

The Earl's Runaway Bride

Sarah Mallory



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Sarah Mallory

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Аннотация

Back in her husband's bed!Felicity's husband, dashing Major Nathan Carraway, has disappeared into war-torn Spain. Left alone, Felicity discovers a dark secret behind her whirlwind marriage and flees to England! By day she banishes every thought of her husband, but by night she's haunted by memories of their intensely passionate wedding night...Five years on, Felicity has just taken the hand of a dangerously handsome dance partner. She's about to come face to face with her commanding husband – back to claim his runaway bride!

Содержание

Author Note	5
The Earl's Runaway Bride	7
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	26
Chapter Three	52
Chapter Four	76
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	79

Felicity turned and stared as Nathan strode into the room.

The candlelight, which she had thought so beneficial moments ago, now seemed far too glaring. There were no concealing shadows that she could step into.

‘So. *It is* you.’

Fear tingled down her spine as she saw the glitter in Nathan’s eyes.

‘Nathan, listen to me, please. When I left Corunna I had no thought of ever seeing you again.’

‘Until I became an earl!’ he bit out. ‘You had no wish to be the wife of a poor army officer, but a countess—no doubt you find the title irresistible.’

‘That is not true!’ She stepped away, trying to ignore the sheer animal power that emanated from him.

‘It is time to consider what you owe me.’ He held out his hand to her. ‘Come.’

Felicity eyed him warily. ‘I do not understand you.’

He took her wrist. ‘I am taking you back to Rosthorne House with me.’

‘No! It is far too late at night.’ She tugged against his iron grip.

He pulled her towards him and lifted her easily into his arms. Felicity gasped, then began to kick and struggle, but it was useless. His hold tightened, pinning her against his chest.

‘Be still, woman. You did not fight me thus last night.’

Author Note

The Retreat to Corunna is one of the less well-known episodes of the Napoleonic Wars. The Spanish allied armies had been overwhelmed, and Sir John Moore found himself and his British troops alone in northern Spain, facing Emperor Napoleon's victorious French army. Moore retreated to the port of Corunna and managed to keep his exhausted men together as they struggled across the mountains during the depths of winter. He fought off the French at Corunna long enough to allow the British transport ships to come into the harbour and carry the remains of the army safely back to England. Travelling that same route in January 2009, I realised just how awful that journey across the mountains must have been. Many soldiers perished from cold and hunger, stragglers were cut down by the French, and the ragged, starving wretches marching back into Corunna aroused the sympathy of their Spanish hosts.

The story of *THE EARL'S RUNAWAY BRIDE* begins amongst the mayhem and confusion of that winter in Corunna. Felicity Bourne is alone and penniless in the city, and when she is rescued by a dashing British soldier she thinks him the hero of her dreams.

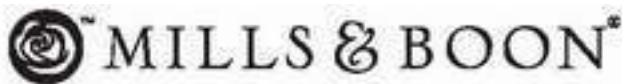
Unfortunately, those dreams turn into a nightmare, and she is separated from Nathan Carraway for five long years, until the premature Peace Celebrations of 1814 bring them together

again in London. Nathan and Felicity are both scarred by their wartime experiences. They must learn to forgive the past and work together for their future happiness.

I do hope you enjoy **THE EARL'S RUNAWAY BRIDE**. As an author I set scenes and drop my hapless characters into predicaments that I would certainly not wish to experience, but they battle through, survive and succeed, often in ways that surprise even me!

The Earl's Runaway Bride

Sarah Mallory



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SARAH MALLORY was born in Bristol, and now lives in an old farmhouse on the edge of the Pennines with her husband and family. She left grammar school at sixteen, to work in companies as varied as stockbrokers, marine engineers, insurance brokers, biscuit manufacturers and even a quarrying company. Her first book was published shortly after the birth of her daughter. She has published more than a dozen books under the pen-name of Melinda Hammond, winning the Reviewers' Choice Award in 2005 from Singletitles.com for *Dance for a Diamond* and the Historical Novel Society's Editors' Choice in November 2006 for *Gentlemen in Question*.

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Chapter One

Felicity was angry, blazingly angry. All her terror and anxiety at being alone and penniless in a strange country was forgotten, superseded by rage that the portmanteau packed with her last remaining possessions had been snatched away from her. Without a second thought she gave chase, following the ragged Spaniard in his leather waistcoat away from the Plaza and into a maze of narrow alleys that crowded about the harbour at Corunna. She did not stop; even when a sudden gust of wind caught her bonnet and tore it off her head she ran on, determined to regain her property. Only when they neared the harbour and she found herself in an unfamiliar square bounded by warehouses did she realise the danger.

She saw her bag handed to a young boy who ran off with it while the thief turned to face her, an evil grin splitting his face. Felicity stopped. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed two more menacing figures blocking her escape. Felicity summoned up every ounce of authority to say haughtily, 'That is my bag. Give it back to me now and we shall say no more about this.'

The response was a rough hand on her back, pushing her forward. She stumbled and fell to her knees. Quickly she scrambled up, twisting away as one of the men reached out to grab her. There was only the one man in front of her, if she could get past him—with a guttural laugh he caught her by her

hair and yanked her back, throwing her into the arms of his two accomplices. Felicity fought wildly, but it was impossible to shake off their iron grip. They held her fast as the little man with his yellow teeth and stinking breath came close, leering at her as he ripped open her pelisse.

She closed her eyes, trying to blot out their cruel laughter and ugly jests. Then she heard another voice—slow, deep and distinctly British.

‘Move away from the lady, my good fellows.’

Felicity’s eyes flew open. Beyond the thief stood a tall British officer, resplendent in his scarlet tunic. He looked completely at his ease, regarding the scene with a slightly detached air, but when her tormentor pulled a wicked-looking knife from his belt the officer grinned.

‘I asked you politely,’ he said, drawing his sword. ‘But now I really must insist.’

With a roar the two men holding Felicity released her and rushed forward to join their comrade. She backed against the wall and watched the red-coated officer swiftly despatch her attackers. He moved with surprising speed and agility. A flick of his sword cut across the first man’s wrist and the knife fell from his useless fingers. A second man screamed as that wicked blade slashed his arm and when the officer turned his attention to the third, the man took to his heels and fled, swiftly followed by his companions.

The officer wiped his blade and put it away. Sunlight sliced

through a narrow gap between the houses and caught the soldier in a sudden shaft of light. His hair gleamed like polished mahogany in the sunshine and he was grinning down at her, amusement shining in his deep brown eyes as if the last few minutes had been some entertaining sport rather than a desperate fight. He was, she realised in a flash, the embodiment of the hero she had always dreamed of.

‘Are you hurt, madam?’

His voice was deep and warm, wrapping around her like velvet. She shook her head.

‘I—do not think so. Who are you?’

‘Major Nathan Carraway, at your service.’

‘Then I thank you for your timely assistance, Major.’

‘Come along.’ He held out his arm to her. ‘We should get out of here in case they decide to come back with their friends.’

‘But my portmanteau—’

‘I think you should resign yourself to its loss, madam. Was it very valuable?’

‘Priceless.’ She swallowed. ‘It contains everything I own in the whole world.’ Suddenly she felt quite sick as she realised the enormity of her situation. ‘What am I going to do now? I have nothing, no one...’

Instinctively she turned to the man at her side. Looking into his eyes she was conscious of a tug of attraction, a sudden conviction that in this man she had found a friend. Her fear and anger faded away. He gave her a slow smile.

‘You have me,’ he said.

‘Good morning, miss. I’ve brought your hot chocolate.’ Felicity stirred, reluctant to leave her dream, but when the maid threw back the shutters her room was flooded with sunlight, banishing any hope of going back to sleep.

‘What time is it, Betsy?’

‘Eight o’clock, miss. With Master John and Master Simon gone off to school you said not to wake you too early this morning.’

Felicity sat up. She hadn’t bargained for the extra hour’s sleep being haunted by her dreams!

She did not linger in her bed but dressed quickly and made her way down to the schoolroom. It was eerily quiet: after four years of looking after two energetic youngsters and watching them grow into schoolboys it was not surprising that she now missed their presence. As their governess she had grown very fond of them, and they had provided her with an excellent distraction from her constant, aching sadness.

‘Fee, Fee, where are you?’

Felicity heard Lady Souden’s soft calls and hurried across the room to open the door.

‘Do you need me? I was just tidying up.’

Lady Souden entered the sunny schoolroom and looked around, sighing.

‘It does seem so *quiet* with the boys away at school, does it not? But you are no longer the governess here, Felicity.’ She rested

her hands upon her stomach. 'At least not until this little one is of an age to need you.'

'And that will not be for some years yet,' observed Felicity, smiling.

'I know, but oh, Fee, is it not exciting? The boys are darlings, and I adore being their stepmama, but I cannot *wait* to have a baby of my own.' Lydia shook her head, setting her guinea-gold curls dancing. 'After five years I thought it would never happen! But that is not what I wanted to say to you. Come away now; you do not need to be toiling up here.'

Felicity scooped up another handful of books from the table.

'This isn't toiling, Lydia, I enjoy being useful. Besides, the boys will still use this room when they come home, so it is only fitting that it should be as they left it.'

'If it is to be as they left it you had best spread their toys over the floor and pull *all* the books from the shelves! Oh, Fee, do leave that now and come into the garden with me. It is such a lovely morning and I want to talk to you.'

'Oh, but another five minutes—'

'No, now. It is a command!'

As Felicity accompanied Lady Souden down the stairs she reflected that few people could have such an undemanding mistress. They had been firm friends at school, and when Felicity had come to her, penniless and desperate to find work, Lydia had cajoled her doting new husband into employing her as a governess to his two young sons—Lydia's stepchildren. Felicity

knew she was very fortunate. Sir James was a considerate employer and she was thankful that her excellent education allowed her to fulfil her duties as governess to his satisfaction. So pleased had he been with her performance that when the boys finally went away to school he raised no objections to Lydia's suggestion that Felicity should stay on at Souden Hall as her companion. The arrangement worked extremely well, for Sir James was often away from home and said it was a comfort to him to know that his wife was not alone. Felicity's only complaint was that she had so little to do, but when she taxed Lydia with this, Lady Souden merely laughed and told her to enjoy herself.

Now, walking in the shrubbery arm in arm with Lydia, Felicity gave a little sigh of contentment.

'Happy?' asked Lydia.

Felicity hesitated. She was content: there was a world of difference between that and true happiness, but very few people could aspire to such a luxury. She said, 'Who could not be in such lovely surroundings? The gardens here at Souden are so beautiful in the spring. Are you still planning to lay out a knot-garden? I have been studying the pattern books in the library and would dearly like to help you draw it up.'

'Oh, yes, if you please, but I am afraid that will have to wait. James has written to say he wants me to join him in London next month. For the Peace Celebrations.'

'Oh. Oh, well, while you are away I could—'

'You are to come with me, Fee.'

Felicity stopped.

‘Oh no, surely that is not necessary.’

‘*Very* necessary,’ said Lydia, taking her hands. ‘With the boys at school there is no reason for you to hide yourself away here. Besides, you have read the news sheets, you know as well as I that any number of important personages will be in London for these celebrations: the Emperor of Russia and his sister the Grand Duchess of Oldenburg, the young Prussian princes and—oh, too many to name them all now! And James has already been informed that he will be expected to entertain them all. Just think of it, Fee, dinners, soirées and parties—dear James has also said he wants us to hold a ball! So I shall need you to help me with all the arrangements. I could not possibly cope with it all.’

‘Should you be coping with any of it when you are with child?’

‘Oh, Fee, I am not *ill*! I am more likely to die of boredom if I stay here with nothing to do. Besides, the baby is not due until the autumn and the celebrations will be over by then. Do not look so horrified, Fee, look upon this as a rare treat.’

‘A treat! Lydia, you know I am...not good in company. I fear I should let you down.’

‘Nonsense. You have very good manners, it is merely that you are out of practice—and that is because your horrid uncle dragged you away from the Academy to make you his drudge!’

‘Lydia! Uncle Philip was not horrid, he was...devout.’

‘He was a tyrant,’ returned Lydia with uncharacteristic severity. ‘He tried to beat all the joy out of you.’

Felicity hesitated.

‘It is true my uncle considered all forms of pleasure a sin,’ she conceded, ‘but that was only because he was deeply religious.’

‘Then he should have hired a *deeply religious* servant to take with him rather than dragging you off to deepest Africa!’

Felicity laughed at that.

‘But he didn’t! We only got as far as northern Spain! Poor Uncle Philip, he convinced himself that the Spanish Catholics were as much in need of saving as any African tribe, but I have always suspected the truth was he could not face another sea journey.’

‘Well, it was very wrong of him to take you away instead of giving you the opportunity to marry and have children—’

Felicity put up her hand in a little gesture of defence; she did not want to contemplate what might have been.

‘What’s done is done,’ she said quietly. ‘I am very happy here at Souden, and I would much rather stay here while you go to London.’

‘But I shall need you!’

Lydia’s plaintive tone carried Felicity back to their schooldays, when her friend had often begged her for company. Poor Lydia could never bear to be alone. Now, as then, Felicity found it impossible to resist her. Sensing her weakening, Lydia pressed her hand.

‘Do say you will come, Fee—you are so *good* at organising parties.’

‘But you will not expect me to *attend* any of these parties.’

‘Not unless you want to, my dear.’

‘You know there is nothing I would want less!’

‘Then you may remain behind the scenes, invisible.’

Felicity laughed at her.

‘But I cannot possibly be your paid companion if I never leave my room. Sir James will not countenance such a thing!’

‘I shall tell him that you have a morbid fear of strangers,’ said Lydia. ‘He will understand that, for he has a cousin who is very much the same, only because he is a man, and rich, it is *quite* acceptable for him to be a recluse. And James knows how much I rely upon you, especially now that I am increasing.’

‘Perhaps you should not go at all,’ said Felicity, clutching at straws.

Lydia gave a little gurgle of laughter.

‘But of course I should! I have never felt better, and the doctor says I must not pamper myself but carry on very much as normal. Oh, *do* say you will come with me, Felicity: you are very necessary to my comfort, you know.’

Felicity could not resist Lydia’s beseeching look.

‘You have been so kind to me that I cannot refuse you.’

‘So you promise you will come to town with me?’

‘Yes, I give you my word.’

Lydia gave a huge sigh.

‘I am so relieved!’ She linked arms with Felicity again and gave a little tug. ‘Come along, now: we must keep moving or we shall

grow too chilled. It is only April, after all.'

They walked on in amicable silence for a few more minutes.

'Is that what you wished to say to me,' asked Felicity, 'that we are to go to town?'

'Well, yes, but there is a little more than that, my dear.'

'Now, Lydia, what mischief are you planning?'

'None, I promise you, but there is something you should know.' Lady Souden gave her arm a little shake. 'Remember, Fee, you have given me your word!'

'Very well. Tell me.'

'The Earl of Rosthorne will be in town.'

Felicity's heart lurched. The Earl of Rosthorne—Nathan Carraway, her handsome hero. The man who still haunted her dreams, but had proved to be a master of seduction. She swallowed nervously, trying to remain calm.

'How do you know that?'

'James wrote to me—'

'Lydia, you haven't told him—!'

'Of course not, I promised I would not give you away. No, his letter was full of the plans for the celebrations. He said that Carraway had been ordered to London, not only because he is now Earl of Rosthorne, but because he is—or was—a military man and Prinny is quite *desperate* to impress. The royal parks are to be opened, there will be displays, and fireworks, and—oh, Felicity, it will be so exciting—are you not the *teeniest* bit curious to see it all?'

‘Not if there is the teeniest risk of meeting Lord Rosthorne!’

Lydia turned her wide, blue-eyed gaze upon her.

‘I know he treated you badly, my dear, but are you not curious to see him again?’

Felicity hesitated. Nathan had rescued her, given up his lodging for her, bought her new clothes. He had taught her to love him and then broken her heart.

‘No. I have no desire to see him again.’

‘Felicity, you are blushing. You still care for him.’

‘I do not! It was five years ago, Lydia. I am over him.’

‘Well, perhaps you no longer cry yourself to sleep every night, as you did when we first took you in, but at times, when you are sitting quietly, there is that faraway look in your eye—’

Felicity laughed.

‘Lydia, you are too romantic! That faraway look was most likely exhaustion, having had the care of two energetic boys for the day!’

‘Well, it does not matter what you say, I have the liveliest curiosity to see the man who—’

‘Lydia!’ Felicity stopped abruptly. ‘Lydia, you promised me when I came to you that you would respect my secret.’

‘And so I shall, my love, but—’

‘Pray let us say no more about the odious Lord Rosthorne! If you insist upon my coming to town with you then I will do so, but pray understand that upon no account must he know I am there. It would be embarrassing to everyone.’ She swallowed hard. ‘I

am dead to him now.'

Lydia threw her arms around her, enveloping Felicity in a warm, scented embrace. 'Oh, my dear friend, you know I would do nothing that would make you miserable!'

'No, of course you would not. Not intentionally, that is.' Felicity glanced up. 'The rain clouds are gathering. The sun will soon disappear; I think we should go indoors now.'

They did not speak of London again, or of the Earl of Rosthorne, but when Felicity retired to her room that night he was there, in her head, as close and as real as ever.

'The Earl of Rosthorne, sir.'

The butler's sonorous tones filled the small, book-lined study, investing the announcement with considerable gravitas. Nathan squared his shoulders. After twelve months he was still not comfortable with the title. The gentleman sitting behind the large mahogany desk jumped up immediately and came forward to meet him. Nathan regarded him with interest. He knew Sir James Souden only by reputation but even if he had not heard that the man was an active supporter of Lord Wellesley, he would have been disposed to like him, for there was a look of intelligence and humour in his face and an energy in that lean body. Here was a man who was used to getting things done. He was smiling now at Nathan and waving him towards a chair.

'Welcome, my lord, and thank you for coming so promptly.'

Nathan bowed.

'Your message was waiting for me when I arrived in town this

morning, Sir James.'

'Ah, but knowing the object of this meeting I would not have been surprised if you had put it off.'

The twinkle in the older man's eyes drew a wry grin from Nathan.

'Always best to attack the unpalatable without delay, I find.'

'Spoken like a true military man.' Sir James gestured towards the decanters lined up on a side table. 'You'll take a glass with me, my lord? I've a very fine cognac—stolen from the French, of course, so you might appreciate it.'

'I would, thank you.'

'So,' said Sir James, when the glasses had been filled and his guest was sitting in one of the comfortable padded armchairs that faced the desk. 'So, my lord, how much have you been told?'

'Only that his Highness wants me to help with the entertaining of his royal visitors.'

'Aye. He's turning the town into a damned beargarden for the summer,' said Sir James, shaking his head. 'But there, it's all in a good cause. Peace, don't you know, so I suppose we shouldn't complain.'

Nathan sipped at his brandy. It was smooth and aromatic and definitely not to be hurried.

'I am at a loss to know why he has summoned me here,' he said at last. 'I would have thought there were hostesses enough in London to entertain all the crowned heads of Europe. Mine is a bachelor establishment; my mother does not come to town. You

may know she is an invalid and spends all her time at Rosthorne Hall—’

‘Oh, his Highness ain’t looking for you to give parties and all that sort of nonsense. The ladies will be falling over themselves to do that—and in fact I have asked Lady Souden to come to town for that very purpose—not that she needs any persuading to hold a party! But the Regent wants military men around him, especially to accompany Marshal Blücher: the old Prussian is so highly esteemed that even Prinny is in awe of him. There will be so many of ’em, you see: Blücher, the King of Prussia and all those princes, not to mention Tsar Alexander. And his sister, of course, the Grand Duchess... So we are all recruited to help: an army of attendants to ensure that his royal guests are not left to themselves for a moment. Your first task is to head up the Tsar’s escort from Dover. I know, I know, my boy; I can see from your face that you don’t like the idea.’

‘You are right,’ replied Nathan. ‘I begin to wish I had never left the army!’

Sir James laughed and got up to refill their glasses.

‘Do you miss it, my lord, the military life?’

‘It was the only life I had ever known, until last year. I obtained my commission in the Guards when I was sixteen.’

‘The title came as a surprise?’

Nathan nodded. ‘Quite. The old Earl, my uncle, had three healthy sons, so I never expected to inherit. But the two youngest boys perished in Spain.’ Nathan paused for a moment, recalling

the icy winters and scorching summers: the torrential rain, cloying mud, flies and disease that took their toll of the troops. It was said more men were killed by disease and the weather than by Bonaparte's army. The scar across his left eye began to ache. Too many memories. He shook them off. 'Their loss may well have hastened the old man's end. He died at the beginning of the year '12 and his heir took a fall on the hunting field less than six months later. When the news came I thought it my duty to come home. Boney was on the run, after all.' He allowed himself a little smile. 'Since then I have been so tied up with my new duties I've had no time to miss the army.'

'And do your new duties include looking for a wife? You will need an heir.'

Nathan's reply was short. 'My cousin is my heir.'

'The ladies won't see it that way.' Sir James winked. 'You are now the biggest catch on the Marriage Mart.'

An iron claw twisted itself around Nathan's guts. 'I do not think so.'

'Oh? From all I've heard of you, my boy, you have never had trouble attracting women. Your reputation precedes you,' said Sir James, when Nathan raised his brows. 'It is said that Europe is littered with the hearts you have broken. Although to your credit, I have never heard that you seduced innocent young virgins.'

No, thought Nathan bitterly. Only once did I break that rule, to my cost!

His lip curled. 'With such a reputation I would expect the

doting mothers to keep their chicks away from me.'

'But they won't, believe me. They will be planning their own campaigns once they know you are in town.' Nathan's hand briefly touched his temple and Sir James smiled. 'And don't think that scar will frighten them away—'tis more likely to fascinate 'em; it will add to your attractions!'

Hurriedly Nathan rose. 'If there is nothing else to discuss I must be away.' He saw his host's brows rise and tried to moderate his tone. 'I do not think there is much that can be done until the allied leaders arrive next month.'

'You are right, of course. We will meet again before then to discuss our roles.' Sir James chuckled. 'Thank God his Highness is too busy designing new uniforms for his troops and working on his plans for a grand spectacle in Hyde Park to worry about us. Goodbye, then, for the moment, my lord. If you have no other engagements, you might like to join me for dinner on Wednesday night. I am expecting Lady Souden to be here by then, but we shall not be entertaining: just a snug little dinner, if you care for it.'

Nathan bowed. 'My presence in town is not generally known yet, so I have no fixed engagements.' He bowed. 'Thank you, sir. I should be delighted to join you.'

London, thought Felicity gloomily as she gazed out of the carriage window, was crowded and noisy and so very dirty. The roads were thick with rubbish and droppings from the hundreds of horses and oxen that plodded up and down, the cobbles only

visible in the wheel tracks or where a crossing sweeper cleared a temporary path for a pedestrian and earned a penny for his pains. The cries of the flower-seller mingled with those of the knife-grinder and the hot-pie man as they hawked their wares from street to street. Rows of tall houses lined the road, mile upon mile of brick and stone with barely a patch of grass to be seen.

In one corner of the carriage, Lady Souden's severe-looking dresser was snoring gently while Lydia herself was sitting bolt upright, staring out of the window, her eyes shining and a little smile of anticipation lifting her mouth. She was born to be a society hostess, thought Felicity. She delighted in parties and balls and could not understand Felicity's reluctance to come to town. After all, she reasoned, if Felicity refused to go into society, what did it matter if she was in London or at Souden?

But it did matter. Felicity knew that there was danger in London.

Nathan Carraway was in London.

Chapter Two

The carriage drew up outside Sir James's house in Berkeley Square and Felicity followed Lydia through the gleaming front door and into the study on the ground floor, where Sir James was waiting for them. Lydia ran in, cast aside her swansdown muff and threw herself into her husband's arms. He kissed her soundly before holding her away from him.

'Well, well now, puss, have you missed me?' he said, laughing. 'What will Miss Brown think of this very unfashionable display of affection?'

'Miss Brown is delighted with this display of domestic harmony,' murmured Felicity, her grey eyes twinkling.

Sir James grinned at her, keeping one arm about his wife's still tiny waist.

'I'm glad to hear it. And I am glad to see *you*, Miss Brown. I hope Lady Souden has warned you, we are to be very busy for the next two months.'

'She told me you would be entertaining a great deal, Sir James.'

'Aye, dukes, duchesses, crown princes—and never a moment to call our own. What do you say to that, Miss Brown?'

'I say Lady Souden is equal to the challenge, sir.'

'Aye, so do I,' declared Sir James, giving his wife another kiss. 'But I rely upon you to look after her when I am not here, Miss

Brown. Lydia is far too careless of her health, especially now.'

Felicity met his eyes and said resolutely, 'You may depend upon me, Sir James. I would not wish any harm to come to Lady Souden or the unborn child.'

Sir James bestowed a grateful smile upon her.

'Thank you, I am sure I may. Lydia has told me of your fear of going out, Miss Brown, and I will do everything I can to lessen your own discomfiture. A carriage shall be at your disposal at all times, you have only to say the word. Now upstairs and unpack, the pair of you, for we have a guest for dinner.'

'Oh?' Lydia clapped her hands delightedly. 'Is it someone I know?'

'No, a young man I met only t'other day, but he is very agreeable, I assure you. He will set all the young ladies' hearts aflutter this summer, I have not a doubt.'

'Oh, who?' cried Lydia. 'Do tell me, my love!'

Sir James kissed her nose.

'He is a young nobleman. Rich, handsome and most clearly in want of a wife.' He looked from Felicity to Lady Souden, his smile growing. 'It is the new Earl of Rosthorne.'

Felicity's hands tightened on her reticule. What cruel trick was fate playing upon her, to force the earl upon her notice so soon? She cast an anguished look at Lydia, who attempted a little laugh as she turned to her husband.

'R-Rosthorne? Well, bless me! How is this, my dear?'

'He is newly arrived in town,' explained Sir James. 'We met to

discuss the arrangements for looking after his Highness's guests at the forthcoming Peace Celebrations and he struck me as a very pleasant young man. I thought it would please you to meet him, my love.'

'It—it does,' stammered Lydia. 'It is a little sudden, that is all. Having just arrived...'

'Well, he is not expecting any formal ceremony. Just a snug little dinner, I told him, so off you go and put on one of those pretty gowns of yours, my love. You are required to look charming tonight, nothing more.'

'Then perhaps Lady Souden should come upstairs and rest for a little while,' suggested Felicity, edging towards the door.

With another slightly hysterical laugh Lydia allowed Felicity to lead her away, leaving Sir James still chuckling to himself.

'I am sorry, Fee,' she whispered as they went up the stairs. 'I had no idea James would invite Rosthorne to the house!'

Felicity sighed. 'It was inevitable, I suppose, but I did not expect it to be *today*.'

Lydia squeezed her hand. 'You must not worry, my love, you need not see him. This house has so many rooms the earl could be *living* here and not know of your existence!'

Despite Lady Souden's assurances Felicity found herself growing ever more anxious as the hour approached for Lord Rosthorne's arrival. For five years she had done everything in her power to remain hidden from Nathan Carraway and the thought that he would shortly be in the same house terrified her. Not least

because she had an overwhelming desire to see him again.

It was dangerous, but she could not resist. A few minutes after Lydia had gone down to the drawing room, Felicity slipped out of the little chamber that Lady Souden had decreed should be set aside as her own private sitting room. The entrance hall of Souden House extended up to the roof and a glazed dome provided natural light for the ornate staircase that rose from a central point to the half-landing before splitting into two flights that curved around the side walls to the first floor and the main reception rooms. From there a narrower stair curled up to the second floor where a small balcony overlooked the hall below. During past seasons Felicity had often brought her young charges on to this balcony when Sir James was entertaining and they had spent many a happy hour watching the arrival of the guests. Now she decided to use it for her own purposes.

Feeling very much like an errant schoolchild, she crept towards the edge of the balcony and sank down. Felicity knew from experience that visitors rarely raised their eyes beyond the ornately decorated first floor. Her dark-grey gown blended well with the shadows and through the balusters she had an excellent view of the front door and entrance hall as well as the first rise of the staircase. The long-case clock on the landing below chimed the hour. It was followed almost immediately by the sounds of an arrival. Felicity knew a sudden, irrational desire to laugh—trust Nathan to be so punctual, it was the soldier in him.

Then he was there. They were in the same house, the same

space. She leaned forward, straining to see him. Her heart turned over as he walked into the hall, but his curlybrimmed beaver hat obscured her view of his face. She had never seen him in anything but his scarlet regimentals and thought him handsome in uniform but now, seeing his tall, athletic figure in the plain black swallowtailed coat, she almost fainted with a wild yearning to run down the stairs and throw herself into his arms. She stifled it, reminding herself of how he had betrayed her. She hated him, did she not? She had vowed she was done with him for ever. Yet here she was, hiding in the shadows, desperate to see the man who had broken her heart.

He spoke to the footman as he handed over his hat; she could not make out the words but his warm, deep voice awoke a memory and sent a tingle down her spine. She noticed that his brown hair was no longer tied back but cut short so that it just curled over his collar. He turned to ascend the stair and she was momentarily dazzled by his snowy white neckcloth and waistcoat. As he lifted his head she put her hand to her mouth, stifling a cry. A disfiguring scar cut through his left eyebrow and down across his cheek. His face was leaner and his mouth, which she remembered as almost constantly smiling, was turned down, the lines at each side more pronounced. She had expected him to look a little older, but the severity of his countenance shocked her.

Felicity had followed his career as closely as she could. She knew Nathan's regiment had been involved in several bloody

battles so she should not have been surprised to see he had been wounded, but the scar made it suddenly very real.

Do not be so foolish, she told herself. *You should rejoice that he has been punished for the way he treated you!* She closed her eyes and shook her head slightly. It had been her uncle's way to call down fury and retribution upon the heads of those that had offended him. But she was not like her uncle and the thought of Nathan's suffering sliced into her heart. She stared again at the tall figure ascending the stairs.

Look up, she pleaded silently. *Look at me.*

As Nathan reached the top of the first flight of stairs he paused. Felicity's heart was thudding against her ribs: if he raised his head now he would see her! For one joyous, frightening, panic-filled moment she thought he would do just that, but then he was turning to greet his host and Sir James's bluff good-humoured voice was heard welcoming him.

'Come along up, my lord, do not hesitate out there! Here is my lady wife waiting to make your acquaintance...'

The drawing room door was closed, the voices became nothing more than a low drone. Felicity slumped down, her head bowed. She had seen him. He was alive and apart from that scar on his face he looked well. A burst of laughter reached her: he even sounded happy.

And he was not aware of her existence.

Hot tears pricked her eyelids and she berated herself for her stupidity. It had been foolish to come to London, knowing he

would be here. She should have known it would only bring pain. She dragged herself back to her room. It was senseless to think of him, laughing and talking with Lydia and Sir James in the gilded splendour of the dining room below. She would be best to put him out of her mind and go to sleep. That was the sensible thing to do.

But when the Earl of Rosthorne left the house several hours later, the silent grey figure was again watching from the upper balcony.

Having lost his first wife in childbirth, Sir James was morbidly anxious for Lydia. Felicity was aware of this and resolutely stifled her own misgivings as she offered to accompany Lady Souden about the town. Lydia's delighted acceptance of her company was at least some comfort.

'Oh, I am so pleased! I knew how it would be, once you saw how exciting it is going to be in town this summer. I only wish we could have been here for the procession in honour of King Louis last month, but there is so much to look forward to; it will be *so* entertaining.'

'I am sure it will,' said Felicity bravely.

Lydia gave her a long look. 'And Lord Rosthorne?'

Felicity hesitated. 'I must do my best to avoid him. If I dress very plainly I shall not attract attention. It is possible that he would not even recognise me now. Perhaps, when we go out during the day, I might be veiled.'

Lydia clapped her hands. 'How exciting! But people will be

so curious! We could say you are a grieving widow...'

'No, no, Lydia, that will not do at all.'

But Lady Souden was not listening.

'Smallpox,' she declared. 'You have been hideously scarred—or mayhap your head was misshapen at birth.'

In spite of her anxieties, Felicity laughed.

'Shall I pad my shoulder and give myself a hunchback as well? That is quite enough, Lydia. We will say nothing.'

'But people will think it very odd!'

'I would rather they think me eccentric than deformed!'

Glancing at her reflection in the mirror the following day, Felicity could see nothing in her appearance to cause the least comment. Lydia had informed her that they were going to drive out in Hyde Park at the fashionable hour. Felicity's russet-brown walking dress was not quite as fashionable as Lady Souden's dashing blue velvet with its military-style jacket but it looked well enough, and the double veil that covered her face was perfectly acceptable for any lady wishing to protect her complexion from the dust kicked up by the carriage horses.

The drive started well, but there was such a number of carriages in the park and so many people claiming acquaintance with the fashionable Lady Souden that it was impossible to make much progress. Lydia was enjoying herself hugely. She introduced 'my companion, Miss Brown' with just the right amount of indifference that very few bothered to spare more than a glance for the plainly dressed female with her modest bonnet

and heavy veil. Felicity was beginning to relax and enjoy the sunshine when she spotted yet another carriage approaching, but this one was flanked by two riders, one of them the unmistakably upright figure of Lord Rosthorne.

She gripped Lydia's arm and directed her attention to the coach.

'Heaven and earth, Lady Charlotte Appleby! I had no idea she was in town.'

'But Rosthorne is with her,' exclaimed Felicity. 'Can we not drive past?'

'Too late,' muttered Lydia, pinning on her smile. 'They have seen us.'

She was obliged to order her driver to stop. Felicity held her breath and sat very still, praying she would not be noticed.

With the two carriages side by side, Nathan brought his horse to a stand and raised his hat to Lady Souden.

'Good day to you, ma'am. You know my aunt, of course.'

'Yes indeed.' Lydia Souden turned her wide, friendly smile towards Lady Charlotte and was rewarded with no more than a regal nod. Nathan's lips tightened. His aunt made sure no one ever forgot she was the daughter of an earl. Lady Charlotte raised her hand to indicate the second rider.

'Let me present my son to you, ma'am. Mr Gerald Appleby.'

Nathan grinned inwardly as his cousin took off his hat and greeted Lady Souden with all the charm and courtesy that his mother lacked. Young scapegrace!

‘Delighted, ma’am! But we are remiss here, I think—will you not introduce your friend?’

Nathan blinked and berated himself. It was unusual for Gerald to show him the way, but he had not even noticed the rather dowdy little figure sitting beside Lady Souden, still as a statue.

‘Oh, this is my companion, Miss Brown. Lady Charlotte, you are in town for the Peace Celebrations?’

‘Yes. We were obliged to hire, since Rosthorne House is no longer available.’

‘You know that if you had given me sufficient notice I would have had rooms prepared for you, Aunt,’ replied Nathan.

‘In my brother’s day there were always rooms prepared and ready for me.’

‘Heavens, Mama, the house has been shut up for the past year or more,’ replied Gerald Appleby. ‘Nathan wasn’t expecting to come to town this summer, were you, Cos?’

‘No. Consequently I have only opened up such rooms as I require.’

‘Fortunately my man was able to secure a house in Cavendish Square,’ Lady Charlotte addressed Lydia. ‘With so many visitors in town this summer there was very little to suit. So different in Bath, of course, where I have my own house...’

‘My dear ma’am, there was any number of apartments that would have been ideal if you had not insisted upon having so many servants with you.’ Gerald glanced at his audience, a merry twinkle in his eye. ‘Only imagine the task: not only

had her poor clerk to find somewhere with sufficient rooms for Mama's household, but *then* he was obliged to find stables and accommodation for her coachman and groom, too!

'Really, Gerard, do you expect me to do without my carriage?'

'No, but you might well do without your groom. You no longer ride, ma'am.'

'Harris has been with me since I was a child. He comes with me everywhere.'

'I wonder if perhaps he might have enjoyed a holiday,' observed Gerald, but his mother was no longer listening.

'My man had instructions to find me the very best,' she announced. 'And I do not think he has managed so ill.'

Nathan's attention began to wander as the ladies discussed the forthcoming arrival of the foreign dignitaries. Gerald, he noticed, was passing the time by trying to flirt with the veiled companion. While his mother's attention was given to speculation about the Grand Duchess of Oldenburg's latest conquest, Gerald was leaning over the side of the carriage and murmuring outrageous remarks. The poor little dab looked quite uncomfortable. Nathan tried to catch Gerald's eye. Damnation, why couldn't the lad behave himself? Nathan's hand clenched on the reins. He must get out of the ridiculous habit of regarding Gerald as a boy. He was eight-and-twenty, the same age as himself, but his cousin had not served a decade in the army, an experience that Gerald declared had left Nathan hardened and cynical. It might well be the case, but it was quite clear that the little figure in the carriage

was not enjoying Gerald's attentions. He was leaning closer now, his hand reaching out towards the edge of the veil.

'Cousin, you go too far!' Nathan's voice cracked across the space between them. It was the tone he had used on new recruits and it had its effect. Gerald's hand dropped.

'I beg your pardon,' Nathan addressed the rigid little figure. 'My cousin sometimes allows his humour to go beyond what is pleasing.'

She did not reply and merely waved one small hand. He threw an admonishing glance at his cousin, who immediately looked contrite.

'Indeed, Miss Brown, Rosthorne is right; I went too far and I beg your pardon.' Gerald directed his most winning smile towards her. 'Well, will you not speak? Pray, madam, take pity on me: I vow I shall not rest until you say that you forgive me. Miss Brown, I *beg* you.'

Nathan could not but admire Gerald's tenacity. He was—

'I do forgive you, sir. Let us forget this now.'

His head jerked up. That voice, the melodic inflection—it struck a chord, a fleeting memory: surely he had heard it before. He stared at the lady, trying to pierce the thick curtain of lace that concealed her face.

'Forgive me,' he said, frowning. 'Have we—?'

'Forgive *me*, my lord,' interposed Lady Souden with her sunny smile. 'We are causing far too much congestion on this path. That will never do; we must drive on. If you will excuse us...'

There was nothing to do but to pull away and allow the carriage to pass.

‘Well, well, one must admit Lady Souden to be most charming,’ declared Lady Charlotte graciously. ‘She intends to hold a ball later this year. I have told her I shall attend. And you must come too, Gerald.’

Mr Appleby grinned across at his cousin. ‘Not really my line, Mama, but if you insist. What of you, Cos?’

Nathan shrugged. ‘If I receive an invitation I must go, I suppose.’ His thoughts returned to the veiled figure in the carriage. Something nagged at the back of his mind, a thought that he could not quite grasp. He said, ‘Who was the female with Lady Souden? Miss Brown. Have you met her before, Aunt?’

‘Lady Souden said she was her companion,’ replied Lady Charlotte. ‘No doubt she is some penniless relation.’ She turned to address her son. ‘And as such she can have no attraction for *you*, Gerald.’

‘Devil a bit!’ responded Gerald, grinning. ‘Just trying to be friendly, Mama.’

‘Better that you should remain aloof, like your cousin,’ retorted Lady Charlotte.

‘What, be as grim as Rosthorne?’ Gerald laughed. ‘Impossible! I swear his dark frown could turn the milk sour!’

Nathan allowed himself a smile at that. ‘Try for something in between, then, Cousin.’

‘Precisely.’ Lady Charlotte nodded. ‘You must remember your

breeding, my son.'

As the carriage pulled away Gerald threw a rueful glance across at Nathan. 'When am I ever allowed to forget it?'

'So. It is done. I have met him.'

Felicity closed the door of her little bedchamber and leaned against it. Her legs felt very unsteady, so much so that she dare not even attempt to walk across the room to her bed. She closed her eyes. Nathan's image rose before her, so familiar, so dear. She had studied him closely while the two carriages were stopped. In profile she thought him even more handsome than when they had first met, his face leaner, his look more serious. Even when she saw again the scar across the left side of his face she was no longer horrified by it. She was thankful the dreadful disfigurement did not seem to have affected his sight; his eyes were as keen as ever and for a moment she had quailed beneath her thick veil, convinced that he would recognise her. Even worse than the fear of detection was the fierce disappointment she had known when he had addressed her; he was clearly unaware of her identity and his indifference hit her like a physical blow.

'But it is done,' she said again. 'Now I have seen him I know what to expect, I am prepared.'

However, being prepared did not prevent her from feeling slightly sick when Sir James announced cheerfully that she would be required to accompany his wife to Lady Somerton's later that night.

'I know I promised to attend, but I have fallen behind with

drawing up my plans for Tsar Alexander's arrival in London—I gave my word that I would report to Carlton House tomorrow morning.'

'Then you must remain here and finish them,' replied Lydia calmly. 'But there is not the slightest need for Felicity to come with me: Lady Somerton is such an old friend...'

Felicity felt Sir James's eyes upon her and she said immediately, 'There is nothing I should like more than to go with you, Lady Souden.'

Lydia blinked. 'You would?'

'Of course,' Felicity lied valiantly. 'You will recall you showed me Lady Somerton's invitation and said she hoped that Lord Byron would be there and would read for her.'

'But I thought you disliked Byron,' objected Lydia.

'His style of living, perhaps,' Felicity persisted. 'His poetry is quite—quite impressive.'

Her friend looked at her in surprise. Felicity maintained her calm, aware that Sir James was also regarding her, but with approval, and she drew some comfort from this as she ran upstairs after dinner to change her gown. And what if Nathan should be there? Felicity knew this question would be on Lydia's lips as soon as they were alone together. She had no answer, and could only pray that the earl was not a lover of poetry.

Lady Somerton's tall, narrow town house was crowded and noisy. Felicity followed Lydia as she swept up the stairs to the main reception rooms, ostrich feathers dancing, and was

immediately surrounded by her friends and acquaintances. Felicity stayed very close. In her plain grey gown she elicited barely a glance from the gentlemen vying for the beautiful Lady Souden's attention and no glance at all from the matrons who came up to claim acquaintance with one of the most fashionable personages of the *ton*.

Lady Somerton laughingly chided Lydia for arriving so late and ushered them into a large salon where the poetry reading was about to begin. Felicity followed on, but such was the crush that she was unable to secure a seat beside her friend and was obliged to find a space for herself towards the back of the room. This suited her very well, for she was able to observe the crowds from the shadowy recesses.

Any hopes that Nathan might not attend were soon dashed when she saw him stroll into the room. At first she thought it was her imagination that there was a change in the atmosphere as he entered, but there was a definite murmur of excitement rippling around the salon. A young lady to her right fluttered her fan and muttered, 'Mama! The Earl of Rosthorne is come.'

'Then stand up straight, Maria,' retorted her turbaned parent. 'You will not catch his attention if you slouch. Shoulders back, my love; he is surveying the company.'

The young lady plied her fan even faster. 'Oh, Mama, he looks so severe, I vow he frightens me!'

'Nonsense, child, it is merely the effect of that dreadful scar. Smile now...Oh, how vexing, Lady Somerton is carrying him

off. Never mind, Maria, while he is in the room there is still hope. Keep your head up. And do not squint, girl! You will need all your wits about you if you wish to become a countess.'

A cold chill settled around Felicity's heart. Was that the reason Nathan was in town, to find a wife? Why should he not? she asked herself miserably. She had done her best to disappear, doubtless he had forgotten her in the inevitable confusion of removing the army and its followers from Corunna.

The evening dragged on. Felicity heard very little of the poetry—her attention was fixed on Nathan. At one point he looked around, as if conscious of her gaze, and she was obliged to draw back into the shadows. When there was a break in the recital Felicity noticed that he was immediately surrounded by ladies, all eager for his attention. The turbaned matron lost no time in joining the throng and was soon presenting him to her daughter. Felicity longed for it to be *her* hand he was carrying to his lips, *her* words that made him smile. She forced herself to look away. It would do her no good to dwell on what could never be.

She spotted Lydia at the centre of a laughing, chattering group of ladies and seeing that she was as far from Nathan as the room would allow, Felicity made her way across to her. Lady Souden looked up as she approached, excused herself with her charming smile and stepped away from the group to take Felicity's arm.

'Well, my dear, what do you think to it?' Lydia giggled. 'I have rarely heard such execrable verse, I think.'

'Was it so very bad? I was not really listening...'

‘Dreadful, my dear,’ Lydia murmured, smiling across the room at their hostess. ‘Rosthorne is here, have you seen him?’

Felicity almost laughed at that. She had eyes for no one else!

‘Yes. By staying in the shadows he has not noticed me.’

‘But you are uneasy.’ Lydia patted her hands. ‘Shall we make our excuses and leave? If Lord Byron had been here I might have made a push to stay and be sociable but as it is, I think I would prefer to be at home with darling James.’

Felicity nodded. She looked across the room at Nathan. She would have liked to stay and prolong the torture of watching him, but she knew that was senseless, so with a word of acquiescence she turned and followed Lydia out of the room.

They were in the entrance hall, waiting for their carriage when Lydia reached over and deftly flicked up the hood of Felicity’s cloak.

‘Cover yourself,’ she murmured. ‘Rosthorne is coming.’ She gave Felicity’s shoulder a reassuring pat before turning. ‘My lord.’

Felicity stepped behind Lydia and out of Nathan’s direct gaze.

‘Going so soon, madam?’

‘Why, yes, my lord.’ Lydia gave him her charming smile. ‘I find a little poetry goes a long way.’

The corners of his mouth lifted. ‘Well said, ma’am! I expected to see Sir James with you.’

‘Unfortunately his work on plans for the Tsar’s entertainment would not allow him time to come with me this evening. I have no doubt that when we get back we shall find him still poring

over his notes.'

'Well, ma' am, if you have no escort, you must let me accompany you to Berkeley Square—'

Lydia gave a little laugh. 'I would not dream of taking you away from Lady Somerton, my lord.'

'If your opinion of the readings this evening is the same as mine, you will know that I welcome the distraction.'

The boyish grin that accompanied the words was like a physical blow to Felicity. Nathan suddenly looked so much younger, so much more like the handsome hero of her dreams.

'But I will not hear of it,' Lydia was saying to him. 'We have our footmen and link boys, so I need not trouble you, my lord.'

'It will be no trouble at all,' replied Lord Rosthorne, walking to the door beside her. 'In fact, it suits me very well, for I need to see Sir James and it is so early that I am sure he will not object to my disturbing him. Therefore I will come with you—I beg your pardon, Miss Brown, did you say something?'

'She coughed,' said Lydia quickly. 'But really, my lord, there is no need—'

'Madam, I insist.' Nathan held out his arm and after a brief hesitation Lydia placed her fingers upon his arm and allowed him to escort her to the waiting carriage. Felicity followed closely. She was aware of an unnerving and quite illogical temptation to reach out and cling to the skirts of Nathan's black evening coat.

Nathan had been quite sincere in his assurances. He was glad of an excuse to quit Lady Somerton's soirée. He had never

intended to remain there for long, and if by escorting Lady Souden to her home he could have five minutes' conversation with Sir James it would save him time in the morning.

He handed Lady Souden into the carriage then turned to her companion. The little hand in its kid glove trembled beneath his fingers but that did not surprise him; Miss Brown seemed to be a very nervous person. She did not even lift her head to thank him as he helped her into the coach.

The journey to Berkeley Square was short and Lady Souden kept up a flow of conversation to which Nathan willingly responded, although he found his attention straying to her companion, sitting quietly in the corner. Even enveloped in her cloak there was something familiar about the way she held herself. Who was she? Why did he feel that he should know her?

He thought of the women he had met during his days with Wellington's army and a silent laugh shook him. Perhaps one of the lightskirts he had known had come to England and decided to turn respectable. They would be very likely to take an innocuous name such as Brown! He glanced again at the little figure sitting bolt upright by the window. No, that was not the answer. His instinct told him the chit was no straw damsel. From what he had seen of her, she behaved more like a nun.

Nathan realised Lady Souden was still talking to him, and he broke into her nervous chatter to say with a touch of impatience, 'I fear my presence makes you uncomfortable, ma'am.'

'No—no, not at all,' stammered Lady Souden.

‘Be assured that I have no intention of stepping beyond the bounds of propriety. Besides, you have Miss Brown here to act as your chaperon.’

‘Oh—no, no, you misunderstand me, my lord,’ Lady Souden stammered. ‘If—if I seem a little anxious, it is because—because I have a headache!’

Nathan was thankful for the dark interior of the carriage, for he was sure his scepticism was evident in his face. Something was upsetting Lady Souden, but if she wished to lie to him rather than explain, then so be it. He had long ago given up trying to understand women.

‘I am sorry to hear it,’ he replied quietly. ‘But if that is the case, perhaps we should not talk for the remainder of the journey.’

The uncomfortable silence that ensued was mercifully short. When they arrived in Berkeley Square, Nathan lost no time in handing down Lady Souden and escorting her to the door, where she thanked him prettily enough for his trouble. As soon as she had directed a footman to take him to Sir James, she grabbed her companion’s hand and hurried away.

Felicity said nothing as Lydia almost pulled her up the stairs and into her luxurious apartments. As soon as she was sure they were alone, Lydia leaned against the closed door and let out a long sigh.

‘Of all the unfortunate circumstances! When Rosthorne insisted upon coming with us I did not know where to look.’

‘That was quite apparent,’ replied Felicity, a reluctant smile

tugging at the corners of her mouth. 'I have never seen you so flustered.'

Lydia shook her head wearily. 'Oh, Fee, I cannot like this! Rosthorne is not a man I like to deceive. Will you not call an end to this charade?'

Felicity put back her hood. 'I cannot, Lydia. You know I cannot.' She turned away, her head bowed as she struggled with the strings of her cloak. Too much had happened that neither of them could forgive. She sighed. 'I am dead to him. It is better that way.'

Lydia swung her around, saying fiercely, 'No, it is not! You have not given him a chance to explain himself.'

'There is nothing to explain. He was desperately in love with another woman.' Felicity shook off her hands. 'He has forgotten me. Let it be, Lydia, it is over.'

'If you do not wish to tell him then there is an end to it. But I do not see how you can maintain this subterfuge. The earl is not a fool, he will recognise you eventually.'

Felicity sighed. 'If I am very careful he need never know I am here.' A sad little smile pulled at her mouth. 'After all, there are plenty of pretty young ladies to distract him.'

'Then you must go back to Souden. You would be safer there.'

'But then who would look after you? A poor companion I would be if I deserted you now! No, I shall do my duty, Lydia, and accompany you whenever Sir James is not available. After all, I am not likely to see Lord Rosthorne so very often: Sir James

will be at your side for most of the balls and concerts you will attend this summer and I may remain safely indoors.'

Lydia did not look completely satisfied with this answer but Felicity was adamant, and at length her friend shrugged.

'Very well, if you are sure it is what you want,' she said. 'Ring the bell, Fee. We will take hot chocolate here in my room. I would like to change out of this gown and go and find Sir James, but Rosthorne may still be with him, and it would look very odd if my headache had disappeared so very quickly!'

An hour later Felicity made her way back to her own apartment. It was not yet midnight, but she felt very tired. The strain of being so close to Nathan had exhausted her, and yet as she lay in her bed thinking over the evening she realised she would not have missed seeing him for the world. It was not without pain, to be sure. He knew her only as Lady Souden's companion, Miss Brown, and his indifference cut her deeply, but there was some comfort in watching him, in being near him. More comfort than she had felt for the past five years.

As the first grey light of dawn seeped into the master bedroom of Rosthorne House, Nathan threw back the bedcovers and sat up, rubbing his temples. Why, after all this time, should he dream of little Felicity Bourne?

He went to the window and pressed his forehead against the cool glass. The view from his bedroom was a pleasant one, for it overlooked the Green Park but this morning Nathan saw nothing; he was thinking of those hectic days in Corunna five

years ago. He had been sent ashore by Sir David Baird to help with the delicate negotiations with the local Spanish *junta*, trying to persuade them to allow the British troops to disembark. It was slow, frustrating work and it took all his attention—until one day he had turned a corner and seen three men attacking a young woman. Felicity.

She had looked magnificent with her dark gold hair in disarray about her shoulders and her eyes flashing with anger. He summed up the situation in one glance and when they dared to lay hands on her, he intervened. It was a brief tussle and they soon retreated, leaving Nathan to receive his reward, a grateful look from those huge grey eyes.

‘So, madam, where may I escort you?’

‘I do not know. That is, I have no place to stay here in Corunna.’ She paused. ‘I—I need to go to Madrid. I have friends there.’

Nathan hesitated. With no effective government in Spain he would not advise anyone to set out for Madrid without an escort, especially such a fragile little thing as this.

‘After what has just happened perhaps it would not be wise for me to travel alone.’

Her quiet words touched a nerve deep inside him, awaking every chivalrous instinct. It was all he could do not to tell her she need never be alone again. His reaction surprised him and he took a small step away.

‘On no account must you travel out of the city,’ he said

decisively.

She turned to him. 'But what am I to do? I am homeless, penniless—' she indicated her muddled pelisse '—and now I am not even presentable.'

'Hookham Frere, the British Envoy, will be setting out for Madrid in the next few days,' said Nathan. 'I have no doubt that he would be happy for you to travel with his party. Will you allow me to escort you to him?'

The relief in her face was evident. 'Thank you, yes, that would be very kind of you.'

Nathan gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. He had little experience of dealing with delicately reared young ladies and this one unsettled him. The sooner he could pass her over to the relative safety of the diplomatic party the better. He held out his arm again and hesitantly she laid her gloved hand on his sleeve. He noted idly that her head barely reached his shoulder.

'How comes it that you are separated from your friends, Miss Bourne?'

'Oh, as to that I...' Her words trailed off. He felt the weight of her on his arm.

'Miss Bourne, are you ill?'

'I beg your pardon, I—that is, I have not eaten for a few days...'

She was near to collapse. Nathan quickly revised his plans.

'If you can walk a little further, I have lodgings near here in the Canton Grande. Allow me to take you there, and when you

are fed and rested we will continue.'

A slight nod was the only answer he received. He put his arm around her and led her through the narrow streets to a neat house whose wide door and shuttered window sheltered beneath a mirador, an upper-floor balcony completely enclosed by glass panels. He saw his man sitting in the doorway, smoking his pipe.

'Sam, run and fetch Señora Benitez!'

'Now that I can't do, Major,' Sam replied slowly. 'She's gone to stay with 'er daughter for a couple o'days. She told you so herself, this morning, if you remember.'

'Damnation, so she did.'

Felicity gave a little moan and collapsed against him. Swiftly he lifted her into his arms. She was surprisingly light, and fitted snugly against his heart. Something stirred within him.

'And just what have we here, sir?' asked Sam, jabbing his pipe at Felicity.

Nathan allowed himself a swift, wry smile. 'A damsel in distress, Sam. Go ahead of me and open the door, man.'

'You ain't never going to put her in your room!'

'Where the devil do you expect me to put her?'

'Well, there's always the nuns...'

'No.' Nathan's arms tightened around her. He remembered the look in her eyes when she had turned to him. It was a mixture of trust and dependence and something more, a connection that he could not explain, but neither could he ignore it. 'No,' he said again. 'I shall look after her.'

Chapter Three

‘Well my love, you can be easy now,’ said Lydia at breakfast a few days later. ‘James and Rosthorne have gone off to Dover to meet the royal visitors and bring them back to London. The Prince is planning a royal procession through the town to St James’s Palace and James has hired rooms for us overlooking the route, so we will be able to watch the procession in comfort.’

Felicity received the news with mixed feelings. She should be relieved that there was no possibility of meeting Nathan for a while, instead she was disappointed.

‘Will Sir James and the earl be riding in the procession?’ She tried to sound indifferent but she blushed when she looked up and found Lydia smiling at her.

‘Yes they will. James tells me the Prince has insisted that Rosthorne should wear his dress uniform: he will look so dashing that I am sure all the ladies will be swooning over him.’

Felicity scowled into her coffee cup.

‘Let them swoon,’ she muttered. ‘I am sure I do not care!’

But when the day arrived Felicity could not deny a frisson of excitement as she and Lydia sat in the window of the hired room.

‘People have been gathering since dawn,’ remarked Lydia. ‘Everyone is eager to see the Emperor. They have even erected stands along the route, but I doubt that even they will have such a fine view as this.’

There was a sudden stir in the crowds below.

‘They are coming,’ declared Lydia, leaning towards the open window.

Felicity could hear the rattle of drums. A cheer went up as the cavalcade approached, a long column of bright colours and nodding plumes. Felicity watched, fascinated by the never-ending ranks of soldiers and dignitaries passing beneath her.

‘There’s Prinny!’ cried Lydia, pointing. ‘And that must be the Prussian King.’

Felicity looked down at the upright, soldierly figure in his topboots and white pantaloons. He looked very serious, but she could not help thinking that was much more regal than the portly Prince Regent. Lydia grabbed her arm.

‘Look, there’s James!’ She waved her handkerchief wildly at a group of riders following the royal party and was rewarded when Sir James looked up and raised his hat to her. ‘Oh, he is so handsome. And he looks so well on horseback, does he not?’

Felicity murmured a reply. She was searching the colourful columns, eager to catch a glimpse of Nathan. What had Sir James said about their escort duties? Nathan was to accompany the Emperor of Russia.

‘I have not yet seen the Tsar,’ she murmured, her eyes raking the crowds.

‘Perhaps he is gone another way.’ Lydia laughed. ‘I would not be surprised if his sister has told him to come direct to her at the Pulteney Hotel. James says she has taken a dislike to the Prince

Regent!’

Felicity was aware of a searing disappointment and berated herself fiercely. For five long years she had resolutely tried to forget Nathan Carraway—now he was out of her sight for just a few days and she was pining for him! She stared out at the colourful cavalcade passing beneath the window and made a decision. She would speak to him. At the very next opportunity she would reveal herself to Nathan. She would watch his reaction carefully; if he wanted nothing to do with her then she would ask Lydia to send her back to Souden and she would do her best to make a life for herself without Nathan Carraway. But perhaps, just perhaps...She hugged herself, trying not to fan the tiny spark of hope that refused to be extinguished. Whatever was decided, surely it would be better than this half-life she was living at present? Beside her, Lydia gave a little tut of exasperation.

‘It does not look as if the Tsar is going to appear. How tiresome! But we shall discover the truth tonight.’ Lydia sighed. ‘Such a lot of new faces, and James will expect me to know them all, for he will be inviting them to our ball! Well, Fee, my dependence is upon you to remember them, so that you can prompt me if I forget their names!’

‘So, James, what happened? Where was the Tsar?’ Lydia drew her husband into her private sitting room. ‘It is no good telling me you have been ordered to dine at Carlton House; you are not leaving until you tell us everything. Is that not so, Felicity?’

‘If you could spare us five minutes, Sir James, we would be

grateful.'

Her calm tone belied her impatience to know why Nathan had not been in the procession. Sir James allowed himself to be pulled down on to a sofa beside his wife.

'Oh, very well. So you and Miss Brown watched the proceedings, did you?'

Lydia shook his arm. 'You know very well we did, sir, for you saw us there when you rode past. But what happened to the Tsar?'

'Aye, well...' Sir James shook his head. 'We made good progress coming up from Dover. There were people lining the streets and hanging out of upstairs windows, all cheering, but the crowds were so thick as we came into London that the royals grew nervous.' He tried and failed to hide his grin. 'They ain't used to the mob, you see. All the people wanted to do was to cheer their heroes, unbuckle the horses and draw the carriages through the streets themselves, but the sovereigns didn't want it. Then someone took a pot-shot at the Tsar.'

'No!'

'Yes, my love. Only the shot went wide and hit Rosthorne instead.'

'Was—was he badly hurt?' Felicity asked, her hands straying to her cheeks.

Sir James laughed. 'Not at all, but the bullet took his hat clean off! I didn't have a chance to talk to him, for he was obliged to set off after the Emperor, who was determined to join his sister.'

'At the Pulteney.' Lydia nodded sagely. 'You said he might do

that.'

'Did I, by heaven?' exclaimed Sir James. He lifted her hand to his lips. 'What a clever little puss you are to remember that! Well, I hope he's comfortable there. The Lord Chamberlain, two bands and I don't know how many others had been waiting since dawn to receive him, then Rosthorne sends a message to say Tsar Alexander came into town by way of the turnpike at Hyde Park Corner and would be staying at the Pulteney. Prinny is as mad as fire, of course, but forced to put on a brave face. That is why I must go now, my love. His Highness is not in the best of moods, so it will not do for me to be late!'

'Poor James,' said Lydia, kissing his cheek. 'I think these celebrations are going to be anything but peaceful! But I must confess a desire to see this Emperor of Russia. Will he be at Lady Stinchcombe's ball tomorrow night, do you think?'

'He has certainly been invited; we must see if Rosthorne can bring him up to scratch!'

Felicity looked up to find Lydia giving her a rueful glance.

'Then I regret I must ask you to come out with me again tomorrow, Fee—I cannot wait for James to finish his interminable meetings before going to the ball.'

Felicity nodded. Inside, she was aching to see for herself that Nathan was unhurt. Tomorrow night could not come soon enough.

The carriage turned into a cobbled street off Piccadilly and pulled up outside a pretty red-brick house set back in its own

grounds. Lady Stinchcombe greeted them warmly.

‘There is no ceremony here tonight,’ she said gaily. ‘The Emperor sent Lord Rosthorne to make his apologies, but we shall do our best to enjoy ourselves without him. Wander where you will, although the garden illuminations will not be at their best until it is properly dark.’

‘I suppose we should wait until the last of the daylight has gone before we look at the gardens,’ said Lydia. She led the way towards the card room. ‘Have a care, Fee,’ she murmured, pausing in the doorway. ‘Rosthorne is here.’

Grateful for the warning, Felicity stayed in Lydia’s shadow as she followed her into the room. She spotted the earl almost immediately. He was playing picquet with another gentleman while a crowd of admiring ladies stood at his shoulder, vying for his attention.

‘Poor man, how very distracting for him.’

Hearing Felicity’s comment, a gentleman standing near them gave a laugh.

‘There’s no distracting Rosthorne! Even being shot at don’t make him turn a hair. Some dashed fool nearly blew his head off yesterday.’

‘Aye, I heard about that.’ A bewigged man in a faded frockcoat nodded. ‘Pretty wild shot if it missed the Tsar and hit Rosthorne. Who did it, some drunken lunatic?’

‘They didn’t catch him,’ replied the first man. ‘He got away in the crowd. Made no odds to Rosthorne, he merely followed on

after the Tsar.'

'He is very brave,' murmured Lydia.

The bewigged man shrugged. 'Rosthorne's a soldier. He thought nothing of it. Ruined a perfectly good hat, though.'

Pride flickered through Felicity. Of course Nathan would think nothing of the danger. He did not know the meaning of fear. Lydia took her arm.

'Even so, we shall not add to the distraction,' she murmured. 'Let us move on to the music room.' She patted Felicity's hand. 'My dear, what is this? You are shaking.'

'I am a little shocked to hear of such violence,' whispered Felicity. 'Pray do not mind me, Lydia; let us go on.'

She was being irrational, she told herself. Nathan had been in danger any number of times when he was a soldier, so why should the news of this incident affect her so? She chewed her lip. Because it was here, in London, where one did not expect such things. She glanced back at Nathan, sitting at the card table.

And because she still cared for him.

They wandered into the next room where Miss Stinchcombe was performing upon the harp. As the final notes died away and they applauded her performance, Felicity saw Gerald Appleby approaching them.

'Lady Souden, how do you do! And Miss Brown. A delightful evening, is it not? Mama is sitting over there by the window, may I take you over? I know she will want to talk to you...'

He led them across the room, chatting all the time until they

came up to Lady Charlotte, who greeted Lydia with a regal smile. Felicity she acknowledged with no more than a flicker of her cold eyes before engaging Lady Souden in conversation. Felicity gave an inward shrug and would have moved away, but Mr Appleby stopped her.

‘How are you enjoying the music, Miss Brown?’

‘Very well, sir, thank you.’

‘I think the harp very over-rated and much prefer the pianoforte,’ he continued, smiling at her. ‘Do you play at all, Miss Brown?’

‘The pianoforte, a little.’

‘Ah, all young ladies say they only play a little and then they perform the most complicated pieces for us. Shall we have the pleasure of hearing you this evening, ma’am?’

‘No, Mr Appleby, I do not play in public.’

‘What, never? But why? This must be remedied immediately,’ he cried gaily.

Felicity tried to step away but found the wall at her back. ‘No, I assure you, sir—’

He took her hand and leaned toward her, smiling. ‘This is no time for bashful modesty, madam. Let me take you to the piano —’

‘Gerald!’ Lady Charlotte’s strident tones interrupted him. ‘Gerald, leave the gel alone. It is beneath you to flirt with the hirelings.’

‘I beg your pardon, Lady Charlotte, but Miss Brown’s birth is

equal to my own,' said Lydia, bristling in defence of her friend.

'So I should hope,' returned Lady Charlotte, unperturbed. 'I would expect nothing less in any companion of yours.'

Felicity observed the angry flush on Lydia's cheek and slipped away from Gerald to take her arm.

'You wished to look at the lamps in the garden, my lady...'

'Insufferable woman,' muttered Lydia as they walked away. 'She is so set up in her own importance!'

'I was quite thankful for her intervention,' returned Felicity. 'Mr Appleby is far too mischievous.'

'Perhaps he is trying to fix his interest with you.'

'Oh, Lydia, surely not!'

'You may look surprised, Fee, but he is quite taken with you.'

'But I have done nothing—'

'No, nothing more than look adorably shy.' Lydia gave a soft laugh. 'There is no need to colour up, my love; you have an air of fragility that makes men want to protect you.'

Felicity put up her chin. 'But I do not want to be protected! Oh dear. I had hoped, by dressing plainly and not putting myself forward, that I would not be noticed.'

'And in general that is the case,' Lydia reassured her. 'Mr Appleby is perhaps trying to make amends for his mother's ignoring you.'

'Yes, that is very possible,' mused Felicity. She looked up, a smile lurking in her eyes. 'And it is a very lowering thought!'

Her companion laughed. 'Yes, it is! But it is quite your own

fault, Fee. If you were to put on a fashionable gown and stop dressing your hair in that dowdy style I have no doubt that we would have dozens of gentlemen clamouring to make your acquaintance!’

Still chuckling, they wandered out on to the terrace where a familiar voice cut through the darkness.

‘So there you are! Now what in heaven’s name are you two laughing at?’

Sir James’s bemused enquiry brought his lady flying to his arms.

‘Oh, my dear, you are here already! How wonderful! No, no, you must not ask about our silly jokes. I did not expect to see you here for another hour yet!’

‘Well, having delivered his Highness to our hostess I have left him being toad-eaten by any number of the guests! What a crush. Scarcely room to move in the ballroom!’

‘I know, that is why we came out here to look at the lamps. They are very pretty, are they not?’ Lydia took her husband’s arm. ‘Shall we take a stroll through the gardens? Come with us, Fee.’

‘If you do not object, I think I might stay here for a little while.’ Felicity had spotted the earl slipping out of the house on the far side of the terrace. She nodded at Lydia. ‘Please, go on without me. I shall be perfectly safe here.’

As soon as Lydia and Sir James had disappeared into the gardens, Felicity ran across the terrace and down the steps in

the direction that Nathan had gone. This was her opportunity to reveal herself to him. It was much darker on this side of the house, for the path led away from the main gardens, where myriad coloured lights were strung between the trees. As she hurried through the gloom her step faltered. Nathan might have an assignation—how would she feel if she came upon him with his arms around another woman? She put up her chin. If that was the case then she would rather know of it. Then she could put him out of her mind and end this growing obsession.

Away from the house there was just sufficient light for her to see the grassy path. It ran between tall bushes with the ghostly outlines of marble statues at intervals along its length. Nathan's tall figure was ahead of her, no more than a black shadow in the darkness. At the end of the avenue he hesitated before disappearing to the right. Felicity followed and found herself stepping into a rather unkempt shrubbery.

‘Why are you following me?’ Felicity turned to flee, but Nathan's hand shot out and grasped her wrist. ‘Oh, no. You will not leave until I have an explanation!’

Felicity swallowed. It was far too dark to see clearly and she only recognised Nathan by his voice. She lowered her own to a whisper in an attempt to disguise it.

‘I—I came out here to...’ Felicity hesitated. Should she reveal herself, tell him she had followed him? Her courage failed her. ‘I do not like the noise and chatter.’

That much at least was true. She heard him sigh.

‘Nor I.’ He released her. ‘In fact, I can’t think why I came tonight.’

Felicity knew that she should pick up her skirts and run away, but her wayward body would not move. To be here, alone with Nathan, talking to him—it was very dangerous, but she could not resist.

‘Why remain in town, sir, if you do not enjoy society?’

‘I have duties to perform.’ He turned his head suddenly, peering at her. ‘Do I know you?’

Felicity shrank back. ‘No,’ she said gruffly. ‘No. I do not move in your circle.’

Nathan shrugged. He had come out into the gardens to enjoy a cigarillo in peace but it was not his house, he could hardly tell this young person to go away. The strains of a minuet floated out on the night air.

‘The dancing has begun. Do you not wish to join in?’

‘No.’

Her laconic reply surprised him into a laugh.

‘I thought all young ladies love to dance.’

‘I do not dance. I have not danced since I was at school.’

He heard the wistful note in her voice and held out his hand to her. ‘Would you like to try now? Here?’

The stillness settled over them. Nathan had the impression the little figure before him was holding her breath. He saw her hand come up, then it dropped again to her side.

‘Thank you, but no. Companions do not dance.’

So that was her role. He felt a stir of pity.

‘But out here we do not need to abide by society’s rules.’ He reached out and took her hand, pulling her towards him. ‘Here we are no more than a man and a woman. We may dance if we wish to, or...’

His words trailed away as he drew her closer. He had not intended to take her in his arms, but as she stepped forward it seemed natural to embrace her. She leaned against him, her head just below his chin. He breathed in the subtle fragrance of flowers and sunshine and—

‘Oh, dear heaven, let me go!’

She was struggling like a frightened bird against this hold. Immediately he released her.

‘Oh, I do beg your pardon,’ she gasped. ‘That was not meant to...I must go!’

‘As you wish.’ She stood before him in the darkness. He could not see her face, but he knew that she was troubled. He said gently, ‘Did I frighten you?’

‘No...’ Her voice caught on a sob. ‘No, never.’

She turned and disappeared into the night. Nathan watched her go, then with a faint shrug he reached into his pocket for his cigarillos.

Felicity flew out of the shrubbery and stopped, panting once she reached the grass path. What had she been thinking of? To talk to Nathan had been foolish enough, to allow him to take her in his arms was sheer madness. Why had she not told him who

she was? She bowed her head. She could imagine his reaction. Anger and revulsion. How had she ever dared to hope that he might want her back? Yet even now she could not bring herself to walk away.

Give him the chance to decide.

Felicity crept back to the edge of the path and peeped around the corner. She could just make out Nathan's dark figure a short distance away, only his white neckcloth and waistcoat showing against the black shadows. He was moving quite slowly and as she watched he tilted his head back and exhaled a little cloud into the night air. A tangy, unusual fragrance wafted towards her. He was smoking a cigar. She had seen the officers in Corunna smoking these little cylinders of rolled tobacco and guessed that Nathan had picked up the habit during his years as a soldier. A movement in the shadows caught her eye. There was someone else in the shrubbery. Immediately she was on the alert, sensing danger. Nathan had turned away from that corner of the garden and Felicity saw a sudden flash, a glint of metal in the moonlight.

'Behind you, sir!' Felicity's shout cut through the silence.

Nathan wheeled about, fists raised. 'Who's there?'

A dark shape broke away and fled, all attempts at stealth gone as it crashed through the bushes.

Felicity stepped back into the shadows. She had succeeded in putting Nathan on his guard. Now she must remove herself. Picking up her skirts, she raced back towards the terrace, veering off along the path leading to the main gardens.

‘Sir James, Sir James!’

Lydia and her husband were strolling arm in arm beneath the coloured lamps. They looked up at her call. She ran up to them.

‘Sir James, there is—an—intruder,’ she gasped out the words, impatient to make him understand. She pointed. ‘Over there in the shrubbery.’

Sir James immediately ran to the terrace and pulled one of the torches from its holder, calling to a footman to follow him. He turned to Felicity.

‘Very well, show me.’

‘James, be careful!’ cried Lydia, running along behind them.

They were halfway along the path when they met Nathan coming the other way. Felicity dropped back immediately into the darkness.

‘Rosthorne,’ Sir James called to him. ‘There’s a report of an intruder. Have you seen him?’

‘Aye, there was someone. He took off through the garden door when I challenged him. I followed him outside, but the alley was deserted.’

Sir James turned to the footman. ‘Could he have got in that way?’

The servant shook his head. ‘No, sir. Her ladyship insists we keep the door locked.’

‘Well, it was used tonight,’ said Nathan. ‘There are bolts top and bottom. I was close behind the man as he opened the door. He did not have time to draw them back. Either he had prepared

his escape, or someone let him in.'

'Good heavens!' gasped Lydia, clinging to her husband's arm.

'I will talk to Stinchcombe,' said Nathan. 'He can have the servants search the house, to check if anything is missing.'

'Make sure you do not alarm the rest of the guests,' Sir James called after him. He patted Lydia's hand. 'There is nothing more to be done here, so I suggest we go back indoors. Come, Miss Brown. You may rest easy now; there is no one here.'

Sir James took the ladies back to Berkeley Square soon after, and the incident in the Stinchcombes' garden was not mentioned again, but it remained in Felicity's mind when she went to bed that night. Sir James had spoken to his hostess before they had left and she had assured him that nothing had been taken from the house, and no uninvited guests had been seen in the building. For all that Felicity was still uneasy. It would be a very bold thief who would risk entering a house full of guests. There had been something menacing about the way the figure had moved in the shadows, the way it had approached Nathan and the glint of metal she had seen. Could it have been a knife blade? She shuddered. There were so many strangers in London for the Peace Celebrations: perhaps not all of them were friendly.

'Now you are being fanciful,' she muttered, pummelling her pillow. 'It was probably some poor starving creature looking for a little food, nothing more. You were overwrought. Most likely you are making a mountain out of nothing more than a worm-cast!'

Nevertheless, the feeling persisted that by being there she had

saved Nathan's life.

However, there was no talk of intruders the next morning; Lydia's thoughts were all on a forthcoming treat.

'In general James does not like masked balls and I feared that he would cry off from Lady Preston's masquerade next week,' she said, with a twinkling look at her husband. He grinned back at her.

'His Highness insists we all attend, and that we wear a costume of his own designing.'

Lydia laughed. 'How galling that I must be grateful to the Prince Regent for my husband's company!'

Felicity turned to Sir James. 'His Highness wishes you *all* to attend?'

'Aye, Miss Brown. Neither Rosthorne nor I will be escorting the royal party that night, but we are still obliged to wear the Regent's costume.'

Felicity digested this while Sir James took his leave of them and went off to his study.

'I am glad for your sake that James will escort me to Lady Preston's,' said Lydia, when they were alone again. 'It means that you are not obliged to come with me, Fee, so it works out very neatly.'

'Actually, I would like to go to the masquerade, if I may.'

Lydia turned an astonished gaze upon her. 'Fee, my dear, you cannot wish to go!'

Felicity looked down at her hands. 'It is not so long ago we

thought I should be attending as your companion,' she reminded Lydia. 'You expressly requested Lady Preston to send me an invitation, did you not?'

'Yes, yes, I know that, but...oh, Fee, are you sure you want to attend? Have you considered?'

'Yes, I have. It is to be a masked ball, so I may be quite disguised. And I shall leave before the unmasking at midnight.'

'But Rosthorne will be there!'

'I know. That is why I want to go.'

With a tiny squeal Lydia sat up. 'Have you run mad?' she demanded. 'Do you know the risk you will be running to attend a masquerade?'

Felicity nodded. 'I have considered that. But I want to see him again, Lydia.' She clasped her hands tightly in her lap. 'It is the perfect opportunity for me to talk to him.'

'But as soon as you speak to him he will recognise you.'

Felicity shook her head. 'He will not be expecting to see me there.' She thought back to their time together in the shrubbery. 'I doubt he even remembers my voice.'

'This is madness,' Lydia said again. 'Think of the danger, Fee. These events can be very...wild.'

'It is no matter,' said Felicity calmly. 'All I want is to dance with Nathan. We have never danced together, you see. And I would so like to know how it feels. Just once.'

Lydia looked at her, tears starting in her blue eyes. 'Oh, my dear—'

Felicity quickly put up her hands. 'No, please, Lydia, do not pity me or I shall start to cry, too. Instead I would like to ask you to help me in another way.' She fixed her eyes upon her friend. 'I will need some dancing lessons. Apart from a few country dances at Souden I have not danced, not *properly* danced, since we were at the Academy together...'

'And you were always such a graceful dancer. I shall ask my old dancing teacher, Signor Bellini, to come here and I shall play for you,' declared Lydia. 'Oh, Fee, this is so exciting. And when Rosthorne discovers who you are...'

'You go too fast, Lydia!' Felicity frowned. 'I am not at all sure I am ready to reveal myself to him.'

Lady Souden looked as if she would say more, but after a brief hesitation she merely smiled, and nodded. 'Very well, my love. Now, let us think of a disguise for you.'

'I thought you might have a domino that I may borrow. And a mask.'

Lydia sat back and regarded her friend. After a few moments a mischievous little smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. 'I think I can do much better than that for you, my love.' She shook her head. 'No, I will tell you nothing more now, except that you must leave everything to me!'

Lady Souden refused to say any more.

Felicity was obliged to curb her curiosity until the very day of Lady Preston's masquerade, when she accompanied Lydia on another of her shopping sprees. This included the purchase of a

pair of scarlet stockings, which Lydia presented to her friend.

‘What on earth would I want with these?’ asked Felicity, laughing.

‘They will add the finishing touch to your costume this evening.’

‘What are you planning for me, Lydia? Do tell!’

But Lady Souden merely looked mysterious and bade her to wait until the evening.

‘How fortunate that dear James could not dine with us tonight,’ remarked Lydia as she took Felicity upstairs to her apartment. ‘I can help you to dress without fear that he will want to know what we are doing.’

‘I am becoming mighty anxious about this myself,’ said Felicity as she followed her hostess into the white-and-rose dressing room. ‘The thought of those scarlet stockings is quite alarming.’

Lydia giggled. ‘Nonsense, they are just right!’ She smiled at her maid, who was standing beside an open trunk. ‘Well, Janet, have you put everything ready, as I instructed?’

‘Aye, m’lady.’ She reached into the trunk and with a rustle of tissue paper she pulled forth a gown. Felicity stared.

‘Lydia,’ she breathed, ‘I couldn’t...can you not find me a plain domino? That is all I require...’

‘Nonsense, you will look wonderful in this. We are very much of a height, so it will fit you very well. I would wear it myself but...’ Lydia smiled and placed her hands on her waist ‘...I would

not look my best in it this year.'

Felicity looked again at the gown the maid was holding up for her inspection. It was a heavy brocade gown with full skirts and a narrow, boned bodice, but it was not the old style that made Felicity's eyes widen. It was the colour. The gown was a vividly patterned scarlet-and-black, trimmed with black lace.

'Begging your pardon, my lady, but I am not sure this is a suitable gown for Miss Brown,' offered Janet, eyeing the gown doubtfully.

'Pho, it is for a wager,' Lydia responded in an airy tone. 'Come now, we must help Miss Brown to dress. Quickly, Janet, for there is much to do.'

Felicity submitted meekly to their ministrations. Soon her light, flowing muslin gown had been replaced by pads and hoops and petticoats. She gasped as Janet tugged on the laces of her bodice, fitting it tightly into the curve of her waist. When Lydia sent the maid off to pack away her discarded clothes, Felicity gave a little whimper.

'I can scarce breathe.' She regarded herself in the mirror. The tight bodice emphasised her tiny waist and the creamy swell of her breasts above the low neckline. As she raised one hand to her throat the black lace ruffles fell back softly from her white arm. 'Oh dear, Janet is right: I should not be wearing this.'

'You want to dance with Rosthorne, do you not?' said Lydia, eminently practical. 'Trust me, he will not be able to resist you in this gown.' She sighed, a faraway look creeping into her eyes.

‘The modiste named this gown “Temptation”. I remember when I wore it: James could not take his eyes off me.’ Lydia gave another sigh, but as her handmaid came back into the room she recollected herself and said in a very businesslike tone, ‘Now for the headdress. Sit down here, my love, while Janet helps me.’

A heavy black wig was fitted over Felicity’s soft gold-brown hair and she watched in some consternation as Janet pulled up a side table and began to set out a frightening array of powders and paints.

‘Is this really necessary?’ protested Felicity. ‘I am sure—’

‘Hush,’ Lydia told her. ‘You must look the part.’

‘Why, ’tis no more than a little powder, miss,’ said Janet. ‘Thirty years ago no lady would ever leave her room without painting her face as white as snow.’

‘And what is that you are putting on my eyes?’

‘Nothing more than a little burnt cork, miss.’

And so it went on. Felicity stared ahead of her as Lydia and her maid worked their transformation. The daylight faded and was replaced by the soft glow of candles before the maid began to pack away the little pots and brushes.

‘Can I look in the mirror now?’

‘Just a few more touches,’ said Lydia.

She handed Felicity a length of black ribbon embroidered with gold thread.

‘To tie up your stockings, of course,’ she said in answer to Felicity’s questioning look. ‘And finally, these.’

She produced a square leather jewel case and lifted from it a heavy ruby necklace. 'This belonged to my grandmother, but no one wears such things now. There...and the ear-drops...well—' she caught Felicity's hands and pulled her up to stand before the long glass '—what do you think of yourself?'

For a long, silent moment Felicity gazed at her reflection. A strange, exotic creature stared back at her. A dark-haired stranger with white skin and light grey eyes framed by long dark lashes.

'Well?' said Lydia again.

'Even *I* do not recognise myself.' Even as she spoke her eyes were fixed upon her mouth: plump, sensuously curving lips painted a vivid red contrasted with the whiteness of her skin.

Lydia gave a little crow of laughter. 'That is precisely what we want!' She handed Felicity a mask, a black-and-gold creation with long black ribbons to fasten around her headdress. 'Now, you are to sit down and keep still while Janet helps me into my dress. Tonight I shall be Aphrodite, the goddess of love.' She gave her friend a mischievous smile. 'Quite appropriate, do you not agree? Goodness, look at the hour! We must be quick, Janet, Sir James will be here any minute and we cannot risk him coming upstairs and finding Miss Brown dressed like this!'

The maid's head shot up. 'Sir James doesn't know that Miss Brown is attending—?'

Lydia shushed her maid and waved an impatient hand. 'I told you it is for a wager. Now not another word from you, Janet, and

make haste to help me into my costume!’

Lydia was giving her golden curls a final pat when word arrived that Sir James was waiting below.

‘I must go,’ she said. ‘I have given instructions for your coach to be at the door for you in half an hour. Janet has looked out a domino for you, so your costume will be completely concealed when you leave here.’ She gave her friend a final hug. ‘Do take care, Fee. I will be sure to keep James away from you tonight.’

‘Are you afraid he might recognise me?’

Lydia picked up her mask. ‘No,’ she said, going to the door. ‘I am afraid he might find you too, too attractive.’

Chapter Four

Nathan prowled restlessly around Lady Preston's magnificent ballroom. The walls were covered with swathes of midnight-blue silk that seemed to absorb the light from the huge chandeliers. The colourful costumes lost something of their brilliance as the movement of the dance took the dancers away from the centre of the room and they were eager to push back into the middle of the swirling, swaying mass. Not so Nathan, who took advantage of the shadows to hide himself away against the dark walls or in the shadowy corners of the room. He tugged at his collar: it was very warm, despite the tall windows being thrown wide. Impatiently he fiddled with the strings of his mask and heard a quiet laugh at his shoulder.

'No, no, my lord, it's not time for the unmasking yet.'

He turned to find Sir James and Lady Souden beside him.

'Fie upon you, sir, that is no way to address someone at a masquerade.' The lady was smiling at him through the scrap of lace that served as her mask.

'Well, I'm dashed if I'm going to ask Rosthorne if I know him,' retorted Sir James. 'It's perfectly plain to see who he is. But you don't look as if you're enjoying yourself, my boy.'

Nathan shrugged. 'I have been here for most of the day, sir. His Highness got wind of the fiasco in the Stinchcombes' garden and I was despatched to check that the grounds here are secure.'

‘Ah, yes. We cannot risk another assassination attempt,’ replied Sir James. ‘That would really put a damper on the celebrations. But having done your duty you are free to enjoy yourself now, Rosthorne.’

‘To tell the truth I wish this whole evening was over,’ replied Nathan, grimacing.

‘Is it really so bad?’ Lady Souden gave him a sympathetic smile.

‘I would be more comfortable in a plain domino, but this—’ Nathan indicated his costume, an over-elaborate variation of a hussar’s uniform in royal blue, red, white and gold.

Sir James nodded. ‘Garish, ain’t it? And even the mask don’t conceal one’s identity. But his Highness insists. A display of solidarity for his guests, I think.’

‘And they haven’t even put in an appearance,’ declared Nathan bitterly.

‘But they will.’ Sir James patted him on one heavily gilded shoulder. ‘Bear up, Rosthorne. Prinny and his royals will turn up shortly and depart again even sooner, no doubt. When they have gone you can take your leave.’

‘Aye, I’ll go home and change.’ Nathan grinned. ‘I pity those poor fellows in the Prince’s Own if their uniform is anything like this.’

‘Well, I think you both look very dashing,’ laughed Lydia as Sir James led her away to join the dancing. ‘Every woman will want to dance with you.’

And that's the problem, thought Nathan as he drew back once more into the shadows. It seemed to him that all the matchmaking mothers in London had begged, borrowed or stolen an invitation to this masquerade for no better purpose than to fling their marriageable daughters at his head. Lord, what a conceited fool everyone would think him if he expressed such a view aloud, but it was true Sir James himself had called him—what were his words? The biggest catch on the Marriage Mart. Nathan's mouth twisted in distaste. When he had been a mere Major Carraway no one had cared about his marital status, but the wealthy Lord Rosthorne was the subject of constant speculation.

Nathan had not expected to become Earl of Rosthorne, but when he had inherited the title he had thought it his duty to sell out and interest himself in his estates. Now, as he dodged behind a pillar to avoid the gaze of another predatory matron, he began to wish he had remained in the army.

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