



REGENCY

*The  
Captain  
and the  
Wallflower*

LYN STONE

Lyn Stone

# **The Captain and the Wallflower**

«HarperCollins»

**Stone L.**

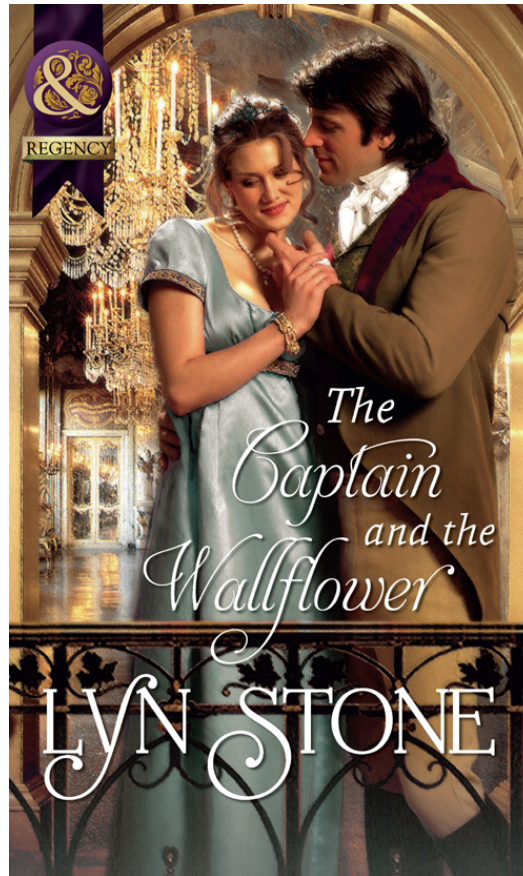
The Captain and the Wallflower / L. Stone — «HarperCollins»,

A PROPOSAL OF NECESSITY Badly scarred Captain Caine Morleigh must marry to inherit. Who better than the homeliest young woman left over at the end of the London season? After all, she will require little attention to keep her happy... Lady Grace Renfair leaps at the only chance to escape her emotionally abusive uncle and accepts Caine's proposal. Soon she blooms with confidence and beauty, causing her husband's forbidding exterior to crumble. If she could only reach beyond his scars to the gentleman beneath...

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**“Not for all the gold in England would I dance with you, sir.”**

His eye twinkled and he smiled more sincerely, with a crooked expression that warmed something inside her. “I’m not offering *all* the gold,” he said, “but a significant portion could be yours if you’re amenable.”

“A proposition, sir?” She raised an eyebrow with the question. “Am I to run weeping at the insult or deal you a resounding slap? How do the bets go that I will respond?”

“No bets and no proposition. I have a very decent proposal in mind.”

“I am already the object of ridicule,” she told him frankly, withdrawing her hand from his. “Go find another to tease, who will at least award you points for originality.”

He inclined his head. “Will you not grant me a small favor, at least, and take a turn about the floor?”

Perhaps this was an arranged jibe, compliments of her uncle. “Do you know Wardfelton?”

“I have not met him yet, but I shall seek him out immediately if you will give me leave to ask him for you.”

“For my *person*? Not only a dance? How droll.”

“For your hand in marriage,” he said without equivocation.

## AUTHOR NOTE

All too often we judge on appearance alone. There might be a really wonderful person concealed beneath a less than perfect façade. As the hero and heroine of THE CAPTAIN AND THE WALLFLOWER discover, perceptions can change radically when one delves a bit more deeply and discovers true character and personality.

I write romance to entertain, but also to illustrate my heartfelt belief that selfless love does exist and ought to be celebrated! It is possible to find someone who would jump between you and a bullet, who would put your happiness before their own, and who would love you unconditionally. Some of us have found that person, and to those who haven't as yet I say, 'Keep an open mind, keep up the search, and don't forget to note what's beyond the surface!'

I hope you enjoy the journey as Grace and Caine discover the sort of love neither dared hope to find when they first stumbled into a marriage of mutual convenience. If you enjoyed *The Ugly Duckling*, *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* as a child, I think you will appreciate my grown-up story THE CAPTAIN AND THE WALLFLOWER.

## About the Author

A painter of historical events, **LYN STONE** decided to write about them. A canvas, however detailed, limits characters to only one moment in time: 'If a picture's worth a thousand words, the other ninety thousand have to show up somewhere!' An avid reader, she admits, 'At thirteen, I fell in love with Emily Brontë's Heathcliff and became Catherine. Next year I fell for Rhett and became Scarlett. Then I fell for the hero I'd known most of my life and finally became myself.'

After living for four years in Europe, Lyn and her husband Allen settled into a log house in north Alabama that is crammed to the rafters with antiques, artefacts and the stuff of future tales.

# **The Captain and The Wallflower**

Lyn Stone



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This book is for my wonderful and courageous friend,  
Garland Whiddon Rowland. This is for all those  
discussions about what love is when we were teens  
still anticipating it. Oh, and for being my maid  
of honor once I found it! So happy that you found it, too!



## *Prologue*

*London*

*July 25, 1815*

Caine Morleigh studiously avoided touching the cloth bandages covering his eyes as he waited for the physician to arrive. For five long weeks, his injuries had remained under wraps, the bandages changed by feel in pitch-dark to avoid further damage from the light. And to avoid revelation, he admitted to himself. Today, he would know whether his sight had been destroyed.

There would be so much for him to learn if that proved so. Already, he had begun counting steps from one place to another so that he could eventually get about the house unaided. He fed himself in private still, but was becoming good at it.

Control would not be beyond him. In time, he would be able to manage the impediment, if forced to it. Damn, but he hated being dependent. Impatience warred with apprehension as the wait dragged on in the drawing room of his uncle, Earl of Hadley.

He heard his aunt Hadley gasp again as Trent, his best friend and companion, regaled her with prettied-up details of their final day on the field of battle. Caine paid little heed to the words. He'd heard it all before in considerably more graphic terms. Hell, he had lived it. Trent talked entirely too much, but his effort here was admirable, Caine admitted. It was Trent's way of lessening the tension and distracting everyone from the purpose of the gathering.

"We were wounded on the charge along with most of our brigade, most never to rise again! Caine fell beside me, unable to see, and I, my leg badly twisted, could not hope to walk. But did we lie there and die? No, ma'am! I served as his eyes whilst he got us to my horse. His horse had collapsed, you see, so we mounted double and rejoined the charge, galloping full speed. There was no going back...."

Someone cleared their throat and Trent, thank God, left off his narrative at the interruption. "Dr. Ackers and Miss Belinda Thoren-Snipes," Jenkins, the butler, announced.

"Show them in! Show them in!" his aunt exclaimed. Caine heard the rustle of taffeta skirts as Aunt Hadley approached and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I thought he would never come."

"How convenient they've arrived together," his uncle said. "I sent a note round for your Belinda to join us, too. I knew you would want her here."

Caine sighed, wishing he had not. He wanted to discover for himself whether he could see before he encountered his fiancée. If he was to be blind for life, she should not be held to the betrothal. For that reason, he had not initiated any contact at all since his return to London.

He had no trouble recalling how she had looked the last time he had seen her. He hoped against hope he would see her again. She was a blonde, rose-cheeked beauty, his Belinda. Her image had sustained him for nearly two years as he had faced the ugliness of war.

He heard approaching footsteps, the physician's heavier masculine tread interspersed with the soft click of Belinda's dainty shoes on the marble floor of the corridor. Did he actually smell the scent of her lilac perfume as she entered, or was that merely a fond brush of memory and expectation? Caine was convinced he loved her and had from their first meeting.

Despite that, he realized he knew very little about his future wife. He had courted her, of course, but not for long and always under the strictest of supervision. Their desultory conversation then, and later her infrequent letters filled with frivolous details of life at home, had not told him much.

In fact, he did not know a great deal about women in general, other than in the biblical sense. That paid-for expertise was helpful only in the bedchamber, but valuable nonetheless. Perhaps that was all that any man could hope to understand fully or, in fact, would need to know.

He employed respect with all females, regardless of rank, as well as chivalry and what charm he had acquired. Common courtesy demanded that much of a man, and rightly so.

He forced a smile to greet Belinda even as he wished for her own sake, as well as for his, that she were elsewhere this morning. Her scent of lilacs, the essence he had recalled with fervent longing in the midst of war, now nearly overpowered the senses he had left.

“Captain Morleigh!” she said with obviously forced brightness.

“How are you, my dear?” he asked, sick with apprehension, holding his smile in place by sheer force of will.

“Fine, thank you,” she replied, the brightness slipping, replaced by a tremor.

He noted that she did not return the question. Her fear of the answer must be nearly as great as his own, at being faced with the very real prospect of having a blind husband to look after. He would release her from their betrothal if it came to that, but she did not yet know it.

Caine identified the sound of the medical bag being opened.

“Could we get on with it?” he asked, impatience winning out. He wanted this over with, whatever the outcome.

“Certainly, my boy,” the doctor answered, his tone entirely too sympathetic and tinged with worry. “Let’s turn you away from the lamps to the soft light from the window.”

Caine moved as directed and heard the others in the room, Trent, Aunt Hadley and Belinda, shifting positions, as well.

“Belinda, you must stand just there so that you will be the very first thing he sees!” his aunt said.

Belinda muttered her thanks as the doctor slid a scissor blade beneath the bandage at Caine’s right temple and began to cut. He carefully peeled the cloth away and dabbed something wet over both eyelids, soaking them thoroughly. “There,” he said finally. “Now open your eyes slowly.”

Caine concentrated as he did so and sensed the doctor move to one side and expose him to the window.

He blinked, saw blessed light ... and heard the screams.

## Chapter One

*London*

*Cavanaugh House*

*August 25, 1815*

“Spot the homeliest of the lot, Trent, and speak to her sponsor on my behalf.” Caine Morleigh smiled at his friend as he handed his cane and top hat to the attendant. “She should look utterly frightful, perhaps be a bit dull of wit and wanting in every respect, or she won’t do.”

Trent sighed, rolling his eyes as he tugged at his gloves. “You don’t have to do this. You’re making far too much of that girl’s reaction.” He scoffed. “Porridge for brains, that one.”

“That’s as may be, but I have a more significant reason for this than the way *I* look.” The receiving line had dispersed, and apparently they weren’t to be announced, since they had come so late. He led the way, following the music down the wide corridor. He glanced inside a smaller room, which had been set up for card playing and refreshments, then turned and entered the ballroom.

He kept his voice low as he leaned sideways to continue his conversation with Trent. “I need someone who will require little attention, a woman satisfied to simply change her marital status and then leave me alone. I shall have more than enough to do as it is.”

Trent huffed. “A woman who needs little attention? Is there such a creature? In my experience —”

“I know all about your *experience*. Now, stop blathering on and help me look.”

The gathering at Lord Cavanaugh’s was far from a crush, since it was past the regular London season and many had retired to the country. Decorations had been held to a minimum and this appeared to be a rather modest affair. Still the columned entry, the great expanse of highly polished floor and elegantly curved staircase needed little embellishment to shout wealth.

The musicians sounded rather good, though they were few in number compared to events he had attended in years past. He watched the dancers move through their measured steps without much gaiety or conversation.

“Not much of a rout, is it,” Trent commented with a sigh of resignation. “I’ve seen more excitement at funerals.”

“Suits my need perfectly,” Caine responded. Most of the single women present would be the leftovers and their sponsors, hoping for a late-made match. Perhaps with a bit of luck, he could make one of the hopefuls content, if not happy.

Trent snorted. “Damned harebrained idea. You’re obsessed with controlling every aspect of your life. Always have been. And it’s not possible, y’know.”

“I can but try.”

“You’re treating this like a military campaign, and you know how I hate taking orders!”

“Think of the compensation. You may go for the best-looking one for yourself. It’s a small thing I’m asking of you,” Caine said, applying his most reasonable tone. “*Asking*, not ordering. And as a friend, Trent.”

“Fine! It’s your own throat you’re cutting. Your uncle was wrong when he put the condition on you to marry. I wouldn’t do it if I were you. You’ll have his title no matter what you do or don’t.”

Caine shrugged. “Yes, but it’s the fortune that will go to Cousin Neville, plus the estates, since none is entailed. Think of all the people now employed by the earl who would suffer if Neville lost everything over a stupid game of cards or on a damned horse race. He could, and probably would, piss away everything the family has worked for these last two centuries.”

“You don’t know that he will. You haven’t seen him since you were children.”

“Oh, I’ve heard enough of his maddening exploits from my uncle. Knowing such things, I cannot imagine why he would even consider leaving *anything* to Neville, but Hadley seems amused by it all

and oddly unconcerned. Therefore, I must prevent it however I can. So I will marry, as he stipulates. I don't have any strong objections. He is my uncle, after all, and I do care about his feelings. I should settle his mind before he gives up the ghost."

"But why must you have a woman who's desperate to marry?" Trent clicked his tongue, exasperated. "Not every female in London runs screaming from the room when she sees you."

"One certainly did."

"Well, *only* that one, and as I've said before, she's not all there." He tapped his temple with two fingers and shook his head. "Silly witch."

"Well, she's not *here*, either, which is why I came." Caine heaved out a breath of frustration and began strolling the perimeter of the room, Trent at his side.

"Watch how each miss gives me a look of repulsion as we pass, terrified I will take an interest." He shook his head. "Times such as this, blindness would be a blessing."

"Well, I'm damned glad you're *not* blind and you ought to be, too! Perhaps their regard is merely a reaction to your grim expression. Try smiling now and again. They could do far worse than you, and you know it. So you have a few scars. A wife would get used to that after the first shock of seeing them."

"I hope you're right." Caine stopped beside a towering plant and picked absently at one of the leaves. "But I think it best to choose a woman not prone to play the social butterfly. The most beautiful exist for it. I despise these sorts of occasions and would like to be done with them."

He hadn't used to hate social events, not when he'd been a young lieutenant, flirting, dancing, assessing the newest crop of preening lovelies, giving Trent solid competition. That's how he had found a little beauty of excellent birth, whom he had thought would be the perfect mate for a rising army officer. A young fool's mistake, that. Now he knew better.

He had been only third in line for the earldom then, with a military career underway. However, with the deaths of his father and a brother during the years Caine had served in the army, he was now set to inherit from the eldest of that generation, his uncle. He had not been born to the title, nor had he been trained for it. The responsibilities were enormous, greater than he had ever imagined. There was so much to learn. So much to sort out.

The old earl, who admittedly was not long for the world, demanded that his heir be settled and ready to assume his duties. That involved Caine's getting a wife immediately, so here he was, shopping. He surveyed the goods, evaluating faces, postures, attitudes.

This time he knew he must rely on different currency for the negotiations. The women he had been well acquainted with in his life thus far had proved rather shallow, valuing a handsome face, charm and practised manners well above anything else in a man. They left it to their practical families to ascertain whether their choice possessed the necessary means to support them.

Now he must find a suitable woman desperate enough to overlook his altered appearance and lack of social inclinations to settle for his prospective wealth and title. More important, as he had impressed on Trent, he needed one who would not impact on the time he would require to fulfill his duties as earl. The task of handling the earl's business matters already proved daunting. He must live up to it.

Trent's words troubled him. Did such a woman as he required actually exist? He continued scanning the ballroom, dwelling on the corners where the wallflowers perched, trying to conceal their hopes and dreams behind fans and half smiles. None of their smiles were directed at him.

Suddenly, his good eye landed on one in pale yellow, a painfully thin figure with lank brown hair, a colorless complexion and enormous, doe-like eyes. Caine immediately sensed in her a mixture of hopelessness and resignation, yet she somehow maintained an air of calm dignity he admired. "A definite possibility there," he muttered, more to himself than to Trent.

The girl was not precisely ugly, but it was certain no one would describe her as pretty. He felt a tug of ... what? Sympathy? No, more like empathy. She did not wish to be here, either, most likely for similar reasons. Yet they must be here, probably striving toward the same goal—a suitable match.

These mating rituals were such a trial for any not blessed with the allure necessary to attract the opposite sex. At least he would have wealth and the title to recommend him. She had only her dignity apparently. If she were an heiress, she would certainly be better dressed, coiffed and bejeweled. Her pale neck and earlobes were completely bare.

If he could look past her surface, perhaps she would be willing to look past his. But he must put it to her in a way she would find palatable. He couldn't very well say "You look like a quiet, unprepossessing chit I could count on to not complicate my life any further than it is already."

Could he summon enough charm, persuasion and outrageous bribery to convince this one to have him? Yes, he decided, approaching her might be worth the risk of rejection.

"Yes, I think so," he said to himself. "That one, Trent," he said, nodding toward the candidate. "The one in the lemon-colored frock. She'll do."

"What? She's a bean stalk, Morleigh, and the beans don't appear to have developed yet."

"I'm not out for beans," Caine said tersely, his gaze still resting on the waiflike girl.

"Well, she looks like death on a plate. I doubt she'll live through the month, much less the rigors of a wedding." He nudged Caine with his elbow. "Besides, you said you'd let me choose."

"Don't be tedious. I believe she's the one, so go. Do what we came to do," Caine said simply, straightening his sleeves.

He hoped to have the selection completed with this one foray into society, because it was damned uncomfortable submitting himself to all these stares. He knew he wasn't that monstrous looking and that they were mostly curious, but it bothered him.

His left eye bore only a few scars, but those surely made everyone imagine the very worst of the one he kept covered. The right, he always avoided looking at in the mirror and concealed it behind a rather large eye patch whenever he was in company.

That was probably a useless vanity due to the well-broadcast observation of Miss Thoren-Snipes, his former fiancée. She had declared to one and all that he was a horrible sight that turned her off sick, a fright she would never forget, one that caused her nightmares.

To her credit, his aunt's reaction that day had verified that Belinda did not exaggerate by much. He made women faint, cast up their accounts and scream in their sleep. Avoiding that hardly qualified as vanity on his part. No, more like a gentleman's consideration, he thought.

Trent did not understand, and why should he? He had the wherewithal to pick and choose and take his own sweet time about it. No woman would refuse Gavin Trent, handsome as he was, a hero of the wars and witty as hell. Caine owed him his life, admired him enormously and wished him well. Envy had no place in a friendship as enduring as theirs. But Trent's eternal optimism and infernal teasing tried his patience to extremes.

The girl in yellow was now getting an earful from one of the other unfortunates, an overweight dumpling who seemed entirely too vivacious to qualify as second choice if he needed one. Her glance left no doubt about whom she had chosen to revile.

Caine wondered if perhaps he was overly sensitive and tried not to be, but he was unused to it yet. He had attended none of these functions since his return to London. He was grateful that he was still able to see and wished he could simply bypass mirrors forever and ignore how he looked. If not for this acquiring of a wife, he could be content with himself as he was.

The object of his future suit looked up and her very direct gaze again met his across the room. He should march right over and ask her to dance. Three times running. That would seal the deal. But not yet.

Caine snagged a glass of champagne off the silver tray of a passing waiter circulating among the guests. He raised it slightly, toasting the girl, and forced a smile as he spoke to his friend. “Go, Trent. Find out who she is. I’ll wait here.”

“You’re certain you want to go through with this?”

“Yes, quite.” He sipped the sparkling wine and concealed a wince. He preferred a stouter drink with some substance to it.

A quarter hour later, Trent rejoined Caine. “She’s Wardfelton’s niece, Lady Grace Renfair,” he declared. “His lordship laughed in my face when I spoke with him. Told me she has no dowry. She’s penniless. *Worthless* was the word he used to describe her, an ailing, aging millstone around his neck and none too bright.”

“Aging? How old is she?”

“Twenty-four or thereabout. I inquired of a few others, as well as her uncle. Lady Nebbins, that old talebearer, told me the chit was orphaned at sixteen, engaged to Barkley’s second son, a lieutenant in the navy, who died aboard *The Langston* six years ago. She lived as companion to the lad’s widowed mother until that lady remarried. Lady Grace has been with Wardfelton for these past two years.”

“Ah, good. Of suitable birth then. And something in common already, noble uncles with a foot on our necks. Perhaps she’s ready for a change.”

Trent hummed his agreement. “I don’t doubt that. Rumor about town had it she was perhaps dead. People had begun wondering aloud whether she was deceased and how she came to be so. It’s thought Wardfelton has trotted her out tonight to dispense with the gossip. I must say, she might yet make it a fact. To call her frail would be kind.”

Caine smiled. “No matter. I can go forward with it then.”

“Ah, well, there’s a fly in the ointment,” Trent informed him. He rocked to and fro as he spoke. “Wardfelton didn’t take me, or my request on your behalf, seriously at all. He thinks we are making fun of his simpleminded niece and seemed to find it highly amusing that we should do so.”

“Simpleminded?” Caine didn’t believe it for a second.

Trent shrugged. “He doesn’t think much of her, obviously. Probably exaggerated. I would remind you, you did ask for dull of wit.”

“He didn’t refuse outright to let me address her, did he?”

“No, he doesn’t really expect you to,” Trent admitted. “I spoke with Lord Jarvis, too. He says she is the daughter of the previous earl. Wardfelton’s actually the third brother to hold the title. The second, Lady Grace’s father, was a physician until he inherited. Only held it for a couple of years before he died of the cholera during the outbreak here, along with his wife. The girl was left home in the country and escaped their fate. And as I said, Barkley’s mother took her in.”

Caine nodded. “Ah, an earl’s daughter. Uncle should consider the match entirely acceptable. If she is willing and I could obtain a special license from the archbishop, we could marry this week.”

“You know what they say about marrying in haste.”

“Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today,” Caine retorted. He shoved his glass at Trent. “Hold this for me. Better yet, get me another with something more bracing than bubbles. Courting’s thirsty work.”

He left Trent standing there staring at the delicate crystal stem and went to ply his suit.



## Chapter Two

Grace Renfair shifted her gaze elsewhere, determined not to look back at the man standing across the ballroom. His intense regard unnerved her. Why did he single her out so pointedly? Probably wondering who was so witless as to sponsor a creature such as herself.

She felt exposed, woefully underdressed and incomparable in the worst sort of way. No matter. She lifted her chin and paid only scant attention to the vile chatter of the girl beside her.

"I could never abide a man so tall and large as Captain Morleigh, even if he were handsome!" exclaimed Miss Caulfield. Grace did not reply, even to nod or shrug.

He was large, yes, but not frighteningly so. Grace thought he cut quite a figure when compared to the fashionably slender or the aging portly gents milling around him at the moment.

"He would frighten the life out of anyone! Belinda is well out of that match! She says he has turned unbearably cold and cruel since the war. Why, he probably slew dozens of people before he was nearly killed himself!"

Wasn't he *expected* to do that when he was a soldier? Grace ignored Miss Caulfield's comment. Would the girl ever change topics? No, she prattled on. "Look at his shoulders! All that swordplay, I should think. No padding there, I'd wager!"

Not a bet Grace would take. She had also noted that his features were well defined and rather stark above that square jaw and stubborn chin. The eye patch added a dash of interest, as perhaps it was meant to do, though if he had been wounded in battle, it probably was not simply for show.

The black evening attire topped by a snowy neckcloth looked impeccable, though his straight-shouldered military bearing was such that he might as well have worn regimentals. His height was remarkable, too, putting him at least half a head above the men around him.

"Yes, his looks are compelling," Grace said, before remembering she should not speak at all.

So why should she mind if he caught her looking at him, since everyone else seemed to be? Perhaps she should thank him for drawing inquisitive stares away from her.

When she finally gave in to curiosity and shot another glance in his direction, she saw this Captain Morleigh heedlessly interrupting the progress of the quadrille by walking directly through it. Now, there was a man who did precisely as he pleased. She would give anything to be that bold.

She had been once, but had changed so much she hardly knew herself any longer. The face in her mirror seemed a stranger, as did her almost-lifeless form swathed in the dated ball gown her uncle had provided. There had been no maid to dress her, to help with her woefully straight hair or even produce pins for it.

Her uncle had brought her here to show her off, so he said. She believed that to be true in the very worst sense and wondered if perhaps he thought he must. He had kept her a virtual prisoner for well over a year. Did anyone question where she was keeping these days and what had happened to her? Or did anyone remember her at all?

She had never made her debut, having been betrothed so early on. Then her mourning had been extended much longer than usual. She had lost both parents and soon after, her husband-to-be. The comfort of his mother, Lady Barkley, had been such a balm, she had been loath to give

up the sweet lady's company. Not one to intrude on her dear friend's newlywed state, Grace had insisted on removing herself to the care of her only relative. Such a mistake that had been, and so irrevocable.

She and Wardfelton had gotten on quite well in the beginning. She even played hostess for several entertainments he had held at the country house. Then, literally overnight, things had changed. He suddenly turned into nothing short of a jailer, insisting she remain in her rooms except for a supervised walk about the enclosed gardens when weather permitted. Her meals were sent up. Her correspondence disallowed.

It seemed he thoroughly enjoyed humiliating and even frightening her in every way he could devise. She shuddered just thinking of the tales he had told of young English women disappearing, sold into white slavery, never to be seen or heard of again. Though not an outright threat, there had been warning in his eyes. Why, she could not fathom, but he obviously meant to keep her terrified and biddable for some reason or other.

Perhaps he feared being called to account for squandering her inheritance, if indeed she had ever possessed any such thing. She could not look into it herself and whom did he think would do so on her behalf? No one cared.

Well, her looks were gone now and she much doubted any foreign sultan with proper eyesight would want to buy such as her. What more could Uncle do to her other than offer her up to ridicule as he was doing tonight?

Murder was still an option, even though he would be the most obvious suspect. She had pointed that out to him when he deliberately had left out that book of poisons for her to see. He had laughed at that, but she had sensed his unease. More likely, he intended to drive her to suicide so he would look blameless.

If only she knew someone here, she would plead for escape. But would anyone believe her? Would anyone care?

“He’s coming this way!” Miss Caulfield announced. “Should we venture to speak to him?”

Grace knew she was being watched, for Wardfelton had told her she would be. He also warned rather adamantly that she was to hold no personal conversations with anyone present. She was only to be seen, not heard. Grace held her head high despite all that. He would not steal what little dignity she had left.

Nor would this man approaching with a patently fake smile upon his face. He stopped directly in front of her.

“My lady, please allow me to presume and introduce myself.”

“You would be Captain Morleigh,” she replied, to save him the trouble. She held out her hand and watched with interest as he lifted it almost to his lips. Damn Wardfelton. Let him do his worst. Damn them all. She was sick of living in fear.

“Lady Grace,” he said, holding her gaze, as well as her hand. “I see that our reputations have preceded us. Such a pleasure to meet you. Would you do me the honor of the next dance?”

Grace cocked her head to one side as she continued to peer up at him. He bore a few scars from the war, pinkish and still healing, random marks upon his forehead and around his uncovered eye. They did proclaim the validity of the eye patch he wore that lent him his roguish air.

Misses Caulfield and Thoren-Snipes were so wrong. The man was not hideous at all. More’s the pity. She had never trusted handsome men, especially *arrogant* handsome men who presumed too much, as he did now. She forced a half smile. “Not for all the gold in England would I dance with you, sir.”

His eye twinkled and he smiled more sincerely, a crooked expression that warmed something inside her. “I’m not offering *all* the gold,” he said, “but a significant portion could be yours if you’re amenable.”

“A proposition, sir?” She raised an eyebrow with the question. “Am I to run weeping at the insult or deal you a resounding slap? How do the bets go that I will respond?”

“No bets and no proposition. I have a very decent proposal in mind.”

“I am already the object of ridicule,” she told him frankly, withdrawing her hand from his, flipping open her fan and giving him the signal to leave her alone. “Go, find another to tease who will at least earn you points for originality.”

He inclined his head. “Certainly no ridicule intended, my lady. I merely ask to be considered. I have some trouble in that quarter as you have no doubt heard.” He cast a pointed look at her overfed companion, who promptly blushed and hurried away.

Morleigh returned his attentions to Grace. “Will you not grant me a small favor, at least, and take a turn about the floor?”

Perhaps this was an arranged jibe, compliments of her uncle. “Do you know Wardfelton?”

“I have not met him yet, but I shall seek him out immediately if you will give me leave to ask him for you.”

“For my *person*? Not only a dance? How droll.”

“For your hand in marriage,” he said without equivocation.

A short laugh escaped in spite of her dismay. The man was either woefully desperate, quite mad or downright cruel. “I should give you that leave, my lord, and hold you by law to your word. It would serve you right for carrying this jest too far.”

Amazingly, he stretched his hand closer, his expression totally devoid of sarcasm, his deep voice rife with sincerity. “Please do. I would be forever grateful. Perhaps we could dance and discuss it further?”

His madness must be contagious. Whatever he had in mind could hardly lower her any more in public estimation than did the way she looked tonight. And why should she care if it did? None of her former friends were in attendance, not that she had ever had many who would be here in town.

She had hoped at first to appeal to someone she knew to give her some respite from her uncle, but he had warned her no one would. In fact, she had nothing provable to complain about except his clearly implied hatred and her suspicion that, for some cause unknown, he wished her to wither and die. She could not run away again, for even if he were disposed to let her, where would she go and what would she do?

Revealing her fears to anyone and asking their interference might imply hysterics on her part. Wardfelton had accused her of that himself, cleverly attributing it to her martyring grief and self-induced illness. No doubt he had already broadcast that diagnosis to anyone willing to listen. Secluding her in a madhouse was a distinct possibility, and perhaps tonight was meant to set the stage for that.

Damn the man and his threats! This was no way to live, and she was sick of it. Why had she stood it for so long?

Let him do his worst. She probably would die soon one way or another. Sad, but that fact seemed oddly freeing at the moment. It wasn’t as if she stood any chance of ever making another match or doing any of the things a young woman of means might undertake. She had no means. No prospects at all. Why not do as she pleased tonight and damn the consequences?

Without thinking any more about it, Grace placed her gloved hand in the captain’s again. He swept her onto the dance floor and into a scandalously close waltz.

She was not so familiar with the steps, but he held her firmly and guided her as if they had practiced daily for weeks. Grace found it exhilarating, being held so near and whirled about so expertly.

After one turn around the floor, she looked up at him. “Why do you do this, really? You have already made us a spectacle, so honesty will lose you nothing.”

His expression smoothed out. “Honestly? I need a wife. And I am guessing that you need a husband. That *is* why we are here, is it not?”

“You *do* know Wardfelton. He has put you up to this.”

“We have never met, I vow it on my life. I will admit I sent Lord Trent as my emissary to ask Wardfelton’s leave to court you.”

“Oh, he would never agree to that,” she stated, quite sure of it. Who knew what her uncle would do to her simply for having this dance and conversation?

“Well, he did not refuse, either. Probably too deep in his cups. I can only hope he’s drunk enough to let me have you. Assuming you are willing, of course. Are you?”

She laughed a little. “What idiot steered you in this direction, I wonder? I’ve not a farthing to recommend me. I would come with nothing. Surely he made that clear enough.”

“I come with everything you will need. Make your demands and I shall meet them.”

Grace shook her head and kept a smile on her face, unwilling to let him see how painful it was to be toyed with in such a way. Yet she decided the best way to deflect this sort of jest was to laugh along with the jester. “Ah, well, if you put it that way ... A thousand quid per annum, two maids and a shiny new phaeton. Oh, and diamonds, of course. A lady must have diamonds.”

He gave a satisfied nod. “Done and done, my lady. Only, you shall have two thousand, all the servants you like, plus a matched team to pull the phaeton.”

“Why, thank you!” she exclaimed with her widest smile. “But what of the gems, my lord? Does that break the deal?”

“No. Do you prefer blue or yellow stones?” He whirled her again, causing her stomach to flutter wildly.

“White diamonds,” she declared, leaning back and challenging him with her eyes. “You know, this is most entertaining. For you, that is to say. As for me, I should like to kick you in the shins and spit in your face. Manners prevent, however, so if you would kindly lead me back to my place by the wall and collect whatever sum you have riding on this farce, I would be most appreciative.”

He stopped dead still in the middle of the floor and stared down at her. The music faltered and the noise died down. With no apparent care for who was watching and listening, he took both her hands in his and brought them to his lips. “Lady Grace, you’ve quite stolen my heart and I cannot live without you. Would you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?” His voice was even deeper than before. And rather loud in the gathering hush.

A collective gasp shook the cavernous room. Someone dropped a violin and the strings pinged, the only other sound to be heard.

“Say you will have me, or my heart will break.” A stage whisper if she had ever heard one. It fairly echoed round the room.

Grace barely resisted the urge to throw back her head and laugh out loud. She had not laughed that way in so long, perhaps she had forgotten how, but the urge was there.

She glanced over the group surrounding them and saw Wardfelton had entered the ballroom and was standing there with his mouth agape. She realized at that moment she would do virtually anything to discommode him further. And anything to get away from him permanently, even if it landed her in a worse fix. Well, here was her chance.

She recalled the old expression, *better the devil you know* ... Balderdash, that wasn’t so in her case. The devil she didn’t know could hardly be any worse than Wardfelton. She had nearly forgotten what it was like to live without constant terror. And for some unfathomable reason, she had no fear of Captain Morleigh. None at all.

Grace looked back into the eye of the presumptuous man who held her hands. Here was no devil, only a slightly disfigured fellow who doubted his appeal to women so devoutly he would settle for the one he thought most desperate. Well, he had found her right enough.

The description of him that Miss Thoren-Snipes had passed around had been widely dispersed, according to Grace’s companion earlier this evening. Perhaps Morleigh suffered more than anyone knew, especially if he was now reduced to pleading with the least-agreeable woman in the room to marry him.

He began to look hopeful then, taking her hesitation for wavering, she supposed. It certainly was that. She felt him draw her closer as he leaned down to speak privately. “All that I promised you, plus independence,” he whispered, then added, “no conditions attached.”

“None?” Yes, he *was* mad.

“Well, faithfulness, of course,” he said against her ear. “We will vow that much when we wed. But otherwise, you shall do as you please, go where you will, act as you choose.”

“Your word of honor?” she whispered back, actually considering it seriously. She might be trading one threat for another. Morleigh could beat her, lock her away or possibly get rid of her

permanently as she was sure her uncle planned to do. Even as she thought that, it seemed more likely this man would simply leave her to her own devices if she displeased him. Or even if she didn't. It certainly was a gamble, but she really had nothing to lose.

"Then yes," she replied in a whisper.

"Louder," he suggested. "That will make it official and irrevocable."

"I will!" she declared, flashing her uncle a steely glare. "I would be honored to marry you, Captain Morleigh. My heart is lost and I simply cannot wait to be your wife." Who cared if that sounded like a line from some mawkish play. So had his loud proposal.

Morleigh kissed her hands, each in turn and signaled to the orchestra. "Gentlemen, if you please, a celebratory waltz!"

Stunned, shaken, still feeling the urge to laugh wildly, Grace followed his lead until the music stopped.

Lord, she felt dizzy, overcome with heat from the exertion. The moment he released her to applaud the music, she swooned. Her last thought was that she had finally starved herself into wild delusions. This night could not be real.

## *Chapter Three*

“Fetch a doctor!” shouted Caine. He felt her wrist for a pulse and found one. It seemed steady enough and only a trifle weak.

No one came forward to help. Highly unlikely that a mere physician would be present at the assembly, so he scooped her up in his arms and strode out, barking an order to have his carriage brought round on the instant.

“Where do you think you’re going with her?” Wardfelton demanded loudly. He followed them out the front entrance and scampered around to hamper Caine’s progress.

“She needs a doctor. I know one. Stand aside. She’s mine now.”

“She is *not* yours!” The man’s outrage seemed real enough. “I forbid this!” he shouted. “Put her *down*, I say!”

“Come with us if you’re worried about her. Otherwise, stand clear!”

Half the attendees had followed them out to the steps and stood transfixed. Better than a horse race or a boxing match, Caine figured. More food for gossip at any rate. He needed the audience, so he didn’t mind.

“Someone call the watch! This is abduction!” Wardfelton cried, wheeling right and left, searching for someone to interfere.

Caine faced him down, the lady’s inert form between them. “Lord Trent is my witness. He spoke for me and you did not deny my asking for her hand. I have done, and with intentions most honorable. She is of age to accept without your consent. Lady Grace will be properly chaperoned by my aunt, the countess of Hadley, until she recovers and then we shall be married.”

“This is absurd!” Wardfelton announced, still looking around for support amongst his peers.

“Is it? What is your objection, sir?” Caine noticed the carriage making way along the thoroughfare to where they stood at the edge of the steps. “I marry her not for money or property, for you and she both swear she has none. I admire her enormously and find her delightful.”

He appealed to the crowd, whose female members had just uttered a sigh and were looking rather dreamy eyed. “Beauty is as beauty does, you know. And she does beautifully so far as I am concerned.”

Another collective sigh and numerous eager nods of approval. As he meant them to, the women present were eating this up with a spoon.

His carriage now awaited with the door open. Caine turned sideways and stepped into it with his featherlight fiancée still in his arms, her head resting on his chest.

She had revived on the steps. He had felt the tension in her thin body the moment he had faced down Wardfelton, but she continued to feign unconsciousness. He didn’t blame her in the least, and it did suit his purpose of keeping crowd sympathy.

“Don’t come round yet,” he warned her in a whisper as he waited for the footman to close the door. “Your lady friends are sighing at the romance of it all. Add that to their relief that I’m no longer in the market for a bride and we two could become legend.”

“Thank you for a moment I shall never forget,” she whispered back. “Even should you dump me in the nearest ditch, I would still feel beholden. The look on his face was priceless. I peeked.”

He grunted in response as he shifted her more comfortably on his lap. “You are guaranteed more than a moment. Can you survive all this or do you plan to faint on me regularly?”

She shook her head. “No, it was merely the exercise. I’ve not danced in ages. Or eaten of late. Is there food where we’re going?”

Caine relaxed. “I believe we can find something.”



The carriage was well away from the crowd now. Grace sat up, moved off his lap and onto the opposite seat. She leaned forward and clasped her hands on her knees. "So we are going to your home now?"

"My uncle's house here in Mayfair, where you'll be properly chaperoned, as I promised."

She nodded. "All right. This is no jest, is it? You truly were not in collusion with him."

"With Wardfelton? You heard our exchange."

With a heartfelt sigh, she leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes. "Thank God."

"I'll send someone round for your things tomorrow," he said. He reached up and started to shift the patch from his eye, then stopped himself.

"Oh, go ahead. The binding must be dreadfully uncomfortable," she said with a flap of one hand. "My father was a doctor and I assisted with patients. I shan't be shocked by an empty socket."

Still he didn't remove the patch. He merely studied her in the carriage light. "You seem a different sort from the lot I've known."

"Truer than you could ever guess," she admitted, then stifled a yawn with her hand.

"Are you ill, Grace?" he asked, then seemed to realize his impertinence. "Sorry. May I call you Grace in private?"

"Address me as you like. I suppose you have a given name?"

"Caine," he replied, looking a trifle uncomfortable.

He had a strong face and very fine skin where it wasn't scarred. His hair was rather too long, but a lovely shade of brown and with a slight wave to it.

She imagined he had been far too handsome for his own good before his injury. In fact, he was even now, though he would never believe it should anyone say as much. "How were you wounded?" she asked.

For a full moment, he remained silent and she thought he would refuse to answer. Then he did. "Artillery fire." He gestured to his face. "A shell exploded nearby and I was struck by fragments. Killed my horse."

"But you survived," she said, fascinated and wishing he would tell more. "That's the important thing."

"So I thought at the time. Wouldn't you like to lie down? I'll make a pillow of my coat." He began to take it off.

"No, don't bother. Is it very far?"

He glanced out the window. "Almost there. How do you feel?"

"Exhausted, if you must know," Grace admitted. "But I shan't need a doctor. A good night's rest should put me right. And food, as I said before. I'm famished."

"Good God! Has he been starving you?" Caine demanded.

She laughed, giddy and a bit light-headed. "No. I've done it to myself."

His worried expression said what tact prevented. He thought *she* was the mad one. And given her present situation, perhaps he was right.

Caine would not second-guess his choice. That was not his way. He made decisions and lived with them. If one proved wrong, he worked it to his advantage as best he could. Never vacillate, never look back on what might have been. And now he had chosen a wife. Granted, this decision had been made more impulsively than most any other in his life, but he would stand by it.

He would stand by *her*. For some uncanny reason, he felt an odd kinship with the little Lady Grace and had from the moment he had first seen her across the ballroom. Odd.

Trent had followed them home and stood in the foyer behind him as he introduced Grace to his uncle's housekeeper, Mrs. Oliver. The older woman curtsied even as she frowned at the newcomer. Caine could sense her disapproval, or perhaps it was only concern. The earl might mirror that when he met Grace, since she did not possess the appearance of a healthy breeder. No matter.

"Mrs. Oliver, could you arrange something to feed us?"

“The three of you, milord?”

“Yes, but nothing fancy. A simple tray in the breakfast room will do nicely. And a pot of strong tea for the lady.”

“Only brandy for me,” Trent supplied. He turned to Grace with a succinct bow. “I am Gavin Trent, friend of this nodcock you’re now attached to.”

“And his second this evening, so he tells me. Thank you for your assistance with the arrangements,” she said with a curtsy.

“My pleasure.”

“This way,” Caine said, ushering Grace down the corridor.

“A lovely residence,” Grace observed, sounding a bit breathless. “Your uncle is ...?”

“Earl of Hadley.”

She turned to him. “And you are his—?”

“His heir. Yes, you will one day be a countess. I understand your father was an earl, so perhaps you won’t mind the station.” Caine hoped she wouldn’t faint again and took her arm in case she did.

“My goodness!” she exclaimed, her hand clutching her bodice. “Why *me*?”

Caine might not know much of women’s minds, but he certainly knew better than to be completely honest in this instance. “You looked positively regal standing there. I was quite smitten.”

She laughed out loud, a full-throated, joyful sound he hadn’t expected. It was contagious and he laughed with her. Trent shot him a frown and, obviously not amused, went straight for the brandy decanter when the butler appeared with it.

They sat at one end of the breakfast-room table, Grace on his right, Trent to the left. “So, here we are,” Trent said on a sigh as he poured a draft into three snifters. “What now?”

“Would you see about getting the license?”

“If you like.” Trent gulped a swallow and winced at the burn. “But first I’ll need information you haven’t given me yet. Where will you marry?”

“Do you have a preference?” he asked Grace.

She gave a shrug and a small shake of her head. “Anywhere.”

“The chapel at Wildenhurst,” Caine stated. “It’s close enough that Uncle can attend comfortably, but not here in town where we might be plagued by hordes of the curious. Have you friends you wish to witness or attend?” he asked her.

Again, that small, disbelieving shake of her head. She knocked back the entire contents of her glass and coughed.

“Easy there. Are you quite all right?”

She nodded uncertainly as if the full impact of the evening’s events had suddenly hit her.

“No more plans tonight. You need to eat and then sleep. Tomorrow is soon enough for arrangements,” Caine declared. He looked meaningfully at Trent.

Trent set down his glass and stood. “I’ll just be off then.” He held out a hand to Caine. “Congratulations on your betrothal.” He bowed to Grace. “My lady, I wish you every happiness. And with that, a good night to you both.”

Grace exhaled audibly. “Thank you.”

Caine grinned at Trent’s wry expression. “See you in the morning.”

When they were alone, Caine sought to soothe Grace’s concerns, since she surely must have a few. “Everything will be done for you and you needn’t worry about anything.”

A kitchen maid arrived with a tray laden with cold meats, bread, sliced oranges and a pot of tea.

“You may leave it,” Caine told her. “I will serve the lady.” He proceeded to slather butter on a slice of bread for her.

She hurriedly rolled two slabs of ham and attacked the food without pause. Or anything resembling manners. Caine stopped what he was doing and watched with fascination as she ate. Eyes closed, she moaned softly and chewed rapidly.

After a few moments, she stopped and covered her mouth with her serviette.

“Too much, too fast?” he asked. “Perhaps you should rest a bit first.”

“She should and that’s a fact,” Mrs. Oliver declared. Caine turned to see her standing in the doorway Trent had just vacated. The heavysset retainer marched forward and virtually lifted her charge out of the chair. “You come right along, miss.”

He stood quickly to bid Grace good-night, noting that she plucked up the slice of bread he had buttered before being hauled away.

Caine sat down again when they were gone, eye fixed on the remnants of the cold supper without actually seeing it. Why would Grace admittedly starve herself, then gobble down food with such abandon? Had she lied about Wardfelton’s treatment? Had the man withheld sustenance? And if so, whyever would he do such a thing?

This would bear some investigation, but there was no rush. His little Grace would be perfectly safe now and hereafter. He would see to that.

For the first time since the morning of the battle that nearly blinded him, Caine felt a wave of calmness and well-being. He dearly hoped it would last.

The next morning, Caine awakened late, but fully alert and eager, for once, to face the day. He ascribed that to having a meaningful and interesting project other than the tedious business of straightening out his uncle’s affairs.

Grace must take second place, of course, immediately after their marriage. Once he had grown accustomed to the new duties he would assume and felt confident he could handle them, he would investigate Grace’s situation or have someone do it.

No sooner was he dressed and on his way downstairs than Trent arrived with news. Caine motioned him toward the library.

Trent began speaking before he even took a chair. “The archbishop will provide the special license to wed any place you wish,” he announced immediately. “However, Jarvis says that you will still have several weeks’ wait.”

“I thought we could wed at any time thereafter.” Caine made himself comfortable behind the earl’s desk and began rearranging the papers he had been working on the day before.

“Well, these days, a special license has become a status affair and everyone wants one. So why not have banns called at the Wildenhurst chapel and do things in the regular way?”

Caine steepled his fingers beneath his chin and thought about it. “I had hoped to have it done sooner, but I suppose there’s no great reason for haste.”

Trent nodded his agreement. “He also said it might be wise for either you or the lady to repair to the country for the duration in order to establish residence. Though, that could likely be waived, since it was your home before the war.”

Caine considered that for a moment. “Very well.” Truth was, he didn’t mind leaving London, but he would need to convince his uncle to accompany them. “Would you see to retrieving Lady Grace’s belongings from Wardfelton’s house for me?”

Trent sighed and threw up his hands. “I went by to accomplish that after I asked about the license. Her uncle refuses to part with a thread of hers, or to countenance what he’s calling her abduction. He swears he plans to bring charges against you, but I doubt it will come to anything. Too many witnesses heard her accept your offer.”

“I suppose the town’s abuzz with last night’s antics,” Caine said.

“If that was your intention, it was wildly successful.

Still, public approval of your little romance doesn’t help clothe the lady, does it?”

“No matter. I’ll send for a dressmaker. Grace will need a trousseau. But absolutely nothing in *yellow*,” he added with a shake of his head. “Atrocious.”

Trent was staring at the doorway and wincing. Caine turned to see Grace standing there, wearing the awful garment he had just referred to. “Sorry you heard that, but you must admit ...”

She nodded thoughtfully, staring at the floor. "I am well aware of how I look. No need to mince words on my account."

Caine wished he could call her beautiful, but he did not want to begin their relationship with lies. She was not beautiful. The poor little dear looked pitiful this morning, even worse than last evening. Her light brown hair hung from a middle parting in stick-straight strands, the ends uneven about her shoulders. Pale as death, her features seemed far too small for the large blue eyes. Remarkable eyes. His heart went out to her in that moment.

"It's the color yellow that I object to, Grace. And only that," he said with conviction.

Trent cleared his throat, breaking the spell. "Yes, well, if you two will excuse me, I have errands of my own."

Caine thanked him absently as he left.

"Mr. Trent is a good friend to do so much for you," Grace said as she ventured farther into the library.

"It's *Lord* Trent, Viscount Trent. His father's Marquis of Alden. And yes, indeed he is my best friend." Trent had been that since they were boys. "We schooled together and served under the same command in the army. I would scarcely know what to do without him," Caine admitted.

She traced her fingers along a row of books before facing him with a sigh. "Would you grant me permission to go to the country alone while the banns are being called?" she asked.

"Not to Wardfelton's estate. Unless you've changed your mind about the marriage."

"Heavens no on both accounts," she answered with a little huff of laughter. "I will go anywhere you say *except* there, but I would like some time to myself before the wedding if you wouldn't mind."

"If you would be willing to take a companion and the dressmaker I mentioned, you could go on to Wildenhurst. It's one of Hadley's minor properties, but well appointed. And I could remain here. I understand that my company is probably—"

"Oh, no!" She frowned and shook her head vehemently. "No, I swear, it isn't anything to do with you at all!" For a moment, she looked at him with a plea evident in her expression. "You promised me freedom. I would like a taste of it."

Yes, he had promised. He nodded.

"There you are!" Mrs. Oliver came marching in, hands on her hips. "You come with me now, miss. You've not had your chocolate and toast yet and aren't even dressed proper for the morning, showing shoulders and such. Excuse us, sir, and go on with your business. I shall see to the little miss."

In spite of himself, Caine liked the old lady, overbearing attitude and all. Everyone in the household, regardless of rank, obeyed her. Even Jenkins, the earl's snobbish butler, didn't dare oppose her. How she had gained so much power, he couldn't guess, but she was one to reckon with. Still, he felt an urge to defend Grace. "Little Miss has a name, Mrs. Oliver."

"Well, she's Little Miss to me until she's a married lady. Got to look after young misses, we all do, till they grow up and marry."

Caine could see Grace hiding a smile behind her fingertips. So she understood and didn't mind the heavy-handed martinet. Perhaps she would enjoy being fussed over and looked after. "Go with Mrs. Oliver then and have a good day. My aunt and uncle will want to meet you, but I think we should wait until tomorrow for that."

"She'll be ready," Mrs. Oliver assured him. "Now, come along, luvvy, so I can put you to rights. A good feed and a hot bath should do the trick."

"Could I have eggs?" he heard Grace ask her as they left.

"And black pudding. Good for strength and such," Mrs. Oliver declared.

Caine smiled at Grace's groan. A fair beginning. They had two dislikes in common. Black pudding and Wardfelton. He toyed with his pen as his gaze lingered on the doorway. He wondered idly whether they shared any likes. And then, why such a question should occur to him at all.

## *Chapter Four*

Caine promptly went to work, but found he could not concentrate. Impatiently, he pushed aside the account books for his uncle's largest estate. The figures were not in good order, but today there were more pressing matters.

There were inquiries to answer, orders for supplies and letters of instruction to be prepared for signature. He arranged the paper, dipped a pen in the inkwell and began to write.

In all his life, he had never thought to do anything but soldier. He liked the structure of army life in general, but had hated the chaos of battle and the incompetence of leadership. If not for his wounding and the earl's illness, he would have continued trying to rise in rank until he could displace some of that inefficiency. But now here he was, facing the ever-increasing responsibilities of an earldom. So many people were dependent upon his ability to manage well. And soon, so would a wife.

Thankfully, Grace shouldn't pose a problem or even much of an added responsibility. She would remain practically invisible, by her own choice, he expected.

She was easily led and apparently preferred solitude. An excellent match indeed with which to satisfy his uncle's demand and Caine's own need for time and space to acclimate to the nobility. Yes, he had his personal affairs arranged precisely as they should be. Well, almost. There were matters there that needed his attention before he could relax.

That afternoon, he put aside the earl's business for his own. A meeting with Grace's uncle was necessary and might as well be accomplished as soon as possible to get the unpleasant errand out of the way. He changed his coat, ran a comb through his hair, adjusted his eye patch and set off on foot for Wardfelton's town house.

The man was not at home, but the maid who answered the door did advise Caine where the earl might be found at that hour.

Caine had avoided the clubs since returning from the war. Before that, he and Trent had frequented White's on occasion. His leanings were Whig, as were his uncle's. Apparently, Wardfelton preferred Brooke's, overwhelmingly Tory.

Things had worked out well, after all, he thought as he strode down St. James road. A public place would be better than a private meeting.

Caine used his uncle's cachet and feigned interest in joining in order to gain entrance. He strolled room to room. Attendance proved low in midafternoon, most of the cardplayers and drinkers still at home, readying for the next night's revels, he supposed. He found Wardfelton upstairs, sitting alone in one of the assembly rooms and reading a newspaper.

Grace's uncle certainly looked the part of an earl, though he, like Caine, had not been born to it. He was a third son. The elder brother had died accidentally, thrusting the title on Grace's father. Then the country doctor, cum lord, had perished of cholera two years later, leaving Wardfelton to inherit.

Caine assessed the man who had not yet noticed him. The suit appeared to be Saville Row, tailored to perfection, the linen snow-white. His black hair, stiffly pomaded, showed no gray. The waxed mustache curled upward in direct opposition to his thin, pale lips. His hands were smooth, long-fingered and as delicate as a woman's. Nothing else about him looked effete, considering that he was nearly the size of Caine.

Wardfelton looked up suddenly, glared at Caine and folded the paper into a neat rectangle. He did not speak and he did not stand. The gaze of steel held fast as his lips tightened to a straight line.

Caine pasted on a smile in an offer of civility. This was Grace's uncle, her only family. And though she obviously had no love for the man, nor he for her, it would serve no purpose to irritate him further.

"Good afternoon, milord," Caine said as he approached the table and executed a congenial nod in lieu of the bow convention demanded.

“You have no business in this club. Or with me,” Wardfelton said, his tone flat. He slapped the paper on the leather tabletop.

“Surely I do, sir. We should discuss the contract. The marriage is in three weeks.”

“There is nothing to discuss,” Wardfelton snapped, looking past Caine, a deliberate cut. “I made it clear that my niece is destitute, without property or funds.”

“I thought you might want *her* interest served, since I am *not* destitute. We should decide her portion, agree to provisions should I drop dead before I inherit.”

Wardfelton sighed, rolling his eyes. “Very well. Sit down, Morleigh. I see I shall have to speak with you about her, but it’s nothing that you’ll enjoy hearing.”

“Nothing that will dissuade me, either.” Caine pulled out a chair and sat, certain that the man had suddenly decided to stifle his anger over Caine’s appropriation of his niece and be reasonable. “Understand that we must amend today’s contract after I inherit, for there will be more to settle on her then.”

“I doubt either will be needed once I’ve had my say. What has Grace told you?”

“Very little,” Caine said truthfully, unwilling to share how much he had divined from the bits she had revealed. “But I have heard that her parents died, as did her betrothed. She served as her fiancé’s mother’s companion, then came to live with you almost two years ago. Have you something to add?”

Wardfelton nodded and sighed again. He pressed his fingers to his brow. “I’m afraid I do. I had hoped not to have to reveal this. The grief affected her mind, Morleigh. I regret to tell you that Grace is quite mad. She conceals it at times, but she is rarely stable for long.”

Caine froze, locked in denial. Of course it could not be true. Still, a shadow of doubt began to flirt, tempting certainty to desert him. Grace’s response to him had been unexpected, definitely out of the ordinary for a young unmarried woman. There was that sudden faint. And she had expressed unusual candor on such short acquaintance with him. Then there was the fact that she had admittedly starved herself, no reason given.

She certainly seemed lucid enough, however, and he had witnessed no hysterics or incomprehensible tirades. How did this supposed madness present itself?

“I cannot blame you for what happened,” Wardfelton declared. “Grace can be quite persuasive when she chooses and I do not doubt she fabricated some tale of woe to stir your sympathy. Some imagined plight to do with me. You see, I’ve had to keep her confined for her own safety, no choice about the matter. I thought it better than sending her to strangers in some institution.”

Caine listened well enough, but observed even more carefully. His army command and dealing with all sorts of men had taught him that. Tongues could easily lie, but the body often spoke the truth. Wardfelton’s eyes met his only briefly now and again, as if gauging whether Caine trusted what he was saying. The man often shook his head as if he couldn’t believe himself.

“Yet you took her to a public ball where you knew she might embarrass you before the ton?” Caine asked.

“And so she did,” Wardfelton said with a huff. “But I had to do it. Rumors were gathering. Some thought I had done away with her. As if I would harm my own flesh and blood! They have no idea how difficult it has been to care for her at home rather than relegate that duty.”

“That must have been a difficult decision. Did you even consider it, putting her somewhere?” Caine asked, projecting sympathy he did not feel. Wardfelton struck the wrong notes in this song of woe. It simply did not ring true.

The earl pressed his fingers to his forehead, hand concealing his eyes, and groaned softly. “I am ashamed to admit that I did inquire. Not Bedlam, of course, but a licensed house in Houghbarton that provides such care. You see, Grace has wandered away twice and had to be brought home, kicking and screaming.”

“But you decided against sending her? Why?”



“Even though our own king is so afflicted, poor devil, I dreaded the scandal to my own house,” Wardfelton confided, his voice deep and sorrowful. “Madness in the family, you see ... You understand my conundrum, surely.”

“Indeed. An unfortunate situation for anyone to imagine,” Caine remarked with a nod. He drummed his fingers on the tabletop, letting the silence gather, wondering what the man would say next to fill the void.

Once again and once too often for his act, Wardfelton heaved a sigh of regret. “So you must bring her back to me, Morleigh, or let me fetch her. No one has to know why the betrothal was dissolved. We can put it about that Grace herself had second thoughts.”

Aha. The crux of the matter. Caine stood, now impatient to be away. “No, sir, that won’t do. I said I would marry her. Once my word is given, I hold to it. Grace and I will wed, come what may.”

The earl stumbled to his feet, almost upsetting his chair. “No! I insist ... Wait. I implore you, Morleigh. Think, man. You’ll be disgraced!”

“Better I than you, eh? You should be relieved. If Grace’s madness is ever discovered, everyone will believe I am the cause. They shall have Miss Thoren-Snipes to verify once again that Morleigh’s become a monster.” Caine smiled. “I gave *her* nightmares!”

He looked directly into Wardfelton’s eyes and read fear. Caine wondered at that. “Good day to you, sir. You may have your solicitor call on me regarding a contract and your niece’s future.”

Caine left him standing there, obviously dismayed.

On reaching the street outside, worry began to gnaw at Caine like a ravenous rat. Could there be a grain of truth in what her uncle said? Had Wardfelton’s fear been for Grace, or for the earl himself, should his treatment of her be revealed?

The path to truth lay with Grace and her behavior. Caine hurried back to Hadley House to observe that, praying all the while that Wardfelton was simply a mean-spirited man trying to gloss over his abuse of a helpless relative.

Good lord, he should have listened to Trent. What had he gotten himself into with this hasty arrangement? But, as he had stated to Wardfelton, his word was his bond. His decision had been made. Grace was his now, for better or worse, whether that wedding vow had been repeated or not.

Caine felt apprehensive about talking to Grace, though he certainly needed to after his meeting with Wardfelton. The man must be lying, but his words had required careful reflection, in case Caine’s reasoning about this was faulty.

He spent hours after returning home reviewing the visit with Grace’s uncle. His preoccupation was so intense, he barely tasted the meal Mrs. Oliver brought him on his tray. He ate absently as he considered every word, every move, every sigh Wardfelton produced.

Caine denied himself that last element of consideration, the woman herself, until he had examined the rest in detail. That accomplished, he would now have to judge her for himself in light of her uncle’s declaration. He was resolved that, mad or sane, he would never return her to Wardfelton, but Caine felt he should know her state of mind one way or the other.

Grace had been left to her own devices all day. How must she feel in strange surroundings among people she hardly knew? He wanted to give her no reason to reconsider their betrothal, least of all because of his neglect of her when she was most vulnerable.

The visit with Grace could prove awkward. Now that the matter of their marriage was settled, what would they discuss? Most of their conversation thus far consisted of fielding insults, arguing away her mistrust and convincing her that he meant business.

His trepidation annoyed him. She was only a little bird of a girl after all, hardly anything to dread. If grief had stolen her reason, then he would restore it if he could, keep her comfortably if he could not. He would see that she was as happy as he could make her and as free as possible. She would know that she was cared for.

Caine postponed calling for her. The evening would be soon enough, he figured. He resumed working, poring over numbers in the earl's accounts.

Late that afternoon, the butler interrupted the never-ending effort. "A Mr. Tinroy to see you, sir. He insists it is urgent."

"Show him in," Caine said, shuffling the paperwork into a neat stack and setting it aside, welcoming the intrusion, whatever it was. The visitor's name was unfamiliar. Perhaps it was Wardfelton's man.

"Thank you for seeing me, sir," the spindly little fellow said after Jenkins had introduced him. Hat in hand, he stood before the huge oak desk like an errant schoolboy called up for an offense.

"What is this urgent business, Mr. Tinroy?" Caine demanded, the former commander in him responding naturally to the man's subservient attitude.

"It concerns your betrothal," the man said with a timid smile. "I should say, the original one made with Miss Thoren-Snipes."

"Ah, a thing of the past then. What of it?" Caine replied, clasping his hands atop the desk and leaning forward.

"The thing is, she never officially ended it, sir. Her brother has retained me to speak on her behalf and tell you that, as a gentleman, you are obliged to carry through. He mentioned a breach-of-promise-suit if you prove unwilling."

"So she would sue?" Caine almost groaned at the irony. "How can one be a *gentleman*, Mr. Tinroy, when he has been quite publicly declared a beast? Please inform your client that unless she wishes a countersuit for defamation of character, the matter is best considered closed."

"Oh, sir, she meant no harm by her words. You know how young ladies natter on to one another when they are upset. But *never* did she cry off the engagement!"

No, she had *screamed* it off as far as Caine was concerned. He sighed, unclasped his hands and stood. "No contract was ever signed, because her brother originally opposed it. Of course, I was not heir to the title at that time. Perhaps that has inspired his sudden inclination to find me an acceptable match?"

Tinroy rolled his hat brim and tried a smile. "Oh, no, sir, not at all! It's merely that the young lady has realized her foolishness and had a change of heart!"

"So have *I*," Caine declared, rounding the desk and towering over the little toad. "Good day to you, Mr. Tinroy."

He watched the solicitor back out at a near run. Caine felt like dusting his hands and hoped he never heard the name Thoren-Snipes again in his lifetime. Greedy buggers, the lot of them.

After a day fraught with confrontation, he knew he had one more to face before he could rest. Grace. Only, this meeting, of course, was to be more in the nature of an evaluation to see whether Wardfelton's accusation held any semblance of truth.

He flagged a maid in the hallway and sent her up with a summons for Grace. They might as well meet here in the library. If she were a reader, they could discuss books. There, that was settled. He waited.

Grace appeared within five minutes, almost breathless as she entered the room. Had she taken the stairs at a run? Her hair was pulled back into a rather untidy bun at the nape of her neck and several strands had come undone. She raked them back with an impatient hand. "You wished to see me?" she asked with a nervous laugh.

"Yes, of course. Good evening, Grace," he replied as he stood and surveyed the change in her. It was not so remarkable. She wore a plain gray long-sleeved dress, not a good color for her, but better than the yellow. It was a bit short and so large it hung rather loosely at the waist. He figured she must have borrowed it from one of the maids. In fact, she looked like a young maid on her first day of work, sans apron and reporting late.

He could not help comparing her looks to the stunning, yet shallow, beauty of Belinda. Somehow, even in her plainness and disarray, Grace did not seem wanting. Surface attraction held little appeal for him, especially now. Grace's smile was sincere and she seemed honestly happy to see him. Lord, maybe that alone made her unhinged.

He smiled. "How was your day, my dear?"

She cocked her head and studied him for a minute, then seemed to form a conclusion. "Interesting, indeed. How was yours, Captain?"

Caine sensed she was really interested instead of just being polite. "Honestly? I have had better." He indicated she should take one of the large wingback chairs beside the fire. He sat across from her in the other as he elaborated. "Business matters consumed me, being new to the chore of managing properties. I must have been born to soldier. That was never so difficult for me."

"Ah, but you love a challenge," she guessed with a sly grin that lighted her slender features.

"That's true enough," he agreed, noting that she had a foxlike manner, watchful, knowing, quick to respond. "Do you?"

She inclined her head and nodded once. "I suppose I do, come to think of it. We certainly took on this one without much hesitation, so it seems we have something in common from the start."

"Apparently."

The silence drew out between them. Caine wondered if there were any more to say. He had to think of something. "You seem quite ... rested." Truth was always appropriate. Her eyes were brighter, such a true, clear blue. Like a cloudless sky at its best. "I take it that you slept well?"

She sat back in the chair, perfectly relaxed, though her feet, clad in her soft yellow dancing slippers, didn't quite touch the floor. She swung them idly as he watched. "Oh, yes, and I haven't slept much of late, so that was a great relief. And the food here is remarkable!"

Ah, there was that prodigious interest in food again. "I shall commend the cook," he promised. "Have you already eaten this evening?"

"An hour ago. You were busy and Mrs. Oliver said I shouldn't wait for you. I understand your aunt takes a tray in the earl's chambers early in the evening to keep him company."

"Yes. We seldom dine together at table these days." Caine felt guilty that she'd had to eat alone. He should have joined her. But she must grow used to his being absent, since he would have little time to entertain her in future.

He grew impatient to end the exchange that was beginning to seem forced. And yet, he needed to evaluate her condition. Nor did he want her to feel dismissed. Or lonely. She had probably had far too much time alone in Wardfelton's care.

"I look forward to traveling to the country," she declared with another bright smile. "It has been a while since I have been anywhere at all if one doesn't count the trip from the manor to the house here in Town." She leaned forward, her expression animated. "Do tell me about your estate, the one where we are to go."

"Wildenhurst is not mine yet, though it is where I was born." Immensely relieved to have a topic he could expand upon, Caine let himself meander back to childhood. "It's the lesser of two properties owned by Hadley, the grander one being Hadley Grange, his seat near the Eastern Coast."

"A grand mansion, or perhaps a castle?" Grace asked.

He answered absently, "A country house, quite impressive and easily thrice the size of Wildenhurst."

"But what is Wildenhurst like? Has it a great history?"

"Well, I suppose it has that. The property was purchased by my great grandfather who had the house built directly over the site of an old monastery destroyed by King Henry. The stones lining the underground floor are still there. The rest is relatively new."

"You have a dungeon!" she exclaimed. "I love old things and places!"

Caine hated to dash her streak of romanticism. “Not a dungeon at all. It consisted of monk’s cells originally, and with the new structure over it, it became a rabbit warren of storage rooms and a marvelous place for a boy and his imagination.”

“Even better!” She listened avidly and Caine saw yearning for a real home in her faraway look. The place where she had played, laughed and loved now belonged to someone else. Perhaps one day she could think of Wildenhurst as hers.

He continued, “I think of it as home. My father managed it for the earl until his death. As I said, it’s where I first saw light of day, where I lived until I went away to school and then where I took holidays. There are the greenest of hills to ride, a river at the back, trees in abundance and wildlife to watch. Gardens with flowers of every sort you can imagine.”

“I *adore* flowers,” she said, clasping her hands beneath her chin. “And herbs are a must. Is there an herb garden? Say there is or I shall make one for you.”

Caine searched his memory. “I believe so. Yes, I’m sure of it.” He went on. “The house itself is rather modest, comfortable and not too elegant, but with plenty of rooms. When I retreat to a place of peace in my mind, that is where I go.”

“Oh, I know I shall love it!” she exclaimed. “Your description makes it sound heavenly. Why would anyone ever leave it to come to Town?”

He laughed, quite liking her exuberance and her optimism. Caine could use a dose of both, and hers were infectious. “Well, there is the season, of course. And meetings in the House of Lords, though I’ve yet to experience that and hope I shan’t in the near future. Uncle could not attend this year, but remains in town now to be near his physician.”

“I see. Well, I do hope you may spend some days in the country to restore your sense of peace after your time at war. It would probably do you a world of good,” she said with a succinct nod.

He thought so, too, but did not see it as possible the way things were now. However, he agreed with her anyway. “I expect it would. You know you may take complete charge there if you like. My aunt has declared she will do no more with it. I think she always felt somewhat isolated in the country. For all intents and purposes, other than formally deeding it over, my uncle has consigned the place to me.”

“On condition that you marry,” she guessed with a wry purse of lips.

Caine nodded again. “With that stipulation, yes.” He looked at her. “Grace, I sincerely hope you will be content. And I thank you for accepting my offer. This cannot be easy for you and I do appreciate that.”

She laughed, a merry sound and not at all bitter. “I did admit I welcome a challenge. Here’s proof of it. I hope you will be happy, too. There. We have set our goals—contentment and happiness, each for the other. So be it. Now, if you would excuse me, I believe I shall visit the kitchens, nick some milk and biscuits and retire. I understand tomorrow is to be a busy day.”

Caine stood when she did and reached for her hands. “Good night, Grace. Sleep well.”

“Thank you. I’m very grateful,” she said with all seriousness. “I never thought to have such good fortune again in my life.” She gave his hands a fond squeeze and let go.

Caine watched her leave, wondering how he could have dreaded her company. No one could be less intimidating than Grace. Or less mad. Wardfelton was a bounder and ought to be hanged.

## *Chapter Five*

Mrs. Oliver had managed to find her another more appropriate gown to wear, though gray seemed to be the signature color for the help hereabouts. For a price, one of Lady Hadley's maids had parted with her Sunday best, a plain gray broadcloth with long fitted sleeves, a simple black pelisse and a close-fitting bonnet to match.

Grace met Morleigh at the earl's chamber door, where she had been escorted by Mrs. Oliver. He knocked gently as he spoke to Grace. "Don't be afraid," he said, smiling. "I think he's too weak to bite."

She mustered a smile of her own as he ushered her into the room. "Uncle Hadley, Aunt Hadley," he said in a formal tone, "May I present Lady Grace Renfair, my fiancée. Grace, Lord and Lady Hadley."

"Come closer, gel," the earl demanded just as Grace was in the midst of a deep curtsy. He beckoned clumsily, so she approached his bedside.

His lordship was a white-haired, florid-cheeked old fellow who had trouble breathing. He had a heart problem resulting in dropsy, Grace determined from the swelling in his arms and hands. That looked different from ordinary corpulence. His condition could probably be improved by a small concoction of foxglove. She had seen a number of gents in his fix when she had assisted her father in his practice.

It would be rude to suggest a dose of anything, however, since he had a physician in attendance who would surely take offense. The physician was frowning at her from his position in the corner of the room. Perhaps he wasn't reading her mind, but only judging her state of health at the moment.

Caine must have noticed the interaction. "Pardon me. Lady Grace, Dr. Ackers, his lordship's physician."

The man bowed. "My lady."

Grace nodded. "A pleasure to meet you, sir. My father shared your profession when we lived in Norfolk."

"Renfair? Oh, my, yes!" The man's eyebrows rose and his face livened with recognition. "I believe I knew him. *James* Renfair? He studied in Edinburgh?"

"Yes, he did!" Grace said, pleased to meet someone who had known her father.

The earl noisily cleared his throat, obviously to direct her attention back to himself. Grace immediately attended to her audience with the family, smiling her apology for the interruption to his lordship.

She did, however, decide on the instant that she would correspond with Dr. Ackers with regard to his knowing her father. And perhaps when they were better acquainted, see whether he would be willing to entertain Dr. Withering of Birmingham's research papers on treatments of the heart. Her father had found them invaluable.

Her mother had objected to Grace helping her father at first, but Grace had explained how foolish it would be to forego the opportunity to learn as much as she could about healing and tending the sick if she was to run her own household one day. She wondered if she would have the opportunity to treat anyone where she was going or if they would simply think of her as a useless lady.

"How is it you met the boy?" the earl demanded, huffing as he peered up at her from beneath hooded and wrinkled lids.

"At Lord Cavanaugh's ball, sir. He charmed me instantly." Grace glanced nervously at the countess, who stood on the opposite side of the earl's bed, studying her carefully.

The countess looked pleasant enough, not much younger than her husband, at least a stone too heavy but blooming with health. Her hair and eyes were both as dark as a Spaniard's, though her complexion was very fair. Her mouth formed a little bow faintly lined with wrinkles. She wore a

flattering green silk taffeta trimmed in black that was the height of fashion. Quite a beauty in her youth, Grace imagined.

“You are Wardfelton’s child?” she asked Grace.

“His niece, ma’am, though my father held that title before he passed on.”

The earl transferred his attention to his wife, reached for her hand and spoke in a near whisper, “Caine told us of her lineage, remember, my dear?”

“Yes, of course. Where are you staying?” the countess asked.

Grace glanced at Morleigh, wondering what to say. Did the countess not know what had transpired at the Cavanaugh’s and that he had invited her here? Grace thought the events of that evening must be all over London by today.

“She is here with us of late, Aunt,” he said. “However today, she’s going on to Wildenhurst, where we will have the wedding in three weeks.”

“The season must be over,” the countess said, her free hand fiddling with her ear bob as she stared across the room at nothing.

“Almost over, Aunt. Soon we’ll all be breathing the country air,” Morleigh said, sliding an arm around Grace as if to protect her. “We should leave now.”

“I haven’t dismissed you, boy!” the earl exclaimed, shaking a finger in their direction. “What provisions did you make her? What of her dowry and such? Agreeable terms?”

“We are satisfied with the arrangements, Uncle. I’m handling the business matters until your health is restored, so you needn’t worry. Everything’s well in hand.”

“The estates?” the earl asked.

“Thriving, sir. Bills paid, rents collected. Everything is as it should be.”

The earl closed his eyes. “Or will be when you’re wed. She’ll do, then. Got to have a wife to be settled. A helpmate. Eh, m’dear?”

The countess nodded. Her smile was for the earl. They were still holding hands. Grace felt tears threaten at the sweetness of it all. She thought of all the years these two had been together and the bond they obviously had formed.

Morleigh quietly guided her out of the room and closed the door.

“He never dismissed you!” she whispered. “Will he be angry that we left?”

Morleigh patted her back where his hand rested. “No. He only likes to remind me now and then that he’s still in command.”

Grace liked the kind way Morleigh handled the delicate situation with his uncle. Here he was doing all the work of the earl and yet allowing the old gentleman to preserve his dignity.

The earl and countess had not seemed to notice that Morleigh’s future bride looked like a mouse. At least they had not remarked on it. Grace was just happy not to have appeared before them as a molting duck in her old, jaundiced, limp, ruffled frock.

Grace was glad, too, that the audience with Caine’s family had been a short one, so as not to tire his uncle.

She and Caine headed downstairs, since she was to leave immediately for the country. Caine had informed her it was a distance of only eighteen miles to Wildenhurst.

When they were halfway down the stairs, she saw that Lord Trent had arrived and stood speaking to the butler at the open door. He must be a constant fixture in Captain Morleigh’s life. Mrs. Oliver had told her Trent was a born adventurer and a dear friend to Morleigh.

Trent was handsome, a real head-turner, though Grace had scarcely noticed that until now. He was nearly as large as Morleigh, though his features were slightly more refined. He was of fairer complexion and his chestnut-colored hair had a reddish glint. She quite liked his looks, but not the way he assessed her, as if he worried she might harbor some ill intention toward his friend.

She had been told he would bring Madame Latrice, the dressmaker, and a trunk full of fabric lengths for the trousseau.

“Your seamstress and Mrs. Oliver are probably waiting to board the coach,” Caine commented to her as he saw Trent.

“Everything is happening so quickly,” Grace said as they continued to descend.

He had hold of her elbow, a firm but gentle grip. “I know, but in a few hours you’ll be settled and have plenty of time to rest and absorb it all.” He patted her arm with his free hand. “I promise you’ll have nothing to worry your little head about but the cut of your gowns and whether tea is on time.”

Grace decided not to push him down the stairs. He was only a man and they were all taught that women needed coddling. She sighed. “I suppose it’s not your fault, really.”

“What isn’t?” he asked, and she realized she had spoken her thought aloud. Oh, dear!

How could she be so ungrateful? Just because she was feeling renewed strength and boundless energy after deep sleep and a few decent meals was no reason to turn uppity. Captain Morleigh had her best interests at heart and he truly could not deny his ingrained, overprotective nature. She should be kissing his feet!

“Uh, it’s no fault of yours that my shawl was left behind last evening. Is there a blanket in the coach?” And it was not even cool outside this time of year. How ridiculous did she sound?

“Not to worry. I have your shawl. Trent fetched it, so you’ll be warm enough.” He looked so proud, as if he had already procured for her all he promised her last evening.

She stopped, halting their progress for a moment. “About what you said as we danced ... and all those things I asked you for?”

“You will have them, Grace. I always keep my promises.”

“No! What I mean to say is that I was merely playing to what I believed was a jest.” She lifted her hand in question. “Now, what would I do with a phaeton and team? And as for diamonds ...” She scoffed.

He was smiling at her so fondly. “Then perhaps for the nonce, you’ll accept a purse with pin money. It is a wife’s due.” He pulled a small velvet pouch from his pocket and placed it in her hand, folding his around hers.

“I’m not yet a wife,” she reminded him, stunned that he had prepared this just for her. What a thoughtful man he was.

He laughed softly. “So practical. I’ll deduct this from your first quarterly allowance then if you’ll take it now.”

She shrugged. “Very well, if you insist. But I must ask what you want from me, aside from the faithfulness you require and an heir, of course.”

“I never mentioned an heir,” he said, sounding a bit surprised. And confused.

Grace rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s a given, isn’t it? If you’re to be the earl, everyone *knows* you’ll need at least one. Isn’t that the whole purpose of marrying?”

His gaze dropped to the stairs as he seemed to consider it. Perhaps he dreaded the very thought of doing what it took to get the heir.

Then, without responding to her question, he took her arm again. “You should be on your way so as to arrive before dark. There’ll be plenty of time to address details later.”

*Details? An heir was but a detail?* “Yes, of course,” she muttered, doubt setting in that she had made a wise choice after all. He had declared his need for a wife and was taking her without a penny to her name. Her looks certainly had not captured his heart.

So why had he married her if not to continue his line? A condition of the will, she supposed. Mrs. Oliver had hinted at something of the sort and he had all but confirmed it when they’d spoken of the ownership of Wildenhurst. But surely that was not reason enough to bind himself to a wife he had no intention of bedding.

She looked up at him, then allowed her searching gaze to travel the length of his body, wondering if perhaps he was incapable of relations due to some unseen injury. Was that why he had chosen her, a woman who would be too grateful to insist on her rights as a wife once the marriage

was a done thing? No, she could not imagine him capable of such deceit. She would put that right out of her mind and forget it.

Madame Latrice and Mrs. Oliver had already seated themselves inside the coach when Caine handed her in.

“Goodbye for now, Grace,” he said. “Take care you don’t tax yourself these next few weeks and send word if you need anything.”

Grace nodded and added a simpering smile for good measure. If he wanted a milk-and-water miss who didn’t know bedding from biding, she supposed she could pretend. At least for a while.

What a pity that was all he desired, since she had spent the entirety of yesterday and last night looking forward to her marriage to him and imagining, even dreaming about, what it might entail.

Now that she had escaped Wardfelton’s threat, she would be back to her old self in no time. However, Morleigh had arrived in her life as the answer to her fervent prayers and she would try to be precisely what he wanted whenever he was around.

She could not help but like his straightforwardness and felt quite attracted to him as a man, but he was obviously not interested in her as a woman, despite his playacting last evening. Perfectly understandable.

He had baldly stated that he needed a wife, but apparently wanted one in name only, probably one who would not bother him with her presence. Grace smiled inwardly, imagining herself as the invisible countess. What a role to play, but she certainly preferred it to playing Wardfelton’s clueless prisoner.

The question she had to ask was whether she could keep up the act in future just to accommodate Morleigh. She was grateful to him, of course, but gratitude wasn’t everything, was it?

She had always wanted to have a child, and if she were completely honest with herself, she wanted the man even more. However, she was not yet ready to explore too deeply the reasons for her odd reaction to him. Perhaps it was merely because he presented a challenge.

The coach rumbled over the cobblestone streets as Grace studied her companions. Mrs. Oliver appeared a comfortable grandmotherly type, short and rather rotund, dressed in her sturdy black wool. The ruffles of the mobcap beneath her plain bonnet framed graying hair, bright green eyes and sweetly rounded features. But though surely nearing fifty, the retainer possessed the strength of a man and the iron will of a mule. Nothing intimidated the woman. Grace quite admired her for it.

As for Madame Latrice, that one obviously felt her importance and dressed it splendidly. Grace judged her to be close to thirty, very self-sufficient and more than a trifle haughty. She wore a lovely traveling costume of forest green made of fine bombazine that rustled with every move she made. Her black bonnet sported dyed green ostrich feathers and a fringe of jet beads that dangled off the brim. Stylish to a fault. However, the prune-faced expression spoiled the effect.

Grace attempted conversation, but the woman seemed loathe to discuss anything, even her plans for Grace’s new wardrobe. Mrs. Oliver merely raised one eyebrow and gave Grace a conspiratorial look.

The well-sprung coach afforded such comfort and traveled so slowly, Grace found herself nodding off now and again. It was twilight and they had come quite a ways when the coach rolled to a stop in the middle of the road. The horses neighed and she heard a man’s shout. Then a shot rang out.

Madame screamed.

The coach door flew open and a man stood there, holding a double-barreled flintlock pistol. “Get out, all of you!” he shouted. “Now, and look lively!”

Madame exited first, then Mrs. Oliver and Grace followed. She glanced around to see whether the man acted alone. No one else was in sight. She looked up and saw John Coachman slumped sideways on the box, reins still clutched in his fist.

“Which of you is Morleigh’s woman?” the highwayman demanded.



“She is!” Madame cried, pointing a shaking, leather-gloved finger at Grace. “It’s her! She’s the one!”

The highwayman grinned at Madame, showing several missing teeth. He scanned Grace’s length and shook his head slowly. “Don’t think so. Easy t’see who’s the fancy piece here. Beggin’ yer pardon, ma’am,” he said, sounding coy.

Then he shot Madame point-blank in the chest. She crumpled slowly to the ground as Grace and Mrs. Oliver watched, stunned. The gunman kept grinning as he reached into his pocket.

Grace knew at that moment he would not let them live. He was going to stand there, bold as you please, reload and shoot them both! She had to do something.

He wasn’t terribly big, but she couldn’t overcome him on her own and had no idea whether Mrs. Oliver would help her or faint dead away. But if he managed to reload, they had no chance at all!

Grace knew she must use the dirty trick Father had told her about, the last-ditch effort to save herself that he had declared every woman should know. Could she do it? What if she missed? There would be no second chance.

“Sir?” Grace said softly. “Look.” She slowly began to raise the front of her skirt and petticoats to get them out of her way. She bared ankles, knees and even higher to entice him.

He looked, all right, and slowly began to walk toward her. She pasted on an inviting smile and waited for just the right moment. When he was near enough, she kicked for all she was worth, thanking God for the borrowed ankle boots she wore. He dropped the still-empty pistol, grabbed his essentials and buckled forward with a harsh cry of pain.

Mrs. Oliver snatched up the pistol and hit the back of his head with the butt of it. He fell like a tree, right at Grace’s feet. Mrs. Oliver hit him again, several times, then stood away. “Think he’s done for?” she gasped, breathless with exertion.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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