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Leonora
AND THE
LION'S VENTURE

SISTERS OF CASTLE FORTUNE BOOK 4

Leonora and the Lion's venture

Sisters of Castle Fortune 4

Alicia Cameron

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There is a phrase that appears on many thank you gifts for teachers:

“You do not know what a difference you have made to my story...”

To Corinne and Vivian, again.

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Chapter 1

A Journey of Anticipation

Baron Fortune of Fortune Castle was not a man much admired in the *Beau Monde*, but his ancient barony forgave the worst of his excesses, which were, after all, shared in large number by the fashionable World. He drank immoderately, which was usual; he took his pleasure with women of easy virtue, which was understandable; he gambled recklessly — which might even have been regarded as admirable by his fellow players, except for the precarious nature of his repayment of debts. He was, in short, a rogue and rascalion, which was a reputation given many members of the *Ton*. But Fortune had a streak of self-righteousness that made him somewhat repellent to his peers, even if his method of exposing his self-righteousness (talking his true thoughts audibly, as though he believed no one could hear him) was amusing to some.

If there was one thing that the baron did with total perfection, it was to have sired beautiful children. His son, George Fortune (named for his father) was a handsomer version of himself: very tall, barrel-chested, athletic. Unfortunately, he was an exaggerated version of his papa in personality, too, but with no redeeming amusing quirks.

But it was the baron's ten daughters that won the World's approval. Eight of these beauties had been presented already, and all eight were married to swains of their own choosing, despite their papa's best efforts. One of them, as the baron frequently lamented in public, had married a mere music master, and lived in Bath in reduced circumstances. However, friends who knew her said she lived in connubial harmony, and that it was rumoured that her comfort had increased due to the generosity of her brothers-in-law. For the other seven beauties, it could be said they had married very well indeed, even if their father still muttered about some richer or higher-ranking gentlemen who had also pursued them during their time in Town. Jocasta, he lamented, had missed securing a

duke. Of the recent crop of Fortune ladies, one had married a rich baronet, one a baron who was heir to an earldom, one an actual earl, and another a marquis. Not, said the *Beau Monde*, catches to be sniffed at.

And now it seemed, the baron was bringing into Town his final surprise. For this year, there were to be twins. As lovely as their sisters, but in *duplicate*.



Leonora Fortune's excitement grew as they neared London in Baron Fortune's ancient, but reasonably comfortable, travelling carriage. She was seventeen years old, and the culmination of a three-year plan was within reach at last, for in the city was the object she had planned to acquire since she was but fourteen years old. She had already made a deal of preparation with a tenacity that her pretty face and tender years might belie, but she had been separated from her goal by perhaps three hundred miles. Soon, she was sure the distance might shrink to a mile or two at most, and she could almost guarantee that even greater propinquity was tantalisingly near. Her thoughts had only one direction, she knew herself to be a single-minded person, and it was only her sister that provided any distraction from this.

She watched now as her twin sister Marguerite turned her head from side to side, her anticipation bubbling as they reached the outskirts of the city. It was in this way that Leonora, whose thoughts were always on that single track, had been brought to notice the sights of their journey at all. But though Marguerite was distracting, Leonora knew that her sister's more open nature provided the leavening in her own life. Through her Button, who looked exactly like her, Leonora was brought to see the pretty scenery, enjoy the spectacle of the gluttonous fat man at an inn they stopped at, and there been introduced to an amusing child whose peculiar dignity was explained by the nurse accompanying him referring to him as *my lord*.

Marguerite's excitement was voluble, and both large figures on the opposite seat had adjured her to be quiet, several times. They had started the long journey from their Yorkshire home,

Castle Fortune, some days ago, and neither Papa nor their brother George seemed to understand that if one gave a hundred chiding instructions a day, the chided only heard half of them, filtering the voices out of their awareness. They were after all, impossible to obey. ‘Be silent, girls, we do not care to listen to your empty chatter!’ might be followed, a scant five minutes later, by ‘A lady should have a flow of light conversation to keep her companions entertained. Do not be so sulky in London, I shall not allow it!’ Their sister Katerina used to say that their male relatives might be genuinely cruel if either were a bit more intelligent, or had longer memories. Leonora agreed.

London. Her quest was in sight. While Marguerite had talked for months of the fashions that were being made for them, while adjusting necklines and trims to bonnets, Leonora had simply let her carry on. They were to be dressed identically, Papa decreed, so as to be a *spectacle*. Leonora let Marguerite handle this aspect. In her twin she had her own looking glass. Once Button tried a gown on, Leo could see at once that it would suit. Marguerite had exquisite taste. As her vivacious twin had talked of the social expectations of the Season, Leonora had only thought of them as the means to her end. Ways to get closer to her target.

She knew that the outcome was by no means certain, but impossible things made Leonora’s heart stir all the more. She would do her best. And, as she knew from previous campaigns, her best was often enough.

Perhaps, in the intervening years, circumstances had changed to make her task easier than she anticipated. On the journey, sporting their new finery, they had frequently overheard themselves referred to as *beauties*. Marguerite was surprised and delighted, but Leonora thought their faces rather ordinary. No doubt it was the rarity factor of twins. She knew the lightness of their curls was not common, and their likeness to each other arresting. It was only in Marguerite’s joyful or mischievous smile that Leonora saw any beauty in them. It was her Button’s charm that reflected all the glory on Leonora.

But if beauty *was* truly hers, she would use that to her purpose too. Perhaps it would move him, but she suspected not. He had not seemed like a gentleman easily moved by such things.

There was a great deal more to do when in London.

The carriage pulled up at a fashionable address (hired by her brother-in-law, the Marquis of Onslow so that he need not house her papa in his own London abode, Leonora was sure) and the weary travellers descended the carriage, glad to be free of its confines.

Marguerite took her hand and smiled joyfully; Leonora looked at her fondly. Her sister was so excited by the thought of their Season. When George, already mounting the steps to the house, barked at them for dithering, Marguerite's face fell. It would be better, perhaps, if Button was not so affected by her irascible papa and brother — but it would be a shame, Leonora had concluded over the years, if Marguerite was more guarded. For her openness was also the source of her joy. No, better she stayed as she was, and let Leonora be the protection of them both.

'*George!*' Leonora suddenly wailed, sounding panicked. Her brother turned on the steps to the house, tripping over himself as he did so. 'Mind your step, there!' said Leonora comfortably, passing him on the way into the house.

George Fortune glared after her.

Chapter 2

The Hunter and Her Prey

‘Have you seen them?’ said Christiana Carswell to her cousin Roberta Pelleter. Both girls stood at the edge of the ballroom, looking charming in white muslin, Christiana fair, Roberta dark.

‘No. I only heard from Mama that they were at the Rochesters’ salon and caused a stir playing the piano,’ said Roberta.

‘Unaccomplished?’ asked Christiana, hopefully, but humorously.

‘No! The opposite,’ sighed Roberta histrionically.

‘Delphine last year, and now this!’ laughed Christiana.

‘You need not worry, Mr Jasper is taking enough note of *you* not to be swayed,’ Roberta looked around. ‘I saw him earlier. Cannot you do something about his dreadful coats?’ Christiana frowned admonishment at her cousin. ‘I, on the other hand,’ continued Roberta with a sigh, ‘am about to be eclipsed once more.’

‘Do you think we could get prior information on their engagements and appear only where they do not?’ Christiana said, leaning in with a comical expression.

‘Well, possibly Aunt Sybilla could, if anyone,’ offered the dark-haired cousin, jerking her chin towards that plump and pretty russet-haired matron.

‘It was just a jest!’ Christiana said, ‘For goodness’ sake don’t ask her!’

‘What do you think, Foggy?’ said Roberta, turning to Christiana’s brother jauntily, ‘Shall we set Aunt Sybilla on the task?’

The young gentleman had been standing beside his sister, looking around the ballroom in a vague sort of way, and hadn’t taken in their conversation. ‘What task?’

‘Do you *ever* listen to a thing I say?’ Christiana frowned at him.

‘Not really,’ said Christiana’s brother, the Honourable Linton Carswell — known to all the world as Foggy on account of his lack of attention. He was a blond young man, whose nervous disposition was sometimes displayed by the bobbing of a prominent Adam’s apple in his long neck. However, among the company of sister and cousin, he was merely bored. He possessed a pair of large blue eyes which observed the world of the ballroom with the fearful attention of a child, as well as a rather delicate but definite line of nose and mouth. However, it was generally agreed that the face was let down by the lack of a chin and a look of cornered rabbit when challenged.

There was a commotion by the ballroom entrance, and Carswell turned his eyes towards the tumult, and observed vaguely. First a crush around the door, then the handsome figure of George Fortune, followed by his father Baron Fortune, built on the same tall, broad lines (but rather fuller of figure) pushed through the throng. When they parted a little, an astonishing vision of loveliness appeared through the crowd. Twin blonde beauties of celestial perfection. Many observers shook their heads as though to clear their sight.

‘Good God!’ said Carswell’s companion, the elaborately turned-out Petronius Fenn, Viscount Desmond, from his side. What God had denied the viscount in face (somewhat pointed in nature) and figure (slightly shorter than Foggy and what had been described, to the viscount’s utter horror, as burly) his tailor and valet had done their best to supply. His hair (which lacked natural curl) was nonetheless cut and curled in a forward swept Brutus, his jacket gave an appearance of being nipped in at the waist by dint of exaggerated shoulders and came in a daring, experimental hue of pale grey. ‘What a sight! And two of ‘em. If I didn’t know better, I’d think I was foxed.’

Carswell stood stunned, then grasped his friend’s arm desperately. ‘Get me out of here, Pet!’ he said, in panic.

His sister said, laughing wryly. ‘Oh, look, Roberta! Mrs Burton was quite right. We’re doomed!’

Desmond had automatically given the Hon Lin a push away from him, and Foggy moved and turned his back on the vision, shaking his head. '*It's the white cloud!*' he hissed at the viscount, ducking his head.

'Have you finally surrendered all the sense in your cockloft, Foggy? What has your dashed cloud dream to do with those heavenly twins?'

Foggy grasped his friend's exquisite lapel in a manner that only ten years of friendship could make forgivable, and said in an urgent under-voice, two inches from his face, 'One of 'em fell from heaven when she was only a cherub, and cursed me.'

'What on earth are you talking about? What fell to earth? A cherub? Like in a Raphael painting we saw in Florence? A white cloud?' he looked around, at the same time attempting to remove Carswell's fingers from his person, 'I thought there was only Negus cup served at Almacks - how can you be dazed and confused already?'

'The cherub and the cloud are the same thing, Pet,' said Foggy with that strange desperation. 'Don't you *see*?'

Desmond turned his head back to his frightened friend and clapped a hand on Carswell's shoulder in a bid to pacify him. 'I do *not*, Foggy old man. Did the cherub fall from heaven on a cloud?' He ran his fingers through his hair, a danger to his curls. 'Dammit all, why am I trying to understand this lunacy?'

'Get me out of here first,' his friend begged, hiding behind Desmond's superior bulk.

Looking at Foggy's haunted face as he perambulated in a peculiar sideways crab walk towards the ballroom door, Desmond became concerned and followed him. 'You said a *curse*?'

'Shh! Not here!' his shaken friend hissed, looking from side to side as though for spies.

'Linton Carswell — what *are* you doing?' Carswell froze at the stentorian voice of authority. His Aunt Mags. He grasped his friend's arm, not looking to his aunt as yet, though it was

inevitable that he would have to. ‘Desmond? Did she turn?’ he muttered to his friend at one side, ‘Has she seen me?’

‘Lady Mags can *hear* you!’ the viscount hissed.

‘Not her —’

‘You mean the angels?’ asked his lordship, looking over Carswell’s shoulder. ‘Do you know, one of those heavenly twins *is* looking this way.’

‘*No!*’ The young man’s non-existent chin twitched.

‘*Linton,*’ hissed the dark, energetic figure of his aunt, putting herself in his direct view. ‘Do not make a figure of yourself. Stand up straight!’

Carswell pulled himself up with difficulty, but his breath was coming in a ragged spurt.

Desmond said, nobly braving the basilisk eye of Lady Mags Pelleter, ‘He’s a bit under the weather, Lady Mags! Talking about clouds and cherubs and curses. Must pardon him.’

‘Curse? What curse?’ Her terrible brows pulled down. The mouth of her nephew worked once more, and he gave her a terrified look.

‘Can’t tell!’ Foggy clutched his friend’s coat and mumbled into it wildly.

‘What is he saying? He’s always been a fool — is he now a full-blown lunatic?’

‘He said something about a curse, ma’am. At least I think that was it.’

Lady Mags looked up and saw, from behind his back, a pair of impossibly blue, impossibly large, eyes staring back at her. They did not look away as she met them, and her ladyship frowned. The forehead above the eyes frowned also, as though in renewed concentration. These eyes were attached to a very beautiful, youthful face, and should not, within the norms of society, have been able to stay so steady while gazing at an elder. ‘A curse?’ said Mags Pelleter, still distracted by the continuous stare. Then she narrowed her eyes. ‘What is Linton’s worst nightmare, Viscount?’

‘Foggy’s worst nightmare, Lady Mags? That’s easy. Same as mine. The Parson’s Noose,’ he gave a grin at this, which froze under her ladyship’s stare. He coughed. ‘Well, that and the falling cloud—’ he added.

‘Why do I forget that you are a bigger fool than my nephew?’ said Lady Mags, finally moving her eyes to focus on the now almost crouching form of her relative. ‘Take him away before I make a scene in Almacks.’

Lady Mags made her swift way through the throng as Viscount Desmond did just that, and brushed shoulders with her challenger as she did so. She hardly spared her a glance in passing, but in that half-second she was surprised to meet a mild, apologetic gaze from those large blue eyes. This startled her, but she continued on her way to a group at the side of the ballroom who comprised of Linton’s sister Christiana, mother Lady Eloise, and Lady Mags’ own daughter, Roberta. She talked to the daringly fashionable Lady Eloise first. ‘Your son just slouched out of Almacks as though pursued by a ghost, Eloise!’

Lady Eloise looked only mildly perturbed. Foggy was startled by so many things in a ballroom, just like his father before him. ‘Oh dear!’

‘He may be escaping a lady’s *interest*.’

The gentle face of Lady Eloise looked somewhat cross at this, saying, ‘Why does he always do so? Delphine taught him to *speak* to his dance partners at least, but whenever a young lady shows an interest, he slouches off, never to return. However will he marry at this rate?’

‘It would need a young lady of skill and determination, it is true!’ Lady Mags said, thinking of the eyes that had held hers so boldly.

‘Mags ...’ faltered Lady Eloise. ‘You *know* something!’

But there was no reason to give false hope. It was more likely that Linton had given some sort of offence unwittingly, and that the young lady was showing some spirit in staring.

Much more likely. So all she said in reply was, ‘Only that your son is heading towards raving lunacy.’

‘Do not say so, Mama,’ begged the good-natured Roberta. ‘Poor Linton!’

‘Yes,’ said Foggy’s sister with a giggle, ‘but that *is* what one says about lunatics!’

Her mama rapped her with a fan to hold her tongue.



It was half a bottle each later when Desmond deciphered the bones of a story. Robert, Lord Paxton, had joined them (the most intelligent and handsome of the friends, a romantic dark curl falling on his brow), and was, with difficulty, following.

‘So,’ said Desmond, in summary. ‘You met a girl at a house party—’

‘Didn’t meet her,’ said Carswell, bleakly. ‘She fell on me. And not a girl, an infant.’

‘...Who looked like an angel ... or a cloud ... and she cursed you!’ continued Desmond, trying to see through the fog.

‘Hang on Foggy...’ said Paxton, ‘you don’t mean at Castle Fortune three years ago? You haven’t been to a house party since then...’

‘Yes,’ said Foggy with rheumy eyes.

‘What girl?’ demanded Paxton. ‘Are you sure you weren’t dreaming it?’

‘One of *them*.’ Foggy said, with a gesture of his hands.

‘*Who?*’

‘The sisters,’ slurred Carswell.

‘Not *Portia’s* sisters?’ said Paxton, referring to his wife. ‘The baron’s girls?’

‘Yes, but the two sisters ...’ he put an elbow on the table shakily and held up two splayed fingers in a ‘v’, ‘You know,

one of *them...*' he nodded sagely, looking like Paxton was catching on.

His lordship frowned. 'Do you mean the Bailey sisters? They were the only twosome—'

'Not them.' The hand above the elbow shook an admonitory finger. '*Angels.*'

'But there were four Fortune sisters at the party, not two,' protested Paxton in a thoughtful tone. 'Georgette, Jocasta, Katerina and my Portia.' He frowned at his blond friend, whose chin had fallen into the hand above the elbow, then gestured to Desmond, who was nearer to Foggy's glass. 'Stop him drinking that Pet, he's not making any sense.'

'He's not been making any sense for hours, Rob, even before the gin. But the cloud dream ... I've been listening to that one for years now, when he's foxed.'

'Not the four, the *two*,' insisted Foggy, banging the table, causing spillage.

'*What* two?' Paxton was frustrated. 'Miss White and Lady Sarah Alderly? Miss White *is* an angel, I suppose.'

'She's Mrs Ponsonby now — runaway match, you know!' said Desmond in a gossipy tone.

'That's right!' said Foggy, cheerily, recovering. The other two began to look relieved. Then he put his face back on the table, 'But — 's not her!'

'There were no other young females *there* — what are you talking—?' Paxton frowned. 'When did he get in this state?' he asked Viscount Desmond, who was now looking the worse for wear, too, having joined his friend in a number of glasses, in a comradely spirit.

'Tonight. Almacks. His mother drags him there to accompany his sister. She's out you know, second Season. Charming girl.'

'I know Christiana, for goodness' sake,' grinned Paxton. 'You should try there yourself, Pet!'

‘No he shouldn’t,’ Viscount Desmond looked slightly offended at Foggy’s intervention. ‘Me mother won’t want another idiot in the family.’

‘Reasonable,’ said Desmond — relieved, saddened, but accepting.

‘But if it happened at Almacks,’ said Paxton, with concentration, ‘that means — it’s the *twins*.’

‘Yes!’ exclaimed Desmond. ‘When he saw the twin Misses Fortune *that* is when he started to talk about dreams and clouds and curses and so on.’ Desmond frowned. ‘I should have told you that bit.’

‘But it *can’t* be,’ said Paxton, shaking his head. ‘The twins were only fourteen at the time of the house party.’

Foggy looked guilty, tugging on his cravat to reveal a trembling Adam’s apple. He leaned forward, elbow in a pool of gin, confiding. ‘Just an infant, but *I* think she had a *tendre* for an older man.’

‘Who?’ demanded Paxton.

‘Me!’ said Foggy, slapping his chest.

The other two looked at him, his hair on end, his bloodshot eyes in a wan face, a gin stain spreading slowly across his sleeve. ‘No!’ they both said with decision.

‘*You* don’t know.’ Carswell’s fingers wagged first to one and to another. Then he put both palms on the table and leaned forward, whispering. ‘She frightened me. One minute we were talking normally, walking back to the castle — and the next she ... cursed me to—’

‘But *why?*’ asked Paxton, still rejecting the notion.

‘Never mind that. There’s a flaw in this story, Foggy,’ said Desmond, with a drunken determination to follow on. ‘It is only since you became trained by your cousin Delphine, I mean Viscountess Gascoigne now, that you could *string a sentence together* in front of a lady. And you say you were *chatting?*’

‘She was an *infant*. I’m not afraid of *infants*. I just caught the cloud, that was all—’

‘He’s off again!’ Desmond sunk his chin on his hand, defeated.

‘Concentrate, Foggy!’ said the usually gentle Lord Paxton.

Carswell came to attention. ‘Yes!’ he said, swiftly.

‘Which girl was it?’ pursued Paxton.

‘Wasn’t a girl. It was a lion.’ He giggled. ‘Or a cloud. Or cherub. I can’t remember which.’ He found himself hilarious.

‘Lions now — but I’ve heard him talk of lions before when he was foxed.’ Desmond shook his head sadly, ‘He’s generally bird-brained — but now I think he’s fallen off the edge.’

‘No,’ said Paxton, incisively. ‘He’s just told me. He might have *been* caught by a lion. Portia’s sister Leo — Leonora, one of the Fortune twins, just out. A true lion cub, my wife tells me.’

‘So *that’s* what it is.’ Desmond sat up. ‘Right Robbie! Let’s forget the clouds and the cherubs and let us get to the curse. That’s what terrified him. *Foggy*,’ he said, shaking the sleepy friend. ‘What was the *curse*?’

Foggy raised his head with difficulty, and rested his wisp of a chin on the table. His two hands gestured his friends closer, as for a secret. They leant in, faces just a foot apart in each case. ‘She said I should marry.’ His friends looked disappointed at such a commonplace secret and began to move back, when the hands gestured again. ‘And then she said she was *coming* for me!’ The confiding look was replaced by panic. ‘And now she’s come!’

Chapter 3

Lord Paxton Sees Through a Chink

It took Paxton to first arrest the imbibing of strong spirits, then order coffee, and ultimately apply the quiet words from a sober and sensible brain, to finally calm the qualms of his friend Mr Carswell. Between Foggy's two companions, he was adjured to sit in his seat like a man rather than a rag doll, drink two cups of coffee and one of sustaining bone-broth, before he could be brought out of his panic.

After that renowned dandy Petronius Fenn, the Viscount Desmond, straightened the young man's cravat — then, if one ignored the gin stain and the overwhelming whiff of alcohol, the Honourable Mr Carswell could even pass for a gentleman.

The curse continued, his friends explained to him, in his own head alone. The child he had met years ago had enjoyed little male acquaintance at that time, and had evidently, said Lord Paxton, taken a fancy to the first gentleman she had really conversed with, as young girls are wont to do.

'Though it do seem unaccountable when it's *Foggy*,' muttered the viscount.

Lord Paxton — Robbie to his friends, kicked him under the table.

'Yesh!' said Foggy, who had unexpectedly heard the interjection. 'Unaccountable!'

'Well,' said the kind Lord Paxton, 'you are a very fine fellow, Foggy, it is no wonder a young thing might have a romantical notion.'

'She don't seem,' said Foggy reminiscently, 'romantical at all.'

'Well, whatever it was,' continued Paxton, 'it was but a youthful notion on her part. But because of your fear of matrimony — why is that by the way?'

‘Not the marrying kind,’ said the viscount, wisely. Then belched.

‘...You, Foggy, have refined too much upon it,’ finished Paxton.

Mr Carswell’s bloodshot blue eyes looked at him hopefully from the place where his head rested, his eyebrows furrowing upwards on his forehead in a picture of plaintiveness, ‘You really think so?’

‘Of course. She has very likely forgot all about it. It is, after all, three years ago.’

Mr Carswell’s spirits were climbing gradually. ‘Yes!’ he said, ‘She would. Not a child anymore...’

‘Also, like her sisters, she is very beautiful.’

‘All the Fortune girls are,’ remarked the viscount. ‘The old baron might be dicked in his nob, but his girls have all been ballroom belles.’

‘Yes, they generally ruled their Seasons, I’m told,’ agreed Paxton. ‘My Portia would undoubtedly have ruled hers, but luckily I secured her before.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Desmond, rolling his eyes at Paxton’s boast, ‘your wife is dashed pretty, but let us return to Foggy.’

Mr Carswell was reaching for the gin bottle again, and Lord Paxton removed it. ‘Well, not to put too fine a point on it, Foggy, the twins are causing a sensation in Town already. Is it *likely*, even if Leonora still thinks of you, that she will prefer *you*...?’ Paxton stopped. He was being rude to his friend, but since poor Foggy was still trembling, and throwing off longing looks to the gin bottle, it was better to be cruel to be kind.

‘Heard Bexley has taken an interest already,’ the viscount informed them. Mr Carswell knew he was referring to the notable Duke of Bexley, newly risen to his father’s honours. He was young (thirty), accounted handsome, and of the first rank. ‘What Robbie is trying to say is ... well, who would look at *you* when she had a chance of Bexley?’

‘No one!’ said Foggy, clutching his arm. ‘Absolutely *no one!*’ He sighed deeply, his face finally at peace, his trembling decreasing with each breath. Then in sudden panic. ‘But what if the duke prefers t’other?’

‘What’s the difference? They look exactly the same,’ said Desmond.

‘They ain’t the same,’ said Foggy dejected. ‘The other is quiet and obliging whereas the cloud is ...’

‘A cherubic lion ... we know!’ said the viscount.

‘Angelic,’ corrected Foggy.

‘Wha—?’ said Desmond, confused.

‘Angelic lion.’ He giggled. ‘On a cloud.’

‘Don’t start that again.’

‘Angelic? I say, Foggy. You ain’t *disposed* to her?’ asked the sober member of the group with horror.

’*What—?*’

‘You don’t *like* her, do you? Maybe that’s why you’ve been dreaming...!’ wondered Paxton.

‘I. Do. Not.,’ intoned Foggy, not slurring his words for the first time in an hour. He tried to drink from his empty coffee cup. ‘That is, one doesn’t *dislike* a child...! It is only — saw her tonight. No longer a cherub, but an angel.’ He shook his finger at Paxton. ‘But with a lion’s heart.’

‘Yes, yes, old fellow. But we’ve decided. She won’t miss you among all her suitors,’ consoled Paxton.

‘Yesh. Yesh, you’re right dear boy!’ Foggy put his arm around the necks of each of his companions, in a way likely to do them injury, ‘You are the besht friends in the world ... you know that? The very besht—’

‘Alright, old fellow!’ said Desmond, slurring his speech. ‘Let us to bed. I’ll help you up.’ He got up and instantly fell against Foggy, sitting and closing his eyes. Lord Paxton stood too, moving Foggy’s arm away, and looked down at them,

sighing. ‘Get someone to call a hackney,’ he ordered a waiter, ‘and give me a hand to get these two inside.’



Three years ago, in the grounds of Castle Fortune during a House Party:

‘Jump!’

The Honourable Mr Carswell, Foggy to his intimates, had been having a wander around the environs of the castle when he found a bundle of white muslin in a tree. The alacrity with which this command was obeyed almost staggered him. ‘Which one are you?’ he said, unceremoniously putting the blonde-haired child-damsel down.

‘Leonora. The lion,’ she added impressively, looking up at him with a fierce expression in her large blue eyes.

‘Don’t seem very lion-like to me. Couldn’t get down from that tree.’

‘I expect I could have eventually,’ Leonora pouted. She was adjusting her dress and shoes and sat down on a handy fallen log. Carswell, with nothing else to do, joined her. ‘Which one are you?’ she asked, giving him his words back.

‘Foggy. I mean, Carswell.’

‘What are you doing here?’ She was dusting off her boots and retying the laces.

‘Well,’ said Carswell, ‘I find that if one stands around the castle long enough people ask one to do things. And speak to one.’

Leonora accepted this. ‘What do you like to do?’

Carswell edited his answer in regard of her age (fourteen, he believed he remembered hearing) and sex. ‘Ride. Or,’ he said expansively, ‘drive.’

‘So do I. We all like riding, but I *only* like riding, so I do a deal more than the rest of the girls. And once I stole the doctor’s gig and drove it around the park.’ She said it proudly. ‘He was furious.’

‘I should think he might be. I’m dashed glad I didn’t bring my own carriage, in that case,’ Carswell chided.

Leonora turned her nose up at this, but after a moment asked, ‘You came with Lord Paxton. If you don’t like this sort of thing, why did you?’

‘Ah, well,’ taking this whole conversation as he might do with his youngest sister Christiana, nearly the same age, ‘The countess made me.’

‘Why did she want that?’

‘Invited a lot of Paxton’s friends as a cloak to muddy the waters in case the match didn’t take.’ He looked conscious. ‘I mean—’

‘Lord Paxton and Jocasta, I know!’ said Leonora, placating.

Carswell nodded and continued, reminiscing. ‘Lady Alderly trapped us, really. Asked me if I had an engagement, and then pounced.’ He shrugged. ‘Seems like the match is sticking, though. Paxton and your sister are always together.’

‘In the summerhouse, I know.’

‘Well, I suspect Paxton would like there to be more subterfuge and clandestine meetings. Thinks it’s romantic. He’s that sort of chap.’ Carswell blinked. This inclination was obviously beyond him. ‘The summerhouse is as near as he can get to an adventure in this dashed place. Though by the look of it, that shack may fall on them at any minute.’

‘I know!’ Leonora laughed wickedly. ‘It would be so droll!’ Then she regarded Carswell closely. ‘Don’t you like the castle? Papa says it is the most ancient and esteemed house in the district.’

‘Most ancient, anyway,’ Carswell said, looking gloomily at the ancient walls towering above him on a mound. Then he recollected himself. ‘That is, dashed fine building, just a trifle draughty.’

‘Tornadoes of wind in the winter,’ said Leonora in agreement, looking back at her home. ‘You have to know the holes to crawl into.’ She sighed. ‘Funny, isn’t it? It looks very

solid from here and the walls are so thick. You wonder how the wind finds himself inside.'

'Those arrow-hole-notch-things. Whatever they are called.'

'I believe Papa calls them balistraria,' murmured Leonora. 'Oh, how clever you are! That will be how the wind gets in. I don't suppose they could cut glass small enough to fit in there. Or Papa would object in case enemies appear on horseback.' She laughed. 'Do you know, that of all the things Papa insists on, it is that the suits of armour should be oiled in case they have to use them?'

'What?' Carswell said, with unbecoming enjoyment.

'George says it'd be no use against shot, but Papa insists they might need it.'

'Zany!' said Carswell, without thought. He recollected himself. 'I suppose I'd better get back. Dashed early dinners in the country.'

'Yes, and I have to do my arithmetic questions or Georgie says I won't get any supper.' She jumped up, and they started walking back, Carswell lagging. Leonora remarked, 'You *really* don't want to go back. What is the problem?'

Carswell sighed, walked for a bit, then when Leonora's eyes were too probing for him, he gave in. 'I can't talk to ladies,' he confessed. 'It makes it dashed awkward at dinner.'

'You talked to *me*.'

'You are just a child!' said Carswell. He looked at her shining blonde hair, with a few leaves stuck in it which he removed gingerly, and then at the pale blue eyes regarding him frankly, and said grimly, 'Give it a few years and I won't be able to speak to you, either.'

'Being a child is a dashed nuisance,' said Leonora, as Carswell protested her use of his language by a noise. 'It means we can't join you all for dinner, or I would talk to you.'

Carswell ruffled her hair. 'Thanks, lioness!' He moved ahead gloomily, helping Leonora over a stile, by dint of lifting her by the waist. 'It's really peculiar,' he mused as she grunted

her objection to the help she had not needed. 'I just completely dry up. I imagine them failing to find a chin on my face and seeing the vacant look in my eye if they speak of art or poetry or some such, and I cannot talk for the life of me. Like with your sister Jocasta. She's talked to me a number of times to be polite, and all I can hear is a rush of blood to my ears. But once she's safely knotted to Paxton, I expect I'll be able to talk again, all right and tight.'

Leonora looked at him. 'That *is* odd,' she said, 'so it is *marriageable* females that make you afraid?'

'Lord, yes,' said Carswell, once more careless in his language. 'And there are so dashed many of them here, and no escaping them as one can at a ball or some such thing. They terrify me — I don't expect that I'm the marrying type of man.'

'Well, you are young as yet, I suppose,' said Leonora, climbing the next stile with not a hint of decorum, dress up to her knees. 'What age *are* you, exactly?'

'Twenty-three,' answered Carswell casually. 'Why do you ask?'

'I am fourteen. I like a man who likes riding and am not overly fond of chins. I will be seventeen in three years, and have my first Season. You will be twenty-six by then, and I really think you should marry and have yourself some children. You are very good with children, I can tell.'

'I say...' said Foggy Carswell, stopping to meet her blue-eyed gaze with some fear.

'Don't worry. You have three years to think about it.'

She blinked and moved off and he shook himself. He gave an uncertain laugh. Perhaps he should say something either comforting, or off-putting, to a young girl with a *tendre* for an older man. He'd heard of such things before, though he had never thought to inspire one himself. One was supposed to consider such delicate feelings. But the young harum-scarum before him hadn't seemed to be suffering from delicate feelings, she'd looked frighteningly determined.

They had reached the house, and Jocasta Fortune was crossing the hall, took one look at her sister and said, '*Le-on-ora!* Look at you! Go and change immediately before Papa gets a glimpse of you.'

'Doubt he'd notice!' said Leonora, pertly. Carswell, feeling a little battle scarred, was still standing in the vestibule adjacent to the Great Hall.

Leonora, who had skipped up the stairs a way, turned back and said, 'Remember, Mr Carswell, I'm coming for you.'

'You must think her a hoyden, Mr Carswell,' laughed Jocasta. 'When is she coming for you? For the archery tomorrow? She is not very good. None of us have had a great deal of practise. I hope she did not foist herself on your notice, she's more of a wild beast than a little sister, I'm afraid.' Carswell silently agreed, but could not speak. 'Where did you find her?' continued Jocasta. 'Marguerite was looking for her.'

Carswell vaguely concluding Marguerite must be the twin, reverted to type and answered, 'I ... it's ... she ... *tree!*' he finished, brilliantly, scuttling away with an apologetic glance at the pretty Miss Jocasta Fortune.



Paxton was afraid to grace his wife's bed tonight, as the stink of gin was heavily upon him, but he had never, since their union, spent a night in any other room, and so he crept in beside her.

She stirred and turned towards him, then recoiled. 'Paxton!' she muttered. It was an admonition. Whenever his wife used his title in private, she was at odds with him.

'Mmm?' he said, feigning more sleepiness than he felt.

'What on earth...?'

'Foggy had a problem,' he said, pulling her closer. She turned in his arms against the smell of gin, and he spooned her comfortably.

'There is no point in asking about it now, I suppose,' Portia, his pretty, eighteen-year-old wife sighed. He grunted. 'Tell me over breakfast.'

Over breakfast, he told his tale amusingly. All about his friend and the cloud and cherub and lion and the dreams. All his friends already understand not to confide what could not also be left to the discretion of his Lady Paxton, so he did not feel reluctance to share. His Portia was very good at being discreet.

He expected her to share his amusement at the idea that her sister Leonora might have favoured poor Foggy as a child, and that his friend was still terrified that she posed a marriage threat to him.

Portia had laughed at Foggy's terror, and the clouds and the cherubs, but after hearing more of the circumstances of the meeting with her sister at the house party at Fortune Castle, a tiny line formed between her perfect brows. She put her elbow on the table and her chin in her hand, and looked off in contemplation. Paxton gazed at her; her hair falling on her shoulders in lovely waves; her expression often passionate — and sometimes, like now, dreamy. She would put her hair up after breakfast he knew, and he would spend part of every day trying to remove the pins, destroying the artifice that curtailed her natural beauty. He had been distracted from his tale, but her next words recalled him.

‘Could it be — it couldn't surely? — that Foggy, I mean Mr Carswell, is a *Lion's Venture*?’

‘Venture?’

‘Since Leo was a child, Georgette referred to Leonora's little schemes as *The Lion's Ventures*.’

‘Why so?’

‘Because, once Leonora took something in her head there was really no chance in preventing her from pursuing it.’

‘Your sister is manipulative?’ asked Paxton, a little shocked.

‘Not ... precisely. No, not at all, really. It is more a kind of dedicated determination. And she does not mind a wait to achieve her aim,’ Portia's frown lifted and she began to tell a tale more animatedly, eyes sparkling in a way that caused her husband to touch her briefly across the table. ‘Once,

Marguerite had been falsely accused by James Bailey of stealing cake. It was probably his sister Amethyst, and she would have admitted it — but Leo demanded an instant apology from James. He considered it an unimportant matter, and wasn't about to apologise to a ten-year-old, for he was seventeen at the time. It was six months later, and James finally apologised to Marguerite. Leo had conducted a constant campaign of infiltrating the Bailey family kitchen, and at least twice a week James found soap in his drinks, or salt sprinkled on cake served to him. Goodness knows how she enlisted the Bailey servants, but I doubt they did so willingly. Eventually, after investigation, he confronted Leo and she told him he should never be able to put another cup to his lip in peace if he did not apologise to Marguerite.'

Paxton laughed. 'Your sister is more frightening than I supposed.'

'Yes. It wasn't as though James' suspicions were baseless. Marguerite was the cake thief for all of us, on account of her innocent looks.'

'But why would you think that Leonora has a Venture regarding Foggy?'

'Well, Jocasta and Georgette and Aunt Hester have all spoken about Leo's preoccupations in the last years. It was all very odd.' She paused in thought. 'Robbie — does Mr Carswell come from *Suffolk*, by any chance?'

'Yes, Lord Carswell's estate is in Suffolk. How did you know?'

'Because Suffolk is the county that Leonora became obsessed about, asking Great-Aunt Hester interminable questions about it!'

'*Oh...*' was all her husband could manage.

'And then there was the taking over of the household at only fourteen.' Paxton's eyes were rounder. 'Georgette concluded, that since the lion always thinks ahead, she wished to be prepared for an eventual situation as a wife. But we pondered how very *specific* she would be in talking of what size of

house. She evidently imagined a great estate, not a cottage. She talked of Suffolk often, too.’

‘Well, I suppose her beauty and her lineage might lead her to suppose that she *would* achieve some splendid match and have to run a large household—’

‘I do not know, but I do not think Leonora thinks of, or cares about, her beauty. But it would all be explained if she had—’

‘A Lion’s Venture!’ finished Paxton for her.

‘Yes!’

‘But she was a *child* when she conceived of it!’ objected Paxton.

‘I don’t think Leonora was ever a child,’ remarked Portia reminiscently.

‘Now that she is in Town, surely, she will see that Foggy, whom I am most sincerely attached to, is not the marrying type. And she will be able to compare him, a middling sort of fellow, with the beaus that might come her way.’

‘Perhaps you are correct. But if Leonora truly *does* have him in her sights ... well, you should warn your friend to beware!’ Portia giggled. ‘Jocasta invited me to go with Georgie and her to *Hatchards* today, but I was going to practise my sonata! If I leave now, I should catch them.’

His wife was gone in a flash, with only the quickest of kisses on his forehead as farewell.

Chapter 4

The Lion's Venture

The woman that Lady Mags Pelleter had passed, the one with the gentle apologetic eye, was not in fact the same lady as she had seen moments earlier, but her twin, who bore the same Christian name as her ladyship herself, Marguerite.

Leonora Fortune, in Town for a week already, had been waiting for the glimpse she had just managed of the Honourable Linton Carswell. This gentleman had indeed lived on in her memory and had, in her plan, become her Ultimate Destination. Having decided so at fourteen years, she had seen no need to change her mind. A straight course was Leonora's preferred path always. Her sister Marguerite, who was used to confiding every secret of her own to Leonora, had deduced only the vaguest notion of Leonora's purpose. She had been aware, however, since coming to Town, that Leo was *looking* for something. Any gentlemen who approached them were slid over by her glance, which would strain itself to look beyond them, searching.

'Leo, dearest,' said Marguerite to her in bed one night, 'are you looking for someone when we go out, perhaps?'

'Yes,' said Leonora, without further embellishment. Her twin recognised her closed expression, and knew it was of no use to enquire further.

'Oh,' she answered. 'Well, I hope you find them.'

At Almacks, Leonora had finally been lucky. Across the room she had seen him, and seen his panic also. Well, it made it easier that he guessed his fate, she supposed. When it became apparent that he was about to slip away, Leonora exited the ballroom and hid herself in a corner of the entrance hall, beyond the light of the chandeliers, and watched. He was accompanied by someone she did not know, a red-haired exquisite in a superior coat and haircut, who had his arm about Mr Carswell's shoulders in a comforting fashion. Mr Carswell

was seen to be shaking. How silly, thought Leonora, when I only mean the very best for him.

She sighed in satisfaction, however. That dark lady had been his aunt, as she had overheard, and it would be good to pursue the acquaintance, and find her name. Even before she had visited Town, Leonora had found out, from various sources (so as not to elicit suspicion of her purpose) that Mr Linton Carswell had two aunts, Lady Marguerite Pelleter, and Mrs Sybilla Lynfield — Leonora guessed that the dark-haired woman had been the Lady Mags of formidable reputation.

But she had seen him. That was enough for this evening. She felt another sigh escape her. He looked just as he had, and she liked it. There was something about his weak chin that called her to take care of him, and that is precisely what she would do. That thought, and the satisfying sight of him, was enough for today.

But, in the spirit of leaving no stone unturned, she emerged from her corner and approached the lackey who had brought the gentlemen's hats. 'Who was that gentleman with Mr Carswell?' she asked baldly.

The attendant was startled to talk to an unaccompanied young lady, and looked around, fearing for his job. Her large blue eyes looked unusually determined however, and the lackey broke his vow of discretion to get rid of her with as much haste as possible. 'Viscount Desmond, miss,' he muttered. She left as quickly as he desired, in the direction of the ballroom. The attendant breathed a sigh of relief.

He was surprised, at the end of the night, when upon bringing some ladies' cloaks, he had a silver sixpence discreetly pushed into his hands, and the same blonde beauty gave him an infinitesimal nod.



Leonora and Marguerite, dressed in matching pink pelisses, with identical straw bonnets, made a visit the next morning to the house of their sister, the Marchioness of Onslow.

The marquis was there too, playing with the toes of little Felix, Viscount Fordham, his son and heir, who was laid on an

elegant brocade sofa at his side.

‘Lucian insists on counting his son’s toes each morning,’ Georgette explained, looking on benignly.

‘In case,’ the marquis said in own defence, ‘one might have fallen off during the night.’

‘Yes indeed!’ laughed Marguerite, ‘one must be a diligent parent.’

‘All present and correct,’ said Lucian, lifting his blond curly head from contemplation of his son’s chubby legs, ‘I’ll leave you to converse, ladies!’ He smiled lazily, returning to his usual urbanity, and left the room.

‘He is quite besotted!’ said Georgette happily, taking his place on the sofa beside the quietly gurgling Felix, and taking the tempting toes into her own hands.

‘I’ll take him for his feed, my lady!’ said a blunt voice, and the marchioness smiled reluctantly, handing him over to the nursemaid, with a final kiss on his plump cheek. She turned to her sisters. ‘Oh, girls, you look so pretty!’ said Georgette, dispensing the hugs that Marguerite loved, and Leonora took stoically. ‘I know Papa insisted on the matching attire, and it looks charming — but do *you* like it? I have never asked.’

‘Oh, I do not mind,’ said Marguerite, with a smile, ‘Papa said he wanted us to create a sensation when we appeared.’

‘Well, it certainly works. Neither of you could take a breath at Almacks last night.’ She turned to Leonora. ‘Does it chafe at you, Lion?’

‘Not particularly,’ said Leonora, sounding uninterested.

‘Well, there were the Barratt twins a few years ago. Identical, like you, and they strove a little too hard to appear distinct — one of the girls even cropped her hair, which unfortunately did not become her. Wildly differing gowns and coiffures, but the attempt at separation was a little strained, perhaps.’

Georgette ordered some refreshments and the girls chatted amiably enough about the ball, and their future appointments.

Then Leonora said, as though getting to the point, ‘Georgie, I am in need of rather more pin money for the Season.’

‘Oh,’ said her sister. ‘Has Papa kept you short of things such as gloves and stockings? He did with Susan and Cassie and me — he could never understand how kid gloves might become stained, or how the silk in stockings seems to rip all of itself.’ She smiled. ‘I have time now, should we go shopping?’ she touched her temple. ‘I really wanted to buy you both nightgowns, too, but I forgot to do so. Papa will never pay for what cannot be seen.’

‘It is not that—’ began Leonora.

‘How kind, Georgie,’ interrupted Marguerite, ‘Apart from evening gloves, I have only two pairs of kid gloves to myself. And I just put a toe through a pair of stockings.’

‘More gloves would be nice, Georgie, but I do not want to shop now. I have expenses that require some coin.’

Georgie looked at Leonora suspiciously, ‘A Lion’s Venture?’

Leonora looked mischievous. ‘Perhaps. Nothing you would hate, Georgie.’

‘You have had no time to get into trouble yet—’ complained the marchioness.

‘I am not a child now, Georgie. I assure you my Venture this time is wise ... and harmless to living things.’ Leonora was referring to her Beetle Venture when she was eight. She had wished for a red dress, which her mother would on no account allow her, as not befitting a child. Leonora had picked up the information (from Katerina, who told her so with relish) that a red dye called cochineal was produced by crushing beetles, and set about catching a variety of insects for the purpose. The resulting plethora of escaped insects in the kitchen, and the disgusting use of cook’s implements in the crushing process, had caused a domestic uproar that it had taken all Mama’s tact to overcome.

‘Mmm,’ said Georgette, giggling a little. I shall send you both home with two guineas extra a piece, but on no account

tell—’

‘Papa!’ said Marguerite, eyes sparkling at this new wealth, ‘We know Georgie!’

‘Yes, thank you Georgie. But I may apply to you again.’ This was informative rather than pleading, completely in Leonora’s style, and it made Georgette smile.

As the twins left, Georgette drew Marguerite aside. ‘She has not taken to the card rooms at balls, has she?’ she laughed, but with a little frown showing her worry.

‘No. But she *does* have a Venture, Georgie, though I am not quite sure what it may be.’



Leonora led her twin in the direction of Bond Street. ‘I wish to buy ribbon,’ she said shortly.

‘Very well,’ said Marguerite amiably, beginning to chat about last night’s entertainment.

It was an odd shopping trip. Leo ordered only one yard of blue ribbon, which made the sour-faced attendant sniff, then paid for it with one of the sovereigns Georgie had given them.

‘But it is only *tuppence*, miss,’ said the attendant, regarding the coin.

Marguerite reached into her reticule, but Leonora held her arm and shot her a look, whereupon she subsided, looking guiltily at the shop assistant. The woman sighed, and brought the change. It contained a half sovereign.

Leonora said, pointing to another roll of ribbon, ‘and two yards of this please.’

‘Puce?’ said Marguerite, reviewing their wardrobes mentally, ‘Whatever for?’

The attendant cut the ribbon and wrapped it with bad grace, and Leonora held out the half-sovereign.

‘It costs just fourpence ha’penny, miss.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Leonora.

‘Then just give me the pennies, if you please, miss.’

Leonora continued to hold out the half sovereign and met the shop assistant’s eye. After five seconds, the woman grabbed it with a foul look on her face, then came back with a pile of coins in change.

As they left the shop, Leonora headed for their London address.

‘Your reticule is jangling,’ remarked Marguerite, ‘and what on earth shall you do with puce ribbon? And so little of it?’

There was a bedraggled child selling warm pastries in a box slung around her neck, and Leonora dropped the package of ribbon in her tray.

‘To hold your hair back,’ she advised the girl. She walked on a little, and then fished in her noisy reticule and drew out a penny. She walked back and put it in the tray too.

The girl looked bemused rather than grateful, but disappeared the coin rapidly.

‘I must suppose you have a use for the coin,’ remarked Marguerite, then added with a pout, ‘And one you won’t tell me.’

‘Correct!’ said Leonora. Then she turned to smile wickedly at her twin, ‘Except to say it involves bribery and corruption.’

‘Our special talents!’ said Marguerite, skipping along at her sister’s side, hand through her arm.



Even though he had accepted the conclusions of his friends, The Honourable Linton Carswell thought it best, despite his mother’s annoyance at his defection as his sister’s cavalier, to keep to mostly gentlemanly pursuits for the next days. Thus, he had drunk with his cronies in gin houses, visited a Faro bank and lost a little, and attended a pugilist bout in a seedier part of town.

As this last was not licenced, it was broken up by the Watch — and though Carswell and Desmond had escaped, Carswell now bore the bruise of a flying cudgel beneath his eye. It had

not been aimed at him, but at a rough who had baited the Watch, but Carswell and the viscount had been caught in the melee, and laughed about it heartily afterwards in a low drinking ken of their choosing. They had come across Whitaker and Sutton on their escape from the crowd, and had naturally brought them along.

‘It’s all very well for you, Foggy, but what about my hat?’ said his friend the dandy, clutching a dented beaver. It was usual in shape, but not in colour, having been dyed a delicate shade of lavender grey — the number of steps needed to achieve this — bleaching the fur repeatedly, mixing and applying colours in experimental attempts, had bored Desmond’s friends for days in the telling. It matched the viscount’s coat precisely.

Since the viscount had been mourning his new hat repeatedly throughout the evening, the gentlemen paid scant attention to this lament, instead recalling the earlier stages of pugilistic battle, and taking bets on who might have been the eventual winner — this person to be determined by a drawing of names. Sutton grabbed the viscount’s mangled hat, and put the names within, using a serving girl as the disinterested marshal. The thin, harried woman, who looked to be in middle age, did so quickly, before Whitaker’s grandiose voice had finished intoning, ‘Gentlemen, the victor of the great display of pugilistic art, which was interrupted in Shoreditch this evening, must be decided. This comely lass...’ he indicated the plain-faced maid, ‘has agreed to be the Spirit of Fortune this evening and pull the—’ The maid, bearing a tray of tankards, had been hopping from one foot to the other during this peroration and put it down suddenly, pulled out a twist of paper and handed it to Desmond before he could finish his declaration. She picked the tray up and moved off, not turning round. ‘The winner is,’ said his lordship, with a smirk, ‘the Blackamoor himself, *Mis-ter Jo-seph Poo-le.*’

‘You win!’ said Foggy handsomely, taking another swig of gin.

The other three had bet on Dinker-the-Nob, and groaned.

‘I want my hat, pass me it, Foggy.’

‘Just take this out,’ said Foggy obliging, and was about to remove the second twist, but the drunken viscount grabbed it urgently. Foggy had the low cunning, if not the balance, to hold the hat aloft, eventually jumping on a chair to keep it from the long arms of the viscount, who was also jumping to catch at it.

Sutton shouted, ‘I’ve got the one he dropped, Foggy,’ picking up the discarded paper. ‘It says Dinker-the-Nob!’

‘You swindler, Pet!’ called Foggy to the viscount, getting down. ‘I never took you for a Captain Sharp!’

‘You can’t say that Fogs,’ said Desmond with dignity. ‘No money changed hands. It was revenge, pure revenge!’

‘What revenge?’ complained Whitaker. ‘I’ve done you no harm.’

‘You laughed at my grief ... all of you. This hat,’ he said, holding it aloft, ‘was a masterpiece of the hatters’ trade. Even Beaumaris remarked on it when he saw it yesterday in the park.’ He stroked the battered pulp. ‘It fitted divinely, sat at a perfectly jaunty angle. It gave me a *feel*, you know?’ He had lowered it, and now stroked the dyed beaver disconsolately.

‘Fellows,’ declared Whitaker, ‘we have behaved badly.’

‘We have wounded our friend,’ said Sutton, sadly.

‘And the hat,’ the viscount said, cradling it.

‘There is nothing left to do gentlemen,’ said Foggy, tenderly taking the item from the viscount. ‘We must give this relic a decent burial!’

‘Foggy!’ cried the viscount, in a choked voice, biting a knuckle to stop his tears, ‘I am so *touched*.’

The servant, trying to get through, rolled her eyes.

They borrowed a spade from the landlord, by dint of offering a shilling, and left for Hyde Park, where they proceeded, in the dark, to give the lavender chapeau a decent burial. They were chased by Park attendants, but emerged uproariously victorious.

Foggy awoke the next day in the viscount's rooms, clutching the spade to his chest, without a clue as to where it had come from.

Paxton came around to disturb their late breakfast, gazing around the room of strewn clothes, muddy boots, and a bunch of roughly pulled daisies, and said, 'What you fellows need is a wife a piece,' he said, in an annoyingly self-satisfied manner, 'then you would stop doing such silly things as burying a hat in the park.'

'Is that why I have this thing?' asked Foggy, nodding at the spade propped against the damask covered wall.

'Yes. You two told Swinton when you met him after the funeral,' said Paxton, who had swiped one of the tiny rolls the viscount's man, Evans, laid out for his master's delectation. Evans had already disavowed the chaos in the room, saying that his master had begged for breakfast before order. 'Swinton said he'd never seen you in dirty *pantalons* before, Pet.'

'Oh, my reputation!' lamented the viscount.

'You had better avoid your aunts and mother for a couple of days, Foggy. How did you get the shiner?'

'Oh, *that* I remember. It was before the second gin house. The Watch broke up the pugilist bout in Shoreditch.'

'See?' said Paxton. 'This is why you need a wife to come home to!'

'I don't!'

'By the way, I saw your mother last evening and she said you have to pick up her books from the subscription library.'

'Why on earth? Christiana can do it.'

'I am simply conveying the message.'

Foggy sighed, then yelped in pain, touching his temple. 'Oh well, I'll do so, and then hand them to the butler to give to her. If she sees this eye, my mother will likely cry, ye know.'

Tidying himself up with the help of a cravat and shirt of the viscount's (for his *pantalons* and boots had already been brushed clean by his lordship's man), Foggy set out for the subscription library.

As he awaited his order, he heard himself accosted in a charming, husky, low voice. 'Good afternoon, Mr Carswell.'

He turned, ready to smile shyly, when he saw the face of the lady who had spoken. She was only a few feet away, much closer than convention permitted, and her large blue eyes looked up at him below a poked bonnet. He physically shook, and his tongue became glued to the roof of his mouth. There was no doubt of it. Another identical figure by her side chattered on, but he knew it — the little lion was she who had first spoken.

'It is Mr Carswell! Such an age when we saw you last, sir,' said her sister — Marguerite was it? 'But you look confused, sir ... do you not recognise us? It is the Fortune twins you know, though we must have changed a great deal since we saw you last.'

Foggy's eyes had not left the lady who greeted him first. His face was flushed, and he swallowed, but managed, his eyes unable to move, 'No.'

'Mmm?' asked Marguerite.

'He says,' said Leonora, turning towards her, 'that we have not changed.'

'Oh but we have. I have grown three inches at least. How did you recognise us, sir?'

'Lion eyes,' muttered the distressed Foggy, as Leonora turned her gaze back to him.

'You know us apart?' said Marguerite, 'How clever of you!'

Thankfully the attendant handed him his mother's books, and he was able to say, 'Servant, Miss Fortune, and Miss, eh Fortune! M-must go!'

'He is a funny one,' laughed Marguerite.

'We can go now, too,' said Leonora.

‘We have been here so long, I suppose. I thought perhaps you were waiting for ... you were not waiting for *Mr Carswell*?’

‘I thought we should renew the acquaintance of the house party.’

‘But how did you know he would be here?’

‘His aunt mentioned it to me.’

‘The dark-haired lady you spoke to last night?’

‘Yes,’ answered Leonora in the voice that meant there would be no more said on the matter.

Chapter 5

The Trials of Fashionable Life

At an evening in Watier's club, several gentlemen were discussing the ladies in their first Season, while they turned their cards idly.

'Everyone admires the Fortune twins. Has there ever been such a couple of angelic beauties in Town before? I confess it is a riveting sight.'

'Really?' drawled the louche Lord Charleston, crossing his legs and leaning back in his chair. 'I think the duplication dispels the charm. Having something *unique* is an attraction, but two of anything becomes commonplace.'

'We are not discussing snuff boxes here, Charleston,' objected Viscount Desmond.

Foggy Carswell, who had so far been uninterested in the conversation, threw a card down with more force than necessary and said, 'Absurd!'

'What is?' drawled Charleston, meeting Foggy's eye.

'That they are identical.'

'*Really*, Carswell? Pray, wherein lies the differences?'

'Too many to mention.'

Foggy had naturally avoided seeing the twins as much as possible, but he had had to make an undignified dive into a doorway, climbing the house steps of a smart London house to avoid them, one day on the street. As they passed him below, it was as obvious as ever. The bonnets, pelisses, and blonde curls were all the same, it was true. But beyond that was the tilt of the head, the upright gait and steadfast look to the Lion that completely differentiated her from her sister. How could it be doubted? Even when they stood still, it was perfectly apparent. And then the circulating library. Different as night and day.

Foggy had the cloud nightmare more frequently now. The cloud fell, he caught it, and there was the comfortable feeling

for a while that made the sudden dread of those beautiful blue eyes even more disturbing. Foggy was seldom the dominant character in any company, and he was happy to be in the background. Being someone's focus of attention was alarming.

But in their meeting at the circulating library, those eyes were focused on him in a way that demanded something of him. He had now, unthinkingly, disagreed with Charleston, who was not a man to take issue with. The older man gave him a narrow-eyed glance of dislike, which Foggy met.

'Shouldn't be talking of ladies as it is,' Carswell said, unpleasantly.

Viscount Desmond was appalled. Taking on the nastiest-tongued man in town was not Foggy's way. It would earn him the sort of unpleasant attention he most feared, for Foggy Carswell had a delicate soul for insults.

'In *your* opinion, Carswell,' sneered the baron, 'and whoever gave *you* leave to express an opinion here?'

The baron, the viscount and every gentleman at the table waited for Foggy's usual craven apology to this, but Carswell held Charleston's eye with a mulish look. 'You have a dashed unpleasant mouth, Charleston. All I'm saying is, do not use it on the Fortune twins, or ... or you'll answer to me!'

The viscount grabbed his friend's arm. 'Must be foxed, Foggy. Let me take you home.'

Carswell got up, a trifle groggily, and Charleston threw down a card. 'Say that again sober, Carswell, and you'll answer for it.' The baron still drawled, but his voice had grown in unpleasantness.

As Foggy was led away, the tall, handsome figure of Viscount Gascoigne approached the table. 'Did I hear you say that my cousin must answer to *you*?' he said to Charleston. He bent forward into Charleston's face, the whole table trying to hear what he said next, but they could not. The baron alone heard it. 'If so, *you* will answer to *me*.'

He turned and his long strides finally caught up with Carswell and the red-haired Desmond. 'What on earth ails

Foggy?’ he demanded of the viscount, since it was obvious that his cousin-in-law, slumped against his friend’s shoulder, had reached the point beyond all earthly care.

‘Help me get him in a hackney, will you, Titus?’ They did so, and gave the jarvey his address. Once achieved, Desmond turned to Gascoigne, reaching up to put a companionable arm about his shoulders. ‘Come and let me tell you an intriguing tale of clouds, cherubs and lions,’ Gascoigne sighed, and they went in search of a drinking establishment where they might, by dint of the noise, be granted some private conversation.

Sometime later, Petronius Fenn finished his tale with, ‘but until tonight I have never seen any evidence that any of this was more than Foggy’s fears. And I didn’t think he would put himself in harm’s way to protect her. I mean to say, if Miss Fortune walks in a room, Foggy dives out another door. I didn’t think he was partial to her before this evening. But *now...!*’

‘It may not be so,’ soothed Gascoigne, ‘but Foggy is very gentlemanly. His temper is equable, but to someone he knows, he can be very protective.’ Gascoigne was recalling Foggy’s uncharacteristically bullish reaction to the abductor of Gascoigne’s wife, Carswell’s cousin Delphine.

‘Yes, that’s it! He did once step on the toe of a fellow we overheard making a disparaging remark about his sister, but he apologised afterwards, and I thought it *might* just have been an accident.’

‘Unlikely!’ said Gascoigne, with a grin.

‘I see that now,’ replied Desmond, sagely. ‘Hidden depths, my old friend Foggy.’

‘I don’t think,’ laughed Gascoigne, ‘that Foggy is precisely *deep*.’



Marguerite sat on the bed as Leonora donned her nightdress that evening, after the Rochesters’ ball.

‘How was your dance with the duke?’

‘Oh, he had gout you know, and a sudden twinge meant we couldn’t finish the set.’

‘I’m not referring to the aged Duke of Rochester, but of the Duke of Bexley, as you well know, Leo! I thought him handsome, though not so much as our brothers-in-law Onslow or Regis, or even Paxton!’ said Marguerite. ‘But it is a wicked thing to compare appearance, which cannot be counted as a virtue, since it is not something one can help.’ This last was said in a saintly tone, but she added, in quite a different voice, ‘But he *is* handsome, and seemed to talk to you a great deal.’

‘He was polite, after a fashion,’ said Leonora vaguely.

‘Is he amusing? I do not know, for he has not yet danced with me.’

‘He will,’ said Leonora.

‘Did you mention me?’

‘No,’ considered Leonora. ‘He just seems to be making a circuit, you know. Probably every pretty girl will come under his eye. He strikes me as the sort of man who probably keeps a score card of women. You know ... Even Teeth, Shapely Figure—’

‘Good Complexion, Easy Conversation!!!!’ said Marguerite, joining in.

‘Precisely! I should probably have been honoured to have danced with him if he had not shown me so patronisingly that I *should* be honoured.’

‘He sounds dreadful.’

‘Not really,’ said Leonora, indifferently.

‘You do not care for any of your partners, it seems. Even this evening, you were looking for someone again. You talked rather animatedly to Lord Gascoigne, I thought. But he is married.’

‘Gentlemen do not stop being amusing when they are married. He was not flirting with me; he was only talking about horses.’

It seemed to Marguerite that this was not *quite* the whole truth. ‘There is something else to it, or you should not have been so enthusiastic,’ said Marguerite, flinging back the quilt to get into bed. ‘I may not be as clever as you, Leonora Fortune, but I know you have a Venture. Why will you not tell me? *I tell you* everything.’

‘And you must continue to do so,’ said Leonora, getting into bed alongside her sister. Her cold feet sought Marguerite’s leg.

‘Well there is no need to put on your frightening voice as you say so. Why *must* I confide in you when you do not me?’

‘Because you are not safe unless you do so, silly,’ Leonora adjusted the ribbons on Marguerite’s night bonnet in a motherly way. ‘Anyway, Gascoigne was no help, for he suspected my Venture in a minute,’ said Leonora ruefully. ‘He is very intelligent.’

‘Well, if a *complete stranger* may know, why not I?’ wailed Marguerite. ‘Or why should I tell you anything?’

‘You must!’ said Leonora, squeezing her twin’s cheek. ‘I have lost count of the number of times I have saved you since we came to London, even.’

‘Not so,’ said Marguerite, tilting her chin.

‘You would have gone into the garden with Mr Harding at the ball tonight if I had not stopped you,’ Marguerite looked sheepish, remembering her forbidden exit with Mr Ponsonby, who had so needed to talk with her. Luckily her sister had not noticed. Leonora continued, settling down on her pillow, ‘And as to why I do not tell you things, I do, only afterwards.’

‘But *why?*’ asked Marguerite, snuggling beside her. ‘Do you not *trust* me?’

‘I trust you to save me from a bolting horse. I trust that you should risk your life for me. But I do not trust your discretion, my dear Button. You might give away my plans without thinking.’

‘I might not,’ protested Marguerite, with a pout.

‘It seems *likely*, though.’

Marguerite continued to pout, then grinned. ‘Very well. Do as you wish, but if you need my help, you may bid me at any time. I shall not hold a grudge. You need not tell me *why* I act; I shall obey like a soldier.’

‘Yes corporal, I shall rely on you.’

‘Corporal?’ protested her sister, ‘Can you not even purchase me a commission?’

‘No. Now, who is *your* favourite suitor at the moment?’



At another entertainment the Duke of Bexley did indeed dance with Marguerite Fortune, to make the comparison. In point of fact, the Fortune twins drew his attention at all such occasions, and like many men, he watched them carefully. They were both beautiful: the most beautiful girls in London this Season, he thought. He had admired Miss Jocasta Fortune two seasons ago, and paid her some attention, as well as making an offer for her friend Miss Montgomery, who was now the Duchess of Enderby, after marrying her childhood friend. He had preferred her friend the Fortune girl, as he admired blondes, but Miss Montgomery was a pretty enough heiress, and at that time his father kept him on a short leash in the matter of money. He had decided to wed Miss Montgomery and sell her small property to make up the shortfall until his father, failing in health, died. That would have taught the old skinflint. But Miss Montgomery would not have him, and Jocasta Fortune was no use to him except as a flirt, so he had given her up.

Now though, here were her pretty sisters, and his elevated position in life meant he no longer had to worry about pursuing female heiresses. He could choose his wife from the list of the most admired. At the top of this Season’s list were the twins. He thought he began to tell them apart, at least at close view. Miss Marguerite was innocent, vivacious, and biddable, and her sister was more direct and less charming. But contrarily, he chose Leonora. It would be too simple to cow Marguerite after the wedding, and no sport at all. For his personal inclinations it was better to choose the reluctant one. After meeting her father he saw that there would be no difficulty in forcing the *marriage* (the man should just hang a

price around his daughters' necks and be done with it) and after the marriage Bexley would enjoy forcing his *pleasure* on her. The stronger she thought she was, as she now regarded him with her frank and critical eye, the more excitement there would be in putting her in her place. And he would have a beautiful wife, of a name more ancient than even his own, to display to the *Beau Monde*, however much she hated him at home. The prospect pleased him.

He was a man who tortured his servants and his women — who had, indeed, been banned from one of the better run houses of pleasure for *injuring the merchandise* had said the bruiser who evicted him. If it had not been a place frequented by men even more powerful than he, he would have had it closed down, but as it was, he found other places to play.

But a little fighter like Miss Fortune, in his own home — that seemed a sweet thought.

Chapter 6

Alliances

Miss Christiana Carswell, pretty sister of The Honourable Linton, had received a setback in her first Season. Mr Mark Steel, who had for some weeks shown her a flattering degree of attention, had defected to the court forming around her more beautiful cousin Delphine Delacroix. After Delphine's marriage to Viscount Gascoigne, Mr Steel had seemed disposed to Christiana again — but it was no longer flattering. Christiana learnt from her cousin's manner, and replied to Mr Steel's overtures with a cold eye. She did not quite give him the cut direct, but she was silent during his morning calls, rejected his offers for driving in the park, and gave him only the slightest of nods or curtsies at a ball, affecting to be engaged or indisposed for every dance he asked for.

However, tonight Mrs Prosper was giving a musical evening, usually an intimate affair where perhaps only fifty people might attend, and she knew that Mrs Prosper was Mr Steel's aunt. Christiana captured Foggy before breakfast, and blocked his path down the stairs, when he moved to the right she jumped there too, and back to the left. Tired of this after three more attempts, Foggy sighed. 'What is it you want?'

'Come to the Prospers' soiree tonight.'

'What? A load of girls playing the piano and such? No fear. The last time somebody played the dashed *flute* for half-an-hour.'

'Linton, *please!*'

'No!'

'I'll tell Mama that you irk me at Almacks and that she should stop plaguing you to come,' she bribed, with an insinuating smile.

Foggy hovered for a second before attempting another escape. 'I don't go to Almacks anyway,' he said loftily.

Christiana mirrored him, the ringlets from her topknot flying as she did so. ‘But now you won’t have to listen to her telling you how *sad* you make her.’

It was true. Lady Eloise’s gentle complaints of sadness made Foggy uncomfortable every time. His Aunt Mags’ threats terrified him on occasion, but his mama’s sadness was worse. If he had not had his steadfast reason for ditching the ballroom, he would have given in before now.

Now he looked narrowly at his sister. ‘Why do you want me to come?’

Christiana held her head low. ‘It is just that a gentleman seeks to court me and there will be so few people there that it will be harder to avoid him.’

‘What kind of courting oppresses you so? Want me to have a word with him?’

‘Oh no, he is not a rake or anything. Only, I don’t want to talk with him, and you may shield me.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Mr Steel.’

‘I thought you liked him.’

Christiana frowned at her brother’s sketchy memory — surely, he must remember Mr Steel’s defection to Delphine? But she sighed, ‘I did, but I don’t *now*.’

‘Oh, very well,’ said Foggy, catching a glimpse of Christiana’s pale face. ‘But wait, do the Fortune family attend?’

‘Why?’

Foggy’s eyes looked away. ‘Got trapped with the baron and his awful son at a house party once. I avoid them at all costs.’

‘Oh George Fortune danced with me at Almacks. He’s a pill. Told me my dress didn’t become me.’ She considered. ‘The Prospers don’t know the Fortunes at all, I shouldn’t think.’

‘I’ll go. But mind and soften up Mama about Almacks!’

‘You are the *best* brother!’ said Christiana, sardonically but cheerfully.

Foggy walked around her and went on his way. He met Viscount Desmond (nattily dressed a striped waistcoat, many-caped driving coat and Hessian boots) on his way out the door.

‘Off to the races, old chap,’ said the viscount. ‘Care for a drive?’

‘Can’t. Going to a musical evening tonight.’ Foggy moved off, donning his hat, but it was some moments before the stunned dandy could move to follow and demand an explanation for this outrageous start.



Overall, Leonora was enjoying her first Season. London was, after all, a great deal more entertaining than Castle Fortune. Like Jocasta before her, the twins found there was a drawback. It was the inevitability of spending more time with Papa and George without any easy escape. One could not go out a side door in London unchaperoned, as one could at the castle, or go and hide in a room far from their male relatives with little expectation of being caught. Instead, one had to listen to Papa’s interrogation on each and every dance partner or morning visitor, and hear George’s criticisms on the twins’ lack of appeal etc. When Marguerite had been kind to a pimply Mr Herbert, a younger son of a destitute rake, George had almost dragged her away from him at Almacks. Mr Herbert had just asked Marguerite, in embarrassed half-syllables, if he could escort her to supper later, when George had butted in and said coldly, ‘My sister is already engaged for supper, sir.’ And then pulled her away.

Leonora had caught Marguerite with tears in her eyes and after her sister explained, said, ‘But you didn’t really want to go to supper with Mr Herbert, did you?’

‘Well, no. But I expect I would have gone if George hadn’t intervened. Mr Herbert looked so *crushed*, Leonora. He had just been telling me how horrid his elder brother is to him, and then George came and was horrible as well.’

‘So, you *do* like Mr Herbert?’ asked Leonora, prodding.

‘Not really, he had rather grasping hands when he turned me in the dance and his face is so miserable.’ Marguerite looked at Leonora defensively, ‘It has nothing to do with his pimples.’

‘I know you are not so heartless. You even admired Mr Scribster at dinner at the Booths last week, and his face is covered in pock marks.’

‘Yes, but I do think him handsome, but not in an ordinary way. And he had a twinkle in his eye at one point. I like that he paid us no attention.’

‘Ah, but his wife is a beauty, Mr Booth told me, so he may be unimpressed with silly children like us. But I know what you mean about his lack of attention. It is disquieting to be so complimented all the time. It is as though when something becomes fashionable, like Lord Autrey’s abominable nosegay, everyone must give it compliments or possess their own, even if they do not like it at all.’

‘Are *we* like that, Leonora?’

‘A mild sensation, only. It will blow over, and then we might meet only those who *truly* wish to befriend us.’ She smiled and touched her sister’s head, ‘But what I meant to say is that you feel uneasy with Mr Herbert because he is trying to use his weakness to garner attention.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘I do. For what real man would reveal some family problem to a young lady he has just met?’

Marguerite nodded. ‘You are perfectly correct,’ she reflected. ‘But my face does seem to attract confidences, I have found.’

‘It is strange then that mine, while identical, does not.’ Leonora smiled. Sometimes she felt a great deal older than her sister. Whenever she gazed in a looking glass and saw Marguerite’s face stare back at her, she felt more vulnerable than she really was. She always wanted to protect the person with that face, so it was better not to look in the mirror. She was not Marguerite.

Her sister continued, amazed, ‘So George actually did me a *good* turn, didn’t he?’

Leonora was similarly amazed. ‘I think he did!’ Then she added, ‘By accident.’

Marguerite giggled.

It was a bother how to get Marguerite through this Season. She got buffeted about by Papa’s comments, wondering if she should have smiled more at the elderly but rich Lord Barton, or less at the handsome but penniless Baron Culshaw. Truly, Marguerite was a gregarious little thing, who smiled equally, but was apt to be guided by others. Leonora was glad to be close to her often, so that she could continue to be her main guide — or else who knows what Papa could persuade her to do? He had waxed lyrical on the virtues of Lord Barton, twenty-five years their senior, especially to Marguerite, with whom the man had danced. Marguerite had agreed to it all with a miserable look on her face, and Leonora feared that if Marguerite did not have her twin beside her to talk sense to her, she might succumb to parental influence. But the baron was keeping his options open at this point. There were several men of fortune in Town, perhaps his girls might do better. Barton was wealthy, but not fabulously so. So when Leonora was introduced to Lord Barton by her papa as a suitable partner for the next dance, and Leonora called to a bemused Sir Justin Faulkes, who was passing, ‘Sir Justin, we have almost missed the set!’ and then smiled prettily and nodded her apology to his lordship, her papa did not object. Faulkes *was*, after all, fabulously wealthy.

Sir Justin led Leonora out to the floor with a sigh. ‘This is the second time a Fortune girl has made me stand another young lady up. And she is the daughter of my mother’s friend, too.’

‘You know our situation sir. So I only say thank you.’

‘Yes, yes!’ said the handsome baronet. He looked over his shoulder, ‘But even your papa ... not *Barton*? He must know...’

Leonora raised her brows in a cynical manner more befitting a forty-year-old than a seventeen-year-old.

He led her to a place at the end of the row then stood opposite her, his eyes chiding. She smiled back at him. It was always pleasant to dance with Sir Justin, the best friend to her sister Georgette and her husband Lord Onslow. He was handsome and elegant, as well as amusing. And he had favoured both sisters with the occasional dance, in the friendliest of manners, before now.

When the dance movements permitted, she asked him, ‘And did you like the young lady you have disappointed, sir?’

‘Not really, she is a little too *coming*.’

‘It is your own fault for being rich and charming,’ said Leonora as she laughed.

‘Yes, I really must remember to be less charming,’ he said, reflectively.

She giggled, pulled away by the steps of the dance, but gave him a look over her shoulder, her blonde ringlets dancing.

When they came back together, Sir Justin said, to Leonora’s teasingly laughing face, ‘Stop that!’ She raised her eyebrows in enquiry. ‘Your papa is ogling me with an eager eye, and it gets worse whenever you smile!’

‘I expect he did that when you danced with all my other sisters, too.’

She skipped back from him, but when they met again, he replied, ‘He did. But it still terrifies me. So stop smiling.’

She twirled beneath his upraised hand, saying, ‘But you make me smile!’ and matched the word to the deed.

As they held hands to skip together, he said, with a haunted eye, ‘Here! You are not developing—’

‘*You* are as old as Lord Barton!’ she scoffed.

‘Leonora Fortune,’ he said, disgusted, ‘I am twenty years younger than—’

Leonora's brows shot up again in a show of rampant disbelief.

'Well, a few less than twenty—' Faulkes admitted.

'I was teasing you. *I have another object in mind.*'

The dance separated them once more and then Faulkes asked, in a similarly teasing manner, 'Can you tell me?'

'I'm glad to see the fear has fallen from you, for it is a look I seem to engender in some gentlemen. But I will not tell you my object yet!' She frowned. 'Only that it is proving more difficult than I thought.'

He grinned down at her, 'Oh dear! But I expect you will come about!' He straightened his face before he took her back to her papa.

'You are to take Marguerite to supper, Sir Justin, I remember,' Leonora said, looking up at him wickedly.

Marguerite, newly returned from a set, looked confused. Faulkes frowned a little before recovering his aplomb. 'Indeed!' he said smoothly, and moved off, muttering under his breath as he passed Leonora, 'Another lady to apologise to. I will tan your hide, Miss Fortune.'

'Well done, miss!' approved Papa, 'You might just be the one who snares Faulkes, at last.'

'Are you sparing the feelings of Lord Barton because I already said I had a supper partner?' whispered Marguerite a minute later, when Papa's attention had been caught by a hunting companion.

'Well, whatever Papa may do, we should not be *rude.*'

'You are perfectly right.'

According to her sisters, Papa and George used to employ a chaperone frequently to avoid some of the balls and occasions that his daughters attended, preferring their own pursuits. But this year was different. It was, Georgette had explained, Papa's last stand.

Nearly every brother-in-law had rewarded the baron well for gifting his daughter to them, even Jocasta's husband, (of whom the baron complained, since Regis had hidden the size of his fortune from him) had given a substantial amount. It had seemed that even Katerina's husband (an earl with very little love of society) had behaved well, but was to give a sum each quarter in addition, Georgette had told the twins privately, to leave the scholarly couple undisturbed. Leonora did not think this excellent ploy would be possible if *she* were to marry, but approved of it thoroughly.

Leonora had not changed her plan. She knew that her object was afraid, as Sir Justin Faulkes had been briefly. This might have put off another young lady, but Leonora was not one of those. She did not try to intercept his escape, but made good use of her time. She had spoken to his sister in the supper room, after manoeuvring Georgette and Onslow towards her. She had considered knocking into Christiana Carswell, spilling punch over herself as a means to begin conversation — but secretive manipulation was not her way. So she merely stood elbow to elbow and caught Miss Carswell's eye. 'It is a sad crush, is it not?'

Christiana was clearly surprised to be addressed, but she smiled at this and said, 'I do wish they would open the doors a little, it *is* stuffy.'

They smiled at each other, and were called upon to speak to their own parties, Marguerite wondering if Leonora fancied the blancmange (which her sister knew she would not, but wishing her to say yes, so that Marguerite might eat two portions) and Christiana's mother, Lady Eloise, saying 'Christiana, dear, have you seen Roberta?'

Roberta Pelleter ... that was his cousin, Leonora reflected. She had spied her before, she was dark like her mother Lady Mags, and very pretty. There was a second cousin too, Delphine, now Viscountess Gascoigne, who was reputed to be a legendary beauty. The Gascoignes had left Town again. Leonora thought all his family attractive in their own ways, and this boded well for the continuation of the species, thought Leonora's ever-practical brain. He himself was handsome too,

though he did not believe it. Her memory had not deceived her. His blue eyes were large and candid, his nose straight and his lips particularly shapely in a mannish way. If he had the strong chin of one of her brothers-in-law, like Onslow perhaps, he would be accredited very, very handsome. But then some lady of strong character, like herself, might have already taken him, so Leonora loved his receding chin (inherited from his papa, Lord Carswell — Pinky to his friends, said Leonora's information) so much the more.

When might she meet him again? It would be sooner than she had thought.

Chapter 7

The Musical Evening

Since the Prospers' Musical Evening was not a place that any of The Honourable Linton Carswell's set might usually be seen dead in, he was surprised to see a friendly face, and loped over once he had seated his mother and sister — in the chairs which had been casually arranged around a dais, upon which a grand piano forte, a cello and (good god!) a harp, was displayed.

'Bailey!' he said to the gentleman he had passed in the doorway.

'You here, Foggy? I never thought to meet anyone I know here.'

'Precisely!' said Foggy, to the rather dispirited person of Frederick Bailey, some years Foggy's senior, usually a cheerful young man. They had become acquainted at the dreadful house party at Fortune Castle, Bailey being a neighbour of the Fortunes, and had met in Town since. Bailey was in his early thirties, with a friendly open face, clouded over this evening as he stared at the dais. He was looking disconsolately at the harp. 'Why are *you* here?' asked Foggy.

'M'mother will sing,' Bailey said, in a depressed voice.

'Oh, very good!' said Foggy politely, but vaguely.

Bailey just looked at him. 'You?'

'This is just my mother's idea,' Foggy said laconically. 'She's probably hatching some plot about Christiana. I hear Mrs Presper's son is not yet attached.'

'That was my mother, too, before the girls were wed. She's started introducing females to James and me now. She didn't used to interfere.'

'Hey,' said Foggy with a grin, 'you don't suppose Prosper has a Friday-faced, harpist sister that your mater wants you to meet tonight?'

Frederick Bailey's face showed all the panicked outrage Foggy could have hoped for. 'You don't think so?' As Foggy grinned, Bailey silently vowed his revenge. He was to have it sooner than he thought. There was a noise in the foyer behind them and Bailey looked over his shoulder to see who the latest guests might be. 'Oh, it's the twins!' he said casually.

He felt Foggy Carswell jump beside him. 'No!' he said, in a voice of horror.

'What's amiss? Thought you was easier with the ladies these days Foggy.' He watched amused, as Foggy took sideways steps, keeping his back to the entrance, so as to conceal himself from the doorway.

'Ssh!' begged Foggy, as he pressed himself against the wall beside the open door.

Bailey was hailed, 'Frederick!' he turned.

'Marchioness,' Bailey replied with exaggerated respect, and bowed low enough to greet a duchess.

'Stop it at once Frederick Bailey!' said the Marchioness of Onslow's voice, 'or I shall rap you with my fan in the manner of Viscountess Swanson!' She looked at this object and unfurled it for a moment. 'I brought it tonight in case I need to disguise a yawn.'

'Very clever. Hello Georgie! Not your thing, didn't think to see you tonight.'

'Oh, the twins are performing. Portia was to perform, too, but she is a little under the weather.'

'Just as well,' said the husky voice that the skulking Foggy recognised in terror, 'for she would show us up, as usual.'

The still husky, but softer tones of her sister interrupted, 'Oh, I think our piece sounds much better these days.'

'It does, dearest girl,' said the marchioness warmly.

She seemed about to say more and move the girls through the door when Bailey, mindful of Foggy's wicked grin, said, yanking him by the arm back into the doorway, 'I know you'll remember my old friend Carswell, girls.'

Foggy, the murder in his heart obscured by insupportable embarrassment, turned, blushing, towards the marchioness and her sisters. ‘Of course!’ said the marchioness in a friendly way, viewing Foggy’s blushes with surprise, ‘Mr Carswell always keeps a dance for an old married woman at a ball!’

He smiled weakly, then averted his eye.

‘I certainly remember you, Mr Carswell,’ the husky voice said firmly, so that he was obliged to look directly at her. The frank eyes were as he remembered, but seemed even larger. He blinked. But she continued talking, and his eyes dropped to her mouth which he saw was forming words he could no longer hear for the pounding of his own blood in his ear.

The marchioness pulled on his sleeve. ‘Did you not hear, sir?’ she said helpfully, ‘Frederick will take us to seats near his mother, Lady Bailey, and Leonora wishes you to take her to be reacquainted with your sister, Miss Carswell.’

‘You know Christiana?’ he said, bemused.

A small hand laid itself on his forearm sleeve, and she said, ‘A little. It will be so pleasant to know her better. Marguerite and I,’ she looked up at him meltingly — just as though he were handsome, like Faulkes or Onslow, he thought, ‘have so few female friends, you know.’

‘What? Um - eh...’ he muttered. She walked forward a little, pressing on his arm through the cloth and he found himself leading the way to his sister. He saw, as he looked ahead, that his mama and Christiana were standing, greeting Mrs Prosper — whose house they were in — and a gentleman whom Foggy was sure must be Mr Prosper, a young man wearing a sharply styled suit of the dandy with a deal of buckram wadding at the shoulders. He was regarding Carswell’s sister through an eye glass, a thing that rescued Foggy from his present crippling fear and embarrassment. He walked a little more briskly. ‘Mama!’ he said.

His mother, evidently surprised at his sudden appearance with a female on his arm, watched as her son gazed between his sister and the eyeglass with unexpected belligerence. ‘You remember Mrs Prosper, Linton?’ said Lady Eloise’s gentle

voice. Carswell nodded his head at the woman politely, then turned his eye back to her son. 'And this is her son, Mr Prosper. Are you acquainted?'

'I have not had that pleasure,' said her son, in a cool voice, staring hard at the eyeglass. Mr Prosper blushed and dropped it. A small hand squeezed his arm, and he realised his stare had gone on a beat too long. 'I have brought a friend of Christiana's, Mama, Miss Fortune, come to keep her company.'

At this, Leonora blinked, for Christiana Carswell was looking bemused. Not above embarrassment herself, Leonora blushed. However, Christiana held out her hand and drew Miss Fortune down to sit beside her.

Mrs Prosper, who had been busy watching the seats around her fill up, said to her silent son, 'You must take your seat, Murray, dear. I shall begin the entertainment soon.'

With another look at Mr Carswell, Mr Prosper decided to go off, rather than take the seat in Christiana's row that he had wished, for Foggy took it, with that same cold look in his eye.

Lady Eloise was called away by an acquaintance.

'Your brother,' whispered Leonora, leaning towards Christiana, 'is very protective.'

'Oh,' confided Christiana, 'not usually. He generally pays no attention to me at all if he can help it. I expect it was the eyeglass.'

'Excuse me?' said Leonora with raised brows.

'Linton sports an eyeglass sometimes himself, for our whole family are a touch myopic. However, he always says that it is not an implement to be used to ogle ladies. It is something he disapproves of.'

'How sweet!' said Leonora with a look over at Mr Carswell, whose own eye was on the departing figure of Mr Prosper, as though to see him off.

'Sweet? Linton? I think you have the wrong person.' But Christiana laughed.

‘Miss Carswell,’ whispered Leonora, cutting through the rather animated voices of persons around, whose recognition that they were about to be adjured to silence for a prolonged period increased their volume, ‘I fear I have disturbed you, and deceived your brother. I said no untruth, but I gave the impression of being rather better acquainted with you than I am, and told your brother I wished to further that acquaintance.’

Christiana cast a smiling look at her companion. ‘Oh, I am glad you came in any case, for I was having to be polite to Mr Prosper, because he is my mother’s friend’s son.’

‘I quite understand. If it were in a ballroom, one could have been just a little cooler if one did not wish to further the acquaintance.’

‘Indeed,’ said Miss Carswell, smiling. There was a slight pause. ‘But Miss Fortune, why *did* you wish to meet me again?’

‘Well, I told Mr Carswell that it was because Marguerite and I have few female acquaintances. Young ladies see us together, and do not wish to intrude, you know, but it *would* be nice to make some female friends, too.’ Christiana nodded, but was aware that Leonora had not quite met her eye. ‘But there is another reason. I wish to become acquainted with you to understand your brother better.’

‘Linton? *Foggy?*’ said Christiana to the beauty beside her, hardly able to believe it. The last had been said in a squeak, and reached her brother’s ears.

‘Yes?’ he asked, leaning forward a little to see her.

Christiana regarded her brother’s mildly enquiring face, and looked back to the seat in between them to Miss Fortune, with her shoulder to her brother’s back as she made a serious nod to Christiana, and then back again at Foggy. There was a cough from the stage, and Linton looked that way, with a touch of dread at this evidence of industry.

‘*Foggy?*’ whispered Christiana to Miss Fortune again, still in shock.

Leonora closed her eyelids in agreement and tilted her head with a smile.

‘Oh, lord, it’s starting!’ ejaculated her brother with miserable resignation.

‘Music is not to your taste, Mr Carswell?’ Leonora turned to him as the crowd around them began to shift their seats and quieten down in anticipation of the event.

‘No, no, I like music very well. The opera and concerts and so on. It is just that these things...’ he said vaguely, hardly aware he was talking to her with some ease.

‘*Dashed amateurs*, my father says,’ Leonora said brightly.

‘Yes,’ said Foggy, looking down at her with the hint of a smile, but jolted by the utter attention in her blue eyes once more. He felt himself falling from a great height, and his hands moved to grasp onto something of their own volition. He found his chair seat with one hand and the skirts of her gown with the other. He pulled his hand away from her with a squeak.

‘My sister and I shall be two of the *dashed amateurs* this evening...’ continued Leonora, as if he had not just made a fool of himself.

Carswell blushed and looked conscious. ‘I didn’t...’

But Miss Fortune was continuing, ‘and what is worse, it is the same Bach piece you had to sit through three years ago.’ She smiled up at him, as though consoling, and he made a discovery.

‘You are teasing me, Miss Fortune!’

She smiled more genuinely, ‘Haven’t I always teased you, Mr Carswell?’

There was much in this for Foggy to think of. Since Mrs Prosper had begun her introduction to the first guest, (an opera singer who might at least be bearable — these occasions were often top-and-tailed with professional performers to give one hope at the outset and consolation at the end) and Miss Fortune turned her disconcerting gaze to look ahead. He

continued, dazed, to regard her profile. *That* was the explanation, then. She had been teasing him all along. It made more sense than what he had feared, at least. She was most extraordinarily beautiful — as people had said about his cousin, the Snow Queen, Delphine. Miss Fortune's cheek bones were not as high and regal as his cousin's, but her eyes were the prettiest blue he had ever seen and ringed with lashes that were darker than her hair, whose pretty colour was itself just one shade darker than he remembered it when she had been but a white cloud. Her nose was slightly upturned, and her lips were blush pink and lovely, as was the bloom of youth in her cheek. Somehow, with his shoulder five inches from hers, he felt more at his ease in looking at her than he had in the crowded ballroom.

She was aware of his gaze, he was sure, but she had said she had just been teasing. It was intimate to tease, he thought, and her befriending of his sister was a puzzle, but Foggy's friend Paxton was the master of the long tease, so he somewhat understood. Robbie could wait two years until he landed his joke — as when they had visited the lakes, and Paxton had set up an elaborate hoax to convince him that the Monster of Windermere, (a fictitious creature, tales of which Paxton had fed him in a darkened school dormitory) was beside their rowing boat. The monster's wake had been supplied by a colluding friend, dragging a disguised log along with a rope, from the safety of the shore.

But teasing was an intimate thing to do, and Foggy was still left with, why *him*? Then he remembered when he had asked Paxton the same thing. Paxton had replied that Foggy's look of holy terror was more entertaining than anyone else. He must, all those years ago, have entertained that pert young thing while he had stood quivering in the castle hall, as she had looked down on him from the stairs — the most determined fourteen-year-old he had ever seen. And because that had entertained her, and because Castle Fortune was a place where nothing much else happened, she had kept it in her mind, and determined to tease him again in London. To continue the jest. He felt relief course through him, and then something else ... something duller.

Apparently, he had not stopped looking at Miss Fortune's profile as he had been thinking, because as he regarded a blonde ringlet that grazed her cheek, his sister lent forward and hissed at him, 'Linton!'

His eyes darted towards Christiana's reproving look, but not before he had caught a conscious blush from Miss Fortune. He sat back in his chair, gazing ahead at a lady harpist dully, he too blushing. He began to tremble, just as if blushes were not enough. He saw Miss Fortune's head turn for a quick glance, in his peripheral vision, and that made it worse. If she had not blushed, he could have kept to his conclusion that she was a prankster, out to amuse herself by teasing a poor sap. But she had blushed. What could it mean? His eyes moved to look while he kept his nose facing the front with an iron will. Could Miss Fortune be trembling a little, too? He looked ahead again, eyes riveted to the middle-aged harpist, his stomach cramping at the same time. He moved a palm to soothe it, but his arm was caught by a quick hand, and a shoulder moved a little closer to his.

'Don't worry, Mr Carswell,' a low voice said, 'I really mean you no harm.'

Somehow, it was the worst thing she could have said.

Later that night, after escorting his mother and sister home, he staggered to his club, shaken to his core.

He asked Paxton where Pet was, and then remembered Viscount Desmond was at the races, and so joined Paxton and another friend, Sir Joseph Carter, throwing himself in a chair at their table.

'Gin!' he told a hovering lackey.

'Claret, then, sir?' said the superior lackey, with a sniff, for this establishment did not stoop to serve Mother's Ruin.

Foggy shrugged, 'Very well. And a bottle of Port if you please.' The last was added as an afterthought and Paxton shook his head at the lackey who nodded in return, knowingly.

'Another for me!' said the ruddy-faced Sir Joseph.

'Of course, sir,' sneered the lackey.

‘Entertaining fellow that,’ said the baronet as the superior servant left.

‘Oh, *you* are here Magna? When did you come?’

Sir Joseph Carter, Magna Carter to his school friends, gave him a withering look. ‘Been here the whole time Foggy, and you know it! If this is about that bet—’

‘Captain Sharp! When you had spoken to the jockey already!’ Foggy taunted, but wearily.

‘What is the matter with you this time, Foggy?’ asked Lord Paxton, the most sensitive of the crowd.

‘Just had the most awful night.’

‘Where were you?’

‘At Mrs Prosper’s Musical Evening.’

‘Eh?’ Carter was shocked. ‘Well, it serves you right for going,’ said Sir Joseph, swilling his wine rather than sipping it. ‘Why did you?’

‘Christiana,’ explained Foggy briefly.

‘Oh, sisters!’ said Carter with fellow feeling. ‘Better get her wed. They are less bother once wed.’

‘You volunteering?’ asked Foggy.

‘Not on your life!’

‘It’s more than the music,’ said Paxton, pursuing.

‘Yes. The music was rather better than usual, though there was this portly chap with adenoids who insisted on singing ballads,’ Foggy mused.

Paxton was alert. ‘Did my *sisters-in-law* play their Bach piece?’

‘Yes.’ Foggy drank an entire glass of claret and the lackey filled it again.

‘Was it ... *improved* from the last time you heard it?’ his lordship asked, insinuatingly.

‘Much improved,’ said Foggy dreamily, remembering how little hands flew over the keys. He shook himself severely and took another sip. He met Paxton’s overly innocent look. ‘*You know something!* Tell me ... *no*, don’t tell me.’

Paxton took a sip himself, with insouciance.

Foggy gave in. ‘Out with it.’

Paxton put down his glass and regarded Foggy directly. ‘It is only that Portia, my wife you know,’ he informed Carter as an aside.

‘We know, we know! You never stop talking about her with that demmed smug look on your face, too,’ said Carter. He had begun to deal a hand of *Patience*, since the conversation was not about himself.

Paxton turned back to the Honourable Mr Carswell, ‘... said that *what you feared* ... well ...,’ Foggy concentrated on his smirking friend, who tapped the table in a gesture of amazed amusement, ‘... *it cannot be dismissed!*’ he finished, scoffing.

‘You mean...?’ said Foggy, terrified of the confirmation.

‘You might be *right!*’ His lordship exploded at this, as though it were the greatest joke of the century.

‘What might be right...?’ asked Sir Joseph, mildly interested.

‘That Foggy might have an ...’

‘Ssshhhhh!’ cried Foggy. ‘If you say another word, Robert, I swear I’ll—’

‘I will not say it!’ Paxton said, hand in the air for an oath, then his grin returned, ‘for not a soul would believe me!’ then he thumped the table again and bent over, laughing.

Foggy regarded his friend with distaste, but no shock. ‘It matters not at all. It is not as though I will see her again, for my sister promised to stop my mother plaguing me to go to balls.’

‘*Her?*’ Sir Joseph threw down his cards, really interested now. ‘What *her?*’

But the thought that he could completely avoid the situation had calmed Foggy's brain somewhat. 'Doesn't matter!' he repeated. 'Won't see her.'

Chapter 8

The Net Closes

It was past noon before Foggy came downstairs, only just having been respectably dressed by his valet. His man had insisted on applying cucumber to his reddened eyes this morning, which process had required the valet to *tsk*, and Foggy to lie on a plush day bed, listening to dire warnings about his health as the man readied his raiment. Now Foggy was about to head off to see if Viscount Desmond had returned from the races — but being an affectionate young man of excellent manners, thought he ought to look in on the yellow salon to greet his mama for the day. But when he opened the door ...

Four females occupied the room, all blondes. His fair-haired mama was seated on her usual slipper chair, at one side of the fire, looking wonderful as usual in one of her shockingly diaphanous gowns. His sister, with the same colouring, sat on the gilded sofa opposite, flanked by two young ladies in identical gowns of rose pink, with hair of a lighter hue than his relatives. The twins smiled at him as the door opened. Their demeanour was relaxed — and without her usual upright posture, even *he* might not have known the Fortune twins apart, but for the tell-tale blush that crept into the furthest-away young lady's chest. Her sister smiled at him in a friendly way while his mother was introducing him, but *his* Miss Fortune (he instantly scolded himself for naming her so in his mind) blushed and gave him that concentrated gaze once more.

Foggy, who had halted in the doorway, was called to attention by Miss Marguerite saying in a friendly way, after his mother had asked her if *she* had been introduced to her son, 'Oh, but we know Mr Carswell, and saw him the other day at the circulating library! He was at Castle Fortune with Lord Paxton some years ago, and we met him then.' She laughed and continued in her chattering way, 'We are not much acquainted, for we were so young that we were not allowed to

bother the company much. But it is very nice to see you again, Mr Carswell.’

Foggy, who had gone forward to kiss his mama’s cheek during this speech, said, ‘Yes, and you too, Miss Fortune! It is my pleasure to see you ... both ... again.’

Christiana, her voice amused, said, ‘Oh but you sat with Miss *Leonora* Fortune last night, Linton.’

Lady Eloise noted her daughter’s tone and looked again at her son’s more-than-usual embarrassment and said, because his mouth was working but nothing was coming out, ‘Yes, indeed.’

‘It is shameless of me to ask, Mr Carswell,’ said Leonora Fortune, smiling, ‘but did you think our Bach piece improved since the Castle Fortune performance?’

‘Oh, yes, did you, Mr Carswell?’ asked Marguerite Fortune, chiming in. ‘I’m afraid we were not quite proficient in those days.’

‘Yes, but you were so pretty that the audience did not mind,’ said Foggy, with the air of a man talking at random.

There was a moment’s silence. Never, ever, had Lady Eloise or Christiana heard Linton comment on a lady’s appearance. That it was followed by an awkward sort of insult was completely normal.

‘Pretty *children*, you know,’ said Foggy desperately.

‘And even prettier *now*, I shouldn’t wonder,’ said Christiana. She enjoyed stretching Foggy’s torture out longer, but regretted it immediately, since it looked so acute that she did not have the heart.

‘Not really!’ the desperate Foggy said, to push off the suspicion, and beginning of hope, in his mother’s eye. The insult landed like a lead balloon.

‘*Linton!*’ said Lady Eloise, mortified.

Foggy, chin disappearing beneath his stock entirely, said, ‘I meant, still just as pr ... pretty!’ He gulped. ‘I mean ... not just a *particular* one, but *both* of you, you know!’

This was such an odd remark that the room was quiet for a second. ‘Hush, Linton!’ Lady Eloise begged, looking from one to the other of the twins. ‘I do beg your pardon, ladies. My son...’ Lady Eloise closed her gentle eyes as though in pain, unable to continue.

‘My brother,’ said Christiana, ‘was born with his foot in his mouth!’

‘Not at all,’ said Leonora with a blush. She looked up, determinedly. ‘I should like to say in return that you, too, are just as handsome as I remembered, Mr Carswell.’

Lady Eloise could detect no hint of irony in this remark, and regarded Leonora with amazement as her twin was saying faintly, ‘Just so, sir!’

Foggy took a recoil step. ‘I ... I ...!’

‘Have you just remembered an appointment, Linton dear?’ asked Christiana, enjoying herself. ‘Well, delay a moment, for the girls are about to leave, and you may lend them your arm to their sister’s house, and afterwards hear yourself declared by the World the most fortunate of men to be squiring not one, but two of the Season’s beauties.’

The twins rose, and Foggy miserably followed, with a dark look at his sister, warning of later retribution.



Marguerite was by no means as quick on the uptake as Leonora, but she did possess some valuable skills. Though her acting ability was lamentably lacking since she was by nature an honest girl, she had always had the facility to look innocent when accused. The twins had discussed this attribute, and Leonora asked her how she managed it.

‘Well I suppose it is because I really do not consider what I am doing is wrong, and I *feel* genuinely innocent. Mrs Scroggins only limits us in the way of pastries to get the upper hand, and show her power, and I never felt that to be fair. I was just exacting retribution.’

‘That makes sense, Button,’ Leonora had said.

But today Marguerite was using her second attribute, that of her *feeling something unusual*, and as they lay in bed, curled together, she uttered, 'It is Mr Carswell, isn't it? Your Venture.'

Leonora scratched the tip of her nose. She did not have to answer for a moment, for they heard some excited baby-laughing, and knew it was Lucian running along the corridor with the baby again, in the way that made Felix laugh. They could hear the nursemaid's protests, too, and the twins exchanged a smile.

But then Marguerite observed Leonora's dropped eyes and said, 'You are about to lie to me Leo, because you think I will divulge your Venture by mistake. But let me tell you it is no longer secret. After today, his mother, his sister and he himself must be aware of it.'

'I merely gave a reciprocal compliment, as Georgie always said Mama urged us to do,' Leonora sniffed, unrepentant.

'To a gentleman! Poor Mr Carswell was trembling all the way to Onslow House, and scampered off like a kicked dog as soon as he reached the door.'

'Not a kicked dog,' pleaded Leonora, 'a frightened rabbit.' She giggled wickedly. 'I mean to save him from that.'

'What on earth made you say he was handsome?' asked Marguerite. 'I cannot believe that Mr Carswell—'

Leonora sat up. 'Why, I said so because I believe so,' she said sternly.

'You *do*—?'

'I have always thought so, from the moment I fell from a tree into his arms three years ago.' She saw her sister look amazed, and then doubtful. 'Close your eyes if you do not believe me.' Marguerite, obedient as usual, closed them. 'How is Mr Carswell's figure?'

'Well, he was hunched a little today,' said Marguerite, imagining it, 'but, well, I admit it elegant. He is tall—'

'His shoulders?'

‘Powerful...’ said Marguerite, amazed.

‘His nose?’

‘Straight — and a strong nose,’ she frowned a little in concentration, ‘and his bones are well sculpted, his eyes are a colour similar to ours, which people admire I suppose ... but Leo—’

‘The chin is lacking, I know it!’

‘And he looks frightened a great deal of the time ... it is not very manly, my dear...’ Marguerite was apologetic.

‘That is because of his problem in fearing young ladies. He shared it with me on the day of the tree. So it makes no difference to me. I do not regard it. I will save him from that.’

‘How?’

‘Well, he will no longer be afraid of marriage once he is married, will he?’ Marguerite looked dubious. But Leonora looked off in triumph. ‘And I have already seen him where he did not look afraid at all.’

‘Yes?’ Marguerite was agog.

‘Yes.’ Leonora grasped her sister’s hands and drew her up. ‘He was *magnificent!*’ she gushed, ‘He *terrified* his opponent. It was Mr Prosper—’

‘Oh, *that* gentleman. He kept looking at me with that horribly magnified eye at the Musical Evening.’

‘Precisely. He was doing so with Miss Carswell, too, and just one look from Mr Carswell’s fierce eye and he dropped the glass.’

‘Goodness!’ said Marguerite, enthralled.

‘Have you seen Mr Carswell on a horse? Or driving? I have, from afar. His skill is almost as good as Lucian’s,’ here Leonora referred to her brother-in-law The Marquis of Onslow, ‘And his shoulders must come from all the time he spends in the gentleman’s Boxing Salon.’

‘Jackson’s? I have heard of that. He is a member?’

‘Yes, and Damon told me,’ Here Leonora was referring to another brother-in-law, Sir Damon Regis, known as the Demon King, ‘he is the best pugilist amongst the younger set.’ Leonora’s eyes were wide and warm. ‘As you saw today, he is very affectionate to his mama. I knew he was kind all those years ago, it was quite obvious. The very antithesis of *our* male relatives.’

‘He *does* look kind!’ said Marguerite, coming around to the idea.

‘He may not be very practical, I fear, but I have planned for that.’ Now that the dam had broken, Leonora was enthusiastic in confiding. ‘I have learnt how to run a household and keep an eye on expenses, and if I had not had servants who opposed me, I should have done better, even at the castle. I wanted to extend the kitchen garden, you know, and raise more pigs.’

‘*That* is why you occupied yourself with all that.’

‘Of course. I should not have bothered to do so much if I had just had a fancy to come to Town and catch a rich husband, as Papa desires. I already knew that while Mr Carswell might not be impoverished, he is not wealthy. It behoves his wife to be able to cut her cloth and keep an eye on the servants.’

‘Wife?’ said Marguerite. ‘You have thought so far ahead?’

‘Naturally.’

‘But dearest one, have you thought ... what if Mr Carswell does not *wish* to marry you?’

Leonora giggled, lying back in bed, and pulling up the sheets so that only her mischievous eyes were visible, ‘Well, he does not, of course.’ She laughed again, ‘Not that it matters. I will be *very* good for him.’ As Marguerite dropped beside her, she turned over to face her. ‘But he is a little too afraid just now. It is disconcerting that we cannot even talk comfortably. I must find some ways to calm his nerves. It may be my fault,’ she said reflectively. ‘It is not only he who looks afraid when in my company. Why, even Sir Justin—!’ Marguerite was taking it all in, and Leonora flicked her nose

with a finger, 'Never mind Button. I wish I were more like you, and made gentlemen smile easily.'

'Shall I pretend to be you, dearest? Just to calm his nerves a little?'

Leonora looked at her sister affectionately. 'Well, you could try!'



The opportunity to try did not come for some time. But in the park one day, Marguerite broke away from the group she was with (her sisters Portia, Georgette, and Jocasta, as well as her twin) and hailed the phaeton of Mr Carswell. That gentleman had no option but to stop — well, at least a gentleman of Foggy's exquisite manners. He bowed his head at the walking party, and looked down from his high perch to Marguerite, who thought she had done a fine job so far of aping Leonora's decisive nature. 'Will you take me up, sir?' she asked, in the certain tones of her twin, and the tiger jumped from behind and aided her onto the high perch.

Carswell drove a little, looking askance at her, and she finally said, 'Mr Carswell, it is a fine day, is it not?'

He nodded, and whipped his horses to avoid a collision.

His silence was a little off-putting, but Marguerite said, in her gentlest, horse-calming voice. 'As fine a day as the day we met beneath the tree at Castle Fortune.'

'I met your sister beneath the tree, not you, Miss Marguerite,' said Carswell, as though confused.

'You know us apart so easily?'

'Of course!'

'But how? Sometimes even *I* think I am Leonora when I look into a mirror.'

'Phhtt!' said Carswell. 'Why are even *you* saying so? It is perfectly obvious. I have always been able to tell you apart. You are nothing alike.'

'*Pardon me?*'

‘Well,’ Carswell tempered, looking at her briefly, ‘there is the hair, of course — and the face and the figure. But apart from that, nothing at all.’

Marguerite opened her eyes very wide. ‘Well, but if you are not looking at our face or figure, sir, what *are* you seeing?’

‘It is just something that is only in Miss Fortune.’ He frowned and turned his head towards her. ‘*You* must know it!’ he protested. ‘That thing that comes from her ... I don’t know what it is ... Anyway, it is not in the least like *you*.’

‘You are right sir,’ said Marguerite, wondering. Mr Carswell was not at all afraid today. He was speaking to her as easily as he would to her sister Georgette, even. ‘You speak of the Lion’s spirit, do you not?’ She looked at his profile as he manoeuvred the horses. ‘I think I understand you.’

After a turn around the carriage path, they stopped at the party of sisters once more, and Marguerite saw Mr Carswell avoid turning his eyes in her twin’s direction.

She jumped down without assistance and after a few mumbled words he drove off.

Marguerite linked arms with her twin and drew her forward a little.

‘Did it work?’ asked Leonora.

‘No. But that does not matter. I quite see it now, Leonora. Mr Carswell is *precisely* the man for you.’ She skipped a little, excited. ‘I’ll help your Venture in any way I can,’ she promised.

It was Leonora’s turn to look afraid. ‘Don’t help, Button! I beg you, *please* don’t help!’

Marguerite dimpled, looking unabashed.

Chapter 9

Desmond Defects

That evening a dandily dressed exquisite, with a face not quite as elegant as his attire, asked Marguerite for a Cotillion. His name was Viscount Desmond, George said, when her brother nodded his assent. The gentleman was casual in manner and engaging, making Marguerite giggle before she had even gotten to the dance floor.

‘It looks like I rescued you from a lecture, Miss Fortune!’

‘My behaviour doesn’t seem to please my brother, sir,’ said Marguerite, relaxing at the dandy’s smile and teasing tone. They were awaiting the crossing of a party of chatting people so as to continue their path to the ballroom floor.

‘I find it often so with relatives.’

Marguerite giggled. ‘You too, sir?’

‘Yes, and speaking of same, my mother is on the starboard bow — necessary to take evasive action immediately!’

A bulky matron in a Turkish turban with the longest plumes Marguerite had ever seen was moving towards them, saying in a loud voice, ‘*Petronius!*’

By this time, they had ducked behind the chattering throng and escaped to the dance. ‘What on *earth* did she say?’

‘Petronius,’ said Lord Desmond drearily, ‘My name, you know!’

‘*Really?*’ said Marguerite aghast, then changed her tone, ‘How ... unusual!’

‘Well, one comes to live with it, you know,’ said Lord Desmond with some spirit. She giggled again at this. ‘Which one are you?’ he asked when the steps allowed conversation.

This was a rather unrefined way of asking the usual question, but Marguerite did not mind. ‘I am *Marguerite* Fortune, sir!’

‘Oh, I *hoped* to dance with t’other one,’ Desmond said. When he noted that Marguerite’s face grew cold at this and she averted her eyes from him, a trifle theatrically, he said hastily, ‘Not a matter of preference, you know. I mean, how could there be? You look exactly the same.’ He seemed aware of his blunders a second after each one and now looked sheepish, and not quite so old as Marguerite first thought. ‘Excuse me. The mater says I have no manners to speak of.’

‘I shall forgive you only if you explain to me *why* you wanted to dance with my sister rather than me!’ Marguerite’s eyes narrowed.

He looked down at her. ‘It is just ... I am a friend of Foggy, Mr Carswell, you know, and he has made your acquaintance, of course...’ Desmond was getting himself into deeper water and he stopped abruptly.

Marguerite took pity on him because she suddenly saw in him an opportunity. ‘Yes, I do see. Mr Carswell was rather more acquainted with my sister.’

Desmond relaxed, glad to have gotten over rocky ground at last. The steps parted them.

‘Did he send you?’ asked Marguerite with wide eyes when they were reunited.

The rocks appeared under Desmond’s feet once more. ‘Not at all ... that is ... just curious!’

‘Ah-*hah!*’ said Marguerite as though she had discovered something. ‘Sir, where can we meet that we might not be overheard?’

Desmond had been given rendezvous requests before, usually from bored married ladies, but he did not think that he had ever been more flummoxed, because a pair of very blue and open eyes looked back at him ... and in them he saw his own social destruction. ‘You can’t say that to a fellow!’ he protested.

Marguerite looked confused. However, then she appeared to be thinking. ‘Do you drive, sir? Might you take me up in the park?’

Desmond breathed out. ‘Oh, *that* kind of thing...’ he said, relieved.

‘Why, whatever did you think I meant?’

He avoided this. ‘I’ll be in the park at eleven tomorrow ... but I fear I might confuse you with your sister—’

‘I’ll carry a white rose with me!’ said Marguerite, brilliantly.

Desmond, some moments later, took her back to her brother George, who was talking to another bounder of his ilk, Lord Dunton. He didn’t like Fortune, but after a dance with his shockingly open and innocent sister, he felt a little sympathy with him. It must be a trial to keep so many pretty sisters safe in Town all these years. It seemed to him that indiscretion was awaiting Miss Marguerite Fortune at any moment. He therefore gave a slight smile to Fortune before he took his leave.

As he turned to go, though, he heard Fortune say, ‘It is a waltz next. This is Lord Dunton, a friend of mine, who will do you the favour of—’

‘Our waltz, Miss Fortune, I think,’ said a young buck Desmond didn’t know, but heartily approved of.

Desmond moved off again, all feeling for George Fortune gone. Introducing *Dunton* to his sister? Dunton was a fortune hunter with hideous proclivities, and as the Fortune girls had only respectable dowries, Dunton could have only one use for her. Introduce that man to his *sister*?

The next day, in the park, Desmond picked up the Miss Fortune with the rose, but with a little fear in his heart. Her twin had been walking with her, and she seemed inclined to come up and make a squeeze with them. However, Miss Marguerite turned and gave her sister a look, and the other Miss Fortune smiled, saying, ‘Here is Portia come along, Button. I will see you later!’

‘She called you Button,’ said Desmond, always responding to the last thought in his head.

‘Yes. I call her Leo sometimes, but there never seemed to be suitable contraction for the name Marguerite. I do not think I look like a Mags.’

‘No,’ said Desmond, thinking of Foggy’s aunt. ‘Definitely not!’

‘When we were small Mama had a card of green buttons made, and painted them herself with a white Marguerite flower, then had one sewn on my clothes so that the servants and everyone could tell us apart. And so Leonora began to call me Button!’

‘Charming,’ said Desmond. The opening topic having exhausted itself, he wondered what next to say. Usually, he had no trouble with chit-chat, but *her* instigation of this meeting was causing his brain to freeze. Thankfully, she began.

‘I wanted to see you sir, to talk about what we should do about the situation.’

‘Situation?’ Desmond was now beginning to be afraid. Had he just taken the bait in a mantrap? Was she pursuing him with more candour than young ladies usually employed? The assignation ... the private conversation...

‘Leonora and Mr Carswell, you know!’

Desmond was relieved and shocked at once. ‘You don’t mean to say that is *real*?’

‘You must have thought so, sir, since you wished to dance with her.’

‘Well, I was curious about the fuss...’

‘Ah! He makes a *fuss*—’

‘Well...’ said Desmond, trapped.

‘I expect he knows he’s a Lion’s Venture.’

‘Could we stop talking of lions and clouds ... nothing in any of this is ...! You don’t mean Miss Leonora Fortune is *really*...?’ He turned his head towards Marguerite fully, since the path was unusually empty.

Those big open eyes gazed into his again. ‘Can I *trust* you, Viscount?’

‘Pardon? I mean, yes...’ he began, automatically, but then looking at the eyes again, ripe to lay responsibility upon him, he felt, some ancient instinct induced him to correct this, ‘that is ... *no!*’

But Marguerite Fortune did not appear to hear his retraction. ‘The problem is ... Mr Carswell seems afraid.’ Her eyebrows shot up. ‘Is he not?’

‘Well ... eh...,’ said Desmond, all his social address deserting him. But then, responding to this awful brand of candour that Miss Fortune seemed to drag from him, ‘...yes.’

‘And we shall never really know if there could really be a ... a *friendship* between them if Mr Carswell continues to *avoid* my sister...’

‘The thing is,’ said Desmond confidentially, with an air of letting her down gently, ‘Foggy, that is Carswell, well, he ain’t the marrying kind.’ As Marguerite ran her eyes over his face considering, he added, rather desperately, ‘like me!’

‘I understand,’ said Miss Fortune. ‘It may be so.’ Desmond gave his attention to the horses for some time, and an easier silence reigned. Just when he thought his point well-made, she asked, ‘But why, then, did you wish to meet my sister?’

Blast. ‘Oh, well, mere prying, you know. I am famed for taunting my friends with their follies. I didn’t really believe it possible, you know, the thing Foggy fears, so I thought to...’ He gave up. ‘I’m not entirely sure!’ he finished lamely.

‘I expect it is because Mr Carswell has spoken about my sister rather a lot,’ said Miss Marguerite with perspicacity that Desmond was beginning to find a little annoying.

‘Um, well ...’ he blundered, an admission in itself.

‘They are thinking of each other.’ Desmond sealed his lips at this, determined to betray his friend no more. Miss Fortune let this lie for a moment, then started once again. ‘Are you aware that even our family find it difficult to tell us apart?’

‘I expect so,’ said Desmond, not particularly amazed at this.

‘But Mr Carswell can.’ She left a moment for that to sink in. ‘Why *is* that?’

‘He says she has Lion’s eyes,’ said Desmond, despite himself.

‘She does. But Mr Carswell can tell us apart from a distance, my sister Georgette told me, without looking at her eyes.’

Desmond slapped his horses a little, determined to say nothing. If only he could find one of her sisters ahead, he could drop her off again before he was impelled to say more. But it was odd, what she was saying, completely odd.

‘My sisters are thought to have married for advantage, for the most part, Lord Desmond,’ Marguerite informed him calmly, ‘But that is quite untrue.’

‘I am sure it is,’ Desmond said, embarrassed.

‘No, *truly!*’ the little beauty beside him insisted, pulling gently at his sleeve. He glanced over at her, and those frank eyes caught him once more. ‘Finding our true love is what Georgie says — my sister the marchioness, you know — is our only universal talent.’

‘Very happy for you all,’ said Desmond, further embarrassed.

‘And Georgie says, and others of my sisters agree, that the essence of finding one’s true love is the feeling of knowing them better than anyone else in the world.’

All of this was said in a ruminating tone, but Desmond was not deceived. It was boring into his head like a brain-eating worm.

‘And Mr Carswell seems to know my sister better than anyone else. Don’t you agree, my lord?’

Desmond *did*. It shook him. He had previously considered all this an hilarious joke, and now he understood the real danger to his friend. Or *was* it danger?

As though to echo his thoughts, Marguerite Fortune continued. ‘I think you should take my sister up after me, my lord. You must want to know her a little before you decide.’

‘Decide what?’ asked Desmond, panicked.

‘Why, to help us, of course!’

He did take Miss Leonora Fortune up, and was terrified in an entirely different way by the other twin. But he was a friend, a crony, an intimate, a brother-in-arms to Foggy, and so he was undecided what to do about his conclusion.

But that night, at the less-than-salubrious gin house where his friends met to discuss sporting events with jockeys and the like, he looked over at Foggy’s slumped figure and was moved. He remembered Miss Leonora, who had been much more reserved with him than her sister, saying, ‘I hope your friend Mr Carswell is quite well?’ It had been the first mention of his name between them, but her tone had caught at him. This was more than a polite enquiry, this seemed like genuine concern. Perhaps Paxton had talked of Foggy’s present drinking habits to her?

But now, Foggy met Desmond’s eye and sat bolt upright.

‘I hear you drove both Fortune twins today!’ he said — and his tone was, strangely, accusatory. ‘*Separately!*’

Desmond, looking down on him, wondered if Foggy feared his original plan, where Desmond was to tease Foggy remorselessly for the unfounded vanity of thinking himself preferred by a beauty. Seeing his friend’s flushed cheeks and slightly ruffled raiment the whole thing continued to seem wildly unlikely — but *still...!* On impulse, Desmond said casually, as he sat down and took up a gin glass, ‘Well, just because *you* are avoiding them, don’t mean *I* should.’

Foggy looked confused. ‘But you just *flirt* with the new flock every year ...’

‘Hmm! And I mean to flirt with *them*. Well, it is bad form to flirt with both, I suppose. I found Miss ... Leonora, was it? ... the one who is Miss Fortune? ... well, I found her the most interesting, I think.’

‘But *she’s*...’ began Foggy.

Paxton, who was on baby-sitting duty for their friend tonight, lifted eyebrows at Desmond, mouthing “*Whatever...?*”

‘Oh,’ Desmond was replying to Foggy, ‘is *she* the cloud? I thought it might be the other one. Anyway, that is good, isn’t it? I’ll be able to keep her occupied.’

‘But *flirting* ... if one doesn’t want to marry a girl, one might...’

‘Mmm?’ said Desmond, offhand, waving at some friend behind Carswell’s back, ‘Since when are you a Puritan, old fellow? It is just some fun to while away the time. I shall enjoy cutting through her admirers to steal a march, don’t ye know.’ He laughed. ‘This month’s sporting attraction. Do you care to place a bet? How many times can I dance with Miss Fortune in the face of her pursuers this week? *I* say two a ball. When I took her up in the park, Franklin was almost apoplectic!’

Paxton, beginning to see the light, looked down at Foggy’s outraged face. ‘You bounder!’ Foggy hissed below his breath.

‘Excuse me? Couldn’t hear you, Foggy. Dashed noisy in here.’

Another gin was slopped down in front of Carswell, but he did not raise it.

‘Shouldn’t bet on my wife’s sister,’ said Paxton with a knowing nod to Desmond, ‘but I don’t believe you can do it, Pet, so I’m *tempted* to make the wager.’

‘*Paxton!*’ said Foggy, shocked. He looked from one vaguely questioning face to another, seeing no hint of either deception or amusement. He stood up, a dignified drunk. ‘I,’ he announced, ‘am going home.’

‘Well,’ said Paxton to Desmond, watching the staggeringly dignified exit of their friend, ‘What an *interesting* reaction.’

‘Yes. And while I refused to help when Miss Marguerite asked me to, I now think...’

‘Traitor!’ laughed Paxton. ‘How would you like it if someone slipped the noose over your neck?’

‘*You* seem to like it!’ said Desmond, sipping Foggy’s gin. ‘The Parson’s Noose, I mean.’

‘I *chose* it.’

‘True. But why are you not at home this evening?’

‘Worried about Foggy.’

‘Precisely. He’s going to the dogs, it seems to me. I like a tippie m’self, but he’s been foxed four nights out of five since the Fortune twins came to Town.’

‘Yes, but we can’t *force* him, Pet!’

‘Not a question of forcing. Just a question of seeing if it might be something ...’ Paxton was silent. ‘Her twin said a thing to me today. Something about her married sisters telling her that love was knowing someone better than anyone else in the world.’ Paxton glowed, thinking of the night he had seen Portia play at the Castle Fortune house party, and how he had known so clearly ...! Desmond interrupted his thoughts by continuing, ‘and she also said that Foggy is the only person in the world, including her sisters, that can tell them apart.’

‘He *recognises* her?’ said Paxton, suddenly alert, ‘but—’

‘It may just be the instinct of the hunted for the hunter, but maybe...’

‘*Maybe*,’ said Paxton, tapping a finger on the table, ‘we should help him find out!’

‘Yes.’

‘But Portia said that her sister is dogged. It may just be wilfulness on her part, with Foggy as the victim.’

‘But not a *selfish* girl?’

‘I do not think so.’

‘Then, if they meet a little with our help, and Foggy seems to be truly unhappy at marrying a young, talented, and

beautiful young lady that likes only *him* in a sea of more impressive admirers...' said Desmond, not taking a breath.

Paxton laughed. 'When you put it *that* way...!'

'...then we ask her sisters to stop her. If she is kind, she will not force the issue.'

Paxton ran a finger over the rim of his gin glass ruminatively. 'I don't know, Pet. I'll have to discuss it with—'

'*Portia!*' interrupted Desmond. 'I know! But Robbie, think about it. If Miss Fortune does not marry this Season and comes back for another, without confronting the issue, what ruin will poor Foggy have wracked upon himself by then?'

'Perhaps,' said Paxton, with unusual crassness, 'it *might* be better to just squeeze the boil.'

They clinked glasses, 'Precisely!' said Desmond. After a moment he said, 'Oh, Lord! Foggy will *never* forgive us.'

Chapter 10

The Twins and the Cousins

The cousins, Roberta and Christiana, had spent a little time with the Fortune twins in the last ten days. They proved to be much more down to earth than many beauties about Town. They were well dressed, but the cousins understood this was unusual, for the Fortunes disclosed a little of their lives in the ancient and crumbling castle home and their new enjoyment of having, besides the society of Town, warm beds, and decent clothes. They were, in addition, amusing and kind. The cousins took to them. Christiana knew why Miss Fortune had sought her out, but she found it both interesting and almost inexplicable.

Whether in the spirit of being helpful, or for her own entertainment, Christiana decided to interfere with the *status quo*. ‘Mama,’ she said, one day, ‘the Du Mauriers will attend the Duchess of Davenhurst’s ball this evening.’

Lady Eloise, engaged in writing a letter to an old school friend, said merely, ‘Mmm?’ since the Du Mauriers did not have a son of marriageable age.

‘And you remember that Linton was most attached to Mary Du Maurier when we were children...’ said Christiana, significantly. Her mother’s head shot up and she looked arrested.

Later: ‘Linton!’ she told her son when he came in to change his clothes for the evening. ‘You shall go with us to the Davenhursts’ tonight.’

‘No. I mean ... I have an engagement, Mama...’

‘Please do cancel it, my dear. Your papa cannot come, for the regent called him to a supper party, you know, and you would not wish us to be unescorted.’

‘Well, but you frequently...’

‘There was that *dreadful* incident with the Marchmonts’ carriage only last week,’ she said plaintively, referring to a robbery that had taken place after a ball.

‘John Coachman is sturdy...’ said Carswell. His mother looked at him, her eyes filling in a way he had no defence against. ‘Oh, very well!’

Behind his back, his mother smiled.

And so it was that Carswell found himself in a ballroom once more, with even more reluctance than last Season. He soon deserted his relatives (for he feared the new intimacy of the Fortune twins with his sister) and made the rounds of friends who were here tonight.

Because he was avoiding her, Carswell got to see Miss Leonora’s busy evening (seldom short of a dance) from a safe distance. She eventually sat down with her sister at one point, in evident fatigue, where they seemed to enjoy a chat with his cousin Roberta (*her too?*) before they became besieged again by gentlemen hoping to join their group. Carswell looked in displeasure at some of these gentlemen, Dunton among them, and wondered at the baron. Rakes and rackets fellows should be warned off, at least. Whenever Carswell had observed from a distance, the baron seemed to be either scolding the girls, or thrusting some gentleman to their notice, regardless of age and appearance, but only wealth. And the brother was worse. He introduced her to any of his cronies, who were generally a shady bunch. It made no sense to do so, since presumably he wanted his sisters to marry well, and any slur on their name would call this into question. But Carswell concluded that George Fortune, as well as being a bully, was also a clodpole. Assuring dances for his intimates with his beautiful sisters gave him a shallow popularity among his set. Any danger in this to his sister’s safety or his father’s plans he did not consider.

At least, at the very least, some fellows should be warned off, politely. A form of words existed that was universally understood. These men would not wish marriage without fortune, so what else was there to want, except something less than respectable? Foggy’s papa had spoken to a few on

Christiana's account, and, when his papa was absent, so had he. The Carswells had even done so for Roberta, whose own papa did not take the trouble to appear at these things. Old roués like Baron Crawford, just seeking one dance from a beauty, might be permitted *that*, but no more.

It was no business of his, of course, no business at all.

He saw that Leonora was led out next by the Duke of Bexley. She passed her father on the way to the dance floor, and Carswell could see the baron rub his hands together. Carswell didn't much like the new duke either, he had to say. Unlike Enderby, the other young duke about town, Bexley was arrogant and condescending — and before he entered into his honours, when the previous duke had restricted his income, as young Lord Cunningham he had been a gamester of questionable integrity. Duke or no, if he were sniffing round Christiana, Foggy would have nodded him off. Now, he supposed, Bexley was a great catch for a young lady. If his choice had rested on the naive *Marguerite* Fortune, it might have been a full-blown tragedy in the making, but somehow Carswell knew that Leonora Fortune could handle him even in marriage, like his Aunt Mags handled her gamester husband. But it was not what he would wish for her, or any young girl. She should marry someone like Lord Jeffries, perhaps: an open-natured fellow.

His mother sneaked up behind him and collared him (metaphorically speaking) to re-join the family group. The Du Mauriers were there. Good natured Mrs Du Maurier, plump and smiling, taciturn Mr Du Maurier, only interested in escape to a card room, and finally Mary Du Maurier, still shy at twenty-three, looking much prettier than he remembered. Her presentation had been delayed by the family's financial situation, as Carswell knew. But she was finally in Town, a sudden inheritance to the Du Mauriers making it possible. Her dress was demure but pretty, her soft brown curls styled simply. But her eyes shone, and she looked excited, in her reserved way.

After making his bow to her parents, he smiled down at Mary, who said shyly, 'Linton — I mean, Mr Carswell!'

‘You cannot call a fellow who you made a raft with *mister*, Mary! How are you enjoying the Season?’

Lady Eloise beamed at this, for her son speaking fluently and easily in front of a young lady was rare.

‘Oh this is my first party; it is very exciting ... but I am a little timid.’

‘Have you partners?’ asked Carswell, good-naturedly, ‘I shall introduce you to some fellows...’

His mother’s face fell at this, and she thought that Mary Du Maurier looked a little disappointed, too. However, Mary smiled up at him, saying, ‘Oh, will you, Linton?’ Her eyes were brown and soft, and she was altogether the kind of girl Lady Eloise hoped for as a daughter-in-law.

Foggy became aware of a figure on the outside of the group who, at the ending of the last dance, had come to stand beside his sister Christiana. He briefly met the Lion eyes of Miss Fortune and felt a sense of unwarranted *shame* colour his cheeks. She looked so angry. He ducked a little and turned a shoulder, saying, ‘That is, Mary, let us join this set...’

His old friend looked up at him, delighted, and two fond mamas smiled as he led her away. When he returned her, fifteen minutes later, he thought himself safe, but Miss Fortune was merely momentarily concealed by a gentleman’s back. Seeing her, Foggy abandoned his charge in the vicinity of the group with a distinct lack of grace, and ducked behind a pillar. Peeking, he saw Miss Fortune crane her neck around, while the gentleman beside her still talked.

He knew he was craven, as he skulked away, but what else was there to do? The situation was confusing, and even if Paxton and Desmond suggested it would be better to act like a man, and at least meet the girl as an acquaintance, he could not. He did not want to know the answer to this conundrum — both solutions seemed painful. If she was pursuing him, it was terrifying, if she was not ... well, he would feel ridiculous, and something more. He didn’t want to think of what this was. The whole thing must be avoided. There was nothing good in any of it. To think he might even now be giving *pain*...! But that

was ridiculous. Nothing in this was to do with affection, but only with wilfulness, surely? But he didn't doubt her boldness, if he *was* her object, and if he allowed her space to say something, then, of course, he would then have to say words of rejection — and he could hardly bear the thought.

He shivered, and ducked into the supper room as he saw Miss Fortune detach herself from the group and come in his general direction. He did not think he had been seen, however, but he mulled about the side room, still being set up for supper, getting in the way of the attendants and generally making a nuisance of himself. After ten minutes of this, he put his head out again and saw Miss Fortune's lavender gauze gown disappear towards the corridor that included the ladies' withdrawing rooms. He breathed a sigh of relief and emerged from the supper room, seeing, too late, the same dress on the ballroom floor, being held at the waist by the grasping hand of the Duke of Bexley. The second dance, a mark of distinction for the duke's partner. But he saw her (for it *was* Leonora Fortune) push the duke's hand away in a short, sharp movement, and she left the floor. Bexley followed, with a satisfied grin on his face, but Foggy was relieved to see that he did so casually. No one seemed to be taking much notice, so perhaps no scandal was brewing, and Bexley, whose form Foggy kept his eye on, wandered off at the edge of the floor and merged into the crowd. Foggy's eyes scanned the room. No note seemed to have been taken of this little drama, and he breathed out. His eye looked for Miss Fortune again, and when he saw the dress disappear into the same corridor of rooms set aside for the comfort of guests, he followed, even though he had previously been running from her all night. He did not question himself, but instead was annoyed when he was delayed by Whitaker (one of the members of the burial party) who said, 'You here Foggy? I—'

'Got to go—' said Foggy, quite as though he lacked manners.



Also at the Duchess of Davenhurst's ball, Georgette, the Marchioness of Onslow, was happily overseeing her twin sisters' success in the way of partners, but from the other side

of the ballroom at a safe distance from Papa and George. Her friend Sir Justin Faulkes had danced with Marguerite and brought back the report that she was a vivacious and charming dance partner. Georgette had nodded, content, and watched as Leonora was led out by the Duke of Bexley, the catch of the Season, having newly stepped into his honours. Georgette didn't know much about the duke, and doubted that Leo cared much for the great honour, but at least she was smiling pleasantly at His Grace. Earlier, when Faulkes had led out Leo, Marguerite had been claimed by Lord Rattigan, which made Georgette concerned for a second, for she was not one of the fashionable baron's admirers. He was heading for forty, handsome in a dissipated sort of manner that some ladies admired. Marguerite had addressed some cheerful remark to him (it had seemed to Georgette from her expression), and his lip curled. But Marguerite seemed unaffected by this and so Georgette was less worried.

Now she could not see her youngest sister, who had been afterwards claimed by a Mr Ponsonby, the Earl of Covington's heir. He had seemed a handsome, pleasant sort of man who was already married to a lady whom Georgette knew, once Miss Julia White. Julia and she had never really been friends, for reasons beyond their mutual infatuation with Georgette's now husband, Lucian.

Georgette's handsome husband was now called away by a note from a lackey. 'Regis wants a word,' he told her when he left.

Georgette smiled and chatted to Sir Justin Faulkes, while intermittently looking at what the twins were up to. She could not see her sister Jocasta, but since her husband Regis was here somewhere, no doubt Jocasta would appear at any moment.



Things were not going quite how Leonora predicted. She had come determined to woo, even if the chosen one was reluctant. She knew that she was right for him, that he was for her. She had never questioned herself. For even Portia, a year older than her only, had found her true love Lord Paxton at the same

party. Portia had recognised him at once, she later told her sisters. So much so that she had been able to ignore the circumstances — that the whole house party had been arranged to further the courtship of Paxton and their sister Jocasta. There was no such impediment in the way of Leonora. Mr Carswell was only timid and a little averse to marriage, and needing rather more of a push than her other sisters' choices. She was the very girl, she was sure, to give him that push.

She had not been idle while she waited her chance to see him again. She had studied all she could about the history and topography of Suffolk, where the Carswells' principal seat was to be found, she had tried to find individuals in her limited circle around Castle Fortune who might tell her something of the house. This had been difficult, but she had at last found an old servant in the vicar's employ who was from Suffolk, and remembered something of the house. She had taken up the management of the castle servants to be familiar with a wife's duties in running a house.

She lacked certain skills, for example, flower arranging was lost on her. Her sister Portia could put two twigs in a bowl and create a masterpiece, but Leonora somehow managed to bunch the flowers together in a manner that made them uglier. Lady Bailey, her neighbour, had responded to her desire for instruction, but it had resulted in limited success. 'I really do not know what you do to roses, my dear Leonora, to make them look so sad.' She had practised avidly, and Lady Bailey had finally patted her tense shoulders and said, 'This result is really *nearly* respectable, my dear.'

She had haunted the kitchen to understand the cooking process, rather than just put up with the results. She annoyed Mrs Scroggins, the castle's cook, by saying such things as, 'Yesterday's custard was rather better. The heat was too high this time, Cook, the pudding is scorched.'

She had discussed estate management with their agent, and plagued him for the differences between farming practises in Yorkshire and Suffolk, and hounded him when he could only reply vaguely. 'Well,' he said eventually, 'I have a friend from

Cambridge who now works in the county, and he may be able to answer your questions.'

Leonora had devoured the answering letter avidly, its owner shaking his head in wonder at this pretty, fourteen-year-old battering ram.

But now, nothing went as planned.



When Onslow entered the conservatory, he found a beautiful blonde woman there, standing upright in a dress of cream silk with gold embroidery at the hem. At her heartfelt gaze, Onslow stopped, then turned to go.

'Is this how it is to be, Onslow?' said the lovely Mrs Ponsonby. 'You will not talk to me at all?'

'You should return to the ballroom, madam,' said the Marquis of Onslow's steady voice, 'I shall delay my return for some moments, if you will.'

'An eye to my reputation, or yours?'

'Julia!' he said, crossly.

'So you remember my name?'

'I shall leave,' he said, bored, 'since you do not.'

She moved forward swiftly and held his arm, 'Onslow, what happened to us?'

'Remove your hand.' His tone was cold.

'*Why* did you prefer her? She was nothing but an unwanted woman, with no beauty or fortune. Why did *she* come between us?'

Onslow kept his face stone, but as he glanced at hers, he saw a wilder sort of passion than he had imagined. 'Mrs Ponsonby, you are unwell. I will send a servant to you.'

'I cannot bear it!'

Julia, what on earth has happened to you? Onslow thought, as he looked down at her beautiful, piteous face. She was just

eight months married. But he removed her hand, and left the room.

As he passed from it, he heard the shuffle of feet, and saw, down the corridor, a froth of lavender muslin. Had he been observed?

When he returned to the ballroom, his wife was talking to Justin, and laughing with him in a way that still had the power to put steel in his bones, though he knew it was harmless. He moved towards her through the crowded ballroom, and she saw him, giving him her loveliest smile.

‘We were to dance the cotillion, where were you? I saw Regis over there ...’ she chided him, playfully laughing. Faulkes moved off towards a dance partner.

‘In the conservatory with Julia Ponsonby.’

Her laugh disappeared and she blinked. Then, ‘I expect that was uncomfortable,’ she said, consolingly.

‘I want to kiss you right now. Other women would treat me to a jealous scene.’ He said, ‘Let us find a room where I can kiss you.’

‘But I want to dance with you, and Portia is coming here later.’

Onslow sighed. ‘I think we may have been seen.’ He looked down at her miserably. ‘Someone might remark on it to you ... I cannot bear the thought.’

‘And if they do, I shall laugh and say that Mrs Ponsonby is one of our dearest friends.’

‘Georgette ... my darling! She, too, might make mischief.’

Georgette blinked again, but said, putting a hand in his, ‘Never between us, silly.’

‘But that someone should say foul words to distress you...’

‘Even if they do, it will never distress me in the least.’

‘Something has occurred, something has truly unhinged her.’

‘Despite everything, you fear for her. That is my Lucian.’ Georgette frowned. ‘I cannot befriend her, for she would not accept it, but perhaps Jocasta ... I can ask Jocasta to talk to her.’

‘There is, perhaps, nothing to be done.’

‘Julia’s mother has been upset since Katerina’s marriage to Covington, because a child would remove Ponsonby from the succession to the earldom.’

‘*And children...*,’ he found himself grinning.

‘... *seem inevitable!*’ laughed Georgette, both quoting the Earl of Covington, in his morose tone.

‘But if Julia has married a knave...’ said Onslow.

‘There is nothing to be done, I know,’ but suddenly Georgette frowned a little, remembering Mr Ponsonby had been with Marguerite. She saw her sister had been returned to her father’s side however, and relaxed. She continued, her thoughts on Julia. ‘But perhaps there are ways to make oneself happy after all.’

‘Ways?’

‘Oh, discovering methods to be helpful to others, finding a purpose for your life, like Lady Swinton, though her marriage is accounted unhappy.’

‘Ah, my dear, but Julia is not you, nor the kind and charitable Lady Swinton.’ He touched her hair, a gesture not usual in a ballroom, but it caused no more than a few knowing looks. That the Marquis of Onslow doted on his wife was hardly news.

He thought of Julia asking why he preferred a woman of no fortune or particular beauty. He had been ready to argue about the latter. His Georgette was gorgeous from her head to her toes, and for him her teasing smile had very soon made Julia’s classical beauty invisible. But it was Georgette’s warmth and Georgette’s goodness, and Georgette’s humour that turned even her heinous lack of musical or artistic talent into wonderful attributes — something to tease her about.

Sometimes, at night, he thought about the possibility that he might have married Julia White (for he had proposed to her once) and missed this marvellous woman altogether — and he shuddered.



‘Did you see?’ said Mr Ponsonby to the breathless Marguerite. ‘My wife loves another!’

Marguerite Fortune had come to the door of the conservatory at Ponsonby’s behest, and had witnessed the end of the little scene. As his wife left the conservatory, Ponsonby had pulled Marguerite to hide behind the door. When Julia Ponsonby departed, he dragged the shocked Marguerite out of hiding and back through into the garden room, evidently so that they might not be overheard. Marguerite had resisted a little, but Ponsonby’s demeanour was so tragic, and he looked so shaken, that she had given in.

‘I only saw that she was in conversation with my brother-in-law,’ said Marguerite, defending Onslow. ‘And it is wrong that you speak to me of this, sir.’

‘Only the sympathy in your heavenly eyes has led me to speak, Miss Fortune.’

Marguerite was nervous, but sympathetic indeed. ‘The marquis loves my sister very much, Mr Ponsonby. I believe you suspect your wife too much.’

‘It is like you to be so naive. You are completely without guile. *Onslow* may be innocent, but you saw how she tried to tempt him.’ Marguerite remembered the arm on Lucian’s sleeve. ‘He is not the only one. She uses her beauty to make men her slaves.’

Marguerite had also seen Mrs Ponsonby in action when she was still Miss White. As a guest at their house party, Julia White’s beauty had enthralled every male present. This was something she could not help, of course. However, it was her subtle but playful behaviour that had kept all of them at her feet. Marguerite, not always permitted to be present at every meeting of the party (since the twins had then been children) had still managed to spend some time looking at the beautiful

Miss White, taking notes on her winsome ways for use when her own Season arrived. She felt a little ashamed of this now, as she regarded Mr Ponsonby's miserable demeanour.

'You must speak to her, sir,' said Marguerite. 'If you talk openly, it may be that you will resolve all.'

'You, of all people should realise, Miss Fortune, that there are those who are simply faithless in their very character.'

This struck Marguerite's heart anew. She looked at the kind, handsome Mr Ponsonby, who had married so recently and been so wronged, and her heart melted towards him.

He had rescued her from a very persistent gentleman on another evening, one who had said uncomfortably flattering words to Marguerite. Ponsonby had appeared at her side, telling the gentleman, 'I believe your *betrothed* is searching for you, Seymour!' in a haughty tone. Then Mr Ponsonby had danced with her, and lifted her spirits, and had since danced with her on several occasions. He was very handsome and charming, but sometimes seemed a little sad, and Marguerite's tender heart had been moved.

'I must go to the ballroom at once,' she said now, anxious. 'My absence might be remarked.'

'Of course. But you will be nervous of meeting Lord Seymour, whom I saw arrive. Here. Sit a while.' He handed her to a bench and Marguerite, though she did not want to, sat nervously. She was beginning to be very conscious of Mr Ponsonby's good looks and, perhaps, his attraction to her, and she wished to put a distance between them.

'Meet me at the terrace after the second waltz. I shall not ask you to dance, but I wish to know how your meeting with Seymour goes. You must tell me if he is impertinent again.'

'I should not...'

'Bring an attendant if you will. I should not want to stain your honour, but I feel we need to talk.'

Chapter 11

Leonora Speaks

Carswell's instinct was correct. He had just wanted to see the lion safely returned to her sister, but he found Leonora Fortune sitting in the corridor behind a pillar, her hiding place given away by the flash of lavender muslin, just visible at the foot of the pillar. As he walked forward, he saw her head bowed a little, tears falling. Suddenly, she looked only seventeen to him, and unmistakably vulnerable. A shaky little hand came up to dash away a tear, and he stood spellbound for a second, before his feet moved towards her. 'Miss Fortune ... what is amiss?' he asked simply. She looked up, startled, and he added, 'Was it Bexley? Did he insult you?'

'Yes, and he ... *pinched* at me,' Foggy flushed and looked furious, 'but it is not *that*.' She looked at him accusingly. 'It is *you!*'

Foggy blanched. '*I—?*'

The lion's eye was back for a second, then disintegrated into hurt once more. 'Don't bother to lie to me, Mr Carswell. This is the first time I have seen you in ten days and all you do is hide and run and I am so *tired* of it ... You were my only acquaintance in London, apart from family, and you have not even danced with me once, or called, or driven me, or rode, or even spoken to me in the park. And when I met you in the circulating library, you...!' Another tear fell and was dashed away angrily. 'At *least* we might meet as acquaintances. There are all sorts of gentlemen who seem to want to spend time with me, some like the duke...' here she shivered, and Carswell clenched his teeth, '... and some really *pleasant* — but the person I came to London to see treats me like some contagion that should be avoided.' It was out, thought Foggy, "The person she had come to London to see" — and it made him a cad. The worst sort of fellow in the world. No manners at all. He might at least have met with her in an ordinary sort of way and tried to give her thoughts another direction. There were many things he might have done — but he had only run,

and had made a young girl cry hot tears. He was a cur, worse than that, a brute. Her passionate speech continued. 'I thought I would have more fortitude, but on top of all the insults from Bexley this evening, inviting me to see if a *kiss* might make me a *duchess*—'

'He said *what?*' said Foggy, outraged.

But Leonora just continued over him, '... I am worn down, and I cannot enter the rest room just now to find my sister because these stupid tears began and I—' she gulped, looking up at him again with eyes swimming. 'I do not care about defeat, but might you not just ... do not, at least insult me by *running* so hard? Am I so dreadful, *am I*—?' Her words became suspended. He recognised, from his sister Christiana, the sight of a girl working herself into a passion, who hardly knew what she said, and he patted her shoulder gingerly.

'Don't take on,' he said, gentle and embarrassed, 'I was just ... I'm a timid sort of fellow you know. I shan't ...'

Miss Du Maurier came out of the comfort room, but Carswell had turned swiftly as the door opened, and stood in front of the figure on the chair. 'Oh Linton—!' she began.

Foggy stood stiff as a wooden soldier, but uttered, 'Oh ... Mary ... is there a Miss Marguerite Fortune in there?'

'No one except me, Linton. Do you look for her?'

'Mmm — her sister, the marchioness, gave me a message for her.' He smiled as she lingered. 'See you later, Mary.'

'Oh ... yes!' As she passed the pillar, she caught sight of a figure behind Foggy, but he moved to block her view, and she left for the ballroom.

Miss Fortune stood up. '*Marguerite!*' she said urgently.

Foggy said, perplexed, 'I definitely saw her come this way some minutes ago ...'

Leonora dabbed at her eyes and then slid into the withdrawing room to ask the attendant, and came out looking worried and fierce at once. 'She has not been there.'

Foggy frowned, 'Then *where*...?'

Leonora was already walking towards the garden room at the end of the corridor. It was the Duke of Davenhurst's pride, a large, glazed structure holding plants from far-flung lands, including a few tall trees in pots, as well as some benches for observing the paradise comfortably, Foggy knew. A young lady caught *here* ...!

A male figure emerged and swiftly departed along a corridor at a ninety-degree angle to theirs, not perceiving them, soon hidden from view. A few seconds later, when they had almost reached the door, Marguerite Fortune came out and said, 'Oh, Leonora! How fortunate!' She was the picture of innocence, but seeing her sister's eye she said, 'I was going to the withdrawing room when Mr Ponsonby called me...' her voice turned away. 'I have done wrong...?' she asked, looking at the face of her twin.

'You *know* you have ...' began Leonora.

'But indeed,' whispered Marguerite, 'Mr Ponsonby was almost in tears...'

'You really cannot believe *everything*...' began Foggy. Her innocent eyes stopped him.

'I'll deal with her,' Miss Fortune said, sighing. 'You should go, sir. I'm sorry about earlier. You may forget it if you please.'

'Return to the ballroom together,' Foggy instructed them. 'It will be better so.' He looked to Leonora, 'I—' but he could not think what to say, and turned and left.



For some years previously, St Clair House in London had been occupied, during the Season, by the Earl of Covington's heir, Mr Jonathan Ponsonby, and his mother. The owner had seldom appeared. Now, in the large hall, a group of servants were gathered to welcome their true master and mistress, newly returned to London from their primary country estate.

A red-haired beauty with her bonnet removed but still wearing an elegant green velvet pelisse, smiled around the group of housekeeper, butler, cook, ten liveried footmen,

thirty-two maids (with varying assigned duties), six grooms and a tiger. Behind her stood a very tall man in fashionable driving coat, accompanied by a shorter, extremely elegant man in a plain coat, who could only be his valet.

Then the lady gestured theatrically to two individuals who stood at her side, one a plain faced maid in a superior, but severe, blue gown (presumably a lady's maid) and the other: a broken-nosed thug in a respectable jacket.

'Behold,' the young beauty said, 'The Earl and Countess of Covington.' The maid's face grinned, then resumed her composure.

As one, the staff blinked, and the butler narrowed his eyes at the thuggish fellow meaningfully.

'That is to say,' cool pale eyes made a circuit of the servants, as the beauty continued, 'that every business you may have, you may first apply to them. We,' she cast an eye over her shoulder towards the giant, 'must not be disturbed.'

'There are a number of decisions regarding the upkeep of the house...' began the butler, looking above the redhead to the tall man.

'Then,' said the beauty, bringing the butler's eyes back to her, 'discuss it with the *earl*,' she thumped a hand on the shoulder of the thug, who met the butler's eyes squarely. 'This is how it works at Covington, and must do so here.' She turned to the tall man and said, 'Thaddeus, I am tired, let us to a salon.'

The butler gestured magnificently to a footman, 'Tea and cake to the salon, and enquire what else the countess requires.' The footman departed, and all eyes came to rest on the couple at the centre of the hall, who looked at each other and gave a short smile, then turned back to the waiting, murmuring servants.

'To say this more clearly,' said the thug in a London accent that was ironed out for clarity, 'All correspondence for the earl will come to me, all correspondence for the countess must come to Annie, that is, Barker.' He gestured to the lady's maid

standing beside him. 'His lordship will use the study and the countess the adjoining library. No one is permitted in there without our express permission.'

'Yours?' said the jealous butler.

'Mine. Or Barker's.' He regarded the man calmly but with a latent aggression that seemed natural to him. 'My name is Gilmartin, butler at Covington Park. I will not usurp your place here in London,' he said to the butler, who had been introduced as Grimes, 'for I will have too much to do.'

'But there are many things that the man of business has to discuss with the *earl*, to do with repairs to the house, staffing levels, things a butler cannot *possibly* decide.'

'I will discuss things with the man of business and decide what the earl needs to know, it need not concern you.' He addressed the large group of servants, like a soldier given to command, 'Your earl and countess are unlike any others. They are both engaged in great work and must never be disturbed needlessly.'

Annie stood forward a little, 'I am Barker, her ladyship's maid. I shall see to her ladyship in the morning and at night, but I shall be too engaged to launder her linen and unpack. Who here is used to caring for a lady's things?' Two hands shot up. 'Then you two...?'

'Betty and Agnes, Miss Barker,' said the most youthful of the two with energy.

'...may take care of her ladyship's things.'

'And what exactly,' said a superior housekeeper, whose name was Fogarty, down her nose, 'will you be doing, *Barker?*'

'First, bring the daily menus to me, I know the Family's tastes. Meals will be scheduled differently each day, according to the will of the countess. I will see *you*,' Annie's eyes flicked to the stout woman on the housekeeper's left, 'this afternoon, cook, with a list of suggestions.'

'*You?*' the housekeeper gasped.

‘Me.’ Annie Barker remained calm.

‘Which reminds me,’ said Gilmartin, ‘Annie and I, that is Barker and I, will need a study too, on the other side of the hall from the earl’s study for the sake of his peace. You may find us there when needed.’ He marched, throwing doors open to look at rooms. ‘Yes, this one will do. Grimes, is it? See that some chairs are removed, two desks are put together in the centre of the room and lay all correspondence there for us to peruse.’

‘Together?’ asked Grimes.

‘Together,’ answered Gilmartin, hiding a grin. In fact Annie, who had only begun to read last year, still needed to clarify some vocabulary, or decipher the scrawls some called writing, and they had found, at Covington Park, that it was better to be closer for the purpose. Gilmartin also liked looking at Annie chewing her plume and screwing her face up in concentration. No one at Covington Park stood on judgement on her novice skills, but here he would protect her from any attempt at derision by the London servants. Thaddeus, the earl, had given him the power, and he would use it to protect her if need be. Failing that, he’d use a fist. He didn’t much mind which.

‘I’ll see you after nuncheon, Mrs Fogarty,’ Annie informed the housekeeper. ‘You will no doubt need your instructions.’

The housekeeper grunted. Some of the staff had dispersed, taking the baggage to the earl’s apartments, the two large baskets of documents to the study and the library respectively, as Gilmartin directed. But the other servants still stood, enamoured by the little drama, as the housekeeper continued to look down on Barker.

Barker gave her a cheeky grin. ‘The countess is an easy mistress when it comes to the household. She never notices anything beside her books,’ she added, confidently. Mrs Fogarty’s lip curled. Suddenly Barker’s friendly face became cold. ‘But I do.’ The housekeeper flushed. ‘After two, Mrs Fogarty. My study.’

The false earl and countess entered that apartment with dignity. Then Annie Barker fell against the closed door and

slid down a little. Gilmartin yanked her up.

‘How’d I do, Mr Gilmartin?’ she enquired.

‘You’s the ace, li’l un!’ He said, clapping her head.

‘I nearly died when Miss Katerina, the countess, I mean, said that.’

‘We needs to do what they will us to. We can’t let these smart London servants beat us and disturb them.’

‘No. And if we make it easy sailing for them, pr’aps we can stay in London longer.’

‘When they is out, I’ll show you a bit of the town, gel.’

‘Will you, Mr Gilmartin?’ said Annie, thrilled. ‘Your old haunts?’

‘Nowhere as low as that,’ laughed Gilmartin, ‘but some places you’ll like.’

Annie sighed. ‘But you know *them*. They probably won’t be out much.’

‘The mistress will see her family, I suppose.’

‘The Fortune girls were never that close, though there do seem to be more letters now. Sometimes Miss Katerina even replies.’ Annie frowned. ‘I think she might be here, in part, to see how the twins fare in Town. She might even go to a *ball*!’

She seemed to find this hilarious, and Gilmartin joined her. ‘Pr’aps *Thaddeus*...’ he began. But this idea seemed too ridiculous to support, and they both collapsed in laughter, only stopping to hold grave faces when two footmen arrived with their desks.

‘Bring in two armchairs for the window, and a footstool,’ ordered Gilmartin, but in a rougher accent than that he used with the superior Grimes.

‘Right ye are, yer lordship,’ said a tall handsome one cheerily, and Gilmartin grinned.

As they took their place opposite each other with a pile of correspondence already there, they grinned across at each

other. ‘Countess!’ said Gilmartin, gesturing to Annie, ‘Let’s begin.’

‘Mr Gilmartin?’ Annie said, in a worried tone sometime later. ‘How should I go on? I don’t really know how to run a London house.’

‘Well, we can admit we need guidance, eventually, but for the moment, we should start with orders. Keep ‘em in line, like. They are ready to disdain us, but they cannot disobey us easily.’ He looked at her, ‘That Grimes knows more than me about running a smart London House, but this is for our Thaddeus and the countess. *We* know what *they* likes.’

‘Yes, and it is our dootie to keep them undisturbed,’ said Annie resolutely.

‘Alright! So it is cook first. What orders do you have to give?’

‘Well, I saw a lot of different bakery carts as we travelled into the city ... and Miss Katerina does like her bread.’

‘Then ...’

‘I’ll suggest we buy the breakfast rolls from a different bakery each day until I find the countess’ preference.’

‘Good start. She cannot argue with that, but it will annoy her to take your order.’ He nodded. ‘Make meal suggestions for the moment. But you can give in and ask for advice once she’s gotten used to it. Then you can say yes or no as you see right.’

‘I ain’t never even been a housekeeper, and here I am giving orders in a London House.’

‘They ain’t usual, our master and mistress, and only *we* can do things as they want. You does it at Covington Park. We see they ain’t bothered at all.’

‘You are right, Mr Gilmartin. We can do it.’

Grimes came in and looked askance at them. ‘You wanted somefing?’ he said, his smooth superior tone crashing down to street level.

‘I do. What I wanted to say, Grimes, is this: I might make the decisions in the earl’s place, and that might put that long nose of yours out of joint,’ Grimes looked combative, ‘but what *you* gives this house is somefing I never could, me mucker.’ Grimes stopped clenching his fists. ‘You give it ... *elegance*.’ The butler pulled himself up, looking superior once more. ‘An earl’s crib needs a bit of elegance, and I sure as eggs can’t supply it.’

‘You is right there, Mr Gilmartin,’ agreed Annie. ‘Mr Grimes pulls it off nicely.’

‘You do the elegance, and run the servants as ever. Just do what I’m telling you first.’

The butler began to look sullen again, but he looked at Gilmartin’s grin and spoke. ‘Yes, elegance,’ he said, his adopted accent returning, ‘I’ll continue to supply it, don’t you worry, Mr Gilmartin.’ The *mister* was a recognition of rank. He looked at Gilmartin, his expression bland. ‘Any orders?’ he winked.

Gilmartin smiled back. ‘Yes. Send for the man of business. I’ll see him after breakfast tomorrow.’

‘I’ll send that the *earl* requests his attendance.’

‘Yep. Better do that until he gets used to it.’

Later that afternoon Katerina, the red-haired countess, went into the library and sighed contentedly. Annie had arranged it as near to Covington Park as possible. There was a chair at the fireplace and a cushion rested on the floor beside one arm, a rug thrown over in case of evening chill. All this was for after dinner, when Thaddeus might choose to read there, Katerina at his feet. The fire glowed, a desk was placed opposite the fire, a shawl over the back of a chair, her notebooks and papers on the desktop, quill and ink ready. There was no window seat as at Covington, but a large basket beside the desk housed the books she was using for reference at the present time. Apart from the streetlamps and the sound of carriages passing, they could be at home. But she must begin to think of this house as home, too.

She had come to see the twins, and sneak a look at Leonora's Venture, at last. She was concerned, too, about Marguerite: her youngest sister was worryingly responsive to other's wills. This could be dangerous in society, Katerina considered (though she had never spent time in London society herself — she and her husband were happy recluses). But she also wanted to see Portia, Jocasta, and Georgette, too, she found. Free of Castle Fortune, they had found the space to like and appreciate each other, it seemed. Georgette, Katerina thought, might even summon her to a ball at Almacks or somewhere. She found she was not quite dreading it.

She could, after all, arrive as she wished, and leave as she wished. Marriage had given her this freedom. The Countess of Covington need answer to no one.



'You must know you have behaved dangerously, Button!' said Leonora, when they entered their chamber that night, finally free of other ears.

'I see why you should think so, Leo, but I'm not sure if you understand. Mr Ponsonby is *married*.'

'Excuse me?'

'Well, I know I must not be on my own with *some* married men, of course, but Mr Ponsonby is quite respectable and only *just* married,' Marguerite laughed. 'You probably misunderstood.'

'You *must* know that married men can be just as dangerous...!'

'Well, of course, old gentlemen who want to fondle one like Baron Crawford or someone, but Mr Ponsonby is married to *Julia White* you know.' She said this as though pulling out a trump card and Leonora was exasperated.

'Just because he is married to a pretty woman does not exempt him from ...'

'Really? But he only took me to see Mrs Ponsonby in conversation in the conservatory with Lucian, for he feared she was being untrue to him!'

'No!' said Leonora, shocked in more ways than one.

'And she seemed to be behaving very badly,' Marguerite recalled, then turned a reassuring eye on Leonora, 'but Lucian was most dismissive of Mrs Ponsonby.'

'Of course.' Leonora's eyes had turned cold. 'She was always in pursuit of him, Jocasta has told me, but now she is *married*.'

'*Poor* Mr Ponsonby! And poor Georgette ... there might have been an *on dit* about her and Onslow if the assignation were discovered. It would wound her so much!'

'But there is no *poor Mr Ponsonby*, Button. Do you not see? If Julia Ponsonby was risking a scandal by calling Lucian there, then her husband was risking a much worse one by taking *you* there.'

Marguerite seemed struck by this. 'But his nerves must be overwrought and so he was acting out of character. If you could have *seen* how miserable he was.' As her sister continued to look frustrated, Marguerite grasped her hands. 'And he had just saved me, you know, from Lord Seymour.'

'If you had been caught with him tonight, you might have ruined any chance for a respectable marriage.' Leonora saw that Marguerite looked chastened, but was about to defend herself, so she leaned forward and added with force, 'and *mine*!'

The hands that Marguerite still held became crushed as she replied, 'Oh, I *promise* I will never do anything of the sort again!'

Leonora remained stern, but only for two seconds. She could never resist her sister's pleading eyes. 'Let us think no more of it and sleep. You must be the silliest Button in the world.'

As Leonora lay in bed, holding the regretful Marguerite's waist, the encounter with Mr Carswell flooded through her. He, too, had risked something in helping her find Marguerite. If he had been seen on his own, heading for the conservatory with an unmarried young lady, he may have been caught in the

trap of having to offer for her. But much as she had decided on him, Leonora could never allow him to be pressured in this way. Her fear for her sister had made her rash, she supposed, and she would not let it happen again.

But it had shown her how fine he was, how right she was in her choice, based on so little evidence all those years ago. At the musical evening, he protected his sister so well, and then tonight he had instantly wanted to protect hers. And he was tender, too, as when he had found her in tears and hidden her from the sight of the young lady who called him *Linton*. Who on earth was *she*? Miss Du Maurier, was it not, who was with him earlier? She must ask Roberta or Christiana. Leonora had not seen his face. Did he think Miss Du Maurier pretty? *Leonora* thought she was, in a quiet way. Perhaps this was the way he preferred. He alone, Georgette had said, had *not* admired Miss White at the house party. And he had not flirted with her pretty sister Jocasta, either. So perhaps he did not admire blonde locks like her own? What was the use of a hundred compliments when one was not admired by the person one admired oneself? Miss Du Maurier's voice told her that she liked Mr Carswell a lot. Leonora jerked the covers up violently.

She had said, in her passion, more than she wished to Mr Carswell tonight. There could be no subterfuge now. It was better so, perhaps, but it might make him hide even more. How could she make him like her if she couldn't even *talk* to him?

She had done a great deal. She had met with his family and friends, found out more about him, tried to orchestrate encounters, all to no avail. She sighed. It would have been better if Mr Carswell had not guessed her pursuit yet. Then he would probably have danced with her once or twice like an old acquaintance, or taken her up in the park to ask how her Season was. And she would have had a *chance*. But he had known from the first, and this frustrated and yet thrilled her at the same time. Mr Carswell remembered her promise to him all those years ago.

Then Leonora turned her head to the problem of the suggestible Marguerite. She would *wish* to behave, but it clearly behoved Leonora to find a solution to her safety when Leonora's back was turned by her own pursuits. She might enlist Jocasta, Portia, and Georgette to be Marguerite's protectors whenever she herself was otherwise engaged. She could certainly not rely on the Fortune gentlemen.

Chapter 12

Miss Du Maurier

Marguerite, following Leonora's instructions, did not dance with Mr Ponsonby again. He continued to ask her, but she was always busy. Once he tried to join her on a bench at the side of the ballroom, but she called to Roberta who happened to be passing, and avoided it again. Mr Ponsonby, whose sad eyes had mildly accused her of desertion, still bothered her tender heart. However, the thought that she could cause a problem for Leonora had resolved her.

At Almacks one evening, Leonora had just been claimed for a cotillion, and Marguerite was awaiting her own partner, Mr Preston, who she could see at the other side of the ballroom, delivering another dance partner back to her party. Evidently, he got caught in conversation, and he looked over towards Marguerite and his eyes sent an apology. He wished to come to her, and it was just as evident that the young lady's mama was anxious to keep him longer. Marguerite smiled her pardon. George and Papa were beside her, but talking between themselves, when Mr Ponsonby was almost upon her. His look was pleading as he came towards her. Marguerite dropped her eyes to avoid being sucked in, but when she raised them, she understood that this time there was no escape. Without an excuse, she could not add to poor Mr Ponsonby's pain. He was ten paces from her, and she became trapped in his eyes.

Suddenly a voice to one side said, 'Our dance, Miss Marguerite, is it not?'

A tall, humorous-eyed man, whom Marguerite had once danced with, but whose name she did not recall, stood there, and she gave a sigh of relief. She took his arm and passed Mr Ponsonby with a smile and a nod.

The gentleman said, 'Was it a rescue? I thought you looked a little ... shall I say, reluctant to meet the gentleman.'

'Oh yes, Mr — sir! You guessed it. It is quite my own fault. I frequently seem to need rescue.'

‘Has the gentleman offered any insult—?’

‘No, really! It is just that since he also rescued me from real insult, he has become a little too ... I seem to invite—’

‘It is not amazing. Aside from your beauty, your kindness will draw others to you.’

She blushed and did not speak. The movement of the dance brought them closer. ‘I do not know how to draw back compassionately. It seems that ordinary friendship between men and women is often judged by society. It could hurt my sister, too, if I am assumed too *fast*.’

‘I *do* know. But it is the *gentleman’s* duty to lay the boundaries for you. If they are honest. You are open and innocent, and *he* should have a care for your reputation.’

‘That is what my sister says. But it is *I* who am at fault, I feel. I do not have the proper reserve of a lady, my brother says.’

‘You are a beautifully behaved young lady,’ he said seriously, but with the hint of a tender smile, ‘just a trifle innocent of the ways of the world. Do not fear with me. I like your honesty, but I will never use it against you.’

It seemed like an important promise. Marguerite looked up at him. His eyes were grey, there were lines around them that showed how often he laughed. They were kind eyes, like Mr Ponsonby’s, but they did not seem to ask anything from her. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘It is Mr Charles Chesterton. You do not remember my name. How dreadful of you!’

Marguerite laughed at his teasing and relaxed further.

‘Might I call on you tomorrow to drive?’ he said when they walked from the floor at the end of the dance.

‘That would be excessively kind!’ Marguerite said, delighted. Then her face became anxious. ‘Oh sir ... you do not have a *wife* by any chance, do you?’

He gave a crack of laughter at this, which was loud enough to draw some eyes to them. ‘No. I do not,’ he said, still

smiling.

‘That is a relief!’ said Marguerite with innocent seriousness.

He laughed again, and returned her to her sister, who had just come back with her dance partner. Mr Chesterton smiled and bowed, saying, ‘Until tomorrow!’

‘Tomorrow?’ asked Leonora of her.

‘We shall drive,’ said Marguerite. ‘It is quite alright, Leo — I asked. He is not married.’

Leonora rolled her eyes.



After warning Georgette to help her keep a better eye on the gullible Marguerite, and to pass this order to Portia and Jocasta, Leonora dealt with her own affairs, visiting Christiana Carswell.

‘Who is Miss Du Maurier?’ She asked, having barely sat down on the green silk, Chinese patterned chair.

Christiana had been expecting some attempt at seeking this information, but as usual Leonora Fortune’s direct approach took her by surprise. She was thoroughly amused at Miss Fortune’s single-minded pursuit of her brother, as well as perplexed by it. Why had Linton, of all people, become the choice of one of the Season’s beauties?

She answered, her wickedness showing, ‘Oh she is a family friend who was especially close to my brother since childhood.’

‘I do not think her a good match for him,’ said Leonora, after a blink of her expressive blue eyes.

‘You do not?’ said Christiana, all amazed. ‘Why ever do you say so?’

‘She is timid. He needs a wife who is less so.’

‘Ah,’ said Christiana thoughtfully. ‘But I wonder where he might find one?’

Relaying all this later to her cousin Roberta later had them both laughing. Roberta said, still giggling, ‘I feel sorry for

them both. She is doomed to fail with Linton. He even danced with *me* at the Davenhursts', only to avoid her approach.'

'Yes, but it is so entertaining to watch him duck behind pillars and sidle out of doors when she is around. He definitely fears her. Why on *earth* did her fancy alight on my brother?'

'Well however that occurred, she has no chance at all, for Linton will never cease to outrun her,' laughed Roberta.

But when Linton took Roberta up in the park next day to show off his new pair of chestnuts, she was astounded when he stopped the phaeton next to the Fortune sisters. 'Good day, ladies!' he said stiffly.

Two yellow bonnets turned up at him. 'I hope you enjoy the weather...' It suddenly came on to rain a little and he gulped. 'I have not room to take you up, but perhaps I will see you both at Almacks this evening.'

Since the stunned Leonora was unusually silent, Marguerite answered for her, 'We do not attend this evening.'

'Oh, then ... on another occasion,' Carswell said, blushing. He inclined his head politely.

He slapped the reins and the horses moved forward, and the stiff figure of Leonora came to life, rushing forward saying 'Stop!'

He did so, and Leonora, eyes lowered, adjusted Miss Pelleter's skirts. 'Your dress looks to get caught.'

Roberta looked down, seeing nothing out of place. Miss Fortune's large eyes suddenly looked past her at her cousin, with such a burning intensity that Roberta felt scorched.

'*Thank you!*' she said, simply.

'Mmm,' said Carswell and drove on, his face the colour of beetroot.

Roberta asked to be driven to her aunt's house so that she could relay this perplexing titbit to Linton's sister.

'*He* approached *her*? Whatever can it mean?' said Christiana.

Chapter 13

A Bout Between Gentlemen

This encounter left Carswell shaken. It was all very well resolving to show some manners to the Fortune girls at last, but such things as the look in her eyes, or the meaning in her sweet, husky voice made him literally quake. He had mustered the courage to take her up today, he was going to suggest polite resumption of their acquaintanceship, such as the drive in the park today, or occasionally joining the large Onslow group on a morning ride, or a dance at a ball (a country dance, he decided, where the figures of the dance kept the necessity of conversation to a minimum). And he had been going to explain to her again, quite gently, that he was not a marrying man.

His mother looked pained whenever he uttered this line at home, and begged him to think about the succession. Foggy dimly supposed that marriage to some quiet girl might be in his future, as a duty, since his younger brother Bertie had sworn off the institution too. But many men put off marriage until they were past forty, after all, since this seemed the best way, if one couldn't avoid marriage at all. Women changed a man.

Look at Paxton, for example. Even though Robbie had a romantic soul, and had always been much more interested in women than Foggy, he had still used to carouse with their particular friends until three, then fill sheets of paper with his scribbles for the rest of the night, then read the dratted poems at them all over breakfast (in whoever's set of rooms they ended up) on a regular basis. Now he still saw his friends sometimes (for his wife was frequently engaged with her sisters) but he generally left first, to keep his wife company. In the old days, instead of scolding them for burying a hat in Hyde Park, a drunken Robbie would have dashed off a tragic eulogy on the spot.

So Foggy would explain it to Miss Fortune, explain that he was a frivolous man, who liked his own frivolity, and had no

intention of settling down for the next fifteen years or so at least.

He found himself doing some arithmetic. Miss Fortune would then be thirty-two — Mrs Bishop, a society matron, had just produced a child at forty — perhaps he shouldn't mention the prospect of fifteen years or so.

Something told him Miss Fortune might do the calculation as well. And wait.

However, there was something nagging at Foggy since the night at the Davenhursts'.

He went to his club that night with a definite purpose. He made his way, in an exaggerated stagger, towards a table housing his cousin-in-law, the Viscount Gascoigne, a sportsman and leader of fashion. He hailed Gascoigne from a distance, and Titus' autumn coloured head looked up in surprise. Foggy, while often a sot, was seldom noisy, in this place at least. The viscount nodded, about to return his attention to his cards, when he saw Foggy's eye, rather sharper than his gait would suggest, move off to the table just before him. Gascoigne kept his eye on Foggy's progress, somehow not surprised when Foggy tripped and knocked into a seated gentleman, who gave a yelp.

'So sorry, old fellow!' said Foggy, straightening up.

'Damn it all, Carswell, the claret has stained me, and I'll have to change.'

'Knee breeches!' said Foggy, bending down to get a better look. 'Almacks. You'll never make it now, your grace!' But Carswell, though pouting in a show of regret and pity, sounded a little cheerful.

Gascoigne sat at attention, ready to intervene.

Bexley was furious, but it was bad form to fight with a drunk — a mild fellow like Foggy Carswell to boot. He glowered, only just keeping his temper.

'Tell you what, tell you what Bexley, old fellow. You should punish me soundly.' Carswell grinned foolishly around the table at the others. 'What do you say gentlemen?' He looked

skyward as though considering, then thumped the table. 'Tomorrow! We'll have a bout at Jackson's. I'll give you ...' Foggy raised fingers along with his next suggestion, 'one, two, no ... three free punches. For my stupidity. What do you say, gentlemen?'

There was a general amused assent, and Bexley, goaded by the crowd, said, 'Eleven of the clock. And I'll give those punches, Carswell, for you deserve them!'

There were some ribald comments about Bexley's spoilt plans with the ladies this evening, and Gascoigne arrived, putting his hand on Foggy's shoulder. 'I apologise for my cousin, your grace, gentlemen. It looks like he's a trifle foxed. Come on Foggy, let us get you a hackney.'

Carswell smiled easily at this, as Gascoigne expected, since he had, the viscount suspected, completed his mission.

After seeing Foggy sent home and sitting back down at his own table, Gascoigne said, to his friend Charles Booth, 'Want to witness a bloodbath tomorrow?'

Booth looked interested, but surprised. 'What?' he said, ineloquently.

'Foggy and the duke.'

'I thought it was a silly mistake,' said Booth, shaking his head, '... and anyway, it's no contest, Bexley will have a start, and he's no slouch with his fists.'

'Yes, but trust me, you have no idea what a Carswell man can do when he wants a *dashed word* with a fellow.' He smiled to himself at his private joke and Booth regarded him strangely.



It was unfortunate that neither the Duke of Bexley nor the Honourable Mr Linton Carswell could be seen around Town for the next few days. Those present at Jackson's salon were not surprised, and the tale was spread around the gentlemen's clubs.

Among the gentlemen casually regarding the bout were Viscount Gascoigne and Mr Charles Booth, at their ease on a

bench. There was a little raillery directed the pair as they entered for the bout, it being a joke among the gentlemen who had witnessed Foggy's drunken invitation.

Among the fashionable gentlemen's bouts it was usual to avoid the face, since one did not wish to frighten the ladies in one's life — at home, or in the ballroom, by sporting a bruise. However, after Bexley had taken his first free punch at Carswell's stomach (accompanied by a few gentlemen's shouts of "*One!*") and Foggy only gave a silly grin, the duke lost his temper and gave a blow that broke open Carswell's nose. The shout of "*Two!*" lost energy midway. Blood sprayed canvas, and there was a sudden silence. Carswell, wiping away blood with his forearm, grinned even wider. The reaction in the room had tempered the duke's spirits, but Carswell's grin inflamed them again and he aimed a punch at Foggy's stomach once more, which Carswell made no attempt to block. "*Three!*" a lone man counted.

Suddenly, Carswell's fists rose with energy, and something new was in Foggy's eye. Seeing this, Bexley tried to get in another jab, but this was blocked, and a fist was planted square in his face. As more blood sprayed canvas, pummelling fists to his torso stopped the duke's response. He fell heavily as the company gasped. Carswell bent over him, as though to say something, but seemed to think better of it.

He stood up and said loudly, 'Good bout, your grace! You punished me well.'

And he walked off, gentlemen looking strangely at him. But he seemed the same good-natured Foggy, his eyes a little unfocused, but in his usual pleasant humour.

Gentleman Jackson helped Bexley to his feet. Apart from the nose, the duke held his ribs. His mouth was pouting, his brows drawn. 'Excellent sport, both gentlemen! You need to raise that arm and twist a little, your grace, to avoid the opponent. But it was a fine display from both of you.'

A Mr Pearson added, in a sycophantic voice, 'You landed a great one in the gut, your grace. Don't think Carswell will eat

well tonight.’ Bexley gave this a half grin, but it seemed to restore him somewhat.

‘Well, well!’ said Booth to the viscount in an under-voice. ‘Wonder what the duke did to rile up the nicest man in London?’

‘Foggy’s very protective.’

‘Ah ... I’ve heard the duke is loose tongued with the ladies,’ mused Booth. ‘Said something to his sister, I expect.’

Gascoigne narrowed his eyes. ‘I expect so. But it is interesting, nevertheless.’



When Roberta Pelleter and Christiana Carswell met the Fortune twins in the park some days later, the girls decided that they had had enough exercise and that the time had come for some coffee in a nearby coffee house. The cousins’ maids were sent ahead to reserve a table, and soon the girls were seated together, on high stools around a table. Some matrons from seats nearby looked askance, since very young girls were apt to frolic when not accompanied by an elder, but Roberta Pelleter took on her mother’s mantle and looked back at them with a tilted chin, before gravely inclining her head. The dames receded somewhat.

The young ladies had been chatting for some time when Leonora suddenly said, ‘Did you enjoy Almacks the other evening with your brother?’

Roberta and Christiana exchanged significant glances, but Christiana answered brightly, ‘Well, Linton did not escort us last evening, and now he cannot even if he wills, for,’ she leaned forward and gestured the others in, ‘he has a bruise on his face the size of a cricket ball.’

‘He is quite alright?’ asked Leonora anxiously.

‘He is. I believe it is that horrid sport gentlemen all pursue. If they are not at Angelo’s on Bond Street shooting or fencing, they must be next door in the horrid boxing salon.’

‘Jackson’s?’ said Marguerite. ‘I have heard of it.’

The ladies at the next table gave them a suspicious look again because their voices were lowered, but it was Leonora Fortune who outstared them on this occasion.

The elder ladies fell back to their conversation, and the sad inclination in the young for *pertness* became an audible topic of their conversation.

The pert ones ignored it.

‘But is he much hurt?’ pursued Leonora.

‘No, he is not.’

‘How did it occur?’ asked Marguerite, taking rather more gruesome interest in the matter than Leonora thought right.

‘Well,’ said Roberta, shaking her black curls. ‘After I saw him yesterday afternoon, I came upon Lord Desmond last night and impelled him to tell me.’

‘How did you manage that?’ asked Leonora.

‘Oh,’ laughed Marguerite reminiscently, ‘it isn’t that difficult.’

‘And then...?’

‘It seems he had a friendly bout with the Duke of Bexley at Jackson’s.’

Leonora grasped the edge of the table. The duke ... was it possible...?

‘Friendly?’ said Christiana. ‘Is *this* what gentlemen call friendly?’

‘Well, Lord Desmond says that the duke is much worse,’ said Christiana cheerfully. ‘I believe my brother has a punishing right!’

Leonora had eventually found her voice. ‘Where is your brother now?’ she asked.

‘Well, at home of course. Mama will not let him be seen in Town for a day or two.’

Marguerite turned to look at Leonora, concerned. The others, alerted by her expression, turned too. Leonora’s eyes

were like blue flint, hard and glittering.

‘Marguerite, we must go,’ she said, her voice flat.

‘Leo, no! You must tell me what you are about...’ but she was running after her green twill back, with more pace than was seemly in a crowded coffee house. Marguerite’s head turned around, ‘Ladies ... so sorry!’

Leonora had already put up with a great deal from the Duke of Bexley. He had driven in his phaeton in the park with her brother George as passenger, so that George might order Leonora to take his place in the vehicle. During this horrific ride the duke’s knees had pushed onto her, he had offered her the reins in a playful manner, taking her hands to facilitate it, and whispered vile compliments whenever he could manage to get his face close to hers. She had previously, at morning visits, politely declined the boon of driving with him, but it seemed the duke did not like to be refused. Then one day she had found him at the circulating library, after her papa had ordered her to go to pick up a book for him. A bizarre request, since the baron seldom read. She might have guessed it was suspicious. On that occasion, she had not been able to shake the duke from walking her home. He told her then what alone could terrify her. That her papa had given him encouragement to woo his daughters, and if *she* were uninterested, he supposed he must let his attention fall on her sister. So she had smiled at him, and knew that he was enjoying torturing her with the threat to her Button. She had been considering ever since what she might do to him.

She had felt Bexley’s eyes on her at every social occasion, even a literary evening Jocasta had wished to attend. She felt that he knew where she would be. If George or Papa were absent, she had managed to deny him upon occasion. But to give a gentleman who asked at least one dance was Georgette’s rule of manners, even if one did not give him two. His words were insinuating on these occasions, and the more she showed her displeasure, the more he seemed to enjoy it. The normal ways of putting off a gentleman — ignoring them, showing one’s boredom or, failing that, all-out rudeness — did not dent the duke’s obnoxious smile. She made sure he did not

find occasion to approach Marguerite after that single dance she had earlier endured, by whisking her away or using Damon, Sir Justin, or Lucian as her umbrella. She noticed the duke did not approach when these gentlemen were near them.

She could bear all of it, but she should not have betrayed herself to Mr Carswell. This was all her fault.

Departing the coffee house, Leonora stopped in the street so abruptly that Marguerite ran into her. She turned to the left and then turned around, bumping into Marguerite again. ‘I *thought* I wanted Lucian,’ she said, mentioning the Marquis of Onslow, ‘but I realised I do not, I want *Damon*.’

With her eyes like this, it seemed dangerous for Leonora to be searching for the Demon King, but Marguerite trusted to her brother-in-law’s wisdom, and followed along, wondering what was amiss.

In Regis House, they were greeted by their fairy sister Jocasta, who declared that the drizzle had cut short a trip to the dressmaker, and welcomed them with promises of cake. This was enough to distract Marguerite, so that when Leonora asked for Damon’s whereabouts, she eagerly followed Jocasta into a cosy salon, leaving Leonora to head to the study.

Sir Damon Regis, handsome and dark, looked up from his desk and stood for his sister-in-law, ‘Oh, ... Mmm... let me see ... Leonora is it not?’

‘It is the first time you guessed correctly,’ remarked Leonora absently.

‘Ah well, you look quite fierce today.’

‘Damon ... will you help me?’

‘Anything in my power,’ he said, surprised but gallant. His hand directed her into a seat, and he came around the desk to sit on the edge, and eye her furious little face at his leisure.

It took her a moment of reflection to speak. ‘I have no subtlety...’

Sir Damon Regis surveyed her, then commented, ‘And yet you generally get what you want.’

‘Perhaps. But now, my methods may be too direct. I do not wish to damage another person’s reputation.’ Her brother-in-law sat back, but had intense interest on his dark face. Leonora’s furious eyes held his. ‘But I need to know how to inflict damage on the Duke of Bexley.’

One of Damon’s mobile brows rose, but his face was not amused. ‘If he has offended you, it is for others, like me or Lucian, to inflict the damage,’ he said dangerously.

‘I think he has already been punished...’

‘You mean that rum bout with Foggy Carswell...?’

‘Mr Carswell is *hurt*...’

‘Is *that* it?’ laughed Damon. ‘Foggy might be bruised, but I believe the duke is in bed with a broken rib, as well as a colourful complexion.’ He looked down in amusement at Leonora Fortune’s unappeased face. ‘You are very angry, but it seems the matter has already been handled. I must remember to thank Foggy.’

‘Do not mention the matter to him, I beg.’ Leonora blushed. ‘He might have done as much for any young lady. The thing is, he saw me distressed ...! But I should not like my family to give him the impression that I think he did so for my sake.’

‘And did he?’ asked Regis, his voice invitingly confiding.

‘I do not...’ she looked up at him, her eyes large and blue, and more like her determined self than the blushing seventeen-year-old she had been a second ago. ‘I may as well tell you, but please do not repeat it, that I have come to London with Mr Carswell in mind.’ Regis, not wishing to stop the flow, merely made another interesting eyebrow shape to signify he was listening. ‘He ... he does not share my interest...’ Regis finally remembered seeing some bizarre Carswell behaviour in a ballroom and began to see the light, ‘but he is so kind, and he feels, perhaps, that I lack the protection of my papa...’

Damon Regis was ashamed of himself. No female had been appointed chaperone to the twins, who, after all, had each other and were generally accompanied at balls by their father and brother. While sometimes Georgette, and sometimes

Jocasta, had spent a ball in their company, they had probably all assumed too easily that someone else was responsible for them. That Leonora had been insulted in some way by the duke made his blood boil. But really, his anger was that he had not noticed it himself.

He looked down at the little virago and was worried. She *did* lack subtlety, and the anger in her might be dangerous. He adjured her to do nothing, that Lucian and he could deal with the matter, but was not reassured by her looks.

So when an altercation took place on a dance floor sometime later, he was not really surprised.



‘Lucian!’ said the Demon King later that afternoon, ‘Let us pay a visit! We should pick up Robbie on the way.’

‘The full coterie of Fortune sister brothers-in-law?’ said Onslow, raising a brow beneath his blonde curls. ‘Is something amiss?’

‘Foggy Carswell should be thanked and apologised to.’

‘Tell me on the way.’

Robert, Lord Paxton, was loath to disclose any business of Foggy’s, but hearing about the fight in Jackson’s, he eventually gave limited information to his trusted brothers-in-law. First, he asked, ‘What precisely do you know?’

‘Leonora has told me that she has ... not to put it too delicately ... become inclined to Foggy Carswell,’ said Sir Damon.

‘Really?’ said the marquis, shaking his blond curls, ‘*Really?*’

‘Yes. It seemed it has been her intention since the house party at Castle Fortune three years ago,’ Paxton added.

‘Ah! The Lion’s Venture.’

‘But *three years* ago?’ objected Sir Damon, ‘She would have been only fourteen...’

‘Apparently, she told him she would come for him, and she has. The thing is ... Foggy ain’t interested in marriage ... so he tried to keep his distance in case she might be still...’ Paxton finished lamely.

‘Yes, yes...’ said Lucian, ‘but now it would seem that Foggy has taken an interest in Miss Fortune’s business. I thought he was doing his best to avoid the whole thing.’

‘He was.’ Paxton looked at his brothers-in-law, one dark, one blond, both the definition of men of integrity. ‘The thing is, Pet and I have pushed him a little. Marguerite showed Desmond a thing. The only human being who can tell the twins apart from a distance, including her sisters is ...’

‘Foggy?’ said Regis, amazed.

‘Yes. So it seemed to us that, much as he is avoiding her, Foggy is ... well, we thought he should at least *speak* to the girl. And something must have occurred when he did ...’

‘He must have witnessed, or perhaps she mentioned, some insult from the duke.’

‘She would not have complained,’ said Regis, ‘That is not the Lion’s nature.’

‘True. But somehow, he found out, and he punished the duke on her behalf.’

‘I’ve never seen him as a bloodthirsty sort of fellow,’ remarked Lucian.

‘But insult to his sister or mother sets him off,’ said Lord Paxton, ‘I’ve seen it. He can become cold in the extreme. Almost a different person.’

‘But why would he?’ said Lucian.

‘Because she was without the protection of her family,’ said Regis, shaking his head in self-disgust. ‘Gentlemen, we *know* the Fortune men offer no protection ... and yet we have done little to show *our* interest in the matter of the twins’ come-out. And consequently the duke felt safe to offer insult to Leonora.’

They exchanged chastened glances.

When they met Foggy, desolately reading a sporting journal in his father's study, they found out, after some persuasion, what the insult was.

The Demon King demon king looked like the devil indeed. 'He said *that?* To see if a kiss might make her a duchess? As though she were auditioning for a role on Drury Lane. *My sister?*'

'Thank you for punishing him, Foggy,' said the marquis, 'It saves me resorting to murder.'

'I did not wish to get involved in your family business, but it seems that no one noticed ... do you know that George Fortune introduced his sister to *Lord Dunton?*'

'Probably a wager,' said Regis half-cynical, half-angry.

The Marquis of Onslow sat on the edge of a desk. 'So are we to take it that you are a particular friend of my sister Leonora?' he asked, in an insinuating fashion.

'What?' Foggy jumped. 'No! Not at all, not at all, not at all!' his hand gestures made the marquis grin. His Adam's apple bobbed another few times before he added, 'Of course, we *are* acquainted — but the duke had ... had angered me any number of times, and hearing of that ... and to a lady of my acquaintance...' his eyes watered as he gazed into three sets of eyes, Onslow's suspiciously bland, Regis' ironically amused and his friend Paxton's sympathetic but disbelieving, and added desperately, 'friend of my sister's, ye know! Well, I was obviously tipped over the edge, ye see,' he made a punching gesture with his fist. '*Any* lady telling me such a thing would have caused my ... disgust at the duke, since I already had cause to ... to...'

Paxton covered his face with his hand to cover his grin. Poor Foggy, cornered in this manner! Perspiration was gathering on his forehead.

'Quite!' The demon king put a hand on Foggy's shoulder consolingly, while throwing a chastising look at Lucian to stop his provoking for his own amusement. 'Don't fear, Carswell. We know just how it is. And we all—' he indicated the

brothers-in-law, 'will take care the girls are properly looked after.'

Three sets of eyes swerved to the Marquis of Onslow, who sighed. 'I expect you mean *I* will take care.' Two grins, from his relatives, greeted this long-suffering remark, and the result was that Georgette visited her papa that afternoon to beg that the twins be allowed to stay with her. Since both he and George were bored with their chaperonage, however loosely performed, he agreed with a shrug.

'But it falls on you, Georgette, to see them handsomely established. The Duke of Bexley is taking an interest in one or another of them. That would be an excellent match.'

Georgette, who knew that by this evening his grace would be well warned off from ever *dancing* with a Fortune twin again, nodded her assent mendaciously and went upstairs to inform the twins.

Chapter 14

Marguerite's Suitor

Marguerite was more excited than Leonora had ever seen her as she awaited her drive with Mr Chesterton the next morning. Leonora regarded the gentleman closely. He was universally pleasing during the morning visit to Onslow House, laughing and smiling with the marquis and marchioness, herself, as well as Portia and her husband Lord Paxton, who also happened to be there.

It was Marguerite's demeanour, just a trifle shyer than usual, that made Leonora pay attention at all. She narrowed her eyes at the gentleman, but he seemed simple and friendly rather than flirtatious and dangerous. His gaze upon her sister was warm, but that made Leonora incline to him as a man of good taste.

When the couple left for their drive, Leonora drove off to the park too, squeezed into Paxton's phaeton beside her sister Portia, on the other side of her husband. She asked Paxton what he knew of Mr Chesterton, but Paxton could only say he knew nothing against him. Leonora's attention was soon taken by something else, however. In the park, Robbie stopped his phaeton to meet another vehicle. The Honourable Mr Carswell's. That gentleman offered to take Miss Fortune up for a turn, and Leonora tried not to shake as she was handed down, then up by a tiger, who jumped back on the stand at the rear of Mr Carswell's high-perch phaeton.

They drove off silently, Leonora so happy she could not speak.



Marguerite did not know how it was that she was so nervous when she sat with Mr Chesterton. She had treated the Season thus far as a Great Game, and though some aspects had made her uncomfortable (gentlemen whose hands were clammy or grasping, whose tone towards her insinuating) she had seldom been nervous, even when paid extravagant compliments by the

boldest of these men. Leonora had explained to her that much attention they received was to be taken lightly, for they were pretty enough to be the *sport* of some gentlemen who *meanwhile* looked for more rank or fortune in the women they wished to marry. Despite their surname, they had only a small portion (from their mama) each, and their lineage, while ancient, was a now-poor barony. Rich gentlemen, with a less ancient name, might show interest, especially because they would be in-lawed to an earl and a marquis, but these were thin on the ground.

But Mr Chesterton fell into none of these categories, thought Marguerite. She could hardly think of such things in his presence at all — but for her new awareness that her own behaviour could affect Leonora's reputation. For this she did consider the possibilities, though her attention was mostly on his strong hands on the reins, his easy, open smile, his grey, laughing eyes. His jaw was just as firm as Lucian or Damon's, and though he was not as handsome as Lucian or as striking as the Demon King, Marguerite found him more mesmerising. His hands made several protecting motions towards her as the wheels hit a stone or a furrow, though he never touched her. Marguerite found that she relaxed a little, and smiled at him warmly.

‘I think I am very lucky to be given the privilege of driving you today, Miss Fortune — you and your sister have created quite a stir in Town.’

‘Well, there haven't been twins newly out for four years, I've been told,’ Marguerite said lightly.

‘Even if you were not a twin, your success must have been secured. You are too lovely.’

‘I think, sir,’ said Marguerite with a frown, ‘that you should not say so.’

‘I am rebuked! But surely you have heard so before?’ he laughed, and it seemed that the boundary he had jumped had been in jest, too. She was making too much of it. But fulsome compliments made in the ballroom, or under the eye of

Georgette in the visiting hours, were somehow not quite permissible in the intimacy of a drive.

‘I have. But not from *well-behaved* gentlemen,’ she said severely.

‘Ah! Have I shown myself a rackets fellow?’ he pulled the carriage over, as though to regard a bed planted with roses. ‘I assure you Miss Fortune, that is, Miss *Marguerite*, that I am most sincere in my dealings with you.’ He had turned, and regarded her openly, and Marguerite blushed. One gloved hand had dropped to the seat, and it found her own little hand and squeezed it, briefly and unobtrusively. He picked up the reins, saying, ‘We should not linger, in case the old cats talk of us. But I must ask you, Miss Marguerite, when I might see you again?’

But this Marguerite had heard too often not to be able to handle with aplomb, ‘Oh,’ she said airily, ‘I cannot say. We are a great deal occupied.’

‘Are you to attend Lady Bexley’s ball?’ he asked, referring to the duke’s mother’s promised function.

‘We have received an invitation, but...’ Marguerite thought of Leonora spitting out the duke’s name on an evening a few days since, ‘we may not attend.’

‘Well, I shall. If only in the slight hope that you might reward me with a dance.’

Marguerite smiled down at her gloves. When he handed her from the carriage later, the gloved hand which had just recovered from the squeeze before, now became a searing hot appendage. She smiled shyly as she left him.

‘You really are the most fascinating ...’ he remarked as though to himself. He gave her a warm look, full of secretive laughter, and Marguerite’s breast swelled. She looked back at him trustingly, and saw, in confusion, his grey eyes darken to black. She pulled away and ran up the stairs to Onslow House.

Leonora and Georgette awaited her in Georgette’s little private salon, and she rushed in, having removed only bonnet, but not pelisse, hand at her heart.

‘Is this what it is like, Georgie?’ she asked the marchioness with a breathless tone. ‘Does your heart race whenever you think of him?’

‘Well, I suppose you could do with some tea, my dear,’ sighed Georgette, ‘then tell us all about it.’

Leonora, in her own private daze, tried to sharpen up and pay attention.

The conversation caused Georgette to consult her husband, enclosed in his study with his man of business, immediately. ‘What do you know of a Mr Chesterton, my love?’

‘Nothing at all. He is newly returned from the military, I believe, lived some time abroad, and is now returned to inherit his father’s property. Which is, I think, modest but respectable.’

‘Marguerite won’t mind that.’

‘Marguerite?’

‘She seemed moved by her drive with the gentleman.’

‘I’ll ask at the club.’

‘Yes, do. For all she’s been enjoying her Season, I have never heard her express a preference before.’ She smiled, ‘I will bring Felix down from his nap soon. Come and greet him when you’ve finished here.’ Georgette knew it would take no persuasion — Onslow was an unfashionably doting father.

The Onslow party had arrived a little later that evening. Jocasta and Portia came in with Georgette and her husband, plus the ever-present Sir Justin Faulkes, the brothers-in-law, and finally (and the twins squeaked when they saw it) Katerina, the Countess of Covington, at her very first ball. Katerina wore a green silk dress (that the twins remembered had been made for the Season their sister had never attended) and her red hair, usually thrust back into a careless coil, was atop her head in ringlets. She looked perfectly beautiful. The girls made their way over as fast as permitted in a ballroom, and hugged the sister they had not seen for nearly a year soundly. Katerina put up with this stoically, and even patted

Marguerite's back once — as far as a public display of affection would permit.

'Your life of seclusion in the country is finally broken, Katerina,' laughed Marguerite.

Katerina's brows rose. 'Seclusion? We wish. If it was not bad enough that Sir Andrew Templeton invades our doors at any time he chooses, there are now the Bellamys, not six miles away, who do the same. We have settled on one dinner each Friday evening at one of the houses, but we cannot guarantee that they limit themselves to this. Especially Drew. I must marry him off to keep him occupied!'

Georgette smiled, glad that the Covingtons had a more rounded life than she'd feared. Their great work notwithstanding, friends were important, considered Georgette. And though Kat complained, she must count these as friends indeed, or she (or her husband) were quite able to be rude enough to eject them from her home.

Chatter was interrupted by gentlemen's dance demands and even Katerina gave way a few times to take the floor.

An hour later an extremely tall gentleman, dressed respectably enough in fine knit knee breeches and well-fitting coat, but with curly locks rather standing at attention in every direction above his vulpine face, entered the ballroom and headed towards the Onslow party.

'Covington!' said Georgette joyfully, 'Didn't you say you would not come?'

'Yes, but I have misplaced a book I need immediately, and I cannot wait to ask Katerina ... where is she?'

Georgette gestured to the ballroom floor, where Katerina was making an elegant figure in her first waltz, being twirled underhand by the handsome Sir Justin Faulkes.

'*He has his hands on her!*' growled the earl, and marched off, pushing his way into the ballroom throng.

'Lucian, stop him!' said Georgette, between amusement and outrage.

‘Justin will manage it.’ He looked on as his friend did so urbanely, patting the shoulder of the tall man who had wrested his wife from his arms rudely, and making it seem like a comfortable joke. The earl’s face remained stiff and dark in expression, but he suffered the friendly overtures even as he pulled his wife’s hand firmly through his arm.

As they returned, the marquis leaned sideways to his wife and said, ‘Thaddeus voiced exactly what *I* think every time.’

Georgette’s eyes flew to him, shocked and amused, ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘*He has his hands on her!*’ the marquis reprieved. ‘Only, I do not voice it aloud.’

‘Silly!’ said the marchioness, taking his arm affectionately. Then she raised a brow, ‘*Every time?*’ she asked in a lowered tone.

‘*Every time, my darling!*’ he whispered in her ear, and the pretty marchioness blushed.

Chapter 15

Leonora's Ill-fated Drive

Leonora's drive, on the same day as Marguerite's happy drive with Mr Chesterton, had been very different.

Seated beside Mr Carswell at last, she was a trifle overcome. He sat silent, though occasionally his mouth opened as though he would say something, and in between times his Adam's apple bobbed up and down above his high stock cravat.

Leonora wanted to relieve his stress — but that he was beside her at last affected her in a way that she had not anticipated. He had been her clear target, and there had been more determination than emotion in that. But ever since arriving in Town, and seeing more of Mr Carswell's qualities, she was aware that this aim had become emotional, not simply rational. She had reasoned from her first meeting that he was a good man, but his hidden strengths had been revealed, and she had become somewhat overwhelmed by admiration for him. She gazed at his profile seeing his strong nose, well-formed lips, the pale blue eyes gazing ahead, their fair lashes pointed down at the side, and curling in the middle. She sighed.

'Is there something on my face?' Carswell said, blushing.

'I was staring. It was rude, sir, I am sorry.'

'But *why* were you—?' he turned from the horses briefly and regarded her, amazement and frustration warring. 'What on earth is there to—?'

Leonora had recovered herself and sat up a little. 'Do you wish me to tell you that you are handsome? Well, so I shall.'

'Mmm? I beg your pardon? ... You say the most *ridiculous* things ... it is not kind to jest with a fellow ... I mean, you shouldn't say such things to gentlemen.'

'But it is only to *you!*' said Leonora stoutly.

By this time Carswell, who had anticipated employing a light-hearted, acquaintance-type tone for this interview realised he was lost once more and found himself instead covered in blushes.)

‘Compliments to gentlemen on their appearance,’ he said, finding himself lecturing her as he would Christiana when he wanted to annoy her, ‘make a young girl sound *fast*.’

Leonora clutched his arm and he looked down, first at her hand and then at her face, fearfully, ‘Oh,’ she said, her eyes round and innocent, with the beginning of tears forming, ‘I would *never* say so to anyone but *you*, Mr Carswell!’

Foggy was not up to this. Her eyes were beautiful and true and now tearing up, because of *him*. ‘No, no!’ he said, consolingly. ‘Just giving you a hint. But you really *shouldn’t* say so, even to me. I mean *especially* to me—’

‘You *do* think I am fast!’ Leonora almost wailed.

This could get tricky. People were beginning to turn. ‘Please no! I do *not*.’ He drove on, and Leonora made no other sound than a sniff for some time.

‘I meant to be calm like an acquaintance, just as you wanted — only to speak with you about ordinary things, you know. But now I have upset you.’ Her husky voice was a trifle broken, and now he feared the social repercussions of being seen with a distraught lady rather less than he cared for alleviating her upset. Carswell tried to use his voice again, and again only managed a fish impression. ‘But you asked me why I stared,’ she continued, ‘and I could not *lie* to you.’

‘Do not be so silly, I pray you,’ he was attempting to sound comforting and chiding at once and it was a difficult task. He tried again. ‘You meet many handsomer fellows than I, and you don’t *gawp* at them, I notice.’ When his mouth *did* work, Foggy was finding, it did not say what he intended.

‘I wasn’t *gawping*,’ protested Leonora, ‘only *looking*. That is a horrid word ... I do think you are cruel.’

She hiccupped a sob, and Carswell panicked enough to drop the reins. Regaining control took him a second and he

pulled the phaeton down a side path that seemed deserted for the moment.

‘Don’t cry, *please*, Miss Fortune.’

‘I won’t,’ Leonora assured him. ‘I do not really know what is wrong with me. I feel a good deal more moved than I thought I would. I *promise* I shall not be like this the next time you speak to me, so *please don’t*...! Let us at least be friends.’

‘Yes, yes of course!’ Then in a panic he added, ‘Well, if not friends, then, then ... fortuitous acquaintances,’ was the best he could come up with not to be misunderstood. ‘You are ... a very ... nice ... girl,’ he added, feebly, after a long minute’s silence laced with his companion’s depression.

‘Do you think so?’ said Leonora, hopefully.

‘Of course,’ said Carswell, stoutly, but a trifle distantly.

‘Yes, I see,’ said Leonora in a sad little voice. ‘You do not mean it, but you mind your manners well. You think me *fast* and *pushing* and you do not admire blondes at all, and think that Marguerite and I are given too much attention, and that I have Everything seemed to be spilling from her, and Leonora, usually going a straight path to her destination, was annoyed at herself for berating him.

‘I do not admire *blondes*?’ asked Carswell, bemused by everything, but managing to question the most obscure statement.

‘You were the only one at the Fortune Castle house party that did not like Miss Julia White.’

‘*That?* I suppose I *was* the only one,’ said Carswell vaguely, thinking back to the house party. ‘Something about her just didn’t sit well with me ... but then I’m not a great admirer of ladies generally. But why you think I belittle *your* success this Season, I do not know. Your sister and you are *clearly* the prettiest in any ballroom,’ he said casually, but Leonora gasped. Carswell did not notice the reaction and continued, ‘... it is just that I ... And you are not *fast*, I said that in case you were complimenting gentlemen all over the place, and to warn you — but if you only say so to *me*, that’s alright.’ He

reflected, then horrified, began again, ‘At least it *isn't* for ... for it is clearly an untruth and children should not tell untruths.’

‘But I am not a child, and it is *not* untrue,’ insisted Leonora. ‘You are the handsomest of *everyone!*’

Carswell blinked a few times, then turned to her. Those earnest eyes looked up at him once more and he feared he would lose control of his horses if he did not look away. He turned back to the road with an effort and let a few seconds go by before he said, sympathetically, ‘You have obviously been hit on the head a little, Miss Fortune. You have the wrong fellow.’ He took a breath. ‘I wanted to explain to you today, *calmly*, and *rationaly*, that it really has nothing to do with *you*, but it is that if you have any strange notions in your head, and I’m not saying you *do*, mind, but *if* you do, then it is just that *I* am not ... not at all ... a marr—’

‘Miss Du Maurier is hailing you,’ said Leonora suddenly and bleakly.

‘Pardon me?’ said Foggy, almost annoyed that he had been about to make things clear to her, and had been interrupted.

‘Miss Du Maurier,’ Leonora informed him. ‘You should stop. I do not wish to hear you tell me *that*, hear you foist me off again quite yet. I need some time to talk in an *ordinary* way to you. Somehow this drive has not gone well. Let us at least have a *few* more tries to be civil.’

Carswell had obeyed her command automatically, and stopped the carriage.

‘Linton!’ said Miss Du Maurier, very pretty today, in a velvet bonnet and pelisse the colour of her soft brown eyes. ‘I did not mean you to stop.’

‘I will alight,’ said Leonora dully.

‘Don’t be absurd,’ said Carswell briskly, irritated. ‘I must see you home, you have no maid with you.’

Leonora sat down again. Miss Du Maurier was seriously surprised at the shortness of his tone, for usually Linton Carswell was the cheeriest of companions with the very

kindest of manners towards ladies he knew well enough to speak to.

‘Oh then, Miss Du Maurier,’ said Leonora in a commanding manner, ‘if you do not object to a crush, will you leave your maid and mount with us for a turn?’

Carswell breathed in, but gave Miss Du Maurier his hand when she jumped up at the other side of him to Miss Fortune.

‘No Mama today, Mary?’ asked Foggy in a friendly fashion to the blushing girl.

‘She did not care for exercise this morning,’ smiled Miss Du Maurier. Leonora was annoyed at the smile, and the way Foggy talked to *Mary*, even though it was *she*, Leonora, who had instigated all this. ‘I wanted a little air.’

‘And a little conversation, I’ll warrant,’ said Foggy kindly. ‘Have you made new friends in Town?’

‘Not many, but Mr Steel took me up today, and I also encountered Christiana walking with Mr Jasper. Mr Steel seemed displeased to see them together.’ Miss Du Maurier turned to Leonora, ‘It is Miss Fortune, is it not?’

‘Yes, and to anticipate your next question,’ said Leonora brightly, ‘it is *Leonora* Fortune, the eldest twin. People do not always like to ask.’

‘You are so alike and *so* pretty!’

‘Thank you! As are you, Miss Du Maurier. Your bonnet and pelisse today are divine. Do you like Town?’

‘Oh, very much! I have been living quite quietly in the country. I am almost a bumpkin, I fear,’ she laughed, lowering her eyes.

Leonora did not quite like her self-deprecation. There seemed to be something *coming* in it, as though she were requiring an answering compliment from her listeners. She liked it less when Carswell looked his sympathy at Miss Du Maurier, saying indulgently, ‘Nonsense! You look very smart these days, Mary. No tangled curls to catch on bushes

anymore.’ He smiled at the childhood reminiscence, and Miss Du Maurier blushed. Leonora’s eyes narrowed nastily.

‘I was such a *forlorn* little child,’ Miss Du Maurier said softly, amused at herself, ‘but you and Christiana were *always* so kind to me.’

‘I, too, lived only in the countryside until this Season, Miss Du Maurier,’ said Leonora, in a crisp voice, meant to break the sentimental spell, ‘We have that in common.’

‘Really?’ said Miss Du Maurier, politely.

Carswell said, ‘But you hardly looked *forlorn*. You were the most self-possessed child I have ever seen.’

‘Oh, Mr Carswell knew you as a child?’ Miss Du Maurier’s large eyes went from one to the other.

‘It was only one meeting,’ said Carswell briefly.

‘But he decided my character *fully*,’ announced Leonora, in a pet.

‘Wasn’t it *you* who decided...?’ said Carswell, needled, then stopped, blushing, annoyed more with himself than she. *This woman ...!*

‘Why do you not drive to Grosvenor Square, and then continue in the park with your *childhood friend*, Mr Carswell?’ said Leonora repressively. ‘I think I have a headache.’

‘Certainly!’ he turned to Miss Du Maurier stiffly. ‘Do you wish to return first to inform your maid, Mary? Perhaps I could take you back home after I go to the square.’

‘That would be lovely, Linton. I have walked a good deal today,’ said the quiet, accommodating voice of Miss Du Maurier in reply.

Leonora sat ramrod stiff and silent beside him all the way to Grosvenor Square, where she leapt down without aid, saying only, ‘Farewell Miss Du Maurier!’ and ran up the steps to the marquis’ house.

Some way down the road, Miss Du Maurier ventured to say, 'Miss Fortune seemed a little put out today, Linton. Have I *interrupted* some private conversation?'

'Whatever do you mean? Not at all, not at all!' he said appalled.

'Oh, that is alright then.' She smiled sweetly and looked ahead. Then, after a little moment, she added, 'Perhaps she has a short temper, as many beauties do?'

'Not at all. You must not think so. It is *I* who ...' he looked down at her, suddenly confiding, 'You know I can put my foot in my mouth sometimes, Mary. I said something cloddish and stupid, and she is perhaps a little annoyed with me. Nothing at all to do with you.'

Miss Du Maurier looked sceptical.

'Really!' reiterated Carswell. 'Miss Fortune has a pleasant temper usually. It was all me.'

They had traversed several streets and were almost at her house when she asked. 'I suppose, like every young gentleman in Town, you are one of Miss Fortune's admirers.'

'Not at all!' said Carswell, throwing this imputation off with energy, 'That is ... no!'

'Then you admire her *sister* more?'

'*Whatever...?* No, no, no!' He waved a dismissive hand.

Miss Du Maurier jumped from the phaeton and looked up at him. 'Thank you for today, Linton. And for telling me that.'

He was a little confused as to her last statement, but he ignored it, being too involved in a pinching feeling of guilt. He was uncomfortable to talk about Miss Fortune to others at all. Nothing he could possibly say seemed right. He should not have—! He broke off his thought however, to say, in a distracted way, 'What's that? ... Oh, goodbye Mary!'



'You are in love?' asked Leonora of her twin once they had reached their pretty bedchamber in the marquis' house. They

might have had a room each, but of course they had opted for their usual arrangement.

‘I do not know. But he is so *very* ...’ She held her sister’s hand. ‘You know we have been a little spoiled by attention since we came to Town, but this is the first time I have felt...’ She held her chest once more and Leonora smiled. But Marguerite saw that it was an effort, and she asked, ‘How did your drive go, Leo? You have been so strange this afternoon that I did not wish to ask, even in front of Georgie.’

Leonora’s face collapsed in a way that Marguerite had not seen since they were small the day their mama had died. ‘Oh Button, it all went *wrong!*’

‘*No!*’ Marguerite was shocked and sympathetic at once.

‘I cannot work out how it happened. But being near him had an effect on me, overturned my thoughts, and I started to babble and behave badly. And you know how *gentle* Mr Carswell is?’

‘Yes indeed.’

‘I even made him *angry*.’

‘*No!*’ then Marguerite looked at her sister hard. ‘You didn’t *kiss* him, did you?’

‘Why would I...?’

‘I just thought you might have ... done something impulsive,’ Marguerite giggled.

‘I did *not*.’ She looked ahead, recalling, ‘Only my mouth got carried away...’

‘Well it *is* one’s mouth that...’

‘Button! *Stop!*’

Marguerite hugged her, but as she had planned, Leo was now between sobs and laughter. ‘Tell me all!’



It was Jocasta’s turn to oversee the girls at Almacks that evening, before they removed to Georgette’s house to live. Papa had been more reluctant to part with them than he had

with Jocasta two years ago, fearing that these, his last human sacrifices on Cupid's altar, might be guided to make matches inferior to his wishes. But laziness inclined him, at last, to agree. The girls caused him a deal of botheration, and to attend every ball or dinner of the Season neglecting his own heady pursuits and cosier armfuls was a bore that he was secretly glad to escape.

Jocasta felt very grown up indeed. She had nearly been a mother last year, but it had ended almost before she had been aware of the possibility, and Georgette, pregnant at the same time, alone had borne a child. Little Lord Felix was a stout fellow of six months now, and it made Jocasta happy to see him. But she thought that just the possibility of her own motherhood had added to her maturity, and was hoping to be sensible enough to be a mama any day now. So it was with a motherly air that Jocasta, only twenty years old herself and two inches shorter than her sisters, oversaw the chaperonage of these exceptionally admired girls. They danced every dance, and that let Jocasta steal a few dances of her own with her husband and two of his dearest friends. As the girls returned from a set, and the gentlemen arrived around to demand the next dance, Jocasta smiled while trying to identify any gentlemen who might be considered a threat — in a very responsible way, she thought to herself. She had only the sketchiest knowledge of gentlemen, though, and she suddenly felt herself not quite up to the task. Well, a dance couldn't hurt much. She happened to catch sight of Leonora's face at this point. A young buck, whose name Jocasta had not caught, was bowing before Leonora in cheerful good form, but Jocasta saw the fatigue in her sister's eyes before she covered it with a smile.

'Leonora!' Jocasta said before the gentleman had time to talk, 'Could you come sit with me, for I feel a trifle spent.'

Leonora looked both relieved and surprised, and with apologies to her suitor, she left to find a bench with her sister. There was a gap in the crowd surrounding the ballroom floor and the sisters, two blondes who were nevertheless completely different, looked at Marguerite dancing by with a dashing partner.

‘Marguerite reminds me of myself in my first Season in London. She is enjoying every moment of it.’

Leonora smiled, but a trifle wearily, ‘She’s a carefree Button.’

‘Yes, as was I. Only she is not so flirtatious or so vain as I was.’ Leonora looked at Jocasta, concerned, but her sister’s mood was reminiscent, but also sunny. Jocasta turned to Leonora and said, ‘But *you* remind me of myself in my *second* Season, when I had recognised the folly of my own vanity, and it took *effort* to smile at people when I no longer wished to.’

Leonora looked at her hands. ‘The Season is just a trifle tiring.’

‘Yes,’ scoffed Jocasta, ‘because *you* lack so much energy!’ Her voice became gentle. ‘I shall not ask what troubles you, Lion, for you wish to hide it. I will simply see that you get respite. You need tell me nothing.’ She held her sister’s clasped hands and shook them, as if awaking her. ‘I do not pity you, for I know that you are strong and will come about. And pity is so hard to bear for the receiver. But if you need an excuse to miss an occasion, use me. I shall not ask you why.’

‘Thank you. I *would* tell you all, Jocasta, but it is just that I do not know where to start.’

‘Is it about your Venture?’

Leo’s eyes flew to Jocasta’s. ‘You knew? Oh, I suppose Damon told you.’

‘The Demon King would not squawk your secrets like a parrot, even to his wife. He is True Blue. But I am much better at noticing things these days, and I guessed.’

‘If *he* is not present, I am not at all sure why *I* am here,’ Leonora said in an effort at confiding to her sister, ‘It all just seems so futile.’

‘Think of the dance as exercise,’ recommended her sister. ‘Damon told me to find the joy in the occupations themselves.’

‘Yes, I should,’ Leonora smiled slightly. ‘But balls come with all sorts of silly compliments and worse. It is wearisome.’

‘Is it because you no longer trust the gentleman’s sincerity?’ said Jocasta, remembering her own turmoil.

‘I don’t think of that. It doesn’t really matter whether they are sincere or not. It is simply uninteresting.’

‘It is as I said. In my first Season, my head was turned by the compliments of gentlemen, but in my second, I found it a burden of sorts. I think I understand you in feeling, at least. You are different, however. In your case it is because you only seek the regard of *one* gentleman?’

‘*That* is it. And I thought perhaps he might be here tonight, because he has vowed not to avoid me anymore, and I thought we might have a *dance* at least, and an opportunity for conversation...’

‘I see.’ Since Leonora did not seem reluctant to talk now, Jocasta probed further. ‘It has been three years since you met him. Was it love at first sight then? I have heard of such things. But you were *very* young—’

‘I was *too* young to feel any such thing. I just *decided* on him. And you know what I am when I decide.’

Jocasta did. ‘Well, you hadn’t met very many gentlemen.’

‘I knew he was kind and gentle and well-meaning, and that he had difficulty talking to young ladies. I thought he would make an excellent husband, and that since he lacked a little practicality and confidence, I would be the very wife for him.’

Jocasta blinked. ‘I see,’ she said.

‘I told him I would come for him,’ Leonora shook her head, ‘— but that was a childish mistake.’

‘Mmm?’

‘Yes, for it frightened him so much that he now avoids me.’ Her voice was sad, but then became like a child’s. ‘And I have been practising *very hard* to be a competent wife, but he did not *talk* to me and *now* I have to listen to a great many other gentlemen instead. It is dispiriting.’

‘Well, as I said, you may miss a party or two if it becomes too much.’

Leonora straightened her spine. 'I have to watch over Button.'

'Georgette or I, or even Portia can do so.'

'But you sisters have *no* idea the trouble my Button can get into. No idea at all.' The two looked at the ballroom revellers. 'Let us go back, the sets are breaking up,' said Leonora with forced energy. Jocasta squeezed her hand, suddenly understanding all those who had offered that useless, dreaded kindness to her two years since. But Leonora seemed to take some comfort from it, and said candidly, 'You are much nicer than you used to be, Jocasta!'

'Thank you,' said Jocasta ironically. 'I shall ignore the insult and take the compliment, for you are quite correct. It is all Damon's doing!'

Chapter 16

Jocasta and Mrs Ponsonby

Jocasta had heard a version of the tale of Julia Ponsonby's entrapping of Onslow in the garden room, and Marguerite's version of her sad, betrayed husband. She watched the beautiful wife and her handsome husband and saw the change in Julia. Georgette had asked her to intercede, and she had confessed her insecurity about doing so to her Demon King, but he had told her that she could and would be able to find the needed words. *Because she was Jocasta.*

Jocasta was driving her new phaeton and pair when she stopped and invited Julia to join her. Julia got up, admiring the horses. But then a silence fell for a minute.

'Are you sent by your sister to warn me off?' asked Julia with a brittle laugh.

'Georgette needs to issue no such warning,' replied Jocasta calmly, and a little gently. Julia's prickliness was evidence of her pain.

'You had not heard that her husband had a tryst with me?' said Julia, defiant.

'Setting that falsehood about would destroy *you* before him,' Jocasta answered without rancour. 'Is it that your life is in such ruins that you no longer care for your reputation, Julia?' Jocasta addressed her intimately, since to call her by the name *Ponsonby* at this juncture would be cruel, she felt.

Spots of colour suffused Julia's cheeks. 'How *dare* you?'

'If you do not take care, you will become an embittered old woman,' said Jocasta, sadly. 'It is time to decide whether your bad bargain—'

'What have you heard?' hissed Julia, mortified.

'Nothing, I intuit. From your behaviour. You were not always so.' Julia breathed deeply, as though to remember those bygone days, only eight months so. 'But now — what do you

decide? Do you become an old cat like Viscountess Swanson, loving to make the rest of the world wrong, or be more like Julia White? Interesting, beautiful, talented, vivacious, caring?’

The blonde beauty’s eyes dropped. ‘Julia *Ponsonby* can never be that.’

‘Because you have been destroyed? Will you *let* him destroy you? I was once destroyed. Not wilfully, but it mattered not. But I met a man who told me that everything I enjoyed was still there, waiting for me. I had to concentrate to see it once more in the face of my betrayal, my destruction,’ she turned and Julia was silent, but appeared to be listening. ‘My drawing, my music, my love of dance ... all things still were within me to be enjoyed. They could not be taken from me by one idiot. I began to see and understand. To enjoy it all again.’ She paused, cracking the whip a little to drive the new horses faster. ‘But *I* was never the fabulous Julia White. I was never the *supremely talented* Julia White. You have more to enjoy than ever I had. So what has he left of you? He cannot have taken *everything*.’

Julia was still for a moment before she said, but in a more candid tone, ‘He has taken my future life.’

‘It is the nature of society that many women make bad bargains, Julia. Look around and see how others deal with it. Some do so with great elan, and the wonderful Miss White inside you can do so too. You were ill advised. This is not all your own fault — but you may overcome. Look around in this throng. Many wronged women live better lives than you. It *is* possible.’

She saw Julia Ponsonby look around the coaches and pedestrians in the busy paths avidly, and hit upon various women who were known to have faithless or feckless husbands. ‘How do *they* live?’ asked Jocasta. ‘Some miserably, some bitterly, but some differently. Lady Swinton. She lives a life of service and of grace. Will you live as Lady Swinton or as bitter old Viscountess Swanson? You decide.’

But as Julia's eyes roamed the park, Jocasta saw them rest not on Viscountess Swanson or on Lady Swinton. They landed upon the Countess of Frampton, famed for her relationship with Lord Eccles, since their legal partners were feckless and faithless both. Jocasta sighed. Not precisely the point she had been trying to make, but it seemed as though Julia saw a way through, at least. So long as she did not think *Lucian* were a candidate lover for her future life, it was none of Jocasta's business.

Mr Ponsonby, Jocasta believed, had another partner. Damon had heard something of the kind when she had told him of Georgette's mission for her. As well, if Ponsonby's behaviour with the innocent Marguerite was a norm, he had other lovers, too, or at least flirts. The innocent, as well as the experienced. His marriage was thus a lie, and Jocasta could hardly imagine how this must hurt. The rest of one's life with a faithless, cynical partner...! But once the bargain was made, one must deal with the reality.

'Julia?' Jocasta asked suddenly, '*Why* did Mr Ponsonby marry you?'

Julia looked sick again.

'Yes,' said Jocasta directly, since she knew that kindness was the last thing Julia needed right now. 'He married you for your beauty, no doubt, but mostly for your money. He knew he might lose the earldom if Thaddeus married, so he rushed you.'

'How do you know all this?' said Julia.

'Oh,' said Jocasta, 'I am not clever like Katerina, but I am much more *au fait* with London matters. I guessed. He has been settled with a generous sum from your papa, is it not so? But still, it is the fact that you are an *heiress* to your papa's *entire* fortune that is your main benefit. Much of the inheritance he desires is to come. *That* is your power, Julia, for you may threaten to urge your papa to deny this inheritance to you, unless Ponsonby does some of your bidding, at least. You cannot make him good, but perhaps you can have a little control.'

The next morning over the breakfast that they normally had in silence, Julia took Jocasta's advice — if not quite in the way she'd intended. Since Ponsonby, a week after they were wed, had replied to her question about where he was going out to, with a ... 'Oh, to my mistress's house. I shall not return tonight!' Julia's humiliation knew no bounds. Her handsome husband's eyes had been laughing at her, and she knew afterwards that it was useless to talk to him on that, or any other subject, and did not stoop to do so. She cried in her bed, but with him she was silent instead. She was vivacious when in company with him, and submitted to his occasional demands on her body.

Today, she dismissed the servants from serving breakfast.

Now, using the threat that Jocasta had given her, she explained to her husband how life would be from now on. He heard her out calmly, continuing to eat his breakfast. He may keep his mistress, she told him, but only visit Julia's bed until she bore him a son. These visits would be short and sharp, and contain no hypocritical loving words. After pregnancy, he would never visit her again. She would then be free to take lovers of her own, to live a life independent of her husband. They would, of course, keep up appearances in the fashionable world.

Her young husband's answer was as cruelly sardonic as any could be. So long as Julia did not give birth to a red-haired child, he would undertake to bring up any brat she wished as his own. He already had a child with his Deborah, of whom he was quite fond, and apart from appearing to have an heir to please his mother, and his father-in-law, Julia might take any number of lovers right now, so long as she was discreet. Julia's children would inherit, for what would he care when he was dead? Though he might leave some small sum for the other brats, if he were still with Deborah. He would stop visiting Julia's chamber today, if she liked, for he said, yawning, that her reluctance gave him little pleasure. 'But remember, no red-haired rogues in your bed, my dear.' He laughed at her. 'I shall not stomach that!' He took his leave and wandered off to his club.

Julia watched him go, stung by his coldness, but felt also a little release. Her husband was a practical individual, at least. She moved to the smaller salon, and began to practice on the pianoforte for the first time since she had discovered the truth.



The next morning Mr Chesterton arrived at Onslow House considerably before the hour of calling, and persuaded Marguerite out for another drive. Unexpectedly, Miss Christiana Carswell was just behind him and apologised to the company for her early visit.

‘You are most welcome Miss Carswell,’ the marchioness assured her. ‘I take it that you are here for the twins.’ Marguerite came in then, wearing her bonnet and driving dress, and said, ‘Oh, Miss Carswell! You are here!’

Mr Chesterton, who had bowed at Miss Carswell, was looking a trifle disconsolate, probably, thought Georgette, amused, fearing for his drive. He had already joked with the marchioness, while Marguerite got ready, about *stealing a march* on the other callers.

‘Yes, indeed, Mr Chesterton,’ Georgette had smiled at him, then added practically, ‘But do not do so again, or you might find us at breakfast still.’

With laughing eyes, Mr Chesterton had bowed his apology. Georgette could quite see what made Marguerite giddy.

Now, Christiana Carswell looked a little nervous, which was quite unlike her usual, rather *knowing*, self.

‘Do you wish to go upstairs?’ asked Leonora, while Marguerite looked on with open eyes.

‘No, no, I just find myself in need of,’ she lowered her voice so that only the twins could hear her, ‘some sober guidance.’

‘Oh, you don’t need *me* then!’ said Marguerite brightly, ‘Come Mr Chesterton.’

Georgette smiled at this, and Marguerite escaped with her swain.

Leonora was also gone before the callers left their cards, because Christiana Carswell and she took a trip to a coffee house. It was the only one who served at this hour, mostly for early riders from the park.

It was evident by the time of the visit and an air of urgency exhibited by fair haired Christiana, that she had something of a private nature to discuss. Leonora's thoughts went to Mr Carswell, of course, but she held her tongue, and joined in the too-bright chatter of Christiana until they reached their destination and were served their coffee.

'You seem to have something to tell me, Miss Carswell,' Leonora said.

'Will you call me Christiana, Miss Fortune?' Christiana's eyes looked openly at Leonora. 'Not Miss Carswell. I suddenly realised, as I ran to your house this morning, that I have begun to think of you as a real friend.'

Leonora was touched, but said, 'You may only do so if you call me Leonora.' Although Christiana's demeanour was not one of concern, but rather suppressed excitement, she added, 'Is anything amiss with Mr Carswell?'

Christiana laughed. 'Only what has been amiss with him since birth! Sense. Has anyone ever had a more ridiculous brother?'

This last was said almost to herself, but Leonora frowned. 'How can you say so when he saved you so ably from Mr Prosper's horrid leer?'

Christiana frowned slightly, recalling, 'I suppose he has *some* uses!' she said. 'But it is not of Linton I wish to speak.' She saw that Miss Fortune looked a trifle less avid in her attention. 'But this is important!' she hissed so as not to be overheard by the few morning patrons.

Leonora sat to attention, for it was vulgar to whisper, and Christiana was never vulgar. 'Yes?'

'I realised that I cannot tell my family, and Roberta is my best friend — but she is also my cousin, and very close to her

mother. It is not that she would tell Aunt Mags *deliberately*, if I were to ask her not to, but...'

'You are meandering,' interrupted Leonora helpfully.

'Yes. It is just that I *must* tell someone. I have something to consider, but if I do not say my thoughts aloud, I cannot seem to make sense of them...'

'Tell me,' encouraged Leonora.

'Mr Jasper has offered for me!' Christiana's bright eyes held Leonora's, looking joyful for a second, then concerned.

Leonora thought that they should have gone to her room at the Onslows indeed. But she only said 'Oh!' with a look about the coffee house for large ears. Thankfully, there was no one close, or any other who seemed concerned with them. 'Is this a good thing? Has he applied to your papa?'

'No. He said he knew it to be against convention, but he did not want to apply to Papa without my permission.' She looked at Leonora, who blinked. 'In case I did not *incline* to him, and afterwards faced parental pressure to marry him.'

Leonora thought of the bluff, bumbling Lord Carswell and the gentle, caring Lady Eloise and giggled. 'Parental pressure. Exactly!' she said faintly.

Christiana smiled too. 'I begged him to wait until I considered the matter, for I did not know he had such intentions.'

Leonora's brows rose. 'Really? Roberta has been teasing you about the matter incessantly.'

'Well, but it is different when a man *really* stands in front of one and offers his life to you.'

'What a charming expression.'

'Isn't it?' said Christiana eagerly, obviously steeped in a memory. 'But I should not discuss his words with you or anyone else. Only, I do not know what to do.'

Leonora was thinking. All accounts she had heard of her sisters' couplings were very different from this. They had

thrown themselves into the arms of the one they loved very soon after hearing the proposal, to a woman. Did the fact that Christiana was *considering* the proposal mean that Mr Jasper was not her real love?

‘Is this your first such offer?’ asked Leonora.

‘Oh, no. I’ve had three offers before, last Season as well. But they were not really—’

‘I know. There are gentlemen with all *sorts* of low motives, or gentlemen who have no thoughts to share between you, but find you *convenient* or some such thing.’

‘Precisely! But Mr Jasper is different.’ Leonora did what she sometimes did with Marguerite, waited while Christiana gathered her thoughts. ‘He is such a *serious* man. Very different from Linton, you know, thought they are the same age, different even than Papa...’ She paused. ‘I do not know why he would consider me a suitable wife. I am frivolous, like Linton. I told Mr Jasper so, but he said he liked it, since he knew himself to be too grave. He became the head of his family at such a young age, he told me. He was just sixteen when his mother and father died, and he had four other siblings to be responsible for. Though they were all wards of their uncle, they never lived with him, but continued as a family at their home.’

‘You might be the light Mr Jasper desires in life, Christiana.’ Leonora smiled. ‘Sometimes, you know, Marguerite wants to be more serious, or useful. And sometimes I am afraid of her naivety, in case it leads her into danger, but I consider that I do not *wish* her to change, because she is such a bright sun in all our lives. Like you!’

Christiana looked hopeful. ‘Do you think so?’ Then she frowned. ‘But I do not know how to manage a house, or anything. Mama and Papa are not very sensible, you know, although very kind.’

‘Yes,’ said Leonora. ‘I was aware, and that is why I learnt to run a house.’

‘You did? Because of *Linton*?’ The depth of Leonora’s dedication to her silly brother still took Christiana’s breath away.

Leonora ignored this last. ‘You can too, Christiana. But you speak of being worthy of Mr Jasper. Does that mean you *wish* to marry him?’

‘I do not quite know,’ said Christiana with a ghost of a frown, ‘but I should not like to be a hindrance to him, I *do* know that.’

‘I think Mr Jasper, ten years the patriarch, probably now has a grasp of all that needs to be done for his family. Perhaps he only needs some jollity around him, to increase his happiness — and like my Button, you can certainly supply that for him.’ Leonora grasped her hand. ‘But Christiana, is this what you *wish*? Do you not want a more amusing, or perhaps more exciting, love?’

‘I would like a peaceful, safe life, not exciting. My uncle Pelleter was an exciting young man, I have been told. But he drinks and wagers and I believe, though I should not say so, he is not ... well, I would not say this to anyone else, but I once overheard Papa and Linton saying that my uncle should not let his mistress drive with him in the park.’ Leonora looked grave. ‘So, you see? And even in my own home, the surprises of a bad yield on the estate that casts everyone’s spirits down, or Papa’s occasional loss at Faro, or a dreadful milliner’s bill making Mama cry suddenly — I do not think I would enjoy such a life. I want to always know I am loved and protected and live a rational life.’

‘And since that is what he wants, too, you should not change.’ Leonora smiled. ‘I think you will, though. You will wish to share his burdens — though secretly, I think.’

‘Why do you think so?’ asked Christiana, a little flattered, but more intrigued.

‘Oh, I have seen you do so. You pay more attention to the bills at the dressmakers than does dear Lady Eloise, so as to spare your family. You say that you prefer to wear muslin in the evening and do not wish any more silk, and that the

number of bonnets you possess is bothersome, and you like to re-trim them yourself.'

'You noticed?'

'It is the kind of thing my sister Georgette used to do, to save the family's purse. I saw it when I was young, but I did not strive to emulate her, being much too selfish. But when I took over the accounts at Castle Fortune, I found that I *did* wish to make sensible adjustments, and that one sometimes had to borrow from Peter to pay Paul. You will make a wonderful wife, Christiana. But do you *want* to? With Mr Jasper, I mean?'

'I did not know before I spoke with you, dear Leonora, but I *do*. I really do. I was only concerned that I would not be *good* for him.'

Leonora smiled. 'I expect he is going through great trepidation right now. You should write him a note immediately, granting him leave to speak to your papa.'

'But what could I write, without embarrassment—?'

Leonora took out a notebook and silver pencil. She wrote some lines.

Dear Mr Jasper, it read, I think you should make an appointment to visit my papa.

Christiana Carswell.

'It is perfect. I shall go home and write it out immediately. You always get straight to the point, Leonora!'

'Not with Mr Carswell,' Leonora lamented. 'Or perhaps I do, but too quickly for your brother's sensibilities.'

'I thought you had agreed to be friends?' said Christiana, as they left the coffee house.

'Alas! The friendship is not flowing freely. I am not a pleasing person, like Marguerite. If I had been named for a flower, as she was, it should be as a thistle, I think. Mr Carswell was quite cross with me.'

'Cross? *Linton?*'

Leonora defended him. ‘It was all *my* fault. And I meant to be so *good* when he took me for a drive.’

Christiana could not help but laugh at her tragic tone. ‘But whatever did you say to *anger* him? I have never known Linton...’

‘A great many things. I think it started when I told him I thought him handsome, which I did not mean to say at all.’ Leonora sighed. ‘He thought I must have been hit on the head and told me not to tell untruths.’

Christiana was doing her best to control her giggles in the wake of this ridiculous account, ‘But you know, no wonder he doesn’t trust you. You must be the only one in London to think so!’

‘I can tell you another.’ Leonora gave a frigidly cold stare when she added, ‘Miss Mary Du Maurier *certainly* thinks so!’

Christiana, hearing her gentle friend’s name spat out in a vicious manner, was still amused, though she should not be. ‘I think Mary has always admired Linton, but only because he was kind to her as a child, you know.’

Christiana was sure Leonora’s blue eyes turned green when she said, ‘Yes, and he was kind to *me* as a child, which is why I can accurately tell that Miss Du Maurier *still* admires him.’

‘Well, perhaps so.’ Christiana hesitated, then added, ‘However, I should give you a *little* hope since you have been so kind to me.’

‘Yes?’ The girls stood still for a little, Leonora looking up at Christiana’s eyes.

‘I have never seen Linton cross with *any* young lady — except for me, of course. He has such good manners, you see.’

‘You mean he sees me as an annoying sister?’ said Leonora, disheartened.

‘No, I’m saying, that no matter what Mary Du Maurier did, Linton would *never* be angry, because he is a gentleman. But to you, who are *not* his sister, he feels *intimate* enough to be cross.’ Leonora blinked twice this time. ‘You are the *only* one,

Leonora.’ At the dawning of a wonderful smile on her friend’s face, Christiana thought of drawing back and added hastily, ‘But whether he could ever be brought to the point, you know ... Linton really does *not* want to be married!’

But Leonora was smiling, looking revitalised, and now a calculating look entered her eye. ‘Leave that to me. It is only because he does not know how *good* I will be to him.’ She looked Christiana square in the eyes. ‘You have renewed my resolve, Christiana. I shall save him from the annoyances to come. Miss Du Maurier, for example, could trap him before he knew it. She is quite sly enough.’

‘*Sly? Mary?* I know you are jealous, Leonora Fortune, but I assure you Mary is as harmless as a butterfly.’

‘You are *quite* mistaken!’ said Leonora firmly. ‘She is *just* the sort of girl he is powerless against. Because she knew him as a child, and because she professes to be helpless, he will have no defence against her. She could have him compromised in a trice. He is guarded against *me*, but blind to her. Well, I shall not let her have him. She would be of no use to him at all, but just hang on his sleeve, and demand things in a failing voice for the rest of his life.’

Christiana laughed, but when she went home and her old friend Mary was to be found with her mother and brother, she was suddenly not so amused. She stood on the threshold before anyone noticed her, looking a little, her interest quickened by Leonora’s suspicions, which she was still inclined to find droll.

‘Linton was kind enough to drive me home from the park yesterday, Lady Eloise! He was *too* polite...’ Mary Du Maurier said in her sweet voice.

Christiana saw the hope in her mother’s eye at this, and that her gaze slid over to her son, who was engaged in regarding a pocket watch, and answered vaguely, but politely, ‘Not at all!’

‘Perhaps,’ said her mother, hopefully, ‘You could walk dear Mary home after tea, Linton.’

'*Sorry* Mama! Meeting Desmond, you know!' Linton looked up briefly. He was, as Christiana saw, unaware of any machinations.

'Oh well,' said Mary, as though embarrassed, 'I have my maid of course. I should not wish to *bother* you.' She saw her brother twitch a little with the guilt that it was so easy to prod him into. Christiana used this frequently, though her way did not use Mary's saddened tone. But her friend was not being *calculating*, Christiana thought, appeasing her own suspicions, she was just a little interested in Linton. And Christiana was aware that it was *she* who had put this notion in her mother's head, who had then probably said some words to give Mary a hint, or ask her *opinion* of Linton in an insinuating manner, thus giving her *friend* some hope. What had begun as a casual jest might now become a trap for her brother. But now Mary was saying, chattily, 'I am going to the drapers after I leave here.'

'Perhaps Linton, after your appointment with the viscount, it may be convenient to pick Mary up in the phaeton,' suggested Mama. 'She might have trouble carrying her purchases, after all.'

He might have said, *send a footman*, and solved it. But four large eyes looked plaintively at her poor brother's, and Linton was caving in as he said, 'We-ell...'

Christiana suddenly saw it all, and felt her responsibility. 'No need,' she said, breezily entering the room. 'I shall go too, Mary, and we'll take a hackney on the way home to carry our boxes. Or failing that,' as she saw Mary Du Maurier's face fall, 'we may have it all delivered, you know!'

Mary, she now saw, *did* have designs on Linton, and Lady Eloise was happily encouraging. But Linton was not equipped, as Leonora Fortune said, against this sideways infiltration. If he liked Mary in that way, Christiana would have encouraged it all, too. She had no objections, but seeing a hitherto unnoticed *calculation* in Mary's behaviour, which upon reflection was *not* Leonora's style at all (the Lion, as Marguerite sometimes called her, was all frontal attack) Christiana saw that her brother might need a hint to know the

danger. Time to consider whether Mary was someone he could be interested in, or not. Christiana did not wish him to find himself in deep water *before* he realised.

She followed her brother into the hall. 'Linton, a word.' He turned, and she saw that he looked over her shoulder a trifle nervously, no doubt his sixth sense engaged even while his brain was still in ignorance. 'I think Mary has a *tendre* for you,' she said, borrowing some of Leonora Fortune's swift bluntness. 'If you are interested, that is wonderful, I suppose,' she smiled at Foggy's shocked face, 'But if not, or even if you are still considering it, do not take her up on your own, or treat her as you would me.'

'*Tendre?* Nonsense!' But he hissed all this, as though something had begun to make sense. His eyes travelled upward as though reviewing clues.

'It is a hint only,' said Christiana, shaking her head at his growing panic.

He seemed to have a sudden thought. 'Who have you been speaking to?'

'Really, it is not that. Only that Mama is all for your marrying, and she has said that Mary is the sort of girl ... and I suppose it might be my fault, for I said something to Mama as a jest once...'

'*Never* jest to Mama about marriage!'

'It was remiss of me,' Christiana said, hanging her head, 'I shall never do so again.'

Carswell looked stunned. It was evident that Christiana was helping, not teasing him. She liked Mary, but she still was warning him of a pitfall that it might be easy to fall into, giving Mary's closeness to his parents. Mary was coming out from the salon with his mama, chattering about the cost of French muslin, and she looked at him from across the hall with what now seemed sinister cheerfulness.

'I'm off,' he said crushing his hat onto his head. 'Don't outrun the carpenter, you two!' he called out, a little too

jocularly. He nodded significantly to Christiana, and she gave a sigh of relief.

‘You forgot your gloves,’ his sister said, crossing the hall as he left, and handing them to him by the door.

‘Thank you!’ he said, feelingly. ‘By the way, where were *you* early this morning?’ It was said in a lowered tone of the conspiratorial older brother, not an enemy.

‘Oh, I went with Leonora to have early morning coffee. I had something to tell her.’

‘Leonora? You mean Miss Fortune?’

‘We are particular friends now, and we call each other by name.’

‘You do, eh?’ He frowned. He felt a trap closing in. ‘You didn’t talk of me, did you? She didn’t give you the notion about Mary—’

‘It was *I* who had something to confide to *her*—’

‘Confide to Mama or Roberta, why confide to a stranger?’ He was aware that he sounded a trifle sulky, and unlike himself.

‘She is my *friend*. I *shall* confide to you all, but I was not quite ready, and Leonora is so very sensible, I thought I might confide in *her* first. And she was extremely helpful.’

‘Really? Well, your friends are nothing to do with me, of course.’

‘You sound a little *unkind*, Linton. She said she made you cross, but I hardly believed it ... It is not like you. Or only with *me*.’

‘Only when you poke at me. But I was not cross ...’ he remembered the sharp order he’d delivered to Miss Fortune in the phaeton, and frowned. ‘I suppose I *was* a little bad-mannered,’ he confessed.

‘You had better apologise then,’ recommended Christiana. ‘You don’t want to be one of those caddish fellows, brother dear.’

Even though he understood the jibe, Linton Carswell was wracked with guilt. He had already caused Leonora Fortune to *cry* once. But how could he apologise without getting in deeper? And now Mary. Perhaps that was some silly notion of the Lion's — but Carswell trusted his sister, who obviously cared. Mama constantly wished for his marriage, and enlisted his aunts Mags and Sybilla in *pressuring* in the first case, or in the second case, *gently reminding* him of the need to provide an heir. Foggy thought that his brother Bertie, now at Oxford, was a perfectly good heir, but his mama explained that Albert hated estate business, and was resolved to become a scholar. 'Another son with no interest in marriage!' lamented his mama. Foggy had a great affection for Bertie, but as he was a rather serious fellow, they had not much in common. But Foggy saw that he was happiest among like minds, and that it would be left to Foggy himself to do the dutiful, sometime. He could see that for Mama, Mary *would* be a suitable candidate for marriage.

He was embarrassed that *she* would be embarrassed by hints, and the poor girl might be hounded even into *considering* him as a possible husband. He worried for her.

But the animal instinct that had him escape young ladies' mamas before was playing not a church bell, but a cathedral chime in his head. Better avoid his old friend, as well as he could without giving offence.

How did handsome fellows stand it, he thought? Here he was, the fool of his family, and because he was solvent, and not a complete waster, he had had to rely on his own *inability* to talk to young ladies as a perfect defence against the designs of their mamas. His tender heart had, before now, led him to dance with wallflowers upon occasion — his friend Desmond said he could never resist a plain lady — and had therefore sometimes been stalked by encouraged mamas. He had got away cleanly so far — but being gazed at earnestly by the beauty of the Season, or giving offence to a dear childhood friend, were rather more than he was capable of dealing with.

Damn his cousin Delphine, who had calmed his nerves by introducing him to her friends for gentle conversation. Now he

could talk to woman, taking away his natural protection. But Viscount Gascoigne, her husband, or such handsome fellows, how had they handled *constant* feminine pursuit? Just as well the pool of young ladies who might stomach *him* was limited. But there was one large fish in that pool. It still terrified him.

Chapter 17

Christiana's Hope

Christiana, once her note had gone off, felt herself to be on tenterhooks. Perhaps Mr Jasper would not be at home, and would not receive the missive until this evening. Also, being a very deliberate sort of man, he may delay making an appointment with her papa until tomorrow, or even later. After an hour of being chided by her mama to pay attention to the morning visitors, Roberta, also present, whispered to a footman to move her chair closer to her cousin so that she might pinch her. For Christiana had already absently agreed to drive out tomorrow with Lord Marshall, whom Roberta knew she loathed, and engaged herself to Sir Simon Leggatt for a waltz at an upcoming ball, a man who danced like a shire horse at an ungainly gallop. Roberta nipped her before she could agree to more disastrous arrangements.

The visitors left, and Christiana leapt to her feet, hearing her papa in the hallway, back from a ride. She followed him into his study, a place so necessary to him that he spent a full five minutes there each morning to check his correspondence, and hand it to Greaves to deal with for him.

‘Papa,’ said Christiana, once more on the threshold of a room, waiting until he had tossed cards of invitation across the desk, keeping one or two to the side. Apart from these, there seemed to be only a longish letter, written in a careful lawyerly hand, which, from her papa’s exclamations, seemed to be from his man of business, *‘Draining the land? All very well, but where is the, eh, gold to come from, I say man?’*

He sounded all at once like Leonora’s father, Baron Fortune, who was well known to talk to himself like one of the royal princes did.

‘Well, well. I suppose he must say so every so often.’ He sighed. *‘But what with bonnets and so on, I cannot oblige him.’*

‘Am I, then, a great expense, Papa?’

Lord Carswell's colour heightened as he saw his pretty daughter in the doorway. 'Oh,' he said, smiling as she came towards him, and standing to kiss her cheek, 'bonnets? Well, I always blame bonnets and tippetts — you wouldn't expect me to blame horseflesh and, and ... waistcoats, now would you, my pet?'

Christiana looked frankly, and a little guiltily at him, and he hugged her shoulders, then pinched her chin. 'Nothing to worry about. Just nuisance reminders, you know.'

'I know, Papa. Did you have any request for an appointment today, Papa?'

'No dear.'

'And if you did, Papa. Would you ...' she looked at her father's kindly face. He had many times said he was not ready to give her up, 'be gentle with him?'

'Who?' said her papa.

'Em,' Christiana had lost her composure. She thought she had seen it escape her out of a door after she had sent off her short note to Mr Jasper two hours since. 'Whoever it may be.' Then she bethought of herself of the portly gentleman who had proposed to her last week. What if *he* should choose today to... 'That is, Mr Jasper,' she confessed.

But her father was not following her. He spluttered. 'You think me unkind, dear girl. Because I forgot that chap's name at the Cowpers' the other evening? I *said* I was sorry ...'

'No, no Papa.' She looked at his dear, bluff face and gave up. 'Never mind, dear. I must go and see Mama.'

She was almost at the door, when her papa, back looking at the engagement cards, said, 'Another musical evening! Should you dislike it?'

'Oh, *pray* do not tell Mama. She will urge me to play, and I do not wish to...'

Her father's eyes creased, and he touched the side of his nose in the ancient sign of confidentiality. 'I'll give our apologies myself. How's that?'

‘Thank you, Papa.’

Christiana knew she was becoming a lunatic. Fancy thinking she could explain to Papa. She hardly knew what she did with herself for the rest of the day, but she would not consent to leave the house. She practised the pianoforte as though she were in training for a solo concert, she set some extremely bad stitches, and she jumped anytime the front door sounded.

Nothing occurred until nuncheon. Her Aunt Sybilla, (cropped russet hair and comfortably upholstered), and her comically expressionless Uncle Edgar Lynfield, had arrived to share it, and as the normal chatter continued, a note was delivered to Papa. Christiana put down her knife. He perused it, then said, ‘What the devil does *he* want?’

‘Who?’ said her uncle with an enquiring brow.

‘That Jasper fellow, twice in one day.’

‘Twice?’ asked Sybilla.

Edgar Lynfield laughed. ‘There was an incident at the club earlier.’

Her brother, who had put his head around the door to check for unwanted guests, said, ‘Already heard about that. Injured the poor fellow.’

Christiana emitted a sound.

‘Injured?’ said Lady Eloise, concerned.

Lord Peregrine Carswell, Pinky to his intimates, shook his head. ‘I did not mean to. Only, I had lost a hand at cards you see, and threw it on the table in disgust and in the process, my wine glass fell and shattered against the table foot, and that young Jasper fellow *walked* on it.’

Edgar Lynfield laughed, and said ‘The poor young man yelped, for a large piece had actually managed to pierce his boot, but what must Pinky do than go up behind him without any warning and raise his foot, like you would a horse, and attempt to remove the glass shard.’

‘In deep,’ lamented her papa.

‘Oh!’ said Christiana, ‘Poor Mr Jasper.’

‘That’s not the best of it, I heard,’ said her brother.

‘Speak respectfully of your papa, Linton dear,’ admonished Lady Eloise, but her large eyes sought Edgar Lynfield’s, since she knew no sensible account was likely to come from her inarticulate husband.

‘Well, the short tale is, Mr Jasper, taken by surprise, toppled over, and sat on Pinky’s head!’ He banged the table in a manner unlike him, ‘*Priceless!*’

‘He’s heavy, dashed ... heavy,’ complained her papa. ‘But why should he wish to see me this afternoon?’

‘To apologise or berate you, take your pick, Papa!’ jeered his son. ‘Ah!’ he uttered, as though having a genius thought, ‘To call you out!’

‘Now, Linton...!’ said his mama.

‘He *apologised*—’ said Lord Carswell feebly.

‘Excellent manners, Jasper,’ said his son, enjoying himself, ‘He probably reflected on it afterwards and felt you’d besmirched his reputation as a sober gentleman.’

Her papa’s mouth worked, and *Phhtt! Phhtt!* sounds came out, while his male relatives laughed treacherously.

Lady Sybilla had suddenly noticed Christiana’s tragic demeanour, frozen in air since the tale. ‘*Eloise!*’ she whispered urgently. Lady Eloise looked across at her sister, whose eyes darted to Christiana then back. Lady Eloise looked at her daughter and back at her sister and her eyes widened. Could it be?

‘What time?’ said a gravelly voice that came from Christiana.

‘What? Oh, four, it says here.’ Pinky Carswell looked at his brother-in-law. ‘You don’t think...?’ he said, looking a little craven.

This renewed his son’s amusement. But Lady Eloise, now laughing too, clasped a hand over her husband’s. ‘There, there,

dear. I'm persuaded it is no such thing.' As usual as his watery eyes met the gentle ones of his wife, Carswell calmed a little.

Linton Carswell took the opportunity to lean sideways at his sister and say, 'Thank you for the hint. But it is dashed awkward. I might need you to help with the Mary thing.'

'Oh, yes...' said his sister, but vaguely. Her face was pale.

'Are you ill or anything?' asked Foggy, looking at her askance.

'Oh no! But Linton, remember I said I would confide in you...'

'What? That? Aunt Sybilla's staring. Tell me later!'

'Before four,' said Christiana, obscurely.

Her mama had grasped her arm as they exited after the meal.

'Is Mr Jasper coming to—?' Christiana nodded, and the hope in her eyes made her mother's next question unnecessary, so she only said, 'Oh, my dear!'

Linton, following on, stopped. 'No!' he said.

'Yes!' said Christiana.

'Oh well,' he said, 'I'd better give Pa a hint, or he'll be greeting poor Jasper with his seconds this afternoon, afraid of a dawn meeting with pistols!'

'Aren't you concerned about your sister at all, Linton?' said Lady Eloise, in a hissing side voice. 'Don't you fear for her future? Who is this gentleman really?'

Carswell put a dotting hand on his mama's grasping hand. 'He's been nosing around my sister for weeks — don't you think I've seen whether he's a right 'un? Sober fellow, not in my line, but *kind*.' He laughed, 'No fear, Mama, Edward Jasper ain't a rackets fellow like me.'

His mother sighed, 'But Linton, I know I should not interfere — but your papa may not enquire — does he have a respectable fortune at least?' Her eyes watered, 'His coats are so *plain*.'

‘Fortune? Not at all sure about that, Mama! What do you take me for, counting someone else’s guineas?’

His mother sighed, looking after him, then left to accompany Christiana for a while. Her daughter was doing her best to look unconcerned as she attempted to untangle some embroidery silks, making it all a great deal worse.

Carswell followed his father into the library leisurely, a room where all the ancient tomes on the shelves remained untouched for years, and only the shelf housing sporting periodicals enjoyed any air. Father and son used it frequently though, for it was a harbour of peace and a refuge from females — their own, plus the aunts. Any books delivered from Hatchards bypassed this room to go to his mama’s sitting room, since that lady enjoyed the newest novels. These had no need of library shelf space, since once she had read them, she sent them to her sisters or friends, as the occasion demanded.

In the library, Lord Carswell was shocked at his son’s news, and his son companionably offered him a snifter, which he took. Both gentlemen sat silently afterwards, except for the odd inarticulate sound that emanated from the elder every so often. He sought the brandy once more, after which the son moved the decanter away from his father’s questing fingers. Father and son both held periodicals, but only Linton Carswell read, looking sympathetically over at his pa from time to time. The son left the room at five minutes to four.

A shell-shocked Lord Carswell, who welcomed a stiff Mr Jasper into the room at four pm by the ormolu clock, was in a dream, and immediately overwhelmed by the sheaf of papers presented to him. They concerned Mr Jasper’s two estates and funds, and his unexpectedly generous offer of Settlements, if allowed to marry his daughter. The young man talked in a low even voice while Carswell’s colour rose alarmingly. He was trying to hit on something to object to in the blighter, but he was good enough looking, earnest, strong. The ill-fitting coat of inferior material was the worst he could say of him.

The papers and stiff request for permission to address Christiana did not impress Lord Carswell, only confused, and troubled him, and he blustered a little in return. But Mr

Jasper's sudden passionate plea at the very end of the interview, emitted with a flushed countenance and a good deal less self-possession, did move him.

'I assure you, my lord, that if you give your permission and she should consent, I shall t-*treasure* Miss Carswell for the rest of her life.'

Lord Carswell teared up at this, and put a hand on the young man's shoulder. It was the nearest he could get to express approval. But Mr Jasper's smile said he understood.

Lady Eloise had the rest in hand. Mr Jasper was led to her sitting room, and found only Christiana in there, her hair dressed differently than when he had briefly seen her in the hall, her dimity gown one he had never seen, looking so beautiful that it took his breath away. She stood up. He gazed at her from behind the door, which had been closed by the butler after he entered. 'Miss Carswell, would you consent to be my wife?' he said, at a rush.

Christiana ran to him, and threw herself into his arms. Mr Jasper, who had been daring to hope that he might be permitted to clasp her hands if she agreed to be his betrothed, stood still for half a second. Yet again Christiana had broken through the walls he built around himself for protection. *Right* through, like an efficient wrecking ball. He might seek to be upright, but no sane man would be a sluggard in this situation, so he wrapped his arms around her tight enough to take her breath, and when she looked up at him joyously, he forgot to ask for her answer, but only kissed her soundly instead.



The Fortune twins were among the first, outside the Carswell extended family, to hear Christiana's happy news personally. The Morning Post would carry the notice the next day, but that evening at the opera Christiana gestured the girls over (who were in the Earl of Alderly's box opposite, with Paxton and their sister Portia) to visit at the interval.

They made haste, guessing the news on the way from Christiana's smiles. It was not to be expected that Mr Carswell was in the family opera box, where he seldom appeared except

in manacles supplied by the tears of his mama or the guilt-imposing demands of his other aunts. Many fashionable young gentlemen made frequent visits to the opera (music being merely a tangential reason for this) but Carswell was seldom of their number. The shapely limbs of the opera dancers, and the ease of some who smiled and spoke with gentlemen after the performance, were not quite to his taste. The limbs embarrassed him, and the smiles did not entice him. In any case, he would not have utilised his mother's opera box for any such purpose, even if he had been there with differing intentions.

So, with Roberta making room for the twins and going off to a neighbouring box to visit a friend whose brother she had a liking for, and Lord Carswell making his escape to seek something to quench a sudden thirst, there was only Christiana and her mother present. The news was soon told, with some whispered details shared, Christiana clutching a hand of each twin. Marguerite was in raptures, and her happiness made Christiana's greater. Leonora was quieter in her congratulations, but her eyes were warmly encouraging. Lady Eloise looked on happily at them, and then over at the other boxes, perhaps to find an acquaintance with whom she could share her good news. Mr Jasper could not be called a *brilliant* match, but by looking at the sheaf of papers he left behind, it seemed he was a great deal richer than his coats suggested, and she was a relieved mama.

Leonora moved over to sit nearer, while the other two chatted on, and Lady Eloise looked at her kindly, but slightly warily.

'Your home is in Suffolk is it not?' said Leonora brightly. 'I hope Mr Jasper's home is not too far distant?'

'A few hours journey only, in Essex,' said her ladyship. She seemed, she thought, to talk a great deal about *Suffolk* when Miss Fortune was near.

'Let us hope land prices in that county fare better than Suffolk. It must be a trial.'

'Land prices?' said Lady Eloise faintly.

‘Well, no doubt your family need not sell land, and this is a problem for smaller farmers only.’

‘Quite!’

‘I have heard that the roads in Suffolk are improved unbelievably since the last century.’ Leonora was not sure why Lady Eloise was wringing her dress skirts nervously, but she smiled at her. There was a pause, before Leonora began again. ‘Your home has a great number of rooms, I suppose,’ the young girl asked with that rapt attention that characterised her.

‘Well, as to that, I do not quite know how many ...’ she put herself to think. ‘There may be fifteen or so bed chambers, perhaps twenty — I remember somewhat, for when I gave a party last,’ she looked at Leonora who seemed to be riveted. ‘But as to the number of *rooms*, I cannot guess.’

‘Why should you? I expect there are any number of public rooms of different functions on the ground floor, perhaps as many as above, and then of course you cannot be interested in the kitchens and so forth. Not to say the attics.’

‘No,’ said Lady Eloise, vaguely.

‘But such a number of rooms must need refurbishing from time to time — it must be a trial,’ commiserated the serious young beauty.

‘Well, I decorated only once, upon my marriage, but I was rather over-enthusiastic on the Chinese style of the time, even having some London rooms done that way too, you know, and I had to refurbish some of them later, since I could no longer stand the sight of another pagoda over breakfast.’

‘Quite! But it must have been expensive ...’ reflected Leonora.

‘Should I not...?’ wondered Lady Eloise guiltily.

‘Oh, no,’ said Leonora comfortably, ‘old houses need to be up-kept, or they become rather dingy, and fall into disarray like Castle Fortune, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh,’ said Lady Eloise, wondering why she was having this conversation, ‘is it?’

‘Oh yes, Papa would not spend a groat on what does not contribute to his comfort, you know, so it is all leaky casements and fraying brocade — and mice!’

‘We all suffer from mice...!’ sighed Lady Eloise.

‘But the *attics*, your ladyship,’ said Leonora earnestly, ‘are your *attics* sound?’

Lady Eloise blinked. ‘I’m not quite... I *suppose* they are. No one has mentioned...’

Leonora shook her head in an admonitory fashion, ‘It is useless to *suppose*. My agent told me that in all great houses the attics give the first hints of rot, you know. If you find it there, one can stop it quickly before it gets a hold. Only think of the folly of ignorance — one more winter and the Castle Fortune roof might have fallen on top of us all!’

Another figure appeared, and moved towards the ladies, saying, with wide eyes to the elder lady, ‘Of what do you speak so earnestly, Lady Eloise?’

Lady Eloise looked rescued. ‘Attics...!’ she said, a little loudly.

The two others turned and looked on.

‘Was that Leonora who began? She is most frightfully interested in household matters,’ smiled Marguerite.

‘Are you advising Lady Eloise, Miss Fortune?’ said Miss Du Maurier. ‘I must confess *I* know nothing of attics.’

‘Nor I,’ said Lady Eloise feebly.

‘Many owners do *not*,’ said Leonora, serious again, ‘but it is well to inspect them occasionally. Does your husband do so?’

‘Well, I shouldn’t think so. Very likely not,’ said Lady Eloise, beginning to be a trifle worried in the face of Leonora’s gravity.

‘He *should*,’ advised Leonora.

‘Why do you speak of attics when I have my joyful news to tell?’ laughed Christiana.

‘News?’ asked Mary.

‘I am to become Mrs Jasper soon.’

‘Oh, I *am* pleased for you!’ said Mary, clapping her hands silently. Then she said, soft and sad, ‘I do not suppose that *I* shall ever ... well, never mind! I wish you very happy...’

Kind Marguerite was moved to ask, ‘Do you not enjoy your Season, Miss Du Maurier?’

‘Of course I do! I am *so* grateful. But with a small portion like my own, my mother holds out little hope for an offer for me.’

‘Oh, if we are to talk of such things, *our* portions cannot be larger than yours,’ said Marguerite cheerfully, ‘but gentlemen do still seem to ...’

‘Gentlemen might have amusements with such young ladies as we, but when it comes to marriage...!’ Mary looked a trifle downcast, then picked herself up. ‘You are *so lucky*, Christiana.’

Christiana looked smirched a little, and lost her smile.

‘It is *Mr Jasper* who is lucky,’ interrupted Leonora.

‘Well,’ laughed Christiana, for she had just begun to feel that she had bought Mr Jasper’s interest with her portion — which was not, in fact, vast, ‘I mean to be of use to him in any event. Perhaps I should begin by inspecting his attics, though I would have no idea what to look for!’

‘Mr Jasper looks to me like a man who has his attics well in hand,’ said Leonora decidedly.

‘He *does*, doesn’t he?’ said Christiana dreamily, as though this new-found attribute was making her fall more deeply still.

‘I believe I am six years your senior, Miss Fortune, but you sound so much older than me, I always think,’ smiled Miss Du Maurier.

But her voice held that weak, plaintive note that Leonora did not like, so she said briskly, glancing at her, ‘Perhaps because I have given up the habit of complaining.’ She turned

to Marguerite, 'Button, the interval is ending, we should return to our box.' She left without looking back, but she had heard a gasp at her last remark, and she hoped she had not shocked dear Lady Eloise.

'Your friend Miss Fortune frightens me a little, Christiana!' said her mother, faintly.

But though Lady Eloise had indeed been shocked at the tone of Miss Fortune's last remark, she found herself looking at Mary Du Maurier, and then exchanging glances with her daughter.

It was the kind of remark that had power, for it explained the faintly uncomfortable feeling she had when in dear Mary's company. Her ready fund of pity could be worn out upon occasion. It would be difficult to see Mary after this without the word 'complaining' becoming attached to her.

Miss Fortune had been blunt and possibly rude, but she was quite right. In reality, the Fortune girls were in no better position in the World than Mary. Their beauty took them far in popularity, of course, but Mary was pretty, too. Lady Eloise had not seen her sit out many dances when she thought of it. And she had seen Mary being driven by gentlemen in the park, and so on. What on earth was it that required *quite* so much pity?

And Linton. Where she thought that Mary would be gentle and kind to her son and, as he was already fond of her since childhood, might make him a good wife, now she questioned this. For if Mary had what Miss Fortune had called 'the habit of complaining' would marriage solve it? She bethought herself of an acquaintance who was kindly treated by her husband but complained a great deal about how little she had, pitying herself greatly. Her dead sister Emilia, too ...! Mary was not the selfish Emilia, but that the young girl seemed to feel generally aggrieved like Emilia had, was true. Mary portrayed herself as brave in the face of misfortune, but since she had robbed a smile from Christiana's face on her happiest night, Lady Eloise was no longer convinced.

Perhaps it was the Fortune twins, whom she had once overheard being bullied by their dreadful father and brother — but who smiled and enjoyed themselves nevertheless, who were *truly* brave.

Chapter 18

The Family Delegation

The Beau Monde found that the title of Snow Queen, which had been given to Delphine Delacroix on her first Season, was still applicable, even now that she was Viscountess Gascoigne. Those who found her hard to approach would have been amazed that in her pretty private salon at Gascoigne House, she greeted her lady guests with warm hugs. That the viscountess was a beauty was in no doubt. She had silver hair, piled high on her head Grecian fashion, a beautifully boned face with arresting turquoise eyes. Her face, in repose, was a little distant since she had been trained to show no emotion since a child. But among her three aunts, she often displayed her affection. The only other person in the room was Phoebe Beauford, a little person who had been elevated, since Delphine's marriage, from companion to true friend, and who resided permanently with the Gascoignes.

Aunt Sybilla (Mrs Lynfield), after embracing Delphine, also bent to kiss Miss Beauford on the cheek, saying, 'Phoebe dear, I declare you are growing quite plump!'

Since Miss Beauford was tiny, and slender as a reed, she laughed at this and blushed, replying, 'Indeed, I think so.'

Soon they were all seated, and sipping at the proffered refreshments, and Delphine said, 'Since it is a delegation, I infer there is a subject for today's visit.'

'It is Linton!'

'Foggy? What ails him? Is he in another scrape?' Delphine thought guiltily that she should not have said so, Foggy's scrapes were often not the sort to end in his mother's ears. But Titus enjoyed recounting her cousin's latest absurdities to her, and she enjoyed hearing of them. They were seldom of a serious or concerning nature. More like the hat-burying incident that had made her chuckle when Gascoigne told her — usually just absurd.

‘You should not call your cousin Foggy, Delphine.’

‘Oh, it is what Titus and his friends call him, you know, and very affectionately.’

‘You have heard of Christiana’s good news? She is to become Mrs Jasper,’ said Lady Eloise, contentedly.

Delphine nodded. ‘I danced with him once. He seems a very sensible young man.’

‘Too sensible to choose Christiana, we thought,’ laughed Lady Mags Pelleter.

‘But sense and levity match well, I think,’ said Sybilla Lynfield quickly before Lady Eloise’s rare frown became fierce.

‘But now there is the problem of ... Delphine, you have met her. What do you think of Mary Du Maurier?’

‘She seemed like a pleasant enough girl,’ said the viscountess, blandly.

‘You know, I have thought she might be the very wife for Linton,’ said Lady Eloise, worriedly, ‘since he was fond of her even as a child, but now I am not so sure.’

‘It seems to me like the perfect match. Linton is not *afraid* of her, at least. He would take the entire season to talk to another female, and so it might go on if no one gives him a push,’ said Mags Pelleter, reasonably.

‘Yes, I thought so ... but something Miss Fortune said gave me pause.’

‘Fortune? The eldest twin?’ asked Lady Mags. ‘She is pert and impudent, and a great deal too sure of herself.’

‘Yes?’ said her russet haired sister with an eyebrow lifted. ‘That could almost be a description of yourself.’

‘I do not find her impudent,’ said Lady Eloise, ‘just strange. She talked to me yesterday of Suffolk and attics...’

‘Attics?’ asked Delphine, diverted.

‘A strange child.’

‘Well, Christiana and Roberta both like her.’

‘Christiana thinks her interested in *Linton*.’

‘That explains the interest in Suffolk,’ said Delphine. ‘And perhaps in attics. She must be a planner, like you Aunt Mags.’

‘She is too forceful for poor Linton. The younger Fortune twin might be better,’ considered Sybilla Lynfield, ‘She’s a happy, simple child. Like Linton himself.’

‘But she has not the stamina required to bring Linton to the point,’ said Mags cynically. ‘Or do you wish to see him unmarried at forty?’

‘And then again, *two* heedless fools in a marriage might be too many,’ giggled Sybilla.

‘Roberta tells me that Miss Fortune has been preparing herself to marry him since she met him at fourteen years old,’ said Lady Eloise, incredulously. ‘That *would* be amusing, if it were not for the fact that she has never once wavered, not in *three years* — or even since coming to Town, when more eligible, handsomer men pursue her.’

‘They may pursue, but will any of them marry a portionless female?’ snarled Mags. ‘Perhaps she thinks of Linton as easier prey.’

‘Every *other* portionless Fortune girl has found a mate,’ remarked Viscountess Gascoigne, dismissing this argument.

‘Well, they all have the advantage of beauty, it is true,’ said Sybilla, ‘and beauty is its own coin.’

‘All the young ladies who have wished to be introduced to Foggy before have simply wanted security, rather than he himself, I have always thought,’ said Foggy’s mother. ‘*She* seems to be different.’

‘Perhaps Mary Du Maurier is different too, she *does* seem to have affection for Linton,’ said Sybilla.

‘What did Miss Fortune say that has led you to doubt Mary, Eloise?’ asked Lady Mags, frowning.

‘Well, *I* also observed, afterwards...’ Eloise seemed to think a little. ‘Miss Fortune watched as Mary congratulated Christiana on her betrothal, while still declaring herself a little sad that she, Mary, might never have such a match since she was without a portion. It quite took Christiana’s smile away,’ said Eloise sadly. ‘Later, Mary remarked that Leonora Fortune always seemed older than she, although she is not — and Miss Fortune said that was because she had given up *the habit of complaining*.’ Eloise blinked around the ladies. ‘It gave me to think, rather.’

‘A complaining nature *is* rather difficult to live with,’ said Phoebe Beauford’s quiet voice.

‘Precisely. I suddenly saw it...’ declared Lady Eloise a little sadly, ‘...that I generally come away from a conversation with Mary with my energy quite depleted.’

‘I have to say,’ said Mags Pelleter, recalling some moments, ‘that I cannot deny the suspicion. One is expected to be sorry for her, and however sweet she may be, pity is a useless endeavour and I do not indulge in it.’

‘So, shall we support Miss Fortune now?’ asked Sybilla. ‘Even with Miss Fortune’s determination, Linton could prove slippery. Shall we *vote*, as the gentlemen do in parliament?’

‘Not yet, I think,’ said Delphine. ‘We should all observe her a little and then come back for the vote.’

They met again two days later, once again at Gascoigne House where there was less chance of being interrupted.

‘Well, the way Miss Fortune looks after her sillier sister really seems selfless,’ admitted Lady Mags, sipping her ratafia.

‘Her spirit revived itself quickly, after her dreadful brother insulted her, as I overheard,’ said Sybilla Lynfield.

‘She supports the weak against the unjust, without sentimentality,’ said Delphine, having seen a scene where Miss Fortune came to the aid of a weaker damsel.

‘Her sisters are fond of her and admire her,’ added Phoebe, quietly. ‘I have heard them discuss her while at supper at

Almacks.’

‘She takes responsibility, Christiana has told me, for the whole of Castle Fortune’s household,’ said Lady Eloise.

‘At such a young age! That explains talk of attics, I suppose,’ murmured Sybilla.

‘But can she make him truly *happy*?’ said Lady Eloise, faintly.

Delphine was still and thoughtful. ‘Gascoigne said Foggy was suddenly protective of someone. That he had matured because of it,’ she said. ‘I suspect that was Miss Fortune’s doing.’

‘Well, we shall watch and see, and lend her what aid we may,’ said Lady Mags. ‘It is not a perfect match, but she seems to be a woman of ambition.’

‘Like yourself,’ remarked Sybilla.

‘But we must not *force* him, Mags!’ wailed Eloise.

‘Phshaw!’ said Lady Mags stoutly, but to that company, unconvincingly, ‘As though I would.’

‘Perhaps, after all, Mary *is* better,’ Eloise said. ‘She is gentler and kind. I think perhaps, if Linton made her feel more secure, she would give up her sadness and become happier in her manner. Don’t you think?’

‘You shilly-shally as always, Eloise. We have chosen our runner. Let us place our bet.’



Leonora, after her conversation with Christiana, was re-motivated in her pursuit of Carswell. It was rather unfortunate that she did not see him in the next days, and more unfortunate still that she had said cross words to him at the end of her drive with him. She needed to apologise, she felt. But then she remembered Miss Du Maurier, and she no longer wished to apologise. What right had he, knowing something of how she felt, to be so much nicer to another young lady than her? Indeed, he was nicer to *every* young lady than to Leonora. He did not dislike her, she was sure, but he was afraid of her.

But going her straight path as always, it seemed the heavens were on her side, for she did not have to seek out his friends and acquaintance, as she once had. In the last two days she had been approached by his mama, his Aunt Sybilla, and his Aunt Mags, all on separate occasions. She had eventually come to meet his beautiful cousin Delphine, Viscountess Gascoigne, and had a conversation with her over supper at Almacks. His friend Viscount Desmond had danced elegantly with her once more, volunteering Linton's whereabouts on the morrow.

His mother later verified the fact, telling her that Linton was sure to return her books to the circulating library on the morrow, at ten. A small person, who had been introduced to her as Miss Beauford, had rushed at her between dances and asked if the twins might keep her company when she returned Viscountess' Gascoigne's books to the library, tomorrow before ten.

It had been days since Leonora had recourse to her stack of coin given to servants to hear news of Mr Carswell, for many of his family and friends now seemed to offer information (in a casual way), willingly.

Leonora blinked at Miss Beauford, but was anxious to agree, but eventually asked Christiana what was going on. That young lady, living in her happy bubble of betrothal, smiled benignly, but distantly. 'Oh, I think my family has decided to help you!'

Christiana walked off happily with Mr Jasper, making wedding plans, and Leonora turned to Roberta, who was looking at her cousin's back a trifle jealously.

'I shall have to follow you twins around now, for Christiana is rendered useless as a ballroom companion.'

'Her betrothed hardly leaves her side, it is true,' said Marguerite, a little jealous herself. 'But you may certainly keep *us* company, dear Miss Pelleter.'

'Since Christiana and Leonora call each other by name, we should too, dear Marguerite! Let us not be left behind.'

‘Certainly, Roberta!’ Marguerite looked at her twin who had a thinking look on her face. ‘Leo, whatever is amiss?’

‘Nothing! Nothing at all is amiss. But Roberta, what did Christiana mean when she said her family is helping me?’

‘I did not give *you* leave to call me by name, Miss Fortune, but only my *dear* friend Marguerite!’ When Leonora did not rise to this gambit, but merely waited, Roberta finally said, offhand, ‘I’m not at all sure, but I think they see you as the best way to get poor Foggy married.’

‘Oh, how splendid!’ said Marguerite.

Leonora liked to get to the root of things, and looked pleased, but perplexed. ‘But *why*?’

‘Something you said about Miss Du Maurier and complaining.’

‘I did not mean any insult...’ said Leonora, embarrassed. ‘Sometimes I just say what I think.’

Marguerite giggled.

‘Oh, I know,’ replied Roberta, ‘but Mama explained that it was one of those remarks about someone that turn out to be so obvious when one thinks about it that you realise you have always known, but never given it a thought.’

‘What remark?’ demanded Marguerite.

‘Something and nothing, Button,’ Leonora said, brushing it off in embarrassment.

‘And so now the females of the family are pinning their hopes on you, because Christiana and I like you, and because you have the persistence to succeed.’

‘She *is* very persistent,’ agreed Marguerite, seriously.

‘But what of Lady Eloise’s preference for Miss Du Maurier?’

‘Well Aunt Eloise is a trifle fickle in her opinions, Mama said, and she had swung towards you in some way, and then back to Miss Du Maurier. I would say that Aunt Eloise is not quite to be trusted for *whole-hearted* support.’ Roberta smiled.

‘Foggy is a hopeless case, so *my* mama favours you — because, though she cannot at all see it, you are very like her.’

‘I am?’ said Leonora, considering. Then she asked her friend, ‘And *you*, Roberta?’

‘I? I like you very well, Leonora, but you are too like my mama for me to want to *live* with you. And so I am not sure you could make my cousin happy if you lived with *him*. Perhaps Linton needs someone with the temperament of Mary, instead. So *I* shall live on the fence.’

Leonora grasped Roberta’s hand suddenly. ‘And if I *promise* I will not marry him if I do not think he *will* be happy?’

Roberta regarded Leonora severely, ‘You will not be tempted to bully him into marrying you out of good manners? His dratted manners might be the death of his good sense.’

‘That was what I feared about Miss Du Maurier, but *I* will certainly never do so. Unless Mr Carswell really wants me, I shall never say yes.’

‘Then why are you active in pursuing him? What is there for you to *do*, after all?’

‘I do not feel that he and I have yet had a *chance*, you see,’ explained Leonora. ‘How can he know he does *not* want me until we converse? I do not think it right or fair to give up yet. I decided on him so long ago.’

Roberta laughed. ‘*Really?*’ said Foggy’s cousin, still incredulous. ‘Well, I do hope you succeed, Leonora. You would be such an amusing cousin-in-law.’

‘Here comes Mr Knight, who is engaged to me for the Cotillion,’ said Marguerite gaily, looking at a tall man with the fashionably cynical face of a thirty-year-old bachelor, doing his umpteenth round of London ballrooms. ‘I think him quite handsome,’ she whispered, ‘do not you, Roberta?’

‘Yes. I have always thought so. Mr Knight has never asked *me* to dance, as yet!’ Roberta sounded so sad at this that Marguerite laughed. ‘But there is Sir Reginald Forbes who is engaged to me for this dance.’

Sir Reginald was younger, in his mid-twenties, and more cheerful in look than Knight. Marguerite sighed, looking at the young man, still some way off. ‘*Very handsome!*’

Roberta suddenly looked mischievous. ‘Do you have a *penchant* for Mr Knight?’

Marguerite looked naughty too. ‘Not really. Shall we ... swap?’

‘Button, what are you about?’ objected Leonora.

But Marguerite had danced forward boldly to stand just in front of Sir Reginald, ‘Our cotillion, dear sir?’

Sir Reginald, bemused, looked down at the small, gloved hand on his sleeve. He glanced over at Miss Pelleter, who smiled brazenly back at him, then turned to Knight, whose face remained sardonic. ‘And you, Mr Knight,’ Roberta Pelleter was saying, with some jauntiness covering her embarrassment, ‘Do you object to a brunette as your partner?’

The gentlemen exchanged intelligent looks and grinned.

‘*You* must be the naughtiest brunette of my acquaintance,’ remarked Mr Knight with a wry look as he led Roberta away.

Viscount Gascoigne came to claim Leonora, and she felt that it only wanted Lord Peregrine Carswell to talk to her for her to have collected the whole family set.

‘Do you object to Sir Reginald in some way, my lady?’ asked Knight, with a quizzical look, as he walked Roberta onto the ballroom floor.

‘Not at all,’ Roberta smiled at him sweetly. ‘On the contrary, he is a *delightful* companion.’

‘Then...?’ his brows rose as he looked down at her dark eyes.

‘Do you not think it unjust sir, that *gentlemen* are permitted to look around the ballroom and choose a partner at will, while *ladies* must wait to be asked?’

‘What a novel thought! And your little trick just now was ... to circumvent such base traditions?’ he asked, with a flying

brow for punctuation.

‘To play a trick on you two gentlemen and deny your choices and make some of our own,’ said Roberta stoutly, but blushing.

‘I heard that Miss Marguerite Fortune is a minx, but I have not heard that you are, Miss Pelleter.’

Roberta looked up, surprised. ‘Oh, you know my name, Mr Knight?’

‘I do.’

‘Did you *ask* someone?’ said Roberta, with a shy hope poking through her pertness.

‘I did,’ he laughed at her. ‘As I suppose you must have, too.’

Roberta looked conscious, but said, ‘I do not usually indulge in tricks, sir.’

‘Oh, no?’ Mr Knight seemed a little doubtful, but teasing.

‘No,’ said Roberta. She was buffeted by a couple passing on their way to a free spot on the floor, and Knight’s hand steadied her. She shook a little beneath his touch, and looked a trifle more serious when she added, ‘I have saved my one trick this Season for you, sir.’ She tilted her head to one side — delightfully, he thought — as the start of the dance brought them together. ‘Has it annoyed you, sir? My little trick?’ she asked gravely, in a lowered tone.

His breath became uneven, and his natural insouciance faltered. ‘May I—’ the dance pulled them apart some steps, then he continued as they came together, ‘... call on you tomorrow, Miss Pelleter?’

The movement of the dance took them away again, so it was some fraught seconds before she said, blushing wildly, ‘The normal hour is ten, Mr Knight. If you wish to take me for a drive, you *might* come a little earlier.’

Mr Knight saw a pert look, but felt Roberta Pelleter tremble once more beneath his hand. She was afraid, this pretty, dark, little thing. Since they had shared a dinner table at the

Gascoignes' home one evening at the beginning of the Season, he had noticed her. It had been a very large party, probably forty people seated, and she had not been near him. But it was now obvious that she had noticed him too. They had exchanged only a few words and one smile. He had not danced with her at all this Season, because he had found out her name, and her father, Lord Pelleter, was not a man he wished to become involved with. Of course, the Fortune girls' papa was as bad, but somehow no such serious thought had arisen when asking *them* to dance. What could be worth the risk, he had asked himself after once seeing Roberta, of being the rackets, unstable, Lord Pelleter's son-in-law? A practical man, Knight saw the danger of rescuing the fellow from his own folly for the rest of his life. Seeing Miss Pelleter's attempt at bravery — beneath it her hope, and even longing — Knight suddenly thought that there might just *be* something worth it. She had the aspect, since she had changed partners so improperly, of someone bravely launching their last raft. He smiled down at her, not playful, but reassuring. 'Wear something warm. We may wish to take some time.'

Chapter 19

Foggy's Mantrap

It was as a result of the two summits in Gascoigne House that the Honourable Mr Linton Carswell wandered into a mantrap — in his own home. (It was a last-minute decision by the aunts; the younger cousins would certainly have advised against the sledgehammer approach.) Accompanied by his friend, Viscount Desmond, he sauntered nonchalantly into the *Salon Chinois*, where his family generally gathered before dinner. Pet and he had plans to go to the club, and his mama had casually told her son to bring him along to dinner.

‘Pagodas!’ the Lion was saying with a smile to his mama.

‘This many are quite enough,’ his mother smiled back at her.

Foggy turned a wrathful eye to the butler, who despite his training in imperturbability, dropped his chin in shame. For Carswell, fearing to meet Miss Du Maurier after his sister’s warning, had already asked Grace if there were guests for dinner.

The butler had not lied. He had merely said, as though in reminder, ‘It is Almacks this evening, sir,’ which Carswell had taken (as he was meant to do) as a sign that his mama would not wish to linger over dinner, and thus would have no guests. Now, chin still lowered, the butler raised his eyes to meet his young master’s in a comical look that made Foggy sigh in resignation.

Carswell was amazed that the pagoda conversation seemed to attest to some intimacy with his parent that Foggy was wary of. When had *this* occurred? Before, his mama had been kind and polite to the twins, of course, as she was to all the world. But now she seemed to be sharing a joke.

‘Linton!’ said Christiana, ‘Mr Jasper would like your advice on horseflesh.’

‘Oh, evening Jasper, Mama. And good evening, Miss Fortune, Miss Marguerite.’

Desmond was also doing the decent, and since Marguerite Fortune chatted happily with all, it seemed that he might just be able to keep some distance from the dangerous spot, and talked horseflesh with Edward Jasper, rather desperately, leaving Pet to do the gentlemanly thing with the ladies. The twins wore their hair in coils tonight, but their curls still framed their lovely faces. They wore gowns of simple white dotted Swiss; the only other adornments were snowy white ribbons tied in an off-centre bow at their delicate necks.

Foggy knew he was stealing looks and tried to stop. He knew that *his* Miss Fortune (as his brain could not stop calling her) was not saintly. But tonight this young girl, whose large blue eyes seemed sometimes to be lion’s eyes, looked once more as though she had fallen from heaven. What was she doing looking so very like an angel? He coloured, remembering holding a bunch of muslin in his arms when she had been but a cherub. He had put her down easily, and had only dreamt of the event afterwards because of her strangely insistent words when he had taken her back to the castle. The helping of a child falling from a tree had become some mystical symbol of divine intervention in his dreams, some dreaded reminder that his life may not be within his control. But now he wondered what it would feel like if this angel before him, not the little cherub, fell into his arms from the sky. His blush grew deeper.

She, too, was stealing looks at him. Her sister, as far as he knew, had not glanced at him at all since her friendly first greeting, but he felt the Lion’s gaze a great deal. It made the hairs at his nape stand up. He was embarrassed, too. Normally, he might simply hide and avoid, but now he was aware that there was the added tension of that drive between them — he owed an apology, and he knew it. He had almost *snapped* at her. When had he become such a bad-mannered fellow? Jasper was frowning at him in perturbation. No doubt he had been spouting desperate gibberish for some time now.

The entrance of his papa, surprised and embarrassed by the addition of guests for dinner, as Linton had been himself, interrupted his thoughts.

‘Peregrine, dear! Come and meet the Misses Fortune,’ said his wife, smiling. ‘Miss Fortune and Miss Marguerite Fortune,’ she gestured.

Marguerite giggled. ‘You have mixed us up again, Lady Eloise!’

‘Easily done!’ said Lord Carswell. His face was red and round, his hair a little thin (but gallantly holding on), his body a little portly, and his manner was bluff, but embarrassed. ‘That is to say ... never seen such girls—’ he bowed awkwardly, ‘I mean, so ...’ words failed him.

Lady Eloise was about to fill in for him as usual, but Leonora finished ‘...alike?’

Lord Carswell looked at her, smiling sweetly, then added, to be kinder, ‘but also so ... so...’ he looked them up and down each one and then he blushed and opened his mouth a couple of times, in a manner reminiscent of his son.

‘...pretty?’ suggested Leonora, without guile, it seemed.

‘Precisely!’ Carswell beamed. He took Leonora’s hand between both of his, patted it and said, ‘Good girl, good girl!’ Then blushed again as he became aware of doing so, and dropped it rudely, as though it were hot.

Marguerite Fortune giggled as Mrs Du Maurier and daughter were announced.

Leonora was engaged in reducing Lord Carswell’s mounting embarrassment, and Lady Eloise looked on. The younger twin evidently found her husband amusing, as did most of the world, but Miss Fortune, like herself, tried to fill in his missing words in a kind and practical manner. His blushes, after he had inadvertently taken Miss Fortune’s hand in thanks (rather as he did with his wife in similar circumstances) now overtook him, so that he looked at his shoes — a thing that might continue for some time, if his embarrassment were not relieved. Lady Eloise readied herself to soothe his spirits before he became

quite stuck in this attitude for the evening, but Miss Fortune was once again before her. In a quick, decided move, she recaptured Lord Carswell's hand, which caused him to look up at her, still blushing. 'Thank *you*, sir. My own papa has never said those words to me.'

Carswell looked flummoxed. He gazed off for a second, and Lady Eloise thought she could see the slow working of his mind conjure up the image of Baron Fortune. Sympathy overtook him, and he raised his other hand again, to grasp Leonora's hand between his once more, moved by her simplicity. 'Good girl!' he said again, as he patted it. He seemed to recollect himself and turned to Marguerite. 'Good girls!' he said, inclusively. Marguerite beamed at him, too, and she saw her husband's shoulders relax. Lady Eloise was surprisingly moved, and her eyes filled.

Mrs Du Maurier said pleasantly, 'Good evening, Lady Eloise!'

Recalled to her duties, Lady Eloise completed the greetings and introductions. Dinner was announced. Lord Carswell squired his lady, Mr Jasper his betrothed, and Linton was happy to offer Mrs Du Maurier his arm — thus avoiding having to choose an unattached young lady at all. Desmond ushered all three younger ladies ahead of him with becoming grace.

If there was any scintilla of hope in Linton Carswell's frightened eyes that tonight's dinner was motiveless on the part of his mama, the seating arrangements at table removed it completely. Mrs Du Maurier was placed one side of his mama, with Marguerite opposite at the other side. Desmond was seated next to Marguerite, with Christiana on his other, Jasper beside her. On his side of the table Miss Du Maurier sat next to her mama, and he was sandwiched between her and the Lion. He gave his mother a look of deep disappointment, but she was engaged in saying pleasantly to Marguerite, 'You do not mind being separated from your twin, do you, Miss Marguerite? This is just a family dinner, you know, and we do not hold with the formalities. Just converse over the table as you would at home.'

Miss Du Maurier was smiling sweetly, but her heart was not at ease. She had witnessed Leonora Fortune take Lord Carswell's hand in such a forward manner, a manner that *she* never had, despite her superior time of attachment to the Carswell family. And yet, the rest of the company did not seem to feel it showed her at a disadvantage. Lord Carswell had seemed somehow *grateful*, and she had seen Lady Eloise look on in *approval* almost. At least Linton's face had seemed somewhat bemused, not happy at all. She ventured to speak to him in a lowered tone, 'Is tonight a trifle awkward, Linton? Lady Eloise cannot know that you and Miss Fortune were a little at outs with each other the last time you met.'

Pet was talking to Marguerite idly, but gave Foggy a knowing look across the table, since Miss Du Maurier had leaned rather closer to his friend.

'I was not at ... at *outs* with Miss Fortune,' Foggy disclaimed.

'Oh!' said Miss Du Maurier. Her voice suggested he had been a trifle rude again, and though he did not think he had been, he said, brightly, 'Almacks again this evening?'

'Yes indeed.'

'The ladies all,' said Desmond to the company, 'look delightful this evening.'

'I quite expected that you might disapprove of our gowns, Lord Desmond, since they have no trim at all,' said Marguerite. 'I was going to ask you if you could think of a suitable addition for next time, for your taste in ladies' dress, says my sister Georgette, is renowned.'

'I *do* have rather an eye, it is said,' said Pet smugly in his light-hearted manner. He considered. 'Let me look.' He did so, with great attention, and Marguerite endured it pertly. Finally he gave his verdict. 'No, it is as I thought — perfection in simplicity this evening, Miss Marguerite. The snowy ribbon at the neck is a masterly touch.'

'Indeed, I thought it very pretty, too,' said Christiana, 'and mean to adopt it with another gown. Is it your thought,

Leonora dear?’

‘Oh, no,’ said Leonora. ‘It is Button who thinks of how to make things pretty.’

‘Leonora is not much interested in such things,’ smiled her twin.

‘Really?’ said Lady Eloise.

‘I have never had to be,’ explained Leonora practically, ‘I have Marguerite for that. She is my mirror.’

‘I suppose if you see that it becomes Marguerite, it *must* become you!’

‘Exactly.’

‘And Leonora,’ said Marguerite proudly, ‘has so much more to do than I. She is interested in so many things.’

‘Attics!’ said Christiana, with a laugh.

‘I beg your pardon?’ spluttered Lord Carswell.

‘Did you not tell him, Lady Eloise?’ Leonora said, looking down the table rather accusingly, thought Foggy’s mama. She looked back to Lord Carswell gravely. ‘Have you had your attics checked?’

‘Eh?’

‘You *should*.’ Carswell looked shocked at being expected to reply. ‘For rot, you know,’ said Leonora helpfully. ‘Rot is *fatal*, and may bring the house down around your ears.’

Several pairs of eyes, Viscount Desmond’s included, raised to the ceiling as though nervous.

‘Ah!’ said Lord Carswell.

‘Well, *have* you, sir?’ continued Leonora pressingly. ‘I mean, I suppose an agent looks after *this* house in Town, but in Suffolk—’

Suffolk again, thought Lady Eloise, sighing.

Miss Du Maurier exchanged a glance of mild incredulity with her mother, for this conversation was not at all in the established mode. This is when Foggy, who had been

addressing his plate of food so that he did not have to engage too often with his dinner companions, took the wind out of everyone's sails by saying, 'Have it done every year.'

'We *do*?' said his father, amazed.

'Gave orders. Actually, Onslow once mentioned the trouble at Castle Fortune three years ago, and I thought we'd better have a look, Pa.'

He became aware of a silence and looked up to see everyone staring at him in amazement. He gazed around vaguely, waving a knife. 'It's as well to take precautions. Carswell Park has perfectly sound attics.'

Miss Fortune broke the silence. 'Well done, sir!'

'Yes, well done my boy, didn't know you'd taken an interest in such—' said his father.

'*Attics*, Foggy?' laughed his sister.

'*I* didn't know you had it in you, old man,' said Desmond, stunned and amused.

'Well, it's not something you bring up over dinner, now, is it?' said Foggy to his friend, then recollected that someone had already done so. 'That is ... very interesting things, attics,' He glanced over at Leonora Fortune, who looked a little sad, he thought, though he could not think why. She was not looking at him, but at her plate.

Christiana said, 'Well, we should talk of *gowns* on a ballroom night, not attics,' she protested, but to deflect from Leonora's strange expression. She looked at Viscount Desmond, the celebrated dandy. 'Does *my* gown meet your discerning eye, viscount?'

'Amber becomes you,' Desmond decreed royally. 'The pink becomes Miss Du Maurier, too.' He glanced at his hostess, but the barely-there-bodice of her diaphanous gown nearly defeated comment, so he made it general, 'Lady Eloise is at the forefront of fashion as usual, and Mrs Du Maurier looks perfectly regal in that lavender silk.'

That lady laughed, but her daughter said, 'I fear *my* gown cannot match those of the other ladies present'

Her mother looked at Mary a trifle worriedly lest she be intimidated by her surroundings, and Foggy felt called on to say, 'Not at all. Very fine gown.'

Christiana and her mother exchanged glances. *Complaining* once more. It looked as though Leonora Fortune had seen something they had all missed. But Mary had chosen a bad night for it, reflected Christiana, for the twins' gowns were so very simple this evening. It was their beauty that was so amply enhanced by this simplicity, their beauty that made the simple gowns stunning. Mary's gown had a pretty pin-tucked bodice and an embroidered band beneath her breast, and had evidently cost more time and money in its construction than the simple voiles that the Fortune girls wore so well. And Mary looked charming in it. There was really nothing to complain *of*, and yet ... Christiana thought it was a habit with Mary to say something self-disparaging in the hope of garnering a consoling compliment. It must be very dry meal to swallow, those crumbs that were begged for, Christiana thought. But for a man of such sensibilities as her brother, Mary Du Maurier's habit might be a dangerous thing. If Foggy were to consider that he'd led his old friend along by the words that were thus drawn from him, he might feel obliged to take responsibility. It was the danger Leonora Fortune had somehow seen. Foggy might marry Mary with his sister's blessing, but *not* by this method.

Mama had set up her trap to see both girls in conversation with her son. She wished to compare, Christiana thought, their affection for him. Christiana wondered why Leonora had suddenly appeared sad, and promised herself to think about it after the heady delight of Mr Jasper's hand in hers gave her respite to do so.

Chapter 20

Marguerite's Awakening

Mr Chesterton, so particularly handsome in evening wear, (being a gentleman peculiarly suited to knee breeches, which showed off his powerful calves elegantly) had told Marguerite that he had something *particular* to say to her, and asked to meet her in the garden in a half hour. He had arrived a little late this evening and so he had only been able to secure a country dance with Marguerite, and she too felt the need for conversation together now that he was returning her to her sisters. His eyes smiled down on her, but there was an underlying seriousness that made Marguerite's heart dance.

'Something particular?' Marguerite said. Chesterton was jolted by the crowd and so he was very close to Marguerite's ear when he said, 'Something very particular.'

Marguerite's chest heaved. She looked at him with shining eyes. But ... Leonora passed her view, returning with Viscount Gascoigne to Georgette's side. 'I cannot meet with you here tonight, sir. Can it not wait until tomorrow?'

'Alas, I leave Town for three days tomorrow. I must speak with you tonight. I *cannot* wait!' His manner was urgent, almost passionate, but his eyes humbly begged her leniency.

Marguerite saw a lady look at them, for they were much closer than the proprieties demanded, and were dawdling back to her party. Thankfully, their closeness could be explained by the pushing crowd, but Marguerite suddenly had the thought that the disapproving lady would not be able to judge if it were she or Leonora who was too close to a gentleman. Quite apart from Leonora being affected by her behaviour as a family member, any improper conduct on *Marguerite's* part might be attributed to her *sister*, since they were identical. So sadly, and reluctantly - for her heart was beating to know what Mr Chesterton might confess to her — she said, 'I am so sorry Mr Chesterton, I cannot meet you.'

His eyes, so open and urgent, changed to cold in a second. He thinks I reject him, thought Marguerite in a panic. She began again. ‘Sir, *please* understand...’

‘I understand perfectly, madam,’ said Chesterton in a cold tone, and Marguerite knew it was his pride covering his pain. He moved away from her before she could explain, and she spent the next hour dancing with who-she-did-not-know, looking everywhere for Mr Chesterton to apologise once more. Surely, he would understand that it was not to protect *herself* but *Leonora* that made her hesitate to hear him out. It would be a shocking meeting if discovered, but Marguerite knew that he was not one of the grasping, faithless men who seek to trick young women. He truly admired her, had told her so in word and action. On one drive, he had told of his home which he said she would like very much, *when she visited*. Since his home was in Northumberland, a place she would have no need to visit normally, this was significant indeed. He had only the highest of intentions, he was suggesting to her. Perhaps this evening he had decided to declare himself more fully. She was excited and uplifted by the possibility, realising that she had been gradually falling for the warmth of his smile, his good looks, and the care he took of her at every turn, so different from her male relatives. To be Mr Chesterton’s wife would be a happy thing indeed! His desperation to speak she understood, for perhaps, as he had to go away for some days, he had resolved to settle things with her. She was a little desperate herself.

He had told her playfully, but with a wickedly serious look, how jealous he could become when he saw how sought after she was. Had admitted that he was envious of every man who danced or conversed with her. She understood him, for though she did not seek to see who he danced with (being too much occupied by her own partners) when she did happen to dance by him and a partner, she too was a little concerned. He seemed to smile a good deal. She would have risked the garden in a moment if there was no concomitant risk to her twin. But there was. Surely, if she could talk to him tonight once more, perhaps at supper, or during a waltz, she could get him to understand this, and to see that no other had the space

in her heart that he had claimed. Perhaps then he could go on his visit away from Town with a comforted spirit.

So Marguerite's eye followed him around, and she saw that he entered the supper room, leading another young lady, Miss Farley, with him. Marguerite, who had arranged to be led into supper by Sir Reginald Forbes, could not wait to follow Chesterton, and grasped the arm of Sir Justin Faulkes, Onslow's friend. The debonair baronet looked down at her wryly, 'What is it, Leonora?'

'It is Marguerite, sir,' said Leonora's twin with a pert look.

'I supposed it to be your sister, since she is the one who pulls at my arm to make demands. Well, now I have had the full complement of demanding Fortune ladies — what is it that your grasping hand demands?'

'Supper sir,' said Marguerite, keeping an eye on the direction taken by Chesterton.

'Are you without escort?'

'No, but I need to go *now*.'

'Abandoning some poor fellow as we go,' said Faulkes laconically walking her. 'You are a heartless lot, you girls.'

'Yes sir,' agreed Marguerite, and her hand directed his way to the supper buffet, towards Chesterton.

They fought their way through the crowds, Marguerite's step just ahead of his, the baronet following resignedly. As they approached the table, he saw Marguerite's eye brighten, then suddenly dull. He followed her gaze. They were standing near enough to a handsome blade to hear him urge the young lady in a blue muslin gown, to whom he was handing a Negus cup, 'Meet me there, I pray you, because I have something *particular* to say to you.'

Faulkes frowned slightly, the lowered tone suggested the clandestine, and he gazed at the handsome Chesterton fellow with dislike. But when Faulkes looked back to his little companion, to his horror Marguerite's large blue eyes filled with alarming rapidity. 'Stop it *at once*, Marguerite!' he hissed.

Sir Justin's reprimand, delivered for her own sake she knew, jerked her from her daze. She had turned towards Faulkes fully and she tilted back her head a little, perhaps to stop the tears from spilling over.

'Take me away, sir.'

Faulkes, knowing she was distressed, did not make the mistake of sympathy at this juncture. For surely then the tears would fall. 'Certainly,' he said, coolly unconcerned, and they pushed through to leave the supper room. 'What a motley crew you Fortune girls are. First your sister Georgette trifles with my heart, then Jocasta orders me around and uses me for her own purposes, then I must rescue your sister Leonora and be pulled through a crowd by you. Thank goodness you twins are the last of the clan.'

'You are sorely used, Sir Justin. But it is only because you are closer than family!'

Faulkes laughed sardonically. 'Oh, a fine excuse for your ill-treatment.'

He was glad to see that the scolding had stopped her tears and that he had made her smile a little. But he knew from the trembling hand on his arm that her state was not stable. He took Marguerite back to her sister Georgette, and gave the marchioness a significant look with his eyes.

A quick glance at Marguerite's high chin and contained manner, so unlike her, and the marchioness said, 'Might we leave now Marguerite? I need you to keep me company, for I have the headache. Sir Justin will tell Leo and Lucian!' And so, before the hot tears could fall, Marguerite was safely in the Onslow carriage, and in her elder sister's unquestioning arms. She gulped a few times as if to explain, but Georgette only held her closer and said, 'Later, my darling. It is alright now, tell me later.'



When Leonora heard that Marguerite was ill, she begged Onslow to take her home quickly.

‘Stay for me for a minute, I’ll come too,’ said Faulkes. He searched the room for blue muslin, and eventually located the slightly tall girl that he had seen with Chesterton in the supper room. She was with a lady that must be her mama, from their similarity. Sir Justin approached. This was Lady Farley, whom he knew slightly as a good-natured widow, whose son was the new Lord Farley. Justin didn’t see him here, and even if he had been, Faulkes was sure he would still have chosen the mother. Farley was an insecure, bumptious young man whom Faulkes was not fond of. Justin went over to Lady Farley, stood rather closer to her shoulder than was strictly *comme il faut*, but which the press of people might excuse. Looking out over the ballroom he surprised her by addressing her, but not looking her way.

‘Lady Farley, your daughter has been approached to meet a gentleman on her own later. I overheard it and thought I should give you a hint.’

‘Sir Justin? Deborah would *never*—’

‘I did not hear her agree, mistake me not. However, I think the personable Mr Chesterton might be avoided.’

Lady Farley was still somewhat mortified. ‘Thank you, sir.’ As he began to move off, she added, ‘May I ask you not to mention this to my—’

‘Young men may be rash in dealing with such things. Rest assured.’

‘Deborah, I have the headache,’ said Lady Farley as he left.

‘Oh, let us leave then Mama. I have been wishing to do so. It is so stuffy in here.’

Ah! thought Faulkes. Not such an easy target after all. Had Chesterton made such a suggestion to Marguerite Fortune? He remembered seeing them dance twice, and drive once. No doubt there were many more occasions that he had *not* seen. Yes, Chesterton had given her some expectation, if not a promise. If Faulkes told Lucian, the young buck would be ground to dust. Faulkes had better deal with the matter himself.

Lucian and Leonora Fortune were not where he left them, so he went to the vestibule where he found the carriage had just returned from Onslow House and was pulling up after being summoned. They might have walked otherwise, but Miss Fortune's dancing slippers would no doubt have faced ruin at the attempt, for the streets tonight were wet with the rain that had so recently passed.

When they piled into the carriage, Leonora asked, 'What happened to Marguerite?'

'How do you know it was not my wife who wished to leave?' asked Lucian.

'In body and spirits, Georgette is as strong as a horse. She would only have one reason to leave so early — and Papa and George were both absent.'



'I shall avail myself of your sofa for a few days, Pet,' Foggy informed him.

'You are *planning* this now?'

'Home is no longer safe. My mama, my sainted mama ... what did she mean by it?'

'You know very well what she meant by it, old fellow, meant you to choose which one to marry. Compare and contrast in one practicable step.'

'But I am not ...'

'... A marrying man,' said Lord Paxton, sipping some ale. 'We know Foggy, we know, but when pitted against the women of your family, are you sure of avoiding the trap?'

'Not *all* the women,' said Foggy. 'The aunts, yes, m'mother, yes. But my sister warned me about one of 'em. Good girl Christiana, she likes me.'

'She's probably just supporting t'other,' said Desmond, gloomily.

Foggy banged the table. 'What? No ...!' Then he reflected. 'But perhaps ... they are calling each other close friends now, by name.'

‘Never thought anybody decent would want to marry *you*, Foggy,’ said Paxton blandly, with the casual candour of long friendship.

‘Pretty girls, both, I grant you,’ objected Desmond, ‘but no fortune either of them, not what *my* mama would call eligible.’

‘Foggy’s mama doesn’t require much in the way of eligibility. Take any nibble on the bait, because Foggy won’t give himself the trouble to go fishing,’ Paxton shrugged.

‘I’m not a ...’ intoned Foggy again.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Desmond with a thump on his back. ‘But you’ll have to one day. Like me. We’re the hope of our lines.’

‘Not *yet* anyway,’ Foggy said, drinking sullenly.

‘If you must be married to one of them, old fellow,’ said Paxton, suddenly, ‘which one would you choose?’

This was something he hadn’t stopped to consider. *If I had to?* He thought, but he was never going to voice his thoughts, even among friends. One couldn’t speak of ladies in this fashion. He imagined both scenarios. It was clear who he would choose. He’d known Mary as a child. Nice girl, easy to get along with. He could have, he thought, a peaceable life with her. Whereas the other one ...! The Lion might also be an angel, but she was totally unpredictable. She would run him ragged, upend his home (for his own good, he was sure) and demand *everything* of him. He did not know what that consisted of, precisely, but he knew she would have it. She would consume his life. He was not at all sure he could say no to her.

Whereas with Mary, she might be an undemanding type of wife who would not pry too deeply into his Town doings. Not that he would be a faithless husband, on the contrary. He did not admire men who were. But the sporting life, the carousing with friends, the life, in fact, of a fashionable fellow, Mary would turn a blind eye to, he believed, as long as he was pleasant to her over breakfast. He based this on the careless treatment he had meted out to her as a boy, forgetting a promise to play with her or so on, and how she had always

come back to follow him like a puppy. He could not imagine Leonora Fortune being so easily silent. No, if he were to be put up against a wall to be shot, or have to marry one of the two girls who were genuinely (astoundingly) interested in him, Mary it would be.

What Leonora Fortune wanted of him seemed to have expanded after their carriage drive. She had been a little girl who had chosen him as a future prospect, no — *project!* A practical, determined little girl. But once when she cried at the ball, and then when she was jealous in the carriage, he had known instinctively that practicality and determination, those things ruled by the brain, were no longer all that was at play. Miss Fortune cared for him, and in a passionate manner that he had never expected or wanted to inspire in anyone. And it was this that terrified him. For beyond fear, something in him was overset and in danger of running off like a raging bull.

At the dreadful dinner trap, Pet had pointed out, Miss Leonora Fortune had entertained his father more than Foggy. She had not sought to engage him in conversation at all.

‘Maybe she’s cooling her heels at last. Probably at the dinner more on your sister’s account, not yours,’ Foggy’s friend suggested.

Foggy thought back. It was true that Mary Du Maurier was the one who required him to answer her with frequency. But on his other side, even as the Lion was taking pains with his papa, he had *felt* her. The air between them was charged with their awareness of each other, even if they never said a word. When their elbows had accidentally brushed together, the fork she was holding had clattered onto her plate. No, she was not newly indifferent. If anything, it was all getting worse.

Nip it in the bud! He said now, ‘Tomorrow. Must see her.’

‘Thought you were *avoiding* seeing her?’ said the viscount.

‘Was. Am. But must. Morning drive. No, not drive. Too close. Walk. That’s it.’

‘Take the gin away, will you, Robbie? He’s off again.’

‘You won’t be fit for anything tomorrow morning, gudgeon...,’ said his lordship, obeying the viscount’s wise instructions.

There was a general derisive laugh of agreement, but they were wrong.

Chapter 21

The Tale of a Tree Cloud

To say Leonora was surprised to see the Honourable Mr Carswell in the troop of morning callers was to understate it. First, her eyes widened in shock, then her mouth gave a radiant smile she could not suppress. But she was not alone in her surprise. The five other gentlemen who had come to call on the twins eyed him, amazed. Anyone-who-knew-anything knew that Foggy Carswell was averse to the marriage mart, and did not usually play with young ladies at all. The Marchioness of Onslow, presiding over the welcomes, was as usual in her greeting and Foggy responded politely, but stiffly.

‘Is Carswell *related* to the Fortunes?’ one gentleman asked another in an under voice.

‘Not so far as I know...’ was the reply.

‘Then *why*...?’

‘No idea...’

Carswell took very little pains to enter conversation and merely responded to the pleasant remarks that Lady Onslow addressed to him from time to time, so eventually the gentlemen who were keeping the ladies amused, and vying with each other in the process, paid him no mind. He sat on the edge of his chair for the rest of the call, perhaps biding his time. It seemed to Georgette that for the other gentlemen, either twin would do. Her sisters looked equally scrumptious in pale primrose gowns, with three rows of deeper yellow satin ribbon woven through the hem, another woven at the bosom, and one in their high-coiled hair. Only Carswell avoided the eye of both, after being, thought Georgette, bowled over by Leonora’s brief but delighted smile of welcome.

The twins, both, looked strained. Marguerite had been making a pretence of keeping her spirits high after the dreadful blow to her heart that Faulkes had hinted at. Leonora let her glance go to Carswell for fleeting seconds and, as she did so,

became more and more tense for some reason. But Georgette was proud of them. It was only her sisterly awareness that revealed anything out of the ordinary. The general company did not appear to notice.

But as the marchioness crossed the room to leave for a second (for there were a plethora of maids seated in the room), Carswell surprised her by saying in a lowered voice as she passed, 'Is Miss Marguerite quite alright?'

Georgette looked down. The blue eyes looking up at her, in that face that amused her ordinarily, did not look much different, but she was nevertheless amazed. He was a much more sensitive individual than she'd guessed. 'She will be,' Georgette said in a similar tone, with a smile.

Mr Thornton asked Miss Fortune if she would care to go for a drive this morning. Leonora's eyes flickered to Carswell. 'I'm afraid I am already engaged this morning,' she said, but in a serious voice.

Carswell looked over at her, their eyes met in acknowledgement, and he was disturbed to see that hers shone with more than their usual light. The marchioness returned, and this was the hint for the gentlemen to take themselves off. Marguerite had agreed, rather half-heartedly, to drive with Mr Holden.

As the girls put on their pelisses and bonnets (blue twill today) Marguerite whispered, 'Whatever is the matter, Leo? He has *come* for you at last.'

Leonora's eyes were downcast. 'He has come to say goodbye, I think.'

'No—!' objected Marguerite.

But Leonora tilted her chin up. 'I think I'm tired of it all, anyway.'

As Mr Carswell, looking sheepish but determined, held an arm out to squire Leonora from the house, a little maid scooted after them, taken by surprise at the marchioness's nod. Thomas the footman ran for the maid's cape and bonnet, and she caught up with the pair by the end of the street, walking a few

paces behind them. The couple ahead seemed awkward and stiff, but it was none of her business.

Mr Carswell had *decided* — so that beneath his embarrassment and dread, his determination to speak this day was strong. Only more pain and upset awaited the drawing out of this situation any longer. He meant, after this, to talk freely to Mary Du Maurier, too, to be done with the whole thing before dinner. But the nearness of Leonora Fortune was the same to him as it had been last night. To have her so close was enough to make him tremble from something other than fear. So he was having difficulty in beginning.

But he managed a deep breath and squared his shoulders, after they had walked a whole street in silence.

Before he could speak, the low husky voice that he loved interrupted. ‘Mr Carswell, might I tell you a story?’

‘What ... *eh?*’ He knew he should ask to speak first, to carry out his deed as swiftly as possible, but the respite from having to so as yet was a relief, so he remained silent. If she were to venture into muddy waters he would interrupt, for it was his duty to end this, and he was resolved to do it.

‘There was once a silly young child who fell from a tree —’ she began.

‘Miss Fortune, I—’ with unnerving efficiency, Miss Fortune had struck the muddy waters straight away.

‘Do not fear, sir,’ she said, shakily but soothingly. He was ashamed that she soothed him. ‘I shall not be long.’ She had let go of his arm and clasped her hands before her in a nervous fashion as she walked on, matching his slow stride. ‘The girl was caught by a handsome man—’ Foggy coughed in self-disparagement, but she continued, ‘and, like a silly child, she decided to marry him.’

If there was a hole in the ground, Foggy wished it would open and let him jump in.

‘She already knew, you see, that as well as being handsome and strong, he was kind and gentle and funny and good natured and well mannered — which is a great deal to know of

any prospective groom. And he was as different from the men in her family as it was possible to be. Thus, for practical reasons, she decided to choose him, for she was an unusually determined child, old before her time, as her family always told her. Since she *was* still a child, she knew that marriage was some years off, so she put herself to prepare in the interim. She learnt how to keep a great house and manage servants, by doing so in her castle home. She tried to find out what else a lady should be able to do for her husband, and master that. Flower arrangement defeated her, I fear — but she did well in ordering meals and stocking the kitchen garden and the stillroom. She found out where his faraway home was situated, and asked people incessantly for information on the topic. She even had her sister purchase a guidebook of the county from *Hatchards* and send it to her. She looked up his name in *Debrett's Peerage and Baronetage*, and annoyed any passing member of the gentry with questions about the family and its situation.' She stopped, suddenly conscious, and turned to him with eyes pleading for understanding, 'She did not care, you know, about the *wealth* of the young gentleman—'

Here she met Carswell's now watering eyes, with feeling eyes of her own, and he said in the lowest voice possible, 'I know.'

Reassured, she looked away again, adopting her discursive tone once more. '... or only so far as she could increase it by her industry. To which end she pestered her father's land agent to learn the gentleman's part of running an estate.' Her fingers wrapped themselves nervously as she stole an apologetic look at him. 'It seemed to her, you see, that her chosen one, while wonderful in many ways, was perhaps not *practical*, and that because she *was* practical, she could truly aid him as his wife.' She looked off again.

Foggy Carswell gulped. The detached voice had become a trifle huskier, and he could hardly bear it. Some of this he had known of course, but now his purpose here today seemed terrible — and possibly doomed. How could he counter such a story with a cruel rejection?

‘Later, she came to Town, and after a first encounter, she believed that he knew her intent. She had wished to get to know him again before she sprang his fate on him, for he had once told her he was uncommonly nervous regarding marriage. You must remember that she had been a child when she made her decision. And that she was used to pursuing all her goals to the end. But everything began to go wrong.’ She took a breath to steady herself. ‘He did not want her, avoided her, but she still held firm, as only an arrogant, determined little person could,’ she looked down, and laughed a trifle bitterly, while Carswell gulped, ‘becoming intimate with his family, trying to discover where he might be found from time to time. She believed, you see, that she might be a useful wife, and good to him.’

Another gulp. They had reached the park, and Leonora sat at the edge of a bench, directing her maid to a place under a tree some feet away. Gingerly, Foggy Carswell took a seat at the other side of the bench, leaving a space between them.

‘But other factors came in, factors that the practical young child had not foreseen. It was her sister who was romantic, not she, and though she had heard from her married sisters, of the force of lo ... that is, *attraction*, she never thought to encounter it. She thought only to make a good plan. But when she got to know her chosen one as a young lady, she found that her feelings were not within her control. She became hot with a strange kind of anger when he was kind to other young ladies, for example.’ She gave a cough, and a deep sigh came from her companion. ‘And then she began to see and know many other wonderful things about him that had an unsettling effect on her heart. Not only how *kind* he was to his family, but how *manly* he was on a horse, or driving a team, or when he protected his sister, or even her own sister and herself. She began to see how much *more* marvellous the man truly was than her dream of him, and it made her something she had never been — afraid.’ This word landed between them like a rock, and she began to twist her hands again before she had courage to recommence. ‘She became cross and petty at times — so that she even provoked the nicest man in London to be cross with *her*. In her pride and determination, she had

believed that she would be better for him than the young lady of his choice—’

A strangled sound came from Foggy’s throat.

‘...more practical, more helpful, because of the many hours she had dedicated to becoming someone useful.’ Leonora gave a derisive sound. ‘But then she heard his sister say that she did not want an *exciting* husband, just a simple happy life. And she began to understand that *he* might want the same. Since a child our heroine had been in scrape after scrape with her family and friends. She was known, quite literally sometimes, as Trouble. She began to see why such a kind man might run from her. She began to want for him what he wanted for himself. And then too, she experienced for herself being the object of another man’s unwanted obsession and how unpleasant it is to be pursued by someone you do not like.’ She dropped her eyes to her lap, as though in shame. ‘It is quite disgusting, degrading, and frightening. No wonder his look whenever he saw her was terror.’

‘Do not *like*...? *Degrading*...? No, *really*, Miss Fortune—’

‘My tale is almost done, sir. Recently, she saw what she had put him through, how uncomfortable and unwelcome her childish attentions were. And then she began to see too that the preparations she had made were all hollow. As well as being braver and truer and more handsome than she had ever guessed, her chosen one was also perfectly practical in his own right. He had begun already to have a rational hold on running his father’s estate, without loss of dignity to his beloved father. *All* her preparations were unnecessary. There was nothing at all she could give him, not even happiness, though that had become the honest dream of the heart she had not known she had.’ At this last, Leonora laid a heavy fist on her bosom and bent a little, before pulling herself up suddenly, turning to him. He sprang to his feet in instinctive good manners. ‘Goodbye Mr Carswell. It is my earnest hope that you find peace and contentment. I hope you enjoyed my tale. It ends here, today. Her childish delusions of usefulness are gone. Now she will turn away from her chosen one for good and all, using all the

determination she has homed in herself, and never trouble him again.’

She held her hand out as parting, he took it and looked down at her eyes, the Lion’s once more. ‘There,’ she purred gently. ‘You did not have to say it. I spared you that, at least.’

His throat was choked. He thought, in horror, that he might cry in the park, but she pulled away and walked back in the direction of home.



After an alert from Christiana, who had seen her brother’s shocked and depressed behaviour after returning from his morning call to the Onslows’, only to go back out a half hour later, Viscount Desmond and his friend Lord Paxton had eventually found Foggy, head on a gin-soaked table sleeping, at only the seventh establishment they had visited.

Betty, a plump-bosomed serving wench in a tawdry gown, who was nevertheless pretty, walked over to them as they approached. ‘Here!’ she said, holding out a leather purse, ‘I saw someone filch it from his highness there, when he fell asleep, so I filched it from the dipper.’

‘Not a skill I knew you to possess, Betty,’ said the viscount cheerfully.

‘I haven’t *always* been this respectable ... ow!’ she finished as a passing gent pinched her posterior.

‘Quite!’ said the viscount with a grin. He opened Foggy’s purse with a generous gesture, offering her a florin from within.

‘I took two already,’ she said with insouciance, making her way to the board and swaying as she went. She looked over her shoulder, ‘and a guinea.’

‘*Very* respectable!’ said Paxton. ‘Let us get him to a hackney, Portia has plans this evening.’

But Foggy, when roused, was not willing to go. ‘Am I a fool, Pet?’ He turned his head, ‘Robbie?’ His voice was the most desperate they had ever heard it.

‘Not ... *well*...!’ Pet was forced to honesty by the pleading but raw look in Foggy’s eye.

‘She told me a story ... it was a horrible story, the worst and best story of my life...’

‘Who did? Betty?’ said the viscount.

‘No, Miss Fortune, I’ll wager,’ said Paxton intelligently.

‘A story—’ wondered Desmond.

‘A story about the tree and the cloud and the angel—’ Foggy’s voice was going cloud-wards itself.

‘Oh lord, don’t start that again!’ begged the viscount.

‘You *knew* the story —’ objected Paxton, ‘so why did she ... are you dreaming again, old fellow?’

‘Not a dream,’ Foggy shook his head sadly. ‘I paid a morning call.’

‘On whom? *On Miss Fortune?*’ Paxton turned to the dandy. ‘I *knew* he liked her.’

‘Not *that*...’

‘Well, why pay a call if—’

Foggy eyed them with a whiff of his determination of earlier. ‘It was all to be done with today. Finished.’ He banged the table. ‘The Lion — and Mary, too.’

‘There was a horrid dinner last evening,’ explained Desmond to Paxton. ‘His mother sat him between them, Miss Fortune and Miss Du Maurier, that is.’

‘Ghastly, in the circumstances!’ imagined Paxton.

‘Yes,’ agreed his drunk friend, but then in defence, said kindly, ‘My mama *means* well—’

‘I know about mamas,’ said Petronius Fenn, with a sigh.

‘Yes. But it was *painful*. For *the ladies*, too. I had to stop it. It can’t go on so. I’ve been a coward running away, but now it is hurtful to them both because I am *not a*—’

‘We know!’ said his friends, together.

‘So I had to deal with it. I went for a morning visit, so as to tell her afterwards—’

‘Right. Dashed awkward thing—’ said Paxton, vividly recalling such a scene with Jocasta Fortune (now his sister-in-law, Lady Regis) in a summerhouse in the grounds of Castle Fortune.

‘But she told me a story ... I *knew* the story, but not all of it ... did you know she learnt estate management at fourteen, just for *me*...?’ He looked up, hand clapping his chest, his eyes wounded and amazed at the same time.

‘Portia said something—’ said Paxton, gently.

‘Yes, but it was the *saddest* story. And she didn’t cry ... not once,’ he looked far away. ‘She is the bravest little thing,’ to his friend’s distress, Foggy’s eyes filled as he looked back, reliving the meeting with Miss Fortune. ‘Much braver than I, though she thinks *I* am brave—’

‘*You?*’ said Paxton, amazed.

‘*I know...!*’ Foggy agreed, voice soaring, ‘If I were brave at all, *this* situation would never have come about.’

‘I suppose you *are* brave upon occasion, now I think of it. Challenging Bexley, and then fighting him — *I* wouldn’t like to do so,’ confessed Desmond.

‘No. *You* must think of what you owe to your coats,’ jeered Paxton. ‘Not but what Pet’s right, Foggy. On the back of a horse too. You don’t fear much.’

‘*She* said I look wonderful on horseback — I mean *me*, Robbie. Who thinks that of *me*?’

‘But I suppose, now I come to think of it, she is right,’ said Paxton, musingly. ‘I am not anywhere near as good a seat as you, Foggy. When you come to think of it, she seems to see things about you even the rest of us don’t notice, or pay much attention to. Because you are not a flashy kind of fellow, like Pet.’

The viscount buffeted the baron on the shoulder, but accepted this as his due.

‘The things she *said* ...’ said Foggy in an awed voice. He made a dismissive gesture with his hands, ‘... she’s thinking of someone else. I mean to say, how can *I* be those things she said? I mean *me*...? I have never had a serious thought in my life, or a useful one.’

‘I don’t know Foggy,’ Paxton said, running his hands through his romantic crop of curls, ‘You are a dashed good friend. Generous too, even when you know people like Charlie Farnborough are just going to fleece you.’

‘Well, I let him win a round now and again when I’ve heard the duns are too persistent,’ said Foggy, dully.

‘Just delaying the inevitable,’ said the viscount more cynically than was his wont.

‘No!’ offered Paxton, taking a diversion, ‘Hear he’s marrying a widow with a respectable property...’

Desmond gestured him quiet, putting an arm across his wilting friend’s shoulders. ‘Anyway old fellow, what ails you...?’ He sat up as a thought occurred and added, a trifle urgently, ‘She didn’t make you *give in*, did she? You haven’t made her an *offer*?’

‘Is *that* why you are miserable?’ asked Paxton.

‘No. She told me the story so that I didn’t have to pull myself out of the noose Mama had primed.’ He smiled sadly. ‘Just to save me that, she told me everything ... *everything*, so honestly.’

‘What do you mean...?’ the viscount’s voice was quieter, something in his friend’s sadness making him afraid.

‘She told me, you see,’ Carswell said bleakly, looking at the table, ‘that’s she’s finished with me.’ He sobbed loudly, holding it back in a hiccough.

The other two both looked at his misery, as Foggy took another gulp of gin.

‘Isn’t that a *good* thing, Foggy?’ said Paxton, gently. ‘Is that not what you wanted?’

‘Yes, old man,’ said Desmond bracingly. ‘No more trees, clouds, angels or lions.’ He slapped the picture of misery on the shoulder. ‘But you’ve, um, *celebrated* enough, I think, Foggy. Let’s take you to Pet’s.’

‘Why my rooms?’ said the viscount, shirking responsibility.

‘*My wife...*’ Paxton explained, with an open-armed shrug.

The viscount regarded him with dislike. ‘I had no idea in the past why a man would want such a thing as a wife—’ said Desmond. He turned to the figure of Foggy, whose heaving body already seemed to foresee the gruesome events to come in his small rooms tonight, ‘—but I suppose they come in useful for some things...’ A sober friend, he chided himself, was less forgiving than a foxed one.



There was nothing Marguerite could do with Leonora, when she later discovered her in their room, but hold her. Marguerite had considered her own heart broken and her trust lost since she had realised that Mr Chesterton was not honest, but now she knew her pain to be superficial in comparison. Leonora was curled into a ball on the silken coverlet, a sodden handkerchief clutched in her hands, and Marguerite watched as her strong sister became a shaken child.

Before she climbed into the bed, she sent a message to Georgette to excuse them both from dinner and from the social engagements of the day. ‘We are both fatigued and shall sleep. Please tell my sister that we need not be disturbed.’

Being held from the back by her sister caused Leonora to convulse once more. ‘I shall be well in a little time only, do not fret, Button.’

‘I know, I know,’ said Marguerite rocking her slightly, ‘you are very strong and there is nothing wrong at all,’ there was a slight smile in her voice, then she added soothingly, ‘Just sleep now, my Lion, and you will awake as brave as before.’

Leonora did sleep eventually, as the exhaustion of grief overcame her. Marguerite saw that her sister’s belief about Mr Carswell’s motive for visiting today was not mistaken. There

was certainly more wrong with her twin than upset at a plan defeated, and Marguerite stayed awake for a while, stroking her sister's arm in a movement that seemed to soothe Leo's sleeping twitches, before worry sent *her* to sleep, too.

A maid arrived at the dinner hour with two plates and two glasses of Madeira wine sent by Georgie. The wine was not usually offered to such young ladies, and Marguerite understood her elder sister's intention. A wan-faced Leonora ate something from the plate and Marguerite did too, sipping at the unfamiliar wine. They changed silently into their bed clothes, and slept again as though drugged. Which the younger sister had considered the intent of the wine.

The next morning Marguerite rose as she heard the maid make up the fire that would allow dressing to be a more leisurely experience, but found that her idle, soothing prediction of yesterday was quite right. Leonora was already dressed and coiffed, and said, in a firm voice, 'Time to rise, Button. If we are not at breakfast, Georgie will worry.'

Her eyes were the Lion's eyes. Marguerite understood that whatever her pain, her twin had herself well in hand again.



Georgette looked on as her twin sisters talked brightly over breakfast. Onslow and Faulkes, also present, were enjoying a male discussion on the points of Bexley's new team, which both agreed were showier than the team he had only just lost to their brother-in-law Regis (in a race held on a common at the outskirts of the city) but less well matched.

'I heard about that ... Regis doesn't give himself the trouble to do such things these days.'

'It is the final slap in Bexley's face, easy to deliver by challenging him before others at the club. His pride would not let him refuse,' said Faulkes. 'Damon decided to punish him a little more, even though Foggy Carswell had already done so, and Lucian had already warned him off the twins in the most unpleasant manner.'

Leonora gave a start when she heard Carswell's name, but said quickly and lightly, 'We have not seen enough of Kat,

shall we go after breakfast, Button?’

‘She has told us she is busy.’

‘She has come to London to see how you fare, I believe,’ said Georgette brightly. ‘You should go and shake her from her dusty study, however briefly.’



The girls did, and when they asked for the countess, they were shocked to be shown into a room with two handsome desks in the centre, a figure seated at each, but no sister. One was a thuggish male and the other a familiar figure. Both rose, but the little female *jumped* up.

‘Miss Marguerite, Miss Leonora!’ she cried, delighted.

‘Annie?’ cried Marguerite going forward. ‘You look so smart! And your tooth...!’

Annie smiled, pointing to a tooth at the side of her mouth, ‘Wooden miss! Miss Katerina had it fixed the first time we came to London, miss!’

Leonora came forward, smiling too. ‘It isn’t Annie any longer, is it? You have risen in the world.’

‘Yes Miss Leonora. It is Barker now. And this is Gilmartin, miss, butler at Covington Park.’

The thug bowed, and Leonora’s eyebrows rose. There had been a twinkle in his eyes. She remembered Kat telling her about the military friends who were Covington’s servants. ‘We’ve come to see Katerina, but must accidentally have been shown in here.’

‘Oh, it’s the countess’ orders. You know they hate to be disturbed. But she will wish to see *you*.’

‘You nearly convince me, Annie,’ said Leonora.

‘*Oh, miss!* I’ll take you to a salon and go to fetch her.’

She did so, and Marguerite said, in an under voice. ‘Annie is so poised now. And she even answers correspondence!’

‘We have grown taller than her in the year since we’ve met.’

Katerina arrived in the salon five minutes later, a quill behind her ear and a wearing a slight frown. She smiled when she saw the girls though, and said, ‘Well, how are you two faring? Marguerite, I saw at the ball was in full flight. But how do you bear the Season, Leonora?’

Leonora was not able to answer this question just at the moment, and she paused before adopting an ironic smile. As a punishment for the frown Kat had worn about being disturbed, and as a way to turn the topic, Leonora said sweetly, ‘Bad news, Katerina. My sisters are otherwise engaged on the fifteenth, and Georgette sends me to inform you that you must chaperone us.’ Katerina looked suspicious, ‘and at a *ball*.’

The countess looked appalled, but Annie, entering that moment with refreshments she had chosen to bring in herself, said, ‘Another *ball*. Oh miss, I shall dress your hair right fine!’

‘Annie do not even think of it!’ said the countess, dismissively.

‘You have *your* Great Work, my lady!’ said Annie, plaintively. ‘Let me have *mine*!’

The twins laughed at this interjection and Katerina sat back, resigned, looking at her sisters with narrowed eyes.

You could never tell what Katerina saw, thought Leonora. The twins were showing smiling faces today. But sometimes Kat saw more, and she surprised you by offering casual aid, just at the time you needed it.

Chapter 22

The Problem of Miss Du Maurier

Desmond's valet watched as the wan figure of the Honourable Linton Carswell sat up at the smell of the breakfast that he was laying on a small table for his master and guest. This was by no means an unusual occurrence, though it had been, in Evans' view, too frequent recently. Mr Carswell came to the table and Evans glanced at him. His pale face was normal for a condition that had required Evans to open the window to dispel the smell of alcohol, but since his master had been sober last evening (a visit to his mother for dinner had required this) this was a difference. The sufferings of the night before were usually dispelled after a breakfast, so that a lack of energy only lasted for as long as the first slice of ham — young gentlemen's constitutions being as resilient as they were. But Evans was not used to seeing his master's friend lachrymose as well as spiritless, and he placed a glass of milk into Carswell's pliant hands sympathetically. The young man drank, and seemed suddenly revived.

'I did not finish!' he said suddenly, spilling milk on the table.

'Pardon?' murmured the viscount, always sleepy before breakfast.

'I didn't see Mary.'

He sat up and began to look for his coat and boots, since he had slept in his breeches and shirt. He threw them on, as the viscount looked on, and attempted to tie the cravat, that he had found discarded by the sofa, around his neck.

'Let me, sir!' Evans said — and with a choke hold, made Carswell submit to his ministrations.

'I'm only going back to change,' Carswell protested, 'you need not, Evans.'

'Nevertheless, sir. I will see you off as a gentleman.'

'*Must* you go now?' asked Desmond, standing yesterday's coiffure on end with his fingers.

'I must see her. Before *she* sees ... I must go!' And quickly, Carswell was gone.

Desmond, chin on his hand, said to his servant, 'Why do I think that Foggy's worse now than when he escaped the first trap?'

'Trap, your lordship?'

'Female trap,' the viscount informed him.

'Ah. Dicey...' said Evans, eyebrows raised as he brushed the viscount's beaver hat.

'Yes, but the first one played fair at least. According to Christiana, the second one might be trickier,' he said to himself. He too sat up abruptly. 'Must follow him. Go to Christiana.'

'To Miss Carswell, my lord? But you require at least an hour to be properly...!' protested his servant, shocked.

'Just bring my riding gear, I'll dress myself.'

'Dress *yourself*? ' said Evans, staggering back a little.

'Come on man, this is a matter of life and ... If *this* one goes wrong, it would have been better for the *first* to have gone wrong, ye know.'

'Your lordship?' said Evans, pulling on boots.

'It's the *wrong* one that could go badly — but first wrong one going badly might have been, when I think of it — good.'

Evans regarded him from a recoiled position, wondering if his master *had* partaken, after all.

His hair only flattened, not coiffed, the viscount followed his friend. A look at his departing back, and Evans shuddered and fell into a chair. The valet knew that those artfully concocted curls persisted, but were no longer bouffant. But now he feared that Nature, given a sharp wind or a few drops of rain, would ruin the vestige of his masterpiece and return the viscount's hair to — he could hardly bring himself to think

it — a deeply unfashionable poker-straight shag. At times like this he could only be grateful of the viscount's lack of vigilance over the measure in the brandy bottle.



The viscount caught up with Foggy in his townhouse, mounting the stairs two at a time when the butler had told him the young master was changing his raiment. He bumped into Christiana at the top of the stairs, looking breezily pretty in beribboned green muslin, and she stopped him.

‘What has occurred?’

‘Foggy. He’s off to deal with the Miss Du Maurier situation, but he is of unsound mind, Christiana. I need a word.’

‘Did he offer for Leonora after all? Is that why he looked so dreadful yesterday?’

‘From what I understand Miss Fortune told him it was all over.’

‘No!’

‘To save him from having to do so himself, as I understood it.’

‘She’s a remarkable girl ... so why was Foggy *sad* that he escaped Mama’s trap at last?’ Christian mused, but looked at Desmond as though she knew the answer.

‘Complicated situation. But what I mean to say is ...’ he looked over his shoulder to make sure he wasn’t overheard, and Christiana pulled him closer to the shadows of a wall, ‘now he’s off to reject Miss Du Maurier, in case she meets Miss Fortune first, I think. Although why that signifies, I don’t understand...! But he’s not rational. And as I said to Evans—’ Evans was legendary amongst the viscount’s cronies, so Christiana knew to whom he referred, ‘—if *this* goes wrong, it would be worse than the *first one* going wrong because—’

‘The *first one* going wrong might have been *right!*’ said Christiana, with quick understanding of his gibberish.

The viscount was surprised to be so well understood, since he was perfectly aware his panic was making him gabble. But

as Foggy's sister, he supposed Christiana was fluent in gabble.

'Come with me to his room,' she ordered.

'He won't like that I told you—' began Desmond, following her.

'Never mind *that*,' said Christiana, 'this is an emergency.'

Foggy was just emerging from his room when four hands thrust him back. 'I must go!' he protested.

'No you don't. Mary is performing at a musical breakfast this morning, and won't be finished until—'

'Miss Fortune, I mean the Fortune twins won't be there—?' said Foggy in a panic.

'No. It is held by Mrs Hardy and a lot of old fusty people that Mrs Du Maurier knows. Not fashionable at all.'

Foggy stopped and, as pennies dropped in his head, looked disappointedly at Desmond.

'Pet! You *told* her!'

'Just the gist, old man.'

'You can meet Mary in the park before lunch, she has to walk that pug of her mother's. In the meantime—' Christiana looked to the discreet servant in a brown waistcoat who stood to one side. '— Turk, could you do something,' she waved a vague finger, 'with his lordship's hair? It looks a fright.'

'Certainly, my lady.'

Christiana drew Foggy, whose reckless nerves were obviously jangling, to a small brocade covered sofa, and pulled him down beside her.

'Leonora has ended her pursuit of you, I hear. Well, brother, I think that it might be a little *more* difficult to speak to Mary on this subject. She might not be quite so willing to understand.'

'Yes. Because Mama has encouraged her.'

'Yes. And because she is a little *different* from Leonora in nature.' She squeezed Foggy's hand. 'I am not trying to stop

you, brother mine. Only arm you for what is to come.'

'You are a good girl, Christiana, but—'

'Or you may find yourself betrothed before the morning is out,' continued his sister, pertly.

Foggy sat, open mouthed.

'Listen to her, Foggy,' said the viscount with his back to them as Turk dealt with his hair. 'Women know what they are about.'

'Well, for this knowledge of Mary I must credit *Leonora Fortune's* wisdom.' Foggy looked up, at attention once more. 'She made a remark, and all the family — Mama, the aunts, Delphine, and I — could see right away that she had noticed something about Mary that we never did. And that *something* is a thing you have not been armed against, Linton dear.'

'*Really?*' said Desmond, intrigued by this, and turning from the looking glass where Turk was doing his best with back-combing and pomade, not having a curling iron to hand, as his master never used one. 'What is it...?'

'A habit of *complaining*, but ever so gently.'

Foggy's eyes were reviewing. '*I can't see that.*'

'Well, at dinner that evening ... "I fear *my* gown cannot match that of the other ladies present,"' Christiana mimicked Mary's soft, plaintive tone. 'And so, of course you had to reassure her by giving her a compliment.'

'Ah, yes!' said the viscount. 'She told me the other day that Mrs Ponsonby's coiffure made her feel like a country bumpkin.'

'And you replied...?' said Christiana, significantly.

'That I preferred simplicity in young ladies — which was, in fact, a demmed lie.'

'You *see*...?' said Christiana to Foggy, who was looking bemused. 'I do not think she *means* to do it, but she has the habit of extracting compliments in this fashion, and it could lead you to trouble.'

‘But I am not going there on a visit to *compliment* her, but just to say that I am very sorry, but ... but ... I am not a marry —’

‘If you cannot even say it to *us*, then how shall you say so to Mary? Another man might cast her off with aplomb, and even with little pain perhaps, but you could tie yourself in a knot...’

‘And be led to give her so many compliments in a row that you will realise that you have just led her on again, instead of putting her off,’ said Desmond, in full understanding.

‘Do you see why you need this time to prepare yourself?’

Desmond was sloughing off Turk, looking in the mirror and saying, ‘Very good, Turk! That will do!’

Turk said, ‘If you could just let Mr Evans know that this was achieved *entirely* without irons, I would be obliged, my lord.’

‘Eh?’ said Desmond. ‘Oh, right ye are!’ He frowned and moved towards Foggy. ‘So, you should go, yes — but do not respond to the call for compliments, or you will be trounced in ten minutes.’

‘You make her sound like a designing woman, and she ain’t. Mary’s a good girl.’

‘She *is* Foggy!’ said Christiana, holding his hands again briefly. ‘She’s my friend too. But she has not the strength of character of Leonora, and might not wish to relinquish such a chance of comfort as marriage to her old friend could offer — in this matter, she might not be so brave as Leonora Fortune.’

Christiana was stunned that this remark made her brother’s eyes water. ‘She *is* the *bravest* little thing—’

‘You started him off again—’ said Desmond, annoyed. He, too, was embarrassed. ‘Too much spring water in the gin last night, that’s the thing.’

Christiana laid a bracing hand on Foggy’s arm. ‘You can do it, brother. It is better so. You are calmer now.’

Foggy rose and looked for his hat, which his man held out to him by the door.

‘Any chance of coffee, Christiana?’ the viscount said as they left the room at a more leisurely pace. ‘I stopped breakfast to run after your ridiculous brother.’

Christiana smiled and asked Grace the butler to find some ham and coffee for Lord Desmond.



Mary Du Maurier, walking a disobedient pug in Hyde Park, was delighted, and surprised to see Mr Carswell approach her from the opposite side of a path. She handed over the leash to her maid at once, and greeted him.

‘Linton!’ she cried, smiling more widely than was her wont, ‘How lovely!’

This smile crashed over Foggy like a tsunami, and almost defeated him. He saw, in the distance, a pink pelisse near to the colour of the Fortune girls’ favourite coats, and it braced him. Dreadful for Mary to meet Miss Fortune before all was settled. It might give Mary more hope of ...! Or let Miss Fortune believe that Mary *was* the girl of his choice, as she had hinted ...! Dreadful for them both.

‘Actually, Mary, I was looking for you,’ he began bravely.

‘Oh, yes?’ Mary said, searching his smile-less face for clues. Then she added, quietly, ‘Well, it can hardly be for my witty conversation. I fear I do not know how to converse as easily and prettily as *some* young ladies.’

‘No, no!’ Foggy said, ‘Indeed you—’ he suddenly realised the benefit of Christiana’s advice, and held his tongue. ‘Might we sit on this bench a moment?’

Mary, in more fear than hope, did so, nodding her maid on to walk the dog back and forth along the path.

Foggy had a thought. ‘Your mother isn’t here?’ he said, looking over his shoulder.

‘No indeed. What can I help you with Linton?’

‘I am here to talk a little about ...’ Mary’s eyes widened expectantly, ‘Mama.’ He finished, disappointingly.

‘Is dear Lady Eloise quite well?’ she asked, confused and anxious.

‘She is ... em ... but I feel that some of her actions ... well, Mama is a *darling*, but sometimes she does not *think*—’

‘You speak of—?’ asked Mary, still anxious, ‘I’m sorry Linton,’ she gave her self-deprecating smile again, ‘I am not terribly bright, you know. I think every young lady in London must be superior to me in understanding.’ Her eyes dropped once more.

‘Not at all...!’ Foggy found himself beginning. It was torture for his generous nature not to say some words of comfort as she sighed in self-disparagement. He strangled his own throat from within. ‘The ... the dinner the other evening...’ He began again, not knowing how to end his sentence. He swallowed hard. ‘... and, and even before that. Well, Mama is anxious that I ... um, I...!’

Mary helped him. ‘Marry?’

‘Yes. And so she put us all in that dashed awkward situation, and must have thrown any number of embarrassing hints at you previously ... which I know you would not mind, since we have always been such *friends* ... but I thought I should—’ This was perfectly grisly. Mary kept her head down or turned away, but Foggy was aware that she was upset, and his inability to offer words of admiration and comfort were making him ill. ‘Not that I think you would be interested in a fool of a man such as me...’ He realised with horror that this was exactly the sort of remark that Mary made about herself and rushed into speaking before she could rebut him. ‘It seems the dog is finished his walk.’

‘Yes...!’ said Mary bravely, her voice shaking. ‘Do I understand then that you have spoken to Miss Fortune of marriage? She seems to admire you greatly.’

‘No ... not at all. That is, I don’t think Miss Fortune admires me any longer, if she ever—’ he said this in confusion. It was not for him to expose Miss Fortune’s story to another.

His voice was so sad that Mary responded. ‘Then, if you do not wish for ... excuse me, Linton, but your mama wishes something quiet and sensible for your marriage, I think. She said as much to me. If you do *not* want...’ her voice became suspended.

As Foggy was fearful of having the truth wrung from him, he hoped she would not mention the Lion again.

But she said instead, in a stronger tone, ‘I shall not repeat this ... but since you do not wish for the *dramatic*,’ here she must be referring to Miss Fortune again, ‘...then friendship, your mama believes, is a sound basis—’

Foggy was amazed that quiet Mary would go this far. ‘I *did* say so to Mama at one time, imagining some years in the future, you know....’ He was floundering again. He must straighten his spine.

‘Yes,’ appealed Miss Du Maurier, ‘but it is often the custom to be some years betrothed, you know. My friend Miss Carlson, for example, has been engaged for six years now.’

‘Yes,’ said Foggy. He was sick of his own prevarication and half-truths, and he thought of a long engagement with Mary and shuddered. The pink pelisse that was not Miss Fortune’s now sat beside an exquisite in a smart barouche and passed him by. ‘Until recently I thought that *was* the kind of marriage I’d like if I ever—’ he turned to her and touched her arm to meet her eyes squarely. ‘But not now, Mary. I clearly see that is not what I wish for now.’

Mary’s eyes filled, but she nodded, and smiled a little. She stood, gestured her maid, and took the dog, which began attacking the ankle of Foggy’s new boots. She jerked the leash and said, ‘Bad dog!’ and then added with some attempt at a normal tone, ‘Walk me back then, Linton. I have a book for Christiana, and you may carry it to her.’

Foggy was grateful for this, friendship’s boon, and took the dog-lead in a more relaxed manner to give himself some time to settle into the conceit of normality. However the dog, clearly enamoured of his new boots, made such a fuss in running around his legs that a comic performance took place,

to the delight of several bystanders. Inarticulate sounds escaped him, he danced a jig to avoid the worst of the damage, and only succeeded in having the pug attach itself to his ankles, the leash wrapped around him.

Mary took the leash from him, and untied it, laughing. ‘Oh Foggy, you *are* ridiculous! Whatever made me think I would like to marry you?’

This was a shocking admission, of course. But Foggy, cursing in an under breath about his boots, looked up and grinned. ‘Precisely!’ he agreed.

She met his eye properly, smiling, and moved along the path with him, holding the pug on the shortest possible leash.

Chapter 23

Mr Carswell Takes an Interest

The Ladies Onslow and Regis were poring over their purchases from a fascinating shop that sold some perfumed products *for the conservation of beauty when applied to the skin*. The array of bottles and jars on the small table before them was not large, but had cost a startling amount of pin money.

It was as well for male ignorance of these matters when Sir Damon Regis entered, looked at the bottle in his wife's hand, and said casually, 'What do you have there, sweetheart?'

'It is a French lotion, efficacious in removing age spots,' she informed him.

Since his fairy wife was but twenty years of age, Regis lowered the sporting journal he had taken up as he sat down and said, 'But you *have* no age spots, my love.'

The two females exchanged long-suffering looks, 'Also *prevention* of age spots, Damon. I have only to apply this nightly and I shall not gain any.'

Sir Damon returned to his journal, but said presently in his most dry tone, 'Give me a few drops of that if you can spare them, my love.'

Jocasta was suspicious, '*Why?*'

'It may be efficacious to put on the threshold to keep eagles from entering the drawing room.'

Jocasta threw a cushion at him.

'You really do *not* understand, Damon,' said Georgette patiently. 'It is from *France!*'

He sighed, unconvinced. 'How do the twins fare?' he asked, continuing to read.

'Both nursing a broken heart, I fear,' said Georgette.

‘But only we might guess. They are busier than ever. Indeed, every hour of their days are accounted for, attending far too many events. They even went to the British Museum with Covington and Kat yesterday, though by all accounts Marguerite sat on a sofa the whole time nursing a fictitious headache.’

‘They are both in a pact to be bright and cheerful not to worry us, and won’t talk of anything at all!’ lamented Georgette, sniffing a cream preparation in a tiny earthenware pot. ‘Oh, how lovely! Violets, I think,’ she said, handing it to Jocasta.

Jocasta sniffed approvingly and said, ‘But they remind me of myself two Seasons ago. All the natural *heart* has gone from them.’ She sat up and looked at her devilishly dark husband, reclined at his ease. ‘*You* could help them Damon, you helped *me*!’

‘And look,’ said her husband, drawing down his brows in a demonic frown, ‘where *that* got me!’

Jocasta looked about her for another cushion. ‘*You...!*’ she said, threatening.

‘We should not interfere yet,’ said Georgette. ‘The girls are doing their very best to fool us, and we should remain fooled for the present. But my fear is Papa. As the Season ends, he’s been pulling at me to tell him about their *prospects of marriage* and has started to attend balls again, introducing them to completely ineligible—’

‘Your papa’s notion of eligibility rests on one thing alone.’

‘Wealth. If *you* hadn’t threatened to shoot all my other suitors dead, he shouldn’t have let *us* marry,’ remarked Jocasta, fondly.

‘*And* you fleeced him with the settlements, letting him think you were not wealthy at all,’ marvelled Georgette. ‘I’ve told Lucian what a slow-top he is compared with you in that regard, oh Demon King.’

‘But Lucian’s contribution *did* save the castle roof,’ remarked Jocasta.

‘Before Papa and George could quite game it all away,’ said Georgette. ‘There is that.’

‘If the twins go home husband-less, at least they will not quite freeze next winter, I suppose,’ remarked Damon, cynically.

‘It is *so* sad,’ sighed Jocasta. ‘Mr Chesterton has proved himself totally false to Marguerite, I understand — but I was really hopeful of the Lion’s Venture. Mr Carswell is not my idea of a hero, but he is such a very nice young man.’

‘Pity!’ said Damon for them all.



It was now ten days since the dreadful walk with Mr Carswell, and Leonora was on her last nerve pretending to be happy to attend yet another stupid ball. What was worse was that Papa and George were here, and so although the twins had the protection of both the Onslows and the Regis family, she knew he was bent on more sinister introductions. Now her male relatives were conversing with a Mr Harper, a widower of fifty, known both for his large fortune and his leering remarks to the ladies. Marguerite, who had been obliged to dance with him once under Papa’s eye, squeezed Leonora’s hand. Leonora winced.

Faulkes, who was with the Onslow party as usual, noticed and whispered. ‘Don’t worry, if Harper approaches there are enough men in our party to dance you away from him before he comes.’ Leonora smiled thinly. Lord Jeffries approached her for a dance, but she hesitated, looking back to Marguerite. But she too had been claimed, and so Leonora went off to the set with an assumption of enthusiasm.

It did not seem to serve, however, for Lord Jeffries said presently, in a cheerful tone, ‘Do you particularly like my waistcoat Miss Fortune?’ since her eyes had been on his chest for some steps.

‘No!’ said Leonora absently, which caused Jeffries to give a shout of laughter, which Leonora, realising why, joined. ‘Oh, I beg your pardon.’

‘Do not!’ he laughed down at her. ‘Your honesty always contrives to make me laugh. It distinguishes you from your sister,’ he added playfully, ‘who has *much* better manners.’

She smiled back at him. ‘Good looking young gentlemen like you hear too many flattering things, I fear.’

‘And pretty young ladies such as yourself do *not*?’ he teased.

‘We do, but sweet remarks pall after a while, do not you think, sir?’

‘I shall strive to say something unpleasant to you each time we meet.’

‘And I to you!’

‘Ah, but you do not have to *strive*. The bald truth falls from your lips on each occasion we meet.’

‘It does?’ said Leonora, not remembering, but interested.

‘Yes. So far you have told me to mind my steps when I stood on you—’

‘Well, *anyone* would...’

‘Other young ladies fail to notice, and only scrunch up their noses in pain.’

‘Oh. And what else have I said?’

‘You recommended me to brush my hair once, when I offered to drive you in my phaeton at the park.’

‘How dare I,’ said Leonora, unmoved.

‘And on that occasion, you also told me to point my leaders.’

‘I expect they were adrift.’

‘I took your sister up the next day, and she told me I drive very well.’

‘Button is very polite,’ Leonora informed him. ‘But she is an enthusiast. If she had *really* admired your skill, she would tell you that you drove *magnificently*.’

‘Oh,’ said Jeffries, abashed. Then he smiled his open, genuine smile. ‘I must have guessed so, for after that drive I felt the lack of your clear judgement, and since then I have only driven or danced with you, not your sister, Miss Fortune. Have you not noticed?’

Leonora had not. The entire might of her attention at all social functions was the presence or absence of Mr Carswell. She must stop that. The pleasantly teasing conversation had taken up the whole of the quarter-hour of the dance, for they had only been able to continue when the steps permitted. When they stopped, Jeffries begged that Leonora let him accompany her for supper. She smiled inattentively in agreement. She returned to her sisters’ party, and looked around vaguely. She was frozen when she saw George, not with the awful Harper in tow, but with Lord Jeffries, whom he was marshalling towards her papa.

‘It cannot be helped, love,’ said Georgette, following her gaze.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Jocasta in comfort, ‘when poor Lord Jeffries was waylaid by Papa during *my* second Season, he jumped from the net very nimbly.’

Jeffries talked for longer than they liked to Papa, but he soon walked off, smiling with his usual good-humour, and greeting friends.

‘Lord Jeffries is such a happy natured young man. He would make just the husband for *you*, Button.’ She said so at random, almost to herself, but Marguerite laughed.

‘But unaccountably he prefers *you*, or hadn’t you noticed?’

Leonora was pricked by her own lack of attention, and shared a guilty look with her twin that Marguerite well understood. It was an admission of Leonora’s remaining sadness that she tried so hard to hide. She attempted a light tone. ‘Unaccountable indeed. He seems to like my insults to him. It is very strange!’

‘More gentlemen like to be scolded than you think!’

Leonora's eye had followed Jeffries idly, and as he passed behind a pillar, she spotted a figure behind it, with a recognisable head. '*I don't believe it!*' she said. The head was turned her way, as though regarding her. Then the figure disappeared behind the pillar entirely. She looked elsewhere in the ballroom and did not see Lady Eloise, Christiana, or even Roberta. Why on earth was *he* here? She did not know if it was rage or shock that moved her, but she shook with it. He hated balls. If no one was here to force him, what was he *doing*? Could it be...? She looked again, panicked. No. No Du Mauriers either. This was such a relief that her knees gave way. Marguerite caught her discreetly, and they moved off to a bench, in the opposite direction to the pillar.

'Whatever—?' began Marguerite.

'I thought I saw him.'

'No! Is his mother here?'

Leonora sat, taking Marguerite's hand. '*I hate this, Button.*'

'As do I. But it must get easier. You *promised* me.'

'Smile! Lucian is looking over.'

'Let us sit out this dance and then return,' said Marguerite, comfortingly. They faced each other to give hovering gentlemen the sign of ladies very involved in feminine conversation, and these gentlemen sheared off one by one.



Foggy had already left. What had impelled him to adopt knee breeches this evening rather than go to his club as promised, he well knew. It was the overheard conversation between Roberta and his sister about the ball this evening, and how Marguerite had asked if they were to attend. Foggy, hearing this as he had been about to enter the room, had stood beside the open drawing room door like a dashed sneak, listening.

'I think she asked for Leonora's sake. *She* would not attend if we were to go.'

Foggy had smarted at this, though he knew it was what the circumstances dictated.

‘She should not continue so. Anyway, Foggy won’t be pressed by Mama anymore. I’ve seen to that. The twins should go about as they please, and so I shall tell them! Unless they attend prize fights, or get admitted to Watier’s, they have precious little risk of meeting my brother.’

He therefore knew where she would be this evening. He wanted, he argued to himself as he changed into evening attire, just to see that she was well and happy. That was all. Some great pall had fallen over his own life, that even gin did not dispel these days, and he wished to know that she was not so affected as he. His guilt after he heard her tale that fateful day — the tale that reran nightly in his head, robbing him of sleep — was only part of it. He looked for her around every corner, followed bonnets that seemed familiar, stood around Hatchards all day once when he *felt* she might attend. These *feelings* that overcame him, telling him where she might be, were invariably wrong, he discovered, but he still felt the need to respond to them.

After some days he had decided to return to his own routine. She, after all, had previously followed *him* about, and though he doubted it, since she was so much stronger than he, perhaps she would give way to old habits and find him once more. If only to see from a distance, as he wished to do. The trouble was, he couldn’t think what his routine *was*, and went instead to any place — the park, the Onslows’ square, even his mother’s sitting room — where he had ever seen her. Once, at midnight, he had found himself outside Onslow House looking up and wondering what room she occupied. This last he could not even explain to himself, so he shuddered at the thought he might have been discovered.

So, when he knew she would be at the ball, he had dressed and gone, filching an invitation from Paxton, who would not attend. He said he wanted it for Roberta. And Paxton had paid no attention. But now he was a liar, as well as pathetic.

He had watched the whole dance with Jeffries, and saw her laugh with him. It was a relief that she wasn’t too injured from the loss of her three-year plan. A great relief, he told himself soundly. He also observed the Harper fellow, great bloated

bladder of a man, ogling both the girls from afar, watched encouragingly by the Fortune men. He wondered what he would do to Harper in the coming days, but he did not doubt he would find *something*. The ox would touch neither twin. However, he was well aware that there would be more such individuals, more men of a kind that he would never have permitted to walk even on his sister's shadow, that the Fortune men would *formally* introduce to the twins. Paxton should *be* here. He would have to remind Robbie of his duty of care. The Fortune father and son made his skin crawl.

But then he thought the Lion had seen him, just as he was making sure again that she was well. He wished to be reassured on this one point. He *was* reassured now, and could go. It depressed him, though he welcomed it. She could not have been sure it was him she saw, he believed, for it had only been a second.

Had he found her low in spirits, and headed for a decline, perhaps, as some young ladies did when in romantic disappointment — what would he have done? Well, in that case one should take *responsibility*. This thought had heartened him. It would be the gentlemanly thing to do. He was cheered once more by the thought, no doubt since it returned him to a man of manners and integrity. If she had *really* been sad, he would *have had* to marry her. But when he stole a last look from behind the pillar, she was dancing with Faulkes and smiling again. She was wearing a white gown with silver trim, and a little coronet of silk flowers painted silver, and she looked so fresh and lovely. Happy too, so his self-sacrifice was not at all needed. That was good then. He could leave in peace.

But he slumped in the hackney home, hardly looking like a man released from necessity at all.

Chapter 24

Christiana Interferes

There was only so much Christiana could stand. She was extremely happy with Mr Jasper, but the worry about her hollow-eyed brother and the too-bright Leonora Fortune, who had become so quickly her closest friend, was taking the edge off her joy. She had instructed the twins to behave as usual, and that she would warn them if Foggy was to be present at a function, but the girls no longer visited the homes of either of the cousins, and it all felt very regrettable. She was surprised that Mary had visited twice, once seeing Linton and being almost at ease with him. But when her mama had ventured to say something linking the two, Mary had looked Christiana in the eye for aid and remarked, ‘Isn’t Sir Reginald Forbes particularly handsome, Christiana?’

And Christiana had replied, without knowing if it were true, ‘He is. I saw him dance with you *twice* last evening.’

Lady Eloise, startled, drank her ratafia. Her shoulders drooped. There was no more to be expected from that quarter, it seemed. Perhaps it was for the best, she reflected. Her ladyship did not know how the other affair fared, but Christiana’s frustration was about to inform her.

Christiana called a caucus of female family, and all were present at the Gascoignes’ after breakfast on the following morning.

‘It is like you, Christiana, to order your aunts as you wish!’ sniffed her Aunt Mags.

‘It is like *you* to mention it,’ said Christiana, pertly.

Roberta smiled behind her hand. Christiana dared more with her mother than she could, because in the end Christiana could escape her.

‘We are agog,’ remarked Delphine in her cool manner, ‘to know why we are summoned.’

‘I assume it is about Linton!’ said Lady Eloise to the others, ‘but indeed, she would not say...’

‘The Fortune girl has stopped pursuing him,’ remarked the good-natured Sybilla Lynfield, sadly.

‘She *has*?’ asked Linton’s mother, shocked.

‘Oh Eloise!’ said Lady Mags, with her terrible brows drawn, ‘You notice nothing.’

‘It is a pity,’ said Delphine. ‘I had taken rather a liking to her as a prospective cousin-in-law. A straightforward young lady.’

‘I suppose,’ said Lady Eloise, shuddering in her diaphanous gown, ‘he has told her he is *not a marrying man*. He makes my head ache.’

‘Actually,’ said Roberta, helpfully, ‘it was Leonora who ended the whole proceedings her sister told me.’

‘Well, he didn’t give her a *scintilla* of encouragement,’ said Sybilla reasonably, ‘she must have exhausted her patience with him.’

‘Who could blame her?’ sighed Mags.

‘I thought she had rather more staying power, or I should not have offered my support previously,’ remarked Delphine.

‘Oh,’ said the small, but remarkably emotional, voice of her little companion, Phoebe Beauford, ‘but she must have been so *wounded* after trying for the whole Season to glean his attention. She must have *suffered* so!’

‘Poor thing! And so she must think herself well rid of him now!’ said Linton’s mother, angrier at her son than she could remember.

‘I called this meeting because I do not think she *does* think herself well rid of him.’

Her mother clutched at her arm. ‘What, Christiana dear? You think there is still *hope*?’

‘It matters not at all whether Leonora Fortune still secretly wishes it,’ said Mags Pelleter in a hope-quashing tone, ‘for he

will still not have her.’

‘Yes, and he must have spoken to Mary Du Maurier, putting *her* off too,’ said Lady Eloise, dispirited, ‘He has, has he not, Christiana?’

‘I believe so Mama. Which was the right thing to do.’

‘Yes, Aunt Eloise. It is really too horrible to give hope to a girl like Mary, when there is none,’ said Roberta, chiding. ‘Who knows why anyone would *want* to marry Foggy, but *she* did, and it is cruel to continue.’

‘It must have been hard to say so to his childhood friend. Well done Foggy, for doing so, so honestly,’ said Delphine affectionately.

A silence fell.

Then Christiana said, ‘I did not bring you here to discuss Leonora, but Linton.’ All eyes turned to her. ‘What should we do about *Linton*?’

‘How should I know?’ snapped Lady Mags. ‘It was almost a miracle that two ladies should desire to marry the fool! Let him wed some tavern floosy for all I care.’

‘He is not of Papa’s ilk,’ said Roberta shockingly, but under her breath.

Christiana frowned. Even her intelligent cousin Delphine did not seem to comprehend. ‘Think back to last Season.’ They did. ‘How was Linton then?’

Delphine stopped Lady Mags’ acid reply by saying in summary, ‘He was a cheerful, rather silly but kind man-about-town.’

‘Precisely!’ said Christiana. ‘And so he should be again, now that two weeks have passed for his embarrassment to die down, don’t you think?’

‘But Foggy is the most miserable,’ Roberta mused, just realising it, ‘that I have ever seen him.’

‘Yes!’ said Christiana. ‘I have spoken to Pet and Robbie ... Viscount Desmond and Lord Paxton, you know...’

‘His ridiculous friends!’ said Lady Mags.

‘... and my brother is getting no better.’

‘Well,’ said his loving Aunt Sybilla, ‘he is a tender-hearted boy, perhaps he is ashamed to have given pain...’

‘It is hardly his fault that Leonora pursued him,’ said Roberta reasonably. ‘She did that all on her own. So why is *he* suffering?’

‘Because,’ said Delphine, sitting even more erectly, her eye on Christiana, ‘he is *missing* her.’

‘Yes!’ said Christiana in triumph. ‘Pet suspects that Foggy is wandering around London looking for her.’

Lady Eloise sat at attention. ‘He *loves* her?’ she cried.

‘Do not get ahead of yourself, Mama!’ warned Christiana. ‘I thought very hard about telling you, in case giving you false hope — but I thought I *must* risk it before poor Linton expires of not understanding himself.’

‘Perhaps we can talk to Leonora, Christiana,’ offered Roberta, ‘and suggest she begins her pursuit again in earnest.’

‘No, for she is too hurt, almost brittle with the effort she is putting into forgetting my addle-headed brother. If any move is to be made, it should come from Linton alone.’

‘I suspect, however, that Linton has no clear idea where his misery right now stems from,’ said Delphine.

‘Well, it is up to us to help him,’ said Sybilla, comfortably. ‘Is that what you wished, Christiana?’

‘Well we must help him do something — even if it is only to be happy with his freedom!’

‘No,’ said Lady Mags with narrowed eyes. ‘We won’t let him be happy with *that*. If that dolt cannot think for himself, we must think for him.’ Lady Eloise was too happy at the sliver of hope in the offing to issue more than a groan of admonishment at her son being called a dolt, and Lady Mags continued, ‘Now ladies, what is our plan?’



The first thing, and Christiana's duty, was to convince both Linton and Leonora that it was absurd to avoid each other more. It was surprisingly easy to convince her brother when she broached the subject.

'The Fortune twins shall not attend Delphine's ball, you know Linton,' she said airily, 'all because Leonora fears you might be ill at ease to see her there.' She looked to see how her brother, sitting disconsolately over a coffee at breakfast, took this. He looked up, flushed but energised, as she added, 'It is absurd.'

'Absurd indeed!' he said, quickly. '*I shall not mind at all.*'

'*Really?*' asked Christiana blandly, 'You will not find it awkward?'

'I will not. I mean, even if I were so craven as to mind, I don't see why Miss Fortune should limit her pleasures for me.'

'Oh yes, and it is easy to see she is *quite over* the whole thing.'

'*Is it?*'

'Yes, she confided in me that it was just a child's notion, you know, that got fixed in her head.'

'Yes, I see,' said Foggy, sounding miserable. He bucked up enough to say, 'Well, so in that case you should just mention to her, if you should see her that is, that it is more ... more *sensible* to stop avoiding ... well, you know. To be friends as before.' He blushed again. 'For *your* sake Christiana,' he added.

'Yes indeed!' said Christiana, resisting the idea of torturing him on this. 'The twins were often here before. With Mama, too.' Foggy started at this. 'But Mama *completely* understands now. That Miss Fortune is no longer...'

'Quite!' said Foggy, turning purple. 'But you should have a word with her. For ... friendship's sake!'

That hurdle cleared; Christiana bustled off to see the twins. She could have done with the aid of Roberta's quiet wisdom for this delicate mission, but Roberta was mysteriously absent

on many mornings these weeks. It was Marguerite Fortune who told her why.

‘Roberta was from home when I called on her to come visit with me,’ sighed Christiana, seating herself in the twins’ bedchamber, where they took her to view some new purchases that the marchioness had foisted upon them.

‘Oh, she’ll be driving with Mr Knight again,’ said Marguerite.

‘Mr Knight?’ said Christiana, diverted from her purpose.

‘Did I not tell you the trick we perpetrated at that ball?’ said Marguerite, dimpling. ‘When we swapped partners?’

The story was soon told, and Christiana laughed at Roberta’s unusual burst of daring. ‘She has said nothing of it.’

‘I think they have driven almost every day since the ball.’

Leonora smiled secretly. ‘She wouldn’t have wanted to tell you until she is certain. Roberta is a reserved person, in truth.’

‘Not usually from *me*,’ complained Christiana.

‘But if it is very *precious and delicate*,’ said Leonora sadly, ‘she will not wish to risk that it shatters before she has a grip on it, I think. I wish I had her wisdom.’

Christiana told herself that sympathetic understanding of Leonora’s true meaning was not her job here today. ‘Well, I have come again on behalf of my cousin Viscountess Gascoigne to make sure you attend her ball. She said it can only be a true success when this Season’s beauties attend and play.’

Marguerite eyed her twin, then said apologetically, ‘Well, it is very kind of the viscountess to say so, but we may have other commitments...’

Christiana decided to rush her horses. The strong and decisive Leonora Fortune sat like a wraith, almost missing from the room entirely. ‘My brother,’ she began, and Leonora’s eyes lifted sharply, suddenly alive, ‘is anxious that you both come.’ Leonora began to depart again, and Christiana said, remembering some advice from Aunt Sybilla, ‘It pains

Linton to think that you should avoid our family.’ Leonora blinked and Marguerite met Christiana’s eye. ‘It *really* pains him.’ *Prod her not with her own feelings, but his*, had said Aunt Sybilla. She watched as Leonora took this in, then said encouragingly, ‘You should visit our home before then, as you used to. Mama has a wallpaper pattern book she wants Marguerite’s advice on.’

‘Really?’ said Marguerite, while everyone looked at Leonora’s dropped head.

‘She has quite given up hope of my silly brother’s affairs this year. She was laughing with Mary Du Maurier about her beaux, you know, and has confessed to me that Linton is too immature for marriage at present, so you need not fear any of her unsubtle hints, my dear Lion.’

Leonora laughed a little at this. ‘We should call tomorrow. You can warn your brother to be absent, after all.’

‘That is just what Linton does *not* want. He wishes to resume our friendship, altogether.’ Leonora jerked and Marguerite held her hand. ‘Now that the other silliness is all at an end, I hear Lord Jeffries is very attentive, Leonora!’

‘He is, I suppose,’ said Leonora dismissively. ‘Well, let us, since Mr Carswell wishes it, be easy again.’

Christiana, after Leonora left to fetch a servant, had only to prime Marguerite a little. ‘I know it is dangerous, but they are both so *miserable* ...’

‘*Both?*’ asked Marguerite, shocked.

‘Yes, my brother is in as bad a state as I have seen him, I assure you. He is much more attached than he knows ...’

‘But perhaps it is best they stay apart. I do not think Leo can bear another such ...’

‘It is a risk, I know. But knowing both, I have concluded something, Marguerite ... they are neither of them the personality to get over this easily. So they may as well be in each other’s orbit to see what transpires.’

‘She will never go towards him again.’

‘Good! He does not deserve that she does. But there is only misery for them apart. They are a strange pairing, but ...’

Marguerite was as usual persuaded by the stronger character, but it was also because of the lack of hope that Leonora always carried with her now. Her dynamic sister could see no purpose or interest in life at all, Marguerite intuited, no matter how she tried to hide it. The first sign of life she had seen recently was when Christiana mentioned her brother. It was better that they explore it all a little more. But Marguerite was worried if she was doing the right thing.

The next day seemed to pass off well. Linton Carswell breezed into his mother’s sitting room as his sister, the Fortune girls, and his mama pored over a set of wallpaper samples on a table.

‘Oh, Mama, which room do you decide to change?’ he said, a little heartily.

‘The dining room,’ said Lady Eloise, smiling at him, but in a very casual manner.

Leonora looked up, shyly. ‘Absolutely no more pagodas!’ she said, smiling.

This let him grin at her, which went on a second too long as their eyes met. Mother, daughter, and Marguerite, too, held their breath. Christiana coughed to break the spell and Foggy blinked, saying, ‘Well, I’ll leave you to it, off to the races with Pet!’ His attempt at casual good humour faltered somewhat as he tripped when leaving the room, but it was good enough. They had met, and no one had died.

Marguerite, walking home with her twin afterwards, was amazed to note that Leonora’s steps were once more like the Lion’s. There was some sadness emanating from her sister, but it was almost as though just the *sight* of Mr Carswell had done her good.

Marguerite, at the sight of Mr Chesterton these days, did not feel the same. She knew that Sir Justin Faulkes must have mentioned something to Lucian or Damon, for Mr Chesterton had not again approached her.

She saw him at the opera on one occasion, and he had blushed and looked away. He had that grace at least. They had both left their respective boxes, it seemed, to seek a withdrawing room. Marguerite approached him as he turned away, and said, grasping his coat sleeve for a quarter second to detain him, ‘Mr Chesterton, I just wished to say...’ He looked over her head and stood very still, his face a frozen mask. ‘... that it was so nice to have spent time with you.’ At this, Chesterton’s eyes blinked, and he sought hers. Her manner was neither pleading nor passionately scolding, either of which might have been a reason for her to detain him. She continued without pause, ‘I felt I must just say so. I know that for *you* it was perhaps, a game — but for me it was real. I liked you very much. I was *so* happy, even if it was false. So, *thank you.*’ It was so genuinely said, and with eyes so gentle and true looking back at him, that he trembled.

‘Miss Fortune ... I—’ something like genuine regret was on his face. For the first time, perhaps, he saw her true sweetness.

‘Goodbye,’ she said with a tremulous smile, and turned from him.

The strains of a tragic aria could be heard as Chesterton watched the little figure in the white dress leave him, walking along the almost deserted corridor of the opera house, except for imperious liveried footmen standing like guardsmen every few feet outside the doors of the boxes. Until she entered her own box, he watched her still.

She was extraordinary, and he had never even guessed.



Returning to the box, Leonora had felt her sister’s disquiet, and pulled her to a seat at the back. Marguerite whispered her encounter to her twin.

‘You *thanked* him? You had better have killed him.’ She said wrathfully. ‘I shall do it for you.’ She could barely read Marguerite’s expression in the half-light. ‘Did you wish to *console* him, Button?’ she asked, astounded.

‘No, I did not do for *him*, but for myself.’ Marguerite smiled sadly at her twin. I have been feeling, as well as the sting of

the betrayal, so very, very foolish for being deceived. As though it were all my fault. You told me it was not, and suddenly I *saw* it, Leo!

‘What?’

‘That if I continued on this path, *I* was making myself *wrong*. All I did was to behave to Mr Chesterton truly. I admired him above all others, and was encouraged by his apparent admiration of me. The things he said...’ she said, reminiscently. Then she shook it off, speaking deliberately. ‘Those were *my true feelings*, and I did not want to betray them anymore by being *ashamed*.’ She held her sister’s gloved hand. ‘Because of you, Leo, I know, at least, that I did no wrong.’

There were times, thought Leonora, when her Button was much wiser than she.



The twins had several more meetings in the vicinity of Mr Carswell in the next days, and both Marguerite and Christiana began to trust that they were behaving for the best, for their siblings were looking considerably less peaked.

Lady Mags invited Roberta’s twin friends for dinner one evening, and was joined by the Carswells as a family group. Leonora and Linton Carswell were seated far from one another at the table, and the whole thing allowed for an informality that broke any tension.

The twins joined the female cousins Roberta, Christiana and Delphine at a card party, and Gascoigne and Foggy, coming in from a ride, were told to escort the ladies home. Foggy took the twins back to Onslow House, telling a funny tale of Robbie Paxton’s past school life that had them both giggling.

The twins continued their hectic schedule, more to confuse Papa and George than anything else, for Papa had brought a gentleman morning caller to Georgette’s himself, and obliged the twins to drive with him. This man was Scots, a Mr McDougall, who was rumoured to be both wealthy and miserly. The man — little, wiry, crotchety and forty — had terrified Marguerite, and it was therefore Leonora, who,

pressed by Papa on their return, had agreed to drive with him alone on the morrow.

Marguerite told Roberta, who told Christiana, who told Foggy, and he had fumed for a whole afternoon. He and the viscount had taken a phaeton each and followed McDougall's antediluvian coach the next day, frequently overtaking it, and chatting to Miss Fortune as they passed. Leonora had smiled at them when eventually the Scottish gentleman had dropped her at her door, and the accompanying coaches passed by.

Foggy could not attend balls without good reason, but he worried at the scrapes the twins might get into when he was not there, and forced Paxton to attend some and report back to him - reminding his friend of his duty of care to his young sisters-in-law. Thus Portia had attended more balls than was usual, taking advantage of her husband's willingness to go.

But a great deal of what Foggy heard from Paxton gave him nightmares. The actions of the Fortune men, plus the new, repeated attentions from Lord Jeffries and others, that Leonora seemed to be *encouraging* — perhaps, said Paxton, seeing Foggy's expression, to throw dust in her father's eyes.

Foggy saw Jeffries at Watier's, and heard him being asked about his driving companion of that day, with broad hints as to his intentions. Jeffries, to Carswell's amazement, *blushed*, even as he turned off the comments about the Fortune twin. Foggy guessed it was no longer Marguerite he coveted. This was fine, was it not? He remembered once wishing that Miss Fortune should find someone with the happy good nature of Jeffries. For no discernible reason, this thought now seemed insane.

Chapter 25

Mr Knight's Intentions

Mr Knight had received the summons to the Pelleters' townhouse the morning after he had sent his request for an interview with Lord Pelleter. He was surprised, but not much, to be ushered into a room where Lady Mags Pelleter sat alone.

He bowed formally to her ladyship, and she sat upright on a chair by the marble fireplace, her dark, intense eyes regarding him frankly.

'Mr Knight, you may be surprised to see me. Perhaps you thought my invitation was from my lord?' Knight nodded, with a slight smile. 'I apologise for my wilful deception.' Lady Mags added, with no sign of regret discernible. She gestured into an elegant chair opposite her. He took it, with a look of mild inquiry on his face. 'You know my character somewhat, sir. It is ever direct. Also, I am unlikely to take offence at similar directness on your part, and I will not be upset by any answer you give to my next question. Is the interview you seek with my husband to do with Roberta?'

'It is,' said Knight shortly.

'And for the usual purpose?' asked Lady Mags, as an insurance.

'Yes. To ask for the right to speak to Miss Pelleter of marriage.'

'Very good. I have already enquired of your circumstances and character, sir, so I shall leave you to discuss that with Lord Pelleter, but I may as well tell you that *I* approve this match.'

'Thank you, my lady,' Knight was amused, but also a little touched. But this was a strange interview to be having with his beloved's *mother*.

'However, there are some legalities that must be settled — with my lord, of course.'

Even such a vague allusion to the matter of the Settlements was shocking from the mouth of a female, as women were never party to such discussions.

‘Lawyers,’ she now declared, ‘shall deal with Settlements, which will be paid to the *estate*. I let you know this much sir, for the alleviation of any fear that you may have in joining this household.’

Knight’s urbanity was tested, but this was too important an interview for him to utter a platitude denying any fear. So he merely said, in a serious tone, ‘I see.’

‘Lord Pelleter is Roberta’s papa, and must be consulted, naturally, upon the matter of marriage between the families,’ said Lady Mags comfortably.

‘Naturally,’ agreed Mr Knight.

‘But it is *the estate* who will deal with the vulgar matters of finance. *The estate* who will be enriched by any contribution of yours.’

‘I see,’ said Knight ... but not entirely sure he did.

‘As a prospective family member, I must advise you that my husband has generously handed over all estate matters to his heir, my son Frederick, now at Oxford.’

Ah, thought Knight, understanding. The boy owns it, the mother runs it.

‘Lord Pelleter may in future apply to you personally on matters of finance. Perhaps.’

‘Mmm,’ said Knight, meeting her direct gaze with understanding.

‘But you may cite the estate as the benefactor of your munificence.’

‘Ah!’ he said. He could do it, but it would be awkward.

‘And, *for Roberta’s sake*, you must never, never, seek to solve Lord Pelleter’s problems with, um, donations...’

‘No?’

‘No. Not only will it bring pain to your wife ...’

‘Ah...!’ said Knight, knowing he would never mention such a thing to Roberta.

‘...but it will be useless. The only beneficial thing is to let the minders of the estate deal with any problems of Lord Pelleter’s. You may contact the lawyers if such an application is made. They will look into the matter. On some occasions, it is simply a matter of Lord Pelleter needing a small retreat to the country. For six months or so.’

Knight smiled, despite himself. What a formidable woman!

‘Our family matters are no longer complicated ... I assure you, Mr Knight. And I shall be very happy to welcome you. But it seemed to me that a man with such a firm jaw as yours,’ here Knight smiled more broadly, ‘will know how to deal with the *first* conversation with Lord Pelleter.’ Here she paused, leaning forward, ‘It is easier to start as you mean to go on, sir.’

‘I understand entirely madame. I thank you for your advice.’

She rang the bell calmly, ‘I will have Burton direct you to his lordship’s study. And I will instruct him to let his lordship know you have previously met with *me*,’ this was said grandly, but she lowered her manner as she added, more honestly, ‘That should stop the worst of his nonsense!’

This caused Knight to emit a laugh, and he stood as the butler entered and bowed over Lady Mags’ hand formally, ‘If Roberta accepts me, my lady, I shall be the best husband that I can, I assure you ... and moreover, I should be very happy to have such a mother-in-law as you!’

‘Pretty words!’ said Lady Mags shortly. ‘You should rather be afraid of me. For if you *hurt* my dearest girl...!’

Knight shuddered, making her smile sourly, ‘I should not *dare*, my lady,’ he said, smiling in a way that warmed her.

He left, to visit her husband.

Chapter 26

Misunderstandings Resolved

It was a pity that Almacks housed the Duke of Bexley this evening, Foggy considered. The duke did not approach Miss Fortune, he noted, probably because her brothers-in-law had forbidden him. But Bexley asked Roberta for a waltz, and Foggy was about to intercede when Christiana shook her head at him, a wicked glint in her eye. There was some plot afoot. Knight was beside Roberta at the time the duke came to claim her, and Leonora Fortune was at Roberta's other side. She smiled at the duke, and after a brief word with Knight, the duke led *Leonora* out to the waltz. The twins' chaperone this evening was another sister, the lovely red-haired Countess of Covington, hardly in Town enough to know Bexley's reputation. The other sisters were not present.

Carswell's attention had been claimed by Viscount Desmond in the middle of Bexley's waltz with Leonora. He was declaring himself ready to take lessons from Foggy on ducking around pillars, since his formidable mama had got wind of the *l'enterrement du chapeau* escapade (as the wags in Town referred to the hat burial) and had fully decided that his wastrel life was at an end, and she was therefore at this very moment, trailing the ballroom with a girl in tow whom he recognised as *suitable wife* material. 'The Denby heiress,' he added gloomily.

As Foggy was unresponsive, looking around the ballroom, Pet nudged him. 'You should show some fellow feeling at least, Fogs. When I *think* of the times this Season when I've lamented with you!'

'Well, I danced with Catherine Denby once, and she seemed like a nice girl,' said Foggy, fairly. 'Just a bit shy.'

'Look at her gowns!' lamented Desmond the Dandy. 'How might *I* be seen with a lady in such an over-trimmed gown such as *that*?' He pointed, but Foggy wasn't looking.

‘Probably wears what her mother tells her,’ Foggy said, still distracted. ‘Lady Denby has shocking taste. *You* might give Miss Denby a new touch.’

‘I do not wish to give her a new touch ...’ complained the viscount. ‘I wish to swerve around her for the rest of the ball, until I have to escort the mater home. Where did *you* hide, Foggy? Ten to one if I find a card room, the mater will send a lackey to haul me out.’

‘Oh, best be a moving target then,’ advised Foggy. ‘If you dance with other eligible ladies your mama can hardly complain. It is what she brings you here to do.’

‘Lost in the throng, Foggy!’ cried the viscount appreciatively, ‘You are right!’

‘But you know,’ said Foggy suddenly, looking at his friend in the eyes, ‘you might just want to dance with the girl and be done with it. Get to know her a little.’ To the viscount’s horror, Carswell’s eyes misted as he added, ‘Or else you might miss something wonderful, all by your own folly.’

Desmond’s hand came on Foggy’s shoulder, but Carswell had already looked away, searching the ballroom floor. ‘I’ve lost her — but the waltz is not yet finished, she should still be on the floor.’ He kept looking anxiously as he mused, ‘What makes a girl dance with a man she dislikes?’

‘Pleasing her parents,’ said Desmond easily.

‘But if she is not a pleasing sort of person...? Where *is* she?’ he was beginning to sound frantic. ‘She’s making mischief again! But Bexley is no one to play with....’

‘There’s Bexley!’ reported the viscount, nodding casually in the correct direction. ‘What a disastrous coiffure! The bouffant is fashionable if well achieved, but *his* is merely ridiculous. He is leaving the room with Lady Jersey.’

‘*There* she is!’ said Foggy, finally seeing Miss Fortune sitting with lowered head, evidently listening to the strictures of Mrs Drummond-Burrell, another of the patronesses of this august establishment.

Foggy marched as quickly as he could through the throng to the bench, and bowed to Mrs Drummond-Burrell, 'Ladies!' he said cheerfully, 'I am tasked by the Countess of Covington to search out Miss Fortune to bring her back to her chaperone.'

'Very well!' the formidable lady said regally, then turning to Leonora, 'But I adjure you, Miss Fortune, to behave with more decorum on the next occasion.'

Leonora stood and curtsied, and Carswell was concerned at the depressed air with which she did so. But when they turned away, she whispered in an excited tone, 'Oh, thank you for rescuing me, Mr Carswell, you have no idea how disapproving she was being. She may not have finished for a *month* when she *really* should have berated the duke. Apparently when a gentleman offers one insult, it is the fault of the young lady insulted. *Her* behaviour must have lacked decorum.' Since this stricture was repeated ironically, it did not appear to have wounded her.

A martial light appeared in Foggy's eye. 'Bexley? What did he do to you...?'

Leonora understood her mistake, and said, 'Oh, nothing at all, Mr Carswell, I assure you.'

'Then why—?'

They had approached another bench where the beautiful red-haired countess was scribbling in a silver notebook, saying vaguely, 'Oh is it you, Leonora? Where is your twin?'

'Still dancing, Kat. You really are a worse chaperone than Jocasta, who forgets all about us once she begins to dance herself.'

'Oh,' said Katerina, still writing.

Not the best chaperone in the world, thought Foggy, but a pull on his sleeve urged him sit beside Miss Fortune, permissible since her sister was respectably on the other side.

'What did Bexley do?' he hissed.

'Nothing beyond paying me some ridiculously fulsome compliments, thinking I was Marguerite, you know, for I was

much nicer than my real self, just to fool him — and thinking himself safe to do so because none of our brothers-in-law are here.’

‘*What* compliments?’ said Carswell, suspiciously.

‘Oh ... he sneers them out because he knows we despise them so. He is a despicable person. He just said that in blue last night I was an angel, while in rose tonight the heavens promoted me to goddess.’

The countess looked up from her writings, ‘Logically inconsistent,’ she remarked.

‘Why?’ enquired Leonora at Katerina’s interruption.

‘Well, angels are Theist notions,’ she met her sister’s blank stare and moved to Foggy’s frown, ‘You know Theism, like the Judeo-Christian belief in One God — whereas the notion of a *goddess* is entirely *Deist* in nature, obviously.’ She looked at the still blank faces and added, ‘Deism, you know. Greek. Roman. Hindu.’ Her eyebrows rose in disbelief.

Leonora sighed at this. ‘I found you were less tiresome when you were seeking to *hide* your intelligence, Kat. You should go back to your calculations.’

‘Mmm,’ answered her sister, already obeying.

‘But the thing is,’ Leonora continued to Mr Carswell, ‘Roberta and I had earlier been in the ladies’ comfort room, and I saw a young girl very distressed. She had been dancing with Bexley and he had behaved appallingly, she eventually confided. He continually nipped at her and made tawdry remarks,’ Leonora looked mutinous as she told this, then sought Foggy’s eyes in understanding, ‘She is the daughter of a village vicar, only having vouchers for Almacks because she is Lady Calderbeck’s niece, and she had *never* been spoken to in that manner. She said she hoped never to go to another ball. I told her that the *duke* was at fault, and that she should in no way curtail her future entertainment because of a pig-man. So I decided to see to him, since I already had a score to settle with him, and Roberta helped.’

‘The score was his words to you previously?’

‘No,’ said Leonora.

‘You don’t mean—?’

‘I do,’ Leonora said, eyes flashing. ‘*You* were injured.’

‘Why does that still...! Never mind, what on earth did you do?’

‘First I smiled at him so that he might think I was Marguerite and be willing to ask me to dance.’

‘He was already engaged to Roberta for the waltz...’

‘Yes, because Roberta had smiled at him too before, just to get him to ask for a dance. We told Mr Knight to look jealous, and I was *very* encouraging in my smile...’

Foggy frowned awfully.

‘I knew he had been warned off, but I believed he might still just dance with Marguerite, if only to make me *afraid* of him, or at least annoy me once I knew of it.’ Foggy gritted his teeth. ‘I waited my moment in the dance, and listened to his stupidities until we were close to passing Lady Jersey, when I pulled my hand away from him and said in a low voice, so that beyond us, her ladyship alone could hear, “I am *insulted*, your grace!” Lady Jersey then gathered me up quickly before anyone noticed, and handed me off to Mrs Drummond-Burrell, and said to the duke, “If you please, your grace, follow me.”’ Leonora laughed. ‘I’ve heard even *Wellington* was barred for the evening, just for being *late*, so *bad behaviour* should ensure that *this* duke shall never enter Almacks again, I hope.’ She looked pleased with herself and added, ‘And even more parents will warn their daughters against him.’

The countess snorted, not bothering to look up from her notebook. ‘Like *our* papa?’

‘There are other kinds of papa, Kat. Mr Carswell’s papa would *never* let Christiana dance with the duke once he heard the rumours.’

‘Good man!’ remarked Katerina, going back to her calculations.

‘Is she doing sums?’ asked Foggy, looking over at the odd behaviour of the countess.

‘Mathematics!’ Leonora informed him, ‘Or perhaps chemistry. One never knows. My sister is a Great Mind.’

‘Ah!’ said Foggy for lack of anything else to say. Then he got back to the matter in hand. He frowned. ‘It is not safe to attack a *duke* in this manner, Miss Fortune. There are a variety of ways that Bexley can harm you socially.’

‘I expect I would be very afraid if *he* was not also afraid of my brothers-in-law. Well, not Paxton...’

‘No,’ grinned Foggy, ‘the worst Robbie could do is murder him in verse.’ They giggled. Then Carswell became serious. ‘But you mustn’t be so audacious as that, or I shall never be able to sleep for worry.’

Katerina’s red head rose, but neither of the others noticed.

Leonora flushed. ‘You *worry* about me?’

‘All of the time. It is unbearable wondering what next you will be at.’

‘But it is nothing to do with you,’ Leonora said in a little voice. ‘I thank you for this evening, but I have *family* who care for me. My sisters, at least, and so you have no more need to worry about my silly ... *predilection* for you.’

‘Oh,’ interrupted Kat. ‘So *you* are the Lion’s Venture. I should never have guessed it.’

Foggy heard her, but he was locked looking down into Leonora’s eyes, while the whole ballroom throng seemed far removed from them. ‘It isn’t that I’m worried that you are interested in *me* anymore,’ he took pains to explain, ‘I can quite see that you are more sensible now — over it entirely. But it is that *I* cannot seem to stop worrying ... this evening, for example. It is not enough to deal with the *consequences* of your actions; it would have been much better to stop you *before* it occurred.’

Katerina’s head came up again. ‘I suppose that to be aimed at me.’ She considered it. ‘You are probably right.’

'*You* do not know the duke,' Leonora said over her shoulder at her sister, 'and I was quite determined to dance with him.'

'If I knew the danger, do you think what *you* wanted would have stopped me, Leonora?' asked Katerina.

Leonora turned to meet the challenge in her sister's voice, and faced her. Two pairs of determined eyes, one blue and one an almost clear grey, regarded each other. The power shook Carswell.

'I meant,' interrupted Foggy, to break the deadlock, 'no disrespect to you, countess, only that it is not easy for anyone to predict what next Miss Fortune will do. Many eyes watch her, it is true, but it seems to me that that only means that everyone assumes that she is safe and under another person's wing, while *she* is actually free to get into mischief.'

'I do *not* get into mischief!' protested Leonora. 'Indeed, I am very responsible, even for Marguerite.'

'This is my point,' said Foggy. 'Marguerite is safe, generally, because there are a steady pair of eyes regarding her, and stopping her from young girl's follies. *Your* eyes, Miss Fortune. Not your sisters' or brothers'. They might notice something, but not *everything*. Do you see?'

Katerina nodded at this, though he did not notice, for he was looking once more in the deep blue waters of Leonora's eyes.

'One pair of eyes,' sighed the countess. 'Yes! Are you suggesting those eyes should be *yours*, Mr Carswell?'

Foggy blushed and stammered, eyes dragged away from Leonora's questioning ones. 'What? No. It is just ... until the someone else begins to pay attention, it *must* be me. I mean,' he said, appealing to the countess, 'You have heard what the Lion did this evening ... she has deliberately made an enemy of a *duke*, and she does not care one bit. How *can* I just let such a girl carry on without a care? Could any man do so without worrying?'

'*You* could not, sir, only because you have such wonderful manners,' said Leonora wistfully.

He shook his head, looking at her once more. 'It is nothing to do with manners. It is only that you are in need of someone to watch over you. It is disturbing my sleep.'

Leonora's eyes changed. 'But I have released you from the need to worry about me,' she said.

Foggy's hand rose in a dismissive gesture. 'I am aware of that, and that you are strong enough to give the likes of Bexley his just desserts on your own ... but you are just a *little* thing,' he looked down at her worriedly. 'You might be a Lion, but you are still a cub, and I cannot just let you run around biting the hunters who might *shoot* you.'

The two looked at each other, Foggy a little determined and concerned, Leonora with some dawning understanding.

Katerina, hearing no more for a minute or so, watched as their frozen mime, staring into each other's eyes, continued. She sighed. 'Why is it always *my* lot to facilitate the love life of my sillier sisters?' she moaned under her breath. She raised her voice and said, 'Mr Carswell, you cannot continue this conversation here.'

'But Kat—' objected Leonora, her heart beating fast, feeling like there was something she still had to know before Carswell was taken from her.

The countess stood. 'Let us all take the garden air.'

Foggy stood also, irresolute. But Leonora smiled suddenly, shyly.

'Mr Carswell!' said the countess. 'Your arm!'

Automatically, Foggy took the countess' hand on his arm and led them out through the tall windows to a terrace.

There was a silence. Katerina sought a stone garden bench, and *tssked* because she could no longer read her notebook. She found another beneath a flambeau, which was mounted on an iron railing. The others followed, now mute and still standing, and after a minute Lady Covington said helpfully, but in a distant tone, 'We had reached the point where the Honourable Mr Carswell was loath to let the lion cub bite hunters, I believe.'

Foggy's throat displayed his energetic Adam's Apple once more. 'I ... I—'

Leonora was kind, relieving him of this embarrassment. 'There is no need to worry, sir. I have quite finished with the duke, and though he is higher in rank, I believe him to be too terrified that Sir Damon might call him out to take revenge on me.' She looked at her toes. 'I know that you have *such* a kind heart, but you really mustn't concern yourself. You have, you know, no right to do so.'

Foggy blushed. 'I do know it. But I cannot *help* it. Until you are someone else's sole concern, you must be *mine*.'

Leonora trembled, but began to feel a flutter. 'Someone else.' She thought about what Christiana had remarked upon. 'Like Lord Jeffries?'

'Jeffries?' said Carswell, singed.

'He will visit Papa in the next week, he told me.' Leonora said, distracted by puzzling at Carswell's expression of shock and perhaps pain. She had indeed listened to the charming young lord say so, but with such little interest that she had only registered its meaning half a day later. She had meant to forbid him to do so this evening, but he had not been present.

'When?' said Foggy urgently.

'Why?' asked Leonora, all big eyes.

'I just ... it is not my affair.' Foggy was wondering why this idea had punched a hole in his stomach larger than any the duke had landed at Jackson's. He pulled himself together to say weakly, 'Jeffries is a good chap.'

'Handsome, too!' remarked Katerina, who had never met his lordship. She was hoping to speed things up, since the light from the flambeau flickered annoyingly in the wind, obscuring her pages somewhat.

'Ye-es. I expect he is.' Foggy choked, not knowing why, and his attempt at a joke came out as a croak, 'He has a chin, at least.'

Seeing his miserable expression, Leonora stepped closer to him, touching his arm briefly. She took a breath, and said, bravely, 'But I, as you know, am not overly fond of chins...' It was the words she had once said to him at Castle Fortune, and now her last bold move, though issued in a little voice that showed her fear.

It was enough. Foggy took a step further to her and swept her into his arms, 'Oh, Leonora ... *still?*'

'*Still.*' She looked up at him desperately, her eyes swimming with tears. 'Even *more!*' she whispered.

'You are so perfect!' he breathed, looking everywhere on her face at once. 'I have been *such* a fool!'

He bent his head towards her, and Katerina, looking up at this interesting moment, flinched, as Foggy bumped foreheads with Leonora on his first attempt, flinched again as their noses crashed on the second. But then he held Leonora's trembling chin still and succeeded on hitting his target with a passion that almost knocked her from her feet. Kat looked back at her notebook.

Leonora held on bravely, but almost swooning, their lips locked in a fiery, bruising punishment, until Kat's voice said, 'Now *that* is settled, let us leave this wretched place. I need to consult Covington about the practical application of this equation. I may have it wrong, but—' she looked at the guilty pair, who had sprung apart, but were nevertheless smiling. 'Let us go.'

She led the way, and Mr Carswell drew the shaking Leonora's hand through his arm in a very possessive manner, and re-entered the ballroom again grinning like a fool. He encountered his mother and Christiana on the way, and said sunnily, 'Just escorting Miss Fortune and the countess home, Mama. Do not wait on me.'

His mother beamed, looking at the hand that covered Miss Fortune's on his arm. 'No, no!' she said. 'You *must* see Miss Fortune home.' She exchanged glowing looks with Christiana.

‘Em,’ Foggy said, ‘If you are to stay, might you chaperone Miss Marguerite for a while and bring her home, Mama? The countess needs to consult with her husband urgently.’

‘I see Marguerite dancing with Mr Trent,’ Christiana said, smiling too. ‘Don’t worry Linton, we’ll take her in charge.’

Leonora, suffused in blushes, said in a tremulous manner most unlike her, ‘Oh, Lady Carswell, I shall visit tomorrow after ... after ...’

‘Yes, in the afternoon, Mama,’ said Foggy coming to her aid, and patting the small hand on his arm. ‘I shall bring her.’

‘Of *course* you shall!’ said Lady Eloise gushing. ‘I shall be so happy to receive you, my dear.’

‘*Really?*’ asked Leonora.

Lady Eloise grasped her hand impulsively. ‘*Really, dear* Miss Fortune.’ She smiled and bowed to the countess at one side of the happy couple, who seemed a little bored, but not unfriendly. The countess bowed her red curls, smiled, and led the way from the ballroom.

In the carriage home, Foggy took Leonora’s hand under the disinterested eye of the countess, who was also feigning deafness after an evening of being the worst chaperone in London. ‘I shall steal a march on Jeffries and visit your papa tomorrow after breakfast.’ He looked smug, then worried. ‘The trouble is, though I am rather better off than he might think, due to some investments Paxton’s father recommended, I am *not* the Duke of Bexley. He may not consent immediately.’

‘Do not let him cheat you, Mr Carswell, *I* shall take care of Papa!’

‘Before tomorrow?’ asked Carswell. The Lion’s eyes looked back at him, and he nodded. ‘Well, I cannot think how, but I suppose you will, my Lion. You are the most redoubtable girl.’

Leonora squeezed his hand and blushed at being called *his* Lion.

‘I will not let Papa cheat you, either. I will protect you!’ she said, looking ahead with fire in her eyes.

Katerina waited up to tell Georgette the news when she returned from her supper evening, ‘They were both going on about protecting each other until I had no idea who was protecting whom.’

‘I suppose,’ smiled the marchioness, ‘they complement the other’s weakness. *He* may stop her imprudence a little, and she will aid his nerves.’

‘If I am not mistaken,’ said her husband, serving the ladies a little warm brandy in tiny glasses, ‘while making sure that Leonora should undergo no harm or insult, Foggy has cured his own nerves. He is quite the protector.’

‘I worry about Marguerite,’ said Katerina, sipping the brandy, ‘but I suppose she might still make a match before the Season ends.’

‘I do not think so,’ said Georgette sagely. ‘Her innocent heart was dashed a little by Mr Chesterton, I think. She needs more time to recover. She must come back to us next Season.’

Onslow sighed, more audibly than necessary to make the ladies smile.

‘Oh, but to be at Castle Fortune with only George and Papa!’ groaned Katerina, with similar histrionics.

‘She’s an affectionate creature. If Papa has a soft spot for any of us, it is for Marguerite,’ said Georgette comfortingly.

‘Perhaps she will stay with the Carswells, too?’ asked the marquis, crossing his long legs.

‘I know that is what Leonora will want,’ said Georgette. ‘We shall have to see. And there will be a wedding trip. Marguerite can hardly accompany a newlywed couple on that.’

‘We speak as though they will marry quickly,’ Katerina said.

‘I believe they will. Have not we all, once we finally decide?’

‘Let us rejoice for the silliest pair of lovers of all,’ said the marquis, toasting them. ‘The Lion has finally caught her prey.’

‘I think,’ reflected Katerina, remembering, ‘on this occasion, she was caught. Which is as it should be. By the way, I saw the Lion give a letter to a servant, telling him to place it into no other hand than Baron Fortune’s. She promised Mr Carswell that she would deal with Papa. I wonder what she has written to *terrify* him with?’

‘I suppose that Carswell is hardly the great match to swell your papa’s coffers,’ sighed Onslow. ‘I only hope it will work.’

‘I have faith in Leonora,’ said Katerina. ‘And if it didn’t work, the brothers-in-law will have to write to Papa, wishing the young people happy.’

‘Thus subtly threatening him with stoppage of his quarterly allowances — oh, well done Kat!’

The countess stood. ‘Well, I have delayed enough with this silly evening of chaperonage. Covington will be awaiting me at St Clair House, and I wish to consult with him on ... never mind, you wouldn’t understand.’

‘It must be frustrating to be so little understood, Lady Covington,’ Onslow said, in a gentle taunt.

‘It *is* Lucian, it is!’ she acknowledged, taunting him back as she moved to the door.

The marquis and marchioness sat in comfortable silence, after she left, considering the latest news. ‘Nine down and only one to go!’ the marquis said eventually.

‘You sound like Papa! But you will just be glad to have Fortune girls stop disturbing your peace.’

‘I am resigned to have Fortune girls disturbing my peace frequently. You have a letter from your sister Susan awaiting you, which no doubt precedes a visit. No, it is the line of male suitors and the endless balls where I am responsible for the latest *unmarried* Fortune sister that I shall be glad to be free from. *And* all the enquiries — I’ve always liked young Jeffries, but when he started to get nearer to Leonora recently,

I thought it my duty to find out more. I just sent Norman the footman to visit his county for information.'

'I wonder if there is time to call him back?'

'He can visit his mother, I suppose. That is why the butler recommended him.'

'That's alright then,' sighed Georgette. 'Take me to bed Lucian.'

'With the greatest pleasure in the world, my darling.'

'Perhaps I should look in on the twins, to see if they are yet asleep.'

They were not, and Onslow thought he would have a long wait for his wife as he heard the three sisters laughing.

Chapter 27

Leonora's Solution

Leonora's missive was quite sufficient to make the baron receive the Honourable Mr Carswell's visit with a dull resignation. It read:

Papa,

At last I have received an offer of marriage! [Since Leonora had already received seven offers, unbeknownst to her papa, this was disingenuous to say the least] This must please you, I imagine, as much as it pleases me. The Honourable Mr Linton Carswell will visit you after breakfast tomorrow when I beg you will make yourself available to him.

It may interest you to know that I have fixed myself to marry this gentleman since I first met him three years ago at Castle Fortune. To this end was my running of the house, kitchen gardens and interest in estate business taken up. I have never wavered from my decision, and shall not in the future. You are aware of my personality, Papa, when I am set on something.

It is your right to refuse his suit, but just know that I shall never wed another. You will then be saddled with this 'stubborn vindictive leech' (I quote your description of me) of a daughter, for life. The resolute and creative actions I might have applied to marriage will all then be applied instead to the comfort and health of the papa who thwarted my happiness.

I imagine I need say no more.

I remain, as ever, your obedient daughter,

Leonora

With the greatest lassitude in the world, and not even an attempt to discuss financial matters, Baron Fortune granted Mr Carswell permission to address his daughter. 'She should be worth more than you, sir,' said the baron's audible thoughts after he had done so. 'Such a beauty thrown away for pennies! Stupid, stupid girl! What on earth possessed her to take such a

notion in her head? Look at you...' the baron's rheumy eyes slid over Foggy's recoiling form, *'got a stupid look on your face. Not as though you were even as handsome as that music master Mary took up with.'* He shook his head. *'Waste!'* he sighed, *'Such a waste!'*

Foggy was so much in agreement with these remarks that he wasn't even appalled by them. There was, moreover, the unbelievable joy of success, that he knew to attribute not to himself, but his Lion. How she had achieved it he could not know, but she had. There was no resistance in her papa at all, beyond his depressed complaints. Now Foggy could properly propose. So he simply grinned in a fashion quite as idiotic as the baron feared, and took a hearty leave of his future father-in-law, with repeated thanks and an unwanted, but excitable handshake.

When Mr Carswell's lawyer arrived the next day, the baron revived somewhat. While not as generous as Covington or Onslow, Mr Carswell's additions to the Fortunes' coffers was by no means as paltry as he feared. He was even able, when he visited his daughter at Onslow's, to pat her head and wish her well in a voice that almost made her believe it, but as he added, in his rambling mumble, *'Bexley available and she picks the heir to an inferior barony. The biggest fool in England, too. Well, maybe Marguerite can win the duke, if she doesn't make a fuss all because he flirts a little. Too squeamish, girls of today ... don't know what's due to rank. Lady Jersey said the brat complained ... well, I shall take dashed good care her sister don't...!'*

Onslow, usually letting the baron's words flow past him, thought he had gone too far, and opened his mouth.

But Leonora, angry that her love had been called a fool, and seeing her sister look afraid, said in a dangerous voice. *'If the Duke of Bexley should even look Marguerite's way this Season, Papa, I shall stab him with a hat pin at the first opportunity.'*

Her father glared, but a look around the room had told him he had no friend here. He muttered, not supposed to be heard.

'Well. I can't say I'll be sorry to be rid of you, Leonora, at any event.'

Mr Carswell was announced, and Leonora went out for her bonnet immediately.

Faulkes, present, said to Onslow, 'I've heard him often enough, and sometimes your father-in-law can be entertaining, but he is the *most*...!'

'Yes, but at least he is transparent. He has not the intelligence for a plot.'

'You sound like Georgette. *Give thanks for small mercies.*' He sighed. '*Poor* Marguerite! She doesn't have the spirit to withstand such a papa. I wonder if the last Fortune girl's match will go so smoothly as her sisters?'

'*You* may have to marry the final Fortune girl, Justin, just to save her from some terrible end — like Bexley, Leonora's pig-man.'

'I pity Marguerite, but not that much! She has *you* to look after her.' He smiled, looking smug. 'Besides, *I* have just seen the most beautiful woman in the world, and shall be unavailable.'

'Justin!' said Onslow with energy. 'At last!'

'But I have no notion how to find her again. However, there were any number of fortune hunters in her surrounds at the Cowpers' last evening, so she must be unmarried. I don't want to raise a lady's name with any of *them*, so I must enlist Georgette for enquiries!'

Onslow put his hand on his friend's shoulder, and led him into the study. 'I can help! Just once, tell *me* first...'



In fact Leonora, efficient and penitent, had sent two missives that evening, and to one she received a reply at breakfast the next day.

My Dear Lord Jeffries,

I believe, in a moment of inattention, that I gave you permission to visit my father. I meant to correct this error on

my part this evening, but you were not present at the ball. I should tell you baldly sir that I have accepted an offer from The Honourable Mr Linton Carswell some hours ago.

You are so kind, my lord, and have always been such an amusing companion to me that I hope you may, sometime soon, find it in your heart to forgive me for an unpardonable wrong.

I wish you the happiness that you undoubtedly deserve, now and forever,

Leonora Fortune.

Dear Miss Fortune,

First, I send my felicitations on your upcoming nuptials. Foggy is a fine fellow and now I understand some strange looks he has given me lately.

I cannot say that I am not disappointed. That would be, in any case, an insult to you. You value honesty, and I found this both attractive and amusing, and so you will not suspect that I am being impolite if I tell you that I had delayed my visit to you father deliberately.

This was no fault of yours, it is simply that when you gave me your permission, 'in a moment of inattention' you write, (in your usual brutal way that has made me laugh again) I could not help but feel that it was unenthusiastic. I might wish for rather more rapture from my chosen bride.

So, let there be no hard feelings between us. All is as it should be.

I am ever your servant, Miss Fortune,

Richard Jeffries

Chapter 28

EPILOGUE

Leonora and Foggy, after a very busy day, had finally been granted leave to sit together in Georgette's rear garden just as the afternoon sun began to fall. She put her head on his shoulder, a little bashfully, and Foggy sighed happily.

'We really are betrothed,' he breathed. He sat up suddenly and said, 'Oh wait, I asked your *papa*, and have been accepting congratulations all day, but I did not *ask* you...!'

Leonora's tiny hand pulled him back and she settled her head on his shoulder again. 'Oh, since you are the Lion's Venture, perhaps I should ask *you*, my love.'

'Your *love*...!' said Foggy, his voice trembling. 'Oh, you *darling*.' He kissed her hair, holding her closer to his shoulder as they looked over the pretty prospect before them in the twilight. 'A gentleman should beg his lady for her hand, it is a noble tradition.'

'Yes. Some other day you may do so, but now let us be at peace. I am so very happy and comfortable.'

'Mmm,' he agreed.

'Poor Foggy!' she laughed dreamily at his side.

'Eh?'

'You fought *so* hard to escape me!'

He flushed. It was embarrassing to recall his behaviour now. But Leonora rubbed her head on his shoulder like a cat snuggling in, and he forgot to be embarrassed. 'I did. I was such a fool. For I always knew how much I admired you.'

'You did?' said Leonora. 'You did not show it.'

'I had been having the cloud dream for years.'

'Oh about the tree?' giggled Leonora. 'Portia told me.'

'Yes,' said Foggy, glad to be understood. 'It was because I *believed* you ...!'

'When I said I would come for you...?'

‘Yes. And then you *did*. But it was impossible, what with you turning out to be such a beauty...! No one believed that there was any reason for my fear,’ he laughed. ‘Pet told me I had pigeons in my cockloft.’

‘That is because *they* did not know me.’ Her voice held a smile. ‘But *you* did.’

‘Always, though other people find it odd. Not a noticing chap.’

‘That was one of the thoughts that sustained me when you were pushing me away, you know,’ confessed Leonora. ‘That you alone knew me from my twin.’

‘It is *obvious!*’ scoffed Foggy.

‘Only to you, dearest Foggy!’ she hugged his arm even more. ‘But I have always known *you*, too.’

He sighed. ‘You flatter me so that I am afraid you will find out you are mistaken, and be heartily disappointed.’

‘Tell me what untruth I have said of you!’ demanded Leonora.

‘That I am handsome, for one. No one else in the world thinks so.’

‘Then everyone has extremely bad taste. You are the *most* handsome.’

‘And that I am brave...’ said Foggy, amazed.

‘You are. You had a pugilist bout with the duke! And you are fearless on a horse.’

‘That is no great thing...’ protested Foggy, but coming to terms with this new vision of himself. ‘Anyway,’ he concluded, ‘I cannot go back now, so I shall just have to hope you never notice how useless I am for a great many years. Why, even Mary laughed at me when a dashed pug attacked me, and said how foolish I am, and how she cannot imagine why she had thought to marry me.’

‘Do not mention her name!’ said Leonora, stiffening at his side. ‘I know she is your friend, but she had designs on you to

make you her own. And not at all caring what *you* wanted.’

‘So did *you*...!’ Foggy said smiling, then sat up, appalled, and took Leonora’s shoulders in his two hands, turning her towards him, blushing and stuttering desperately, ‘I don’t mean....! *Please* forgive me, Miss Fortune ... my dashed mouth...’

But Leonora laughed up at him. ‘I *did!*’ she said, and her face was so naughty that Foggy swiftly kissed her, ‘But I was so prideful that I assumed you would want me, after you knew me a little.’

‘How could I not?’ he said, pulling her shoulders towards his, ‘But I was afraid of your determination, your utter attention when you looked at me. It seemed to me that some better fellow deserved it, not *me*.’

‘There is no better gentleman in this world, Linton Carswell. You must never argue with me on this point again.’ She grasped his lapels, and her eyes were serious and chiding.

He laughed. ‘No, my Lion!’ he said, pulling her head back onto his shoulder. After a while, he sighed, ‘I think I have died and gone to heaven.’

‘It was *so* lovely today. I was afraid that your mama and the aunts were not always admiring of me, but they are all so happy!’

‘And the tales of the ways in which they had been assisting us to be together. I am so stupid that it required my whole family to knock some sense into me.’

‘And my sisters helped. I believe my Button conspired with Viscount Desmond.’

‘Pet? Really?’ Foggy exclaimed. He gave it some thought, remembering the viscount’s threat to flirt with Leonora. ‘*That* explains it! And I think your sister Portia had words with Robbie.’

‘We are really *fortunate* to have had such help. For I was making a shocking mull of it, although usually I achieve my ends quite efficiently, I assure you.’

He laughed at her serious tone, saying, ‘Yes, my Lion!’

‘But meeting you in real life affected me so that I did the wrong thing again and again.’

‘It just served to make you more adorable. And *I* was so moved when I was with you that I forgot to breathe sometimes,’ he said reminiscently.

‘We are *silly!*’ sighed Leonora.

‘Soon we shall be sensible married people — once the banns are read. And I know you worry about your Button, but we will bring her to us as soon as the wedding trip is finished. I have it all planned. Mama is happy to have her.’

‘You are very practical. I will hardly be needed, after all my training to be a good wife.’

‘Oh, you can help my mama a great deal, I’m sure.’ He pinched her cheek. ‘But try not to let her know you’ve taken over.’

‘There are plenty of things she may do and continue to know herself useful. I may take over the accounts and the kitchen matters, oh and the hothouses and the kitchen gardens, of course,’ she said, and the enormity of her vision made him stop breathing a moment, ‘but there is still flower arranging and then advising me on my dress — which I shall never be able to manage once Button leaves me for her marriage! I have very little taste, you know.’

Foggy laughed. ‘I do, and it is fortunate, for it allowed you to choose the biggest fool in England for your spouse.’ Her Lion eyes looked like she would threaten him again, but he continued bravely. ‘I may not be the best catch in London,’ he said gently, ‘but I shall strive to be the best husband to you.’

‘I know it.’ She put a questing hand to his face, caressing it. Then she looked a little guiltily at him. ‘I should warn you; I may be a little *troublesome* sometimes, but I will *try* to be good!’

He laughed and kissed her soundly.

‘That is *quite* enough, you two,’ drawled Damon Regis, coming towards them from the French doors. ‘I am here to bring you to the table in case your behaviour should shock the marquis’ superior servants.’ As the pair stood up, a little shamefaced, he put his arm around Foggy’s shoulders and drew him towards the house, saying, ‘You have not yet had dinner with *six* Fortune sisters at once, have you, Foggy? I am certain that you can endure it, since you have quite the naughtiest of the set on your arm.’ He slapped Foggy’s shoulder companionably. ‘Leonora is quite right. You *are* the bravest of us all...’

‘He is! He is the Lion’s Venture, after all!’ said Leonora, skipping forward happily, tucking her hand more securely in Foggy’s arm.

Marguerite grasped her other hand as she walked through the door, drawing her forward to the table of smiling faces. ‘I am so happy, Button!’ Leonora said in a whisper.

‘I know,’ her twin laughed. They had talked and talked, first last night and then as they dressed for dinner. Marguerite had laughed at the tale of Christiana and the viscount just managing to prevent Foggy’s engaging himself to Miss Du Maurier out of good manners (a story Christiana had told her sister in the strictest confidence). Although they had suspected the Carswell relatives of aiding the pair, there were more stories than the sisters had guessed. The viscount had been especially delighted at the betrothal, shaking his friend’s hand warmly, while railing at Foggy in a happy way for escaping the Parson’s Noose, only to slip it around poor Miss Fortune’s neck instead.

Marguerite heard this, unsurprised, and told Leo naughtily, ‘But the viscount must meet his just deserts. We shall have to aid *him* to marriage too! Next Season, perhaps.’

But Leonora had only smiled, for Desmond had eventually, Foggy told her, danced with Miss Catherine Denby, the girl his mother sought to manacle him to, ‘... to tell her...’ Foggy had begun...

‘*Calmly and rationally...*’ interrupted Leonora, making Foggy blush and laugh.

‘...that he wasn’t a marrying man. But Pet said that she wasn’t such a bad girl after all. Just driven by her mother to wear dreadful clothes.’ They were to visit a dressmaker together on the morrow so that he could dispense his advice. Leonora giggled at this. Foggy had touched the side of his nose. ‘Noose primed,’ he’d remarked to his beloved.

Georgette now looked on at her twin sisters, beaming at their dual loveliness — enhanced tonight by their very prettiest gowns of rose silk over sheer petticoats — and at their joyful faces sharing her content in a glance with her Lucian. The dining chairs were replete with Fortune sisters and their husbands, as well as everyone’s dear friend, Sir Justin Faulkes.

‘An intimate family dinner,’ the marquis remarked.

‘I suppose I should add Papa and George as well as all the Carswells, Pelleters, Lynfields and Gascoignes tomorrow,’ smiled his wife wickedly.

‘Now, Georgette—’ begged her husband, sitting.

‘I hear the Bellamys are in town, Georgette.’ Said Sir Justin helpfully. ‘You know the Colonel is a great favourite with all the girls!’

‘Quiet, you!’ the marquis ordered his friend, who grinned, exchanging a colluding glance with his wife.

‘Damon,’ said Leonora after the first course had been served, a small line formed between her brows. ‘About the dreadful duke ... I must make sure he does nothing to Marguerite while I am away.’

Marguerite shivered. ‘Papa might still...!’

‘We shall allow no such thing, Leonora,’ said Lucian.

‘*I’ll* deal with him!’ said Foggy, unconcerned. The brothers-in-law stared at him, suddenly seeing that Foggy’s mild manner hid a forceful nature beneath, as his cousin Viscount Gascoigne had once suggested to them.

‘No,’ warned Paxton. ‘*You* must come to your nuptials with a whole skin, Foggy,’

‘But Bexley *cannot* continue to insult young ladies,’ said Leonora in her Lion voice. ‘I’m quite determined.’

‘Oh, Lord!’ said Lucian.

‘Leonora! This is your happy day ... do not!’ said Georgette, between amusement and dismay.

‘Someone *must* deal with the duke, if only to keep the newly betrothed from Newgate,’ said Katerina, practically. ‘You know what Leonora is when she makes a decision.’

The Demon King looked up from his meat to say, ‘Shall I put a hole in him for you, Lion?’

Leonora looked over at him. ‘Oh, *will* you Damon?’ she said happily. ‘But do not have my Foggy for a second, for I do not want Bow Street chasing him *before* we are married.’

There was an altercation at this: Sir Justin Faulkes begging Damon not to encourage the little lion, for goodness sake, her beloved saying he wasn’t such a shirker, and if Leonora wanted it done, it should be done, Covington’s serious voice saying there *was* an argument for shooting rabid dogs without remorse, Katerina making an obscure quote in Swedish that no one understood, Jocasta objecting to *her* husband being the one sought by the law, Lucian remarking that yes, it was better to have Foggy sought by the law *after* they were married, Georgette buffeting her husband for this remark, adjuring him not to make jokes. for her dreadful sister was *serious*, Portia saying, laughing, that Leonora should think more carefully about what she said now that she was an engaged lady, Paxton saying, with a forlorn shake of his head, that Foggy did not have a peaceful life ahead of him, Marguerite saying to her twin to *please* tell them it was a joke, for everyone believed her.

Leonora smiled around the table, her blonde ringlets dancing. ‘Don’t worry! I shall let him live. I declare I am *too* happy today to begin another Venture.’

‘Foggy,’ said Lucian, Marquis of Onslow, for them all, ‘It is your own decision to enter the lion’s den. You are either brave or idiotic. I cannot make my mind up which.’

‘Oh, as to that,’ said Foggy Carswell happily, ‘never had any sense in my cockloft!’

‘*Foggy!*’ exclaimed his love, histrionically offended.

‘...so the Lion’s Den looks like *heaven* to me!’

Leonora smiled at him, and his friend Paxton stood up, raising his glass, ‘Since there is no saving my sister-in-law from Foggy’s silliness, or my friend from evident danger, let us instead raise a glass in toast. To the Lion and her Venture!’

‘*To the Lion and her Venture!*’ toasted the company heartily.



‘Well,’ said the marquis to his wife later that night, ‘we have got the most dangerous of your sisters dealt with. I think the last will be much easier to cope with next Season.’

‘Do you think so?,’ said Georgette, snuggling closer to him. ‘I think Leo saved us from the worst effects of Marguerite’s naivety this year.’

‘Oh, these Fortune girls,’ he sighed. ‘Nothing is ever easy!’

Georgette laughed at his tone and gave up worrying for her sisters for long enough to fall asleep in her husband’s sheltering arms.

Chapter 29

Delphine and the Dangerous Arrangement (Preview)

Since all the characters in [Delphine and the Dangerous Arrangement](#) appear in this book, I thought you might like to read the first chapters of Delphine's tale.

Chapter 30

CHAPTER 1

Considering that the house had received no visitors for some years, excepting the occasional visits by old Mr Rigby-Blythe, and considering that she had just become an orphan, Delphine Delocroix's house seemed remarkably full of relatives. Especially aunts. There were probably a similar number of uncles, but as they gathered around sipping wine and indulging in desultory conversation, the worst she could say of them is that they blocked any heat from the cavernous fireplace. The aunts on the other hand gathered around one like gnats, even entering her bedchamber and pulling and picking at her dress and hair, buzzing with words that overlapped each other so much that she barely understood them. They were her mother's sisters, which did not recommend them to Delphine, but as unlike her in appearance as they were each other. Her mother had brown hair, one aunt was fair beneath the turban, another dark and definite. The third was plump, unlike the others, and her hair was russet as an autumn day.

The throng followed her downstairs, surrounding her, and flew around her whilst she entered the drawing room which contained sundry male relatives that she had been briefly introduced to, as well as a number of unknown neighbours that the aunts had seen fit to invite to the funeral. These last could be seen to have wandering eyes, taking in the rooms and the appointments of furniture of the biggest house in the vicinity, about which their curiosity had been denied so long. She too, they had taken in hungrily, as the young lady they had been permitted to bow to, never approach, as she sat stiffly upright in the carriage whilst her mother entered one of the village draper shops.

She was twenty-two years old and alone in the world, despite the chattering hoard that she only just met. Mr Rigby-Blythe was her only acquaintance, and she met his ancient eye as she entered. She suspected he was to blame for the swarm. He was wearing the same rusty black suit as he always wore, and was so similarly ruined and rusty in his person that he

always gave alarm, lest he gave his last breath under one's anticipatory eye. Only his watery eyes gave any sign of life, and they glittered at her as they usually did in the few minutes that she had ever been allowed to sit with him before his lawyerly business with her mama.

There was to be a will reading, of course. Delacroix House was a large manor that had been raised in old Queen Anne's day and her mother had been proud of it. Its many features had been spelt out to her, as had the life story of the great-great grandfather who had built it. She was aware that she came from a long illustrious line, whose closeness to monarchs had resulted in being granted many favours, including a Baronetcy that was now lost for lack of a male heir. It was a knife in her father's heart, her mother had frequently informed her, that she had been born female, so much so that he had not been able to look at her. His death three years after she had been born had made this less of a blow than it may have been. She did not remember him. But the frequency of her mother's reminder let her know that the knife had also penetrated the second parental heart. But then, so much that she had done in her young life had wounded her mother. 'You will oblige me, Delphine, by ...' Refraining from slouching. Modulating your tone. Foregoing to run. Keeping your opinions to yourself. Eating what has been provided for you. Straightening your dress. Avoiding speaking to the servants. Wearing what I set for you. Reading what I choose for you. Never entering my chamber.

She was wearing a dress her mama had had made for her for this very day, once she knew that consumption was hastening her demise. It was of the finest black silk brocade, over an under-dress of heavy black satin. The whole thing had about twice as much skirt as any lady's present, they wearing the finest muslin or silk, caught under the bust, with skirts that draped to show the body. Aunt Eloise, in particular, though a woman of fifty-five, wore a dress that was so diaphanous as to be shocking. On her head was a silken turban and a plume (dyed black, of course) and though she had fretted at Delphine's dress, Delphine considered her deranged. Her own gown must have cost a great deal more than her aunt's feather-

weight affair. And that lady must be pierced with cold in these ancient, but draughty halls.

Delphine made her stately way around the room, nodding to the village people, which was more condescension than she would had been allowed to show in her mother's presence. A poor little scrap of a woman in a fluttery grey dress moved forward and put out her hand saying, 'Oh my dear, how very sorry-'

Delphine stopped and looked at the hand. She had no notion what to do with it, no one had had the temerity to offer her such intimacy in her life. One of the aunts, plump good natured Aunt Sybilla, said, 'Oh, Miss Beauford, so kind of you to have come,' and shook the poor lady's hand lightly.

Miss Beauford's eyes looked into Delphine's with an expression she had never seen before, but that she feared maybe pity, and then smiled faintly and fluttered away.

That such a woman should pity her held Delphine stiff with humiliation. But she was moved to say to her aunt, 'Beauford ... but that is Mama's own name?'

'Of course my dear, Beauford is my late Papa's name. We were all Miss Beaufords. Phoebe Beauford is, I believe, a second or third cousin of yours. Surely you were made aware when your mother introduced you?'

'I have never been introduced to her before.'

Aunt Sybilla stared. 'But she is a relative. She lives in the *village*.' Delphine said nothing. 'Perhaps your mama feared that she and her sister would batten onto their more prosperous relatives.' She looked again at Delphine's face. 'But it is very strange of Emilia not to apprise you of-'

Her aunt led the way forward to another group of villagers, none of whom repeated the attempt at intimacy, but contented themselves with slight bows (the gentlemen) or curtsies (the ladies) which Delphine reprised, even more slightly.

Lady Marguerite Pelleter, the most brisk of the aunts, with thick dark brows as decided as her character, and a chanteuse

dress draped *à la Diane*, was regarding Delphine from a distance. 'She holds herself very high. She's as cold as Emilia.'

'I think, don't you, that we should give her a chance,' said Lady Eloise Carswell, she of the shocking gown, but with large blue eyes that expressed her caring nature, 'She has had only one pattern-card for behaviour and I do not wish to speak ill of the dead, but Emilia was-'

'Yes. We all must do what we can for her. But if she really is of Emilia's nature-'

'Quite!'



After the guests had left and the will had been read, there had been the chattering dinner to be endured before Delphine had been released to her bedchamber. She was in shock. As well as the trial of the whole day, exposed to more society than in her whole life preceding, she had just found out that she was very wealthy indeed.

She had previously considered that her mother's choice of restricted society and travel stemmed from a similarly restricted income. They ate frugally and had a fire in very few of the rooms. Their clothes were the only luxury mama had permitted - this she'd thought of as display of consequence for the village and the servants, with all the other economies practised to support the display. So much she had worked out. But it was quite untrue. The Delacroix estate was the largest and wealthiest in the county. Her late father had owned other properties throughout England, some let to wealthy families, including a whole London Square. There were bonds and investments of many kinds, and apparently she could ransom a king.

Her maid Susan, over forty with a face of frozen biliousness, had that night removed her mistress's clothes silently, but permitted herself a few acid words before she left the bedchamber.

'Your wealth will attract only the sewer rats of London to your side - Lady Delacroix said as much to me before her

death.’ The bitter lines around her mouth tightened before she turned to go. She had been her mother’s devoted slave - and spy.

Delphine seldom exchanged words with this attendant of all her young days. ‘You need not worry about London, Susan.’

‘You do not go, then?’ said that upright dame, surprised - and pleased, the girl thought.

‘Oh yes,’ said Delphine, ‘at the beginning of the season. But you will not accompany me.’

Susan blinked, then left her with a look that could turn milk.

Wealth, had thought Delphine, was already having some benefits.



‘The richest?’

‘Oozing’

‘How wonderfully vulgar you are, Hildegard. How came town to be ignorant of this? If we cannot trust the wag tongues, what use have they?’

‘Lived with her mother in the country. Religious women’

‘As are we all. Young, then?’

‘Practically past her prime. Twenty-two, I believe.’

‘Youth gone and the bloom left her cheek. But life teaches us that there are always trials to be borne.’

‘Old Midas says she is richer even than him.’

‘Then I suppose we must forgive her the face.’

‘Her face?’

‘The face that prevented the rich mama from presenting her to the town.’

‘Foggy saw her. No disfigurement that he could see. Just dresses oddly, he said.’

‘Well, Foggy himself dresses oddly so we’ll give little credence to that... I do hope it doesn’t start a new fashion. Just

when society has settled to a dream of classicism - it would be bad manners for a rich young *debutante* to attempt a coup. I should have to cut my hair. But a wondrously rich orphan with no obvious disfigurement. It's a rare, unprotected, prize.'

'As to that, there are a number of maternal aunts.'

Gascoigne sighed. 'It is ever thus. Who?'

'Well, Lady Carswell, Foggy's mother, of course, Mrs Lynfield, and Lady Mags Pelleter.'

'Good God! As well take on the Duke.'

'Wellington might be preferable to Lady Mags. Well, anyway, I believe I will try my luck at the Castlereigh's ball where it is rumoured she will make her first appearance!'

'So, I suppose, must I. The hounds are even now baying at my door. How desperately dull. Should I wear a wig, do you think, to curry favour?'

'Yes. It sounds odd - hair a mile high like portraits of one's grandmamma, Foggy says.'



Delphine Delacroix was sitting on her Aunt Sybilla's pale gold covered settee which matched another three such plus several chairs in her aunt's commodious morning room in Russell Square. Mrs Sybilla Lynfield was the richest of her sisters, having failed, happily, to catch a poor aristocrat like the others. Mr Lynfield was both rich and kind, delighting in his plump and amusing little woman. Fifty now, her French embroidered muslin dress was in a rich green colour that cleverly complimented the red in her hair. This was styled in the latest (and daring) short crop, enhanced today by a broad green silk band.

Her niece was wearing a heavily corseted blue brocade dress, which may make some suitable upholstery for any number of chairs, and her brown hair (despite the strict instructions given by her hostess to her lady's maid) was piled on her head precariously in coils and rolls (no doubt some of them false) with an ornate pleated ribbon arrangement threaded through. One ringlet hung over her shoulder to finish

it. It was surprising that she did not also wear powder and patch. She sat perfectly straight in her chair and did not move. Her face had regular features, was triangular in shape; her large turquoise eyes could have offered it distinction, but as their expression was as closed off and cold as her mother's, they failed to do so.

Here sat the richest unmarried girl in England, thought Mrs Lynfield, and much good has it done her.

It had been thought by the three aunts that Sybilla, not having a daughter to bring out, would be the person best suited to take Delphine in charge after the strict period of mourning had passed. They had all determined to rescue her from Delacroix House, where she had lived as a bird in a gilded cage all her life, speaking only to her mother and to servants, allowed no visitors. Mrs Lynfield herself had, five years ago, written to her sister offering to bring the girl out - but she had received no reply.

Mrs Sybilla Lynfield had been chosen to house the girl, since it was obvious that her sisters' as yet unmarried daughters (Christiana Carstairs and Lady Roberta Pelleter, both thankfully pretty) would get stampeded underfoot in the attempt to get near Miss Delacroix's fortune. Mrs Lynfield, with only a son away at sea, had happily agreed.

Mr Lynfield had, last evening, grasped Delphine's shoulders, which caused her to stiffen, and said, 'you are very welcome here, my dear girl.' He'd leaned forward and kissed the girl's cheek, which had caused her eyes to enlarge in shock, as though she had been struck.

When Lord Peregrine (Pinky to his friends), also there with the family to welcome her, had tried his inarticulate best to express his feelings on the occasion, she had almost jumped. Mind you, the big, bluff, face of his lordship coming towards one was a trial, but he meant well. Eloise, the kindest of the sisters had become engaged to the tortured young man in her first season precisely because he was always strangled with embarrassment when asked to speak to young ladies. Her compassionate heart had sought to make him more comfortable, and eventually he proposed, with Eloise filling in

a great many blanks in his declaration with imagination, and she had consented. Lord Carswell, last evening, had made do with patting his niece's arm, which had caused the girl to look at him as if he were an escaped lunatic. Which was unfair, thought Sybilla, he was only an idiot.

It had seemed that all that would be needed to launch her niece on the world was to take her to the best dressmaker in town and update her antiquated (if expensive) wardrobe, have her hair done, and steer her past the shoals of fortune hunters towards some worthy match.

But her niece had proved more difficult than she had imagined. To all her expositions of the latest modern fashions she had asked 'Must I?' and when her aunt had said peevishly that she thought it would be a treat for her, said firmly, 'It is not.'

'Well, it would be a treat for me!' said her exasperated aunt. 'You really cannot be seen in London looking such a fright.'

There was a flicker in Delphine's eye at this, and her soft-hearted aunt was stricken with guilt. 'I did not mean you, but only your clothes.'

'My mama had this fabric imported from Italy at great expense, and had it made in the village by a seamstress who once worked in the finest London establishments.' She heard her aunt mutter, 'Thirty years ago!' but ignored it. 'I must suppose that the cost of my gown is vastly superior to yours.'

'Very likely,' said Sybilla Lynfield, acidly, 'and if you were a cushion, or a dining chair, or some such thing, I would consider you very elegantly appointed. But as you are a young lady making her debut in the polite world, you will wear something fitting.'

The two sets of eyes met each other and Delphine's cool turquoise ones were rather surprised at the fire in her erstwhile kind aunt's. The eyes held for perhaps a minute, then Delphine rose calmly. 'I shall consider the matter,' she said regally and moved from the room.

Her aunt sat with a phoph! on a well upholstered chair and looked at the tall, ancient figure of her butler, who allowed himself to meet her eye briefly. ‘I do not know what to do with that girl, Fiennes!’ she confided, beyond convention.

‘A great deal of spirit.’ He muttered.

‘Is that what it is called? More like Emilia’s-’ she said referencing her dead sister, but she recalled herself. Fiennes knew all her sisters, having worked for her father before her, but it was unbecoming to discuss such things with him. Their eyes met and she did not have to finish with “stubbornness” for him to understand it.



Mr Rigby-Blythe had the veiled young lady ushered into his office, reflecting that the discretion of the veils was quite redundant since the dress of the last age (this time a voluminous cloak of purple velvet over a such a profusion of lavender silk as would fashion evening gowns for three young ladies of today) made it quite unnecessary to await the lifting of the veil, to say:

‘Miss Delacroix, a pleasure.’

‘Mr Rigby-Blythe. We may converse at last.’

Seeing her to the seat beside his large mahogany desk, his eyes twinkled.

‘Our stolen conversations at Delacroix House seemed almost clandestine, had I not been an old man.’

Delphine smiled, the first he had seen from her, ‘I believe if you had offered for me sir, I may have run away with you.’

‘Alas that I had not a steed with the stamina to speed us to Gretna Green!’ he smiled.

‘No, I believe your Trusty might have failed us before Speltham.’ She said, a trifle sadly, mentioning the town twenty miles distance from her home.

‘Well, we must not repine for what might have been, my dear girl. What may I do for you? Your uncle Lynfield has said

to me quite clearly that I must deal with him in all matters relating to you.'

Delphine frowned. 'And you replied?'

'I did the lawyerly thing my dear, and smiled. If Mr Lynfield chose to conclude that I agreed, he was quite free to do so.'

'I knew, sir, that to further my acquaintance with you would be a joy for me. Now that we are at our leisure to talk, let me enjoy it - might I have some tea?'

With a large gesture of acquiescence, Mr Rigby-Blythe rang a bell.

Over tea Delphine learnt a great many things about her fortune. It would become hers fully when she was twenty-five, although the assumption was that she would have a husband to manage it before then. Her maternal uncle, Mr St John Beauford, now living in Paris, was her executor, with the practical aid, in London, of Mr Rigby-Blythe. All accounts would be sent to Mr Beauford - but he had already resolved on a princely sum as her quarterly pin money. He would be resistant, as any gentleman would, to his niece's interest in the financial matters regarding her estate, for women's brains were not formed to deal with such things.

'I may have other expenses over and above the clothes that my aunts wish to foist on me. Might I draw on you?'

Mr Rigby-Blythe's merry, rheumy old eyes looked into hers, 'I suspect,' he said, 'that you will be a very fashionable and expensive young lady.'

'I do not think so.'

'If there are a plethora of expenses,' he suggested sagely, 'some more than might be considered usual, who knows what bills might be lost among?'

'So I must embrace the dress maker?'

'Oh, I thinks so. And the manteau-maker and the milliner. And you may wish to set up your stable, perhaps. A number of

fashionable young ladies have horses and carriages of the latest design, to tool around the park and be remarked upon.'

'I do not wish to be remarked upon,' said Delphine flatly.

Mr Rigby-Blythe sipped his tea. 'Then you had better not wear the clothes your mother had made for you. They may be finely made, but they are so outmoded as to make you a figure of fun.'

Delphine had already been pointed out by people on the street enough to know this to be true. Her resistance to her aunt's entreaties burst like a bubble. She had refused merely to escape another version of her mother's control. But when her true ally told her the same thing, she gave in. At least this way she would no longer be an oddity. 'And the horses?' she enquired.

'Are the sort of expense that your uncle St John would not take issue with. He wishes you to make your mark upon the world so that you may gain a husband and relieve him of the burden of your financial empire. It is rather more than he bargained for at his time of life.'

'Shall you tutor me in the business of my holdings?'

His eyes considered. 'It is perhaps a little tedious work for a young lady, but if you wish it, I will.' He sighed, 'My dear girl, if I might be permitted to call you so, it will do you little good. Your wealth will be dealt with by your husband, whose name we will find out by the end of the season, I have no doubt.'

As if she had not heard him, she said coolly, 'My aunt visits with her sisters on a Thursday afternoon, saving more pressing invitations. They like to speak of me, so it will be quite convenient for me to come to your office on these days, on the pretext of attending the lending library.'

'I should not have guessed that subterfuge would come so easily to you, my dear.'

'I did not previously have the scope.' She saw Mr Rigby-Blythe's eyes water a trifle more than their rheumy best even as he smiled at her jest, and added gently, 'My aunts are a

great deal kinder than my mother, sir, in their individual ways. But I fear finding myself in a trap worse than I have lived. Marriage is their answer to all, but I think them all too silly to be trusted with my future.'

'I would I could advise you, my dear, but the polite world is not my area of expertise. I have a few clients, I hear gossip, but I doubt it enough to avoid a possible *mésalliance*.'

'Ah! You do understand. I always believed that you would. Though we exchanged so few words, I saw a wealth of understanding in your eyes.'

'And I in yours. Your mother was a challenging woman. I cannot imagine the life you lived there.'

Delphine's eyes became a little cold. 'She did not like me, but she could never let me become attached to another person. More than one servant was cast off simply for showing me a morsel of affection, including my old nurse. I should like you to find her, sir, and to make sure she was adequately pensioned.'

The lawyer took up his quill and asked some questions, writing down his client's scant knowledge. 'I shall set enquiries in motion at once, it may be that her direction is in some old papers of your mother's that I have not yet perused.'

'Before I left, I visited with Miss Beauford, a cousin of some distance, I understand. She was most thankful that her late sister and she were permitted to live in the cottage by my so-generous parent. Aunt Eloise took me on a polite visit before we left Delacroix, and I could see that even she was shocked. The running water on the wall, the leaking roof and this sweet creature with her mother's china and her clean white linen. How could my mother allow it? No wonder she did not take me to visit my only relative in the village. I wish that her cottage be repaired as quickly as possible.'

'I believe that I have the authority to keep Delacroix house and *all* its properties in good order, without recourse to your uncle. It shall be done,' he paused, 'Might I propose something to you, Miss Delacroix?'

She nodded graciously, still sitting stiffly on her chair.

‘While the work is done on the cottage, might you not invite Miss Beauford to London as your companion? With her accompanying you, I feel your aunts might grant you more freedom in London with little fear.’

‘It is a good notion, but much as I pitied her, sir, I must say that Miss Beauford was even sillier than my aunts.’

Mr Rigby-Price laughed at her from beneath his caterpillar brows, ‘your honesty is refreshing, my dear girl. But I have known Phoebe Beauford since she was young and though not exactly sharp in her wits, I know her to be two things you might need in a companion. Both loyal - and *biddable*.’

She gave a laugh, a delightful and unusual sound to emanate from this young lady ‘You persuade me, sir. Once I have permission from my Aunt Sybilla to invite her, I shall write to her tonight.’ Delphine rose and her lawyer joined her, she buttoned her kid gloves and said, ‘Goodbye sir. I look forward to our next meeting.’

Mr Rigby-Blythe shook his head and chuckled when his client had gone. Long had he wished to help her, because the beautiful hermitage she had lived in, with her ice-cold mama, had been no life for a young girl. She was allowed in the garden and the village, but the latter only with her mama. He believed she was used for show, finely kitted out like the daughter of the great house - the daughter of a mother whose self-interest was of an order close to madness. They had exchanged some words and many looks over the years, and he had espied beneath her upright bearing a humorous eye and a desperate spirit. But her sense of purpose and determination amused him. He hoped it would not be sold to the first charming smile, the first caressing words that she heard. Yet, after a life such as she had had, how could she fail to be moved by any affection? Hold fast, young mistress, against the suave tongues and dastardly hearts of the Beau Monde.

Chapter 31

CHAPTER 2

Sybilla Lynfield sent letters to her sisters directly after the unexpected capitulation of her niece. When once more lamenting, over her excellent dinner, that Delphine had nothing fashionable to wear for the Castlereigh's ball. It was at this event that Delphine was to be launched onto the world, a world that was already talking about her, anxious for the sight of the most eligible girl in London.

'I really can't take you in a gown that I might have worn at my own come-out, more than twenty-five years ago,' she wailed again.

Her husband raised his eyebrows. His wife's come-out was rather more than 25 years ago - he remembered it well. Mrs Lynfield frowned him down. This was no time for her husband to remember anniversaries.

'Very well,' came a bland reply from her niece, continuing to eat her *salmon au crème*.

'You will?' cried her aunt, 'Oh my dear!' She stood as though to run to her, but was put off by the raised eyebrow and cold eye of her niece. Never mind, she would not allow her to retract. She and her sisters would press home their advantage and make her over in a trice.

She smiled and retook her place, countless plans for the morrow jostling in her head. She gave her niece another appraising glance and noticed a gleam around her face she had not before noted.

'What is that at your temple?'

Delphine's hand rose there. 'Oh, is my colour showing? I have need of another rinse, but I do not know what my servant made it of, so I have quite forgotten.'

'What colour is your true hair?'

'Why, blonde, like my papa. It was the greatest trial to Mama. She said it reminded her of her loss, so it was rinsed from the age of seven.'

I did not think that I had the power to be shocked at the actions of Emilia any longer; Mrs Lynfield wrote in the postscript to her sister Eloise, Lady Carswell. The girl has the almost silver blonde hair of her papa, I had assumed it had darkened since her childhood - but Eloise had it rinsed to a dull brown. So that she would not be reminded of her loss, said she to Delphine, but I believe it was to stop her daughter being her rival in beauty. The poor child. She is still cold, but despite myself, I warm to her.



In addition to her three aunts, Delphine was surrounded by women. She stood shivering in her shift, whilst a number of women pulled her gently about this way and that. Her hair had caused a sensation. It was still damp and hung down her back to her buttocks whilst each aunt and a few of the maid servants lifted it to better see.

‘Why it quite lovely, my dear - never have I seen this silver shade in my life, apart from on your papa,’ said her Aunt Marguerite

‘Like an angel!’ said Aunt Eloise.

Delphine had seen herself in the glass after the astringents had been applied to her hair several times, each time washing away more of the dull brown. She was not sure it was so beautiful - it looked odd to her after so many years of the brown. She did admit that her eye colour made more sense than before, but apart from that she had no idea what the fuss was about. Thankfully her lashes and brows were darker, as otherwise she would have looked like a ghost.

She was being very patient. She supposed she had been touched more often in the last half hour than in the previous six months of her life in Delacroix House. It almost hurt her, and the desire to flinch away was nearly overpowering, but she was, if nothing else, a disciplined person.

Now ladies passed tapes around her body and discussed fabric and style as though she were not present.

‘I took the liberty of bringing some dresses-,’ said Madame Godot, a little French dressmaker, indicating a pile on the bed.

‘No, no,’ said Aunt Marguerite, Lady Pelleter, ‘she cannot wear anything off the shelf - she must have creations made only for her-’

‘She needs something or other to wear just now, Mags,’ said Aunt Sybilla, ‘We cannot even walk to the milliners until she has something more fitting.’

And so it was that Madame Godot stole a march on the other dressmakers present. She shook out the first dress, a quiet muslin with roses on a yellow ground, very simply draped “*à la jeune fille*” said Madame.

The noise around her rose again as her aunts clucked and discussed the colour and style.

‘No,’ said Delphine. The company froze. She had been silent before this. ‘Yellow does not become me.’ She moved to the pile on the bed, ‘Not the cream ground, but the white,’ she said casting the cream to the floor, where a maid rescued it, ‘The lavender, but not the olive,’ again it was cast, ‘I am not sure about the blue.’ She pulled it in front of her and looked at her frozen companions.

‘She is perfectly right!’ Madame Godot was the first to recover from the spell, ‘the blue certainly, but not those warm colours with that so-beautiful hair.’

The swarm reasserted itself, and bolts of fabrics suitable for day and evening wear were draped over her, and she could hardly distinguish the sounds or the people from one another.

Her hair was cut at the front a little, and hot irons applied to make curls around her face, her long hair piled and made into ringlets in the classical style so popular. Finally they lowered the pale blue muslin with the hundred tiny ribbon bows at the hem, over the lightest shortest corset she had ever worn, and voila!

Her image in the glass was strange to her and she said, ‘How does one not freeze?’

Her aunt Eloise, the kindest of her aunts, dropped her own handsome fringed shawl over her niece’s shoulders. The semicircle of eyes behind her looked satisfied.

‘She will be besieged, I daresay!’ breathed gentle Aunt Eloise.

‘There is no doubt that men, eligible or not, will fall at her feet!’ said the cynical Lady Pelleter. ‘We shall have to take care.’

Delphine had met the dissipated Lord Pelleter. She did not think that she could trust her aunt to take care. She would have to consider this herself, in the unlikely event that they were correct about a successful debut for her. She had borne enough. ‘Might I be alone now?’ she said coldly.

‘Oh, no, my dear. Monsieur René, the dancing master, is arriving within the quarter hour. And poor Miss Beauford is in the drawing room awaiting you. And this afternoon, now that you are suitably dressed, we might all venture out to the draper’s halls.’

‘All?’

‘Why certainly, all. My sisters are to luncheon here.’

‘Very well,’ sighed Delphine, beginning to regret taking advice from Mr Rigby-Blythe.



‘The Castlereigh’s ball! Today we shall see Miss Delacroix and one of her amusing dresses. Lady Scott let me know about a velvet cloak full five miles wide that she wore in the street the other day.’

‘Not really!’

‘Absolutely, it was too opulent even for an opera.’

‘Well, not long now.’ The speaker made a toast, ‘To all of us desperate bachelors with hounds of debtors baying at our heels, might the best of us be successful!’

The four gentlemen laughed and toasted with him, one shrugging and saying, ‘Why do the rich ones have to be oddities to boot?’

‘The price we pay, my cynical friend, for a life of ease and plenty.’



Delphine, still wearing the pale blue dress, marched into the room that held the timid Miss Beauford with an obvious air of getting on with it. Miss Beauford rose politely, but by her enquiring look, obviously did not recognise her benefactress.

Miss Delacroix herself held a hand out on this occasion, a custom she feared she must adopt, 'Delphine Delacroix,' she said helpfully.

Miss Beauford, engaged in bobbing a curtsy, said, 'You Miss Delacroix? But your hair is-'

'Different, beautiful-' she said wearily, 'so I've been told.' She was engaged in regarding Miss Beauford critically. Her dress was simple and grey - and unmistakably woollen. She wore crisp white linen beneath, but there was no escaping the mud marks at the hem - the price of travel, of course - and the obvious beginning of fraying. The boots were worse.' This won't do at all.'

She moved to the door. 'Fiennes!' she called to the butler. He appeared like a genie at her side. 'Have the dress makers left yet?'

'I believe they are packing, Miss Delacroix.'

'Send them.' She said. She returned to Miss Beauford who was blushing.

'I assure you, Miss Delacroix, I do not expect you to buy me a gown-'

'It has been explained to you that you are here as my companion?' interrupted Delphine. '-and you agreed?'

'Oh, I am so happy to do so. A trip to London! You can have no notion how much of a treat-'

'So do you wish me to look ridiculous? Will you stand beside me at a ball in that-' Delphine's hands gestured to the woollen dress.

Aunt Sybilla bustled in. 'What is it you want with the dressmakers Delphine? Monsieur René is even now setting up in the drawing room-' She turned and smiled at the little lady, 'Hello again, Miss Beauford, it is so lovely to see you once

more.’ Her aunt lowered her voice a little as she turned once more to her niece. ‘And what is I heard you say as I came in? Companions do not usually attend balls with one. You have your aunts for that.’

Delphine’s eyebrows rose and she looked over her aunt’s shoulder to the little woman, who was by now very uncomfortable. ‘Do you have any objection to dancing, Miss Beauford?’

‘Well no, as a girl it was one of my delights. But I haven’t-’

‘No matter. My companion,’ she said to her aunt firmly, ‘will accompany me to balls as well.’

The butler opened the door to the four dressmakers.

‘Well, ladies. We have fifteen minutes, I believe, to plan Miss Beauford’s wardrobe for the season. She will go wherever I go, so I believe will need everything I need for the season. All the incredible amount of differing things you have persuaded me I shall need, she will need too, I suppose.’

The dressmakers, delighted, came forward to surround the frightened Miss Beauford.

‘What are your favourite colours?’ asked Delphine above the hubbub of Miss Beauford.

‘I wear brown and sometimes grey.’ She said, hardly liking to admit she had only two dresses.

‘Very well. So green would do too, and perhaps bronze for the evening,’ Delphine said speculatively. ‘And we shall have to visit a boot maker and - I really cannot be seen with that hat.’ She pointed to the sad bonnet on the settee beside Miss Beauford. ‘Milliners too.’

Aunt Sybilla who had been frozen by all this, said, ‘But my dear Delphine, the expense-’ but her niece was headed for the door.

‘I will join Monsieur Rene now and you can join us later Miss- I think I will call you Miss Phoebe, and you may call me Delphine - anyway, you seem to have made a start on the

dancing, so when these ladies have finished, join me in the drawing room for the lesson.'

She left the room, pursued by her aunt's, 'But Delphine!'

Mrs Lynfield then turned hurriedly to the dressmakers. 'No more than two of each dress type,' she said, biting her lip and regarding Miss Beauford, 'not but what she is right. Make it three. And nothing showy!' She added to the *modistes*. She looked apologetically at Miss Beauford. 'I'm sure you agree, my dear.'

'Oh, quite!' said the little lady.

'So, madam, to be clear,' said the efficient and ambitious little Madame Godot. 'We need three each of morning dress, walking dress, carriage dress, evening gowns and probably pelisses. What about riding habits?'

'Do you-?' asked Mrs Lynfield. Miss Beauford nodded. 'Then I'm sure only two riding habits will suffice.'

'Half dress? Ball gowns?' asked another lady.

'I suppose so.'

'So that will suffice-?' asked Madame Godot her voice trailing.

Mrs Lynfield was anxious to follow her niece before other ructions occurred, so she moved to the door. 'Oh, I suppose you are right, Madame Godot, four of each it is.' She waved a hand and left.

She put her head round the door again to see the women surround the fearful Miss Beauford, and said in a determination to be frugal, 'But some of them, you know, might be models you already have.'

'*Bien sûr*, Madame,' said that pattern card of frugality, Madame Godot, struggling to keep the laugh from her eye.



'There she is!' hissed Hildegard Foster into Gascoigne's ear. His lordship gave a pained expression, but nevertheless turned to see the new arrivals and his heart dropped. It was worse, much worse, than he had anticipated. Indeed, he intended to

ring The Honourable Foggy Carswell's neck. How could this poor dab be described as 'quite pretty?' It was beyond even the gleam of her gold to make her so. Her face was a flat dinner plate with a pair of frightened pale eyes regarding the room and her hair styled in the plainest style permitted, a simple coil behind her head. The amber dress they had persuaded her into was indeed more fashionable than had been described, but it was too young for her (what age was she? She had not seen twenty for very much longer than he had been assured) Could he? He thought of the drawer of bills in his study and stepped forward.

As he did so, Sybilla Lynfield moved aside and he saw the third member of the party, a young lady engaged in shaking out a skirt that her male companion, Mr Edgar Lynfield, appeared to have stood on. The dress was certainly from Madame Godot's establishment, it had adorned a form there for some months, its richness and the discreetly whispered price had drawn much attention. The blush silk, and soft silver net worn over it, had a flat, narrow front drape (to emphasise a slender frame) widening to a short train at the back. Cecile, the French dancer he had taken to Madame Godot's, had begged him for it, but he had held fast. Madame Godot had removed the tall stiffened lace collar, which Cecile had so admired, so as to make it suitable for a young debutante, but only just. It was unquestionably the richest gown in the room. Now the girl who wore it stood unnaturally still, her neck and shoulders rising from her wonderful dress, her pale face framed becomingly with silver curls, her serious turquoise eyes meeting his. The Snow Queen of legend, those eyes almost without expression.

He gave a jolt and forgot to look bored. The eyes did not move, the eyelids did not flutter down in maidenly modesty. She looked on. Eventually, not taking her eyes from his, she leaned sideways to whisper to her aunt - for he saw all the traits of the Beauford aunts in her face and knew this to be Miss Delacroix - and muttered something. The aunt looked and muttered something back, something that made Miss Delacroix draw back and turn to her other companion. It didn't

halt his purpose, however, his reputation may go before him, but many an inexperienced young lady was attracted by a rake.

He found Hildegard at his shoulder as he marched forth, the younger man hailing Mr Lynfield in a friendly fashion, begging to be introduced to his companions.

Lynfield sighed, looking at him wryly. 'Well, I suppose so,' he intoned with little enthusiasm. 'This is Miss Beauford,' both gentlemen bowed slightly to the embarrassed lady in amber, 'oh - and Miss Delacroix. Mr Hildegard Foster and Viscount Gascoigne of Raith etc. etc.'

'Etcetera?' enquired Miss Beauford, who had a logical mind, after bobbing a curtsy.

'Oh, there are a number of other titles. I should really give him all his honours, you know - but I have known him long enough to have forgotten them,' said Mr Lynfield, rather bored.

'Miss Delacroix, how beautiful you look this evening.' Hildegard Foster bowed low over her hand.

'Yes,' said the still Miss Delacroix, only turning her eyes towards him.

Her aunt gasped, then trilled falsely, 'We were jesting that we all look very handsome this evening - dressed for the occasion, you know.'

Her husband looked at her piteously, 'Quite. Are you gentlemen here to demand dances? We are blocking the door somewhat.'

Miss Delacroix raised her head to the Viscount, but he had grasped Miss Beauford's hand and kissed the air above it, 'May I lead you to the set that is just starting?'

Her uncle raised an eyebrow to Delphine, while her aunt gasped. 'And so it begins!' he said laconically.

'Oh, sir - I mean your lordship. A quadrille! I will need you to mark my steps. I have not much danced these twelve years!'

'Miss Delacroix - may I?' Hildegard Foster was quick when she nodded her head and they moved towards the dance

together.

She did not look at him more than the dance dictated, she appeared to be counting her steps. The reason was whispered by his partner, Miss Beauford in a panting voice, 'My cousin and I have only just had a dancing master teach us the quadrille - excuse my poor timing, your lordship.'

'You dance charmingly, Miss Beauford!' she gave a trill of laughter, and he looked up to see if her cousin noticed. It appeared she did not. She seemed to be having a desultory conversation with Hildegard, only answering in single syllables.

As the dance steps led him close to Edgar Lynfield, his eye was caught, just as his hand grasped Miss Delacroix's in the turn of the dance. It was an ironic look that Lynfield gave him. Perhaps the claiming of Miss Beauford to distinguish himself from all the fawning rattles that would no doubt pay the heiress court this evening was a little obvious as ploys went, but it often worked. He glanced occasionally in her direction, but was never rewarded by her regard. His charms must be failing him.

But later that evening, as she stood in a circle of admirers who all sought her attention, he was rewarded by catching her eyes following him. He inclined his head a little, letting a long lazy smile curl his lips, but she neither looked away nor blushed, only stood very still until Nigel Stanhope put his hand on her arm to claim her attention. She recoiled and gave him a look that might have rivalled that of Medusa. She did not like to be touched.

He danced with another few young debutantes, some of his friends' wives, and meandered around the ballroom talking to acquaintances and laughing with friends. At all times, he now felt her eye upon him. Inside he was smiling. Before he left he would wander to her side and bid her a casual goodbye, exciting her interest just enough.

He would be the counterpoint to Hildegard and the others who had set up court around her, and it would intrigue her.

Robert Duncan, another of his cronies, wandered over to him. 'What have you done to Miss Delacroix, you reprobate? All she did during our country dance was ask questions about you. The queerest sort of questions too. Her aunt had apparently warned about the obvious. And I heard her asking Lady Carswell about you, too.'

Gascoigne yawned. 'I had no idea I was so interesting. But we should be glad for her sake that her aunts have been diligently warning her off my empty purse.'

'I shouldn't think that's all that Mags Pelleter has warned her off. She's an outspoken woman Lady Pelleter. And you thrive on young ladies being warned. Makes you more interesting.'

As he wandered off, Gascoigne moved through the ballroom in the general direction of the heiress, who had taken her seat beside her companion on a bench by the wall, and waved away any gentlemen who came near. It was not a gesture in a debutante's usual behaviour. It amused him. You could not say that she gave herself airs, it was just a plea for some peace.

He wondered if he would be similarly dismissed, but doubted it. She saw him arrive and held his eyes with those extraordinary turquoise orbs.

'Ladies, I take my leave of you. I trust your first ball was a pleasant one, Miss Delacroix.'

Miss Beauford began to chatter and Delphine Delacroix raised her hand to stop her.

'Sir, will you call at nine tomorrow in Russell Square? I wish to speak with you.'

Gascoigne was in danger of showing his surprise. He pretended hesitation, then, 'Of course!'

Miss Delacroix rose and taking Miss Beauford with her. She walked away from him and did not look back.



Titus Gascoigne regarded himself in his shaving mirror appraisingly. What did this odd young woman want with him? He was reported to be handsome, of course, and he looked

closely. Hair worn a little long and allowed to fall over one eye, the colours, said a woman friend, of autumn. A long face with merry hazel eyes, a hawk nose and a strong jaw. It was his smile, which he reserved for occasions, highlighted as it was with deep dimples, which gave him the universally agreed epithet “handsome”. He dispassionately agreed. His charm with women, and his ability to push and pull in the game of flirtation was legendary. Had he been able to bring himself to the mark, he might have married several rich young ladies, whether or not their Uncle Edgar had warned against him. Even because of it. But thankfully a horse had come in, or he’d had a win at Faro in the nick of time to let him escape the married state. *The Wed or Dead League* of gentlemen had been formed in the realisation that for all of them, a win on a horse could no longer suffice. Marriage was the only road to solvency left. That or sign up to the regulars. And a fragment of ball that still resided in his shoulder, plus a gouge in his side was enough to remind him that his debt to King and Country was paid.

He had been a good soldier, he’d unexpectedly discovered. Brought up by two heedless, hedonistic parents, he had become a hedonist himself and had long ago outrun everything but his entailed property. He’d meant to do better than his father, to tend to the huge estate in Shropshire, to put the evils to rights, but the task had seemed beyond him. But the risk and adventure of the army suited him, and even the dark sometimes damp nights under canvas in the Peninsular had a camaraderie about them that he enjoyed. He had always been a leader of men.

And now, the only men he led followed him in manners, and how to tie a cravat. His own careless tie had become fashionable, which could not but amuse him.

There was also the loose association, formed at late night in a tavern, of *The Wed or Dead League*. They had modelled themselves after the Abduction League, the notorious Irish gentlemen of the last century, mostly younger sons with little inheritance, who had abducted heiresses to force the family to allow a marriage instead of scandal. This would not take so well in England, they felt, but still there was much that one

gentleman could do to help another in the courtship of an heiress. Such things as keeping a vigilant mother busy in a ballroom whilst his friend enjoyed a tryst with the young lady in an attendant room.

There had been six men at the table in Cribb's Parlour that night, when Lord Grandiston had dropped a purse onto the table in passing.

'You winnings Marquis, your time still stands. I got caught behind a cursed cart.'

The gentlemen at the table raised their glasses in a toast to their companion, the darkly handsome Marquis de Chabernet, who pocketed the purse with a Gallic shrug. 'Merci, mes amis, but this one purse will not save me, I fear. I must marry well and quickly, or die, I think!'

'So dramatic, Pascal,' had said Gascoigne, 'you must have another!'

'Les Francais sont dramatique, oui, but also practical. I am at an end in London. I could run, but only as far as this purse would take me. And what then? As well blow my brains out.'

'That bad?' asked Lord Jeremy Lockhart, his large frame slumping at the same time, 'Fie! It is the same for me. The wolves are at the door, and it is of no use to apply to my father. He's worse than I am.'

Gascoigne stirred, 'You talk of marrying well. Did I not see you dance with Miss Frobisher last evening?'

'You can't say that's marrying well,' said the red haired Honourable Daniel Galbraith in the corner of the booth, 'Her father's a cit.'

'Then the Marquis' ancient name' (for the Marquis had been saved from the jaws of the guillotine as a child, rescued in a potato cart, so it was said), 'will confer on hers' some distinction. And she has ten thousand a year, I believe. And that will bestow equal distinction on the Marquis.'

'I'm willing, but it is of no use, her papa and two brothers already warned me away. They are not quite gentlemen, but one must admire their style.'

'Gretna!'

'No. Special licence, she's twenty-one isn't she? So she does not need her papa's consent. I have a bishop in the family. Here - you're not Catholic are you?' said Hildegard, brushing his fair hair from his face.

'No.'

'Could you persuade her?'

'I think she is disposed to like me.'

'Then you shall be married within the week.'

The Marquis sat at sudden attention, hope on the horizon. 'But I will not be able to get near her.'

'At a crush like the Heston's Ball? Leave that to us, my friend,' said Hildegard Foster, eyes shining.

'Marry well or die. Wed or Dead, I think that is the situation of every gentleman here,' said Gascoigne, getting - a trifle unsteadily - to his feet and raising a glass, *'To the Wed or Dead League, gentlemen. We pledge ourselves to aid each other in our quest to marry. And the Marquis is our first attempt.'*

'Like the Irish Abduction Club of last century - they who abducted their brides?' asked Galbraith.

'No woman shall be abducted against her will. We are English, and have rather more address than that,' said Gascoigne aloofly. *'No, we shall persuade our own young ladies, but the League will do all it can to confound the vigilance of families, who have a prejudice against men who seek their fortunes in marriage. We may be fortune hunters, but we are gentlemen.'*

'Wed or Dead!' toasted each in turn. They called for paper and pen and the rules of the league were spluttered onto the paper in increasingly shaken hands. Thus was the inception of the League, and it went forward to this day.

The desperate bunch had almost signed their drunken pact in blood, dedicated to help each other storm the respectable defences of their female targets. He supposed it was

despicable, but he was not troubled by guilt. Each of the brotherhood of *Wed or Dead* was a man driven to marriage as a last defence. All meant to keep to the bargain of marriage as the *ton* dictated - perhaps not faithful, but always discreet in their affairs. To a man they decided to swear off gambling. At least its excesses. And whoring, at least its excesses. He himself intended to be a model husband, at least as far as his innocent wife would know.

The agreement was in a locked drawer in his desk.

1. The gentleman would make a claim on an heiress to the group.

2. In the event of more than one claim on the same lady (quite often the case in these desperate days) the group entire will decide, by careful attention at social functions within the next fortnight, which one has the best chance. The others will then retire from the fray.

3. All the members of the League shall do what is requested by the pretender to the hand to forward his suit - and foil his rivals.

4. A successful gentleman will remain a member for six months after marriage, still pledged to help his brothers.

5. Absolute secrecy is demanded.

6. New members for the League may be suggested, but must be vetted by all the members before joining. Rattles and other such crass gentlemen are never to be admitted.

Next month, member Jeremy, Lord Lockhart, was to marry Maxine Dawson, heiress to a wealthy country squire. Miss Dawson was quiet and somewhat plain, but it was obvious to Gascoigne that it had become a love-match. Engineering ways that Lockhart had been able to meet the carefully tended Miss Dawson had stretched the members' creativity to a great degree, but after a number of meetings, the fish was hooked. In a stand-out fight with her papa, Miss Dawson had been determined in her choice of *fiancé*. She calmly threatened a Gretna marriage if her parent did not agree. Lockhart's eyes shone as he told this story. He was so proud of his bride-to-be.

Deville's case had been messier. A flight to the border with young Lady Harriet Conway, with her brother in hot pursuit and a sword fight in Gretna. In the end her injured brother had served as best man as the two married over the blacksmith's forge. Lady Harriet was a pert young lady, he seriously doubted which would rue the marriage, his friend or she.

Should he now claim his first pursuit? The richest girl in England, the enchanted, but cold, Snow Queen? He knew Hildegard and some others might make the claim also, however his invitation today surely ranked as evidence of his prior and better claim.



The purse of pin money that Mr Rigby-Blythe had pressed into her hand as she left him was proving useful. A large coin pressed into the hand of Fiennes had ensured that Viscount Gascoigne was admitted to the library where she awaited him in the house where only the servants were yet awake. Fiennes had been supremely uninterested in the coin, of course, hardly noticed it in his hand, but had been moved to make a remark.

‘Will Miss Beauford be with you, Miss?’

‘No. I wish to speak to the viscount on my own.’

Fiennes coughed. ‘The viscount's reputation-’ he began.

‘I understand completely, Fiennes. You can stay in the hall for the duration of his visit, if you must, and should there be a problem I have only to call. I hardly think the viscount would offer me any insult in a gentleman's house.’

Fiennes thought so too. His mistress would not like it, he knew, but there was nothing of the love lorn about this strange young lady.

Viscount Gascoigne was introduced into the library and found his summoner seated in the peculiarly upright manner he had noticed on the previous evening. She did not rise, but indicated a handsome leather chair opposite her and after the smallest of bows, he sat.

Delphine considered him. She had learnt what she could of him last night.

Her aunt had underlined his terrible reputation with women, had said his pockets were "all to let", had warned about fortune hunters.

Her uncle had taken issue with this label, and he had challenged his wife to name an heiress Gascoigne had pursued for her money. She could not, but merely said, 'Perhaps he has waited for a prize he would consider worthy of his greatness. The Gascoignes have always been proud. And now Delphine-'

'Perhaps! His reputation is founded on a few girls with whom he danced and gave rise to speculation.'

'And the rest!' said his wife tartly.

'Affairs with married ladies are as much their fault as Gascoigne's, don't you think?' Her uncle had said this in low tone, but Delphine had excellent hearing.

Later she had asked her uncle if he liked Gascoigne. 'As to his dealings with women, I do not know if I can vouch for his behaviour. Unlike your aunts, I do not concern myself with gossip. But as to his dealing with gentlemen, he keeps his word and aids his friends, and that suffices. Besides that, he is an amusing companion.' He looked down at her with a rare frown and a wagged finger, 'But do not fall in love with him, my dear. He is, as your aunt guesses, something of a scapegrace.'

It was a pity she had not the time to verify her investigations (she had talked to each aunt and every gentleman she had danced with) with Mr Rigby-Blythe. However, it had been borne upon her that she had been somewhat of a hit last night. All her aunts had said so. Being a hit seemed to consist of many eyes regarding one, being solicited for every dance by multiple gentlemen and being paid outrageous complements by complete strangers. None of it had pleased her. For years she had longed for society, to be taken to London and meet a great many people that one would not be forbidden to talk to. However, she had found it far too much all of a sudden. And she had decided something urgent must be done to make life with her aunts comfortable.

Now she looked at Gascoigne who had taken his seat, leaned back, and crossed his legs. He regarded her lazily. It

occurred to her that they had not yet spoken - the silence was probably a rent in the fabric of society.

She began with her first concern.

‘I understand sir, that among gentlemen you are considered a man who keeps his word.’

Gascoigne gave this start no more than an inclination of his head.

‘But it has also been suggested that in your dealings with women the same may not be true.’

Gascoigne did no more than purse his lips at that, a fleeting frown passed his face.

‘I have insulted you, I see. I choose to believe that a man who keeps his word behaves the same in all situations. Unless you consider women so far beneath you that they do not merit the same treatment.’

‘I do not.’ He said it firmly.

‘Then I ask at once that what is said between us this morning, whatever the outcome, remain secret.’

Re-crossing his legs was the only indication that Gascoigne was intrigued.

‘I give my word.’

‘Very well. I have a proposition for you.’ Gascoigne looked both amused and uncomfortable at this. ‘Not a proposal.’ He relaxed once more. ‘I have lived a secluded life thus far, sir. How secluded it would be difficult to tell. I need a guide through this world I find myself in, and one who has little interest in persuading me of things.’

‘Surely you have been warned, madam, that my purse is empty and yours might just be the answer to my problems.’

‘Indeed, I hope it will be.’

Gascoigne sat up at this. ‘I thought this was not a proposal, Miss Delacroix. I must say that when I take a wife I would fain chose her for myself.’

‘We agree completely, my lord. I offer you not my hand, but employment.’

His laugh rang out loud enough to raise the house.

‘Ssh!’ she said sternly, ‘Or you will cause us to be interrupted.’

‘Why me?’

‘You are extremely handsome, and have wonderful manners. And intelligence. The tactic of asking my companion to dance instead of me showed much more force of mind than those gentlemen who paid me compliments all evening. I expect if I was inclined to romance, it may have worked. But what it did do was single you out as a better player than all the others. My aunts tell me I know nothing of the world, and they are quite correct. I need a guide to this stormy sea.’ She sighed. ‘Explaining myself is exhausting. I am really not used to talking so much.’

‘If you do not want to be married, what do you want from London society?’ enquired Gascoigne with a curve to his mouth. ‘What is your plan?’

‘I suppose that marriage must be my ultimate fate. But I want to marry on my own terms. I wish to know all that a reprobate like you could tell me of my beaux. Whether they are as they appear to a green girl.’

‘I have never met such a knowing innocent.’

‘I need to know more.’

‘You are better, much better, to leave all this to your aunts. They have your best interests at heart.’

‘Have you met my aunts, sir? Is there a sensible one amongst them? Aunt Eloise was even inclined to be sentimental about you - based on a kindness you did her dog when you were a boy. Naive I may be, but I could see the trap of your charm and your looks at fifty paces.’

Gascoigne’s laugh rang out again. ‘You are the most original beauty that I have yet met.’

‘Very clever, you compliment my looks and wrap it in a jest. It won’t work however, and you had best leave off trying. I will never marry such as you.’

He laughed once more. ‘I don’t think I blame you. What next will you say?’

Fiennes entered the library. ‘Miss Delacroix, I should tell you that your aunt has rung for her chocolate. The house awakes.’

Delphine stood at last and Gascoigne knew himself to be dismissed. She held out a folded paper to him.

‘I feared we would be interrupted. Here are my terms, my lord. Read them and meet me in the park this afternoon, say at two of the clock, to let me know if you accept. In any event, I trust you will destroy my letter after having read it.’

He bowed, and Fiennes led him out.

To read on, click here : <https://Getbook.at/Delphine>

About Author

Alicia Cameron lives between her homes in rural Scotland and rural France. She reads avidly, laughs a lot, and is newly addicted, unfortunately, to Korean Dramas ... for which she refuses treatment.

Here is a link to get the short story **Angelique and the Pursuit of Destiny** for FREE!
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It puts you on the list to receive Alicia Cameron's book news and offers, occasionally.

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Regency Romance

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Clarissa and the Poor Relations: getbook.at/Clarissa

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Delphine and the Dangerous Arrangement:
getbook.at/Delphine

Delphine Delacroix was brought up by her mother alone, a cold and unloving childhood. With her mother dead, she has become the richest young lady in England, and is taken under the wing of her three aunts, Not quite trusting them, Delphine enters a dangerous arrangement with the handsome Viscount Gascoigne - but will this lead to her downfall?

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Honorina and the Family Obligation, The Fentons 1

<https://getbook.at/Honorina>

Honorina Fenton has been informed that the famous Mr Allison is to come to her home. His purpose? To woo her. She cannot recall what he looks like, since he made her nervous when they met in Town. Her sister Serena is amused, but when Allison arrives, it seems that a mistake might cost all three their happiness.

Felicity and the Damaged Reputation, The Fentons 2

<https://getbook.at/Felicity>

On her way to London to take a post as governess, Felicity Oldfield is intercepted by xx, who asks her to impersonate his cousin for an hour. When, in an unexpected turn of events, Felicity is able to enjoy a London Season, this encounter damages her reputation.

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3 <https://getbook.at/Euphemia>

Euphemia, plain and near forty, is on her way to live with her dear friend Felicity and her husband when she is diverted to the home of Baron x, a bear of a man as huge and loud as Euphemia is small and quiet. Everything in her timid life begins to change.

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<https://getbook.at/Ianthe>

The Fighting Foxes, Lord Edward, his half-brother Curtis and Lady Fox, his stepmother, are awaiting the arrival from France of a poor relation, Miss Ianthe Eames. But when Ianthe turns up, nothing could be further from their idea of a supplicant. Richly dressed and in high good humour, Ianthe takes the Foxes by storm.

The Sisters of Castle Fortune Series (Regency)

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Georgette Fortune, one of ten sisters, lives as a spinster in Castle Fortune. She refused all offers during her London Seasons, since she fell in love, at first glance with the dashing

Lord Onslow. He hardly knew she existed, however, but now he has arrived at the castle for a house party, and Georgette is fearful of exposing her feelings. She tries to avoid him, but Onslow treats her as a friend, making Georgette's pain worse, even as he makes her laugh.

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Katerina and the Reclusive Earl: Sisters of Castle Fortune 3 <https://getbook.at/Katerina>

Katerina Fortune has only one desire, to avoid going on her London Season altogether. On the journey, she hears of a recluse, who dislikes people as much as she. Katerina escapes her father and drives to offer a convenient marriage to the earl, who refuses. But an accident necessitates her stay at his home, and they discover they have more in common than either could have believed.

Leonora and the Lion's Venture: Sisters of Castle Fortune 4 <https://getbook.at/Leonora>

The pretty Fortune twins come to Town, and Leonora has only one object in view: The Honourable Linton Carswell. But Foggy Carswell is too craven to be caught – he is not a marrying man. While trying to save her twin Marguerite from the results of her own romantic naivety, Leonora has her work set for her. But a number of family alliances begin to aid the unlikely pairing.

Edwardian Inspirational Romance

(typewriters, bicycles, and leg-of-mutton sleeves!)

Francine and the Art of Transformation:
getbook.at/FrancineT

Francine is fired as a lady's maid, but she is a woman who has planned for every eventuality. Meeting Miss Philpott, a timid, unemployed governess, Francine transforms her into the Fascinating Mathilde and offers her another, self directed life. Together, they help countless other women get control over their lives.

Francine and the Winter's Gift: getbook.at/FrancineW

Francine and Mathilde continue to save young girls from dreadful marriages, while seeing to their own romances. In Francine, Sir Hugo Portas, government minister, meets a woman he could never have imagined. Will society's rules stop their union, or can Francine even accept the shackles of being in a relationship?

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