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The Earl and the Pickpocket

Helen Dickson

Vintage Historical

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Found out!Heloise Edwina Marchant longs for the beauty and comfort of her former life, before she was forced to flee her family home. Coming to London in the guise of a boy, she has learned the hard way how to survive among the hovels and alleyways of St. Giles. There is shame in having to pick the pockets of unsuspecting passersby, and the inevitable happens–she is caught!The gentleman who seizes hold of her is not angry for long. In fact, his firm kindness is almost her undoing. For he has come to St. Giles with a purpose–and she will help him if she doesn't want to be reported to the authorities. But how can she agree, when at any moment this good-looking man could find out that he is a she?

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Could this delectable, lovely young creature be the boy Ed?

A young woman dressed in an extremely fetching buttercup-yellow dress stood by the window, her hands clasped at her trim waist. Small and as slender as a willow, she was watching him warily. Without taking his eyes off her, Adam moved toward her, staring in disbelief.

“Good Lord!” The words were uttered on a breath. “I should have known.” She had a femininity he could have put to his lips and drunk, and she was so close he could feel her breathing, feel the warmth of her, and smell her natural scent. She was quite enchanting.

Rather nervously Edwina withstood the intensity of his gaze. His dark brows lifted a fraction in inquiry.

“Well, Ed? What do you have to say for this deception?”

HELEN DICKSON

was born and still lives in south Yorkshire, England, with her husband, on a busy arable farm where she combines writing with keeping a chaotic farmhouse. An incurable romantic, she writes for pleasure, owing much of her inspiration to the beauty of the surrounding countryside. She enjoys reading and music. History has always captivated her, and she likes travel and visiting ancient buildings.

The Earl and the Pickpocket
Helen Dickson

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Chapter One

London, 1770

A murky haze hung over the narrow alleyways and squalid, rickety hovels in the secret world of St Giles—a wretched, brutal, frightening place, cramped, dark and noisy, where violence and death were an inescapable fact of life. The air was foul, and the humid, sweltering heat pressed down on its inhabitants—a churning crush of people, the flotsam of human life. These were thieves, cutthroats and beggars, painted harlots and scavengers, a ragged, unwashed assortment of men, women and children, most of them prematurely aged by poverty and hunger, their only recourse to be found in the gin shops. This tax-free liquor was in plentiful supply, its consumption endemic—a perfect antidote for dulling pain, replacing lost dreams and deepening despair.

Moving among the jostling crowd, Adam carefully scrutinised every face, searching for one that was familiar, unaware of the youth following him closely—a slight, inconspicuous-looking lad in shabby garb and a shapeless hat pulled well down over his ears, who nimbly danced out of his sight whenever he turned about.

Adam was so deeply engrossed in his mission that it was a moment before he reacted to the body suddenly thrust against him, and the pull at his watch. Clapping his hand to his chest, a vicious curse exploded from him when he found he had been relieved of his timepiece by somebody with the manual dexterity of a practised thief. He whirled in time to see a ragged urchin dart away. Immediately he gave chase, following him through a network of narrow alleyways.

Eventually the lad was delivered up to him by a couple of youths anticipating a reward. Tossing them a shilling apiece, Adam gripped the young thief's arm, ignoring his strangled squawk as he dragged him aside. He grasped the thin arm more tightly as the lad struggled against him, wincing and loosening his hold when he felt a boot rebound against his shin.

Slipping from Adam's grasp, in a blur of panic the youth turned to run, only to find a long booted leg thrust out, obstructing his path. Unable to check his momentum, he stumbled and fell, landing on his stomach in a mud puddle. His posterior pointing skywards, he lay for a moment winded and stunned, successfully managing to hold back tears of shame and humiliation that gathered in his eyes. Covered in mud and slime, he was heaved from his ignoble position by the seat of his breeches, and with a string of outraged curses he quickly danced away and whipped a knife from his belt, wielding it in front of him.

'I'll have your blood,' he snarled, glaring at his abuser as ferociously as a wild animal.

Like lightning Adam drew his sword, placing the point at the lad's throat, locking eyes—the youth momentarily mesmerised by the terrible deadly grace of the stranger's swift manoeuvre.

'I wouldn't try it,' Adam ground out, backing his captive into a corner. 'Do not add murder to your crime. Lower your weapon and give it to me,' he coolly ordered, 'and slowly, if you please. I am far from amused.'

Glowering out of a dirty face at him, breathing fast, his cheeks pink with a combination of rage and fear, reluctantly the youth did as he was told. Adam gave the knife no more than a cursory glance before sliding it down the top of his boot and sheathing his sword. 'A nasty weapon for a boy,' he remarked, his stern gaze raking the lad. 'Very clever, you young guttersnipe. However, you should have studied your craft more and not allowed yourself to be caught.'

Adam's fingers had bit painfully into the lad's arm, who now rubbed the offended member, still scowling up at the giant who loomed above him, looking very small and fragile now he had no weapon with which to defend himself.

'What's the matter?' Adam growled. 'Afraid of the law, are you?'

'You hurt my arm,' the lad snapped, his eyes narrowed accusingly.

‘Rob me again and I’ll hurt more than your arm, you young whelp,’ Adam promised direly. He held out his hand. ‘My watch, if you please.’

The youth’s clear blue-green eyes glared hotly back at Adam, and he continued to fidget beneath his close inspection. He felt anger towards the stranger for catching him, but most of his anger was directed against himself for getting caught. He was aware of the painful gnawing of his stomach, and the dinner the proceeds of selling such a fine watch would have provided—after Jack had had his cut.

‘I repeat. Give me back my watch.’ Adam’s eyes narrowed when the lad remained mute, and there was a glint in his eyes that warned the youngster against pushing his luck further. Taking him by the front of his jacket with both hands, Adam lifted him so the toes of his ill-fitting boots barely brushed the ground, thrusting his face close to the slim, arrogant nose. ‘I dare say a constable will bring you to your senses, lad.’

Adam had the satisfaction of seeing his captive squirm uneasily and his face blanch. To be publicly conveyed through the streets by this tall stranger, and subsequently brought before the magistrate and thrown into prison for thieving—the utter humiliation of this ordeal would be so mortifying that it had the lad delving into the pocket of his baggy breeches and producing the purloined watch.

‘Here, take it. I—I am sorry I took it,’ he muttered, the apology almost sticking in his throat.

Adam released his hold on the jacket and retrieved his timepiece, noticing how small the lad’s hands were—a necessary asset to any thief, he thought wryly. He was certain this young scamp possessed a healthy concern for his miserable hide, and knew fear was the determining factor in his decision to return his watch.

‘Being sorry won’t undo what you’ve done.’

Silent and antagonistic, the lad looked up at the stranger, meeting eyes of vivid blue set in a face tanned by the sun. The man was tall, his body hard, lean and muscular, giving the appearance of someone who rode, fenced and hunted. Beneath his tricorn hat dark brown hair was drawn back and fastened at the nape, accentuating his leanly covered cheekbones and firm, angular jaw. His nose was aquiline, and beneath it were generous, but at present, unsmiling lips.

The lad guessed him to be at least twenty-eight. There was an aggressive confidence and strength of purpose in his features, and also something serious, studious, almost. He detected an air of breeding about him, a quality that displayed itself in his crisp manner, neat apparel and austere mien. The man’s stern eyes, holding his captive, seemed capable of piercing his soul, laying bare his innermost secrets, causing a chill of fear to sear through him and his eyes to dart about, looking for a means of escape, but the man barred his passage.

Adam was calmly giving the lad the self-same scrutiny, seeing a boy of no more than thirteen or fourteen. Feeling a stirring of compassion—an emotion that was completely alien to him—he gradually allowed his anger to recede and his stern visage softened. The small, slight form was clad in ill-fitting garments, and he was as dirty and undernourished as any other juvenile who inhabited St Giles, but there was an air and manner about him that held his attention.

Adam’s look became enquiring as he continued to study the lad—and realized he was educated, recalling how he had blistered him in French in so diverse a manner when he’d hoisted him out of the puddle by his backside.

‘Now, what shall I do with you? You’re naught but a boy. It’d be more fitting to give you the spanking you deserve than to deliver you up to the magistrate.’

A feral light gleamed in the lucid depths of the lad’s eyes. ‘You lay one finger on me, and I promise you you’ll live to regret it,’ he ground out in a low, husky voice.

In the face of this dire threat Adam leaned forward deliberately until his eyes were on a level with the lad’s, little more than a foot apart. His eyes were hard and ice cold, yet when he spoke his voice was soft and slow.

‘Be careful, boy. Don’t you dare me, or I’ll administer the punishment you deserve. I abhor the abuse of children—so don’t tempt me, otherwise I might change my ways.’ The lad stared at him, and when Adam considered he was sufficiently chastened and humbled, he drew himself erect. ‘Do you make a living out of stealing other people’s property, knowing you could land in gaol—or be hanged for it?’

A brief, reluctant nod gave Adam his answer. ‘Better than starving,’ he mumbled.

Adam suppressed a smile and directed a stern countenance at the young rapscallion. ‘And do your parents know?’ he enquired, knowing as he asked the question, being a student in human nature, that his parents would more than likely be the receivers of their son’s stolen goods.

Still glaring his defiance, the lad raised cold bright eyes to Adam’s and his chin came up belligerently. ‘What’s that to you?’

Adam shrugged. Re-attaching his watch to the empty chain and shoving it inside the breast pocket of his waistcoat, he continued to study him thoughtfully. ‘Do they know where you are?’

Thrusting his hands deep into his pocket, the lad scuffed the dirt with his oversized boots and averted his angry eyes. ‘They’re both dead,’ he revealed in sullen tones.

‘I see,’ Adam said with more understanding. Hearing a low growl come from the lad’s stomach, he took pity on him. ‘I was about to get something to eat. Would you care to join me—or will that pride of yours stand in the way of allowing your victim to put food in your belly? You look as if you haven’t had a decent meal in a month or more.’

The lad’s eyes betrayed a large measure of distrust and he held back. A thief couldn’t afford to hang around his victim. ‘I don’t take charity. I can take care of myself.’

‘I know,’ Adam remarked drily. ‘You prefer to steal it.’

‘I’m particular as to whom I eat with.’

‘Suit yourself.’ Adam turned abruptly and strode away.

Gnawing on his bottom lip, the lad watched him go, the hollow ache in his middle reminding him how hungry he was. It had been hours since he’d eaten, and the stale bread and mouldy cheese had been less than appetising. Hunger pains overcame his sense of outrage and, unable to let the chance of a meal slip by he scrambled in the stranger’s wake.

‘Wait. I suppose I could manage a bite,’ he said, though it chafed him to do so.

Adam smiled to himself and glanced back. ‘Then hurry up. You’re lagging, boy,’ he reproached, heading for the nearest alehouse.

The youth glowered at the broad back. The man was infuriatingly sublime in his amusement. If he weren’t so desperate to eat, he’d cheerfully tell him to go and jump in the Thames.

Avoiding the drunks, they entered a tavern. It was scruffy, noisy and dark, the walls blackened with the heavy smoke of the fire, candles and tobacco smoke. When they were seated in a dark corner and food ordered, Adam looked across the table at his companion. He sat erect, his small chin raised, and Adam could see him putting up a valiant fight for control—a fight he won. Despite his ragged garb he looked incongruously like a proud young prince, his eyes sparkling like twin jewels. Adam’s granite features softened and his eyes warmed, as if he understood how humiliated the lad felt.

Pity stirred his heart. The lad was just one of hundreds of London’s lost children with thin, dirty faces, their eyes dull and lifeless, children who would never know their parents, since many whose parents could not support them had been deserted, and their only means of survival was to steal or beg.

His thoughts shifted to another young boy, a bastard of the same blood as himself—that he too might be a ragged street urchin, condemned to a life of disease and hunger. Deprived of the prosperity he was accustomed to, had he survived—this? With this in mind he looked again at the lad and felt himself drawn to him. Why, he could not say, but he was in a position to ease his lot in life—if only a temporary ease—and perhaps the lad could be of help to him.

‘Since we are to eat together, we might as well get better acquainted. My name’s Adam. What’s yours?’

The lad met Adam's gaze, serious, intent on his own. He had the uneasy thought that his companion was like a tall, predatory hawk, and that he was a tiny disadvantaged bird, or a mouse about to be pounced on.

'What's that to you?' he questioned suspiciously.

Adam's curiosity increased. He arched a brow and peered at his companion, shrugging casually. 'Just curious. You do have a name, don't you?' he enquired with a trace of sarcasm. When the lad made no further comment Adam glanced at him sideways, prompting, feeling his resistance.

'Ed,' the lad mumbled reluctantly.

'Ed? Ed what?'

'Just Ed,' he retorted sharply, not wishing to become too friendly.

'Right. Just Ed it is then.'

Ed began to fidget and his expression became pained. Removing his hat to scratch his head, he exposed an unevenly cropped thatch of an indeterminate colour.

Adam grinned at the tousled-haired youth. 'It's time you took yourself in hand and gave yourself a bath.'

'I can take care of myself,' Ed bit back irately, pulling his hat back on. 'Besides, baths are for the gentry—not the likes of me.' Uneasy beneath Adam's close scrutiny, he pulled his hat further down. Sometimes daylight had a habit of revealing more than it ought.

Adam continued to watch him, reminding himself that here was no innocent. But he could not help but wonder at the gist of the lad. 'Where do you live, Ed—when you're not relieving people of their possessions, that is?'

Ed's eyes sparked, and his fine-boned face tilted obstinately to betray his mutinous thoughts. Why did he have to pry? 'You ask too many questions,' he snapped.

'It's a habit of mine. Besides, in the light of your theft of my watch, I reckon you owe me a few answers.'

Ed saw Adam's blue eyes were not without humour, but there was censure in the set of his jaw. 'I—I have a room.'

'With friends?'

'No. I'm selective about who I call friends,' he said reflectively, some of his cockiness fading. 'I don't need them. Some people do, but I don't. People are not always what they seem—and not to be trusted. I only need myself. It's best that way—easier, and less complicated.'

'In that case you must be lonely.'

Ed looked at Adam, considering the word. Lonely, he thought. Yes, he was lonely; in fact, he had never imagined he could be so lonely, but, worse than that, he was afraid—afraid of getting caught. He hated robbing people, and he hated St Giles. He desperately wanted to stop and be respectable, and not spend his life feeling scared. When he'd found himself in London's substructure six months ago, he'd had no choice but to face a world he could never understand, and a tyrant who might end his life at a whim.

'I can see that in your line of business,' Adam continued, 'there must be a great many things you wish to protect from intruders.'

Ed frowned. 'Secrets, perhaps, not things. I don't own anything.'

'You own yourself,' Adam responded quietly.

'Do I?' he asked, thinking of Jack, and wondering what this stranger would have to say about that, since Jack regarded him as his most valuable possession. 'I've never really thought about it. Do you?'

'All the time,' Adam replied, studying Ed gravely, having decided that Ed was a young person of no ordinary cleverness. 'You seem to be an intelligent lad so I'm sure you care about yourself, about what you do—but not enough, it would seem, and for all the wrong reasons. Perhaps you don't

have enough faith in yourself—or pride. If you did, you wouldn't steal things. Why do you steal, Ed? Don't you have an alternative?'

Ed looked at him steadily, his eyes darkening at some secret memory. 'Oh, yes—I do,' he said quietly. 'But this is far, far better.'

'I see. You might give some thought to what I said.'

Ed nodded, fascinated. Adam's eyes were frank and interesting. 'I have—and I do believe in myself,' he confided. 'I don't like stealing things and I intend to stop—one day. And I will. I want so many things—somewhere special, and safe, that I can call my own. I will change my entire life, when I've figured out a way how to do it.'

Adam believed him. He was troubled by the intensity of his statement. It was born of deep conviction—and perhaps more than a little pain. Ed's eyes were wide and intense, showing in their depths a strong will that as yet knew neither strength nor direction. He was surprised at the feelings of tenderness this youth aroused in him. He sounded so ingenuous about what he wanted that he wanted to reassure him.

'Don't take too long,' he said gently. 'Those who make thieving their profession are destined for an early death on the gallows. Next time you get caught, the person you rob might not be as lenient as me. Have you always been a child of the streets? Have you never lived anywhere else?' When he got no response he lifted a questioning brow. 'France, perhaps?'

Ed stiffened, suddenly wary. 'Why should you think that?'

'When I pulled you out of the puddle, your cursing in that language was most proficient.'

Immediately the shutters came down over Ed's eyes and his expression became guarded. He didn't like talking about himself, especially not with strangers. 'I told you—you ask too many questions,' he replied sharply, averting his eyes.

Adam smiled, nodding slowly. He assumed there was a past that Ed was trying to forget. 'I beg your pardon. I can see I intrude on your privacy too much. Being a private person myself, I respect it in others. You can relax. See, our food has arrived.'

Faced with warm buttered bread, hot, succulent meat pies and tarts packed with apples and pears, a significant battle to conduct himself properly was fought and lost in a matter of seconds as Ed was unable to override the demands of hunger. Eating more leisurely, Adam watched in amusement as the ravenous youth gorged himself. Studying the remarkable face and unable to resist the temptation to draw the lad, he took a small sketchpad and a piece of charcoal from his pocket and began to sketch quickly, effortlessly.

As the food filled and warmed his belly, Ed began to eat more slowly, savouring the taste fully. When his hunger was satisfied, he took a rag from his pocket and wiped his mouth and sat back, lulled into a harmony he thought he'd lost. He became aware of Adam's preoccupation as he sketched, his fingers long and lean—the fingers of a creative man of some refinement—and how he raised his eyes every now and then to glance at him. How remote he was, he thought, how detached. Stung with curiosity, he leaned across the table.

'Can I see?'

'Of course. Here, what do you think of yourself?' Adam turned the pad round to show him.

Ed gasped, staring incredulously at the image of himself. Adam had captured his likeness expertly. His face was all angles and shades, his eyes sad and thoughtful. 'Is that how you see me?' he asked, without taking his eyes off the sketch.

'I'd have made a better job of it if I'd had longer.'

'You're very good. You really ought to take it up professionally.'

'I'm glad you like it. And I promise to give serious thought to your suggestion,' Adam replied, with a teasing smile in his voice and a knowing glint in his eyes.

'You should,' Ed said with gentle, but unshakeable firmness. 'You could make a fortune. May I keep it?'

‘My pleasure.’ Adam tore the sketch off the pad and passed it to him, touched to see how carefully Ed handled it and placed it flat beneath his jacket so as not to crease it, as if it were the most precious object.

‘Do you feel better with food in your belly?’ Adam asked.

Ed nodded, remembering his manners. ‘Thank you. I am grateful.’

‘You’re welcome.’

Ed’s earlier anger had receded, leaving nothing to bolster his flagging courage. Adam’s eyes were still fixed on him so avidly that he blushed. There was an intensity, a pointedness about his look that for some reason unnerved him. He was curious to know more about the man whose watch he had stolen and who could sketch so artistically. He wondered why he hadn’t handed him over to the law, as others he stole from would have done. He cocked his head to one side and took stock of him. He really was a striking-looking man.

‘You’re a gentleman, I can tell, so what’s a gentleman doing in St Giles?’ he asked. ‘I don’t believe you came to take a stroll, or take the air.’ Suddenly his dark scowl vanished. He laughed out loud, a mischievous twinkle dancing in his eyes as the obvious reason occurred to him. ‘Were you looking for something that might be of interest to your habits?’ he remarked boldly. ‘If it’s a whore you’re after, there are plenty to be had, but ’tis the pox you’ll get for your sins.’

Adam caught his breath. ‘I don’t buy my pleasures—I’ve never had to. I can attract my own women—and I never barter.’ He became silent and thoughtful as he seemed to mull something over. ‘I’m looking for a boy,’ he told Ed bluntly.

After six months as a resident of St Giles, it took no straining of Ed’s mental process to conclude his companion might be one of those depraved characters who practised wicked vices.

Aware as to the tenor of Ed’s thoughts, which Adam found nauseating in the extreme—that this young lad should believe he could stoop to something so corrupt, so vile—his expression became rigid, his eyes glittering like shards of ice.

‘I do not take solace from young boys of the street. The boy I am looking for is a relative of mine. He disappeared two months ago, and I’m anxious to locate him.’

‘Why? Did he run away?’

‘No. He was taken.’

‘And you think he’s here—in St Giles?’

‘I have reason to believe so. He was last seen in the company of a man and woman. I have a network of people combing the city, but this was where he was last seen. I often come myself, but unfortunately there are places my spies and I can’t penetrate, unlike someone who is familiar with the buildings and alleyways—someone like yourself,’ he said quietly, watching Ed closely. ‘Maybe you could make enquiries—discreetly, mind.’

Ed eyed him warily. ‘I’ve got things to do. I’ve got my work cut out picking pockets.’

Adam’s firm lips twisted with irony. ‘I suppose one could call thieving a lucrative career if one is prepared to cast aside all moral principles.’

Ed wanted to shout it was his living, that the mean and filthy streets were his home, and that Jack was the wretch that made him steal and wouldn’t let him go, but all he said was, ‘It’s what I do.’

Adam sat forward and rested his arms on the table, sensing Ed had learned the hard way how to survive among the odious hovels and alleyways of St Giles. ‘Come now. Let us make a bargain.’

His voice was husky and attractive, putting Ed instantly on his guard. ‘A bargain? I’ll do no bargain.’

‘Ah, lad—not so hasty. Hear what I have to say. I tell you what,’ he said mockingly, his blue eyes snapping with amusement as he reached with his fingers to chuck him under the chin. ‘I don’t think I need remind you that you have just robbed me of my watch, which is a serious criminal offence—and, as the watch is valued at more than a shilling, a hanging offence, is it not? So, I’ll do you a favour. I shall not summon the sheriff’s forces if you agree to help me.’

Ed shot him a sullen look. ‘That isn’t a favour. It’s blackmail.’

Adam arched an eyebrow. ‘You might stand to profit by it. You will be well rewarded, I promise you. You wish to change your life, you say—to improve your lot. I am offering you the means to do just that. All you have to do is keep your eyes open. The lad is nine years old, slight, with brown eyes and black hair and answers to the name of Toby.’

‘You have just described hundreds of boys in St Giles. And two months you say he’s been here?’ Ed smiled wryly, shaking his head slowly. ‘If he’s survived the life, he’ll be unrecognisable.’

Adam’s expression became grim. ‘I think not.’

‘Certain, are you?’

He nodded. ‘Born with his right leg shorter than the left and his foot turned in, he is unable to walk without the aid of a crutch. Toby is a cripple.’

Ed found this regrettable, but his expression did not change. ‘So are many others, some deformed from birth, but many of them are mutilated on purpose, usually by those who wish to capitalise on their misfortune by making them beg and displaying them to the curious.’

Taking a purse from his pocket, Adam passed it discreetly across the table. ‘Take this for now. Inside you will find five guineas. When I return four days hence there will be more.’

Ed felt the purse. Five guineas was more money than he had seen in a long time. Hope blossomed in his chest, but he’d learned not to trust the future. He looked at Adam with a sceptical eye. ‘And all I have to do is look for the boy?’

Adam nodded. ‘You don’t have to speak to him. Just tell me where he can be found and I will do the rest. You’d be a fool for certain if you didn’t accept.’

‘How do you know I won’t take your money and not come back?’

‘Call it intuition. I like your spirit. I trust you, Ed.’

Tears threatened. No one had ever said that to him before. ‘Thank you,’ he whispered. ‘I’ve given you no reason to trust me. I don’t deserve it.’

Adam grinned. ‘No, you don’t,’ he agreed, ‘so don’t let me down.’

‘I’ll try not to.’

Sensing Adam’s deep concern for the boy, Ed studied the face opposite. His hair was thick and unruly and the colour of walnuts. Dark brows and lashes defined his features in an attractive way, and masculine strength was carved into the tough line of his jaw and chin. His voice was deep and compelling, and the tiny lines at the corners of his eyes testified to his sense of humour. There was a self-assurance about him, which was slightly marred by arrogance, but as Ed looked steadily into his eyes he detected neither cruelty nor dishonesty. He was unquestionably the most handsome male he had ever seen. Deciding he liked Adam, Ed was contrite.

‘I’m sorry I robbed you. If the boy Toby is here, I’ll do my best to find him.’

‘Good.’ Adam believed him, and, if Ed didn’t come back, he knew it would be through no fault of Ed’s. He raised his flagon. ‘To success,’ he said, tossing down the contents. ‘And here, you’d better have this.’ He passed Ed the knife he’d taken from him earlier. ‘Unless you have a death wish, I advise you to keep it in your belt.’

On leaving the alehouse, after arranging to meet in the same place at noon four days hence, Adam stood and watched his young companion melt into the intricate web of narrow alleyways and yards of St Giles, silent as mist.

Chapter Two

P ushing open the door of a vermin-infested house in a yard off Spittle Alley, Heloise Edwina Marchant stepped inside. The air was thick with stagnant odours hardly fit for a human being to breathe, and little natural light penetrated the grime-covered windows. She groped her way up the narrow, broken staircase to the landing above, closing her ears to the children screaming behind closed doors, and men and women, many of them sodden with gin, arguing loudly and bitterly because of their frustrations.

Weeks before, the sights and sounds that made up her everyday life would have sickened Edwina. Now she didn't even turn away. The squalor of St Giles had lost all its terror for her in its abundance.

She let herself into the small room Jack Pierce had allocated to her when he'd put her to work. She often shared it with other boys who worked for Jack, until they either disappeared or went to live at Ma Pratchet's, a gin-soaked old widow woman of gargantuan proportions by all accounts. Ma Pratchet was employed by Jack to look after the younger children he plucked off the streets, children who had been abandoned. The older, more experience boys trained them to pick pockets.

The wretched plight of these children had seared Edwina's heart when she had first come to St Giles. She had wanted to help them all, to gather them round her and ease their suffering if just a little, but she had soon realised that, in order to survive herself, these kind of emotions would not help her.

The light from the window she had scrubbed clean fell on broken bits of furniture, a few kitchen utensils and a narrow straw pallet shoved against the wall. Pulling off her hat, she laid down on the thin coverlet, resting her head on the pillow. It was hard and smelled of poverty.

Something stirred within her—a yearning for beauty, for luxury and comfort. Closing her eyes, she did something she had not done in a long time and allowed her mind to drift, remembering a time when she had lain between white linen, fresh and sweet smelling, when there had been maids to do her bidding and pander to her every whim. Opening her eyes, she gazed up at the cracked ceiling, the thought of her former life bringing pain more intense than her physical discomfort. The memories filled her with a weary sadness, and thoughts of her father and home seemed like a faraway dream.

Perhaps it was her encounter with Adam that had made her resurrect her past and sharpen the pang of homesickness, but before she could journey too far back along that path reality rushed back at her, a harsh, ugly reality, and, with a hardness of mind born of necessity, she flinched away from memories of the life she had once known. They would not help her now, and feeling sorry for herself would do her no good.

Taking the purse that Adam had given her from her pocket, she clutched it to her breast. Five guineas made it possible for her to leave Jack and make her own way in life—to go to France and look for her mother's people, which was what she had intended doing from the start.

No one knew how badly she wanted to escape her increasingly odious role as a thief, but every day that passed drew her deeper into Jack's debt. She wondered if she dare keep the money and not tell him—but she dare not. Everything she stole she gave to Jack, and when he had sold it on he would give her a small portion of the sale. Silently she considered this grossly unfair, but she would never argue with Jack. Besides, if she were to find the boy Toby, she would need Jack to help her.

He was clever, was Jack—the cleverest person she'd ever met—but her meeting with him when she had arrived in London had been her introduction to the world of crime. When Jack had arrived in the city three years ago, he had been on the run from the law, and St Giles was a perfect place for a man like Jack to develop contacts and start to carve out a reputation for himself.

He had convinced her there was no safer place to hide than the alleyways of London town, and so desperate had she been to escape her past and recoup the money she'd had stolen from her on her journey south from Hertfordshire that she had believed him. At first it had been frightening to be so

far away from what she knew. Everything was so different, but she'd willed herself to think of the present and put past and future away if she hoped to survive.

Though eighteen years old, she had masqueraded as a lad since running away from her uncle's house. Being slight, with features that could pass as a boy's, and cutting off her copper tresses, which would have proved a liability she could ill afford, had lent well to her disguise. Until the day came when she had enough money to enable her to go France, this was a time for survival.

Not even Jack knew her secret. It had been Jack who had taught her how to steal, and right lucky it was for him that she'd proved a natural-born pickpocket. She'd learned fast to develop and hone her skills. She was agile, her fingers small and quick, her mind alert. She hated doing it, but she didn't tell Jack.

He became angry when she didn't steal enough, and she was afraid of his anger. Once, she had sold her spoils to another receiver, praying Jack wouldn't find out, but he did, and his wrath had been terrible. Now she knew better than to try to deceive him, which was why she would have to hand over the five guineas. She felt her cheeks burning—they always did when she was angry, or ashamed—and she was ashamed now, ashamed for putting her trust in Jack in the first place.

Being a master of manipulation, he played on her desperation, and he knew how to use the right combination of charm and menace to ensure her absolute loyalty. They said he was evil, said he was dangerous. They said Jack had killed a man.

He lived alone above a pawnbroker's shop on Fleet Street, but he was never really alone. Others, vulnerable like herself, worked for him, and he carried them around in his head—moving them around like chess pieces as he played his deadly game. He controlled them all. No one could stand against Jack. He had many friends in St Giles, but few were cleverer, bigger, stronger or more terrifyingly ruthless than Jack.

Hearing heavy footfalls on the stairway, she got up and lit her one remaining precious candle—the rats had made a meal of the rest—watching as the meagre yellow flame cast a soft glow around the cheerless room. She started when the door burst open to admit Jack. A man of medium height, thickset and with heavy features, he wore a tall, battered black hat, and the crow's feather stuck into its brim hung limp like the tattered lace at his wrists. His stained dark-green velveteen coat, which strained across his bulky shoulders, had seen better days.

'So here you are, Ed,' he muttered. Pulling out a chair, he sat down, stretching out his legs, his thick calves encased in wrinkled, dirty grey stockings. Placing his hat on the table, he combed his sparse brown hair over his shiny skull, and his deep-set black eyes under bushy brows had a hard glitter when they fastened on her. 'Wondered where you'd got to. It's been a bad day,' he growled in a deep voice. 'Hope you've got more for me than the other lads—a fine watch, perhaps, or a jewelled snuff box…a pretty fan, even, or a lady's purse.'

'No, nothing like that today…but I do have a couple of lace handkerchiefs—and some money.'

Jack's face jerked sideways and his small black eyes fixed her with an investigative stare. It was the quick, sharp movement of an animal watching its prey. 'Money, you say! How much?'

'Five guineas—and there will be more if we help the man who gave them to me to find a boy he's looking for.'

Jack's heavy brow creased in a frown. 'Boy? What boy?'

'His name's Toby.' Edwina gave him a full description of the boy as Adam had given it.

Interest gleamed in Jack's eyes. 'Who is this man? What's his name?'

She shrugged. 'Adam. That's all I know.'

'How much will he give for the boy?'

'He didn't say—only that he would be generous.'

Jack considered this and nodded. 'I'll ask around. Is this man trustworthy?'

'Yes, I'm sure of it. He—he's nice.' Taking her courage in both hands, she said, 'After this I will make my own way, Jack. I told you from the start that when I have enough money I will go to France to look for my mother's people.'

This didn't suit Jack at all. 'So, you're scheming and plotting to run away from me, are you, Ed?' he thundered.

'No. I'm being straight with you. I don't want to do it any more,' she said in a rush, before her courage failed her.

'Not do it?' Jack echoed incredulously, jerking his body in the chair. 'After I went to the trouble of teaching you all you know? Not do it?'

Edwina shook her head, gulping down her fear of him. 'I've thought about it a lot, Jack. I don't mean to sound ungrateful—but I want to stop. I don't want to go on stealing.'

Jack was watching her closely through narrowed eyes. He had dozens of boys working for him. He was their absolute master and he demanded loyalty. They had to steal when he bade them, or be hanged for refusing after Jack informed them on about some former crime. He would also reap the forty pounds' reward the government offered for anyone providing evidence that would convict a thief.

Ed was good, the best he'd got, but Ed was no fool, and that was the curse of it. Jack knew nothing about him, about who he was or where he had come from. He wasn't interested in that, but Ed was good at picking pockets and Jack was thinking of moving him on to work with the older youths; no matter how many high-falutin ideas he had about going to France, he had no intention of letting the lad run out on him.

'Don't think you can run out on me. It'll do you no good. We're in this together.' Clutching the purse, he folded his arms on the table. 'Sit down. I think you and I should have a little talk. I'm disappointed in you, Ed. I thought you and I understood one another. It seems I was wrong.'

Edwina faced him across the table, seeing his true character much more clearly now since she had got to know him. She feared him, and knew him to be deadly. He spoke softly, but she could see his anger simmered. He sat regarding her with dilated nostrils and heaving breast. She held her hands in her lap so he wouldn't see them tremble. She had turned pale, and she knew that if he roared at her and she broke down and cried he would have the mastery of her.

Taking a deep breath, she looked at him directly. His rugged features were impenetrable, but there was a pitilessness there that repelled her. 'We do understand one another, Jack. I want to end it, that's all.'

'So, you've had enough of picking pockets. Ungrateful wretch, that's what you are—and there was I, thinking you were fond of me.'

'I—I needed you Jack.'

'And now you don't? Is that what you're sayin'?' His eyes narrowed suspiciously and he leaned across the table, his face close to hers. 'Hope you're not playin' a double game with me, boy, and keepin' some fancy trinkets for yourself. If you are, I'll tell you this: I'm the boss in this game—always have been and always will be. My God, I'd like to see the lad who dared to double-cross me.'

Edwina raised her head resolutely, choosing to protect herself from Jack's closeness as much as to hide her fear. Her pride ached, but the fear of what lay in store for her if she remained stealing for Jack threatened to reduce her to a trembling, shaking coward. 'I haven't, Jack. I've always been straight with you.'

'You've had an easy time since I took you in and set you to work, and you ought to go down on your knees and thank me for it. I've always had a soft spot for you, Ed,' he said, 'you've got spirit and pluck. Because I liked you and you were cleverer than the other lads, because you were quick to learn and kept your mouth shut, I've treated you like a lamb and let you alone to do pretty much as you please, and if you hadn't had that honour you'd have perished before now.'

'And I'm grateful, Jack. But I need more money if I'm to make my own way.'

Jack glared at her, leaning forward. His face was vicious, and his breath stank of sour rum. His deep, grating voice filled the silence that had fallen between them. 'Are you telling me you're not getting a fair deal?'

'Apart from that time when I took my spoils to another fencer—what you give me scarce covers the food I eat. You haven't been over-generous, Jack,' she said accusingly, emphasising the words to defend her actions, as she fought to prevent the shattered fragments of her life from slipping into an abyss.

Fire blazed in Jack's eyes. 'You young whelp. I'll bring you to heel or hand you in,' he threatened savagely. 'Do you think you can stand against me with your damned impudence? I haven't heard the others complaining.'

'No, because they fear you,' she told him truthfully.

'No harm in that. That way they'll do as they're told.'

'I know,' she said, standing up, her voice threaded with sarcasm. 'Charity and sympathy are not in your nature, are they, Jack?'

'What's charity and sympathy to me?' A sneer twitched the corner of his surly mouth. 'They can be the ruination of many a good man.' Scraping his chair back, he stood up and eyed the youngster narrowly, thoughtfully. 'I'll give you more,' he offered suddenly—after all, a tasty morsel had been known to keep a whining dog quiet.

'It's too late.' Edwina was adamant. She had come this far and would not back down now. 'I've made up my mind. I've had enough.'

Jack blustered angrily, making Edwina's cheeks flame considerably as she listened to the curses and insults he flung at her. She wanted desperately to retaliate, to tell him to go to the devil and be done with it, but she knew the folly of doing that. It was far better to let him say what he had to and let him go. Then she could think what to do.

He grasped her shoulder and twisted her round, thrusting his face close. 'Listen to me, boy, and listen well. Don't try to run from me, because if you stray I swear I'll find you and break every bone in your body.' Seizing her wrist, he doubled her arm behind her back. He laughed caustically when she cried out from the pain of it, thrusting her from him so forcefully that she fell against the table and toppled a chair over. 'That's a foretaste of the punishment you can expect if I have to come lookin' for you.'

Jack's parting words seared into Edwina's memory with the bitter gall of betrayal. The fact that she could have been so stupid as to believe she could go on her way when the fancy took her, that Jack would simply let her walk away, showed her weakness of character, in her mind. Her thoughts traced over the events that had led up to her present predicament, seeking to find the exact moment when she had become Jack's property, and she knew it had been right from the very beginning.

She was thrown into a dilemma as to what to do next. Its solution concealed itself in the chaotic frenzy of her thoughts. With nothing to her name but a few coppers, where could she go? There was no one she could turn to, no safe haven she could seek, and if she ran from Jack her fortune would be what she could make herself.

Feeling a bone weariness creeping over her, she sat and placed her forearms on the table, lowering her head upon them and sighing. 'Oh, Father,' she whispered. 'Why did you have to die? Why did you have to leave me to the mercy of Uncle Henry?'

Gordon Marchant had been a good father to her. She recalled how, handsome and proud, he'd smiled down at her from the saddle that last morning when he'd left Oakwood Hall, their fine Hertfordshire home, with his brother Henry, prepared to meet his creditor Silas Clifford, the Earl of Taplow, and beg for more time to pay back what he owed, and how she had stood on tiptoe to meet his parting embrace. The warmth and safety of his tone enclosed her for a moment.

'Promise me you'll have a care,' she'd said.

'Don't worry, Edwina.' His voice was quiet and he released her gently. 'I'll be back, and, if not, you can trust Henry. He'll take care of you.' Those had been his last words to her.

Henry had brought him home across the saddle of his horse, his fine clothes stained dark crimson with his life's blood. Her heart hardened. He had claimed her father had had a run in with a thief on the road to Taplow Court. She had believed him. Henry had smiled and promised to handle everything—and he'd handled it very well…the blackguard.

Together Henry and the Earl of Taplow had drawn up a marriage contract. The Earl had proposed to disregard his losses and marry her without a dowry. Anger welled up in her, anger at Uncle Henry, at the Earl of Taplow. They had done this to her. She would never forgive them, either of them, ever!

In her mind's eyes she saw Silas Clifford. To a seventeen-year-old girl, at fifty he was an old man. He was thin, his skin pale with prominent veins. His hair was white and he gave the impression of deformity without any obvious malformation. In fact, she had found everything about him displeasing. When he had come across her riding her horse along the lane near Oakwood Hall, his attention had been sharply and decisively arrested.

She recalled how he had called on her father soon after, how he had run his eyes over her, examining her face and figure as he would a prize cow. His hissing intake of breath as he did so had reminded her of a snake, and she had been glad when his business with her father had been concluded and he had gone on his way.

But following his visit her father had been uneasy and nervous, and to this day she did not know why. Soon afterwards he had been killed and Henry had become her guardian, and with it came the suspicion that he had killed her father. His odd behaviour, and the way he had of avoiding her eyes and refusing to speak of the tragic incident that had occurred on the road to Taplow Court, fuelled this suspicion, until she became certain of it.

What would her father think of Henry now? It had never occurred to him to doubt the honour of his own brother. Henry had fooled her father. He had taken his trust and trampled it. By running away she had made him pay for his lies.

Tears of fear, sorrow and frustration welled up in her eyes. 'Oh, Father, why did you desert me? I have lost everything.'

It was a cry from the heart, the cry of a lost and lonely child, but the sorrow that shaped it was soon spent. Jack and his kind would not defeat her. The food Adam had bought her still filled her stomach and lent support to her resolve. All she needed was the courage to remove herself as far away from Jack as she possibly could. She had not escaped from her uncle's clutches only to die a lingering death in the filth and squalor of St Giles, wretched and without hope.

She would not be beaten. She was young. She had the strength and the power to survive and grasp for herself a better future. She would make it happen because, if she didn't, no one else would. What was it Adam had said—that a person must have faith and pride in oneself, must believe in oneself? Well, she did believe in herself, and she would start by taking control of her life.

There would be no more Jack. No more Silas Clifford. No more Uncle Henry. Somehow she must find her way back to her own kind, but first she must have money, and Adam would give her that. She would find the boy Toby and take the reward he had promised for herself.

Her spirits strengthened, the following morning she left her squalid room for the last time and took her first steps into an uncertain future. If Jack caught her, there was no telling what he would do. But maybe he wouldn't catch her. It was a risk she was willing to take.

For three days Edwina scoured the vast network of alleyways and yards of St Giles, certain they had been built for the very purpose of concealment. It was like a vast jungle, which harboured criminals with as great a security as accorded to wild beasts in the jungles of Africa and India.

Careful to avoid the places where she knew Jack would be, she entered and searched places she would have steered clear of before—the meanest hovels, from the cellars to the rooms stacked on top.

In the streets clouds of flies hovered over horse dung and offal from the slaughterhouses, mingling with the stench of unwashed humanity. Edwina was oblivious of everything outside her own purpose. She questioned fellow thieves and beggars. Everyone had seen crippled boys, and there were some who did fit Toby's description, but they were nameless.

It was almost dark and Edwina, utterly dejected and suffering from exhaustion, found herself in Covent Garden. Sitting on a low wall at the base of some iron railings, she kept herself awake only by a prodigious effort of will. Her whole body ached as if she had been beaten, and she blinked like a night-bird at the many bright lights around her.

She often found her way to the busy piazza. It was famous for its gaming, rowdy taverns, chocolate and coffee houses, and brothels filled with loose women. Its marvellous fruit and vegetable market and theatres giving it flavour and vitality, Covent Garden was pervaded by an atmosphere of uninhibited pleasure, attracting all kinds of folk—in particular actors, painters and writers—both day and night. Tonight was no different to all the others, as people came to savour the high life. Even in the fading light the vibrant colours drew Edwina into the tableau, and she listened to the din of voices as they laughed and boasted, cursed and argued.

Theatre-goers were beginning to arrive for the evening's performances in fine carriages, and she watched enviously as fashionable men and women in glittering and dazzling attire climbed out, the ladies holding froths of lace dipped in perfume to their noses to kill the unpleasant odour of rotting garbage. Creamy bosoms bedecked with jewels rose out of fitted bodices, slender waists accentuated by flowing skirts.

The gentlemen were no less magnificent in their leather pumps with silver buckles, white silk stockings and knee-length pale-coloured breeches, and superbly tailored frock coats over elaborately embroidered waistcoats. Most of the upper classes, both men and women, wore powdered wigs, but those of lesser means could not afford them. Eager to see the night's performances, with much laughter and light-hearted chatter, they alighted from their carriages and disappeared inside.

Edwina was about to stand up and move on when a carriage carrying two ladies and two gentleman stopped and caught and held her attention. Her eyes became riveted on one of the gentlemen. She watched him spring down and hold out his hand to assist one of the ladies with the tender care of a devoted friend—or lover. She was a tall, glittering young woman dressed in cobalt blue silk, her dark hair arranged superbly on her proudly erect head, the silken tresses threaded with sparkling jewels.

The gentleman was a tall, extremely striking man. He was impeccably dressed, his knee-length claret coat and rich dark hair emphasising the pristine whiteness of the cascade of lace at his throat and wrists. He declined the wearing of the customary wig, and Edwina thought how suited his own hair was to him. Suddenly her heart was beating wildly. She stared wide-eyed at the man, unaware that she had stood up. It was Adam. She was sure it was. If only he would turn his head, so she could see his face more clearly.

As if he felt the pull of her eyes he spun his head round and met her gaze head on. An expression Edwina couldn't recognise flickered across his handsome features, and even from a distance of several yards his eyes seemed very bright. Then one corner of his mouth cocked up in a smile, the same mocking smile she remembered. A sweet longing radiated through her, setting her pulse racing.

Not wishing to embarrass him by drawing further attention to herself, she turned. Just as she was about to disappear into the crowd, something clamped her upper arm like an iron band and spun her round. Rage edged Jack's deep voice as he thrust his face close.

'So, you young guttersnipe. Thought you'd run out on Jack, did you? Thought you'd escape me?' His small black eyes blazed. 'I said I'd find you—told you what would happen.'

Overcome with fear, Edwina panicked. A groan of terror tore from her constricted chest, and she pulled away, cringing from the blow she knew would follow. When it came she fell to the ground. Coloured sparks exploded in her eyes and the world began to spin, before blackness enfolded her.

From across the street, horrified, Adam saw what had happened. His eyes flashed with blue fire. 'Go in, will you,' he said quickly to his companions. 'I'll join you shortly.' They watched in stunned amazement as he ran across the street.

The crowd that had gathered around the unconscious youth parted to let him through. 'Stand back,' he ordered. 'Give the lad some air.' Crouching down beside Edwina, he raised her up. Her head fell back limply and blood began to trickle from the cut on the right side of her small face. Adam raised his head and looked at the thug responsible, a murderous glint in his blue eyes.

'Damn you! If the lad doesn't recover, you'll regret this,' he said, and, for all its quiet, his voice was like a suddenly unsheathed blade.

Jack turned and lumbered away. He disappeared down an alley, moving with a speed and agility that could not have been anticipated in a man of his bulk.

Adam gently raised the broken, pitiful burden into his arms, and to the amazement of the crowd he carried the lad off across the square. His arrival at the house just off the piazza with an unconscious street urchin in his arms caused a furore of bawdy comments from both male and scantily clad female occupants, who sat around talking and laughing and openly caressing each other.

With the supreme indifference of a true gentleman toward lesser mortals, Adam ignored the lewd remarks and addressed a servant, his voice rich and compelling. 'Fetch Mrs Drinkwater at once.'

Right on cue an elegantly attired woman in middle age moved slowly down the stairs.

'Why, it's you, Adam. I figured it must be. Who else would make so much bluster? Still, 'tis a pleasure to see you.' She gave the man she had known since childhood an adoring, almost sainted look, before dropping her gaze to the boy and bending over him with concern. 'Bless me! What have we here?'

Adam's voice was urgent. 'I need your help, Dolly. The lad's injured and needs tending.'

'I can see that. Who is he?'

'A friend.'

Looking at the deeply etched lines of concern and strain on Adam's face, Dolly realised the boy must be quite special. 'Tell me what happened?'

'Some thug being too liberal with his fists,' he ground out.

'Oh, the poor mite. Bring him upstairs. We'll find him a bed right away.'

Following Dolly up the stairs and into a bedroom, Adam gently deposited his burden on the bed and loosened the fastenings at Edwina's throat. She groaned and rolled her head from side to side, but didn't open her eyes.

'Who is he?' Dolly asked as she busied herself with the unpleasant task of pulling off Ed's oversized, almost worn-out boots.

'He lives in St Giles. I hired him to help me find Toby.'

Dolly glanced up. 'Still no news of the lad, then?'

'No, unless Ed has something to offer.'

'I do hope so,' Dolly said sympathetically, knowing how important it was to Adam that he find Toby—his cousin Olivia's boy. 'And your cousin Silas?' she asked quietly, keeping her eyes down. 'What has become of him? It's so long since I had news of any sort from Tap-low—not that I seek it or care.'

Looking at Dolly's bent head and recalling the dreadful business that had forced her to leave Taplow Court, where she had been employed as housekeeper, Adam's expression softened. 'Silas is dead, Dolly—a month ago.'

She looked at him and nodded, digesting his words and straightening her back, knowing Adam would feel no remorse over the demise of that particular gentleman—and she even less—although there was a time when there was nothing she would not have done for Silas Clifford. She had been at Taplow Court just one month when he had taken her into his bed, and, though he didn't have an ounce of affection for her—taking her body night after night without the courtesy of a caress, without

the slightest endearment and with less feeling than a dog for a bitch—she became a necessity in his life and she had loved him with a passion that had made her ache.

'Thank God,' she said.

'I always admired the way you put what happened behind you and got on with your life, Dolly. It can't have been easy.'

'It was very hard, Adam. But I cured myself of what Silas did to me before a serious depression could occur. Sadly the same cannot be said of your cousin Olivia—poor thing. What happened to the young lady Silas was to marry?'

Adam shrugged. 'She disappeared without a trace.' His firm lips curved in a wry smile. 'Apparently Silas inspired in her nothing but repugnance and she refused to be forced into marriage. Young women of seventeen do not willingly give themselves in marriage to licentious monsters more than twice their age. When her uncle insisted, it appears she ran away and has not been seen since. I never met her, but, whoever she is, I admire her courage.'

'And what of you, Adam? As heir to your cousin's estate you are now the Earl of Taplow. Are felicitations in order—or commiserations?'

His look was sombre. 'I never sought the title, you know that, Dolly. I always hoped Silas would marry and have children. My profession and my position as the Earl of Taplow do not rest easy together. There are many who would not approve.'

'Since when did Adam Rycroft care what others think?' Dolly remarked quickly. 'In that you and I are alike. Approval and disapproval are not words in my vocabulary, Adam.'

Adam grinned. 'You know me too well, Dolly.'

'In that you are right,' she said, laughing lightly. Thinking of Tap-low Court, she had a vision of happy children playing in the deserted gardens, running through the empty rooms, injecting them with life. 'Some might say Taplow Court is a grim and gloomy place, but despite what happened I liked it there. Silas never appreciated it—he never appreciated anything. What that house needs is a family living in it—children, Adam. You should give it some thought.'

'I have, Dolly, but what I do suits me. It is a part of me. The city is my home.'

'Hertfordshire is only a few hours away from London. You could quite easily reside at Taplow Court and still manage your business here. You don't have to sell your house in town.'

'I suppose you're right, but here I come and go as I please, and no man commands me. At Taplow, where I was never at ease, I shall be forced into habits, restricted, which will eventually kill my initiative—my spontaneity—which is an important part of my work.'

'Being the Earl of Taplow will not necessarily change that.'

'I wish I could be so sure. I do not want to become part of a system that stifles—a cog in a wheel that's forever turning and going nowhere.'

Dolly could understand what he was saying. The tragedies of his personal life had made him cynical.

He combed a rebellious lock of hair from his forehead with an impatient hand, and paced the carpet between the window and the bed with long, vigorous strides, his eyes constantly drawn to the still figure laid out on the bed. Dolly could sense the restlessness in him.

'You haven't been back to Taplow?'

'No, not since I left all those years ago. But I will. I have no choice. As yet I have not divulged my elevation to the title to anyone, Dolly, and I would prefer it to remain so until I've been back to Taplow. Had Toby been legitimate, the estate would have passed to him. You, more than anyone, will remember the circumstances of Toby's birth, and the day Silas threw Olivia out of Taplow Court after slaying her lover.'

Dolly nodded. It was something she had tried so hard to forget, but the memory of Joseph Tyke, Silas's incredibly handsome head groom, his blood pouring from a gaping wound in his chest and draining him of life, of Silas standing over him, gloating, bloodied knife in his hand, meant that

she never would. That was the day she had come to hate Silas Clifford with a virulence that almost choked her, and made her turn her back on him and his home. She recalled Lady Olivia as being a demure young woman with a sweet nature, and, unfortunately, very poor health.

'I do. It was a truly wicked, cruel act on his part.'

'I know. He should have been apprehended for what he did—hanged, even, but he had the establishment background, wealth, power, influence, and the bland confidence of a noble lord,' Adam said with snarling bitterness. 'When Olivia knew she was dying, destitute and with no one else to turn to, in desperation she returned to Taplow Court and begged her brother to take care of the boy. You can imagine Silas's reaction.'

'Yes, I can. Your cousin was a man used to his own way, a ruthless man, too unprincipled, too wealthy, with too much of everything, who thought the world should pay obeisance to him.'

'He also found disfigurement of any kind abhorrent…' Adam paused. His face was hard with memory, the muscles tight, and his blue eyes were hard too. 'Silas couldn't bear to look at Toby with his twisted leg, so when Olivia died he cast him out—gave him like a bit of old garbage to some passing tinkers.'

His voice was calm, much too calm, carefully modulated, but Dolly knew that beneath the calm Adam seethed with anger, and the striking gentleman in claret velvet and lace became the youth again, the fervent, embittered boy who had been forced to live under Silas's tyrannical dominance at Taplow Court. He took a deep breath and ran a hand across his brow. When he spoke his voice was still calm, but each word might have been chiselled from ice.

'Olivia wrote to me shortly before she died, explaining her situation, but I was out of the country at the time and when I returned it was too late for me to help her. I failed her, Dolly. I saw Silas when he came to London. He told me what he had done—coldly and without an ounce of remorse. If he hadn't died, I think I would have killed him with my bare hands. I have to find Toby—for Olivia's sake. If it's the last thing I do, I will find him.'

His voice was so full of conviction that Dolly believed he would.

Adam stood back as she continued to administer to the inert figure with a cool efficiency he'd always admired. Despite her chosen profession, one that caused her to be shunned and looked down on, he respected Dolly and would defend her to the death. Apart from his parents, she was the only person he had ever loved. She had taken him under her protective wing when, at the age of six, following the tragic death of his parents, he had been sent to Taplow Court to be brought up by his cousin Silas.

Dolly was a shrewd businesswoman. When she'd left Taplow Court she'd come to London and opened a dress shop, which had proved a huge success. She was extremely likeable and vivacious, and she soon became a popular figure.

Having made a huge profit, but not content with that, and liking the sound of clinking gold, she'd opened a gambling house in Covent Garden with investments from some of her wealthy gentlemen friends. The downstairs' rooms were sumptuously decorated and the tables run by competent, attractive young women. Upstairs there were a number of private rooms where these same young ladies, and others whose job it was to please the customers, could retire with well-heeled patrons.

Adam suddenly remembered his companions at the theatre, and knew that Barbara, who was Dolly's niece, would be livid because he'd deserted her. 'I don't think the lad's badly hurt, so, if you don't mind, Dolly, I'll leave him in your capable hands. I have to go. I promised I would escort Barbara to the theatre tonight and had to leave her with Steven Hewitt and his wife. As you know, your niece has temper that would shame the devil. My life won't be worth living if I abandon her completely.'

'You have my sympathy. I know just how difficult Barbara can be—even at the best of times. You'd better go.'

Adam glanced with indecision at the recumbent form on the bed. ‘I know you’ll take good care of the lad. For some reason I feel responsible for him now. Send for the doctor if need be. I’ll be back to see how he is in the morning.’

Chapter Three

E dwina opened her eyes. Darkness pressed around her. She winced at the pain in her head. Gingerly she turned it an inch at a time. Curtains were drawn across a window, so it must be night. She was in a bed, the mattress soft—as soft as her own had been. Tobacco smoke and the sweet, cloying scent of women's perfume permeated the air, and from somewhere beyond the room she could hear voices.

Her hands were resting on top of the covers. Sliding them underneath, she was horrified when she felt her naked body. Someone had removed her clothes—not just her breeches and jacket, but everything. She couldn't remember being without her undergarments, except before she had come to London, when she had taken her bath. Fighting down her panic, she wondered what kind of people would take her clothes and—worse—how many had seen her without them?

Anger flared through her and she sat up, clutching the bedcovers to her body. She must escape, but how could she when she didn't know where she was and had nothing to wear? The pain in her head pushed her back against the soft pillows and, closing her eyes, she drifted back to sleep.

The soft singing of a woman came to Edwina. She opened her eyes to find the cosy room flooded with morning sunlight. The familiar hubbub of the streets drifted from beyond the walls, and above it all a cacophony of sound from the city's many church bells. From somewhere in the house doors opened and closed, and the smell of warm bread and frying bacon wafted into her room.

She tried to remember what had happened—seeing Jack and how he had lashed out at her in anger. A chill ran through her. She recalled being lifted up by someone else, but she couldn't remember who it had been.

Unable to conjure up his face, she forced herself to relax and enjoy the warmth and safety of the bed, at least for the moment, letting the pleasant smells of the house and the woman's song lull her. Edwina wondered who she was. The singing stopped and whoever it was spoke to someone else. Other voices could be heard now, laughing and giggling.

Hauling herself to a sitting position, she leaned back, pulling the covers up to her chin. After a few moments a young woman came into the room, humming softly under her breath. Her auburn hair spilled to her shoulders in a luxuriant mass. She was bearing a tray weighted down by a pot of tea and a platter of eggs and bacon and bread and butter. The delicious aroma tempted Edwina, who'd had nothing to eat since the previous midday.

The young woman stopped when she saw Edwina sitting up in bed, and a smile stretched across her pretty face. 'Good, you're awake!' she said, her voice as clear as her glowing complexion. She placed the tray in front of Edwina on the bed. 'Here, get that down you. Mrs Drinkwater says you're much too thin for comfort and insists we feed you up.' She took a step back. 'I'm Harriet Crabtree, by the way, and I'm pleased to meet you. How do you feel?'

'Better, thank you—at least I shall when my clothes are returned to me.'

Still smiling, the young woman cocked her head. 'I can't say that I blame you, but when you were brought here, Mrs Drinkwater refused to let you lie between her clean linen in what you were wearing.'

'Mrs Drinkwater?'

'The owner of this establishment.'

'And what kind of establishment is this?'

Harriet had no time to reply, for at that moment a woman bustled in, carrying some clothes over her arm. She smiled when she saw her young guest sitting up in bed. 'Hello, dear. Dolly Drinkwater,' she introduced herself. 'I'm glad to see you awake at last. You took a nasty knock on the head last night and had us all quite worried, I don't mind telling you.' Her voice was rich and warm like the

peach dress she wore. Fifty years old, Dolly Drinkwater had a face that was lined, but her figure was still slender, and there was a sparkle in her eyes that age would not dim.

Draping the clothes over the back of a chair, she stood looking down at Edwina. Despite her outward composure, the poor young thing looked extremely tense, frightened, almost. 'You can put them on when you've eaten and had a bath. We had difficulty with the dress size—you being so small, you understand—but Harriet made a quick adjustment to the seams so that it would fit. I've told one of the maids to have some hot water brought up.'

'Thank you—and thank you for the bed. It's the best I've slept in for a long time. You've been very kind.'

'What's your name, love?'

'E—Ed,' she replied hesitantly, her voice hoarse.

The older woman raised an elegant brow. 'Oh, come now. It was no stripling lad I undressed last night—though you'd have everyone believe that, wouldn't you? You might have fooled Adam, but you can't fool me.'

Edwina's composure began to crumble when she recalled seeing Adam outside the theatre. He must have witnessed what happened and rescued her from Jack. 'Adam? Adam brought me here?'

'That he did, and most concerned he was, too. Now, what's your real name?'

'Edwina.'

'And how old are you?'

'Eighteen.'

Dolly's stare was forthright, her tone gentle. 'Why are you masquerading as a boy? Running away from someone, are you?'

'You—might say that,' she answered, convinced Jack would come after her—or worse, that he would put the law on her.

'Well—you'll be safe now. There's no where safer in the whole of London, dearie, than Dolly's Place. No constable will venture inside this house.'

'No?'

'It's a bordello, love,' Harriet quipped saucily, her eyes twinkling. 'Of the prestigious kind, of course. Don't you worry, though,' she said, winking cheekily. 'You needn't sell your favours if you have no mind to. Although, we could teach you all you need to know to be a fitting companion for the gentlemen who visit here—but,' she went on, wrinkling her nose with distaste at Edwina's greasy hair and dirty face, 'we'd have to fatten you up a bit and do something about your appearance first.'

'Stop it, Harriet,' Dolly reproached, a chuckle taking out the sting. 'You'll embarrass our young guest.'

Edwina stared from one to the other in shocked incomprehension. She was in a bordello, a den of depravity, and this kindly lady was a procuress. 'Companion? You mean whore!' she blurted out hotly. 'I will not sell my body.' She had not given up her life as a thief to become a whore. That would be too much to be borne.

As soon as she had said the words Edwina was contrite. It was a harsh remark, and it must have hurt, she could see that. Harriet didn't reply at first, and then a faint smile curved her lips. The lovely, vivacious young woman with lively, laughing hazel eyes was too worldly to be upset by a remark that must have been hurled at her many times.

'Don't judge me or the other girls who work at Dolly's Place too harshly, Edwina. Life isn't always as clear cut as it might seem.'

'You're right. I, more than most, should know that. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for helping me. I owe you and Mrs Drinkwater a huge debt of gratitude,' she murmured, smiling at Mrs Drinkwater as she went out. 'I'm sorry, Harriet. I meant no offence.'

'None taken, love. What I do helps pay the rent, and a girl needs all the help she can get. I've no romantic illusions about what I do—I've grown used to having insults thrown at me. Reality surrounds

me every day, and I face it resolutely—shoulders squared.' She shrugged and smiled prettily. 'What other way is there? Now, eat your breakfast before it gets cold. I'll go and see where that girl's got to with your bath.'

The maid who carried the water and prepared Edwina's bath could not suppress her curiosity at the young person with cropped hair. But nothing was said, and after laying out soap and towels she left the room. Alone at last, immediately Edwina was out of bed and lowering herself into the hot scented water, revelling in the sheer luxury. She scrubbed weeks-old grime from her skin and soaped the gnarled thatch of hair, careful when she washed over the cut on the side of her face, which was extremely tender.

When she was satisfied that she was clean, she relaxed and closed her eyes. Her body now smelled of roses, and not the hateful stench of poverty. Not knowing what would happen next, and that there was every possibility that she would be turned back out onto to street, she was determined to savour the moment to the full.

It was mid-morning when Adam arrived at Dolly's Place. Striding with a natural exuberance into the spacious hall, with elegant, sumptuously carpeted and furnished gaming rooms leading off, he was met by Dolly herself. She ran her establishment and her girls with stern efficiency and the keen eye of an army commander, and no one seeing her now, bright and cheerful as ever, would suspect that she would not have sought her bed until the dawn light was peeping over the horizon.

With a smile curving her lips, she swept an eye of admiring approval over Adam's well-groomed form. He was attired in buff-coloured breeches above trim brown knee boots, a cream silk waistcoat embroidered with silver fleurs-de-lis, and a superbly cut tan frock coat, the lace tumbling from his jabot and spilling over his wrists of the finest quality.

Darkly handsome and imbued with potent masculine allure, he exuded virility and a casual, lazy confidence. There was little wonder women were eager for his affections, falling over themselves in the rush to get close to him. Seeing him here at her humble establishment was like seeing a royal prince consorting with the commoners.

Mid-morning, and with most of the girls still sleeping off a busy night, the establishment was relatively quiet.

'How's Ed? How does he fare this morning, Dolly?' Adam enquired briskly, removing his gloves and placing them with his tricorn on an occasional table at the bottom of the wide, white marble staircase.

'She's much better—and cleaner,' Dolly replied, preceding him up the stairs. She paused and glanced back at him, her eyes sparkling. 'I think you'll be impressed.'

'She?' Adam asked, standing stock still and staring up at her blankly.

'Yes, she,' Dolly repeated, enjoying his confusion. 'Ed—or perhaps I should say Edwina—my dear Adam, is no boy.'

'He isn't? Don't be ridiculous, Dolly. Have you taken leave of your senses?'

'No—' Dolly chuckled richly '—but you must have if you, of all people, can't tell the difference. You have been completely hoodwinked. Now stop gawping and come and see.'

She ushered Adam inside the room before making herself scarce. A young woman dressed in an extremely fetching buttercup-yellow dress stood by the window, her hands clasped at her trim waist. Small and as slender as a willow, she was watching him warily. Without taking his eyes off her, he moved towards her, staring in disbelief. Could this delectable, lovely young creature be the boy Ed? Reaching out, he cupped her chin in his hand, raising her face. He could only stare in wonder at the face that was unmistakably Ed's.

'Good Lord!' The words were uttered on a breath. 'I should have known.' She had a femininity he could have put to his lips and drunk, and she was so close he could feel her breathing, feel the warmth of her, and smell her natural scent.

Never had he seen such shimmering perfection in his life before, as he did now, when he gazed at her vibrant copper-and-gold-coloured hair curling in soft, feathery wisps, framing a finely proportioned visage, flawless, except for the small cut and purple bruise on her temple. Her eyes were as he remembered, a sparkling shade of blue-green—jade, he now noted with an artist's expert eye. She wore an expression that combined vitality and youthful curiosity, without appearing indelicate or wanton. She was quite enchanting.

Rather nervously Edwina withstood the intensity of his gaze, meeting those disturbing deep blue eyes of his levelled on her own. His dark brows lifted a fraction in bland enquiry.

'Do you mind?'

Edwina continued to stare up at him, aware of two things—his darkly handsome face, and the richly textured deep voice. The combination sent a peculiar warmth up her spine.

'Mind?' she repeated stupidly.

'If I look at you.'

'No—oh, no.'

A chuckle started deep in his chest. 'Well, Ed? What do you have to say for this deception?' he asked, dropping his hand and taking a step back.

His eyes were dark, probing, quizzical. His smile was rakishly winsome, and must have fluttered many feminine hearts. 'I say it was no deception. You seem surprised—about my being a girl, I mean.'

'Frankly, my dear, I believe you to be full of surprises.'

'Are you disappointed?'

'A little. It means I can no longer employ you to look for Toby.'

'I don't see why that should make a difference. I can revert back to Ed any time I choose.'

Adam laughed lightly, not taking her reply seriously. Her voice was soft centred, lovely, creamy. The vivid colour of her dress brought a glow to her pale skin. Without realising it she was standing straight, her head high. There was the hint of the kind of sophistication that seemed natural to young ladies of breeding—straight shoulders, the confidence of a level gaze, smooth line of spine, with no slouch.

'I must thank you for coming to my aid last night. I hope it didn't spoil your evening at the theatre,' Edwina remarked, wondering who the dark-haired woman was and how closely linked they were.

'I was glad to be on hand to render assistance,' he said rather formally. 'I'm afraid the ruffian who attacked you got clean away. Now—explain to me what has prompted you to adopt such a mode of attire.'

'I dressed as a boy for my own protection. As a girl in St Giles I would have been ready bait.' She gazed steadily into his clear blue eyes. 'You are a man, so you will know what I mean.'

'Perfectly. However, you seemed well at home in your boy's clothes—but I like these better,' he murmured in such a way that it brought an embarrassed flush to Edwina's cheeks.

Having played the lad so long, she found the conversion to feminine ways difficult. Besides, with the air positively crackling with Adam's virile presence, for the first time in her life she had met a man who made her feel alert and alive, and curiously stimulated.

'I don't know your reasons for the masquerade,' he went on, recalling their conversation in the alehouse when the boy Ed had told him he had secrets he wished to keep, 'nor do I particularly want to know. Suffice it to say that is your business—not mine. What we must decide is what is to be done with you. Just how old are you?'

'Eighteen.'

'I thought you were much younger. And the man who attacked you? Who was he?'

'That was Jack.'

'Your fence—receiver?'

'Yes.'

‘And is he aware of your sex?’

‘No. No one is. I told you, it was for my own protection that I dressed as a boy.’

‘Yes, I can understand that. Why did he attack you?’

‘Because I ran away.’

‘Are you afraid of him?’

‘I’m afraid he will put the law on me—that I will go to prison—and because I ran away from him nothing would please Jack more than to see me rotting in a filthy cell. If he were to discover I am a girl in boy’s clothing, it would simply amuse him, and he would use it against me.’

‘Then he would do well to remember that receiving is as much a capital felony as the stealing of the goods.’

‘He knows that, but he is shamelessly bold and hardened above cautionary fear, working in an organised and far-ranging manner. He controls shoplifters and housebreakers, but I never progressed further than picking pockets. He despises laws and will carry on with his wicked trade, making sure he never hands over stolen goods himself, but craftsmen he employs—paying them handsomely so that they will keep their mouths shut, making them unidentifiable first.

‘He always uses someone else to exchange the spoils for money at a time and place arranged by him.’ She looked up into Adam’s warm blue eyes. ‘I have no money, nothing of my own, and when Jack took me in I knew I was on the road to prison, or worse—to the noose at Tyburn.’

‘Why did you stay with him?’ Adam asked gently. ‘Why didn’t you run away sooner?’

‘I couldn’t. I was afraid—and no one runs away from Jack,’ she said quietly. Those few words held a world of meaning that Adam fully understood. ‘Jack humbled me, confused me and seriously diminished my own sense of worth, and I could not seem to be able to clamber out of the dark hole into which I had fallen. Besides, it was inconceivable for me to return to my former life. I had nowhere to run to. I couldn’t see the point in exchanging one hell for another.’ She shrugged. ‘What’s the difference? When I did finally pluck up the courage and left Jack, hoping to find your Toby and receive payment, I staunchly decided to take charge of my own life and to choose its direction. I made up my mind to live decently, to find work of some kind to support myself.’

‘Dolly may be able to help you there,’ Adam suggested casually.

Offended by what she thought he was implying, Edwina drew herself up proudly and raised her chin to a lofty angle. ‘I may not be honest, sir, but I would never stoop so low as to become a whore.’

Observing that her eyes were dark with anger, Adam suppressed a smile and directed a stern countenance at her. ‘I was not suggesting that you should. That was certainly not what I meant.’

‘Besides, I’m unattractive and skinny, with none of the curves required to be one of Dolly’s girls, and not much hair to speak of, either,’ she said, running her fingers through the short, wispy tresses.

Perching his tall frame on the edge of a dresser and folding his arms across his chest, Adam arched his eyebrows, squinting at her with his head cocked to one side as he made a study of her. The purity of her face was quite striking. With her large eyes and unbelievably long dark eyelashes resting against her smooth, high cheeks, she looked innocent and incredibly lovely. She glowed with that strange fragile beauty of a young woman newly awakened to her sex, a nymph, clothed in bright yellow finery. Not for the first time, he wished he could immortalise her on canvas, but could he—or any artist—do justice to her flawless beauty? He smiled inwardly at the poetic bent of his thoughts and the challenge she presented.

‘Allow me to disagree. You are a remarkably beautiful young woman. You have the kind of unusual looks that put you in a class by yourself. The colour of your hair is divine—such radiance. You have a good neck and an excellent bone structure, and your features, particularly your eyes, are perfect.’

Edwina’s lips twitched slightly as she tried to suppress a smile. ‘In the past I’ve often been called sweet and sometimes pretty, but no one has ever complimented me—in such a matter-of-fact way—about my bone structure or my long neck. I don’t quite know whether to feel flattered or offended.’

‘I meant it as a compliment. I speak as I find. What happened to the five guineas I gave you?’

‘I had to give them to Jack.’

‘Had to? I gave the money to you, not Jack,’ he admonished sharply, coming to his feet.

‘I know better than to cheat him.’ Edwina was downcast. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. Having witnessed his brutality at first hand, perhaps it was as well. Did you manage to make enquiries about Toby?’

‘Yes. As you know, cripples are a common sight, and no one I asked remembered seeing a boy who answered to that name. One woman vaguely recalled seeing a man and woman with a boy, a crippled boy, about a week ago, but they left St Giles and took to the road.’

Interest flickered in Adam’s eyes. ‘Anything else?’

‘Yes. They had a bear with them.’

Adam lowered his eyelids and reflected for a moment. ‘A man and woman, you say?’

She nodded. ‘Do you think the boy might be Toby?’

‘It’s possible,’ he replied absently as he began to pace restlessly about the room, frowning thoughtfully.

‘Who is this boy? What does he mean to you?’

‘He is my cousin’s child—the son of a young woman who died a while back. Even though I have never laid eyes on Toby, he means a great deal to me.’

‘Do you fear for his safety?’

‘Naturally, but I don’t think he’ll come to harm while he can earn money at freak shows.’ His frown deepened. ‘A crippled boy and a bear,’ he murmured, tossing the image around in his head. ‘A useful combination. Unless they have transport of some kind I don’t believe they will leave London. I can only surmise the man and woman are to display them to the curious at fairs and markets, and if so I’ll find them.’

Edwina’s eyes lit with interest. ‘Are you going to look for them? If so, will you take me with you?’ she asked enthusiastically. ‘Two pairs of eyes will be better than one.’

Her words caught all Adam’s attention. He ceased pacing and looked at her with narrowed eyes. What she was asking was out of the question. But what was he going to do with her? As a lad he’d have no qualms about taking her along—but this young woman was a different matter entirely.

‘No.’

Watching his finely moulded lips form his answer, Edwina was surprised and mortified by his refusal, and also a little angry, but she was even more surprised by the unmistakable regret she’d heard in his voice. ‘But why not?’ she argued.

‘For a start, fairs are known to attract violence and vice. Some are also well known centres for the distribution of stolen goods, places where criminals congregate—although I’m sure you will know all about that,’ he remarked with meaningful sarcasm. ‘Not only do you run the risk of meeting Jack, but you also risk being robbed or crushed to death—as small as you are.’

‘Do you mean to frighten me with a description of what it is like to come into contact with thieves and cutthroats, when I have lived among them for six months of my life?’

‘Aye, as an insignificant lad. If you were to appear among them now, looking as you do, you wouldn’t last five minutes. You are not an easy woman to ignore.’

Edwina was indignant. Her head lifted and her chin squared up to him, the action saying quite clearly that she was contemptuous of being told what to do by anyone. ‘I don’t need to be protected,’ she said boldly. Her anger made her eyes gleam like green stones, and her mouth hardened to unsmiling resentment.

‘And I don’t expect to have my decision questioned,’ Adam rapped out. Despite his anger he admired her courage. She did not cower, but flashed her sparkling eyes in a defiant challenge to his authority.

Edwina clenched her teeth and held back her retort. Adam's stern, stiff-backed hauteur irritated her. All trace of softness had vanished from his face. His dark brows were drawn together, and his blue eyes were cold. The words were an order, one he expected her to obey.

'The majority of the men swilling ale will be drunk out of their minds, and there is always the possibility of you bumping into Jack. The man is dangerous. It's advisable not to put yourself in his path.'

Edwina met his dark scowl with a heated glower, her fingers drumming upon her slim hips. Her expression dared him to attempt control of her. 'Thank you for your concern, but I don't remember giving you the right to tell me what I can and cannot do. Who do you think you are, anyway?'

'Your saviour, it would seem,' Adam replied drily. 'Listen to what I'm saying, will you, and take heed? I'm more advanced in years than you, so I know what I'm talking about. It's a man's world out there, Ed.'

'You're right, but that does not mean that I have to submit to their will. My own strength was my only weapon when I defied Jack Pierce and ran away, and that will is still as strong as it ever was.'

'Nevertheless, the places I intend searching are no place for a respectable young woman.'

'I am not a respectable young woman,' she argued heatedly, firmly, 'who needs cosseting—to be treated like some fragile sugar confection. I can handle myself.'

'As you did last night? If you could handle yourself you wouldn't be here now,' he pointed out. 'I will not take you with me and that is my final word on the subject.'

These words were delivered in a cold, lethal voice, and Edwina grew pale beneath her own anger. 'If I have a mind I shall return to the streets, and there's not a thing you can do about it.' She was adamant and not to be put off by his anger. He was standing not three feet away from her, looming over her, his blue eyes gleaming with deadly purpose, and the uncompromising lines at the sides of his mouth had not been there before. She could see that same cold rage as when she'd stolen his watch, and also a cynicism and ruthless set of his jaw—things she'd obviously been too blinded by her predicament to see before. 'You can't stop me. I'll disguise myself as a boy again,' Edwina persisted.

'And then Jack would be sure to recognise you—and if he's as angry as you say he is, he'll be looking for you. No, Ed. You must abandon your disguise for good.'

'I will do as I please,' she persisted crossly.

'I'm sure you will, you stubborn, wilful little fool,' Adam retorted, combing his fingers through his hair in exasperation. 'I have been in your company twice and each time you've been in some scrape or other. Little did I realise when I rescued you from that animal's clutches that I was committing myself to certain disaster.'

'My, a proper knight in shining armour, aren't you, Adam? I didn't ask you to interfere,' Edwina snapped.

'Why, you—damn you for an ingrate.' He stood in front of her, looking down at her upturned face. It had whitened with her anger, revealing the pale freckles across her nose. The sunlight lancing through the window brightened her hair to a living flame, making an aureole of light around her small, proud head. He looked at her thoughtfully, touched by her vulnerability. He felt himself dwelling with a good deal of pleasure on what it would be like to get to know her better. But as he looked at her, a kind of rage welled up in him against Jack Pierce, and also against the person or persons who had abandoned her to a life of crime, alone on the streets, through no fault of her own.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound so brutal. But can't you see that I am concerned about your present distress and offer my assistance only with the kindest intent?' he said on a softer note.

The faintest of smiles curved his lips, so slight it was scarcely discernible. Edwina felt a poignant emotion welling up inside her, a tenderness she never believed she could feel for any human being. Immediately the fight went out of her. She moved closer to him.

'If I offended you, then I beg your pardon. I've been on my own and had to look out for myself for too long. It's such a long time since anyone showed any concern about me, about what I do, that

it takes some getting used to. I'm sorry I made you angry. Please don't be. I'd rather we were friends than enemies.' She offered him her hand as was proper.

The gesture made Adam smile suddenly, a slow, startlingly lazy smile as he took her hand in his firm grasp. His gaze scanned her face, and when he raised her hand to his lips the pressure of his mouth lingered longer than was customary.

'Friends we are, Ed, or may I call you Edwina?'

'As you please.'

'Then Edwina it is. So, now that is established, what am I supposed to do with you? You've made it plain that you will feel uncomfortable living here. And you can forget any notion you have of donning your boy's clothes and taking to the streets. You've done with that.'

'Then what am I to do? I must earn some money. How else am I to live?'

Adam's eyes narrowed, studying her with unnerving intensity for a moment as he considered her situation carefully. Ever since their first meeting the lad 'Ed' had haunted him. And now he'd been transformed into female form, he couldn't let this young woman with the most remarkable face he'd ever seen simply walk out of his life.

Aware that his fascination was rapidly winning out over his common sense, he said to his own utter astonishment, 'You could come and live with me for the time being.' She looked so surprised and so hesitant for a moment that he wished he had not made the extraordinary, impulsive suggestion, but when he saw a little smile tug at the corners of her lips, he knew she was not as shocked as he at first thought.

'Live with you?' she murmured, seeing his blue eyes darken to indigo. 'Do—do you want me to work for you?'

'In a manner of speaking.'

'I—I'm not very good at woman's work. I—I can't cook.'

'I don't need a cook,' he said, mentally shaking his head at the naïvety of her. 'That position is already taken—and I have servants enough to administer to my personal needs.'

'Then what would you require of me?'

'Oh—this and that.' His smile was lazy and infuriatingly secretive.

Misinterpreting his meaning, Edwina flushed scarlet. 'Kindly explain what you mean by "this and that"?' she asked tentatively in an attempt to clarify matters. 'Do you mean to establish me as your paramour? If so, I must tell you that I will be no man's property. I intend standing on my own feet.'

Adam's eyes took on a humorous glint. He placed a finger over her lips. 'Heaven forbid I would dare suggest anything so bold. You would never be my property, Edwina. What I will ask of you will take very little effort on your part, I can promise you that,' he said softly, 'but I think you will enjoy the work. I'll pay you generously, if that's what's worrying you, but I must warn you that I'm a hard taskmaster. Shortly, I have to go away for a while. Since I shall be absent for quite some time you are welcome to make use of my house. Now, I have to go. I have pressing matters to attend to.'

He took her hand, and when he would have raised it once more to his lips she pulled it away and stepped back with an arch smile.

'You take a liberty. Do you make a habit of kissing the hands of all your employees?'

'It's not usual.'

'Then as my employer you'll not kiss mine.' Edwina raised a brow and regarded him with the same amusement he had earlier directed at her.

Adam was clearly at pains to control his laughter as he playfully chucked her under the chin. 'Cheeky as ever! You are a most uncommon, intractable wench, Edwina.'

'I merely protect my honour,' she countered. 'But isn't what you are proposing to do rather shocking and likely to be frowned upon by polite society?'

'Being an unconventional man, I care nothing for polite society.'

She cocked her head to one side, giving him an enquiring look. ‘Forgive me, but I can’t help noticing that you’re on familiar terms with Mrs Drinkwater. Do you often visit her establishment?’

He grinned. ‘It’s not my habit to visit bordellos. I’ve known Dolly since I was a small boy. She used to work for my family as housekeeper. When she left she decided to settle for something less respectable, but far more remunerative.’

‘And is there a Mr Drinkwater?’

‘Once. He was laid to rest many years ago. Dolly and I always keep in touch. I’ll have a word with her on my way out and tell her what we’ve decided.’

He strode towards the door where he turned and looked back at her. For a moment his gaze held hers with penetrating intensity, and unexpectedly Edwina felt an answering frisson of excitement. The slight smile that curved his lips warned her he was aware of that brief response. His eyes moved over her face as if he were memorising it, and then, with a slight satisfied nod of his handsome head, he left her.

Chapter Four

T he thought of going with Adam to his home, working for him, had great appeal. It loomed on the horizon of Edwina's mind like a sweet haven…waiting. Peace and quiet was what she wanted. No more Jack. No more Uncle Henry. No more Earl of Taplow.

No sooner had Adam left than Harriet breezed in. She was certainly different to anyone Edwina had ever known, and it was impossible not to warm to her.

'So, you know the great Adam Rycroft!' Harriet exclaimed, sitting on the edge of the silk-covered bed.

'Yes, but not very well. He—he's asked me to work for him.'

'Oh? Doing what?'

'That's just it. I don't know.'

'He comes here often to see Mrs Drinkwater. She's quite fond of him—known him since he was a lad, apparently. He's very popular with the ladies, and he's a connoisseur of beautiful women.'

'And he makes love to them all, I expect,' Edwina said laughing softly. Spectacularly good looking and imbued with potent masculine allure, she was sure Adam Rycroft was rarely refused.

Harriet smiled knowingly, lying back and propping herself up on her elbow. 'More than likely. He's no saint where women are concerned. But mostly he paints them—professionally, of course.'

Edwina looked at her with surprised amazement, settling herself down on the bed facing her. 'He's an artist?' Recalling the sketch Adam had made of her, she should have known. She shook her head at the mysterious combination of gentleman and painter. 'Is he good?'

'I'm no judge, but some say he's the best—a genius. His pictures cost the earth. You, I wager, are going to be the subject of a painting. He must want you to sit for him, that'll be what he wants you to do.'

'Sit?'

'Be a model—so he can paint you. Make the most of it, love. Duchesses and the like consider it a privilege to sit for the great man. There are many women who would die to be in your shoes.'

Edwina was impressed. 'You obviously like him.'

'Oh, he's quite endearing, really. He's rich, has oodles of charm when he chooses to employ it, but the man's like a human whirlwind and a positive despot when he's at his easel. Don't let him browbeat and bully you. When he's involved in a painting he loses all track of time. He'll have you sitting there for hours if you let him. I sat for him once—once was enough, believe me. A girl could catch her death sitting for him.'

'Oh?'

'He's a master of the human form, love—the female form—and there's more than one model he's painted in the nude. Mind you, he has to pay extra for a girl to take her clothes off. Titled ladies flock to have him paint them, and they all fall prey to his fatal attraction. By the time he's finished they're head over heels in love with him—and more than one husband regrets his choice of artist to paint his wife.'

'Goodness! Why on earth would he want to paint me?'

'Probably because you're different to all the other models who grace his couch. Your face is unusual—interesting, he would call it. He probably sees you as a challenge, love. Who knows—' she laughed, tossing her head so her auburn curls bounced '—you might turn out to be his greatest masterpiece yet. He might even make you famous.'

'I sincerely hope not. I don't want to be famous. That kind of notoriety I can do without,' she said, thinking of Uncle Henry. Her uncle was a man of fine tastes. In particular he was an avid admirer of paintings, and had built up an enviable collection over the years. Many of the paintings he hung for their quality rather than decoration, which was the case in many houses. If he were to see one of

her, he would know exactly where to come looking for her. Her mind shied away from the thought. 'But what's Adam like, Harriet, really?'

'Well,' she said, lowering her eyes and reflecting for a moment, 'he's certainly a complex character, and he can be utterly ruthless at times. So be warned, Edwina. His fury is unequalled when roused—as I and some of the other girls who have sat for him know to our cost, having been on the receiving end.'

'Is he married?' Edwina asked, thinking of the stunningly beautiful brunette she had seen him with outside the theatre.

'No, love. Adam Rycroft is a self-proclaimed single man, although he's always careful to choose a mistress whose company he enjoys. She has to be unmarried, passionate and experienced, and highly pleasurable in bed, a woman who will not mistake lovemaking and desire with love—who will make no demands and expect no promises.'

'Goodness, you make him sound cold hearted and self-centred.'

'He's certainly volatile. I don't think anyone's got his true measure—except Mrs Drinkwater, perhaps, but she guards her tongue whenever she speaks of him. He's totally committed to his work, a perfectionist, and he won't allow anything or anyone to interfere with that. Have you given any thought as to where you will live?'

'He—he's offered to let me stay in his house.'

The words brought Harriet upright. 'Ooh—now that is a first! And you said yes.'

She nodded. 'I've nowhere else to go, Harriet—only back to the streets and my life as a thief.'

Harriet's eyes opened wide in shocked amazement. 'Thief?'

'Yes. I picked pockets.' Edwina smiled, feeling a slight unease at disclosing her criminal past, but somehow she didn't think Harriet would judge her.

She was right. Harriet sat up with a joyous laugh. 'I insist that you tell me every single detail of this unbelievable story if I have to wring it out of you with my own bare hands. Now, begin at the beginning.'

Edwina started to refuse, but Harriet looked so determined that it was useless. Besides, she suddenly wanted to talk about it, and found herself giving Harriet a brief account of what her life had been like working for Jack for the past six months, talking to this engaging girl as she had never talked to anyone before. At the end of the story Harriet stared at her with a combination of mirth and wonder. 'Does that shock you?'

'No more than you were, when you realised the great Adam Rycroft had brought you to a brothel and I was one of Mrs Drinkwater's whores,' she remarked, gulping down a giggle. 'It's too delicious for words.'

'Do you live here, Harriet?'

'No. Some of the girls do, but I don't. I've got a room over a bakery off Drury Lane. It's not very big, and it's by no means grand, but it's mine. Every night I work one of the gaming tables at Dolly's Place, and afterwards…' she shrugged, unabashed '…well, you know.'

'Yes. Haven't you got a family, Harriet?'

She nodded. 'Across the river in Rotherhithe. Why?'

'And—do they approve of what you do?'

A frown marred Harriet's smooth forehead as she considered the question for a moment before replying. 'I suppose not. It did cross my mind in the beginning that there is something to be ashamed of in my profession—and, in fact, there is, but my mother is poor with four little ones to bring up alone since my father died. He worked in the shipbuilding trade and met with an accident, which killed him. I send my mother what I can. She doesn't question me how I earn it.' She shrugged. 'It doesn't mean she doesn't love me. It doesn't matter,' she said simply.

Edwina shook her head, unconvinced, and then, placing a hand over Harriet's, said, 'It doesn't matter to me, either, Harriet.' There could be nothing wonderful or exciting about Harriet's profession,

but her open friendliness spoke volumes about her. There was something about her that inspired trust and put one completely at ease. Harriet Crabtree might be a whore and wicked in the eyes of some, but in this age of cruelty and unconcern she had a caring nature and a kind heart, and these were rare. 'Do you know, I'm glad I've met you.'

'Really? I feel the same way,' Harriet confessed ingenuously. 'I wish you weren't leaving.' With a disheartened sigh she stood up, eyeing the dress Edwina was wearing. 'I'm glad the dress fits. I'll try and find you some more clothes. You'll have to have something to wear until you can buy some of your own.' She smiled, holding out her hand. 'Before the great man comes to fetch you, come and meet the others girls—the ones who have managed to crawl out of bed, that is.'

The afternoon was hot and sultry when Edwina, clad in her donated finery, climbed into Adam Rycroft's shiny black carriage. It was drawn by a matching pair of prancing bays and driven by a scarlet-and-gold-liveried servant. She settled back against the luxurious cream upholstery, wondering if all that was happening to her was a continuing dream. Was she really sitting in a grand carriage with a handsome stranger, travelling across London to goodness knows where? She also wondered how foolhardy she had been to accept Adam's proposal that she stay at his house.

The driver whipped up the horses and the carriage slowly negotiated the congested, twisting alleyways. Covent Garden had long been the most popular haunt of painters, with several resident on the piazza, so Edwina was pleasantly surprised when the carriage rumbled north towards Mayfair, where Adam told her he had a house on the Grosvenor Estate.

No one took any notice of the man standing across the street from Dolly's place. It was Jack Pierce. After his assault on Edwina, but before disappearing into London's back streets, he'd glanced back just in time to see Adam carry the unconscious form inside Dolly's Place. Determined not to let Ed slip away without him seeing, he'd come back to watch the building and learn the identity of the man who'd interfered, surprised to discover his name was Adam Rycroft, the man who'd hired Ed to find the boy Toby. Jack had thought his luck was in when Rycroft appeared earlier in his carriage and entered the building. Convinced they would emerge together, he'd been disappointed when he left with a young woman and drove away.

Seated across from Edwina, Adam stretched his long legs out, crossing them at the ankles. He eyed her in watchful curiosity, dwelling on the perverse quirk of fate that had caused her to be sitting opposite him, and wondering what he had let himself in for by inviting this curious, fascinating young woman into his home. Hers was not a soothing or a restful presence, and he strongly suspected that she did not intend it to be. The impression she conveyed was one of confidence and intense and challenging self-knowledge, defying anyone to catch her out in complacency or self-delusion, but he was not to know that at that moment, under his watchful and penetrating gaze, some of Edwina's confidence was sliding away.

Studying him surreptitiously, she sensed that beneath his relaxed exterior there was a power and forcefulness carefully restrained, and she wondered how different the tyrannical artist Harriet had described to her differed from this gentleman of leisure. It had been so long since she had conversed with people other than beggars and thieves, that now she found herself alone with Adam she suddenly felt gauche and ill at ease.

'So, Edwina,' Adam said at length. 'No doubt Harriet or one of the other girls has enlightened you as to what your work will involve.'

Edwina watched him settle himself more comfortably with that same natural grace that seemed so much a part of him. She gave him a direct, appraising stare. 'Not very much, it would seem. Do you really want to paint me?'

'I do. I must,' he replied quietly, watching her.

'I can't imagine why.'

Adam's brows lifted over sardonic blue eyes. 'I can.'

She flushed softly, deciding it best not to proceed along this path, and to turn the conversation from herself. 'What else do you paint—or do you just paint people?'

'I paint all manner of things—landscapes and whatever else takes my fancy, but painting people is my bread and butter. I find it necessary to cater to the whims and predilections of my commissioners.'

'In which case I would imagine it's unlikely that such paintings will have appeal to anyone other than the client.'

'True. Unfortunately most of my clients are infatuated with "face painting", and fill their houses with family portraits, leaving little scope for the artist to indulge upon. These paintings rarely enter the open market. No one wants to buy paintings of another person's family.'

'I can understand that. And are you good at what you do?'

'I think the people who view my paintings are the ones you ought to ask.'

He was watching her thoughtfully, a strange, unfathomable smile tugging at his lips. He seemed so strong, so self-assured, appearing to hold himself apart from the world, and yet, with his mere presence, dominating the scene around him as he did now. His voice was rich and pleasing to the ear, and Edwina began to wonder if he had any flaw she could touch upon. Watching the satisfied look on his face, she gave up trying to discern what his faults might be. Tipping her head on one side she remarked, 'You look rather pleased with yourself.'

'I should. I have just acquired the most enchanting model. You played the part of a lad so well it's difficult to keep in mind you are, in fact, a very lovely young lady. I look forward to painting you Edwina…?'

His gaze was searching, delving, and Edwina met it directly. 'Just Edwina,' she replied, feeling no compunction to enlighten him beyond that. She was not yet ready to divulge her surname, and she liked and respected him too much to lie by fabricating another. Besides, precepts of conscience forbade it. 'I don't think you need to know more than that if all you are going to do is paint me.'

The bright blue eyes considered the young woman opposite without a hint of expression. When he realised that she had no intention of elaborating further, with slow deliberation he nodded. 'I have many skeletons in my own cupboard, Edwina, that I'm careful not to rattle for fear of which one will tumble out first. Since you are obviously reluctant to share your name with me, I will respect your wish for privacy and not persist.'

'I am obliged,' she said, thinking it a strange thing for him to say and wondering at his own secrets. 'Do you have a family?' she asked, unable to staunch her own curiosity about him.

His expression became guarded. All his life he had kept his emotions locked in an iron heart. He wasn't about to change that. 'My parents died when I was a boy. I have no other relatives.'

'I see. I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. That's how I like it,' he retorted, his tone harsher than he intended as he turned away.

Edwina watched him. She sensed that his ruthlessness, his power over others, the sheer devil-may-care brilliance of his life, were not the reality of him. He seemed to have come from nowhere. He didn't have a father or mother. That struck a perfect chord in Edwina. That was how she came to detect the loneliness in him.

'Why did you offer to let me stay at your house? According to Harriet, you never extend the same hospitality to any of your other models.'

'That's because my other models are not usually homeless. You are. Besides, I consider you an investment. I don't want you disappearing when I'm halfway through painting you. There is, of course, the rather delicate matter of your reputation to consider. It's hardly a respectable situation. I trust there will be no irate relative who will come and snatch you away?'

'Being respectable doesn't concern me any more. It's a little late in the day to begin worrying about my reputation. Whatever reputation I had to speak of was shredded long ago. I took care of that myself,' she said quietly.

The blue eyes lightly swept her, and, catching her own, held them with a smiling warmth. 'Do you never think about your life before you became a thief?'

'Not if I can help it. That way life is bearable. I am no longer the girl I was before I came to London. That girl has ceased to exist. In her place stands another, no longer a prisoner of convention, but most of all a woman who is mistress of her own fate. So, you see, you needn't worry, Adam. No irate relative will come knocking at your door.' After a moment she said, 'Harriet says you're extremely talented.'

'Do you doubt it?'

'No. That sketch you did of me was very good. I still have it,' she said, patting the brocade-and-beaded bag by her side, which one of Mrs Drinkwater's girls had given to her. 'I shall keep it always.'

'Why? It was done in a hurry and is not very good. I'll sketch you another—a better one.'

'I shall still keep that one. It will always remind me of a time when I was as low as I could get and pretty desperate—and prevent me from ever becoming that desperate again.' She fixed him with a level gaze. 'How much will you pay me for being a model?'

Adam became thoughtful. In any of his business ventures he was regarded as a tough negotiator and he would never ruin his own negotiating position by helping his opponents to see the worth of what they held, and the beneficial terms they might extract from him because of it. In Edwina's case, however, he would do just that. 'What are your terms?' he countered. 'I've made no secret of how much I want to paint you. I'm scarcely in a position to argue.'

Edwina hesitated, half-embarrassed. She hadn't expected him to tip the balance of power into her hands. 'I suppose we'll have to negotiate,' she said with imperturbable feminine logic.

'That seems reasonable to me.'

'Money is the solution to all my troubles. Of course, I do understand that, if you are to house and feed me until the painting is completed, you will have to deduct the cost from whatever I earn as your muse. I—I shall want enough to take me to France.'

'Done,' he agreed with alacrity, while wondering what there was for her in France that was so important. 'I will be generous with you, Edwina,' he said gently. 'You hold something of value that I want. I am willing to pay you dearly. When the painting is finished I will furnish you with more than enough money to take you round the world if need be.'

Edwina saw the admiration in his smile and smiled a little in return. 'Thank you—but I have no wish to travel to such lengths. France will do. In return, I will endeavour to be a good model and keep very quiet so as not to distract you from your work.'

Adam grinned. 'Never waver when you've successfully negotiated terms and won. Would you like what we've agreed written down and witnessed, or—in the light of your recent masquerade—shall we shake on it and call it a gentleman's agreement?'

Edwina's smile widened at the teasing light that twinkled in his eyes. She reached out and shook his proffered hand firmly. 'A gentleman's agreement will suffice, I think. I trust you implicitly. Am I likely to meet any of your other models?'

'At present, no. One model at a time is enough for any artist to have to cope with.'

'But what about all those people who commission you to paint them?'

'I've put them on hold for the time being. I have a far more interesting subject to paint,' he murmured, his voice silky soft.

The effect of that warmly intimate look in his eyes, which was vibrantly, alarmingly alive, and the full import of the risk she was taking by being with him, made Edwina quake inside. She did not know this man at all, and yet he was watching her with a look that was much too personal—and possessive. 'I—I have never considered myself interesting,' she stammered. 'I've never had any pretensions to beauty—in fact, I've always considered my looks, like my views, unconventional.'

'I won't argue with that. To me you are unusual, Edwina, an individual, and luckily for you, you are sufficiently sensible to be neither ostracised nor derided for it, but admired, which is the reaction

I hope my painting of you will provoke in those who look at it.' He grinned when he saw his remark pleased her. 'Don't let it go to your head. If you're to sit for me, you'll have to learn to sit still and not fidget like that,' he chided gently, observing how uneasy she seemed to be. With her hands fluttering in her lap, she radiated a nervous energy. 'We'll begin work in the morning. Early.'

She scowled across at him, irritated by his imperious tone. 'I do hope you're not going to turn out to be the temperamental monster everyone accuses you of being?'

He arched a lazy black brow. 'Everyone?'

'Harriet,' she confessed. 'She also told me you have a vile temper.'

'Harriet always did have plenty to say,' he retorted drily. 'You'll have to get used to the way I am. We're going to be spending a lot of time together.' He chuckled. 'Does my being a monster worry you?'

She shrugged, giving a little laugh that Adam found utterly endearing. 'No. I can be temperamental myself on occasion.'

'Intractable and impudent, too, and frequently stubborn, I don't doubt. You'll probably be more troublesome than all my other models put together.'

'Only if you drive me to it.'

'My temper can be awesome—that I freely admit, but Harriet maligns me most dreadfully and does me a terrible injustice. You shouldn't believe all the gossip you hear about me. In fact,' he murmured, a slow, roguish grin dawning across his handsome features, 'I can be quite delightful—malleable, too, in the right hands.'

Edwina's lips curved slightly with wry amusement, trying hard to ignore the gentle caress in his voice and the pull in his eyes. 'From now on I fully intend to keep my hands to myself,' she remarked pointedly, 'and I shall reserve judgement as to the true nature of your character until I have gotten the full measure of you.'

'And I should have known that a defiant young pickpocket with an unpredictable disposition and no regard for convention would insist on prolonging a disagreement instead of politely letting the matter drop,' Adam said smoothly.

'My disposition!' Edwin exclaimed sharply, her delicate brows snapping together. 'There is nothing wrong with my disposition.'

'No? I find it quarrelsome,' he told her, losing the battle to suppress his smile.

'And still you want to paint me. Are you sure you're up to the challenge?' she quipped playfully.

'I shall prevail, you'll see,' he told her firmly. 'However, I foresee many skirmishes ahead.'

He laughed and Edwina felt curiously lightened by it. 'Then I shall strive to have the upper hand every time and out-manoeuvre you at every turn.'

Adam looked at her for a long moment with those magnificent deep blue eyes, knowing that undoubtedly she would pit her will against his, and he already looked forward to the challenge. His firm chiselled lips curved in a slow smile. 'I wouldn't advise it. I always win,' he stated, with the supreme confidence of one who succeeded in all he set out to do, and with the experience gained from years of intimate dalliance with the opposite sex.

Edwina returned his smile calmly. 'We'll see about that,' she told him, at which she decided to let the matter rest. She directed her gaze to the passing scenery, but felt almost smothered by a perusal she knew by instinct never left her. She smiled to herself, knowing that the time she was with him would probably be the most exciting and stimulating time of her life.

They were travelling through a more rural neighbourhood, where the streets were wide and straight, the houses spacious and more gracious, with white columns. The carriage came to a halt before a large three-storey building with a plain brick façade. Suddenly nervous about beginning this new stage in her life, which would happen the moment she entered this grand house—the kind of house that she was familiar with and rekindled memories of a past she had put behind her—she shrank back.

‘This—this is where you live?’

‘It is my home. Do you like it?’

‘It—it’s very grand.’

‘I’m glad you think so.’

‘And—this is where I am to stay?’

Adam’s lips twitched with wry amusement. ‘It’s not outside the realms of possibility—if you should feel inclined to stay. Come in and meet Mrs Harrison.’ Still she held back. In silence he contemplated her face. She was pale, with just a faint smattering of pale golden freckles over her nose. Sunlight gilded her hair, which was a mass of short, wispy copper curls. Her large eyes were a darkly anxious shade of green. He sensed she was afraid. ‘You look nervous.’

‘Forgive me, but I can’t help it.’

Adam leisurely raised an eyebrow. ‘It is uncommonly warm. You don’t feel faint?’ he queried with a hint of mockery.

She gave him a withering look. ‘I never faint.’

Adam smiled to himself. He should have known better than to ask. ‘Good. Don’t be nervous. You’ll be perfectly safe here with me. Mrs Harrison is my housekeeper. Come. I instructed her to have cold drinks ready on our arrival, and a room has been prepared for you. Tomorrow I’ll show you my studio.’

‘Studio? What studio?’ The absurdity of her stilted words struck her, but her stomach had worked itself into such a knot she was unable to help it.

‘Where I work.’

On entering the house they were met by Mrs Harrison, a neat little woman of a cheerful disposition. She was dressed in black, the only relief being a white lace collar and cap, which completely concealed her hair. Out of her lined, round face peered two faded grey eyes.

‘So, this is your guest, sir?’

‘Quite right, Mrs Harrison. I trust you have everything prepared?’

‘Indeed I have.’

‘My name is Edwina,’ Edwina offered.

‘Oh, but I couldn’t possibly address you by your Christian name,’ Mrs Harrison countered, clearly shocked at the very idea of it. ‘It would be most disrespectful.’

‘Please do. Everyone else does.’

‘I’d do as she says, Mrs Harrison,’ Adam commented with irony. ‘I don’t doubt for one minute that Edwina has good reason for keeping her surname to herself.’

Mrs Harrison silently conveyed her disapproval to the master but could only resign herself. When she had told him he was behaving in an extraordinary manner—moving a young lady he knew nothing about into his house and hastily packing his apprentices off on holiday—he had grinned quite boyishly and told her there was nothing ordinary about his guest. And as she looked at her she completely agreed.

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