



KINGSCASTLE
Sophia Holloway

ISABELLE

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get one shot
at happiness...?

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*For
K. M. L. B.
and in memory of K A H*

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BY SOPHIA HOLLOWAY
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CHAPTER ONE

THE TALLER OF THE YOUNG WOMEN CLAD IN BLACK paced the room impatiently. She had deep chestnut hair that was actually shown to advantage by the sombre silk, and she carried herself imperiously. Her features were good, and only upon a second glance would it be noticed that she had a sharp nose, and that her green eyes were agate hard.

The aged butler entered and spoke to the other lady, who was seated before the fireplace and gazing into the flames. She was a more muted version of her sister, with nut brown hair, gentle features and eyes that mixed green and hazel to the point where it was impossible to describe them in simple terms.

‘The gentlemen will be joining you shortly, Miss Isabelle. I believe the sad business is concluded.’

‘Thank you, Wellow. I think some tea would be in order.’

‘Yes, Miss Isabelle.’

He bowed slowly, more from infirmity than deference, and withdrew. The taller lady snorted.

‘Wellow ought to have been retired years ago. He is so slow, and has a vastly inflated idea of his own importance in this house. No doubt he was listening where he had no right to be. He will be one of the first things that I get rid of, along with the awful wallpaper in the morning room. I am sure that the background was white and not cream in my mother’s day.’

Isabelle Wareham winced. Cornelia always referred to the late Mrs Wareham as ‘my mother’ as if she were hers alone. Cornelia was nine years old when Isabelle was born, and the joy at her safe arrival after several unsuccessful pregnancies had been turned to grief when Patience Wareham had died within twenty-four hours of the delivery. Colonel Wareham had always seen his younger daughter as his dear wife’s parting gift, but Cornelia was convinced that

Isabelle had killed her mother, and had resented her from birth.

‘And,’ added Cornelia, pointedly, ‘I cannot conceive why Papa did not have the dining room improved.’ She cast her sister a look which clearly intimated that she blamed her for this omission on his part.

‘I hardly think this the time to consider such—’ Isabelle’s soft voice, surprisingly deep but melodious, was interrupted by her elder sister.

‘And it is impertinent of you to tell me what is or is not suitable. You think I do not grieve? Well, I do, but for poor Papa being left as he was these last years, incapacitated, dependent. This was a release. I will remember him as he was, vital, active and happy.’

She did not actually say ‘remember him as long ago when you were not here’, but she might as well have done so.

Isabelle coloured. Normally a heated exchange would have ensued, but she was too tired, too weary with grief and the responsibilities that her father’s death had laid upon her.

In a way Cornelia was right; it *was* a release. Colonel Wareham had been an active man on his estate and in the local community. The seizure, some four years past, which had left him virtually chair-bound, barely able to stand long enough to be assisted down the stairs, and both slow and slurred of speech, had imprisoned his body, but not his mind. So much had to be done for him, by her, and by his faithful valet, Sileby, but he had never complained, and even said it had been the opportunity to enjoy the things his quicker pace of life had overlooked. He had watched the birds in the garden outside his library, painstakingly taught Isabelle, thrust into running the house at the age of fifteen, and being involved in management of the estate, how to deal with such things. They were not the years he had anticipated, but he had used them well, and they had not been miserable. Cornelia did not understand. Married these ten years past, running her own household and nursery, she

saw only the outward limitations of her father's state. Nor did she appreciate what it had meant to Isabelle. When she had reached fifteen, Cornelia had gone to her aunt, Lady Colebatch, Mrs Wareham's sister, and spent two years being prepared for Society. Lady Colebatch had brought her out, approved Lord Dunsfold as a match, and smiled benignly upon her success.

Isabelle had, at a similar age, neither wanted, nor indeed been able, to leave her Papa, and Lady Colebatch had succumbed to influenza the following winter. Cornelia had never even mentioned bringing her sister out herself, in part knowing she was needed at home. If she contemplated any future for Isabelle, it was as the wife of some local squire, probably Edwin Semington, who was Colonel Wareham's godson, and who was, in her opinion, a solid, reliable man of sense who would keep the far-too-independent Isabelle under suitable restraint.

The door opened, and three gentlemen entered, the first obviously in an agitated state, the second thoughtful, and the third slightly amused. Cornelia Dunsfold raised an eyebrow as she looked at her husband.

'Well?'

'It is preposterous.' Lord Dunsfold's naturally florid complexion had assumed an even more crimson hue. 'I said so to Filey, but he says it is all in order and cannot be faulted.'

'For goodness' sake, my lord, just tell me what the Will contained.'

'He left it all to her,' he declared angrily, pointing at Isabelle.

'All of it to my sister?' his wife blinked incredulously. 'But I am the elder.'

'In such cases as this, Lady Dunsfold, where there is no title or entailments, the disposition of the estate is entirely up to the testator, so Filey informs us,' explained Mr

Semington, shaking his head, 'and it is not everything, exactly.'

'You call the property in Leicestershire worth having? And a portion of the investments in Funds? When this,' Dunsfold threw his arm out, expansively, 'comes to Isabelle?'

'Jolly good thing it does, I say.' The amused gentleman smiled at Isabelle, whom everyone else was talking *about* but not *to*, and then looked challengingly at Dunsfold. 'Cornelia is taken care of, established. Isabelle has spent her life here and cared for Uncle George in his ailing years. This gives her security and, dash it, she deserves it too.'

'You are a fool, Charles, so I will not deign to respond to that remark,' Lady Dunsfold snapped at her cousin.

Isabelle cast him a grateful look. Sir Charles Wareham, son of Colonel Wareham's elder brother, was not, perhaps, of the highest intellect, but he was sweet-natured and pragmatic. Although nine years her senior, the gap in age seemed very small, for circumstance had made her mature quickly, and he retained a youthful simplicity of attitude. He had attended his uncle's obsequies with genuine sadness as a nephew, as well as in his role as head of the family. He had been at the reading of the Will in that capacity, without any thought of being named, and had been rather touched that his uncle had left him his favourite shooting piece. He only wished that he had been left in partnership with Lord Dunsfold as Isabelle's guardian, until she came of age in nearly eighteen months' time. He had however, been named as joint trustee of the estate until that time. It would undoubtedly be onerous, because Dunsfold was a man he both distrusted and disliked intensely, since Dunsfold openly treated him as a buffoon.

The antipathy was mutual. Dunsfold might be a viscount, not, as he phrased it 'a mere country baronet', but Sir Charles' forebears had held both land and title since before the Wars of the Roses and the Dunsfold elevation dated only as far back as the Restoration. The viscount, if pressed, would murmur about 'services to the Crown', but he was

not the only one to know that these 'services' had been to renounce any interest in a mistress upon whom the royal eye had fallen. It rankled with him, nearly as much as the fact that the Wareham estates, cared for and managed over generations by men who did not aspire to cut a dash in society, were extensive and profitable, whereas he had been forced to dispose of assets to cover his father's debts. He had anticipated his wife, and thus himself, inheriting Bradings, with both pleasure and some relief. Certain investments which he had been persuaded to make of late had proved disappointing and the sale of the property would boost his depleted coffers.

'It was always expected that Bradings would come to me.' Cornelia Dunsfold sounded petulant.

'Expected by you, yes, but it makes no sense otherwise. It is the best way to ensure Isabelle's secure future. Was Dunsfold living off the expectation? The more fool him.'

'Lady Dunsfold has a point, surely,' interposed Mr Semington, hurriedly. 'The eldest, or in this case the elder, child normally inherits the main property.'

Sir Charles cast him a look of dislike.

'You really are a prosy bore, Semington. Godson or not, I am not surprised Uncle George left you nothing but a case of port and his butterfly collection. Dust collection, I call it. You were the only person ever to wax lyrical over those pinned moths.'

'You are not a lepidopterist,' remarked Semington, condescendingly.

'I should dashed well say I am not a leopard-anything. And Uncle George never looked at those cases any time these last twenty years.'

'We stray from the point,' announced Lord Dunsfold, loudly. 'The thing is that my father-in-law left Bradings and the entire estate to Isabelle. However, she is under age and so he appointed me as her guardian until that date. I admit that I think that putting the estate in trust and preventing me

making any decisions concerning any disposal of assets without recourse to,' he paused, and looked disdainfully at Sir Charles, "the Head of the Family", totally unnecessary, but ...'

'He named me as the other trustee just so that you were not given free rein to tamper with the estate, that's why.' Sir Charles grinned, but his eyes flashed. There were limits to how far he would put up with being insulted. He looked to Isabelle, who was frowning, and his look softened. 'Don't you worry yourself, Isabelle. You will not find yourself without a feather to fly with when you come of age.'

'I am not worried, dear Charlie, but,' she looked at the others, 'I object to being discussed as though I were an inanimate object when I am sitting here before you all. I did not know of the guardianship, though I should have thought about it, but Papa did tell me that I would not need to worry about the future because he would provide for me.'

'And you said nothing to me?' Cornelia glared at her sister.

'I am not sure that you ever listen to a word I say, Cornelia,' she snapped suddenly, and drew her hand across her eyes, 'so why should I waste my breath?'

She got up, agitatedly, and went to the window. The branches of the beeches showed nearly bare in the October sunlight, and she watched a gust of wind toss a heap of bronzed leaves nonchalantly into the air and drop them as suddenly. Life was just as it always was and yet was so different. The tossing of leaves by the wind was an inconsequential thing but one to which she would have drawn her father's attention, and now he was not there. A huge void had appeared in her life and gazing into it brought a lump to her throat and tears to her eyes. She swallowed hard and blinked.

'You are overwrought, Isabelle,' murmured Mr Semington and came to pat her hand, patronisingly, and a little possessively. She pulled it away, colouring.

‘Not overwrought, Edwin, just grieving. You seem to have forgotten that in your interest into what Papa left in his Last Will and Testament, even before the earth has settled over him. And I do wish you would desist from acting as if you were my brother.’ She turned her face away.

‘Now, my dear, you know full well that the last way in which I would think of myself would be as your brother,’ he responded, smiling in a way which made her long to hit him. He had taken it into his head that she would marry him, and nothing that she might say or do seemed likely to disabuse him of this belief. That she did not care for him did not seem to worry him in the least.

Wellow entered the room before the atmosphere could become even more fraught, followed by the family solicitor, whom Isabelle had ensured would be invited to partake of tea. As Wellow remarked later to the housekeeper, Mrs Frampton, it was clear to see that it was not a scene of family amity.

‘Her ladyship looked as if she had been sucking a lemon, and his lordship was choleric. Well and truly out of joint, their noses are, to be sure. I just hope as they do not make life hard for poor Miss Isabelle, though.’

Filey, the family solicitor, was more concerned that life would become hard for him, mediating between Sir Charles and Lord Dunsfold. He knew of their animosity and would guarantee that whatever one suggested the other would try and veto. He might think not giving Lord Dunsfold sole control of the estate a sensible action by his late and respected client, but he also thought he was in for a testing eighteen months. The angry looks that the two men exchanged were merely a visual indication. It was enough to bring on one of his headaches.

Cornelia glanced briefly at the man of law and sniffed. Isabelle turned and smiled a little wanly at him.

‘Do take a seat and some tea before your departure, Mr Filey. I know you have quite a drive ahead of you, back to Malmesbury, and the wind is bitterly cold.’

He gave her a hint of a smile and bowed in acknowledgement. Miss Isabelle always treated him with courtesy, not as some insignificant minion. It was a pity in some ways that her years did not match her experience, for in all honesty, she could have taken up the formal control of the estate without recourse to any but himself on rare occasion, having had to deal with most of the business aspects of it during the last two years or so. She looked more than nineteen, for certain. She might not have had a London Season, but she had poise and a certain natural gravitas which cloaked her youth.

The presence of the lawyer effectively stifled any further mutual recriminations between Lord Dunsfold and Sir Charles, and Isabelle was grateful for it. Only when Filey rose and announced he had best depart before the light began to fail, did Lord Dunsfold do more than engage in a muttered conversation with his wife.

‘We have decided, Cornelia and I, that it would be best for you to return to Lincombe with us. The house can be shut up for the winter, and—’

‘Why on earth should I leave Bradings?’ Isabelle was stunned.

‘You are too young to live here alone, without someone to guide you. Heaven knows how badly you will be cheated by tradesmen and your tenants,’ her brother-in-law declared.

‘They never did so before, and I have had to deal with them increasingly as Papa grew more infirm.’

‘Ah, but he was still there, behind you, so to speak. Now you are quite alone.’

‘Thank you for reminding me of that,’ she flashed.

‘So little respect!’ Cornelia shook her head. ‘If that is how you have been allowed to go on, I despair of getting you a husband, Isabelle. A want of conduct in a girl is most certain to put off suitors.’

Edwin Semington coughed, pointedly, as if to assert that however true this might be, he was prepared to overlook the

fault.

‘Since I am in deep mourning that is totally irrelevant, Sister. And besides, I am not so sure I want any husband, least of all one of your choosing.’

Lady Dunsfold was speechless, as much from surprise as outrage.

‘If Isabelle wants to remain here, why should she not do so?’ Sir Charles had kept silent, but now joined the conversation. ‘Since she is in deep mourning she won’t be going into society anyway, and I am close enough to trot over every so often and make sure all is well.’

Husband and wife exchanged glances.

‘I wish to remain here, in my home,’ declared Isabelle. ‘I will not be lonely here, for there is Wellow and also Mrs Frampton, and—’

‘Servants! Oh Isabelle, if that is what you consider company, you are a lost cause.’ Cornelia pulled a face and sighed in a theatrical manner. ‘You mark my words, by the spring you will be begging us to take you in when we go to Bath.’

Isabelle said nothing for a minute. Her head was beginning to ache, and all she really wanted to do was go to her bedchamber and give in to the rising ball of grief in her chest. Now it seemed she was not even to be permitted to remain in her beloved home.

‘Please, Cornelia, I beg of you. Let me stay here where I have occupation. At Lincombe I would simply be in the way and have nothing to do.’

Truth to tell, Lady Dunsfold, having at first thought her lord’s idea very wise, was beginning to regret their generosity. She had forgotten just how embarrassingly forthright Isabelle could be, and how she would have to make excuses for her behaviour. Her friends might applaud her charity, but soon enough they would be shaking their heads over her inability to school her younger sister into

decorum. This gave her the chance to back off without appearing to withdraw the offer.

‘If you are so set on it, Isabelle, I suppose we might permit it, whilst, as you say, you are bound to be out of society.’

That she would also have her social life curtailed had given Cornelia more tears than her father’s demise, but as a married woman with a wide circle of friends who might still visit even if she might not organise any large-scale social events, there was no likelihood of her being immured in Lincombe. The same would not be true for Isabelle at Bradings. More fool the girl.

An uncomfortable silence descended upon the room as the daylight became gloaming. Sir Charles had but three miles to travel home to the Hall, and delayed as long as he might, thinking how little he liked to leave Isabelle with the Dunsfolds and Semington. In fact, he could not see why Semington had remained at all, since he might as easily return to his waiting mother, almost the same distance away but in the opposite direction. He came up with the happy idea that since he could not remain all evening, he would at least get Semington to withdraw. He did this by the simple expedient of rising and saying to Semington, ‘Time you and I were off home. Your mama will want you home before it is full dark, or else she will fret, eh?’

Edwin Semington had little wish to leave but this statement was very true. He sighed, and agreed, with due reluctance. He bade Lord and Lady Dunsfold a very polite farewell and took Isabelle’s hand in what he thought of as a sustaining grasp as he wished her goodbye.

‘You know where I am, whenever you have need of guidance.’

This annoyed not only Isabelle but the other gentlemen present, uniting Sir Charles and Dunsfold for a brief moment.

‘She has relations to guide her, Semington,’ growled Sir Charles.

‘Presumption!’ snorted Lord Dunsfold.

Mr Semington coloured and gabbled his farewell.

‘He merely let his compassion get the better of him,’ murmured Cornelia placatingly, as the door closed behind him and Sir Charles.

‘He acts as if he had a right. I hate it, hate him,’ Isabelle spluttered.

‘That shows that you are equally unrestrained, Isabelle.’ Her sister looked down her nose at her. ‘It is to be hoped that you will strive to curb such intemperance.’

Isabelle flung her a look of intense dislike and, to show what she thought of this statement, flounced from the room, slamming the door behind her. The Dunsfolds looked at one another, in mutual and silent agreement. Their point was proven, as far as they were concerned.

CHAPTER TWO

THE AUTUMNAL WEATHER CONSPIRED WITH ISABELLE'S grief. For the best part of a fortnight it rained, if not continuously, then so frequently as to render even a gentle hack about the countryside liable to result in returning soaked to the skin. She was listless and inclined to think only of the past. In the immediate aftermath of her father's death there had been practicalities with which she had dealt, aided by Filey, and with the moral support of Cousin Charles. Only when her sister and Dunsfold had arrived and taken over as if they owned the house had she had empty hours in which to contemplate her loss, and now everything was in hand and only the empty hours seemed to remain. She wandered about the house, a black, silent shadow, gravitating always towards the library, where she had used to sit with her father, and where the comforting smell of ageing leather bindings seemed to mix with an echo of his presence. There she sat and watched the rivulets of water course down the windowpanes, nature's tears reflecting her own and distorting her view of the world without. The initial visits of consolation had been replaced by a reluctance to 'disturb' her, and though she had resented having to keep her poise and listen to well-meaning, though perfectly sincere, condolences and reminiscences which made her feel her loss more acutely still, seeing nobody now felt worse.

She was also contemplating the unfortunate truth that there was no requirement for Sileby, since he had nobody to valet, though he was so much more than her father's personal servant. When Isabelle was born there had been a wet nurse, and a nursemaid, but the first had of course departed before Isabelle could remember her, and the maid had left to marry when Isabelle was four. The governess, as Cornelia frequently informed her little sister, 'belonged' to her, and indeed Miss Gilkicker had been Cornelia's prop in the aftermath of her mother's death, although Cornelia would never have described her as such. The gap in age

between the sisters also meant that it was impossible to teach them together, the one struggling with French irregular verbs, and the other with her letters. Little Isabelle had spent the two years before Cornelia went to stay with her aunt, largely excluded from the schoolroom, where the presence of a little girl under the age of six was 'not conducive to Miss Cornelia's acquisition of knowledge'. Colonel Wareham accepted the situation and had given Sileby the duty of being his younger daughter's guard dog, since his valeting tasks were not onerous. It had been Sileby who stopped her falling in the pond, led her first pony, and anointed the grazes that were the natural consequence of a small child running about. When Cornelia had left home, Miss Gilkicker had taken charge of Isabelle, but a bond remained, one which was re-established and strengthened when daughter and valet had worked together so long in the course of caring for the ailing colonel.

Sileby had always been there, always been a fount of solid common sense, and letting him go seemed an added loss, a finality of accepting her father's absence. He himself had hinted at the problem on several occasions, asking what she would like him to do, but she had brushed it away, always for another day. When he knocked and asked if he might speak with her this day, she knew it was unfair to do nothing.

'Yes, of course Sileby, do come in, and take a seat also.' She saw him bridle. He had been her father's soldier servant from his first service at the end of the war in America until he retired at the time of the brief peace in 1802. Colonel Wareham had sold out and come to Bradings, which he inherited from an uncle. Isabelle had been a small child and could not remember anything of the life before this house. 'Please, do sit.'

He sat, as if at attention, perched on the edge of a chair, his capable hands placed side by side on his knees.

'What am I to do, miss? You know as well as I do, there is no work for me now the Colonel has gone.'

‘Oh, Sileby, I know and yet ... Is there not some other role you can assume here?’

‘Now, what could an old soldier like me do, Miss Isabelle? I looked after the Colonel for thirty-eight years. I am not a groom, nor a butler, as if Wellow was not able to do his job, which he is.’

‘But you are part of the family, Sileby, the family of this place.’

‘I am not here to be idle like an expensive ornament, Miss Isabelle.’

‘No indeed, but ... Where would you go?’

‘That I couldn’t say. I’ve no relations as I know of. Last saw my sister before we went off to Holland, over in Kent that was.’

Isabelle felt at a loss and sighed, but then an idea struck her.

‘What about the Lodge?’

‘The Colonel never replaced the old chap who used to live there, years back. Gates haven’t been shut in three years at the least. You’ve no call to have a lodge keeper, Miss Isabelle.’

‘But it would give you somewhere to live, somewhere close by, and I know my father made provision for a pension in his Will. Filey sent me a copy of the whole of it. If you took up the Lodge, made it habitable again, that and the pension would keep you very tidily. Mrs Frampton would be happy to have you still at table, I am sure, and there are times when dear Wellow needs another pair of hands to move things, and you know he would never trust the outdoor staff not to be clumsy.’

Sileby frowned. It would be easy to say yes, but he did not want to take advantage of Miss Isabelle’s youth and inexperience. He had known her all her life and understood now was a difficult time. As a sop to his conscience, he accepted the offer on a temporary basis, ‘until things settled down’. The relieved smile on her face made him feel better,

and worse. He admitted as much to Mrs Frampton, below stairs.

‘Well, she’s right enough about you being welcome here, as well you know,’ Mrs Frampton assured him.

‘Ah, but it’s a crying shame for the poor young lady. Here’s she been, hidden away here all these years, and now who does she know? Us three old ’uns, and you cannot count the maids and such, Sir Charles up at the Hall, and old Lady Monkton, who’s older ’n all of us.’

‘I thought perhaps she and Sir Charles might make a match of it once, but he treats her like a brother would,’ sighed Mrs Frampton.

‘Nice enough fellow is Sir Charles, but Miss would run rings round him. She needs a man with more in his noddle than her cousin. Old Sir John was nobody’s fool, but her ladyship ... Ah, now there’s a butterfly-brained lady if ever there was.’ Wellow added his mite to the conversation. ‘I reckon as it is from her Sir Charles gets it, and Miss Julia even worse. Mind you, if Miss Julia were home, she would give Miss Isabelle company her own age.’

‘From what I hear from the Hall, there’s high hopes for Miss Julia contracting a very good alliance.’ Mrs Frampton was on good terms with the housekeeper at the Hall. ‘When the Season ended, she went off to Worthing with her Grandmama, and a likely gentleman followed her there. She is visiting with her ladyship in Shropshire, where he is likely to inherit. The word at the Hall is that there will be an engagement before Christmas.’

‘Which will leave Miss Isabelle even more isolated. Perhaps she should have gone off with Lady Dunsfold after all.’ Sileby looked glum.

‘No, no,’ Wellow shook his head. ‘Better for her, and us too, she does not go to her ladyship at Lincombe to be treated like she was dirt. Never was any sisterly feeling between them, as well we know.’

Meanwhile, the object of their concern was wondering whether it was worth having a fire kindled in the dining room for her to eat there, or whether she might as well eat at the little supper table in the small parlour which had doubled as the schoolroom. Isabelle had been a bright pupil and enjoyed learning, but Miss Gilkicker had always been, in her own mind, Cornelia's governess, and there had been no strong bond between them. It had seemed perfectly natural that Cornelia should have called Miss Gilkicker to inculcate the basis of learning into her son before he was sent off to school, and Isabelle had been too busy in the early days after her father's seizure to have time for the finishing touches that Miss Gilkicker would have liked to give to her education. The schoolroom had become Isabelle's private parlour to which Colonel Wareham had been wheeled to give a change of view and take tea on summer afternoons. He was used to saying that she held court there but if that was so, he was her only courtier.

She was dragged from her cogitations by the sound of the bell ringing from the front hall. A minute or so later Wellow announced Sir Charles Wareham, and her cousin, muddied of boot and in riding dress, strode into the room with a cheery greeting. Isabelle requested the burgundy to be brought in for her guest, and tea for herself. Sir Charles grinned.

'You are the perfect hostess, coz. I just thought I would pay you a little visit on my way back from Devizes. Er, has Mrs Frampton been baking her almond tarts?'

'I am sure if she has, Wellow will bring a plate of them, for everyone knows how susceptible you are to them.'

'Mrs Frampton has a magic touch with almond tarts.'

'So you really only came to see if there were any you might devour?' Isabelle smiled, and then laughed as her cousin coloured and demurred. It was not a thing she had done much in recent weeks.

'No, no! Isabelle, you wretched girl, you are roasting me as always. It is no way to speak to "the Head of the

Family”.’ He attempted to look serious and failed.

‘Dear Charlie, you only remember me when there is another reason that connects, and the thought of Mrs Frampton’s almond tarts must have been it.’

‘Actually, you are wrong.’ His amiable features settled into a more serious expression. ‘The thing is, Isabelle, what about Christmas?’

She looked perplexed and repeated the word.

‘Uncle George always had the hunt meet here Boxing Day, and then a day’s shooting about Twelfth Night. His coverts were always good. But in the circumstances ...’

‘Oh! Goodness, I had not considered even as far as Christmas, but you are right. It is impossible for me to hunt, of course, or entertain properly, but there is no reason why the hunt might not meet here, and arranging the day’s shooting would give me something to do, you know. I am sure it would not be considered improper for me to let it take place since I would be expected to remain out of the way. I got used to it with Papa. We would see everyone at the first stand down by the Home Wood, then watch them go off, and hear the guns, of course, and at the end of the day they would return and describe their day to him over mulled wine and pies. That last part might be difficult, I suppose, but your mama might be able to act as hostess perhaps?’

‘She might. Not back with Julia as yet, you see. To be honest, I think Slinfold needed to feel his old grandfather approved of his choice before popping the question. I count it a bit lily-livered of him, but, no doubt he calls it filial duty, or is that grand-filial duty?’

‘I did get a letter from Julia just before ...’ Isabelle paused for a moment, and then continued. ‘She did seem in remarkably good spirits and described Lord Slinfold in glowing terms.’

‘Good enough fellow, Slinfold, but you know, the sort who takes his fences but is secretly yearning to go by the

gate instead. His heart isn't in the jump. Julia will lead him a merry dance if he lets her, and I fear he will.' Sir Charles shook his head in brotherly concern. 'But we stray from the point. The hunt is simply a matter of telling the Master to carry on as normal. When it comes to the shooting it is a bit different.'

'Give me a list of those who normally come, Charlie, and I will write letters, rather than send out cards of invitation. If I couch it in terms that Papa would wish this tradition to continue, and it would be a form of memorial to him, it would not sound forward. Of course, include any guests of yours who are with you over Christmas.' She looked up as Wellow returned with refreshments. Mrs Frampton clearly believed Sir Charles to be suffering from starvation, she thought, for besides almond tarts, there was a pound cake and shortbread. 'You have cheered me up, Charlie, and here is your just reward. I hope your horse is strong enough to carry you with all the extra weight afterwards.'

He grinned.

'You sound yourself again, Isabelle, just a little.'

Her face clouded.

'Oh. Should I, Charlie? Is it not too soon?' She sounded guilty and he came and took her hand, pressing her gently onto the sofa.

'You should. It is what your Papa would have wished, that you look forward, live your life.' He looked very earnestly at her. 'I do understand, Isabelle, the feeling that anything but grief is wrong. I felt it after my father died, and you were closer to yours than I was to mine, through necessity and being just the two of you here. Uncle George once told me his only regret these last years was that he had been blessed by your company, but in doing so had kept you from the youth you deserved.'

'What nonsense.' She frowned.

‘No, he was right. Quite a downy one, Uncle George. My father always said the brains of the family passed him by and went to his brother. A girl of your age should have had a Season, been presented at Courtlike Cornelia was. At the age she was perfecting her curtsey and poring over fashion plates and ribbons, you were taking up running Bradings and caring for your Papa. You went from girl to lady of the house almost overnight.’

‘I would not have had it any other way, Charlie, you know that.’

‘I know’ he squeezed her hand, ‘but I am telling you the truth. You wear your blacks but you must not linger in black gloom, or think that laughing is dishonouring your father’s memory. He wanted you to be happy. When you laugh, you do as he would want.’

She tried to smile but her lip trembled, and he put an arm about her shoulder and gave her a cousinly hug.

‘Things will get better, you wait and see.’

Sir Charles was a country gentleman at heart and had not spent the Season in London for some years. He preferred hunting game in his coverts to chasing Covent Garden ‘ladybirds’, and a hand of picquet, with a good claret from his own cellars set at his elbow, to an evening losing his blunt in White’s. He did, however, like to have his coats made in Town, and so the following week, whilst Isabelle tried to begin preparations for a very isolated Christmas at which she could be, at best, a sad spectator, he drove up to London, stopping overnight at Newbury. Upon entering Weston’s premises, he heard a voice he thought he recognised, and he waved away the employee bowing before him to look around the corner to where a tall gentleman in military uniform was being measured. His scarlet coat was laid over a chair.

‘Idsworth! Good God! Haven’t seen you since I was hauled up for putting that piglet in the Master’s lodgings, and it made a terrible mess of his new Persian carpet. You

said it would have been better if I had found a lamb.’ He paused. ‘You know, I thought you were dead, old fellow.’

The gentleman turned, thereby forcing a pin into his arm, but barely registered it nor the tutting of the tailor.

‘Wareham? As you can see not dead yet, despite every attempt Boney’s finest made upon me. It is good to see a face I recognise.’ He smiled.

‘Well, if you will be in London in November, what do you expect? Very thin of company. You after evening togs or ...?’

‘Sold out, and it is nine years since I wore anything but uniform. Not sure any of my old clothes even fit me now.’

Charles Wareham’s memory was good but not swift. He remembered now what had happened to his friend from Cambridge. Idsworth was two years his senior and had gone down at the end of his first year. What had then occurred had all been rather messy and embarrassing, and Julian Westerham, Earl of Idsworth, had disappeared into a line regiment.

‘No, I don’t suppose they do, all that running about killing Frenchmen would put muscles on a fellow for sure.’

‘If you would just stand still a moment longer, my lord,’ the tailor murmured, still with a pin in his hand.

‘I am sorry. Of course.’ Idsworth stood still, but even when relaxed clearly had the demeanour of a man used to standing at attention.

His companion in youthful misdemeanours had changed, thought Wareham, but then he had been only twenty-one when he left England for Portugal, proud possessor of a sword, a lieutenant’s commission, and very little else. The boy had become the man, not only in stature. He was a fraction taller than all those years ago, no longer gangly and loose-limbed, but broader of chest and firmer of thigh. His face was more sombre as well as weathered, the grey-blue eyes more guarded. The naive youth who had gone

unsuspecting into society from Cambridge had learnt more than just how to survive in battle.

‘So where are you off to after London?’ Sir Charles enquired.

‘I am not destitute, Wareham, I promise you.’ There was a slight snap to Lord Idsworth’s voice.

‘I did not mean ...’ The younger man was slightly taken aback.

‘No, of course you did not. I apologise.’ Idsworth smiled lopsidedly. ‘I suppose I am too much on the defensive, in enemy territory, or so it feels. I will return to Buriton, to the Dower House. That was kept on, and my aunt lived in it until her death last year. Buriton Park itself is leased for two more years, and then ... It will be a start.’

Charles Wareham was a kind-hearted man and saw the shadow of loneliness pass over Idsworth’s features.

‘I don’t suppose you have met up with many of your old cronies as yet, but Christmas is fast approaching, and you cannot spend that alone. Come down to Baddesley Hall and spend it with me. We don’t do anything fancy. It will be my mother, my sister, oh and “Molly” Mollington. Not sure if you know him.’

Lord Idsworth frowned at the unexpected offer.

‘Very decent of you. Not sure I should ...’

‘Do say yes, there’s a good man. Be delighted to have you. Might as well have somewhere to show off the new toggery, eh?’ Wareham beamed, and in the face of such genuine kindness, Lord Idsworth agreed to come into Wiltshire a week before Christmas.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PROSPECT OF CHRISTMAS DID NOT IN ITSELF BUOY Isabelle's spirits. The season was one for family, and being together, and she faced the very first without her father. They had kept the Feast of the Nativity quietly enough but it had been happy, nonetheless. Even in the worst of weather she and Sileby had managed to get Colonel Wareham to the church services, and he had taken to having the staff come up to the dining room and sharing a huge bowl of hot punch with them Christmas evening. He told Isabelle it cost nothing to show gratitude, and though working for him was their paid employment, he was conscious that they all did so with cheerfulness, and never begrudged the extra work his infirmity put upon them. Isabelle would do the same this year, but it would feel more like a wake.

There had been the small distraction of Sileby taking over the little lodge cottage. Isabelle had herself gone to see what needed to be done to make the place habitable after several years without an occupant, and then sent the under housemaid and the gardener's lad to assist, returning once Sileby was installed with his personal possessions, which seemed to her meagre.

'What needs have I for clutter, Miss Isabelle? I am used to campaigning, and you travel best if you travel light.'

'But this is not campaigning, Sileby. This is now your home.' She did not add that she wanted him to feel so at home that he would not wish to move. 'There is not even a mat before the fire, nor an upholstered chair, which is odd, because I am sure there was one when I came a week ago.'

'That there was, Miss Isabelle, but it had the worm something bad and collapsed when Sukie tried to sit in it. Not that I need something soft to sit upon.'

'Well, I refuse to think of you living here sat upon a stool or that dining chair. There is a Windsor chair in the small parlour that is actually in the way. I shall have that sent

down, and when next I get to Chippenham, I shall purchase material for a new pair of curtains. Those are mildew stained and not thick enough to keep in the warmth on these cold winter days. What size would you say they were?’

‘I’m not a tender plant, Miss, so don’t you fret about me.’ Sileby was touched but embarrassed.

‘No, no. New curtains, I insist.’

The old retainer recognised her tone and gave in gracefully. He was not surprised that his mistress ordered the carriage the next clement day, nor that the curtains appeared within a week thereafter, though he did not know that she had hemmed them herself, much to Mrs Frampton’s horror. That lady did admit to Wellow that, however demeaning it might sound, not that she would breathe a word to anyone else, she could see it gave poor Miss Isabelle something to occupy her besides sitting all sorrowful. It was true, but Isabelle had other things which would take her attention in the coming weeks.

Since the hall and dining room were public rooms and would be seen by those who returned from the New Year shoot, Isabelle contemplated their decoration with greenery for the festive season and discussed it with Wellow. She then awaited Sir Charles’ list of those she should invite for the shooting. Some she remembered from previous years, and although Wellow shook his head over her spending so much time at her father’s desk, and sending the groom hither and yon with her missives, it did give her occupation. The first letter was to the Master of the Hunt, and since he had known her since infancy, it was not merely a formal communication. His response was swift, avuncular and positive, and Isabelle was cheered by it.

It was the second week in December when Wellow interrupted a detailed discussion between herself and Mrs Frampton on what viands should be prepared for the shooting party with the unwelcome announcement that Mr Semington had called to visit her. Isabelle groaned but accepted that she ought to see him, since he had ridden over specially. Mrs Frampton withdrew to her kitchen realm, and

Mr Semington entered. There was always something about the way he did so which implied that it was only a matter of time before he would do so by right of ownership, a right which extended to Isabelle. She found it both intensely annoying and vaguely disquieting, and it made her sharp with him.

‘Good morning, Edwin. I am quite busy today, so I may not linger in idle chatter.’

Neither her words nor acerbic tone seemed to affect his self-confidence.

‘Ah yes, my dear, a woman’s work is never done, is it. I am so glad to see you engaged in activity again, not moping aimlessly.’

Isabelle resented being told that her moping was aimless by another, whatever she had told herself.

‘And what highly important tasks have you been about?’ She raised an eyebrow.

‘Business, my dear. Business that you would not understand.’

‘Really?’ Isabelle nearly ground her teeth in frustration.

‘Actually, Isabelle,’ he continued, ‘I am here today to invite you to Pescombe for Christmas day. Mama and I agreed it would be kind to take you from your solitude for a day.’

He made her sound like a charity case. The trouble was that she had no reasonable cause to refuse this highly unwelcome offer.

‘Well, it is very kind of Mrs ...’

‘... but Isabelle is already engaged to spend the day with us up at the Hall, aren’t you, coz?’

Sir Charles strode in without being announced, which irritated Semington, as Wellow knew it would when he ushered him into the room.

‘I ... Yes, I am, and so although it is so very kind of Mrs Semington to think of me, I have to decline the offer. Do thank her for me, Edwin, and thank you too, of course,’ Isabelle lied, without compunction.

Mr Semington’s self-belief would not admit the rather obvious nature of the falsehood. Sir Charles was, however, having difficulty in keeping a perfectly straight face.

‘Ah, then perhaps at New Year?’

‘We shall see, Edwin. I have the shooting party to organise.’

‘You are not hosting that without your father, surely? A young lady in your situation? Alone?’ Semington sounded slightly shocked, which pleased Isabelle the more.

‘Not quite. My aunt will receive any gentlemen who come into the house after the shoot for refreshment, and the luncheon is being taken out in hampers.’ Reluctantly, she knew she could not fail to invite her father’s godson, though he was an awful shot, and she wished to avoid him as much as possible. ‘Do say you will join us, on the sixth.’

‘Of course. Delighted. As always.’ He puffed out his chest, as if accepting the role of guest of honour.

Sir Charles very nearly sniggered, and Isabelle, unwilling to let open acrimony break out, gave her cousin a warning frown. He retrieved his place in her good graces by ensuring Semington’s departure by the simple expedient of claiming to have to discuss a matter arising from the Trust.

‘Private affairs, Semington. I am sure you understand.’ He went and held open the door.

Edwin Semington had no choice but to retire gracefully.

‘You are a wicked liar, Charlie.’ Isabelle gave in to a wide smile.

‘Only a bit. I was going to invite you to the Hall for Christmas and I’ll be da—dashed if I will let that puffed-up prig ruin your day. And as for lying, you made a pretty good

job when I gave you the chance.’ He pushed his voice up an octave. ‘And thank you toooooo.’ He choked, and coughed.

‘Serves you right. I do not sound at all like that. It will be all right for me to attend do you think? In my blacks? I am not meant to go to parties and such.’

‘You are family. What sort of relations would we be to leave our cousin on her own at Christmas? Besides, it is only us and Lord Mollington, whom you may have met last Easter, and Lord Idsworth, who has been away serving King and Country these past nine years and has just sold out. No, it is not really a social gathering and nobody could take exception to it. At least,’ he qualified his statement, ‘I would not think anyone around here would do so.’

It snowed during the ten days before Christmas, creating from the grey dampness a pretty world of white, decorating bare branches and rutted lanes, but not heavily enough to preclude Sir Charles’ guests arriving. Lady Wareham kept repeating how fortunate it was that she and Julia had returned in such good time, as if she had studied the weather before making her decision. In fact, it had been Lord Slinfold’s decision. He had decided that his aged relative, who was going to leave him a very tidy property, might find his prospective mama-in-law rather too much after a week and had escorted them both back to Wiltshire, whereupon Lady Wareham had invited him to return with his own parent, and spend Christmas at the Hall. Sir Charles had groaned inwardly. He vaguely remembered meeting Lady Slinfold, who had been the sort of woman whose ailments were always more severe, pronouncements more accurate, and relations more elevated, than any other woman with whom she came into contact. He therefore greeted the arrival of Lords Mollington and Idsworth with a mixture of relief and guilt at what they had to face.

‘I had no idea my mother was going to invite them. Slinfold is not a bad chap, though I claim no strong acquaintance with him, but his mama ...’ Words failed him.

‘Is she likely to be worse than the Imperial Guard?’ enquired Lord Idsworth, with a wry smile.

‘Probably worse at close quarters,’ declared Sir Charles, gloomily.

‘Then we keep out of range.’ The smile remained.

‘You mean the billiard room?’ suggested Lord Mollington, taking the suggestion literally. ‘We could hide in there if needs be.’

‘Not hide, Molly. That sounds cowardly. Beat a whatsit retreat,’ Sir Charles interjected.

‘Strategic, Wareham, a strategic retreat to regroup our forces,’ Lord Idsworth laughed.

‘Best take several bottles of claret with us, then, in case we are besieged.’ Lord Mollington was only half joking. ‘I have an aunt. When she descends upon us, I either make a bolt to Town or pretend I am sick. The trouble is, last time I played sick she stayed three weeks and I was trapped. By the time she left I really was ill, feeling blue as megrim from being cooped up.’

‘What about your father? How did he manage?’ Sir Charles wondered.

‘Ah, my Aunt Almeria is his sister. He got used to ignoring her early in life. Mind you, even he spent most of the time in his study or out with the bailiff. He rarely takes as much interest in the estate, I will say. What about you, Idsworth? Any dangerous aunts?’

‘My father’s elder sister was my only aunt, and actually I rather liked her. She died last year, and her only oddity was that she still thought we were fighting the American Colonists. Why she thought I was in the Peninsula I have no idea, but her letters always ended with the hope that “they will see the error of their ways and be good subjects again”.’

‘She sounds quite benign, then.’

‘She was.’ He smiled, though a little sadly. ‘Relatively speaking.’

The arrival of Lord Slinfold and his mama marked a change in the atmosphere of Baddesley Hall that even the lowliest scullery maid could not fail to notice. Slinfold was an amiable enough young man but had learnt early in life that the easiest course was simply to go along with whatever his mother thought best, since she was the strongest character in his orbit. As Sir Charles feared, Julia Wareham appealed to Slinfold because she was, besides being very pretty in a fey sort of way, determined to have everything her own way, regardless of good sense. This worried her brother, who knew his own limitations, but also knew that Julia was unaware of hers. This concern he voiced to his mother.

‘Fiddlesticks, Charles. Slinfold will suit Julia very well.’

‘Only because she will get her own way and not flounce about. It doesn’t mean she will behave with an ounce of sense if she gets a corkbrained idea into her head. She needs a husband who will care for her, and that does not mean letting her do just what she wants.’

‘Do you not want your sister to make a good match?’

‘Of course I do, Mama, but I am just saying I am not convinced Slinfold is the best choice.’

Lady Wareham gave him a lengthy list of highly improbable worse suitors for his sibling, and ended by threatening a fit of the vapours if he set any obstacle in the path of his sister’s nuptials. Sir Charles withdrew, uneasy, but at least in the certain knowledge that he had done his fraternal duty. He only wished he might withdraw into the next county when the three ladies had got beyond the distantly civil stage. Nothing could exceed Lady Wareham’s solicitude for her guests’ comfort, and Slinfold seemed perfectly happy. His mother, however, managed to give the impression that her remaining in Baddesley Hall was a sacrifice upon the altar of maternal duty. The fire in her room had made her cough, the view was uninspiring, the curtains, which were of recent date and Lady Wareham’s favourite shade, made her feel bilious, but she ‘just knew Lady Wareham was doing her best’. The list, which dripped gradually from her tongue over the course of the first day,

was interminable. Lady Wareham panicked. Miss Julia Wareham, for all her lack of good sense, recognised her future mother-in-law as a force to be reckoned with, and drew up her own battle lines. She won the first skirmish by an excess of solicitude in front of Lord Slinfold, fussing over his mama's 'frail health', offering to give up her own room, which was far smaller and faced north, suggesting everything from mustard plasters to paregoric draughts, and generally treating the robust Lady Slinfold as though she were at death's door. This had the effect of making Lord Slinfold regard her as a ministering angel, whilst his mother was forced onto the defensive about her vastly exaggerated complaints, and began to wonder if Julia might be the amenable daughter-in-law she had anticipated.

Sir Charles took his other guests out shooting, apologising so profusely that Lord Idsworth told him he risked becoming a bore.

'When you invited me, and I am sure Mollington also, you had no inkling that the Slinfolds were also to be here.' He loaded his gun, and, with almost casual marksmanship, dropped a rabbit making a dash for cover. 'For myself, I have every intention of enjoying your hospitality to the full, and their presence will not diminish it.'

For a moment Sir Charles was distracted by Lord Idsworth's ability, but then he sighed, and resumed his apologies.

'That is very generous of you, very generous. Tricky position I am in, with Slinfold likely to come up to scratch and make my sister an offer. Though I have to say, if he will only do so when he has trotted Julia and the rest of the family up and down for inspection before his mother, like sale day at Tattersalls, my opinion of him diminishes even further. If he wants to make a fourth for cards, I cannot deny him, however dull he is.'

'Really, my dear fellow, you concern yourself too much. We shall have a capital time,' Lord Mollington assured him, and reloaded his gun. 'Do not worry yourself about it.'

Sir Charles was not entirely satisfied. As they returned in the fading afternoon light with wood pigeon and rabbit to go to the kitchens, they saw a gig bowling back along the driveway that led up to the Hall. Thirty years ago it had been a straight and purely functional approach, but now it wound past shrubbery by the lodge gates and then turned up a short avenue of lime trees, giving what Lady Wareham considered a more impressive first view of the house.

‘Hey, that’s my cousin’s gig.’ He waved, and hailed Isabelle, who drew up as the three gentlemen approached. She was well wrapped against the cold wind, with a sable tippet wound about her neck, but her nose tip was already pink. That, as well as her cheeks and bright eyes, stood out in contrast to her black pelisse. The groom sat beside her had a muffler so tight about his face that it would have been impossible to recognise him again. The gentlemen made their bows as Sir Charles smiled up at her.

‘Isabelle, I had not expected you to be coming over today.’

‘No, no. It was an act of impulse. The snow is barely a powdering now and Mrs Frampton had promised your cook a recipe which seems to have a secret as if alchemy. I thought it would be nice to get fresh air and so brought it myself. It was not really a social call, though I paid my respects to your mama. I confess I had not expected it to be quite so bracing out.’ She looked at her cousin, with raised brows. ‘You have not introduced me to your companions, Charles.’

‘Ah, yes. Sorry, Isabelle. The Viscount Mollington, I think you might possibly have met before, and this fellow,’ he indicated the taller gentleman, ‘is Julian, Earl of Idsworth. Gentlemen, this is my dear cousin, Miss Isabelle Wareham.’

There was an exchange of civilities, but the weather was not suited to protracted conversation and in a very few minutes Isabelle was upon her way.

‘Is Miss Wareham’s bereavement of recent date?’ Lord Idsworth enquired, gazing thoughtfully after the vehicle.

‘Sadly, yes, but two months since. My uncle had been an invalid some years and Isabelle looked after him. She misses him greatly, since she is now on her own at Bradings.’

‘Her mother ...?’

‘Died when she was born. Her sister, Lady Dunsfold, is considerably older and they are not close. So poor Isabelle is in bereaved seclusion, but she is at least coming to dine with us Christmas Eve, and remaining overnight.’

Idsworth’s frown became, for a moment, a scowl, but his companions were watching the gig turn a corner and disappear from view.

‘Now,’ declared Sir Charles, changing the subject to something more cheerful, ‘let us take our trophies for Cook, who will applaud our efforts.’

CHAPTER FOUR

WHILST COOK UNDOUBTEDLY RECEIVED THEIR trophies with suitable approbation, Lady Wareham greeted her son with a warning glance, and almost dragged him from his guests and into the green parlour.

‘It is all very well for you to run away, Charles, but That Woman has been running me ragged all afternoon. Where were you when I needed your support?’

‘In the Home Wood, of course, doing the decent thing by my guests, and also by you, Mama. How you think my presence would have helped with Lady Slinfold I cannot imagine, unless you think we ought to have shot her, and if you believe that exposing Mollington and Idsworth to her complaining in front of you—’

‘Oh, she has not been so open. No. Instead I have had Mumby, at his most lugubrious, appearing every five minutes to report another fault that she has found and asking how we are to solve it. She has been complaining to the servants, Charles, the servants! It is most unsettling.’

‘Do nothing, Mama, and encourage her and Slinfold to leave us in peace. You know my opinion of the match, and if she is this much trouble—’

‘And have the tabbies spread the rumour that we could not get Slinfold to come up to the mark? It would ruin your sister’s chances, having to face another Season after everyone expects an announcement.’

Sir Charles shook his head, but said no more. A diffident knock was followed by the entry of the butler, whose expression, normally inscrutable, was clearly pained.

‘Yes, Mumby, what is it now?’

‘I regret, your ladyship, that Lady Slinfold says she has seen a rat, and that the house is infested with vermin.’

‘A rat? Good God, do tell me she is wrong.’

‘I can assure your Ladyship, that whilst mice at this season are inevitable in the wainscotting, the felines, which Sir John advocated be kept, have brought nothing larger than a field mouse. Had there been larger rodents, they would assuredly have caught at least a few. I believe her Ladyship to have heard a small scratching noise and invented the rest.’

‘All very well, Mumby, but how do we prove that we are neither ignoring her, nor infested?’ Lady Wareham wrung her hands.

Sir Charles, his brow furrowed in thought, suddenly smiled.

‘Leave it with me, Mama. I think I have the solution. Thank you, Mumby.’

Without further elucidation he left, and headed to the rarely visited kitchen domain. It took him back to his childhood, when, escaping nurse, he would slip below stairs and use wide eyes and pleading looks to bring out Cook’s maternal side and win choice sweetmeats. Nowadays he sent the results of his shooting expeditions by the hand of the footman and Cook would send her thanks, or, if particularly pleased, come forth and give praise in person. His arrival in the kitchen caused little short of a fit of the vapours in the scullery maid who dropped a copper pan with a resounding clang. Cook frowned, but comment was forestalled by Sir Charles’ most apologetic and charming smile. It had worked when he was four, and it worked a quarter of a century later.

‘I know. I should not be here, Mrs Wells, but this is an emergency. I need a cat.’

The redoubtable Mrs Wells blinked.

‘A cat, Sir Charles? Whatever ... Dead or alive?’

‘Alive, of course.’ It was his turn to look surprised. ‘What use would a dead cat be to me?’

Since the good woman had no idea what use a live one might be, she could not answer this.

‘We have cats,’ he declared. ‘They keep the mice down. I need a cat. Now. Preferably the most unappealing specimen in the household.’

‘You needs Esau, Sir,’ piped up the under footman, a sharp-faced lad who was passing through to the silver cupboard with freshly polished cutlery. ‘Never saw a cat that looked so downright evil.’

‘Sounds just the thing. Find him for me. I am going to make myself presentable and will then be in the library. Oh, and do not let her Ladyship see the cat.’

It did not occur to Sir Charles that locating ‘Evil Esau’ would take the efforts of almost the entire staff, or that it would take so long. Esau was not an idle cat, not the sort to curl up on a chair somewhere warm, purr contentedly, and open a lazy eye on occasion. Esau was a killing machine, and a very efficient one too. He was also belligerent and bore the scars of fearsome fights. One ear was ragged and his face white-scarred. For an hour the Hall was in silent agitation. A feeling of unease pervaded it and even reached Lady Wareham, who put it down to the malevolent effect of her guest.

Sir Charles went upstairs, rang for his valet, and, in blissful ignorance of the turmoil he had created, was only concerned about a loose button on his favourite waistcoat. When this worry had been allayed and he had listened to his valet’s exculpatory speech concerning a scratch on his second-best pair of top boots, he sauntered down to the library, meeting Lord Idsworth on the staircase.

‘Come and warm yourself in the library, Idsworth. It was dashed cold out this afternoon.’

‘My dear Wareham, you have clearly not experienced true cold.’ Idsworth smiled.

‘I forgot. You hardy military types, eh? Nothing you enjoy more than cold, wet and discomfort.’

‘What an odd notion you have of soldiery, my dear fellow. It was not a warm afternoon but everything is

comparative. I have spent nights when the thought of a peasant's byre was a dream of luxury. That is not to say I do not appreciate the fire in my chamber or would refuse a bowl of hot punch.'

'Punch. What a good idea.'

'So glad you think so,' murmured Idsworth, who had thought the merest suggestion would be enough to inspire his host.

The two men entered the library and Sir Charles rang the bell. Mumby appeared some minutes later.

'Ah, Mumby, we would like a bowl of punch, and has the other thing been found yet?'

Mumby gazed at his employer, exuding a vague air of ill-usage.

'I regret, Sir, that the animal thus far eludes us. It is,' he sniffed, 'not within the house.' He bowed himself out, at his most stately.

'Animal? Has your sister lost some pet?'

'Er, no. The thing is ...'

Sir Charles revealed his plan to his friend, with a certain amount of schoolboyish glee. Lord Idsworth raised an eyebrow.

'Not sure your tactic will work, Wareham.'

'Surely it cannot fail, my dear chap?'

'Having seen the enemy I am not so sure. She may indeed beat a hasty retreat, taking her rather dull son with her, but if she recognises the ploy for what it is, she may entrench more deeply.'

Sir Charles looked horrified for a moment, then his brow cleared.

'I've no doubt you are an expert when it comes to Frenchies, but I have experience of cantankerous women. Like Molly, I have aunts, far too many of them. There were six, no five, since Aunt Eleanor died, at the last count.

Admittedly, one is now just bizarre. She keeps knitting purses for the indigent, on the grounds that if they had somewhere to put their money, they would not squander it. I ask you, is that sane?’

‘Hmmm, idiosyncratic at the least.’

‘Mad, you mean.’ Sir Charles smiled. ‘Queer old sticks, aunts. Have to say I am glad Lady Slinfold is not one of mine. Cursed bad luck to have her on the family tree. Almost feel sorry for Slinfold, but he makes no effort to assert himself.’

‘One wonders what Lady Wareham, or your sister, sees in him that is so appealing as a husband.’

‘Ah, now that is easier to explain. My mama likes his lineage and his good manners towards her, which verge on the toadying in my view, and Julia sees a man who will give in to her every whim, however ridiculous, or indeed expensive, rather than face one of her tantrums. Doesn’t lack spirit, my sister, but does lack sound sense, and when she gets one of her peculiar ideas she is very tenacious. What she really needs is a man capable of keeping her in hand and teaching her that tears and flounces and throwing ornaments will not work.’

‘Is that what she does?’ Lord Idsworth looked vaguely surprised.

‘Well, I would rather you did not let it be known, but yes. Devilish temper she can have if thwarted. My father would simply avoid her, but Mama has always gone to any lengths to placate her and so gave in, except when she wanted a little dog cart to tool about in, like my cousin Isabelle. Mama was worried and Father put his foot down over that one, for anyone more cow-handed you never did see. Odd really, because Julia is a fair rider, but I think handling the reins confuses her.’

‘Your cousin looked remarkably at ease, though.’

‘Oh yes. Isabelle learnt to drive when barely in her teens. Very tidy she is.’

‘You said her sister is married to Dunsfold.’

‘Yes. He is her guardian until she comes of age.’

‘Of age? But ...’ Idsworth frowned.

‘You thought her older? Easy mistake to make. If you compare her to Julia, Isabelle seems so much more sensible and, well, grown up. I think it is in part down to her having had to run the estate these four years past. In all truth, she could run it perfectly well with the occasional aid of the family man of business, but for the period before she attains her majority she is Dunsfold’s ward. My uncle put the estate in trust between myself and Dunsfold, however, so that will be all right and tight. I don’t trouble telling you I dislike the man and have little doubt that if he could turn himself a profit from the next year and a bit, he would. You no doubt think me fanciful but ...’

‘Not at all.’ Idsworth’s expression was grim. He paused. ‘In fact—’

There was a knock on the door and Mumby entered, bearing a silver bowl, from which arose a tantalising aroma. Lord Idsworth thought better of what he had been about to say, and let his host be distracted by the ladling out of two cups of the hot beverage. It was, he told Sir Charles as he took a first sip, an excellent concoction. Whether directed by a servant, or the enticing smell, Lord Mollington came into the library very shortly afterwards.

‘I say, that’s just the thing. I was saying to my man that my feet were like ice when I came in.’

‘There’s not enough for a footbath, Mollington.’ Lord Idsworth’s humour had improved. ‘But if it is warming from the inside that you want, I can recommend it.’

‘That I do.’ He accepted his drink with a contented sigh. ‘I call this a very fair afternoon, Wareham. Good sport in your coverts and a very potable punch. What more could a man want?’

‘A cat, apparently.’ Lord Idsworth, sitting upon the arm of a leather armchair, and enjoying his second cup of punch,

grinned.

Sir Charles had to explain his intentions once again. Lord Mollington, a less critical listener than Lord Idsworth, found nothing wrong with the scheme.

‘I’d give a monkey to see her Ladyship’s face when she sees it.’

‘But what if she has some unperceived fondness for cats, even ugly ones?’ Lord Idsworth held up a hand. ‘Yes, I know it is unsporting of me to raise such a possibility, but one ought to consider the thought.’

Sir Charles looked nonplussed. He had not got further than the assumption that placing an unappealing feline in her Ladyship’s chamber would do the trick.

‘If it is aggressive, won’t it spit at her?’ offered Lord Mollington, hopefully. ‘She would be bound to take umbrage at that.’

‘I was told it was ugly, not that it was wild.’

The three gentlemen pondered this problem and took a third cup of punch. It really was very warming. Whilst they sat in companionable silence, there was a knock at the door and Mumby entered, followed by the sharp-faced under footman, who held a bundle of black fur.

‘The animal,’ the butler announced, in sepulchral accents, ‘has been located. It was in the stables.’

‘Excellent. It doesn’t look that—’

Evil Esau turned his head, having been glowering at the footman. The yellow-green eyes set in the scarred face gave the cat a fiendish expression, and Sir Charles stared at it in fascinated silence.

‘Is its mien at one with its appearance?’ asked Lord Idsworth, controlling his features with some difficulty. The punch was having a mellowing effect.

‘I believe, my Lord, that its animosity is largely towards other felines.’ Mumby paused for effect before continuing. ‘I have to report, however, that it took exception to being

removed from the stable and scratched the lad who picked it up. Quite vicious it was.'

'It seems comparatively docile now,' observed Sir Charles, cautiously.

'That may well be due to the fact that William here placated the animal with a fish head from the kitchens, Sir. It is clearly open to bribery.'

Sir Charles revised his plan.

'It therefore regards William as a friend. William, you will come with me. Thank you, Mumby.'

Mumby, given this dismissal, retired with a sniff. He was relieved that he could claim, in all truth, that he had no knowledge of whatever his master was about to do, and that he himself had not been asked to hold the cat. At the same time, it irked him that the under footman would be able to regale below stairs with interesting details. The general consensus had been that Sir Charles was going to play some trick upon one of his friends, but since both gentlemen were present in the library, this was patently not the case. Mumby foresaw trouble.

William stood, rather self-conscious, and with Esau in his arms.

'Good idea not carrying it yourself, Wareham. Don't know where it has been,' commented Lord Mollington, sagely.

'Yes we do. It has been in the stable,' Sir Charles responded.

'But it doesn't like other cats,' Lord Idsworth murmured, more to himself than his friends.

'What has that got to—'

'Do you not recall that Lady Slinfold arrived with a large fur muff? I wonder where her maid put it. It was not the sort of item that would fit in a drawer with ease.'

He now had the attention of the other three men, two of whom gazed at him owlshly, whilst the third, stone-cold

sober, contemplated being dismissed from service. William was quite able to see where Lord Idsworth was leading.

‘Beg pardon, my Lord, but I am sure her Ladyship’s tirewoman must have put it away somewheres. Her Ladyship is a stickler for order. One of the housemaids said she got the sharp edge of her Ladyship’s tongue, all because the poor girl’s cap was not on straight.’

Sir Charles looked gloomy. Lord Mollington sighed and then suddenly brightened.

‘Perhaps our luck is in.’ The enterprise had suddenly become a joint venture. ‘Lady Slinfold is outside, surveying the formal garden by the looks of things, and she has her fur muff.’

‘But she will ring for her maid as soon as she reaches her chamber, and the maid will put it out of sight.’ His host shook his head, despondently.

‘*Praemonitus, praemunitus,*’ remarked Lord Idsworth, cryptically.

Lord Mollington frowned, trying to dredge Latin verbs from his memory.

‘Sorry, my dear fellow, not as bright as you chaps. I only went up after sustained cramming, and promptly forgot everything the fusty old dons tried to teach me.’

Sir Charles, whose entry to the hallowed halls of learning had also been less than smooth, looked nearly as bemused.

‘Forewarned is forearmed. Not sure that helps us, Idsworth.’

‘We know where the muff is now, yes?’ Lord Idsworth spoke carefully, as if explaining to children.

The other gentlemen nodded.

‘That gives us an advantage. What we have to do is prepare an ambush.’

‘Ambush Lady Slinfold? Can’t do that, Idsworth, she is my guest. My mama would never forgive me for the scandal.’

‘No, no, Wareham, Idsworth must mean we ambush the muff.’ Lord Mollington saw no problem with this concept, ‘But not when it is about Lady Slinfold’s person, of course.’

‘No.’ Lord Idsworth leant his head into his hand. ‘Not a literal ambush of Lady Slinfold or her muff. What we need to do is let her reach her bedchamber, and then remove her and the maid from the room before the muff is put away. Then the cat is introduced, sees the muff, and ... fur may fly.’

‘Remove them? Carry them off?’ Lord Mollington looked more confused.

‘No, Mollington. We use a ruse.’

‘Use ruse.’ Lord Mollington made a sound suspiciously like a giggle.

Lord Idsworth was not entirely sober. In normal circumstances he would not have lent himself to such an exploit, but the day had been cold, the punch potent, and he had spent many evenings in the company of subalterns who cocked a snook at a violent death by living life to the full and leaving the consequences for a tomorrow whose end they might not live to see. He had been lonely since leaving the familiar and comforting company of the army, and here, in Sir Charles’ library, that comfort had seeped back. He was, however, better able to hold his liquor than the other two gentlemen present.

He looked at the under footman, who was standing with his expression inscrutable, as he had been taught. It could not be said to have dimmed the twinkle in his eye.

‘You – William, isn’t it?’ The earl addressed him as he would one of his Company.

‘Yes, my Lord.’

‘I am relying upon you, understood?’ It was always useful to have the subordinate feel that their action was

important. He had used it with men so often it had become second nature.

‘Yes, my Lord.’ William stood a little taller, his chest puffed out, buoyed by the confidence placed in him.

‘Good. I want you in the vestibule, ready to let Lady Slinfold back into the house. Leave the cat here. It will not escape. As soon as she is indoors, come here, alert us, and collect it. We will go upstairs, and you stick close by me. Mollington, you ... Mollington listen, man.’

Lord Mollington, his fourth punch in his hand, was now becoming a trifle sleepy, if amiable.

‘Me? All ears, like a donkey, assure you.’

‘You come upstairs too, but as soon as we see Lady Slinfold’s maid ascending in response to her bell, I want you to head down the flight and stumble by the landing.’ In his current condition, that, thought Idsworth, would not be difficult. ‘The maid will come to your assistance. Your job is to get her to help you to your own chamber. Got that?’

‘Stairs, stumble, maid to chamber.’

‘Excellent. Now, Wareham, I must distract Lady Slinfold, and get her to leave her room. I will tell her I have just been speaking to you and you are keen to find out about the problem with her room. Do not ask why it is not a servant passing the message, because I cannot work that one out as yet, but I will winkle her out. Then William will take the cat and place it near the muff, which ought to attract its attention. And William, if the beast does not look interested, make the muff move.’

‘But, Idsworth, I do not want to discuss her room with her.’

‘You are her host, think of something. Now, off you go, William, keep your nerve, and best of luck.’

Without thinking, William thrust the black cat at Lord Idsworth, who blinked in surprise.

‘I think,’ remarked his Lordship, as the animal regarded him balefully, ‘I am right to prefer dogs.’

William returned some ten minutes later, and at least five minutes after the gentlemen had decided that none of them liked cats. Esau, having made clear his objections to being held at arm’s length by Lord Idsworth, had been set in a leather armchair, from which he glared as if daring any to touch him. Sir Charles craved his friends’ pardon and assured them that his late father’s idea of having cats to keep down the mice had never included anything as fearsome as the black monster before them.

‘It’s the eyes,’ remarked Lord Mollington, a trifle owlishly. ‘Sort of burn into one. Enough to give a fellow nightmares. If I wake screaming in the night, Wareham, remember it is your fault.’

‘Let us hope Lady Slinfold is similarly discomfited by the animal.’ Lord Idsworth was keeping a wary eye upon it and wondering if William would be remembered as a ‘friend’.

The under footman entered, attempting to remain the unemotional servant, but exhibiting the same excitement as an undergraduate upon a lark.

‘Her Ladyship is going up to her room, my Lord.’ Without thinking, William reported not to his employer, but the man clearly in command.

‘Then you pick up the cat and follow me. Mollington, this is no time to take a nap. Stand-to, my dear fellow, and let us get into position.’

William, emboldened by his role in the plan, ignored the irritated hiss that Esau gave as he was gathered up, and the trio made their way upstairs, Lord Idsworth giving Lord Mollington a guiding arm, since he was rather less tipsy. Whilst Lord Idsworth and William tucked themselves out of sight around a corner of the passageway that offered onto the guest bedchambers, the inebriated peer was left on the wide half-landing with a repeated instruction to request assistance from Lady Slinfold’s maid. Sir Charles remained

in the library, formulating and discarding phrases he might employ with the fearsome lady herself.

Lord Idsworth recognised that timing was important, but his efforts were set at naught by Lord Mollington's volubility when he saw the maid. Instead of ambling away, he engaged her in rambling conversation. Lord Idsworth successfully winkled out Lady Slinfold, but when, at her most stately, she began to descend the stairs on his proffered arm, the unsteady Viscount was still on the landing, with the firewoman attempting to ascertain which was his chamber. Her Ladyship entered the conversation, which soon became muddled thanks to Lord Mollington's befuddled state, and Lord Idsworth realised that it served the purpose as well as the original plan, if not better. His host in the library was forgotten.

Sir Charles paced his library, and William entered the guest chamber. He heaved a huge sigh of relief at the sight of the muff, as had been expected, placed upon the bed. He set Esau next to it. He was keen not to be discovered in the room but was duty-bound to await Esau's reaction.

There was none. Esau sniffed at the fur. It did not smell of cat, in fact it was heavily scented with the frequent use of attar of roses. Esau jumped nimbly from the bed and sauntered towards a far more interesting smell of mouse beside the fireplace.

William panicked. He had not been told to use his own initiative. The only thing Lord Idsworth had said was to make the muff move if Esau did not attack it. He therefore took up the muff, leant down, and dangled one end on the floor, wiggling it and making what he hoped were 'hissing cat' noises. Esau stared at him blankly. He agitated the fur more, to no avail. Not wishing to admit failure, he threw one of her ladyship's gloves at the cat to annoy it. This did produce a hiss, but it was as he reached for the second glove that the door handle turned. He had a moment in which to straighten, but was then faced with Lady Slinfold, fresh from berating Lord Mollington for drunkenness at half past two of the afternoon, and in belligerent mood.

‘Just what are you doing?’

William stood mute.

‘What are you doing in my chamber, dolt? Answer me. Do not stand there mouthing like a landed fish.’

William gulped, and envisioned a Christmas without employment, if not under the charge of the constable if her Ladyship took it into her head that he was stealing the fur muff. He was not, however, a dolt, and the appellation flicked him on the raw. In truth, Mr Mumby was frequently heard telling him to think less, as befitted his position. Right now he thought, and thought hard.

‘Begging your Ladyship’s pardon, but I heard an untoward noise as I was passing, and since there was no response to my knocking, entered your Ladyship’s room. I discovered this’ he paused, seeking the most impressive word for the muff ‘fine accessorarary upon the floor, whence it had been dragged by Sir Charles’ favourite cat.’ He indicated Esau, who was staring at Lady Slinfold in dislike, her voice being strident and indicative of human disapprobation, which often resulted in being assaulted with a broom. ‘And also one of your Ladyship’s gloves,’ he added, seeing it by the grate.

Lady Slinfold eyed the cat with curling lip.

‘That ... creature ... is Sir Charles’ favourite cat? How dare you try to deceive me.’

‘Indeed, ma’am, it is, not for its looks and manner but because it is a very fine mouser,’ William warmed to his theme, ‘and when we was near overrun with them two winters past, Esau there was the champion mouse catcher. It brought fourteen into the scullery one day.’

‘And it has free run of the house?’

‘It has, at this season, ma’am.’

‘It must be an exceptional animal to be able to open a closed door.’ Her Ladyship raised an eyebrow.

‘No doubt Sir Charles had one of the maids place it here, when he heard as you was concerned about vermin,’ William replied, conscious of having averted disaster by a whisker no bigger than one of Esau’s.

‘It was not present only a few minutes ago when I was in the room.’

‘Could well have been beneath the bed, or hidden itself at your Ladyship’s entrance.’

Lord Idsworth, who had been enjoying the latter part of this interchange from the doorway, felt that William had done more than enough, and entered, giving him a slight nod and a smile before Lady Slinfold turned.

‘Is there some problem, ma’am?’

‘I ... No ... I wish that animal to be removed forthwith.’ She pointed at the cat.

‘Ah, yes. It does look decidedly unsavoury. No doubt it is covered in fleas.’

Lady Slinfold had clearly not considered this and stepped back in some horror, and Lord Idsworth addressed William sternly.

‘Did you have instructions from the butler to bring this cat to Lady Slinfold’s chamber?’

‘No, my Lord, but Sir Charles was very concerned at her Ladyship’s worry about noises in the wainscotting,’ replied William, quite truthfully.

‘Well, see that it does not enter her room again. I shall have words with you outside, when you have removed that fleabag. Off with you.’

William bowed, straight-faced, took up Esau, bowed again to Lady Slinfold and exited, mightily relieved, but proud at having fulfilled his mission and having got the better of such a malign old trout.

‘It is ridiculous. I am not at all sure that menial is to be relied upon.’

‘Oh, I do not think he would dare disobedience, ma’am. No doubt this is all some misunderstanding. If Sir Charles sought to alleviate your fears over a few mice in the wainscoting, having a cat introduced was an obvious measure. He could not have guessed it would, er, despoil your sable muff.’

She looked at the muff, thinking about fleas.

‘I shall burn it immediately, and purchase another.’

‘Might I suggest that it would smother such a fire as is in a bedchamber. Let me remove it for you and see to its disposal. Mind you, among the servants, such a thing might be considered too precious to burn, whatever insect life it may have acquired.’

‘I do not care what you do with it as long as it is removed from my sight.’ Lady Slinfold actually shuddered.

Lord Idsworth picked up the muff, holding it rather closer to his person than he had Esau, bowed slightly, and withdrew. He felt a little guilty about the muff. It was a fine fur, and destroying it seemed wrong, yet it had been obtained by what was essentially deception. His first thought was to give it to William to give to his mother or a sweetheart, but such a valuable item would occasion remark, at best embarrassing, and at worst casting doubts upon his honesty. When he met with William in the passageway, he therefore confined himself to praising his presence of mind, warning him about keeping his own counsel lest Lady Slinfold should hear of what really happened, and giving him a half guinea, the combination of which left the under footman quite pink, and almost speechless.

Lord Idsworth, remembering Sir Charles still awaiting an unpleasant interview in his library, went to recount the tale and inform him that it was not now necessary. He went first, however, to his own chamber and placed the muff in a deep and empty drawer. Its fate might be decided later.

CHAPTER FIVE

LADY SLINFOLD, SUSPICIOUS OF THE AFTERNOON'S events but constrained to thank Sir Charles for his 'solicitude, however unfortunate the consequences', was at her most objectionable during dinner, finding fault with the warmth of the soup, the consistency of a syllabub, and the freshness of a dish of sweetbreads. That Julia Wareham stifled a giggle when Sir Charles eulogised over the cat's prowess she considered both ill-mannered and added to her suspicion that he had caused the beast to be placed in her room to upset her.

It could not be said that matters improved over the next couple of days. There was, at best, a period of brittle armistice. Lady Slinfold was of the opinion that Julia, once removed from the security of the familial home and isolated, would come to heel, and, as Lord Idsworth had prophesied, she entrenched. She despised Lady Wareham for making no attempt to stand up for herself, considered Sir Charles and his cronies juvenile and foolish, and determined that she would not be defeated. It was, after all, inconceivable that she had misjudged Miss Wareham when she had permitted her son to entertain tender feelings for the girl.

For his own part, Lord Slinfold was conscious of unease at the excessive politeness he saw between his mama and the young lady of his choice. He could not put his finger on what, exactly, was amiss, but he sensed that neither lady was being honest with him when they categorically denied any animosity toward the other. For his own part, Sir Charles, who had endured his mother's lengthy castigation after the Esau incident, could not fathom why his sister would want to marry a man so much under his mother's thumb, and when she and his mother were at odds.

'At odds? Do not be even more foolish than normal, Charlie. Once Lady Slinfold accepts that upon marriage Slinfold will look first to me, all will be well.' His sister treated his enquiry with scorn.

‘Your feelings, they are not engaged, are they, Julia?’

‘Goodness no. How very rustic. I am not the dairymaid giggling at the farmer’s son because he looks all misty-eyed at me. Slinfold is an excellent match. You should have heard how envious were my friends in London when his attentions became pronounced. He has a good title and expectations of inheriting a most impressive estate.’ Miss Wareham’s tone was pragmatic. ‘His temperament is conciliatory, and he is quite good-looking, though I confess I would have liked him darker. All the heroes in novels are dark, have you not noticed?’

‘No. I have not, thank God, read such rot, but I would almost prefer to hear you languishing over some ineligible fellow than listen to this. Have you no heart, Julia?’

‘Do not be offensive, Charles.’ Her mouth lengthened to a thin-lipped smile. ‘For my part I hope I do not find myself with some soft-witted mediocrity for a sister. Have you found some tender-hearted maid loitering in the lanes, brother?’

Sir Charles ground his teeth. Legally, he could forbid his sister’s match, but she knew as well as he did that if it had their mama’s approval he would not do so. He was disappointed, and worried. He remembered his little sister before she had been prepared for Society. She had always been spirited, wilful, but he could forgive her being a child of passions whilst her heart was predominant. Now she was cool and calculating, and he wondered if the passion remained. If it did, then one day she would awake to it, and if she had married for entirely worldly reasons, they would be in the suds. She might mock him, but he knew what was due to his name, and would not dishonour it. At the same time, he hoped that when he decided to get leg-shackled it would be to a young lady for whom he had, at the least, a distinct fondness and who reciprocated his feelings. It was a frowning host who agreed to a game of billiards with Lord Mollington.

‘If you would rather not ...’ Mollington observed the frown upon his friend’s brow.

‘No, no. Please forgive me, Molly. Only too delighted to play. Family concerns, you know, can be the devil.’

‘Ah. Will not pry, but I did notice Slinfold looking decidedly peaky this morning. Thought it must have been that second bottle last night. He was a trifle bosky when he retired, and some men do suffer the next day, even after a most moderate night. I hope Miss Wareham and he have not argued. I would not like to see her hurt. In fact,’ Lord Mollington sounded suddenly quite bellicose, ‘if he really upset her, not just some natural misunderstanding, I would dashed well wish I could find an excuse to call him out, though of course you would get first chance at him.’

‘Good grief. My dear chap, I had no idea you felt ...’

‘Good job too. Above my touch, the lovely Miss Wareham. Looks at me as if I were a piece of the furniture, just like the last time I was here. But, you know, the Easter before last, when I came for a fortnight, and your mama let her join “the grown-ups” as she called it, for dinner, she was so engaging. And then she became beautiful.’ Mollington gave a small sigh.

‘I am sorry, but you know she would lead you a merry dance, as a wife.’

‘Likes her own way? Oh yes. Been far too indulged.’ Lord Mollington coloured. ‘Forgive me. I did not mean by you, and it is an impertinence ...’

Sir Charles patted his friend on the back.

‘Nothing to forgive, my friend, and you are quite right. I had another sister and when Charlotte died very young, while I was in my first year at Harrow, Julia became my mother’s focus. But there ... Now let us shut out the world of women and have the game.’ He paused. ‘Have you seen Idsworth? I did not catch him at breakfast.’

‘Why yes, I should have told you. He breakfasted early and as I was coming downstairs was going out for a brisk walk.’

‘A what?’ Sir Charles looked stunned.

‘I know. He did look a bit apologetic. Said it was years of campaigning. Gave him the need for exercise.’

‘Well, that is fair enough, but just walking?’

‘He was in the infantry, remember.’

‘But he was an officer. He had a horse.’ Sir Charles shook his head. ‘Well, I suppose if he wants to tramp about the countryside once in a while, who should stop him. Best we don’t make it public, mind.’

The object of their concern was striding across the park, where vestiges of the snow clung to hollows and shaded aspects. His breath formed clouds upon exhalation, but the air was still and he was conscious not of discomfort but of liberation. The atmosphere, for all that he assured Sir Charles that he was more than content, had been oppressive the previous evening, and good fresh air cleared his head.

He had no objective in view upon his departure, and simply walked briskly away from the house until he reached the perimeter of the parkland, and then followed the line of the wall until such time as he hit upon the driveway. He halted briefly. He could take the carriage-way back to the front of the house, or continue round to the opposite entrance. A robin that was perched upon a branch and singing lustily, decided him. Given the chance to hear birdsong or Lady Slinfold’s complaints, there was only one choice to make. He struck out with the wall in sight to his left, skirting a thicket where the brambles, frost-spangled, might catch upon his coat, and interrupting a squabble among magpies in the bare branches above.

He smiled to himself. This was England, and he loved it. Fighting through the Iberian Peninsula had taught him to appreciate the verdure of his native country, even in the grey-green drabness of winter; the smell of damp woods with the leaf litter of beech, oak and ash; the dark, ploughed loam ready to nurture the next year’s harvest. Only by being effectively exiled from it had he come to realise how much it meant to him. He had no doubt that men like Sir Charles felt the same, but did not realise it, since they were never

kept from it, and had not seen anything with which to compare it.

His long legs made short work of the distance to the western lodge gates. He consulted his pocket watch. It lacked well over three hours until luncheon. Perhaps he ought, as a guest, to return to the house. Beyond the lodge gates, wisps of smoke indicated some hamlet at no great distance. He told himself that to go thus far and return would add but twenty minutes to his excursion. The gatekeeper emerged, looking rather surprised to see a well-dressed pedestrian, and asked the gentleman's pleasure. Lord Idsworth smiled, apologised for taking him from his hearth, and said that he would return shortly. The man touched his forelock and went to open the gates, blowing upon his hands when they had contacted the chill of the wrought iron. When he went back indoors, he told his wife that Sir Charles was entertaining some very rum guests.

Unaware that his behaviour was seen as irregular, Lord Idsworth took the lane to the hamlet which proved in fact to be a village, with a squat towered church hidden behind a screen of trees. Few folk were out of doors unless by necessity. If women had time to gossip with their neighbours, they did it within doors. An old man, clay pipe clamped between his gap-toothed jaws, and with a bundle of sticks upon his back, touched his battered hat as he passed, and a mongrel, sniffing some likely rathole, looked up and barked, though it wagged its tail. A square, well-appointed house, by size and location obviously the rectory, lay set back slightly from the thoroughfare. A horse was being walked up and down outside by a muffled groom, and as Lord Idsworth drew abreast of the gateway, a lady emerged from the house, and was thrown up into the saddle. She turned her horse, made some final farewell and it was then that he recognised her. He halted, and as she drew close, made his bow to her.

‘Good morning, Miss Wareham. I take it you had some urgent message to see you out, and alone, in this weather.’

Isabelle frowned slightly, unsure whether censure was implied.

‘Not urgent, my Lord, but it was a matter I wished to discuss with the Rector before Christmas, and I do not habitually take my groom upon local errands. Besides, Thomas has every sign of a bad cold and I commended him to remain within doors. It would be different if I were out riding purely for pleasure and a good gallop, since if I failed to appear when expected, the house would be set by the ears. The distance is short enough that I might indeed have walked into the village this morning, but this was warmer. One cannot walk as briskly, as a gentleman may do, when confined by skirts.’

‘Forgive me, I did not intend to sound as if I questioned your actions, ma’am.’ He had caught her tone. ‘It is merely that there are not many abroad on such a sharp morning, unless they have some need.’

‘Yet I do not see any evidence that you have any “need”, my Lord.’ A dimple peeped, and a delicately arched eyebrow was raised.

He smiled up at her.

‘My need was to stretch my legs and get good wholesome air into my lungs. I am not yet so used to an existence in which being out of doors is not part of every day. It is the effect of campaigning.’

A shadow seemed to cross her face and her smile twisted.

‘I understand, my Lord,’ she said, and there was wistfulness in her voice. ‘My father was such a man, having had a military career, until ill health confined him, and he said the same thing.’

‘I am sorry. I did not know. If I have caused you distress, Miss Wareham ...’

‘You could not have done so, and ... I must learn not to be distressed. It is, in my defence, still rather too recent. I am sorry to sound so feeble-spirited.’

He cursed himself, nonetheless. She had looked so assured and, as Sir Charles had remarked, older than her years, but sorrow stripped that veneer and left her youthful, vulnerable, and, he thought, clearly very much on her own. So much was visible in her eyes, eyes that drew one in. He thought how brave she was, or was at least trying to be in public, but had the sense to recognise that she would be embarrassed if he commented upon it.

‘I assure you, ma’am, that is not how you sound at all.’ He paused, wanting to say more, but judging it better not to do so. ‘Sir Charles has said that you are coming to the Hall for Christmas Eve. I have to warn you that the presence of Lady Slinfold has created tensions, although,’ he coloured slightly, ‘I have to confess some part in the exacerbation of the situation.’

He stamped his feet as the cold seeped into the soles of his boots, and Miss Wareham’s horse flung up its head in surprise. She patted it soothingly.

‘My Lord, you will get cold, standing. You are heading back to the Hall?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then since it matters little to me to cover an extra mile, might I be so bold as to accompany you to the gates? I feel sure any confession you may have is likely to be highly diverting, and diversion is what I need.’

It was not, perhaps, quite within the bounds of propriety for her to spend the next ten minutes alone with him, but her sop to propriety was that she remained mounted and counted Jupiter as her chaperon. When she explained this, he laughed, and then launched into the tale of Esau the cat. It did just as he had hoped, and dispelled the misery in her eyes. They twinkled and her laugh sent a flock of fieldfares from a crab apple. When they parted at the gates by the lodge, both felt the morning had been well spent.

Fortified by his exercise, and by his encounter, although he did not admit the latter even to himself, Lord Idsworth returned to the Hall in time to change his raiment before

luncheon, and found himself being quizzed upon his pedestrian habit, in a funning way by Sir Charles, and more in the form of interrogation by Lady Slinfold.

‘I cannot see why a gentleman would wish to wander about like some yeoman farmer with a haystack between his teeth.’

‘Oh, I can assure you, ma’am, I did not have a haystack between my teeth, or upon my person in any way. The season is far too advanced to obtain one.’ Lord Idsworth smiled, and his tone was light, but his eyes narrowed fractionally and in a manner which any who knew him would have recognised as indicative of displeasure. ‘Do furnish me one upon my next setting out from the house, Wareham, if you would be so kind.’

Sir Charles grinned, but Lady Slinfold’s lips pursed.

‘I should not have to tell you what becomes your station in life, my Lord.’

‘Indeed, not, ma’am. To do so would be intolerably rude,’ Idsworth flashed back.

She opened her mouth, but no words were uttered. Lady Wareham, most concerned, sought to divert the conversation.

‘I have ordered a Chantilly cream with poached pears to be placed upon the table tomorrow evening, Charles, since it is poor Isabelle’s favourite. I am sure it will raise her spirits, as will having company. I was saying to Julia that we must drive out and visit her most frequently when the weather improves.’

If her son thought that the sight of a dessert was unlikely to ease his cousin’s grieving state, he said nothing, comprehending her intention. He launched into a discussion about the Boxing Day hunt, and the New Year shoot, since his mama would preside over closing refreshments for the latter in Bradings itself. Neither of them had any idea how tenacious Lady Slinfold could be.

‘You do not intend to run after the hounds, Lord Idsworth, I take it? In some distempered freak?’

‘Sir Charles is lending me one of his hunters, so that will not be necessary, ma’am. I might add that however “freakish” my behaviour might appear to the ignorant, it is never “distempered”.’

Lady Wareham gazed along the table to her son, in patent horror. Her eyes pleaded for him to do something. He was not sure there was, in truth, much that he might do. Lady Slinfold turned an unbecoming shade of red and glared at her son.

‘Are you intending to simply sit there, Slinfold, while I am insulted?’

‘I ... Well ...’ Lord Slinfold looked acutely uncomfortable. ‘The remark was, I am sure, taken out of context, ma’am. Lord Idsworth did not say that you were ignorant.’

Lord Mollington choked over a mouthful of soup, and Julia Wareham pressed her napkin to her lips. Lady Slinfold gave her son a look that presaged a severe dressing-down when they were next alone, and turned her basilisk stare upon Sir Charles.

‘You are the host, Sir Charles. If my son will do nothing ...’

‘I assure you, ma’am, you misconstrue what Lord Idsworth said. I am sure nobody else saw any insult, implied or open.’

‘Are you saying I am wrong?’ Lady Slinfold’s voice intimated that this was virtually an impossibility.

Sir Charles made a decision, possibly a bold one.

‘Yes, ma’am, or rather, you are mistaken on this particular occasion.’ His eyes did not waver from her face.

Lord Idsworth, recognising the signs of a man leading a forlorn hope, came in as reinforcements.

‘If you have taken my comment as an open affront, ma’am, I crave pardon.’ He inclined his head, as graciously as any dowager duchess.

Lady Slinfold believed neither gentleman, but realised that she could take the matter no further. She therefore withdrew into stately silence for the rest of the meal.

Luncheon had drawn battle lines, and Lady Slinfold saw herself as making a stand against myriad inferior foes. That her son had proved pusillanimous she put down to his late father’s ancestry, whom she slandered without the slightest thought throughout the peal she rang over her son when she cornered him later in the afternoon.

It was into this atmosphere that Isabelle arrived the following afternoon, in Lady Wareham’s carriage, sent by her ladyship to show kindness to ‘poor Isabelle’ and to avoid having to stable the Bradings’ horses and provide for the coachman, who would have otherwise remained to take her home Christmas Day after the first service. It was instantly apparent that she was to feature as ‘poor Isabelle’ for the duration, which irked her. That the air prickled with animosity between Lady Slinfold and almost everyone else present was, having been primed by Lord Idsworth, neither a surprise, nor a concern. As one who could be a mere observer it might even prove entertaining. The only awkwardness was having to sit and listen to her cousin simultaneously decry her putative mama-in-law, and describe her swain in terms at odds with what little Isabelle had seen or heard of him. She noted, however, that none of the accolades was couched in terms of tender affection.

‘Forgive me, Julia, but do you like Lord Slinfold?’

‘I do not dislike him.’ Julia shrugged. ‘What more should one require?’

‘But,’ Isabelle frowned, somewhat confused, ‘surely you must think him the best of men to wish to marry him?’

‘The best of ...’ Julia laughed. ‘You are as bad as Charlie. You will be saying next that I ought to be passionately in love with him.’

‘I do not presume to say “passionately”, Julia, but I confess I would not entertain accepting a man for whom I did not have a decided partiality and whom I felt I could love.’

‘That,’ announced Lady Wareham, with a snort, as she entered the little parlour, ‘shows the dangers of having grown up without a mama to guide you, my dear. No doubt you have filled your head with lurid romances.’

‘Indeed no. I did try one of Mrs Radcliffe’s stories when I was younger but disliked it. I found the tale preposterous, and the characters too colourful.’

‘Then I cannot imagine whence you derive your foolish ideas.’

‘Is it foolish, ma’am, to seek affection in one’s partner for life?’

‘Not entirely, but it is not the basis for marriage. Of course, one should not loathe one’s spouse. Had Julia taken Lord Slinfold in aversion, or had I discovered any blemish upon his character, I would have depressed his aspirations at an early point. Let nobody say I am unfeeling towards my child, uncaring for her happiness.’

Isabelle gave up. For the life of her she could not see what appealed about Lord Slinfold, especially since he came with a domineering mama in tow. He was not ugly, in fact there might be some who would regard him as handsome. His figure was a trifle stocky, but well-proportioned otherwise, his features regular, his hair slightly waving and fair. Isabelle was not a young woman much given to comparing gentlemen, since she had known nearly every one of her acquaintance since early childhood, but set against Lord Idsworth, or indeed, Lord Mollington, Lord Slinfold came a poor third. Sat in front of the dressing mirror before dinner, Isabelle blushed at the realisation that she looked forward so much to Lord Idsworth’s presence at dinner. Miss Julia’s maid finished the arrangement of her hair, through which she had threaded a black ribbon, and arranged the black shawl over her elbows. Isabelle sighed.

That she should attend a function such as a dinner, with more than close relatives present, might be seen as unbecoming in view of her recent bereavement, and to counter that she had ensured that she wore no jewellery, nor anything but black. The silk dress was cut simply, excepting the swathe of the bodice. It had been made by one of the best modistes in Bath, at her father's instigation, and upon the demise of her aunt three years past. With some small alteration to fit her slightly more mature figure, it looked very well, but her pallor was accentuated so that she might almost have been a porcelain doll. She should not, of course, care that no gentleman would give her a second glance; but in the case of one gentleman, she did.

CHAPTER SIX

ISABELLE CAME DOWNSTAIRS FOR DINNER FEELING rather more self-conscious than normal, and it was not simply that she felt her blacks set her apart at what should be a festive meal. The sensation was not helped by Lady Slinfold staring at her, quite pointedly, when she entered the room. It was not an admiring gaze, although she was greeted far more favourably by others present. Her aunt came forward in a gushing overcompensation for her situation, which accentuated it even more and gained her a whispered apology from her cousin Charles.

‘You must not think you look like some bird of ill omen, coz,’ he grinned.

‘Thank you, Charlie, that thought had not thus far occurred to me, but it has now.’ She tried to sound offended but the laugh in her voice betrayed her.

‘I happen to think you look wonderfully elegant, and if saying that black suits you sounds a trifle infelicitous, I am sorry, but it does. Idsworth was mightily struck, and Mollington was speechless.’

‘From what I recall of Lord Mollington, that is not an uncommon state.’ Isabelle skated over what Lord Idsworth might have thought.

‘He is no gabster, to be sure. He is seated next to you at dinner, but I am sure he will converse quite happily.’

‘Oh, no, I did not mean ... Charlie, does Lord Slinfold have that expression whenever he looks at Julia?’

Sir Charles turned his head slightly and followed her bemused gaze. Lord Slinfold was regarding Julia Wareham as if she might be a dangerous tiger.

‘No, thankfully. I can only assume there has been some private altercation between them. You know what Julia can be like when on her high ropes, and presumably Slinfold has

just discovered it. He is probably afraid she will upset his mama. Never saw a fellow so under his mother's thumb.'

Julia was indeed fuming, since Lord Slinfold had drawn her to one side and begged her to be placatory and agree with whatever his mama might say, since she was at present feeling decidedly 'underappreciated'.

This guileless insult to her family's hospitality, combined with his assumption that she would act as meek sycophant to his maternal tyrant, had brought a waspish reply and she was clearly in a very brittle humour. At this minute she was engaged in conversation with Lord Idsworth, and Isabelle did not need to have been brought out in Society to see that she was attempting to flirt with him. Isabelle chastised herself for uncharitable thoughts about her cousin, and tried not to feel so pleased that Lord Idsworth was polite but unresponsive. He looked rather uncomfortable and it was only kind, she told herself, to rescue him. She took her cousin's arm and steered him towards his sister.

'Why Julia, what a fetching way of dressing your hair. I declare it must be one of those styles you discovered in London.'

To her own ears she sounded unbelievably stilted, but Julia, too caught up in herself, did not seem to notice. Lord Idsworth did, and a momentary frown indicated his surprise, then Isabelle caught his eye. It was but the glance of a moment, but he understood. He was being rescued. Isabelle suppressed any further advances by her cousin with a flow of adulatory comments, which Julia found just to her taste. It was only some time later, just before Mumby announced dinner to be served, that Lord Idsworth managed to speak to Isabelle alone for a moment.

'Thank you, Miss Wareham. Your arrival was most timely, and I think you caught your cousin in enfilade.'

'I fear you will have to explain what I take to be a military term, my Lord, but I did sense that you, er, might appreciate a distracting "cavalry charge".'

'With trumpets.'

‘Do you think so? Well, I did sound terribly empty-headed and brash.’ Isabelle wondered if he had thought the performance excessive.

‘Oh, I say so as a compliment, ma’am. Anything less would not have won the day.’

He smiled at her and she felt as if the smile paralysed her chest, for breathing became, for an instant, impossible. She coloured and dropped her gaze. When she raised it again, the innocent confusion was obvious.

‘I am sorry, my lord. Forgive me. I am unused to compliments, for I have been so little in society and nearly all my acquaintance have known me since I was in my infancy. You must think me foolishly gauche.’

He thought her enchanting, but dare not say so. That so light a comment should make her blush took him by surprise. When he had spoken with her before, she had been swift to gauge the bantering tenor of the conversation, and remarkably assured. What she said made perfect sense. She had grown up motherless, had no doubt known her father’s friends and would be comparatively at ease in male company, but any compliments would have been of the jocular and avuncular variety. He had mistaken a maturity of outlook with social experience.

‘No ma’am, neither foolish nor gauche, but it gives me pause. I think, for the sake of your cheeks, I ought not inform you that your sombre attire makes the other ladies present appear gaudy, and that I think you bear Lady Slinfold’s distinctly undeserved comments with commendable patience.’ The funning tone was absent, and the blush deepened. He had said too much. He attempted to retrieve the situation by reverting to the military analogies. ‘The mark of good infantry is an ability to stand firm under fire. It is why our infantry is the best in the world. You have stood equally firm. I would love to see you go on to rout the opposition, but understand that in your aunt’s drawing room that might prove impolite.’

Isabelle fought a giggle, and he relaxed.

‘Were you many years in the army, my Lord?’

‘A little short of ten. But do I look so weathered and battered that you expect more?’

‘Oh no, not at all. But if you served that length of time, you must have seen a vast deal of action.’ She sounded shyly admiring.

‘Rather more than is healthy, perhaps. I enjoyed soldiering. There is a reality to it, a simplicity, and one discovers the best and worst of man. War is a cruel and savage thing and one sees unspeakable brutality, yet in the next moment such nobility of spirit, such generous altruism, such depth of friendship, that it quite restores one’s faith in our species.’ He spoke with passion, and it touched her.

‘You miss it. My father did also, though he only ever talked of not missing the discomforts of campaigning. Might I also guess that your own experience is with the infantry of whom you speak so highly?’

‘Correct, Miss Wareham.’

‘Then if the British infantry is the best in the world, Sir, and you are an “infanteer”, it follows that you are the best in the world.’ Isabelle very nearly gave in to a far from ladylike grin. ‘You see, I have now paid you a compliment, so the one discounts the other and we may be easy again.’

Their eyes met, saw the reflected laughter, and their smiles were of some mutual bond established. It was fortunate that the announcement of dinner held everyone else’s attention. A moment later and Lady Wareham came to claim Lord Idsworth’s arm to go in to dinner, since he was the most highly ranked gentleman present.

Looking back upon it, Isabelle could not but regard the Christmas Eve dinner itself as wickedly entertaining. Lady Slinfold clearly had her marked down as ‘the poor relation’, and referred to her in a stage whisper as ‘that dab of a thing’. Her ladyship was not deaf, but had an intrinsic belief that whatever she said was of importance, and therefore spoke as if at a public meeting. Once she had assimilated

this idea, Isabelle ceased to feel any embarrassment at her comments, especially since they were barbed against everyone, and ranged from animadverting upon Lady Wareham's tiara, 'in need of a good cleaning. I can recommend a jeweller in Bath', to the thickness of the soup. Perhaps more importantly, Isabelle felt happy, truly happy, for the first time since her father's death. It warmed her, thawed her misery.

Isabelle was seated between Lord Mollington and the Rector, who had been invited with Mrs Jessop, his mild-mannered spouse. It was a gesture of graciousness combined with Lady Wareham's wish to remind him that if he was conducting three services, she expected the sermons to be each no longer than fifteen minutes, since her feet grew cold in church even if her maid brought a hot brick with her. The Reverend Giles Jessop was a man of jolly, florid cheeks, at odds with his mournful disposition. Isabelle was very glad when his gloomy commiserations upon how this first Christmas must be without her father were cut short by Lady Slinfold, who was seated to his left, and had restricted her comments throughout the early part of the repast to admonitions and recommendations to Sir Charles, at the foot of the table. She heaved a relieved sigh, and looked up, in time to catch the eye of Lord Idsworth, sat to the right of Lady Wareham. She wondered if it was merely a coincidence, or whether he had been observing her. He gave the most covert of encouraging smiles, and she was inclined to think that he had caught the gist of the Rector's conversation, even whilst apparently attending to Lady Wareham's commentary upon the debilitating effects of the London Season.

'I always find,' declared Lady Slinfold to the cleric, 'that things go far more smoothly if I give the vicar of St Botulph's, our parish church, a hint upon how to conduct his sermons. It prevents embarrassments during the service. His predecessor was of a far too independent mind and on several occasions I had to tap the floor with the end of my parasol, or get my husband to use his cane, and to indicate disapprobation most openly. Thankfully, he died suddenly.'

Isabelle refrained from enquiring whether Lady Slinfold meant the independent vicar or her lord, but she had to bite her lip, and the impulse to glance to see if Lord Idsworth had picked up on the ambiguity was too tempting. He was at that moment about to take a forkful of beef into his mouth, and Isabelle thought she detected the briefest of pauses, and a tremor of the shoulder.

The Rector was, in the general way, a very quiet man but he held strong views upon his calling. Much to the surprise of everyone who attended his church, he launched into a stout defence of the right of those called upon by the Almighty to minister to the populace at large in whatever way their superior understanding of Scripture, and Divine guidance, might lead them. He might as well have declared himself in favour of cannibalism, so outraged was her Ladyship. Mrs Jessop shrank quite visibly whilst the argument continued. Sir Charles looked at the Rector with new respect, Lord Slinfold tried and failed to catch his parent's eye, and everyone enjoyed a verbal joust in which it had to be said the Rector, from a basis of intellectual ability, and with God, so to speak, on his side, did much the better. That is, he did so until Lady Slinfold lost all patience and demanded to know if he understood the power of advowson. This was undoubtedly a low blow, as Lord Mollington remarked after the ladies had retired, but it did make the reverend gentleman pull up short. The power to appoint or dismiss a man of the cloth from his living was a material, but sadly pertinent, thing. The whole episode had increased Lady Slinfold's conviction that Sir Charles was little more than a weak-minded ninny.

'I hope you know what you are about, Sir Charles,' she whispered loudly, whilst prodding a pear tartlet as if it might show signs of life, 'for laxity with incumbents is positively dangerous. There are those,' she dropped her voice, 'even within the Church of England, who preach little short of revolution and sedition. Wild talk in the pulpit one Sunday, and a guillotine on the village green the next.'

Sir Charles looked startled, and Isabelle choked on her sip of wine, which necessitated Lord Mollington,

apologising as he did so for the assault upon her person, patting her firmly upon the back. This drew a most severe stare from Lady Slinfold.

‘You find the concept of decapitation amusing, Miss Wareham?’ Her tone was chill.

‘My apologies, ma’am. I do not find it at all amusing, but from what I have read of the Revolution in France, to which you allude by mentioning guillotines, the Church was as much a victim of the intemperance of the revolutionaries as the nobility, and large numbers of priests and nuns were sent to an untimely death.’

Ignoring the content of Isabelle’s response, Lady Slinfold fastened upon her knowledge.

‘I am astounded that it was thought fitting for a young woman to read about such unsavoury things. Had I a daughter, she would never be exposed to such material. What your mama was thinking of—’

‘My mama was not thinking at all, ma’am, since she departed this life as I entered it, and my dear papa did not believe that a state of ignorance was any more acceptable in a daughter than in a son.’ Just for a second, Isabelle let her anger get the better of her, for the comment flicked her upon the raw, and her reply was rapier sharp. Then she lowered her chin and said, with dulcet smoothness, ‘But I have led a secluded life, and perhaps in Polite Society, knowledge is looked upon as a fault. *Mea culpa.*’

Lady Slinfold had no understanding of Latin, but the gentlemen did, and, with the exception of Lord Slinfold, their lips twitched.

‘Do not think that apologising in Italian makes me think any the better of you, Miss Wareham.’

‘It was not Italian,’ Isabelle controlled her features, ‘and not exactly an apology.’

Lady Wareham, exchanging desperate looks with her son at the other end of the table, gave up, and made a general comment to the entire company about the likelihood of

more snow before the year's end, in the hope that some order might be restored. Lord Idsworth, taking pity upon his hostess, cast Isabelle a look of congratulation, and began to discourse upon the harshness of the winter in the Pyrenees. Lady Wareham had only the vaguest idea where the Pyrenees might be situated, and absolutely no interest in their meteorological conditions, but gave every indication of finding it fascinating, and hung upon his every word.

Isabelle felt peculiarly exhilarated and wondered if she had taken too much wine. The taste of victory, and she had no doubt that she had emerged victorious in the exchange with Lady Slinfold, was sweet and made more so by it being in front of the gentleman seated to the right of Lady Wareham. He also seemed to be enjoying the repast, but they were the minority. Lady Slinfold was in a mood to cross swords with any who addressed her. Her son was therefore in a quake, the Rector was offended at being described as seditious, his wife terrified, and Julia Wareham felt ignored. Lady Wareham wished she could resort to her vinaigrette, and Sir Charles was looking forward to the ladies retiring. Had Slinfold been retiring also, the remaining gentlemen might have had the relief of commenting upon a dinner the like of which none had previously encountered. Lord Mollington had taken the wise course, said nothing beyond inanities to the frightening dame on his left and had enjoyed a gently pleasant conversation with Isabelle, whom he thought a pretty girl, and eaten well of a wide variety of dishes.

That Sir Charles did not actually cheer when his mother rose from the table and announced that she thought it time that the ladies withdrew and left the gentlemen to their port and brandy, showed great restraint on his part. Lady Wareham's look pleaded that he should not linger too long, abandoning her to her fate as if she were likely to be mauled by wild beasts. He could not look her full in the eye, since he felt both he and his guests needed the restorative powers of strong drink.

Isabelle followed the more senior ladies and fell into step beside her cousin.

‘What possessed you, Isabelle?’

‘Possessed me, Julia?’

‘You know what I mean, you have set Lady Slinfold all on end and she will be appalling for the rest of the evening. Have you no thought for me, or Mama?’

‘I do, but I fail to see why I should put up with her insulting Papa as well as me. And from what you were telling me, you have not acted the simpering miss with her.’

‘That is different. I have a good reason.’

‘As did I. Let us not argue over it, Julia.’

‘Was that reason Lord Idsworth?’ Julia could not help giving in to the snide remark.

‘Lord Idsworth?’ Isabelle frowned.

‘Oh, do not pretend you have not noticed how he watches you, cousin. I shall of course say nothing, but before you set your cap in that direction, I ought to warn you he is almost penniless. His estate, what was not sold, is encumbered and he has had to lease out the family home. I believe he is set to return to live in a cottage once lived in by an aunt.’

‘I am not setting my cap at him. I am not even sure how one would go about it, even if I wished to do so and I do not. In fact, if I had not heard at such length how you aspire to become the new Lady Slinfold, I would have said it was you setting your cap at him.’

‘Good gracious, that was merely to make Slinfold take notice. One would not cast out lures to Lord Idsworth, well, not once you know he has nothing. And,’ she added in the hushed tone of one about to reveal a gruesome secret, ‘it was all his fault. He lost everything in some speculation that went horribly wrong. He must have been terribly foolish, and avaricious also. I admit he does not appear that way now, but a decade living in stables in Spain must have taught him humility.’

Isabelle looked at her cousin and pursed her lips.

‘You are harsh, Julia, and you make service in the Peninsula sound as if it were a penance or penal servitude.’

‘Well given the choice between living a normal life in the comforts of England and roaming Europe little better than a vagrant and with people trying to kill one ...’

The ladies entered the drawing room and Lady Wareham invited Lady Slinfold to take the chair nearest the fire, but she declined, saying that her skin was too delicate to withstand direct heat. She therefore took the seat which she knew was the one usually taken by Lady Wareham, and smiled, which deceived nobody.

Mrs Jessop took the least comfortable chair that she could see, and even moved it further from the fireside, fervent in the hope that Lady Slinfold might forget her presence entirely. There followed what must have been only twenty minutes of conversation, although it seemed far longer to Lady Wareham. Lady Slinfold glared occasionally at Isabelle, as if she were an interloper, but refrained from engaging in any discussion with her, preferring to commence a monologue in which she covered the dangers freedom granted, and here she stared most pointedly at Isabelle, to young women. She then continued with the culpability of those who did not, even nearly three decades later, see that only the English Channel, and according to her, the Enclosure Act, had prevented the spread of bloodthirsty revolution to the shores of Britain and that vigilance must be maintained, and finished with a condemnation of misguided philanthropy.

The gentlemen joined them as this reached a natural conclusion, and Lady Wareham rang immediately for the tea tray to be brought in. Julia, forgetting all that she had told Isabelle, or still intent upon rousing Lord Slinfold to jealousy, patted the sofa next to herself and smiled engagingly at Lord Idsworth. He looked acutely uncomfortable, pretended that he simply had not seen her do so, and went to stand by the fire, his arm resting upon the mantel. Julia sniffed, and tried the same tactic upon Lord Mollington, who gave in and sat nervously upon the sofa’s

edge. Lord Slinfold smiled benignly, which annoyed Julia intensely. She was not to know that he had been quite cut up by their argument and her behaviour before dinner and had managed a few anxious words with his mother before the repast. She had smiled and told him, in succinct terms, how to deal with the situation and bring his intended to heel.

‘I told you that she was not an easy choice, Frederick, but I see potential in her as long as this youthful attempt at independence is broken. I see her as a fitting wife for you. The important thing is not to buckle. Be firm. Ignore her tricks.’

So Slinfold stood ‘being firm’ and with a fixed smile. Isabelle, inexperienced as she was, thought he looked like a man in amateur theatricals being asked to play heroic, and failing. If one wanted heroic, there was Lord Idsworth. However true the basis of Julia’s information, Isabelle could not see him as other than heroic. He had the assured stance of the military man, a stance with which she was comfortable and familiar. She recalled what he had said before dinner, about having discovered ‘the best and worst of man’, seeing the brutality of war and yet self-sacrifice, and that it restored ‘one’s faith in our species’. How much more it must have done so to a young man who must surely have been deceived and shamed by scoundrels. She was looking at his profile, her eyes filled with sympathy for the youth of a decade before, when he turned and their eyes met once more. His face barely moved a muscle, but his eyes offered consolation, for he assumed she had been hit by some wave of grief, guilt perhaps at having spent an evening in company whilst her blacks were still so fresh.

There was no opportunity for further conversation, and, mindful of her cousin watching her, Isabelle strove to look unconcerned by it. She drank her tea, laughed at a mild sally of Lord Mollington’s, and as soon as the Rector and his wife had departed, made her excuses to the remainder and retired to her chamber, though not to restful slumber. Her dreams were of snowy fastnesses, and a man, whose face she could not see, struggling towards a summit, only to fall into an abyss.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHRISTMAS MORNING, ISABELLE AWOKE LATER THAN she would have done in her own bed, and less refreshed. The hour was not so advanced that she might not take breakfast before preparing for church, and so she completed her ablutions and dressed with some alacrity, not least because even with a fire lit in the grate, her chamber was draughty and chill. She made her way to the breakfast parlour where her host was sat with his two friends. No other ladies were present, and Isabelle looked uncertain as to whether she should remain, but was greeted warmly, Sir Charles going as far as kissing her upon the cheek and wishing her a happy Christmas.

‘I have a gift for you, my dear cousin, and since you will be leaving us after church, I ought to give it to you now. Do not go away, will you?’

‘A gift?’

‘Yes.’ He was already getting up and heading for the door.

Lord Mollington expressed his regrets that Miss Wareham was departing so early, but Isabelle assured him that if he was riding to hounds the next day he would see her again, at least briefly.

‘And on Twelfth Night, well, during the day there will be shooting at Bradings also. It is terribly kind of my cousin and indeed my aunt to welcome me here at the festive season, but my place is at home. After Evensong it has been our custom to share a bowl of punch with the servants and give gifts before dinner. That must continue, even if I dine alone. Papa would have wished it so.’ She smiled, just a little wistfully.

Lord Mollington exclaimed at the thought of her dining in solitary state.

‘You forget, my Lord, that is how I dine each evening now.’

‘It is a sad thing, Miss Wareham, a sad thing.’ He shook his head.

Lord Idsworth, who was taking a slice of ham, said nothing, and before Lord Mollington could say more, Sir Charles came back into the room, bearing a package most like a hatbox and tied with a red ribbon.

‘I know you cannot wear it yet, Isabelle, but when I saw it in London I knew it was just the thing for you.’ He held it out to her and she took it from his grasp.

‘Am I to open it now?’

‘Why, yes. What better time?’

The ribbon was undone, the lid lifted, and a layer of tissue paper was removed to reveal a veiled, low-crowned beaver hat suitable for a lady out riding.

‘Oh, Charlie, how kind. It is beautiful. Thank you.’ Her voice trembled as she stood and gave him a hug.

‘Isabelle, there’s a good girl, no tears.’

She sniffed and denied any.

Lord Mollington excused himself and shortly afterwards, her breakfast completed, Isabelle withdrew to prepare for church and her departure thereafter. She had expected to leave the two gentlemen together, but as she turned to leave, Lord Idsworth moved to open the door for her.

‘Miss Wareham, might I have the pleasure of a few words with you?’

Isabelle inclined her head, hoping to look gracious and also conceal what she feared might be a rising blush. He opened the door to let her pass through into the hall. Somewhere more private might be preferable but propriety would be breached. He contented himself with indicating the rather incongruous and tired-looking gilded chair by the library door, where she seated herself and looked up at him, her face open and a look of anticipation upon it. It struck him yet again how quietly beautiful she looked.

‘Miss Wareham, I have a confession to make.’

‘To me, my Lord?’ She wondered what on earth he might need confess to her.

‘I think you are the only person to whom I might make it, since you are in possession of most of the story. When I revealed what had happened with the cat and Lady Slinfold, I omitted to tell you that at the conclusion, and entirely owing to the fact that I had made the suggestion that the cat might have spread fleas to the muff, Lady Slinfold wanted it destroyed – the muff, not the cat. She advocated burning it there and then, though it would have merely smothered her fire, and then told me to dispose of it. I am in a quandary. I cannot give it to the servants and it is a very fine, and undoubtedly flea-free, sable muff. It is currently hidden in my chamber, where I fear Sir Charles’ valet, who has been attending me since I have not yet engaged one of my own, may find it and create acute embarrassment. It cannot be given to Miss Julia since if she is to become the new Lady Slinfold, her mama-in-law will see it and recognise it. I am therefore turning to you. It is an imposition and I will understand perfectly if you do not wish to be associated with such havey-cavey goings-on, but might you place it in your own baggage and take it home with you?’

Even as he spoke, he thought how insulted she might be, that he should ask her to be an accessory to what was, seen in the light of total sobriety, a rather juvenile and reprehensible affair. His face betrayed his concerns, and it was that which assured that she would agree. A dimple peeped.

‘I fear, my Lord, that you must think me fit for Newgate, for I am perfectly prepared to relieve you of the, er, evidence of your, and I use the term collectively since it was my cousin who first thought of the idea, ill-judged behaviour.’ She held up a finger as he prepared to thank her. ‘But it is upon the strict understanding that you mend your ways.’ Her tone was mock severe and her eyes twinkled.

‘For you, Miss Wareham, I eschew a life of crime, and swear that never again shall I connive at the placing of a cat in Lady Slinfold’s chamber.’

‘Hmm, the first part is general and commendable, the second rather specific, do you not think?’

‘This is true. Shall I say, “in any person’s chamber”?’

‘That is far better. I shall sleep secure in the knowledge that I have turned you back to the path of rectitude, my Lord.’

‘Will you wear the muff?’

‘After a suitable period of time, and when Lady Slinfold has left the district, yes. It would be wasteful otherwise.’

He thought how pretty she looked, and was conscious of wishing that he might have been in a position that gave him the right to present her with a muff as a proper Christmas gift. The degree of attraction he felt towards her was quite startling, and very unsettling. After all, he had been but a few times in her presence.

‘Thank you, Miss Wareham. You are the best of ladies, and I ...’ He swallowed, aware how close he was to making a fool of himself and frightening her, ‘now realise how deprived I am, not having a sister.’

She smiled, and tried not to show how disappointed the compliment made her feel.

The gentlemen walked the mile and a half to church, three out of the four being on such terms as meant it was an amicable stroll with light-hearted banter. The ladies followed on in the carriage, which was not of very recent date, and which Lady Slinfold mentally designated as antiquated. Lady Wareham had a smart barouche bought for her by her late husband, and that was her preferred transport in warmer weather. In winter, however, when even the hot brick at her feet did not keep them from aching, practicality won over style. She explained her reasoning.

‘I am a martyr to poor circulation, alas.’

‘I have never held with poor circulation,’ announced Lady Slinfold, with an air of finality. ‘It is a weakness of attitude.’

Lady Wareham blinked in understandable consternation at such an utterance from the woman who had complained so much about the lack of warmth in her bedchamber.

‘Mama suffers to such a degree that her extremities can go quite blue with cold, ma’am,’ volunteered Julia, coming to her mother’s defence. ‘An eminent doctor in Bath has confirmed that it is a condition he has seen before.’

‘Are there any eminent doctors in Bath?’ Lady Slinfold snorted.

‘Oh yes,’ replied Lady Wareham, failing to rise to the bait, ‘at the pinnacle of their profession.’

Lady Slinfold saw this as an attempted set-down, and sat in a dignified silence, which bore striking similarities to a huff, all the way to church.

The gentlemen, who were stamping their feet in the porch, had arrived a few minutes previously. They escorted the ladies within, where the arrival of the local gentry was greeted by deferential obeisances as they made their way to the oak box pew. There was then some rearrangement of who sat where, Lady Slinfold expecting to have a direct view of the pulpit so that she might intimidate the Reverend Jessop with her basilisk stare, should he show signs of libertarianism in his sermon. As a result of these manoeuvres, Isabelle found herself beside Lord Idsworth, and, since the pew was a little cramped with eight adults in it, her arm brushed his several times during the service as they rose or sat. She tried to concentrate upon the religious service and ignore the frisson that the contact created, but was not totally successful. She spent the return journey, despite Lady Slinfold’s dissection of the sermon, in a contented silence.

Her departure after Matins was greeted with silent relief by her aunt, although she kissed her cheek, sighed over her impending solitude, and promised to visit very soon. Sir Charles led her out to his waiting carriage and handed her into it.

‘We will see you tomorrow morning, since the weather looks set to hold, Isabelle.’ He did not repeat ‘Happy Christmas’ because he understood that what she was returning to at Bradings could not be that. She smiled, and settled herself in her seat with a rug over her knees.

From the drawing room window, Lord Idsworth watched her departure and felt the day had dulled.

Isabelle spent the short journey trying to prepare herself for home. The garlands would be up, placed as she had directed but yesterday morning. It seemed so long ago, and yet was only twenty-four hours past. Seeing the house green and festive would hurt, return her to her mourning. For a brief spell she had cast off her blacks, not physically, but in her mind. Duty demanded that she return to them, and she had never shirked duty. At the lodge gate to Bradings, Sibley was on the alert for the approach of the carriage and had the gates open swiftly. He stood at attention as she passed through. Once the carriage passed on its return, he would close the gates and come up to the house.

Wellow greeted her as if she had travelled a great distance and in hazardous conditions, rather than in great comfort for three miles.

‘So good to have you back, Miss Isabelle.’

‘I was only gone for a day, Wellow.’ She smiled at the aged retainer.

‘Ah yes, but at the season, it felt longer. We decorated the rooms as you desired, miss, and Mrs Frampton says as there have been no culinary accidents, not like two years past when Mary slipped on a carrot and the bread sauce went all over the kitchen floor.’ There was no reason to tell his mistress this, but Wellow thought it would be a memory which would make her smile.

‘Thank you, Wellow.’ She let him assist her from her pelisse. ‘I will take luncheon in the small parlour, if you please, in about a half hour.’ She mounted the bottom stair and turned. ‘And a happy Christmas to you.’

‘Thank you, Miss Isabelle.’ He bowed.

Isabelle set her hat, gloves and tippet upon the bed, and then sat down beside them and sighed, not so much from dismal reflection as dreamy cogitation. It was all foolishness of course, since with the exception of a brief view of him on the morrow, and at the shooting party, she was not likely to see Lord Idsworth again. It was a lowering thought, but she could not help looking back on their meeting in the village, and the short time at the Hall, as an interlude so pleasurable that it brightened the gloom to which she must return. She went over each interchange, the light-hearted yet confiding nature of his conversations, and was still smiling when the footman brought in her valise and the hatbox. She thanked him, and, as soon as he closed the door behind him, opened the bag to reveal the sable muff, which she had added to her baggage even though it meant cramming it somewhat. She withdrew the rich fur, noted with some disfavour the clinging odour of attar of roses, which her sister Cornelia favoured, and made a mental note to place it in a bag with plenty of lavender sachets both to ameliorate the scent and prevent moth. It was not a Christmas gift, of course, and yet she knew she would treasure it as if it were. She rang for Jane, who combined the duties of senior parlourmaid with attending her mistress where a personal maid was needed. Isabelle had never had a dedicated maid or dresser. Cornelia had acquired one when she had gone to her aunt at sixteen, and no doubt Isabelle was intended to have followed the same pattern, but events had changed things, and somehow a lady’s maid had never seemed necessary in the quiet existence of home. Her father could not get to social functions and Jane dressed her hair if she was acting as hostess when he invited some old friend to dinner, as well as undertaking the brushing of hems and other mundane tasks.

After luncheon, Isabelle wrapped the gifts for the servants, which she would hand out upon the following day. Mrs Frampton always made gingerbread cut into the shape of holly leaves, and Isabelle would wrap packages of this to hand to the lower servants, enclosing also a silver shilling. For the upper servants there would be half a crown, and for

the long-standing retainers Isabelle set aside greater largesse and tried to hit upon a personal gift. She still remembered the knitted purse upon which she had spent laborious hours as a girl of eight, new to the craft. What she did not know was that Mrs Frampton, to whom it had been given, had it treasured in a drawer, unused, and not because there were holes in it from the looseness of the stitches and mistakes which would have seen the smallest coins fall through them.

This year there was a large magnifying glass for Wellow, so that he might read the weekly periodical more easily; a new pocketknife for Sileby, whose old one had a haft worn and loose with age; a finely lace-edged cap for Mrs Frampton, and an ebony-framed hand mirror for Jane. When all the parcels were wrapped, she set them on a side table in the morning room to await the morning. The household went to church for Evensong in crisp darkness and the service, which had been her father's favourite, made Isabelle feel simultaneously closer to him, and more alone. They returned at as brisk a pace as aged joints might manage, and Isabelle encouraged everyone to warm themselves before the fire in the hallway before departing to their duties, although Mrs Frampton disappeared immediately to check on the goose.

Try as she might, she could not but wonder how the dinner at the Hall was unfolding. There would, despite Lady Slinfold's presence, surely be merriment, and parlour games thereafter. She imagined Lord Idsworth, seated as he had been the previous evening, and was guilty of the vanity of hoping that he missed sharing those moments of mutual comprehension of the ridiculous, even as she carved slices of the Christmas goose. It was ridiculous in many ways to have such a bird, but it had been almost equally so when there had been herself and her father. He had persisted in having one because he thought it fitting, he enjoyed the many different dishes that Mrs Frampton's ingenuity devised in the week thereafter, and he had long ago instructed Mrs Frampton to make parts of the bird available for the servants' hall. Isabelle could at least be assured they would eat roast goose this evening. It was, excepting for

Wellow hovering solicitously in case she should need her wine glass refilling or a dish brought to her, a silent meal, and she was glad when the covers were removed and the staff assembled. Cornelia would no doubt be horrified at the thought that Isabelle might enjoy the company of servants, but in many ways these people were her family, known since childhood and not merely employees. It would be unthinkable to Lady Dunsfold to know about the personal lives of her servants, but Isabelle had done such things as console Mrs Frampton when her nephew was drowned at sea, or sent a piece of lawn for a christening gown when Jane's only surviving sister had been successfully delivered of a baby.

Wellow made an excellent Christmas punch to a recipe known only to himself. It managed to be warming and cheering without being so potent that it might lead to early inebriation, which would, as he always told Mrs Frampton, be particularly dangerous with the staff in the presence of the Colonel and Miss Isabelle. It was redolent of cinnamon and lemons, though the other ingredients were guarded as if alchemy, and was the ultimate Christmas aroma to Isabelle.

The servants stood a little self-consciously, especially those who never ventured above stairs in their daily tasks, and Isabelle said a few words. More were impossible, because this was when her father had thanked them, and his absence was felt by all. She said that though this Christmas was unlike others, and clouded by sorrow, yet the Colonel would have desired that traditions within the house be kept, and that tonight there should be happiness. She then raised a toast to his memory. The groom, who was musical, produced his fiddle as he did annually, and played carols and seasonal hymns. She then led the assembly in prayers, and everyone dispersed. The candles were snuffed, the fires banked, the house settled to rest, and in her bed, Isabelle wept.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BOXING DAY DAWNED FINE. THE GROUND WAS HARD and any fallers would feel it for certain, but the sky was clear of snow clouds, and a watery winter sun strove to make its warmth felt. Isabelle sighed. She had always enjoyed hunting on Boxing Day. This year it would not be possible but at least the old tradition continued. The hunt had met at Bradings on the twenty-sixth of December since long before her father had inherited it, and she had every intention that it should continue to do so.

After breakfast she checked that Wellow and all the upper servants were prepared for the cold, since they would be handing round the stirrup cup. The wind, though light, was a bitter easterly that would chill deceptively quickly. For her own part she wrapped herself in her warmest, if most outmoded, pelisse, a pair of fur-lined gloves, a sable tippet, and fur hat. This last she spent some minutes adjusting, wondering whether the more jaunty angle, which was the more fetching, might be considered too frivolous for one in mourning. She would have denied, most strongly, that her eventual decision was influenced by who might see her. The Master arrived early and came first into the house to speak with Isabelle in private. He and Colonel Wareham had been friends for many years, and his standing in the study reminded her forcibly of other Boxing Days whilst her father was still in good health. He had his big black hunter and she had followed the hunt on her pony, with Sileby in attendance. They had been days of adventure and she had always felt very proud. The last few years had been rather different. She had hunted, but her father had come no further than the porch of the house and raised a toast to the hunt. When she rode to hounds she felt as if she did so on his behalf also, and was sure to describe the day in detail to him upon its conclusion.

The sounds from without indicated the hounds had arrived, and several, already eager to be off, were giving voice. She and the Master went outside and split up, he to

talk to the hunt servants, she to greet neighbours. The party from Baddesley Hall arrived, the four gentlemen and Julia. Charles' flea-bitten grey was an old friend, and she patted its shoulder as she looked up at her cousin.

'I know you will wish you could be with us, Isabelle. Next year we will ride shoulder to shoulder, yes?'

'Like we did when you were first allowed on one of your father's hunters?'

'That was, I admit, a mistake.'

'A mistake, Charlie? That brute you were failing to control was all of 16.2 hands and Damson was 13.1. You took a flyer at that bullfinch and then berated me for lack of bottom when I refused to jump it.'

'I was a bit too keen, I confess it.' He grinned at her. 'Do you recall—'

'Are we setting off soon?' interjected Julia, who was feeling the cold and did not find the sight of the other gentlemen listening to Isabelle's past very much to her taste.

'I am sorry. I will have the stirrup cup brought round immediately,' Isabelle said hurriedly, not wanting to appear a poor hostess.

She turned, walked back to the doorway, and took up a tray herself. She presented the first cup to the Master, and then one to her cousin. The third she handed up to Lord Idsworth. The servants went about until all who wanted were supplied. When her tray was empty except for one glass, she took it and raised it.

'I give you good hunting, Master.'

'Good hunting, and here's to the Colonel's memory also.'

A murmur rippled through the assembled riders.

'Good hunting, and Colonel Wareham.'

Isabelle bit her lip, and drank. She watched as the whippers-in prepared the agitated hounds, heard the horn

sound, and stood as the riders departed to draw at the first covert. Lord Idsworth looked back, and saw the lonely figure before her house. He touched his crop to his hat in salute and trotted after his companions.

Isabelle remained in front of the entrance until all sign of the hunt disappeared. She shivered, and turned back into the house, where Wellow solicitously relieved her of coat, hat and gloves, and informed her that Mrs Frampton was preparing a good thick broth for luncheon. Whilst others enjoyed excitement, she had mere domesticity.

The thought of spending a day alone with Lady Slinfold almost made Lady Wareham wish that she rode to hounds, although she had always been very nervous with horses, and had given up all equestrian activity once married. However, Lady Slinfold had sneezed twice in the course of Christmas afternoon, a circumstance which she blamed upon some contagion caught from the parishioners in the church, and chose to keep to her room until mid-afternoon, sending commands as a general might orders on a field of battle, and generally keeping the servants busy.

It was only an hour after she made her appearance when the riders returned, and it was immediately obvious that there had been a thaw in the frostiness between Julia Wareham and Lord Slinfold. Lady Wareham looked interrogatively at her son, but Sir Charles merely gave a wry smile. Having commenced the day in what she thought was aloof hauteur, and her brother described irascibly as ‘a childish pet’, Julia had ridden in a very determined style, which Lord Slinfold had apparently viewed as wildly brave, and Lord Idsworth described to Sir Charles as actually wildly irresponsible. Sir Charles, who had been looking forward to a good day following the hounds and was trying to work out how he would explain his sister coming home stretched out on a hurdle, agreed and glowered in her direction.

Julia’s mount was thoroughly sweated up and agitated by its rider’s tense excitement, and as a brace of pheasant flew up in alarm, shied. She was thrown forward but kept her

seat, although her foot was dislodged from the stirrup. Lord Slinfold, assuming that no lady would be capable of retrieving the situation, swerved his own mount at speed and grabbed for the bridle above the bit. Julia was about to complain at this assertive male behaviour when she saw the look upon his face. His concern was so obvious that she bit back the words of reproof, and changed her viewpoint entirely, regarding him as some gallant rescuer.

‘If she calls him Lochinvar, may I be permitted to leave the county forthwith?’ whispered Lord Idsworth, his lip curled in revulsion, when he, Lord Mollington and Sir Charles were stood watching the reconciled pair while the hounds tried to find a lost scent.

‘Count me with you, my dear fellow,’ grumbled Lord Mollington, who found the idea of Slinfold being elevated to hero status rather more than he could stomach.

‘Beats me how females think,’ sighed Sir Charles. ‘They blow hot and cold and one can never never tell why. You might think living with a pair of them I might have some inkling, but no.’

So he could not explain why it was that the match of which his mother showed signs of despairing, seemed once again likely. Lady Slinfold, now more concerned at her impending inflammation of the lungs than the course of her son’s courtship, recommended, when he had described his delight after two days of misery, that he make the girl an offer and arrange for their own return to Hertfordshire before she was too ill to travel and risked death in this draughty and outdated abode.

Thus castigated, he went off to seek private words with his adoring Julia, and made Lady Wareham a happy woman thereby. Sir Charles, when informed of the event, simply said that if Slinfold was determined to marry his sister there was little point in trying to put him off, and it was a relief that the whole thing was settled.

‘Thing is, we can at least be comfortable again once they depart,’ he confided to his friends.

‘No more hiding in the billiard room,’ agreed Lord Mollington, nodding.

Lord Idsworth did not appear to be attending, and they had to repeat the news.

Isabelle spent the period between Christmas and the New Year very quietly. Lady Monkton, nearly eighty but determined not to submit to age and infirmity, came to visit her on New Year’s Eve and gave her trenchant advice on recovering her spirits.

‘Things cannot be the same, my dear, but it would leave you a dreary soul if you maintained the mourning in your heart as long as you wear your blacks. You are young, and what is more, your papa would not want you to live like a miserable hermit. With the New Year you must make an effort.’

‘But I am not permitted to be sociable for months yet, ma’am.’

‘There is a difference between gallivanting about and being a sensible young woman. Of course, you may not attend balls or large parties, but if I invite you to come to dine with me, and perhaps the Malverns, I will expect you to accept, not give some limp excuse and refuse.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘And you can invite me here, at least once the evenings are a little lighter. I won’t have my coachman driving in the dark unless it is a full moon as tonight. He’s too old and rheumy of eye to do so safely.’

‘Yes ma’am.’ Isabelle smiled.

She liked old Lady Monkton, for all her dictatorial ways. It might be thought that dinner with so elderly a lady would be boring, but in fact she was a fount of wonderful stories, especially about life in Paris before the Revolution. Her husband had been one of the embassy staff before he inherited his title, and as a young matron with every salon door open to her, Maria Monkton had enjoyed herself hugely. Isabelle had been listening to her tales, at least the

less scandalous ones, since she was fourteen, when the old lady had decided that she needed some form of female guidance. What Lady Monkton did not say was that she was worried what might happen to Isabelle when her period of mourning was at an end. She was nearly too old to be brought out properly, not that her sister Cornelia would lift a finger to do so, and Lady Monkton very much feared that Isabelle would cast off her mourning clothes but remain immured at Bradings, with no hope of finding a husband. Lady Monkton was not shy or retiring, she was in fact a very independent lady, but she was fully aware that dwindling into an idiosyncratic old maid of the county was the worst of options. Marriage, and not to that snivelling cod's head Semington, was what Isabelle needed, and deserved.

Of this concern, Isabelle was blissfully unaware. Whilst it did not take a vast deal of organising, she considered that she was obeying Lady Monkton's strictures by focussing her efforts on the shooting party. Sir Charles rode over on the third, accompanied by Lord Idsworth, with the news that his mama, who was in fine form, would be delighted to act as hostess for any who came back to the house at the conclusion of the day's shooting. He also told Isabelle that the reason for her improved mood was that Slinfold had come up to scratch, proposed and been accepted.

'M'sister is currently "my clever Julia" whenever Mama addresses her. It won't last beyond the first distempered freak, but there.'

'Oh Charlie, I am delighted, I think. If it pleases Julia, and my aunt also, I ought to be. I was not convinced there was any depth to Julia's feeling for him, but if that has changed ...'

'On the surface it has, but you know Julia.'

'Yes.'

Lord Idsworth had retired to the window and was looking out beyond the small knot garden to where the trees bordered the grassy lawn, currently rather tired and crushed

by recent snow and frost. He turned upon hearing himself addressed.

‘I was saying that Old Joshua, who is regarded as the authority upon the weather in the village, forecasts that more snow is coming but he doubts before Twelfth Night, so the shooting should be safe, my Lord.’

‘I would be interested to know upon what he bases his forecasts, Miss Wareham.’

‘Ah, that appears to be a number of factors, including the state and quantity of the hips in the hedgerows, how many fieldfares he sees together, and whether his cow is milking well.’

‘The last seems particularly odd. It sounds no more scientific than augury in Ancient Rome.’ He raised a sceptical eyebrow.

‘I fear my knowledge of the classics is lacking, my Lord, but I can say that Old Joshua has been uncannily prescient these last few years.’

‘That is true enough,’ corroborated Sir Charles. ‘If he could also predict which horses I should back at the Salisbury races, I would be a rich man.’

‘I bow to your local knowledge, then. You have a pleasing view, Miss Wareham.’

‘My father liked it. He himself would not have planted the knot garden. That was made in the time of my great-uncle, who had it constructed as a wedding present for his wife. As such, Papa never sought to remove it, but he preferred the more natural aspect of grass and trees. The local fauna makes it an interesting place to watch, and he spent many, many hours here when he was incapacitated.’ There was wistfulness in her voice.

‘I am sorry. I had not intended to make you dwell upon what must still be painful for you.’

‘Not at all, my Lord. My cousin here would tell you I must learn to speak of my papa without melancholy. Is that not so, Charlie?’

‘When you can do so, it marks the point where you truly pass from the darkness of grieving, that is all I say.’ Sir Charles looked slightly embarrassed.

‘And rightly so. So do not ask my forgiveness, my Lord.’

There was a short silence, then Sir Charles moved the conversation on.

‘How many guns have you for Friday, Isabelle?’

‘Fourteen at the last count. Mr Burbage has had to cry off. His aunt is severely ill, and he is summoned to her bedside. There will be the three of you from the Hall, Mr Winchope and his son, who is down from Oxford, the Delbys, Sir John Marten, Mr Mitchell, Squire Cotten, Mr Lampley, Mr Kempton and Geoffrey Kempton, and last, unfortunately, Edwin Semington.’ She sighed, and pulled a face.

‘Pity about that. He really is the most appalling shot, and hasn’t the sense to realise it. I wouldn’t let him shoot on my land.’

‘Yes, well if you remember, I had to wriggle my way out of him inviting me to visit at New Year by saying I was making ready for the shooting. I had to invite him then.’

‘I suppose that is true but as I said, it is a pity.’ He shook his head.

‘Surely he cannot be that bad?’ Lord Idsworth found it difficult to imagine a man being incompetent with a shotgun.

‘There speaks a man who is at home with a musket.’

‘An officer would not normally carry a musket, Charlie,’ murmured Isabelle.

‘A pistol, then. I take it you will outshoot us civilians and bag most of the birds.’

‘Not necessarily,’ drawled Lord Idsworth. ‘I have to say most of my targets were ... rather larger.’

‘Larger?’ Sir Charles paused for a fraction of a moment, as Isabelle’s lips twitched, and then comprehension dawned. ‘Oh! Yes, of course.’

‘They also shot back.’

‘It is the big advantage with pheasant, my Lord. They never shoot back,’ Isabelle offered, consolingly.

‘I shall remember that, Miss Wareham.’ Lord Idsworth kept his composure, almost.

On the morning of the sixth, Bradings was a hive of activity. Whilst Isabelle would be firmly in the background, this was still her house and she wanted everything to go perfectly. She was a little on edge, and even raised her voice to the under housemaid who dropped a coal scuttle scattering coals and dust over the dining room floor, which was where the food would be laid out after the shooting. Sir Charles arrived early with his two friends and was followed by a dog cart with the Hall keeper and his lad, who were going to load for them, and also bringing his favourite spaniel. Isabelle had no qualms about putting herself forward and welcomed them in, offering coffee to warm them after their drive. Barely had this been brought when Wellow announced Mr Semington, who entered as if he needed no announcing, cast a proprietorial glance about the room and over Isabelle, and looked to Sir Charles to introduce him to the other gentlemen. Isabelle seethed.

Edwin Semington did not lack self-confidence about his person but was easily impressed by rank. Mollington’s viscountcy was one thing, but on hearing that he was now conversing with the Earl of Idsworth, Mr Semington’s manner changed. He was, thought Isabelle, storing every word exchanged so that he could report it to his mama, and thereafter lace his conversation with others with such phrases as ‘I was discussing just this with Lord Idsworth’.

Isabelle had only had the opportunity for a few words with Lord Idsworth, but it had been a relaxed and light-hearted interchange. She saw how he stiffened in tone and manner once Edwin joined the conversation, and how his

mouth set in a thin line of disapprobation when Isabelle was addressed as 'my poor child' and then ignored, as if the conversation of gentlemen was too elevated for her to comprehend. He cast her a look of apology, though the fault was not his, and pointedly included her when he spoke.

Mr Semington saw the look and read even more into it. It came as a shock to him. Since he could not see that he himself was being offensive to her, the only reason for Lord Idsworth to meet her eye so meaningfully was that he was trying to fix his interest with her, and Idsworth was an earl. However much he valued himself, Edwin Semington was under no illusions about the attraction of becoming a countess. He would obviously have to make it clear to his Lordship how matters stood.

The other guests were arriving in numbers now, and Sir Charles' party went out into the hall as Isabelle welcomed the newcomers. It was some minutes before Mr Semington was able to get close enough to Lord Idsworth to speak quietly.

'Miss Wareham is a charming young lady. I have been intimately acquainted with the family since before she was born, for I am Colonel Wareham's godson. He favoured me exceedingly, and there is an understanding ...'

'An understanding, Semington?'

'Yes. Poor Isabelle is left ostensibly without a man to guide and protect her, but she is without neither. Whilst her father was alive but an invalid, nothing was said openly, but as soon as her period of mourning is ended, I shall announce our betrothal.'

He had not seen Isabelle draw near. Her bosom heaved.

'How dare you presume, Edwin.' Her voice was low, and quiet, but throbbed with anger. 'For your information, I do not need a man, for "guidance" or for "protection", and if circumstance called for either I would look to my cousin. And I have never, never given you any reason to assume that I would accept an offer of marriage from you. Oh yes,

you have acted as if it was so, but that is a delusion. I would not marry you if you were the last man in England, sir.’

She turned her shoulder upon him and stalked away.

‘You were saying, Semington? An understanding?’ Idsworth’s voice was cold.

Semington did not reply. He was stunned by her outburst. As the shooting party began to leave the house and head to the first stand, his mind was reeling.

Isabelle, wrapped well against the cold, walked at her cousin’s side, incapable of speech for some minutes. She knew that she had behaved intemperately, but Edwin had been insupportable. She fought back angry tears, and only as the gentlemen formed their line did she recover enough to wish her cousin a successful day.

Mr Semington was towards the left of the line, with Lord Idsworth at the end, next to him. Isabelle walked up and down the line wishing her guests good fortune as the beaters moved the birds towards the field. She reached the end. Lord Idsworth turned to his right to face her and she gave a wry smile.

‘Forgive me, my Lord. I should not have displayed my anger in front of you.’

He was about to respond when a lone cock pheasant broke cover early, flying very low and slightly towards them. The guns were not all ready, and would not fire at a bird below the skyline, for the safety of the beaters, but Mr Semington was keen to show Miss Wareham his prowess and stepped forward of the line that she might see him better. The first barrel missed, and, in desperation, he swung left as it crossed him. Instinctively, Lord Idsworth grabbed Isabelle and pushed her out of the line of fire, calling out as he did so.

‘For God’s sake, be caref—’

What he said was cut short by the loud report, and the Earl of Idsworth took a staggering step backwards, looking rather surprised. Isabelle heard a scream and only

afterwards realised that it was her own voice. He looked straight at her, took two staggering steps, and collapsed at her feet.

CHAPTER NINE

FOR A STUNNED MOMENT NOTHING HAPPENED. THEN Mr Semington started gabbling self-exculpatory phrases, to which nobody paid the slightest attention. The man set to load for him took the gun away from his slackened grasp. Sir Charles shouted to his keeper to take control of the gun line, and ran to where Isabelle was now on her knees, feeling for a pulse. She was struggling with a sensation of being unable to breathe. Lord Idsworth's cheek and neck were bleeding, and the topcoat was staining red. When she unfastened it, the superfine coat beneath was worse. She looked up, parchment-cheeked, at her cousin.

'He is alive, but ... we need to get him to the house, and send for Dr Apsley immediately.'

Sir Charles nodded and squeezed her shoulder encouragingly.

'You, Jem, you're as fast as they come. Run to the house, warn the servants to make up a bed, and take the fastest horse. Ride to Dr Apsley, and if he is from home, track him down and tell him it is an emergency.'

His keeper's son touched his forelock and set off at a sprint.

'Could two of us carry him, Isabelle, supporting him upright?'

'I fear not, Charlie. Is there a hurdle? Or could three men carry him on their shoulders? I do not know. Oh, there is so much blood. Your neckcloth, give me your neckcloth.' There was panic rising in her now.

Sir Charles was obeying this command as Lord Mollington tapped him on the shoulder.

'Thought you might need a way of moving the poor chap, so ...' He pointed to where a man in homespuns was holding the bridle of a heavy-set pony pulling a small cart.

‘Molly, you are a trump. Excellent. Help me get him to the cart. Isabelle, you climb in first and try and keep him comfortable.’

Regardless of decorum, Isabelle hitched up her skirts and ran towards the labourer, who nodded respectfully as she reached him and then hoisted herself into the cart. Her cousin and Lord Mollington half carried and half dragged the ashen and limp form of Lord Idsworth to the tail of the cart and laid him on the boards. Isabelle had removed her pelisse and laid it over the unconscious man, making a pad of the muslin neckcloth and holding it firmly where the shirt was most soaked.

‘Tell him to make haste, Charlie,’ she whispered.

Neither carter nor pony was built for speed, but he comprehended the urgency and managed to get the pony to trot, though it made the ride more bumpy. Isabelle was torn between the desire to get the wounded man home as soon as possible and the fear that the additional movement might make things worse. It took but four or five minutes to reach the house, but felt a lifetime, and part way Lord Idsworth made a groaning sound, and his eyes flickered open for a moment, but then closed again. As they reached the front of the house Wellow was already at the open door, his brow furrowed in concern.

‘I took the liberty of sending for Sileby, Miss Isabelle. I thought he might be—’

‘What a good idea, Wellow.’ She cut him short. ‘Which room is prepared?’

‘The best guest chamber, Miss, and Mrs Frampton has a copper on the range and fresh linens laid out.’

Sir Charles and Lord Mollington, assisted by the labourer, carried the wounded man up the stairs and to the readied bedchamber, pulling off his boots and removing the bloodied topcoat as they set him on the bed. Isabelle, who had disappeared briefly to fetch something, watched as they began struggling with his tight-fitting coat.

‘No, do not manhandle him any more, Charlie. I will cut it.’

‘But it is a dashed good coat,’ murmured Lord Mollington, half to himself.

‘And peppered with holes.’ Isabelle’s temper was fraying under the strain. ‘Let me deal with this, please.’

She sat upon the bed, took a deep breath, and cut the fine woollen cloth with her dressmaking shears. Never, in her years of making petticoats and frills, had she imagined them used for so vital a task. She slit the sleeve and across the shoulder, and Sir Charles helped her ease the coat away. Several lead shot rattled to the floor.

‘The heavy clothing has saved him.’ Sir Charles looked encouraging.

‘If he doesn’t bleed to death,’ added Lord Mollington, glumly.

The muslin pad was now sodden, and the shirt also. It was clear from the amount of bleeding that some vessel or vessels had been struck. She resolutely began to cut away the cambric, controlling the feeling of nausea within her. There was another groan, and Lord Idsworth coughed. The fleck of blood which appeared on his lips made Lord Mollington shake his head.

‘Not a good sign,’ he remarked.

‘Oh, will you just leave,’ demanded Isabelle in exasperation.

‘Sorry, coz, not really the thing. I mean, before Apsley arrives we ought to get him into the bed and ... Young lady and all that.’

‘Charlie, I will shut my eyes if needs be.’

‘Perhaps, gentlemen, I might be of use.’ They all turned to see Sibley, clearly a little out of breath, in the doorway. ‘Seeing as how I have seen more wounds in my time.’

‘Sibley, thank goodness!’ exclaimed Isabelle with patent relief.

‘If you would care to inform the doctor what exactly took place, Sir, and send him up as he arrives.’ Sileby was giving a dismissal, but very politely, and Sir Charles recognised the sense of it.

‘Yes, I will. You carry on here, Sileby. I am sure you know just what to do.’ Sir Charles rose and took Lord Mollington by the arm.

‘Right, Miss Isabelle, let’s see the problem.’ Sileby came to the bedside. ‘Well, there’s a bit of a mess. Seen worse, mind.’ He exuded calm. ‘You keep a cloth over that bleeding and I’ll deal with getting the gentleman fit to go between the sheets.’

When Dr Apsley came up the stairs ten minutes later, the bedroom was an organised sickroom. Lord Idsworth was in the bed, the covers drawn decorously up to his waist, the rent and bloodied garments removed from sight and a bowl of steaming water and fresh cloths set by the bed. The fire was lit and a small kettle was coming to the boil on a hob. Isabelle had not left her post, though her hand felt stiff from pressing upon the wound. She looked round at the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

‘I am so glad to see you, Dr Apsley.’ Her voice trembled slightly. She knew the doctor well and had great faith in his abilities.

‘I hear it is a shotgun wound.’ He shook his head. ‘Some gentlemen are very lax, for their own safety and for others about them.’ He came to the right side of the bed and looked down at the patient. He took a pulse. ‘Quite strong, considering.’ He noted the physique, which was not that of one used to a sedentary existence. ‘I take it that the gentleman is quite healthy, and takes good exercise?’

‘Lord Idsworth is but lately sold out of the army, after some considerable years of service.’

The doctor’s keen eye noted a scar across the left bicep.

‘I ought to have guessed at a military man. You may move the pad, Miss Isabelle.’ He spoke with calm authority,

and she obeyed without demur.

‘The bleeding has lessened considerably. If it were a vital vessel, that would not occur. We will continue to apply pressure a little longer, I think.’ The doctor studied the situation with perfect calm.

‘His breathing is a little fast, surely, Doctor?’

‘Yes. Has he coughed blood?’

‘A very little, just a spotting, really.’

‘I would suspect a collapse of the lung, though likely partial if but one tear was caused by shot. Judging by the wounds it is entirely feasible that a pellet has perforated the apex of the left lung.’

‘Will that kill him, Dr Apsley?’ She had to ask.

‘A wound to the lung should never be treated lightly, but if the tear is small, then it is most likely to resolve itself in a few days. There has been considerable blood loss, however, and there is the possibility of fever and infection.’

They were concentrating so much upon the damage to chest and upper arm that they did not at first notice the flickering of the eyelids.

‘Not dead ... yet.’ The voice was barely more than a whisper and accompanied by a contortion of the features.

‘Ah, you are awake, my Lord.’ Dr Apsley sounded at once convivial. ‘No, indeed, not dead yet. But I would wish to remove such shot as is accessible, which will not be a comfortable procedure.’

‘Hurts ... to breathe.’

‘There is some damage to a lung, my lord, but I would give you a good prognosis, given rest and good nursing, and I can vouch for Miss Wareham’s skills in that department.’

Lord Idsworth rested his eyes upon Isabelle’s pale face, and his expression of pain was softened until the next spasm as he inhaled.

‘I will have to ask you to behave with fortitude, my Lord, though I hear you are a soldier, so no doubt you will have no problems. Sibley here will hold you still, and Miss Isabelle, if you will hold the bowl.’

‘No.’ The voice was stronger.

‘No, my Lord?’

The wounded man lifted his right hand and held it out to Isabelle. She took it in both of hers, and nodded.

‘Sibley will hold the bowl, Doctor, and I shall hold his Lordship’s hand sustainingly.’

Dr Apsley frowned doubtfully, but said nothing.

The next half hour proved most trying, both to the patient and nurse. He lay with jaw determinedly clamped shut, his eyes boring into hers as if in them was relief from the pain. She felt the spasms in his hand as she held it so tightly that her own hands seemed moulded about his. The muscles in his arm stood out, taut. The doctor probed, occasionally giving a word of encouragement, and there was the frequent sound of a lead pellet dropping into the dish held by Sibley, who was regarding Lord Idsworth with approval. The information that he was an officer, combined with his stoicism, made the old soldier look upon him charitably.

A few pellets had pierced the cheek and neck, and Dr Apsley was very delicate and cautious in working in these areas. He remarked how fortunate his Lordship had been not to have lost his eye, or suffered the severance of a major vessel of the neck. It could not be said that the Earl of Idsworth was currently feeling particularly fortunate, nor did he evince any joy at the comment that the weight of the shot had been too light to shatter his jaw.

‘There, my Lord, all done. At least all as I would care to touch. There remain a couple *in situ*, but I would think it safer to leave them be than probe further, since they lie by important structures.’

Lord Idsworth swallowed hard. ‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure, my Lord.’ The doctor, relaxing, had become avuncular.

‘You will not bleed him, will you?’ Isabelle could not imagine taking more blood when so much had been lost.

‘No, Miss Isabelle. The idea that bleeding is a recourse on every occasion is erroneous. It might be advisable at some time in the future, but I think one can safely say that it is not a superfluity of blood that Lord Idsworth suffers from at present. I shall provide a soporific to enable his Lordship to rest quietly, which is what he needs now. I will bring laudanum for the chest pain, though if the patient can manage without, all the better.’ He looked at the earl, who was pale and frowning. ‘Don’t you worry, my Lord. We will see you recovered in no time at all.’

He poured out a dose of clear liquid, held it to Lord Idsworth’s lips, and rose, indicating that Isabelle should accompany him from the room. She looked at him anxiously.

‘You mean that, Dr Apsley? That he will recover quickly?’

‘He has every chance of making a full recovery, Miss Isabelle, but I grant that such things cannot be guaranteed, and I would say it may be some weeks before he is entirely back to normal. It is also entirely possible that there will be some localised suppuration, and the risk of fever, but with luck it will be transient. He is obviously a very strong individual, a fine specimen.’ He suddenly realised that his last description was not entirely suitable for a young lady’s ears and coughed, embarrassed. ‘If there is any sudden deterioration you must send for me at once, especially if the breathing becomes faster, and if there should be blueness about the lips. I will return this evening. Now, you make sure that you take good care of yourself, for I know you of old. You pour all your care into your charge and leave nothing for yourself. Remember you are only of use to him if well. Eat regularly, and get proper sleep.’

She assured him that she would obey his strictures, and thanked him profusely. Sir Charles and Lord Mollington emerged from the library as the door was closed behind the good doctor.

‘Is all well, Isabelle?’

‘As well as can be expected, Charlie, but ...’ Her voice wavered and then failed her, and she took a great sobbing breath and began to shake.

‘Here, coz, it is all right. You are shaken, quite understandably.’ He put an arm about her shoulders, led her into the library and pressed her gently into a chair. ‘Molly, ring for a small glass of brandy, there’s a good fellow.’

‘No, no, I am not in need of brandy. I should go back upstairs.’

‘Not in this state.’ Sir Charles stood firm.

Thus bullied in a kindly fashion, Isabelle sat until the trembling in her limbs ceased, and took a few unwelcome sips of the brandy when it arrived, pulling such a face as made her cousin laugh, despite the seriousness of the situation.

‘Charlie, will you go back to the shoot and tell them things go well. Since your mama is to preside over everything at the conclusion, it matters not that I will be engaged in the sickroom, and I would not have their day completely ruined.’

‘And Semington?’

She shuddered.

‘As long as I do not have to face him.’

‘I doubt he stayed much after we came here, Miss Wareham.’ Lord Mollington made no attempt to keep the disgust and disapproval from his voice. ‘His gun was taken from him, and he did look decidedly cut up, as well he might. I imagine he went home. I certainly cannot think anyone would have been happy to shoot with him next to them.’

Lord Mollington's words reassured her. She would not have to have him in the house, at least not yet.

'Perhaps I should send to his home and inform him that the wound was not fatal?'

'He can be told tomorrow,' remarked Sir Charles, unsympathetically.

Isabelle returned to the best guest chamber some twenty minutes later. Sileby had removed all evidence of the surgery and was engaged in placing a substantial log upon the fire. He looked up and smiled as his mistress came in.

'He's asleep, Miss, never you fear. Best thing for him too. I've seen those as have suffered damage to the lung and it is painful, must be said. Not that his Lordship is not very sound under trying circumstances, very sound. You said he was in the army, Miss Isabelle. Do you know which regiment?'

'That I cannot say, Sileby, only that it was in the infantry.'

'And none the worse for that. Though we was dragoons, the Colonel and meself.' Sileby puffed out his chest a little.

'He was very brave about it, all that ghastly prodding about. It seemed to go on for ever.'

'There are upwards of thirty pieces of shot in the basin, Miss.'

'Goodness. He ...' she paused, looking at the sleeping figure, 'was so very stoic, wasn't he, and it could have had nothing to do with him being insensitive to the pain, for I could actually feel the degree of his suffering. Poor man.' She sighed. 'I shall never permit Mr Semington to shoot on my land again. In fact, I would prefer it if he did not come here at all. I am not sure I would keep my composure.'

Sileby said nothing. He had known Edwin Semington from when he had been a scrubby, snivelling schoolboy. He had not thought much of him then, and maturity had not much altered the opinion. That Mr Semington was possessed of the belief that Bradings and Miss Isabelle were

his to claim, was known to everyone in the house down to the scullery maid who, though not having ever spoken to the gentleman, decried him for his presumption. None of the staff wanted him ordering their lives, but for Sileby it was more personal. He had protected Isabelle Wareham since she could first toddle about, had encouraged, and admonished also. He would not overstep the boundary that existed between them as employer and employee, now that she was grown. Yet he had told her off the same way he would have told off a little girl of his own when she had been a truculent ten-year-old. Edwin Semington might be possessive but in reality he was less so than Sileby, the difference being that Sileby would lay down his life at the drop of a hat for his Miss Isabelle. It was a selfless sort of possession.

‘Will you remain here, Sileby? I do not just mean this minute, but for as long as Lord Idsworth is ill. From what Dr Apsley has said, the next few days may require a presence in the room much of the time, and there are aspects ... A gentleman ought to have a man to attend him.’

‘Of course, Miss Isabelle. You know you can rely upon me, though I would have thought his Lordship’s own man would come over from the Hall.’

‘Ah, now he told me that he had not as yet engaged a valet, not since returning home. I suppose he is more capable than most to fend for himself. After all, deciding upon which raiment to wear, and arranging for the brushing of one’s coats, must seem trivial things to a man who has had to survive upon campaign, with all the deprivations that must entail.’

Sileby nodded. Possessing the King’s commission did not protect one when on the march in the rain for hours, did not provide shelter from the cold, food when supplies were short, or ward off the impact of a musket ball.

‘Is the doctor returning today, Miss? He mentioned bringing laudanum.’

‘He said so, this afternoon. But you know Dr Apsley. If his calls bring him back past our gate he will come in just to see how we are “getting along”.’ She smiled, for it had become a stock phrase when the doctor called upon her father, not in any emergency, but just to check that all went well, but then her face became serious again. ‘We must call him immediately if there is any further increase in the rate of breathing, if it becomes more laboured or if the lips take a bluish tinge. He has said that he would not be surprised if there should be signs of infection in some of the wounds, and there is the possibility of fever. Until the lung recovers, I would think a constant presence here important.’

‘Well, we have worked in watches before, Miss Isabelle, and we can do so again. I would think the draught that the doctor administered would keep his Lordship peaceful some time. I will sit and watch until after you have taken your luncheon, Miss, then I will fetch all I need from the lodge.’

‘And eat also.’

‘With Mrs Frampton running the kitchen, that is guaranteed. She will have me sat down with a bowl of good thick soup as soon as I set foot back in the house.’ He smiled. ‘Now, off you go, Miss Isabelle, and do not dwell upon what might or might not happen. Our task is to deal with what is, here and now.’

Thus advised, Isabelle returned downstairs and went to the dining room, ostensibly to look over the preparations one more time, but in fact she sat upon a dining chair with her hands clasped together to prevent the tremor in her fingers. It seemed so odd that here everything was so organised and everyday, when there was such drama upstairs. Wellow, coming in to check that the housemaid had obeyed an instruction correctly, was surprised to see her.

‘Why, Miss Isabelle, are you quite well? You have not felt faint, have you? Should you not lie upon your bed an hour before luncheon, perhaps?’

‘Thank you, Wellow, but I am well enough. However, I will take some tea in the small parlour, and would you ask Mrs Frampton to come to me also? I would like to discuss arrangements whilst Lord Idsworth is an invalid in this house.’

‘Of course, Miss. And perhaps you might take a biscuit with your tea.’

It was a suggestion rather than a question, and Isabelle smiled. The staff, her staff, would try and cosset her. When Mrs Frampton joined her in the small parlour a few minutes later, it became even more obvious.

‘You can be sure as I know just what to prepare for when his poor Lordship is fit to take nourishment, and if meals are taken at odd hours, well, I will not have things that spoil before the cat has had time to lick her ear.’

Isabelle thought suddenly of the cat in Lady Slinfold’s chamber, and the muff in her bedchamber. She bit her lip. Mrs Frampton frowned.

‘How about I poach you some nice eggs, with a slice of the honeyed gammon, for your luncheon? And don’t you tell me you are not hungry, for I know as you had but a slice of toast and your hot chocolate at breakfast, all in a tizzy over everything being right for today.’

‘Oh dear, and you have so much to prepare for this afternoon. I am sorry, Mrs Frampton.’

‘All that is in hand, Miss. The cold dishes are all laid out and covered, and the hot ones that remain are simple enough. Don’t you worry about anything. Now, poached eggs?’

CHAPTER TEN

LORD IDSWORTH SLEPT UNTIL THREE IN THE afternoon when he awoke somewhat confused, the lingering effects of the drug combining with a general haziness about what on earth had happened, and where he was. He was aware of pain, and in the first moments completely forgot that he was no longer at war and assumed he had suffered some wound. He opened his eyes and frowned, both in discomfort as he took a breath, and because he could not fathom why he appeared to be propped up in a bed and in a very English-looking bedchamber. Then Miss Wareham's face hovered above him. He screwed up his eyes and tried to think.

‘What—’

‘Lie still, my Lord, and do not agitate yourself. There was ... an accident. You are at Bradings, my home.’

He tried to concentrate. His chest hurt as if he had been kicked by a cavalry horse. Strands of memory returned.

‘Semington ... shot me.’

‘Yes. I am terribly afraid that he did.’ She did not add that it had dawned upon her that she would have been the recipient of much of the injury had he not thrust her back. This was not the time. ‘But the doctor says that the pain in your chest should ease over the next few days. The lung needs time to recover.’

‘So does ... rest of me.’ He tried to smile but it seemed an awfully great effort.

‘Take all the time you need, my Lord. We will look after you.’ She beckoned Sileby closer. ‘This is Sileby. He was my father's soldier-servant and then his valet.’

The old soldier stood more erect.

‘Sileby ... yes.’ He focussed on the older man as if imprinting him on his memory.

There came the sound of voices on the stairs, and the doctor was shown in.

‘Ah, good. I am glad you are awake, my lord. Not that I mean to tax you or prod you about. Is the pain severe at present?’

‘Have felt better ... much better.’

‘Yes, yes. I am sure. As I have explained to Miss Wareham, the lung has sustained some damage and part of it has collapsed. Such a partial collapse should resolve itself within a few days. I would not want you to sleep upon your back until that time. I recommend three or four pillows as support. I removed some thirty-five lead shot from your person, some quite shallowly embedded, others more deeply so.’

‘Recall ... that.’

‘The worst is, I hope, over. You are in the best of hands I can assure you, my Lord. Miss Wareham and Sibley work well in concert.’

Lord Idsworth looked at Isabelle. He felt the better for it.

‘Best of hands,’ he echoed, holding out his right hand and closing his eyes.

Isabelle took the hand, which lay resting in hers as he drifted back to sleep.

Dr Apsley brought forth a bottle of laudanum, and some basilicum powder.

‘Just in case you are not provided with a plentiful supply of it, Miss Isabelle. Do not wake his lordship specially, but tomorrow when he is awake the dressing can be changed and the powder applied. I should have left this when I used it earlier.’

‘If there is infection, when is it likely to present? Presumably after a few days the healing will mean that if there are no signs, all will be well?’

‘I think it optimistic to think there will be none at all, but look how often has a splinter of wood resulted in a small effusion of pus and not done general harm. We will be watchful but not over worried, yes?’

‘Yes, Doctor.’

Had Dr Apsley been present in the small hours he would have found that her answer had changed. About midnight his Lordship awoke and was difficult to settle, complaining of the discomfort when breathing and paying little attention to Sileby’s reassuring voice. Sileby had encouraged his mistress to go to bed early, agreeing to let her take over the watch at four of the clock, but after a difficult hour he went and knocked upon her door. She came after some moments, wrapped in a voluminous shawl and with the plait of her hair lying over her shoulder.

‘Sileby, is something wrong?’ Her eyes, though a bit bleary, opened wide.

‘I am sorry, Miss Isabelle, but I cannot get his Lordship to settle.’

‘Is he feverish?’

‘No, but agitated. I think it is the breathing pain, and the confusion of the laudanum. I am not sure he should have more, at least yet, and so ... he might attend to you, Miss.’

‘Yes, of course.’

She entered the sickroom where a screen shielded the head of the bed from excessive light, but the branch of candles on a table by the fire made her blink. Lord Idsworth was propped up in the bed, his face drawn, one hand appearing to grip the bedcover. He watched her approach. It was only as she drew close that there was recognition, but then he had never before seen her with her hair down and a lace-edged cap tied under her chin. He scowled.

‘It is night?’

‘Yes indeed, my Lord, the middle thereof. You should try to sleep.’

‘I cannot.’

‘Not with his eyes open, certainly,’ mumbled Sileby.

Isabelle came to sit on the bed and took hold of the hand which clasped the coverlet.

‘I understand, my Lord, that breathing is a torment, but if you can but sleep a little those hours are freed of it.’

His face grew grim and he screwed up his eyes.

‘If I sleep ... won’t breathe at all. Won’t wake.’

That scared her, but she sounded calm.

‘That is the twisted thought of the laudanum, my Lord, but if it concerns you so, I shall stay here with you and watch that you breathe, and wake you if it seems you may “forget” to do so.’

‘Promise?’ He needed her assurance.

‘I promise.’ She smiled at him. ‘Now shut your eyes. If you can think of something pleasant it may help.’ She thought that sounded fatuous even as she said it, but he did shut his eyes and after about ten minutes the breathing became a little less tense, and she thought him asleep. She began to withdraw her hand, but he stirred, and in a mumbled and slightly slurred whisper said one word.

‘You.’

Isabelle eventually managed to disengage her hand. Sibley had put more coals upon the fire and set a pan of milk upon a trivet to warm should she wish for any. The temptation of the warmth of the fire was countered by her promise and also by the feeling that her patient genuinely needed her. He had not wanted anyone but her when Dr Apsley worked upon him, held her hand as if it were a lifeline, would not rest secure without her presence. It was not a normal reaction but then he had been confused, first by pain and then the effects of the medicines. She was the rock to which he clung, and she found it rather wonderful. Perhaps she had missed it, being needed. Her father had needed her, her physical assistance and also her emotional support, for four years. With his death she had become redundant, and here she was, suddenly, important to another individual again. She tried to ignore the small voice which added ‘not just to someone, but to *him*’.

She placed the chair so that she was beside the bed, and in the chill small hours, dozed a little, very lightly. Every pausing breath, every change in the pattern, saw her awake, and watchful as promised. At five he awoke coughing, which tried him sorely, and he took a little water. There was still the occasional red fleck of blood, and she had a horror that in some way the coughing might cause some catastrophic rupture, though Dr Apsley had not warned her of any such likelihood. The worrying part of her brain said that this was because if it happened there was nothing she could do. He did seem less confused, and since he coped she kept the laudanum bottle stoppered. When the coughing eased he spoke, slowly, and in a whisper.

‘What hour is it?’

She rose so that she could see the face of the clock placed upon the mantelshelf.

‘Just gone five and twenty past five in the morning, my Lord.’

‘You were here. All night.’

‘I promised I would stay.’

‘You did?’ He paused. ‘I ... requested?’

‘Demanded.’ She smiled. ‘But it is no matter. Sileby will relieve me at six, and I shall sleep until noon.’

‘I am sorry.’

‘Why?’

‘I am a trial.’

‘If you are, my Lord, you are one which I am perfectly willing to endure.’ She sounded so calm, so restful.

‘Thank you.’

There was strain still in his eyes, but was her heart deceiving her when it said there was more also? Last night, when he had said ‘You’, perhaps it was a random thought, but perhaps it was one uninhibited, one which said that she was ‘a nice thought’. She looked down, avoiding those eyes,

but knew they remained upon her. They sat in silence, in a strange mix of awkwardness and companionship. Just before the hour she moved the chair, stretching stiff limbs. The shawl slipped from her shoulders, and she bent quite casually to pick it up. That he might have seen her, albeit briefly, attired only for her bed, did not occur to her.

‘You will try and rest, my Lord, as much as you can.’ She tried to make it a command more than a request. ‘I will return at noon and we will dress the wounds again. The doctor left more basilicum.’ Sileby entered the room. ‘I shall wish you a good morning, my Lord, and retire.’

‘Wish you ... goodnight, then.’

She smiled and controlled the urge to yawn.

‘You sleep as much as you needs to, Miss,’ advised Sileby as he saw her out.

‘I will be here at noon, Sileby.’

She was true to her word and returned at noon, having had an early luncheon as soon as she awoke. His lordship had requested to be shaved and Sileby had done his best, but dare not touch those parts which had taken injury. The Earl of Idsworth did, perforce, look slightly one-sided, one cheek sleek and tidy, the other mostly stubbled. Isabelle could not prevent a smile.

He raised an eyebrow.

‘I fear, my Lord, you look a trifle,’ she bit her lip, ‘moth-eaten.’

There was a gurgle of laughter in her and it made him smile, lopsidedly, for one side of his face was beginning to throb. He opened his mouth to speak and winced. His jaw ached abominably.

‘My Lord, is your face more painful?’ There was no laughter now, and she drew closer.

He nodded, slowly. She leant close, so close he could detect the smell of lavender upon her skin, and peered at the damaged flesh. A wound close to the hinge of the jaw was

red-edged, and showed inflammation. She touched the area very fleetingly with her fingertip, and he flinched.

‘I am sorry. I believe there is some infection, and of course moving the jaw will hurt. Perhaps Dr Apsley will recommend hot compresses, I do not know. I would wish to remove the bandage now, if we may, and check the other wounds and apply fresh basilicum powder.’

He inclined his head slightly in assent, and Sileby supported him as the bandage about shoulder and chest was removed. He could not turn his head but his eyes moved to see as much of what had happened as he could. The upper portion of his chest and left upper arm were dotted as if with a rash, except that instead of spots there were wounds. A few were already showing good signs of healing. The area looked bruised. Some wounds looked angry.

‘Not ... pretty,’ he whispered out of the side of his mouth.

‘No, my Lord, but prettiness is not everything.’ She sounded cool, calm, in control, though in reality her brief period of relief had ended. ‘I must ask you to keep as still as you can, while I clean everything.’

She took a piece of muslin and dipped it in water that Sileby had boiled in preparation. She worked as gently as she could, conscious that he must feel every touch as she removed traces of pus. He watched her look of concentration, the furrowing of the delicately arched brows, the way that sometimes the very tip of her tongue protruded between her lips. Focussing on her helped. Lord Idsworth had never been one for the muslin company. There had been the ‘young lady’ whilst at Cambridge who had proved to be neither quite as young as he thought, and as far distant from a lady as could possibly be imagined, after whom he had shied away from the gentle sex. His period in London had been marked by far greater worries than a nascent interest in debutantes, and the women of the Iberian Peninsula had failed to attract him.

Miss Wareham attracted him a great deal, a very great deal, and it was not simply the attractiveness of her physical form. She seemed to understand the nature of his humour, to be able to follow it and match it, and had a sweetness which yet had some steel to it. He felt awful, yet her proximity alleviated the misery just enough to make it bearable. He wished he could thank her properly, but anything approaching a gracious speech was entirely beyond him. In fact, a full sentence was probably beyond him. There were much more suitable things for a well brought up young lady to be doing than cleaning suppurating wounds, his wounds, and yet here she was, and treating it as if it was as normal as stitching a sampler or taking tea with a friend.

Isabelle had done nearly all that she could. She hoped that Dr Apsley would dismiss the infection as trivial. She was worried but she smiled as if the inflammation meant nothing.

‘That is a little better, my Lord. I shall dust it with the powder and bind your shoulder with a fresh bandage.’

She looked him straight in the eye and he could only hope she saw his gratitude.

It was mid-afternoon, and her patient had drifted into an uneasy doze, when there came a gentle knock on the sickroom door. Isabelle hoped it was the doctor.

‘Begging your pardon, Miss Isabelle, but Mr Semington is below, and most desirous of speech with you.’ It was Wellow, and he sounded apologetic.

‘Oh no, not now.’

‘I did suggest he call at a more appropriate time, Miss, knowing how matters stand with his Lordship, but he is adamant that he should see you.’ The old butler paused. ‘If you can spare Sibley we might be able to remove him forcibly, if required.’ He did not sound too convinced.

In less stressful circumstances Isabelle would have found the thought of Edwin being ejected from the house by her

devoted and elderly retainers amusing. At the moment she just sighed.

‘I shall have to see him, I suppose, but only briefly. He is the most vexatious man. Thank you, Wellow. Please send Jane upstairs to keep watch. Lord Idsworth sleeps, and if he wakes she can come to fetch me. Sileby is taking his rest. Show Mr Semington into the drawing room. There is no fire lit there. Perhaps he might get the hint more swiftly if cold. I shall be down directly.’

Wellow went to execute this instruction, and took secret delight in showing the unwelcome guest into a room where no cheering fire burnt in the grate, and the dull day necessitated the lighting of a branch of candles to lighten the gloom. He took his time lighting the candles.

Isabelle looked down at the drawn face, sleeping but not restful. The increase in his temperature worried her, and she hoped that Dr Apsley’s visit would be soon. Jane knocked and entered quietly.

‘You cannot do anything particular, right now, Miss. I can carry on with the cool cloth. You go and give that Mr Semington the truth of ’is folly.’ Jane made no attempt to disguise her dislike.

Isabelle nodded and went downstairs, with a deliberate slowness. Meeting him would be difficult, not from embarrassment, for she felt none, but because she wanted to shout at him, shake him for his wanton recklessness, and she would have to curb that desire. When she entered the drawing room, he was stood before the fireplace in much the same attitude as if there had been warmth at his back.

‘Ah, there you are my dear Isabelle. I just had to comewhen I heard the news. I must explain.’

Isabelle stood completely still. He had come to explain? Explain what? And ‘when I heard the news’? There was no news. He knew when he shot Lord Idsworth yesterday morning. Why had he not sent yesterday to find out, even if he thought better of coming himself, whether or not he had

killed a man? When she found her voice it was chill with antipathy.

‘Yes, I am here Edwin, when I ought rather to be attending the man you nearly killed. And I am not your “dear”. What is more, there is nothing to explain. I was there, remember. I saw what happened.’

‘But you were not looking at me at the fatal moment.’

‘It is not yet fatal, though if Lord Idsworth recovers it will be through his own strength, a good doctor, and Providence.’

‘Ah, yes, perhaps an infelicitous choice of adjective. I apologise. However, you did not see what happened. The gun was faulty. I blame the loader, of course, and I hope that ...’

He stopped. Isabelle was staring at him and her jaw had actually dropped in total amazement.

‘The gun was faulty?’ Her disbelief was patent.

‘Yes, my dear. You would not understand the technicalities.’

‘For your information, I used to accompany Papa when he went out shooting wood pigeon. He let me load for him and indeed, I have shot a few birds, so I know rather better than you think.’ He looked both shocked and surprised. She glared at him. ‘You have the audacity to come here and try to apportion blame elsewhere when the fault lies entirely and utterly with you. You are not only an appalling shot, you are dangerous and should not be permitted to carry a gun. You stepped forward of the gun line, which would have forced those about you to cease firing, had the birds been flying, and you loosed both barrels, one after the other, successfully, which proves there was no failure of the gun. Your first shot missed, of course, and you just carried on regardless of safety, far beyond the arc of fire, thinking what? That you would prove yourself by downing an easy bird that even a novice would have dropped at the first shot

had it not been too low to take? You disgust me, Mr Semington, and I desire that you leave my house.'

'You are overtired, agitated. You do not mean these hurtful things.'

'Hurtful? Oh, I assure you, you do not know the meaning of "hurt", Sir. "Hurt" is having the doctor dig lead from your flesh; "hurt" is losing function in your lung so that there is pain upon every breath. Now, I am needed upstairs for Dr Apsley is due. Wellow will show you out.'

She did not bid him goodbye, but stalked from the room, her nails digging into the palms of her hands with anger. Wellow was hovering outside, 'in case of need' as he later told Sibley. He also had the under housemaid already holding Mr Semington's hat, gloves and coat.

'Should Mr Semington call again, Wellow, I am not receiving visitors.'

'Yes, Miss Isabelle.'

'Please show him out.'

'With pleasure, Miss.' Wellow bowed, and smiled to himself, before schooling his features into suitable inscrutability and opening the drawing room door. He enjoyed the next two minutes exceedingly.

In the hall, the maid helped Mr Semington on with his coat. As he left, the doctor's gig drew up.

'Ah, Dr Apsley. I hope you are well. I myself have suffered a severe shock to the nerves. Look, my hand is trembling.'

He held out a hand. It trembled, but very much as if he was making it shake. Dr Apsley made vague noises and committed himself not at all. Privately, he thought that the man was trying to cover himself, in case, God forbid, it ended up coming before the coroner. It was unlikely, but there was always a possibility. He would not tell Miss Wareham, because it would upset her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DOCTOR CLIMBED THE STAIRS A LITTLE SLOWLY. He had had a busy day, with a cross birth, a broken arm, and a child with the croup. However, as he entered the room his face showed nothing but competence and assurance. Miss Wareham gave him a smile, but it was a worried one.

‘Good afternoon, Doctor.’ Her voice was lowered, and she moved away from where she had taken a seat beside the bed. ‘Lord Idsworth is asleep at the moment, but has been more restless as the day has worn on. I think him a little flushed. He has not taken any more laudanum. It caused confusion and distressful imaginings. He awoke last night and was of the belief that if he closed his eyes to sleep, he would cease to breathe. I had to promise to remain and watch that he did not in order for him to relax.’ She sighed. ‘He woke about five of the clock and seemed a little better, more lucid, though in pain from his chest. However, when I returned to change the dressing at noon, he was very reluctant to speak because of the pain in his face. There is a wound adjacent to the hinge of the jaw that looks decidedly inflamed, though there has been no obvious suppuration. I removed the dressing to the shoulder and chest. There is a large and general bruise. Some wounds are already clearly healing, perhaps half. Of the others, some dozen looked angry and oozed. I cleaned the wounds with boiled water, applied basilicum and a new bandage. This afternoon he seems vague.’ She tried to sound detached.

‘A thorough report, Miss Isabelle. That there is some pus does not surprise me, as I warned, but I had hoped that there would not be fever. However, let us see the patient, asleep or not.’

He approached the bed. There was indeed a slight flush to the cheeks, and the area described by Miss Wareham was inflamed. He frowned. He had chosen not to probe the wound so close to the working of the jaw, but he might yet have to do so.

‘Should hot fomentations be applied? Would that help?’
Isabelle was watching the doctor’s expression.

He looked at her.

‘Yes, we try that first, and to the other inflammation.’

‘Try?’

‘I will not raise your hopes. I would expect an amelioration but ... it might not clear the infection entirely.’

‘But the feverishness. If it gets worse ...’

‘Miss Isabelle, you must not work to your worst fears.’

‘I am being realistic, Dr Apsley.’

‘I admit it is disappointing but not, as I maintain, unexpected. He is clearly a strong man, in the prime of life, and it is quite possible that his body will be able to counter the infection. Fever is a sign that the body is fighting illness. The fever itself is a danger, but now we have to help him. We deal with the infected areas, and we nurse the fever: cool cloths applied to the skin if hot, blankets when he shivers. Hot fomentations should be applied to the infected wounds. I am, I must say, reluctant to probe the wound on the jaw. The shot was not removed because doing so might damage the movement of the jaw, but if the infection gets worse, I will have to make the attempt.’

‘He has not eaten,’ she said, fretfully.

‘A few days without food will not do harm, but he must have fluid. Use a spoon if he cannot sip water. It is time-consuming, but good nursing can make all the difference. You have shown how capable you are at that in the past, Miss Isabelle. Do not let yourself be despondent.’

‘I will do my best, Doctor.’

‘Your best has always been good enough. It will be so now.’

‘It has to be.’

Dr Apsley’s visit did not leave Isabelle in the mood to eat a good dinner. When she was relieved by Sileby a little before

six o'clock, she found Wellow anxious to lay Mrs Frampton's best efforts before her. Below stairs there was anxiety among the trio of her chief supporters. Mrs Frampton had shaken her head over her mistress.

'We know how she is. She wore herself to the bone when her poor father had the influenza, and again when he was laid up with that bad chest last winter, and I fear she will do so on this occasion.'

'I think part of her is better, you know, having something to do, someone to care for, after these last months,' offered Wellow, 'but she will overwork herself, and over a gentleman whom she scarcely knows.'

Sibley kept his own counsel on that point. It seemed to him that Miss Isabelle's concern for the wounded man was not dispassionate. As far as he had learnt, Lord Idsworth had only once been within the house, and had arrived at the Hall only the week before Christmas. He could not see that they had met on more than four or five occasions, but the way she looked at him, and the way he responded, was not that of slight acquaintances.

With her retainers determined to cosset her as much as possible, Isabelle found herself presented with dishes that Mrs Frampton knew would tempt her, and with Wellow encouraging her to keep up her strength, hovering at her elbow to press more upon her. She was caught between ravenous hunger and feeling rather sick through worry.

'When you are finished, Miss, your bed is all warmed and the fire made up for you in your room. Best you get all the rest you can, and not worry.'

She could have laughed at the idea of not worrying. It was as if she had nothing but this enormous worry. It crushed her in an almost physical way and besides, she wanted to commence the hot fomentations herself before taking to her warmed bed.

'Thank you, Wellow. I will go to my bed as soon as I may do so, but Dr Apsley has recommended fomentations

for the wounds, and I wish to see those commenced, at the least.'

'As you wish, Miss, but do, I beg you, have a care to yourself.' Wellow made no attempt to hide his fatherly concern.

Isabelle smiled at him and assured him she would not be foolish.

'Sileby will be chivvying me, I am sure of it. I am surrounded by those with an eye to my welfare.'

Wellow looked unconvinced that his advice would be taken and thought how sad it was that those who had his young mistress's welfare most to heart were her servants.

Isabelle returned to the bedchamber, where Sileby was already laying a tray with clean linen and recently boiled water. He turned and frowned at his mistress.

'Now, Miss, you are not going to say you cannot trust me to do this, are you, for I will be mightily offended.'

'Of course not, Sileby, but I am not going to sleep without the chance to do something rather than simply observe and worry.'

'And if you do not take care you will find yourself done to a cow's thumb in no time, and then where will we be.'

'Do not scold me, Sileby. I am not a child of six.'

'Indeed, Miss Isabelle. You just remember that also and think like the grown woman you are.' He came as close to direct censure as he could, aware that he was permitted far greater licence than a mere servant would ever expect, and not wanting to abuse the privilege.

She smiled lopsidedly, and went to the bedside. She had been absent less than an hour but could see that there was a deterioration. Lord Idsworth was not asleep, but his eyes were half-closed, and one hand plucked at the bedcovers. She laid a hand on his brow, not that it needed such confirmation of what she could see. The skin was hot and dry. She turned back the covers, and called Sileby to hold

his lordship whilst she removed the dressing and laid a pad beneath him to absorb any moisture that trickled from the compresses.

‘The water should be about cool enough not to scald, Miss, but take care. Do not harm your hands.’

She nodded and dipped the first piece of flannel in the bowl. It was unpleasantly hot, but the heat was important to the efficacy of the treatment, so she displayed no sign of discomfort. She placed it in a length of cotton towel, and Sileby took the other end so that the water would be squeezed out as they twisted it. Then Isabelle wrapped it around a pad and pressed it to the shoulder. A smaller pad was prepared for the jaw, and that one she held in place most firmly. Her fingers pressed the pad, and her thumb lay along the jawline, noting the roughness of the stubble. The thought occurred to her that it must be unusual for a young lady of her age, as yet unmarried, to have touched stubble, but having nursed her father when he was too ill to be shaved meant that the feel of it was not new to her. It registered in a different way, however much she might tell herself that it was the same. She flushed, and hoped Sileby would put it down to the heat in the room. It was wrong, immoral even, to feel as she did when her fingers touched Lord Idsworth’s skin, but she would ignore the guilt for the pleasure of it. Only in such awful circumstances would it have been possible, and she chastised herself for the wicked thought that wormed into her brain, the thought that said Providence had thrown them together with a reason.

The fomentations were continued for an hour, but then the degree of fever necessitated cooling of the skin. Isabelle was fully prepared to remain, but Sileby virtually ordered her to bed.

‘You needs your rest, Miss, and besides, with you not here, I can cool his Lordship more effectively.’

Isabelle looked questioningly, and he cleared his throat, embarrassed.

‘I can draw back the covers, Miss, and if a sheet is soaked in iced water, use that over all. Worked in the Americas, when the Colonel had a bad fever in ’79.’

Isabelle blushed, and left. The blush remained, even as she lay in her bed and tried to sleep, for the image in her mind was of Lord Idsworth lying with but a damp sheet clinging to his form.

She slept more heavily than anticipated and it was one in the morning when she awoke. She dressed hurriedly and returned to the sickroom apologetic. Sileby saw it as a vindication.

‘Never you mind, Miss. I said as how you ought to have retired earlier. It’s glad I am that you took what sleep you needed.’

‘How is he?’

‘Can’t pretend he has improved at all, Miss Isabelle. I have applied the compresses again while he was shiver-cold, and piled on the blankets only to remove the whole lot half an hour later. The fomentations have helped the shoulder, I think, for those parts which looked most red and had given up pus yesterday have rendered more, and freely. With luck, they will be clear enough for healing proper.’

He drew back the coverlet. He had not bandaged the chest but merely covered it in a clean dressing. Dots and smears of suppuration marked the cloth. Isabelle counted.

‘I think there are fewer, you know. I counted a dozen infected wounds yesterday, and now see but nine. It does show that his body is fighting well.’ She tried to sound confident. The wound to the jaw looked no better – if anything, it looked more angry red.

‘We just has to persevere, Miss Isabelle, and what will be, will be.’

‘Yes. Now, Sileby, it is your turn to rest. I will see you in the morning.’

Left alone in the quiet, where only the occasional movement of a coal within the fire, or a mouse in the

skirting board, made a sound, Isabelle took her chair by the sickbed. The covers were drawn up to the chin, and Lord Idsworth was beginning to shake with rigors. It broke her heart to see him so, and she fought back tears. She was no use to him weak and emotional. The bed was piled with blankets, and she knew that there was little else she could do in this phase for the fever. She might usefully apply more fomentations, though, and so she set about preparing more pads. Having something to do was a boon, but within the hour she wished she had less. He passed from chill to burning, and thrashed about to cast off the covers. Isabelle wondered if she ought to wake Sileby, but the poor man had barely had more than an hour's sleep. She wavered, and then made her decision. The sheet lay folded in the basin of water. She could always close her eyes for modesty's sake, and nobody would ever know. It was, she reasoned, a life or death situation, and normal rules of propriety did not apply. She removed all but the final sheet, keeping her eyes on his face. Then she went and wrung out the sheet, folded it in half along its length, returned to the bed and took a deep breath. Shutting her eyes, she whisked off the dry sheet and cast the damp one where she thought it would land correctly. By stepping back to where his feet must be she could move the sheet into place over the legs, and then do the same at chest level. This manoeuvre complete, she opened her eyes and nearly squeaked in horror, for his eyes were open and he was staring at her. He frowned, then his face cleared. He moved his lips, but there was no sound. She remembered the instruction to give water and took a small glass from the table. She pressed it to his lips, telling him to open his mouth a little, speaking reassuringly but firmly. She let the water trickle into his mouth and hoped he could swallow. He did so but choked slightly, and an expression of pain crossed his features.

She soothed him with her voice, took his hand, and he looked at her, bemused, trying to place her, and himself. She gained confidence. This need not be embarrassing for he would recall nothing. She kept talking, so that he would register he was not alone and hopefully feel cared for, and after a few minutes the eyelids flickered and closed.

‘You poor, dear man,’ she breathed softly, without thinking.

The night swung from one extreme to the other, until Isabelle lost count of how many times she had applied or removed the covers. She thought perhaps the breathing itself had improved, but what use was a healing lung if the body was being poisoned. As the hours progressed and her actions formed a rhythm, she became less concerned about decency. She averted her eyes as much as possible, but did not bother to close them, dismissing it as prudery. Her task was to help him live, and anything else was trivial. Whether Sileby discovered her beside a man covered only in damp sheeting no longer mattered. As it turned out, she was piling more blankets upon her patient when he came in, smothering a yawn.

He saw the severity of her expression, and grimaced.

‘No sign of the fever breaking, then?’

‘Not as yet, Sileby, but you and I both know they can last several days and yet be broken successfully.’

‘That’s it, Miss, you keep positive.’

‘If it were but the suppurations from the chest, I would be confident, I think. I see further good signs there apart from a few places. It is the wound on the face that worries me most. Dr Apsley would not have neglected to remove the lead if it had been safe to do so, but I can see no alternative to him probing for the shot. I also think he ought to be summoned earlier on his rounds. I will send Thomas to request him to call earlier in the day, and if he does so when I have retired, you will call me.’

Sileby looked undecided.

‘You will call me, Sileby. I want that understood.’

‘Yes, Miss Isabelle.’

‘And we must give him water as often as possible, especially if he stirs. He did so several times, unaware of where he was, and I gave him sips of water from the glass.’

Now, I shall retire, and be back about noon. Good luck, Sileby.'

'Sleep well, Miss Isabelle.'

She went to ring for Wellow, and then realised the hour. She crept downstairs in the darkness, so familiar with the house as not to need candles, and went to sit in the library, in her father's favourite chair. It was there, with her hand under her cheek, that she was discovered, asleep, by the under housemaid, when the girl came to sweep the hearth half an hour later. The poor girl dropped the pan and brush with a clatter and a cry, and then brought forth a torrent of apology.

Wellow, hearing the cry, came from the servants' quarters with the buttons of his waistcoat still undone, and as fast as his age permitted. He found two young women, their hearts both racing, facing each other in the gloom of a single candle flame.

'Whatever is to do? Miss Isabelle?' He frowned. 'You should be in your bed, not here, Miss.'

'I am sorry, Wellow. I had to wait for the house to waken. I want you to send Thomas to Dr Apsley as soon as it is light. I think he ought to visit earlier in the day for Lord Idsworth's condition is worse. Oh, and I think Thomas should then go on to the Hall and warn ... Tell Sir Charles. Perhaps I should write a note. Oh dear.' She pressed a hand to her cheek.

'I am sorry to hear it, Miss. I will send the message to the stables for Thomas to make himself ready directly. It will be light enough within half an hour for him to depart.'

'Thank you.' She got up, a little stiffly. 'I am sorry that I startled you, Sukie.'

'Oh Miss, it was just so unexpected. I am sorry I dropped the brush and pan.' She curtsied and looked to Wellow. 'Should I remain, Mr Wellow, and continue?'

'Yes, do that, Sukie.' He looked to his mistress. 'Would you like a cup of tea, in here, and a slice of bread and butter,

before retiring?’ His voice was all consideration.

‘Oh, Wellow, that would be nice. In fact, do you think Mrs Frampton would boil me an egg?’

‘It would be her pleasure, Miss. You sit there and I will return shortly.’

She sat before the desk, her thoughts upstairs, and managed a hasty note to her cousin. Before long, Wellow came with a tray of bread and butter, two boiled eggs and a pot of tea.

‘There, Miss Isabelle, you make a good breakfast and then get your rest. Just leave the tray when you have finished.’

‘Thank you, Wellow. You all take such care of me.’ She handed him the note. ‘This is for Sir Charles, but only after Thomas has found Dr Apsley.’

He smiled in a paternal way, bowed, and left her to eat. When she had finished, she made her way up to her room but did not undress, merely removed her shoes and lay upon the bed with a shawl over her. She was asleep within minutes.

It was after ten o’clock when Thomas, having tracked down the good doctor, reached Baddesley Hall, and delivered the note. Sir Charles was breakfasting with Lord Mollington, who was reluctantly making preparations to depart. He read the scribbled missive in a matter of moments, his brow creased and his lips drawn in a thin, angry line.

‘Er, not bad news, I hope?’ enquired Lord Mollington, without any hope at all.

‘Isabelle says Idsworth’s fever is worse and she is calling back the doctor. She fears the poison from the wounds may be becoming general.’

‘Ah. Not good at all. I am sorry.’

‘I think,’ declared Sir Charles very deliberately, ‘I shall pay a visit to Semington.’

It did not sound as if Mr Semington would appreciate this visit. Lord Mollington looked worried.

‘Wouldn’t if I were you, my dear fellow. I mean, Idsworth may pull through and there seems little doubt it was an accident, however foolish.’

‘If Idsworth dies, I will break his neck,’ muttered Sir Charles, grinding his teeth.

‘Well, in those circumstances, I would return and help you, dashed if I wouldn’t.’

Isabelle awoke to the sound of knocking and sat up so fast she felt dizzy. A voice from beyond the door announced that Dr Apsley was in the hall. She sat for a moment, then went to splash water on her face and tidy her hair a little. She met the doctor at the top of the stairs.

‘Good morning, Miss Isabelle. I take it our patient is no better.’

‘Worse, I fear, Doctor. I would have you look especially at the cheek. The night was very restless, and the fever grips more firmly.’

‘I see. Then let us assess the situation.’ He opened the door for her to precede him into the room. He went immediately to the bed, and took a pulse, then turned back the covers to reveal the chest.

‘Breathing is more even.’

‘I thought that, Doctor.’

‘And the general bruising and healing is good.’ He stared more closely at several puncture sites. ‘I may attempt the removal of the shot from one which I previously left, but otherwise ...’ He touched the jaw, and as he neared the angry wound, his Lordship moved his head, flinching even when barely conscious. The doctor frowned. ‘There is no help for it but to remove the shot and drain the wound. I will probe the most inflamed shoulder wound also. Sibley, will you boil water, and if you would remove the pillows, Miss Isabelle. Thank you.’

Dr Apsley rolled up his sleeves and said no more, concentrating upon what he was about to do, going over the anatomy in his mind. He took out his roll of instruments and placed several in a basin where Sileby poured the hot water. A few minutes later he was ready to begin. Without asking, Isabelle placed herself on the opposite side of the bedhead. Conscious, Lord Idsworth had striven to lie still; clouded by fever, he was less likely to co-operate.

‘You hold his head, Miss Isabelle, firmly now, facing your side, and Sileby, hold down the torso if he writhes, please.’

Aware how dangerous movement might be, Isabelle held the head so tightly her forearms ached within minutes. She watched, mesmerised, almost holding her breath, though the sight was revolting. Dr Apsley worked cautiously, and it took far longer than the simple extractions of two days before. At last, however, the doctor made a sound indicating satisfaction, and withdrew the shot, then irrigated the track of the wound, which produced, what he called ‘a satisfying discharge’. As he turned his attention to the shoulder, Isabelle relaxed a little, less aware of what harm might follow an injudicious advance of the slim steel forceps. When the second extraction was complete the doctor straightened and spoke.

‘I believe that should diminish the production of suppurating material.’

‘Will the jaw be normal, Dr Apsley?’

‘I cannot be certain until such time as the patient is coherent and capable of speech, but I am reasonably confident. If the source of infection is reduced to a marked degree, there is a greater chance of the fever breaking. You have done well so far, but must remain vigilant.’

‘How long do you think it will be before we know if ...’

‘I would expect any crisis in the next thirty-six hours. I do not think I shall bleed him today, but may do so tomorrow. If there is a sudden worsening, send to me, day or night, Miss Isabelle.’

She felt her heart sink. That he felt it necessary to give such an injunction filled her with fear. She nodded.

The instruments were cleaned of pus and put away, the doctor rolled down his sleeves, and departed. Isabelle returned to her rest but did not achieve more than a fitful doze.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE NEXT EIGHTEEN HOURS PASSED IN A BLUR OF anxiety. Isabelle took less and less of her allotted time to rest, and her face was pinched with worry. Just to add to her concerns, the weather deteriorated, and by eleven in the evening it was snowing heavily. By the dawn there was a good eight inches of snow in front of the house, and in places it was drifting. Isabelle realised that whatever happened, it was unlikely that Dr Apsley could assist further. She felt beleaguered.

Lord Idsworth was clearly delirious now, and constantly fretful. At one point, whilst Sileby was absent, he threw all the bedcoverings off and tried to climb out of the bed. It took Isabelle by surprise, and she only prevented him doing so by speaking very firmly, ordering him to lie back, and pressing back hard upon his good shoulder and the middle of his chest.

‘No, my Lord, you shall not. Lie down, Sir, lie down.’ She spoke not in alarm but with authority. On the third such command, he did lie back, and for a moment there was a hint of understanding, perhaps even of recognition. She sat upon the bed edge, looking down, her hand still firmly pressing him back. ‘That is better. Do as you are bid, my Lord, and all will be well.’

He made as if he would say something, but then frowned as the clouds of semi-consciousness fogged his thoughts again. She sat very still for some minutes as her heart resumed its normal beat, and then realised that all the bedclothes lay upon the floorboards. Strangely, she did not even blush, but simply replaced them. She was too stressed, too tired, to care.

About six in the morning, she returned to the bedside, having made herself a cup of tea, and dropped both cup and saucer to the floor. The saucer cracked across and the cup rolled under the bed, but she ignored them. She was gazing at Lord Idsworth’s face. His brow was beaded with sweat.

She touched his cheek, his body. Out of nowhere the fever had broken. She stood for a moment and then a sob burst from her, like a bubble of relief, and she sat down heavily on the bed itself. She took up his right hand and held it to her cheek, where her tears fell upon it. After a while she regained her self-control, sniffed, and stood up, her mind crowded with practicalities. The bed linen must be changed for some that were fresh and dry; Mrs Frampton must be readied to make gruel or a consommé as soon as his Lordship had rested sufficiently; barley water, yes, there must be barley water. Her thoughts were muddled and she did not hear Sileby enter.

‘Miss Isabelle?’

‘Oh, Sileby,’ she turned to him, her voice cracking, ‘The fever has broken. He will live.’ Thereupon she sat back down on the foot of the bed and wept.

She slept long, and deeply, the nagging worry removed from her mind, and awoke feeling sparkling and refreshed. Had she been nine, not nineteen, she would have skipped along the passageway to the best guest bedchamber. She entered softly. Sileby was seated by the fire, his feet stretched out before him, and was snoring very gently. She could not begrudge him, for he too had spent far too many hours awake, and she had slept three hours beyond his ‘watch’. She looked at the bed. It was tidier than the last few days, and Lord Idsworth lay with only a single pillow beneath his head. He slept. He was not unconscious; he simply slept. She tiptoed closer and looked down at his unshaven face. He had looked better. The stubble was disreputable, and the left side of his jaw still had evidence of swelling and a small square of dressing over the recent surgery. Yet he struck her as beautiful to behold. She smiled.

The eyelids flickered and opened. His eyes screwed up as he drew her into focus.

‘Odd. An angel wearing black.’ His voice was barely more than a croaking whisper, accompanied by a very wavering smile.

‘I have no wings. I am no angel.’ Her own smile broadened and answered his, and her voice was soft. Without thinking, she touched his cheek. ‘Go back to sleep, my Lord. All will be well, I promise.’

He shut his eyes, obediently, and did not see the joyous tear that trickled down her cheek. Isabelle watched the breathing, even and normal at last. It was so simple a thing and yet now seemed a miracle. She had prayed for a miracle indeed and here it was. The price was that she need no longer spend every waking hour with him, but that first day of recovery she did not think of that.

She discussed with Mrs Frampton what dishes would best tempt the recovering patient’s appetite, and the cook marvelled at the change in her mistress. She had seen her but once in the last four days, and she had looked grey and careworn. Now she looked brighter and happier than she had been in six months. It was as if she had been unnaturally aged by care, and suddenly she was just her own nineteen years.

Isabelle arranged that Sileby should remain in the house to act as his Lordship’s personal attendant during his recuperation, and that a night watch need not be kept at all after this first night on the road to recovery. She argued that if he slept through the day, he might not wake at all until the night-time and then be thoroughly confused.

‘After all, he will probably recall nothing or little of the last few days since the accident.’

Sileby admitted this to be true, but suggested that he take the watch from midnight, since she could not expect to return to her bed only three hours after leaving it, and then sleep. She agreed to this, and so Sileby retired to a sound seven hours of sleep. Isabelle took her dinner upon a tray in the sickroom, but ate extremely well even requesting a second helping of Mrs Frampton’s steamed sponge pudding. She then spent the evening quietly, ostensibly with a branch of candles and some sewing, but few stitches were set. Most of the time she simply gazed at the man lying asleep in the bed. It was a little after ten, and she had just heard Wellow

fasten the front door for the night, when she detected stirring, and approached the bed. Lord Idsworth's eyes were open and this time he clearly knew who she was.

'Miss Wareham.' He smiled, still a little hazily. 'What day is this?'

'It is Thursday, my Lord. The ninth day of January.'

He assimilated this information.

'Ah. I confess that my recollections of the past four days are somewhat nebulous, but I am correct in saying that I was shot, by an idiot with a shotgun?'

'Yes, my Lord, and the idiot's name is Mr Semington.'

He set this piece in the jigsaw puzzle that was his memory of events.

'Yes, you were there. And you saved my life.'

'I rendered what meagre assistance I could, my lord. That you are happily on the road to recovery is down to the skill of the doctor who attended you, and to Providence. And if we are to talk of saving lives, well, had you not pushed me out of the way ...' She spoke very formally. It was so at odds with her youth that he smiled, and held out his hand. Without thinking, she took it.

'Thank you, anyway,' he murmured, and frowned, for the act was familiar. Then he looked at her, as if his gaze could read her mind and see the missing days through her. 'I held your hand before, when the sawbones was digging about.'

'That is hardly a polite way to describe Dr Apsley, my Lord.'

'He wasn't digging very politely, as I seem to remember.' His eyes did not waver, in fact they took in more; the dark shadows that lingered beneath her eyes, the hint of shyness that had sprung in them. 'You know, I think I was right the first time.'

'Sir?'

‘I have not lain in some peaceful swoon for four days, Miss Wareham. I have been nursed. I know it, and I remember—’

‘You were fevered, my Lord,’ she interjected swiftly, ‘and thus memory is not to be relied upon.’

She made to withdraw her hand, but he held it as firmly as his weakened state permitted. Had she truly wished to break free, she might have done so. She blushed.

‘You nursed me. You were here, all the while.’

‘Oh no, I swear that was not so, my Lord. I shared the duty of care with Sileby, my father’s old servant. Do not ascribe all to me.’

‘I do not recall holding his hand.’

‘No.’ She looked down, the blush deepening.

‘I find it hard to talk.’

‘Then you should remain silent, for a while.’

‘Why does it hurt? I do not remember that part.’

‘The injuries you sustained were some forty in number, lead shot from the cartridge. Some were trifling flesh wounds, others deeper and more serious. You lost a considerable amount of blood, but thankfully the vessel was small enough for the bleeding to stop, eventually. At least one pellet tore the lung, and that took several days to recover. Most of the wounds are healing well, a few became infected. Most of those are now healing, though I warn you that hot fomentations will be applied again now you have woken from your rest. The infection caused a fever. A few shot were left because Dr Apsley was unwilling to damage important parts, and two of these caused a good deal of trouble. One was at the hinge of the jaw. Dr Apsley removed that one successfully but yesterday, and the one from the chest also. They are improving, but speech is likely to be uncomfortable for a while yet.’ She recited the list like a catechism and did not say that his speaking at all would gratify the doctor.

‘That is a very clinical account, Miss Wareham, but does not mention that you have been exposed to unpleasant sights, and indeed duties. I am in your debt.’

She had been looking down at his hand holding hers, but now let herself look him in the eye once more. She said nothing, but felt much. He was gazing at her very seriously, but within that seriousness was something that made her heart thump in her chest. He drew her hand to him and kissed it, quite formally, and yet it was not at all formal.

‘I am so very, very glad that you are getting better,’ she whispered, but pulled her hand away. He let it go, unresisting.

‘Getting better, perhaps, but I am as weak as a cat. And very thirsty.’

‘Oh, my goodness, of course. I have had Mrs Frampton make up lemon barley water. Let me pour you some.’ She was eager to lead the conversation from the intensely personal.

He watched her at the simple task, and as he did so he became aware of a depth of feeling for her that suffused him with an exulting warmth. He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that what he had been entertaining as a possibility only a few days ago, days that seemed an age ago, was certain. He was in love with her. It was not some warped gratitude towards her for nursing him, for it had been blossoming before ever he was hurt, but her care, her feeling, and he could recall now the courage in her eyes when he had held on to her in his pain, set her aside from any other woman to such a degree that he knew that he would never feel for another as he did for her.

She returned with the glass and set it briefly upon the pot cupboard beside the bed.

‘Let me place another pillow behind you, my Lord, to make it easier to drink.’

She put an arm behind his head and lifted him a little to place the pillow. He caught the scent of lavender on her

gown, on her skin, and it almost overwhelmed him.

‘Now, do not drink too swiftly, or too deeply.’

She held the glass to his lips. He drank, not just the liquid, but the essence of her. She was so close, and he would swear that she was as aware of him as he was of her. He was too tired, too weak, to see his way forward. He knew his own mind but could only guess at hers. She had no experience, he knew that. Perhaps what she felt was some sort of juvenile tendre. How many gentlemen had she met that she had not been acquainted with from childhood? It was all very difficult, and he wanted to sleep.

‘There, Sir, you will feel better for that. It is eleven of the clock, but when you wake in the morning I shall be pressing food upon you, so that you may regain your strength, but for the while, just rest. Are you comfortable? Is there anything I may do to ease you?’

He shook his head, gingerly. He could not tell her that her just being there eased him. He shut his eyes and drifted into sleep.

The morning began what developed as a pattern for the first few days. Isabelle breakfasted and then came to his room to supervise and assist with him taking nourishment. If, after the first day, he did not need to be spooned broth he did not mention it, for having her sit upon his bed and encouraging him with every mouthful was too much of a delight. The hot fomentations were less so, but she was a devoted nurse, and he remained stoic, assuring her that the warmth helped, even though in places it felt as if hot needles were being pressed into his skin.

Sibley watched him carefully, but from entirely different motives. He was not to be deceived, and wondered whether the noble earl was trying to appear brave to impress Miss Isabelle, or to keep her from worry. There was no doubt in his mind that Miss Isabelle was smitten with the gentleman, and her new happiness pervaded the house like spring sunshine, though the snow remained up to eighteen inches

deep outside. She smiled; she laughed; she was happy. He consulted with Wellow and Mrs Frampton on the third day.

‘She does not see it, of course, but now that his Lordship is on the mend, I wondered if I should remind her of the proprieties.’

‘You think he would take advantage?’ Mrs Frampton was shocked.

‘I have no reason to think so at all, but what would the world say to a young lady in a gentleman’s chamber?’

‘She sees it as the sickroom still,’ volunteered Wellow. ‘She called it that this very morning.’

‘And the world,’ declared Mrs Frampton, not a little belligerently, ‘will never know of it. Have you heard her, the dear lamb, laughing and bubbly. Fair takes you back years it does. I say let her be happy.’

‘Ah, but for how long, that is the problem. When his Lordship is recovered he must leave, and will this be but some matter of the moment to him? That is your fear, isn’t it, Mr Sileby?’ Wellow was a romantic too but had a streak of pragmatism.

‘It is. He seems a genuine man, a fine man, I might say. He is the sort of officer you would be glad to follow, but does that mean he is as nutty upon her as she is on him?’ Sileby sniffed. ‘I am tempted to say yes, but foresee dark times. Miss Isabelle is not of age. Can you see Lord Dunsfold agreeing to her getting wed?’

‘To an earl, why would he not do so?’ Mrs Frampton almost snorted.

Sileby bit his lip. He had overheard snippets of conversation that might mean Lord Dunsfold would not be so amenable to a match.

Lord Idsworth remained, in his own mind, pathetically weak, although Isabelle seemed to find the excuse to do everything for him a good thing. He had greater powers of speech, however, and there was no constraint between them. He felt as if he could say anything to her and she would

understand, everything except the depth of his feelings for her. They chatted with the intimacy of friends of long standing. She made him laugh and was then distraught that the laughing made him clutch his chest in pain at the movement. She was as easy with him as with her cousin Charles, though he was no cousin. She was mischievous, quick, and in a more experienced damsel, her behaviour would have been ascribed to flirtatiousness. Yet she was perfectly genuine. He was captivated. It occurred to him, however, that she might assume his rank came with an equally high income. It would be wrong to let her think that, not that he thought her mercenary, but that to conceal his past would be dishonest. So, he told her the sad and sorry tale, making much of his own foolishness, and Sibley heard the end of it.

‘I inherited far too young, of course. My father died when I was nine, and my mother remarried the following year.’

‘Did you dislike your step-papa?’

‘To be honest, I have rarely met him. Mama was never the maternal sort. I was packed off to school at the earliest opportunity, and when I came home for the holidays, my parents were busy or away. Once Mama remarried, I spent my holidays with my Aunt Sophia at the Dower House. She was more of a mother to me, really. I went up to Cambridge, thought myself a man of the world when I came down at the end of my degree, and headed straight to London to cut a dash in Society. Dangerous place, London, for arrogant young cubs with nobody to guide them.’

‘You are very self-critical, my Lord.’

‘I have reason to be, I assure you.’ His smile was crooked. ‘In my folly, I thought that I would not fall into the traps that catch other youths. I did not gamble beyond the odd bet at Tattersalls, and the occasional hand of cards in my club with my friends. I was in some ways a paragon, but a proud one, and pride does indeed come before a fall. I had a mind not just to refrain from losing money, but to invest wisely so that my estates might no longer be encumbered.’

My father had been forced to mortgage much of the land. I think my mother was exceedingly expensive. Luckily her second husband is as rich as Croesus.

I heard of a very reputable company, via a gentleman a few years older than myself. He himself was putting money into their venture and recommended it to me. My man of business looked into it. All seemed sound, excepting for one piece of information he could not pin down. He advised caution, but I went ahead and put all, yes all, of my available capital into the project, and I mortgaged the London residence. Six weeks later, the company failed, leaving massive debts. All that I had was swallowed up. I was *de facto* penniless. The country estates could be kept, but only if I continued to pay the mortgage on them by leasing out the property. My dear aunt provided me with the money to buy a lieutenancy in an infantry regiment, my uniform, sword and a decent mount, and I went off to Portugal to hide my folly, and probably get myself killed.'

Isabelle paled at the thought, and then a crease appeared between her brows.

'Surely others suffered as badly in this disaster? What of the other gentleman, who led you to invest?'

'He sold his stake just before the crash. It seems the missing information came to his ear, but he thought if others also knew and were selling, he would only get a fraction of his investment back. He therefore told me nothing.'

'But that was ... appalling. How could he behave so?'

'He was about to contract a respectable alliance and could not face failure. He sacrificed me.' Lord Idsworth shrugged. 'Such things happen.' He paused, watching her face. All he saw there was compassion. 'So you see, my dear Miss Isabelle, I am a very poor specimen, tarnished by scandal. Perhaps you should cast me out into the snow.'

Sibley had caught that 'Miss Wareham' had become 'Miss Isabelle', though he did not know it had been at her insistence. She had told his Lordship that, circumstance having thrown them into such proximity, it was ridiculous

that he should persist in referring to her as if he had just met her at a ball. He had succumbed to her entreaty. Sibley frowned.

Isabelle's heart was touched by the thought of a young man, a young man deprived of not just maternal love, as she had been, but of a father's also, thinking he was being prudent, being so taken in and deceived, and then bearing such a burden of shame which she felt he did not deserve. Her eyes were misty.

'My Lord, whatever "shame" you suffered, was due to youthful inexperience. You are too hard upon yourself.'

'And you are too generous. Society does not like failure. In polite circles I am "the impoverished Earl of Idsworth", and avoided.'

'But Charlie did not shun you.'

'Your cousin is a good fellow, and not ruled by what others think. I am eternally grateful for him inviting me into Wiltshire for Christmas, rather than me returning to the Dower House and Christmas alone.'

'Your kind aunt?'

'She died last year.'

'Oh dear.'

She was on the point of saying more when Sibley coughed, rather loudly, and they suddenly realised they were not alone.

Isabelle viewed Lord Idsworth in an even more generous light as a result of his honest revelation. Whatever ladies such as her cousin Julia might think of him, she considered him possessed of a sense of honour and duty that made her heart sing. Faced with the shame he felt he had brought upon his name, he had gone to risk life and limb in the service of his king. What more might a young man have done? He must have faults, common sense told her so, but she could not see any. As the days passed, snowbound and secluded, the barriers between them, so flimsy at the outset, simply fell away. They were so engrossed in each other that

they did not even see that what existed had become obvious. Lord Idsworth tried to hold back a little, told himself over and over that she was too innocent to know what she was doing, but they were together too much, alone too often.

What occurred was inevitable. They had been playing chess, which Isabelle consistently lost through impetuosity, and she was laughing at her own folly. Lord Idsworth, attired in one of her father's old dressing gowns, had progressed to sitting out for part of the day, and was respectably shaved and presentable. A strand of hair came loose from Isabelle's knot, and fell against her cheek. Without thinking, he brushed it back behind her ear with his hand, and his palm remained against her cheek. She sat very still, her bosom rising and falling a little fast, and he leant forward and kissed her, very softly, as the chess pieces tumbled. It was a single kiss, and it was intoxicating. Then reality hit him, and he pulled back. She did not take her eyes from his face.

'That was unforgivable. I am sorry.'

'Are you? I ... I liked it.' Her voice sounded very small. 'Did not you?'

'You know I did, Isabelle, but it is to take advantage of you.'

'And if I do not mind? I trust you, completely.'

'Yes, and I have betrayed that trust.'

'No. You kissed me. It would only be a betrayal if you did not mean it.'

'I meant it.' He was not smiling.

'Will you do it again, Sir?'

'No.'

'Oh dear. Was I that bad at it?' She tried to make light of it but looked hurt.

'Isabelle. It is not that I do not want to. I must not. You have to see that.'

‘There is clearly something wrong with my perceptions, for I do not see at all.’

‘Then I must see for you.’ His hand gripped hers. ‘I am a guest in your house. Your only guest, and an uninvited one at that.’

‘I would have invited you, my Lord, but at the time I was too busy staunching blood.’ She gave him a lopsided smile.

‘You do not understand. You are too young, too innocent.’

‘Do you know, I have come to hate the assumption that one’s years are a gauge for one’s ability to comprehend. You are, no doubt, concerned about my “reputation”. I have to say—’

He did not find out what she would have said, for there was a knock upon the door.

Wellow entered with the information that Dr Apsley had managed to make it through the snow and was desirous of seeing his patient. Isabelle’s colour was slightly heightened, but that might have been due to her bending to pick up the white queen.

Dr Apsley came to two conclusions. The first was that his patient had made a remarkable recovery, and the other was that he was in the presence of two people who had eyes for none but each other. Unlike Sileby, he saw no problems ahead. He took it at face value and thought it would be a good match, which would be regarded with approval by Miss Isabelle’s relations. Who would not be pleased to see Miss Wareham become the Countess of Idsworth?

Isabelle withdrew to gaze out of the window during the examination, in part to regain her composure. She was delighted to hear the doctor comment favourably upon the speed of his patient’s return to health.

‘There were moments when I did have my doubts. You have a remarkable constitution, my Lord, quite remarkable.’

‘Thank you. And I would like to say that, despite what I may have said at the time, you did an excellent job of

repair.’

‘Oh no, my Lord. You said nothing in the least untoward. Besides, I understand that in trying circumstances, my patients can say things they do not intend. It is one of the things we in the profession learn to accept very early.’

‘How long before I should be fit to return to Sir Charles, whose guest I technically remain?’

Isabelle held her breath.

‘Oh, you go along famously, my Lord, but I would recommend you do not resume normal activities, or remove to the Hall for a week yet, assuming that is, that the snow does not make travel impossible again. Now, I shall come and see you again on Friday.’ He turned to Isabelle. ‘I leave his Lordship in your capable hands, Miss Isabelle.’

He left, believing he had assisted the romance.

Isabelle watched Lord Idsworth struggling into the dressing gown, and smiled, drawing close.

‘Now, Dr Apsley left you in my hands, my Lord.’ She helped him into the dressing gown. ‘Let me assist you.’

‘Isabelle, I ...’

She placed a finger on his lips and looked up into his face. There was no doubt, no concern. She loved him, and was confident that he loved her. There had been, she thought, no ‘wooing’ one of the other, rather a natural drawing together that owed nothing to artifice. She had not been won with compliments, nor he with fluttering lashes. What more was there to consider?

Unfortunately, Lord Idsworth could provide a list of things.

Lord Idsworth put his feelings on a tight leash. The kiss had been a mistake, letting instinct overcome sanity. Isabelle saw him withdraw into himself, but looked upon it with tolerance. He was trying to protect her, even though she did not want to be protected. He maintained his physical guard all afternoon, but by the time she oversaw him eat his

dinner, their conversation at least had returned to normal. There was a level of mutual understanding that defied formality, and whatever intention he might have of keeping his distance, failed within hours. He would not kiss her, would not court her, and yet they spoke with the intimacy of spirit that lovers possess.

The snow and doctor's orders kept him where Isabelle's bubble of happiness encompassed him also, try as he might to remain outside it, and for the better part of a week they lived within it. Cold reality was lost to the warm glow of loving and being loved. Sibley saw, and worried. He was almost certain of Lord Idsworth's depth of attachment to his mistress, but saw nothing but sorrow in the offing. He could only think that love blinded his Lordship, and eventually felt bound to speak up.

He had been assisting him with his shaving, which was still a little awkward. As he folded the towel, he cleared his throat.

'My Lord, there is a matter which I am obliged to raise with you, and which I hope you will understand does not stem from presumption on my part.'

'That sounds very serious, Sibley.'

'It is, my Lord. It concerns Miss Isabelle.'

'Ah.' His Lordship guessed what was coming.

'Forgive me, my Lord, but I have to ask ...'

'Are my intentions honourable? Entirely.'

'I do not doubt your attachment, my Lord. If I had thought you trifling with her affections, belted earl or not, injuries or not, there would have been a reckoning.' He was in earnest and Lord Idsworth did not interrupt again. 'You see, Miss Isabelle has nobody to look out for her well-being. Her sister and Lord Dunsfold would not consider her feelings, only "the family". I was the Colonel's man for over thirty-eight years, have looked after Miss Isabelle since she was a mite, and it is my duty to my late master and to

my mistress that makes me ask you if you know what you are doing, my Lord.'

Lord Idsworth gave a crack of laughter, and winced.

'Know what I am doing? I wish I could tell you, Sileby. I can tell you what I have done, and that is fall in love with your mistress.'

'That much is clear enough, my Lord, but have you considered what will come of it?'

Lord Idsworth ran a hand through his newly brushed hair.

'In the hours of the night, oh yes. But when she is with me ... it is like being under a spell. All I can think is how much I ... when alone, I see the difficulties.'

'Lord Dunsfold, he won't let her wed while he holds the reins, my Lord, not to you, begging your pardon.'

'Indeed, I am the very last man he would approve of as a brother-in-law. Do you think Miss Isabelle would not cope with waiting?'

'She would cope, my Lord. Tenacious she is, when she wants, but she would not enjoy it.'

'Nor would I, Sileby.'

'At the end of her minority, could you support her? It should not be my place to ask that question, but her father would have done so, my lord, and I ask it in his place.'

'If she seeks a Society life, no, but I do not think she does. I am not totally without funds now. I shall not explain my financial situation to you, Sileby, but, living modestly I can support a wife in comfort. It would not be a diet of turnip soup and rye bread, if that is what you fear.'

'I do not, my Lord. So, before you leave, will you be making her an offer?'

'At this juncture, no, I cannot, because it would cause repercussions with Lord Dunsfold, and constrain her. She has seen nothing of the world, and if in the next year, she

does so, she must be free to change her mind. I would not bind her now, and she would not renege on a betrothal, however private. I cannot, to my regret, make her an offer, but I do make one to you.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SILEBY THOUGHT LONG AND HARD ABOUT WHAT LORD Idsworth said to him, and that evening sought to speak to Isabelle alone.

‘Of course, Sileby. You do look very serious. I hope there is not some bad news, though I am at a loss to know how you would have received it in our current situation.’

‘I have been giving some thought, Miss, to my future.’

‘Oh.’ Her heart sank. She was secretly hoping that Sileby would have settled into the lodge and forgotten the idea of it being temporary.

‘Yes, Miss, and an opportunity has arisen unexpectedly, you might say.’

‘Oh.’

‘I am not a young man, Miss Isabelle, but nor am I fit only to sit before a fire and wallow in the past. I need something to keep me busy and keeping the lodge is scarcely that.’

‘I suppose not.’ Isabelle sighed.

‘The thing is that I have had an offer of employment, and I am mindful to accept, if you permit.’

‘I permit? Oh Sileby, it is not a case of needing permission. What is the offer, and from whom?’ She was puzzled.

‘Lord Idsworth, Miss, has offered me the situation of being his personal servant, his valet. I would not suit some fancy-mannered and fancy-dressed gentleman, but he is a military man, and I think we would understand each other very well. If it were not for leaving you, Miss, I would have said yes immediately.’

‘Oh, Sileby, I would not hold you back. I can see it would be an excellent thing for you, and Lord Idsworth also. I cannot pretend that I relish the thought of your

departure, but can think of nothing better for you.’ The thought crossed her mind that the separation might not be permanent anyway, but she kept the thought to herself. Sileby saw the tinge of colour and guessed, and hoped she was right. ‘If my blessing is needed, then you have it.’

She held out her hand, and he took it.

‘Thank you, Miss Isabelle.’

Isabelle confronted Lord Idsworth after breakfast the next day.

‘So you are a poacher, my Lord?’

‘A poacher?’ He was thinking how soft her skin looked, and not paying the fullest attention.

‘Yes, Sir, a poacher of retainers, not of game.’

‘Ah, Sileby. Well ...’

‘Do you deny the charge?’ Her eyes twinkled.

‘In part. You see, he had mentioned that he was underemployed, and he really would be the ideal valet for a man like me, so ...’

‘Would you like to take Mrs Frampton, my cook?’

‘Tempting, after the fare I am being offered at every meal, but no, Miss Isabelle, I would not.’ The smile he had held in check spread into a grin. ‘Nor will I try and drag Wellow from your employ, as if that were possible. You engender great devotion in your servants.’ Without thinking, his hand reached out to hers, but he recollected himself at the last minute, and would have withdrawn it again had Isabelle not entwined her fingers between his. He wanted to say things, words of love, that he was as devoted to her, but held back. She smiled at him, for he could not conceal what his eyes conveyed. A very small voice in his head warned him this was all madness, but it felt so good to be mad.

Dr Apsley was a discreet individual, as his calling expected, and no murmur of how matters stood at Bradings filtered into local gossip. However, he was called to the Hall to attend Lady Wareham, who had a slight cold which she had

magnified into a potentially fatal inflammation of the lungs, and whilst reassuring her that no such calamity was likely, he did comment upon her niece's good fortune, thinking she must have knowledge of the state of affairs between Miss Wareham and Lord Idsworth. Lady Wareham stared at him in disbelief.

'My niece, and Lord Idsworth? Good Heavens!' She paled, and for a moment he thought she looked faint.

'My apologies, my Lady. I assumed ...'

'Assume nothing, Dr Apsley, and I beg you will not mention your wild imagining to anyone else.' Lady Wareham, who was usually very gracious towards him, sounded quite haughty.

He immediately assured her that no word would pass his lips, and went away wondering what on earth might be going on.

Lady Wareham, who had been confining herself to her chaise longue, wrapped in shawls, cast them off as soon as the doctor departed, and sought out her son.

'Well, Charles, what have you to say to this? Did you know of it?' she cried, accusingly.

'I did not know of it, though it scarcely surprises me. I thought him very taken with her at Christmas. Good for them both, I say. He will make her very happy.'

'Charles! Are you mad? Idsworth! Oh, I knew I was wrong to let you invite him here.'

'It was not in your power, ma'am to prevent him. This is my house and he was my guest.' Sir Charles was ruffled.

'But the shame of it, the scandal.'

'The shame of what?' He looked at his mother, bemused.

'And I shall be blamed, just you wait and see.'

'Mama, you have not been quacking yourself with Aunt Mattie's cold cure, have you? The one with enough brandy to pickle a horse?'

‘Do not be vulgar, Charles, or change the subject.’

‘I wa—’

‘Idsworth is a pauper, and his name besmirched,’ Lady Wareham declared, in a manner which would have won applause in the theatre.

Sir Charles looked at his mother as if she had taken leave of her senses.

‘If he is a pauper then he would no longer have an account with Weston for his clothes, and he would have been dunned years ago. I do not say he is flush but he did not come here because he could not afford to eat, Mama, I assure you. And as for his name besmirched, well, most will have forgotten about it and there was never any suggestion that he acted in anything less than an honourable fashion. Dashed too honourable, by many people’s ideas.’

‘But the thought of a Wareham allied to such a man!’

‘Well, it sounds an excellent notion to me. I always did like him, and would be happy to have him as part of the family.’

Lady Wareham shuddered and told her son he was a fool. She then went away, a worried woman, and wrote a letter. She took some time over it, and addressed it to Lord Dunsfold. Her duty done, she sent a groom struggling to Chippenham to get it on the mail coach, if it was getting through.

Lord Dunsfold received the letter two days later, as a thaw set in. His jaw set in an uncompromising line, and he went to inform his wife of her sister’s folly, and his intention to post forthwith into Wiltshire.

‘This is common knowledge? My God, we shall be ruined. I do not know how I will look Lady Marklington in the eye again. She will cut me dead, I have not a doubt of it.’ Lady Dunsfold focused entirely on possible social repercussions for herself.

‘Thankfully, your Aunt Wareham seems to have prevented such a calamity. I will have to go and put an end

to this immediately. I take leave to tell you, Cornelia, that your sister is far too independent and has been overindulged. She needs to be brought to heel, and I shall do so.'

Lady Dunsfold did not disagree.

Lord Dunsfold arrived at Bradings the day after Sir Charles had ridden over, ostensibly to bring items from Lord Idsworth's valise, and in reality to see if his cousin and Lord Idsworth were indeed going about smelling of April and May. When Sir Charles saw them together it was patently obvious how things stood, and he was a little surprised that Lord Idsworth took him to one side and asked if he might return to the Hall in a couple of days.

'I am now up and about all day, as you can see, but could not yet manage driving back to the border of Sussex. I have imposed upon Miss Wareham long enough, and now the snow is melting have no excuse to place her in what may be perceived as an awkward situation.'

'But—' Sir Charles stopped. He had suddenly realised that an announcement, which he had assumed imminent, was dependent upon Dunsfold's permission, and Dunsfold was the sort of stickler who would cut up rough if he thought Lord Idsworth had been guilty of cocking a snook at the proprieties. 'But of course, my dear fellow, I shall be delighted to come and pick you up. The roads are almost clear. By the day after tomorrow it will be easy enough to get my tilbury over here. Consider it arranged.'

Lord Dunsfold was admitted into the house just as Lord Idsworth, looking distinctly relaxed and at home, and with his left arm in a sling, emerged from the morning room. The two men stared at each other for a moment.

'I shall inform Miss Isabelle of your arrival, my Lord,' declared Wellow, at his most formal, and aware of a sudden chilling of the atmosphere. Lord Dunsfold did not bother to look at him, but removed his hat and gloves, and stood for the maid to assist him from his topcoat. 'Inform your

mistress that I will attend her shortly. My business is first with Lord Idsworth,’

Wellow looked to the earl, who was grim-faced, and who nodded.

‘Very well, my Lord.’

Dunsfold, on whom the significance of the look had not been lost, thought the reply more to Idsworth than himself.

‘Shall we discuss matters in the library?’ Idsworth indicated the room, far too much, thought Dunsfold, as if he lived there. He gave a curt assent and stepped before the earl into the library. Lord Idsworth closed the door behind them.

‘I do not suppose I need ask why you are here, Dunsfold.’ Lord Idsworth’s tone was not welcoming.

‘No. As I am Isabelle’s guardian, I imagine it is obvious.’ He glared at Idsworth. ‘My ward,’ and he stressed the possessive, ‘is a green girl without an ounce of sense, and no understanding of the real world. That she should entertain a gentleman, alone, in her house—’

‘She was not “entertaining me”, she was saving my life. In the circumstances there was nowhere else for me to go, and my injuries, combined with the weather, have precluded my removal until now.’

Lord Dunsfold sneered, and his expression hinted that had Lord Idsworth succumbed to his wounds he, for one, would not have mourned.

‘That may be as you choose to portray it, Idsworth, but in the eyes of the world it will not be seen that way at all. My niece’s reputation is placed in jeopardy.’

Lord Idsworth was thin-lipped with anger, but saw an opportunity. His reply was therefore made in the smoothest of tones.

‘If, Dunsfold, you are suggesting that, as a man of honour, I am obliged to offer for Miss Wareham, I am quite prepared to do so, though I consider that only the most

warped of minds would consider that for a man, injured within the vicinity of the house, to be cared for in that house by a manservant, renders the single lady who owns the property compromised.’ He omitted Isabelle’s near constant presence. After all, none who did know of it would make it known. For all that the world knew, Miss Wareham might have confined herself to asking after his well-being, and offering to knit him a nightcap. ‘When shall we announce it in the *Gazette*? You will want a quiet affair, I take it, in view of her bereavement.’

Lord Dunsfold gaped at him, caught between the thought that Idsworth was bluffing, and the determination that Isabelle would not marry this man who could offer nothing in terms of a settlement, and more importantly, no incentive to him as Isabelle’s guardian.

‘That will not be necessary in this case. I am trusting to whatever shreds of decency you retain that this sorry interlude will be kept from public knowledge. Isabelle is obviously incapable of making her own decisions without falling into error, and I will be taking her back to Lincombe to reside with my wife and myself. It may yet be possible to inculcate some ladylike attributes. I would also add that were you the last man in England, I would not permit my ward to marry you.’

‘It would bring back certain awkward memories would it not? I wonder, did you ever reveal to your wife how close you came to ruin, or what you did to ensure you avoided my fate?’

‘Are you threatening me with blackmail?’ Lord Dunsfold was angry but nervous.

‘No, Dunsfold, I am not. What is past is past, and I am not the sort of man who stoops to such things. It is interesting that you should light upon it as the likeliest reason for my mentioning it. Perhaps you do not keep the right company.’

‘You are insulting, Sir.’ Lord Dunsfold felt he could bluster now that the threat did not exist.

‘I am, aren’t I, but justifiably so, I believe.’ Lord Idsworth remained outwardly very calm.

‘I remember now why I came to find you insufferable. I will not have my wife’s sister allied to a man so ineligible on every score. That will suffice, in the eyes of Society.’

‘Ah yes, the judgmental eyes of “Society”. Well, I doubt it is of interest to you, but I have given a great deal of thought to my “ineligibility”. More importantly, I understand that Miss Wareham has been so closeted these last years as to make it unfair for her to make any decision based solely upon her experience, which is nil. You may accuse me of many things, Dunsfold, but I am not a shirker. I will also say that Miss Wareham’s happiness and well-being are of paramount importance to me.’

‘Then you will leave this house forthwith.’

‘You see me dressed and fit to travel. Had you arrived tomorrow I would have already departed. Sir Charles is putting me up until such time as a longer journey may be considered, in view of my injuries.’

The dislike crackled between the two men.

‘You will leave within the hour, if necessary in my carriage. You will not make any attempt to contact my ward in person or by written communication ever again.’

‘You are her guardian, but your guardianship ends upon her twenty-first birthday. Whatever right you have to constrain her, ends at that date. I make no promises once Miss Wareham attains her majority and, furthermore, I reserve the right to take whatever action is needful if you fail in your duty of care to her.’

‘Do not presume to tell me my duty, Idsworth.’ Lord Dunsfold had taken on a choleric hue and, secure in the knowledge that Lord Idsworth was incapacitated, blustered, ‘If you were not an invalid—’

‘Empty threats, Dunsfold, empty threats, for even as I am you could not land a single successful blow.’ He

sneered, at once angered and repelled by the man. That Isabelle was in his charge was scarcely to be borne.

Lord Dunsfold looked venomously at him, and slammed out of the room.

Isabelle had been informed of her guardian's arrival and felt quite sick. There could be only one reason why Lord Dunsfold should come out of Gloucestershire in this weather, and it would not be to give the relationship his blessing.

'Thank you, Wellow. When his Lordship has finished his conversation with Lord Idsworth, please take him to the morning room. I will see him there. Oh, and I suppose I ought to offer him refreshment.' She did not sound very keen to do so.

'Yes, Miss Isabelle.'

Isabelle went to the looking glass and stared at her reflection. She was pale, the pallor accentuated by her black dress, and she looked afraid. Well, whatever else, she would not be afraid in front of her brother-in-law. She lifted her head, took a deep breath, and went to await him in the morning room. The fire crackled cheerily, at odds with the sense of impending doom which she felt. When Lord Dunsfold was shown in, he was clearly in a foul temper. Wellow had scarcely closed the door before he launched into a diatribe, in which her own wilfulness and stupidity were matched by Lord Idsworth's Machiavellian plotting, which most oddly seemed directed at himself, and in which she was but a feeble pawn.

'He has used you for his own ends, to take his revenge upon me, Isabelle. He is unscrupulous, manipulative—'

'Stop it. None of this makes sense.'

'Not perhaps to a foolish chit of a girl, but to me, perfect sense.'

'What possible reason could Lord Idsworth have to wish for revenge upon any ...' She halted, mid-sentence, as a terrible thought occurred to her. Dunsfold was perhaps

seven or eight years Lord Idsworth's senior, and had married Cornelia in the spring of '08. What if he were ...

Dunsfold watched her face, and regretted that he had said so much. Had Idsworth regaled her with the story? That she did not throw it back in his face indicated that he had not been named. He took the offensive again.

'You are a very green girl. He has taken advantage of that, and you will come to thank me for saving you from the embarrassment, and I put it no higher out of consideration for your feelings, that he would cause you.'

'But—'

'What you have to say is of no relevance, Isabelle. You will pack immediately and return with me to Lincombe. It was a mistake to leave you here in the first place, however much of an inconvenience you are to your poor sister. As for Idsworth, I have ordered him from the house immediately. You will not speak to him again, nor have any communication with him.'

'No.' She looked at him squarely.

'I am glad that you see reason, my—'

'It was not agreement. You may have the power to prevent communication in the future, but Lord Idsworth has been a guest in my house, and I will not see him treated as if he were being thrown out. He is not being thrown out by me. He is in the library still?'

Dunsfold nodded, automatically, too taken aback at her temerity to remonstrate.

'And when will you be dragging me from Bradings?'

'Foolish girl, we will leave in the morning, and I am not dragging you.'

'I go unwillingly, so you might well be said to be dragging me.' Two spots of colour flamed on her pale cheeks and she fought the tremor in her voice. Regardless of it appearing to be some juvenile flounce, she stood, turned

on her heel and strode purposefully from the parlour, with Lord Dunsfold left, lost for words, standing before the fire.

Isabelle paused before entering the library, trying to gain control of her emotions. She was angry beyond belief, but also stunned. In her happy bubble she had seen only that Lord Idsworth would have to remove to the Hall, which was an unfortunate necessity, but not the end of the world. This, however, was the end of the world, her world of hope, her dream of a future. Dunsfold was exercising his right to take her from her home, from the man she loved. As the words formed in her head, she realised how histrionic they sounded if she said them out loud. If her cousin had said such a thing, she would have suggested she had been reading too many romances, though Julia seemed far more hard-headed than herself. Love was an acute feeling. She had not even set eyes upon Lord Idsworth a month ago, and now his absence felt like another bereavement. That must be it. In her fragile emotional state, still mourning the man she had loved and looked up to all her life, she had seen in a man who had a similar soldierly background, and needed care, a replacement, a surrogate. Calling it love was fanciful, preposterous. Her head dismissed the cry of her heart that this was not so, and remained in control until she opened the library door.

He stood before the fire, gazing down solemnly into the flames, frowning. What Dunsfold had said was wrong, she was certain of it. This was not a man who had planned some seduction to gain revenge upon another, one who had seen her lack of experience and exploited it. He had not come into Wiltshire with any knowledge of her existence, had most certainly not engineered the accident which had befallen him. He was sensible of the ruin he had brought upon himself in the folly of youth, but oh, how he had paid for that folly, how he had grown in stature as a man because of it. He had not concealed it from her, had ruefully admitted the whole sorry business. She could trust him, did trust him.

He turned as she entered and shut the door behind her. His expression did not lighten. In fact, it grew more grim.

‘I ...’ Her voice sounded suddenly very small, and she cleared her throat. ‘I would not let you depart without seeing you, my Lord, out of ... courtesy. I myself have to pack for imminent departure.’

She drew closer, with a rustle of black silk. Her face was ashen.

‘I regret, Ma’am, that my presence in this house has occasioned your removal from it.’

He sounded cold, formal, angry. She blinked.

‘But how can I blame you, Sir, for that which should bring no blame? What has happened was never planned.’ She intentionally did not specify whether she meant the accident or the bond between them. Her eyes were wide, trusting. He looked away.

‘Your guardian has made it clear that I am not to contact you in any way, Miss Wareham. As a man of honour, I shall of course comply with ...

‘Is it so easy then? I thought ... My name was yours to use, and you used it. Surely we need not ...’ The words knotted in her throat. ‘You would deny what has happened?’ She would shirk the truth no longer.

‘I must.’ His free hand clenched. ‘We must.’

‘I will not, no, I will not deny truth for the sake of Dunsfold’s lies. Look me in the eye and tell me there is nothing between us.’

‘There was, but it has no future. We have no future, Isabelle.’

‘I have no future without you.’ She sounded lost.

‘It seems so now, perhaps, but Dunsfold was right about one thing. You have no experience of the world, you are a child still in that sense. To take advantage of that would be the act of a dishonourable man, and, whatever dishonour I brought upon my name a decade ago, I have never abused the trust of a lady.’

‘You would rather desert me, then?’

‘Not desert you, but let you discover the world, make a sensible choice. This, these last few weeks, was a madness, a sweet but transient thing. You will forget me in a few months of Bath society.’

‘You think me shallow, fickle?’

‘You are nineteen, have never been in Society. There is so much world to see.’

‘I want none of it. I want to be here, at home, and I want —’

‘What we want, and what we may have, are rarely the same.’ He sounded harsh even to his own ears, and how little he wanted to be so. He saw her flinch, and could not prevent himself half extending his hand. She stared at it as if it were an alien thing.

‘You have wanted, though?’

He closed his eyes. A denial, a lie, would hurt her, but an admission would be as harmful. He said nothing.

In that moment she stepped forward, took his hand in hers and raised it to her cheek. It was bold, it was worse than bold, and yet her heart was sure.

‘You placed your hand here before, remember, and kissed me.’

‘Isabelle.’ He invested her name, the single whispered word, with such desperate longing, such hopeless regret. ‘I cannot. I must not.’

Tears misted her eyes, and her voice trembled.

‘I have learnt things these last few months, I have learnt how strong love can be, I have not ceased to love my father because he is dead. Nor shall I cease to love you just because we shall not meet for a long time. You think I shall forget you. You are wrong. You cite my youth, my inexperience. I grant them to be true, but it does not mean that my feelings have to be transient. I will wait for you, if you but ask me to do so, willingly. In little over a year, I

may accept any offer I wish. It is not so very long. It just seems so now.'

'You must be free.' He shook his head.

She looked so vulnerable, so hurt. He wanted to hold her, soothe her, protect her, and could not. He did not trust himself any longer.

'I must go.' His hand was still on her cheek, her tears dampening it. 'I must go.'

She looked at him, her heart in her eyes, the silent plea so strong he wavered. His hand moved, and his lips replaced it; they brushed her cheek, tasted the salt, but avoided her mouth.

There was a sound from the hallway. Sir Charles' voice was clear, and firm steps sounded his approach. Whatever else might have happened, did not. Lord Idsworth pulled back, put a decent few feet between them so that when Sir Charles entered there was no physical sign of the emotional torment undergone.

'Isabelle, I just heard. Outrageous! My poor coz. No use me putting in a word for your defence, for Dunsfold never listens to a word I say, but it is the outside of enough. Trouble is, he has the legal right to take you to Lincombe or to Bath whether you like it or not. All I can do is ensure he does nothing about the estate.' He turned slightly to address his friend. 'And if you had called him out, Idsworth, I would have seconded you with pleasure. You wouldn't, I know, but there it is. I have my tilbury outside. I thought I would try it out in advance and ... your baggage can come on afterwards. We had best leave poor Isabelle to her packing.'

Isabelle was scarcely listening. She was trying to fix the image of Lord Idsworth in her mind so that it might not fade, just as she felt as if his lips were still upon her cheek. He was making his farewells, formal, the act of a mere casual guest. Sir Charles, seeing her distress, for it had now struck him how pale she appeared, put it down to being wrenched from her home, and came to give her a cousinly

hug and then led the way from the room. Lord Idsworth followed, steeling himself not to turn his head and look at her again, but he heard the sharp intake of breath and succumbed, for one heartbreaking glance. Her desolation was so utter and complete, his heart ached almost as a physical pain.

Lord Idsworth was silent for the first mile. Sir Charles was driving with care, but the ground was hard and his shoulder felt every bump. He tried to focus on the physical pain as easier than the emotional torment in which he found himself. Sir Charles took his eyes from the road for a moment and cast his friend a sideways glance. His profile showed a man not just in discomfort, but angry enough to commit violence.

‘Nasty piece of work, Dunsfold. Mean-spirited. Only glad my uncle left the estate in our joint control, or I am certain he would have sold the better part of it off and pocketed the profits before Isabelle attained her majority. You might find that hard to believe, but ...’

‘Oh no. I would believe it.’ Lord Idsworth looked even more grim. In normal circumstances he would not have revealed the nature of the antipathy between himself and Dunsfold, but these were not normal circumstances. Sir Charles listened, appalled.

‘Well, that settles it. Shall I turn us about and go back to Bradings? If you do not feel up to knocking his teeth down his throat, my dear fellow, I will be glad to do so on your behalf. The swine!’

‘No, Wareham. In one thing only he was right. Your cousin is a green girl. She has seen nothing of the world, and it would be wrong of me to bind her before she has had opportunities.’

‘No wish to upset you, Idsworth, but the truth is that you are Isabelle’s world, the only world she will want. I know my cousin. She ain’t fickle, and she doesn’t care about social fripperies, not like my sister and most of the chits one

meets. Very genuine girl, Isabelle, and ... damn it, you would make her very happy.'

'I have just made her very unhappy, so much so I might almost have wished Semington had been a better, or is it worse, shot.' Lord Idsworth gritted his teeth as the tilbury hit a pothole.

'Rot. I've never been in love, thank the Lord, so I do not know what it does to patience, but I can see nothing for it, if we are not going back to strangle Dunsfold into giving his consent, but for you both to be patient. He cannot make her wed against her will. Next March she can wed whom she likes, whatever he says, and I for one will give three rousing cheers and throw rice at your nuptials.' He tried to sound positive, but he felt for both his friend and his cousin.

Lord Idsworth did not reply.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ISABELLE TRAVELLED INTO GLOUCESTERSHIRE IN silence, still in the numbness of shock. There had been tears at Bradings, and not just hers. Mrs Frampton and the maids had wept openly, and Wellow's eyes had been moist. He had also sniffed. Sileby had been determinedly erect and dry-eyed. He had managed to have a few words with Lord Idsworth, and arranged to remove to the Hall after Isabelle's departure. She had spoken privately with her most devoted retainer, and though it made her weep to part from him, part of her took solace from the knowledge that he and Lord Idsworth would be together, and that his presence would ensure that even if he tried, Lord Idsworth would find it very difficult to submit to the noble idea of forgetting her.

Her love was letting her go out of some peculiar sense of honour which she could not fully understand, and she dreaded what lay ahead, but she told herself that if she was strong, then her happiness was in fact not ruined, but delayed. 'Only a year' she had said, and it was little more than that, but it lay before her like an eternity. Had they been able to correspond, it might have seemed more bearable, but that lifeline was not hers to grab. She must survive this alone.

It was perhaps the sense of being alone which dragged her down so low. At home she had people who cared about her, and for whom she in turn cared. Where she was going she was despised, disliked, disregarded. Criminals, she thought, were transported to the Antipodes. Though innocent, she felt that a sentence of transportation had been passed upon her, even though it was only to the next county.

Lord Dunsfold, nursing an incipient cold, which he blamed upon his having to travel, and therefore upon Isabelle, stared pointedly out of the window and ignored her. Upon their arrival at Lincombe, he stepped from the carriage before her, and did not even look back as a liveried servant assisted her to alight. Isabelle was shown into a room where her sister was seated at an *escritoire*. She did

not look up until she had finished her sentence, and then stared at her sister.

‘Well? And what do you have to say for yourself?’

‘Nothing, Cornelia, other than I object most strongly to being removed from my home as though under arrest.’

‘Do not be so histrionic.’ Lady Dunsfold pulled a face indicative of distaste. ‘You were removed as you call it, because of your unseemly behaviour.’

‘My what? Since when has giving a bed to a wounded gentleman, a man wounded on one’s own estate, been “unseemly”?’

‘Since the hospitality was offered by a single woman, and to the Earl of Idsworth.’ Lady Dunsfold enunciated the name as if it were Bluebeard. ‘And of course,’ she added spitefully, ‘it depends upon whose bed.’

Isabelle blinked in surprise, and then she drew herself very upright.

‘I do not know where you acquired a mind which would even consider that thought, Cornelia, but it was not at home.’ She was white with outrage.

‘Are you going to deny that you have been cavorting with That Man?’

‘Cavorting? I had thought I was being brought to Lord Dunsfold’s home, but I appear to have entered a madhouse. I have never “cavorted” with anyone.’ Isabelle drew her hand across her eyes and tried to speak less heatedly. ‘I am weary, and in no condition to cross swords with you, Cornelia. I shall go to my room and take a little supper upon a tray, if you will permit.’

‘If you do not appear for dinner, Isabelle, you will not eat at all.’

‘Then I shall fast. No doubt I shall see you on the morrow.’ With the very slightest inclination of her head, she turned and left the room.

She was shown to the bedchamber prepared for her. It was evidently not one much used, for it smelt musty, and it looked to the north, where the view was of flat, snowy pasture beyond the stables. A fire burnt in the grate, but seemed to do so grudgingly. Isabelle removed her pelisse and laid it upon the bed. The counterpane was moth-eaten. Then she sat on the single chair by the window and rested her head in her hands. Fourteen months would seem a lifetime.

It soon became apparent that the Dunsfolds' idea of bringing Isabelle to conform to their ideas was to wear her down with a mixture of constant disapproval of her every action, treating her as some inferior paid companion to be set menial tasks, and excluding her from most conversation. She was discussed as if she were an inanimate object, her myriad misdemeanours listed. When Cornelia invited ladies to take tea, Isabelle was requested to mend linen, or to take the air with the youngest Miss Dunsfold and the nursery maid. This did not in fact upset Isabelle, since she found Cornelia's friends as snide and self-important as her sister, and disliked being referred to as 'the poor child'.

She had initially intended to spend much of her time alone writing letters, to her cousin Charles, her aunt or Lady Monkton, but this proved impossible. About a week after her arrival the butler entered with the morning post and presented it to his mistress as she completed a late breakfast. He was half turning to Isabelle when Lady Dunsfold cleared her throat in a meaningful manner and he halted and gave the missive to her Ladyship with an apology. Lady Dunsfold inspected the superscription and then opened it and perused its contents.

'Cousin Charles has written to you,' she announced. 'He says all is well and that you need not worry about Bradings. Very little else is of interest. I consider his handwriting abysmal.' She then stood up, went to the fire, and very deliberately cast the letter into the flames.

'Cornelia, that was addressed to me.'

‘Dunsfold does not trust that Idsworth will keep his word, and has instructed that all post addressed to you should be read by me or by himself.’

‘And I may not even read my letters if they are discovered to be innocuous?’

‘You will be informed of anything of note.’

‘I see. And what if I should choose to write letters.’

‘You may write as many as you wish.’

‘Thank you.’

‘However, Dunsfold will not frank them, and the staff have been told that posting any unfranked letters on your behalf will attract the most severe displeasure.’

‘So I am to be kept in isolation, even from my relatives. Will they not think it odd?’

‘If you do not respond they will simply think you are sulking. That is what I wrote to our aunt.’

‘Would you care to shackle me at wrist and ankle, Cornelia?’

‘Do not be ridiculous, Isabelle. When you can be trusted to behave with modesty and decorum, some privileges may be restored to you.’

‘Then I was right when I said I was brought here like a criminal. This is my prison, and you, Sister, are my gaoler.’

As if to reinforce this, if she chose to take a walk within the grounds, even only as far as the leafless rose garden, she was always accompanied by a servant. When she attempted to slip out on her own, she found some poor retainer sent running out after her, without any outer coat. She was watched; she knew it. She was allocated a maid, Hobson, a dour-looking individual with a face that reminded Isabelle of a fish, specifically a stuffed one her father had in a case. It was obvious that her role was to inform on Isabelle’s actions, and anything unusual. When Hobson unpacked the sable muff, she sniffed, suspicious. It was, admittedly, an oddity among Isabelle’s garments. The sable tippet was

clearly old, the fur hat needed a new lining, and yet the muff was luxurious and comparatively new, with a label naming a furrier in Ludgate Hill. It was obvious that she would be quizzed upon it, but she was prepared.

‘Oh, my lovely muff, yes, it was a gift. Such a surprise, too. Quite unexpected.’ She smiled and looked her sister straight in the eye. ‘It came all the way from London. It caused quite a stir at the Hall.’

‘At the Hall?’ Cornelia frowned.

‘Yes, that was where I was given it. Was it not kind? Charlie is very generous. He brought me a lovely gift he had purchased on his visit to the capital.’ This statement was true, of course, as were all the others individually. It was just that they were not necessarily connected. Her smile broadened.

Cornelia sniffed, and commented that it was far too ostentatious for one of her years. Isabelle bit her lip, which Lady Dunsfold chose to interpret as her accepting criticism.

Under constantly trying circumstances, Isabelle’s solace was the knowledge that her thoughts were safe and secret. She took to sitting upon her bed, ostensibly with a book of homilies, and revisiting the month during which she had met and spoken with Lord Idsworth, when she had fallen in love. She tried to recall every conversation, every gesture, and then, in her mind, she wrote the letters that could not be sent, telling him of her treatment, telling him of her love, and how every day was crossed from the calendar with relief. She ‘wrote’ to him every day, and it strengthened her. She tackled her situation by always aiming to give the impression of meekness whilst rebelling within, and her only real failing was a tendency to be caught with a small and secret smile upon her face, which Lady Dunsfold found particularly disquieting.

Her Lord, noting that Isabelle seemed far less inclined to react when berated, proudly told her that his regime was working.

‘She is quiet, and appears submissive. We have undoubtedly made progress, my dear.’

‘Is it safe to leave her here when we go to Bath, though?’ Lady Dunsfold recollected those smiles. ‘I am not sure that without our influence she might not try to reassert her independence.’

‘I have considered the matter and I think that taking her with us is safer. Besides, if she is seen in Bath, she may draw attention from a gentleman who would be, shall we say, generous, if permitted to wed her. She cannot marry except with my approval until next March. If she finds the constraints of living in our household too irksome, she would no doubt accept any gentleman who offered her an alternative. In order to pay his addresses, he must have my sanction and that will come at a price.’

‘I had not thought of that, my lord.’

‘No, my dear, but I had.’

Sir Charles Wareham was not a man who went through life in a worry, but he was deeply concerned when Isabelle did not respond to the letter which he wrote to her. After all, it contained information which would have been certain to have roused her to wrath. He had debated whether to inform her of what had been attempted in Wiltshire, but in the end thought it dishonest to hide the truth from her.

Wellow had walked over from Bradings, bearing a letter which he handed to Sir Charles with a trembling hand. It informed him that the staff retained to keep the house in order were being reduced, and that a butler was not required. His services were to be dispensed with from the end of the month.

‘I did not know what to do, Sir Charles, and remembering as you were a Trustee of the Estate, Sir ...’ Wellow sounded worried but trusting.

‘Dunsfold! Why, he cannot do this without my agreement, which he will never have. Good God, you cannot be dismissed like this. It is high-handed, underhand,

and ... just plain wrong. Leave it with me, Wellow, and do not be concerned. Your position is secure, and those of the other staff in my cousin's house.'

'Thank you, sir. I was that worried.'

Wellow had returned home with signs of a spring in his aged step, and Sir Charles had set pen to paper, both to Filey and to Isabelle. He expected a reply from her almost immediately. None came, even after nearly two weeks. He mentioned it to Lady Wareham.

'I expect she is still in the sulks. Cornelia wrote to tell me she was being decidedly unhelpful, and moping.'

'That does not sound like Isabelle. Besides, informing her that Wellow came to see me with a letter telling him that his services were no longer required would have guaranteed a response.'

'He is not a young man, Charles.'

'He is a man who has spent all his life working at Bradings, and it is also not within Dunsfold's power to dismiss him. I checked with Filey, who sent a legal letter reminding Dunsfold of his limitations. If Isabelle offers Wellow retirement it is one thing, but Dunsfold cannot just turn him off, nor the other servants either, certainly not without my agreement, which he knows he would not get. He tried to do it anyway, no doubt hoping the staff would assume he had such powers. I have made it clear to Wellow that any instruction concerning the estate and house has to have my name on it, as well as Dunsfold's.'

'Oh dear. I wish you were not involved in this, Charles.'

Lady Wareham sighed.

'Well, I am dashed glad that I am, Mama. Not a nice man is Dunsfold, I assure you. Which brings me back to Isabelle and the letter. I wonder ...' He frowned, but then changed the subject. There were some thoughts he would not share with his mama. After all, it had occurred to him after Isabelle had been removed from Bradings, that someone must have informed the duplicitous Dunsfold of what was

happening there. The only person Sir Charles could think of who might have done such a thing was his mother, since she was so revolted by the prospect of the match.

It was the Dunsfolds' intention to remove to Bath at the end of March, a few weeks after Isabelle's twentieth birthday, which passed without any celebration. The day prior to the move, Lord Dunsfold received a communication which sent him to his study where he remained for over an hour, and from which he emerged looking decidedly preoccupied, if not green about the gills. When Lady Dunsfold questioned him, he was unusually sharp with her, and uncommunicative. His distraction continued even through dinner, and when Lady Dunsfold and Isabelle withdrew, he sat with a decanter of brandy for the rest of the evening, and did not join them.

Cornelia Dunsfold was not a warm-hearted woman, but she had a great deal of interest in her own comforts. If her Lord was so worried, it must cause her worry also. She had no thought that his problem might involve the muslin company, for he was a man of infrequent needs, and a tight purse. A mistress meant expense, and his Lordship liked the trappings of wealth without expending any more of it than absolutely necessary. His favourite saying was that a truly happy man lived like a king and spent like a pauper.

This did not mean that she was forced to darn her dresses or wear outmoded bonnets, for his Lordship regarded showing off his wife to advantage as part of the illusion of wealth. It did mean that he kept much of his house unheated, was swift to evict any tenants who did not pay promptly on Quarter Day, and only travelled post in dire necessity. He knew he was regarded as a 'warm' man, and considered it a compliment. Had he heard how often he was referred to as 'cheese paring' and 'penny pinching' he would have been less pleased.

Whatever it was which had caused him concern, it was clear that he had no wish to share it at this juncture. He even took a far greater interest in the movement of parts of his household to Bath than normal, and informed Isabelle that

he would be granting her an allowance, to be spent under her sister's aegis, when they arrived. Her blacks, he said, were lacking in style, and in another month she would not be festooning them in crape. Isabelle cared little about an allowance, though she disliked the way he portrayed himself as generous with what was her own money. Since she would not be attending the assemblies, or even private parties, she saw little reason to make any adjustment to her attire.

Lord Dunsfold's town house was situated in Henrietta Street, just off Laura Place. Whilst not as fashionable as living higher up the hill near the Upper Assembly Rooms, it was a very good address, and most convenient for the Pump Room, the Abbey and Lower Assembly Rooms. Lord Dunsfold's father had purchased the house when he had begun to suffer from gout at the turn of the century, and regularly took the therapeutic baths. Whilst part of him would have preferred to sell the property, his son kept it because it was far more convenient and cheaper than a house in London, and in those years where impending confinement kept Lady Dunsfold out of society, he was able to lease it at a very good price to those of an invalid disposition. Bath was not as grand as once it had been, nor as fashionable, but in a smaller aristocratic circle, Lord and Lady Dunsfold held a greater position. It suited them well.

Isabelle saw no advantage to being cooped up in Bath over being cooped up in the country, but she was wrong. Whilst she was still accompanied everywhere, and treated much the same in the house, Lord Dunsfold wanted his sister-in-law to be seen. He therefore had Cornelia 'show her off' where it was possible to do so. The emphasis was on 'seen', and conversation was discouraged beyond the politeness of casual acquaintance. She went to church in the Abbey, sat while her sister drank the frankly foul-tasting waters in the Pump Room, and promenaded with her in the Lower Assembly Rooms several mornings a week. She thought herself invisible, but in fact quite a few people noticed her, the pale young woman in her mourning clothes with an expression as though she were in a private, sad world of her own. Some people imagined her a tragic young

widow, but gradually it became known that there was no lately interred husband in the case, and several gentlemen, who would otherwise have held back, found themselves exchanging pleasantries with Lady Dunsfold, even though they had previously avoided her as much as possible.

Her ladyship reported each of these gentlemen to her spouse, and those whom he saw as realistic prospects, and well-heeled, he decreed should be offered discreet encouragement. In mourning herself, Lady Dunsfold could not entertain on a large scale, but to invite a half dozen persons to dine, most of whom were old acquaintances, was entirely permissible. The first of these dinners was not a success. Isabelle was informed that she would be present, but she barely exchanged more than a few sentences and monosyllabic answers with the gentleman beside whom she was strategically placed for dinner, and he put her down as far too insipid a damsel.

Cornelia was set to take her to task next day, but did not relish it, for how she was expected to get her sister to be outgoing when she had spent the last two months telling her to be more reticent, without revealing the objective, eluded her.

‘You know, Isabelle, your behaviour at dinner verged upon the churlish.’

‘It did? I had thought I should have been commended, Cornelia. You are always reminding me that to listen is more becoming than to chatter on. I listened.’

‘Sir Matthew thought you almost lacking in wits.’

‘I do not much care what he thought, Sister. I was required at table. I sat at table. You did not instruct me to show animation and you know how biddable I am become.’ Isabelle folded her hands in her lap, and her expression was meekness itself. ‘I would not be so wilful as to speak without your, or Dunsfold’s, permission.’

Lady Dunsfold eyed her narrowly. She did not believe a word of it, but nor could she disprove it.

‘When you are invited to our private dinners in future, Isabelle, you will behave like a sensible young woman, and not like a plank of wood.’

‘Yes, Cornelia.’

Isabelle was not a fool. This *volte-face* on the part of her sister must spring from some cause, and that Dunsfold wanted her off his hands seemed a logical reason. Well, any gentleman aspiring to her hand was in for a shock, for she wanted none of them. She was committed elsewhere. At the next such evening, Isabelle was so light-hearted and gay, that the rather serious widower who had thought she might suit his quiet and dispassionate nature, went away horrified. The meek young woman who had walked the Assembly Rooms with downcast eyes, had become frivolous and, yes, so flirtatious that he had thought her inebriated.

Dunsfold was apoplectic, which gave Isabelle great cause for rejoicing, as she ‘wrote’ when she lay in her bed that night, telling Lord Idsworth of the course of the evening.

One of the other guests had not been fooled. Lady Taynton was not well known to Cornelia Dunsfold, being some twenty years her senior, but her husband was very wealthy, and she glittered in the Bath firmament. She had accepted the invitation because a previous engagement had been called off by the hostess’s ill health, and had expected nothing but boredom from the evening, but she was vastly entertained by Miss Wareham, whom any ninny could see was playing tricks to scare away a potential suitor. Lady Taynton wondered why. The gentleman was perhaps a little ponderous and staid, but neither unprepossessing nor, since Dunsfold had invited him to dinner, was he going to be with his pockets-to-let. Lady Taynton resolved to gain closer acquaintance with Miss Wareham.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WITH THIS INTENTION, LADY TAYNTON TOOK UP Lady Dunsfold, which pleased that lady very much. She soon thought of herself as one of Lady Taynton's inner circle of friends, and laced her conversation to more lowly individuals with, 'As I was saying to Lady Taynton' until they grew thoroughly bored with it. She failed to realise that Lady Taynton was playing her like a fish. By being accepted by Cornelia Dunsfold, Lady Taynton could arrive and guarantee that she would be received, and that Isabelle would be allowed to see her also. Isabelle herself was given strict instructions to 'behave', which might be interpreted as 'speak when addressed, but do not initiate conversation'. At first, she was disinclined to conform, working on the assumption that any friend of Cornelia's would be as vain and vapid, if not as vituperative, as that lady herself. Lady Taynton was undoubtedly vain, and in many ways as vapid, but she did have remarkable social adroitness, and proceeded very neatly to slip past Isabelle's formidable defences. She did not rush things, so that the afternoon when she called only to find her ladyship had gone out to purchase gloves, and then guilelessly asked after Miss Wareham, the butler had no qualms about telling her that Miss Wareham was at home.

Isabelle rose in some surprise when her unexpected guest was announced, but was mistress of herself enough to ask for tea to be brought, just as if it were her own home, and invited her ladyship to be seated.

'Do you know, my dear, I am so glad to find you at home.'

'But I am almost always at home, ma'am.'

'Yes, of course, but I meant alone.'

Isabelle might have added that she was almost always alone too, but refrained.

‘Forgive me, but I am not blind, my dear. You are overly constrained in Lord Dunsfold’s house, and you are evidently unused to such a thing. Your sister prefers to speak only of herself, so might I take this rare opportunity to learn a little of you? I have watched you send unwelcome gentlemen to the right-about, and play the mouse when you are not a mouse at all. I am intrigued. One might, of course, rightly claim it is none of my concern, but I like you, Miss Wareham, and I would have you know that you are not quite as alone as you may feel.’

Isabelle was speechless for some moments, unsure what to say. ‘I cannot, in courtesy, speak against my guardian, ma’am.’

‘No, and I was not asking for you to speak in courtesy, but from the heart. I am not a maternal woman, Heaven forbid,’ her ladyship shuddered, ‘but I dislike cruelty by intent, and I detect that in this house.’ She paused. ‘I am not going to reveal what you may say to your sister, or indeed to anyone else.’

‘I am sorry, ma’am, I am not silent through doubt, but through, well, surprise. You see, I have not had the opportunity to speak to anyone, openly, since my brother Dunsfold took me from my home.’

‘You make that sound like an abduction.’

Isabelle laughed, without mirth.

‘It was very like. I had no say in the matter and it was very sudden.’

She described Lord Dunsfold’s arrival, and the way in which he had removed her from Bradings, but withheld any reason. That there must have been one was obvious enough, but Lady Taynton thought that particular revelation might wait.

‘There seems little family feeling between yourself and your older sister. I fear that the considerable age difference must have been awkward.’

It was an observation intended to draw Isabelle out further, and did so without difficulty. Isabelle recounted her story, not with any intention of eliciting sympathy, but because talking about the life she had enjoyed had been denied her. Lady Taynton thought she saw more of why Miss Wareham chafed at her restraints. She thought it terrible that she had been denied her older sister's opportunity, but could see that it mattered not a jot to the girl. What did matter was that having had an independence that many married ladies did not enjoy, being trammelled as she was now was a torture. There was more, definitely more, but it was enough for Lady Taynton to decide that she would do everything in her power to give Isabelle Wareham room to 'be' in Bath.

'I cannot do much, Miss Wareham, for, as you say, you are Lord Dunsfold's legal ward, and he may order your life as he sees fit, but I would like you to know that you need not be silent with me, and that if it is possible for you to come out with me, or to me, without your sister, I would be delighted to offer you a few hours of freedom, yes?'

'That is very kind of your ladyship. I do not know why you should ...'

'No, no, and no more do I, my dear, but I do, and there's an end to it.' She shook her head at the mysteries of her own mind. 'It is such a pity you are in full mourning still, for it would be such fun to take you shopping and see you dressed properly, not in gloomy blacks. But there, one cannot blame people for dying inconveniently. I had an aunt who died the day after my Presentation. I was so relieved. The dear woman lingered long enough for me not to have to make my curtsy in black gloves. They always make one's hands look far too large.'

Isabelle, who had bristled at the idea of her father's death being an 'inconvenience', realised that Lady Taynton had no idea that what she had just said might cause offence, and laughed.

'I had not thought about it before, ma'am, but when black gloves alone are worn, you are so right. They give one

paws.'

'Exactly so. I declare it positively discourages one from having distant relations.'

Both ladies were laughing as Lady Dunsfold came hurrying in, having been informed of her illustrious visitor's arrival as she returned from a fruitless search for gloves of a particular shade of lavender. These would be worn with her new gowns as soon as she could change into half-mourning. Shopping for garments that she might not wear for another four months was better than not shopping at all. The news that Isabelle was entertaining her ladyship in the green parlour filled her with dread. She entered, fulsome apologies upon her lips, only to find Lady Taynton and her sister getting along famously.

'If only I had known, ma'am, I would have delayed my expedition.'

'You could not possibly have done so, my dear Lady Dunsfold, for I came upon whim. I do an awful lot of things upon whim. Taynton, dear man, says it is why I am so expensive, but also why I remain so very youthful.' She laughed in a remarkably girlish manner which added veracity to what might have seemed an unlikely statement.

'Indeed, ma'am.' Lady Dunsfold was unsure how to reply and reverted to her own train of thought. 'And in the end, you know, I wasted the hour, for it was only to purchase gloves which I did not find.'

Isabelle choked and received a warning look.

'There,' declared Lady Taynton, beaming at Isabelle, 'and we were ourselves only this very moment discussing gloves.'

'You were?' Lady Dunsfold sounded doubtful. She could not imagine anything remotely humorous about gloves.

'Indeed we were, but, goodness me, look at the time. I promised to pay a call on old Lady Sempringham this afternoon, and if I linger I shall be late. I am so sorry that I missed you, Lady Dunsfold, but be sure your sister has been

a charming substitute. Oh, and before I forget, I was hoping you and Miss Wareham might attend a very private gathering I am arranging for Thursday next. It is just a few ladies and a little music. Miss Jermyn is going to play the harp for us, and Lady Embleton has a delightful contralto voice. It would be quite “convenient” as my poor dear mama would have said, for you to join us. Do either of you play?’

‘I used to sing,’ murmured Isabelle, reverting to meekness.

‘But not for some years, I am sure,’ declared her sister, depressingly, ‘so I doubt your voice would be worth hearing.’

‘Well, my dear Miss Wareham, if your vocal chords might be dusted off, I am sure we would enjoy any offering you set before us. I shall send cards. Now, I really must be on my way.’

Lady Taynton rose with a smile, and, after suitable expressions of gratitude had been exchanged, the sisters were left looking at each other.

‘What on earth could you find to discuss with Lady Taynton, Isabelle?’ Cornelia was suspicious.

‘Oh, Lady Taynton did much of the talking,’ lied Isabelle, smoothly. ‘She is a most entertaining lady. I merely made appropriate remarks.’ She smiled with a sweetness which her sister found unnerving.

‘You will not sing.’

‘Do I look as if about to break into song, Cornelia? How strange. I have no such intention.’

‘Next Thursday, I meant, as you well know.’

Isabelle inclined her head, and the smile widened.

Edwin Semington had not had a pleasant start to the year. The incident with the shotgun had gained him a certain unwelcome notoriety, and caused him considerable worry, lest Lord Idsworth should not recover and he find himself

giving evidence before the coroner. He hid much of this from his mama, who was of a nervous disposition.

He had found Isabelle's antagonistic attitude inexplicable and put it down to an excess of nerves, until such time as he tried to gain admittance to Bradings again, only to be told that Miss Isabelle was not at home to visitors, when he had passed Sir Charles riding away but five minutes before. How he found out about the putative romance between Lord Idsworth and Isabelle, whom he had confidently expected to wed as soon as she cast off her blacks, was uncertain, but it gave him reason to think. It also roused in him the totally unexpected emotion of jealousy. He did not love Isabelle in any sense that Lord Idsworth would have understood, but he believed her to be his, and he was jealous of his possessions. In his own mind he was the victim of Idsworth's 'poaching', and he knew how to deal with poachers. He spent many a contented hour imaging himself besting the earl in all manner of ways, and proving himself the better man, but was equally happy to consider how Isabelle might be brought to accept him, even if her heart yearned for the dark, athletic figure of the noble earl. In reality, the first element of the situation appeared to have been solved for him, with the removal of both parties from Wiltshire. The next stage was to get his ring on Isabelle's finger. The key in his plan was Lord Dunsfold. There remained a year in which he controlled Isabelle, and Edwin Semington knew that Lady Dunsfold would be more than happy to see her sister wed as long as it did not mean that she would outrank her, and would thus support his suit. However, what made Dunsfold happy was money, and what worried him was lack of it.

Semington was a sycophant, whilst having an inflated idea as to his own worth, but he had a nose for the scent of money, and he had also just come into an unexpected inheritance from a cousin near Cirencester. This comprised a tidy estate and a quarry of Cotswold stone which brought in a very fair sum each year. It was also only two miles from Lord Dunsfold's estate. Dunsfold would know of it. His Lordship might find the prospect of owning a lucrative

quarry appealing, but Semington knew that for him to be prepared to 'exchange' Isabelle's hand in marriage for it, he would have to have suffered a reverse. He therefore set about discovering just where Lord Dunsfold's investments lay. He knew that Funds alone, in which many of the aristocracy held a stake, were not profitable enough for the lucre-loving Viscount, and that his finger was, without advertising the fact, in many pies. Commerce was below him, but investment, 'patronage of production' as Semington had once heard it described, was not. He was not sure that he could engineer any financial misfortune, but knowing where his Lordship stood financially would stand him in good stead. He would watch, and wait.

His man of business was as delighted as a ferret sent down a rabbit burrow and reported to his client within a few weeks that there were rumours about a tin mine in which Lord Dunsfold had invested heavily, and which had suffered a bad accident. Lives had been lost, but more important to the investors, the roof fall had the potential to close off an entire seam, and the one which had been vaunted as the mine's future. The next few weeks would, the agent wrote, 'prove interesting'. Mr Semington rode past Bradings the following day with his sense of possessiveness rejuvenated.

Once his hopes were confirmed, he travelled into Gloucestershire, ostensibly to view his recent acquisitions, and paid a call upon Lord Dunsfold, only to be informed that his Lordship had already removed to Bath. He therefore wrote a letter to his mama, explaining that business took him to Bath, and that he might be found at the Christopher should she require him urgently.

Lady Dunsfold was suffering from twinges of toothache, which she hoped would be resolved by oil of cloves, and was also fretting over her own musical limitations. Whilst she had been competent with watercolours and had mastered French and a decent knowledge of Italian, she was not at all musical. She would never have admitted that an evening listening to harp, pianoforte and voice could be guaranteed to have her stifling a yawn. For the 'pleasure' of attending such a 'select' gathering she would have been

content to watch a bare wall. She was not convinced that Isabelle would not show her up by singing and being mediocre, or even worse, by sounding sublime. Isabelle, when confronted, looked bland, and merely murmured that 'you have said that I shall not'. It was therefore as much in trepidation as anticipatory excitement that she arrived at Lady Taynton's house in The Circus, with Isabelle looking deceptively docile.

For her own part, Isabelle was determined to keep her sister guessing. She had a very good idea how much not knowing worried Cornelia, and she had every intention of maintaining that state. In truth she did not herself know if she would sing. Much depended upon the standard of those who performed first. Isabelle knew that she had a fair voice, but it was not trained, and if the other ladies were too polished in their performances she would decline, on the reasonable grounds of lack of practice. If, however, they were of a roughly similar standard to herself, and she was pressed to do so by her hostess, she would 'give in' and sing, and Cornelia could do nothing about it.

Isabelle had but a nodding acquaintance with most of the ladies present, but there were enough topics of genteel conversation to which she might add the occasional comment to prevent her being forgotten. Her ladyship had provided her guests with an excellent array of delicacies prepared by her very expensive French chef, and the pianoforte had been tuned but the week before. Lady Embleton opened the evening by accompanying herself at this instrument, and sang a ballad and a pretty song in Italian, which enabled Lady Dunsfold to show off her knowledge by translating for the benefit of a lady less adept in that foreign tongue, although had she done so more quietly it would have been appreciated by everyone else. Miss Jermyn plucked sweetly upon the harp, and three other ladies performed pieces on the piano or sang unaccompanied. Isabelle was relieved to find none sang the piece she had, at least mentally, prepared.

Lady Taynton rose and came to stand behind her chair as a performance was applauded, and enquired very quietly, if

her young friend would be prepared to sing. Isabelle said that she would 'if pressed' and gave her hostess a meaningful glance. Lady Taynton smiled, and moved forward, thanking the soloist for a charming performance.

'And now, Miss Wareham, would you favour us with a song?'

Isabelle blushed and demurred, in a meek way.

'No, no, I am sure you sound delightful, and if you have not had the opportunity to use your voice of late, I am sure in this company it will be understood. Please, my dear, do sing.'

Isabelle glanced at her sister, with a look which said 'I cannot refuse', and rose to take her place. She cleared her throat, hoped that the surreptitious scales she had worked upon very quietly in her chamber had been enough, and began. She sang 'Dido's Lament', and its mournful tone was, combined with her black attire, so moving as to make one lady dab at her eyes unashamedly. If there was the slightest tremor to a note, it sounded as if emotion placed it there. At the conclusion there was silence.

Lady Taynton took a breath.

'That was so very affecting, I declare I can scarcely speak. Bravo, my dear.'

'My sister can only sing in English,' whispered Lady Dunsfold, rather loudly to her neighbour.

'Oh, but with such a voice need she sing in anything else?' responded that lady, and sighed. Cornelia smiled and said nothing.

At the end of the evening the two sisters made their farewells to their hostess. Lady Taynton smiled at Isabelle.

'I am so glad you found your voice tonight,' she said and gave Isabelle's hand a slight squeeze. Her eyes conveyed the fact that Isabelle might take two meanings from her words. 'I do hope to hear it again soon.'

Isabelle blushed.

In the carriage home, Lady Dunsfold said little, and rubbed her jaw. Her face ached.

‘I am sorry to have disobeyed you, Sister,’ murmured Isabelle, in the darkness, ‘but I was not in a position to refuse Lady Taynton’s request.’

‘If you are going to do such a thing again, then we will employ a singing master, paid for out of your allowance, so that you might have more than that miserable dirge to parade. You made far too much of your situation tonight, and played upon sympathy. You shall not do so again.’

‘You are right, as so often, Cornelia. I think perhaps an aria by Handel might be suitable. One should not sing frivolous pieces whilst in mourning, if one sings at all.’

‘If one sings at all, indeed,’ repeated her sister, repressively.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE DAY AFTER HIS ARRIVAL IN BATH, MR SEMINGTON presented himself in Henrietta Street, full of his recent good fortune, to which Lord Dunsfold listened with a mixture of burning indignation and an equal amount of interest. Dunsfold had not known of any connection between the late Mr Swanborough and Edwin Semington, but then the relationship was some form of cousinship. He thought how unfair it was that Semington should have distant relatives who left him all their considerable worldly goods, whilst he, who ought to have inherited Bradings through his wife, had gained no more than a cheerless rabbit warren of a house in Leicestershire that had been her mother's dowry. He had hoped to renovate it enough with the profits from his investments to enable it to be sold at a reasonable price, but that was out of the question at the present, and he was faced with bills just to maintain it which made him wince every time they were set before him by his man of business. There was no justice in life.

'But I did not come here to puff off my good luck, naturally,' lied Mr Semington, and stared contemplatively at his glass of burgundy, twisting the stem of the glass between finger and thumb. 'How does the fair Isabelle? No doubt the amusements of Bath are giving her thoughts a more cheerful turn.'

'Isabelle does not go into Society as such, but is enjoying those aspects which are open to her. She is,' and Lord Dunsfold could not resist the opportunity to niggle his smug visitor, 'highly regarded by those who have come into contact with her.'

'Understandably so.' Mr Semington did not rise to the bait. After all, he knew just how much Dunsfold would welcome what he had to offer. 'I have always admired her, of course, having been brought up with such access to Bradings as a godson must have.'

The two gentlemen eyed each other. Nothing so plebeian as the 'price' for Miss Wareham's hand would pass their lips.

'I remain the dear girl's guardian until next March, and of course I consider she is far too inexperienced to make any choices which would affect her future.'

'Obviously. Such a choice as she might make would undoubtedly be ... inappropriate.' Mr Semington had no wish to mention the name of the Earl of Idsworth.

'Having a care to her well-being, it behoves me to approve only a man who would be sufficiently before-hand with the world to be able to keep her in comfort. Of course, anyone who takes her hand takes the Bradings estate.'

'And both things would make one the envy of one's neighbours.' Mr Semington smiled. 'I myself would consider myself honoured ... but you see I am so overburdened at present, what with Mr Swanborough's estate ... so time-consuming. I have never really interested myself in the workings of quarries. Quite amazing the price that good Cotswold stone is fetching at the present.' He shook his head as if bemused by the very mention of it.

Lord Dunsfold smiled, slightly. They were coming towards an agreement, a gentlemen's agreement, naturally.

'Perhaps I may be in a position to lighten your burden, in exchange for you lightening a burden that is at present upon me,' suggested Lord Dunsfold, and offered Mr Semington another glass of his better burgundy.

Isabelle greeted the news of Mr Semington's arrival with a lack of interest that was soon replaced by intense irritation. She had assumed that Lord Dunsfold's previous attitude towards Edwin Semington would remain, for he had never shown any inclination for his company, and yet the man seemed to haunt the house. In the first few days he dined twice with the family, and no sooner did she leave the house with Cornelia than she could almost be guaranteed to meet him, 'coincidentally' passing in their direction. It was evident that he was being given every assistance by her

sister and guardian. Mr Semington's attitude was as if January had never happened, and he stood upon as close terms with her as in the past. Considering that these had always been treated by herself as cool, but by him as almost familial, she was swiftly incensed. It was also clear that gossip, which ran through Bath like wildfire, simply awaited an announcement. Cornelia, remonstrating with her over a snub which Mr Semington had either failed to grasp, or had simply ignored, chose to make her situation more plain.

'Edwin Semington meets with Dunsfold's approval, you know.'

'I cannot think why, unless he has taken toadying to a new level and Dunsfold likes it.'

'That, Isabelle, is a very unladylike expression. I have always liked Mr Semington.'

'What a pity that you went to London for your come-out, then, for otherwise you might have married him.'

Isabelle spoke softly, for they were seated in the Pump Room, having just bidden him farewell after he had given them his company all the way from Henrietta Place, but her tone was sharp.

Cornelia winced, though it might have been a stab of pain in her tooth.

'He has a great fondness for you.'

'Foxes have a great fondness for chickens, but it does not mean they should be thrown together.'

'Do not be facetious.'

'He has treated me as if I were some item of art that he was due to inherit. Well, I am not a picture, or a piece of porcelain, and I am determined that he will not "inherit" me.' Isabelle pursed her lips.

'You have the oddest notions, I declare, Isabelle. He was Papa's godson.' Lady Dunsfold sniffed.

‘Yes, and you did not hear what Papa had to say about him.’

‘Papa’s mind was not really as it should be, though, those last years, I am convinced.’

‘Papa’s mind,’ Isabelle bit her lip, and paused before continuing, ‘was perfectly sharp. It was his body only that was struck down. What he said came more slowly, but was not less considered. He found Edwin pompous and presuming, and he was quite right. You speak of what you do not know, Cornelia, for you were never there.’

Lady Dunsfold would have responded, but at that moment Isabelle was hailed by a well-dressed man threading his way towards them. He was smiling in unaffected pleasure.

‘Miss Wareham, I declare. How do you go on?’

‘Lord Mollington.’ Isabelle rose, giving a smile in response, and curtsied as he raised his hat. ‘I ... am quite well, thank you. Have you been introduced to my sister, Lady Dunsfold?’

He had not. Civilities were exchanged. Lady Dunsfold looked down her sharp nose at him.

‘What brings you to Bath, my Lord?’ Lady Dunsfold was suspicious.

‘My grandmother’s arthritic complaints.’ He waved his hand vaguely in the direction of a group of elderly ladies. ‘She is come to take the baths and drink the waters, and demanded an escort until such time as she has settled in.’

‘Then you will not be remaining long?’ The question was posed in a manner which indicated that Lady Dunsfold hoped for an answer in the negative. ‘Have you known my sister for some time, my Lord?’

‘Not long, ma’am.’ Lord Mollington became aware that Miss Wareham was trying to impart some unspoken warning to him. ‘Remaining here, that is. I had the pleasure of being introduced to Miss Wareham by her cousin, Sir Charles Wareham, last Easter, when I visited him.’

He glanced at Isabelle to see if he had done aright. Her look of gratitude spoke volumes.

‘My Lord, when you do depart, would you be so kind as to pass on my sincere, and deepest,’ she stressed the word, ‘regards to those of our mutual acquaintance.’

‘Of course, Miss Wareham, with the greatest of pleasure, though I would hope that I might see you again before I leave Bath.’

Lady Dunsfold gave him a quelling look, and he withdrew. Isabelle wondered if he had comprehended her.

‘What did you mean by that, Isabelle?’ Her sister glanced at her, eyes narrowed.

‘Well, it occurred to me that he might stay briefly at Baddesley Hall when he leaves Bath, and I have had no chance to send even the simplest greetings to my aunt and cousin since I left home in January.’ She made it sound very reasonable.

In fact Lord Mollington only encountered Isabelle once more, very briefly, and that was in the street later that day, for she did not thereafter leave the house for some time. Lady Dunsfold’s toothache grew suddenly worse, and her Lord recommended that she have the tooth drawn, but she was most reluctant to face the extraction. She found it unfeeling in the extreme when he commented that since she had presented him with three children, the brief agonies that would have to be endured would not be beyond her fortitude. However, after a night spent rocking to and fro in such pain as rivalled those happier events, she relented. For several days afterwards she was not at home to visitors. The drawing of the tooth had left her with a swollen face and she had taken to her bed upon the advice of her doctor, who had prescribed laudanum for the pain. She had no wish to see Isabelle in attendance and banished her from her room, though with a prohibition upon her ‘junketing about’. Isabelle almost laughed. She could not recall having done anything in Bath which might be termed ‘junketing’. Instead, she wrote several notes of regret on her sister’s

behalf to ladies who had sent them invitations, and even longer ones in her head to Lord Idsworth.

Lady Taynton, calling on the third day, left a note expressing the sincere hope that dear Lady Dunsfold might be soon restored to health, and inviting Isabelle to take tea with her the following afternoon. Cornelia felt too unwell to do more than groan and say that Isabelle might do as she liked. Thus it was that Miss Wareham was announced by Lady Taynton's supercilious butler at four o'clock the next day. Lady Taynton rose with a rustle of silk and came forward with her hands outstretched.

'My dear girl, I hope your poor sister is improved. It is awfully depressing when there is someone ill in the house. It pervades, like cheap perfume. I remember when my eldest boy had the mumps, I felt blue-devilled for a week.'

'The sickroom can sometimes make one feel low.' Isabelle did not add that the reverse might also be true, and not just from relief.

'Oh, I did not enter the sickroom more than the once. He looked so misshapen, poor child, I could not face seeing him again with his poor face so ugly. Of course, the doctor assured me it was not a complaint that was likely to be fatal, so I could be easy on that score, at least.'

Isabelle looked at her in some surprise. It had never occurred to her that anyone would leave the nursing of their nearest and dearest to servants, least of all their children.

'Ah, now I can see that you think me unfeeling. Well, I am not going to pretend that I am one of those mothers forever worrying about their progeny. I never have. My dear mama was much the same, though my father said that was because she was French. Personally, I never saw that her country of birth made any difference, since my dearest friend had a French mother also, and she positively draped herself in motherhood. It was quite embarrassing. But had there been the slightest hint of deadly danger to my poor dear child, I would have steeled myself. Truly, I would.'

‘Forgive me, Ma’am. I did not intend to appear in any way critical. It is just that my experience has been so different, first with Papa and—’ She stopped, and a blush suffused her cheeks.

Lady Taynton ignored the blush, but noted it.

‘Of course, your situation was very different, with just the two of you for so long.’ The servants were invisible to her Ladyship. ‘And you were so very dutiful.’ She gazed at her as if she had offered herself as some form of human sacrifice upon the altar of filial devotion.

Isabelle wondered if Lady Taynton had any idea of parental duty towards a child, but gave up. Towards herself Lady Taynton had shown nothing but kindness, but then she had not had to put herself out in any way. Part of her charmed and fascinated Isabelle, and part was entirely incomprehensible.

Tea was brought in, and when the servant withdrew, Lady Taynton looked shrewdly at her guest.

‘You need not tell me, you know, if it is upsetting to you.’

‘Ma’am?’

‘You are, though it pains me exceedingly to say so, easily young enough to be my daughter. You are inexperienced in the art of emotional concealment, my dear. Your face is too open and you speak, sometimes, without considering what follows. The other whom you nursed ...?’

Lady Taynton was not criticising, and her voice invited confidences. Isabelle sighed, and a quivering smile touched her lips.

‘Am I so transparent, ma’am? Oh dear. You see, it is not so very long ago, though these last few months have made it almost as a dream.’

Lady Taynton sat very still, and listened. Isabelle was very shy at first, and her Ladyship had to piece information together to discover the interesting parts which were omitted. The gift of the muff was not mentioned at all.

However, once the story reached the point of Mr Semington's disastrous shot, Isabelle became quite loquacious. She almost forgot that she sat in Lady Taynton's drawing room and instead was back in the best guest chamber at Bradings, with the fireglow, and the bandages, and the man she loved. The older woman watched her, and her shallow heart went out to her.

'It is, my dear, quite the romance, though I am sure you would hate it to be termed so. "Romance" has become so synonymous with fanciful fiction, has it not. But I do not see that your guardian need have been so swift to remove you, since the gentleman was on the point of departure. It would appear that you have an excellent and discreet staff, so nothing would have been known to the world outside. His actions drew attention unnecessarily. Besides, if there is an attachment, why should Lord Dunsfold not look favourably upon it? He might forbid a public betrothal until your mourning ends, though if you would be content with a quiet and private ceremony, marriage would not be unthinkable whilst you are in black. I do not understand. Sir Charles does not sound the sort of man who would invite a disreputable gentleman to spend the Christmas season with him.'

'The gentleman is far from disreputable, but he is not wealthy.'

'Ah, what a pity.'

'But I do not see why Lord Dunsfold holds him in such aversion, and I would swear that is the case. If anything, it should be the—' She halted, unwilling to give away more, and annoyed with herself at giving away so much. 'Nor has he any ambition for me. The gentlemen he has permitted to show any interest have none of them been particularly rich, and certainly not as high in rank, though to me neither is important.'

'Whilst it is nice to hear a young woman not sound grasping, I fear that your disregard of those two things shows your innocence and also ignorance of the real world.' She paused for a moment. 'You have been very discreet, my

dear, but would you be prepared to tell me the gentleman's name?'

'I doubt you would know much of him, ma'am, for he has been abroad most of the last decade, in the army.'

Lady Taynton had visions of a younger son, perhaps come unexpectedly into the title. 'A soldier!'

'Yes, in an infantry regiment,' Isabelle declared, with a slight challenge in her eye.

'Ah. Well, no doubt he is an excellent, brave young man.' Privately, Lady Taynton was wondering if Lord Dunsfold had not been quite as precipitate as she had thought.

'Well, not "young", for he is ten years my senior,' replied Isabelle, and then wished she had not said it, for a twisted smile crossed Lady Taynton's visage. To a woman of her age, a man of thirty was young still. 'And ...' she took a deep breath, 'he is the Earl of Idsworth.'

Lady Taynton dropped her teaspoon.

'Idsworth! Goodness me!'

'You know of him, then?'

'I have not seen him in very many years, but yes, I know him.' It was Lady Taynton who dropped her gaze.

Isabelle instantly regretted her admission. Lady Taynton would no doubt be like her cousin Julia and act as if Lord Idsworth were a pauper, and damned by scandal. She stuck out her chin.

'You may, perhaps, think that I do not know about what happened to him, when he was very young, Ma'am, but I do. He told me everything.'

'Everything?' Lady Taynton's eyebrows rose.

'Yes. That he came down from Cambridge eager to repair his family finances, and had been persuaded to invest in some scheme which appeared reputable, well, was almost

certainly so, only for it to fail and leave him in a worse state than before, even having to sell the family's London house.'

'The house in Albemarle Street. Yes, it was a particularly fine residence.'

'You visited it, Ma'am?'

'Oh, frequently, my dear. But continue.'

'He felt he had brought shame upon his name and took up a lieutenancy in a line regiment in Portugal. He told me he had hoped to hide the shame or more likely that he would be killed.'

'That does sound so very like the boy I remember,' sighed Lady Taynton. 'He did take things very much to heart. I said it was foolishness at the time, but nobody listened to me.'

'I found his admission very affecting. That a young man should have tried so hard to do the best for his estates and to have seen it end so ruinously ... And he blamed nobody but himself.'

'Poor Idsworth. He never had a chance, of course, for one cannot outdo Fate, and an inability to keep money from positively running through one's fingers is in the blood.'

'He told me his father was a very solid man, and would have been horrified at what happened.' Isabelle thought Lady Taynton's comment rather an insult.

'Oh yes, my dear, he was terribly "solid", perfectly rigid with propriety and good sense. He only ever did one thing that made no sense at all, and that was when he married.'

Isabelle frowned. She was missing something. Perhaps there had been some rivalry, long ago.

'That does not seem very flattering to Lady Idsworth, on either count.'

Lady Taynton laughed.

'But, you see, I am allowed to say so. I, Miss Wareham, am Idsworth's mama.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ISABELLE BLINKED. 'YOU CAN'T BE.'

Taking it as a compliment to her looks, Lady Taynton contrived to look arch, which was quite an achievement for a lady only a few months shy of her fiftieth birthday.

'Thank you, my dear.' She patted her carefully dressed hair, the colour of which owed much to walnut shells. 'Of course, I married Idsworth at seventeen, and was not yet nineteen when I presented him with his son and heir. I was so thankful there were not more, though. I am not a very maternal woman. I told Taynton as much when I married him, but he did not seem to mind. He just said he loved me for being me, which was terribly sweet. Fate, and Fate is always "misfortune" and not "good fortune", of course then decreed I should have three more. It is when I see my progeny that I feel old, so it is far better that I avoid them as much as possible, and if Louisa ever teaches her brood to call me Grandmama, I have told her I shall not leave her my diamonds, and they are of the finest quality for Taynton only ever buys me the best.'

She made it sound very reasonable. Isabelle merely nodded in agreement. She was trying to come to terms with the fact that this strangely likeable woman was the very same she had damned as hard, heartless and cruel, neglecting her little boy, leaving him without a thought for a new husband, abandoning him to school and whatever love an aunt might give. That she could be both seemed so peculiar, and yet it was so. She had admitted that she was not at all maternal. What greater proof could there be than her treatment of her firstborn.

'And you love him.' Lady Taynton smiled, and held out her hand to place over Isabelle's. 'I am so glad. He deserves someone who will do that, completely.' Her eyes misted for a moment and then she said, more robustly, 'But the same goes for you too, my dear. Teach any child of yours the

dreaded word beginning with G, and I shall never speak to you again, which would be a great shame.'

'Oh Ma'am,' she laughed, but there was a catch in it. 'If only I was as confident of the outcome.'

'I cannot see you changing your heart. It strikes me that you are actually very strong.' She paused before continuing. 'I do not claim to know Idsworth very well, but I can tell you that he was always very tenacious as a small boy, positively rooted to his convictions, however much one tried to move him. His nurse had the most terrible trouble when she foolishly told him he could keep tadpoles in the nursery, in a bucket. Of course, when he turned up with a bucket of the ghastly things, she explained they were slimy and dirty and turned into toads. He stood his ground and said they were going to grow up in his bedchamber, and anyway they would be frogs. There followed an argument that could be heard way beyond the nursery wing, and Idsworth, his papa Idsworth I mean, arrived to call for order to find little Julian, standing arms folded in front of his bucket, daring Nurse to touch them, and threatening to stay awake until such time as they stopped being tadpoles, and were hopping about the room. He only abandoned the plan when his father, clever man, explained that he had every right to do so, but that without the insects they would find outside in the pond, the tadpoles would die. Julian then marched, and yes, he was a little boy who did march, back to the pond and released them.'

Isabelle sat with a lump in her throat at the thought of the small, dark-haired child, defending his tadpoles. And his name was Julian. She had forgotten Charlie's brief introduction before Christmas, and turned it over in her mind, saying it in her head.

'If he loves you, his love will not waver because of absence, just as yours does not. And I see that it does not. I have never been cursed with such strong feelings, or blessed with them if you prefer, but I have learnt to see them.' Lady Taynton gave a wry smile. 'And since I do not advertise the fact that my eldest son is very nearly thirty years of age, I

am happy to add the fact that he is in love with you to my list of secrets. Now, your tea is cold. I will ring for a fresh pot.'

Isabelle returned from her tea with Lady Taynton feeling ridiculously buoyed. In reality nothing had changed, but to feel that she had support, however secret, was a great relief, and that the support came from Idsworth's mama, however tenuous the link between them beyond blood, added to her sense that in the end all would be well. She was glad not to have to face her sister, who would have been bound to enquire why she was inclined to smile so fatuously all evening. She retired rather early, and whilst intending to 'write' her letter to her love, got no further than 'My darling, Julian' and then went into a reverie. Knowing his name gave her the sensation of goosebumps all over, for it was so intimate. Admittedly he had not given her the use of it, as she had given hers to him, but then there had not been occasion to do so. Married ladies rarely referred to their husbands by their Christian name in front of others, but in private ... that was surely another matter. She fell asleep with the smile still upon her face.

If it lingered, then the following day wiped it away in no uncertain manner. Mr Semington called to ask after the invalid. Lord Dunsfold spoke with him for a short time, and then sent for Isabelle. She had no knowledge when she entered the room that Mr Semington was present.

'Ah, there you are, Isabelle. Mr Semington has something of importance to say to you, so I will withdraw.' He turned to Edwin Semington, who was attempting to look exceptionally serious, and reminded Isabelle of Lady Kirksanton's pug dog. 'You will find me in the library, Semington, when you have finished.'

Before Isabelle could say anything, he walked out. Mr Semington smiled at her in a way she found distinctly unpleasant.

'Now, my dear, I think you should sit down.'

‘Really, Mr Semington, am I in for a severe shock to the nerves?’ Her tone was acerbic, and she remained standing.

The smile became rather fixed.

‘Hardly a shock, and why so formal? Surely it has always been Edwin?’

‘Not since I discovered that you were not a man able to face his responsibilities, Mr Semington.’

‘How so? Oh, you mean that unfortunate misunderstanding at New Year.’

‘Misunderstanding? You nearly killed a man.’

‘But he is quite recovered, I believe, so no harm done.’ He sounded totally unconcerned.

She frowned, not in anger but consternation.

‘You believe that? When you placed a man’s life in danger, when he suffered weeks of pain and ill health, when he bears the scars of your foolishness?’

‘He was a soldier, was he not?’ A glint entered Mr Semington’s eye, and he shrugged. ‘They are casual about such things.’ He saw her bristle, knew she would counter, defend the man who had smoothly stolen from him what ought to be his. ‘You no doubt learnt a lot about the way military men think. Well, I know a thing or two about strategy, and that one may lose a battle and still win the war.’

Isabelle shuddered. Edwin Semington had annoyed her for years, but never had he scared her. There was something here beyond the usual self-belief, the right of future possession. She had never seen him jealous, and never seen him in control of a situation. Now he was both. She felt, for the first time, that this man would indeed have what he wanted, and it frightened her.

He saw her fear and liked it. He had never seen it in a woman before, not that sort of fear. Of course, if one had challenged him and asked if he wished he had killed Lord Idsworth, he would have denied it, but he would not have

looked his interrogator in the eye. He did not like the fact that Isabelle had formed an attachment to another man, not one bit, but that would not stop him taking her as his wife. To him, love might be the ‘battle’ but possession was the ‘war’, and he would win it, for he knew that Lord Dunsfold would dance to the tune of his playing, and Isabelle was just a woman. That it gave him an advantage over his Lordship had an added piquancy, because he was so conscious of not having a title.

‘So, my dear Isabelle, you cannot be surprised that I am now making you an offer. You have the choice, since I am an understanding man. We can be married soon, very quietly, or I am prepared to wait until your mourning is over, if you wish for one of those grander affairs that mean so much to the ladies.’

‘The choice, Sir, is whether or not I accept, not the timing of the ceremony. So I can assure you that you will have an endless wait, for I decline your offer.’ She looked as haughty as her sister.

‘Perhaps “offer” was not the best choice of word.’ He did not sound put out by her refusal.

‘What other could it be?’

‘Making you a declaration.’

‘Of your feelings?’ She curled her lip. ‘Please do not insult me by pretending you are in love with me.’

‘Of course not. There is no need to pretend such a very juvenile and passing emotion. I admire your looks, your competence. In some ways you are remarkably mature, but in years you are very young, and so it is perfectly understandable that you should be prey to “love”, but that will pass, and you will become sensible once more. I am your future, Isabelle.’

‘Never.’ She glowered at him. The thought of him as her husband made her feel quite sick.

‘Such heat is unbecoming, but I forgive it.’ He paused. ‘I shall leave you to think upon the matter when you are less

fraught. I think I have taken you a little by surprise. You will see sense.'

He bowed, rather awkwardly, and left the room. He then requested to be shown to the library. The footman led him up a flight of stairs, knocked and opened the door. Lord Dunsfold sat at the desk, his hands steepled together. The servant withdrew, as Mr Semington advanced into the room.

'Well?'

'She refused me.' Mr Semington sounded unperturbed. 'In fact, she was quite determined in her refusal.'

'The little fool.' Dunsfold sneered. 'Well, she will change her mind, you may be confident of that, Semington.'

'Oh, I am, my Lord, I am.'

Lord Dunsfold did not hurry to speak with his ward, upon Mr Semington's departure. When he did so, however, she was pacing up and down the room, still clearly in deep agitation.

'That was really very short-sighted of you, Isabelle.'

She turned. 'How so?'

'A man like Semington makes a better husband if one is amenable.' He watched her. 'There was never any future for your sickroom romance, you know. You would be well advised to dismiss all thoughts of Idsworth, as I am sure he has of you.'

It was odd, she thought, that he talked of there being 'no future' as Lord Idsworth had upon parting. She had not believed him then, and she did not now believe her guardian. And even, though it tore her heart, if it were true, 'no future' was better than Mr Semington.

'You can have no knowledge of a man of Lord Idsworth's character, so your "certainty" does not impress me.' She held up her head.

'There you are wrong. I know far more of him than you could possibly imagine. Once upon a time he might even have thought of me as a friend.'

‘You?’ she scoffed.

‘Me. But you see, he was always the noble fool, and would have ruined all, being honourable, so I simply had to cut the connection. There is no love lost between us, of course, and I am prepared to say I would have you marry a chimney sweep rather than him.’

‘Or Edwin Semington, whom you despise.’

‘Or him. But if I despise him it is of no matter, since I will not have to live with him.’

‘Nor will I.’

‘You do not understand, Isabelle. You remain in my guardianship, and I tell you now, that the only man with whom I will countenance you being married is Edwin Semington. You think that your existence is confined? You cannot imagine how much more so it will become. You will be glad to marry him.’

‘Your control over me ends upon the twelfth of March next. If that meant even solitary confinement for the rest of the year, I would endure it rather than marry him, or any of your choosing. And you cannot force me to marry Mr Semington. Would you drag me up the aisle screaming? It would create a scandal, which you would not enjoy. I have informed Mr Semington that under no circumstances will I accept his offer, and I will not change my mind.’ She looked him full in the face, a challenge in her eyes.

Lord Dunsfold regarded her with dislike, but her words contained food for thought. Two of them seemed pertinent, ‘force’ and ‘scandal’. He smiled, slowly, and Isabelle thought how like Edwin Semington’s it was. Suddenly she felt trapped.

‘We shall see, Isabelle.’

The Dower House at Buriton Park was a neat, square building of warm, red brick, constructed for his widowed mother by the third Earl of Idsworth just under a century ago. The drawing room boasted a fine Venetian window which gave a view of the main house across the parkland.

Lord Idsworth wondered if it had been rather a cruel thing to do, for although the big house made an excellent focal point, it must have rubbed salt into the wound of a lady having to remove from the one to the other. He at least had the prospect of reclaiming the ancestral home, and had in fact spent so many happy holidays in the Dower House with his aunt that he felt perfectly comfortable in it. The smells were homely to him. The camphor that Aunt Sophia had demanded be kept in every linen chest to keep away the moth had crept into every corner of the upper floor and lingered, like the rosemary she added to her potpourri, even though the mistress of the house had been dead the better part of eighteen months, and the beeswaxed furniture shrouded in holland covers. Lord Idsworth missed his aunt, with her dry wit and her no-nonsense affection, and the house seemed to miss her also.

He had resolved to throw himself into discovering the exact state of his affairs as they would stand when the lease on the Park expired in just under two years' time, and not to dwell upon how Miss Isabelle Wareham might be faring. This proved, as she had anticipated, totally impossible with Sileby an ever-present reminder of her. She was not bound, he kept telling himself, and although in mourning, he had little doubt Dunsfold would be pushing likely suitors in her direction. He tried telling himself that what had passed between them was, on her part, merely the first stirring of a youthful heart, but deep down he believed that she would be constant. He could only serve her, therefore, by waiting and by preparing for the day when he could lead her to the altar, and he focussed upon it. Only in the long hours of the night did he dream of a sad-faced girl shaking her head at him, and placing her hand in that of another.

With few acquaintance in England, his life was fairly solitary, and the days at the Dower House inclined to drag. He was delighted to receive a letter from Lord Mollington, although he could have had no intimation that its contents would have him calling for Sileby to pack his bags.

My dear Idsworth,

I do hope this finds you in good health. I have just returned from escorting my grandmama, Lady Saltburn, to Bath, where she has gone for her health. I have to say I can think of nowhere worse. The place is full of miserable old coves bemoaning their lumbago, and elderly tabbies who spend their days insisting their complaint is far more severe than those of their 'friends' and that they are far more stoic. I was heartily glad when she declared that she no longer required my services to squire her about, and I could make a bolt for it, though I shall be returning shortly.

Lord Idsworth smiled, but his expression changed as he read the next paragraph.

I did come across Miss Wareham in the Pump Room one morning, and she did not look at all in plump curren, though if she was being forced to drink the disgusting waters that they actually sell to the unwary, I am not surprised. She was with her sister, Lady Dunsfold, who looked at me as if I were something that had crept from under a stone. I do not claim to be a downy one, but it was clear that Miss Wareham was very wary of revealing how we were acquainted. She did say, most specifically, that she implored me to pass on her sincere and, she stressed, deepest, regards to our mutual acquaintances. I broke my journey at Baddesley Hall on leaving Bath, and found that Wareham has not heard a word from his cousin, despite having written to her on a matter of importance. This seemed a bit rum. I passed on her message, and then realised that you were the only other person we both know. Wareham has been preoccupied with his sister, who has broken off her engagement to Slinfold. This struck me as a good thing, but has cast Lady Wareham into nervous spasms. Wareham tells me he is likely to be taking Lady Wareham into Bath to see some doctor about her nerves and will write to you when he has news of

Miss Wareham. I find I shall be back in Bath in the near future.

Frowning, he skimmed over the closing platitudes, and read the postscript twice.

PS. I later briefly encountered Miss Wareham in Milsom Street and she told me that Semington was in Bath, and a frequent visitor. I got the impression that this was not to her liking.

His face was now very grim. He had promised to have no communication with Isabelle, but this did not prevent him visiting in the same city, and he had reserved the right to interfere if Dunsfold failed in his duties as a guardian. It seemed something was seriously awry. He rang the bell, and set off within an hour, hoping to reach Romsey before nightfall.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LEFT ALONE, ISABELLE SAT DOWN QUITE HEAVILY upon the window seat, and noted that her hands trembled. She felt slightly sick. She had resolved to be strong, be patient, but she was being suffocated, and now threatened. When communication of her plight to others was almost impossible, what hope had she? She took a deep breath and tried to concentrate. Fear would make her feeble. She was, after all, in Bath, a city, not 'locked away' in the country, so there must be some way of reaching out for help. If only she could contact Lord Idsworth. For all that he had promised not to communicate with her, he would not permit her to be mistreated in this way. She stopped suddenly.

'What a fool I am, of course. How could I not see?' She rose and went to the drawer of the card table. There were pencils within, and she took one and slipped it up her sleeve. She went next to the little parlour that overlooked the street, where Lady Dunsfold's writing desk was placed before the window. Isabelle entered and stopped. Cornelia, a shawl swathed about her head and shoulders, was standing to one side of the desk, observing with disfavour an altercation between a chair mender and a crossing-sweeper in the street below.

'Oh, I did not know that you were well enough to get up, Cornelia.' Isabelle sounded surprised rather than pleased.

'I am not,' enunciated her sister, slowly, 'but my bedchamber is too dark, and I am bored. I came to write to Lady Taynton.'

Isabelle thought quickly. She went to the desk, took out a sheet of paper and opened the inkwell.

'Might I also write ... a list of requisites, for I find I am quite out of ... tooth powder, and one of my stockings is so badly worn through that it is beyond darning. Oh yes, and was it Denmark Lotion that you and Lady Bromfield thought I should apply to improve my poor complexion?'

Her sister replied, though her eyes were still fixed upon the fracas in the street, which looked likely to end in a brawl. Isabelle added several other minor but spurious items to her list, cast a swift glance to ensure she was not observed, and slid two sheets of paper from beneath the first into her lap. From the window it would not be possible to see her fold them, although she needed both hands, which was risky. Cornelia was, however, uninterested in her sister's shopping list, and the sheets of paper were reduced to such a size that they might easily be concealed in the fold of her skirt.

'If I take Hobson with me, may I purchase these items tomorrow? I will need to be advanced sufficient of my own money to pay for them, but please check the list, then you can make an accurate estimate of how little I need be given. I could also deliver your letter to Lady Taynton.' Isabelle spoke in the most submissive tone, though the words were barbed if one attended closely. Lady Dunsfold did not. She merely held out her hand, and Isabelle handed the list to her, whilst her left hand held the precious paper out of sight. The list was surveyed and approved, and Isabelle withdrew, inwardly relishing her success. She would not even need to think up an excuse to visit Lady Taynton's house.

Writing the letter proved more difficult, both in doing so without interruption, and deciding upon its content. Although she had written Lord Idsworth many letters in the last three months, they had all been in her head, and words committed to paper looked rather different. Even the commencement of the letter took much deliberation. 'Dear Lord Idsworth' might as easily be at the top of a report from his steward. In the end she settled for a sense of urgency, rather than convention, and once engaged upon it the words flowed to such a degree that she was forced to cross the sheet. The second sheet was used to scribe a note to Lady Taynton, and was wrapped about the first letter.

Since Lord Dunsfold had not yet issued any instruction that Isabelle was to be kept closely confined, Isabelle was able to set out the next afternoon after a light luncheon she barely touched. Her lack of appetite was set down to her

‘sulking’. She now had not only her own inconsequential list of items to purchase, but one from Cornelia, who did not mind her sister purchasing mundane items on her behalf. Seeking out these things took the best part of an hour, and Hobson looked even less happy than usual, for the spring day was bright but with a sharp wind.

‘Do not look so glum, Hobson,’ remarked Miss Wareham, cheerfully, ‘for we have but to deliver the missive to The Circus and then we may return to Henrietta Street.’

She led the way up the hill and arrived before Lady Taynton’s residence, quite pink-cheeked, having done so at a speed which she knew Hobson would find hard to match. The maid was indeed breathing hard and concentrating upon getting her breath back rather than the brief conversation at the door. Isabelle smiled at the liveried servant and handed him the two letters with an apology to her Ladyship for not being able to call properly in the afternoon. Upon her return, Lord Dunsfold saw her removing bonnet and gloves, and demanded to know where she had been. She looked at him serenely.

‘I was out upon shopping errands, for my sister and also myself, and delivered a letter to Lady Taynton which Cornelia desired me to do.’ She indicated a number of packages being laid aside by the footman. ‘Hobson can give you a complete report should one be needed.’ She smiled brightly and headed upstairs, triumphant.

Lord Idsworth arrived in Bath in the afternoon and bespoke himself a room at the White Hart, which was not the most expensive of hotels, but which provided decent fare, and sheets which could be guaranteed fresh and aired. He had no idea how long he would be remaining in Bath and did not care to expend his carefully marshalled guineas on unnecessary luxury. It was a very respectable hotel, but few of such elevated rank as an earl ever stayed there, and he was accorded every distinction.

‘I fear, my Lord,’ remarked Sileby, unpacking his valise, ‘that I do not come up to the expectations of the staff.’

‘You do not, Sileby?’

‘No, my Lord. The general opinion seems to be that an earl should have a gentleman’s gentleman who demands that his master’s boots be polished with blacking and champagne, and who does not pick his teeth.’

‘Ah, I was unaware that you had that unsavoury habit, or I would never have taken you into my employment.’ Lord Idsworth cast his valet a sidelong glance.

‘I shall endeavour never to do so in your presence, my Lord.’ Sileby already had the measure of his employer. ‘I might add that I will attend to your Lordship’s boots personally, and if I cannot achieve far better than fancy recipes with the way we did it in the regiment, then I hope to be cast off without so much as a reference.’

‘I have no doubt my boots will outshine all others in this hostelry, if not Bath, Sileby. Besides, you know I would not turn you off even if they were abysmal, because it would upset Miss Wareham. So I am stuck with you.’ He gave a heavy sigh, which had the effect of sending Sileby into a fit of laughing, thinly disguised as a nasty paroxysm of coughing. ‘However, before you attend to my boots, I want you out on a reconnaissance. I need to find out where Lord Dunsfold is staying in Bath.’

‘He has a house, my Lord, that is for certain, but I do not recall the name of the street, not having ever visited it.’

‘Well, your task is to provide me with its location and direction. I shall show myself about a bit, and get my bearings.’

‘And if the, er, “enemy” should get wind of your presence, my Lord?’

‘Oh, I am hoping they shall. In this instance I think more may be achieved by spreading fear in the ranks, than by surprise.’

‘Understood, my Lord.’

That same afternoon, Sir Charles Wareham arrived in Bath with his mama and his sister, who was sulking, and made

straight for the York House Hotel, only to find that the provision of three bedchambers was not possible for that night. Lady Wareham groaned and blamed her son for not sending ahead. Sir Charles, who had endured a journey marked by angry silences, complaints and threats of swooning, was in no mood to placate her, and simply ordered the coachman to drive on to the Christopher. Lady Wareham refused to alight until she knew 'where she might rest her head for the night', so he entered the vestibule alone, and walked straight into Mr Semington. The two men glared at each other and exchanged a frosty greeting. Mr Semington then left, and, in a swift change of plan, went to see Lord Dunsfold. Meanwhile, and to his intense relief, Sir Charles secured three rooms for his party and went to appease his parent.

Sir Charles, who was well aware of the house in Henrietta Street, strode purposefully over Pulteney Bridge the next morning, having fortified himself with a plate of ham and eggs, and knocked determinedly upon the door of Lord Dunsfold's abode. The individual who answered the door informed Sir Charles, in a pained tone, that the ladies were not receiving visitors today and that his lordship was not yet risen.

'Dash it, I am not a visitor, I am a relative. I should not have to leave my card and arrange a morning call. If my cousins are ill ...' He was suspicious. 'And it is not that early.'

'I regret, sir, that I can only say what I said before. I shall of course take your card if you would care to leave it.'

'I shall return this afternoon, to speak with Lord Dunsfold, if he has managed to leave his bed by then.'

In high dudgeon, and considerable frustration, Sir Charles returned to his hotel. Lord Dunsfold watched his retreating figure and awaited the report.

'Thank you. Should anyone except Mr Semington call this afternoon, I am out, and her Ladyship and Miss Wareham are still not receiving visitors.'

Lady Dunsfold was, it had to be admitted, in no mood to receive callers, having had an altercation with her Lord. In order that Isabelle might not be seen abroad over the next few days, he requested that she also remain housebound and that she should not entertain. Whilst not yet fully restored to health or humour, Cornelia Dunsfold was tired of her own company, and especially of remaining cooped up indoors. Receiving sympathetic visitors to whom she could recount the horrors of her ill health would be most therapeutic, but her husband was adamant.

‘You may always tell Mr Semington about it all.’

‘I always liked Mr Semington, but you know, the more regularly I see him, the more I find he grates upon one’s nerves.’

‘Indeed so, my dear, but I would remind you that through him we are relieved of Isabelle, and profitably so.’

‘Perhaps if I went out alone to see Lady Kinnerton ...’

‘I must insist that you remain at home, Cornelia.’

She told him he was a cruel tyrant, dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief, and went away to take out her anger upon a housemaid, her dresser, and a footman who closed a door too loudly.

Meanwhile Isabelle, secure in the knowledge that her letter would have been passed to Lady Taynton, had not even realised that she was now a prisoner in her guardian’s house. She sat in one of the smaller parlours, where the lacklustre fire had some chance of warming the room, and employed herself in hemming a petticoat whilst her mind was elsewhere. The note to Lady Taynton had in fact been more dramatic than the letter to Lord Idsworth, but Isabelle had felt that her ladyship would respond more swiftly to a *cri de coeur*.

Dear Lady Taynton,

You are my only hope at this moment. I am prevented from communicating with my cousin, or anyone other

than yourself who might assist me in my hour of need. My guardian seeks to see me wed to the odious Mr Semington. I am to be incarcerated until such time as I submit, and am desperate. Lord Idsworth promised to have no communication with me, but I am convinced only he can rescue me now. I am forbidden to send any letter, and in truth, do not know his direction. Please send my enclosed letter to him most urgently.

She thought it sounded like something from a Gothic romance, but hopefully it would capture Lady Taynton's full attention, and it was entirely truthful.

So she waited, like a princess in a fairytale, locked in her tower in Henrietta Street.

Lord Idsworth, having been given the result of Sileby's successful reconnoitring, was also headed for Henrietta Street, although he had no intention of knocking upon the door. As it was, he met Sir Charles heading back.

'Idsworth! Good God, I must suppose you a mirage.'

'Do I appear in any way non-corporeal, Wareham?' Lord Idsworth gave a wry smile.

'Well, what I mean to say is ... was just thinking about you and up you spring.'

'Have you been to Henrietta Street?'

'Yes, but ... how do you know about Henrietta Street or ... Molly! Of course! Mollington wrote to you, did he not?'

'He did, and I posted here straight away. From your expression, I take it that I have not come upon a wild goose chase.'

'No, by Jove, I fear you have not.' Sir Charles' brows knit. 'I don't like the look of things one bit. I arrived yesterday with my mother and Julia. Mama got in a fret because the York House did not have rooms, so I came on to the Christopher and there he was.'

'Mollington?' Idsworth was confused.

‘No, Semington. And he looked far from happy to see me. Though I was not happy to see him either. This morning I have just been to Henrietta Street, only to be told Cornelia and Isabelle are not receiving any visitors today and Dunsfold is not yet risen.’

‘The latter may be true.’

‘It might, but I tell you what, Idsworth, it looks damned rum to me. I wrote to Isabelle, in February, because Dunsfold had tried to turn off old Wellow, which he had no right to do. Isabelle would have been mad as fire when she heard of it, and I expected a response to that effect, but heard nothing at all. I think she never saw the letter. She has not even written to Julia. Mama had a letter from Cornelia, shortly after Isabelle left Bradings, saying she was in a huff and not writing, but that sounded odd to me, and was over four months ago.’

‘I agree with you. But I did not get the impression from Isa— Miss Wareham, that Dunsfold and Semington were on anything but casual terms.’

‘That has me in a puzzle too.’ Sir Charles paused, and then smiled. ‘Er, delicate matter, but ... I assume that you and Isabelle still have some sort of understanding?’

‘Yes. I have no reason to think otherwise.’

‘Excellent news, my dear fellow. Did I not tell you she was the loyal and tenacious sort? I could not be more pleased.’

‘You can be a lot more pleased when you bring her down the aisle to me. Before that we have to sort matters here.’ Lord Idsworth frowned.

‘Yes, of course. Come back to the Christopher with me. If Semington is there you will give him the fright of his life, and I’d give a monkey to see his face.’

‘Well, he isn’t going to think me a mirage, or a ghost. He knows he did not kill me.’

‘No, but he might not be entirely sure you do not want to kill him.’

‘Nor am I.’

In perfect accord, the two gentlemen made their way towards the Christopher. As they turned the corner from Bridge Street into the High Street, they stood aside to let a lady pass, and raised their hats. Lord Idsworth’s remained raised, suspended above his head. The lady paled. They looked at each other, uncertain. Idsworth looked sufficiently like his father for the lady to use his title, tentatively.

‘Lady Taynton?’ He was equally uncertain.

She nodded and gripped her reticule more tightly. Sir Charles looked from one to the other and frowned.

Idsworth bowed.

‘May I present my friend, Sir Charles Wareham, Ma’am.’ He paused as she acknowledged Sir Charles. ‘Wareham, may I present Lady Taynton, my mother.’

Sir Charles dropped his hat.

It took some minutes before Sir Charles regained his full composure, and part of the ensuing conversation he missed entirely. Lady Taynton, who had but that morning sent Isabelle’s letter on to Buriton Park, was stunned that her son had, by some apparently telepathic awareness of his beloved’s distress, already posted to Bath. He tried to explain that he had received a worrying communication from a mutual friend, but she still seemed more inclined to believe that his arrival was to be put down to the mystery of love.

‘The poor child is in the most terrible distress, from the note she sent me, accompanying the sealed letter to you. She is imprisoned, and I have seen for myself how close watched she has been. She is permitted no private conversation with anyone.’

‘Then how come you are exempt, Ma’am?’

‘Because I am clever, Idsworth. I saw her at a terribly boring dinner Dunsfold held. He was trying to trot her out in front of Gerald Covington, and she was having none of it. I was intrigued, and I am Lady Taynton, so Cornelia

Dunsfold was delighted when I singled her out for attention.'

'I take it, Ma'am, that you are a personage in Bath society?'

'But of course, my dear.' She patted her son's hand. 'By taking up the truly awful Lady Dunsfold I had the chance to get to know your delightful Isabelle.'

'She is not mine yet, Ma'am.' Lord Idsworth actually blushed.

'She is, and you know it.' Lady Taynton smiled. 'All we have to do is save her from her guardian and the repellent Mr Semington.'

'We, Ma'am?'

'Yes, we.'

'Have you some scheme, then, Lady Taynton?' Sir Charles had by now caught up.

'None whatsoever, Sir Charles.' This did not apparently worry the lady.

'Oh.'

'Might I suggest we keep our relationship hidden, Ma'am, in case we need to use you as a "Trojan horse".'

Lady Taynton grimaced.

'Do you seriously think I would wish to advertise it? Thirty, I know! Though you have turned out very well, I must say. Rather too much of your father and not enough of me to make you devastatingly handsome ... but there. And I think it very rude of you to wish to treat me as any form of equine animal.'

'I meant,' Lord Idsworth glossed over her comment on his looks, 'that if Lady Dunsfold does not know that we are even acquainted, she may let you in where we may not gain admission, and you can let Isabelle know she is not alone.'

'Oh, I see. Well, that does seem reasonable, but if we are not acquainted, Idsworth, how do I know what to do and

when?’

‘Jolly good point, Ma’am.’ Sir Charles looked to his friend, questioningly.

‘Is your mother perhaps an old acquaintance, who might visit my – Lady Taynton and be our go-between? Or act as if she were? If we send Lady Wareham to leave her card ...’

‘Ah. The thing is, I do not see that Mama will look upon this in the same light that we do.’ Sir Charles turned rather pink.

‘Go on.’

‘She does not see you as an, er, eligible *parti*, my dear fellow.’

‘She would prefer Semington?’ Idsworth’s eyebrow was raised.

‘No, no, of course not. It is just ...’

‘Are you saying,’ enunciated Lady Taynton, slowly, ‘that she thinks My Son ineligible to marry the younger daughter of a younger son, of a ...’

‘Highly respected and ancient Wiltshire family? It seems so.’ Lord Idsworth kept a straight face. ‘And she does not know that I am “Your Son”. If she did, I am sure things would be different.’ He glanced at Sir Charles, who thankfully took his cue.

‘Oh yes, Ma’am, very different indeed. I mean ... Obviously.’

‘Then I suggest you introduce me to Lady Wareham, immediately.’

‘I regret that my mother is consulting with her doctor this morning, Ma’am, but if you give me your direction, I could send her to call upon you this afternoon.’

‘You think that you can persuade her that I am the ideal suitor for her niece, Mama?’ Lord Idsworth was at the point where even he floundered.

‘You simply do not know how persuasive I can be, Idsworth, but if you refer to me by that appellation in a public place again, I shall not help you at all.’

‘My apologies, Ma’am.’ He bowed, and it hid his smile.

Lord Idsworth and Sir Charles watched Lady Taynton glide away.

‘Your m— Lady Taynton ... remarkable woman.’

‘Yes,’ Lord Idsworth looked a little surprised, ‘it seems she is. Wareham, has your own parent really got an appointment with a medical practitioner this morning?’

‘Not exactly. It is tomorrow morning. I thought it would be rather awkward if we arrived together at the Christopher with her Ladyship, whom we “do not know”, and bumped into Semington.’

‘My dear fellow, you are a genius.’

‘I would not go that far,’ declared Sir Charles, grinning. ‘Let us hope, however, that although he will not see Lady Taynton, he does see you.’

They crossed the street and entered the hotel. Sir Charles’ hope was realised, for Mr Semington was seated in one of the public rooms, perusing a periodical. He glanced up as Sir Charles entered, and then swallowed rather hard, and turned a sickly shade as he saw Lord Idsworth come in behind him. As Lord Idsworth thought of how Semington was trying to bully the lady he loved, his face became implacable. It was perfect. Mr Semington wetted suddenly dry lips. Lord Idsworth glared at him, and then approached.

‘Semington. How fortunate to find you here.’

‘Er, fortunate, my Lord?’

‘Yes. Since it is highly unlikely that you would be in possession of a shotgun in a hotel.’

Sir Charles actually winced.

‘Are you being insulting, my Lord?’ There was a hint of tremor to Semington’s voice.

‘No. I am merely observing that I am unlikely to be shot by you a second time.’

Mr Semington looked uncomfortable. Several people were giving him odd glances.

‘I object, my Lord.’ His voice was a little strained.

‘That does not concern me.’

Idsworth was being outrageous. Sir Charles wondered if he really was trying to get Semington to call him out. He thought it unlikely he would succeed.

‘You should not be here,’ declared Mr Semington, showing signs of panic. ‘You promised.’

‘I have never made you a promise, yet, Semington.’ Lord Idsworth raised an eyebrow, ‘though I am tempted to do so.’

‘You are?’

‘Yes. If you impose upon or frighten Miss Wareham, I will make you wish you had aimed a little more to the left when you had the chance.’ Lord Idsworth’s tone was very even, and very chilling.

Mr Semington’s eyes widened.

‘And you may remind Dunsfold that I only assured him that I would not contact Miss Wareham as long as he fulfilled his duty of care to her. He has failed.’ He turned to Sir Charles. ‘Now, are we going to find Lady Wareham?’

He did not look at Mr Semington again, but ambled out with Sir Charles.

‘By God, Idsworth, you almost scared me when you spoke like that. Excellent ruse.’

Lord Idsworth frowned slightly.

‘That was no ruse, Wareham. I meant every word.’

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MR SEMINGTON REMAINED SEATED FOR SOME minutes, uncertain as to whether he would be able to stand without his knees knocking together. The presence of Sir Charles in Bath had made him wary, simply because that gentleman might get in the way. That Lord Idsworth had arrived put an entirely different complexion on matters. Edwin Semington was torn. Part of him wanted to leave Bath immediately and return home, and yet he had enjoyed the power of controlling events, and people. The idea of real power over Isabelle Wareham was tempting him. He wanted her married, submissive to him by right, and, for all that Lord Idsworth frightened him, he wanted to best him. He regained his composure by imaging the earl's chagrin and devastated disappointment when presented with the new Mrs Semington, and hastened to Henrietta Place.

Admitted into Lord Dunsfold's presence, Mr Semington barely waited for the door to close behind the butler before announcing the news.

'He's here. Idsworth is here in Bath.'

Lord Dunsfold frowned but did not react with the shock that Mr Semington had expected.

'That is unfortunate.'

'Unfortunate? He threatened me.'

'Did he? Well, one would hardly suppose he would be well disposed towards you. You did shoot him.'

'That was an accident, but now I almost wish—'

'You would, naturally,' interjected Dunsfold. 'However, before you launch into what might have been, let me tell you that Lord Idsworth will find himself *de trop*. I have every intention that Isabelle will be Mrs Semington within two days from now.'

'Has she capitulated so quickly?' Mr Semington was incredulous.

‘I have no idea, for I have not spoken to her today.’

‘Then how on earth ...’

‘For God’s sake, stop pacing the floor, Semington. Take a seat and attend to me.’

Mr Semington obeyed the instruction.

‘In view of Isabelle’s rank in society, it is reasonable to assume she would be married by licence.’ Lord Dunsfold looked very calm.

‘I do not see that it advances my cause, my Lord, since Isabelle has declared that she will not marry me. She has but to say “No” at the point where the minister asks “Do you take this man ...” and all is lost.’

‘She will not say no.’ Lord Dunsfold smiled. ‘She herself asked me if I was prepared to drag her, screaming, to the altar. I am not. However, to the altar she will go, with you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because she will have no alternative.’ He paused. ‘I say again that tomorrow we obtain the Marriage Licence from the archdeaconry. Do you have the deed for the quarry with you in Bath?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we shall also arrange a bill of sale with a solicitor, for a nominal sum, of course.’

‘We will?’

Lord Dunsfold ignored Mr Semington’s obvious confusion.

‘And tomorrow you will take Miss Wareham up in your chaise, and remove her to Wiltshire, to your house at Pescombe.’

‘She will not wish to come with me.’ Semington blinked.

‘No. That is why you will abduct her.’ Lord Dunsfold sounded very matter-of-fact.

‘I will ab—’ Mr Semington opened and shut his mouth several times, in the manner of a fish out of water. ‘Are you mad? What sort of a man do you think I am?’

‘You would not wish to know. Suffice to say one with whom circumstance means I have to conduct business.’

‘I will not do it. The scandal! Why, I sit on the bench in Chippenham. A magistrate may not be pointed out in the street as an abductor. Lady Dunsfold—’

‘Does not concern you.’ Lord Dunsfold had no intention of telling his wife of his plans for Isabelle’s sudden departure from their household, until such time as it had taken place. He did not think Cornelia, for all her dislike of her sister, would wish to hear that she had been abducted, but since she could not do anything about it, would soon see it had been worth it, and would smile graciously upon the wedding. ‘There will be no scandal, no apparent abduction. You take my ward to Pescombe. The next day you return with her, since that is outside this diocese, and we go to St Mary’s church and she becomes your wife, willingly, since the alternative is to have her name dishonoured. By agreeing, what has occurred is merely a private ceremony in view of her bereaved state, with her guardian there to bless the union. Whereas if she was known to have spent the night in your house, alone ...’

‘My mama is in the house. That would make everything —’

‘It would be made known, through gossip, of course, that your mother had been from home. Isabelle, faced with being the subject of conjecture over her virtue, will agree to marry you as the lesser evil. She will not like you for it, but then you are not looking for her affection, merely her inheritance and her person.’

‘It does not sound very plausible to me.’

‘No, but you are not a chit with no more knowledge of the world than a child in leading strings.’

Mr Semington thought about this. Isabelle was certainly lacking in worldly experience. Such threats might seem very real to her. His mind was not quite clear, and he put it down to the shock he had sustained at the Christopher. He did realise that his position, controlling events, had been lost. He was once again just Mr Semington who was to be led by the nose, but he could think of no other way of bringing his 'courtship' of Isabelle Wareham to a speedy conclusion.

Lord Dunsfold watched the emotions cross Semington's face. He was very easy to read. His lordship had not enjoyed his sojourn in Bath, and would be very glad to be rid of Isabelle and the tiresome Semington, in exchange for a tidy little money-making quarry.

'I cannot pretend to like it, for I must dissimulate to my mama, but I see it is the only course open to us. At what hour do you wish to visit the Archdeacon?'

As unaware of the arrival of her cousin and Lord Idsworth as of the grim fate being prepared for her, Isabelle wondered, with some excitement, how long it would be before the earl received her cry for help. There were times when she imagined that he might have gone to visit friends and be from home, or even that the epistle might be lost in transit, but overall she remained cheerful. Concealing this beneath a veneer of boredom was not as easy as she had thought.

Cornelia was much better and no longer confined to her bedchamber, though now in an even worse temper. She even complained to Isabelle about being kept at home like a prisoner. Dunsfold, she explained, would not have it that she was recovered enough to go about at least until the morrow. Isabelle bit back the retort that seclusion for a few days was as nothing to what she had thus far endured.

'It is most unfortunate for you, Cornelia, but you will at least be able to attend Mrs Anstruther's Wednesday afternoon.'

'Remaining indoors is bad for my nerves.' Lady Dunsfold sounded aggrieved.

‘Oh dear, have you developed them?’ replied Isabelle, brightly.

Her sister sniffed and resumed her ‘very dull’ book.

Meanwhile, Sir Charles, having enjoyed a decent luncheon, delivered his mother and sister to visit Lady Taynton, rather to their bafflement. His explanation that he had met her Ladyship that morning, and that she was keen to make their acquaintance as soon as possible, left Lady Wareham cudgelling her brains over any possible distant family connection, or mutual ‘dear friend’. It so occupied her that for an hour she forgot her displeasure with her daughter, and resumed normal conversation, until an unfortunate remark about a spinster cousin brought Julia’s failure to mind, followed by the heavy sighs and reproachful looks.

Having brought Lord Slinfold up to the mark, and accepted his proposal, Julia had basked in congratulation and approval for all of three weeks, when her betrothed had then invited her and her mama to visit what would become ‘her home’. It was at this point that Miss Wareham woke up to the fact that Lady Slinfold had absolutely no intention of moving to the dower house. Nor was she going to change her life, which revolved about organising her son, in any shape or form. Julia was shown ‘how things are done here’, how every decision must be countersigned ‘by Mama’, how anything that was not to her Ladyship’s instructions was countermanded. She had blithely assumed that all she had to do was be amenable until his Lordship’s ring was upon her finger, and that a mixture of allure and threat would part progeny from parent. After a fraught fortnight she admitted defeat. After a series of angry mutual silences and even loud disagreements, Lord Slinfold agreed the two women in his life could not work together. When Julia finally offered him the ultimatum of parting from Mama or taking back his ring, there was no contest. She returned home, where her brother applauded her decision, and her mama declared herself destined for an early grave, into which she would be laid to rest in the knowledge that her only daughter was doomed to spinsterhood.

Julia expected a dull afternoon, but at least knew that her mama would not discuss 'the Unhappiness' in front of a stranger. What she observed, and found herself beguiled by, was a remarkable display of social skill and manipulation. Within twenty minutes Lady Wareham was made to feel as if she had been a bosom companion of the glittering Lady Taynton since girlhood. The idea that they should even think about departure at the half hour when a simple social call would end, was greeted as if it would tear her Ladyship's heart from her, and so they remained. It was only at this point that Lady Taynton introduced 'your charming niece' and described, in horrified tones, the mistreatment she was suffering at the hands of her guardian. She was so good that had she said that Isabelle was taken daily to the courtyard and flogged, her auditors would have believed her.

Lady Wareham was suitably shocked, and pricked by guilt. Involved in her daughter's wavering engagement to Lord Slinfold, Lady Wareham had cast all thought of Isabelle from her mind. This, she admitted to herself, was remiss. The situation as described to her sounded dire, and she reached the stage of wringing her hands and repeating 'Oh dear' at frequent intervals.

Having painted this picture of horror which might have graced the pages of any romance, Lady Taynton produced 'the hero'. Instead of 'dear Isabelle' being condemned to the mediocre existence of becoming Mrs Semington, she would be plucked from the jaws of this disaster and become the Right Honourable, the Countess of Idsworth, *châtelaine* of a pretty country seat, wife of a man who had served his country against the Monster Napoleon, and who would treat her, according to Lady Taynton, as if she were Cleopatra herself. This last comment was a mistake, since Lady Wareham looked quite worried, and said all she knew of Cleopatra was that she had odd bathing habits and had met a sad end which involved a snake.

In the ensuing silence, Miss Wareham then asked the unfortunate question. However noble, and indeed heroic,

could the Earl of Idsworth afford a wife, and would she not have to live under the stigma of his 'past'?

Lady Taynton smiled at Julia, and Julia wilted, as was intended. Whatever had happened so long ago, declared her Ladyship, there had never been a suggestion of anything dishonourable, and if Lord Idsworth could not support the Lady of his choice in a suitable manner, he would undoubtedly have withdrawn his suit before her feelings became engaged. She then played what she considered her trump card and revealed that her deep knowledge of his Lordship's character stemmed from his being her son. It cost her a pang to admit it, but she offered it as her sacrifice upon the altar of mother love.

Lady Wareham blinked and did not know what to say. Had she been asked about Lord Idsworth at luncheon, she would have dismissed him as the next best thing to a penniless outcast, and one whom she had entertained unwillingly in her home, yet here was a very fashionable lady, who might have hidden her relationship, proudly declaring both it and the fact that matters stood far better with him than had been assumed. The truth lay somewhere in the middle, but truth was not taking tea with Lady Taynton.

As Lady Taynton brought the Wareham ladies round to the idea that Isabelle marrying her son would be a social coup for the Wareham family, that gentleman and Sir Charles, with Sibley in attendance, were sat in Lord Idsworth's rooms at the White Hart. They were trying to formulate a plan to release Isabelle from her confinement which fell short of climbing drainpipes at dead of night and breaking into the residence of a peer of the realm. It had been Sir Charles' suggestion of last resort.

'Have you ever tried climbing a drainpipe, Wareham?' Lord Idsworth enquired.

'No, I cannot say that I have. I slid down one once at Cambridge but no, I have never attempted to get up one.'

‘I think you might find it exceedingly difficult. Besides which, what would you do when you had climbed it? We have no idea of the internal plan of the house, and breaking a window and climbing in might as easily bring you face to face with Dunsfold in his nightshirt. Whilst I commend your commitment, it is not really a plan.’

‘The trouble is, as her guardian Dunsfold can treat Isabelle pretty much as he likes until next March, with the law on his side. You cannot expect the poor girl to remain in her room for,’ he made a quick calculation on his fingers, ‘the best part of ten months.’

‘No, and we do not. We have to make Dunsfold give her her physical freedom, and agree, at the very least, to a public announcement of our engagement; something he cannot wriggle out of without embarrassment.’

‘A good-sized horse pistol can be very persuasive, my Lord,’ Sileby murmured.

‘But I think physical threat has to be our last resort. It lacks subtlety, and one would have to be prepared to carry out any threat. Not that it isn’t a temptation.’

‘So what do we do, Idsworth?’

‘We make sure Isabelle knows she is not alone. That is important, but will be up to Lady Taynton. We need to keep a watch on Semington. If we are lucky, he will already be so frightened he will cry off and head back home. That would take pressure off Isabelle. Threatening Dunsfold with violence would be temporary, but if it was something that would lower him in the eyes of the world ...’

‘Telling what he is doing to Isabelle ought to do that,’ grumbled Sir Charles.

‘But it would be hard to prove, and he may think he can bluff his way out of it. No,’ Lord Idsworth frowned, ‘Dunsfold likes money, and is selfish enough to let others flounder if it is to his advantage. I told you the outline of what happened before he married Isabelle’s sister, but one day, Wareham, I will give you the full tale. If he had been a

gentleman, a man of honour, my life would have been very different. But, if he was prepared to do it once, what odds he has not done so again?’ Lord Idsworth was almost talking to himself. ‘Over so long a period, it would take a deal of hunting.’

Sir Charles was lost.

‘What I want to know is why Dunsfold, who has always looked down on Semington, has changed his mind so suddenly. Dunsfold and I are at odds over almost everything, but unite in thinking Semington a worm.’

‘Say that again.’ Lord Idsworth looked at Sir Charles intently.

‘Semington’s a worm.’

‘No. I meant the part about Dunsfold looking down on Semington.’

‘Well, he has, as I told you earlier, and one can see why. Semington tries to lick your boot one minute and act high and mighty the next. He has treated Isabelle as if he just had to name the day for years. Odd fish.’

‘So something quite recent has occurred to make Dunsfold look upon Semington with favour, and it will not be a sudden change of character. Semington must have something he wants, or needs.’

‘I can’t see what, Idsworth. Pescombe is a tidy little estate but nothing grand, and he does not strut about flaunting rolls of soft, or buying racehorses.’

‘Not every rich man looks wealthy,’ Idsworth smiled wryly, ‘just as every impoverished one need not go about in rags. If Dunsfold suffered a reverse, might Semington lend him money, or give it, “for the hand of Miss Wareham”?’

‘If he really wanted Isabelle for herself, but I always thought he wanted possessions, Bradings, her, to show off. He would not want to have less. You are guilty of thinking like a man in love.’ Sir Charles was quite serious.

‘Yes. Very well, might Semington have something to which he has not become attached, or unexpected capital? That would make him worthy of consideration.’

‘True enough.’

‘We need to look into Dunsfold’s affairs, but that takes time. I shall send to my man of business immediately. Might you see what your man can find out, more locally? There must be rumour if Semington came into money, or if Dunsfold lost it.’

Sir Charles nodded but looked a trifle disappointed. Lord Idsworth smiled.

‘You thought I might storm Henrietta Street like a one-man Forlorn Hope, sword in one hand, pistol in the other?’

‘Not exactly, but ...’

‘I am sorry, Wareham, but real life is less dramatic. We wait, we find the weakness, then we make a move. And Isabelle is quite safe. After all, Semington is hardly likely to run off with her.’

CHAPTER TWENTY

SIR CHARLES REMAINED TO DINE WITH LORD IDSWORTH but did not linger afterwards, being keen to pen a letter to his agent, and requiring a deal of sobriety to do so. Lord Idsworth sat for some time, gazing into the fire in the private parlour, holding a glass of port, and idly twisting the stem between thumb and forefinger, but neither looking at it nor drinking it. His mind was full of Isabelle Wareham, questioning whether what he had done, from motives of honour, had led to her misery these last months. Dunsfold would not have let him pay his addresses to her, that was certain. He might have asked that she swear that she would remain true, since she had clearly wanted to avow her commitment. Perhaps that would have made her feel better when alone. He shook his head. No, he had done the right thing, for if she was committed, if she loved, it did not need words, and if not, then he had given her her freedom, as a man of honour should. He could not, while keeping to his promise, have known what had been her life in Dunsfold's home, and yet he felt guilty for having been in ignorance of her plight, beleaguered, kept from contact with even her relations. It made him wish he could take Dunsfold by the throat and shake him, like a terrier with a rat. He hoped that the opportunity would arise for him to do so, but he would have to be patient a little longer.

The Earl of Idsworth retired at a reasonable hour, but slept very badly.

He awoke with the wisps of a confused and unpleasant dream clinging to his brain, and Sibley announcing, crisply, that it was time to 'Stand to'.

'I took the liberty of ordering your breakfast for half an hour, my Lord, thinking you would not be wishful to remain in bed when there are troops on the move, so to speak.' Sibley sounded very much like his old Company Sergeant Major, brisk, no nonsense, and clearly deciding what he should be doing and when, but couching it in unimpeachably respectful terms.

‘Sileby, there are three of us, not an army.’ He propped himself up on one elbow, yawned, and rubbed his chin.

‘And the can of hot water is on its way up for your shave, my Lord.’

‘You seem to have everything organised, Sileby.’

‘I hope so, my Lord. I was thinking I should be in position by the Christopher by half past nine of the clock, just in case Mr Semington is going to slip away from Bath and hope nobody notices him in full retreat.’

‘Very good, Sileby. I am to meet Sir Charles at the Pump Room at one, so if there is anything to report, come there. We will be taking luncheon at the Christopher, so if Semington should return thereafter, you can stand down, and we will watch him.’

‘Very good, my Lord.’ Sileby paused. ‘If I might suggest, it might be handy if I was in the possession of some coin of the realm in case of emergencies. Just in case, you might say.’

‘You are right. I will make sure you are not sent out into the world without two pennies to rub together.’

There was a knock on the door, and a servant brought in the shaving water.

His Lordship sat up, stretched, and climbed out of bed. He glanced at his boots, which were stood very precisely, as if on parade.

‘By the way Sileby, your employment continues.’

‘My Lord?’

‘My boots. They are excellent.’

‘Thank you, my Lord.’

Lord Dunsfold looked at the ormolu timepiece on the mantelpiece and sighed. Semington was ten minutes late. He hoped the man was indeed coming and had not made a bolt back to Wiltshire. He had certainly looked scared enough yesterday. The post had brought a further gloomy

prediction about the tin mine, and it would be even more useful to get one's hands on a nice safe investment like a quarry. After all, the stone was in constant demand, and there was surely very little that could go wrong with an open hole in the ground.

The butler knocked, and announced Mr Semington, who entered looking nervous.

'If you show that face to the Archdeacon, Semington, he will think it is you being pressured into wedlock,' remarked Lord Dunsfold caustically, once the door had closed. 'For goodness' sake stop twisting your signet, and desist from staring at me like a terrified rabbit.'

'You did not run the risk of seeing Lord Idsworth this morning.'

'No. But even had he accosted you in the street he was hardly going to murder you in cold blood, was he?'

'His manner was exceedingly threatening. I really cannot be sure that he might not offer violence when next he sees me.' Mr Semington shuddered, and Lord Dunsfold decided that he might need fortifying with a glass of wine before they set out upon their morning's visits. It was therefore a full half hour after he had hoped to set off that he left his house, with Mr Semington at his side keeping a wary eye open for the tall, dark figure of the Earl of Idsworth. So intent was he on ensuring that Lord Idsworth did not catch him unawares that he entirely failed to spot Sileby, either in Laura Place, where he took up his surveillance, or en route to the archdeaconry.

The obtaining of a licence was not at all difficult, and the mild-mannered cleric who issued it hoped that entry into the married state would be a comfort to the bereaved young lady, though privately he thought the prospective groom looked as if he had an addiction to strong drink, since his hand trembled when he signed the licence and he smelt of sherry. Having obtained the document, the two gentlemen took a cab to the office of a firm of solicitors. Sileby was very glad of the coins in his pocket which enabled him to

also hail a jarvey, and trot along close behind them. Lord Dunsfold and Mr Semington remained within the building for over forty minutes. They had to wait before being able to see Mr Cosby, the senior partner, and that gentleman was very thorough, reading the deed of ownership through twice before asking several pertinent questions to assure himself that the vendor had legal entitlement to the business which he intended to sell. There was also some dispute as to the 'nominal sum' which Lord Dunsfold was going to pay, since Mr Semington had assumed, perhaps not unreasonably, that it would hardly exceed the sum of one guinea. Mr Cosby finally assured the two gentlemen that all documentation would be ready for them by the middle of the afternoon and would be sent round to Lord Dunsfold's address.

Sibley, not privy to what was going on within the premises of Messrs Cosby and Sidlesham, took the opportunity to scribble a note to Lord Idsworth, and prevailed upon a skinny youth in patched trousers to run to the Pump Room and deliver the note to an attendant, for the sum of thruppence.

Lord Dunsfold and Mr Semington left the solicitors' office together, but stood some minutes in conversation before going their separate ways. Mr Semington was instructed to go and hire a chaise, for two o'clock.

'But I cannot see how I am going to get Isabelle into the chaise. She simply would not do it, and I refuse, absolutely, to grab a young woman off the public thoroughfare in broad daylight.'

Lord Dunsfold did see that this was a reasonable objection, and set about constructing a plan which would avoid any risk of Mr Semington being followed by a hue and cry and accused of kidnap. His answer was, he thought, very clever, except for the fact that it might lead to Lady Dunsfold having to be told the truth rather earlier than he had wished.

'Lady Dunsfold has been complaining about me keeping her indoors after her recent upset. I shall "suggest" that she,

accompanied by Isabelle, take a walk to the Sydney Gardens this afternoon, a little after two o'clock. You will stop them as you pass, claiming that they must return home urgently, I shall leave it up to you to devise a reason why, and take them up in your carriage, bringing them back to Henrietta Street. I will take my wife into the house, and you simply get the postillion to set off smartly before Isabelle can alight.'

Mr Semington was very dubious, but could not think of anything better, and reluctantly agreed to follow this plan to the letter. He and Lord Dunsfold parted, Dunsfold to persuade his lady wife that a walk with Isabelle to the gardens at the end of Great Pulteney Street would be far better for her than a shopping expedition, which was not easy, and Mr Semington to arrange for the hire of a chaise and pair. He considered a post-chaise and four, but thought it both a pointless additional expense, and that it would look more suspicious.

Sibley smiled when he saw where Mr Semington went after parting from Lord Dunsfold. Having seen the gentleman's demeanour all morning it was clear that he regarded remaining in Lord Idsworth's vicinity as likely to prove injurious to his health. So, Mr Semington was going to run away with his tail between his legs, was he? Well, he had never thought much of the man. He wondered if Lord Dunsfold was aware what he was about to do. He hoped it would be a nasty surprise.

Lord Idsworth was just leaving the White Hart, which was very conveniently situated for the Pump Room, when he was hailed by name. He turned, and saw Lord Mollington coming towards him from the opposite direction.

'Idsworth! I thought it was you, and I have also got a jolly good idea why you are here.'

'I did not realise that when you said you were returning "shortly" you meant you were coming back to Bath quite so soon, Mollington. Oh, and I have to thank you exceedingly for your letter.'

‘Not at all, my dear fellow. It was the least I could do, for Miss Wareham also. Have you seen Wareham? I thought to find him at the York House, but he is not there.’

‘He is at the Christopher.’

‘And Lady Wareham and Miss Wareham also, I presume?’ Lord Mollington tried to sound very casual, and failed.

‘Yes. But I am due to meet Wareham on the hour in the Pump Room, and then he is escorting his mother and sister to the Sydney Gardens this afternoon, if all goes well.’

The last part of the sentence seemed a little cryptic, but Lord Mollington ignored it.

‘Any objection if I join you?’

‘None at all, my dear fellow.’

Thus, Sir Charles, who had been trapped into conversation by an elderly gentleman who was very hard of hearing, and thought Sir Charles was his uncle Robert Wareham, who had been dead for twenty years, was both relieved and delighted to be rescued by not one but two of his friends. He then set about putting Lord Mollington firmly in the picture concerning Lord Dunsfold, Semington and Miss Isabelle Wareham. Lord Mollington was suitably shocked and volunteered to help in whatever capacity was required.

‘Are you not dancing close attendance on Lady Saltburn, Molly?’ Sir Charles wondered.

‘Yes, well, no, well, only in part.’ Lord Mollington looked a little uncomfortable.

‘Then why return to a place you described in the most uncomplimentary terms?’

‘Ah.’ Lord Mollington looked even less comfortable.

‘Oh no, Molly, you aren’t, are you?’ Sir Charles looked pained.

Lord Idsworth looked from one to the other.

‘I am missing something here.’

‘I am sorry, Wareham, but ... Dashed fine girl, and I thought, if she was feeling a trifle blue, and Lady Wareham was cutting up rough about the broken engagement ...’

The light dawned upon Lord Idsworth.

‘You want to dangle after Miss Wareham, Miss Julia Wareham I mean?’

‘Not dangle ... just ... And another thing. If Miss Isabelle Wareham ends up a countess, well Miss Julia will feel even worse, facing a second Season. M’father is, thankfully, in prime twig, so I am unlikely to inherit in the near future, as Slinfold is with his old grandfather, but I could offer her the chance to be a countess in the fullness of time, and being a viscountess is not to be sneezed at.’

‘She would make you miserable, Molly, trust me. I’ve told you often enough, she is wilful, shallow, and throws tantrums if she does not get her own way. She’s pretty but ...’ Sir Charles was trying to be kind.

‘But you would not forbid me to pay my addresses?’

‘My dear fellow, of course not, other than I think you would be making the biggest mistake of your life.’

‘Well, no doubt she will still turn me down.’ Lord Mollington clearly did not think his suit would prosper, even given the current circumstances. ‘I tell you, though, if she says yes, it will be in the knowledge that I will not stand for tantrums. Wouldn’t be fair on her to let her think she will get everything her own way.’ Lord Mollington looked remarkably resolute. Sir Charles wondered if he had misjudged his friend, and was about to say so, very generously, when an attendant approached and asked which gentleman was Lord Idsworth. He then handed his Lordship a piece of paper which looked very much as if it had been clutched very tightly in a grubby hand. He opened it and frowned. Sileby was literate, but not so literate that reading his inventive spelling did not take rather longer than normal. The frown deepened.

‘Well, what does it say, Idsworth?’ Sir Charles was impatient.

‘It appears Dunsfold and Semington have been to see the Archdeacon.’ Idsworth spoke slowly, obviously thinking.

‘For some form of confession?’ enquired Lord Mollington.

‘I rather think for a special licence. They then went to Messrs Cosby and Sidlesham, solicitors. It was from there that Sileby sent this note, via a youth to whom he gave three pence for the trouble.’

‘But what is the point of a special licence, since they cannot make Isabelle marry against her will?’ Sir Charles looked perplexed.

‘They would not go to the effort of obtaining it unless they thought they could make her agree. Perhaps I underestimated Semington. I thought he would turn and run.’ Lord Idsworth stared at the paper as if it would yield further secrets. ‘I think it is even more important that we keep a watch on Semington from now on.’

‘So what do we do?’

‘We eat luncheon, gentlemen.’

Sir Charles, who was, underneath it all, of a rather romantic turn of mind, felt that eating exhibited rather too much *sangfroid* when facing the possibility that his cousin stood in some potential peril, but his stomach was more pragmatic, and he managed a good meal. It was as they rose from eating that Sileby arrived, red-faced and very much out of breath.

‘My Lord, I’m sorry, but I couldn’t follow them.’ The man could scarcely get his words out, and was patently distressed.

‘What has happened, Sileby?’

‘Mr Semington came back here, briefly, spoke to his man, and then went and hired a chaise. I followed it right to the far end of Great Pulteney Street, there being quite a deal

of traffic to slow its pace. I had thought he was going home, my Lord, honest. Then he stopped by two ladies, which was Lady Dunsfold and Miss Isabelle. He spoke to them, with much flailing of his arms, and they got into the vehicle. Then they drove back to Lord Dunsfold's house in Henrietta Street, where his Lordship came out and assisted Lady Dunsfold from the chaise himself. She seemed highly distressed, and seemed to collapse in some sort of swoon almost upon the doorstep, but then the door of the chaise was shut, with Miss Isabelle still inside, and the postillion set off at pace. I could not follow, my Lord, not to see which way they took, except they headed on towards Bathwick Street. I could only come straight here, as fast as I could. My poor Miss Isabelle!' He shook his head.

'My God, he cannot be taking her to Gretna!' Lord Mollington looked shocked.

'No, he did this with Dunsfold's connivance, if it was not Dunsfold's scheme, and Gretna would shame the family.' Lord Idsworth looked at his servant. 'Sileby, sit down, man, before you fall down.'

Sileby obeyed.

'We do not have Semington's direction.' Sir Charles was very agitated. 'Not for sure.'

'I would guess he has taken the Chippenham road, and is heading towards home, but we cannot, as you say, be sure, which is a problem.' Lord Idsworth remained outwardly calm. 'And we do not know what pressure is being brought to bear on Isabelle.'

'So, what on earth do we do now?'

'Now, Wareham, we do what you wanted me to do from the first.' Lord Idsworth's eyes glittered, and his mouth was set in a thin line. 'We storm the breach.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WHILST SIR CHARLES AND LORD MOLLINGTON were all in favour of entering Lord Dunsfold's house by force, they were not exactly sure what they were expected to do.

'Never stormed anything before, actually,' admitted Lord Mollington, shamefacedly, as though part of his education had been sadly missing.

Lord Idsworth surveyed his 'army' and decided upon a redeployment of his forces. All four men forcing their way in through the front door of a gentleman's residence might be counterproductive, and he had to think ahead.

'Well, I hate to disappoint you, Mollington, but you are not doing the "storming". I have no doubts concerning your abilities or determination, but there's more than one thing we need to do. Getting into Dunsfold's house is not an end in itself, and will probably be very easy. We need to know where Semington has gone, because once we do, we will catch him. He has a jobbing chaise and pair and we will take my curricule, which will be faster. But we have to be absolutely sure of the destination. I have no doubt we can obtain that from Dunsfold. As I said, the likeliest thing is for Semington to be heading for his own estate, not expecting to be followed. Which is where you come in, Mollington.'

'I do?'

'Yes. Lady Wareham and her daughter are due to go out to see the flowers or something in Sydney Gardens, so you will go as escort in Wareham's stead. Just tell them it is important and involves his cousin at this stage. By the time you return we should be on our way, but will send a note here. If we are heading to Semington's place I want you to arrange for Lady Wareham and Miss Julia to set off, under your escort, tomorrow, because they are attending Miss Isabelle Wareham's wedding as soon as we obtain the licence. We need a day's grace to apply for a licence ourselves from ...' He looked at Sir Charles.

‘Er, Ramsbury for our parish. That is where our local archdeacon resides.’

‘Ramsbury, then. I want this guardianship ended and Isabelle safe as my wife, as soon as possible.’

‘Understandable, Idsworth.’ Lord Mollington paused. ‘Do I tell them about the abduction and the licence? Semington’s, that is.’

‘Why not. They will be more inclined to abandon whatever they had planned and come. If they dither, you must be firm, Mollington. When the marriage takes place, it is to be private but not secret. If her relations are about her, nobody will question why Miss Isabelle Wareham’s nuptials were a surprise to them.’

‘I can always say the engagement was desired, but Dunsfold needed persuading. That would be believed and is true. I will not say how we persuaded him.’ Sir Charles was warming to the task.

‘Good. You’d best give Mollington a roll of soft to pay Lady Wareham’s bill, by the way.’

This practicality was immediately dealt with, and Lord Mollington prepared to go.

‘I shall be firm. Trust me to have them at Baddesley Hall in time, and I wish you good fortune.’ He blushed. ‘My only concern is setting off early. Ladies dislike early starts and I cannot, er, drag them from their chambers.’

‘Don’t you worry, Molly, and there is no rush. Besides, if you explain what has happened, it will be my mother who will be dragging you from your bedchamber at an unreasonable hour.’ Sir Charles looked quite serious.

He patted his friend on the back and Lord Mollington, regretting not being involved in the action, but looking forward to hours in close proximity to Miss Julia Wareham, went off to find the Wareham ladies.

Sibley, by now recovered, was given money to pay Lord Idsworth’s shot at the White Hart and told to gather his belongings and bring the curricule to Henrietta Street as soon

as possible. It was not a racing model, but would be faster than the chaise, for Semington would not have any idea that he was being pursued. Lord Idsworth and Sir Charles left the Christopher once the latter had paid his own bill and spoken to his valet, and strode purposefully towards Pulteney Bridge.

The servant who answered the door was by now used to informing visitors that his Lordship was not at home, and likewise the ladies, so he was more than surprised when the tall gentleman to whom he conveyed this information, smiled and said ‘No’, quite calmly, and handed him his card. The second gentleman, whom he had seen previously and turned away, did the same.

‘We will see Lord Dunsfold.’

‘I will have your cards conveyed to his Lordship, but I repeat, gentlemen, that he is not—’

‘At home. Yes, we heard. And if he is not, we will wait, but you and I both know he is within, so let us end this pretence.’ Lord Idsworth sounded affable enough, but the lackey was confused by his inability to grasp that Lord Dunsfold was not seeing visitors.

‘I will enquire of the butler, gentlemen, as to whether he knows when his Lordship will be returning.’

This seemed an excellent way of passing the problem on to the butler, but as he took a step back and began to shut the door, the tall gentleman’s smile broadened and he pushed his shoulder swiftly and firmly against it. The footman, not expecting any such action, had no time to resist, and found himself effectively pressed between front door and the wall of the vestibule. Sir Charles, following Lord Idsworth in, politely freed the man by shutting the door, though it did not catch.

‘You may take my hat and gloves,’ declared Lord Idsworth, as though he had just been invited to step within. The servant half extended his hand, automatically responding to the commanding tone, and then, remembering

his employer's instructions, rather unwisely stepped forward in a pugilistic attitude.

'Oh dear,' murmured Lord Idsworth, and hit him squarely on the jaw.

The butler, hearing a heavy sound, which was the footman hitting the floor in a heap, went to investigate and found the two gentlemen in the hallway, and James slumped on the floor.

'Good afternoon,' Lord Idsworth sounded most urbane, though he was rubbing the knuckles of his right hand, 'Lord Idsworth and Sir Charles Wareham to see Lord Dunsfold.'

'I regret—'

'Yes, we know you do,' interrupted Sir Charles, still marvelling at the very flush hit his friend had landed on the hapless footman, 'but you will regret even more if you do not take us up to his Lordship.'

'I might add,' Lord Idsworth said, silkily, 'that this is not what one would term a social call.'

The butler, just for one small moment, wondered if he might stand his ground, and then decided it was beneath the dignity of his calling to engage in fisticuffs, especially if he was bound to lose. He bowed, in what he hoped was a condescending manner.

'Of course, gentlemen. Whom have I the honour of announcing? I did not quite catch ...'

'Lord Idsworth and Sir Charles Wareham,' repeated Lord Idsworth.

'Thank you, my Lord. Be pleased to follow me.'

He led them up two flights of stairs, knocked upon a door and opened it. Lord Dunsfold was staring into the fireplace, and his lady was seated upon a small sofa, her hands clenched and her cheeks flushed.

The butler began to announce the visitors, but they entered the room even as he spoke. Lord Dunsfold turned quickly, and Lady Dunsfold took a sharp intake of breath.

Lord Idsworth bowed to her, and Sir Charles, not totally sure how the interview would be conducted, followed suit.

‘Your servant, Ma’am. Might I suggest that you withdraw, since the matter we have to discuss with your husband is, shall we say, unsavoury.’

Cornelia Dunsfold had endured a very unhappy half hour. Her bosom heaved.

‘Whatever he may tell you, I had no knowledge that That Man would take her by force.’ She glared at her husband. ‘We got into the chaise because he told us there had been an accident ... One of the children—’

‘I did not suggest he use that as an excuse, I have told you already, Cornelia,’ interjected Lord Dunsfold, tetchily. ‘It was unfortunate.’

‘Unfortunate?’ Lady Dunsfold’s almost screamed at him.

It was at this moment that the door opened, and Lady Taynton stepped over the threshold.

Lady Taynton was a woman basking in the warm glow emanating from the knowledge that she had put herself out for her offspring. That this had been no more strenuous than entertaining two ladies for an hour, and acknowledging her relationship with her eldest child, did not in any way decrease its value. She had awoken in a very positive humour and had already planned what would obviously be a successful day before she had finished her morning chocolate. She had chosen her toilette with care, changed her mind only twice about her morning gown, and left her French chef in a state of shock, since she neither amended nor indeed replaced, any of the dishes he set before her as a suitable menu for her dinner party three days hence. She had then written a note to the most expensive milliner in Bath, complaining that the hat which had been delivered did not have the particular shade of grosgrain ribbon she had specified, and a letter to her very indulgent husband, who had remained upon his estates but would be joining her the following week, in which she explained, at least to her own satisfaction, the purchase of a new set of cushions for her

barouche, and mentioned, just at the end, that she had met her son Idsworth in the street, and was securing him a very charming young wife.

After a light luncheon she had sallied forth to Henrietta Street intending to make contact with Miss Wareham. It was clear when she reached the front door that the house was in some form of uproar. From the distant regions a high-pitched and angry voice could be heard, and, most surprisingly, the front door was not properly shut. She did what any woman would do.

‘The front door was open, and there were signs of violence downstairs,’ declared Lady Taynton, by way of explanation. As a reason to come upstairs unannounced it was thin, though accurate. Rampant curiosity would have been more truthful. ‘I was coming to ask after Miss Wareham,’ she offered in addition.

‘I think, Ma’am, that you would be best to take Lady Dunsfold elsewhere.’ Lord Idsworth really did not want his mother involved any more than necessary. His voice was cool, rather hard.

Lady Taynton saw the look upon his face and was reminded forcefully of her late husband on those occasions when her wild extravagances or debts at cards had driven him to conduct very unpleasant interviews with her in private.

‘Of course.’ She sounded unusually submissive. ‘Come with me, my dear.’ She held out her hand, and Lady Dunsfold took it.

When the door was shut, Lord Idsworth stepped a little closer to Lord Dunsfold, just close enough to seem threatening.

‘Now, you will tell us exactly where Semington has taken her.’

‘I do not need to tell you anything.’ Lord Dunsfold decided to call their bluff. They would hardly assault him in

his own home, and according to the law there was no abduction, no witnesses to abduction.

‘By Jove, you stand there and—’ Sir Charles lost his temper, but was silenced by Lord Idsworth’s lifted hand.

‘That is where you are wrong, Dunsfold,’ Idsworth’s voice was very deliberate, ‘because if you do not, or what you tell us is not the truth, you will limp for the rest of your miserable life.’

‘Limp?’

‘Yes.’ He withdrew a small pistol from his pocket. ‘And then I will throttle you. It will be most satisfying.’

Dunsfold stared at the pistol, and then at Idsworth’s face.

‘It will not be loaded,’ Dunsfold averred, but his voice wavered.

‘I have killed men in action, of course, and there was afterwards that regret, for after all, they were just soldiers, like me. It was never personal. This, this is personal. Tell me now, Dunsfold, before my finger tenses.’

‘Back to Pescombe.’

‘And how is Semington going to persuade Miss Wareham to agree to marry him?’

‘They remain at Pescombe tonight. He brings her back for the wedding tomorrow.’

He did not say more, for the look on Lord Idsworth’s face drove the words from his mouth as much as the colour from his cheeks.

‘You b—’

‘Idsworth, no!’ Sir Charles exclaimed as the pistol was raised to point at Dunsfold’s heart.

For a moment Lord Idsworth stared into the eyes of a man awaiting death, and then the barrel was raised a little higher. There was a loud report, and Lord Dunsfold fell to the floor, in a dead faint. From somewhere in the house

came a woman's scream. The ball lodged between the eyes of a wooden caryatid supporting the mantelshelf.

'Now for Semington,' declared Lord Idsworth, softly, and walked from the room, with Sir Charles, his ears ringing and his mind in a whirl, in his wake.

Isabelle had been shocked at the news. She had no particular feeling for her nieces and nephew, but fully understood why Cornelia scrambled into Mr Semington's chaise. Mr Semington himself looked rather shaken. Whilst Cornelia bombarded him with questions in the short minutes it took to return to the house, she saw the raw emotion of love on her sister's face for the first time. Cornelia did not love her husband, disliked her sister, but mother love, beneath the veneer of cool composure, had her in thrall. She might not gush over them, give up her time for them, but if her children were at risk, were harmed, it was different. Her hands were clasped together to prevent them from shaking. She almost leapt out of the chaise before the steps were let down, as her husband descended the steps of the house and came to take her hand.

'Tell me, tell me, what has happened? Is it Edward? For God's sake—'

'Be calm, my dear, and come indoors.' Lord Dunsfold looked serious but composed.

'Oh my God, not dead!' Lady Dunsfold sank to the ground, her knees buckling.

Isabelle made to climb down to assist her sister, but Mr Semington inexplicably shut the door as she moved, and called upon the postillion to 'Set 'em off'. She lurched, and half landed in his lap as the horses sprang forward under crop and spur.

'Mr Semington, Edwin, for heaven's sake!' Isabelle pulled away from the unwelcome contact. 'My sister needs me.'

'She will be perfectly well shortly.'

‘How can you say such a thing? She swoons, and how understandably. Oh, have the postillion turn us about immediately.’

‘No. There is no need. Lord Dunsfold will set her mind at ease.’

Isabelle was confused, but a worm of worry already gnawed at her.

‘But the accident?’

‘There was none.’ Mr Semington actually smiled at how well he had deceived them both.

‘But, why ...’ She paused. ‘Where are we going?’

‘Home.’

‘Home? To Bradings?’

‘Not yet. To Pescombe.’

‘But why?’ she repeated, and then saw the look on Edwin Semington’s face. ‘Mr Semington, I have told you I will not wed you. Your Mama will not persuade me otherwise, and ...’ A horrible thought dawned upon her, and her stomach turned over. ‘Your Mama is at home, waiting for us?’

He said nothing, but his expression became suddenly more lupine. Lord Dunsfold had shocked him with the suggestion that he abduct his future bride, and when he stopped to take up the ladies in Great Pulteney Street he had been very nervous. His lie had had such an effect upon Lady Dunsfold, turning a woman who treated him as one beneath her, into a pleading wreck, that he found his confidence boosted. Dunsfold had ‘given’ him Isabelle Wareham; she was his possession. He had just seen how a proud woman could be brought down. All he had to do was prove himself her master, and Isabelle would implore him take her hand. It would not be difficult. His mother retired early, and was deaf.

‘This is madness, Mr Semington. Set me down at the next roadside inn, and we shall say no more about it. I shall

forget everything about this ridiculous exploit.’

The lengthening smile made her feel physically sick. She could not, without risk of serious injury, leap from the carriage, for the horses were at a steady canter. There might be an opportunity to make her escape when they changed horses at The Angel in Chippenham, for Rudloe, who kept it, was known to her.

‘And lest you think to raise an alarm at Chippenham, I have already told the postillion that we shall not change horses there, since this pair can take us all the way.’ He saw her flash of angry disappointment. ‘I know, my dear, it is very vexatious for you, but you really ought to have realised by now that your pretty little head cannot match the intellect of a sensible man.’

‘Perhaps not sir, but then I am not sitting beside a sensible man, but a madman.’

‘Empty words, Isabelle, empty words. You will learn that I am to be respected, once we are married. Your guardian already has the licence ready for our return upon the morrow.’

‘I told you I would not marry you, and even if you constrain me to remain in your house, who would believe —’

‘You? When your guardian tells everyone how you absconded from his care and came to me? Nobody.’

‘That is utter nonsense.’

‘Perhaps. But remember, Isabelle, that you are indeed to be in my house all night. You seem to assume that when you stand before the altar tomorrow, and your guardian places your hand in mine, for he and your sister will be there so that all looks well, that I will have not already possessed far more than that hand.’

‘You would threaten me with ...’ Isabelle was not entirely sure what ‘possession’ entailed, but had a good enough idea to turn white.

‘Have I threatened you, my dear Isabelle? I thought I simply explained possibilities. You know, I never really considered the pleasures of the married state, but you have become an exceedingly pretty girl. Amazing how one does not see what is before one’s nose, is it not?’ He leered at her.

‘It is only amazing that I never realised just how hateful and reptilian you were.’

‘Ah, but you will find that I can be perfectly pleasant and amenable if you accept your role as Mrs Semington.’ He savoured the words, ‘There, does the appellation not have a fine ring to it?’

He reached for one of her hands, even as she tried to pull it away, then placed and held it, firmly, upon his knee, where he felt it tremble. He was winning already.

Isabelle was revolted. Her head was full of jumbled thoughts: half-formed ideas of trying to escape from his house; wondering if she could withdraw her hatpin and stab him with it before he could stop her; imagining the look in Lord Idsworth’s eyes when he heard she was married to another; imagining those same eyes if he could but know what appalling fate awaited her now. Might he have received her letter? Was he on his way to Bath? Even if it were so, he would be too late. She had faced so much alone, perhaps it was only to be expected that she should face this horror without aid. She would have to save herself, but she could not begin to imagine how.

She tried desperately to appear calm, but her pulse raced. Edwin Semington watched the rise and fall of her bosom, and anticipation made him rash. He gazed upon her with the eyes of a predator. The sensations were new, intoxicating, dangerous. She could not shrink further from him, for there was simply no room. He squeezed her hand and involuntarily she looked at him. He saw the fear, relished it, and leant to kiss her. She brought her free hand to his cheek in a ringing slap. He grabbed the wrist and twisted her arm, even as his cheek throbbed. She cried out, and then jolted forward.

The horses were jibbing and the postillion attempting to control them and keep his seat. A vehicle had slewed across the road ahead of them. Suddenly the door of the chaise was yanked open. Isabelle was half on the floor and looked up. She wanted to cry out in triumph, but the only sound that escaped her was a whimper.

‘You really will wish you had killed me when you had the chance,’ growled Lord Idsworth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

EDWIN SEMINGTON FROZE. IT WAS A NIGHTMARE; Idsworth could not be here. His nemesis could not have known details of a plan that had been no more than a nebulous idea three hours ago. He opened his mouth, but there were no sounds. The newly adopted cloak of bullish self-confidence was snatched from him, leaving him naked in his fear.

Lord Idsworth had seen too much. He had seen Isabelle strike to defend her honour, seen her manhandled, and his blood was up. His hand went out to Isabelle, though his eyes remained fixed on Semington's near bloodless face.

'I trust you have sustained no serious hurt, Miss Wareham.'

He sounded so formal, she almost laughed.

'No, my Lord, thanks to your timely arrival.'

'You will oblige me by waiting by the curricule. Sibley is there. You are quite safe.'

'I know, oh, I know it.' There was a catch to her voice. She looked at her rescuer, and saw what had made Lord Dunsfold blench, a man prepared to kill. 'My Lord, do not, I beg of you.'

He looked at her then, and saw that the horror was no longer of what might happen to her, but what he himself might do.

'He does not deserve to live, not for what he has done to you, frightening you, laying hands on you.'

'Nor does he deserve to die when ... the worst of those things remain in his head alone. I would not have his death on your conscience, my lord, or on mine. As you love me, let him live.'

She did not say 'If you love me', for she knew with absolute certainty that he loved her as she loved him.

‘You hear that, Semington. You live because Miss Wareham wishes it, and only for that reason.’ His voice softened. ‘Go to Sileby.’

Sir Charles, who had been speaking to the agitated postillion, came to the door. Lord Idsworth squeezed her hand, and unlike the squeeze a few minutes before from Edwin Semington, it brought a squeeze in return.

‘Come along, Isabelle.’ Sir Charles smiled encouragingly, but gave Lord Idsworth a worried glance.

‘I shall not be long, Wareham.’

‘No. Er ... Idsworth ...’

‘I shall not be long.’

It was a dismissal. Isabelle tugged her cousin’s sleeve.

‘Charlie.’

He led her away.

Semington bit his lip. Idsworth might have promised him life, but he still looked murderous.

‘Climb down and stand by the roadside.’

Semington obeyed. There was a narrow gateway into a field. Lord Idsworth removed a pistol from his coat pocket and pointed it at him.

‘Now walk into the field.’

Semington stood rooted to the spot.

‘Walk.’

Upon the second command he did so, shaking.

Sir Charles looked at Sileby, who was stony-faced, and then at Isabelle.

‘He wouldn’t, would he? In cold blood?’

‘That’s not cold blood, Sir Charles. That’s his Lordship so mad with rage it goes beyond sound and fury and is plain dangerous.’ Sileby looked grim.

They pondered this for a minute or so.

‘He said he would let him live,’ murmured Isabelle, ‘because I asked it of him.’

‘Live, aye, but that doesn’t mean he won’t—’

There was a shot, and Isabelle jumped.

‘My God, he has shot him!’ Sir Charles gasped, and paled.

‘No, no, he said he should live.’ Isabelle put her hand to her cheek in distress.

Lord Idsworth came back to the chaise a couple of minutes later. He was carrying a bundle. He walked past the chaise, with the postillion looking at him warily as he passed him, and then approached the trio by the curricule, handing the bundle to Sibley, with an expression of vague distaste.

‘Wareham, might I desire you to take the chaise back to Bath, but first write a note in my pocketbook so that I might stay the night in Baddesley Hall. When you get back to Bath, send word to Henrietta Street that Dunsfold will be required to travel with you tomorrow morning to whichever is your deanery, and I will meet you there so that a new licence may be obtained.’ He sounded very calm. He then turned and raised his voice to address the postillion. ‘You will take directions from this gentleman.’

‘Deanery is easy enough, because it is Chippenham, and we can meet up at The Angel, so you will not be wandering up and down aimlessly.’

At this, Lord Idsworth managed a smile.

‘Good. You can send your mama and sister on home with Mollington while we make the application.’

‘But what of Semington?’ Sir Charles sounded worried.

‘When we reach Chippenham, which I believe to be some four miles distant, I will leave the bundle at The Angel posting inn.’

‘It is not Semington, though, Idsw—’ Sir Charles began, but was silenced by an upraised hand.

‘My Lord,’ Isabelle looked up at her love, very serious of expression, ‘what has happened to Mr Semington?’

‘Mr Semington has not got what he deserved. However, he is one much puffed up in his own importance. That will be difficult to sustain all the way to Chippenham ... without clothes.’

‘You mean he is in that field stark ...’ Sir Charles’ eyes boggled.

‘Yes. He very obligingly removed his garments at my ... er ... suggestion.’

‘The shot, my Lord?’ Sibley managed to sound only vaguely interested.

‘Helped him undress even more quickly. Also, a shot fired very close to the skin can leave a powder burn that remains a permanent reminder of a “near accident”. Semington is a man who needs such a reminder, both on how close he has come to death, and how dangerous a firearm can be. He will not forget now.’

‘It has to be very close, Idsworth.’

‘Yes, but Semington was wise enough to stand very, very still, and my hand, unlike his, does not shake.’

‘Good God. And where ...’

‘Not with a lady present.’

‘You didn’t shoot ...’

‘Not quite, but that was what he thought I was going to do.’ Lord Idsworth smiled, very slightly. It was not a friendly smile, but one of satisfaction. ‘Now, I wish to drive Isabelle on to Bradings. I will go on to Baddesley Hall thereafter. One would wish to observe the proprieties, naturally.’

‘Of course, my dear chap. Of course. Here, coz.’ Sir Charles was about to hand Isabelle up into the curricle, but Lord Idsworth was before him.

‘Chippenham by noon, Wareham. And if Dunsfold sounds reluctant, just tell him you bring him or I fetch him.’

Sir Charles laughed, with a tremor of relief, and turned back to the chaise. Lord Idsworth climbed up into the driving seat, and Sileby let go of the horses’ heads.

‘Now, my love, I shall drive you home.’

The curricle pulled up in front of the house about an hour later. Sileby went to tug the bell as Lord Idsworth assisted his future wife tenderly from the vehicle. It took a second tug before footsteps were heard, and Wellow opened the door. The elderly retainer looked at his old friend, who was grinning, and then past him to his mistress, who was standing with her hand tucked in Lord Idsworth’s arm.

‘Good afternoon, Wellow. Miss Isabelle has had a most trying afternoon. Do you think you could arrange for a tray of tea in the library as soon as possible?’ Lord Idsworth sounded extremely cheerful.

‘Of course, my Lord,’ replied Wellow, mechanically, and then beamed at his mistress. ‘Oh Miss Isabelle, we have missed you.’ There were tears in his eyes.

‘And I have missed being here, dear Wellow.’

‘But we had no notion you were returning, Miss.’ He was conscious of the fact that he was in his shirtsleeves. ‘I shall have to remove the holland covers.’

‘No matter. It was rather a ... sudden decision.’ She looked up at Lord Idsworth, and smiled, her face alight with her happiness.

Wellow ushered them inside, and preceded them into the morning room, where he whisked away the holland covers and tried to ignore a few excited motes of dust that danced before his eyes.

‘We would have had it all ready, Miss, if we had known.’

‘That is all right, Wellow. Has Mrs Frampton been baking today?’

‘Oh yes, miss, takes a lot to stop her baking. Almond tarts I believe, and a seed cake.’

‘Seed cake. Oh, how I have missed Mrs Frampton’s seed cake.’

‘Would you object, miss, if Mrs Frampton were to bring that in herself. I know as it isn’t right, but she will be that glad to see your face, Miss, as we all are.’

‘Oh yes, please ask her to do so.’

Wellow sniffed, and withdrew before his emotions unmanned him further.

‘I think you will like Mrs Frampton’s seed cake, my Lord.’ Isabelle felt all of a sudden shy. So much was understood, and yet so little said. They had spoken but sparingly on the journey, in part because Isabelle needed to come to terms with so much happening in so short a time. She was not sure what would happen in the immediate future, but simply understood she would become Lady Idsworth at some point. ‘Her baking is very ...’

She stopped. He was looking at her with such a smile on his face, indulgent, understanding, loving.

‘Come here.’

She approached, and he held out his hands to her.

‘Are you giving me commands in my own home, Sir?’ She dimpled.

‘It is the effect of all those years soldiering.’ His eyes danced. ‘Do you mind, my darling?’

‘Not when you call me that.’ She frowned, just a small frown of enquiry. ‘What happens next?’

‘This.’

He lifted her chin and kissed her, softly at first, but as she trembled, he put his arm about her and held her very close, and the kiss deepened. In that moment her burdens lightened, because they were all to be shared, and some even removed. She was a young woman capable of making

decisions, independent of spirit, but responsibility had been loaded upon her very young, and weighed her down. Eventually the need to breathe parted them, and she freed the arm that had been pinned against his chest so that her hand could touch his cheek, the fingers running over the small scars on his jaw.

‘I thought, my Lord, you spoke of observing the proprieties,’ she whispered.

‘Yes, I did at least speak of them, but perhaps we might ignore a few, in the circumstances.’

‘And what circumstances are those?’ She dared to be bold.

‘That I am about to—’

There was a louder than normal knock upon the door. They broke apart, and when it was opened a moment or two later, Miss Wareham was seated on a chair, her hands folded decorously in her lap.

Mrs Frampton, bearing a plate with a fragrant cake upon it, advanced into the room, with Wellow, laden with a tray bearing enough tarts and buns to feed half a dozen, in her wake. She bobbed a deep curtsy to Lord Idsworth, and a rather more rushed one to her mistress, beaming, and speaking even as she set down the cake.

‘Oh Miss, I could weep, I could really.’ She then suited action to words and had to dab at her eyes with the corner of her apron.

Isabelle got up and took the woman’s hand.

‘I am home, and so very, very glad to be so.’

‘And I’ll vouch they didn’t feed you properly neither,’ sniffed Mrs Frampton, noting the thinner cheeks.

‘It looks like you will rectify that soon enough.’ Lord Idsworth eyed the laden tray, and his lips twitched.

‘We will, most certainly, my Lord,’ declared Mrs Frampton, proudly. ‘The tea will be right along, Miss, but I thought if you was hungry after your journey, and ... I just

couldn't help myself. I just had to see you with my own eyes. Oh, Miss Isabelle.'

The poor woman was overcome once more, and Lord Idsworth watched his love set about soothing her. Wellow withdrew with the empty tray. When he returned with the tea, Mrs Frampton was recovered sufficiently to be worrying that what she had in the house was not grand enough to make a fitting dinner.

'... and the end of a mutton pie that we had yesterday, and a cheese pudding, but not a cream or a jelly could I produce in time, more's the pity. Perhaps a sweet omelette?'

'Dear Mrs Frampton, it will be a positive feast, and do not forget we will have been rejuvenated already by tea and cake.'

She observed, over that lady's shoulder, Lord Idsworth cutting himself a sizeable slice of seed cake. Mrs Frampton, now eager to make the best of what she had available, whisked herself away. Isabelle broke into laughter. 'I am glad to see you making yourself at home, my Lord.'

'It was too tempting,' he admitted, looking a little guilty.

She poured tea for them both and nibbled a rather smaller slice of cake. They sat quietly for a few minutes, for the tea seemed to make an extraordinary day more normal, then he brushed a crumb from his coat and came to sit next to her on the sofa.

'You were about to do something, my Lord, when we were interrupted by cake.'

'I was. I was about to ask you if you would do me the great honour of becoming my wife. Will you?' He asked but was confident of her response.

'Yes, my Lord. You know my answer is yes.'

'I love you.' He took one of her hands and pressed a kiss into the palm of it. 'I am not sure I have said the words to you before, but you have known it nonetheless, haven't you?'

‘Yes. I have known, and ...’ She blushed. ‘I wrote to you, you know, nearly every night, but in my head. I could not write, on paper, to anyone at all, but telling you everything ... made it easier.’

‘That is all over now.’

‘Yes. What is going to happen next, my Lord, and I mean over the next days, months? I am still my brother-in-law’s ward. Must we wait until next March? Until I am free?’ She did not sound as if this idea appealed.

‘No. No more of this. I want you safe, with me. Tomorrow I will meet with your cousin Charles and Dunsfold, and we will apply for another licence, but from the rural dean in Chippenham, and we will be married in your own parish church within a few days, with all your neighbours and friends about you. Mollington is bringing your aunt and cousin Julia to Baddesley Hall.’

‘But surely he, Lord Dunsfold, will not agree to this?’

‘Oh, I assure you he will be over his indisposition of today and will most definitely agree. He will also be a witness at the wedding, whether it pleases him or not. I really do not care.’

‘Indisposition?’ Isabelle latched onto this point.

Lord Idsworth then had to describe the forced entry into Henrietta Street and what happened with Dunsfold. Isabelle regretted that she had not seen it and said that she would quiz her cousin to make sure the details were correct. She frowned over her sister, though.

‘It was a very callous thing on Edwin’s part, and equally so on my brother Dunsfold’s, not to see how deeply shocked and upset Cornelia would be at such a ruse. I am so glad that Lady Tay ... your mama, arrived as she did.’

‘Yes, she did succumb to a very timely curiosity.’ He smiled, wryly. ‘It is difficult to imagine her as my mama, and she said she would not help me if I addressed her as “Mama” in a public place. I am, er, too old, though she did

admit she thought I had turned out well, considering.’ The smile became a grin.

‘Oh yes,’ she said, impulsively. ‘She would do just that! She told me that if I ever taught her grandchildren to call her “Grandmama” she would ...’ Isabelle stopped and went bright red, dropping her gaze. ‘I meant ...’

He slipped an arm about her waist and drew her tightly to him. She still had that scent of lavender clinging to her, the smell he associated with their happy time during his recovery, and it added to the frisson.

‘Isabelle, my love,’ he whispered, a trifle thickly, ‘I am glad that we do not have to wait long.’

He held himself in check, but she was not oblivious to his desire. What had been repellent in Edwin Semington was exciting in the Earl of Idsworth. She emerged a little flustered, and still blushing, from his embrace.

‘We will return here, immediately after the wedding?’ She made a valiant effort to direct his thoughts to practical matters and failed.

‘As soon as you wish, my love, but I think we may have to delay our raptures until after the wedding breakfast. We will have guests, you know, just a few – your friends from the locality.’

‘My Lord!’ She nearly choked. ‘Ooh, wedding breakfast! I must tell Mrs Frampton!’

‘You may tell her after dinner. Personally, she could serve gruel and I would still enjoy it, with you as my bride beside me.’

‘Oh, what a lovely thing to say. But she will want to do something very splendid. And in only two or three days!’

‘I like the only two or three days part.’ There was laughter in his eyes, but more besides.

‘Be serious, my Lord.’

‘I am.’

‘Will we move to the Dower House at Buriton, after the ... celebrations?’ Isabelle could not keep the regret from her voice. It was so nice to be home.

‘Only if you choose to do so. There are another eighteen months before the main house reverts to me. I would like to live there then, but to me the Dower House is old memories and my aunt.’

‘You would have us remain here for a while?’ She sounded hopeful.

‘I confess, it has all been a ploy to live here. You see, I could not face living in the Dower House after I saw the wallpaper my aunt had chosen to have hung in the morning room, so there was no help for it but to marry a lady with a neat little house and good taste in furnishings.’ His mock serious tone failed him. ‘And a cook who bakes a good seed cake.’

‘You like it here?’

‘Yes, I do.’ The frivolity left his voice. ‘We will be happy here, my sweet. I did not begin to fall in love with you here, for, ridiculous as it sounds, that began at our second meeting, when I told you about the wretched cat. But it was here that I was certain, here that love deepened, and here where I thought my heart would be torn in two when we parted.’

‘It was like that for you too, wasn’t it?’ She smiled at him, shyly.

‘Yes. But I had to let Dunsfold have his way, for the law would side with him, and it was right to give you the chance, Isabelle. To offer you marriage when you had never seen the world would have been unfair, as little as you wanted me to be fair. Not,’ he added honestly, ‘that you have seen much of the world at all these last months.’

‘I was afraid.’

‘Of Dunsfold?’

‘Of leaving my home; of what would happen to my people here; most of all, of you forgetting me.’

‘Did you think that I would, my love?’

‘Not think, but feared. Everything I had hoped for seemed as insubstantial as a dream in the night. I feared it would all be lost, and I would “wake” to being my sister’s unwilling and unwelcome guest. I hated it at Lincombe, hated it.’ She shuddered, and he pressed her hands between his own.

‘I am sorry, Isabelle.’

‘It was not your fault, my love.’

‘I am still sorry.’

‘Anyway, it is you who have rescued me from the misery, as you have rescued me from the appalling Edwin. The only thing I never realised was that he could be so devious, so actively unpleasant. I dismissed him as a weak, sycophantic bumbler, and he was much more.’

‘I do not know whose neck I had more desire to break, his or Dunsfold’s. In fact, it would have been very easy to break both.’

‘I am content that you broke his inflated self-esteem, and in such a way. He is bound to have been seen, and even recognised when he reached Chippenham, and the news will flood half the county in no time.’ She looked down at his hands, hands that cradled hers, and thought it odd that only a few hours ago he might have used them violently. ‘Thank you, for listening to me. I do not think I could have borne ...’ She sighed.

‘Then I am glad I held back.’

‘Edwin did look as if he thought you would leave him like a broken rag doll.’ Isabelle smiled again, then a small frown appeared between her brows. Her thoughts came back to Bradings.

‘Would you have to sell Bradings, when the lease upon Buriton Park is ended?’ She tried to sound as if it was not important to her.

‘No, my love, for it is your inheritance, part of you. We would manage. I would like it to pass to a younger son, as it did through your family, even if the surname would be Westerham not Wareham.’

‘Westerham? I did not know your family name, my lord. So close to Wareham. How funny.’

‘You know, you do not even know my Christian name, and—’

‘But I do, sir. It is Julian. Lady Taynton let it slip.’

‘Ah. Did she let slip the whole of it?’

‘No, but I like Julian.’

‘But there is more. Julian Montagu Delacroix Westerham. There, you know the worst. Do you still want to marry me?’

‘I may have to reconsider.’ She giggled. ‘Montagu Delacroix!’

‘Yes, well ... Montagu was the name of my godfather, and my maternal grandmother ...’

‘Of course! I recall Lady Taynton saying that her mama was French. I think she thought it gave her a cachet.’

‘It gave me a dashed silly name.’ He pulled a face.

‘If, Sir, this is the moment for admissions, then in all honesty I ought to confess that my middle name is Lovinia, with the O.’

‘I love Lo-vinia,’ he murmured. She tilted her head up for his kiss. There followed several minutes when conversation was entirely impossible. When she was eventually able to catch her breath, it was followed by a sigh.

‘You make me the happiest of women.’

‘I make you a countess in straitened circumstances.’ His face became serious. ‘If I could turn back the clock ... but I cannot. The ancestral home – and I think you will like it, for it is not so cavernous as to be a day’s march to reach the

dining room or with more wings than a flock of geese – I can afford to run once the tenancy ends, and the home farm is not entailed. If we live quietly, there will be a sufficiency, but I cannot offer you the Season in London. I could not afford to hire, and the house in Albemarle Street was sold when I ...’

‘I have never sought Society. I was brought up in the country, my lord. I like it. And I would be happy anywhere with you, you know that.’

‘No regrets?’ He put his arms about her once more.

‘None. And I shall certainly not miss London, for I never saw it.’

‘I will take you for a visit if you want to order clothes for when you emerge from mourning.’

‘But Bath has perfectly good modistes, and it would be wasteful.’

‘You see,’ he frowned, ‘already I make you penny pinch.’

‘Fiddlesticks. To be truthful, I saw this dress in the window of a shop in Milsom Street and, oh, it was beautiful. I would like one made like that, and,’ her eyes twinkled, ‘I am sure it is not cheap. My sister said it was far too grand for me.’

‘Then you must have it.’

‘When we do not live here, it can be leased, and the farms with it. It is not a great estate, but an old manor, and the land is productive. The income will help us. I can see that this concerns you, my love, but you must believe I never dreamt of wealth or fancy things. I never dreamt at all, until I met you.’ She touched his cheek, and whispered, ‘And then I dreamt of the impossible. Yet here I am; here you are.’

‘At your feet.’

‘I do not want you there. I want you as you are now, with your arms about me.’ Isabelle leant her cheek against his

shoulder, the shoulder she had tended and worried over. He kissed the top of her head, and she sighed, completely happy.

Just before the dinner hour, Wellow stood before the library door. The housemaid, who was carrying a bowl of potpourri, looked at him in surprise.

‘Why, Mr Wellow, what are you a-doin’ of, standing there like a statue?’

In reply, he held a finger to his lips and then shooed her away. He looked once again at the library door, and a smile dawned and spread across his face as he heard Isabelle Wareham laugh softly. He would wait here another few minutes before announcing dinner. Mrs Frampton would not mind it waiting, not for love.

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SOPHIA HOLLOWAY describes herself as a ‘wordsmith’ who is only really happy when writing. She read Modern History at Oxford, and also writes the Bradecote and Catchpoll medieval mysteries as Sarah Hawkswood.

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By Sophia Holloway

Kingscastle

The Season

Isabelle

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