



CHAPTER 1

Hampshire, 1832

A stable boy wasn't supposed to speak to an earl's daughter, much less climb up to her bedroom window. God knew what would happen to him if he was caught. He would probably be whipped before being booted off the estate.

McKenna climbed up a support column, curled his long fingers around the ironwork of the second-floor balcony, and hung suspended for a moment before swinging his legs up with a grunt of effort. Catching the edge of the balcony with one heel, he pulled himself onto the balcony and eased over the railing.

He crouched in front of the French doors and cupped his hands on either side of his eyes as he peered into the bedroom, where a single lamp was burning. A girl stood before the dressing table, pulling a brush through her long dark hair. The sight filled McKenna with a rush of pleasure.

Lady Aline Marsden...the older daughter of the Earl of Westcliff. She was warm, high-spirited, and beautiful in all ways. Having been allowed too much freedom by her inattentive parents, Aline had spent most of her short life roaming about her family's lavish Hampshire estate. Lord and Lady Westcliff were too caught up in their own social affairs to give any real consideration to the supervision of their three children. The situation was not uncommon for families who inhabited country houses like the one at Stony Cross Park. Their lives were stratified by the sheer size of the estate, as children ate, slept, and played far away from their parents. Moreover, the notion of parental responsibility did not constitute any kind of bond between the earl and countess. Neither of them was particularly inclined to worry over a child who was the product of a practical and loveless union.

Since the day that McKenna had been brought to the estate at the age of eight, he and Aline had been constant companions for ten years, climbing trees, swimming in the river, and running about barefoot. Their friendship

had been overlooked because they were children. But eventually things had begun to change between them. No healthy young man could fail to be stirred and set off-kilter by Aline, who, at the age of seventeen, had become the loveliest girl on God's green earth.

At the moment Aline was already dressed for bed, wearing a nightgown made of intricately tucked and ruffled white cotton. As she moved across the room, the lamplight silhouetted the generous curves of her breasts and hips through the thin fabric, and slid over the shining sable locks of her hair. Aline's looks were the kind that caused the heart to stop and the breath to catch. Her coloring alone would have given even a homely woman the appearance of great beauty. But her features were fine and perfect, and perpetually lit with the radiance of unchecked emotion. And as if all that hadn't been quite enough, nature had added one last flourish, a tiny black mark that flirted with the corner of her mouth. McKenna had fantasized endlessly about kissing that tantalizing spot, and following it to the lush curves of her lips. Kissing and kissing her, until she was weak and shivering in his arms.

On more than one occasion McKenna had pondered the question of how a man of the earl's unremarkable looks, paired with a woman of the countess's average attractiveness, could have produced a daughter like Aline. By some quirk of fate, she had inherited just the right combination of features from each. Their son, Marcus, had been somewhat less fortunate, resembling the earl with his broad and harsh-planed face, and his bull-like physical build. Little Livia--rumored to be the result of one of the countess's extramarital affairs--was pretty but not extraordinarily so, lacking her sister's radiant dark magic.

As he watched Aline, McKenna reflected that the time was fast approaching when they could have nothing more to do with each other. The familiarity between them would soon become dangerous, if it had not already. Collecting himself, McKenna tapped gently on a glass pane of the French doors. Aline turned toward the sound and saw him without apparent surprise. McKenna rose to his feet, watching her intently.

Folding her arms across her chest, Aline regarded him with a scowl. Go away, she mouthed silently through the window.

McKenna was both amused and consternated as he wondered what the hell he had done now. To his knowledge, he hadn't been involved in any pranks or mischief making, and he hadn't picked any arguments with her. And as a reward, he had been left waiting alone by the river for two hours this afternoon.

Shaking his head stubbornly, McKenna remained where he was. He reached down to rattle the door handle in subtle warning. They both knew that if he was discovered on her balcony, he would bear the brunt of the consequences, not she. And it was for that reason--to preserve his hide--that she reluctantly unlocked the door and opened it. He couldn't help grinning at the success of his ploy, even as she continued to frown.

"Did you forget that we were to meet this afternoon?" McKenna asked without preamble, grasping the edge of the door in one hand. He leaned his shoulder against the narrow wood frame and smiled into her dark brown eyes. Even when he slouched, Aline was forced to crane her neck upward to meet his gaze.

"No, I didn't forget." Her voice, usually so light and sweet, was edged with surliness.

"Then where were you?"

"Does it really matter?"

McKenna tilted his head as he briefly pondered why girls liked to put a fellow through a guessing game when he was in trouble. Arriving at no reasonable answer, he resolutely picked up the gauntlet. "I asked you to meet me at the river because I wanted to see you."

"I assumed that you had changed your plans--since you seem to prefer someone else's company to mine." As Aline read the confusion in his expression, her mouth twisted impatiently. "I saw you in the village this morning, when my sister and I went to the milliner's."

McKenna responded with a cautious nod, recalling that he had been sent

to the cobbler's by the stable master, to deliver some boots that needed repair. But why the hell would that have offended Aline so?

"Oh, don't be such a dunderhead," Aline exclaimed. "I saw you with one of the village girls, McKenna. Youkissed her. Right there in the street, for the whole world to see!"

His brow cleared instantly. So he had. His companion had been Mary, the butcher's daughter. McKenna had flirted with her this morning, as he did with most of the girls he knew, and Mary had teased him about something or another until he had laughed and stolen a kiss from her. It had meant nothing to him or to Mary, and he had promptly put the whole incident out of his mind.

So that was the source of Aline's irritation--jealousy. McKenna tried to hold back his pleasure at the discovery, but it gathered in a sweet, heavy mass in his chest. Hell. He shook his head ruefully, wondering how to remind her of what she already knew--that a daughter of the peerage shouldn't give a damn about what he did.

"Aline," he protested, half lifting his hands to touch her, then snatching them back. "What I do with other girls has nothing to do with us. You and I are friends. We would never...you're not the kind I...damn, there's no need for me to explain the obvious!"

Aline looked at him in a way she never had before, her brown eyes filled with an intensity that caused the hairs on the back of his neck to rise. "What if I were a village girl?" she asked. "Would you do the same thing with me?"

It was the first time that McKenna had ever been tongue-tied. He had a knack for knowing what people wanted to hear, and he usually found it to his advantage to oblige them. His easy charm had stood him in good stead, whether it was to wheedle a cross bun from the baker's wife, or to get himself out of trouble with the stable master. But as for Aline's question...there was infinite danger in saying either yes or no.

Silently McKenna groped for some half truth that would pacify her. "I don't think of you that way," he finally said, forcing himself to meet her gaze without blinking.

"Other boys do." At his blank look, Aline continued evenly, "Last week when the Harewoods visited, their son William cornered me by the ironstone wall at the bluff and tried to kiss me."

"That arrogant little snot!" McKenna said in instant fury, recalling the stocky, freckle-faced boy who had made no effort to conceal his fascination with Aline. "I'm going to tear his head off the next time I see him. Why didn't you tell me?"

"He's not the only one who's tried," Aline said, deliberately adding fuel to the flame. "Not long ago my cousin Elliot dared me to play a kissing game with him--"

She broke off with a slight gasp as McKenna reached out and seized her.

"Damn your cousin Elliot," he said roughly. "Damn all of them."

It was a mistake to touch her. The feel of her arms, so supple and warm beneath his fingers, made his insides tighten into knots. He needed to touch more of her, needed to bend closer and fill his nostrils with the smell of her...the soapy scent of just-washed skin, the hint of rose water, the intimate waft of her breath. Every instinct clamored for him to pull her closer and set his mouth on the velvety curve where her neck met her shoulder. Instead he forced himself to release her, his hands remaining suspended in midair. It was difficult to move, to breathe, to think clearly.

"I haven't let anyone kiss me," Aline said. "I want you--onlyyou." A rueful note entered her voice. "But at this rate, I'll be ninety years old before you ever try."

McKenna was unable to conceal his wretched longing as he stared at her. "No. It would change everything, and I can't let that happen."

Carefully Aline reached up to touch his cheek with the tips of her fingers. Her hand was almost more familiar to McKenna than his own. He knew where every tiny scar and nick had come from. In childhood her hand had been chubby and often grimy. Now her hand was slender and white, the nails neatly manicured. The temptation to turn his mouth into her soft palm was excruciating. Instead McKenna steeled himself to ignore the stroke of her fingers against his jaw.

"I've noticed the way you've looked at me lately," Aline said, a flush rising in her pale face. "I know your thoughts, just as you know mine. And with everything I feel for you, and everything you are to me...can't I have at least one moment of...of..." She struggled to find the right word. "Illusion?"

"No," he said gruffly. "Because soon the illusion would end, and we'd both be worse off than before."

"Would we?" Aline bit her lip and looked away, her fists clenching as if she could physically knock away the unpleasant truth that hung so insistently between them.

"I would die before I ever hurt you," McKenna said grimly. "And if I let myself kiss you once, there would be another time, and another, and soon there would be no stopping place."

"You don't know--" Aline began to argue.

"Yes, I do."

They stared at each other in wordless challenge. McKenna kept his face blank. He knew Aline well enough to be certain that if she detected any vulnerability in his facade, she would pounce without hesitation.

Finally Aline let out a sigh of defeat. "All right, then," she whispered, as if to herself. Her spine seemed to straighten, and her tone flattened with resignation. "Shall we meet at the river tomorrow at sunset, McKenna? We'll throw stones, and talk, and fish a little, as always. Is that what you want?"

It was a long time before McKenna could speak. "Yes," he said warily. It was all he could have of her--and God knew it was better than nothing.

A wry, affectionate smile tugged at Aline's lips as she stared at him. "You had better go then, before you're caught up here. But first, bend down and let me fix your hair. It's sticking up on top."

Had he not been so distracted, McKenna would have pointed out that there was no need for her to neaten his appearance. He was going to his room over the stables, and the five dozen horses that were lodged there didn't give a damn about his hair. But he bent automatically, indulging Aline's slightest wish from sheer force of habit.

Instead of smoothing his unruly black locks, Aline stood on her toes, slid a hand behind the back of his neck, and brought her mouth to his.

The kiss affected him like a lightning strike. McKenna made an agitated sound in his throat, his entire body suddenly immobilized from a shock of pleasure. Oh God, her lips, so lush and delicate, searching his with awkward determination. As Aline had known, there was no way in hell that he could pull away from her now. His muscles locked, and he stood passively, fighting to contain the flood of sensation that threatened to overwhelm him. He loved her, wanted her, with blind adolescent ferocity. His shaky grasp on his self-control lasted for less than a minute before he groaned in defeat and clamped his arms around her.

Breathing harshly, he kissed her over and over, intoxicated by the softness of her lips. Aline responded eagerly, pressing upward, while her fingers curled into the closely shorn strands of his hair. The pleasure of holding her was too great...McKenna couldn't stop himself from increasing the pressure of his kisses until her lips parted innocently. He took immediate advantage, exploring the edge of her teeth, the wet silk of her mouth. That surprised her--he sensed her hesitation, and he crooned in his throat until she relaxed. He slid his hand over the back of her head, his fingers conforming to the curve of her scalp, while he sank his tongue more deeply inside her. Aline gasped and clutched his shoulders tightly, responding with a raw, unselfconscious sensuality that devastated him. McKenna longed to kiss and love every part of her, to give her more pleasure than it was possible to bear. He had known desire before, and although his experience was limited, he was not a virgin. But he had never encountered this agonizing blend of emotion and physical hunger before...a searing temptation that he could never surrender to.

Tearing his mouth from hers, McKenna buried his face in the shining midnight veil of her hair. "Why did you do that?" he groaned.

Aline's brief laugh was an audible ache. "You're everything to me. I love you. I've always--"

"Hush." He shook her slightly to silence her. Holding her at arm's

length, he glared into her flushed, radiant face. "Don't ever say that again. If you do, I'll leave Stony Cross."

"We'll run away together," she continued recklessly. "We'll go to a place where no one can find us--"

"Holy hell, do you know how insane you sound?"

"Why is it insane?"

"Do you think I would ruin your life that way?"

"I belong with you," she said stubbornly. "I'll do whatever I have to, to be with you."

She believed what she was saying--McKenna saw it in her face. It broke his heart, even as it infuriated him. Damn her, she knew that the differences between them were insurmountable, and she had to accept that. He couldn't stay here and be faced with constant temptation, knowing that to give in would result in both their downfalls.

Cradling her face in his hands, McKenna let his fingers touch the outward tips of her dark brows, and drew his thumbs over the warm velvet of her cheeks. And because he couldn't manage to disguise the reverence of his touch, he spoke with cold bluntness. "You think you want me now. But you'll change. Someday you'll find it damned easy to forget about me. I'm a bastard. A servant, and not even an upper servant at that--"

"You're the other half of me."

Shocked into silence, McKenna closed his eyes. He hated his own instinctive response to the words, the leap of primitive joy. "Bloody hell. You're making it impossible for me to stay at Stony Cross."

Aline backed away from him at once, the color draining from her face. "No. Don't go. I'm sorry. I won't say anything else. Please, McKenna--you'll stay, won't you?"

He had a sudden taste of the inevitable pain that he would experience someday, the lethal wounds that would result from the simple act of leaving her. Aline was nineteen...he had another year with her, perhaps not even that long. Then the world would open up to her, and McKenna would become a

dangerous liability. Or worse, an embarrassment. She would make herself forget this night. She would not want to remember what she had said to a stable boy on the moonlit balcony outside her bedroom. But until then...

"I'll stay for as long as I can," he said gruffly.

Anxiety flashed in the dark depths of her eyes. "And tomorrow?" she reminded him. "You'll meet me tomorrow?"

"The river at sunset," McKenna said, suddenly weary from the endless inner struggle of wanting and never having.

Aline seemed to read his mind. "I'm sorry." Her anguished whisper descended through the air as gently as falling flower petals as he climbed down from the balcony.

After McKenna had disappeared into the shadows, Aline padded back into her room and touched her lips. Her fingertips rubbed the kiss deeper into the tender skin. His mouth had been unexpectedly hot, and his taste was sweet and exquisite, flavored with apples that he must have purloined from the orchard. She had imagined his kiss thousands of times, but nothing could have prepared her for the sensual reality of it.

She had wanted to make McKenna acknowledge her as a woman, and she had finally succeeded. But there was no triumph in the moment, only a despair that was as incisive as a knife blade. She knew that McKenna thought she didn't understand the complexity of the situation, when in truth she knew it better than he.

It had been relentlessly instilled in her since the cradle that people did not venture out of their classes. Young men like McKenna would forever be forbidden to her. Everyone from the top of society to the bottom understood and accepted such stratification--it caused universal discomfort to suggest that it could ever be any other way. She and McKenna might as well have been different species, she thought with black humor.

But somehow Aline could not see McKenna as everyone else did. He was no aristocrat, but neither was he a mere stable boy. Had he been born to a family of noble pedigree, he would have been the pride of the peerage. It was monstrously unfair that he had started life with such disadvantages. He was

smart, handsome, hardworking, and yet he could never overcome the social limitations that he had been born with.

She remembered the day he had first come to Stony Cross Park, a small boy with unevenly cropped black hair and eyes that were neither blue nor green, but some magical shade in-between. According to the servants' gossip, the boy was the bastard of a village girl who had run off to London, gotten herself in a predicament, and died in childbirth. The unfortunate baby had been sent back to Stony Cross, where his grandparents had cared for him until they became infirm. When McKenna reached the age of eight, he was sent to Stony Cross Park, where he was employed as a hall boy. His duties had been to clean the upper servants' shoes, help the maids carry heavy cans of hot water up and down the stairs, and wash the silver coins that had come from town, so as to prevent the earl and countess from encountering any traces of dirt that might have come from a tradesman's hands.

His full name was John McKenna, but there had already been three servants on the estate named John. It had been decided that the boy would be referred to by his last name until a new one was chosen for him...but somehow that had been forgotten about, and he had been simply McKenna ever since. At first most of the servants had taken little notice of him, except for the housekeeper, Mrs. Faircloth. She was a broad-faced, rosy-cheeked, kindhearted woman who was the closest thing to a parent that McKenna had ever known. In fact, even Aline and her younger sister, Livia, were far more apt to go to Mrs. Faircloth than they were to approach their own mother. No matter how busy the housekeeper was, she always seemed to have a moment to spare for a child, to bandage a hurt finger, to admire an empty bird's nest that had been found outside, or to glue the broken part of a toy back into place.

It had been Mrs. Faircloth who had sometimes dismissed McKenna from his duties so that he could run and play with Aline. Those afternoons had been the boy's only escape from the unnaturally restrained existence of a child servant.

"You must be kind to McKenna," Mrs. Faircloth had admonished Aline,

when she had run to her with a tale of how he had broken her doll's painted wicker perambulator. "He has no family at all now, nor does he have nice clothes to wear, nor good things to eat for his supper, as you do. Much of the time while you are playing, he is working for his keep. And if he makes too many mistakes, or he is ever thought to be a bad boy, he may be sent away from here, and we will never see him again."

The words had sunk into Aline's marrow. From then on she had sought to protect McKenna, taking the blame for his occasional acts of mischief, sharing the sweets that her older brother sometimes brought from town, and even making him study the lessons that her governess gave her to read. And in return McKenna had taught her how to swim, how to skip pebbles across a pond, how to ride a horse, and how to make a whistle from a blade of grass stretched between her thumbs.

Contrary to what everyone, even Mrs. Faircloth, believed, Aline had never thought of McKenna as a brother. The familial affection she felt for Marcus bore no resemblance to her relationship to McKenna. McKenna was her counterpart, her compass, her sanctuary.

It had been only natural that as she developed into a young woman, she would become physically attracted to him. Certainly every other female in Hampshire was. McKenna had grown into a tall, big-boned male with striking looks, his features strong if not precisely chiseled, his nose long and bold, his mouth wide. His black hair hung over his forehead in a perpetual spill, while those singular turquoise eyes were shadowed by extravagant dark lashes. To compound his appeal, he possessed a relaxed charm and a sly sense of humor that had made him a favorite on the estate and in the village beyond.

Aline's love for McKenna made her want the impossible; to be with him always, to become the family he had never had. Instead she would have to accept the life her parents chose for her. Although love matches among the upper classes were no longer as objectionable as they once had been, the Marsdens still insisted on the tradition of arranged marriage. Aline knew exactly what was in store for her. She would have an indolent aristocratic

husband, who would use her to breed his children and turn a blind eye when she took a lover to amuse herself in his absence. Every year she would spend the season in London, followed by the country house visits in summer, and then the autumn hunts. Year after year she would see the same faces, hear the same gossip. Even the pleasures of motherhood would be denied her. Servants would care for her children, and when they were older, they would be sent away to boarding school as Marcus had been.

Decades of emptiness, Aline thought gloomily. And worst of all would be knowing that McKenna was out there somewhere, entrusting another woman with all his thoughts and dreams.

"God, what am I to do?" Aline whispered in agitation, flinging herself onto her brocade-covered bed. She clutched a pillow in her arms and dug her chin into the downy plumpness of its surface, while reckless thoughts clattered through her mind. She couldn't lose him. The thought made her shaky, filled her with wildness, made her want to scream.

Flinging aside the pillow, Aline lay on her back and stared blindly into the dark folds of the overhead canopy. How could she keep McKenna in her life? She tried to imagine taking him as her lover after she was married. Her mother had affairs...many aristocratic ladies did, and as long as they were discreet, no one objected. But Aline knew that McKenna would never accept such an arrangement. Nothing was half measure for him--he would not consent to share her. A servant he might have been, but he had as much pride and possessiveness as any man on earth.

Aline did not know what to do. It seemed the only choice was to steal every moment she could with him, until fate pulled them apart.

CHAPTER 3

It had been a long, hard day's work for McKenna, helping the gardener's assistants to construct a stone wall around the fruit orchard. Hours of lifting heavy rock had caused his muscles to tremble with strain. With a rueful grin, he reflected that he wouldn't be of much use to Aline for a day or two--he was almost too sore to move. But perhaps she would let him lay his head in her lap, and allow him to nap for a few minutes, with her perfume and softness surrounding him. Sleeping while her gentle fingers stroked his hair...the thought filled him with weary anticipation.

However, before he could go to Aline, he would have to see Mrs. Faircloth, who had bid him to come to her at once. After bathing in the old iron tub that all the menservants made use of, McKenna went to the kitchen with his hair still wet. His skin was scented with the acrid soap that was used to clean floors and wash the laundry, as well as given to the servants for their personal needs.

"The hall boy said you wanted me," McKenna said without preamble. As he glanced at the housekeeper, he was puzzled by the consternated look on her face.

"Lord Westcliff has asked to see you," Mrs. Faircloth said.

Suddenly the large kitchen lost its comforting warmth, and the rich sweetness of a pot of jam simmering on the stove ceased to call to his ever-ravenous appetite. "Why?" McKenna asked cautiously.

Mrs. Faircloth shook her head. The heat of the kitchen had caused wisps of her salt-and-pepper hair to stick to the sides of her cheeks. "I'm sure I don't know, and neither does Salter. Have you gotten into some kind of mischief, McKenna?"

"Mischief, no."

"Well, to my knowledge you have done your work, and you've behaved yourself as well as a boy your age is able." She frowned contemplatively. "Perhaps the master wishes to commend you, or send you about some special

task."

However, they both knew that was unlikely. The earl would never summon a lower servant for such a reason. It was the butler's province to offer praise or discipline, or hand down new responsibilities. "Go put on your livery," Mrs. Faircloth bade him. "You can't appear before the master in your ordinary garb. And be quick about it--he won't want to be kept waiting."

"Hell," McKenna muttered, cringing at the idea of dressing in the hated livery.

Pretending to scowl, the housekeeper raised a wooden spoon threateningly. "Another blasphemous word in my presence, and I'll rap your knuckles."

"Yes, ma'am." McKenna lowered his head and attempted a meek expression, which made her laugh.

She patted his cheek with her warm, plump hand. Her eyes were soft pools of brown as she smiled. "Be off with you, and after you've seen the earl, I'll have some fresh bread and jam waiting for you."

As McKenna left to comply, his smile vanished, and he let out a long, taut sigh. Nothing good would come of the earl's request. The only possible reason for the summons was his relationship with Aline. A slightly nauseous feeling came over him. McKenna feared nothing except the possibility of being sent away from her. The thought of days, weeks, months passing without being able to see her was unfathomable...like being told that he must try to live under water. He was overwhelmed with the need to find her, now, but there was no time. One did not tarry when the earl had sent for him.

Dressing quickly in the livery of gold-braided velvet, pinching black shoes, and white stockings, McKenna went to the study where Lord Westcliff waited. The house seemed peculiarly quiet, filled with the hush that occurred before an execution took place. Using two knuckles as Salter had taught him, McKenna gave the door a cautious rap.

"Enter," came the master's voice.

McKenna's heart pounded so hard that he felt light-headed. Making his

face expressionless, he entered the room and waited just inside the door. The room was stark and simple, paneled in gleaming cherrywood and lined on one side with long, rectangular, stained-glass windows. It was furnished sparsely, with bookshelves, hard-seated chairs, and a large desk where Lord Westcliff sat.

Obeying the earl's brief gesture, McKenna ventured into the room and stopped before the desk. "My lord," he said humbly, waiting for the ax to fall.

The earl regarded him with a narrow-eyed stare. "I've been considering what is to be done with you."

"Sir?" McKenna questioned, his stomach dropping with sickening abruptness. He glanced into Westcliff's hard eyes and then looked away instinctively. No servant ever dared to hold the master's gaze. It was an untenable sign of insolence.

"Your service is no longer required at Stony Cross Park." The earl's voice was a quiet lash of sound. "You will be dismissed forthwith. I have undertaken to secure another situation for you."

McKenna nodded dumbly.

"I am acquainted with a shipbuilder in Bristol," Westcliff continued, "a Mr. Ilbery, who has condescended to hire you as an apprentice. I know him to be an honorable man, and I expect that he will be a fair, if demanding, taskmaster..."

Westcliff said something else, but McKenna only half heard him. Bristol...he knew nothing about it, save that it was a major trading port, and that it was hilly and rich with coal and metal. At least it was not too far away--it was in a neighboring county--

"You will have no opportunity to return to Stony Cross," the earl said, recapturing his attention. "You are no longer welcome here, for reasons that I have no wish to discuss. And if you do attempt to return, you will regret it bitterly."

McKenna understood what he was being told. He had never felt so much at someone else's mercy. It was a feeling that a servant should be well

accustomed to, but for the first time in his life, he resented it. He tried to swallow back the seething hostility, but it remained sharp and stinging in the back of his throat. Aline ...

"I've arranged for you to be transported tonight," Westcliff said coolly. "The Farnham family is conveying goods to be sold at Bristol market. They will allow you to ride in the back of their cart. Collect your belongings at once, and take them to the Farnhams' home in the village, from whence you will depart." Reaching into his desk drawer, he extracted a coin and flicked it to McKenna, who caught it reflexively. It was a crown, the equivalent of five shillings.

"Your month's pay, though you are a few days short of the full four weeks," Westcliff commented. "Never let it be said that I am ungenerous."

"No, my lord," McKenna half whispered. This coin, along with the meager hoard of savings in his room, would amount to approximately two pounds. He would have to make it last, since his apprenticeship would probably begin as unpaid labor.

"You may leave now. You will leave your livery behind, as you have no further need of it." The earl turned his attention to some papers on his desk, ignoring McKenna completely.

"Yes, my lord." McKenna's mind was a welter of confusion as he left the study. Why had the earl not asked any questions, why had he not demanded to know precisely how far their short-lived affair had gone? Perhaps the earl had not wanted to know. Perhaps Westcliff was assuming the worst, that Aline had indeed taken McKenna as her lover. Would Aline be punished for it?

He would not be here to find out. He would not be able to protect or comfort her...he was being removed from her life with surgical precision. But he was damned if he wouldn't see her again. The stupor faded, and suddenly his breath seemed to burn in his throat and chest, as if he had inhaled lungfuls of fire.

Aline nearly doubled over with agony as she heard the sounds she had been expecting...the quiet scrape of McKenna climbing up to her balcony.

Her stomach roiled, and she clenched her fist against her abdomen. She knew what she had to do. And she knew that even without her father's manipulations, her involvement in McKenna's life could only have resulted in unhappiness for them both. McKenna would be better off to make a new start, unfettered by anything or anyone from his past. He would find someone else, someone who was at liberty to love him as she would never be. And no doubt many female hearts would be offered to a man like him.

Aline only wished that there was another way to set him free--a way that wouldn't cause them both so much pain.

She saw McKenna on her balcony, a big shadow behind the web of the lace curtain. The door had been left slightly open...he nudged it with his foot, but as always, he did not dare to cross the threshold. Carefully Aline lit a candle by her bedside, and watched as her own reflection flickered to life in the panes of glass, superimposed on McKenna's dark form before the door opened further and the image slid away.

Aline sat on the corner of the bed nearest the balcony, not trusting herself to come any closer to him. "You talked with the earl," she said without inflection, as a trickle of sweat eased down her tense back.

McKenna was very still, reading the stiffness of her posture, the way she withheld herself from him. She should have already been in his arms by now. "He told me--"

"Yes, I know what he told you," Aline interrupted softly. "You're leaving Stony Cross Park. And it's for the best, really."

McKenna gave a slow, confused shake of his head. "I need to hold you," he whispered, and for the first time ever he stepped into her room. He was stayed, however, as Aline raised her hand in a gesture of restraint.

"Don't," she said, and her breath caught before she could continue. "It's all over, McKenna. The only thing to do now is say your goodbyes and disappear."

"I'll find a way to come back," he said thickly, his gaze haunted. "I'll do whatever you ask--"

"That wouldn't be wise. I..." Self-loathing twisted through her as she forced herself to go on. "I don't want you to come back. I don't want to see you ever again."

Staring at her blankly, McKenna took a step back from her. "Don't say that," he murmured huskily. "No matter where I go, I'll never stop loving you. Tell me you feel the same, Aline. God...I can't live without some shred of hope."

It was precisely that hope that would prove his eventual ruin. If he had hope, he would come back to her, and then her father would destroy him. The only way to save McKenna was to drive him away for good...to extinguish all faith in her love. If she didn't accomplish that, then no power on earth would be enough to keep him from her.

"I apologized to my father, of course," Aline said in a light, brittle voice. "I asked him to get rid of you, to spare me the embarrassment. He was angry, of course--he said that I should have at least looked somewhere higher than the stables. He was right. Next time I'll choose with more discrimination."

"Next time?" McKenna looked as if he had been struck.

"You've amused me for a while, but I'm bored with you now. I suppose we should try to part as friends, only...you are just a servant, after all. So let us end it cleanly. It's best for both of us if you go before I am forced to say things that will make us both even more uncomfortable. Go, McKenna. I don't want you anymore."

"Aline...you love me..."

"I was playing with you. I've learned all I can from you. Now I need to find a gentleman to practice with."

McKenna was silent, staring at her with the gaze of a fatally wounded animal. Desperately Aline wondered how long she could continue before she broke.

"How could I love someone like you?" she asked, each mocking word causing a stab of agony in her throat. "You're a bastard, McKenna...you have no family, no blood, no means...what could you offer me that I couldn't get

from any man of low breed? Go, please." Her nails left bloody crescents in her own palms."Go."

As the silence unraveled, Aline lowered her head and waited, trembling, praying to a merciless God that McKenna would not come to her. If he touched her, spoke to her once more, she would crumble in anguish. She made herself breathe in and out, forcing her lungs to work, willing her heart to keep beating. After a long time she opened her eyes and looked at the empty doorway.

He was gone.

Rising from the bed, she managed to reach the wash-stand, and she clutched her arms around the porcelain bowl. Nausea erupted in punishing spasms, and she gave in to it with a wretched gasp, until her stomach was empty and her knees had lost all ability to function. Stumbling and crawling to the balcony, she huddled against the railing and gripped the iron bars.

She saw McKenna's distant figure walking along the drive that led from the manor house...the drive that connected to the village road. His head was bowed as he left without a backward glance.

Aline watched him hungrily through the painted bars, knowing that she would never see him again. "McKenna," she whispered. She watched through the painted bars until he disappeared, following a bend in the road that would lead him far away from her. And then she pressed her icy, sweating face to the sleeve of her gown, and wept.

CHAPTER 5

Twelve years later

"It seems that the Americans have arrived," Aline said dryly, as she and her sister, Livia, returned to the manor house after an early-morning walk. She paused beside the honey-colored stone facade to have a good look at the four ornate vehicles that were stopped in front of the manor house. Servants dashed across the large courtyard that fronted the manor house, from the stables located on one side, to the servants' quarters on the other. The guests had come with a great quantity of trunks and baggage for their month-long stay at Stony Cross Park.

Livia came to stand by Aline. She was a winsome young woman of twenty-four, with light brown hair and hazel-green eyes and a slim, small figure. From her blithe manner, one would think she hadn't a care in the world. But it became evident to anyone who looked into her eyes that she had paid a high price for the rare moments of happiness she had known.

"Silly things," Livia said lightly, referring to their guests, "haven't they been told that it isn't done to arrive so early in the day?"

"It would seem not."

"Rather ostentatious, aren't they," Livia murmured, observing the gilded moldings and painted panels on the sides of the carriages.

Aline grinned. "When Americans spend their money, they like for it to show."

They laughed and exchanged impish glances. This wasn't the first time that their brother, Marcus, now Lord Westcliff, had hosted Americans at his renowned hunting and shooting parties. It seemed that in Hampshire, it was always the season for something...grouse in August, partridge in September, pheasant in October, rooks in spring and summer, and rabbits all year round. The traditional chase took place twice a week, with ladies occasionally riding to the hounds as well. All manner of business was conducted at these parties, which often lasted weeks and included influential political figures or rich

professional men. During these visits, Marcus cleverly persuaded certain guests to side with him on one issue or another, or to agree to some business matter that would serve his interests.

The Americans who came to Stony Cross were usually nouveaux riches...their fortunes made from shipping and real estate, or factories that produced things like soap flakes or paper rolls. Aline had always found Americans rather engaging. She liked their high spirits, and she was touched by their eagerness to be accepted. Out of fear of seeming too modish, they wore clothes that were a season or two behind the current fashion. At dinner they were terribly anxious about whether they either had been seated below the salt or had been given the more prestigious locations near the host. And generally they were concerned about quality, making it clear that they preferred Sèvres china, Italian sculpture, French wine...and English peers. Americans were notoriously eager to make transatlantic marriages, using Yankee fortunes to catch impoverished British blue bloods. And no blood was more exalted than that of the Marsdens, who possessed one of the most ancient earldoms of the peerage.

Livia liked to joke about their pedigree, claiming that the renowned Marsden lineage could make even a black sheep like herself seem attractive to an ambitious American. "Since no decent Englishman would have me, perhaps I should marry one of those nice rich Yankees and sail with him across the Atlantic."

Aline had smiled and hugged her tightly. "You wouldn't dare," she whispered into her sister's hair. "I would miss you too much."

"What a pair we are," Livia responded with a rueful laugh. "You realize that we'll both end up old and unwed, living together with a great horde of cats."

"God save me," Aline had said with a laughing groan.

Thinking back to that conversation, Aline slid an arm around her sister's shoulders. "Well, dear," she said lightly, "here is an opportunity for you to land an ambitious American with large pockets. Just what you were hoping for."

Livia snorted. "I was joking about that, as you well know. Besides, how can you be certain that there are eligible gentlemen in the party?"

"Marcus told me a bit about the group last evening. Have you ever heard of the Shaws of New York? They've had money for three generations, which is forever in America. The head of the family is Mr. Gideon Shaw, who is unmarried--and apparently quite fine-looking."

"Good for him," Livia said. "However, I have no interest in husband hunting, no matter how attractive he may be."

Aline tightened her arm protectively about Livia's narrow shoulders. Since the death of her fiance, Lord Amberley, Livia had vowed never to fall in love again. However, it was clear that Livia needed a family of her own. Her nature was too affectionate to be squandered on a life of spinsterhood. It was a measure of how deeply Livia had loved Amberley, that she still mourned him two years after his death. And yet surely Amberley, the most kindhearted of young men, would never have wanted Livia to spend the rest of her life alone.

"One never knows," Aline said. "It's possible that you will meet a man whom you will love as much as--if not more than--you did Lord Amberley."

Livia's shoulders stiffened. "Lord, I hope not. It hurts too much to love someone that way. You know that as well as I."

"Yes," Aline admitted, struggling to close away the memories that stirred behind an invisible door in her mind. Memories so incapacitating that she had to ignore them for the sake of her own sanity.

They stood together in silence, each understanding the other's unspoken sorrows. How strange, Aline thought, that the younger sister she had always thought of as something of a nuisance would turn out to be her dearest friend and companion. Sighing, Aline turned toward one of the four towers that cornered the main body of the manor house. "Come," she said briskly, "let's go in through the servants' entrance. I don't wish to meet our guests while I'm dusty from our walk."

"Neither do I." Livia fell into step beside her. "Aline, don't you ever tire of acting as hostess for Marcus's guests?"

"No, I don't mind it, actually. I like to entertain, and it's always pleasant to hear the news from London."

"Last week old Lord Torrington said that you have a way of making others feel more clever and interesting than they really are. He said that you are the most accomplished hostess he has ever known."

"Did he? For those kind words, I will put extra brandy in his tea the next time he visits." Smiling, Aline paused at the tower entrance and glanced over her shoulder at the entourage of guests and their servants, who milled in the courtyard as various trunks were carried this way and that. It seemed to be a boisterous group, this entourage of Mr. Gideon Shaw's.

As Aline surveyed the courtyard, her gaze was drawn by a man who was taller than the rest, his height exceeding even that of the footmen. He was big and black-haired, with broad shoulders and a confident, masculine way of walking that was very nearly a strut. Like the other Americans, he was dressed in a suit that was well tailored but scrupulously conservative. He stopped to chat easily with another guest, his hard profile partially averted.

The sight of him made Aline feel uneasy, as if her usual self-possession had suddenly been stripped away. At this distance she could not see his features clearly, but she sensed his power. It was in his movements, the innate authority of his stance, the arrogant tilt of his head. No one could doubt that he was a man of consequence...perhaps he was Mr. Shaw?

Livia preceded her inside the house. "Are you coming, Aline?" she said over her shoulder.

"Yes, I..." Aline's voice drifted into silence as she continued to stare at the distant figure, whose barely contained vitality made every other man in the vicinity seem pallid by comparison. Finishing his brief conversation, he strode toward the entrance of the manor. As he set foot on the first step, however, he stopped...as if someone had called out his name. His shoulders seemed to tauten beneath his black coat. Aline watched him, mesmerized by his sudden stillness. Slowly he turned and looked right at her. Her heart gave a hard, hurtful extra thump, and she retreated quickly into the tower before their gazes met.

"What is it?" Livia asked with a touch of concern. "You're flushed all of a sudden." She came forward and took Aline's hand, tugging impatiently. "Come, we'll bathe your face and wrists with cool water."

"Oh, I'm perfectly all right," Aline replied, but the pit of her stomach felt queer and fluttery. "It's just that I saw a gentleman in the courtyard..."

"The black-haired one? Yes, I noticed him too. Why is it that Americans are always so tall? Perhaps it's something in the climate--it makes them grow like weeds."

"In that case, you and I should go for an extended stay," Aline said with a smile, for both she and Livia were small of stature. Their brother, Marcus, was also no more than average in height, but his build was so muscular and bull-like that he posed a perilous physical threat to any man foolish enough to challenge him.

Chatting comfortably, the sisters made their way to their private apartments in the east wing. Aline knew that she would have to be quick about changing her gown and freshening her appearance, as the Americans' early arrival had undoubtedly set the household in a commotion. The guests would want refreshments of some kind, but there was no time to prepare a full-blown breakfast. The Americans would have to be content with beverages until a midmorning "nuncheon" could be assembled.

Rapidly Aline went through a mental list of the contents of the pantry and larders. She decided they would set out crystal bowls of strawberries and raspberries, pots of butter and jam, along with bread and cake. Some asparagus salad and broiled bacon would also be nice, and Aline would also tell the housekeeper, Mrs. Faircloth, to serve the chilled lobster souffle that had been intended as a supper course for later in the day. Something else could be substituted at dinner, perhaps some tiny salmon cutlets with egg sauce, or sweet-breads with celery stalks--

"Well," Livia said prosaically, interrupting her speculations, "Have a pleasant day. I shall proceed to skulk about as usual."

"There is no need for that," Aline said with an instant frown.

Livia had virtually gone into hiding after the scandalous consequences

of her tragic love affair with Lord Amberley. Although she was generally regarded with sympathy, Livia was still considered "ruined," and therefore unfit company for those of delicate sensibilities. She was never invited to social events of any kind, and when a ball or soiree was held at Stony Cross Park, she stayed in her room to avoid the gathering. However, after two years of witnessing Livia's social exile, Marcus and Aline had both agreed that enough was enough. Perhaps Livia could never regain the status she had enjoyed before her scandal, but the siblings were determined that she should not be forced to live the rest of her life as a recluse. They would gently wedge her back into the fringes of good society, and eventually find her a husband of suitable fortune and respectability.

"You've done your penance, Livia," Aline said firmly. "Marcus says that anyone who does not wish to associate with you will simply have to leave the estate."

"I don't avoid people because I fear their disapproval," Livia protested. "The truth is that I'm not ready to get back into the swim of things just yet."

"You may not ever feel ready," Aline countered. "Sooner or later you will simply have to jump back in."

"Later, then."

"But I remember how much you used to love to dance, and play parlor games, and sing at the piano--"

"Aline," Livia interrupted gently, "I promise you, someday I will dance and play and sing again--but it will have to be at the time of my choosing, not yours."

Aline relented with an apologetic smile. "I don't mean to be overbearing. I just want you to be happy."

Livia reached for her hand and squeezed it. "I wish, dearest, that you were as concerned for your own happiness as you are for everyone else's."

I am happy, Aline wanted to reply, but the words stuck in her throat.

Sighing, Livia left her standing in the hall. "I will see you later this evening."

Aline took hold of the painted porcelain doorknob, pushed into her bedroom, and tugged the bonnet from her head. The hair at the back of her neck was wet with perspiration. Pulling the crimped wire pins from her long chocolate-brown locks, she set them on her dressing table and picked up a silver-backed brush. She dragged it through her hair, relishing the soothing scratch of boar bristles on her scalp.

It had been an exceptionally warm August so far, and the county was swarming with fashionable families who would not be caught dead in London in the summer months. Marcus had said that Mr. Shaw and his business partner would be traveling back and forth between Hampshire and London, with the rest of their entourage remaining firmly entrenched at Stony Cross Park. It appeared that Mr. Shaw planned to establish a London office for his family's new enterprises, as well as secure the all-important docking rights that would allow his ships to unload their cargo at the docklands.

Although the Shaw family was already wealthy from real estate and Wall Street speculation, they had recently launched into the fast-growing business of locomotive production. It seemed their ambition was not only to supply American railways with engines, coaches, and parts, but also to export their products to Europe. According to Marcus, Shaw would have no shortage of investors for his new enterprise--and Aline sensed that her brother was interested in becoming one of them. With that goal in mind, Aline intended to see that Mr. Shaw and his partner had an extremely enjoyable stay at Stony Cross.

Her mind filled with plans, Aline changed into a light summer frock of white cotton printed with lavender flowers. She did not ring for a maid to help her. Unlike other ladies of her situation, she dressed herself most of the time, requesting help only from Mrs. Faircloth when necessary. The housekeeper was the only person who was ever allowed to see Aline bathing or dressing, except for Livia.

Closing the line of tiny pearl buttons up the front of her bodice, Aline stood before the looking glass. Expertly she braided and pinned her dark hair in a twist at the back of her neck. As she anchored the last pin in her coiffure,

she saw in the reflection that something had been left on the bed...a stray glove or garter, perhaps...on the gleaming pink damask coverlet. Frowning curiously, Aline went to investigate.

She reached out to lift the object from the pillow. It was an old handkerchief, the silk embroidery faded to near-colorless hues, many of the threads worn away. Puzzled, Aline traced her fingertip over the pattern of rosebuds. Where had it come from? And why had it been left on her bed? The fluttery feeling came back to her stomach, and her fingertip stilled on the delicate web of embroidery.

She had made this herself, twelve years ago.

Her fingers closed around the bit of cloth, compressing it into her palm. Suddenly her pulse drummed in her temples, ears, throat, and chest. "McKenna," she whispered.

She remembered the day she had given it to him...or more accurately, the day he had taken it from her, in the carriage room of the stables. Only McKenna could have returned this fragment of the past to her. But that was not possible. McKenna had left England years ago, breaking his apprenticeship agreement with the Bristol shipbuilder. No one had ever seen or heard from him again.

Aline had spent her entire adult life trying not to think about him, entertaining the futile hope that time would soften the memories of aching love. Yet McKenna had remained with her like a phantom, filling her dreams with all the abandoned hopes she refused to acknowledge during the daytime hours. All this time she had not known if he was dead or alive. Either possibility was too painful to contemplate.

Still clutching the handkerchief, Aline walked from her room. She slipped through the east wing like a wounded animal, using the servants' entrance to leave the manor. There was no privacy in the house, and she had to steal a few minutes alone to gather her wits. One thought was foremost in her mind...Don't come back, McKenna...It would kill me to see you now. Don't come back, don't...

Marcus, Lord Westcliff, welcomed Gideon Shaw into his library.

Marcus had met Shaw before, on a previous visit to England, and he had found much to recommend the man.

Admittedly, Marcus had been predisposed not to like Shaw, who was a well-known member of the so-called American aristocracy. Despite a lifetime of social indoctrination, Marcus did not believe in aristocracy of any kind. He would have disclaimed his own title, were it legally possible. It was not that he minded responsibility, nor did he have an aversion to inherited money. It was just that he had never been able to accept the concept of one man's innate superiority over another. The notion was inherently unfair, not to mention illogical, and Marcus had never been able to tolerate a breach of logic.

However, Gideon Shaw was nothing like the American aristocrats that Marcus had encountered. In fact, Shaw seemed to enjoy making his New York family cringe with his cheerful references to his great-grandfather, a crude and outspoken sea merchant who had amassed a staggering fortune. Subsequent generations of refined and well-mannered Shaws would have preferred to forget their vulgar ancestor...if only Gideon would let them.

Shaw entered the room with a loose, easy stride. He was an elegant man of about thirty-five years of age. His wheat-colored hair was cropped in short, gleaming layers, and his skin was tanned and close-shaven. His looks were quintessentially American...blue-eyed, blond, with an air of irreverence. But there was a darkness beneath his golden surface, a cynicism and dissatisfaction that had etched deep lines around his eyes and mouth. His reputation was that of a man who worked hard and played even harder, triggering rumors of drinking and debauchery that Marcus suspected were well deserved.

"My lord," Shaw murmured, exchanging a decisive handshake, "it is a pleasure to arrive at last."

A maid came bearing a silver coffee service, and Marcus gestured for her to place it on his desk.

"How was the crossing?" Marcus asked.

A smile crinkled the corners of Shaw's blue-gray eyes. "Uneventful, thank God. May I ask after the countess? She is well, I trust?"

"Quite well, thank you. My mother bid me to convey her regrets that she could not be here at this time, but she is visiting friends abroad." Standing over the refreshment tray, Marcus wondered why Aline had not yet appeared to greet the guests. No doubt she was busy adjusting plans to compensate for the party's early arrival. "Will you take some coffee?"

"Yes, please." Lowering his rangy form into the chair beside the desk, Shaw sat with his legs slightly spread.

"Cream or sugar?"

"Just sugar, please." As Shaw received his cup and saucer, Marcus noticed a distinct trembling of his hands, causing the china to rattle. They were the unmistakable tremors of a man who had not yet recovered from a previous night's drinking.

Without missing a beat, Shaw set the cup on the desk, withdrew a silver flask from the inside of his well-tailored coat, and poured a liberal quantity of spirits into the coffee. He drank from the cup without benefit of the saucer, closing his eyes as the hot alcohol-infused liquid poured down his throat. After downing the coffee, he extended the cup without comment, and Marcus obligingly refilled it. Again the ritual of the flask was performed.

"Your business partner is welcome to join us," Marcus said politely.

Settling back in his chair, Shaw drank the second cup of coffee more slowly than the first. "Thank you, but I believe that at the moment, he is busy giving instructions to our servants." An ironic smile touched his lips. "McKenna has an aversion to sitting down in the middle of the day. He is in constant motion."

Having taken his own seat behind the desk, Marcus paused in the act of lifting a cup to his own lips. "McKenna," he repeated quietly. It was a common name. Even so, it sounded a note of warning inside him.

Shaw smiled slightly. "They call him 'King' McKenna in Manhattan. It's entirely because of his efforts that the Shaw foundries have begun to produce locomotive engines instead of agricultural machinery."

"That is seen by some as an unnecessary risk," Marcus commented.

"You are already doing quite well with the production of agricultural machines...the mowers and grain drills, in particular. Why venture into locomotive manufacturing? The principal railway companies already build their own engines--and from all appearances, they supply their own needs quite efficiently."

"Not for long," Shaw said easily. "We're convinced that their production demands will soon exceed their capability--and they'll be forced to rely on outside builders to make up the difference. Besides, America is different from England. There, most of the railways rely on privately owned locomotive works--such as mine--to provide their engines and parts. Competition is fierce, and it makes for a better, more aggressively priced product."

"I would be interested to learn why you believe that the railway-owned foundries in England won't be able to maintain an acceptable pace of production."

"McKenna will provide all the figures you require." Shaw assured him.

"I look forward to meeting him."

"I believe you already have, my lord." Shaw's gaze did not stray from Marcus's as he continued with studied casualness. "It seems that McKenna was once employed here at Stony Cross Park. You may not remember him, as he was a stable boy at the time."

Marcus showed no reaction to the statement, but inwardly he thought, Oh, bloody hell! This McKenna was indeed the same one whom Aline had loved so long ago. Marcus felt an immediate urgency to reach Aline. He had to prepare her somehow for the news that McKenna had returned. "Footboy," he corrected softly. "As I recall, McKenna was made a house servant just before he left."

Shaw's blue eyes were deceptively guileless. "I hope it will cause you no discomfort to receive a former servant as a guest."

"On the contrary, I admire McKenna's achievements. And I will not hesitate to tell him so." That was half the truth. The problem was, McKenna's presence at Stony Cross would certainly cause Aline discomfort. If so, Marcus would have to find a way to deal with the situation. His sisters meant

more to him than anything else on earth, and he would never allow either of them to be hurt.

Shaw smiled at Marcus's reply. "I see that my judgment of you was correct, Lord Westcliff. You are as fair and open-minded as I suspected."

"Thank you." Marcus devoted himself to stirring a spoonful of sugar in his own coffee, wondering grimly where Aline was.

Aline found herself walking quickly, almost running, to her favorite place by the river, where a wildflower meadow sloped down to tall grasses alive with meadow-brown and marbled-white butterflies. She had never brought anyone here, not even Livia. It was the place she had shared only with McKenna. And after he had gone, it was where she had cried alone.

The prospect of seeing him again was the worst thing that could happen to her.

Still clutching the embroidered handkerchief, Aline lowered herself to a patch of grass and tried to calm herself. The sun struck off the water with brilliant glints, while tiny black beetles crawled along stalks of spiny gorse. The pungency of sun-warmed thistle and marsh marigold mingled with the fecund smell of the river. Numbly she stared at the water, tracking the progress of a crested grebe as it paddled by industriously with a slimy clump of weed clamped in its beak.

Voices from long ago whispered in her mind...

"I'll marry no man but you, McKenna. And if you ever leave me, I'll be alone for the rest of my life."

"Aline...I would never leave unless you told me to go..."

She shook her head sharply, willing the tormenting memories to go away. Wadding the handkerchief into a ball, she drew her arm back to throw it into the gentle river current. The movement was stayed by a quiet sound.

"Wait."

CHAPTER 7

Without question, the best-smelling room in the manor house at Stony Cross Park was the storeroom, a chamber next to the kitchen where Mrs. Faircloth stored blocks of soap, candles, crystallized flowers, and fancy edibles such as bottled fruit. Today the housekeeper was unusually busy, with the household filled with guests and servants. She left the storeroom, her arms filled with heavy bricks of newly made soap. As soon as she carried the bricks to the stillroom, a pair of housemaids would use string to cut the soap into hand-sized cakes.

Preoccupied with the multitude of tasks yet to be done, Mrs. Faircloth became vaguely aware of the large bulk of a footman as he followed her along the narrow hall. "James," she said distractedly, "be a good lad and take these things to the stillroom. I have need of a strong pair of arms. And if Salter takes exception, you tell him that I bade you to help me."

"Yes, ma'am," came the obedient reply.

The voice did not belong to James.

As Mrs. Faircloth hesitated in confusion, the burden was taken from her, and she realized that she had just issued orders to one of the master's guests. His well-tailored clothes proclaimed him to be a man of privilege--and she had just ordered him to carry something for her. Servants, even upper ones, had been dismissed for less. "Sir, do forgive me..." she began in distress, but the dark-haired gentleman continued to the stillroom, hefting the weighty soap bricks with ease. He set the soap on the slate-topped table, turned from the openmouthed housemaids, and regarded Mrs. Faircloth with a rueful smile.

"I should have known you'd start giving commands before I had the chance to say hello."

Staring into his glowing blue-green eyes, Mrs. Faircloth pressed her hands to her heart as if to stave off the threat of apoplexy, and blinked with sudden tears of astonishment. "McKenna?" she exclaimed, impulsively

holding out her arms. "Oh, good Lord..."

He reached her in two strides and caught her stout form against his, briefly lifting her off her feet as if she were a slight-framed girl. His gruff laugh was muffled in her silvery curls.

Dumbfounded by the emotional scene involving their normally stoic housekeeper, the maids in the stillroom drifted into the hallway. They were followed by a gaping scullery maid, a kitchen maid, and the cook, who had worked at the manor for only five years.

"I never thought to see you again," Mrs. Faircloth gasped.

McKenna tightened his arms around her, basking in the never-forgotten maternal comfort of her presence. He remembered the countless times that Mrs. Faircloth had saved extra food for him--the heels of the bread loaves, the leftover tea biscuits, the flavorful dregs from the stew pot. Mrs. Faircloth had been a source of necessary softness in his life...someone who had always believed the best of him.

She was much smaller than he remembered, and her hair was now pure white. But time had painted her gently, adding only a few softening wrinkles across her rosy cheeks, and a nearly imperceptible bow to the formerly straight lines of her shoulders and spine.

Drawing back her lace-capped head, Mrs. Faircloth regarded him with open disbelief. "My heavens, you've grown into a Goliath! I would scarcely have known you, were it not for your eyes." Becoming aware of their audience, the housekeeper released the large young man from her arms and gave the assembled servants a warning stare. "Busy yourselves at once, all of you. There's no need to stand there with your eyes bulging from your heads."

Mumbling obediently, the maids scattered and resumed their posts, throwing discreet glances at the visitor as they worked.

Mrs. Faircloth pressed McKenna's hand between her small, plump ones. "Come with me," she urged. They went in tacit agreement to the housekeeper's personal room. She unlocked the door and let him inside, and the familiar smell of clove pomanders and beeswax and tea-dyed linen mingled in a perfume of pure nostalgia.

Facing Mrs. Faircloth, McKenna saw that the housekeeper was becoming tearful once again, and he reached out to wrap his fingers around hers. "I'm sorry," he said gently. "I should have found a way to warn you before I appeared so suddenly."

Mrs. Faircloth managed to master her welling emotions. "What has happened to you?" she asked, staring at his elegant clothes, even noting the polished black shoes on his feet. "What has brought you back here, after so many years?"

"We'll talk later, when we both have more time," McKenna said, remembering the tumult of activity on days such as this, when dozens of visitors kept most of the servants at a dead run. "You have a house full of guests--and I haven't yet seen Lord Westcliff." He withdrew a packet of wax-sealed papers from his coat. "Before I go, I wanted to give you this."

"What is it?" the housekeeper asked in bewilderment.

"The money you gave me for my passage to America. I should have repaid you long before now, but--" McKenna paused uncomfortably. Words were inadequate to explain how, for the sake of his own sanity, he'd had to avoid anything or anyone in connection with Aline.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Faircloth tried to give the packet back to him. "No, McKenna, that was my gift to you. I was only sorry that I hadn't more to spare at the time."

"That five pounds saved my life." With great care, he straightened the cap on her head. "I'm returning your gift with interest. Those are shares in a brand-new locomotive foundry, all in your name. You can cash them immediately, if you wish. But I'd advise you to let them ripen a bit more. In the next year, they'll probably triple in value." McKenna couldn't restrain a rueful grin as he saw the perplexed way Mrs. Faircloth regarded the packet. She had little knowledge of stocks, equity, and future prospects.

"There's no actual money in here, then?" she asked.

"It's better than money," McKenna assured her, half suspecting that the stock certificates would soon be used to wrap fish. "Put that in a safe place,

Mrs. Faircloth. What you're holding in your hands is worth about five thousand pounds."

Blanching, she nearly dropped the bundle. "Five thousand..."

Instead of demonstrating the elation McKenna had anticipated, the housekeeper seemed utterly dazed, as if she could not absorb the fact that she had just been made a wealthy woman. She swayed a little, and McKenna quickly reached out to steady her shoulders.

"I want you to retire," he said, "and buy a house for yourself, with your own servants, and a carriage. After all you've done for so many other people, I want you to enjoy the rest of your life."

"But I can't accept so much," she protested.

McKenna helped her to sit in the chair by the hearth, and sank to his haunches before her. He settled his hands on either arm of the chair. "That's only a drop in the bucket. I'd like to do more for you. To start with, I want you to consider coming back to New York with me, so that I can look after you."

"Ah, McKenna..." Her eyes glittered as she laid her work-roughened hand atop his. "I could never leave Stony Cross! I must stay with Lady Aline."

"Lady Aline?" he repeated, giving her an alert glance as he wondered why she had mentioned Aline in particular. "She can hire a new housekeeper." His senses sharpened as he saw her guarded expression.

"Have you seen her yet?" the housekeeper asked cautiously.

McKenna nodded. "We spoke briefly."

"Fate has not been kind to either of Lord Westcliff's daughters."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. Lady Aline told me about what happened to her sister."

"But nothing about herself?"

"No." McKenna did not miss the shadow of consternation that crossed her face. "What is there to tell?"

The housekeeper seemed to choose her words carefully. "Not long after

you left Stony Cross, she was...quite ill." Two small, sharp indentations formed between the silvery arcs of her brows. "She was bedridden for at least three months. Although she recovered in time, she...has never been quite the same."

His eyes narrowed. "What happened to her?"

"I dare not tell you. The only reason I've mentioned it is that the illness has left her somewhat...fragile."

"In what way?"

She shook her head decisively. "I cannot say."

McKenna sat back on his heels, staring at her. Calculating the most effective way to elicit the information he wanted, he made his voice gentle and coaxing. "You know you can trust me. I won't tell anyone."

"Surely you wouldn't ask me to break a promise," Mrs. Faircloth chided.

"Of course I would," he said dryly. "I ask people to break promises all the time. And if they don't, I make them sorry for it." He rose to his feet in a fluid movement. "What do you mean, Lady Aline was 'never the same'? She damned well looks the same to me."

"Profanity!" The housekeeper clicked her tongue reprovingly.

Their gazes caught, and McKenna grinned suddenly as he thought of how many times he had received that same look from her in his boyhood. "Don't tell me, then. I'll get the truth from Lady Aline herself."

"I doubt that. And if I were you, I shouldn't push her too far." Mrs. Faircloth stood as well. "What a fine-looking man you have become," she exclaimed. "Is there a wife waiting for you back in America? A sweetheart?"

"No, thank God." His grin faded, however, at her next words.

"Ah..." Her tone was imbued with what could have been either pity or wonder. "It's always been her, hasn't it? That must be why you've come back."

McKenna scowled. "I've come back for business reasons, not the least of which is the likelihood that Westcliff will invest in the foundry. My presence here has nothing to do with Lady Aline--or a past that no one remembers."

"You remember it," she said. "And so does she."

"I must go," he said brusquely. "I have yet to find out if Westcliff will object to my presence here."

"I don't believe that will be the case," Mrs. Faircloth said at once. "Lord Westcliff is very much a gentleman. I expect he will offer you a gracious welcome, as he does to all his guests."

"Then he is remarkablyun like his father," McKenna said sardonically.

"Yes. And I suspect you'll get on quite well with him, as long as you give him no cause to fear that you might harm Lady Aline. She has suffered quite enough, without you adding to it."

"Suffered?" McKenna couldn't restrain the contempt that curled through his tone. "I've seen real suffering, Mrs. Faircloth...people dying for lack of food and medicine...breaking their backs with hard labor...families wretched with poverty. Don't try to claim that Aline has ever had to lift a finger for her own survival."

"That is narrow-minded of you, McKenna," came her gentle rebuke. "It is true that the earl and his sisters suffer in different ways than we do, but their pain is still real. And it is not Lady Aline's fault if you've had a difficult life, McKenna."

"Nor is it mine," he said softly, while his blood boiled like a cauldron in hell.

"Good heavens, what a diabolical look," the housekeeper said softly. "What are you plotting, McKenna?"

He divested his face of all expression. "Nothing at all."

She regarded him with patent disbelief. "If you intend to maltreat Lady Aline in some way, I warn you--"

"No," he interrupted gently. "I would never cause her harm, Mrs. Faircloth--you know what she once meant to me."

The housekeeper seemed to relax. And, turning away, she missed the dark smile that crossed his hard features.

McKenna paused before reaching for the doorknob, and glanced back

over his shoulder. "Mrs. Faircloth, tell me..."

"Yes?"

"Why is she still unmarried?"

"That is for Lady Aline to explain."

"There must be a man," McKenna murmured. A woman as stunningly beautiful as Aline would never lack for male companionship.

Mrs. Faircloth replied cautiously. "As a matter of fact, there is a gentleman with whom she keeps company. Lord Sandridge, who now owns the old Marshleigh estate. He took up residence there about five years ago. I suspect you may see him at the ball tomorrow night--he is often invited to Stony Cross Park."

"What kind of man is he?"

"Oh, Lord Sandridge is a very accomplished gentleman, and well liked by his neighbors. I daresay you'll find much to recommend him, when you meet."

"I look forward to it," McKenna said softly, and left the housekeeper's room.

Aline greeted the guests mechanically. After encountering Mr. Gideon Shaw on the way back to the manor house, she made the acquaintance of the Chamberlains--his sister and brother-in-law, and their wealthy New York friends, the Laroches, the Cuylers, and the Robinsons. As one might have predicted, they possessed the typical American awe of British nobility. The fact that Aline asked about their comfort during the Atlantic crossing elicited a torrent of gratitude. The mention of the refreshments that would soon be served was received with the volume of joy one would expect from a condemned man who had just received a pardon. Aline was strongly hopeful that after they had all lived beneath the manor roof for a few days, they would cease to be quite so dazzled by her.

Taking leave of the guests, Aline went to the kitchen in search of Mrs. Faircloth. Oddly, although the scene was completely normal, Aline knew without being told that McKenna had just been there. The air seemed alive

with energy, as if a lightning bolt had just been hurled across the room. One look into Mrs. Faircloth's eyes confirmed her suspicion. Yes, McKenna had come immediately to find the housekeeper, after seeing Aline. Of everyone who had once known him, they were the two who had loved him best.

McKenna...Thoughts swarmed in her head like bees in an overturned hive...she couldn't seem to catch hold of one coherent notion, one clear image. It seemed impossible that McKenna could have returned to Stony Cross as if drawn by the polarity of some magical lodestone, needing a resolution to the past that had haunted them both. He wanted something from her...some ransom of pain, regret, or pleasure, that would finally bring him a measure of peace. And she had nothing to offer him, though she would have given her very soul as a willing sacrifice, were it possible.

She wanted another glance of him, just to make certain that he was real. She needed the sound of his voice, the feel of his arm beneath her hand, anything to confirm that she had not gone mad from her eternal craving. Struggling for self-mastery, Aline made her face blank as she moved toward the long wooden table. She glanced at the page of notes between the cook and Mrs. Faircloth, and quietly suggested a few changes to the menus. When the final decisions were agreed upon, Aline considered the prospect of joining the crowd of visitors for the midmorning meal, and felt a wave of exhaustion sweep over her. She did not want to eat and smile and make conversation with so many eager strangers. And to have to do so with McKenna there watching...impossible. Later tonight she would have set herself to rights, and she would be the consummate hostess. Right now, however, she wanted to go somewhere private, and think. And hide, a little mocking voice added. Yes, and hide. She did not want to see McKenna again until she had managed to compose herself.

"The earl will want to see you," Mrs. Faircloth said, drawing aside with her to the kitchen entrance. Her gaze was warm and concerned as she stared into Aline's bloodless face.

Of course. Marcus would want to make certain that she wasn't weeping or shaken, or otherwise dismantled by the appearance of a man whom she

had once loved. "I will go find him," Aline said. "And I will also tell him that he will have to entertain the guests this morning without my help. I feel...rather fatigued."

"Yes," Mrs. Faircloth agreed, "you will want to be well rested for the ball tonight."

McKenna, attending a ball at Stony Cross Park--it was something Aline had never dared to imagine. "Life is strange, isn't it," she murmured. "How ironic it is that he should finally come back."

Naturally Mrs. Faircloth knew which "he" Aline was referring to. "He still wants you."

The words caused a quiver to run through her, as if her spine had been plucked like an archer's drawn bow. "Did he say so?"

"No...but I saw his face when I mentioned your name."

Aline took a strained breath before asking, "You didn't tell him--"

"I would never betray your secret," the housekeeper assured her.

Discreetly Aline took Mrs. Faircloth's warm, work-coarsened hand in her own soft, cold one. She was comforted by the housekeeper's touch as their fingers entwined tightly. "He must never know," she whispered. "I couldn't bear it."

Aline found Marcus and Livia together in the family receiving room, a private place where they occasionally met to discuss issues of particular urgency. This appeared to be one of them. Despite her inner havoc, Aline smiled as she glanced at her brother's dark, concerned face, and her sister's tense one. "There is no reason to look as if you expect me to hurl myself through the window," she told them. "I assure you, I am perfectly calm. I have seen McKenna, we spoke quite cordially, and we both agreed that the past is completely irrelevant."

Marcus came forward and took her shoulders in his broad, square hands. "The past is never irrelevant," he said in his distinctively gravelly voice. "And now, circumstances being what they are...I don't want you to be hurt again."

Aline tried to reassure him with a smile. "I won't be hurt. There is nothing left of the feelings I once had for him. I was just a muddleheaded girl. And I am convinced that McKenna feels nothing for me now either."

"Then why is he here?" Marcus asked, his gaze hard.

"To conduct business with Mr. Shaw, of course. And to discuss your investment in their foundries--"

"I suspect that is a subterfuge to conceal McKenna's true purpose."

"Which would be...what?"

"To finally make a conquest of you."

"Really, Marcus, do you know how ridiculous that sounds?"

"I'm a sportsman," he said flatly. "I've ridden to the hounds and shot game for most of my life--and I know a hunt when I see one."

Pulling back from her brother, Aline gave him a mocking glance. "I should have known you'd reduce it to that. Life is about more than pursuit and conquest, Marcus."

"For a woman, perhaps. Not for a man."

Aline sighed and gave Livia a meaningful glance, silently enlisting her support.

Her younger sister complied immediately. "If Aline says that she is not troubled by McKenna's presence, then I think we shouldn't take exception to it either."

Marcus's expression did not soften. "I'm still considering asking him to leave."

"Good Lord, do you know how much gossip that would cause?" Aline asked impatiently. "Why bother asking for my opinion, if you've already decided what to do? Just leave it be, will you? I want him to stay."

She was surprised by the way that her brother and sister both looked at her, as if she had spoken in a foreign language. "What is it?" she asked warily.

"Just now, I saw some of your old spirit," Marcus said. "It's a welcome

change."

Aline responded with a wry laugh. "What are you implying, Marcus? That I've become timid and spineless?"

"Withdrawn is more like it," he retorted. "You refuse to accept the attentions of any man except Sandridge--and it's obvious that nothing will ever come of that." As Aline spluttered in protest, Marcus turned his attention to Livia. "And you're no better than Aline," he said flatly. "It's been two years since Amberley died, and you might as well have gone to the grave with him. Time to shed the widow's weeds, Livia, and start living again. Good God, you're the two prettiest women in Hampshire, and you both live like nuns. I fear I'm going to be saddled with the both of you until I'm bald and toothless."

Livia gave him an offended glare, while Aline suddenly snickered at the image of her virile brother as a hairless old codger. She went to kiss him affectionately. "We're exactly what you deserve, you arrogant meddler. Just be thankful that I'm not of a mind to lecture you on your faults, my dear, unmarried thirty-four-year-old brother, whose sole purpose in this life should be to produce an heir for the title--"

"Enough," he groaned. "I've heard that a thousand times from Mother. God knows I don't need it from you."

Aline glanced triumphantly at Livia, who had managed a wan smile. "Very well, I'll desist for now, if you'll promise to do and say nothing in regard to McKenna."

Marcus nodded and grumbled, taking his leave.

Holding Livia's gaze, Aline saw how Marcus's remarks had troubled her. She smiled reassuringly. "He's right about one thing," she said. "You should begin to mix in company again."

"In the company of men, you mean."

"Yes. You're going to fall in love again someday, Livia. You'll marry some wonderful man, and bear his children, and have the life that Amberley would wish for you."

"What about you?"

Aline's smile vanished. "You know why those dreams are no longer possible for me."

A sigh burst from Livia's lips. "It's not fair!"

"No," Aline agreed softly. "But there you have it--some things are just not meant to be."

Wrapping her arms tightly around herself, Livia frowned at the carpeted floor. "Aline, there is something I've never said to you--I've always been too ashamed. But now that McKenna has returned, and the past is so much in my thoughts, I can't ignore it any longer."

"No, Livia," Aline said gently, sensing what her younger sister was about to say.

A sudden tear slid to the delicate curve of Livia's chin. "I was the one who told Father about seeing you and McKenna together in the stables, all those years ago. You've suspected it, of course, but you've never asked. I wish I had kept silent. I'm so sorry that I didn't. I ruined everything for you."

"It wasn't your fault," Aline exclaimed, moving forward to hug her. "How could I blame you for that? You were just a child, and...no, don't cry! It doesn't matter that you told Father. Nothing could ever have come of my relationship with McKenna. There was no place that we could have gone, nothing that could have been done, that would have allowed us to be together."

"I'm still sorry."

Making a soothing noise, Aline patted her slender back. " 'Only a fool argues with his fate'...that's what Father always said, remember?"

"Yes, and it always made him sound like a complete idiot."

Laughter rose in Aline's throat. "Perhaps you're right. McKenna has certainly defied his own fate, hasn't he?"

Pulling a handkerchief from her sleeve, Livia drew back and blew her nose. "The servants are talking," she said, her voice muffled in the wad of crumpled cotton. "Apparently Mr. Chamberlain's butler told James the

footman--who told one of the housemaids--that McKenna is called 'King' McKenna in New York, and he has a huge mansion on Fifth Avenue, and he is known by everyone on Wall Street."

Aline smiled crookedly. "From a stable boy to a king. I should have expected no less of him."

"Aline, what if McKenna falls in love with you again?"

The question caused her to shiver. "He won't. Believe me, once the flame of a past love affair has been extinguished, there is no way to revive it."

"What if it was never extinguished?"

"Livia, I assure you that McKenna has not been pining after me for twelve years."

"But haven't you--" Livia stopped abruptly.

Realizing what her sister had been about to ask, Aline flushed. She wandered to the window, staring out at a path of stone arches that led through the east garden. The arches had overgrown with roses, clematis, and honeysuckle, forming a fragrant tunnel that led to a stone-walled summerhouse with a wood-latticed ceiling. Memories of McKenna were everywhere in the garden...his hands moving carefully among the roses, pruning the dead blossoms...his tanned face dappled with the sunlight that broke through the leaves and lattices...the hair on the back of his neck glittering with sweat as he shoveled gravel onto the path, or weeded the raised flower beds.

"I don't know that one could call it pining," Aline said, stroking the windowpane with her fingertips. "McKenna will always be a part of me, no matter where he goes. They say that people who've lost a limb sometimes feel as if they still have it. How many times I've felt that McKenna was still here, and the empty space beside me was alive with his presence." She closed her eyes and leaned forward until her forehead and the tip of her nose touched the cool glass. "I love him beyond reason," she whispered. "He's a stranger to me now, and yet he is still so familiar. I can't imagine a sweeter agony, having him so close."

A long time passed before Livia was able to speak. "Aline...won't you tell McKenna the truth, now that he has come back?"

"For what purpose? It would only earn his pity, and I would sooner throw myself from the bluff." Pushing back from the window, Aline rubbed the side of her sleeve over the smudge her face had made on one of the gleaming panes. "Better to let him go on hating me."

"I don't know how you can endure it!" Livia exclaimed.

Aline smiled wryly. "Well, I find a strange comfort in the fact that he wouldn't feel this degree of animosity now, had he not loved me so much before."

Despite entreaties from both Marcus and Aline, Livia refused to attend the welcoming ball that would be attended by everyone of note in the county. "I need you there," Aline had insisted, trying to think of any way that would induce her sister to emerge from her self-imposed seclusion from society. "I am feeling unsettled tonight, Livia, and your presence at my side would be such a help--"

"No," Livia said placidly, settled in the family receiving room with a book in one hand and a glass of wine in the other. She wore her hair in a loose braid, and her feet were tucked into soft knit slippers. "I have no desire to mix with that mob of Americans. Besides, I know exactly why you're unsettled, and my company won't make a bit of difference to you."

"Have you no desire to see McKenna, after all these years?"

"God help me, no." Livia's bright hazel-green eyes surveyed her over the rim of the glass as she sipped her wine. "The thought of facing McKenna after the way I tattled on the two of you so long ago makes me want to sink through the floor."

"He doesn't know about that."

"Well, I do!"

Frowning, Aline decided to take another tack. "What about Mr. Shaw? Aren't you the least bit desirous of meeting him?"

"From what Marcus has told me about the infamous Mr. Shaw, I would

do well to stay far away from him."

"I thought Marcus liked Shaw."

"He does, but not as a companion for either of his sisters."

"I should think that would make Mr. Shaw very entertaining," Aline said, making Livia laugh.

"Since he's staying here for a month, we'll probably find out. In the meantime, go downstairs and enjoy yourself. You look so beautiful in that gown...didn't you once tell me that blue was McKenna's favorite color?"

"I don't remember."

It had indeed been blue. Tonight Aline had not been able to prevent herself from reaching for a silk gown the color of Russian lapis. It was a simple gown with no flounces or overskirt, just a demi-train in the back and a low, square-cut bodice. A string of pearls was wrapped twice around her throat, with the lower loop hanging almost to her waist. Another strand had been artfully entwined in her pinned-up curls.

"You're a goddess," her sister proclaimed cheerfully, raising her wineglass in tribute. "Good luck, dear. Because once McKenna sees you in that gown, I predict that you'll have a difficult time keeping him at bay."

Once McKenna's business partnership with Gideon Shaw had been struck, Gideon had insisted on making him presentable for Knickerbocker society. This had entailed a long and rigorous period of training and instruction, which had given McKenna suitable polish to mingle with those in the Shaws' elevated circles. However, McKenna would never deceive himself into thinking that his cultivation was anything more than skin-deep. Being a member of the upper class consisted of far more than clothes and manners. It required an attitude of entitlement, an intrinsic confidence in one's own superiority, and an elegance of character that he knew he could never attain.

Luckily for McKenna, in America money was enough. As exclusive as the American upper class was, it still reluctantly made room for wealthy climbers. A man with new money, usually referred to as a "swell," found that most doors were open to him. Women were not so fortunate. If an heiress's

family was not well established, no matter how financially well endowed, she would never be accepted by Old New York, and she was obliged to do her husband hunting in Paris or London rather than at home.

After the captious atmosphere of the New York balls, McKenna was pleasantly surprised by the relaxed quality of this gathering. When he said as much to Gideon, his friend laughed quietly.

"It's always like this in England," Gideon said. "English peers have nothing to prove. Since no one can ever take their titles away from them, they are free to do and say as they wish. Whereas in New York, one's social status is a rather precarious thing. The only way you can be certain of your standing is if you're included on one damned list or another. Committee lists, guest lists, members lists, visiting lists..."

"Are there any lists that you aren't on?" McKenna had asked.

"God, no," Gideon said with a self-mocking laugh. "I'm a Shaw. Everyone wants me."

They stood together at one end of the ballroom, which contained what seemed to be acres of parquet flooring. The air was dense with the fragrance of roses, irises, and lilies, cut from the estate gardens and expertly arranged in crystal vases. The niches set into the walls had been fitted with tiny velvet-upholstered benches, where dowagers and wallflowers sat in tightly compacted groups. Music floated down from an upper-floor balcony, the small orchestra half concealed by bowers of lush greenery. Although this ball did not approach the extravagance of some of the Fifth Avenue affairs McKenna had attended, it put those opulent balls to shame. There was a difference between quality and mere showiness, he thought. That notion was reinforced immediately by the appearance of Lady Aline.

She was dazzling, with strands of white pearls in her lustrous dark hair, her voluptuous body wrapped in a blue dress that molded tightly over the swell of her breasts. A double circlet of fresh white rosebuds was wrapped around one of her gloved wrists. Extending her hands in welcome, she went to a group of guests near the door of the ballroom. Her smile was a flash of magic. As he watched her, McKenna noticed something about her that had

not registered during their earlier meeting...she walked differently than he remembered. Instead of exhibiting the impetuous grace she had possessed as a girl, Aline now moved with the leisurely deliberateness of a swan gliding across a still pond.

Aline's entrance attracted many gazes, and it was obvious that McKenna was not the only man who appreciated her sparkling allure. No matter how tranquil her facade, there was no concealing the luminous sensuality beneath. McKenna could barely restrain himself from going over to her and dragging her away to some dark, secluded place. He wanted to tear the pearls from her hair, and press his lips to her breast, and breathe in the scent of her body until he was drunk from it.

"Lovely," Gideon commented, following his gaze. "But you could find someone almost as attractive--not to mention quite a bit younger--back in New York."

McKenna threw him a dismissive glance. "I know what's back in New York." His gaze returned compulsively to Aline.

Gideon smiled and rolled the stem of a wineglass between his long fingers. "Although I wouldn't claim that all women are alike, I can say with some authority that they do possess the same basic equipment. What makes this one so infinitely preferable to all the rest? The simple fact that you couldn't have her?"

McKenna did not bother replying to such inanity. It would be impossible to make Shaw--or anyone else--understand. The dark reality was that he and Aline had never been separate--they could live on opposite sides of the earth, and they would still be caught together in a hellish tangle. Not have her? He had never stopped having her...She had been a perpetual torment to him. She was going to suffer for that, as he had suffered for more than a decade.

His thoughts were interrupted as Lord Westcliff approached. Like the other men present, Westcliff was clad in a formal scheme of black and white, with fashionably wide, straight-cut coat lapels and loose, expertly tailored trousers. He had the powerful build of a sportsman, and his manner was straightforward rather than scheming. His resemblance to the old earl,

however, caused a prickle of animosity that McKenna couldn't ignore. On the other hand, not many peers would receive a former servant as a valued guest--McKenna would give him that.

As Westcliff greeted them, his expression was pleasant, if not precisely friendly. "Good evening," he murmured. "Are you enjoying yourselves so far, gentlemen?"

"Quite," Shaw said cordially, lifting his glass in approbation. "A very fine Bordeaux, my lord."

"Excellent. I will see that some of that particular vintage is stocked in the bachelor's house for your convenience." Westcliff's gaze moved to McKenna. "And you, sir? What do you think of your first ball at Stony Cross Park?"

"It looks different from this side of the windows," McKenna said frankly.

That drew a reluctant smile from Westcliff. "It is a long distance from the stables to the ballroom," he acknowledged. "And not one that many men could have traversed."

McKenna barely heard the remark. His attention had returned to Aline, who had gone to greet a newcomer.

It appeared the guest had come alone. He was a handsome man of not more than thirty years of age, with blond good looks that were comparable to Gideon Shaw's. However, whereas Gideon was golden and weathered, this man was wintry-fair...his hair pale and gilded, his eyes piercing. The sight of him with Aline, light matched with dark, was strikingly attractive.

Following his gaze, Westcliff saw the pair. "Lord Sandridge," he murmured. "A friend of the family, and held in high regard by Lady Aline."

"Apparently so," McKenna said, not missing the air of intimacy between the two. Jealousy spread through him in a poisonous tide.

Westcliff continued casually. "They have been friends for at least five years. My sister has an unusual affinity with Sandridge--which pleases me a great deal, as I desire her happiness above all else." He bowed to them both.

"At your service, gentlemen."

Gideon smiled as he watched the earl leave. "A proficient strategist is our Westcliff," he murmured. "He seems to be warning you away from Lady Aline, McKenna."

McKenna gave him a damning glance, though he had long been accustomed to Gideon's perverse delight in jabbing at his self-possession. "Westcliff can go to hell," he growled. "Along with Sandridge."

"You're not afraid of competition, then?" Gideon murmured.

McKenna arched one brow and spoke scornfully. "After five years of knowing Lady Aline, Sandridge hasn't yet laid claim to her. That's not what I would call competition, in any sense of the word."

"Hasn't publicly laid claim to her," Gideon corrected.

McKenna shook his head with a faint smile. "To my knowledge, Shaw, that's the only way that counts."

CHAPTER 9

After a night of dancing, none of the guests at Stony Cross Park was inclined to awaken before noon, except for a small group of men who wished to go shooting. As Aline sipped from a cup of tea and smiled at the early risers who were gathering at the back terrace, she was disconcerted to see McKenna in their midst.

It was daybreak. The air was cool and heavy as the weak English sun struggled ineffectually to burn through the haze. Sitting at an outside table with a silk shawl knotted over her thin morning dress, Aline tried not to stare at McKenna. However, it was difficult to conceal her fascination. McKenna possessed a dynamic presence, an inherent virility, that she had seen in no other man except perhaps her brother. And the sportsman's attire suited McKenna perfectly, the black coat defining the breadth of his shoulders, with dark forest-green breeches closely following his muscular legs, and black leather boots conforming to his long calves. Such garments were becoming to any man, but on someone as big as McKenna, the effect was awe-inspiring.

Sensing her discreet regard, McKenna glanced at her quickly. Their gazes held in a flash of raw interest, before he forced himself to turn and reply to a guest who had approached him.

Aline stared into the hot amber depths of her tea, her body filled with exquisite tension. She did not look up until her brother approached to ask about the day's schedule.

"Breakfast will be served at the pavilion by the lake," Aline replied. On extended visits such as this, the first meal of the day was never served before noon. It would be a prodigious repast, with a multitude of hearty dishes and just enough champagne to revive the mood of the previous evening. Aline reached out to touch her brother's broad brown hand. "Have a good morning," she said cheerfully, "and do try to keep your distance from guests with bad aim."

Marcus grinned and spoke in a low voice. "That's not usually a problem

with Americans. Although few of them can ride worth a damn, they're fair shots." Continuing to lean over Aline, he waited until her gaze lifted to his. His black eyes narrowed. "You disappeared with McKenna for almost a half hour last evening. Where did you go, and what did you do with him?"

"Marcus," Aline said with a reproving smile, "on the occasions when you have disappeared with a female guest--and there have been many--I've never demanded to know where you went and what you did."

"It's different for you than it is for me."

Aline was both touched and amused by his protectiveness. "Why?"

Marcus's dark brows drew together in a frown, and his voice was infused with surliness. "Because you're my sister."

"I have nothing to fear from McKenna," she said. "I know him quite well, Marcus."

"You knew him when he was a boy," her brother countered. "But McKenna is a stranger now, and you have no idea of what he's capable of."

"Don't meddle, Marcus. I will do as I please with McKenna. And I hope that you won't try to manipulate things as Father did, all those years ago. His interference cost me dearly, and while I had no choice but to accept it then, things are different now."

Marcus settled a hand on the back of her chair. The tautness of his mouth betrayed his concern. "Aline," he asked carefully, "What do you think he wants from you?"

The answer was clear to both of them. However, Aline saw that her brother didn't yet understand what she desired. "The same thing that I want from him," she replied.

"What did you just say?" Marcus stared at her as if he didn't recognize her.

Sighing, Aline glanced across the terrace at McKenna, who was engaged in a conversation with two other men. "Haven't you ever wished that you could steal back just a few hours of your past?" she asked softly. "That's all I want...just a taste of what might have been."

"No, I never wish for that," came his brusque reply. "The words 'might have been' mean nothing to me. There's only now, and the future."

"That's because there are no limitations to your future," she said evenly. "But there are to mine."

Marcus's hand compressed into a hard fist. "Because of a few scars?"

The question made her eyes flash dangerously. "You've never seen my legs, Marcus. You don't know what you're talking about. And coming from a man who takes his pick of the most beautiful women in London as if he were sampling from a tin of bonbons--"

"Are you implying that I'm some shallow fool who values a woman only for her appearance?"

Aline was tempted to retract her charge in the interest of maintaining peace between them. But as she considered the last few women that Marcus had carried on with..."I'm sorry to say, Marcus, that each of your recent choice of companions--the last four or five, at least--displayed all the intelligence of a turnip. And yes, they were all quite beautiful, and I doubt that you were able to have a sensible conversation with any of them for longer than five minutes."

Marcus stood back and glared at her. "How does that pertain to what we were discussing?"

"It illustrates the point that even you, one of the finest and most honorable men I've ever known, place great importance on physical attractiveness. And if I ever see you consort with a woman who is less than stunningly perfect, then perhaps I'll listen to your lectures on how appearance doesn't matter."

"Aline--"

"Have a good shoot," she said. "And heed my warning--don't cross me in this, Marcus."

Heaving a sigh, her brother went to find his valet, who was laden with rifles and leather bags.

More of the shooting party came to Aline's table to exchange

pleasantries, and she smiled and chatted pleasantly, always aware of McKenna's dark figure in the background. Only when the guests began to descend en masse down the terrace steps, led by Marcus, did McKenna come to her.

"Good morning," Aline said, while her heartbeat rapidly outpaced her ability to think. She offered him her hand, and her breath caught at the gentle clasp of his fingers. Somehow she managed to find a calm social voice. "Did you rest well last night?"

"No." His eyes glinted as he retained her hand a moment longer than was acceptable.

"I do hope that your room is not uncomfortable," Aline managed to say, tugging free of him.

"What would you do if I said it was?"

"Offer you another room, of course."

"Don't bother--unless it's yours."

His boldness nearly startled a laugh from her--she couldn't remember when, if ever, a man had spoken to her with such a stunning lack of respect. And it reminded her so much of the comfortable ease they had once shared that she actually found herself relaxing in his presence. "That obliging a hostess, I'm not," she informed him.

McKenna leaned over the table, resting his hands lightly on the glossy surface. His dark head hovered over hers, his stance reminding her of a cat poised to strike its prey. A flicker of predatory interest lightened the turquoise depths of his eyes. "What's the verdict, my lady?"

She pretended not to understand. "Verdict?"

"Am I to leave the estate, or shall I stay?"

Idly Aline drew an invisible circle on the table with a well-manicured fingertip, while her heart thumped in her chest. "Stay, if you wish."

His voice was very soft. "And you understand what will happen if I do?"

Aline had never thought that McKenna could be so arrogant--or that she would enjoy it so much. A sense of challenge, male against female, rippled

between them. When she replied, her voice matched his for softness. "I don't wish to disappoint you, McKenna, but I have complete faith in my ability to resist your advances."

He seemed mesmerized by whatever he saw in her face. "Do you?"

"Yes. Yours wasn't the first proposition I've ever received. And at the risk of sounding rather conceited, it probably won't be the last." Aline finally let herself smile at him as she wanted to, full and provocative and gently mocking. "Therefore, you may stay and do your worst. I fully expect to enjoy your efforts. And you should know that I do appreciate a certain amount of finesse."

His gaze fell to her smiling lips. Although he showed no reaction to her impudence, Aline sensed how greatly she had astonished him. She felt a bit like a damned soul who had gone right up to Lucifer and chucked him playfully beneath the chin.

"Finesse," he repeated, looking back into her eyes.

"Well, yes. Serenades, and flowers, and poetry."

"What kind of poetry?"

"The kind that you write yourself, of course."

His sudden lazy smile caused soft prickles of pleasure to course through her. "Does Sandridge write poetry for you?"

"I daresay he would." Adam was clever with words--no doubt he would perform such a task with great style and wit.

"But you haven't asked him to," McKenna murmured.

She shook her head slowly.

"I've never given much thought to finesse," he told her.

Aline arched her brows. "Even when it comes to seduction?"

"The women I take to bed don't usually require seduction."

She rested her chin on her hand, staring at him intently. "They're simply yours for the taking, you mean?"

"That's right." He gave her an inscrutable glance. "And most of them are

ladies of the upper class." With a perfunctory bow, he turned and left with the shooting party.

Aline worked to keep her breath even, and sat until her pulse had steadied.

It was now clear to both of them that the game had two fully committed players...agame with no rules and no clear outcome, and potentially heavy losses on both sides. And as much as Aline feared for herself, she feared even more for McKenna, whose knowledge of the past was riddled with significant and hazardous gaps. She must let him go on thinking the worst of her...to take what he wanted of her, and to eventually leave Stony Cross with his sense of vengeance appeased.

Now that she had seen the shooting party off, she had time to relax with a cup of tea in the breakfast room. Preoccupied with thoughts of McKenna, she nearly bumped into someone who was leaving the manor at the same time.

The man reached out to steady her, grasping her elbows until he was assured of her balance. "Forgive me. I was in a bit of a hurry to join the others."

"They've only just left," Aline said. "Good morning, Mr. Shaw."

With his sunstruck hair, lightly tanned complexion and sapphire eyes, Gideon Shaw was dazzling. He possessed an elegant insouciance that could only have come from being born to limitless wealth. The faint lines that cynicism had carved around his eyes and mouth only enhanced his looks, weathering his golden handsomeness agreeably. He was a tall and wellformed man, though his proportions did not approach McKenna's warriorlike build.

"If you descend the stairs on the left and follow the path to the forest, you will catch up to them," Aline told him.

Shaw's smile was like a ray of sunshine piercing a cloud bank. "Thank you, my lady. It is my particular torment to enjoy sports that can only take place early in the morning."

"I assume you also like to fish, then?"

"Oh yes."

"Some morning you must go with my brother to our trout stream."

"Perhaps I will--although I may not be up to the challenge. English trout are far more wily than American ones."

"Can the same be said for English businessmen?" Aline asked, her eyes twinkling.

"Much to my relief, no." Shaw made a slight bow in preparation to leave, then paused as a thought occurred to him. "My lady, I have a question..."

Somehow Aline knew exactly what he was going to ask. It took considerable acting ability to maintain an ingenuous expression. "Yes, Mr. Shaw?"

"Last night, as I took a stroll through the back gardens, I happened to make the acquaintance of a young woman..." He paused, obviously considering how much of the encounter he should describe.

"She did not give you her name?" Aline asked innocently.

"No."

"Was she one of the guests? No? Well, then, she was probably a servant."

"I don't believe so." His brow was hemmed with a slight frown of concentration as he continued. "She has light brown hair and green eyes...at least, I think they are green...and she is small of stature, perhaps only an inch taller than you."

Aline shrugged apologetically. Although she would have liked to oblige him by giving him her sister's name, she wasn't certain that Livia wanted him to know her identity yet. "At the moment, Mr. Shaw, I can think of no one on the estate who matches that description. Are you certain that she wasn't a figment of your imagination?"

He shook his head, his dark lashes lowering over rich blue eyes as he seemed to contemplate a problem of great magnitude. "She was real. And I

need--that is, I would very much like--to find her."

"This woman seems to have made quite an impression on you."

A self-mocking smile deepened the corners of Shaw's lips, and he dragged a hand through the gleaming layers of his hair, carelessly disheveling the amber-shaded locks. "Meeting her was like taking a deep breath for the first time in years," he replied, not quite meeting her gaze.

"Yes, I understand."

The unmistakable sincerity in her voice seemed to snare his attention. He smiled suddenly, and murmured, "I see that you do."

Feeling a rush of liking for the man, Aline gestured in the direction of the departing sportsmen. "You can still catch the shooting party if you run."

Shaw laughed briefly. "My lady, there is nothing in this life I want badly enough to chase after it."

"Good," she said, pleased. "Then you may take an early breakfast with me instead. I'll have it served out here."

With her companion seeming more than agreeable at the prospect, Aline directed a servant to set out breakfast for two at the table. A steaming basket of scones and sweetened buns was brought to them quickly, along with plates of broiled eggs, baked mushrooms, and thin slices of roast partridge. Although Shaw seemed to enjoy the breakfast offering, he seemed far more interested in a carafe of strongly brewed coffee, drinking it as if it were the antidote to some recently ingested poison.

Settling back in her chair, Aline popped a morsel of buttered scone into her mouth, and slid him a glance of flirtatious inquiry--the look that never failed to elicit the information that she wanted from a man. "Mr. Shaw," she asked, following the scone with a sip of well-sugared tea, "how many years have you known McKenna?"

The question did not seem to surprise Shaw. After having downed two cups of coffee with barely a pause for breath, he now applied himself to drinking a third at a more leisurely pace. "About eight," he replied.

"McKenna told me that the two of you met while he was still a

ferryman--that you were a passenger on his boat."

A peculiar smile curved his lips. "Is that what he told you?"

She tilted her head to the side as she regarded him closely. "Is it not the truth?"

"McKenna tends to shade certain details in the interest of shielding my reputation. In fact, he's far more concerned about my reputation than I am."

Carefully Aline stirred more sugar in her tea. "Why did you strike up a partnership with a mere ferryman?" she asked in a deliberately relaxed tone.

Gideon Shaw took a long time to answer. He set down his half-empty cup and stared at her steadily. "McKenna saved my life, to start with."

Aline did not move or speak as he continued.

"I was wandering along the waterfront, blind drunk. Even now I can't remember how I got there, or why. On occasion I have some memory loss while drinking, and I can't account for hours or even days." His bleak smile chilled her to the marrow. "I stumbled and fell into the water, far enough along the docks that no one saw me, especially as the weather was inclement. But McKenna happened to be ferrying back from Staten Island, and he jumped into that damned freezing ocean--in the midst of a brewing storm, no less--and fished me out."

"How fortunate for you." Aline's throat tightened at the thought of the risk that McKenna had taken for a complete stranger.

"Since McKenna had no means of identifying me," Shaw continued, "and I was out cold, he took me to the tenement room he rented. A day and a half later I found myself in a rat hole of a room, being slapped awake by a giant, irate ferryman." A reminiscent smile touched his lips. "As you can imagine, I was much the worse for wear. My head felt like it had been split open. After McKenna brought me some food and drink, I was lucid enough to tell him my name. As we talked, I became aware that despite his rough appearance, my rescuer was surprisingly well informed. He'd learned a great deal from all the passengers he'd ferried back and forth, much of it concerning Manhattan real estate. He even knew about a parcel of land that

my family had bought on a long-term lease, and had never developed, and then he had the b--pardon me, the audacity...to propose a deal."

Aline smiled at that. "What was the deal, Mr. Shaw?"

"He wanted to subdivide the land into a series of lots and sell them as short-term leases. And of course he wanted ten percent of whatever he could get for them." Leaning back, Shaw rested his interlaced fingers on his midriff. "And I thought, Why not? No one in my family had bothered doing anything with the land--we third-generation Shaws are accurately known as a bunch of idle pleasure-seeking good-for-naughts. And here was this stranger, reeking of ambition and primal intensity, obviously willing to do anything to make a profit. So I gave him all the cash in my wallet--about fifty dollars--and told him to buy himself a new suit of clothes, cut his hair and shave his beard, and come to my offices the following day."

"And McKenna did well for you," Aline said rather than asked.

Shaw nodded. "Within six months he had leased every square inch of that land. Then, without asking permission, he used the profits to buy up acres of submerged shoreline property from the city, in the area below Canal Street. That made me rather nervous, especially when I began to hear the jokes circulating about the Shaw and McKenna 'underwater lots' for sale..." A gentle reminiscent laugh escaped his lips. "Naturally I questioned his sanity. But at that point, there was nothing I could do but stand aside as McKenna arranged for the submerged acreage to be filled in with rocks and soil. Then he built tenements and a string of warehouses, transforming it into valuable commercial property. Eventually McKenna turned an investment of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars into a development that yields approximately a million dollars annually."

The numbers, so casually spoken, stunned Aline.

Seeing her wide eyes, Shaw laughed softly. "Not surprisingly, McKenna has become a sought-after guest in New York, not to mention one of the city's most eligible bachelors."

"I suppose his attentions are encouraged by many women," Aline said, trying to keep her tone offhand.

"He has to beat them off," Shaw replied with a sly grin. "I would not claim, however, that McKenna is known as a ladies' man. There have been women--but to my knowledge, none that he has ever taken a serious interest in. Most of his energies have been directed toward his work."

"What about you, Mr. Shaw?" she asked. "Are your affections engaged by someone back home?"

He shook his head at once. "I'm afraid that I share McKenna's rather skeptical view of the benefits of marriage."

"I think you will fall in love someday."

"Doubtful. I'm afraid that particular emotion is unknown to me..." Suddenly his voice faded into silence. He set his cup down as he stared off into the distance with sudden alertness.

"Mr. Shaw?" As Aline followed his gaze, she realized what he had seen--Livia, wearing a pastel flower-printed walking dress as she headed to one of the forest trails leading away from the manner. A straw bonnet adorned with a sprig of fresh daisies swung from her fingers as she held it by the ribbons.

Gideon Shaw stood so quickly that his chair threatened to topple backward. "Pardon," he said to Aline, tossing his napkin to the table. "That figment of my imagination has reappeared--and I'm going to catch her."

"Of course," Aline said, struggling not to laugh. "Good luck, Mr. Shaw."

"Thanks." He was gone in a flash, descending one side of the U-shaped stone staircase with the ease of a cat. Once he reached the terraced gardens, he cut across the lawn with long, ground-eating strides, just short of breaking into a run.

Standing to better her view of his progress, Aline couldn't suppress a mocking grin. "Why, Mr. Shaw...I thought there was nothing in life you wanted badly enough to chase after it."

CHAPTER 11

For the next two days McKenna could find no opportunity to get Aline alone. Playing the part of hostess with sparkling skill, she seemed to be everywhere at once, efficiently orchestrating suppers, games, amateur theatricals, and other entertainments for the horde of guests at Stony Cross Park. Short of stalking up to her, seizing her, and dragging her away in front of everyone, McKenna had no recourse but to wait for his chance. And as usual, he found it hard to be patient.

Everyone flocked around Aline whenever she appeared. Ironically, she possessed the ability that her mother, the countess, had always coveted--to draw others to herself. The difference was that the countess had wanted their attention for her own benefit, whereas Aline seemed to possess a sincere desire to make people happy in her presence. She flirted skillfully with old men, and sat and gossiped over glasses of cordial with old women. She played games with the children, listened sympathetically to the unmarried girls' tales of romantic woe, and deflected any young men's interest by acting like a kind older sister.

In this last endeavor Aline was not entirely successful. Regardless of her lack of interest, many men were obviously smitten with her...and the sight of their hopeful, barely suppressed ardor turned McKenna's entire being to gall. He wanted to dispatch them all, drive them away, bare his teeth at them like a snarling wolf. He owned her, by virtue of his need and the bitter-washed memories of their past together.

In the afternoon, as McKenna, Gideon, and Lord Westcliff relaxed in an outside conservatory, Aline appeared bearing a silver tray. A footman followed closely, carrying a small portable mahogany table. The day was humid, the summer breeze doing little to cool them as they sat in their shirtsleeves. Lazy quietness ruled the estate, most of the guests having elected to nap with the windows open until the cooler evening hours approached.

For once, no soiree, supper, or al fresco party had been scheduled for tonight, as the annual village fair had begun. There would be much drinking and reveling in Stony Cross while practically everyone in the county attended the fair. It had been held once a year since the mid-1300s, a week-long event at which all of Stony Cross was overtaken with happy chaos. High Street was virtually unrecognizable, the usually tidy succession of storefronts surmounted with booths run by jewelers, silk mercers, toymakers, cobblers, and a host of other craftsmen. McKenna still remembered the excitement he had felt as a boy at fair time. The first night always began with music, dancing, and a bonfire located at a short distance from the village. Together he and Aline had watched the conjurors, tumblers, and stilt walkers. Afterward they had always gone to the horse fair, to view dozens of gleaming Thoroughbreds and massive draught horses. He still remembered Aline's face in the light of the bonfire, her eyes shining with reflected flame, her lips sticky from the iced gingerbread she had bought from one of the merchant stalls.

The object of his thoughts entered the conservatory, and all three men began to stand. Aline smiled and quickly bade them to remain seated.

Although Westcliff and Gideon obediently settled back in their chairs, McKenna stood anyway, taking the tray of iced lemonade from Aline while the footman unfolded the portable table. Aline smiled up at McKenna, her cheeks flushed from the heat, her brown eyes velvety. He wanted to taste her dewy pink skin, lick the salt of her perspiration, and strip away the gown of thin pastel-yellow muslin that clung to her body.

After setting the tray on the table, McKenna straightened and caught Aline staring at the hair-roughened surface of his forearms, where his sleeves had been rolled snugly over his tanned skin. Their gazes meshed, and suddenly it was difficult for him to remember that they were not alone. He could no more hide the fascination in his eyes than Aline could conceal her own helpless attraction.

Turning to the tray, Aline reached for the etched-glass pitcher and poured some lemonade, the brief rattle of ice shards betraying a momentary

slip of composure. She gave him the glass, refusing to look into his face again. "Do be seated, kind sir," she said lightly. "And continue your conversation, gentlemen--I did not intend to interrupt you."

Gideon received his glass of lemonade with a grateful smile. "This kind of interruption is always welcome, my lady."

Westcliff motioned for Aline to join them, and she sat gracefully on the arm of his chair as she gave him a glass. The warm friendship the siblings shared was obvious. Interesting, McKenna thought, remembering that in the past, their relationship had been rather distant. Aline had been intimidated by her accomplished older brother, and Marcus had been isolated from the family during his years at school. Now, however, it seemed that Marcus and his sister had formed a close bond.

"We were discussing the question of why British firms don't sell their products abroad as effectively as the Americans and Germans do," Westcliff told his sister.

"Because Englishmen don't like to learn foreign languages?" she suggested cheerfully.

"That's a myth," Westcliff told her.

"Is it?" she responded. "Then tell me how many languages you know--aside from Latin, which doesn't count."

Westcliff gave his sister a challenging glance. "Why doesn't Latin count?"

"Because it's a dead language."

"It's still a language," Westcliff pointed out.

Before the siblings became detoured in an argument, McKenna steered them back on course. "The problem isn't language," he said, earning the attention of them both. "The difficulty with British trade abroad is that the manufacturers here have an aversion to mass producing their goods. You value individuality over conformity--and as a result, the average British manufacturer is too small, and their products are too varied. So few of them can afford to launch a strong selling effort in the world markets."

"But shouldn't a company please its patrons by offering a variety of products?" Aline asked, her brow puckered in a way that made McKenna want to kiss it smooth.

"Within certain limits," McKenna said.

"For example," Gideon broke in, "British locomotive foundries are so specialized that no two engines coming out of any one factory look alike."

"It's that way with other British-owned firms," McKenna continued. "A biscuit factory will make a hundred varieties of biscuits, when it would do far better to offer only twelve. Or a wallpaper printer will produce five thousand designs, even though it would be more profitable to offer one-fifth that amount. It's too expensive to offer so many different products, especially when one is trying to market them overseas. The numbers don't support it."

"But I like having a large assortment of things to choose from," Aline protested. "I don't want my walls to look like everyone else's."

She looked so adorably perturbed by the notion of having fewer choices of wallpaper that McKenna couldn't help grinning. Noticing his amusement, Aline raised her brows in a coquettish tilt. "What are you smiling at?"

"When you spoke just now, you sounded very British," he told her.

"Aren't you British too, McKenna?"

Still smiling, he shook his head. "Not any longer, my lady."

McKenna had become an American the very second his foot had touched Staten Island all those years ago. While he would always admit to a certain nostalgia for his birthplace, he had been reinvented and forged in a country where his common blood was not a hindrance. In America he had learned to stop thinking of himself as a servant. Never again would he bow and scrape before anyone. After years of backbreaking work, sacrifice, worry, and sheer mulishness, he was now sitting in Lord Westcliff's library as a guest, instead of working in the stables for five shillings a month.

McKenna quickly became aware of the way Marcus looked from him to Aline, his sharp black eyes missing nothing. The earl was no fool--and it was obvious that he would not suffer Aline to be taken advantage of.

"I suppose you're right," Aline said. "If a man looks, speaks, and thinks like an American, he probably is one." She leaned toward him slightly, her brown eyes sparkling. "However, McKenna, there is some small part of you that will always belong to Stony Cross--I refuse to let you disclaim us entirely."

"I wouldn't dare," he said softly.

Their gazes held, and this time neither of them could manage to look away, even when an uncomfortable silence gathered in the conservatory.

Westcliff broke the spell, clearing his throat and standing so abruptly that Aline's weight on the arm of the chair nearly caused it to topple sideways. She stood as well, giving her brother a little frown. As Westcliff spoke, he sounded so much like the old earl that the hairs prickled on the back of McKenna's neck. "Lady Aline, I want to discuss some of the arrangements you've made for the next few days, to ensure that our schedules do not conflict. Accompany me to the library, if you will."

"Certainly, my lord," Aline said, and smiled at McKenna and Gideon, who had both risen to their feet. "Do excuse me, gentlemen. I wish you a pleasant afternoon."

After the earl and his sister had departed, McKenna and Gideon resumed their seats and stretched out their legs.

"So," Gideon remarked in a casual tone, "it seems that your plans are well on the way."

"What plans?" McKenna asked, moodily surveying the watery remains of his lemonade.

"To seduce Lady Aline, of course." Lazily Gideon went to pour himself more lemonade.

McKenna responded with a noncommittal grunt.

They sat in companionable silence for a few moments, until McKenna asked, "Shaw...has a woman ever asked you to write a poem for her?"

"Good God, no," Gideon replied with a snicker. "Shaws don't write poetry. They pay others to write it for them and then they take the credit for

it." He arched his brows. "Don't say that Lady Aline asked for such a thing?"

"Yes."

Gideon rolled his eyes. "One can't help but marvel at the variety of ways that women have devised to make us look like flaming idiots. You're not actually considering it, are you?"

"No."

"McKenna, how far do you plan to take this revenge notion of yours? I rather like Lady Aline, and I'm discovering an odd reluctance to see her hurt."

McKenna shot him a glance of cold warning. "If you try to interfere--"

"Easy," Gideon said defensively. "I don't intend to foul up your plans. I expect you'll foul them up quite well enough on your own."

McKenna lifted one brow sardonically. "Meaning?"

Gideon withdrew his flask and poured a liberal quantity of alcohol into his own lemonade. "Meaning that I've never seen you so spellbound by anyone or anything as you are by Lady Aline." He took a deep swallow of the potent mixture. "And now that I've had some liquid fortification, I'll venture to say that in my opinion, you still love her. And deep down, you'd rather die by slow inches than cause her one moment of pain."

McKenna stared at him stonily. "You're a drunken fool, Shaw," he muttered and rose to his feet.

"Was that ever in question?" Gideon asked, tossing back the rest of his drink with a practiced swallow as he watched McKenna's departing figure.

As evening approached and the temperature cooled, the guests at Stony Cross Park began to congregate in the entrance hall. Small groups drifted out to the graveled drive, where a line of carriages waited to convey them to the village. Among those who wished to amuse themselves at the fair were Gideon's sister, Mrs. Susan Chamberlain, and her husband, Paul. During the past few days Aline had found it easy enough to socialize with the Chamberlains, but she could not summon any real liking for them. Susan was golden-haired and tall like her brother Gideon, but she did not possess his easy humor or his gift of self-mockery. Rather, she seemed to take herself a

bit too seriously--a quality that was shared by her husband, Paul.

Just as the first carriage left, Aline happened to glance at Gideon Shaw, and she saw that his attention was ensnared by someone coming from the house. A faint smile curved his lips, and his expression softened. Following his gaze, Aline saw with a jolt of glad surprise that Livia had finally ventured out of her self-imposed seclusion. It was the first time that Livia had gone on a public outing since Amberley's death. Dressed in a deep rose gown edged with pale pink piping, Livia looked very young, and more than a little nervous.

Aline went to her sister with a welcoming smile. "Darling," she said, sliding an arm around her sister's slender waist, "how nice that you've decided to join us. Now the evening will be perfect."

Susan Chamberlain turned to whisper to her husband, delicately cupping her hand over one side of her mouth to mask the gossip she was relating. Chamberlain's gaze flickered to Livia and then slid quickly away, as if he did not want to be caught staring at her.

Determined to shield her sister from any slights, Aline urged Livia to come forward. "You must meet some of our guests. Mr. and Mrs. Chamberlain, I should like to introduce you to my younger sister, Lady Olivia Marsden." Aline adhered exactly to the order of precedence, wishing there were some way she might emphasize that they were, socially speaking, of a lower rank than Livia--and therefore they had no right to slight her. After the Chamberlains had acknowledged Livia with shallow smiles, Aline introduced the Cuylers and Mr. Laroche, whose wife had already departed in the first carriage.

Suddenly McKenna appeared before them. "I doubt you'll remember me, my lady, after all the years that have passed."

Livia smiled at him, though she suddenly looked pale and guilty. "Of course I remember you, McKenna. Your return to Stony Cross is quite welcome, and long overdue."

They came to Gideon Shaw, who did a poor job of concealing his fascination with Livia.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lady," Shaw murmured, taking her hand and bowing over it, rather than simply nodding as the others had. When his head raised, he smiled at Livia, whose cheeks had turned several shades darker than her dress. The attraction between the pair was nearly tangible. "You will ride to the village in our carriage, I hope," Shaw said, releasing her hand with obvious reluctance.

Before Livia could reply, Shaw's sister Susan intervened. "I'm afraid that won't be possible," she told Shaw. "There simply won't be enough room in the carriage for someone else. We've already got you and Paul and I, and Mr. Laroche, not to mention McKenna--"

"McKenna isn't riding with us," Shaw interrupted. He glanced at McKenna meaningfully. "Isn't that right?"

"Indeed," McKenna confirmed, taking his cue. "Lady Aline has already arranged for me to ride in another carriage."

"Whose?" Susan asked peevishly. It was obvious that she was not pleased by the substitution.

Aline smiled brightly. "My own, actually," she lied. "McKenna and I have not finished an earlier conversation about, er..."

"Poetry," McKenna supplied gravely.

"Yes, poetry." Maintaining her smile, Aline resisted the temptation to step hard on his foot. "And I had hoped to continue our discussion on the way to the village."

Susan's blue eyes narrowed into suspicious slits. "Really. I doubt that McKenna has ever read a poem in his life."

"I've heard McKenna recite one before," Shaw said. "I believe it started with the line 'There once was a man from Bombay.' But as I recall, the rest of it would prove unsuitable for present company."

Mr. Chamberlain turned red and began to snicker, betraying his familiarity with the rest of the so-called poem.

McKenna grinned. "Obviously it falls to Lady Aline to improve my literary tastes."

"I doubt that can be accomplished during one carriage ride," Aline replied demurely.

"That depends on how long the ride lasts," McKenna rejoined.

The remark could hardly be construed as a suggestive one, but something in his tone and the way he looked at her brought a blush to Aline's face.

"I suggest you don't stop until you reach Siberia, then," Shaw said, breaking the sudden tension between them, and a chuckle rumbled through the group. Gallantly he presented his arm to Livia. "My lady, please allow me..."

As Shaw guided her sister to the waiting carriage, Aline stared after them in wonder. It was a bit odd, really, to see Livia with another man. And yet Gideon Shaw seemed to be good for her. Perhaps Livia needed a man with his easy confidence and worldliness. And he seemed to be a gentleman, in spite of his cynicism.

However, there seemed to be no real possibility of a match between Shaw and Livia. His drinking was a problem that worried Aline greatly, not to mention his wicked reputation, and the fact that he came from an entirely different world from Livia's. Sighing with a thoughtful frown, Aline looked up at McKenna.

"He's a good man," McKenna said, reading her thoughts with an ease that amazed her.

"I believe that," Aline said quietly. "But if Livia were your sister, McKenna...would you want her to be involved with him?" The question was asked without prejudice, only concern.

McKenna hesitated for a long moment, then shook his head.

"I was afraid of that," Aline murmured. She took his arm. "Well, since you've availed yourself of my carriage, we may as well depart."

"Is your brother coming with us?" he asked, escorting her along the drive.

"No, Westcliff has no interest in the fair. He's staying at the manor this

evening."

"Good," McKenna said with such obvious satisfaction that Aline laughed.

It was clear that McKenna would have preferred to ride alone with her in the carriage, but they were joined by the Cuylers, who turned the conversation to the subject of local cheeses. As Aline answered their questions in detail, she found it difficult to hide a grin at the sight of McKenna's disgruntlement.

By the time the entire party had arrived in the heart of Stony Cross, the village was blazing with lamps and torches. Music floated over the oval-shaped village green, which was crowded with exuberant dancers. Tidy rows of thatched black and white cottages were nearly obscured by a proliferation of booths. The flimsy wooden structures were all similar, with a stall in front for selling and a tiny room in back where the owner took shelter at night. There were stalls featuring jewelry, cutlery, toys, shoes, fans, glassware, furniture, and specialty foods. Bursts of laughter issued from the crowds around the theatrical booths, where actors and comedians entertained as coins were scattered at their feet.

Allowing McKenna to escort her along the rows, Aline glanced at him curiously. "This must bring back many memories."

McKenna nodded, his gaze turning distant. "It seems as if it was a lifetime ago."

"Yes," Aline agreed with a touch of melancholy. How different they both had been. The innocence of those days, the exquisite simplicity, the sense of life and youth that had imbued every moment with a golden aura...remembering, she was suddenly invaded by a warm impatience that seemed to have no particular aim or outlet. The feeling coalesced inside her until her blood was pumping and she felt radiantly aware of every sight and sound and sensation. Walking through the village with McKenna by her side...it was a lovely echo of the past, like listening to a beautiful melody she had not heard since childhood.

Staring into his eyes, she saw that he too was becoming enmeshed in the

feeling. He was relaxing, smiling more easily, losing the harsh look about his eyes and mouth. They pushed through a tightly packed section of High Street, where a pair of conjurers was eliciting cries of delight from the gathering onlookers. Sliding an arm around Aline to protect her from being jostled, McKenna continued to shoulder his way through the crowd. In the excitement of the fair, no one took notice of the gesture, but Aline was stunned by the naturalness of it, and by the response he evoked from her. It felt completely right to be held close against his side, to let him guide her where he would, to surrender to the coaxing pressure of his hand at her back.

As they emerged from the densely gathered fair-goers, McKenna's hand found hers, and he pulled it back to the crook of his arm. Aline's fingers conformed to the hard swell of muscle, while the side of her breast brushed against his elbow. "Where are we going?" she asked, vaguely perturbed by the languid, almost dreamlike quality of her own voice.

McKenna didn't answer, only led her past more stalls until they reached the one he wanted. The pungent fragrance of gingerbread rose in a warm draught to her nostrils, and Aline laughed in delight. "You remembered!" As a girl, the first thing she had always done at the fair was to gorge on iced gingerbread--and although McKenna had never shared her fondness for the treat, he had always gone with her.

"Of course," McKenna said, extracting a coin from his pocket and purchasing a thick slice for her. "To this day, I've never seen anyone devour an entire loaf the way you used to."

"I did not," Aline protested with a frown, sinking her teeth into the heavy, sticky bread.

"I was in awe," McKenna continued. He drew her away from the stall. "To watch you eat something the size of your head in less than a quarter hour--"

"I would never be that gluttonous," she informed him, deliberately taking another huge bite.

He grinned. "I must be thinking of someone else, then."

As they browsed leisurely among the stalls, McKenna bought some

sweet wine for Aline to wash down her gingerbread with, and she drank thirstily. "Slowly," McKenna admonished, his gaze caressing. "You'll make yourself dizzy."

"Who cares?" Aline asked blithely, drinking again. "If I stumble, you'll be here to catch me, won't you?"

"With both arms," he murmured. Coming from anyone else, the statement would have had the ring of gallantry. From McKenna, however, it contained a deliciously threatening edge.

They made their way toward the village green, but before they reached it, Aline saw a familiar face. It was Adam, his blond hair glittering in the torchlight. He was accompanied by friends, both male and female, and he parted from the group with a brief comment, eliciting a few knowing laughs as they saw that he was heading to Aline.

She went to him eagerly, while McKenna followed like a grim specter. Reaching Adam, Aline took his hands and smiled up at him. "I behold a handsome stranger," she teased. "No, wait--were you not once a frequent visitor to Stony Cross Park? It has been so long since I've seen you, my memory fails me."

Adam's mouth quirked with amusement as he replied. "My absence has been deliberate, sweet--and you know why."

She felt a glow of fondness, comprehending that he had stayed away to allow her to deal with McKenna in any way she desired. "That doesn't prevent me from missing you, however."

Adam's smooth, strong fingers squeezed hers before he released her hand. "I'll come to call soon," he promised. "Now, introduce me to your companion."

Obediently Aline made the introduction between her dearest friend and her past love...the former, who would never cause her unhappiness, and the latter, who almost certainly would again. It was strange to see McKenna and Adam shaking hands. She had never imagined the two of them meeting, and she could not help but mark the contrasts between them, the angel and the devil.

"Mr. McKenna," Adam said easily, "your return to Stony Cross has afforded Lady Aline such delight that I can't help but share it, as I am appreciative of all things that bring her pleasure."

"Thank you." McKenna subjected him to a coldly hostile stare. "You have been friends for some time, I gather."

"Well nigh five years," Adam replied.

A stilted silence ensued, until it was broken by a cry from several yards away. "McKenna?..."

Glancing in the direction of the voice, Aline realized that some of McKenna's old friends had seen him...Dick Burlison, once a carrot-headed, gangly-legged boy, who was now a stocky married man in his midthirties...Tom Haydon, the baker's son, who now ran his father's business...and Tom's wife, Mary, the buxom butcher's daughter whom McKenna had so often flirted with in his youth.

Smiling, Aline nudged McKenna gently. "Go on."

He needed no further urging. As he strode to the group with a grin, they all let out jubilant laughs and shook hands enthusiastically. Mary, a mother of five, wore a look of astonishment on her round face as McKenna bent to kiss her cheek.

"I perceive that you have not been intimate with him yet," Adam said to Aline sotto voce.

She replied softly as she continued to watch McKenna. "I may not be brave enough to take such a risk."

"As your friend, I should probably advise you not to do something that you may regret later." Adam smiled as he added, "Of course, one tends to miss out on a great deal of fun that way."

"Adam," she chided, "are you encouraging me to do the wrong thing?"

"Only if you promise to tell me all about it afterward."

Aline shook her head with a laugh. Hearing the sound, McKenna turned and looked at her, a scowl working between his dark brows.

"There, I've just made it easier for you," Adam murmured. "The flames

of jealousy have been fanned. Now he won't rest until he claims his territory. My God, you do like them primitive, don't you?"

Sure enough, McKenna returned to her in less than a minute, his fingers clasping Aline's elbow in a clear display of ownership. "We were heading to the village green," he reminded her curtly.

"So we were," Aline murmured. "Lord Sandridge, will you join us?"

"Regretfully, no." Adam lifted Aline's free hand to kiss the points of her knuckles. "I must rejoin my companions. Good evening to you both."

"Goodbye," McKenna said, making no effort to hide his animosity as the handsome viscount took his leave.

"Do be civil to him, please," Aline said. "Lord Sandridge is quite dear to me, and I wouldn't have his feelings hurt for the world."

"I was being civil," McKenna muttered.

She laughed, relishing his obvious jealousy. "You barely said one word to him, except to bid him goodbye. And the way you glowered reminded me of a stuck boar, ready to charge--"

"What kind of a man is he," McKenna interrupted, "that he makes no objection when he sees you being escorted through the village by someone like me?"

"A trusting one. Lord Sandridge and I have a certain understanding--we allow each other as much freedom as is needed. It's a very enlightened arrangement."

"Enlightened," he repeated with ill-concealed contempt. "Sandridge is a fool. And if I were in his place, you wouldn't even be here."

"Where would I be, then?" she asked pertly. "At home, I suppose, mending your shirt cuffs?"

"No, in my bed. Under me."

Her amusement dissolved at once. Reaction to the soft-voiced words skittered through her body, making her feel light and shivery. She kept silent, her face turning pink as she walked with him to the village green. More than a few people glanced at them speculatively as they passed. After McKenna

had spent so many years away, his return was reason enough for the villagers' interest, but the fact that he was in Aline's company caused tongues to wag even more eagerly.

The music was accompanied by clapping hands and stomping feet as men and women skipped and spun to a spirited folk tune. Enjoying the infectious melody, Aline let McKenna draw her closer to the musicians.

As soon as the song finished, McKenna gestured to their leader, a fiddle player, who approached him at once. McKenna spoke close to the man's ear and crossed his palm with a few coins, while Aline observed him with sudden suspicion.

Grinning broadly, the fiddle player hastened back to his companions, held a quick conference, and the group of eight musicians walked en masse to Aline. She regarded McKenna with growing suspicion. "What have you done?"

Bringing her with them to the center of the crowd, the musicians stood her in front where she was visible to everyone. Their leader gestured with his bow to McKenna. "My merry friends," he called, "this gentleman has requested a song to honor the charms of the lady who stands before us. I beg your kind assistance in singing 'The Rose of Tralee' to Lady Aline."

The audience applauded heartily, for the tune was a wildly popular one that had just been published that year. Turning scarlet, Aline gave McKenna a glance that openly threatened murder, causing most of the assemblage to laugh. He returned her gaze with an innocent smile, lifting his brows mockingly to remind her that she had been the one to request a serenade.

The musicians gazed at Aline with exaggerated soulful gazes, and she shook her head with a grin as they began to play, accompanied by at least two hundred voices. Even some of the shopkeepers and traveling merchants gathered near to join in, substituting her name for that of the heroine in the song:

The pale moon was rising
above the green mountain;

the sun was declining
beneath the blue sea
when I strayed with my love
to the pure crystal fountain
that stands in the beautiful
vale of Tralee.

She was
lovely and fair
as the rose of the summer
yet 'twas not her beauty
alone that won me
Oh, no! 'twas the truth
in her eye ever dawning
that made me love Aline,
the Rose of Tralee
The cool shades of evening
their mantle was spreading,
and Aline, all smiling,
was listening to me,
The moon through the valley,
her pale rays was shedding
when I won the heart
of the rose of Tra-leeeeee!

At the conclusion of the song, Aline curtsied deeply in acknowledgment. She gave the lead fiddle player her hand, and after bending to kiss it, he pretended to fall backward in a swoon, eliciting a round of applause and friendly laughter from the gathering.

Returning to McKenna, Aline regarded him with a mock glare. "You're going to pay for this," she warned.

He grinned. "You wanted a serenade."

Laughter rustled up from her chest. "From you," she exclaimed, taking his arm once again. "Not from the entire population of Stony Cross!"

"Trust me--that was far better than hearing me sing alone."

"As I recall, you had a very nice voice."

"I'm out of practice."

They stared at each other, smiling, while delight hummed through Aline's veins. "I also asked for a poem," she said.

The flirtatious sparkle of her eyes seemed to affect McKenna, causing his voice to deepen as he replied. "And I told you I needed more inspiration."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be more precise. What kind of inspiration are you referring to?"

His wide mouth curled up at the corners. "Use your imagination."

Aline was struck by the words. Unknowingly, McKenna had used the same phrase that Adam had once spoken, when they had discussed the scars on her legs.

The feeling of impatience returned, and she could hardly draw breath around the billowing excitement and confusion in her chest. If she was clever, if she was bold, she might be able to have what she wanted most in the world. One night with McKenna...no, just a few minutes stolen from the grasp of an uncharitable Fate...Dear God, was that too much to ask for?

No. No matter what it cost her, she would have a few precious moments of intimacy with the man she had never stopped loving. And she would find a way to do it without letting him know her secrets. Tonight, she thought in passionate rebellion, and damn anyone or anything that tried to stop her. Damn Fate itself...she and McKenna were finally going to have their reckoning.

CHAPTER 13

McKenna wandered to the back terrace in a kind of stupor, feeling drugged and floundering...no doubt similar to the way Gideon Shaw had felt while he was drunk and drowning in a storm-swept ocean. In all of McKenna's imaginings of this night, he had always pictured himself as completely in control. He was experienced with women, cognizant of his own sexual needs and the responses of his partners. He had known exactly what he was going to do with Aline, and how the scene would be played out. And then Aline had changed everything.

Sitting at an outside table in the shadows, McKenna clasped his head in his hands and closed his eyes. The faint mingled scents of oak and sap and female arousal clung to his hands...he inhaled the fragrance greedily and felt heat stirring in his groin. He remembered the feeling of sliding inside her, the lush flesh that had surrounded him so tightly. The gasps that had come from her throat. The taste of her mouth, spiced with wine and ginger. She had satisfied him more than anyone ever had, and yet he already desired her again.

A virgin...damn her. Damn her for the feelings she roused in him, the confusion and suspicion and protectiveness and sexual hunger. He would have bet every last cent that she had taken dozens of lovers by now.

And he would have lost.

McKenna tightened his palms on his head as though he could crush out the traitorous thoughts. She was not the girl he had once loved, he reminded himself grimly. That girl had never really existed. And yet it didn't seem to matter. Aline was his curse, his fate, his consuming desire. He would never stop wanting her, no matter what she did, no matter how many oceans and continents he managed to put between them.

God...the sweetness of her body, so tight and warm around him...the salty-fresh scent of her skin, the perfumed softness of her hair. He had felt his sanity dissolve as he took possession of her, and he had lost all thought of

withdrawing at the moment of climax. It was possible that he had made her pregnant. The thought filled him with primitive satisfaction. To see her big and helpless with his child, overtaken with his seed, dependent in every way on him...yes, he thought grimly. He wanted to occupy her with his own flesh, and chain her to him with a bond she could never break. Aline didn't realize it yet, but she would never be free of him--or the demands he would make of her.

"What a deadly dull evening," Susan Chamberlain, Gideon Shaw's sister, remarked sourly. They had just returned from the village fair, having left the festivities just as things began to get interesting. Apparently the provincial pleasures of having one's palm read, or watching tumblers and fire eaters, or drinking local elder wine, was lost on people as urbane as the Shaws and their kin.

"Yes," her husband, Mr. Chamberlain, chimed in, "the novelty of mingling with rustics wears off rather quickly, I'm afraid. It is better to spend time in one's own company than to consort with people who have no more intelligence than the sheep and goats they herd."

Annoyed by his snobbery, Livia could not resist making a retort. "You are fortunate, then, Mr. Chamberlain. With that attitude, it seems likely that you will indeed be spending a great deal of time in your own company."

While both the Chamberlains glared at her, Gideon Shaw laughed freely at her impudence. "I enjoyed the fair," he said, his blue eyes twinkling. He glanced at Susan. "And you seem to have forgotten, dear sis, that most of those so-called rustics have better bloodlines than the Shaws."

"How could I forget?" Susan Chamberlain asked sharply. "You are always so eager to remind me."

Livia bit the insides of her lips to keep from laughing. "I suppose I shall retire for the evening. I bid you all a good night."

"Not yet," Shaw said softly. "The night is still young, my lady. Shall we play a hand of cards, or have a turn at the chessboard?"

She smiled and asked ingenuously, "Do you like to play games, Mr. Shaw?"

His gaze was subtly seductive, but his tone matched hers for innocence. "Of every kind."

Livia's teeth caught at her lower lip in the way that had always inspired Amberley to say that she was adorable. How strange--she hadn't consciously done that in so very long. Which made her realize how very much she wanted to attract Gideon Shaw.

"I never play when I don't think I can win," she told him. "Therefore, I suggest that we take a turn through the portrait gallery, and you can view my ancestors. You may be interested to know that our family tree boasts of a pirate. Quite a ruthless fellow, I've been told."

"So was my grandfather," Shaw remarked. "Although we politely refer to him as a sea captain, he did things that would make a pirate blush for shame."

His sister Susan made a strangled sound. "I will not join you, Lady Olivia, as it is obvious that my brother is determined to denigrate his antecedents at every opportunity. Heaven knows for what purpose."

Livia tried to suppress a rush of pleasure at the prospect of being alone with Shaw again, but a betraying tide of color burnished her cheeks. "Certainly, Mrs. Chamberlain. Again, I wish you good night."

The Chamberlains' replies, if they made any, were inaudible. And Livia wouldn't have been able to hear them in any case: her ears were filled with the pounding of her own heartbeat. She wondered what they thought of her going somewhere unchaperoned with Shaw, and then decided in a rush of happy self-indulgence that it did not matter. The night was young, and for the first time in a long while, she felt young too.

Leading Shaw to the portrait gallery, Livia gave him an arch glance. "You are wicked, to tease your sister so," she said severely.

"It is a brother's duty to torment his older sister."

"You perform your duty with awe-inspiring thoroughness," she said, and his grin broadened.

They entered the long, narrow portrait gallery, where paintings had been

hung in six rows up to the ceiling, clearly intended not as a display of art but rather a display of aristocratic heritage. At the far end of the gallery stood a pair of immense gothic thrones. The backs of the chairs were eight feet tall, and the seats were surfaced by cushions that managed to be harder than a wooden plank. To the Marsdens, bodily comfort was of far less importance than the fact that the thrones dated back to the 1500s and represented a lineage far less corrupted by foreign influences than that of the current monarch.

As they walked back and forth along the gallery, the conversation quickly detoured from the subject of ancestry into far more personal channels, and somehow Shaw managed to guide Livia into the subject of her love affair with Amberley. There were countless reasons why Livia should not have confided in him. She ignored them all. Somehow Livia did not want to keep anything hidden from Gideon Shaw, no matter how shocking or unflattering. She even told him about her miscarriage...and as they talked, Livia found herself being pulled to one of the enormous chairs, and suddenly she was sitting on his lap.

"I can't," she whispered anxiously, staring at the empty doorway of the gallery. "If someone should catch us like this--"

"I'll watch the doorway," Shaw assured her, his arm tightening around her waist. "It's more comfortable to sit like this, isn't it?"

"Yes, but--"

"Stop wiggling, darling, or you're going to embarrass us both. Now...you were telling me..."

Livia went still in his lap, blushing wildly. The endearment, commonplace as it was, and the prolonged contact with his body, and the friendly sympathy in his gaze, made her weak all over. She struggled to remember what they had been talking about. Ah...the miscarriage. "The worst part was that everyone thought I was fortunate to have lost the baby," she said. "No one said it in those exact words, but it was obvious."

"I imagine that it wouldn't have been easy, to be unmarried with a fatherless child," Shaw said gently.

"Yes. I knew that at the time. But I still grieved. I even felt as if I had failed Amberley, by not managing to keep that last little part of him alive. And now there are even times when I find it difficult to remember exactly what Amberley looked like, or what his voice sounded like."

"Do you think he would have wanted you to commit suttee?"

"What is that?"

"A Hindu practice in which a widow is expected to throw herself on her husband's burning funeral pyre. Her suicide is considered as proof of her devotion to him."

"What if the wife dies first? Does the husband do the same thing?"

Shaw threw her a mildly taunting grin. "No, he re-marries."

"I should have known," Livia said. "Men always manage to arrange things for their own benefit."

He tsked in mock reproof. "You're too young to be so disillusioned."

"What about you?"

"I was born disillusioned."

"No, you weren't," she said decisively. "Something made you that way. And you should tell me what it was."

Subtle amusement flickered in his eyes. "Why should I do that?"

"It's only fair, after I told you about Amberley and my scandal."

"It would take the rest of the night to tell you about my scandals, my lady."

"You owe it to me," she said. "Surely you are too much of a gentleman to renege on a debt to a lady."

"Oh, I'm quite the gentleman," Shaw said sardonically. Reaching into his breast pocket, he withdrew the small silver flask. He tucked her deeper into the crook of his arm and brought his hands together to uncap the flask. Livia gasped a little as she was lightly squeezed amid taut bands of muscle. When the task was accomplished, Shaw's arms relaxed, and he brought the flask to his lips. The smell of expensive liquor drifted to Livia's nostrils, and she

watched him warily.

Shaw let out a measured sigh, welcoming the calming effect of the bourbon. "Very well, Princess Olivia...how do you like your scandal...au tartare, or well done?"

"Something in-between, perhaps?"

Shaw smiled and took another pull on the flask. For a long minute they sat together in silence, with Livia piled on his lap in a heap of skirts and stays and confined female flesh. She saw the careful consideration in his eyes as he weighed how much to tell her, which words would most efficiently convey his meaning...and then his mouth quirked with moody resignation, and his shoulders tensed in the bare promise of a shrug. "Before I tell you anything, you have to understand the Shaws' perception--no, conviction--that no one is quite good enough for them."

"Which Shaws are you referring to?"

"Most of them--my parents in particular. I have three sisters and two brothers, and believe me, the ones who are married had the very devil of a time getting my father to approve of their prospective spouses. It was infinitely more important to my parents that their offspring should marry people of the right backgrounds, with the appropriate bloodlines and financial endowments, rather than marry someone whom we may have actually liked."

"Or loved," Livia said perceptively.

"Yes." Shaw regarded the worn silver flask and drew his thumb across the warm, scuffed metal. Livia had to avert her gaze from the sight, astonished by the sudden intense wish that his hand was on her body instead. Fortunately Shaw seemed too lost in his thoughts to notice the way she had tensed in his lap. "I am...was...the second oldest son," he said. "While my brother Frederick struggled beneath the weight of expectation, I became the black sheep of the family. When I reached a marriageable age, the woman I fell in love with was nowhere near the standards that the Shaws had established. Naturally that only made her more attractive."

Livia listened carefully, her gaze on Shaw's face as he smiled with self-derision. "I warned her what to expect," he continued. "I told her they would

likely disown me, they would be cruel, they would never approve of someone they had not chosen themselves. But she said that her love for me would never waver. We would always be together. I knew that I would be disinherited, and it didn't matter. I had found someone who loved me, and for the first time in my life I would have the chance to prove to myself and everyone else that I didn't need the Shaw fortune. Unfortunately, when I took her to meet my father, the relationship was immediately exposed for the sham that it was."

"She crumbled beneath your father's disapproval," Livia guessed.

Shaw laughed darkly, recapping the flask and replacing it in his coat pocket. "'Crumbled' is not the word I would use. They struck a deal, the two of them. My father offered her money to simply forget my proposal and go away, and she responded with a counteroffer. The two of them bargained like a pair of bookies in a listmaker's office, while I stood by and listened, slack-jawed. When they reached an acceptable sum, my beloved left the house without once looking back. Apparently the prospect of marrying a disinherited Shaw wasn't nearly as attractive as a nice big payoff. For a while I couldn't decide whom I hated more--her or my father. Not long after, my brother Frederick died unexpectedly, and I became the heir apparent. My father made his disappointment in me clear from then until the day he died."

Livia was careful not to reveal her sympathy, fearing that he would misread it. A dozen platitudes occurred to her, about how Shaw would certainly find a woman worthy of his love someday, and perhaps his father had only wanted the best for him...but in the stark honesty of the moment, she couldn't say anything so banal. Instead she sat in silence with him, eventually glancing into his face to find that instead of looking bitter or disillusioned, he was staring at her with a quizzical smile.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I was just reflecting on how fortunate I am. Even though I only had Amberley for a short time, at least I know that once I was truly loved."

His fingers touched the edge of her jaw, stroking delicately. The gentle caress made Livia's heart throb violently. He held her gaze deliberately, his

fingertips playing on her skin until he found the tender hollow behind her earlobe. "Anyone would love you."

Livia could not seem to look away from him. He was a dangerous man, offering sensation in lieu of safety, passion instead of protection. Once she never would have believed that she would consider having an affair with a man whom she didn't love. But there was something tantalizing about him, a promise of wicked enjoyment, of fun, that she found impossible to resist.

Impulsively she leaned forward and touched her mouth to his. The texture of his lips was smooth and silken, cool at first, then warming rapidly. As before, his kisses were playful, expressive, nipping with gentle curiosity, then pressing with more purposeful intent. After coaxing her lips apart, he settled in for a long, open kiss, his tongue delving in soft exploration.

As Livia squirmed closer to him, she felt the tension of his body, the taut muscle of his chest and abdomen...and lower down, a rising pressure that made her flush in sudden awareness. His hand moved over her back in a lazy circle, influencing her to lean harder against him, until one of her hands encountered the edge of the silver flask. The metal object interfered with her explorations, giving her an unwelcome jolt of reality.

Livia pulled back, smiling and trembling.

"Don't go yet," Shaw murmured, feeling the way she tensed in preparation to climb off his lap.

His hand was at her waist, and she reluctantly pushed it away. "I can't do this with my entire family watching, Mr. Shaw." She gestured at the rows of solemn-faced ancestors lining the walls.

Shaw responded with a slow smile. "Why not? Don't they approve of me?"

Livia pretended to consider the question seriously, contemplating the countless austere Marsden faces. "They don't seem to. Perhaps they should get to know you better."

"No," he replied without hesitation. "I don't improve on closer acquaintance."

She arched her brows, wondering if the statement had been made out of sincerity, or manipulation, or merely a dark sense of humor. Unable to decide, she shook her head with a reluctant smile. "Actually, the closer you are, the more I like you."

Instead of replying, Shaw took her small head in both his hands and pulled her close, and crushed a kiss on her mouth. The smacking imprint of his lips was hardly romantic--it was too hard, too fast, though gratifyingly enthusiastic. Yet it affected Livia even more intensely than the languid, soft searching of a few minutes earlier.

Releasing her, Shaw watched as Livia slid from his lap. The floor seemed to slant beneath her feet before she finally regained her balance. Shaw settled back in the throne, staring at her in a way that drew a quiver from deep in her abdomen.

"What are you thinking?" Livia whispered, echoing his earlier question.

He answered with a startling lack of pretense. "I'm wondering how much I can take from you without hurting you."

It was then that Livia was certain of something: before Gideon Shaw returned to America, she and he were going to be lovers. She saw from the expression in his eyes that he knew it too. The knowledge filled her with a shivery kind of anticipation. Blushing, she backed away from him a step or two, and murmured good night. Turning to walk away from him, she could not resist throwing a glance over her shoulder.

"I'm not afraid of being hurt," she murmured.

He smiled faintly. "All the same...you're the last person in the world I want to cause any harm."

Aline discovered that the door to her room was half open, with golden lamplight spilling invitingly into the hallway. Desperately self-conscious, she went inside and hesitated as she saw Mrs. Faircloth waiting at a chair near the grate. Her usual bath had been placed in the center of the room, with a kettle of scalding water on the hearth.

Naturally Mrs. Faircloth understood everything in one incisive glance.

Aline closed the door, not looking at the housekeeper. "Good evening, Mrs. Faircloth. If you will unfasten the back of my gown, I will manage everything else by myself. I don't need any help tonight."

"Yes, you do," Mrs. Faircloth said, coming to her.

Wry amusement broke through Aline's misery. There was no possible chance that the housekeeper would ignore this turn of events without having her say. After helping Aline off with her gown, Mrs. Faircloth fetched the kettle from the hearth and warmed the bath with a new infusion of boiling water. "I expect you're sore," the housekeeper said. "The hot water will help."

Turning crimson all over, Aline unhooked her corset and dropped it to the floor. The sudden inrush of oxygen made her dizzy, and she waited until she felt steadier before removing the rest of her clothes. The tight cinch of her garters had left dark red rings around her thighs, and she sighed in relief as she untied them and removed her stockings. Filled with the uncomfortable suspicion that the things that she had done with McKenna were probably visible on her body, Aline hurriedly entered the bath. She sank down into the water with a hiss of comfort.

Mrs. Faircloth went to straighten various articles around the room, while a pair of notches appeared in the space between her silvery brows. "Did he see the scars?" she asked quietly.

Aline let the top of her right knee break through the steaming surface of the water. "No. I managed things so that he didn't notice them." She narrowed her eyes against the sudden sting of tears, willing them not to fall. "Oh, Mrs. Faircloth, it was such a mistake. And so appallingly wonderful. Like finding a part of my soul that had been ripped away." She grimaced in self-mockery at the melodrama of the words.

"I understand," the housekeeper said.

"You do?"

An unexpected glint of humor appeared in Mrs. Faircloth's eyes. "I was a young woman once, difficult as that may be to believe."

"Who did you--"

"It is not something I ever discuss," the housekeeper said firmly. "And it has no relevance to your predicament with McKenna."

A more accurate word could not have been chosen. It was not a difficulty, or a problem, or even a dilemma. It was indeed a predicament.

Morosely Aline swirled her hands in the water, while Mrs. Faircloth came to pour some herb-infused oil into the bath. "I've behaved like a greedy child," Aline said ruefully. "I reached out for what I wanted without giving a thought to the consequences."

"McKenna's behavior has been no better." The housekeeper retreated to the chair near the fire. "Now you've both gotten what you wanted, and it seems that you're both the worse off for it."

"The worst is yet to come," Aline said. "Now I've got to drive him away without ever explaining why." She paused, rubbed her wet hands over her face, and added bleakly, "Again."

"It needn't be that way," Mrs. Faircloth countered.

"Are you suggesting that I tell him the truth? You know what his reaction would be."

"You can never know someone else's heart completely, my lady. Why, I've known you since the day you were born, and yet you still have the ability to surprise me."

"What I did with McKenna tonight...did that surprise you?"

"No." For some reason the promptness of Mrs. Faircloth's reply caused them both to laugh.

Leaning her head against the rim of the tub, Aline flexed her knees, willing the heat of the bath to soften her scars. "Has my sister returned from the fair yet?"

"Yes, she came back in the company of Mr. Shaw and the Chamberlains, at least three hours ago."

"How was she? Did she seem happy?"

"Rather too much so."

Aline smiled faintly. "Is it possible for someone to be too happy?"

The housekeeper frowned. "I only hope that Lady Livia understands what kind of gentleman Mr. Shaw is. No doubt he has dallied with a hundred women before her, and will continue doing so long after he's left Stony Cross."

The words caused Aline's smile to fade. "I will talk to her tomorrow, and perhaps together we can settle our heads."

"That's not what needs settling," Mrs. Faircloth said, and Aline made a face at her.

CHAPTER 15

It would have been an exaggeration to claim that Gideon was completely sober when McKenna loaded him into the carriage the next day. However, he was at least clean and shaven, his face pale beneath the gleaming cap of expertly clipped blond hair. They were bound for the Rutledge, a London hotel comprising four luxurious homes that were let to well-to-do gentlemen or families from abroad. McKenna hoped that the investment negotiations would keep him so busy that he would stop thinking about Aline. At least for a few minutes at a time.

A faint groan came from Gideon's side of the carriage. Wreathed in a queasiness that was nearly palpable, Gideon had said virtually nothing so far that morning. "Goddamn," Gideon said in bleary realization, "I'm riding backward. Change seats with me, will you?"

Recalling Gideon's aversion to facing the rear of the carriage while traveling, McKenna complied. When they had both settled, Gideon propped one foot on the opposite cushion, heedless of the fine velvet upholstery. "What are you brooding about?" He braced his head on his hand as if to prevent it from toppling off his shoulders. "Haven't you managed to tumble Lady Aline yet?"

McKenna gave him a narrow-eyed stare.

Gideon sighed and rubbed his aching temples. "I'll say this--there is something about those Marsden women and their aristocratic little notches that is impossible to resist."

The remark so perfectly expressed McKenna's own sentiments that he smiled grimly. "You've taken an interest in Livia, it seems."

"Yes," came the none-too-happy reply. "An interest that has earned me the worst case of blue balls I've had in years."

McKenna was perturbed by the realization that his friend was strongly attracted to Aline's sister. It seemed an inappropriate match in every regard. "Aren't you too old for her?"

Fumbling for the ever-dependable silver flask, Gideon registered extreme annoyance at the realization that he'd forgotten to fill it. Tossing the empty container to the floor, he glared at it blearily. "I'm tooeverything for her. Too old, too damned jaded, too thirsty...the list is endless."

"You'd better take care, or Westcliff will slaughter and dress you like a yuletide goose."

"If he'll do it quickly, he has my blessing," Gideon replied morosely. "Damn you, McKenna, I wish I hadn't let you talk me into visiting Stony Cross. We should have gone directly to London, conducted our business, and returned to New York as soon as possible."

"You didn't have to come with me," McKenna pointed out.

"I had some misguided notion of keeping you out of trouble. And I wanted to see what kind of woman could turn you into such a mooncalf."

Stewing, McKenna gazed out the window, watching the quiet green countryside that rolled beside them. Only Lady Aline Marsden, he thought balefully. A woman of such discriminating taste that she had remained unwed rather than accept a suitor who was below her standards.

"I want to take her back to New York with me," he said.

Gideon was silent for a long time. "Has Lady Aline indicated that she might consider such a proposition?"

"No. In fact, she's made it clear that anything other than a five-minute hump in the closet is out of the question. Because I'm not of her class."

Gideon did not seem at all surprised. "Naturally. You're a professional man in a culture that values indolence and has contempt for ambition."

"Youwork."

"Yes, but not regularly, and everyone knows that I don't have to. And my money is old, if only by New York standards." Gideon paused for a thoughtful moment before continuing. "Don't mistake me, McKenna--you're the best man I've ever known, and I'd give my life for you if necessary. But the fact is, socially speaking, you're not just a step down for Lady Aline. You're a long tumble from the mountaintop."

The words hardly did anything to improve McKenna's mood. However, Gideon could always be counted on to speak to him honestly--and McKenna appreciated that far more than countless well-meant lies. Receiving the observation with a nod, he frowned at the tops of his shiny black shoes.

"I wouldn't say that your situation is completely hopeless," Gideon continued. "You've got some advantages that would inspire many women, even Lady Aline, to overlook the fact that you're an oversized mongrel. The ladies seem to find you attractive enough, and the devil knows you don't lack for money. And you're damned persuasive when you want to be. Don't tell me that you can't manage to convince a thirty-one-year-old spinster from Hampshire to marry you. Especially if she's already demonstrated her willingness to, er...favor you, as she apparently has."

McKenna threw him a sharp glance. "Who said anything about marriage?"

The question seemed to catch Gideon off-guard. "You just said you want her to come to New York with you."

"Not as my wife."

"As a mistress?" Gideon asked incredulously. "You can't really believe that she would lower herself to accept such an arrangement."

"I'll make her accept it--by any means necessary."

"What about her relationship with Lord Sandridge?"

"I'll put an end to that."

Gideon stared at him, seeming confounded. "My God. Have I misunderstood, McKenna, or do you really intend to ruin Lady Aline's hopes of marriage, blacken her name on two continents, break all ties to her family and friends, and destroy all hope of her ever participating in decent society? And probably foist a bastard child on her in the bargain?"

The thought caused McKenna to smile coldly. "A Marsden giving birth to the bastard of a bastard...yes, that would suit me quite well."

Gideon's eyes narrowed. "Holy hell--I never would have thought you capable of such malice."

"You don't know me, then."

"Apparently not," Gideon murmured with a wondering shake of his head. Though it was clear that he would have liked to continue, a particularly bumpy stretch of road caused him to subside back in his seat and clutch his head with a groan.

McKenna returned his gaze to the window, while the remnant of a cool smile remained on his lips.

Marcus's pleasure at Shaw and McKenna's departure lasted for precisely one day...until he discovered that Livia had left for London on the following morning. It had been no mean feat to accomplish the necessary packing and make the travel arrangements, all in secret. Aline had been certain that one of the servants might let something slip before Livia was actually off. Thanks to Mrs. Faircloth, however, lips were buttoned everywhere from the scullery to the stables, as no one dared to incur the housekeeper's wrath by betraying Livia's plans.

When Livia's carriage finally rolled away, the sun had just begun to shed its first feeble rays on the drive leading from Stony Cross. Heaving a sigh of relief, Aline stood in the entrance hall, wearing a soft blue morning gown and worn felt slippers. She smiled at Mrs. Faircloth, whose obvious ambivalence about Livia's actions had not prevented her from doing whatever was necessary to help her.

"Mrs. Faircloth," Aline said, slipping her hand into the housekeeper's. Their fingers clung briefly. "How many years have you stood by and watched Marsdens doing things you haven't approved of?"

The housekeeper smiled at the rhetorical question, and they stood together in silent affection, watching the carriage disappear at the end of the drive.

A voice startled the two of them, and Aline turned to meet her brother's suspicious gaze. Marcus was dressed in his hunting clothes, his eyes cold and black amid the hard angles of his face. "Would you care to tell me what is going on?" he asked brusquely.

"Certainly, dear." Aline glanced at Mrs. Faircloth. "Thank you, Mrs.

Faircloth--I am certain that you have things to do now."

"Yes, my lady," came the immediate and distinctly grateful reply, as the housekeeper had no wish to be present during one of Marcus's rare but volcanic rages. She sped away, her black skirts fluttering behind her.

"Who was in that carriage?" Marcus demanded.

"Shall we go to the parlor?" Aline suggested. "I'll ring for some tea, and--"

"Don't tell me that it was Livia."

"All right, I won't." She paused before adding sheepishly. "But it was. And before you work yourself into a lather about it--"

"By all that's holy, my sister hasnot raced off to London to pursue that damned libertine!" Marcus said in murderous fury.

"Livia will be perfectly fine," Aline said hastily. "She's going to stay at Marsden Terrace, and she has a chaperone, and--"

"I'm going to fetch her at once." Squaring the muscled bulk of his shoulders, Marcus started for the door.

"No!" Well intentioned he might be, but her brother's high-handedness had just reached its limits. "You will not, Marcus." Although she did not raise her voice, her tone stopped him in his tracks. "If you dare try to follow her, I will shoot your horse out from under you."

Marcus swiveled around to stare at her incredulously. "Good God, Aline, I don't have to tell you what she's risking--"

"I know perfectly well what Livia is risking. And so does she." Sailing past him, Aline went to the parlor that adjoined the entrance hall, while he followed at her heels.

Marcus closed the door with a perfectly executed swipe of his foot. "Give me one good reason why I should stand by and do nothing!"

"Because Livia will resent you forever if you interfere."

Their gazes locked for a long time. Gradually the fury seemed to drain from Marcus, and he went to sit heavily in the nearest chair. Aline could not help but feel a flicker of sympathy for him, knowing that for a man like her

brother, this enforced helplessness was the worst sort of torture. "Why does it have to be him?" he grumbled. "Why couldn't she pick some decent young man from a solid English family?"

"Mr. Shaw is not so terrible," Aline said, unable to repress a smile.

He gave her a dark look. "You refuse to see anything past that blond hair and all that empty charm, and that damned American insolence that women seem to find so alluring."

"You forgot to mention all that nice American money," Aline teased.

Marcus lifted his gaze heavenward, clearly wondering what he had done to deserve such infernal aggravation. "He's going to use her, and then break her heart," he said flatly. Only someone who knew him well could hear the edge of fearful worry in his voice.

"Oh, Marcus," Aline said gently, "Livia and I are both stronger than you seem to believe. And everyone must risk heartbreak, at one time or another." Coming to stand by his chair, she smoothed a hand over his crisp black hair. "Even you."

He shrugged irritably and ducked away from her hand. "I don't take unnecessary risks."

"Not even for love?"

"Especially not for that."

Smiling fondly, Aline shook her head. "Poor Marcus...how I look forward to the day when you fall under some woman's spell."

Marcus stood from the chair. "You'll have to wait a long time for that," he said, and left the parlor with his usual impatient stride.

The Rutledge Hotel was currently approaching a remarkable metamorphosis, at the conclusion of which it would undoubtedly be the most elegant and modern hotel in Europe. In the past five years, the owner, Harry Rutledge--a gentleman of somewhat mysterious origins--had quietly and ruthlessly acquired every lot on the street between the Capitol Theater and the Embankment, in the heart of the London theater district. It was said that in his ambitions to create the ultimate hotel, Rutledge had visited America to

observe the latest in hotel design and service, which was developing much faster there than anywhere else. Currently the Rutledge consisted of a row of private homes, but these structures would soon be razed in preparation for a monumental building the likes of which London had never seen.

Although Lord Westcliff had offered McKenna and Gideon the use of Marsden Terrace, they had opted for the more convenient location of the Rutledge. Not unexpectedly, Harry Rutledge had identified himself as a close friend of Westcliff's, leading Gideon to observe sourly that the earl certainly had a healthy proliferation of acquaintances.

Taking up residence in an elegantly appointed suite filled with brass-bound mahogany furniture, Gideon soon discovered that the hotel's reputation for quality was well deserved. After a night of sound sleep and a breakfast of crepes and out-of-season plovers' eggs, Gideon had decided to amend his opinion of London. He had to admit that a city with so many coffeehouses, gardens, and theaters couldn't be all bad. Moreover, it was the birthplace of the sandwich and the modern umbrella, surely two of man's greatest inventions.

A day of meetings and a long supper at a local tavern should have left Gideon exhausted, but he found it difficult to fall asleep that night. There was no mystery as to why he was so restless--his usual talent for self-deception was failing him. He very much feared that he was falling in love with Livia Marsden. He wanted her, adored her, craved her, every waking moment. However, whenever Gideon tried to think of what to do about Livia, he was helpless to arrive at a solution. He was not the marrying kind, and even if he were, he cared for her too much to expose her to the pack of sharks that was his family. Most of all, he was far too closely wed to the bottle to consider taking a bride--and that was something he doubted that he could change, even if he wanted to.

It began to storm outside, thunder growling and clapping while rain fell in intermittent bursts. Gideon opened a window an inch or two to admit the smell of summer rain into the room. Resting fitfully between freshly ironed linen sheets, he tried--and failed--to stop thinking about Livia. Sometime in

the middle of the night, however, he was rescued by a rap on his bedroom door and his valet's quiet murmur.

"Mr. Shaw? Pardon, Mr. Shaw...someone is waiting for you in the entrance hall. I requested that she return at a more suitable hour, but she will not go."

Gideon struggled to a sitting position and yawned, scratching his chest. "She?"

"Lady Olivia, sir."

"Livia?" Gideon was stupefied. "She can't be here. She's in Stony Cross."

"She is indeed here, Mr. Shaw."

"Jesus." Gideon leaped from the bed as if electrified, searching hastily for a robe to cover his nakedness. "Is something wrong?" he demanded. "How does she look?"

"Wet, sir."

It was still raining, Gideon realized in growing concern, wondering why in the hell Livia would have come here in the midst of a storm. "What time is it?"

The valet, who showed signs of having tugged on his rumpled clothes in a great hurry, gave a beleaguered sigh. "Two o'clock in the morning."

Too worried to bother with finding his slippers or combing his hair, Gideon strode from his bedroom, following the valet to the entrance hall.

And there was Livia, standing in a little puddle of water. She smiled at him, though her hazel-green eyes were wary beneath the brim of a sodden hat. Right at that moment, staring at her across the entrance hall, Gideon Shaw, cynic, hedonist, drunkard, libertine, fell hopelessly in love. He had never been so completely in the thrall of another human being. So enchanted, and foolishly hopeful. A thousand endearments crowded his mind, and he realized ruefully that he was every bit the mooncalf that he had accused McKenna of being the previous day.

"Livia," he said softly, approaching her. His gaze raked over her flushed,

rain-spattered face, while he thought that she looked like a bedraggled angel. "Is everything all right?"

"Perfectly all right." Her gaze chased down the front of his silk robe to his bare feet, and she reddened at the realization that he was naked beneath.

Unable to keep from touching her, Gideon reached out and took her coat, letting a shower of droplets cascade to the floor. He handed it to the valet, who went to hang the garment on a nearby rack. The sopping wet hat followed, and then Livia stood shivering before him, the hem of her skirts drenched and muddy.

"Why have you come to town?" Gideon asked gently.

Livia gave an impudent shrug, her teeth chattering from the damp. "I had some sh-shopping to do. I'm staying at Marsden Terrace. And since our respective lodgings are s-so close, I thought that I would pay a call."

"In the middle of the night?"

"The shops don't open till nine," she said reasonably. "That gives us some time to ch-chat."

He gave her an ironic look. "Yes, about seven hours. Shall we chat in the parlor?"

"No--in your room." She hugged herself in an effort to stay her shivering.

Gideon searched Livia's eyes, looking for uncertainty, finding only a need for connection, for closeness, that paralleled his own. She held his gaze as she continued to tremble. She was cold, he thought. He could warm her.

Suddenly Gideon found himself acting before he gave himself a chance to think sensibly. He gestured to the valet and murmured a few directions to him, about sending away the footman and carriage outside, and that Lady Olivia would need to be conveyed back to her residence at a discreet hour in the morning.

Taking Livia's hand, Gideon slid his arm behind her back and guided her to his room. "My bed isn't made. I wasn't expecting company at this hour."

"I should hope not," she remarked primly, as if she weren't about to

launch herself into a clandestine affair with him.

After closing the bedroom door behind them, Gideon lit a small fire in the hearth. Livia stood before him docilely, bathed in a flickering yellow-orange glow as he began to undress her. She was silent and passive, raising her arms when necessary, stepping out of her gown as it dropped in a wet heap. One by one Gideon draped her damp garments over the back of a chair, carefully removing layers of muslin and cotton and silk from her body. When she was finally naked, the firelight gilding her slender body and her long, light brown hair, Gideon did not pause to look at her. Instead he removed his own robe and covered her with it, swaddling her in silk that had been heated by his own skin. Livia gasped a little as he picked her up and carried her to bed, laying her amid the rumpled bedclothes. He straightened the covers around her and joined her beneath them, gathering her in his arms. Holding her spoon-fashion, he laid his cheek against a swath of her hair.

"Is this all right?" he whispered.

She sighed deeply. "Oh yes."

They lay together for a long time, until Livia's tension eased, and her silk-draped body was warm and pliant. One of her feet moved, her toes exploring the hairy surface of his leg. Gideon drew in his breath sharply as he felt her hips inch backward until they were cradled against his. With only a thin layer of fabric between them, she could not help but be aware of the turgid length of his erection.

"Are you sober?" she asked, nestling closer.

Gideon was acutely aroused by the voluptuous brush of her body against his hard, sensitive flesh. "I occasionally am, despite my best efforts to prevent it," he said huskily. "Why do you ask?"

She took his hand and pulled it to her breast. "Now you can seduce me without being able to claim afterward that you didn't know what you were doing."

The sweet little hill beneath his fingers was too insanely tantalizing for Gideon to resist. He caressed her lightly over the silk, then slipped his hand beneath the robe. "Livia, darling, the unfortunate fact is, I nearly always

know what I'm doing."

She gasped a little at the velvety stroke of his thumb and forefinger against her nipple. "Why is that unfortunate?"

"Because at times like this, my conscience is screaming at me to leave you alone."

Turning in his arms, Livia slid one of her thighs over his hip. "Tell your consciencethis," she said, and fastened her mouth to his.

Requiring no further encouragement, Gideon took her lips in slow, drifting, gently inquiring kisses. He opened the silk robe as if he were peeling a fragile, exotic fruit, laying her bare before him. His head lowered, and his mouth traveled tenderly over her downy skin. Finding the vulnerable places where her pulse beat most strongly, he stroked her with his lips and tongue, and caught at her lightly with his teeth until she made shivering sounds of delight. He had never known such an overwhelming need to penetrate, to enter, to possess another human being. Whispering her name, he touched the place between her thighs, where the flesh was silken and very wet, and he slipped his fingers inside her. Livia went rigid at his touch, delicate splotches of passion marking her skin, her hands opening and closing frantically against his shoulders.

Gideon teased her languidly, loving her faraway expression, the sensual helplessness of a woman being fondled and stroked into climax. Livia's eyes closed as she gave herself over to his gentle skill, gasping and arching in mounting pleasure. She reached the peak, going stiff against him, her toes curling tightly. "Yes," he whispered, his thumb swirling over her clitoris, "yes, sweet lady, sweet darling..." He brought her down slowly, tracing erotic patterns in the damp thatch of curls between her thighs, kissing her breasts until she was calm and still beneath him. Then he drew his lips over her midriff, and the soft skin of her stomach, and he pressed her thighs open with his hands.

Livia moaned as his tongue found her, while his thumb pushed inside the swollen entrance of her body. Gideon nibbled and teased her, loving the sounds she made, the rhythmic undulation of her hips as they rose against his

demanding mouth. Feeling the delicate clench of her muscles around his thumb, he realized that she was at the edge of another orgasm, and he withdrew his hand slowly. With a little protesting cry, she stretched her entire body toward him. He levered himself over her, spread her trembling limbs, and thrust inside her warm, pulsing softness.

"Oh God," he whispered, suddenly unable to move, so intense was his pleasure.

Purring, Livia wrapped her slim arms around his back and rocked her hips upward to engulf his stiff length and pull him deeper. He answered her movements compulsively, nudging, pushing, then plunging, until the sweet impact of flesh into flesh was too much to bear. She held her breath and shuddered, her body tightening around him in a rippling inner caress. Gideon withdrew from her with a harsh cry, his cock throbbing in frenzied release against her stomach.

Groaning, he collapsed beside her dizzily, his pulse thudding in his chest and loins and ears.

A long time passed before either of them could speak. Livia lifted her face from his shoulder and smiled drowsily. "Amberley never did that, at the end," she told him, her fingers playing in the hair on his chest.

Gideon grinned suddenly at the reference to his last-second withdrawal. "It's the coffeehouse method of contraception."

"Coffeehouse?"

"You go in and out without ever spending anything," he explained, and she pushed against him with a muffled laugh. He caught her wrists easily. "Livia...I have to protect you from the consequences of what we're doing, until--"

"I know," she interrupted, pulling away from him. Clearly she did not want to discuss anything of importance right now. Slipping out of bed, she gave him a provocative smile. "We'll talk about that later. But for now..."

"Yes?"

"Come and bathe me," she said...and he obliged without hesitation.

CHAPTER 17

Livia had spent approximately seven nights in London, returning with sufficient parcels and boxes to lend credence to the claim that she had gone to town for a shopping expedition. The female guests took great enjoyment in viewing some of Livia's purchases...a small, high-crowned hat trimmed with dyed feathers...gloves that had been embroidered and beaded at the wrists...shawls of lace, cashmere, and silk,...a sheaf of sketches and fabric samples from the London modiste who was making gowns for her.

Naturally, Susan Chamberlain asked if Livia had seen Mr. Shaw and McKenna while she was in London, and Livia replied with breezy offhandedness. "Oh yes, my chaperone Mrs. Smedley and I spent a most delightful evening with them at the Capitol Theater. Box seats, and an excellent view of the stage--we were positively transported!"

However, no matter how casual Livia's manner was, her statements were greeted by arched brows and pointedly exchanged gazes. Everyone, it seemed, suspected that there was far more to the story than what was being told.

Aline had heard the details of the London visit as soon as Livia had returned. She went to Livia's bedroom after her sister had changed into her nightclothes, and the two of them sat on the bed with glasses of wine. Aline leaned against one of the massive carved bedposts, while Livia settled back into the pillows. "I was with him every evening," she told Aline, her cheeks flushed. "Seven nights of absolute heaven."

"He's a good lover, then?" Aline asked with a smile, not above a little prurient curiosity.

"The most wonderful, the most exciting, the most..." Unable to think of the precise superlative she wanted, Livia sighed and sipped her wine. Regarding Aline over the delicate rim of the glass, she shook her head in wonder. "How strange it is that he could be so different from Amberley, and yet suit me just as well. Perhaps even better in some ways."

"Are you going to marry him?" Aline asked with a queer pang in her chest, happy for her sister, and yet at the same time thinking how far away America was. And if she was being honest with herself, she would have to admit that an envious voice inside was demanding to know why she too couldn't have what she most wanted.

"He proposed to me, actually," Livia said. Then she astonished Aline further by adding bleakly, "I turned him down."

"Why?"

"You know why."

Aline nodded, her gaze locking with Livia's as an entire silent conversation seemed to pass between them. Letting out a long breath, she looked down and traced the edge of her wineglass with her fingertip. "I'm certain that was the right decision, dear, though not an easy one to make."

"No, it wasn't." They sat in silence for a minute, until Livia asked, "Aren't you going to ask about McKenna?"

Aline stared into her glass. "How is he?"

"Quiet. Somewhat distracted. We...spoke of you."

A clang of warning sounded in Aline's mind as she heard the edge of guilt in Livia's cautious admission. She looked up quickly, her face stiffening. "What do you mean, you spoke of me?"

Livia took a large swallow of wine. "It turned out quite well, actually," she said guardedly. "At least, it didn't turn outbadly, although one can't be certain how he reacted to--"

"Livia, out with it!" Aline demanded, turning cold with anxiety. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing very much." Livia gave her a defensive glance. "I finally brought myself to apologize to him about what I did to both of you, so long ago. You know, when I told Father about--"

"Livia, you shouldn't have," Aline said, too furious and fearful to shout, her throat constricting to one thin channel. Her hands quivered so violently that her wine was in danger of spilling.

"There's no reason to be upset," Livia said, infuriating her further. "I didn't break my promise to you--I said nothing about your accident, or the scars. I just told him about my part in the matter, and about how our father manipulated everyone, and...well, I did happen to mention that you sent him away to protect him, because Father had threatened to harm him--"

"What?I never wanted him to know that. My God, Livia, what have you done?"

"I only told him a little part of the truth." It seemed that Livia was torn between defiance and repentance, her face flushing brightly. "I'm sorry if I've upset you. But as they say, honesty is the best policy, and in this case--"

"I've never said that!" Aline exploded. "That is the most overused, self-serving maxim in existence, and it is most definitely not the best policy in this situation. Oh, Livia, don't you realize how difficult you've made everything for me? How infinitely harder it's going to be to part from him again, now that he knows--" She broke off suddenly."When did you tell him?"

"The second night I was in London."

Aline closed her eyes sickly. The flowers had arrived two days after that. So that was why McKenna had sent the gifts, and the poem. "Livia, I could kill you," she whispered.

Evidently deciding to go on the offensive, her younger sister spoke decisively. "I don't see what is so terrible about removing one of the obstacles between you and McKenna. The only thing left to do now is for you to tell him about your legs."

Aline responded with an icy glare. "That will never happen."

"You have nothing to lose by telling him. You've always been the bravest person I've ever known until now, when you finally have a chance at happiness, and you're throwing it away because you're too stubborn and afraid--"

"I've never been brave," Aline shot back. "Bravery isn't tolerating something merely because there is no other choice. The only reason that I

haven't thrown myself to the ground and kicked my heels and screamed every day for the past twelve years is the knowledge that when I get up from the floor, nothing will have changed. My legs will always be repulsive. You can barely bring yourself to look at them--how dare you suggest that I'm being cowardly in not wanting to expose them to McKenna?" She left the bed and set her wineglass aside. "You're a bloody hypocrite, Livia--you seem to expect that McKenna should accept me no matter what my flaws are, when you refuse to do the same for Mr. Shaw."

"That's not fair," Livia protested indignantly. "The two situations are entirely different. Your scars aren't remotely comparable to his drinking--and how dare you imply that I'm being small-minded in refusing him?"

Steaming with fury, Aline strode to the door. "Just leave me in peace. And don't you dare say another word to McKenna about anything." She barely restrained herself from slamming the door as she left.

Aline and Livia had always lived in relative harmony. Perhaps it was because of the seven-year difference in their ages, which had caused Aline to assume a motherly role toward her younger sister. On the rare occasions in the past when they had argued, it had been their way to avoid each other afterward, letting their tempers cool as they sought to pretend that nothing had happened. If a quarrel had been particularly bitter, they each went separately to Mrs. Faircloth, who had always reminded them that nothing was more important than their sisterly bonds. This time, however, Aline did not confide in the housekeeper, nor did she think that Livia would. The issues were too explosively personal. Instead Aline tried to go on as usual, treating Livia with a stiff politeness that was all she could manage. She supposed that she should unbend enough to offer an apology...but apologies had never come easily to her, and she would most likely choke on it. Nor did it seem that Livia was inclined to offer the olive branch, though she was most definitely the one at fault. After three days, Aline and Livia managed to achieve a state of normalcy, although a residual frostiness lingered between them.

On Saturday evening Marcus gave an al fresco party that was soon

threatened by clouds gathering overhead. The sky turned the color of black plums, while a few preliminary droplets of rain fell onto the crowd and caused the garden torches to sputter in protest. The crowd began to drift indoors, while Aline hurried back and forth giving directions to the servants as they labored to bring refreshments, glasses, and chairs into the drawing room. In the midst of the flurry, she saw something that caused her to stop in her tracks. Livia was talking with Gideon Shaw, who must have just returned from London. They stood near the doorway, while Livia rested back against the wall. Livia was laughing at some quip he had made, her face glowing, her hands clasped behind her back as if she had to restrain herself from reaching for him.

If there had been any doubt in Aline's mind that Livia loved Gideon Shaw, it was removed at once. She had seen her sister look at only one other man that way. And although Shaw's expression was not visible from this angle, the protective inclination of his posture spoke volumes. What a pity, Aline thought. It was clear that no matter what their differences were, they had each found something necessary in the other.

She was distracted from her thoughts as she felt an odd warmth spreading over every inch of her skin, all the way up to the roots of her hair. Transfixed, she stood still while people brushed by her, heading for refuge as the storm continued to gather. The air felt damp and alive with energy, causing thrills to chase over her skin.

"Aline."

A deep voice came from behind her. She looked down for a moment, concentrating fiercely on the ground as the world seemed to tilt off its axis. When she was able to move, she turned to find McKenna just a few feet away.

It was difficult to believe that she could need another human being this much, that longing could send one into near-delirium. It required scrupulous effort to breathe, while her heart tripped clumsily behind her lungs. They stood at the edge of the garden like a pair of cold marble statues, while the rest of the party swarmed away from them.

He knows, she thought, her nerves stretched to the breaking point. There had been a change in him, some inner transformation that seemed to have released him from all constraint. He stared at her the way he used to in the days of their youth, his eyes lit with open yearning. It produced the feeling in her that only he could engender, a sort of dreamlike excitement that seemed to open all her senses.

As Aline remained mute and unmoving, a cold drop of rain struck her cheek and slid down to the corner of her mouth. McKenna came to her slowly. His hand lifted, and he captured the raindrop with the pad of his thumb, and rubbed the dampness between his fingers as if it were a precious elixir. She back-stepped instinctively, away from him, from her own insatiable longing, and he caught her easily with one hand at her back. Slowly he drew her with him into the concealment of the yew hedge.

Unable to look at him, Aline bent her head, even as McKenna pulled her close. He moved with great care, bringing her against his body until her face rested near his collar. The delicious smell of his skin drew a catch of pain from beneath her ribs, a sting that quickly eased into fluid warmth. It went far beyond sexual pleasure, standing there with his hands on her, one at her back, one at her nape. It was bliss. Completeness. The heat of his touch sank through her skin and leaked down into the marrow of her bones. His thigh pressed between her legs, nudging so gently, as if he knew of the urgent fullness that was gathering in her tender flesh. And he held her, just held her, with his mouth against her temple and his hot breath blowing over her skin. Their bodies were so close, and yet not close enough. She would gladly give away the rest of her life in exchange for one night of pure intimacy, to feel the naked length of his body, skin to skin, heart to heart.

"Thank you," Aline whispered after a long time.

"For what?" His lips moved softly against her forehead.

"The gifts," she managed. "They were lovely."

McKenna remained silent, breathing in the scent of her hair. In a desperate attempt at self-preservation, Aline attempted conversation. "Did it go well for you, in London?"

To her relief, McKenna answered. "Yes." He eased her head back, with his hand still cradling the back of her neck. "We secured the docking rights from Somerset Shipping, and all the potential investors have made firm commitments."

"Including my brother?"

That drew a quick smile from him. "He's indicated that he will throw his lot in with theirs."

She sighed with relief. "That's good."

"Now that everything has been settled, I have to leave for New York. There is much to be done, and many decisions to make."

"Yes, I..." Her voice faded as she looked up at him anxiously. "When are you leaving?"

"Tuesday."

"So soon?" she whispered.

"Shaw and I will return to New York. The Chamberlains, the Cuylers, and the rest of them want to tour abroad. They'll go to Paris first, and then to Rome."

Aline absorbed the information quietly. If the ship sailed on Tuesday, then McKenna and Shaw would probably depart from Stony Cross the day after tomorrow. She couldn't believe that she would lose him so quickly.

The rain fell harder, until sparkling water beaded on the dense black locks of McKenna's hair and ran off as if it were a seal's pelt. "We should go in," Aline said, reaching up to brush a few droplets from the inky locks. He caught at her hand and wrapped his fingers around hers, and pressed the points of her knuckles against his lips.

"When can I talk to you?" he asked.

"We're talking right now."

"You know what I want," came his low murmur.

Aline fastened her gaze to the hedge beyond his broad shoulder. Yes, she knew exactly what he intended to discuss with her, and she would have given anything to avoid it. "Early in the morning, before the guests awaken,"

she suggested. "We'll meet at the stables, and walk somewhere..."

"All right."

"Tomorrow, then," she said, ducking her head as she began to walk around him.

McKenna caught her easily, bringing her close again. He gripped the back of her braided coiffure and tugged her head back, his mouth covering hers. Aline began to sigh repeatedly as he explored her with his tongue, filling her mouth the way he wanted to fill her body.

Sensing her rising need, McKenna gripped the sides of her hips and slid his knee between her legs. He urged her against him, over and over, until her heart was pounding madly and her skin was burning everywhere, even as the coolness of rain drenched her skin and clothing. Groping for balance, she held on to his shoulders while he pressed kisses and indistinct words against her parted lips. He pulled her forward until she rode him more fully, his hands moving her in a delicious rhythm. That steady friction, right where her body had become swollen and hot...the pleasure built too quickly, and she struggled against him with a moan of denial.

McKenna eased her away, breathing raggedly. They faced each other, standing in the rain like a pair of besotted half-wits. Shrugging out of his coat, McKenna held it over Aline as a makeshift umbrella and urged her to come with him. "Inside," he murmured. "We'll get struck by lightning, standing out here." A crooked smile crossed his face as he added wryly, "Not that I would notice."

CHAPTER 19

After the last guest had departed, Aline changed into a comfortable at-home gown and went to the family receiving room. Curling up in the corner of a deeply upholstered settee, she sat and stared at nothing for what seemed to be hours. Despite the warmth of the day, she shivered beneath a lap blanket, her fingers and toes icy. At her request, a maid came to light a fire in the hearth and brought a steaming pot of tea, but nothing could take the chill away.

She heard the sounds of rooms being cleaned; servants' footsteps on the stairs, the manor being restored to order now that the house was finally cleared of visitors. There were things that she should be doing; taking household inventory, consulting with Mrs. Faircloth about which rooms should be closed and what items were needed from market. However, Aline could not seem to rouse herself from the stupor that had settled over her. She felt like a clock with a damaged mechanism, frozen and useless.

She dozed on the settee until the fire burned low and the shafts of sunlight that came through the half-closed curtains were replaced by the glow of sunset. A quiet sound awakened her, and she stirred reluctantly. Opening her bleary eyes, she saw that Marcus had come into the room. He stood near the hearth, staring at her as if she were a puzzle that he was uncertain how to solve.

"What do you want?" she asked with a frown. Struggling to a sitting position, she rubbed her eyes.

Marcus lit a lamp and approached the settee. "Mrs. Faircloth tells me that you haven't eaten all day."

Aline shook her head. "I'm just tired. I'll have something later."

Her brother stood over her with a frown. "You look like hell."

"Thank you," she said dryly. "As I said, I am tired. I need to sleep, that is all--"

"You seem to have slept most of the day--and it hasn't done you a

damned bit of good."

"What do you want, Marcus?" she asked with a spark of annoyance.

He took his time about answering, shoving his hands into the pockets of his coat as he appeared to be thinking something over. Eventually he glanced at the shape of her knees, hidden beneath the folds of her blue muslin skirts. "I've come to ask something of you," he said gruffly.

"What?"

He gestured stiffly toward her feet. "May I see them?"

Aline gave him a blank stare. "My legs?"

"Yes." Marcus sat on the other side of the settee, his face expressionless.

He had never made such a request before. Why would he want to see her legs now, after all these years? Aline could not fathom his motive, and she felt too exhausted to sort through the many tiers of emotion she felt. Certainly it would do no harm to show him, she thought. Before she allowed herself to think twice, she kicked off her slippers. Her legs were bare beneath the gown. Lifting them to the settee cushions, she hesitated before tugging the hem of her skirts and drawers up to her knees.

Other than a nearly undetectable hitch to his breathing, Marcus showed no reaction to the sight of her legs. His dark gaze moved over the ropy pattern of scars, the patches of rough, ravaged skin, down to the incongruous whiteness of her feet. Watching his impassive face, Aline didn't realize that she was holding her breath, until she felt the taut burn of her lungs. She let out a slow sigh, rather amazed that she was able to trust Marcus to this extent.

"They're not pretty," he finally said. "But they're not quite as bad as I expected." Carefully he reached over to pull the skirt back over her legs. "I suppose things that are unseen are often worse in one's imagination than they are in reality."

Aline stared curiously at the overprotective, strongwilled, often annoying brother she had come to love so dearly. As children, they had been little more than strangers to each other, but in the years since their father's death, Marcus had proved himself to be an honorable and caring man. Like

her, he was independent to a fault, outwardly social and yet fiercely private. Unlike her, he was always scrupulously honest, even when the truth was painful.

"Why did you want to see them now?" she asked.

He surprised her with a self-derisive smile. "I've never been certain how to contend with your accident, other than wish to hell that it had never happened. I can't help but feel that I failed you in some way. Seeing your legs, and knowing there is nothing I can do to make them better, is damned difficult for me."

She shook her head in bafflement. "Good Lord, Marcus, how on earth could you have prevented an accident from happening? That's taking your sense of responsibility rather too far, don't you think?"

"I've chosen to love very few people in this world," he murmured, "but you and Livia are among them--and I would give my life to spare either of you a single moment's pain."

Aline smiled at him, feeling a welcome crack in the numbness that surrounded her. Despite all better judgment, she couldn't prevent herself from asking a critical question, even as she struggled to crush the feeble stirring of hope within herself. "Marcus," she asked hesitantly, "if you loved a woman, would scars like this stop you from--"

"No," he interrupted firmly. "No, I wouldn't let them stop me."

Aline wondered if it was really true. It was possible that once again he was trying to protect her, by sparing her feelings. But Marcus was not a man to lie out of kindness.

"Don't you believe me?" he asked.

She looked at him uncertainly. "I want to."

"You are wrong to assume that I insist upon perfection in a woman. I enjoy physical beauty like any other man, but it's hardly a requirement. That would be hypocritical, coming from a man who is far from handsome himself."

Aline paused in surprise, regarding his broad, even features, his strong

jaw, the shrewd black eyes set beneath the straight lines of his brows. "You are attractive," she said earnestly. "Perhaps not in the way that someone like Mr. Shaw is...but few men are."

Her brother shrugged. "Believe me, it doesn't matter, since I've never found my looks--or lack thereof--to be an impediment in any way. Which has given me a very balanced perspective on the subject of physical beauty--a perspective that someone with your looks rarely attains."

Aline frowned, wondering if she was being criticized.

"It must be extraordinarily difficult," Marcus continued, "for a woman as beautiful as you to feel that there is a part of you that is shameful and must be concealed. You've never made peace with it, have you?"

Leaning her head against the side of the settee, Aline shook her head. "I hate these scars. I'll never stop wishing that I didn't have them. And there's nothing I can do to change them."

"Just as McKenna can never change his origins."

"If you're trying to draw a parallel, Marcus, it won't do any good. McKenna's origins have never mattered to me. There is nothing that would make me stop loving him or wanting him--" She stopped abruptly as she understood the point he had been leading to.

"Don't you think he would feel the same way about your legs?"

"I don't know."

"For God's sake, go tell him the truth. This isn't the time for you to let your pride get the better of you."

His words kindled sudden outrage. "This has nothing to do with pride!"

"Oh?" Marcus gave her a sardonic look. "You can't bear to let McKenna know that you're less than perfect. What is that if not pride?"

"It's not that simple," she protested.

His mouth twisted impatiently. "Perhaps the problem isn't simple--but the solution is. Start behaving like the mature woman you are, and acknowledge the fact that you have flaws. And give the poor devil a chance to prove that he can love you regardless."

"You insufferable know-all," she choked, yearning to slap him.

Marcus smiled grimly. "Go to him, Aline. Or I promise you that I'll go tell him myself."

"You wouldn't!"

"I've already had a carriage readied," he informed her. "I'm leaving for London in five minutes, with or without you."

"For God's sake," she exploded, "don't you ever get tired of telling everyone else what to do?"

"Actually, no."

Aline was torn between laughter and exasperation at his reply. "Until today you've done your best to discourage my relationship with McKenna. Why have you changed your mind now?"

"Because you're thirty-one and unmarried, and I've realized that this may be my only opportunity to be rid of you." Marcus grinned and ducked to avoid the halfhearted swipe of her fist, then reached out to fold her tightly in his arms. "And because I want you to be happy," he murmured against her hair.

Pressing her face against his shoulder, Aline felt tears well in her eyes.

"I feared that McKenna was going to hurt you," Marcus continued. "I believe that was his intent in the beginning. But he couldn't carry out his plans, after all was said and done. Even thinking that you had betrayed him, he couldn't help but love you. When he left today, he looked somehow...diminished. And I finally realized that he had always been in far more danger from you than you ever were from him. I actually pitied the bastard, because every man has a mortal terror of being hurt that way." Marcus fumbled for a handkerchief. "Here, take this before you ruin my coat."

Blowing her nose gustily, Aline pulled away from him. She felt horribly vulnerable, as if he were prodding her to jump off a cliff. "Remember when you once told me that you didn't like to take risks? Well, I don't either."

"As I recall, I said unnecessary risks," he replied gently. "But this seems

to be a necessary one, doesn't it?"

Aline stared at him without blinking. Try as she might, she was unable to disavow the overwhelming need that would rule the rest of her life, no matter what she chose to do now. Nothing would end when McKenna left England. She would find no more peace in the future than she had during the past twelve years. The realization made her feel sick, scared, and yet oddly elated. A necessary risk...

"I'll go to London," she said, her voice shaking only a little. "I'll only need a few minutes to change into my traveling clothes."

"No time for that."

"But I'm not dressed to go out in public--"

"As it is, we may not reach the steamer before it departs."

Galvanized by the words, Aline jammed her feet into her discarded slippers. "Marcus, you have to get me there in time!"

Despite Marcus's advice that she should try to sleep during the journey to London, Aline was awake for most of the night. Her insides seemed to knot and twist as she stared through the darkened interior of the carriage, wondering if she was going to reach McKenna before his ship, the *Britannia*, left for America. From time to time the silence was broken by the rasp of her brother's snore as he dozed on the opposite seat.

Sometime before dawn, exhaustion overcame her. She fell asleep sitting up, with her cheek crushed against the velvet curtain that draped the interior wall. Floating in a dreamless void, she awakened with difficulty as she felt Marcus's hand on her shoulder.

"What...?" she mumbled, blinking and groaning as he shook her lightly.

"Open your eyes. We're at the docks."

Aline sat up clumsily as Marcus rapped on the carriage door. The footman, Peter, who looked somewhat the worse for wear himself, opened the portal from outside. Immediately a curious mixture of odors filled the carriage. It was a malty, fishy smell, heavily tainted with coal and tobacco. The screeching of seagulls mingled with human voices...there were cries of

"Rowse-in, and bend the cable," and "Break bulk," and other equally incomprehensible phrases. Marcus swung out of the carriage, and Aline pushed back a straggling lock of hair as she leaned forward to watch him.

The scene at the docks was a swarm of activity, with an endless forest of masts extending on both sides of the channel. There were coal barges, steamboats, and too many merchantmen to count. Crowds of burly, sweat-soaked dockers used hand-held hooks to move bales, boxes, barrels, and parcels of every kind to the nearby warehouses. A row of towering iron cranes were in constant motion, each long metal arm operated by a pair of men as they discharged cargo from the hold of a ship to the quay. It was brutal work, not to mention dangerous. She could hardly believe that McKenna had once earned his living this way.

On the far end of the dock, a kiln next to the warehouses was being used to burn off the damaged tobacco, its long chimney sending a thick stream of blue smoke into the sky.

"They call that the queen's pipe," Marcus said dryly, following the direction of her gaze.

Staring along the row of warehouses to the other end of the quay, Aline saw a massive wooden paddle steamer, easily over two hundred feet in length. "Is that the Britannia?"

Marcus nodded. "I'll go find a clerk to fetch McKenna from the ship."

Aline closed her eyes tightly, trying to picture McKenna's face as he received the news. In his current disposition, he wasn't likely to take it well. "Perhaps I should go aboard," she suggested.

"No," came her brother's immediate reply. "They're going to weigh anchor soon--I'm not going to take the chance of having you sail off across the Atlantic as an accidental passenger."

"I'll cause McKenna to miss his departure," she said. "And then he'll kill me."

Marcus gave an impatient snort. "The ship is likely to launch while I stand here arguing with you. Do you want to talk to McKenna or not?"

"Yes!"

"Then stay in the carriage. Peter and the driver will look after you. I'll be back soon."

"He may refuse to disembark," she said. "I hurt him very badly, Marcus."

"He'll come," her brother replied with calm conviction. "One way or another."

A hesitant smile worked its way past Aline's distress as she watched Marcus stride away, prepared to do physical battle, if necessary, with an adversary who was nearly a head taller than he.

Settling back in the carriage, Aline pushed the curtain open and stared through the window, watching a marine policeman wander back and forth past rows of valuable sugar hogsheads piled six and eight high. As she waited, it occurred to her that she must look as if she had been pulled backward through a hedge, with her clothes rumpled and her hair a disheveled mess. She wasn't even wearing proper shoes. Hardly the image of a fine lady visiting town, she thought ruefully, regarding her toes as she wiggled them inside the knit slippers.

Minutes passed, and it became warm and stuffy in the carriage. Deciding that the smell of the docks was better than the prospect of sitting in an enclosed vehicle with no breeze, Aline began to rap on the door to summon Peter. Just as her knuckles touched the paneling, the door was wrenched open with a violence that startled her. She froze, her hand stopped in mid-motion. McKenna appeared in the doorway of the carriage, his shoulders blocking the sunlight.

He reached out to grip her arm as if he were saving her from an unexpected fall. The urgent clamp of his fingers hurt. Wincing, Aline reflected that McKenna seemed like an utter stranger. She found it impossible to believe that this harsh-featured man had held and kissed her so tenderly. "What is the matter?" he demanded, his voice grating. "Have you seen a doctor?"

"What?" She stared at him in utter bewilderment. "Why would I need a

doctor?"

McKenna's eyes narrowed, and his hand dropped from her abruptly. "You're not ill?"

"No...why would you think I..." As comprehension dawned, Aline glared at her brother, who stood just beyond him. "Marcus! You shouldn't have told him that!"

"He wouldn't have come otherwise," Marcus said without a trace of remorse.

Aline gave him a damning glance. As if matters hadn't been difficult enough, Marcus had now succeeded in making McKenna even more hostile. Unrepentant, Marcus stepped back from the carriage to allow the two of them a marginal amount of privacy.

"I'm sorry," Aline said to McKenna. "My brother misled you--I'm not ill. The reason I am here is that I desperately need to talk to you."

McKenna regarded her stonily. "There's nothing left to be said."

"There is," she insisted. "You told me the day before yesterday that you were going to talk to me honestly, or you would regret it for the rest of your life. I should have done the same, and I am so sorry that I didn't. But I've traveled all night to reach you before you left England. I am asking--no, begging you to give me a chance to explain my behavior."

He shook his head. "They're about to pull the gangway. If I don't reboard within five minutes, I'm going to be separated from all my trunks and personal papers--everything but the clothes on my back."

Aline gnawed at the insides of her cheeks, trying to contain her rising desperation. "Then I'll come aboard with you."

"And sail across the Atlantic without so much as a toothbrush?" he jeered.

"Yes."

McKenna gave her a long, hard stare. He gave no indication of what he was feeling, or even if he was considering her plea. Wondering if he was going to refuse her, Aline cast about recklessly for the right words, the key to

unlock his frozen self-control...and then she noticed the vein throbbing violently at his temple. Hope unfurled inside her. He wasn't indifferent to her, no matter that he tried to pretend otherwise.

Perhaps the only salve to McKenna's battered pride was the sacrifice of her own. Reluctantly letting her guard down, she spoke more humbly than she ever had in her life. "Please. If you still feel anything at all for me, don't go back on that ship. I swear that I will never ask anything else of you. Please let me tell you the truth, McKenna."

As another untenable silence spun out, McKenna's jaw tightened until a muscle in his cheek twitched. "Damn you," he said softly.

Aline realized with dizzying relief that he was not going to refuse her. "Shall we go to Marsden Terrace?" she dared to whisper.

"No--I'll be damned if I'll have your brother hovering over us. He can go to Marsden Terrace, while you and I talk in Shaw's rooms at the Rutledge."

Aline was afraid to say another word, on the chance that she might cause him to change his mind. She nodded and settled back in the carriage, while her heart slammed repeatedly against her ribs.

McKenna gave instructions to the driver and then climbed into the vehicle. He was immediately followed by Marcus, who did not seem terribly pleased by the plan, as he wanted the situation to remain under his immediate control. Nevertheless, he offered no protest, only sat beside Aline and folded his arms across his chest.

The silence was thick and heavy as the vehicle rolled away from the docks. Aline was wretchedly uncomfortable, her legs stiff and itching, her emotions in turmoil, her head aching. It didn't help that McKenna looked about as warm and understanding as a block of granite. Aline wasn't even certain about what she would say to him, how she could tell him the truth without engendering his pity or disgust.

As if sensing her worry, Marcus reached down and took her fingers in his, giving them a small, encouraging squeeze. Looking up, Aline saw that McKenna had noticed the subtle gesture. His suspicious gaze flickered from Marcus's face to hers. "You may as well start explaining now," he said.

Aline gave him an apologetic glance. "I would rather wait, if you don't mind."

"Fine," McKenna said derisively. "It's not as if I don't have the time."

Marcus stiffened at the other man's tone. "Look here, McKenna--"

"It's all right," Aline interrupted, digging her elbow into her brother's side. "You've helped quite enough, Marcus. I can manage on my own now."

Her brother frowned. "Be that as it may, I don't approve of you going to a hotel with no family member or servant to accompany you. There will be gossip, and you don't--"

"Gossip is the least of my worries," Aline interrupted, increasing the pressure of her elbow against his ribs, until Marcus grunted and fell silent.

After what seemed to be hours, they reached the Rutledge Hotel. The carriage stopped in the small street behind one of the four private accommodations. Aline was in an agony of anticipation as McKenna descended from the carriage and helped her down. Turning, she glanced back at Marcus. Seeing the raw helplessness in her eyes, Marcus gave her a reassuring nod, just before he spoke to McKenna in a hard voice.

"Wait. I want a word with you."

Arching one black brow, McKenna stepped aside with him. He met the earl's gaze with a look of icy inquiry. "What now?"

Marcus turned his back on Aline, and spoke too quietly for her to overhear. "I hope to hell that I haven't underestimated you, McKenna. Whatever comes of your conversation with my sister, I want to assure you of one thing--if you harm her in any way, you'll pay with your life. And I mean that literally."

Aggravated beyond bearing, McKenna shook his head and muttered some choice words beneath his breath. He strode to Aline and guided her forcibly to the back entrance, where the footman had already rapped at the door. Gideon Shaw's valet appeared at the doorway with an expression of open astonishment. "Mr. McKenna," he exclaimed, "I would have thought your ship had sailed by now--"

"It has," McKenna said curtly.

The valet blinked and strove to regain composure. "If you are searching for Mr. Shaw, sir, he is at the company offices--"

"I want the use of his rooms for a few minutes," McKenna said. "See that we're not disturbed."

With an admirable display of tact, the valet did not even glance in Aline's direction. "Yes, sir."

Brusquely McKenna ushered Aline into the residence, which was handsomely furnished in dark woods, the walls covered in rich plum-colored em-bossed paper. They went to the sitting room, with the bedroom visible just beyond. Heavy velvet drapes had been pulled back to reveal curtains of tea-dyed lace that softened the sunlight as it streamed into the room.

Aline could not control her nervousness. It erupted in a violent trembling that made her teeth click. Clenching her jaw, she went to sit in a large leather chair. After a long pause, McKenna did the same, settling back in a nearby chair and regarding her coldly. An antique French carriage clock ticked busily on the mantel, underscoring the tension that fractured the air.

Aline's mind went blank. In the carriage she had managed to think of a fairly well-structured explanation, but all her carefully considered phrases had suddenly vanished. Nervously she dampened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

McKenna's gaze flickered to her mouth, and his dark brows drew together. "Get on with it, will you?"

Aline inhaled and exhaled slowly, and rubbed her forehead. "Yes. I'm sorry. I'm just not quite certain how to begin. I'm glad of the chance to finally tell you the truth, except...this is the hardest thing I've ever done." Looking away from him into the empty hearth, Aline gripped the upholstered arms of the chair. "I must be a better actress than I thought, if I've managed to convince you that your social standing matters to me. Nothing could be further from the truth. I've never cared one whit about the circumstances of your birth...where you came from, or who you are...you could be a rag man, and it wouldn't matter to me. I would do anything, go anywhere, to be with

you." Her nails dug deep crescents into the worn leather. She closed her eyes. "I love you, McKenna. I've always loved you."

There was no sound in the room, only the crisp tick of the mantel clock. As Aline continued, she had an odd sense of listening to herself as if from a distance. "My relationship with Lord Sandridge is not what it appears. Any appearance of romantic interest between the two of us is a deception--one that has served both Lord Sandridge and myself. He does not desire me physically, and he could never entertain that kind of feeling for me because he..." She paused awkwardly. "His inclinations are limited exclusively toward other men. He proposed marriage to me as a practical arrangement--a union between friends. I won't say that I didn't find the offer attractive, but I turned him down just before you returned from London."

Opening her eyes, Aline stared down at her lap, while the blessed feeling of numbness left her. She felt raw and exposed and terrified. This was the hardest part, making herself vulnerable to a man who had the power to demolish her with a single word. A man who was justifiably furious at the way she had treated him. "The illness that I had so long ago..." she said raspily, "...you were right to suspect that I was lying about that. It wasn't a fever. I was injured in a fire--I was burned quite badly. I was in the kitchen with Mrs. Faircloth, when a pan of oil started a fire in the basket grate on the stove. I don't remember anything else. I was told that my clothes caught fire, and I was instantly covered in flames. I tried to run...a footman knocked me to the ground and beat out the flames. He saved my life. You may remember him--William--I think he was second footman when you were still at Stony Cross." She paused to take a long breath. Her trembling had eased a little, and she was finally able to steady her voice. "My legs were completely charred."

Risking a glance at McKenna, she saw that he was no longer leaning back in his chair. His body was canted slightly forward, his large frame overloaded with sudden tension, his eyes a blaze of blue-green in his skull-white face.

Aline averted her gaze once more. If she looked at him, she wouldn't be able to finish. "I was in a nightmare that I couldn't awaken from," she said.

"When I wasn't in agony from the burns, I was out of my head with morphine. The wounds festered and poisoned my blood, and the doctor said that I wouldn't last a week. But Mrs. Faircloth found a woman who was said to have special healing abilities. I didn't want to get better. I wanted to die. Then Mrs. Faircloth showed me the letter..." Remembering, she trailed into silence. That moment had been permanently engraved in her mind, when a few scrawled words on paper had eased her away from the brink of death.

"What letter?" she heard McKenna ask in a suffocated voice.

"The one you had sent to her...asking for money, because you needed to break your apprenticeship and flee from Mr. Ilbery. Mrs. Faircloth read the letter to me...and hearing the words you had written made me realize...that as long as there was a chance that you were in this world, I wanted to go on living in it." Aline stopped suddenly as her eyes blurred, and she blinked furiously to clear them.

McKenna made a hoarse sound. He came to the chair and sank to his haunches before her, breathing as if someone had delivered a crushing blow to the center of his chest.

"I never thought you'd come back," Aline said. "I never wanted you to find out about my accident. But when you returned to Stony Cross, I decided that being close to you--even for one night--was worth any risk. That is why I..." She hesitated, blushing wildly. "The night of the village fair..."

Breathing heavily, McKenna reached for the hem of her gown. Swiftly Aline bent to stop him, gripping his wrist in a convulsive movement. "Wait!"

McKenna went still, the muscles of his shoulders tightly bunched.

"Burn scars are so ugly," Aline whispered. "They're all over my legs. The right one is especially bad, where much of the skin was destroyed. The scars tighten and shrink until it's difficult to straighten my knee sometimes."

He absorbed that for a moment, and then proceeded to pry her fingers from his wrist and remove her slippers, one after the other. Aline fought a wave of nausea, knowing exactly what he was about to see. She swallowed repeatedly, while salty tears burned the back of her throat. He reached beneath her skirt and slid his hands along her tense thighs, his palms

skimming the fabric of her drawers until he found the tapes at her waist. Aline turned chalk-white, followed by brilliant scarlet, as she felt him tugging at the undergarment.

"Let me," he murmured.

She obeyed clumsily, raising her hips while he pulled the drawers over her buttocks and stripped the garment from her legs. The hem of her skirt was pushed to the tops of her thighs, the cool air washing over her exposed skin. A profuse sweat of anxiety broke out on her face and neck, and she used her sleeve to blot her cheeks and upper lip.

Kneeling before her, McKenna took hold of one of her icy feet in his warm hand. He brushed his thumb over the pink tips of her toes. "You were wearing shoes when it happened," he said, staring at the pale, smooth skin of her feet, the delicate tracing of blue veins near the arch.

Perspiration stung her eyes as she opened them to look at the top of his dark head. "Yes." Her entire body jerked as his hands slid to her ankles.

McKenna's fingers stilled. "Does it hurt when I touch you?"

"N-no." Aline blotted her face again, gasping as the slow, easy exploration continued. "It's just...Mrs. Faircloth is the only one I've ever allowed to touch my legs. In some places I can't feel anything...and in others, the skin is too sensitive." The sight of his hands sliding along her ravaged calves was almost more than she could bear. Transfixed and miserable, she watched his fingertips pass over the rough, reddened scars.

"I wish I had known," he murmured. "I should have been with you."

That made Aline want to weep, but she set her jaw hard to keep it from quivering. "I wanted you," she admitted stiffly. "I kept asking for you. Sometimes I thought you were there, holding me...but Mrs. Faircloth said they were fever dreams."

The motion of his hands stopped. The words seemed to send a tremor across his wide shoulders, as if he had taken a chill. Eventually his palms resumed their progress along her thighs, pressing them apart, his thumbs skimming the insides. "So this is what has kept us apart," he said unsteadily.

"This is why you wouldn't let me come to your bed, and why you refused my proposal. And why I had to hear the truth from Livia about what your father did, instead of hearing it from you."

"Yes."

McKenna rose on his knees, gripping the chair arms on either side of her, his face just inches from her own.

Aline had been prepared for sorrow, sympathy, repulsion...but she had never anticipated rage. She had not expected the gleam of primitive fury in his eyes, and the grimace of a man who had nearly been pushed beyond the limits of sanity. "What did you think I meant when I said that I loved you? Did you think I would give a damn about your scars?"

Stunned by his reaction, Aline responded with a single nod.

"My God." The blood rose higher in his face. "What if the situation were reversed, and I was the one who had been hurt? Would you have left me?"

"No!"

"Then why did you expect anything less of me?"

The explosive outburst caused her to shrink back in the chair. McKenna leaned forward, following her, his fury now edged with anguish. "Damnyou, Aline!" He took her face between his shaking hands, his long fingers cradling her cheeks, his eyes liquid and glittering. "You're the other half of me," he said hoarsely. "How could you think that I wouldn't want you? You've put us both through hell for no reason!"

Clearly he did not understand the source of her fear. Taking hold of his broad, hard wrists, Aline gripped them tightly, her throat working.

McKenna glared at her with ardent, angry concern. "What is it?" He kept one hand at the side of her face, while using the other to smooth the hair back from her forehead.

"It was one thing to make love to me when you didn't know about my legs. But now that you know...you will find it difficult, perhaps even impossible..."

McKenna's eyes gleamed in a way that alarmed her. "You doubt my

ability to make love to you?"

Hurriedly Aline pulled the gown back over her legs, infinitely relieved when they were covered once more. "My legs are horrible, McKenna."

He uttered a curse that startled her with its foulness, and gripped her head between his hands, forcing her to stare at him. His voice was savage. "For twelve years I have been in constant torment, wanting you in my arms and believing it would never be possible. I want you for a thousand reasons other than your legs, and...no,damn it, I want you for no reason at all, other than the fact that you're you. I want to shove myself deep inside you and stay for hours...days...weeks. I want morning and noon and nightfall with you. I want your tears, your smiles, your kisses...the smell of your hair, the taste of your skin, the touch of your breath on my face. I want to see you in the final hour of my life...to lie in your arms as I take my last breath." He shook his head, staring at her like a condemned man who beheld the face of his executioner. "Aline," he whispered, "do you know what hell is?"

"Yes." Her eyes overflowed. "Trying to exist with your heart living somewhere outside your body."

"No. It's knowing that you have so little faith in my love, you would have condemned me to a lifetime of agony." His face contorted suddenly. "To something worse than death."

"I'm sorry." Her voice cracked. "McKenna--"

"Not sorry enough." He pressed his wet face to hers, his mouth rubbing over her cheeks and chin in feverish, rough half kisses, as if he wanted to devour her. "Not nearly enough. You say you've had to live without your heart...how would you like to lose your soul as well? I've cursed every day I've had to live without you, and every night that I spent with another woman, wishing that it was you in my arms--"

"No--" she moaned.

"Wishing," he continued fiercely, "for some way to stop the memories of you from eating away at me until there was nothing left inside. I've found no peace anywhere, not even in sleep. Not even in dreams..." He broke off and assaulted her with hungry, shuddering kisses. The taste of his tears, his

mouth, made Aline disoriented and hot, her head reeling from shocks of pleasure. McKenna seemed possessed by a passion that bordered on violence, his lungs wracked with hard breaths, his hands tightening with a force that threatened to leave bruises on her tender flesh. "By God," he said with the vehemence of a man to whom entirely too much had happened, "In the past few days I've suffered the torments of the damned, and I've had enough!"

Suddenly Aline felt herself being plucked out of her chair and lifted against his chest as if she weighed nothing. "What are you doing?" she gasped.

"Taking you to bed."

Aline squirmed and struggled in his arms. Wildly she wondered how to explain to him that this would require slow degrees of acclimation, rather than full and immediate submersion. "No, McKenna, I'm not ready for that yet! Please. I want to talk first--"

"I'm tired of talking."

"I can't," she said desperately. "I need some time. And I'm exhausted ...I haven't slept properly in days, and--"

"Aline," he interrupted tersely, "the forces of heaven and hell combined couldn't stop me from making love to you right now."

That hardly left room for ambiguity. Quaking, Aline felt a renewed sweat break out on her face.

McKenna pressed his mouth to her shimmering cheek. "Don't be afraid," he whispered. "Not with me."

She couldn't help it. The habits of privacy and isolation had been established over twelve long years. And the knowledge that he would allow her no retreat, no refuge, made her heart thrash violently as McKenna carried her into the next room with purposeful strides. Reaching the bed, he lowered her to her feet, and leaned over to pull back the brocaded counterpane. As Aline stared at the smooth expanse of freshly laundered white linen, her stomach plummeted.

McKenna reached for the buttons of her gown, his fingers moving along

the front placket to unfasten her bodice. After letting the loosened gown drop to the floor, McKenna grasped Aline's chemise and pulled it over her head. Goose bumps rose over her skin as she stood naked and trembling before him. It took all her will to keep from trying to cover herself, to hide the disparate parts of her body.

McKenna brushed the backs of his fingers against the slope of her breast, trailing them down to the quivering tautness of her midriff. He massaged the cool skin, then slid his arms around her with extreme care, whispering something soft and indecipherable into her tumbled hair. She took hold of the lapels of his coat, resting her face against his shirtfront. He was infinitely tender as he pulled the pins from her hair, dropping them to the carpeted floor. Soon the long locks hung loose and free, tickling her back with heavy silkiness.

Sliding his hand beneath her jaw, McKenna turned her face upward and fitted his lips to hers in a long, incendiary kiss that made her knees buckle. She was caught firmly against his body, the tips of her breasts softly abraded by the broadcloth of his coat. Her lips parted helplessly beneath his, and McKenna demanded more, creating a seal of moisture and heat and erotic suction as he drove his tongue into the warm depths of her mouth.

His hand ran possessively down her back and over the swell of her buttocks. Finding the vulnerable spot just below her spine, he brought her closer against his front until she felt the thick shape of his arousal mounded tightly behind his trousers. He nudged against her deliberately, as if to demonstrate the scalding eagerness of his flesh to join with hers. She gave a little sob against his mouth. Allowing her no time to think, McKenna reached over her buttocks and between her thighs, while one of his legs expertly nudged hers apart. He kept her locked securely against his body, while his fingers parted her intimate flesh, stroking, spreading the secret softness to leave her open and vulnerable.

Poised on his hand, Aline arched her back slightly as he slid two fingers inside her. More, her body demanded, undulating to take him deeper. She wanted McKenna all over her, against her, inside her, filling every empty

space. More of him, and more, leaving no cruel modicum of distance between them.

McKenna adjusted her body until his shaft fit snugly against the notch between her thighs, providing a delectable friction that corresponded perfectly with the slow wriggle of his fingers. He urged her against himself, dragging her repeatedly over the rock-hard swell of his loins, caressing her outside and inside in a lazy but unfaltering rhythm. He smoothed his cheek over her hair, and rubbed his lips into the dark filaments until he had reached the sweat-dampened roots. Aline felt her body tightening, throbbing, the pleasure intensifying until she had almost reached the bright flashpoint of release. His mouth took hers again, his tongue penetrating her gently, a soul kiss that flooded her with aching bliss. Oh, yes...oh yes...

To her frustration, McKenna lifted his mouth from hers and withdrew his fingers just as the rocketing sensation began to crest. "Not yet," he whispered, while she shuddered wildly.

"I need you," she said, barely able to speak.

His damp fingers traced the taut line of her throat. "Yes, I know. And when I finally let you leave this bed, you're going to understand exactly how much I need you. You're going to know all the ways that I want you...and how completely you belong to me." McKenna picked her up and laid her on the bed, setting her on the pressed linen sheets. Still fully clothed, he leaned over her naked body. His dark head lowered, and she felt his lips touch her knee.

It was the last place she wanted to feel his mouth, against the ugliest of her scars. Turning cold, Aline protested and tried to roll away from him. McKenna caught her easily, grasping her hips in his hands. He pinned her to the mattress, while his mouth wandered back to her knee. "You don't have to do that," Aline said, cringing. "I would rather you didn't...really, there's no need to prove--"

"Shut up," McKenna said tenderly, continuing to kiss her legs, accepting her scars as she had never been able to do for herself. He touched her everywhere, his hands stroking and caressing her shrinking flesh. "It's all

right," he murmured, reaching up to rub her taut stomach in soothing circles. "I love you. All of you." His thumb traced the small circle of her navel, and he nibbled at the delicate skin high inside her thigh. "Open for me," he whispered, and she colored violently. "Open," he urged, the velvety kisses venturing higher.

Moaning, she parted her legs, feeling the desire rise again. McKenna's mouth delved into the exposed cleft, his tongue tracing the swelling bud of her sex, then slipping lower to probe the salt-scented entrance of her body. Aline felt her body turning heavy, her senses unlocking, all awareness focused on the delicate, excruciatingly light stroking between her legs. McKenna drew back to blow lightly on her wet flesh, then worried the peak of her sex with the tip of his tongue. She clenched her fists and dug her head back, pressing herself upward, making pleading sounds in her throat. Just as she thought she could take no more of the artful torture, he slid three fingers inside her, the hard knobs of his knuckles plunging into the slick channel. She couldn't think, couldn't move, her body immersed with pleasure. His mouth tugged at her, while his entwined fingers twisted and thrust until she cried out sharply, convulsing in ecstasy.

While she lay gasping on the bed, McKenna stood and shrugged out of his coat, his gaze locked on her supine form. He undressed before her, dropping his shirt to reveal a tautly muscled torso and a chest covered with black hair. His big-framed body was clearly built for power rather than elegance. Yet there was something innately graceful about the long lines of muscle and sinew, and the heavy breadth of his shoulders. He was a man who made a woman feel safe, and at the same time, deliciously overpowered.

Joining her on the bed, McKenna slid a large hand behind her neck and settled over her, nudging her legs apart. Aline's breath caught as she absorbed the sensation of his naked body pressed all along hers...the hard, hair-roughened limbs, the stunning breadth of his chest, and the places where satin skin stretched over rippling muscle. McKenna grasped her right thigh, carefully adjusting her knee to keep the contracture scar from pulling.

Wonderingly she lifted a hand to the side of his face, caressing the

close-shaven surface of his cheek. The moment was so tender, so sweet, that tears spilled from her eyes. "McKenna...I never dared to dream about this."

His thick lashes swept downward, and he pressed his forehead against hers. "I did," he said gruffly. "For thousands of nights I dreamed of making love to you. No man on earth has ever hated sunrise as much as I do." He bent to kiss her lips, her throat, the rosy tips of her breasts. Drawing on her lightly, he stroked her nipple with his tongue, and as she quivered in response, he reached down to guide himself inside her. He entered her, filling her until they were matched hip to hip. They both gasped at the moment of joining, hard flesh immersed in softness, the deep, unbearably sweet fusion of their bodies.

Aline drew her hands over McKenna's flexing back, while he slid his hands beneath her bottom, pulling her neatly into his savoring thrusts. "Don't ever doubt my love," he said raggedly.

She shuddered hungrily with each wet, hard lunge, and whispered obediently through kiss-swollen lips. "Never."

McKenna's features gleamed from mingled exertion and emotion. "Nothing in my life has ever compared to what I feel for you. You're all I want...all I need...and that will never change." He groaned harshly as the headlong rush of release began. "God...tell me that you know that...tell me..."

"I do," Aline whispered. "I love you." The ultimate pleasure rippled through her once more, silencing her with its power and acuity, causing her flesh to enclose his with pulsing heat.

Afterward, Aline was barely conscious as McKenna tenderly used a corner of the sheet to wipe the film of sweat and tears from her face. Cuddling against his bare shoulder, she closed her eyes. She was replete, and exhausted, and filled with wholesale relief. "I'm so tired, McKenna..."

"Sleep, my love," he whispered, smoothing her long hair, lifting the damp locks away from the back of her neck. "I'll be here to watch over you."

"You sleep too," she said groggily, her hand creeping to the center of his chest.

"No." McKenna smiled and pressed a soft kiss against her temple. His voice was husky with wonder. "Not when staying awake is better than anything I could find in a dream."

It was late afternoon by the time Gideon returned to his rooms at the Rutledge. He was tired, gray-faced, and irritable, wanting a drink so badly that he could hardly see straight. Instead he had downed enough coffee to float a timber barge. He had smoked too, until the smell of a cigar had started to make him nauseated. It was a novel experience, this pairing of exhaustion and over-stimulation. Considering the alternative, however, he supposed he had better get used to the feeling.

Entering the residence, Gideon was immediately met by his valet, who had some rather surprising news to convey. "Sir...it seems that Mr. McKenna did not depart for New York as scheduled. He came here, as a matter of fact. Accompanied by a woman."

Gideon gave the valet a blank look. Considering the information for a long moment, he frowned inquiringly and rubbed his jaw. "Dare I ask--was it Lady Aline?"

The valet nodded at once.

"I'll be damned," Gideon said softly, his surliness replaced by a slow smile. "Are they still here?"

"Yes, Mr. Shaw."

Gideon's smile broadened into a grin as he speculated on the unexpected turn of events. "So he finally got what he wanted," he murmured. "Well, all I can say is, McKenna had better get his hindquarters back to New York soon. Someone's got to build the damned foundry."

"Yes, sir."

Wondering how long McKenna was going to make use of his rooms, Gideon headed to the bedroom and paused at the door, discerning that no noise came from within. Just as he turned to leave, he heard a brusque summons.

"Shaw?"

Cautiously Gideon opened the door a crack and ducked his head inside. He saw McKenna propped up on his elbow, his tanned chest and shoulders contrasting with the gleaming white linens. Little was visible of Lady Aline, save for a few locks of dark brown hair that draped over the edge of the mattress. She was snuggled in the crook of his arm, sleeping soundly as McKenna drew the bedclothes protectively over her bare shoulder.

"Missed your ship, did you?" Gideon asked mildly.

"Had to," McKenna replied. "It turns out that I was about to leave something important behind."

Gideon stared at his friend intently, struck by the difference in him. McKenna looked younger and happier than Gideon had ever seen him. Carefree, in fact, with a relaxed smile on his lips and a lock of hair tumbling over his forehead. As Lady Aline stirred against him, her sleep disrupted by the sound of their voices, McKenna bent to soothe her with a soft murmur.

In the past Gideon had seen McKenna with women in far more licentious circumstances than this. But for some reason the brilliant, unguarded tenderness of McKenna's expression seemed unspeakably intimate, and Gideon felt an unfamiliar heat creeping up his face. Damnation--he hadn't blushed since the age of twelve.

"Well," Gideon said flatly, "since you've helped yourself to the use of my rooms, it seems I'll have to find other accommodations for the night. Of course, I wouldn't think twice about putting you out...but for Lady Aline, I'll make an exception."

"Go to Marsden Terrace," McKenna suggested with a sudden gleam of mischief in his eyes. His gaze returned compulsively to Lady Aline's sleeping face, as if he found it impossible to look away from her for more than a few seconds. "Westcliff is there alone--he might welcome the company."

"Oh, splendid," Gideon replied sourly. "He and I can have a lengthy discussion about why I should stay the hell away from his youngest sister. Not that it matters, since Livia will have forgotten all about me in six months."

"I doubt it," McKenna said, and grinned. "Don't give up hope. Nothing's

impossible--God knows I'm proof of that."

Epilogue

The blustery February wind whistled against the parlor window, diverting Livia's attention from the letter in her hand. Curled in the corner of a settee with a cashmere blanket over her lap, she shivered pleasantly at the contrast of the damp, bitter winter day outside, and the cheerful warmth of the parlor. A mahogany letter box sat open beside her, one side of it filled with a neat stack of letters, and the other side stuffed with a far more ungainly pile tied with a blue ribbon. The smaller stack was from her sister Aline, whose letters from New York had been surprisingly regular, considering her notorious laxness in matters of correspondence.

The other mass of letters was from an entirely different source, all written in the same masculine scrawl. By turns playful, touching, informative and searingly intimate, these letters told the story of a man's struggle to change himself for the better. They also spoke of a love that had deepened and matured during the past months. It seemed to Livia that she had come to know a different man than the one she had met at Stony Cross, and while her attraction to the original Gideon had been impossible to resist, the former rake was turning into a man that she could trust and depend on. Reaching down to the blue ribbon, she stroked the satiny surface with her fingertip, before turning her attention back to the letter from Aline...they say the population of New York City will reach a half-million in the next two years, and I can well believe it, with foreigners such as myself pouring in every day. This blend of nationalities gives the city a wonderfully cosmopolitan aspect. Everyone here seems to take a large, liberal view of matters, and at times I have actually felt a bit provincial in my opinions. I have finally begun to adjust to the pace of things here, and have caught the New York mania for improving oneself. I am learning a great many new things, and have acquired the art of making decisions and purchases with a rapidity that will no doubt amuse you when we meet again. As you can imagine, Mrs. Faircloth has a firm command of the household staff, and seems quite enamored of the markets west of Manhattanville, where every conceivable variety of produce

is available. It is remarkable, really, that two miles away from towering eight-story buildings, one can find rural country with an abundance of miniature farms. I have barely begun to explore this handsomely built city, and I am pleased to say that I generally accomplish more in a week here than I did in a month back at Stony Cross.

Lest I mislead you, however, I will confess that McKenna and I do have our lazy days now and then. Yesterday we went sleighing through Washington Square, with silver bells jangling on the horses's harnesses, and then we spent the rest of the day snuggled by the hearth. I forbade McKenna to do any work at all, and naturally he obeyed me, as an American wife is ruler of the home (though we cleverly give all outward appearance of authority to the husband). I am a benevolent dictator, of course, and McKenna seems to be quite content with the arrangement...

Smiling, Livia looked up from the letter as she heard the sounds of a carriage outside. As the parlor was conveniently situated at the front of the manor, she had the advantage of seeing all the comings and goings at the entrance drive. The sight of a black carriage and a team of four was hardly unusual at Stony Cross Park. However, as Livia stared at the horses, whose breath was blowing white from their nostrils, she felt a tug of curiosity. Marcus had said nothing about visitors arriving today--and it was too early in the day for anyone to make calls.

Standing from the settee, Livia wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and peered through the window. A footman headed for the front door, while another opened the vehicle and stood back. A tall, lean form emerged from the carriage, eschewing the use of a step and descending easily to the ground. The man was clad in a black coat and an elegant hat, beneath which a gleam of blond hair was visible.

A thrill of sudden, intense excitement stole Livia's breath away. She watched him without blinking, rapidly calculating...yes, it had been six months, almost to the day. But Gideon had made it clear that he wouldn't come for her unless he was certain that he could be the kind of man he felt she deserved. And I'll come armed with honorable intentions, he had written--

more's the pity for you.

Now Gideon was more handsome than before, if that was possible. The lines of strain and cynicism had been smoothed away, and the dark smudges had disappeared from beneath his eyes, and he looked so vibrant and vigorous that her heart thudded wildly in response.

Although Livia didn't move or make a sound, something drew Gideon's attention to the window. He stared at her through the glass panes, seemingly riveted by the sight of her. Livia stared back at him, wrenched with exquisite longing. Oh, to be in his arms again, she thought, touching the window, her fingertips leaving watery circles in the thin glaze of frost.

A slow smile began on Gideon's face, and his blue eyes sparkled. With a shake of his head, he put his hand on his chest, as if the sight of her was more than his heart could bear.

Smiling brilliantly, Livia tilted her head to the side, gesturing to the front entrance. Hurry! she mouthed.

Gideon nodded at once, throwing her a glance rife with promise as he strode away from the window.

As soon as he was gone from sight, Livia tossed the blanket to the settee and found that her sister's letter was still half crumpled in the clutch of her fingers. She smoothed the sheet of paper and pressed a kiss to it. The rest of the letter could wait. "Later, Aline," she whispered. "I've got to see about my own happy ending." And laughing breathlessly, she dropped the letter into the mahogany box as she rushed from the room.

END