REGENCY
Lady Beneath the Veil
SARAH MALLORY

Sarah Mallory
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Аннотация

SECRETS AT THE ALTAR…When Gideon Albury lifts his new bride's veil he can't believe his eyes–this dark-haired dab of a girl isn't the blonde beauty he's been courting! Stunned, Gideon resolves to seek an annulment at the earliest opportunity, but to do so he must first make sure Dominique Rainault's virtue stays intact….Blackmailed into marrying Gideon by her despicable cousin, Dominique is just as keen to keep her distance from her unsettling husband. But despite their good intentions the marital bed beckons–and a stolen kiss could prove to be their undoing!

Содержание

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'So it is.' The Honourable Gideon Albury smiled down at his new wife. 'I think we can dispense with this now.'

He reached for her veil, but she quickly put her gloved hand over his.

'Not yet,' she whispered.

He laughed. 'Be careful, my love, I shall begin to think I have married a little prude!'

He expected to hear her delicious throaty laugh but she was silent, merely putting her fingers on his arm as he escorted her to the door.

After the darkness of the stone building the spring sunshine was almost blinding when they stepped outside. He stopped and turned to her again.

'Now, Miss Propriety, let me kiss you … Good God!' He stepped back, his eyes widening with horror as he looked down into the face of a stranger.

AUTHOR NOTE

The very first page in LADY BENEATH THE VEIL is, in fact, the very first idea I had for this story. I wanted to explore what would happen if a man suddenly found himself married to a woman he had never seen before. Of course this is not a new idea—throughout British history many sons and daughters of the aristocracy have been married off for political or economic reasons to virtual strangers—but this was to be no reasoned alliance: it was to be a cruel hoax.

You might think that no one would play such a trick … Well, one only has to look into history to see that life in Georgian England could be cruel and brutally short and, as if in response, the Georgians could be tough, crude and boisterous. There are the much-recorded practical jokes of Sir Francis Blake Delaval, of Seaton Delaval in Northumberland, who played the most outrageous practical jokes upon visitors.

Mechanical hoists were installed so that when unsuspecting guests were undressing the bedroom walls would suddenly be lifted up, exposing them. In one bedroom the bed could be lowered into a tank of cold water, and in another guests would wake to find everything upside down—the whole room inverted—with furniture suspended from the 'floor' and a chandelier rising up from the middle of the 'ceiling'. It must have been a most unnerving experience. One elderly (but rich) widow was

even persuaded to marry Sir Francis after a charade involving a fortune-teller and an 'accidental' meeting.

So I thought the marriage of Gideon and Dominique might well have happened—but what about the happy-ever-after? Could such a marriage work when it was not the fairytale wedding that either of them had wanted? Well, they struggle, of course, but I think I have found a way for them to resolve their differences and find happiness together. I hope you agree. Please feel you can contact me at www.sarahmallory.com

Lady Beneath the Veil

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 from singletitles.com for *Dance for a Diamond* and the Historical

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To Sally, my best friend through good times and bad.

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Chapter One

'Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder!'

The words boomed around the small church, echoing off the walls. The Honourable Gideon Albury grinned down at the heavily veiled figure at his side. Bless her, she was taking

maidenly modesty to new heights!

Perhaps she thought it would inflame him, but she did that perfectly well without dressing as a nun. With her voluptuous body, golden curls and cornflower-blue eyes, she was a rare beauty. And that little trick she had of peeping up at him from under her lashes, those blue eyes promising the lush delights to come—his body hardened with anticipation. At last he would be able to enjoy those ample curves to the full!

Not that the little darling had flaunted her charms. She was, after all, a lady—the Earl of Martlesham's cousin, in fact. He would not else have contemplated marriage without his father's approval. Depraved as Lord Rotham might think him, he had not sunk so low that he would marry out of his sphere. But 'fore Gad, Gideon had never before seen such perfection in a gently bred young lady. She had allowed Gideon a glimpse of her pretty ankles, his hands had spanned that tiny waist and her plump, snow-white breast had been just crying out to be kissed. By heaven, just the thought of it made it difficult to concentrate on the marriage service. The register was produced. Gideon scrawled his own name carelessly and watched as his bride added her name to his. He guessed that damned veil was making it difficult for her to see because her hand shook a little as she held the pen. As a witness, Martlesham signed with a flourish and grinned.

'There—'tis done.'

'So it is.' Gideon smiled down at his new wife. 'I think we can

dispense with this now.'

He reached for her veil, but she quickly put her gloved hand over his.

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He laughed.

'Be careful, my love, I shall begin to think I have married a little prude!'

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'Now, Miss Propriety, let me kiss you... Good God!' He stepped back, his eyes widening with horror as he looked down into the face of a complete stranger.

Chapter Two

Dominique stood very still, staring up into the shocked face of her new husband. It was all there, everything she had expected: horror, revulsion, disgust. She had known how it must seem to him once the trick was revealed. He pushed his fingers through his auburn hair, disturbing the carefully arranged disorder, while behind them Max's cruel laugh rang out.

'Caught you there, Albury!'

'But I don't understand. Your cousin—'

'This is my cousin.'

Max chortled and Dominique's heart went out to the man standing before her. He looked stunned.

As well he might. Instead of the beautiful, voluptuous blonde he had courted for the past two months he was married to a diminutive brunette whom he had never seen before in his life.

'Is something amiss?' The vicar looked from one to the other before directing a vaguely worried look towards Max. 'Lord Martlesham?'

'No, no, nothing's wrong,' declared Max, still chuckling. 'The groom is struck dumb by the enormity of the occasion, that's all.' He began shepherding the guests away from the church. 'Come along, everyone, the carriages are waiting!'

'Just a moment!' The man beside her did not move, except to shake her hand from his arm. 'Where is Dominique?'

'Lord, Albury, have you not understood it yet? You have married her!' Max gave him a push. 'Come along, man, don't stand there gawping. Let us return to the Abbey.'

'Please.' Dominique forced her vocal cords to work. 'Come back to the Abbey and all this can be explained.'

Frowning, he grabbed her arm and set off for the gate with Dominique almost running to keep up with him. As was usual with weddings, the path was lined with well-wishers who showered them with rice as they hurried to the carriage. It was decorated with ribbons for the occasion, the Martlesham coat of arms displayed prominently on the door. Without ceremony her escort bundled Dominique into the carriage, climbed in after

her and the door was slammed upon them. Max's grinning face appeared in the window.

'Now then, Gideon, try to contain your lust until after the wedding breakfast. The journey from here to the Abbey ain't long enough to tup a woman properly. I know, I've tried it!'

Dominique closed her eyes in mortification. The carriage began to move and the raucous laughter was left behind them.

'So, this was one of Max's little tricks.'

Dominique looked at Gideon. His voice was calm, but there was a dangerous glitter in his hazel eyes that made her think he might be about to commit murder. She swallowed.

'Yes.'

'And everyone at the Abbey was privy to the joke, except me.'

'You and...my mother.'

'Max told me she was too unwell to attend the ceremony.'

Dominique bowed her head.

'She does not know. Maman would never have agreed to such a scheme.'

'I take it the female I knew as Dominique was hired for the part?'

She nodded.

'An actress. Agnes Bennet.'

'And a damned good one. She fooled me into thinking she was a lady. Whereas you—' His lip curled. 'You may be Max's cousin, but no true lady would lend herself to this, this joke.'

His contempt flayed her. Given time, she could explain to

him why she had agreed to Max's outrageous scheme, but they had already arrived at the Abbey. She waited in silence for the carriage to stop and a liveried footman to leap forwards and open the door. Her companion jumped out first and with exaggerated courtesy put out his hand to her.

'Well, madam, shall we go in to the wedding breakfast?'

Miserably, Dominique accompanied him into the house.

* * *

'Now, perhaps you will explain to me what the hell is going on.'

Gideon looked about him at the company assembled in the dining room. The servants had been dismissed and it was only the twenty or so guests who had comprised Lord Martlesham's house party for the past two months—with the exception of the blonde beauty, of course. The woman he had believed was Martlesham's cousin. She had been replaced by the poor little dab of a girl who was now his wife.

Everyone stood around, ignoring the festive elegance of the dining table, all gleaming silver and sparkling glass, set out in readiness for the wedding breakfast. His eyes raked the crowd, but no one would meet his gaze.

'It's a practical joke, old boy,' said Max, who was helping himself to a glass of brandy from the decanter on the sideboard.

'Not one that I appreciate!' Gideon retorted.

Max turned to him, still smiling.

'No? Strange, I thought you would, given what happened at

Covent Garden last year.'

'Ah...' Gideon nodded slowly '...so that is it. You are paying me back for stealing the divine Diana from under your nose!'

The scene came back to him. He had been one of a dozen rowdy, drunken bucks crowding into the dressing rooms after the performance. Max was paying court to a pretty little opera dancer, but Gideon knew from her meaningful smiles and the invitation in her kohl-lined eyes that she would happily give herself to the highest bidder.

'Confound it, Albury, I had been working on that prime article for weeks, then just when I thought she was going to fall into my lap you offer her a carte blanche!'

Gideon felt his temper rising. There was a world of difference between competing for the favours of a lightskirt and trapping him into marriage!

'And because I bested you on that occasion you concocted this elaborate charade?'

'Why, yes, and I thought it rather neat, actually,' returned Max, sipping his brandy. 'I hired Agnes Bennet to play my cousin and you fell for her—quite besotted, in fact. All I had to do then was persuade you to propose. Of course, it helped that you were still smarting from the roasting your father gave you at Christmas and ripe for any mischief that would pay him back.'

Gideon could not deny it. He recalled that last, fraught meeting with his father. They had rowed royally. If he was honest, Gideon had already been a little tired of Max and his

constant tricks and stratagems, but he did not like his father criticising his friends. He had lost his temper, declaring that he would do what he wanted with his life. He remembered storming out of the house, declaring, 'I will make friends with whom I like, do what I like, marry whom I like!'

How unwise he had been to relay the whole incident to Martlesham.

The earl continued, 'You knew that marrying any cousin of mine would anger your father. It helped, of course, that she was such a little beauty. A typical English rose.'

'Couldn't wait to get her into bed, eh?' cried one of Max's cronies, a buck-toothed fop called Williams.

Dear heaven, Gideon wondered why he had never noticed before just what a hideous smirk the fellow had! Max filled a second glass with brandy and handed it to him.

'Then, of course, you said you could never marry a Frenchie.'

'Well, what of that?' said Gideon, stiffening.

Max's smile grew.

'It so happens that my dear cousin here is most definitely French. Ain't that so, m'dear?'

The girl made no answer, save for a slight nod of the head. Gideon's eyes narrowed.

'Reynolds is an English name. And you told me Dominique was an old family tradition...'

'Now there I admit I misled you, my boy. The name is a family tradition, but it belongs to her French ancestors, not mine.'

Max's hateful smile widened. 'My dear Gideon, you should have looked more closely at the register before you signed it. You would have seen then that her father's name was Rainault, not Reynolds. Jerome Rainault, a wine merchant from Montpellier. A full-blooded Frenchman, Albury, and a paid-up Girondin to boot.'

'What!'

Gideon was surprised out of the dispassionate hauteur he had assumed. Max's pale blue eyes gleamed with malicious triumph.

'Oh, yes,' he said softly. 'You swore that the French were all your enemies, did you not? It seemed poetic justice to marry you off to a Frenchwoman.'

More of Gideon's last, heated exchange with his father flashed into his head.

'Martlesham is a bad lot,' the viscount had said. 'You should choose your friends more carefully.'

He had been angered by his father's words, but now the truth of them stung him even more.

Williams guffawed loudly. 'What a good joke. You have been well and truly duped, Albury! You fell head over heels for Max's actress, didn't you? He made the switch this morning. He even had shoes made with a heel so that you didn't see that your new bride was shorter than the lovely Agnes.'

Williams pushed his silver-topped cane under the bridal skirts, but the girl whipped herself away from him, her cheeks aflame with embarrassment. The others sniggered and Gideon cursed

silently. How had he ever found their childish humour amusing?

He said furiously, 'This goes beyond a joke, Martlesham. This time you are meddling with peoples' lives.'

Max shrugged.

'We all found it devilishly amusin', old fellow.' He held out the glass. 'Here. Admit we caught you fair and square. Then let us enjoy the wedding déjeuner and afterwards I'll summon the vicar and my lawyer from the village and we can arrange to have the marriage annulled. After all, there's witnesses enough to the fact that you have been tricked.'

Gideon took the brandy and sipped it. Everyone around him was grinning, save the bride. The heat had left her cheeks and she now stood beside him, pale and silent. This slight, dark figure could not be less like the bride he had been expecting. The enormity of his folly hit him. He had not consulted his father about the marriage—a petty revenge against his parent for daring to ring such a peal over him at that last meeting. He had not even notified his lawyer, knowing that Rogers would demand settlements should be drawn up. In his eagerness to secure his bride he had accepted Max's assurances that they could deal with all the usual formalities later. Now he knew why and a cold fury seized him.

He said slowly, 'Admit I was tricked and become a laughing stock? No, I don't think so.'

It gave him some satisfaction to see the smiles falter. Max frowned. His bride turned to stare at him. Gideon forced a smile

to his lips.

'No,' he drawled. 'I have to marry sometime. Your cousin will do as well as anyone, Martlesham. The marriage stands.'

* * *

'No!'

Dominique gasped out the word. This was not the way it was meant to be. She looked imploringly to her cousin, but the earl's face was a mask.

'Come.' Gideon was holding his hand out to her. 'Let us sit down and enjoy our first meal as man and wife.'

His tone brooked no argument. Reluctantly she accompanied the stranger who was now her husband to the table. Only he was not a stranger to her. For the past two months she had watched him from the shadows as he laughed and danced and flirted with the woman chosen to impersonate her. How Dominique wished that she was more like the beautiful Agnes, with her deep, throaty laugh and bewitching smile. She had watched Gideon fall in love with the actress and realised that she would willingly exchange her dusky locks and green eyes for blonde curls and cornflower-blue eyes if Gideon would give her just one admiring glance. Max had not objected when he discovered Dominique had dressed herself as a servant so that she could watch the courtship. Indeed, he had enjoyed the added piquancy her masquerade gave to the proceedings and gradually she had found herself being drawn ever closer to Gideon Albury. He was different from the others, more thoughtful, and lacking the cruel humour that characterised

so many of Max's friends. She had thought at first that his lean face was a little austere, but she had seen the way his smile warmed his eyes and she had learned to listen out for his voice, deep and rich as chocolate.

And she had fallen in love.

* * *

If someone had told her she would lose her heart to a man who didn't even know she existed she would have said it was impossible, but somehow, over the weeks of watching and listening she had come to believe there was more to this handsome young buck than his devil-may-care attitude. She had seen the brooding look that would steal into his countenance when he thought no one was attending and had caught the fleeting sadness that occasionally clouded his eyes. In her disguise it had been difficult to avoid the leering glances and wandering hands of Max's other guests, but Gideon had not ogled her, and if he noticed her at all it was with a careless kindness, a word of thanks when she presented him with his drink or a quiet rebuke when one of his friends tried to importune her.

He was a true gentleman, even if today there was only anger in his tone and a touch of steel in his hazel eyes when they rested on her. He despised her and, knowing the part she had played in this charade, she could not blame him. She knew how she would feel if someone played such a trick upon her, so why should she be disappointed that the bridegroom should now look at her with such contempt? She felt sick at heart, but it would do no good to

repine. She had made a bargain with Max, and if he kept it then all this charade would have been worth it.

* * *

Dominique partook very little of the food served at her wedding breakfast and even less of the wine. On the surface Gideon appeared to be at his ease, smiling and joking with his companions, the perfect bridegroom. But when he called for a toast and turned to salute her his eyes were cold and hard, and a little frisson of fear shivered down her spine.

At last the meal was over, but not her torment. People were getting up, congregating in little groups. Gideon tapped his glass and brought a hush to the assembly.

'Carstairs, I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for putting Elmwood Lodge at our disposal.' He rose and put his hands on the back of Dominique's chair. 'Now, wife, it is time you changed into your travelling dress and we will be away.'

She cast another startled glance at Max, who merely shrugged. Silently she rose, but as she passed her cousin she hesitated. Surely he would intervene now. She said quietly, 'The joke is played, my lord. I have done my part, pray you, call an end to it.'

To her dismay Max merely took her hand and raised it to his lips.

'Let me be the first to congratulate you, Mrs Albury.'

She gripped his hand, angered and frightened by his mocking smile.

'And my mother? You promised.'

Those haughty eyebrows lifted a fraction higher.

'I gave you my word, did I not?' He leaned a little closer and murmured, 'Go along, my dear, do not keep your husband waiting.'

Her lip curled and she wanted to retort, but Gideon was approaching, so she whisked herself out of the room.

* * *

Dominique went up to her bedchamber, seething with anger and not only for Max. She had lent herself to this and could hardly complain now if things did not go as she had expected. It had seemed so simple when the earl had explained it to her: the trick would be played and upon discovery the lawyers would be summoned, the sham marriage annulled and everything would be put right. Only Gideon was not playing by the same rules as her cousin. He wanted to continue the farce a little longer, to save face, to turn the joke on to her cousin and probably to punish her for her impudence in duping him. She glanced in the mirror, her spirits falling even further. It was inconceivable that he would really want to keep her as his wife, but for now she had no choice but to prepare to drive away with him.

The only gown she had with her was the olive-green walking dress she had arrived in. It was not new, but the colour suited her, and with its mannish cut and the gold frogging it looked well enough for an earl's cousin. The embroidered lace veil would fill in the low neckline and keep the cold March wind at bay. She squared her shoulders. If Gideon Albury wanted to continue with

this charade it would have to do.

To her consternation everyone was gathered in the hall, waiting for her. They all seemed determined to pretend that this was any normal going-away ceremony. Max ran up the final few stairs and gave her his arm as though he was about to give her away all over again.

'I have had the maids fill a trunk for you,' he murmured. 'Can't have you going off without a rag to your back.'

He led her up to Gideon, who stood rigid and implacable. Dominique glanced once at his face—it could have been chiselled from stone, so cold and impassive did he look. Concealing a shudder, she dropped her eyes to his exquisitely embroidered waistcoat. Perhaps he had ordered it especially for the wedding, to impress his bride. She felt even more ashamed of allowing herself to be a part of Max's cruel scheme.

With much cheering they were escorted to the waiting travelling carriage, where her trunk was being strapped on the roof. She felt a light touch on her shoulder as the carriage pulled away.

'Well, madam, are you not going to smile for your guests?'

She shrugged off his hand.

'How far do you intend to carry this joke, sir?'

'Joke?' His voice was icy. 'I do not know what you mean, madam. It was Martlesham who played the joke.'

'And you have repaid him. He was quite shocked when you said the marriage would stand.'

‘Yes, his reaction was delightfully amusing.’

‘You have had your fun, sir,’ she said coolly. ‘Now I pray you will abandon this charade.’

‘Oh, it is no charade, madam. I am in deadly earnest.’

She stared at him, a cold hand clutching at her heart when she saw his implacable look.

‘But—but you never meant to marry me. You cannot want me for your bride.’

‘Why not? As I told Max, I have to marry sometime, and you are as good as any other wife.’ His eyes swept over her, as if stripping her naked and she felt a hot blush spreading up through her body. She realised for the first time how fully she had put herself in this man’s power. She summoned up every ounce of indignation to respond.

‘That is outrageous!’

‘Outrageous or not, madam, you should have considered every possibility before you gave yourself to this plan. You married me, for better or worse. There is no way back.’

* * *

Unsettled by the look of horror on his companion’s face, Gideon closed his eyes and feigned sleep. He was still furious at being duped into marriage, but he had some sympathy with his bride. Knowing Max, he suspected that pressure had been put on the chit to comply. But she could have declared herself in church, if she had really objected to the whole thing. No, he would punish her just a little more.

He wondered what they would find when they eventually reached Elmwood Lodge. Carstairs had almost choked on his wine when Gideon had reminded him that he had offered it—obviously no one had expected the marriage to go beyond the wedding ceremony, so no arrangements had been made. While everyone had waited for the bride to change her gown a rider had been despatched to Elmwood on a fast horse to notify the servants that a bride and groom were on their way.

How soon after they arrived he would call a halt to this masquerade Gideon had not yet decided.

* * *

When the carriage turned into the gates of Elmwood Lodge sometime later it was immediately apparent that the news of their arrival had been received with enthusiasm. The open gates were decorated with ribbons and as they bowled up to the entrance an elderly couple appeared, the man hurriedly buttoning his livery. Gideon recognised Chiswick, the butler and man of all work, and the woman following him in her snowy apron and cap was his wife and housekeeper of the lodge.

'Oh, lord,' Gideon muttered as the door was wrenched open. 'We are properly for it now.'

'Welcome, sir, madam! We are delighted you have come to Elmwood Lodge.' Mrs Chiswick almost hustled her husband out of the way as she greeted them with an effusion of smiles. 'If you would care to come into the parlour, you will find cakes and wine set out there, and a roaring fire. If we'd had more notice then

the rest of the rooms would be ready for you, too, but they may take a while yet, although I have sent for Alice from the village to come and help me.'

Gideon jumped down and turned back to help his bride to alight. She did so silently, looking pale and dazed. He pulled her hand on to his sleeve and followed the still-chattering housekeeper into the house. The large, panelled hall had been hastily decorated with boughs of evergreens and spring flowers. Gideon's heart sank: the couple were clearly overjoyed to be entertaining a pair of newlyweds. He felt the fingers on his arm tremble and absently put his hand up to give them a reassuring squeeze.

More early spring flowers adorned the wainscotted parlour where a cheerful fire burned in the hearth and refreshments were set out on the table. Gideon waited until his garrulous hostess paused for breath, then said firmly, 'Thank you, Mrs Chiswick. We will serve ourselves.'

'Very well, sir. And...' She turned to look out of the window. 'Do your servants follow you?'

'No, we are quite alone.'

'Ah, of course.'

Her understanding smile brought a flush to Gideon's cheek and he dared not look at his companion to see the effect upon her, but as soon as they were alone he said, 'I beg your pardon. When Max told me your servant was remaining at Martlesham to look after your mother I thought it best to leave my man behind,

too. Now I see that it has given rise to the very worst sort of speculation.'

'Very natural speculation, given the circumstances.'

Her calm response relieved his mind of one worry: she was not going to fall into hysterics. Yet he should not have been surprised. She could have no proper feeling to have lent herself to this madness in the first place.

He retorted coldly, 'These circumstances, as you describe them, are very much your own fault.'

'I am well aware of that.'

She took off her hat and gloves and untied the strings of her cloak. When he put his hands on her shoulders to take it from her she tensed, but did not shrug him off. He was standing so close behind her that he could smell her perfume, a subtle hint of lily of the valley that made him want to drop his head closer still, perhaps even to bend and place a kiss upon the slender white neck exposed to his view.

Shocked at his reaction, he drew back. This woman was nothing to him—how could he even contemplate making love to her? But the idea lingered and it disturbed him.

Gideon threw her cloak over a chair with his own greatcoat, placing his hat and gloves next to hers on the small side table. His temper was cooling and he was all too aware of their predicament. Perhaps it was not too late to remedy that. He dashed out of the room. He found the butler crossing the hallway and called to him as he ran to the main door.

‘Has the coach gone? Quickly, man!’

‘Y-yes, sir! As soon as you was set down. We took off the baggage and they was away, wanting to get somewhere near home before nightfall, there being no moon tonight.’

Gideon yanked open the door and looked out at the empty drive.

‘But that was only minutes ago. We must fetch it back. There must be a horse in the stables you can send after it.’

Startled, the butler shook his head.

‘I’m afraid not, sir. There’s only Bessie, the cob, but she pulls the carts and has never worn a saddle in her life. I suppose old Adam could harness her up to the gig...’

Staring into the gathering darkness, Gideon realised it would be impossible for them to call back the carriage now.

‘How far is it to the nearest town, or even the nearest inn?’

The butler looked at him with astonishment and Gideon thought grimly how it must look, the bridegroom wanting to run away before his wedding night! However, the truth would be even more unpalatable, so he remained silent while the man pondered his question.

‘There ain’t an inn, sir,’ he said at last. ‘Not one as would suit you, at any rate. And it’s all of seven miles to Swaffham, but you wouldn’t be wanting to set out tonight, not without a moon.’

‘No, of course not.’ With a shake of his head Gideon stepped back from the entrance, leaving Chiswick to close the door while he made his way back to the parlour. He could hardly

complain. After all, he himself had hired the post-chaise and his instructions had been quite clear: it would not be required again for two weeks. He had fully intended to enjoy his honeymoon with his bewitching bride. Now he was stranded in the middle of nowhere with a young woman he had never met before today. And a respectable young woman at that, despite her part in this charade. Damn Max and his practical jokes!

Chapter Three

Gideon returned to find the lady in question pacing up and down the parlour. He said as calmly as he could, 'It seems we are stuck here, at least until the morning.'

'Was that not your intention?'

Her glance scorched him and he frowned.

'No, I had not thought it out. I was angry.'

'And now?'

'Now I realise that it would have been better if we had remained at the Abbey.' He paused. 'We are in the devil of a coil.'

She sighed. 'I know.'

His eyes fell on the table.

'Shall we sit down?' He held a chair for her, thinking that they were like two cats, warily circling each other. When they were both seated he filled two glasses and pushed one towards her. 'Why did you agree to Max's outlandish scheme? You do not look like the sort to indulge in practical jokes of your own accord.'

'No.' She put a small cake on to her plate and broke it into little pieces.

‘Did he offer you money?’

‘Something of that sort.’

‘But you are his cousin.’

‘An impoverished cousin. My mother brought me to England ten years ago, seeking refuge with her brother, the earl—Max’s father. When Max inherited Martlesham he also inherited us. We have been living off charity ever since. A few months ago Max set us up in a cottage in Martlesham village.’ Her fingers played with the crumbs on her plate. ‘He promised... If I agreed to take part in his scheme, he would sign the property over to my mother and give her a pension for the rest of her life.’

‘And for this you would marry a stranger.’

Her head came up at that. She said angrily, ‘Do you know what it is like to be someone’s pensioner? To know that everything you have, every penny you spend, comes from someone else?’

‘As a matter of fact I do, since I am a younger son. For many years I was dependent upon an allowance from my father.’

Their eyes clashed for a moment, then her glance slid away and she continued quietly, ‘Max promised it would only mean going through the ceremony. He said that once the trick was uncovered the marriage would be annulled.’

‘The devil he did!’ Gideon pushed back his chair and went to the window. The darkness outside showed only his scowling reflection. ‘The servants must have known what was going on —that the woman I thought was Martlesham’s cousin was an impostor.’

‘Yes. Max threatened instant dismissal to anyone who did not go along with his deception.’

He turned back to face her.

‘And your mother? Will Max explain everything to her?’

‘I doubt it.’ She bit her lip. ‘Max tends to think only of those things that affect him.’

‘But won’t she worry about you?’

She looked down at her hands clasped in her lap.

‘I wrote a note for her, telling her that I would be remaining at the Abbey for a few days.’

‘And she will be content with that?’

Her head dipped even lower.

‘Maman has her own concerns and will think nothing amiss.’

Gideon finished his wine and poured himself another glass. Dominique—he almost winced. He must get used to calling her that. The girl had hardly touched her wine and the cake lay crumbled on her plate. A tiny spark of sympathy touched him.

‘Do not despair,’ he told her. ‘In the morning we will return to Martlesham and I will arrange for an annulment.’

‘And until then?’

Her gaze was sceptical.

‘We are not alone here. Mrs Chiswick is a respectable woman and, when we tell her there has been a mistake she will look after you until we can get you back to Martlesham.’ He tried a reassuring smile. ‘I think she can be relied upon to protect your honour.’

Dominique forced herself to meet his eyes, wondering at the change in tone. It was the first time Gideon Albury had done anything other than glower at her. Oh, he had smiled in the church, but then he had thought her someone else. Now he was smiling at her, plain little Dominique Rainault, and her heart began to thud with a breathless irregularity. Often in the preceding weeks she had dreamed of such a moment, but had never expected it, not after the scene outside the church that morning.

The revulsion she had seen in his face had quite chilled her and since then he had regarded her with nothing but repugnance. She was not prepared for the sudden charm, or the way it made her want to smile right back at him. Common sense urged her to be cautious. Despite the attraction she felt for him he was, after all, one of Max's cronies, one of that crowd of irresponsible young bucks who were more than happy to play cruel jokes upon one another. Just because he was the victim of this particular jape did not mean she could trust him.

* * *

There was a light scratching on the door, and the housekeeper peeped in.

'Beggin' your pardon sir, madam, but I was wondering if you would be wishing to change before dinner? The bedchamber's not prepared yet, but your trunks have been taken up to the dressing room and there is a good fire burning in there...'

Gideon shook his head.

‘I will not change, but perhaps Mrs Albury would like to make use of it?’

‘Yes, thank you, I would like to wash my face and hands.’ Dominique made for the door, thankful for the opportunity to gather her thoughts. Unfortunately, the housekeeper was eager to talk as she escorted her up the stairs.

‘I haven’t had a chance to make up the bed, ma’am, for Alice hasn’t come yet so I’ve only got Hannah, the scullery maid, to help me and I can’t trust her to look after the kitchen, but I shall get around to that just as soon as I have finished cooking dinner. If only we’d had more notice, we would have been able to give you a welcome more suited to a new bride, but there, Mr Carstairs has never been one to give us much warning.’ The woman gave a wheezy laugh as she opened the door to the dressing room. ‘I’ve no doubt he’ll descend upon us one day with a bride of his own, and never a bit o’ notice of that, either!’

Dominique knew this was her opportunity.

‘Mrs Chiswick, could you have another bed made up for me, if you please, in a separate chamber?’

The housekeeper gave a fat chuckle as she went around the room lighting the candles.

‘Lord bless you, dearie, you won’t be needing that tonight.’

‘But I shall. You see, this is all a mistake, I never intended—’

Dominique found her hands caught in a warm clasp.

‘Now, now, my love, you ain’t the first young bride to have last-minute nerves. Do you not know what to expect on your

wedding night?'

'Well, yes, but that's not it...'

'Now don't you be worrying yourself, my dear, I've been with Mr Chiswick for nigh on thirty years and I can tell you that you have nought to worry about, especially with a kind young man like Mr Albury. He's always been a favourite here at Elmfield, more so than many of Mr Carstairs's friends, I can tell you. But there, it's not for me to criticise the master. Anyway I'm sure Mr Albury will take very good care of you. You just go and enjoy your dinner, and I've no doubt that once you and your man are tucked up warm and cosy in the bedroom next door you will enjoy yourself there, too!'

Dominique looked into that kindly, smiling face and knew she would have to tell the housekeeper that she and Mr Albury were not really man and wife and must have separate rooms. She took a deep breath.

'Thank you.'

The explanation withered before it even reached her tongue. The idea of confessing the truth—and her own collusion in the deception—even to this kind-hearted soul, was beyond her. She shrivelled at the very thought of it and allowed the housekeeper to withdraw without uttering another word.

Dominique berated herself soundly. She should have insisted Mrs Chiswick make up another bed for her and put a second bed in the room for herself. She removed the lace fichu and poured water into the basin to wash her face. Did she really expect

Gideon Albury to keep away from her if she did not take such measures? She might think him charming, but what did she really know of him? Should one not judge a man by his company? He was friends with her cousin and Max was a cruel bully.

The heavy gold band on her finger touched her cheek, reminding her of her perilous situation. She was married. The register had been signed and she now belonged to the man sitting downstairs in that snug little parlour. The law of the land was quite specific: she was his property, to do with as he wished. A shiver ran through her.

The distant chiming of a clock caught her attention. She had dallied as long as she dared, but she could not remain in the dressing room forever. Picking up the bedroom candle, she snuffed the other lights and made her way out through the adjoining bedchamber. The large canopied bed loomed dark and menacing in the centre of the room, the hangings casting ominous shadows over the bare mattress. Dominique averted her gaze, looking instead around the room. A large linen press stood against one wall next to a bow-fronted chest of drawers, while under the window was a pretty little writing desk, still adorned with its accessories. As she passed the light glinted on the silver inkstand with its cut-glass inkwell, silver nib box and a fine ivory-handled letter opener.

Dominique stopped and set down the candlestick. She picked up the letter opener and slid it into her sleeve. The ivory handle pressed against the soft skin on the inside of her wrist, but the

buttoned cuff disguised its slight bulge. She dropped her arm. The letter opener did not move, her tight-fitting sleeve holding it fast. Satisfied, she picked up her candle and continued on her way downstairs.

* * *

Gideon was waiting for her in the parlour, a fresh bottle of wine open on the table. He had loosened his neckcloth and was lounging in a chair by the table, one booted ankle resting on the other, but she thought he looked incredibly handsome, the candlelight accentuating the smooth planes of his face. Her eyes were drawn to the sensual curve of his lips and Dominique found herself wondering what he would taste like. The thought shocked her so much that she stopped just inside the door.

Perhaps he thought she was offended by his negligent attitude, for he rose to his feet and pulled out a chair for her. Silently she sank down on to it, aware of his hands on the chair back, his presence towering over her. She took a deep breath to steady herself, but instead found her senses filled with the sharp tang of soap and a musky scent. She had a strong desire to lean back against his fingers, to turn her head and press a kiss against them, inviting him to—

No! Good heavens, where did such wicked thoughts come from? She sank her teeth into her lip, forcing herself to sit still.

'Well...' he refilled her glass and held it out to her '...did you explain our situation to Mrs Chiswick?'

'No.' His surprised stare would have made Dominique flush, if

her cheeks had not already been burning with her own wayward thoughts. 'I thought perhaps you should do so.'

'Me?'

'Yes.' She took the glass, resisting the urge to slide her fingers over his. 'I thought if I broached the subject she might think you had coerced me into this marriage.'

'Instead of you tricking me.'

'I did not!' she retorted hotly. 'I was as much a victim as you. Well, almost.'

His lips tightened.

'Let us agree to blame Max for this sorry mess, shall we? He knew that someone with French blood would be the worst possible match for me.'

'Of course.' She recalled his reaction when Max had explained her parentage. 'Will you tell me why that should be?'

'Because—' He broke off as they were interrupted again, saying impatiently, 'Yes, Chiswick, what is it now?'

'Dinner is ready now, sir, if you is amenable.'

'Very well, we will be over directly.' As the butler withdrew he turned back to Dominique, 'We will continue this discussion later.'

He spoke harshly, but she detected a note of relief in his tone. Silently she rose and took his proffered arm as they crossed the hall to the dining room. Beneath her fingers she could feel his strength through the sleeve. He was tense, his anger barely contained. This courtesy was a veneer, a sham, and she felt as if

she were walking beside a wild animal—one wrong word and he would pounce on her.

* * *

Chiswick served them, passing on his wife's apologies for the lack of dishes upon the table. Dominique was quick to reassure him that there was more than sufficient. Indeed, by the time she had tried the white soup, followed by the neck of mutton with turnips and carrots, a little of the carp and the macaroni pie she had no room for the fricassee of chicken or any of the small sweet tarts and the plum pudding that followed. Mrs Chiswick proved to be a good cook and the wines her husband provided to accompany the dishes were excellent. Dominique drank several glasses, partly to calm her nerves. She had never before dined alone with any man and she was all too conscious of the taciturn gentleman sitting at the far end of the table. She shivered, regretting that she had left her lace fichu in the dressing room. Not that she was really cold, just...nervous.

* * *

Conversation had been necessarily stilted and she was relieved when the meal was over and she could return to the parlour. She hesitated when Gideon followed her out of the room.

'Are you not remaining to drink your port, sir?'

'Chiswick shall bring me some brandy in the parlour. I do not like to drink alone.'

'I admit I have always thought it an odd custom, to remain in solitary state when there are no guests in the house. My cousin

insists upon it at the Abbey, although he is rarely there without company.'

Dominique babbled on as Gideon escorted her back across the dark and echoing hall, but she could not help herself. It was nerves, she knew, but there was something else, an undercurrent of excitement at being alone with Gideon. It was a situation she had thought about—dreamed of—for weeks, only in her dreams he had been in her company out of choice, not necessity. She continued to chatter until they were both seated in the parlour. Chiswick deposited a little dish of sweetmeats at her elbow and placed a tray bearing decanters and glasses on the sideboard.

'Shall I send in the tea tray in an hour, madam?'

'No, let Mrs Chiswick bring it in now,' Gideon answered for her. He added, once they were alone, 'You can tell her when she comes in that you will require another bed to be made up.'

'Will not you—?'

He shook his head

'The running of a household is a woman's business, madam. 'Tis for you to order the staff.'

He got up to pour himself a glass of brandy while Dominique stared miserably into the fire. No matter how embarrassing, she must do this. The alternative was too dreadful to contemplate.

Gideon was still standing by the sideboard moments later when Mrs Chiswick bustled in.

'The tea tray, madam, as you requested. You must be very tired from your journey, ma'am, and you won't be wanting to

prolong your evening.'

'Actually, Mrs Chiswick, I—'

'Alice and I are going upstairs to make the bed now. I've taken the liberty of heating a couple of bricks for the bed, too, seeing as how it hasn't been used for a while, but I don't suppose you will be wanting me or Chiswick to remove them, now will you?' The housekeeper gave a conspiratorial smile that made Dominique's face burn, which only made Mrs Chiswick smile more broadly. 'Bless you, my dear, no need to colour up so. You are on your honeymoon, after all! Now, the bedchamber should be all ready for you in two shakes of a lamb's tail. Chiswick will leave your bedroom candles in the hall for you and we'll say goodnight now, so we don't bother you again. And we won't disturb you in the morning, either, 'til you ring for us. I doubt you'll be wanting to be up with the lark.'

With another knowing smile and a broad wink the housekeeper departed, leaving Dominique to stare at the closed door.

A strained silence enveloped them.

'By heaven, what a gabster,' remarked Gideon at last. 'Difficult to get a word in, I admit.' He sat down beside her on the sofa. 'I suppose I can always sleep here.' She turned to look at him, surprised. His lips twitched. 'We were neither of us brave enough to stem the flow, were we?'

Dominique's hands flew to her mouth, but could not stifle a nervous giggle. Gideon began to laugh, too, and soon they were

both convulsed in mirth. It was several minutes before either of them could speak again.

'It is very like a farce one would see in Drury Lane,' Dominique hiccupped, searching for a handkerchief to mop her streaming eyes.

Gideon pulled out his own and, cupping her chin in one hand, turned her face towards him and gently wiped her cheeks.

'But if such a story was presented, one would say it was too far-fetched and could never happen.'

He was still grinning, but Dominique's urge to laugh died away. Carefully she disengaged herself.

'But it has happened.' His touch on her face had been as gentle as a kiss and yet the skin still tingled. He was leaning back now against the sofa, relaxed and smiling. She thought again how handsome he was, with those finely chiselled features, the thick, auburn hair gleaming in the candlelight. If they had met in other circumstances... She stopped the thought immediately. He hated the French and there could be no denying her parentage, nor did she want to do so. She was proud of her father.

Gideon was on his feet, going back to the sideboard.

'You shouldn't be maudling your insides with tea. Let me get you some port.'

She looked towards the tea tray. He was right, she did not feel up to the careful ritual of making tea this evening. She was so nervous she feared she would drop one of the beautiful porcelain cups. When he held out a glass of dark, ruby-red liquid she

accepted it with a murmur of thanks, holding it carefully between her hands. Perhaps it would put some spirit into her. She took a large gulp, swallowing half the contents in one go but thankfully Gideon did not see it, for he was busy pouring himself more brandy.

'We are in a pickle, my dear.' He sat down beside her again. 'I lost my temper and I apologise for it. If we had remained at Martlesham everything would have been so much simpler.'

'You were very angry, I understand that, and I beg your pardon for my part in it.'

The corners of his mouth lifted a little. He said ruefully, 'It is the red hair. When the angry mist descends I am not responsible for my actions.'

A smile of understanding tugged at her own mouth.

'My hair is not red, but I have a temper, too, at times.'

'Your Latin temperament, perhaps.'

'Yes.'

* * *

There was a shy smile in her green eyes, and Gideon was pleased to note the anxious frown no longer creased her brow. She looked so much better when her countenance was not strained and pinched with worry. A soft blush was mantling her cheek as she went to the sideboard to put down her empty glass. Gideon noted the way the walking dress clung to her figure, accentuating the slender waist, the sway of her hips. As she returned he could appreciate the curve and swell of her breasts

rising from the bodice of her gown. She was no ripe beauty, but he would wager that beneath that mannish outfit was a rather delectable body. He remembered standing behind her earlier, breathing in her fragrance and felt a flicker of interest—of desire—stir his blood.

As if aware of his thoughts she chose to sit in the armchair beside the fire. Gideon cleared his throat.

'I believe there is a gig in the stables. When it is light I shall drive you to Swaffham, and from there we will hire a post-chaise to take us back to Martlesham.'

'Not the Abbey,' she said quickly. 'Will you please set me down in the village, at my mother's cottage?'

He shrugged. 'If you wish.' A sudden thud on the ceiling made them both look up. 'But first we have to get through this evening.'

The port had had its effect. Dominique knew now what she must do.

'I shall remain down here,' she announced, sitting very straight and upright in her chair. 'You may have the bedroom.'

'Nonsense. I have already said I shall sleep on the sofa.'

She put up her chin. 'I have made up my mind.'

'Then unmake it.'

His autocratic tone only strengthened her resolve.

'I will not.'

'I am not so unchivalrous as to condemn you to such discomfort.'

'I shall be perfectly comfortable. Besides, there are bolts on

the parlour door, while the bedchamber boasted not even the flimsiest lock.'

Gideon sat up, frowning.

'Are you saying you do not trust me?'

'Yes, I am.'

He jumped up.

'Damn it all, when have I given you occasion to doubt me?'

Her brows went up.

'When you insisted we come here.'

The truth of her statement caught him on the raw and he swung away, striding over to the window.

'Do not be so damned obstinate, woman! I have said I will sleep on the sofa and I shall.'

His words appeared to have no effect.

'Impossible. It is far too short for you. Why, you must be six foot at least.'

'Six foot two,' he said absently. 'But that is not the point.'

'It is very much the point.' He heard the quiet rustle of skirts. 'You see, it is the perfect length for me.'

When he looked around she had stretched herself out on the sofa. Her gown fell in soft folds around her, accentuating the contours of her body, the swell of her breast and curve of her hip that only served to emphasise the tiny waist. And how had he failed to notice the length of her legs? She stretched luxuriously and he had a glimpse of dainty ankles peeping from beneath the hem of her skirts. In any other situation he would have found the

view enchanting, but—hell and confound it, she was mocking him!

'The bedroom has been prepared, madam and you will sleep in it.'

'And I tell you I shall not.'

He almost ground his teeth in frustration.

'I admit it was a mistake to come here.' He spoke carefully, reining in his anger. 'I was at fault, but you will agree the provocation was great.'

'Of course.'

'However, when all is said and done, I am a gentleman. I will not have it said that I enjoyed the comfort of a feather bed while you spent the night on a sofa!'

Dominique felt an unexpected frisson of excitement at his rough tone. He was rattled and clearly no longer in control of the situation. An exulting feeling of power swept through her. She put her hands behind her head and gazed up at him defiantly.

'But I am already in possession, so I do not see that you can do anything about it. I suggest you admit yourself beaten and retire in good order.'

She closed her eyes and forced herself to keep very still, feigning indifference. He would see she was not to be moved and would go away and leave her in peace. She expected to hear a hasty footstep and the door snapping closed behind him. Instead she heard something between a snarl and a growl and the next moment she was being hoisted none too gently off the sofa. Her

eyes flew open and she gave a little scream as she experienced the novel sensation of being helpless in a man's arms. But not just any man, and along with her natural indignation she was aware of the urgent desire curling through her body. It frightened her, but she would fight it. She would show him she was no milk-and-water maid, to be treated so abominably.

'You said you were a gentleman,' she protested, struggling against his hold. In response his grip tightened, one arm pressing her against his chest while the other supported her knees, so that her frustrated kicks met nothing but air.

'I am, but you have tried my patience too far!'

'Put me down this instant!'

She tried to free her arms, but at that very moment he loosened his grip around her shoulders. Instinctively her hands went around his neck to save herself from falling. He looked down at her, a wicked glint in his hazel eyes.

'I thought you wanted me to let go?'

She was feeling extremely breathless and her heart was thudding so painfully against her ribs that he must feel it, since she was pressed against his hard chest, but she replied with as much dignity as she could muster.

'I do not wish to be dropped on my head.'

With a little grunt of satisfaction he settled her more comfortably before him. Her arms were still around his neck and she could not for the life of her release him. Dominique told herself this was solely for the purpose of supporting herself,

should he drop her, but she could not deny the sensual pleasure of feeling the silk of his hair, where it curled between her fingers and the back of his collar. Shocked by the idea that part of her was enjoying Gideon's masterful behaviour, she gave a half-hearted kick. His arms tightened and her breathing became even more constricted.

'You are suffocating me,' she protested.

'Keep still, then.'

He crossed the room in three strides and somehow managed to open the door.

'Put me down!' she hissed at him as they crossed the empty hall. 'I can walk perfectly well.'

'And give you the opportunity to run straight back into the parlour? I think not.'

Silenced, Dominique marvelled at his strength as he took the stairs two at a time. He held her firmly with his arm around her back and his hand clasped about her ribs and she was achingly aware of how close his fingers were to her breast. She was filled with outrage—at herself, for her wanton feelings, but even more so at Gideon for his cavalier behaviour. How dare he manhandle her in this way!

As they reached the landing Chiswick appeared in the corridor. He stopped, his eyes almost popping out of his head.

'Don't just stand there gawping, man,' barked Gideon. 'Open the door for me!'

Speechless with anger and shock, Dominique watched the

servant throw open the door to the bedchamber. The golden light of the fire and several candles greeted them. Gideon sailed through with his burden and the butler reached in to close the door behind them. As it clicked shut there was the unmistakable sound of a throaty chuckle. It was all that was needed to fan the spark of her anger into full flame. She began to kick and struggle violently.

'How dare you treat me like this!'

'If you behave like a fishwife, then I will treat you as one.'

'Fishwife! I merely asked you to leave me alone.'

With an oath he set her on her feet, but kept hold of her wrists.

'By Gad, woman, you are beyond reason! Do you not want to sleep in a comfortable bed tonight?'

'No! I was quite happy to sleep downstairs.'

'Well I was not! Damnation, madam, you are here now and here you will stay, whether you like it or not.'

'Oh, and who is going to make me?'

'I am, even if it means I have to stand guard outside your door all night.'

'Much good that will do you, since there is a door from the dressing room on to the landing.'

'Then I had best stay here where I can see you.'

He released her, but there was a challenging look in his eye. Dominique knew that if she made a bolt for the dressing-room door he would catch her. She threw up her head.

'I demand you let me go back downstairs.'

‘Ho, demand, do you? What about those wifely vows you took, to honour and obey?’

‘Worthless. Now will you let me go?’

‘Never.’

He towered over her, sparking a tiny frisson of unease as she realised she was now in the very situation she had been trying to avoid. However, her temper was up and she was not daunted by his superior height and strength.

‘I refuse to sleep in that bed.’

‘That may be so, but you are not leaving this room again tonight.’

She took a step back, glaring up at him as she folded her arms across her chest. As she did so she felt the solid line of the letter opener against her left forearm. She pulled it out with a triumphant flourish.

‘What the devil are you going to do with that?’

‘Stab you with it, if you don’t get out of my way.’

* * *

Gideon stared at her.

‘Good God, madam, anyone would think I intended to ravish you, instead of offering you the most comfortable bed in the house.’

He wished he hadn’t used the word ravish, it brought all sorts of unhelpful connotations to his mind as she stood before him, breasts heaving and eyes flashing fire. Her hair had come loose in the struggle and now fell in a dusky cloud to her shoulders.

The desire he had felt earlier stirred again, only stronger. He reminded himself he was a gentleman and should retire now, before it was too late. But she was still defying him, brandishing the letter opener like a sword, and that was a challenge he could not resist.

'Step aside,' she ordered him. 'Let me return to the parlour.'

'The devil I will.'

'I—I will stab you if you get in my way.'

He threw his arms wide.

'Stab away.'

His taunt brought a blaze of anger to her eyes again and with a shriek she launched herself at him. He grabbed her wrist. The letter opener was not that sharp and he doubted it would do much damage, but she seemed intent upon attacking him and he was damned if he was going to allow that. She was surprisingly strong. He twisted her wrist and she dropped the weapon, but immediately she sank her teeth into his hand.

'Ouch! You little termagant!' He wrestled her backwards on to the bed, pinning her wrists above her head. 'Will you stop fighting like a wildcat?'

She continued to struggle and he was obliged to use the weight of his body to hold her down and prevent her flailing legs from kicking him.

'Let me go!'

'Not if you are going to scratch my eyes out. Stop it!' She ceased struggling and glared up at him, the gold braid on her

bodice glinting with the rise and fall of her breast. 'That's better.'

He, too, was breathing heavily, but he recognised it was not just exertion. The feel of her body beneath him was exciting him almost beyond reason. He smiled and earned for his troubles a smouldering look that sent the blood pounding faster through his body. He was lying between her legs, crushing her skirts against the bed, and for one searing moment he imagined what it would be like if her thighs were pressed against his, skin on skin rather than separated by numerous layers of cloth.

'That reminds me.' His voice seemed very distant and slightly unsteady. 'I have not yet kissed the bride.'

He told himself he was teasing her, punishing her just a little more. She watched him from those huge eyes. Large and dark, unfathomable pools, dragging him down. His gaze moved to her mouth.

Better stop this now, before it gets out of hand.

Too late. The pink tip of her tongue flickered nervously across her lips and he could not resist lowering his head to capture her mouth. It was a swift, hard kiss and she trembled beneath him. Immediately he drew back.

* * *

Dominique took a quick, shuddering breath. That was the last straw. Her blood was up, she had been aware of a sharp exultation when she had flown at him with the paperknife in her hand and her heart was still pounding from the ensuing tussle. He had overpowered her, of course, but she was not beaten. She told

herself she would never give in, even with his body pressing down upon hers she felt herself stronger, not weaker, as sensations she could not explain took control of her body. She felt alive, buzzing with energy, ready to fight him again. Then he had closed the distance between them, his mouth finding her parted lips and taking possession. Her body responded with a shudder of desire that shocked and startled her. A longing, a need she could not control was unleashed—she wanted him as she had never wanted anyone, or anything, before.

It was a shock to realise she would sell her soul to the devil for one night with Gideon Albury, and what did it matter? Her reputation was ruined, whatever happened, so why should she not have one glorious night to remember? He was easing himself away. In another moment he would be lost to her forever.

* * *

'I beg your pardon,' he muttered, releasing her hands. 'I should not—'

Gideon broke off in surprise as she reached up and clutched at his neckcloth. She pulled him close and began to kiss him, a little inexpertly, but with such eagerness that desire lanced through him. He was lost. It was as if someone had opened the floodgates and a torrent of passion poured forth, carrying all before it.

Clothes were hurriedly discarded, buttons torn off in their haste to disrobe and all the while they strove to continue those heady, desperate kisses that kept all coherent thought at bay. Gideon lifted her easily on to the cool silk covers of the bed and

measured his naked length against her. She clung to him, eager for his touch, returning his embraces with a fervour that more than matched his own. She cried out as he entered her, but when he hesitated she pulled him to her, claiming his mouth, tangling her tongue with his and leaving him in no doubt that she wanted to continue the hot, passionate coupling that carried them on to a heady, exhilarating climax and left them both panting and exhausted.

* * *

Dominique woke up when the fire was dying down and the night air cooling her skin. She lifted one hand to her head, trying to make sense of where she was and what had happened. She remembered dining with Gideon, then arguing with him and finally, when he had laid hands on her—understandably, since she was trying to stab him—she had wanted nothing more than to cling on to him forever. It was as if she had been possessed, filled with desire that must be satisfied. She ran a hand over her body. It felt no different, yet everything had changed. She was no longer a virgin.

She tried to examine her feelings about that and about the naked man sleeping beside her. She felt numb. It was as if there was some great unhappy void ahead of her that she dare not face just yet. Perhaps in the morning she would be able to make sense of it all. For now her main concern was to get warm. She slid between the covers. The hot bricks so thoughtfully supplied were gone. They had fallen out on to the floor at some point,

unnoticed, and the sheets were cold.

Her movements disturbed Gideon and he followed her under the covers, silently pulling her close. She could not deny the comfort of his warm limbs wrapped around her. Nothing mattered when she was in his arms. Tomorrow. She would think about it all tomorrow. She closed her eyes and, as she was drifting away into sleep, she felt his breath against her cheek, heard him whisper one word.

'Dominique.'

Chapter Four

The early morning sunshine was just peeping into the bedchamber when Dominique opened her eyes again. She was alone in the canopied bed. Soon she would have to get up and face the day—and Gideon—but for now she lay very still and allowed the memories to flood back. Perhaps she had been wrong to agree to her cousin's plan, but if it had secured her mother's independence then she could not regret it.

And her night of passion with Gideon? She would regret that, she was sure, but it had been inevitable. From the first moment she had peered through the thick wedding veil and seen him standing at the altar, tall and athletic, with the bars of sunlight from the windows striking red-gold sparks from his auburn hair, she was lost. Her heart had turned over and, oh, how she had wished that his smiles had really been for her and not for the person he thought her to be.

His anger, when he discovered the deception, had been

monumental, but she could forgive that—as she would have forgiven him if he had taken her in anger, forced himself upon her. After all, what rights did she have now, as his wife? But she truly believed he had planned to protect her. If she had not been so obstinate, they might well have spent their wedding night in separate rooms, emerging chaste and unsullied this morning. But his autocratic behaviour had angered her and she had a temper equal to his own. Over the years she had learned to keep it in check, except in the most trying circumstances, and there could be no denying that yesterday had been extremely trying.

Once she had lost her temper there had been no way of regaining it again and when Gideon had kissed her she had reacted instinctively, taking her opportunity to possess him, if only for one night. She had given in to pure, wanton lust and now she must pay for it.

* * *

Dressing took some time. Clothing was scattered across the room—one stocking was dangling from the handle of the linen press and her garters had disappeared completely. She rummaged through the trunk that Max had supplied, but soon realised that her cousin's cruel sense of humour was present even here. The diaphanous nightwear and flimsy muslin gowns were more suited to a courtesan and had probably been left at Martlesham by one of Max's numerous lovers. She would have to wear her walking dress again.

However, she found in the trunk a clean chemise of the very

finest snow-white linen and a pair of silk garters to replace her own embroidered ones. She considered cutting off the gold tassels from the garters, but in the end decided to leave them. After all, no one would see them under her skirts—unless Gideon wished to repeat last night's passionate encounter.

Oh, if only he would! A delicious curl of desire clenched her stomach and left an ache between her thighs as she remembered how it had felt to be in his arms, to have him love her.

Love. How could it be love? Gideon had no reason to think well of her. And for herself, she had watched him courting the actress, but had never spoken to him before yesterday. It could only be a savage, primitive animal attraction, acceptable in a man, but not at all the sort of thing that a respectable young lady would admit.

* * *

Dominique made her way downstairs. She found the housekeeper in the parlour, spreading a cloth over the little table.

'Good morning, Mrs Albury. I'm setting up breakfast for you here. Mr Albury thought you would prefer that to eating in the dining room, which can be draughty when the wind is in the east, as it is today.'

Dominique nodded absently and asked if she had seen Mr Albury.

'Aye, madam, he took himself off for a walk about an hour ago, it being such a fine morning. Would you like to break your fast now, madam, or will you wait for your husband to come

back?'

'A little coffee now, if you please. I will take breakfast when my...husband returns.' She stumbled over the words, but she was glad to have a little longer to compose herself before meeting Gideon again.

* * *

She did not have long to wait. The thud of the front door, footsteps and the rumble of voices in the hall warned her of his arrival. She remained at the table, trying to look calm. He strode into the room, his greatcoat swinging open, his face alight with the effects of fresh air and exercise. He greeted her civilly, but she saw the sparkle fade from his eyes, replaced by a closed and shuttered look. She glanced away, trying not to feel hurt. She gestured to the table.

'There is coffee here, sir, and it is still warm, if you wish for it.'

'Thank you, yes. Mrs Chiswick is bringing in a fresh pot, but that might be some time.'

He threw his greatcoat over a chair and came to sit down. Dominique poured coffee into a cup and Gideon accepted it in silence. She wondered if she should say something and was relieved when the bustling entrance of Mrs Chiswick made speech unnecessary, at least for a while. They managed to get through breakfast with mere courtesies, but when the table had been cleared and they were alone again, the silence hung heavily between them.

'We need to talk,' Gideon said at last.

Dominique looked around her, seeking an escape from the suddenly oppressive room.

'It—it is such a lovely morning and I have not yet seen the gardens. Would you mind if we walked outside?'

'Not at all.'

She picked up her cloak and they made their way to the shrubbery, where the high walls sheltered them from the biting east wind. They walked side by side, taking care they did not brush against each other. So different from last night, thought Dominique, when they could not touch each other enough. It had to be mentioned. She launched into speech.

'About what happened—'

'A mistake,' he interrupted her. 'And one I deeply regret. I apologise, madam, most humbly.'

She answered him firmly, 'I am as much to blame as you.'

'Perhaps, but the consequences for both of us are disastrous.' He paused. 'You realise the marriage cannot be annulled now.'

'Surely, if we return to Martlesham—'

He silenced her with an impatient wave of his hand.

'Do you think anyone would believe the marriage was not consummated? The servants would be questioned. Mrs Chiswick prepared the bridal chamber for us, her husband saw me carrying you up the stairs and I'd wager any money the maid will check the sheets!' He kicked a stone off the path. 'No, last night's folly is our undoing.'

Folly! That was how he saw the most wonderful experience of

her life. Hot tears prickled at the back of Dominique's eyes, but she would not let them fall. She swallowed and clenched her jaw so that her voice did not tremble.

'What do you suggest?'

He looked up at the sky, the breath escaping between his teeth in a hiss.

'Divorce will be my father's suggestion. He abhors the French as much as I and will strongly oppose the connection. I believe he would even bear the ignominy of our family name being dragged through the courts.'

Dominique shivered. Was this to be her punishment, to have her wantonness publicly paraded?

'He could arrange the whole,' Gideon continued thoughtfully. 'But that would mean your taking a lover and I would have to sue him. A humiliating business for both of us, enduring shame for you. I will not countenance that.'

'Then what?' she asked. 'Separation? I can go back to Martlesham and live with my mother—'

He shook his head.

'No. Too many people know the circumstances of our marriage. It is unthinkable that they will all remain silent.'

'That is true,' she agreed, bitterly. 'Max has always delighted in bragging about his jokes.'

'And the chance to make me a laughing stock will prove irresistible.'

Dominique stopped.

‘What shall we do, then?’

‘Brazen it out.’ He turned and looked down at her. ‘We will continue with the marriage.’

She stared at him, her world tilting alarmingly.

‘But...’ She swallowed, struggling to push out the words. ‘It will be a sham. You love someone else.’

That an actress would be even more unacceptable as the wife for the future Viscount Rotham did not concern Dominique, only that he loved the beautiful blonde. Gideon waved aside her objections.

‘There are many such marriages in our world. It does not follow that it must be unhappy. We need only present a united front for a few months, perhaps a year or so, until the gossip has died down.’

‘I have no dowry.’

He laughed, but there was no humour in it.

‘Money is one thing the Alburys have in abundance.’

‘Then your father will say we are even more ill matched.’

He shrugged. ‘Father will come about, especially once you have provided a grandson to carry on the family name. And after that—if you want a lover you will not find me unreasonable, as long as you are discreet. That should not be a problem for you, since you grew up in France. These arrangements are understood there.’

Not in her world. Dominique thought of her mother, still so very much in love with one man, after all these years.

‘Well, madam, what say you?’ Gideon asked her. ‘Are you prepared to continue with this marriage?’

After the slightest hesitation she nodded.

‘Yes. Yes, I am.’

After all, what choice did she have?

* * *

It was early evening by the time the post-chaise bowled into Martlesham village and drew up at a line of cottages. Gideon handed out his wife, then followed her through the nearest door. He was too tall to enter without stooping, but he was relieved when he entered the small sitting room off the narrow passage to find that the ceiling was considerably higher. The serving maid who had admitted them retired to the nether regions of the little house to fetch refreshments, bidding Dominique to go in and greet her mother. The maid had subjected Gideon to a frowning, silent stare before disappearing. He was well aware that she had been a party to the hoax and he had no doubt that she was agog to know how matters stood now. He gave a mental shrug. If his wife wanted to tell her, then he had no objection. In fact, it concerned him very little: he was about to make the acquaintance of his mama-in-law.

The little sitting room was comfortably if sparsely furnished. A couple of armchairs flanked the hearth, where a cheerful fire blazed and a small table stood by the window, its surface littered with papers. A silver inkstand rose from the centre of the chaos, like an island amid a turbulent sea and to one side sat a lady in a

dark woollen gown with a tight-fitting jacket. She was hunched over the table, writing furiously, and did not appear to notice their entrance.

'Maman?'

Madame Rainault looked up. Gideon detected some likeness to his wife, but the lady's fair complexion and light eyes reminded him more of Martlesham, save that she had none of the earl's blustering arrogance. She wore a muslin cap over curls which were sprinkled with grey, and her eyes held a distracted look, as if her thoughts were elsewhere. She seemed to struggle to focus as she put down her pen and smiled.

'Dominique, my child. Are you back from the Abbey so soon? I had thought to have all these letters done before you returned.'

'Maman, I have something to tell you.' Gideon found himself pulled forwards by a small but insistent hand. 'This is Mr Albury, Maman. He—we...'

As the words tailed away he stepped forwards and picked up Madame Rainault's hand.

'Enchanté, madame.' As he bowed over the thin fingers he realised how long it was since he had spoken in French and he had to fight down the painful associations before he could summon up a smile. 'What your daughter is trying to say is that she has done me the honour of becoming my wife.'

Madame Rainault withdrew her hand and regarded him, bewildered.

'Your wife? But when, how?'

He felt a touch on his sleeve.

'Perhaps, sir, I should talk to my mother alone.'

'Yes, of course. I will go on to the Abbey. I need to arrange to have the rest of my luggage packed up and sent on to me.' He hesitated. 'Unless you wish to see your cousin?' He received a darkling look in answer and gave a wry smile. 'I thought not. I will be back as soon as I can.'

* * *

His arrival at Martlesham caused no little consternation. It was the dinner hour and Gideon told the butler not to disturb his master, but to send Runcorn up to his room immediately. It took very little time to explain the situation to his valet and give him his instructions.

* * *

Half an hour later he was ready to leave. He found Max waiting for him in the hall.

'Albury. Back from your honeymoon already? Is my cousin not with you?'

'I left her with her mother,' said Gideon, pulling on his gloves.

The doors to the dining room were open and the guests were beginning to wander out.

'Ah, tired of her already?' The earl grimaced. 'Can't say I'm surprised, she's too tight-laced and proper to please a man.'

Gideon was already furious with Max for the way he had cheated him. Now, when he heard the earl's insulting description of his young relative, Gideon was aware of a burning desire to

knock the fellow's teeth out. But he had decided he would beat Max at his own game, so he concealed all signs of anger and merely raised his brows a fraction.

'Really? Are we talking about the same woman, Martlesham?' He noted the look of uncertainty in Max's face and smiled. 'We are going to London. I need to buy my wife a new wardrobe before I take her into Buckinghamshire.'

The uncertainty was replaced by amazement.

'You are taking her to Rotham?'

'Of course, that is her due.'

'B-but the viscount hates the French. He will refuse to acknowledge her.'

The thought had occurred to Gideon, but Max's shocked tones angered him and he responded with more than a touch of hauteur.

'He will be obliged to do so, since she is the wife of his heir.'

Williams came mincing forwards, quizzing glass raised.

'Now look here, Albury, we all know the marriage is a farce, it was never intended to go this far. Bring the gel back here and let Martlesham sort it all out—'

'But there is nothing to sort out,' replied Gideon, smiling again. 'I am exceedingly happy and I have you to thank for it, Max.' He patted the earl on the shoulder as he passed him. 'Now, if you will excuse me, I have to collect my wife. I have booked rooms at the Globe and we have an early start for town in the morning.'

‘The Globe!’ Williams dropped his quizzing glass. ‘But that’s devilishly...’

‘Expensive, yes.’ Gideon smiled. ‘Only the best for Mrs Albury!’

He walked out, leaving them gaping and speechless behind him.

* * *

When he arrived back at the cottage, Lucy, the maid, accorded him a grudging curtsy and a slightly less-hostile look, from which he guessed that she had been apprised of the current situation. His wife he found in the sitting room with her mother. They were side by side in the armchairs, which had been drawn together. As Gideon entered the room Madame Rainault rose.

‘Dominique has explained it all to me, Mr Albury, including my nephew’s part in your marriage. It was a very wicked trick, sir, but I understand you intend to stand by my daughter. However, if you cannot be kind to her, then I pray you will leave her here with me.’

‘Maman, you know that is impossible!’

‘Madame, I give you my word that your daughter will receive all the kindness and consideration I can give her. As my wife she shall want for nothing.’

Madame Rainault’s anxious eyes searched his face and at last, satisfied, she held out her hands.

‘I believe you will do your best for her, sir, and I commend her to your care. Put on your cloak, Dominique, it is only a few miles

to the Globe, but it is growing dark and there is no moon tonight.'

Mother and daughter exchanged kisses.

'Maman, I wish...'

'Go along, my love, I shall do very well here with Lucy to look after me. Besides, I have work to do. Now the new treaty with France is signed I am hopeful I shall begin to make progress. I have at last had word from one of my old friends and I am writing to him now, for news of your father. Lucy shall take it to the post office. She takes all my letters there now, instead of asking my nephew to frank them for me. I was never sure that he sent them on, you know...'

Madame Rainault was still talking as she waved them off. As his bride settled herself in the carriage, Gideon thought he saw the gleam of a tear on her cheek. He said, to distract her thoughts, 'What news of your father? I thought he was dead.'

She shook her head.

'He disappeared, soon after he sent us to England in ninety-three. He wanted to protect the king and queen, but the revolution had gone too far. Many moderate Girondins were executed, or imprisoned at that time. When we lost touch, Maman began writing to everyone she could think of in France, trying to find out what had happened. She has been doing so ever since.'

'Ten years and you have heard nothing?'

'No. Max thinks Papa is dead, but my mother does not believe that.'

‘And you?’

Her face was no more than a pale oval in the fading light, but he saw her chin go up.

‘I never give up hope, sir.’

* * *

The Globe was a prestigious hostelry and the couple were made to feel their lack of servants and baggage, until Gideon’s haughty manner and generous purse convinced the landlord that this wealthy viscount’s son was merely eccentric. Gideon had sent a runner ahead of him to bespeak a suite of rooms, which included, as Dominique discovered as she explored their apartment, two bedrooms.

‘It is de rigueur for married couples, so no one will think anything amiss,’ explained Gideon. ‘And I did not want to impose upon you.’

‘You are very kind, sir.’

‘Gideon,’ he corrected her gently.

‘Gideon.’

The lackeys had withdrawn and they were alone again, a situation that Dominique found disconcerting, despite their intimacy the previous night. Gideon came closer. His hand came up, as if to touch her cheek, then dropped away again.

‘I want you to be comfortable,’ he told her. ‘Is there anything I can do, madam, that will help?’

She clasped her hands together.

‘There is one thing, sir.’

‘Yes?’

She raised her eyes to his.

‘If—if you could call me Dominique.’ Silence met her words and she hurried on, ‘You never use my name—well, only once.’ She blushed furiously at the memory. ‘I do not think we can be c-comfortable if you continue to call me madam.’

She was looking down, and saw his hands clench into fists.

‘That is one request I am afraid I cannot fulfil, my dear.’

‘Oh.’ She blinked to clear the tears that had suddenly sprung up. ‘N-no doubt you think of Dominique as that b-beautiful actress.’

He did not contradict her. After a moment’s tense silence he said, ‘It is not only that. It is a French name.’

‘And—and is that so very bad?’ she asked him.

He hesitated, no longer than a heartbeat, but she noticed it.

‘Yes, my dear. I’m afraid it is.’

He turned towards her, his face polite, smiling, but that shuttered look was in his eyes, telling her he was unreachable.

They retired to their separate rooms that night. Dominique did not sleep, but lay tense and still in the middle of the bed, listening. She convinced herself that she was dreading a soft knock at the door, but when it never came she realised just how disappointed she was. Yet what could she expect? Gideon had never wanted to marry her; he was in love with the actress who had taken her place. So much in love that now he could not even bring himself to use her name.

* * *

At breakfast the following morning Gideon was all consideration. He escorted her to her chair, poured her coffee and helped her to the freshest of the toasted muffins before sitting down to his own meal.

'You are right,' he declared. 'I cannot continue without a name for you.'

She bridled instantly.

'I have a perfectly good name, thank you.'

'You have indeed.' He smiled at her and she found her anger melting away. 'I have been thinking about it.'

'You have?'

Had he stayed awake to relive their night together, as she had done? The little flare of hope quickly died.

'Yes,' he continued. 'We could shorten it to Nicky. A pet name, if you like.'

'My grandfather, the old earl, used to call me that.'

'There we have it, then. I shall call you Nicky—but only with your permission, of course.'

She gave him a shy smile.

'I should like that, si—' She noted his sudden frown and corrected herself. 'I should like that, Gideon.'

* * *

By the time they reached London Dominique thought they were getting on famously. They laughed at the same things, shared a love of music and poetry, talked for hours, like true

friends. But not lovers. Gideon was polite and considerate, but nothing more, and Dominique, afraid to risk the fragile bond between them, lay awake in her lonely bed and ached for him to come to her. It would not do, however, to admit such a longing, so she hid it behind a smile and accepted as much companionship as her husband was willing to give.

Chapter Five

Her new home was a neat house in Brook Street, which Gideon informed her belonged to his father.

'I do have a house of my own I inherited from my godmother, Lady Telford,' he told Dominique as he helped her out of the chaise. 'But it is a few miles out of town and so run down that I have never used it.'

'I think this would be more convenient for you,' remarked Dominique, looking up at the elegant facade. At that moment the door was thrown open and a liveried servant came out, beaming at them.

'Master Gideon, welcome home, sir!'

'Thank you. My dear, this is Judd, who has known me since I was a babe, which means he takes the greatest liberties.'

The old man chuckled in a fatherly way.

'Now then, Master Gideon, you don't want to be telling Mrs Albury such tales. Welcome to you, mistress. Mrs Wilkins is waiting inside and will show you over the house.'

'Perhaps she will begin by showing Mrs Albury to her bedchamber,' suggested Gideon, taking her arm and leading her

into the narrow hall. 'We have had a long journey and I am sure my wife would like to rest before dinner.'

'Aye, of course, I will do that, Master Gideon.' A plump, rosy-cheeked woman in a black-stuff gown and snowy apron bustled forwards and dropped a curtsy. 'If Mrs Albury would like to come with me, there is hot water already on the washstands and I will send Kitty up to help you dress. She is only the second housemaid, but she's a good girl and has ambition to be a lady's maid, but if she don't suit we will send to the registry office for someone else.'

'I shall be delighted to see how she goes on,' said Dominique quickly.

'Very good, madam. Now, which of these trunks is yours, and we'll have them taken up immediately.'

'Only one.' They had brought only the trunk Max had sent with her to Elmwood and now Dominique met Gideon's eyes in a mute appeal.

'My wife is to have everything new, as befits a future viscountess,' he said coolly. 'She will manage with what is in the trunk and tomorrow we will set about replenishing her wardrobe.'

The housekeeper looked a little shocked.

'Very well, sir. If you would care to come with me, ma'am, I'll show you to your room and we'll unpack that single trunk of yours and see what there is for you to wear tonight...'

Taking a mental review of the items she had seen in the trunk, Dominique hastily declined the offer.

‘You have more than enough to do, Mrs Wilkins,’ she said. ‘I am sure the maid you have found for me will be able to help.’

* * *

When Dominique came downstairs for dinner she was wearing one of the muslin gowns from the trunk Max had provided. The previous owner of the gown had been somewhat taller than Dominique, but Kitty had proved to be very useful with a needle and had soon taken up the hem. The unknown woman had also been more generously endowed and Dominique had had to cover the extremely low and rather loose décolletage by draping a fine muslin handkerchief across her shoulders, crossing the ends over her bosom and tying them behind her.

When she joined Gideon in the drawing room he raised his brows and she felt obliged to explain.

‘I was delighted to leave off my travelling dress, but the trunk my cousin packed up for me was sadly lacking in suitable clothes. This is the most respectable of the gowns and even this required several petticoats beneath it before I was fit to be seen.’

Gideon raised his quizzing glass and surveyed her. His lips curved into a grin.

‘Yes, I can see that.’

She fingered the skirts, chuckling.

‘It is the finest quality, as is everything in the trunk, but most of it is highly improper. I think it must have been left behind by one of Max’s less-respectable guests. He is forever filling the house with lightskirts and actresses— Oh!’ She stopped,

colouring painfully. 'I—I beg your pardon, I d-did not think...'

The cheerful camaraderie disappeared in an instant. Gideon's grin was replaced by a polite smile. He waved one hand, as if to dismiss her words, but Dominique knew she had erred.

* * *

Gideon saw her stricken look and wished he could say something to comfort her, but the words would not come. He had never been one for dissimulation. How could he tell her it did not matter that he had married the wrong bride when it did matter, when he regretted it so bitterly? The woman he had courted, the bride he had expected, was tall and fair and buxom, with blue, blue eyes and a smoky laugh full of sexual promise. Instead he found himself married to a diminutive brunette with a damnably obstinate streak. She was pretty enough, perhaps, if you liked thin women.

Here he stopped himself. She was petite, yes—the top of her head barely reached his chin—but she was not thin. He remembered their wedding night, when they had both allowed their pent-up emotions to run away with them. He recalled how well her small breast fitted into his hand, how her tiny waist contrasted with the full, rounded softness of her hips. Their lovemaking had been as hot and passionate as anything he had ever experienced and her untutored ardour had fuelled his desire. He hoped he had not hurt her. He had always expected to take his virgin bride gently, to go slowly and teach her the pleasures of the flesh.

Instead they had tumbled into a hedonistic, lust-filled coupling and he had risen at dawn bemused and mortified by his lack of control. He remembered glancing down at his sleeping bride, seeing her hair arrayed over the pillows in a dark cloud and feeling an unexpected tenderness for the innocent, fragile girl he had married. He had wanted to protect her—from the world, from himself. He had made a vow then, that he would conduct himself with proper restraint in future.

And there could be no going back. Having consummated their marriage, he must now commit himself to it and put aside all thoughts of the actress—what had Max called her? Agnes Bennet. Gideon doubted he had truly loved her, but he had been captivated by her beauty and she had shown him a flattering attention that had put all sensible thought to flight. No, it had not been love. Gideon recognised that it was his pride that was hurt most and the woman now sharing his life had colluded in the shameful trick. For that he could never forgive her. Of course, there was no reason why they should not be happy enough and have a comfortable, civilised existence together. Many couples entered into arranged marriages and rubbed along well enough, but it wasn't only her deceit—he could not ignore her French blood.

It was twelve years since his brother James had died at the hands of the French mob and the pain of that loss had never left Gideon. His father had trained him to take his place, to become his heir, but James had been everything Gideon was not,

quiet and studious, but with a charm of manner that made him universally loved—not for him the rakehell existence of a young man on the town—and Gideon knew how unworthy he was to fill James's shoes.

Dinner was a strained affair. They were achingly polite to each other and by the time the covers were removed Dominique was glad to leave Gideon to enjoy his port in solitary state. She realised sadly that, however friendly he might seem, Gideon could not forgive her for her duplicitous actions. It had been a cruel trick and she should never have taken part, but when she had agreed to it she had been in turmoil. Blackmailed by her cousin and half in love with the man behind whose eyes she glimpsed a sadness that set him apart from the others, while at the same time detesting the man who would run with Max and his self-seeking, hedonistic crowd. However, standing beside him while Max gloatingly explained the deceit, the hurt and humiliation Gideon had suffered was quite clear to her, if to no one else.

Sitting alone now in the drawing room, she felt thoroughly ashamed and knew she should be grateful that he treated her with any kindness at all. Thoughts of their wedding night returned and she wrapped her arms about her, as if to hold the memory close. Desire had made her reckless and she had given in quite freely to the passion that had swept them up, but she knew—from what she had overheard from the gossiping servants and her own observations at Martlesham Abbey—that it was different for a man. Gideon's taking her that night had been no act of love, it

had been simply lust, easily roused and as easily forgotten. She was not the woman he loved, merely a substitute.

Dominique wondered if she dared go to bed, but decided the proprieties must be observed and asked Mrs Wilkins to bring in the tea tray when the master joined her in the drawing room.

* * *

When Gideon came in she was relieved to see that the shuttered look was gone and he addressed her in a cheerful, friendly tone.

'I have been thinking, Nicky, I have not yet given you a wedding present. I shall take you to Rundell's and you shall choose something for yourself, but in the meantime I found this —my godmother's jewel case.' He held out a small leather box. 'Most of Godmama's jewellery is at the bank, but you might like these trinkets to be going on with.'

Dominique set the case on her lap and pushed up the clasp, her eyes widening as she opened the lid. The contents glittered in the candlelight. A profusion of gold and silver and coloured stones winked up at her.

'Th-thank you,' she murmured, bemused. She pushed her fingers gently into the tangle and lifted out a handful of the jewels, letting them fall back into the box in a sparkling cascade. 'They are beautiful, Gideon, thank you.'

'Some of the stones—perhaps all—will be paste,' Gideon explained, watching her. 'I noticed that you wear no jewellery, but I thought these trinkets might amuse you.'

‘Amuse!’ She gave a little laugh. ‘They are much more than amusing. We brought very little to England, Papa disposed of everything to pay for the journey, including most of Mama’s jewels.’

‘No doubt she kept her most precious pieces to pass on to you?’

‘They have all been sold now. The attempts to find information about Papa have cost her a great deal.’

‘But surely Martlesham...?’

Dominique shook her head.

‘While my uncle lived we were very comfortable, but once Max became earl he said he could no longer afford to fund Mama’s search for my father. She sold her jewels, gave him everything she had to pay the bribes the French officials demanded for information, but it all came to nought. Max thinks Papa is dead and would do nothing more than frank Mama’s letters.’ She bit her lip. ‘You have a penniless bride, Gideon.’

‘Martlesham told me as much before the banns were called.’

Colour stained her cheeks, but she refused to look at him.

‘But then you thought you were marrying someone else...’

An uncomfortable silence fell. Gideon felt a tug of sympathy and a keen desire to distract her from her unhappy thoughts.

‘May I?’ He reached down and pulled out a necklace gleaming with green fire. ‘This would suit you, the stones are the colour of your eyes. I remember Godmama wearing it and there should be some ear-drops in there, too...’

‘Yes, here they are.’ She looked up. ‘May I put them on now?’

‘Of course.’ He watched her, smiling at her enthusiasm as she carefully put the box down and went over to the mirror to fix the ear-drops in place. He followed her across the room. ‘I was right, the colour does suit you. Let us add the necklace.’

She laughed. ‘First I must remove the kerchief.’ She reached around and began to fumble with the knot at the back.

‘Here, let me.’ Gideon untied the lacy ends and pulled it carefully away from her shoulders.

Without the concealing fichu it was apparent just how badly the dress fitted. Its original owner had obviously been of much more generous proportions than the waiflike creature who stood before him. Even with the drawstrings pulled tight the décolletage was extremely low, exposing the gentle swell of her bosom and more flesh than was becoming. Even as the thought entered his head he knew he was being unfair. Many ladies wore dresses as revealing as this, possibly even more so.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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