



## **“Mrs. Montford?” he said softly. “Perhaps we ought to stop playing games with one another?”**

As if his hand possessed a will of its own, Giles lifted her chin, forcing her eyes to his. Much of her color was gone now, and both her shoulder blades were set against the linen cupboard. He had her trapped.

“Wh-what do you want of me, my lord?” she whispered.

He moved another inch closer, until he could feel the warmth of her breasts against his coat. “At this particular moment?” His words were oddly thick. “Not your fine housekeeping skills.”

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—Award-winning author of *Bridal Season*, Connie Brockway

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To my beloved husband

Fortis in arduis.

## Prologue

### Up Jumps the Devil

Winter along the Somerset coast was said to possess a certain bleak beauty. To some, however, the February of 1827 was mostly just bleak. It could have been worse, Aubrey Farquharson supposed. It could have been the winter of 873.

That was the year a village of local peasants, harried, starving, and weary, raised a cairn on a hill high above the Bristol Channel, to keep watch for Norse invaders. But as invaders generally are, these were treacherous and persistent. Soon, by necessity, the little cairn became a watchtower, and the tower a bulwark until, many years later, the cairn had become Castle Cardow, so called for the tor on which it stood.

Given such strategic importance, Cardow was soon crenellated beneath the banner of the Wessex king. Yet from its inception, the castle seemed fated to be a place of grief. Some said Cardow had been built of stone mortared with tears, and certainly, many were shed there. Finally overrun in the second Danish war, the brave lads who held the castle were burned, tortured, and skinned alive by Gunthrum the Viking and his henchmen. The most barbaric of these was called Mangus the Waelrafaen, or the Death Raven, so named for the carving on his prow, a huge black bird with wings spread wide, a scavenger swooping down on the unsuspecting.

The symbolism was apt enough. After laying waste to the castle, Mangus decided to pick over the bones. He found a fine one, the heiress of Cardow, and took her by force as his wife. She was a fair, blue-eyed Saxon girl named Ermengild whose name meant, literally, “strong in battle.” Mangus, alas, did not take the hint. He renamed the castle and village after himself and settled in to stay.

For two years the Vikings sacked Wessex and Mangus sacked his wife. But Ermengild endured with grace. And eventually the Wessex king, the man who would one day be called Alfred the Great, forced the Viking heathens to bow, not just to England, but to Christianity. Gunthrum sailed away in ignominious defeat, taking his henchmen with him. Mangus left his wife three months gone with child, and swore he would return.

By the time he did, the castle atop Cardow—whatever one wished to call it—was a fully fortified stronghold. For Ermengild’s purposes, however, the battlements were little needed. Upon seeing her husband’s ship come sailing up the channel, she made her way down to the moat, embraced Mangus on

the drawbridge, then buried her best kitchen knife between his shoulder blades. Thus ended, or so it was said, the first of many mismade marriages at Castle Cardow.

Aubrey Farquharson had heard this tale and many more during her journey down from Birmingham. The naval surgeon who had sat opposite them in the mail coach had been a Bristol man, and happy to spin his yarns for the entertainment of all trapped within. Aubrey had thanked him, hopped out at Minehead, and rushed into the shabby little posting inn, only to have her worst fears confirmed.

They had arrived too late, the innkeeper said, for the coach which had been sent to fetch her up to Cardow. Major Lorimer's servants had given up some two hours past. But there was good news, the innkeeper added. He had an old carriage for hire. For hire. That part of the news was not so good. Still, she had little choice. She picked the coins from her purse and set out to meet her fate.

As the carriage clattered off the channel road and crossed the old moat to begin its grinding ascent, Aubrey leaned nearer the window and looked up, scrubbing at the fog with her fist. High above, the castle could have been the inspiration for one of Mrs. Radcliffe's more chilling novels. All it wanted, really, was a flock of ravens exploding upward in a malevolent cloud against the leaden sky.

But that thought brought to mind the grim legend of the Waelrafaen. Aubrey shivered and looked away. She'd no wish to spend her next decade virtually imprisoned there. Certainly she did not want to take a child into such a gloomy place. Beneath her, the badly sprung carriage pitched as the coachman cut his horses into the next turn, his wheels plowing into the mud for purchase. Inside, the thing smelled of moldering leather and sour, rotting wood. On the seat opposite, Iain looked up at her. The boy's eyes were round, his face still bloodless. What had she been thinking, to drag a five-year-old into the unknown? The strain had no doubt contributed to his illness. Surely someone could have kept...

But no. There was no one. No one she could trust with Iain.

"Will the man still give you the job, Mama?" Iain asked softly. "I did not mean to get sick in Marlborough. Shall I tell the man—the Major—it was my fault?"

Aubrey leaned forward to smooth her hand over Iain's glossy black hair. It was her father's hair. Her father's name, too. That much Aubrey had been afraid to change. It was all very well to persuade a child he must take a new surname and forget he'd ever had another. Easy enough to smooth the edges from his faint brogue and pass him off as just another Geordie-boy left fatherless by the mines. But to change his Christian name? Or hers?

No. It went against all instinct. Moreover, today, his name might have to be her trump card. She hoped not. But she would do what she must to put a roof over the boy's head and put the hounds off their scent. Surely there was no better place than Castle Cardow, so desolate and impervious?

"Iain," she whispered. "This isn't your fault. Say nothing, laddie, do you hear? We'll find a place for you to lie down, and I'll deal with Major Lorimer. He'll give me the job. I promise."

Iain settled back and closed his eyes. Soon they were rattling up the cobblestones toward the gatehouse. High above, in the center of the arched entrance, a faint light shone through a mere slit of a window. Below it, Aubrey could see the massive iron spikes of an ancient portcullis which had been raised to admit them. Or perhaps raised three hundred years ago and left hanging there, rusted and forgotten. But as the coach rolled under it, Aubrey looked up at the black carriage roof and felt her skin prickle. She was struck by the most irrational notion that the portcullis was going to come grinding down behind them, forever sealing them inside the castle walls.

In the courtyard the stooped coachman set them down beneath an ancient porte-cochère, heaved off

their trunks, and scabbled back up on the box. Aubrey almost cried out for him to wait, but bit back the words. The rain was sheeting down again. No doubt he was anxious to make his way back along the horrid, twisting road lest the mud worsen. Clutching Iain's hand, Aubrey turned to the massive door and dropped the knocker.

"'Tweren't aught said about a child," remarked the housemaid who bustled about taking their cloaks. Her expression was doubtful, but her eyes were kind. Aubrey did not think she would throw them back out again, so she tried to smile.

The housemaid shrugged and kept chattering. "Now, Pevsner—he be the butler—went off to the King's Arms w' the footmen," she continued. "Or I'd be asking him what to do."

Servants out carousing at such an hour? How odd. "I did not think to mention Iain in my letter to Major Lorimer," Aubrey lied. "But he is no trouble. May I ask, what is your name?"

"Betsy, ma'am."

"Thank you, Betsy." Aubrey smiled again. "May Iain have a pallet by the kitchen hearth whilst I speak to the Major? I'm sure you will never know he is there."

Betsy eyed the boy narrowly. "Reckon there be no harm in it, ma'am," she finally said. "But you were expected afore teatime. The Major don't see anyone after that."

"I'm so sorry," she murmured. "Our mail coach was delayed." It was but a small lie.

Betsy handed off both the cloaks and the boy to another, younger girl who waited nearby, ogling them through wide, ingenuous eyes. Apparently, they did not receive a great many visitors here at Cardow, for dust lay thick on the furnishings. Aubrey kissed Iain lightly on the cheek, then he and the girl disappeared down a staircase on the opposite side of the hall.

As befitted her new station in life, Aubrey was not offered a seat in the parlor, but told to sit on a stiff, black settle in the hall. Betsy gave her another doubtful smile and went up a wider, far more elegant staircase that led to an open gallery which ran the length of the room.

Aubrey tried to calm her nerves by looking about. The hall was vast and vaulted, with a very medieval feel. And a medieval smell, too, for it reeked of damp and rot. Aubrey could only imagine the mildew which lurked behind the huge tapestries. Cobwebs the size of skiff sails could be seen on the corbels which supported the gallery. The two massive fireplaces were filthy, the matching marble chimneypieces stained with soot. A coat of arms hung above the south mantel; a black raven, its wings spread against a blood-red background, and the shield itself borne by two lions rampant.

Well. The earls of Walrafen sent their message loud and clear, did they not? Still, its heraldry and its mildew notwithstanding, Cardow had been modernized at least once or twice during the last thousand years. The flagstones were covered with Turkey carpets, though they had seen better days. The furniture looked to have been built in the reign of William and Mary, while half the walls were covered with tapestries, the other half with Jacobean panels, their intricate oak carvings black with age, matching the gallery.

As Aubrey looked up to study it, she became aware of the murmur of voices which echoed there—a murmur quickly swelling to an argument. An instant later, a deep voice thundered through the house. "You'll tell her the goddamned job is filled!" a man shouted. "That's what! Now get out, you slattern! And take that tray. Goddamned food's not fit for swine."

A murmur followed. Dishes clattered.

“’Tis done if I say so!” came the voice again. “Get out, damn you. Don’t argue.”

More murmuring, more clattering.

“Then put the child out, too! It’s half past four. Blister it, I’m at my whisky.”

More murmuring. Then a short, sharp scream followed by the sound of shattering glass.

Unthinkingly, Aubrey leapt from her bench and rushed up the stairs. The gallery was broad but unlit, and turned into a corridor lined with doors set deep into stone arches. A few feet along, a feeble light spilt across the flagstones. Aubrey did not hesitate, and barged into the room.

Just inside the door, Betsy knelt, picking up shards of porcelain and dropping them into her apron. Aubrey peered into the gloom. A low fire burned in the hearth, the room’s only light. It was a library.

“Are you all right?” asked Aubrey, kneeling to help Betsy, who was quaking with suppressed emotion.

“No, she’s not all right,” growled a man from the shadows. “She’s a goddamned halfwit. Who the hell are you, barging in here?”

Aubrey stood, her eyes adjusting to the light. “Major Lorimer?”

In the farthest corner of the room sat a barrel-backed chair, positioned deep in the shadows, as if its occupant had no wish to be seen. Aubrey could just make out the form of a man. He rose unsteadily, grabbed up a walking stick, and came clomping toward her, listing badly to starboard.

The servant on the floor cowered and kept plucking at shards of porcelain which were stuck in the carpet. The man stopped a few feet away and stared Aubrey up and down with his right eye. The left was just a puckered knot of flesh, sucked back into its socket like some huge, obscene belly button. His left arm looked stiff, and half the leg beneath was missing. He was far older and more irascible than she’d expected. And far drunker, too.

He tottered a little closer on his wooden leg, squinting at her. “Goddamn it, who are you?”

Aubrey stood and looked him straight in the eye—as best she could judge it. “Good evening, Major Lorimer,” she said in a steady voice. “I am Mrs. Montford, the new housekeeper.”

“Oh?” the old man snarled, leaning over the housemaid. “Give me your goddamned hand.”

Uncertainly, Aubrey held out her hand. The Major took it and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger as if testing a bolt of wool. “Humph!” he snorted. “If you’re a goddamned housekeeper, I’m the Archbishop of Canterbury.”

Aubrey had heard quite enough. “Actually, I am just an ordinary housekeeper,” she retorted. “Not a goddamned housekeeper. Really, sir, have you no other adjective in your vocabulary?”

For an instant the Major just stood there, blinking at her with his good eye. Then he looked down at Betsy and shouted, “Out! Out!” He jabbed her with his stick on each syllable. “Leave us, you cow!”

“Stop that!” ordered Aubrey, grabbing for the stick. “Stop it at once.” But Betsy was already hastening from the room, her apron jangling with pieces of broken dishes.

The Major braced both hands on his stick and leaned into her. “Now see here, Miss—Mrs.... what the

devil's your name?"

"Montford," she said very distinctly.

"Well, Mrs. Montford," he echoed snidely. "Just how bloody old are you?"

"Twenty-eight, sir," she lied.

The Major laughed. "Oh, I doubt it." But there was less anger in his tone now. "And that boy you dragged in, who's get is he? Your last employer's?"

Aubrey felt heat flood her face. "My late husband's, sir." This lie was harder to tell.

He sensed her hesitance and seized her other hand. The wedding ring she wore winked in the firelight. "He was a mining clerk," she said. "We're from Northumberland."

The Major dropped her hand. His gaze flicked up at her. "You've the look of a bloody Scot to me."


"I—yes, perhaps," she admitted. "My grandmother was from Sterling."

"Little matters," he grumbled. "Position's filled."

Aubrey shook her head stubbornly and reached into her pocket. "You promised the position to me, Major Lorimer," she said, producing her forged reference. "You wrote that I was to bring a letter from my last employer. And if it was to your satisfaction, you said, the job was mine."

"Well, there you have it!" he snapped. "It ain't to my satisfaction!"

Aubrey rattled her letter in his face. "Why, you've not so much as looked at it!" she said indignantly. "I



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've traveled all the way from Birmingham to work for you."

The Major seized it. "Not for me!" he snapped, hobbling toward a desk by the windows. "For my goddamn—I mean, for my blasted nephew. Giles. It's his house, not mine." He tossed the letter on the desktop.

"Everyone knows who the Earl of Walrafen is," said Aubrey. "But I was told his lordship rarely visits Cardow. Now, can you explain how you have managed to fill a position which was offered to me not three days ago?"

Major Lorimer sneered at her. "You've a saucy mouth, Mrs. Montford."

Aubrey held her ground. "I do not appreciate being trifled with, Major Lorimer," she said firmly. "Moreover, it's rather obvious Cardow needs a housekeeper. Does his lordship have any idea of the

condition his family seat is in?"

The Major wheezed with laughter. "Wouldn't make a ha'penny of difference if he did," he retorted. "Giles wouldn't give a damn if the place fell to rubble tomorrow. Now, go on, girl. Get out. Betsy'll find a place for you and the boy to sleep for tonight. Changed my mind about a housekeeper. Don't need any more servants creeping about here, drinking my whisky and meddling in my business."

He was entirely serious, Aubrey realized. Certainly, he was intoxicated; his pores oozed with the scent of habitual drunkenness. His cravat was disordered, his face stubbled with beard. Still, one could sense that there was yet some honor in him. He was older than her father, but Lorimer had the still-rigid spine of a soldier. She loathed him on sight. And yet, she found him oddly compelling.

Faced with no alternative, Aubrey drew a deep breath and opened her reticule. She withdrew a second letter, its edges curled with age. Wordlessly she handed it to him.

Lorimer looked at her strangely. "What's that?"

"Another letter, sir."

"Eh?" Reluctantly he took it. "Who from?"

"From you, sir," she answered. "It is your word of honor as an officer and a gentleman. You wrote it to my mother when my father died, offering us your help should ever we need it."

His expression inscrutable, the Major sat down in a chair beside the desk. Aubrey followed. He unfolded the letter and turned it to the firelight. After a long pause he enfolded it around the first, and dropped them both into a drawer. "Ah, God, poor Janet," he whispered. "Dead, then, is she?"

"Yes, sir."

"What of that eldest chit?" he grunted. "Married well, didn't she? Can't she help you?"

"Muireall was always sickly," said Aubrey. "She died soon after Mama."

The Major would not look at her. "By God, I knew you had the look of a Scot," he whispered, holding his head in his hand. "You've your mother's eyes and hair."

"Yes," she said softly.

The Major snorted. "So you're in trouble now, are you, girl? And you expect me to get you out of it? Well, you've come to the wrong place. I'm just a broken-down old soldier, with no influence and barely enough money to keep me in whisky and whores."

"Sir," she said, pleading now. "I want only a job. Just a chance to earn my keep."

He laughed again and stared into the darkness. "It was Iain's doing, you know, my taking up such a vile habit," he said in a voice of quiet confession. "Not the whores. The whisky. Glasgow Gold, he called it."

"Papa did appreciate fine whisky."

The Major looked up at her then, narrowing his single eye. "Your father was worth a lot of money, girl," he said suspiciously. "What need have you of a job?"

Aubrey hesitated. "I need it," she said. "On my father's life, please ask me nothing more. Please tell no one that you know me."



“By God, I don’t know you!”

“Indeed,” said Aubrey swiftly. “I am just Mrs. Montford. Your housekeeper.”

In response, the Major leaned forward and picked up his half-empty bottle. A filthy glass sat on the desk by his elbow, and slowly he filled it. “On your father’s life, eh?” he grunted. “I think it was wasted on me.”

“Sir, you cannot believe that.”

His gaze turned on her then, suddenly aflame. “You know nothing of what I believe!” he snapped. “Goddamn it, stopped nattering at me!” Then his eye slowly narrowed to a slit. “Wait, by Jove! I’ve something stirring up dust in my head.”

Aubrey swallowed hard. “Sir?”

“There was some scandal in the papers last spring.” He cocked his head to one side and scratched it. “Or was it the year before? A familiar name, I remember thinking. I’ve not been so cup-shot as to forget that. Ha! Mrs. Montford, my arse. I’d lay ten guineas you’re lying about that, too.”

Aubrey closed her eyes. “Don’t ask me anything more, sir. Please.”

“Oh, I won’t!” he assured her. “I don’t want to know anything more about you or the trouble you’re in. I’ll do my duty by your father, but that’s it, do you hear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Then he stared not at her, but into the fire. “A girl of your blood has no business being a servant.”

“It’s honest work, sir,” said Aubrey. “I’ve experience in the running of large households.”

The Major snorted. “It’s nothing to me if you can’t tell a box mangle from a bottle-jack,” he said. “I’d dismiss the lot of ’em if Giles would let me. But he won’t. And now I’m stuck with you, too, aren’t I?”

Aubrey said nothing.

The Major cursed beneath his breath and put his bottle down awkwardly, as if he couldn’t quite judge the distance to the desk. “Well, here’s how we’ll go on, girl,” he continued, pausing to wipe his sleeve across his mouth. “I want my whisky kept cool and my bathwater brought hot. I want my tea at four and my dinner at six. In here. On a tray.”

Aubrey breathed a sigh of relief. “Yes, sir.”

“And I don’t want to see or hear so much as a peep out of any of you unless the castle’s afire or the French are sailing up the channel. Don’t ask me anything about the running of this house, for I’ve no opinion. Don’t ask me anything about the running of this estate, either, for I don’t know a damned thing, and don’t care to learn it.”

Aubrey managed to nod. “Yes, sir.”

But Lorimer took another deep breath. “I don’t take breakfast. I don’t receive callers. Open the post. If it’s a bill, pay it. If it’s estate business, take it up with Giles. If it’s anything else, burn it. If I go down to the village and bring back a whore, that’s my business. If I pass out drunk in here and shite all over myself, that’s my business. If I decide to strip naked and run bare-arsed across the parapets—now, what would that be, Mrs. Montford?”

“Y-Your business, sir?”

“You’re goddamned right. And if anyone doesn’t like it, they can go hang. Are you following this, Mrs. Montford?”

“Yes, sir.”

Lorimer smiled sarcastically. “And another thing, Mrs. Montford—I hate children. Keep that sniveling whelp of yours out of my sight, do you hear? Because if you let the brat come near me, I swear to God, I’ll teach him everything I know, starting with the word goddamn.”

Aubrey felt her knees begin to give. “Yes, sir,” she answered. “I shall keep him away, I swear it. Is there . . . anything else?”

The Major wheezed with laughter. “I should say!” he answered. “In two days’ time the whole bloody village will be whispering you’re another of my fancy pieces from London. They say that every time a pretty woman’s hired up here.”

Aubrey felt nausea surge.

“So there!” he grumbled, tossing back the whole glass of whisky. “Now you have your precious job, Mrs. Montford. Much joy may it bring you.”

Unsteadily, Aubrey curtsied. “Th-Thank you, sir.”

Major Lorimer belched.

Aubrey fled.

## Chapter One

### In Which Lord de Vendenheim Is Not Amused

September 1829

It was a lovely afternoon in Mayfair. The windows of shops and homes alike had been flung open to take in the autumn breeze, and up and down Hill Street, housemaids were seizing the chance to sweep down their front steps while the sun was still warm. Coachmen doffed their hats more readily when they went clopping past, and along the pavement a half-dozen footmen lingered, taking in the fresh air and waiting for something—or nothing—to do.

The Earl of Walrafen’s library was perfectly situated to enjoy such a day, positioned as it was on a second-floor corner. All four of his sashes were up, and behind him he could hear pigeons warbling as they preened and picked at their feathers. But unlike the housemaids, Walrafen was not content—he rarely was—and so he tossed the letter he was reading onto his desk and scowled across the room at his clerk.

“Ogilvy!” he bellowed. “The pigeons! The pigeons! Get them off the bloody windowsills!”

Ogilvy’s face went blank, but to his credit, he leapt from his writing table and charged, a yardstick in hand. “Shoo, shoo!” he cried amidst the thumping and fluttering of wings. “Off, you wee devils!”

That done, he bowed stiffly and returned to his copying. Walrafen cleared his throat and felt a bit foolish. Perhaps young Ogilvy was not yet a full-fledged man of affairs, but it really was not the lad’s job to chase

pigeons, was it? Walrafen opened his mouth to apologize, but in that instant the breeze shifted to a gale and blew open the file on his desk. Two years of correspondence went whirling through the room, a tiny tornado of foolscap.

Walrafen cursed aloud. "Is it not enough, Ogilvy, that that woman must plague me weekly with her harangues?" he grumbled as they gathered up the papers. "Now it seems Mrs. Montford's file is possessed by the devil, too."

And it did indeed seem to be so, for the air was perfectly still now. Ogilvy tapped the file's edge lightly on Walrafen's desk. "No harm done, sir." He handed the file back to Walrafen. "It's all here."

The earl smiled wryly. "That's what I'm afraid of."

The lad grinned and went back to his work. Walrafen opened the file and began the topmost letter again.

Castle Cardow

21 September

My lord,

As explained in my last four letters, it is now imperative a decision be made regarding the west tower. Having heard nothing from you, I took it upon myself to send to Bristol for an architect. Messrs. Simpson & Verney report there is a deep fissure in the exposed wall, and the foundation is badly shifted. Please, sir, must we tear it down or shore it up? I assure you I do not care, and wish only that a decision be made before the whole of it collapses on one of the gardeners, as good ones are hard to come by.

your obedient s'vant,

Mrs. Montford

Good Lord, was this really her fifth letter about that moldy old tower? He would have thought she'd had the bloody thing fixed by now. Walrafen had no wish to think about it further. Already, she'd hired architects. Yes, in Mrs. Montford's capable hands Cardow, and everything in it, could be forgotten, just as he wished. He could safely do nothing. It was an almost astonishing luxury.

He went on to the next sheet of foolscap. Ha! Another of her favorite scolds. Uncle Elias. The poor chap probably never saw a minute'



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s peace.

My lord,

Your uncle continues most unwell, suffering now from a bilious liver, I collect. He will not let Crenshaw

in, and last week hurled an empty bottle at his head whilst the doctor was climbing back into his carriage. His vision going the way of his liver, the bottle missed. Still, I implore you to turn your attention to him in an effort to persuade him to compliance. . . .

“Madam,” murmured Walrafen to the paper, “if your incessant nagging does not persuade him, then I have not a chance in hell.”

“Beg pardon, my lord?” Ogilvy looked up from his work.

Walrafen lifted the letter, pinching it between two fingers as if it were a soiled handkerchief.

“Ah!” said the lad knowingly. “The housekeeper.”

Yes, the housekeeper. A well-known thorn in his side. Walrafen gave a rueful smile, filed away the letter, then on a strange impulse, pulled another from the pile. March, two years ago! This one was an early favorite.

My lord,

Your uncle has fired me again. Please tell me if I am to stay or to go. If I am to go, please be advised I am owed £1.8.6 which I advanced the chemist last week when your uncle spitefully swallowed the key to the cash box. (We had exchanged ill words about his wish to purchase some untaxed brandy in the village.) If I am to stay, pray write him forthwith, and tell him that the cash box key must be retrieved, and that the duty of uncovering it, so to speak, rests with him. . . .

Poor Uncle Elias! He could see him bent over the chamber pot now, his penknife in hand, and Mrs. Montford behind him, probably clutching a riding crop. Walrafen snorted with laughter, ignored Ogilvy’s curious glance, and seized another. Oh, yes! This one was from the early spring, when she’d been turning out the house top-to-bottom. A little part of him wondered what the old place looked like nowadays.

My lord,

Are you aware that there are six dead toads in the bottom drawer of the bombé commode which sits in your old dressing room? Betsy tells me you gave strict orders upon your departure for Eton that nothing within be touched. But since that was in 1809 and this is 1829, I thought it best to clarify. May I add, regrettably, that said toads are but dust and bones now?

My sympathy at your loss,

Mrs. Montford

P.S. Your uncle has fired me again. Please tell me if I am to stay or to go.

Walrafen tossed the last letter aside and pinched the bridge of his nose hard between his thumb and forefinger. He wanted to laugh. Damn it, he wanted to cry, too. Go, go! he thought. Go, and good riddance, Mrs. Montford!

But he didn’t really want her to go, did he? No, dash it, he didn’t. The paper seemed suddenly too bright for his eyes. He could feel a headache coming on. The woman always had a way of getting under his skin. She angered him. She amused him. She was insolent. Yet sometimes deplorably incisive.

That was the very trouble, was it not? In his more honest moods he could admit it: the woman made him feel guilty, and had done so with appalling regularity for almost three years. Her letters had grown more strident, more demanding, and more perceptive with each passing month. He dreaded opening them, but

he read them over and over. Usually he never bothered to answer them, which only resulted in more letters. He should have fired her at the first sign of insolence.

But her letters did make him laugh sometimes, and he'd had little enough of that in his life. And they brought to mind most vividly his childhood home. The pleasant parts of it, anyway. It was very odd, but sometimes it almost felt as if Mrs. Montford were trying to—well, to lure him there. Sometimes there was something in her letters beyond the cynicism and chiding. Something that spoke to him in a quiet, secret voice.

He took another, from just this past May, its corners already dog-eared, and read a familiar passage.

The upland gorse this year is a most remarkable shade of green, my lord. I do wish you could see it. The China roses show great promise, and Jenks tells me he is of a mind to build a pergola near the walled garden....

Why did she write to him of such things? And why did he read them over and over? Walrafen wondered, not for the first time, if his housekeeper were pretty. He was not sure of her age, but her letters told him she was young. Young and full of vitality. Uncle Elias had always preferred to employ the prettier servants on their backs instead of their feet. He wondered if the randy old goat had got this one into his bed.

Well, of course he had. Otherwise, he'd have run her off long ago. No servant would put up with Uncle Elias for the paltry amount of money he paid Mrs. Montford. No one could be that desperate. Could they?

The question made him feel... well, he did not know how it made him feel. Certainly, he didn't wish any Englishman—or woman—trapped by class or by poverty in a position which they found intolerable. The pounding in his head was worsening. Oh, God, she was a pox upon him, his carping Mrs. Montford! Really, what did he care whether the west tower lived or died? He almost didn't care whether the gardeners lived or died.

Good Lord.

Oh, that was not so. He had not spent the whole of his career fighting for the rights of the workingman only to recklessly risk one of his own. But if he simply did nothing, Mrs. Montford would take care of it. Oh, she would be angry with him. An ice storm of haughty letters would rain down upon his head, followed by a hailstorm of bills and receipts. But all would be set to rights at Cardow. And for his lassitude, Walrafen would have all that correspondence to read as penance. Or diversion. He wasn't sure which. The thought made Walrafen wonder again why such a clever woman would let Uncle Elias grunt and heave on top of her.

A piercing pain stabbed into his temple. "Ogilvy!" he said sharply. "Draw the draperies and ring for coffee."

Ogilvy looked at him suspiciously. "Yes, my lord." But before Ogilvy could rise, the door flew open.

"Lord de Vendenheim," announced his butler. And then Walrafen's friend Max stepped into the room.

"Per amor di Dio!" muttered Max, stripping off his driving gloves as he strode into the room. "You aren't dressed!"

Lean, dark, and stoop-shouldered, Max always sounded irritable. And arrogant. The fact that Walrafen outranked him had never much troubled Max, not even when he'd been a lowly police inspector working

the river in Wapping, while Walrafen had been one of the most influential members of the House of Lords. If you were a fool, Max treated you as one. He was very egalitarian that way.

Max was scowling down his big, olive-colored beak now. "Are you going with me?"

From across the room Ogilvy cursed softly. "The dress parade, my lord!"

Walrafen smiled tightly. "They can hardly start without us, old fellow," he said, coming to his feet. "But I'd best go upstairs and change. I can't think where the time went."

Max's eyes fell upon the file which lay open on Walrafen's desk. With his long, dark fingers he picked up the topmost letter. "Ah, the housekeeper again," he said knowingly. "Really, Giles, when are you going to stop playing cat and mouse with this woman?"

Walrafen shot his friend a dark look. "That's my business," he said, trying not to limp on his leg, which had stiffened while he was seated. Max followed, carrying the letter. While his valet stripped off Walrafen's coat and cravat, Max sat down in Walrafen's favorite chair and read the bloody thing aloud.

"What an extraordinary creature!" he remarked when done. "I should very much like to meet her."

Walrafen barked with laughter. "Still waters run deep?"

Max lifted his dark brows. "Oh, these waters are not still," he said certainly. "They are churning with thwarted intent—and something else, too, I'd wager. I wonder...yes, I wonder what it is."

Walrafen leaned a little closer to the mirror and adjusted the folds of his fresh cravat. "Mrs. Montford is just a servant, Max. Just an arrogant, overbearing housekeeper."

"Then dismiss her."

"What, and burden some other poor chap with her?" Walrafen laughed. "I could never dismiss a servant without a reference. Not unless they'd done murder or worse. And really, what trouble is she to me?"

"A vast deal, from what I've seen in your eyes," said Max, rising and throwing open the door. "And I rather doubt she will do something so convenient as to murder someone, and thereby save you from your life of—what is it you call it? Benign neglect? Yes, then you'd be forced to go home, wouldn't you?"

Walrafen strode past him. "Put down the bloody letter, and let's go," he said. "There will be crowds in the streets around Whitehall now. We shall have to walk."

"Yes, and whose fault is that?"

Walrafen's prediction was to prove true. By the time they reached Charing Cross, they were forced to elbow their way through the throng. The usual tide of black-coated clerks and bespectacled shopkeepers surging out of Westminster in search of their luncheon was choked to a trickle by the carriages. At Max's office the corridors were filled with men rushing about in long blue police uniforms and tall hats. The stairwells were clogged with clerks and bureaucrats, even a few ladies sporting chip bonnets and parasols.

Amidst the chaos, last-minute changes were shouted out, and finally they reached Max's door. But the room was already occupied. A lady and gentleman stood looking out the window, staring down into the tumult below. At the sound of the door the lady turned, but Giles knew her instinctively. It was Cecilia, his father's young widow, and her second husband, David, Lord Delacourt.

“Good afternoon, Cecilia,” Walrafen said, bowing to her. “And Delacourt. What a surprise.”

“Hello, Giles, my dear,” Cecilia answered. “And Max! We’d hoped to catch you here.”

Cecilia floated toward Walrafen, her cheek already turned for his kiss. And he would kiss her, of course. He always did. But suddenly a small boy appeared from behind Cecilia’s skirts and hurled himself between them.

“Giles! Giles!” said the boy. “We saw Sergeant Sisk! He let me wear his hat! Are you and Lord de Vendenheim going to march in the parade with him?”

His heart suddenly lighter, Walrafen swept the boy up in his arms. “No, but I am going to give a very dull speech, Simon,” he said. “And I should have wanted Sisk’s new coat, myself. I like those big brass buttons.”

The boy laughed. Cecilia’s husband stepped away from the window. “Cecilia and Simon insisted on seeing London’s new police sworn in,” said Delacourt a little apologetically. “I hope we’re not in your way?” He was addressing Max, but his eyes were watching Walrafen.

“Not at all,” Max answered.

“Good,” said Delacourt. “If you gentlemen have your schedules and speeches in hand, may we take you up to Bloomsbury in our carriage? Simon, climb up on Papa’s shoulders and I shall carry you downstairs.” The boy scrambled over as Max threw open the door.

Cecilia smiled and laid her hand on Walrafen’s arm. “Giles, I am so proud of you today,” she whispered. “You make me feel quite the doting stepmother.”

Walrafen let the others file out as he stared down into her beautiful blue eyes. “Don’t be absurd, Cecilia,” he murmured. “You are no longer my stepmother. Indeed, you are Delacourt’s wife. Simon’s mother, for heaven’s sake.”

Cecilia looked at him strangely. “As I am well aware,” she murmured. “Are those things so mutually exclusive? I have always cared deeply for you, Giles. Not, of course, as a mother. But as—well, as a sister, I daresay.”

As a sister. Platonically. That was ever Cecilia’s way. And it was all he could hope for now. In the eyes of the church Cecilia was his mother, and thus could never be anything else—which was precisely what his father had intended by marrying her, devil take him. Then, as if to worsen Giles’s torment, his father had died prematurely, allowing Delacourt, a scoundrel unfit to kiss Cecilia’s hems, to slip shrewdly into her life. To everyone’s amazement, he’d become a faithful husband. And Delacourt had better remain faithful, thought Walrafen grimly. Otherwise, he’d have to kill him. Which would be rather a shame, since he’d come to like the preening cox-comb.

Gently he propelled Cecilia out of Max’s office. “I am older than you, Cecilia,” he reminded her as they started down the stairs. “When you married Father, I was three-and-twenty and already sitting in the Commons. It sounds foolish for you to go on calling yourself my stepmother.”

With a light laugh Cecilia halted and patted him on the cheek. “My poor, poor Giles!” She made a little pout with her lips. “David and I are part of your family, whether you want us or not. Now, speaking of family, tell me how Elias is keeping. He won’t answer my letters.”

“The Home Office is no place for a lady, Cecilia,” Walrafen said, ignoring her question. “Can’t your husband keep you in Curzon Street where you belong?”

Cecilia laughed again. "Why, how very rigid you are, Giles. I wouldn't miss this. Peel could never have pushed this bill through Parliament without your influence, and Max's hard work. Everyone says so."

Walrafen gave up. Cecilia said nothing more, and soon, with their positions in the viewing stand secured, the five of them watched and waved as the newly formed Metropolitan Police paraded about in their new uniforms. In their sweeping coats and towering hats, the men made a stirring sight. But soon the dull speeches were finished, the new officers sworn in, and the waving and cheering was over. Cecilia offered her cheek again, and dutifully Walrafen kissed it. He and Max declined an offer to return to Mayfair in Delacourt's carriage, and strolled down Upper Guildford Street on foot.

"She is a rare sort of woman, isn't she?" said Max as Cecilia waved at them through the crowd.

Walrafen said nothing for a time. Cecilia was more than rare. She was incomparable. "Speaking of rare women," he finally said, "where is your wife?"

"Home in Gloucestershire," said Max a little glumly. "Her newest niece or nephew—possibly one of each—is soon to make an entrance."

"And what of you, old friend?" asked Walrafen. "Will you follow her? Town will soon be empty. The shooting season, you know."

Max pushed his way past a hawking newsboy as they strode through Russell Square. "I daresay I shall," he said. "We would normally winter in Catalonia. But with the new baby coming? No."

"You could stay in town with Peel," Walrafen suggested.

Max shook his head. "Peel may be going home, too. His father is failing."

"Ah!" said Walrafen. "And soon he shall be Sir Robert, I suppose? A title instead of a beloved father. He'll think that no fair trade."

Max looked at him curiously. "Is that how you felt when your father died?"

Walrafen stared across the open square. "My father's death shocked both Cecilia and me," he finally answered. "His health had been excellent."

"My friend, I do not think you answered my question."

Walrafen looked at him darkly. "You are ever the police inspector, are you not?" he answered. "No, Max, I felt nothing when my father died. We'd been estranged since my boyhood, and despite Cecilia's efforts to reconcile us, we were barely on speaking terms at his death. And I cannot say I was sorry to see him go. Do you think less of me for it?"

Max shocked him then by settling a hand between his shoulder blades and gently patting him. "No, Giles," he said quietly. "I could never think less of you. But I do think it a waste for you to remain here in town alone. That is what you mean to do, isn't it?"

Fleetingy Giles considered it. But the truth was, he'd nowhere to go. Oh, Cecilia had already invited him to Delacourt's seat in Derbyshire. But it felt ungentlemanly to accept a man's hospitality when what you really wanted was his wife. Of course he could always go to Gloucestershire with Max and Catherine, and spend the season shooting on their estate—he could sense Max was on the verge of inviting him. But the warmth and ebullience of Catherine's extended family always left him feeling vaguely awkward, as if he were inept at something he could not quite put a name to.



So that left only Cardow. And its memories.

“Max, I am too busy,” he finally said. “



So much must be done before Parliament reconvenes. There is a groundswell of support for this new radical reform association, and Peel is rightly worried. Equality is a fine notion, and I support it in principle, but this could get out of hand.”

Max looked at him oddly. “My father once supported a radical movement,” he said warningly. “And all it got him was a shot to the head, courtesy of Napoleon. So be careful what you do, Giles, else one of these days your noble notions are going to get you shot. Then I’ll be in the damnable position of having to figure out who did it—the Whigs, the trade unions, the radical mobs, or your own blasted party.”

Giles shrugged. “Someone has to worry about England’s future, Max,” he said. “This is my life’s work.”

Max chuckled quietly. “Oh, there is more to life, my friend, than one’s work, a lesson I’ve finally learned.” Then he added, half in jest, “Here’s a thought, old fellow. Find yourself a wife. I can recommend it, and after all, you need an heir. Someone besides Elias, for pity’s sake.”

“Oh, I’ve a long-lost cousin or two,” said Giles. “Somewhere in—I don’t know, Pennsylvania, perhaps? One of them will turn up if there’s enough money in it. Americans are opportunists to the core.”

Max laughed. “But isn’t there some plump, pretty country girl left pining for you in Somerset?” he suggested. “After all, you need to go home and put that saucy housekeeper of yours in her place.”

“Mrs. Montford?” Walrafen laughed. “I’d likely strangle her.”

Max shot him a curious glance, but kept walking. “Tell me, Giles, is your Mrs. Montford old or young? Or somewhere in between?”

Walrafen lifted his shoulders dispassionately. “Quite young, I assume,” he said. “They always are.”

“What do you mean?”

“Uncle Elias hires them,” said Walrafen. “What do you think I mean?”

“Ah!” said Max. “She has other duties in addition to her housekeeping?”

Walrafen hesitated. “Well, in the old days they often did,” he admitted. “But my uncle is no longer young. I do hear, however, that he and Mrs. Montford quarrel often, and bitterly.”

“Oh?” challenged Max. “And from whom?”

“Pevsner, the butler,” said Walrafen. “I think Mrs. Montford put his nose out of joint, too. But since

Uncle Elias has never complained to me, one must conclude there is something between them. My uncle does not have a charitable disposition.”

For a while no more was said. They were walking through Berkeley Square when Max spoke again. “How’s that leg today, Giles?” he asked. “You are limping a bit, I fancy.”

But he’d had enough of Max and his meddling for one afternoon. “You are not responsible for my leg,” he grumbled. “Walk on, for God’s sake, and let us stop talking of all this old nonsense.”

Max looked at him as if wondering just what nonsense he meant. The leg? His father? Cardow? Ah, so many possibilities! And none of them pleasant. But like the good friend he was, Max said no more.

## Chapter Two

### In Which a Very Bad Bargain Is Struck

The west tower of Castle Cardow had long been forbidden to the staff. No one ventured there, for it was dank and gloomy, and filled with nothing but broken furniture. But the north tower, which looked out across the channel to Wales, was a different story. Some of Cardow’s most precious possessions were stored on its topmost floor, in part because servants and villagers alike had long sworn the place was haunted.

Early in the seventeenth century the wife of the third earl had hurled herself out of its fourth-story window, splitting her skull on the courtyard below. Since then, more than a few wide-eyed servants had come staggering up the hill after a late night at the King’s Arms, to see the ghost of Lady Walrafen floating along the parapet. Marriages did tend to end badly at Cardow.

After tentatively pushing the door open, Aubrey lifted her lantern high and turned all the way around in the attic. A vast stone circle reflected back, without so much as a sliver of a window set into it. She saw no ghosts.

“Ooh, lawks!” whispered Betsy as the flame began to dance unsteadily. “Reckon they be bats up here, Mrs. Montford?”

Aubrey shook off a sudden sense of foreboding. “I shouldn’t be surprised,” she answered, making her way around the circle. “Mice and spiders, too.”

“Ooh, but bats, mum!” Betsy’s voice quavered. “They do say bats’ll suck out a body’s blood. And I be wishful o’ keeping mine.”

Aubrey was beginning to wish they’d stayed downstairs, where their blood could go about its business of coursing warmly through their bodies. “Bats do not suck blood,” she said, more bravely than she felt. “And if those portraits are up here, Betsy, I must have them. How many, did you say?”

Betsy pushed an old perambulator from their path, sending a mouse shrieking into the darkness. “A half dozen or better, mum, as I recollect,” the servant answered. “But all too big for us to carry.”

Aubrey lifted the broom she’d carried up the twisting tower stairs, and swiped down a veil of cobwebs. As if by magic, a huge portrait appeared, higher than she was tall. “Good heavens!” she whispered. “Would you look at that?”

“Oh, mercy!” whispered Betsy. “Reckon that’s the one what pitched herself out the window?”

It was not. This lady wore a sack-backed gown more commonly seen just a hundred years earlier. “The Major’s great-grandmother, more likely,” said Aubrey, hanging her lamp from a peg in the masonry. “Here, help me slide it away.”

Together they heaved until they’d moved it aside. Behind it was a second portrait, larger and more magnificent. The age, however, was hard to guess, for the young lady was in costume, a wreath and Grecian toga. “Now, her I know,” said Betsy decisively. “That be her ladyship who jumped off the gallery and broke her neck. It was hanging in the hall when I first come up here as a scullery maid.”

Aubrey was horrified. “She jumped?”

Betsy shrugged. “Well, some said she jumped, and some said she fell,” the maid continued. “She’d be the present lord’s mother. Affected him something terrible, all that talk of suicide, and him just a lad, I reckon. And the church cut up something awful, so the old lord had to hush it by building a new rectory.”

“How dreadful!”

“Ooh, a very black mark on the family, it was,” said Betsy. “But people do say it’s the curse of Castle Cardow that a bride can never be happy here.”

“Well, the poor lady shall be returned to her former glory in the hall,” said Aubrey briskly. “Let’s drag it away until the footmen can fetch it.”

Betsy dragged, but with obvious reluctance. “But what if ’is lordship don’t want these paintings hung back up, mum?” she said between grunts. “After all, someone packed ’em off up here, didn’t they? Besides, that blue and gold tapestry’s been hanging in this one’s place for an age.”

Aubrey lifted her brows with some impatience. “Did someone say they weren’t wanted?”

Betsy dusted off her hands and shrugged. “Seems I heard it, mum. But I disremember who told it.”

Aubrey stood her ground. “Well, those tapestries are fraying and filthy, and must come down. We cannot stare at plain stone walls now, can we?”

Betsy did not look as if she cared. But suddenly, as they pushed the painting away, her face lit with pleasure. Another portrait had been hidden deeper in the stack, this one of a very young lady with hair almost as red as Aubrey’s. “Ooh, look, mum! Here’d be the last Lady Walrafen!”

Aubrey gaped at it. The portrait was shockingly modern. The young lady had a round, lovely face and fine blue eyes which seemed to be laughing at the artist. Her figure was lush, almost plump, and she wore a high-waisted gown barely out of fashion. “Why, I had no idea...” stammered Aubrey, feeling oddly embarrassed. “That is to say, no one ever mentioned that his lordship was—had been—married.”

Betsy laughed. “Lord, no, mum, not this Lord Walrafen,” she returned. “She’d be his stepmother, Lady Cecilia Markham-Sands. Painted in London she was, right afore she wed Major Lorimer’s elder brother.”

Aubrey was appalled. “Good heavens! How old was he?”

Betsy squinted. “Oh, fifty, p’raps. But she seemed fair fond of ’im. Musta been a good marriage, for she was the only Lady Walrafen who didn’t die at Cardow.”

“W-Where did she die?”

At that, Betsy guffawed. "Lord, mum, she ain't dead! She buried the earl not long after she wed 'im. Then she married an old beau. Now she's Lady Delacourt. Does charity work for the poor, gives fancy balls, and all manner of fashionable things."

Aubrey was stunned. She'd heard nothing of this in the two years she'd lived at Cardow. Certainly, the lady had left no trace of her presence in the house. "They—they had no children?"

Betsy hesitated. "Well, I don't think they could 'ave, mum," she said, dropping her voice. "D'you remember Maddy who used to be head laundry maid? She always said the old lord was a bad'un to chase your skirts. But right afore he married again, he caught Maddy in the washhouse, but couldn't do the deed, if you know what I mean."

Aubrey felt her face color furiously. "Don't gossip about the family, Betsy," she chided. "It is disrespectful."

Betsy hung her head, but only for a moment. "Well, anyways, that Lady Walrafen didn't come 'ere above three or four times," she said, looking again at the red-haired woman. "But, oh, mum, she was nice! Not a bit above 'erself, if you know what I mean. One Christmas, she brought us all presents and helped Mrs. Jenks make the tenant baskets. Still, the old earl didn't much care for Cardow."

"Nor does the son, apparently." Aubrey was still enraged that Lord Walrafen was ignoring her letters about the collapsing west tower.

Betsy looked at her eagerly. "Let's take this one down, mum. She's pretty. Besides, it used to hang over the south mantel in the great hall. We can move that big old shield with that nasty crow to the gallery."

"I believe, Betsy, that it is a raven, not a crow," Aubrey gently corrected. "And I daresay there's no harm in—"

A horrible sound cut her off; a low, inhuman rumble, like a tomb sliding open beneath their feet. The flagstones shuddered. Betsy screamed. The lantern's flame danced wildly. Good God! An earthquake? An avalanche? In Somerset?

In the courtyard below one of the footmen began bellowing. "Run!" he shouted. "Good God, run!" Understanding slammed into her. And then, Aubrey was running, bolting through the darkness, ghosts and lanterns forgotten. She burst into the stairwell, grabbing blindly at the rope. Desperately she clutched it to keep herself from tumbling headlong as her feet flew down and around the steep circular steps.

"Oh, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" she heard Betsy praying behind her as she came. "Somebody's like to be dead!"

Aubrey kept running, fighting back a scream. Two flights down, a thick oak door gave onto the barbican. Desperately she shoved at the bolt.

"Oh, Lord, oh, Lord," chanted Betsy, lending her hands to the job. The rumbling had faded. Somewhere, a child was screaming. The footman was still shouting. The rusty bolt flew back, crushing Aubrey's thumb. Once outside, she dashed heedlessly along the rampart, Betsy on her heels.

Aubrey saw the pile of rubble scattered across the wall. Half the west tower hung open, exposed like a bloody gash. The collapse had taken out thirty feet of parapet. Men were still running through the courtyard. She and Betsy kept running, too. They reached the ruined parapet just as Pevsner began to scream, "Get back! Mrs. Montford, get back! It's all coming down!"

But in that instant Aubrey had already looked over the edge. Her hand flew to her mouth. God. Oh,

God! In the rubble covering the parterre below, she could see the patch of white linen. The scattered schoolbooks. A little hand, reaching skyward.

Fear clutched at her. "Iain!" she screamed. "Iain! Iain!" She felt Betsy catch her round the waist and drag her back from the edge. For an instant Aubrey fought her. Then instinct kicked in, and she shook Betsy off. She dashed back toward the north stairs. She had to get down. Had to get to Iain.

After that, she remembered little. Somehow, they made their way back along the high rampart, down the remaining steps, and into the gardens. Aubrey remembered running through the beds and borders toward the parterre, and pushing branches from her face, then falling to her knees to tear at the stones. Two of the gardeners were there before her.



In the distance Pevsner was still shouting for them to get back. That the rest of the tower was coming down. Aubrey ignored him. The gardeners did not stop. More stones were torn away. And then one of them had an arm around Iain's chest. "He's breathing!" Jenks shouted, dragging the child from the rubble.

The second gardener seized her arm. "Run, Mrs. Montford! Run!"

Behind her she heard another stone crack and bounce off the parapet. She hesitated, frozen by fear for Iain. Betsy shoved her hard between the shoulder blades, propelling her into motion. And then the roar was back, and a landslide of rock, timber, and slate—all that remained of the west tower—was tumbling down behind them. Somehow, the four of them got Iain inside. Betsy hit the kitchens at a run and seized the hall boy, screaming at him to fetch Dr. Crenshaw.

Iain's room adjoined Aubrey's, just through her sitting room. They carried him in, and as they laid him down, the boy's eyelids fluttered. "Mama," he whispered, words barely audible, his face covered with dust. "Mama, the Major... w-was walking. Fell. The stones... stones were coming down."

Crying, Aubrey laid her hand lightly on Iain's forehead and told him to lie still. From across the narrow bed, Jenks, the head gardener, caught her eyes and shook his head.

"Drunk," he said, mouthing the word. He jerked his head toward the second gardener. "Phelps 'ere dragged him away. 'E was passed out, mum, but not much 'urt."

Aubrey squeezed shut her eyes and thought of Lord Walrafen. Of his cruelty and his neglect. Of his utter irresponsibility. This was his fault! Good God, she'd brought Iain here to keep him safe! And now, because of one man's indolence, the child was almost dead.

Aubrey opened her eyes and looked straight at Jenks without seeing him. "God help him, he has gone too far," she whispered, her words slow, grim, and certain. "This time I am going to kill him."

Crenshaw finished his work by candlelight. Iain had broken two ribs and a finger. His left ankle was badly wrenched, and his head had needed six stitches. Over Aubrey's prayers, the doctor had uttered words like trauma and concussion. She'd fought hard to absorb them, to understand what was being asked of her. And she'd fought back tears, too.

According to the gardeners, Iain had been running up the hill from the village school when he'd seen Lorimer go staggering past the formal gardens. The Major had tripped—or passed out—below the west tower. And then the stones had begun to come clattering down, just a few at first. The gardeners had watched in horror as the little boy rushed into the chaos. Thank God the stone gateposts of the parterre had taken the brunt of the avalanche.

But Iain was hurt. Badly. As the doctor packed his tools, Betsy sat by Iain's little grate, winding up bandages by the glow. Aubrey lingered in the shadows by the bed, holding the child's good hand, which was warming now, thank God. The lamp on Iain's night table cast eerie shadows across the doctor's face as he leaned over him, checking his vital signs one last time.

Then the doctor dropped the last of his tools into his leather satchel and glanced across the bed at Aubrey. "We are fortunate, Mrs. Montford, that one of those ribs did not puncture a lung," said Crenshaw. "Still, the pain will require him to breathe shallowly, so he must be kept motionless. Give him the laudanum to help him sleep."

"With a concussion? Must I?"

The doctor smiled reassuringly and lightly touched her hand. "It will permit him to rest, Mrs. Montford. As to the concussion, that is the least of our worries. How has his asthma been?"

"Nonexistent," she answered. "The sea air helps."

"Perhaps he's outgrown it," said Crenshaw hopefully. "Still, tomorrow some ugly bruises will appear. Even his internal organs will be tender. He'll have no appetite. Tell Mrs. Jenks to prepare a strong beef tea, and nothing more."

Aubrey got up to fetch the doctor's coat. "Poor mite," said Betsy, moving to the foot of the bed. "He'll miss the Harvest Fair now. And Jenks had particularly promised him. He was so excited."

Dr. Crenshaw turned back, his hand already on the doorknob. "The fair is what, two weeks hence?"

"Saturday a week," said Betsy.

Crenshaw smiled a little ruefully. "Well, I wouldn't recommend running the sack race," he said. "Let us have strict bed rest for a time. After that, I daresay his body will tell him what he can and cannot do."

Betsy grinned. Aubrey thanked the doctor and escorted him back through the stairwells and passageways to the great hall. A storm had rolled in off the channel again, and Crenshaw's carriage waited beneath the porte-cochère. "I shall return tomorrow, Mrs. Montford!" he shouted as the rain spattered down beyond them.

A footman yanked open his door. Only then did Aubrey remember her other patient. "Dr. Crenshaw, wait! How did you find the Major?"

Crenshaw clutched his coat against the damp. "Ah, the usual, I fear. Along with a few bruises. But you needn't look in. Mrs. Jenks sent a girl up to tend him the night."

So the Major had drunk himself into a stupor again. It was happening with frightening regularity now. Her quarrels with him had become the stuff of legend throughout the castle and village. The servants thought her mad to cross him. And yet, cross him she did, time and again.

A little sadly, she watched as the doctor's carriage went rattling toward the gatehouse, barely visible in the murk. She wished she could tell Crenshaw about the man the Major had once been. She wished she could explain why she thought him worth quarreling over, when no one else did.

The Major had been her father's dearest friend. During his long years spent serving under Lorimer, her father's every letter had mentioned him; the Major's valor, his honor, his skill on the field. And when her father died in a hail of French fire trying to drag a wounded Lorimer off the field at Waterloo, Aubrey had not been able to find it in her heart to resent the fact that he had lived, while her father had not. All she resented was that Lorimer was now squandering what was left of his life. She could not bear to think her father's sacrifice had been for naught.

And yet her entreaties were nearly useless. She was beginning to fear that nothing would stop Lorimer from slowly killing himself. And that nothing could stop the servants from secretly laughing at her efforts, and speculating as to why their very proper housekeeper went to such pains over a man who regularly grumbled and cursed at all of them.

A metallic clanking drew her back to the present. Crenshaw's carriage had vanished and the gatekeeper was letting the portcullis down. Aubrey turned and went into the house. She must stop worrying so much about Lorimer. She must. For God's sake, she was just the housekeeper.

Fortunately, ten days wrought a great improvement in Iain's condition. His bruises were fading, his limp lessening. Even better, there was no sign at all of the asthma which had long plagued the child, particularly in the autumn. And so by the time of the Harvest Fair, Aubrey could see no logical reason to refuse Iain his outing.

The day dawned warm and fine, as pretty an autumn morning as any in Somerset could recall. By half past ten the sun was already heating the flagstones of the estate yard, which was enclosed in the lower bailey. In the nether regions of the castle, the kitchen maids rushed to and fro, packing hampers of food. A little anxiously Aubrey watched the preparations.

One of the grooms had brought up a cart, and the double doors in the service wing had been thrown wide to load it. In the bailey the servants' chatter was echoing loudly off the stone walls. Mindful of the Major's temper, Aubrey rose to quiet them. She opened her door just as Lettie and Ida came darting from the stillroom, two cider jugs each hooked in their fingers and giggling at the grooms who were loading the cart outside. At the sound of Aubrey's door, however, the housemaids cut an uneasy glance at one another, curtsied low, and hastened on. Aubrey opened her mouth to chide them, then abruptly closed it. It was only laughter. A little cider.

Impulsively Aubrey called out, "Lettie! Wait!"

The pair jerked to a halt by the scullery. Lettie turned around, eyes downcast. "Yes, Mrs. Montford?"

"Take that extra cask of ale in the beer cellar," she said. "Jenks can help you load it."

The girls broke into grins and scurried off with their jugs.

This was a small reward for work well done, to attend the Harvest Fair, and to picnic on the village

green. For just this one day Aubrey would manage the house alone. She did not mind. The servants had worked hard to reshape Cardow into the elegant, orderly place it had become.

And Iain—well, she could not coddle him forever, could she? He was nearly eight years old. Mr. Jenks and his wife, the head gardener and cook, loved him like a grandson. It was important Iain have a male influence in his life. Besides, she reassured herself, he really was well enough to go. Crenshaw had said so.

Just then a shadow fell across the corridor, and Aubrey looked up to see Mr. Brewster, the young man Simpson and Verney had sent to oversee the tearing down of what remained of the west tower. He was dressed for the outdoors and carried his hat in his hand. “Off to the fair, Mrs. Montford?”

Aubrey smiled. “No, Mr. Brewster. Someone must see to things, you know.”

Brewster grinned. “Now, what sort of things could persuade you to stay indoors on such a fine day?”

Aubrey hesitated. “Someone must attend to the Major’s coffee.” It sounded like a paltry excuse, but she wasn’t about to leave the castle empty. “And someone must be here to answer the door.”

At that, Brewster threw back his head and laughed. “Come now, Mrs. Montford! That bell hasn’t clapped a note in the week I’ve been here.”

Aubrey blushed. “I cannot go,” she repeated. “But you should. Besides, I’ve given all our laborers the day off, so there’s no one to haul your stone.”

“As you will, ma’am.” With a smile, Brewster slapped his hat on his head, ducked beneath the wide oak lintel, and went out into the bailey, where the wagon was being loaded.

A little sadly Aubrey returned to her sitting room. They were neither fish nor fowl, she and Mr. Brewster. Other than Pevsner, the two of them were the highest-ranking staff at Cardow, and the others treated them with deference. Pevsner, regrettably, was accorded something less, a circumstance for which he himself was to blame. Prior to Aubrey’s arrival, he’d run a loose ship and permitted a sense of familiarity to creep into his dealings with the staff.

“Mama, I’m ready,” said a small voice behind her.

Aubrey wheeled about and knelt in a crush of black bombazine to gather Iain against her. “Oh, how fine you look!” she said after gently hugging him. “Now, you must be a very good boy, Iain. Mind Mr. Jenks, and don’t—”

“I know,” interjected the boy. “Don’t overdo.”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “Don’t overdo, love.”

Out of habit Aubrey slicked a hand through his hair and stared into his eyes. Her father’s eyes. Her sister Muireall’s eyes, too. Deep blue Farquharson eyes, seen again and again in the moldering old portraits which had lined their gallery at Cragwell Court. Dour, dreary Scottish faces she’d never thought she’d miss—and now that she would never see them again, well, she rather did miss them after all. But Aubrey crushed the instant of homesickness.

Iain had seen the hint of wistfulness in her expression. “I’m well,” he said insistently. “Really, Mama, I am.”

Aubrey closed her own green eyes and leaned forward to press her lips to his forehead. Dear God, she



thought. He still smells like a baby to me. And then, after a swift kiss on her cheek, Iain was rushing—well, hobbling, really—into the sunlit bailey where Mr. Jenks was loading the ale.

Soon they were rattling away, the servants and their cart full of blankets, baskets, and casks. Aubrey watched the last footman pause to lock the bailey gate, then disappear down the village path. A little sadly she lifted the heavy doors and walked them backward until they were shut, then slid the wooden bar across to secure them.

The bar gave a solid thunk as it dropped into place, and Castle Cardow seemed suddenly bereft. After a moment Aubrey forced away her feelings and headed toward the kitchens. There was no time in this new life of hers for self-pity. It was well on eleven o'clock, time for the Major's coffee, and today, God help her, she would have to do the honors.

It was a long walk from the kitchens to the south tower, and the Major's room was three floors up. By the time Aubrey reached his door, she was a little breathless. Her nerves were jittery, too. She did not like bearding the lion in his den. But after a perfunctory knock, she went in, put the tray down by his bed, and crossed the room to draw back the thick velvet draperies.

She could hear the Major behind his bed curtains, already cursing as the sun warmed the room. He did not like this little routine, her insistence on coffee and toast each morning, but it was something she'd nonetheless forced on him since coming to Cardow. After all, he had to eat.

"Good morning, Major," she said brightly. "Your coffee is hot. Please sit up and drink it."

Another curse, followed by a spate of gagging and coughing. "You, eh?" he said, spitting out the words. "Come to bedevil me again?"

Aubrey had half hoped he wouldn't remember the terrible row they'd had the previous evening. "We'd agreed the others might go down to the Harvest Fair, sir," she said. "Do you not remember?"

"Yes, yes, devil take you!" he grumbled, jerking back one side of his bed curtains with his good hand. "I'm an inebriate, not an idiot."

The Major sat up in his nightshirt and regarded her mistrustfully. He'd been especially intoxicated last night, and he looked worse today, if such a thing were possible. His skin was pasty, and his abdomen bloated, even though his body had thinned to the bone. More troubling still, he'd not eaten a bite of his dinner again, which was precisely why they had argued.

Aubrey folded her hands in front of her. "Drink the coffee, please," she said firmly. "And you really must eat your toast today. I insist."

The Major screwed up his face. "Oh, you must eat your toast today!" he parroted in a prissy falsetto. "Mrs. Montford, need I remind you that you're a servant in this house, and I'm not? I'll eat what I damned well please, when I damned well please. And unfold your hands. You look pious. Can't bear a woman to look pious."

Aubrey unfolded her hands and looked at him grimly. "Major, you cannot continue drinking as you do, yet refuse to eat," she warned. "I am begging you to take better care of yourself. I am worried about you."

He muttered an especially vile curse under his breath.

"Major Lorimer, please mind your language."

Lorimer's face was turning a livid shade of red. "Mind my language!" he roared. "Eat my toast! God, what a miserable life." Then, with one fell stroke of his good arm, he swept the tray off its stand and into the floor.

"Oh!" Too late, Aubrey darted forward. The pot was upturned on the carpet, its dark brown stain spreading. Toast, marmalade, butter; all of it was a sodden mess.

"There, Mrs. Montford," he said snidely. "The toast and coffee have been taken care of."

With quick, angry motions Aubrey righted the tray and began slamming the dishes and silver back onto it. "They certainly have not," she retorted. "Now, I am going straight back downstairs to fix another tray. And this time I'm bringing a boiled egg."


"I don't want a bloody egg!"

"Well, you're going to eat it," said Aubrey, shooting him a dark look from her position on the carpet. "Or I swear with God as my witness, I'll pour every whisky bottle in the cellar straight down the drain and come back with a whole leg of lamb for your lunch—which, yes, you will eat."

It was an idle threat, but Aubrey could think of no better idea. She lifted the tray and stood to see that the Major's face was quivering with indignation. "You would not dare!" he growled. "Touch my whisky, and by God, I'll see you dismissed without a character!"

But he wouldn't, and they both knew it now. He did not want her to leave. No, not really. For all his nasty temper, they had become friends of a fashion. With a wistful sigh she set aside the tray and leaned forward to take his good hand in hers.

"Please, sir, let us not argue." She patted his hand and tried to smile. "It serves only to upset the servants. Last night they quite feared we might kill one another."



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"But the servants aren't here, are they?" he said peevishly. "They've all gone down to the village."

Aubrey shrugged. "Some days they can hear us from the village."

Something in her tone must have appeased him. His snarl melted, and he wiped the back of one age-spotted hand across his mouth. "All right," he said as if beaten. "Bring your damned egg. I suppose I shall have to try it."

"Thank you, sir," she said, moving as if to go. "I'll warm the butter, too, just as you like it."

Suddenly he tightened his grip on her hand, and shot her an odd, almost furtive glance. "Aubrey," he rasped. "Where's the boy?"

It was not the first time he'd used her Christian name, and strangely, each time it happened, his gaze would be glassy, and a little confused. "I beg your pardon, Major?" she said gently. "Whom do you want?"

"The boy! The boy!" he said impatiently. "We've just the one, haven't we?"

Aubrey was puzzled. The Major never spoke of Iain. "Jenks took Iain to the fair."

"Ah." The Major pursed his lips and suddenly looked more himself. "Iain, yes. Betsy says he broke a rib when the tower collapsed."

Iain had broken more than a rib, but Aubrey bit her tongue. "Indeed, sir."

"Humph." The Major removed his nightcap to scratch at the grizzled hair beneath. "Fetch me that valet box, then," he finally said. "No, no, blister it, the wooden one. On the dressing table."

Aubrey found it and carried it to the bed. After opening it, the Major withdrew his pocket watch by its gold chain and dropped it into Aubrey's hand. "Here," he said, his voice more gruff than usual. "Give this to the boy."

Aubrey stared at it. The thing lay heavy as a stone in her palm and was surely solid gold. "Why, Major, we could not possibly—"

"No possibly to it!" interjected the Major. "Give it to the boy, damn it."

Aubrey studied him for a moment. The white of his good eye was yellow, his nose bulbous and shot with veins. The skin on his face hung loosely from his bones. "Why are you doing this, sir?"

The Major frowned. "Jenks said the boy was trying to get me away from the falling rocks," he grumbled. "No need, of course. I was fine. Brave of him, though. That watch was a gift to me from your father and his men. The summer after Toulouse, it was. I've no need of it now."

"Sir, I cannot." Aubrey tried to return it, but he shoved at her hand. "As you say, I am but a servant," she protested. "I cannot take such a thing."

"Didn't give it to you, did I?" he snarled. "Gave it to the boy. Bloody thing has his grandfather's regiment engraved on the case. I want the boy to have it."

Aubrey bit her lip. "Very well," she said quietly. "On one condition."

"Oh?" he challenged. "And what might that be?"

"You must agree to let Crenshaw in tomorrow," she answered. "You are not well. You must see him, and do just as he asks. That is my condition."

For an instant the Major's jowls quivered again, but whether from indignation or illness, she could not say. "Fine!" he finally spat. "Fetch the bastard up here, if you think it'll do me a bloody bit of good. Tomorrow suits me quite well. Why, let's have him to tea! Perhaps we'll play a rubber of piquet." He threw back his head and cackled with laughter.

Another deal done to her satisfaction, Aubrey dropped the watch into her pocket. "Thank you, sir," she said crisply. "I shall write a note to Crenshaw after I bring up your egg."

"You just do that, Mrs. Montford," he said snidely.

Aubrey turned toward the door, but the Major's voice stayed her hand on the knob. "Aubrey, wait."

She turned. "Yes, Major?"

"You and the boy—" he began, his sarcasm suddenly gone. "All's well, eh? You've told no one you're here?"

She shook her head. "No one, sir."

He nodded as if to himself. "And you'll give the watch to the boy?"

"Yes, Major," she replied over her shoulder. "Eventually."

"Eh? Eventually?"

Aubrey looked away. "He's too young, sir, to be told certain things just now," she managed. "I'll give him the watch on his majority. Will that do?"

Lorimer grumbled something which sounded like agreement. Balancing the tray on one hand, Aubrey drew the door shut.

Iain's majority, she thought, staring down at the brass doorknob. Dear Lord. It was a long way off. And yet, too near. Oh, much too near. The watch swayed heavily in her pocket as she turned, and strode off down the empty corridor.

## Chapter Three

### Whom the Gods Love Die Young

The early morning was always the most hectic of times in Lord Walrafen's office. Clerks, messengers, and political toadies rushed in and out, carrying legal files, legislative proposals, and urgent missives, for unlike most of England's nobility, Walrafen did not dabble in politics. He ate, slept, and breathed politics. He was a power broker. A coalition builder. And a lightning rod for controversy.

Walrafen had the distinction of being the only peer never to have missed a session during his tenure in the Commons. Upon ascending to his father's title, he'd gone on to do the same in the Lords. And in March he'd earned true glory for having stayed awake through the whole of Peel's infamous four-hour diatribe on Catholic emancipation.

Walrafen was, nominally, a Tory, though more than a few did not care to claim him. All of them, however, feared him. Walrafen could be abrasive, arrogant, and Machiavellian when it suited him. But the deeper trouble with Walrafen was more often whispered than spoken, for he was, God forbid, a liberal—or as liberal as a Tory could be without getting himself pilloried in the middle of Whitehall. The earl believed England hung too many of her criminals and starved too many of her poor. He wanted to welcome the Irish into Parliament with open arms, and had even been seen attending literary salons in the company of that dark, dandified Jewish upstart, Benjamin Disraeli. He was just as bold in his political aspirations, too. It was all quite shocking.

Walrafen didn't mind shocking anyone if it was done in a good cause, but this morning he hadn't a moment to spare, and there was trouble nagging in the back of his mind. Trouble of a personal nature, the worst sort of problem for Walrafen. So he went through his routine with mechanical precision, signing the ten documents laid out across his desk, then shoving them in succession at Wortwhistle, his ancient man of affairs.

“Thank you, my lord,” said Wortwhistle after each, giving a creaking bow which sent his silver spectacles inching down his nose.

When all were signed, the messengers standing in line beyond the door breathed a collective sigh of relief. Smythe, the butler, waived them in by turn, so that each might present whatever it was that so urgently required his lordship’s attention. Swiftly Walrafen’s eyes skimmed each document, a few words were exchanged, then the mechanical signature again, and the messenger waived back to Whitehall or wherever it was he’d come from.

“Next, Smythe,” Walrafen called to his butler as Wortwhistle vanished into his office.

Clearing his throat, Smythe unfolded his list and stepped forward. “Firstly, my lord, Sir James Seese is below. He wishes to know if you still plan to attend the opening of the new surgical facilities at St. Thomas’s at half past three?”

“Yes, I’ll meet him a quarter-hour prior.”

“Yes, my lord.” Smythe consulted his list. “Secondly, Lady Kirton has sent round a note asking if you can host the Nazareth Society meeting tomorrow. Major Lauder-wood is in the gout.”

Walrafen turned to his clerk. “Mark that down, Ogilvy, won’t you? That’s seven to dinner, Smythe, with the governors’ meeting after in the long drawing room. Make sure there is turtle soup for Lady Delacourt and find a bottle of the ’09 bordeaux for the Reverend Mr. Amherst.”

“Very good, my lord.”

Just then a little clock chimed on Ogilvy’s desk. He snatched up his lordship’s calendar. “Ah! Luncheon at White’s with the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary in one hour, sir,” his clerk reminded him.

“Wellington and Peel? Was I fool enough to agree to that?” Forcing a smile, Walrafen pushed back his chair with every intention of going upstairs to dress, but he did not rise as one might have expected. Ogilvy and Smythe hung on the pregnant silence.

Finally the butler cleared his throat again. “Is there... something else, my lord?”

Walrafen shuffled absently at the papers remaining on his desk. “The morning post, Smythe,” he answered. “Is this everything?”

The butler looked confused. “Why, yes. It is.”

“I see.” Walrafen shuffled through the pile again.

“Did you expect something further, sir?” asked Ogilvy solicitously.

“No.” Walrafen shook his head, but the nagging thought would not go away. “No, I suppose not.”

He jerked to his feet and excused himself. But as he went along the passageway and up the stairs to his suite, the worry kept needling him. All those messages, all those letters—yet nothing from Mrs. Montford? Well over a fortnight had passed since her last correspondence. It was all quite odd. Walrafen had scarcely known a week’s peace since his uncle had hired the woman. And now a fortnight of dead silence? Had his attitude finally pushed her to the brink? Had she quit? Had Uncle Elias driven her insane?

Good God. He did not know. And, much to his chagrin, that was driving him insane.

His problem, he abruptly decided, was that he needed a new mistress. He needed to stop fretting over his stepmother and her new husband, stop thinking about his housekeeper and her bloody letters, and in particular, he needed to stop agonizing about Cardow and his old life. Instead, he should be spending his frustrations between some lush demimondaine's thighs. He almost regretted having let Yvette—no, Yvonne—go, but the woman had begun to complain about his work hours.

Perhaps she did not care that half of London's population lived in a state of penury she could not begin to comprehend. Perhaps she had not wished to be reminded that in England, children were regularly beaten, imprisoned, and hanged at the whim of the upper class. No, Yvonne—or whatever her damned name was—had always been more worried about whether her hat matched her gloves. And suddenly he realized that a new mistress would not lessen the malaise which lately dogged his every step.

Malaise? Good Lord, how maudlin that sounded! He was no longer some motherless child, relegated to boarding school or the servants' quarters, so that his father need not be inconvenienced by his presence. On a quiet curse, Walrafen practically burst through the doors of his bedchamber, eager to dress and be gone. But Bidwell, his valet, had scarcely removed his morning coat when his butler came into the room.

"My lord," said Smythe in a strained voice. "A messenger has just arrived—"

"Let him wait," snapped the earl. "I've a luncheon engagement."

"—from Cardow," finished the butler ominously.

"From Cardow?"

Walrafen waved off Bidwell and his fresh cravat. Smythe looked very ill. "Go on," he said more gently.

"What is wrong?"

Smythe gave a sorrowful smile. "It is bad news, my lord."

Suddenly Walrafen suffered one of life's chillingly intuitive moments. "Is it... Uncle Elias?" he whispered. "It is, isn't it?"

"I am so sorry, sir," said Smythe quietly. "Major Lorimer has passed away."

"My God." Fleeting, he closed his eyes. "How, Smythe? What happened?"

"It is unpleasant, my lord," he murmured. "The local justice of the peace requests that you come to Cardow at once."

"That goes without saying," answered Walrafen, impatiently motioning Bidwell toward his dressing room. "But the justice of the peace, did you say? What has he to do with any of this?"

Smythe's frown deepened. "I'm very sorry, sir, but it seems your uncle has died under questionable circumstances."

Walrafen felt sick. Weak in the knees. And suddenly, very deeply, alone. Dear heaven, how could this have happened? He thought again of Mrs. Montford's barely veiled admonishments. But Elias had always seemed invincible to him.

"How did he die?" he whispered.

In the pregnant silence Bidwell could be heard already bumbling around as he dragged out the trunks. "He was shot, sir," Smythe finally said.

“Shot?”



” Incredulous, Walrafen tried to focus on his butler. “How? By whom? By God, I’ll see them hanged and sent straight to hell.” He had quite forgotten he did not believe in capital punishment.

“It is believed a thief broke into the library and surprised him.”

“A thief?” said Walrafen sharply. “At Cardow? No one would dare. Besides, the walls are high and crenellated, the lower windows barred. There are two baileys, and all the gates are kept locked.”

“Perhaps the locks were picked, my lord?” Smythe offered.

“Not these,” said Walrafen grimly. “Cardow is a bloody fortress. Even the library windows are thirty feet up. No one—no one—has ever gotten into that castle by stealth. Not in the last eight centuries, at any rate.”

“Oh, dear,” murmured Smythe, apparently drawing some sort of grim conclusion.

But the earl had snapped into action, already jerking on his coat and heading for the door. “Send word to the Prime Minister, Smythe,” he ordered. “I must reschedule our meeting. Cancel Sir James, postpone the Nazareth Society, and send a messenger to Lady Delacourt in Curzon Street. Tell her to be ready to leave for Cardow by three.”

Smythe looked vaguely surprised. “Her ladyship will accompany you?”

“She shall have to,” said Walrafen grimly. “I will have this terrible business to deal with, and there will be guests and meals and God only knows what else to see to. And she is, after all, still his sister-in-law. She still has a duty to this family.”

In the end, of course, Cecilia was pleased to do her duty. Walrafen had long known that his stepmother liked being needed, and liked being a part of the Lorimer family, though God only knew why. During her marriage to his father, she’d become the cog about which they revolved, and following his death, she’d remained in touch with most of his relations. More important, despite their petty quarrels, Walrafen and Cecilia had long ago become best friends. It was better than nothing, he told himself. And just now he needed her help.

So he found himself deeply relieved when she arrived in Hill Street a quarter hour early, ready to commence the long journey west. Delacourt, of course, accompanied her, which Walrafen had expected. Had he been married to Cecilia, he wouldn’t have let her from his sight. Besides, Cecilia could sometimes get herself into mischief.

There were four coaches in all, two laden with baggage and servants. Of the others, there was one for himself and young Ogilvy, another for Lord and Lady Delacourt. The journey seemed interminable, even as it neared its end. Worse, Walrafen hadn't even arrived at Cardow, and already he wished to leave the blasted place. Tomorrow, if at all possible.

But by God, he wanted his uncle's murderer even more. He would find a way to tolerate Cardow if it killed him. Perhaps they'd not been close, but Elias had been a good man at heart. He'd sacrificed everything for his king and his country. It was inconceivable his killer might go unpunished. By God, it was not just. And was not justice his most fervent cause? Surely if he could bring a degree of justice to the poor of England, he could do so for his uncle?

Walrafen was shocked to feel a hot, welling warmth behind his eyes. Regret weighed him down. Good God, he should have stopped inviting Elias to London years ago and ordered him there. He should have closed up Cardow and left him with no choice. Then perhaps this would not have happened. Ruthlessly Walrafen forced that notion away. It would never have worked. Elias had been so bloody stubborn.

Regrettably, the Bristol Channel was fogged in on the afternoon of their arrival. In Somerset the mist had spread inland, swathing fields, forests, and villages in thick gray wool and making Walrafen's bad leg ache like the very devil. At the foot of Cardow Tor, they turned left onto the steep castle road, each carriage slowing as it rumbled over the moat's bridge.

To distract himself, he looked straight up through the carriage window, struggling to make out the west curtain wall of the castle. He could not see it. Ah, but it was there, thick and immutable, looming somewhere in the fog above his head. And this time there would be no running away from the place. Later, Walrafen was to realize that but for the fog, he would have immediately noticed the horrid, gaping ruin of the west tower. And he would have seen that someone—Pevsner, perhaps—had queued up the servants through the courtyard in a most formal fashion.

But the murk merely thickened the higher he went, and when his carriage rolled beneath the barbican and drew up in the middle of the courtyard instead of beneath the porte-cochère, Walrafen opened the door and thrust out his walking stick, intent on giving his coachman a lecture. Then he stepped down and saw the two long rows of servants standing in the swirling mist. Dressed in somber black and stiffly starched white linen, they bowed and curtsied two by two in perfect unison, their eyes lowered, their mouths unsmiling, as he and Ogilvy passed between them.

At the front door stood his butler, his arm banded in mourning black. "Welcome home, my lord."

"Good afternoon, Pevsner," he said. "You have everything quite in order, I see."

But Walrafen was not really looking at his butler. He was looking instead at the tall, slender girl beside him. The word girl sprang to mind, for she was delicate and willowy, and yet slightly—very slightly—past the blush of youth. Against her dull black dress, her throat was the purest shade of alabaster he'd ever seen. Her facial bones were sharp and very fine. She was as tall as Pevsner, her auburn hair almost obscured by her cap, and drawn back so tightly it appeared painful. But despite her efforts, she looked nothing like a housekeeper.

Walrafen looked pointedly at Pevsner. The butler roused himself. "My lord, allow me to present Mrs. Montford," he said. "She has been with us almost three years now."

Mrs. Montford curtsied, as deeply and as gracefully as a debutante at court. Her shoulders were pulled back, her spine as straight as his walking stick. "Welcome back, my lord, to Castle Cardow," she said,



hardening her r and rounding the last syllable. But she did not look at him. Instead, she looked through him. That sparked his ire, for his nerves were raw.

“Mrs. Montford,” he snapped. “We will get on far better if you’ll look at me when I address you.”

At that, her whole body went rigid. “Your pardon, my lord,” she said coolly. “I did not realize you were.”

Walrafen looked her straight in the eyes and was instantly shaken by what he saw there. Loathing. Fierce and unadulterated, it fired her gaze to an almost unholy shade of green. For an instant, he grappled for words, but the look had vanished, replaced so quickly by the emotionless mask of a submissive servant, Walrafen felt fleetingly disoriented.

He must have imagined it altogether. Cardow always unnerved him. “Well, Mrs. Montford, I am certainly addressing you now,” he said, thrusting his stick at Pevsner and stripping off his gloves. “I shall see you in my study in half an hour, if you please.”

“As you wish, my lord.” Her voice was deep, beautifully modulated, yet it grated on him. Then the woman curtsied again, slow and deliberate, her gaze never leaving his, as if challenging him. Or daring him. But to do what?

Walrafen could hear Cecilia coming up behind him, cooing and patting at the older servants as she passed by. They were chattering back, too, no longer so glum and decorous. “Mrs. Montford,” he said stiffly. “This is my late father’s widow, now Lady Delacourt, and her husband, Lord Delacourt. You will see that they are made comfortable.”

Cecilia was patting the butler on the arm. “How splendid everything looks, Pevsner. But do bring the servants in from the damp now. Yes, there’s a good fellow. Hello, Mrs. Montford, is it? How glad I am to see that Cardow again has a proper housekeeper.”

Without comment Walrafen led the way into the house, which seemed much as he remembered it. The scent of beeswax and soap assailed him; the comforting smells of old-fashioned cleanliness. But that, he belatedly recalled, was a memory from his youth. During his last two or three brief visits here, Cardow had smelled more musty than clean and had looked... well, a little shabby.

Behind him, Cecilia was chattering to Mrs. Montford about the dreadful shortcomings of the inn in which they’d slept the previous night. Walrafen’s eyes were adjusting to the gloom. Eagerly, and a little apprehensively, he stepped from the vestibule into the vast, vaulted great hall, allowing his gaze to roam over the old place. But something did not look just as it ought. Something was missing. And then it struck him. By God, his tapestries were gone! His eyes moved from one empty wall to another. And then he saw something worse.

He must have drawn in his breath audibly. Suddenly Cecilia was beside him. “Oh, Giles! I had no notion you’d hung my old portrait here.” But for once, Cecilia was far from his mind. His gaze was fixed not upon her portrait, but upon the one which hung opposite.

Good Lord, his mother had been incomparably beautiful at the age of seventeen. In the spring of her youth, her eyes had still shone with expectant happiness, fixed for all eternity. But those expectations had hardly been fulfilled, had they? Indeed, the contrast between what she had been and what she had become still left him grief-stricken. And for all its beauty, and for all he had loved her, Walrafen was enraged to see her portrait hanging here, in this place she’d so despised.

It had been a miserable mistake of a marriage, arranged very much against her will. And rightly or wrongly, she’d made her husband pay, by lavishing all her love and attention on Giles, her only child. No,

his mother had had no choice but to live at Cardow. As punishment, his father had forbidden her ever to leave the wretched place. But by God, she had a choice, even from the grave, as to where her portrait would hang.

“Mrs. Montford,” he said, his voice lethally soft. “Come here.”

The servants were flooding around him now. Everyone was speaking at once as the luggage was brought in and sorted. Walrafen realized, vaguely, that he was blocking the path from the door.

“Mrs. Montford!” This time he roared. “Come here!”

Fleetingly, all the servants froze. He felt a warmth suddenly hovering at his elbow, though he did not tear his gaze from the portrait.

“Yes, my lord?” said his housekeeper coolly.

“This portrait,” he said. “Are you responsible for it?”

“Responsible for it?” She sounded almost condescending. “Indeed, I am responsible for the whole of the house, so—”

“Oh, bloody hell, woman!” he interjected. “Did you or did you not have it hung here?”

Her answer was swift. “Yes,” she said. “The decision was mine.”

Giles jerked his gaze to hers and pinned her with it. “Your half-hour reprieve just became ten minutes, madam,” he snapped. “Meet me in my study.”

She looked at him with a remarkable amount of disdain for a servant. “But of course, my lord.”

Ogilvy was already organizing Walrafen’s desk when Mrs. Montford entered the study precisely ten minutes later. The earl did not fail to notice the pitying look the young man cut in the housekeeper’s direction. Walrafen’s simmering rage was apparent to anyone who knew him. And the worst of it was, he did not quite know why he was angry.

It was, in part, the portrait. In part, this place; this house, and its memories. And a part of it, admittedly, was her. She was beautiful, in a quiet, elegant sort of way. He’d not quite expected that, and somehow, her elegance maddened him. He waited for her by the tall windows which overlooked the upper courtyard.

“At least you are prompt,” he said, snapping shut his pocket watch.

“Yes,” she said simply. “Always. How may I help, my lord?”

“Firstly, Mrs. Montford, you can explain certain mysteries to me.” It was not a request.

She had come but a few feet into the room. Still, she lifted her chin with a hint of arrogance. “Regarding the portrait, my lord?”

Walrafen felt his jaw twitch. “Let us begin at the beginning, madam,” he said. “What, pray, has become of my Flemish tapestries? They’ve hung in the great hall of Cardow for three hundred years, yet now I arrive home to find they’ve simply vanished. And in their place is a portrait which you did not have permission to take out of storage. I want it moved at once.”

Mrs. Montford did not falter as he'd expected. "I shall have your mother's portrait removed within the hour," she said calmly. "And yes, the tapestries are exquisite, but they were mildewed and in danger of ruin. Mice had got at them and chewed away some of the corners."

"Mice—?"

"The house was quite full of them when I arrived," she explained. "So the tapestries have gone back to Flanders for repair. I submitted the estimate to you some months back."

Had she? Probably, blister it.

But Mrs. Montford was still speaking. "Whilst the footmen are removing your mother's portrait, do you wish the portrait of Lady Delacourt down as well?"

Yes, he did. But it would be a dashed awkward job now. Cecilia had already seen it. "Leave it," he snapped. "But take down my mother's portrait and...and crate it. I don't want it hanging there. Or rather, I mean to say, I wish to...to take it away with me when I leave."

He was lying, and she knew it. She still looked haughty and regal, setting her shoulders firmly, as a lady might do if dressed in a low-cut ball gown. But Mrs. Montford wore a garment in keeping with her position; a dress of black bombazine up to her throat. A ring of keys hung from the chain at her slender waist, and her fiercely colored hair was covered with a black lace cap.

"I shall have it crated immediately." Her voice was cool and controlled. "Is there anything further, my lord?"

"Oh, indeed there is," he said grimly. "In years past I was accustomed to reaching this room by the simple means of traversing the south wing and going up the west staircase. But I now find my way blocked by timbers and canvas. It is a bloody mess, madam, and I want it cleared and moved at once."

"Moved?" Her voice was sharp, her cool control gone.

Walrafen felt a shaft of pain knife into his skull. "I did not appreciate, madam, the five-minute hike through the servants' quarters which I had to make in order to get here," he snapped, setting his fingertips to his temple. "We are shortly to have houseguests descend upon us. It was a most ill-advised time to undertake renovations. Worse, I don't recall your having asked permission to do so."

The green glint of hatred was back in her eyes. "There are no renovations," she snapped. "Merely excavations."

"I beg your pardon?"

Her face seemed tight with wrath. "The west tower collapsed."

Walrafen dropped his pocket watch, which went swinging wildly from its fob-chain. "I—I beg your pardon?" he said again.

"The west tower," she repeated as if addressing an imbecile. "It fell down. What did you expect, when you did nothing about it?"

"When I did nothing?" he sputtered. "But you said—I thought—you would—"

"I wrote you five letters," she interjected, her green eyes mere slits now. "And they were all a waste of my time. Now the passageway has had to be blocked off from both sides—not to inconvenience you, my

lord, but rather, to protect your servants from falling rubble. God only knows what might collapse next.”

Walrafen hadn't fully absorbed her words, but he knew it was time to put Mrs. Montford in her place. “Madam, I do not care for your tone,” he said. “Are you implying that I lack concern for my staff?”

Obviously exasperated, Mrs. Montford threw her hands up. “Dear heaven, don't you understand anything? People must work near there! Children play there! It was not safe. Indeed, it still is not safe. Now, do you really wish those barriers moved?”

There was a wealth of insinuation in her last words. “But you should have written me again,” he said. “Yet you did not. Why?”

Mrs. Montford was trembling with suppressed rage now. “Further discussions seemed moot,” she snapped. “I informed you quite clearly that it was unstable. Now nature has taken its course, and the tower has come down of its own accord. I am having the stone cleared away and the passageways bricked up.”

“But that simply isn't acceptable,” Walrafen sputtered. Good Lord, was he about to get his wish? Was Cardow about to cave in? Suddenly that was not what he wanted at all. “The symmetry of the castle will be ruined without that tower,” he went on. “And one will have to walk a quarter-mile to get from one end to the other.”

Her brows arched sharply. “So you wish it rebuilt?”

“Absolutely,” he answered.

Mrs. Montford bowed her head stiffly, almost as if she were dismissing him. “I shall inform Messrs. Simpson and Verney at once.”

Simpson and Verney? Bloody hell, the architects! It was only then that he recalled her outright pleading in her last letter. Please, sir, must we tear it down or repair it? I wish only that a decision be made before the whole of it collapses on one of the gardeners. . . .


Walrafen felt a little ill. Her arrogance was unacceptable, yes. But dear God, he really had ignored her. And this time the resulting mess was a bit beyond her normal capabilities. A good housekeeper she might well be, but she was hardly a stonemason. “Mrs. Montford?”

She stopped abruptly, her hand already on the doorknob. “Yes?”

“I hope . . . that is to say, I do hope no one was killed or injured in the accident?”

“No one was killed.” Her voice caught a little oddly on the last word.

“Good,” he said.



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“That is good.”

Wordlessly she turned to go.

Walrafen, however, was reluctant to let her leave. What on earth was wrong with him? And why was he being so hard on the woman? To date, her only offense had been her forthright letters, and her unflagging attempts to make him fulfill his duties to Cardow and the earldom. And when he ignored her—well, was not the west tower a perfect example of what could result?

Sharply he cleared his throat. “Mrs. Montford?”

She turned round again. “Yes, my lord?”

“You are not yet dismissed.” He tried to strip some of the chill from his voice, but it wasn’t working. “I wish to inform you of the guests whose arrival you may shortly expect.”

Mrs. Montford withdrew a slip of paper from her pocket, crossed the room, and gave it to him. Her hands, he noted, looked slim and capable. Beautiful, really. And they were not shaking, either. “The rector and I prepared a list,” she said.

Walrafen tore his gaze from her hands and flicked his eyes down the paper. His aunt Harriet and her family from Bath. A great-uncle on his grandmother’s side. Two Welsh cousins. He read on, just six lines in all, listing every relation he possessed, save for the Americans. Roughly he cleared his throat. “This seems...reasonably complete.”

“I am glad to hear it,” she said tartly.

To occupy his own hands, Walrafen snapped open his watch again, staring at it blindly. He wondered again if this woman—this deceptively delicate-looking creature—had been his uncle’s lover. But what difference did it make? Why did he even care?

Mrs. Montford made a sound of impatience. “Will there be anything further, my lord?”

Somehow he managed to nod. “Yes, I wish to tell you that whilst Lady Delacourt is here, you will take your direction from her in household matters,” he answered. “You will treat her as if she is still mistress here. I don’t want to be bothered with schedules, meals, who is to sleep where, or when people are coming or going. I have more important things to do.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And you will put her in her former suite of rooms.”

Mrs. Montford hesitated. “The master suite?”

“Yes.”

Swiftly she crossed the room and took hold of the bellpull. “The bags have already been taken up.”

“Then move them at once.”

She looked at him archly. “I am ringing Betsy now.”

“Fine.” He waved his hand dismissively.

She rang, then returned her gaze to his face. “Which rooms will you occupy?”

“I do not care,” he said swiftly. “Something near Ogilvy.”

“Your old suite in the north wing?”

Walrafen shook his head. “No,” he said. “I dislike that part of the house. Besides, there is the matter of those dead toads in my dressing room. Perhaps they, too, are waiting to haunt me.” The last was said under his breath.

He thought he saw a hint of humor tug at Mrs. Montford’s mouth. “The Chinese bedchamber, then?” she said. “It is nearby.”

“Fine.”

Just then one of the maids peeked timidly into the room. Mrs. Montford turned to the door. “Please ask the footmen to move Lord and Lady Delacourt’s baggage into the master suite, Betsy,” she said. “His lordship wishes to have the Chinese bedchamber.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The housemaid looked confused, but obedient.

“And when you are finished,” Mrs. Montford continued, “go into the stillroom and prepare a tisane of meadowsweet and wintergreen for his lordship. Do you remember how?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Betsy hurried away.

“A tisane!” said Walrafen. “What in God’s name for?”

With her hands folded together, Mrs. Montford looked annoyingly prim. “You have a headache,” she said. “And I fancy you are favoring your left leg.”

Walrafen snorted. “I’m well enough,” he said. “And I’m reasonably certain my physician would disapprove of herbal tisanes.”

“Oh, that I do not doubt.” Again, he caught the edge of an accent in her last word. “But meadowsweet contains large amounts of salicin.”

Her self-confidence exasperated him. And he hated that she was right about his head and his leg. “Salicin,” he grunted. “Never heard of it.”

“It is a substance which relieves inflammation,” she responded. “It is very good for rheumatism.”

“By God, woman, I do not have rheumatism!”

“Of course not, my lord.”

Walrafen got the distinct impression he was being humored now, and he did not like it. "Mrs. Montford," he said tightly. "Let us return to the business at hand. Where has my uncle been laid out?"

"In the Gilded Saloon," she answered. "Do you wish him moved at once?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You seem generally displeased with the placement of everything in this house," she said calmly. "And if you wish your uncle moved elsewhere, I shall see to that as well."

"No," returned Walrafen, fighting down a sudden wave of grief. "No." He didn't want him moved. He wanted him alive, damn it all. Alive, healthy, and stomping about the house, grumbling and cursing. But Mrs. Montford couldn't fix that, either, could she?

"The Gilded Saloon is a large chamber." Giles forced himself to go on. "Have a great many come to pay their respects?"

"Half of Somerset," she said. "Twice."

Yes, and most of them more curious than grief-stricken, mused Giles. His housekeeper thought so, too. He could hear the faint skepticism in her voice. He looked at her again, this time truly studying her face. He hardly knew what to make of the woman.

He must have fallen silent for too long. Mrs. Montford cleared her throat again. "Is there anything further, my lord?"

"Yes, Mrs. Montford, there is," he said. "I forgot to ask, how old are you?"

"How old?" she echoed. "Why, I am thirty, my lord."

Giles gave her a skeptical smile. She was lying now, he was certain. But what business was it of his? Either she could do the job, or she couldn't. "Thank you, Mrs. Montford," he said abruptly. "You are dismissed."

"Thank you, my lord," she said stiffly.

"Oh, and Mrs. Montford?"

She turned and looked at him, but said nothing.

"I realize we are all under a vast deal of strain just now," he continued. "Because of that, I am going to overlook the haughty tone you took with me earlier. But in the future, please remember that however excellent your work may be, I shan't tolerate insolence from my staff. Is that clear?"

Her face was again the emotionless mask. "Quite clear, sir."

Suddenly Walrafen wanted to be alone. He felt weighed down by grief and loss. By an almost overwhelming sense of duty, too. And Mrs. Montford, with her angry green eyes, saw too much. She was too intelligent, too outspoken, and most of all, just too damned beautiful. She was not at all what he'd expected. Not what he was going to be comfortable with. Indeed, he was sorely tempted to simply dismiss the woman. And yet, he could not. Cardow needed her. Moreover, they were expecting a house full of guests. Lord, what a curst coil family duty was. No wonder a fire-breathing mob of London radicals seemed less fearsome than a life at Cardow. And to think, Max thought him brave!

"Thank you, Mrs. Montford," he finally said. "You may go."

His clerk, who had not opened his mouth in Mrs. Montford's presence, watched her depart, his expression curious. "Ogilvy, I wish to see my uncle's physician within the hour," he said, joining the young man by his desk. "And the rector first thing tomorrow."

"What about the local J.P., sir?"

"Who, Higgins? Schedule him for tomorrow also."

But Ogilvy appeared confused. Walrafen was beginning to miss old Wortwhistle, but the fellow was too frail to spend hours sitting in even the best-sprung carriage. "Ogilvy, you look perplexed."

Ogilvy's eyes had been fixed on the door, but they turned to his employer now. "Well, it's just that housekeeper," he began uncertainly. "Mrs. Montford. Where do you think she's from?"

Walrafen picked up a stack of letters Ogilvy had just unpacked. "From the north, I collect," he said, distracted. "Newcastle."

Ogilvy frowned. "No," he said quietly. "No, I don't think so."

Walrafen lifted one brow. "You know her?"

Ogilvy shook his head. "No, but the voice—" he began. "No, not the voice. The accent. It's Scots. Faint, and upper-class, to be sure. But still..."

To Walrafen, anything north of Whitehall might as well have been the backside of the moon. "Yes, well, whatever," he muttered, shuffling through the pile of correspondence. "Tell me, Ogilvy, how do these letters of condolence arrive so swiftly? It boggles the mind, does it not?"

"Indeed, my lord," agreed the young man. "It quite boggles."

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Upon leaving Lord Walrafen's study, Aubrey managed to close the door softly, just as she'd reminded all the staff to do. They were to see, and not be seen. They were not paid to feel. So why was she rushing blindly up the steps, her heart in her throat?

Because she'd almost ruined her life just now. It was bad enough she couldn't keep her mouth shut. That had compelled her to pause outside the study just long enough to reel in her temper. And just long enough to overhear Mr. Ogilvy's remark, so innocently spoken. The accent. It's Scots. Faint, and upper-class, to be sure...

She had not waited to hear the earl's response. Her tight control snapped. Her anger turned to panic. Unthinkingly, she bolted into an empty passageway. The terror was mounting. A sense of powerlessness and fear, all too familiar. She wanted to escape. To run. Abruptly she jerked to a halt, frantically fumbling with the keys at her waist. She must not be seen so distraught. She must not.

Somehow she unlocked a door to an empty bedchamber, bursting inside as if the devil were on her heels. Slamming the door shut, she leaned back against it, her palms pressed hard against solid oak, as if it might splinter open behind her. Dear Lord, how had she let things get so terribly out of hand? How had she let her temper get away with her?



The Major was dead! And now he had come here with his ice-cold eyes and scornful mouth. It wasn't just his disdain she had to worry about. There were going to be questions. Suspicions. And people—strangers—every-where. Someone might recognize her. Or Iain...

Oh, why had she dared to argue with Lord Walrafen? She was lucky she'd not been dismissed on the spot. Iain was dependent on her! Aubrey snatched a cushion from the bed and pressed it to her mouth, stifling the gasps which racked her body. Oh, God. Oh, God. She had to calm down. For the child's sake, she must cope. Keep her head. Keep her job. Keep her mouth shut. In short, she had to do whatever it took to satisfy the arrogant Earl of Walrafen—even if it killed her—because everything had changed now.

The Major was dead. Cardow was no longer her refuge.

## Chapter Four

### A Room with a View

Giles was pleased to see the gentleman who entered his study late that afternoon, though the man bore little resemblance to the round, tousle-haired lad he'd played with as a child. Geoffrey Crenshaw hastened into the room, his shirttails barely tucked in and a dark bloodstain on his coat cuff. Now thin and angular, he carried a leather satchel in his hand and the weight of the world on his shoulders, if appearances could be believed.

"Sorry to be so late," said the doctor, his empty hand extended. "It is good to see you home, Walrafen."

Giles waved the doctor into a chair. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

Crenshaw grinned. "Jack Bartle had an unfortunate run-in with a sharp scythe and one too many pints," he admitted. "But your message said it was urgent, so I stitched him up and came straight here. I am so sorry, Walrafen, about this business with your uncle. Such a tragedy. You've scarce spent a fortnight here since your mother's funeral, and now you're back for your uncle's. I regret it is death which brings you home."

Giles paced toward the window and back again. "This is not home, Crenshaw," he said quietly. "But I come when I must. I do my duty."

Crenshaw looked fleetingly uncomfortable. "Walrafen, we are old friends," he finally said. "We had some splendid times here as children. Your mother disliked it, I know, but is it really so bad?"

The earl lifted his hands expressively. "Look at this place, Crenshaw," he rasped. "



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There was nothing for her here. She was young and beautiful, full of vivacity. This dreary old castle, the

sea, the mist, the utter isolation—Christ, it sucked the life out of her.”

“She had you,” said Crenshaw. “You were her life.”

“Yes, and my father was determined to take that from her, too, wasn’t he?”

“Many boys go away to school, Giles,” said the doctor softly. “It did not have to be the end of her world.”

Giles returned to the window and stared into the darkness. “We cannot resolve that tragedy, Crenshaw,” he said. “Let us turn our attention to the one we have some hope of avenging.”

“Yes, of course,” he agreed. “Tell me, how may I help?”

Giles wanted to hear his old friend’s view on Elias’s death. Crenshaw was a good doctor, as his father before him had been. Giles liked him. Trusted him.

Over brandy Crenshaw explained how he’d been summoned to the castle on the afternoon of Elias’s death. It was the day of the Harvest Fair, and one of Cardow’s footmen had come tearing through the village, a little worse for drink, bellowing at the top of his lungs that the Major had been murdered.

Crenshaw had grabbed his bag and run straight up the hill to the castle, but there had been no hope. The local constable and justice of the peace had soon followed. The library windows had been open, which was not surprising since the day had been warm. There had been no sign of forced entry anywhere in the castle.

Giles was struggling to take it all in. “Crenshaw, who actually found my uncle?”

The doctor hesitated. “Mrs. Montford, I believe.”

“She heard the shot?”

Crenshaw stared into his brandy. “I collect she mis-took it for revelry down in the village. She realized he’d been killed when she took his tea tray.”

“Good God!”

Crenshaw leaned forward in his chair. “But it didn’t matter, Walrafen,” he said stridently. “He was struck in the chest. He hadn’t a prayer.”

“The chest?” Giles put his brandy aside and tried to calm his breathing. “Geoff, you don’t think... I mean, surely he did not...”

Crenshaw shook his head. “Don’t even whisper such a thing,” he cautioned. “You know too well the sort of talk that will start. Besides, no weapon was found.”

Giles slid a hand through his hair and considered it. “But how was his health? Could he have been despondent?”

“His health was abysmal,” admitted Crenshaw. “His liver was distended. His skin was jaundiced. He was wasting away, yet he refused treatment. But soldiers, especially those as brave as Lorimer, do not kill themselves. It is thought dishonorable.”

“Yes, of course,” said Giles. “I never considered it.”

Crenshaw put down his glass with an awkward clatter. “Well, stop considering it now,” he ordered. “Do

you want the Crown to seize his every possession?"

The earl smiled sadly. "He had little, save for his reputation as a hero."

"And is that not the most precious thing of all?" asked Crenshaw, opening both his hands expressively. "Certainly he doesn't deserve to be dumped into a grave in the dead of night without so much as a proper Christian prayer said over him. This is a suspicious, backward village, Giles. Not a decade past, we were still burying suicides at crossroads with stakes through their hearts. Let the church give the Major a proper burial, and let the constabulary worry about the rest."

Giles sighed. "You are sure it was murder?"

"What else, with no weapon, and the house empty?" said Crenshaw. "Someone simply took advantage of the Harvest Fair—Gypsies, perhaps—and thought to make an easy shilling. They must not have known about Elias."

Giles looked at him blankly. "The house was empty?"

Crenshaw hesitated. "Mrs. Montford had given everyone the day off for the fair."

"That's odd." Giles considered it. "How well do you know her?"

Again, the doctor hesitated. "As well as anyone, I daresay," he answered. "She is... rather aloof. Uncompromising, perhaps. But very competent. You have only to look about this house to see that. Why, before her arrival, the place was a pigst—" Crenshaw turned a little pale.

"A pigsty," finished Walrafen dryly. "Yes, I know. Mrs. Montford wrote me regularly to complain of it." He paused for a moment. "It's almost breathtaking the changes she's wrought here, isn't it? The place actually has a warmth about it now."

Crenshaw smiled tightly. "Cardow has long been one of England's most important estates," replied the doctor. "And at long last it looks it. No one doubts who deserves the credit for that."

The earl sipped pensively at his brandy. "Tell me, Crenshaw, what is known of the woman? Is she, or was she... well, my uncle's mistress?"

The rest of Crenshaw's color drained. "I'm sure that's none of my concern."

"Yes, yes, but what is said?" asked Giles impatiently. "As you say, this is a small village."

"Just so," he agreed, staring into the depths of his glass. "Therefore, you can't believe half of what you hear. Initially, yes, there was talk. She'd a way with the old devil—your pardon, Walrafen—and I believe he was fond of her, too, since he put up with her interference. But what cinched it down in the village was the fact that shortly after her arrival, the Major stopped his... well, his womanizing."

"You mean his whoring?" interjected Walrafen.

The doctor smiled wanly. "Whoring, yes. And he kept more to home. But I daresay that was a result of his age and his drinking affecting—er, his vigor, if you take my meaning."

Walrafen smiled wryly. "I'm afraid I do," he said. "Tell me, Crenshaw, what does the justice of the peace think?"

The doctor's face fell. "Who, old Higgins?" he asked dismissively. "He suspects Mrs. Montford, of course. He thinks she's hiding something, and it is always easiest to seize upon an outsider, is it not? She

keeps to herself and rarely ventures so far as the village unless a tenant needs her. So Higgins theorizes that perhaps she and the Major had one of their infamous rows, and it got out of hand. But he is wrong, Walrafen. Aubrey Montford did not kill your uncle.”

The doctor’s vehemence surprised him. And yet, Giles tended to agree. The woman he’d just met did not seem capable of such a crime. Oh, he did not doubt Mrs. Montford was capable of murder. But it would have been a neat, methodical killing, not some spate of uncontrolled rage that left bloodstains on the carpet and the house in disarray.

“You sound almost smitten with my housekeeper, old boy,” murmured Giles.

Crenshaw flashed his boyish grin. “Ah, a bit, perhaps,” he admitted. “Much good it has done me. But admit it, Walrafen, she’s a rare beauty. And she has a certain charm, if a man isn’t intimidated by strong, competent women.”

“I had not noticed,” Giles lied. He certainly had mixed feelings about Mrs. Montford, didn’t he? He found her exasperating. He did not like her sharp tongue, or the air of aloof arrogance she carried. But he’d not missed the flash of humor in her eyes when he mentioned his dead toads. Somehow, that had taken the edge off his anger, if not his voice.

And Crenshaw was right. She was a rare beauty. But that fine-boned, heart-shaped face with its luminous green eyes looked too intelligent by half. And then there was her rich, red hair which somehow kept escaping the constraints of her cap, as if it demanded to be displayed. Yes, her appearance had taken him quite by surprise. Elias generally preferred voluptuous women.

“Aubrey,” he mused. “Is that her Christian name? How odd I did not know it. Does Higgins have any actual evidence against her?”

Again, the doctor shrugged. “There was a vast deal of blood on her clothing,” he admitted. “She was supposed to have been alone in the house, at her own insistence. And she was, he claims, far too calm when they spoke. But then, Mrs. Montford is hardly the histrionic type.”

That was certainly true, thought Giles. This afternoon she’d gone toe to toe with him and held her own. She’d shown no sign of tears or hysteria, as most women of his acquaintance would have done. His anger this afternoon hadn’t seemed to shake her in the least, not even when he’d threatened to dismiss her.

What would it take, he wondered, to crack that veneer of hers? Or was it even a veneer? Maybe the woman had more than a spine of solid steel. And maybe, just as Higgins suspected, she was hiding something. Just then, the door opened. Giles looked up to see Pevsner.

“Your pardon, my lord,” said the butler. “I did not realize Dr. Crenshaw was here.” He already had the door half shut before Walrafen called him back.

“Pevsner, you seem distressed.”

In reality the butler’s lips were thinned with disapproval, as if he’d just found a dead rat on the dining table. He came in, tossed a chary glance at Crenshaw, and closed the door. “I’m sorry to report, sir, that your uncle’s pocket watch has gone missing.”

“His watch?” Giles must have looked impatient.

“Well, it was solid gold set with sapphires, sir,” said the butler defensively. “And very dear to him. He always kept it in a valet box on his dressing table. I’ve been packing up his things, but the watch is

nowhere to be found in his rooms. I fear it has been stolen.”

Walrafen sighed. The truth was, material things had mattered little to Elias. “I’ll report it to Higgins,” he answered. “Thank you for your diligence.”

“If it doesn’t turn up soon,” pressed the butler, “I think we should conduct a thorough search of the house.”

“By all means,” said Giles with a wave of his hand. “Have at it, Pevsner.”

The butler nodded and left. Abruptly Crenshaw stood. “I should go, too, unless I can be of further assistance?”

“No, Crenshaw, thank you,” said Giles, rising and extending his hand. Then he jerked it back at once. “Wait, there was something. Ogilvy was sorting the mail. A letter addressed to you got mixed up in it.”

He went to his desk and thumbed through the pile of post. “Here,” he said, handing a small letter to the doctor. “Ogilvy found this on the side table in the great hall. In all the confusion, someone apparently piled the incoming post atop it.”

Crenshaw was studying the folded paper. “This is in Mrs. Montford’s hand,” said Crenshaw, breaking the seal. His eyes skimmed it. With a look of relief, he passed it to Giles.

“How amazing,” said Giles, reading it. “Mrs. Montford wished you to come up to the castle and examine my uncle? He had agreed to it, she says. I find that hard to believe.”

“Why would she lie?” asked Crenshaw defensively. “The thing was written the morning of his death. Clearly, she expected him to be alive the next day. No one could be so clever as to plan such a thing in advance.”

But Mrs. Montford was very clever indeed. Giles knew that firsthand. Still, Mrs. Montford a murderer? No. “Of course you are right,” he said to the doctor. “So take it with you when you go, please. I’ve enough of my own correspondence.”

Crenshaw grinned. “I’m glad your sarcasm is intact.” Then the doctor tucked the letter in his coat pocket, shook Giles’s hand, and headed for the door.

“Wait, Crenshaw!” said Giles. “You couldn’t stay to dinner, could you? The Bath relations are expected soon. Frankly, I feel outnumbered.”

The doctor shot him a look of sympathy. “Sabrina, Sarah, and Susan?”

“I think it is Sylvie, Sybil, and Serena. Or is it Sandra? I cannot tell one from the other. And of course, Aunt Harriet.”

Crenshaw winced and gestured at his bloodied coat sleeve. “Sorry, old fellow,” he answered rather cheerfully. “I’m just not presentable.”

Although no one who saw her would have guessed it, by five o’clock Aubrey was almost sick with anxiety. Not only had she managed to insult her employer the first time she lay eyes on him, it would soon be time for their first formal dinner at Cardow. Fully half of the Lorimer family would be in attendance.

Methodically Aubrey moved through Cardow’s formal staterooms, casting a careful eye over the floors,

furnishings, and draperies. Frequently she paused to adjust a pleat or turn a flower arrangement. Everything had to be perfect. Pristine. Elegant. It was a goal she'd set, not just for her staff, but for herself as well. She would not give the Earl of Walrafen the satisfaction of believing that not only was his housekeeper insolent, she was incompetent, too.



Having finished with all the saloons and withdrawing rooms, Aubrey made her way to the state dining room. The housemaids were to give everything one last dusting before the footmen set up the table. As she approached, however, she saw that the doors were flung open. Voices were perfectly audible. Too audible. Just beyond the threshold, Aubrey paused. She could see Betsy in the back of the room polishing the mirrored girandoles which hung along the walls. But Lettie and Ida were not so industriously engaged. They stood before the windows with their heads together, tongues wagging as they peered through the draperies and into the gardens beyond.

“Reckon she’s pretty as ever,” said Lettie appraisingly. “Never seen such a pile of red hair. And Lord Walrafen, well, he’s still a stunner. Got a grim look round his eyes, though, don’t he?”

“And Betsy says ’is lordship told Mrs. Montford ter put ’er ladyship in his suite,” she heard Ida whisper. “Don’t that seem queer? All the baggage ’ad ter be moved twice.”

Lettie snorted. “Gawd, Ida, you’re green as grass,” she said. “And you from London!”

“Wot?” said Ida, clearly affronted.

Aubrey knew she should interrupt, but her feet seemed frozen to the floor. Just then Lettie pulled the curtain back another inch. “Let’s just say Lord Delacourt had best be bolting his wife’s door of a night,” Lottie continued. “Everyone knows Walrafen’s still after her. Look at ’em out there, all moonie-eyed at each other.”

“Oh, go on wiv you!” said Ida. “She don’t look moonie-eyed ter me! Besides, ain’t she the one wot was married to the old lord?”

Lettie snickered again. “Aye, well, only because the old lord stole a march on Mr. Giles,” she retorted. “Done it out of pure spite, too. A nasty piece of work, he was, always pinching and groping where he’d no business.”

“Hush up, Lettie,” hissed Ida. “You want Montford ter catch us?”

Aubrey stepped fully into the room, her arms crossed. “I am afraid it is too late,” she said quietly. “Ida, Lettie, just what is going on here?”

The girls spun around, eyes wide. “Nothing, ma’am,” said Lettie.

“It sounded like gossip to me, and of the vilest sort,” said Aubrey. “If you’ve finished here, take your things and go back downstairs. You may help the footmen polish the wine coolers.”

The housemaids snatched up their dust cloths and bolted like a pair of rabbits. Apparently finished with the girandoles, Betsy approached the window and put down her bucket. The scent of vinegar was suddenly sharp in the room.

Aubrey looked out through the window. Lord Walrafen was still strolling through the formal gardens with Lady Delacourt on his arm. The lady was laughing, her head thrown back so that the dying sun lit her hair most attractively. Walrafen must have agreed. He stopped, plucked a sprig of green from a nearby bush, and tucked it behind her ear. He touched her lightly on the cheek, his expression amazingly gentle. They did make a lovely couple; so lovely one could almost assume they were courting.

“The girls were gossiping, Betsy,” murmured Aubrey, absorbed by the scene in the garden. “They were saying... distasteful things. About his lordship and Lady Delacourt.”

Beside her, Betsy leaned into the window. “Well, I daresay it’s mostly true, ma’am,” she said quietly. “Oh, Lettie ought to keep her trap shut, right enough. But she ain’t making up lies.”

“Oh,” said Aubrey softly. “I did not realize.”

Feeling oddly ill at ease, she let the curtains drop shut.

Shortly before dinner that evening, Giles’s relatives from Bath did indeed descend on Cardow, turning dinner into a slow, arduous affair filled with a great many probing questions he’d no wish to answer. Aunt Harriet and her spinster daughters were terrible gossips, but her husband Miles was a quiet mouse of a man. Thank God for Cecilia, who had gracefully deflected the most prying inquiries with inane chatter, and for her husband, who had flirted shamelessly with Giles’s aunt and cousins throughout all seven of the seamlessly served courses.

That had been yet another shock. Giles had expected the worst, given that the servants were unaccustomed to caring for anyone save Uncle Elias, whose standards had been notoriously lacking. So far as he knew, fully half his staff had never waited at table in their lives, yet every detail, from the perfectly pressed table linen to the after-dinner port, was faultless. He knew better than to credit poor Pevsner. Mrs. Montford, he concluded, must be a dragon indeed.

Mercifully, dinner did end, and Giles was able to retreat to the Chinese bedchamber to collapse into a fretful sleep. He arose at dawn, pulled on his dressing gown, and rang impatiently for coffee. A courier from Whitehall had been expected during the night, and Ogilvy was no doubt already preparing a raft of paperwork for his review. And then there was his nine o’clock meeting with the justice of the peace. Though his determination to find Elias’s killer was undiminished, he dreaded dealing with the bureaucratic snarl. And he did not like to think that one of his staff was suspected, even if it was Mrs. Montford. Especially if it was Mrs. Montford.

The thought of it drove him restlessly to the window, and he threw back the heavy velvet draperies with rather more energy than the job required. He wanted to see if the fog had lifted, but the curtain rings had scarcely stopped jangling when he roared for his valet. He could not believe his eyes. Bidwell darted in barely dressed, still rubbing sleep from his face.

Giles uttered just three words. “Mrs. Montford,” he rasped. “Now.”

“But my lord!” protested his man. “You aren’t dressed to receive!”

Giles turned on him. “She’s the bloody housekeeper, Bidwell, not the Queen of England,” he said. “Go downstairs and get her. Now.”

Not two minutes later Mrs. Montford stood by his side at the window. She was noticeably out of breath, too, a fact he found unreasonably gratifying. With a steady arm he lifted his hand and pointed through the glass. “Mrs. Montford,” he said very quietly, “if you look straight down from this cliff, what—other than this damned abysmal fog—do you see? Or perhaps not see is the better question?”

Mrs. Montford’s forehead creased. “I—” she began. “Well, I see nothing. . . that is to say, my lord, that I am not perfectly sure. . .”

Giles dropped his arm. “The sea! The sea!” he bellowed. “What has become of the sea? Surely, madam, surely the ocean did not dry up whilst I was away in London? Surely you’ve not packed up the Bristol Channel and shipped it off to—to I don’t know, Asia Minor or some godforsaken place? I mean, correct me if I am wrong, Mrs. Montford, but wasn’t this once a seaside castle with a fine view?”

Mrs. Montford opened her mouth, then closed it again. “Really, my lord,” she finally said, her green eyes flashing. “Is all this drama necessary over a little tide-land? God knows—”

“Oh, I’m fairly certain God had nothing to do with it!” Giles snapped, staring at the flat, fertile fields barely visible through the mist. “What on earth, madam? This is unbelievable! Inconceivable! Whatever you’ve done, undo it now. I want my view. Is that understood?”

Mrs. Montford drew herself up a full three inches, he was sure. “Quite clearly,” she snapped. “But I’d best tell Mr. Bartle and his eight children to pack up first, lest their new cottage flood. It will be the first to go, situated as it is.”

Giles paused in the middle of drawing another breath for his next harangue. “Jack Bartle? Why, what can he possibly have to do with this?”

Mrs. Montford jabbed a finger toward the window. “His was one of the tenant farms we expanded with the reclamation work last spring,” she retorted. “Perhaps, my lord, you did not fully comprehend the nature and scope of the drainage project when I wrote to explain it?”

Giles threw up a hand. “Now, wait just a—”

But Mrs. Montford wasn’t waiting. “Or perhaps that was yet another of my letters you did not trouble yourself to read?” she continued. “But it matters little. If you wish it undone, and do not care that no less than three of your tenants shall be displaced and unemployed—along with their wives and children—then by all means, I shall find a way to do it. After all, my lord, I live to serve your every whim.”

That was enough for Giles. “Madam,” he exploded, “I do not have whims.”

The woman had the audacity to set her hands on her hips. “What word would you prefer?”

“You may call it what you will,” he growled. “But never forget, Mrs. Montford, you get paid to carry out my commands.”

Mrs. Montford’s green eyes widened mockingly. “Which I gladly do, my lord, on those rare occasions when I can actually discern just what it is you want done,” she retorted. “After all, I thought you wanted these drainages. You certainly did not say otherwise.”



Blast it, he could remember reading nothing of any such proposal. But then, he did tend to pick over her letters, reading only the witty parts, and skipping over anything that was dull, or required him to think very deeply about Cardow. Drainage fell into both those categories.

Mrs. Montford's finger was still pointing at the window. "I thought you were the great political champion of the common man, my lord," she said a little bitterly. "Have you any idea how many of them those new fields employ? Not just on the estate, but in the village, too? Is your fine view worth their livelihood?"

At that moment blessed relief arrived in the form of a coffee tray. Giles poured himself a cup and swilled it, still steaming. It rolled down his gullet, stripping off the hide as it went. Oh, to hell with his bloody view! That wasn't even the point. The point was, he no longer felt in touch with this land, this house. The changes bothered him far more than he'd ever dreamt they would. And then there was his housekeeper's impudent mouth. Good Lord, he scarce knew whether to kill the woman or kiss her. Either would shut her up.

What? Oh, no. No, no, no. Housekeepers got paid to keep house; mistresses got paid to—well, to do what they did. Only a fool confused the two. Besides, Mrs. Montford was the worst sort of shrew imaginable. He shook off the moment of insanity.

"Drainages!" he finally muttered after sipping his coffee. "Whose idea was it, anyway, these drainages? I don't seem to understand what's going on nowadays. Who is in charge here, Mrs. Montford? Who has made all these big decisions and grand proposals? Who is running this bloody estate? Can you tell me that? Can you?"

Surprisingly, that took the wind out of her sails. "Why, I daresay your uncle was," she murmured lamely. "And I was...helping. One might say."

Giles eyed her narrowly. "Oh, and one might say pigs can fly over the moon," he remarked, putting down his coffee cup with a clatter. "But I shan't, shall I, Mrs. Montford?"

Silence hung over them for a moment.

"All right!" she finally hissed. "It was my idea. Mine. But really, my lord, money does not grow on trees! An estate must turn a profit, for when all is said and done, it is but a business, is it not? We have buildings to maintain. Salaries to pay. This castle costs a fortune to keep up. The home farm must be constantly modernized. Arable land is our only commodity, and those fields down there can be tilled into gold. Where is that money to come from if your estate is unprofitable? Are you an eternal font of wealth? Are you? Have I been wasting my time? Pray say so at once, and I shall return to my sitting room and—and press pillow slips until Kingdom Come!"

Press pillow slips? By God, he'd finally shaken her up. And she was even prettier when her eyes were afire and her color was high. But that did not bear thinking about. "Oh, hell, what does it matter?" he muttered, pouring another cup of coffee. "I suppose I am, very nearly, an eternal font of wealth. I just never stop to think of it, that's all."

"Waste not, want not," she snapped.

He glared at her. "Why, what an oracle you are, Mrs. Montford!" he said. "I must strive to remember that when next I'm squandering my life and fortune in some tawdry gaming hell."

At once the color drained from her face. "I do beg your pardon, my lord," she choked, her eyes flaring wide. "Whatever your—your inadequacies may be, no one could fairly accuse you of profligacy."

His inadequacies? Giles almost laughed aloud. Mrs. Montford was embarrassed, and he was enjoying it. “Well, what’s become of old Erstwilder, anyway?” he finally asked, trying to keep his lips from twitching. “Isn’t he the estate agent around here? Why didn’t he write to me about these drainage projects?”

He could almost hear something inside her snap. “Oh, I cannot believe this!” she said, clapping a hand over her forehead. “Erstwilder ran away with the innkeeper’s wife a month before I got here! You never replaced him!”

Oh, dear. That little scandal had completely slipped his mind. He wondered what else he’d forgotten. But what did it matter? Mrs. Montford knew all. Indeed, had he not sent for her instinctively, the very moment he realized his view had been altered? Why, it had never occurred to him to go looking for Erstwilder or Pevsner or any other staff member, had it? Mrs. Montford was in charge, and everybody knew it. His benign neglect had created a monster in the form of a slight, auburn-haired, mean-eyed, housekeeper-cum-estate manager, and he’d done nothing to rein her in.

Giles didn’t know whether to laugh or curse. He was beginning to feel trapped in a bad French farce—one of his own making, too. His housekeeper, however, looked trapped in something worse. She was no doubt regretting her too-sharp tongue again.

“My dear Mrs. Montford,” he said a little mordantly. “You look as if you need one of those tisanes of elder-berry.”

“Meadowsweet,” she whispered, the hand on her forehead slipping to her eyes. “A tisane of meadowsweet.”

“Yes, well, whatever,” he answered, waving magnanimously at the tray. “Look here, have a cup of coffee. Sometimes it cures the headache. I should know.”

Bidwell came in at that moment, and somehow another cup was found and the coffee poured. The valet urged Mrs. Montford into a chair, and Giles pressed the cup into her hand. As she took it, however, her fingers slid warmly around his. Suddenly their eyes met, and a jolt of unexpected emotion passed between them. Something primitive. Metaphysical. A feeling beyond the tangible, and almost... what? He did not know. But he could feel his heart leap in his chest.

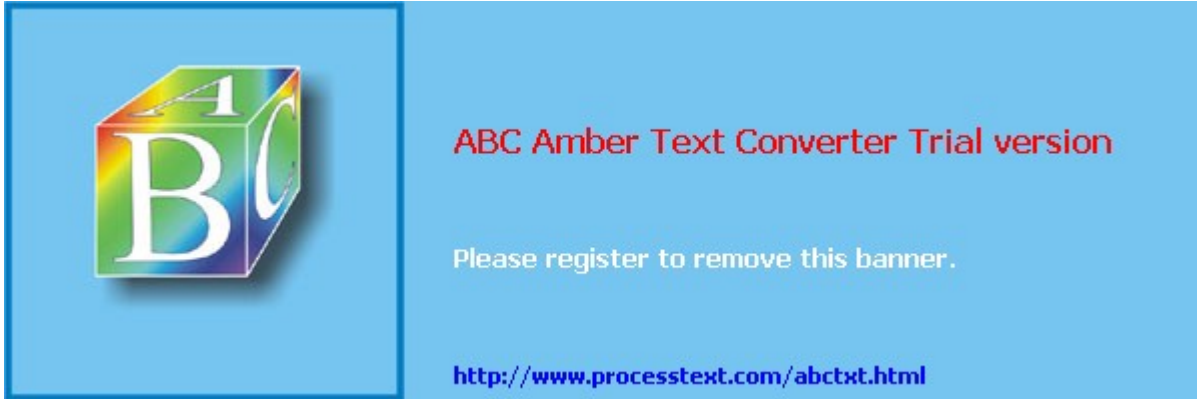
For an instant he hesitated. Good God, didn’t she feel it? They were so near, he could see her green eyes were flecked with gold. Her skin was so fine, he could see the faint hammer of her pulse at the base of her throat. She smelled of something sweetly familiar. He jerked his hand away and swallowed hard.

It was a long moment before he had the courage to look at her again. But Mrs. Montford seemed to have felt nothing at all. She was sipping tentatively at her coffee, as if she feared they might be trying to poison her. She refused to hold his gaze again. Bidwell had drifted back into the dressing room. How odd it was that they should be alone like this. And yet, it felt perfectly natural to have her here, despite the fact that she’d made him feel so strange for an instant. And despite the fact that he was in his dressing gown, with his bed unmade and his face still shadowed with beard.

Odder still, he was reluctant to send her away, though they’d only met just yesterday. But they were hardly strangers, were they? They had corresponded for years. And in a strange, inexplicable way, he’d enjoyed it, hadn’t he? Enjoyed, at least, the parts he’d paid attention to...

“Look here, Mrs. Montford,” he said, when she put her cup down. “Clearly I’m somewhat at fault here. Obviously, it is time I educated myself. I think I’d best begin by having a look at the books. The household accounts and the estate books. I somehow suspect you’ve both in your sitting room. Will

Friday be convenient?



”

Mrs. Montford opened her mouth, then closed it again. “There are no irregularities in my bookkeeping, my lord,” she finally said.

She was nervous, he realized. He wondered again if she were hiding something from him. Something about his uncle’s death, perhaps? “I never suggested there was anything amiss, Mrs. Montford,” he said, gentling his tone. “I merely wish to learn, and to see how we’re doing. Now, would Friday at, say, two o’clock suit your schedule?”

“I am at your disposal, of course,” said Mrs. Montford, rising from her chair and going to the door. For a moment silence held sway over the room. Then slowly she turned around and looked at him. Something inside her had shifted, lessening her strength. “My lord, might I ask—do you truly mean to keep me on now?”

“Keep you on?”

She had gone very still and pale. “Yes, I mean, now that—that things have changed.”

Giles was instantly on guard. “Do you mean now that my uncle is dead?”

“I—yes. I suppose.”

What on earth did she mean? Now that I’m a murder suspect? Now that my protector is gone? But Crenshaw had cast doubt on that old rumor. And he knew, by God, she was no murderer. Still, could he be twice a fool? Giles hedged. “Why wouldn’t I keep you on, Mrs. Montford?”

She lowered her lashes and stared at the floor. “I thought you might simply...oh, I don’t know, close up the house, perhaps?”

And then he saw it clearly in her face. The silent worry. The wordless pleading. That look of a wee tim’ rous beastie, her nest turned up by the plough. Oh, it hurt her pride to beg, but that was what she was doing—or as close as Aubrey Montford would ever come to it, he suspected.

Well, he’d wanted to see her veneer shatter. This was at least a crack. Why did it give him no satisfaction? He considered, fleetingly, the power he wielded over her. The gift of a livelihood. Money. Shelter. Food. Good God, it brought him no joy. And how must it make her feel, to be beholden to him?

Giles cleared his throat and closed the distance between them. “There is no question, Mrs. Montford, of the house being closed up,” he said, standing perhaps a little nearer than was wise. “Is there any reason you feel you mightn’t be able to meet all my needs? Or give me satisfactory service in any way?”

He forced her to hold his gaze. For a moment she hesitated. "No, my lord," she said softly. "I shall do my best in whatever you ask of me."

A good answer, thought Giles. And one which brought some strange, vivid notions to mind. "Then I shall have no reason to terminate your employment, shall I?" he said.

She gave a little curtsy. "Thank you, my lord." She blinked her lashes rapidly, and for the first time he saw the strain, perhaps even a little fear, in her eyes.

"Thank you, Mrs. Montford," he answered. "You are dismissed."

She laid her hand on the doorknob again, then hesitated. "My lord," she said. "You can still see it, you know."

"I beg your pardon?"

She looked at him over her shoulder. "The sea," she said quietly. "You can see it once the fog lifts. Truly. It is but a little farther away, that's all." And then she opened the door, swished her black skirts neatly through it, and vanished, leaving the room strangely empty.

## Chapter Five

### In Which Aunt Harriet Shakes the Hornet's Nest

"I won't have it," the earl found himself telling the justice of the peace later that morning. "I won't have a member of my staff accused, Mr. Higgins."

Giles had deliberately seated Higgins on the opposite side of his desk in the study. He was not perfectly sure why he was taking such an aggressive stance on Mrs. Montford's behalf. He barely knew the woman.

Higgins scooted forward in his chair. "Your uncle is dead, my lord," he said. "And I've accused no one. I was merely asking questions about your housekeeper."

Giles stared across his desk at the man. "I'm well aware my uncle is dead," he said coldly. "And I want his killer brought to justice. That, sir, is your job. But I think you suspect Mrs. Montford, and you've my assurance that she is innocent."

Higgins opened his hands plaintively. "My lord, they were known to have bitter quarrels," he interjected. "The night before his death, their shouting could be heard throughout the castle. Your butler even tells me a tray of china was broken."

Giles leaned back in his chair and studied the man. "I think you are making my point, Mr. Higgins," he said calmly. "Mrs. Montford and my uncle quarreled almost weekly. She wrote to me often to complain of his health and habits. He drank too much. He did not eat properly. It caused problems, yes. But it seems to me the woman was trying to keep him alive, not shoot him dead."

"I suppose one might view it that way," said Higgins reluctantly.

"That is precisely how I view it," said Giles. "So look elsewhere, sir. Try harder. Dig deeper. Pray let us get on with it."

Higgins looked deeply frustrated. "Then I shall interview all the servants again as to what they may have seen," he said. "I shall inquire again throughout the village if strangers have been about. But I tell you, my

lord, there has been no one.”

“Dr. Crenshaw mentioned Gypsies.”

“There’ve been no Gypsies in this part of Somerset since Michaelmas last, my lord,” said Higgins sadly. “Moreover, Gypsies don’t kill people. They are said to steal, to swindle, and to pilfer, which may or may not be true. But they certainly don’t run about the countryside doing murder.”

Giles could not bear to think Elias had been struck down by someone—anyone—he knew. “But what if the killer meant merely to—to steal something?” he asked. “And what if they came upon Uncle Elias by accident?”

Higgins shrugged. “Then how did they get in? And where did the weapon come from?”

Giles was clutching at straws, and he knew it. “My uncle always kept a pistol,” he said suddenly. “When I was a boy, he kept it locked in his desk in the library. Sometimes he would take it out and clean it.”

Finally he had Higgins’s attention. “Did he have it still?”

Giles did not know. It was just one of the many things he should have known, and did not. “We can see,” he said, rising from his desk.

The library was on the opposite end of the west wing, but a few moments’ brisk walk. The justice of the peace followed on his heels. Giles reached the door, and hesitated. He had resisted coming into this room; had been unable to bear the thought of seeing just where his uncle had breathed his last.

But of course, the room was immaculate. Mrs. Montford’s doing, no doubt. The huge Turkey carpet which had lain upon the floor for decades was gone, but otherwise, nothing had changed. The desk sat on the opposite wall against the windows, just as it always had. Giles went to it and seized the top right drawer. It slid open easily. It should not have. It should have been locked. His heart stopped.

It was bare, of course, save for an empty whisky bottle and a pile of yellowed letters scattered across the bottom.

“I asked the housekeeper about a weapon,” said Higgins as Giles stared into the depths of the drawer. “She said there was none she knew of.”

Giles licked his lips uncertainly. “Yes, well, she has been here but a short while.”

Higgins looked at him inquiringly. “And when did you last see the weapon, my lord?”

A lifetime ago, he thought sadly. “Many years past, Higgins,” he said softly. “Eons, it now seems. Perhaps I was mistaken altogether.”

Giles found lunch with his family worse than dinner. The table was growing more crowded every day with myriad kith and kin, all of them cleverly managed by Cecilia. Mercifully, Aunt Harriet and her spinster daughters, Sybil, Sylvie, and Sonya, were one down, since his Cousin Sybil had taken to her bed with a migraine, so deeply distressed was she—or so Harriet claimed—by the loss of her dear, dear uncle. An uncle whom, Giles forbore to point out, none of them had actually bothered to visit in the last decade.

Sybil’s place at the table was taken by Great-uncle Frederick, who was much quieter than his predecessor, since he had the wisdom to sleep through almost every family gathering. Giles couldn’t

blame him. The Bath Bunch could never be kept long from idle gossip. Over the second course the talk quickly turned gruesome.

Cecilia began as the voice of good cheer. "I do hope everyone slept well last night?" she remarked as the first course was taken up. "Frankly, I was so tired from our travels, I fell dead asleep."

Giles waved away the footmen just as his cousin Sylvie—at least he thought it was Sylvie—gave an eerie shudder. "Ooh, Cecilia, how can you use such a horrid phrase?" she asked as the doors shut. "I wasn't able to close my eyes, knowing that poor Uncle Elias was practically murdered in his bed!"

"Actually, Sylvie, he was murdered in the library," said Cecilia, attempting to pass a relish tray to his uncle Frederick, who was, unfortunately, already snoring. "But I daresay the King's Arms can put you up. I hear they've finally got rid of the rats, though the sheets still mightn't be as pristine as one would wish."

Sylvie blanched. "Why, that's not what I m-meant, Cecilia," she stammered. "I m-merely meant what a great mystery it all is. Uncle Elias's dying, that is. I mean, really, who did it?"

"Oh, good Lord, the housekeeper did it," answered Aunt Harriet biting into a crisp slice of pickled cucumber. "My maid Addie already heard it from Milson, the third footman."

Giles put down his fork with a harsh clatter. "Then Milson is about to find himself dismissed without a character," he said, his voice lethally soft. "As to you, Aunt Harriet, you know nothing of Mrs. Montford. I pray you will keep silent about her."

Delacourt relaxed into his chair and swirled his wine-glass lazily. "Thought she was a thorn in your side, old chap," he murmured. "Maybe this Higgins fellow is about to take her off your hands."

"I daresay he shall," murmured Aunt Harriet. "My Addie says that woman threatened to kill poor Elias. It's all the talk belowstairs. A threat, you know, is evidence."

Cecilia laughed. "Harriet, my dear, if Mrs. Montford had done it, there would be no evidence," she said. "Believe me, I've been working with her. The words cool and competent don't begin to do her justice."

"What utter nonsense this is." Giles felt his temper slip. "I beg you will all speak of something else."

"But Mama is quite right," said Sonya. "That housekeeper did threaten him. The head gardener heard her and reported it to Mr. Higgins."

Giles glared at her. "You've been in this house less than one day, Sonya, and already you know all? It is perfectly ludicrous. Why on earth would Mrs. Montford threaten Uncle Elias?"

Seated beside Sonya, Aunt Harriet widened her eyes innocently, setting Giles instantly on guard. Women, in his experience, always looked the most ingenuous when spreading the vilest gossip. "I should think it obvious, given the rumors about those two," she said. "My brother was never a saint, God knows."

"No, I believe it had something to do with the tower's collapse," interjected Sonya. "Addie said the housekeeper's son ran after Uncle Elias when the stones were falling. The boy was almost killed. For some reason, the housekeeper took it into her head that the whole thing was Uncle's fault."

Almost killed? What in heaven's name were they talking about?

Before Giles could find his tongue, Aunt Harriet nodded sagaciously. "There's been thievery, too," she

said. "Elias's good gold watch has gone missing—the one given him by Lieutenant Lord Kenross after Toulouse. Mark me, Giles, your housekeeper took it."

"Really, Aunt Harriet," snapped Giles, on the verge of doing something unforgivably rude. "I assure you that you are quite mistaken."

She shook her head. "No, dear boy, I know the type. Too pretty, and too prideful. Neither is seemly in a servant. And as I've often warned you, one cannot simply abandon a house and entrust it to servants who—"

Delacourt cut her off. "Good Lord, look at the time!" he said as he shoved back his chair. "My dear Cousin Sonya—I may call you cousin, mayn't I?—I'm told there's a cliff nearby which overlooks the sea rather dramatically. I wonder, do you know it?"

Sonya batted her eyelashes. "Oh, indeed! The view is quite breathtaking."

"And I love nothing so well as to be left breathless." Delacourt smiled, showing his huge, flawlessly white teeth. "Besides, you did promise me a walk this afternoon. Might I prevail upon you? Lady Harriet, Sylvia, my joy would be complete if you'd join us."

Cecilia rolled her eyes at Giles. Still, her husband's flirtation was enough, thank God, to put an end to the awful luncheon. The women left the table on his heels in a tittering, preening gaggle, and Giles made a mental note to buy Delacourt a whole crate of those nasty West Indian cheroots he so loved.

But as he watched his uncles bestir themselves and stagger off toward the billiard room, Giles's relief at having the meal over with was not enough to suppress the black cloud of dread settling over him. He had not misjudged Higgins's questions this morning, had he? The justice of the peace really had targeted Mrs. Montford, and not without reason. Servants



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' gossip was a dangerous thing.

Giles retreated to his study to ponder how best to put an end to it. He sat there but a moment before ringing for the butler. "Tell me, Pevsner," he said when the door opened. "Who is head gardener here nowadays?"

Pevsner smiled unctuously. "It is still Jenks, sir," he said. "And Phelps is second."

"So I thought." But it made no sense. Giles took up his pen and toyed with it for a moment. "Ask Jenks to come up, Pevsner," he said. "I have a notion to level the orchard and put in one of those French water gardens. You know the sort of thing; spouting fountains, naked nymphs, gurgling waterfalls."

Pevsner let slip a horrified gasp. "At once, my lord!"

The butler vanished. Just then, Giles heard carriage wheels rattling on the cobblestones below. He rose and stared down into the inner courtyard to see a carriage drawing up. Two elderly gentlemen in tall black hats and sweeping cloaks climbed down. Cecilia hastened out to greet them as Mrs. Montford set the footmen to work with the bags and horses. These must be the Welsh cousins on his grandmother's side. From Swansea, he thought, though he'd met them but once or twice. He'd pay his respects shortly.

Well, that was it, then. Everyone was here. And tomorrow the funeral. Then everyone would leave, and it would be over. Over, and yet not done with. No, not by half. Not until he could discover the truth.

"My lord?"

He spun about to see Jenks framed in the doorway, his stiff canvas cap clutched tightly in his hands.

"Ah, Jenks, do come in," he said, stepping back to the desk. "And shut the door."

"Aye, sir."

Giles had known Jenks all his life. The man was not a gossip. Moreover, neither of them had time to beat about the bush. "Look here, Jenks," he began. "There is something I just cannot fathom. What's this nonsense about your having told the justice of the peace that Mrs. Montford threatened to kill my uncle?"

The head gardener jerked back as if he'd been struck. "No, sir," he said firmly. "I told nothing o' the sort. 'Twas Phelps 'oo went and opened his mouth to Pevsner, sir. Before I could hush 'im up. And he's sorry for it now, sir, but the harm's done."

Mystified, Giles shook his head. "Why on earth would he accuse her, Jenks? This is most damaging. They are saying Mrs. Montford threatened him right after the tower fell. Surely she—"

"Oh, no, sir!" interjected the gardener. "'Tweren't what she meant a'tall. She was just overset about her boy, sir. About the broken ribs and bruised lungs. Truth is, sir, the lad was in a terrible way. We thought he was dead when we pulled him out o' the rubble, me an' Phelps."

"Good God," whispered Giles. "You... pulled him out? Her son? Jenks, perhaps you'd best explain. And perhaps you'd best tell me just what Mrs. Montford did say."

The gardener tugged even harder at his hat.

"Well?"

The gardener colored furiously. "Look here, my lord," he said. "I've worked hard for you, and your father and grandfather before you. Forty years, all told."

"Yes, Jenks, I know," he said softly. "And you've always done exemplary work."

"And I'm to be pensioned off come spring," he said. "Mary's taken a notion to buy a cottage at Penzance."

Giles tried to smile. "I'm very happy for you both, Jenks," he said. "You've my word as a gentleman, nothing you might say here could undo forty years' devoted service."

Jenks narrowed his eyes. "Well, good, then, sir," he answered. "Because I'd say Phelps misunderstood. Mrs. Montford wasn't wishing the Major dead, my lord. She was wishing you dead. But only in that moment. Only because she thought her boy was going to die, do you see?"

Broken ribs. Bruised lungs. Good God, he was rather afraid he did see. Through the dawning shame,



Giles struggled to listen.

“She’s a good, hardworking woman, sir. She didn’t understand why, after all her letters, you’d let the tower go so long. And frankly, sir, neither did I. And then it went and fell in on poor little Iain.”

Iain. The little boy’s name was Iain. Giles sat down abruptly. “I did not realize—no, no, that’s no excuse—I shan’t waste my breath with it. Look here, Jenks, the J.P. is going to speak with everyone again. You’re to tell him it was me she wished dead; I don’t give a damn for anything but the truth. As you say, she can’t have meant it, so it doesn’t matter, right?”

Jenks looked surprised. “Yes, sir.”

Giles was a little embarrassed at his outburst. Still, Jenks could be trusted. “Thank you for coming up,” he managed. “You’d best go now. And...and thank you, Jenks, for your honesty. I shall look forward to calling on you and Mrs. Jenks in Penzance next year.”

Still appearing vaguely mystified, the gardener nodded and turned to leave.

Giles cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Also, Jenks, I, ah, I wanted to ask your opinion,” he said. “Confidentially, do the other servants dislike Mrs. Montford?”

Jenks considered a moment. “I daresay they did at first, my lord,” he admitted. “The lazy ones, anyways. But she’s fair, and asks nothing o’ them she’s not willing to do herself. She just keeps to herself, is all.”

“Yes, I see,” said Giles as Jenks put his hand on the door. “Well, one last thing, then. I told Pevsner we were to discuss replacing the orchard with a French water garden.”

“Good Lord!”

Giles managed a weak smile. “Yes, and you’ll tell him you convinced me otherwise, and that that was the end of our discussion. Do you take my meaning?”

“Oh.” Jenks smiled broadly. “Yes, sir.”

It was past midnight when Giles finished his dispatches to Whitehall and dismissed Ogilvy for the night. It had been a hard day, part of it spent searching through his uncle’s personal effects. He’d found nothing. Indeed, he’d no clue what he was looking for. What sort of evidence did one look for in a murder? Not for the first time, he toyed with the idea of sending for Max, or perhaps Max’s associate, George Kemble. That man had a nose like a bloodhound when it came to sniffing out scandal. He resolved to discuss it with Cecilia, who knew both men well.

With that in mind, Giles retired, stripped off his coat and waistcoat, then poured himself a generous tot of brandy. After that a second followed, but even the hint of sleep evaded him. Eventually, however, he’d enough liquid courage in him to do what he’d both wanted to do and yet dreaded doing since his arrival. And now, he decided, was as good a time as any. Certainly, it was as private a time as any.

It was a long trip from his bedchamber to the east wing where Cardow’s elegant state rooms were located. And because of the tower’s collapse, the quickest route was past the servants’ quarters, which he’d been using regularly since his arrival. He did not mind. It afforded him frequent opportunities to see Mrs. Montford at work; sometimes even to speak a few quiet words to her about whatever mundane topic he could dredge up on short notice.

The Gilded Saloon was a vast chamber which had been elaborately done up in the French fashion early in the reign of George III. In Giles's memory, it had never been used, save for his grandfather's lying-in-state. His mother's funeral had been quick and quiet. His father had died in Hill Street. And now Giles was left, the last of his line. A grim reflection, that.

The double doors swung open on silent hinges to reveal the flickering light of perhaps a dozen candles, all of them carefully placed around his uncle's body. The coffin itself, a good, sturdy piece of English oak, sat in the center of the room. The bier beneath had been draped in dark, sumptuous velvet. Reverently, but somewhat reluctantly, Giles approached, only to be shocked by what he saw.

Elias's body was slight and wizened; the form of a frail man, not a strong, stalwart soldier. His face looked like that of a corpse, and Giles had the overwhelming sense that it had done so long before death had taken him. Good God, how could his uncle have changed so much?

Someone—Mrs. Montford, no doubt—had laid a spray of meadowsweet across Elias's chest. Giles was reaching out to brush it with his fingertips when he became aware of someone sitting deep in the shadows. He glanced up and cleared his throat expectantly. It was a woman dressed in black, her hair shrouded by a flowing mantle. She neither stood nor spoke, nor made any effort to identify herself to him. But he knew. Oh, yes. He could feel her presence in his bones.

Of course, tradition dictated his uncle's body not be left alone, and Giles was exceedingly glad his servants were observing this old-fashioned custom. Moreover, it was neither necessary nor even appropriate that anyone should speak to him in his private grief. And so Giles did what he'd longed to do, and bowed his head to say a silent, private prayer over Elias's body.

He must have spent longer at it than he realized, for when he lifted his head and opened his eyes, the candlelight seemed blindingly bright. Just then, someone did disturb him, their heels clacking rapidly on the marble. He turned from the coffin to see a girl he now recognized as Ida, the third housemaid, hastening into the room.

Upon noticing him, Ida stopped, clapped a hand over her mouth, and curtsied deeply. The woman in the shadows stood and came toward them, lifting back her black mantle to reveal a soft halo of red-gold hair, its arrangement partially loosened as if for sleep.

Mrs. Montford nodded at Giles, then dropped her gaze discreetly to the girl. "Betsy will relieve you at four," she whispered. "If you cannot stay awake, you must send someone to fetch me. Do you understand?"

The girl nodded, and darted toward the chair to take up her place.

From her position on the threshold, Aubrey watched Lord Walrafen. His back was turned to her now. She should go, she told herself. She did not wish to linger in his presence one moment longer than was necessary. And yet, there was a sadness in him she'd not sensed before; an unmistakable slump to his shoulders, and a look of grief about his eyes. It seemed wholly out of character with the man she'd come to think him. Indeed, she'd not expected Walrafen to mourn his uncle at all. On impulse, she turned and went back into the room.

The earl did not look at her. Instead, his fingers were clenched tight on the edge of the coffin, his knuckles white in the candlelight. Instinctively she reached out and touched his hand with hers. It was an intimate, but somehow not inappropriate, gesture.

His head, still slightly bowed, swiveled toward her. Their eyes met. Aubrey withdrew her hand. "He rests in peace, my lord," she said quietly. "I am sure of it."

The earl straightened up from the coffin and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers, as if the pain might stanch his tears. "I trust you are right," he whispered. "I trust that that which eluded him here on earth is now his into eternity."

"There is no shame in your grief, my lord," she whispered. "Your loss is immeasurable. He was a good man."

Walrafen gave a short, bitter laugh which resonated in the vast chamber. "Do you think that I don't know that?" he asked, but there was no anger in his words.

"I'm sure you do," she answered softly. "But sometimes it helps to hear it from others."

He watched her quietly for a time. "Have you lost a great many loved ones in your short life, Mrs. Montford?" he asked. "You seem to know how it feels." Then, surprisingly, his face seemed to crumple a little. "Ah, forgive me. I forget that you have buried a husband."

Aubrey did not know quite how to respond. "I have also lost both my parents," she finally said. "And a sister whom I nursed for some years. Yes, my lord, I know what it is to lose a loved one. And I know what it is to blame oneself."

He was still staring at her, his gaze hooded. "Was your sister an invalid?"

"She had a wasting disease of the muscles," Aubrey answered, even as she wondered why she was telling him about Muireall. "And asthmatic lungs. In the end, she just... faded away."

"I am sorry," he said. "Have you no family left?"

"No," she whispered. "Just Iain."

The earl was silent for a long moment. "Does one always suffer these doubts at the end?" he finally said, returning his gaze to his uncle. "Do we always wonder if we could have done something different? Something more? I now fear I made a mistake in giving into his wish to remain here alone. But it was, after all, his childhood home."

Yesterday, she would have accused him of having failed his uncle. Tonight, that did not seem so. Aubrey touched his hand again. "What choice did you have as to where he lived or how he lived?" she asked gently. "None, if you consider it. He was a stubborn man, my lord. Trust me, I know. It was a constant battle just to make him eat properly and keep him from..." Her words fell away.

"Drinking himself to death?" supplied the earl thoughtfully. "I know you often quarreled over it. Sometimes I was half afraid to open your letters."

"We had strong words from time to time," she said a little defensively.

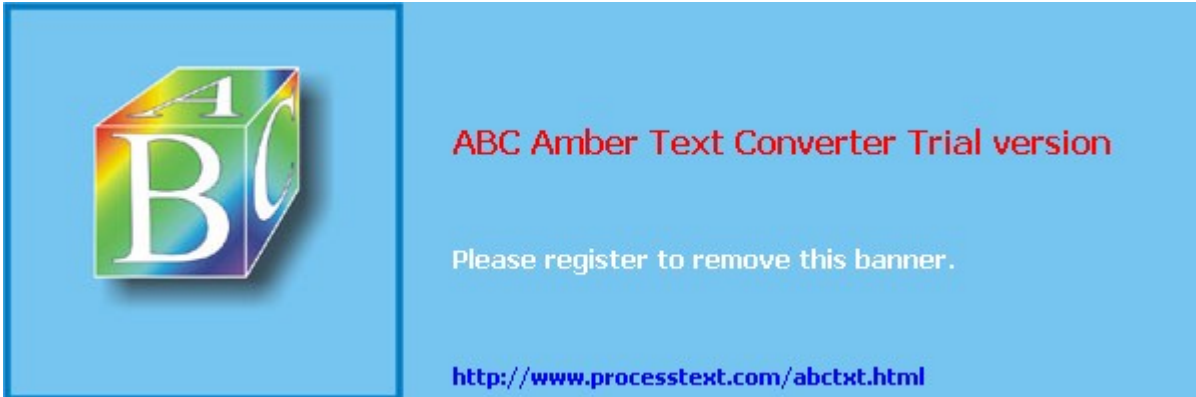
But Walrafen looked as humble now as he'd seemed confident mere hours earlier. "Perhaps I should have insisted he live with me in London." He motioned impotently toward his uncle's body. "Certainly I should never have permitted him to come to this, so frail and weak."

Aubrey shook her head. "Oh, he was not weak, my lord," she gently countered. "The spirit and the flesh are two vastly different things, and the Major was as strong a man as ever drew the breath of life. Still, he'd grown weary, I think, of this mortal coil."

“Do you think so?” whispered the earl.

Aubrey was treading on thin ice, and she knew it. “A soldier sees the worst of mankind, my lord,” she finally answered. “And he lives ever after with the horrors of war; with an ugliness the rest of us cannot begin to comprehend. Their very bravery shields the rest of us from that ugliness, but our soldiers pay an awful price. And if they do not die in battle, they sometimes die at home, a little at a time. We must never forget that. We must always remember what a debt we owe them.”

“How wise you sound, Mrs. Montford,” he said.



“And how compassionate. Was your husband, by chance, a military man?”

Aubrey shook her head. She did not dare mention her father, or how he’d died.

They fell silent for a long moment. “Thank you, Mrs. Montford,” he said quietly.

Walrafen turned from his uncle’s coffin and walked away. Aubrey lingered to say one last prayer. Her cheerless task complete, she left. But to her shock, the earl still stood in the shadows of the corridor.

Tonight, without the formality of his coat, Walrafen looked a little less civilized. He wore a plain white shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows to reveal a pair of fine, well-muscled forearms. He must box, she thought. Or fence, at the very least? Suddenly she wondered what he was doing, just standing in the passageway staring at her.

“Do you wish to remain, my lord?” she asked, confused. “I can send Ida away if you want privacy.”

Lord Walrafen fell into step beside her. “No, I am finished,” he said quietly. “I was waiting, really, for you.”

Aubrey looked at him, instantly wary. The quiet intimacy they had shared in the saloon began to fade. “You are up quite late, are you not?” the earl continued.

“As are you, my lord.”

Their steps echoed hollowly in the vaulted stone passageway. “You have arranged for servants to sit with my uncle,” he murmured. “Thank you.”

She looked at him oddly, never slowing her pace. “Some may think it quaint, my lord, but I think it a proper sign of respect.”

“That matters greatly to you, does it not, Mrs. Montford?”

“That things be done properly? Yes.”

He stopped abruptly. She followed suit, for she'd little choice. This part of the castle was lit by wall sconces alternating with tall, arching windows, and in the flickering light, he held her gaze with a strange intensity. "I am not a bad man, Mrs. Montford," he said quietly.

Aubrey was taken aback. "I hardly think you need prove yourself to me, my lord," she murmured, lightly lifting both brows.

He smiled faintly. "Why is it, then, that when I am with you, you make me feel as though I ought?"

Aubrey felt her posture stiffen. "My apologies, my lord, if I have ever done so."

Apparently, he did not mean to let her off the hook easily. "Mrs. Montford, why did you not tell me your son had been hurt when the tower fell?"

A strange mix of emotions swept over her, fierce and sudden. "My son's welfare is hardly your concern, my lord," she said more harshly than she'd intended.

"That is quite untrue," he replied. "He lives beneath my roof. If I did not concern myself with his welfare, I'd be a heartless man indeed, and you'd have every right to think ill of me. But as it is, you don't. Do you know what I believe, Mrs. Montford?"

"I'm sure, my lord, that it is none of my business." She stepped away, and a shaft of moonlight from one of the tall clerestory windows spilt across her shoulder.

"I wonder, Mrs. Montford, if you hid it from me so that you wouldn't have to admit that I do care," he whispered. "Sometimes, perhaps, it is easier for you to think me heartless."

"Really, my lord, I scarce think of you at all."

"Oh," he said, lifting one brow. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Realizing what she'd just said, she blanched. "I mean to say, sir, that I strive to do my duty, and to give satisfaction. But beyond that—"

"Yes, yes." He cut her off gently. "Look, let's not quarrel. I was grateful for your kindness tonight. And I just want you to know I'm sorry about your son. My inattention contributed to his accident, and for that, I shall never forgive myself."

She dropped her gaze and stared at the floor. "Iain is here on your sufferance, my lord," she whispered. "Do you think I don't realize that?"

"Mrs. Montford, your child is welcome in my house," he said softly. "He always has been. And I pray that he makes a full recovery."

Aubrey fought an inexplicable urge to flee. "Dr. Crenshaw assures me he shall," she said. "Now I must bid you good night, my lord. I am on my way down to the kitchens." She curtsied to him again, then hastily turned to go.

Giles laid his hand fully on her shoulder and felt Aubrey tremble beneath his touch. "Please wait," he whispered.

Of course, she did so. She worked for him.

In the flickering light Giles watched her face carefully, studying its every turn. Sometimes he thought he saw flashes of joy in her, though they never seemed to quite break through. Then again, who was he to

judge joy in another?

“Aubrey,” he said quietly. “That is your Christian name, isn’t it? I find it remarkably beautiful.”

She cut him a strange, sidelong glance, but said nothing.

He raised his hand uncertainly, then lowered it again. “I just want to look at you for a moment,” he rasped. “You seem . . . constantly in motion. Or constantly hidden in the shadows. Constantly . . . I don’t know, something which frustrates me.”

When she made no answer, he held her gaze intently and went on. “May I ask you a strange question, Mrs. Montford?”

He could sense her sudden anxiety. “Yes?”

“Yesterday, in my bedchamber—” He stopped, swallowed hard, then went on. “I felt there was something—I don’t know—something which passed between us. When I handed you your coffee. Might I ask, did you feel . . . anything?”

She shook her head slowly. “No,” she murmured. “Nothing I recall.”

She still stood obediently in the spilling moonlight, her spine erect, her hair curling softly about her face, the weariness of the ages etched about her beautiful, knowing eyes. She looked wary, too. Oh, yes. She knew, he fancied, just what he was thinking.

He wanted her.

How in God’s name had they come to this so swiftly, he and his haughty housekeeper? Just this morning he’d felt quite exasperated with her. She was his servant, for pity’s sake.

But servitude could be a double-edged sword. His eyes drifted over her again, and the power taunted him. The power he held over her life and livelihood. Never had he taken pleasure in the influence of his position. He did not do so now—but only a monk could remain un-mindful of the advantages which could be his for the asking. Or the taking, perhaps, was a more honest way of putting it. It was an awful, thrilling, almost sickening temptation.

She’d been crying, he thought, at some point during her quiet vigil tonight. In the feeble light he could still see the tracks of her tears, faint against her alabaster skin. Good God, he needed to know. What did she think of him? Did she hate him? Did she feel anything for him? Had she ever been his uncle’s lover? Had she?

No, that wasn’t even the question any longer, was it? The question was, would she be his lover? Just how distasteful would she find it to come to his bed? Just how badly did she need her position? The direction of his thoughts made Giles’s skin crawl. What a nightmare this visit to Cardow was becoming. How could he be torn apart by so many disjointed emotions? How could he feel both grief and lust? Guilt and regret?

He did not know. He knew only that she seemed to speak to some deep, gaping emptiness inside him. In the moonlight he allowed himself to drink her in, felt his breath catch and his groin thicken. He could not stop himself from lifting his hand and slowly stroking his knuckles across her cheek.

“Mrs. Montford,” he whispered. “Do you feel anything now?”

She did not move, she did not speak, nor did she lower her gaze. Instead, she challenged him with it. But

he could feel her nonetheless, trembling beneath his touch. He heard her breath hitch and watched her nostrils delicately flare. And he realized, abruptly and awfully, that he wanted Aubrey Montford more than he'd ever wanted anyone or anything. Wanted her, perhaps, badly enough to do the one thing he'd always abhorred in other men; force a weaker person to his will. Not physically, no. But subtly, by power and influence. It was almost worse.

No. He would not do it. It would be madness. He did not know her; did not even know if he could fully trust her. Indeed, his every instinct screamed that she was hiding something. Still, even the most noble of his life's causes, the things he'd fought hardest for, seemed suddenly to pale in comparison to his craving for her. Raw desire and hot, burning shame coursed through him, pulsing and throbbing like the very blood in his veins. And for the first time in his life, Giles truly understood what a dangerous thing lust could be.

This had to end. He dropped his hand. "I should bid you good night, Mrs. Montford," he said quietly. "I thank you for the service you did my uncle tonight. It was a measure of great respect."

"He was a man worthy of great respect," she answered.

Aubrey did not go down to the kitchens. Instead, angry and shaken, she waited until the earl had vanished into the darkness of the stairwell, then went straight to her private sitting room. By the time she reached it, however, she was shivering as if ill. For the first time in memory, she did not go directly into Iain's little bedchamber to assure herself he slept soundly. Instead, with trembling hands, she set her kettle on the hob and sat down at her desk, clasping her hands between her knees.

Oh, God, she thought, squeezing her eyes shut. Was she going to survive this? Was she? Tonight's encounter had been the worst yet. How could a man behave with such duality of character? How could he act so humbly, so honorably—particularly when one had expected lordly disdain—and yet in the next moment look at her with such heat in his eyes? Aubrey opened her lashes and felt the warmth of his caress sliding across her cheek. The questions he'd asked that morning in his bedchamber came back to haunt her.

Is there any reason you feel you mightn't be able to meet all my needs? Or give me satisfactory service in any way?

Even then, she'd wondered if a deeper meaning lay behind his words. She remembered looking at him, at the state of his undress, at his beautiful ice-cold eyes, and the stubbled black beard shadowing that unnaturally handsome face, and she'd felt the earth shift beneath her feet. Yet she had said nothing. Nothing save humbly promising to do her best. Because she'd had no choice.

In fact, she had none now. If the Earl of Walrafen knocked on her door at this very moment and ordered her upstairs to his bed, she would have little recourse. He could order her to do anything. Anything. The thought set her to shivering again, and she wasn't sure why. She thought of them lying naked together on his wide, canopied bed in a tangle of sheets. The image brought with it a mix of mortification and restlessness which she did not wholly understand.

Aubrey was not naïve. Such things happened in great houses every day. At least the earl was not married. At least it would not be adultery. That was some small comfort, she supposed. And if she simply refused him, would he dismiss her on the spot? Would he simply hand her over to that beady-eyed justice of the peace and let him do with her as he pleased? And how long would it take Higgins to uncover the truth?

Murderess. It was a sobriquet she'd worn like a noose once before, and she could still feel the weight of it round her neck. It would slip tight with ever more ease a second time. Perhaps she should snatch Iain again and run? She'd saved a little money, still had some of her mother's jewels. And the watch. But that was Iain's, and it would be dangerous to sell it now. Aubrey's heart still beat in her throat. She felt cornered, afraid to move. Surely running would imply she were guilty of something?

A lifetime ago she'd sworn on Muireall's deathbed to care for Iain as if he were her own. To protect him, no matter what. She had been glad—no, eager—to do it. And Lord Manders, ever the rich, spoilt bon vivant, had been glad to leave the job to someone. Anyone. Raising a thin, asthmatic child, particularly one who looked far too much like his dead wife, was not a priority in his life. And Aubrey had been quick—perhaps too quick—to chastise him for it.

But not even Lord Manders had deserved what had happened to him. It had been a nightmare; the story of Cain and Abel all over again. So much quiet jealousy and seething resentment. Watching. Plotting. Wealth, land, and possessions beyond most men's dreams—and all of it had belonged to Lord Manders. It had been his birthright. And now it was his son's.

But that was a legacy Iain could not yet claim. Which begged the earlier question. What was best for Iain now? To stay here, at Cardow, of course. Iain had been happy and healthy here. Away from the soot and chill of Edinburgh, awash in the clean sea air of Somerset's rugged coast, the child had thrived. Moreover, the Earl of Walrafen could protect them. He was suspicious of her, yes. But he did not think her a murderess; that much was apparent in his face. She could play that to her advantage. He could be used, too, could he not? Would it kill her to give in to him if she had to? Would it be all that distasteful?

Oh, God. Aubrey was half afraid it would not be distasteful at all. She did not like—or rather, liked too well—the sensations his touch stirred in her body. Warm, wicked, twisting sensations which must surely be glorious and sinful. But Aubrey was not afraid of sin. She'd committed more than a few in her twenty-six short years, and she'd do it again if she had to. Besides, it was not as if she were saving herself. After all, what for? Her old life, and the future she'd once blithely expected, were but a dream now. It would be years before Iain could take care of himself.

She thought again of the Earl of Walrafen, of the pleasure his touch promised, and she was terrified. Terrified of the loss of Cardow, her sanctuary. And terrified, sometimes, of herself. She ached for the touch of another human being. For someone to hold, and be held by. And sometimes, when she looked into Walrafen's eyes, she wanted a different sort of touch altogether. Yes, he was handsome. And probably well aware of it, too. He was also far younger than she had expected, little more than thirty, perhaps.

Somehow, Aubrey had expected an older, more portentous sort of man. Instead, the earl seemed quick and shrewd. He was tall, broad-shouldered, but almost too slender. His hair was nearly black and absent even a hint of gray, while his face was all smooth, hard planes and finely chiseled bones. A high brow. A thin nose. An aristocrat to the bone. And a man accustomed to getting just what he wanted. His glittering gray eyes held no hint of a smile, and seemed to take everything in with one arrogant sweep.

No, she had not missed the way his gaze followed her when they passed one another in the corridors. She had not mistaken that jolt of emotion which had leapt between them when he touched her hand that morning in his bedchamber. Oh, yes, she'd noticed it.

He was not a bad man.

He'd told her that tonight. But strangely, she'd already begun to believe it. He was sorry about Iain. And she believed that, too. She had seen him bow over his uncle's body and pray for a very long time. It had



not been a pretense. She'd seen the welling of dampness in his eyes.

He was not a bad man. In many ways, he was a very good man. God knew she'd seen worse. Moreover, Walrafen was one of the most powerful men in England. He would make a formidable ally indeed. Or would he? Walrafen was a man of principle; a man sworn to uphold the laws of the land, and she'd already broken a great many.

The kettle was boiling now. Mechanically Aubrey got up and made tea. She had finally stopped shaking. She had reasoned away the terror as she always did. With cold, rational thought. She would survive this. She would reconcile herself to it, and do what she must. Iain would be safe. Somehow, it would all work out. She had to believe that.

Besides, Walrafen would not tarry long in Somerset. He hated Cardow, did he not? Doubtless, he found its isolation, the very thing she'd come to love, tedious. She would not need to warm his bed long, if at all. As soon as his uncle's affairs were in order, he and Lord and Lady Delacourt would return to the glamour of London. It would likely be another three years before Lord Walrafen returned to his family seat. That was a comforting thought. And if she let it slip from her grasp, she might well go insane.

## Chapter Six

### In Which Lord Walrafen Behaves Badly

The day of Elias's funeral passed quickly for Giles, which was the only good thing to be said of a day in which so much grief had to be borne. The funeral was as bad as one could have expected given the circumstances of Elias's death and the enduring guilt Giles carried down the hill to the graveyard. To make matters worse, the keening wails of Aunt Harriet as the men departed with the coffin seemed to carry on the wind halfway to the village. Giles tried to tell himself that her anguish was real; that she was burying the last of her brothers, and that she was overcome by the pain, but he was not at all sure he believed it.

He did not have to suffer her theatrics much longer. By the following morning Cecilia and the clever Mrs. Montford had packed all his relations back up again and sent them rolling down Cardow Tor with warm bricks beneath their feet and wicker lunch baskets on their laps. Giles was a little sad to realize there wasn't a one of them he'd truly miss.

He stood at his study window watching as the last carriage, Great-uncle Frederick's, rattled over the drawbridge and disappeared round the bend. Suddenly he felt angry that his family had been so detached, both emotionally and geographically, from one another. These last few days, he could have used a dose of sincere comfort. A little good advice. Instead, he'd borne this sorrow as he'd borne every other in his life. Alone.

There had been a time, briefly, when he would have turned to Cecilia. But now she had Delacourt and two lovely children. When he had a family, Giles abruptly decided, they would stay together, quarrels and estrangements be damned. Cardow had housed whole armies. Surely two or three extended families could peaceably exist within its wings?

He realized suddenly that it was the first time in two decades he'd thought of Cardow as home. And it was the first time he'd ever thought of staying, or of having a family here. The first time, since losing Cecilia to his father, that he'd sincerely considered his own future on any personal level. His parliamentary career he'd crafted with utmost care. He'd done his time in the Commons, excelled in the Lords. He possessed, as much as any man, the trust of the King and his counsel. Already, he'd turned down several key government posts, including Lord Privy Seal. He was biding his time for just the right

place of power. But he'd made not one plan for his personal life.

Find yourself a wife, Max had suggested.

And all his protestations aside, Giles did need an heir. He was thirty-three years old, and the reality was, his long-lost cousins might be living or dead. They might be scoundrels. Bank robbers. Stockbrokers. Cowboys, for pity's sake. God knew America bred plenty of all those things. And suddenly it was not a risk he was perfectly sure he wanted to take with Cardow and the earldom.

He stared into the autumn morning, which was clear for once, and watched as a fishing boat went trawling up the channel. No, he could not quite see himself taking a wife. What a damned shame that was. Only recently had he got his blood truly up over a woman. And she was his housekeeper. A woman he'd barely touched. Oh, he'd taken more lovers than he could count, but the raw emotions he felt for Mrs. Montford—no, for Aubrey—were complex and confusing.

Ever since arriving here, he'd been able to feel her. He could sense her presence in this house, his home. It was as if she'd become a part of it. He could almost feel her moving from place to place as she went about her daily duties. Often, his senses would heighten just before she entered a room or turned a corner, even before he could hear the faint jingle of the keys at her waist. And then a strange, nameless longing would seize him, twisting deep into his belly. It was... primeval. Aching. Breathtaking. But he hid these feelings, hid them well, though they were with him always, even when his thoughts were elsewhere.

Just then, as if to remind him that his thoughts should be elsewhere, the mantel clock struck nine, and Ogilvy came promptly into the room, a huge pile of papers in hand. "Good morning, my lord," said his clerk brightly. "We've a busy day ahead."

Giles stared at the material Ogilvy was laying out across his desk and realized, reluctantly, that his musings about Aubrey had to slide onto the back burner of his mind, where they would no doubt simmer for the rest of the day. What a pity he could not simply marry her. It was she whom he wanted to bed, after all. Certainly the woman had the spirit and self-possession to make a fine politician's wife. But alas, a peer with political aspirations did not wed his housekeeper.

"Well, what do we have on the schedule today, Ogilvy?" Giles forced himself to smile.

"Your J.P. wishes a meeting whenever you can fit him in," said the clerk. "The Prime Minister wishes you to review his response to Lord Grey's proposals on parliamentary reform. Then there's luncheon with Lord and Lady Delacourt. And at two you're to review the household accounts and estate books with Mrs. Montford."

Ah! thought Giles. Now that was something to look forward to. An afternoon alone with his quarry.

She was nervous. Very nervous. Aubrey paced the floor of her spacious sitting room, sliding her damp palms down her skirts. That man—Higgins, the justice of the peace—had been in the castle all morning. At least he'd had the decency to stay away on the day of the Major's funeral. But today he had insisted upon questioning everyone again. He had upset her routine, disturbed her staff, and set their tongues to wagging anew. And now it was almost two o'clock.

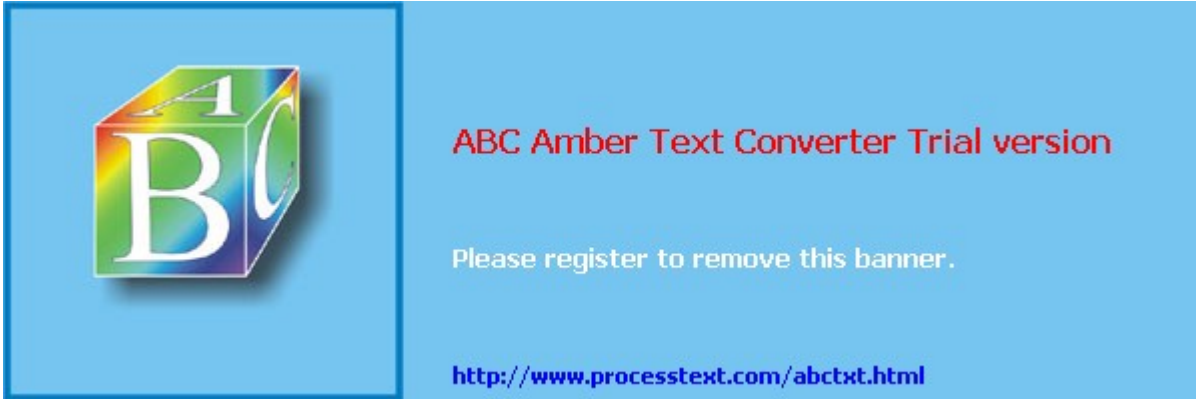
At two o'clock things would go from bad to worse. The Earl of Walrafen was to review her accounts. She was not worried about her bookkeeping; it was exemplary. Nor was she worried he might find fault in her management of the house or estate. Oh, he might rant and rave a bit over some paltry expense or decision, but in the end, he would do what he always did; relent, apologize, and admit she was right. And

she was right. Almost always. Aubrey closed her eyes and tried to remember that.

And then there was a knock on her door, and she spun about to see him, his broad shoulders filling the expanse of her doorway.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Montford,” he said in his low yet commanding voice.

“Good afternoon, my lord,” she managed. “The ledgers are ready.”



He stepped fully into her room, seemingly filling it. Today, the earl was dressed for the country, in high, polished hessians, snug buff breeches, and a dark brown coat which fit as if it had been sewn on. With his glittering gray eyes, and hard, clean-shaven jaws, he looked every inch the rich, arrogant aristocrat.

For an instant, those glittering eyes drifted over her, and Aubrey felt warmth spring to her cheeks. Yanking her every fiber under control, she escorted him across the room and politely showed him the two stacks of ledgers, green for the estate books, brown for the household accounts.

It was very uncomfortable standing shoulder to shoulder over her small desk with him. Perhaps because his clothing was always so simply tailored, she'd not realized quite how large a man he was. Though his body was slender, his shoulders really were quite broad and obviously unpadded. He smelled of soap and very expensive cologne. She was tall, but he topped her by a good six inches. His hands were long-fingered and quick. His mind was quick, too. He grasped her method of accounting easily and rocked back on his heels to study her.

Aubrey tried to smile. “So as you see,” she concluded, “we are using standardized entries for the household accounts, and a modified double entry system for the estate records. Because they are more complex, what with the various forms of income.”

“All is crystal clear, Mrs. Montford.” His voice was soft. “You’ve a fine grasp of numbers.”

She stepped a little away from him then. “Thank you,” she said. “Shall I ring for a footman? It will be no inconvenience to do without the books for a few days. In your study you may peruse them at your leisure.”

He narrowed his gaze assessingly. “Madam, I have no leisure,” he said quietly. “I mean to do it here and now. Is that a problem?”

So much for that ploy. She tried not to look rattled. “Of course not, my lord. What will you require? Pencils? Paper?”

He pointed at a folio tucked under his arm. “Tea,” he said, his silvery eyes still watching her. “Just a pot

of strong tea, and the occasional splash of milk. Will that be a problem?"

Her blush heightened. "Of course not, my lord." She went at once to the hob.

"Will anything about my presence in this room be a problem?" he asked, as if trying to pin her down on some small point.

"Certainly not." Awkwardly she put the kettle on and snatched up her small pewter jug. "I shall just send to the dairy for fresh milk."

Lord Walrafen settled down at Aubrey's desk, looking impossibly large in her dainty chair. But just as she touched the doorknob, a sharp knock sounded, and Betsy came into the room. She stopped short on the threshold when she saw the earl.

"Pray do not mind me," he said, motioning her inside. "Mrs. Montford, can you manage at your worktable for the nonce?"

Aubrey put down her jug. "Indeed, yes. Come in, Betsy." In the narrow room Aubrey was forced to lean around Lord Walrafen to take up her daily workbook and pencil. Again, the scent of him teased at her nostrils. She shook off the sensation, and Betsy followed her to the oak worktable in the center of the room. "Have you taken the linen count in the guest rooms?"

"Yes, ma'am. We've the ten beds stripped, and just one pillow slip for repair."

"Excellent." Aubrey wet the tip of her pencil and sat down. "And who is to do the holland covers? I want everything on in the west wing by the time the late sun hits."

"Lettie and Ida have nearly finished, ma'am," reported Betsy. "Do you wish the draperies covered as well?"

Aubrey considered it. There was no reason to assume Cardow would see houseguests again in the near future. "Yes, the draperies, too. Tell Lettie to be careful with the pins, please. And brush all the carpets, but do not sand or beat them unless absolutely necessary."

"I'll tell 'er, ma'am," she answered. "And Mrs. Jenks wishes to know what to tell the butcher for the rest of the week. Do you wish the order cut back?"

"Yes, by half, please, since most everyone has gone," said Aubrey. "But there could yet be callers, and we have Lord and Lady Delacourt."

"They are leaving tomorrow," came a deep voice from the desk.

Aubrey jumped at the sound. "I beg your pardon?"

The earl smiled faintly. "You needn't plan to feed them past tomorrow," he said. "I've told them not to wait on me."

"You—you are not leaving with them?" Aubrey managed. "I mean to say, you are planning to remain? Here?"

Lord Walrafen lightly lifted his brows. "I'd rather not put up at the King's Arms," he said dryly. "I hear they've trouble with rats."

Aubrey stood in such haste she knocked her pencil into the floor. "I did not mean to suggest it, my lord."

But Lord Walrafen's expression was suddenly sly. "Now, why is it, Mrs. Montford, I wonder if you wish to be rid of me?"

And then she saw the earl's lip begin to twitch. He was watching her from one corner of his eye, even as he tallied up a long column of numbers. And then the twitch was a full-fledged grin. Suddenly Betsy let go a spurt of laughter.

"Betsy!"

The housemaid's face went red with effort. "Sorry, ma'am."

Then Lord Walrafen began laughing. Truly laughing, looking from her to Betsy with his pencil hanging limply from one hand. "Really, Mrs. Montford, it's your own fault," he said. "The expression on your face is quite priceless. I seem to have come and set your kingdom on its ear, and now I don't have the good grace to take myself away again when I ought. Is that it?"

"Certainly not!"

Walrafen was still chuckling. "Ah, whatever are you up to, I wonder?" he said almost to himself. "You and Pevsner aren't smuggling off the coast again, are you? Some of my ancestors did that, you know, and made quite a tidy profit."

"You are welcome, my lord, to stay as long as you wish," said Aubrey. "I said nothing to suggest otherwise."

Lord Walrafen was grinning at Betsy now. "I think she's hiding something, Betsy." He paused to wink. "What do you think?"

"Oh, I think I'd best go back to work," said Betsy.

"Good idea," said the earl, still dangling his pencil. "But fetch me some milk for my tea first, will you? Mrs. Montford seems to have forgotten me."

But Mrs. Montford had not forgotten him, Giles soon realized. And she did not forget him during the whole of the two hours he spent ensconced in her tiny sitting room, alternately reviewing her bookkeeping and watching her work. Her interactions with the servants were smooth and professional. Her accounting was the same. He could find no fault in either.

Nor could he find fault in the way her eyes kept drifting to him when she thought he was not looking. She was looking, and often, too. There was an undeniable tension between them, something almost palpable in the room. Yet she went about her duties with her usual energy and self-possession. She was all smooth grace and lithe femininity, moving through the room with light, quick steps, her black skirts swishing about her ankles.

He liked watching her, he realized. Today, her thick auburn hair seemed somehow softer, and in the privacy of her quarters, she wore it uncovered. The hollows and turns of her long neck could have been sculpted from the creamiest shade of marble. And as always, those shoulders set so rigidly back made her bearing almost regal in its elegance. From time to time he would glance surreptitiously up from the ledgers, and watch her face shift as first one issue then another was laid before her by her staff. Sometimes her brows would snap together in obvious consternation. But once or twice, he saw her smile, and when she did, it warmed the room.

He was skimming the last of the ledgers when the second housemaid, a girl called Lettie, came in for clean tablecloths. He watched Aubrey go to one of the tall cupboards, which lined one wall of her sitting room, and unlock it with a key from her waist. She stretched up, very high up, and Giles watched, intrigued, as her skirts flattened over a very delightful derriere.

He thought of filling his hands with those shapely mounds and his mouth went dry. In fact, he was on his fifth cup of tea, but it wasn't helping much. Aubrey handed a stack of snow-white linen to the girl, and she turned to go.

Giles stood abruptly. "Lettie," he said to her. "We do not wish to be disturbed for the next hour."

She jumped when he spoke. "Yes, my lord."

"Inform the household staff, if you please," he said. "I need to ask Mrs. Montford a number of questions about these accounts. Tell Betsy she is in charge."

Mrs. Montford shot him a dark look, but said nothing. Lettie curtsied deeply, clutched her pile of clean tablecloths to her breast, and darted out. Mrs. Montford lingered by the tall linen cupboard. As soon as the door was shut, Giles crossed the room to stand before her. Mrs. Montford seemed to shrink back against the narrow cupboard door.

"I think we should move the books to the worktable, my lord," she said, her voice suddenly unsteady. "There is more room there."

"I'll get them," said Giles. "They are too heavy for you."

But despite his good intentions—they had been good, hadn't they?—he made no move to pick up the books. Instead, he stepped incrementally closer and slipped one finger beneath her chin.

She looked up at him through a fan of thick, dark lashes, then swiftly dropped her gaze. She was beautiful. Exquisitely so. Suddenly he burned to take her mouth with his and drive his fingers into her pile of rich, red hair. As if his hand possessed a will of its own, Giles lifted her chin and forced her eyes back to his.

"Mrs. Montford?" he said softly. "Perhaps we ought to stop playing games with one another?"

Much of her color was gone now, and both her shoulder blades were set against the linen cupboard. He had her trapped between his body and the door.

"W-What do you want of me?" she whispered.

He moved another inch closer, until he could feel the warmth of her breasts against his coat. "At this particular moment?" His words were oddly thick. "Not your fine housekeeping skills."

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

That made kissing her inevitable. Holding her chin firmly, Giles lowered his lips to hers. She did not fight him, nor did she kiss him back. Instead, she stood, rigid and stoic as his mouth moved over hers, nipping, sucking, and tasting her lips thoroughly.

It occurred to him that his actions were not his, but those of a rash, undisciplined man. He had never been either. It did not seem to matter. Lust shot through him, molten and searing. He molded his body to hers then, and she trembled faintly against him, but not, he feared, from lust. Instead, she was almost like a virgin, untutored by a man's touch.

He should have put a stop to it then. But for once in his life, his self-discipline failed him. He wanted her, simply and desperately. He slanted his lips over hers again, stilling her to his touch by sliding one hand into the hair at the nape of her neck.

“Open your mouth,” he murmured.

Obediently she did so, but he could still feel her trembling. Giles surged inside her mouth, sinuously stroking his tongue back and forth along hers. She seemed not to know how to kiss, but it little mattered. Her mouth was warm, her breath faintly spicy. He heard himself groan as he deepened the kiss, so lost in the sleek, hot feel of her, he barely noticed when she began to respond. But then he realized that small, delicate fingers were inching round his waist. Their warmth was searing his flesh. Then her tongue touched his, tentative but unmistakable.

Still shivering, she rose cautiously onto her toes. It was a small response. But it was enough. Blood began to thunder in his head. Almost experimentally, she turned her head to one side, and delved deeper into his mouth. He felt wild and urgent, like some animal unleashed. His eyes shot toward the long, sturdy worktable.

For an instant, he considered throwing up her skirts and simply taking her there, in the bright shaft of afternoon sun which slanted through the room. He could imagine how the light would heat her hair to rich, red fire as he pulled the pins from it. Could imagine how her bared shoulders would look, pale alabaster against the wood, her small breasts exposed, her nipples taut and dusky. He reached up to cup one in his hand.

But that would not do. Indeed, this would not do. The door, he realized, was not locked.

His timing was almost perfect. Behind them, the doorknob rattled. Aubrey tore her mouth from his, shoving hard at his shoulders. “Stop,” she panted. “Get away!”

They sprang apart just as Jenks came into the room, the crook of one arm filled with a bundle of long, sword-like foliage topped with large white blooms. Coloring furiously, the gardener dropped his eyes.

Oh, God, thought Giles. The damage is done.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” mumbled Jenks. “You said to lay out the gladiola in here until Ida washed the vases.”

“Indeed, yes.” Aubrey leapt from her position by the cupboards. “On the worktable, Jenks, if you please. I was just—just—”

“Trying to get a spider out of her hair,” interjected Giles. “I saw it come down from the ceiling and thought to brush it away.”

A spider? Lord, what a bounder. Jenks didn’t believe a word of it, either.

“I’m told a spider’s bite can be quite dangerous,” he added lamely.

“Aye, well, that’d be true enough.” The gardener lifted his gaze from the floor, but avoided his master’s eyes. “Will there be ought else, ma’am, before me and Phelps start on the parterre hedges?”

Giles snatched up his leather folio and strode toward the door. “I’ll just be off, then, Mrs. Montford,” he said. “My questions can wait.”

She did not look at him. Her face was deathly white. “Yes, my lord.”

“Good day to you both,” said Giles.

“Put the flowers down, Jenks,” he heard Aubrey say as he left. “Anywhere. Then please just go.”

Quietly Giles closed the door, then hesitated. The passageway through the servants’ wing was mercifully empty. He shut his eyes, leaned back against the cool stone, and pressed his fingers to his forehead. Good Lord, what a hash he’d made of that.

What had he been trying to do, anyway? And how could he be so hopelessly inept at it? Half the gentlemen of his acquaintance probably seduced their female servants on a regular basis. And yet, the first time he so much as kissed one, he was caught. Worse, he’d humiliated Aubrey.

Just then the hinges squeaked again, and Jenks came out into the stone passageway. Giles cleared his throat sharply. The gardener whipped around, his eyes narrowing.

“You were not mistaken, Jenks,” said the earl quietly. “I won’t insult your intelligence by pretending otherwise.”

“Reckon that’d be none o’ my business, my lord.” But his dark look said otherwise.

“No, it isn’t,” agreed the earl coolly. “But it is Mrs. Montford’s business.”

“I don’t carry tales, sir, if that’s your meaning.” His voice was grim.

Giles stepped nearer. “I know,” he answered. “So I’m bloody lucky it was you, and not one of the household staff. I forgot myself, Jenks, plain and simple. As you say, it is none of your business, but I wanted you to know that.”

Jenks eyed him narrowly. “Well, you can know this, my lord,” he said quietly. “Aubrey Montford is a good girl. And she has trouble enough round here as is.”

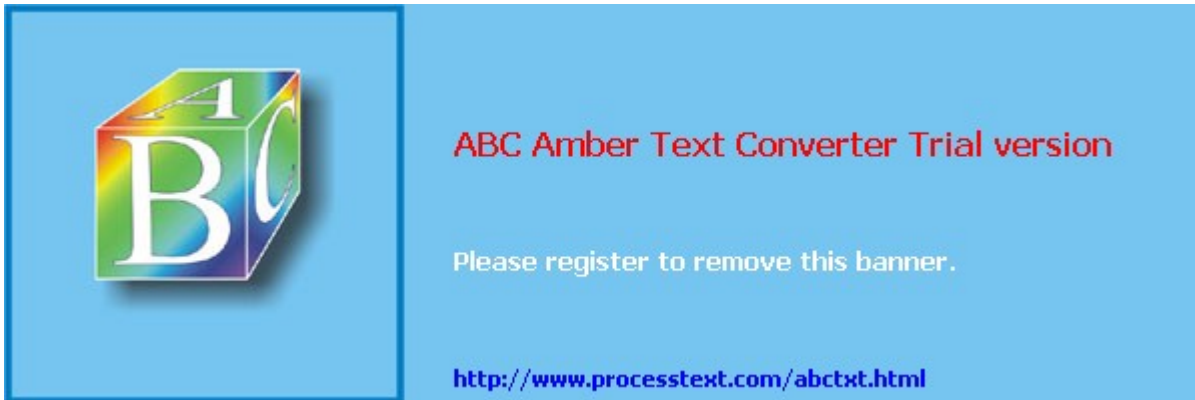
With that, the gardener slapped his cap back on his head and strode off down the corridor, leaving Giles to wallow in his emotional quagmire of lust, humiliation, and worse still, an almost breathtaking lack of remorse. But apparently Giles did not have sense enough to know when to cut his losses. As soon as Jenks disappeared into the lower bailey, he went directly back into the lion’s den, without even pausing to knock.

Aubrey could not believe it when Lord Walrafen stepped back inside her sitting room. Had the man no shame? Hadn’t he caused trouble enough? Apparently not. All long legs and masculine beauty, the earl strode across the floor as if he owned it. Which, of course, he did.

She jerked from her chair at the worktable and watched him warily.

He tossed his folio down with what looked like aristocratic disdain. “I spoke to Jenks,





” he said coolly. “You won’t have any trouble from that quarter.”

Something inside her seemed to snap. “Oh, you spoke to him—?” she hissed, circling from behind the table. “Why, how very lordly of you, sir. And just what did you tell him? Never to interrupt you whilst you’re debauching the staff?”

He looked at her in some surprise. Surprise which swiftly shifted to something else. He stalked closer, so close she could see flecks of ebony in his silvery gaze. “Madam, were I intent on debauching you, I’d have had your drawers round your ankles days ago,” he returned. “All I did was kiss you—and not entirely without your consent.”

“Why, how dare you!” Aubrey had quite forgotten her plan to keep her mouth shut. To cooperate. To do anything to keep her job. “How dare you lay the blame for your lapse at my door!”

The earl shrugged. “I’m sorry you were embarrassed,” he answered. “That was never my intent.”

“Oh, but you found me irresistible, so all must be forgiven?” she suggested cynically. “I suppose you were overcome with lust at the sight of my exceptional bookkeeping skills. Or was it my extraordinary way with the linen press?”

“Actually,” interjected the earl, “it was your arse, Aubrey. Your skirts cling to it most invitingly when you reach upward.”

Much of her color drained. “I see,” she whispered. “And like some ripe apple, my lord, I am to be yours for the plucking?”

Walrafen lifted one brow at her analogy. “Forgive me, my dear, but you did give that impression,” he answered. “But perhaps I was confused. Perhaps that was someone else’s tongue in my mouth?”

Instinct seized her. Aubrey drew back her hand to strike him.

The earl’s hand came up, quick as a cat on its prey, snaring her wrist and dragging her close. “Don’t even consider it, my dear,” he said, his voice low and ominous. “I’ve put up with a vast deal of insolence from you already.”

“Well put up with this, Lord Walrafen,” she whispered darkly. “I choose who shares my bed. No one commands it.”

Walrafen no longer looked so civilized. His eyes were dark, his mouth hard. Aubrey drew in a jagged breath, and with it came the scent of hot, angry male. His expensive cologne didn’t smell quite so refined now.

“As to your bed, Aubrey,” he whispered hotly against her ear, “perhaps you’d best remember who owns

it? And as to commands, yes, you are free to choose. So choose very, very wisely.”

“And I thought you were a gentleman,” she whispered.

He drew back, his gaze running over her face. “A politician,” he corrected. “A real gentleman wouldn’t know what to do with you.”

“Oh, and you do?”

Challenge fired his eyes. Walrafen jerked her fully against him. “I think I’m catching on,” he said, right before he kissed her.

Aubrey had found his first kiss overwhelming. This one was emotion unleashed. A firestorm of hot, rushing blood and blinding light. Walrafen opened his mouth over hers and took her, invading her mouth, pressing her back against the worktable until she felt the wood at her back.

She fought him, beating her hands against his shoulders and twisting her face away. When that yielded nothing, she tried to bite him. He caught her by both wrists, and forced them against the tabletop, pinning her with his body. Aubrey felt the evidence of his desire, hard and unmistakable. For an instant, their gazes locked.

Walrafen was trying to catch his breath. “Don’t fight me, Aubrey,” he growled.

Her breath, too, was short. “Let me go.”

But something in his eyes shocked her. She saw in him a ferocity, a wild, hot madness she could never have imagined. But there was pain, too. She had hurt him. Still, he looked like a man who got what he wanted. Good Lord, she’d been playing with fire.

“Just let me go,” she whispered again.

But even as his grip was loosening, his lips were moving toward her again, and her eyes—her treacherous eyes—were slowly closing in surrender. “Are you sure that’s what you want?” His voice was like sin and silk. “Are you, Aubrey?”

Her body went limp against the wood. Oh, God! That was the trouble, wasn’t it? She was not sure. Any human contact, any sort of emotion—yes, even lust and anger—felt better than the nothing she’d been living with.

That moment’s hesitation was her undoing. The earl kissed her again, his lips soft and warm, melting over her own. A lover’s caress. Aubrey was drowning. Drowning in confusion and hunger. Lazily he let his lips move over hers, tasting and sliding, his breath warming her skin. His fingers were threading lightly through the hair at the nape of her neck, and vaguely, Aubrey realized it was tumbling down.

He had released her wrists, she finally realized. His hand slid from her hair to her face, cupping one cheek as if she were some fragile piece of porcelain. His touch was warm, his arm gentle as he pulled her effortlessly up from the table. The arm came around her, tight and secure, and inexplicably, she wanted to let her weight—and the weight of the world—sag against his solid body.

“Aubrey, I’m sorry,” he whispered against her mouth. “Oh, Aubrey...”

His lips found her neck, his mouth open and hot. He let one hand roam down the swell of her buttocks, smoothly caressing her. When she did not resist, he gathered her skirts in his fist and inched them up slowly. Cool air breezed across her stockings. With his long, warm fingers, the earl cupped one hand

beneath her hip, curving his fingers into the plumpness and lifting her body against his. Again, Aubrey felt the heat of him, the jutting strength of him, straining through his clothing.

Suddenly horse hooves clattered into the bailey beyond her window and a wagon rumbled past. The racket cut into his consciousness. As if waking from a dream, he lifted his mouth and looked down at her. His hand went slack, and her skirts slithered back down her legs.

Aubrey stared at him for a long, silent moment. “What do you want, my lord?” she whispered. “Just what are you asking of me?”

His eyes searched her face, his expression that of a man both torn and confused. “I hardly know,” he said, as if to himself. “I am sorry, Aubrey. I . . . I had better go.”

The earl turned and strode toward the door, his tread heavy. His shoulders were stooped, his hands fisted tightly at his sides. In an instant the door opened and shut, and he was gone. Aubrey wrapped her arms about herself, went to the cold hearth, and set her forehead against the mantel. The odor of old ashes was bitter in her throat as she inhaled raggedly. She had wanted him. Oh, yes. Despite his overbearing arrogance, she’d been willing. He had not been wrong in guessing that, had he? Which made another truth chillingly clear: if ever the Earl of Walrafen did order her to his bed, only her pride would suffer. The rest of her, apparently, would find it no hard task to go.

## Chapter Seven

### Interlude in a Rose Garden

Shortly before dinner, Giles found himself standing in the castle gardens, with no clear notion of how he’d come to be there. His afternoon had been plagued by an awful mix of guilt and anticipation, like a keen blade constantly needling at him. But what in heaven’s name was he anticipating?

Everything. Anything. The next word she might speak. The next breath she might draw. Just a glimpse of her, a mere exchange of sidelong glances, seemed as if it might be manna from the heavens. The truth was pathetic. He stopped, laid his hand on a stone gatepost, and closed his eyes. Lord, he had wanted her. And she had wanted him, or at least her body had. Their last kiss had been so different, so much more dangerous in its intensity.

Still, her use of the word command stung. Her assumptions had hurt him; had made him want to lash out. Given his high-handed behavior, he deserved worse. But why had she chosen that phrase, when her own desire had been so apparent? Still, he’d seduced Aubrey—or come damned close. He was not fool enough to delude himself about her reluctance. Or his shameful behavior. A gentleman would not have pressed her so aggressively. A gentleman would never have left such an ugly implication—that word command—hanging in the air.

Despite his claim otherwise, Giles had always thought himself every inch a gentleman. But perhaps he’d been mistaken. Or perhaps he’d finally run slam into the one thing capable of stripping away his civilized veneer. That he did not wish to consider.

Suddenly he looked up to see the walled rose garden rising up before him. The evergreens surrounding it had grown so high and verdant, he almost did not recognize it. And yet it seemed like a perfect place to lose himself for a moment.

At the entrance he lifted the ornate iron latch and pushed the gate open on shrieking hinges. Inside, the old brick walls did not seem quite so tall anymore, but otherwise, the garden was unchanged from his

boyhood. He almost fancied he could smell the peppery-sweet scent of Mr. Jenks's prized China roses. The walls were covered with those of the climbing variety, while the neatly sculpted beds held rows of sturdy shrubs. Each genus was marked on a tiny ceramic plaque, but their fragrance was just a memory now, their foliage all but gone.

In the center of the garden sat the same fountain he recalled from his childhood; a trio of fat cherubs pouring water from ewers into a round pond below. He walked slowly along the gravel path toward it, then paused to stick his hand into the stream, watching as it ran down his fingers and dropped into the pond like rain.

Christ, it was cold. As cold as poor Elias in his grave. As cold as Cardow itself. And almost as cold as his proud, unapproachable housekeeper had once seemed. Ah, but she was not quite what she appeared, was she? Pensively he turned his hand over and let the stream spatter off his palm.

"You aren't supposed to do that," said a small voice deep in the shadows. "You mustn't splash it out."

Reflexively Giles jerked back his hand. Then he remembered that he was lord and master here now. He walked past the fountain and into the cool depths of the garden. All around the perimeter sat pairs of benches, and on the most distant a small, dark-haired child was perched. A boy of perhaps eight years old, whose legs did not quite touch the ground.

He slid off the bench and came closer with an unsteady gait. No, a limp. Sickly Giles realized that the boy must be Aubrey's son. Pausing by the bench nearest Giles, the lad lifted a pair of earnest blue eyes and laid down the cricket bat he'd obviously been playing with.

"Mama says we aren't to play in the fountain," he said solemnly. "It isn't ours."

For reasons he could not quite explain, Giles sat down and gestured to the lad to sit opposite. "It's all right," he said quietly. "I'm Lord Walrafen."

"Oh," said the boy. But the significance of this seemed lost on him.

Perhaps it wasn't significant. Giles smiled. No, it really wasn't significant at all. Not in the grand scheme of life. And in that moment he decided he rather liked being unimportant. "Do you like to play in here?" he asked.

The boy nodded again. "Sometimes I pretend it's a fort, and that Red Indians are attacking."

Giles wanted to laugh. "You must be young Montford," he said.

The child's eyes rounded, as if realizing he'd forgotten his manners. Belatedly, and rather shyly, he stuck out his hand. That was even more improper, of course, for he was a servant's child. But Giles shook it enthusiastically.

"I'm Iain," he said quietly.

So this, then, was the boy who'd been so badly injured. The boy Pevsner had been in such a snit about three years ago. Admittedly, it was a little odd to take on a housekeeper with a child in tow. But Elias had been perfectly happy to have the pair of them, so far as Giles had been able to tell.

"Well, Iain," he said. "Have you ever seen a real Red Indian?"

A little despondently the lad shook his head. "No, but they are very brave and fierce," he said. "They live in America. Have you ever been there?"

“No, I’m afraid not.” Giles stared up at the castle walls, slate gray against the sky. “But I did live here at the castle for a while,” he said. “Until I was about your age.”

The boy looked at him curiously. “And then where did you go?”

“I went. . .” I went to hell and back. But he said, “Oh, I just went away to school. My father thought it best for me.”

“Oh,” said the boy. “My mama would never let me go away. But I like school.”

Somehow, Giles forced a smile. “My mama did not want me to go, either,” he managed to say. “Do you go down to the village school?”

Iain nodded. “I’m good at arithmetic.”

“Ah, like your mother!” Giles remarked. He’d looked carefully through her accounts, and all were flawlessly kept. If Aubrey were dishonest, he could find no evidence of it. Certainly she knew how to stretch a shilling. His estate had begun to turn a fine profit, leaving Giles in the enviable position of being a very wealthy man who was well on his way to becoming disgustingly rich.

The lad had fallen silent now. “Do you know, Iain,” said Giles, letting his gaze drift about the place, “when I was a boy, this garden was often locked. But sometimes I would sneak in. My Uncle Elias would come out with me and lift me up onto his shoulders so that I might scramble over the wall.”

Iain’s eyes rounded again. “That’s pretty high up.”

Giles winked. “But I knew how to climb down the rose trellis,” he confessed. “It is only the outer wall which is difficult.”

The boy looked at him admiringly.

“Did you know my uncle?” he asked abruptly, then wondered why he was carrying on such a conversation. But he was, and it was too late to stop. “Major Lorimer, you see, was my uncle.”

Iain looked at him unflinchingly. “I wasn’t allowed to bother the Major,” he said. “Besides, he’s dead now. Mama says he’s lying in. . . in state. So people can pay their respects. She made them put him in his regimentals.”

Giles swallowed hard. “Yes, and he looked very fine in them, too,” he said. “But we buried him yesterday, you know. So he isn’t lying in state any longer.”

“Oh,” said the boy, clearly pondering this. “Anyway, Mama said the Major was very brave. He was a famous war hero. So he needed lots of rest. That’s why I couldn’t bother him.”

To his shock, Giles felt the sudden press of tears again. “Yes, Iain, he was a war hero. A great one.”

Iain shrugged. “I think being a soldier must make you awfully tired,” he said. “Was he a nice uncle?”

“I never knew one better.” And he realized on a flood of emotion that it was true. Elias had been the best uncle a boy could have wished for, until he’d marched off to war and come back in ruins.

Their very bravery shields us from ugliness, Mrs. Montford had said. But our soldiers pay an awful price.

Something in those passionate words continued to haunt him, as if they held a more serious, less esoteric, meaning. But one thing was certain. Their truth had cut to the bone.

“Do you have a special uncle, Iain?” he asked, his throat still a little choked. “I vow, they are worth their weight in gold.”

The boy said nothing for a time. “I had an uncle,” he finally answered.



“A long time ago.”

“Ah, that is good.” Giles smiled at him. “What was his name?”

“Fergus. Fergus McLau—” Suddenly Iain went perfectly still. “No...not that. Something else. I forgot.”

“That happens sometimes,” said Giles.

“I guess.”

The boy looked uncomfortable. Giles searched for another topic. “You’ve a fine-looking cricket bat there, Iain,” he said. “Do you play?”

The boy shrugged. “I know the rules,” he said. “But I can’t bat.”

Giles patted him on the knee. “You’ll learn,” he said. “I used to be a decent bowler myself. About twenty years ago. But I think I remember how. Perhaps we should practice someday.”

Iain brightened. “I should like that.”

“Well, enjoy your afternoon in the garden, young Montford,” said Giles more cheerfully than he felt. “I’m afraid duty calls me elsewhere.” Then he slapped his hands on his thighs and stood. But as it occasionally did, his left knee buckled a little, and he had to stumble forward a step or two before his gait evened out.

“You have a limp,” said the boy. “I do, too.”

The sick feeling blindsided him again. Giles turned to look at the boy. “I heard you were hurt in the tower’s collapse,” he said. “I’m very sorry. I hope your limp will get better.”

The lad shrugged. “It will,” he answered equably. “Dr. Crenshaw said so. Did you get hurt in a fall?”

Giles tried to smile. “No, actually, I got shot.”

Iain’s eyes widened. “Did you really?”

“I really did,” said Giles with a wink.

“Who shot you?” asked Iain, suddenly breathless with awe. “A highwayman?”

“No, a smuggler,” said Giles in a dark whisper.

“Really?”

Giles decided to play it for all it was worth. “Indeed,” he said. “I got shot in a dark alley on the riverfront. And a very wicked place it was, too.”

Iain’s big blue eyes were like saucers now. “Did you shoot back? Did you kill him?”

Giles grinned. “Actually, it was a woman,” he said. “You must never turn your back on an angry woman, Iain, for they can be quite vicious. And no, I didn’t kill anyone. But it was exciting.”

“And then what happened?” asked the boy. “I want to hear the whole story.”

Giles shook his head. “Well, I’m afraid I must dress for dinner now, or Mrs. Jenks will be very put out with me,” he said. “But I’ll tell you the whole sordid tale someday—if your mama gives me permission.”

“Oh,” said the child softly. “Well, good-bye, then.”

Giles ambled off toward the garden gate. “Oh, one more thing, Iain,” he called over his shoulder.

“Yes, sir?”

“You may splash in my fountain if you like,” he said. “I shall tell your mother it is all right.”

The boy’s face brightened, and he waved once more as Giles shut the gate.

It had been a strangely satisfying interlude, he decided as the gate hinges squalled behind him. Though he hadn’t found the solitude he’d sought, he’d enjoyed spending a few moments with someone who didn’t seem to want anything from him.

Aubrey Montford’s son was a bright, charming boy, if a little too quiet. Giles could sympathize. As a child, he, too, had been solemn and pensive. Some might say he still was. In any case, the boy had cheered him up considerably. But his mind was still on Aubrey Montford.

“Lord Walrafen got shot by a smuggler,” announced Iain over his cocoa later that evening.

Aubrey looked up from her task, a careful mending of the torn pillowslip. “I beg your pardon?”

“Lord Walrafen,” the boy repeated, blowing into his mug to cool it. “He got shot by a smuggler. On the riverfront.”

They were sitting together by the hearth, as they always did after dinner. Until now Iain had been oddly quiet. But her own nerves were so perilously on edge, Aubrey had not cajoled him as she ordinarily might have. “Who told you such nonsense, Iain?” she asked, drawing her next stitch.

Iain looked up innocently. “He did. He came into the rose garden. He told me I could splash in the fountain, too.”

Aubrey studied him for a moment. “I’m sure you misunderstood, my dear,” she said, tying a careful knot. “Men like his lordship don’t get shot by smugglers.”

“Yes, he did,” said Iain stridently. “He limped, and I asked him why.”

“Iain!” she chided.

“But that’s when he told me about the smugglers,” Iain explained. “Very wicked ones, he said. And if you will let him, he means to tell me the whole story.”

“Does he indeed?” Aubrey murmured, then paused to bite off her thread. “Well, we shall see. But please don’t bother his lordship, my dear. We live here in his house. He pays my salary.” As he so recently—and so bluntly—reminded me, she silently added.

“I didn’t bother him,” said Iain defensively. “I didn’t. Except that he was splashing in the fountain, and I told him he wasn’t allowed—”

“Oh, dear!” interjected Aubrey.

Iain looked a little embarrassed. “I didn’t know who he was.”

Aubrey laid aside her sewing and took the boy’s chin in her hand. “It’s all right, Iain,” she said. “I know you were polite and respectful.”

“I was,” he agreed. “And I thought he was nice. I heard Betsy said he was a stiff-rump, but I think it’s just his knee that’s stiff. Besides, he was funny.”

Lord Walrafen funny? Aubrey closed her eyes and, at the same time, made a mental note to scold Betsy.

“He warned me about women, too,” Iain continued. “He said you ought never turn your back on one. That’s how he got shot.”

Aubrey lifted one brow. “Hmm, let me see if I’ve properly grasped this sordid tale,” she said. “Lord Walrafen got shot by a smuggler on the riverfront over a woman?”

Iain shook his head. “No, it was a woman that shot him.”

Goodness, Iain’s imagination was running wild tonight. “Perhaps you misunderstood, my dear?” she gently suggested. “Now, look at the time. You should be in bed.”

Obediently Iain drank the last of his chocolate and slid off his chair. Then he looked at Aubrey curiously. “Mama, is Lord Walrafen going to live with us now?”

Aubrey pulled the child toward her and gave him a swift kiss on the forehead. “No, love, he can’t,” she answered, hoping she was right. “He has important government work in London.”

“Oh,” said Iain, dropping his gaze. “How long is he to stay?”

“Just a few more days, I daresay,” she answered. “Why?”

The boy shrugged and stared at his feet. “He knows how to play cricket.”

Aubrey smiled wistfully. Iain hungered for a male influence in his life. The child barely remembered his own father. And Muireall. Poor Muireall. She’d been too sickly to be a good mother. Marriage had crushed her spirit. Still, it would have been better for all of them had her husband not died. His mysterious death had meant the end of life as Aubrey had known it: an easy existence of comfort and privilege. And it had left Iain an orphan at the mercy of others.

Until now Mr. Jenks had helped fill the void in Iain’s life. But in the spring he would retire. And who would the boy then look to? Certainly not the Earl of Walrafen. He could not possibly have time for a servant’s child. And that’s what Iain was now. By virtue of her decision, a decision rashly made, he was forced to live here, practically on charity. Was that right? Was it fair? Had she made a dreadful mistake



in taking Iain from his destiny?

Fleetingly she considered asking the earl for his help. She was tired, so tired, of bearing this burden alone. Walrafen seemed to have taken a liking to the child. Certainly, he had the power to protect Iain from anyone who might wish him ill. Perhaps Fergus McLaurin would be afraid to harm a hair on his nephew's head were the child under the watchful eye of the great Lord Walrafen.

But Fergus—and Iain's destiny—were far away.

Out of sight, out of mind, she cautioned herself. So far as Aubrey could tell, that was how the English seemed to view Scotland, and everything in it. Besides, why should Walrafen care about Iain? The boy was not his responsibility. He was hers. Walrafen owed them nothing. Moreover, why would Walrafen believe her story over Fergus's anyway? Fergus would simply say she was a murderer who'd barely escaped the hangman's noose. He would say she'd abducted Iain.

Gently she urged the child across the sitting room and into his narrow bedchamber, which was just an oversize pantry she'd fitted with a small bed and chest. A housekeeper was not expected to bring children. She'd been fortunate to find this post. Fortunate that Iain was accepted at all. And fortunate that the Major had been a man of his word. It was worth a great many sacrifices to keep her position at Cardow.

But was it worth giving her body to the Earl of Walrafen? She closed her eyes and considered it. Yes. Yes, if she had to. And she mustn't dwell on it further. She would get through it. She might even, heaven help her, enjoy it.

Soon Iain was tucked safely under his quilts. "Sleep well, love," she whispered after his prayers were said.

The boy yawned hugely. "All right, Mama. Sleep tight."

She leaned across the narrow bed to brush a wisp of hair off his forehead. "Iain," she said on impulse, "if ever you should wake in the night and be unable to find me, do you remember what to do?"

The boy nodded, scrubbing the pillow with his hair. "Go down the passageway to Betsy's room," he murmured, already half asleep.

"Yes, love, go to Betsy."

Then, after one more kiss, Aubrey blew out Iain's candle and went back into the sitting room. At that moment, however, a soft knock sounded at her door. Her nerves already on edge, Aubrey stiffened. She was in no mood for a late-night household crisis or, God forbid, Walrafen again.

But when she opened the door, she was shocked to see Pevsner on her threshold. It was rare the butler ventured from his domain into hers. It must be a bad sign.

"Do come in, Mr. Pevsner," she said as civilly as she could. "You are working rather late."

"Yes, well, I've little choice," said the butler sourly. "That Higgins person was about the house all afternoon, throwing the footmen into disarray. We've only now finished washing the plate from dinner."

Aubrey made a sympathetic noise. She did not dislike Pevsner, but she found him just a little too lazy for her taste. He also relished gossip too well. "Do sit down," she said. "I was just about to have a cup of chocolate. Will you join me?"

“No, thank you,” said the butler, taking the chair Iain had vacated. “The boy is asleep?”

“Yes,” said Aubrey, looking up from her chocolate pot. “Why?”



”  
“I want to talk to you,” he said. “About this murder business.”

Aubrey filled her mug and sat back down. “Go on.”

Pevsner’s mouth tightened. “You’ve heard, I daresay, that the Major’s gold watch has been stolen?”

Aubrey jumped, sloshing a bit of hot chocolate onto her hand. “Ouch!” She dabbed it away with one corner of her apron. “I’m sorry, what did you say? Something about a watch?”

“The Major’s gold watch has been stolen,” said the butler peevishly. “The expensive one with sapphires set round the dial. I’m sure one of the under servants has taken it. Possibly even murdered him.”

Aubrey swallowed hard. “No one here would do such a thing. Besides, they were all with you at the fair. Weren’t they?”

Pevsner ignored her question. “I’ve taken the liberty of speaking to his lordship about the theft. He is, of course, quite alarmed. Higgins is to investigate. In the meantime, I think we should turn out all the maids’ bedchambers tomorrow and see if we can find the thief.”

“Really, Mr. Pevsner! That cannot be necessary.”

Pevsner stiffened. “I’ve already dealt with the footmen and their underlings,” he said. “Now we must see to the female staff.”

“You searched their rooms?” asked Aubrey angrily.

But the footmen were, at the moment, the least of her worries. Good God, she should have known someone would miss that bloody watch. She’d never wanted it anyway. Fleetinglly, she considered flinging the thing into the fish pond. But she already knew her heart would never permit it. Perhaps she could simply return it to the Major’s room? But no doubt every nook and cranny had already been searched. Its reappearance would likely garner more attention than its disappearance.

Pevsner was evading her question. “I didn’t search their rooms,” he finally admitted. “But I spoke with them at length. I was very firm and told them if they were aware of the watch’s whereabouts, they were to report it at once.”

“Very well.” Aubrey tried to keep her fear and anger in check. “I shall do the same with the housekeeping staff. Everyone must be treated equally.”

“Well, the watch was in his valet box not three days before his passing,” insisted the butler. “I was helping him dress, and I saw it with my own eyes. And there’s something else, too.”

“Indeed? What?”

Pevsner leaned nearer. “The inquest has been set.”

Aubrey faltered. “The—the inquest?” Good God, of course there would be one. She should know.

“No doubt all the servants will try to find a reason to be called, since the whole business is so salacious,” he said with a sniff. “I suggest we keep them busy with their duties, and out of the limelight.”

Aubrey felt sick. What a horrid, horrid day. “When is the inquest to be, Mr. Pevsner?”

“In two days’ time,” he answered. “In the assembly room at the King’s Arms. It should have been sooner, but the coroner was ill. Of course, you and I will be expected to attend.”

Her panic leapt. “Will we?” she said. “Why?”

Pevsner looked at her oddly. “Why, you are the chief witness, Mrs. Montford,” he said with no small amount of relish. “You shall have to give testimony.”

## Chapter Eight

### In Which Lady Delacourt Sets Out on a Mission

After a sleepless night Aubrey rose before dawn the following morning. She had no time to spend dreading the inquest or worrying about Lord Walrafen’s roaming hands. She was still housekeeper at Cardow—at least until the earl gave her the boot—and today was the day of Lord and Lady Delacourt’s departure. By seven o’clock Betsy had already been summoned to help her ladyship’s maid pack. Unfortunately, she’d been gone but ten minutes when Ida took a tumble down the scullery stairs, badly spraining her ankle, and leaving them shorthanded for breakfast.

Left with no choice, Aubrey made the first of many trips up to the morning parlor, where breakfast was to be served. Entering through the service pantry, she put down the coffee tray and went into the parlor to draw the draperies. She ran a finger over the sideboard, checking for dust, then fastidiously picked a piece of lint from the carpet. The footmen had already set up the table and laid it precisely with silver and linen. Lettie had placed one of the vases of white gladiola in the center. At a glance, all was in order.

But on closer inspection, Aubrey spied a fork with a luster she did not quite like. She could hear Lettie sliding the dishes of eggs, kidneys, bacon, and tomatoes into the warming oven, and carried the fork in to her. “Take this back down to the butler’s pantry,” she told the maid. “Tell Pevsner I’m afraid it won’t do.”

Lettie frowned. “Ooo, ’e won’t much like it, mum.”

“Then tell him to make the footmen rub the rouge in properly the first time,” she said impatiently. But on second thought, Aubrey took pity on the girl. “Here, give it to me, Lettie. Can you set up the sideboard alone?”

Lettie nodded, relieved. But by the time Aubrey returned from her unpleasant exchange of words and silverware with Pevsner, Walrafen and Lord Delacourt were already seated. She slipped in to replace the latter gentleman’s fork, hoping to go unnoticed.

Instead, Delacourt looked up at her and smiled broadly. "Good morning, Mrs. Montford! What have we here?"

"I'm afraid one of the forks was not up to snuff," she answered. "I apologize."

"Oh, I've doubtless put worse things in my mouth," he cheerfully returned. "My standards are notoriously low."

Walrafen seemed to choke on his coffee. Just then Lady Delacourt came swishing into the parlor wearing a traveling dress of striped dimity in a shade of blue which perfectly matched her eyes. Aubrey felt like a bony old crow by comparison. Lady Delacourt was lushly figured and breathtakingly lovely, despite the unmistakable frustration on her face. She carried a newspaper, and laid it down beside Walrafen's plate with a decided thwack!

Aubrey escaped into the service pantry and pulled the door half shut. "Good morning, Cecilia," she heard the earl say. "What's this?"

Unable to resist, Aubrey peeked as Lady Delacourt went to the sideboard. "That, Giles, is last Wednesday's Times," she said, pouring herself a cup of coffee. "Had you not seen it?"

"No." Walrafen snapped open the paper.

"The lower left-hand corner," she said, sitting down. "It seems the conservatives are quite enjoying themselves."

"Oh, Lord!" said Delacourt, moving to peer over Walrafen's shoulder. "What now?"

"Another story about Elias's death," she answered irritably. "They quite relish the fact that the great Lord Walrafen cannot find justice for his own. Really, Giles, don't you think this Higgins person has let the matter go unresolved too long?"

"And what, pray, would you have him do, Cecilia?" asked Walrafen. "Simply hang someone at random?"

His eyes now on the small print, Delacourt snatched the paper and gave a low whistle.

"Well, what?" snapped Walrafen. "Go on, read the bloody thing."

Portentously Delacourt cleared his throat. "'Perhaps Lord Walrafen, our perverse Tory liberal, will at last be willing to admit what we on the opposite side of this debate have long held true,' " he read. "'That the judicial leniency and consolidation of criminal penalties in England has been a travesty. Scoundrels, scalawags, and cold-blooded killers now roam the country at will, as Walrafen has learnt firsthand. Swift and certain hanging is the only sure deterrent to the criminal classes.' "

Walrafen groaned. "Who are they quoting?"

Lady Delacourt peered at him over the rim of her coffee cup. "Lord Ridge," she said dryly. "And he is your friend, Giles. One wonders what your enemies are saying."

Delacourt sat back down. "The conservatives mean to tap your claret over this, old chap," he said grimly. "And it will lessen your chances of aiding Peel's position on parliamentary reform come the spring."

Walrafen cursed under his breath.

“Giles,” said Lady Delacourt abruptly. “I have reached a decision. I am going to send you Max. As soon as I get home.”

“Are you indeed?” he murmured. “I didn’t know you’d taken possession of the poor fellow, Cecilia.”

Aubrey peeked out again. The earl was calmly buttering his toast. Lady Delacourt’s brow knotted. “Oh, you know what I mean, and don’t argue!” she returned. “That Higgins is a fool. If you don’t quash this gossip soon, it will drag on forever. Then where will you be?”

The earl sighed and put down his butter knife. “Still grieving for my dead uncle, I daresay.”

Lady Delacourt blanched. “Well, of course,” she said. “But it does no one any good if your political career ends in shambles.”

Across the table her husband laughed. “Oh, I’d say it would do the conservatives a damned sight of good,” he said. “We probably ought to send that Higgins chap round to interview Lord Ridge. Maybe he shot Elias. But Cecilia is right about one thing, Giles. You ought to send for Max.”

Who were they talking about? Aubrey could not quite make out the earl’s expression. “Yes, but I’d be taking him from his wife and family,” he said quietly.

Lady Walrafen shrugged. “Well, if your career sinks, Max and Peel may go down with you.”

For a long while the only sound in the parlor was the occasional clinking of silver on china. Cecilia cleared her throat sharply.

“All right,” Walrafen finally said. “Yes, Cecilia, speak with him. If he can do anything, I’d be most grateful.”

Delacourt pushed away his plate. “You’d best have Kem along, too.”

“Why?” Walrafen smiled weakly. “Is my wardrobe going to hell with my political career? Do I require Kemble’s esteemed fashion advice?”

Delacourt lifted one brow. “You need someone who isn’t afraid to get his hands dirty,” he answered. “Someone slightly less fettered by principle than Max.” He got up and began to poke about the sideboard. Aubrey opened the warmer and took in another dish of eggs.

“Ah, there they are!” said Delacourt. “You are perfection personified, Mrs. Montford.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“By the way,” he said, returning to his seat. “I keep meaning to ask about your accent, Mrs. Montford. I sometimes catch a hint of it. From where do you hail?”

At the sideboard Aubrey froze. “Northumberland, my lord.” She’d chosen it since it was as far north as one could get and still remain in England.

“Ah! What part?”

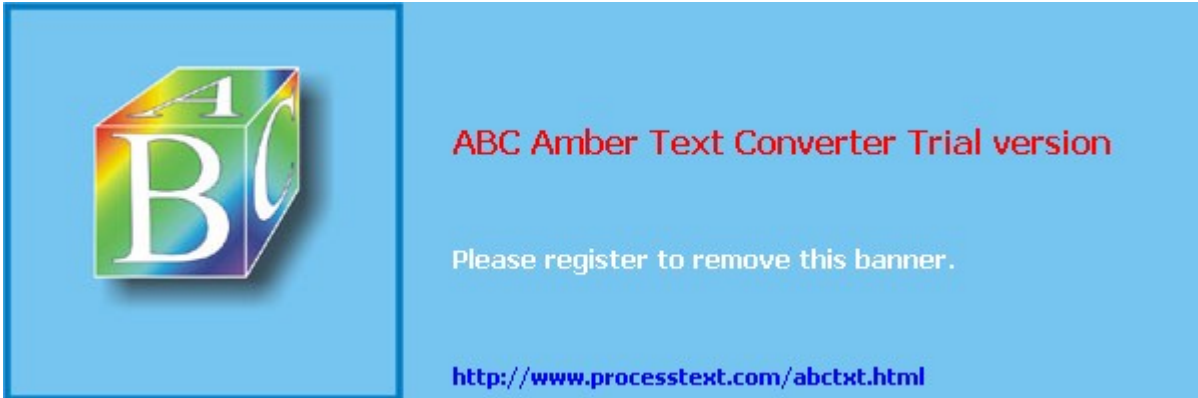
Her pulse quickened. “Near Bedlington, my lord.”

Delacourt laughed. “My God, what a small world! I have an uncle in Morpeth!”

Lady Delacourt put down her coffee cup with an awkward clatter. Her husband’s eyes twinkled up at

Mrs. Montford. "My uncle is Sir Nigel Digby," he said on a wink. "I'm sure you've heard of him."

Aubrey shook her head. "I—no, I'm afraid not,



" she said. "We lived a very quiet life."

"Sir Nigel Digby of Longworth?" Delacourt said, as if to jog her memory. "You needn't be polite about it. I know he is thought quite outré."

"He's thought to be quite insane," interjected Lady Delacourt. "Because he is."

"I—perhaps the name is familiar," said Aubrey, wishing she could escape the room.

"Oh, Lord!" said Walrafen, as if finally grasping Delacourt's meaning. "Is this your uncle with the—er, the penchant for—"

"Yes, yes, for wearing ladies' clothing," interjected Delacourt, picking up his fork. "He'd likely kill for that gray serge you're wearing, Mrs. Montford. Fancies himself a retired governess, you see."

Lady Delacourt sighed. "Darling, must we discuss this?"

"And he's a dreadful old gossip, too," Delacourt continued. "But the local vicar is kindhearted and encourages everyone to play along. This year they're even letting him chair the Greater Bedlington Ladies' Botanical Society. Has a deft hand with a rosebush, our uncle Nigel."

"I—I see," stammered Aubrey.

Suddenly Lady Delacourt pushed back her chair. "Heavens, look at the time!" she said. "David, I'm sending the trunks down. Fetch the carriages, please."

The topic of Sir Nigel thus dispatched, Lady Delacourt swished toward the door in her blue dimity. Lord Walrafen turned halfway around in his chair to watch her as she left the room. Aubrey could not miss the look of affection which passed across his face. Oddly it felt a little like a knife twisting in her heart. She wondered if Lord Delacourt had noticed.

Both gentlemen had risen as Lady Delacourt departed. Her husband went to the coffeepot and tipped it far forward to fill his cup. Drat, thought Aubrey. Almost empty.

Delacourt sat back down, but Walrafen clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace the floor in front of the sideboard. "If it rains, David, the coast roads will be treacherous," he warned. "Take the high road over the moor, away from the cliffs."

Delacourt leaned back in his chair and studied his host. "Worried about Cecilia, old boy?"

Walrafen's expression darkened. "I'm worried about you both," he snapped. Then, as if to busy himself, the earl moved to refill his coffee. Aubrey prayed there was enough left.

Delacourt was studying his host with a good-humored smile. "You must forgive me, Giles, if I sometimes have trouble forgetting that you once wished to marry Cecilia," he murmured. "I mean, everyone knows that's why your father snatched her up during her come-out. Simply to take her away from you. A dashed slippery business, if you ask me."

Walrafen turned from the sideboard and shrugged. "What you say is true," he admitted. "Not to mention a bit humiliating."

Delacourt laughed. "Yes, well, never forget, old friend, that I was right behind you in that long but futile line of the lady's suitors all those years ago," he said. "And she cheerfully told me I could burn in hell. That, Giles, is what total humiliation feels like."

Walrafen's mouth curved into something which might have been a smile. "I just pray she never realized my father's motivation in marrying her," he said quietly. "I hope she still believes he cared for her."

Delacourt's expression softened. "I have shielded her from all that, Giles," he said. "As I have tried to shield her from all the world's wickedness. I promise you that Cecilia will never suffer a moment's unhappiness, so long as I am capable of preventing it."

Lord Walrafen was staring into his empty cup now. Aubrey could delay no longer. Gathering her courage, she took up the second pot and slipped into the room.

The viscount brightened when he saw her. "Ah, and here is the efficient Mrs. Montford with fresh coffee," he said, sliding back into the role of indolent nobleman. "Mon ange," he murmured, catching her hand as she returned from the sideboard, "this Philistine does not deserve a woman of your grace and talent. Could I persuade you to run away with me to Curzon Street?"

Aubrey did not answer that. "May I fill your cup, Lord Delacourt?"

"No, no," he said, waving her on. "Just leave it. We can help ourselves." Immediately he changed the subject. "I think you are right about the rain, Giles," he continued. "What shall you do with the rest of your day? Surely you don't mean to spend it with your justice of the peace?"

Walrafen made a disparaging noise. "Higgins is to call shortly and give me a progress report," he said, staring blindly out the window. "A report that will be a total waste of my time. And after that, I'll spend the rest of the day touring the estate."

"Ah, duty calls!" said Delacourt. "I swear, Giles, you have more on your shoulders than any two men ought. You make me almost grateful for my misspent youth. At least I have it to look back on."

"As I recall, your misspent youth lasted two decades," said Giles dryly.

"Touché, old boy."

At that, Walrafen spun abruptly from the window. "By the way, Mrs. Montford," he said out of the blue. "You do ride, do you not?"

She turned at once from the sideboard. "I beg your pardon?"

Walrafen looked vaguely irritated. "Can you ride?" he repeated. "On horseback?"

Her response was almost explosive. "With you?"

Lady Walrafen strode back into the room at that moment. "Are the two of you to go riding, then?" Her voice was cheerful. "How delightful. But Giles perhaps Mrs. Montford does not have a habit?" She turned to look at Aubrey. "I have one I could leave for you."

Aubrey could not hold her gaze. "Thank you, my lady, but I have my own."

All three of them looked at her a little oddly, as if wondering why a housekeeper would possess a riding habit.

"Well!" said her ladyship brightly. "That is good news. Mine would hit you right about the knees, I daresay. Now, my love, if you are ready?"

Delacourt leapt up. "Dash it," he said, heading for the door. "Forgot the carriages."

Aubrey returned to the service pantry, this time pulling the door fully shut. For a time she busied herself by stacking dishes, listening to the rise and fall of voices. A long good-bye, it seemed. But at last, the room fell silent. Relieved, Aubrey took up the tray to collect the coffee service. When she opened the door, however, Lady Delacourt was still there, caught in Walrafen's silent embrace.

He released her and pressed his lips lightly to her forehead. She stepped away at once.

"Well, good-bye, old thing," she said, tugging at his cravat as if to neaten it. "I shall send Max and Mr. Kemble straightaway. Perhaps Kem can teach Bidwell a new trick or two with this neckcloth."

"Good-bye, Cecilia," said the earl after her. "Thank you for coming along and dragging me out of this mess."

At once she spun around and blew him a loud, smacking kiss. "Anytime, Giles," she said. "You have only to ask, you know. And good-bye to you, too, Mrs. Montford! It really was lovely to meet you." And then she was gone, leaving Aubrey alone with Walrafen, in a room which felt as though the life and light had just been sucked from it.

But the earl seemed oddly unaffected. He headed for the door, his pace brisk. "In two hours, then, Mrs. Montford?" he asked, pausing on the threshold. "Will that be sufficient time?"

"Time for what, my lord?"

"I wish to have a tour of the estate," he answered. "And I wish to see everything. Every furrowed field, every cow byre, every single bit of Cardow, right down to the gateposts."

Aubrey seized upon the first excuse which came to mind. "I fear it is going to rain, my lord."

The earl actually laughed. "Then bring an umbrella!" he said, his voice surprisingly cheerful.

## Chapter Nine

### Three Little Lies

The rain did not come in time to save Aubrey from her fate. The earl was waiting for her in the great hall, impatiently snapping his crop against his tall riding boots. They set off on foot, beginning with the outbuildings nearest the castle, which included the game larder, the dovecote, and the icehouse. Aubrey struggled to be businesslike, and to ignore what had happened between them yesterday. She needed her



job. And she was mindful that there was one particular injury the earl had not done her. He'd never questioned her abilities. Indeed, he seemed to take them for granted.

"Good heavens," said Walrafen as they strode through the orchard toward the stables. "We really could quarter and feed an army here."

He'd chosen a quiet bay mare for Aubrey. As they rode across the newly drained bottomland, he asked intelligent questions about the construction of the ditch work and expressed amazement at the richness of the soil. When they passed Jack Bartle's new cottage, Mrs. Bartle came out to chat as she always did. But she grew quiet when she saw that Lord Walrafen accompanied Aubrey.

The earl, however, was surprisingly amiable, and spoke to the woman as if he'd been there just last week. He even asked after her children by name and inquired about Mr. Bartle's scythe accident. "Oh, Jack's recovering nicely, my lord," she said. "Bless you for asking."

"May I send you anything from the castle, ma'am?" Aubrey asked. "We have an abundance of late parsnips."

"Well, we could use more rose-hip salve, Mrs. Montford," she said. "Dr. Crenshaw says it will keep Jack's wound from scarring."

"I'll make it tomorrow," she promised as they rode away.

The earl looked at her strangely. "Do all my tenants know you so well?"

"They must look to someone, my lord," she answered. "And I do collect the rents."

"Do you?" The earl seemed surprised. "But of course. I have no estate agent, have I?"

Aubrey did not answer. The truth was, she'd seized the opportunity to take on Erstwilder's duties. In part because she'd been bored. But in part because the job had needed doing, and the earl had sent no one. And so, just as it had happened on her mother's small dower property in Scotland, the job had fallen to Aubrey bit by bit, so slowly no one realized it. And now that the earl was aware of who was running Cardow, he did not seem to object. Was that a vote of confidence? Or another indication he did not care about his estate?

They rode around the hill in silence. On the inland side of Cardow Hill lay the estate's greater expanses of farmland, along with its granaries, tenant farms, and the new mill. Walrafen had said he wished to see everything. Moreover, she was very proud of the improvements which she'd made.

"Has it been difficult doing two jobs?" asked Walrafen some hours later. "Have you been dreadfully overworked?"

"With so little family in residence, the role of housekeeper is not a great one," she answered honestly. "Your uncle's demands were few."

"I'll bet you were glad to see the back of my aunt Harriet, then," he said dryly. "Not to mention the rest of my family."

Aubrey hesitated. "It isn't good for the castle when no family is in residence, my lord," she said quietly. "An estate is a living, breathing thing. A family's absence leaves it less vibrant, allows the staff to grow slack, and gives the impression that you..."

"That I do not care?" supplied Walrafen. "I care for my tenants and staff very much. But I don't care for

the castle. I find it oppressive—or at least I once did.”

“When I first came here, I thought it dreary,” she admitted. “But when one lives in it, one comes to realize that the castle possesses a rare serenity, and yet a drama unequaled by most grand estates.”

He looked at her strangely again. “And have you seen a great many such estates?”

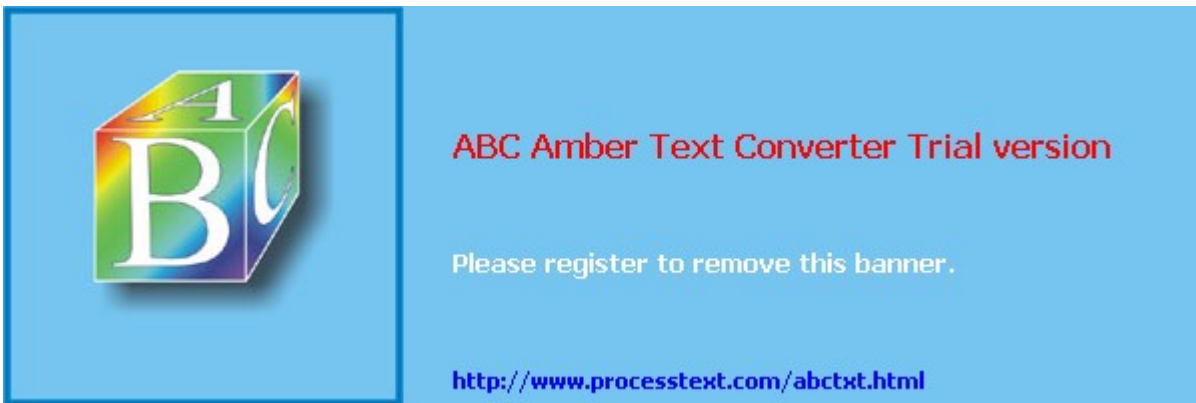
Aubrey realized her error at once. “Perhaps one or two.”

“In the course of your employment?”

“Yes.”

The earl looked pensive. “Tell me, my dear, how did you learn so much about estate management?” he asked. “Such matters are not normally within a housekeeper’s purview, are they?”

Aubrey looked straight ahead.



“Mr. Erstwilder left excellent notes.”

“How remarkable,” said the earl. “The man scarcely wrote me six words in all the years I knew him. I never met a less charming fellow.”

“Well, he charmed the blacksmith’s wife,” Aubrey muttered.

The earl tipped back his head and laughed. It was too rare a sound, she thought. She liked the way his eyes danced, the vivacity which lit his face. And when his gaze caught hers and held it, something inside Aubrey seemed to melt.

They had reached the old tithe barn now, and Aubrey was anxious to avoid the subject of her past. She also wished to stop thinking about Walrafen’s eyes, and instead show him the barn’s new slated roof. She dismounted on an old stump, rather than suffer the disquieting sensation of the earl’s hands about her waist.

Apparently, he noticed, for he crooked one brow in her direction and swung himself smoothly out of the saddle. But when his left leg touched the ground, something went badly awry. The knee buckled, almost sending him to the ground. He dropped his reins and staggered back. Instinctively Aubrey rushed forward, sliding a steadying arm about his waist.

Walrafen looked down at her, vaguely embarrassed. “My rheumatism again,” he said dryly.

Aubrey frowned at him. “Ah, yes, that rheumatism you do not have. I recall it.”

“Heavens, Mrs. Montford,” he said. “Your sense of humor is showing today.”

Walrafen was bearing weight on the leg again, so she let him go. "Perhaps we should rest beneath this tree," she offered.

"An excellent notion."

But he had no trouble securing his horse and sat down beside her without struggle. The tree was a spreading oak, its branches almost bare now. Walrafen extended his leg with a slight wince, then leaned back against the oak's trunk.

Aubrey cut a surreptitious glance in his direction. "My son told me he saw you in the walled garden yesterday," she said. "I hope he was not impertinent."

"Are you afraid impertinence is hereditary?" he asked, grinning at her. "No, he was well mannered. You must be very proud of him."

"Well, yes."

Walrafen looked at her and laughed again. That, and the light breeze tossing at his hair, served to make him look almost boyish. "Aubrey, your mouth is gaping open," he said, leaning nearer. "And there is a question, probably another impertinent one, hanging on your lips."

Aubrey had not missed his use of her given name. "Iain says you limp because you were shot in the leg. By a smuggler, he says. I'm sure you were just entertaining him. But you do not have rheumatism at all, do you?"

The earl was absently massaging his knee now. "So I said, Aubrey, when first we met," he answered with perfect equanimity. "But you wished to think me a doddering, broken-down sort of fellow."

Aubrey's eyes widened. "My lord, I thought no such thing."

Walrafen's gaze snapped to hers. "Then what do you think of me?" His voice was soft. Vaguely suggestive.

Aubrey looked away. "That you are a young man in the prime of life," she said. "And that you do not have rheumatism or arthritis or anything remotely like it. But you do occasionally limp."

Walrafen was quiet. "It is a story that would be of interest only to small boys," he finally said. "I got involved with one of Cecilia's madcap projects—a mission house for nightingales, of all things—and as it happened, some of the girls were involved in a business even less wholesome than prostitution."

"Oh, dear," said Aubrey. "What?"

The earl smiled faintly. "Opium smuggling," he said. "And one night Delacourt and I got ourselves tangled up with some unsavory characters offloading cargo by the Thames. A shot went wild, and my leg got in the way."

"Oh," she said. "That sounds... unpleasant." But what it really sounded was totally out of character. Aubrey was beginning to wonder if she knew the man at all.

Walrafen shrugged. "Ah, well, the wound was by no means life-threatening," he said. "But it tore out a bit of tendon, or a ligament, or some damned thing that I now miss from time to time. And the bone aches when rain is near."

Just then the wind whipped up, tearing loose a lock of Aubrey's hair. She looked up at the darkening

sky. "My lord?" she said. "Is it aching now, by chance?"

"Like the very devil," he admitted just as the rain began to spatter all about them.

Aubrey leapt up with a shriek, grabbed her horse's reins, and dashed into the open barn. The earl followed her in just as the deluge began. "I told you to bring an umbrella!" he shouted over the growing din.

They led their horses into the depths of the barn and secured them. The place smelled of hay and moldering grain, overlaid now with the sweet scent of rain. Aubrey peered into the gloom just as an orange tabby leapt down from a loft, pattering past them with a suspicious, sidelong glance.

Walrafen shook the rain off his hat and hung it up on a rusted nail. Aubrey did likewise. The rain was roaring now, spattering and bouncing off the packed dirt yard. "This cannot last!" shouted the earl. "Come on, let's find a quieter spot."

In the rear they found a pile of clean straw. The earl sat down, and propped one elbow on his knee, making himself look quite at home. Aubrey gathered up her habit and joined him. For a time they simply listened to the rain, softer and more distant now. Inside the barn, there was a sense of quiet intimacy, which made her feel vaguely uncomfortable. She must have drawn away.

He cut a sudden glance at her, his expression a little bleak. "You need not feel uncomfortable, Aubrey," he said softly. "I can hardly press my attentions on you in such a public place."

Aubrey began to pluck at the pleats in her habit, slowly neatening them. Walrafen still stared into the depths of the barn. "Are you sorry, Aubrey, that I kissed you?" he asked. "Do I owe you yet another apology?"

Aubrey considered it. Was she sorry? It had been wrong, of course. But she was not perfectly sure she would easily surrender the memory of it. She had few memories of such physical pleasure and wasn't apt to acquire many more. "I shan't lie to you, my lord, and tell you I felt nothing," she said. "But what we did was not wise."

He turned fully to look at her then, his silvery eyes urgent and searching. "But was it so terribly unwise, Aubrey?" he asked. "Beneath all your anger and all my arrogance, there was a burning passion."

"I am your servant, my lord," she answered.

The earl formed a fist with one hand, then let it drop impotently into the hay. "You are a woman, Aubrey. A beautiful, desirable woman. How can wanting you be unwise?"

Aubrey simply shook her head. "That kiss was a foolish thing, my lord," she said. "But that must be the end of it. We are not... we are not bound to one another."

"Bound?" he echoed in amazement. "What do you want, Aubrey, before you'll sleep with me? A wedding ring? And be careful with your answer."

Aubrey jerked her gaze from his. I want you to look at me as you look at Lady Delacourt, she almost said. I want you to tuck a sprig of greenery in my hair and brush your lips across my forehead.

Oh, this would not do! "I am your servant, my lord," she repeated.

"Aubrey," said the earl grimly. "If you use the words my lord once more when we are alone, I will kiss you."

“What am I to call you, then?”

“Giles,” he said.

She shook her head. “It is too familiar.”

The earl cursed softly beneath his breath and turned toward the door. This time he propped both elbows on his knees, as though he wished to shut her out, and simply stared into the rain.

Walrafen looked younger, somehow. Oh, there were still signs of grief about his eyes. But since coming to Cardow, he seemed more relaxed, and he moved about the house with less formality. She saw him often, striding through the servants’ quarters, exchanging pleasantries with anyone he met. And he’d begun to wear a country gentleman’s clothing more often, browns and greens with buff breeches, rather than the more formal blacks and blues which his life in town no doubt required. But some things had not changed. He was still breathtakingly handsome. And he could still be unbearably arrogant.

For a long time she simply sat on the straw and let her eyes drift over his face. The earl’s dark hair and silver eyes were the perfect foil for one another, and his jaw had that hard, perfect turn which hinted at stubbornness. His nose was straight and thin, which gave him a decidedly aristocratic profile. And when he laughed, oh! Something in her stomach bottomed out.

Walrafen must have finally felt her eyes on him. He leaned back onto one elbow in the straw and looked at her pensively. “Aubrey,” he said out of nowhere, “did you love your husband very deeply?”

She looked away at once. “I...I suppose that I did.”

“Ah, uncertainty!” he murmured. “But true love is rarely uncertain, my dear.”

“What would you know of such an emotion?” she asked. Too late, she remembered Lady Delacourt. “I am sorry,” she said at once. “I ought not have said that. I am sure you have suffered loss in your own way.”

Walrafen lifted one brow. “I have never been married.”

It was as if the devil ginned her with his pitchfork. “It is whispered belowstairs that you are still in love with Lady Delacourt,” she said. “And that you will have no other.”

“The deuce!” grunted the earl, picking up a piece of straw and beginning to chew at it. “Is that what they say?”

“I have overheard it once or twice.”

“You don’t sound especially pleased, my dear.”

Aubrey wished he would not keep calling her my dear in that low, dusky voice of his. “My pleasure or displeasure is hardly your concern, sir.”

He looked straight at her, his eyes dancing again. “But it could be,” he suggested.

Aubrey ignored him. “I spoke out of turn, my lord. I apologize.”

“Well,” he said. “There’s something new.”

“I beg your pardon? What is new?”

The earl laughed. "Just the apologizing, Aubrey. You've been speaking out of turn for years." He grew quiet for a moment, then added, "And yes, as to Lady Delacourt, I courted her for a time when we were both very young. I found her charming and beautiful. But I could not quite bring myself to the point. And he who hesitates is lost, you know."

Aubrey tried to be gracious. "I'm sorry that you lost her, my lord."

The earl shrugged. "Which brings us back to my original assertion," he said. "That true love is rarely uncertain."

"You did not love her?" Oh, worse and worse! Couldn't she keep her mouth shut?

But Walrafen seemed to be pondering an answer. "Certainly I was infatuated with her once," he finally said. "But now we are family. And the dearest of friends."

It was a slightly ambiguous response. And suddenly Aubrey realized she did not want ambiguity. In her heart she wanted Lord Walrafen to disavow ever having any desire for his beautiful stepmother. And the very notion that she should want such a thing frightened her. She tore her eyes from his and began to arrange the pleats of her habit all over again.

In the gloom of the barn Giles watched as a strange mix of emotions shifted across Aubrey's face. Then she looked away and began to fiddle with her skirts for about the umpteenth time. She'd lost a little of her color, and her jaw was set somewhat grimly. He wondered what she was thinking. Surely she was not jealous? She kept rebuffing his advances at every turn. She seemed not to care for him in any way.

But she could feel desire for him. He'd learned that much yesterday, had he not? In his arms he'd felt her tremble and come passionately to life. And what a heady, powerful sensation it had been. He was fast learning that with Aubrey, he felt more alive, more virile, even, than he'd felt at twenty. All this, despite the fact that the woman had scarcely let him touch her.

But there was more to Aubrey than just passion. More, too, than just her air of composure. She possessed an outward beauty which those drab dresses had never hidden, but there was an inward beauty, too, he now realized. And yet underlying all that was a melancholy, an aura of sadness and self-imposed solitude which made no sense to him. She was a woman of secrets, and that was not just his imagination at work. No one seemed to know her.

She keeps to herself, Crenshaw had said. But it was more than that, Giles thought. He wondered yet again what she might be hiding from the world. He was beginning to form a couple of nebulous ideas, yet the uncertainty was driving him mad. Not because he feared the truth; strangely, he did not. But because he hated how easily she could hold herself apart from him. He hated how she seemed to need no one. Especially him.

"Aubrey," he said, cutting into her thoughts. "I was wrong about this rain."

"I beg your pardon?"

He rolled back onto his elbow again and looked up at her. "This deluge is not going to stop anytime soon," he said. "And I, for one, am bored to tears. Tell me, do you like to play parlor games?"

Aubrey looked at him very strangely. "As in charades?"

"That sort of thing, yes," he said. "But I had more in mind one of those guessing games. Simon, Cecilia's eldest, has a fondness for them. Especially Three Little Lies."

“I do not know the rules, my lord.”

He forced a huge smile. “We can always make them up as we go along,” he said with a wink. “But basically, we play on our honor. I ask you a question, and you may choose to tell the truth, or you may tell a lie. If you get three lies past me, you may announce it at any time, and win the game. But I have three challenges. If I challenge your answer correctly, you must grant me a forfeit of my choosing. You do not, however, have to tell the truth.”

Oh?” she said suspiciously. “And what sort of forfeit must I pay?”

“Something foolish,” said the earl. “Once, Simon made me stand on my head—the result was not pretty—and on occasion I have had to sing ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God’ with my nose pinched shut. But usually he just makes me hop about the room on one foot.”

Aubrey looked at him as if he’d gone mad. “I don’t think so.



”

“Aubrey,” he finally snapped. “You and I may well be stuck here for another hour. I am trying to be a gentleman. You had best help me distract myself.”

She swallowed hard, the white length of her throat constricting, then barely relaxing. “Very well.”

Giles smiled and fell fully back into the hay, crossing his arms behind his head. Aubrey drew her knees up, and wrapped her arms about them. “You are on your honor, now, Aubrey,” he warned. “I shall go first since I have already answered your questions. The first to win three rounds is the champion.”

“All right,” she agreed, her voice still reluctant.

He stared up into the rafters and pondered it. Best to start simple and lull her into complacency. “What did you have for breakfast this morning?”

She blushed very prettily. “Nothing.”

Giles watched her carefully and considered it. “I shan’t challenge that,” he said. “But why nothing? Weren’t you hungry?”

She stared down at him primly. “That makes two questions, my lord.”

Giles scowled up at her. “Just answer the first.”

“I was too nervous to eat,” she admitted. “I wanted Lord and Lady Delacourt’s last day to be perfect, and their departure smooth. Then I quarreled with Pevsner over the silver and completely lost my appetite.”

“Do you and Pevsner quarrel often?”

Aubrey lifted one brow. “Is this a part of the game, my lord?” she asked. “If it is, I must try to think up a suitable lie.”

“Oh, never mind,” he answered. “Back to the game. From whom did you inherit those startling green eyes?”

The startling green eyes blinked at him. “From my mother,” she said so swiftly he knew she was telling the truth.

“All right,” he said. “What was her name?”

“Janet.”

“Aubrey, Aubrey,” he chided. “You must try to slip a lie past me, else you’ll never win.”

Aubrey nodded and looked more determined.

Giles thought up another question. “And what is the best thing you inherited from your father?”

“My lord, doesn’t that call for an opinion?”

He was growing impatient now. “Just answer the question, Aubrey.”

Her brows drew together. “My...my tenacity. But that is a quality, not a characteristic.”

“It will do,” said Giles. “And I shan’t challenge it. God knows you are tenacious.”

Aubrey scowled at him. “When do I get to ask a question, my lord?” she ventured.

“When this round is over,” he snapped. “Now, where were you born?”

She hesitated a moment too long. “In Northumberland.”

Slowly Giles shook his head. He remembered her reticence at breakfast. And he remembered, too, Ogilvy’s suspicions. “No,” he responded. “I challenge that.”

Aubrey looked insulted. “Why?”

Giles reached out and encircled her wrist with his fingers. “Because it is my prerogative,” he said quietly. “Now, did you lie?”

Aubrey tried to pull away, but he would not let her. “Yes,” she finally said. “I lied. Your challenge has been successful.”

“Then where were you born?” He still held her wrist.

Aubrey shook her head. “My lord, you cannot keep asking the same question over and over,” she said. “That is not fair. You will lessen my chance of winning by process of elimination.”

“Yes, and you still owe me something, don’t you?” he said, pulling her another inch closer. He was about to do something stupid, but couldn’t stop himself. “I almost forgot that forfeit. Aubrey, I’m afraid I must ask you to kiss me.”

Aubrey gasped in outrage and tried to pull away. “My lord, that is a vastly different thing from hopping



about on one foot!”

The earl laughed. “I did not say you would have to hop about on one foot, my dear. I said you would have to do something foolish.”

“Kissing you is not foolish,” she hissed. “It is dangerous. Do you think I learned nothing from yesterday? This is not the game as you described it, my lord.”

“Aubrey, Aubrey! I am a politician. The cleverly twisted word is my stock in trade.”

“You are not twisting! You are being dishonorable.”

“Oh, Aubrey, my dear.” Giles gave a final tug on her wrist. Unbalanced by her knees, she toppled into the straw beside him, leaving them eye to eye with one another. “Not five minutes ago,” he continued, “you said—and I quote—‘that kiss was a foolish thing, my lord.’ Now, do you deny having said it?”

For an instant her eyes glittered. “No. No, I won’t give you the satisfaction.”

With his free hand Giles lightly touched his lips. “Then kiss me right here, if you please,” he said. “I know you too well, you see, Aubrey, to leave you with a loophole to slip through. I do not yearn to feel your lips on the back of my hand, but here. On my mouth.”

For an instant he thought she would not do it. And then she propped herself on her elbow, closed her eyes, and set her lips to his.

He had expected to have to snatch her back, expected she would just peck him on the mouth and jerk away. But she meant, it seemed, to fully honor her wager. Her mouth softened over his with a sweet tenderness. Giles lifted his head and rested one hand at her waist. She settled against him with a sigh, the kiss exquisitely tempting, but still innocent.

Unable to resist, he circled her waist with his arm and drew her closer. She lay half atop him now, her lips moving in a slow, sinuous rhythm over his. She smelled of lilac and horse, and of warm, sweet feminine things. When she lifted her mouth but a fraction, he drew her back. Aubrey did not resist, not even when he opened his mouth beneath hers. Instead, she let her tongue play tentatively across his lower lip.

They resumed the kiss slowly, languorously, savoring one another as if they had all the time in the world. As if they were not lying together in a very public place. Giles did not care. But Aubrey, it seemed, did. Something brought her back to reality, and she jerked her body from his. Panting lightly, she looked down at him, her slender hands splayed across his chest.

“There,” she said breathlessly. “There. I have paid my forfeit.”

Giles tried to draw her back. “Aubrey,” he pleaded. “Don’t stop. Please.”

She jerked her eyes away. “I paid the forfeit,” she repeated. “Don’t... don’t torment me, my lord.”

“I have two left,” he growled.

Her gaze, wide and frightened, snapped back to his. “What?”

“I have two challenges left,” he rasped. “So answer this, Aubrey. Answer it for me now. Did you love your husband?”

Her face crumpled, and her eyes closed.

“Answer it,” he demanded.

She shook her head, eyes still squeezed shut. “No,” she whispered. “I—I have to say I did not.”

“What was his name?” The words came out thick and rough.

She had not yet caught her breath. “What?”

“His name,” he demanded. “This husband you never loved, what was his name?”

For a moment, he thought she was going to refuse to answer. “Charles,” she finally whispered.

He knew it for a lie the moment it left her lips. “No,” he gritted. “I challenge that.”

Aubrey opened her eyes. “Fine,” she said. “Have it your way.”

“Are you lying? Aubrey, are you lying? If you are, admit it.”

“Yes,” she said. “I am lying.”

This time he did not tell her what the forfeit would be. Instead, he drew her close and kissed her. If their first had been a spark, this one was incendiary. Everything leapt to flame. Blazed out of control. Somehow, he shifted her onto her back, and dragged the weight of his body over her. Beyond them, the spattering rain and scent of hay spun away, and there was only her.

Over and over, he thrust inside her mouth, tasting and touching. Learning the feel of her sleek, warm mouth. She answered him, returning his kiss thrust for thrust, her breathing fast and urgent. Her hands were restless on him, roaming, stroking. The need to possess her was uncontrollable; the hunger to join their bodies undeniable. And nothing but trouble would come of it.

“Aubrey, Aubrey.” He buried his face against her neck, drew in her scent. “Why do you do this to me?”

“I don’t,” she choked. “I don’t mean to.”

His hand stroked her arm, the turn of her waist, then slid around and lower. He splayed his hand over the lush curve of her hip, cupped and squeezed through the wool of her skirt, then lifted her against him. Aubrey moaned, her body arching instinctively to his. Hungering. Wanting. He burned to satisfy her.

Giles rolled to one side and began to jerk open the buttons of her jacket. He pushed the fabric aside and caressed her left breast. It was warm. Perfect. Her eyes were still closed, her breathing still rough. She was passive, allowing him to touch her as he wished. But she wanted him, he was certain. Lightly he thumbed her nipple through the layers of cotton, felt it harden to his touch. Unable to resist, he put his mouth there, sucking and stroking light circles with his tongue until the fabric clung wetly to her nipple. He drew back and watched it. “Aubrey,” he rasped. “You are so beautiful.”

Giles rolled to one side, feeling as if he moved within a dream, as if she might stop him at any moment and cast him back into the dreariness of his ordinary existence. A little desperately he slid open a button on her skirt. Would she let him? Another slipped free. She said nothing; merely held his eyes, her gaze soft with desire, apprehensive with questions.

“Let me touch you, love,” he said. “Let me show you.”

The buttons were loose now. He folded back the waist of her habit. Unable to fully control himself, he let his hand slip down to cup her mound through the soft, white cotton of her drawers. Fleeting she shuddered. Was it desire? Watching her, Giles responded by easing his fingers between her legs, gently

rubbing and probing. In response, Aubrey made a small, soft sound, her throat working up and down as she let her head tip back into the hay.

Quite by luck he found the slit in the fabric and gently pushed one finger between the plumpness of her downy flesh. He kissed her again, hot and open-mouthed. Beneath him she made another sweet sound, exhaling deeply. He pressed deeper, easing himself into her feminine heat. The scent of woman filled his nostrils, firing his blood, hotter and hotter. And on his next stroke he touched her secret place and felt Aubrey go rigid in his arms.

“Be still,” he whispered against her mouth. “Be still, Aubrey. Open your legs. Let me touch you.”

She sagged into the hay, relaxed perhaps a little, and let his hand slide deeper into her flesh. Her sweet nub was hard and already slick with a hint of dew. He rubbed back and forth, wetting his finger, then touched her again. She sucked in her breath. Giles began to circle the mere tip of his finger around and around until the gasps became thready sighs. Her wet heat flooded forth, teasing at his senses.

She wanted him, he realized—or at least her body did. The thought sent fire coursing through his loins. He thrust hard inside her mouth, pressed her firmly back into the hay, and shoved her legs a little wider with the weight of his thigh, fully exposing her to his touch. Working her with his tongue and his finger, he felt the heat inside her build. Felt her open wider still and urge herself against his hand. Her delicate nostrils were flared wide. He tore his mouth from hers, watching her face as he caressed her.

Aubrey’s eyes were closed, her face half turned from him. Her mouth opened on a soundless moan, and her breath came in short, desperate pants. “Stop,” she whispered. “Oh, please. I can’t.”

He pressed his feverish lips to her temple. “I want you in my bed, Aubrey,” he whispered, still caressing her intimately. “Tonight, when the others have gone to sleep. Come to me. I promise I’ll be gentle.”

She said nothing. She did not open her eyes. “I should not want this,” she whispered.

“You do want this,” he choked. “For God’s sake, Aubrey, don’t torture me. You want this as much as I do. Say it.”

She half nodded, her heavy auburn hair scrubbing in the hay. “Yes.”

“Tonight, then,” he whispered.

“No.” She shook her head. “Not tonight. Please.”

“Aubrey, why?” He let his hand fall away and began to restore her clothing to order.

“The rector,” she said witheringly. “He and Crenshaw are to dine with you. You will be late. And it would seem... seem so... oh, I don’t know!”

Bloody hell. He’d forgotten about the rector. Besides, the fellow might drone on all night. “Then tomorrow,” he begged. “Come to me tomorrow, Aubrey. Will you?”

She opened her eyes, but held her gaze away from him. Her face was flushed with embarrassment now. “



Have I any choice, my lord? My body is traitorous. You are relentless.”

Though true, the words chilled him a little. “You are a passionate creature, Aubrey,” he said. “There is no shame in that. And you obviously feel desire for me.”

Her voice was thready. “Yes. I do.”

Giles brushed his lips to the slender length of her neck, closed his eyes, and drew in another draught of her scent. “No one will know, Aubrey,” he whispered. “What can be wrong with two people privately sharing physical pleasure?”

He could sense Aubrey’s thoughts racing, could feel the unasked questions between them. He knew he should give her an easy way out, should let her refuse him as her conscious mind wished to do. But her body wanted his as he yearned for hers. At last she went limp in his arms. Was it resignation? Or surrender?

“You will come?” he rasped abruptly.

She surprised him then by turning her head and pressing her lips to his hair. “Yes,” she said, her breath warm against his ear. “Yes. Tomorrow. At midnight, my lord.”

## Chapter Ten

### In Which Mrs. Montford Asks a Favor.

“What did Ida mean, Mama, when she said the Crowner was a cross-eyed old fool?” asked Iain the following evening. He was playing with his cricket bat by the hearth.

Aubrey paused in her pacing before the windows. “It is pronounced coroner,” she corrected, turning to smile at him. “Ida was just speaking cant.”

“What’s cant?”

“Well, it is a sort of jargon, love,” Aubrey answered. “And she ought not have said it at all. He was a very nice gentleman.”

“Well, what does a cor-oh-ner do, anyways?” asked Iain, swinging a practice stroke.

“Any way,” corrected Aubrey, ruffling his hair with her fingers. “Really, Iain. You have been spending too much time around Ida. And a coroner is the gentleman who conducts an inquest, a sort of meeting, when it is not clear how someone has died.”

Iain propped his bat by the hearth. “Was he nice to you? Did he ask you questions?”

“Yes, love, on both counts.”

Aubrey drew back her draperies and peered into the inky depths of the bailey. A pair of flambeaux flanking the gate shed the only light. The days were growing shorter. Colder, too. Already, she could hear the wind whistling past the castle walls, as if December were just around the corner. She almost wished it was. Surely by December, the Earl of Walrafen would be comfortably ensconced in London again?

She let the drapery drop and set a hand to her stomach. She felt a little ill, as she'd done all day. The inquest had shaken her. The eyes of so many had been fixed upon her.

She'd told the truth, of course. Oh, perhaps not the full truth. The coroner had not been very clever in his questions, while she had been very clever indeed with her answers. And now that that trial was past, another was almost upon her. She had not forgotten her promise to Lord Walrafen.

“Can we play a game tonight?” asked Iain from the hearth.

Aubrey spun around. “Yes, of course,” she said, grateful for the distraction. “Why don't I fix the chocolate whilst you choose one?”

Iain's face lit up. “Virtue and Vice,” he said, darting toward his room.

Aubrey suppressed a sardonic laugh. Iain would have to choose that one, tonight of all nights, wouldn't he? She herself was about to engage in vice, while she'd spent the better part of the day trying to paint it—at least in her own mind—as virtue.

While she finished preparing the chocolate, Iain pushed their little gate-legged table to the fire and set up the board. Aubrey was just putting down his mug, however, when someone knocked softly at her door. She felt almost faint when Lord Walrafen stepped inside.

Somehow, she closed the distance between them. “My lord,” she said a little breathlessly. “It is but half past seven.”

But Lord Walrafen seemed to have something other than their assignation on his mind. Indeed, he looked vaguely self-conscious. “Yes, well, it is very cold in my study,” he said. “I had quite forgotten how strong that wind off the channel can get.”

Aubrey already had one hand on the doorknob, hoping he would go right back out again. “I shall have your windows reglazed next week,” she assured him. “In the meantime, I'll have a footman bring up extra coal to—”

The earl waved one hand. “Sit, sit!” he said. “I merely thought to... well, to visit down here for a moment. This is quite the warmest room in the castle, I believe.”

“Yes, well, the—the bailey, you see,” she stammered. “It shields this wall.”

Lord Walrafen clasped his hands in front of him and looked about the room, an almost boyish gesture. “Is that chocolate I smell?”

Aubrey glanced at the hob. “Yes, it is. Would you...?”

“I should be delighted,” he said.

“We are playing Virtue and Vice,” announced Iain amiably. “What color marker do you want?”

The earl stepped closer to the table, and looked down at the game board. “ ‘The New Game of Virtue Rewarded and Vice Punished,’ ” he read aloud. “ ‘For the amusement of youth of both sexes.’ ” He flicked a quick glance up at Aubrey. “I feel quite youthful tonight, Mrs. Montford,” he said. “So I believe that I qualify to play, if you’ve no objection?”

Aubrey carried his chocolate to the table. “Of course I do not.”

Lord Walrafen hastily dragged a chair from the wall to the table. “Capital!” he said, sitting down and smacking his hands together. “I shall have red.”

Still wondering precisely why Walrafen had come, Aubrey passed around the remaining mugs and took her seat. It seemed unnatural to have him here. Unnatural, but not unpleasant. The earl lifted his eyes from the board, caught her gaze across the table, and smiled warmly. For the first time Aubrey noticed he had a deep dimple on the left side. She felt, suddenly, quite happy to have him near.

At Iain’s directive they began to play, with the predictably comical results. “You have spun a four,” he said to the earl. “That means you may escape the House of Correction and go all the way to Folly.”

“Is that a good thing?” asked the earl.

The boy shrugged. “I daresay it’s better than landing on Hypocrisy,” he said, giving the teetotum a little spin. “Look! I’m going all the way to Truth!”

Iain soon took the lead and moved well ahead of his sluggardly competition. Lord Walrafen stumbled along, barely cognizant of the rules. For her part, Aubrey landed successively on Impertinence, Obstinacy, and Sloth.

“Oh, I say!” the earl cried when she landed on the latter. “That cannot be right! Mrs. Montford is never slothful.” He picked up her marker and moved it straight to the center, dropping it on Virtue.

Aubrey looked at him over the rim of her mug. “How charitable of you, my lord,” she said. “You seemed perfectly willing to let me linger on Impertinence and Obstinacy.”

The earl grinned at her across the table. “If the shoe fits,” he said.

Iain was shaking his head. “She cannot stay on Virtue,” he protested. “She must go back and do it properly.”

Aubrey looked down at the incongruity of it all. “Oh, I’m very much afraid he is right, my lord,” she managed. “Virtue is hardly the place for me nowadays.”

The earl snatched up her marker and moved it to the space marked Luxury. “This, then, Mrs. Montford?” he asked suggestively.

“You are not playing by the rules, Lord Walrafen,” said Iain very politely.

The earl looked up at Aubrey and winked. “Sometimes I forget to,” he said.

Aubrey pursed her lips and put down her chocolate. “I do not think Luxury is the right place for me, either,” she said, dropping her eyes to the game board.

“But I should very much like to keep you there, Mrs. Montford,” he answered. “Keep you in luxury, I mean. If you would let me.”

Aubrey grappled for words. Innocently Iain stepped in and saved her, moving her marker back where it

belonged. "The two of you are very slow," he grumbled. "And I have to be in bed by half-past eight."

Lord Walrafen looked perhaps a little ashamed and played by the rules for the rest of the game. Iain won, of course. Then he put away the game board while Aubrey took out the book which they'd been reading. She looked up to see that the earl was helping Iain fold the table and move it back against the wall.

"We have been reading Mr. Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, my lord," she said, returning to her chair. "I hope you will not find it dull?"

He smiled softly. "By no means, ma'am," he said. "May I stay, then?"

Iain yawned and fell back in his chair. "You should stay," he advised. "We are just at the beginning of his third year on the island, and he is fretting over his corn crop."

"An excellent example to me, then," said the earl. "I've been told I do not fret nearly enough about mine."

"I never said that," countered Aubrey.

Walrafen lifted both brows. "Not with your mouth, no," he admitted. "Please, read on, Mrs. Montford."

Aubrey began. She'd read but six pages, however, when Walrafen reached out and laid his hand on her arm. She looked up to see that Iain had fallen sideways in his chair and gone to sleep.

"I should hate him to wake with a crick in his neck," he said softly.

Aubrey laid her book aside and stood. "I don't think children suffer such ailments, my lord, but I had best carry him to bed."

But Lord Walrafen had already scooped the boy up in his arms. "I have him," he said. "If you will just show me the way?"

Aubrey threw open the door to the little room that was Iain's. "Perhaps he needs another blanket?" murmured the earl as she was tucking him in. "This cold snap is fierce."

The room was so small, two people could scarcely move about in it. Aubrey gestured toward a chest beside Lord Walrafen. "In the bottom drawer, if you would be so kind," she said.

The earl opened the drawer and lifted out the topmost blanket. His hand, however, hovered admiringly over the one beneath, a carefully folded plaid. The Farquharson plaid, to be precise. He stroked his hand over it, and fleetingly, she panicked. Then just as quickly she reassured herself that the earl was not apt to recognize the plaid of a relatively obscure Scottish clan. Certainly he was not apt to take it out and give it a good shake.

Instead, he stood up, smiled, and handed her the brown blanket. Together, they spread it across Iain's bed, then pulled the door shut behind them. Lord Walrafen stopped, turned to her, and touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

"Thank you, Aubrey," he said softly. "You and Iain were very kind to share your evening with me."

She looked at him unflinchingly. "Will you come and sit with me by the hearth, my lord?" she asked quietly. "I have something I should like to say to you."

In the candlelight it looked as though Lord Walrafen lost a little of his color. "I don't like the sound of

this, Aubrey.”

She smiled crookedly. “Indeed, you may not,” she agreed. “May I pour you a little sherry? I believe that I will have some myself.”

Walrafen looked at her and dragged a hand roughly through his hair. “Oh, I like this less and less,” he said. “Aubrey, if this is about what happened in the—”

“It is not,” she interjected.

Aubrey went to the small cabinet beneath the windows and poured out two glasses of sherry. She pressed one into his hand and sat down opposite him. The flickering firelight fell across the left side of his face, casting irregular shadows over his features.

She sipped a little at her wine, hoping it would give her strength. “I would like to ask for your help in a very small matter,” she began. “But you may think it presumptuous of me.”

“I doubt that, my dear,” he said, and set aside his glass. He did not look especially surprised. Indeed, he looked perhaps a little relieved. Fleetinglly Aubrey considered telling him everything. The sense of intimacy surrounding them was so seductive; the guilt she carried so heavy. But would he believe her? What would he say? What would he think?


Oh, those were easy questions. Walrafen would realize that he’d been harboring a criminal. There was no end of damage that might do to him, to his career, to his family. She did not even know what sort of charges were now pending against her. Abduction and theft, certainly.

She felt the earl touch her lightly on the arm. “My dear, what is it?” he asked. “In what way may I help you?”

Aubrey forced her thoughts back to the present. “I wish a favor of you,” she finally said. “With Major Lorimer gone and Mr. Jenks retiring, I have no one to trust.”

He leaned very close to her. “Yes, of course,” he said. “But, Aubrey, if it is money, rest assured I have plenty—”

“It is not money,



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” she said, cutting him off. His assumption hurt, and it sounded in her voice, too. “It is simply that your uncle’s death has brought home to me quite painfully the fact that life is uncertain,” she said. “I am solely responsible for Iain, and if ever anything should happen to me—”

“Happen to you?” he interjected. “What on earth do you mean?”

She shrugged, and leaned back into her chair. “People die every day, my lord,” she answered. “They fall



down wells, catch pneumonia, eat bad fish...”

“Yes, all right,” he said. “What is it you wish?”

“I have a letter for Iain which I wish him to have on his majority,” she said. “And a will. They are sealed and tucked inside my Bible. I have a little savings, and some jewelry. Family mementos. Everything is in the drawer you took the blanket from. I wish you to give it to your rector and ask him to raise Iain as his own. Will you do that for me?”

Walrafen shook his head. “Aubrey, you are talking nonsense,” he said. “Nothing is going to happen to you. I won’t let it. And I won’t let the boy go to a stranger.”

“Your rector is hardly a stranger,” she said quietly. “And Iain has nowhere else to go.”

“This is his home, Aubrey,” said the earl, as if it were obvious. “Why must he go half a mile away and live in a pokey little rectory with a man old enough to be his grandfather?”

“Because it is what I’m asking you to do.”

Walrafen pursed his lips. “Did you ask this of my uncle?” he demanded.

Aubrey nodded. “Some months after I arrived here, yes,” she said. “Despite what people think, I trusted him to do the right thing. In his heart he was an honorable man.”

The earl looked at her very somberly. “And why are you telling me?”

She lifted her gaze to his. “Because I have come to think you are the same,” she said quietly. “You and he are very alike. And that is a compliment, not an insult.”

Giles left his chair and went down on one knee before hers. “Aubrey, my dear,” he said, cradling her face in his hands. “Nothing is going to happen to you. Or me. Or Iain. But if it should, on my honor, I shall take care of him, in one way or another.”

She closed her eyes. “Just do not let him leave Somerset,” she said. “The village or the castle, you decide. Just keep him here. Keep him safe. I am begging you.”

Lord Walrafen kissed her then, melting his lips over hers, gently and comfortingly. When he pulled away, she felt surprisingly reassured. “Aubrey, let’s speak no more of bad things that simply aren’t going to happen,” he whispered. “I came instead for quite another reason. One far more pleasant to reflect upon.”

“To remind me of my promise?” she whispered.

His eyes darkened a little at that. “Our prior arrangement, I should prefer to call it,” he said. “Do you wish to keep it?”

She nodded, but could form no words.

He hesitated, and for a moment Aubrey thought he meant to cancel it himself. His eyes were still stormy as they searched her face. And then he sighed and dropped his hands. “In another hour?” he whispered. “Will the house be quiet by then?”

By ten Giles was wearing a path in the carpet of his bedchamber, a glass of his best cognac in hand, and his black silk dressing gown whipping about his heels as he paced. He still could not quite absorb the fact

that he was about to take a new mistress. Or that she was his servant. Such a thing should have gone against his grain. It did, he supposed, but the thought of having her in his bed made him feel alive with anticipation.

He had dismissed his valet shortly after returning from her sitting room, then ordered a bottle of champagne brought up. It sat now in its silver cooler by the bed, the condensation soaking into the white linen towels which swathed it. But Giles had lost his taste for champagne and turned to something stronger instead. Aubrey, however, might be persuaded to take a glass. In his experience, women always enjoyed being seduced over a bottle of good champagne.

Then again, Aubrey was not his usual sort of mistress, was she? When a man auditioned a polished, professional courtesan, she came with a standardized script of flirtations and a veritable grocery list of financial requirements. Oh, one might laugh, tease, flatter, and go through all the motions. But both parties knew how the evening would end—and ultimately, how the relationship itself would end.

That was the unnerving thing about bedding Aubrey. He didn't know. In fact, he was a little bit afraid of what he might be getting himself into. Sometimes, when a man sailed too close to dangerous waters, he could sense a shift in the tension of the sea. Every time he kissed Aubrey, it felt a little bit like that. A strange, sensual darkness enveloped him—pulled him toward something precarious—the moment his lips touched hers. Still, despite having been married, Aubrey was inexperienced. Only a fool would have failed to notice. Perhaps she would not know what to do? Perhaps he would find her a dreadful bore in bed?

With a bark of laughter Giles sat down his empty glass and went to the open window. He braced his hands wide and leaned out to draw in the ocean breeze, which no longer seemed too cold. Oh, he already knew what Aubrey would be like in bed, didn't he? He would not find her boring. He would find her captivating. He already did. And nothing—not even her inexperience—would alter that inevitability.

He only wished she'd been more receptive to his overtures. She was reluctant, and he knew it. Still, she was a passionate, sensual creature. He must use all his skill to play upon that passionate nature; to seduce her so thoroughly, she would be as unable as he to deny her own desires.

Just then a light knock sounded at his door. Giles turned from the window and crossed the room in three strides, his heart suddenly in his throat. He threw open the door to see her standing on his threshold, still dressed in the gray serge gown she'd worn earlier. The thing was without lace or embellishment of any sort, save for a long row of jet buttons down the front. It should have looked drab, but instead, it merely made her hair more vivid, and her skin more exquisite.

“Good,” he said, taking her elbow and drawing her inside. “You have left your hair up.”

When she looked at him quizzically, he gave her a crooked smile. “I have thought all day, Aubrey, of what it would be like to unpin your hair.”

Her eyes grew round. “My lord—” she began awkwardly. “I am afraid that... that you are going to find me...” Words seemed to fail her.

Giles pulled her at once into his arms and kissed her as he had that afternoon in the tithe barn. But now she came against him stiffly, her entire body rigid. She kissed him back, but there was no warmth in it. Her hands, he realized, had gone round his waist, but her fingers were cold and viselike, not warm and exploratory.

“Open your mouth, love,” he whispered.

A shudder ran through her, but she allowed him to slowly thrust his tongue into her mouth. He slid deep inside then, tasting her, drawing her body closer, until finally, he felt something inside her give way. Her breasts came against him, and her body seemed to melt just a little. He tasted her deeply, thoroughly, and she began to respond.

On a sudden surge of tenderness he broke the kiss and tamped down his impatience. Taking her hand in his, Giles led her gently into the room. "Come, Aubrey," he said. "Will you have a glass of champagne?"

"N-No thank you," she answered breathlessly, eyeing the bed as if it might be the gateway to perdition. "I should rather we j-just get on with it, my lord."

He stopped abruptly. "Just get on with it?"

Aubrey nodded. "Do you...shall I...lie down on the bed?"

Good Lord, this was not going well. She was acting like a candidate for martyrdom. Generally, women vied rather enthusiastically for his favors. Giles released her and caught her face between his hands. "Look at me, Aubrey," he whispered. "Do you want this? Do you want me?"

He watched as her face flushed with color. "Do I want you?" she echoed a little miserably. "I wanted you two days ago. You know that I did. But I am n-not especially good at this. I have not had a vast deal of —of experience. I am sure, my lord, that you will find me quite inadequate."

Giles softened his expression. "Aubrey, my dear, you and the word inadequate cannot coexist in the same sentence," he said. "Just don't be frightened. You have been married. Lovemaking between a man and a woman is the same the world over."

"Is it?" she asked softly. "I wasn't sure."

It seemed a very strange response, but he was afraid to ask her about it; afraid, perhaps, of what he might hear, he later considered. So instead of asking hard questions, Giles sat on the edge of his bed and pulled her down beside him. He turned her a little, so that her back was to him. Aubrey's hair was twisted up tonight, revealing the nape of her neck. The site was so inviting, Giles lowered his head and set his lips against her bare skin. She made a little sound, a sigh so faint he felt, rather than heard it. Then slowly he began to pull the pins from her hair.

The heavy tresses came down, one by one, forming a shimmering curtain of deep red shot with gold. And as he watched her hair fall, Giles wondered if her husband had been a poor lover. Perhaps he'd been brutish? Or perhaps he'd simply died young? Giles did not ask; he did not want to know. Could not bear to think of her ever having been in another man's bed. And so he drew her deeper into his, determined to erase her memories of anyone else.

Resting his back against the headboard, he pulled one knee up and settled Aubrey into his arms, so that her spine was against his chest. He somehow sensed that it would go easier for her if he was not staring straight into her eyes. Aubrey tucked her feet up on the bed, and on impulse, Giles reached around, gently pushed off her slippers so that they slid onto the floor. Her gray skirts spilled across his left knee, cascading off the edge of the bed.

He tucked his chin over her shoulder and turned his face into the long, lovely length of her throat. "Thank you, Aubrey," he whispered against her ear. With one arm wrapped about her waist, binding her to him, Giles dipped his head to nuzzle her neck and let the other hand slide slowly up the row of buttons. When he reached the topmost one, he deftly opened it, revealing another half-inch of ivory skin.

“Are w-we to do it with the candles lit?” she whispered.

“Yes.” He kept his voice gentle but firm. “You are too beautiful for the darkness.”

Slowly, methodically, he began to slip free each button in turn. Beneath the gray serge, she wore not a corset, but a delicate chemise of a surprisingly fine fabric. The needlework was as exquisite as any his money had ever paid for, and the neckline was trimmed with tiny bows made of pale blue silk. He wondered at it, and then lost that train of thought entirely as the next two buttons slipped free.

He could see the outline of her nipples now, a treasure just beyond his touch, dark and faintly protruding through the thin lawn. With a hand that trembled he pulled loose the tie at the top and drew back the fabric. Her breasts were small but perfect, the areolas dusky rose. Lightly he thumbed her nipple, watching in wonderment as it peaked and hardened to his touch.

“Ah,” she whispered.

He felt suddenly impatient, and an image of her crying out beneath him flashed through his mind. Wait, he cautioned himself. Not yet. Instead, he continued to rub and fondle her breasts. They seemed to have swollen in his hands, and both nipples now pouted for his attention. While he touched her with his left hand, his right made short work of the remaining buttons, until the gray serge lay open to the waist. Then he turned his head and set his lips against her throat, pulling just a fraction of skin between his teeth and nipping ever so gently.

“You like this?”

She did. Her body answered his every touch. He soothed the bite mark with his tongue, then nuzzled and kissed her neck until she was moving restlessly against him. He drew in the scent of her: plain soap, lilac, and heated woman. It was intoxicating. Impatiently he slipped his right hand beneath the lace at the top of her drawers, until he found the soft, springy curls between her thighs.

She was already damp, he realized. “Open your legs, love,” he commanded.

She let one leg relax, parting herself for him. He touched her intimately then, slicking his fingers deep into the feminine folds of flesh. She exhaled on a little gasp when he brushed lightly at her clitoris. He could take her now, he thought. She was ready. But he tried to wait; to draw out her passion.

With one hand still at her breast, he continued to tease her nipple while his other hand kept exploring and stroking between her thighs. She was trembling against him now, her head thrown back against his shoulder. He’d meant to undress her slowly, but the feel of her hips against his cock was agonizing.

He simply could wait no longer. Somehow, he eased her from between his legs and moved to stand at the side of the bed. Without preamble he slid out of the black silk robe and let it fall to the floor.

Aubrey almost gasped aloud when she saw Lord Walrafen naked. He was beautiful, she was sure, though she had little experience to go on. He was sleek and lean like a cat, his chest seemingly wider out of his clothes than in them. His thighs were thick, and dusted with dark hair, and between them he was... well, he was generously endowed. Frightening, really. She was absolutely certain they would not fit together at all.

Walrafen’s thoughts were obviously elsewhere. He crawled back onto the bed in an almost predatory fashion, pushed her back onto the bank of pillows, and kissed her, deeply and urgently, driving her head down into the feathery softness. Her gown lay open to the waist, and her skirts were rucked up beneath her. He was half on top of her now, and it should have felt embarrassing to be almost naked beneath him,

but it didn't.

Everything happened too quickly after that. Aubrey thought he would undress her. Instead, he made a low sound in the back of his throat and shoved up her skirts. He fumbled clumsily at her drawers until they were off. Then he dragged the weight of his body over her, rasped out something which sounded apologetic, and kneed her legs roughly apart. And then the hard length of his erection was pushing at her, probing hotly and urgently at her flesh.

Aubrey was a little frightened. She could sense he was not totally in control. Perhaps that was best. It was now or never. Aubrey widened her legs and closed her eyes. He shoved himself inside her with such force she scarcely felt the barrier of her maidenhead break. But the pain was sharp. She bit her lip, and did not cry out.

He suspected, though. "You're all right?" he choked.

Aubrey nodded. He came up onto his forearms, held himself over her, then drove himself inside her, once, twice, perhaps ten times in all. Then his head went back, his eyes squeezed shut, and his mouth opened in a strained, silent cry. He was glorious to watch as the warmth of his seed pumped deep inside her body.

At last the earl fell against her, a hard, sweaty weight, and for long moments, the only sound in the room was the sawing of his breath in and out of his chest. "Oh, God, Aubrey," he finally said, grunting the words into her hair. "You will never forgive me for this, will you?"

Long moments passed before another word was spoken. Aubrey did not know what to say. What, exactly, required forgiveness? She shifted a little on the bed, and the earl tightened his embrace. "Don't leave," he begged, lifting himself up onto his elbows to look at her. "It will get better, Aubrey. I swear it."

He spoke as if she had a choice. Did she? "I wasn't leaving," she whispered.

He stared at her through a disorderly shock of hair, his color deepening. "Aubrey, I swear to you I have never done that before," he said sorrowfully. "Well, not since I was eighteen."

Aubrey did not know what he was referring to. His face softened. "Did I hurt you, love?" he whispered, stroking the back of one hand down her cheek. "I did, didn't I? I misjudged... something. You weren't ready."

He seemed to need reassurance. "I was ready," she whispered, but the last word came out weak and thready.

He smiled his crooked smile again, which made him look almost boyish. "You were too tight," he said. "Lord, for a moment, I thought..."

Aubrey swallowed hard. "What?"

The earl looked puzzled. "I don't know," he whispered. "I was afraid I'd hurt you."

Mild panic struck. Oh, how she wished she'd asked Muireall more questions when she'd had the chance.

"And now I am crushing you." He withdrew from her body and rolled to one side.

Aubrey was still lying half-clothed, her stockings twisted, her skirts bunched up beneath her in a most undignified fashion. At least she wouldn't have bled on the earl's sheets. She wouldn't need her silly fib

about her courses coming early. "My lord, might I—"

"Giles," he said firmly, stroking her face again. "Please, Aubrey, don't go 'my lording' me in bed. We are lovers now, even if I did do a damned sorry job of it."

Aubrey rose onto one elbow. "You did not hurt me," she said again. "It was not unpleasant in any way."

The earl winced. "Oh, Lord, you really are damning me with faint praise," he said. "It was not unpleasant! I can see that I have much to make up for tonight."

Aubrey sat up in bed. "Tonight—?"

An expression of distress passed over his face. "You are not leaving?"

Aubrey didn't understand. "I shall stay, my lo—" She halted, caught between the name she could not bring herself to use, and the title which he'd forbidden. "I shall stay as long as you wish," she finally said.

A dark cloud passed over Walrafen's face, just as it had done in her sitting room. "As long as I wish?" he echoed. "And what of you, Aubrey? What do you wish? You are very beautiful, my dear. I should like nothing better than to make love to you—and do it properly—for the rest of the night. But I'm hardly a charity case."

The earl lay beside her, propped on one elbow, staring into her eyes. His mouth was tight, his silvery gaze filled with pain. She had hurt him again, she realized. Oh, she had not wanted to do that—and for reasons which now went well beyond her desperate need to keep her job. She was beginning to feel all sorts of emotions for Lord Walrafen, and chief amongst them was this sudden rush of tenderness which was causing her breath to catch.

She laid her right hand against his cheek, which still felt flushed. "No, you are not a charity case,



"she whispered. "You are beautiful. Splendid. A woman who knew what she was doing would be fortunate to share your bed. But I am not very experienced, my lord. I fear it is I who disappoints. Not you."

He stared down at the rumpled sheets for a long, quiet moment. "Aubrey," he finally said. "Have you had no lover since your husband died?"

"No."

Lord Walrafen began to toy with a fraying hem stitch in the topmost sheet. Aubrey made a mental note to see it repaired. "Might I ask, my dear, was your marriage a short one?"

"Yes, very."

“And so you really don’t have much experience, do you?”

“I said as much, did I not?”

The earl gave a sharp laugh. “And I didn’t listen, did I?” he said. “I am sorry, my dear. I am used to bedding the sort of women who have a vast deal of experience. In fact, I’ve never known another kind.”

A sudden sense of disappointment settled over Aubrey. She really had not pleased him, had she? Obviously, lovemaking was not so simple as Muireall had made it out. A woman was expected, apparently, to do a little more than close her eyes and relax. Instead, Aubrey had been clueless. The earl was not apt to invite her in his bed again.

But that was good, was it not? So why did it feel so crushing? Aubrey squeezed her eyes shut and answered her own question. Because despite all the fear and uncertainty, it had felt wonderful to have his body deep inside hers. Because his arms were strong, and she had ached for the touch of another human being. And because his caresses brought her to the edge of something elusive.

Was that what he meant when he spoke of giving her pleasure? Was there more? And how much more could she stand before this inexplicable yearning simmered down into something far more potent? Aubrey felt as if the earth were cleaving open beneath her feet. She had to jump quickly to one side or the other.

The Earl of Walrafen was waiting, she finally realized, for her next words. Tentatively she cleared her throat. “I will get better with practice,” she whispered. “I am sure that I can learn to do this properly, if you will teach me.”

And then the earl did the strangest thing. His eyes softening, he caught her face between both his hands, cradling it as he kissed her over and over. “Ah, Aubrey,” he whispered, pressing his lips across her brow. “If you get any better, I will be in deep, deep trouble. And all you need to learn is how to enjoy it.”

“Do you think so?” she asked unsteadily.

He planted one last kiss on the tip of her nose. “Well, you need a lover with a little self-control.” He laughed.

“I was too eager, my dear. Let me make love to you again, but in a different way, Aubrey. Stay with me, and let me show you. Please?”

In a different way? Mutely she nodded.

As if she were a small child, the earl pulled the front of her dress together. “Why do you not make use of my bathroom?” he gently suggested, reaching down to catch his dressing gown on the tip of one finger. “Go, and make yourself comfortable. And when you come out, Aubrey, leave all these clothes behind. I am ashamed to see I did not even do a proper job of undressing you.”

“Yes. All right.”

His expression softened. “You may wear this robe if it makes you more comfortable.”

She took it, and did as he bade her. There was a brass can filled with water, still a little warm, and a pile of soft towels nearby. Slowly she slid the dress and chemise off her arms and stepped out of it, wondering as she did so just what she was about to do. He had been willing, she thought, to let her go. And if she’d done so, that might well have been the end of it. The earl might have left her alone ever after, to do her job in peace.

Ah, too late for that now. At least he still desired her. Inexplicably that pleased her. Her hands shook as she washed. She'd bled very little, thank God. A small stain was visible on the inside of her gray skirt. She drew on the silk dressing gown, and it settled over her shoulders, cool and light, enveloping her in a faint masculine scent. His scent.

When she came out, he was standing totally naked by the edge of the bed, drawing down the bedcovers. He seemed comfortable without his clothes. No doubt countless lovers had already told him how beautiful his body was. Only a pale, puckered scar near his left knee kept him from physical perfection.

As she came closer, he turned toward her, allowing the candlelight to cast shape and shadow to the hardened planes of his body. His arms and abdomen were sculpted with muscle, his chest lightly covered in dark hair, which dwindled away as it reached his taut belly, and grew thick again between his thighs. Almost willfully, her gaze went to his penis which was half hard again. It moved almost insistently as she approached.

His expression softened, and he drew her fully against him, tucking her head beneath her chin in a gesture that was more protective than sensual. Suddenly, and very strangely, all of the tension seemed to drain from her body. She felt oddly safe, unburdened by fear or dread. She felt free; free to feel joy, at least in this moment. It seemed an addictive emotion to someone who had felt neither freedom nor joy in a very long time.

Emboldened, Aubrey put her arms around his body and let her palms skate up the muscles which layered his bare back. It felt wonderful, and so she allowed herself to explore him. She could sense a hard, tightly coiled strength in his body. Like some powerful Thoroughbred being groomed, he stood calm and still, allowing her fingers to stroke the hardness of his body, until her hands slid over the taut swell of his buttocks. Suddenly he made a dark, eager sound and pressed his body into hers.

"Aubrey," he whispered. He stepped incrementally away and set his hands on her shoulders, pushing the black silk robe slowly off her arms. Cool air caressed her, and involuntarily her nipples hardened. The earl saw it and groaned audibly. His eyes drifted down her, hot and hungry, searing her skin.

Fleeting Aubrey felt embarrassment, then just as quickly pushed it away. There was such promise in this moment. She'd done without so much. She would not do without this. Precisely what this was, she did not know, but she wanted it; wanted the Earl of Walrafen to do to her body all those things which his mouth and eyes and whispered sighs had promised. But most of all, she wanted him to take her body again; to put himself inside her and slide deep, until that ephemeral, exquisite sensation edged near once more.

"Aubrey," he rasped. "So beautiful." He sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her to stand between his thighs. His ravening mouth sought her breast, and when he found it, his eyes closed, fanning thick black lashes across his cheeks. His warm hands slid up her back, holding her motionless. For long moments he suckled her, until a dark, twisting sensation began to draw at her body.

His mouth moved lower, and his tongue came out to stroke a sweet, hot trail of fire along her last rib. Aubrey shuddered. His tongue found her navel, circled it, then delved inside. When she sighed with pleasure, the earl nipped lightly at her belly and let his hands slide down to her buttocks. Gently he urged her legs wider. When she obeyed his silent command, he brought one hand around to touch her. This time his fingers slid easily into the folds of her flesh. Her wetness was almost embarrassingly audible now.

He lifted his mouth from her belly. "Lie down on the bed." He choked out the words, his gaze dark and hot on the joining of her thighs.

Aubrey did as he asked, lying back against the bolster, never taking her eyes from him. She wondered



what he was going to do now. The expression on his face was a little daunting.

Bracketing her shoulders with his hands, the earl leaned over her and kissed her, opening his mouth wide over hers. This time she drew his tongue inside her mouth almost eagerly, sliding her own sinuously against his. She whimpered when his mouth moved to her throat. He kissed her there, then down her collarbone, then lower, the stubble of his beard lightly abrading her skin. Aubrey felt alive, as if her body vibrated with anticipation.

He sat back on his heels and set his hands against the insides of her thighs, urging them gently apart. Embarrassed, she wanted to look away, but his dark gaze commanded her not to do so. Watching her face, he let two fingers stroke softly through her flesh, lightly brushing her center. Aubrey gasped, her body arching off the bed of its own volition. His dark gaze went to his hand then, and he watched himself work her. She felt as though she were drowning in sensation. Fleeting she closed her eyes, and a little roughly he shoved two fingers inside her body.

Aubrey shuddered, opening her eyes and trying to sit up. He set the other hand flat on her belly and urged her back down. "I want to taste you, Aubrey," he rasped. "Do you like that? Will you let me pleasure you in that way?"

She shook her head. "I—I don't know."

His thumb came up to stroke her feminine nub again. "Just tell me you want it," he whispered as she arched against his hand. "Tell me to make you come with my mouth."

"I want it," she said, her voice thready. And she did. Whatever he was offering, she wanted it. But when he lowered his mouth and let his tongue touch her where his fingers had been, she cried out, her whole body arching, her head going back into the softness of the bolster.

In the faint candlelight she heard him groan. His hands came up to push her open wider, and his thumbs slid into her folds, opening them fully. Aubrey wanted to die of embarrassment. Of pleasure. Of yearning. Her every emotion seemed suddenly laid as bare as her body. Very gently he slicked his tongue up again, tormenting her with light, sweet strokes. She strained against the bed with his every touch. He forced her back down again and plunged his tongue into her body.

Her eyes opened wide, and her hand frantically sought him, her fingers tangling in his hair, as if she could hold him back, hold off the sensation that seemed to be driving her toward a dark, dangerous edge. Over and over, he licked and teased. In the stillness of the room someone was panting, almost sobbing. It was her, she realized vaguely. And still he stroked her, pushing her deeper, forcing her need higher and higher. A sensual darkness swirled about her, drawing her down. She wanted, oh she wanted... something. Wanted him to stop. Wanted him never to stop. Desperate, she whispered something and tried to push him away.

"No," he said sharply. "Open, love. Let me have you."

His palms pressed hard against her thighs, holding her open to his onslaught. His every stroke made her shudder. Her hand seized the sheets, and she clung as if drowning. Then he touched the sensitive place with his tongue, and Aubrey bit back a scream. The light was blinding, as if the room exploded. Her body shattered, came apart, and left her trembling.

She came back to earth, back to her body, and felt his hard, warm weight drag over her. He was whispering sweet, soothing things against her neck even as his knee urged her legs wide again. Then he sat back and looked at her almost apologetically. His left hand went to his erection, which was huge now. He slicked one hand back and forth down his length, holding her gaze as if mesmerized. He seemed

reluctant. But his eyes looked suddenly desperate. “Aubrey,” he finally choked. “I have to have you.”

Still holding the weight of his erection in his hand, he stroked himself up through her warm, wet flesh, tormenting and teasing them both. Acting on instinct, Aubrey pulled her knees up. “Come inside me,” she whispered. “Let me feel you deep inside again.”

His face slicked with sweat now, the earl bent over her and shoved himself inside, heated inch by heated inch. She was wet, relaxed, and fully open to him this time. The pain she’d felt before was barely noticeable now. Her hands slid around to cradle his buttocks, boldly urging him deeper.

The earl responded by burying himself fully on a deep, guttural cry. Aubrey held herself still and open, accepting his driving rhythm. And slowly, though she scarcely believed it possible, the hunger began to draw at her.

“Ah, God, Aubrey,” he choked, pounding himself inside her. “I should be gentle.”

She shook her head, her hair scrubbing against the pillowcase. “Don’t talk,” she whispered. “Oh, don’t talk.”

The intensity was rising inside her. She wanted to feel, not think. His driving thrusts pushed her closer and closer to the blinding light again. The warm scent of his body enveloped her. His breathing roughened. His strokes deepened. She let her head arch back against the pillow again; let herself go to him without reservation. And then Aubrey shuddered, and was lost to the world around her. As if from a distance she heard him cry out, once, then again. She felt him fall against her, his lungs heaving, and then she knew no more.

## Chapter Eleven

### In Which Lord Walrafen Makes a Proposal

Giles awoke to a flickering, faltering light and the vague realization that something deeply significant had just occurred in his life. Rolling up onto one elbow, he looked at the candelabrum on his night table and realized the candles were guttering. How long had he slept? He squinted into the gloom. His small ormolu clock said four.

Beside him, Aubrey lay on her side, one hand tucked under her cheek. She looked so innocent. Lord, she had been innocent—or so near it as made no difference. He rolled back down and collapsed into his pile of pillows just as the first candle sputtered and went out. Aubrey whispered something in her sleep and wriggled closer.

Good God, what had he done? he wondered, staring up into the bed canopy. Nothing he hadn’t set out to do, of course. So why did the result seem so...so profound? On that thought, something inside him quickened, bringing with it a sense of anxiety. This affair he’d begun with his housekeeper seemed suddenly too tentative, too fragile.

He was overcome by the urge to wake her; to settle things between them now. And in truth, he probably should wake her. Aubrey was proud. She would not fancy being found naked in the master’s bed by one of her own chambermaids. No, not until things were decided between them. He turned to set a hand on her shoulder and realized her eyes were open. She was staring up at him, her expression anxious.

“Good morning,” he said, lightly kissing her forehead.

“What time is it?” she rasped, sitting up in bed, clutching his sheet to her breasts. “I must go.”

Giles pulled her back down into the depths of the bed. "Barely four," he said, drawing her body against his. "Don't leave yet."

"Ida will be up soon," she answered. "I shall be noticed."

Giles caressed her face between his hands. "Aubrey, my darling, don't go," he whispered. "Not before I've had the chance to tell you what this night with you meant to me."

Through the gloom he could sense her blushing. "I am glad, my lord," she said. "You are wonderful. But really, I must go if I'm not to be seen leaving your bedchamber. Neither of us wants that, I am sure."

He did not like her air of desperation. "Listen to me, Aubrey," he said suddenly. "I don't care. I am enchanted by you."

She looked at him, and her expression softened. "But you hardly know me, my lord," she answered. "And of course you care what is said of you by your own servants in your own house. Certainly, I care very deeply what is said of us both."

He kissed her again, feverishly. "Aubrey, this will not do," he said. "We cannot go on like this. You cannot stay at Cardow."

In his arms she stiffened. "I beg your pardon?"

Desperation drove his words. "Listen, Aubrey, I am accustomed to providing well for my mistresses," he said urgently. "I don't want you to work—certainly not for me—and I want you to have nice things. A good life. I was not teasing last night about keeping you in luxury. Perhaps you think me mad, Aubrey, but I'm not. I swear it. I want you to be with me."

"As your mistress?" Her face had gone pale. "You wish to—to pay me? Like a whore?"

Giles drew back an inch. "That is putting it rather starkly."

"No," she whispered, her tone horrified. "No, that isn't stark. That is honest."

It felt as if panic was squeezing the air from his lungs. Something which had seemed so right mere moments ago now seemed to be going badly awry. The black void—the loneliness—threatened to drag him under again. "I need you," he said simply. "I don't think you understand, Aubrey, how much. I want you with me. In London, not here. Good God, you cannot work for me."

"If I am paid to be your mistress, I will most certainly be working for you—and in the shabbiest possible way," she whispered.

But Giles didn't want to listen. "Aubrey, I have a residence, a lovely town house, just off Regent's Park. You—and Iain, of course—would be happy there. You would have your own staff. A carriage. I will find a good tutor. I will take care of you both, Aubrey, forever. That is how much I want you."

"You want me," she echoed. "And that is all which matters to you."

"Everything about this matters to me," he returned.

Aubrey shook her head. "I am your housekeeper, my lord," she whispered. "Here, at Cardow. If you tell me to share your bed, I shall, but—"

Giles sat up abruptly. "If I tell you—?"

Her lips thinned, then relaxed again. "If I share your bed, for whatever reason, that is my business," she clarified. "You are a wonderful lover. But I'm no man's whore, my lord, and I won't be paid for what we do together. I cannot go to London. And I won't expose my child to something I would be ashamed to explain to him. I am your housekeeper. At Cardow."

"At Cardow?" he repeated hollowly.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, unless you mean to dismiss me."

Giles drew up his knees, propped his elbows on them, and held his head in his hands. "Don't be ridiculous, Aubrey," he said, staring at the bedcovers.

"But you hold that power over me," she said quietly. "That, my lord, is the reality."

Dear God, she was serious. His head swiveled toward her, and he pinned her with his glare. "Is that what you think of me?" he rasped. "You really imagine I might dismiss you? For this?"

Aubrey jerked her eyes away. "Many men would."

Suddenly his palm just itched to slap her. But then he realized she was right. Most men would. And he did hold that power over her. He'd used it, too, hadn't he? Oh, subtly, in a way which let him evade much of the guilt. But that power, the ugly disparity in their positions, had been ever present in his mind. And in hers, too, he was sure.

Yet she was not going to be persuaded, he sensed, no matter what he promised her. The void was back, gaping and hungry. He felt his world—and the grand plan he'd barely known he'd had—crumbling all around him. Suddenly, quite inexplicably, he wanted to cry.

"Just tell me something, Aubrey," he whispered, setting the heels of his hands against his eyes. "Did you enjoy my attentions last night? Other than the raw physical satisfaction, did you take any pleasure at all in my touch? In being held in my arms as you slept? Or was it all just duty?"

He heard her catch her breath, a pitiful sound. "Oh, don't do this to me, my lord," she said hoarsely. "If you have an ounce of mercy in your heart, don't ask me that."

"I am asking," he demanded. "By God, I have at least a few rights in this relationship."

"Of course I found pleasure in your touch," she finally answered, her voice quaking. "Of course I wanted it. I am a servant, my lord. I have no one. Other than my child, I have not known a human touch or a moment's affection from anyone in more years than I care to count. Of course I found your attentions enjoyable. I ached for them. Do you not see? Can you not fathom what that kind of life is like?"

He looked at her coldly then.



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“And what do you imagine my life is like?” he demanded. “Do you think a touch which has been bought and paid for feels any different, Aubrey? Do you imagine that bartering with courtesans for their affections warms a man’s heart?”

“And yet, that is what you would have me do, my lord,” she whispered.

Giles struck the headboard with his fist. “No, by God, it is not!” he roared. “I...I care for you, Aubrey. It is different—or it could be, if you would but let it.”

“It is never different,” she answered. “And you don’t know me.”

“Yes,” he snapped. “I do.” And in that moment he thought he meant it. “I have learned a great deal about you, Aubrey, these past few years. Perhaps I did not always know you in the physical sense, but I knew your mind—even your heart, in some small way. I learned what you think, what you value. And now I have learned how you quicken to my touch, how you set my soul afire. Damn it, don’t you presume to tell me what I do or don’t know.”

“I have to go, my lord,” she said, her voice a little sorrowful. “Please, may I go?”

He made an angry, violent gesture toward the door. “Yes, go, for God’s sake,” he snapped. “Pray do not let me distress you with my presence one moment longer than is absolutely necessary.”

“It is not like that,” she whispered. “You know it is not.”

Without answering her, Giles sat up on the edge of the bed, drew the sheet across his thighs, and snarled one corner of it in his fist. He listened to the sound of her quietly dressing behind him. She did not speak, and he did not move again until he heard his door softly open, then click shut. And just like that, she was gone.

Hell and damnation! He had ruined it! He had not even realized how much he’d wanted her until he’d blurted out his awkward proposition.

She claimed he did not know her. Logically, he knew that was so. And yet, he had the nagging sense that his desire for her had been with him for a very long time; longer than just the week he’d been here at Cardow. It felt as if, somewhere, amidst all their letters of the last three years, he’d become intrigued by her. Not enchanted. Not charmed. Something else. Obsessed?

No, not that either. Giles shook his head, then let it fall forward again into his hands.

And then it occurred to him that there was at least a little hope. If Aubrey would not come to him, he could come to her. Here, to Cardow. Good Lord, he would likely kill his coachman and run himself half to death. His career would probably fall to ruins. But he almost did not care. The castle was beginning, slowly, to feel as if it could be his home again.

More important, Aubrey had not said she wouldn’t be his lover. She’d said only that she wouldn’t be his mistress. If he could seduce her once, he could do it again. Good Lord, if she wanted to keep her bloody job, let her. It stuck in his craw, of course. But what was the alternative? A life with no prospect of seeing her? And if he were honest with himself, he was not at all sure how well Cardow would go on without her. He had the welfare of his land and his people to consider. So perhaps he was on his way to becoming a country gentleman, after all?

With these hopeful notions spinning about in his head, Giles got up and padded into his bathroom, so lost in thought that he scarcely noticed that cold water already stood in the basin. Or that the white towel he unfolded was already damp. Instead, he was thinking of how he ought to buy a newer, faster,

better-sprung traveling coach so that he might make the journey from London more efficiently. He would ask Ogilvy to make inquiries. So resolved, Giles moved to dip one corner of the towel into the basin. And it was then that he saw the bloodstain.

Oh, it was so faint. So faint he could almost pretend it didn't exist. For a long moment he stared down at the pale pink smear on his very white towel, and tried to comprehend how he might have managed to nick himself, when he'd not yet so much as stropped his razor. And finally it struck him. The unvarnished truth, which had been staring him in the face. Suddenly there was a roar in his ears, and a blood-red haze before his eyes.

"Aubrey!" he roared, stalking out of the bathroom and hurling the towel to the floor. "Aubrey! Goddamn it! Get back here! Get back here this instant!"

Nothing but silence answered him.

Indeed, if he was lucky, no one had heard him. The horrible reality of his situation was sinking in. Aubrey was not coming back. Not into his bedchamber, at any rate. Not if she could help it. Indeed, she'd not wanted to come this time, had she? Still, he had pushed her. Manipulated her. Seduced her.

She had been a virgin. He was unutterably certain of it. The blood had come from nowhere else. There had been no husband. No marriage. Just another of Aubrey's carefully crafted deceptions. And he had half suspected it, yet refused to look too deeply, for fear of what he might find. God only knew what else she might be hiding. But there was no escaping the fact that she'd been, sexually speaking, an innocent.

Now Giles was the one who was frightened. He had to find her. Somehow, he had to apologize. And she had to explain—quite a lot, too. Then, together, they had to decide what was to be done about this travesty. To hell with his career; he would simply make her marry him. And yet he had the dreadful feeling that would be easier said than done. Aubrey would view his offer with skepticism. He knew, too, how the world would view it. As unnecessary. As a foolish overreaction. But did that matter? Did he care?

In any case, such decisions must wait. There was at least one small thing which needed doing first. Giles slowly, and quite calmly, walked back into his bathroom, drew open his razor, and sliced an eighth-inch nick on his neck. Then he picked up Aubrey's towel and blotted away the blood. But for all his calculated planning, for all his determination that Aubrey's shame be hidden and his carelessness righted, there was one simple thing which Giles failed to do. He failed to return to his bedside. And he failed to pick up the little pile of hairpins left scattered across his night table.

Sometime in the emotional haze between breakfast and luncheon, Aubrey realized yet a second mistake she'd made. It was a little less earth-shattering than surrendering her virginity to Lord Walrafen, thank heaven. Still, amidst her anxiety over the inquest, and her obsession with her employer, Aubrey had failed to deliver the promised rose-hip salve to Mrs. Bartle. She'd made it, yes. But it did Jack's wound precious little good sitting on the marble slab in her stillroom.

Unfortunately, today was washday. Worse, poor Ida's ankle was still twice the size it ought to have been. There was no one else to send. Snatching a wicker basket from the larder, Aubrey filled it with parsnips and a fresh loaf of bread. She tucked the salve on top, then went into the kitchen to tell Mrs. Jenks of her errand. On her way back, however, she saw Pevsner standing in the passageway with the justice of the peace.

There could not possibly have been a better time to escape the house. Moreover, she needed to be alone

with her thoughts. Unobserved, she took the shortcut by the beer cellar and set a hasty path toward the bailey gate.

Lord Walrafen had always been a bit of a perfectionist. And like most such creatures, he was secretly haunted by the fear of failure, often with bizarre results. For example, during most of his adult life, he'd been tormented by a recurring dream in which a gaggle of Cambridge dons burst in upon the House of Lords and seized him up by both arms. Before a full session they would proclaim quite loudly that Walrafen had failed to take his final examinations and was therefore unfit to sit in either chamber. Sometimes they would go so far as to insist that he'd been granted his title by mistake. Or that he was hopelessly inept, and that his whole career was a sham.

In reality the stupid, the inept, and the uneducated regularly turned up in Parliament. Had they not, half the seats would have gone empty. But the absurdity did not stop the nightmare from coming. And it did not stop it from ending in precisely the same way. Just as they were dragging him from the chambers, Walrafen would look down to discover that he was utterly and completely naked. Which was precisely how he began to feel shortly after luncheon on what had already been a dreadful day.

As if Giles did not have enough trouble trying to figure out his housekeeper, his butler appeared in his doorway at the very moment he sat back down at his desk. Oddly, the justice of the peace stood in the shadows behind him, holding something which looked like a rolled blanket.

"Come in," said the earl, very much wishing they wouldn't.

Pevsner was looking very pleased with himself. That could not possibly be a good sign. "My lord," he said gravely. "I fear we have made a most shocking discovery."

As if it contained the Holy Grail, Higgins laid the blanket down in the center of the earl's desk. It was a wool plaid in blue and green with small stripes of red and yellow. The thing looked vaguely familiar, but not so familiar that Walrafen could be brought to appreciate their intruding on him with it.

He stared at it impatiently. "Yes? What?"

With a great deal of flourish the butler unfolded the plaid twice to reveal a small treasure chest of valuables which had apparently been wrapped inside for safekeeping. Walrafen picked up the first thing that caught his eye, a short strand of pearls—very fine ones, too, if he did not miss his guess. There was also a locket on a heavy gold chain, a chased silver brooch with a huge red stone, three gold rings, and two gilt-framed miniatures so exquisite they might have been painted by Oliver, the famed miniaturist himself. Underneath it all lay a few other trinkets, but none of it, unfortunately, hid the heavy gold watch which lay in the center.

Walrafen pushed back his chair just an inch and braced his hands on his desk. He felt suddenly sick. Oh, God. He remembered now where he'd seen the plaid. "What do you mean to do with this?" he asked quietly. "To whom have you shown it?" They were not all the right sort of questions to have asked at such a moment.

The J.P. waved a hand over the plaid as if it were obvious. "My lord, we discovered all this in your housekeeper's quarters and have shown it to no one," he said. "But the watch is indisputably your uncle's. God only knows where she got the rest of it. The conclusion is painfully obvious."

The earl shoved back his chair and stood. "Painful for whom?" he snapped. "It did not pain either of you to go snooping through Mrs. Montford's personal effects, I'll warrant."

Pevsner jerked back as if he'd been struck. He very nearly had been, too. Only Giles's white-knuckled grip on the back of his chair had kept him from swinging at the man. "But, m-my lord!" the butler stuttered. "The Major's watch!"

"The things you've discovered are Mrs. Montford's lawful possessions," Giles heard himself say. "They are family heirlooms. She mentioned them to me herself but recently."

Higgins shook his head disbelievingly. "My lord, surely you do not claim the watch is hers? It is inscribed to Major Lorimer."

"If she has it, then it is hers," snapped Giles. "It is as simple as that. Now I should like to know why you were searching through her son's chest."

The butler and the justice of the peace exchanged telling glances. Too late, Giles realized what he'd revealed. "My lord," began the butler. "You told me some days ago I might search the whole of the house."

Had he? It sounded rather extreme now.

It was as if the butler read his mind. "Everyone's rooms have been searched, mine included," he went on. "That is how Mrs. Montford wished it. Everyone, she insisted, must be searched or the search would not be fair."

Giles had the strangest feeling Pevsner was twisting Aubrey's words somehow, but at the moment he could hardly prove it. "Well, there you have it," he said instead. "If everyone was searched at her insistence, then she must feel quite sure of her own innocence."

Higgins cleared his throat delicately. "And are you quite certain, my lord, these things belong to your housekeeper?"

Something inside him snapped. "Damn it, man, didn't I just say so?" he asked. "Not two days ago the woman told me she'd some family heirlooms stored in the bottom drawer of her son's chest. She asked that should anything ever happen to her, that I ensure those things were passed down to him. I saw the bloody blanket, for God's sake. She also mentioned a Bible containing a will and a letter. Did you find those, too?"

Pevsner and Higgins exchanged glances again. Something akin to relief flooded through him. Yes, they had indeed seen the Bible and the papers. Giles would have staked his last guinea on it.

"So these are the heirlooms she spoke of?" asked Higgins.

Giles looked at him impatiently. "I am not about to insult the woman by asking her."

"They seem rather dear for a housekeeper, my lord."

"Good God, Higgins, she runs this entire estate!" Giles snapped. "If she were dishonest, there are a thousand ways she could more easily and more profitably cheat me. Why would she trouble herself to snatch some paltry watch?"

But the watch was not paltry, and they both knew it. Higgins opened his hands expressively. "I take your point, my lord, but if you do not ask her about the watch, then I shall have to," he said softly. "I have a job I must do, whether I like it or not. Now I shall give you the liberty of deciding which of us makes that inquiry."



Oh, Giles meant to make an inquiry all right. Indeed, he meant to drag Aubrey's pale, perfect face right into his, and demand a little honesty of her. He was bloody tired of her half-truths, evasions, and lies. He just didn't want Higgins or Pevsner to know it. And he was going to have to marry her for sure now, just to staunch the spurt of ugly rumors.

"I shall be happy to ask on your behalf," Giles said as civilly as he could. "But I think, Mr. Higgins, that this business of my uncle's death has dragged on too long. It is casting a pall over the whole house. So I mean to have an expert in criminal matters sent down from London."

Higgins paled. "What sort of expert, my lord?"

"A former police inspector," answered Giles, praying Max was on his way. "The Vicomte de Vendenheim-Sélestat, to be precise."

"Good God! A Frenchman?" Higgins was plainly horrified.

"An Alsatian," Giles corrected. "And a close associate of the Home Secretary. Peel thinks him eminently qualified to investigate all manner of criminal activity. I am sure he will resolve this matter."

"Then I wish him well." But Higgins looked insulted. That would surely do Aubrey no good.

"He will, of course, require your help," Giles hastily added. "You will have to—to aid him in his investigation. To explain to him what you have uncovered. With his background, and your careful work, I am sure the two of you can quickly conclude this business."

Higgins looked marginally mollified. Pevsner didn't dare open his mouth. The two of them left the plaid unrolled on the desk, and departed. Giles went at once to the marquetry table by the windows and dumped out half a tumbler of brandy.

Alternately sipping at it and pressing the cool glass to his forehead, the earl paced back and forth in front of his desk. Dear God in heaven. That had been a near run thing. Despite his protestations to Higgins, he'd no clue what Aubrey was doing with Elias's watch. He wanted so much to believe in her—indeed, he did believe in her. But she was making it bloody hard on him. He would quite probably end up shaking her until her pearly white teeth rattled. He could already see those cat-green eyes of hers narrowing to slits.

Damn it all, he wished the watch would simply vanish. He turned from the window to look at it. It had not vanished. Instead, it was still lying in the center of his desk, its solid gold cover reflecting a shaft of sun, casting it into splinters on his ceiling. Giles put down his drink, picked up the watch, and flicked open the cover. Strangely, he still remembered the day his uncle had received it, in the summer of 1814. Giles had come down to London between school terms to find Elias on leave and ensconced in Hill Street.

One night his uncle had gone out to dine at White's with some of his men. He'd come home with the watch in his pocket, his spirits high, and one of his officers in tow—his favorite and his finest officer, he'd said. Giles remembered the man only as soft-spoken, with dark hair and an easy smile. The three of them had sipped a celebratory whisky together, for the officers had believed—wrongly, as it happened—that their nightmare on the Continent was over.

Giles had never forgotten the visitor saying, with obvious reluctance, that he was soon to sell his commission. He had come late into an earldom—a Scottish title, perhaps?—and he had no sons. But what the devil had his name been? He vaguely recalled Aunt Harriet having recently mentioned it. Kenway? Canwell? But those names did not sound Scottish. Indeed, he might be altogether mistaken.

In any case, his uncle had never spoken of the visitor or the watch again, save once. It seemed the poor chap had not sold out soon enough. Instead, he'd gone back to Belgium with Elias when Napoleon had made his last grand dash for glory. And there he'd died, leaving Elias nothing but the watch to remember him by.

Giles closed the cover, put the beautiful timepiece back, and folded the plaid over it all. Despite the grief surrounding it, the thing was, perhaps, the finest watch he'd ever seen. The sapphires alone were worth a small fortune. Still, of what use could it be to Aubrey, unless she meant to sell it? And why on earth would his uncle have given such a beloved thing to a servant? A week ago Giles would have said it was simply a gift from a gentleman to his mistress, for the watch could easily be sold.

But his uncle had treasured the watch, and Aubrey had not been his mistress. Had Giles suffered any lingering doubts on that point, that little smear of blood on his towel this morning would have coldly dispensed with them. Now there were too many unanswered questions. Why had Aubrey hidden her virginity? Why had she hidden Elias's watch? And what else might she be hiding? But the most disconcerting question of all was, why had he lied to protect her?

Oh, he was half-afraid he knew the answer to that one. But rather than consider it too closely, Giles tossed back a healthy amount of the brandy and simply stood by the window until he heard Ogilvy come in.

"Good afternoon, my lord," said the young man.

"I daresay," grunted Giles without turning from the window.

Behind him, he heard papers shuffling, and heard Ogilvy go to the desk, but Giles's mind was elsewhere. "A Farquharson plaid," the young man murmured. "My lord, where did you get this?"

Giles was in no mood to explain anything to Ogilvy. "What, that bloody blanket?" he said, going to the desk and pushing the thing away. "Never mind it. Have you got the morning's post?"

"Yes, sir," said Ogilvy, laying a row of it neatly across the desk. "Here are the things which are urgent."

Giles nodded tightly, and Ogilvy left him to it. He sat down and tried mightily to focus on it all. But it was no use. "Ogilvy!" he barked.

The young man leapt from his chair. "Yes, my lord?"

"Find Mrs. Montford," said the earl. "And bring her to me."

## Chapter Twelve

### In Which the Truth Begins to Come Out

After her visit with Mrs. Bartle, Aubrey did not rush back to the castle. Instead, she surprised herself by dawdling along the village path, then stopping to pick a few cattails by the fishpond under the hill. After laying them neatly across her empty basket, she sat down on a rocky outcropping and let her mind turn fully toward the thing which had lingered there all day. Lord Walrafen. Giles.

She looked out across the water, smooth as glass, and smiled a little. Even after sharing his bed, it seemed strange to think of him as simply Giles. But she was thinking of him, almost constantly now. Today she was thinking of how wonderful his mouth and his hands had felt on her body. Of the pleasure he'd obviously taken from hers. But she was remembering, too, the hurt which had been so plain in his

eyes at the end. She wished she could take back, or at least temper, some of her words.

He had said that he would not force her into anything she did not wish to do. After considering it, she had decided she believed him. For all his faults, he seemed a deeply honorable man. And now she knew he was an exquisite lover. Aubrey closed her eyes, lifted her face to the autumn sun, and let herself imagine his handsome features. She'd grown so accustomed to speaking—and often arguing—with him on a daily basis. She'd begun to look forward to hearing his ringing laugh and rapid steps in the castle's corridors. For the first time in years she felt alive. Happy. Almost safe.

The house felt alive, too. It became a real home when he was there. She wondered a little sadly when he would leave Cardow and return to London. She wondered, too, how long he would be away this time. Another year? Another five? Aubrey dragged in her breath a little roughly. How odd it seemed that the thought of not seeing him disturbed her now. How empty the castle would feel when he was gone.

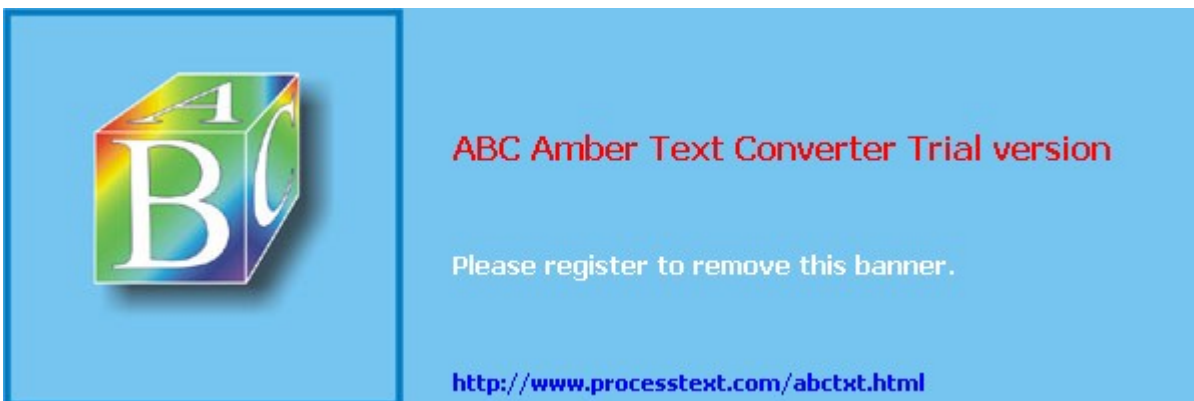
Still, no matter how much she missed him, she would not accept his offer. She was tempted. She wondered what it would be like to share his bed and his life. To have someone to hold, and be held by. Someone who would simply take care of her. What a luxury that would be! But even if she wished to lower herself so, she had lain to think about. Moreover, London was too dangerous a place for either of them.

By the time Aubrey returned from her walk, the afternoon sun had warmed the cobbled bailey. She strode across its length and let herself in near the kitchens. Lettie and Ida stood by the servants' hall, their heads leaned together. At the sound of the door, their whispers stopped dead, and their wide eyes shot in her direction. Ida suppressed a little spurt of laughter.

Aubrey put her basket on the table by the door. "Have you two finished helping in the laundry?" she gently prodded. "If you have, Lettie, you may wax the floors in the Gilded Saloon. Ida, go put your foot up, please."

Both girls curtsied, then hastened away. Untying her bonnet, Aubrey strode down the passageway toward her sitting room, only to have Betsy step from the larder and seize her by one arm. "Get in here," she hissed, dragging Aubrey inside.

"Good heavens,



" murmured Aubrey. "What is wrong?"

Betsy shut the door. "Here," she said, pressing something into Aubrey's hand. "Put these in your pocket."

Aubrey looked down. Hairpins? Oh, God. Hairpins.

Betsy's kindly face had turned pink. "I snatched 'em up afore Lettie got a good look," she said. "But

there be whispering already.”

Still stunned, Aubrey looked up. “Whispering?”

“Yes, and if they’re yours, ma’am, I don’t want to know,” said Betsy firmly. “But hairpins is hairpins, and there be but so many people in this house who wears ’em.”

Aubrey shut her eyes and closed her hand into a fist until the metal bit into her flesh. She did not know what to say. Or what to deny.

“And that Mr. Ogilvy’s waiting to see you now,” Betsy continued, busying herself at one of the shelves. “Been in your sitting room a good ten minutes, he has. Best go see what he wants.”

“Yes,” she said softly. “Yes, I shall.”

Betsy turned from the shelf. “Begging your pardon, ma’am,” she said more gently. “But are you all right? You ain’t seemed yourself lately.”

Aubrey forced herself to nod. “I’m fine,” she said softly. “Thank you, Betsy.” Then, with the ribbons of her bonnet still hanging loose, Aubrey left the larder and went down the hall to her sitting room.

Ogilvy snapped to his feet the moment she entered. “Mrs. Montford,” he said politely. “His Lordship wishes to see you in his study. A matter of some urgency, I gather.”

“Of course,” she managed to say. “I shall go at once.”

As if she moved in a dream, Aubrey laid down her hairpins and lifted off her bonnet. She was still in shock over Betsy’s warning. Dear heaven, how could she have been so stupid? And now this, the very thing she’d half dreaded since leaving Walrafen’s bedchamber this morning. She was being summoned to his inner sanctum.

Perhaps the earl meant to continue badgering her to become his mistress? And perhaps if she meant to go about leaving her hairpins scattered across his furniture, she might as well agree to do it. Her reputation would end in tatters either way. For months after her arrival at Cardow, the other servants had suspected she was the Major’s mistress. It had been hard to hold up her head and do her job despite it all. Still absently carrying her bonnet, Aubrey made her way to the study.

He started forward as if to greet her the moment she entered. Her eyes flew to his face, searching. She realized at once he looked unwell, and her first instinct was to rush to him, to smooth her hand over his cheek and ask him what was wrong. Then he stepped a little to the left, and Aubrey saw the plaid laid out across his desk.

Suddenly she could not quite catch her breath. Suddenly everything changed. She must have looked unsteady, for the earl slid a warm, strong hand beneath her elbow. “Aubrey, are you all right?”

No. She was not all right. She left the earl’s side and approached the desk as if a coiled snake lay upon it. Her hand went to her mouth, and she spun about to face him, blinking back tears.

Walrafen looked at her with misgiving in his eyes. “I am afraid, my dear, that you’ve some explaining to do.”

Aubrey felt as though she’d been publicly violated. “Who has been going through my things?” she whispered. “Who?”

The earl's gaze slid from her face to the plaid and back again. "Pevsner and Higgins," he said softly.

"By whose authority?" she demanded. "Yours? Was it yours, my lord? Did you ask them to do this? Why did you not just ask me?"

The earl laid a hand on her shoulder. "Aubrey, it seems I did indeed give Pevsner permission to search the entire house," he said quietly. "I am sorry, my dear. But you are going to have to explain this watch. Just now, it is all I can do to keep Higgins at bay."

Aubrey picked up Muireall's miniature from the plaid and stroked a finger over the frame. Then another, even more frightful thought struck her. "My Bible," she whispered, looking frantically about the room. "Do you have it? Where is it?"

Walrafen steered her toward a chair and urged her into it. "The Bible is no doubt just where you left it," he said gently. "Something so benign could hold no interest for Pevsner. Now tell me, Aubrey, what are you doing with my uncle's watch?"

She looked up into his eyes, which were warm and steady. It was slowly dawning on her that the earl was not her enemy. He did not sound angry, just mystified. Indeed, he sounded as if he wanted to protect her. And hadn't that been her very reason for going to his bed? To garner his protection should she need it? She must surely use it now, though the thought brought her no joy.

"The Major gave it to me," she finally answered. "Or rather, he gave it to me to give to Iain."

"To Iain? Why?"

Weakly Aubrey shrugged. "He said something about Iain's trying to warn him when the tower collapsed," she whispered. "He seemed... touched. But I did not want the watch. I told him Iain was too young. Indeed, I tried very hard to give it back, but he was stubborn. And so I... why, I made another deal with the devil. To get what I wanted. That is how one often went on with him, you know."

Walrafen knelt before her chair and took one of her hands into his, and began to chafe it, as if to get both her blood and her words moving again. "What sort of deal, Aubrey?"

Aubrey nodded and swallowed hard. "I said I'd take the watch, but only if he agreed to let Dr. Crenshaw examine him. The very next day. To my shock, he agreed. And so I took the watch. I thought it would be worth it." She looked up at Giles, silently pleading with him to understand. "But he did not see Crenshaw after all, did he? Instead, he... he just died."

The earl squeezed her hand. "Aubrey, why did you not tell me all this? Why didn't you just say you had the watch?"

Aubrey shook her head. "Because no one would have believed me."

Walrafen laid both his hands on her shoulders and stared deep into her eyes. "Aubrey, if you say my uncle gave you his watch, then I believe you." He spoke slowly and distinctly. "I believe you."

"Thank you," she whispered. "But Pevsner will talk, my lord, and—"

"Giles," he corrected, squeezing her fingers again. "Just Giles, Aubrey, all right?"

Aubrey found herself fighting back tears. "Yes, all right."

"And Pevsner will talk at his peril," he added.

There was such comfort, such strong conviction, in his voice. And suddenly Aubrey wanted to tell him everything. To just unburden herself and fall sobbing into his cravat. But her confession would put Giles in an untenable position. He was sworn to uphold the law. Unfortunately, according to the law, Aubrey was guilty of child abduction, perhaps worse. England afforded mothers few rights where their children were concerned. Indeed, they would not even recognize her as Iain's mother. And then, of course, the worst thing of all would happen. They would return him to his only male relative. To his uncle, Fergus McLaurin.

No, confession would not be good for her soul. Certainly it would not be good for Iain. What had she been thinking to get them into this mess?

"Oh, I wish I'd never seen that watch!" she cried. "I wish I'd never gotten myself involved in any of this! I was just—just trying to do the right thing. I did not understand how complicated all this would become."

"Aubrey," he said very quietly, "what are you talking about?"

She hiccuped on a sob, and hesitated, afraid she'd said too much. "I did not even realize until days later that the watch was thought missing," she said, which was true. "In all the confusion, I just did not think about it. A watch seemed so...so trivial, with the Major dead, you know?"

"Yes, I think I see."

"Then Mr. Higgins came, with his big, black eyes and his dreadful questions," she continued. "And I realized that he suspected me. That nothing I could say would help. The watch would only have made it worse. And it will."

Giles set his warm hand against her cheek. "I'll deal with Higgins," he said.

One hand still on her shoulder, Giles felt Aubrey sag with relief. She trusted him at least a little, he thought. And he wanted to trust her. Wanted to believe every word she uttered. Was he the world's worst sort of fool? A fool in love? Whatever her reasons, Aubrey was a liar. He knew that. Why couldn't he accept it?

"Aubrey, who are those people in the miniatures?" he demanded. Giles had not failed to notice how finely they were dressed, and somehow, he doubted their finery had anything to do with artistic license. He had also noticed that the woman looked hauntingly familiar. "Are they your family?"

Aubrey nodded and dashed a hand beneath her eye. "My sister, Muireall," she said. "And her husband."

Again, Giles wondered if she was lying. "But you look nothing like her," he pressed.

Aubrey gave a pitiful laugh. "No, nothing," she agreed. "She got Papa's looks, and Mama's temperament, whilst I got precisely the opposite."

"There were but the two of you? No brothers?"

She shook her head. "Just us."

Giles hesitated for a moment, and when it became plain she meant to say no more, he let his hand slip from her shoulder, then paced slowly across the room. He stood for a time staring blindly through the window, and wondering how to broach all that needed saying. "Aubrey," he finally said. "Why have you been lying to me about so many things?"

“I—I am not sure what you mean.”

Giles clasped his hands tightly behind his back. “You told me your marriage was a short one,” he said grimly. “You came here, into my employ, claiming to be a young widow. You said you were an experienced housekeeper. That you’d come from the north, and that Iain was your son, and that... oh, Christ Jesus, Aubrey!” He finally spun around. “Is any of that true? Any of it? Please tell me. This isn’t just about the watch. Aubrey, I want to help you. I’m begging you. Tell me everything now, before someone else does.”

The silence deepened. “Just what are you accusing me of?”

He crossed the room in three strides. “I know you lied about one thing, Aubrey,” he rasped. “I had a virgin in my bed last night. A virgin. Not a widow. You never had a husband, did you?”

“Oh, God,” she whispered.

“Why, Aubrey?” he demanded. “Why would you lie about such a thing? Don’t you comprehend the seriousness of it? Don’t you realize what we’ve done?”

She lifted her hand, a pathetic, impotent gesture. “What household would take on a young single woman as a housekeeper, my lord?” she asked him, a silent tear sliding down her cheek. “Would you have done so? I had to put food on the table and find a safe place for Iain to live. At first, yes, I was honest. But I quickly learned no one would hire me.”

“You could have sold your jewelry,” he suggested. “Some of those things look very fine.”

“Those things are family heirlooms,” she said, balling her handkerchief in one fist. “But that wasn’t what you meant, was it? I know what you are thinking, and you are wro—”

“No, you don’t know what I am thinking,” he interjected. “I am trying to find a way to help you, Aubrey.”

Some of the tension went out of her then. “I am hoping to save what is left for Iain,” she said, her voice gentling. “Yes, we once had a few nice things but I’ve sold many. What remains is... well, our nest egg, I suppose.”

“And what of Iain, Aubrey?” Giles asked hollowly. “Whose child is he?”

Her eyes flicked over him uncertainly. “He was born to my sister,” she finally answered. “But I... adopted him. He is mine in all ways that matter.”

“Your sister, the invalid?”

“Yes,” Aubrey whispered. “She probably should not have borne a child, but her husband wished for a son to inherit the—well, to carry on his family’s name.”

“Many men do,



” he acknowledged tightly.

Aubrey nodded. “I attended my sister during her confinement,” she went on. “Afterward, she’d neither the strength nor inclination to mother him.”

“And he carries your name because...?”

Aubrey swallowed hard. “It just seemed safer,” she whispered. “Iain’s father died shortly after Muireall, and—well, there was some scandal attached to his passing, as there often is with young men who live large and live dangerously.”

Giles lifted his brows lightly. “What sort of scandal?”

She hesitated. “It is a family matter, my lord,” she whispered. “When Iain comes of age, I mean to encourage him to take up his father’s name and restore its honor. That is all I feel at liberty to say.”

Giles kept noticing Aubrey’s use of the word safe. He was tempted to simply shake the full story out of the woman, but he was halfway in awe of her, and what she’d so obviously been through. “Aubrey,” he said quietly. “Did you even have any experience at housekeeping when you came here?”

Her eyes widened at once. “Oh, years,” she said. “I would never lie about my abilities, my lord.”

Strangely, he believed her. He’d no clue where, exactly, Aubrey drew her bright line between truth and duplicity, but he was somehow certain there was one. It crossed his mind that perhaps he was going slowly insane. He had come to Cardow full of rage and guilt, meaning to avenge his uncle’s murder. Instead, he’d spent the better part of his time trying to exonerate, not to mention seduce, the only suspect. His behavior had been irrational. And it was about to become worse.

“So there was no marriage, and no husband,” he said hollowly. “I have deflowered a virgin. Iain is, essentially, an orphan. And now we have this business with my uncle’s watch. Aubrey, I think, my dear, that there is only one solution to this mess. I think you are going to have to marry me.”

Aubrey choked out a strange, nervous sound and splayed her hand over her chest as if she could not breathe. “My lord, is that... is that some sort of joke?”

“I am afraid not.”

“My lord, I daresay you mean to be kind, but...”

“But what, Aubrey?”

She merely shook her head. “How can you even suggest it? I am not of your world, my lord. Worse, I am under suspicion of murder. Now, is it possible that one of us here does not understand the implication of these things? I assure you, I understand it quite well indeed. For you to marry me would be social and



political suicide.”

“Oh, I somehow suspect our worlds are not as diverse as you make them out, my dear,” he said quietly. “As to social suicide, I care little for society.”

“And your career?” she challenged. “Will you toss away all that you’ve worked for—all that you believe in—simply to punish yourself for taking a servant’s virginity?”

“You mean a little more to me than a mere servant, Aubrey,” he said. “Admittedly, my career means a vast deal, too, but I’ve seen politicians weather worse things than a disparate marriage. Perhaps I will merely be thought eccentric.”

“Oh, no,” she whispered. “You must stop thinking of this, my lord. You must stop thinking of Higgins and the trouble he can cause. I can take care of myself if it becomes necessary.”

“Perhaps it already has,” he said quietly.

“No.” She shook her head violently. “I can manage this. They can prove nothing, for I have done nothing.”

“The truth does not always save the innocent, my dear,” he said.

All the color drained from her face. For a moment he thought he’d finally put the fear of God in her. And he thought, perhaps, that she was going to say yes to his proposal. His heart leapt with hope.

She did not say yes. “You are very kind, my lord,” she finally managed. “Indeed, you honor me. But I have no wish to be married. My present life suits me. As to my past, it is very much my business. It will not affect my work.”

He took both her hands in his then and leaned forward to kiss her lightly on the forehead. “Then you leave me no choice but to accept that,” he said quietly. “But if ever you ask me to take care of you, Aubrey, I will. You have only to ask. Will you remember that?”

She looked up at him with hurt and sorrow in her eyes. But she did not ask him to take care of her. Indeed, she did not ask him for anything at all, though there were, he later realized, a hundred other things he could have done to make her life better or easier than to marry her. Instead, Aubrey simply went to the desk, quietly re-folded the plaid, and left.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

### **A New Broom Sweeps Clean**

They were watching her.

She was certain of it. They had bound her wrists again.

She tried to roll onto one side. Get off the straw. Onto her feet. The rope cut into her flesh. Dragged her down. No slack. No use.

Footsteps echoed. Through the gloom someone stared down, his eyes running boldly along her length. Then, as if to taunt, he crept closer and grinned. “A gude e’en tae you, my fine lady.”

His words and his eyes mocked. His teeth were yellow in the lamplight. Like a cur. He dragged his metal club across the bars, the clatter echoing hollowly against the thick stone.

“I wouldna stand sae close, lest ye lose an eye.” The grating rasp came from the shadows. From the other one. The one who’d bound her arms. Breathed down her neck. Touched her breasts.

They thought she meant to kill herself. Or them. Or anyone who came too near.

“I havnae seen one sae wild-eyed in many a day,” said the guard through her bars.

The one in the shadows—the one with the whip—laughed. “Aye, mad as a hatter, she is,” he agreed. “No’ sich a fine sight now. No pretty ways, no costly clothes. And hair sae filthy a rat wouldna nest in it.”

Her guard snorted, then spat through the bars into her straw. “No highborn lady now,” he said. “The Queen o’ Canongate, more like.”

She’d had enough. She rolled onto one elbow and spat back.

Her aim was better. The guard leapt away, staring at his shoes incredulously. “Why, ye wee red-haired bitch!”

In the shadows something creaked. It was him. With the whip. “Time tae teach milady a lesson, is it?”

“No!” Aubrey screamed. “No! I’m to have a trial. A fair trial.”

“Aye, and I’ve got yer fair trial right here, my fine lady,” said the rasping voice. “Right ’ere in my hand.”

She heard leather crack across the cobbled floor. She screamed. And kept screaming, until she screamed herself awake.

Aubrey jerked upright in bed, the taste of fear and bile sour in her throat. In the dark her mind raced. Her breath hitched. Frantic, she patted the bedcovers all about her. Wool. Linen. The smell of clean things. Aubrey closed her eyes and let the air flow from her lungs on a long, silent sigh.

A dream. Just another dream.

The shaking slowly subsided. Then, as she always did, she lit her lamp and carried it with her into Iain’s little room. The child lay on his side, one fist curled into his counterpane. He was asleep. Safe. As was she. The last of the terror melted, slowing her heartbeat, and draining the tension from her shoulders.

After tiptoeing back to bed, Aubrey turned down the wick until it sputtered out, then crawled back into the soft linen sheets. In the distance thunder rolled away, though the rain was still sheeting across the bailey beyond her window. Deep in the servants’ hall, she could hear the old longcase clock tolling three. Aubrey curled herself into a tight ball beneath the covers. She would sleep no more this night.

On the afternoon of the mysterious Lord de Vendenheim’s arrival at Cardow, the skies portended ill. Though she was not expecting visitors, Aubrey was in the great hall examining the carpets when a great clattering arose in the courtyard beyond. Mindful of the rain and slick cobbles, she hastened to the door to see that a sleek black coach with four black horses was rushing toward the gate. Fresh horses, too, by the look of them, for the beasts were traveling at a perilous pace. Luckily, the portcullis was up, and at the last instant the black-caped coachman drew the carriage expertly through with just inches to spare.

The horses came to a halt in a flashing, flying clatter of hooves, the rain spattering all about them. Just then lightning cut a gash through the darkening sky, and with one thrust of an arm, someone flung wide

the carriage door. A man dressed head to toe in black stepped out, without waiting for assistance. He was so tall, he scarcely needed it. His companion, however, waited for the steps to be put down, then motioned irritably for one of them to be wiped off, and finally followed.

Aubrey held open the door. The first gentleman approached and gave a courtly, old-world bow. "I am de Vendenheim," he said by way of introduction. "His lordship is expecting me."

The gentleman's coachman was already taking down baggage. Aubrey introduced herself. "Welcome to Castle Cardow," she managed. "You will be staying?" She sounded awkward, for the man's hard black eyes unnerved her.

"I believe so, yes." De Vendenheim spoke with a faint Continental accent, the words rumbling deep in his chest. Dark hair was drawn straight back off his face, accentuating a Mediterranean appearance. He was not handsome, but he was arresting.

Behind him, the smaller man was still darting about the carriage, snapping his fingers and calling up fretful instructions to the coachman, the footman, and anyone who would listen. Apparently there was some concern about a dressing case. And then a bandbox. A hatbox. A foot-warmer. Nothing seemed to suit him. De Vendenheim watched it dispassionately, and eventually, all was seemingly in order, for the man followed de Vendenheim in, took off his hat, and began to gently shake the rain from it. He was middle-aged with keen, golden eyes, and in stark contrast to his companion's dour garb, his clothing was more elegant than anything Aubrey had ever seen.

"My associate, Mr. Kemble," de Vendenheim announced. "This is Mrs. Montford, the housekeeper."

"Charmed, I'm sure," said the second man, though he certainly did not sound it. "Tell me, Mrs. Montford, does it ever stop raining here?"

Aubrey suppressed a smile. "Not for long," she murmured, showing them inside.

"Ah, Max!" boomed a voice from the gallery above. "You have come! I had not expected you so soon."

Aubrey spun about to see Walrafen coming down the broad gallery staircase. He looked so handsome, something in her stomach seemed to turn upside down. His arms were wide, his face less tense than it had been these past two days.

"Of course I have come," said de Vendenheim.

Walrafen shook his hand, then turned to the more dapper gentleman. "And Mr. Kemble," he said warmly. "Welcome to Cardow."

"Bloody awful weather, Walrafen," he returned, stripping off his gloves. "Pity your uncle couldn't get himself murdered someplace more obliging."

"What did you have in mind?" asked Walrafen dryly.

"The south of France," said Kemble, casting an eye about the great hall.

The earl seemed unoffended. "I'm shocked you've come," he said. "What persuaded you?"

"Blackmail."

"Not blackmail," de Vendenheim's deep voice corrected. "Kem had merely come into possession of what I shall term a misappropriated Verzelini chandelier—quite by accident, of course. Still, he was

eager to make a gesture of apology.”

But Mr. Kemble no longer appeared to be listening. His keen eye had fallen on a mace and shield mounted over the gallery. “Fifteenth century Danish,” he murmured approvingly. “I do like that, old boy. Could you be persuaded to part with it?”

“Thank you, no,” said Walrafen as Aubrey quietly directed the footmen to take their coats and hats away. “I trust your journey was not too miserable?”

De Vendenheim shot Mr. Kemble a warning look. “It was lovely,” he said. “Look, Giles, why don’t we get to it? Kem has the file. We shall need a large table. And, of course, your justice of the peace.”

“By all means,” said the earl. “Mrs. Montford, please be so kind as to see their rooms prepared and things sent up.”

“Yes, of course.”

Aubrey stood in the center of the great hall, watching them go, Lord Walrafen and Mr. Kemble flanking de Vendenheim as they made their way back up the staircase. The three were quietly conversing. She was beginning to understand why the men were here, and it chilled her a little. Why had the earl not told her of their expected arrival?

On the top step the earl halted and turned around, his face emotionless. “Mrs. Montford,” he said quietly. “Please find Ogilvy, then send a carriage for Mr. Higgins. I should like them both to join us in the library.”

Within the hour Mr. Kemble had unpacked his tidy portfolio and spread neat rows of documents across one of the library’s reading tables. Giles sat at the head, staring down the length of it. Kem and Max were men on a mission, it seemed.

“And on the left we have the lists of your servants and tenants,” Max was explaining. “In the center are Lady Delacourt’s rough notes as to the whereabouts of each at the time of death, and what, if anything, they claimed to have seen, known, or suspected.”

“Gossip, in other words,” interjected Kem in a conspiratorial whisper. “The most interesting sort of evidence.”

Max scowled at him. “Lastly,” he continued, “we have a sketch showing the library floor plan and its relation to the other rooms in this wing.”

“Good heavens,” said Walrafen. “You two have been very thorough.”

“Lady Delacourt was very thorough,” Max corrected, easing back into his chair. “Her notes are excellent. But there is one thing, Giles, I cannot quite fathom.”

“And what is that?”

Max propped his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers lightly together. “There is one name which keeps cropping up in these notes,” he said quietly. “Your housekeeper. Mrs. Montford.”

“That is ridiculous,” said Giles.

Kem smiled thinly. “Precisely what Lady Delacourt says,” he interjected. “And yet, the name is there,

over and over, in her very own notes.”

“What do you know of the woman?” Max interposed. “Where did she come from?”



”

“Somewhere in the north, I’d understood.” Giles did not miss the speaking glance Ogilvy cut in his direction. “But Ogilvy here may wish to disagree.”

“Would he?” said Max, lifting both brows.

The young man blushed. “Well, I’m from Kirkcud-bright myself.”

“And—?” said Max.

Ogilvy shrugged. “Sometimes, when she’s in a temper, Mrs. Montford sounds more Scots to me. But what difference would it make?”

“What indeed,” murmured Max, his eyes returning to the spread of papers.

Still standing, Kemble placed his fingertips lightly on the table. “Well, let us forge ahead. We must review the statements your constabulary has taken into evidence, and examine the results of the coroner’s inquest.”

Giles frowned deeply. “And then what?”

Kemble shrugged. “And then we begin again,” he said. “I shall poke about belowstairs whilst Max here takes on the tenants and a few villagers. Everything must be reexamined.”

Just then Mr. Higgins came into the room carrying more papers. Giles made the introductions, then withdrew to the windows with a fresh cup of tea, leaving Ogilvy to help with the copying. There was nothing further he could add. Instead, he stood at his uncle’s desk, sipping his tea and staring through the windows, listening with half an ear to the discussion behind him. The conversation had already begun to warm. Kemble was obviously charming Mr. Higgins.

Soon Giles quit listening altogether. Everything was in capable hands. Max had years of experience in police work. And Kemble had years of experience, too—of precisely what sort, Giles would as soon not know. Ostensibly, Kem was a dealer in antiquities, curiosities, and jewels. Kem had friends in places both high and low, and an ear which was ever to the ground. Yes, capable hands indeed.

Giles focused on the view beyond Elias’s desk. Was this what his uncle had seen, he wondered, on what was to be the last day of his life? Had he watched the gray, dreary rain sluicing down the castle walls and dripping off the trees as he sat at his desk? No, probably not. It had been the day of the Harvest Fair, and likely warm and sunny. On the other hand, maybe it had rained buckets. He’d never thought to ask.

Aubrey would know.

Aubrey. Aubrey, who seemed to know everything. And told almost nothing. She was never far from his thoughts. It was as if something profound had changed; yet neither of them could find the words for it. Perhaps because they did not even agree on what it was. He thought that they had embarked on a love affair. She thought... what? That she was simply servicing her master's needs? The very idea sickened him.

Certainly she did not trust him, while he was trying very hard to trust her. It made for an uneasy peace between them. And so they had begun almost to avoid one another this past week. He'd even forgotten, he now realized, to tell her that guests were expected. He hoped she was all right; hoped that Pevsner had kept his mouth shut about the watch. But a strange unease had settled over the staff. One could almost feel it as one passed through the servants' quarters, which he was obliged to do at least two or three times a day. There were odd looks. Suppressed whispers. Conversations cut short and doors pushed shut.

Behind him, laughter broke out at the table. Giles looked around, saw that everyone now appeared relaxed and cooperative, then promptly forgot them again. He thought instead of Aubrey, and of what he might possibly do to break the impasse between them. He wondered what she wanted of him. Anything? Nothing? And what did he want?

He wanted not to be without her. That was the only clear notion his brain could form.

Suddenly he became aware of a dead silence behind him. Giles set his teacup on the wide stone windowsill and slowly turned around. All eyes seemed on him.

"Giles," said Max quietly. "A moment?"

"Of course." Giles returned to the table.

Max's hawkish black brows were drawn together. He was pointing at a sheet of foolscap on the table. "This report about the stolen watch," he began. "Am I to understand the thing has been found? In your housekeeper's possession?"

Giles realized at once he should have already mentioned the watch. "She has it, yes," he answered as calmly as he could. "She tells me Elias gave it to her, and I believe her."

"You believe her?" Max echoed.

"Everything she said made sense." He relayed Aubrey's explanation.

Kemble's eyes glittered wickedly. "Oh, I am not so sure I'd swallow that one, Walrafen."

"But I do," Giles said simply.

Max drew back and studied him. "Why?"

The truth came to Giles on an awful rush.

Because I am hopelessly in love with her. Because I have to trust her, or go mad.

Somehow, Giles kept from saying either of those things aloud, and making a total ass of himself. In reward, divine intervention struck, and he remembered the letter addressed to Dr. Crenshaw. "Mrs. Montford actually wrote a letter instructing Crenshaw to come examine Elias," he said. "In all the

confusion which followed his death, the thing was left lying on the table in the great hall and never taken down to the village. Why would she summon the doctor, if she did not have every reason to think Elias would be alive to see him?"

Max looked little appeased. "Perhaps because she is very clever," he murmured. "Or very innocent. It remains to be seen. Now, gentlemen, what of this footman, Milson? Where is his statement?"

Giles wandered back to the window and let the conversation slide away into the background. Dusk was beginning to settle. He was going to have to see Aubrey soon. He needed to hear her voice. He needed her back in his bed, too, if she would come.

Suddenly the door behind him opened, and he turned to see the object of his reverie come in with one of the housemaids. They were carrying trays of fresh tea and biscuits. Giles realized that he'd not dined since breakfast, and had eaten precious little then. His guests were probably starving. Trust Aubrey to realize it, and take care of it in her quiet, competent way.

Mr. Kemble rearranged a side table, making room for the trays, and the women began to set out plates, platters, and teapots. Suddenly he realized that Max was standing at his elbow. "Careful, old boy," he said, so softly Giles could barely hear him. "You're about to trip over your tongue."

Giles shot him a dark look. "What the deuce do you mean?"

Max shrugged. "You should have fired your impertinent housekeeper, Giles, when you had the chance. I am not at all sure I like the way the wind is blowing here."

Before Giles could tell him to mind his own business, Kem approached, holding out a tape measure. "If you're just standing round being charming, Max, take hold of this," he said. "I want the distance from the door to these windows."

Max moved to help him. Giles watched, bewildered, as the two men moved about the room measuring from doors to windows, floor to ceiling; almost every conceivable distance was calculated. But they ended up back at Elias's desk.

"Mr. Higgins, is this precisely where Major Lorimer was found?" asked Max.

"Indeed," he said. "But the chair was pushed a little away from the desk."

"And he was facing the window?" Max clarified.

"Yes, but with his shoulder angled slightly toward the door."

"I see." With that, Max reached across the desk and pushed open one of the casement windows. He craned his neck out into the gloom and stared down into the gardens. "Kem," he said when he'd drawn his head back in again. "Measure the distance from the chair, across the desk to this wide windowsill."

Kemble did so. "Mr. Higgins," said Max. "What is beyond the garden, just through those trees?"

Higgins shook his head. "Not a thing," he answered. "We are on the very top of the hill here. Besides, my lord, the Major was shot at quite close range, not from a distance. The blood spatters were to one side of the desk, and across the rug, which has since been removed."

Max leaned across the desk to stare at the floor. "Puts me in mind of the time Lord Collup shot himself dead loading his dueling pistols."

“Just so, sir,” said Higgins. “Except there was no gun.”

“And were these windows open or closed?”

“All three were open,” said the justice of the peace, clearly puzzled. “It was a warm day. But no one could scale that wall. My lord, what, precisely, are you looking for?”

Max shook his head. “I hardly know.”

Giles could take no more. If he stayed cooped up in here much longer, he might well go mad. Standing here doing nothing allowed thoughts of Aubrey to torment him. And the talk of death and bloodstains served only to remind him that his uncle was gone.

He bowed to his guests. “Gentlemen, I leave you to it,” he said. “Dinner is at seven. Higgins, please join us.”

And on that note, Giles escaped the library with all its grim secrets and started straight down the corridor to the sanctuary of his study. But halfway along the gloomy passageway, he ran straight into Aubrey, exiting an empty bedchamber.

It was as if a madness seized him, as if the moment was so providential, he dared not refuse it. He was on her before he realized what he was doing, dragging her back into the room, and slamming the door behind them.

“Aubrey,” he said, jerking her body against his. He did not wait for her response. Instead he kissed her, imprisoning her face between his hands, moving his mouth over her brow, her cheeks. “Aubrey, you are avoiding me. Stop it.”

“I—I am not,” she whispered.

“Don’t lie to me,” he whispered. Feverishly he opened his mouth over hers. Relief and joy shot through him when her lips parted easily, greedily taking his kiss. Her arms came up and around his neck unhesitatingly. Giles pulled her hips against his and felt the warm, womanly curves of her body mold against his length.

Oh, Lord, how he needed her. Needed to drown the loneliness and grief in her embrace. Needed her arms around him, her hands on him. He bent her back and kissed her throat, then moved lower.

“My lord,” she whispered. “Not here.”

Giles wasn’t sure what happened then. But his hands were on her shoulders, and he was shaking her. “Why not here?” he demanded. “Why not now? Why must we live like this, Aubrey? Hiding. Pretending. Why are we not free to care for one another?”

She looked at him, her eyes wide, and slowly shook her head. “Oh, do not start again,” she whispered. “Oh, please, Giles, I beg you.”

There. She had said it at last. Giles. He closed his eyes and bound her tightly to him, an embrace of both gratitude and fear. Fear of losing what he’d barely known he wanted. He almost wished he’d never invited Max to Cardow. He needed desperately to put all this behind him and go forward.

“Come to me tonight,” he whispered, his lips pressed to her hair. “Please, Aubrey. I am asking. Not ordering. Come to my bed. I need you.”



She went perfectly still in his arms for a moment. "Yes," she finally said. "I will. I... desire you, too. I won't deny it."

He set her away then, and looked down into her eyes, which were softening with tears. He saw it then; the pain and the regret. And a sense of hopelessness, too. "Oh, Aubrey, don't," he rasped. "Don't, love, don't. It will all work out. Trust me."

In response, Aubrey blinked away her tears, gave a watery smile, and kissed him on the cheek. "You are precious to me beyond words, Giles," she whispered. "Never think otherwise. Never." Then she pushed past him and into the corridor beyond. Giles did not move. He felt frozen to the spot. He listened as her quick, light footsteps faded away. And still he stood there, alone in the falling dusk, simply drawing in what was left of her scent, unable to get the vision of her sorrowful eyes out of his mind.

He must have stood there for some time, but slowly Giles realized that a lamp had been lit by the bed, its wick turned down to almost nothing. Someone's room, then. But whose? He looked about to see that a portmanteau sat in a chair beneath the windows. Suddenly the door flew open. Giles's head whipped around, and he found himself staring into the wide, golden eyes of George Kemble.

Kem flashed his knowing grin. "Walrafen, you sly dog!" he exclaimed, sliding gracefully out of his coat. "I would never have guessed you my type."

Somehow, Giles managed to grin. "I'm not," he said. "Your virtue is safe with me, Kem."

At that, Kem threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, my virtue and I parted ways about thirty years ago," he said, going to the portmanteau and rummaging through it. He extracted a silver flask, then tossed it to Giles. "But you, old chap, look like someone just buggered you over the bedpost."

"I feel it, too." Giles caught the flask. "What's this?"

"Twenty-year-old armagnac," said Kem, carefully arranging his coat over the chair. "Guaranteed to wash away whatever ails you—I shan't venture to guess what that might be. Anyway, drink up. I'm having a long, hot bath before dinner."

For three days Max and Kem remained sequestered in Cardow's library, venturing out only to dine or conduct interviews, with Higgins dogging their every step. Giles answered their questions as best he could, entertained them at dinner, and otherwise kept to himself.

He already had more than he could handle. Matters between him and Aubrey seemed to be fast approaching some sort of implosion, and yet nothing had changed. In his bed she shimmered like liquid fire; more passionate and more giving than any courtesan he'd ever known, yet impossible to hold on to for long. About the house she was as quiet and self-contained as ever. They shared nothing but their bodies.

In the late afternoons he'd taken to meeting young Iain in the gardens as the lad trudged up the hill from school. There, they would take turns bowling and batting until dusk. Sometimes they would even persuade Jenks to make up a third. The servants tended to gawk a little at the sight of them, but Giles no longer cared. Iain was a good boy—and he had the makings of a fine bats-man.

On the morning of the fourth day Giles went down to breakfast early to find Max already at the table. His expression was more grim than usual, which was something of an accomplishment.

"May we speak privately, Giles?" he asked, when coffee had been poured and the morning's niceties

said.

The earl motioned his servants from the room. "Of course."

Max put down his coffee cup. "I find we are at an impasse, old friend," he began. "Higgins's work is amateurish, but so far as I can see, he has overlooked nothing."

Giles felt something inside him collapse. "I feared as much."

Max lifted his hands in one of his more telling gestures and continued. "You don't want to hear this, my friend, but the only suspect is your housekeeper."

"No." Giles shoved away his plate, his appetite already gone.


"She was alone in the house, by her own plan, at the time of death," said Max calmly. "Her skirts were stained with blood. She and the Major had a history of terrible rows; had had one, in fact, the preceding evening. And less than a fortnight before that, she was overheard threatening to kill him."

Giles closed his eyes, and shook his head. "Max, that was a misunderstanding."

"She was found in possession of a watch worth a small fortune, Giles," he pressed. "A circumstance she never volunteered, despite the fact that the watch was thought missing."

"My uncle gave it to her," said Giles firmly. "I believe that."

But Max was relentless. "Well, yes, and a month ago, you believed she was his lover," he said, ignoring Giles's glower. "Moreover, unless I am much mistaken,"



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he continued very quietly, "she has since enticed you into her bed."

The earl's fist crashed down on the table so hard the silver leaped and the china rattled. "Damn you, Max, you haven't heard a bloody thing I've said!" he roared. "Not one more word, or by God, I'll be obliged to call you out."

Max's black eyes narrowed. "Va' al diavolo!" he snarled.

"Careful, my friend," warned Giles. "My Italian is not that rusty."

Max shoved away from the table in disgust. "What the deuce is wrong with you, Giles? You have always been so rational. So analytical. So bloody above it all."

Giles looked at him pointedly. "And you think those are good things, Max?" he answered. "To go through life feeling... nothing? To live a life devoid of joy or risk?"

“That is not what I meant.”

“It might as well have been.”

Max cut his eyes away and stared into the depths of the room. “You hardly seem the same man I knew a month ago.”

“I think I had grown weary of being that man,” said Giles quietly.

Max struck a more conciliatory expression. “Look, Giles, it isn’t like us to quarrel,” he said. “I am not here in any official capacity. I can simply pack my things and go home, if that’s what you ask of me. But I think it most unwise.”

“Max,” he said quietly. “You don’t understand.”

“I’ve read the whole bloody file about six times,” he answered. “I think I have grasped it.”

“No.” Giles looked at him plaintively. “I love her.”

“Dannazione!” Max cursed under his breath, his fists closed tightly on the table. “I feared it.”

“I love her,” he said again. “And I think I know her, Max.”

“Giles, that’s half my point,” said Max more gently. “You don’t know her. You know almost nothing of her. Admit it.”

“I know what is in my heart.”

“Yes, your heart, Giles,” he said, reaching out to touch him lightly on the arm. “But do you know what is in her heart?”

“She is not dishonest,” he said. But Max’s words troubled him.

Max smiled sadly. “No one even knows where she came from, or what her background is. And you won’t let me press her, will you?”

Giles shook his head. “No,” he admitted. “She has been through enough. I’m sorry, Max. You’ll have to discover whatever it is you wish to know by some other means.”

Max reached across the table and took hold of Giles’s arm. “Look, old fellow, surely your uncle knew something of her?” he said urgently. “After all, he hired her, didn’t he? Surely he had some sort of records? References?”

“That sort of thing was always kept in the study,” Giles said wearily. “I already gave you everything.” But suddenly he realized he hadn’t. He remembered the yellowed letters scattered in the drawer of the library desk, right where Elias’s pistol should have been. They were nothing, most likely. Still...

“There were some old letters in the library,” he said. “Nothing of significance, I daresay. But I did think it odd.”

Max shoved back his chair. “Let’s go.”

The library was empty when they reached it. Giles went at once to the desk in front the wide bank of windows. “Elias used to keep an old pistol locked in this drawer,” he said, pulling it open and lifting out the old whisky bottle. “That’s what I was looking for when I found these letters.”

“Was the drawer locked?”

“No.”

The letters were still untouched, perhaps two dozen altogether. In his later years Elias must have taken to simply pitching his mail into a heap rather than answering it properly. He'd become a total recluse. Was this, then, the measure of the man's life? A pile of faded, unanswered letters? And did some similar fate await Giles? Perhaps. For until he'd met Aubrey, he'd been much the same, though his reclusion had been achieved differently. He'd used power and politics to wall himself off, rather than escaping to a faraway castle. He'd become an emotional recluse.

He followed Max to the hearth and began to sort through the pile. “Ah,” he said, immediately tossing nearly half onto the tea table before them. “Cecilia claimed Elias wouldn't answer her correspondence. But it looks as though he read it.”

Max looked disappointed. “Is that all there is?”

Giles was thumbing through the next few. “No, here are some letters from old army friends,” he said. “Asking after his health, that sort of thing. I doubt he answered them, either. But wait—here is an odd one.”

Max leaned forward in his armchair. “Odd? How?”

Giles studied it for a moment. “It is not a letter to Uncle Elias,” he said slowly. “It is a letter from Uncle Elias. It's addressed to a Lady Kenross of Dundee, and posted from... Belgium?”

Max shifted his chair so that he, too, might read it. “Dear God, look at that date,” he said. “Just six days after Waterloo, Giles. And look at this first paragraph. He is writing to tell her that her husband has died.”

Giles glanced up pensively. “I remember him,” he said. “Lord Kenross. He called in Hill Street once. They were quite close friends.”

“Your uncle seems to have been much affected by his passing,” said Max, still skimming the page. “He seems greatly concerned for this Lady Kenross and her daughters. I wonder how the letter came back into his possession?”

“There's no knowing.” Giles took the next letter. “Ah, this one will be of more interest to you, Max. Here is Mrs. Montford's letter of application for the position of housekeeper at Cardow.”

Max snatched it from his hands. “Posted from Birmingham,” he muttered, his eyes darting over it. “Written, it says, in response to his advertisement.”

“Yes, go on.”

“She says she is residing temporarily with relatives, following the death of her husband,” he continued, as if speaking to himself. “A mining clerk, eh? Wonder what the poor fellow died of? Late of Northumberland, she claims. And she was last employed by a Mr. Harnett of Bedlington, who passed on unexpectedly—heavens, the people in Mrs. Montford's life seem prone to sudden death, don't they?—and she now seeks a similar situation.”

But Giles did not react to the sarcasm. What was this nonsense about relations in Birmingham? Not many days past Aubrey had claimed to have no family at all. Moreover, he'd hardly forgotten her reticence in answering Delacourt's casual questions about Bedlington. As to that dead husband, the mining clerk—well, he already knew the truth about that, didn't he?

But Max did not notice Giles's sudden silence. "Mrs. Montford says she will present a letter of reference from her previous employer upon her arrival," he continued, refolding the letter. "Well, what else have you got there, old chap?"

Giles jerked his attention back into the present. "Just one more," he said, taking up the last letter. His eyes widened at once. "Good heavens. Is this the reference?"

"What?" said Max, snatching it. His eyes ran back and forth across the page. "From a Mrs. Preston in Morpeth. She claims that Mrs. Montford was in her employ for two years. Very conscientious servant. Left to get married and move to Bedlington." Max's shoulders fell. "A straightforward story, it would appear."

But there was nothing straightforward about it. Giles found it chilling that Delacourt's uncle Nigel lived in Morpeth. Aubrey had denied knowing him. That was ludicrous, wasn't it? Could one possibly live in a place the size of Morpeth and not know the local eccentrics? Especially a dotty old baronet who insisted upon running about town wearing ladies' dresses and chairing the local botanical society?

Perhaps Aubrey had denied it to save Delacourt from embarrassment? But Delacourt had no shame, a fact which was apparent. Indeed, he'd introduced the topic of Uncle Nigel himself. Aubrey's whole life, it seemed, was a careful fabrication. "Something is not right," he said.

Max was instantly alert. "In what way?"

Giles shook his head. "I—I cannot say."

"Cannot?" challenged Max. "Or won't?"

Giles did not feel up to another quarrel and jerked to his feet instead. "Forget it," he said, tossing the letters back into the drawer and shoving it shut.

Max followed him across the room. "Perhaps, old friend, I had better go up to Bedlington myself," he said, laying one hand on Giles's arm. "Would you be very angry with me, Giles, if I did?"

"It is a long journey," said Giles grimly. "And for what, Max? Nothing you might find could make me care for her any less. That's the most damnable part of all. And I will never believe she harmed Elias. Never."

Max stood very quietly for a moment. "But you do think she is hiding something, don't you?" he finally said. "You believe that she has been less than honest?"

Giles stared blindly through the window and nodded. He could not quite find his voice.

Max did not move from his position by Elias's desk. "I think, old chap, that you'd best tell me what you know," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle.

"What I know?" Giles echoed. "Precious little that would be. Yet I fear that if you go to Northumberland—or even to that address in Birmingham—you will not find anyone who knows Aubrey Montford. I fear they will say she does not exist."

Max seemed to consider it for a moment. "Well," he said slowly. "Don't take the counsel of your fears too hastily. I like your Mrs. Montford, Giles. I should like nothing better than to exonerate her. So I think, all considered, that Kem and I had best go up. Will you agree?"

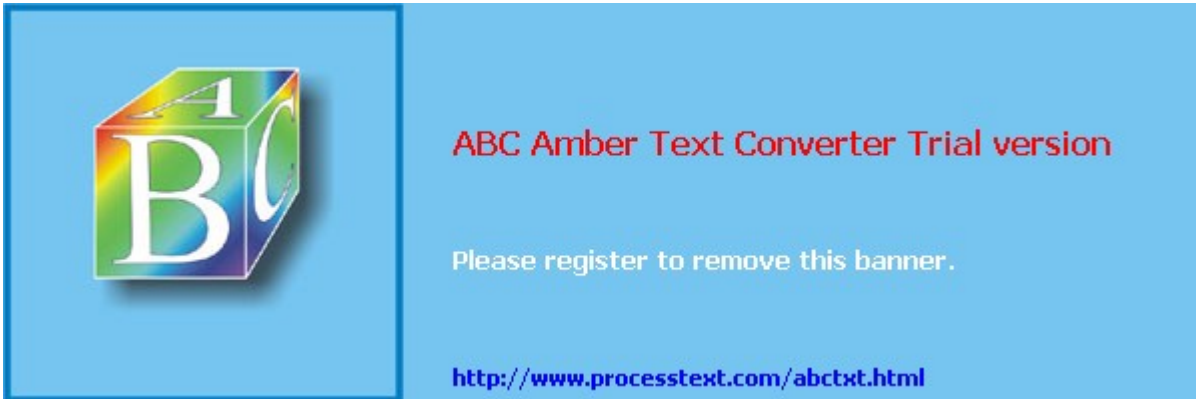
"It is up to you," Giles finally whispered. "But if you're going, Max, go quickly. Before I change my mind."

”

“I’d best go break the bad news to Kem,” said Max on a sigh. Then he hesitated. “Giles, are you going to tell her?”

Giles shook his head. “No,” he finally answered. “I plan to say nothing more. Not until this dreadful nightmare is over.”

Max held out his hand. “Then give me the letters,” he said.



“All of them. I need the addresses.”

## Chapter Fourteen

### To Sleep, Perchance to Dream

Five days after their arrival Mr. Kemble and Lord de Vendenheim left Cardow in almost as much haste as they had come, climbing back into their sleek black carriage on a cold, clear morning, their expressions distant, their eyes grim. Aubrey was not sorry to see them go. Their purpose in coming had been all too clear, and an uneasy silence had settled over the castle during their stay.

Just before she turned to go back inside the great hall, she looked up to see the earl standing high on the barbican, his long, booted legs spread wide, his hands clasped tight behind his back. With his greatcoat open to the wind, he was staring toward the road which snaked down Cardow Tor, apparently watching their carriage until it vanished from sight.

That day marked some sort of change in him. He began to keep his distance. To ask Aubrey nothing. He began to look drawn, too, the creases about his eyes deepening, his mouth again fixed in its stern, familiar line. And although she often felt his gaze upon her, as searing and urgent as ever, he no longer tried to entice her to his bed. In their casual dealings there was an unmistakable tension between them; a vague sense of some question left unanswered, or an argument never finished.

She should have been relieved by his detachment. But instead, she felt a growing sense of panic. An awful, urgent feeling that she’d made a terrible mistake. That something precious was about to slip from her grasp, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Slowly the days began to rival some of her darkest in Scotland, when cold prison walls had cut her off from Iain and all that she held dear. This, however, was a wall of a different sort; a wall, at least in part, of her own making. Yet she’d not built it strong enough. Her stone had turned to shale. Everything had collapsed. And she had fallen hopelessly in love with the Earl of Walrafen.

Aubrey was still struggling with that terrible truth when foreboding struck again, almost a fortnight after Lord de Vendenheim’s departure. By chance Aubrey was passing through the great hall when the post

was brought in. A thick letter lay upon the top of the stack, the slashing black penmanship unmistakably familiar to anyone who had been tasked with neatening the library during de Vendenheim's visit. The man wrote copious, untidy notes to himself, in what looked like three or four different languages.

At first Aubrey paid his letter no heed. But something about the envelope drew her, and she looked again.

Birmingham. The letter had been posted from Birmingham.

She felt the cold, familiar surge of panic, but quelled it. Birmingham was a large place. Perhaps the vicomte had business there? Or family? Indeed, there were any number of reasons why one might go to such a place.

That evening she sat upon the hearthrug, toasting cheese with Iain. He was explaining in great detail his afternoon cricket practice—which the earl, thank God, had not given up. “And the next time it flew all the way over the parterre,” the boy was bragging. “Lord Walrafen said I would have hit a six for sure if we'd been playing for real.”

Aubrey wet her thumb and leaned across the rug to rub a smudge of soot from Iain's cheek. “You like Lord Walrafen a vast deal, don't you?” she murmured, almost to herself.

Oddly his round face fell. “I like him,” he said, then hesitated. “Mama, when does Parliament re... reconvene?”

“Gracious, what a question,” she answered. “Are you studying it in school?”

Iain shook his head, and a shock of shiny black hair slid into his eyes. “Not school,” he said. “I just heard Mr. Ogilvy say that they had to be back in London when that happened.”

Aubrey handed him another chunk of cheese. “To reconvene means to restart, love,” she explained. “But that won't happen for some time yet.”

“Oh.” The boy just stared into the fire.

Aubrey watched him a little sadly. Giles's departure was weighing heavy on them both, she realized. Surely he could not remain at Cardow much longer? The thought had once given her hope. But now it left her sagging with disappointment. Her disappointment, however, she could deal with. Iain's was more troubling. Had she made a mistake, she wondered, in allowing the earl to befriend the boy? Perhaps the better question was, could she have stopped it? Giles seemed relentless when he wanted something.

Beside her, Iain yawned. Aubrey slid an arm around his shoulders and drew him close. “Time for bed, love,” she said, planting a kiss on the top of his head.

Soon Iain was tucked safely in, and before Aubrey could finish arranging his blankets, the boy's breathing had deepened to the slow rhythm of sleep. But as she straightened up from the bed, Aubrey felt her back tighten. She pressed her fingers to the curve of her spine and rubbed. She and Betsy had been sorting winter apples in the stillroom, packing them into boxes they had loaded too heavily.

On impulse she decided to treat herself to the luxury of a steaming bath. It took but a few moments to build up the fire in her tiny bedchamber and drag the copper hipbath from its corner. However, the six trips required to draw hot water from the kitchen boiler soon made her reconsider her notion. She remembered a little wistfully—and a little ashamedly—the days when she'd been required to give no thought as to where her hot water had come from.

On her last trip from the kitchen Aubrey did not notice that her sitting room door, which she'd left open, was now pushed partially shut. Instead, with her brass cans in hand, she shouldered her way through, then instantly froze.

The earl was sitting in her chair by the hearth, his chin propped up pensively on one fist. He was dressed most informally, his shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbows, and his coat, waistcoat—even his shoes—dispensed with. She must have made a sound of astonishment. His head whipped round at once. There was an unasked question in his eyes as he slowly rose from the chair. Then, noticing her burden, he hastened forward and took the cans.

Swiftly she shut her door. "It was open," he said, his voice soft. "But I could not find you."

Without waiting for a response, he carried both cans into her room and upended the first into the tub. His movements were easy and graceful, as if he performed such chores every day of his life. Despite the uncertainty in his eyes, he seemed entirely comfortable in her bedchamber. Then she realized in mild embarrassment that in all probability, he'd already looked for her there.

Hesitantly Aubrey approached the hipbath and let her fingertips rest lightly on its curved copper backrest. "It seems almost anticlimactic to say that you have surprised me," she said.

His eyes looked a little grim. "Sometimes, Aubrey, I surprise myself," he said.

She studied him for a moment. "Why have you come here?"

He dragged in a deep breath and stared at the brass cans, now empty on the floor. "Oh, Aubrey, I have tried," he whispered. "I have tried, and I cannot do it. I cannot stay away." Then he lifted his silvery gaze to hers, and asked his silent question again.

"Giles," she said very quietly, "have I asked you to stay away?"

He shook his head and opened his arms. Aubrey walked into them, and wrapped her own about his neck. He drew her fully against his chest and sighed into her hair. "I need to be inside you, Aubrey," he whispered. "I need to make love to you. Hard and fast. Then again, slowly and sweetly."

"Giles—"

He set his lips against hers for an instant, stilling the words. "Aubrey, I feel as if my blood is on fire for you," he said, pressing light kisses over her face. "As if there is no choice to be made. As if there is only inevitability. I wish it weren't so—it would be so much easier for us both, wouldn't it?—but it just is, and I don't want to stay away."

"Don't," she said, the word a whisper. "Oh, Giles, don't stay away. I've decided that would be the worst choice of all."

And then he was kissing her, his mouth warm and wide over hers. She tightened her arms about his neck and rose against him, closer than ever, and wanting very much to simply crawl inside him. To be joined to him again. To be two people, sharing and giving as if with one body. The sense of loss she'd been fighting seemed to recede, then melt away. And suddenly the love she felt for him seemed to well up to the very surface of her existence.

"Giles," she whispered as his mouth trailed toward her throat. "Oh, I have missed you."

"Aubrey," he rasped. "Let me show you how I feel."



He kissed down her neck, and then around the collar of her dress. His hands went to her hair, and slowly he began to pull the pins from it. He looked down at her then, his eyes soft and fervent. "I have interrupted your bath," he said. "Here, Aubrey, let me help you."

She flushed warmly at his suggestion.

"What?" he asked. "Don't I look like a lady's maid? I have little experience, it is true. Let me practice, Aubrey, by brushing out your hair."

He pulled the next pin from her hair and continued to hold her gaze as her tresses came down. When all her hair was loose, he ran his hands up her back and through it, spreading it wide with his fingers. "Your hair is your glory, Aubrey," he whispered. Over and over, he repeated his motions, stroking her scalp with his long, slender fingers, and drawing out her hair like a curtain. Aubrey let her eyes drop shut and fell into the soothing rhythm.

Suddenly his hands stilled. "Iain is asleep?" he rasped. "He will not awaken?"

Aubrey's eyes flew open in alarm. Iain.

In response Giles reached behind her, pushed shut the door, and turned the lock. "There," he whispered. "Just in case." And then his hands went to the buttons of her dress and began slowly working them loose. She should have stopped him, but she didn't. Couldn't. A strange, melting lethargy seemed to have taken hold of her. The black bombazine fell to her feet in a puddle, her under-things following.

He went down on one knee to roll her stockings to her ankles. Aubrey slipped from her shoes and kicked them away. Giles set his hands beneath her breasts, cupping them warmly, stroking around her nipples with his thumbs. Dreamily Aubrey closed her eyes, and lifted her chin.

"Oh, Lord," he said. "So beautiful. But your bath awaits, my dear."

Aubrey opened her eyes wide and laughed.

Giles tilted his head toward the water. "It's still hot."

Then he turned to the bed, lifted the quilt she kept folded at the foot, and deftly tossed it out before the fire. The towel followed, and then a second, tossed in a heap by the tub. When he turned round again, she hadn't moved.

"Go on," he urged. "Get in."

"But it seems... strange."

"Not to me, sweet," he answered. He took her arm and guided her in.

"Mmm," she said, settling into the water and trying not to think of how odd it felt to be bathing in front of him.

Giles came down on one knee by the tub on the side opposite the fire. He jerked his shirt free from his trousers, stripped it off over his head, and tossed it onto her bed. The glow from the hearth warmed his skin, emphasizing the sculpted muscles of his arms and chest. He was so beautifully, so perfectly, made. And she doubted he ever gave that beauty a moment's thought.

She must have been staring at him. He smiled, scooped his hands full of water, and lifted them over her hair. "Lie back," he whispered. "Relax, Aubrey."

Warmth drenched her. Over and over he repeated the gesture, sending hot, soothing water over her hair and down her back. Surprisingly, she did relax. It felt oddly comforting to be bathed by someone else.

“What do you wash it in?” he asked, waking her from her dream.

She pointed to an earthenware jar on her bureau, and he reached back to snare it. He pried out the large cork and bent his head to draw in the scent. “Mmm, lilacs,” he said. “You always smell of that.”

“An infusion of lilac,” she explained. “Along with soap and some other things.”

He scooped out two fingers full. “Do you make this yourself?”

“In the stillroom, yes.”

He smiled as if that pleased him and applied it to her hair. He reached one arm across the tub, the muscles of his arms and chest bunching, then relaxing, as he worked the infusion into her hair. Aubrey relaxed and let the wonderful scents envelop her. But she did not close her eyes again. Oh, no. The sight of his body, naked from the waist up, and stretched across the width of her tub, was just too inspiring. She felt decadent, and a little wicked, watching him work.

When he finished, he rinsed her hair out again, slowly and rhythmically scooping up the water and pouring it over her. “Have you a face flannel?” he asked.

“Somewhere.” Aubrey felt around in the water.

He took it from her hand, and she felt embarrassed again. But Giles had snatched the soap from its dish on the floor and was working it into a lather. “There,” he said when he was satisfied. “Your arm, if you please, my lady?”

My lady.

In an instant her heart was in her throat. She must have gone rigid. His face fell with disappointment. “Aubrey?”

She jerked her arm from the water too hastily and splashed water onto his trousers, but he scarcely seemed to notice. “It’s nothing,” she said. “Just a little soap in my eye.”

Soon he was absorbed in washing her arms, his expression intense and focused, as if bathing her was the most important thing he’d done all day. Slowly and methodically he soaped and scrubbed every inch of her skin—except for the parts she particularly wanted him to touch. By now his own body was faintly sheened with perspiration from the damp and the hearth. He came up onto one knee and braced his left arm on the opposite side of the tub.

“I think, my dear, that I shall ask you to finish,” he said, handing her the soap.

Aubrey was confused. “Shall I?”

“I’m feeling decidedly voyeuristic,” he said, his voice dark and suggestive. “Your breasts, I believe, are next?”

He just wanted to watch her bathe? But perhaps that made sense. She’d certainly enjoyed watching him stretch and rub, and yes, even sweat a little as he worked over the tub of hot water. Uncertainly, she lathered her hands, then stroked them tentatively over her breasts. To her shock, her nipples peaked and hardened at once, as if she sat not in a tub of steaming water, but in a snow-bank.

Giles, apparently, approved. Something in his eyes began to simmer, his gaze never leaving her hands. Emboldened, she stroked the soap around and around, making slow, concentric circles with her fingertips, then lifting her breasts with her palms.

“A born temptress,” he said, his voice low and thick.

And she felt like a temptress; as if she were performing some sort of erotic ritual, something beautiful and natural, and meant for his eyes alone. She soaped her hands again, closed her eyes, and let her head tip back against the back of the tub. It felt so good. Slowly she stroked herself, smoothing the soap over her breasts for long moments, then drawing her hands up to cup her nipples as she rinsed.

“Good God Almighty,” Giles rasped.

She repeated the motions, then sensed rather than saw him rise up over the tub again. Her eyes flew open. His face was just inches from hers. “Woman, give me that soap,” he demanded.

She fished it from the water. Bracing one arm on the opposite edge of the tub, he leaned in very close, and bent his head to her right breast. With a flick of his tongue, he lightly licked the tip of her nipple, making her rise up in the water on a gasp.

She gasped again, sharper still, when his hand slid beneath her right leg. He lifted her leg from the water, and positioned her foot on the rim of the tub. “Now lie back,” he rasped. “And close your eyes.”

She did. Heavens, she was too embarrassed to watch. With his palm, he gently pushed her left knee, opening her fully to his touch. The warm water caressed her intimately. Giles made a sound of approval in the back of his throat, found the soap again, and began to slide it erotically back and forth. Over and over, he drew the soap, or sometimes just his fingers, between her legs. Soon she was slick. So silky and so wet. From the soap and the warm water and her own desire. She felt open. Exposed. Her breathing sped up.

“I want to watch you come,” he rasped.

Aubrey licked her lips uncertainly, but dared not open her eyes.

“Will you?” he demanded.

She nodded, or tried to, and Giles dropped the soap with a splash. She cried out when his mouth came down over her breast. Greedily he laved her, then pulled and sucked at her nipple. He began to work her with his fingers, sliding one inside. It felt sinful—wonderful—to be touched so decadently. When she was ready, he slipped a second into her sheath, and his thumb slid up and up, to touch the erect nub between her folds.

Aubrey gasped and let her head go back. Giles circled her core with his thumb, his movements as slick as satin over her skin. His mouth was still on her breast, tasting and tormenting. Aubrey’s head began to thrash.

“That’s it, love,” he crooned. “Let go. Let go.”

She muttered something, barely audible even to herself.

“What?” he rasped, scarcely lifting his mouth from her flesh.

Her whole body seized. “Oh—ah—yes—that—”

In the water her hips came up, seeking his touch. Her hands were clenching the sides of the tub, her whole body shuddering. And then she came apart, her soft cries of pleasure instinctive. Uncontrollable. The warm, pounding waves swept over her, took her deep, then washed into calm again.

“Giles,” she said softly when the tempest had past. “Oh, Giles, I have tried not to fall in love with you.”

“Have you, my love?” he murmured, his breath warm against her ear. “I hope you’ve failed.”

“Thoroughly,” she answered. “Completely. You are, I think, my life’s greatest joy.”

She was only dimly aware of Giles’s arms sliding beneath her and lifting her from the tub in a cascade of water. He knelt by the towel and laid her down. Warm from the water and the loving, Aubrey wanted never to open her eyes again. She wanted to just lie there by the fire, allowing Giles to towel the damp from her body.

But the night was cold, and her warmth did not last. As he blotted the water from her hair, she began to shiver. Giles stood, and she opened her eyes to see that he was stripping off what remained of his clothes.

“Your body is magnificent,” she whispered, coming up onto one elbow to watch him.

He smiled, a faint, almost self-deprecating grin, and scooped her up again, moving her closer to the fire.

“Neanderthal!” she softly exclaimed. “



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What next?”

“Me next,” he growled, placing her on the quilt so that she faced the warmth of the hearth. “But I’ll not freeze you to death taking my pleasure.”

He lay down behind her and curled his body to hers, nestling her hips against his pelvis. Immediately she felt the long, hard ridge of his erection pressing between the swell of her derriere. Oh, Lord, she was so warm. So warm and so sated. But she still had the strength to give a groan of pleasure when Giles curled one arm around her waist and set the palm of his hand over her belly.

He hoped he’d given her his child. The thought struck Giles so hard and fast his breath seized. Good God, he really must be mad. Already, he’d been playing with fire. Aubrey was not an experienced woman. She probably knew next to nothing of conception—and now he was about to plant his seed in her again. The thought should have terrified him, but it didn’t.

He’d grown so tired of living a cautious, precisely planned life. Aubrey made him want to do foolish things. Made him want to live dangerously and act rashly. To do, in short, just as he damned well pleased instead of worrying about the greater good of society, or what it expected of him.

Ah, but he did not want to hurt Aubrey in the doing of it.

He would not, he resolved. No matter what happened, she was his. He would care for her somehow. And right now the sort of care she seemed to require suited him very well indeed. Aubrey had begun to make sweet, urgent noises and was easing her hips up and down the thick length of his erection. And all he could think about was parting her legs and driving himself into her. Of losing himself in her lithe, elegant body.

He wished he could wait. Would he ever get enough of her to temper his gnawing need? Tonight, it did not seem so. Giles stroked one hand down the slender turn of Aubrey's waist, up along the swell of her hip, and as far down her ivory thigh as possible. He wanted to worship. To caress and to taste. But his body was impatient. He'd been too long without her. He pressed his cock against her more urgently, then set his lips to the back of her neck. "Lift this knee, love," he said, sliding a hand down her thigh.

With an uncertain glance over her shoulder, she did as he asked. Giles shifted his hips, and let the hard length of his erection ease between her thighs. Her folds, still warm and slick with her own desire teased at him. He let himself slide back and forth through the wet heat as his breath came faster and rougher.

"Ah, Aubrey, Aubrey," he groaned, his mouth hovering over her ear. "Your hips... tilt them back."

Almost instinctively she did as he asked. He prodded at her wet, silky opening. Her body took him in, greedily enveloping the first inch of his heated flesh. He rocked his hips back and forth a little, and felt her shiver. "Ride down on me, Aubrey," he choked. "Take me, love."

Aubrey did as he asked, though her movements were less certain and more wakeful now. Giles couldn't wait. He drew in his breath and thrust up to meet her on a guttural cry. He felt her go rigid for an instant, her body growing accustomed to the invasion. Experimentally she lifted her hips, then pushed back against him. Giles groaned with pleasure, and buried himself in her again.

Slowly their rhythm built, his hips rocking against hers, her breathy sighs ratcheting upward. In response, Giles let his hand slide from the swell of her belly to the nest of curls below. One finger delved deeper, searching for the core of her desire. He found it, and she gasped. Over and over he pumped himself into her, Aubrey's snug, sweet body pulling at him, drawing him deeper. Deeper into love.

He felt the urgency in her build, felt the rhythm moving through them. Soon Aubrey was crying out with breathless sobs on his every stroke. He touched her more intently, circling her sex with his fingertip, feeling her begin to shudder. He tried desperately to hold himself in check as Aubrey struggled for her release.

"That's it, love," he whispered, pressing his lips to the damp flesh of her neck. "Take me. Yes, yes, like that, like that..."

She went rigid in his arms, then began to tremble. She cried out, soft but sharp. Her climax was too much. Giles drove himself in on one final thrust and felt his seed explode inside her. The room faded to black as he throbbed and pulsed, claspng Aubrey tight against him.

Aubrey awoke to the sound of ash sheering off in the hearth. The fire was dying down, she realized. They must have drowsed for a time. She and Giles still lay on the quilt before the hearth, wrapped in one another's embrace. She felt drained. Emotionally and physically eviscerated. And a little fearful, too, for it seemed as though she'd no right to be this happy. But she was. And she meant, at least for tonight, to savor it.

She must have drifted off again, for at some point she woke to find herself clinging to Giles, and whispering something desperate.

Another bad dream, she told herself, fighting her way from the fog. Yes, just another bad dream, replaying itself in her head again. There was no freezing gaol. Fergus was far away. She was free. Iain was safe. And in the here and now, there was only Giles, his body warm and solid and real, his mouth open and feverish now, urgently seeking hers.

"It's all right, my love," he whispered. "I'm here." Then he held her close, and kissed her long and deep. As if to further comfort her, he turned her onto her back and mounted her again without prelude. He made love to her again slowly, saying nothing, asking nothing. When they were finished, he carried her to her bed, tucked her between the sheets, and then crawled in to face her.

Aubrey smiled. "Are your feet hanging over?"

"It is a dashed small bed," he agreed.

"Housekeepers are not normally expected to entertain guests."

On a soft chuckle Giles drew her closer and began to slide his fingers through her hair in that slow, soothing rhythm she loved. "You didn't sleep well, did you, my love?"

"I had a nightmare, I think."

"You think?" She felt him shift and look down at her.

"I don't remember it," she said. "I don't want to."

He held her quietly for a time, but Aubrey could feel a certain tension building. "Aubrey, my dear," he finally said. "I came downstairs in part because I wanted to ask you something."

She was instantly on edge. "Did you?"

He smiled faintly. "Yes, but I got distracted, didn't I?" he said, then paused for a moment. "Aubrey, did you ever have family in Birmingham?"

Aubrey drew a deep, unsteady breath. She was so tired of being less than truthful with Giles. "No," she said. "I did not."

By the faint light of the fire, she saw his eyes studying her. "But you once told my uncle that you did," he said quietly. "Do I remember that correctly?"

She swallowed hard. "Yes, I—I did say that, but only at first," she told him. "I was alone, and staying at an inn with Iain when I saw your uncle's advertisement in the newspaper, and... well, it felt like fate to me. But I was afraid he would disapprove of a young woman traveling alone."

"I see," he said quietly. "And this housekeeping experience. Where did you get it?"

"I... I kept house for my family," she said. "Initially for my mother, and later, for my sister. I ran both households in every respect. I was very good at it."

"I see," he answered. "And you worked nowhere else?"

She curled her fingers into the softness of the pillow and closed her eyes. "Must we talk of this now, Giles?"

He slid one finger beneath her chin. "Aubrey, love, look at me."

Aubrey did not open her eyes. "Your friend Max went to Birmingham, didn't he?" she said quietly.

Giles nodded. "How did you know?"

"A letter came today," she whispered. "His penmanship is unique."

"Ah."

"He does not trust me," she said. "I cannot blame him. This has turned into a very bad business. I wish I'd never gotten involved."

His eyes searched her face again. "But you didn't involve yourself, Aubrey. You were just... in the wrong place at the wrong time. Isn't that right?"

"Then I should have run to the village the moment I heard the shot," she said quietly. "I should never have gone into that room and touched the... touched him. It was stupid of me. So incredibly stupid. But I thought I... I could help, I suppose. I did not realize there was no helping him. Not until I saw the wound."

A look of sympathy passed over his face. "I am so sorry, my love."

Aubrey was silent for a long moment. With her body pressed to Giles's, she could feel his heart beating, slow and steady. "Giles, you once said that if I asked you to trust me, you would," she whispered. "Did you mean that?"

He hesitated. "Yes, I did."

Carefully she considered her words. "Giles, I have been here at Cardow almost three years," she said quietly. "I love it, for what you call isolation I call peace. Moreover, I truly love my job, and I take pride in doing it. And while I did not, perhaps, seek out this... this affair, if I never saw you again, or if you were to send me away, I would be shattered. But I don't see what the past—anyone's past—has to do with this. I have asked you nothing of your past, have I?"

"No," he said quietly. "You have not."

"I am sorry your friend suspects me," she continued.

"Still, I am guilty of nothing save stupidity. I am sorry your uncle is dead. I cared for him very much, as strange as that may sound. But, Giles, he is dead. Nothing Lord de Vendenheim can do will ever change that."

"What are you saying, Aubrey?" He stroked one finger along her jawline. "That we should simply give up?"

"Yes," she said swiftly. "Trust me, nothing good will come of it. All this talking merely keeps our wounds fresh."

In the dim light she saw him frown. "But justice should be served."

She laughed a little bitterly. "The courts of mere men rarely serve up justice," she answered. "You once said as much yourself. I believe that vengeance, like judgment, belongs only to God. As for me, I care very little what de Vendenheim thinks. I believe I've proven my loyalty as a servant."

“But that’s the point,” he said. “I don’t want you, Aubrey, as a servant—”

“That is all I can be, Giles,” she interjected, setting one palm over his heart. “All I want to be. Can’t you just accept that? Can’t we just have... this?”

Fleetingly, his eyes closed, as if he could not bear to look at her. “Not two hours ago, Aubrey, you said you loved me.” His voice was cooler now. “Was that true? Or was it part of your ‘loyalty as a servant’?”

She jerked back as if he’d struck her. “Get out!” she hissed, pushing her palm against his chest. “Get out of my bed.”

He caught her wrist gently in his and rolled her onto her back, dragging himself over her. “But it’s my bed,” he whispered, the hurt plain on his face. “Just as you are mine, Aubrey, no matter what you call yourself. No matter who you are or what you have done. You are mine. Now and always.”

“You wish to play lord and master again?” she answered bitterly. “Go on, then. Take me, Giles, right now. Just like this. Against my will. I dare you.”

The fight went out of him, and he fell against her. “Damn it, it isn’t like that, Aubrey,” he whispered against her throat. “This isn’t about possession. It’s something... worse. It’s desperation. Or obsession.”

Aubrey blinked back tears and relaxed into the softness of her bed. “We are all on edge,” she whispered. “I am sorry I cannot bare my soul for you, Giles. I am sorry I cannot be what you want.”

Giles stroked his hand over her head and gently kissed her. “You are what I want, Aubrey,” he said again, but this time his voice was soft. “And in my heart you are mine. But you are right, my dear. I can never possess you.”

“I love you, Giles,” she whispered. “There, are you satisfied? I have said it again, when my mind is clear of lust. But I am not the woman for you. Not for long.”

“I don’t understand,” he whispered.

She pressed her lips together and shook her head.

“Someday you’ll wish to marry, Giles,” she said. “But you must choose someone who will be an asset to your career, someone from your own world. You have a duty to your title and your family.”

“Ah, duty,” he echoed. “Now, that, Aubrey, I understand all too well. I have been doing my duty all my life. But now I find myself wondering if I will ever be able to do what makes me happy. Would you have me make a marriage like my mother’s? One made for economic and dynastic considerations?”

“No, for political considerations,” she answered. “You have the power to help so many who cannot help themselves. Nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of that.”

“My career again, is it?” he muttered. “I fear I’ve begun to resent it a bit. But yes, my work is important, Aubrey. I have not lost sight of that fact.”

She took his hand and kissed it. “How long, Giles?” she whispered, rubbing her cheek over the backs of his fingers. “How long before you must go back to London?”

“I thought to be gone a fortnight past,” he admitted. “I need very much to be in town. But I’m loath to leave you. And loath to leave this place, too, much to my surprise.”





”

She looked up at him through her eyelashes. “Perhaps you’ve come to like this old castle just a little?”

“I have come to see it now for what it is,” he said. “To see it through my own eyes instead of someone else’s. And I’ve discovered that it is not, after all, a prison, but a stately home, rich with its own personality. A ‘living, breathing thing,’ you aptly called it.”

Aubrey looked at him steadily. “Did you really once think it a prison?”

He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. “My mother felt imprisoned here,” he admitted. “She came here as a seventeen-year-old bride, very much against her will. She always said that her greatest fear was that she would die at Cardow.”

Aubrey brushed the hair from his eyes. “It was an unhappy marriage?” she murmured. “Your father did not love her?”

Giles smiled sadly. “He loved her too much,” he said. “And she loved him not at all.”

“Ah,” said Aubrey. “That is unfortunate.”

“She never wanted to live here,” he whispered. “It is said that no bride has ever been happy at Cardow. This place is so old and so desolate. Probably even haunted. Sometimes I think the house drove her a little mad. And she did indeed die here. It was tragic.”

Aubrey tucked her body closer to his. “I—yes, I had heard that she fell.”

Giles’s gaze had turned inward now. “Oh, what you heard was that she killed herself, I daresay,” he answered. “But she did not. She did not. He pushed her—if not with his hands, then with his words. I am no longer sure which weapon he used.”

“He pushed her?” Aubrey hesitated. “I thought—I mean, I had understood—”

“What, that she jumped?” He slowly shook his head.

“No. He pushed her—” His own voice broke. “Or that’s what it looked like to me. Of course a child’s mind can play tricks. I know that, too.”

“My God.” Aubrey looked at him in shock. “You weren’t there?”

Giles looked at her strangely and nodded. “Do you know the mace, Aubrey, which hangs from the gallery?” he asked. “Mama was wearing her favorite blue velvet gown, and the hem caught on one of the spikes. It made a horrible, blood-chilling sound as it ripped. I have never forgotten it.”

Aubrey felt a little sick. “Why? Why would he do such a thing?”

“Because they were quarreling,” he whispered. “Over me, as always. My father had grown so bitter. He had loved her once—still did, perhaps—but after she’d given him his heir, she spurned him. This time, my father was threatening to send me away. To school, he said, to make a man of me. But what he really wished to do, I think, was punish her for loving me. Mother started crying and saying that she would die, that being trapped at Cardow without me would kill her.”

Aubrey grimaced. “How very sad.”

Giles was staring into the darkness again. “Father just shrugged and walked out of the library, but she ran after him. She would never, ever let it go. She seemed almost to relish her fights with him. And so they burst out onto the gallery. She was on his heels shouting, screaming. And then she...she pushed him. And he pushed her. Harder. And then she...she just hit the balustrade and went over.”

“Oh, my God,” Aubrey said, tightening her arms about him.

Giles blinked twice. “Servants came running from all directions, and Father started bellowing that she was insane; that she’d jumped,” he went on. “That lie served him well enough until the rector turned up and reminded him of the penalties for suicide.”

“Oh, Giles.” She could see the pain etched on his face.

“All her property would have been forfeit to the Crown, Aubrey,” he whispered. “They would have whispered that she was mad—that she was destined for hell—and then buried her in the darkest of night without so much as a prayer.”

“Yes.” Aubrey tried to swallow. “Yes, I know.”

“The thought of such humiliation changed my father’s tune, of course,” Giles said, his silver eyes suddenly flat and gray. “Father realized the ignominy about to be heaped upon our family, and suddenly, Mama had simply fallen over the balustrade. She’d had an accident. And...and maybe she did. Christ, I don’t even know anymore.”

Aubrey closed her eyes. “Oh, Giles,” she said quietly. “I am so sorry.”

“I hated my father for that,” he said. “I still do. But now that I am older, I realize my mother did deliberately antagonize him. He was petty and jealous. Yet she was incapable of accepting her lot in life and making the best of it.”

“It was an arranged marriage?”

Slowly Giles nodded. “But the parson did not hold a gun to her head, did he?” he finally said. “She spoke her vows. Yet in some ways, Aubrey, she did not honor them. I loved her. I truly loved her. But now that I’ve spent some time here—now that I see through the eyes of a grown man rather than a grieving child—my memories are clearer, somehow. And I begin to wonder if there wasn’t enough blame to go all the way around.”

Aubrey drew the sheet more snugly around them and tucked herself closer to Giles, for it seemed to be what he needed in that moment. “What happened to you, Giles, after she died?”

“I went away to school,” he said matter-of-factly. “My father certainly did not want me here. And I did not come back again until I had no choice. That is always how I have handled Cardow—by simply ignoring it—to its detriment, I now fear. Perhaps, Aubrey, I have been guilty of my mother’s sin.”

“What do you mean?”

He smiled a little bitterly. “Perhaps I have not made the best of my lot in life,” he said. “Perhaps I have ignored my family duty and let others pay the price for my pain.”

Aubrey did not know what to say. There was a certain amount of truth in his words. But she no longer felt as angry and exasperated over it as she once had. Now that she knew him, loved him, perhaps she saw with clearer eyes? Or perhaps she saw with blinders. She was no longer sure she cared. She laid her head against his chest and listened to his heart beat. And slowly they both slipped away into sleep.

## Chapter Fifteen

### In Which Mr. Kemble Is Sold Down the Road

It was Lord de Vendenheim’s unwritten rule that in any criminal investigation, anything that could go wrong would go wrong. And then something worse would happen. Certainly, nothing had gone right in Birmingham, and he’d written Giles to tell him so. That had probably been a waste of good ink. Giles, devil take him, already knew more than he was letting on.

Then, after they had left Birmingham for Bedlington, the “something worse” had come along. He and Kem had shared a pint of scalloped oysters in a tavern just a tad too far inland, with the predictably unpleasant results. When they’d got their heads out of their chamber pots and gone staggering off to the address Aubrey Montford had given on her reference, they found instead of a private residence, a milliner’s shop. When they asked at the milliner’s for anyone named Montford, they’d been sent to a tobacconist, and from the tobacconist to a farmhouse. A moldering old farmhouse owned by a grumpy bastard named Montwell who had three bad-tempered bulldogs, all of whom took grave offense at Kemble’s French cologne.

From thence they hastened off on yet another leg of their wild-goose chase, a chase they had yet to complete, because somewhere—somewhere—in the wilds of Northumberland, there had once been a family called Montford. It was a certainty, for every farmer, ostler, and smithy they’d questioned along the way had stuck his thumbs in his braces, spat on the ground, and politely told them so. They had not, however, been able to agree on the name of the village.

In exasperation, Max paused to kick a stone from the rutted country lane he was presently obliged to walk down. The stone, unfortunately, flew wide and hit Kem in the arse. He spun about and shot Max a blistering look. “Max, I’m bloody sorry your precious carriage lost a wheel in Darlington,” he said, holding up one palm. “But this mess we’re in now is not my fault!”

Max twisted his mouth into a wry grin. “Oh? Whose would it be?”

“I never saw that ditch!” he exclaimed. “Can’t these bumpkins cut back their bloody hedgerows? And that rattletrap cart wasn’t worth half what you paid to hire it. And now, how are we to return it with a broken axle? And don’t say ‘find a smithy,’ Max! If I see another of those black, hairy, sweating beasts, I shall scream!”

“Oh, I don’t know, Kem,” said Max pensively. “I thought the one in Hepscoth took rather a liking to you.”

Kem crossed his arms petulantly and kept walking. “I did not ask for this!” he reminded Max. “And all I know is that so far, I’ve been dumped in the back-of-beyond, and dragged through a dozen little villages with disgusting little names like Spitford, Cowpen, Pigpen, and Chicken-Shite Crossroads—”

“You mean Mitford and Pigdon,” said Max, trying not to laugh. “And that was a guinea fowl that did its business on your portmanteau.”

“That still does not explain Cowpen,” Kem persisted, fishing in his greatcoat for his armagnac. “Good God Almighty! Ruts that could swallow Seven Dials! Really, Max, where is that road-paving Scottish chap when one could use him?”

“Dead, I daresay,” said Max evenly. “And McAdam did not pave the whole of England. Get over it, Kem, and get a bloody move on.”

“Damn it, don’t rush me,” grumbled Kem. “Do you know, Max, being your friend is rarely worth the heartache. And what sort of fellow blackmails his friends anyway, I ask you? I should have pitched that blasted chandelier into the Thames when I had the chan—well, hello! What’s this?” Kem struck a pose in the middle of the road, artfully dangling his silver flask from his fingers.

Max saw it then. The crooked little sign had lost a couple of nails, but if you squinted through the high grass, you could still read it.

“Montford Farm,” he muttered after cocking his head to one side. “Good heavens, can this be it? It looks ...overgrown.”

“Oh, then this must be the place!” said Kem.

They set off down the lane, which consisted of two ruts with a foot of grass between. After half a mile even Max was starting to lose his temper. Suddenly they burst from the hedgerows into a clearing, in the center of which sat a farmhouse. A very sad little farmhouse, with a roof made of thatch, which seemed to be sliding back into the fields whence it had come, and a stone barn clinging crookedly off one side. A few bowlegged cows were staggering about, and amidst them was a farmer who looked as tired and worn as his humble abode.

“Mud!” hissed Kem, stabbing a finger at the barnyard ahead. “More mud!”

“No, that would be manure.” Max studied the ooze which covered the ground. “Fresh, too, unless my nose is off.”

“Ma foi!” muttered Kem, soldiering forward. “What a curst trip!”

The farmer had seen them and was ambling in their direction. Max introduced them both, then asked, “Are you Mr. Montford?”

“Afraid not,” he said cheerfully.

“But this is called Montford Farm,” said Kem, his voice growing shrill.

The farmer pushed back his leather cap. “Aye, ’twas,” he said. “All dead now. Got it from my wife’s cousin. Bequeathed it, he did.”

“Yes,” said Max. “I see. But we were looking for the family of a woman named Montford. A housekeeper by profession.”

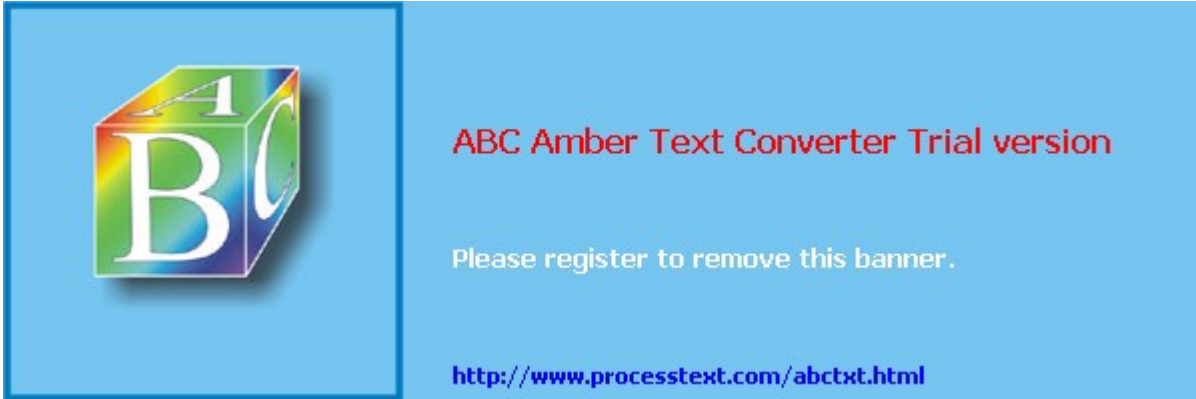
The man’s face seemed to light up. “Aye, aye, right you are, sir!” he said, lifting a gnarled finger in the air. “One o’ Elbert’s sisters—he’d be the wife’s cousin—she went off to housekeep, but I disremember her name.”

“Could it possibly have been Montford?” asked Kem a little snidely.

The farmer just chuckled. “Now, you’ve a right queer sense o’ humor, sir,” he said. “Montford it was, but whether it be Ann or Mary or Jane, I could not now tell you.”

“Aubrey, perhaps?” suggested Max.

The fellow spat, striking the manure just an inch from Kem’s Italian slippers. “Mayhap ’twas,



” he finally said. “Odd name, though, Aubrey. In any case, she went north to keep house for some rich fellow a long time ago.”

“How far north?” snapped Kem, obviously wondering just how bad this was about to get.

“Oh, a goodly ways,” he said, nodding affably. “A goodly ways. Near Dundee, it was.”

“Oh, God!” Kem pressed one hand to his heart.

The farmer ignored him. “Fellow was a Scottish earl,” he went on. “But I collect he died, and a younger brother come up to the title. Kept her on, though. Then that one passed—shot dead by old Boney, I heard—and a cousin turned up. So I reckon she’s still there, if she ain’t dead, too—which, if she is, no one’s said as much to me, which I should think they would, wouldn’t you, her being kin to the wife?”

Kem was tapping his toe impatiently, but Max was busy counting dead earls on his fingers. He looked at the man in puzzlement. “How long since Mrs.—or Miss—Montford left?”

The farmer adjusted his hat again and stared pensively at Kem’s shoes. Kem stepped back another foot. “Mrs., she did call ’erself,” the farmer finally said. “But she weren’t. And ’twas ’02 when she left, or as near as makes no difference.”

“Nearly thirty years?” Kem made a hissing sound through his teeth. “I broke an axle for this? She cannot possibly be the woman we want!”

The farmer just lifted his brows, widened his eyes, and turned to Max. “Well, we’ve just the one, sir,” he said almost apologetically. “Maybe you’d be wanting the Montwells over at Cowpen?”

“No!” Kem stamped his foot petulantly, splashing Max with manure. “No, no, no! Not Montwell! Not Cowpen! And for God’s sake, not Scotland! Max, please, I am begging you. Take me home. Take me home now.”

Max smiled apologetically at the farmer. “This Scottish earl,” he said. “Do you by chance recollect his name?”

The farmer slowly shook his head. “Can’t say as I do,” he answered. “But it was something queer.

Penknife? Penrose? Or maybe it started with Hen-something. . . .”

“Henny-Penny?” suggested Kem.

Max shot Kem a black look. “Or perhaps it was a name ending in ross?” he proposed to the farmer. “That’s a common variation in Scotland.”

The farmer jerked off his hat and slapped his leg with it. “By gad, you’re close! ’Tweren’t Penknife or Penrose or anything like it! ’Twas Kenross!”

“Kenross—?” said Kem, suddenly attentive. “Now that’s a bizarre coincidence.”

“My friend, there is no such thing,” said Max grimly. “Bizarre or otherwise.”

Milson, Cardow’s third footman, was a typical member of Pevsner’s staff. He was too young, too handsome, and too friendly with the housemaids. Moreover, he was lazy. Still, Aubrey had learned early on that there was little to be done about Milson’s failings, other than to point out the most egregious, then stare pointedly at Pevsner until they were put right again. The line between the domain of butler and housekeeper was a blurry one, but it existed.

One of Milson’s duties was to collect the household lamps each evening. In the lamp-room downstairs, he was supposed to wash the soot from the glass chimneys, trim back the wicks, and refill each vessel with oil. Frequently, in her afternoon inspections, Aubrey found a lamp which was not up to standard. This afternoon she’d found two in the small dining room alone.

Aubrey noted all of this on her list, then headed toward the morning parlor with trepidation. But she did not get so far as the lamps. When she entered the service pantry that connected the two rooms, a strange sound stopped her in her tracks.

“To the left! To the left!” someone shrieked from inside the parlor.

“My left or your le—” An awful clatter of metal rang out.

“Oops!” said a small voice. “The pewter platter. From the sideboard.”

Iain’s voice? Yes, unmistakably. But Iain was not permitted in the family rooms. Certainly he was not permitted to go knocking the dishes about.

Aubrey laid down her notebook and cracked the baize door an inch. To her shock, Giles walked past, his arms outstretched before him like some ghostly specter. Aubrey watched, speechless. The earl had a white linen napkin tied around his eyes and a silver candelabrum balanced atop his head.

“The fender! The fender!” Iain shouted.

Deftly Giles shifted to the left, stepping round the fireplace fender, but causing a candle to tilt and fall. “I’m going to make it the whole way round this time,” the earl declared. “I’ve only the windows to go!”

Curious, Aubrey pushed the door wide and stepped into the room.

“Oops,” came Iain’s voice again, smaller still.

Giles stopped, the candelabrum teetering precariously. “What now?”

“Mama,” said the boy witheringly. “In the pantry.”

Giles clapped a hand over the base of the candelabrum, turned, and pulled his blindfold down with one finger. He was grinning broadly.

Aubrey strode deeper into the room, shaking her head. “What do the two of you think you’re doing?”

“We didn’t break anything,” said Iain. “Honest.”

“We were just playing Three Little Lies,” Giles confessed, putting down his candles. “And I found myself obliged to pay a penalty.”

“A penalty?” echoed Aubrey, staring at the pewter platter which had rolled into the center of the room. “What would that be? To knock all the bric-a-brac off the parlor shelves?”

Giles was struggling with his blindfold now. “I have been challenged to walk around the room blindfolded whilst balancing a branch of candles on my head,” he admitted almost proudly. “That was my third attempt, and I daresay I would have made it, too.”

Iain was looking up at her earnestly. “It was raining, so we couldn’t play cricket after school,” he hastily explained. “But this is almost as much fun.”

“Is it indeed?” asked Aubrey dryly.

The boy nodded. “I won two rounds already.”

Aubrey returned her gaze to the earl, and to her surprise he winked. “Iain,” he said. “I fear we are keeping your mother from her inspections. May we finish this game another time?”

Iain, who obviously still feared he might be in for a scold, snatched up his schoolbooks from the dining table and made a hasty retreat, leaving Aubrey alone with Giles, who had managed to thoroughly knot up his napkin now. “Damn and blast this thing!” he grumbled, giving it one last jerk. “Untie me, Aubrey, will you?”

Aubrey bit her tongue to keep from laughing. She saw humor flash in his eyes, too. She lifted her hands to undo the knot, and Giles set his hands at her waist, drawing her closer. “I like having you about the house,” he said, dipping his head to nuzzle her hair. “I like having you around to rescue me from myself.”

Aubrey felt her face flush with heat. “Giles, we shouldn’t,” she chided. “Not here.”

“Ah, no, this will not do, will it?” he said.

But it hurt to see his smile melt away, and his handsome face cloud with disappointment. Aubrey was disappointed, too. She’d spent the last two weeks racking her brain, trying to think of a way out of her wretched situation. It was impossible not to reflect upon the future Giles was offering her. With every week which passed, every night spent in his arms, and every whispered tenderness, Aubrey felt herself falling deeper and deeper in love.

The earl wanted to marry her. He did not seem to care that she was his housekeeper. A hired servant. He knew nothing of Iain’s blood, and yet he’d accepted the child almost on sight as his equal and his friend. Even in her old life, with her generous dowry and fine family name, the notion of Aubrey marrying a wealthy, politically powerful English earl would have been something of a social triumph. Now it was just an impossibility.

“There,” she said, finally loosening the knot. “You are free at last.” Impulsively she kissed his cheek.

Giles did not take his hands from her waist. “Am I free, Aubrey?” he asked. “I do not feel it. I feel very much caught. Forever ensnared, I fear.”

Aubrey said nothing.

“Aubrey, look at me,” he commanded. “There is something you and I must talk about.”

She lifted her gaze to his. “Yes?”

“I have to go away soon,” he said, his voice quiet and sad. “I must return to London. You know that, do you not? That we cannot go on as we are?”

“I know,” she said quietly. “I know, Giles, that your life is there. Your work is important. Nothing can be allowed to interfere with it.”

“You and Iain feel important, too,” he admitted.

“These weeks here with you have changed me. They have opened my eyes to at least a few of my own failings, and to the beauty of this place. I have come to realize, too, how much of life—real life—I have been missing. And I have learned what I want from the time I have left on this earth.”

“I have learned a few things, too,” she admitted. I have learned to love; to love unreservedly, without expectation or hope. I have learned what joy is. Those things she did not say aloud. But she felt them in the core of her being when she was with Giles.

He gripped her upper arms hard in his hands. “I want to ask you again, Aubrey, to come to London with me,” he said. “To marry me. To let me take care of you and Iain.”

She shook her head. “I thank you for the honor you do me, Giles, but I cannot.”

His expression darkened. “Have you ever been to London, Aubrey?”

“No,” she said honestly.

The set of his jaw was grim now. “You don’t ever mean to go, either, do you?”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

He jerked her a little closer. “Aubrey, do you really love me?”

“Yes.” She did love him, and she was tired of denying it.

“I believe that,” he said. “And I am not, I think, a vain man. Or a man who is easily fooled. I feel your love for me in your touch—not just your sensual caresses, but in every gentle brush of your fingers. I see it, too, in your eyes, though I think you’d sooner deny it to us both.”

“I’m not denying it,” she said.

“So why do you refuse me, Aubrey? Damn it, just give me one good reason.”

Aubrey closed her eyes and turned her face from his. “I...I cannot,” she whispered. “Please do not press me, Giles. Please.”

Giles relaxed his hold on her arms. When he spoke again, his voice was cool. “I must leave at the end of



November, then,” he said. “You will not let me help you. And I can do no more here to help my uncle. I won’t stay here, Aubrey, and beg you. My pride will not let me.”

“I see,” she said quietly.

Giles gave a wintry smile. “So, at the end of November,” he repeated. “Unless you decide to trust me.”

## Chapter Sixteen

### In Which Mr. Kemble’s Appalling Adventure Continues

“I still cannot understand why we had to come here,” fumed Kem as the stone walls of Cragwell Court came into view. They were perhaps half a mile away, and after what felt like months on the road, Max was beginning to have some sympathy for Kem’s incessant carping. Scotland in November was no one’s idea of fun. At least he had his own carriage, now properly equipped with hot bricks, wool blankets, and all of its wheels.

The seat of the Earl of Kenross was an eighteenth-century manor house perched atop a hill not far from Dundee. It had not been difficult to get directions, though for the life of him, Max couldn’t answer Kem’s question. Why had they come here? What was it that drove him to do something that even Giles, his best friend, would not have asked of him? Sheer obstinacy, perhaps.

“Are you ignoring me?” prodded his traveling companion.

“Just let me see that brooch again.



”Max tried to snap his fingers, but his gloves were thick and his hands numb.

Reluctantly Kem dug into the pocket of his greatcoat and extracted a fold of silk. Max unwrapped the brooch, a chased silver circle set with a faceted red stone bigger than the end of his thumb. “What did you call this again?”

“A rare Madeira citrine,” said Kem. “About twenty carats’ worth, give or take.”

Max turned it to the window and watched its fiery center catch the light. “Is this extremely valuable?”

“Good Lord, were it that valuable, would I have stolen it?” he snipped. “What kind of person do you think I am?”

“I do not presume to comprehend your morals, Kem,” said Max dryly, “but merely to remark upon their flexibility. Our Mrs. Montford will likely have a heart seizure when she finds this missing from her treasure blanket.”

Kem scowled. "I'm going to give it back!" he insisted. "A serious cracksman would have pinched her pearl choker. I just wanted to see this brooch under a jeweler's glass."

Max shrugged. "And you learned...?"

"That the purchaser was wealthy—and probably now dead, since the thing is at least fifty years old," said Kem. "And it's French, not English. On the reverse is a maker's mark. Chauvin and Truffaut, a Parisian firm of no small repute. It is a very unusual piece. But her pearls, Max! Hors concours! It broke my heart to leave them."

Max weighed the thing in his palm and stared through the glass at Cragwell Court, which was nearing now. "What do you think, old friend?" he murmured. "Are we going to learn anything of our mysterious Mrs. Montford here?"

"Which one?" asked Kem dryly.

Max lifted his brows. "Ah!" he said. "You have a theory!"

"Ten pounds," said Kem, extending his hand. "Are you in?"

Max, foolishly, shook Kem's hand.

No footman came out to greet them when their coach drew up. Indeed, Cragwell Court looked deserted. Kem pulled the bell, however, and eventually a pale, pretty housemaid answered. The family, she said, lived abroad most of the time. When they asked for the housekeeper, however, the girl curtsied and darted away.

"Settle up, old chap," said Kem, turning up his palm.

"Not yet," grumbled Max.

But just then she came around the corner, a sturdy, broad-shouldered ball of efficiency dressed in brown wool worsted. "A good afternoon to you gentlemen. How may I help?"

"Mrs. Montford, is it?" Max ventured.

The matron smiled. "Why, that's right!" she said. "Do come in."

"Ten pounds," hissed Kem as they strode down the corridor.

The housekeeper bustled them into a yellow parlor, a color chosen, no doubt, to offset the lack of sunshine this time of year. Once the introductions had been made, Max could not decide how to politely ask the lady to explain her own name, so he withdrew the letter addressed to Lady Kenross instead.

She looked at it and shook her head. "Oh, you can't be wanting the present Lady Kenross," she said, tapping her finger on the date. "This letter was written to Lady Janet, who married the previous earl, but she passed away a few years ago."

Assessingly, Max flicked a quick glance at her. "And just how long have you been here, Mrs. Montford?"

"Twenty-six years come July," she said, sitting a little straighter in her chair. "I've kept house for the last three earls, and a good family they are, too. Why do you ask?"

He and Kem exchanged glances, and Kem produced the brooch. The housekeeper's breath seized. "

Where did you get that?" she demanded. "That was her ladyship's mother's brooch. I would know it anywhere."

Max leaned forward in his chair. "Mrs. Montford," he said softly. "Have you any idea how this brooch could have come into the possession of a young woman using your name and working as a housekeeper in Somerset?"

The woman pressed one hand to her chest. "Using my name?" she said. "Another Lydia Montford? Why, I've no notion!"

"Not Lydia," Max corrected. "Aubrey."

"Oh! Oh, dear." She began to wring her hands.

"Mrs. Montford?" Max prompted. "Do you recognize that name?"

She looked back and forth between Max and Kemble, her face very pale now. "Are you gentlemen with the police?"

Kemble tossed his hand charmingly. "Oh, come now, my dear! Do we look it?"

The woman pursed her lips and looked them both over again. "Well, Lieutenant Farquharson and Lady Janet had two daughters," she finally said. "Before he became the fifth Lord Kenross. Muireall was the elder, and Aubrey the younger, and a very good girl she was, too. If you heard differently, then you were told a lie. And if she's pretending to be me, I don't mind one b—"

"Do you mean to say you knew her?" Max interjected.

The housekeeper looked at him askance. "Well, I should say so! The poor wee thing came here to Cragwell when she was but a little girl." She paused to give an inward smile. "Always loved to bake cookies, Lady Aubrey did, and to listen to my stories about growing up in Northumberland. All those little villages with all their funny names used to make her just laugh and laugh."

"Oh, I got quite a giggle out of them myself," Kem remarked.

Mrs. Montford glanced at him strangely and returned to the present. "But as I was saying, after Waterloo, when she and Lady Kenross had to move to the dower farm, I visited every fortnight on my half-day. Lady Aubrey was full of questions, and I did my best to teach her whatever she asked. Very good to her mother, she was, and a hard worker, too. Took care of everything, so that her ladyship wouldn't be bothered. The farm, the house, all the accounts. And then she went on to do the same for poor Lady Manders after their mother died."

"Lady Manders?" asked Kem abruptly.

"Her sister Muireall," said the housekeeper, as if it were obvious. "She married the Earl of Manders, handsome wastrel that he was. But Muireall was an invalid and could never keep up with him. Now, begging your pardon, gentlemen, but precisely why are you here?"

"Why, we're just trying to find Aubrey Montford," said Kem. "We're gravely concerned for her welfare."  
"

The woman stiffened. "Her name is Lady Aubrey Farquharson," she countered. "And he just said she was in Somerset!"

Kem hesitated but a heartbeat. "And so she was," he said sweetly. "But we are not perfectly sure where she might be now. Indeed, we have not seen her in some weeks."

The woman looked suddenly sorrowful. "Och, run off again, has she?" she said, rummaging in her pockets as a tear leaked out. "Poor wee lass! Having to dart about like some pitiful kit with a pack of hounds giving chase! Dreadful, it is, just dreadful!"

"There, there, Mrs. Montford," said Kem soothingly. He slid onto the sofa next to the housekeeper, deftly producing a handkerchief. "Now, just unburden yourself, my dear. What is poor little Aubrey running from?"

"Why, from that wicked, lying Fergus McLaurin!" She paused to honk loudly into Kem's handkerchief. "But I daresay you knew that."

"Well, I suspected as much," lied Kem, his voice like silk.

"And I've fretted myself half to death, wondering what had become of my poor dear girl," Mrs. Montford said between sniffs. "She ran away, of course, as soon as the murder trial was over and they let her out of prison."

"Good Lord!" hissed Max. "Prison?"

Kem shot him a quelling look. "Well, of course she did!"

"Indeed, who wouldn't have?" cried Mrs. Montford.

"Only a fool!" Kem agreed. "After all, what choice had she?"

"Why, none in the world!" said the crying housekeeper.

Kem shook his head. "None whatsoever."

"After all, wasn't it plain what Fergus was up to?"

"Oh, I always had my suspicions!" Kem paused fleetingly. "But what were yours?"

Mrs. Montford was hitting her histrionic stride now. "Why, I think he conked that fool brother of his—Lord Manders, I mean—on the scone with that poker!" she sobbed. "Then he tried to blame it on poor Aubrey! Fergus was always jealous of his brother. That's why they never got on, you know."

"Well, I'd always wondered about it," said Kem. "But what an amazing theory!"

The good woman nodded vigorously. "Well, as to theories, sir, you may mark this one: if that murder trial had end with my dear Aubrey hanged, the next to go would have been poor little Lord Manders! Then Fergus would have had just what he wanted, wouldn't he?"

"Quite so, quite so!" Then Kem hesitated. "But what did you think he wanted, Mrs. Montford?"

The woman looked at him strangely.

"Wanted most of all, I mean?" he hastily added. "After all, there was the... the money, right?"

"Well," she said pensively. "It's always about money, isn't it? But the estate in Tayside is very fine. Then there's a small chateau, I believe, in the Loire Valley. But mostly, I think Fergus just wanted to be Lord Manders. He'd always coveted his brother's title. And if Fergus would murder his own brother, why

would he stop at his wee nephew, I ask you?”

“Oh, I am confident he would not have!” declared Kem.

“You think n-not?”

“Indeed, murderous villains rarely do.”

“That’s j-just what I thought,” she agreed, dabbing at her eyes.

“And you have a remarkable understanding of human nature, ma’am.”

“Well, I’ve always thought so,” said Mrs. Montford between sniffs. “And so when Lady Aubrey snatched little Lord Manders right out of his cradle in the dark of night, I did not blame her one bit!”

“Why, heavens no!” Kem sounded thoroughly indignant now. “Who would?”

“Thank God for men like you, sir.”

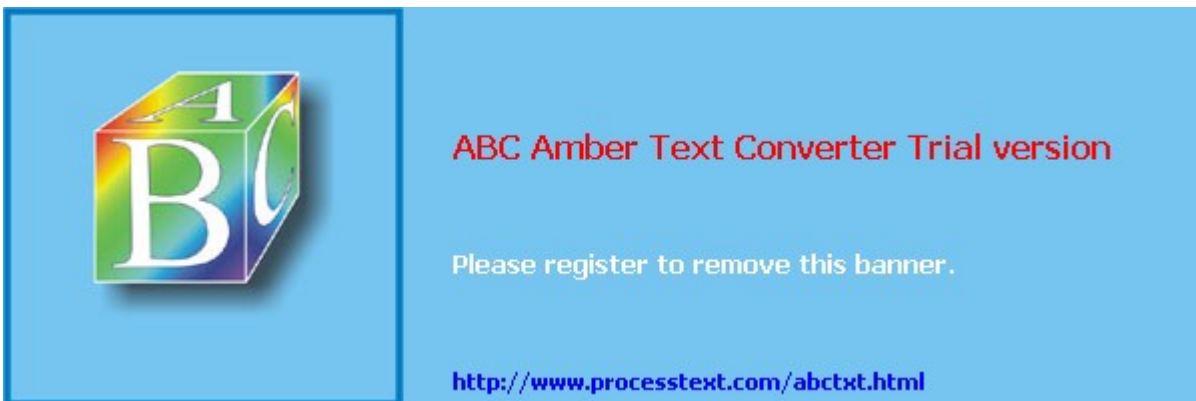
“Well, a fool could have seen Fergus was trouble from the very start.”

“Plain as the nose on my face!” she said, looking at Kem as if he were some messianic hero. “Though what’s to be done about it now, Mr. Kemble, I’m sure I don’t know.” She gave another pitiful sob.

“Madam, I have been thinking of calling him out myself!” Kem produced yet another handkerchief.

“Oh!” cried Mrs. Montford, bursting into full flood now. “Oh, but you can’t!”

Kem’s face fell. “Can I not? Is he a coward? A cripple? What?”



“Nooo!” she moaned, snatching the handkerchief.

“He’s dead!”

“Dead?” said Kem. “When? Where?”

“Edinburgh!” she said after another healthy honk. “Just last week! Lord Carthard caught him in bed with Lady Carthard and throttled him with his own neckcloth!”

“Why, you cannot mean it!” said Kem indignantly. “I’ve been cheated out of my revenge?”

Max rolled his eyes and stood. “Come on, Kem,” he said under his breath. “We’ll go piss on his grave if it’ll make you feel better.”

One arm still around Mrs. Montford, Kem looked up innocently. "What on earth are you mumbling about, Max? Aren't we going home now?"

"Afraid not, old boy," he answered grimly. "Tear yourself away, and start praying that Edinburgh is lovely in the winter."

It was the sort of day which should never have occurred in the middle of November—not along the Somerset coast, at any rate. But the beautiful day had come nonetheless, the morning clear and cool, but full of promise. The promise held, and by afternoon it was almost warm, and very definitely sunny. It was also a Sunday, and one of those rare times when Aubrey could take a break from her usual duties.

Iain had known this, of course. His eyes had been round and pleading. Unable to say no, Aubrey had packed a basket with meat pies, cheese, and apples, and together, they set off on a two-mile hike to a cove below the cliffs. This wide, sheltered stretch of sand was Iain's favorite place to play and explore, for the tide washed all manner of curiosities to shore. After just a quarter-hour he'd already found a length of rusted chain, a brown bottle with no cork, and a piece of driftwood shaped—or so he assured her—like a magical unicorn.

After depositing his loot by the blanket, Iain returned to a pile of rocks by the water's edge to search for the hidden smuggler's gold which he was sure lay somewhere nearby. He began by poking about in the wet sand between the rocks with a long stick. Suddenly a shadow fell across her blanket. Aubrey looked up and felt her heart lurch.

Giles stood behind her, tall and breathtaking in his casual clothes: boots, breeches, and an old frieze coat. His eyes were squinted against the sun, his coat whipping open in the breeze. Aubrey had not seen him—not alone—in several days. And suddenly she realized how empty those days had been.

Giles was still watching Iain dig. "Pirate gold?" he said musingly. "Or smuggler's loot? Which, I wonder, is he looking for?"

Aubrey laughed. "A combination thereof, I'm afraid," she said, overjoyed at his presence. "He heard Jenks say that French smugglers once plied these waters, and he surmises they were paid in gold."

"He surmises right," returned Giles. "May I join you?"

Aubrey felt suddenly shy. "Yes, please do," she said, reaching out to smooth a wrinkle from the blanket.

"You are wondering, I daresay, what brings me here," he said, sitting down and stretching his long legs out.

"I was, rather," she admitted.

Giles was still watching Iain. "I followed you," he confessed. "I wanted to talk to you. And when I saw you leave from my study window, I decided to see where you were going with your basket and your blanket. It looked... well, pleasant."

"Pleasant?" Aubrey smiled. "To clamber down a rocky cliff just to sit on the sand by the water? I think most people would find that rather a dull business."

He turned to face her, his silver eyes serious. "I don't," he said. "I don't find anything I do with you or Iain dull." Her hand lay upon the old blanket, and impulsively Giles picked it up and carried it to his lips. "I am sorry, my dear, that I spoke so harshly the other day."

“You needn’t apologize.”

His mouth curled into what might have been a smile. “Well, it’s only half an apology,” he said. “I meant what I said, Aubrey.” He sat watching her for a long moment. “But I do love you. Distance won’t change that. I almost wish it would.”

“I love you, too, Giles. Please always remember that. And I understand you have duties in London.”

He looked at her pointedly. “I’m not sure I understand it any longer,” he said. “Aubrey, am I going to have to give it all up? Would that make any difference to you? Is that what it will take to win your hand? I love you, but I don’t understand why you won’t trust me.”

For a moment she was tempted. Oh, so tempted. Then reality intruded. It wasn’t just living in London. It wasn’t just the critical and very public nature of his work. It was the fact that she was living a lie. She was a criminal. She would ruin him. Aubrey shook her head, fighting against the tears which were welling hotly behind her eyes.

“You must not even consider giving up your career,” she whispered. “Promise me, Giles, that you will not. It would be wrong. Wrong of me to ask, and wrong for you to do.”

“Would it?” His shoulders fell a fraction. “Oh, I daresay I know the answer to that. There is so much that desperately needs doing.”

Aubrey touched his arm. “Something is troubling you, Giles. Something besides me.”

Giles stared out to sea for a long moment. When at last he spoke, his voice was pensive and a little worried. “England is on the cusp of a crisis, Aubrey,” he said. “I feel it in my bones. I can’t afford to simply do what I want when our people are already starving. Our labor unions are up in arms. Radicals are pushing for reforms so sweeping the country might be ripped apart. And if the King dies, as he may well, God help us. Wellington’s government will be forced into a general election which we are ill prepared for. We could lose control of the Commons. And Lord only knows how much power the radicals will gain.”

“And if that should happen, you’ll be needed all the more, Giles,” she said calmly. “You’ll have to be the voice of reason, as you have ever been.”

Giles smiled grimly. “I wish, Aubrey, that someone else could take a turn being the voice of reason,” he said. “I should like to play the truant for a change. Is that wrong?”

“No, but it is im—” Her words ended on a sharp cry. Iain had slipped from his rocky perch.

Giles was up and running before Aubrey could pick up her skirts. He dashed behind the rocky outcropping, and came up with Iain in his arms. Alarmed, Aubrey closed the distance between them, her gray cloak flying out behind her. “Iain, what happened?” she asked breathlessly.

“I—I—I fell,” gasped Iain, struggling manfully against his tears. There was an ugly gash on his temple, and a tiny trickle of blood.

Giles carried the boy back to the blanket. He sat down and settled the boy across his lap. Aubrey fell to her knees beside them. Giles shot her a reassuring glance. “The rocks were slippery,” he said, jerking a clean handkerchief from his pocket. “There’s algae all over the back side of them, but he’ll be fine.”

Aubrey threaded a hand through Iain’s hair and pushed it back so that Giles might dab at the wound with the handkerchief. “Ow!” squalled the boy.

“Don’t squirm,” said Giles gently. “Just let me wipe the sand out, all right? I promise it won’t hurt.”

Iain scowled, but he sat, still and stoic. Aubrey was impressed, both with the child’s desire to please and with Giles’s gentle touch. “There,” said the earl when he was done. “Nothing to worry about. If your mama agrees, I think you may safely return to your treasure hunt.” He looked at her, and she nodded.

Iain hesitated. “But I’m hungry now,” he said.

Aubrey laughed. “Always a sign of good health,” she said, dragging the basket to the middle of the blanket.

At once Giles’s expression shifted. “I should go and leave you to it,” he said.

“You ought to stay,” warned Iain. “Mrs. Jenks sent pork pies.”

Reassuringly Aubrey touched Giles’s hand. “We brought plenty.”

His eyes lit with humor. “I was hoping you would say that,” he admitted. “I have not eaten my luncheon out of doors in...well, forever.”

With the sun warming her back, Aubrey was carefully lifting the food from the basket. “But isn’t dining alfresco all the rage during the London season, my lord?” she teased, passing him a wedge of cheddar. “I should have thought your calendar quite filled with such excitements.”

Giles broke a corner off the cheese and handed it to Iain. “It is not at all the same thing as this,” he said quietly, watching as the boy nibbled at it.

Aubrey glanced up at him then, and his gaze caught hers, his silvery eyes suddenly intense. She felt that familiar rush of breathless sensation, as if she’d just jumped a four-foot hedge on horseback. A sense of sailing, wildly and almost uncontrollably, into the unknown. A leap of faith.

She wanted to do it, she suddenly realized. She wanted to take that leap of faith. She was so tired of holding herself apart from him. Of evading and dissembling at every turn. She needed his help. She needed him. And suddenly it seemed the wisest thing in the world to simply place her fate and future in the hands of the Earl of Walrafen.

But what of Iain? Was that best for him? Giles cared for the boy; that was apparent in everything he did. He’d turned back to attend to Iain again. Aubrey watched from her side of the blanket as he broke a pie in half and passed part of it down, smiling at the child as he did so. As Iain bit into the food, Giles’s left dimple deepened, and his whole face softened.

She was tired, Aubrey realized. So tired of struggling on, and of doing it alone. She was weary of having no one to help her make decisions about Iain’s welfare. In three years he’d turned from a toddler into a stalwart little boy. And for all her maturity and determination, she’d been ill-prepared for any of it. Ill-prepared for motherhood, and for a life spent on the run with one eye forever open. But she’d managed to keep Iain from his uncle’s clutches, and she’d given him a good, settled life.

Was it so wrong of her to want a settled life, too? Was it wrong to want to love Giles, and be loved by him in return? To be his wife and have his children? Oh, it was a terrible temptation he had offered her! He had offered her himself. And in so doing he had offered her a second chance at her dream. A husband she truly loved. A home. A real family for Iain.

But if she told Giles of the charges against her, and what she’d been accused of doing in the past, what would he think? There was no way to be certain, was there? She would have to trust him, pray that her



past did not ruin him, and take the risk of plunging in. She would be making that leap of faith.

But whatever Giles might think of her, and of her rash behavior in Scotland, Aubrey was beginning to trust that he would somehow ensure Iain's safety. Surely Fergus would be no risk to the boy if Giles were watching over him, even from a distance? Yes, she could believe that now, when her mind was at peace and her heart free of fear. The Earl of Walrafen had a long reach and much authority. The entire Home Office was at his disposal. Iain would be safe.

Just then Giles glanced back at her and smiled. There was a wealth of meaning in his eyes. Happiness and wonderment. Satisfaction. And a healthy dash of lust, too. The breeze coming in off the channel lifted his dark hair and made his eyes sparkle. Yes, he was a good man. A totally honest man. Perhaps it was time that she was totally honest, too?

Aubrey went to Giles's bed that night with a newfound sense of urgency. It felt as though she needed him more desperately than ever, both physically and emotionally. And yet, there was an element of uncertainty, too, much as there had been that first night, when she'd gone to his bed half-unwilling, and so dreadfully confused.

Tonight she was far from unwilling. But she was oddly nervous. Once Giles held her in his arms again, with their bodies naked and their barriers down, would her newfound certainty feel as strong as it had this afternoon? Would she still feel safe in throwing all that she'd struggled for to the winds of fate? Or was the conviction she had felt this afternoon just a chimera; a sense of false intimacy brought on by his kindness toward Iain? Aubrey felt as if she stood on a threshold, frozen, afraid of stepping forward.

But going backward, to a life without Giles, no longer seemed possible. During their many nights together, Aubrey and Giles had taken to making slow, passionate love first, then whispering together into the early hours of the morning. She'd missed that so very much. It felt like an almost hedonistic luxury, to have someone to talk to. It was, on its face, such an ordinary thing; a thing most people took for granted. Aubrey, however, knew better.

She opened his door without knocking. At first he did not hear her. He was standing by his hearth in his black silk dressing gown, one hand braced on the mantel as he stared into the licking flames. His hair, which had grown too long during his weeks at Cardow, had fallen forward to shadow his eyes. He looked so breathtakingly handsome, somehow grim yet vulnerable all at once.

Delicately she cleared her throat.

His expression softened immediately. "Aubrey," he said, going to her at once and pulling her into his arms. "Aubrey, my love."

Oh, it was so easy to fall into his embrace. Easier still to fall into his bed. She could no more deny her desire for Giles than stop the sun from rising. Swiftly they undressed one another, their fingers quick yet clumsy. Clothing slithered piece by piece into the floor, and soon they were sliding between the cool sheets. He was especially needful tonight. She sensed it as soon as he touched her. There was an almost heated desperation, as if he were counting the days left to them. They did not speak, for sometime in the last few weeks, their lovemaking had gone beyond words; had transcended common communication to become a merging of something deeper.

Giles loved her with his mouth and with his hands, stroking and plunging, tasting and soothing, yet never rushing. Aubrey let her hands roam over him with abandon. His body was all hard bone and flat, taut muscle. She skimmed one hand down his side, along the length of him, and then lower. Giles groaned

when she took his erection into her hand. She weighed the weight of it, savored the warm, satiny length of him, and remembered what it felt like to be joined with him in heated madness.

For long moments they simply caressed one another in wonderment. Even now, after all these weeks, Giles felt new and beautiful to her. It made her want to explore. To experiment.

Giles seemed suddenly beyond experimentation. He rolled onto his back, set his hands about Aubrey's waist, and lifted her on top of him. "Love me, Aubrey," he pleaded. "Take me inside you. Make love to me."

He'd taught her well. He'd taught her to hunger, and to seek unhesitatingly the satisfaction which only he could give. Greedily Aubrey took his satiny flesh into her hands, tipped back her head, and impaled herself onto him with a sigh. Giles moaned softly, his hands leaving her waist to slide lingeringly down her thighs, his fingers dark and hard against the white of her skin. When she rose up again, he tightened his grip on her legs, his head going back into the pillow until the ten-dons of his neck drew taut.

She rode him hungrily then, lifting herself up and easing back down his length, watching as the lust and need played across his beautiful face. She marveled at her own power, at her ability to enrapture him. At the welling capacity of her love for him. For what could have been minutes but might have been hours, their soft sounds filled the darkness until Aubrey's sighs came faster and more frantically. She closed her eyes, and leaned forward to splay her hands across Giles's chest, so that she might feel the power and the strength in him as he thrust up beneath her. Her hair, already loosened, fanned over her shoulder and spilt onto his.

Sensation drew her down into a dark, churning cloud of desire. The scent of man and sweat and sex swirled around them in a heady, sensual haze. Panting lightly, Aubrey leaned forward to kiss his throat, and tasted salt on her lips. She licked it away and rose up to see him staring at her. He drew her face down to his again and kissed her, thrusting rhythmically inside her with his tongue as he took her higher. Aubrey felt the heat of his hands sear her as they slid around to grasp her buttocks, to hold her more fully open to his powerful thrusts.

She thought only of his body inside hers, felt only the hard sleek power of him driving inside her, driving her toward that glistening, perfect precipice. His breath sawed in and out of his chest now. She felt the tension inside him build and climb, until at last Giles cried out in triumph, and they came together in a splintering of light and heat and rapture.

Aubrey fell against his feverish body, spent. Eviscerated. Giles wrapped his arms about her, binding them heart to heart. "I love you, Aubrey," he breathed into her hair. "I cannot help it. I love you."

Secure in his words and his arms, Aubrey drifted off to sleep.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

### **In Which de Vendenheim Returns Triumphant**

It was the awful grating of metal against metal, abrasive and rusty. A corroded key in an ancient lock. She thrashed against the arms which bound her. No use. None. Again and again, the unseen gates crashed shut behind, sealing off hope. Another gate. Another lock. Another flight of stairs. Down and down into the yawning black void.

Her arm was twisted behind, shoved high between her shoulder blades, propelling her into the gloom. Blood no longer flowed. She was cold. So cold. The damp clung, sharp with the scent of rot and

desperation. She stumbled forward, fighting to hold back.

The dank stone cell loomed up before her, its thick door flung wide. And somehow, she knew. This was the last. The last door. The last lock. If it shut, she would never leave. Her arm no longer hurt. She felt nothing. Nothing but the churning terror in her gut. She tasted fear in her mouth, acrid as vomit. Behind her, someone's breath was hot against her ear.

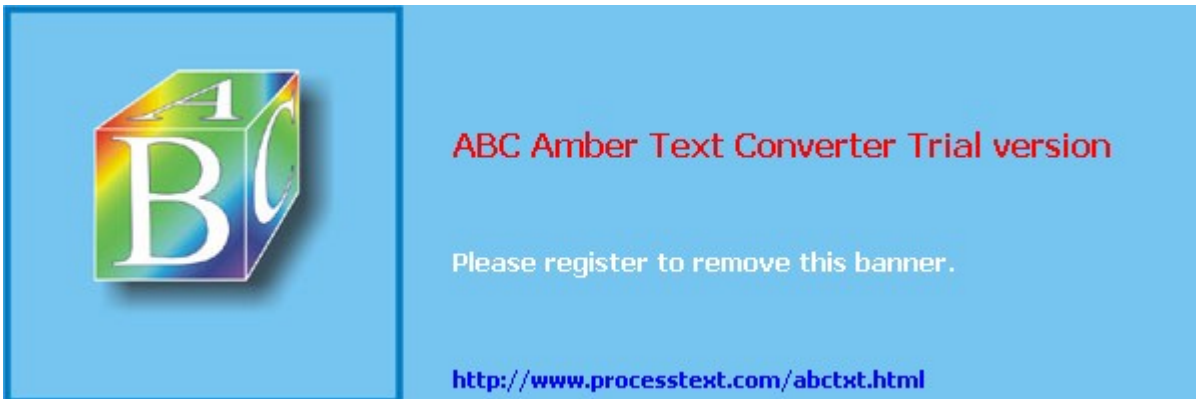
“Interfering bitch.”

Fergus. God, it was Fergus.

“You won't get out this time. Not this time...”

He had found her. He had her. But she would not go easily. “No!” she cried, lashing out at him. “No, I won't go! I'm innocent! Innocent! You can't make—you can't make—” The words choked in her throat. Aubrey tried to run, tried to fight. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Fergus clutched at her, pushed at her—pushing her in—until the black void of the prison cell rose up like a gaping chasm. Aubrey screamed. And screamed again.

“Aubrey!” The voice came from a distance



—strong, not whispered.

“Aubrey, for God's sake, wake up!”

Aubrey tried to jerk away. Tried to fight him off. Strong arms shoved her hard against the bed. “Stop it, Aubrey!” he ordered. “Don't fight me. I have you. I have you safe.”

The strong hands let go. She awoke to the vague awareness that someone was picking her up, dragging her against the warm width of his chest. Tears were hot and wet on her face. She was sobbing.

“Thank God,” she heard Giles whisper. “Oh, Aubrey.”

Giles. Just Giles. There was no one else. And then she was truly crying, bawling like a baby, her face turned into his neck. “Oh, Giles,” she whispered, sucking in deep, ragged gasps. “I thought—I thought—oh, Giles...”

Giles set his lips against her temple. “Hush, love, I have you now,” he crooned. “You are with me. You are safe. Always.”

Aubrey tried to stop crying, but the relief flooding through her made it somehow harder to do. The blood was coursing back into her arm now, stabbing her fully awake with pins and needles. She struggled to sit up straight, but her hand would not function. “Oh, my arm,” she whispered.

Giles moved her gingerly onto her side of the bed. "You must have twisted it under you and slept on it," he said, plumping a pillow behind her. "Here, let me have it."

Aubrey pushed a shock of hair back off her face with the hand which still had some feeling left in it. "I had a bad dream," she murmured, watching his long, elegant fingers massage the sensation back into her other arm.

"I think that rather an understatement," he answered, lifting his silvery gaze to hers. "A night terror, I should have called it. You were fighting me like a hell-cat, Aubrey."

She sniffed against her sobs and said nothing, merely watched him work.

"What were you dreaming?" he asked without looking down at his hands. "You cried out in your sleep, Aubrey. You kept saying you would not go. Where did you fear you were going?"

She shook her head. "I—I am not sure."

His eyes were gentle, but disbelieving. And hurt, too. She could see it now. "You've had that dream before," he said quietly. "I've heard you talking. Felt you thrashing."

Aubrey swallowed hard, and nodded. "Yes."

He released her arm and circled his own about her shoulders. He smelled so good. So warm and safe. Sometimes, in Giles's arms, she felt as if she could face any obstacle. The strength he radiated was an almost tangible thing.

"Aubrey, I think it's time you told me what's going on here," he said firmly. "Can you not see what you're putting us through? I can't bear seeing you like this. Haunted. Tormented. I want to help you. I want you to trust me. I want to know what is causing this nightmare you keep having."

Oh, it wasn't just a nightmare she kept having; it was a nightmare she'd been living. Only at Cardow had the terror begun to recede. Only here had she and Iain begun to live a life which was almost normal. Was she about to throw it all away?

Oh, God. This was it, wasn't it? That leap of faith. The risk which must be run in order to have any hope of a future with Giles. And suddenly Aubrey just wanted it to be over.

"All right," she finally whispered. "I don't want to talk about the dream yet, Giles. I want to tell you about myself, and Iain. About our lives before we came here to Cardow."

He pressed his lips to her temple. "I want to hear it."

She flicked a quick glance up at him. "But it is something, Giles, which may alter your feelings for me."

His gaze was steady. "'Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds,'" he quoted, setting the back of his warm hand against her cheek.

Aubrey drew a deep, steadying breath. "You know that Iain is not my child."

"Not yours, but your sister's."

"Muireall was delicate, but lovely," Aubrey went on. "She possessed the sort of frailty which attracts men, for it served to heighten her beauty, if you know what I mean."

The earl lifted one shoulder. "It is my personal opinion that it is strength which heightens a woman's

beauty, not frailty,” he said quietly. “But many men would disagree.”

Aubrey dropped her gaze. “Indeed, Muireall was much sought after. And eventually she married well—or so it was thought—to a young man of good family from Edinburgh.”

“In Scotland?” he murmured archly. “Do go on.”

Aubrey fisted one hand in the bedsheet. “Douglas was not a good husband,” she finally continued. “He liked society and...and a fast life. Clothes. Gaming. Other women.”

Giles made a sound of sympathy.

Aubrey lifted her shoulders dispassionately. “He was what he was,” she said simply. “A spoilt young man. And...and a rich one, too.”

Giles said nothing for a moment. “How rich?”

Aubrey sighed. “Wealthy even by English standards, I daresay,” she answered. “And of course, he wanted a son, but it was hard for Muireall to carry a child to term. By the time she succeeded, she was very ill and disillusioned with her marriage. She began to fade away, weary and bitter. For the last few years of her life, I lived with her, took care of Iain, and managed her household.”

She felt Giles nod. “I remember your saying so.”

“But Douglas and I did not get on,” she admitted. “He had neglected Muireall, and he kept on neglecting Iain. I suppose I blamed him for her death, but mostly I could not abide his ignoring his son. I toyed with leaving, but I could hardly abandon Iain, and I really had nowhere to go. Besides, Douglas needed me. But he wanted me quiet and docile. Out of his way. Regrettably, I was none of those things.”

“One can only imagine his shock,” murmured Giles.

Aubrey tried to smile. “His neglect of Iain grew worse, as did our arguments,” she went on, forcing herself. “Then unexpectedly Douglas’s younger half-brother moved from London back to Edinburgh,” she said. “It struck me as odd, for they weren’t close. Nonetheless, one evening, the two of them went out drinking and came home swaying arm-in-arm, singing some sort of silly sea shanty. Iain heard and ran down the stairs to greet them, laughing. But Douglas called him a nuisance and pushed him from their path. Iain fell against the newel post and cut his lip.”

“That sort should be horsewhipped,” said Giles grimly.

Aubrey could feel hot tears pressing against the backs of her eyes now. “Poor Iain, he always yearned for his father’s attention,” she said. “And when he fell, my temper just snapped! Douglas and I had a terrible quarrel then and there, and it certainly was not our first. His brother just stood to one side and laughed. All the servants heard. It was...ugly. Very ugly. My mouth, it seems, has plagued me all my life.”

Giles kissed the top of her head. “But it is a lovely mouth,” he said, as if to console her.

Aubrey half-laughed and half-sobbed. “The two of them stayed up drinking in the parlor late into the night. I put Iain to bed and went to bed myself. But the next morning Douglas was found dead on the parlor floor. He’d been struck across the base of his skull with a poker. One which had been taken from the hearth.”

This Giles clearly had not expected. “Oh, dear God.”

Aubrey felt panic swell in her chest. "Giles, there was blood—and hair, his hair, still on it," she whispered. "He was dead. Cold. There was nothing to be done for him. And so the constable was called. And then the magistrate. And then Fergus."

"Fergus?" She could hear the attention in his voice now.

"Fergus McLaurin," she said quietly. "Douglas's half brother."

"That name is familiar," Giles murmured.

Aubrey laughed again, sharp and bitter. "I thought it might be," she answered. "In any case, Fergus told the magistrate that Douglas and I had quarreled, not once, but twice. He claimed to have left us in the parlor arguing and gone home. He said I was threatening Douglas and saying he'd sent my sister to an early grave. But Fergus also admitted he was rather drunk, and that he'd thought it all a great joke. He said he never dreamt Douglas was in any jeopardy from a mere woman, and so he let himself out and went home."

Giles hugged Aubrey tighter, and a sense of relief flooded through her. "But surely they did not believe this McLaurin. It was his word against yours."

"He...he found a witness," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "A footman not long in our employ. Perhaps Fergus had planted him there. I really do not know. So much of this did not occur to me until much later. Can you understand? I was so frightfully naïve. At first it felt like a nightmare. Like a mistake that would soon be put right. But then I realized there was no one to help me. Iain could not. My parents and elder sister were gone. I began to feel very alone. And I began to wonder how long Fergus had planned this."

"Good Lord, what a harrowing thought," murmured Giles. "But why? Why would he plan such a thing? Hatred? Revenge?"

"Power," said Aubrey. She turned in his embrace then and stared straight into his eyes. "Douglas McLaurin was not just a wealthy man. And not just Fergus's elder brother. Douglas was the sixth Earl of Manders."

She watched as all the color drained from Giles's face. She waited for him to push her from his bed and throw her out of his house. But instead, he tightened his arm about her shoulders, so tight she thought her bones might shatter. It was a wonderfully comforting pain. "Dear God in heaven," he finally said. "The murder of the Earl of Manders!"

"You remember it?" she asked.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, I—I do remember a bit. The criminal aspects of the case caught Peel's attention. There was...my God, Aubrey, there was a trial."

Aubrey felt her eyes well with tears. "I once told you there was a family scandal, Giles," she said simply. "I was the scandal. They took me away from Iain and held me for murder."

He pressed his lips to her forehead. "Oh, my love! My precious love."

His tenderness almost undid her, and Aubrey choked back a sob. "I had played into Fergus's hands that night with my bad temper and my sharp tongue," she said. "And after three months in prison I stood trial for the death of Lord Manders."

"But that is monstrous!"

“Oh, the evidence was very convincing,” Aubrey whispered. “Fergus was appropriately guilt-ridden for having failed his dear brother. His witness was so very, very careful. Only my good name and my sex, I think, kept me from the gallows. That, and my minister, who had the mettle to stand up for me.”

“But they found you innocent,” said Giles abruptly. “They... they let you go. Didn't they?”

Aubrey shook her head. “They found the case against me not proven,” she said. “Do you understand, Giles, what a hell that is? It is a legal loophole which the English do not have.”

He was frowning at the dying fire now. “It means you are free.”

“No, it means they let you out of prison,” she said bitterly. “But you will never be free. A verdict of ‘not proven’ just leaves the shadow of doubt hanging over you. I had lost my good name. I had lost Iain. My home. Fergus had taken away everything I held dear. There was little left to lose.”

He slowly shook his head. “But why, Aubrey?” he asked. “How could anyone be so cruel?”

“I daresay he did it for the money. For the title. There is a remote chance, I suppose, it was an accident. A drunken quarrel which got out of hand. Or some chance discovery that they were bedding the same barmaid. Perhaps, perhaps! But I do not know. I shall never know.”

“For the title?” Giles was obviously beginning to absorb it all. “But Iain is...?”

“Yes, but Iain is,” she echoed. “Quite a dilemma for Fergus. Only that child stood between Fergus and the earldom. Douglas was dead, I was thrown into the street, and Fergus had moved into the house—ostensibly to care for his brother's heir.”

“So our Iain is the Earl of Manders.” Giles sounded mystified. “He has a title, and a fortune, and an estate—two or three, perhaps—and he has been living here? In my servants' quarters? For all these years?”

“And it has done him no harm,” insisted Aubrey. “



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In fact, I daresay it has done him a vast deal of good.”

Suddenly Giles seized her by both shoulders. “Aubrey, did my uncle know this?”

Tears sprang at once to her eyes. “I'm not sure what he knew,” she admitted. “Major Lorimer was not much interested in the world beyond his walls. Certainly I did not lie to him about who I was.”

Giles looked at her very oddly. “What do you mean?” he asked. “Did you tell him you were Manders's sister-in-law or not?”

Aubrey bit her lip and shook her head. “I just threw myself on his mercy and asked him for this position,”

she said. "I'd seen his advertisement and recognized his name. He was once a friend of my father's, you see, and he...he felt he owed my family a debt."

"What sort of debt?" His voice was urgent.

She shrugged. "The details hardly matter. But I asked him to repay that debt by hiring me, and by allowing Iain to live here in the castle. He was reluctant at first, but later, I think—why, I think he came to trust me, after a fashion."

Giles's gaze looked suddenly distant. "Aubrey, who was your father?"

She hesitated, but she wasn't sure why. "His name was Iain Farquharson," she finally answered. "He served under Major Lorimer on the Continent. They were very close. He died at Waterloo trying to drag Major Lorimer off the field. After that, I think the Major never forgave himself for living."

A strange expression passed over Giles's face. "Farquharson," he said, his gaze turned inward. "Not Montford. Iain Farquharson. And not just that, either, Aubrey. I...I remember it now."

"What?" she asked. "What are you speaking of?"

He turned to her, his eyes wide yet grave. "He became Lieutenant Lord Kenross, did he not?" whispered Giles. "I met him once. The night he and some of his men gave Uncle Elias a gift. Not just a gift—a watch." His gaze snapped into focus. "Oh, my God. That's why he gave you the watch!"

Aubrey stared down at the sheets again. "To Iain," she corrected. "He gave it to Iain. Just as I told you."

But Giles was shaking his head. "Good heavens, Aubrey! Why didn't you just say so? Why didn't you just say who you were, and who your father had been? Everyone knew Lieutenant Lord Kenross gave Elias that watch."

She looked up at him and shook her head. "And what would that confession have earned me?" she asked quietly. "To confess my real name would have been as good as confessing I was already a murderess and a kidnapper. The gossip would have exploded. Just think of it. The daughter of an earl masquerading as a housekeeper! Eventually the talk would probably have cost me my freedom—and Iain."

"Aubrey," he said grimly. "This cannot go on. This must be straightened out."

She turned and seized his arm. "No, it cannot be straightened out! Don't you see?"

Giles shook his head in mystification. "Aubrey, you two cannot live here like this," he whispered. "Certainly you cannot let people go on thinking you are Mrs. Montford, a less than honest servant who has stolen my uncle's watch."

"Being thought a thief little concerns me, Giles," she whispered, her fingers digging into his arm. "Lady Aubrey Farquharson is thought a murderess. Which would you prefer to employ?"

"What are you saying, Aubrey?"

Her hands were shaking now. "Do you understand, Giles, that I have abducted that child downstairs? That a peer of the realm was snatched from his bed in the middle of the night? I stole clothes, jewelry, even money—all of it ours, but the law won't see it that way. Can you imagine what they will do to me if they catch me? Do you have any notion what could happen to Iain?"



“Dear God!” said Giles, staring into the depths of the darkened room.

“Giles, Fergus McLaurin does not know where Iain is,” she whispered. “No one knows. Only you. Do you understand me? Only you.”

His expression was grim. “You really fear this McLaurin might hurt the child?”

Aubrey nodded. “I know what he did to Douglas,” she said. “And I know what he did to me. Why would he stop, Giles? What if it was all of a piece? One grand, diabolical plan? Could you run that risk?”

“No,” he whispered. “No, I could not. Not with Iain.”

Aubrey gripped his arm tightly now. “Oh, Giles, it would be so easy! Iain is so defenseless. So trusting. Fergus isn’t fit to raise a child, but he is clever. He could make sure it looked like an illness. Or an accident. Now can you understand why I did not want to tell you? Why I do not want to leave this place?”

“Oh, Aubrey,” he said softly, drawing her tight against him. “I am so sorry, my love, for what you have suffered.”

She was crying again, sobbing against his chest. He believed her. He believed her. “Just keep us safe, Giles,” she whispered. “Let us be in peace here at Cardow, and just keep us safe.”

He pressed his warm lips to her temple again. “I will do more than that, my dear,” he vowed. “I will find a way—some way—out of this mess. I will make things right for you and Iain. I swear it.”

It was a bitter cold night in the West Country when Lord de Vendenheim’s sleek black carriage ground its way back up Cardow Tor. Regrettably, however, the carriage was neither so sleek nor so black as it had been on the day he and Mr. Kemble had set off on their wild, northbound goose chase. In addition to the broken wheel in Darlington, they had cracked a harness pole near Leeds, sprung a door-hinge in Derbyshire, and then, somewhere beyond Bath, his dead-tired coachman had sideswiped a mail coach, leaving streaks of blue paint in the glossy black lacquer.

Max had been gone from home so long his wife was going to kill him. And if he had to spend another month with Kemble, he would welcome a merciful death. Catherine, however, mightn’t be merciful. As to Kem, he lay snug and snoring on one of the banquettes, the door tied shut with yesterday’s neckcloth, while Max sat upon the box, jogging the coachman awake. And he was awake enough, miraculously, to make it through that wickedly narrow stone passageway under Cardow’s portcullis.

The second miracle was the hallboy, who was still half awake and willing to come out and help take down their luggage. Kemble untied his door, clambered out to stretch, then staggered into the great hall. “In the morning, then,” he yawned over one shoulder. “I’m going up to my room, old chap.”

“Will ye be needin’ beds made up, then?” asked the hallboy fretfully, hefting a bag which appeared to outweigh him.

“I think I was a chambermaid in a past life,” said Kem. “I’ll make do.” And with that, he picked up his portmanteau and ambled up the stairs.

Max appraised the hallboy in some sympathy. “I fear I am not so resourceful,” he said. “And I’m very much afraid I must ask you to wake your master.”

“Gor,” said the hallboy. “It’s half-past three, m’lord!”

“I know,” he said. “But if it’s any consolation, he might be glad to see me.”

Giles was indeed glad to see him—and bloody glad the hallboy had knocked first, allowing Aubrey to go scurrying for the bathroom with her arm full of clothes.

“I’ll send up coffee,” she whispered when he went in to do up her buttons. Then Aubrey slipped away. Giles threw a little water on his face, dressed, and went straight to the library. He had the distinct feeling this was going to be a long day. When he entered the room, Max was standing by the cold hearth, flipping through his slender, leather-bound notebook. He looked haggard and thin.

“Good Lord, where have you been?” said Giles, striding across the room to shake his hand. “I vow, Max, you’ve dropped two stone.”

Max did not look happy about it. “Giles,” he said grimly. “Have you any notion what haggis is? Or stoved howtowdie? Or cullen skink?”

“Cullen Skink?” Giles grinned. “Went to Eton with him, I believe.”

“Try again.”

His grin faded. “Well, it’s all Scottish food, isn’t it?”

Max’s lips curled disdainfully. “Yes, I have learned to my detriment that the Scots know nothing of fine wine, and live off oats, suet, and animal intestines stuffed with other vile things which man was never meant to eat, and you, my friend, are going to pay dearly for it.” He tossed aside his notebook. “And I’ve not even begun to tot up what you owe me for spending nearly a month cooped up with George Kemble. But it will be worth it, Giles, for I have a story to tell that is going to curl your hair.”

“Ah,” said Giles, sitting down in one of the chairs by the hearth. He felt weary, and not just from the lack of sleep. “I believe I’ve already heard it. And rather recently, too.”

Max followed suit and sat opposite. For a moment, he just tapped on the chair arm with one finger, as if considering how best to go on. “She has told you, then?” he finally asked. “Aubrey, I mean. You know the truth of who she is?”

“Max, I have always known the truth of who she is,” said Giles. “But now I know her history—or a part of it, at any rate. I know that she is Lady Aubrey Farquharson, and that she was accused of murdering the Earl of Manders. I am still reeling from the horror of it.”

Max seemed to relax into his chair. “I’m glad she told you,” he said, looking relieved. “It seems fantastical to realize that your housekeeper is really a lady on the run, and that the little boy is a nobleman. Surprising...and yet not. Still, it was a very bad business she got mixed up in.”

Giles fisted one hand and set it on his knee. “That’s why I’m leaving for London tomorrow,” he said. “I want you to come with me, Max. I am going to have a long talk with our Home Secretary.”

Max lifted both his harsh black brows. “Peel? Why?”

Giles narrowed his eyes. “I mean to put an end to this once and for all,” he answered, his voice grim. “I want Aubrey’s innocence established beyond question. I want her accuser turned on a rack so tight he

can't draw breath. Moreover, I want that child under my protection until he's of age. I want him to have his rightful name and claim his title."

"Do you?" murmured Max.

Giles leaned forward in his chair. "I mean to marry her, Max," he said in a tone that brooked no opposition. "And I've been asking her for weeks now, not just since she told me who she was."

"Oh, that I believe."

Giles narrowed his eyes. "Peel owes me, Max," he said. "You know that. He will not dare refuse to press this case. We will find a way to take care of this McLaurin fellow."

"I don't doubt your determination," said Max. "Or your ruthlessness. But I'm glad to say, Giles, that you will have no need of your rack. McLaurin has conveniently put an end to himself."

Giles's mouth was still hanging open when Aubrey came into the room carrying a tray with butter, bread, and coffee. Max sprang to his feet and took it from her. Aubrey looked at him, colored, and cut her glance away. "Will that be all, my lord?" she asked quietly.

Giles had risen to his feet. He held out his hands toward her. "Come here, my dear," he said quietly. "Sit down. I'm afraid Max has been to Scotland."

"I'll pour," said Max dryly. "We'll need it."

Aubrey's face paled, but she said nothing. She allowed Giles to lead her to a chair.

Max tried to smile, but his face did not easily turn to such a benign expression. "Your homeland is not especially charitable this time of year, Lady Aubrey," he said, tipping the pot carefully forward. "But we"

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ve done what we set out to do."

Aubrey's gaze shifted from Max to Giles and back again. "I can only imagine what you must be thinking," she finally said, her voice surprisingly clear and strong. "But I had no choice. None. Can you understand that? I did what I had to do."

Max passed her a cup of coffee, and when she did not notice, he simply set it down on the table before her. "I never meant to put anyone to such trouble," she went on, still staring at him. "I just wanted to be left alone. To do my work in peace. Perhaps I should have explained, but I did not...I was just so..."

"Terrified?" supplied Max.

She dropped her eyes. "Yes. Terrified."

“And not, I think, without reason.”

Max’s admission took the edge from Aubrey’s voice. “I regret my silence has put you to such inconvenience,” she said as Giles leaned over to lay his hand on hers. “I recently explained everything to Lord Walrafen. You have made an arduous journey for nothing.”

“Oh, far from it.” Max leaned forward and poured himself a cup of coffee. “Unless you call discovering the truth and disproving a pack of bald lies nothing.”

Aubrey’s head jerked up at that. “What do you mean, the truth?”

Max slowly stirred his coffee. “I fear Fergus McLaurin has come to rather a bad end,” he finally said. “I shan’t bore you with the details, but it was an easier death than he deserved. Afterward, Kem and I found your footman and had an honest exchange of views.”

“Honest?” Giles snorted in disgust. “I marvel such a man knows the meaning of the word.”

Max shrugged. “Perhaps it had something to do with a guilty conscience?” he offered. “But then again, it might have been Kem’s right knee. In any case, with a little, er, prodding, the chap was amazingly forthcoming.”

Giles winced. “That sounds painful.”

Max looked very solemn. “Oh, it was,” he admitted. “Kem has, you know, quite a nasty temper. I fear he found the weather in Scotland tedious, and when the rain ruined his favorite pair of Italian slippers, it was quite the last straw. Fergus’s footman happened into his path at the wrong moment.”

“A pity,” said Giles dryly.

Max smiled. “In any case, we hauled him down to the magistrate,” he continued. “And given that Fergus was dead and Kem’s mood was foul, the fellow was voluble, to say the least.”

“Thank God,” said Giles. Beside him, he saw Aubrey sag with relief.

Max shrugged again. “To be honest, Giles, it wasn’t much needed,” he said. “Public sympathy had already swayed toward Lady Aubrey over time. In Edinburgh, McLaurin had slowly shown himself for the opportunist he was. And amongst the servants, there seems never to have been any doubt of her innocence.”

Aubrey had regained a little of her color. “Several spoke up on my behalf,” she whispered. “And after the trial, Iain’s nurse arranged to leave the door unlocked one night so that I might snatch him. I have been worried sick. I hope Fergus did not exact revenge.”

Max smiled. “I think Fergus had other fish to fry, ma’am,” he said. “From all accounts, his enemies were legion. He spent most of his time watching his back.”

One could almost see the lessening of the tension in Aubrey’s body as she began to comprehend all that Max was saying. “But what does all this mean?” she asked. “Is it over, then? Just like that?”

“Just like that,” said Max gently. “There are no charges against you, my dear, but rather a vast deal of empathy—and embarrassment on the part of certain officials.”

“But there is still the other—” she began awkwardly. “You think that—I mean, I have seen it in your eyes—the very reason you went to Scotland in the first place...”

Giles looked at her incredulously. "Aubrey, love, what are you talking about?"

Max relaxed in his chair, holding his cup and saucer. "She is speaking of Major Lorimer," he said quietly. "That is the death which concerns us here, is it not?"

"I've decided my concern is for the living," said Giles, shifting uneasily in his chair.

Max motioned him down with one hand. "Relax," he murmured. "I have resolved that business as well."

"In Scotland?" said Giles. "I can't think how."

"There, you see, Giles?" said Max, sipping pensively from his coffee. "You have hit upon the key word. Think. That is what any good policeman must do first. I, alas, have let my skills go rusty. I was so busy trying to catch up on the reading, reviewing, and interviewing that I simply failed to consider the logic of the thing."

"Oh, and now you have?"

But Max did not look at him. He looked instead at Aubrey. "My dear, dear girl," he said very quietly. "Do you not think it is time we resolved this unpleasantness?"

Aubrey leapt from her chair. Her face was deathly white. "I have no notion what you mean."

Max made a sympathetic sound in the back of his throat. "Oh, Lady Aubrey, the best-laid plans!" he murmured. "Those will sometimes come aright, you know. But you did not have even so much as a roughly cobbled plan, did you?"

Giles jerked to his feet. "See here, Max, I won't stand for this!"

But Aubrey had left them and was striding toward the door. "I cannot bear this any longer," she said. "I cannot. I won't." She slammed the door behind her.

Giles turned to him incredulously. "Damn you, Max!" he said. "Hasn't she been through enough? Why can't you leave her alone?"

Max had gone to Elias's desk, where he stood looking out the window. "Oh, she will be back," he said, lifting his coffee cup to his lips. "She will. And I very much wish to see what she brings with her."

## Chapter Eighteen

### In Which Major Lorimer Speaks

Aubrey did indeed return, some minutes later. She reentered the library without knocking. It was obvious she'd been crying. She carried a book; a small Bible bound in black leather and tucked full of envelopes and papers. She looked at Giles sadly, almost apologetically, and went to the desk where Max stood. She withdrew one of the papers from the Bible's pages and handed it to him.

"Let it be as you wish, Lord de Vendenheim," she said, her words edged with resignation. "Let the burden of knowledge rest on your shoulders for a while. Mine have grown weary."

Alarmed by her pallor, Giles went to Aubrey and urged her back toward her chair. She sat and began to drink her tepid coffee with an unsteady hand. Giles watched Max's black eyes flick back and forth over the paper. "Dio mio!" he whispered.

“What is it?” Giles demanded.

Max looked at Aubrey regretfully, then held out the paper. Giles went to the window, took it, and turned it toward the desk lamp. Even in the flickering light, the bold penmanship was unmistakable.

My dear Aubrey,

Forgive me for taking the coward’s way out. I only pray I’ve not spattered the carpet in the doing of it, for I know you’ll only fuss until it’s set to rights. The truth is, I’d rather burn in hell for suicide than be a burden to you, or to Giles, or to anyone else. I’m dying and in pain, and there’s not a damned thing Crenshaw’s brown bottles can do now. Let the church bury me when and how they will. When I’m dead, I won’t give a damn if they call me coward. Perhaps God will have mercy on me. Perhaps he will take me to your father, where I ought to have been long ago. Bless you for all you’ve tried to do. Good luck to you and the boy.

“Oh, dear God!” Giles forced himself to read it again. Then he held the letter at arm’s length and stared across the room at Aubrey. Her eyes were shut, her hands clasped firmly in her lap. He looked at Max, still standing nearby. “I suppose I should have guessed.”

“But Aubrey did not wish for anyone to guess,” said Max quietly.

Aubrey opened her eyes, which were suddenly clear and candid. “I do not believe what he did was wrong,” she said. “I do not. Nor do I think him cowardly.”

Max lifted one brow. “Indeed, it takes great courage to hold a gun to one’s heart.”

Giles couldn’t think clearly. “But why, Aubrey? Why?”

She shot another wary glance at Max. “It was just as he said,” she admitted, her hands beginning to shake again. “I—I had no plan. I burst in and saw the blood. The letter. And I j-just panicked. I knew if I did nothing, shameful things would be said of him. And of the family. I could not bear it.”

Giles returned to Aubrey’s side. He took one of her hands in his. “Oh, my love.”

But Aubrey was still staring at the chair by the desk, her gaze turned to the past. “I knew others might have heard the shot.” Her voice was a whisper. “Perhaps even returned early from the village. So I took the gun and the letter. Without those, I thought, they could prove nothing. At the time, it made sense.”

“But it was such a risk to you, Aubrey!” Giles’s voice was gentle. “What were you thinking?”

“Giles, I wasn’t thinking!” Her voice went up an octave. “I just wasn’t. Had I been, I would have realized an investigation would ensue. That questions would be raised about my past. Not even for Major Lorimer would I have risked Iain’s secret. But in that moment, when I saw him dead, I just knew I could not bear him to be subjected to scorn and pity.”

“And you were clever enough to keep the letter,” murmured Max.

“Oh, I did not fear being hanged for murder this time,” she said confidently. “What I feared was being sent back to Scotland. But I could not just tell the truth and allow him to be treated like a pariah by the church. To allow him to be called a coward. He’d done too much for us—all of us. Why, it could have been my father—or any other brave soldier—sitting dead in that chair, had circumstances been different.”

“You are right, of course,” said Giles softly. And again he thought of those words she’d so eloquently spoken over his uncle’s coffin. “And if they do not die in battle, they sometimes die at home, a little at a

time. We must never forget that. We must always remember what a debt we owe them.”

She had not forgotten. Most of the world had let Major Elias Lorimer and the sacrifices he’d made for king and country slip from their consciousness. But Aubrey, an orphan of war, had not. He wondered if he would have had the guts to do what she had done.

“And now,” he said quietly, “I suppose it must all be undone.”

“No!” Aubrey thrust out one hand. “You mustn’t!”

“Aubrey,” Giles said, his voice chiding. “We cannot leave this suspicion hanging over your head. You tried. My uncle would understand.”

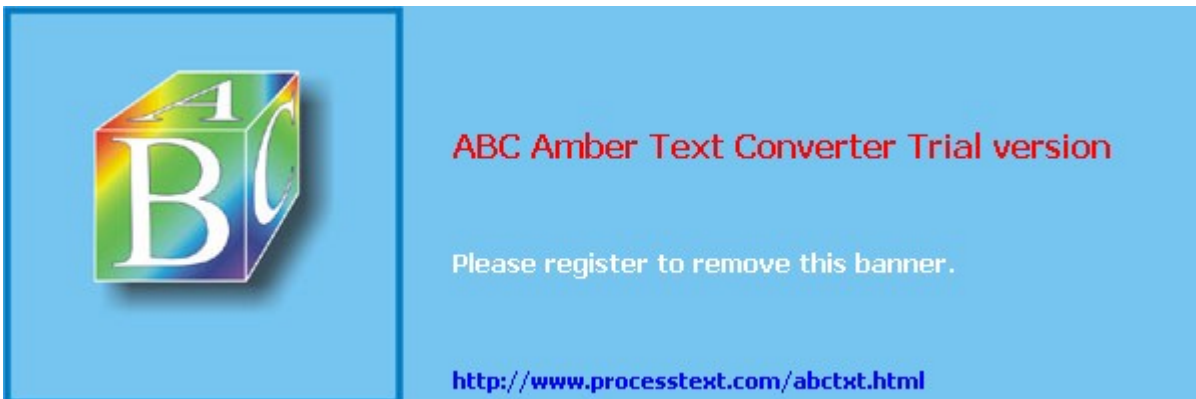
Aubrey was gripping her hands very tightly. “To tell the truth now will look worse!” She looked at Max pleadingly. “Lord de Vendenheim, tell him! Please!”

Max held his hands behind his back, his expression both pensive and grim. “I take it you were clever enough to do away with the gun, Lady Aubrey?”

Aubrey’s face colored faintly. “I...I meant to.”

Max’s head jerked up. “What do you mean, meant to?”

Aubrey’s gaze shot across the room to a distant corner. “I j-just wanted to get rid of it as quickly as possible,”



she whispered. “In case someone came rushing into the room. I thought I would come back later to get it, then toss it into the fishpond—”

“Maledizione!” Max’s voice was sharp. “Did you?”

Aubrey bit her lip and looked down. “I couldn’t,” she said. “I had done a terribly stupid thing.”

“What sort of thing?” he demanded.

Aubrey stood and crossed the room. Deep in the shadows sat a huge vase, a tall oriental urn of unknown origin—a water jar perhaps. It had been perched there on its carved mahogany pedestal in that dark corner of Cardow’s library for as long as Giles could recall. As a very small boy, he had sometimes measured his height against it. By the time he’d been sent away to school, the top of his head barely reached its lip.

Aubrey touched the vase and peered down into it. “I dropped it in here,” she said, almost apologetically. Max and Giles went to her side, Max taking the desk lamp along with him. “I can’t imagine what I was thinking,” she went on, still staring into its depths. “I was looking for a place no one would think to look,

but I was in such a rush.”

Max leaned over it with the lamp. “Good Lord,” he said. “Even if one does look, it is too dark down there to see anything.”

Aubrey clasped her hands before her like a chastised schoolgirl. “It was the only place I could find,” she said. “But then I couldn’t reach in, so I couldn’t get it out. And just as well, for no one found it.”

“Per fortuna!” said Max, his voice suddenly lighter. “The fishpond, now; that would have done us no good at all.”

Aubrey’s brow drew together fretfully. “But you cannot reach it, either, my lord. Even your arm isn’t long enough.”

Max smiled and set down his lamp. “I am going to pick it up,” he said. “But Giles will have to help me. Lady Aubrey, kneel down, if you please, and reach inside when we upend it.”

It was an elegant solution, really. Metal clattered ominously against the fragile china as the men turned it, but nothing broke. Gingerly Aubrey thrust her hand up inside the throat of the jar. “I feel something cold!” she said. Her arm twisted and turned until she’d worked the pistol back through the narrow opening, then she stood and held it out to Max.

“Well done, my dear!” said Giles.

The men set the vase back down without incident, and Max took the gun. He went directly to one of the windows above Major Lorimer’s desk, popped the latch, and pushed it out. Without explanation, he set the barrel of the pistol against the iron window frame, drew it harshly along its length with a great deal of pressure. The motion etched a long, ugly scratch down the barrel. Then, to everyone’s shock, Max hurled the gun through the window and into the gardens beyond.

“What the devil?” said Giles, watching the pistol arc, then disappear into the darkness. It landed with a faint crash in the shrubbery.

Max just stood there, palms flat on the desk, his neck craned out the window. “I have the unmistakable feeling that Mr. Higgins shall shortly make a brilliant discovery in this case,” he said.

Giles exchanged confused glances with Aubrey. “Dare I ask what?”

Max pulled away from the window. “Any fool can see that the gun accidentally discharged whilst the Major was handling it,” he said. “The force of the explosion must have knocked the gun across the desk and through the window, where its barrel was damaged by the iron framing.”

“Higgins won’t swallow that!”

“We shall leave Higgins to Mr. Kemble,” said Max. “A few well-placed questions, a couple of subtle suggestions, and I guarantee Kem will have Higgins on his knees in the shrubbery by luncheon.”

“Will he?” said Giles, smiling. “You seem to have great faith in Higgins’s powers of deduction.”

“I have faith in Kemble,” said Max a little sourly. “Besides, it isn’t such a stretch. Lord Collup died in just such a way whilst cleaning his gun last year. I mentioned it to Higgins the day I arrived. So once he finds the gun, I’ll remark upon the scratch in the barrel. Kem will notice how it matches that little scrape on the window frame. Higgins will draw a conclusion, and we will publicly proclaim him a genius. Next we know, Peel will have him in the Home Office, and I’ll be working for the chap.” He shook his head a little



sadly.

“Then you are a friend indeed,” said Giles, circling his arm about Aubrey. “And now, my love, you must go back downstairs and rest. This is going to be a long day, and we have much to do.”

The silence in the servants’ hall that evening was heavy with the sense of expectation. Cardow’s staff was rarely called together. They now sat rapt and attentive, facing the Earl of Walrafen, who paced back and forth before them as if deliberately allowing the tension to mount. Finally he turned to face them, and sharply cleared his throat.

“I know all of you are wondering why I have called you here tonight,” he began, his voice carrying authoritatively through the hall. “It is simply to put some old misunderstandings to rest, and to tell you of a few changes which will soon take place here at Cardow.”

He turned to look at Max and Mr. Higgins, who stood behind him. Aubrey watched from the back of the room. For the first time in months—years, perhaps—she felt strangely at peace. She did not know precisely what Giles meant to say tonight, but she assumed he meant merely to lay aside the rumors about Major Lorimer.

“This afternoon Mr. Higgins made a brilliant and astonishing discovery,” the earl went on with an air of gravity. “Inasmuch as it concerns my late uncle’s death, it concerns us all. I thought it only proper you hear it from his very lips.”

With a pompous harrumph, the justice of the peace stepped forward. Every servant seemed to scoot onto the edges of their chairs as Higgins began. Only occasionally did he look to de Vendenheim for elucidation. The audience nodded raptly at his explanations of such terms as trajectory and ballistics. And at each twist and turn of his narrative, murmurs of astonishment ran through the room.

“And in conclusion,” Higgins finally said, “I shall be asking the coroner to recall the jury in this case and revise the verdict to that of accidental death. We thank each of you for your cooperation during this tragic and trying investigation.”

The crowd gave a sigh of relief as Higgins sat. Giles returned to his place before the room. “And now I would like to explain just one thing further,” he said. “It concerns my uncle, and some of his mysterious actions in the years preceding his death. It also concerns Mrs. Montford.”

Aubrey barely suppressed a sound of surprise.

Giles was looking across the sea of tables and chairs, looking very directly in her eyes, as if his words were particularly meant for her. “We are all going to be seeing some changes here at Cardow,” he went on. “Very good changes, I hope. And I wish each of you to understand why. And I wish you to know a very important secret, one which Mr. Higgins and I have heretofore not been at liberty to share.”

All eyes were on the earl now. Jenks began to shift in his chair. Pevsner gaped. “Many of you know the story of how Major Lorimer was wounded at Waterloo,” Giles went on. “And that he lived only by the grace of God, and by the bravery of his best friend, Lieutenant Lord Kenross.”

The crowd nodded. They had heard this story before. Giles paced theatrically for a moment. “What you may not know, however, is that Mrs. Montford is the daughter of Lieutenant Lord Kenross.”

The servants gasped. Pevsner looked as if he might choke. Giles smiled across the room at Aubrey. “My uncle gave Mrs. Montford this position merely to protect her, and young Iain, from a grave danger,” he

went on. "In fact, Iain is not Mrs. Montford's son at all, but her nephew. And Montford, as it happens, is not even their real name."

"Ooh, lawks!" blurted Betsy, clapping a hand over her mouth.

The earl looked at her and smiled. "A fascinating story, Betsy, is it not?" he murmured. "Lady Aubrey and her nephew had to be hidden here, under my uncle's protection, until a very complex investigation could be completed by the Home Office."

Lord de Vendenheim and Mr. Higgins nodded solemnly. "Very complex," murmured de Vendenheim. "Very detailed. A most terrible tragedy."

"Yes, a most terrible tragedy, indeed," Giles agreed. "But I am happy to say that the tragedy—the murder of young Iain's father—has been at long last solved." Giles looked as grave and as proper as though he were addressing the Upper House. "The criminals have been brought to justice, and a terrible wrong set to rights, thanks in part to my uncle."

"An' a very brave gen'leman, 'e was, too," murmured one of the grooms in the front row.

Giles looked at him gratefully. "Quite right, Jim," he said. "Now, whilst I am not at liberty to say more—the details will doubtless leak into the newspapers over the coming weeks—I can tell you one more wonderful bit of news: that Iain is now free to return to his home in Scotland, and"—here, Giles paused theatrically—"free to assume his rightful name and position, Iain McLaurin, Earl of Manders."

The servants broke into gasps, looking back and forth at one another, then over their shoulders at Aubrey. "Ooh, mum, is it true?" asked Betsy, coming half out of her chair. "Poor little Iain? A proper lord?"

Aubrey blushed and nodded. "Treat him no differently, I beg you!"

Giles cleared his throat, and all eyes turned from Aubrey. "And of course, it would hardly be proper for the aunt of an earl to continue to serve us here as housekeeper," he went on.

Betsy's shoulders fell and Mrs. Jenks frowned.

"However," he continued, "I have asked her to stay on in quite another capacity. I have asked her to stay as my wife and countess. As mistress of Cardow."

The servants broke out into whispers. Pevsner looked as if he might faint right off his chair. In the front row Jim laughed. "What do yer mean, my lord, yer arst?" he teased. "Won't she make you no answer?"

Giles looked chagrined. "Not as yet, Jim," he said. "I have been asking her for some weeks now. Indeed, I begin to despair."

In the back of the room Betsy hooted with laughter. "I'll set to work on her, your lordship," she said warningly. "You just leave your troubles in old Betsy's hands."

"A fine notion," said the earl, lifting his hands as if they all should rise. "And now I believe we have some sherry and one of Mrs. Jenks's fine berry trifles, for those who can be persuaded."

"I can be persuaded," said Jim the groom.

The earl smiled across the room. "Excellent!" he said. "Then may I ask you all to join me in toasting—well, if not my betrothal, then at the very least, my fondest hopes?"

## Epilogue

### In Which a Peacock Comes Home to Roost

The evening of Lord Walrafen's annual charity ball seemed interminable to his hostess. Aubrey wished only to be alone with her husband. Instead, she stood by the grand entrance to his home in Mayfair, kissing cheeks and shaking hands as the last of the guests made their way down the steps.

In Hill Street a watchman was calling three o'clock, strolling slowly past the droopy-headed horses which lined the pavement all the way to Berkeley Square. An invitation to Lord Walrafen's ball had long been one of the most coveted of the season, and this year was made more so by gossip and speculation. This, over a man who was not normally gossiped about.

But the tittle-tattle had done his career no harm. Aubrey acknowledged it as she shook Mr. Peel's hand and sent him on his way down the steps. Indeed, the heroic exploits of Giles's uncle grew more bold each time the tale was told, and some of the glory had spilt onto Giles. Before they finished crafting their account of how Major Lorimer had so heroically shielded Aubrey and Iain from a murderous scoundrel, Giles's friends had burnished his reputation into a near pattern of rectitude.

In the village of Walrafen the good citizens had commissioned a marble war memorial in Lorimer's honor, right on the village green. In Edinburgh the Lord Justice-General of Scotland had come to Aubrey's wedding, and in a most deferential mood, too. Giles, of course, had invited everyone of influence in Edinburgh. None had dared refuse. Suddenly someone cleared her throat, drawing Aubrey back into the present. She donned her brightest smile and turned.

"Good night, my dear," said the short, matronly woman who approached. She kissed Aubrey firmly on both cheeks, her turban feathers cheerfully bobbing. "Thank you for having me."

"It was a great pleasure, Lady Kirton."

And indeed, it had been more than a pleasure. Lady Kirton was a particular friend of her husband's—and Lord de Vendenheim's aunt, or some such near relation. The kind lady had taken Aubrey under her wing as soon as they'd arrived in London. Together, she and Cecilia had dragged Aubrey up and down Bond Street and into at least half the houses in Mayfair.

"You've thrown such a lovely ball, my dear," Lady Kirton continued in a loud, almost theatrical voice. "So far superior to Giles's solo efforts! Thank God he's finally got himself a wife—but I am still put out about the wedding, you know. The social event of the year! And I missed it!"

Aubrey motioned a footman to fetch Lady Kirton's wrap. "I regret you could not be with us," she answered. "I'm afraid my husband insisted we marry in Edinburgh."

Lady Kirton seized her by the elbow with surprising strength and drew her a little away from the crowd. "And quite right, he was, dear child!" she whispered, her voice suddenly grave. "You must always trust your husband's political instincts."

"Political instincts?"

"Oh, indeed!" whispered her ladyship. "London runs on little else. And I'm glad to see you've begun as you mean to go on. You've returned to Edinburgh in triumph, my dear, and now you're setting London on its ear. You are going to be nothing but an asset to Giles. I sense it already."

"You are very kind," said Aubrey.

Lady Kirton turned to allow a footman to settle a cashmere shawl across her shoulders. “Now, remember I’m giving a soiree in your honor next week,” she continued, her loud voice returning. “And there



’s Cecilia’s brother’s ball on Friday next. Then a garden party at Mrs. Castelli’s. My dear, you’ll soon be all the rage! Cecilia and I shall see to it.”

Suddenly Giles was at her side, circling one arm about Aubrey’s waist. “She is already all the rage in certain circles,” he said, lifting Lady Kirton’s fingers to his lips with his other hand. “Mine, for example. Now, off with you, Isabel. A newly married man has better things to do than linger over his guests.”

Lady Kirton rapped him harshly across the knuckles with her lorgnette. “Cheeky rascal!” she said and went at once down the stairs. Another twenty-odd guests trailed out after her, slowly emptying the adjacent ballroom. Just then a cool hand settled on Aubrey’s elbow, and she turned to see Lord Delacourt.

“Well done, old girl!” he said. “You’ve quite livened up this deadly dull season. And may I say how lovely you look in that ball gown? Peacock blue, would you call it?”

“This from a man who knows all about peacocks,” muttered Giles.

Aubrey laughed. “You may call it what you wish, my lord.”

“Peacock blue it is, then.” Delacourt leaned closer with a conspiratorial wink. “Now, since you’ve no further need of it, might I salvage that old gray serge for Uncle Nigel?”

“No further need?” exclaimed Aubrey.

“Surrender it gracefully, David,” advised Giles. “Remember, she’s a Scot. She’ll keep scrubbing floors in that gown until the knees wear through.”

Delacourt placed his fingertips on his chest in mock horror. “Surely you jest? Her ladyship scrubbing floors?”

Aubrey frowned at both men. “I hardly mean to scrub them myself,” she chided. “I never did before, unless the staff was—”

“It’s like this, David,” interjected Giles. “I’ve caught her at least six times this week looking under beds for dust balls and running her fingers across the furniture.”

Aubrey looked affronted. “Why, particular women—even wealthy ones—often keep their own house!” she said. “What is the harm in it? I must have something useful to do. And I want to, especially at Cardow.”

Delacourt lifted one elegant shoulder. "Well, you're stuck in Hill Street until Parliament ends," he said. "So perhaps I have a job for you? Congratulate us, my friends. Cecilia is again enceinte and needs someone to take her place at the Nazareth Society for a few months."

"Me?" asked Aubrey, flattered. "I've no experience with charities."

"Nonsense, old girl," said Delacourt. "You're a born administrator. Besides, Lady Kirton can hardly go it alone. And a few weeks in that hellish place will make you look like a paragon to all of London. I should know."

"Should you?"

He smiled faintly. "It almost redeemed my reputation," he said. "Ah, look! There is my beloved coming through the ballroom now."

A quarter-hour later Aubrey was toeing off her dancing slippers and kicked them in the general direction of her dressing room. Giles stripped off his coat and waistcoat, and stood before her in his shirtsleeves, a very fine sight indeed.

"Oh, my feet!" she said, rolling down her stockings and tossing them aside. "How glad I am that our ball is finally over. I hope, my love, I did you proud."

"You need do nothing, Aubrey, to make me proud." Giles lifted his dark brows and looked down at her. "I am always proud of you. Now, do you know what I am glad of?"

Aubrey stepped near and began to untie his cravat. "You are glad that I am hopelessly enchanted by your masculine beauty?" she suggested.

"Ah, well, there's always that," he said on a laugh. "But actually, I was thinking of Cardow, and of how beautiful you looked when I first saw you there. How very much you seem to be a part of the old place. I understand, you know, how much you love it, and I mean for us to return as soon as possible."

Aubrey let the cravat slither onto the floor. "Do you promise?"

"On my honor." Giles smiled and kissed the tip of her nose. "I want to go back, Aubrey. I want Iain to grow up there. And I'm actually a little homesick. Do you know how wonderful that feels to me? And I was thinking, too, how glad I am that we are happily married, and that there is no question now that the curse of Castle Cardow has been broken."

Aubrey circled her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek to the crisp linen of his shirt. "What, that silly old legend that no bride can ever be happy at Cardow?"

Giles was kissing his way down her throat now, a process she found terribly distracting. "Yes, that one," he murmured against her skin.

"I should say it is not just broken," she managed, "but shattered entirely to splinters. I love both you and Cardow. I am a very happy bride, Giles, and happier there than anywhere. Indeed, I long for it."

"As I long for you," he returned, his words faintly feverish. "And wherever you are, Aubrey, that will be my home."

A frisson of desire ran through her, deep and swift. "Will it?"

"Oh, yes," he said softly, pulling a little away from her. "And Delacourt was right, damn his eyes."

Peacock blue is very definitely your color.”

“Is it?” Aubrey fluttered her lashes. “Yesterday you said it was emerald green.”

“I’m a politician,” he said, his eyes beginning to simmer with desire. “Just yesterday Lord Grey accused me of always saying whatever it took to get whatever I wanted.”

“Did he?” she murmured. “How vile.”

“Ah, well, Whigs!” Giles shrugged. “By the way, my love, have I ever told you how very much I admire your pearls?”

Aubrey touched her choker uncertainly. “These?”

His gaze hooded, Giles nodded. “I remember the first time I saw them,” he whispered, one hand going to the buttons of the back of her blue silk ball gown. “And I remember thinking, even amidst all the anguish of the moment, how very beautiful those pearls would look against your bare skin.”

“And do they?”

“Very beautiful indeed,” he said, then paused for just a heartbeat. “As best I can see.”

Aubrey looked at him in some confusion. “Do you need more candles?”

Aubrey felt him slip loose another button. “No, my love,” he whispered, his mouth hovering over hers now. “Just... a little more skin.”



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