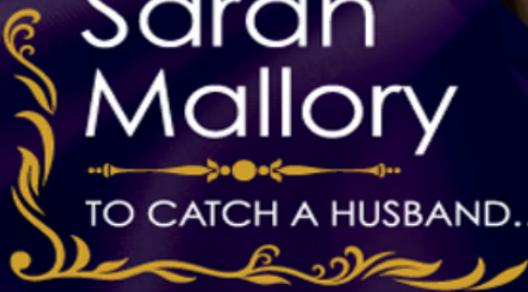




Sarah Mallory



TO CATCH A HUSBAND...



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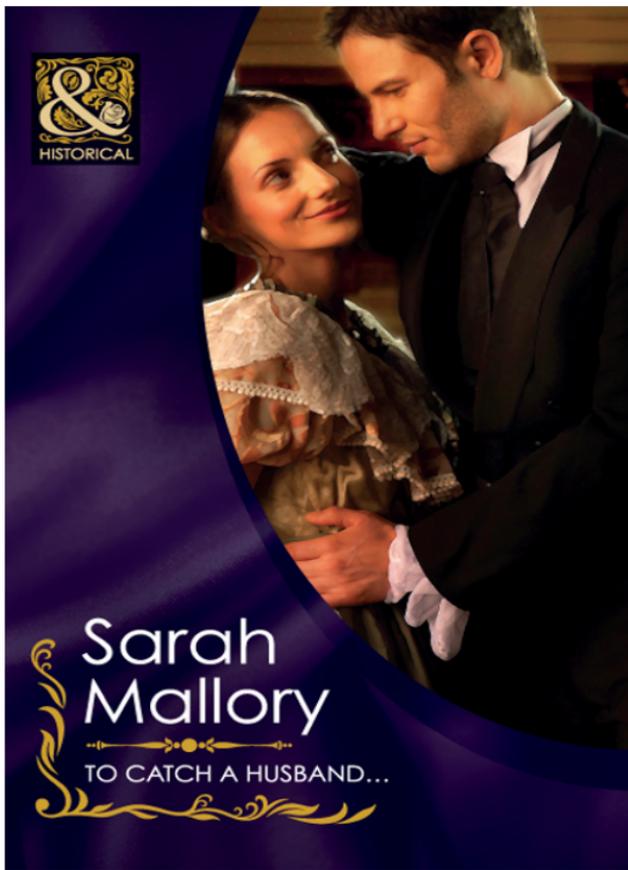
To Catch a Husband...

Аннотация

“I AM OFF TO LONDON, TO SEEK MY FORTUNE! ”
Impoverished husband-hunter Kitty Wythenshawe knows what she must achieve by the end of her London Season—marriage to a wealthy gentleman will save her mother from a life of drudgery. After all, love doesn't pay the bills. Wealthy landowner Daniel Blackwood is proud to be an industrialist, even if it means he's not quite what the ton expects. And as for young ladies like Kitty, who care only for a man's fortune, well, they just ought not to feel so temptingly irresistible when you kiss them. . . .

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‘I am afraid I may have damaged your reputation, Miss Wythenshawe,’ Mr Blackwood said bluntly.

‘Because you kissed me?’

He squeezed her fingers. ‘Just being alone here with me is enough to compromise you.’

‘I am not known here, sir. Neither are you. Who are they likely

to tell?’

‘A few judicious coins in the right hands might secure the silence of anyone at this inn. Are you willing to trust that no one will find out about our being here together?’

She gave him a little smile. ‘What is the alternative, Mr Blackwood?’

He shrugged.

‘That we marry, I suppose.’

About the Author

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

Previous novels by the same author:

THE WICKED BARON

MORE THAN A GOVERNESS

(part of *On Mothering Sunday*)

WICKED CAPTAIN, WAYWARD WIFE

THE EARL'S RUNAWAY BRIDE

DISGRACE AND DESIRE

AUTHOR NOTE

I live in the north of England, high on the Pennines, in an area of outstanding natural beauty. When I am out walking it is not uncommon to come across huge stone blocks tumbled amongst the trees in the bottom of some remote wooded valley—

the remains of an early spinning mill. These mills were built more than two hundred years ago, when the industrial revolution was just beginning and water was needed to power the new machines used to spin wool, linen and cotton.

Inventions like the spinning mule and Arkwright's water frame meant that people could spin better, faster, and produce more yarn than ever before to supply a growing market. The entrepreneurs who built and managed the mills were adventurers, working at the forefront of technology—and the innovations were as startling and exciting as anything to come out of Silicon Valley.

These new industrialists were hailed as heroes, adventurers, and I have long wanted to write about them. Daniel Blackwood is my first hero from this new breed of tough, resourceful industrialists. London Society of the 1780s doesn't quite know what to make of this fiercely independent self-made man—and neither does my heroine, Kitty. I had great fun putting these two together and creating the battle of wills that ensued before they realised they were made for one another—I hope you enjoy their journey.

Kitty and Daniel's story led me to some of the darker aspects of late-eighteenth-century society. The Abolition movement was gaining pace, with Anti-Slavery Societies being set up around the United Kingdom. There was certainly one in Sheffield at the time of my book, and 8,000 people signed a petition from the people of Sheffield to Parliament in 1793, calling for an end to

the Slave Trade. However, to the best of my knowledge there was never a West Riding Anti-Slavery Society—an invention of my own for the purposes of the plot.

This was also an age when children were often exploited, but some mill owners were against this—for example Robert Owen, who built the New Lanark Mills in Scotland, introduced the revolutionary idea that children should not be allowed to work in the mills before the age of ten. For the sake of historical accuracy I could not remove children altogether from Daniel's mills, but as a forward-thinking employer he does have schools and nursery buildings for the children of his workers and the apprentices.

Kitty and Daniel are a forward-thinking couple, and have very liberal views, but they are based on real characters—people who really did strive to improve the lot of the factory workers, and who fought for the abolition of the slave trade even though it was a risk to their own livelihood. The real heroes of the time.

To Doris Sweet
To Catch
A Husband ...
Sarah Mallory



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Chapter One

‘I am off to London, to seek my fortune!’

Kitty Wythenshawe glanced up hopefully at the young farmhand driving the gig. He did not look overly impressed with her announcement, but perhaps that was because he had known her for years and had always thought of her as the seamstress’s daughter—which, of course, she was—but now she was off to stay with her godmother. And her godmother was *A Lady!* Lady Leaconham, to be exact.

‘Well, Joshua?’ she demanded. ‘Are you not pleased for me?’

The lad moved the straw he was chewing from one side of his mouth to the other.

‘Nowt to do wi’ me.’

Kitty sighed but did not allow her companion’s indifference to damp her spirits. The overnight rain had given way to a beautiful spring morning, the sun had driven off the early mist from the moors and she could see the lapwings circling lazily over a distant field. It was as if Nature itself was smiling upon her adventure. Kitty glanced down at her olive-green walking dress with the yellow leaf motif embroidered down the front and around the hem. Mama and Aunt Jane had worked so hard for this occasion. She had never before had so many new clothes at one time.

‘Dunno what tha wants wi’ goin’ t’ Lunnon,’ remarked Joshua, suddenly becoming loquacious.

‘I have to find a husband,’ said Kitty, clasping her hands together in a sudden moment of anxiety. If only she could marry well then she could provide for Aunt Jane and Mama. They were both widows, eking out their meagre savings with a little dressmaking. Their home was a little cramped, to be sure, but Kitty had grown used to that. However, she was painfully aware that Mama and Aunt Jane were growing older and the cold, damp cottage was not so comfortable in winter, when the water would seep up through the earth floor and Mama’s joints would become stiff and painful, and Aunt Jane’s cough always became much worse. They were the daughters of a gentleman and this was not what they had been born to. Kitty knew it was her duty to improve their fortunes and if she had to sacrifice herself at the Matrimonial Altar then she would do it—not that it seemed to Kitty much of a sacrifice to marry a rich man: it was all very well to read novels where the heroine gave up everything to follow her heart, but Mama had married for love and Kitty did not think that she was particularly happy, living in such straitened circumstances. Indeed, had she and Aunt Jane not scrimped and saved every spare penny to give Kitty this one chance to go to London expressly for the purpose of achieving a good marriage?

Letitia Leaconham had been a close childhood friend of Mama’s and had gone on to make a brilliant marriage, while Mama had defied her family and married Walter Wythenshawe for love. He had been in possession of a moderate income, but he had not prospered, and as Mama was wont to point out at times

of stress, strict principles and enlightened views were all very well but they do not pay the bills. Upon Papa's death there had been any number of accounts to be settled and so it had come to pass that Kitty and her mama had moved into the tiny cottage in Fallridge with Aunt Jane, the widow of an impecunious curate. Since then Mama had spent every penny she could spare upon Kitty's education in the belief that if only she could be launched into Society she would make a good marriage. After all, her birth was impeccable, even if she had no dowry. As Aunt Jane said, Kitty was their *Last Hope*; if she could only find a rich husband then they could all be comfortable.

'I'd marry thee.'

This utterance put an end to Kitty's ponderings.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I said I'd marry thee,' repeated Joshua. 'If tha needs a man.'

'Oh, Joshua, that is very kind of you!' Kitty put a hand on his rough sleeve. 'Indeed it is very generous, but you see, if I am to support Mama and Aunt Jane, that they may live out their years comfortably and without more suffering, I need to marry someone ... someone ... '

'A lord,' said Joshua, spitting out his straw. 'Some 'un richer nor me. Aye, well, me mam's set her heart on my marrying Lizzie Greenwood, since she will inherit the farm from her faither, so I suppose it wouldn't do fer me to be marryin' a lass with nowt to 'er name.'

For a few moments Kitty's sunny mood clouded: it was very

lowering to think even Joshua considered her a poor prospect for marriage. Her spirits soon recovered, however. She was a gentlewoman by birth, and as Papa had always told her, it was a person's actions that were important. So Kitty pulled herself up and said graciously, 'No, but thank you for the offer. And it is very good of you to drive me to Halifax, and so kind of your father to let us use the gig. I am to meet with Mr and Mrs Midgley at the Crown. You may not know them; Mr Midgley is a cloth merchant, which is how Mama became acquainted with the family, for she often buys cloth from him. They are taking their samples to London, you see, and have agreed to take me with them, which was very fortunate, because otherwise Mama would have been obliged to send me on the stage and hire a maid to go with me. So you see everything has worked out very well.'

She ended on a cheerful note with a sunny smile for Joshua but he was not attending. He was staring ahead of him and frowning.

'Well?' said Kitty. 'What is it?'

Joshua scratched his head.

'I ain't right sure which road we wants.'

Kitty followed his stare. They were dropping down from the hills and she could see the junction in the distance, a large, open space where several highways converged.

'The road to Halifax will be the main route,' suggested Kitty, but even as she said it she realised that this did not help. All the roads leading away from them were in good order and wide enough for two carts to pass.

‘Da said to keep goin’ downhill ‘til we get to Halifax.’

‘That is all very well,’ retorted Kitty, beginning to lose patience, ‘but there are at least three of those roads leading downhill. Think, Joshua. Can you not remember which one you take?’

‘Ah, well, I’ve never bin this road afore,’ he confessed. ‘Uncle Jed allus makes this run.’

Kitty closed her lips to prevent herself making a hasty exclamation. It would help no one and might upset her companion, who, after all, was going to considerable trouble for her. As they descended to the crossroads she spotted a large black horse standing at the side of the lane. At first she thought the animal unattended, but as they approached a man stepped into view. His serviceable buckskins and brown riding jacket were liberally spattered with mud and he was hatless, his black hair unconfined and hanging wild and disordered to his shoulders. He did not look around as they approached, but was concentrating upon securing the straps of his saddle.

‘That fellow might know which is the correct road,’ said Kitty. ‘You should ask him.’

Joshua looked at the bedraggled stranger and pulled a face. ‘Nay. No need for that.’

‘To be sure he looks very rough, but he might know the way.’

‘Tha can’t be certain o’ that.’

‘Well, it would do no harm to ask,’ said Kitty, trying to hide her impatience.

Joshua ignored her. When she realised that he had no intention of asking for directions she decided she would have to act. As they drew abreast of the man she leaned over the side of the gig and called out to him.

‘I say, my man—yes, you: which one of these roads leads to Halifax?’

She was not used to accosting strangers, and a mixture of nerves and irritation at her companion’s stubbornness made her tone much sharper than usual. The man turned slowly and looked up at her from beneath heavy dark brows. Kitty found herself facing the blackest, fiercest stare she had ever encountered.

It was as much as Kitty could do not to recoil from the stranger’s angry glare. With some alarm she realised that Joshua no longer intended to drive past. He brought the gig to a halt and the man walked over to stand before them, looking very much as if he would drag her from the gig at any moment. Swallowing hard, she sat up straight, determined not to show fear. She said haughtily, ‘Did you understand me, fellow?’

Those piercing black eyes held hers for a moment, then they swept over her, from the crown of her bergère bonnet down to the nankeen half-boots peeping out from under the hem of her walking dress. Kitty had the unsettling feeling that he could see right through her clothing to the flesh beneath. She felt thoroughly exposed and her cheeks flamed. She snapped her head up and stared straight ahead.

‘Drive on, Joshua.’

The stranger's long arm shot out and one big hand caught the pony's bridle.

'Nay,' he said in a slow, deep drawl. 'First tha needs to know t'road.'

Kitty shot a furious look at him.

'Then perhaps you would be good enough to tell us!'

'I'll tell thee nowt afore I hears a civil word from yer ladyship.'

Joshua shifted uncomfortably beside her. Kitty wondered that he did not stand up to the stranger, but a moment's consideration told her that her companion, a stocky youth of sixteen, was no match for the tall, broad-shouldered stranger some ten years his senior. The man stood at their pony's head, one hand gripping the leather cheek-piece while the other stroked the animal's neck with slow, reassuring movements. The pony, traitor that he was, turned his head and rubbed against the stranger's arm.

Kitty realised that, however angry the man might be with her, he was in control of himself and the situation. They could not move on until he allowed it.

She ran her tongue over her dry lips.

'I beg your pardon,' she said politely. 'Pray be good enough to direct us to the Halifax road.'

Silence.

It dragged on for a full minute. Kitty gave the stranger a challenging look but he did not move, merely stared back at her with his unfathomable black gaze. He looked as hard and immobile as the rocky granite outcrops that littered the moors.

Joshua rubbed his nose. A bullock cart lumbered up to the junction and turned along one of the lanes but still the stranger held Kitty's eyes. Then, just when she was wondering if Joshua would dare to use the shotgun that she knew lay beneath the seat, the man stepped back.

'That's thy road.' He pointed to the lane where the bullock cart was disappearing around a bend. 'Just follow yon wagon t'bottom of t'hill.'

With a slight nod of acknowledgement Joshua flicked the reins and they began to move.

'Thank you.'

Kitty felt obliged to utter the words as they drove away, but she kept her eyes fixed on the road ahead. From the tail of her eye she saw the man tug his forelock but there was nothing subservient about the gesture and she could not shake the horrible conviction that he was enjoying her discomfiture.

Daniel Blackwood watched the gig pull away, a deep crease in his brows. He was in the worst possible humour but he should not have taken it out on that young couple. He had been travelling since yesterday afternoon, his horse was lame and he had been obliged to spend the night on the moors. He was in a devil's own temper and it had not been improved by being addressed by an arrogant chit as if he was a lackey!

He had seen the gig approaching, but knowing the young couple could do nothing to help him he had ignored it, only to

be summoned like a servant to give directions. True, the girl was young and pretty, but he was in no mood to appreciate the heart-shaped face, the large green eyes fringed with dark lashes or the dusky curls that escaped from beneath her wide-brimmed straw bonnet. He watched the gig rolling away down the hill, the little figure in her green robe and yellow bonnet sitting rigidly upright beside the boy who was driving. Probably some farmer's daughter trying to impress her swain by acting the great lady. Well, she had chosen the wrong man to try out her airs and graces!

With an angry snort he bent to pick up his greatcoat and hat from the grass verge and gathered up the reins of his horse.

'Come up, Marnie. I'll walk you to the inn and Fletcher can keep you there until you're fit to come home.'

Kitty arrived at the Crown and was informed by the landlord that she was expected: Mr and Mrs Midgley were waiting for her in the coffee room. Kitty nodded and he directed one of his servants to carry her trunk across to the travelling carriage standing in the middle of the yard. Before stepping into the inn she turned to say goodbye to Joshua, thanking him for his trouble and pressing into his hand a sixpence which he was somewhat embarrassed to take, but she insisted. She watched him drive away in the gig, a tiny pang of homesickness mingling with the excited anticipation she felt for the journey ahead of her.

Mr and Mrs Midgley greeted her with unfeigned delight, declaring that she had not kept them waiting at all, and begging

her to sit down and join them for breakfast before they set off.

‘For if I am not mistaken,’ said Mr Midgley, twinkling at her, ‘you were up before dawn, miss, and too excited to take a bite to eat.’

‘Very true,’ laughed Kitty, removing her bonnet and shaking out her dark curls. ‘If you are sure we have time?’

‘All the time in the world, my dear,’ replied Mr Midgley. ‘We travel to London in easy stages. I don’t mean to press the horses, for we shan’t be changing them again for some while, unlike the mailcoach.’

‘Nor will we be careering along at such a breakneck speed,’ added Mrs Midgley, chuckling. ‘So come along, my dear, sit by me and you can tell me how your dear mother does.’

Kitty readily complied. She was not well acquainted with her hosts but their warmth and kindness soon broke down any reserve and she found herself chattering away quite naturally while they breakfasted upon freshly baked bread rolls and scalding coffee.

‘So you arrived in style, Miss Wythenshawe,’ remarked Mrs Midgley, when they had finished their meal and Mr Midgley went off to check if their carriage was ready. ‘You say the farmer’s boy drove you in his gig? I have no doubt your mama was very pleased you were not obliged to travel here with the poultry for market!’

‘If I had done so then my driver might have known the way,’ replied Kitty with a sigh.

She decided not to recount the incident at the crossroads. The

man had been odiously rude and not a little frightening, but Kitty was aware that her own conduct was not what it ought to have been. If she had not spoken in such a proud, disdainful way perhaps the whole unpleasant incident might not have occurred. She deeply regretted her own conduct but it was too late to apologise. She would learn from it and do her best to make sure she did not act in such an ill-mannered fashion again.

She gave Mrs Midgley a bright smile. 'But I am here now, and very much looking forward to our journey.'

'Bless you, my dear, then we shall be off directly,' declared Mr Midgley, coming in at that moment. 'If you would care to don your bonnets and cloaks, ladies, the berline is ready and we can be on our way! Oh, and we have a passenger for the first part of the journey: I'll just go and hurry him along.'

With that he was gone, leaving his wife to tut and direct a rueful glance at Kitty as they gathered up their belongings and headed out to the yard.

While they had been breaking their fast the clouds had gathered and now it was raining steadily, a fine, soaking drizzle. The ladies hurried across to the waiting carriage and made themselves comfortable on the forward-facing seat while they waited for Mr Midgley. He soon appeared at the door, standing back and addressing someone beyond her view.

'Get in, my boy, get in. You will find Mrs Midgley inside, and our young guest Miss Wythenshawe. This is Mr Blackwood, my love,' he called in through the open door. 'His mare is lame, so I

said we would take him up as far as Hestonroyd.'

A large figure in a greatcoat and wide-brimmed hat filled the doorway, his shadow momentarily darkening the interior of the carriage, but as he sat down opposite her, Kitty bit back a gasp of dismay. It was the boorish stranger from the crossroads! He had washed his face and hands and tied back his hair, but there was no mistaking that strong jaw shadowed with its dark stubble or the coal-black eyes that now rested upon her with a look of cool disdain. Embarrassed, Kitty looked down and nervously twitched her skirts out of the way. He had such long legs that she was obliged to keep her feet tucked in to avoid dirtying her hem on his muddy boots. She knew her walking dress would not remain clean for very long, but it was new and she was determined to take care of it. She fully appreciated all the hard work Mama and Aunt Jane had put in, making all the gowns and clothes for her stay in London. She had helped, of course, but Mama had worked long into each evening, sewing by lamplight until her eyes were red and sore with strain.

'There, now, we are off at last!' declared Mr Midgley as he climbed into the carriage and they began to move. 'What a merry party we shall be.' He turned to his wife. 'Blackwood here lives at the Holme and—'

Daniel was quick to interrupt him, saying in a very broad accent, 'Nay, sir, I don't think the ladies is fetched to know about me.' He glanced at the young woman sitting opposite and added, 'They'd be more interested in frills and furbelows.'

Mrs Midgley chuckled.

‘You are far too modest, Mr Blackwood. I take it you are Samuel Blackwood’s son?’

‘Aye, ma’am.’ Daniel kept his response brief: if they knew his father they might well wonder why his son spoke in such an uneducated manner!

‘We are well acquainted with your parents,’ Mrs Midgley went on. ‘If we had time I would suggest we call upon them when we drop you off, but Mr Midgley is determined to reach Market Harborough tonight, so we must not tarry. Do, pray, remember me to your mama.’

Dan nodded silently in response and earned a disapproving frown from Miss Wythenshawe. He returned her look with a cool one of his own and had the satisfaction of seeing her blush. As well she might, given her own behaviour towards him that morning.

He wondered if he should have hired a horse after all, but by the time he had walked Marnie to the inn the rain had set in and Mr Midgley had been most insistent. Daniel had seen the cheerful-looking gentleman with his full wig and bushy side-whiskers sheltering under the arch leading to the stableyard and he had nodded as he passed him. The man touched his hat.

‘By Gad, sir, you look as if you have been through the wars!’

Daniel stopped. He looked down at his muddy clothes and gave a wry grin.

‘My horse took a tumble yesterday evening and I landed in the

dirt. I was unhurt but my mount was lamed, so I was obliged to spend the night on the moors.’

‘And in the rain, too.’ The gentleman shook his head.

Daniel shrugged.

‘A little damp won’t hurt me. I am even now going to find our host and hire a horse to take me back to Hestonroyd.’

The man looked up, his little bright eyes gleaming.

‘Oh? Not the Holme, by any chance? Samuel Blackwood’s place?’

‘Why, yes, sir. I am his son.’

The gentleman gave a hearty laugh.

‘Well met then, Mr Blackwood! My name is Midgley. I have known your father for many a year—a good man, and an honest businessman, too!’

‘Indeed.’ Daniel nodded. ‘I will give him your regards, sir. Now, if you will excuse me, I must see if Fletcher can find me a horse ...’

‘No need, sir, no need,’ cried Mr Midgley. ‘I am going your way—that is my berline over there. We shall be setting off shortly—we have many miles to cover today!—but I should be delighted to take you up.’

‘Indeed, sir, I would not wish to put you out.’

‘Not at all, my boy, not at all. You do not want to be riding in this weather. And besides, we shall be driving through Hestonroyd and can drop you at the very gates of the Holme. Now, there is plenty of room in my carriage for another body, so

let me hear no more arguments!

Daniel hesitated, but only for a moment. His greatcoat was still wet and the idea of getting another soaking was not a tempting prospect, so he accepted Mr Midgley's offer. Now, looking across at Miss Wythenshawe's haughty profile, he thought that if he had known she was one of the party, he would have preferred to walk back to Hestonroyd in the rain rather than sit in a closed carriage with such a disagreeable wench.

Kitty stared resolutely out of the window. Heavens, she had thought Joshua taciturn, but this man had no conversation at all, except to be uncivil. Her conscience suggested that this might be her own fault. The thought made her uncomfortable, but she could not bring herself to utter an apology before Mr and Mrs Midgley: if she did that she would also be obliged to give them an explanation. She decided to put the matter from her mind and concentrate on the passing countryside.

The view could not fail to excite her. She had never been so far abroad before and as they travelled on, the harsh grandeur of the moors was left behind for a softer, greener landscape. Orderly fields stretched away on either side towards rolling, wooded hillsides. She was only a few hours from home and already everything looked strange: how much more diverting would it be in London? Mr Midgley said it would take two full days' travelling to reach the capital. A little tremor ran through her: how would she go on? She had never even been to school!

There had never been any money to send her to one of the

select academies that taught young ladies how to behave. Not that her education had been lacking. Mama and Aunt Jane had seen to that. When Papa had died they had been obliged to release her governess but Mama and Aunt Jane had continued her lessons, which she had augmented by extensive reading of the books kept from her father's well-stocked library. Most had been sold to pay his debts but those suitable for a young lady's education had been retained—as well as less improving works. Mama might not wholly approve of novels, but she and Aunt Jane enjoyed listening to Kitty reading from the works of Mr Fielding or Mr Richardson while they sewed. They had managed to keep the little pianoforte for her to practise upon but there had been no money for a dancing master, so Kitty had joined the Squire's daughters for dancing lessons, repaying this kindness by helping their harassed governess with their schooling. Mama had been at great pains to teach her to be a lady. There had been extensive descriptions of life in a big house, lessons on how to address the various ranks of nobility and how to prepare tea, but Kitty suspected it would be very different practising all she had learned in London rather than in the tiny cottage in Fallridge.

She clasped her hands together. Mama had never taught her how to deal with rough, wild-looking gentlemen like the one now sitting opposite her. The only men she had met before had either been the young boys of the village or fatherly types like the Squire or Mr Midgley. In all her nineteen years she had never met anyone who had made her feel so ill at ease. She stole a

glance across the carriage at Daniel Blackwood. He had removed his hat and was leaning back against the leather squabs, his eyes closed, his head moving gently with the swaying motion of the carriage. If, as Mr Midgley said, he had been travelling all night that would explain his wild, unkempt appearance. But it was clear that he did not favour a powdered wig, for he wore his own dark hair tied back at the nape of his neck and that, together with his heavy dark brows and straight nose, gave him a rather hawkish appearance. With his greatcoat hanging open she could see the broad width of his chest straining beneath his brown riding jacket and the outline of his muscled thighs encased within the buckskin breeches. He exuded strength and power. She thought back to their first meeting on the edge of the moors above Halifax: that, she realised, was the perfect setting for such a wild, vigorous creature. He was not a man to be crossed, but it occurred to her that he would be a good man to have as a friend.

At that moment Mr Blackwood opened his eyes and Kitty found herself once more staring into their coal-black depths. She had the oddest feeling that he was looking into her very soul and reading her thoughts. Blushing, she forced herself to turn away. She fixed her gaze on the window again. Really, the man was insufferable. She hoped they would be reaching Hestonroyd very soon, so that they would be free of his unsettling presence.

The carriage lurched and bumped as their route wound down through a steep wooded valley. The rain had stopped, but the leaves and the ground glistened in the watery sunlight, while

tumbling streams ran down the hillside, creating frothy waterfalls between the trees. The carriage slowed and came to a stand. Mr Midgley let down the window and put out his head to direct an enquiry to his coachman. Kitty could not hear the man's reply, but it caused his master to climb out of the carriage, closely followed by Mr Blackwood. Kitty leaned across to look out of the open doorway. They had reached the valley bottom where a new cobbled road had been laid to take vehicles through the ford. Now, however, the stream was swollen by the recent rains and it rushed and tumbled across their path. Mr Midgley came back to speak to them.

'Roberts doesn't want to drive across the ford with you ladies inside,' he told them. 'He is afraid of what might happen to you if the carriage should be overturned by the fast-flowing waters. You can see that it would not be unprecedented.' He nodded towards the far bank of the stream, where the remains of a farm cart protruded from the water. 'Roberts thinks it would be safer for us to use the bridge yonder.'

He pointed upstream, where an ancient stone bridge arched across the waters. It was wide enough for a single horse, but it was clear that it would not accommodate a carriage.

'Is it quite safe?' enquired Mrs Midgley, eyeing the bridge with some misgiving.

'Oh, aye, ma'am, the bridge is sound enough,' said the coachman cheerfully. 'It's not much used now we have the new road, but the pack-horses still cross by it.'

Kitty gave a little shrug. 'And so must we, it seems. Let us go to it.'

She followed Mrs Midgley out of the carriage and the party stood and watched as the coachman slowly drove across the ford. The water surged between the horses' legs and frothed around the wheels of the carriage, splashing up over the coach body and making it sway alarmingly, but at last the berline was drawn up safely out of the water on the far side.

'Excellent,' declared Mr Midgley, 'Well done, Roberts.' He held his hand out to his wife. 'Come along then, ladies. It is our turn!'

He set off towards the little bridge. The track was wet and overgrown and the ladies were obliged to hold up their skirts to keep them out of the mud. Kitty did her best to ignore Daniel Blackwood, who fell into step beside her but did not offer her his arm. The bridge was soon reached and they paused for a moment on the apex to gaze over the low parapet at the turgid water.

'I should not like to fall in there today,' remarked Mrs Midgley. 'The rains have swollen the stream so much it is in danger of overflowing its banks.'

'It has certainly flooded on this side,' said her husband, who had walked to the edge of the bridge and was prodding the grass with his cane. 'The ground is sodden here.'

Mrs Midgley followed her husband to where the cobbles of the bridge ended and the grassy track began.

'Well, we have to get across,' she said prosaically.

She laid her hand on her husband's arm and put one foot on the track. Immediately she sank ankle-deep into the mud.

'Oh, good heavens!' cried Mrs Midgley, picking up her skirts and stepping quickly back on to the cobbles. 'The ground is a quagmire. We cannot walk on that!'

'I am afraid we have no choice, my dear,' cried her spouse.

They watched as he strode purposefully forwards to the carriage, his feet sinking into the ground until the mud came halfway up his top-boots. When he finally reached the road he turned and looked back rather helplessly.

'Well, what else are we to do, my love? The carriage is on this side now, so we must cross somehow.' Daniel Blackwood stepped forward. 'Allow me, mistress.' In one easy movement he scooped Mrs Midgley into his arms and carried her across the muddy stretch, setting her gently on her feet beside her husband, where she stood, a little red-cheeked and flustered by such cavalier treatment.

'Oh, well done, my boy!' cried Mr Midgley, clapping his hands. 'Now if you will do the same by Miss Wythenshawe we will be on our way.'

Kitty's throat tightened in alarm. That big brute of a man was bearing down upon her, a look of unholy enjoyment in his eyes. She looked at the mud and wondered if she dared run through it, but the thought of ruining her new half-boots and very likely muddying both her walking dress and her petticoats was too horrific to bear. Her dark tormentor stood before her, grinning.

‘Well, Miss Wythenshawe, if tha’s ready?’

She bit her lip and nodded. The sensation of being swept off her feet left Kitty feeling giddy and very helpless. She was held tightly against the man’s chest, her face only inches from his jaw, so close that she could see the black stubble on his cheek and smell the damp wool of his greatcoat. As he turned his feet slipped a little on the cobbles and her hands flew up around his neck. His arms tightened even more. He held her firmly but he was not crushing her, yet for some reason she found it difficult to breathe. Her heart was pounding erratically, thudding against her ribs as if trying to escape her body. She had a sudden and inexplicable desire to lean her head against the man’s shoulder. She had to admit it looked very inviting, and reassuringly wide. She realised that this was a situation she had dreamed of, a chivalrous knight coming to the rescue of a beautiful maiden. Only in her dreams her hero was a fair, handsome young knight, one deserving of his reward, not a big, brutish oaf with no manners. She peeped up at the strong, rather hawkish face of her rescuer, noting the long black lashes around his eyes, his straight nose and the smooth curve of his lips. Suddenly, surprisingly, Kitty found herself wondering what it would be like to kiss him.

He glanced down at that moment and she found herself staring into those dark eyes, unable to look away. For one alarming moment she thought he had read her mind and that he would actually kiss her. She was in his arms and completely at his mercy. Her heart raced. A moment’s heady excitement was

followed quickly by panic. To cover her confusion she said crossly, 'Pray do not hold me so tightly. You are crushing my dress.'

He chuckled.

His amusement only served to increase her discomfiture. She said angrily, 'I vow I cannot breathe! Loosen your hold, you oaf!'

The black brows snapped together and a dangerous gleam flared in his eyes. He released his grip on her legs and she gave a little cry as her feet touched the sodden ground.

'Ee, lass, seems I lost my grip on thee.' Her tormentor still had an arm around her shoulders, hugging her to him. She managed to free one hand and brought it up to his grinning face with a slap.

'How dare you do that to a lady?'

He looked down at her, his eyes narrowing. Then, very deliberately, he let her go. She gave a shriek, her arms tightening around his neck as she tried to lift her feet from the mud. Calmly he reached up and pulled her hands away and she was obliged to stand, the cold muddy water oozing around her ankles and into her boots.

'If that wants trettin' like a lady,' he growled, 'then that mun act like one.'

And with that he turned and walked to the carriage.

Kitty lifted her sodden skirts and pulled one foot clear of the sticky, cloying mud. With slow, unsteady steps she made her way to the road, biting her lip in rage and mortification. She had been very rude, to be sure, but how dare he drop her in the water? She

looked down at her feet. Her new boots were ruined and instead of a jaunty yellow decoration around the hem of her walking dress, the bottom six inches of her skirts glistened with slick brown mud.

When Kitty reached the road she was too upset to speak and after scraping the worst of the mud from her boots and stockings she climbed silently into the carriage, biting her lip while Mrs Midgley clucked and fidgeted around her like a mother hen.

Daniel looked down at his legs. His topboots were almost completely covered in mud and it had splashed up over his buckskins. He walked to the edge of the ford to wash the worst of the dirt away before climbing back into the carriage. Mr Midgley gave the word and they set off again. The atmosphere inside the carriage was distinctly uncomfortable. Daniel looked at the young woman huddled in the corner: she was staring out of the window, her jaw set hard. He saw her blink rapidly and guessed that she was trying not to cry.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said quietly. ‘Miss Wythenshawe, I—’
‘Now, now, my boy, you did your best,’ put in Mr Midgley. ‘I did not see quite what happened, as I was helping my wife into the coach, but I am sure it could not be helped. We must be thankful that one of our ladies at least was carried safely across the mud. I have no doubt Miss Wythenshawe is most grateful for your efforts, isn’t that so, my dear?’

Daniel saw the little chin tremble. Miss Wythenshawe averted her face but he could not mistake the bitterness in her voice when

she replied.

‘Mr Blackwood’s *efforts* will not be forgotten.’

‘There, now, all’s well, you see.’ Mr Midgley beamed around the carriage. ‘Once the mud has dried, we can clean it off and your boots and your gown will be as good as new!’

Daniel sat back, closing his lips against further comment. Mrs Midgley did not look convinced by her husband’s cheerful assurances and as for Miss Wythenshawe, she kept her gaze fixed firmly upon the passing landscape. He leaned forwards, his hand going out to her.

‘Perhaps you will allow me to—’

‘Pray do not touch me!’ she said icily. ‘I think you have done quite enough damage today!’

Daniel drew back immediately. He had been about to offer to pay for a new gown, but it was quite clear the young woman wanted nothing further to do with him. Stifling a sigh of exasperation, Daniel turned to stare out of the window beside him, praying that his nightmare journey would soon be over.

Chapter Two

The carriage slowed to negotiate a winding village street and Daniel sat up, relieved to recognise the familiar buildings.

‘Hestonroyd.’ He turned to Mr Midgley. ‘This will do for me, sir, if you would direct your driver to stop.’

Mr Midgley pulled the check-string and Daniel jumped down. He bowed and offered his thanks to Mr and Mrs Midgley but when he touched his hat to Miss Wythenshawe she merely hunched her shoulder and looked away. With a shrug he waited until the carriage had moved off then walked briskly along the street until he arrived at the gates to the Holme, an imposing new house set back from the road. As he strode up the drive, the front door flew open and a young lady ran out.

‘Daniel, at last!’

He caught her up in his arms, swinging her around and laughing.

‘Have you been looking out for me, Bella?’

He set her back on her feet.

‘Since daybreak. But what *have* you been doing, brother dearest? You are covered in mud.’

He grinned.

‘That is a very long story. Let us go indoors. I need to clean myself up.’

‘You must be quick, then, for Mama is waiting in the drawing

room for you. Papa is at the mill, but he said we were to send word as soon as you arrived.’ She twinkled up at him. ‘He would not say so, of course, but he has missed you, and was mightily disappointed when you did not come home last night.’

Daniel put his arm around her shoulders.

‘Well, you can send him a message now to tell him I am safe, and inform Mama that I will be with her as soon as I am presentable!’

The clock in the hall had chimed two more quarters before Daniel finally made his way downstairs to the drawing room. It was a large well-proportioned chamber, comfortably furnished, everything of the finest quality, and it had a quiet elegance that Daniel found very restful. His mother was seated at her new writing desk, her dark hair neatly confined beneath a lace cap.

‘Well, Mama, I am home at last.’

She looked up, a smile lighting her face.

‘Daniel, my love.’ She rose to greet him, hugging him tightly. She would never admit it but he suspected she had spent a restless night worrying over his safety. He held her away from him.

‘You are looking very well, Mama, and that is a very fetching coat. Is it new?’

‘It is a *pet-en-l’air*,’ she told him, smoothing her hands over the grey velvet of the loose jacket she wore over her morning gown. ‘They are not so fashionable now, I’m afraid, but just the thing for these chill spring days.’ She gestured to him to sit down with her. ‘Bella tells me you have had an eventful journey.’

‘Yes, Marnie is lame; we took a fall coming back from Barrowford. No, no, I suffered no injury,’ he added quickly when he saw the alarm in her face. ‘I was obliged to leave Marnie in Halifax but was fortunate to meet Mr Midgley and his lady on their way to London and they took me up. They send their regards, Mama, but would not stop.’

‘That was very kind of them, but are you sure you are not hurt? No doubt you were cutting across the moors again. I wish you had kept to the roads, my son.’

‘I wish I had done so, this time,’ Daniel responded with a rueful grin. ‘You will say I was well served, Mama, for I had to spend the night sleeping on the heather.’

‘He was covered in mud,’ added Bella, following him into the room. ‘Up to his knees!’

‘Not from my sojourn on the moor,’ Daniel was quick to reassure his mother. ‘The stream was in full spate across the ford and Midgley deemed it safer for us to walk across the bridge.’

‘Heavens, if it was that muddy what did poor Mrs Midgley do?’ asked Bella, eyeing the scalloped hem of her own gown.

‘I carried her, since her husband could not.’

‘Oh, famous!’ Mrs Blackwood clapped her hands, laughing. ‘A veritable hero! I have no doubt the lady was very pleased to have you with them.’

‘*She* was, perhaps,’ remarked Daniel, his brow darkening, ‘but not her companion. Too high in the step for me. A right top-lofty piece ...’

‘Daniel!’

‘I beg your pardon, Mama, but you know how I dislike it when people put on airs that don’t become them! And this young miss, hah! Far too high and mighty *she* was! She took one look at me and wrote me off as a mere nothing.’

‘I have no doubt she mistook you for a common labourer if she saw you in all your dirt,’ remarked Bella sagely. ‘I am sure she soon realised her mistake when she knew who you were.’

‘Nay,’ drawled Daniel, ‘I weren’t about to put ‘er right.’

Mrs Blackwood frowned at his sudden lapse.

‘My dear, I trust you were not uncouth.’

Daniel hesitated, thinking back over the events of the morning. He had behaved very badly by Miss Wythenshawe, he knew that, but it was too late to do anything about it now. He gave his mother an apologetic smile.

‘Alas, Mama, I fear I was very uncouth.’

A deep, amused voice was heard from the doorway.

‘What is this? Is my son up to his tricks?’

‘Papa!’ With a shriek Bella flew across the room and flung herself into the arms of the gentleman who had just entered.

‘Father.’ Daniel rose. ‘I beg your pardon, I sent a message to assure you I was safe. I did not mean you to leave the mill early—’

His father smiled across the room at him.

‘It was no hardship. ‘Tis a poor manager I would be if my manufactories could not function without my presence! But what has been occurring, my son, to bring that black scowl to your

face?’

‘A minor irritation, sir, too trivial to bore you with.’

‘Good manners are never trivial, my son,’ put in Mrs Blackwood, a troubled look in her eyes. ‘I had hoped your education had taught you how to mix with your fellow man, from humble labourer to the highest in the land. But I know that temper of yours: you will act rashly if your will is crossed.’

‘Oh?’ Mr Samuel Blackwood raised his dark brows at his son. ‘And who has had the temerity to cross you, my boy?’

‘A young lady,’ put in Bella before Daniel could reply. ‘She saw Dan in all his dirt and mistook him for a rough, coarse fellow.’

‘And is my son so lax in his manners that he is judged solely upon appearance?’ asked Mr Blackwood gently.

A dull flush mantled Dan’s cheek.

‘Not generally, sir, I assure you.’

‘I am very glad to hear it,’ returned his father, smiling a little. ‘Because your manners are going to be sorely tested, I fear.’

Daniel looked up.

‘Sir?’

‘Yes, my son, I have some matters of business for you to attend to.’ Mr Blackwood reached into his pocket and took out his snuff box. ‘I am sending you to London!’

Dearest Mama. You will know from my previous correspondence that I think Lady Leaconham the kindest, most generous godmother in the world! She delights in showering gifts upon me and will not hear of my spending the money you gave me

upon anything other than little luxuries for myself—pin money, she calls it—and every time I remonstrate with her she merely laughs and says what else is she to spend her money upon, if it is not her goddaughter?

Kitty put down her pen. She had been in Portman Square for four weeks now, and already Lady Leaconham had spent more money upon her than Mama and Aunt Jane earned in a year. Letitia Leaconham had been a widow for a long time. Her husband had left her with a comfortable income that allowed her to hire a house in London for several months each year and entertain her acquaintances in lavish style. She had one son, Garston, but since attaining his majority four years ago he had set up his own bachelor establishment, leaving his mama to yawn over her morning chocolate and bemoan the fact that she had no daughter to comfort her in her twilight years. She was therefore delighted to welcome her goddaughter into her house and even more delighted when she discovered Kitty to be an attractive young lady with very pretty manners. She began immediately to make plans to introduce her goddaughter to her friends, and wrote to Mrs Wythenshawe to assure her that, despite Kitty's complete lack of fortune, she had no doubt she would be able to secure for her a very advantageous marriage.

Since this was her sole reason for coming to London, Kitty could only be grateful that her godmother entered so fully into her concerns and therefore she stifled her misgivings and threw herself into her new life. Kitty had to be honest; it was not

difficult to enjoy all the amusements that London had to offer. Lady Leaconham took her to the theatre, they attended concerts, and spent hours browsing in shops that carried such a wide variety of merchandise Kitty's eyes grew round in amazement. It was also very pleasant wearing modish gowns and having my lady's *coiffeuse* coax her soft dark hair into fashionable ringlets. It had not taken Kitty long to realise that Lady Leaconham was a wealthy woman with very little to do, and she looked upon her goddaughter very much as a novelty, an amusement—a doll to be dressed and petted and exhibited to her friends. For the first week or so Kitty had found the experience deliciously exhilarating, but a life dedicated to nothing but pleasure was not something she could wholly approve. Her father had been a very religious man with a strong moral code. He had died before Kitty was twelve years old but by then she had been inculcated with his principles and a strong sense of social justice. She believed that the advantages of wealth and rank carried with them responsibility for those less fortunate, a belief that did not seem to be shared by many of the fashionable ladies she had met since arriving in Town. She took up her pen again.

Pray be assured that I carry out such errands as Godmama will allow and take her little dog for his daily exercise, but this is small recompense for her generosity.

Kitty paused. She did not think Mama would quite approve of the number of times Lady Leaconham had taken her shopping, positively showering her with purchases until Kitty's room was

overflowing with hats, bonnets, cloaks, pelisses, dancing slippers and half-boots as well as more day dresses, morning and evening gowns and walking dresses than Kitty could ever imagine having time to wear. She broke off from her reverie as the door opened and Lady Leaconham came in.

‘Ah, so there you are, Kitty my love,’ she greeted her with a smile as she drew off her gloves. ‘Now, what are you about, here all alone in the morning room?’

‘I am writing to Mama. I beg your pardon, Godmama: is there something you would like me to do for you?’

‘No, no, child, you work far too hard as it is—no one should be writing letters so early in the day!’ Kitty laughed.

‘This is not *work*, Godmama!’

‘Perhaps not for you,’ returned my lady, casting a dubious eye at the sheet of paper with its closely written lines. ‘I have noticed that you like to read a great deal, too.’ She looked at Kitty, a slight frown creasing her brow. ‘My dear, I do hope you are not *bookish*, and pray tell me you do not wish me to get you an invitation to my neighbour Mrs Montagu’s blue-stocking parties! Nothing would be more fatal to your chances of making a good match, you know.’

Kitty hastily disclaimed and Lady Leaconham gave a very visible sigh of relief.

‘Very well, my love, put away your letter now, if you please: you may finish it later. I have just come from Bond Street where I saw the prettiest pair of sandals! I just had to buy them for

you. I thought they would go very well with your yellow muslin. I had Meakin put them in your room so perhaps you would run upstairs and try them on. I am expecting my sister Lady Harworth to call shortly and thought you might like to change your gown for her visit.’ Kitty looked down at her closed robe: it was one of the gowns Mama had made for her. As if reading her thoughts, Lady Leaconham said quickly, ‘I know how hard your dear mama and your aunt worked, making all those lovely gowns for you, and while they are perfectly suitable for quiet days at home, I do believe you should wear something a little more ... stylish when we are entertaining guests such as Lady Harworth. And I do so want you to make a good impression upon her.’

‘Oh, why should that be, Godmama?’

‘Well, she is very well connected, and she has a daughter only a year or so older than you; I should like her to think you a fitting companion. Also.’ My lady slipped off her pelisse and gave her attention to laying it carefully over the arm of the sofa. ‘Also, she has a son, and Lord Harworth is unmarried.’

Kitty was not deceived by her airy tone.

‘Surely you do not think a *lord* would look at me, Godmama.’

‘I do not see why not,’ returned Lady Leaconham. ‘Now that Meakin has cut your hair and dressed it a little more stylishly, you look exceedingly pretty, and your manners are very good, so I have no doubt that if you exert yourself a little you could make yourself very agreeable—you must not talk about your family, of course.’

‘Oh, must I not?’

‘No, my dear. It is not the thing in Town to chatter on about people known only to oneself.’ My lady clasped her hands together, her pale eyes taking on a dreamy look. ‘Only think how pleased your mama would be with both of us if we were to catch you a lord!’

Kitty did not think it worth trying to reply, so she obediently slipped away to her room to change into her new gown of lemon-coloured muslin with the blue sash and to put on the soft yellow kid sandals that her godmother had purchased for her. When she returned to the morning room some twenty minutes later she found her godmother sitting with her visitors.

‘Ah, my dear, come in.’ Lady Leaconham drew her forwards. ‘Clara, may I present my goddaughter Katherine to you?’

‘Why, she is quite charming,’ cooed Lady Harworth as Kitty dropped into a deep curtsy. ‘And how old are you, child?’

‘Not yet twenty, ma’am.’

‘Oh, how wonderful. You must talk to Ann, my daughter. She is only a little older than you. She will attain her majority in June. I have no doubt you will have much in common.’

The fair-haired young lady sitting beside Lady Harworth rose to her feet, smiling.

‘Mama says that of every young lady we meet. But in your case I think she may be correct.’ Ann Harworth took Kitty’s arm and led her away to the other side of the room. ‘There is a liveliness about your countenance that I like very much.’

Kitty blushed and laughed.

‘Thank you, Miss Harworth, I hope I do not disappoint you.’

‘I am sure you will not. You come from Yorkshire, you said? We have estates there, or rather my brother does, which is the same thing. Come, sit here in the window with me and tell me how you like London!’

Kitty happily obliged and after a half-hour’s lively discussion was pleased when Miss Harworth declared that she had found a friend.

‘I am so glad to have discovered someone with a wit to match my own. And someone who knows their own mind, and is not afraid to say so, Miss Wythenshawe.’

‘Am I so unusual, then?’ asked Kitty, her eyes twinkling. ‘I must learn to guard my tongue if I am not to be labelled an oddity.’

‘No, no, you must say exactly what you mean. I always do. We are holding a ball on Friday and—Mama, have you invited my aunt?’

‘Manners, my love.’ Lady Harworth frowned at her daughter’s impetuous interruption. ‘As a matter of fact we were just discussing it, as well as the little party we will be holding next month to mark your birthday, Ann.’

‘So your son will be there on Friday?’ enquired Lady Leaconham, flicking a small, triumphant glance towards Kitty.

‘I would not consider such an event without his being there,’ replied Lady Harworth. ‘It is his house now, after all, and while

he says I must continue to treat everything as my own until such time as he takes a wife, it is so very difficult, for I no longer feel like the true mistress now I am a widow. But you must understand that, dear sister, since you are in very much the same position.'

'Well, Garston is somewhat younger than his cousin, Clara, and he is content to leave everything as it was when his dear father was alive,' replied Lady Leaconham.

Kitty heard the faint note of dissatisfaction in her voice and closed her lips tightly to prevent herself from expressing her own opinion. She had not yet met Lord Leaconham but she could not help thinking that at five-and-twenty, her godmother's only son was more than old enough to be taking responsibility for his inheritance.

'But you will come?' Ann implored her. 'Do say you will, *dear* Aunt!'

'Lady Leaconham has agreed to attend, and to bring Miss Wythenshawe with her,' replied Lady Harworth, a touch of impatience creeping into her well-modulated tones. 'Now, pray you go away with your new friend and talk quietly so that your aunt and I may enjoy a little conversation.'

Ann turned to address Lady Leaconham.

'Perhaps Miss Wythenshawe and I could take your dear little dog for a walk, Aunt.'

'But Kitty took him out this morning.'

'I am sure he would enjoy another airing,' Ann persisted. 'It is such a lovely day. I am sure the fresh air would do us good.'

‘Oh, do let them go out, sister,’ begged Lady Harworth. ‘My maid is sitting in the hall with nothing to do, so she may accompany them.’

In the face of such enthusiasm Lady Leaconham capitulated. Ten minutes later the girls were stepping out into Portman Square with the little Scottish terrier trotting merrily along beside them on his silken leash.

Ann gave a noisy sigh and slipped her arm through Kitty’s.

‘It is so good to be on our own, where we may say what we please. Oh, you need not worry about Norris,’ she added, as Kitty glanced back towards the maid following silently behind them. ‘She has been with us for ever and is *very* discreet. And I am so pleased that you will be coming on Friday.’

‘It will be my very first ball,’ Kitty admitted.

Ann gave a little squeak of excitement.

‘How wonderful! I shall be able to introduce you to everyone! How long will you be staying in Town?’

‘I do not know ... as long as Lady Leaconham is pleased to have me with her.’

‘I hope it is for ever!’ cried Ann. They had reached the gate in the low railing that surrounded the gardens and she stopped. ‘This is very pretty, but shall we go instead to Hyde Park? There will be so many more interesting people there.’

Kitty hesitated. ‘I do not think ...’

‘Oh, do say yes,’ Ann squeezed her arm. ‘We have only to slip across Oxford Street to get there.’

‘I do not know London as well as you, Miss Harworth, but I do not think one can *slip across* such a busy thoroughfare.’

‘No, but there are crossing sweepers, and we have Norris, so there can be no objection. Oh, do say yes, Miss Wythenshawe!’

Kitty was not proof against her new friend’s entreaties. They left the square, safely negotiated the traffic of Oxford Street and soon found themselves in the relative peace of the great park. Although it was not the fashionable hour there was a considerable crowd and several carriages to be seen, but once they had crossed the broad carriageway and walked some distance from the gates they found themselves alone. Kitty released the little dog and watched him running happily amongst the bushes.

‘Oh, this is infinitely better than a dusty street,’ declared Ann.

Kitty turned her face up to the sun, so much warmer here than in her native Yorkshire.

‘I have to agree, Miss Harworth.’

‘Let us be done with this formality. You must call me Ann and I shall call you Katherine.’

‘Kitty, if you please—apart from when Godmama introduces me to new acquaintances the only time I am called Katherine is when I am in disgrace.’

‘Very well, then, Kitty! And since we are now such good friends, you can tell me if you have a beau.’

‘Goodness me, no,’ replied Kitty, laughing and blushing at the same time.

‘What, is there no gentleman waiting back in Yorkshire for

you?’

Kitty shook her head. ‘There were no gentlemen in Fallridge. None that Mama approved,’ she added, thinking back to the occasions when she had seen the carriages driving up to the King’s Arms for the monthly assembly.

‘Farmers and tradesmen,’ her mother had said, dismissively. ‘Very good people, I am sure, but not suitable companions for *you*, my love.’

‘Were you very lonely?’ asked Ann.

Kitty looked up quickly, and Ann smiled at her.

‘You looked so wistful that I thought, perhaps.’

‘Yes, I *was* lonely,’ Kitty confessed. ‘I should have liked to go to school—’

‘Oh, I went to school,’ broke in Ann, pulling a face. ‘It was the most horrid experience and of very little use, for apart from learning to dance what do I need with history, or the use of globes, or even to speak French, when we are forever at war with that frightful country?’

‘But surely you made friends there?’

‘Well, of course, although most of them are married now. Or betrothed.’ She flicked a glance at Kitty. ‘I am considered quite old to be still unwed, you know. Poor Mama is beginning to despair.’

‘And do you not wish to marry?’

‘Oh, yes,’ replied Ann casually, ‘eventually I suppose I must accept someone. Poor Mama is even more desperate for Bertram

to wed, because he is nearly forty and Mama says we must have an heir. As for me, I am enjoying myself far too much flirting with all the gentlemen of my acquaintance! Do you like flirting, Kitty?

‘I do not think I have ever tried it.’

Her frank reply brought Ann’s astonished gaze upon her.

‘Never?’

‘No, never. I know so few gentlemen, you see. The Squire and Reverend Denny are the only gentlemen who called upon Mama, and they are both very old.’

‘But surely you must have come into contact with younger gentlemen?’ said Ann, appalled.

Kitty considered for a moment.

‘Well, there is Joshua, of course: he is the local farmer’s son who drove me to Halifax.’

‘No, a farmer’s boy does not count,’ declared Ann firmly. ‘But you must know others. *Think, Kitty.*’

Kitty tried to think, but the only other man who came into her mind was the fierce-eyed Mr Blackwood, and he had not even liked her. At last she shook her head, saying ruefully, ‘I fear I am not the sort of girl that gentlemen like to flirt with.’

‘Gentlemen will flirt with any female,’ Ann retorted. ‘It is quite clear to me that you have lived far too sheltered a life, Miss Kitty Wythenshawe, so we must do what we can to make it more exciting!’

Kitty laughed at her. ‘I shall be delighted if you can do so!’

For now, though, we had best return to Portman Square before Godmother thinks we have been kidnapped!’

Kitty called the little dog to her and fastened him on the leash, then the two young ladies set off to retrace their steps in perfect harmony. When they reached the edge of the park Kitty noticed something white fluttering against the trunk of one of the trees. As they drew closer it became clear it was a printed sheet, secured to the trunk with a nail.

‘It will be a handbill,’ said Ann, when Kitty directed her attention to the paper. ‘Perhaps there is a new play at Drury Lane!’ She stepped closer, peering up at the words. ‘No, it is one of Mr Clarkson’s meetings.’

‘Thomas Clarkson the abolitionist?’

‘You have heard of him?’

‘Why, yes,’ said Kitty, coming forwards to stare at the paper. ‘He travels the country with his talks on how badly the slaves are treated. I have never attended a meeting, however. I have only read reports.’

‘Then perhaps we should go to this one,’ said Ann slowly. ‘It is at the Red Lion in Lombard Street—in the City, where the banks are.’ She turned to Kitty, her eyes shining. ‘Shall we go? We have a week to concoct a story that will please Mama and Aunt Leaconham. We will take a hackney carriage to the City. It will be so exciting.’

‘Now, that’s enough, miss,’ said Norris, stepping up. ‘You know her ladyship will never allow it.’

‘She will not know,’ replied Ann. ‘Not a word of this to anyone, Norris, or I shall have you turned off for insolence.’

The maid snorted loudly. ‘I should like to see you try that, miss. What, when her ladyship knows just what a handful you are?’

‘You are right, of course, and I should never let you leave me, *dear* Norris!’ Ann put her arms about the older woman and hugged her ruthlessly. ‘But I am quite determined to go to this meeting, so you must come with us, Norris, to make sure we are safe!’

Kitty could not but admire her tactics. The maid argued for a few moments, but soon gave in to Ann’s cajoling, saying bitterly that if she refused then her mistress was quite capable of sneaking off alone and unprotected.

‘And what her ladyship would have to say about that, I don’t know,’ she ended, shaking her head.

‘No more do I, Norris,’ chuckled Ann, turning to take Kitty’s arm again. ‘Come along then, we had best make haste back to Portman Square or Mama will be demanding to know just what you were about to let us tarry so long in the gardens!’

They set off, Ann taking no notice of the maid’s outraged mutterings. Instead she began to describe for Kitty the gown she would wear to the forthcoming ball. As they prepared to cross Oxford Street Kitty found her attention caught by someone standing on the far side. There was something familiar about the tall, commanding figure encased in a close-fitting coat of dark

superfine wool and nankeen knee-breeches. As they approached the gentleman turned and with dismay Kitty recognised the dark, aquiline countenance of Mr Daniel Blackwood. He was deep in conversation with another gentleman and Kitty lowered her gaze, hoping they would be able to walk by unnoticed, but her companion broke off from her talk of shell-pink satins with old rose ribbons and scalloped hems to give a delighted cry.

‘Bertram! Oh, by all that is famous, what luck is this! Kitty—it is my brother!’

With a sinking heart Kitty watched the gentleman standing with Daniel Blackwood turn towards them. She was struck immediately by the similarity between brother and sister, both fair-haired and grey-eyed, although Lord Harworth was much older and his countenance was the more serious of the two.

Introductions could not be avoided. She allowed Ann to present her to Lord Harworth but all the time she was aware of Daniel’s dark, piercing gaze fixed upon her. When at last Lord Harworth drew his companion forward she raised her eyes, opening her mouth, ready to admit they had already met, but Daniel was there before her.

‘Miss Wythenshawe and I are already acquainted.’ He spoke calmly, with no hint of the broad Yorkshire accent she had expected. Stunned, she could only watch as he reached out for her hand and lifted her fingers to his lips with all the practised ease of a gentleman. ‘So we meet again, ma’am.’

Kitty tried to think of something to say, but was distracted by

the shrill barking of her canine companion. She looked down to see that the little dog was greeting Daniel like a long-lost friend, jumping up and emitting a series of ecstatic yelps.

Kitty jerked on the lead, saying sharply, 'Down, Titan!'

Daniel raised an enquiring eyebrow. '*Titan?*'

Kitty bridled. 'Be careful,' she said in a voice of rigid self-control. 'He bites.'

Daniel looked down and uttered one quiet command. 'Sit.'

To her surprise Titan sat down immediately, obviously recognising a voice of authority.

'Oh, how sweet,' declared Ann. 'He likes you, Mr Blackwood.'

'Yes, he does,' Daniel responded. He bent to scratch Titan's ears. 'Very intelligent animals, dogs. They have an instinct for a fellow's true character, while humans are so often misled by appearances.' He straightened. 'Would you not agree, Miss Wythenshawe?'

The wicked glint in his black eyes made her seethe inwardly. She put up her chin and gave him back look for look.

'I have always maintained that *actions* are the real mark of a gentleman, Mr Blackwood.'

He bowed. 'Ah, but even a gentleman may fall from grace if the provocation is great enough,' he murmured.

Kitty glared at him, guilt and anger bringing a flush to her cheeks.

'But what are you doing here, Bertram?' Ann demanded of her brother. 'Are you on your way home from your club?'

‘No, no, I have been meeting with Blackwood. He is advising me on a—ah—business venture that I am considering. When I found he was staying in Greenwich, I told him it was foolish of him to remain at the Spread Eagle when there is so much I want to discuss with him, so he has agreed to be my guest for the remainder of his stay.’

‘You never told me about this, Bertram,’ said Ann, smiling up at Daniel in a way that Kitty considered to be far too friendly.

‘We have only this minute decided upon it,’ replied her brother. ‘We are on our way back to Harworth House now, to send a messenger to Greenwich with instructions for Blackwood’s man to pack everything up and bring it here. But what are you doing out, Ann?’ asked Lord Harworth. ‘Does Mama know?’

‘Oh, yes,’ came the airy reply. ‘She is visiting Aunt Leaconham. Aunt is Miss Wythenshawe’s godmama, you know. We offered to take her dog for a walk and are on our way back to Portman Square now. Why do you not come with us? You can say hello to Aunt Leaconham and I am sure Mama would be glad of your escort back to Cavendish Square.’

‘An excellent idea,’ declared Lord Harworth, holding out his arm to Kitty. ‘What do you say, Blackwood, will you help me escort these two young ladies to Portman Square? It is not far out of our way and there will still be plenty of time to get a message to your man and have him back here with your bags before dinner.’

Kitty’s hopes rose a little when Daniel hesitated.

‘Will that not be an imposition? After all, I do not know Lady Leaconham.’

‘Then we shall introduce you,’ cried Ann. ‘I am sure she will be pleased to meet an acquaintance of her goddaughter. Besides,’ she added naughtily, as she took Daniel’s arm, ‘I am intrigued to know more of you, sir. Miss Wythenshawe assured me she had no personable gentlemen amongst her acquaintance.’

‘Did she indeed?’ Again those coal-black eyes quizzed Kitty. ‘I suppose our meeting slipped her mind. It was quite a trivial event, after all.’

Trivial! Kitty’s eyes blazed with fury. She had been picked up and dropped, quite callously, into cold, muddy water that had quite ruined her gown and boots and stockings. If Godmama had not been so generous she would even now be obliged to walk out in skirts stained quite six inches deep at the hem!

‘You are right.’ She threw the words over her shoulder as she and Lord Harworth led the way back to Portman Square. ‘I had quite forgotten you, Mr Blackwood.’

Kitty turned her attention to her escort, forcing herself to converse with Lord Harworth as they made their way back to Lady Leaconham’s house, but all the time part of her mind was racing with conjecture about Daniel Blackwood. Just to know he was behind her made her spine tingle, as if he might pounce upon her at any moment. What was he doing in London, and what had happened to the rough country voice he had used in Yorkshire? She thought she knew the answer to her last question

and her conscience pricked her when she remembered how uncivil she had been towards him. She had assumed he was a rough labourer and he had responded in kind. She deserved that trick, she acknowledged, but she had *not* deserved his subsequent treatment of her! Her indignation grew with every step and by the time they arrived at Lady Leaconham's door Kitty was full of righteous fury. When they entered the hall she left all the explanations to Miss Harworth and stalked past the wooden-faced butler to hand Titan over to a hovering footman. By the time she turned back the rest of the party were divesting themselves of hats and surcoats. Daniel took advantage of the confusion to step up to her.

'I have long wanted to offer you an apology, Miss Wythenshawe,' he said quietly. 'My actions when we last met were inexcusable.'

'I do not want your apology!' she said in a fierce whisper, and immediately regretted her incivility.

'But I would like to make some recompense to you—I fear I ruined your gown—'

A mixture of anger and remorse combined in Kitty and she answered recklessly, 'My gown is of no consequence. I have *trunks* full of clothes, so you need concern yourself no further with me!'

With that she put her nose in the air and sailed into the morning room.

‘After you, Blackwood.’

Lord Harworth was standing back, waiting for Daniel to follow the ladies.

‘Thank you, I really do not—’ Daniel bit off the words. He wanted to tell Harworth to go to the devil and storm out of the house, but that would be the height of incivility, and, however little Miss Wythenshawe might think of him, he had been brought up a gentleman and would act like one. Curbing his temper, he nodded and strode into the room, forcing himself to smile and say everything that was required of him, but all the time he was aware of Kitty standing in the corner, biting her lip and darting fiery looks at him from those stormy green eyes. He had offered her his apology and it had been rebuffed. He clenched his jaw, smiling with even more spurious interest at something Ann Harworth was saying. If the chit could not bring herself to act in a civilised manner than he would have to show her how it was done!

Kitty could barely suppress a sigh of relief when at last the visitors took their leave and it was the greatest trial for her to sit quietly while her godmama declared herself delighted with the success of the visit.

‘And what a sly little puss you are, my love,’ Lady Leaconham chuckled, tapping Kitty’s knuckles playfully with her fan. ‘I send you out for a little walk and you return with two eligible gentlemen in tow!’

‘Mr Blackwood is not in the least eligible,’ protested Kitty.

‘He is my nephew’s guest, is he not? To be sure a mill-owner’s son is not what your mama would like for you, but he is very gentlemanlike, *and* he is related to some of the wealthiest shipping families in Liverpool.’

‘It smacks of trade, Godmama.’

‘It smacks of a fortune, my dear,’ responded Lady Leaconham drily. ‘However, I will grant you that a man like Mr Blackwood should only be considered as a last resort. Lord Harworth would be a more prestigious match for you.’

‘He is indeed more what Mama had in mind,’ agreed Kitty. ‘But is he not a little ... old, Godmama?’

‘At eight-and-thirty? Not at all, my love. It makes it all the more likely that he is looking in earnest for a wife. But we must be practical. Every cap in Town will be set at such an eligible *parti*. However, not every young lady will have an invitation to the Harworth ball, so I have great hopes for Friday, my love. Great hopes indeed!’

Chapter Three

Any hopes Kitty might have had for her very first ball were eclipsed by apprehension. Mama had insisted that learning to dance was a prime requirement for every young lady but Kitty was very sure that dancing with the Squire's daughters in the privacy of Fallridge Manor was a very different matter from standing up with a gentleman in a crowded ballroom. And she would have to stand up at least once because Lord Harworth, prompted by his sister, had requested that she save a dance for him.

When Friday arrived Kitty resolved to wear the evening gown that Mama had made for her rather than any of the dresses purchased by Lady Leaconham. Politely but firmly she rejected her godmother's suggestions of the pink sarcenet or the blue spider gauze and insisted on wearing the simple white crape gown ornamented with silver embroidery to the sleeves and hem. Aunt Jane had embroidered a silk shawl to match and she had a pair of white satin dancing slippers to complete the ensemble. Kitty was quite satisfied with the result, but she was more than a little nervous when she joined her godmother in the drawing room

‘Well, Godmama, what do you think?’

She spread her skirts and gave a little twirl before fixing her anxious gaze upon Lady Leaconham.

‘To be sure it is a much simpler design than the evening gowns

I had made for you,' said my lady, studying her closely. Kitty held her breath. At length her godmother smiled. 'But is looks quite perfect upon you, my love. And no one will recognise the seamstress, you may be sure of that.' She blinked rapidly and began to hunt for her handkerchief. 'You look like an angel, my dear.'

'She does indeed!'

Kitty spun round to see a rather portly young gentleman in the doorway, regarding her through his quizzing glass.

'Garston!' Lady Leaconham flew up from her chair in a flutter of lace. 'My dear boy, when did you return to Town?'

'At noon, Mama,' replied Lord Leaconham, suffering her embrace. 'Thought I should come and tell you I was back. Didn't know you had company ...'

'My love, this is my goddaughter Katherine, come to keep me company for a few weeks,' said Lady Leaconham. 'Kitty, my dear, allow me to present my son Garston to you.'

Kitty dropped into a curtsy, blushing a little as Lord Leaconham bowed over her hand.

'Delighted, Miss Wythenshawe. Proule informs me that you are about to go out, so I know that all this splendour is not in my honour.'

'We are off to Harworth House,' replied Lady Leaconham, a note of triumph creeping into her voice. 'Your cousin Ann has taken a great liking to dear Kitty. Why do you not come with us, my son? I am sure your aunt would have invited you, had she

known you were back in Town.’

Lord Leaconham was still casting an admiring eye over Kitty, who found the prolonged scrutiny a little unnerving.

‘I am dining with friends at my club tonight but I may well look in later.’

‘Well, if you are coming, pray be in time to dance with Kitty and do not spend all your time in the supper room,’ replied his mother, picking up her wrap. ‘Now, we must be off. Come along, my dear, we will go downstairs to wait for the carriage.’

Lady Harworth might complain that her house was not situated on the magnificent west side of Cavendish Square but it seemed to Kitty that the whole of fashionable London was intent upon attending the ball. The square was crowded with vehicles. Coachmen and postillions traded insults while liveried footmen directed the carriages to the entrance before tenderly handing down the occupants and escorting them into the house.

Kitty followed Lady Leaconham up the wide sweeping staircase, her nervousness somewhat alleviated when she saw Ann waiting for her at the top of the stairs, a beaming smile upon her face as she held out her hand to Kitty.

‘Is this not wonderful? I have never seen so many carriages in the square before. It is going to be *such* a squeeze, and Mama has hired a whole host of musicians to play for us. I cannot *wait* for the dancing to begin!’

‘Well, you must contain yourself a little longer,’ put in her mother, directing a smile towards Kitty. ‘There are any

number of people still to arrive. Now pray, Ann, allow Miss Wythenshawe to move on, that the other guests may approach.'

Kitty glanced behind her: a column of gorgeously gowned ladies and elegant gentlemen stretched all the way down the stairs. It was quite unnerving to see so many strange faces. She knew so few people, despite having been in Town for a whole month. Kitty was so daunted by this thought that when she saw Daniel Blackwood enter the house and join the line she could not suppress a smile of relief.

It was unfortunate that the gentleman should glance up at that moment, raising his brows when he saw her smiling down at him. Kitty quickly turned away, blushing furiously. What had possessed her to smile at the man? Resolutely putting this aberration aside, she followed her godmother into the ballroom, only to stop on the threshold and gaze about her in astonishment. The lofty room was ablaze with light from several glittering chandeliers. Everywhere was colourful and noisy confusion, the sounds of the musicians tuning up adding to the laughter and chatter of the guests.

'Good evening, Aunt, Miss Wythenshawe.' Lord Harworth stepped up to them and bowed. He gazed at Kitty, appreciation in his slightly protuberant grey eyes. 'I hope, Miss Wythenshawe, that you have not forgotten you have promised to dance with me later this evening?'

Kitty gave him a shy little smile. 'No, indeed, my lord.'

'Good,' responded his lordship. 'Capital. I shall look forward

to it.’

‘Well, that is an exciting start,’ declared Lady Leaconham, as Lord Harworth moved off to greet more guests.

‘It is, ma’am,’ said Kitty, feeling rather overawed. ‘At least I shall have one dance partner tonight, and if Lord Leaconham should turn up and dance with me as well I shall think myself very content.’

‘Oh, I do not think we need to rely upon Garston tonight,’ declared her godmother, her voice rich with satisfaction. ‘I have already noticed several gentlemen looking at you with interest, my love. I shall introduce you to everyone I know, and with you looking so very pretty this evening I have no doubt that we shall soon find you any number of partners. And with luck a good many of them will be unmarried!’ She took Kitty’s arm and began to look around her. ‘Now, where shall we begin?’

Between them, Lady Leaconham and Miss Harworth introduced Kitty to so many people—turbaned matrons, bewhiskered lords and eager young gentlemen—that there was no possibility of her remembering all their names, but she should not complain, for when the musicians finally began to play she had the satisfaction of walking out on to the dance floor to join the very first set. Her initial anxiety soon disappeared as she realised she was familiar with all the steps and she uttered up a silent prayer to the squire for employing such an excellent dancing master. After that first dance, she found there were a number of gentlemen eager to partner her and she began to

enjoy herself. Rather to his mother's surprise, Lord Leaconham arrived in time to stand up with Kitty for a minuet and even came back later to escort the two ladies to the supper room, where he remained to entertain them until it was time to return to the dancing.

It was towards the end of the evening when Lord Harworth came to claim his dance with Kitty. He appeared to be in the very best of spirits, although she suspected that the high colour in his cheeks was partly the result of the rather potent punch being served at supper. After a particularly lively country dance he pulled her hand on to his arm.

'Well done, Miss Wythenshawe. My sister informs me this is your very first ball, but to see you dance one would never know it.'

'Thank you, my lord,' Kitty replied. 'I did not expect to enjoy myself half so much. Everyone has been most kind, especially you, sir, and your sister.'

'Phshaw!' Lord Harworth puffed out his chest. 'Think nothing of it, Miss Wythenshawe. Now, where shall I take you, who is your next dance partner?'

'Why, sir, I do not think I have one, so perhaps you could escort me back to Lady Leaconham.'

'What, no partner?' cried my lord. 'But these will be the last dances of the night. We cannot have you sitting out! I promised m'sister we would keep you amused tonight, so we must see what

we can do.’

Lord Harworth raised his head and began to look about him.

Kitty disclaimed and declared herself perfectly ready to join her godmother, but her escort merely patted her hand as he raised his voice to address someone.

‘Blackwood—just the man! You are not dancing?’

The press of people had prevented Kitty from spotting Daniel Blackwood, but she saw him now as he stepped towards them, unsmiling, towering over her, a dark and brooding figure in the colourful crowd.

He said briefly, ‘No, my lord. I do not dance.’

‘Nonsense, man, you trod a very pretty measure with Ann earlier this evening, I saw you! I have here a delightful partner for you.’

Kitty went cold.

‘Believe me, my lord,’ she began, ‘there is no need—’

‘Nonsense, you will be doing Mr Blackwood a great service,’ cried Lord Harworth jovially. ‘I am appalled to think he has been standing around all evening.’

‘I assure you, my lord,’ Daniel began, his tone clipped, ‘I have partnered more than one young lady tonight—’

‘Then you must dance again, sir!’ Lord Harworth took Kitty’s hand and held it out. ‘Come along, Blackwood, take Miss Wythenshawe to the floor!’

Kitty thought she might die of embarrassment. Daniel, his face cold and shuttered, held out his arm to her and when she slipped

her fingers on to his sleeve he silently led her away.

‘I am sorry,’ she managed, biting her lip. ‘I know you want this as little as I do.’

‘Society has its rules, madam, and we must both adhere to them.’

His indifferent tone had its effect in rousing Kitty’s spirit. She put up her chin.

‘For either of us to walk away would have given rise to conjecture.’

‘Quite,’ he replied. ‘So let us get through this dance as best we may.’

‘Certainly,’ she said icily. ‘After all, we need only stand up for one dance, and there is no necessity for us to speak to one another.’

However, once the music started and she put her hand into his, something very strange happened. It was as if she had danced with Daniel Blackwood many times before: their steps matched perfectly as they followed the traditional movement of the country dance and when they were required to separate their fingers seemed reluctant to part. Bemused, Kitty raised her eyes and regarded her partner, only to find him watching her with a fierce glow in his eyes that brought the colour rushing to her cheeks. She had danced with many gentlemen that evening, she had even performed a very stately minuet with one fair-haired young man reputed to be the epitome of a fashionable Adonis, yet none had had the same effect upon her. Not one of them had

infused her with the soaring elation she experienced now, the feeling that she and her partner were alone in the room, the only people in the world.

The dance drew to its conclusion. He bowed, she made her curtsy, but neither made any move to leave the floor. The cry went up for the last dance and suddenly they were surrounded by even more couples, all jostling to find space. With so many dancers on the floor Kitty found herself very close to Daniel, so close that she could not move without her arm brushing his sleeve. Kitty looked up and saw the rueful smile upon his face as if he, too, realised there could be no possibility of maintaining a cool reserve once the lively music began. With a jolt of surprise Kitty realised she did not mind. Suddenly all the hurt and anger she had felt for the man melted away. He took her hands.

‘Are we ready, Miss Wythenshawe?’

She found herself smiling up at him.

‘Perfectly, Mr Blackwood.’

Kitty would never forget that final country dance at Harworth House. It was hot and noisy and it seemed as if all the world was crushed into the ballroom, everyone bouncing and skipping, laughing and shouting and determined to expend every last ounce of energy before they went home. Garston and Lord Harworth were on the floor, each squiring a handsome young lady, and at one point she came close to Ann dancing with the fair-haired Adonis, but Kitty hardly noticed them. All her attention was on Daniel. She no longer thought him dark and menacing. She

could see beyond the rather austere cast of his countenance to the warmth in his dark eyes, the faint curve of his lips that was not quite a smile yet told her he was happy to be at her side. He was not the tallest man in the room yet to Kitty he stood head and shoulders above every other gentleman. He held her hand and led her confidently about the room, skilfully manoeuvring to put himself in the way and prevent her from being buffeted by the jostling dancers. He bore no resemblance to the boorish brute who had treated her so abominably, but instead was more like a guardian angel, strong, gentle and protective. She stole another look at him as he danced her down the line. No, *not* an angel: the strong jaw and athletic frame were more those of a warrior. A hero. By the time the music ended Kitty was the victim of such conflicting emotions that she dare not even look at her partner. She wanted to appear calm and assured, but she suddenly felt extremely shy.

Daniel was enjoying himself. It surprised him, for the stately minuets of the first part of the evening had been a lifetime away from the lively dances he had enjoyed at home and, although he had partnered one or two of the blushing young ladies Lady Harworth had brought up to him, he had found the evening a little dull. He had even considered how soon he would be able to make his excuses and retire. If Harworth had not persuaded him to stay in Cavendish Square he could have excused himself on the grounds of the long journey back to Greenwich. To leave the party and travel no further than the next floor would be the

height of incivility.

He had been aware of Miss Wythenshawe from the first moment he had looked up and seen her at the top of the stairs, such a delightful smile on her face that his heart had flipped over, until he came to his senses and realised that there was no possibility that she could have directed such a smile at him, and he looked around him, trying to discover just who was the lucky recipient of her favour. He had done his best to prevent his eyes dwelling on her as she glided about the room in her sparkling white gown, her dark curls glowing in the candlelight. She had made it very plain that she despised him and thus she was not worth his notice. When Harworth had insisted he lead her on to the floor Daniel had fully intended to leave her after that first dance together, to make some excuse to quit the ballroom, but she had been so light on his arm, had danced so beautifully that he had forgotten she was the proud disdainful woman who had scorned him. He saw only an entrancing, ethereal creature that bewitched his senses. So he persuaded himself that it was only polite to remain for the last set. Harworth would expect it of him.

The final, energetic measure of the evening was much more like the assemblies he attended at Hestonroyd: too many dancers, too little space. He remembered standing up with his sister Bella, leading her through the movement of the dance and all the time trying to protect her from the other couples who were charging up and down the room. But this silver and white creature beside him was most definitely not his bouncing, boisterous sister! He

was almost sorry when the music ended. He stood beside his partner as they joined in the spontaneous applause for themselves and the musicians, then he held out his arm, ready to escort her back to Lady Leaconham. Some of his good mood evaporated when he looked down at the still little figure beside him. Her lips were firmly closed and she laid only the tips of her fingers on his sleeve, as if she could not bring herself to touch him. He was disappointed at the change from his lively, sparkling dance partner. Silently he delivered her back to Lady Leaconham but in response to his parting bow her thanks to him were uttered in a cold, stilted manner and she turned away immediately. Daniel's jaw tightened. So much for enchantment!

'An excellent evening, eh, Blackwood?' Lord Harworth came up to him, his mother leaning on his arm. 'I hope you enjoyed yourself, sir. 'Twas your first ball here in Town, was it not?'

'It was, my lord.'

'I doubt you have such glittering occasions in the north, Mr Blackwood,' remarked Lady Harworth.

'Certainly we cannot boast such elevated society as one finds in Town, ma'am,' returned Daniel, 'but we have our balls and assemblies.'

'Indeed, Mama, they ain't savages,' chuckled Lord Harworth. 'And we shall soon be adding to the society, ma'am, will we not?' He turned to Daniel, smiling. 'Mama has suggested that we should open Kirkleigh Hall and take a party to Yorkshire in July. You suggested we should travel north to look at the

mills and Kirkleigh is perfectly placed between Hestonroyd and Arkwright's mills at Cromford, less than a day's ride from either place. No harm in mixing a little business with pleasure, eh, Blackwood?

'No indeed, my lord,' said Daniel. 'Although I had planned to show you more than just Cromford: if you are serious in building a mill of your own we shall not have a great deal of time for society—'

'Nonsense, sir, there is always time for society!' declared Lord Harworth. 'We shall take a little longer over the business, that is all, and I have no doubt Mama will like to entertain while we are there—even a ball, eh, Mama, now you have seen Blackwood dance? I am sure we can find you a few pretty girls to stand up with, although none to surpass your last partner.' He gave Daniel a playful dig in the ribs. 'Exceptionally pretty little thing, ain't she?'

'Miss Wythenshawe?' said Daniel coolly. 'She is far above my touch.'

'Indeed?' said Lady Harworth, suddenly showing an interest. She turned to watch Kitty as she walked out of the room. 'Letitia was not very forthcoming about her family. I believe she comes from the north, too—do you know her family, Mr Blackwood? Are they very wealthy?'

Lord Harworth laughed.

'Must be as rich as Croesus if they won't look at Blackwood, Mama. His family owns half of the West Riding!'

Daniel disclaimed, but Lady Harworth was not listening. She excused herself, saying, 'I believe my dear sister is about to leave, and I must go and say goodbye to her.'

'Well, that was a success and no mistake!' Lady Leaconham settled herself back into the corner of her carriage and gave a satisfied sigh. 'You danced every dance, and I cannot tell you how many compliments I received for you, my love! You were enchanting.'

Kitty gave a little nod but said nothing. She knew that at least one person was less than delighted with her. She had been quite dismayed by her behaviour towards Daniel Blackwood at the end of the evening, when she had suddenly been overcome with nerves. She had intended to be charmingly grateful for his standing up with her, yet when she spoke she had been cool to the point of rudeness. Even now she was embarrassed to think of it.

So she would not, she decided quickly. She would concentrate instead upon what her godmother was saying.

'Yes, Kitty dear, I could see from the first that Lady Harworth was disposed to like you. I was afraid she might think you a little *too* pretty, but with your dark hair you are such a contrast to Ann's fair beauty that you complement one another perfectly! And nothing could have exceeded Clara's affability, when she came up to us just as we were leaving. She hinted at many more invitations this summer.'

'How delightful for you, Godmama.'

'For *me*? Kitty, you little goose, the invitations will be for you,

too.’

‘But I have already been with you for a whole month, ma’am. I thought I should be thinking of returning home very soon ...’

‘Nonsense,’ retorted her godmother briskly. ‘A month is nothing, and if my niece has taken to you then nothing could be better than for the two of you to be seen together—so much more attractive than to be always accompanied by a matron!’ Lady Leaconham paused while she smoothed the wrinkles from her long gloves. ‘My sister can seem a little ... cold to those she thinks beneath her notice, but I know she takes her responsibilities very seriously. I have no doubt she would like to see Bertram settled and raising a hopeful family, but Ann must be causing her some anxiety, to be nearing one-and-twenty and still unmarried! So I can quite see why Clara is happy to promote your friendship with her daughter. Two such pretty young ladies out on the Town together will be sure to attract any number of gentlemen.’ Lady Leaconham reached out and placed a hand on Kitty’s knee, saying urgently, ‘Think of it, my dear: if we can secure a gentleman of good birth with even a modest fortune, the settlements will allow your mama and her sister to give up their sewing and live in the manner more suitable to their stations!’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ said Kitty, brightening. ‘And you think it is possible, Godmama?’

‘I think it very likely,’ returned Lady Leaconham, leaning back in her corner. ‘You charmed a number of gentlemen this evening, even my nephew. What a great thing it would be if he were to

offer for you.’

‘Lord Harworth? Oh, no, ma’am, surely not. He was merely being kind to me, because I am your goddaughter.’

‘He showed you a great deal of attention, my love. But perhaps you are right: we must not be too ambitious for you. But neither must we settle for anything less than your equal in birth—whoever we choose for you *must* be a gentleman!’

From the number of callers at Portman Square over the next few days it did indeed appear that Kitty had made a good impression at her very first ball, as her godmother was quick to explain to Ann when she came to see Kitty.

‘I am delighted to hear it,’ declared Ann, smiling. ‘I have never known Mama to be so taken with any of my friends before.’ She added, when Lady Leaconham had left the two young ladies alone, ‘Was it not the most wonderful ball? I was engaged for every dance, and whenever I looked across you were always dancing, too!’

‘Yes, I was very fortunate. I had not looked for such attention.’

‘And you even persuaded dour Mr Blackwood to stand up with you.’

‘Why do you call him dour?’ asked Kitty, intrigued in spite of herself.

Ann wrinkled her nose. ‘Well, he is perfectly *polite*,’ she said slowly, ‘but he is so very quiet, and only seems to want to talk business with Bertram.’ Her eyes twinkled and she added ruefully, ‘He makes no attempt to flirt with me. In fact, he makes

no attempt to engage my attention at all! I am most impressed that he danced with you.'

'That was your brother's doing.' Kitty felt the colour rising to her cheeks. 'I think, since he is staying in your house, he could hardly refuse to dance with me when Lord Harworth suggested it.'

'Yes, that will be it.' Ann nodded. 'They have become wondrous great friends. My brother wrote to old Mr Blackwood when he first conceived the idea of building a mill and they were corresponding for several months before Mr Daniel Blackwood came to London. Bertram says that with the exception of Mr Arkwright, no one knows more about mills and manufacturing than the Blackwoods. But this is very boring talk! Let us discuss instead the Abolition meeting tomorrow evening. Have you given any thought to how we shall get there?'

'I confess I have not,' admitted Kitty. 'Perhaps we should not go, if your mama disapproves ...'

'Mama disapproves of everything except achieving a great match for Bertram and the same for me,' declared Ann. 'I am determined to go. It is quite the fashion now, you know, to support the abolition of the slave trade.'

'My family have been fighting against slavery since before I was born,' replied Kitty. 'My father was vehemently opposed to it, and my mother still does what she can—we do not buy sugar from the West Indian plantations, you know.' She wanted to add that Mama could not afford to buy very much sugar at all, but

remembered her godmother's warning that she should not chatter on about her family. Ann was regarding her with admiration.

'How good you are! I have no idea whether Bertram has any slaves, but I am even more determined that we shall go to the meeting tomorrow. Now all you need do is to tell Aunt Leaconham that I am taking you to join us for dinner tomorrow and that we will not be returning until late. What time shall I call for you?'

'It cannot be too early,' replied Kitty. 'I have an engagement tomorrow. With Lord Leaconham. He is going to take me driving in the park.'

She ended a little hesitantly. Garston had issued the invitation and Kitty had accepted quite happily without reference to her godmother, but when Lady Leaconham heard of her plans she had looked a little shocked.

'I am sorry, Godmama,' Kitty had said, anxious and bemused. 'I thought there could be no harm in going out with Lord Leaconham in an open carriage.'

'No, of course not. It is just that ...' Lady Leaconham bit her lip and gazed at Kitty, a shadow of unease in her eyes. 'It is just ... I do not want you to develop a *tendre* for Garston, my dear. I had planned on finding him, um.'

'You want him to take a rich wife,' Kitty finished for her. She had been in Town long enough to know that every man and woman of marriageable age was intent upon making a brilliant match. 'Yes, I quite see that, Godmama, and you need have no

fear: I am sure Lord Leaconham only offered to take me out in order to please you.’

‘I expect you are right,’ said Lady Leaconham, much relieved, ‘and it will give you the opportunity to be seen in the park at the fashionable hour.’

So Lady Leaconham gave the outing her blessing.

Kitty set off with Lord Leaconham, knowing that her godmother would be far more disapproving of her engagement with Ann Harworth, if ever she learned the truth of it.

It was a beautiful summer’s day and much as Kitty wanted to turn her face up to the skies and feel the sun’s warmth on her skin, she knew that this would be frowned upon. Instead she unfurled her parasol, looking around her with interest as Lord Leaconham drove his phaeton through the busy London streets. Her initial apprehension at riding so high above the ground soon disappeared and she relaxed, looking forward to her excursion.

‘Heavens, how crowded it is,’ she remarked, as they turned in through the park gates. ‘I thought it busy enough when Miss Harworth and I brought Titan here for a walk one morning.’

‘Oh, I have seen it ten times worse than this,’ cried Garston, gaily flourishing his whip. ‘I have been here when we have been forced to crawl along at a snail’s pace because there is so much traffic. But it is not yet five o’clock. We are early. I have no doubt it will fill up later.’

Kitty heard this with dismay. She had been expecting the great park to offer some peace and solitude after the hustle and bustle

of the busy streets but all she could see was a host of fashionably dressed people riding, driving or walking, everyone intent on seeing and being seen.

Their own progress was slow for the park was full of Garston's friends, some of whom she knew, but many she did not, so that each stop necessitated explanations and a few moments' conversation.

'Well, Miss Wythenshawe, are you enjoying yourself?' Lord Leaconham enquired as they moved off from yet another introduction.

'Why, yes, my lord. Very much. Although I am afraid that with so many of your acquaintances here today we shall not complete even one circuit of the park.'

He laughed. 'What a jokesmith you are, Miss Wythenshawe! One does not come to Hyde Park for the drive! No, no: when I go to White's this evening I shall be complimented on the fine new rig I was driving this afternoon, and of course upon my charming companion. To be seen here will bring you to the attention of a great number of useful people, I assure you.'

She did not know what to reply; she was not at all sure she wanted to be brought to anyone's attention.

Kitty was beginning to wonder if she would be back in Portman Square before Ann called for her when she suddenly heard her escort give a low whistle.

'By heaven, that is a most beautiful piece of horseflesh.'

Kitty looked up to see two riders approaching and had no

difficulty in recognising the creature that had drawn Garston's admiration—a sleek black horse with a deep chest, refined head and a bold eye. The animal seemed well aware that it was a handsome beast for it carried itself proudly, almost as proudly as the straight-backed gentleman in the saddle: Daniel Blackwood. He was accompanied by Lord Harworth but to Kitty's mind neither the older man's bearing nor his glossy bay hack could compare with the dark grandeur of Daniel and his mare. But Kitty remembered seeing the very same horse and rider when they had looked much less grand, covered in mud in a lane above Halifax. Once again the mortification of that encounter overwhelmed her and she hoped fervently that the two riders might not see them in the crowd, but Lord Leaconham pulled up the team, waving his whip to attract their attention. She smothered her dismay as the gentlemen drew rein and turned their mounts towards the phaeton.

Lord Harworth greeted Kitty in his usual friendly way but his companion gave only a slight nod of recognition.

'Blackwood, ain't it? We met at the ball the other night. By Jove, that's a fine horse you have there, sir,' declared Garston. 'Broad chest, good sloping shoulders, intelligent eye—magnificent!'

Daniel acknowledged the compliment with a nod.

'Thank you. She's Yorkshire bred, of course.'

'Of course.' Garston laughed. 'We've a few good hunters at Leaconham but nothing as fine as that.' He cocked an eyebrow

at Daniel. 'How much d'you want for her? She looks up to my weight. Yes, I'd like to buy that mare.'

Daniel's dark brows rose.

'What, when you haven't seen her put through her paces?'

'No need, Blackwood. I can tell just by looking that she is a good all-round mount, certainly at home here in Town, but I have no doubt she comes into her own in the hunting field. Well, Blackwood, what d'you say? Name your price, sir!'

'Thank you, my lord, but no. Marnie has been with me for so long I believe she will see her days out in my company.'

'As you wish,' replied Garston, shrugging. 'But I'm not beat yet. Mayhap you will give me a chance to win her from you one night, when we've had a few glasses of wine together. Now what d'ye say to that, sir, eh?'

Kitty saw the faint hint of contempt creep into Daniel's dark eyes.

'I never gamble—'

'Never gamble?' cried Garston, 'why, man, you will be telling me you don't like cock-fighting next!'

'As a matter of fact, I don't,' Daniel replied curtly. 'But I was going to say that I never gamble with what is important to me.'

'Ha, very wise,' agreed Lord Harworth. 'That's a lesson we could all learn, eh, Leaconham? But we are holding you up, sir, and we should not keep the horses standing. Nor should we keep a lady here in this heat. You will want to get on, Miss Wythenshawe.' He smiled at Kitty. 'Has that madcap sister

of mine acquainted you with her latest scheme?' Kitty's eyes widened. Had Ann told her brother of their visit to Lombard Street that evening? She was about to speak when Lord Harworth continued, saying jovially, 'A picnic! My mother has a small property a little way out of town, on the Cambridge road. She rarely uses it but the grounds are very pretty and Ann has decided we should dine there, *al fresco*'

'Miss Harworth has said nothing to me, my lord,' replied Kitty, thanking Providence she had not mentioned the Abolition meeting.

'Well, depend upon it she will. I have no doubt that she is even now plaguing my mother to write the invitations.' He touched his hat. 'Good day to you, Miss Wythenshawe. Leaconham.'

As the gentlemen moved off, Garston turned in his seat to watch them.

'Do you know, I was not that enamoured of Blackwood when I first met him. Far too serious for me, and he drinks hardly anything—Bertram tells me he never goes beyond the third bottle. Not the sort to go out on a spree! But having seen his horse, damn me, I think he can't be such a bad fellow after all! I can even forgive him for not liking to gamble! Seems to be great friends with Harworth.'

'I believe Mr Blackwood is a manufacturer,' said Kitty carefully.

'Ah, that might explain his gloomy looks,' nodded Garston, setting his team in motion. 'Not brought up to enjoy himself, or

to appreciate the finer things in life.’

‘He is a very good dancer,’ she responded, determined to be fair.

‘Ah, well, that might give him an advantage with the ladies, but a man without a taste for gambling, or cock-fighting, well—’

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