware that she had provoked him, for he pulled back his shoulders, frowning.

'I can reply to that,' he said, ignoring Nicola's expression of bored resignation. 'You have every right to be vexed by my long absence, my lady, but the reasons are simple enough. My life has not been exactly to do with as I pleased these last few years. I was at sea with my father until recently,

putting me out of touch with almost everyone, then attending to my family since my return. You've not been in London long either, so I understand, and before that you were some years in York. Hardly the best circumstances to pursue that duty to our fathers, was it? No one regrets more than I that I was not able to visit my friends in the last few years, believe me.'

'I am not in the least vexed by your lengthy absence, Sir Fergus. I only wish it could have been longer still. And it makes little difference whether I believe you or not.' Nicola raised her eyes no further than the pea-sized buttons on his doublet. 'The plain truth is that after years of total silence, during which you could presumably have married several times over, your sudden appearance here suggests desperation rather than commitment. You can hardly expect me to be flattered that you have been struck by a sudden call to duty. Were there no other ancient families to whom you could attach yourself, or did your so-called duty to your father suddenly acquire a deeper meaning for you? Do tell me what I've done to deserve this unexpected burst of attention.'

'Nicola!' warned George.

But now she had the man's full heed and, while it lasted, there was yet more she could say on the subject. 'Let us not waste any more time on such a lovely day,' she said, bunching her long skirts into a pregnant pile before her. 'We all have more interesting things to do than talk about duty. When I choose a man to marry, he will be a nobleman with blood the same colour as my own, not a newly knighted provincial nobody with equally new coins in his pouch.'

She had a hand on the door-latch as she delivered this last appalling insult, and it was the horrified look on her brother's face that made her hesitate. 'Don't worry, George dear. Our guest won't be demanding rapiers at dawn on this occasion. Will you, Sir Fergus?' Her huge dark eyes blazed with scorn into the hard grey steel of her adversary, and she knew that her hit had damaged him as much as his earlier one upon her, perhaps more so, and that he would do nothing to counter it. Not then, anyway.

The sharp clack of the latch hung heavily in the ensuing silence like the distant sound of lances shattering upon armour. No man would have escaped such a volley of insults with his life, and no woman would have walked from a room without leaving behind some kind of awareness that there was more to this than mere dislike of a man's pedigree, however deeply embedded that had become.

'I'm sorry, Ferg,' said George. 'I must have forgotten to tell her about your father. But still, she had no right to…tch! This is dreadful. I wish I'd asked Charlotte to be with us.'

Sir Fergus placed a hand over his friend's arm. 'I think we both expected that kind of reaction,' he said. 'If we didn't, then we should have done. Don't take it too personally.'

'Even so, it looks as if her line-up of suitors has given her big ideas. She may well prefer a title, but, if so, that's not the Nick I know. Give her another year, Ferg, and then see. Eh?'

Walking over to the window, Sir Fergus collected the two abandoned rapiers and leaned them against the wall. 'No, I shall not wait,' he said.

'Oh…well…no, I can't blame you, of course.'

'I shall press on with it. I'm a fighting man and she's a courageous woman to fight me back. We shall come to terms by and by, you'll see.'

'Well, I'm relieved to hear it. You were never one to give up easily, were you? Nevertheless, I shall go and speak to her. I'm determined you shall have a full apology before you leave.'

'Not necessary, George.'

'Of course it is, man. Help yourself to Nicola's malmsey. I'll be with you in a few moments.'

'Nicola! Wait!' George, Lord Coldyngham, called to the white butterfly disappearing round the bend of the passageway, striding over the stone-flagged floor towards her, though his request was ignored.

'Oh, George,' she called over her shoulder, 'not again, please. I've heard enough on the subject to last me a year.'

Catching up with her before she reached the door to the garden, he ushered her sideways along the gravel path and into the bright greenness of new growth and vine-clad arbours. A circular fountain held centre stage, its jet of water cutting across the sun and scattering its light into sparkling droplets that pattered down upon the darting silver shapes beneath. Yellow king-cups clustered around the edge. 'Nicola, you've gone too far,' he said, severely.

She stopped and sat upon the wide stone edge of the fountain, trailing one hand in the water and looking up at him with feigned innocence. 'And in future, George, would you mind allowing me to issue my own invitations? Would you and Lotti expect me to invite my friends to your home without telling you?'

'I'm sorry. I sent him a message to meet me here. He came early, that's all. Was he so discourteous to you that you had to insult him, a guest in your own home? That was not well done, Nick. Did you not know that his father was killed at sea scarce eight months ago?'

Nicola's eyes clouded as she took her bottom lip between her teeth, halting the prepared riposte. 'No,' she whispered. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'When was I supposed to tell you?' he said, crossly. 'I thought you'd have heard it from your noble friends. They seem to have plenty of gossip about births, marriages, deaths and—' He stopped, abruptly.

'Yes? And affairs, you were about to say? Don't try to wrong-foot me, George. You forgot. Admit it. At least he now knows, as you do too, that I've just given him no more or less than he damn well deserves. It would hardly have penetrated his thick skull, anyway.' She turned her face away angrily, recalling that morning's shameful episode. 'He's done far more than that to me and nobody ever demanded an apology from him. Monster!'

There was a quick unseen movement of her brother's handsome eyebrows and a tightening of the lips to prevent a smile. He reached out a hand to clasp hers, well aware that there was much more to her hostility than she was saying.

'George,' she said, suspecting some imminent persuasion, 'there's really no more to be said.' Sideways, she observed the long mulberry brocade cote-hardie with its precise pleats beneath the red leather belt. Everything about him proclaimed wealth and good breeding with never a trace of ostentation.

'Yes, there is.' He kept hold of her hand, and she knew that there was indeed more to be said and that she was not nearly so dismissive as she pretended to be. 'In spite of the insults just now, Nick, Fergus is still willing to offer for you. He made a promise to his father when he was dying. Ferg was wounded in the same skirmish. They were fighting off pirates.'

'Promise, fiddlesticks!' she scoffed. 'George, what nonsense.' Her laughter did not last long, for she felt again the hard intimate pressure of Fergus's body upon hers and knew instinctively that it could not have been the first time he had held a woman like that. Or exposed her breast, for that matter. 'You've got it wrong. Whatever he's told you, you've misunderstood. He no more wants to marry me than I do him, and if he's told you different then he's lying. There was never a moment when he could find a civil word to say to me, and most of the time I might not have been there at all. Why would he suddenly come and offer for my hand if not for links with the Coldynghams?'

It took little effort for her to remember the time she had placed her eleven-year-old hand in Fergus's while he was looking the other way. Without a word or a smile, he had pulled his hand away as if it had been scalded, leaving her close to tears at an insensitivity she could not begin to understand. She had never forgotten the snub, nor had she ever repeated the attempt. Even now, when she might have been expected to know how an age difference of five years will eventually close and disappear, the recurring humiliation of being a female child trying to hold her own against older lads in their own peer group had stayed in her tender young psyche and refused to fade with time. She had not nurtured it, just not forgotten the pain of rejection that accompanied each of his visits when only blind hero-worship forbade her to stop trying for his approval.

Consequently, she had made a fool of herself time and again to the embarrassed amusement of all her brothers except Ramond. He had been the one to go back for her, the one who would pick dock leaves to salve her nettle-stings, the one to help her down a tree when the others had deserted her to follow Fergus. Dear Ramond. He was the offspring of the second Lady Coldyngham; George and Daniel shared the first. Nicola and Patrick shared the third, though she had died at Patrick's birth. When an unexpected girl had arrived to interrupt the flow of lads, the chosen name had only needed to be docked by one letter to make it suitable. Similarly with the middle names: Leonie for Leo, Phillipa for Phillip.

'It's not nonsense,' said George, 'nor do I believe for one moment that Fergus is merely seeking a connection. I'm telling you, he wants to marry you. He's changed, Nick.'

Nicola jumped to her feet, snatching her hand away in annoyance. 'He has not, George. He's not changed one whit. And I'll be damned if I'll give myself to that…that churl just because of his father's promises. He can go and look elsewhere for his breeding stock. I can have my pick of lords and earls any time I choose. Tell him he's too late. Tell him I'd rather stay unmarried for the rest of my life than accept his patronising offer. Condescending…overbearing…superior…highhanded…' Slowly, very slowly, her salvo fizzled out as she shook her head, her eyes filling with sudden tears. 'Isn't it ironic?' she whispered.

Surprised, George watched the transformation from indignant woman to rueful child. 'Come here, love,' he said, holding out a hand. 'Tell me what's ironic. That Fergus should want you, after all?'

She allowed him to pull her back to sit by his side again, reluctant to complete an admission she had never voiced, even to herself. 'That when we were children, I would have done anything for him. Anything. I thought he was… Oh, this is ridiculous, George.'

'You admired him so much?'

'Worshipped him, more like. I would have been happy for him just to smile at me, speak kindly to me, but he rarely looked my way. All he came to Coldyngham Park for was to be with you and the others. I suppose I should have had a sister, then I wouldn't have pretended to be one of you, would I?' She sniffed and wiped her eyes with her knuckles, trying to laugh it off. 'But then, I was a silly child. I knew no better. Now, I don't care for anyone's approval. I don't need anything he has to offer.'

'Still hurting after all these years, love?'

Unconsciously, one hand moved upwards to press a palm upon her breast where a nagging sting lay just beneath her chemise. 'No,' she said, so softly that George had to look to see the word. 'No, I don't care a fig who he marries as long as it's not me. I know what he's like, George. I can do better than that.'

'You know that you insulted him.'

'Yes. And he'll not expect me to apologise.'

'Oh? Why do you say that?'

'Just take my word for it.'

George's silence did not mean that he had nothing to say. This time, he was thinking that for both Fergus and Nicola to deny the need for an apology, Fergus must have done some insulting of his own. And the only thing George could add to the picture was a stolen kiss. That might explain their very obvious silence regarding that earlier meeting. 'You'll be with us for supper later on?' he said. 'Charlotte's birthday. A few friends, that's all.'

'Yes, I'd not forgotten. You'll allow the children to be there?'

He smiled. 'I shall get into the gravest trouble if they miss you.'

Whether Nicola suspected that one of the 'few friends' might include Sir Fergus, she made no further mention of him until George asked if she would come and say farewell. 'Excuse me this once,' she said, placing her hand over his. 'You invited him here, you show him the way home.'

He picked up her hand and kissed the knuckles, levering himself up from the fountain wall. 'Until this evening then, love.'

'George…' she said, holding him back by a finger.

He stopped and waited.

'George, you're not going to insist on this…this promise thing, are you? I know it's what Father wanted and I suppose he must have had a good reason, but I don't think he'd have insisted, would he?'

Gently, he shook her hand, though there was no smile to make light of it. 'Of course I shall not insist. Whatever gave you that idea and, in any case, what good would it do? I don't have any power to hold back your inheritance because you've got it already. Anyway, you know what my thoughts are about women being allowed to choose their own husbands.' He came to sit by her side again, closer this time. 'Nobody's going to insist,' he said, looking into her darkly troubled eyes. 'But…'

'But what?'

'Well, all Father ever wanted was for you to be safely married. For your own protection, you know. You have a large income, property, a house here in London with a large household…you know…plenty of fortune-hunters on the lookout for more. You can't call Fergus a fortune-hunter, whatever else you might call him. Perhaps that's what Father had in mind. Some men have ways of making themselves very agreeable until they've got what they want. I'd hate to see you taken along that road.'

'Well, no one could accuse Fergus Melrose of making himself too agreeable, could they? Far from it. But the road up to Scotland is a very long one, George, and I don't see my future up there as a breeder of Melroses while he careers off round the world. He may have stallions and mares in mind, but I want more from life than ritual mating once a year.'

Making no attempt this time to hide his amusement at her picturesque speech, George shook his head, laughing. 'Nick,' he said at last, 'all I ask is that you don't dismiss him quite so soon. People do change. You have. Give him a chance, love. Why not talk to Charlotte about it? She's quite anxious about you.'

'George, I'm twenty-four, not twelve. Why should she be anxious?'

'Vultures, love,' he said, rising again. 'Too many vultures.'

'What are they…something legal, is it?'

'No, vultures are nasty big birds that the king keeps in his menagerie at the tower. They tear juicy bodies to pieces with their greedy beaks, bone, fur and all. Some men are like that, and some will protect you from vultures. Fergus is one of those. I know him better than you, and if he says he wants you it's not because he wants your wealth or ancestral links. Why else d'ye think he came round here early if not for a sneak preview after all these years? Eh?'

'Curiosity, I expect.'

'Yes, and now he's seen you, not even your insults have put him off. He still wants you, love. I told you.'

She stared at him, stuck for words. 'I…I thought…he…'

'He'd go off with his tail between his legs? Hah! You should know him better than that, lass. He's got more between his legs than a tail.'

'George!' Her heart lurched uncomfortably, making her aware of the sharp pain of her wound.

'Sorry. I'll go before I say any more. See you this evening.' He grinned. 'Don't look like that. You've got four brothers, remember. You must have seen.'

'I didn't look,' she called after him.

'Little liar.' He laughed. 'Swimming in the river? You too?'

Yes, she remembered that, and the time she'd followed them and got out of her depth and was rescued by Ramond long before the others even noticed, so intent were they on watching Fergus. He had always been graceful and strong, excelling at everything, leading them into risky situations, yet always emerging first, triumphant. She recalled how he had ridden bareback the stallion that none of them would go near, how the maids would giggle and ogle him, how shamefully excited and angry she had felt when she discovered he had kissed one of them. How she had longed to be the one instead

of a nobleman's chit for whom he had no time. Whatever she had done, there had always been time to dream and then to weep with forlorn childish tears. How she had hated and adored him.

Nicola had known that Fergus Melrose would be there—Sir Fergus, as she was now supposed to call him—and while she tried to convince herself that she didn't care, that she would not dress to impress anyone, least of all him, the end result would have done justice to a Botticelli goddess floating in from the sea. Blue silk, very full, very sheer and diaphanous, very low-cut and high-waisted, very suitable for the kind of open-air feast that Charlotte enjoyed most.

Her hair, severely pulled back into a long sleek plait that reached her waist, was crowned with a garland of blue flowers echoed by a tiny nosegay tucked into the vee of her bodice to hide the top edge of an unsightly red line. Pendant pearls from her ears were the only other adornment and, if she did not quite believe the mirror that told her she looked ravishing, then she had to take account of her maids and the stares of the guests. Especially from two of them.

'Since no one has yet offered to introduce us, my lady,' said a personable young man to Nicola, 'then I must needs do it myself. I asked my brother to, but he has declined.'

'And who is your brother, sir?' As if she couldn't have guessed.

'Over there,' he said, glancing with a certain relish across to where his elder brother lounged against a marble table laden with food. 'Sir Fergus Melrose.'

Nicola followed his glance, relieved to have a genuine excuse to look at him so soon after her arrival. Then, seeing the message that awaited her, she wished she had not done. The business of the day is not yet over, he was telling her. You'll not get rid of me so easily.

'My name,' the young man was saying, 'is Muir. I expect he's mentioned me.' His merry brown eyes were revealing far more than his name—his admiration, for example, his interest in every detail of her appearance as well as in some that were hidden. In that respect, he was easier to read than his brother, more affable, more extrovert in his much-padded pink satin doublet that made her wonder how he managed to squeeze through doorways. The pleated frill below his belt was skimpy enough to reveal what older men kept politely concealed.

'Master Melrose,' said Nicola, averting her eyes from the pronounced bulge, 'why did your brother refuse to introduce us? Would he not approve of us being acquainted?'

'Apparently not. In fact, he was quite specific about the problem. He said I'd get under his feet. Wasn't that discourteous of him?' Like a watered-down version of the original, he was almost as tall, almost as dark, but not nearly as imposing as the brother he criticised; even without the gathers, Fergus's shoulders were wide and robust, his chest deeper, his neck more muscled, his manner more dangerously mature, less boyish.

'Extremely discourteous,' Nicola agreed, bestowing on Muir her most charming smile as long as the two grey eyes glared at them from across the garden. 'Surely he must have known we'd meet, somewhere?'

'Not if he could help it, my lady. It was your brother who invited me here. Fergus is trying to persuade me to go back home to Scotland. I came here to the capital for a wee visit, but I didn't think it would be quite so short.'

'And what is the purpose of your short visit? Business?'

'Er…not quite.' His smile was mischievously rueful. 'An affair of the heart, my lady.' Clapping one hand to his heart was too dramatic for it to have been genuine. 'I had to make myself scarce.'

'I see. In some haste, I take it.'

'In great haste,' he agreed, grinning.

She felt the hostile glare still upon them both and assumed that the younger Melrose was not averse to queering the pitch of his elder brother by telling her of things that ought to have been private. Also, that in revealing his own penchant for non-serious affairs of the heart, he might in fact be offering her the chance to flirt with him and thereby to annoy the arrogant Fergus. With an air

that exposed intentions unashamedly several stages ahead of hers, Muir Melrose wore his virility like one who had just discovered its purpose and was ready to put it to good use.

At once, she knew what she would do, that she would have to be careful, and that between them they could make Fergus Melrose's ambition somewhat more difficult to achieve. It would not be hard to do and must surely be more fun than today's worsening relationships.

'Then you cannot go home soon, can you? Not immediately.'

'It would be a great pity—' he sighed '—now we've been introduced. Would you allow me to call on you, perhaps?' When she purposely kept him waiting for an answer, he pleaded, gently, 'For the summer months?'

'Oh, not months,' she said. 'Weeks…days…'

'My Lady Coldheart,' he said, pulling a tragic face, 'you cannot be serious. Are you so very hard to please, then?'

'Alas, I am indeed, Master Melrose. My standards are high, you see, and my interest appallingly short-lived. I'm afraid I send men packing, as your brother may already have told you.' Their laughter rang like a peal of bells across the sunset garden, and this time she refused to meet the grey eyes that watched the start of yet another impediment to the day's plans. Then she told Master Melrose of last night's fencing wager and the way she had dealt with it this morning and together they laughed again and went to look for food with an unspoken agreement already forming between them.

Lord and Lady Coldyngham's grand and spacious home sat securely on the bend of the Thames in one of the most desirable and attractive stretches between the royal palaces of Savoy and Whitehall. Built around a central courtyard with stables and service buildings at one side, the house extended towards the river with large gardens and orchards and a private wharf where barges were moored. For Lady Charlotte's thirtieth birthday, the green expanse of bowers and arbours had been hung with streamers of ivy and coloured ribbons, the lawns scattered with satin and velvet cushions while musicians played and small tables were piled with food, and flagons of wine were placed up to their necks in the stone channel of water that ran from the fountain.

So Nicola allowed Master Melrose to offer her the choicest and most succulent morsels of food that came with every accompaniment and garnish, saffron-dyed and disguised, moulded to look like fish or hedgehogs, even when they were not, decorated with feathers, gilded, pounded, pureed, glazed and spiced. Nothing was meant to look like what it was, or taste like it, come to that. For Lady Charlotte, it was a triumph of a meal; for Nicola, it was utterly tasteless, but not for the world would she have said so, nor would she have said why.

Meanwhile, there were other guests to talk to, most of whom she knew, mummers to watch at their antics, jugglers to admire, a jester to avoid if one could, and musicians to applaud for the way they incorporated the duet of tin whistle and tambourine. Nicola had brought presents for Roberta, whose name had been prepared for another boy in true Coldyngham fashion, and eight-year-old Louis, the elder by two-and-a-half years. She gave the tin whistle to Roberta and the tambourine to Louis, who marched solemnly away to show the guests how it was done, though later it was observed that Roberta was rattling noisily and Louis was tunefully piping.

They played tag and blind-man's buff, and anything else to avoid having to speak to any group of which Sir Fergus was a part and, at last, Nicola gave her garland of flowers to Roberta to take to bed. Naturally, she had to part with the nosegay from her bodice for Louis, by which time she was sure no one would notice.

It grew dark and the music changed to dance rhythms, the river sparkled with reflections from torches, and the distant sounds of Thames oarsmen echoed on the night air as they took their last customers home by wherry. Mellowed by wine, the guests joined hands to snake their way through the plots and arbours, benches and trellises, singing the two-line refrain while male soloists sang the stanzas as the rest marked time on the spot. Then off they went again, lurching and laughing, unsure whose hand they held in the darkest shadows away from the torches.

Muir Melrose pulled at Nicola and headed purposefully away from the light. 'This way,' he said. 'Come on.'

His flirting, Nicola thought, had gone far enough for one day. 'No,' she called. 'No…er…this way.' She pulled, bumping into someone.

'Come on,' Muir laughed. 'We shall lose them if you—'

She shook off his hand to pick up her long skirts, which were in danger of being trampled, draping them up over one arm. But again her free hand was sought as she was nudged along the line of dancers and, to escape the singing jostling bodies, she went with him, expecting to join up again when she could see what she was doing. His hand tightened insistently over hers, and the noise of the dancers' cries was cut off by a thick screen of darkness.

'Master Melrose,' she said, coldly, 'we should be going the other way. Please…let go.' She tried to free herself, but in the dark tunnel of foliage where only pin-pricks of light filtered, his arms closed quickly around her, bending her hard into his body. Then she knew, foolishly, that all young Melrose's attentions had been directed towards this end, a far from innocent conclusion to his gentle and inoffensive dalliance. Not even to vex Sir Fergus had she wanted it to go this far, and now she was angry beyond words that this gauche young man believed she could have as few scruples as any servant-girl against being bussed and groped in the shadows.

She struggled fiercely, dropping her skirt to beat at him and push him away, but he was remarkably strong, too strong for his size, and there was no chance for her to cry out for help before his mouth silenced her protests with a firmness that belied all his earlier frivolity and playfulness. After his teasing manner of the evening, this was certainly not what she had expected from him and, although she had understood from the start that he was probably promiscuous, she had not for one moment believed that he had intended to defy his brother so insistently, or so soon. Or without any kind of warning. This was more than flirting—this was a determined, serious and skilled performance that from the first touch had the effect of holding her mind into that one place where sensation burst into bloom like the springtime of all her twenty-four years.

Her hands forgot to beat, but clung helplessly to his shoulders, as bewildered as her mind. Obedient to the hard restraint of his arms, lured by the skill of his lips, she had no choice but to surrender to the confusing thoughts circling her mind that this did not match the rather silly, witty, shallow creature she had saddled herself with for the last few hours. It was a complete revelation, and an exciting one, but a high price to pay for a scheme that had so soon got out of hand.

For all her popularity with men since her appearance in London, and indeed before that, she had never allowed more than a chaste kiss upon her cheek. Her inexperience showed, for now anger, outrage, and something quite new and fearful combined to tell her that, however much she had wished for a kiss with someone else, this must be stopped by any means available, whether ladylike or not. With a push of superhuman strength and a twist of her body, she tore her mouth away and bent her head towards the hand that held her wrist in a grip of steel, biting hard into his knuckles and releasing all her fury, not only at his immediate behaviour but at his deception too.

She felt the resistance of bone under her teeth and the taste of his skin on her tongue before his fingers relaxed and pulled away and, though she half-expected a howl of pain from him, there was no protest and no retaliation. It was as if he had been waiting for it, deserving it, accepting it.

In uncharacteristic silence, he put his arm across her shoulders to lead her forward as if he knew the way back, but she balked at this too-easy dismissal, taking time to lash him with her tongue before they parted. 'Don't ever…' she panted '…ever come near me again. Do you hear me? Now leave me…let go of my shoulder—' she shook his hand away '—and speak to me no more of friendship, sir. You are despicable! Go away!'

It was too dark for her to witness his departure, though she felt that he bowed before he left and, in only a few more hesitant and lonely steps, she was within sight and sound of the music once again. Most of the guests had now regrouped around a male soloist whose low voice, accompanied by his

own lute, was holding them all spellbound. Thankful of the darkness and their diverted attention, she waited for a moment to gather her thoughts, to smooth her hair, and to lay a cooling hand upon her mouth that still tingled from his kisses. Her pounding heart she could do nothing to moderate. Like a shadow, she glided round the edge of the crowd to see who sang and played so sweetly, experiencing such a weight of numbing disappointment that her first real kisses should have come so insincerely from a man of his small calibre, a virtual stranger and self-confessed philanderer. It had served her right. She should have had more sense. He had disappeared quickly enough afterwards with not a word of explanation or apology, not even an enquiry after her state. The man was a worm, after all.

Dazed, still furiously angry and disturbed at the violation of her emotions, she felt the dull thudding in her chest change to a stifled gasp of horror as she peered through the crowd, rooted to the spot and unable to believe what she was seeing. His dark head bent over the lute, the soloist was Master Muir Melrose and, by the soaring final chord and the warm applause at the end, it was clear he had been there for some time.

Now, with her heartbeats drowning out all other sounds, her eyes combed frantically through the group to find the one man she had avoided all evening, the one whose message had warned her that his business with her was not over. He was there, alone, standing by the fountain and holding one hand tightly clasped inside the other, not applauding. As she watched, he lifted the hand to his mouth then back to its mate for some kind of comfort, turning his head as he did so as if to seek her out.

Through the dancing shadows and the flare of torches, their eyes linked at last and held, part possession and part solace, and while her eyes communicated shock and disbelief, his message was that he was in charge, that she was not free to follow his brother's lead, and that she would not escape him. A shiver of fear coursed through her again. Fear and excitement.

Slowly, he wound his way through the scattering crowd and came to stand beside her. She, reluctant to be seen so patently avoiding him, remained fixed to the spot, overwhelmed by the urge to flee, but hampered by legs that would not obey. 'Barbarian!' she growled at him under her breath.

His hand moved over the wounded knuckle, though his eyes remained upon her, searing her with their unaccustomed warmth. 'Wildcat!' he whispered. 'I can tame you.'

The daunting words brought her eyes to his face again, as he knew they would. But if she hoped that the creases around his mobile mouth were formed by pain, she was forced to conclude that there was quite a different emotion on display there and that he had seen how her hand stole of its own volition to comfort a certain sharp pain of her own.

Chapter Three

‘W hat is it, love?’ said Lady Charlotte to her sister-in-law. ‘I saw you speaking to Sir Fergus before he left. Are you still angered? Or is he angered that you spent more time with his brother than with him?’

‘No, Lotti,’ said Nicola.

Not quite satisfied, Lady Charlotte drew Nicola’s arm through hers and strolled away from the river’s edge towards the house. It was still ablaze with light from the torches, the musicians were packing away their instruments and the servants glided through the shadows to gather left-overs into baskets. Ripples from the last of the departing wherries lapped shallowly at the jetty and rocked the one remaining boat that belonged to Lord Coldyngham.

Merchants’ wives, collectively envied for their access to the newest styles and finest fabrics from Venetian and Genoese trading galleys, had a reputation for wearing their wealth without the slightest flair. But Lady Charlotte was an exception; tall, elegant, ma-donna-like in many respects with soft sea-coloured eyes that changed with the light and a top lip that barely covered her white teeth, she wore her wealth with more sophistication and discretion than most. She and George made a perfect couple and, for Nicola, Lotti was the only woman with whom she could talk intimately. Tonight, however, she did not intend to talk about Fergus Melrose when she suspected that parts of the conversation might accidently leak back to her brother during the night. George’s enthusiasm for the match had not been lost upon Nicola.

They sat together in one of the leafy alcoves on one side of the garden where Nicola watched the full moon’s reflection, striving to place those amazing kisses in the context of Fergus instead of Muir, trying hard to reverse her disappointment yet unable to think more positively about such a phenomenon. A few moments ago, she was sure he meant to chasten her, humiliate her. It was what he was best at, after all. He had done it that morning. Now, she was sure of only one thing: that they both intended to do battle.

Lotti’s head dipped gracefully. ‘George has told me something of the problem,’ she said softly, ‘but can you hold that against Fergus now, after all these years? It was a long time ago, love. He obviously intends to win you, you know.’

Nicola’s resolve not to speak of him instantly dissolved. ‘He wants to win because that’s the way he is,’ she said. ‘He’s always been like that. Tell him he can’t have something and he’ll prove to you that he can. Imagine being married to a man like that.’

Lotti’s sigh finished with a musical, ‘Mm…m.’

‘I don’t mean that,’ said Nicola, smiling at last.

‘Is it someone else? You have a lover?’

The question took Nicola by surprise. ‘Not a lover, exactly. Friends, not lovers. There’s Lord John, and…’

‘You mean Jonathan Carey, Earl of Rufford?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’re fond of him?’

‘Well…yes…in a way. He’s fun to be with.’

‘He wants you to marry him?’

Nicola glanced at Lotti’s profile, but could see nothing of the concern in her eyes that George had spoken of. But the question was not easy to answer. ‘I don’t really know,’ she said. ‘I think… well…I think so.’

‘You mean he’s not said as such in so many words, is that it?’ When Nicola hesitated even more, Lotti began to understand. ‘You mean he wants you to go to bed with him. Yes, well…he would.’

‘What d’ye mean, he would? He’s nice. Very courteous.’

‘Of course he is, but how much do you know about him?’

‘Well, I know that he’s experienced. Most men of his age are if they get half a chance. I expect Fergus Mel-rose is too. I dare say Lord John would marry me if I gave him a little more encouragement.’

Experienced was not the word Lady Charlotte would have chosen to describe the dubious charms of the Earl of Rufford—Lord John, as he was known to his acquaintances. ‘Then for heaven’s sake don’t give him any encouragement, love. Marry Sir Fergus. You’ll be on safer ground there.’

‘Thank you, but no. Stuck up in the wilds of Scotland with nothing but a clutch of bairns for company is not my idea of safer ground, Lotti.’

‘He’s comely,’ Lotti replied. ‘And wealthy. And intelligent. What more d’ye want?’

Nicola cast a reproachful glance at her sister-in-law before returning to her study of the moon. ‘Do you have a spare four hours?’ she said. Then, regretting the reply, she tried to put into words the essence of her objections while wondering if Lotti would be able to see what lay beneath them. ‘Lotti,’ she said, ‘I want to keep hold of my new life. That’s what I want. I’ve only just discovered how it feels to take control of my own affairs, to be secure in my own home, be my own mistress. Without a mother I’ve had to suffer the control of four men in different dosages. Then the strict family in York. Now I’ve chosen friends who like me for my own company, men who actually seek me and vie for my attention. That’s new, Lotti. I’m enjoying it. I could become addicted. Do you understand? I know George thinks they’re all after something more interesting than me, but that’s what I’ve always been told, never that I was worth seeking out for myself alone. Now I know different, and I can pick and choose, and I can stop a man’s friendship if he doesn’t come up to scratch. I’m turning the tables, Lotti.’ She laughed with excitement, not noticing how Lotti studied her carefully. ‘I shall go too fast for them and leave them behind. For the first time in my life I can call my own tune and have men dance to it, and if Fergus Melrose wants to join in, he’ll have to do the same. So it’s no use asking me about marriage, Lotti. I don’t know. I’m not interested. Ask me again in ten years.’

‘So you’re still a virgin?’

‘Yes, silly. Of course I am. What makes you think I’d give that away so soon?’ Furtively, one hand crept up to hitch the vee of her bodice by a notch and to hold it there as the moon smiled knowingly back at her.

As far as it went, the explanation would probably convince Lotti, though Nicola knew only too well how much more personal it was than that. It was to do with the prickly defence she had placed around that tender place deep inside, a place that Fergus Melrose had trampled over and must not be allowed to reach again. It was to do with their old immature relationship where he had been the one to call the tune and she had followed, blinded by the force of adoration.

Yet now there was a new and more disturbing element that made it hard for her to dismiss him as she would like to do, as she would have done to any man guilty of such advantage-taking. Fergus Melrose would not be pushed aside as other young hopefuls had been, and she would have to fight him tooth and nail to maintain her ground and to show him that he could never be a part of her life. Whatever reason he’d had for changing places with his brother and making love to her, Nicola understood that he did not mean to play by the rules.

Her night at her brother’s River House was anything but peaceful, despite the ministrations of her maids, the coolness of white linen sheets, the regular call of bells and the nightwatchman’s reassuring cry. From the first fierce invasion of his lips, she had been badly shaken, but the question that remained longer than all others was to do with his deceit. Would she have pushed herself away so soon if she had known it was Fergus instead of his fawning brother? ‘Damn you!’ she whispered to her pillow. ‘I’ll make you pay dearly for that.’

‘George, dearest?’ said Lady Charlotte to Lord Coldyngham that same night, slipping a bare arm through his.

He clamped it to his side, possessively. 'The answer's no. I'm too exhausted.' His grin was poorly concealed.

'Stop teasing,' she chided. 'It's not that.' Even now, he was still able to send shivers down her legs. 'It's something else.'

'So if it's not that, it must be money. How much?'

'George, stop it!' Charlotte pulled at her arm, laughing when George held on to it. 'Listen to me seriously. You've got to get Nicola and Fergus together somehow. Are you hearing me?'

She had few clothes on; in the light of one candelabra, she glowed like a young girl, alluring and lissome. It was not likely that George was listening as he turned her in his arms and let his hands wander. 'Well, that's the general idea, my sweet, isn't it?' he murmured in her ear. 'Come to bed. We'll talk about it tomorrow.'

'George, she's getting too friendly with Jonathan Carey. She believes he'll marry her if she encourages him to.'

His hands stopped caressing. 'Is that what she said? Carey doesn't need any encouragement, from what I've heard.'

'Yes, they're close. It's dangerous, love. She must marry Fergus. It's the best way for her to be safe. You know how persistent men like Lord John can be. He'll not be the only one, either.' She would not have said as much to Nicola, but the problem was serious, for while it had been acceptable for her father to live alone at the Bishops-gate house whenever he needed to, it was not at all the same thing for Nicola to do so. Widowed, she could have got away with it, but Nicola had neither husband nor father nor family with her, and was therefore living outside a man's rule. For her to entertain a stream of young men on the basis that she was merely exercising her independence was asking for trouble. An ungoverned and unprotected woman could very quickly be saddled with a reputation that would take some living down. Charlotte could not quite understand why Nicola didn't seem to care.

'Well, the trouble is, love,' said George, 'that my sister's dislike goes so far back that Fergus is going to have a real battle on his hands now. They didn't even look at each other this evening.'

'She looked plenty at his brother, though. Was that to annoy Fergus, d'ye think?'

'I'm sure of it. That's been the least of her rude-nesses so far.'

'Did you know she has a wound on her breast?'

'A what?' George frowned, turning her to face him.

'I saw the top of it just below her chemise. She's been fencing with the guards off again, I suppose. I do wish she wouldn't. Can you not speak to her about it?'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, positive. Why?' George was used to keeping his thoughts to himself, but his wife knew him too well to be deceived. 'You know something, don't you? Tell me,' she said.

'There were two rapiers in the hall. I wondered what they were doing there at that time of the morning. Fergus picked them up and placed them against the wall. I thought that was a bit odd, too.'

'God in heaven, George, what are you saying? That Fergus…and Nicola…?'

'Fought. Before I got there. She'd not beat him at that. None of us could.'

'Argh!' Charlotte pulled herself out of George's arms with a cry of despair and went to hold the carved post of the bed, leaning her fair head against the knotted curtains. 'That puts him out of the running, then.'

'Not at all,' said George. 'I know his ways.'

'What?' She turned angrily. 'To wound a woman first before he…?'

'Well, I don't think he's ever gone quite as far as that before, but he has his methods, and he'll certainly make her pay attention to him, one way or another.'

'George Coldyngham, you can be so crass when you try, can't you?' Charlotte snapped, trying to push past him to her side of the bed. 'I've never heard anything so ridiculous, and if I were Nicola I'd—'

She was caught up by George's arms and thrown sideways on to the bed like a skittle with him on top of her, and the tussle that ensued was too short to be anything like equal. 'But you're not her, are you?' George whispered, taking a handful of her moonbeam hair. 'You're the woman I've had my eye on all evening, and now I've got you here, all to myself, and I'm not sharing you a moment longer with anyone. Now, do you give yourself, or do I have to take you?'

'Mm…m, a bit of both?' she said, showing him her lovely white teeth.

While Lotti and George saw Fergus as a solution to the problem of Nicola's safety, Nicola herself saw things rather differently. Her brother and sister-in-law had not, after all, experienced what she had experienced of the man's youthful callousness and now his grave discourtesy when he had taken advantage of her right under their noses. The memory of the kiss had kept her awake half the night as she alternately ascribed it to a kind of revenge, then to curiosity, then to a manly thing, then to some misguided idea that it might help to persuade her. None of them rang true.

Convinced that she must be the one to hold the reins in this matter, she set to work as never before to put as much distance between them as it was possible to do in a place the size of London, a device not so very difficult with the help of friends and fair weather. The first day she spent at the Tower of London, where the Yorkist king Edward IV kept his menagerie of lions and an elephant, a camel and a black-and-white striped horse. She went hawking outside the city walls and returned home to discover that Sir Fergus Melrose had called and left her a white rabbit. It was a very satisfying day, and she called the rabbit after him, being unsure of its gender.

The next day she devoted to visiting several of the convents near Bishops-gate. To her delight, she discovered that Sir Fergus had called again while she was out, but no one could tell him exactly where she would be. The gardener grumbled that Melrose had chewed through four of his lettuces.

The next two days were taken up from morn till night with another endless round of activities designed especially to keep her from home; a day spent mostly on the river as far as Richmond, another day shopping on Cheapside, returning home by suppertime to find that Melrose had demolished more lettuces and was imprisoned in an empty coldframe. It was all going very well, for Sir Fergus had called yet again. She had begun to hope that he would soon take the hint, but she had forgotten how Fergus thrived on challenges.

Jonathan Carey, Earl of Rufford, thrived on challenges of a different kind that Nicola, in her innocence, had not fully understood until last night, when Lotti had pointed out with alarming frankness that Lord John had not mentioned matrimony and that it would probably be bedlock he had in mind rather than wedlock. He had never approached George for formal permission to court her and, though Nicola felt that perhaps the handsome earl's thinly veiled suggestions were putting the cart before the horse, so to speak, a hint of marriage would have been more in keeping with her declaration to Lotti that her friends wanted her for her own sake. That had been a monumental piece of wishful thinking, for she had no way of knowing what they wanted her for.

As for Fergus Melrose, he was the exception. He wanted her for the Coldyngham name and for his personal promise to his father. Believing himself to be her favourite, Jonathan Carey wanted her for her companionship, and presumably if George had thought her reputation to be in danger because of it, he would have told her so.

The day was bright and warm as Nicola and Lord John rode side by side through Bishops-gate past the Bethlehem Hospital and the Priory of St Mary's Spital, both of which she had recently visited. Beyond the fine houses and gardens was the Shoreditch, open fields and windmills where they and their friends could freely show off their horses, eagerly placing bets on the outcome of their races.

He was a pleasant companion, one of the first to come a-calling when she had first moved to Bishops-gate; although there were a few little weaknesses in his character, none of them had been serious enough to disturb Nicola. He was apparently wealthy, so George's fears that she would be a target for bounty-hunters was not applicable there. He was pleasantly good-looking rather than striking, graceful and willowy rather than robust, well mannered but sometimes embarrassingly

flirtatious, chatty, good fun and ever ready to entertain her, and if she found herself lending him money for expenses while they were out, that was because he forgot to carry any with him. He also forgot, dear man, to pay her back, but no matter.

His trim sandy hair hardly moved in the breeze as he turned to look over his hugely padded shoulder at the troupe of friends riding behind them. A high embroidered collar embraced all but the front of his neck where an ornate tassel held his short cloak together. Nicola liked his style.

'Well, my lady,' he said, turning his twinkling blue eyes towards her. 'There'll be a few bets laid on your new nag, but I think I may well go home with funds in my purse today.' He patted the blue leather pouch that hung from his belt over a blue pourpoint. Everything matched, even his sapphire ring. 'What's the prize for the winner to be?' he whispered, leaning towards her. 'A night with the chaste Nicola?'

Nicola looked straight ahead, ignoring his teasing look. 'The winner may take me back home by all means,' she said lightly, 'but that's all. Anyway, I shall win on my Janus, then I get to choose my own escort.'

'Ah…' he laughed '…then I cannot lose, can I?'

'Don't be too sure, my lord,' she said, patting the smooth neck of her mount. 'My choice will not always fall on you, you know.'

The merry smile left his face, though his eyes watched hers to assure her of his intentions. 'I shall take it very ill, Nicola, if it does not. You know how I feel about you.'

Privately, she wished he would not. She had no objection to mild flirting, but this kind of talk was difficult to handle, coming from him, too restricting, too uncomfortable. What was the matter with men these days? Fortunately, the usually well-mannered Janus threw up his head and danced sideways as a hedgehog scuttled away from the track before them, claiming her attention until he was settled.

She had bought Janus only a few weeks ago, and still only suspected the kind of speed of which he was capable with those long delicate legs and deep chest. He was a three-year-old gelding with dappled-grey shading and charcoal socks, like a silver ghost in a leafy-shadowed forest. He was exquisite and showy, full of energy, and he had cost her forty guineas, and she was sure that none of her friends, including Lord John, knew that she had been used to racing her brothers in the past.

Being unmarried and free, she had chosen to wear her hair in one thick plait braided with ribbons and a gold circlet that sat well on her forehead. A broad green sash supported her breasts, pushing them high beneath a tiny bodice of patterned green brocade, its wide neckline showing off an expanse of peachy skin upon which she felt Lord John's purposeful attention.

Just as purposefully, she laughed and chatted to all the young men in the party with equal gaiety, laying small bets on their challenges and cheering as they jumped the stream, leapt over logs, and raced from one windmill to the next.

'Your turn, Lady Nicola,' called Lord John. 'Let's see the pace of that mule you've bought. I swear two circuits of the common will see him winded or you tumbled in the stream. One or the other.'

'I'll take you all on, then,' she replied.

'What's your prize?' called a man's voice from the crowd.

She had been thinking. 'I get to ride home pillion behind the winner.'

There was laughter at that. That, they said, was her prize, surely?

'Take it or leave it,' she called.

'We'll take it!' said the deep voice. 'Ready, lads?'

That voice! 'Ready, lads?' The words he had always used to call her brothers away on the next adventure that had never included her.

'Who's that?' she whispered to the young groom whose cupped hands waited for her foot. 'I don't recognise the voice.' It was untrue. She recognised it well enough, but dare hardly admit to it.

'You'll see better from the saddle, m'lady,' said the groom. 'You're not riding sideways, then? Hup!'

'No,' she said, throwing one leg over and tucking her skirts beneath her. It was unladylike in the extreme, but she intended to win this race and that could not be done without a secure seat. 'It's all right. My friends have seen my ankles before.'

From the height of Janus's back, she turned to see what she most feared and was caught, well before she could avoid them, by the triumphantly laughing eyes of Sir Fergus Melrose. Supremely confident, he towered a head above most of the others on a bay stallion at least two hands taller than her delicate racy gelding, yet there was no time to exchange more than one forbidding glance before the horses jostled into a prancing snorting line, stamping and tossing with impatience.

'Two circuits!' somebody called, and she knew it was him.

Hostility burned a scowl upon her face, for now her chances of winning had lessened considerably. Worse still, she had hoped for another day free of his presence. Even his complete retreat. Now that possibility had all but disappeared. Clenching her teeth, she gathered the reins and watched the white kerchief fluttering in the breeze, ready to drop.

'Off!' The kerchief descended and Janus leapt forward well ahead of the others as if he knew the signal as well as she. A stampede of hooves threw sods of dry turf high into the air as a sea of colour surged across the common land towards a distant windmill, its arms waving lazily to them in a clear blue sky. It seemed a very long way away, and Nicola was the only woman in a field of determined men.

Sheep and lambs belonging to the commoners had, since the previous contests, herded themselves together well away from the yelling riders who thudded forward, led by the silver-and-green image of Nicola. Just in the lead, she was able to choose the narrowest part of the stream to jump, hardly noticing a change in Janus's stride as he flew over it like a swallow. But the ground was hard and unkind to horses' hooves, and the sound of crashing behind her told a story of spills and worse.

In Nicola's mind, however, a force had taken hold that harked back to her youth when, as an eleven-and twelve-year-old, her main ambition had been to make Fergus Melrose recognise her abilities, to place herself on his exalted level and, dream of dreams, to beat him. That would be triumph indeed. That would show him, especially after that humiliating episode with the swords. So she forgot how uneven the contest was, and how things had always been between them, how he always won and how bitter was the pain not only of losing but of being ignored, too. This time, she would give him a good run for his money, and she would ride pillion behind a man of her own choosing, whose name would not be Fergus Melrose.

Janus was everything she had hoped he would be, fast, sure-footed and agile, and possessed of excellent stamina long after many of the others had dropped back on the second circuit. Passing those friends who had not taken part, she was aware of their cheering for her and of their warning that the stranger on the big bay was close behind her. Indeed, she could hear the pounding of his hooves close by, the steady unbroken rhythm and the untroubled breathing, though she would not turn to look. She placed Janus carefully to clear the stream again, but now the big bay stallion leapt it as if it were not there, then went loping across the ground as if he was fresh out of the stable and his rider taking the morning air.

From then on, no matter how she kept up the pressure on the gallant Janus, Sir Fergus stayed half a length in front as if to tease her into believing that a win was still possible when she could sense that it was not. Hoping for an extra burst of speed at the end, Nicola dug her heels into the horse's heaving sides and dropped her hands, urging him on with her fingers in his mane. But the distance between them increased and, though there were others not far behind her, the race might as well have been between only Nicola and Fergus for all it mattered, for Fergus romped home as he had always done ever since she had known him.

Lathered with sweat, Janus dropped his head as Nicola slid to the ground, ready to hand him over to the waiting groom. She was tired, angry and bitterly disappointed that this man should have spoiled what had begun as fun and games, no more. Now, it was the same as ever, and she had been robbed of her success because he couldn't bear to be beaten by little Nicola Coldyngham.

He turned back to meet her, smacking the sweating neck of the glossy bay, not as smiling in victory as she had expected him to be, though surrounded by admirers. Leaning down, he held out a hand to her. 'Jump up behind me, my lady. Put your foot on top of mine.' It took him barely four seconds to recognise the defiance in her eyes, and his dismounting was a quick roll off the horse's back that brought him very close to her. 'I'm taking you home, Nicola,' he said, grimly.

'I am not ready to go home, sir. I'm staying here with my friends. I know you can claim the prize, but you'll have to wait,' she said, trying to dodge round him.

Fergus was not inclined to argue, for now the other riders were approaching, Lord John amongst them leading his exhausted horse through clouds of steam and shouts of congratulations. Fergus acted. With one sudden dip of his body, he caught Nicola like a puppet and tossed her up on to the wide rump of his bay, behind the saddle. Then, before she could protest or wonder how to get down from that perilous height without breaking an ankle, he was seated in front of her, gathering the reins and moving away, calling to Nicola's groom to lead Janus behind them.

On this rare occasion, Nicola saw the wisdom of holding her tongue. For one thing, much as he deserved it, she did not want Fergus's overbearing behaviour to become an issue or to spark off an incident. For another, this conclusion to her losing and his winning was so unlike the way it used to be when she had been left alone and dismal, that something in her rejoiced, childlike, to be acknowledged as the one who might…just…have won.

Lord John was not so impressed. 'Who are you, sir?' he snapped at Fergus, his coarse skin blotched and sweating profusely, his fair hair dark and sticky and very untidy. He looked suddenly dissolute and old.

'Sir Fergus Melrose, my lord, at your service. The Lady Nicola and I claim our prize. First man. First lady. I'm taking her home now. She's been out long enough.'

From behind his back, Nicola nearly spluttered with indignation at this latest piece of interference, but again she kept her peace. Joining in would gain nothing except, possibly, to be the centrepiece of a brawl.

'And who are you to say when Lady Nicola has been out long enough? Are you related?' Lord John said, coldly eyeing Fergus's expensive saddle and boots.

'Distantly,' said Fergus. 'Lady Nicola and I have an agreement of long standing. We shall soon be betrothed. I give you good day, my lord.'

'What!' Lord John's colour drained away as they watched. 'You are—? Is this true, my lady?' He looked up at Nicola with eyes, usually so merry and teasing, now staring and cold with fury.

Determined not to be drawn into an unseemly discussion before all these sharp ears, Nicola put on what she hoped was a brave smile intended to placate her friend. 'We'll talk about this another day, my lord, if you please, when we have more privacy. This is not the time or place. Sir Fergus is a friend of the family. I've known him since we were children.' By the time she had finished the last sentence, Fergus had put his heels to the bay's flanks and was already moving away through the envious and curious spectators, and Nicola had to snatch at his belt to keep her balance, leaving Lord John truly speechless with rage at being robbed of his prize. He would certainly have been allowed to win if Fergus had not appeared.

The look on Lord John's face as they left made her arms prickle with an icy chill: it was a look she would remember for some time.

She waited until the friends were out of their hearing before launching into a reprimand of the kind she would like to have delivered twelve years ago, if she had had the courage. 'If you think this is the kind of behaviour appropriate from a suitor to a lady, Sir Fergus, you had better take some

lessons, it seems to me. Your rudeness was well-nigh unbearable when you were sixteen. It certainly hasn't improved, has it? Is this the best you can do?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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