A Regency Romance
KASEY MICHAELS
WHAT A LADY NEEDS

Кейси Майклс
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Аннотация

From USA TODAY bestselling author Kasey Michaels comes the second book in her captivating series about the Redgraves—four siblings celebrated for their legacy of scandal and seduction… Lady Katherine Redgrave has one mission—to find her deceased father's journals, which may hold the key to a traitorous conspiracy that puts Kate's family in danger. Kate vows to let no obstacle stand in her way…but when she meets Simon Ravenbill, Marquis of Singleton, her attentions are diverted as the sinfully handsome nobleman tempts her beyond reason.Simon has a mission of his own: to uncover the truth about the secret society he believes murdered his brother. All he needs is to get to the Redgrave journals before Kate does. The solution is simple—he'll romance the fiery beauty in the hopes of distracting her from her quest, all while covertly searching for the diaries himself.Yet what begins as a charade soon becomes an all-consuming desire…one that could lead them down the most dangerous path of all.

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Praise for USA TODAY bestselling author

"Kasey Michaels aims for the heart and never misses."

—New York Times bestselling author Nora Roberts

"Mistress of her craft Michaels uses her signature wit to introduce…[an] intricate story, engaging characters and wonderful writing."

—RT Book Reviews on What an Earl Wants, 4 1/2 stars, Top Pick

“The historical elements…imbue the novel with powerful realism that will keep readers coming back.”

—Publishers Weekly on A Midsummer Night’s Sin

“A poignant and highly satisfying read…filled with simmering sensuality, subtle touches of repartee, a hero out for revenge and a heroine ripe for adventure. You’ll enjoy the ride.”

—RT Book Reviews on How to Tame a Lady

“Michaels’ new Regency miniseries is a joy.… You will laugh and even shed a tear over this touching romance.”

—RT Book Reviews on How to Tempt a Duke

“Michaels has done it again….Witty dialogue peppers a plot full of delectable details exposing the foibles and follies of the age.”

—Publishers Weekly on The Butler Did It (starred review)

“[A] hilarious spoof of society wedding rituals wrapped around a sensual romance filled with crackling dialogue reminiscent of The Philadelphia Story.”

—Publishers Weekly on Everything’s Coming Up Rosie

KASEY MICHAELS

What a Lady Needs

Kasey Michaels

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my readers.

Thanks for all the hours of pleasure you've given me!

Dear Reader,

In the first book of this series, What an Earl Wants, I introduced the Redgrave family—those scandalous Redgraves—whose family history includes whispers of hosting a salacious hellfire club known only as the Society.

Now the whispers are back, and it's up to the Redgraves to find and destroy this new, treasonous incarnation of the Society before it not only destroys the family, but England as well.

The earl himself, Lord Gideon Redgrave, located the first clues. Now, to keep his sister, Lady Katherine, safe, he's advised her to search for evidence of the original Society at Redgrave Manor. Evidence he's certain isn't there.

But never underestimate the determination of a beautiful, headstrong young lady, or the mischief that can unfold when an unsuspecting Simon Ravenbill, Marquis of Singleton, is sent to ride herd on her.

I think you'll enjoy Kate and admire her courage, even as we all shake our heads at her methods. When Simon gives up on any notion of controlling her and realizes the inevitability of loving her, they set off for the adventure, and discovery, of a lifetime.

Enjoy! And please visit me online on Facebook or my website, to catch up on all my news.

Kasey

www.KaseyMichaels.com

Oh, what a tangled web we weave,

when first we practice to deceive.

—Sir Walter Scott

Contents

PROLOGUE
CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
EPILOGUE
AUTHOR NOTE

PROLOGUE

1810

THE HISTORY OF the Redgraves could be traced to the days before the beheading of the House of Stuart's Charles I in 1649. Meandering through the years, the family managed to stay on the good side of the Cromwell Roundheads. They then lightly danced through the return and second exit of the Stuarts, before managing to be favored with quite good seats for the Westminster Abbey coronation of the first monarch of the House of Hanover. All accomplished without ever forfeiting any of their lands or fortune and, more important, any of the family's heads to the chopping block in the Tower of London.

There was one hanging, but that was the twelfth earl, and really didn't count. He'd accomplished the deed himself in his study as the consequence of steep gambling debts and a genuine horror of his lady wife learning of them while he was still able to hear her screeching. After all, it was a matter of honor that before he kicked the chair out from beneath him, he had first settled said gambling debts by prying the major stones out of his wife's

jewelry and replacing them with paste. Not that women, who had no real notion of honor, understood such things.

But the thirteenth earl backed faster horses and could count trumps with the best of them, so that the Redgrave holdings once more increased. Their social status never wavered, and the paste gems were replaced thanks to the earl's brilliant marriage to a lovely young thing whose father's enormous fortune was a full generation away from the smell of the shop.

So much for the history of the Redgraves and the many earls of Saltwood.

The scandal of the Redgraves began in 1789, thanks to Barry Redgrave, the handsome, fashionable seventeenth Earl of Saltwood, who unexpectedly found himself quite dead one winter's morning, facedown in an icy puddle on a makeshift dueling ground. How he came to this ignominious end, when even as he'd aimed his pistol he'd been planning his order for breakfast once his wife's French lover was disposed of, has a simple answer. His lady wife, the fiery Spanish beauty, Lady Maribel, had shot Barry in the back. As noted earlier, women have no real notion of honor.

After all, not only did the countess coldly dispatch her own husband, but she and her lover had then fled to the Continent, leaving her four young and now fatherless children behind, motherless, as well.

Oh, the scandal! This was no nine-days wonder soon forgotten, especially when coupled with rumors Barry Redgrave

had been the leader of some sort of debauched hellfire club, the group known only to its members, and then only as the Society.

Everyone knew such clubs were only excuses for otherwise respectable gentlemen to don cloaks and masks and behave badly with women from the lower orders, indulge in drunken orgies and dabble in other disgusting yet titillating experiments, such as opium eating. And, of course, it goes without saying there was also this business of sacrificing the odd billy goat here and there, just to keep their end up on the satanic-chanting, ritual-ridden hellfire side of things.

Except the rumors surrounding the late earl's hellfire club after his death went deeper than that, all the way to political conspiracy and admiration of the French citizens bent on taking down their king. One side of the Channel or the other, the chopping off of heads still registered the ultimate in displeasure by both the masses and monarchies. So, naturally, having managed to outwit the headsman thus far in their history, the Redgraves were quick to deny Barry's possible seditious leanings to George III—who had just come out of a year in a straight waistcoat, no longer foamed at the mouth and had been declared fit to rule once more—so it is anybody's guess whether or not he understood.

But a titillated society was mostly certain Barry's little hellfire club was all about the orgies; if nothing else, they were much more delicious to contemplate. Perhaps his wife's affair with the Froggie had been merely to register her dissatisfaction with her

spouse's licentious activities outside the marital bed? Had she only known about them, or had the round-heeled beauty been a willing participant? You never knew about those foreign types. Hot-blooded and volatile, the lot of them. Oh, how delicious to speculate!

Nothing could be proved, of course, as the so-called Society was made up of people whose names were not known, and none of them thought it would be jolly fun to publish his memoirs recounting something like: The Society: a Chronicle of Great Times and Lascivious Pleasures with Barry Redgrave, the Other Lads, a Cast of Willing Trollops and the Occasional Billy Goat. No, definitely not.

There was also the dowager countess to add into the mix of conjecture; Lady Beatrix Redgrave, who was herself a scamp of the first water. She took lovers by the dozen, helping to keep alive all those rumors about her late husband, Charles, who'd had all the circumspection of a satyr, even decorating his Mayfair mansion in a way the majority of the world would term salacious. That Trixie hadn't had the decency to have fig leaves plastered to the larger-than-life marble statues lining the curving staircase after the man's death only proved the woman was no fit guardian for her grandchildren.

Still, the years passed, and the four Redgrave siblings somehow managed to reach adulthood without growing horns or bursting into flames when passing by a churchyard. The current eighteenth Earl of Saltwood, Gideon Redgrave, had entered

society with his head held high and an unspoken challenge to anyone who might dare speak ill of his late parents or attempt to rake up that old scandal.

A few did try him on, to see how far they could go. That was their mistake, and the beginning of the belief the Redgraves were not only scandalous, they could be downright dangerous. Intelligent, yes, smoothly sophisticated, yes...but there was just something about them that warned the wise that to scratch a civilized Redgrave was to reveal the barbarian beneath.

Gideon's brother Maxmillien went off to sail with the British Royal Navy at a ridiculously young age, and he managed to be on the deck of the Victory to witness the heroic death of the illustrious Admiral Nelson at Trafalgar.

The youngest Redgrave son, Valentine, traveled about the Continent in the way of younger sons, cleverly avoiding areas of increasingly hostile action as that upstart Bonaparte randomly flexed his muscles.

And their sister, Lady Katherine, had made her curiously belated come-out a scant year ago, in 1809. A true beauty, it appeared she would take London by storm. She very well might have, except for That Unfortunate Business at Almacks.

After all, it wasn't every day London got to see a debutante fracture her dancing partner's nose with a brilliantly executed right cross. Lord Hilton, the fool, had dared to say something amusing to Kate about her family tree as they came together in one of the movements of the dance. The abused gentleman had

bled copiously all over his waistcoat while pressing both hands to his abused proboscis, screaming, “My node! My node! She broke my node!”

With all eyes in the room wide with shock, all ears open for what would happen next, Kate had told him to stop being such a baby, then serenely strolled off the dance floor, declaring London society to be a sad waste of her time, just as she had predicted. It may not have helped that the dowager countess followed behind her, laughing so hard she had to walk nearly bent double.

No overt gossip resulted from this shocking event, no barely veiled references to the incident were reported in the daily newspapers, no limericks were composed by young wits. This was not amazing. Gideon, Earl of Saltwood, made the rounds of all the gentlemen clubs the next day, seemingly ignorant of the scandal his sister had caused, and everyone took their cue from him, then breathed a collective sigh of relief when he moved on to the next club. A message had been delivered, and they’d all heard it, loud and clear.

Not that the Redgraves weren’t by nature an affable bunch. The line was pure—if somewhat clouded by the Spanish wife-murderess—the pockets were deep, the progeny tall, strikingly good-looking, very nearly exotic thanks to that touch of foreign blood.

There was just something about each and every one of them, some nebulous something that whispered rather than shouted a warning: they’re being affable only because it suits them, even

the old lady.

The Redgraves were lions, one surprisingly insightful gentleman had whispered. Seemingly indolent, they could lie in the sun for hours, secure in themselves and seemingly indifferent to the world about them. But the more they relaxed—and nobody could relax with quite the magnificent sangfroid of a Redgrave—the more everyone else knew to stay on their toes and keep their wits about them.

Because if you did catch their notice they might look, blink and turn away, or they might pounce. Not that any of them had—with only a few notable exceptions no one ever spoke of—but the possibility was there, very clearly. After all, it was in the blood. Nobody knew what would happen if they took on a Redgrave because, thanks to those few notable exceptions in the past, nobody was foolish enough take on a Redgrave.

Except now, something indirectly has. The Society, the legacy of Barry Redgrave, and that of his father before him, has been resurrected by a new, even more deadly dangerous brand of hellfire members. Its unknown leader, building on the surviving members of the supposedly defunct Society, is employing every vice possible to lure both members and victims, the ultimate aim destroying England from the inside out and then handing the empire to a grateful Bonaparte.

With the help of the earl's new bride, Jessica, whose recently deceased father had been a member, and the information all but bullied out of the dowager duchess, the Redgrave siblings set out

to swiftly and quietly find and destroy this deadly reincarnation of the Society, from its members to its leader, relying on Trixie's memories, and in hopes of locating the journals detailing the sordid, even treasonous history of the hellfire club.

It's imperative this rejuvenated Society be identified and stopped, with the Redgrave name not connected to its actions in any way. Otherwise, this time, the resulting scandal could destroy them, and possibly the monarchy itself, forever.

CHAPTER ONE

"EXPLAIN TO ME again why you get to perch there chomping on an apple—and I do mean chomping—while I've been put to crawl around on my hands and knees, tapping at the woodwork while Tubby keeps insisting on licking my face. Not that I mind, do I, Tubby?" Valentine Redgrave put down the small hammer so he could tug on the spaniel's ears. "There's a good old dog. Fat, decrepit and with the fetid breath of a mongoose, but I love you, truly I do. You're a good old dog."

Lady Katherine Redgrave employed her tongue to push her most recent bite of apple against the inside of her cheek, looking much like a squirrel gathering up nuts for the winter. She was sitting on the back of one of the enormous leather couches in their brother Gideon's study at Redgrave Manor, her bare feet pressed onto the cool cushions, her long, lithe body still clad in her simple cotton night rail and dressing gown, although it had already gone noon.

"He knows when you're being facetious," Kate pointed out

to the sibling closest to her in age of her three brothers, which had made him both the best friend and chief tormentor of their youth. “You could have said good dog, good dog all day last year, when you were so careless as to trip over dearest old Tubby and tumble down the stairs, taking Duke and Major along with you, poor animals. Tubby still knew you were angry. Everybody did. After all, you howled worse than the hounds.”

Valentine sat back on his haunches, wiping at his damp face with his handkerchief as the spaniel watched, tail wagging in ecstasy and ready to launch himself, tongue first, at his master again. “I broke my damn leg and all three insanely concerned mutts kept leaping on it until you could pull them off, or has that part of the incident escaped your memory?” he grumbled, and then went back to crawling and tapping, tapping and crawling.

“It still aches, you know, when the weather’s about to change, although I suppose you’d think that a good thing. So you can make sure you have your umbrella handy, except you like getting soaked to the skin, don’t you? In any event, being a weather soothsayer was only amusing the first time I bet Jeremy it would rain by dusk before he figured it out, and then blabbed my secret to everyone. I still want to know who left the gate open at the bottom of the stairs so the dogs could get up them in the first place. Because I could swear I’d closed it.”

Kate examined her half-eaten apple, as if looking for the next logical area to bite, which was safer than looking at Valentine, and much safer than having him look at her. “It’s a petty man

who holds a grudge. I'm certain the person is most exceedingly sorry."

"And you damn well should be, instead of talking me into crawling around Gideon's inner sanctum looking for secret passages."

Kate slid down the back of the couch, her night skirt billowing out around her as she plopped onto the cushions. "I never said it was me. I?" She waved the apple about in frustration. "I never could get the straight of that one, no matter how Miss Pettibone tried to drum it into my head. I know—I never said I forgot to latch the gate."

"You never said you didn't," Valentine responded reasonably. "You don't lie, Kate. You just don't tell the truth if you can find a way around it."

"Well, that's true enough. You've gone beyond the length of the couch now. You want me to help you push it back against the wall?"

"I told you nobody puts a secret passage behind a hulking great piece of furniture. Scrape marks would show on the floor every time it was moved, and be a dead giveaway. There's probably some sort of switch somewhere that operates a lever that opens some cleverly disguised door. Maybe hidden in all that carving around the fireplace—not that I'm saying there is a lever, or a door."

"No. I checked there. I checked all the obvious places before you arrived to bear me company. Now I'm working on the

unobvious places, obviously. But if you're so certain I'm wrong, why did you volunteer to help me?"

"Again," Valentine corrected, unnecessarily dusting at his clean breeches, for Redgrave Manor was run by Dearborn, the butler, and Mrs. Justis, the housekeeper, who oversaw a multitude of well-trained servants. No bit of dust or dirt had dared to even think of being caught out lingering anywhere on the premises for at least thirty years, not even beneath the couches in the eighteenth Earl of Saltwood's study. "That's why I am helping you again, since you've been getting into scrapes all your life, left to your own devices. But the answer to that rephrased question is both obvious and simple. I'm not helping you. I'm keeping you out of trouble."

"How so? Why would I be getting into trouble? Gideon asked me to do this."

"Really? The way I was told the thing, our clever new sister-in-law asked you not to go hunting the journals, at the request of our big brother, which meant you immediately made plans to return here and do it. But that got you to leave London, which is what Gideon wanted Jessica to get you to do any way she could, since you were demanding to remain after the wedding and things could have turned dicey. It was only when he realized you might actually find something that big brother began to panic like an old woman."

Kate didn't know if she should be amused, surprised or angry. She quickly decided on amused, knowing Gideon's bride had

truly tricked her. A person could admire that. “And that’s why you’re really here, instead of London? To make me stop?”

“Clearly not, or I wouldn’t have spent these last miserable minutes crawling around on the floor. We’re still to look, but you aren’t going to be searching alone. Those were my marching orders from Gideon—don’t let that idiot girl out of your sight. My God, Kate, what would you do if you found those infernal journals our father and his cohorts kept?”

She moved her shoulders a time or two, trying to act nonchalant, as if she hadn’t yet contemplated that possibility. “I don’t know. Read them? Write to Gideon at Yearlings and announce I’ve found them?”

“Exactly. You’d do both, and in that order.”

Kate grinned. She never could fool Valentine. “Are they really that naughty?”

“They don’t describe the Society’s lawn parties, I’ll tell you that much. I’ve read the single one we found, and one was enough, more than enough, even for me. Now, let’s get this couch back into place.”

Sticking the apple between her fine white teeth once more, Kate pushed with all her might, helping to slide the couch against the wall. It wasn’t easy to do, which was why she hadn’t yet searched the area, and in the end, Valentine had to do the majority of the pushing. “You’re right. Nobody would hide a door or secret panel behind that monstrosity. That really cuts down on my list of possible hidey-holes, doesn’t it? And in a house with

seventy rooms, I can't tell you how that cheers me. Where shall we search next?"

Valentine glanced at the mantel clock. "No more today, Kate. I've got a friend arriving from London in less than two hours."

"Please say it's not Jeremy. He keeps looking at me with his mouth hanging open. I can nearly see his tonsils."

Valentine chuckled as they left the study, arm in arm. "He can't help it. He's mad for you. Except when he's afraid of you, which is most of the time."

"That's ridiculous. Why would he be afraid of me?"

"I don't know. Probably because I said you'd eat him for lunch." Valentine grabbed Kate's elbow and turned her toward the large pier glass in the hallway. "Look at you."

"I don't have to look at me—I know what I look like, Val, for pity's sake."

"Do you? Just because it amuses me, let me tell you what Jeremy sees. Jeremy, and any man with two eyes in his head and not dead below the waist—and don't try to be coy and tell me you don't know what that means, because Trixie gave you the same talking-to she gave all of us, God help us."

Kate was checking out her reflection in the glass, pushing a lock of hair back behind her ear. "Oh? So she told you if a man misbehaves you're to kick him hard in the fork and then run away while he's on his knees, whimpering and calling for his mama?"

"My God. It's even worse than we'd imagined she say." Valentine rubbed at the slight twitch that had started up beneath

his left eye. “Thank you for not doing that last year, at Almacks. Really, I mean that sincerely. Now, shall we continue?”

“I’m not continuing anything,” Kate said, trying not to grin at her brother’s embarrassment. “You started this, remember?”

“Yes, for my sins, I do.”

“We make quite the handsome couple, don’t we, Val? Same dark hair, same amber eyes. Why, your eyelashes are nearly as long as mine. Does that bother you?”

“Not as much as it does Max. Why else do you think he’s grown that mustache? Now pay attention, Kate. First, your hair. Black as the ace of spades in most lights, golden-black in the sun. Hair like yours is rare as hen’s teeth in London, land of the insipid blond, blue-eyed miss. Then there’s the sheer amount of it. And the curls when you let it hang loose, which is most of the time, because you’re a lazy sot. Females live to be told they’re old enough to put up their hair, and you let yours hang. I’ll bet Trixie told you to do that.”

Kate played with one of the fat, soft curls that reached halfway to her elbows. “So Jeremy’s shocked into imbecility by my hair? Which, yes, Trixie told me to continue wearing down because the only reason to put it up would be so men can do nothing but concentrate on finding a way to take out the pins. Why not give them what they want beforehand, because that way maybe they’ll retain enough brains to actually attempt coherent conversation.”

“That woman’s a menace. And dead wrong in this case, or hoping to keep you looking younger so she doesn’t feel older. In

any event, you let them start thinking lascivious thoughts having already arrived at step two of their plan for you—and with your help. Luckily for you, Jeremy hasn't the expertise to have ever gotten past step one to even begin thinking about step three. You confound him, poor fellow."

"Intriguing. What's your step three, Val?"

"None of your business, brat. All right, so much for the hair. We've discussed the eyes as to color. The problem with yours is, you don't lower them, not to anybody. You don't simper, you don't flirt, you don't flutter. You look at the world with beautiful eyes, granted, but beneath those lashes and those tip-tilted ends you've got going so nicely for you, you're a man, and they know it. You think like a man, you look boldly like a man, you appraise with your eyes. Also damnably unnerving."

Kate looked at herself looking at her eyes. "Good. I like that."

"Wonderful. I'm trying to explain something, and all I'm doing is handing you more ammunition to use against my own gender. Your mouth? That mouth is self-explanatory, and probably a sin to think about, not that your older, wiser brothers see it for more than it is, which is bold, and definitely opinionated. Leaving us with your body."

"We are not going to discuss my body." Kate tried to tug her arm free of her brother.

"No, no, let's finish this. First, it's noon, and you're not yet dressed for the day. Not because you're lazy. Lord knows half of London's debutantes are just now waking up to their

morning chocolate. But they're hidden away in their chambers, not tramping about the house in their bare feet because of a sudden insuppressible desire to have me poking around behind a couch."

"I wanted to catch you before you went out riding, or something."

"We could argue that one point for hours, Kate, but we'll let it go with the easiest explanation—you want what you want when you want it. Just like Gideon."

"Thank you," Kate said cheekily, knowing she was making her brother crazy. "Now you're going to compare my body to Gideon's?"

"No, mostly I'd compare it to our mother's. I'd compare all of you, and most of the rest of us, to our mother. It's what you do with your body that is like Gideon, or Max, or me, or men everywhere, at least the ones who aren't wearing red-heeled shoes and mincing about like nincompoops."

"Speaking of nincompoops, do you know Adam sleeps until eleven, and then takes two full hours to bathe and dress, only to come out of his rooms looking the brainless fop, his scent arriving in any room a good ten seconds before he appears?"

"Jessica's brother is a good example of the men you don't resemble," Valentine said, grinning. "You haven't been tormenting him too much since you brought him back here from London, have you?"

"No," Kate said, peering at her reflection again, trying to

understand what Val had meant about her body. She'd been tutored by Trixie, she was all of twenty years old—she should know what he'd meant. "He can fairly well make a cake of himself all by himself. And does, frequently. A spider crawled up his silly pink clocked stockings out in the garden the other day. He screamed, worse than any female and ran in circles until I could catch him and flick the thing away. I like him, though. He's almost my same age, I think. We've agreed to cry friends, as long as we're banished here together to keep us out of the way."

"You two weren't banished here to keep— Oh, all right. I'll grant you that one. On the other hand, you weren't Adam's age since you were five. That's still not what I'm trying to say, so if you'd please shut up I can be done with this. And not a moment too soon for my comfort." He looked toward the ceiling, as if hunting his next words, and then said carefully, "You didn't quite get the hang of London last year."

"Oh, nonsense. Don't tiptoe around the thing. I know exactly what London is. I just didn't like it."

"Yes, I've seen Lord Hilton's crooked nose. Actually, it helps one forgive his nonexistent chin. But what I'm saying is you have a woman's body, but you comport that body like a man. You slouch when you want to, you cross your legs at the knee, for God's sake. You walk with purpose, your strides too long to be dainty. You fold your arms across your chest when your hands should be neatly curled in your lap. You put your feet up on the table and let your ankles show. And look at you today. Traipsing

about here in your nightclothes, as if you have no notion of what's proper. And when you finally get dressed, nine times out of ten it's in one of your riding habits and a pair of boots."

She truly didn't understand his concern. She was who she was, just as her brothers were who they were, and what was good for the goose should also be good for the gander. Who'd decided only men could be comfortable? Probably a man. "Oh, dear. Surely I should be locked up. Or is that shot?"

Valentine ran his hand through his own thick thatch of dark hair. "You're a motherless child, raised by Trixie of all people, and in the company of three older brothers who probably set a bad example."

"Probably?"

"I'll ignore that. But you aren't a Redgrave brother, Kate, no matter how much you may have wanted to be. You're a female, and these things matter. You were in London for less than a week when you went to Almacks and performed your little party trick. Now I've got a friend coming to stay with us for a few weeks. A sophisticated gentleman. A marquis."

"Oh? And you're ashamed of me, is that it? Wait—it's worse than that, isn't it? You're matchmaking? I refused to go back to London for a second season, so you're bringing London to me? With all that's going on here, Val, with the search for the journals, the caves where the Society met? Have you entirely lost your senses?"

"As you just said, probably," Val muttered, turning away

from the glass, refusing to meet her gaze. “All I’m saying, Kate, is...well, it’s time to grow up, be a lady. You can do it, I know you can, Gideon made sure you had lessons. You need to do it.”

But he turned back at the sound of a short, hurriedly cut-off sob, and held out his arms to her. “Aw, Kate, I’m sorry. Come here.”

Kate walked into his arms, to lay her cheek against his chest. Her brothers were all such sweethearts, they really were. But even her love for Valentine wasn’t enough to contain her giggles for long, and he soon put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her away from him enough to see her grin.

“Why, you—”

“What’s wrong, Val? I just acted like a lady. You should be overjoyed I didn’t fall into a ladylike swoon. Oh, but if this marquis of yours begins courting me on orders from you—”

“Now wait a moment, Kate. It isn’t as if I deliberately invited the man for you to practice on. We were both bored hollow with the season, and Gideon had already asked me to come here to watch over you. I just opened my mouth and heard myself inviting Simon to join me,” Valentine corrected quickly. “The rest was an afterthought.”

“Well, that at least sounds like you. Always quick to lend assistance. And, as I always remind you, one day you’re going to drop yourself into trouble, being so helpful.”

“I just think it would be a good thing for you to get in a little...practice before you descend on London next spring.

Because you are going back, Kate, and at twenty-one some will already say you're getting a bit too long in the tooth for a debutante. Gideon's already working on securing another voucher for Almacks, although I doubt even he can manage that miracle."

"Right up there with the loaves and fishes, I gather? Bunch of high-in-the-instep matrons who think they're more important than they are. But tough nuts to crack, hmm? Maybe Gideon ought to petition the heavens for help."

Val pointed a finger at her. "See? That's what you do. Young ladies don't say things like that. What you need is practice, and me for a mentor, God help me, because I'm the only one available except for Trixie, and we can all see how that turned out the first time. So practice on the marquis while he's here, and I'll guide you."

"That depends, Val. Can he join in our treasure hunt? We can call it that, at least. Gideon said there may also be a treasure of sorts in the cave when we find it, remember? A golden rose with a diamond in it as big as a pigeon's egg, perhaps?"

Valentine's eyes went wide. "Who in bloody blazes told you about the rose?"

Really, men were so simple. "Nobody. I just happened to hear something about it somehow. You've only just confirmed it for me, thank you. And gentlemen don't say bloody in front of ladies, even sisters. I'm not the only one in need of a mentor, it seems."

"Never mind that. Eavesdropping, were you?"

She jammed her fists onto her hips. “How else am I supposed to learn anything? Of course I eavesdrop. The members of the Society all wore a golden rose in their cravats, to show they’d brought a virgin into bloom, correct? And, somewhere on the estate, there’s possibly a very large golden rose, with a diamond in it as big as a pigeon’s egg. Maybe. Perhaps. Or at least Gideon was thinking that way early on, when he suspected someone was poking about the grounds last winter. You know, lights moving through the trees, that cave-in in one of the greenhouses that exposed some bit of collapsed cave or tunnel?”

“Do...do you have any idea what you’re saying? About the rose?”

Kate lowered her head, this time truly close to tears. “Yes, I think our father was an exceedingly bad man who did exceedingly bad things, much if not all of it done here, at Redgrave Manor. I can’t ask Trixie, because that might hurt her. That her son was evil. Our father was evil. I’ve stared and stared at his portrait in the long gallery since I returned from London. He was very handsome, like some sort of blond god. I don’t see evil, except perhaps in his eyes. They’re cold, aren’t they, and mocking. He’s got one of the golden roses stuck in his cravat. That couldn’t have made our mother happy, could it? No wonder she shot him.”

Valentine pinched at the bridge of his nose. “God, I’m done. I came here to protect you, and you already know more than you should.”

“I know you’re all after a murderer, who probably killed Jessica’s father and some of the other older members of the Society who possibly didn’t agree with the new leader. Trixie said that right in front of me in London. She was half in her cups, poor thing, but she couldn’t help it. After all, her lover had just—”

“I know what happened that night,” her brother said, looking pained.

“I’m sorry. I’m simply trying to help, that’s all. I should be allowed to help. Tell me about the murderer. Who all did he murder? What other bad things has the Society done?”

Valentine shook himself back to attention. “Now we’re more than done. You learned about the journals, and Gideon decided you could search for them, certain you wouldn’t find them, that Trixie had found them years ago and burned them all. And then he had second thoughts. Concentrate on the journals, Kate. Finding them would be an immense help.”

“So you won’t tell me about the murderer. Why? It’s all of a piece, isn’t it? The Society, the journals, the murderer?”

“We believe the murderer, as you call him, is the new leader of the Society. Murder is not their true purpose but only, as I said, a weeding out of the members from our father’s time who might not agree with what’s happening now. Tell you what, Kate. Find the journals, and I’ll tell you the rest. All you have to do is promise me you won’t open them, and that in the meantime you won’t badger me incessantly to know what nobody wants to tell you. That’s a fair bargain, isn’t it?”

"Is there a lot I don't know?"

"God, I sincerely hope so."

Kate considered this for a moment. Either way, she'd learn the whole of it, eventually. But if it made Valentine happy? "All right. We'll shake on it."

"We bloody well will not. Women don't shake hands to seal a bargain. If they do anything, they offer their hand and allow us gentlemen to bow over it."

"So stuffy, Val. All right, pretend I just did that, assuming you agree to the rest. We'll let this marquis of yours join in the treasure hunt, unaware of what we're really looking for. If we don't, and you insist on being with me as I search in case I find something—which I'm determined to do—he'll have nothing to do all the day long otherwise but twiddle his thumbs. That and have his ears banged on by Adam, which isn't always as jolly as it sounds."

"And," Valentine said, apparently feeling he had the advantage now, "you'll behave like a lady in the man's presence. Seriously, Kate, much as we all adore you, you need the practice."

She could give in, but never completely. It wasn't in her nature. "I'll try, that's the best I can say. However, if he should be so impressed with my ladylike behavior that he attempts whatever step three is, be aware, Val, I'll kick him hard in the fork. I really will, and then I'll blame you."

"I need a drink. Go get dressed."

Kate held out one side of her dressing gown and sank into a

deep curtsy. “La, sir, you’re so very masterful. I shall of course rush off now, begging your leave, to do your bidding.”

“Two. Make that two drinks...”

CHAPTER TWO

SIMON RAVENBILL, LATE of his majesty’s navy and now marquis of Singleton, both thanks to the unexpected death of his older brother the previous year, reined in his curricle at the crest of a hill overlooking Redgrave Manor.

This is where it all began, he thought, looking down at the enormous fieldstone country mansion that had probably stood there for well over a century, with each new earl adding his own touches by way of wings that seemed to jut out willy-nilly on three sides. Spread around the main grounds were at least a dozen more stone buildings of varying sizes, as if the main house had pupped and the hodgepodge of structures was the result of several strong litters.

There were sheep milling about, their purpose to keep the acres of grass neatly gnawed, but the animals were kept away from the buildings and gardens by means of a ha-ha, a gracefully meandering but rather formidable sunken fieldstone wall. Simon eyed the height of the wall from the distance, took in the several high stone pillars fitted with heavy iron gates that kept the ha-ha from completely circling the grounds. The road leading to the gates took the same deep dip and rise of the ha-ha trench, rather like a moat.

He decided sheep weren’t the only unwanted visitors that

could be kept at arm's length.

The ha-ha's wide top was encrusted with bits of colorful broken glass and sat level with the scythed lawns nearest the buildings. The wall must be a dozen feet high, seemingly grown up out of the twenty-foot-wide ditch that then gently sloped back up to the level of the rest of the property. A sheep could amble in and out of the grassy ditch easily enough, but only on the same side on which it had entered. The same could be said for any man hoping for entry anyplace other than one of the gates, unless he brought his own ladder with him, and a stout pair of leather gloves.

Green grass, white sheep, the sunlight dancing on the broken glass and setting off small rainbows of color. Bucolic. Picturesque. Deceptively deadly.

All that was needed was a drawbridge. Then Simon remembered where he was: southern Kent, not more than a mile from Hythe and the Channel. Beautiful, but with a sometimes violent history. Smugglers had been active here for centuries, and probably would see the coast for what it was, a spot seemingly fashioned perfectly to ply their trade.

Invading armies saw it likewise, most recently Bonaparte himself. Although Simon agreed with the current theory that the new self-proclaimed Emperor Napoleon was now too busy annexing every country in Europe to attempt an assault of England by sea.

All the strong brick Martello watchtowers hastily constructed

along the southern coast in earlier years of the new century were left now to inferior troops who spent their days napping and their nights in the local dockside pubs as guests of the friendly local smugglers.

Hopefully, nobody noticed the building of the towers, mostly abandoned a few years ago, was quietly taking place once more, with the goal of having more than one hundred of the things fully manned before they were done, their cannons all aimed out over the water.

It took an army to win a battle, but only a few determined men could completely alter the tide of a war. That those men could be English, and their goal the collapse of their own country was why Simon now found himself the guest of a man he'd met only the once, and a reluctant actor in a romantic farce dreamed up by Prime Minister Spencer Perceval himself in order to appease Gideon Redgrave and gain his cooperation.

Or as the earl had affably stated as he relaxed in Perceval's office as if it were his own: "We Redgraves will see these traitors brought down, I assure you. However, if you wish for me to continue to share information, you'll do things my way. I keep you apprised, you keep me apprised, and nothing appears so much as vaguely suspicious at Redgrave Manor." He'd then stood up, shot his cuffs and smiled one of the most appealing yet threatening smiles Simon had ever seen. "We're agreed? Otherwise, good day, gentlemen, and good luck."

Only days earlier Simon had still thought Gideon Redgrave a

possible traitor himself because of who he was, and suddenly his family was to be their savior. He didn't like it. In fact, he was all for bringing in troops and ripping Redgrave Manor apart, and the devil with this tiptoeing about as if the man were in charge.

But as the prime minister had pointed out, Simon hadn't made much progress on his own in the matter. With one of the two men he'd been investigating now dead, and the other claiming illness and retiring to his country estate, Simon had to agree. Now, thanks to the Redgraves, they had hopes of more information, and had already uncovered one nasty plot at the Ministry level to criminally divert the timely delivery of food and ammunition to their troops on the Peninsula.

Perceval was no more comfortable with the thought he'd been unknowingly harboring traitors in his own midst than Gideon Redgrave had been to realize his family's long-ago shame could end up trotted out for another airing, this time with high treason not an accompanying rumor but a proven fact.

"All of which has resulted in me arriving here, about to play houseguest to a man I don't know and possible suitor of his bound to be half-witted sister, if she'd be fool enough to believe any of it." Then, wondering when he'd begun to talk to himself out loud, he released the brake and the matched pair of bays in the traces responded to his light touch on the reins. "That's it, boys, let's get this over with."

Redgrave Manor got larger as Simon drew closer, even as, in parts, the sparkling top of the walls of the ha-ha disappeared here

and there, following the rises and dips in the land. He kept to the well-tended road, which he was certain had run through the huge expanse of property during the last mile of his journey, noticing a grassy avenue lined with ancient trees off to his right. Could that have been the scene of the long-ago duel turned murder?

To his left he could see what had to be only a small part of the extensive gardens drifting away from the rear of the mansion, along with a moss-covered stone ruin. It was probably a true ruin, and not especially built to appear to be one, as there was at Singleton Place, thanks to Holbrook, who'd thought them the height of good taste.

Then again, his late brother had harbored many strange tastes. And, as it had worked out, one of them had proved fatal.

As he approached the main gate a pair of what could have been farm laborers sidled out from small doors cut into each of the massive stone pillars. Now that he was nearly on top of them, Simon could see the pillars were actually a clever pair of gatehouses, complete with colorful potted flowers below the windows and stout iron bars behind the leaded glass panes. Again, it was discreet, but the place had all the beauty of a fairy tale while carefully disguising its many defensive strengths.

He gave a moment's thought to the existence of a dungeon in the cellars, one with a well-greased rack.

The servants stood at their ease just behind the gates. Nonchalant. Waiting. One of them raised a hand to poke a finger in his ear, wiggle it and then visually examine what he'd managed

to dislodge. It would appear the Redgraves didn't stand much on ceremony. Either that, or they liked their visitors caught off guard and more than slightly confused. Was he facing two none-too-intelligent country dullards, or was he facing a fortress?

"Good afternoon, my fine fellows," Simon called out cheerfully if facetiously. "The Marquis of Singleton, to see Mr. Valentine Redgrave. Is that sufficient information for you, or is there also a password?"

The two young men exchanged puzzled glances before one of them tugged at his forelock and pulled a large iron key from his pocket. "You're expected, my lord. I'll just open these gates and Liam here will hop up behind you lickety-split so as he can take your horses around to the stables and see they're bedded down all nice and tight."

"That sounds reasonable. Tell me, are these gates always locked?"

Again, the servants looked to each other before the one called Liam answered. "I'll be bringing up that there trunk you have tied up behind the seat, my lord, once I've got those pretty horses tucked up. You want to open the gates now, Dickie, I suppose?"

Simon thanked him as the lad hopped up behind him. So much for any idea of cultivating the servants for gossip. Redgrave had trained them well, if not then dressed them accordingly. Suddenly eager to see more of Redgrave Manor, and its inhabitants, he released the brake again, only to set it a minute later as he reined in his team halfway around the wide circle that

sported a gray, weathered sculpture at its center. He couldn't be certain, but he believed the marble had been chiseled to resemble Hades, Greek god of the underworld. Why else would the marble hound seated next to him have three heads?

"If you're so concerned about rumors and speculation, you don't invite it in by greeting visitors with that," he murmured under his breath as he hopped down from the seat just as one of the massive front doors opened and the tall, darkly handsome Valentine Redgrave bounded down the stairs, his right arm extended in greeting.

"Simon!" he said, pumping the man's hand as if they were old school chums reunited. "I heard someone was loitering up on the hill, and hoped it was you. Gives a grand view of this pile, doesn't it?"

"And a grand view of anyone loitering up on the hill, obviously. You have sentries posted, sir?"

"No, no, not sir. And not my lord. Val and Simon, Simon and Val. We cried friends months ago, somewhere in Sussex, I believe we'll say."

"I met you for five minutes in Perceval's office, and told you then I'm not happy about this ridiculous playacting."

"So you did," Valentine said, draping a companionable arm around Simon's shoulder and walking him away from the open front door. "I advised you to learn to like it, which you better have done, because Lady Katherine is about to do some playacting of her own, which might put you a little off your game unless you

apply yourself."

Simon stepped away from the man. "Excuse me? She knows about the deception?"

"Not quite. She leaped to an erroneous conclusion this morning and I allowed her to leap, even pointed her more firmly in that direction one might say. Kate's a stickler for the why of things, so it seemed best to have her think she'd guessed correctly." Valentine hesitated a moment before continuing. "Oh, about that. She thinks I invited you here so she can 'practice' on you. Let me explain. Some would say she didn't fare well during her first foray into society. You may have heard of it?"

A truly splendidly delivered right cross, Singleton. You should have seen it. "I may have heard a few whispered words at one of my clubs. Should I consider wearing some sort of protection?"

Valentine immediately glanced down at Simon's crotch, which unnerved the marquis just a little bit. "No, of course not. Look, Simon, it's simple. I told her you're my friend, we're both bored with London, I invited you here for some respite and, hopefully, to let her practice her feminine wiles a tad before we haul her back to the city next season. It was too soon to take her back this year. You, however, have no idea you're here to act the role of interested parti in between searches for those damn journals and hopefully, a cave or tunnel that hasn't yet collapsed from age."

"Have you poked around that statue? It could be the portal to the underworld." Simon wasn't feeling particularly cooperative.

Valentine laughed. "Good point, we'll have to give it a look.

Maybe one of the hound's heads swivels and opens a stairway or some such thing? We call him Henry, by the way. Hades, not the hound. String him with holly at Christmastime. Our grandmother told us, in the old days it served to keep the locals on their best behavior, but now Henry is mostly a family joke."

"Do you have many such jokes about the place?" Simon asked.

"Well, there's the ha-ha, but that's only funny if you're not sixteen and don't attempt to climb it after you've stayed out past the time the gates are locked, enjoying the company of the extremely accommodating barmaid at the Eagle." Valentine looked down at his palm. "I can still make out a few of the scars."

"From the broken glass embedded in the top of the wall, or the extremely accommodating barmaid?"

Valentine threw back his head and laughed. "No, she left her marks on my back, as I recall the thing."

Damn. Simon was beginning to like the fellow. Probably because that's what he was supposed to do. "All right," he said, deliberately turning back toward the open front door. "So I'm playacting as your friend, brought here by you to distract your sister, hiding the fact I'm really here to find the journals—which she doesn't know. In her turn, Lady Katherine is set on finding the journals, but now she's also playacting as a—what?"

Valentine sighed. "Much as it pains me to say it, she'll be playacting as a lady."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Don't concern yourself. I'll soon be saying those same words

to you, if you aren't careful. The thing is, it's imperative she stops searching for those godawful journals on her own. Imperative. One of us has to be with her at all times. She cannot read them, not so much as a single page. Remember, Simon, I've read one of them."

"I haven't. Your brother didn't pass it along to us."

"As Gideon convinced Perceval, there was no need. That journal is only the first small piece of a very large puzzle. But since we can't stop her, I could be called away at any time, and nothing less than binding her hand and foot and shipping her off to one of Gideon's other estates will even begin to put a spoke in her wheel—like a pigeon, she'd somehow find her way back here again—we're doing three things. Distracting her with your handsome face—but carefully, my friend, or I'll be constrained to hurt you—keeping her on her toes as she attempts to impress me with her ladylike accomplishments and accompanying her on any searches. Those are our goals. She's really quite acute, Simon, and beyond tenacious. If those journals still exist, she'll find them better and faster than any dozen hounds we could put on the scent. Gideon will have both our heads on a platter if she finds them without us."

"I think I might be able to do with a glass of wine before you introduce me to your sister," Simon said as they neared the wide steps to the mansion. "Perhaps more than one."

"That's strange. My interlude with Kate this morning ended much the same way. She can have that effect on people."

“Well, if nothing else, Val, you’ve certainly piqued my interest.”

Valentine grinned. “Yes, she has that effect on people, as well.”

Simon was impressed with the house the moment he entered it. Massive. Everything about it was massive, from the size of the entrance hall to the height of the dark, polished oak paneling and woodwork in the fashion of another time. The heavy wooden staircase, again massive, began with three steps up to a landing, then turned toward a full flight, currently blocked by a sturdy yet ornate wooden dog gate that told him the Redgraves loved their animals, but they didn’t love them everywhere.

He directed his eyes upward and saw the staircase had another landing, another turn, and then the railing seemed to wrap itself about three sides of the hallway before rising again to the next floor.

“Impressive, isn’t it? All that magnificent oak is from our own lands, when they were cleared to build this pile. Horribly out of the current style, but we like it, although the maids tend to grumble while they’re polishing that staircase.”

“Beauty being in the eye of the beholder, as opposed to the labor of the worker.”

“Oh, we’ve all polished that staircase at one time or another. Our grandmother considered it the perfect punishment. I was given the job for one day each week for six months after I had the happy notion to slide down the entire staircase on a large silver

tray. If the dog gate hadn't been closed, I might have made it all the way to the tiles."

Simon gave another look to the sheer height and tricky landings. "How did the tray fare?"

Valentine grinned. "That was sent off to the blacksmith, to be hammered back into some semblance of its former self. Now, about that drink..."

But Simon was still looking at the staircase, which meant he was the first to see the exotic vision that had just appeared at the wooden railing to peer down at them, her long black curls hanging slightly over the railing. "My God," he breathed quietly.

Valentine looked up, as well. "Oh. It's only Kate." He waved his arm at her. "Come on down, Kate. Our guest has arrived."

Lady Katherine turned toward the stairs, keeping her right hand on the railing, using her left to hike up her hem a few inches as she took on the first few steps. Then she stopped, took a breath, let go of her skirt and continued her descent, this time with her head held high, and at a much more sedate pace.

Simon prayed she'd continue to take her time, stretching out the moments he could simply stand and stare at her. And hopefully figure out a way to get his tongue unstuck from the roof of his suddenly dry mouth. Please let her open her mouth and squawk like a parrot. Otherwise, I'm doomed.

"So?" Valentine asked.

"Hmm?"

"So, do you think you can do it?"

“Do what?” Simon asked, finding it difficult to believe the beautiful creature had just winked at him.

“You know, Singleton, I don’t think I thought this new twist on our little game through as well as I could have, and should have just let Kate be Kate,” Valentine said on a sigh. “Because this is beginning to show all the hallmarks of a bad, bad idea.”

* * *

KATE HAD ALREADY lifted her right leg to cross over her left before she caught herself in time and carefully placed her foot back down on the carpet. Five minutes into the thing, and she had almost proved Valentine correct—she didn’t know how to behave as a lady. It would have been thirty seconds into the thing, if her brother had seen her wink at the marquis, but he hadn’t, so that didn’t count.

But she hadn’t been able to resist. The marquis had looked so adorably flustered as he watched her descend the staircase, yes, like a lady. It was just as Trixie had promised: men were lamentably easy, as they rarely thought with their brains. She probably should have asked her what they used instead, but Trixie had seemed to think she understood, and she hadn’t wanted to appear blockheaded. Still, she believed she was beginning to get an idea.

Now here they were, all cozy in the enormous main drawing room, the introductions behind them, and she was wondering why she continued to find his lordship so appealing.

Perhaps it was his coloring. Her brothers were dark-haired,

and none of them had such startlingly green eyes. Perhaps that was it—the marquis was a new experience for her. Not that she hadn't seen her share of light-eyed, blond-haired men. It's just that none of them had looked anything like Simon Ravenbill, or dressed half so well. In fact, although his clothing was more than two decades out of date, the man the marquis put her in mind of most was her father, and the portrait that hung in the long gallery.

Maybe it was fate, sending her a warning. Was there something hidden beneath the appealing surface of the marquis, as there had been evil lurking behind the smiling face depicted in that portrait? It still didn't seem sensible to her that Valentine would have invited a guest to Redgrave Manor now, of all times. Was her brother playing her for a fool? Why?

"Kate?"

She shook herself back to attention. It wasn't like her to allow her mind to drift. The marquis must think her rude, or shallow...or simple. "A thousand apologies, Val," she cooed sweetly; she'd learned at Trixie's feet how to deliver a cutting line with an accompanying smile. "Did you say something of interest, and I missed it?"

The marquis, just then in the midst of taking a sip of wine, gave a short cough and then swallowed, seemingly with some difficulty.

Kate could like this man. If she wasn't so suspicious of him.

"I was saying, Kate," Valentine pressed on, ignoring the jab, "I think Simon would enjoy joining us in our small treasure

hunt. You know, the jewels supposedly hidden somewhere on the estate by that band of smugglers who then set out on another run, only to drown to the last man in a storm."

Oh, that was fairly good. Valentine must have put some thought into that fib; to mention the golden rose by name would have been a mistake. Still, it was a lengthy explanation of his lie, and he probably should have kept it shorter. And probably would have, if she'd been paying him the least attention when he first uttered it.

"Really?" she asked, turning to the marquis. "I doubt there's any truth to the legend, but I will admit to being intrigued ever since I heard the tale a few weeks ago. My brother Gideon thinks it all a great hum, but Val here has promised to help. You don't think us incredibly silly?"

"Not at all. There isn't a little boy in all of England who hasn't dreamt of finding buried treasure. I don't see why it should be so different for the fairer sex."

She smiled at him, careful to bat her eyelids, just the once. "La, my lord, how forward-thinking of you. Many would suggest we of the fairer sex are too fragile for such undertakings."

"Not true. But I would be remiss if I didn't add joining you and Val here will also afford me an excuse to spend more time in your fair company."

Oh, now I know I'm being led by the nose! Such stuff and nonsense, and laid on with a trowel, it's so thick! "You put me to the blush, my lord."

She sensed Valentine looking from the marquis, to her, and then back again. He then got to his feet, rubbing his palms together. “Good! That’s settled, then. Kate, isn’t it soon time for some afternoon refreshment? I’m sure Simon is hungry for a little something before dinner.”

“Yes, of course. A poor hostess I’d be, indeed, if I hadn’t thought of that myself.” Don’t ask me to be perfect and then continually test me, Val, or you’ll be sorry you ever began this farce. Although I suspect you already are!

As if he’d been hovering outside the door awaiting his cue to enter, Dearborn stepped into the room to announce the arrival of refreshments, “as requested by Lady Katherine” (she’d asked him to add that last part). In marched a trio of maids, all carrying silver trays laden with sandwiches, cakes and a large pitcher of lemonade. They could have fed a half-dozen ravenous men with this display of food, but then, the Redgraves did nothing in a small way...and the servants would enjoy the remnants that returned to the kitchens.

The marquis surprised Kate by taking on the role of mother, pouring them each a tall tumbler of lemonade. “So you don’t have to strain to lift such a heavy pitcher,” he told her, handing her one of the glasses.

“Oh, too kind, too kind,” she purred, smiling around gritted teeth, mentally exchanging that trowel for a shovel. “We’re quite informal here, my lord. Please feel free to help yourself to anything you’d like.”

“Yes,” the marquis said slowly, his back to Valentine, looking at her rather than the trays of sandwiches and decorative cakes. “I’ll do that.”

Kate felt herself being put to the blush, an occurrence so rare in her experience she couldn’t remember the last time it had happened. “Val? Aren’t you hungry?” she asked quickly.

Valentine was looking at his own glass with barely veiled horror. Kate believed she could read his mind: Lemonade? Is the man mad? What in bloody hell am I supposed to do with lemonade?

“Not anymore,” he grumbled, eyeing the drinks table.

Kate had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. She didn’t know how long she could last with this ridiculousness, but she was certain she could hang on longer than her brother. Besides, it was rather fun being flirted with, even if the man was doing it on orders from his new friend—because that had to be the answer, it was the only answer that fit. Val had told both of them to flirt, his lordship in order to do his friend a favor, and Kate in order to play at being somebody other than herself. Or could her brother actually have brought them both together, spinning lies for both of them, all in order to matchmake? Clearly her brother had no head for intrigue. No matter what, Valentine was in trouble!

Kate reached for one of the plates holding a cake iced with some lovely pink confection. It was time to learn more about their guest. “Valentine tells me London is very flat this season,

my lord. Is that true?"

"London is London, my lady, and in the end, I suppose what you make of it," he answered, having somehow already downed half his sandwich, rather like a person who has learned to feed his belly as quickly and efficiently as possible. Someone like a soldier, perhaps?

"Yes, and I made a shambles of it last year. It was really quite enjoyable."

"Kate," Valentine said warningly.

"There's no sense in pretending it didn't happen, Valentine. Now is there, my lord?"

"I'm certain you were quite justified in your actions, my lady."

"No, I wasn't. I could have done any number of things. Walked off the floor, for one, cutting the man dead. Claimed a sudden indisposition and asked him to return me to my grandmother. Feigned an overturned ankle. Any number of things. I simply preferred my chosen rebuttal to his statement."

"Again, may I say I'm certain you were quite justified."

"Thank you." She turned to Valentine. "Now, see how simple that was? Rough ground gotten over swiftly and smoothly. It had to be said, didn't it? Elsewise, it would hang over us all. My goodness, she's the barbarian who bloodied that man's nose last year at Almacks." She gave a slight toss of her head. "I feel much better now. Shall we cry friends, my lord, as you and Val have already done? We prefer to be informal here at Redgrave Manor."

“I would be honored,” the marquis said with an inclination of his handsome head. “Kate.”

“Simon,” she answered, again feeling heat climbing into her cheeks. She was going to have to be extremely careful around this so pretty, so pleasing man. “I’m certain Dearborn is waiting outside, to show you to your rooms.”

As Kate rose, he stood up, as well. “I would like to change out of my traveling clothes, thank you.”

“We keep country hours, Simon,” Valentine told him. “Dinner gong goes at six, tea at ten and then early to rise. We might think about a ride over the estate in the morning?”

Simon looked to Kate. “Do you ride?” His tone implied if she didn’t, he wouldn’t, either.

“I do,” she said, “thank you for asking.”

He inclined his head to her once more. “My mount will be arriving shortly, if it hasn’t already, along with my coach and valet. I eagerly anticipate the dinner gong, so that we may become more acquainted.”

She dropped him a small curtsy, then watched as he strode out of the room. Grabbing up one of the well-cut sandwiches, she plunked herself back down on the soft couch and clunked her heels, one after the other, on the low table before crossing her legs at the ankle. “All right, where did you meet him?”

“Is it impossible for you to employ correct posture for more than ten minutes?” Val asked, seating himself on the opposite couch and repeating her action with his own legs.

She spoke around a bite of ham shoved between a split roll spread with their own homemade mustard. “No, but that doesn’t answer my question, does it?”

“Sussex. Somewhere in Sussex, I disremember where. We met again in London, at some insipid affair, and soon I was regaling him with the beauty of Kent. Did you have to bring up Almacks?”

“Of course I did. Everyone knows, even if Gideon made it clear no one was to talk about it. You can’t stop gossip, Val, you can only make it whisper instead of shout. Why else did you all decide I shouldn’t return for another year? Simon was sure to have heard, so why not admit it and be done?”

“I’m not certain I like you addressing him as Simon.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “I’m not overjoyed with his blatant flirting. You might consider advising him to not lay it on so thick and rare.”

“You don’t use cant expressions like thick and rare,” Valentine said, almost as if the correction was by habit, without having to think about it. “And I did not invite him here to flirt with you. You’re to be practicing on him, remember?”

Poor Valentine, trying so hard to elude the ensnaring net of his lies. “Yes, certainly. Such deep intrigue confuses me. Poor Simon has simply taken one look at me and succumbed. Much like Jeremy, except he can still speak. Being older, he probably knows Step Three, as well, don’t you think? Or should I say, shouldn’t you have thought of that before starting this? I mean, as it would appear your hoyden of a sister is irresistible when

playing the lady." Then she grinned at him.

Val sighed theatrically. "I never should have mentioned Jeremy. I think we need Trixie here, but she refuses to leave London, saying you've more than enough guardians here without dragging her away from her fun."

"Fun? Jessica told me she was off to the countryside to attend a funeral."

"Two funerals, actually. As I said, our grandmother didn't want to be dragged away from her fun. And, no, I'm not going to explain that. It's enough you were there to see—"

Kate held up one hand. "Ah-ah, I thought we weren't going to talk about that. Although it was all rather jolly, except, of course, for that poor old fellow. You should have seen Gideon's face, he was that appalled. I laughed so hard I ended up with a bout of the hiccups."

"Dead men in our grandmother's bed amuse you. Wonderful. May I now critique your first attempt at behaving like a lady?"

"No, I don't think so. Was Simon in the army?"

"Now why the devil would you ask that?"

Kate shrugged, and sank a little lower on her spine. "I don't know. Trixie trained us all to be observant. He eats like a man used to consuming his meals in a rush, and he walks with some command to his step. It seemed a logical conclusion."

"Logical, but not completely correct. He served in the Royal Navy. Had his own command as a matter of fact. But his brother...died last year, so now he's the marquis."

Kate sat up a bit straighter. Aha, now she'd stumbled onto something. "You hesitated before you said died. Why?"

"Once in a while, I wish you wouldn't be so awake on all suits. The man hanged himself. Nobody speaks of it, just as nobody speaks of that right cross of yours or the Redgrave family scandals, but everyone knows of it. Holbrook Ravenbill wasn't in debt, a victim of some new heartbreak—any of the usual reasons for putting a period to one's own existence, not as far as anyone knows. If he left behind any sort of explanation, Simon's the only one who knows it, and no, I didn't ask him. And neither will you."

"Your confidence in me is sadly lacking, brother mine. I would never be so rude as to ask a grieving brother such a thing." But he'll tell me, eventually. "Now I suppose you'll want me to change my clothes yet again before dinner, which is a sad waste of time."

"Nobody said being a lady is easy," Valentine quipped as she got to her feet.

"Nobody said it was logical, either. Just be grateful I have all those gowns upstairs that never got to see the light of day in London. But for now, I'm off to the west wing. Liam told me his grandfather told him old houses were sometimes built with hidden staircases that could lead all the way from the attics to secret rooms in the cellars, but with no other openings along the way. Odd, isn't it? Since our grandfather ordered the construction of the west wing, I've been thinking perhaps Liam's grandfather might know something about that construction, that it isn't just a tale he told to entertain Liam."

“You think our grandfather and father had everyone climb up to the attics just to descend four floors into the cellars? In a parade of masks and cloaks, I’d suppose, dragging a braying goat behind them?”

Kate pulled a face. “I didn’t say I was positive. And I would think only the journals could be hidden in such a place. I doubt they performed their silly rites in a cellar. But now that I don’t have to ask you and your friend Simon to move every heavy bed and couch pressed up against a wall, I thought I’d give it try.”

“There’s dedicated, Kate, and then there’s— Bloody hell, I don’t know what to call it.”

She put a finger to her chin. “You know, just because couches and beds and chests are where they are now doesn’t mean they were there all those years ago. A secret panel could still be hidden behind one of them, somewhere. Seventy rooms. Quite a task. But perhaps we should—”

Valentine held up both his hands. “No. No, no, no. I think you and Liam’s grandfather might have stumbled onto something here. Go. Crawl around the attics of the west wing, tapping your little hammer. Really. Enjoy yourself.”

“And what are you going to do, that you can’t join me?”

“I, um, I haven’t yet looked at today’s post. I may have letters to answer.”

“What a hum. You couldn’t come up with a better excuse?” Kate rolled her eyes. “You know, Val, it’s just as Trixie says, a real conundrum that women don’t rule the world. And, also

according to Trixie, that's only because we don't have—"

But Val was already stalking out of the room, his ears looking faintly red.

"Power!" she called after him. "Only because women don't have power." And then she ended quietly, "Or some other word beginning with P..."

CHAPTER THREE

SIMON BELIEVED THE Earl of Saltwood could comfortably fit any three rooms at Singleton Place inside his dining room and still seat a dozen diners. Not that Ravenbill was small; it was a fine estate. But everything about Redgrave Manor was immense. Most families suffered setbacks over the years, the centuries. The Redgraves seemed to have never taken a backward step.

That meant either unbelievable good luck, or a long line of crafty, intelligent men and women who always chose the right side, the correct moment; when to act, and when to retreat. So how, if what he believed was true, did at least the last two earls reconcile all this bounty with plotting to overthrow the monarchy? It made no sense.

Unless...

"I hope you don't mind," he said conversationally as the servants passed around yet another course, "but I spent a bit of time earlier with your obliging butler, familiarizing myself with your beautiful home. Quite an interesting and certainly extensive lineup of portraits in your gallery. From the change in dress,

I'd have to think the Redgrave line goes back a considerable distance."

"Ages, yes," Kate said from her seat across the wide table. The four of them were gathered at one end of the immense table, with Valentine at the foot and young Adam Collier sitting beside Kate, alternately stuffing his face and attempting discreet peeks at her bosom, fetchingly outlined by her lightly golden silk gown. The puppy. And did he actually believe that pale paste he'd rubbed onto his face really succeeded in covering his spots? Simon sent up silent thanks he was no longer eighteen.

Valentine took up his fork. "True, Kate. Ages. All the way back to the Stuarts, the first time they held the throne, even before the first earl wrangled himself the title. We carry a few drops of Stuart blood, actually, although you'd have to apply to Gideon for the particulars, as the study of our family tree became lost on me by the time our tutor had got to the fifth branch."

"Descended from kings. And you're not interested?"

"Good Lord, Simon, who's even to say what side of the blanket our supposed Stuart was born on in the first place?" Valentine looked to Kate. "And you did not hear me say that."

"Oh, no, definitely not. But there is that small portrait of the first King Charles in the long gallery, remember? The one who had his head lopped off?"

Valentine widened his eyes in what seemed to be real shock. "I really should have paid more attention, shouldn't I?"

"I would have. No choice, really," Adam said, speaking for

the first time in long minutes, an interlude he'd clearly felt had been better spent in seeing how many peas he could line up on his knife and then slide into his mouth without dropping any. "My father had me study the monarchies of every last country in creation. Boring stuff mostly, but I haven't been able to boost it out of my head now it's there. Charles the first was followed by that Cromwell fellow, and then his son, before the Stuarts came roaring back for a second go at things with Charles the second, but when Queen Anne died, everything went to our first George of the House of Hanover, thanks to a few drops of Stuart blood in him somewhere. You know, Valentine, like you Redgraves."

"Yes, of course. My brother should be sitting on the throne right now. Idiot."

"I think the Redgraves are smarter than that, Adam," Lady Katherine said, patting the boy's arm. "As I said, kings can be beheaded. Kingship was a messy business back then."

"They do sillier things than that! Did you know when the Stuarts got back on the throne they dug up Cromwell the first and chopped off his head because the first Charles had his chopped off? I mean, Cromwell had already been dead for dog's years, but it was a show of power, m'father said. Very important in kingships, showing off your power. Chopping off heads, poisonings, perhaps even drowning royal dukes in barrels of Malmsey wine, whatever that is. Then there were those poor boys in the Tower. Nobody knows who did that, not for certain. You have to be careful most times in not letting what you did get

followed back to you, you see, or at least not be the only one who might be blamed. Now, consider Julius Caesar, for one. He was Roman, you know, and—"

"Eat your peas, Adam," Valentine instructed wearily, and turned back to Simon. "You'd never think our new relative has been tossed out of every school his late father managed to get him into, would you?"

"Only five, my lord, not all of them. One burned down—but it wasn't me who did it, I swear. Mine was only a small fire, nothing quite so spectacular. I still got the boot, though. Picky things, deans," Adam grumbled, plucking an errant pea out of his lacy neck cloth. "The only reason I'm not in school now, your lordship, is I'm in mourning. Both my dear parents died in a coach accident, you know. The oil from the outside lanterns caught fire when the coach overturned, and they were both burned up. I'm devastated."

"Yes," Simon said blandly as Kate hid her smile behind her serviette. "Yes, I can see that. Allow me to offer my condolences, Mr. Collier."

"Well, it was nearly two months ago, and Gideon tells me I'm rich as Croesus now, save for the fact he's my guardian for another three years, and now that he's married my sister, I'm family, as well. I'd rather be in London, but it's as his lordship says, one can't always have everything one wants, at least not while he's in charge of me, and he lives only for the day I reach my majority. But he likes me. I'm certain of it. Everybody likes

me."

This was all said with such artlessness, such nonchalance—and probably a dearth of brainpower backing his words—Simon felt himself unable to reply.

Kate, however, wasn't so reticent.

"That's because you're such a lovable looby," she said, nudging Adam with her elbow.

The boy carefully patted at his hair, dark and stiff with pomade, so that it probably wouldn't have moved by a single strand in a gale. "Thank you, Kate."

Lady Katherine rolled her eyes. "You're welcome—looby."

"Yes, well, Kate, shall we have our dessert in the main drawing room?" Valentine broke in. "We'll join you and Adam there in an hour."

Kate agreed, and the men all rose as she departed the room, smiling over her shoulder at Simon, who nodded his acknowledgment of her favor. He fought the urge to follow her.

"You're going to have brandy and cigars now, aren't you? I'd rather stay here with you and the marquis. My father and his friends used to step outside after dinner and piss off the balcony into the garden. I think they held contests. Do you do that, too?"

"We most assuredly do not," Valentine said coldly. "Or, as my grandmother the dowager countess would say, were you raised by wolves? Now go harass Kate while the grown-ups among us talk."

Simon watched the boy mince off in his red-heeled evening

shoes and sat down once more. “That’s Turner Collier’s son? Was the man sure? I’d worry my wife had played me false if I ended up with a popinjay like Adam.”

“Jessica says he’s his mother’s child, down to his ridiculous shoe tops. Jess, um, she left home when he was only twelve, leaving behind, she vows, a sweet, bashful child who sang songs with her. Gideon ended up with the guardianship of him a few months ago, thanks to Collier’s ridiculous will that named the Earl of Saltwood, but didn’t happen to mention which one. You know Collier was involved with the Society in my father’s time, correct? From what we’ve been learning, he was also his closest friend and associate. Wait. Don’t answer yet.”

The baize door opened and Dearborn himself carried in a tray holding a crystal decanter and two snifters. He then employed the small key he’d carried with him to unlock a drawer in the immense sideboard. He extracted a rosewood humidor, smartly snapping back the lid and offering the selection inside first to his lordship’s guest, and then to Valentine, who took two, pocketing one for later, probably.

The butler then deftly managed the ceremony of assisting in the tip-cutting and lighting of the cigars for each man by way of a short candle also on the tray, bowed and retired from the dining room.

“He loves doing that,” Valentine commented as he puffed on the cigar and then smiled in satisfaction. “Ah, wonderful. Count on Gideon to have nothing but the best. I’m more of a cheroot

man myself, but cigars take longer, leaving us more time to talk before we'll be expected to rejoin the children."

"Children? Your sister made her come-out last season. She's hardly a child."

"True," Valentine said, putting a finger to his lips before quietly pushing back his chair. "Follow me. Quietly."

Simon did as he was told, casting only one regretful look at the decanter of brandy as they headed for one of the many sets of French doors leading onto some sort of balcony. If the Earl of Saltwood's good taste in cigars was matched by his selection of spirits, he knew he was missing a treat.

"What's all this about?" he asked as Valentine gently closed the door behind him.

"Notice we're on a balcony, Simon. It runs the length of the dining hall, with the only entrances leading from that room. If Adam's right, I finally realize why the balcony may have been constructed this way, but I chose it because we're a good twenty-five feet above the gardens and Kate won't be able to hear us."

"She'd eavesdrop? Why would she do that?"

Valentine leaned against the stone balustrade. "Because I'm an idiot, but she's not. Within a minute of your going off with Dearborn, she asked me if you'd been a soldier. Because, if you can believe this, you eat quickly and efficiently, and walk with command in your step, or some such nonsense. It has been less than a full day and I already have the headache, watching her pretend—badly, I might add—watching you pretend. If I didn't

know you're acting on orders, I'd actually believe you saw her and were instantly struck. But it isn't going to work. Sooner or later, Kate is going to see through the thing from both sides. Hang Gideon and Perceval for sorry plotters and me for thinking I could boost Kate through some hoops of my own as long as we were putting on this charade. We have to call it off."

"I thought I was doing fairly well," Simon said, damned if he'd call it off, not if Valentine was going to use the failure to send him on his way. He was here to find those journals and anything else he could find. Besides, pretending an interest in Lady Katherine wasn't the hardship he'd imagined. Not by a long chalk.

"Simon, if you did any better I'd have to pop you in your nose. But that's probably because you haven't met Kate yet. Not really."

Simon smiled. "She's a bit of her own person, isn't she? She's beautiful, entrancing, really, and quite unexpected."

Valentine looked at the glowing tip of his cigar. "Go easy, my friend."

"I'm doing my best, but even a brother should be able to recognize her unique beauty. That said, don't think I was unaware that she was—how should I say this? Putting me on? Yes, that's it. Crude, but correct. And all while somehow already knowing I was doing the same thing. Hell, Val, I'd compliment her, and her eyes would fill with laughter, all through dinner. So how do we fix this?"

"I'd say by you taking yourself back to London, but I doubt you'd go without a fight."

Simon's jaw tightened, and he wondered if the reaction was all because of his hunt for the journals, and had nothing to do with learning to know the intriguing Kate better. "And you'd be correct."

"Which leaves us with telling her the truth, although Gideon won't ever see it that way. Against all common sense, he still harbors the hope we can keep Kate away from the worst of this. Are we agreed?"

"Agreed," Simon said, reluctantly pitching the cigar over the balustrade.

"Oh, too bad. Dearborn doles out Gideon's prize cigars very carefully to younger sons," Valentine said, peering down into the gardens. "I was going to ask Kate to join us in the dining room. She quite likes the smell of a good cigar." Then he laughed and reached into his pocket. "Here—take this one, and I'll go find her, bring her back here."

"Don't you think you should first tell me what she knows. I don't want to say anything to shock her."

"Redgraves don't shock easily. Besides, what she hasn't yet been told she's probably conveniently overheard."

"And Adam? What does he know?"

"I'd have to say he doesn't even know how to find his own backside with both hands, but the truth is he was a font of information for us, even though he has no idea what his father was preparing him for, which was membership in that damned Society. That business about learning all the monarchs?

Mostly, what his father was attempting to teach him was about assassinations, governments being overthrown, the how of the thing. What worked in the past, what failed. That, and giving him an education that went well beyond the usual visit to the local tavern on your sixteenth birthday and the trip upstairs with one of the barmaids as the entire taproom cheered you on your way. Can you imagine? Lessons in debauchery."

"I noticed him ogling your sister overtop his peas," Simon said, suddenly not finding the boy's antics so amusing.

"Yes, we'd thought about having all the younger housemaids fitted with chastity belts. Either that, or arming them with pikes, so they could fend him off. But we've found he's more boasting and wishful thinking than anything else. Collier had him keep a yearly journal of his conquests. Gideon said it read mostly as very bad fiction, which isn't to say he hasn't had his successes, willing ladies who like the feel of heavy coins in their palms."

Simon rubbed a hand across his mouth. "And that's how you —"

"Adam mentioned the lessons, the journal, to Jessica, and we quickly learned the boy also had a copy of his father's journal for last year, given to him to use as a reference or some such thing. Dates, the participants, the, um, the actions taken. As I said, Adam's entries were mostly that of an overactive imagination, but Collier's journal was something else entirely."

"So I've heard. The members' names all listed somewhere in it, although in some sort of code. It's how you discovered Sir

Charles and the late Mr. Urban, correct? Again, I'd like to see one." One in particular...

"And again, no, you wouldn't," Valentine said, shaking his head. "We especially dread finding anything our father wrote. And our grandfather, as well. Believe me, Simon, this isn't easy for any of us. According to our grandmother, the Society members kept yearly journals from the beginning, during my grandfather's, shall we say, tenure as leader of the group. And then the Keeper, as that privileged member is called, the latest one being Adam's father, gathers the journals every year, compares them and dutifully records everything into their unholy bible. All the names, the secrets, the intrigues, the debaucheries, the supposed crimes, going back all those years. God knows who some of their guests were. Prime ministers, royal princes, men of letters, leaders of our military. Seduced, corrupted, blackmailed. Sometimes eliminated. Nobody knows the true extent of the Society's activities. But we're certain of one thing, none of that information can ever see the light of day."

"I begin to see your point." Simon had to tamp down his excitement at this revelation. The answers were in the bible. He had to find the bible. "I hadn't heard of any bible. Just the journals."

"Really? Gideon always did play his hands close to his chest. The journals will give us more clues, we hope, although we'll be dealing with those blasted codes. Only the supposed bible will give us everything, all neatly spelled out for us. My brother has

hung his hopes on it, at least. But now that you're here, you might as well know the rest. We're looking for one other thing."

"And what would that be?" Simon spoke quietly, aware Valentine was speaking with some reluctance.

"Not what, who. The seventeenth earl," Valentine said, forcing a smile. "A tree fell against the mausoleum last winter and broke a lovely stained-glass window—not that you need know all of that. We don't visit inside the family's final resting place unless we're walling up a Redgrave, so nobody had noticed our father's crypt had been broken into, or knows when, but we've decided it had to be shortly after he was interred. In any event, the old lech's remains have been taken, providing we don't believe he somehow got up and toddled off on his own with a whacking great hole in his back."

The Redgraves had a lot to hide. Their sordid history going back two generations—and now a missing earl. "The Society took him? Why?"

Simon shrugged. "We don't know. Gideon believes they propped him up somewhere and held their own ritual. Remember, the rumors include that of devil worship, and Barry was their exalted leader or some such rot."

"Yes, I'd heard about that aspect of the Society. Rites, rituals, rumors of virgin sacrifices."

Valentine looked at him curiously, and Simon realized he just may have said too much. The man bantered so easily, it was easy to forget he was a Redgrave, and probably much more intelligent

than he let on. Gideon Redgrave got what he wanted through sophisticated intimidation; Valentine Redgrave probably did just as well with his outward charm.

"Is that so. Well, that's discouraging, isn't it? How would you know about that?"

"I've been investigating the two men you found for more than a year before you Redgraves joined the party, we could say. That included familiarizing myself with hellfire clubs in general. Scratch most anyone in one of the London clubs and they'll soon come up with stories their grandfather told them about Sir Francis Dashwood, and others like your father," Simon answered carefully, because he hadn't heard any of that, not officially. But he'd made it his business to learn anything and everything he could about the Society. In the past six months, he'd made the Redgraves themselves targets of his investigation, half hoping they were behind it all and he could get back to his own life.

Then again, who could say whether or not the Redgraves were acting out of loyalty to the Crown, or in some convoluted, self-serving way meant to take suspicion away from them? Give the Crown one small success to prove their loyalty, and then be able to operate with Prime Minister Perceval's full assistance. Simon wished he wasn't so inclined to like this odd family. Especially when it came to the quixotic Lady Katherine.

"In any event, we hope he's here, somewhere on the estate. We already know there were tunnels, because one caved in last year, as well as caves, although I've never seen one, so if they

exist they've been cleverly disguised. It's a large estate."

"I'll agree with that."

"Our grandmother doesn't know. We just want to find him and put him back. Barry was a rotter to his toes, from all accounts, but he was her son."

"And your sister knows this, as well? That the body has gone missing?"

"She does now."

Both men turned to see Kate standing at the other end of the balcony, more than half-hidden in the shadows. She stepped forward, her face pale in the moonlight, her arms wrapped about her as if she'd taken a chill. Simon felt an insane urge to go to her, hold her in his arms, comfort her.

"When were you going to tell me, Valentine? When I tripped over him?"

"Kate, I—"

"Never mind. I probably know the rest. The journals, the bible and the rest of it—the reborn Society and its plans to open England's door and let Napoleon stroll in. I'm a woman, yes, but I'm a Redgrave first. I'm a part of this. God help us, it's our heritage. So now that the farce is over, and not a moment too soon, we'll meet tomorrow morning at seven to take that ride, and then resume the search. Oh, and one thing more. Simon, I don't know how you're involved, or why Gideon allowed you here, but know this. You stay the bloody hell out of my way or I'll have your liver on a stick."

With that, she pulled open one of the other French doors and was gone.

Valentine took a long pull on his cigar and then rather violently tossed it down into the garden. “My apologies, Simon,” he said tightly. “I didn’t have a chance to introduce you before she took her exit. That was my sister Kate.”

Simon was still looking at the empty spot where Lady Katherine had stood. He felt incredible helplessness, not unmixed with guilt. “Shouldn’t you go after her? Clearly she’s upset.”

Valentine looked at him in some surprise. “That’s what you got from that? She’s upset? She’s homicidal, man, not that I blame her. Hell of a way to find out about old Barry.”

“I wouldn’t care for the method, no. Does she even remember him?”

Valentine shook his head. “No, she was only an infant. I don’t even remember him, or my mother for that matter. You can look at Barry in the Long Hall, but Maribel’s portrait is up in the attics if you want to see her—or you could just look at Kate.”

Simon thought for a few moments. “Sometimes it’s more comfortable to build castles in your mind than to actually live in one.”

“How marvelously obscure. But I understand what you’re saying. Kate probably built our parents into perfect beings in her mind, victims of circumstance and a cruel fate. They were far from that. Our grandmother told her everything she felt she had

to know before her first season, but these past weeks have been a painful revelation to all of us. Kate probably most of all. You're right, I have to go to her. If I don't appear by the time our mounts are brought round tomorrow morning, check to see if my body has been stuffed behind a rosebush. Here, take your cigar."

Simon nodded his thanks, but then slid the cigar into his pocket for later in the evening, as he doubted he'd find sleep easily tonight, so a head-clearing walk in the gardens might be in order. For the moment, he was going to find his way back to the long gallery and take another look at Barry Redgrave, and then hunt up the portrait of his father, the sixteenth earl, as well. He'd thought he'd seen something in the background of Barry's portrait earlier, but he'd dismissed it. Now he wanted a closer look without Dearborn standing behind him, because he'd imagined he'd seen the faint outline of a draped tartan painted in one dim corner inside the frame.

Not the Hunting Stuart tartan, which could be worn by anyone, but the distinctive red and green of the Royal Stuart, reserved for members of the Stuart line, and worn only with the permission of the king.

But that would be insane....

CHAPTER FOUR

KATE WATCHED AS Simon mounted his horse, a fine shiny brown stallion with a white blaze on its handsome face. The horse was ready for a run, but the marquis controlled it beautifully. Not that she'd compliment him on either his fine judge of horseflesh

or his horsemanship. Not now, and not if he cleared two five-bar fences while sitting backward in the saddle, playing the flute.

She wasn't feeling in charity with Simon Ravenbill this morning. She wasn't very happy about the world in general.

At least Valentine had now answered all her questions, promising he was holding nothing back and there would be no more unpleasant surprises.

The marquis of Singleton wasn't Valentine's new friend, but working for the government, and here with Gideon's blessing. She was only the silly young female who should be hoodwinked, tricked, cajoled if necessary, even romanced, just to keep her from knowing what any fool could see was happening beneath her own roof.

Gideon would get a scathing letter from her in the next few days. Valentine had already received notice of her displeasure with him, and Simon Ravenbill could just go hang, for all she cared.

"Where are we off to?" Valentine asked from atop his bay gelding. "Kate, which fields are lying fallow this year?"

"The entire West Run, but first I want to see the mausoleum."

"Kate," Valentine warned, but his tone was resigned. "All right, as I'd rather you didn't go on your own. Do you mind, Simon?"

Kate looked at him, her chin raised defiantly.

"Not a bit," he said affably, and then raised one eyebrow at her as if to say happy now, brat?

Clearly the gloves were off, for both of them. She didn't like him, and he— Well, she didn't know what he thought of her. Nothing good, surely, not after her explosion last night on the balcony.

She really should attempt to be a better hostess. If only any of her brothers ever brought home somebody normal.

Valentine dismounted, tossing the reins to one of the grooms. "You two go on ahead," he said as he walked toward the door. "I'll hunt up Dearborn and get the key."

Kate felt her stomach do a small flip. She did not want to be alone with the marquis. "No, we'll wait for—"

"Excellent idea," Simon interrupted. "Is it far? Hector here is on the frisk. I'd like to give him a short run rather than have to fight him."

"Kate, take the long way," Valentine called back over his shoulder. "I'll meet you there."

Kate was considering hot coals heaped on Val's head, and didn't immediately respond.

"You're thinking up a way to lose me in the woods?" Simon asked, drawing his mount up alongside her Daisy, who wasn't shy about indicating her interest in the stallion.

"No," she answered honestly. "I was mulling punishments for Val. But you were next on the list. What are your feelings as to thumbscrews?"

"I'm not particularly enamored, thank you, anyway. You know, I'd wondered if there might be a dungeon somewhere in

this great pile of stones."

Kate acknowledged the jab with a small smile as she urged Daisy ahead at a walk. "I suppose I should apologize for my behavior last night."

Simon returned her smile, still easily controlling the eager stallion. He didn't pull at the horse's mouth by trying to rein it in, or dominate the animal. It was his calm manner that had Hector obeying him. She could admire that sort of talent and understanding. And he really was quite handsome. He couldn't help that his hair was blond.

"The eavesdropping, or the designs on my liver?"

"Excuse me?" She'd really have to begin concentrating on what he was saying rather than how he looked. After all, he was only a man. She refused to be impressed.

"I was inquiring as to the possible subjects covered in your apology."

Now who wasn't listening? "I didn't apologize. I said I supposed I should."

"Ah, yes, you're right. I see the distinction. Would you mind if I apologized?"

She shook her head. "No, that would take too long, as I consider the list to be quite lengthy. I'll just graciously accept." They were clear of the circle now, and about to pass through the gates held open by Dickie and Liam. "To the top of the hill, my lord, and then bear to your right and follow the trail. It eventually leads us back around to the other side of the stone fence. You'll

be able to see the mausoleum tucked into the trees at the crest of the far hill. Show off if you feel the need, as I'm certain your mount can best mine, but please don't frighten the sheep."

And with that warning, she was off, urging Daisy into a full gallop.

She needed this. The morning sun on her face, the breeze blowing away the cobwebs in her head and easing the heaviness in her heart. Kate's life had been one long fairy tale here at Redgrave Manor, and even Trixie's explanation of her parents' tragic end had been something out of a storybook, made romantic in her mind. A misunderstanding, an impetuous challenge. A warning shot gone mortally astray. A devastated mother forced to leave her beloved children to escape arrest, but vowing to return for them, only to perish in the French Terror. Nearly a Shakespearian tragedy.

Kate could have been content with that fairy tale for all of her life, knowing she was deceiving herself, still embracing the deception. Now her world had turned upside down, and she'd been forced to grow up and face the truth. Oh, how that hurt. It hurt so much.

And it seemed every day brought a new revelation, a fresh ugliness to light. Kate couldn't go back to her carefully constructed cocoon of wishful dreams, but she couldn't look away from the nightmare. That the world could end up knowing every Redgrave secret was to be averted at all costs. That Simon Ravenbill already knew those secrets was humiliating past all

bearing.

But there was no getting rid of him, not if Gideon approved of his presence. She'd have to face him every day until the journals were found. If she hadn't had good reason to search for them before, she certainly had one now. Every time she looked at the marquis she would know he knew. And probably judged. Who wouldn't be suspicious, at the least, and disdainful at the most, of any offspring of two such immoral, deadly monsters who were their parents?

She heard the sound of hoofbeats behind her and moved to the side of the riding trail.

"I'll be mindful of the sheep!" Simon called out cheerfully as he and his mount blew by her as if Daisy were moving at a sedate trot.

"Show-off, indeed," Kate muttered, watching him go, the stallion's hooves kicking up great clouds of brown dust from the dirt trail, the breeze blowing it all straight back at her. She now had two choices: ride the rest of the way eating dust in Simon's wake, or reining in the mare and only following once he was off the trail and onto the grass. She chose the latter alternative. "Daisy," she said, brushing dust off the shoulders of her dark blue riding habit, "I do believe this means war. And as he threw down the gauntlet, it's left to me to choose the weapons—or something like that."

Wasn't it strange? She felt much more in charity with Simon when he treated her as her brothers did...as his equal. But this

was still war, and he had to be taught a lesson!

By the time she'd reached the mausoleum, Kate had made her choice. Valentine wanted her to practice? She'd practice. But she'd do it her way, as herself and not as some simpering debutante, and Simon would either tumble madly in love with her or go running back to London in fear for his sanity. After all, she was a Redgrave, so it could go either way. And, either way, she'd have his solemn vow to never speak a word of what he knew before she, at least figuratively, kicked him out the door.

Yes, it was the perfect plan. Hadn't Trixie told her women always win any battle between the sexes, because they are born with more interesting weapons. Kate at last believed she truly understood what her grandmother had meant.

Simon, who had already dismounted and had been sitting on an iron bench placed outside the mausoleum, quickly rose and went to assist Kate from the saddle. But she was far ahead of him, intent on being Kate: she merely tossed him the reins, then lifted her leg to disengage from the pommel, kicked her other leg free of the stirrup and lightly leaped to the ground.

"Very neatly done," Simon complimented her coolly. "And here I had been so hoping to help you dismount. A man lives for such opportunities, you know. My hands spanning that narrow waist, drawing you closer as I slowly lower you to the ground. A chance for an accidental brushing together of bodies..."

"And an even greater chance of suddenly finding yourself rump down in the dirt." Kate, far from missish or easily flustered,

responded without heat, already looking past him to the large stone mausoleum. She ignored completely the small tingle just then running up her spine. What a maddening man—up close like this, he even smelled good!

"A risk I'd eagerly accept."

"Then more fool you." He wasn't going to stop, was he? This called for a change of subject. She kept her eyes on the mausoleum, certain if she looked at him his green eyes would be laughing. How dare he find her amusing! "But thank you for your attempt at distracting me, although it hasn't worked. Imposing up close like this, isn't it? And even larger than I remember from the one time I thought it might be interesting to peek inside, although the stained-glass windows prevented that."

"All right, I'll stop teasing you now. Yes, quite imposing, like everything else at Redgrave Manor. The pillars make for a nice touch. Do you come up here often?"

"Never." Kate shook her head. If she visited her father's grave, it would only remind her of her mother's probably unmarked grave in France. But she wouldn't tell him that. "Trixie always says the dead can keep each other company well enough. It's not as if they're really here, you know." She shook her head again. "Well, Barry isn't, that's for certain, not unless he's haunting the place, looking for his body. Do you believe in ghosts, and talking to the dead?"

Simon had tied Daisy's reins to a tree branch on the opposite side of the mausoleum from his stallion, and now stood beside

Kate once more as they both stared at the family tomb. “I don’t think I’ve given the subject much thought. I would like to speak to my brother, though. A lot of questions could be answered if we had the chance of hearing a voice from beyond one last time.”

Once again Kate thought about her mother. Had Maribel lingered long enough to kiss her infant daughter goodbye, or had she just run off with her French lover? She sighed and turned away. “But we might not like the answers.”

Simon put his hands on her shoulders and turned her toward him. “Look, Kate...every family has its share of scandal of one sort or another. I’m not judging, and I wish to God I didn’t need to know what I need to know. But I am here to help. Not to be overly dramatic, but lives depend on us finding those journals, that supposed bible. So, can we forget yesterday ever happened, and begin again? With you being you and me being me, and all three of us dedicated to the search.”

“I don’t know,” Kate answered, avoiding his mesmerizing green eyes, his open and honest green eyes. She felt so...drawn to him. The idea that had seemed brilliant not ten minutes earlier was now hastily discarded as she remembered swords cut both ways. Trapping him, she could end up trapping herself. Trixie had never mentioned that possibility. Her grandmother could snap her fingers and walk away from anyone except her adored grandchildren, whom she’d kill for if necessary, and without a blink. Love was a game she played well, but Kate was surprised and dismayed to realize perhaps she didn’t share Trixie’s prowess.

She took a deep breath and turned to look at him, determined to face him down. “In other words, no more outrageous comments such as the one you made about helping me dismount?” And felt her knees melt as he smiled at her, his eyes twinkling with mischief once more.

“Ask me not to breathe. It would be simpler.”

Oh, enough of this! Kate willed her knees to stiffen and then rolled her eyes at such blatant nonsense. She didn’t know if she was impressing him, but her defensive actions hadn’t done much for her still slightly wobbly knees. Compliments, sweet words, made her nervous, that’s all it was; she never knew how to respond. “So, you being you means you’re prone to spouting ridiculousness like that at the drop of a handkerchief—not that I’m dropping mine, let’s be clear about that. If so, you could stop now, because I know you don’t mean it.”

“I don’t? Are you certain of that?”

“I’m certain you’re nothing like anyone I met in London.” She rocked on the heels of her riding boots, every nerve in her body tingling with an awareness the two of them were quite alone at the top of this dratted hill and out of sight of the house. Next thing she knew, Simon would start waxing poetic about her fetching smile, or some such rot—and how would she respond to that? When one was complimented, did that make one beholden to send a compliment winging back? And where would that lead? At the rate Simon was moving, she’d soon find out what step four is! Oh, where was Valentine? What was taking him so long? It

was only a stupid key.

"That's probably because I was never meant to be the marquis."

"What?" Kate realized her mind was wandering, perhaps even running in panicked circles.

"You said I wasn't like any men you met in London, and I offered that this might be because I wasn't raised to be the marquis. I happily chose a more rough and tumble life, as suited my embarrassingly plebeian nature. Or so my late father said as he happily agreed to buy me a commission and pack me off to sea. London truly does bore me. In the Royal Navy, the chain of command has a reason. In society, it's all a bunch of self-important people deciding who should bow lower to whom because of who their father was."

Exactly as she felt about the patronesses of Almacks. How strange. "People bow to my brother Gideon because they'd be fools not to," Kate pointed out, not without pride. "It certainly can't be because of who our father was. Gideon is his own man."

"And you are very much your own woman, if you'd let yourself realize that, and not allow Val or Gideon or your grandmother or anyone else to tell you to change. The last thing you aren't, however, is either of your parents. Or am I wrong, and the fact I've learned certain things about your family isn't what's standing between the two of us getting to know each other better?"

Kate tilted her head to one side, rhythmically tapping her small

riding crop against her thigh. Too close, he was getting too close. “You know, Simon, just when I think I can begin to like you, you go and say something like that. What makes you think you can presume to peek inside my head?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps it’s because we’re more alike, you and I, than you know. We feel...responsible.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

Simon looked past her, down the hill. “It means you’re not the only one who would like all of this to disappear, have never happened. Can I trust you?”

Kate could feel her heart pounding against her ribs. For the first time, she knew he was being deadly serious. “I don’t know. Should I trust you?”

“I won’t presume to answer that for you, Kate. Make up your own mind. I’ll be waiting with Henry and his hound at midnight. Some things are easier said in the dark.”

“Henry? Who told you about Hen—?”

But Simon was walking away from her, his right hand already extended to grab the bridle of Valentine’s horse. “Did you get lost along the way?”

Valentine dismounted, looking somewhat harassed. “Nothing that simple. It seems Adam got himself locked in a linen cupboard.”

Kate looked at Simon, who was a distinct distraction and puzzle, and then to the doors of the mausoleum, which were both beckoning her and repelling her, and decided, for the moment at

least, she'd much rather hear about Adam.

"How did he get locked in a cupboard?" she asked, joining the men. "More important, whatever possessed you to let him out again?"

"It wasn't an easy decision, believe me. Then again, listening to him bleat about there possibly being spiders sharing the dark with him was equally embarrassing as the reason he was in there. When nobody seemed able to locate the key, I suggested a hatchet, but Adam screamed I was trying to kill him, so we gave that up as a bad idea. As to the why of the thing, it would seem our new relative woke early today, feeling amorous, and spied out a maid bending over the fireplace grate. Needless to say, Adam needed no further invitation."

"Oh, the poor thing," Kate said in dismay. "Who is she?"

"I didn't ask, but I'm told by Mrs. Justis the girl is fine. I sent her my compliments and gave her the rest of the day off. Now, let me get on with the story, which I'll relate quickly. The nameless but brilliant maid suggested they postpone their liaison until she quickly did something Mrs. Justis asked her to do. Adam was to await her in the large linen cupboard on the third floor, as Adam's valet was just in the other room, because, and I quote, 'I gets noisy sometimes, you know?' All of which he agreed to, of course, because he's a bumble-brained idiot. She waited in the shadows until he was inside, then snuck up and locked the door before disposing of the key. She threw it from the nearest window. It took six of us to locate it."

By now Kate was nearly bent in half, suffering a case of the giggles. She'd have to find out which of the maids was involved, and then invite her to her bedchamber so she could hear the story again, with many more of the details.

"Excuse me, Kate, for this indelicate question, but I have to know," Simon said, "as I'm already building a picture of this in my head. Val, were his breeches on or off?"

"On," Valentine responded, his smile lopsided, at last losing the glowering expression he'd arrived wearing. "But buttoned incorrectly. Otherwise I might have been tempted to choke him with them. That boy needs some straightening out, with no thanks to the claptrap his father fed him. I ordered him to present himself to me—properly buttoned—in Gideon's study in one hour. If you knew what he said to me—" Again, he looked at his sister. "Never mind."

"Don't look at me like that, Val. I don't need to know everything. Besides, I'm busy building my own unlikely pictures, although I'm having some trouble painting one of you being the stern voice of reason and maturity."

Valentine looked relieved she hadn't pressed him for more. "Don't pin all your hopes on that eventuality, Kate. I may bring home my points by repeatedly dunking him head and shoulders into a horse trough until he either drowns or promises me he understands."

They all laughed, but then Kate remembered the last piece of Valentine's tale. "If you're busy schooling Adam, does that mean

we can't continue the search until this afternoon?"

"No," Valentine said, extracting a large black key from a pocket in his hacking jacket, "you two can manage well enough on your own this morning without me, I'm sure. It may be time to broaden the search from the house to the grounds, anyway. Now let's get this over with, not that there can be much of anything to see."

Kate looked to the heavy iron doors, suddenly not so anxious to go inside the family tomb as she had been the moment she'd heard about the theft of her father's body. She'd never been inside the mausoleum, not in all of her life. No Redgraves had died in her lifetime except her parents, and Trixie was adamant about leaving the dead in peace, even going so far as to say she'd probably haunt anyone who dared disturb her rest with weeping or the cloying smell of too many flowers.

Now Kate found herself wondering if her grandmother feared death, and deliberately avoided any reminders Redgraves weren't immortal. It certainly couldn't be just any mausoleum that bothered her; she'd just tripped merrily off to a pair of funerals. Or was it that she couldn't face evidence of her only son's death in particular?

"Kate, are you coming?" Valentine called to her. "This was your idea, remember?"

"I remember," she said, allowing Simon to take her hand as he stood on the marble steps, to assist her. "You can let go now," she reluctantly whispered as they followed Valentine into

the high-ceilinged, dome-top crypt. It was both cold and dim inside, the only light provided by the leaded glass panes in the ceiling and two small stained-glass windows, one definitely a recent replacement, as its many-colored panes were grime-free. Clearly even Mrs. Justis and her small army of maids considered the mausoleum out of bounds between interments.

That explained why it had taken nearly twenty years and a fallen tree branch for anyone to discover her father's body had gone missing. It didn't explain Trixie's avoidance of the final resting places of both her son and husband.

Or was Kate now looking at everything she believed with new eyes?

"You won't see much if you don't open your eyes," Simon told her softly, leaning in close to her as if he knew she was all but shaking in her boots. "Stacked to the dome on three sides. Extremely impressive. There must be more than a hundred tombs in here."

Kate kept her chin lowered and peered upward through her lashes, not really wanting to see. Simon was right. Everything was excruciatingly neat, almost mathematically so; row upon row of long cubicles, each fronted with marble and inscribed with a name and two dates. They'd started at the top, and descended from there, row by row, as if the tombs were a linear depiction of the Redgrave family tree.

The family must have dug up any ancestors who had been planted elsewhere and brought them here when this enormous

mausoleum was built. And wasn't that...disturbing.

On the right wall there were still four rows of empty shelves. Twenty more bodies and the mausoleum would be filled. They looked like dark, empty maws, awaiting their prey.

Kate looked away, feeling ashamed. She'd never considered herself fanciful, but she could swear all these generations of Redgraves were calling to her; pleading fix this, don't allow us all to be shamed by the actions of a few.

"Here it is, Kate," Valentine said, directing her attention to the last opening on the fifth shelf. "Gideon thinks they chiseled out the stone and then carefully put it back, but with inferior mortar. That's what happens when supposed gentlemen are forced to put their hands to real work. The stone was found on the floor, cracked in two, and Barry's coffin gone. You can see bits of mortar sticking to the iron shelving and the stone, as well. Now can we get the hell out of here?"

"In a moment," Simon said, still holding Kate's hand as he approached the violated tomb, but then passed by it to the next one. "'Charles Barry Redgrave, Sixteenth Earl of Saltwood.'" He rubbed his hand across the stone. "It looks as if something was affixed here, just below the dates, and then removed. See the holes, and the damage to the stone? As if someone went at it with a chisel, and rather angrily at that." He leaned in closer. "A coat of arms, perhaps?"

Valentine repeated Simon's action, and then began examining other stones, walking around the room, stopping here and there.

“Well spotted, Simon. It looks as if each earl sports a replica of the Redgrave coat of arms, all done up out of silver and colored enamels. I suppose we need to replace my grandfather’s, and Barry’s, as well, if we can find it. You’re certain it didn’t just loosen and fall out?”

Now Kate took her turn in front of the stone, running her gloved fingers over it, still able to feel the small chinks in the otherwise flat surface. “But wouldn’t both have been found on the floor when Gideon came to inspect it after the servants’ report about the crypt being empty? Do you think they were stolen?”

“They’re silver, Kate, so it’s possible. But why steal only two when you can take them all? Besides, Dearborn actually keeps the only key inside a locked box, and that key with his ring of butler keys that never leaves him. Nobody comes in here unless they’ve got his permission. Any other suggestions? A ghostie wielding a hammer and chisel, perhaps?”

Kate pulled a face at her brother and turned to leave the mausoleum. She didn’t know what she’d hoped to find, or feel, or learn here. She’d just known she’d had to come. Now all she wanted was to be gone, flying across the fields of the West Run with Daisy, the chill of the stone tomb and the stench of stale air replaced by the warmth of sunlight and a clean, fresh breeze. She needed to take herself as far from death as she could get.

“Here, I’ll boost you up,” Simon said from behind her, even as his hands clamped about her waist and she was lifted high, then settled into the sidesaddle with such ease it was embarrassing.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she told him, adjusting the military shako hat that had slipped down over her eyes. “I could have managed. My brothers never believed in coddling me, and I actually much prefer it that way. I often ride alone on the estate, and they felt I should know how to remount if I fell off—which I never have.”

“That very nearly makes sense, except for the part about you riding out without a groom in tow, which is bloody stupid.” He handed her the reins. “Very well, remind me to do you no more favors.”

Rough and tumble. That’s what he’d said was how his father had described his younger son. And for all Simon’s outward polish, clearly something about her allowed him to speak and act as his real self. She believed she could be either flattered or insulted, and immediately decided on flattered. Especially since it allowed her to be herself.

“I have reminded you, repeatedly. I’m not helpless, and don’t care to be made to feel that way.” She raised her voice so Valentine, who was still locking the doors, could hear her. “I’m heading for the West Run. You can follow or not.”

“And the breeze will dry those tears you don’t want anyone to see,” Simon said quietly, shaking his head. “You’re the prickliest woman I’ve ever met. Have you ever wondered what you’re trying to prove?”

Kate opened her mouth to say something scathing, but then realized she had no answer for the man. He’d bested her. She

tugged on the reins with more force than care, so that a confused Daisy actually turned her head as if to be sure who was atop her before setting off toward the fields of the West Run.

Maybe somewhere along the way, Kate thought, she might discover why she felt it so important to keep Simon Ravenbill at arm's length. She'd already thought up and discarded several reasons, from his hair color, to his and Valentine's attempted deception, to her family pride. But did she really want him gone? Even her foolish plan to keep him away had hinged on deliberately drawing him closer.

Was she afraid of Simon Ravenbill? Or was she afraid of how Simon Ravenbill made her feel? He made her feel like a woman, and she wasn't certain she was comfortable with that.

CHAPTER FIVE

SIMON WATCHED AS Kate rode off, her spine ramrod straight, wondering if he looked long enough whether he'd see smoke emanating from her ears. She was the most interesting, maddening, not romantically inclined, exotically beautiful woman he'd ever encountered, and the more she pushed him away the more he longed to know her better.

He might consider her actions to be a ploy meant to draw him closer. But, no, not Kate. He was more than certain she said what she meant. Or what she thought she meant...

So. Did he now tag along after her like some lovesick swain hoping for crumbs—or possibly a rousing argument—or did he ride back to the Manor with Valentine to tell him what he was

beginning to suspect?

If he told Valentine without including Kate in the telling, he would be at least figuratively putting his life in her hands.

Then again, chasing after her could pretty much guarantee the same result.

Simon laughed softly as he considered his dilemma.

But, if he was going to be hanged, it might as well be for a sheep rather than a lamb.

"She says you allow her to ride unaccompanied," he said, watching Valentine mount.

Valentine settled into the saddle. "Oh, she did, did she? At least she almost got it right. It's more that we'd rather she do it openly than sneak behind our backs. Either way, she rides when she wants to ride. Did you see the bell nailed to the stable wall?"

"No, I haven't yet visited the stables. But doesn't the bell go on the cat?"

Valentine laughed, acknowledging the joke. "Whenever Kate rides out alone one of the grooms rings the bell, an action repeated across the estate by those who hear it. Rather a heads-up to be on the lookout for her, you understand. If she's off to the West Run, we know it by the bells. Toward the village, we know that, as well. Et cetera. She's not as alone as she thinks, everyone watches for her. When she returns, the groom rings the all-clear. It sounds convoluted, I know, but believe me, it's much simpler than trying to keep Kate to the rules."

"And she doesn't realize this?"

“Of course she does, unless she thinks some bloody angels are ringing mystical cowbells as they greet her along the way. She doesn’t acknowledge it, which to my sister’s mind is rather as if it isn’t happening. I suppose you could say she’s being accommodating. She may even think she’s won. You never know with Kate.”

“Yes, I’m beginning to see that. No cowbells needed today, I’ll go after her. In a moment. What did that hen-witted twit say to you?”

Valentine brushed at the sleeve of his riding jacket, as if attempting to remove a smut of something unpleasant that had got stuck there. “Nothing worth committing to memory, I assure you. He’s as ready to go as any young lad of his age, but with twice the brass because he’s been convinced he’s entitled. He’s a parrot for his father’s teachings, you understand. What randy young pup doesn’t want to hear women have been placed on this earth to please him? Men rule the world and are, again, entitled to anything they want. Oh, although we can thank our lucky stars Turner Collier hadn’t gotten so far in Adam’s lessons to actually show him how men gain strength and power by bedding as many women as possible, most notably during their supposed ceremonies. So everyone can observe and join in, perhaps applaud, you understand. The mind fairly boggles, doesn’t it?”

“It’s disgusting,” Simon said, fighting back a mental image he could feel forming in the back of his brain.

“Despicable, I agree. But useful for keeping members in line and blackmailing their carefully selected guests—the journals, remember? Gideon remarked that it comes down to a simple strategy of play tonight my good fellow, to the top of your bent, unaware you’ll pay tomorrow. You’ve had your every sexual whim provided for, and will so again—we just ask you to first do us this one small favor.”

Simon nodded. “Such as the recent attempt to divert supplies meant for the troops massing on the Peninsula. Not traitors, not primarily, but weak-minded men who don’t want their pleasures taken away.”

“As far as it goes, yes. You’re forgetting the implied or else. Lord only knows the forms the threats might take. We think the first favor is fairly innocuous, but then they’ve really got the man on their hook. After that, they own him pretty much body and soul, and the favors turn to outright crime, even treason, poor bastards. Didn’t Gideon share all of this with you in Perceval’s office?”

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