



Prologue

London, 1843

Two young women stood at the threshold of the perfumery, one tugging impatiently at the arm of the other. "Do we have to go in there?" the smaller one was saying in a flat American accent, resisting as the other pulled her forcibly into the quietly lit shop. "I'm always bored to tears in these places, Lillian--you stand there and smell things for hours--"

"Then wait in the carriage with the maid."

"That's even more boring! Besides, I'm not supposed to let you go anywhere alone. You'd get into trouble without me."

The taller girl laughed with unladylike gusto as they entered the shop. "You don't want to keep me from getting into trouble, Daisy. You just don't want to be left out if I do."

"Unfortunately there's no adventure to be found in a perfume shop," came the surly reply.

A gentle chuckle greeted the statement, and the two girls turned to face the bespectacled old man who stood behind the scarred oak counter that stretched along the side of the shop. "Are you entirely certain of that, miss?" he asked, smiling as they approached him. "There are some who believe that perfume is magic. The fragrance of a thing is its purest essence. And certain scents can awaken phantoms of past love, of sweetest reminiscence."

"Phantoms?" Daisy repeated, intrigued, and the other girl replied impatiently.

"He doesn't mean it literally, dear. Perfume can't summon a ghost. And it's not really magic. It's only a mixture of scent particles that travel to the olfactory receptors in your nose."

The old man, Mr. Phineas Nettle, stared at the girls with growing interest. Neither of them was conventionally beautiful, although they were both striking, with pale skin and heavy dark hair, and a certain clean-featured appeal that seemed indigenous to American girls. "Please," he invited,

gesturing to a nearby wall of shelves, "you are welcome to view my wares, Miss..."

"Bowman," the older girl said pleasantly. "Lillian and Daisy Bowman." She glanced at the expensively dressed blond woman whom he had been attending, seeming to understand that he was not yet at liberty to assist them.

While the indecisive customer hovered over an array of perfumes that Nettle had brought out for her, the American girls browsed among the shelves of perfumes, colognes, pomades, waxes, creams, soaps, and other items intended for beauty care. There were bath oils in stoppered crystal bottles, and tins of herbal unguents, and tiny boxes of violet pastilles to freshen the breath. Lower shelves held treasure troves of scented candles and inks, sachets filled with clove-saturated smelling salts, potpourri bowls, and jars of pastes and balms. Nettle noticed, however, that while the younger girl, Daisy, viewed the assortment with only mild interest, the older one, Lillian, had stopped before a row of oils and extracts that contained pure scent. Rose, frangipani, jasmine, bergamot, and so forth. Lifting the amber glass bottles, she opened them carefully and inhaled with visible appreciation.

Eventually the blond woman made her choice, purchased a small flacon of perfume, and left the shop, a small bell ringing cheerfully as the door closed.

Lillian, who had turned to glance at the departing woman, murmured thoughtfully, "I wonder why it is that so many light-haired women smell of amber..."

"You mean amber perfume?" Daisy asked.

"No--their skin itself. Amber, and sometimes honey..."

"What on earth do you mean?" the younger girl asked with a bemused laugh. "People don't smell like anything, except when they need to wash."

The pair regarded each other with what appeared to be mutual surprise. "Yes, they do," Lillian said. "Every one has a smell...don't say you've never noticed? The way some people's skin is like bitter almond, or violet, while others..."

"Others have a scent like plum, or palm sap, or fresh hay," Nettle commented.

Lillian glanced at him with a satisfied smile. "Yes, exactly!"

Nettle removed his spectacles and polished them with care, while his mind swarmed with questions. Could it be? Was it possible that this girl could actually detect a person's intrinsic scent? He himself could--but it was a rare gift, and not one that he had ever known a woman to have.

Withdrawing a slip of folded paper from a beaded bag that hung from her wrist, Lillian Bowman approached him. "I have a formula for a perfume," she said, handing him the paper, "though I'm not quite certain of the proper proportions for the ingredients. Might you be able to blend it for me?"

Nettle opened the paper and read the list, his graying brows lifting slightly. "An unconventional combination. But very interesting. It could work nicely, I think." He glanced at her with keen interest. "May I ask how you obtained this formula, Miss Bowman?"

"It came from my head." An artless smile softened her features. "I tried to think of what scents might be most effective with my own alchemy. Though as I said, the proportions are difficult for me to figure out."

Lowering his gaze to conceal his skepticism, Nettle read the formula once more. Often a customer would come to him requesting that he mix a perfume that contained a predominant scent like roses or lavender, but no one had ever given him a list like this. More interesting still was the fact that the selection of scents was unusual and yet harmonious. Perhaps it was an accident that she had managed to choose this particular combination.

"Miss Bowman," he said, curious as to how far her abilities extended, "would you allow me to show you some of my perfumes?"

"Yes, of course," came Lillian's cheerful reply. She drew close to the counter as Nettle brought forth a small crystal bottle filled with pale, glittering fluid. "What are you doing?" she asked, while he shook out a few drops of the perfume onto a clean linen handkerchief.

"One should never inhale perfume directly from the bottle," Nettle

explained, giving her the handkerchief. "You must first aerate it, to float off the alcohol ...and then one is left with the true fragrance. Miss Bowman, what scents are you able to detect in this perfume?"

It required great effort for even the most experienced perfumers to separate the components of a blended perfume...minutes or even hours of repeated inhalations to discern one ingredient at a time.

Lillian lowered her head to breathe in the fragrance from the handkerchief. Without hesitation, she astonished Nettle by identifying the composition with the nimble finesse of a pianist running through practice scales. "Orange blossom ...neroli ...ambergris, and...moss?" She paused, her lashes lifting to reveal velvety-brown eyes that held a glint of puzzlement. "Moss in perfume?"

Nettle stared at her in open astonishment. The average person was severely limited in his ability to recognize the components of a complex smell. Perhaps he could identify a primary ingredient, an obvious aroma like rose, or lemon, or mint, but the layers and refinements of a particular scent were far beyond most humans' ability to detect.

Recovering his wits, Nettle smiled faintly at her question. He often graced his perfumes with peculiar notes that gave the fragrance depth and texture, but no one had ever guessed at one of them before. "The senses delight in complexity, in hidden surprises ...here, try another." He produced a fresh handkerchief and moistened it with another perfume.

Lillian performed the task with the same miraculous ease. "Bergamot ...tuberose ...frankincense..." She hesitated, inhaling again, letting the rich spice fill her lungs. A wondering smile touched her lips. "And a hint of coffee."

"Coffee?" her sister, Daisy, exclaimed, and bent her head over the flask. "There's no coffee smell in there."

Lillian threw Nettle a questioning glance, and he smiled, confirming her guess. "Yes, it is coffee." He shook his head in admiring surprise. "You have a gift, Miss Bowman."

Shrugging, Lillian replied wryly, "A gift that's of little use while

searching for a husband, I'm afraid. It's just my luck to have such a useless talent. I would do better to have a fine voice, or great beauty. As my mother says, it's impolite for a lady to like to smell things."

"Not in my shop," Nettle replied.

They proceeded to discuss aromas as other people might have discussed art they had seen in a museum: the sweet, murky, living odors of a forest after a few days of rain; the malty-sweet breeze of the sea; the musty richness of a truffle; the fresh acrid snap of a snow-filled sky. Quickly losing interest, Daisy wandered to the cosmetic shelves, opened a jar of powder that made her sneeze, and selected a tin of pastilles that she proceeded to crunch noisily.

As the conversation continued, Nettle learned that the girls' father owned a New York business enterprise that manufactured scents and soaps. From occasional visits to the company's laboratory and factories, Lillian had gained a rudimentary knowledge of fragrance and blending. She had even helped to develop a scent for one of Bowman's soaps. Her training had been nonexistent, but it was obvious to Nettle that she was a prodigy. However, such talent would go forever undeveloped because of her gender.

"Miss Bowman," he said, "I have an essence that I would like to show you. If you will be so kind as to wait here while I locate it at the back of my shop...?"

Her curiosity piqued, Lillian nodded and leaned her elbows on the counter, while Nettle disappeared behind a curtained doorway that led from the shopfront to the storeroom in back. The room was filled with files of formulas, cupboards of distillations and extracts and tinctures, and shelves of utensils and funnels and mixing bottles and measuring glasses--everything necessary for his craft. On the highest shelf reposed a few linen-wrapped volumes of ancient Gallic and Greek texts on the art of perfumery. A good perfumer was part alchemist, part artist, and part wizard.

Ascending a wooden stepladder, Nettle procured a small pine box from the top shelf and brought it down. Returning to the front of the shop, he set the box on the counter. Both the Bowman sisters watched closely as he flipped open the tiny brass hinge to reveal a small bottle sealed with thread

and wax. The half ounce of near-colorless fluid was the most costly essence that Nettle had ever procured.

Unsealing the bottle, he applied a precious drop to a handkerchief and gave it to Lillian. The first inhalation was light and mild, almost innocuous. But as it traveled up the nose, it became a surprisingly voluptuous fragrance, and long after the initial rush had faded, a certain sweet influence lingered.

Lillian regarded him over the edge of the handkerchief with patent wonder. "What is it?"

"A rare orchid that gives off its scent only at night," Nettle replied. "The petals are pure white, far more delicate even than jasmine. One cannot obtain the essence by heating the blossoms--they are too fragile."

"Cold enfleurage, then?" Lillian murmured, referring to the process of soaking the precious petals in sheets of fat until it was saturated with their fragrance, then using an alcohol-based solvent to draw out the pure essence.

"Yes."

She took another breath of the exquisite essence. "What is the orchid's name?"

"Lady of the Night."

That elicited a delighted chuckle from Daisy. "That sounds like the title of one of the novels my mother has forbidden me to read."

"I would suggest using the orchid's scent in place of the lavender in your formula," Nettle said. "More costly, perhaps, but in my opinion it would be the perfect base note, especially if you want amber as a fixative."

"How much more expensive?" Lillian asked, and when he named the price, her eyes widened. "Good Lord, that's more than its weight in gold."

Nettle made a show of holding the little bottle up to the light, where the liquid glittered and shimmered like a diamond. "Magic is not inexpensive, I'm afraid."

Lillian laughed, even as her gaze followed the bottle with hypnotic fascination. "Magic," she scoffed.

"This perfume will make magic happen," he insisted, smiling at her. "In

fact, I will add a secret ingredient to enhance its effects."

Charmed but clearly disbelieving, Lillian made plans with Nettle to return later in the day to collect the perfume. She paid for Daisy's tin of pastilles as well as the promised fragrance, and walked outside with her younger sister. One glance at Daisy's face revealed that her younger sister's imagination, always easily stirred, was running rampant with thoughts of magic formulas and secret ingredients.

"Lillian...you are going to let me try some of that magic perfume, aren't you?"

"Don't I always share?"

"No."

Lillian grinned. Despite the sisters' pretend rivalry and occasional squabbles, they were each other's staunchest ally and closest friend. Few people in Lillian's life had ever loved her except for Daisy, who adored the ugliest stray dogs, the most annoying children, and things that needed to be repaired or thrown out altogether.

And yet for all their closeness, they were quite different. Daisy was an idealist, a dreamer, a mercurial creature who alternated between childlike whimsy and shrewd intelligence. Lillian knew herself to be a sharp-tongued girl with a fortress of defenses between herself and the rest of the world--a girl with well-maintained cynicism and a biting sense of humor. She was intensely loyal to the small circle of people in her sphere, especially the wallflowers, the self-named group of girls who had met while sitting at the side of every ball and soiree last season. Lillian, Daisy, and their friends Annabelle Peyton and Evangeline Jenner had all sworn to help one another find husbands. Their efforts had resulted in Annabelle's successful match with Mr. Simon Hunt just two months ago. Now Lillian was next in line. As of yet, they had no clear idea about whom they were going to catch, or a solid plan for how they were going to get him.

"Of course I'll let you try the perfume," Lillian said.

"Though heaven knows what you expect from it."

"It's going to make a handsome duke fall madly in love with me, naturally," Daisy replied.

"Have you noticed how few men in the peerage are young and nice-looking?" Lillian asked wryly. "Most of them are dull-witted, ancient, or possess the kind of face that should have a hook in its mouth."

Daisy snickered and slid an arm around her waist. "The right gentlemen are out there," she said. "And we're going to find them."

"Why are you so certain?" Lillian asked wryly.

Daisy gave her an impish smile. "Because we've got magic on our side."

CHAPTER 2

Marcus rode away from the manor, guiding his horse along the well-traveled forest path beyond the gardens. As soon as he crossed a sunken lane and ascended the incline on the other side, he gave the animal its head, until they were thundering across fields of meadowsweet and sun-dried grass. Stony Cross Park possessed the finest acreage in Hampshire, with thick forests, brilliantly flowered wet meadows and bogs, and wide golden fields. Once reserved as hunting grounds for royalty, the estate was now one of the most sought-after places to visit in England.

It suited Marcus's purposes to have a more or less constant stream of guests at the estate, providing ample company for the hunting and sports that he loved, and also allowing for quite a bit of financial and political maneuvering. All kinds of business were done at these house parties, at which Marcus often persuaded a certain politician or professional man to side with him on important issues.

This party should be no different from any other--but for the past few days, Marcus had been deviled by a growing sense of unease. As a supremely rational man, he did not believe in psychic premonitions, or any of the spiritualist nonsense that was becoming fashionable of late...but it did seem as if something in the atmosphere at Stony Cross Park had changed. The air was charged with expectant tension, like the vibrant calm before a storm. Marcus felt restless and impatient, and no amount of physical exertion seemed to pacify his growing disquiet.

Contemplating the evening ahead of him, and the knowledge that he would have to hobnob with the Bowmans, Marcus felt his unease sharpen into something approaching anxiety. He regretted having invited them. In fact, he would gladly forgo any potential business deal with Thomas Bowman if he could just be rid of them. However, the fact was that they were here, and would stay for well nigh a month, and he might as well make the best of things.

Marcus intended to launch into an active negotiation with Thomas Bowman about expanding his soap company to establish a production division in Liverpool or, perhaps, Bristol. The British soap tax was almost certain to be repealed in the next few years, if Marcus's liberal allies in Parliament were to be trusted. When that happened, soap would become far more affordable for the common man, which would be good for the public health and, conveniently, also good for Marcus's bank account, hinging on Bowman's willingness to take him on as a partner.

However, there was no escaping the fact that a visit from Thomas Bowman meant enduring his daughters' presence as well. Lillian and Daisy were the embodiment of the objectionable trend of American heiresses coming to England to husband-hunt. The peerage was being set upon by ambitious misses who gushed about themselves in their atrocious accents and constantly angled for publicity in the papers. Graceless, loud, self-important young women who sought to purchase a peer with their parents' money...and often succeeded.

Marcus had become acquainted with the Bowman sisters on their previous visit to Stony Cross Park, and had found little to recommend either of them. The older one, Lillian, had become a particular focus of his dislike when she and her friends--the wallflowers, they called themselves (as if it were something to be proud of!)--had engineered a scheme to entrap a peer into marriage. Marcus would never forget the moment when the scheme had been exposed. "Good God, is there nothing you won't stoop to?" Marcus had asked Lillian. And she had replied brazenly, "If there is, I haven't discovered it yet."

Her extraordinary insolence made her different from any other woman of Marcus's acquaintance. That, and the rounders game they had played in their drawers, had convinced him that Lillian Bowman was a hellion. And once he had passed judgment on someone, he rarely changed his opinion.

Frowning, Marcus considered the best way to deal with Lillian. He would be cool and detached, no matter what provocation she offered. No doubt it would infuriate her to see how little she affected him. Picturing her

irritation at being ignored, he felt the tightness in his chest ease. Yes...he would do his utmost to avoid her, and when circumstances forced them to occupy the same room, he would treat her with cold politeness. His frown clearing, Marcus guided his horse over a series of easy jumps; a hedge, a fence and a narrow stone wall, rider and animal working together in perfect coordination.

"Now, girls," Mrs. Mercedes Bowman said, regarding her daughters sternly as she stood in the doorway of their room, "I insist that you nap for at least two hours, so that you will be fresh for this evening. Lord Westcliff's dinners usually start late, and last till midnight, and I don't want either of you to yawn at the table."

"Yes, Mother," they both said dutifully, regarding her with innocent expressions that did not deceive her in the least.

Mrs. Bowman was a rampantly ambitious woman with an abundance of nervous energy. Her spindle-thin body would have made a whippet look chubby. Her anxious, hard-edged chatter was usually directed toward advancing her main objective in life: to see that both her daughters were brilliantly married. "Under no circumstances are you to leave this room," she continued sternly. "No sneaking about on Lord Westcliff's estate, no adventures, scrapes, or happenings of any kind. In fact, I intend to lock the door to ensure that you stay safely in here and rest."

"Mother," Lillian protested, "if there is a duller spot in the civilized world than Stony Cross, I'll eat my shoes. What possible trouble could we get into?"

"You create trouble from thin air," Mercedes said, her eyes slitted. "Which is why I am going to supervise the pair of you closely. After your behavior on our last visit here, I am amazed that we were invited back."

"I'm not," Lillian rejoined dryly. "Everyone knows that we're here because Westcliff has an eye on Father's company."

"Lord Westcliff," Mercedes corrected with a hiss. "Lillian, you must refer to him with respect! He is the wealthiest peer in England, with a bloodline--"

"--that's older than the queen's," Daisy interrupted in a singsong tone, having heard this speech on a multitude of occasions. "And the oldest earldom in Britain, which makes him--"

"--the most eligible bachelor in Europe," Lillian finished dryly, raising her brows with mock significance. "Maybe the entire world. Mother, if you're actually hoping that Westcliff is going to marry either of us, you're a lunatic."

"She's not a lunatic," Daisy told her sister. "She's a New Yorker."

There were an increasing number of the Bowmans' kind back in New York--upstarts who could not manage to blend with either the conservative Knickerbockers, or the highly fashionable crowd. These parvenu families had garnered massive fortunes from industries such as manufacturing or mining, and yet they could not gain acceptance in the circles that they aspired to so desperately. The loneliness and embarrassment of being so thoroughly rejected by New York society had fueled Mercedes's ambitions as nothing else could have.

"We're going to make Lord Westcliff forget all about your atrocious behavior during our last visit," Mercedes informed them grimly. "You will be modest, quiet, and demure at all times--and there will be no more of this wallflower business. I want you to stay away from that scandalous Annabelle Peyton, and that other one, that--"

"Evie Jenner," Daisy said. "And it's Annabelle Hunt now, Mother."

"Annabelle did marry Westcliff's best friend," Lillian pointed out idly. "I should think that would be an excellent reason for us to continue seeing her, Mother."

"I'll consider it." Mercedes regarded them both suspiciously. "In the meantime, I intend for you to take a long, quiet nap. I don't want to hear a sound from either of you, do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother," they both chorused.

The door closed, and the outside key turned firmly in the lock.

The sisters regarded each other with a shared grin. "It's a good thing that she never found out about the rounders game," Lillian said.

"We would be dead now," Daisy agreed gravely.

Lillian fished a hairpin from a small enameled box on the vanity table and went to the door. "A pity that she gets so upset about little things, isn't it?"

"Like the time we sneaked the greased piglet into Mrs. Astor's parlor."

Smiling reminiscently, Lillian knelt before the door and worked the pin into the lock. "You know, I've always wondered why Mother didn't appreciate that we did it in her defense. Something had to be done after Mrs. Astor wouldn't invite Mother to her party."

"I think Mother's point was that putting livestock in someone's house does little to recommend us as future party guests."

"Well, I didn't think that was nearly as bad as the time we set off the Roman candle in the store on Fifth Avenue."

"We were obligated to do that, after that salesman had been so rude."

Withdrawing the pin, Lillian expertly crimped one end with her fingers and reinserted it. Squinting with effort, she maneuvered the pin until the lock clicked, and then she glanced at Daisy with a triumphant smile. "That was my fastest time yet, I think."

However, her younger sister did not return the smile. "Lillian...if you do find a husband this year...everything's going to change. You'll change. And then there will be no more adventures, or fun, and I'll be alone."

"Don't be silly," Lillian said with a frown. "I'm not going to change, and you won't be alone."

"You'll have a husband to answer to," Daisy pointed out. "And he won't allow you to be involved in any mischief making with me."

"No, no, no..." Lillian stood and waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "I'm not going to have that kind of husband. I'm going to marry a man who either won't notice or won't care about what I do when I'm away from him. A man like Father."

"A man like Father doesn't seem to have made Mother very happy," Daisy said. "I wonder if they were ever in love?"

Leaning back against the door, Lillian frowned as she contemplated the question. It had never occurred to her before now to wonder if her parents' marriage had been a love match. Somehow she didn't think so. They both seemed entirely self-contained. Their partnership was at best a negligible bond. To Lillian's knowledge, they seldom argued, never embraced, and rarely even spoke. And yet there was no apparent bitterness between them. Rather they were indifferent to each other, with neither evincing any desire or even aptitude for happiness.

"Love is for the novels, dear," Lillian said, trying her best to sound cynical. Easing the door open, she peeked up and down the hallway, and glanced back at Daisy. "All clear. Shall we slip out the servants' entrance?"

"Yes, and then let's go to the west side of the manor, and head into the forest."

"Why the forest?"

"Do you remember the favor that Annabelle asked of me?"

Lillian stared at her for a moment of incomprehension, and then she rolled her eyes. "Good God, Daisy, can't you think of something better to do than carry out a ridiculous errand like that?"

Her younger sister gave her an astute glance. "You just don't want to because it's for Lord Westcliff's benefit."

"It's not going to benefit anyone," Lillian replied with exasperation. "It's a fool's errand."

Daisy responded with a resolute stare. "I'm going to find the Stony Cross wishing well," she said with great dignity, "and do as Annabelle asked of me. You may accompany me if you wish, or you can do something else by yourself. However"--her almond-shaped eyes narrowed threateningly--"after all the time you've made me wait while you browse through dusty old perfume shops and apothecaries, I should think that you owe me just a little forbearance--"

"All right," Lillian grumbled. "I'll go with you. If I don't, you'll never find it, and you'll end up lost in the forest somewhere." Looking out into the

hallway again, and ascertaining that it was still empty, Lillian led the way toward the servants' entrance at the end of it. The sisters tiptoed with practiced stealth, their feet noiseless on the thick carpeting underfoot.

Much as Lillian disliked the owner of Stony Cross Park, she had to admit that it was a splendid estate. The house was of European design, a graceful fortress made of honey-colored stone, cornered by four picturesque towers that stretched toward the sky. Set on a bluff overlooking the Itchen River, the manor was surrounded by terraced gardens and orchards that flowed into two hundred acres of parkland and wild forests. Fifteen generations of Westcliff's family, the Marsdens, had occupied the manor, as any of the servants were quick to point out. And this was hardly the full extent of Lord West-cliff's wealth. It was said that nearly two hundred thousand acres of England and Scotland were under his direct control, while among his estates were numbered two castles, three halls, a terrace, five houses, and a villa on the Thames. Stony Cross Park, however, was undoubtedly the jewel in the Marsden family crown.

Skirting the side of the manor, the sisters took care to keep close to a long yew hedge that sheltered them from view of the main house. Sunlight glittered through the canopy of interlaced branches overhead as they entered the forest, populated with ancient cedars and oaks.

Exuberantly Daisy threw her arms into the air and exclaimed, "Oh, I adore this place!"

"It's passable," Lillian said grudgingly, though she had to admit privately that in this full-flowered early autumn, there could hardly be a more beautiful part of England than this.

Hopping onto a log that had been pushed to the side of the path, Daisy walked carefully along it. "It would almost be worth marrying Lord Westcliff, don't you think, to be mistress of Stony Cross Park?"

Lillian arched her brows. "And then have to endure all his pompous pronouncements, and be expected to obey his every command?" She pulled a face, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

"Annabelle says that Lord Westcliff is actually much nicer than she

originally thought."

"She would have to say that, after what happened a few weeks ago."

The sisters fell silent, both reflecting on the dramatic events that had occurred recently. As Annabelle and her husband, Simon Hunt, had been touring the locomotive works that they owned along with Lord Westcliff, a horrific explosion had nearly claimed their lives. Lord West-cliff had dashed into the building on a near-suicidal mission to save them, and had brought them both out alive. Understandably, Annabelle now viewed Westcliff in a heroic light, and had actually said recently that she thought his arrogance was rather endearing. Lillian had replied sourly that Annabelle must still be suffering the aftereffects of smoke inhalation.

"I think we owe Lord Westcliff our gratitude," Daisy remarked, hopping off the log. "After all, he did save Annabelle's life, and it's not as if we have a terribly large array of friends to begin with."

"Saving Annabelle was incidental," Lillian said grumpily. "The only reason that Westcliff risked his life was so he wouldn't lose a profitable business partner."

"Lillian!" Daisy, who was a few steps ahead, turned to view her with surprise. "It's not like you to be so un-charitable. For heaven's sake, the earl went into a burning building to rescue our friend and her husband...what more does the man have to do to impress you?"

"I'm sure Westcliff couldn't care less about impressing me," Lillian said. Hearing the sullen note in her own voice, she winced, even as she continued. "The reason I dislike him so, Daisy, is that he so obviously dislikes me. He considers himself to be my superior in every possible way; morally and socially and intellectually...oh, how I long for a way to set him back on his heels!"

They walked along in silence for a minute, and then Daisy paused to pluck some violets that were growing in thick clusters on the side of the path. "Have you ever considered trying to be nice to Lord Westcliff?" she murmured. Reaching up to tuck the violets into the pinned-up garlands of her hair, she added, "He might surprise you by responding in kind."

Lillian shook her head grimly. "No, he would probably say something cutting, and then look very smug and pleased with himself."

"I think you're being too..." Daisy began, and then paused with an absorbed expression. "I hear a sloshing sound. The wishing well must be near!"

"Oh, glory," Lillian said, smiling reluctantly as she followed her younger sister, who was scampering along a sunken lane that was sided by a wet meadow. The swampy meadow was thick with blue and purple asters, and sedge with its bottlebrush flowers, and rustling spikes of goldenrod. Close to the road, there was a heavy thicket of St. John's wort, with clusters of yellow blossoms that looked like drops of sunlight. Luxuriating in the balmy atmosphere, Lillian slowed her pace and breathed deeply. As she approached the churning wishing well, which was a spring-fed hole in the ground, the air became soft and humid.

At the beginning of summer, when the wallflowers had visited the wishing well, they had each thrown a pin into its frothing depths, in keeping with local tradition. And Daisy had made some mysterious wish for Annabelle that had later come true.

"Here it is," Daisy said, producing a needle-thin metallic shard from her pocket. It was the metal filing that Annabelle had pulled from Westcliff's shoulder when exploding debris had sent bits of iron flying through the air like grapeshot. Even Lillian, who was hardly disposed to have any sympathy for Westcliff, winced at the sight of the wicked-looking shard. "Annabelle told me to throw this into the well and make the same wish for Lord Westcliff that I did for her."

"What was the wish?" Lillian demanded. "You never told me."

Daisy regarded her with a quizzical smile. "Isn't it obvious, dear? I wished that Annabelle would marry someone who truly loved her."

"Oh." Contemplating what she knew of Annabelle's marriage, and the obvious devotion between the pair, Lillian supposed the wish must have worked. Giving Daisy a fondly exasperated glance, she stood back to watch the proceedings.

"Lillian," her sister protested, "you must stand here with me. The well spirit will be far more likely to grant the wish if we're both concentrating on it."

A low laugh escaped Lillian's throat. "You don't really believe there's a well spirit, do you? Good God, how did you ever become so superstitious?"

"Coming from one who recently purchased a bottle of magic perfume--"

"I never thought it was magic. I only liked the smell!"

"Lillian," Daisy chided playfully, "what's the harm in allowing for the possibility? I refuse to believe that we're going to go through life without something magical happening. Now, come make a wish for Lord Westcliff. It's the least we can do, after he saved dear Annabelle from the fire."

"Oh, all right. I'll stand next to you--but only to keep you from falling in." Coming even with her sister, Lillian hooked an arm around her sister's slim shoulders and stared into the muddy, rustling water.

Daisy closed her eyes tightly and wrapped her fingers around the metal shard. "I'm wishing very hard," she whispered. "Are you, Lillian?"

"Yes," Lillian murmured, though she wasn't precisely hoping for Lord Westcliff to find true love. Her wish was more along the lines of, I hope that Lord Westcliff will meet a woman who will bring him to his knees. The thought caused a satisfied smile to curve her lips, and she continued to smile as Daisy tossed the sharp bit of metal into the well, where it sank into the endless depths below.

Dusting her hands together, Daisy turned away from the well with satisfaction. "There, all done," she said, beaming. "I can hardly wait to see whom Westcliff ends up with."

"I pity the poor girl," Lillian replied, "whoever she is."

Daisy tilted her head back in the direction of the manor. "Back to the house?"

The conversation quickly turned into a strategy-planning session, as they discussed an idea that Annabelle had mentioned the last time they had talked. The Bowmans desperately needed a social sponsor to introduce them into the

higher tiers of British society ...and not just any sponsor. It had to be someone who was powerful and influential, and widely renowned. Someone whose endorsement would have to be accepted by the rest of the peerage. According to Annabelle, there was no one who fit the bill more than the Countess of Westcliff, the earl's mother.

The countess, who seemed fond of traveling the continent, was rarely seen. Even when in residence at Stony Cross Manor, she chose to mix very little with the guests, decrying her son's habit of befriending professional men and other nonaristocrats. Neither of the Bowman sisters had ever actually met the countess, but they had heard plenty. If the rumors were to be believed, the countess was a crusty old dragon who despised foreigners. Especially American foreigners.

"Why Annabelle thinks there is any chance of getting the countess to be our sponsor is beyond my comprehension," Daisy said, kicking a small rock repeatedly before them as they walked along the path. "She'll never do so willingly, that's for certain."

"She will if Westcliff tells her to," Lillian replied. Picking up a large stick, she swung it absently. "Apparently the countess can be made to do something if West-cliff demands it. Annabelle told me that the countess didn't approve of Lady Olivia marrying Mr. Shaw, and she had no intention of attending the wedding. But Westcliff knew that it would hurt his sister's feelings terribly, and so he forced his mother to stay, and furthermore, he made her put on a civil face about it."

"Really?" Daisy glanced at her with a curious half smile. "I wonder how he did that?"

"By being the master of the house. Back in America the woman is the ruler of the home, but in England everything revolves around the man."

"Hmm. I don't like that much."

"Yes, I know." Lillian paused before adding darkly, "According to Annabelle, the English husband has to give his approval of the menus, the furniture arrangement, the color of the window hangings...everything."

Daisy looked surprised and appalled. "Does Mr. Hunt bother with such

things?"

"Well, no--he's not a peer. He's a professional man. And men of business don't usually have time for such trivialities. But your average peer has much time in which to examine every little thing that goes on in the house."

Leaving off her rock kicking, Daisy regarded Lillian with a frown. "I've been wondering...why are we so determined to marry into the peerage, and live in a huge crumbly old house and eat slimy English food, and try to give instructions to a bunch of servants who have absolutely no respect for us?"

"Because it's what Mother wants," Lillian replied dryly. "And because no one in New York will have either of us." It was an unfortunate fact that in the highly striated New York society, men with newly earned fortunes found it quite easy to marry well. But heiresses with common bloodlines were desired neither by the established blue bloods nor by the nouveau riche men who wanted to better themselves socially. Therefore, husband hunting in Europe, where upper-class men needed rich wives, was the only solution.

Daisy's frown twisted into an ironic grin. "What if no one will have us here either?"

"Then we'll become a pair of wicked old spinsters, romping back and forth across Europe."

Daisy laughed at the notion and flipped a long braid over her back. It was improper for young women of their age to walk about hatless, much less with their hair hanging down. However, both of the Bowman sisters had such a wealth of heavy dark locks that it was an ordeal to pin it all up in the intricate coiffures that were so fashionable. It required at least three racks of pins for each of them, and Lillian's sensitive scalp literally ached after all the tugging and twisting required to make her hair presentable for a formal evening. More than once she had envied Annabelle Hunt, who had light, silky locks that always seemed to behave exactly as she wished them to. At the moment Lillian had tied her hair at the nape of the neck and allowed it to fall down her back in a style that never would have been allowed in company.

"How are we going to persuade Westcliff to make his mother act as our sponsor?" Daisy asked. "It seems very unlikely that he would ever agree to do

such a thing."

Drawing back her arm, Lillian flung the stick far into the woods, and brushed the flecks of bark from her palms. "I have no idea," she admitted. "Annabelle has tried to get Mr. Hunt to ask him on our behalf, but he refuses on the grounds that it would be an abuse of their friendship."

"If only we could compel Westcliff in some way," Daisy mused. "Trick him, or blackmail him, somehow."

"You can only blackmail a man if he's done something shameful that he wants to hide. And I doubt that stodgy, boring old Westcliff has ever done anything that's worthy of blackmail."

Daisy chuckled at the description. "He's not stodgy, boring, or even that old!"

"Mother says he's at least thirty-five. I'd say that is fairly old, wouldn't you?"

"I'll wager that most men in their twenties aren't nearly as fit as Westcliff."

As always, when a conversation turned to the subject of Westcliff, Lillian felt thoroughly provoked, not unlike the way she had felt in childhood when her brothers had tossed her favorite doll over her head, back and forth between them, while she cried for them to give it back to her. Why any mention of the earl should affect her this way was a question for which there was no answer. She dismissed Daisy's remark with an irritable shrug of her shoulders.

As they drew closer to the house, they heard a few happy yelps in the distance, followed by some youthful cheers that sounded like those of children playing. "What is that?" Lillian asked, glancing in the direction of the stables.

"I don't know, but it sounds as if someone is having an awfully good time. Let's go see."

"We don't have long," Lillian warned. "If Mother discovers that we're gone--"

"We'll hurry. Oh, please, Lillian!"

As they hesitated, a few more hoots and shouts of laughter floated from the direction of the stable yard, offering such a contrast to the peaceful scenery around them that Lillian's curiosity got the better of her. She grinned recklessly at Daisy. "I'll race you there," she said, and took off at a dead run.

Daisy hiked up her skirts and tore after her. Although Daisy's legs were far shorter than Lillian's, she was as light and agile as an elf, and she had nearly come even with Lillian by the time they had reached the stable yard. Puffing lightly from the effort of running up a long incline, Lillian rounded the outside of a neatly fenced paddock, and saw a group of five boys, varying in ages between twelve and sixteen, playing in the small field just beyond. Their attire identified them as stable boys. Their boots had been discarded beside the paddock, and they were running barefoot.

"Do you see?" Daisy asked eagerly.

Glancing over the group, Lillian saw one of them brandishing a long willow bat in the air, and she laughed in delight. "They're playing rounders!"

Although the game, consisting of a bat, a ball, and four sanctuary bases arranged in a diamond pattern, was popular in both America and England, it had reached a level of obsessive interest in New York. Boys and girls of all classes played the game, and Lillian longingly remembered many a picnic followed by an afternoon of rounders. Warm nostalgia filled her as she watched a stable boy round the bases. It was clear that the field was often used for this purpose, as the sanctuary posts had been hammered deeply into the ground, and the areas between them had been trampled to form grass-free lanes of dirt. Lillian recognized one of the players as the lad who had loaned her the rounders bat for the wall-flowers' ill-fated game two months earlier.

"Do you think they would let us play?" Daisy asked hopefully. "Just for a few minutes?"

"I don't see why not. That red-haired boy--he was the one who let us borrow the bat before. I think his name is Arthur..."

At that moment a low, fast pitch streaked toward the batter, who swung in a short, expert arc. The flat side of the bat connected solidly with the

leather ball, and it came hurtling toward them in a bouncing drive that was referred to as a "hopper" back in New York. Running forward, Lillian scooped up the ball in her bare hands and fielded it expertly, throwing it to the boy who stood at the first sanctuary post. He caught it reflexively, staring at her with surprise. As the other boys noticed the pair of young women who stood beside the paddock, they all paused uncertainly.

Lillian strode forward, her gaze finding the red-haired boy. "Arthur? Do you remember me? I was here in June--you loaned us the bat."

The boy's puzzled expression cleared. "Oh yes, Miss...Miss..."

"Bowman." Lillian gestured casually to Daisy. "And this is my sister. We were just wondering ...would you let us play? Just for a little while?"

A dumbfounded silence ensued. Lillian gathered that while it had been acceptable to loan her the bat, allowing her into a game with the other stable boys was another thing entirely. "We're not all that bad, actually," she said. "We both used to play quite a lot in New York. If you're worried that we would slow your game--"

"Oh, it's not that, Miss Bowman," Arthur protested, his face turning as red as his hair. He glanced at his companions uncertainly before returning his attention to her. "It's just that ...ladies of your sort ...you can't...we're in service, miss."

"It's your off-time, isn't it?" Lillian countered.

The boy nodded cautiously.

"Well, it's our off-time too," Lillian said. "And it's only a little game of rounders. Oh, do let us play--we'll never tell!"

"Offer to show him your spitter," Daisy said out of the corner of her mouth. "Or the hornet."

Staring at the boys' unresponsive faces, Lillian complied. "I can pitch," she said, raising her brows significantly. "Fast balls, spit balls, hornet balls ...don't you want to see how Americans throw?"

That intrigued them, she could see. However, Arthur said diffidently, "Miss Bowman, if someone was to see you playing rounders in the stable

yard, we'd likely get the blame for it, and then--"

"No, you wouldn't," Lillian said. "I promise you, we'll take full responsibility if anyone catches us. I'll tell them that we left you no choice."

Though the group as a whole looked openly skeptical, Lillian and Daisy badgered and pleaded until they were finally allowed into the game. Taking possession of a worn leather-covered ball, Lillian flexed her arms, cracked her knuckles, and assumed a pitcher's stance as she faced the batter, who stood at the base designated Castle Rock. Shifting her weight to her left foot, she stepped into the throw, launching the ball in a fast, competent pitch. It landed with a stinging smack in the catcher's hand, while the batter swung and missed completely. A few admiring whistles greeted Lillian's effort.

"Not a bad arm for a girl!" was Arthur's comment, causing her to grin. "Now, miss, if you wouldn't mind, what was that hornet ball you were talking about?"

Catching the ball as it was thrown back to her, Lillian faced the batter again, this time gripping the ball with only her thumb and first two fingers. Drawing back, she raised her arm, then threw the ball with a snap of her wrist, giving it a spin that caused it to veer sharply inward just as it reached Castle Rock. The batter missed again, but even he exclaimed in appreciation for the hornet ball. On the next pitch, he finally connected with the ball, sending it to the west side of the field, where Daisy happily scampered after it. She hurled it to the player at the third sanctuary post, who leaped in the air to snatch it in his fist.

In just a few minutes, the fast-paced enjoyment of the game caused the players to lose all self-consciousness, and their drives and throws and full-bore runs became uninhibited. Laughing and crowing as loudly as the stable boys, Lillian was reminded of the careless freedom of childhood. It was indescribable relief to forget, if only for a little while, the innumerable rules and the stifling propriety that had smothered them ever since they had set foot in England. And it was such a glorious day, the sun bright but so much gentler than it was in New York, and the air soft and fresh as it filled her lungs.

"Your turn at bat, miss," Arthur said, raising a hand for her to toss the ball to him. "Let's see if you can hit as well as you throw!"

"She can't," Daisy informed him promptly, and Lillian made a hand gesture that caused the boys to roar in scandalized delight.

Unfortunately it was true. For all her accuracy in pitching, Lillian had never mastered the art of batting-- a fact that Daisy, who was a superior batter, took great delight in pointing out. Picking up the bat, Lillian gripped the handle like a hammer with her left hand, and left the index finger of her right slightly open. Cocking the bat over her shoulder, she waited for the pitch, timed it with her narrowed gaze, and swung as hard as she was able. To her frustration, the ball spun off the top of the bat and went sailing over the catcher's head.

Before the boy could go in pursuit of it, the ball was tossed back to the pitcher by some unseen source. Lillian was perplexed as she saw Arthur's face suddenly blanch to a shade of white that contrasted starkly with the fiery locks of his hair. Wondering what could have put such a look on his face, Lillian turned to glance behind her. The catcher seemed to have stopped breathing as he too beheld the visitor.

For there, leaning casually against the paddock fence, was none other than Marcus, Lord Westcliff.

CHAPTER 4

It was the first time in Lillian's life that a man had ever kissed her without asking for permission. She wriggled and strained until Westcliff secured her more firmly against his body. He smelled like dust and horses and sunlight...and there was something else ...a sweet, dry essence that reminded her of freshly mown hay. The pressure of his mouth increased, searching ardently until her lips were coaxed apart. She had never imagined kisses like these, deep, tenderly impatient caresses that seemed to sap her of strength until she closed her eyes and leaned into the hard support of his chest. Westcliff took instant advantage of her weakness, molding her against him until not an inch separated them, and her legs were parted by the intrusion of his powerful thigh.

The tip of his tongue played inside her mouth in sweeps of warmth that explored the edges of her teeth and the silken dampness beyond. Shocked by the intimacy, Lillian shrank backward, but he followed her, both his hands sliding up to cradle her head. She didn't know what to do with her tongue; she drew it back awkwardly as he played with her, harried and goaded and pleased her until a shaking moan rose in her throat, and she pushed at him frantically.

His mouth broke from hers. Conscious of her father and his companions standing on the other side of the juniper, Lillian struggled to control her breathing, and watched their dark shapes through the heavy screen of verdant needles. The men proceeded along the pathway, oblivious to the embracing couple hidden at the garden entrance. Relieved that they were leaving, Lillian let out a shivering breath. Her heart hammered in her chest as she felt Westcliff's mouth slide along the fragile arch of her throat, tracing a simmering pathway of nerves. She writhed against him, still helplessly riding his thigh, and a brilliant bloom of heat began inside her.

"My lord," she whispered, "have you gone mad?"

"Yes. Yes." A velvety drag of his lips back to her mouth...another

deeply marauding kiss. "Give me your mouth...your tongue...yes. Yes. So sweet...sweet..." His lips were hot and restless, shifting over hers in sensuous coercion, while his breath rushed against her cheek. Her lips and chin tingled from the scratchy bristle of his unshaven skin.

"My lord," she whispered again, jerking her mouth from his. "For God's sake--let go of me!"

"Yes...I'm sorry...just one more..." He sought her lips again, and she shoved at him as hard as she could. His chest was as hard as granite.

"Let go, you oaf!" Twisting wildly, Lillian managed to pry herself free of him. Her entire body tingled from the exquisite friction with his, even after they were separated.

As they stared at each other, she saw the haze of lust begin to dissipate from his expression, and his dark eyes widened with the dawning realization of what had just happened. "Holy hell," he whispered.

Lillian did not appreciate the way he stared at her, like a man beholding the fatal head of Medusa. She scowled at him. "I can find my own way to my room," she said curtly. "And don't try to follow me--I've had quite enough help from you today." Turning, she sped across the walkway, while he stared after with his jaw sagging.

By some miracle of God, Lillian managed to reach her room before her mother appeared to wake her daughters from their nap. Slipping through the partially open door, she closed it and hurriedly unfastened the front buttons of her gown. Daisy, who had already stripped down to her undergarments, went to the door and inserted a crimped pin beneath the knob to trick the lever and relock it.

"What took you so long?" Daisy asked, intent on her task. "I hope you're not angry that I didn't wait for you--I thought I should get back here and freshen up as quickly as possible."

"No," Lillian said distractedly, stepping out of her filthy gown. She deposited it at the bottom of the armoire and closed it out of sight. A sharp click signaled Daisy's success in relocking the door. Rapidly Lillian strode to the washstand, emptied the dirty water into the slop jar below, and poured

fresh water into the bowl. Washing her face and arms hastily, she blotted her skin with a length of clean toweling.

Suddenly a key turned in the lock, and both girls glanced at each other in alarm. They headed for their separate beds with running leaps, landing on the mattresses just as their mother entered the room. Fortunately the curtains were closed, making the light too ineffectual for Mercedes to detect any evidence of their activities. "Girls?" she asked suspiciously. "It is time for you to awaken now."

Daisy stretched and yawned loudly. "Mmmm...we've had a lovely nap. I feel so refreshed."

"As do I," Lillian said thickly, her head buried in her pillow, her heart pounding hard against the mattress.

"Now you must bathe and change into your evening gowns. I'll ring for the maids to draw a bath. Daisy, you will wear your yellow silk. Lillian, you must wear the green with the gold clips at the shoulders."

"Yes, Mother," they both said.

As Mercedes went back to the room next door, Daisy sat upright and stared at Lillian curiously. "Why were you so long in returning?"

Lillian rolled over and looked up at the ceiling, considering what had happened in the garden. She couldn't quite believe that Westcliff, who had always exhibited such disapproval of her, would have behaved in such a way. It made no sense. The earl had never displayed any hint of attraction to her before. In fact, this afternoon was the first occasion when they had actually managed to be civil to each other. "Westcliff and I were obliged to keep out of sight for a few minutes," Lillian heard herself say, while thoughts continued to click through her mind. "Father was among the group that came along the walkway."

"Oh Lord!" Daisy swung her legs over the side of her bed and stared at Lillian with an aghast grimace. "But Father didn't see you?"

"No."

"Well, that's a relief." Daisy frowned slightly, seeming to sense that

there was a great deal being left unsaid. "It was quite sporting of Lord Westcliff not to give us away, wasn't it?"

"Sporting, yes."

A sudden smile curved Daisy's lips. "I think it was the funniest thing I've ever seen when he showed you how to swing the bat--I was certain that you were going to bash him with it!"

"I was tempted," Lillian replied darkly, standing from her own bed and going to pull the curtains open. As she jerked the heavy folds of lined damask to the side, a burst of afternoon sunlight invaded the room, causing tiny floating dust motes to sparkle in the air. "Westcliff looks for any excuse to demonstrate his superiority, doesn't he?"

"Was that what he was doing? It looked rather like he was trying to find an excuse to put his arms around you."

Startled by the comment, Lillian looked at her with narrowed eyes. "Why would you say a thing like that?"

Daisy shrugged. "There was something in the way he looked at you..."

"What way?" Lillian demanded, while panic began to flutter through her body like a thousand tiny wings.

"Just a sort of, well...interested way."

Lillian covered her turmoil with a scowl. "The earl and I despise each other," she said tersely. "The only thing he is interested in is a potential business arrangement with Father." She paused and approached the vanity table, where her vial of perfume glittered in the ample fall of sunlight. Closing her fingers around the pear-shaped crystal vessel, she picked it up and rubbed her thumb across the stopper repeatedly. "However," she said hesitantly, "there is something I must tell you, Daisy. Something happened while Westcliff and I waited behind the hedgerow..."

"Yes?" Daisy's expression was alive with curiosity.

Unfortunately their mother chose that moment to sweep back into the room, followed by a pair of maids who laboriously dragged a folding slipper tub into the room in preparation for the bath. With their mother hovering over

them, there was no opportunity for Lillian to speak to Daisy privately. And that was likely a good thing, as it allowed Lillian more time to ponder the situation. Slipping the vial of perfume into the reticule that she intended to carry that evening, she wondered if West-cliff had really been affected by her perfume. Something had happened to make him behave so strangely. And judging from the expression on his face when he realized what he had done, Westcliff had been shocked by his own behavior.

The logical thing to do was test this perfume. Put it through its paces, so to speak. A wry grin worked its way up to her mouth as she thought of her friends, who would probably be quite willing to help her conduct an experiment or two.

The wallflowers had been acquainted for approximately a year, always sitting against the wall during the dances. In retrospect, Lillian couldn't decide why it had taken so long for them to strike up a friendship. Perhaps one reason was that Annabelle was so beautiful, with hair the color of dark honey, and brilliant blue eyes, and a voluptuous, neatly turned figure. One couldn't imagine that such a goddesslike creature would ever condescend to be friends with mere mortals. Evangeline Jenner, on the other hand, was appallingly shy and possessed a stutter that made conversation incredibly difficult.

However, when it had finally become obvious that none of them would ever transcend their wallflower status by themselves, they had banded together to help one another find husbands, starting with Annabelle. Their combined efforts had succeeded in winning a husband for Annabelle, even though Simon Hunt wasn't the peer that she had originally set out to catch. Lillian had to admit that despite her initial misgivings over the match, Annabelle had made the right choice in marrying Hunt. Now, as the next oldest unmarried wallflower, it was Lillian's turn.

The sisters bathed and washed their hair, and then occupied separate corners of the room as the pair of maids helped them to dress. Following her mother's instructions, Lillian donned a gown of pale sea-green silk, with short, full sleeves and a bodice that was held together at the shoulders with

gold clips. A detested corset had reduced her waist by two inches, while a bit of padding at the top enhanced her breasts until they formed a shallow cleavage. She was guided to the vanity table, where she sat wincing and flinching, her scalp smarting as a maid brushed the snarls from her hair and pinned it into an elaborate coiffure. Daisy, meanwhile, was subjected to similar torture as she was laced and padded and buttoned into a butter-colored gown with ruffles at the bodice.

Their mother hovered over them, anxiously muttering a stream of instructions about proper behavior. "...remember, English gentlemen do not like to hear a girl talk excessively, and they have no interest in your opinions. Therefore, I want the both of you to be as docile and quiet as possible. And do not mention any kind of sport! A gentleman may appear to find it amusing to hear you go on about rounders or lawn games, but inwardly they disdain a girl who discusses masculine subjects. And if a gentleman asks a question of you, find a way to turn it back to him, so that he will have the opportunity to tell you about his own experiences..."

"Another thrilling evening at Stony Cross Manor," Lillian muttered. Daisy must have heard her, for a muffled snort of amusement came from the other side of the room.

"What was that noise?" Mercedes asked crisply. "Are you paying attention to my advice, Daisy?"

"Yes, Mother. I couldn't breathe properly for a moment. I think my corset is too tight."

"Then don't breathe so deeply."

"Can't we loosen my stays?"

"No. British gentlemen prefer girls with very narrow waists. Now, where was I--oh yes, during dinner, if there is a lull in the conversation..."

Grimly enduring the lecture, which would undoubtedly be repeated in various forms during their stay at Westcliff's estate, Lillian stared into the looking glass. She felt agitated at the thought of facing Westcliff this evening. An image flashed through her mind, of his dark face lowering over hers, and she closed her eyes.

"Sorry, miss," the maid murmured, assuming that she had pinned a lock of hair too tightly.

"It's all right," Lillian replied with a rueful smile. "Tug away--I've got a hard head."

"That is a monumental understatement," came Daisy's rejoinder from the other side of the room.

As the maid continued to twist and pin her hair, Lillian's thoughts returned to Westcliff. Would he try to pretend that the kiss behind the hedgerow had never occurred? Or would he decide to discuss it with her? Mortified at the prospect, she realized that she needed to talk to Annabelle, who had come to know a great deal more about Westcliff since her marriage to his best friend, Simon Hunt.

Just as the last pin was being prodded into her coiffure, there came a tap on the door. Daisy, who was tugging on her elbow-length white gloves, hurried to answer it, ignoring Mercedes's protest that one of the maids should see to the door. Flinging it open, Daisy let out a happy exclamation at the sight of Annabelle Hunt. Lillian stood from her seat at the vanity and rushed over to her, and the three of them embraced. It had been a few days since they had seen each other at the Rutledge, the London hotel where both families resided. Soon the Hunts would move into a new house that was being built in Mayfair, but in the meanwhile the girls visited each other's suites at every opportunity. Mercedes objected occasionally, airing concerns about Annabelle's bad influence on her daughters--an amusing assertion, as it was clearly the other way around.

As usual Annabelle looked ravishing, in a pale blue satin gown that was tightly fitted to her shapely figure, with matching silk cord that laced up the front. The color of the gown deepened the rich blue of her eyes and flattered her peaches-and-cream complexion.

Annabelle drew back to look at both of them with glowing eyes. "How was your journey from London? Have you had any adventures yet? No, you couldn't possibly, you've been here less than a day--"

"We may have," Lillian murmured cautiously, mindful of her mother's

keen ears. "I have to talk to you about something--"

"Daughters!" Mercedes interrupted, her tone strident with disapproval. "You haven't yet finished preparing for the soiree."

"I'm ready, Mother!" Daisy said quickly. "Look--all finished. I even have my gloves on."

"All I need is my reticule," Lillian added, darting to the vanity and snatching up the little cream-colored bag. "There--I'm ready too."

Well aware of Mercedes's dislike of her, Annabelle smiled pleasantly. "Good evening, Mrs. Bowman. I was hoping that Lillian and Daisy would be allowed to come downstairs with me."

"I'm afraid they will have to wait until I am ready," Mercedes replied in a frosty tone. "My two innocent girls require the supervision of a proper chaperone."

"Annabelle will be our chaperone," Lillian said brightly. "She's a respectable married matron now, remember?"

"I said a proper chaperone--" their mother argued, but her protests were abruptly cut off as the sisters left the room and closed the door.

"Dear me," Annabelle said, laughing helplessly, "that's the first time I've ever been called a 'respectable married matron'--it makes me sound rather dull, doesn't it?"

"If you were dull," Lillian replied, locking arms with her as they strode along the hallway, "then Mother would approve of you--"

"--and we would want nothing to do with you," Daisy added.

Annabelle smiled. "Still, if I'm to be the official chaperone of the wallflowers, I should set out some principal rules of conduct. First, if any handsome young gentleman suggests that you sneak out to the garden with him alone..."

"We should refuse?" Daisy asked.

"No, just make certain to tell me so that I can cover for you. And if you happen to overhear some scandalous piece of gossip that is not appropriate for your innocent ears..."

"We should ignore it?"

"No, you should listen to every word, and then come repeat it to me at once."

Lillian grinned and paused at the intersection between two hallways. "Shall we try to find Evie? It won't be an official wallflower meeting unless she's with us."

"Evie is already downstairs with her aunt Florence," Annabelle replied.

Both sisters exclaimed eagerly at the news. "How is she? How does she look?"

"Oh, it's been forever since we've seen her!"

"Evie seems quite well," Annabelle said, sobering, "though she is a bit thinner. And perhaps a little dispirited."

"Who wouldn't be," Lillian said grimly, "after the way she has been treated?"

It had been many weeks since any of them had seen Evie, who was kept in seclusion by her late mother's family. She was frequently locked away in solitude as punishment for minor transgressions, and let out only under the strict supervision of her aunt. Her friends had speculated that living with such harsh and unloving relatives had contributed no small amount to Evie's difficult speech. Ironically, of all of the wallflowers, Evie was the one who least deserved such stern regulation. She was timid by nature, and inherently respectful of authority. From what they could gather, Evie's mother had been the rebel of the family, marrying a man well below her station. After she had died in childbirth, her daughter had been made to pay for her transgressions. And her father, whom Evie seldom had the opportunity to see, was in poor health and probably hadn't much longer to live.

"Poor Evie," Lillian continued moodily. "I'm strongly inclined to give her my turn as the next wallflower to marry--she needs the escape far more than I do."

"Evie's not ready yet," Annabelle said with a certainty that betrayed previous thought on the matter. "She's working on her shyness, but so far she

can't even bring herself to have a conversation with a gentleman. Besides..." Mischief glimmered in her lovely eyes, and she slipped her arm around Lillian's narrow waist. "You're too old to put it off any longer, dear."

Lillian feigned a sour look in response, making her laugh.

"What was it that you wanted to tell me?" Annabelle asked.

Lillian shook her head. "Let's wait until we join Evie, or I'll end up having to repeat everything."

They made their way to the circuit of public rooms downstairs, where guests were milling about in elegant groups. Color was fashionable this year, at least for ladies' attire, and so the array of rich hues made the gathering appear like a flock of butterflies. The men were dressed in traditional black suits and white shirts, the only variation being the subtle differences in their soberly patterned vests and neckties.

"Where is Mr. Hunt?" Lillian asked Annabelle.

Annabelle smiled faintly at the mention of her husband. "I suspect he's visiting with the earl and a few of their friends." Her gaze sharpened as she caught sight of Evie. "There is Evie--and fortunately Aunt Florence doesn't seem to be hovering over her as usual."

Waiting alone, her absent gaze fixed on a gold-framed landscape painting, Evie seemed lost in private contemplation. Her shrinking posture was that of an apologetic cipher...it was clear that she did not feel herself to be part of the gathering, nor did she wish to be. Although no one ever seemed to look long enough at Evie to really notice her, she was actually quite beautiful--perhaps even more so than Annabelle--but in a completely unconventional way. She was freckled and red-haired, with large, round blue eyes and a mobile, full-lipped mouth that was utterly out of fashion. Her well-endowed figure was breathtaking, though the excessively modest gowns she was compelled to wear were distinctly unflattering. Moreover, her slump-shouldered posture did little to advertise her attractions.

Stealing forward, Lillian startled Evie by grasping her gloved hand and tugging her away. "Come," she whispered.

Evie's eyes lit with gladness at the sight of her. She hesitated and glanced uncertainly at her aunt, who was talking with some dowagers in the corner. Ascertaining that Florence was too absorbed in her conversation to notice, the four girls slipped from the parlor and hurried down the hallway like escaping prisoners. "Where are we going?" Evie whispered.

"The back terrace," Annabelle replied.

They went to the rear of the house and exited through a row of French doors that opened onto a broad flagstoned terrace. Stretching the entire length of the house, the terrace overlooked the extensive gardens below. It looked like a scene from a painting, with orchards and beautifully kept walks and beds of rare flowers leading to the forest, while the Itchen River flowed below a nearby bluff that was defined by an ironstone wall.

Lillian turned toward Evie and hugged her. "Evie," she exclaimed, "I've missed you so! If you only knew of all the ill-conceived rescue plans we thought of to steal you away from your family. Why won't they let any of us come to visit you?"

"Th-they despise me," Evie said in a muffled voice. "I never realized how much until recently. It started when I tried to see my father. After they caught me, they locked me in my room for days, with h-hardly any food or water. They said I was ungrateful, and disobedient, and that my bad blood had finally risen to the fore. To them I'm n-nothing but a dreadful mistake that my mother made. Aunt Florence says it is my fault that she's dead."

Shocked, Lillian drew back to look at her. "She told you that? In those words?"

Evie nodded.

Without thinking, Lillian let out a few curse words that caused Evie to blanch. One of Lillian's more questionable accomplishments was the ability to swear as fluently as a sailor, acquired from much time spent with her grandmother, who had worked as a washwoman at the harbor docks.

"I know that it's not tr-true," Evie murmured. "I mean, m-my mother did die in labor, but I know that it wasn't my fault."

Keeping one arm around Evie's shoulders, Lillian walked with her to a nearby table on the terrace, while Annabelle and Daisy followed. "Evie, what can be done to get you away from those people?"

The girl shrugged helplessly. "My father is s-so ill. I've asked him if I could come to live with him, but he refuses. And he is too weak to keep my mother's family fr-from coming to take me back with them."

All four girls were silent for a moment. The unpleasant reality was that even though Evie was of an age to leave her family's custody voluntarily, an unmarried woman was in a precarious position. Evie would not inherit her fortune until her father's death, and in the meantime, she had no means to support herself.

"You can come live with me and Mr. Hunt at the Rutledge," Annabelle said suddenly, her voice filled with quiet determination. "My husband won't let anyone take you away if you don't wish it. He's a powerful man, and--"

"No." Evie was shaking her head before Annabelle had finished the sentence. "I would n-never do that to you...the imposition would be so...oh, never. And surely you must know how odd it w-would appear...the things that would be said..." She shook her head helplessly. "I've been considering something ...my aunt Florence had an idea that I sh-should marry her son. Cousin Eustace. He's not a bad man...and it would allow me to live away from my other relatives..."

Annabelle's nose wrinkled. "Hmm. I know that's still done nowadays, first cousins marrying, but it does seem a bit incestuous, doesn't it? Any blood relation at all just seems so...ugh."

"Wait a minute," Daisy said suspiciously, coming to Lillian's side. "We've met Evie's cousin Eustace before. Lillian, do you remember the ball at Winterbourne House?" Her eyes narrowed accusingly. "He was the one who broke the chair, wasn't he, Evie?"

Evie confirmed Daisy's question with an inarticulate murmur.

"Good God!" Lillian exclaimed, "you are not considering marrying him, Evie!"

Annabelle wore a puzzled expression. "How did he break the chair? Does he have a foul temper? Did he throw it?"

"He broke it by sitting on it," Lillian said with a scowl.

"Cousin Eustace is rather l-large boned," Evie admitted.

"Cousin Eustace has more chins than I've got fingers," Lillian said impatiently. "And he was so busy filling his face during the ball that he couldn't be bothered to make conversation."

"When I went to shake his hand," Daisy added, "I came away with a half-eaten wing of roast chicken."

"He forgot that he was holding it," Evie said apologetically. "He did say he was sorry for ruining your glove, as I recall."

Daisy frowned. "That didn't bother me nearly as much as the question of where he was hiding the rest of the chicken."

Receiving a desperately imploring glance from Evie, Annabelle sought to calm the sisters' rising ferment. "We don't have much time," she counseled. "Let's discuss cousin Eustace when there is more leisure to do so. Meanwhile, Lillian, dear, wasn't there something you were going to tell us?"

It was an effective diversionary tactic. Relenting at the sight of Evie's distressed expression, Lillian temporarily abandoned the subject of Eustace and motioned for all of them to sit at the table. "It began with a visit to a perfume shop in London..." Accompanied by Daisy's occasional interjections, Lillian described the visit to Mr. Nettle's perfumery, and the concoction she had purchased, and its purported magical properties.

"Interesting," Annabelle commented with a skeptical smile. "Are you wearing it now? Let me smell it."

"In a moment. I haven't finished the story yet." Withdrawing the vial of perfume from her reticule, Lillian set it in the center of the table, where it sparkled gently in the diffused torchlight on the terrace. "I have to tell you about what happened today." She proceeded to relate the story of the impromptu rounders game that had taken place behind the stable yard, and Westcliff's unexpected appearance. Annabelle and Evie listened

incredulously, both of them wide-eyed at the revelation that the earl had actually taken part in the game.

"It's no surprise that Lord Westcliff likes rounders," Annabelle commented. "He's a virtual fiend for outside activities. But the fact that he was willing to play with you..."

Lillian grinned suddenly. "Clearly his dislike was overridden by the overwhelming urge to explain everything that I was doing wrong. He started by telling me how I should correct my swing, and then he..." Her smile faded, and she was uncomfortably aware of a flush that spread rapidly over her skin.

"Then he put his arms around you," Daisy prompted in the avid silence that had settled over the table.

"He what?" Annabelle asked, her lips parting in amazement.

"Only to show me how to hold the bat properly." Lillian's dark brows drew together until they nearly met over the bridge of her nose. "Anyway, what occurred during the game doesn't matter--it was after the game that the surprise happened. Westcliff was guiding Daisy and me along the shortest route back to the house, but we were separated when Father and some of his friends came down the walkway. So Daisy sneaked on ahead, while the earl and I were obliged to wait behind the hedgerow. And while we were standing there together..."

The other three wallflowers leaned forward, all three gazes fastened on her without blinking.

"What happened?" Annabelle demanded.

Lillian felt the tips of her ears turn red, and it took surprising effort to force the words from her mouth. She stared hard at the little perfume bottle as she murmured, "He kissed me."

"Good Lord," Annabelle exclaimed, while Evie stared at her speechlessly.

"I knew it!" Daisy said. "I knew it!"

"How did you know--" Lillian began to argue, but Annabelle interrupted eagerly.

"Once? More than once?"

Thinking of the erotically linked chain of kisses, Lillian blushed even harder. "More than once," she admitted.

"Wh-what was it like?" Evie asked.

For some reason it hadn't occurred to Lillian that her friends would want a report on Lord Westcliff's sexual prowess. Annoyed by the insistent heat that was now making her cheeks and neck and forehead prickle, she cast her mind about for something to pacify them. For a moment the impression of Westcliff came to her with startling vividness ...the hardness of his body, his warm, searching mouth...Her insides shifted as if they had been turned into molten metal, and suddenly she could not bring herself to admit the truth.

"Dreadful," she said, her feet fidgeting beneath the table. "Westcliff is the worst kisser I've ever encountered."

"Ohhh..." Daisy and Evie both breathed in disappointment.

Annabelle, however, gave Lillian a frankly doubtful look. "That's odd. Because I've heard quite a few rumors that Westcliff is very adept at pleasing a woman."

Lillian responded with a noncommittal grunt.

"In fact," Annabelle continued, "I attended a card party not a week ago, and one of the women at my table said that Westcliff was so superb in bed that he had ruined her for any other lover."

"Who said that?" Lillian demanded.

"I can't tell you," Annabelle said. "The statement was made in confidence."

"I don't believe it," Lillian replied grumpily. "Even in the circles that you move in, no one would be so brazen as to talk about such things in public."

"I beg to differ." Annabelle gave her a vaguely superior glance. "Married women get to hear much better gossip than unwed girls do."

"Drat," Daisy said enviously.

The table fell silent once again as Annabelle's amused gaze locked with

Lillian's glowering one. To Lillian's chagrin, she was the first to look away. "Out with it," Annabelle commanded, with the tremor of a sudden laugh in her voice. "Tell the truth--is Westcliff really so terrible at kissing?"

"Oh, I suppose he's tolerable," Lillian admitted grudgingly. "But that's not the point."

Evie spoke then, her eyes round with curiosity. "What is the p-point?"

"That Westcliff was driven to it--to kiss a girl he detests, namely me--by the smell of that perfume." Lillian pointed at the tiny glimmering bottle.

The four girls regarded the vial with awe.

"Not really," Annabelle said disbelievingly.

"Really," Lillian insisted.

Daisy and Evie remained raptly silent, looking back and forth between the two of them as if they were viewing a tennis match.

"Lillian, for you, the most practical girl I've ever known, to claim that you have a perfume that acts as an aphrodisiac, is the most astonishing--"

"Aphrowhat?"

"A love potion," Annabelle said. "Lillian, if Lord Westcliff displayed any interest in you, it was not because of your perfume."

"What makes you so certain?"

Annabelle's brows lifted. "Has the perfume produced this effect in any other man of your acquaintance?"

"Not that I've noticed," Lillian admitted reluctantly.

"How long have you worn it?"

"About a week, but I--"

"And the earl is the only man it seems to have worked on?"

"There are other men who will respond to it," Lillian argued. "They just haven't had the opportunity to smell it yet." Seeing her friend's disbelief, she sighed. "I know how it sounds. I didn't believe a word that Mr. Nettle said about this perfume, until today. But I promise you, the moment that the earl got a whiff of it..."

Annabelle pinned her with a considering stare, clearly wondering if it could be true.

Evie spoke in the silence. "May I s-see it, Lillian?"

"Of course."

Reaching for the perfume vial as if it were some highly combustible explosive, Evie unstopped it, brought it to her whimsically freckled nose, and sniffed. "I don't f-feel anything."

"I wonder if it works only on men?" Daisy mused aloud.

"What I'm wondering is," Lillian said slowly, "if any of you wore the perfume, would Westcliff be as attracted to you as he was to me?" She stared directly at Annabelle as she spoke.

Realizing what she was about to propose, Annabelle wore a look of comical dismay. "Oh no," she said, shaking her head vigorously. "I'm a married woman, Lillian, and very much in love with my husband, and I haven't the slightest interest in seducing his best friend!"

"You wouldn't have to seduce him, of course," Lillian said. "Just try some of the perfume and then go stand next to him, and see if he notices you."

"I'll do it," Daisy said enthusiastically. "In fact, I propose that we all wear the perfume tonight, and investigate whether it makes us more attractive to men."

Evie chortled at the idea, while Annabelle rolled her eyes. "You can't be serious."

Lillian gave her a reckless grin. "There's no harm in trying it, is there? Consider it a scientific experiment. You're merely collecting evidence to prove a theory."

A groan escaped Annabelle's lips as she watched the two younger girls shake out a few drops of the perfume to adorn themselves with. "This is the silliest thing I've ever done," she commented. "It's even more absurd than when we played rounders in our drawers."

"Knickers," Lillian said promptly, continuing their long-standing debate

on the proper name for undergarments.

"Give me that." With a long-suffering expression, Annabelle held out her hand to receive the vial, and dampened her fingertip with the fragrant elixir.

"Use a little more," Lillian advised, watching in satisfaction as Annabelle dabbed the perfume behind her ears. "And put some on your neck too."

"I don't usually wear perfume," Annabelle said. "Mr. Hunt likes the smell of clean skin."

"He may prefer Lady of the Night."

Annabelle looked appalled. "Is that what this is called?"

"It's named after a night-blooming orchid," Lillian explained.

"Oh, good," Annabelle said sardonically. "I was afraid that it was named after a harlot."

Ignoring the remark, Lillian took the vial from her. After applying a few drops of the scent to her own throat and wrists, she tucked the vessel back into her reticule and stood from the table. "Now," she said in satisfaction, glancing at the wallflowers, "let's go find Westcliff."

CHAPTER 6

As Lillian walked into the orangery, she was suffused in the scent of...oranges. But lemons, bays, and myrtles also cast their fragrance extravagantly through the gently heated air. The tiled floor of the rectangular building was punctuated with iron grillwork vents that allowed the warmth of the stoves on the lower floor to waft evenly inside the room. Starlight shone through the glass ceiling and glittering windows, and illuminated the interior scaffolding that had been loaded with rows of tropical plants.

The orangery was shadowy, with only the flicker of torches outside to relieve the darkness. At the sound of a footstep, Lillian turned quickly to view the intruder. A flash of uneasiness must have revealed itself in her posture, for Westcliff made his voice low and reassuring. "It's just me. If you would rather meet in another place--"

"No," Lillian interrupted, mildly amused to hear one of the most powerful men in England refer to himself as "just me." "I like the orangery. It's my favorite place in the manor, actually."

"Mine also," he said, approaching her slowly. "For many reasons, not the least of which is the privacy it offers."

"You don't have much privacy, do you? With all the comings and goings at Stony Cross Park..."

"I manage to carve out sufficient time for solitude."

"And what do you do, when you're alone?" The entire situation was beginning to seem rather dreamlike, talking with Westcliff in the orangery, watching the glimmers of stray torchlight score across the harsh but elegant modeling of his face.

"I read," came his gravelly voice. "I walk. Occasionally I swim in the river."

She was suddenly grateful for the darkness, as the thought of his unclothed body sliding through the water caused her to flush.

Reading discomfort in her sudden silence, and mistaking the cause,

Westcliff spoke gruffly. "Miss Bowman, I must apologize for what happened earlier today. I am at a loss to explain my behavior, other than to state that it was a moment of insanity that will never be repeated."

Lillian stiffened a little at the word "insanity." "Fine," she said. "I accept your apology."

"You may set your mind at ease with the knowledge that I do not find you desirable in any way whatsoever."

"I understand. Enough said, my lord."

"If the two of us were left alone on a deserted island, I would have absolutely no thought of approaching you."

"I realize that," she said shortly. "You don't have to go on and on about it."

"I just want to make it clear that what I did was a complete aberration. You are not the kind of woman whom I would ever be attracted to."

"All right."

"In fact--"

"You've made yourself quite clear, my lord," Lillian interrupted with a scowl, thinking that it was undoubtedly the most annoying apology she had ever received. "However...as my father always says, an honest apology comes with a price."

Westcliff shot her an alert glance. "Price?"

The air between them crackled with challenge. "Yes, my lord. It's no trouble for you to mouth a few words and then be done with it, is it? But if you were truly sorry for what you did, you would try to make amends."

"All I did was kiss you," he protested, as if she were making far too much of the incident.

"Against my will," Lillian said significantly. She adopted an expression of wounded dignity. "Perhaps there are some women who would welcome your romantic attentions, but I am not one of them. And I am not accustomed to being grabbed and forcefully subjected to kisses that I didn't ask for--"

"You participated," Westcliff retorted, wearing a Hades-like grimace.

"I did not!"

"You--" Seeming to realize that it was an unproductive argument, Westcliff broke off and swore.

"But," Lillian continued sweetly, "I might be willing to forgive and forget. If..." She paused deliberately.

"If?" he asked darkly.

"If you would do one small thing for me."

"And that would be?"

"Merely to ask your mother to sponsor my sister and me for the coming season."

His eyes widened in a most unflattering manner, as if the notion was outside the bounds of reason. "No."

"She might also instruct us on a few points of British etiquette--"

"No."

"We need a sponsor," Lillian persisted. "My sister and I won't make headway in society without one. The countess is an influential woman, and well-respected, and her endorsement would guarantee our success. I'm certain that you could think of a way to convince her to help me--"

"Miss Bowman," Westcliff interrupted coldly, "Queen Victoria herself could not drag a pair of savage brats like you along the path of respectability. It's not possible. And pleasing your father is hardly enough incentive for me to put my mother through such hell as you are capable of creating."

"I thought you might say that." Lillian wondered if she dared follow her instincts and undertake a huge risk. Was there any chance that in spite of the wallflowers' lack of success with their perfume experiment this evening, it was still capable of working some magic on Westcliff? If not, she was about to make a terrible fool of herself. Taking a deep breath, she stepped closer to him. "Very well--you leave me no choice. If you don't agree to help me, Westcliff, I will tell everyone about what happened this afternoon. I daresay people will find no small amusement in the fact that the self-possessed Lord Westcliff cannot control his desire for a bumptious American girl with

atrocious manners. And you won't be able to deny it--because you never lie."

Westcliff arched one brow, giving her a look that should have withered her on the spot. "You are overestimating your attractions, Miss Bowman."

"Am I? Then prove it."

Surely the feudal lords in Westcliff's extensive ancestry had worn an expression just like this when they had disciplined rebellious peasants. "How?"

Even in her present spirit of throwing caution to the wind, Lillian had to swallow hard before answering. "I dare you to put your arms around me," she said, "as you did earlier today. And we'll see if you have any more luck in controlling yourself this time."

The scorn in his gaze revealed exactly how pathetic he considered her challenge. "Miss Bowman, as it appears that I must put this plainly ...I do not desire you. This afternoon was a mistake. One that will not be made again. Now if you will excuse me, I have guests to--"

"Coward."

Westcliff had begun to turn away, but the word caused him to swivel back to her with sudden incredulous fury. Lillian guessed that it was an accusation that had rarely, if ever, been leveled at him.

"What did you say?"

It required every inch of backbone she possessed to hold his icy gaze. "Clearly you're afraid to touch me. You're afraid that you might not be able to control yourself."

Looking away from her, the earl gave a slight shake of his head, as though suspecting that he must have misunderstood her. When he glanced back, his eyes were filled with active hostility. "Miss Bowman, is it so difficult for you to comprehend that I don't want to hold you?"

Lillian realized that he would not be making such a fuss if he was completely confident in his own ability to resist her. Encouraged by the thought, she moved nearer to him, not missing the way his entire body seemed to tense. "The issue isn't whether you want to or not," she replied.

"It's whether you'll be able to let go of me once you do."

"Incredible," he said beneath his breath, glaring at her with rank antagonism.

Lillian held still, waiting for him to pick up the gaunt-let. As soon as he closed the remaining distance between them, her smile died away and her mouth felt oddly stiff, and her heart thumped hard at the base of her throat. One glance at his purposeful face revealed that he was going to do it. She had left him no choice but to try and prove her wrong. And if he did, she would never be able to look him in the face again. Oh, Mr. Nettle, she thought weakly, your magic perfume had better work.

Moving with infinite reluctance, Westcliff gingerly put his arms around her. The escalation of Lillian's heartbeat seemed to drive the air from her lungs. One of his broad hands settled between her tense shoulder blades, while the other pressed at the small of her back. He touched her with undue care, as if she were made of some volatile substance. And as he brought her body gently against his, her blood turned to liquid fire. Her hands fluttered in search of a resting place until her palms grazed the back of his coat. Flattening her palms on either side of his spine, she felt the flex of hard muscle even through the layers of silk-lined broadcloth and linen.

"Is this what you were asking for?" he murmured, his low voice at her ear.

Lillian's toes curled inside her slippers as his hot breath tickled her hairline. She responded with a wordless nod, feeling crestfallen and mortified as she realized that she had lost her gamble. Westcliff was going to show her how easy it was to release her, and then he would forever afterward subject her to ruthless mockery. "You can let me go now," she whispered, her mouth twisting in self-derision.

But Westcliff didn't move. His dark head dropped a little lower, and he drew in a breath that wasn't quite steady. Lillian perceived that he was taking in the scent of her throat ...absorbing it with slow but ever-increasing greed, as if he were an addict inhaling lungfuls of narcotic smoke. The perfume, she thought in bemusement. So it hadn't been her imagination. It was working its

magic again. But why did Westcliff seem to be the only man to respond to it? Why--

Her thoughts were scattered as the pressure of his hands increased, causing her to shiver and arch.

"Damn it," Westcliff whispered savagely. Before she quite knew what was happening, he had pushed her up against a nearby wall. His fiercely accusing gaze moved from her dazed eyes to her parted lips, his silent struggle lasting another burning second, until he suddenly gave in with a curse and brought their mouths together with an impatient tug.

His hands adjusted the angle of her head, and he kissed her with gentle bites and nips, as if her mouth were an exotic delicacy to savor. Her knees weakened until she could hardly stand. This was Westcliff, she tried to remind herself ...Westcliff, the man she hated ...but as he sealed his mouth harder over hers, she couldn't stop herself from responding. Straining against him, she instinctively rose on her toes until their bodies were perfectly aligned, the aching place between her thighs cradling the rigid bulge behind the buttoned fall of his trousers. Suddenly realizing what she had done, she flushed and tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her. His hand clenched firmly over her bottom, holding her there while his mouth devoured hers with smoldering sensuality, licking deeply, exploring the damp silk of her inner cheeks. She couldn't seem to catch her breath...she gasped as she felt his free hand search the front of her bodice.

"I want to feel you," Westcliff muttered against her trembling lips, tugging in at the unrelenting obstruction of her padded basque. "I want to kiss you everywhere..."

Her breasts hurt inside her tightly cinched bodice. She was possessed by the insane urge to tear away the quilted lining of her corset and beg him to soothe her tormented flesh with his mouth and hands. Instead she threaded her fingers through the thick, slightly curling locks of his hair while he kissed her in a fever of rising need, until her thoughts were no longer coherent and she was shivering with desire.

Suddenly the heady stimulation ended, as Westcliff tore his mouth away

and thrust her back against a fluted half column. Breathing raggedly, he half turned from her, and stood there with his fists clenched.

After a long time, Lillian collected herself sufficiently to speak. The perfume had worked rather too well. Her voice was thick and scratchy, as if she had just awoken from a long sleep. "Well. I ...I suppose that answers my question. Now...as to my request for sponsorship..."

Westcliff did not look at her. "I'll think about it," he muttered, and strode from the orangery.

CHAPTER 8

Before Westcliff could react, Lillian dug her heel into Starlight's side and leaned over the saddle, her weight shifting to accommodate his sudden leap forward. The horse rallied at once, taking off at a full gallop. Clenching her thighs around the sidesaddle's pommels, Lillian felt her position weaken, her body pivoting as a result of what she was later to learn had been a "grip seat" that was a bit too tight. Gamely she adjusted the change in her hips' orientation just as Starlight approached the jump. She felt the rise of his forelegs and the tremendous force of his hindquarters pushing from the ground, giving her the momentary exhilaration of flying over the triangular barrier. As they landed, however, she had to fight for her seat, taking most of the impact on her right thigh and causing an unpleasant stinging pull. Still, she had done it, and very credibly.

Bringing the horse around with a triumphant smile, Lillian was aware of the surprised gazes of the assembled riders, who were no doubt wondering what had prompted the impulsive jump. All of a sudden she was startled by a blur of dark color beside her and a thunder of hooves. Confused, she had no opportunity to protest or defend herself as she was literally snatched from the saddle and thrown across a brutally hard surface. Dangling helplessly across Westcliff's rock-solid thighs, she was carried several yards away before he stopped the horse, dismounted, and dragged her to the ground with him. Her shoulders were caught in a bruising grip, and Westcliff's livid face was just inches from her own.

"Did you think to convince me of something with that asinine display?" he growled, giving her a brief shake. "The use of my horses is a privilege that I extend to my guests--a privilege you have just lost. From now on, don't even think of setting so much as a foot in the stables, or I will personally boot you off the estate."

White-faced with a rage that matched his, Lillian answered in a low, shaking voice. "Take your hands off me, you son of a bitch." To her

satisfaction, she saw his eyes narrow at the profanity. But his painful grasp did not ease, and his breathing deepened to aggressive surges, as if he longed to do her violence. As her defiant gaze was imprisoned by his, she felt a searing charge of energy pass between them, an undirected physical impulse that made her want to strike him, hurt him, sink to the ground and roll with him in an outright brawl. No man had ever maddened her so. As they stood there glaring at each other, bristling with hostility, the heat between them increased until they were both flushed and quickened. Neither of them was aware of the congregation of dumbfounded onlookers in the near distance--they were too enmeshed in mutual antagonism.

A silky masculine voice interrupted their silent, lethal communion, slicing skillfully through the tension. "Westcliff ...you didn't tell me that you would be providing entertainment, or I would have come out here earlier."

"Don't interfere, St. Vincent," Westcliff snapped.

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of it. I merely wanted to compliment you on the way you're handling the situation. Very diplomatic. Suave, even."

The gentle sarcasm caused the earl to release Lillian roughly. She staggered back a step, and was immediately caught at the waist by a pair of deft hands. Bemused, she looked up into the remarkable face of Sebastian, Lord St. Vincent, the infamous rake and seducer.

The intensifying sunlight burned off the mist and laced St. Vincent's dark gold hair with streaks of glittering pale amber. Lillian had seen him from a distance on many occasions, but they had never been introduced, and St. Vincent had always avoided the line of wallflowers at any ball he happened to be attending. At a distance, he was a striking figure. At close range, the exotic beauty of his features was nearly immobilizing. St. Vincent had the most extraordinary eyes she had ever seen, light blue and catlike, shaded with dark lashes and surmounted by tawny brows. His features were strong but refined, his skin gleaming like bronze that had been patiently polished for hours. Contrary to Lillian's expectations, St. Vincent looked wicked but not at all dissipated, his smile skillfully reaching through her anger and enjoining a tentative response. Such a plenitude of charm should have been illegal.

Switching his gaze to Westcliff's set face, St. Vincent arched one brow and asked lightly, "Shall I escort the culprit back to the manor, my lord?"

The earl nodded. "Get her out of my sight," he muttered, "before I'm moved to say something I'll regret."

"Go ahead and say it," Lillian snapped.

Westcliff took a step toward her, his expression thunderous.

Hastily St. Vincent tucked Lillian behind him. "West-cliff, your guests are waiting. And although I'm certain they're enjoying this fascinating drama, the horses are getting restless."

The earl seemed to undergo a brief but savage battle with his self-discipline before he managed to school his features into impassivity. He jerked his head in the direction of the manor in a silent command for St. Vincent to remove Lillian from the scene.

"May I take her back on my horse?" St. Vincent inquired politely.

"No," came Westcliff's stony reply. "She can damned well walk to the house."

St. Vincent motioned at once for a groom to take charge of the two abandoned horses. Giving his arm to a fuming Lillian, he gazed down at her with a twinkle in his pale eyes. "It's the dungeons for you," he informed her. "And I intend to personally apply the thumbscrews."

"I would prefer torture to his company any day," Lillian said, gathering up the long side of her skirt and buttoning it to walking length.

As they walked away, Lillian's back stiffened at the sound of Westcliff's voice. "You might stop by the icehouse on the way back. She needs cooling."

Fighting to marshal his emotions into some semblance of order, Marcus stared after Lillian Bowman with a gaze that should have singed the back of her riding jacket. He usually found it easy to step back from any situation and assess it objectively. In the past few minutes, however, every vestige of self-control had exploded.

As Lillian had ridden defiantly toward the jump, Marcus had seen her momentary loss of alignment, potentially fatal on a sidesaddle, and the instant

expectation that she would fall had sent him reeling. At that speed, her spine or her neck could have snapped. And he had been powerless to do anything but watch. He had been abruptly cold with dread, nauseated from it, and when the little idiot had managed to land safely, the full sum of his fear had been transformed into blazing white fury. He had made no conscious decision to approach her, but suddenly they were both on the ground, and her narrow shoulders were in his hands, and all he wanted to do was crush her in his arms in a paroxysm of relief, and kiss her, and then dismember her with his bare hands.

The fact that her safety meant so much to him was...not something that he wanted to think about.

Scowling, Marcus went to the groom who held Brutus's reins, and took them from him. Lost in brooding contemplation, he was only dimly aware that Simon Hunt had quietly advised the guests to proceed with the jumping course without waiting for the earl to lead them.

Simon Hunt approached him on horseback, his face expressionless. "Are you going to ride?" he asked calmly.

For answer, Marcus swung up into the saddle, clicking softly as Brutus shifted beneath him. "That woman is intolerable," he grumbled, his gaze daring Hunt to offer an opinion to the contrary.

"Did you mean to goad her into taking the jump?" Hunt asked.

"I commanded her to do the exact opposite. You must have heard me."

"Yes, I and everyone else heard you," Hunt said dryly. "My question pertains to your tactics, Westcliff. It's obvious that a woman like Miss Bowman requires a softer approach than outright command. Moreover, I've seen you at the negotiating table, and your powers of persuasion are unmatched by anyone except perhaps Shaw. Had you chosen, you could have coaxed and flattered her to do your bidding in less than a minute. Instead you used all the subtlety of a bludgeon in the attempt to prove yourself her master."

"I've never noticed your gift for hyperbole before," Marcus muttered.

"And now," Hunt continued evenly, "you've thrown her over to St. Vincent's sympathetic care. God knows he'll probably rob her of her virtue before they even reach the manor."

Marcus glanced at him sharply, his smoldering ire undercut by sudden worry. "He wouldn't."

"Why not?"

"She's not his preferred style."

Hunt laughed gently. "Does St. Vincent have a preferred style? I've never noticed any similarities between the objects of his pursuit, other than the fact that they are all women. Dark, fair, plump, slender ...he's remarkably unprejudiced in his affairs."

"Damn it all to hell," Marcus said beneath his breath, experiencing, for the first time in his life, the gnawing sting of jealousy.

Lillian concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, when all she wanted was to head back to Westcliff and fling herself upon him in a mindless attack. "That arrogant, pompous clodpole--"

"Easy," she heard St. Vincent murmur. "Westcliff is in a thorough temper--and I wouldn't care to engage him in your defense. I can best him any day with a sword, but not with fists."

"Why not?" Lillian muttered. "You've got a longer reach than Westcliff."

"He's got the most vicious right hook I've ever encountered. And I have an unfortunate habit of trying to shield my face--which frequently leaves me open for gut punches."

The unashamed conceit behind the statement drew a reluctant laugh from Lillian. As the heat of anger faded, she reflected that with a face like his, one could hardly blame him for desiring to protect it. "Have you fought with the earl often?" she asked.

"Not since we were boys at school. Westcliff did everything a bit too perfectly--I had to challenge him now and then just to make certain that his vanity didn't become overinflated. Here ...shall we take a more scenic route

through the garden?"

Lillian hesitated, recalling the numerous stories that she had heard about him. "I'm not certain that would be wise."

St. Vincent smiled. "What if I promise on my honor not to make any advances to you?"

Considering that, Lillian nodded. "In that case, all right."

St. Vincent guided her through a small leafy grove, and onto a graveled path shaded by a row of ancient yews. "I should probably tell you," he remarked casually, "that since my sense of honor is completely deteriorated, any promise I make is worthless."

"Then I should tell you that my right hook is likely ten times more vicious than Westcliff's."

St. Vincent grinned. "Tell me, darling, what happened to cause bad blood between you and the earl?"

Startled by the casual endearment, Lillian thought of reprimanding him, then decided to let it pass. After all, it had been very nice of him to give up his morning ride to escort her back to the manor. "I'm afraid it was a case of hatred at first sight," she replied. "I think Westcliff is a judgmental boor, and he considers me an ill-natured brat." She shrugged. "Perhaps we're both right."

"I think neither of you is right," St. Vincent murmured.

"Well, actually ...I am something of a brat," Lillian admitted.

His lips twitched with barely suppressed humor. "Are you?"

She nodded. "I like to have my way, and I'm very cross when I don't get it. In fact, I've often been told that my temperament is quite similar to that of my grandmother, who was a dockside washwoman."

St. Vincent seemed entertained by the notion of being related to a washwoman. "Were you close to your grandmother?"

"Oh, she was a ripping old dear. Foul-mouthed and high-spirited, and she often said things that would make you laugh until your stomach hurt. Oh ...pardon...I don't think I'm supposed to say the word 'stomach' in front of a

gentleman."

"I'm shocked," St. Vincent said gravely, "but I'll recover." Looking around them as if to ascertain that he wouldn't be overheard, he whispered conspiratorially, "I'm not really a gentleman, you know."

"You're a viscount, aren't you?"

"That hardly goes hand-in-hand with being a gentleman. You don't know much about the peerage, do you?"

"I believe I already know more than I want to."

St. Vincent gave her a curious smile. "And here I thought you were intent upon marrying one of us. Am I mistaken, or aren't you and your younger sister a pair of dollar princesses brought over from the colonies to land titled husbands?"

"The colonies?" Lillian repeated with a chiding grin. "In case you hadn't heard, my lord, we won the Revolution."

"Ah. I must have forgotten to read the paper that day. But in answer to my question ...?"

"Yes," Lillian said, flushing a little. "Our parents brought us here to find husbands. They want to infuse the family line with blue blood."

"Is that what you want?"

"Today my sole desire is to draw some blue blood," she muttered, thinking of Westcliff.

"What a ferocious creature you are," St. Vincent said, laughing. "I pity Westcliff if he crosses you again. In fact, I think I should warn him..." His voice died away as he saw the sudden pain on her face, and heard the sharp intake of her breath.

A tearing agony went through Lillian's right thigh, and she would have stumbled to the ground had it not been for the support of his arm around her back. "Oh, damn it," she said shakily, clutching at her thigh. A twisting spasm in her thigh muscle caused her to groan through her clenched teeth. "Damn, damn--"

"What is it?" St. Vincent asked, swiftly lowering her to the path. "A leg

cramp?"

"Yes..." Pale and shaking, Lillian caught at her leg, while her face contorted with agony. "Oh God, it hurts!"

He bent over her, frowning with concern. His quiet voice was threaded with urgency. "Miss Bowman...would it be possible for you to temporarily ignore everything you've heard about my reputation? Just long enough for me to help you?"

Squinting at his face, Lillian saw nothing but an honest desire to relieve her pain, and she nodded.

"Good girl," he murmured, and gathered her writhing body into a half-sitting position. He talked swiftly to distract her, while his hand slipped beneath her skirts with gentle expertise. "It will take just a moment. I hope to God that no one happens along to see this--it looks more than a bit incriminating. And it's doubtful that they would accept the traditional but somewhat overused leg-cramp excuse--"

"I don't care," she gasped. "Just make it go away."

She felt St. Vincent's hand slide lightly up her leg, the warmth of his skin sinking through the thin fabric of her knickers as he searched for the knotting, twitching muscle. "Here we are. Hold your breath, darling." Obeying, Lillian felt him roll his palm strongly over the muscle. She nearly yelped at the burst of searing fire in her leg, and then suddenly it eased, leaving her weak with relief.

Relaxing back against his arm, Lillian let out a long breath. "Thank you. That's much better."

A faint smile crossed his lips as he deftly tugged her skirts back over her legs. "My pleasure."

"That never happened to me before," she murmured, flexing her leg cautiously.

"No doubt it was a repercussion from your exploit in the sidesaddle. You must have strained a muscle."

"Yes, I did." Color burnished her cheeks as she forced herself to admit,

"I'm not used to jumping on sidesaddle-- I've only done it astride."

His smile widened slowly. "How interesting," he murmured. "Clearly my experiences with American girls have been entirely too limited. I didn't realize you were so delightfully colorful."

"I'm more colorful than most," she told him sheepishly, and he grinned.

"Much as I would love to sit here chatting with you, sweet, I had better return you to the house, if you're able to stand now. It will do you no good to spend too much time alone with me." He stood in an easy movement and reached down for her.

"It seems to have done me quite a bit of good," Lillian replied, allowing him to pull her up.

St. Vincent offered her his arm, and watched as she tested her leg. "Is it all right?"

"Yes, thank you," Lillian replied, taking hold of his arm. "You've been very kind, my lord."

He stared at her with an odd flicker in his pale blue eyes. "I'm not kind, darling. I'm only nice to people when I'm planning to take advantage of them."

Lillian responded with a carefree grin, daring to ask, "Am I in danger from you, my lord?"

Though his expression remained relaxed with good humor, his eyes were disturbingly intent. "I'm afraid so."

"Hmm." Lillian studied the chiseled edge of his profile, thinking that for all his posturing, he had not taken advantage of her helplessness a few moments ago. "You're awfully forthcoming about your evil intentions. It makes me wonder if I should really worry."

His only response was an enigmatic smile.

After parting company with Lord St. Vincent, Lillian climbed the steps to the spacious back terrace, where laughter and excited feminine chatter was resounding off the flagstones. Ten young women were standing around one of the tables, involved in some kind of game or experiment. They bent over a

row of glasses that had been filled with various liquids, while one of them, who was blindfolded, cautiously dipped her fingers into one of them. Whatever the result was, it caused them all to squeal and giggle. A group of dowagers sat nearby, watching the proceedings with amused interest.

Lillian caught sight of her sister in the crowd, and wandered to her. "What is this?" she asked.

Daisy turned to view her with surprise. "Lillian," she murmured, slipping an arm around her waist, "why are you back early, dear? Did you have some difficulty at the jumping course?"

Lillian drew her aside while the game continued. "One could say that," she said tartly, and told her about the events of the morning.

Daisy's dark eyes turned round with dismay. "Good God," she whispered. "I can't imagine Lord Westcliff losing his head that way ...and as for you...what were you thinking, to let Lord St. Vincent do such a thing?"

"I was in pain," Lillian whispered back defensively. "I couldn't think. I couldn't even move. If you'd ever had a muscle cramp, you would know how much it hurts."

"I would elect to lose my leg entirely before letting someone like Lord St. Vincent near it," Daisy said beneath her breath. After pausing to consider the situation, she couldn't seem to keep from asking, "What was it like?"

Lillian smothered a laugh. "How should I know? By the time my leg stopped hurting, his hand was gone."

"Drat." Daisy frowned slightly. "Do you suppose he'll tell anyone?"

"Somehow I don't think he will. He seems to be a gentleman, in spite of his claims otherwise." A scowl settled on Lillian's forehead as she added, "Far more of a gentleman than Lord Westcliff was today."

"Hmm. How did he know that you couldn't ride sidesaddle?"

Lillian regarded her without rancor. "Don't play the idiot, Daisy--it's perfectly obvious that Annabelle told her husband, who then told Westcliff."

"You won't hold this against Annabelle, I hope. She never intended for the issue to blow up the way it did."

"She should have kept her mouth shut," Lillian said grumpily.

"She was afraid that you would take a tumble if you jumped sidesaddle. We all were."

"Well, I didn't!"

"You might have, though."

Lillian hesitated, her scowl fading as honesty compelled her to admit, "There's no doubt that I would have, eventually."

"Then you won't be cross with Annabelle?"

"Of course not," Lillian said. "It wouldn't be fair to blame her for Westcliff's beastly behavior."

Looking relieved, Daisy tugged her back to the crowded table. "Come, dear, you must try this game. It's silly but quite fun." The girls, all of them unmarried, and ranging in age from their early teens to mid-twenties, moved to make room for the pair of them. While Daisy explained the rules, Evie was blindfolded, and the other girls proceeded to change the positions of the four glasses. "As you can see," Daisy said, "one glass is filled with soap water, one with clear, and one with blue laundry water. The other, of course, is empty. The glasses will predict what kind of man you will marry."

They watched as Evie felt carefully for one of the glasses. Dipping her finger into the soap water, Evie waited for her blindfold to be drawn off, and viewed the results with chagrin, while the other girls erupted with giggles.

"Choosing the soap water means she will marry a poor man," Daisy explained.

Wiping off her fingers, Evie exclaimed good-naturedly, "I s-suppose the fact that I'm going to be m-married at all is a good thing."

The next girl in line waited with an expectant smile as she was blindfolded, and the glasses were repositioned. She felt for the vessels, nearly overturning one, and dipped her fingers into the blue water. Upon viewing her choice, she seemed quite pleased. "The blue water means she's going to marry a noted author," Daisy told Lillian. "You try next!"

Lillian gave her a speaking glance. "You don't really believe in this, do

you?"

"Oh, don't be cynical--have some fun!" Daisy took the blindfold and rose on her toes to tie it firmly around Lillian's head.

Bereft of sight, Lillian allowed herself to be guided to the table. She grinned at the encouraging cries of the young women around her. There was the sound of the glasses being moved in front of her, and she waited with her hands half raised in the air. "What happens if I pick the empty glass?" she asked.

Evie's voice came near her ear. "You die a sp-spinster!" she said, and everyone laughed.

"No lifting the glasses to test their weight," someone warned with a giggle. "You can't avoid the empty glass, if it's your fate!"

"At the moment I want the empty glass," Lillian replied, causing another round of laughter.

Finding the smooth surface of a glass, she slid her fingers up the side and dipped them into the cool liquid. A general round of applause and cheering, and she asked, "Am I marrying an author, too?"

"No, you chose the clear water," Daisy said. "A rich, handsome husband is coming for you, dear!"

"Oh, what a relief," Lillian said flippantly, lowering the blindfold to peek over the edge. "Is it your turn now?"

Her younger sister shook her head. "I was the first to try. I knocked over a glass twice in a row, and made a dreadful mess."

"What does that mean? That you won't marry at all?"

"It means that I'm clumsy," Daisy replied cheerfully. "Other than that, who knows? Perhaps my fate has yet to be decided. The good news is that your husband seems to be on the way."

"If so, the bastard is late," Lillian retorted, causing Daisy and Evie to laugh.

CHAPTER 10

Lillian was nearly overcome by nausea as Westcliff took her to an outdoor conservatory. The sky had turned plum-colored, the gathering darkness relieved only by starlight and the flares of newly lit torches. As the clean, sweet evening air swept over her, she gulped in deep breaths. Westcliff guided her to a cane-backed chair, exhibiting far more compassion than Daisy, who staggered against a column and shook with spasms of laughter.

"Oh...good Lord..." Daisy gasped, blotting tears of hilarity from her eyes, "your face, Lillian...you turned as green as a pea. I thought you were going to cast your crumpets in front of everyone!"

"So did I," Lillian said, shuddering.

"I take it you're not fond of calf's head," Westcliff murmured, sitting beside her. He extracted a soft white handkerchief from his coat and blotted Lillian's damp forehead.

"I'm not fond of anything," Lillian said queasily, "that stares back at me just before I'm supposed to eat it."

Daisy recovered her breath long enough to say, "Oh, don't carry on so. It only stared at you for a moment..." She paused and added, "Until its eyeballs were flipped out!" She convulsed with mirth once again.

Lillian glared at her howling sister and closed her eyes weakly. "For God's sake, do you have to--"

"Breathe through your mouth," Westcliff reminded her. The handkerchief moved over her face, absorbing the last traces of cold sweat. "Try putting your head down."

Obediently Lillian dropped her forehead to her knees. She felt his hand close over the chilled nape of her neck, massaging the stiff tendons with exquisite lightness. His fingers were warm and slightly rough-textured, and the gentle kneading was so pleasant that her nausea soon faded. He seemed to know exactly where to touch her, his fingertips discovering the most sensitive places on her neck and shoulders and nudging cleverly into the soreness.

Holding still beneath his ministrations, Lillian felt her entire body relaxing, her breathing turning deep and even.

All too soon she felt him easing her back to an upright position, and she had to bite back a protesting moan. To her mortification, she wanted him to continue stroking her. She wanted to sit there all evening with his hand on her neck. And her back. And ...other places. Her lashes lifted from her pale cheeks, and she blinked as she saw how close his face was to hers. Strange, how the severe lines of his features became more attractive every time she beheld them. Her fingers itched to skim along the bold edge of his nose, and the contours of his mouth, so stern and yet so soft. And the intriguing shadow of his night beard. All of it combined in a thoroughly masculine appeal. But most appealing of all were his eyes, black velvet warmed by torchlight, framed with straight lashes that cast shadows on the dramatic planes of his cheekbones.

Remembering his creative exposition on the subject of purple-spotted dingy-dippers, Lillian gave a little huff of amusement. She had always considered Westcliff an utterly humorless man...and in that, she had misjudged him. "I thought you never lied," she said.

His lips twitched. "Given the options of seeing you become ill at the dinner table, or lying to get you out of there quickly, I chose the lesser of two evils. Do you feel better now?"

"Better...yes." Lillian realized that she was resting in the crook of his arm, her skirts draped partially over one of his thighs. His body was solid and warm, perfectly matched to hers. Glancing downward, she saw that the fabric of his trousers had molded firmly around his muscular thighs. Unladylike curiosity awakened inside her, and she clenched her fingers against the urge to slide her palm over his leg. "The part about the dingy-dipper was clever," she said, dragging her gaze up to his face. "But inventing a Latin name for it was positively inspired."

Westcliff grinned. "I always hoped my Latin would be good for something." Shifting her a little, he reached into the pocket of his waistcoat and glanced at his watch. "We'll return to the dining hall in approximately a

quarter hour. By that time the calves' heads should be removed."

Lillian made a face. "I hate English food," she exclaimed. "All those jellies and blobs, and wiggly puddings, and the game that is aged until by the time it's served, it is older than I am, and--" She felt a tremor of amusement run through him, and she turned in the half circle of his arm. "What is so amusing?"

"You're making me afraid to go back to my own dinner table."

"You should be!" she replied emphatically, and he could no longer restrain a deep laugh.

"Pardon," came Daisy's voice from nearby, "but I am going to take this opportunity to make use of the...the...oh, whatever the polite word is for it, I have no idea. I will meet you at the entrance of the dining hall."

Westcliff withdrew his arm from around Lillian, glancing at Daisy as if he had temporarily forgotten her presence.

"Daisy--" Lillian said uncomfortably, suspecting that her younger sister was inventing an excuse to leave them alone together.

Ignoring her, Daisy departed with an impish grin and a wave, slipping through the French doors.

As Lillian sat with Westcliff in a spill of shifting torchlight, she experienced a pang of nervousness. Although there might have been a dearth of rare hybrid butterflies outside, the ones in her stomach more than made up for it. Westcliff turned to face her more fully, one arm braced along the back of the cane settee.

"I spoke with the countess earlier today," he said, a smile still lurking at the corners of his lips.

Lillian was slow to respond, trying desperately to push away the image that had suddenly appeared in her mind, of his dark head bending over hers, his tongue penetrating the softness of her mouth..."About what?" she asked dazedly.

Westcliff responded with an eloquently sardonic glance.

"Oh," she murmured. "You must mean my...my request for her

sponsorship..."

"Are we calling it a request?" Westcliff reached out to tuck a strand of loose hair neatly behind her ear. His fingertip brushed the outer edge, following the curve to the soft pad of her earlobe. "As I recollect, it bore a strong resemblance to extortion." He fingered the delicate lobe, his thumb smoothing over the tingling surface. "You never wear earrings. Why not?"

"I..." Suddenly she wasn't breathing properly. "My ears are very sensitive," she managed. "It hurts to clamp them with earbobs...and the thought of piercing them with a needle..." She stopped with a broken inhalation as she felt the tip of his middle finger investigating the shell of her ear, tracing the fragile inner structure. Westcliff let his thumb brush over the taut line of her jaw and the vulnerable softness beneath her chin, until she felt hot color spreading over her cheeks. They were sitting so close...it must be that he could smell her perfume. That was the only explanation for his loverlike touch on her face.

"Your skin is like silk," he murmured. "What were we talking about?...Oh yes, the countess. I managed to persuade her to sponsor you and your sister for the next season."

Lillian's eyes widened in astonishment. "You did? How? Did you have to bully her?"

"Do I strike you as the kind of man who would bully his sixty-year-old mother?"

"Yes."

A low laugh vibrated in his throat. "I have methods other than bullying," he informed her. "You just haven't seen them yet."

There was an implication in his words that she couldn't quite identify ...but it filled her with a tingle of anticipation. "Why did you persuade her to help me?" she asked.

"Because I thought I might enjoy inflicting you on her."

"Well, if you're going to make me sound like some sort of plague--"

"And," Westcliff interrupted, "I felt obligated to make amends after my

rough handling of you this morning."

"It wasn't all your fault," she said reluctantly. "I suppose I might have been somewhat provoking."

"Somewhat," he agreed dryly, his fingertips sliding behind her ear to the satiny edge of her hairline. "I should warn you that my mother's consent to the arrangement is not unconditional. If you push her too far, she'll balk. Therefore, I advise you to try to behave in her presence."

"Behave how?" Lillian asked, excruciatingly aware of the gentle exploration of his fingertip. If her sister didn't return soon, she thought dizzily, Westcliff was going to kiss her. And she wanted him to, so badly that her lips had begun to tremble.

He smiled at her question. "Well, whatever else you may do, don't--" He broke off suddenly, glancing at their surroundings as if he had become aware of some- one's approach. Lillian could hear nothing except the rustle of the breeze that swept through the trees and scattered a few fallen leaves across the graveled pathways. However, in just a moment a lean, lithe form cut through the mosaic of torchlight and shadow, and the gleam of antiqued-gold hair identified the visitor as Lord St. Vincent. Westcliff withdrew his hand from Lillian immediately. The sensual spell was broken, and she felt the rush of warmth begin to fade.

St. Vincent's stride was long but relaxed, his hands buried casually in the depths of his coat pockets. He smiled at the sight of the pair on the bench, his gaze lingering on Lillian's face.

There was no doubt that this remarkably beautiful man, with the face of a fallen angel and eyes the color of heaven at daybreak, had occupied the dreams of many women. And been cursed by many a cuckolded husband.

It seemed an unlikely friendship, Lillian thought, glancing from Westcliff to St. Vincent. The earl, with his straightforward, principled nature, must certainly disapprove of his friend's wayward inclinations. But as often was the case, this particular friendship might be strengthened by their differences rather than being undermined by them.

Stopping before them, St. Vincent confided, "I would have found you

sooner, but I was attacked by a swarm of dingy-dippers." His voice lowered with conspiratorial furtiveness. "And I don't wish to alarm either of you, but I had to warn you...they're planning to serve kidney pudding in the fifth course."

"I can manage that," Lillian said ruefully. "It is only animals served in their natural state that I seem to have difficulty with."

"Of course you do, darling. We're barbarians, the lot of us, and you were perfectly right to be appalled by the calves' heads. I don't like them either. In fact, I rarely consume beef in any form."

"Are you a vegetarian, then?" Lillian asked, having heard the word frequently of late. Many discussions had centered on the topic of the vegetable system of diet that was being promoted by a hospital society in Ramsgate.

St. Vincent responded with a dazzling smile. "No, sweet, I'm a cannibal."

"St. Vincent," Westcliff growled in warning, seeing Lillian's confusion.

The viscount grinned unrepentantly. "It's a good thing I happened along, Miss Bowman. You're not safe alone with Westcliff, you know."

"I'm not?" Lillian parried, tensing inwardly as she reflected that he never would have made the glib comment had he known of the intimate encounters between her and the earl. She didn't dare look at Westcliff, but she apprehended the immediate stillness of the masculine form so close to hers.

"No, indeed," St. Vincent assured her. "It's the morally upright ones who do the worst things in private. Whereas with an obvious reprobate such as myself, you couldn't be in safer hands. Here, you had better return to the dining hall under my protection. God knows what sort of lascivious scheme is lurking in the earl's mind."

Giggling, Lillian stood from the bench, enjoying the sight of Westcliff being teased. He regarded his friend with a slight scowl as he too rose to his feet.

Taking St. Vincent's proffered arm, Lillian wondered why he had

bothered to come out here. Was it possible that he had some kind of interest in her? Surely not. It was generally known that marriageable girls had never been a part of St. Vincent's romantic history, and Lillian was obviously not the kind whom he would pursue for an affair. However, it was rather entertaining to find herself alone in the company of two men, one of them the most desirable bed partner in England, and the other the most eligible bachelor. She couldn't help grinning as she thought of how many girls would commit outright murder to be in her shoes at this very moment.

St. Vincent drew her away with him. "As I recall," he remarked, "our friend Westcliff forbade you to ride his horses, but he said nothing about a carriage drive. Will you consider accompanying me on a tour through the countryside tomorrow morning?"

As Lillian considered the invitation, she allowed for a brief silence in anticipation that Westcliff might have something to say on the matter. Naturally, he did.

"Miss Bowman will be occupied tomorrow morning." The earl's brusque voice came from behind them.

Lillian opened her mouth to deliver a sharp retort, but St. Vincent sent her a sideways glance as he opened the door, conveying a mischievous admonition to let him handle things. "Occupied with what?" he asked.

"She and her sister are meeting with the countess."

"Ah, what a magnificent old dragon," St. Vincent mused, drawing Lillian through the doorway. "I've always gotten along famously with the countess. Let me offer a bit of advice--she loves to be flattered, though she'll pretend otherwise. A few words of praise, and you'll have her eating out of your hand."

Lillian glanced over her shoulder at Westcliff. "Is that true, my lord?"

"I wouldn't know, as I've never bothered to flatter her."

"Westcliff considers flattery and charm a waste of time," St. Vincent told Lillian.

"So I've noticed."

St. Vincent laughed. "I shall propose a carriage drive for the day after tomorrow then. Does that sound agreeable?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Excellent," St. Vincent said, adding in an offhand manner, "unless, Westcliff, you have some other claim on Miss Bowman's schedule?"

"No claim at all," Westcliff said flatly.

Of course not, Lillian thought with sudden rancor. Obviously Westcliff had no desire for her company, unless it was to spare his guests the sight of watching her cast up her crumpets on the dinner table.

They rejoined Daisy, who raised her brows at the sight of St. Vincent and asked mildly, "Where did you come from?"

"Were my mother alive, you could ask her," he replied pleasantly. "But I doubt she knew."

"St. Vincent," Westcliff snapped for the second time that evening. "These are innocent girls."

"Are they? How intriguing. Very well, I'll try for propriety...What subjects may one discuss with innocent girls?"

"Hardly any," Daisy said glumly, making him laugh.

Before they reentered the dining hall, Lillian paused to ask Westcliff, "At what time shall I visit the countess tomorrow? And where?"

His gaze was opaque and cool. Lillian couldn't help but notice that his disposition seemed to have soured since the moment St. Vincent had invited her on a carriage drive. But why would that displease him? It would be laughable to assume that he was jealous, since she was the last woman in the world in whom he would entertain a personal interest. The only reasonable conclusion was that he feared that St. Vincent might try to seduce her, and he did not want to deal with the trouble that would ensue.

"Ten o'clock in the Marsden parlor," he said.

"I'm afraid that I am not familiar with that room--"

"Few people are. It is an upstairs parlor, reserved for the family's private use."

"Oh." She stared into his dark eyes, feeling grateful and confused. He had been kind to her, and yet their relationship could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered a friendship. She wished that she could rid herself of her growing curiosity about him. It had been much easier when she had been able to dismiss him as a self-important snob. However, he was far more complex than she had originally thought, revealing dimensions of humor, sensuality, and surprising compassion.

"My lord," she said, ensnared by his gaze. "I ...I suppose I should thank you for--"

"Let's go in," he interrupted curtly, seeming eager to be out of her presence. "We've tarried long enough."

"Are you nervous?" Daisy whispered the next morning, as she and Lillian followed their mother to the door of the Marsden parlor. Although Mercedes had not been specifically invited to meet with the countess, she was bound and determined to be included in the visit.

"No," Lillian replied. "I'm certain we have nothing to fear as long as we keep our mouths shut."

"I've heard that she hates Americans."

"That's a pity," Lillian said dryly, "since both of her daughters married Americans."

"Quiet, the both of you," Mercedes whispered. Dressed in a silver-gray gown with a large diamond brooch at the throat, she gathered her hand into a tangle of sharp knuckles and rapped at the door. There was no sound from within. Daisy and Lillian glanced at each other with raised brows, wondering if the countess had decided not to meet with them after all. Frowning, Mercedes knocked at the door with increased force.

This time, a barbed voice penetrated the seams of mahogany paneling. "Stop that infernal hammering and enter!"

Wearing subdued expressions, the Bowmans entered the room. It was a small but lovely parlor, with walls covered in blue flowered paper and a large set of windows that revealed a view of the garden below. The Countess of

Westcliff was arranged on a settee beneath the window, her throat swathed in ropes of rare black pearls, her fingers and wrists weighted with jewels. In contrast to the brilliant pale silver of her hair, the lines of her brows were dark and thick, set uncompromisingly low over her eyes. In feature and in form, she was completely bereft of angles; her face round, her figure run to plumpness. Silently Lillian reflected that Lord Westcliff must have inherited his father's looks, for there was little resemblance between him and his mother.

"I expected only two," the countess said with a hard look at Mercedes. Her accent was as clean and crisp as white icing on a tea cake. "Why are there three?"

"Your Grace," Mercedes began with a toadying smile, bobbing in an uncomfortable curtsy. "First let me tell you how deeply Mr. Bowman and I appreciate your condescension to my two angels--"

"Only a duchess may be addressed as 'Your Grace,' " the countess said, the corners of her mouth drawn downward as if by an excessive pull of gravity. "Did you intend that as mockery?"

"Oh no, Your...that is, my lady," Mercedes said hastily, her face turning skull-white. "It was not mockery. Never that! I only wished to--"

"I will speak alone with your daughters," the countess said imperiously. "You may return in precisely two hours to collect them."

"Yes, my lady!" Mercedes fled the room.

Clearing her throat to camouflage a sudden irrepressible laugh, Lillian glanced at Daisy, who was also struggling to contain her amusement at seeing their mother so handily dispatched.

"What an unpleasant noise," the countess remarked, scowling at Lillian's throat clearing. "Kindly refrain from producing it again."

"Yes, my lady," Lillian said with her best attempt at humility.

"You may approach me," the countess commanded, looking from one to the other as they obeyed. "I watched you last evening, the both of you, and I witnessed a veritable catalogue of unseemly behavior. I am told that I must

act as your sponsor for the season, which confirms my opinion that my son is determined to make my life as difficult as possible. Sponsoring a pair of maladroit American girls! I warn you, if you do not heed every word that I say, I will not rest until each of you is married to some sham continental aristocrat and sent to molder in the most godforsaken corners of Europe."

Lillian was more than a little impressed. As far as threats went, it was a good one. Stealing a glance at Daisy, she saw that her sister had sobered considerably.

"Sit," the countess spat.

They complied with all possible speed, occupying the chairs that she indicated with a wave of her glittering hand. Reaching to the small table beside the settee, the countess produced a piece of parchment liberally covered with notes written in cobalt ink. "I have made a list," she informed them, using one hand to place a tiny pair of pince-nez spectacles on the abbreviated tip of her nose, "of the errors that were made by the two of you last evening. We will address it point by point."

"How could the list be that long?" Daisy asked in dismay. "The dinner lasted only four hours--how many mistakes could we have possibly made in that length of time?"

Staring at them stonily over the top edge of the parchment, the countess let the list unfold. Accordionlike, it opened...and opened...and opened...until the bottom edge brushed the floor.

"Bloody hell," Lillian muttered beneath her breath.

Overhearing the curse, the countess frowned until her brows formed an unbroken dark line. "If there were any room left on the parchment," she informed Lillian, "I would add that bit of vulgarity to it."

Repressing a long sigh, Lillian settled low in her chair.

"Sit up straight, if you please," the countess said. "A lady never allows her spine to touch the back of her chair. Now, we will begin with introductions. You have both displayed a lamentable habit of shaking hands. It makes one appear distastefully eager to ingratiate oneself. The accepted

rule is not to shake hands but merely to bow when being introduced, unless the introduction is being made between two young ladies. And as we're on the subject of bowing, you must never bow to a gentleman to whom you have not been introduced, even if he is well-known to you by sight. Nor may you bow to a gentleman who has addressed a few remarks to you at the house of a mutual friend, or any gentleman with whom you have conversed with casually. A short verbal exchange does not constitute an acquaintanceship, and therefore must not be acknowledged with a bow."

"What if the gentleman has done you some service?" Daisy asked. "Picking up a fallen glove, or something like that."

"Express your thanks at the time, but do not bow to him in the future, as a true acquaintanceship has not been established."

"That sounds rather ungrateful," Daisy commented.

The countess ignored her. "Now, on to dinner. After your first glass of wine, you may not request another. When the host passes the wine decanter to his guests during dinner, it is for the benefit of the gentlemen, not the ladies." She glowered at Lillian. "Last night I heard you ask for your wineglass to be refilled, Miss Bowman. Very bad form."

"But Lord Westcliff refilled it without a word," Lillian protested.

"Only to spare you from drawing yet more undesirable attention to yourself."

"But why..." Lillian's voice faded to silence as she saw the countess's forbidding expression. She realized that if she was going to ask for explanations on every point of etiquette, it would be a long afternoon indeed.

The countess proceeded to explain dinner table conventions, including the proper way to cut an asparagus point, and the way to consume quail and pigeon. "...blancmange and pudding must be eaten with a fork, not a spoon," she was saying, "and much to my dismay, I observed you both using knives on your rissoles." She looked at them significantly, as though expecting them to wilt with shame.

"What are rissoles?" Lillian dared to ask.

Daisy answered cautiously, "I think they were the little brown patties with the green sauce on top."

"I rather liked those," Lillian mused.

Daisy regarded her with a sly smile. "Do you know what they were made of?"

"No, and I don't want to!"

The countess ignored the exchange. "All rissoles, patties, and other molded foods must be eaten only with a fork, and never with the aid of a knife." Pausing, she glanced over the list to find her place. Her birdlike eyes constricted to slits as she read the next item. "And now," she said, staring meaningfully at Lillian, "as to the subject of calves' heads..."

Groaning, Lillian covered her eyes with one hand and slid down in her chair.

CHAPTER 12

A formal dress ball was held in the evening. It was a fine night, dry and cool, with the rows of tall windows opened to admit the outside air. The chandeliers scattered light over the intricately parqueted floor like glittering raindrops. Orchestra music filled the air in buoyant drifts, providing a perfect framework for the gossip and laughter of the guests.

Lillian did not dare accept a cup of punch, fearing that it would drip on her cream satin ball gown. The unadorned skirts fell in gleaming folds to the floor, while the narrow waist was cinched with a stiffened band of matching satin. The only ornamentation on the gown was an artful sprinkling of beads on the edge of her scoop-necked bodice. As she tugged a finger of her white glove more firmly over her little fingertip, she caught a glimpse of Lord Westcliff from across the room. He was dark and striking in his evening clothes, his white cravat pressed to the sharpness of a knife blade.

As usual, a group of men and women had gathered around him. One of the women, a beautiful blond with a voluptuous figure, leaned closer to him, murmuring something that brought a faint smile to his lips. He coolly observed the scene, appraising the gently milling assembly ...until he saw Lillian. His gaze flicked over her in swift assessment. Lillian felt his presence so palpably that the fifteen yards or so between them might not have existed. Troubled by her own gauzy sensual awareness of the man standing across the room, she gave him a brief nod and turned away.

"What is it?" Daisy murmured, coming up beside her. "You look rather distracted."

Lillian responded with a wry smile. "I'm trying to remember everything the countess told us," she lied, "and keep it all straight in my head. Especially the bowing rules. If someone bows to me, I'm going to shriek and run in the opposite direction."

"I'm terrified of making a mistake," Daisy confided. "It was so much easier before I realized how many things I have been doing wrong. I'll be

quite happy to be a wall-flower and sit safely at the side of the room this evening." Together they glanced at the row of semicircular niches running along one wall, each sided by slender pilasters and fitted with tiny velvet-covered benches. Evie sat alone in the farthest niche in the corner. Her pink dress clashed with her red hair, and she kept her head down as she sipped furtively from a cup of punch, every line of her posture proclaiming a disinclination to talk with anyone. "Oh, that won't do," Daisy said. "Come, let's pry the poor girl out of that niche and make her stroll with us."

Lillian smiled in agreement and made to accompany her sister. However, she froze with a sudden breath as she heard a deep voice near her ear. "Good evening, Miss Bowman."

Blinking with astonishment, she turned to face Lord Westcliff, who had crossed the room to her with surprising speed. "My lord."

Westcliff bowed over Lillian's hand and then greeted Daisy. His gaze returned to Lillian's. As he spoke, the light from the chandeliers played over the rich dark layers of his hair and the bold angles of his features. "You survived the encounter with my mother, I see."

Lillian smiled. "A better way to put it, my lord, is that she survived the encounter with us."

"It was obvious that the countess was enjoying herself immensely. She seldom encounters young women who don't wither in her presence."

"If I haven't withered in your presence, my lord, then I'm hardly going to wither in hers."

Westcliff grinned at that and then looked away from her, a pair of small creases appearing between his brows, as if he was contemplating some weighty matter. After a pause that seemed interminably long, his attention returned to Lillian. "Miss Bowman..."

"Yes?"

"Will you do me the honor of dancing with me?"

Lillian stopped breathing, moving, and thinking. Westcliff had never asked her to dance before, despite the multitude of occasions on which he

should have asked out of gentlemanly politeness. It had been one of the many reasons that she had hated him, knowing that he considered himself far too superior, and her attractions too insignificant, for it to be worth the bother. And in her more spiteful fantasies, she had imagined a moment like this when he would have asked for a dance, and she would respond with a crushing refusal. Instead, she was astonished and tongue-tied.

"Do excuse me," she heard Daisy say brightly, "I must go to Evie..." And she sped away with all possible haste.

Lillian drew in an unsteady breath. "Is this a test that the countess has devised?" she asked. "To see if I remember my lessons?"

Westcliff chuckled. Gathering her wits, Lillian couldn't help but notice that people were staring at them, obviously wondering what she had said to amuse him. "No," he murmured, "I believe it's a self-imposed test to see if I..." He seemed to forget what he was saying as he stared into her eyes. "One waltz," he said gently.

Distrusting her own response to him, the magnitude of her desire to step into his arms, Lillian shook her head. "I think ...I think that would be a mistake. Thank you, but--"

"Coward."

Lillian remembered the moment she had leveled the same charge at him...and she was no more able to resist the challenge than he. "I can't see why you should want to dance with me now, when you never have before."

The statement was more revealing than she had intended it to be. She cursed her own wayward tongue, while his speculative gaze wandered over her face.

"I wanted to," he surprised her by murmuring. "However, there always seemed to be good reasons not to."

"Why--"

"Besides," Westcliff interrupted, reaching out to take her gloved hand, "there was hardly a point in asking when your refusal was a foregone conclusion." Deftly he pressed her hand to his arm and led her toward the

mass of couples in the center of the room.

"It was not a foregone conclusion."

Westcliff glanced at her skeptically. "You're saying that you would have accepted me?"

"I might have."

"I doubt it."

"I did just now, didn't I?"

"You had to. It was a debt of honor."

She couldn't help but laugh. "For what, my lord?"

"The calf's head," he reminded her succinctly.

"Well, if you hadn't served such a nasty object in the first place, I wouldn't have needed to be rescued!"

"You wouldn't have needed to be rescued if you didn't have such a weak stomach."

"You're not supposed to mention body parts in front of a lady," she said virtuously. "Your mother said so."

Westcliff grinned. "I stand corrected."

Enjoying their bickering, Lillian grinned back at him. Her smile died, however, as a slow waltz began and Westcliff turned her to face him. Her heart began to thump with unrestrained force. As she looked down at the gloved hand that he extended to her, she could not make herself take it. She could not let him hold her in public...she was afraid of what her face might reveal.

After a moment she heard his low voice. "Take my hand."

Dazed, she found herself obeying, her trembling fingers reaching for his.

Another silence passed, and then, softly, "Put your other one on my shoulder."

She watched her white glove settle slowly on his shoulder, the surface hard and solid beneath her palm.

"Now look at me," he whispered.

Her lashes lifted. Her heart gave a jolt as she stared into his coffee-colored eyes, which were filled with dark warmth. Holding her gaze, Westcliff drew her into the waltz, using the momentum of the first turn to bring her closer to him. Soon they were lost in the midst of the dancers, circling with the lazy grace of a swallow's flight. As Lillian might have expected, Westcliff established a strong lead, allowing no chance of a misstep. His hand was firm at the small of her back, the other providing explicit guidance.

It was all too easy. It was perfect as nothing else in her life had ever been, their bodies moving in harmony as if they had waltzed together a thousand times before. Good Lord, he could dance. He led her into steps that she had never tried, reverse turns and cross steps, and it was all so natural and effortless that she gave a breathless laugh at the completion of a turn. She felt weightless in his arms, gliding smoothly within the parameters of his taut and graceful movements. Her skirts brushed his legs, wrapping and falling away in rhythmic repetition.

The crowded ballroom seemed to disappear, and she felt as if they were dancing alone, far away in some private place. Intensely aware of his body, the occasional touch of his warm breath on her cheek, Lillian drifted into a curious waking dream ...a fantasy in which Marcus, Lord Westcliff, would take her upstairs after the waltz, and undress her, and lay her gently across his bed. He would kiss her everywhere, as he had once whispered...he would make love to her, and hold her while she slept. She had never wanted that kind of intimacy with a man before.

"Marcus..." she said absently, testing his name on her tongue. He glanced at her alertly. The use of someone's first name was profoundly personal, far too intimate unless they were married or closely related. Smiling mischievously, Lillian turned the conversation into a more appropriate channel. "I like that name. It's not common nowadays. Were you named after your father?"

"No, after an uncle. The only one on my mother's side."

"Were you pleased to be his namesake?"

"Any name would have been acceptable, so long as it wasn't my father's."

"Did you hate him?"

Westcliff shook his head. "Something worse than that."

"What could be worse than hatred?"

"Indifference."

She stared at him with open curiosity. "And the countess?" she dared to ask. "Are you also indifferent to her?"

One corner of his mouth curled upward in a half smile. "I regard my mother as an aging tigress--one whose teeth and claws are blunted, but who is still capable of inflicting harm. Therefore I try to conduct all interactions with her at a safe distance."

Lillian gave him a mock-indignant scowl. "And yet you tossed me right into the cage with her this morning!"

"I knew you had your own set of teeth and claws." Westcliff grinned at her expression. "That was a compliment."

"I'm glad you told me so," she said dryly. "Otherwise I might not have known."

To Lillian's dismay, the waltz ended with one last sweet drawn-out note of a single violin. Amid the ensuing currents of dancers moving off the main floor, with others coming to replace them, Westcliff stopped abruptly. He was still holding her, she realized with a touch of confusion, and she took a hesitant step backward. Reflexively his arm hardened around her waist, and his fingers tightened in an instinctive attempt to keep her with him. Astonished by the action, and what it betrayed, Lillian felt her breath stop.

Checking his impulsiveness, Westcliff forced himself to release her. Still, she felt the force of desire radiating from him, as penetrating as the heat drafts of an entire forest on fire. And it was a mortifying thought that whereas her feelings for him were genuine, his might very well be the whimsical result of a perfume's aroma. She would have given anything not to be so attracted to him, when disappointment or even heartbreak was a foregone

conclusion.

"I was right, wasn't I?" she asked huskily, unable to look at him. "It was a mistake for us to dance."

Westcliff waited so long to reply that she thought he might not. "Yes," he finally said, the single syllable roughened with some unidentifiable emotion.

Because he could not afford to want her. Because he knew as well as she that a pairing between them would be a disaster.

Suddenly it hurt to be near him. "Then I suppose this waltz will be our first and our last," she said lightly. "Good evening, my lord, and thank you for--"

"Lillian," she heard him whisper.

Turning from him, she walked away with a brittle smile, while goose bumps rose on the exposed skin of her neck and back.

The rest of the night would have been a misery for Lillian, had it not been for a timely rescue in the form of Sebastian, Lord St. Vincent. He appeared beside her before she could join Evie and Daisy, who were sitting together on a velvet bench.

"What a graceful dancer you are, Miss Bowman."

After being with Westcliff, it seemed awkward to look up into the face of a man who was so much taller than she. St. Vincent stared at her with a promise of wicked enjoyment that she found difficult to resist. His enigmatic smile could have been offered to a friend or an enemy with equal ease. Lillian let her gaze slip downward to the slightly off-center knot of his cravat. There was a hint of disarray in his clothing, as if he had dressed with a bit too much haste after leaving a lover's bed--and meant to return there soon.

In answer to his easy compliment, Lillian smiled and shrugged a bit awkwardly, remembering too late the countess's admonition that ladies never shrugged. "If I appeared graceful, my lord, it was because of the earl's skill, not mine."

"You're too modest, sweet. I've seen Westcliff dance with other women,

and the effect wasn't nearly the same. You seem to have patched up your differences with him quite nicely. Are you friends now?"

It was a harmless question, but Lillian sensed that his meaning was multilayered. She replied cautiously, while she noticed that Lord Westcliff was escorting an auburn-haired woman to the refreshment table. The woman was glowing with obvious pleasure at the earl's interest. A needle of jealousy stabbed through Lillian's heart. "I don't know, my lord," she said. "It's possible that your definition of friendship does not match mine."

"Clever girl." St. Vincent's eyes were like blue diamonds, pale and infinitely faceted. "Come, let me escort you to the refreshment table, and we'll compare our definitions."

"No, thank you," Lillian said reluctantly, even though she was parched with thirst. For her own peace of mind, she had to avoid Westcliff's proximity.

Following her gaze, St. Vincent saw the earl in the company of the auburn-haired woman. "Perhaps we'd better not," he agreed in a relaxed tone. "It would undoubtedly displease Westcliff to see you in my company. After all, he did warn me to stay away from you."

"He did?" Lillian frowned. "Why?"

"He doesn't want you to be compromised or otherwise harmed by association with me." The viscount slid her a baiting glance. "My reputation, you understand."

"Westcliff has no right to make any decisions about whom I associate with," Lillian muttered, swift anger burning through her. "The top-lofty, superior know-all, I'd like to--" She stopped and fought to marshal her rearing emotions. "I'm thirsty," she said tersely. "I want to go to the refreshment table. With you."

"If you insist," St. Vincent said mildly. "What shall it be? Water? Lemonade? Punch, or--"

"Champagne," came her grim reply.

"Whatever you desire." He accompanied her to the long table, which

was surrounded by a long line of guests. Lillian had never known a purer sense of satisfaction than the moment Westcliff noticed that she was in St. Vincent's company. The line of his mouth hardened, and he stared at her with narrowed black eyes. Smiling defiantly, Lillian accepted a glass of iced champagne from St. Vincent and drank it in unladylike gulps.

"Not so fast, sweet," she heard St. Vincent murmur. "The champagne will go to your head."

"I want another," Lillian replied, dragging her attention away from Westcliff and turning toward St. Vincent.

"Yes. In a few minutes. You look a bit flushed. The effect is charming, but I think you've had enough for now. Would you like to dance?"

"I would love to." Giving her empty glass to a nearby footman with a tray, Lillian stared at St. Vincent with a deliberately dazzling smile. "How interesting. After a year of being a perpetual wallflower, I've received two invitations to dance in one night. I wonder why?"

"Well..." St. Vincent walked slowly with her to the crowd of dancers. "I'm a wicked man who can, on occasion, be just a bit nice. And I've been searching for a nice girl who can, on occasion, be just a bit wicked."

"And now you've found one?" Lillian asked, laughing.

"It would seem so."

"What were you planning to do, once you found the girl?"

There was an interesting complexity in his eyes. He seemed like a man who was capable of anything ...and in her current reckless disposition, that was exactly what she wanted. "I will let you know," St. Vincent murmured. "Later."

Dancing with St. Vincent was an entirely different experience from dancing with Westcliff. There was not the sense of exquisite physical harmony, of movement without thought ...but St. Vincent was smooth and accomplished, and as they circled the ballroom, he kept throwing out provocative comments that made her laugh. And he held her with assurance, with hands that, despite their respectful clasp, bespoke a wealth of experience

with women's bodies.

"How much of your reputation is deserved?" she dared to ask him.

"Only about half...which makes me utterly reprehensible."

Lillian stared at him with quizzical amusement. "How could a man like you be friends with Lord Westcliff? You're so very different."

"We've known each other since the age of eight. And, stubborn soul that he is, Westcliff refuses to accept that I'm a lost cause."

"Why should you be a lost cause?"

"You don't want to know the answer to that." He interrupted the beginnings of her next question by murmuring, "The waltz is ending. And there is a woman near the gilded frieze who is watching us rather closely. Your mother, isn't she? Let me take you to her."

Lillian shook her head. "You had better part company with me now. Trust me--you don't want to meet my mother."

"Of course I do. If she is anything like you, I will find her captivating."

"If she is anything like me, I pray you will have the decency to keep your opinion to yourself."

"Have no fear," he advised lazily, easing her away from the dancing area. "I've never met a woman I didn't like."

"This is the last time you will ever make such a statement," she predicted dourly.

As St. Vincent escorted Lillian toward the group of gossiping women that included her mother, he said, "I'll invite her to accompany us on the carriage drive tomorrow, as you are in dire need of a chaperone."

"I don't have to have one," Lillian protested. "Men and women may go for an unchaperoned drive as long as it's not a closed carriage and they're not gone for longer than--"

"You need a chaperone," he repeated with a gentle insistence that made her feel suddenly flustered and shy.

Thinking that his gaze couldn't possibly mean what she thought it meant,

she laughed shakily. "Or else..." She tried to think of something daring to say. "Or else you'll compromise me?"

His smile, like everything else about him, was subtle and unhurried. "Something like that."

There was an odd but pleasant tickle at the back of her throat, as if she had swallowed a spoonful of treacle. St. Vincent wasn't behaving at all like the seducers that populated the silver-fork novels Daisy was so fond of. Those villainous characters, with their heavy mustaches and lecherous gazes, were prone to lie about their evil intentions until the revealing moment when they assaulted the virginal heroine and forced themselves upon her. St. Vincent, by contrast, seemed positively determined to warn her away from himself, and she could not quite picture him bestirring himself enough to force a girl to do anything against her will.

When Lillian made the introductions between her mother and St. Vincent, she saw the instant calculation in Mercedes's eyes. Mercedes viewed all eligible men of the peerage, regardless of age, appearance, or reputation, as potential prey. She would stop at nothing to ensure that each of her daughters married a title, and it mattered little to her if the man behind it was young and handsome, or old and senile. Having commissioned a private report on nearly every peer of note in England, Mercedes had memorized hundreds of pages of financial figures about the British aristocracy. As she stared at the elegant viscount who stood before her, one could almost see her riffle through the wealth of information in her brain.

Remarkably, however, in the course of the next few minutes Mercedes relaxed in St. Vincent's charming presence. He coaxed her into agreeing to the carriage drive, teased and flattered her, and listened to her opinions with such attentiveness that soon Mercedes began to blush and giggle like a girl in her teens. Lillian had never seen her mother behave that way with any other man. It quickly became obvious that whereas Westcliff made Mercedes nervous, St. Vincent had the opposite effect. He had a unique ability to make a woman--any woman, it seemed--feel attractive. He was far more polished than most American men, yet warmer and more accessible than English men.

His allure was so compelling, in fact, that for a while Lillian forgot to glance around the room in search of Westcliff.

Taking Mercedes's hand in his, St. Vincent bent over her wrist and murmured, "Until tomorrow, then."

"Until tomorrow," Mercedes repeated, looking dazzled, and suddenly Lillian had a glimpse of what her mother must have looked like in her youth before disappointment had hardened her. A few women leaned toward Mercedes, and she turned to confer with them.

Bending his dark golden head, St. Vincent murmured close to Lillian's ear, "Would you care for that second glass of champagne now?"

Lillian nodded slightly, absorbing the pleasant mixture of fragrances that clung to him, the touch of expensive cologne, the hint of shaving soap, and the clean, clovelike essence of his skin.

"Here?" he asked softly. "Or in the garden?"

Realizing that he wanted her to steal away with him for a few minutes, Lillian felt a stirring of caution. Alone with St. Vincent in the garden...no doubt many an unwary girl's downfall had begun that way. Considering the proposition, she let her gaze wander until she caught sight of Westcliff taking a woman into his arms. Waltzing with her, just as he had with Lillian. The forever unattainable Westcliff, she thought, and anger filled her. She wanted distraction. And comfort. And the large, handsome male in front of her seemed willing to provide it.

"The garden," she said.

"Meet me in ten minutes, then. There is a mermaid fountain just beyond the--"

"I know where it is."

"If you can't manage to slip outside--"

"I will," she assured him, forcing a smile.

St. Vincent paused to view her with a shrewd but oddly compassionate gaze. "I can make you feel better, sweet," he whispered.

"Can you?" she asked dully, unwanted emotion staining her cheeks as

red as poppies.

A promising glint appeared in his brilliant eyes, and he responded with a slight nod before taking his leave.

CHAPTER 14

A wordless exclamation escaped Lillian's lips as she beheld a square patch of lawn that was surrounded on all sides by a butterfly garden. Every wall was bordered with rich tumbles of color, a profusion of wildflowers that were covered with delicate fluttering wings. The only furnishment in the garden was a circular bench in the center from which every part of the garden could be viewed. The sublime incense of sun-heated flowers floated to her nostrils, intoxicating her with their sweetness.

"It's called Butterfly Court," Westcliff said, closing the door. His voice was a stroke of unfinished velvet on her ears. "It's been planted with the flowers most likely to attract them."

Lillian smiled dreamily as she watched the tiny, busy forms hovering at the heliotrope and marigold. "What are those called? The orange and black ones."

Westcliff came to stand beside her. "Painted ladies."

"How does one refer to a group of butterflies? A swarm?"

"Most commonly. However, I prefer a more recent variation--in some circles it is referred to as a kaleidoscope of butterflies."

"A kaleidoscope...that's some kind of optical instrument, isn't it? I've heard of them, but never chanced to see one."

"I have a kaleidoscope in the library. If you like, I will show it to you later." Before she could reply, Westcliff pointed toward a huge fall of lavender. "Over there--the white butterfly is a skipper."

A sudden laugh bubbled in her throat. "A dingy-skipper?"

Answering amusement twinkled in his eyes. "No. Just the regular variety of skipper."

Sunlight glossed his heavy black hair and imparted a bronze sheen to his skin. Lillian's gaze fell to the strong line of his throat, and suddenly she was unbearably aware of the coiled force of his body, the contained masculine

power that had fascinated her since the first time she had ever seen him. What would it feel like to be wrapped inside that potent strength?

"How lovely the lavender smells," she remarked, trying to distract her thoughts from their dangerous inclinations. "Someday I want to travel to Provence, to walk one of the lavender roads in summer. They say the stands of flowers are so far-reaching that the fields look like an ocean of blue. Can you imagine how beautiful it must be?"

Westcliff shook his head slightly, staring at her.

She wandered to one of the lavender stalks and touched the tiny violet-blue blossoms, and brought her scented fingertips to her throat. "They extract the essential oil by forcing steam through the plants and drawing off the liquid. It takes something like five hundred pounds of lavender plants to produce just a few precious ounces of oil."

"You seem quite knowledgeable on the subject."

Lillian's lips quirked. "I have a great interest in scents. In fact, I could help my father a great deal with his company, were he to allow it. But I'm a woman, and therefore my only purpose in life is to marry well." She wandered to the edge of the radiant wildflower bed.

Westcliff followed, coming to stand just behind her. "That puts me in mind of an issue that needs to be discussed."

"Oh?"

"You've been keeping company with St. Vincent of late."

"So I have."

"He is not a suitable companion for you."

"He is your friend, is he not?"

"Yes--which is why I know what he is capable of."

"Are you warning me to stay away from him?"

"As that would obviously be the supreme inducement for you to do otherwise...no. I am merely advising you not to be naive."

"I can manage St. Vincent."

"I'm sure you believe so." A thread of annoying condescension had entered his tone. "However, it is clear that you have neither the experience nor the maturity to defend yourself against his advances."

"So far you have been the only one I've needed to defend myself against," Lillian retorted, turning to face him. She observed with satisfaction that the shot had hit its mark, causing a faint wash of color to edge his cheeks and the well-defined bridge of his nose.

"If St. Vincent has not yet taken advantage of you," he replied with dangerous gentleness, "it is only because he is waiting for an opportune moment. And in spite of your inflated opinion of your own abilities--or perhaps because of it--you are an easy mark for seduction."

"Inflated?" Lillian repeated in outrage. "I'll have you know that I am far too experienced to be caught unaware by any man, including St. Vincent." To Lillian's vexation, Westcliff seemed to recognize the exaggeration for what it was, a smile gleaming in his sable eyes.

"I was mistaken, then. From the way you kiss, I assumed..." He deliberately left the sentence unfinished, laying out bait that she was powerless to resist.

"What do you mean, 'from the way I kiss'? Are you implying that there is something wrong? Something you don't like? Something I shouldn't--"

"No..." His fingertips brushed her mouth, silencing her. "Your kisses were very..." He hesitated as if the right word eluded him, and then his attention seemed to focus on the plush surface of her lips. "Sweet," he whispered after a long time, his fingers sliding across the underside of her chin. Light as the touch was, he had to feel the exquisite tension of her throat muscles. "But your response was not what I would have expected of an experienced woman."

His thumb rubbed across her lower lip, teasing it apart from the top one. Lillian felt bemused and combative, like a sleepy kitten who had just been awakened with a tickling feather. She stiffened as she felt him slide a supportive arm behind her back. "What...what more was I supposed to do? What could you have expected that I didn't--" She stopped with a swift

inhalation as his fingers followed the angle of her jaw, cupping the side of her face.

"Shall I show you?"

Reflexively she pushed at his chest in an attempt to loosen his hold. She might as well have tried to move an ironstone wall. "Westcliff--"

"You clearly have need of a qualified tutor." His warm breath touched her lips as he spoke. "Hold still."

Realizing that she was being mocked, Lillian pushed much harder, and found her wrists being twisted behind her back with astonishing ease, until the gentle weight of her breasts was thrust forward against his chest. Sputtering in protest, she felt his mouth cover hers, and she was instantly paralyzed by a flare of sensation that whipped through every muscle in her body until she was drawn up like a child's wooden puppet with knotted strings.

Folded inside his arms, compressed against the hard surface of his chest, she felt her breathing escalate into deep, uneven surges. Her lashes fell, the sunlight warm against the frail shelter of her lids. There was the slow penetration of his tongue, a melting intimacy that sent a hard shiver through her body. Feeling the movement, he sought to soothe her with long strokes of his palm over her back, even as his mouth played with hers. He searched more intensely, and the thrust of his tongue met with a bashful retreat that drew a low sound of amusement from his chest. Instantly offended, Lillian drew back, and he cupped his hand around the back of her head.

"No," he murmured. "Don't pull away. Open for me. Open..." His mouth was on hers again, coaxing and firm. Gradually understanding what he wanted of her, she let her tongue touch his. She felt the strength of his response, the urgency that flooded him, but he remained gentle as he explored her with drifting kisses. With her hands free, she could not stop herself from touching him, one hand flattening against the conditioned muscles of his back, the other rising to the column of his neck. His sun-darkened skin was smooth and hot, like freshly pressed satin. She investigated the forceful pulse in the hollow at the base of his throat, then let

her fingers wander to the dark fleece that filled the open neck of his shirt.

Westcliff brought his warm hands up to her face, cupping her cheeks as he concentrated on her mouth, possessing her with hungry, soul-stealing kisses until she was too weak to stand. As her knees buckled, she felt his arms go around her again. He cradled her weak body, easing her to the thick carpet of grass underfoot. Lying halfway across her, his leg anchored in the heap of her skirts, he wedged a solid arm beneath her neck. His mouth sought hers, and this time she did not shy away from his restless searching, but opened to him fully. The world beyond the hidden garden vanished from her awareness. There was only this place, this patch of Eden, sunny and quiet and blazing with unearthly color. The mixed scents of lavender and warm male skin were all around her...too delicious...too compelling...Languidly she twined her arms around his neck, her hands sliding into the thick locks of his hair.

She felt a series of deft tugs at the front of her gown, and she lay passively beneath the clever workings of his hands, her body aching for his touch. Levering himself above her, he unhooked her corset and released her from the prison of laces and stays. She couldn't breathe deeply enough, or fast enough, her lungs striving to appease a desperate need for more oxygen. Caught in a tangle of confining clothes, she writhed to be free of them, and he held her down with a quiet murmur as he spread the edges of her corset wider and tugged at the delicate ribbon tie of her chemise.

The pale curves of her breasts were bared to the sun and the open air, and to the sloe-eyed gaze of the man who held her. He stared at the shallow rise of her chest, the pink buds of her nipples, and said her name softly as his head lowered. His mouth moved lightly against her skin, coasting up the taut hill of one breast and opening over the delicate tip. A sound of fearful pleasure was torn from her throat as she lay beneath him. The tip of his tongue circled the edge of her nipple, provoking it into unbearable sensitivity. Her hands gripped the impossibly hard muscles of his upper arms, her fingertips digging into the bulge of his biceps. Passion smoldered and flamed in ever-higher drafts, until she gasped and tried to twist away from him.

She breathed in quivering sobs as he kissed her mouth again. Her body, filled with unfamiliar pulses and rhythms, no longer seemed her own. "Westcliff..." Her mouth wandered unsteadily over the masculine scrape of his cheek, the edge of his jaw, and back to the softness of his lips. When the kiss ended, she turned her face to the side and gasped, "What do you want?"

"Don't ask that." His lips moved to her ear, and his tongue stroked into the tiny hollow behind the fragile lobe. "The answer..." Hearing the way her breath hastened, he lingered at her ear, tracing the fine edge with his tongue, nibbling at the folds within. "The answer is dangerous," he finally managed to say.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she brought his mouth back to hers in a fiery open kiss that seemed to unravel his self-control.

"Lillian," he said unsteadily, "tell me not to touch you. Tell me it's enough now. Tell me--"

She kissed him again, greedily absorbing the heat and flavor of his mouth. A new urgency ignited between them, and his kisses became harder, more aggressive, until a surge of agonized need made her limbs heavy and weak. She felt her skirts being eased upward, the heat of sunlight penetrating the thin linen of her knickers. The careful weight of his hand descended to her knee, his palm covering the rounded joint. After a moment his hand slid upward. He gave her no opportunity to object, his mouth occupying hers with restless kisses, while his fingers skimmed the sleek line of her leg.

She jerked a little as he reached the swollen, tender flesh between her thighs, tracing the shape of her through the gauzy linen. A flush suffused her limbs and chest and face, and her heels dug into the lawn as she arched helplessly against his hand. He stroked her soothingly over the veil of linen. The thought of how those strong, slightly roughened fingers might feel against her skin caused her to moan with need. After what seemed an eternity of torment, he let his fingers enter the lace-edged slit of her undergarment. An agitated gasp escaped her as she felt herself being stroked and parted, his long fingers gliding through the silky dark curls. He fondled her with delicate idleness, as if he were playing with the petals of a half-open rose. One

tantalizing fingertip brushed over the little peak that kindled with excitement, and all rational thought dissolved. He found the subtle spot where all her pleasure centered, and stroked her rhythmically, circling delicately, making her writhe in gathering desperation.

She wanted him, regardless of the consequences. She wanted his possession, and even the pain that would come with it. But with brutal suddenness, the weight of his body was lifted from hers, and Lillian was left tumbled and disoriented in the patch of velvety lawn. "My lord?" she asked breathlessly, managing to heave herself to a sitting position, with her clothes in wanton disarray.

He was sitting nearby, his arms braced on his bent knees. With something close to despair, she saw that he was once again in control of himself, whereas she was still trembling from head to toe.

His voice was cool and steady. "You've proved my point, Lillian. If a man you don't even like can bring you to this state, then how much easier would it be for St. Vincent?"

She started as if he had slapped her, and her eyes widened.

The transition from warm desire to a feeling of utter foolishness was not a pleasant one.

The devastating intimacy between them had been nothing but a lesson to demonstrate her inexperience. He had used it as an opportunity to put her in her place. Apparently she wasn't good enough to wed or to bed. Lillian wanted to die. Humiliated, she scrambled upward, clutching at her unfastened garments, and shot him a glare of hatred. "That remains to be seen," she choked out. "I'll just have to compare the two of you. And then if you ask nicely, perhaps I'll tell you if he--"

Westcliff pounced on her with startling swiftness, shoving her back to the lawn and bracketing her tossing head between his muscular forearms. "Stay away from him," he snapped. "He can't have you."

"Why not?" she demanded, struggling as he settled more heavily between her flailing legs. "Am I not good enough for him either? Inferior breed that I am--"

"You're too good for him. And he would be the first to admit it."

"I like him all the better for not suiting your high standards!"

"Lillian--hold still, damn it--Lillian, look at me!" Westcliff waited until she had stilled beneath him. "I don't want to see you hurt."

"Has it ever occurred to you, you arrogant idiot, that the person most likely to hurt me might be you?"

Now it was his turn to recoil as if struck. He stared at her blankly, though she could practically hear the whirring of his agile brain as he sorted through the potential implications of her rash statement.

"Get off me," Lillian said sullenly.

He moved upward, straddling her slender hips, his fingers grasping the inner edges of her corset. "Let me fasten you. You can't run back to the manor half dressed."

"By all means," she replied with helpless scorn, "let's observe the proprieties." Closing her eyes, she felt him tugging her clothes into place, tying her chemise and re-hooking her corset efficiently.

When he finally released her, she sprang from the ground like a startled doe and rushed to the entrance of the hidden garden. To her eternal humiliation, she couldn't find the door, which was concealed by the lavish spills of ivy coming over the wall. Blindly she thrust her hands into the trailing greenery, breaking two nails as she scabbled for the doorjamb.

Coming up behind her, Westcliff settled his hands at her waist, easily dodging her attempts to throw him off. He pulled her hips back firmly against his and spoke against her ear. "Are you angry because I started making love to you, or because I didn't finish?"

Lillian licked her dry lips. "I'm angry, you bloody big hypocrite, because you can't make up your mind about what to do with me." She punctuated the comment with the hard jab of one elbow back against his ribs.

The sharp blow seemed to have no effect on him. With a mocking show of courtesy, he released her and reached for the concealed door handle, allowing her to escape the hidden garden.

CHAPTER 16

To anyone who cared to notice, it was obvious during the last two weeks of the house party at Stony Cross Park that Lord Westcliff and Miss Lillian Bowman made a mutual effort to avoid each other's company as much as possible. It was equally obvious that Lord St. Vincent was partnering her with increasing frequency at the dances, picnics, and water parties that enlivened the pleasant autumn days in Hampshire.

Lillian and Daisy spent several mornings in the company of the Countess of Westcliff, who lectured, instructed, and tried in vain to instill them with an aristocratic perspective. Aristocrats never displayed enthusiasm, but rather detached interest. Aristocrats relied on subtle inflections of the voice to convey meaning. Aristocrats would say "relation" or "kinsman," rather than "relative." And they used the phrase "do be good enough" rather than ask "would you." Furthermore, it was mandatory that an aristocratic lady should never express herself directly, but instead hint gracefully at her meaning.

If the countess preferred one sister over the other, it was certainly Daisy, who proved far more receptive to the archaic code of aristocratic behavior. Lillian, on the other hand, made little effort to hide her scorn at social rules that were, in her opinion, completely pointless. Why did it matter if one slid the bottle of port across the table or simply handed it over, as long as the port reached its destination? Why were so many subjects forbidden to discuss, whereas others that held no interest for her must be visited in tedious repetition? Why was it better to walk slowly than at a brisk pace, and why must a lady try to echo a gentleman's opinions rather than offer her own?

She found a measure of relief in the company of Lord St. Vincent, who seemed not to give a damn about her mannerisms or what words she used. He was entertained by her frankness, and he was decidedly irreverent. Even his own father, the Duke of Kingston, was not exempt from St. Vincent's derision. The duke, it seemed, had no idea how to apply tooth powder to his

toothbrush, or put on his stocking garters, as such tasks had always been done for him by his valet. Lillian could not help but laugh at the idea of such a pampered existence, leading St. Vincent to speculate in mock horror at the primitive life she must have led in America, having to live in a mansion that was identified with a dreaded number over the door, or having to comb one's own hair or tie one's own shoes.

St. Vincent was the most engaging man that Lillian had ever met. Beneath the layers of silken gentility, however, there was a hardness, an impenetrability, that could only have belonged to a very cold man. Or perhaps an extremely guarded one. Either way, Lillian knew intuitively that whatever kind of soul lurked inside this elegant creature, she would never find out. He was as beautiful and inscrutable as a sphinx.

"St. Vincent needs to marry into a fortune," Annabelle reported one afternoon, as the wallflowers sat beneath a tree, sketching and watercoloring. "According to Mr. Hunt, Lord St. Vincent's father, the duke, is soon to cut off his annual portion, as there is hardly any money left. There will be little for St. Vincent to inherit, I'm afraid."

"What happens when the money is gone?" Daisy asked, her pencil moving deftly across the paper as she sketched a view of the landscape. "Will St. Vincent sell some of his estates and properties when he becomes a duke?"

"That depends," Annabelle replied, picking up a leaf and inspecting the delicate vein pattern of its amber skin. "If most of the property he inherits is entailed, then no. But have no fear that he'll become a pauper--there are many families who will compensate him handsomely if he agrees to marry one of them."

"Mine, for example," Lillian said sardonically.

Annabelle watched her closely as she murmured, "Dear...has Lord St. Vincent mentioned anything to you about intentions?"

"Not a word."

"Has he ever tried to--"

"Heavens, no."

"He intends to marry you, then," Annabelle said with unnerving certainty. "If he were merely trifling, he would have tried to compromise you by now."

The silence that followed was gently fractured by the dry swish of the overhead leaves, and the scratch of Daisy's busy pencil.

"Wh-what will you do if Lord St. Vincent proposes?" Evie asked, peeking at Lillian over the edge of her wooden watercolor case, the top half of which served as an easel as she balanced it on her lap.

Unthinkingly Lillian plucked at the grass beneath her, breaking the fragile blades with her fingers. Suddenly realizing that the activity was reminiscent of Mercedes, who had a nervous habit of pulling and tearing things, she stopped and tossed the bits of grass aside. "I'll accept him, of course," she said. The other three girls looked at her with mild surprise. "Why wouldn't I?" she continued defensively. "Do you realize how few dukes there are to be found? According to Mother's peerage report, there are only twenty-nine in all of Great Britain."

"But Lord St. Vincent is a shameless skirt chaser," Annabelle said. "I can't envision that as his wife, you would tolerate such behavior."

"All husbands are unfaithful in one way or another." Lillian tried to sound matter-of-fact, but somehow her tone came out defiant and surly.

Annabelle's blue eyes were soft with compassion. "I don't believe that."

"The next season hasn't even started," Daisy pointed out, "and now with the countess as our sponsor, we'll have much better luck this year than last. There's no need to marry Lord St. Vincent if you don't wish it--no matter what Mother says."

"I want to marry him." Lillian felt her mouth tighten into a stubborn line. "In fact, I will live for the moment when St. Vincent and I will attend a dinner as the Duke and Duchess of Kingston ...a dinner that Westcliff will also be attending, and I will be escorted into the dining hall before him, as my husband's title will take precedence over his. I'll make Westcliff sorry. I'll make him wish--" She broke off abruptly, realizing that her tone was far too sharp, betraying far too much. Stiffening her spine, she glared at some distant

point on the landscape, and flinched as she felt Daisy's small hand settle between her shoulders.

"Perhaps by then you won't care anymore," Daisy murmured.

"Perhaps," Lillian agreed dully.

The next afternoon saw the estate mostly vacant of guests, as the majority of the gentlemen went to a local race meeting, to wager, drink, and smoke to their hearts' content. The ladies were conveyed in a succession of carriages to the village, where a traditional feast day would be attended by a touring company of London performers. Eager for the diversion of some light comedies and music, the female guests left the estate en masse. Although Annabelle, Evie, and Daisy all implored Lillian to come with them, she refused. The antics of a few traveling players held no appeal for her. She did not want to force herself to smile and laugh. She only wanted to walk alone outside...to walk for miles, until she was too weary to think about anything.

She went alone into the back garden, following the path that led to the mermaid fountain, which was set like a jewel in the middle of the paved clearing. A nearby hedge was covered with wisteria, appearing as if someone had draped a succession of pink tea cozies across the top of it. Sitting on the edge of the fountain, Lillian stared into the foamy water. She was not aware of anyone approaching until she heard a quiet voice from the path.

"What luck to find you in the first place I looked."

Glancing up with a smile, she beheld Lord St. Vincent. His golden-amber hair seemed to absorb the sunlight. His coloring was unquestionably Anglo-Saxon, but the dramatic lines of his cheekbones, angled at a rather tigerish slant, and the sensuous fullness of his wide mouth gave him a singularly exotic appeal.

"Aren't you leaving for the race meeting?" Lillian asked.

"In a moment. I wanted to speak to you first." St. Vincent glanced at the space beside her. "May I?"

"But we're alone," she said. "And you always insist on a chaperone."

"Today I've changed my mind."

"Oh." Her smile held a slightly tremulous curve. "In that case, do have a seat." She colored as it occurred to her that this was the exact spot where she had seen Lady Olivia and Mr. Shaw embracing so passionately. From the glint in St. Vincent's eyes, it was apparent that he remembered too.

"Come the weekend," he said, "the house party will be over...and then it's back to London."

"You must be eager to return to the amusements of town life," Lillian remarked. "For a rake, your behavior has been surprisingly tame."

"Even we dissipated rakes need an occasional holiday. A constant diet of depravity would become boring."

Lillian smiled. "Rake or no, I have enjoyed your friendship these past days, my lord." As the words left her lips, she was surprised to realize that they were true.

"Then you think of me as a friend," he said softly. "That's good."

"Why?"

"Because I would like to continue seeing you."

Her heart quickened its pace. Although the remark was not unexpected, she was caught off-guard nonetheless. "In London?" she asked inanely.

"Wherever you happen to be. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Well, of course, it ...I...yes."

As he stared at her with those fallen-angel eyes and smiled, Lillian was forced to agree with Daisy's assessment of St. Vincent's animal magnetism. He looked like a man who was born to sin...a man who could make sinning so enjoyable that one hardly minded paying the price afterward.

St. Vincent reached for her slowly, his fingers sliding from her shoulders to the sides of her throat. "Lillian, my love. I'm going to ask your father for permission to court you."

She breathed unsteadily against the caressing framework of his hands. "I am not the only available heiress you could pursue."

His thumbs smoothed the gentle hollows of her cheeks, and his dark brown lashes half lowered. "No," he answered frankly. "But you're by far the

most interesting. Most women aren't, you know. At least not out of bed." He leaned closer, until the heated touch of his whisper warmed her lips. "I daresay you'll be interesting in bed as well."

Well, here it was, Lillian thought dazedly--the long-awaited advance--and then her thoughts were muddled as his mouth moved over hers in a light caress. He kissed as if he were the first man who had ever discovered it, with a lazy expertise that seduced her by slow degrees. Even with her limited experience, she perceived that the kiss was wrought more of technique than emotion, but her stunned senses didn't seem to care as he drew a helpless response from her with every tender shift of his mouth. He built her pleasure at an unhurried pace, until she gasped against his lips and turned her head weakly away.

His fingers slid over the hot surface of her cheek, and he gently pressed her head to his shoulder. "I've never courted anyone before," he murmured, his lips playing near her ear. "Not for honorable purposes, at any rate."

"You're doing quite well for a beginner," she said against his coat.

Laughing, he eased away from her, and his warm gaze coasted over her flushed face. "You're lovely," he said softly. "And fascinating."

And wealthy, she added silently. But he was doing a very good job of convincing her that he desired her for more than financial reasons. She appreciated that. Forcing a smile to her lips, she stared at the enigmatic but charming man who might very well become her husband. Your Grace, she thought. That was what Westcliff would have to call her, once St. Vincent came into his title. First she would be Lady St. Vincent, and then the Duchess of Kingston. She would be above Westcliff socially, and she would never let him forget it. Your Grace, she repeated, comforting herself with the syllables. Your Grace...

After St. Vincent left her to go to the race meeting, Lillian wandered back to the manor. The fact that her future was finally taking shape should have relieved her, but instead she was filled with grim resolve. She entered the house, which was serene and silent. After the past weeks of seeing the place filled with people, it was strange to walk through the empty entrance

hall. The hallways were quiet, with only the occasional passing of a lone servant to interrupt the stillness.

Pausing near the library, Lillian glanced into the large room. For once it was unoccupied. She stepped inside the inviting room, with its two-story ceiling and the shelves lined with more than ten thousand books. The air was filled with the pleasant scents of vellum, parchment, and leather. What little wall space wasn't occupied with books had been crowded with framed maps and engravings. She decided to find a book for herself, a volume of light verse or some frivolous novel. However, with the acres of leather spines facing her, it was difficult to ascertain precisely where the novels were located.

As she passed before the shelves, Lillian discovered rows of history books, each of them sufficiently weighty to flatten an elephant. Atlases were next, and then a vast array of mathematical texts that would cure the most severe cases of insomnia. Near the end of one wall, a sideboard had been installed in a niche to fit flush with the bookshelves. A large engraved silver tray covered the top of the sideboard, bearing a collection of enticing bottles and decanters. The prettiest bottle, made of glass molded in a pattern of leaves, was half-filled with a colorless liquor. Her attention was caught by the sight of a pear inside the bottle.

Lifting the bottle, Lillian examined it closely and gently swirled the liquid until the pear lifted and turned with the motion. A perfectly preserved golden pear. This must be a variety of eau-de-vie, as the French called it..."water of life," a colorless brandy distilled from grapes, plums, or elderberries. Pears as well, it seemed.

Lillian was tempted to sample the intriguing beverage, but ladies never drank strong spirits. Especially not alone in the library. If she were caught, it would look very bad indeed. On the other hand...all the gentlemen were at the race meeting, the ladies had gone to the village, and most of the servants had been given the day off.

She glanced at the empty doorway, and then at the tantalizing bottle. A mantel clock ticked urgently in the silence. Suddenly she heard Lord St.

Vincent's voice in her mind...I'm going to ask your father for permission to court you.

"Oh, hell," she muttered, and bent to rummage through the lower cabinet of the sideboard for a glass.

CHAPTER 18

If this was a dream, Lillian thought a few minutes later, it was happening with amazing clarity. A dream, yes ...she clung tightly to the notion. One could do anything one wished in a dream. There were no rules, no obligations...only pleasure. Oh, the pleasure ...Marcus, undressing her, and himself, until their clothes were mingled in a heap on the floor, and he lifted her to a wide bed with cloud-soft pillows covered in slick white linen. This was definitely a dream, because people only made love in the dark, and afternoon sunlight was flooding the room.

Marcus was beside her, leaning over her, his mouth playing with hers in kisses so lazy and prolonged that she couldn't tell when one ended and another began. The length of his naked form pressed against hers, startling in its power, his flesh like steel beneath her exploring hands. Hard and yet satiny, and fever-hot...his body was a revelation. The springy hair on his chest tickled her bare breasts as he moved over her. He laid claim to every inch of her in a slow, erotic pilgrimage of kisses and caresses.

It seemed to her that his scent--and her own, for that matter--had altered in the heat of desire, acquiring a salty pungency that suffused every breath with erotic perfume. She buried her face against his throat, inhaling greedily. Marcus ...this dream-Marcus was not a self-contained English gentleman, but a tender, audacious stranger who shocked her with the intimacies he demanded. Turning her onto her stomach, he nibbled his way down the length of her spine, his tongue finding places on her back that caused her to twitch in surprised pleasure. The warmth of his hand smoothed over her bottom. As she felt his fingertips probing the secret crevice between her thighs, she made a helpless sound, beginning to push up from the mattress.

Pressing her back down with a low murmur, Marcus separated the springy curls and entered her with one finger, teasing and circling the delicate flesh. She rested one side of her burning face against the snowy bed linens, gasping with pleasure. He purred against the back of her neck and moved to

straddle her. The silken weight of his sex brushed against the inside of her leg while his hand played between her thighs, his touch devilishly light and gentle. Too gentle. She wanted more...she wanted anything ...everything. Her heart raced, and she clutched handfuls of the linens, knotting them in her damp fists. A peculiar tension coiled within her, making her writhe beneath his powerfully muscled body.

Her breathless cries seemed to please him. He rolled her onto her back, his eyes glittering with dark fire. "Lillian," he whispered against her trembling mouth, "my angel, my love...does it ache right here?" His finger stroked inside her. "This sweet, empty place ...do you want me to fill it?"

"Yes," she sobbed, wriggling to get closer to him. "Yes...Marcus, yes..."

"Soon." He dragged his tongue across her taut nipple.

She groaned as his tantalizing touch withdrew. Bewildered and frantic, she felt him slide lower, lower, tasting and nipping at her tense body, until ...until...

Her breath caught with astonishment as his hands pushed her thighs wide, and the wet coolness of his tongue invaded the damp thicket of curls. Her hips arched high against his mouth. He couldn't, he couldn't, she thought dazedly, even as he licked deeper into her mound, the tip of his tongue circling in a sly, flirting torment that made her cry out. He wouldn't stop. He centered on the tiny peak of her sex, finding a rhythm that sent wildfire through her body, then pausing to probe the intricate folds until she groaned at the sensation of his tongue entering her.

"Marcus," she heard herself whispering brokenly, again and again, as if his name were an erotic incantation. "Marcus..." Her shaking hands descended to his head as she tried to urge him higher, to push his mouth where she needed it. Had she been able to find the words, she would have begged. Suddenly his mouth slid upward that small but crucial distance, clamping over her with sensuous precision, sucking and tonguing her without mercy. She let out a hoarse cry as a heavy tide of ecstasy swept over her, tumbling and washing her senses.

Marcus levered himself over her and cradled her in his arms, his mouth

warm as he kissed her wet cheeks. Lillian held him tightly, her breath coming hard and fast. It still wasn't enough. She wanted his body, his soul, inside her own. Reaching down awkwardly, she touched the rigid length of his shaft and guided him to the damp cove between her thighs.

"Lillian..." His eyes were like molten obsidian. "If we do this, you need to understand how it will change things. We'll have to--"

"Now," she interrupted huskily. "Come inside me. Now." She ran exploring fingertips from the root of the shaft to the swollen tip. Nuzzling the strong column of his throat, she bit him lightly. In a sudden blur of movement he pushed her to her back, his body lowering over hers. He pushed her legs wide. She felt a stinging pressure between her thighs, and her muscles tightened against the invasion.

Marcus reached between their bodies and found the peak of her sex, his fingertips kindling new pleasure in her sensitive flesh until she rocked upward in helpless reply. With each welcoming rise of her hips, she felt his insistent hardness pressing deeper, stretching her. And then he moved with an explicit thrust to sink fully inside her. Gasping in pained surprise, she held still, her hands clutching his hard, smooth back. Her flesh throbbed violently around his, a rim of tight-stretched soreness that would not ease despite her willingness to accept him. Murmuring for her to relax, he held still inside her with infinite patience, trying not to hurt her.

As he cuddled and kissed her, Lillian looked up into his tender dark eyes. As their gazes held, she felt her entire body loosening, all resistance draining away. His hand cupped beneath her bottom, lifting her as he began to move in a careful rhythm. "Is this all right?" he whispered.

Moaning, she wrapped her arms around his neck for answer. Her head fell back and she felt him kissing her throat, while her body opened fully to the slippery-hot intrusion. She began to squirm upward into the strokes of pleasure-pain, and it seemed that her movements enhanced his delight. His features went taut with excitement, while his breath scraped in his throat. "Lillian," he rasped, gripping her bottom more firmly. "My God, I can't...Lillian..." His eyes closed, and he groaned harshly as he reached his

own climax, his sex throbbing palpably inside her.

Afterward he made to withdraw from her, but she clung to him, murmuring, "No. Not yet, please..." He rolled them both to their sides, their bodies still joined. Reluctant to let go of him, she hitched her slender leg high over his hip while his fingertips drifted over her back in exotic patterns. "Marcus," she whispered. "This is a dream ...isn't it?"

She felt him smile drowsily against her cheek. "Go to sleep," he said, and kissed her.

When Lillian opened her eyes again, the afternoon light was considerably diminished, and the sky visible through the window was tinted with lavender. Marcus's lips wandered lightly from her cheek to her jaw, and his arm hooked beneath her shoulders, lifting her to a half-sitting position. Disoriented, she breathed in his familiar scent. Her mouth was parched, and her throat was stinging and dry, and when she tried to speak, her voice came out in a croak. "Thirsty."

The edge of a crystal glass pressed to her lips, and she drank gratefully. The liquid was cool and flavored with citrus and honey.

"More?"

As Lillian stared at the man who held her, she saw that he was fully dressed, his hair brushed into order, his complexion fresh from a recent washing. Her tongue felt thick and dry. "I dreamed...oh, I dreamed..."

But it rapidly became clear that it had not been a dream. Although Westcliff was properly clothed, she was naked in his bed, covered only by a sheet. "Oh God," she whispered, amazed and frightened by the realization of what she had done. Her head throbbed painfully. She pressed her aching temples with her fingers.

Turning a tray on the bedside table, Westcliff poured another glass of the refreshing liquid. "Does your head ache?" he asked. "I thought it might. Here." He gave her a thin paper packet, and she unfolded the end with trembling fingers. Tilting her head back, she poured the bitter contents of the packet to the back of her throat and washed it down with a gulp of the sweet beverage. The sheet slipped down to her waist. Flaming with mortification,

she snatched it up with a gasp. Though Westcliff forbore to say anything, she saw from his expression that it was rather too late for modesty. She closed her eyes and moaned.

Taking the glass from her, Westcliff eased her down to the pillow and waited until she could bring herself to look at him once more. Smiling, he stroked her burning cheek with the backs of his knuckles. Wishing that he wouldn't appear so damned pleased with himself, Lillian scowled. "My lord--"

"Not yet. We'll talk after I've taken care of you."

She yelped with dismay as he pulled the sheet away from her body, exposing every inch of her skin to his gaze. "Don't!"

Ignoring her, Westcliff busied himself at the nightstand, pouring steaming water from a small jug into a creamware bowl. He dipped a cloth into the water, wrung it out, and sat beside Lillian. Realizing what he intended, she knocked his hand away reflexively. Pinning her with an ironic glance, he said, "If you're going to be coy at this point--"

"All right." Blushing wildly, she lay back and closed her eyes. "Just ...get it over with."

The hot cloth pressed between her thighs, causing her to jerk in response. "Easy," he murmured, bathing her smarting flesh with tender care. "I'm sorry. I know it hurts. Lie still."

Lillian put her hand over her eyes, too mortified to watch as he molded another hot compress over the dull ache of her private parts. "Does that help?" she heard him ask. She nodded stiffly, unable to produce a sound. Westcliff spoke again, his voice colored with amusement. "I wouldn't have expected such modesty from a girl who frolics outdoors in her undergarments. Why are you covering your eyes?"

"Because I can't look at you while you're looking at me," she said plaintively, and he laughed. Removing the compress, he freshened it with a new splash of scalding water.

Lillian peered at him from beneath her fingers as he pressed the soothing

hot cloth between her legs once more. "You must have rung for a servant," she said. "Did he--or she--see anything? Does anyone know that I'm with you?"

"Only my valet. And he knows better than to say a word to anyone about my..."

As he hesitated, obviously searching for the right word, Lillian said tensely, "Exploits?"

"This wasn't an exploit."

"A mistake, then."

"However you define it, the fact is that we must deal with the situation in an appropriate manner."

That sounded ominous. Removing her hand from her eyes, Lillian saw that when Westcliff withdrew the cloth, it was dotted with blood. Her blood. Her stomach felt hollow, and her heart pounded in an anxious tempo. Any young woman knew that when she slept with a man outside the bonds of wedlock, she was ruined. The word "ruined" had such an intractable feel to it ...as if she had been permanently spoiled. Like the banana at the bottom of the fruit bowl.

"All we have to do is keep anyone from finding out," she said warily. "We'll pretend it never happened."

Westcliff drew the sheet up to her shoulders and leaned over her, his hands placed on either side of her shoulders. "Lillian. We've slept together. That is not something that can be dismissed."

She was suffused with sudden panic. "I can dismiss it. And if I can, then you--"

"I took advantage of you," he said, making the worst attempt she had ever seen at trying to appear remorseful. "My actions were unforgivable. However, the situation being what it is--"

"I forgive you," Lillian said quickly. "There, it's settled. Where are my clothes?"

"--the only solution is for us to marry."

A proposal from the Earl of Westcliff.

Any unmarried woman in England, upon hearing these words from this man, would have wept with gratitude. But it felt all wrong. Westcliff wasn't proposing because he truly wanted to, or because she was the woman he desired above all others. He was proposing out of obligation.

Lillian eased herself to a sitting position. "My lord," she asked unevenly, "is there any reason other than the fact that we just slept together that has moved you to propose to me?"

"Obviously you are attractive...intelligent ...you will undoubtedly bear healthy children...and there are benefits to an alliance between our families..."

Spying her clothes, which had been neatly draped over a chair by the hearth, Lillian crawled from the bed. "I must get dressed." She winced as her feet touched the floor.

"I'll help you," Westcliff said at once, striding to the chair.

She remained by the bedside, her hair tumbling over her breasts and down to the small of her back. Carrying the clothes to her and laying them on the bed, Westcliff let his gaze sweep over her. "How lovely you are," he murmured. He touched her bare shoulders and let his fingers slide down to her elbows. "I'm sorry to have caused you pain," he said softly. "It won't be as difficult for you the next time. I don't want you to fear it ...or to fear me. I hope you'll believe that I--"

"Fear you?" she said without thinking. "Good God, I would never do that."

Easing her head back, Westcliff looked at her while a slow smile spread across his face. "No, you wouldn't," he agreed. "You'd spit in the devil's eye if it suited you."

Unable to decide whether the comment was admiring or critical, Lillian shrugged away from him uneasily. She reached for her clothes and fumbled to dress herself. "I don't want to marry you," she said. It wasn't true, of course. But she could not ignore the feeling that it must not happen this way...that she shouldn't accept a proposal that was so obviously duty-driven.

"You have no choice," he said from behind her.

"Of course I do. I daresay Lord St. Vincent will accept me in spite of my lack of virginity. And if he doesn't, my parents are hardly going to toss me out into the streets. I'm sure you will be relieved to know that I release you from all obligation." Snatching her knickers from the bed, she bent to pull them on.

"Why do you mention St. Vincent?" he asked sharply. "Has he proposed to you?"

"Is that so difficult to believe?" Lillian retorted, tying the tapes of her knickers. She reached for her chemise. "He has asked for permission to approach my father, actually."

"You can't marry him." Westcliff watched with a scowl as her head and arms emerged from the chemise.

"Why not?"

"Because you're mine now."

She made a scoffing sound, even though she felt her heart give an extra beat at his possessiveness. "The fact that I slept with you does not constitute ownership."

"You could be breeding," he pointed out with ruthless satisfaction. "This very moment, my child might be growing in your belly. That constitutes something of a claim, I should think."

Lillian felt her knees quiver, although her tone matched his for coolness. "We'll find out eventually. In the meantime, I'm turning down your offer. Except that you haven't really made an offer, have you?" She shoved her bare foot into one of her stockings. "It was more like a command."

"Is that what this is about? That I haven't worded things to your satisfaction?" Westcliff shook his head impatiently. "Very well. Will you marry me?"

"No."

His face turned thunderous. "Why not?"

"Because sleeping together isn't sufficient reason to chain ourselves

together for the rest of our lives."

He arched one brow with impeccable arrogance. "It's sufficient for me." Picking up her corset, he handed it to her. "Nothing you say or do will alter my decision. We're going to marry, and soon."

"It may be your decision, but it isn't mine," Lillian retorted, sucking in her breath as he took hold of the laces and tugged them deftly. "And I would like to hear what the countess will say when she is told that you intend to bring yet one more American into the family!"

"She'll have an apoplectic fit," Marcus replied calmly, tying her corset laces. "She'll go on a screaming tirade, at the end of which she'll probably faint. And then she'll go to the continent for six months, and refuse to write to any of us." Pausing, he added with relish, "How I'm looking forward to it."

CHAPTER 20

It was unclear whether Daisy had been the one to "spill the beans," as they said in New York, or whether the news had come from Annabelle, who had perhaps been informed by her husband of the scene in the study. All Lillian could be certain of, as she joined the other wallflowers for a mid-morning nuncheon in the breakfast room, was that they knew. She could see it in their faces--in Evie's abashed smile, and Daisy's conspiratorial air, and Annabelle's studied casualness. Lillian blushed and avoided their collective gaze as she sat at the table. She had always maintained a cynical facade, using it as a defense against embarrassment, fear, loneliness...but at the moment she felt unusually vulnerable.

Annabelle was the first to break the silence. "What a dull morning it's been so far." She lifted her hand to her mouth with a gracefully manufactured yawn. "I do hope someone can manage to enliven the conversation. Any gossip to share, by chance?" Her teasing gaze arched to Lillian's discomfited expression. A footman approached to fill Lillian's teacup, and Annabelle waited until he had left the table before continuing. "You've made rather a late appearance this morning, dear. Didn't you sleep well?"

Lillian slitted her eyes as she stared at her gleefully mocking friend, while she heard Evie choke on a mouthful of tea. "As a matter of fact, no."

Annabelle grinned, looking entirely too cheerful. "Why don't you tell us your news, Lillian, and then I'll share mine? Though I doubt that mine will be half as interesting."

"You seem to know everything already," Lillian muttered, trying to drown her embarrassment with a large draft of tea. Succeeding only in burning her tongue, she set her cup down and forced herself to meet Annabelle's gaze, which had softened in amused sympathy.

"Are you all right, dear?" Annabelle asked gently.

"I don't know," Lillian admitted. "I don't feel at all like myself. I'm excited and glad, but also somewhat..."

"Afraid?" Annabelle murmured.

The Lillian of a month ago would have died by slow torture rather than admit to one moment of fear...but she found herself nodding. "I don't like being vulnerable to a man who is not generally known for his sensitivity or soft heartedness. It's fairly obvious that we're not well-suited in temperament."

"But you are attracted to him physically?" Annabelle asked.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Why is that a misfortune?"

"Because it would be so much easier to marry a man with whom one shared a detached friendship, rather than...than..."

All three young women leaned toward her intently. "R-rather than what?" Evie asked, wide-eyed.

"Rather than flaming, clawing, lurid, positively indecent passion."

"Oh my," Evie said faintly, drawing back in her chair, while Annabelle grinned and Daisy stared at her with enraptured curiosity.

"This from a man whose kisses were 'merely tolerable'?" Annabelle asked.

A grin tugged at Lillian's lips as she looked down into the steaming depths of her tea. "Who would have guessed that such a starched and buttoned-up sort could be so different in the bedroom?"

"With you, I imagine he can't help himself," Annabelle remarked.

Lillian looked up from her cup. "Why do you say that?" she asked warily, fearing for a moment that Annabelle was making a reference to the effects of her perfume.

"The moment you enter the room, the earl becomes far more animated. It is obvious that he is fascinated by you. One can hardly have a conversation with him, as he is constantly straining to hear what you are saying, and watching your every movement."

"Does he?" Pleased by the information, Lillian strove to appear nonchalant. "Why have you never mentioned it before?"

"I didn't want to meddle, since there seemed a possibility that you preferred Lord St. Vincent's attentions."

Lillian winced and leaned her forehead on her hand. She told them about the mortifying scene between herself and Marcus and St. Vincent that morning, while they reacted with sympathy and shared discomfort.

"The only thing that prevents a feeling of compassion for Lord St. Vincent," Annabelle said, "is the certain knowledge that he has broken many hearts and caused many tears in the past--and therefore it is only just that he should know how it feels to be rejected."

"Nevertheless, I feel as if I misled him," Lillian said guiltily. "And he was so nice about it. Not one word of reproach. I couldn't help but like him for it."

"Be c-careful," Evie suggested softly. "From what we've heard of Lord St. Vincent, it doesn't seem in character that he should concede so easily. If he approaches you again, promise that you will not agree to go somewhere alone with him."

Lillian stared at her concerned friend with a smile. "Evie, you sound positively cynical. Very well, I promise. But there is no need to worry. I don't believe that Lord St. Vincent is foolish enough to make an enemy of someone as powerful as the earl." Desiring a change of subject, she turned her attention to Annabelle. "Now that I've shared my news, it's time for yours. What is it?"

With her eyes dancing, and the sunlight moving over her light satiny hair, Annabelle looked all of twelve years old. Her gaze darted to the side to confirm that they were not being overheard. "I'm almost positive that I'm expecting," she whispered. "I've had signs recently...queasiness and sleepiness ...and this is the second month that I seem to have missed my courses."

They all gasped with delight, and Daisy surreptitiously reached across the table to squeeze Annabelle's hand. "Dear, that is the most wonderful news! Does Mr. Hunt know?"

Annabelle's smile turned rueful. "Not yet. I want to be absolutely certain when I tell him. And I want to keep it from him as long as possible."

"Why?" Lillian asked.

"Because as soon as he knows, he will be so overprotective that I won't be allowed to go anywhere on my own."

Knowing what they did of Simon Hunt and his passionate absorption with all things Annabelle, the wall-flowers silently agreed. Once Hunt learned of the coming baby, he would hover over his pregnant wife like a hawk.

"What a triumph," Daisy exclaimed, keeping her voice low. "A wallflower last year, a mother this year. Everything is turning out beautifully for you, dear."

"And Lillian is next," Annabelle added with a smile.

Lillian's raw nerves stung with a mixture of pleasure and alarm at the words.

"What is it?" Daisy murmured to her sotto voce, while the other two conversed excitedly about the coming baby. "You look worried. Having doubts? ...I suppose that is only natural."

"If I marry him, we're guaranteed to fight like cats and dogs," Lillian said tensely.

Daisy smiled at her. "Is it possible that you are dwelling too much on your differences? I have a suspicion that you and the earl may be more alike than you know."

"In what ways could we possibly be alike?"

"Just consider it," her younger sister advised with a grin. "I'm sure you'll come up with something."

Having summoned both his mother and sister to the Marsden parlor, Marcus stood before them with his hands clasped behind his back. He found himself in the unfamiliar position of trusting his own heart, rather than following the dictates of reason. That wasn't at all like a Marsden. The family was renowned for its long line of coldly practical antecedents, with the exception of Aline and Livia. Marcus, for his part, had followed the typical Marsden pattern ...until Lillian Bowman had entered his life with all the

subtlety of a hurricane.

Now the commitment he was making to a headstrong young woman was bringing Marcus a sense of peace he had never known before. An amused grimace tugged at the small muscles of his face as he wondered how to tell the countess that she would finally have a daughter-in-law--who happened to be the last girl she would ever have selected for the position.

Livia sat in a nearby chair while the countess, as always, occupied the settee. Marcus could not help but be struck by the difference in their gazes, his sister's warm and expectant, his mother's flat and wary.

"Now that you have roused me from my midday rest," the countess said tartly, "I beg you speak your piece, my lord. What news have you to deliver? What matter is so imperative that I must be summoned at so inconvenient an hour? Some inconsequential missive about that ill-begotten brat of your sister's, I suppose. Well, out with it!"

Marcus's jaw hardened. All inclinations to break the news in a gentle fashion had vanished at the uncharitable reference to his nephew. Suddenly he took great satisfaction in the prospect of informing his mother that every single one of her grandchildren, including the future heir to the title, would be half American.

"I'm sure you will be pleased to learn that I have heeded your advice and finally chosen a bride," he said smoothly. "Although I have not yet made a formal proposal to her, I have good reason to believe that she will accept when I do."

The countess blinked in surprise, her composure faltering.

Livia stared at him with a wondering smile. There was a sudden wicked enjoyment in her eyes that inclined Marcus to think she had guessed at the identity of the unnamed bride. "How lovely," she said. "Have you finally found someone who will tolerate you, Marcus?"

He grinned back at her. "It would seem so. Though I suspect it would behoove me to hasten the wedding plans before she comes to her senses and flees."

"Nonsense," the countess said sharply. "No woman would flee from the prospect of marrying the Earl of Westcliff. You possess the most ancient title in England. On the day you marry, you will bestow on your wife more peerage dignities than any uncrowned head on the face of the earth. Now, tell me whom you have decided on."

"Miss Lillian Bowman."

The countess made a disgusted sound. "Enough of this witless humor, Westcliff. Tell me the girl's name."

Livia fairly wriggled with delight. Beaming at Marcus, she leaned closer to her mother and said in a loud stage whisper, "I think he's serious, Mother. It really is Miss Bowman."

"It cannot be!" The countess looked aghast. One could practically see the capillaries bursting in her cheeks. "I demand that you renounce this piece of insanity, Westcliff, and come to your senses. I will not have that atrocious creature as my daughter-in-law!"

"But you will," Marcus said inexorably.

"You could have your pick of any girl here or on the continent...girls of acceptable lineage and bearing..."

"Miss Bowman is the one I want."

"She could never fit into the mold of a Marsden wife."

"Then the mold will have to be broken."

The countess laughed harshly, the sound so ugly that Livia clenched the arms of her chair to keep from clapping her hands over her ears. "What madness has possessed you? That Bowman girl is a mongrel! How can you think of burdening your children with a mother who will undermine our traditions, scorn our customs, and make a mockery of basic good manners? How could such a wife serve you? Good God, Westcliff!" Pausing, the enraged woman labored to catch her breath. Glancing from Marcus to Livia, she exploded, "What is the source of this family's infernal obsession with Americans?"

"What an interesting question, Mother," Livia said drolly. "For some

reason none of your offspring can stand the thought of marrying one of their own kind. Why do you suppose that is, Marcus?"

"I suspect the answer would not be flattering to any of us," came his sardonic reply.

"You have a responsibility to marry a girl of good blood," the countess cried, her face twisting. "The only reasons for your existence are to further the family lineage and preserve the title and its resources for your heirs. And you have failed miserably so far."

"Failed?" Livia interrupted, her eyes flashing. "Marcus has quadrupled the family fortune since Father died, not to mention improving the lives of every servant and tenant on this estate. He has sponsored humanitarian bills in Parliament and created employment for more than a hundred men at the locomotive works, and moreover he has been the kindest brother one could ever--"

"Livia," Marcus murmured, "there is no need to defend me."

"Yes, there is! After all you have done for everyone else, why shouldn't you marry a girl of your own choosing--a spirited and perfectly lovely girl, I might add--without having to endure Mother's silly speeches about the family lineage?"

The countess trained a vicious gaze on her youngest child. "You are ill-qualified to participate in any discussion of the family lineage, child, in light of the fact that you scarcely qualify as Marsden issue. Or must I remind you that you were the result of a single night's dalliance with a visiting footman? The late earl had no choice but to accept you in lieu of being labeled a cuckold, but still--"

"Livia," Marcus interrupted tersely, extending a hand to his sister, who had turned white. The news was far from a surprise to her, but the countess had never dared to voice it openly until now. Rising to her feet, Livia came to him at once, her eyes blazing in her pale face. Marcus curved a protective arm around her back and pulled her close as he murmured in her ear. "It's best if you leave now. There are things that must be said--and I won't have you caught in the crossfire."

"It's all right," Livia said with only a slight tremor in her voice. "I don't mind the things she says ...She lost the power to hurt me long ago."

"But I mind them on your behalf," he replied gently. "Go find your husband, Livia, and let him comfort you, while I deal with the countess."

Livia looked up at him then, her face much calmer. "I'll go find him," she said. "Though I don't need comfort."

"Good girl." He kissed the top of her head.

Surprised by the show of affection, Livia chuckled a little and stepped back from him.

"What are you whispering about?" the countess demanded testily.

Marcus ignored her as he walked his sister to the door, and closed it quietly behind her. When he turned to face the countess, his face was grim. "The circumstances of Livia's birth do not reflect on her character," he said. "They reflect on yours. I don't give a damn if you chose to dally with a footman or even if you bore his issue ...but I mind very much that you should shame Livia for it. She's lived beneath the shadow of your wrongdoing for her entire life, and paid dearly for your past indulgences."

"I will not apologize for my needs," the countess snapped. "In the absence of your father's affections, I had to take my pleasures where I found them."

"And you let Livia take the brunt of the blame." His mouth twisted. "Though I saw the way she was maltreated and neglected as a child, I could do nothing to protect her at the time. But now I can. There will be no further mention of this subject to her. Ever. Do you understand?"

Despite the quiet timbre of his voice, his volcanic fury must have communicated itself to her, for she did not protest or argue. She only swallowed hard and nodded.

A full minute passed as both of them marshaled their emotions into order. The countess was the first to launch an offensive. "Westcliff," she said in a controlled manner, "has it occurred to you that your father would have despised that Bowman girl and everything she represents?"

Marcus stared at her blankly. "No," he said at length, "it had not occurred to me." His late father had been absent from his thoughts for so long that Marcus hadn't thought to wonder what his impression of Lillian Bowman might be. The fact that his mother supposed it would matter to him was astonishing.

Assuming that she had given him cause for second thought, the countess pressed on with increasing determination. "You always desired to please him," she continued, "and you often did, though he rarely acknowledged it. Perhaps you won't believe me when I say that underneath it all, your father had only your best interests in mind. He wished to mold you into a man who was worthy of the title, a powerful man who would never be taken advantage of. A man like himself. And for the most part he succeeded."

The words were intended to flatter Marcus. They had the opposite effect, striking him like an ax blow to the chest. "No, he didn't," he said hoarsely.

"You know what kind of woman he would want to sire his grandchildren," the countess said. "The Bowman girl is unworthy of you, Westcliff, unworthy of your name and your blood. Imagine a meeting between the two of them ...her and your father. You know how he would have loathed her."

Marcus suddenly imagined Lillian confronting his devil of a father, who had awed and terrified everyone he had ever encountered. There was no doubt in his mind that Lillian would have reacted to the old earl with her customary flippancy. She would not have feared him for a second.

At his continued silence, the countess spoke in a softer tone. "Of course she has her charms. I can well understand the attractions that those of the lower order can hold for us--they sometimes appeal to our desire for the exotic. And there is no surprise in the fact you, like all men, crave variety in your female pursuits. If you want her, then by all means have her. The solution is obvious: after you both have married other people, you and she may have an affair until you tire of her. Our kind always finds love outside of marriage--it is better that way, you will see."

The room was unnaturally quiet, while Marcus's mind seethed with soul-

corroding memories and bitter echoes of voices long since silenced. Though he despised the role of a martyr and had never cast himself in that light, he could not help but reflect that for most of his life, his own needs had gone largely unaddressed as he had shouldered his responsibilities. Now he had finally found a woman who offered all the warmth and enjoyment that had been so long overdue him ...and damn it all, he had a right to demand the support of family and friends, no matter what private reservations they might have. His thoughts ventured into darker territory as he considered the earliest years of his life, when his father had sent away anyone for whom Marcus had felt an attachment. To keep him from being weak. To keep him from being dependent on anyone other than himself. It had established a pattern of isolation that had ruled Marcus's entire life until now. But no longer.

As for his mother's suggestion, that he have an affair with Lillian when they were both married to other people, the idea offended Marcus down to the bottom of his soul. It would be nothing but a perverse imitation of the honest relationship that they both deserved.

"Listen well," he said when he could finally trust himself to speak. "Before this conversation began, I was fully determined to make her my wife. But were it possible to increase my resolve, your words just now would have done it. Do not doubt me when I say that Lillian Bowman is the only woman on this earth whom I would ever consider marrying. Her children will be my heirs, or else the Marsden line stops with me. From now on my overriding concern is her well-being. Any word, gesture, or action that threatens her happiness will meet with the worst consequences imaginable. You will never give her cause to believe that you are anything but pleased by our marriage. The first word I hear to the contrary will earn you a very long carriage ride away from the estate. Away from England. Permanently."

"You can't mean what you are saying. You are in a temper. Later, when you have calmed yourself, we will--"

"I'm not in a temper. I'm in deadly earnest."

"You've gone mad!"

"No, my lady. For the first time in my life I have a chance at happiness--"

and I will not lose it."

"You fool," the countess whispered, trembling visibly with fury.

"Whatever comes of it, marrying her will be the least foolish thing I've ever done," he replied, and took his leave of her with a shallow bow.

CHAPTER 22

At a suitably late hour, when some of the guests had retired and others were lingering downstairs in the card room and the billiards room, Lillian crept from her chamber with the intention of meeting Marcus. She tiptoed along the hallway, and stopped short as she saw a man standing against a wall at the juncture of two wide corridors. The man stepped forward, and she immediately recognized him as Marcus's valet.

"Miss," he said calmly, "milord bid me to show you the way."

"I know the way. And he knows that I know the way. What the devil are you doing here?"

"Milord did not wish for you to wander through the house unaccompanied."

"Naturally," she said. "I could be accosted by someone. Seduced, even."

Seemingly inured to sarcasm, when it was perfectly obvious that she was not going to the earl's room for a chaste visit, the valet turned to lead the way.

Fascinated by his reserve, Lillian couldn't help asking, "So...is it often that you are required to escort unmarried ladies to Lord Westcliff's private rooms?"

"No, miss," came his unflappable reply.

"Would you tell me if it were otherwise?"

"No, miss," he said in exactly the same tone, and she grinned.

"Is the earl a good master?"

"He is an excellent master, miss."

"I suppose you would say that even if he was an ogre."

"No, miss. In that case I would merely say that he was an acceptable master. When I say that he is an excellent master, however, I mean precisely that."

"Hmm." Lillian was encouraged by the valet's words. "Does he talk to

his servants? Thank them for doing a good job, that sort of thing?"

"No more than is appropriate, miss."

"Which is to say never?"

"More accurate would be to say not usually, miss."

Since the valet seemed disinclined to talk after that, Lillian followed him in silence to Marcus's room. He accompanied her to the threshold, scratched at the door with the tips of his fingers, and waited for a response from within.

"Why do you do that?" Lillian whispered. "That scratching business. Why don't you knock?"

"The countess prefers a scratch to a knock, as it is more soothing to her nerves."

"Does the earl prefer you to scratch at his door?"

"I doubt very much he cares one way or the other, miss."

Lillian frowned thoughtfully. In the past she had heard other servants scratching their employers' doors, and it had always struck her American ears as being a bit odd...rather like a dog scuffling to be let in from outside.

The door opened, and Lillian felt a rush of pure gladness at the sight of Marcus's dark face. His expression was impassive, but his eyes were glowing with warmth. "That will be all," he said to the valet, staring at Lillian's face as he reached out to draw her past the threshold.

"Yes, milord." The valet disappeared with tactful speed.

Closing the door, Marcus stared at Lillian, the spark in his eyes burning brighter, a smile now lurking at the corners of his lips. He looked so handsome, with his austere features lit by the mingled glow of the lamp and the hearth, that a sweet shiver went through her. Rather than his usual tied-and-buttoned attire, he had gone without a coat, and his white shirt was open at the throat, revealing a glimpse of smooth brown skin. She had kissed that triangular hollow at the base of it ...she had let her tongue play across it...

Ripping her thoughts from the scalding memory, Lillian glanced away from him. Immediately she felt his lean fingers come up to her hot cheek, guiding her face back to his. The tip of his thumb slid over her chin. "I

wanted you today," he said softly.

Her heart escalated into a rapid thump, and the cheek beneath his caressing fingertips tautened with a smile. "You didn't so much as glance in my direction even once during supper."

"I was afraid to."

"Why?"

"Because I knew that if I did, I wouldn't be able to keep from making you into my next course."

Lillian's lashes lowered as she let him ease her closer, his hand sliding over the length of her spine. Her breasts and waist felt swollen within the insulating grip of her corset, and she suddenly longed to be rid of it. Taking as deep a breath as the stays would allow, she became aware of a sweetly spicy scent in the air.

"What is that?" she murmured, drawing in the fragrance. "Cinnamon and wine..." Turning in the circle of his arms, she looked around the spacious bedroom, past the poster bed to the small table that had been set near the window. There was a covered silver dish on the table, from which a few traces of sweet-scented steam were still visible. Perplexed, she twisted back to look at Marcus.

"Go and find out," he said.

Curiously Lillian went to investigate. Taking hold of the cover's handle, which had been wrapped with a linen napkin, she lifted the lid, letting a soft burst of intoxicating fragrance into the air. Momentarily puzzled, Lillian stared at the dish, and then burst out laughing. The white porcelain dish was filled with five perfect pears, all standing on end, their skin gleaming and ruby-red from having been poached in wine. They sat in a pool of clear amber sauce that was redolent of cinnamon and honey.

"Since I couldn't obtain a pear from a bottle for you," came Marcus's voice from behind her, "this was the next best alternative."

Lillian picked up a spoon and dug into one of the melting-soft pears, lifting it to her lips with relish. The bite of warm, wine-soaked fruit seemed to

dissolve in her mouth, the spiced honey sauce causing a tingle in the back of her throat. "Mmmm..." She closed her eyes in ecstasy.

Looking amused, Marcus turned her to face him. His gaze fell to the corner of her lips, where a stray drop of honey sauce glittered. Ducking his head, he kissed and licked away the sticky drop, the caress of his mouth causing a new pleasurable ache deep inside her. "Delicious," he whispered, his lips settling more firmly, until she felt as if her blood were flowing in streams of white-hot sparks. She dared to share the taste of wine and cinnamon with him, tentatively exploring his mouth with her tongue, and his response was so encouraging that she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed herself closer. He was delicious, the taste of his mouth clean and sweet, the feel of his lean, solid body immeasurably exciting. Her lungs expanded with shaky-hot breaths, restrained by the clench of her corset stays, and she broke the kiss with a gasp.

"I can't breathe."

Wordlessly Marcus turned her around and unfastened the gown. Reaching her corset, he untied the laces and loosened them with a series of expert tugs, until the stays expanded and Lillian gulped in relief. "Why did you lace so tightly?" she heard him ask.

"Because the dress wouldn't fasten otherwise. And because, according to my mother, Englishmen prefer their women to be narrow-waisted."

Marcus snorted as he eased her back to face him. "Englishmen prefer women to have larger waists in lieu of fainting from lack of oxygen. We're rather practical that way." Noticing that the sleeve of her unfastened gown had slipped over her white shoulder, he lowered his mouth to the smooth curve. The silken brush of his lips against her skin caused her to tremble, and she nestled close to him, while sensations wavered inside her like images in sun-warmed water. Blindly she reached up to his hair, her fingers thrilling at the feel of the coarse silken locks. The rhythm of her heart drove free and hard inside her chest, and she moved restlessly in his arms as he kissed his way up to her throat.

"Lillian." His voice was husky and rueful. "This is too soon. I promised

you..." Pausing, he stole a kiss from the tender hollow beneath her ear. "Promised..." he continued doggedly, "that we would negotiate your terms."

"Terms?" she asked vaguely, clasping his head in her hands and urging his mouth back to hers.

"Yes, I--" Marcus broke off to kiss her lips, slanting his mouth over hers with twisting pressure. She explored his neck and face, her fingertips passing over the strong lines of his cheekbones and jaw, the taut sinew of his neck. The smell of his skin intoxicated her with every breath. She wanted to press herself against him until there was not an inch of space left between them. Suddenly she could not kiss him hard enough, long enough.

As he felt her escalating wildness, Marcus forcibly eased her back, ignoring her whimper of protest. His own breath knocked sharply in his throat, and it seemed to require great effort to sort through his disordered thoughts. "Little one..." His hands rubbed gentle circles on her back and shoulders to soothe her. "Softly. Softly. You can have everything you want. You don't have to fight for it."

Lillian nodded jerkily. She had never been so aware of the difference in their respective experience, realizing that he was able to restrain his intense passion, whereas she was utterly overwhelmed. His mouth touched her burning forehead and followed the wing of her brow. "It's better for you...for both of us...to make it last longer," he murmured. "I don't want to take you in haste."

She found herself nudging strongly against his face, his hands, like a cat demanding to be stroked.

One of his palms slipped into the open back of her gown, seeking the skin above the edge of her corset, and a sigh escaped him as he felt her downy softness. "Not yet," he said in a rough whisper, though whether he was talking to himself or to her was unclear. He clasped the vulnerable curve of her neck in one strong hand, and bent to feast on her parted lips, her chin, the front of her throat. "You're so sweet," he said raggedly.

She couldn't help but grin, even in the flush of desire. "Am I?"

Marcus sought her mouth with another hungry kiss. "Very sweet," he

confirmed huskily. "Though if I were a lesser man, you'd have torn my head off by now."

The words drew a low laugh from her. "Now I understand the attraction between us. We're a danger to everyone but each other. Like a pair of ill-tempered hedgehogs." She paused as a thought occurred to her, and she pulled away from him. "Speaking of attraction..." Her legs were a bit unsteady, and she wandered to the ready support of the bed. Standing against one of the heavy carved posts, she murmured, "I have something to confess."

Marcus followed her, the light limning the sleek, superbly toned lines of his body. The fashionable looseness of his trousers, which lightly followed the shape of his lean form, did little to conceal the powerful muscles beneath. "That doesn't surprise me." He rested one hand on the post just above her head, his posture relaxed. "Am I going to like this confession or not?"

"I don't know." She reached into the hidden pocket of her gown, concealed in the deep folds of her skirts, and found the vial of perfume. "Here."

"What is it?" Receiving the vial, Marcus opened it and inhaled the scent. "Perfume," he said, his gaze questioning as it returned to her face.

"Not just any perfume," Lillian replied apprehensively. "It's the reason you were first attracted to me."

He sniffed it again. "Oh?"

"I purchased it from an old perfumer in London. It's an aphrodisiac."

Sudden laughter flickered in his eyes. "Where did you learn that word?"

"From Annabelle. And it's true," Lillian told him earnestly, "it really is one. It has a special ingredient that the perfumer told me would attract a suitor."

"What special ingredient?"

"He wouldn't tell me what it was. But it worked. Don't laugh, it did! I noticed its effect on you the day that we played rounders, when you kissed me behind the hedgerow. Don't you remember?"

Marcus seemed entertained by the notion, but it was clear that he did not

believe that he had been seduced by a perfume. He passed it beneath his nose again, and murmured, "I remember having noticed the scent. But I was attracted to you for many other reasons long before that day."

"Liar," she accused. "You hated me."

He shook his head. "I never hated you. I was bothered, plagued, and tormented by you, but that's not at all the same thing."

"The perfume works," she insisted. "Not only did you respond to it, but Annabelle tried it on her husband--and she swears that he kept her up all night as a result."

"Sweetheart," Marcus said wryly, "Hunt has behaved like a boar in rut around Annabelle since the first day they met. It's typical behavior for him, where she is concerned."

"But it wasn't typical behavior for you! You had absolutely no interest in me until I wore this scent, and the first time you got a whiff of it--"

"Are you claiming," he interrupted, his eyes like black velvet, "that I would have a similar reaction to any woman who wears it?"

Lillian opened her mouth to reply, then closed it abruptly as she recalled that he hadn't displayed any interest when the other wallflowers had tried it. "No," she admitted. "But it does seem to make quite a bit of difference with me."

A slow smile curved his lips. "Lillian, I've wanted you every moment since I first held you in my arms. And it has nothing to do with your damned perfume. However"--he inhaled the scent one last time before replacing the tiny stopper--"I do know what the secret ingredient is."

Lillian stared at him with wide eyes. "You do not!"

"I do," he said smugly.

"What a know-all," Lillian exclaimed with laughing annoyance. "Perhaps you're guessing at it, but I assure you that if I can't figure out what it is, you certainly couldn't--"

"I know conclusively what it is," he informed her.

"Tell me, then."

"No. I think I'll let you discover it on your own."

"Tell me!" She pounced on him eagerly, thumping him hard on the chest with her fists. Most men would have been driven back by the solid blows, but he only laughed and held his ground. "Westcliff, if you don't tell me this instant, I'll--"

"Torture me? Sorry, that won't work. I'm too accustomed to it by now." Lifting her with shocking ease, he tossed her onto the bed like a sack of potatoes. Before she could move an inch, he was on top of her, purring and laughing as she wrestled him with all her might.

"I'll make you give in!" She hooked a leg around his and shoved hard at his left shoulder. The childhood years of fighting with her boisterous brothers had taught her a few tricks. However, Marcus countered every move easily, his body a mass of steely, flexing muscles. He was very agile, and surprisingly heavy. "You're no challenge at all," he teased, allowing her to roll atop him briefly. As she sought to pin him, he twisted and levered himself over her once more. "Don't say that's your best effort?"

"Cocky bastard," Lillian muttered, renewing her efforts. "I could win...if I didn't have a gown on..."

"Your wish may yet be granted," he replied, smiling down at her. After another few moments, he held her down on the mattress, taking care not to hurt her in their love play. "That's enough," he said. "You're tiring. We'll call it an even match."

"Not yet," she panted, still determined to best him.

"For God's sake, you little savage," he said in amusement, "it's time to give up."

"Never!" She strained wildly against him, her weary arms trembling.

"Relax," came his caressing murmur, and her eyes widened as she felt the hardness of his body between her thighs. She gasped, her struggles fading. "Softly, now..." He pulled the front of her gown down, momentarily trapping her arms. "Easy," he whispered.

Lillian went still, her blood pumping violently as she stared up at him.

The light was uncertain in this part of the room, the bed swathed in shadow. Marcus's dark form moved over hers, his hands turning her this way and that as he eased the gown from her body, and unhooked her corset. And then suddenly she was breathing, breathing, too loudly, too fast, and the soothing stroke of his palm down the front of her body only agitated her further.

Her skin had become so sensitive that the feel of the open air seemed to chafe her, her entire body tingling and prickling. She began to shiver as he peeled away her chemise, her stockings and drawers, the occasional soft graze of his knuckles or fingertips causing her to start.

Marcus stood by the bed, staring at her intently as he removed his own clothes with leisurely slowness. His elegantly sculpted body was becoming familiar to her now, as was the aching excitement that penetrated every inch of her tender flesh. She moaned a little as he joined her on the mattress, gathering her against the warm fleece of his chest. Feeling the continuous tremors that ran through her, he drew his hand over the pale length of her back and cupped the taut shape of her bottom. Everywhere he touched her, she felt waves of intense relief followed by a deeper, more pleasurable ache.

He kissed her slowly, deeply, licking into the silky recesses of her mouth until she groaned with pleasure. Moving down to her breasts, he covered them with light, half-open kisses, touching her nipples with fleeting strokes of his tongue. He coaxed and courted her as if she weren't already flushed and trembling with desire, as if she weren't breathing in pleading sobs for him to ease the pangs of need. When her breasts were swollen and her nipples had contracted to hard tips, he took one peak into his mouth and began to tug firmly, while his hand settled on her stomach.

She felt a tightening coil inside, a gathering urgency that drove her mad. Her own hand shook violently as she grasped his, and brought it to the damp tangle of curls between her thighs. He smiled against her breast, and moved to the other nipple, pulling it into the moist velvet of his mouth. Time seemed to stop as she felt his fingers searching delicately, parting the springy locks, then grazing over the wet, intricately couched peak of her sex. Ahhh ...his caresses were gossamer-light as he stroked her with delicate insistence, first

teasing, then assuaging, then teasing again, until she cried out in helpless release, her hips jerking hard against his hand.

Cuddling her protectively, Marcus caressed her quivering limbs. He whispered endearments against her half-open mouth, words of adoration and lust, while his hands moved over her body in reverent forays. Lillian wasn't aware of the exact moment when his touch became more arousing than soothing, but gradually she felt him layering sensation upon sensation. Her heartbeat launched into a new urgent pattern, and she shifted uneasily beneath him. He parted her legs and pushed her knees up a little, and entered her slowly. She flinched at the intimate soreness of the invasion. He was so hard, above her, inside her, that her flesh tightened instinctively, but nothing could stop the thick, heavy slide. He kept his thrusts easy and deep, nudging into the tight clasp of her sex with utter tenderness. Every movement seemed to draw a thrill of pleasure from the depths of her body, and soon she relaxed until the pain had tapered to a barely discernible twinge. She felt hot all over, feverish and desperate as she sensed the approach of another climax. Suddenly he astonished her by withdrawing.

"Marcus," she whimpered, "oh God, don't stop, please--"

Hushing her with his mouth, he lifted and turned her carefully until she was lying on her stomach. Dazed and shaking, she felt him push a pillow beneath her hips, and then another, until she was propped up high and open as he knelt between her thighs. His fingers stroked and spread the folds of her sex, and then he was pushing inside her again, and her moans became uncontrollable. Helplessly she turned her head to the side, her cheek pressed against the mattress, while her twisting hips were steadied in the firm grasp of his hands. He thrust even deeper than before, probing and stroking and pleasuring her with a measured rhythm ...deliberately pushing her over the edge of sanity. She begged, sobbed, groaned, even cursed, and she heard him laugh softly as he drove her into a shattering burst of rapture. Her body clenched around his sex in throbbing contractions, milking a climax from him until a deep growl was torn from his throat.

Panting, Marcus lowered his body over hers, his mouth at the nape of

her neck, his sex still buried inside her.

Resting passively beneath him, licking her swollen lips, Lillian mumbled, "And you called me a savage." She caught her breath as he chuckled, the hair on his chest rubbing like rough-napped velvet against her back.

Although Lillian was pleasantly tired from their love-making, the last thing she wanted to do was sleep. She was filled with wonder at the discoveries she was making about the man she had once disdained as stodgy and boring, who had turned out to be neither. She was beginning to recognize that Marcus possessed a softer side that few people were ever allowed to see. And she sensed that he cared about her, though she was afraid to speculate on that, as the feelings that seemed to be pouring from her own heart had become alarmingly intense.

After Marcus had wiped her perspiring body with a cool, damp cloth, he dressed her in his discarded shirt, which held the scent of his skin. He brought her a plate containing a poached pear, and a glass of sweet wine, and even allowed her to feed him a few bites of the silky-soft fruit. When her appetite was sated, Lillian set aside the empty plate and spoon, and turned to snuggle against him. He rose on one elbow and looked down at her, his fingers playing idly in her hair.

"Are you sorry that I wouldn't let St. Vincent have you?"

She gave him a puzzled smile. "Why would you ask such a thing? Surely you're not having pangs of conscience."

Marcus shook his head. "I am merely wondering if you had any regrets."

Surprised and touched by his need for reassurance, Lillian toyed with the dark curls on his chest. "No," she said frankly. "He is attractive, and I do like him ...but I didn't want him."

"You did consider marrying him, however."

"Well," she admitted, "it did cross my mind that I would like to be a duchess--but only to spite you."

A smile flashed across his face. He retaliated with a punishing nip at her

breast, causing her to yelp. "I couldn't have borne it," he admitted, "seeing you married to anyone but me."

"I don't think Lord St. Vincent will have any difficulty finding another heiress to suit his purposes."

"Perhaps. But there aren't many women with fortunes comparable to yours...and none with your beauty."

Smiling at the compliment, Lillian crawled halfway over him and hitched one leg over his. "Tell me more. I want to hear you wax lyrical about my charms."

Levering himself to a sitting position, Marcus lifted her with an ease that made her gasp, and settled her until she straddled his hips. He stroked a fingertip along the pale skin that was exposed at the open vee of the shirt. "I never wax lyrical," he said. "Marsdens are not a poetic sort. However..." He paused to admire the sight of the long-limbed young woman who sat astride him while her hair trailed to her waist in tangled streamers. "I could at least tell you that you look like a pagan princess, with your tangled black hair and your bright, dark eyes."

"And?" Lillian encouraged, linking her arms loosely around his neck.

He set his hands at her slender waist and moved them down to grasp her strong, sleek thighs. "And that every erotic dream I've ever had about your magnificent legs pales in comparison to the reality."

"You've dreamed about my legs?" Lillian wriggled as she felt his palms slide up her inner thighs in a lazy, teasing path.

"Oh yes." His hands disappeared beneath the drooping hem of the shirt. "Wrapped around me," he murmured, his tone deepening. "Gripping tightly as you rode me..."

Lillian's eyes widened as she felt his thumbs stroking the fragile outer folds of her sex. "What?" she asked faintly, and drew a ragged breath as she felt him open her with gentle massaging strokes. His fingers were doing something wicked, their artful movements concealed by the shirt. She shivered and watched his intent face as he used both hands to toy with her,

some fingers filling her, others flirting skillfully with the sensitive little crest that seemed to burn at his touch. "But women don't..." she said in breathless confusion. "Not that way. At least...oh ...ah...I've never heard..."

"Some do," he murmured, teasing her in a way that caused her to moan. "My reckless angel ...I think I'll have to show you."

In her innocence, she didn't comprehend until he lifted her again, and positioned her, and helped her to slide along the rigid, engorged length of his arousal until she was fully impaled on him. Shocked beyond words, Lillian made a few tentative movements, obeying the low murmur of his voice and the patient guidance of his hands on her hips. After a while she found a rhythm. "That's it," Marcus said, now sounding breathless. "That's the way..." Reaching beneath the shirt once more, he found the aching nub beneath the hood of her sex. He circled it with his thumb in an electrifying counterpoint to her downward thrusts, with a soft pressure that sent new heat dancing across her nerves. His steady gaze held hers, drinking in the sight of her pleasure, and the realization of how utterly focused he was on her caused the ecstasy to ripen until she shuddered in hard, deep-seated spasms, her body and heart and mind filled with him. Gripping her waist, Marcus held her firmly as he ground upward, letting his own pleasure pump and surge through her.

Feeling witless and utterly drained, Lillian let herself collapse over him, her head coming to rest on the center of his chest. His heart pounded and thundered beneath her ear for long minutes before it eased into something approaching a normal rhythm. "My God," he muttered, his arms sliding around her, then falling away as if even that required too much effort. "Lillian. Lillian."

"Mmm?" She blinked drowsily, experiencing an overwhelming need to sleep.

"I've changed my mind about negotiating. You can have whatever you want. Any conditions, anything that's in my power to accomplish. Just put my mind at ease and say you'll be my wife."

Lillian managed to lift her head and stare into his heavy-lidded eyes. "If

this is an example of your bargaining ability," she said, "I'm rather worried about your corporate affairs. You don't surrender this easily to your business partners' demands, I hope."

"No. Nor do I sleep with them."

A slow grin spread across her face. If Marcus was willing to take a leap of faith, then she would do no less. "Then to put your mind at ease, Westcliff...yes, I'll be your wife. Though I warn you...you may be sorry you didn't negotiate when you learn my conditions later. I may want a board position on the soap company, for example..."

"God help me," he muttered, and with a deep sigh of contentment, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER 24

Lillian was aware of being jostled with irritating repetition. Slowly she comprehended that she was being conveyed in a carriage, swaying and jolting over the road at high speed. A terrible smell saturated everything...some kind of potent solvent, like turpentine. Stirring in confusion, she realized that her ear was pressed hard against an unyielding pillow stuffed with some highly condensed substance. She felt so horribly ill, as if she had been poisoned. With each breath she took, her throat burned. Nausea spread through her in repeated waves. She moaned in protest, while her clouded mind worked to disentangle itself from unpleasant dreams.

Cracking her eyes open, she saw something above her...a face that seemed to dart out at her and disappear at random. She tried to ask something, to find out what was happening, but her brain seemed to have been disconnected from the rest of her body, and though she was vaguely aware of speaking, the words that came from her mouth were gibberish.

"Shhh..." A long-fingered hand moved over her head, massaging her scalp and temples. "Rest. You'll come out of it soon, darling. Just rest, and breathe."

Confused, Lillian closed her eyes and tried to harness her brain into some fragile imitation of its usual process. After a while, she connected the voice to an image. "Sainvincen..." she mumbled, her tongue not quite moving properly in her mouth.

"Yes, love."

Her first lurching impulse was one of relief. A friend. Someone who would help her. But the relief turned hollow as her instincts shuffled in restless warning, and she rolled her head on what turned out to be St. Vincent's thigh. The nauseating smell overwhelmed her...it was in her nose and on her face, the fumes stinging her eyes, and she lifted her fingers to claw at her skin in an instinctive attempt to scratch it off.

St. Vincent caught her wrists, murmuring, "No, no...I'll help you. Put

your hands down, love. There's a good girl. Drink some of this. Only a sip, or it won't stay down." The nozzle of something--a flask, a skin, a bottle, perhaps--pressed against her lips, and cool water trickled into her mouth. She swallowed gratefully, and held still as a damp cloth moved over her cheeks and nose and jaw.

"Poor sweet," St. Vincent murmured, wiping her throat, then moving to her forehead. "The idiot who brought you to me must have given you twice as much ether as was needed. You should have awakened long before now."

Ether. The idiot who brought you to me ...The first glimmer of understanding came to her, and Lillian stared up at him hazily, perceiving only the lean outlines of his face and the color of his hair, dark gold like the gilding of an antique Slavic icon. "Can't see..." she whispered.

"That should improve in a few minutes."

"Ether..." Lillian puzzled over the word, which sounded familiar. She had encountered it before, in some apothecary shop or another. Ether...sweet vitriol...used as an intoxicant, and occasionally as an aid to medical procedures. "Why?" she asked, uncertain if her uncontrollable trembling was the result of ether poisoning, or the realization that she was lying helpless in the arms of an enemy.

Though she still couldn't clearly see the expression on St. Vincent's face, she heard the gravely apologetic note in his voice. "I had no choice in the manner of your delivery, darling, or I would have made certain that you had been treated more gently. All I was told was that if I wanted you, I should come to collect you without delay, else you would be disposed of in some other manner. Knowing the countess, I wouldn't have been surprised if she had elected to drown you like a cat in a sack."

"Countess," Lillian repeated faintly, still finding it difficult to maneuver her thick, swollen tongue. Saliva kept flooding her mouth, an aftereffect of the ether. "West-cliff ...tell him..." Oh, how she wanted Marcus. She wanted his deep voice and loving hands, and the hard warmth of his body against hers. But Marcus didn't know where she was, or what had happened to her.

"You've met with a change of fate, my pet," St. Vincent said softly,

stroking her hair again. It seemed that he could read her thoughts. "There's no point in asking for Westcliff ...you're out of his reach now."

Lillian floundered and strained to sit up, but all she succeeded in was nearly rolling onto the floor of the carriage.

"Easy," St. Vincent murmured, holding her in place with only the lightest pressure on her shoulders. "You're not ready to sit on your own yet. No, don't. You'll make yourself ill."

Though she despised herself for it, Lillian couldn't prevent a whimper of distress as she collapsed back into his lap, her head falling weakly against his thigh. "What are you doing?" she managed to ask, panting for breath and striving to keep down her gorge. "Where are we going?"

"To Gretna Green. We're going to marry, sweet."

It was difficult to think past the nausea and the instant panic. "I won't cooperate," Lillian finally whispered, swallowing and swallowing.

"I'm afraid you will," he replied evenly. "I know of several methods to solicit your participation, though I would prefer not to cause you unnecessary pain. And after the ceremony, an expedient consummation will make the union permanent."

"Westcliff won't accept it," she croaked. "No matter what you do. He'll...he'll take me away from you."

St. Vincent's voice was soft. "He will have no legal right to you by then, sweet. And I've known him far longer than you have, which is why I know that he won't want you after I've taken you."

"Not if it's rape," Lillian choked, flinching as she felt the easy slide of his palm over her shoulder. "He wouldn't blame me."

"It won't be rape," St. Vincent said gently. "If I know one thing, darling, it's how to...well, I won't boast. But rather than quibble over technicalities, I can assure you that although Westcliff won't blame you, neither will he chance the possibility of his wife giving birth to another man's bastard. Nor would he be able to accept a woman who has been defiled. He will--with reluctance, of course--inform you that it would probably be best for all parties

concerned to leave things as they are. And then he'll go on to marry the proper English girl that he should have chosen in the first place. Whereas you"--his finger traced the curve of her trembling cheek-- "will do just fine for me. I daresay your family will reconcile themselves to me fairly soon. They're the sort to make a virtue of necessity."

Lillian did not happen to agree with his analysis, at least where Marcus was concerned. She had a good deal more faith in his loyalty than that. However, it wasn't a theory that she cared to test--especially the unwilling consummation part. She lay still for a long minute, discovering to her relief that her vision was clearing, and her nausea had eased slightly, though the pools of bitter saliva kept collecting in her mouth. Now that her initial confusion and the first flush of panic were over, she was able to harness her sluggish mind sufficiently to think. Though part of her longed to explode with rage, she couldn't see much benefit for herself in that. Much better to recover her wits, and try to think rationally.

"I want to sit up," she said flatly.

St. Vincent seemed admiring and surprised by her calmness. "Slowly, then, and allow me to support you until you get your bearings."

Showers of white and blue sparks veiled Lillian's vision as she felt him maneuver her until she was braced in the corner of the carriage. More saliva, a surge of weakness, and then she managed to collect herself. Her dress was unfastened, she saw, with the front gaping open to the waist to reveal the crumpled chemise underneath. Her heart kicked anxiously at the discovery, and she tried unsuccessfully to tug the edges of the gown together. Her accusing gaze lifted to St. Vincent's face. His expression was grave, but his eyes were light and smiling. "No, I haven't ravished you," he murmured. "Yet. I prefer my victims to be conscious. However, your breathing was weak, and I feared the mixture of an ether overdose and a very tight corset might be the finish of you. I removed the corset, but I couldn't quite fasten your gown."

"More water," Lillian said raspily, and took a cautious sip from the leather skin that he handed to her. She stared at St. Vincent stonily, searching

for any vestige of the charming companion she had known at Stony Cross Park. All she could see were the dispassionate eyes of a man who would hesitate at nothing to get what he wanted. He possessed no principles, no sense of honor, no human weakness. She could cry, scream, beg, and none of it would move him. He would stop at nothing, even rape, to achieve his ends.

"Why me?" she asked in a monotone. "Why not make off with some other unwilling girl who has some money?"

"Because you were the most convenient option. And financially speaking, you're by far the most well endowed."

"And you want to strike at Westcliff," she said. "Because you're jealous of him."

"Darling, that's going a bit too far. I wouldn't trade places with Westcliff and his infernal load of obligations for all the world. I merely want to improve my own circumstances."

"And therefore you are willing to take a wife who will hate you?" Lillian asked, rubbing her eyes, which felt filmy and sticky. "If you think I would ever forgive you, you're a vain, self-centered idiot. I'll do everything in my power to make you miserable. Is that what you want?"

"At the moment, pet, all I want is your money. Later we'll discover ways in which I might be able to soften your feelings toward me. Failing that, I can always deposit you in some remote country estate where the only entertainment is watching the cows and sheep through the window."

Lillian's head pounded and throbbed. She moved her fingers to her temples and pressed them firmly in an effort to ease the ache. "Don't underestimate me," she said with her eyes closed, while her heart felt like a cold, hard stone in her chest. "I will make your life hell. I may even murder you."

A gentle, mirthless laugh greeted her statement. "No doubt someone will, someday. It may as well be my own wife."

Lillian fell silent, squeezing her eyes tighter over a threatening prickle of useless tears. She would not cry, however. She would wait for an opportune

moment...and if murder was what was required for her to escape him, she would happily oblige.

By the time Marcus had reached the countess's private suite of rooms, with Simon Hunt in close pursuit, the commotion had attracted the attention of half the household. Intent on reaching the malicious bitch who was his mother, Marcus was only vaguely aware of the stunned faces of the servants he passed. He ignored Simon Hunt's exhortations to calm himself, to keep from tearing off in a fury, to behave rationally. Never in his life had Marcus been so far beyond the reach of sanity.

Reaching the door of his mother's apartments, Marcus found it locked. He rattled the handle violently. "Open it," he bellowed. "Open it now!"

Silence, and then a maid's frightened reply from within. "Milord...the countess bade me to tell you that she is resting."

"I'll send her to her eternal fucking rest," Marcus roared, "if this door isn't opened now."

"Milord, please--"

He drew back three or four paces and hurled himself against the door, which shook on its hinges and partially gave with a splintering sound. There were fearful cries in the hallway from a pair of female guests who happened to witness the astonishing display of raging frenzy. "Dear God," one exclaimed to the other, "he's gone berserk!"

Marcus drew back again and lunged at the door, this time sending chunks of paneling flying. He felt Simon Hunt's hands grasp him from behind, and he whirled with his fist drawn back, ready to launch an attack on all fronts.

"Jesus," Hunt muttered, retreating a step or two with his hands raised in a defensive gesture. His face was taut and his eyes were wide, and he stared at Marcus as if he were a stranger. "Westcliff--"

"Stay the hell out of my way!"

"Gladly. But let me point out that if our positions were reversed, you would be the first to tell me to keep a cool--"

Ignoring him, Marcus swerved back to the door and targeted the disjointed lock with a powerful, accurately aimed blow of his boot heel. The housemaid's scream shot through the doorway as the ruined portal swung open. Bursting into the receiving room, Marcus charged toward the bedchamber, where the countess sat in a chair by a small hearth fire. Fully dressed and swathed in ropes of pearls, she stared at him with amused disdain.

Breathing heavily, Marcus advanced on her with bloodlust racing through his veins. It was certain that the countess had no idea that she was in mortal danger, or she would not have received him so calmly.

"Full of animal spirits today, are we?" she asked. "Your descent from gentleman to savage brute has been accomplished so very quickly. I must offer Miss Bowman my compliments on her efficacy."

"What have you done with her?"

"Done with her?" Her expression taunted him with its innocent perplexity. "What the devil do you mean, Westcliff?"

"You met with her at Butterfly Court this morning."

"I never walk that far from the manor," the countess said haughtily. "What a ridiculous asser--" She let out a strident cry as Marcus seized her, his fingers wrapping around the pearl ropes and tightening them around her throat.

"Tell me where she is, or I'll snap your neck like a wishbone!"

Simon Hunt seized him from behind once more, determined to prevent a murder from occurring. "Westcliff!"

Marcus closed his hand in a harder grip around the pearls. He glared without blinking into his mother's face, not missing the flicker of vindictive triumph that lurked in her eyes. He did not take his gaze from hers even as he heard his sister Livia's voice.

"Marcus," she said urgently. "Marcus, listen to me! You have my permission to throttle her later. I'll even help. But at least wait until we've found out what she's done."

Marcus tightened the tension of the pearls until the elderly woman's eyes seemed to protrude from their shallow sockets. "Your only value to me," he said in a low tone, "is your knowledge of Lillian Bowman's whereabouts. If I can't obtain that from you, I'll send you to the devil. Tell me, or I'll choke it from you. And believe that I have enough of my father in me to do it without a second thought."

"Oh yes, you have him in you," the countess said raspily. As his hold on her necklace loosened marginally, she smiled with malevolent enjoyment. "I see that all pretenses of being nobler, better, wiser than your father have finally vanished. That Bowman creature has poisoned you without your even being--"

"Now!" he roared.

For the first time, she began to look uneasy, though no less self-righteous. "I will admit, I met with Miss Bowman this morning at Butterfly Court--where she told me of her intentions to run away with Lord St. Vincent. She has decided to elope with him."

"That's a lie!" came Livia's outraged cry, while a burst of agitated female voices came from the direction of the doorway...the wallflowers, who seemed to be vigorously denying the statement.

Marcus released the countess as if he had been burned. His first reaction was a piercing relief that Lillian was still alive. However, the relief was followed immediately by the awareness that she was far from safe. In light of St. Vincent's need of a fortune, it made perfect sense for him to abduct Lillian. Marcus turned from his mother, never wanting to look at her again, unable to bring himself to speak to her. His gaze locked with Simon Hunt's. Predictably, Hunt was already making rapid calculations. "He'll take her to Gretna Green, of course," Hunt murmured, "and they'll have to travel east to the main road in Hertfordshire. He won't risk traveling the back ways and getting mired in mud, or having the wheels damaged from broken road. From Hertfordshire it will be approximately forty-five hours to Scotland...and at a speed of ten miles per hour, with occasional stops for fresh relay horses..."

"You'll never overtake them," the countess cried with a cackling laugh.

"I told you I would have my way, Westcliff!"

"Oh, shut up, you evil hag!" cried Daisy Bowman impatiently from the doorway, her eyes huge in her pale face. "Lord Westcliff, shall I run to the stables and tell them to saddle a horse?"

"Two horses," Simon Hunt said resolutely. "I'm going with him."

"Which ones--"

"Ebony and Yasmin," Marcus replied. They were his best Arabians, bred for speed over long distance. They were not as lightning-fast as thoroughbreds, but they would endure a punishing pace for hours, traveling at least three times as fast as St. Vincent's coach.

Daisy disappeared in a flash, and Marcus turned to his sister. "See that the countess is gone by the time I return," he said curtly. "Pack whatever she needs, and get her off the estate."

"Where do you wish me to send her?" Livia asked, pale but composed.

"I don't give a damn, so long as she knows not to return."

Realizing that she was being banished, and most likely exiled, the countess rose from her chair. "I will not be disposed of in this manner! I won't have it, my lord!"

"And tell the countess," Marcus said to Livia, "that if the slightest harm comes to Miss Bowman, she had better pray that I never find her."

Marcus strode from the room, shoving through a small crowd that had gathered in the hallway. Simon Hunt followed, pausing only to murmur briefly to Annabelle and press a kiss to her forehead. She stared after him with an anxious frown, biting her lip to keep from calling after him.

After a lengthy pause, the countess was heard to mutter, "It matters not what becomes of me. I am content in the knowledge that I have prevented him from befouling the family lineage."

Livia turned to give her mother a half-pitying, half-contemptuous glance. "Marcus never fails," she said softly. "Most of his childhood was spent learning to overcome impossible odds. And now that Marcus has finally found someone worth fighting for ...do you really think he would let

anything stop him?"

