



JULIA
JUSTISS

*My Lady's
Honor*

Julia Justiss

My Lady's Honor

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Indulge your fantasies of delicious Regency Rakes, fierce Viking warriors and rugged Highlanders. Be swept away into a world of intense passion, lavish settings and romance that burns brightly through the centuries Upon meeting the young lady who'd bedazzled his best friend, Gilen de Mowbry was surprised to find her hauntingly familiar. But surely this demure ton miss couldn't be the violet-eyed Gypsy who had danced for him in the firelight-and still taunted his dreams. . . . Desperate to save herself and her brother from her odious cousin's schemes, Gwennor Southford spirited him away by night-in a Gypsy caravan! Now they were in her aunt's care, and only one thing stood between her and the safe haven of a proper marriage-one unforgettable evening with Gilen de Mowbry. . . .

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“You miserable arrogant excuse for a gentleman,”

she all but snarled, punctuating her epithet with another swipe from the whip.

Gilen dodged the whirling thong and backed away, his initial astonishment giving way to incredulous delight. By heaven, she was magnificent! This girl still garbed like a proper ton maiden had changed before his eyes from demure virgin into the passionate creature who had told his fortune, teased his wits and tantalized him with a dance.

“You find this amusing?” she choked out. And lashed the whip at him again.

He ducked as the leather tip nearly caught his left ear. “If you can’t control yourself, I’ll have to disarm you.”

Ah, that she might compel him to do it! With her body bound closely to his was exactly where this astonishing, intoxicating, intemperate vixen belonged.

He couldn’t wait to see how her passionate nature played out in his bed...!

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To my mother,

Beatrice Ruth Langley,

who taught me a woman can do anything.

For your love and support,

thanks, Mom.

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Chapter One

“Your cousin Nigel—that is, the new Baron Southford, be awaitin’ ye in the library,” the maid informed her with a curtsey.

Gwennor Southford sighed and removed the apron with which she’d covered her mourning gown while she helped Jenny and the staff clear away the remains of the breakfast they’d served after her father’s interment. “Thank you, Jenny. Tell him I will join him shortly.”

While the maid departed, Gwen stopped to check her hair in the black-draped hall mirror, making sure no unruly strands had escaped her coiffeur to catch the eye of her punctilious cousin. A London dandy of the first stare, Nigel never failed to look at her without a slightly pained expression, as if she offended him by sporting soot on her nose or a spot on her gown. Which most of the time, she allowed, she probably did.

Or perhaps it was just that, not being able to peer down at her from a superior height, cousin Nigel tried to intimidate her with his faintly contemptuous gazes. Though they did not succeed in leaving her in awe of him, she did often feel like a large, ugly and not very interesting beetle being inspected under a glass.

Finding that her thick black hair, which had a tendency to curl wildly despite her efforts to subdue it, was still neatly braided, Gwen walked on to the library. She couldn’t imagine what cousin Nigel needed to say to her that could not have been expressed in front of a roomful of other guests.

Perhaps he merely wished to complain—again—about the meals or accommodations. Which, she had no doubt, he would soon be “improving” by the addition of a foreign chef to create dishes more suitable to his cultured palate, followed by an army of workmen to update the century-old rooms to a more fashionable mien.

She grimaced at the idea of her beloved home being transformed under his ruthless hand. Pray God she could convince him to send her to London for the upcoming Season, so she might find a husband and Parry and herself a new home.

Damping down a niggle of unease, she knocked on the library door then entered.

She had to suppress a pang at seeing her cousin lounging in her father’s favorite chair behind the massive desk. Wrenching her thoughts from reflections that could only bring on another wave of useless grief, she curtseyed and forced herself to focus on Nigel.

Once again he subjected her to a lengthy, critical inspection. “Well, cousin Gwennor, I’m afraid the years have not much improved you, but at least you’ve the sense to keep that peasant’s hair tightly braided, and your other features are not unpleasant. I suppose, with the addition of a small dowry, you will do well enough.”

“Thank you, cousin,” Gwen said sweetly with a clenched-teeth smile, “for your kind condolences on my father’s death. And I am...gratified to earn your approval.”

“Your tendency to indulge in levity at inappropriate moments does not become you, Gwennor,” he replied loftily. “I’m quite certain I offered you my sympathies upon my arrival yesterday. However, it does no good to linger in the past. Changes will be taking place at Southford now that I am baron, and you must adapt to them.”

“Naturally, cousin.” She would not refer to him as “my lord,” she thought mutinously, no matter that she was no longer the daughter of the house but merely a female relation dependent on his charity. “Does your reference to my dowry mean that you intend sending me to London for the Season, as I’ve requested? I shall be ready to leave as soon as my bags can be packed.”

She cast her eyes down and clasped her hands in such a picture of maidenly humility that Nigel, no fool despite his affectations, gave her a sharp look.

"I have given thought to your eventual settlement, yes. I think we both agree that it is in neither of our interests that you remain at Southford. After all, the quality of establishment you maintained for your papa, though adequate enough, I suppose, for a Welsh baron of rural tastes, will not do for me."

"No, cousin, my sort of household—" which, she added silently, would be notable for simplicity, kindness and courtesy to all "—would definitely not suit you."

"I'm glad we agree on that score. And since with the alterations necessary to bring the manor and outbuildings up to the standards worthy of my stewardship, the estate is likely to suffer some heavy financial demands, I see no reason to throw away money on a London season. You're well past the age of presentation, no great beauty and your dowry is merely adequate. I do not wish to be unkind, but a dispassionate assessment must conclude that your chances of attracting the eye of a gentleman wealthy and influential enough to make a connection with his family worth the heavy expense of sending you to London are, I regret to say, remote. In this, you must trust my far greater knowledge of the sensibilities of ton gentlemen."

So used to his disparagement that his strictures scarcely made her wince, Gwen's active mind considered instead the implications. Not London. Would he send her to Bath, perhaps? Or to the Assembly in Gloucester?

"It was to announce my solution to this delicate dilemma that I summoned you. Of course, I am fully sensible that as a Southford and my cousin, you must wed a man of good reputation and standing, if not one as discriminating in his requirements as I am myself. I have chosen such a husband for you, cousin. You may congratulate yourself on soon becoming the bride of Lord Edgerton."

Shock riveted her to the spot. "Edgar Edgerton, B-Baron Edgerton?" she stuttered, hoping there might be some misunderstanding.

"Indeed," the new Lord Southford replied, smiling benevolently. "I can see how overwhelmed you are by my choice. Lord Edgerton may be a trifle older than you, but he is still a fine figure of a man, and his six motherless sons, poor lads, will give you ample opportunity to practice your preferences for frugality and a rustic outdoor life."

Gwen swallowed hard. Edgar Edgerton, a hunting crony of Nigel's, was pushing fifty, with a short, stout figure and high coloring that indicated a probable tendency to gout. He resided all year on his estates in Lincolnshire, having, as far as Gwen knew, few interests beyond his stables and his kennels. There would certainly be no need to expend Southford estate money on modish gowns for her trousseau, she thought acidly.

"I...I have heard by all reports that Lord Edgerton is a most...amiable gentleman," she said with only a slight quaver in her voice. "But I am somewhat concerned about his sons, whom rumor would hold to be a bit...spirited." In truth, the alarming escapades indulged in by the baron's energetic offspring, descriptions of which had been brought back to Southford by her father when he hunted with the baron's pack the previous year, had made even as indulgent a gentleman as her papa shake his head in dismay. "I hope they will not be too rough with Parry."

Her cousin had been listening idly, his attention focused on removing a barely visible speck of lint from the sleeve of his immaculate coat of black superfine, but at this his fingers stilled. "Parry?" he said with a frown. "What has that half-wit to do with this?"

"Well, naturally I assumed that since you do not...get on with Parry, he would go with me when I married."

"Whatever would cause you to believe such nonsense as that?" her cousin demanded, his tone aggrieved. "Use what little wit you possess, Gwennor. For one thing, your father long ago designated me as the boy's guardian after his death. Even though he's not a blood relative, I am not one to shirk a duty, no matter how distasteful. Besides, Lord Edgerton, who prides himself upon the bloodlines of his breeding stock, could never abide having that degenerate about, no more than would any other person of sensibility."

“Parry is no degenerate,” Gwen replied hotly, “and he possessed more wit than you until that stallion kicked him!”

Nigel looked at her with cold eyes. “I shall forgive you that remark only because I know you still harbor some ridiculous conviction that, since Parry was injured going to your defense, you are obligated now to defend him. But do not trespass too far upon my goodwill. I grant you, so devastating an accident occurring to a child of his tender age was tragic, but ’tis long past time to be done with such sentimentality. He’s now—eighteen, is he not? He should have been confined years ago, instead of being allowed to wander the woods and fields of Southford, an embarrassment to the family and a threat to the countryside.”

“Parry is no threat to anyone!” Gwen protested. “He treats every fellow creature with consideration! And he’s not an embarrassment—everyone at Southford knows and appreciates him.” Save you, she thought furiously.

“Not an embarrassment?” Nigel retorted. “And what would you call it when he interrupted the solemnity of your father’s obsequies, stumbling into the church in dirty boots and a torn jacket, his pocket full of wild creatures!” He made a grimace of repulsion.

“Baby rabbits,” Gwen replied, trying to hold back the tears that threatened. “Papa was developing a new domestic strain, you’ll remember, and interbreeding them with the darker-colored wild rabbits from the mountains. Parry brought him those as a parting gift.”

“Gift—bah!” Nigel said contemptuously. “That drooling simpleton had no idea the man who’d died was his stepfather—nor any conception of what death means. Although he’s soon to get a lesson in the latter.”

“You’re wrong, cousin Nigel. He knew it was his papa,” she emphasized the word, “and he understands about death.” True, Parry might not have comprehended the threat to his own position implicit in his stepfather’s demise, a threat that—with good reason, it turned out—Gwen had so feared, but he knew the elderly man who’d treated him with love and gentleness had gone away forever.

“Well, I find him offensive, so something shall certainly be done about it. Edgerton wishes to have you settled in at the Hall between the last of the hunting season and the beginning of spring planting, so the wedding is to be at week’s end, here at Southford. Given the groom’s age and the shortness of time to prepare, I see no need for anything elaborate. A simple ceremony with a small reception immediately after should be sufficient.”

Cheese-paring nip-squeeze, Gwen thought, too furious to respond. The will had not even been read yet, and already the new baron was determined to expend as few funds as possible on the former daughter of the house.

“Congratulations on your good fortune, Gwennor. You may go now to begin the preparations.” He waved an imperious hand toward the door—dismissing her from her own library like a lackey.

Too shocked and angry to reply with a remark her cousin would consider suitable for a gentlewoman, in icy silence she pivoted toward the door.

“By the way,” her cousin’s voice halted her before she reached the doorway, “since I expect your bridegroom sometime tomorrow, I intend to have your stepbrother...taken care of before his arrival. Parry shall be confined to the attics, where he can be restrained but kindly treated, at minimal expense. Oh, and should you suffer from some maidenly excess of nerves before the wedding and attempt to call off your nuptials, remember that I have the power to confine you as well, should you take a sudden notion not to acquiesce willingly in my plans.”

He paused, regarding her thoughtfully. She stared back at him, defiantly mute, not caring that he could probably read on her face the intensity of her dislike.

“I shall warn you only once,” he said softly. “Growing up, you had a deplorable tendency to obstinacy and disobedience, traits I doubt your weak-willed papa ever succeeded in rooting out of you. I am not a man who can be manipulated by a shrewish spinster entirely too accustomed to running

things her own way. I am master here now, and the servants will obey me.” He nodded. “That is all.” And looked down to peruse a ledger on the desk.

Her head and heart teeming with a volatile mix of grief, anguish, worry over her brother, fury at her cousin’s threats and fear for the future, Gwen picked up her skirts and half ran through the hall, down the servants’ stairs to the deserted stillroom and out the back door.

Shivering in the late-winter cold, she continued on behind the gardens to the barn surrounded by a collection of sheds and pens where her brother carried out his father’s breeding experiments. She spied Parry’s dark head bent over one of the cages and walked in his direction. His sharp ears no doubt picking up the soft pad of her footsteps, he looked up and smiled at her.

As she drew closer, his smile turned to a frown. “You have no shawl! You’ll be cold, Gwen.” Before she could stop him, he shucked his tattered wool jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

She reached up to hug him fiercely, tears seeping now from the corners of her eyes. How she loved her gentle, serene brother. Even did she not, as Nigel had alleged, feel responsible for his injuries, Parry was so unspoiled and utterly pure a soul she must love him, as nearly everyone in the county did, for his healing hands and sweet-tempered kindness.

He had a special touch with animals and young people. Both seemed to respond to his straightforward nature and both seemed to sense how competently he could soothe and help them. Not only had Parry directed her papa’s rabbit-breeding operations, he was sought by neighbors from all over to treat their ailing livestock, providing, despite Nigel’s dismissal of his usefulness, a small income to Southford’s coffers.

The whole county knew if Parry Wakefield could not cure an animal’s ills, the owner might as well prepare to bury it.

What was she to do? Gwen wondered as she held her brother close. She might detest Nigel, but she wouldn’t make the mistake of underestimating him. If he’d said he would put Parry under restraint, he would do it. And he would have no compunction about locking her up too if she tried to stop him. Nor did she wish to put the servants in the untenable position of opposing their new master.

At last she released Parry. He held her at arm’s length, his guileless face studying hers. “You’re sad, aren’t you, Gwen? Are you missing Papa? I am, too. Look at these babies.” He opened a wicker cage and indicated some tiny balls of fluff. “Misty had them Sunday past—and they are all browns. Just what he wanted. I think he’s happy, looking down at them from heaven.”

“I’m sure he is.” Happier than any of us this side of heaven are likely to be again, she thought bitterly.

Her brother had been wholly content since his physical recovery from his injuries, wandering the estate at Southford, watched over by family and neighbors who cared for him, collecting and succoring the animals he loved.

He would pine away and die without them, locked up in the attics at Southford Manor.

Well on the shelf at five-and-twenty, Gwennor had no illusions about her beauty or her prospects. She’d taken over the management of the household at age fifteen, upon the death of her stepmother—the only mother she remembered, her own having died at her birth. In her concern for her stepbrother and her grieving papa, she’d easily withstood the baron’s half-hearted attempts to send her away for a Season several years later. If Lord Edgerton were prepared to accept Parry, she would give herself to him, if not enthusiastically, at least with resignation.

But would he?

She’d have little time to plead with him, and no leverage to bargain with. Besides, Nigel was probably correct. Most people shied away from anyone with an impairment, which was often looked upon as God’s judgment upon the unhappy individual and his family. Being Nigel’s friend—indictment enough in Gwen’s opinion—as well as a fanatic on the purity of the bloodlines of his horses and dogs, Edgerton would doubtless agree with Nigel’s solution for dispensing with the

embarrassment of his bride's mentally deficient brother. No, she concluded, Parry would find no champion in Edgerton.

And if he would not accept Parry, she had no reason to wed the man, despite Nigel's threats. She'd not spent the last ten years, as he'd described her, an obstinate spinster growing accustomed to running things her own way, to meekly succumb to her detestable cousin's plans for either herself or her beloved stepbrother.

"I must feed the others," Parry said. "Can you help?"

"No, I must get back to the house. Here, take your jacket back before you catch a chill."

She held it out. With a smile he waved it away. "I'll get it later. I have these—" he scooped up a handful of soft rabbit babies "—to keep me warm."

She turned to walk to the house, her anxiety sharpening. Tomorrow morning was terrifyingly close. She would have to think of some way to rescue them both before then, but to be safe, 'twas better for her brother to remain well away from the house until she decided how she was going to do it.

"Parry!" she called back to him. "Nigel will be down for dinner."

Her brother's smile faded. The only person her friendly stepsibling did not like was their father's cousin. "Must I come eat with him?"

"No. Stay with the animals. I'll bring you a tray later. No sense both of us having to deal with him." She made an exaggerated grimace of distaste that set her brother laughing.

"Thank you, Gwen. I'll find you a surprise for tonight."

A lovely surprise it would be, too, she knew—a bird's nest he'd rescued, or a rock crystal of unusual shape and color, or an intricately woven spider's web as complex and beautiful as a master engraving.

Unlike the surprise his cousin had in mind for Parry tomorrow.

A fate he will never suffer while I draw breath, Gwennor vowed, and walked purposefully back to the house.

Chapter Two

Her mind working furiously, Gwennor paced across the stableyard. They would have to leave tonight, secretly, after her cousin and the rest of the household had retired. She would tell Jenny and Cook when they prepared Parry's tray that she planned to work with him well into the evening, so not to wait up for her—a fairly frequent occurrence that should protect the servants from potential dismissal for not alerting their new master that she'd left the house. Since her cousin slept until noon, it was quite possible he'd not discover their disappearance until rather late tomorrow. Perhaps not even, she thought with a savage grin of satisfaction, until his dear friend Lord Edgerton arrived and he summoned the blushing bride to greet her eager bridegroom.

She'd need to pack a small bag—something that could be easily and surreptitiously transported. She'd better bring all her mother's jewelry; she would not put it past her cousin, once he discovered she'd fled, to sell it and keep the money. She'd also need to sneak into the office while cousin Nigel took his nap before dinner. Considering that she'd be saving the estate the expense of her wedding breakfast, she felt justified in removing all the coins currently in the estate's strongbox.

She would also have to go through the motions of planning a wedding. Though she didn't need to seem enthusiastic—that would certainly be suspect—Nigel might well inquire about the progress of her preparations at dinner and would find it suspicious if she had not set the servants to beginning the arrangements. They would have to be warned of Lord Edgerton's imminent arrival in any event.

Having dispensed with the details of getting away, she turned her thoughts to the thornier problem of where they would go and how they would get there.

By now she'd reached the house. Gwennor paused before the stillroom door. 'Twas still too early to risk entering the estate office. Best to slip unnoticed up to her chamber and finish planning.

She crept up the servants' stairs to her room and paced to the window. Hands clasped in concentration, she stared unseeing over the rose and herb gardens.

If only her first cousin Harry weren't away with Wellington in the Peninsula! First in each other's affections, they'd always joked. They'd been boon companions throughout the time she was growing up. Were he at home, Gwennor knew he would assist her escape. But though his mama, her aunt Frances, resided an easy two days' ride from Southford, that widowed lady would be no match for a determined cousin Nigel, should he decide to pursue his disobedient kinswoman.

Would he pursue her? Or simply wash his hands of her, glad to be rid of the burden of a cousin he'd never liked?

Were it not for the plans he'd set in train to marry her off to his crony, she might well think the latter. But she did not believe his kindly-elder-cousin talk of arranging her marriage to insure she had a permanent position worthy of her breeding. She suspected there was far more to the agreement, and given her cousin's proclivities, probably something involving money.

Ever since her father had declined to remarry after her stepmother's death, her cousin had been living on the expectation of one day taking control of Southford and all its resources. His self-professed "refined" tastes in clothes and furnishings were expensive, as were his gaming habits, and she would not be at all surprised to learn he was heavily in debt. Perhaps he owed Edgerton, and had decided to use Gwen and her dowry as a means to repay the baron, at no cost to himself.

Yes, that would appeal to Nigel: not only getting rid of his detested cousin, but using her money to pay off his obligations.

If her suspicions were correct, he would not view with equanimity the double insult of being embarrassed in front of his friend and losing his free means of repayment. She'd also had a glimpse this afternoon of Nigel's relish for exercising his power as Baron Southford. Even were there in actuality no financial considerations involved, having Gwennor flout his new authority before his

friend and her former household was certain to enrage him. He'd probably be angry enough to pursue her, if only to drag her back and impose an equally public punishment.

So, how to make a swift and clean break? Were they to make haste to the nearest posting inn, Nigel would likely catch them either while they awaited the next mail coach or once they'd transferred to that slower conveyance. If they traveled by horseback and she used precious coin to hire new mounts at each stage, as a single lady traveling with no maid in attendance, she would be singular enough that most innkeepers or stablemasters would remember her, making them all too easy to trace.

It was imperative they get far enough away for Nigel's anger to cool and to make further pursuit sufficiently expensive and bothersome that he might choose to simply let them go. Of equal importance was finding a haven that offered some unimpeachable reason for her to withstand his efforts to force her back to Southford, if he did succeed in tracking her.

Harrogate! the answer suddenly occurred to her. They could make their way to her stepmother's Aunt Alice in Harrogate. Gwen had not seen the lady since her stepmama's funeral a number of years previously, but they still corresponded, and she had no doubt the sweet, frivolous Lady Alice would be delighted to receive her.

Not only was the mineral spa in which she resided fortuitously distant, many of its residents and visitors were elderly widowers come to take the waters. Among them, perhaps Gwennor could find a kindly gentleman who'd be willing to wed a young, strong, hardworking lady of good family prepared to run his household and care for him in his declining years—at the negligible cost of also housing her brother.

She could claim Aunt Alice's assistance in her matrimonial quest—what lady could resist the chance to play matchmaker? With luck, she might find an acceptable candidate quickly, perhaps even be wed before Nigel could trace her.

If the new baron found her still single and insisted she marry the suitor he'd chosen, Lord Edgerton could just as easily travel to Harrogate to claim her.

Gwen would wager her mother's entire collection of jewelry that Edgerton would not.

So she now had a destination, but there remained the problem of how to traverse that long distance undetected.

She had reviewed the alternatives over and over, unable to decide which one offered the best chance of successfully evading pursuit, when suddenly another idea occurred, so far-fetched and outrageous she nearly rejected it out of hand.

But, she decided, the advantage lay in its very outrageousness. Cousin Nigel might scour the roads, make a sweep of the posting inns, and question every innkeeper and livery stableman within a hundred miles of Southford and never locate them.

She scrambled to her desk, jerked open the top drawer, and began tossing out the objects in a disordered heap on the desktop. After rooting through each of the drawers in turn, she'd accumulated a trove of small coins and one golden guinea.

Hardly a fortune, but, she hoped, enough to tempt a king.

Quickly she changed into her riding habit and stuffed her findings into a small leather pouch. Tying the strings around her wrist, she tucked it under her sleeve and summoned her maid.

Jenny arrived so speedily Gwennor suspected the woman had been anxiously awaiting a chance to learn the results of Gwen's interview. Sure enough, with the familiarity of one who had been first her nurse and then her maid practically since Gwen's birth, as soon as she hurried in, Jenny asked, "So what was it the new master be wantin'?"

"Cousin Nigel feels it is time for me to marry."

"Saints be praised!" Jenny replied. "'Tis the very thing I've wished for ever since your papa took so sick. Now that the new baron's here, and being how he is, 'tis best ye git a household of yer own, with a husband to protect you. So, when be we goin' to London?"

"We are not going to London. Cousin Nigel has already chosen my husband. In fact, he arrives tomorrow."

Jenny's enthusiasm chilled abruptly. "Already chosen? Who...who is it to be, my lady?"

"Lord Edgerton."

Consternation extinguished the remaining traces of Jenny's gladness. "Lord Edgerton! Why, that gentleman is twice your age or more! With a pack of unruly brats as would try the patience of the Virgin Mother herself, so the story goes! Surely your cousin—"

"My cousin is fixed upon it, Jenny, and will brook no opposition. Indeed, he's threatened to lock me away if I resist. So there's no purpose to be served in repining. Lord Edgerton arrives tomorrow and the wedding is to be the end of the week. A simple affair, cousin Nigel said. Given the circumstances," she finished dryly, "you may dispense with the traditional wishes for my happiness."

"My poor chick," Jenny said, distress on her face. "'Tis a dastardly thing for the new baron to do, and I can't help if I think it!"

Gwennor gave the maid a quick hug. "Bless you, Jenny. But you and the rest of the staff must be circumspect in what you say. I'm not sure who among you, if any, I'll be able to take with me when I wed, and those who remain will have to work for my cousin."

"Probably turn us all off without a character and fetch in some jumped-up London toffs," Jenny muttered.

"I hope he will value you all as he ought. Now, would you tell Cook and Hopkins to make a room ready for Lord Edgerton and ask them to begin considering preparations for a wedding breakfast? I shall consult with them tomorrow about the details, but for now..." Gwen let her sentence trail off and tried to look mournful, not a difficult task. "I believe I shall ride."

"Well, and I don't wonder at it!" Jenny said. "Settin' you up with a man old enough to be your papa, and marryin' you off all havey-cavey, without even time to buy bride clothes! You go on, Miss Gwen. A ride will do your spirits good, and I'll get Hopkins movin' on the preparations."

"Oh, and Parry will not be joining us for dinner. I told him I'd bring him a tray later...and I—I think I shall stay out late, helping him with the animals. I shall not be able to do so much longer, after all."

"Bless me, Miss Gwen, whatever is to become of that poor boy with you gone? I worry about it, I do!"

"You know I would never allow anyone to harm Parry—no matter what I must do to prevent it. I shall think of something, Jenny."

"You bein' so clever and all, I suppose you will. Now, get you off ridin', and leave the rest to Jenny."

Gwennor gave one last hug to the woman who'd been more mother than servant to her for the last ten years. "Thank you, Jenny. You're an angel!"

"If'n I was, I'd be spreadin' out my wings and carryin' you off to London," the maid declared, still shaking her head in disapproval as she walked away.

Gwennor picked up her pace and sped to the stables. She must complete her mission and return with enough time to rifle the strongbox before cousin Nigel rose to dress for dinner.

Firefly, her ginger mare, whinnied a greeting as she approached the hay-fragrant stall, and Gwen felt a pang of regret and anger. Another dear friend, along with her home, she'd soon be forced to abandon.

Sending the stable boy back to his other chores, she saddled the mare and headed off at a trot, letting the horse stretch her legs in a gallop once they reached the open fields near the Home Woods, and then continuing on at a canter to the far south meadow.

"Please," she prayed. "Let them still be there."

When at last she saw the gaily-painted wagons beside the stream that formed the border of Southford land, she let out a gusty breath of relief.

Slowing Firefly to a walk, she proceeded to the end wagon. Before she'd even dismounted, a dark-eyed urchin with a thatch of black hair ran over to catch her bridle.

"A copper for you if you'll take her to drink at the stream—but not too much water, now!"

Gwennor smiled as the lad trotted off, Firefly in tow, and turned to the old woman who sat by her campfire regarding her gravely.

"So, you come to have your fortune read, now that the Evil One descends upon your home?"

"No, Jacquinita. I'm afraid I know what you'd find in my palm," Gwen replied with a grimace, not at all surprised the most revered of the gypsy soothsayers already knew of her cousin's arrival. "I came to ask a favor."

With a jangle of her many bracelets, the gypsy motioned her to sit. "What favor?"

"Parry and I must leave Southford immediately, but we must depart in a way that my cousin cannot trace. I want to ask Remolo to allow us to travel in your train, disguised as Rom. I will pay in coin and in jewels for this boon. Will you plead my case for me?"

The woman fingered a pleat of her full red skirt. "He means to harm you, your cousin, yes?"

"He wishes to marry me to his friend, but that is not why we flee. He intends to lock Parry in the attics and not allow him to roam free. The Rom, of all people, should understand what this would do to my brother."

The old woman nodded. "He has the gift, your brother. Such a spirit should not be caged. Your father was a good man, for a gadjo. Every year he allowed us to camp in his fields. That one—" she spat in the direction of Southford Manor, then made a sign of protection against the evil eye "—will call the magistrates on us soon, so have I warned the people. Therefore we leave at dusk. I will speak with Remolo."

"Dusk!" Gwennor cried with alarm. "If I am to depart undetected, I cannot leave the manor until near on midnight. Please, tell Remolo I will pay him well if he will wait and take us!"

The old woman stood, adjusting her full skirts and the multicolored head scarf. "I will tell him. You follow."

Gwennor removed the small leather pouch and held it out. "Take him this. 'Tis a token and pledge. Tell him I will bring twenty more gold pieces when we come tonight."

The old woman snatched the leather pouch from her fingers. "So will I say."

Gwennor followed as instructed, praying a merciful God would intercede with the gypsy overlord. Swarthy, handsome, mercurial and unquestioned master over his band, Remolo's decision—like her cousin's, she thought with irony—would be final and irrevocable.

As she had only a very basic knowledge of the Romany language, Gwennor could not follow much of the conversation that ensued. The old woman offered the money pouch, which the gypsy lord accepted with a short bow in her direction. But after Jacquinita spoke for several minutes, with gestures and dark looks toward Southford Manor, Remolo's face creased in a frown and he shook his head in vehement negative.

Though it would avail her little to beg, Gwennor was on the point of throwing herself at the gypsy's knees when, after another rapid-fire speech by the soothsayer, Remolo paused, a thoughtful look crossing his face, and then gave a slight nod. After an elaborate curtsy, the old woman returned to Gwennor.

"He will take us?" Gwennor demanded.

The old woman smiled. "For your small gold, he thanks you. But he did not wish to bring along so heavy a burden. I told him you would work for us, playing cards and telling fortunes for the gadjo who come to the wagons where we stop. He said we have women and children enough for those things. Then I reminded him that Parry had cured his stallion—and that his favorite mare is due to foal soon. So, he will let you come for the sake of your brother's skill and the money you promise—but he will not wait until midnight."

Gwen's initial exhilaration faded rapidly. "We cannot go before then! Or rather, I cannot." A heart-wrenching choice that really was no choice confronted her. Deciding rapidly, she said, "Parry can. If I pay Remolo as promised, will he take Parry? And will you watch over my brother and keep him s-safe?" Her voice broke at the awful thought of sending Parry away alone.

The old woman came over to touch Gwen's face. "Child of my soul, you know I will. But you would send your brother from harm and not yourself?"

Gwennor nodded. "For myself I do not care, I will figure out something. But I cannot protect Parry from Nigel if he stays."

"You have the heart of the wildcat, my child," the woman said approvingly. "So have you been since I met you as a little girl—brave, strong and fierce. Ah, if you had been Rom, I would have made you my mulkini, that you might carry on after me. Do not think I, Jacquinita, drabarni of the Remali Rom, will leave you to that Evil One. Come to the clearing at midnight. My grandson Davi —" she nodded toward the boy holding Firefly by the stream "—will wait for you and lead you to us. Go in the spirit, child."

Gwennor threw her arms around the old woman's neck. "Thank you, dya!"

Jacquinita released her, chuckling softly. "We will dress you in skirts and the kishti, with bracelets and earrings and a scarf in that dark hair. Ah, leibling, what a gypsy you will make!"

Chapter Three

Three weeks later, Gwennor dropped the last load of firewood beside Jacquinita's wagon and brushed off her hands. With a now-expert eye, she calculated she had another half hour's daylight to return to the stream, draw water and wash.

She flexed her tired shoulders as she trotted back to the small river near which Remolo had ordered them to make camp this afternoon. Jacquinita had promised the gypsy lord that Gwen and her brother would work, and work they had, Gwen carrying water, foraging for firewood, and assisting with the cooking, while Parry helped the men hunt for game and care for the horses. Though Gwennor had supervised her Southford staff in performing a wide variety of household tasks, she had done little of the physical labor herself. Most evenings, she was so exhausted that she fell asleep the moment she rolled into her blankets in a corner of Jacquinita's wagon.

During the day-long rides, the soothsayer instructed Gwennor in the reading of palms, the rolling of dice and the playing of the various card games with which the gypsy entourage would entertain—and win money from—the people of the towns who came to their encampment. Around the fire on several evenings she had even, at Jacquinita's urging and much to the amusement of the rest of Remolo's family, joined the women in dancing to the plaintive music the men coaxed from their violins.

Her escape from Southford Manor had been almost ridiculously easy. After returning from her interview with Remolo, while Nigel slept, she'd simply walked into the estate office and, without a qualm of conscience, removed from the strongbox a sack containing almost forty golden guineas.

When she explained at dinner that Parry had remained at the barn to tend his animals, her cousin merely shrugged his shoulders, as if to indicate that her brother's behavior proved he was the incompetent Nigel claimed him to be. The new baron also seemed satisfied with her terse assertion that everything was in train for the arrival of Lord Edgerton, and happily monopolized conversation for the rest of the meal, expanding on his plans for the modernization of Southford.

Leaving him to his brandy and cigars, Gwennor had been able to creep out of the manor several hours earlier than expected, to the delight of the waiting Davi, who informed her that Parry had departed with the rest of the family at dusk, as decreed by Remolo.

She'd feared at first that her brother might resist leaving Southford. But though he was sorrowful at abandoning his animals, he seemed to sense without her attempting to explain it that with the coming of their cousin, life as they knew it at Southford could not continue. With the sweet-natured trustfulness she found so endearing, he merely inquired where she wanted him to go, and seemed delighted to learn they'd be traveling with the gypsy band.

After much internal debate, Gwennor had decided against leaving Jenny a note. Though she hated to worry her dear friend, she was more concerned about the consequences should Nigel suspect the maid had abetted her flight. This way, Jenny's alarm and worry would be too genuine for the new baron to suspect her former nurse had any foreknowledge of her mistress's plans. As soon as it was safe to do so, she'd vowed, she would write to her.

Reaching the swiftly flowing river, Gwennor quickly performed her ablutions. Shivering against the chill and thinking longingly of the hip bath full of hot fragrant water back at Southford, she filled two buckets upstream to bring back to the encampment. She hoped the stew would be ready when she arrived, for Gwennor was starving, and eager to practice her card tricks for the night ahead.

By now she was quite skilled, and not nearly so nervous as she'd been the first night the gypsies had welcomed curious farmers and townspeople to their camp. She rather enjoyed leaving her curly hair long and free, unencumbered by pins or braids, she thought as she tied it back again with the multicolored scarf. Accustomed to long, straight gowns fitted only at the bosom, at first it had seemed shocking to don the low-cut peasant blouse and long skirt that hugged her waist. But now she was as

comfortable in her gypsy clothes as she was with the telling of outrageous fortunes and the deft shell games at which she won farthings from gullible young farmers.

If her time with the gypsies had given her a new appreciation for the comforts of living in the Manor, still she had found appeal in their simpler life, the camaraderie of the band and the esteem with which Parry was treated for his skill.

Only one aspect of the experience made her uneasy, she thought as she hefted the buckets and trudged back to Jacquinita's wagon. Though she'd never tasted passion first-hand, she recognized the hungry look in the eyes of the visitors as they watched the gypsy girls tell fortunes or ply the dice, a look that intensified later when the girls danced. Their steady, openly appraising stares while Gwennor dealt them cards or read their palms had at first shocked her, and often still made her cheeks redden beneath the scarf with which she masked her face.

No matter how hot their glances grew, though, most visitors were wise enough not to try to touch where their eyes lingered. Remolo permitted no carnal transactions with the women of his family, and few wished to risk the wrath of the gypsy men who watched and waited, vicious curving blades tucked casually in waistbands or boot tops. Still, Gwennor could read in the attitude of their male customers the opinion that the gypsy women were merely an exotic variety of lightskirt. Should the society to which Gwennor belonged ever discover she had traveled in a gypsy caravan, worn gypsy dress and read the palms of clerks and farm boys, all Southford's wealth would not be sufficient to buy her a respectable husband.

Mercifully, the visitors she'd encountered seemed to accept Gwennor as the gypsy girl she appeared, for which she thanked heaven daily, grateful the Lord had created her dark rather than blond. After the first week, when she'd listened night and day for the pounding of approaching hooves, her fear of pursuit or discovery lessened, though she alone of the gypsy women still wore a scarf over her face when strangers came to the encampment.

She trudged back to Jacquinita's wagon and deposited her twin burdens, mouth watering at the spicy scent emanating from the cooking pot.

The fortune-teller had already spooned her out a large bowl. "Eat quickly, my heart," the old woman said. "Remolo has ridden into the town. We've camped here before, and many will come to have their fortunes told and bet at cards." She smiled at Gwen. "You must help them leave their money behind when they depart."

Gwennor laughed and took the bowl offered. "I shall do my best," she replied.

"I think it's a terrible idea," Gilen de Mowbry, Viscount St. Abrams muttered to his brother, frowning at the noisy group of friends preparing to ride out.

Alden de Mowbry grinned at his sibling. "Don't be a dead bore, Gil. Chase tells me the gypsies camp here every year, and 'tis very amusing to have one's fortune read, or dice with their pretty wenches. Half the town comes out, as well as nearly all Lord DeLacey's servants. The masculine contingent, anyway."

"The females have more sense," Gilen retorted. "Certainly, visit the gypsy camp—if you wish to have the watch nabbed from your pocket while some dark-eyed charmer tells lies about your future."

"Come on, Gil!" Alden coaxed. "Remember, you're bound soon for Harrogate. No amusement to be had in that rubbishing town full of half-pay soldiers and octogenarians. Best find some enjoyment while you can."

"Perhaps you're right," Gilen said with a sigh. "Jeffrey nursing a broken heart is devilish grim, and dancing attendance on his sick grandfather will scarcely be more entertaining."

Alden shuddered. "Sounds appalling! Why go at all? Stay here a while longer. Between billiards and cards, Chase has gone down to you by nearly five hundred pounds. I'm sure our host's son would welcome the opportunity to win back some of his blunt."

Gilen chuckled. "Given his level of skill, he'd likely only lose more. And I really must go lend poor Jeff my support. Damn that Battersley chit! I tell you, Alden, there's nothing so perfidious as a woman! Leading Jeffrey to a declaration, when all the time what she really wanted was to make the Earl of Farleigh's chinless cub jealous enough to pop the question himself."

"Abandon old Jeff after he did, eh?"

"As fast as it took to slip Farleigh's emerald on her deceitful finger."

"You know Jeffrey, though," Alden countered, "Ten to one, by the time you arrive he'll have fallen for someone else. Too easygoing by half, and always fancying himself in love with some chit or other."

"Who's he to fall in love with in Harrogate?"

Alden nodded. "Point taken. I suppose you shall have to go cheer him up. Best friend since Eton, and such. Which," he added, pushing his brother toward the door, "is all the more reason for you to come along with us and enjoy yourself tonight. Mayhap you'll catch the eye of some fetching gypsy wench."

"And then catch the edge of her father or brother's blade? Thank you, no!" he replied, laughing as he gave up his resistance and followed Alden.

Lacey's Retreat was only a day's ride from Harrogate, but Gilen had broken his journey here with the ostensible excuse of spending time with his brother before Alden, Chase and their Oxford classmates returned to school. He had, he knew, been putting off the moment when he must confront Jeffrey's sorrowful face—a sight which would only further inflame his temper against Davinia Battersley in particular and matchmaking females in general.

Thank heaven that, not yet ready himself to become a tenant for life, Gilen confined his attentions to bits of muslin who performed zealously for the high wages he paid them. No fraudulent shows of devotion, no false sighing over his wit, strength, masculinity—just an honest exchange of mutual passion that left each party satisfied. And if the parting was sometimes a bit...tempestuous, he mused, recalling the shrieks and breaking of glass that had accompanied his giving that delectable but fiery-tempered opera singer her congé, such uproar occurred infrequently.

Perhaps the gypsies also provided a straightforward bargain, he thought as he rode his skittish stallion behind the others. After all, if a man wished to throw away his coins listening to a pretty lass spout nonsense, that was his affair. In any event, observing the interplay should prove more amusing than the alternative—challenging himself to a solitary game of billiards while the rest of the party went off to the gypsy camp.

His doubts about the excursion returned after they arrived, however. Chase, Alden and their other friends turned their mounts over to some gypsy youths, who herded them into a brushwork enclosure already containing a number of other horses. His temperamental stallion Raven, however, could not be closeted with other beasts and would have to be kept separately.

While he hesitated, a tall gypsy lad approached. Before Gilen could warn him away, he came to Raven's head, crooning softly. Instead of snorting, shying or baring his teeth at the intruder as Gilen expected, the stallion grew still, watching the boy, who continued to speak to him in a low, singsong voice. To Gilen's surprise, Raven nickered and allowed the boy to stroke his velvet muzzle.

"He'll come with me now, sir," the boy said.

"You mustn't put him in with the others," Gilen advised as he dismounted.

"I won't," the lad replied. Then, while Gilen watched in astonishment, instead of leading the stallion by the bridle, the boy merely walked away, still murmuring, Raven following him docilely like a chick after its mother hen.

Shaking his head in wonderment at the spectacle, Gilen wandered into the encampment.

Brightly dressed gypsy girls rolled dice, or shuffled cards, or traced their fingers along the palms of eagerly waiting men. A large bonfire burned in the center of the circle of wagons, and at its edge the gypsy men stood looking on, one of them idly playing on a violin.

Gilen's attention was drawn to the wagon closest to the bonfire, where a large crowd surrounded a slender figure seated in the wagon, dealing cards to three of the men.

A silky saffron scarf veiled all but the lady's eyes, and silver bangles glittered at her wrists as she laid out the cards. "Stakes in the pool, gentlemen," she said in a soft, lilting voice.

Not only was her accent oddly different from the tones of the other gypsies, she was the only lady veiled. Curious, he drew closer.

She looked up at his approach. A flash of something almost like...alarm registered briefly in her eyes before she lowered them back to the cards before her.

He stood frankly inspecting her. Perhaps the tallest girl he'd seen here, she was whipcord slender, just a hint of full breasts outlined beneath a woolen shawl that mostly obscured her narrow waist. She looked up again, as if conscious of his stare, and he realized with a start that her eyes were not brown, but an intriguing shade of violet. It must have been a trick of the firelight, but he would almost swear the pale sliver of cheek revealed above her veil had reddened at his survey.

As she met his gaze, an instantaneous and entirely physical energy surged between them. Her eyes widened, her hands stilled on the cards and for a moment she sat utterly motionless before once again dropping her eyes beneath a thick veil of lashes. Gilen inhaled sharply, his pulse racing, the rest of his anatomy stirring in turn.

No longer regretting his foray to the gypsy camp, with avid interest he watched her play out the hand. Silver loo was the game, he noted, enjoying the quick movements of her long fingers laying down cards and taking up wagers, the intimate gurgle of her laughter as she bantered in low tones with the men. Starlight flashing on her bangled wrist, she brushed off her forehead one errant lock from the wild tangle of black curls that cascaded out of her colorful kerchief and flowed down her back.

Thick hair a man could wrap his hands in while he drew that tempting body closer, crushed those teasingly camouflaged breasts to his chest and brought the saucy lips beneath that veil close enough to kiss, Gilen thought. Burgeoning desire and heightening anticipation broke a sweat out on his brow.

After the hand ended, Gilen pressed forward. "The next play must be mine, enchantress."

Muttered complaints of "wait yer turn, gov," and "I were next," faded as the local youths, recognizing from his voice and attire his status as the Quality, grudgingly gave way.

The gypsy flashed him an annoyed look, then gestured toward the men. "Abandoning me, my lords?"

"Let them go, lovely one," Gilen said. "Whatever stakes they offered, I will double."

"Too rich fer me," one said to her, while the others, after sidelong glances at Gilen, nodded reluctant agreement and drifted off.

The girl exhaled with exasperation, that slight movement lifting the breasts beneath her shawl. Gilen's fingers itched to remove the woolen wrap so he might view the bare skin of her shoulders and chest, see fully revealed beneath the thin cotton of the low-cut gypsy blouse the shape of those lovely mounds as they rose and fell with each breath.

"If you deprive me of my game and my winnings, milord," she said, "my master will likely beat me."

He dragged his attention back to her face—wishing he could snatch away the fine cloth veiling her countenance as well. "Then I must see that your winnings are bountiful," Gilen replied. "Shall we play piquet?"

"Your lordship has doubtless the superior skill. Better that I roll the dice."

Gilen pulled a fistful of coins from his pocket and tossed them on the wagon bed. "Name your stakes, my beauty, and I will pay."

Her eyes narrowed as she calculated the value of the gold and silver rolling across the scarred wood. "You must be drunk, milord."

"Not yet, my enchantress, but I should like to be—on the honeyed mead of your lips."

Her brows lifted in surprise at his boldness, the left one winging higher than the right. “My lord, where the honey-pot lies, lurk bees to guard their bounty. Take care you are not stung for your efforts.”

“To die in your arms, lady, would be worth the gravest sting,” he replied, grinning.

“You are bawdy, sir,” she reproved.

Surprised she’d apparently comprehended his Shakespearean allusion, he countered, “Nay, mistress, I do but give homage to your beauty.”

“I would rather you give gold to my purse. Now, do you play or go?”

“Oh, most definitely, I wish to...play.”

She arched again that delicate, high-flying brow. “Some games we do not entertain here, milord. I can offer but cards, or dice.”

The wench was not only lovely, but needle-witted, Gilen concluded with delight. “Could you not also read my fortune?” Smiling, he stripped off his riding glove and extended his hand.

Ah, yes, he wanted her to rest his hand in her smaller one, feel those fingers tracing patterns on his naked palm. And on every other part of his body, he thought as hunger surged, thick and potent through his veins.

She studied him without reply, as if uncertain whether she wished to proceed. Gilen dug another handful of coins from his pocket and dropped them atop the others. “Have all those and more, for the future you would pledge me.”

“I will read what the stars have written in your palm, milord, but pledge you nothing else,” she parried.

“Then we shall agree on that—for now.”

Once again he held out his hand, but at a slight distance, requiring her to move closer to the edge of the wagon if she meant to take his palm—closer to him. Her brows knitting as if she’d figured out his stratagem, she hesitated.

So intently was Gilen watching her, the sudden movement from behind startled him. A tall, powerfully built gypsy with an air of authority strode forward and swept up the coins. “Tell,” he commanded the girl.

She dropped her eyes before the gypsy lord’s glare. After he moved away, she reluctantly took Gilen’s hand.

Shivers of delight ran through him as, with barely perceptible pressure, she traced a fingertip across his palm. “This is your head line, milord—see, it is long and straight. You are a man of much ability, born to do great deeds.”

“My head tells me that you and I together would do great deeds,” he murmured.

Ignoring the comment, she continued, “This is the life line, milord. It, too, is deep and straight. You will live long, have many sons, and watch grandchildren grow to bring you honor.”

“Come with me and share that life,” he suggested, grinning as another exasperated exhalation briefly lifted the silken veil above her lips.

“And this,” she said, jabbing her fingernail into his flesh, “is the heart line. You will know many women—”

“All I desire is you, my princess—”

“Whom you will bewitch and bedevil,” she concluded with asperity. Dropping his palm, she jerked her hand away.

“Can you tell me nothing else, my Delilah?” he asked. “Surely you know more of my future than that.”

Before she could reply, the melancholy cry of several violins filled the night, followed by the jangle of bracelets and a shout of acclamation from the crowd. Beside the fire, the other gypsy women had gathered and begun to dance.

Gilen seized his gypsy girl’s hand. “Dance for me.”

She backed away. "N-nay, sir. Dice I play, or cards. I do not dance."

He released her, pulled the purse from his pocket and tossed it on the wagon bed. "All this and more will I pledge, if you will but dance for me."

"S-sir, I cannot—"

Once again, as if conjured from firelight, the gypsy leader appeared behind them. With one quick stride he seized the purse. "Dance," he commanded the girl.

Her veil trembled as she swallowed hard, but her gypsy lord's stare did not falter. At last she nodded, and only then did her master walk away.

She jumped down from the wagon and took a step toward the other women. Gilen grabbed her elbow. "Stay," he said softly. "Dance here—just for me."

For a long moment he held her gaze. Then, pulling away from him, she began to dance.

Hands above her head, arms arched and gracefully swirling, she dipped and swayed to the wild call of the fiddles, the clamor of the crowd clapping. The shawl slipped from her shoulders and she shrugged it off and kicked it free. Gilen caught his breath as, eyes closed, breasts straining against the cotton of her blouse, hips undulating in sinuous rhythm, she became one with the passionate beat of the music.

He scarcely heard the roars and cheers of the men, the clink of the coins they tossed at the gypsy girls by the fire. His entire being focused on the violet-eyed temptress dancing for him alone.

At last the music ended. The girl finished with a final flourish of outstretched arms, her neck arched and her head back. Without thought or conscious volition, Gilen pulled her pliant body in his arms, brushed the gossamer veil aside and kissed her.

No doubt shock immobilized her for an instant, and then for the briefest moment her clenched fists pushed at his chest. But as he moved his mouth over hers, just nuzzling at first, then adding the gentle entreaty of lips and tongue, her resistance dissolved and she swayed against him, opening to his persistent advance.

Exhilaration flooded him when he captured her tongue and she moaned deep in her throat, her slack fingers clenching at his shoulders and her nipples peaking against his chest. He pulled her closer still, voracious, starving to taste every surface of her tongue and every contour of her mouth, his ears throbbing to the hammer of her heartbeat against his own.

So lost to reality was he, there was no predicting how much further he might have gone had not a sudden jerk at his shoulder loosened his grip on her. Before he could reestablish his hold, strong arms seized him and dragged him away.

"No! Forbidden!" the outraged gypsy lord screamed in his face.

Thrown off balance, Gilen staggered a little before righting himself. The blast of cool air rushing into the void left by the loss of her passionate body and the cold fury of the man before him finally doused his overheated senses, making Gilen realize where he was and what he'd been doing. The girl stood where he'd been forced to release her, one trembling hand holding the veil to her face.

For a moment, Gilen thought the gypsy lord would strike him. However, apparently deciding that attempting to mill down an aristocrat would bring him more trouble than satisfaction, the leader stepped back.

"Go!" he shouted at Gilen, gesturing out of the camp. "All, go!" He motioned again, encompassing this time the entire crowd. "Evening is over."

At a sweep of his arm, the gypsy women slipped back toward the wagons. A line of grim-faced gypsy men, hands poised over the knives at their waists, advanced to stand beside him.

With a few muttered oaths, the milling group retreated from the fire toward the enclosure that contained their horses. When Gilen turned from the leader to catch one last glimpse of his gypsy enchantress, she was gone.

He looked back at the gypsy lord, who stood with feet planted, his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes radiating menace.

Obviously he had overstepped the bounds. Giving the man a deep bow by way of apology, Gilen turned and walked away with the others.

“Well done, brother,” Alden threw at him as Gilen caught up with their group.

“S-sorry if I put a premature end to the night’s activities,” Gilen replied, still rattled by the intensity of the reactions he had just experienced.

“Twas the close of the evening anyway,” Chase replied. “They always finish it with the wenches dancing. Though I must say, you’re lucky you cut so commanding a figure. Had one of the farm lads touched a woman, I swear that heathen would have knocked him down and carved out his eyeballs.”

“You were right after all, Gil,” Alden said with a grin. “You nearly did end up with a gypsy’s knife in your ribs. Next time, I shall be more careful what I wish for.”

Though he’d gone back with Alden and his friends for a convivial evening of cards—winning yet more from his hapless host, as he took himself up to bed, Gilen still could not shake from his mind the image of the gypsy girl’s veiled face...or the feel of her in his arms, her honeyed lips yielding to his.

With so enchanting a body wedded to so keen a wit, what a mistress she would make! His blood heated anew at the thought. He’d give a king’s ransom indeed to claim her. Perhaps he should return to the gypsy encampment in the morning, make an attempt to discover the correct protocols so he might negotiate an agreement with the gypsy lord. Given the strength of the attraction between them, confirmed beyond doubt in her kiss, he felt sure if her leader approved, his gypsy enchantress would eagerly accept his offer.

Then he recalled something she’d said, something about being beaten by her master if he deprived her of her winnings. Had the gypsy leader been ready to turn the visitors out of camp, or had he thrown them out because of Gilen’s rash action? If the latter, would the loss of revenue that might have been earned during the remainder of the evening be blamed on the girl?

Remorse with an uneasy layer of worry stabbed at him. What if the leader chastised an innocent maid for his transgression? Although he could not imagine ever striking a woman, apparently beating was not an uncommon punishment among the gypsy clan. And if that slender wisp of a girl were punished, it would be his fault.

The very thought of it made him ill.

He sat straight up in bed, but a moment’s reflection was enough for him to realize he could do nothing further tonight. Tomorrow at first light, however, he would ride to the gypsy encampment to offer more gold, and his formal apologies.

Having made that resolve, he still found sleep elusive. What slumber he managed was disturbed alternately by heated dreams of a dark-haired vixen writhing under him and horrific images of her writhing under the lash. He awoke early and unrefreshed, his mind seized by a combination of eagerness and anxiety.

Gilen made short work of shaving and dressing, and after tossing down a mug of ale brought by his astonished valet, headed for the stable. The sleepy-eyed groom who wandered out goggled at him as he saddled Raven.

The stallion was happy enough to set off at a run. Gilen’s spirits rose too, the exhilaration of a gallop heightening his anticipation.

Slowing the stallion as he rounded the last bend, Gilen rode into the clearing where the gypsy lads had corralled the horses and reined in, looking toward the river.

Where a semicircle of wagons had stood last night, a blazing fire at their center, there now remained only a pile of barely smoking embers. Consternation slammed him in the chest.

During the night as he slept, dreaming of a violet-eyed vixen, the gypsy band had departed.

Chapter Four

Next day, dressed in their own clothes and delivered by Davi to the edge of town at about the hour the mail coach would be arriving, Gwennor and Parry found a hackney to take them to the home of her stepmother's aunt, Lady Alice. After identifying themselves to her butler Mercer, they were led to a small back parlor to await the pleasure of their aunt, who, the butler frostily informed them, obviously skeptical of their unannounced arrival and suspicious lack of either baggage or retainers, had not yet left her chamber.

Although it had been more than ten years since Gwen had visited Harrogate, apparently Lady Alice's cook remembered her, for a short time later, the butler returned bearing a heavily laden tray, his manner now all gracious condescension. "Forgive me for not immediately recalling you, Miss Southford!" he said as he hastened to pour them tea. "I did not recognize in your elegant self the child who came with her lady mother. Cook reminded me, and also remembered you were particularly fond of her jam tarts. Allow me to offer you some fresh from the oven."

Knowing her aunt was not an early riser, Gwen feared they might spend most of the morning waiting in the parlor. However, the news that their mistress's niece from distant Wales had turned up unexpectedly on their doorstep must have inspired her aunt's no-doubt curious staff to risk rousing their mistress, for little more than an hour after they'd finished their refreshments, Mercer returned to escort them into their aunt's presence.

Doubt nibbled at Gwen's certainty and she found herself holding her breath as they entered Lady Alice's sitting room. If her assumptions were incorrect and that lady refused to shelter them, their situation would become difficult indeed, for she could not hope to attract a respectable suitor without a genteel sponsor, and her limited funds would not be sufficient to support them for more than a few months at most.

Though the lady reclining on the brocade sofa, her elegant morning gown draped with a fine shawl, was plumper and the lines about her bright blue eyes more pronounced than Gwen remembered, the warm smile and the delighted tone of her voice were as welcoming as Gwen had hoped.

"My dearest Gwennor!" Lady Alice cried. "A delightful surprise! And Parry here, too!" She held out her hands. "Come now, don't be shy. When last you were here, you embraced me readily enough!"

A little dizzy with relief, Gwen urged Parry forward. After fond hugs all around, Lady Alice motioned them to adjoining chairs. "Now sit and tell me all your news!"

"I'm sorry we did not send a note, Aunt Alice," Gwen said, taking the chair indicted. "Our departure came about...rather abruptly."

"With Nigel Hartwell taking over Southford, I don't wonder at it," Lady Alice said with a sniff. "Detestable man! Oh, but you must forgive me—I've yet not expressed my regrets about your recent loss. Oh, Gwen, I am sorry! I know how close you were to your papa."

Lady Alice leaned over to squeeze her hand. Gwen returned the pressure, her throat tight. "Thank you."

"So, did Nigel send you to me for the Season? Of course he must have! He ought to have dispatched you to London, but that odious nipcheese doubtless believes it will be cheaper to maintain you here. Though our small assemblies cannot claim nearly the quantity of elevated society to be found in the capital, I staunchly maintain the quality of our residents compares quite favorably to the city! Still, were my own resources not so limited I should insist we relocate to London. That is, now that your dear papa is no longer here to protect you, I expect you are looking for a husband, aren't you? Ah, but whatever the reason, I am ecstatic to have you here—and Parry too, of course, dear

boy! I was telling my friend Colonel Haversham just the other day how bored and lonely I'd been of late, and now—here you are!”

While her aunt rattled on, Gwen considered how much of their circumstances she need convey to Lady Alice. A discreetly edited account which warned of her cousin's possible ire but omitted their exact means of transport would be best, she decided.

So when her aunt paused for breath, Gwen said, “Although you are correct in assuming cousin Nigel wished to be speedily rid of me, aunt, h-he didn't precisely send us. In fact, he was planning to marry me off to Baron Edgerton at Southford within the week.”

“So soon after your beloved father's demise—and without even allowing you time to purchase bride clothes?” her aunt replied, clearly appalled. “And Edgerton! Why, he must be twice your age or more, and not at all a stylish gentleman. Indeed, I understand he never leaves hunt country. Definitely not the proper sort of husband for a lovely young lady! I've always thought Nigel an unfeeling monster, and so I told your dear stepmama times out of mind!”

Gwen smiled. “As my opinion of him matches yours, Parry and I decided rather hastily to... depart. To put it quite bluntly, we ran away! I expect Nigel is quite angry with me for flouting his authority. Although I'm of age and he has no legal power over me, he might be incensed enough to pursue us and try to order me back home. So...if you would rather not become involved, I will understand.”

“Fetch you back?” Lady Alice said a little nervously. “Do you believe he will?”

“I trust that once his anger cools, the distance and expense of coming after me will convince him to leave me in your care instead.”

“Doubtless you are right,” Lady Alice returned, her sunny good humor restored. “'Twould be the most sensible thing to do. In any event, I hope I am not such a pudding-heart as to send you back to that unfeeling wretch. Of course you may stay, as long as you like!”

Gwen leaned over to give Lady Alice a hug. “Thank you, dear, brave Aunt Alice!”

“Doubtless I understand better than Nigel the duty I owe a kinswoman. Edgerton indeed!” Lady Alice repeated with a shudder. “Even in Harrogate, I should be able to contrive better for you than him.”

“Such is certainly my hope! But I did bring funds of my own, so we shall not have to be an encumbrance on you.”

“Nonsense, you shall stay as my guest. And dear Parry too, of course. Such a gentle boy.”

Her brother, as usual when obligated to remain for social conversation in which he had little interest, had drifted into reverie, but at the mention of his name, he straightened and gave his aunt one of his sweet-tempered smiles. “I brought you a present, Aunt Alice.” He rummaged for a moment in his pocket, then produced a smooth, symmetrical stone of clear pale hue. “I polished it until it was round and pretty.”

“Why, it's lovely! Thank you, Parry! Only look, Gwennor. I shall have to have it set in a pendant.”

“'Tis pink quartz, I believe, Aunt Alice,” Gwen said.

“I found it while we were traveling. Remolo showed me how to shape it,” Parry offered.

“With an antique gold setting, it would complement this gown nicely, aunt,” Gwen inserted hastily. “Would you mind if Parry were to visit the stables? He misses his animals, and I promised I would let him see the horses.”

Fortunately, Lady Alice's intellect was neither exacting nor suspicious. “Whatever makes the dear boy happy,” she replied. “Indeed, perhaps you can assist my groom,” she said, turning to him. “One of the carriage horses picked up a stone in his hoof and may have bruised it. Your mama was so proud of your skill at healing.”

Parry brightened. “May I go there now, Aunt Alice?”

“Of course, dear boy.”

After making her a proper bow, Parry eagerly exited the room. Gwen watched him walk out, fiercely glad she'd managed to spirit him away. If he'd been anxious after a mere morning cooped up in Lady Alice's parlor, how could he have endured cousin Nigel's incarceration?

"I'm glad you had an errand for him, Gwennor. 'Twill give us a chance to chat privately of your future—and his. What is to become of him, now that Nigel rules Southford?"

"Nigel intended to lock him up in the attic," Gwen replied bluntly, not troubling to hide her indignation.

At her aunt's exclamation of horror, Gwen continued, "'Twas the main reason we left so hastily. I could have stomached Edgerton for husband if he meant to allow me to make a home for Parry, but cousin Nigel made it quite clear that the baron was as revolted by my brother as he is. I mean to keep Parry with me permanently, ma'am. Beyond that unconditional requirement, I am not at all particular about the attributes of my potential husband. A kind, decent man who will see Parry for his strengths and not find it embarrassing or uncomfortable to be around him is all I ask. Do...do you think I shall be able to find such a man?"

"I don't see why not. The dear boy appears perfectly normal to me. Indeed, if Nigel could be induced to agree to it, do you not think Parry could live on a small estate of his own?"

"'Tis a bit...complicated," Gwen returned, frowning. "At times his intellect seems not at all affected by his accident. But it's as if the blow from that stallion's hoof severed the link in his mind from the present to the past or future. You cannot tell him in the morning to do something at noon, for by noon he will not remember the request, nor can he envision what he needs to do tomorrow. He seems instinctively able to perform quite complicated tasks, but if he's given a list of duties to accomplish or a long series of sums to add, he will lose track of them in the middle, which upsets him dreadfully."

Lady Alice shrugged. "Computing a long series of sums has the same effect on me."

"You can see how difficult it would be for him to manage a household, however, and he is so innocent of evil, if a venal or crafty person should enter his employ, they might steal his last shilling or commit some dire mischief without his ever suspecting it. Occasionally he does realize something is...wrong with him, which upsets and alarms him, and requires the reassurance of someone he trusts to help him regain his equilibrium. Most importantly, I love him and I want him with me."

Lady Alice patted her hand. "Such a good sister you've been to him, for all that you're not really blood kin. Still, such a handsome young man, 'tis a shame he'll never—but no sense repining."

"Nor are we blood kin. But will you help me anyway? You know how I've counted on your wisdom and counsel ever since stepmama died."

"Well, of course I shall! You're a handsome, capable young woman, Gwennor, of excellent family. I have no doubt we can find you a suitable candidate—or several. My, to have beaux about the house again, coming to call and leaving bouquets and such! And the shopping...new gowns and pelisses and bonnets. Oh, 'twill be a delight! I shall begin a list of eligible gentlemen immediately."

"Thank you, Aunt Alice! I shall be forever indebted."

"Nonsense, child," Lady Alice replied. "'Tis I who am indebted to you for rescuing me from my ennui."

After making some discreet inquiries of the staff which confirmed her suspicions about the state of Lady Alice's finances, Gwen resolved to be as slight a burden on her aunt's household as possible. Therefore, after adamantly refusing to have her aunt purchase her a new wardrobe, she was forced to expend far too much of her slender resources in acquiring the minimum number of garments her aunt considered necessary for a lady about to make her bow in Harrogate society.

She had to admit, though, as a week later she exited their carriage and strolled on her aunt's arm toward the Pump Room, that facing the world in a stylish new gown of black silk, her hair artfully

gathered in a topknot of curls fashioned by Lady Alice's deft-fingered maid Tilly, certainly gave one a welcome dose of confidence.

"Colonel Haversham should already be within," Lady Alice confided. "I've asked him—quite discreetly of course!—to gather about him any of those gentlemen whom we've discussed. Such as his friend Colonel Howard..." She paused and looked over at Gwen.

"A fine army man who returned here from India to recover his shattered health—a widower of about forty possessed of a comfortable income," Gwen recited her aunt's coaching. "Likes dogs and billiards."

"Very good," Lady Alice nodded. "And Lord Sandstone..."

"Also a widower, tall, thin, suffers from gout but preserves great sweetness of manner despite his pain. Enjoys angling and gardening."

"Mr. Phillips..."

"Youngest son of an earl, a bit vain of his looks and lineage but quite affable; maintains a fine house in town between visits to his father's nearby estates."

"And still in his thirties!" Lady Alice prompted.

"Mustn't omit that important fact." Chuckling at the thought of the youngest of her prospects being nearly ten years her senior, Gwen looked back at Lady Alice, who was following her through the doorway—and was knocked nearly off her feet by a man who briskly shoved open the door they'd been about to enter.

She stumbled sideways, her arms flailing as she attempted to avoid the embarrassment of tumbling face-forward onto the flagstones in front of the Pump Room's main entrance.

"Gwen! Are you all right?"

Before she could reply to her aunt's cry, a pair of strong hands grabbed her from behind and steadied her. "Pray forgive me, ma'am!" said a deep, contrite masculine voice. "I trust you've suffered no harm?"

"I—I am quite unharmed, thank you, sir," she said, turning to face the gentleman, who, after insuring she'd recovered her balance, released her shoulders.

She looked up into a pair of clear green eyes set in a face attractive enough to make even her skeptical heart skip a beat. Firm masculine lips curved into a smile as he brushed a lock of blond hair off his brow, revealing a charming set of dimples.

"Thank heavens for that! I was opening the door for grandpapa's chair and did not pay sufficient attention to who might be approaching. Indeed, let me escort you in before some other ignorant oaf assaults you."

He made them a bow. "Lady Alice Winnerly, isn't it? I believe you are acquainted with my grandfather, Lord Masterson. Please, let me show you back in."

"What have you gotten yourself into now, boy?" an acerbic voice demanded as they entered.

The gentleman hastened back to a thin elderly man who sat in a wheeled chair, swathed in robes. "Nearly ran down these ladies on the sidewalk, I'm afraid, grandpapa."

"Lord Masterson!" Lady Alice said, a smile of delight breaking out on her face. "You look much improved! I trust the waters are proving beneficial, or perhaps it is the reviving presence of your grandson Mr.—"

"This jackanapes?" the old man said with a jerk of his chin toward the young man. "My grandson, Jeffrey Masterson, come to turn me up sweet enough to leave him some of my geld when I'm gone, no doubt—but he's tolerably amusing, so perhaps I shall," he said, ignoring the young man's strangled protest. "And the waters are as nasty as ever, my lady. I suggest you avoid them. Take me home, now, Jeffrey. These old bones are longing for their bed."

The embarrassment in the young man's eyes swiftly changed to concern. "At once, grandpapa. Lady Alice, will you be remaining at the Pump Room?" At her nod, he continued, "Then please give

me leave, after I've gotten grandfather settled, to return and deliver my apologies to you and your charming companion at more length. Ladies."

After bowing, he pushed his grandfather's chair out.

Lady Alice gazed after them for a moment, her bright blue eyes shining. "What a fortuitous encounter! I'd heard Lord Masterson's grandson was visiting but had not yet had occasion to meet him. So attractive, and quite young! A bachelor possessing a large fortune from his mother's side, 'tis said he has no need of his grandfather's money. Most charming, did you not think?"

"Indeed, Aunt Alice," Gwen replied, impressed, but resisting the urge to succumb to the pleasant imaginings which Lady Alice was doubtless entertaining. "If he isn't hopeful of a bequest, it speaks well of him that he would come spend time with his grandfather." Especially a man who appeared as irascible as Lord Masterson.

Fool, she told herself, sternly damping down a niggle of hope as they walked from the entry into the Pump Room itself. Just because Mr. Masterson appeared to possess the kindness and tolerance of infirmity that might make him accept Parry did not mean he would be impressed enough with her to come courting.

She'd better not set her hopes higher than the infirm gentleman stricken in years and wishful of a handmaiden's assistance whom she'd originally envisioned for herself.

Perhaps then she might banish the disturbing memories that, once they'd been accepted under Lady Alice's roof and she'd stopped living in constant fear of pursuit from cousin Nigel, returned all too frequently to plague her.

Memories of a tall blond gentleman whose handsome face and broad shoulders had elicited an immediate, visceral pull of attraction. Whose clever banter had delighted her mind even as she knew she ought to deplore its fixation on the physical. Who, after their encounter and despite her shame over her unprecedented reaction to it, she could not help wishing she might have met instead under proper circumstances, so she might, with the same shivery agitation his presence had excited, look forward to his calling on her, riding with her, becoming a friend.

She suppressed a scornful chuckle at so naive a wish. 'Twas not platonic friendship he'd wanted from her. But given her inexplicable response to his audacious kiss, she could not very well condemn only the stranger's behavior.

Still, the very thought of that kiss refired within her a simmering urgency previously unimaginable in the bounds of her staid existence. A kiss unlike any she'd ever experienced, that within an instant had marshaled the vague longings that had often roiled within her and forged them into irresistible, all-compelling desire.

Instead of exhibiting the horror one would expect of a virtuous maiden suddenly assaulted by a man with whom she'd been acquainted for barely half an hour, her hands had ceased their protesting resistance to clasp about his neck. And her lips had not just yielded to his, but actively responded to the stranger's caress.

Just as bad, once compelled to it, she had to admit she'd enjoyed dancing for him—the erotic freedom of the wild music that matched the fire flaming through her blood. Such incredible behavior must have originated in some previously unsuspected but obviously deep vein of carnality of which she'd heretofore been completely unaware.

The whole experience had been shameful, appalling—and marvelous.

However, if she wished to contract a respectable alliance, she'd best thrust those rash and wanton responses back into the Pandora's box from which they'd sprung. Much as her body might protest, she was probably better off setting her matrimonial sights on a staid and possibly infirm gentleman many years her senior—or an obvious gentleman like Mr. Masterson, who would expect virtuous and restrained behavior from his bride.

And who would have no wish to evoke in her so exhilarating, intense—and frighteningly uncontrollable a reaction.

Chapter Five

“Oh, I see Colonel Haversham—with Colonel Howard!” Lady Alice exclaimed.

Jolted back to the present, Gwennor watched Aunt Alice wave across the room at the gentlemen. “Excellent!” she said as the men approached. “Two eligible suitors already this morning, and only our first day!”

Gwen’s trepidation at meeting one of the prospects her aunt expected her to attract faded as soon as the two men arrived and she perceived the lines of suffering that marked Colonel Howard’s too-thin face. Her ready sympathy immediately activated, as soon as the introductions had been performed and Lady Alice, with a wink at Gwen, sent the two off to procure a cup of the waters, Gwennor set about trying to put the colonel, who seemed rather shy and diffident for a military man, more at ease.

“My first cousin, Major Harry Hartwell, was in India before transferring with his unit to the Peninsula,” Gwen said as she took the colonel’s arm. “He wrote us there were any number of dreadful maladies that plagued Englishmen there. Did you happen to meet my cousin on the continent, Colonel?”

“‘Heedless Harry’ is your cousin? A fine lad, full of enthusiasm, an exemplary rider and marksman besides. I fear he’s correct—there are any number of diseases, each one more noxious than the last, as my pitiful frame can testify. I’m sure Wellington is glad to have your cousin with him in Spain!” The colonel grimaced. “How it grates me, knowing the import of the business going on there, and being forced to remain here so far from the action.”

They reached the basin, where a waterspout delivered a continuous stream of the heated, faintly sulfur-scented mineral water from a natural spring beneath the pump-house floor. “Aunt Alice tells me you are much improved of late,” Gwennor said as he filled two glasses. “Perhaps before long you shall be able to rejoin your unit.”

“So I keep trying to tell myself! If I could just shake this curst fever...” He sighed and, glasses brimming, turned back to her. “Malaria, they tell me. But so young and lovely a lady cannot wish to hear of pills and potions. Nor is it comforting to a man’s pride to demonstrate how thoroughly he’s been defeated by his own constitution.”

Her sympathy increased a notch as they walked together back toward her waiting aunt. So much of a man’s self-esteem, she knew from observing her father as he battled his final illness, derived from his sense of having mastery of the responsibilities given into his charge. For a military man accustomed to command, it must be especially galling to have been invalided out of his post. Perhaps here, too, was a man who could understand and exhibit a tolerance for infirmity.

“I should suppose a malady is no more discerning than a bullet in battle, nor any more avoidable,” she replied.

Surprise lit the eyes that glanced over to her. “I never thought of it in quite that way, but I imagine you are correct.” His assessing gaze lingered on her face before he murmured, “You are a perceptive young lady.”

She flushed a little. “Only a practical one, I fear.”

“As lovely as she is practical, then. Though I understand that you are in mourning, I am happy to note you do not intend to completely shun society gatherings. I haven’t previously visited the local assembly, but I’m told the affairs are quite enjoyable. Should...you and your aunt be planning to attend next Friday?”

“I shall have to inquire, but I would presume so.”

“Good. You must save me a dance, then—or at least promise me a stroll about the room.”

Before she could reply, they reached her aunt, and a few moments were occupied in the transferring of cups and a discussion of the benefits to be obtained from sipping the warm, heavily mineral-flavored water.

Just as, noses wrinkling against the taste, Colonel Haversham and Lady Alice finished sipping their glassfuls, Mr. Masterson hurried back in. After scanning the room to locate them, he walked over, the smile of delight mirrored by one on the beaming face of Lady Alice.

The men exchanged bows, and Gwennor sensed the colonel's warm manner chill abruptly.

"Colonels Haversham and Howard I know, Lady Alice," Mr. Masterson said. "Please, will you not present me to your charming companion?"

The introductions duly made, Mr. Masterson promptly requested Lady Alice to allow her charge to take a turn about the room with him. Her aunt's smile, if possible, grew even broader as, permission granted, she walked off on Jeffrey Masterson's arm.

Knowing her aunt was envisioning a courtship of rivals with competing offerings of flowers, books and invitations, Gwen was hard put not to smile, too. If either of these gentlemen came calling the next day, Lady Alice was going to be in alt.

"What brings you to the city?" Mr. Masterson asked. "Certainly not, given the bloom of health on your cheeks, a need to sip the waters. You are paying your aunt a visit?"

"Y-yes. Although seeing my aunt is always a pleasure, as you can tell by my dress, I've recently lost a kinsman—my father. With my cousin now taking charge of my old home, I wished a...change of scene."

"My condolences on your sad loss."

She nodded briskly, refusing to let her thoughts stray to such doleful ground. "I understand you are attending your ailing grandfather. How kind of you to leave the attractions of London to succor a sick relation."

He smiled slightly. "Much as I should like to boast that noble purpose was my sole reason for quitting the city, honesty forces me to confess that, though I was truly concerned about the recent decline in grandfather's health, there were...other considerations." His smile faded. "I, too, recently suffered a...disappointment, and felt the need for a change." With a shake of his head, he summoned back the smile. "But enough of that! Does your mourning permit you to attend the assemblies and the theater?"

"I expect we shall attend both."

"Would you permit me to call tomorrow? Perhaps we could arrange a theater party." His clear green eyes gazed into hers appealingly.

A shiver of both anticipation and trepidation rippled through her. Firmly suppressing the latter, she replied, "I should like that very much."

As it turned out, she saw him again sooner than expected. Early the next day as she and Parry took their morning walk, they encountered Mr. Masterson near the park, riding a handsome chestnut gelding. Drawing rein, he dismounted and came over to greet them.

Gwennor had a moment of satisfaction upon noting his obvious relief that she presented Parry as her brother.

He, of course, was more interested in the new four-legged arrival. "What a fine beast, Mr. Masterson."

"We were...not able to bring our horses with us," Gwennor said, "and have not as yet had time to hire any. Though the walk is pleasant, we miss our morning ride."

"I'm afraid Vulcan is a bit too spirited for a lady's mount, but until you've made other arrangements, you are welcome to borrow him, Mr. Wakefield," Mr. Masterson replied promptly. "I must warn you, he dislikes strangers. 'Tis the reason I ride early, before the streets are full..."

His words trailed off and his expression turned to amazement as Parry approached his horse, murmuring softly. Vulcan alerted, his ears pricking up, and extended his head to nuzzle Parry's outstretched hand.

“Why, ’tis amazing!” Mr. Masterson exclaimed. “Truly, I’ve never seen him react like that! In fact, he still nips at my groom if Nichols approaches unexpectedly.”

“Parry has a special affinity for animals,” Gwen replied. “They sense and respond to it.”

Her brother turned from crooning to Vulcan, as if suddenly reminded. “Can we return by the stables, Gwen? I want to show you what I’ve found.”

“Oh, not already!” Gwen said with a groan. “My brother also has a knack for discovering lost and injured creatures wherever he goes. At Southford we possessed an ever-changing menagerie of rabbits, fawns, ducks, even wolves he found and healed before setting free again.”

“I have to help them, Gwen,” Parry said.

“Of course you must,” she agreed. “What is it now?”

“Only a kitten. Come see him! His coloring is almost exactly the shade papa was seeking in our rabbits.”

“My father was attempting to produce a stronger strain of domestic rabbit,” Gwen explained. “Parry was directing the breeding experiments.”

“We must go see what he’s found then, mustn’t we?”

Heartened by Mr. Masterson’s congenial response to her brother, as they strolled back, Gwen tried to draw out her potential suitor.

“How do you occupy your time while your grandfather is resting, Mr. Masterson? I imagine there are rather few pursuits here for a gentleman accustomed to London. Though there is, my aunt tells me, a fine lending library.”

Mr. Masterson chuckled. “A claim whose truth I’m not likely to discover! I’m an indifferent scholar, I must confess, and works of literature are more likely to put me to sleep than amuse me. Had it not been for my best friend Gilen—now there’s scholar for you—I would never have survived Oxford.”

Books being one of her chiefest pleasures, Gwen felt a mild disappointment. But there were other interests they might share. “My aunt tells me you came by way of your home at Wilton Park, where you maintain a large stable,” she continued. “Horses are your particular pursuit?”

During the rest of the walk, she coaxed Mr. Masterson to describe his stock and his estate, which he did with so much enthusiasm she concluded both must be extensive, well-maintained and lovely. Once they’d reached the mews and Parry had tied the docile Vulcan to a stall, he led them to a manger half full of fragrant hay.

He clucked softly and a small, malnourished kitten popped out from under the straw. The little creature ran to Parry, purring lustily.

“Isn’t he lovely?” Parry asked.

“Very pretty,” Gwen agreed. But when she reached out to pet the animal’s back, the kitten whirled around and bit Gwen’s finger before burrowing back under the straw.

“Sorry, Gwen,” Parry said. “I forgot he is still shy of strangers. I think he was mistreated.”

“Why don’t you get him some milk from the kitchen?” Gwen suggested. As her brother, after a bow to Mr. Masterson, trotted off in that direction, she turned to give Mr. Masterson a rueful smile. “Obviously, I haven’t my brother’s skill.”

“No, he is quite special,” Mr. Masterson replied.

Gwennor’s eyes flew up to his. He returned her steady regard, his gaze open and friendly. In his tone and manner, she could discern neither mockery nor disdain.

He accepts Parry. The realization filled Gwennor with such a sense of joy and relief, she could have wed Mr. Masterson on the spot. Despite his dislike of scholarship, if further acquaintance confirmed her initial impression of Mr. Masterson as a kind, congenial, sympathetic gentleman of sufficient means, Gwen felt she might be able to develop for him not just a fond regard, but a lasting affection.

An affection that might be coupled with a more measured attraction than the frighteningly intense desire that had swept her for the stranger at the gypsy camp.

If Mr. Masterson found her as appealing as she was finding him, perhaps she'd not have to hunt for an enfeebled octogenarian after all.

Ten days later, grimy and out of sorts, Gilen de Mowbry gritted his teeth as he unpacked clothing from his equally dusty saddlebags.

Weary from six days spent nearly ceaselessly in the saddle, he did not want to hear about the lovely, fascinating creature Jeff had just met. As Alden had predicted, he thought with disgust, only half listening to Jeff's rapturous flow of rhetoric, it appeared the distraught friend whom he'd felt compelled to come support had already fallen in love again with some other chit.

Though how he'd found someone in Harrogate under the age of fifty to fall in love with, Gilen couldn't imagine. If he'd known, he concluded sourly, longing for a bath and a glass of strong ale, that he'd find his supposedly inconsolable friend so irritatingly cheerful, he wouldn't have prematurely called off his search.

After the shock of finding the gypsy encampment deserted, he'd ridden back to Lacey's Retreat and questioned the staff, trying to determine the band's normal route. He'd wasted three days riding west after them before learning that instead of proceeding as usual, they had wandered north. When he finally found them, their leader at first refused to speak with him, then kept him waiting a day while he considered the generous sum Gilen was offering in apology for his previous intrusion.

At last the gypsy lord agreed to meet him, an old woman serving as translator. But to Gilen's infuriated exasperation, the man denied any knowledge of the violet-eyed wench who'd danced for him. He was almost positive the man was lying, but as it was already nearly two weeks past the arrival time he'd indicated in his last letter to Jeffrey, he felt compelled to give up the search for the present and make for Harrogate with all speed.

Only to arrive and find his supposedly brokenhearted friend waxing eloquent about some new female.

"Despite your stops, 'tis a tedious journey and you must be longing for a bath," Jeffrey was saying. "I told grandpapa we'd dine with him—he retires quite early—after which we shall still have time to attend the assembly. There you can meet Miss Southford for yourself. I'm sure you'll find her a delight!"

"As delightful as Davinia?" Gilen shot back.

Jeffrey's genial face sobered, and Gilen immediately felt ashamed of his churlishness. "Sorry, Jeff, that was unkind. Been on the road so long, it's made me snappish."

Jeffrey mustered up a smile. "I deserved that, I suppose. She is delightful, but nothing like Davinia. Lovely, though not as striking, and—I'm not sure how to describe it—so forthright and appealing. The sort of lady who not only encourages a man to talk, as they all do, but truly listens to what he says, and offers some intelligent comments in return. I'm sure you'll like her."

"If she has intelligent conversation to offer, she is unusual!" Gilen declared, only half jesting.

Jeffrey took a swipe at him and Gilen ducked. "At least I have the discernment to develop tendres for well-bred ladies of sensibility," his friend declared. "If you spent less time among mercenary females out of London's Green Rooms, your opinion of the sex might be higher."

"Perhaps," Gilen acknowledged, "though I doubt it. At least a female from the Green Room gives you an honest return on your investment, rather than false devotion and flattering lies."

"I admit, my judgment on this score has not always been accurate, but I assure you Miss Southford's honor and integrity are beyond reproach," Jeffrey asserted.

Gilen raised a skeptical eyebrow. "We shall see. Let me get near some hot water and a warm dinner, and then I shall be most interested to meet your new paragon!"

While Tilly looked on, sighing her approval, Gwennor inspected herself in the pier glass. At Aunt Alice's urging, she'd expended a bit more of her precious reserves on a new ball gown that, with its expert cut and flattering fit, would equal in elegance and sophistication any of the more colorful gowns being worn to the assembly tonight.

"You be ready, Miss," Tilly said, reaching up to make a final adjustment in the curls she'd pinned in atop Gwennor's head. "Lucky for you that dusky gray goes so good with your pale skin and dark hair. Indeed, 'tis so pretty on you, folks might think you're wearing it not 'cause you is in mourning, but for it becomes you so well."

"Thank you, Tilly," Gwen said, gratified.

"And with two handsome gents awaiting you tonight, 'tis fitting that you're in looks! Mistress will be that pleased. Go on and dazzle them, now, Miss!"

Gwennor took her evening cape from the woman with a wry grin. As quietly as she'd been living, 'twas more likely the company would dazzle her.

Still, Gwennor felt a pulse of excitement as she descended to the parlor to meet her aunt. She was wearing the most stylish gown she'd ever owned, her tempestuous hair had been tamed by the fingers of an artist, and with her well-respected aunt here to introduce her to the society of this small resort community, Gwennor had every expectation of both enjoying herself and progressing one step closer to obtaining the safe haven she sought.

Suitably enthusiastic over Gwen's appearance, Lady Alice hastened her to the carriage. "So lovely you are, I'm sure your dance card will be filled to overflowing!"

"Surely it is too soon after Papa's death to dance."

Lady Alice patted her hand. "Ordinarily, I would agree. But I've made the sad facts of your circumstances known to the hostesses here, and all of them understand you need to attract a suitor as quickly as possible. Unless you find yourself unable to countenance dancing, which of course I could understand, even though I should be most disappointed, for there is nothing that can more quickly engage a gentleman's interest than holding a lady close in the shocking intimacy of a waltz! If you are not set against it, then, I should strongly advise you to indulge, and assure you that Society here will not think it unseemly, even given the recentness of your bereavement."

Gwennor had to smile through that long speech. Her gentle father, loving of life and mostly indifferent to its social rules, would have considered the notion of her refraining from one of her favorite social activities in respect for his passing quite ridiculous. "No, aunt, I should be quite happy to dance, if you think it proper."

"Good. Oh, we shall have such a lovely evening!"

They arrived at the assembly rooms soon after, and once they'd proceeded through the reception line and her aunt had introduced her to several matrons whose approval was essential to her acceptance in Harrogate society, they walked on to the ballroom. As Lady Alice had hoped, they discovered all Gwen's potential suitors already present.

The gentlemen soon spotted them. After greetings all around, Mr. Masterson bowed to Gwennor's aunt.

"May I solicit your niece's hand for the first waltz?"

"Miss Southford has just agreed to sit out the waltz and dance the next set with me," Colonel Howard said.

"You do not think the waltz inappropriate, surely?" Mr. Masterson appealed to Lady Alice.

"Certainly not! Indeed, 'tis my hope—oh, but of course, Colonel Howard did—" her aunt stuttered.

"Good," Mr. Masterson inserted with a grin. "To accommodate the colonel, I promise to return the lady before the next set begins." After a quick bow to her aunt, he took her arm and urged her onto the floor.

"Are you kidnapping me?" Gwennor protested, laughing.

“Nothing so violent. But there didn’t seem a tactful way to suggest that though Colonel Howard may not feel up to a waltz, I am quite capable.”

His delicacy in preserving the colonel’s pride further impressed Gwen. “That was most kind.”

Mr. Masterson’s smile deepened and his green-eyed gaze fixed on her with notable warmth. “Besides, I’ve dreamed all week of waltzing with you in my arms.”

Mercifully, the music began, since Gwen was too flustered to reply. Acutely aware of his hands at her waist and shoulder, she let him sweep her into the dance.

Her enthusiasm at the prospect of dancing soon soothed her agitation, and she gave herself up to the delight of swirling with the music.

As they came to a halt at the end of the dance, their position and proximity inevitably called up memories of an even closer embrace that had progressed to a much less proper activity...one in which she’d also participated with great enthusiasm. Her face heated guiltily.

She half stumbled in her eagerness to quit the dance floor, as if by leaving the spot that had invoked them she might banish the disturbing recollections.

“Miss Southford, are you quite all right? You seem fatigued,” Colonel Howard said as they returned. He cast Mr. Masterson an aggrieved glance.

“Twas a bit warm,” she replied, seizing that excuse to explain her overheated cheeks.

“Let me get you a glass of wine,” Mr. Masterson said.

“Colonel, if you do not mind, could we postpone our dance? I believe I would like a glass.”

While the men squabbled over who would bring wine and who the lobster patties and tea cakes, Gwennor took the colonel’s arm, glad for the respite.

The interlude in the refreshment room did much to restore her calm. She was able to dance several sets, and even welcome engaging in a second waltz with Mr. Masterson. He really was a very pleasant gentleman, she concluded as she listened to him expound on his plans for enlarging the horse-breeding operations at his estate.

Horse breeding. Parry would love that.

Dreamily contemplating her brother passing his days crossing bloodlines to produce steeds of particular colors or attributes, at the termination of the waltz she followed Mr. Masterson off the dance floor. And nearly ran into him when her escort suddenly stopped.

“At last!” he exclaimed. “Miss Southford, you must allow me to retain you a few more moments. My good friend Gilen has just arrived and I wish to introduce you.”

Gwennor murmured her assent, smiling a little to think how delighted Aunt Alice was going to be if this friend turned out to be another eligible gentleman. Curious, as Mr. Masterson led her forward, she scanned the people crowding the room beyond the dance floor, but out of the press of guests she could not discern which particular gentleman he seemed to be seeking.

As it happened, the man they approached had his back to them. Mr. Masterson reached out to touch his shoulder.

“Gilen! I was beginning to think you’d not attend after all! Miss Southford, allow me to present my dear friend, Viscount St. Abrams.”

The tall blond man turned. “Ah, Miss Southford—how delightful to meet you at last.”

Those dark blue eyes. That chiseled jaw. Gwennor’s knees nearly buckled as she sank into a curtsy with more speed than grace. When Lord St. Abrams reached to grasp her suddenly nerveless fingers for the obligatory salute, a wave of dizziness swept her. For one awful moment she thought she might faint.

About to bow over her hand was the taunting, tempting stranger she’d kissed at the gypsy camp.

Chapter Six

So this is Jeffrey's new love, Gilen thought, despite his friend's description of her, still a bit surprised as he inspected the woman curtsying before him. This tall, slender lady, her bowed head displaying a luxurious tangle of thick ebony curls, her long dark lashes in sharp silhouette against the porcelain of her face, was not the sort of gazetted beauty to whom his friend had previously lost his heart.

Nor—mercifully—upon Jeffrey's announcing his name and rank, had she latched on to his arm with an effusion of ingratiating chatter, as had happened on several uncomfortable instances in the past when Jeffrey had presented him to his innamorata of the moment.

Lovely rather than stunning, and pretty-behaved besides, he concluded as he reached for her hand. Perhaps she might do for Jeff.

His favorable impression of genteel beauty did not prepare him for the jolt of awareness that hammered his nerves when his gloved hand touched hers. That lingered, pulsing through his veins, while he hastily brushed his lips to her fingertips and released them.

She'd felt it, too—his shocked mind noted her gasping intake of breath, the slight tremble of her hand. It, he concluded as he tried to reorder his scrambled thoughts, being an intense, immediate and entirely unwelcome attraction to the lady who'd won his best friend's admiration. Damn and blast, he cursed under his breath.

"Lord St. Abrams," she murmured, her face still demurely lowered.

"Isn't she splendid?" an exuberant Jeffrey mouthed to him over her head. Reclaiming the lady's hand with covetous zeal, he motioned Gilen to follow them. "Come along, St. Abrams. I'll present you to Miss Southford's aunt, Lady Alice, and some of her friends."

After spending a moment staring in befuddlement at his hand, as if that appendage had betrayed him, Gilen started off a few steps behind the couple. Which, as they crossed the floor, gave him a good view—all too good a view—of Miss Southford, her graceful glide of a walk, that temptation of thick curls balanced on the arched perfection of her neck, the shapely arms beneath the flutter of dark sleeves. Much as he tried to rein it in, to his disgust his body was as enthusiastic as Jeffrey in appreciating the lady's charms.

There was no question of proceeding down that path. His goal was only to protect, as much as it was possible to protect a man who'd reached his majority years ago, his vulnerable friend from unscrupulous husband hunters.

He dragged his eyes from watching for tantalizing hints of the trim posterior beneath her silk gown and fixed them firmly on his friend's back. The fact that she was making no attempt to flirt with Gilen, who wherever he traveled seemed to be instantly identified by every unmarried female in the vicinity as a prime matrimonial prize, was both a relief and a promising sign.

Or perhaps it was just that his reputation as being impervious to female wiles had also preceded him, and Miss Southford realized Jeffrey's easygoing person and titleless wealth made for an easier target.

Uncharitable, he chided himself. He mustn't let Jeffrey's recent unhappy experiences cause him to suspect the motives of every unmarried lady his friend encountered.

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