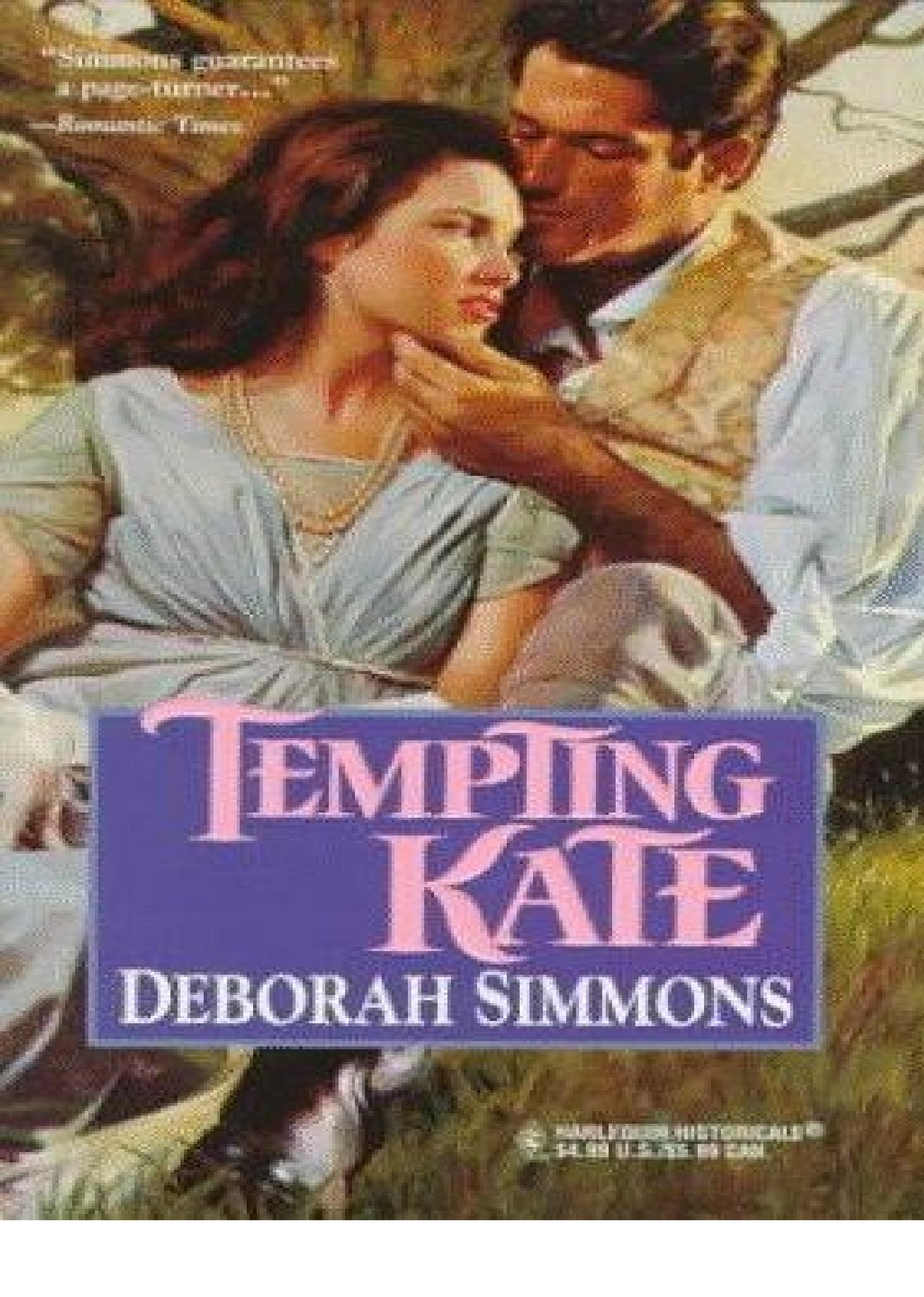


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Tempting Kate

Deborah Simmons

Regency Quartet, Book 3

A Meeting at gunpoint - a fitting start for such a *dangerous* attraction, thought Grayson Westcott, the Marquis of Wroth. And though he'd always prided himself on his infamous self-control, Kate Courtland's hoydenish charms had shattered his defenses and set fire to his soul!

Kate Courtland's life of privilege amongst polite society was a distant memory, and the hardships of her daily struggle had become all too real. Until the night she wounded the Marquis of Wroth, and unleashed a smoldering passion that would change their lives forever!

Tempting Kate

Deborah Simmons

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Chapter One

The marquis of Wroth was restless.

Waving away his driver, he decided to walk the few blocks to his London town house. It was nearly midnight, but the fashionable neighborhood still rang with the sound of coaches ferrying their glittering passengers from one ball to another, and Grayson Ashford Ryland Wescott, the fourth marquis, welcomed the chance to stretch his legs after a tedious hour spent among society's elite.

Unfortunately, the exercise did little to curb the odd sensation that had been plaguing him for months now, escalating today, on the occasion of his thirty-second birthday. He saw no reason for the unfamiliar ennui. In the years since he came into his title, at the tender age of fifteen, he had achieved everything he set out to do, attaining a position of wealth, power and prestige that was the envy of his peers. What more could a man want?

At first, he had put the vague discontent down to a lack of challenges in his life. He had gone as far as he wanted to politically, exerting enormous influence behind the scenes rather than in the House itself. Although his various businesses were thriving, he could easily hand over their management to one of his many capable employees. The pursuits of hunting, boxing and racing his curricle had palled as he grew older, and even gambling seemed little risk these days.

When the unnamed malaise persisted, Grayson had given some serious thought to settling down and establishing his nursery. It was high time he got an heir, and he found the notion of retiring to the country strangely appealing, if he could find a suitable wife.

His friends would have laughed at that, for his wealth and title had assured him a steady stream of women since adolescence, and despite his rather unsavory reputation as a breaker of hearts, mamas still threw their daughters at him. He did little enough to encourage them. His liaisons were more often with married women, attracted to his looks or his position, or members of the demimonde, who had no care for their reputations. Whatever their backgrounds, the ladies never held his interest for long, and he had never considered marrying...until recently.

Her name was Charlotte, and she had burst upon the London season like a breath of fresh air. Beautiful, innocent, intelligent and engaging, she was a vicar's daughter, and Grayson had found himself drawn to her unique brand of honesty. It had soon become plain, however, that Charlotte was enamored of her sponsor of sorts, the stuffy earl of Wycliffe.

Once he discovered where her affections lay, Grayson had played his own small part in ensuring her happiness, and she had married the earl. What a waste, Grayson thought, and yet there was no denying that the two shared something special. Grayson stretched his legs, struck by an odd pang, before continuing on. Damn, but he was not jealous of that clock-minding Wycliffe! It was what the two had between them that he coveted.

Not that he believed in love or any of that nonsense, but the earl and his countess obviously shared a friendship based on common interests, companionship and simple affection that was rare among ton marriages. Wroth slowed his stride. That was what he wanted, but where to find it?

It seemed that all the women in London either were greedy and jaded or hadn't a thought in their heads, while most of the country gentry he viewed as slow-witted, and homely, besides. His own

vicar's daughter was as plain as a rock, and just as exciting. A woman like Charlotte did not appear to exist, and Grayson wondered if he had somehow missed his opportunity and now was doomed to either go childless or settle for one of the grasping females of his acquaintance.

He was not accustomed to settling for anything.

Grayson's pensive mood clung as he approached his darkened town house. He had given the staff an evening off after the impromptu birthday celebration they contrived this afternoon, but he had no qualms about putting himself to bed without the services of the butler, valet and footmen who normally swarmed the halls. In fact, he rather enjoyed the solitude that met him.

It was not the first time he had walked through the shadowed rooms alone, and he certainly felt no threat as he drew off his gloves and tossed them on an elegant satinwood table. His reputation as a ruthless opponent extended from political circles right down to the streets, and was such that even the pickpockets usually left him alone.

Still, he had not earned his hard-won renown by relaxing his guard, and when he stepped into his study, his senses were roused to alertness. A subtle presence tickled the back of his neck and made him move casually toward the desk drawer that held his pistol.

"Hold there, gent!" a voice barked, confirming his suspicions, and a figure stepped out of the shadow of the thick draperies. Grayson would have laughed at the sight of the begrimed urchin, except that there was nothing funny about the weapon trained upon him. The young man was either very brave or very stupid, to dare the marquis of Wroth's own home.

Grayson found himself intrigued. Lifting one brow disdainfully, he eyed the ill-kept youth. "Do you think to hold me up?" he asked, incredulous.

His words seem to disconcert the boy, whose poorly fitting clothes and matted hair looked as if they could use a good wash. "I ain't no criminal. It's you who must answer for your foul deeds!"

Foul deeds? Grayson momentarily ignored the pistol, held in a surprisingly small but steady hand, and inclined his head in interest "And to what, exactly, do you refer, young man? My opposition to the bill that—"

"I ain't talking about your politics. I'm talking about your morals, or lack thereof!"

Lack thereof? The youngster's speech held enough surprises to make Grayson study him closer. Despite his bedraggled appearance, the boy held himself straight, his feet spread in a ready stance for shooting. Yet there was something distinctly odd about him that Grayson couldn't quite put a finger on.

"No one threatens me, pup," he said. Although he did not raise his voice or change its tone, he conveyed a silky menace that had been known to make grown men shudder.

The urchin didn't even blink.

"I'm here to avenge my sister, whom you seduced and got with child," the young man said. Grayson could not mistake the accent this time, or the cool delivery. This was no ordinary guttersnipe. Who the devil was he? And what was this business about a sister?

"I can assure you, pup, that I do not consort with females of your family's ilk," Grayson answered smoothly.

"Don't take that high-stepping tone with me! You liked her well enough when you ruined her. Now it's time to pay the piper."

"And that is you, I assume?" Grayson said, inclining his head in a contemptuous fashion that made the boy flush. Strange little fellow. Grayson couldn't help admiring his heroics, however misplaced, but he had no desire to take a bullet for the sake of them. "Look here, I have no idea what you have heard about me, but I do not prey upon virgins of any stamp. Perhaps your sister is simply trying to protect herself—"

"My sister is not a liar!" the boy said, stepping forward angrily. It was the move Grayson had been waiting for, and he lunged, taking the boy to the floor with the speed that had made him an excellent boxer. He wrested the gun away, but the youth fought like a hellion, knocking it from his hand, and it skidded away. Nor could Grayson easily retrieve it. He had his hands full trying to subdue the body beneath him, which was kicking and flailing like a wild thing.

It was only when his groin came up against that of his opponent that Grayson began to suspect the truth. Startled, he looked down at the face below him. It was contorted in fear and rage and marked with dirt, but beneath the grime was a clear complexion, gently curved cheeks, thick, dark lashes and eyes the color of amethysts. What the devil? Thrusting a hand beneath the youth's baggy coat, Grayson found his answer when his fingers closed over a small but perfectly formed breast. A female!

The stunning discovery distracted him just as the girl, obviously taking exception to his groping, settled her teeth into his arm. She bit down hard enough that he released her with a curse, and then Grayson was not quite sure what happened. He saw her reach for the pistol, but before she could even lift the weapon, it discharged.

Grayson felt the sharp, searing heat of metal ripping through his flesh, but he managed to surge shakily to a standing position and lurch toward the desk that held his own pistol. Having no intention of dying at the hands of this dangerous female, he knew he must not give her a chance to reload.

He needn't have made the effort, for she leapt up and dropped the weapon as if it were suddenly distasteful. Facing him with an expression of horror on her delicate features, she cried, "Gad! You've been shot!"

It seemed that the pup had quite a grasp of the obvious. "Yes," Grayson agreed, before crumpling to the floor at her feet.

Kate Courtland stared numbly at the prone body of the marquis. She had come here to scare him, maybe even to get some badly needed funds to support the child that her sister was carrying, but, angry as she was with the man, she had never intended to harm him.

Her first inclination was to flee from the terrible scene, but how could she leave him here like this, his tall, graceful form prostrate, his dark vitality quenched? Kneeling down beside him, Kate saw the telltale red stain upon his coat and bit down on her knuckles to stifle a gasp. What if he bled to death? The house was silent as a tomb, and she had no idea when the servants would return.

His tanned skin had gone pale, and Kate leaned over him, noting the lock of dark hair that had fallen

over his forehead. His eyes were closed now, but she had seen them. Clear and gray they were, and fringed with dark lashes under elegant brows. His was a man's face, with sharp planes and a strong jaw, but he was also beautiful, like an archangel fallen to earth.

Gad! Kate leaned back on her heels and swore more forcefully under her breath. The man was injured and she was admiring his looks! Yes, he was handsome and polished, yet every inch a male, with an underlying strength that spoke of steely determination, but these very attributes were presumably what had plunged Lucy into disgrace. Kate shook her head. She had never thought to agree with her younger sister, but, apparently, they concurred on one thing. The marquis of Wroth was as appealing as he was dangerous.

He presented no threat now, Kate thought, although the realization gave her no satisfaction. Whatever his sins, she could not leave the man to die. Bending over, she tried to lift his shoulders, but he was heavy. All muscle, she remembered with a blush, for she had felt the press of his body weighing her down during their struggle.

Pushing such thoughts aside, Kate continued her efforts. She had just managed to get him into a sitting position when she heard a low sound at the window. Whistling softly in answer, she soon saw the grizzled head of her coachman poking over the sill.

"I thought I heard a shot," Tom said, and then his dark eyes grew wide. "Cor, Katie, what have you done now?"

"I put a bullet in him."

Letting loose a stream of foul curses, Tom climbed through the opening. "Damn it, girl, now you've done it! The likes of him ain't worth a murder charge, or do you fancy a rope around your lovely little neck?"

Tom's words froze Kate in the act of trying to get the marquis to his feet. She had never considered the repercussions should her carefully laid plans go awry, but they had, and the consequences were more serious than she could ever have imagined. She cringed to think what would happen to them all if she was caught here, dressed as she was, with the wounded marquis.

It was an accident. Kate knew she had never even touched the trigger, but who would believe her? She had snuck into the marquis's home and threatened him. From the way Tom was glaring at her, it seemed even he had judged her guilty.

"Damn it, girl, I should never have agreed to this fool errand," the coachman muttered. "Breaking in was bad enough, but did you have to kill him, too?"

Kate stilled the panic that threatened to cloud her thinking and shot a stern look at Tom. "He's not dead, yet Now, help me get him to his feet."

"What for? Are you going to bury him in the garden?"

Kate ignored her coachman's sarcasm. "No. We're taking him with us."

"*What?*" Tom's gravelly voice rang out loudly, and the marquis stirred in her arms.

"You heard me," Kate said, pushing her small frame under one of Wroth's wide shoulders. "Now help

me, Tom, before we're both arrested."

"And you think that kidnapping the gent's going to help?"

"Lower your voice! I'm not going to kidnap him, just make sure that he doesn't pop off. Now hurry!" Kate urged, firmly eyeing the man who had become much more than a servant in the past few years. Their gazes locked and held until Tom's skidded away in resignation. Blowing out a disgruntled sigh, he heaved the marquis up and moved across the room.

"He ain't no lightweight, this one," he muttered as Kate slipped away to retrieve the errant pistol. She could see no blood upon the carpet, thankfully, and went swiftly to the window to help Tom lift Wroth through the opening.

"He's got the looks of the devil himself, and muscles, besides," Tom said, gasping for breath as he dragged the body out into the night. "You're borrowing trouble with this one, Katie. Make no mistake about it!"

"You just get him to the coach," she answered sharply. "I can handle the marquis."

Kate's confidence flagged when Tom draped Wroth over the cushioned seat and climbed out onto the box, leaving her alone with the injured man. He was still unconscious, and the front of his coat was soaked with blood, making Kate wonder whether he would survive the trip to Hargate. She leaned across the space between them to get a good look at his wound in the dim light of the interior lantern.

Probing the spot as gently as she could, Kate was relieved to find no sign of the bullet. He was lucky, for it appeared to have gone straight through his shoulder, but she still needed to stop the bleeding with something. She was shrugging out of her coat when a jolt sent Wroth sliding precariously near the cushioned edge.

Muttering one of Tom's favorite oaths, Kate swiftly slid into the opposite seat and laid the marquis's head on her lap. His dark lashes lifted, and he groaned before closing them again. "Hang on, Wroth," she said softly. Her lips trembled over his name, and she pursed them tightly together, angry at her own reaction. Turning her grimy coat inside out, Kate pressed the clean lining to the wound while she tried to recapture the outrage that had driven her to his town house.

"Conniving bastard! If you had kept your breeches on, you wouldn't be in this predicament," she whispered, but her soft tone robbed the accusation of some of its sharpness, and the shadowy confine of the coach seemed to close in on the two of them. Wroth stirred, turning his face toward her, and the movement heightened Kate's awareness of him, resting upon her thighs, his head cradled so intimately.

Her knowledge of males was limited to Tom and memories of her father, a rather distant but kindly figure. Vaguely she recollected the presence of stable boys and footmen, but they were nameless and faceless, long gone now. She had never been this close to a man in her life.

It was disturbing. Her breath grew ragged, and her fingers faltered as they held the cloth tightly to his shoulder. Under her palm, Kate could feel the muscles that spread from his broad chest, and she knew that this was no idle-rich dandy, but a strong, virile man. She shifted, dismayed, yet she could not escape the weight of him—or the feel of him.

Her cheeks flaming, Kate tried to concentrate on his sins, but, in all honesty, the marquis of Wroth had surprised her. She had never expected her sister's lover to be so mature, so confident. So... dangerous. He had caught her off guard with his dark good looks and the disdainful lift of his brow. Unfazed by her threats, he had stared, cool as you please, at the pistol she pointed at his heart. Apparently he had just been waiting for his opportunity to strike.

Her color rose higher as Kate remembered the ease with which he had knocked her down and the way his body had covered hers. Hot and heavy and... something indescribable. Then his face had hovered over hers, shadowy with intent, and his hand had... Gad! Kate flinched, startled by the vivid recollection of his fingers closing upon her breast. A strangled noise escaped from her throat.

Bloody hell, it was easy enough to see how Lucy had been seduced! Indeed, Kate felt as if she owed her sister an apology. Although she had never blamed Lucy aloud, she had silently accused her many times. All those uncharitable thoughts about her sister's lack of common sense and weakness of will returned to mock her.

For if this man, with his cool, confident air and his warm, competent hands, had been Lucy's temptation, then Kate could well understand her sister's submission. Indeed, she found herself wondering just what it would be like to succumb to the shadowy promise in his clear gray eyes, to fall from grace with this dark angel.

Sometime during the trip home, Kate checked Wroth's wound again. She had managed to stop the bleeding, and judging from the sound of his even breathing, she could abandon her immediate worry that he might die in the coach. However, his improved condition brought a new concern. Increasingly, Kate feared that he would wake up.

Several times she had seen his eyes flutter open, and once she could have sworn that he studied her with detached interest. Her nervous fingers had faltered then, pressing too hard against his ragged flesh, and he had gone off again with a groan.

Kate had felt guilty, but relieved. After all, what would she say if he was suddenly alive, awake and coherent? *Sorry I shot you, my lord, but now I plan to undo my mistake as best I can, if you'll just come along quietly?*

Somehow, as she studied his handsome face in the dimness of the coach, Kate could not imagine this man coming along quietly. Ever. For the first time since entering the town house, she began to wonder if Tom was right. Perhaps she was borrowing trouble by taking on someone who looked to be as dangerous as the marquis. But what else could she do?

Kate was never more eager to see the soft light in her own window, welcoming her home, as she was this night. Her relief at reaching her destination lasted until Tom pulled open the door of the coach, took one look at the marquis cradled in her lap and swore in disgust. "Mind that you don't find yourself in the same fix as your sister, Katie, girl," he muttered.

Kate gave him a cold glance that conveyed just what she thought of his warning. "I've stopped the bleeding, but I'll need to clean and dress the wound thoroughly, if he's not to pop off from a fever. You can put him in Papa's old room."

With a grunt of disapproval, Tom grabbed the marquis and heaved him half onto his back. "Careful, now!" Kate couldn't help admonishing Tom, although the glare she received from him made her want

to call back die words.

Ignoring the coachman's attitude, Kate jumped down and hurried toward the door. If they could get the marquis to bed without Lucy hearing, she could tend to his injury, find her own rest and deal with her sister in the morning.

Unfortunately, her streak of bad luck was holding firm, for as soon as she opened the door, she heard Lucy's voice from the landing. "Katie, is that you?" her sister called, in a wavering whisper that made Kate feel guilty for having left her alone.

"Yes, it's me. Go on back to bed, dear."

"What are you doing at this hour? Is that Tom with you? What on earth has he got?" Groaning, Kate looked up to see Lucy descending the stairs with a candle while Tom started up, the marquis at his side.

"Go back to bed, Lucy," Kate ordered, knowing she was wasting her breath. Lucy had as strong a will as the rest of the Courtlands, when she chose to exercise it

"What have you got there, Tom? My God, is that a man? What happened? Who is he?"

Tom, who was faltering under the strain of the marquis' weight, heaved himself up the last few steps and said, "It's your fellow, Miss Lucy."

"Mine—? Katie, what have you done?" Lucy rounded upon her sister just as Kate reached the top of the stairs.

"There was an accident. I didn't shoot him on purpose, I can tell you that much," Kate said, brushing past her outraged sister to open the bedroom door for Tom. She followed the grunting coachman into the room and watched him dump the marquis upon the bed with a groan, just as a bloodcurdling shriek erupted behind them.

Lucy stood in the doorway, clutching the frame as if to hold herself upright. "You shot him! Katie, how could you?"

"Never mind that. Tom, help me get his coat off of him," Kate instructed, bending over to remove the blood-soaked material.

"Don't you dare touch him!" Lucy wailed. Before Kate could respond, Lucy rushed to the side of the bed and pushed her away. "Wroth! What have they done to you?" she cried dramatically as she threw herself at the prone body of the marquis.

Kate watched dispassionately as Lucy, ever mindful of her limited wardrobe, stopped short of the wedding coat. Her lashes fluttered as if she might swoon for a moment, but then they flew open and she stared at the marquis with a horrified expression on her lovely face. Jerking back from the bed, Lucy settled her hands on her hips, arms akimbo.

"That is not Wroth," she announced, lifting a finger to point it accusingly at the man in the bed.

"It most certainly is," Kate said.

"I ought to know better than you, and that is not him!" Lucy protested. "Why, Wroth is young and

handsome, not old and cruel-looking."

The strain of the evening's events made Kate raise her voice in exasperation. "This man is certainly not old! Nor is he cruel-looking." She paused to eye the marquis. He was definitely not soft, but it was power and determination that hardened his features—not a mean streak, she would swear upon it. And handsome? Kate had never seen a man more beautiful in her life.

"I don't care what you say, he is not Wroth!"

"Who is he, then?" Kate asked.

"I don't know, nor do I care!"

"Girls! Girls!" Tom's admonitions rose above the squabbling, drawing Kate's attention. She swiveled toward him, just as Lucy did, with the same question on her lips.

"What?" Lucy fairly shrieked.

The coachman heaved a great sigh. "You had better quit arguing and do something, before the fellow bleeds to death all over the best bed linens."

Chapter Two

Grayson drifted in and out of the nightmare. Just when his head began to clear, he would feel a jolt, followed by a sharp rush of pain that sent him back into oblivion. He was not willing to surrender, but each time he thought to struggle, he heard a deep, soothing woman's voice, lulling him into the darkness once more.

She stroked his forehead. It was not a sexual touch, but rather a gentle, maternal motion. His mother? No, she had been dead for years. And this woman was whispering something about temptation. Had he fallen asleep in a brothel? That was not his style. He had been either drugged or attacked by some ruffians, who had obviously left him the worse for the encounter. And the woman?

With great effort, Grayson managed to lift his lashes. At first he couldn't focus, but then he saw a shadowy face take shape, and in it, eyes the color of amethyst. Her eyes. Who was she? He opened his mouth to speak, but then his whole body lurched and rough hands grabbed at him, lifting him and... nothing.

She was touching him again. Grayson felt the intriguing brush of fingertips across his shoulder, gentle but capable. She was wrapping something around him. Had he been injured? He could not remember.

"I refuse to stand here while you...handle a strange man's chest!" A different woman's voice, high and grating, sounded, followed by footsteps.

A snort, but a female one. *His* female. "Seems to me that's what got us in this mess, Lucy," she muttered. "You and some stranger's chest"

"Cor, Katie, it weren't the chest what caused the problem!" A man. A rough baritone. Chuckling coarsely. How many people were here? Grayson tried to clear his head, but the woman rested a hand on his forehead, distracting him with her smooth palm. He remembered it. Soft and soothing.

"Better dose him up with laudanum," the man said, and Grayson fought to rouse himself.

"He isn't conscious," his female protested. *Good girl*, Grayson thought, relaxing once more.

"He'll be awake soon enough," the man muttered. "And then I promise you that there'll be hell to pay"

How right you are, Grayson thought grimly.

When his mind finally cleared, Grayson had the good sense to keep it to himself. He had enemies, and though he had thought himself untouchable, there was always a chance that one of them had gotten reckless. Unfortunately, the dull ache in his head and his shoulder assured him quickly enough that he had been hurt, and badly.

It all came back to him then. The begrimed urchin who was not a boy. The gunshot. And then what? All he had was a hazy memory of the young pup and flashes of conversation. Had he passed out? Damn, it was hard to believe that he could go a round with Gentleman Jackson himself, yet a bullet had rendered him helpless as a babe.

He was not accustomed to feeling helpless.

And no longer would he, Grayson decided. It was time to wrest control of the situation from whoever

was behind it. And he was fairly certain that someone had to be paying the pistol-wielding pup who had attacked him, for he had ruined no one's sister. With the possible exception of Charlotte——Trowbridge, innocent virgins held no allure for him, and he certainly had never gotten one with child. His father had lectured him early on about a man's responsibilities, and he had sired no bastards.

Keeping his breathing low and even, Grayson listened for any sound that would indicate he had company. Vaguely he remembered the presence of a man and a woman, along with the girl with the gentle touch and pleasing voice.

Nothing. Grayson heard only the call of birds outside his window. Deliberately he fluttered his lashes while snatching a quick look at his surroundings. He was alone. Opening his eyes, Grayson first inspected his shoulder, where he found a clean dressing covering the wound. Moving his arm experimentally, he sucked in a breath. Although it hurt like hell, he was grateful that the bullet had not struck him any lower.

Glancing downward, he realized that he was naked from the waist up, and the discovery brought back memories of the girl's light caresses. Fool, he told himself immediately. The chit was probably some street thief who would do anything for money, including shooting an unarmed man.

But he was in no grimy prison. With increasing amazement, Grayson studied the room. Spacious and open, it glowed with the morning sun that shone through the open draperies. The walls were white panels with touches of gilt, and the ceiling was elaborately carved. Although few, the pieces of furniture, including the large bed in which he lay, were fine examples of Louis XIV.

With some effort, Grayson managed to ease himself to his feet. He swayed and righted himself with a swift grab at the bedpost. Blood loss, he thought, willing away the trace of dizziness. Slowly he put one foot in front of the other until he reached the window. Keeping to the wall, he peeked out through the draperies and drew in a long, slow breath at the sight that met him. Instead of the sooty skies of London, he was met with green lawns and the unmistakable outbuildings of a country home.

Where the devil was he?

Neatly arranging the toast and jam and tea upon the tray, along with the last of the ham, Katie headed toward the stairs. It was a peace offering for their guest, as she had come to think of him. She had no idea who he really was, but she was responsible for shooting him in Wroth's study and dragging him here, and now she was going to make her apologies.

Although Kate sincerely hoped he was the understanding sort, from the looks of him, she doubted it. Perhaps a nice breakfast would make him more amenable to explanations. Drawing a deep breath, she started up the steps, cursing the skirts that got in her way. Out of deference to their visitor, she had forgone her usual breeches for one of her old gowns, but even at a size too small, it was cumbersome. Snatching at the material with one hand, she balanced her burden in the other as she hurried toward Hargate's largest bedroom.

Pushing open the door with her hip, Kate peeked in, relieved to see that the man was still abed. Although she was sorry for his injury, she suspected that the mysterious stranger would be much easier to handle prone than upright. Well she remembered his cool confidence in the study, and it made her wary.

Apparently not wary enough, for she crossed the threshold only to be halted abruptly by a hand that

clamped down hard over mouth and an arm that snaked around her from behind. As she watched in dismay, the tray toppled to the floor, spilling its contents on the Aubusson carpet. A sound of horror was caught in her throat when she saw the last of the ham topple from its plate. Angry now, Kate tried to get a leg around to fell her attacker, but her fiendish skirts kept her imprisoned, and then she was pulled back against a body that she knew in an instant was that of their guest.

"Wroth!" she cried against his fingers, but it came out as nothing more than a muffled gasp. No matter, for this man was not the marquis, anyway. Perhaps he was a criminal who had been intent upon burglarizing Wroth's town house, Kate thought wildly, before her good sense denied it. She tried to think clearly, but he leaned over her, his breath tickling her ear, and her immediate fears for her person receded in the face of a new threat. She flushed, suddenly aware of the length of him, pressed to her, touching...

"Are you alone?" he asked, in a voice that evinced no strain whatsoever. Apparently a bullet wound did little to ruffle this man's composure! Kate nodded quickly in answer, then eyed him in amazement as he pivoted swiftly and silently closed the door behind them.

Her relief at no longer being held to his muscular form was short-lived, for he turned her toward him and Kate found herself confronting his bare chest, only inches from her face. She had viewed it last night, of course, but in the light of day, it took on a new vitality, its muscles rippling beneath its dusting of dark hair. Remembering the feel of that expanse, Kate sucked in a sharp breath. She tried to focus her attention elsewhere, but it was caught by the sight of his exposed nipple, brown and hard, and she felt blood surge to her cheeks.

"Who's behind this?" he asked roughly, and Kate jerked her gaze back to his face. Confident and intent, he seemed oblivious of his state of undress—and her inappropriate reaction. She swallowed hard, seeking her usual calm demeanor, but she kept being distracted by his closeness. His height. His heat. Despite her efforts to deny it, warmth stole through Kate's limbs and pooled in the lower half of her body, leaving her brain devoid of reason. Unable to form an answer to his question, she simply stared up at his dark angel's visage.

Despite his threatening stance, she felt no menace emanating from him. His eyes were not cold and bleak, but a clear gray that spoke of difficulties overcome, achievements won, and a solitary life that touched something deep within herself. She could admire this man, Kate suspected, slightly awed by the prospect. Then her gaze slid lower to full lips, so very near and poised to speak, and she stared, fascinated.

"You're the one," he whispered. "You bit me."

"Did I?" Kate murmured. She tried to concentrate, but his fingertips slid across her mouth in a slow, exotic glide that made her breath go ragged beneath them. Her lips trembled and parted as his face moved closer, and her lashes drifted shut just as his open mouth came down upon hers, hot and firm and intense.

She was melting. Slowly, irrevocably, sinking into a netherworld of dark sensation. A heavy, delicious languor surrounded her, robbing her wits and making her arms snake up around his neck. This man was the source of it all, with his naked chest and his wonderful kiss, and she leaned into his muscular body, seeking...

When his tongue touched hers, Kate gasped, astonished. One of his hands closed around the back of

her neck, holding her steady, and then the dance began. His tongue swirled and delved and stroked, coaxing hers to do the same. ~~Hesitantly she assented, and knew another dizzying drag on her senses,~~ for he tasted like nothing she had ever known—like warmth and shadows and forbidden longings. His fingers slid down to his shoulders, seeking purchase on that hard flesh.

Then, suddenly, he was gone, swaying away from her, and Kate blinked up at a face devoid of color. Alarm cleared her head quickly as she saw a red stain that had not been there before mark his bandage. She had reopened his wound!

"Sit down!" she cried, urging him backward to the bed. He seemed bemused by her concern, but willingly took a seat on the edge. Tossing aside the pillows that had disguised his exit, Kate pushed him down against the blankets just as the door swung open.

"Here now, what's this?" Tom asked, in a voice rife with suspicion and warning. Obviously, the sight of her straddling the covers with a half-naked man did not please her old coachman.

"He's bleeding again!" Kate answered. Although she slid to the side of the bed, she refused to turn around, unwilling to let Tom see her crimson face. She had no desire to explain that the damage had been done by her own questing fingers! Nor did she wish to describe what had gone before. Busying herself with changing the dressing, Kate schooled her face to show nothing to either the curious coachman or the man who had so shattered her composure.

What had she been thinking? All this time she had chastised Lucy for being seduced, while she had just let herself be kissed by a total stranger. Not only that, but she had returned his attentions willingly. Eagerly! Just the thought of that hot, dark place to which he had taken her made Kate's hands fumble with the wrapping.

"Still, you should not have come in here alone, Katie girl," Tom scolded, walking toward her. He stopped nearby to study the man, who lay quiet under her ministrations. "This gent might be dangerous. What's that mark on his arm?"

"That's where I bit him," Kate answered, her face flaming anew. "Last night," she felt compelled to add. A muscle jerked beneath her touch, as if the stranger were amused by that small admission, and she yanked on the linen angrily.

"Ahem..." Tom mumbled. "Well, if you're done coddling him now, move away from the fellow. I've mind to get some answers."

Far from appearing concerned about the upcoming interrogation, their guest only leaned back on the pillows in a more comfortable position, his muscles flexing as if to taunt her. Hurriedly Kate finished her task, jerking her hands away from the warmth of his skin and shifting her attention to his face.

Her eyes caught his, and without speaking, he lifted one dark brow in the arrogant manner she remembered from the confrontation in the study. She had known then that this man would always be in complete control of any situation in which he found himself. It had annoyed her yesterday; now it alarmed her. Who was he? And how would he treat those who had done him ill? Kate shivered at the thought

"Comfy now?" Tom jeered. Apparently he was oblivious of the threat posed by this man, but Tom had never been particularly perceptive. It fell to Kate to read the more complex nuances of those few

people with whom they came in contact.

"Actually, no," the stranger answered evenly. "I would be a lot more at ease if you would tell me just who the hell you are and who you are working for."

Tom's mouth dropped open, and Kate felt a shudder of admiration for the wounded man's composure. Despite his prone position, stretched full length on the bed, he was cool as you please, and subtly menacing, besides.

Recovering himself, Tom grunted rudely. "Don't tell him anything, Kate," he advised. His face had taken on that stubborn cast that made her want to groan. So much for her peace offering! So much for trying to make the man feel like a guest. The breakfast! Biting back one of Tom's oaths, Kate ran to where the tray had fallen and tried to clean up the mess. Perhaps if she washed off the precious piece of ham...

'Til be asking the questions, gent," she heard Tom say in a belligerent tone. "Just who the hell are you and what were you doing in the marquis of Wroth's study last night?"

"As puzzling as it may seem to one of your intellect, *I* am Grayson Wescott—"

"Aha!" Tom said, turning triumphantly toward Kate.

She scrubbed at the carpet with a linen napkin, trying vainly to remove the jam stain. "I believe Wescott is the marquis's family name."

"Eh?" Tom looked puzzled. "Some relative, are you? Were you staying with Wroth? He's not saying I is Wroth, is he, Katie?"

"He is *not* Wroth! I told you last night that he does not resemble Wroth in the slightest," a haughty voice declared.

Kate glanced over to see Lucy standing in the doorway, looking fetching in one of her best gowns. Her condition barely showed. Still, the sight of it was enough to make Kate swallow hard. How could she possibly have let the stranger kiss her, even if he was the most handsome, confident and powerful of men? Was that how Lucy had begun, melting in a warm embrace, only to end up carrying a child?

"I assure you, Miss—?"

"Don't tell him who you are, Lucy!" Tom warned. It was the wrong thing to say to Lucy, of course. She immediately lifted her head and tossed her auburn curls in rebellion.

"And why not? I am proud of my family name! I, for one, have nothing to hide from this...this ruffian! When he finds out whom he is dealing with, he will take himself off soon enough."

Kate eyed Lucy with some alarm, dismayed by her efforts to sustain their position. Although the stranger did not look like a gossip, what if he carried the tale of his imprisonment here back to London? Their ruination would be complete. "Lucy, be a dear, and return the tray to the kitchen, will you? I'll take care of this," Kate said, her casual tone belied by the look she sent her sister.

Although Lucy obviously wanted to refuse the request and remain right where she was, she contented herself with glaring at their guest. "I shall leave it to you to put him in his proper place!" she declared.

before turning on her heel and regally exiting the room.

"Now, Mr. Wescott, or whoever you may be—" Tom began.

"Is that the sister you spoke of, the one with child?" the stranger asked, inclining his head toward the door through which Lucy had departed.

Kate felt her cheeks bloom again, but she held her head high. "Yes," she answered honestly.

"Well, it seems that we have quite a coil to unravel," he said, gazing at her from under heavy-lidded eyes. Bedroom eyes, Kate reflected, annoyed at the turn of her thoughts. He had propped one knee up and appeared thoroughly at home in her father's bed, his dark hair tousled, his chest bare. Suddenly, Kate wished he would cover himself, if only so her eyes would not continually drift to that beautiful, dark expanse.

"What coil? What are you talking about, man?" Tom asked.

Her mouth thinning determinedly, Kate walked to a dresser and pulled open a drawer, rummaging for one of her father's old nightshirts. Most of his clothes had been commandeered for their own wardrobes, but such intimate wear remained intact. Grabbing one, she turned and tossed it to her guest. "There. You can put that on," she instructed.

"He won't be needing your Papa's underthings! He ain't staying long enough." Tom protested. "I'll take him back to London today, whoever he is."

"No, you won't, Tom. He's still shaky from loss of blood," Kate argued, trying not to remember just how solid he had seemed a few minutes ago, when she was pressed up against his muscular form. "And what if he gets a fever?" she asked. Although it had not been her intention, she had shot this man, and being responsible for his injury, she felt obliged to nurse him back to health—or at least until he could get up and around without bleeding anew.

"I am not going anywhere," the man announced, in the kind of voice that demanded attention. Both she and Tom turned to stare at him. His expression was polite, but Kate sensed an indomitable will behind it. Even reclining amid the pillows, he held himself just a little aloof, as if born to command, and she felt a growing unease at the enormity of her mistake. She could no more handle this man than she could a charging beast.

"And why not?" Tom demanded angrily.

"Because I intend to find out just who has been using my name to seduce young women."

"What? What the devil do you mean? What's he talking about, Katie?" Tom asked.

Kate's dismay escalated as the truth dawned.

"I have never seen your sister before in my life," the stranger explained dryly. "And the last time I checked, I was the only marquis of Wroth."

Grayson eyed the duo calmly, while they stared as if he had sprouted two heads. Although his name was not always a welcome one, still, he could never recall receiving quite this sort of reception before. It was interesting, to say the least.

Apparently unconvinced of his parentage, the old man, called Tom, was still inclined to argue. "Here now, Lucy says—"

Grayson halted him with his most damning look. "I am sure that the lady, Miss Lucy, is speaking the truth as she knows it, but since I am Wroth and I have not seduced her, it stands to reason that someone has been using my name, although I am at a loss as to who would be so imprudent."

Tom gaped, scratching his bristly chin in confusion, but the dark-haired girl, obviously more intelligent, nodded. It was easy to see that she was in charge, for both Lucy and Tom took orders from her in the manner of those of long habit. Intrigued, Grayson found himself watching her closely. She did not look old enough to run a household, but she had a serious, capable air that told him she could manage very well. As if to prove his thoughts, she proceeded to draw herself up to her full height—she stood not much above five feet—and unflinchingly apologize for shooting him.

"I must tell you that I regret very much your injury, my lord, and will do my best to remedy any inconvenience that *this...misunderstanding* may have caused you." Despite the pain in his shoulder, Grayson found himself admiring her pluck. He could not wait to hear exactly what she had planned for him, should he have been her sister's seducer. A wedding ceremony at gunpoint had most likely been the plan, and he could not help but be relieved at Lucy's imperious rejection. The auburn-haired chit with the grating voice did not appeal to him in the slightest, while this Kate...

"Naturally, you are welcome to stay here until you are sufficiently recovered," she said, as politely as if they were discussing the weather, and not the attack upon his person and his subsequent abduction. Really, she was most intriguing.

A low growl from the corner made him glance toward Tom, who apparently took exception to the offer of such hospitality. He hitched up his trousers and glared at Grayson in a decidedly menacing fashion. "He looks to be well enough right now. I can take him back to London soon as I ready the horses."

"Nonsense," Kate responded in that take-charge tone of hers. "He needs food and rest. Now let us leave him to it." Turning to Grayson, she said, "I shall send Tom up with another tray, since the other was spilled." For the first time, her amazing composure seemed to desert her. She cast her eyes downward and as Wroth watched the slow bloom of color in her cheeks, he felt an answering stirring in his loins.

Then, with a nod, she took her leave, dragging a reluctant Tom along with her, and Grayson felt oddly bereft at her absence. Damn, but she was an extraordinary creature! He found it difficult to reconcile all his images of her: the filthy boy; the gentle healer, the competent woman who took charge of an awkward situation without blinking an eye; and the innocent who had returned his kiss with tentative passion.

Grayson frowned grimly. He did not care to examine that small lapse in his judgment. He had waited for one of his jailers to arrive, not expecting to see the begrimed urchin again until she had walked through the doorway. Although it took Grayson a moment to recognize the demure young girl as the pistol-wielding pup of the night before, he had had no doubts once he looked into those eyes. Luminous eyes, they were like none he had ever seen, serious and clear. Guileless. Lovely.

Enthralled, Grayson had made a feeble attempt to question her before giving in to the lust that seized him in a grip that was truly remarkable, considering his recent injury. But all thoughts of his shoulder had been forgotten when he took her mouth. She tasted of mint and sweetness and delight, with an

underlying passion that took him by surprise. He shuddered to remember the first bold forays of her tongue. She had ignited him effortlessly, and he had wanted nothing more than to feel her breast beneath his palm again, without a layer of boy's clothing to cover it. More than that, he had wanted her naked beneath him, small and slender and...

Hearing the rapid rise of his breathing, Grayson pushed such images forcefully from his mind. It must be his condition, he decided. Never before had he let himself be carried away by the thought of fondling a female. He was a skilled lover, but he never lost his head. Nothing disgusted him more than a supposedly intelligent man who made a cake of himself over the latest fashionable female.

But Kate was neither, and Grayson knew he had been extremely careless to let himself be so distracted from his situation. He was lucky to find himself a victim of mistaken identity, rather than at the hands of someone truly dangerous—though he had an odd suspicion that the inimitable Kate could be dangerous enough, in her own way.

Who was she? Although her speech and bearing proclaimed her a woman of quality, her gown was faded and ill-fitting. And despite her eventual response to his kiss, it was obvious that she was an innocent. As beautiful as she was, Grayson thought she must have lived a protected existence to remain so pure and unaffected, but what sheltered female would dress up as a boy, break into a nobleman's study and shoot him? He knew a few women who could handle a pistol, but none who could have succeeded in besting him.

And how had she become the leader of this odd trio? If her sister truly had been ruined, why was a male relative not seeing to her welfare? Instinctively Grayson knew that the rough-looking Tom was not a part of the family. Yet why was he treated as an equal, rather than as a servant?

And what of the sister's alleged seducer? Had the man truly claimed to be Wroth, or had the girl concocted the story to placate her sister? She would not have been the first to claim that a nobleman, and not the traveling tinker, had sired her child. And, if so, she would not be happy to have her ruse exposed.

Really, the whole business was more entertaining than the theater. From the identity of the players to the country home that formed the backdrop, it was a fascinating puzzle, and Grayson could not wait to begin putting all the pieces together. Not surprisingly, he no longer felt the suffocating press of ennui that had plagued him for months, and the realization made him release a sigh of relief.

Hell, if it were not for the bullet hole in his shoulder, he would be enjoying himself thoroughly.

Chapter Three

Grayson lifted a brow in contempt when Tom came barging in with his breakfast tray. The old man was the worst excuse for a servant Grayson had ever seen, plopping down his burden with total disregard for the tea that sloshed over the rim of the cup. Obviously, Tom was not accustomed to waiting at table.

Eyeing the spill askance, Grayson wondered if Kate and her cohorts were hiding him from the rest of the household, for he had yet to see a maid or serving girl. He was determined to investigate later, but right now he was hungry. He watched, amused, when Tom pushed the food at him, as if begrudging every bite, then stepped back and hitched his trousers in an irritating manner.

Situating the tray neatly on his lap, Grayson glanced at the man, who was glowering at him. "Is there something else, Tom?" he asked.

"That there is, my lord," Tom answered, drawling the address as if he did not believe Wroth to be himself. "Kate's a bit kindhearted, but I won't have her suffering for it." His thick, peppery brows drew together. "Fair warning. I've got my eye on you."

"Do you now?" Grayson asked, undisturbed.

"That I do," Tom growled, as if taking exception to Grayson's attitude. "And I'm thinking that maybe you're Wroth and maybe you ain't."

"And maybe you're an extremely incompetent servant or simply a kidnapper who botched my murder," Wroth said, calmly spreading thick country jam upon his toast.

When he glanced up, Tom had paled significantly. Frowning at the reminder of his criminal activities, the old man slunk out of the room with a disgruntled expression that entertained Grayson enormously. He settled down to eat with a slight smile.

When he had finished, Grayson set the tray neatly on the floor, annoyed at himself for missing his phalanx of servants and the French cook he kept at his country seat. Although edible, the meal had been small and simple, certainly not the elaborate fare he was used to in homes such as this. Which brought him back to one of the myriad puzzles that he had yet to solve.

Slowly easing his way out of bed, Grayson winced at the pain in his shoulder. The meager breakfast lurched in his stomach, and he was thankful it had been small. Obviously he was not up to his old self as yet, but he gritted his teeth and rose to his feet. He did not care to be bedbound.

More importantly, he needed to do some investigating, not only to satisfy his curiosity, but to protect himself, as well. Although his hostess was both intriguing and appealing, Grayson had nothing except her assurances that these people did not mean him harm. He intended to make sure they were as innocent as they pretended before closing his eyes again.

Pushing the bed pillows into the shape of a body once more, Grayson slipped to the door and silently turned the handle. Outside, the hallway stretched before him, the carpeting elegant, if a little worn, and the silence palpable. The quiet spoke for itself, for he had never been to a country home where servants were not bustling to and fro and guests were not idling in their rooms or gathering for cards and entertainment.

Not here. Grayson did not meet a soul as he prowled the upper rooms. Indeed, the first few he entered appeared as though they had been empty for some time, a thin layer of dust making him wonder again about the mettle of the staff. When he finally came upon some signs of occupation, Grayson lifted a brow in surprise, for clothing and hats and gloves littered a crowded collection of furniture that looked to have been taken from other suites. Surely, no self-respecting servant could endure this mess.

Lifting a silk gown of bishop's blue to his nose, Grayson drew in the cloying scent of gardenias. Not Kate's. He let the dress fall to its place, draped over a chair-backed settee, and glanced around. A large mirror rested on a vanity where a number of perfume bottles and a quantity of other female paraphernalia could be found. Lucy's, he suspected, remembering the auburn-haired chit with the grating voice. Although it was cluttered, there was nothing really unusual about the place. He went on.

A connecting door led to another room that was obviously Kate's. Grayson knew its owner at once, because it reflected the somber, clear-eyed girl. Neat and spotless, without the romantic trappings and lace-trimmed pillows of her sister's boudoir, it housed little more than a bed, a dresser and cupboard, chair and an inlaid writing desk. The mirror that lay atop the pristine dresser top was small, part of an ivory-handled set of brush and comb that spoke of necessity, not vanity. No perfume. The mysterious Kate had smelled faintly of mint—or had she simply tasted that fresh and inviting?

Grayson frowned. He pulled open drawers and cupboards, but could find nothing except a rather pitiful wardrobe that included some boy's clothing, like that she had worn into his study. Incredibly, he was seized by an odd agitation at the possibility that a husband or other male might be in residence here with Kate.

He shook his head in denial, and the room itself seemed to spin. Reaching out for the bedpost, Grayson steadied himself and took several deep breaths. No, he would swear that the girl had never even been kissed before. And there were no signs of male habitation, except for a few shirts and trousers, which made him wonder where Tom slept.

Grayson realized that puzzle would have to wait. Although the dizziness seemed to have passed, he did not care to test his endurance and come up wanting. Regaining his feet, he moved silently back to his own room.

As it was the largest and most comfortable, Grayson wondered why neither of the girls used it. Perhaps they were poor relations who had no choice of housing, or mayhap the occupant of this particular bedroom was away. Many people spent more time in London than in the country. He had noted several blank spots on the walls where paintings might have hung. Had the owner of the home fallen on hard times? That would explain the dearth of servants, but how, and why, were the girls living here?

Grayson felt an ache in his head to match the one in his shoulder, and he pushed the pillows aside to lie full length upon the bed. He needed to get his strength back—and soon. Scowling at his own weakness, he closed his eyes. At least he had found nothing suspicious in the upper rooms. It confirmed his gut instinct that Kate, her sister and their grizzled companion were as harmless as they professed to be. And common sense told him that the obnoxious Tom wouldn't be so anxious to send him packing if there was a reason for keeping him imprisoned.

Yes, they were an innocuous group, two young girls and an old man, and none of them truly dangerous, if he ignored the fact that they had broken into his town house and put a bullet hole in him. The abduction, he suspected, had been Kate's way of making amends.

Grayson woke to a persistent pounding. It seemed to be a part of him, throbbing through his head, his shoulder, his dry throat and his eardrums, deafening him. He opened his eyes and stared at the figure of an old man. One of his grooms? No. He shook his head and swallowed as he recognized those thick peppery brows, drawn down in disapproval.

"If you think to cozen them into letting you stay by keeping to your bed, I'm here to tell you it won't work," Tom said, in an excessively loud and unpleasant voice. "And I'm not waiting on you anymore, either, *my lord* or not. Here's your shirt," he said, tossing something at him. It lay on Grayson's chest like a lump of rags. "It's been washed and mended as best it could be, so you can dress for supper. We keep early hours, so see that you're down by seven o'clock." With a scowl, he hitched up his trousers and marched to the door.

Grayson blinked. Even his eyelids hurt. Damn, but he could not recall ever feeling this bad. With a groan, he sat up and grabbed his discarded garment. Once the finest money could buy, it now sported a new seam along the shoulder. He shuddered, aware of just how close he had come to taking his last breath.

The effort it cost him to get the damn thing over his head and properly situated at his wrists had him dizzy and gasping. What the devil was the matter with him? Leaning over, he managed to put his boots on without the aid of a valet, but he was panting from the exertion.

He looked around for his waistcoat and coat, to no avail. Obviously his other clothing had not yet dried, and though he was not accustomed to dining in his shirtsleeves, it was an improvement over eating in bed, wasn't it? Grayson was not sure, His shoulder and head were aching so much that his stomach was forgotten.

Courtesy, if not curiosity, required that he make an appearance, so he opened the door and moved along the hallway. The main stairway curved down to a tiled entranceway, but no butler or footman met him when he reached the bottom. Pausing to catch his erratic breath, he stood blinking up at the painted ceiling and was seized by a sense of familiarity. Had he been here before, staring at the historic scenes, or was this a hazy memory from the night before, when he had faded in and out of consciousness?

With no attendant to lead him, Grayson was forced to follow the sound of voices along a columned gallery. His steps faltered, as he again wondered if he had walked this way before, even though he knew he could not have done so last night. The strange feeling persisted, however, and, coupled with the need to find his way without help, created an eerie sense of unreality.

It continued when he reached the large dining hall, where his motley band of abductors waited: Kate, as lovely and untouched as an angel; her sister, scowling shrewishly; and the ubiquitous Tom, who looked as if he'd be more comfortable in the stables than surrounded by fine china and crystal.

"My lord," Kate said. "You look a bit pale. Should you be up and about?"

Grayson watched her move toward him, as if in a dream, her face gentle with concern, her fingers reaching for him. Perhaps she would stroke his brow again, he thought dazedly. She came to a stop before him, her dark curls shining gloriously in the candlelight. He wanted to touch them.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Grayson tried to execute a bow, but dizziness overcame him. "No," he managed to answer her formally, before everything went black.

For the second time in two days, Kate watched in horror as the marquis of Wroth collapsed onto the floor. She knelt beside him and put her hand to his forehead, her worst fears confirmed.

"He's burning up! Tom, carry him upstairs again!"

"Really, Kate!" Lucy exclaimed, obviously disgusted. "You should never have brought him here. Now look at him."

Kate did, and her heart ached to see him brought low again, his handsome face pale and wan, his eyes closed, his tall body felled by fever. She swallowed painfully. "I'll see to him," she whispered.

"Oh, very well. I'll keep supper for you," Lucy promised, "but I might as well eat his portion. No sense letting it go to waste, after all."

"No, of course not," Kate replied, in response to her sister's cold-blooded behavior. It was a defect of her character that Lucy rarely considered anything more important than her own wishes, but she had suffered much in recent years, and could be forgiven for selfishly wanting an extra helping for herself and her child.

"I would have left him upstairs, if I'd known I'd have to drag him back up again," the coachman grumbled as he hefted the marquis's prone body.

"Then you should not have let him come down," Kate said, without sympathy. "I should have checked on him, as I planned, rather than let you talk me out of it."

"I tell you, it ain't proper for you to be tending a gentleman!"

Kate gave an inelegant snort as she followed the coachman through the gallery and up the stairs. "As that matters now!" Was she the only one with any sense in this household? The marquis of Wroth was injured and sick, suffering by her own hand, and no one seemed the slightest bit concerned. Indeed, the others appeared put out. "How *inconvenient* of the man to fall ill from the bullet I sent through him!" she said, tossing the biting sarcasm at Tom's head.

He ducked and hurried forward, dumping the marquis unceremoniously on the bed that had once been her father's. "Guess I'll have to get his boots off of him again."

"Yes, and the shirt, as well." Kate spoke calmly enough, but she felt panic beating at the back of her mind, and pushed it away. She had to think clearly now, if she was going to save him. And there could be no "if" about it. Although they had been buried here in the country for a long time, she had heard Wroth mentioned before. *Rich, powerful, dangerous*. Those were words that were used to describe him, and although Kate had not heeded them when she was bent upon revenge, now they returned to taunt her.

For one fleeting moment, she pictured herself dangling at the end of a rope while an eager crowd chanted, "Murderess!" Then she rolled up her sleeves and got to work. "Fetch Mother's recipe book, please," she told Tom as she sat down beside the marquis to check his dressing. "And see if there are any spirits in the house. There might be some brandy in the cellar. And bring up a bowl of water, straight from the spring, so it is especially cold."

Tom hesitated, and she shot him a look that questioned his delay. "It's not proper," he protested, with a mulish expression.

Kate nearly gave in to the hysterical laughter that bubbled in her chest. "Proper? *Proper*? How could that possibly matter now? Lucy is already with child by a man who pretended to be someone he isn't!

"Well, that doesn't—"

Kate cut him off with a sharp glance. "We must fend for ourselves, Tom. You know that."

The two shared a poignant look until Tom dropped his eyes and mumbled one of his oaths. "Well, it ain't right." He gazed at her again, suddenly apologetic. "I'll take care of him."

"No," Kate replied firmly. She had entrusted Wroth to Tom today, and he had failed her, whether by accident or by design. It had only reinforced the lesson she had learned a long time ago: The only way to ensure that anything was done was to do it herself.

Waving Tom away, she waited until she heard his footsteps leave the room before she checked her charge. Beneath the unnatural flush that stained his cheeks, she could see the strength and beauty of his face. He had kissed her, this elegant, assured nobleman, Kate thought, still amazed by the memory.

She had no notion why he had done it. Perhaps he thought her a housemaid, eager for a tumble, or maybe he thought any girl who would dress as a boy fair game. Whatever his motivation, Kate was secretly thrilled by his fleeting interest. In the quiet struggle her life had become, she had never thought to visit the dark, sensuous world she had known in his arms. Now she would have that small wonder to carry with her always.

Snorting at the strange, sentimental turn of her thoughts, Kate leaned forward, turning her attention toward the sick man. He was her responsibility, and if she had other reasons for saving him besides self-preservation, she did not care to examine them.

Kate opened bleary eyes and turned them toward the bed, lit by a brace of low-burning candles. Wroth had thrown off all the covers and was tossing restlessly, and the only thing she knew to do was bathe him with cool water. Originally, she had just wiped his face, but as the evening wore on and his body warmed, she had boldly pressed the wet cloth to his arms and his chest. It had gained him some respite, but now he was thrashing again, hotter than ever. Kate's eyes darted down to the breeches that still covered him.

Tom would never approve.

Lucy would have an apoplexy.

To the devil with them, Kate thought, determination firming the line of her lips. She would do whatever was necessary to save this man's life, and if she had to see him in his underclothes to do so, it was no one's concern but her own.

Pulling the covers down to the bottom of the bed, Kate moved toward his waist. She knew how to work the fall, for she often wore boy's trousers, but it was one thing to dress herself and quite another to undo the buttons that covered the front of the tall, virile marquis. Her fingers fumbled against the body beneath, but finally she had his breeches open. Grabbing a fistful of material at either side of his hips, she tugged hard, and nearly fell facefirst upon his thighs at the sight that met her eyes.

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