A Fine Regency Romance!
KASEY MICHAELS
WHAT AN EARL WANTS

Кейси Майклс
What an Earl Wants

Аннотация

Gideon Redgrave, eldest child of the late Earl of Saltwood, refuses to be humbled by the scandal that once tore his family apart. He's built his life in London society around one rule: trust no one. So the last thing he wants is to play guardian and role model to a headstrong boy… or to engage in a battle of wills with the boy's spirited half-sister, who is fighting Gideon for custody.Beautiful and bold, the young widow Jessica Linden proves to be a formidable and passionate adversary. But the more they lock horns, the more Gideon realizes he'd prefer to have Jessica on his side…and in his arms. Especially now that a new threat—sprung from his father's supposedly defunct secret society—is poised to destroy the Redgraves once and for all.Praise for Kasey Michaels'Kasey Michaels aims for the heart and never misses' - NYT bestselling author Nora Roberts'One of the finest Regency writers does it again… Wit, humour and cleverness combine to create an utterly delicious romance, just the kind readers relish' - RT Books Reviews on The Taming of the Rake'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

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Praise for bestselling author KASEY MICHAELS

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

—*New York Times* bestselling author Nora Roberts

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

—*Publishers Weekly* on *A Midsummer Night's Sin*

'One of the finest Regency writers does it again…

Wit, humour and cleverness combine to create an utterly delicious romance, just the kind readers relish.'

—*RT Book Reviews* on *The Taming of the Rake*

'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 can write everything from a lighthearted romp to a far more serious-themed romance. [She] has outdone herself.'

—*RT Book Reviews* on *A Gentleman by Any Other Name*(Top Pick)

'…a sensual romance filled with crackling dialogue

reminiscent of *The Philadelphia Story.'*

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Everything's Coming Up Rosie*

Also available from Kasey Michaels

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The Redgraves 'The Wedding Party' Rules of Engagement

Coming soon What a Lady Needs

Dear Reader,

For this series of four books, I've stepped back in time to the year just before the Regency officially began in February of 1811.

Hellfire clubs have always interested me, as has the politics surrounding the years of the Napoleonic Wars. The thing is, however, when I read histories I immediately begin weaving plots and peopling those plots with characters who make the whole business of history more alive to me.

You could say that's the reason for all historical romances, I suppose. A love of the era you're reading about, and an interest in the well-being and happily-ever-afters of the characters the author has plunked down in the middle of all of it.

I hope you enjoy *What An Earl Wants*, and then move on to read the stories of the earl's three siblings, the headstrong Lady Katherine, the frankly adorable Valentine and the (he believes) love-resistant Maximillian.

Happy reading…and please visit me online if you have a chance!

Kasey Michaels

What an Earl Wants

Kasey Michaels

www.millsandboon.co.uk

With affection, to Debi Allen,
lovely lady *extraordinaire!*

PROLOGUE

Kent, England
1789

THE GROUND SEEMED SUITABLE enough for the purpose. Nearly a tunnel of well-scythed lawn on the Saltwood estate, the carefully planted double row of trees serving as a rather romantical canopy overhead. Or it would have, were it summer, which it was not. In fact, it was the dead of winter and, in the false light before dawn, cold as a witch's teat.

But, then again, no colder than the heart of the man now surveying the scene, no matter how appearances would prompt the casual onlooker to dismiss him as a mindless dandy.

"I say, Burke, shouldn't there be a mist curling about our legs? Yes, I'm convinced of it. All the best early morning duels feature wispy tendrils of curling mist. I would have thought it mandatory. You'll hold my cape, of course?"

The seventeenth Earl of Saltwood, one Barry Redgrave by name, lifted his arms and negligently shrugged out of his sable-lined cape, then laughed as his horrified valet sprang forward in a panic to rescue the magnificent thing before it could hit the ground.

"Ah, well executed, Burke. My compliments." Relieved of the concealing cape, the earl was revealed to be not only a well set-up gentleman but also an exceedingly handsome man, or would

be, were it not for a certain indescribable hardness about his dark blue eyes. His humor never quite seemed to reach them.

"You've drunk half the night away, my lord. You really must reconsider your timing," Burke pleaded, now struggling with both the cape and the heavy rosewood box containing the Saltwood dueling pistols.

"I must, Burke?" The earl removed his tricornered hat with the lilac plume, placed it on Burke's head at a jaunty angle, and then discreetly adjusted his snow-white periwig. "Why? Because of the lack of a mist? God's teeth, man, it's actually in the rules?"

"I don't believe so, my lord, no. I meant only that you might be a mite…foxed, my lord," the valet said, sighing.

"More than a mite, Burke," the earl acknowledged, suddenly seeming amazingly sober. "I do my best shooting when three parts drunk. But if it calms you, I promise if I see three of him I'll prudently aim for the one in the middle. However, if the unthinkable were to occur, you know what to do."

"Yes, my lord," Burke said, visibly trembling. "Everything goes to the Keeper, who also knows what to do."

"Make me pretty, Burke, and well attended by handmaidens, or I shall come back to haunt you," his lordship warned, and then laughed at his valet's horrified expression. "I'm not about to *die*, you old woman. I'll never die. Satan protects his own. Now, how does our importune Frenchman look to you? Quavering in his boots I should hope, as my reputation must surely precede me."

Burke hazarded a look toward the plain black coach and the

surgeon just now conversing with the very tall man and his second. “I don’t think so, no, sir. Rather, I should say, he appears *determined*. I should be remiss if I failed to mention that the duty of a second is to dissuade you from dueling, sir, and to broker a peace with the opponent’s second, one that will be acceptable to both sides.”

“A waste of breath best employed to cool your porridge once we’re finished here, Burke. There can be no acceptable solution other than that already decided upon. The man has been poking my lady wife.”

“Many have, sir,” Burke said, sighing once more. “Begging your pardon, my lord, and no offense meant.”

“None taken, my good man,” the earl said, flourishing a snowy linen handkerchief unearthed from his magnificent lace cuff before delicately pressing it to the right corner of his mouth, so as to not disturb the small star-shaped black patch he wore at the left. “Maribel has seen more cocks than any three generations of hens. With my express encouragement, although I should point out she defied me with this one. In any event, her perfidy serves only as a convenient excuse.”

“Sir?”

“Ah, my apologies. I wasn’t clear enough for you, Burke? It has become apparent to me for reasons I won’t bore you with at the moment that my opponent must cease drawing breath in the next quarter hour at most.” The earl replaced the handkerchief and shot his cuffs before smoothing down the lilac velvet of his frock

coat, putting out his right foot to admire the dull sheen of his satin breeches in the waning moonlight. “Too much, do you think, Burke? This rig-out, I mean. I didn’t wish to appear shabby, although I might make a richer target in this cursed moonlight than previously considered. Well, no matter. Shall we be on with it?”

“If there is no other way?”

The earl’s jawline went hard as he touched a hand to the small golden pin in the shape of a rose in full bloom stuck into the foaming lace of his cravat. “There probably exist a veritable plethora of other ways, but I have chosen this one, magnanimously granting the dishonorable creature an honorable death. Civilized murder, if you will, with man-made rules. And, of course, a lesson quite literally brought home to my lady wife, hmm, when I bring his bloodied body to her bedchamber, to fling it at her feet? Please allow my fornicating opponent first choice of weapons.”

Burke did as he was told, and much too short a time later he was huddled alongside the surgeon and the other second, watching the combatants stand backto-back, pistols raised to their shoulders, the duel about to commence. The earl appeared to be at his ease, a smile on his handsome face. The Frenchman, his chin held high, was pale-cheeked yet determined, as if knowing he was probably about to die.

Yes, Burke thought, civilized murder. All but an execution.

The earl himself began counting out the paces before they

would stop, turn and shoot. "…eight…nine…*ten*."

Burke closed his eyes, only opening them again when the sound of a single shot ripped the morning silence, jolting nesting birds into startled flight. The two men now faced each other across the expanse of winter dead grass, their right arms extended, their pistols aimed at each other. Rather like statues, frozen in place.

But then the earl turned about rather stiffly, as if hunting something, and Burke looked to the opposite line of trees and the cloaked figure standing there, head and shoulders wreathed in blue smoke.

"Now there's something I hadn't expected…" the Earl of Saltwood said at last, just before he dropped to his knees and pitched forward onto the ground, dead.

CHAPTER ONE

London, England 1810

THE EIGHTEENTH EARL of Saltwood, one Gideon Redgrave by name, struck a pose just inside the entrance of the narrow house in Jermyn Street, looking for all the world a sketch from the *Journal des Dames et des Modes* come to life. Not by so much as a flicker of an eyelid did he give away the fact that he'd no idea he'd knocked on the door of number forty-seven only to be ushered into a gaming house. His man of business would answer for that omission when next he saw him; the earl didn't care for surprises.

He allowed a curtsying maid of indeterminate years to relieve him of his hat, gloves and cane, and then shrugged off his evening cloak, watching as the woman folded it lovingly over her arm. A gold coin appeared from his pocket, and he held it in front of her wideopen blue eyes. A copper coin would do for most, but Gideon Redgrave believed the gold coin to be an investment, one that would pay dividends when his belongings came back to him in the same pristine condition in which they'd been handed over, rather than having suffered the unfortunate accident of walking out the door in his absence.

"Yours if my possessions are safely returned when I leave," he told her, and the maid bobbed her head enthusiastically before scurrying away.

He resumed his pose, meant to have all eyes come to him and their owners too busy being either envious or impressed to think up mischief while he surreptitiously acclimated himself to his surroundings. And the eighteenth Earl of Saltwood's appearance was, without fail, nothing short of enviably impressive.

The superb tailoring of his darkest blue cut-away tailcoat accentuated the snowy perfection of his silk brocade waistcoat, but not so much as it displayed the earl's astonishingly fit physique, broad shoulders, flat stomach and narrow waist. Pantaloons of formfitting buff doeskin clung lovingly to long, muscular lower limbs, ending just at the calf, above silk stockings and low-heeled black patent evening shoes.

His only ornamentation, other than the thin black grosgrain ribbon hanging about his neck and attached to the quizzing glass tucked into a small pocket of his waistcoat, was the small golden rose depicted in full bloom and no more than a single inch in circumference, nestled in the folds of his intricately tied cravat. This latter bit of fancy was a recent affectation, one that had caused comment in some circles, but to date, no one had dared speak of it to his lordship.

Thick, longish hair the color of midnight tumbled over his smooth forehead in natural curls that sent other gentlemen to their valets and the crimping iron to duplicate. Hints of his Spanish mother could be seen in the strong, aquiline nose that saved him from too much beauty, the unexpected fullness of his mouth, the sensual smolder in his dark eyes. There

was an earthiness about the man not completely disguised by the trappings of fine clothes, a sense of dangerous energy tightly leashed yet always simmering just below the sophisticated surface.

In a word, the eighteenth Earl of Saltwood was intimidating. In two, if applying to the female population, he was marvelously irresistible.

When he was noticed, and he was always noticed, several of the men who recognized him for what he was, if not who he was, prudently realized they had pressing business elsewhere and quit the room in some haste. Conversations broke off abruptly. Hands stilled in the act of shuffling cards or pulling in chips. The more daring among the players turned their chairs about for a better view of what was sure to be an interesting few minutes, at the least.

One of the hostesses, the term surely taken quite as loosely as the morals of any female in the hall, ran her moist tongue around her lips rather hungrily. She gave her smiling approval of the impossible-to-disguise manly muscle between the gentleman's thighs and took two steps forward, tugging down on the already low neckline of her cherry-red gown before she was grabbed at the elbow and hastily pulled back.

"For Lord's sake, Mildred, control yourself. He's not here for that."

Gideon Redgrave extracted his chased-gold quizzing glass, raising it to one eye, and slowly surveyed the surprisingly well-lit

and clean yet faintly down-at-the-heels room before allowing his gaze to halt and hold on the woman who had just spoken.

She advanced on him with some purpose, the light of confrontation in her sherry-brown eyes, her fairly remarkable chin tilted up as if she had somehow raised the battle flag and was announcing her intention to unleash a broadside. But then she stopped, smiled and dropped into a mocking curtsy.

"Lord Saltwood," she intoned quietly, her voice slightly husky, as if she might be whispering risqué endearments in the privacy of a candlelit boudoir, "I've been expecting you. Do you prefer a public airing of our differences, or would you care to retire to my apartments for our chat?"

She was…magnificent. Gideon could think of no other description. Taller than most women, slim almost to the point of thinness, yet subtly curved. Hair the color of flame against the severity of her high-necked black gown, skin the color of finest ivory. The eyes, mocking, the mouth, full and wide…and *knowing*. No sane man could look at her without imagining his fingers tangling in that mass of warm curls tumbling around her shoulders, sinking himself deep between her thighs, plunging into the promised fire as she wrapped long legs up high around him.

Which, of course, would be total madness.

Gideon's eyes widened fractionally, just enough to dislodge the glass, and he deftly caught it by its ribbon and replaced it in his pocket. "You've the advantage of me, madam. you are—?"

“Exactly who you think I am, my lord,” she returned, her wide smile frosting only slightly about the edges. “And now that you and your glowering face have served to quite ruin what had promised to be a profitable evening, you will please follow me.”

She turned sharply, the scent of sweet lavender tickling his nostrils as her fiery mane, seeming much too heavy for her slim neck, swung about as if in a belated attempt to catch up with her. Her modest gown, a stiff, unyielding taffeta so in contrast to the riot of tumbling curls, rustled as she walked.

“Here now, where do you think you’re—?”

She raised her hand to the faintly rotund, gray-haired man who had stepped out from behind the faro table, his eyes on the earl as if measuring his chances of knocking him down. Though he clearly found them miniscule, he straightened his shoulders, no doubt prepared to give his best if asked. “Simply carry on, Richard, if you please. I’m fine.”

“Yes, you do that, Richard,” Gideon drawled as he and the woman easily made their way through the throng of patrons who had all stepped back to afford them a pathway. He was painfully aware he somehow had been put in the ignoble position of potential despoiler of virgins, which was above everything ludicrous. “Your employer’s virtue is safe with me.”

A young man, looking fresh from the country and obviously a fellow with more hair than wit, dared to chuckle at this remark. “There’s virtue here? Stap me, I wouldn’t have come if it was *virtue* I was looking for.”

“Stubble it, Figgins,” the man next to him warned, saving Gideon the trouble of having to turn back and waste a dark stare on the impudent puppy. “Don’t you know who that is? The fella’s a Redgrave, for God’s sakes. He spits bigger’n you.”

Gideon suppressed a smile. He hadn’t heard that one before. But how convenient that his reputation preceded him; it made life so much easier.

He stepped forward as he realized the woman had stopped in front of a baize door, clearly waiting on him to open it for her. Liked to play at the lady, it would seem, straight down to the prim black gown and the erect nature of her posture. Pity for her that her hair and eyes and mouth—and that voice—hadn’t been informed of this preferred pretense.

“Oh, please, allow me,” he drawled sarcastically, bowing her ahead of him as he depressed the latch, before following her up a long, steep flight of stairs surprisingly located just on the other side of the door. The stairs were between two walls and just well lit enough for him to be able to enjoy the sway of her bottom as she climbed ahead of him, holding up her stiff skirts, affording him a tantalizing glimpse of slim ankles, as well. Ah, and a hint of calf. Lovely.

The woman was contradiction after contradiction. Buttoned nearly to her chin, yet her slippers were silver-heeled black satin. He could imagine himself kissing them from her feet and then rolling down her hose, just so far, because he enjoyed the feel of silk-encased legs on his back… .

He was forced to hold the banister as she stopped, extracting a key from a pocket in her gown and slipping it into the lock. He'd wondered about that, the easy access to the staircase, and how many times in the course of an evening this route might be traveled by patrons and the women.

As if to assure him, she stepped inside the apartments, motioning for him to close the door behind him as she said, "No one is allowed here. We won't be disturbed. Would you care for wine, or would you rather simply be on with it?"

"That's direct, in any case. Be on with what, madam? I had thought I was calling at a private residence, the object conversation. Seeing the nature of this house, the possibilities have become almost limitless. Not that I'm not tempted."

She lit a taper and gracefully moved about the room, lighting candles. "You flatter yourself, my lord, and insult me. I'm not in such dire need of funds. We turn cards here, nothing else."

Gideon sat himself down on a nearby chair, deciding she could remain standing if she so wished, but he was going to make himself comfortable. Redgraves always made themselves comfortable; and the more comfortable they looked, the more on guard any sane person in their midst became. "You might explain that to—Mildred, was it?" he suggested amicably.

He did his best not to blink as she toed off the silver-heeled shoes and kicked them beneath a table as if happy to be rid of them. "I cannot presume to control the world, my lord, only the small portion of it beneath this roof. Mildred and the others

make their own arrangements as to what they do outside this establishment."

"That's…civilized. So, a gaming hell, but no brothel. A fine line between disreputable and despicable. Am I to perhaps applaud?"

She looked at him, long and hard, and then reached up both hands and deftly twisted the heavy mass of curls into a knot atop her head before walking over to a small drinks table holding a single decanter of wine. "I don't particularly care what you do, my lord," she said as she poured some of the light amber liquid into a single glass before turning to face him. "As long as you relinquish guardianship of my brother to me."

"Oh, yes, Miss Collier, the demand presented to me via your solicitor. I can readily see the eminent sense in that. Clearly a fit place for the boy."

"The name is Linden, my lord. *Mrs*. Linden. I'm a widow."

Gideon could not suppress his smile this time. "Of course you are. How very proper. My apologies."

"You can take your apologies, my lord, and stuff them in your…ear," she said, and then turned her back to him as she lifted the glass to her lips. She didn't sip; she drank. He could see that her hand trembled slightly as she lowered the empty glass to the tabletop. The wine was for courage, clearly. He almost felt sorry for her.

Almost.

But then she turned back to him, her eyes shining in the light

of the candles. “We’ve begun badly, haven’t we? Are you certain you don’t care for a glass of wine?”

“A lady shouldn’t drink alone, I suppose. Very well.” Gideon got to his feet and availed himself of the decanter. The wine, when he tasted it, was unexpectedly good, when he’d assumed it would be cheap and bitter. “Do you have a first name, madam?”

The question seemed to surprise her. “Why would you—Yes. Yes, I do. Jessica.”

“Preferable to either Linden or Collier. Very well. My condolences on your recent loss, *Jessica*. I was remiss in not stating that at the outset.”

“My father’s death means nothing to me, my lord, as we’d been estranged for several years. But, thank you. I only wish to become reacquainted with my brother.”

“Half brother,” Gideon corrected. “The son of your father and your stepmother, also sadly deceased. You have no questions about that sad event?”

Jessica shrugged her shoulders. “No. Should I? When I read about their deaths in the *Times*, an accident with their coach was mentioned. I’m only glad Adam was away at school, and not in the coach with them.”

“All right,” Gideon said, looking at her carefully. “There’s still the matter of a rather large fortune, not to mention the Sussex estate. All of it in trust for your half brother, who was not estranged from his parents.”

“That’s also of no concern to me. I support myself.”

“Clearly,” Gideon said, casting his gaze around the sparsely furnished room. “Bilking raw youths in town on a spree profitable, is it?”

“We don’t *bilk* anyone, my lord. We don’t allow it. If we see some fool gaming too deep, he’s sent on his way.”

“Vowing to sin no more, I’ll assume, his ears still ringing from the stern lecture you’ve administered.”

Jessica looked at him unblinkingly, her brown eyes raking him from head to toe before seemingly settling on his chest; perhaps she wouldn’t be so brave if she looked into his eyes. “I don’t like you. *Gideon.”*

“I can’t imagine why not. Another man wouldn’t have answered your summons. I’ll admit to curiosity being my motive for obliging you, but please don’t hold that against me.”

“And it only took you a month, and then you arrived on my doorstep at this ungodly hour of the night, clearly as an afterthought. Or perhaps your planned evening turned out to be a bore, leaving you at loose ends? I’m sorry, I suppose I should be flattered.”

She turned her back to him once more, bending her neck forward. “You may as well be of some use. If you could help with these buttons? Doreen is still busy at the front door, and I’m near to choking.”

Gideon raised one well-defined eyebrow as he weighed the invitation, considering its benefits, its pitfalls…her motives. “Very well,” he said, placing his wineglass next to hers. “I’ve

played at lady's maid a time or two."

"I'm certain you have played at many things. Tonight, however, you'll have to content yourself with a very limited role."

"You're a very trusting woman, Jessica," he said as he deftly—he did everything deftly—slipped the first half-dozen buttons from their moorings. With the release of every button, he made sure his knuckles came in contact with each new inch of ivory skin revealed to him. Even in the candlelight he could see where the gown had chafed that soft skin; no wonder she longed to be shed of it.

Still, he took his time with the buttons until, the gown now falling open almost entirely to her waist, she stepped away from him just as he considered the merits of running his fingertips down the graceful line of her spine.

"Thank you. If you'll excuse me for a moment while I rid myself of this scratchy monstrosity?"

"I'll excuse you for any number of things, my dear, as long as you're not gone above a minute. You wear no chemise?"

"As you're already aware," she answered, throwing the words at him over her shoulder, bare now as her gown began to slip slightly. "I loathe encumbrances."

She disappeared into another room, leaving Gideon to wonder why a woman who so disliked encumbrances had buttoned herself up into a black taffeta prison. Did she think the gown made her look dowdy? Untouchable? Perhaps even matronly? If so, she had missed the mark on every point.

A widow. He hadn't expected less from her than that obvious clunker; there wasn't a madam in all of London who wasn't the impecunious widow of some soldier hero, making her way in the world as best she could.

And, if he was lucky yet tonight—he would be inevitably, in any case—she was about to *make her way* with him, in hopes of her charms rendering him imbecilic to the point of granting her request to take over the guardianship of her half brother.

Or, more to the point, guardianship of her half brother's considerable fortune.

A month ago he had roundly cursed Turner Collier for having lacked the good common sense to have altered his decades-old will, leaving guardianship of his progeny to his old chum, the Earl of Saltwood. Perhaps Collier had thought himself immortal, which should hardly have been the case, considering what had happened to his old chum.

But there'd been nothing else for it, not according to Gideon's solicitor, who had notified him that he had gratefully ended his guardianship of Alana Wallingford upon her recent marriage, just to be saddled with yet another ward a few months later.

At least this time there would be no worries over fortune hunters or midnight elopements or any such nonsense. No, this time his worries would be for reckless starts, idiotic wagers, juvenile hijinks and hauling the boy out of bear-baitings, cockfights and gaming hells such as the one owned by the youth's own half sister.

All while the whispers went on behind his back. There'd been anonymous wagers penned in the betting book at White's on the odds of Gideon forcing Alana into marriage with him in order to gain her fortune. Whispered hints Alana's father, Gideon's very good friend, had been murdered within months of naming Gideon as his only child's guardian. There definitely had been suggestions as to whom that murderer might be.

Now there had been a second "unfortunate coaching accident" directly impacting the Earl of Saltwood. And another wealthy orphan placed into his care immediately after that "accident." Coincidence? Many didn't think so.

After all, Gideon was a Redgrave. And everybody knew about those Redgraves. Wild, arrogant, dangerous, if always somewhat delicious. Why, look at the father, the mother; there was a scandal no amount of time could fade from the consciousness of God-fearing people. Even the dowager countess remained both a force to be reckoned with and a constant source of whispered mischief and shocking behavior. Nothing was beneath them, even as they believed nothing and no one above them… .

"Shall we return to the wars, Gideon?"

He blinked away his thoughts and turned to look at Jessica Linden, who had somehow reappeared without his notice. She was clad now in a dark maroon silk banyan with a black shawl collar and quilted cuffs that fell below her fingertips. The hem of the thing puddled around her bare feet. Once again her curls tumbled past her shoulders, a perfect frame for her fine,

enchanting features. For a tall woman, she suddenly seemed small, delicate, even fragile.

Clearly an illusion.

"My late husband's. I keep it as a reminder," she said, raising her arms enough that the cuffs fell back to expose her slim wrists. "Shall we sit? My feet persist in feeling the pinch of those dreadful shoes."

He gestured to the overstuffed couch to his left, and she all but collapsed into it, immediately drawing her legs up beside her to begin rubbing at one narrow bare foot. The collar of the banyan gaped for an enticing moment, gifting him with a tantalizing glimpse of small, perfect breasts. Clearly she was naked beneath the silk.

The woman was as innocent as a viper.

"How is Adam?" she asked before he could think of a damn thing to say that didn't include an invitation to return to her bedchamber, this time in his company. "I haven't seen him in more than five years. He was just about to be sent off to school, as I recall the moment. What was he? Twelve? Yes, that was it, as I was all of eighteen. He cried so, to leave me."

Gideon began doing quick mental arithmetic. "Making you a woman of three and twenty? A young widow."

"Ah, but positively ancient in experience, and closer to four and twenty in reality. And you? Edging in on a hundred, I would think, if we're to speak of experience. You've quite the reputation, Gideon."

“Only partially earned, I assure you,” he told her as he retook his chair and crossed one leg over the other, looking very much at his ease while his mind raced. “But to answer your question, your half brother is well and safe and here in London. I’ve hired a keeper for him rather than return him to school before next term.”

Jessica nodded. “That’s only fitting. He’s in mourning.”

“He is? Perhaps someone ought to explain that to him. All I hear, secondhand through said keeper, is how fatigued he is with twiddling his thumbs while the entire world goes merrily along just outside the door, without him.”

She smiled at that, and Gideon knew himself to be grateful he was already sitting down, for she had a wide, unaffected smile that could knock a man straight off his feet.

“A handful, is he? Good. As our father’s son, it could have gone either way. I’m gratified to learn his spirit wasn’t crushed.”

Now this was interesting. “I barely knew the man, as he was a contemporary of my father’s. He was a demanding parent?”

“We’ll speak with the gloves off, as I see no sense in dissembling. After all, I’ve heard the rumors about your own father, and the two men were friends. James Linden, fairly ancient, more than a little mean when in his cups, and a lazy waste of talent, was the lesser of two evils, and here I am. Disowned, widowed, but selfsufficient. Perfectly capable of taking on the guardianship of my brother until he reaches his majority. The last place I want him is anywhere our father wanted him,

under the control of anyone he thought *fitting.”* She directed a disconcerting glare toward his cravat. “Do you understand now, *Gideon?”*

He touched his hand to the golden rose in his cravat before he realized what he’d done and quickly got to his feet. “You had my pity, Jessica, until the end. I’m many things, but I am not my father.”

“No, I suppose you aren’t. You haven’t yet tried to seduce me, and after all my clumsy efforts to the contrary. Geld you, did he? No, I don’t think so. You want me, that’s obvious enough.”

At last, Gideon understood the whole of it. He waved his hand in front of him, indicating her pose, the banyan, even her nakedness beneath the silk, the glass of wine that had been raised to her lips by a trembling hand; a drink for courage. “You’ve got a weapon somewhere about you, don’t you?”

“Not the complete fool, are you? Very well. Only a very small pistol, holding but a single shot, but deadly, if it became necessary. I can use it to much more advantage than James ever could, even though he taught me. And before you ask, yes, I was willing to trade my body for your agreement to relinquish your guardianship of Adam, within limits, of course.” She stood up, chin high, sherry-brown eyes locked with his, her hands going to the silk tie at her waist. “I still am.”

He decided it would be safer to be insulted. “And I repeat, madam, I am not my father.”

She tilted her head to one side. “You aren’t? Your stickpin

says differently. That particular rose, by any other name, Gideon, sends out the same stink."

Gideon's jaw set tightly. What in bloody hell was going on here? "You know about that?"

"I know about the Society, yes," she repeated, the light of battle leaving her eyes, to be replaced by a sadness that was nearly palpable. "Among my late husband's many failings was a tendency to run his mouth when he was in his cups. The mark of membership in a most exclusive group of rascals. A flower, in point of fact a golden rose, to commemorate a deflowering, plucking the bud as it were, bringing it into full bloom. But you wear it, you know what it is, what you did to *earn* it."

"The pin was my father's. The rest was rumor or, more probably, bravado," Gideon heard himself saying, even as he hoped he was speaking truth. "It was nothing like that. Only drunken fools and their games, thinking themselves some damned hellfire club. It was all cloaks and oaths of secrecy and more drunkenness and willing prostitutes than anything else. Simply grandiose talk, and all a long time ago."

Her smile was sad, almost as if she pitied him. "So you say. Thanks to James, I never learned for certain. Your father had been long dead by then, your family estate no longer their gathering place. But whatever the Society was, it didn't end with him. You truly profess to not know that? It went on five years ago, it may still go on. If I recall correctly, my father was not too many years above sixty when he died. James was not much

younger when we married, and still…capable."

One more mention of James Linden, and Gideon believed he might go dig up the man, just so he could bash in his skull with the shovel.

"No. You're wrong. Everything ended with my father's death. This is something else."

"This, Gideon? Are we speaking at cross purposes? What is *this?"*

Gideon was seldom the loser in any verbal exchange, but the more he said, the more control of their conversation he seemed to be ceding to her. He didn't much care for the feeling.

"I'll have my town carriage sent for you tomorrow at eleven, to bring you to Portman Square to see your brother. Kindly outfit yourself accordingly."

At last he seemed to shock her, put her off her stride. But not for long. "Would that include wearing a dark veil to conceal my face, or will the carriage be driven directly around to the mews, and the servants' entrance?"

Not before time, he realized, Gideon decided he'd had enough.

He closed the distance between them in two short steps, taking hold of her right wrist before she could successfully reach into the slightly drooping pocket that had given away the location of her pistol.

With his free hand he delved into the pocket and withdrew a small silver pistol, indeed a favorite of cardsharps. He forcefully

turned her hand over and pressed the thing in her palm.

"Go on, you idiot woman. I'm about to *ravish* you. Shoot me."

She made no move to close her fingers around the weapon. "You don't mean that."

"Don't I? Are you sure? I can have anything I want from you, Jessica Linden, any time I want it. Most men could. Get rid of that toy before somebody turns it on you. I don't know what all this James Linden of yours taught you over and above honing that sharp tongue of yours, but he should have pointed out that you can't bluff worth a damn."

He saw the tears standing in her magnificent eyes but chose to ignore them. God save him from fools, most especially well-intentioned martyrs who always seemed to think right was on their side and justice would prevail. He turned and walked away from her, exposing his back to her, not stopping until his hand was on the latch of the door leading to the stairs.

"At eleven, Jessica. And if you dare insult me by wearing that black monstrosity or anything like it, I'll tear it off you myself. Understood?"

He'd barely closed the door behind him when the sound of what he presumed to be the derringer hitting the wood brought a smile to his face. He rather doubted James Linden taught her how to do that. No, that was a purely female reaction, and if there was one thing Jessica Linden was, it was female.

CHAPTER TWO

AS SHE WATCHED RICHARD'S meticulous recounting of the previous night's profits, Jessica was twice forced to cover a yawn with her hand, both times earning a reproving look from her friend and business partner.

"Forgive me, Richard," she said as he finished at last. "I didn't sleep well last night, I'm afraid."

"He was upstairs here for some time, Jess. He upset you."

"He didn't make me happy, I'll agree to that," she said as she locked the satisfyingly full strongbox. "This isn't going to be easy."

"It shouldn't *be* at all. Surely the boy is old enough to mind himself? I was out on my own before I was ten, just a kiddie, making my own way."

"Indeed you were," Jessica agreed, having heard the story of Richard's past more than a few times, in more than a few versions, with probably none of them completely true. "But when you have money, the law sees things differently. Adam doesn't reach his legal majority for another three years, and for all I know won't receive control over his inheritance even then. It all depends on the terms of our father's will."

"And in the meantime, he's stuck with those queer buggers, the Redgraves. Nasty piece of work, that fellow last night, for all his fine clothes. I've seen eyes like that before. Slice your throat

for you as soon as look at you. Just uses a clean knife."

Jessica laughed softly as she returned the strongbox to its hidey-hole beneath the floorboards. She disliked keeping so much money in the house, but they had to be prepared for losses as well as profit.

She stood back as Richard rolled the rug down over the floorboards. "We were right to finally come here to London. So many foolish young men eager to be rid of their quarterly allowance. Our profits astound even me. Only a few more months, Richard, and we can have our inn. Are you still set on Cambridge? Of late I've been thinking of someplace more to the south, nearer the Channel. Perhaps even a port city?"

"With that Bonaparte scum running amok and crowing as how he's coming here any day? No, Jess, no ports for the likes of me. Waking up one morning with a bunch of Froggies parading through the town? I don't think so. It's good English joints of beef we'll be serving up from our kitchen, not slimy snails slipping and sliding off the plate."

"Bonaparte isn't going to invade, Richard. He's much too busy with his new Austrian wife. She'll bring him low one day, you know. You'd think the man would be a better student of history. Women are always the downfall of powerful men, one way or another." She sent him a wide smile. "It's what we do."

Richard stood up, preparing to go downstairs to his small room at the back of the house they'd rented only a few short months previously. "And is that what you're planning to do with

the Earl of Saltwood? I'd go easy with any such notion, I would. The man's no fool. I saw it in—"

"In his eyes. Yes, I remember. I'm not saying I'm out to destroy him, for goodness' sake. All he has to do is give me my brother. He couldn't want him."

"Nor his inheritance," Richard told her. "Man's rich as that Croesus fellow. But if it's some gauntlet you threw down to the earl, and knowing you it was, you've put his back up, so's now he wouldn't give you a crust of bread, just because he knows you want it. Better to ply some wiles or some such thing, not that I'm saying you should."

Jessica averted her head, sure her cheeks were flaming, damn her fair coloring. "He's got a mistress set up at the bottom of Mount Street."

"And another tucked into a bang-up to the echo flat in Curzon Street, some Covent Garden warbler. Then there's his other lady birds, the widow Orford and Lady Dunmore, or so I heard it told just last night, while the two of you were up here and the gossip was flying about downstairs like shuttlecocks in a high wind. Sets them up like dominos, tips them over when he's done with them, leaving them their fond memories, since not a one of them ever had a bad word to say about him, not any of the dozens of them. Dozens, Jessica. So, never mind what I said about wiles. You want this one to do your bidding, don't do his. That's what I'm thinking."

"You know I've never—"

"After Jamie Linden, who would?" Richard said, sighing. "But I know you, and you *dangled*, didn't you? Made promises you'd no intention of keeping, thinking yourself smarter than any man. Dangerous business, that, with one like Saltwood. Better to walk away now. The boy'll come to no harm. Saltwood's no fool. He has to know everyone's watching him."

"Because he's a Redgrave."

"Because he's his father's son, yes. You know what they say."

Jessica walked over to the pier glass and inspected her reflection. "His father was a rake and a libertine, and when he called out his wife's lover in a duel, she hid herself nearby and shot him in the back before she and her lover fled to the continent, leaving her children behind as if they didn't matter to her. Not that she was any better than he was in any event, having had more lovers than most of us have fingers and toes. Yes, I've heard it all. I would suppose it was either Saltwood buries himself in the cellars on his estate to hide his shame or he becomes what he's clearly become."

"An arrogant, to-hell-with-you bastard only an idiot with more hair than wit would ever dare to say any of that to, in case you haven't considered that."

"I don't have to say it, Richard. The man knows his own family history. He should likewise understand I want my brother away from him. Gideon Redgrave may not be his father, as he claims he's not, but he's still that arrogant, to-hell-with-you bastard who clearly cares for no one save himself. Heartless, Richard, there's

no question. Adam was always such a quiet boy. Gentle, almost painfully shy. I left him once, having no choice, and it broke my heart. But now that I have a second chance, I can't simply walk away. The Earl of Saltwood will have him for breakfast, otherwise."

"And you for lunch?"

Jessica pulled a face at him and then turned to Doreen, who had just entered from the stairway. "You're looking more than usually harassed. Is something wrong?"

"There was a knock at the door, ma'am. A pounding, more like. So I went down and answered it so as whoever it was wouldn't break the door down, because it sounded as if the wood was already splintering, it did, and there he was, ma'am, and there he stays until I can talk to you, because that's what I told him after he was done telling me what he told me."

Richard bent his head and rubbed at his temples. "We don't need to know it all, Doreen, as I keep telling you. Just the pertinent bits."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Borders, sir. I'm just saying I didn't invite the fellow inside, but it was either stand aside or get myself bowled over, sort of. I told him the house was closed to callers until eight of the clock, but he paid that no nevermind at all, saying as how he's here to stay and where's his room. I told him, I said, there's no room here for the likes of you—rough-looking fellow he is, you know—but he's still standing there. Right where he was standing when he first stepped inside as I was telling him

to stay out."

"And me out of headache powders," Richard grumbled, getting to his feet. "Very well, lead me to him."

Jessica snatched up her bonnet, pelisse and gloves. "I'll go down with you. The Saltwood coach will be here shortly, if the man meant what he said, and I don't think he wastes his words on lies unless they'd be of some benefit to him, which my presence in Portman Square is not."

"That was nearly as convoluted as Doreen, my dear. I'd be careful of that," Richard warned, holding open the door so that Jessica could precede him down the narrow staircase.

Jessica was still smiling as she reached the first floor and entered the gaming room, wrinkling her nose at the stale smell of tobacco. Other than the tables, covered each day with white cloths to keep off the dust, the room was empty…if she didn't count the near mountain of a young man standing just inside the main door, turning a large-brimmed hat in his hamlike hands.

"And you are…?" she asked, not certain she wished to approach any closer.

"Seth, ma'am," he said, lifting his huge bowed head, directing an innocent wide-eyed blue stare at her. "His lordship sent me."

Jessica relaxed for a moment, until it registered with her that the lad—for he seemed quite young—was dressed like a common laborer. "Oh, for pity's sake. *You're* the Saltwood coachman? He sent a dray wagon, did he? Well, you can just go back to his lordship and tell him thank you very much, but I can

find my own way to Portman Square, as his insult may delay my arrival but it did not dissuade me."

"Ma'am?"

Richard had already gone to one of the front windows and looked down onto the street. "There's no coach out there, Jessica. Or dray wagon." Allowing the heavy curtain to drop once more, he tapped Seth on his shoulder, or as near to it as Richard could reach, as Seth was as tall as he was wide. "Why did his lordship send you, my good fellow?"

The boy flushed to the roots of his red hair. "To protect the lady, sir. In case of any rum coves making a fuss over losing their blunt or getting frisky or drunk or such like. His lordship will pay my wages, and that he's already done, ma'am. All you need do, his lordship says, is feed me and give me somewheres to sleep. His lordship says that you got the bad end of it, ma'am," he said, hanging his head once more. "I suppose I do eats a bit."

"Entire small villages just for breakfast, I should think," Richard said, smiling at Jessica as he walked over to her. "Now here's a turn-up for the books, isn't it? The earl has sent you… protection. Puzzling."

Jessica was livid. "Maddening, not puzzling. He's insulting me. Telling me I can't protect myself."

"And how would he know that, Jess? No, answer me this instead. How do *you* know that's why he sent the boy?" Richard asked, looking at her closely. "What did happen up there last night?"

The jingle of harness followed by the sound of the knocker saved Jessica from answering. “That has to be the coach. Richard, if you’ll get Seth settled?”

“We could bed him down in the stables. If we had stables. So we’re keeping him?”

Jessica shot a quick look at Seth, who reminded her of a woodcut she’d once had, that of a gentle-eyed dragon spreading its wings to protect a group of children lost in the woods. “I don’t suppose we really have a choice, do we? And it will add to my arguments to have Adam here, if we’ve got a…protector. It’s a wonder his lordship didn’t think of that.”

“I doubt there’s much his lordship doesn’t think of,” Richard said, escorting her out to the street. “It’s not too late to reconsider, Jess. Don’t do this. I know he’s your brother, but you haven’t lived in his world for a long time. He could break your heart.”

“I’ve told you, my heart broke long ago. It can’t break again. But having Adam with me might help mend it.” She patted Richard’s plump cheek as a liveried footman opened the coach door and put down the steps. “Think good thoughts while I’m gone, and don’t let Seth loose in the kitchens unless it’s to help Doreen pare vegetables.”

“We’re really going to keep him? I thought you were just being nice until you can think up an excuse to send him on his way.”

Jessica had one foot on the coach step when she turned to her business partner. “I’m being amenable. I will continue to be amenable until Adam is residing under my roof. Besides, it might

be a good idea to have a bit of enormous muscle to point to if anyone becomes a problem."

"Pointing would be probably be enough," Richard agreed as he stepped forward and shut the coach door behind her. "I know it would be enough for me. But until we see if he's anything more than big, I'll keep my wooden club beneath the table, if you don't mind. It has served me well so far."

Jessica smiled until the coach moved off, but then allowed her true feelings come to the surface.

Gideon Redgrave had sent her *protection*, had he? From everyone but him, considering Seth was in his employ. Perhaps the youth's true purpose was to spy, which would make perfect sense to her…and if it made perfect sense to her, his lordship undoubtedly had already thought of it.

But, mostly, Seth was an insult, a reminder that she might have James's pistol, she might consider herself quite a good shot, but she had not been able to bring herself to do more than threaten with it.

Well, of course she hadn't shot him!

She would have been hanged in any event, as blowing a hole in an earl was frowned upon by the courts. She wouldn't have been able to rescue Adam from the man, because she'd be locked up and then executed. Too many people had seen him climb the stairs with her; it wasn't as if she and Richard could have hidden the body somewhere and then hauled it to some alleyway and left it there.

She'd thought of all those things in the few seconds she'd had to reach into her pocket and close her hand around the pistol before the earl had swooped down and taken the weapon from her. A pity she hadn't thought of them *before* she'd so blatantly offered herself to him. It simply had seemed prudent to have it in her pocket, that's all. The weapon had given her courage, she supposed. *Too bad it hasn't given me brains*, she thought, pulling a face.

It was seeing that damned golden rose in his cravat. She'd seen it, and something had seemed to go *snap* in her brain.

She still didn't know how she felt about his refusal. Relieved, definitely. Not that she wasn't willing to make any sacrifice in order to gain custody of Adam; although the gesture had been rather melodramatic, hadn't it? *My body for my brother*. She'd been offering the man a bite of candy when he already had bought up half the stores of sweets throughout London.

And yet, ashamed as she was now, in the clear light of day, she felt insulted, as well. He hadn't even seemed *interested*. If anything, he'd seemed amused.

She'd been too blatant. Even now, she felt hot color racing into her cheeks as she thought of how she'd behaved. Misbehaved. Her body for her brother? How stupid! The man could have any woman he wanted just by cricking a finger in her direction.

And, according to Richard, he already did.

Two mistresses? And a pair of *ton* ladies to boot? That seemed excessive. The man was more his father's son than he might wish

people to think. And again—he wore the golden rose.

"I *have* to get Adam out of there, no matter what I must do to best the man!" she exclaimed aloud, punching her gloved fist into her palm, refusing to consider she might be sounding very much like some overwrought and probably hare-witted heroine in a melodrama.

Still, her determination lasted throughout the quarter-hour journey to Portman Square through the heavy midmorning traffic. But when the coach halted, and she was helped down to the flagway in front of the imposing facade of the Redgrave mansion, a tiny voice in the back of her head whispered less confidently, "How do you propose to do that, exactly?"

Shaking off the question, she reminded herself her brother was behind that large black door with the lion's head knocker. She put out her chin as a mental battering ram and headed inside as if she was accustomed to being welcomed in the finest London houses.

"Mrs. Linden, to see his lordship," she said imperiously as she stripped off her gloves and untied her bonnet, even as she belatedly realized Doreen should be standing just behind her to take possession of the things. Stupid! How could she have forgotten she was to be chaperoned at all times? This was what living her catch-as-catch-can life for the past five years had done to her; she kept forgetting she wasn't supposed to be able to fend for herself. She should have brought Seth, that's what she should have done. Protection, indeed! She'd never needed more

than Richard and his heavy club at the gaming house. Here in Portman Square, an entire regiment of Seths probably wouldn't come amiss!

She shoved both bonnet and gloves at the footman. "His lordship, young man. See to it."

"If you was to wait here, ma'am," the fairly astonished-looking footman said, indicating the open door to what had to be the ground-floor room reserved for tradesmen and those petitioners seeking interviews.

Her fingers still at her throat, as she'd been about to untie the closing of her pelisse, Jessica looked through a dull red haze of anger to the curving staircase that led to the first floor, and then to the small room. "Oh, I think not. I've reconsidered my visit. Kindly inform his lordship I have been and gone."

So saying, she retrieved her bonnet and gloves from the clearly relieved footman, and quit the house. She stood on the top step of the portico as she retied her bonnet and pulled on her gloves, realizing that the coach was now slowly circling the square, so that the horses should not be forced to stand while she was inside.

Well, that presented a problem, didn't it? Not to mention putting quite the crimp in her grand exit. She wasn't about to go running after it, crying *yoo-hoo*, waving it down. Besides, she'd had just about enough of his lordship's *courtesy* for one morning. She had two feet, and she knew how to use them.

She looked to her left, and then to her right. Two feet, yes. Now if only she knew what direction in which to point them… .

"Ma'am?"

Jessica turned about slowly, to see that the footman had opened the door behind her, probably to warn her to take herself off, as loitering on his lordship's doorstep was not allowed.

"I'm going," she said tightly. "You don't have to apply the boot."

"Oh, but, ma'am, you're to come inside. Please."

She whirled about in her anger, skewering the footman with a look meant to set him back a step, which it did. "I am, am I? You'd be wrong there. I don't have to go anywhere. That might be something you could tell his lordship. I'm not his to command."

"No, ma'am. That is to say, ma'am, it was me what thought to put you in the…that is to say, his lordship is awaiting your pleasure in the drawing room. Ma'am?"

All the anger in Jessica drained away. The footman had made a valid assumption. She wasn't dressed in the first stare, Lord knew. She'd arrived unaccompanied. What else was the man to think but that she'd been summoned, perhaps to interview for some domestic position? Ha! If the earl were to do the interviewing, a *position* would definitely be involved!

"Very well." She reentered the mansion, feeling slightly abashed, which was enough to bring back her anger. She'd no idea she was so prickly; she'd always believed herself to be a pleasant person at the heart of the thing. "What is your name?" she asked the footman kindly as, yet again, she handed over her belongings.

"Waters, ma'am," the youth said, bowing as he laid her pelisse over his arm. "I'll be taking you upstairs now and turning you over to, that is to say, where Mr. Thorndyke will announce you to his lordship. And thank you again, ma'am."

"You did as you were trained, I'm sure," Jessica told him, handing over a coin. "The error was mine. Was his lordship that rough on you?"

Waters bowed again, not quite fast enough to hide his relieved smile. "His lordship could blister paint with that tongue of his, ma'am. But not on me, ma'am. Not this time. It was Mr. Thorndyke what explained how I was wrong. He's not half bad."

Jessica shot a look up the staircase, to where she could see a tall, gray-haired man, most probably Thorndyke, waiting for her. She was being passed along to the Upper Reaches. How fortunate she was.

"Really? In other words, Waters, he'll be escorting me into the lion's den. Lucky for me, then, I'm no lamb."

"Ma'am?" the footman all but squeaked, looking nervous once more.

"I'll make my own way up the stairs," she told him. "Just don't put my things too far away, as I might be needing them again quite shortly."

So saying, she lifted her hem a fraction and her chin a fraction more before heading up the staircase, her gaze already locked with that of the butler, or majordomo, or whatever the man considered himself, and by the look of him he considered himself

at least two social levels above that of his lordship's visitor.

And all for the lack of a maid, or a maiden aunt, or some paid companion. Really, society was a set of ridiculous rules. She was well out of it. Were she a man, none of this would apply, and she'd already be sitting in the drawing room with one leg draped over the other, sipping wine instead of the tea she'd be offered, if she was offered anything at all.

And from the looks of Thorndyke, she wouldn't be.

"Mrs. Linden to see his lordship, who already knows I'm here, so that we'd all three of us be wasting our time pretending he doesn't," she announced before Waters, who had quickly divested himself of her belongings and was hurrying up the stairs after her, could open his mouth. "Just point me in the right direction and you can go back to polishing the silver, or stealing it, whichever pleases you."

The butler opened and closed his mouth a time or two before drawing himself up even straighter than before and motioning to the pair of closed doors to the left of the wide hallway.

"Good. At least we're done with foolishness," Jessica declared, her head positively spinning, and knowing she was being ridiculous. But as ridiculousness seemed to be the order of the day, why should she attempt to put a stop to it now?

Of course, that left her with either throwing open the double doors in some dramatic gesture of defiance or knocking on one of them and waiting to be admitted. She probably should have thought of that. She probably should give some thought to the

embarrassing realization that she hadn't been thinking at all since first encountering the Earl of Saltwood, devil take his hide.

CHAPTER THREE

"ALLOW ME, MA'AM," Thorndyke said, stepping ahead of Jessica. He opened a single door and stepped inside. "My lord? I'm happy to say, sir, Waters caught her for you." He then stepped back out and bowed her in, his smile and rather knowing wink nearly causing her to trip over her own feet as she entered the drawing room, only to be stopped again, this time by a pair of sniffing, tumbling dogs.

"Brutus! Cleo! Withdraw!"

The dogs, large puppies, really, and of some indeterminate breed, immediately turned their backs on her, to take up positions on either side of the Earl of Saltwood, who was standing in the very center of the enormous room, looking for all the world as if he'd only lately crawled out of bed.

Gone was the impeccable attire of the previous evening; this was a gentleman at home, and making himself very much at home, indeed. Clad only in buckskins and a white lawn shirt, and minus waistcoat, jacket and cravat, his hair a tumble of dark curls, he held a glass of wine in one hand and something rather limp and filthy in the other.

"I was led to believe I was expected," Jessica said, staring at the limp and filthy thing. "Is that dead?"

Gideon held up the object in question, which proved to be a crude cloth replica of a rabbit, half its stuffing gone. Both dogs,

still sitting up smartly, began to whimper piteously, one of them wagging its tail so violently its entire back end shook. “This? I’m merely training these two young miscreants to avoid temptation.”

Jessica eyed the back-end-wriggling dog. “I see. It’s always good to avoid temptation. And how is that going?”

“It could be better.” He tossed the rabbit in the general direction of the windows as two canine heads whipped about to follow its arc of flight. The whimpering increased. The dog on the left, the back-end wriggler, began to inch across the carpet on its rump. “Brutus! Stay!”

The dog looked to its master, its brown eyes eloquent with pleading, before scooting sideways another inch.

“St-ay,” Gideon warned again, dragging out the word.

“It’s late for a wager, I know, but a fiver the male gives in and the bitch stays put.”

“Your blunt really just on Cleo, as that idiot Brutus probably won’t last more than another ten seconds,” Gideon said, nodding.

“Less. Ten seconds is an eternity. And the bitch resists. That’s the wager.”

The earl nodded. “All right. Done.”

Brutus tried, he really did. His agony was palpable, his need immense. He actually made it for another four seconds (Jessica counted them off aloud), before he gave in to temptation and pounced on the rabbit.

Cleo watched, yawned widely and then turned in a circle before settling herself in front of the fireplace.

Jessica approached his lordship, her hand extended, palm up. “That’s five pounds you owe me, my lord. Men always give in to temptation, and for the most part, sooner rather than later.”

His smile had something clenching deep in her belly. “With women more apt to follow orders. Obey.”

She rallied at this suggestion, clenching belly ignored. “Hardly. She’s merely waiting for a better offer, one she doesn’t have to share.”

“And now we’re not speaking of dogs,” Gideon said, waving her to the nearest sofa. “Please, be seated.”

She waited for him to say something about his attire, some sort of offhand apology for appearing without jacket or waistcoat, at the least. But he looked so at his ease she didn’t really expect it. Rather, it was as if he was saying, *this is my home and I do what I want, when I want, where I want, up to and including tossing filthy cloth rabbits in this splendidly appointed drawing room*.

“Comfortable, Gideon?” she finally asked as, still holding his wineglass, he took up a seat on the facing sofa.

Once again he smiled, and once again, that certain clenching feeling took hold in her belly. “I was wondering how long it would take until you had to say something. All I can answer is to quote you, I suppose. I dislike encumbrances.”

“Loathe. I believe I said *loathe.”*

He shrugged. “A female word. In either case, let it be said we both enjoy being comfortable. There’s a reason gentlemen stand so tall in their finery, you know. Mostly it’s because we can’t

bend, or even remove our own jackets, and risk slicing off our earlobes with our shirt-points if we turn our necks independently of our head and shoulders."

He's trying to make me like him, Jessica thought angrily. He's saying without words: *Look at me, I'm a simple man. I may be Earl of Saltwood, but at the heart of things I'm only a man, one who loves his dogs and his comforts. I'm not who you think I am, your brother is safe with me*.

Either that, or he was returning her favor of last night, already half stripped and ready for seduction. There was also that. Was that what Thorndyke's wink had been all about? Did the servants think she'd been *sent* for, only surprised when she'd shown up at the front door? The thought had already occurred to her downstairs. Good God, yes, that was it! He was about to take her up on her offer. Here. Right here. Probably on the floor, just to double the insult. After all, he was a Redgrave, and above nothing. And she'd come here today like a dog called to heel. She'd *obeyed*.

She had to know. She felt horribly certain she was right, but she had to know.

"My brother, Gideon. He's here? He's not, is he? You've sent him away. You haven't even so much as told him about me."

Brutus had finished with the rabbit, that hadn't put up much of a fight in any case, and was now sitting beside Gideon, his head on the man's knee. The earl scratched him behind the ears, clearly all forgiven. "Hmm?" he said, redirecting his gaze to her.

"I'm sorry?"

"No, you aren't," Jessica said, getting to her feet. "I don't know what sort of mean game you're about, my Lord Saltwood, but I am not playing it. My brother, sir. Or else I'll find my way to the door."

The dark eyes, moments earlier open and amused, narrowed to dark slits. The friendliness was gone, leaving only the man. The menace. The reputation.

"Not if I don't want you to," he said, rising, as well. "You do perceive the difference between now and last night, I'm sure. That is what you're thinking of, isn't it? You, without a chaperone, clearly a *knowing* woman, appearing as requested at a bachelor establishment—worse, at the domicile of one of those rascally reprobate Redgraves. Even that lunkhead of a footman saw the way of things. But, please, continue this belated show of astonishment if you must. I'm amenable either way, actually, although I would prefer you don't prolong the pretense until it becomes tiresome. In other words, I'll play, but I will not lower myself to halfheartedly chasing you around the furniture. It might upset the dogs."

Oh, God. He was big. He was so big. Handsome into the bargain, yes, but mostly, he was so big. She couldn't outrun him. His servants would be of no help to her. He was right. She'd come here of her own free will. She ran a gaming house. She was no lady, disowned by her own father. She was nothing, nobody, not anymore. No one would care… .

"You wouldn't dare," she said even as she backed up a step, shot her gaze toward the doors. The closed doors.

"I wouldn't? Very well, I did agree to play. I'll oblige you, if that's how you like it. Let's see, how shall I say this? I suppose I'll simply say the expected."

He took another sanity-destroying step toward her. "Ah, Mrs. Linden, as you very well know, there is little I wouldn't dare. And, out of your own mouth, little you wouldn't offer. I've considered that offer rather pleasantly overnight, deciding a month of your services to be sufficient to my needs, six weeks at the outside, before you bore me. But in the cold light of day I realized I would be remiss if I were to agree to such a bargain without first tasting the wares. For all I know, you might not be very good at pleasuring a man of my peculiar tastes."

She grabbed at the fragile straw that he was only trying to frighten her, pay her some of her own back for the pistol, if nothing else. The odds weren't in her favor, but she had no options, none. She'd have to stand her ground. *Bluff*, knowing she held the inferior hand.

He took another step toward her and reached out, trailing his index finger from the base of her neck to the modest bodice of her gown, hooking that finger inside the fabric and tugging on it. "Is that red hair a promise, or a tease? Is your willing body lying beneath mine a proposition worth my consideration? Tell me, Jessica. *Are* you any good? Convince me."

"I've only to scream for help." Her voice shook with the fear

she was trying so hard to conceal.

"Be my guest. But remember, my staff is loyal to me. And, being a Redgrave staff, they are doubtless used to all sorts of noises, including feminine shrieks."

Then she was nudged from the side, nearly losing her balance before looking down to see Cleo had roused herself from her nap and somehow insinuated her body between them. The bitch had the rabbit between her jaws and was nudging at Jessica as if asking her to come away and play with her.

Or was the dog attempting to save her? It was a highly unlikely yet lovely thought.

"Does she attack on command?" Jessica said, putting her hand atop Gideon's and pointedly removing it from her bodice. "If she were to feel I were under some sort of duress, you understand?"

Gideon looked down at the hopeful dog and smiled, shook his head. All the dark menace was gone, replaced by that insufferable smile. "A good question. You're a cool one, aren't you, Jessica? Although Cleo here apparently sniffs something amiss. Fear, perhaps? That would be disturbing and quite puts a crimp in my assumptions, doesn't it? No matter what, it would appear you've been granted a reprieve. You wanted to see your brother. I'll have Thorndyke fetch him."

"What?" All that talk, those threats and then…nothing? *Damn him*.

She watched in astonished relief as he walked over to the bell pull, blindly stepping back until the backs of her legs came in

contact with the edge of the sofa, at which point she sat down with a thump. Cleo deposited the fairly damp rabbit in her lap and then lay down, her head on Jessica's feet.

Jessica bent down to rub behind the dog's ears. "He may have been all bluster and having some of his own back, you know. Males are like that, always wanting the upper hand, or at least to make sure we females think they've got it," she whispered to the animal. "He only did what I would have expected from him. Yes, that's it. I don't believe he actually would have done anything… possibly. Perhaps. But thank you."

Thorndyke entered the room a few moments later, doing a fine job of pretending he wasn't looking at Jessica, and then retired with a bow after being ordered to produce young master Collier, who had been last seen by his lordship slopping up eggs in the breakfast room.

Jessica considered this. Did a man, even a Redgrave, seduce a woman while that woman's brother was in the same house? No, he did not. He'd merely, meanly, meant to frighten her, give her some of her own back (sans pistol, thank goodness, not that the man wasn't a weapon unto himself). And he'd succeeded, admirably. Again, *damn the man!*

"Then you did tell him I would be here this morning?" she asked as Gideon picked up his wineglass once more and retook his seat.

"I warned him to get his backside out of bed before two, which is not his custom. I doubt he'll be pleased to meet anyone less

than a scantily clad harem girl wishing to have him recline against her lap whilst she fed him sugared figs."

"Don't measure others by your own yardstick, Gideon," Jessica warned tightly. "He's not a Redgrave."

Gideon chuckled softly. "Oh, yes, we Redgraves are mightily high on sugared figs."

Jessica glared at him. "That wasn't the part of your description I was alluding to, my lord. It's a well-known fact the Redgraves are prone to excesses of a…of a…" She was at a loss as to how to finish that statement. "You're prone to excesses," she finally ended, lamely. After all, if she had ended with "of a carnal nature," he would most probably have laughed so hard he would have fallen off the sofa. She believed she was beginning to get a sort of figurative *handle* on the man now, understand him better. In short, he was a menace!

"Really? We're that bad? I had no idea. Although, clearly, you seemed to have been lapping up tales of the infamous Redgravian debauchery. You should have seen your eyes, Jessica. You believed every word I said."

He had her there. It wasn't as if she'd any certain knowledge of *Redgravian debauchery*. She'd certainly heard about his lordship's light's-o-love. *Four* mistresses? That seemed excessive and spoke of an unhealthy appetite, in her opinion. She knew he was a neck-or-nothing rider who often wagered on himself in races and had yet to lose. She knew he had knocked down Gentleman Jackson not once, but twice, until the renowned

pugilist had declared he wouldn't step in the ring with him again. She knew he won all the top prizes driving with the Four-in-Hand Club. She knew he gambled deep but never wildly. She knew he had no enemies because even the most foolish of London gentlemen perceived the wisdom of calling him friend.

She had, in short, made a study of the man, indeed his entire family, these past weeks. But, really, when she got right down to it, she didn't know anything about the current crop of Redgraves but what she'd heard.

He had two younger brothers, Maximillien and Valentine, and a single sister, Katherine. Maximillen had sailed as one of the Royal Navy's youngest coxswains, and Valentine had been classically educated in Paris and Toulon, managing to remain there even as Bonaparte conducted his on-again, off-again war on England, only returning home a few months ago.

Katherine had come to Mayfair for her Season last spring but hadn't really *taken*, seeing as how she was unfashionably tall and dark-haired, and favored her infamous Spanish mother in her looks in a year where petite blondes were considered all the go. Her suitors had hoped for the mother's morals, as well, and their mamas had cringed at the thought of "foreign-looking" grandchildren. But it had been Katherine herself who had answered an impertinent question about her brother the earl, voiced in the center of the dance floor at Almack's, with a stunning punch to the questioner's nose, breaking it quite nicely, word had it. She hadn't come to town this Season, which to

Jessica's mind made more of a statement about Lady Katherine's disdain for society than any possible fear of it or shame over her actions.

Jessica felt she most probably could like Lady Katherine. Lords Maximillien and Valentine were of no real concern to her, although she imagined they were no better or worse than their brother. As to their grandmother, the dowager countess? All Jessica had heard about the woman was that she knew every secret of every man and woman and even royal, and there wasn't a single person in all the *ton* who wasn't scared spitless by her.

Jessica felt she most probably could like Lady Saltwood, as well.

She did not like Gideon Redgrave, however. Not his reputation, not the man who had just very clearly made a complete fool out of her. *Damn him*.

"Before your brother deigns to join us," he said now, presumably having had his fill of looking at her as if she might be a bug under a microscope. "We're quits of this ridiculous offer of yours? You insulted me with your patently insincere offer, not to mention that idiocy with the pistol. In short, as a seductress, Jessica, you are an abysmal failure. I, on the other hand, succeeded admirably in pointing out I am not to be insulted, not without consequences. And, much as you may believe yourself irresistible, I am more than confident I can stumble along through the remainder of my days without learning, firsthand, and, needless to say, most intimately, whether or not you are a true

redhead. In short, I am willing to accept your apology and move on."

She was certain she now looked as if her eyes would simply pop out of her head. "You…you…how *dare you!"*

He sighed and shook his head, as if saddened by her outburst. "Make up your mind, Jessica. Harlot or genteel widow fallen on hard times. Which is it to be? So far, I would have to say you've mastered neither role. But before you answer, let me make one thing clear to you. I choose my own women, and they come to me willingly or not at all. I've no desire to bed a martyr, no matter how lovely."

There was one part of Jessica, one very small, even infinitesimally tiny part of her that took in the words "no matter how lovely," and considered them a compliment. She shoved that infinitesimal part into a dark corner of her mind and locked the door on it, intending to take it out later and give it a good scold.

"You've made your point, Gideon. Several times, in a variety of unconscionably crude and insulting ways. In my defense, I can only point out that I was, am, desperate. I offered you the only thing I had—"

"Please don't tell me you're referring to your virtue. I don't believe that's been yours to bestow for quite some time. Unless the fabled Mr. Linden was a eunuch?"

"No," Jessica said quietly, "far from it." She took a steadying breath. "A month. You ignored my solicitor's communications for a month, and then you came to see me in person, looking just

as I'd imagined you. Arrogant, overweening, for all the world as if you owned it. You weren't going to listen to reason. And you wear the golden rose. That told me all I needed to know. I… I offered you what interests you most. And damn you, Gideon Redgrave, I did it knowing who you are. *What* you are. If you had half a heart, which you don't, you would have realized what that cost me."

Gideon sat back on the sofa, rubbing a hand across his mouth as he looked at her. He looked at her for a long time.

"I'm sorry," he said at last.

"Excuse me?" She hadn't any idea what he was going to say, but what he said made no sense at all.

"I repeat, Jessica. I'm sorry. Tell me—sans the golden rose, would you have made your offer?"

Slowly, silently, she shook her head. "No."

Once again, he rubbed his hand across his mouth, still looking at her closely. "And you believe it still goes on? The Society."

Jessica shifted uncomfortably on the cushions. "As of five years ago, yes. I can't say for certain about now. But you know this."

"No, Jessica, I don't," he said, getting to his feet, suddenly seeming decades older than his years. "I only know that in the past twelve months, four of my late father's cohorts in that damn *Society* of his have been murdered. Your father included. I wear the golden rose to signal that I know the hunting accident, the accidental drowning, the fall down the stairs, your father's

coaching accident—they all were in fact murders."

He had to be spouting nonsense. "I don't understand. My father was *murdered?* He and his wife both? How can you know that?"

"Later," Gideon said, turning toward a small commotion in the hallway. "I believe I'm about to be gifted with the sight of a touching family reunion. Or not," he added, smiling, as a tall, rail-thin, ridiculously overdressed and harassed-looking youth stomped into the room.

"Now what the bloody blue blazes do you want?" the youth demanded, clutching a large white linen serviette in one hand even as he took a healthy and quite rude bite out of the apple he carried with him. Speaking around the mouthful of fruit, he continued, "First you order me out of bed without a whisper of a reason, then you say I leave the house on penalty of death—as if that signifies, as I might already be dead for all the life you allow me. Then you send me off to stuff my face when Brummell himself swears no sane man breaks his fast before noon, and now you want me in here to—Well, hullo, ain't you the pretty one."

"Ad—Adam?" Jessica was on her feet, but none too steadily. This ridiculous popinjay couldn't be her brother. Adam was sweet and shy, and sat by her side as she read to him, and cried when their father insisted he learn to shoot, and sang with the voice of an angel.

The youth turned to her and gifted her with an elegant leg, marred only when he nearly toppled over as he swept his arm

with a mite too much enthusiasm.

"Bacon-brained puppy," Gideon muttered quietly. "Your brother, Jessica. Behold."

She *beheld*. Adam Collier was clad very much in the style of many of the youths who, from time to time, were hastily escorted out of the gaming room as being too raw and young to be out on their own with more than a groat in their pocket, so eager were they to be separated from their purses. Unpowdered hair too long, curled over the iron so that it fell just so onto his forehead, darkened and stiff with pomade. Buckram padding in the shoulders of his wasp-waisted blue coat, a patterned waistcoat that was a jangle of lurid redand-yellow stripes, no less than a half-dozen fobs hanging from gold chains, clocked stockings hugging his toothin shanks. And was that a, dear Lord, it was—he had a star-shaped patch at the corner of his mouth.

"Adam?" she repeated, as if, having said the name often enough, she'd believe what her horrified eyes were telling her. She didn't want to believe it. Her brother hadn't grown up, he'd simply gotten taller, slathered his face with paint to hide his spots and turned into an idiot. His only submission to the formalities was the black satin mourning band pinned to his upper arm. And that was edged with black lace. He wasn't oppressed, he certainly wasn't heartbroken. He was his brainless twit of a mother, in breeches.

"I fear you have the advantage of me, madam," Adam drawled with a truly irritating and affected lisp as he approached, clearly

intent on kissing her hand. His red heels made his progress somewhat risky, but he managed it, nearly coming to grief only when Brutus ran up to him, intent on sniffing his crotch. “Stupid cur. Do I look like a bitch in heat to you?”

“Don’t blame the dog, you sapskull. You might instead want to rethink the brand of scent you bathe in. As it is, we’re chewing on it,” Gideon said, retiring to the mantel, but not before shooting Jessica an amused look. “Say hello to your half sister.”

Adam stopped, searched among his many chains for a gilt quizzing glass on a stick, and lifted it to his eye. “M’sister? Jessica, was it? No, that’s impossible,” he said, shaking his head. “She’s dead these past half-dozen years or more. Bad fish, something like that. Mama told me most distinctly.” Then his mouth opened in shock, and he pointed the quizzing glass accusingly in her direction. “Imposter! Charlatan! The old reprobate cocks up his toes, and they come out of the woodwork, looking for his blunt. Fie and for shame, woman!”

Gideon rejoined Jessica in front of the sofas. “I’ve been thinking, Mrs. Linden. I may have been unduly hasty in denying your request for guardianship, and even thin-skinned. It must have been the pistol. Perhaps we can reopen negotiations,” he suggested quietly.

At last Jessica regained use of her tongue, which she’d been in some danger of swallowing. “I don’t think so,” she told him, still goggling at the creature in front of her. “You can have him. As to the other, I’ll expect you in Jermyn Street tonight, at eleven.”

Then she clapped her hands to her mouth, realizing what she'd said. "The…the other being discussing this business of murders. Not…not *you know.*"

"What? She's leaving? I've routed her, by God!" Adam clapped his hands in delight. "Yoicks! And away!"

"Oh, stubble it, you nincompoop," Jessica bit out as she brushed past him.

Gideon's delighted, infuriating laughter followed after her, all the way down the stairs.

CHAPTER FOUR

"YOU'RE LOOKING HARASSED," Lord Maximillien commented as he entered the study in Portman Square and perched himself on the corner of his brother's desk. "At least you'd look harassed if you were anyone else. The Earl of Saltwood is never harassed. He is a—Is there such a word as *harasser?"*

"What do you want, Max?" Gideon asked, putting down the letter opener he'd been balancing between his fingertips.

"Me? To bid you farewell, I suppose. I leave for Brighton in an hour, on orders from Trixie. There's some clever barque of frailty she's befriended, a bit o'muslin with a problem our grandmother thinks might rouse me from my boredom. In any case, she's been matchmaking. In a weak moment, I agreed to sign on as cohort. It's my adventurous spirit, you understand."

Gideon looked at his brother and shook his head in mock dismay. "You even look like an adventurer. Your shirt cuffs are unbuttoned and too long, that cravat's an insult, those smoked glasses a ridiculous affectation—and I may soon enlist Thorndyke to help hold you down while I scrape all that hair off your face."

Max bent his head and looked at his brother overtop the blue-smoked rimless glasses he'd discovered a few months earlier in a small shop on Bond Street. "All that hair? A simple mustache,

a cunning patch beneath my bottom lip—hardly *all that hair.”*

Gideon pointed up at him, twirling his finger. “And the rest of it? Looks to be the beginnings of a beard to me. I imagine even a whore with a problem won’t tolerate a fellow who only allows himself to be shaved three times a week.”

Max stabbed his fingers through the heavy thatch of dark brown hair he wore halfheartedly parted in the center of his head, its length covering his ears, the whole waving around his almost aesthetically beautiful face. Only his dark eyes, so like Gideon’s, threw out the warning that this was no pretty fool; perhaps why Max had delighted in finding the smoked glasses. “Allow? I’m not so lazy. I shave myself, brother. Shave myself, dress myself, wash my own rump.”

“And two of those tasks performed in the dark, apparently. Never mind,” Gideon said, not about to admit his brother was one devilishly handsome creature, the sort who could cause small riots among the ladies if he put his mind to it. “What’s the Cyprian’s problem?”

“Other than being ambitious, penniless and of questionable morals? Transport. I’m simply to find a way to get clever girl and ardent swain to Gretna, wed over the anvil and all but publicly bedded so there can be no annulment, all accomplished ahead of any pursuit. You know Trixie. She’s a romantic.”

“She’s a pernicious troublemaker, and that’s in the best of times. Who’s to be the gullible groom—and you’ll notice hearing Trixie has cultivated a whore as bosom chum holds no shock.

No, it's the groom who interests me."

Max grinned wickedly. "So you see it, too? I did a bit of checking. It's Wickham's only grandson. Geoffrey something-or-other. Second in line to the dukedom until his papa, cursed with a spotty liver and still sucking up gin morning till night, sticks his spoon in the wall. Which will probably happen any day now according to Trixie, as they've already laid straw outside the man's door in Grosvenor Square so the invalid isn't pestered on his sickbed by the noise of traffic, and called in the Autum bawlers for some final-ditch prayer vigil. He should be toes cocked up just in time for the new heir—that would be this Geoffrey fellow—to present his *fait accompli* bride to his grandfather, shocking the old fellow to the point of apoplexy."

"Two deaths? That's ambitious, even for our grandmother. She's counting on an even pair?"

"Apparently. She's already had me scribble a wager in the betting book at White's. *A certain interested party offers odds of eight-to-five a certain duke Wdot-dot-dot—as* if nobody would know it's old Wickham—*will depart this earthly coil on or before fifteen June of the current year*. Lord Alvanley's holding the stakes."

"Of course it's Alvanley. The man's always in need of funds, and I'm sure Trixie is paying him well. Plus, I think she once had him as a lover. So. Wickham. It took her long enough," Gideon said, nodding approvingly. "Damn near twenty years. I wouldn't wager against her, or attempt to stop her. Go with God, Max."

"I'll go with most anyone, as well you know. But first—what's this about twenty years? This isn't just her usual mischief? What did old Wickham do to set her off?"

Gideon leaned back in his chair, mulling the idea that his brother should be made aware of their grandmother's motive. After all, Max had already decided Trixie was up to something. "I suppose it's time you knew. Trixie has always felt she had some…scores to settle. One of them is that, hard on the heels of our family shame, Wickham suggested the Saltwood title and holdings be dissolved and returned to the Crown, due to the scandal. More than suggested. The petition grew legs and damn near got as far as to have an airing in Parliament before it could be squashed. We stood to lose everything."

"Bastard."

"He gives bastards a bad name. Self-righteous prig, that's what he was, casting stones while setting himself up as some holier-than-thou man of impeccable morals. And it wasn't only him. There were three others heading up the action, until they were shown to be not as moral as they purported themselves to be, and the petition was withdrawn."

"And Trixie was the one to point this out?"

"I never said that, but you can draw your own conclusions. One was discovered at a house party, in bed with the host's wife—he died in the inevitable duel. Only weeks later, the second was bankrupted over gaming debts suddenly being called in by the person who'd bought up his vouchers—he shot himself rather

than face ruin. And the third was actually imprisoned and barely escaped hanging after it was learned he'd been diddling a family footman, the pot boy and, rumor has it, his own nephew, with or without their agreement. But as I said, all that was years ago."

"God, I adore that woman, much as she terrifies me," Max said in some admiration. "Why did she wait so long with Wickham?"

"Probably because she was diddling *him*. You've seen her diamond choker, that ruby bib she sets such store by? They're only a sampling. She's been bleeding the fool dry on and off for years. Oh, close your mouth. You know Trixie. She's a cat with a mouse, playing with it as long as it amuses her, and then, once bored, she pounces. I remember her telling me a few months ago that the man has developed what she termed a *disky heart*, making him of no further use to her. She's probably already ordered the gown she'll don as one of the chief mourners when they wall him up in the family mausoleum."

"And had the bill sent to Wickham?" Max added, pushing himself up from the desk. "'Frailty, thy name is woman.'"

"True enough. A true possessor of all the better vices, both moral and spiritual. We lesser mortals can only admire and aspire. But as she has ever pointed out, she isn't evil. She'd never strike just for the thrill of the thing. All her targets are deserving of her attention in one way or another, at least to her mind."

And then Gideon frowned.

"What? You're suddenly back to that same puss that greeted

me when I came in here. Is it something to do with Trixie?"

Four men, dead in separate *accidents* in the past year. All four former members of the secret society founded by Trixie's son. Twenty years. Some would think that too long to wait for revenge, for some perverted sense of justice. But then how did he explain Wickham?

"No," Gideon said firmly, not liking his thoughts and definitely unwilling to share them. "Nothing to do with Trixie. I was simply searching my mind for a way to rid myself of that primping, posturing fool I've inherited."

"Adam?" Max said unnecessarily. "Aren't you going to toss him back to school next term?"

Gideon fingered the letter that had arrived in the morning post. "According to the headmaster, that's not possible. He was full of apologies, but it would seem he and a few of the instructors convened a meeting concerning young master Collier, and decided they would forego the pleasure of his company in future. I can't say I blame them. The headmaster went on at some length about my ward's sad lack of talent save a decided propensity for calamity. He actually set fire to his rooms when he employed a candle to burn loose threads from his waistcoat and the damn thing flamed, so that he screeched and tossed it in a cupboard, then went off to dinner. If not for a quick-thinking proctor, they could have lost the entire dormitory."

"I'd never say the boy doesn't rattle when he walks, so many loose screws in his brainbox. But there's other schools."

“Yes, there are. He’s been asked to vacate several of them. If I buy him a commission the tongues will wag that I’m trying to have him killed in order to gain his inheritance, and if I send him to the estate Kate will have murdered him within the week. In other words, I’ve been sitting here this past hour or more cudgeling my brain to discover what sin it was I’ve committed I’m being punished for in the form of that paper-skulled twit.”

“Some sin? Only one? If I weren’t in such a hurry to be off, I could pen you a list. Not only that, but I don’t think I can stand watching you this way, brother. Glum. Defeated. It’s so unlike you. So much so, I find myself wondering if there’s something you’re not telling me, something much more disturbing than locating a deep well in which to deposit your latest ward.”

Maximillien could play the fool with the best of them, but he was rarely *fooled*.

Gideon looked at his brother. “Go away, Max.”

“Ah, then I’m right. I’ll have to write Val and tell him. Where is our baby brother, by the way?”

“I was unaware Valentine still required a keeper.”

“Another subject open to debate. But we should at least be aware of where he is, don’t you think?”

“Not if we don’t want to know,” Gideon suggested, smiling in real amusement. “But, to ease your mind, the last I heard he was heading for some place in Lincolnshire, to lend support to a friend whose father had, to quote our brother, taken a turn for the worse.”

“That’s kind of him. So he’s off to be a supporting prop at some deathbed?”

“Hardly. the bad turn was financial. his friend merely needed someone to put up the blunt for his trip home. Naturally, Valentine offered one of our coaches, and his company on the journey. And probably half his allowance for this quarter, knowing Val.”

“He’s a good friend. Or, as Kate often says, a numbskull. She swears some day that soft heart of his will land him in the briars. Has he ever said no to an appeal? Then again, considering that ludicrous fribble we’ve got residing with us now, have you? It’s your soft heart, both you and Val are stuck with soft hearts. Thankfully, Kate and I escaped the taint.”

Gideon directed yet another cool, dispassionate stare at his brother. “Are we done here now?”

“Oh-ho, speaking of briars,” Max said, putting up his hands in mocking defense. “How about I leave you to your troubles and be on my way?” He turned to quit the room, but at the last moment turned back to add, “Thorndyke told me of your rather unusual visitor this morning. Showed up all unaccompanied and left in some sort of huff. Spirited, that’s the world Thorny used. Curious. But she’s not the reason for that long puss, correct?”

“Goodbye, Max. Safe travels.”

“I thought as much. Thorndyke said she’s quite the looker. Red hair. I’ve always been partial to red hair on a woman. I don’t even mind the freckles. She have freckles, Gideon? Even where the

sun doesn't reach?"

When Gideon was really angry, he went quiet, the sort of quiet that could sound, to the object of his anger, much like a loud clashing of cymbals.

"Right," Max said, nodding. "Forgive me. Clearly the lady is not a subject open to discussion. I'm off to ease the path of true love, Val is off to be a supporting prop, Kate is steadfastly refusing to leave the estate, and you're—well, whatever it is you're doing, I suppose you'll let the rest of us know in your own good time."

Once his brother was gone, Gideon rested his chin in his hand for a full quarter hour, thinking, and then pushed back his chair, giving in to the inevitable. There was nothing else for it, he had to confront Trixie.

AN HOUR LATER HE WAS cooling his heels in his grandmother's drawing room in Cavendish Square, staring down the pair of yellow pug dogs who were eying his highly polished Hessians as if they would take great pleasure in lifting their legs against them.

She'd named the beasts Gog and Magog, after the ancient carved wooden giants that stood just outside the Guildhall, perhaps because they were no more than ten inches from ears to paws, or perhaps because she was amused by the thought the giants were reportedly the product of a coupling of wicked Roman daughters and the demons then inhabiting Albion, one day to be Britain. To Trixie, that would explain quite a bit about

her fellow citizens of the realm.

In any case, Gideon thoroughly detested the dogs and, in return, they didn't care a whit what he thought of them. It was rather lowering… .

"Gideon, my pet, what terrible thing have I done that brings you to my door?"

Giving the dogs one last warning look, Gideon got to his feet to admire Lady Beatrix's entrance, accomplished, as always, with a mixture of imperiousness and panache that was the envy of her detractors—all of them women.

She was no young girl, but the extraordinary beauty of her youth had for the most part stayed with her as she moved through the years, softening a bit about the edges, her blond hair lighter now that it was streaked with silver, her blue eyes alive and sparkling even as small laugh lines framed them. Her chin and swanlike neck remained those of a much younger woman, perhaps because of the queenly way she held her slim, fit body erect, perhaps because a crafty Mother Nature had decided a determined chin was the only warning a sane man should need.

There was, Gideon had decided long ago, a true dearth of sane men in England.

The Dowager Countess of Saltwood had been married to her late husband at sixteen, had borne her only child at seventeen, buried her husband at twenty-one and been terrorizing society ever since. First it was her son's guardian who had learned Beatrix Redgrave may not have been in control of her life for

those twenty-one years, but she was in control of it now, even if she'd had to bed and then blackmail her son's guardian to do it until the underage earl reached his majority.

Marriage, to the widowed countess, was little more than a way for men to control women, beget heirs and have someone to satisfy their base desires when they were too lazy or cheese-paring to seek out a whore. Beatrix would not willingly put her head in the marital noose again, although she had rather elevated the discreet taking of lovers to a sort of art form. Reportedly, thanks either to her late husband's prowess or her own appetites, she was very good at what she did, but whether she truly enjoyed what she did was her secret. Her grandchildren rather thought she did, or she wouldn't *indulge* herself quite so much, although they were secretly appalled that she continued to indulge now and then as she drew ever closer to her seventieth birthday.

Mostly, with the marked exception of her grandsons, Trixie, Gideon believed, loathed men as a clearly inferior species.

Now, wafted along on dainty slippers and a soft cloud of the intoxicating scent that was her own special mix, she held out her arms to her oldest grandson, allowing him to capture and kiss her hands. He did take her hands in his, but only so that he could pull her closer, lean in and kiss both her artfully powdered cheeks.

She tilted her head and smiled archly. "Oh, so very *vaillant*. You must cut a wide swatch through the ladies with that little trick."

"I can only do my best."

“Yes, and I hear you do your best quite a lot, you naughty scamp. I can excuse Lady Malvern, I suppose, as she’s passably attractive, save for those unfortunate ears. They’re not her fault, and she usually has the good sense to keep them covered. But the widow Orford? Honestly, pet, that woman’s so tight in her ways, I fear for your eventual progeny. She could take you in and snap you right—”

“Trixie,” he interrupted quickly before his own grandmother could put him to the blush, “what the hell are you up to this time?”

He had to give her credit; she didn’t attempt to dissemble, bat her kohl-darkened lashes and trill, “But whatever do you mean?” No. She simply smiled that smile that had her clear blue eyes sparkling.

“You mean Reggie, don’t you? Max never could keep a secret. I gave the duke a good run, more than he deserved. But I can’t simply let him die peacefully in his bed, now can I? Lilyann Smithers, late of Bath, Tunbridge Wells and the beds of whomever, soon to be the next Wickham duchess? Delicious! Just think, pet. Reggie condemned us Redgraves as not being fit for a peerage, and now his heirs will henceforth descend from a whore who’s been sat in more than any village barber chair, if you take my meaning.”

“I do. I’d go so far as to ask you to tell me where you heard that description, but then you’d tell me.”

“Most probably. In any case, she’s been instructed to tell Reggie of her great and most helpful friendship with me when her

husband first introduces her on their return from Gretna. That's part of our bargain, and I paid dearly for it. Modistes, tutors. Why, I myself taught her the intricacies of proper behavior at table. Comely girl, biddable and really quite fetching, but shocking table manners. In any case, she's turned into a tolerable silk purse, thanks to my attention, but the sow's ear of her former, shall we say, *occupation?* That will soon come to light. I'll enjoy knowing Reggie will take that realization to hell with him."

"I can see you've put considerable planning into the duke's downfall. Who was it said it's women who most delight in revenge?"

"I have no idea, but I should have, because it's true. You men haven't the proper appreciation for a well thought-out revenge. I do know the source of my most favorite quote, if that helps you in any way. The dear Pierre Laclos, in his marvelously naughty *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, warned, 'Old ladies must never be crossed: in their hands lie the reputations of the young ones.' Something to keep in mind, pet, although I would protest I'm not yet old. I suppose I will be, someday, but in my mind and heart, I'm only a girl."

"You were as ancient as sin in your cradle," Gideon told her, earning himself a playful tap on the forearm as they sat down beside each other. "And if I recall correctly, it ended badly for the conspirators in that immoral tale."

"Ah, but they were all French. Give me credit for being smarter than any Frenchman, if you please. They chop off heads.

How gauche! I'm much more subtle. Now, if you aren't going to cut up stiff with me about a paltry thing like the soon-to-be late duke—and trust me, his is a paltry thing indeed and sadly lacking in talent—why are you here?"

Gideon smiled sadly. "I'm not certain I remember. Perhaps it's been too long since I've felt dizzy, turned around and around by a crafty old woman who should be minding her knitting."

"Or her grandson's children, whom I've little hope of at the moment, sadly. Don't think the widow Orford will give you sons. Her womb has to have shriveled to nothing by now, as she's at least fifteen years your senior. Really, Gideon, what could you possibly have been thinking, to bed her?"

"Lucile and I aren't lovers, Trixie. You shouldn't put credence in every rumor."

"You're not tipping her? You greatly relieve my mind. But then, for God's sake, why *are* you seeing her? You've squired her around the Park at least twice in the past week, and you've stood up with her at balls three times. No, four, I nearly forgot Suffolk's flat affair this past Thursday. It can't be for her conversation, her wit. She possesses neither."

"Her late husband was one of my father's cronies. I was interested in the manner of the man's death last year. She's just out of mourning, remember? Cultivating her friendship and confidence seemed the easier way of learning the particulars that might not have become public knowledge."

"Particulars concerning the manner of his—How perfectly

morbid of you. Gideon, why would you even care about a thing like that?"

She was so good at playacting. Nibbling around the corner of the subject would get him nowhere; she was too proficient in deception to be caught out so easily. Which left the direct approach. "My father's fellow members of that damn Society of his have been dying with alarming frequency of late, Trixie, all of them in a variety of accidents or other misfortunes. Orford, for one. Lady Malvern's uncle, Sir George Dunmore, for another. I know they were members because they all wore the rose. Are you killing them?"

Her response was swift. She slapped him hard across the face.

He lifted a hand to his burning cheek. "I believe I should be remiss if I didn't point out that's not an answer, madam," he told her coldly.

"Perhaps not, but it was most deserved. What's going on, Gideon? I'd decided not to ask about the stickpin, waiting for you to tell me, which you would have done eventually. Thank God you've stopped. I was not, however, expecting you to come to me today with an absurd inquiry more suited to a man possessing less of the strong intelligence for which I've always given you credit."

"Forgive me. I only learned of your plans for Wickham this morning and probably acted hastily. But twenty years, Trixie? It all happened so long ago. Why bring down the ax now?"

"Because he's going to die soon, of course. I settled the others immediately. And, lest you're confused on that head, I *killed* none

of them. If I made it advantageous to them to destroy themselves, that was their decision. Save Perkins, who is still living in his disgrace in prison."

"Not prison, Trixie. You're losing your touch if you didn't hear he's slipped his mind entirely, and is now raving in some small cell in Bethlehem Hospital."

"Delicious! May he survive another two decades and sleep every night in his own filth. But we're speaking of Reggie now, aren't we? My mistake with the others was moving too quickly. They barely had time to realize their error in threatening me."

"Much more satisfying to destroy them an inch at a time?"

"Now you understand, and with all the inches reserved for the duke since the others were gone. Reggie's known nearly from the first he's on my string, and I'd tighten it one day. He simply never knew when, or how. You've never had anyone at your beck and call, have you, eager to do you any service—any service, Gideon. Able to pick that person up and then put that person down, time and time again. To listen to the pleas for your favors, the piteous weeping when made aware there are others to whom you're at times bestowing those favors. Imagine that person suffering, loving so deeply, desperately, yet living constantly in fear that one day the blade will fall. It's heady stuff. I may have grown a touch lazy over the years, as well, content to flaunt the jewels he gives me beneath his wife's nose as he watches in horror, fearing I'm about to tell her from whence they come."

She shrugged her slim shoulders eloquently, almost sadly. "Or

perhaps I grew somewhat fond of the man over time. I'm not completely heartless. But in the end, Gideon, the bill always comes due, the piper has to be paid. It's Reggie's time to learn the full cost of his crime against the Redgraves, and most especially my grandchildren, who he would have stripped of lands and title. That is not a small thing, Gideon, and never forgivable. Although I suppose I may miss him. A little."

Gideon lowered his head, unable to look into Trixie's tear-bright eyes. "I beg your pardon. I had no right to suspect…to question you. My only excuse, lame as it is, is that I've lately been under some duress."

"I forgive you, pet. And I've indulged you this one time, but you must never again question me. You would rarely like the answers. I'll surely burn in hell one day along with Reggie and so many others, but that is my concern, not yours." The countess took his hand and lifted it to her lips. "You children are my weakness, you know, and always have been, from the day your father died and Maribel fled the country. Now, tell me more about these mysterious deaths. And why you took to wearing that damnable rose."

CHAPTER FIVE

JESSICA STOOD IN HER USUAL place, the one she'd long before decided provided the best vantage point from which to observe the gaming room. She smiled and nodded absently to the gentlemen from time to time, although never encouragingly, as it didn't take much for some of them to believe she'd offered a more intimate acquaintance.

They were rather thin of company this evening, and unless more guests arrived in the next hour she might consider eliminating the second supper and close the doors to newcomers at two. It had been a long time since they'd made an early night of it, and she was looking forward to her bed.

Doreen had already left her post at the door to help with the first supper, but Jessica didn't have to sit in at Richard's chair at the faro table so that he could take the maid's place. Not now that Seth was being taught by Doreen and Richard as to how to go on. His imposing size seemed to be enough to "go on" with so far. His open smile and boyish face, when put in contrast with his enormous frame, sent a clear signal: we're delighted to see you, but if you don't belong here or don't behave, I will cheerfully hold you up by your heels while I carry you outside to bounce your head on the cobblestones.

Richard had somehow procured a decent suit of clothes for the boy, although the jacket did seem to strain at the shoulder

seams, and Doreen had explained—undoubtedly in her usual excruciating detail—about the need to be careful as to who was admitted to the house. It would take him some time to become familiar with the usual faces, but he'd learn. Doreen, bless her wise Irish eye, could spot a constable at thirty paces.

Being hauled off to the guardhouse for operating an illegal gaming house was to be avoided at all costs! As far as her neighbors and most of the world was concerned, Jessica and her "Uncle Richard" held nightly soirees for those of an intellectual nature—the reading of self-composed bits of poetry and literary criticism, etc.

Richard had actually penned an "Ode to Dame Fortune;" he then had ordered the thing framed, personally hanging it in the ground-floor foyer. He thought it a fine joke.

After glancing at the mantel clock to see it lacked only fifteen minutes until eleven, Jessica surreptitiously rubbed at her right temple, hoping to ease the headache that had followed her back to Jermyn Street and still stubbornly refused to vacate the premises.

Her brother was a twit. A fool. An uncanny reflection of his brainless, flighty mother. Worried for his soul, Jessica had thought to rescue a nearly grown version of the sweet, shy, delightful Adam she remembered, only to come face-to-face with a simpering, posturing jackanapes rigged out like some Tatony pig, and displaying a similar intelligence.

Her only solace was the look of aggrieved pain on the earl's

face when Adam had presented himself in the drawing room. She had thought her sweet brother was in imminent peril of being corrupted by those scandalous Redgraves. Instead, if anyone was in any danger in that new association, she would have to lay odds Gideon Redgrave would be the first to run screaming into the night, begging rescue.

Jessica covered her smile with her hand. Poor Gideon. She'd handed him an easy escape, and he'd gotten his back up about her demand and refused. By rights, when he showed up here tonight—if he dared—she'd have to ask him if he symbolically carried his nose with him in a small velvet bag…having sliced it off to spite his face.

Still, she felt dreadful at having so quickly deserted the sinking ship that was Adam. It had been the shock of it; that had to be the reason. It wasn't as if the boy was mean or evil. He had simply left the nursery and become a nincompoop. If there could be any pleasure in that knowledge, it had to be that their father must have been yanking his hair out by the roots each time he contemplated his fribble of a son.

But that's what happens when you wed a nincompoop nearly thirty years your junior for her looks and her fertile womb. You had then set yourself up for fifty-fifty odds of her giving birth to a nincompoop. Really, you'd think more men would consider this.

Of course, that also meant he'd gone into the union with fifty-fifty odds she would have produced a likeness and disposition

that mirrored his own.

Either way, Jessica realized now, too late, whatever way Adam was to go, he'd already gone there in the five important, formative years she had been separated from him, and there was no going back.

And there really wasn't anything anyone could do to *undo* those five years. She'd be overweeningly ambitious to believe otherwise. *Which would likewise mean there could be nothing the Earl of Saltwood could do to corrupt or correct Adam*, she thought, and then mentally added to that thought: *something else that might have occurred to you considerably sooner*.

In short, if she'd been less of a sentimental goose and more hardheaded earlier, she would not have just passed through the most excruciatingly embarrassing twenty-four hours of her existence, or be standing here now in her same black hostess gown, attempting to look unconcerned that the clock had just begun chiming out the hour of eleven, and the exasperating man was nowhere to be seen.

And still she hadn't told him what he needed to know about Adam. What he must know, why she had been so willing to sacrifice herself…and ended making a total fool of herself.

She would have thought, if nothing else, the earl was a man of his word. But perhaps not. Dangling a word like *murder* and coupling that word with *your father* should not be done lightly, not if the person doing the dangling didn't mean to follow through with some explanation, for pity's sake. Had the man no notion

of what was correct?

Jessica rolled her eyes. Of course he did. He was the earl. *She* was the one operating an illegal gaming house. Then again, being an earl only proved he knew what was correct. It didn't naturally follow that he'd do the correct thing.

Not that she cared. Except for the *murder* and the *your father* portions of the business. It wasn't as if she ever wanted to see Gideon Redgrave again. Because he was an annoying man. Extremely annoying. Unsettling. So cocksure of himself. Why, it put her teeth on edge, just thinking about him.

But he had apologized about the rose. Why had he done that? Why had he worn it in the first place? Who was this man?

If only she could stop thinking about him… .

"Jess, he's here."

"Hmm?" she said as Richard's roughly whispered words penetrated the introspective fog that was now her mind. She mentally shook herself back to the moment and turned her gaze to the landing in time to see Gideon once more looking perfectly put together, as if he'd just stepped out of a bandbox. He really was remarkable—a dazzling mix of precision and nonchalance, his dark handsomeness vying with his studied reserve.

She wondered if all women felt as she did when she saw him: how delightful it would be to see him discommoded, disheveled, vulnerable.

At her mercy.

Oh, dear, where had that thought come from?

Jessica lifted a hand to her high-necked bodice, perhaps to still her rapidly beating heart, and pasted a welcoming smile on her face as she crossed the room to where Gideon still stood, clearly playing Master of the Domain. *Her* domain.

"I warned you not to wear armor," was his greeting, spoken quietly, yet reverberating inside her as if she'd suddenly grown harp strings inside her chest and he'd just plucked them.

The arrogance of the man! "And I did not, not this morning. Your ridiculous state of near undress to one side, I was nothing but presentable when I dared cross your threshold. Tonight, however, you are the guest, and what I wear is of my concern, not yours."

His smile, so unexpected, nearly had her rocking back on her heels. "Perhaps we should give your brother the dressing of both of us. He's convinced he's in the very first stare of sartorial perfection."

Jessica couldn't help herself; she returned his smile. "I fear even your immense consequence could but crumble beneath the addition of a puce waistcoat, my lord. As for me, I'd rather go na—"

Gideon leaned in as if to hear her better. "Pardon me, I didn't quite catch that? You'd rather what?"

"Could we possibly be serious, sir?" she asked, drawing herself up to her full height, which still made her feel small and insignificant in his presence. She wasn't used to that. Her stature had always been a blessing, she'd thought. Why, she was taller

than at least a quarter of the men in this room, including Richard.

"I rather thought I was being serious. You do know it's inevitable, don't you? You and I, that is. I won't even point out it was you who began this intriguing dance of ours."

"I apologize for that," Jessica said quietly, shooting her eyes from side to side, praying no one could overhear them and this damning discussion. "Profoundly."

"Ah, but not profusely. Profusely would be nice."

"In that case, Gideon, I most *profusely* apologize for apparently goading you into the ridiculous display of ungentlemanly behavior I was so unfortunate as to witness this morning. You must feel so ashamed."

He tilted his head to one side as he contemplated her, seemed to be measuring her in some way. "You're not lacking in intelligence, are you? Or brass. There are few who would dare to speak to me so."

"Perhaps if more did, you wouldn't be so insufferably smug. I'm not afraid of you, Gideon. As to this absurd idea of anything between us being *inevitable*, I should point out that I have absolutely *no* interest in—Let go of me."

"Don't cause a scene," he said, his grip on her arm looking to the casual observer to be one of easy familiarity, when in fact she swore his fingertips were crushing her bones as they walked straight cross the room to the doorway leading to her apartments. "We don't want to rouse Richard's suspicions. He's got thirty years on me—it wouldn't be a fair fight. And I'll remind you,

Seth is mine, not yours. Smile, Jessica. Let everyone know you're just fine."

"This is absurd. You…you're kidnapping me in my own house," Jessica whispered angrily, even as she saw the sense in not alarming Richard.

Richard paused in the act of drawing in the cards for a reshuffle. "You're going upstairs?" he asked worriedly.

"We've some business to discuss, yes. I shan't be long."

"Very good," Gideon complimented as she concentrated on inserting the key in the lock she'd earlier made sure was engaged this evening, which wasn't a simple matter considering he had hold of her right arm and her left hand was shaking with nerves.

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