

A MAN
WITHOUT
A MISTRESS

BLISS BENNET

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CHAPTER ONE

February 1822

“You’ll feel differently, my dear, once you are married. . .”

Sibilla Pennington sighed, her gloved finger tracing smaller and smaller circles on the tufted velvet of the carriage seat.

One hundred and forty-seven. Great-Aunt Allyne had uttered the phrase “You’ll feel differently once you are married” one hundred and forty-seven times during their all-too-lengthy journey from Lincolnshire to London. As if once Sibilla was married, this devilish penchant for risk taking she’d developed since Papa’s death would miraculously be replaced by the demurest of halos and wings.

Only someone who had spent as little time with her over the past year as her aunt would believe the daughter of the fifth Viscount Saybrook likely to be tamed by matrimony. No, she had as little intention of changing her unconventional opinions as she had of participating in this year’s Marriage Mart, despite what she had implied to her brother. Her promise to her father came first. She’d risk far worse than another quarrel with Theo to keep her word to Papa.

Still, she’d have to exercise at least a modicum of restraint if she was to keep this devil’s bargain from crashing down about her head.

“Is it not a wife’s duty, ma’am, to keep herself well

informed?" she asked in as innocuous a tone as she could muster. "So she might appear to advantage in the polite world, and be a credit to her husband?"

"Well informed, yes, but to read the newspapers? The political columns? No proper young lady would even consider such a thing," her aunt said with a delicate shudder.

Sibilla shoved her reticule, which held a tightly furled copy of the *Times*, farther behind her back.

"If only your father had listened to my advice and allowed you to remain in London with me three years ago, rather than curtailing your come-out in that quite shocking fashion," Aunt Allyne continued. "But he never would listen to the guidance of a poor female, not when I advised him about the dangers of filling your head with talk of radicals and reform, nor when I cautioned him about waiting too long to find you a suitable husband. If you had but stayed in town, surely you'd be a happy wife with a child or two by now, and this unwonted interest in politics would be long forgotten."

Aunt Allyne could imagine her happy, with Papa barely a year in his grave?

Sibilla clenched her hands in her lap, wishing the kid of her gloves did not protect her palms from the sharp bite of her fingernails. Physical pain could often distract from pain of the emotional sort.

"Aunt, your offer to keep me in London was all that was good and kind. But my father's health truly did benefit from my company. And missing the rest of my Season did not strike me as so great a loss." Catching sight of the frown burgeoning on her aunt's face, she hurriedly added, "As you yourself noted, so few of the young men that year seemed inclined to marry."

"Ah yes, you are quite right," her aunt replied, apparently appeased. "Only three marriages of any consequence in the year '19, and only five the year after, all involving only the most handsome gels. And with your looks . . . of course, beauty is as beauty does, dear child.

But perhaps it was better to wait. I find you in far better countenance now than when you were only seventeen.”

Sibilla turned to stare out the window, determined to avoid the pity in Aunt Allyne’s eyes. She’d long understood that she would never embody the slim, fair, fashionable ideal held by the *ton*, but her aunt’s forthright summary of her charms still stung. Shorter than the average, with eyes of the plainest brown and straw-colored hair that did not so much curl as wildly corkscrew in all directions, she would hardly turn the head of even the most shortsighted man.

But the only male head she needed to turn during this Season was the one belonging to her eldest brother, Theo Pennington, the new Viscount Saybrook. And turn it not in her own direction, but toward his duty. Theo had little liking for politicking, but surely her offer to act as his political guide would convince him to follow in Papa’s footsteps and speak in Parliament for reform. After all, her father had chosen her over all her older brothers to share all he knew about the House of Lords. Instead of marrying her off, Theo needed her to smooth his way into Whig circles by acting as gracious hostess.

He just didn’t know it yet.

Her heart began to pound at the thought of seeing her brother again. Even though Theo had always been the brother to whom she felt the closest, since their father’s passing—no, since that last bitter parting shortly before it—they had each acted as politely as strangers the few times they had crossed paths. But she must make him understand why every peer who believed in a temperate reform of the government was vitally necessary if England did not wish to see the grievances of the poor erupt in riot or revolt. Surely then he wouldn’t allow his antipathy to politics, or their personal disagreements, to stand in the way of his duty.

Still, perhaps it would be wise to recruit an ally or two.

“Do you know if Theo is acquainted with Lord James

Dunster, son of the Marquess of Tisbury?" Yes, and what other aristocratic names appeared most often in the Parliamentary Intelligence column of the *Times*? "Or Mr. Harold Hardwicke, cousin to the Earl of Trent?"

"Oh, I *am* pleased to see you finally taking an interest in potential suitors!" Aunt Allyne's wrinkled face creased with a smile. "But do not worry yourself; Theodosius and I will choose to whom you should be introduced. Now, my Bible is in my valise, but I do have Miss Hatfield's *Letters on the Importance of the Female Sex* to hand. Shall we take up from where we left off?"

Ah, the enervating strictures of Miss Hatfield. Something between a groan and a sigh escaped Sibilla's lips.

"Now, now, no need to take on so, my child." Aunt Allyne gave Sibilla's knee a kindly pat. "The Season will soon start in good earnest, and you will have your chance to meet the most eligible *partis*."

Heaven help her if her plan failed, and she must accede to her aunt's idea of an eligible marriage partner! She could picture him now, declaiming her aunt's favorite commonplaces as if they held the wisdom of the ages: *An idle brain is the devil's shop, Miss Pennington. You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, Miss Pennington. A little learning is a dangerous thing, Miss Pennington, especially for an unmarried lady with an unseemly interest in politics. And when you are married, surely you'll think the same. . .*

The coachman's "Hollah!" brought the disagreeable litany to a blessed halt. Berkeley Square, at last. Before a groom could drop from the seat above or a footman scurry from the house, Sibilla opened the door of the carriage. One nimble jump and she was on the pavement; three quick steps brought her to the portico-covered door.

"My dear girl, have a care! Lady Jersey resides at number 38, and you would not wish to risk making a poor first impression on one of Almack's most esteemed patronesses!" Aunt Allyne called from the door of the

carriage.

Paying no heed to her aunt's chiding, she pushed past the footman and stepped through the just-opened front door.

At last! Pennington House, the London residence of the Viscounts Saybrook for the past sixty years. The last time she had been here, that tantalizingly brief month during the spring of her seventeenth year, she and Papa had talked politics and hatched plans, debating into the wee hours over potential suitors. She smiled at the memory. How differently the words "When you are married" sounded when uttered by Papa!

But then Lord Saybrook had grown sick and died, and all their plans for forging a marital alliance that would also forward the cause of political reform fell by the wayside. *Yes, I'll see that Theo takes up the cause in your stead*, she'd whispered by her father's deathbed. *And I won't forget it, either. Not like Jane Carson, and Cissy Hubbard, and the others who abandoned politics as soon as they married.* Husband and household, bedding, breeding, and babies—it all left wives far too little time for any pursuit beyond the domestic. No, far better to remain right here at Pennington House, working by her brother's side, than to risk taking on a husband.

"Theo! We're here!" She raced up the main staircase in a manner certain to earn her the label "unladylike" in most *ton* households. Shedding her pelisse and muff, she rushed down the corridor, opening doors right and left. "Theo?"

Dust shrouds had been removed from the furniture, and the windows, recently cleaned, gleamed with light. But each room felt empty, un-lived-in; the smell of polish, not people, greeted her at every door. Had she truly expected Pennington House would still hold her father's scent, tobacco and sunshine and starch, even after it had vanished from the house where he had died?

"Miss? Please, allow me." A tall man in Saybrook livery bowed, then opened the only door on the corridor

that still remained closed.

Her brow wrinkled, then cleared. "Hill, isn't it?" At the footman's answering nod, she added, "Please, Hill, where might I find my brother?"

The footman smiled. "Remember me, do you, then, miss? Ah, your father's daughter, to be sure. You may find Master Benedict in what we are to call his *studio*, in the attic next to the maidservants' room. Master Kit has taken lodgings in Duke Street, I believe."

"But I'm looking for my eldest brother. Don't tell me that sluggard is still abed?"

She hesitated at the threshold of the room Hill revealed. The music room, with its overstuffed armchairs and gleaming pianoforte, purchased by Papa just before he brought her to town that last time. How he loved it when she played just for him. Her fingers began to trace out the notes of his favorite ballad against her thigh.

She jerked them to a halt, her hands clenching.

Hill cleared his throat. "My apologies, miss. I haven't seen Lord Saybrook these many months."

"Months? What, is he not residing at Pennington House?"

Hill started, his eyes growing wide. "No, miss."

She hadn't meant to reply so sharply. But to come all this way, and discover Theo not even here . . .

Sibilla pressed a palm hard against her sternum. Had she been the one to drive him away, with her cruel words and stinging accusations over their father's sickbed?

"Thank you, Hill. That will be all," Sibilla said, dismissing the servant before he could catch sight of the tears threatening the corners of her eyes.

Descending the staircase at a pace far more sedate than she'd taken while climbing it, Sibilla made her way back to the entrance hall.

"Oh, my dear girl, what luck. Not a soul on the square witnessed your untoward flight." Mrs. Allyne juggled a bandbox, a book, and her reticule by the front

door. "The dear Lord looks after his orphans and strays, so he does. Now come, meet Bridget, the abigail I've—"

"Aunt," she interrupted, "Hill tells me Theo is not living here. Why did no one inform me?" *Papa gone, and now Theo, too?*

"Ah, brothers," her aunt answered as she allowed Hill to most properly divest her of her outer garments. "Such provoking creatures! They do say that sisters are ever so much more obliging. Even if your father had been my brother rather than my nephew-in-law, I doubt he would have listened to my advice and agreed to allow you to remain in London rather than traipsing down the countryside to nurse him. After your mother died, Saybrook always did like to keep you close to pay him court. But your nursing didn't help much in the end, though, did it, my child? 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,' just like my own dear Mr. Allyne, may they both rest in peace."

Sibilla bit her lip, hard, determined not to allow her grief to show. It would only lead to another of her aunt's sermons on accepting death with perfect resignation to the will of the Almighty.

"But just think, my dear," Aunt Allyne said, linking her arm through her niece's. "Once you are married, you'll no longer be troubled by such trying creatures as brothers."

One hundred and forty-eight. *One hundred and forty-eight!*

Sibilla bit back a most unladylike curse. Surely she'd be able to persuade Theo to take up his parliamentary duties long before the count could reach a thousand . . .

Across Mayfair, in the London residence of the Earl of Milne, Sir Peregrine Sayre, too, was counting. The num-

ber of acres one needed to enclose to feed the average herd of sheep. The number of men brought into the Guildhall Justice Room each week for thieving, and the number of those who were convicted and transported. And, most recently, the number of men who had voted against the disenfranchisement of Grampound, the first move toward reforming representation in Parliament. And, of course, the number of favors Lord Milne would need to give them as reward for said support. Praise heaven he'd finally been able to convince Milne to champion the bill, despite the earl's conservative leanings. It was one fewer time he'd have to compromise his own principles just to keep in his patron's good graces.

Per sighed, laying down his quill to rub the tension from between his brows. Such glorified accounting hardly did justice to his skills as a politician, garnered over six years of working with the earl. But Milne had seemed unduly anxious of late. Best to humor him, especially when he was so close to persuading the earl to support his candidacy for a seat in the House during the next election. If Per had to count all the fleas on all the rats in all the alleys of London to set Milne's mind at ease, then by God, count fleas he would.

Before Per could take up his quill again, a long arm clad in the richest superfine reached over his shoulder to snatch it up off the desk.

"Still totting away, my good fellow? If one didn't know any better, one might believe my father ran a counting house. How would I ever live down the shame?"

Viscount Dulcie, Lord Milne's scapegrace of a son, perched on the edge of the desk, twirling the stolen pen between nimble fingers. With others, Per's natural reserve held him aloof, but somehow he could never stand on ceremony with the irreverent lord.

"Do my ears deceive me? Or did I truly hear the word *shame* emerge from your lips? Surely Lord Dulcie has no acquaintance with the sentiment?" He made a

lunge for the fluttering quill, but Dulcie danced away, just out of reach.

“How could I not feel shame when all the world blames me for your absence from society? If you do not take steps to address the gossip, my good name will soon lie in tatters.”

With a swift feint, Dulcie darted in, attempting to tap the quill against Per’s nose. But this time Per was quicker, catching the smaller man’s arm and turning it behind his back.

“What has your good name to do with my refusal to waste my time on parties and routs?” Per had cultivated a reputation for indifference with the ladies of the *ton* for a purpose and had little interest in abandoning it without good reason.

“Beast! Give over or you’ll rip the seam. Here, have your dratted pen, for all the good it shall do you.”

Per gave a grunt of satisfaction as Dulcie let the feather drop from his fingers.

“A bully as well as a recluse!” Dulcie accused, rubbing at his arm in an aggrieved manner, as if Per had actually done him an injury. “No wonder they can’t stop chattering about you. Enigmatic, violent fellow. Just the sort ladies hanker after, fools that they are. And then they have the gall to blame me when you ignore them.”

“Of what, precisely, do you stand accused, besides the abuse of perfectly good pens?” He lifted the feather to reveal the top of its shaft tipping over at a drunken angle.

“Why, of encouraging your most unnatural *tendre* for me, of course, dear boy,” Dulcie replied, his lips quirking in amusement. “For what other reason would the ladies of the *ton* believe you would squirrel yourself away in our house, eschewing all their charms?”

Per uttered a silent curse. Dulcie typically took care to keep his liaisons far from the public eye, wary of allowing any whiff of scandal to touch his family. But had Milne’s increasing insistence that his son marry and

produce an heir led Dulcie to rebel and deliberately court scandal? And was Per to be sacrificed on the altar of Dulcie's dramatics?

If such rumors—no matter how patently false—were to reach Lord Milne, Per's dream of sitting in the House of Commons would die a speedy death. And how then would he work toward parliamentary reform, toward giving the people of England a real voice in the running of their own government? How would he ever make restitution for the suffering he had caused?

"Surely, Dulcie, you didn't— you haven't—"

"Of course not. You think I'd share the story of your crushing rejection?" Dulcie gave a dramatic shudder. "Why, no man's *amour-propre* could withstand such a blow! If only I'd known then how often you frequented whorehouses that first year you came up to town, I'd never have mistaken your true proclivities. You must tell me, why ever did you stop?" The viscount settled in Per's chair, chin propped on his hands, eyes wide with curiosity.

How the hell had Dulcie caught wind of that old scandal?

For a moment, Per had the urge to give in to temptation and confess his own past mistakes. But if he spilled his budget to a gossip such as Dulcie, the entire *ton* would soon know that he'd haunted London's brothels and gaming hells during that ghastly year after he had come up from Cambridge for reasons completely unrelated to his own amusement. A rumor of lewd behavior with Dulcie would be nothing to the revelation of those sordid secrets.

If, in fact, such a rumor even existed . . .

He took a step toward Dulcie, frowning as suspicion grew.

"Now, you've no need to punish me for bearing bad tidings," Dulcie said, jumping up from the chair and holding out his hands in supplication. "Indeed, I bring you the means to dispel such scandalous tittle-tattle. All

you must do is drag yourself away from this tedious pile of papers and accept the dinner invitation my parents will so kindly extend. Chat amiably with a chit or two, turn a page of music for another, and you'll quiet the gabblemongers forthwith."

"One dinner invitation? No balls? No routs? No tedious musicales?"

"Only dinner, Per. Lady Butterbank will be in attendance, so if you snub me, we're certain to dispel this scurrilous scandalbroth brewing among the gossips. Lord knows that woman loves to tattle."

"Yes, almost as much as you do." He retreated to his chair, crossing his arms in disgust.

Dulcie chuckled. "Lady Butterbank does give me a good run for my money. But I see no reason not to throw her a juicy bone now and again. You'll attend, if only to give her a reason to rise the next morning?"

He found himself unable to maintain a grudge in the face of Dulcie's good humor. "If I must," he conceded.

"And, if you would," Dulcie added in a suspiciously offhand manner, "you might consider a Miss Pennington as one of the recipients of your somewhat dubious charms. Another nobleman's daughter up from the country, ready to make her bow to the king, my mother tells me. Ill dressed and whey-faced, I'll wager. And from bucolic Lincolnshire, no less!"

"Dulcie," he growled, eyes narrowing as he rose from his seat to tower threateningly over the far shorter viscount. "If I discover you've created this ridiculous rumor only to extricate yourself from yet another of your father's matchmaking schemes . . ."

The viscount raised one eyebrow as he backed through the door. "Why the earl thinks I'd have anything to say to a schoolgirl who has spent far more time communing with cows and cabbages than engaging in intelligent conversation, I cannot begin to imagine. But you, Sir Peregrine, should be more than suitable."

Per lunged, but caught only the sound of laughter as

the viscount beat a quick retreat.

In truth, this Pennington girl must be a gorgon if Dulcie required *his* help to free himself from her clutches. Perhaps he would attend the Milnes' party, if only to watch the sport as the earl tried once again to entice his son into the matrimonial lists. And might he even teach Dulcie not to tease him with false gossip?

The corner of his mouth quirked as he tapped his quill against the table. Just what words should he whisper in the ear of the whey-faced Miss Pennington to suggest Viscount Dulcie harbored a *tendre* not for Per, but for her?

Before Per could ponder the possibilities, a noise from the hallway caught his ear. Had Dulcie been so unwise as to return?

The door opened to reveal not the slender viscount, but the man's far more rotund father. "Peregrine, my boy, come quickly. I've need of that logical brainbox of yours."

Lord Milne waved an elegantly clad arm in his direction as he hustled into the library. Praying that his rash promise to count fleas had not come back to bite him so soon, Per followed the earl into the library. After shutting the door, he took a seat opposite his patron.

"Sayre, we've got to do something about this attack on the salaries of the lay Lords of the Admiralty," Lord Milne said, his long fingers drumming on the arms of his chair. "I'm all for retrenchment, you know that, but damn it, my wife's cousin will lose his post if this bill passes."

Per tamped down a grimace. Lady Milne rarely took any interest in her husband's political maneuvering, except when family was involved. Then, whatever the countess asked, the earl would demand, no matter his own party's position on the matter. Or Per's.

"Whom must we persuade to vote against it?" Per asked, resigning himself yet again to the need for compromise.

“That idiot Calthorpe, of all people. He and his cronies have agreed to side with us, but only if I can garner enough votes for his ridiculous amendment to the Vagrancy Bill.”

“Amendment?”

“The one that will allow watchmen to turn over any prostitutes arrested under the new vagrancy law to Calthorpe and his Guardian Society do-gooders. Do you remember, they’ve set afoot a scheme to reform street-walkers by housing them and teaching them trades?”

At Per’s nod, the earl continued. “Apparently they’re having difficulties persuading enough doxies to agree to repent. Hardly surprising, that—as if a depraved female could be reformed at the snap of Calthorpe’s skinny fingers.”

Per frowned, not liking the direction his thoughts were taking. “He wants lightskirts arrested for vagrancy turned over to the Guardian Society, rather than sent to gaol?”

“Yes. And not just for being offensive in public, but also if they can’t give a satisfactory account of themselves. Can you believe his gall? Why, half the women in London couldn’t give a satisfactory account of themselves if asked.”

Per cursed under his breath. The reform-minded MPs whom he had taken such pains to cultivate would be outraged if Milne voted in favor of such a proposed infringement of the immemorial liberties of Englishmen. Or Englishwomen as the case may be. But the mulish set of Milne’s mouth told him that the rights of anonymous masses would come in a distant second to the immediacy of family ties.

His mind raced. How could he frame Milne’s throwing his weight behind Calthorpe in a way that would justify it to the liberals?

A few moments of furious thought, and Per had the answer. He leaned forward, his eyes

ed on Milne’s. “You need numbers, my lord. Good,

solid numbers.”

“Numbers? What numbers? The number of whores in London? The average price they charge? How many are infected with the pox?”

“No, sir. Evidence that will justify locking up the doxies in Calthorpe’s asylums. Exactly how many of those whores he’s taken in have truly stopped whoring? Calthorpe can wave his hand and say they’re meeting with success, but you’ll need facts and figures, ones that show his plan actually works. Otherwise you’ll never be able to explain why you’re supporting Calthorpe, not to liberals such as Brougham. Or to the new Lord Saybrook, if he follows in his father’s footsteps and takes on a leading role amongst the Whigs. He’s out of mourning now, I hear.”

“Yes, yes, I see.” Milne’s tapping fingers stilled as he took in the implications. “Interview ’em, use that new-fangled political arithmetic to count ’em up, prove that Calthorpe’s claims are not just a lot of hot air. Brougham won’t be able to plague me for crossing party lines if I’ve solid facts to hand, will he?”

Per sat back, a smile hinting at the corners of his mouth. “Which men should we set to the task, my lord?”

Milne looked up with a frown. “Sending a bunch of fellows to muck about Covent Garden and the like will cause talk. One man, though, will hardly be noticed. May I rely upon your discretion, Sayre?”

It had been a long time since Per had felt that acrid edge of disgust, deep in his gut. With a quick swallow, he forced back the bile that rose at Milne’s ghastly request. Not that it would strike the earl as ghastly; any other man but Per would probably consider it a lark, chasing down and interviewing purportedly penitent prostitutes.

“My boy, I know you don’t typically consort with ladies or lightskirts,” Milne added, a note of caution tempering his usual genial tone. How long had Per

remained silent?

Per jerked up from his seat and walked over to stare out the library window at the back garden, still barren in the rainy March gloom. Lord, was his lack of intrigues with the opposite sex a topic of gossip not just among Dulcie's set, but among their elders as well? Perhaps he *should* start attending more *ton* events, if only to prevent speculation. But to return to the stews of London, to perhaps catch sight of Mary Catharine after all these years . . . His gut clenched in protest.

Milne's hand on his shoulder interrupted the refusal poised on Per's lips.

"Peregrine. I know this task isn't to your liking. But you're the only one I can trust with such a task. Do this for me, and you'll earn my undying gratitude. And that of Lady Milne. Such supporters are not so easy to come by for a man eager to earn a seat in Parliament . . ."

And just as easily lost by a man unwilling to do his mentor's bidding, Per understood, though Milne graciously forbore to utter the words.

He turned and gazed steadily at his patron. So this was the way it would be. His peace of mind, perhaps even his good name, all in exchange for a seat in the House. A devil's bargain, to be sure.

But he had not spent the last six years of his life cultivating Lord Milne only to be dropped for refusing a seemingly harmless task. And if Milne had no inkling of what such a search might cost his protégé, then it would be wise not to raise suspicions with any further delay.

With a short, sharp nod, Per damned himself to the distasteful task.

A smile of relief lit Milne's face. "I'll get a list from Calthorpe, with names and addresses of all the penitents who have passed through the Guardian Society. You will interview them and find out whether the claims of reform put forth by the Society are at all close to accurate."

Milne returned to his desk, clearing his throat as he

sat. "Just be sure you keep your activities to yourself, Peregrine. Wouldn't want any of the eligible ladies to get wind of such goings-on. A wife may look away if her husband visits a demirep, but no woman wants her spouse cavorting with the bunkers and bulk-mongers of the street, does she?"

"A wife, sir?" he asked, confused.

"Yes, a wife," Lord Milne said with a grin. "Mr. Courtald, I have heard, will not be standing for his seat in the Commons during the next election. That seat is under the control of my earldom. You'll need a wife, won't you, to entertain and woo potential supporters? That is, if I'm correct in assuming you'd care to take his place?"

Pasting a civil smile on his face, he bowed to his patron. "Yes, you are quite correct, my lord. I would be most proud to represent the people of Essex in the Commons."

Lord Milne smiled. "Well then, Sayre, count up these prostitutes for me, and we'll see what we can do about satisfying your ambition. And come to dine at Milne House on Thursday. We'll see about finding both you and Dulcie suitable wives."

Per nodded and left the room, stifling a groan. *Prostitutes!* This ridiculous project of Milne's would take an exorbitant amount of time and trouble, never mind the painful memories revisiting the dregs of London would likely waken.

He'd almost rather it had been fleas . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Nudging a knee against the long-tailed gray he had hired from Tilbury's Mount Street stable, Per wove through the drays and carts that crowded the early morning Piccadilly street. Blast it, more than two hundred names appeared on the list of penitent prostitutes Milne had handed him three days ago. Most of their addresses lay in the dankest parts of London. And in all likelihood not more than one in ten of the girls still resided at her last reported abode. Not only was this undertaking distasteful, it was damn near impossible.

At least today he needn't guard himself against cut-purses or soiled doves. Much to his surprise, some quite fashionable addresses had been written beside the names of a handful of the women on his list, including the address of Lord Milne's former opponent, Viscount Saybrook. Had Saybrook, like other charitable supporters of the Guardian Society, offered a reformed woman employment? Or had he lured a penitent away from the path of righteousness?

A sudden rush of hooves and horseflesh sent the question, and his hat, flying from his head. A horseman careened past, in through the gates of Hyde Park.

Damned fool!

But the rider was sitting sidesaddle, not astride. A lady unable to control her mount, with no groom to hand to help her? He wheeled his horse in pursuit.

His blood pounded in time to the hooves thundering beneath him. The gap between himself and the bay quickly narrowed. Urging his horse to keep pace, he

moved the reins to one hand. As he drew level, he stretched toward the runaway, grabbing its bridle, forcing it to slow.

Amazingly, the rider had somehow kept her own riding hat atop her head. Its lacy veil had streamed out behind her like a streaky summer cloud until he pulled both animals up sharply. Now he shook his head, trying to dislodge the lace from where it lay tickling against his nose.

He caught his breath, readying himself to calm hysterics or tears. A gentle reminder of the importance of choosing a mount suitable for a lady might also be in order. But before he could utter a word of either comfort or rebuke, two small fists began pummeling him in the chest. What, was the chit hitting him? And after he'd saved her from a probable fall?

Layers of fabric protected his body from the blows, but still, they stung his pride. As a sharp elbow nearly sent him from the saddle, he scrabbled to maintain his balance. Somehow the rider tipped off her horse and onto his, where she landed in an untidy heap, her bottom pointing up into the air. A quite round and shapely bottom, he found himself noting with unwonted, and unwelcome, heat as it wiggled and twisted teasingly under his nose.

His horse, less than pleased by the sudden addition of extra weight, sidled uneasily, forcing his attention away from the lady. Taking advantage of his distraction, she twisted out of his grasp and slid down the horse's flank, landing in an ungainly heap in the grass.

Per dismounted, then crouched down beside her, pulling back sharply as a toss of her head again swung the lace of her hat in his direction. Once out of range of the dangerous frippery, he looked down to find a round face quivering with indignation.

"Do you mean to kill me, sir? Or is it simply your habit to assault the nearest woman to hand as she takes her morning ride?" The girl—no, woman—glowed with

an angry sheen, the color of her cheeks nearly matching the cherry red of her riding habit. He watched warily as her crop whipped at the dirt beside her. Why wasn't the baggage thanking him for risking his neck to save hers?

Per took a deep, calming breath. "Your pardon, ma'am," he said, extending a conciliating hand. But the lady, mistaking his intentions, sidled backward, raising the crop threateningly between them.

"Do not think of taking further advantage, you ruffian. I don't often need to use this on Lady Jane, but I assure you I am well able to deploy it against a blackguard such as yourself."

Her breath rose and fell rapidly, pushing the fabric of the riding habit tightly across her chest. Why, in the midst of such a ridiculous situation, was he compelled to dwell on that particular sight?

"Why would I be interested in taking advantage of a chit too silly to command her own horse?" Intent on self-protection, he grabbed the end of the crop. "A vixen who threatens a well-meaning rescuer with a beating?"

He yanked on the whip, but the woman, uncommonly strong, pulled back. Per tripped over her heel and found himself tumbling down atop her. The warm curves beneath him sent an unexpected frisson of awareness flashing throughout his body. As he stared into her brown eyes, his fingers, without stopping to consult his brain, clutched at the turn of her waist. If only they had stopped there. But no, they kept moving, as if to shape the roundness of that bosom pressed so close against him.

Damnation! He'd thought he'd trained his unruly body these past six years to disregard any such carnal urges. What the hell was it doing?

With an embarrassed grunt, he pushed up off the ground and came to his feet. Wary of offering his help again, he thrust his wayward hands behind his back, willing them to mind their manners.

"You thought me unable to command my horse?"

she asked, struggling to her feet.

He'd long prided himself on his polite, detached manner of speaking to the gentler sex, but the ingratitude of this reckless young woman made composure difficult to maintain. "Forgive me, but has the meaning of the word *command* been changed without my knowledge? The last time I consulted Dr. Johnson's dictionary, hurtling through the park as if one were being chased by Napoleon's entire army did not number among its definitions."

The lady's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps it is not your understanding, but your eyesight that is at fault, sir. To mistake the glide of the canter for the uncontrolled dash of a bolt, one must lack a certain ability to discriminate. Might you be in need of spectacles?"

"I'd no need of spectacles to see your horse was galloping away at a clip that no lady in a sidesaddle could long maintain. Not, that is, if she wished to avoid falling on her lovely ar—"

Lord, the vexing baggage had nearly goaded him into cursing in front of her. Had he completely lost his mind?

"I assure you I had complete control over my mount, sir, and was at no time in any danger of falling, on my lovely *a*— or on any other part of my person."

He felt his breath catch at the girl's audacity. Would a proper lady speak so, or look at a man so boldly?

Suddenly realizing he was staring, he yanked his eyes away from the cherry-red figure, feigning an urgent need to attend to his own attire. Leaning over to brush the dirt from his knees gave him no respite, however; from that vantage point, he could not help but see that her skirt had sidled up almost to her knee, revealing scuffed riding boots below all-too-shapely calves. Her mouth widened into an angry O as she saw the direction his gaze had taken. She yanked her skirt back down over her ankles, freeing him from the enticing sight.

What the devil ailed him today, to allow a pert young

miss to goad him into such appalling behavior? Before his lips could form the words of the apology she was surely due, a rough cough informed him they were no longer alone. A retainer joined them, holding the reins of her horse in one hand, Per's hat in the other. The wry twist of the man's lips told Per that this was not the first time he had been left behind as the chit tore off on her own.

"All to rights, miss?" the groom asked.

Skirts swayed temptingly over that shapely bottom as she strode over to collect her mount. "Yes, Farley, everything is fine. A simple misunderstanding, it would appear. The gentleman mistook my mount for a runaway and thought me in need of rescue."

"All too easy to make a mistake like that, here in the city, with so many folks as what don't know a body and all," the groom replied. "And thankful I am to you, sir, for all the young miss knows as much about handling a horse as I do meself. All good and well to give me the slip in the country, but Lord Saybrook would have me head iffen he was to hear of her riding about alone here in Lunnon."

Saybrook? Did the groom belong to Saybrook's household?

"Perhaps you might do me a favor in return then," Per said, happy to have a reason to turn his gaze away from the cherry-red young woman, and the blush that had suffused her face at her retainer's words. "Do you know a servant who works at Pennington House, a girl called"—he paused to pull the penitent list from his pocketbook—"Bridget McGinnis?"

Instead of answering, the groom glanced nervously toward his mistress.

"If you are interested in Miss McGinnis, would it not be best to speak with her, rather than her servant?" she said, stepping between him and the groom.

"You are Bridget McGinnis?" She hardly looked the part of a dependent. And what serving girl would be

allowed to ride about London on such prime horseflesh? He raised a skeptical eyebrow.

But the girl did not retreat. "And if I were?"

Her speech and manner hardly suggested that of a lightskirt. But perhaps hard times had brought her low? He allowed his eyes to wander her person, from the springs of curling hair that peeked out from under her hat to the dirty hems of her habit. Not a typical beauty, with her abundant curves and tart tongue, but still, there was something that drew a man's eye, even against his will. The previous Lord Saybrook had no reputation as a skirt chaser, but perhaps his heir was different. If she stirred the new master of Pennington House half as much as she did him, then perhaps Miss McGinnis was not as reformed as the Guardian Society might wish.

"Then I would say, Miss McGinnis, you need to demand more from your protector," he heard himself reply. "No high-flyer worth her salt would be caught dead in such outmoded clothes."

"My protector? What, you believe me some man's mistress?"

Eyes glittered back at him with a fire far different from his own cool reserve. *Disregard it*, he told himself sharply, even as his boots took one step closer, then another. The sight of her pulse leaping in the hollow of her neck set his own heart pounding, as if he were once again in the midst of pursuing her. But they both stood firmly on the ground.

"Are you not, little hoyden?" he heard himself whisper, his voice rasping strange and low. Tension laced his body as he waited for her answer.

"Sir?" The groom coughed. "Be needing your hat, will you?"

Per jerked away in embarrassment. How humiliating, to need a servant to remind him of proper behavior! Whether lady or lightskirt, the girl had not merited such disrespect.

But at least his actions had given him the answer to

his question. For surely a gentlewoman would have reacted to his insulting familiarity with a cry of outrage or a stinging slap, rather than allow him to speak with her so. And the way her eyelids had opened so wide, then drifted so enticingly low, as if his voice had cast as deep a glamour over her as she had seemingly cast over him . . .

Devil take it! If every penitent he met sent him into such a state, he'd not be through with the odious search until Michaelmas. And being seen in conversation with a lightskirt would hardly burnish his reputation, would it?

Collecting his usual *sang-froid* about him as if it were a shield, he strode over to his horse and swung quickly up into the saddle. He grabbed his hat from the groom and placed it, one-handed, upon his head, then turned his mount toward the south gate. But somehow—because, though they looked nothing alike, something about her put him in mind of Mary Catharine, perhaps?—he could not bring himself to leave without speaking a final word.

“Please accept my apologies, Miss McGinnis, for mistaking you for a lady in distress. Now that I know you are much too capable ever to be in need of rescue, you can be sure I will not make the same mistake again. But I will share with you one word of advice. Any woman who rides through the park at such a breakneck pace is likely to draw unwanted attention. You'd best curb your mount if you do not wish word of your misadventures to get back to your patrons at the Guardian Society.”

With a quick nod, he set his mount to a brisk trot, steeling himself against turning back for one last sight of the girl. And against thinking overmuch about why any such effort was needed.

A mistress. The blasted man actually had the temerity to believe her some man's *mistress!*

Sibilla strode down the Mayfair pavement, the dappled afternoon sunlight doing little to brighten her mood. Back home in Lincolnshire, whenever unruly temper threatened to overcome her, she took refuge not in dirty city avenues but in the land, galloping heedlessly through the woods and dells until she no longer had energy left to expend on anything as useless as anger. As a child, her brothers had most often driven her out, with their taunts and teasing and their infuriating bodies, bodies large enough and strong enough to easily push aside any attempts she might make to join in their play, or protest their leaving her behind.

But then Kit had gone to Cambridge to prepare for the church, and Benedict to the Continent to study art. And then Theo, too, had removed to London, to learn nothing at all. Unless one counted the gentlemanly debaucheries, of course. With three brothers gone, it had been her father's physician, then, who had driven her to race over the lanes with rash abandon. "Nothing to do but wait," he would intone, his kindly smile infuriating in its resignation. "'Tis the will of God." Nothing to do as she spent each morning nursing Papa, listening to his stories of his past political accomplishments, refusing to believe he'd not have the opportunity to contrive even greater triumphs in future. Refusing to believe he'd ever leave her.

Toward the end, when her father had coughed and raved, Sibilla found herself tearing over the countryside, turning toward home only when she could barely keep her seat for weariness and despair. After her father's death, she'd vowed never to allow herself to be so helpless, so vulnerable, ever again.

Yet here she stood, not three days arrived in London, and already social convention had ruined her freedom.

Devil take him, that far-too-attractive man, with his insulting insinuations and presumptuous hands. Devil take him for stealing away even the tame release offered by a harmless gallop. *If only I'd had the courage to let fly with my riding crop—*

Her steps beat against the cobbles as she strode across Oxford Street. Ridiculous to give the rude stranger any more of her thoughts. She had problems much closer to home—three, to be exact. Three insufferable, infuriating problems that had driven her to race Lady Jane through the park as if Old Nick himself had been in close pursuit. Namely, Benedict, who gave her a bow rather than an embrace when he finally dragged himself away from his oh-so-important studio to acknowledge their arrival. And Kit, who called the next day only to tell her he was far too busy to accept that morning's, or any morning's, invitation to ride. And above all, Theo, her beloved Theo, who had driven her from the house without even stepping a foot within it. How could he let three entire days slip by without calling?

Well, if Theo would not come to her, then she would just have to go to him. Aunt Allyne might insist that a respectable unmarried lady did not call on a gentleman, but surely the rule did not apply to brothers.

"Miss?" The question was tentative, but insistent, spoken by her maid, Bridget McGinnis. The same Bridget McGinnis after whom the insolent man in the park had been inquiring. When Sibilla had so impulsively allowed that man to mistake her for the maid her aunt had hired, her only thought had been to protect the young woman. Having a gentleman chasing after a servant surely boded no good. And her later questioning suggested the girl might just be in need of such protection. Though Bridget denied knowing any such man, her refusal to look her mistress in the eye struck Sibilla as more than just respectful deference.

"Aware, are you, that we've left Mayfair, miss?" Brid-

get asked. "This neighborhood—'tis not all it should be. Not a place for a gentlewoman such as yourself." The girl's freckled face flushed with the exertion of keeping pace with Sibilla's quick strides. "Sure, are you, that it's your brother's lodgings? And not those of his—"

"Not those of his what?"

An odd look passed across Bridget's face, the meaning of which Sibilla could not tease out after less than a week's acquaintance. And the sharpness with which she had just spoken would hardly give Bridget any incentive to confide.

Before she could soften her tone to question Bridget further, a shutter seemed to draw down somewhere inside the girl, curtaining all emotion from her scrutiny. "It do be nothing, miss," the maid murmured, head bent.

Dash it all. She'd never found it difficult to be on good terms with the family's servants before. But here she'd known this girl for less than a week, and already the poor thing stood in dread of her. Why should grief make it so difficult to keep a civil tongue in her head?

She sighed in mute apology, hoping the girl would forgive her rudeness.

"Here is Seymour Street, miss" was Bridget's only response.

Sibilla nodded, then walked down the pavement until she reached number 28. A maidservant, clearly on her way out to polish the front railing, pulled the door wide from beneath Sibilla's hand.

Sibilla stepped back to avoid a collision. "Is your master within?" she asked.

The serving girl's eyes widened. "You be wantin' 'is lordship?" She glanced back through the open door, a look of doubt overtaking her face.

"Yes. Lord Saybrook." Her voice caught. It still hurt, using that title to refer to someone other than her father. "He is your employer, is he not?"

The girl nodded, but did not say another word.

Low laughter from inside the house broke the awkward silence. Heavens, she hadn't heard that sound in more than a year. She smiled, her brother's good cheer heartening her for the difficult task ahead.

Pushing past the protesting maidservant, Sibilla began to climb.

"Miss. Miss. Does 'is lordship know you're a-comin'?" The servant dropped her basket, flapping her hands in obvious dismay as she chased Sibilla up the stairs. "My lady, please . . ."

Taken back by the girl's obvious distress, Sibilla paused on the landing. "I am Miss Pennington. Surely he will not object to a visit from his own sister?"

"Aye, miss, I mean, no, miss, please, miss, if you'll just wait here?" Scrambling in front of her, the servant gave an awkward curtsy, then rushed down the hall to a half-opened door.

Sibilla crossed her arms and tapped her foot to the sound of muffled words and shuffling chairs. What could Theo be up to, that his servant would be so filled with consternation at the thought of his sister catching him at it?

Or was he still be so angry about their last argument that he'd commanded his staff not to allow her entrance?

Shaking off the ill thought, Sibilla stepped determinedly down the hall and opened the door.

A large blond man stood by the head of the table, his face hauntingly familiar—so like Papa!—yet at the same time, so distressingly distant. "Theo?"

Her eldest brother had always taken care with his attire. But the man standing before her looked as if he had never heard of the word *valet*, never mind made daily use of one's services. His waistcoat unbuttoned, his hair disheveled, his cravat entirely askew, he looked as rumped as a pile of laundry awaiting the day's washing.

None of that mattered. She flew across the room and

pulled her brother into an unexpectedly fierce embrace. "Theo," she whispered into his neckcloth as she felt his arms encircle her. "Theo."

The urge to beg his forgiveness—not for her interruption, but for the horrid imprecations she had thrown at him over their father's sickbed—flooded her. But before she could summon the words, she felt him stiffen, his arms loosen. Shrugging carefully out of her grasp, he set her aside as if her touch embarrassed him.

"Billie. What are you doing here?" he asked as he worked the buttons on his waistcoat. "And who was fool enough to give you this direction?"

"Your direction?" she repeated. It had been plaguey difficult, in fact, to ferret out Theo's direction; none of her family seemed to know of it. Only after ransacking the office of her father's secretary, guessing that the account books must include mention of any rent he paid, had she discovered this Seymour Street address. Why would he wish to keep his whereabouts a secret?

"Why, Aunt Allyne, of course," she prevaricated, adding a careless shrug for good measure.

"Our aunt sent you here, did she? I am all astonishment."

The slight slur of his words, the unsteadiness of his gait, the way he slumped into a chair without waiting for her to take a seat—was her brother drunk? And so early in the afternoon?

Theo reached out to pull the stopper free from a decanter on the sideboard. Before he had a chance to refill his empty glass, Sibilla's hand darted out to pull it from his grasp.

"Have a care, or you'll spill on that frock," Theo said, carefully enunciating each word as he peeled back her fingers one by one to repossess the glass.

"Aunt Allyne says it's entirely unsuitable for town. Too tight in the bod— But I'm determined not to give it up," she heard herself chatter. Why did he stare so at his glass, as if it could reveal every secret of the world to

one wise enough to plumb its illusive depths? “Papa loved red, and I haven’t been able to wear colors, not since—”

Neither she nor her brother, it seemed, could bring themselves to finish that sentence. Too many “sinces” hung in that silence between them, light as air, thick as a castle’s wall.

She looked at Theo then, really looked at him. He was more than just disheveled; with such red-rimmed eyes and bristle-bound cheeks, he looked careworn. Exhausted. Why?

Maybe Theo missed their father more than she’d thought. The two had never managed to rub along very well together, Papa’s political ambition the driest of kindling to the spark of Theo’s indifference. But this looked like grief. Did he care that much for Papa, then, despite their almost constant bickering?

Tipping his head with slow care to lean back against his chair, Theo hardly seemed in a state to discuss his finer feelings, never mind all the logical, rational arguments she had prepared to persuade him of his political obligations.

Would he even listen to an apology, or offer one of his own in return?

Start slowly, Papa’s voice cautioned inside her head.

Sibilla sank into the chair beside her brother, folding her hands neatly on the table. “I came to ask if you’d spare me your copy of the *Times*, Theo. Aunt Allyne has forbidden me to read it, of all things, and I’m woefully uninformed of the doings of Parliament this past week.”

“Forbidden you the *Times*, has she?” He moved one hand to rest stolidly atop a copy of the newspaper lying beside him.

“Yes. Except for the court news, which she kindly clips from the paper for my edification. ‘Time enough for the rest when you are married,’ she says. As if I hadn’t read the political column to Papa every morning since I was a child. Tell me, what debates will be roiling

Lords today?" she asked, easing the sheets from under his fist.

Large hands pulled the paper from her before she could read even a word. "Brangling with our aunt already, are you Billie? Self-effacing woman, but rather immovable in her ideas, you'll find. Better to give over early; save you the headache."

"Surely you're not taking her part in this, Theo," Sibilla exclaimed, following her brother as he strode toward the hearth. "Theo? Theo!"

Heedless of her cries, Theo tossed the offending paper onto the fire. With a deliberate turn of his wrist, he tipped out the remaining liquor from his glass.

"The devil, Theo! Do you truly mean to take her side?" she cried as the sheet crumpled to ashes.

Sibilla blinked back the tears smarting her eyes. The Theo she had grown up with would never have acted so. But this new, debauched brother? A brother who reeked of smoke and unclean linen? A brother with the sour smell of liquor hanging on his breath?

He must have seen the disgust on her face, for all she tried to hide it. With a mumbled curse, he strode to the window and braced his forehead against its frame.

"I asked Mrs. Allyne to watch out for you, to make sure you find a suitable husband. She agreed to leave her own home to look after you, to guide you through your first full year in society. But only if I promised not to interfere."

"Not to interfere? But you are my guardian, Theo."

"A less-than-suitable one, at least to Aunt Allyne's way of thinking." A wry grimace slashed across his face as he raised his glass. "Doesn't believe my conduct of late sets much of an example of genteel behavior, does our aunt."

She took a cautious step toward him. "Is that why you're living here, Theo, and not at Pennington House?"

Theo shrugged. "Our aunt fears I'd only encourage you in your hoydenish ways."

Are you not, little hoyden? The words of the infuriating man in the mews echoed, the memory of his eyes—no, his words—bringing a flush of color to her face. Was she destined to be labeled a roistering romp at every turn?

“A hoyden, you say? Do you know, I’ve heard the word in reference to myself once already today. Shall I tell you of my adventure?”

“Ladies aren’t supposed to have adventures, Billie,” Theo said. “Proper ladies, in any case. You promised you’d behave if we brought you to London. Stop walking out without a chaperone. Stop scandalizing the neighbors by speaking ill of the government. Stop writing to Papa’s cronies, plaguing them for political tidings on my behalf.”

Sibilla’s cheeks burned, almost as if she had been slapped. Was this what Theo truly thought of her? A scandal, a plague?

“Is it not proper for a lady to ride of a morning?” she asked, her voice stiff and sharp with pain. “It was the gentleman’s behavior that was not all the thing, if in fact he was a gentleman, which I now begin to doubt.”

“What, out riding, were you? And some poor fellow gave you chaff? Showed him the sharp side of your tongue, I’ll warrant.”

Sibilla’s lips tightened. Coming from her father, such words would have been intended as a compliment. But from Theo? “Chaff? Do you call it merely chaff when a man accosts and almost abducts a woman? Cannot Parliament do something about the vagrants and rogues who plague honest people whenever they leave their lodgings?”

“Accosted and abducted, you say?” Theo turned abruptly, the suddenness of his movement throwing him slightly off balance. But when he saw her standing there, obviously unharmed, he steadied, his eyes narrowing. “Mrs. Allyne allowed such a thing?”

“Noooo . . .” she grudgingly acknowledged.

“Your maid? Or your groom? I’ll release them if they’ve not taken proper care.”

Lord, was Farley right that Theo might turn him off, all because of *her* heedless behavior?

“Left them behind again, didn’t you?” Theo walked back toward the table, stopping to scoop up the half-empty decanter. “Serves you right, then. Foolish chit.”

“Foolish? Is it any more foolish than a peer living in lodgings instead of taking up residence at his own rightful home?” she cried, shame and anger overcoming sense. “Shirking his duty by not taking up his seat in Parliament? Leaving his sister to the ministrations of the silliest woman in Christendom, all so he might . . . might frolic with his *mistress* instead of seeing to her well-being?”

Damn that vile stranger and his insinuations! Before he’d put the idea of mistresses into her head, she’d never once thought to consider whether Theo might be indulging his baser urges with the opposite sex. Truly, she had never even imagined he might be subject to such urges. And now here she was, not only thinking but speaking of such matters as no well-bred girl should ever admit to understanding.

At least her outburst should show Theo how provoking his behavior had been, leaving her to Aunt Allyné for three entire days. And of course he’d deny her outrageous charge.

Wouldn’t he?

“Heard a rumor, did you, and thought to see a courtesan’s house for yourself?” Theo said after a pause as long as a sermon. “Or was it the lady you wished to view? What would you have done, pray, if I had not been here to intercept you? Made your curtsy to Mademoiselle Crèbillon and taken tea? Inquired when it might be convenient for our aunt to pay a call?”

“A courtesan? You keep a mistress, Theo?” Her voice sounded odd, so short and jagged. No wonder he was less than pleased to see her—she had come not to his

lodgings, but to those of his kept woman.

And this was the brother she'd once idolized? The man she'd been so eager to help take up their father's political mantle? How dare Papa set her such an impossible task!

No, how dare Theo *make* it so impossible. And how dare he cause her to think ill of her father, even for an instant . . .

"What, now that our father is dead, you feel free to indulge in every debauchery known to mankind?" she heard herself say, as if her words came not from her, but from some other, darker being. "Well, Papa never did think you would ever amount to much, but I dare say even he'd be surprised to find his heir using Saybrook rents to fund a whorehouse."

"Damn you, Sibilla." He grabbed her arms, his eyes flashing with sudden alertness. "A mistress is not the same as a whore."

"No, one is paid per act, the other per annum, I believe," she said, recalling strangely titillating conversations between her father and his friends, whispered without knowledge of her hidden presence. "But what a man does with each varies little, I understand."

The reckless words continued to fall from her lips, unbidden. "Or perhaps I am mistaken? A genteel girl is taught so little about such things . . ."

Theo's fingers tightened, as if he might shake her for allowing such shocking words to escape her mouth. No, she would not take it back, not a single word, no matter how her stomach roiled.

"Lord, to see you now, who would ever imagine what a cheerful, biddable little thing you used to be before Papa's illness?" Theo said, his arms falling to his sides.

Biddable? Lord, had this brother she'd idolized ever even known her at all?

Theo turned away from her, his hand carving a path of frustration through his already disheveled hair. "Dev-

il take it, Sibilla, I'd be tempted to turn you over my knee right now, if only I thought it would have the least chance of teaching you to curb this wild, impetuous behavior."

"Turn me over your knee? Papa would never have done such a thing," she flung out in the most cutting tone she could summon.

"No. But Papa was a far better man than I," her brother answered, his head bowed. "And Papa is dead, Billie. He's gone."

Sibilla and Theo stood silent, as if neither had been quite convinced of the truth of the words until he had spoken them aloud.

Could sharing their grief mend this awful rift between them? Sibilla reached out a tentative hand and set it against her brother's back.

But Theo only jerked away.

"I am the head of this family now, no matter how ill suited you may find me for the role," he said, his voice hardening as he stared out the window with blank eyes. "And I have brought you to London to present you to society, and to begin the search for a suitable husband. Not to become embroiled in politics, or to allow you to embroil me in them, either."

"But I promised Papa—"

"And so you will conduct yourself in a proper manner, Sibilla," Theo continued, as if she hadn't even spoken. "You will not leave Pennington House without escort. You will heed our aunt, and you will entertain any suitor she deems worthy. Especially the gentleman to whom I wish to introduce you at Lord Milne's later this week. And I beg you will play your role with all the decorum due the Pennington name."

"As do you?" Sibilla taunted.

"If my example gives you justification for your own reckless behavior, then Mrs. Allyne was wise, I think, to bid me stay away," he replied, refusing to rise to her bait. "I'll squire you about, and act as host for any

events held at Pennington House. But until you're safely married, I think it best for me to leave Berkeley Square to her, and to you."

Sibilla clutched at a chair back with both hands, afraid she might fly apart if she did not hold tight to something other than herself. Papa had left her, but he'd had no choice. Would Theo abandon her, too?

"So *once I am married* you'll deign to visit me, brother? Coward," she whispered. "Coward!"

Without thinking, she snatched the decanter from the table and flung it. Only at the sound of glass shattering, shards of crystal cascading off the chimneypiece in all directions, did she realize what she'd done.

But it was too late.

The liquor trailed down the highly polished steel fender like runnels of rain down a windowpane.

Sibilla ran from the room before her tears did the same.

CHAPTER THREE

“Miss Pennington, I understand from your aunt that this is the first invitation you have accepted since your return to town. How pleased I am you’ve granted Milne House the honor of your presence.” Lady Milne, her hostess, smiled at Sibilla with a kindly if distracted air.

Sibilla had been looking forward to this evening’s dinner party. The lively discussions one would surely find at the home of a politically active peer such as the earl would provide a welcome distraction from the embarrassment and pain of her last meeting with Theo. But during dinner, she had heard little beyond the difficulties of carriage travel, the trouble one had in hiring attentive servants, and the joys of Bond Street shopping. The appearance of the motherly, but rather vapid, Lady Milne by her side in the drawing room, a cup of tea in hand, suggested that after-dinner discussions would continue in a domestic, rather than political, vein.

“You are too kind,” Sibilla said, her eyes darting to the door. When would the men leave off their port?

“Oh, my dear girl. I understand how difficult it can be to reenter society after such a loss,” the countess said, patting her hand. “I, too, lost my own dear father, not three years ago, and well recall how my mind would fly to him when I first set off my half mourning. But we must not allow grief to distract us from our social responsibilities, must we?”

Why did Lady Milne not speak of her father’s work, rather than his death? Sibilla shut her eyes, just for the barest moment. But the countess must have recognized

her distress, for she quickly turned the subject. "Tell me, my dear, how did you find your partners at table? Lord James is ever the gentleman, but my son is all too wont to talk nonsense, the sad scamp. Please reassure me Dulcie said nothing untoward."

Lord James Dunster, son of the Marquess of Tisbury, *had* been all that was polite. Although the way he had turned the topic each time she asked him about his work in the House of Commons suggested he believed political discussions beyond the abilities of a mere female. Lady Milne's son, Viscount Dulcie, had proven far more agreeable, but just as unlikely to debate the Irish question or the need for parliamentary reform as was Lord James. More from lack of interest, though, than from a belief in the inherent stupidity of the other sex, if Sibilla had judged him correctly. Yes, all that was polite, each of them, and Dulcie quite attractive with his guinea-gold curls and impish smile. But both disappointing, all the same.

"Oh no, my lady. No need to call either to account, I assure you. Both Lord James and your son were all that is proper."

"Ah, you are kind to reassure me, Miss Pennington," Lady Milne said. "Your own father had not the pleasure of knowing Dulcie, but the current Lord Saybrook is well aware of his sterling qualities. It would please me no end were you and my son to become better acquainted during the coming Season."

With one last pat, and another vague smile, the countess rose. "Ah, Lady Agatha, do allow me to freshen your cup."

Theo had intended to present her with a potential suitor tonight, had he not? He must still be upset with her if he left the task to Lady Milne. Because of their argument two days ago? Or because of the one they'd had nearly a year ago, as their father lay dying?

Or perhaps it was simply that Theo found himself too incapacitated by drink. Even from the other end of

the table, she had seen the footman refill his wineglass more than once . . .

Aunt Allyne dropped into the seat abandoned by the countess with a sigh. "How kind of Lady Milne to speak with you. When you are married, you would do well to take such a genteel lady as your pattern for proper behavior. Such a comfort to the ear!"

Sibilla hid her impatience behind a china cup. Which would prove more tepid, her aunt's conversation or her rapidly cooling tea?

"Have you heard Lady Davenport's news?" Aunt Allyne asked after settling her skirts to her satisfaction. "The short-waisted dress is no longer the thing! And all your new gowns were made in that style. Do you think Madame Charbon can rework one before Lady Butterbank's ball? And when you are married, of course, you will want a completely new set of clothing. I feel almost faint at the thought! Oh, whatever have I done with my vinaigrette?"

Sibilla sighed, setting down her cup to take up the search for her aunt's reticule. But neither it nor the vinaigrette that it purportedly contained were anywhere to be found.

"I must have left it in the dining room," her aunt cried, her hands fluttering like little birds trapped in a cage. "Such an addlepate I am. What will Lady Milne think?"

"I am sure a footman can retrieve it for you, Aunt," Sibilla reassured, rising to find a likely servant. But all the footmen in the drawing room were engaged.

Fetching the reticule herself would be quicker. And it had the consequent benefit of removing her from the matrimonially inclined conversation of Lady Milne and Aunt Allyne. Perhaps she might even have the luck to overhear something that would help her persuade Theo how important it was that he take his seat in Parliament.

Her steps quiet on the softly carpeted hallway, Sibilla paused at the door to the dining room. She could spy no

footman here, either, only the gentlemen, smoking and sipping at the other end of the room, far from where her aunt had been seated. It would be easy to dart in and retrieve the reticule without calling any attention to herself.

But was it worth the risk of being caught intruding on the gentlemen's conversation?

Yes. Ducking down, she edged carefully across the carpet.

"Can I have heard you aright?" Lord James Dunster exclaimed in a tone of disbelief. "Is Dashwick truly going to propose an act to legalize bawdy houses? I find such a proposal more than reprehensible. Could he be in his right mind?"

Lord Milne raised his glass with a laugh. "Trolling Covent Garden in the wee hours of the night has certainly not dampened Dashwick's reputation for eccentricity. At one time he bruted about the idea of reviving the sumptuary laws, to require lightskirts to wear a distinguishing mark. How this was meant to curb the practice, he never could explain."

Viscount Dulcie gave a loud snort. "And soon all the fashionable ladies would be imitating the mark! Never be able to sort the doxies from the mere hoydens then, would we? Hmm, perhaps that would not be so bad after all," he concluded, eliciting laughter from the younger bucks who surrounded him.

"Would men who keep a mistress have to be licensed as well?" asked another man. "Imagine you, Saybrook, taking yourself down to court to procure a paper for Mademoiselle Crébillon! Or, no, even better—imagine watching sobersides Kit, who always swore he had better things to do with his time than to chase after women, trotting out to procure a license now that he's set up his own fancy piece! What a joke!"

Sibilla clapped a hand over her mouth. Her youngest brother had a mistress, as well as Theo? Ducking down behind a chair, she winced, praying her reflexes had

been quick enough to avoid her brother's gaze. Aunt Allyne would surely admonish that eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves, but Sibilla hadn't expected to hear ill of her brother. Devil take it! Bad enough for Theo's amatory relations to be bandied about in such a manner, but to have Kit's morals questioned, too?

Lord Milne must have sent a quelling look in the direction of her brother and his tormenter, for no set-down came in response to the man's ill-bred jibe. Instead, it was the earl who spoke next. "Surely, allowing the watch greater authority over such practices will curb streetwalking more than the licensure of bawdy houses or the marking of prostitutes. Will you be supporting the changes in the Vagrancy Bill that Dunster has proposed, Saybrook?"

Sibilla edged around the bottom of the table, closer to where her aunt had been sitting. Her hand groped under the chair, searching in vain for the missing reticule.

"Mmmm," her brother replied, the slightest slur marking his speech. "Find some of the stranger positions men have taken regarding the suppression of prostitution highly amusing, though. Ever come across Reverend Madan's volumes? Says England ought to become a polygamous society! Legalizing multiple marriage, the only viable remedy for men's incorrigible need for sexual variety, so he writes."

Her brother's remark raised another laugh from the young bucks, but drew only a snort from her. Had Reverend Madan considered what would happen if a man developed an "incorrigible need" for his neighbor's second wife? Or his third?

With a huff of frustration, Sibilla half rose from her crouch. Aunt Allyne's reticule was nowhere in sight. Glancing over her shoulder to ensure none of the gentlemen were looking in her direction, she scampered back to the dining room door.

When she put a hand down to help her rise, though,

instead of soft carpeting, her fingers lit on the smooth, polished surface of a man's evening slipper. A blush, half embarrassment, half amusement, suffused her face. She hoped the footman would not give her away.

But when her head tilted upward, it wasn't a footman or other manservant whom she found. Instead, her gaze was captured by eyes of the deepest blue, dark and unsettled as a stormy winter sea. Familiar eyes, she realized with a stifled gasp—the man from the park, the one who had pulled her from her horse and insulted her so abominably. He hadn't been present at dinner. What could a man of his ilk be doing at Lord Milne's?

"I wonder if the reverend intended that women also be given the right to marry more than one man?" he asked in a quiet voice as he crouched down beside her. "Surely, the incorrigible need for variety extends to the female sex? Women are far more libidinous than men, or so I have always heard . . ."

Before she could reply, she felt his hand, bare, warm, grasp hers. He stood, pulling her to her feet, as a blush of awareness warmed her fingers. She dropped his hand, unnerved, and stepped into the passageway. Why had she not put her gloves back on after removing from table?

He stood taller than she remembered, and slimmer, though large enough to shield her from the gentlemen in the dining room. Realizing she was staring, Sibilla jerked her own eyes free from his, only to find them flying to his other features—a thin blade of a nose, nostrils slightly flared, as if scenting for danger; high, narrow cheekbones; a shock of midnight hair in danger of tumbling into short, spiked lashes. Only the shape of one eyebrow, curved at both ends like a tilde, hinted that humor might occasionally lighten that sober countenance.

"Are you unfamiliar with Reverend Madan's work, then?" Sibilla whispered, determined not to be intimidated. "Perhaps that gentleman would lend you a copy

of the relevant volume, so that you might satisfy your curiosity on the subject.”

“You have no opinion on the topic yourself, then?” the man asked, as coolly as if they were discussing a performance of the latest opera rather than mankind’s sexual proclivities.

“Certainly I have an opinion. Though my aunt frequently tells me that a lady’s opinions on political matters are unlikely to be of interest to a gentleman.”

“The question of whether a man or a woman is more libidinous is a political one? In what regard?” he asked, his eyes crinkling with curiosity.

“In too many ways to number. But if you would like a specific example, then I would point to the discussion in which the gentlemen are currently engaged, on the subject of suppressing harlotry. If the female of the species is more driven by libidinous desires, then laws regulating streetwalkers would be the most efficacious route to dampening the trade. But if the male’s drives are more at fault, then the laws should be reframed to regulate male, rather than female, behavior.”

“What if both are driven by such desires?” the man asked. “Should both the woman who prostitutes herself and the man who buys her wares be subject to arrest?”

“Should not the focus still be on the man, as he is the one with the means? Women would not prostitute themselves if there were no financial gain to be had from the transaction. Do you not think—”

Sibilla stopped abruptly, realizing that the sounds of conversation from the dining room had grown silent as their voices had risen. Viscount Dulcie stood by her interlocutor’s side, a curious expression playing about his handsome features.

“You are kind to come and retrieve your aunt’s reticule, Miss Pennington,” he said, holding out the article in question. “May I escort you back to the drawing room?” Cutting a quick look at the man beside him, Dulcie offered his arm with a gracious nod.

“Thank you, my lord,” she replied. The flush that had faded during her sparring with the dark-haired man burned again across her cheeks. “Sir.” She nodded to him before turning to take the viscount’s arm.

She struggled to slow her pace to Dulcie’s, quashing the urge to flee. Her awareness of the silence, and of the male gazes focused on her retreating back, made it surprisingly difficult. One gaze in particular seemed to burn right through her, and not the one belonging to her brother. No, the scrutiny sending prickles of awareness trailing up and down her spine belonged to the cool blue eyes of the imperturbable stranger. The first, and perhaps only, man to deem her worthy of intelligent conversation this entire evening.

“Well, Sayre, missed dinner, did you? Really shouldn’t allow your mentor to drive you so hard, eh?” Lord Milne laughed as he clapped a friendly arm across Per’s shoulders. “Care to join the ladies, make your apologies to the countess?”

Per gave a start, embarrassingly aware that he had been staring as if bewitched at the retreating figure of the young woman on Dulcie’s arm. Saybrook’s courtesan, at a respectable dinner party? But Dulcie had called her Miss Pennington . . .

Per had thought to embarrass the woman with his salacious talk of multiple marriages and the libidinous nature of the sexes, to goad her into revealing her true identity. But she’d overthrown all his intentions, turning a lewd conversation into a political debate. A debate that proved her not only remarkably well-informed, but intelligent, well-spoken, and assured.

“Bit of a shock to discover a female in the midst of that conversation,” Milne continued as they made their

way to the drawing room. "A bit too forthcoming with her opinions for a political man such as yourself, but Dulcie seems to find her of interest. Still, a damned shame, when all the brains in a family end up with the girls instead of the boys."

Per's eyes cut toward where Dulcie stood, doing the pretty with the woman he'd led from the room. "What family?" he asked.

"Ah, Saybrook's sister felt free to jabber at you even without the benefit of a proper introduction, did she? Dulcie will have to teach her to curb her tongue if she has any hopes of joining this family. But come, here is General Pittsford and his daughter, both of whom I particularly wish you to meet."

Per bowed and chatted politely with the general, but all his awareness remained fixed on the forward young lady in the amber-colored gown who stood across the room. Not Saybrook's mistress, but his *sister*?

Not Miss McGinnis, reformed prostitute, but Miss *Pennington*, the latest lady whom the earl hoped would wed his son. The gorgon on whose behalf Dulcie had wheedled Per into attending this party. No courtesan, as he had thought, nor twittering miss from the country, as Dulcie had feared, but a vibrant, passionate lady with a wit sharp enough to interest even the mercurial earl's son.

Per's eyes drifted across the room to where his friend stood chatting amicably with Saybrook's sister. The look Dulcie shot him made it all too clear that Per's dubious charms would no longer be required.

Lord, he had accused Miss Pennington of being a strumpet! Would she tell the earl of his offensive *faux pas*?

Damnation and double damnation!

Her hair, which he had only caught a glimpse of during their moments together in the park, proved to be a wheat-tinged blonde, with the most amazingly springy curls he had ever seen. Even cut short as it was, it

seemed a mass of wild exuberance in the midst of Milne House's staid dining room. While she debated so earnestly with him, he'd had the maddest urge to take a curl between his fingers and pull on it, then watch as it sprang at his touch. Why had she allowed him to mistake her for someone—something—she obviously was not?

"Sir Peregrine?" Milne's daughter, Lady Wilhelmina, offered him a teacup.

Per shook his head and took the saucer from her. Clearly, Milne wanted him to look elsewhere for a prospective bride. To the general's daughter? Or even, perhaps, to his own? Lady Wilhelmina was eyeing him with the thoughtful expression he had once seen her give another woman's bonnet, as if judging both its provenance and its price.

"My lady," he said as the general and his daughter left to refresh their teacups. "I find myself at a disadvantage. Might I beg your assistance?"

Dulcie's sister smiled up at him. "Of course, Sir Peregrine."

"As I arrived so tardily, I find myself unacquainted with all your guests. Might you introduce me to the gentleman over by the window? The one with the exquisitely tailored coat?" He did not mention the lady standing beside him, the true object of his inquiry.

"Viscount Saybrook?" Lady Wilhelmina asked. "He resembles his late father so, I'm surprised you didn't realize who he is. But he has not involved himself in politicking as his father did, has he? Please, allow me to make the introduction."

Per set down his cup and followed her across the room. How could he convey an apology to Miss Pennington without revealing his misstep to her brother?

"Lord Saybrook, may I introduce Sir Peregrine Sayre?" Lady Wilhelmina said, touching a small hand to the viscount's sleeve.

Saybrook's forehead puckered as he rose from his

bow. "Ah, Sayre, was hoping to find you here tonight. Where was it we last met? The Pigeon Hole? The Two Sevens? Ah no, you're a chum of Dulcie's; the Club House, then—only hell lofty enough for that dandy, eh?"

Per's nostrils flared. Even if Saybrook had not had the poor taste to mention three of the city's most notorious gaming hells in front of the ladies, the heavy odor of spirits that hung over him like a fog suggested he did not have complete hold over his faculties. The earl rarely served more than a glass or two of port after a meal; Saybrook must have been imbibing long before dinner. Did he not realize how people would talk if he often ventured out cup-shot in polite society? How disappointing to find the new viscount so different from his quick-witted, decorous father, one of the most accomplished political opponents against whom Per had ever strategized.

"Sir Peregrine and my father work together quite closely on matters in Parliament," Lady Wilhelmina said, breaking the awkward silence. Her tone, one designed to quell, suggested that she understood the impropriety of Saybrook's words, if not their specific meaning. But Per had little attention to spare for the lady's displeasure, for it was now Miss Pennington's turn to receive his bow.

"Sir Peregrine, how pleasant to make your acquaintance," she said with elegant restraint, as if their meeting in Hyde Park and their conversation in the Milne dining room had never taken place. "You are in Parliament? In the Commons?"

"Sibilla, really. Must we ever be speaking of politics? Men want to get away from the cares of the day, not hash them up all over again over tea," Saybrook chided.

"Perhaps if you did anything during the day that would give you such cares, I'd be more inclined to help you ease them away," his sister replied with the same withering scorn that had animated her during their

encounter in the park. Yet the tentative, tender hand she placed on her brother's arm suggested she felt something more. Could she care for him, even though he appeared to be little better than a wastrel?

"Unlike my brother, however, Sir Peregrine must be given the benefit of the doubt." Miss Pennington gave him a considering look. "In fact, he seems just the sort to take on the cares of the world. Are you like a knight of old, sir, in constant search of imperiled villagers to rescue and maidens fair to succor?" She cocked her head to the side, her mouth lifting just a hint at each corner. A corkscrew curl, escaped from the bandeau that circled her head, bounced temptingly by her ear.

"Ah, but there are so few maidens in need of rescue these days, don't you find?" he replied, her words of repudiation in the park coming swiftly to mind.

"I believe ladies are more in need of protection now than they were during the days of chivalry," Lady Wilhelmina murmured. "So many carriages rushing by! So many footpads! Why, a gentlewoman can hardly walk down a public way without being accosted!"

"Well, on some streets it's a man who can't walk without being importuned by a member of the other sex," Saybrook said, glancing at his sister. Lady Wilhelmina seemed oblivious to the nuances of the viscount's claim. But he could see by the glower Miss Pennington gave her brother that she surely understood his reference to the earlier dining room conversation.

Per cleared his throat. "Miss Pennington, I understand from Lady Wilhelmina that you have recently suffered a loss. Please allow me to offer my condolences. Your father was reputed a fine orator, and I congratulate myself on having had the privilege of hearing him speak several times in Lords."

The uncomfortable pause that followed showed him that his words, intended to ease the awkwardness, only made the situation worse. Saybrook shuffled and his sister blinked, neither of them quite able to look at the

other. Cursing his stupidity, he tried again.

“And here we are, back at Parliament and politics. It seems as if we cannot escape them. Perhaps it is no surprise, given our host’s predilections. Lady Wilhelmina, what methods do you employ to ease your father’s cares when he returns after a day at Westminster?”

“Play for him, do you not?” Saybrook said before the lady had a chance to respond. “And see, your mother calls to you from the pianoforte to do just that. I dare say we all could use something to soothe the cares of the day, even if politicking is not our pursuit of preference.”

Per bowed as Saybrook led Milne’s daughter across the room, his mind scrambling for the most appropriate apology one might offer a lady one had mistaken for a whore.

But Miss Pennington did not give him the chance. As soon as her brother was out of earshot, she murmured, “Might I inquire, Sir Peregrine, why you were in search of my abigail? Or is it not a topic appropriate to discuss at the home of one’s mentor?”

“Just as appropriate as asking why you chose to adopt her identity,” Per said, taking a step closer so their words would not be overheard. Might he use her strange impersonation as a bargaining chip, to ensure she wouldn’t tell Milne of his mistake? “Why did you do it?”

“Come, you must admit that a lady has cause for suspicion when she finds a rake asking after a dependent woman entrusted to her care.”

“A rake? What, you thought me a danger to her virtue?”

“Perhaps. It did seem unlikely such a man would need any *proper* services a lady’s maid might provide,” Miss Pennington said, the demureness of her tone only increasing the provocation of her words. “Mistaking ‘Bridget’ for a courtesan only confirmed my suspicions.”

“When I discovered a girl whom I expected to find in

respectable employment gallivanting around on a horse, bedecked in garments far above her supposed station, can you blame me for suspecting the worst?" Per asked, taken aback by the heat of his words. Why could he not bring himself to offer her his apology and be done with it?

"If you expected to find her in respectable employment, why were you in pursuit of her? Do you commonly poach other households' domestics?"

"I do not poach the servants of others," he said, his mouth tightening. "Not to see to my domestic, or any of my other, needs."

"Perhaps, then, your search had something to do with that mysterious Guardian Society you mentioned," she persisted, undeterred by the hint of irritation in his voice. "Tell me, is it a group bent on the reform of public morals? Or perhaps more likely, a brothel?"

Had he been foolish enough to mention the Guardian Society to her? "Miss Pennington, I beg you, please do not speak—"

"Miss Pennington." A male voice heavy with condescension interrupted before Per could finish his warning. "You had not finished telling me your opinion of the Egyptian Hall's exhibition on Lapland when the ladies were called to remove from table. I am eager to hear whether you think it might be of interest to my younger brothers."

Lord James Dunster, third son of the Marquess of Tisbury, moved between them. He spared nary a word for Per, only crooked his arm in expectation toward Sibilla Pennington.

The young lordling had been a mere schoolboy when Per had been drawn into his elder brother's orbit. But his disdain suggested the boy knew some of the old gossip. Now that he was old enough to dabble in politics, did he think it his duty to defend the family honor by dredging up troubles best left forgotten?

Miss Pennington glanced at Lord James, then at Per,

clearly taken aback by the antipathy in the air. "But Sir Peregrine—"

"Sir Peregrine will surely excuse you," Dunster said, reaching out to place her hand on his arm. "He would not wish to disappoint any brother of mine, I'm certain."

Ah yes, the young lord knew something of the scandal, then. But not the entire story, not if he thought Per had been the disappointer, his brother the disappointee. Better to keep the boy from speaking further on the subject, particularly in front of a lady.

He bowed his assent, a bow Dunster failed to return. Instead, he hustled Miss Pennington away as if he could not remove her quickly enough from the taint of Per's presence.

Per drew in a slow, steady breath. He should be grateful to Lord James for pulling Miss Pennington away before she could badger him into revealing even more about the penitent search than he already had. But instead, he found himself worrying that Lord James's reputation for abstemious, upright behavior might be as false as his elder brother's had been. *This* Dunster had best not take up with Miss Pennington where his brother left off with Mary Catharine, or he'd be meeting the cur at dawn to put a period to his existence.

A smooth voice by his ear interrupted his dark thoughts. "A remarkably intelligent creature, do you not think?" Viscount Dulcie, a smile of amusement playing about his lips, nudged Per with his elbow.

"Who, Lord James?"

"A pup still wet behind the ears?" Dulcie exclaimed. "And so impressed by his own conversation that he fails to see how tedious the rest of the company finds it? No, handsome though he may be, it's not Dunster who catches one's eye."

"Then the creature to whom you refer must be Miss Pennington."

"Yes, man, precisely. Quite surprising, Miss Sibilla

Pennington.”

“Has more conversation than a cabbage, does she?” Per asked.

“Yes, much to my astonishment. And hardly whey-faced, though her garments are not at all flattering. Allowing herself to be clothed by a Lincolnshire dress-maker certainly cannot be counted as a point in her favor. But now that she is in London, she will soon learn better.”

“Do you propose to teach her? I thought you had no interest in your father’s matchmaking.”

Protecting Miss Pennington from James Dunster’s improper advances gave Per no qualms. But the idea of Dulcie as her suitor seemed to sit no better.

“Ah look, yet again she attempts to draw Dunster into political discourse. She met with little success during dinner, but one must admire her tenacity. Can you believe she actually asked *my* opinion on the best ways to reform Parliament? Alas, she may be even more of an idealist than you were when you first took up with my father, although the horror of such a possibility makes me shudder.”

Dulcie put a kindly arm around his friend and shook him lightly. “That girl needs distracting from such unladylke concerns. I’d be perfect for her, wouldn’t I?”

“For Miss Pennington?” Per asked, working hard to keep his words even.

“Yes, Miss Pennington.”

He watched, frowning, as laughter danced at the edges of Dulcie’s mouth. Per’s eyes narrowed. “Perfect for you? Perhaps, if she doesn’t mind sleeping alone every night,” he said, failing miserably to keep the tone of his set-down light.

“Ah, but those earnest chits are never much interested in the activities of the bedchamber. Just the type of girl I need.” Dulcie laughed, raising his teacup. “To Miss Pennington.”

Per crossed his arms, his eyes drawn against his will

once again to the lady in question. As she sought to engage Dunster in a conversation from which he clearly would have preferred to abstain, her curls bounced with enticing abandon against her nape. Per remained silent, unwilling to show Dulcie how fervently his unruly body thrummed with the hope that his friend was utterly wrong.