

Scandalous
Lord,
Rebellious Miss

*Deb
Marlowe*

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Deb Marlowe

Scandalous Lord, Rebellious Miss

Аннотация

The Wicked Lord DayleCharles Alden, Viscount Dayle, is intent on reform, having misspent his youth on hard living, soft women and outrageous pranks. Forced by circumstance to hold a title he never wanted, he's determined to live up to his noble name.The Unconventional Miss Westby Sophie Westby is the last woman who should attract his interest. And yet she comforts his battered spirit, captivates his wary mind and tempts him with her exotic beauty. But the reformed rake cannot cause another scandal—can he?

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Scandalous Lord, Rebellious Miss DEB MARLOWE



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To my husband—supporter of dreams
and builder of sheds extraordinaire
And to Susan—for cracking her whip
and wielding her red pen with flair

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Epilogue

Chapter One

Charles Alden, Viscount Dayle, sank into his favourite overstuffed chair in the morning room at White's. It was early; the porters had not yet let down the awnings and bright light flooded through the floor-to-ceiling window. At his elbow sat a pot of coffee, a plate of muffins, and a pile of papers. He snapped open *The Times*, sank his teeth into his first, hot, buttery bite and let out a heartfelt sigh.

He revelled in the peace of the morning all the way through the first paper. Unfortunately, peace was a commodity hard to come by anywhere in England in the spring of 1817, even for a viscount. Charles first noticed something amiss as he set aside *The Times* and reached for the *Edinburgh Review*.

A space had cleared all about him. The morning room, usually full of gentlemen either beginning one day or ending another, was empty but for a few souls gathered in whispering knots along the walls. One man caught his gaze, blasted him with a look of utter scorn, and stalked out, calling for his hat. A wrench of foreboding seizing his gut, Charles looked up into the sympathetic eye of one of the porters, come to refresh his coffee.

'Well, Bartlett,' he said quietly, 'I can see you are not half so ignorant as I. Tell me.'

Bartlett cleared his throat. 'I have taken the liberty of adding a copy of today's Oracle to the stack of your usual papers, my

lord. Perhaps you would care to peruse the editorial section?"

"The Oracle?" It was little more than a scandal sheet. "Thank you, Bartlett."

Charles picked up the paper with trepidation and turned a few pages until he found the item he sought, directly under a scathing response to Lord Sidmouth's call against 'seditious publications'.

Tory Darling or Wolf In Sheep's Clothing?

They do say that a Reformed Rake makes the Best Husband—but what kind of Politician does he make?

Just such a man is Lord D—, a Rakehell of the First Order, now converted into a Responsible English Peer. Or is he? Based on certain, recent Rumours, We wonder if he has changed pastures only in search of fresh prey.

Lord D—has been seen often lately with the notorious Lady A—on his arm. Perhaps this is not so surprising when one considers his past taste for women of immodest character and her known taste for the rising young members of her husband's political party. What is surprising is that a man previously known for living on wit and instinct could have fumbled this situation so badly. No other explanation presents itself for yesterday's dramatic events, when Lord A—returned home unexpectedly only to find a dark-haired gentleman departing the house by route of Lady A—'s bedchamber window.

The lady has reportedly been duly chastised and banished to the country. But as for the gentleman?

It cannot be denied that Lord D—is a man of many talents.

Indeed, it is rumoured he is to be groomed for High Office. We at the Oracle cannot help but wonder if the Tories should reconsider the notion. Surely a candidate exists who can demonstrate a higher standard of character. For if the Tories cannot trust Lord D—with their women, then why should they trust him with the Nation?

For a long minute Charles sat rigid with anger. Bloody, damnable hell. Months of hard work. Weeks of toadying. Countless gruelling hours spent constructing a careful façade. All destroyed in a moment with the vicious swipe of an acid pen.

Normal, everyday sounds drifted in from the adjoining rooms: the rustle of freshly ironed papers, the soft clink of china, the low murmur of men whose lives had not just been turned inside out. Charles sat frozen, trying to wrap his mind about the disaster that had befallen him with the turn of a page.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when grizzled Lord Rackham paused behind his chair and thumped him soundly on the shoulder.

‘Just so, my boy!’ the old relic bellowed. ‘Brazen it out. Don’t let them see you with your head down, that’s the wisest course! Tomorrow some bloke will get caught hammering his rocks in someone else’s quarry and they’ll all be talking about that. It will blow over soon enough.’ After another encouraging cuff he stalked off to rejoin his friends, the whole pack of them muttering darkly as they crossed into the coffee room.

With quiet, deliberate movements Charles finished his coffee. Old Lord Rackham had the right of it; he would not let anyone think he was ashamed. Once he had finished he stood, tucked the copy of the Oracle under his arm, and with a flash of a gold coin in Bartlett's direction, Charles walked out of White's.

He stood a moment on St James's Street, dazzled by the bright sun and annoyed at the bustle of traffic. Then he let loose a great laugh. Who in the world did he think he was—the heroine in a gothic novel? Should lightning crack the sky and mere mortals scurry for cover because Viscount Dayle's political career lay in ruins?

As if in answer, a brisk breeze riffled his hair, and Charles set off towards Mayfair. Who did he think he was? That was the question of the hour—no, of the entire past year—was it not?

There was only one answer. He was Viscount Dayle, a carefully constructed facsimile of the man who should hold the title. And Viscount Dayle was nothing without his political career.

His mind darted from one scenario to the next as he approached Piccadilly, scrambling to come up with some way to salvage the situation. Lost in his own whirlwind of thoughts, he failed to notice both the rising wind and the increasingly strident sound of his own name. It wasn't until someone grasped his arm that he came awake to his surroundings.

'Dayle, did you not hear us calling you, man?' It was Henley and Matthews, two of the more degenerate hangers-on of his old

crowd. They were still in their evening clothes and looking the worse for wear. Charles winced. These two would tear him apart after reading that piece.

‘Sorry, chaps. Lost in the fog of my own thoughts this morning,’ he said, striving for a light-hearted tone.

‘A bit dense in there, eh?’ laughed Matthews. ‘I trust it’s not as thick as the fog at Hyde Park this morning.’ He leaned in and spoke confidently. ‘Blackmoor met Ventry at dawn. Ventry was shaking so hard his gun went off before he’d got his hand half-raised. Hit the ground not ten feet in front of him, the poor sod.’

Charles felt like shaking himself, in relief. Obviously they didn’t yet know. ‘Blackmoor didn’t kill him, did he?’ he asked with nonchalance.

‘I should say not,’ Henley drawled. ‘Pinked him in the arm, which is far less than the upstart deserved, should you ask me.’ He shot Charles a conspirator’s grin. ‘It’s good to see you, Dayle. It’s been an age since you’ve been out and about with us. Leave the debates to them what can’t get a rise out of St Peter, if you catch my meaning, and come on with us. You’re too young to bury yourself in the House.’

Matthews chimed in. ‘We’re off to breakfast, old man, before heading home,’ he said. ‘Been to the new bawdy house on Bentinck Street? Opens in the morning and lays out a breakfast buffet. Mrs Pritchett guarantees a bellyful and an armful to send you sweetly to your dreams. Care to join us?’

The desire to yield and go along with them was almost

visceral. How easy it would be to forget, to lose the pain of the last year and the humiliation of the morning in the burn of good liquor and the hot sweet flesh of a woman. He could just let it all go. End the charade.

He shook his head to rid himself of the notion. No. Charles Alden was dead. Slain by the same wild round that had stolen his brother, buried by the despair that had seduced his father. There was no going back.

He went forward instead, resolutely and one footfall at a time. Good-naturedly refusing the offer, he saw Matthews and Henley into a passing hack before crossing over Piccadilly. By the time he passed Devonshire House and headed into Berkeley Square, temptation had been safely locked away. Viscount Dayle was once again in full possession of all his faculties and putting together a plan of action.

The wind had become quite forceful by the time Charles reached his Bruton Street townhouse, and the sunlight dimmed by fast-moving clouds. Perhaps fate had indeed meant to give him the backdrop for his drama, and had only missed her cue.

‘My lord,’ his butler gasped as the door swung in. ‘Forgive me, we were not expecting you back...’

‘No need for apologies, Fisher.’ Charles headed for the library. ‘But could you please send round a man to fetch my brother? Drag him from his books, if need be, but tell him I need him now. And send some coffee in, too.’

‘Wait, my lord!’ the butler called as Charles stalked away. ‘You

have a visitor awaiting you.'

'At this hour?'

The butler had no chance to reply before the library door slammed open. 'Dayle!' The shout rang in the cold marbled entry. 'This time you will pay for your perfidy. Name your seconds!'

'Lord Avery, how kind of you to call,' Charles said, running a hand across his brow. 'Better make that something stronger, Fisher. Brandy will do.'

'Now, my lord,' Charles spoke soothingly as he ushered the man back in the room and away from the staring eyes of the servants, 'we are a bit precipitous with this talk of seconds. But I would be happy to discuss the upcoming Poor Relief Bill, even at this early hour.'

'There's no distracting me, you philandering dog! I know what you've done with my wife, all of London knows!' The older man was nearly grey with fatigue and emotion. Charles guided him to a chair. The last thing he needed was for the fool to collapse in his study.

'You know no such thing. It's nonsense. I dined at the Clarendon, and stayed there talking most of the night. You will easily find a roomful of gentlemen to corroborate the fact. We can send for one or more of them right now.'

'I know what I saw, you young rakehell.'

'I don't know what you saw, my lord, but I know it was not me.' Charles's tone grew more firm.

'Do you think me a fool? I've seen you together with my own

eyes! And all of London knows of your rackets ways.'

'I've never had more than a casual public conversation with your wife, sir. I own that she is charming, and exceedingly handsome, but whatever trouble lies between you has nothing to do with me.'

Charles saw the first sign of uncertainty in the man's face. He felt for him, but he could not let this go any further. He hardened his expression and said with finality, 'If you choose not to believe me, then I will indeed give thought to finding a second.'

Jack arrived just then, excited and fully ready to defend his brother's honour, but the fight had gone out of Lord Avery. He hung his head in his hands while Charles greeted his brother and while the brandy was brought in. He accepted a drink, threw it back, and held out his glass for another. Then he stood.

'I will accept your explanation for now, Dayle, but I shall check out your claim, and if I find it's a lie, I'll be back. Why would your name be mixed up in this if you weren't involved? Makes no sense.'

'You echo my own thought exactly,' said Charles.

Lord Avery bristled. 'This is no laughing matter! My honour, and my wife's, has been destroyed.' He looked thoughtfully at Charles. 'I know that there are those in the Party who believe in your transformation. The rake reformed.' He snorted. 'I know your history, and today's work smacks of it. Blatant. Insulting. Just like your soft-hearted politics. It's bad enough to side with the unwashed masses against your own kind in the Lords, but

this! Unforgivable is what I call it, and so will many a Tory, after I am through with you.’ He marched to the door and paused on the threshold. ‘If your whereabouts last night are uncertain, then tomorrow morning’s will be assured.’

The echo of the slamming door was much quieter on this side. Charles looked away and began to pace, from the sidebar to the crackling fire, then away to the full wall of books. He couldn’t bear to look upon his father’s portrait above the mantel.

‘I’m sorry, Charles.’ Jack’s tone was quiet, careful. ‘God knows I don’t understand it, but I do know how important your political interests have become to you.’

Charles nodded again and drank. He crossed to the window and watched as the rain began to come down in sheets.

‘Throw me a bone, would you? I’m trying to play the supportive brother here.’ Jack rose and came to stand behind him.

‘He’ll check your story and find that it’s true. After that it’s only a piece in a scandal rag. Is it really so bad?’

Charles stared at his brother’s reflection in the window. ‘It’s bad, and it couldn’t have come at a worse time. The Board of Trade is looking for someone to head an investigative committee on distressed farming areas. My name has been mentioned. It could set me on a path to much higher places.’ He scrubbed a hand through his hair. ‘I’ve worked hard, and come so far. Take a good look around, little brother, this country is in an horrendous mess. I have finally got myself into a position where I can do something about it...I could help.’

He slammed his fist into his hand. 'And now someone wants to use my past against me? No one will consider me seriously. I'll be just another ton wastrel who cannot keep his bodkin buttoned up. This could ruin me. My political career could be over before it has truly begun.'

'Would that be such a terrible thing?' His brother's hand was suddenly heavy on Charles's shoulder. 'Phillip is dead. You are not. Perhaps it is time to let all of this go. You could get back to your own pursuits, spend some time at Fordham with Mother.'

'No,' Charles barked. 'I could not.' He stared down into his drink, but there were no answers there. And no solace either, as he had good reason to know. How could he explain his desperation to his little brother? There were some things that Jack could never understand. 'I need this, Jack. I can't explain it, but I need to do this, and I need you to help me out of this mess.'

There was a moment's silence, and then Jack took his hand away and went to pour himself a drink. 'Is the situation salvageable? What do you mean to do?'

'I suppose I must demonstrate a higher standard of character,' Charles said with a wry twist of a grin.

'Higher than what?' Jack laughed suddenly and the tension in the room became a little more bearable. 'That wasn't really you climbing out of the old jade's window?'

'Good Lord, no! I'm willing to sacrifice a good deal in the name of politics, but that's taking the matter too far. In any case, I believe she only flirts with us young bucks to stir her husband

up, to get his attention off the quarter of a million military men set adrift with no pensions and back on her. But she's evidently gone too far this time.'

Charles scrubbed a hand across his brow while he thought. 'Still, I have to admit this was a master stroke. Whoever is behind this is clever. They've negated months of work, and done it by painting me with my own brush. All with no hint of his own identity or agenda.'

'Someone doesn't like the influence you've begun to gain. How do we track the whoreson down?'

'First I'm going to find the baseborn idiot who wrote that piece for the Oracle. Whether he wants to or not, he's going to tell me who his sources are. But it's not going to be enough to find out which coward is behind this. The damage is done.' He moved back to the window and gazed out at the gathering intensity of the storm. 'I'm going to have to give them all something better to talk about.'

Jack nearly choked on his drink. 'Better than sex and scandal? There isn't anything the ton loves better.'

'Oh, yes, there is, little brother.'

'What?' Jack demanded as an enormous branch of lightning split the sky.

Into the brief moment of calm, Charles spoke. 'Marriage.'

His brother's jaw dropped. Thunder broke open in the heavens. The house shuddered.

'Marriage? To whom?' Jack managed to ask.

‘To the most priggish lady you can drag up from the muck of the ton, I should imagine.’ Charles shrugged. ‘It seems clear that the only way I will ever live down the excesses of my past is to secure the dullness of my future. I don’t know, draw up a list. Only the primmest and most proper to be considered. I’ll marry the one at the top.’

Thunder throbbed through the house once more. The windows shook in their frames. Behind them their father’s portrait rattled off its moorings, crashed into the mantel, and flipped face down in front of the fire.

Chapter Two

Her step light, her portfolio swinging and her maid scurrying to keep up, Sophie Westby strode through Cheapside. A gusting wind swept past in brisk imitation of the traffic in the streets, whipping her skirts and challenging the knot holding her bonnet. Sophie raised her chin, breathed deep of the pungent air and grinned in delight. London might be dirty, occasionally rank, and surprisingly lacking in colour, but it was also a huge, bubbling cauldron of life.

After years of quiet country living and near isolation, Sophie's own life was suddenly beginning to simmer. Furniture design had long been her passion, and in an effort to ease her dearest friend Emily Lowder's unusually long and difficult confinement, she had indulged them both with an extensive nursery project. It had been a smashing success. They'd had such fun and Emily had been so enchanted with the result, she had quickly swept Sophie up into a redesign of her dark and cluttered drawing rooms. The new suite had been unveiled at little Edward Lowder's birthday celebration and, to Sophie's chagrin, the room had nearly eclipsed the cherubic infant.

The grandest lady of the neighborhood, Viscountess Dayle, had been most impressed. Lady Dayle had run an assessing eye over both the new room and its designer, and in a bewilderingly sudden turn of events, she had them all established in town for

the Season and for a large, mysterious design project.

Almost before Sophie could catch her breath, she found herself out of Blackford Chase, ensconced in the Lowders' London home, and finally encouraged to pursue her design work. The result was one ecstatic young lady.

A young lady who perhaps should not have left her coach behind, stuck in the snarl of vehicles blocked by an overturned coal cart. Against her maid's protests Sophie had climbed down, left instructions with the driver and set off on foot. And she could not bring herself to regret the decision. Walking was so much more intimate. She felt a part of the city rather than a bystander.

'Paper! The Augur!' The newsboy hefting his heavy sack of papers looked perhaps ten years old. He had inked-smeared hands, a scrupulously clean face, and eyes that made Sophie's fingers positively itch for a pencil. An old soul smiled hopefully out of that young face.

'Paper, miss? Only sixpence and full of society's latest doin's.' He spotted a pair of well-dressed young ladies emerging from a shop across the street and waved his paper high to get their attention. 'Paper! The Augur! More exciting tales of the Wicked Lord Dayle!'

He could not have used a more enticing lure. Sophie promptly bought a copy, then turned to Nell, the maid assigned to her from the Lowders' town staff. 'Will you tuck this away in your bag, Nell, just until we get home?'

The maid looked startled. Sophie smiled at her. 'I promise to

share as soon as I've finished.'

Gossip was like gold below stairs, and Sophie knew she had an ally when Nell, her face alight with mischief, took the paper and shoved it under the mending in her bag. The newsboy flashed them both a gap-toothed smile, then a cheeky wink. Nell giggled, but Sophie caught herself unthinkingly reaching for her sketchbook.

No. Not this time. She took a tighter grip on her portfolio and firmly set herself back to the task at hand: reaching the shop of a particularly well-recommended linen draper.

It was a scene that she had replayed with herself countless times in the past week. With so much history, so much energy and so many human dramas unfolding about her, the temptation to put it all down on paper was nearly overwhelming. From the towering glory of the churches, to the saucy curve of the newsboy's cheek, to the flutter of the fine ladies' dresses, London was full of sights, textures, and subtle images that she longed to capture in her sketchbook.

But she did not intend to succumb to the temptation. Sketching meant taking a step back, imposing a distance, becoming an observer, and Sophie Westby was done with being an observer.

Fate had finally smiled upon her and she meant to make the most of it. That was one reason why today's errand was so important. Though she as yet had no idea what project Lady Dayle had in mind, Sophie intended to dazzle her. Themes,

colour schemes, and any number of preparatory steps could be readied ahead of time and individualised later. When the time came Sophie would be ready with an array of ideas and choices that would quickly highlight the viscountess's tastes. And when the project was complete, she vowed, Lady Dayle would have reason to be proud.

Sophie could do no less for the woman who had been so kind and generous. And indeed, Lady Dayle had no true idea just how much her kindness had meant, for she could not know that in the very act of bringing her to London, she had brought Sophie that much closer to two of her most heartfelt desires.

First, of course, were the incredible opportunities that could arise from a London project. She smiled when she remembered thinking that Emily's drawing room had been such a coup. As wonderful as that had turned out, it was as nothing compared to what exposure to the ton's finest might do. So much might be accomplished if her designs were well received.

Second, and somehow more importantly, Lady Dayle had placed Sophie squarely in a position where she might see Charles again. Her pulse leaped at the thought.

She wondered what Lady Dayle knew of their relationship—but perhaps relationship was the wrong word. Friendship, then, because he had indeed been her friend. Her friend, her companion, her confidante, the knight of her youth.

Anticipation brought a secret smile to her face when she thought of the paper hidden in Nell's bag. How she loved to

read of his exploits. Through the years she had followed his nefarious career with the same glee that she had felt hearing of his schoolboy stunts. She could scarcely wait to tease every scandalous detail from him. It was her favourite fantasy; the pair of them, reunited, sharing laughter and dreams just as they had used to do.

Sophie had always known that some day they would meet again. But now that the distant promise had become a near certainty, she found that it had gained new significance.

How had he changed? What would he have to say to her? Sophie knew she stood at a crossroads in her life, a rare point filled with promise and possibilities ahead. Yet she also knew that she would not be able to settle to any one of them until she had the answers to those questions.

‘Miss!’ came a gasp from behind her. ‘Is it very much farther, miss?’ Nell sounded breathless. Apparently Sophie’s pace had quickened along with her thoughts.

‘Not much farther, I don’t believe.’

For Nell’s sake she slowed her steps and resolved to keep her mind off of the distant past and the uncertain future, and firmly on the task in the present.

It proved easier than she might have imagined, for Cheapside was a treat for the senses, populated as it was with all manner of shops and craftsmen. Sophie wrinkled her nose at the hot smell at the silversmiths, and again at the raw scent of fresh dye at the cloth weavers. She marvelled at the crowded windows of the

engravers, but it wasn't until she reached the tea merchant's shop that she came to a delighted stop.

The merchant had at one time been blessed with a bowed shop window, but the area had been converted, or inverted, and now held a charming little protected alcove. Like a miniature Parisian café, it held a small table, meant, she supposed, for customers to sit and experience some exotic new flavour before they parted with their coin. It was the seating, in fact, which had so caught Sophie's attention.

'Nell, just look at those chairs. If I'm not mistaken, those are true Restoration pieces, sitting right out in the street! Yes,' she said, rushing forward to stroke one lovingly. 'The Portuguese arch. Oh, and look, Nell, you must hold my portfolio while I examine the pé de pincel.'

She could never truly say, afterward, just what went wrong. Perhaps the clasp had already been loose, or perhaps she herself accidentally triggered it. In any case, one second she was absentmindedly passing her portfolio back to Nell, and the next it was dropping wide open. Another gust of wind hit just then and all of her sketches and designs were sent skyward in a veritable cyclone of papers.

For a moment Sophie stood frozen in panic and watched as her life's work scattered about the busy street. Then she sprang into action. First she sent Nell after those that had skipped back down the way they had just come. Then an enterprising street sweeper approached and offered to help retrieve the papers that

had fluttered into the street. Sophie gave him a coin, entreated him not to place himself in any danger and sent him off.

She herself set after the bulk of the lot, which had gone swirling ahead of them. She was not heedless of the sight she must present, chasing, stooping, even jumping up to snatch at one desk design that had impaled itself on the pike of an iron railing, but she was beyond caring. These designs were her hopes for the future; she could no more abandon them than she could go quietly back to Blackford Chase.

At last, after much effort, there was only one paper left in sight. It led her a merry chase as it danced mere inches from her fingertips more than once. But each time she drew near another mischievous breeze would send it bounding ahead. Sophie's back ached and her gown grew more filthy by the minute, but she refused to give up.

And she finally had a stroke of fortune. Just ahead a gentleman stalked out of a printer's shop, right into the path of the wicked thing. It fetched up against a pair of well-formed legs, then flattened itself around one shining Hessian.

With a triumphant whoop Sophie swept down and snatched the paper up. Oh my, she thought as she caught sight of her own distorted grin, you truly can see your reflection in a gentleman's boots.

'Of course. It only wanted this.' The voice above her was heavy with sarcasm. 'I can now officially brand this day one of the worst I have ever endured. Now my valet shall berate me as soundly as

the rest of London.’

Sophie fought the urge to grin as she slowly straightened up, her gaze travelling the unusual—and unusually pleasurable—path up the form of a well-formed gentleman. A well-heeled gentleman too, judging by the quality of the small clothes, which were buff, and the morning coat, which was, of course, blue, and the scowling face, which was...

Charles’s.

The shock was so great that her stomach fell all the way to the pavement and the rest of her nearly followed.

He saw the danger and grasped her arm to steady her. She looked again into his face and saw that it was true. His face was not quite the same, the handsome promise of youth having hardened into a more angular and masculine beauty.

His eyes were different as well, so cold and hard as he scowled down at her, but it was undeniably, without a doubt, her Charles Alden.

Sophie was so happy to see him, despite the awkwardness of the moment, that she just beamed up at him. All the joyful anticipation she’d felt for this moment simply flooded out of her and she knew that her delight shone all over her face.

It was not a shared emotion. In fact, he dropped her arm as if he’d suddenly found her diseased.

Sophie’s smile only deepened. He didn’t know her! Oh, heavens, she was going to have some fun with him now.

‘I don’t know what you are smiling at. That was the worst

example of unfeminine effrontery I have ever witnessed, and in the street, no less.' He raked the length of her with a hard gaze. 'You look the part of a lady, but it appears to end there. Where is your escort?'

'My maid will be along in a minute,' she replied almost absentmindedly. She couldn't take her eyes off of him. It was no wonder he'd had such a reputation as a rake; he had grown almost sinfully handsome. She would bet that women threw themselves in his path on a regular basis.

'Please, stop that infernal smiling,' he ordered. 'If you need a good reason, impudent miss, just look at my boots!'

She obediently arranged her face into a more sombre mien. 'Please, do forgive me, sir.' She smoothed the chalked design that had indeed smudged the high polish off one of his Hessians. 'Let me assure you that I do not usually behave in so reckless a fashion. But I had to have my papers back, you see.'

'No, I do not see.' He stopped suddenly, an arrested look upon his face. He glanced back at the building he had just exited; with a closer look it appeared to be a publisher's office. 'Are you a writer, a reporter, by chance?' he asked.

'No, sir. I—' She was not allowed to finish.

'Damn. I could do with someone from the press in my court.' With a sudden motion, before she could protest, he had reached out and smoothly snatched the paper from her grasp. 'But please, enlighten me as to just what is worth making a spectacle of yourself.'

Sophie looked as well and saw that it was a design of a chaise-lounge she had specifically drawn for his mother, complete with a complementary colour palette and notes on specific fabrics and trims.

‘Furniture,’ Charles said with a deprecating snort.

‘Décor,’ she corrected as she just as smoothly retrieved the design and tucked it with her others.

‘Pray, do excuse me.’ he drawled in exaggerated tones. For a moment he reminded her forcefully of his younger self, and her reaction was instantaneous and purely physical. And yet, something distracted her and slowed the melting of her insides. She’d heard that mocking tone before, but never with so hard an edge. He wasn’t taking her seriously, true, but he wasn’t being nice about it either.

She narrowed her eyes. ‘No, I don’t believe I will,’ she replied.

His eyes widened in mock dismay. ‘Was that meant as a mortal blow to my pride? Unforgiven and despondent, the gentleman prostrates himself and begs for mercy. You have read one too many novels, my dear,’ he said.

‘Just look about you,’ he continued with an encompassing wave of his hand. ‘There are a good many things in this world in need of attention, even some worth making oneself a fool over. But let me assure you—’ his voice was getting louder now ‘—that furniture is not one of them.’

Sophie raised her brow in the very arrogant manner that he himself had taught her. ‘Perhaps not to you, sir, but our

circumstances are quite different. You haven't a notion of my concerns. To me, this is very important.'

'Important, of course,' he said, the sarcasm growing heavy again. 'You will forgive me if I don't raise décor to the same level as perhaps, the plight of the English farmer, or the suspension of Habeas Corpus.'

'And you will forgive me if I place it a little higher than the shine on your boots.'

Charles stopped in the act of replacing his hat, clearly taken aback. He opened his mouth, then closed it. He jammed the beaver on to his head. 'I concede you the point.'

Suddenly his shoulders slumped. He tore the hat off again and bowed his head. 'What on earth am I doing?' He heaved a sigh and the tense lines of his neck and shoulders relaxed.

When he looked up at Sophie again, it was as if a layer of cold stone had fallen from him. 'Listen, I do apologise.' He scrubbed a rough hand through his hair and flashed her a half-grin that was awkward and thoroughly familiar.

'It's not my usual habit to go about berating young women in the street, but then nothing has been usual in my life for—well, it feels like for ever. It has been so long since I had a normal conversation,' he continued, 'I scarcely recall how to go about it.'

The indefinable pull that emanated from him had doubled in its intensity. Sophie could not make herself respond, could not tear her gaze from his. There they were at last, warm in their regard, Charles's eyes. Her Charles.

He didn't seem to notice her lapse. 'Allow me to help you.'

With brisk efficiency he soon had her designs in order and her portfolio securely fastened. Another awkward silence followed her thanks. Sophie desperately tried to gather her wits. She knew she should either take her leave of him or reveal her identity.

He spoke before she could choose either option. 'You seem to have a great many ideas. It must be a very large project you have undertaken.'

Sophie flushed. How to answer that without making a fool of herself? She should have told him who she was at the start. 'Yes, at least I believe so. The truth is, I do not really know yet.'

He shifted and she could almost feel his restlessness, his need to escape. But she was not ready to see him go yet, nor was she quite sure she had forgiven him his harsh manner. She curved her lips into a smile and cocked a brow at him. 'If not normal, then what sort do you usually have?'

He was puzzled. 'Pardon?'

'Conversations. You say you are unused to the normal variety. I am perishing to know what kind of conversations you usually have.'

'Oh.' He paused and she thought that he might not answer, that he would put an end to this improper tête à tête and go about his business, but instead he glanced carefully about, then flashed her a wicked smile. 'Do you wish for the truth or for a properly polite answer?'

Sophie tossed her head, her chin up. 'Always the truth, please,

sir.' 'Very well, then. The truth is that for most of my days my conversations tended on the coarse and bawdy side. More like the seasonal bawling of young bucks and the bleating of...available females than true human exchange—'

Sophie interrupted him with a sigh. 'You did warn me. I am sure I should be slapping your face, or stalking off in high dudgeon. Fortunately I am not so faint-hearted.' She smiled. 'Do go on.'

He shrugged. 'Now I have political conversations. Long, relentless, occasionally monotonous, but in the end productive and worthwhile. Both sorts, I find, have their own drawbacks and pleasures.'

The playful gleam returned to his eye and he leaned in a little closer and lowered his voice. 'But I will let you in on a little secret. Sometimes, especially when the stakes are high, political debates are remarkably similar to primitive mating rituals. There is a little polite cooing, leading to an extravagant display of superiority, then a mad scramble as everyone pairs off. Occasionally there is a show of temper and brute strength. In the end someone wins, the victor takes the spoils and the next day we all ever so politely begin all over again.'

Sophie laughed. 'Fascinating. It gives one a whole new perspective on Parliament, does it not?

'It helps me get through some very long days in the Lords.'

'It makes me wish I was indeed a reporter. Imagine the story I could write: "Wild Westminster, The Secret Life of Parliament."

Every paper in London would be at my feet. Alas, my talents lie in another direction altogether.'

Charles eyed her portfolio, then slid his gaze down her form. A swift, fierce heat swept through her, following its path. 'I beg you won't be insulted if I say that you decorate the city with your mere presence.'

Before she could gather herself enough to respond, his face suddenly contorted into a grimace of dismay that had her following his gaze. An elegant carriage pulled by an exquisite team passed them by. Very obviously staring was a pair of wide-eyed feminine faces. One even craned her neck to look back as the equipage moved on.

'Oh, hell,' he breathed before turning back to her. 'As stimulating as this has been, I cannot afford any more gossip just now. Neither would I wish to harm your reputation with my tarnished presence.' He sketched her the curtest of bows. 'I wish you the best of luck with your endeavours.'

She returned with a curtsy just as brief. 'Indeed, I understand, sir.' She watched as he turned to go and called after him, 'Off you go to save the world. I will content myself with dressing it up.'

He tossed a scornful glance over his shoulder at her. 'Unworthy, my dear, and just when I had begun to judge you a promising opponent.'

Sophie watched, amused, as he stalked away. Let him have the last word for now, she thought. Oh, she was going to enjoy their next meeting even more than this one.

She became aware, suddenly, of a faint panting just behind her. She turned and found Nell, who handed over a sheaf of papers and wiped her brow. 'Who was the gentleman you was talking with, miss? He looked a mite put out.'

'That, dear Nell, was none other than the Wicked Lord Dayle.'

'No!' The maid's gasp was more titillation than shock.

'Indeed, although I recall him more fondly as my very own knight in shining armour.'

Nell had been pushed too far this morning to be discreet. 'Happen that armour's tarnished some.'

'It does appear so,' Sophie mused. 'Though the polishing of it could be quite a bit of fun, indeed.'

Nell only shook her head. 'If you say so, miss.'

Chapter Three

Miss Corinne Ashford's hand was limp and cool as Charles bent over it. As was the expression on her face while he took his leave of her. Even so, Charles's step was light when he stepped into Portman Street and set out for home.

He felt as if he could breathe again, as he hadn't been free to since that cursed piece in the Oracle. He had been exonerated, of course, once it had leaked out that the dark-haired man sneaking out of Lady Avery's window had been none other than Lord Avery's valet. And society had quickly sunk their teeth into new and even more delicious gossip when the old girl had run off with the young fellow, the petty cash, and the family jewels.

Yet the damage had been done. The thinly veiled references were in every scandal sheet. Suddenly his old peccadilloes were fodder for gossip again.

Wild, reckless, restless—these were the epithets he had become accustomed to in his seven and twenty years, the labels a scandalised society had readily laid at his door. They were well and truly earned, too. He had misspent his youth in a frenzy of hard living, soft women, and outrageous pranks. He had, in short, enjoyed the hell out of himself.

But such carelessness belonged to another lifetime. Charles Alden might have spent his time in carefree pursuit of pleasure, but Viscount Dayle was not so lighthearted. Two years ago his

brother had died, his father had shortly followed, and Charles's life had been transformed.

It had begun as a penance he had embraced in a fury of remorse and determination, and, though it was true that grief and guilt still lay heavy on his shoulders, Charles could not deny that it was the work that had saved his sanity.

With fierce devotion he had immersed himself in the estates, the accounts and the politics. Somehow he had survived, had even reached a point where he could draw breath, enjoy the success he had wrought and begin to envision a future.

Until that ridiculous article. Now his name had once again been associated with scandal and vice, and his reception had significantly cooled, both in the corridors of Westminster and the parlors of Mayfair. He found the setback infuriating, and despite his best efforts, he still hadn't a clue as to who was behind it.

So, he had temporarily abandoned his search for the villain, dragged out his original plan, and after careful deliberation decided that Miss Ashford might be just the thing to cure his ailing reputation. She was the daughter of a baron and a member of a notoriously staunch conservative family. Elegant and tall and proud to a fault, she wore respectability like an enveloping mantel. Charles just hoped that it was large enough to cover his own sins.

In truth, he had half-expected to be left standing in the street when he began to pay his addresses to the lady, but the past year's good works—or his title and fortune—had proved credit

enough to get him in the door. Whether he progressed any further remained to be seen.

He crossed his own portal now, satisfied for the moment, and more in charity with the world than he'd felt in weeks. He found his mother descending the stairs, straightening her gloves. 'Going out, Mother?' he asked.

'Indeed, as are you. Please have the carriage sent around, dear. We won't wish to be late.'

Charles nodded to a footman to deliver the message. 'Late for what?'

Only a mother could fit so much meaning into a sigh of exasperation. 'I knew you would forget. We are promised to call at Mrs Lowder's, both of us. And do not even think of trying to wiggle out of it. You know that Edward Lowder is influential in some very important political circles. And in any case, Emily Lowder has something in particular at her house that I wish to show you.'

She had reached the bottom of the stairs. Charles smiled and offered her his arm. 'Wiggle out? I wouldn't dare. Not since the Aunt Eugenie incident.'

She laughed. 'I would never have banished you to your room if I thought Phillip would do such a thing. I thought we were going to have to break the door down. Do you know, to this day we have never found that key?'

He couldn't hide the twinge he felt at Phillip's name. She saw and stopped to put her hand on his cheek. 'They were good

times, Charles. It is fine to remember them.' She smiled and straightened his cravat. 'And we will have good times again, I feel it.'

Charles could almost believe her. His mother was smiling again. She had come up from Fordham Park with a spring in her step, a list of some kind in hand, and he had barely seen her in the weeks since. He had warned her of the Avery scandal, but she had only laughed and dared anyone in society to vilify her son to her face.

'How went the hunt?' she asked now. 'You have certainly given the rumour mill enough grist. Word is out that the Wicked Lord Dayle is looking for a wife to tame his ways. Surely the worst must indeed be past if such a high stickler as Lavinia Ashford gave you entrance to her drawing room.'

The arrival of the carriage saved him from a response, but his mother would not let the subject drop. She teased a list of names from him and then cheerfully dissected each one, as callous in her regard for the young ladies as if they were no more than choice offerings at the butcher's stall. 'If what you truly wish is to wed a pattern card of propriety, Charles, then there are in truth only three or four girls who will do. Nearly everyone of consequence is in town now. There should be plenty of time for you to meet them all and select the best.'

Charles suffered a little qualm hearing his mother discuss his marriage in such cold-blooded terms. He suffered a bigger qualm picturing the many long years ahead leg-shackled to a cold-

blooded shrew. Then, like a sudden summer breeze, the image arose in his mind—dark, windswept tresses, laughing eyes, a radiant smile. The chit from Cheapside.

The exotic little beauty had invaded his thoughts more than once since their encounter. That smile—it kept coming to mind. Perhaps she reminded him of someone? And perhaps it was only a knee-jerk reaction to the course he had chosen. Intelligent and witty as well as pretty, she would be a far more pleasing prospect to face every morning over breakfast.

Except that such a prospect did not exist. Nor should it. He could not forget the near panic he'd felt during the lowest moments of the last weeks. The thought of failure was insupportable. He had hit upon the best path out of this mess and he was going to follow it right into a cold and sterile marriage.

He gave a cynical shrug; it would be a fair trade, surely. A cold marriage bed for a lifetime of credibility. And he should be down on his knees thanking the powers that be for even such dim prospects, for he was lucky to have a future at all.

These reflections left him in a mood of grim determination. He would prevail, would sacrifice anything to ensure his success. His resolution lasted across Mayfair, through all of his mother's chatter, and right up until he entered the Lowders' family drawing room. It might have lasted through the entire Season and seen him through the tedious weeks ahead, had it not encountered the pair of ankles.

A very fetching pair of ankles, framed by a scalloped flounce

and situated right at eye level. Grim determination stood not a chance; it melted under a combined onslaught of shock and pure male appreciation.

‘Have the guests arrived, Thomas?’ asked a voice situated somewhat above the ankles and the stepladder they were perched upon. Charles couldn’t see how far above because his gaze remained locked where it did not belong. ‘Hold a moment and let me hand down my things. I wouldn’t wish to be caught at work.’

‘Too late, my dear,’ his mother chirped. ‘Come down, please, you frighten me out of my wits on that thing.’

But the unexpected reply had disturbed the girl’s balance, both mental and physical. A surprised ‘Oh!’ came from above and then the ankles and the stepladder began to sway.

The footman who had admitted them—the recalcitrant Thomas, no doubt—lunged for the ladder, but it was Charles who, without conscious thought, reached out and plucked the girl from the air.

‘Charles, dear, I did particularly wish for you to meet Miss Westby today,’ his mother said, her voice wry.

But Charles was staring at the woman he held in his arms. She was a beauty indeed, and she’d had quite a fright. Large dark eyes stared apprehensively into his, her arms were locked tight about his neck and her soft, full bosom was pressed quite delightfully into his chest. But pleasure faded as realisation dawned, and then it turned to growing outrage. ‘You!’ he gasped.

Sophie’s heart was beating so fast—partly from fear, partly

from exasperation at the absurdity of the situation, and partly from sheer feminine appreciation—that she was sure Charles could feel it. To view Charles from a few feet's perspective was a delight; the prospect from a few inches was awe-inspiring.

It was as if he had been designed to be pleasing to every eye. His hair was the colour of chestnuts, thick and luxuriant, his eyes a deep brown that clearly signalled his shock—and his interest. Strong cheekbones, stubborn chin, every inch of him solid, authoritative, and somehow English. It was enough to tempt one to sing in praise of a nation that could produce such a specimen.

She'd forgotten that smug English superiority. Ever so slowly the astonishment faded from his face, only to be replaced once more by haughty disdain. What was it? she wondered. What had happened in the intervening years to turn her laughing boy into this proud, imposing man?

This proud man who still held her tight in the incongruous safety of his arms. Sophie took encouragement where she could find it, and forged ahead.

‘Well, my lord, you have caught me—literally—at a disadvantage once again.’ She peeked over his shoulder, ‘Really, Thomas, it was too bad of you to neglect to warn me. I’m sure we have embarrassed Lord Dayle past all bearing.’ She handed the footman her wet paintbrush and cut off his apologies. ‘No, it’s fine, really, just remove my equipment, please, and we shall muddle through, shan’t we, my lord?’

Charles did not reply, although the stark lines of his face tightened, and so did his grip.

‘Do put her down, Charles, for heaven’s sake,’ Lady Dayle commanded.

He flushed and immediately set her down, with a bit more force than was necessary, Sophie thought. She flashed him an unrepentant smile, and wiped her paint-stained fingers. She would break through his stone-sober demeanour, she thought, if she had to take up a chisel and hammer to do it.

‘I’m fine, truly,’ she said as Lady Dayle fussed over her. ‘I should have known not to ask Thomas to warn me, he’s started up a flirtation with the parlor maid and was bound to forget.’

‘Mother,’ Charles said tightly, ‘you seem to have some idea just what the dev—deuce is going on here. Perhaps you will enlighten me?’

‘It is what I have been trying to do, my dear, indeed, it is why you were invited today.’ Beaming, she took Sophie’s hand. ‘Allow me to reacquaint the two of you. I do not say introduce, for, if I recall, the two of you did bump into each other in Dorsetshire in years past.’

‘We have indeed bumped into one another,’ Charles began in an acid tone, ‘and only too recently—’ He stopped. ‘In Dorsetshire?’

‘Yes, dear. May I present Miss Westby? Sophie, surely you remember my son?’

Sophie could only nod. Her heart was, unexpectedly, in her

throat and she could not tear her eyes from him as she waited for the truth to strike. She could almost see his mind spinning behind the dark and masculine beauty of his eyes. ‘Westby,’ he repeated. And there it was, at last, shining in his gaze, knowledge, and a flash of pure, unfettered joy. ‘Sophie?’

A weight of uncertainty dropped from Sophie’s soul. He knew her. He was glad. She felt as if she could have floated off with the slightest breeze.

He stepped forward and took her hands. His grip was warm and calloused, and so longed for, it almost felt familiar. ‘Sophie! I can scarce believe it! It’s been so long.’

‘Indeed.’ She smiled. ‘So long that you did not know me—twice over! If I weren’t so pleased to see you again, I should feel slighted.’

‘It was you in the street that day, and you did not reveal yourself—minx. I do not know how I failed to realise. I should have known that only you would back-talk me so outrageously!’

‘Back-talk? I only gave back what you deserved. You were so high in the instep I barely knew it was you at all.’

The door swung open and in swept Emily. ‘Oh, do forgive me,’ she said, her voice shaky. ‘I should have been home an age ago, but you’ll never believe it.’

‘Emily, are you well?’ Sophie turned as Charles dropped her hands. ‘What is it?’

‘We have been caught up in a riot!’ Her hand shook a little as she returned Sophie’s embrace.

‘A riot?’ gasped Lady Dayle. ‘My goodness, are you unharmed?’

‘Perfectly well, do not fear.’ Emily removed her bonnet and moved to a chair. ‘Perhaps riot is too strong a word, though it was unsettling!’ She tried to rally a reassuring smile. ‘It was only a group of mourners who had come from that poor Mr Cashman’s funeral. They were quite well behaved, but there were ever so many of them! It was a little frightening to find ourselves in their midst.’

‘No weapons, no looting?’ asked Charles. His voice had gone cold and harsh, so different from just a moment ago that Sophie could scarcely credit it. His smile was gone. All traces of warmth had vanished and he stood, shoulders squared, solid and unmoving. Sophie instinctively took a step towards him. He looked as if the weight of the world had descended upon him.

‘No, thank the heavens.’ Emily sighed. ‘I own that the man was used rather badly, but I have no wish to be drawn into the situation.’

‘Used indeed!’ said Sophie, still eyeing Charles uneasily. ‘And then cheated, robbed, and made a terrible example of by the very government he risked his life to protect.’ She allowed Lady Dayle to pull her to a chair. ‘I wish I might have paid my respects.’

The man’s story was tragic, and all too common. A navy man, the ‘gallant tar’ had faithfully served his country for years. The war at last over, he’d been discharged, but unable to collect his arrears in pay and prize money. He’d pursued his claim, but

had been insulted and ignored. The same day as his last curt dismissal by the Admiralty Board, spurred by drink and anger, he'd become caught up in an angry crowd bent on riot, and he'd been caught and arrested for stealing arms from a gunsmith's shop. Tried, convicted, and publicly hanged, he'd become a symbol for thousands of the discontented across the nation.

'In any case, it is too upsetting to contemplate,' shuddered Emily. 'Let us order tea and talk of pleasanter things.' She rang for a servant, and then settled on the sofa next to Lady Dayle. 'Well, Lord Dayle, tell us how you are getting on after that absurd Avery situation.'

Charles paled even further and shot a wary glance in Sophie's direction. Clearly he did not account this a more pleasant subject.

'I am faring little better,' Charles responded, 'though the truth is out.' He spoke tightly, his face a mask of control. 'I prefer not to discuss the subject, ma'am.'

'I don't know who could have believed such nonsense in any case,' the viscountess complained. 'As if you would have been interested in such a nasty old piece of baggage.'

'Mother,' chided Charles.

'I'm sorry, my dear, but it is the truth. Lord Avery and his wife have antagonised each other for years, each trying to outdo the other in their outrageous bids for attention. I wish they would finally admit their feelings for each other and leave the rest of us out of it.'

'Charles is not the first young Tory she has used to stir her

husband's jealousy,' Emily agreed.

'Nor am I the first whose career has been jeopardised,' he added, 'but I am the first to be so publicly reviled for it.'

'It is your past exploits that make you so irresistible to the papers, my lord,' Sophie teased, hoping to restore his good humor. 'They think to line their pockets with so long a list.'

'I would that that were the only motivation behind this constant attention. But someone seems determined to unearth every scrape I've landed in since I was breeched.'

Sophie deflated a little with this answer. It would appear that Charles could not be coaxed back to his good humour. If anything, he looked more morose as the tea things were brought in and he took a seat. Emily poured, and, after she had offered around the biscuits, she exchanged a pointed look with Lady Dayle.

'I know it has been an age since you were last in this room, Charles,' his mother said, setting her tea down, 'but have you noticed the changes that have been wrought?'

The question appeared to startle him. As it would any man, Sophie supposed. Yet she could not suppress the nervous chill she felt when she recalled his scorn at their last meeting.

He glanced about, and Sophie followed suit. She could not help but be well pleased with what she saw. Emily had held a definite vision for this room, and between them they had created something special. Much of the woodwork had been painted a dark green, softer shades of the same hue graced the walls and

were incorporated into the upholstery and curtains. Rich cherry furniture, including a stately grandfather clock, contrasted nicely. It looked well, and, most importantly, it satisfied a secret longing in her friend's soul.

‘It is very peaceful,’ Charles replied, sounding surprised.

‘Exactly how I hoped it would feel,’ Emily agreed. ‘I wanted to step in here and feel as if I were hidden away in a forest glen. It is only just finished, and I could not be happier with the effect. I am extremely pleased with the artist who helped me with the design. In fact, although it is supposed to be a secret, I believe I will share one aspect that was done just for me. You will not spread the tale, and I am convinced no one else would have done the thing so well.’

Sophie held her breath. The viscountess looked intrigued. Charles appeared to be looking for a back way out. But Emily was not to be deterred.

‘When I was a girl,’ she began in a dreamy voice, ‘I was fascinated with fairy rings. I searched our home woods diligently, and when I found one I would spend days there, making wishes and dreaming dreams of the fairy realm.’

‘Your mother and I did the very same thing, dear, when we were young.’ Lady Dayle’s voice was gentle.

‘I know,’ Emily said fondly. ‘She discovered me one day. She joined me, plopped herself right down amongst the toadstools in her best day dress. We spent many a happy day so occupied.’ She sat quietly a moment and Sophie’s heart ached for her friend.

‘So when we began this room,’ Emily continued, ‘I tried to convince...ah...my designer, to use a fairy wallpaper pattern I had seen in a design guide. It really was quite loud and colourful, though, and not nearly so tasteful as what we have here now. It was my designer who convinced me and still found a way to incorporate the youthful fantasies of a silly, nostalgic woman.’

‘Don’t keep us in suspense, dear,’ said Lady Dayle. ‘Where is it?’

‘All around us,’ said Emily, ‘and neither of you had any idea! But if you look closely, you’ll see a pixie here and there peeking out at us.’

The viscountess immediately rose and began to search, but Charles looked straight at Sophie’s green-stained fingers then right at the high spot where she had been when he entered the room. And there she was, a tiny green and gold-haired sprite, peering at them from the top of the curio cabinet.

He looked back at her and Sophie smiled and gave a little shrug.

‘Well, Charles,’ his mother said with a touch of sarcasm as she returned to her seat, ‘that’s a sour look you are wearing. Have you too much lemon in your tea, or are you in some kind of pain?’

‘No, no.’ He let loose a little bark of laughter. ‘No more than any other gentleman forced to listen to a pack of ladies fussing over décor.’

It was Sophie who was in pain. He was being deliberately cruel. But why?

‘Well, pull yourself together, dear,’ his mother was saying, ‘for you are in for more than a little fussing.’

‘Yes, for we have saved the best surprises for last,’ Emily said.

‘I think he has already discerned one of them,’ said the viscountess shrewdly. ‘And you are correct, my son, it was indeed Sophie who envisioned the design of this room. She has done a magnificent job, both here and at Mrs Lowder’s home in Dorsetshire.’

‘I congratulate you on your fine work, Miss Westby,’ he said, his voice coldly formal. ‘I wish you equal success in your début.’

Sophie was growing tired of Charles’s swaying moods. What on earth was wrong with the man? None of this was going as she had planned. ‘I am a designer, my lord, not a débutante,’ she said firmly.

He cocked his head as if he had heard her incorrectly. ‘Nonsense. You are an earl’s niece. You are of good birth and good connections.’ He nodded at the others in the room. ‘Why else come to London at the start of the Season?’

‘She has come at my invitation, Charles,’ his mother intervened. ‘Both to be introduced to society and to aid me with your birthday present.’

His look was so frigid that Sophie wouldn’t have been surprised if the viscountess had sprouted icicles. ‘I beg your pardon?’

Lady Dayle was a warm-hearted and giving woman. She was also still Charles’s mother. ‘Do not practise your high-handed

ways with me, sir.’ She softened her voice a bit and continued. ‘The Sevenoaks house, dear. A politician needs a place to get away, to invite his cronies and plan strategies, to entertain. The place is run-down and shabby. For your birthday, I would like to ask Miss Westby to help me with the redecorating of it.’

Sophie could have cheerfully kissed Lady Dayle’s hem. A house. A nobleman’s house. It was exactly what she hoped for.

‘I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Mother, but such a large undertaking is unnecessary. I would not wish you to tax yourself. Nor would I wish to be responsible for taking so much of Miss Westby’s time away from her first Season.’

Sophie could have cheerfully punched Lord Dayle’s nose. Was he insane or merely trying to make her so? Who was he? Haughty aristocrat or charming gentleman? She was beginning not to care.

‘Nonsense,’ returned his mother. ‘I shall see to it that we both divide our time favourably. And with Emily’s help as well, we shall have a grand time with it all. You will,’ she added her *pièce de résistance*, ‘be in no way discommoded.’

‘But, Mother,’ he returned gently, ‘perhaps this sort of project should be undertaken by my bride?’

‘I should place a great deal more weight with that argument if such a person existed.’ The viscountess sniffed. ‘You haven’t won the hand of a dyed-in-the-wool puritan yet, my boy.’

Emily spoke up. ‘I dare say that your mama should derive more enjoyment from such a project, in any case, my lord,’ she said with a significant look.

This argument did indeed appear to sway him. 'Oh, very well,' he capitulated with bad grace. He turned, his eyes narrowed, to Sophie, 'But I beg you both, here and now, to leave me out of it. It is entirely in your hands. I do not wish to be conferred with, consulted with, or called on. In fact, I would be mightily pleased if I hear not another word on the matter until it is finished.'

Even before he had finished his sentence Sophie was swallowing her disappointment, pushing away a deep sense of betrayal. She had been so humiliatingly wrong. The Charles Alden she had longed for was nothing more than a foolish girl's fantasy. A ghost of a man who might have grown from a good-hearted boy.

The real Charles Alden, she was forced to conclude, was this hard-eyed monument, more marble than flesh. He had no inclination to renew their friendship, and she—well, she was long past the time she should be indulging in daydreams.

She met his stony gaze and nodded her agreement as Lady Dayle and Emily chattered, full of excitement and plans. Sophie would easily—gladly—meet his terms. She would do her very best for the viscountess and she would make the viscount's home a place of beauty and harmony. But another ten years would be too soon for her to ever see Lord Dayle again.

He stood. 'I shall leave you ladies to your fairies, furniture, and furbelows.' He bowed and took his leave, never quite looking Sophie's way. She watched him go, felt her dreams dragging out behind him, and took some small satisfaction in the cheerful

green handprint showing clearly on his left shoulder.

Charles clutched his hat with shaking fingers as the door closed firmly behind him. For several long moments he stood, shoulders hunched to ward off the pain. Sophie.

When he had first realised who she was—for the briefest moment—he had forgotten. Elation and an odd possessiveness had surged through his veins. At last fate had smiled upon him and sent the one person who in some elemental, deeply satisfying way, understood him completely.

The flash of joy and relief had been overwhelming. His ally, his friend, his very own Sophie.

Then Mrs Lowder had come in talking of riots, and he had remembered. Realised. She didn't know, could never understand. They couldn't ever go back. The thought hurt on a nearly physical level.

She had grown up, his childhood friend. She was all vibrant energy and exotic beauty, as passionate and unconventional as ever. Still, he had longed for her company. He wanted to tell her everything and hear everything she had done over the years.

He could not. Judging from their two unconventional encounters, she had not changed. She was impetuous, opinionated, and always in trouble. A friendship with her would be dangerous. Poison to Viscount Dayle, the only part of him still living. He had realised it at once; he could not have her. Ever.

So he had acted like the juvenile she had known and he had

flailed at her in anger. Now she would despise him, and it was better that way. Easier.

Charles straightened and dragged himself off. He would go home and examine this situation in the way that it deserved—through the bottom of a bottle of blue ruin. Then he would live the rest of his life the way he deserved. Alone.

Chapter Four

‘Sophie, you are not attending me.’ Lady Dayle’s words barely penetrated the mist in Sophie’s head.

‘What?’ She blinked her eyes and focused on the jumble of fabric swatches and wallpaper patterns spread before her. ‘Oh, yes, that combination is lovely, but I don’t know how much more we can accomplish until I have seen the house.’

It was a true statement, but what she left unsaid was that though this was the chance of a lifetime, she could scarcely concentrate on plans for the house without succumbing to a barrage of conflicting thoughts about its owner. One minute she was wishing him to perdition where she would never have to lay eyes on him again. The next she wanted to knock him to the floor, sit on him, and flick his ear until he confessed just what it was that forced him to act like an ass, just as she had done when she was twelve and he had hidden her favourite box of coloured chalks.

‘I know, dear, but it will not be long before we see it. I’ve already sent word to the staff to remove all the covers and shine the place up, so you’ll see exactly what you have to work with. In a day or two we can visit and—Oh, I’ve had the most fabulous idea! Let us make a party of it!’

‘Party? But we will have much work to be done if we are to be there for only a day.’

‘True, but we can at least make a picnic of it. Emily, and her dear little one, will enjoy it. Jack can come, he needs to get away from his books occasionally. And Charles can escort us. How refreshing it will be to get away together!’

A little frisson of panic travelled up Sophie’s spine at the mention of his name. ‘I do not think we should bother Lord Dayle. I promised he should not be troubled by this project, if you will remember.’

‘Don’t be such a widget! We are his family. It is his house, for heaven’s sake. In any case, we’ll invite that dreadfully prosy Miss Ashford along and he can feel as if he is putting his time to good use.’

A different kind of twinge struck Sophie. ‘Miss Ashford?’

‘The leading candidate for dullest débutante in London, and therefore the main focus of Charles’s attention. He has a notion that marriage to a strait-laced girl of impeccable family and no two thoughts to rub together will settle all his troubles in one fell swoop.’ Lady Dayle paused. ‘Although he could not have picked a more unlikely miracle worker, should you ask me.’

‘Miracle worker?’

‘Indeed. An alliance with such as her, he expects, will reassure the party, restore his standing in the ton, and stop the papers’ infernal fascination with his old exploits.’

Surely it was a sudden onset of the putrid fever that had Sophie’s throat closing and her eyes watering, not the tight fist of jealousy or the realisation that if that was the sort of girl Charles

was looking for, it was no wonder he wanted nothing to do with her.

‘In any case, we’ll ask him tonight at Lady Edgeware’s ball,’ continued the viscountess, unaware of her protégée’s distress.

‘I know you went to a deal of trouble to have me invited, my lady, but I am of a mind to stay quietly at home tonight. You know that going about in society is not my true reason for being here, and, indeed, I am not feeling all that well.’

‘Nonsense. All work and no play, and all those other adages, my dear. In any case, I think we are avoiding the real issue.’ She stroked the back of Sophie’s hand. ‘You must face him some time, you know. Emily and I will be with you, there will be nothing to fear.’

Indignant, Sophie sat up straighter. ‘I am not afraid of Lord Dayle.’ She might not have the pedigree or propriety of a Miss Ashford, but she was no coward.

‘Good Lord, why should you be? I was not speaking of my addleheaded son. I meant Lord Cranbourne, your uncle.’

Her uncle. A man for whom she had given up all feeling, confused or otherwise. Would that she could do the same for Lord Dayle. ‘I’m not afraid of him, either, but neither do I wish to rush a confrontation.’

‘There will be no confrontation, of that I can assure you. Just a polite, long-overdue meeting.’ Dismissing the subject, she forged ahead. ‘We’ve been so busy lately with plans for the house that we have quite neglected our social obligations, and this will be

just the thing to liven you up a bit. And in any case you must come tonight and see Lady E's Egyptian room. It is quite famous, and you will not want to miss it.'

'Oh, very well...' Sophie paused. 'Did you wish me to bring my notebook? Are you thinking of something similar for the Sevenoaks house?'

'Heavens, no! She has taken Mr Hope's ideas and run wild. It is a dreadfully vulgar display.'

Sophie thought longingly of her own bed and her previous plans for the night: a quiet meal in her room, a nice long soak, the pages of portraits she would like to draw of Lord Dayle before she shredded each one and consigned it to the fire. Then she thought of him dancing with the faultlessly lineaged Miss Ashford, or perhaps taking her for a stroll in the garden, where he would kiss her eminently respectable lips.

'In that case, how can I resist?'

Miss Ashford, Charles thought as he led the lady out for their set, was everything he was looking for in a bride. She did everything proper and said everything prudent. She even danced in an upright manner, perfectly erect and composed, with no expression, of enjoyment or otherwise, on her face.

Why, then, was he trying so hard to discover some chink in her flawless façade? He had spent the evening trying to uncover something—addiction to fashion, a sweet tooth, a secret obsession for nude statuary, anything.

He had failed. The lady seemed to be everything reputable and nothing else. No flaw, no interests or passions or pursuits. And no warmth for him, either. She accepted his attentions with calm dignity and with no sign of reciprocal regard or even disfavour. He felt as if he was courting a pillar. Lord, it was a depressing thought.

Their set finished, he led her back across the ballroom, exchanged all the correct pleasantries with her equally bland mama, and took his leave, trying not to yawn.

A slap on the back from his brother brought him awake.

‘Evening, Charles,’ Jack said, ‘you look like a man who could do with a drink.’ He signalled the footman and when they both had a glass of champagne, said, ‘Just thought you might want to celebrate a bit—your name hasn’t been in the papers for a week, but it has shown up in the betting book at White’s.’ He swept his glass across, indicating the crowded ballroom. ‘They’re betting which of these dull-as-ditchwater debs will have the chance to tame you.’ He drank deep again.

Charles grinned, feeling more than a little satisfaction. Things were finally progressing according to his own plans. He still had much political ground to make up, and, ridiculous though it might be, his social success would help him cover it quickly.

‘I am happy to report that Miss Ashford is the filly out in front,’ said Jack. ‘Wouldn’t be surprised if your attention to her tonight makes it into the respectable social columns tomorrow.’

Charles’s good humor deflated a little. He glanced over at Miss

Ashford, who stood in unsmiling, serious conversation with some matron or other. This marriage-of-convenience business was a bitter brew to swallow. But swallow it he would, and be thankful for it, he thought. The bitterness he undoubtedly deserved, and some stubborn, wilful part of him welcomed the challenge.

‘Good.’ That same stubborn part of him yearned to find the person responsible for stirring up this hornet’s nest of scandalbroth. ‘Unfortunately I haven’t had the same luck finding the editor of the Augur.’

‘Someone’s tipped him off,’ said Jack.

‘It is a convenient time for the man to have developed a far-flung sick relative. I doubt I’ll get anywhere with him if he’s anything like the one at the Oracle. He makes Lord Avery’s talk of a peasant revolution look quite sane. Hates the nobility, took a satanic glee in rubbing my nose in my own misdeeds.’

‘He certainly did his research.’ Jack grinned. ‘Honestly, Charles, even I did not know that you were the one who painted old King Alfred’s statue such a heavenly shade of blue. There’s a certain justice in it that you must pass the old boy every day on the way in to the Lords.’

Charles firmly suppressed his answering smile. ‘Somebody’s feeding them information, and being bloody clever about it. My man hasn’t found a scrap of a clue.’

‘So what shall we do now?’

‘I meant to ask you to take over the search for the missing editor.’ He clapped his brother on the shoulder. ‘Sorry, old man,

I know it means time away from your research.'

'It's no matter, I find I quite enjoy this sleuthing. It's not so different from scholarly research, except for the venue. And I never had to buy so many rounds in the university library.'

'I appreciate it, Jack. In the meantime I have taken a lesson from this tricky cove and decided to fight him with his own weapons.'

'Do tell!'

'One of my footmen has been "bribed" by the press.'

Jack laughed. 'Damn me if you aren't brighter than you look, big brother. Brilliant idea. Now you can leak the information you wish to hit the streets.'

Charles smiled. 'Before long there will be an entirely different view of the "Wicked Lord Dayle" circulating.'

'I'd drink to it, but my glass is empty. Ah, well. Perhaps I will dance, since I am all rigged out and actually made it to one of these intellect-forsaken functions.' He surveyed the room, then nodded his head and raised a brow. 'And there is just the creature to make me willing to dredge up the memories of those nightmarish dancing lessons—Mother's protégée. Take a look, Charles, she cleans up excellently well.'

Charles did not turn. He had spent the evening purposefully trying not to notice Sophie. And yet he knew how incredible she looked in her exquisitely embroidered ivory gown. He knew how the scarlet of her overdress contrasted so richly and set off the lustrous sheen of her ebony tresses, and he could probably

calculate to the smallest measurement just how much of her smoothly glowing skin was displayed.

He did not look, for every time he did he found himself mocked by his own thoughts. He would prevail, would sacrifice anything to ensure his success.

He'd had no idea just how much he would be asked to sacrifice.

Jack was leaning in closer. 'Tell me, what do you think of that whole situation? There's been a bit of gossip there as well. None of it malicious, so far, just curious, what with the estranged uncle and the unflagging interest in design.' He nodded again towards the corner where their mother stood with Sophie and a group of friends. 'Although I did hear a few catty whispers from the younger set, something about the girl having trouble with society at home.'

Charles unclenched his teeth. 'I think that her presence makes Mother happy, and for that we owe her much.'

'Without a doubt. I haven't seen Mother so animated since... well, in a long time. But I confess, at first I thought that Mother was matchmaking.'

This time Charles could not stop the grin that came at his brother's words. 'It occurred to me as well. In fact, I scrubbed up the courage to confront her, thinking to forestall any hopes in that direction, only to be unequivocally warned off.'

'I was read the same lecture.' Jack rolled his eyes and imitated his mother's stern tone. "The dear girl has suffered enough at

society's hands. I mean to ease her way, not subject her to the wayward attentions of a man too busy with his nose in a book to treat her properly.”

Charles laughed. ‘It was my boorish moods and general crankiness.’

‘Well, she’s right, old boy. You are a cranky boor and I am in no way ready to acquire a leg shackle, but that doesn’t mean I can’t dance with the little beauty.’

Charles watched him go. Watched him receive a smile from Sophie and a warning look from their mother. Watched the other men watching her as she gracefully took the dance floor, smiling her evident enjoyment. Then he turned, heading for the card room, where one of the members of the Board of Trade was reportedly diminishing his own cash flow.

Sophie watched him leave the ballroom as the dance began. She had been surreptitiously watching him all evening, all the while painfully aware that he was nearly the only person present not watching her.

The beau monde did not know what to make of her. Her birth was good, her fortune respectable, though it had a slightly mercantile taint. But she was undeniably not one of them. At three and twenty she was a bit long in the tooth to be entering society. Worse, her manner was too direct, her looks too exotic, her passions too strongly expressed. She was too much of everything, she felt, for them to be comfortable with her.

They studied her like a rare insect, some with fascination, some with revulsion, and Sophie wouldn't have cared a whit, yet she knew Lady Dayle would be distressed should she be found wanting.

Not to mention that she was absolutely determined, even more so as she pretended to ignore Charles ignoring her, that he would not find her alone and friendless today as he had so many years ago. Especially not when his own social standing appeared to be so fully restored. The 'Wicked Lord Dayle' might not play well in Whitehall, but since the rumours began of his search for a viscountess, he was a hit in Mayfair.

So she had smiled. She had sparkled. She had danced and talked with a great many boring gentlemen, and she had secretly studied Charles the way the rest of the room studied her, trying to fathom his mysteries.

He was incredibly handsome tonight, in deep blue and creamy white. Someone had tamed his wayward hair; like him, it was shining and gorgeous and contained.

When, she wondered, had he donned this mask of control? She knew he must be relieved at his restoration, but there was no sign of it. No sign of any emotion, except for a few moments of obvious camaraderie with his brother. He remained calm and cool, receiving attention from every woman in the room as if it were his due. He spent a good deal of time in corners with other gentlemen of a political bent, danced only a few dances, and twice only with Miss Ashford.

She could not like the man he had become. But though she wavered between hurt and disdain, she had to admit also her fascination. How and when had he changed so completely? She was not ready to give up on her questions, to give up on him.

Let him bask in the admiration of the silly women of this world. Sophie knew her man, and with the old Charles a little disdain went a long way. Perhaps, with this stranger, it would as well.

So she thanked his brother prettily for the dance and bided her time. When she grew tired of feeling like a new species of insect at a naturalists' gathering, she retreated to the ladies' retiring room. She dawdled for a bit in front of the mirror, gathering her determination. She was no stranger to disapproval. At the tender age of seven she had been orphaned, uprooted from her home in Philadelphia, and unceremoniously shipped to England. She'd dreamed of a warm welcome and a loving uncle. Instead she'd been shuffled off to a lesser estate, hidden away along with her eccentric aunt, who sometimes thought that she was seven years old as well.

The people of Blackford Chase had taken their cue from the earl and done their best to forget her existence. She'd been so lonely until she found Charles, and again after he left. Still, she had managed well enough for herself and eventually found a way to be useful. She could do the same here. And here she still had a chance at unravelling the mystery that was Charles Alden.

Still lost in thought, she headed back, but was surprised when

she heard a step close behind her and felt a hand on her shoulder.

‘Good evening,’ a strangely familiar voice greeted her.

Sophie froze. It wasn’t her chance. It was her uncle.

She forced herself to breathe deeply and turned. She’d known she must face him some time, but still she found herself unprepared for the pain. ‘Hello, Uncle.’

He had grown older. The broad shoulders she remembered were a little stooped, the dark hair shot with grey.

‘It has been a long time,’ he said.

She inclined her head. There was no polite reply to that.

‘You are doing well for yourself. You’ve shown initiative getting yourself to London.’ He smiled for the first time and looked her over like a horse at Tattersalls. The smile did not reach his eyes; they glittered, reminding her of a hungry spider. ‘Quite a change from the snivelling chit that landed on my doorstep.’

He would find her no easy prey. ‘Indeed,’ she politely agreed. ‘Many changes take place over the course of so many years. The most important one is that I no longer need, or desire, your approval.’

Her rudeness didn’t faze him. ‘You’ve got your mother’s spirit as well as her looks.’

‘Enough of it to tell you that you may go to the devil, which is exactly what she said to you, is it not?’

‘Clever, too. Young lady, you have far more potential than I have given you credit for.’

‘Lord Cranbourne,’ a clear voice rang out, and Lady Dayle

materialised behind Sophie. 'We so hoped to see you tonight. How nice to see that Sophie has at last tracked you down.'

'She has indeed, and I see how wrong I have been not to search her out sooner. But I shall make amends and call on you soon, my dear.' He made his bow and departed.

Lady Dayle turned and stroked Sophie's face, her own dark with concern. 'Are you all right?'

'Perfectly.'

'I am sorry I was not here sooner.'

'Do not worry.' Sophie made herself smile for her friend. 'The worst is over. It will only get easier from here.'

'I hope you are right.' She sighed. 'But he did not seem upset in the least, did he? I had worried that he would resent my interference. Well! Everyone is still at supper. If you have finished, then perhaps we should take a look at the Egyptian Room?'

'Lead on, my lady.' But Sophie drew her shawl closer to her for warmth, and tried to ignore the fact that her hands were shaking.

She forgot her discomfort once they entered the Egyptian Room. Sophie's shawl fell along with her jaw as the door closed quietly behind them. It was unlike anything she had ever seen. She had expected something cold and sterile. Instead her senses were under attack. The vibrant warmth of the vivid blues and oranges contrasted strongly with the antique red and black. It was astonishingly busy, yet the lines were straight and clean. It was alien, spectacular, and oddly compelling.

‘Dreadful, isn’t it?’ asked Lady Dayle. ‘I don’t think this was what Mr Hope meant at all.’

‘In fact, I believe this is quite close to the spirit of some his work,’ came a voice from deep within a lionskin chair. ‘Except for all the odd animal parts. I believe that little touch is all Lady Edgeware’s.’

Charles stood and Sophie’s heart dropped. She was shaken still, and edgy from her encounter with her uncle. Not at all up to dealing with him, or the way he made her feel.

‘Charles! What are you doing in here?’ Lady Dayle’s tone was sharp.

‘I’ve come to see Lady E.’s latest acquisition.’ He gestured and Sophie swept around a sofa with legs fashioned after an elephant’s.

‘Oh!’ she gasped. It was a monstrosity of a stuffed crocodile, frozen for ever in a snarling pose of attack.

‘Good heavens,’ complained Lady Dayle, ‘the woman has gone too far. Charles, you shouldn’t be hiding away in here. Some baron from the north has stolen a march on you and taken Miss Ashford in to supper.’

‘I make it a point to come in here every year. It helps to distract myself from my own folly when I contemplate someone else’s.’

‘Yes, well, perhaps you should not encourage Lady Edgeware. I don’t find this place at all comfortable, but there is an appealing piece here and there. This, for instance,’ and she swept toward the heavily adorned marble mantel.

‘Hold, Mother,’ Charles warned, but it was too late. The short, pearl-encrusted train of her gown had caught in the jaws of the stuffed crocodile. The tear of fabric sounded loud in the room, along with the pinging dance of scattered pearls.

‘Oh, the horrid thing,’ huffed the viscountess. ‘Do untangle me, Sophie, and tell me how bad it is.’

Sophie knelt to examine the hem. ‘I’m afraid it is quite a long tear, my lady. Let me help you to the retiring room and we’ll find a maid to stitch you back up.’

‘No, no, dear. You stay and finish your look around. If you find any of my seed pearls, do be so good as to tuck them into your reticule. No, Charles, you go on to the dining room. I shall be back in a trice to fetch Sophie.’

She was gone from the room before either of them could protest. Neither of the pair left behind would have been comfortable had they seen the crafty smile she wore as she went.

Sophie, who felt that her current mood could rival any of Charles’s most cranky moments, bent again and began to gather the pearls. ‘You should go, my lord. I doubt Miss Ashford would be happy to know you were alone in here with another woman.’

He stood, silent and cold, for a moment. ‘Perhaps you are right.’ He turned to go.

Perverse disappointment bit into Sophie. ‘Incomprehensible.’ She said it just loud enough for him to hear.

‘I beg your pardon?’

Defiant, Sophie lifted her chin. ‘I was remarking to myself

that I find you incomprehensible.’ She pursed her lips and shook her head. ‘But upon reflection I find that I don’t even want to try to understand it.’

‘Understand what?’ he demanded.

‘How the boy who faced down Otto, the village bully twice his size, the same boy who climbed the maypole just to win a bet, the man who swam naked in the Serpentine with two of the city’s most famous high flyers—how that person somehow metamorphosed into the pluck-less specimen before me.’

Charles just blinked for several seconds. ‘Did you say pluck-less?’

‘Yes, but I could have substituted faint-hearted, mean-spirited, dandified, or, let us not forget, hen-pecked.’

For a moment he looked as if he might explode. Then he laughed. And laughed. Then he sat down in the lion chair and laughed some more.

‘Damn you, Sophie,’ he said when he had recovered, ‘you always did bully me out of a bad mood. I should have remembered.’

He met her gaze as he smiled in remembrance and Sophie’s breath caught. Here it was, the look, the feeling of friendship and something indefinable, but more. This was what she had been looking for when she found him again. It was sweet to discover it at last, but also painful, because she knew it was fleeting.

‘I? Bully?’ she asked. ‘You are the one who has yelled at, insulted, and ignored me. A little name calling is the least you

deserve.'

He grinned. 'How did you hear about the Serpentine?'

'The same way the rest of England did—in the papers. I dare say I've heard of every scrape you've been in since you were fifteen.'

'Good Lord, I hope not. Some of them were never meant for ladies' ears.'

'No one has ever had cause to call me faint-hearted,' she said with pride. 'You know I've never cared for what people say of me. You never did either.'

The challenge hung in the air between them, and Sophie held her breath. For a moment she thought she had done it, that he would tell her what haunted him, but then he grimaced and the light in his eyes died. The mask was back.

'Now I do,' he said, his voice harsh, 'and it is past time you did too.'

'I never thought to see the day I could say this with honesty. I don't like you, Charles. I can't abide the person you have become. You are closed, cold, and cruel.'

'Good. It's better that way.' His voice was as remote as his expression.

'Why are you trying to drive me away?' she whispered.

His eyes closed. He was fighting some inner battle while she waited alone. He knelt and took her hands. His were warm. He smelled of masculine things, smoke and expensive cologne and raw male sensuality. 'Things have changed,' he said gently. 'You

are right, I've changed. We cannot be to each other what we once were.'

'Why not?' She had to fight to keep the anguish from her voice.

'Don't, Sophie,' he said, dropping her hands and rising. 'If you only knew how hard it has been.' He was pacing now and she was shaking. 'And you come along and make it so much more difficult.' He turned to her. 'You're not...I cannot...' It was panic in his voice and on his face. Something out of proportion for the situation as she knew it. He began to pace again.

He stopped. 'Listen, Sophie, let's agree to be friends, then. I cannot offer any more. Please.'

He was hurting and, in some way she didn't understand, it was her fault. She wanted to ease his pain, wanted to know what it was that frightened him. 'We have always been friends, Charles. We always will be.'

'Thank you.' His relief was palpable.

Confused, she bent back to her forgotten task. The tiny pearls blurred as she fought the tears that threatened.

'Here, let me help you, then I shall escort you to Mother.'

She blinked furiously. He didn't truly wish for her friendship either, he just wanted to be rid of her.

They worked quietly for a moment before he said, 'I believe there are some still trapped in the creature's jaws.'

Sophie struggled to regain some semblance of herself. Never would she allow him to see the depth of her humiliation. She summoned a smile from some buried vein of strength she didn't

know she possessed. 'Shall I leave them to you, then?'

He made a face and knelt down, picking a jewel from the crocodile's teeth. 'You always did leave the nasty work to me.'

'How can you say so?' she protested, leaning back on her heels. 'I believe it was I who pulled the leeches off you when you would go into the South Bog after those berries.'

'Very true,' he returned, 'but who had to muck out the gardener's shed when you decided to raise a goat in there?'

Her smile was a true one this time. At least they had not lost this, the ease they felt together. It had been present since their first meeting and was the part of their relationship that she would have mourned most. Perhaps she could be content with this. 'Poor William,' she sighed. 'He's still a terror, you know.'

He made a strange, strangled noise. 'William!' He began to chuckle. 'I'd forgotten the goat's name.' He began to laugh in earnest again. 'Because Billy was undignified!' he whooped, and set himself off again into gales of laughter.

This time she joined in, because it was easier to laugh than to cry.

'Ah, Sophie,' he said a minute later as he wiped his eye, 'we always laughed, didn't we?' He leaned in close to pass her his handful of pearls, his gaze suddenly serious and locked with hers. 'I'd forgotten how much I missed it.'

Now it was her turn to experience a twinge of panic. He was close, so close. He looked relaxed, almost happy now that he had settled her firmly in a distant sphere.

Biting her lip, she asked herself just what it was she wanted. She scarcely knew. She'd come to London telling herself she only wanted to renew their friendship. Now he offered just that and she felt—what? Disappointment. Dissatisfaction. She yearned for that connection that lit her insides, ignited her passion, made her feel whole.

Very well, she breathed deep. She would take what was offered. For now.

She schooled her expression and lifted her gaze to meet his. But didn't.

Because his was locked on her mouth, and the atmosphere had suddenly, subtly changed. She could almost feel the hot touch of his gaze as it travelled down the column of her neck and across the expanse of her shoulder. The air between them danced with the hard beat of her pulse.

Slowly, his hand rose. Sophie's eyes closed as, whisper-soft, his fingers brushed along her collarbone. Her head tilted as he caressed the one heavy lock that lay against her nape.

It was the tinkling of the scattering seed pearls slipping through her fingers that allowed sanity to intrude. Just in time, too, for once she was released from the sensual spell of Charles's touch, her brain began to process what her ears had been trying to relay.

'I'm sure he must be in here, dear, I left him here gathering up the jewels from my dress.'

Lady Dayle. Right outside the door. Sophie only hoped it

was the proximity of the viscountess that caused the horrified expression on her son's face as they both clambered to their feet.

'There you are, my darlings.' Lady Dayle had a distinctly sour-looking Miss Ashford in tow. 'Haven't you found all those pearls yet? I was just telling Miss Ashford about our plans for a picnic, Charles, and felt sure you wouldn't mind if I invited her along.'

'What plans are those, Mother?'

Charles walked away without a second glance, and Sophie had the distinct impression that that look of horror would have been there even had his mother not appeared.

Chapter Five

Perfect morning light, a soft haze of chalk dust, the quiet scratch of a pen—it was a recipe for contentment. Alone in her room, enveloped in her beloved things, Sophie should have been content. Ecstatic, even.

She wasn't, because the air also hung with the heady fragrance of lilacs. He had remembered her favourite flower. A glorious full vase of lilacs rested on her dressing table, their scent teasing her, their beauty distracting her, the card that had accompanied them tempting her to read it just one more time.

Friends, then.

That was all it said, all he offered.

Sophie flung down her pen and gave up her work as a lost cause. It was time she was honest with herself, she thought as she began to pace the room. Her real problem, the true source of her agitation, was the certain realisation that what he offered was not enough.

She wanted the old Charles back, him and their rich, easy friendship. She wanted the laughing, carefree Charles, the one who, when left alone with a pretty girl, would have gone far beyond one burning caress.

She pressed one hand to the spot he had touched and dug her other palm into her brow. She was mourning the passing of a rake! She must be the only person in all England who wasn't

completely enamoured of the new Lord Dayle. It was the new Charles they admired, the one who was productive, and prudent, and moody, and so incredibly handsome.

The horrid truth was that she wanted that Charles too.

She groaned and started to pace again. She was as inconsistent as he! He who asked for friendship with words and pen, and something else entirely with stormy eyes and fervent touch.

Sophie sighed and came to a stop. There was only one thing she could be certain of: her need for some answers. She had to know where that mask had come from, what had caused that haunted look in his eyes, where the old Charles had gone. Perhaps a better understanding of Charles's feelings would clarify her own.

Very well, they would be friends. She would chip away at the stone, remove what obstacles she could from between them, and then? Then she would see what happened next.

She dipped her nose in the bouquet one last time, then turned and rang for Nell. If she was going to begin to look for answers, there was no time like the present.

'Nell,' she began when the maid appeared, 'will you let me know right away when Emily returns from the park with the baby?'

'Yes, miss.' Nell stopped and looked surprised at the stacks of papers and designs covering the bed, the table, and nearly every flat surface in the room. 'Lordy, miss, I hope you don't mind my saying it, but you have been busy. I thought you'd done all you

could until you saw the big house?’

‘I have. All this—’ she gestured ‘—is for another project. Something very special indeed.’ In fact, this work represented a dream very close to Sophie’s heart. It was nearly complete, but she was not quite ready to confide in anyone just yet.

‘Mrs Lowder did send word that you should be ready for callers this afternoon. Shall I just run a brush through your hair?’

Sophie laughed. ‘Nell, you are wonderfully circumspect. Yes, thank you, I always do muss it dreadfully when I am working.’

She sat quietly while Nell plucked the pins from her hair. Once the maid had begun brushing with long, rhythmic strokes, she asked, ‘How long have you been with the Lowders, Nell?’

‘Oh, going on seven years now, miss. Usually I’m just the upstairs maid, so I was ever so glad when you came.’ For the first time Nell sounded shy. Sophie guessed she was not used to talking of herself.

‘You’ve done a wonderful job,’ Sophie said warmly, ‘and I shall be sure to tell Mrs Lowder so.’

‘Oh, thank you, miss. I did get to help with Mr Lowder’s sister when she made her come out, and I watched her dresser do her hair ever so many a time, so I had an idea what was needed.’

‘Seven years. And you’ve been in the London house all this time?’

‘Yes, miss.’ The maid sounded a little wistful. ‘Though I’ve thought a time or two that I might like the country.’

Sophie chuckled. ‘I always felt the same about the city. I

suppose it's natural to wonder about what you've never really experienced.' She was quiet a moment and then she cast a glance at Nell in the mirror. 'I suppose you've heard a good deal about Lord Dayle's adventures, then? He did keep the London papers busy for a good number of years, did he not?'

Nell ducked her head and kept her brush busy. 'They say he's reformed now, Miss. Though I admit I was surprised when such a good girl as you are had an acquaintance with him.'

'Oh, yes...' Sophie did her best to sound nonchalant '...I've known Lord Dayle since we were both practically in leading strings.' She cocked her head. 'I never truly knew his older brother, though. But you would have been working here when the previous Lord Dayle died?'

'Oh, yes. Such a shame. I even saw him a time or two, he was as wrapped up in politics as Mr Lowder is. That sorry I felt for his poor mother. Bad enough the son, but then her husband gone so soon after.' Nell shivered as she twisted Sophie's hair up and reached for the pins.

'Phillip died at Waterloo, but I was home in Dorset when Lord Dayle took sick. We all thought it just a minor illness. No one expected he would die as well.'

Nell pursed her lips and concentrated intently on her work.

Sophie watched her in the mirror. 'There were vague rumours of trouble in the family at home. Did they reach town?'

'Almost done, now. Such hair you have, miss! You must remember to wear your new bonnet for the picnic tomorrow, it

brings out the light in your hair so well.'

'Nell?'

The girl sighed. 'It's just servants' gossip, miss.'

Sophie sat silent, questioning.

'They whispered below stairs that Lord Dayle died because he wanted to.'

Shocked, Sophie said, 'Surely no one believes...?'

Nell shook her head. 'No, they just said he gave up. Got ill and didn't fight it, then he just slipped away.'

Sophie turned around in her chair and gave Nell a measuring look. 'The next time we are at Lady Dayle's house, do you think you could...?'

Nell's bright eyes shone. 'Ask some questions?'

'Discreetly.' Sophie paused. 'You've already shown yourself to be loyal and trustworthy, Nell. I know I can depend upon you in this matter.'

The maid straightened, her face proud. 'Of course, miss.'

A knock at the door startled them both. Sophie called entrance, and a footman opened the door deferentially to announce a visitor waiting below.

With a flustered glance towards the lilacs, Sophie rose. Was it Charles? She gathered her shawl and steadied herself. Good, she could begin finding some answers straight away.

She entered the drawing room a moment later at a sedate pace, chin up, only to draw up short.

'Lord Cranbourne, miss,' the butler intoned.

Once again she found her uncle where she had been expecting someone else entirely.

‘Uncle,’ she said in the frostiest tone she could summon.

‘Niece.’ He was equally formal as they seated themselves and the butler offered to go for the tea. He watched her the entire time, his gaze sharply calculating.

As the servant’s footsteps faded in the marbled hall, her uncle spoke. ‘I was annoyed when I first heard you had come to town, I admit.’

‘I am amazed you thought to care one way or another.’

He crossed his legs negligently. ‘It doesn’t look well, you coming here without my sponsorship, but, after meeting you, I’m willing to overlook the matter.’

Sophie inclined her head regally. ‘That does seem to be what you do best.’

He leaned forward, suddenly intent. ‘Look here, niece. We can sit here all afternoon while you flail me with the sharp edge of your tongue, or we can get straight to the point. Which would you prefer?’

‘Whichever gets us finished quickest.’

He chuckled. ‘I’m impressed, my dear, and that is not something I say with any frequency.’ He shook his head. ‘I just never guessed you had any fire in you.’

The tight control she held on her rage snapped. ‘It is impossible that you would know anything about my character!’ She struggled to regain herself as the servants returned with tea.

Heavy silence hung in the room as she poured for them both and wished mightily for Emily's return.

Her uncle was still entirely at ease. 'I know more about you than you would think, young miss, never doubt it. I know you resent me, but what's done is done. We find ourselves now in a situation where we can help each other.'

Determined not to let him see her out of countenance again, Sophie sipped her tea. 'Your offer comes fifteen years too late, sir. I'm not interested.'

'Don't go missish on me now, girl. It took brains and courage to get here without my help. Now I can make sure you go much, much further.' He leaned back. 'I have connections. What is it that you want? To be a leading lady of the ton? A political hostess holding her own salons.' He gestured to her colour-stained fingers. 'A patroness of the arts?'

She merely shook her head in reply.

'There is power to be had behind the scenes. True power. Empires are won and lost by chance meetings at a ball, by a loose word let slip over drinks. You could be a great help to me, and I can make sure you meet all the right people.'

Sophie closed her eyes in pain. She'd spent too much of her life hoping for some kind of attention from her uncle. Now here he sat and she only felt ill. He wasn't interested in her, only in what she could do for him. Perhaps, she thought for the first time, she had been better off without his attention.

'You are more like your mother than I thought possible,' her

uncle continued. 'She had beauty and intelligence and spirit as well. But she chose poorly, and look what it got her. A few years of love in a colonial backwater and a watery grave.' He sat straighter and stared intently at Sophie. 'Don't repeat her mistakes.'

'I thank you for the confidence you have finally shown in me, sir, but I am not feeling at all well just now.' She could stay no longer. What he did not know was that Sophie had her mother's temper as well, rarely raised, but devastating in scale. One minute more of this and she would be throwing his offer, along with her cup of tea, in his face. Only the thought of Lady Dayle's and Emily's disappointment stayed her hand. She took comfort instead in imagining his reaction when all of her plans were revealed. 'Pray, do excuse me.'

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