Ann Lethbridge

Lady Rosabella's Ruse

REGENCY

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Lethbridge A.

Lady Rosabella's Ruse / A. Lethbridge — «HarperCollins»,

A LADY NEVER REVEALS HER SECRETS… None of the women at an ‘anything goes’ house party catches Garth Evernden’s jaded eye. The only one worth noting is a covered-up lady’s companion with an intriguing hint of exotic beauty the eighth Baron Stanford would like to uncover… …DOES SHE?Rose is in fact posing as a widow to find her inheritance – without it, she and her sisters will surely perish! The Baron is known for his generosity, and he is so very handsome.A new solution springs to Rose’s mind…surely becoming mistress to this rake would bring definite advantages?

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He glanced at Lady Keswick for an introduction and she waved an indolent pudgy hand. ‘Mrs Travenor.’

Married. Garth didn’t quite believe his instant flash of disappointment.

‘My dear, meet the worst scapegrace in London,’ the old lady continued. ‘Mrs Travenor is my companion.’

A widow, then. He cheered instantly. Illogically.

He inclined his head. ‘A pleasure to meet you, Mrs Travenor.’

A shaft of sunlight released by a passing cloud gilded the young woman’s warm-coloured skin, illuminating the quiet purity of her expression. A virginal widow? Hardly likely. But a woman best avoided.

She was the kind of woman who expected the parson’s mousetrap at the end of the day. He had walked that path once already. He didn’t want a wife. The thought made him shudder.

‘Enough, Stanford.’

Garth realised he was still staring at the widow and dragged his gaze back to Lady Keswick.

The elderly woman smiled at her companion fondly. ‘Rose doesn’t deserve your kind of trouble.’

AUTHOR NOTE

When I first met Garth in THE RAKE'S INHERITED COURTESAN I just knew I needed to write his story. He popped up again in THE RAKE'S INTIMATE ENCOUNTER (Mills & Boon® *Undone!* eBooks) to remind me of my promise. As all bad boys do, he finally got his way. I do hope you enjoy learning more about him and Rose as much as I did.

If you would like to know more about me and my books you can find me at my website: http://www.annlethbridge.com. Drop me a note. I love to hear from readers. If you would like to join me as I explore Regency England on my blog you can find me at http://www.regencyramble.blogspot.com

About the Author

ANN LETHBRIDGE has been reading Regency novels for as long as she can remember. She always imagined herself as Lizzie Bennet, or one of Georgette Heyer's heroines, and would often recreate the stories in her head with different outcomes or scenes. When she sat down to write her own novel, it was no wonder that she returned to her first love: the Regency.

Ann grew up roaming England with her military father. Her family lived in many towns and villages across the country, from the Outer Hebrides to Hampshire. She spent memorable family holidays in the West Country and in Dover, where her father was born. She now lives in Canada, with her husband, two beautiful daughters and a Maltese terrier named Teaser, who spends his days on a chair beside the computer, making sure she doesn't slack off.

Ann visits Britain every year, to undertake research and also to visit family members who are very understanding about her need to poke around old buildings and visit every antiquity within a hundred miles. If you would like to know more about Ann and her research, or to contact her, visit her website at www.annlethbridge.com. She loves to hear from readers.

Previous novels by this author:

THE RAKE'S INHERITED COURTESAN
WICKED RAKE, DEFIANT MISTRESS
CAPTURED FOR THE CAPTAIN'S PLEASURE
THE GOVERNESS AND THE EARL
(part of *Mills & Boon New Voices …* anthology)
THE GAMEKEEPER'S LADY
MORE THAN A MISTRESS
(linked to *The Gamekeeper's Lady*)
LADY ROSABELLA'S RUSE
(linked to *The Rake's Inherited Courtesan*)

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THE RAKE'S INTIMATE ENCOUNTER
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ONE NIGHT AS A COURTESAN
UNMASKING LADY INNOCENT

Lady Rosabella’s Ruse

Ann Lethbridge

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I would like to dedicate this book
to the bad boy in my life, my husband Keith,
who knows beyond any shadow of doubt
he is the model for all of my heroes.
I would like to thank Joanne Grant, my editor,
and all the wonderful staff
at Harlequin Mills & Boon
for their help and support,
for without them there would be no book.
And finally a big thank you to the readers who keep reading.

Chapter One

The weight of tedium hung heavy in the air. After only one hour at Lady Keswick's Sussex mansion, Garth Evernden, eighth Baron Stanford, was bored. Summer house parties were all the same, deadly dull or wildly hedonistic and utterly predictable.

As he prowled in the wake of his hostess's butler along a corridor lined with every Greek god known to man, he wondered why he hadn't gone to Brighton. A fleeting thought of Prinny and his cronies produced a yawn.

Why had he accepted Lady Keswick's invitation? Ah, yes, now he remembered his purpose. Having delivered Clarissa her *congé* last month, he needed an occupant for his discreet town house in Blackheath. A woman who would entertain his nights and stay out of his days. This gathering of philanderers and fast widows might provide such a woman, but now he was here, hope seemed elusive.

The butler threw back a pair of French doors. 'The terrace, my lord, where you will find everyone gathered.'

'No need to announce me.'

The butler grinned. 'Hadn't planned to, my lord. No standing on ceremony at The Grange.'

He'd forgotten Lady Keswick's refreshing informality. Perhaps his stay wouldn't be so bad.

A group of five or six men in dark coats and women in pastels hung over the terrace's greystone parapet gazing at the lawn.

'Look at Fitz go!' one of the men hooted. Hapton. A slender brown-haired dandy of about forty summers, with a penchant for fast women and outrageous wagers. 'I'll wager a pony on him.'

The woman in yellow at his right turned her back on the view and laughed up at Hapton. Mrs Mallow made an enchanting picture with her lovely, if somewhat hard, face framed by luxurious chestnut curls and a lavender parasol. 'My money is on the gardeners. Fitz is all go at the start, but in my experience, he has no stamina.'

General laughter along the rail met the sally.

Seeing Garth, Mrs Mallow waved. Hapton turned to look, grimaced, then swung back to whatever had their attention on the lawn. Taller than most, Garth peered over Hapton's shoulder. It was a human wheelbarrow race. Two gentlemen against two brawny young men in homespun. Garth sighed. God, they were childish. He hoped this wasn't the pinnacle of the entertainment to come.

Having not yet greeted his hostess, he turned away from the view and spotted her seated in a chair on wheels in the shade of a cluster of potted yews. A monstrous red wig battled with the purple of a sarcenet gown cut low enough to reveal an expanse of enormous breasts. Struggling to keep his gaze on her face and not the jiggling mass of flesh, he made his bow. 'Lady Keswick, your servant.'

'Lord Stanford. Welcome.' She offered him a lazy smile, her puffy cheeks swelling to melon-sized proportions and practically obliterating her twinkling faded blue eyes. 'I hope my staff took proper care of you?'

One hand to his heart, he offered his most charming smile. 'The accommodations are excellent. I congratulate you on your new home.'

'Good. Very good.' She eyed him a little askance. 'I expected you yesterday.'

'I had trouble tearing myself away from a prior engagement.'

'I never heard you had trouble bidding a woman farewell. Who was it this time?'

He raised a brow, let the mockery show on his face. 'I don't remember.'

A rich chuckle set her bosom trembling like a blancmange carried by a nervous footman. 'Cheeky rogue. Now I recall why I invited you. You make me laugh.'

She made him laugh, too. Most of the time. He grinned at her. ‘Is everyone here?’

‘All that’s condescended to come.’

He eyed the women speculatively. From this angle, their pink, yellow and blue-clad bottoms were presented in a row like choice desserts on a plate—they looked delicious. Choosing was always interesting.

Tasting could be a disappointment.

A dog, an overweight pug, waddled from beneath the elderly lady’s skirts and growled at his reflection in Garth’s boots.

‘Hello, old chap.’ Garth bent down and scratched behind the dog’s ears. ‘Who are you?’ The dog stared up at him with bulbous eyes.

‘Digger,’ Lady Keswick said. ‘Come, sir. Lie down.’

The dog swaggered back into hiding.

A movement deeper in the shadows of the potted trees brought Garth to his feet. Another woman was seated behind his hostess, her black attire making her almost invisible.

He disguised a sharp intake of breath as he took in the woman’s face. Pale olive skin and dark, almond-shaped eyes gave her perfectly oval face an exotic mysterious look. The raven-black hair swept back and tightly constrained at her nape only added to the impression of reserve. His fingers tingled with the urge to see it fall in luxurious lengths to her shoulders. Her mouth tightened as he continued his perusal and he let his gaze linger on her lips. Set in her Madonna-like face, that mouth was a wonder. Full and lush, it spoke of carnal delights while it pretended disapproval.

A woman garbed like a nun with the face of a temptress.

He bowed. ‘I beg your pardon, madam. I did not see you.’

He glanced at Lady Keswick for an introduction and was surprised to see an odd expression flicker across the normally placid face. Concern? The look disappeared too fast for him to be sure. She waved an indolent pudgy hand. ‘Mrs Travenor.’

Married. Garth didn’t quite believe his instant flash of disappointment.

‘My dear, meet the worst scapegrace in London,’ the old lady continued. ‘Mrs Travenor is my companion.’

A widow, then. He cheered instantly. Illogically.

Mrs Travenor rose to greet him. Taller than he’d guessed, her eyes were on a level with his chin. Tall and willowy. She made a stiff curtsy, her head dipping briefly. Jasmine wafted up from her skin. A sensual fragrance for a woman who dressed like a crow. A pair of velvety brown eyes dusted with gold at their centres steadily returned his gaze. ‘My lord.’ The soft husky voice raised the hairs on his arms. The jolt of unwanted lust annoyed him. There was nothing about this woman to suggest she would welcome a discreet liason. Then why was he interested?

He inclined his head. ‘A pleasure to meet you, Mrs Travenor.’

A shaft of sunlight released by a passing cloud gilded the young woman’s warm-coloured skin, illuminating the quiet purity of her expression. A virginal widow? Hardly likely. But a woman best avoided.

She was the kind of female who expected the parson’s mousetrap at the end of the day. Had walked that path once already. He didn’t want a wife. The thought made him shudder. He had an heir. His brother. A man who deserved the title of Stanford, and Garth would make sure he got it.

‘Enough, Stanford.’

Garth realised he was still staring at the widow and dragged his gaze back to Lady Keswick. The elderly woman smiled at her companion fondly. ‘Rose doesn’t deserve your kind of trouble.’

Rose. The name seemed too trite for such exotic loveliness.

Lady Keswick waved a beringed hand. ‘Go join your fellow reprobates.’

Summarily dismissed, he joined the party watching the sport on the grass. He didn’t mind being warned off. Indeed, this was where he would find his next source of amusement, not with a

woman who eyed him with disapproval even if he had seen a flicker of interest in those extraordinary brown eyes.

'Stanford,' Hapton said. 'I thought you'd gone elsewhere?' The man sounded less than pleased. He must have his eye on a morsel he feared Garth would steal. Well, that might make things a bit more interesting.

Garth greeted the languid dandy with a handshake and a raised eyebrow. 'Tracking my movements, old boy?'

'Hardly,' the other man said with a glower.

Further along the wall, a woman's head turned swiftly, her jaw dropping in dismay.

Penelope? His best friend's wife? His stomach fell away. Dis appointment, disgust, anger, followed each other in swift succession. He closed the distance between them with one long stride. 'Lady Smythe. What are you doing here?'

Her green gaze beseeched him. 'I—'

Mrs Mallow, her dark eyes gleaming with malicious delight, looped an arm through Penelope's. 'She came with me.'

And that was supposed to make it better? Maria Mallow was the female equivalent of a rake and not above leading a new bride astray. Anger curled tight fingers in his gut, despite his calm expression, as he bowed to the ladies.

Mark would be devastated when he learned of her treachery. And to think, he'd actually felt a twinge of envy for his friend's obvious happiness when he'd attended their wedding a scant two months before.

Or did he have this all wrong? 'Is Mark with you?'

Auburn-haired and freckle-faced, her flush was painful to watch. 'My husband is away on business.' Anger coloured her tone. It sounded like jealousy to his practised ear.

He frowned. 'Does he know where you are?'

She stiffened and something like pain darkened her gaze. 'Mark doesn't care what I do.'

Had the blush of happiness faded so quickly? He found it hard to believe. Yet here she was, at a house renowned for high jinks among the guests.

Mrs Mallow patted Penelope's hand. 'What is sauce for the gander …' She raised a brow. 'Surely that is your motto, Forever?'

Forever was a nickname he'd earned years before. He ground his teeth. It was not his motto, though others here would claim it. Hapton, for example. Or Bannerby.

Damn Penelope. The girl was as bad as the rest of these women, but he couldn't let it go. Pretend it was of no consequence. Damn it all.

In hindsight, his earlier boredom was a hell of a lot more inviting than the prospect of persuading a recalcitrant wife to go home.

Certainly not a role he'd ever played before.

He glanced back at the mysterious Mrs Travenor and caught her frowning gaze and his blood rose to the challenge.

Fiend seize it. Two women under one roof, likely to give him nothing but trouble.

Outwardly composed, inside, Rosabella Cavendish trembled like an aspen. For the first time in her life, she didn't know what to think. One glance from those dark, coolly insolent eyes and her heart had drummed so hard and so loud her body shook. Why? He was no different from the rest of Lady Keswick's male guests. Rakish. Confident. Handsome. All right, perhaps he was more handsome than the rest, with his lean athletic body and saturnine aristocratic features. His smile when he bent over the dog had been heart-stoppingly sweet.

None of that was what had sent her blood pounding in her veins, though. It was the way he had looked at her. Really looked at her. Most of them presumed her a poor widow forced to earn a living as a paid companion and their gazes moved on. He'd looked at her as if he saw her innermost

secrets. She had the feeling that for the price of his smile, she'd tell him anything he wanted to know. Clearly the man was downright dangerous.

'Striking-looking devil, ain't he?' Lady Keswick said, watching him shake hands with the men and greet the ladies to their obvious pleasure.

'I hadn't noticed,' Rosa said, breathing deeply to settle her heart into its proper rhythm.

'Don't look at me with those innocent brown eyes, my dear. You'd have to be dead not to notice Stanford. Be warned, though, he's an out-and-out rogue. Never settles on one woman when two will do.'

Facing Lady Smythe and Mrs Mallow, his spare elegant form in a dark coat and buff unmentionables a foil for their pastel gowns and fluttering ribbons, she sensed a wildness about him, a hard edge. Rosa's insides fluttered with what could only be fear.

Sensible terror.

It certainly was not envy of the two beautiful ladies so obviously entranced by his company.

Beside the fashionable lush-figured Mrs Mallow in primrose, Lady Smythe looked ethereal in a gown of pale leaf green, the scalloped hem finely embroidered with flowering vines and her face framed within a leghorn bonnet adorned with a profusion of roses at the crown. The ruffled lace at her throat gave her an air of modesty out of place among Lady Keswick's flashy company. A pearl among diamonds who, according to Lady Keswick, had been snapped up in her first Season by a man destined for political greatness. Every man at the house had been paying her attention from the moment she had arrived this morning. A woman who already had a husband, too.

A stab of something sharp in her chest stopped her breath. Surely she didn't envy the young woman her attentive male court? A bunch of rakes and Stanford the worst of them?

The *grande dame* narrowed her eyes. 'He seems to have got Lady Smythe all of a fluster. I won't have him upsetting my guests.'

Lady Smythe did indeed look a little panicked, the colour in her cheeks a bright flag. Perhaps she wasn't so charmed by the rake after all.

Despite the gossip, Lady Keswick ensured nothing happened under her roof that both parties didn't want. It was a point of honour with the hostess to the wickeder element of the *ton*. As she'd earlier explained, a woman needed some freedom in her life. Freedom without consequences for widows and women who had married for convenience. Women like Lady Smythe, Rosa assumed.

Her heart ached for the delicate-looking lady. A marriage without love was no marriage at all, her mother had always said.

'Bah!' Lady Keswick pronounced. 'Stanford's trouble. Has been since he arrived on the town. No girl, decent or otherwise, is safe once he has her in his sights. Take my advice, Rose, keep well clear of him. You are far too innocent for a man of his ilk.'

Did innocence show on one's face? She hoped not or her game would be up.

A cry went up from the watchers. The race must be over.

'Who won?' Lady Keswick asked. 'I had five guineas on my gardeners.'

The men on the balcony doubled up with laughter. Jeers rang out across the lawn. 'I think your money is safe,' Rosa said.

'Go and see, child.'

With a swift intake of breath, Rosa left her shadowy corner, edged around the laughing group, mentally shaking her head at her cowardice as she made for the stone railing far from Lord Stanford.

On the grass, Mr Fitzwilliam and Lord Bannerby were collapsed in a heap two-thirds of the way down the course, while the gardeners, at the finish line, toasted them with mugs of ale and huge grins.

'Did you win?' a low dark voice said in her ear.

She jumped, heat flashing through her, and turned to find Lord Stanford smiling down at her. His gaze flicked from her head to her feet the way it had when they were introduced. As she had then, she felt exposed, vulnerable.

Fortunately, her skin didn't blush pink the way most pale English ladies did. He couldn't possibly know of the quickening of her heart or the sudden clench in her belly. She backed up until the carved-stone rail pressed against the small of her back.

Dark as the devil, out here in the sun his eyes were obsidian, his cheekbones and jaw carved in hard angular lines, his hair a shade darker than chocolate. But darkest of all was his aura of danger.

No wonder Lady Smythe's eyes turned his way the moment she thought he wasn't watching.

'I do not gamble,' she said. How self-righteous she sounded. How priggish in this company that denied itself nothing. Yet it was the truth. She had no money for frivolities. 'Lady Keswick has an interest in the outcome.'

He leaned one elbow on the rail, effectively cutting her off from the rest of the company. Deliberate? Naturally. He was a man who did nothing without a purpose. What purpose could he have with respect to her? A tremor ran through her frame. Fear. Excitement. She quelled the rush of sensation and presented a calm expression. 'If you would excuse me?' She moved to step around him.

He shifted and blocked her path. 'I would excuse you anything at all,' he said with a dark smile. 'What is your offence?'

'I say, Stanford,' called Mr Phillips, a man so pale he looked as if he had never stepped in the sun, pale eyes, pale thinning hair, pale skin. 'They are setting up the butts. Time to make good on your boast.'

The crowd on the balcony were drifting down the steps at the far end, heading for the lawn.

A flicker of emotion passed over his face. Annoyance at the interruption? Before he could say more, Rosa ducked around him and hurried to Lady Keswick's side, her heart beating far faster than she wanted to admit. 'You win, my lady.' Her voice sounded breathless as if she'd run a mile. She drew in a steadying breath. 'The gardeners were indeed too much of a match for the gentlemen.'

'Fifty guineas isn't a bad profit for indolence,' Lady Keswick said with twinkling eyes. 'Hapton is a fool with his money. Tell Jonas to see that the lads get a shilling each for their effort. Will you join the guests at the butts?'

'I have no skill with a bow and prefer to watch from up here. Would you like to move closer to the balcony for a better view?'

Lady Keswick reached out and patted her hand. 'You are a good girl, Rose. And you have talent. By summer's end I am sure I can find you a place in the opera.'

The end of the summer might be too late. Triggs was beginning to press for his money.

Rosa pushed the old lady towards the terrace wall. 'Has no one replied?'

'Have patience. They are busy people. One of them will come through, I am sure.'

It was their agreement. Rosa would help entertain the guests over the next few weeks, and Lady Keswick would help her find a role in an opera company.

Only things were not going quite as she'd planned. The money she was earning as a companion was not enough for her urgent needs. It was beginning to look as if she might need to find something more lucrative. A role in an opera seemed as if it might be her best option.

To date, though, there had been no one interested in hiring an unknown singer, in spite of Lady Keswick's unqualified praise.

Hopefully, Rosa wouldn't need to fall back on her talent. Hopefully, she would find what she needed tonight and all her worries would be solved.

'I am grateful for your help.'

'Pshaw,' the old lady said as she looked down at the company gathered on the lawn. 'Did I tell you I was considered the best female archer in all of Sussex in my girlhood?'

Many times. 'How did that come about?' Rosa opened her parasol, shading them both from the afternoon sun.

‘It was in seventy-eight,’ Lady Keswick mused. Then scrunched up her face. ‘Or was it seventy-nine? No matter. Keswick was present, you know. He always said that was the day he learned about love …’

Love. Wasn’t it love that had brought Rosa to Sussex and to the house of a woman with a less-than-stellar reputation? An actress who had married an elderly nobleman. When Rosa saw Lady Keswick’s advertisement for a companion at this house, so close to where Rosa had grown up, the opportunity had seemed heaven-sent.

And if she was wrong about her father’s love? What then? Her hands clenched inside her gloves. She would not let such doubts enter her head. The idea was too painful to contemplate.

‘Oh, I say, nice shot!’ Lady Keswick cried, dragging Rosa’s attention back to the contest. Lady Smythe had hit the bull and was now laughing up at Lord Bannerby. It was the first time she’d seen the young woman look even moderately happy since she’d arrived. Bannerby tucked a loose strand of copper hair behind a shell-like ear with a grin that said his intentions were all bad, while Stanford glowered at the pair from the sidelines as if he wanted to challenge Bannerby to a duel for that touch.

Jealousy between rival males. Something in Rosa’s chest felt uncomfortable, the way a pebble in a shoe felt. A painful irritation.

She really didn’t belong in this house. The sooner she left the better. And tonight’s search would end all her difficulties. It must.

Garth stared up at the haloed moon and drew on his cigar. He sent a stream of smoke upwards to form a cloud above his head. A fluky gust of wind whipped it away. He enjoyed a smoke before bed, yet hated the smell of stale cigars first thing in the morning. So here he stood on the terrace to blow a cloud after the rest of the guests had retired. Some to their own rooms. Some to those of other guests.

He grinned as he recalled Bannerby’s obvious confusion when he’d chased him away from Penelope’s door. Hopefully that would be an end to the man’s ambition.

His lip curled. All he needed to do now was get the foolish wench to go home before a braver man than Bannerby tried his luck. Hapton, for example.

Garth turned the cigar in his fingers and observed the glowing tip through narrowed eyes. If he could get her out of here quickly, perhaps Mark need never know.

A scandal of that sort would make life for Mark unbearable. Unsupportable. The stupid wench.

He drew hard on his cheroot, fury at her deception a low fire in his stomach.

The sky turned dark. Rain spattered on his shoulders and in his hair, left dark spots on the terrace flags in a sudden rush of wind. The shower ceased. The cloud cleared, leaving the moonlit landscape grey and full of shadows. He gazed at that telltale ring of moisture around the moon and the increasing number of clouds floating by. *More rain to come.*

A door opened and closed somewhere around the corner. Someone coming in or going out? Mildly curious, he stubbed out his cigar and strolled down the steps. As he rounded the corner, he glimpsed the back of a figure enveloped in a black cloak. A woman, he thought from the slender shape and quick short steps. A chambermaid off to meet her beau in the village? He frowned. If he remembered correctly, the village lay in the other direction. There was something familiar about the hurrying figure. One of the guests?

A smile pulled at his lips. Intrigue was rife in this house, but why would one of the guests need to leave the comfort of a well-appointed bed in pursuit of bliss? Tantalised, he followed and caught another glimpse of the quick-paced shadow disappearing into the woodland to the east of the house, then a whiff of jasmine.

Mrs Travenor? Rose. Her height should have given her away, but she was the last female he would have expected to see scurrying off to an assignation. Was he, then, so naïve? Hardly.

She might have purity in her face, but beneath her still surface, she was as wicked as any woman. A pang of disappointment stilled him. No, he wasn’t disappointed. He was glad. It meant his instincts about her were right. He would only be disappointed if she’d proved to be virtuous.

Arriving at the entrance to the woods a few moments later, Garth saw no sign of the woman. Paths led in three directions and, with no sound to guide him, he halted.

He inhaled. Was it imagination, or did a trace of her perfume linger on the rich damp air? Where was she going? It was not a good night to meet a man out of doors unless there was some handily placed folly somewhere in the grounds. A vision of the exotic Mrs Travenor in the arms of one of the burly gardeners filled his mind. Or might she prefer the cheeky butler? Neither image fit. Unease rolled through him.

A suspicion rose that the quiet widow might be up to something nefarious. If she was meeting a servant, or even one of the guests, she would not be heading into the woods. There were too many other convenient places, dry places, within doors or nearby. No, the lady had some other less straightforward purpose.

His jaw clenched. He lifted his face as rain pelted down. He felt the sting of it on his cheeks and eyelids and mentally shrugged. It was none of his business what Lady Keswick's temptress-nun-come-companion did with her nights, no matter how much she aroused his curiosity.

Hell, she aroused more than that, he realized, as his blood thickened and an image rampaged through his mind of her dressed as a nun pressed up against a marble column with him filling her body. No wonder he was hard within the tight confines of his pantaloons.

Moonlight speared through a gap in the clouds, revealing nothing but trees and lawn.

A wry chuckle escaped his throat. Another lying little baggage keeping secrets. It would behove him, for the sake of his hostess, to find out what they were.

She'd gone out by the side door, and he did not doubt she would come back the same way.

Rosa stopped to listen. Had she heard footsteps on the flagstones behind her? A shiver ran down her back at the thought of one of Lady Keswick's dissolute guests finding her out here alone in the dark. Whoever or whatever she'd heard, there was no sound of them now. Aside from the wind in the trees, the whole world seemed remarkably quiet. Any creature with any sense was huddled somewhere out of the wind and rain. She pulled her cloak tighter around her and continued on.

Since she arrived two weeks ago, she'd several times walked this way in daylight, familiarising herself with the paths meandering through the park, ostensibly exercising Lady Keswick's pug, Digger. The fat little thing hated to walk and in the end he'd sat down and refused to budge beyond the edge of the lawn. Now she was resorting to night-time expeditions.

On one of her earlier rambles, she'd found the shortcut leading to the woods belonging to Gorham Place, the square red-bricked mansion where she'd lived out her childhood. She trudged on.

Deep in the forest, at the edge of Lady Keswick's estate, the sharp sound of fast-flowing water cut through the muffling effect of her hood. A fence blocked her path. In one of the brief moments of moonlight, she found the stile, an ancient right of way, leading to the bridge across the stream meandering between the two estates.

While the bridge was in a poor state of repair, she'd crossed back and forth several times during one of her daytime forays and knew it would safely hold her weight. Darkness slowed her steps to a crawl. She looked up at the sky, waiting for the moon to reappear and light her way. Rain slapped her in the face and she turned away, holding the hood close while the wind tugged at her skirts. As the cloud drifted on, she could see where the muddy footpath changed to the slippery wooden slats of the bridge.

Carefully holding the rough wooden railing, she crossed the shaky structure, testing her weight on each rotting plank before stepping forwards. At this rate it would take her all night to reach the house. Perhaps she should turn back and try on another evening, one with better weather.

Gritting her teeth, she pressed on. She couldn't bear the thought of going back without at least looking upon the house where she had spent the happiest years of her life. In those days, she'd been secure in the knowledge of her parents' affections. Now, as she crossed six feet of rotting wood, the doubts crowded in. She forced them to the back of her mind and hurried on, emerging from the trees

and crossing the expanse of ill-kept lawn until she reached the drive. Stray moonbeams bounced off darkened windows revealing the house. Gorham Place.

Dear old house. So full of happy memories. Idle enquiry in the village had revealed no one lived here. The house had been let for a while after her father remarried, but now it lay empty and abandoned, with only a gardener employed to see to its maintenance. A man who would know her. But would he let her inside to search?

Her wet hem clinging to her ankles, she strode quickly to the walled courtyard around the back. A light flickered in an upper window of a cottage adjoining the stables.

Taking courage from a swift deep breath, she lifted the cottage's iron knocker and let it fall with a loud bang. The sound echoed through the night.

Chapter Two

Heavy steps coming downstairs emanated from within. And then the echo of a chest-rattling cough. ‘Who is it?’ a voice wheezed.

‘Mr Inchbold,’ Rosa said. ‘It is Rosa Cavendish. Do you remember me?’ She held her breath, fearful and excited all at once. When she’d heard in the village of the guardian left here to mind the place, the familiar name had given her hope.

A bolt rasped in its hasp and the heavy oak door swung creaking back. ‘Lady Rosabella?’ the white-haired and bent old man said querulously. ‘Is it really you?’

Relief rushed through her in a warm flood of memories. ‘Yes. It is me. It was more than I dared hope to find our dear old Inchbold still here after all this time.’

Dim muddy eyes peered at her. The wrinkled face cracked a smile. ‘Welcome home, my lady. Welcome.’

It seemed so odd to be called my lady after weeks of being plain Mrs Travenor. ‘Thank you. I’m so happy you are here. Are you well?’

The gnarled hand holding the lantern on high trembled weakly. Not surprisingly. Inchbold had been ancient the last time she saw him, eight years before. ‘Well enough, my lady. Am I to open the gate? If you’ve a carriage, there are no grooms, no servants. Best if ye go to the inn in the village. Come back in the morning. Is your grandfather with you?’

She swallowed. ‘No carriage. Only me. I wondered if you might let me in the house?’

A gust of wind whipped around the corner of the cottage, bringing another smattering of rain. The lantern flickered and died to no more than a glow, then flared up.

‘Come in, child, come in. No sense in standing out in the rain.’ He turned and led the way down a short passage past the stairs into a small square parlour stuffed full of old furniture. He brushed half-heartedly at a chair, sending a cloud of dust upwards. ‘Sit down, dear girl.’

She perched on the chair edge just as she had as a small child, while he set the lamp on the table. He peered down at her, his bushy white brows drawing together over his hooked nose. The lines on his face had deepened and spread out over his face. Shiny pink scalp covered his head, apart from the odd tuft of thin white hair. ‘What brings you to Gorham Place at this time of night after all these years, my lady?’

Even bent as he was, and trembling, shades of the man he’d been clung to his shoulders. As steward and trusted retainer, he’d been kindly but firm to his master’s daughters.

‘I really did not expect to find you here after all this time,’ she said. ‘When they mentioned your name in the village, I had to see for myself.’

He gave a gusty sigh. ‘When your grandfather closed up the house and took the knocker off the door last year, I thought of applying for a new position elsewhere, but he needed someone to keep an eye on the place, maintain the grounds, like, so I offered. Too old to start again. But why are you here?’

She clenched her hands in her lap. ‘My father’s will was never found. This is the only place I can think to look.’

Inchbold frowned, his lined face a map of crevasses. ‘Your grandfather searched, my lady. He went through everything in the house.’

Disappointment, sorrow, bitter defeat tangled in her chest, leaving her breathless from the pain. She stared at her twisting fingers, blinking away a hot rush of moisture. Finally, she drew a breath around the lump in her throat. ‘I see.’

When she could bring herself to raise her gaze, Inchbold's brown eyes regarded her sadly. 'There is one thing I recall. I didn't mention it to your grandfather. It didn't seem important at the time.'

She forced herself not to hope. 'What is it?'

'Not long after your ma died, I had occasion to visit your father in his study. He had me and the footman, William, that was here then, sign a paper. Witness to his signature.'

Hope unfurled a tentative shoot. 'You think it was a will?'

He shook his head. 'It could have been anything. Not my business to ask.'

'Then I must search for myself.'

At his expression of shock, she clenched her hands together. 'It is too important to trust anyone else. I can't believe Father did not make provision for me and my sisters.'

'How are Lady Meg and Lady Sam?'

'Well,' she said, lying to save the old man's feelings. Sam had never recovered from an ague caught out in the rain and Meg was losing hope. She leaned forwards, closing the distance between her and the old man, looking into his dull brown eyes. 'Dear Inchbold, won't you let me in the house for old times' sake? I promise Grandfather will never know.'

He shook his head.

Rosa wanted to scream. To throw herself at his feet and beg. She straightened her spine. 'Why not?'

'The woman who comes to dust once a week has the key.'

She frowned. 'But you can get it?'

Unwillingly, he nodded. 'Tomorrow, I can. But last week Barrington, your grandfather's solicitor, came down from London and showed a gentleman around. He's leased the house starting the first of the month.'

Her stomach dropped. She'd wasted too much time, hesitating in fear of finding nothing, preferring to dream of a perfect answer to her problems. She shot up from the chair and paced to the window. 'Then I must begin right away. Tomorrow night.'

All this time, she'd held on to the flicker of hope their father had kept his word, despite every derogatory thing her grandfather had said about his feckless fanciful heir and his dreadful foreign first wife. Rosa had clung to the belief that sooner or later the will would be found. She'd worked and schemed so she could search for herself and then she'd hesitated.

Such a coward.

She turned to face him, looking into his worried face. 'Please, dear Mr Inchbold. It won't take long. A few hours at most.'

'All right. I'll get the key, tomorrow. Where will I find you?'

'At the Grange. I am employed as Lady Keswick's companion.'

Horrified, he gaped at her. 'You are staying at that den of iniquity? The parish is up in arms about her buying the place. The gentry won't have nothing to do with her. Oh, my lady, how could you?'

Rosa drew herself up straight. 'How could I what, Mr Inchbold?'

He stared at her, his eyes wide, his jaw slack. 'Did anyone tell you, you are just like your mother?'

'Frequently. But not as a compliment.'

He winced. 'Well, you should be proud, you should. She was a fine woman, your mother. A proper lady, no matter what they said.'

'She was an opera singer from Italy, Mr Inchbold. The reason my grandfather cut my father off without a penny until she died.' And now he was doing the same to her daughters.

He looked sad. 'His lordship would never leave you and your sisters with nothing. While 'tis more than my job is worth to help you search, I'll turn a blind eye.'

Relief flooded through her. At last someone who cared. ‘Thank you, Inchbold.’ She rose to her feet and hesitated, pressing her lips together. ‘You won’t tell Grandfather you’ve seen me, will you?’

A wheezy cackle ended in a cough. ‘Lord, my lady, your grandpa don’t come nigh or near this place. He certainly doesn’t communicate with the likes of me. Nor I with him. Just with old Barrington.’

Naturally. Grandfather was far too high in the instep to have anything to do with servants or the children of an opera singer, even if they were his own flesh and blood.

She smiled and patted his hand. ‘Thank you, dear Mr Inchbold. I will return tomorrow evening. Oh, and by the way, I go by the name of Mrs Rose Travenor.’

His frown deepened. ‘Be careful, my lady. Your Grandpa is not a man to cross.’

As her parents had discovered.

Only the torches at the doors gave off any light as Rosa approached The Grange. As it should be. She slipped quietly around to the side door she’d left open. Her heart picked up speed. What if someone had come along and locked it? Slowly she lifted the latch and pushed. The door swung back on silent hinges.

She let go a sigh of relief and stepped over the threshold.

A large warm body smelling of cigars and sandalwood blocked her way. A man. She leapt back.

The man grabbed her arm and raised a lamp high. She blinked in the glare shining on her face, unable to see her assailant. ‘Back so soon, Mrs Travenor?’ he mocked. ‘Whoever you are meeting can’t be much good if he is finished already.’

Stanford. She recognised his voice. A flash of heat followed by the cold of dread left her breathless. She drew herself up to her full height. ‘Stand aside, Lord Stanford.’

He hung the lamp on a hook on the wall. It cast eerie shadows on his harsh features. She shivered. ‘Please, let me pass.’ She made to push by him.

He put a hand against the wall, blocking her way.

She could feel the heat of his body only inches from hers, his dark insolent gaze raking her face. ‘Where have you been?’

Her heart rattled. Her breath quickened. ‘Out for a walk.’

‘At this time of night?’ He made no attempt to hide his disbelief.

‘Where I go is none of your business.’

‘Perhaps not,’ he mused, not moving an inch. ‘But Lady Keswick might be interested to hear about her little companion’s forays into the night. Or does she already know?’ The amused smile on his lips made her want to hit him.

He lifted a hand and brushed back the hood of her cloak, trailed a finger down the side of her face. ‘Who are you meeting, hmm? A lover? Or some man you must meet in secret because … he has mischief on his mind?’

Inwardly, she trembled. She hated how weak he made her feel, as if her knees had no more substance than overcooked asparagus. She straightened her shoulders and forced herself to meet his dark gaze and saw more than she expected. Heat.

She drew in a shaky breath. ‘Lady Keswick has no interest in what I do in my free time.’

He laughed. A cruel low chuckle, full of arrogance. ‘And if I tell her I suspect you are up to no good, if I tell her I suspect you have some criminal intent sneaking out at night? What then, do you think?’

She edged back, away from the heat of his body, free of his overbearing presence that seemed to scramble every thought in her head. ‘Why are you wandering the halls at night?’ she asked haughtily.

His smile broadened. ‘Waiting for you.’ His low murmur was a silky stroke to her ear. ‘I saw you leave.’

A shiver slid down her spine, far too pleasant to be entirely fear driven. The thought of such a man waiting for her was far too distracting. Her brain seemed full of him, instead of coming up with a reasonable explanation.

‘Well, here I am,’ she said, lifting her chin and meeting that penetrating gaze full on. Pride that her voice held steady, despite the trembles rushing through her body, gave her courage. ‘And you can tell Lady Keswick whatever you wish. Now if you would excuse me, I would like to retire.’

His eyes widened a fraction. He turned sideways and leaned against the wall, tipping his dark head back. ‘Not until you tell me where you were.’

‘Why?’

‘Let us say I am curious.’

She swallowed. ‘I told you, I went for a walk.’

He turned to face her, his eyes gleaming. ‘In the woods, in the pouring rain?’

‘I couldn’t sleep. I find the fresh air helps.’

‘I know an excellent cure for insomnia I’d be willing to share.’

The salacious undertone in his voice sent shivers across her shoulders. ‘No,’ she whispered. ‘Thank you.’

He chuckled softly. ‘Such a polite little nun. And yet I do think you are tempted.’ He leaned closer.

Tempted? She stared up at him, staring at the smile on his sensual mouth a mere whisper away, the scent of brandy and cigars filling her nostrils. If she leaned forwards just a fraction, she had the feeling he would kiss her.

Her lips tingled at the thought of how his mouth might feel on her lips. Her body ached to be held close to that magnificent breadth of chest. A moan of longing rose in her throat and only by dint of will did she stop from giving it voice.

Heaven help her, he was tempting. The man was a rake and a libertine and he thought her a widow. An experienced woman.

Her heart banged a fearful tattoo against her ribs. Her blood ran in rivers of molten lava. Did he know the effect he was having? A swift glance into his eyes told her he had no doubt about what he was doing. He was playing with her. Tormenting her the way a cat toyed with a mouse.

‘Let me pass,’ she said, knowing she was begging for release, not from physical restraint, but from the spell holding her enthralled.

‘Tell me where you went and I will let you pass. If you are sure you really want to go.’

She swallowed. ‘How many times must I repeat myself before you believe me?’

His smile turned hard. He stepped back and bowed. He gestured for her to continue on. ‘Then I must bid you goodnight and hope you find sleep.’

A breath she didn’t know she’d been holding rushed from her parted lips. Ignominiously, she ducked her head and scuttled past him. For some reason, she felt curiously disappointed.

Oh, dear. It seemed she really had wanted that kiss.

The showers of last evening had turned into a steady drizzling rain overnight. Most of the company gathered in the library around two in the afternoon. Tucked in a quiet corner at her employer’s elbow with her needlework, Rosa forced herself to hide her impatience for the day to be over and her night of searching to begin.

Her only fear was Stanford saying something to Lady Keswick and preventing her from going back to Gorham Place tonight. He couldn’t.

Digger snuffled and snorted through his dreams, using her feet as his own special pillow.

While the men conversed about the sports news in desultory tones, the elegant ladies compared notes on various creams and potions designed to improve their complexions. Lady Smythe and Lord Stanford had yet to put in an appearance.

Every so often, Lord Bannerby kept looking at the door with a frown. Poor man. He was clearly suffering.

The door opened and Lady Smythe sauntered in dressed in a morning gown of blue muslin with rows and rows of diamond-pointed lace at the hem and cuff. Her copper-coloured curls created a halo around her head. She looked like a fairy queen. 'It is still raining,' she announced.

Observant as well as beautiful. Oh, dear. Was the acerbic wit of these ladies rubbing off? It wasn't Lady Smythe's fault her petite beauty made Rosa feel ungainly.

The various groups scattered around the room looked up and offered greetings.

'What on earth will we do now?' Lady Smythe said. Her rosy lips formed tragic lines. 'We were to go riding. I had my outfit all picked out. It took me ages to find something else.'

An excuse for her tardiness? And still no sign of Lord Stanford.

Bannerby leapt to his feet to kiss her hand and lead her to his recently occupied chair. 'My dear Lady Smythe, we were only waiting for you before we decided on the entertainment for the day.'

Clever Lord Bannerby elicited a brilliant, if brittle, smile. 'What did you have in mind?'

As if there had been some unseen signal, the company slowly gathered around her.

Lady Keswick cast her newspaper aside. She'd chosen a blond wig today, with ringlets above the ears and tiny curls across her forehead. 'Now we will see some liveliness.' Her smile turned her cheeks into rouge-painted apples. 'I like to see young people enjoying themselves.'

'Why don't we put on a play? Daniel has several he is working on.' Mrs Phillips, a buxom brunette just past her first bloom, looked adoringly at her aesthetic playwright husband. For all his severe appearance, he was a nice man, if rather led around by the nose by his wife. He was always courteous to Rosa, who would have liked to have talked to him more about the theatre. His wife's glares kept her at bay.

'Charades is better,' Fitzwilliam said. 'A play requires the learning of lines and will take more than a week of hard work.' He smothered a yawn behind his hand. 'Who knows, it might be fine tomorrow and then all the work will be for naught.'

Several of the men muttered agreement with the sentiment and voices were raised on each side of the question.

'Good day, Lady Keswick, Mrs Travenor.' Rosa jumped, instantly recognising Stanford's deep rich voice. Heat rushed through her body. She closed her eyes against the invading warmth as the image of his mouth close to hers danced in her vision. She took a deep calming breath and attempted a serene smile.

Lady Keswick gave him her hand. 'Stanford. I see you are not among the early risers.' Her gaze darted to Lady Smythe. 'Made a late night of it, I suppose.'

Stanford grinned good-naturedly, his eyes finding Rosa with a gleam of wickedness. 'I like to walk before retiring as an aid to sleep, though the rain last night was not conducive to long ramblings.' His gaze rested upon Rosa's face. 'How about you, Mrs Travenor? Did you sleep well?'

A breath caught in Rosa's throat. There was no doubt in her mind he was threatening exposure as he looked at her, his eyes issuing a challenge.

She raised her chin. 'I always take a short walk every evening, rain or no, Lord Stanford.'

He blinked at her intimation that only a weakling would let rain keep him indoors. With a triumphant smile at his obvious surprise, she gestured to the dog at her feet. 'I usually take Digger for his nightly perambulation. But, like you, he preferred to remain indoors last evening.'

Stanford hunkered down at her feet and scratched behind the pug's ear. The dog opened one eye and wriggled with pleasure as the strong long fingers moved with assurance over its flanks. The dog grunted its bliss and rolled on its back.

Stanford tickled the dog's underside and tipped his face up to meet her gaze. The individual lashes around his eyes were long and thick and veiled his thoughts, but not his mocking smile. 'He's a

lucky fellow to have such a considerate attendant, but you really should not wander the grounds alone at night, Mrs Travenor. Anything might happen. I beg you allow me to accompany you in future.'

A warning. He was not going to say anything this time. A spurt of relief left her feeling weak. She really didn't want to make up any more lies. Nor did she want to have to explain to her employer.

Lady Keswick's plucked eyebrows drew sharply together. 'Are you implying Mrs Travenor is not safe in my grounds, Stanford?'

His smile turned cynical. He straightened to his full height and once more she was aware of just how large he was, despite his sparseness of frame. 'I am sure she is as safe here as anywhere, Lady Keswick.'

Not safe at all with men like Stanford on the prowl.

'Hmmph,' the old lady said, eyeing her guests, who had devolved into a heated discussion about the relative merits of a play or charades. She picked up the cane beside her chair and rapped it sharply on the floor. Silence descended as all eyes turned on their hostess. Rosa shrank into the shadows of her corner.

Not that she need have bothered. None of them were looking at her. They were all looking at Lady Keswick.

A wicked grin spread over Stanford's face. He kept his eyes fixed on Rosa's face as he spoke, though he raised his voice to include the whole company. 'I suggest a game of hide and go seek. The gentlemen will find, while the ladies hide. Ladies, if you are caught, you will forfeit a kiss.'

One of the women squealed her excitement. Mrs Mallow, Rosa thought.

'Stanford,' Lady Smythe said in objecting tones. 'How can we hide if we do not know our way around the house?'

'Don't worry, Lady Smythe,' Mrs Mallow said. 'Stay with me. I am good at this.'

A flicker of something passed across Stanford's face. Dismay? How could that be? This was all his idea. He turned to Mrs Mallow, his smile turning wolfish. 'Have no doubt, I will find you.'

And he would. His kind knew such things by instinct.

Lady Smythe cast him an anxious glance, which seemed a little odd. Unless she worried that Stanford might not find her.

Rosa bit her lip until it hurt. Better that than feel envy for Lady Smythe. Envy? Surely not? What had got into her head? The kind of fun proposed by Lord Stanford would keep the guests busy for the rest of the afternoon. A good thing, from her perspective.

Stanford glanced down at her. 'Would you care to join us, Mrs Travenor?'

Dear Lord, had he read her thoughts? She really must be more careful around him. He was far too observant for a man so apparently indolent.

'Certainly not,' Lady Keswick put in. 'Mrs Travenor has other duties.'

Rescued. She lifted her chin, shooting Stanford a look of triumph.

He shrugged. His dark eyes gleamed wicked encouragement. 'Too bad.'

Lady Keswick's eyes lit up. 'And before you ask me, I am far too old, but it sounds like just the right sort of thing for a rainy day. Feel free to use the whole of this floor, but do not go upsetting my servants.' She reached out a hand. 'Come, Rose, you shall help me to my chamber. I have correspondence to write.'

Lady Keswick heaved herself to her feet with Rosa's help. Digger, tongue lolling, got his short legs beneath him. 'Dinner will be served at six in the dining room,' the countess announced and headed for the door.

Hapton strolled to her side and offered his arm. 'May I escort you, Lady Keswick?'

She beamed. 'Now you are what in my day we called a cavalier.' She took his arm. 'You can see me as far as the stairs. Clarence will take me the rest of the way.'

Rosa trailed in their wake, oddly aware of Stanford's gaze on her back. The very thought of it made her legs feel wooden and her movements stiff. It was only by practising a great feat of will that she did not turn around to ask him to stop.

The footman stationed at the foot of the stairs took over escort duties from Mr Hapton, whose granite-grey eyes ran over Rosa for a moment. 'I keep thinking we have met before, Mrs Travenor,' he said as she passed him to climb the stairs.

Rosa shook her head. 'I don't believe so.'

'Then you remind me of someone.'

A cold feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Everyone said she looked like her mother. An Italian opera singer famous in Rome and London before she married, she had been much admired for her voice and her opulent figure. Many painters had daubed her likeness, some showing her in the scandalous costumes of the opera house. One reason Grandfather had been so opposed to her parents' marriage. The reason for their years of estrangement.

Hapton must have seen one of her mother's likenesses somewhere. The thought he might put two and two together made her queasy. Not because she was ashamed of her mother, but because she did not want word of her presence in the area to reach her grandfather. Not yet. Not until she found the will. 'I can't think who it might be, Mr Hapton,' she said coolly and followed Lady Keswick and Clarence up the stairs.

At the door to his mistress's chamber, the footman waited while Rosa fetched the wheeled chair. Lady Keswick collapsed into it with a deep sigh as Rosa wheeled her inside.

Stone-faced, but with beads of sweat on his upper lip and forehead, Clarence closed the door from the other side.

'You should really think about a bedroom on the ground floor,' Rosa said gently.

'Pshaw. I'm not dead yet, girl. Nor yet an invalid.'

'Indeed no,' Rosa said. 'I was thinking more of your footman. Didn't you see how red Clarence's face was by the time he reached the top of the stairs?'

Lady Keswick grinned. 'Naughty puss. Trying to appeal to my soft heart.' She sighed. 'Very well, I will consider it. But not until these guests of ours are gone. Time was when I would be playing hide and go seek with the best of them. Are you sure you don't wish to join in the fun? An amorous adventure might be just the thing to cheer you up. You can't remain in mourning forever. Fitz is a nice young man and without a brain in his handsome head. You'd twist him round your little finger in a trice. I'd be wary of the rest, though. Bad men, the lot of them.'

Despite the horrid feeling in the pit of her stomach each time Lady Keswick mentioned her widowhood, Rosa laughed at the old lady's character assassination of her guests. 'A man would interfere with my plans.'

Lady Keswick shook her head. 'You gels today, so independent minded. Very well, I will write again to my friend with connections at the Haymarket. Meanwhile, you can practise on my guests tonight. It would be to your advantage to gain the Phillipses' approval, if nothing else.'

Mr Phillips had lots of connections with the theatrical community in London. He would be useful, if she did not find the will. But she had so much hope in her heart, she really didn't want to think about her option of last resort. Not today.

Yet, it was wise to be prepared. 'I will look forward to singing tonight.' She just hoped the nerves that always assailed her when singing to an audience would not change Lady Keswick's view of her talent.

Rosa tied the length of cord attached to the bell pull around the arm of Lady Keswick's chair. 'Ring if you need anything.'

'There is one thing. Tell Jonas I want the best burgundy served tonight. I can't abide the dreadful stuff he served last evening.'

Rosa sighed. Lady Keswick's servants could be a little slack sometimes and she had a feeling the butler watered the wine, but the old lady wouldn't hear a word against him, so all she could do was pass along the message.

Leaving Lady Keswick scratching away with her pen, Rosa ran down the nearest servants' staircase and along the corridor on the first floor, only to find the pantry empty. He must be below. She headed for the cellars.

An arm shot out from a cupboard, jerked her inside, up against a man's body.

Rosa screamed.

A hand covered her mouth, the palm damp and smelling of snuff. 'Hush, you little fool.' Hapton.

He swung her around to face him, pushing her deeper into the small space lined with shelves full of table linen and lit by a small window high on one wall.

She pulled free and stared at his sly grin. 'Mr Hapton, you know very well I am not playing your game.'

He leaned against the door frame, his arms crossed over his chest with a rather chilling smile. 'You are now.'

'Let me pass. I am on an errand for Lady Keswick.' She stepped towards him, but he remained blocking the doorway.

'The price of release is a kiss,' he said.

Her heart thundered. She felt as if all the air had been squeezed from her lungs. Another man who wanted to kiss her. But unlike last night, she felt not the slightest bit tempted. What she felt was disgust. She backed away until a shelf prevented further retreat. 'You should not be here. Her ladyship offered you the second floor for your game.'

'I play to win,' he murmured. 'And today you are the prize.'

'Is there something wrong with your intellect? I made it quite clear in the library that I did not intend to join your festivities this morning. Now, please excuse me.'

'Not without my kiss.' He lunged at her. She dodged his pursed lips and ended up jammed in the corner.

Now what was she to do? Men like Hapton saw anyone in the servant class as an easy target.

'You will let me pass, sir,' she said in a low voice. 'Or Lady Keswick will hear about your ungentlemanly conduct.'

He crooked a finger beneath her chin. Forced to look up, she glared into his cold grey eyes and repressed a shudder. Showing fear would only make things worse.

'Come now, Mrs Travenor, we both know her ladyship cares nothing for convention. And I've remembered where I've seen your face. On a theatrical broadsheet. Does Lady Keswick know your true calling?'

The idiot had mistaken her for her mother. Her chest tightened. If he thought her an actress, would he refuse to listen to her objections? 'You are mistaken, sir. And you will unhand me.'

'Now here's a pretty picture,' a darkly dangerous voice said from the doorway. 'Plaguing the hired help now, Hapton? Not getting anywhere with Mrs Mallow?'

Hapton cursed softly and turned to greet the newcomer. 'Am I treading on your turf, Stanford? Sorry, old chap, the last I saw you were hard on the heels of Lady Smythe. A little greedy, even for you.'

Stanford merely cocked a brow. 'Lady Smythe is in the library along with Bannerby, Mrs Mallow and Mrs De Lacy. It appears you have wandered off course. Unless I am mistaken and Mrs Travenor has changed her mind about joining us?' He cocked a questioning brow in her direction.

Rosa glared at him. 'As I told Mr Hapton, I am not a participant, Lord Stanford.'

A cool smile curled his lips and made him look darker and less friendly than she could have imagined. 'If that is the case, do feel free to be about your business, Mrs Travenor.' His ice-cold stare moved to Hapton and he stepped back with a gesture inviting them both to depart.

She had never felt so mortified in her life as she followed Mr Hapton into the corridor. There was something in Stanford's mocking gaze that made her feel like a scullery maid caught with her skirts over her head, instead of a victim of a man who ought to know better.

But then she could hardly expect him to fight a duel for her honour. He also saw her as ripe for amorous adventure.

Face scalding, she glared at both of them. 'You were given the run of the second floor by your hostess. Please do not come down here again.' Shoulders straight, she spun away and marched through the door leading to the basement, slamming it pointedly behind her.

Horrid men. Just because they had the morals of tomcats on the prowl, did they have to assume everyone else was the same?

And if Mr Hapton told his tales to Lady Keswick, he would catch a cold. While she hadn't given the lady any names, the dowager countess knew about Rosa's family connections to the opera. It was how she had secured this position. Lady Keswick liked to help those in the theatre down on their luck.

She took a deep breath and realised she was trembling from head to toe. Hapton had made her afraid. And Stanford's considering gaze had made her angry. Both for the same reason. No matter how drably she dressed or how prim and properly she behaved, men took one look at her foreign appearance and decided the worst.

Luckily, her two younger sisters took after their father, neither of them having their Italian mother's dark complexion or jet-black hair. Neither of them, as her grandfather was fond of saying, looked like dirty gypsies.

Heart still pounding, face still full of heat, she headed for the kitchen in search of Jonas.

Chapter Three

Restlessness felt like maggots under Garth's skin. Watching Penelope playing the harpsichord, while a solicitous Bannerby turned the pages of her music, was enough to turn his stomach.

After hours of ridiculous games in the afternoon and a dinner consisting of inane conversation, he really had to wonder if he'd survive the next few days without calling someone out. Someone like Hapton. He glared across the drawing room at the languid dandy and his fingers curled into his palms. He'd wanted to choke the life out of the ageing tulip of fashion this afternoon, and he would have, if he'd been certain Mrs Travenor hadn't welcomed the man's advances.

They'd looked very cosy in the linen cupboard. And she'd looked devastatingly flustered. Much as she'd looked the previous evening trapped in the passage. She'd certainly been angry when he interrupted them, but whether it was because he'd disturbed a *tête-à-tête*, or Hapton's importunities, he had no way of knowing. Unless he asked.

He glanced her way. As usual she was sitting calmly at her embroidery beside Lady Keswick, looking thoroughly nunnish and utterly desirable. Her tapered, skilful fingers moved with a delicate precision. He imagined those fingers in his hair, or on various parts of his body. Most of all, he wondered how those lush courtesan-lips would feel beneath his own in the throes of passion.

He'd almost found out last night. Yet something, some chivalrous instinct, had held him back. An instinct he now heartily regretted after finding her with Hapton.

A stab of jealously twisted in his gut. For Hapton? Damn it all. What was he? A fifteen-year-old with a crush on his governess? He could have any one of the other women in this room at a snap of his fingers and the promise of a diamond necklace. And if he'd wanted, he could have had Mrs Travenor. He'd seen the longing in her eyes.

She might look like a nun, but his initial instincts had been correct: the woman was like all the others here. Available to the right man.

His gaze swung back to Penelope. Could he have her? Not that he wanted her. He didn't. He would never touch another man's wife, not even to prove a point to Mark, who deserved so much better.

No. Her he would chase back to London. Infuriatingly, Maria Mallow was sticking to her like a limpet to a rock and he'd yet to get Penelope alone and convince her to see reason.

Bannerby leaned over to turn the sheet of music. Didn't the silly chit know he was looking down the front of her gown? Perhaps she didn't care. Perhaps she wanted him to look.

Mark would be devastated if he learned of her perfidy. Why the hell hadn't he made sure she stayed at home? Locked her in. Or, better yet, taken her with him wherever he'd gone. That was a man besotted for you. They saw what they wanted to see. Mark had forgotten how easily women gave in to temptation. Either that or the poor sap thought his wife was different.

Which left the field open to men like Bannerby and Hapton. Men who didn't give a damn if a woman was married or not. They were curs. And the women who succumbed were no better.

He gritted his teeth and forced the thought aside, letting his idle gaze drift to Mrs Mallow. The woman pouted. He pretended not to notice. His gaze once more fell on Hapton, who was lounging, eyes half-closed as if listening to the music, when in reality he was also watching the companion ply her needle.

Garth kept his hands relaxed and his gaze moving. Mrs De Lacy and Mrs Phillips had commandeered the window seat furthest from the harpsichord and were exchanging remarks about their dress and yawning copiously.

All the while their plump hostess sat beaming happily.

For a house rumoured to be seething with carnal sin and every kind of vice known to man, he had never been so bored in his life.

He pushed to his feet as Penelope played the closing notes of the piece of music. Applauding loudly, he strolled to her side. Others politely joined him. Penelope blushed, rose to her feet and dipped a curtsy.

Garth took her hand and led her away from the instrument. 'Let us take a turn about the room. You have been wearing your fingers to the bone, my lady. Perhaps there is someone else who would like to play or sing for us?'

Her gaze when it met his contained resentment. He gave her his most charming smile.

Lady Keswick said something to her companion, too low to be heard, and Mrs Travenor nodded and rose to her feet.

Hapton sat up. 'Why, I believe Mrs Travenor has been hiding her light under a bushel.'

The lady in question stiffened, but kept walking.

'How delightful,' Mrs Mallow said.

'Mrs Travenor has a beautiful voice,' Lady Keswick said. 'Will someone play while she sings?'

'I will,' Mrs De Lacy said from the window. She was one of the kindest of the racy females here. The ardent expression on Mrs Phillips's face indicated a hope that the beautiful widow would sing like the old crow whose feathers she emulated in her dress. Garth found himself wincing. He had no wish to see Mrs Travenor embarrassed.

He guided Penelope to a chair and perched one hip on the arm, blocking her from any possible intrusion. Garth bared his teeth at the approaching Bannerby and the man gave him a sour look and with a huff took the seat vacated by Mrs De Lacy.

Rose—Mrs Travenor, Garth corrected himself—glided to stand beside the instrument. Black suited her. It emphasised the warm tones of her skin, the beauty of her stunningly expressive eyes and the lush ripeness of her lips. Most women looked washed out in black, their skin deadened. She looked dramatic, like an exotic fruit that could taste either gloriously sweet or surprisingly bitter.

Every muscle, every sinew, every blood beat inside him, wanted to taste, to savour, to learn her unique flavour. He curled his lip at his body's state of arousal. These days most of the thrill lay in the chase, not in the capture.

He doubted this one would be any different.

In which case, why bother?

And yet …

Mrs Travenor gave Mrs De Lacy her music and stood at her right shoulder.

'Why are you doing this?' Penelope hissed up at him.

'Adoring you?' he murmured back. 'Isn't that what you want?'

'No.'

He raised a brow and for a moment Penelope looked ready to scream. He curbed a smile. Adoring swains did not find the tantrums of their adored ones amusing, though he dearly wanted to laugh at her chagrin.

Mark would not appreciate his being amused. Probably wouldn't appreciate his methods either. But that was his friend's fault. He should better guard what was his instead of being so trusting. Had he learned nothing during his years on the town?

The first notes from Mrs Travenor's throat were low and hoarse. Panic filled her gaze and he winced, expecting the worst. She dragged in another quick breath and her voice steadied; at first barely audible, it grew in volume. Everyone paused mid-breath the better to hear. Even Garth. Then her voice swelled with astonishing depth and strength. The room vibrated with its power.

Not a weak tinny soprano, after all, this dark exotic female. A stunning contralto. She'd chosen Handel's *'Ombra Mai Fu'*, a distinctly odd choice. Originally composed for a castrato, it was often performed as a female trouser role. Her tones were rich with passion and dark with mystery.

There wasn't a man in the room who wasn't wholly focused on her. A feral odour of lust and excitement filled the room, when all she was singing about was sitting beneath the shade of a tree.

As the last notes died away, male applause thundered. Bannerby cried, *'Bravo.'*

Garth rose to his feet. *'Encore.'*

Hapton followed suit, as did Fitz and Phillips.

The women smiled and clapped, any sound deadened by their gloves.

Mrs Travenor curtsied and brought Mrs De Lacy to her feet. Both women curtsied together. Garth narrowed his eyes. So the mysterious young widow was wont to perform. In drawing rooms? Or on the stage? The professional manner, the confidence—hell, the skill—said she was no amateur. What a surprise. An opera singer who left the house in the dead of night.

What the hell was she up to?

Despite the calls for more, Mrs Travenor shook her head and returned to the shadows behind her employer, who said cheerfully, 'Be still, you rascals. She will sing for us again another day. Will you play for us, Mrs Mallow, or will you sing?'

Mrs Mallow's irritation in being asked to follow such a performance could not have been more obvious.

Garth leaned forwards to whisper in Penelope's ear, 'Be glad she did not call on you.'

Penelope's expression said she was very glad indeed. She shrugged an impatient shoulder.

A glance at Mrs Travenor revealed no expression at all. The woman was an actress *par excellence*. First she played the nun and now the siren. His curiosity had been thoroughly roused. Along with a decidedly unruly part of his anatomy.

The woman presented a challenge. His blood stirred at the realisation. Very well. He'd pick up the gauntlet and find out exactly what she was about. Honest or nefarious. Virtuous or clever whore. The truth would out.

Mrs Mallow elected to play rather than sing. No fool, Maria Mallow. She never had been. She'd landed an ancient earl at the age of sixteen, buried him not long afterwards and spent most of her adult life as a rich and very indulged widow. She was the sort of woman he'd have been only too delighted to pursue at this kind of party, if his interest hadn't been diverted.

Boredom had dissipated. He felt enervated. All because of Mrs Travenor. Fiend seize it, his quarry would be a whole lot easier to catch if he didn't have to play nursemaid to Penelope.

He gulped down half of his wine and gave Penelope a toothsome smile.

She glowered over her fan. 'Why can't you bother someone else?'

'Go home and I won't bother you at all.'

Like the spoiled miss she was, Penelope slumped in her chair and gazed at the piano, her pretty mouth in a pout. What the hell was Mark thinking marrying such a girl? Obviously thought hadn't entered into his decision. Thank God Bannerby was too much of a coward to challenge Garth head-on for what he wanted, the puny weakling.

Another warning would probably do it, despite Penelope's encouragement. Not that she seemed particularly encouraging today. More sulky and unhappy.

No doubt because Garth was getting in the way. Well, she should have picked a man with a stiffer spine.

Hapton was a different proposition altogether. He took what he wanted and got away with it. Of all the men here, he presented the most danger to the pretty bride should he bestir himself in her direction. Fortunately, he seemed more taken with the lady companion. Garth suppressed the urge to warn him off there, too.

To Hapton that would be an irresistible dare.

While Mrs Mallow played competently, if without inspiration, the rest of the party listened politely or chatted softly. 'This is so dull,' Penelope whispered.

'What were you expecting?' Garth asked. 'An orgy?'

Penelope's cheeks turned pink. 'You are disgusting.' Married she might be, but she was no sophisticate.

'You said you were bored,' he said mildly.

The pout grew more pronounced. 'And all you think about is … is …' Now her face was fire red.

'It is all any man thinks of.'

Pain filled her pretty green eyes. Tears welled. 'I know that now.'

Why the hell was she crying? Mark was the one being betrayed. 'What is going on, Penelope?'

She blinked a couple of times, teardrops clinging to her lashes. She dashed them away. 'Why would you care?' she muttered. 'You are just like him.' She turned her face away.

'Penelope?' he said.

She rose swiftly to her feet with her fingertips pressed to her temples. 'Please excuse me,' she said to the room at large. 'I have a headache.' She almost ran from the room.

Mrs Travenor leaned forwards and whispered something in Lady Keswick's ear. The old lady nodded and Rose came to her feet and disappeared from the room.

She looked tired, he noticed, as if singing had tapped her strength. Or was her late-night excursion wearing her down? Would she go out again tonight? If she did, he would be right behind her.

Mrs Mallow finished her piece and the guests applauded.

Lady Keswick got to her feet, smiling broadly. 'Come along, every one. Rose has arranged for card tables in the drawing room.'

Cards had been an inspired idea. Rosa closed the door on a buzz of conversation and laughter. While the guests, including Lord Stanford, gambled away their wealth, Rosa had something else in mind.

She smiled at Jonas coming the other way with more port for the gentlemen. 'Goodnight, Jonas. I hope they don't keep you up too late.'

'I'm used to it, Mrs Travenor. Got a note for you.' He nodded at his tray. A white folded square of paper lay on its edge against one of the bottles. Who on earth would be writing to her? No one knew she was here, except her sisters. She nipped the paper between finger and thumb, smiled her thanks and ran off up the servants' stairs, the missive a dead weight in her hand.

Inside her room, she opened the letter.

The spidery handwriting was unfamiliar, but the signature was not. She sat on the bed to read.

Inchbold's note relayed the worst possible news. Her grandfather would arrive in two days' time to ensure all was in readiness for the new tenants. Inchbold had been ordered off to Rye to procure supplies and servants and he would not be back until the day after tomorrow. Just in time to meet her grandfather. The dear sweet man had left her the key under a stone beside the door into the kitchen.

She only had two nights for her search.

Something hard and heavy weighed down her chest. Fear.

Fear that Grandfather's blistering rant the day he came to the school to inform her of Father's death was the truth. Fear her father had forgotten his daughters.

She got up from the desk and went to the window, fingers laced so tight her skin burned. She would not give up. She would prove Grandfather wrong.

Whirling around, she grabbed up her cloak and fled, pausing only long enough to pick up the small lantern she'd placed beneath the table near the side door earlier in the day. She lit it from one of the candles on the hall table and ducked out into a light drizzle.

Cloud cover made finding the path through the woods difficult. She shielded her light from the house with her body and held her skirts as high as possible with her other hand. The scent of wet

leaf mould and greenery washed clean filled her nostrils. A friendly scent, unlike the heavy perfumes of Lady Keswick's female guests.

She spun around at a sound. Could someone have followed her? Stanford? Hapton? She shuddered at the thought it might be the latter. She stood stock-still, not breathing and hearing nothing but the pounding of her heart and the rain pattering on soft earth. It must have been raindrops dripping from the trees that she'd heard. Or a nocturnal creature about its business. A badger or a fox. She waited a moment more. Waited for her heart to calm. Then hurried on, crossing the bridge in reckless haste, splashing through puddles and mud. She only had a few hours before she must return. It would not do for any of the early-rising servants to see her coming in.

She found the key as promised by Inchbold, unlocked the door and stepped into a kitchen that seemed oddly chill, when it had always been a warm friendly place in Rosa's memories.

Where to start?

Her father's chamber. Mother and Father had always shared a room and Rosa had visited them there in the mornings. To go there in the knowledge they would never be there again clawed at her heart. For her, there was some joy in the sadness. At least she remembered Mother and Father and how happy they were. The girls struggled to remember their faces and Grandfather had insisted that all pictures of their mother be destroyed.

On the way up the well-remembered flight of stairs to the second floor, memories flooded back. The pictures on the walls, all gone now, the pale green paint picked out in white replaced with Chinese silk. She flung open the chamber door, fearing the worst. If the pictures were gone, would the furniture be gone, too?

Everything was covered in holland covers—chairs, chests, tables. Hardly daring to hope, she lifted the corner of a sheet and discovered her father's desk in its usual place. A cloud of dust rose in the air. She sneezed. The woman who dusted clearly didn't make a very good job of it.

She smiled at the desk she remembered so well. Her father's escritoire, inlaid with gilt and rosewood flowers and birds. She'd sat on his lap while he wrote his personal letters. She also remembered the secret drawer beneath the lid.

Could it be this simple? Could what she sought be right here, tucked away and forgotten? If it was going to be anywhere, would it not be here where he must have known she would look?

It had to be.

Chapter Four

Breath held, fingers trembling with hope, Rosa felt far at the back for the catch inside on the roof of the pigeonhole. A small raised knob. It was easier to twist as a child. It slipped from between her thumb and forefinger. She huffed. Tried again. It turned. A faint click.

A drawer slid out from the elegant carving above the writing surface. She peered in. Nothing.

Either someone had found it already, or … Neither scenario boded well for her quest. She refused to give room to her doubts. He must have put it elsewhere.

She would not lose hope. For her sisters' sake, she must search everywhere.

She glanced around the room. Under the bed?

She crawled on the floor, but found only dust.

Perhaps another secret hiding place. One she did not know about. She walked around the room and its adjoining dressing room, pushing and twisting any projection or seeming oddity in the hearth and the panelling until her fingers were sore.

A loose floorboard squeaked beneath her feet. She snatched up the poker and pried it up. An old mouse's nest, full of bits of wool and fluff, met her gaze.

Rosa shuddered.

Despair rose in her throat. Hot moisture burned the backs of her eyes. She swallowed hard. She'd been so sure it would be in the desk.

She sucked in a breath. She'd try the other bedrooms on this floor and then the library, and after that, she'd try every other room in the house. And if she didn't find it tonight, she'd come back tomorrow.

Oh, please let her find it tonight.

Garth wanted to curse. He would never have believed the woman could slip out of a house so quickly. He'd had to run to catch her up. Or at least to catch up to the sight of her lantern willow-wisping ahead to who knew where.

Thank heavens for the lack of a moon, though he could have done without the rain.

The lantern danced ahead like a glow worm. Or a naughty little wood sprite of children's stories. Except there was nothing of the wood sprite in Mrs Travenor. Far from it. She looked like an innocent and sang like a siren, an erotic siren. As exotic as an eastern princess.

The lantern stopped bobbing.

Damn. She'd heard him. He remained still, not breathing, staring into the dark, listening to the sound of the rain splattering on leaves, on his hat and his shoulders. The rain itself was of the fine drizzling sort, a kind of irritating mist, but the leaves harboured the foggy stuff, releasing it in big fat drops.

The twinkle moved on. Faster this time. He increased the length of his stride, determined not to lose her. In his mind's eye, he tried to guess her destination. There was nothing out here, except woods. He'd checked with the gardeners.

A new sound, the sound of running water, overpowered the pattering of the rain on the leafy floor. A small stream, if he recalled the map, with a narrow footbridge. It defined the boundary of the neighbouring estate.

The progress of the lantern slowed to a crawl. He drew closer, catching glimpses of ancient wooden rails in the swinging circle of light. Why would she risk life and limb crossing such a rickety structure?

He waited until she was clear and approached the stream. Feeling the slick boards beneath his feet and the shake in the timbers in his grip, he crossed slowly.

Wherever she was going, it had to be important to risk traversing this bridge.

By the time he reached the other side, all sign of her lantern had disappeared. Cursing under his breath, he wandered around seeking a path. Without her light to guide him, it took him a good few minutes to find the track, only to discover he'd gone in a circle ending back at the bridge. This time he used his brain and sparked his tinderbox. In the brief flash it provided, he found her footprints in the mud, heading off to the right.

He pressed on through the tangle of brambles. A wet branch slapped him in the face. He grabbed for his hat. He cursed at the trickle of chilly rain running down between his collar and his skin. Any owner of a property who let his woods grow wild ought to be shot.

The woods ended at a lawn. And beyond the lawn there had to be a house.

Got you!

He frowned. Why so much secrecy? He couldn't imagine

Lady Keswick caring if her lady companion had a special friend at her neighbour's house. He could even imagine the old girl encouraging the lass.

Perhaps she had. Then why not admit it?

He forged on. The house was there, he knew, he'd seen it on the map, but strangely, it was utterly dark. Even if all the occupants were abed, which they couldn't be if she was meeting someone there, then there ought to be some light in the corridors and stairways.

The house must be empty.

The crunching of gravel beneath his feet signified he'd reached a drive, albeit a rather weedy one. And at the end of the drive, he found a house. Of Mrs Travenor there was no sign. How far ahead of him was she? He must have lost sight of her at least a half an hour before. He went around to the back of the house and stopped.

Here were the lights he sought. A lantern hanging beside a back entrance to the house. It bounced off slick cobbles.

Of Mrs Travenor there was no sign.

He crossed the courtyard, searching for a clue to her whereabouts. He scanned the back of the house. There. A light. On the second floor. It wasn't very bright, but it had to be her.

She'd gone inside. It was the only explanation.

What in hell's name was she doing?

He walked carefully up to what was clearly the kitchen door and put his ear to the crack at the jamb. Nothing.

Slowly, he depressed the latch. The door opened silently. He stilled, breath held. No cry of alarm. No footsteps coming his way. He opened the door enough to allow his body to slide through and closed it behind him.

Now he really was in the dark. In the pitch-black, with the echoing sound of footsteps somewhere deeper in the house.

It seemed Mrs Travenor was up to no good.

A sense of disappointment slid through him, bitter edged and sharp. He hesitated. He could just walk away and forget what he'd seen. Or he could catch her in the act and, damn it, see her brought to justice. Clearly she'd been using Lady Keswick as her dupe to gain access to this empty house and now was about to make off with some sort of loot. His gut knotted. He almost preferred to think of her in the arms of a lover than this.

He fumbled around as quietly as possible until he found the stub of a candle. Taking his time in order not to alert her to his presence, he lit the wick. The light revealed an abandoned kitchen. Clean. Tidy, but definitely not used recently. A narrow set of stairs led upwards. Perfect. He'd take the servants' stairs to the second floor, where he'd seen the light, and catch her in the act.

This was impossible, Rosa thought, staring around the library at chairs and tables covered in sheets and walls lined with empty bookshelves. Where did she start?

She set her lantern down on the red-leather-covered rent table in the middle of the room. It had a keyhole within its central circular section. Would her father have hidden his will in there? It seemed unlikely. Any fool would look there first, and Grandfather wasn't a fool.

She pulled on the knob beside the keyhole. It lifted easily. She groped inside, feeling nothing but dust under her nails. Ugh.

Walking around the table, Rosa pulled open the three drawers beneath its top where Father would have kept his records of rents paid and collected. More emptiness.

She turned in a circle. This room still had all of its pictures. Perhaps they disguised a hiding place.

She pulled one of the straight-backed wooden chairs underneath a hunting scene adjacent to the hearth.

She hopped up on the chair. The picture shifted easily enough to reveal blank plaster painted blue like the rest of the walls. Disappointed, but not surprised, she slid the picture back in place. Something gave way with a snap. The picture slid through her hands. It was going to smash to the floor. She clutched it, wobbling on the chair.

'Blast!'

'Well, well,' a menacing voice said from the doorway. 'I had no idea you were an art lover, Mrs Travenor.'

Rosa gasped and almost dropped the picture. 'Lord Stanford?' Oh, no. What was he doing here?

He strolled to her chair and looked up at her. 'It seems a call on the magistrate is in order.'

'You followed me.' Gripping the picture frame, she stared at the cynical twist to his mouth and the suspicion rampant in his dark eyes.

'As well I did,' he said. 'Or you'd be making off with someone else's property.' He moved in close, too close, and grasped the picture by the frame. 'I'm afraid I can't allow you to steal this.' He took the frame from her grasp and set it down, one edge on the floor, the other leaning against the wall.

He put his hands around her waist and lifted her. His hands were large and warm; he smelled of rain and cigars, and sandalwood. He set her down lightly, as if she weighed nothing at all. 'Now then, madam, what are you up to?'

How to explain without giving too much away? 'I know this doesn't look good, but I am looking for something that belongs to me. I did not intend for the picture to come down off the wall.'

Stanford laughed. 'Smooth, Mrs Travenor. Very smooth. You must think I'm an idiot.'

'Then why do you think I have the key to the door?'

He frowned. Looked a little nonplussed. 'Perhaps you have an accomplice.'

Her heart sank. She certainly did not want to implicate Mr Inchbold. Brazen it out. It was the best way—she'd learned that during her long years at school. And more recently in dealing with the doctor who had come to attend her sister, Sam. 'I have the key, my lord, because I have every right to be here. I used to live here with my father and I believe he left something behind.'

If anything, the curl to his lip increased. 'Money? Of course. You are looking for a safe. Expecting to find the family jewels, perhaps?'

'There are no family jewels here.' They had all gone to her stepmama. Even those her father bought for her mother. Blast Lord Stanford—why couldn't he just stick to playing cards instead of chasing after her?

It was that business with Hapton in the linen closet, no doubt. A blush crept up her face. He thought she was no better than she should be. Apparently in more ways than one. 'This really is none of your business.'

‘It is every man’s business to protect his fellow from thieves and burglars.’ He gave a rather nasty laugh. ‘Indeed, I’ll have you know I am sworn to uphold the law in my role as a member of the House of Lords.’

She gave him a sour look. ‘God help England.’

He cracked a laugh. ‘Indeed.’

Dare she trust him? She heaved a sigh. ‘Perhaps if I explain …’

He nodded, his eyes wary. ‘I’ll listen. But stick to the truth. I will know if you are lying.’

Not telling everything was not lying. All she had to do was convince him she wasn’t a thief. ‘As I said, I lived here once.’

He threw back his head and laughed. ‘Mrs Travenor, you are the most outrageous female I have ever met.’

‘It’s true. There is a servant here who can vouch for me.’

‘Where is this servant?’

She winced. ‘He had to go to Rye, but he will be back and he will confirm that my father was a tenant here before he died. We had to leave in a hurry.’

The laughter left his face, replaced by a swift frown. ‘Debts?’

Well, there were debts. Just not her father’s. ‘Yes.’

His mouth twisted in that cynical smile. ‘And what do you expect to find behind the pictures?’

He didn’t believe her. She swallowed. She couldn’t tell him about the will because then he would want to know the names of her relatives. If any word got back to her grandfather about her search, he would no doubt ban her from the house and Inchbold would be in terrible trouble.

She clasped her hands together, a prayer for his trust. ‘A miniature of my mother. It was only after he died that I realised it was missing from his effects.’ It wasn’t completely a lie. Change the word miniature for will and it was as close to the truth as she dared get.

He looked unconvinced.

‘In two days the house will be rented again. This is my last chance to search.’ She couldn’t stop the pleading note in her voice. Not that she thought pleading would do any good, judging by his forbidding expression.

‘Are you sure it is here?’

‘It cannot be anywhere else.’

‘Why sneak about in the night? Why not just ask the owner for permission to look?’

Did he have to be so logical? ‘The owner is unlikely to grant me permission, given the cloud we left under. Surely you won’t stop me from looking for what is mine? It has no value to anyone except me and my sisters.’

His expression remained doubtful.

She swallowed the dryness in her throat. ‘You can stay and watch if you wish.’

‘Good God, woman, it is long past midnight. A time when honest people are heading for their beds.’

‘I have other duties to perform during the day, as you know.’

He muttered something under his breath. ‘All right. Search. But you will not remove anything from the property without the owner’s express permission.’ He folded his arms across his chest and leant against the wall.

It was the best she could hope for. Besides, if she did find the will, she would be able to put paid to his suspicions in an instant.

She stared at the picture on the other side of the fireplace, another hunting scene. She dragged her chair around the hearth and stepped up. Taking care not to put any pressure on the cord, she pushed the picture aside. Nothing here either. Skirts in hand in preparation of jumping down, she glanced over at Stanford. He was staring at her ankles. When she didn’t move, he raised his gaze to her face. She glared. ‘Do you mind?’

‘Not in the slightest.’

Heat flooded her body at his lazy mocking smile. They locked gazes for a moment and then finally he shrugged and looked away. She leapt from the chair.

There was another picture, this time a Scottish scene, complete with a gillie and his dogs out amid the heather. A console table stood beneath it. It looked sturdy enough to hold her weight, but she needed the chair to climb up. She turned to pick it up.

‘Allow me.’

The velvety voice in her ear caused her heart to leap into her throat. She drew back. ‘Certainly. Over there by the window, if you please.’

‘That is not the kind of wall where one would locate a safe.’

‘I want to look.’

‘Well, we don’t need the chair.’ He strode to the picture, reached up, grasped the frame and shifted the picture at an angle. Nothing. His expression was long suffering. ‘As I said. Can we now put an end to this nonsense?’

Damnation. He was going to try to rush her out of here. ‘If you don’t want to help, sit down and leave me to it.’ She walked over to the bookshelves and tried twisting and turning any ornate projection she could see.

He let go a heavy sigh and did the same for the ones above her head. Lord, but the man was tall. When they were finished there, she peeled back the large rug covering the middle of the floor and started on the floorboards.

‘What is so important about this picture anyway?’ he grumbled while he tested the boards at the other end of the room.

‘It is the only picture we had of my mother.’

‘Why would someone hide it away?’

The man just couldn’t leave well alone. ‘My father couldn’t bear to look at it after she died. He put it away in a safe place for us. When we left, it was forgotten.’

‘It sounds like a very bad play,’ he said. ‘Who can’t bear to look at a picture?’

‘My father loved my mother very much.’

‘As I said, a very bad play,’ he scoffed.

She frowned at him. His gaze was fixed on the floor, but the smile on his lips was not merely mocking, it was bitterly cynical.

‘I suppose you are one of those men who does not believe in love,’ she said, flipping down one corner of the rug and moving to another carpet corner on her side of the room.

‘Love is a fairy tale created by females with nothing better to do than create fantastical events in their heads.’

‘Don’t you love anyone? Your family? Is there no woman you have ever loved?’

‘Family is a duty. I fulfil my responsibilities. I believe in friend ship. It also has responsibilities.’ He looked up, his dark gaze shadowed and unfathomable. ‘But all this emotional talk and poetry about hearing music, the sky being brighter, because you love someone is just so much claptrap. It isn’t possible.’

The vehemence in his tone took her aback. ‘I will admit there are different kinds of love. Love of family is quite different from romantic love. But why would so many people, men and women, write about it, if they have never experienced it?’

‘Because they are in lust. People don’t like to think of their baser urges as the same as unthinking beasts, so they call it another name.’

She gasped. Baser urges. Is that how he saw love? ‘Then what about familial love?’

‘Family members care about each other as long as it benefits them. If it doesn’t, then they don’t.’

Never had she heard anything so cold. What on earth could have caused such a chilly outlook? She flung the carpet back in place and put her hands on her hips. 'I feel sorry for you, Lord Stanford, if that is how you feel.'

He kicked his corner of the carpet flat. A puff of dust rose up. 'Indeed, Mrs Travenor. Well, I am not the one searching a stranger's home for a stray picture that a widower no longer wanted to look at and promptly forgot about because he probably married again to assuage his baser instincts.'

How had he guessed Father had married again? 'My father never forgot my mother. Never.'

He gave her a dark glance. 'Are we done here? Are there any other hiding places you can think of?'

'The study.'

He groaned and pulled out his fob watch, bringing it close to the lantern on the table. 'It is almost two. After the study, we will leave.'

'After the study, there is nowhere else to look.' She'd searched all the other rooms. Oh, how she hoped the study held the answer.

She blew out the candles she'd lit, picked up her lantern and marched along the corridor, all too aware of Stanford trailing behind.

She was aware of his presence all the time. It was like having the devil sitting on your shoulder, whispering tempting words in your ear, because she kept remembering their almost-kiss, kept feeling a glimmer of the heat that had ripped through her body, each time their gazes met. And she had the distinct impression, when he looked at her, that he was remembering it, too.

'You certainly seem to know your way around,' he said as she went to the study and flung back the door.

'Because I lived here,' she said, not quite disguising the triumph in her voice.

'Or because this is not the first time you have searched.'

The room was bare of furniture. Not even one picture remained.

'Oh,' she said, recalling her father's oak desk and the heavy wooden chairs. 'Where is everything?'

Stanford shrugged.

If only Inchbold was here, he would know. She glanced around the oak-panelled walls. Could they hide a secret place? She tried tapping on the wall nearest the door.

Stanford groaned. 'This is ridiculous.'

'Not to me, it isn't,' she said fiercely. Her sisters were depending on her to find the will. They all were. The debts were mounting by the day. Debts to the school. Debts to the doctor. She'd managed to stave them off, but she had borrowed against the certain knowledge they would inherit something by way of her father. When no will was found, everything had gone to his new wife and their son and the debts had remained. Growing more crushing by the day as interest piled on top of interest. She clenched her hands. She would not believe her father had broken his promise.

'If you want to help, then do so. If not, please stand back.'

She pushed past him to get to the wall on the other side of the door. Her tapping revealed nothing out of the ordinary. With a long-suffering sigh, Stanford inspected the floorboards.

'There's nothing here,' he said after he'd covered every inch of the floor and she had done the same with the walls. She'd even looked up the chimney, which was an old-fashioned one, probably built when the first house occupied the estate.

Her shoulders slumped as defeat washed through her. 'You are right. There is nothing here.' And disaster loomed closer.

He shot her a considering look.

She forced a careless shrug. 'He must have put it somewhere else. Perhaps his second wife has it.'

His mouth tightened. 'I'm sorry.'

‘Me, too. There is no point in searching any longer. It is time we went home to our beds.’

The hot look he sent her way seared her skin everywhere it touched and it roamed her at will. As if he’d like to eat her up. Or kiss her.

The thought of comfort in a pair of strong arms was very tempting right at this moment. It seemed like years since she’d had anyone to lean on. She forced her gaze away. ‘Let us go.’

Outside, she locked the door and put the key in her pocket. ‘I will return it to the servant tomorrow.’ In an oppressive silence they walked across the lawn and into the woods, with only the light of the lantern to guide their steps.

‘You don’t believe me, do you?’ she said. ‘About the miniature?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it doesn’t make sense. Why wouldn’t the owner give you permission to look?’

‘He took the furnishings in lieu of rent,’ she said. ‘He would say the miniature also belonged to him.’

‘In that case, I’m afraid it does.’

She halted. ‘Have you no compassion at all?’

His gaze searched her face, the light from the lantern emphasising the starkness of his features, the high cheekbones, the angular jaw. The bleakness in his eyes. ‘None.’

‘Heaven help you, then.’

He gave that short laugh of his. ‘It won’t.’

She wanted to shake him. Then realisation flooded through her. ‘You are going to contact the owner, aren’t you?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you are lying.’

‘How can you say that?’

His lips twisted. ‘Do you want to know how I can tell when a woman is lying?’

She stared at him. ‘How?’

‘Her lips are moving.’

She recoiled. ‘What cynicism, my lord. Perhaps you have been mixing with the wrong kind of women.’

He inclined his head a fraction. ‘Perhaps.’ He took her arm firmly and urged her forwards. ‘But you are lying, nonetheless.’

Blast the man, she was, but not about what was important in this matter. ‘What I seek is rightfully mine.’

‘If so, you would not be sneaking around in the dark.’

Implacable. She jerked her arm free of his hand. ‘If I had any other choice, do you think I wouldn’t take it?’

Oh, dash it all, were those tears she heard in her voice? She despised tears. She swallowed the hot lump in her throat. ‘Fine. Tell whoever you wish.’ She broke into a run, slipping and sliding on the sodden ground, hearing his heavy steps behind her. Why couldn’t he just leave her alone?

‘Mrs Travenor,’ he said in low impatient tones. ‘Stop. You will fall and hurt yourself.’

She broke through the trees and saw the light of the house ahead. She lifted her skirts higher, ran faster.

A hand caught her arm. Swung her around. Held her upright. And then she was pressed against a hard wall of male chest. It rose and fell from running. As did hers. Heat invaded her breasts and thighs. She struggled to free her arms. He drew her closer, using only one hand, and lifted the lantern. Grim-faced he glared down at her. ‘What in hell’s name do you think you are doing?’

‘Let go of me.’

If anything he tightened his grip. The heat of the day before swirled around them. She stared at his mouth. At the lips that once more tempted. She could not tear her gaze away.

‘Rose,’ he whispered.

He bent his head and took her mouth.

She grabbed his lapels, stood on tiptoes and pressed against him, kissed him back. It seemed the only way to quench the fire in her blood.

A groan rumbled up from his chest. Her breasts tingled and tightened. She put her arms around his neck.

On a gasp, he broke the kiss.

A sense of loss engulfed her. Longing.

Retaining his grip on her shoulders, he blew out the lantern and set it down. ‘Now,’ he murmured, ‘where were we?’ Both arms went around her, one hand at her nape, the other around her waist, and once more their lips melded.

She felt as if she was flying ten feet off the ground. A dizzying, exciting sensation. Her body hummed with a longing to burrow against him. His tongue slipped through her parted lips and into her mouth. Her limbs became heavy and languid, her mind empty of all but the heat and the hunger. When his tongue retreated, she followed it with her own, tasting the darkness of his mouth, the brandy and pleasure.

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