



Lord Difficult

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Anglesey Press

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This book grew out of a story previously published as *Never Kiss A Duke*. It bears almost no resemblance to that book.

Cover design by Kimberly Killion, The Killion Group Inc.

Formatting by The Killion Group Inc.

1st Edition: 2024

*Lord
Difficult*

Maitland's Rogues

EILEEN
PUTMAN

For Alan, Always

Chapter One

London, 1811

“A WOMAN OF MODEST beauty, independent means, and a tireless passion for marital, er, relations.” Emmaline hoped her frozen smile projected confidence, not desperation. “I will find just the right bride for you, Mr. Burwell.”

“Not too headstrong, mind you, Mrs. Stanhope.”

Emmaline looked aghast. “Oh, no. Headstrong is not the thing.”

“Her passions must be limited to the marriage bed. I want no intemperate shrew.”

“Ugh.”

He frowned. “What?”

“Certainly not,” she quickly amended, lowering her lashes. The floor, she noticed, had a new crack. Yet another entry for the vermin.

“My work is very demanding,” he went on. “I won’t stand for a nagging wife. You’re certain you are not available?” He stood on her sagging front steps, a speculative gleam in his rather beady eyes.

“I am afraid not.” Emmaline’s voice filled with

what she hoped was regret. "My heart will always belong to my poor husband, God rest his soul."

"He was lucky to find such a helpmeet." Mr. Burwell tipped his hat. "With your help, I suspect I will be lucky, too. Indeed, you have restored my faith in the future."

He walked toward the street. Emmaline couldn't suppress a surge of elation. The deposit he'd given her would see them through the month.

"Mind the Mail, sir," she called. "The driver never has the courtesy to slow his team. You will wish to cross quickly to avoid his dust."

Mr. Burwell pulled a watch from his waistcoat, which stretched tightly over his ample midsection. "Five o'clock. I didn't realize the day was so far advanced."

"Oh, yes," she replied, with forced cheer. "You can set your watch by the Mail."

And by the bill collectors.

And the drunken sots sleeping on the stoop each morning.

And the stench of cesspits in the night air.

"There's the rent, thank the Lord," muttered a voice at her elbow.

Emmaline turned to her aunt. "Shhh. He will hear."

"Not with the commotion of the Mail," Aunt Heloise replied. "Ruins my afternoon nap."

"When one lives near the Tyburn tollgate, one cannot be particular about noise."

"Or clients." Her aunt studied the man in the street. "If his middle was any larger, he'd not see his shoes. And that scruffy beard—pity the

woman who marries him. Her complexion will pay the price. Do you have a prayer of finding him a bride?"

"His requirements are rather stringent," Emmaline conceded. And loathsome. Why had she thought this wretched business would save them?

"Like all of them," her aunt agreed. "The men want doxies, and the women want dukes."

"Unfortunately, I don't know any beautiful, well-fixed women with passionate natures."

"Find him a woman who enjoys the marriage bed, and he won't mind about the other," Aunt Heloise said. "One of the Covent Garden set will take him on, once she sees he's a man of means. In my day, that lot was always on the lookout for the main chance."

"Mr. Burwell is not seeking a prostitute."

"Nonsense. All husbands want their wives to be whores in the bedchamber."

Emmaline sighed. Ever since she'd placed the notice for Harmonious Matrimony Services in the *Times*, they had been deluged with men of the worst sort. "If we don't get more paying clients, we'll have to return to fortune-telling."

"I shouldn't have given away my crystal ball," her aunt said as they stood in the doorway, watching their new client. "Bird in the bush, and all that."

"Bird in the hand."

"Hand, bush—what does it matter? It all boils down to money in the end."

Emmaline couldn't argue. "With Mr. Burwell's

funds, we can afford Dr. Black.” None of the other doctors they had consulted could help her aunt’s crushing fatigue.

Aunt Heloise patted her shoulder. “It pains me to see you spend your youth on me. In a just world, you’d be married to a prince by now and readying the nursery.”

“A prince? You sound like Father. But daydreams don’t pay the rent.”

“A woman cannot have too many dreams,” her aunt said. “By the time she’s my age, she’ll need every one of them.”

“Then let me dream of a cure for you,” Emmaline said. “Come. I will make tea. And you can tell me more about the magnificent Mr. Kemble.”

“Stepped on everyone’s lines,” her aunt grumbled. “We loathed him. Did you notice that the door hinges squeak, dear?”

“Candlewax will help,” Emmaline said absently.

Mr. Burwell was talking to an elderly woman, apparently giving her directions, for he pointed toward the park, then bowed politely as the woman, her back bent with age, wrapped her voluminous cloak more tightly against the wind.

But after the woman moved on, he remained standing in the road.

“Mr. Burwell,” Emmaline called, “the Mail is due any minute—have a care.”

Already, the dust cloud that heralded its arrival was in sight. The Mail guard sounded a blast on his tin horn to signal the toll keeper to open the gate.

Mr. Burwell did not budge.

“Lives dangerously, that one,” Aunt Heloise observed.

The thundering of hooves and the rumbling of the heavy coach roared nearer. Still, Mr. Burwell did not bestir himself. He wore a pleasant, but strangely empty expression.

Emmaline ran down the steps, nearly tripping as her bad leg tried to buckle. “Mr. Burwell! Sir, you must move this instant!”

He was still smiling when the Royal Mail ran him down.



If George Campbell, the sixth Duke of Argyll, hadn't known beyond doubt that the man behind the desk was his deceased sister's child, he'd be hard pressed to believe it. That Portia could have birthed such a cold creature as Robert Tavish defied comprehension.

The relentlessly recalcitrant Earl of Kent sat at his vast desk, glowering at a scrawny yellow bird. Next to it rested a white bone as big as a man's thigh.

Macabre images came to mind, involving cannibalism and the like. Unthinkable, even for his nephew—no matter that Robert looked but a step removed from the wild. His long hair was not in the current fashion, which favored short at the ears and longer on top so it could be swept into curls approximating some absurd notion of an ancient Roman emperor.

Instead, Robert's sand-colored mane fell to his

shoulders. Occasionally, he pulled it back in an old-style queue.

And while Robert's father had been a fashion peacock given to embarrassingly colorful attire, the son never met a shade of brown that didn't appeal. Now and then, he mustered a drab moss green; otherwise, he seemed determined to sink into mud-colored oblivion.

No oblivion to be had with that unruly hair, though. Or his hard jaw, high forehead, imposing dark brows, and gray eyes the color of unforgiving stone. Even the roaring blaze in the fireplace did not banish the chill he radiated.

If only Portia had seen fit to send him to town years ago to gain polish. But no, she'd taken him off to the wilds of Scotland, and Scotland had produced a beast.

The beast had rebelled. *Shunned family and clan. Refused to embrace his heritage.*

Bringing him back into the fold would be a challenge. Robert rebuffed his every overture. He hadn't so much as glanced up when George showed himself into the study.

Never underestimate a Campbell, however. There was no more politically astute clan. George had set his sights on high office. Already, he had purview over certain War Office matters—his sporadic alliance with Whigs notwithstanding. He was aiming for Privy Council, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and—in time, perhaps—prime minister.

But first, there was the matter of his nephew. Family mattered. Clan, above all. Inveigling Robert was a long game, but George had finally arrived at the perfect plan.

“There has been a death,” he began. “Unusual circumstances that fall, as it happens, within your area of expertise.”

His nephew’s disapproving glare remained fixed on the bird, which was staring back.

“The deceased, William Burwell, was a clerk in the War Office,” George continued. “He was under investigation for possible treason.”

This statement likewise had no discernible effect.

“Documents have been disappearing,” he went on. “Last month, the French obtained schedules for our supply ships to the peninsula. They sank one ship, damaged another.”

George paused to allow Robert to commiserate with England’s war woes.

He did not.

“We’d been shadowing Burwell, hoping to catch him in the act,” George said, more forcefully. “His sudden death was cause for consternation. We are no closer to identifying those behind this treachery.”

Those unnerving gray eyes blinked once.

George prided himself on his calm mastery of the vagaries of politics, London weather, and the silly social scene. He rarely spoke intemperately. Nevertheless, his blood boiled.

“The Mail ran him over.” He barely restrained himself from shouting. “By all accounts, Burwell stood in its path like a suicidal squirrel.”

An appreciative chirp came from the desk.

“Can’t you do something about that bird?”

George demanded. "Surely, your cook has a recipe for pigeon pie."

"Canary," his nephew corrected. "Most unsatisfactory in a pie."

The low voice flowed like thick honey—the bitter kind from heather, not the mild stuff from orange blossoms. His mother's voice had been pure and sweet. Robert's left a distinct aftertaste.

With a muttered curse, George pulled a newspaper from his pocket and tossed it onto the desk. "Burwell died outside this woman's establishment. She runs some sort of marriage agency. I've circled her notice."

It read:

Gentlemen desirous of meeting agreeable ladies for marriage are requested to call at Harmonious Matrimony Services, 709 Oxford Street, where a Respectable Widow will assist them in the process of selecting a future mate. A small fee will ensure the happiest of outcomes.

"And this handbill was found in his pocket." George thrust it under Robert's nose. "Seems she also dabbles in fortunes."

Fortunes told, wishes fulfilled, future unveiled. Madame Flora, 709 Oxford Street.

When Robert did not react, George turned the handbill over. On the back was drawn a skeleton in black armor riding a horse, its reins adorned with skull and crossbones.

His nephew blinked. "The Tarot death card."

"Exactly. It's possible she was involved in Burwell's death and possibly his treason."

Robert regarded the drawing thoughtfully.

"She lives with an aunt," George said. "Nothing

criminal in her background, but that death card has unnerved more than one investigator. Some suspect that mesmerism or other occult art caused him to stand in the path of the Mail.”

His nephew’s mouth curved in what might have been a smile, had he been one to indulge in frivolity. “I know of no occult practice capable of causing a man’s feet to stick to the cobblestones as death bears down on him.”

“Still, we lack an explanation as to why he didn’t save himself.”

“Rational explanation lies behind all unusual phenomena.”

“We don’t have one here,” George insisted.

“I tried to enlighten Parliament about this sort of thing years ago. Failed.” Robert picked up his pen. “I’ve a paper to finish, Uncle. What do you desire of me?”

“Visit this woman. Pretend to be a client in need of her matrimonial services. With your background, you’ll discern things others might miss.”

Robert’s pen moved smoothly over the paper. “No.”

“Do it for your mother’s sake, Robbie. You might prevent someone else falling victim as Portia did.”

His nephew looked up, his gaze hard. “You dare invoke her memory for such triviality?”

“It’s anything but trivial. With Massena on the run, the peninsula war’s at a turning point. We must discover who is behind this nefarious scheme.” George took a deep breath. His

expression softened. "I honor you for what you tried to do in her name. Just because you failed to convince some quarreling Tories is no reason to—"

"It's every reason," Robert tossed his quill on the desk as the canary fluttered in protest.

Time to shift tactics. "I know you had a difficult boyhood—"

"I am thirty, Uncle. Boyhood's a lifetime behind me."

"Yet I cannot forget that summer Portia brought you to us." Dangerous ground there, but George pressed on: "You were so lost."

Robert's features flattened, until they were empty of all expression. He picked up his quill once more but did not dip it into the inkwell. Instead, he began to move it back and forth.

"The woman's name is Emmaline Stanhope," George said. His eyes tracked the pen's steady tempo.

No response.

The silence lengthened. The pen kept moving.

The bird, meanwhile, had gone still at the edge of his nephew's desk.

In fact, everything seemed to freeze. There was only that slow-moving quill.

Robert's gaze fixed unblinkingly on George.

George's vision shrank to the tip of that quill. A strange heaviness beset him. Time seemed overcome by the same lethargy. His brain felt... scrambled. His legs were lead, his arms paralyzed. Whispered words penetrated the fog that engulfed him.

They ordered him to throw himself into the fire. Deadly flames flared in his mind's eye.

With great effort, George stepped backward. "What are you doing to me?"

"You've done it to yourself, Uncle." Robert rapped his pen sharply on the desk.

The world struggled into focus. It was a moment before George could speak.

"I may have...lost the thread," he said slowly.

"No, you've proven my point," Robert said. "While the mind can be led, it inclines above all to survival. It will triumph over insidious efforts to subvert that instinct. You, for instance, declined to throw yourself on the fire. If your traitor was murdered, it was not by mesmerism."

But George had recovered his senses. "I remain unconvinced. I insist that you investigate Burwell's death and prove me wrong." Spoken firmly, in a tone calculated to brook no argument.

It was a risk. His nephew was not one to be pushed.

Robert regarded him incredulously. "Am I to understand that you wish me to discover whether this Mrs. Stanhope put your suicidal squirrel under a spell?"

George shot him a pained look. "I am aware that sounds slightly ridiculous. Do this for Portia's sake, if nothing else."

Shameless tactic, that. But it had the desired effect.

Robert gave a curt nod. Abruptly, he rose. "Show yourself out, Uncle. I have papers to write.

The beauty of science is that it is not dependent on human foolishness.”

His nephew, so pitiful as a child, had grown into the very devil himself. Complete with a familiar, which—freed from its own tiny trance—squawked loudly as George beat a swift retreat.

Chapter Two

“**A** GENTLEMAN IS DOWNSTAIRS.” Aunt Heloise struck a pose in the doorway of Emmaline’s bedchamber. “Compelling sort. Claims to be in search of a bride.”

Emmaline looked up from her diary. “I hope you told him our services are no longer available.”

“I did no such thing. The rent is due.”

Emmaline gave a weary sigh. “Poor Mr. Burwell.”

“Pity him if you must, but no sane person would stand in the path of a coach and four.”

“He gave no sign that his wits were addled,” Emmaline said.

“He dies and makes no sign.” Aunt Heloise brought her handkerchief to her lips. “You ought to have seen me as Queen Margaret. Although that line was Henry’s. Shakespeare gave the best lines to men. He made Margaret a she-wolf because she dared to be ambitious.”

Emmaline smiled. “Only because you were not there to inspire him.”

“Perhaps. But to the matter at hand: The gentleman’s clothes are of good quality but not ostentatious. His hair is not in the usual style—

long and full, almost leonine. Odd sort, though. Doesn't speak much."

"If he lacks manners, that might explain why he needs help finding a wife." Emmaline sighed in resignation. They did need the money. They had returned Mr. Burwell's deposit to a pair of investigators who could give her no clue as to why the man had failed to save himself. They promised to convey the funds to his relatives.

She checked her appearance in the mirror. Men who came to them for matrimonial assistance often misunderstood the services they offered. Thus, precautions had to be taken. Her hair was secured in a tight coil so as not to convey frivolity or worse, lascivious intent.

Her forest green dress—her one serviceable frock—was equally spartan. Its unfashionably high neckline rose nearly to her chin. No flounces or adornments marred its hem.

Moreover, she looked exceedingly grim. Dark circles under her eyes reflected the sleepless nights she'd spent since Mr. Burwell's horrifying death. She turned to her aunt. "Out of respect for the poor man we should drop this venture."

"Respect's a fleeting coin," Aunt Heloise insisted. "Won't pay the rent."

"I cannot force a pleasant countenance and pretend that everything is as usual," Emmaline protested.

Her aunt preened in the mirror and tossed her own, faded copper curls. "Women pretend. It's one of our gifts."

Emmaline mustered her resolve. Perhaps this man would be their salvation.

Or not. Miracles did not walk into one's parlor and await discovery.

Making her way down the narrow stairs, Emmaline fought against her limp. Today required more effort to control it. Perhaps that was due to fatigue. Or the pall that had settled over her since her client's death.

Aunt Heloise was well-suited to pretense. She wasn't.

Emmaline halted outside the parlor and peeked in to see what manner of man awaited.

A gaze—gray as gloom but penetrating as a stiletto—slammed into hers.

She stifled a gasp, though it was too late for stealth. He'd seen her.

The man's large frame took up most of the sofa. It was as if a giant tried to fit on a pin cushion. Even as she tried to grasp an overall image of the man, her eyes fixed on individual parts. His undisciplined long hair put her in mind of a pirate, its color wet sand with a hearty burst of red clay. His face was clean-shaven. Strangely, that made him look more dangerous.

His clothing was brown, like rich earth. The moss green walls she had painted just last week seemed to exist solely to frame him as a force of nature.

Quickly, Emmaline pasted a smile on her face. "Good afternoon, sir. I am Emmaline Stanhope. I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

“You have.” He rose, his gaze icy. “Robert Tavish.”

He regarded her extended hand as if it were a piece of rotten fish, not that she could blame him. Her hands were red and raw from soap-making. She’d added too much lye, and it left her with burns. But they couldn’t afford the gentler, expensive bar soap from Gerrard Street.

She tucked her hand into the folds of her dress. “How may I be of service, sir?”

“Wife. Need one.” His deeply resonant voice held a rough undercurrent.

How could such a robust specimen of a man need assistance? His broad shoulders and rugged physique put her in mind of a medieval warrior ready to do battle—with or without a weapon. Indeed, those large hands were weapons enough.

His temperament was suspect, judging by that stern brow, grim mouth, and disregard of complete sentences.

“I should inform you that an unfortunate accident occurred last week,” Emmaline began.

One forbidding brow arched.

“A client had the misfortune to be struck by the Mail. Investigators tend to drop by at odd moments. I’m afraid I cannot promise that your association with me would remain confidential.”

When his frown deepened, she immediately regretted her candor. Aunt Heloise had the right of it. If he took his business elsewhere, there’d be no paying rent.

Emmaline had no doubt he could afford her fee. Though his clothes were plain, the facing

of his coat was silk serge. A woman who had to trim her frocks every year to disguise the wear developed an eye for such details.

“I could meet you elsewhere,” she offered, “so that we would not risk observation.”

He was silent for so long Emmaline feared she had offended him. Or—heavens!—thought she was suggesting another kind of rendezvous altogether.

“What I meant to say,” she added carefully, “is I am aware that those who seek assistance in matrimony may have no wish for that fact to be known.”

He scowled at the floor. She turned to see a small black shadow dart around a chair leg.

“Can’t abide cats,” he growled.

Emmaline scooped up Thomas. “This one has a gentle nature. And people who come to have their fortunes told expect to see a black cat in residence.”

“Fortunes?” Uttered with distaste.

“My aunt and I read the Tarot occasionally,” she said. “It can be amusing.”

“What of those who take your words to heart and ruin their lives?”

His hostility took her aback.

“We do not ruin lives here, Mr. Tavish,” Emmaline snapped.

Thomas squirmed in her arms, and she quickly released him. He landed at her visitor’s feet and proceeded to rub against his leg.

He stiffened.

No wonder the man’s marital prospects

were dim. A man with a perpetually stern countenance and insufficient warmth to abide even so independent a creature as a cat would have difficulty gaining any woman's affections. Emmaline had a fierce urge to send him packing.

Instead, her practical nature won out.

"Perhaps it would be best to go over the terms of my services." She seated herself in the chair, leaving him to stand or sit as he preferred. He remained standing.

"My fee is fifteen pounds." Usually it was far less, but he could afford it. "Half paid on signing our agreement, the rest on your betrothal. If, for some unforeseen reason, marriage doesn't occur, I refund a small sum to be applied to a new search through our agency."

His gaze narrowed.

"I am well-qualified, as I was married myself," Emmaline said, the lie making her throat as dry as dust. "Unfortunately, my husband is deceased."

This revelation usually caused prospective clients to eye her with compassion. Mr. Tavish's stern expression did not change.

"Moreover, I attended Catherine Warwick's School for Young Ladies in Hadley," she continued. Her father had sent her there to gain what a mother would have imparted. "Perhaps you have heard of it? It is known for its education in the womanly arts, such as managing the household, supervising meal preparation, mending..."

Boredom swept Mr. Tavish's features. He still didn't trouble to sit but stood towering over her.

Men such as this irritated her. Their high

regard for their own importance required that they diminish or dismiss other human beings, especially females. Women were expected to accept their disregard without complaint.

A task at which she routinely failed.

Emmaline's temper snapped. "I imagine you'd view Miss Warwick's as beneath your attention. Especially as there's little left but one shabby building and elderly teachers with nowhere else to go."

The stony contempt in that gray gaze might have slipped a notch.

Drat her wayward tongue. She needed to salvage this. Emmaline forced a conciliatory tone. "Suppose we begin with the type of bride you seek."

"The marrying kind."

She fought the urge to box his ears. "What I *meant* was her character, her temperament, that sort of thing. You would, of course, wish her to share your interests."

"I study rocks. I would doubt her sanity if she shared my interests."

"Rocks?"

He reached into his pocket, pulled out some bank notes, and tossed them at her. "I must finish a paper for delivery tonight. Argyll Rooms, eight o'clock. We will talk then."

With that, he gave a cursory bow and strode from the house. The front door's creaking hinges punctuated his departure, mocking her increasingly desperate plight.

To Robert Tavish's growing list of undesirable

qualities, Emmaline added the sin of unbridled arrogance.

She would find him a wife. Then the devil could take him.



Infinity, Robert thought darkly, might well be measured in cobblestones. Someone, somewhere, was always building roads in the name of progress.

To him, progress meant avoiding the past. But despite the years he'd put behind him, the darkness stalked him still. How like George to dip into his bag of tricks and summon unanswered questions and disturbing memories.

George had in common with centuries of Campbell chiefs the skill of manipulation. Invoking Portia was a low blow. Robert ought to have saved his mother. He didn't. Guilt festered.

And George knew it.

Robert had sent his carriage home, deciding that walking was a better remedy for his mood than a closed vehicle. It was a choice he now regretted. The rows of uneven cobblestones stretched to forever under his feet as late afternoon grew into dusk.

His thoughts were equally unrelenting. Emmaline Stanhope's eyes—startlingly blue, like cornflowers—had not quite disguised her disgust of him when he shunned her cat. Odd how the old fears could be summoned so easily.

No matter. If he had to apologize every time someone took him in disgust, he'd spend eternity in supplication.

Besides, the pinch-faced Mrs. Stanhope seemed to take offense at everything. Life, or perhaps a threadbare widowhood, had given her a flinty nature and sharp edges.

Robert did approve of her frock—plain with no embellishment. She kept her spine straight and her gaze direct, perhaps to inspire trust from clients. More handsome than beautiful, she hadn't fluttered her lashes or deployed other silly feminine strategies, which was a relief. He had no patience for silly women.

If ever he was inclined to seek a wife—God forbid—he'd never hire someone like her for the task. Her ideas were absurd. Why the devil would he wish a wife to share his interests? So they might go digging together? A wife would only get in the way.

Perhaps his uncle's suspicion was correct—that Mrs. Stanhope's marriage brokering, or whatever it was called, served as cover for illicit activities that turned a better profit. If not treason, perhaps the occult. That feline proved nothing, of course. Many people had cats, even black ones.

Nevertheless, signs of trickery were apparent if one knew where to look. Robert hadn't learned them in time to save his mother, but he'd studied them deeply since.

Discovering the dour Mrs. Stanhope's tricks would be an unpleasant use of his time. As unpleasant as the endless cobblestones that with every footstep sounded a question about whether life held much to interest him anymore.

A clatter of wheels punctured his bleak

reverie. The very carriage he'd dismissed at Mrs. Stanhope's cottage rolled to a stop beside him. Gibbons peered out, silently opened the door.

Robert sank gratefully into the squabs. "Remind me to pay you better."

"As you say, my lord." Gibbons regarded him benignly, as if it were perfectly ordinary to rescue his employer from whatever fate awaited a man so foolish as to walk the turnpike at dusk, alone save for his own depressing thoughts.



"It is possible the bone derives from an ancient, as yet unrecognized creature. Size and weight rule out human origin." Mr. Tavish scarcely glanced at his audience as he held up the ghastly bone.

He pointed to a chart. "The New Red Sandstone strata contains the oldest relics, the Chalk strata the most recent."

His baritone was dry and flat, as if he'd intentionally wrung the life out of it. Emmaline detected something in his speech—a slight lingering over a syllable here and there—that added an exotic note. But he seemed determined to wrestle it into drab monotone.

Emmaline felt distinctly out of place in this room of men. She'd brought her walking stick, which made her feel conspicuous, as most women didn't carry them. But most women had no need to walk by themselves at night or fend off the human predators who plied the streets.

Mr. Tavish hadn't even offered to send a conveyance, despite all but decreeing her presence.

But she told herself to stop looking for slights. They needed this client.

From her seat in the back of the room, Emmaline noticed that a few in the audience had dozed off. If she hadn't been so intrigued by Mr. Tavish's transformation from the wildly edgy man in her parlor to this lifeless pedagogue, she might have nodded off, too.

Fortunately, the lavishly decorated room, though not large, offered much to see, like the massive chandelier hanging from a thunderbolt clutched by a gilded eagle. There were other distractions. Laughter filled the corridor beyond the room as scantily attired women passed by to the grand saloon, which served as the ballroom.

Mr. Tavish seemed oblivious to the noise.

"Diligent study will be required to determine the bone's origins," he droned on. "It is my recommendation that the Society undertake new excavations in Cornwall and along the [Devon coast](#), the most promising sites." He massaged the bridge of his nose, as if unburdening himself of such weighty information had given him the headache.

Heaven save the world from such scholars. Her father had been one, and if he had ever come down from his ivory tower to grapple with real life, Emmaline had missed it. His lofty detachment was fed by the adoration of his students, who thought he could do no wrong.

And wasn't that a bitter thought? She wasn't proud that she had envied those students for capturing her father's undivided attention.

Resentment, envy, boredom—this evening was bringing out the worst in her. Emmaline tried to focus on something positive.

Such as Mr. Tavish's appealing superficial qualities. His clothing was understated—dark brown coat, tan trousers, and drab neckcloth. On him, they looked anything but dull.

Rather, they proved a perfect backdrop for showcasing the muscular frame that, with those slashing cheekbones and unruly hair, gave him a look unlike that of any man in the room. Truthfully, it was no chore for her eyes to feast on that.

The more she studied him as he paced the stage with his charts and his bone, the more she realized that while Mr. Tavish was a scholar, he wasn't like her father. He didn't seem to care, for instance, whether the audience hung on his every word. His gaze did not roam around the crowd looking for adoration, making eye contact like a needy performer.

That fascinated her. Most scholars, her father included, loved to show off their brilliance. Mr. Tavish didn't seek affirmation or acolytes.

Yet he had made an important discovery—that ghastly bone.

Why, then, this dry-as-dust delivery?

The man in her parlor had been as restless as a caged bird of prey. But perhaps parlors and stages did not suit him. Perhaps he belonged out in the open, stalking red sandstone and chalk strata with shovels or picks or whatever tools he used.

Almost, Emmaline envied him that freedom. Save for Oxford, she'd never lived anywhere but London, first in her father's house stuffed with papers, and now the shabby cottage she'd been forced to let after selling the house to pay his unexpected and strange debts.

Slowly, methodically, Mr. Tavish neatened his papers into a precise pile, then regarded his audience with a lifeless gaze. It seemed he had finished.

One by one, the men in the audience bestirred themselves as they realized the lecture was over. No women—to their credit—had wasted their evenings by coming. Women had flocked to her father's talks, mostly to flirt with the handsome widower.

Woe betide any woman who undertook a flirtation with Mr. Tavish. As a conversationalist, he was sadly lacking. As a scholar, he seemed intent on stamping the life out of learning. As a prospective groom, he perhaps held possibilities: Some women might be drawn to that savage look. Still, Emmaline would have her work cut out for her finding him a bride.

A smattering of applause spread through the room. Mr. Tavish bowed in acknowledgment. Another man on stage made closing remarks praising his scholarship.

The room emptied, leaving Mr. Tavish to gather his bone and charts. Emmaline made her way to the stage. When he failed to notice her, she cleared her throat discreetly.

“Whatever it is you are peddling, madam, be it arcane theories or your person, I’m not interested.” He hadn’t even glanced at her.

Emmaline frowned. “I understood this was urgent.”

“Nothing exigent about fossils.” He wrapped the bone in a swath of linen. “They’ve lain in repose for millions of years. And will for millions more.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“E-x-i-g-e-n-t. Something that requires immediate action. Or was it ‘repose’ you did not comprehend? This meeting’s for Society members only.”

He still hadn’t bothered to look at her. As she stood below the stage, looking up at him, he seemed impossibly tall and beyond her reach—in all meanings of the word, the arrogant man.

“I am here at your invitation—nay, demand,” she snapped. “I cannot imagine why you have forgotten our appointment, unless the lecture numbed your brain as much as it did mine.”

At last, he turned. Annoyance gave way to slow recognition as he looked down at her.

“Mrs.....?” His brow furrowed.

“Stanhope. Emmaline Stanhope.”

“Ah.” He pointed to the pile of charts, as if that explained his lapse. A gentleman might have apologized for his rudeness, but Mr. Tavish did not.

Emmaline took a deep breath, striving for calm. “Have you decided whether the terms I outlined are acceptable?”

He gave an indifferent shrug. "Need to know more about your customers—"

"Clients," she corrected.

"—the dead one, especially."

"What do you wish to know?"

"Whether hiring you puts me in mortal danger."

Emmaline gritted her teeth. "May we sit, Mr. Tavish?"

She didn't wait for a response but marched up the steps to the stage and sat in a wooden chair vacated by the man who had closed the program. "I keep information about my clients confidential, but in the case of poor Mr. Burwell, I suppose it does not matter. He was in a jolly mood. His last words to me were along the lines of my having restored his faith in the future."

"Ironic."

It was all Emmaline could do not to kick his shins. "How unkind. But I suppose it's useful for me to learn your faults if I am to find you a bride. I will note that your humor tends toward sardonic. *Some* women may find that appealing."

Such candor was unwise, she knew. But she couldn't resist a chance to puncture the arrogance she was certain lay beneath his relentless disregard of her.

Something flared in that gray gaze, then vanished. "What of the grieving fiancée?"

"We had not gotten that far," she said. "I had only obtained a list of his requirements."

"Which were?"

Emmaline bristled. "I don't see why that is your concern."

"Wondered whether you'd satisfied his needs." He gave the last word a slight emphasis, and it lingered in the air between them.

"My business is entirely aboveboard. I hope you do not suggest otherwise." She paused in the event he chose to reassure her that he intended no such insinuations.

Mr. Tavish remained silent.

Abruptly, she rose. Rent money or no, she wouldn't tolerate insult. "If you are looking for an abbess, you had best look elsewhere."

"Abbess?" His brow furrowed.

"A-b-b-e-s-s." Emmaline wrapped her cloak around her and turned to leave. "I doubt you'll find the meaning in Mr. Johnson's dictionary. Perhaps some of the noisy ladies out in the corridor can enlighten you."

He moved to block her way. "Wait."

Emmaline's chin rose. They regarded one another like two fighters in Gentleman Jackson's boxing exhibitions. And yes, she knew more than most women about such events.

"My, ah, requirements for a bride...not something I've thought about," he said.

Why then, had he come to her?

"Intelligence, I suppose," he added. "Aversion to sentiment, disinclination to hysteria."

"Most men wish for brides who are beautiful and passionate," Emmaline said.

"No passion."

Emmaline blinked. "I see."

“You think that odd?”

“Marriage is said to foster the sharing of mutual passions,” she said carefully.

“Never met one.”

“One what?” she asked.

“A mutual passion. Illusion created by poets. But I defer to your experience. Doubtless you shared such with your husband.” His speculative gaze made her face warm.

Emmaline studied him. “Why, exactly, do you wish to wed, Mr. Tavish? In my experience, people marry for passion and companionship on the one hand, money and lineage on the other. In the happiest of marriages these goals coincide.”

“I have money. I’ve no use for pedigree, and passion never serves.”

A revelation—the man could muster complete sentences.

“Would you wish for children?” Emmaline asked.

Something flickered in his gaze. “I think not.”

Her stomach chose that moment to growl rebelliously.

“I’ve a biscuit in my pouch,” Mr. Tavish said.

There was no denying the obvious.

“I did not have time to eat,” Emmaline confessed.

He handed her a small cake. While she ate, he finished packing.

Emmaline’s temper improved with food. “So, as I understand your requirements for a bride, she must be smart, practical, even-tempered—”

“More than even-tempered. Phlegmatic. P-h-1-”

“I know how to spell, sir. My education was in no way defective. You want a woman without an ounce of emotion.”

He looked surprised. Did he think her vocabulary limited to words of one syllable?

“What of her appearance?” Emmaline asked.

Mr. Tavish stared at her blankly.

“Her *looks*, sir. Some of my clients prefer dark-haired women, some light; some prefer thin women, others ladies with more...fullness.”

“Big as a barn or as thin as a rail, just as long as she doesn’t get in my way.” He pronounced “rail” with a slight trilling of the R. “I have precise habits. Commit them to memory, as my wife must observe them scrupulously.”

Emmaline eyed him warily. “My memory is excellent.”

“I rise at six, breakfast at seven. Luncheon is flexible—noon, give or take the half hour. I am not to be disturbed when working in my study. I take sherry at dusk, dinner at eight, brandy after. Prefer whisky, but not the English turpentine.”

“Sherry at dusk,” she murmured, dazed.

“In summer I am in Cornwall for digs. Autumn I prepare a paper on my findings for presentation to the Society. Winter I teach at Oxford.”

“And the spring?” she managed. “Is that planned, too, or do you leave it to chance?”

“I leave nothing to chance. Spring is Sussex—wealth of fossils in sandstone. But I’m intrigued

by Devon's possibilities, so that may change. You are looking at me strangely."

"It is just that—" Emmaline began.

"Those are my requirements. How soon can you find someone?"

When hell freezes over.

"I may need a few days," she said cautiously.

He picked up his charts and bone. "Time to leave."

Emmaline waited for the arm she assumed would be offered. But Mr. Tavish simply strode off. At length, he turned and frowned. "Coming?"



Mrs. Stanhope looked peaked. He'd been tempted to take her arm or offer a steadying hand, but she was a prickly sort who exuded capability and undoubtedly would take offense. Odd that she had a cane; she carried it like an accessory, never once leaning on it.

As they descended the grand staircase, her lips were pursed, her expression strained. Judging by the rigid set of her shoulders, she was consigning him to the devil.

No matter. She might be a traitor, she might be a whore—albeit an educated one—but it was nothing to him. He had agreed to do this for the sake of his deceased mother; nothing else mattered. Certainly not Mrs. Stanhope's sensibilities.

Fashionable peers of the realm escorting provocatively attired women brushed by them. His lecture had coincided with the Cyprian's

Ball—a night of bacchanalia when some of London's most fashionable aristocrats cavorted openly with their light-skirts. Robert was not unfamiliar with Cyprus and its association with Aphrodite, the sexually insatiable goddess of love. But using Greek mythology as excuse for louche behavior was both unoriginal and excessive. One more reason—not that he needed it—to be repulsed by the titled elite.

Robert was learning to bear the nuisance of a title, but Society members and his students knew him simply as Professor, the only title he valued.

Some of the men, he noticed, eyed Mrs. Stanhope speculatively. Though she must have felt their scrutiny, she held her head high amid the tawdry birds of paradise.

Even in her plain frock and worn cloak, she exuded a taut dignity. Her auburn hair was disciplined into a severe coil at her nape. Her simple cloth bonnet lent her an air of innocence that Robert suspected masked a calculating mind.

Had she conspired in Burwell's death? Did evil lurk behind her striking features?

Outside, private carriages were lined up for blocks. Mrs. Stanhope would have to walk some distance to find a hackney. Robert hesitated. Whatever she was, he couldn't abandon her in the crush of leering peers and half-naked women.

"I will help you find a hackney," he said.

"How kind."

Was there an edge in that clipped response? But she merely stared straight ahead.

Robert strode past the carriages—his wasn't

among them, as he'd walked the few blocks from his home—leaving her to follow. But when he reached the corner, he was alone.

Frowning, he turned. Half a block behind, Mrs. Stanhope stood between two disheveled dandies. One of them pulled her into his arms.

She uttered no cry of distress, no plea for rescue.

Instead, she swung her reticule, landing a blow on the man's head. He staggered, then lunged for her, but came away with only her cloak. With a roar, he tossed it into the street.

"Hell," Robert muttered.

The dandies were foxed. There'd be no reasoning with them. Robert secured his bone and charts under his arm and strode toward them.

By the time he reached Mrs. Stanhope, she was readying her reticule for another blow.

"Do stop dallying, madam," Robert ordered.

She eyed him incredulously.

"Is she yours?" one of the men drawled, putting a proprietary hand on her shoulder. "Ours now. Finders, keepers."

Mrs. Stanhope sent a sharp elbow into the man's gut. When he grunted in pain, she swung her reticule again. It connected with his face—but not before he tore at her frock.

"Madam," Robert said in a low voice. "Step aside. I will handle this."

Instead, she caught the ruffian's hand and bit it.

There was nothing for it but to set his priceless bone and charts near her ruined cloak and pray they did not meet the same muddy fate.

Robert's kick caught her assailant in the back.

His next kick sent the man to the ground. He turned to the other dandy in time to see Mrs. Stanhope bring her cane down on the man's shoulders. The culprit wobbled, then fell to his knees.

Robert plucked her cloak from the street. It was dirty and damp, but he tossed it over her shoulders nonetheless. Then he rescued his bone and charts.

He grabbed her hand, and they fled.