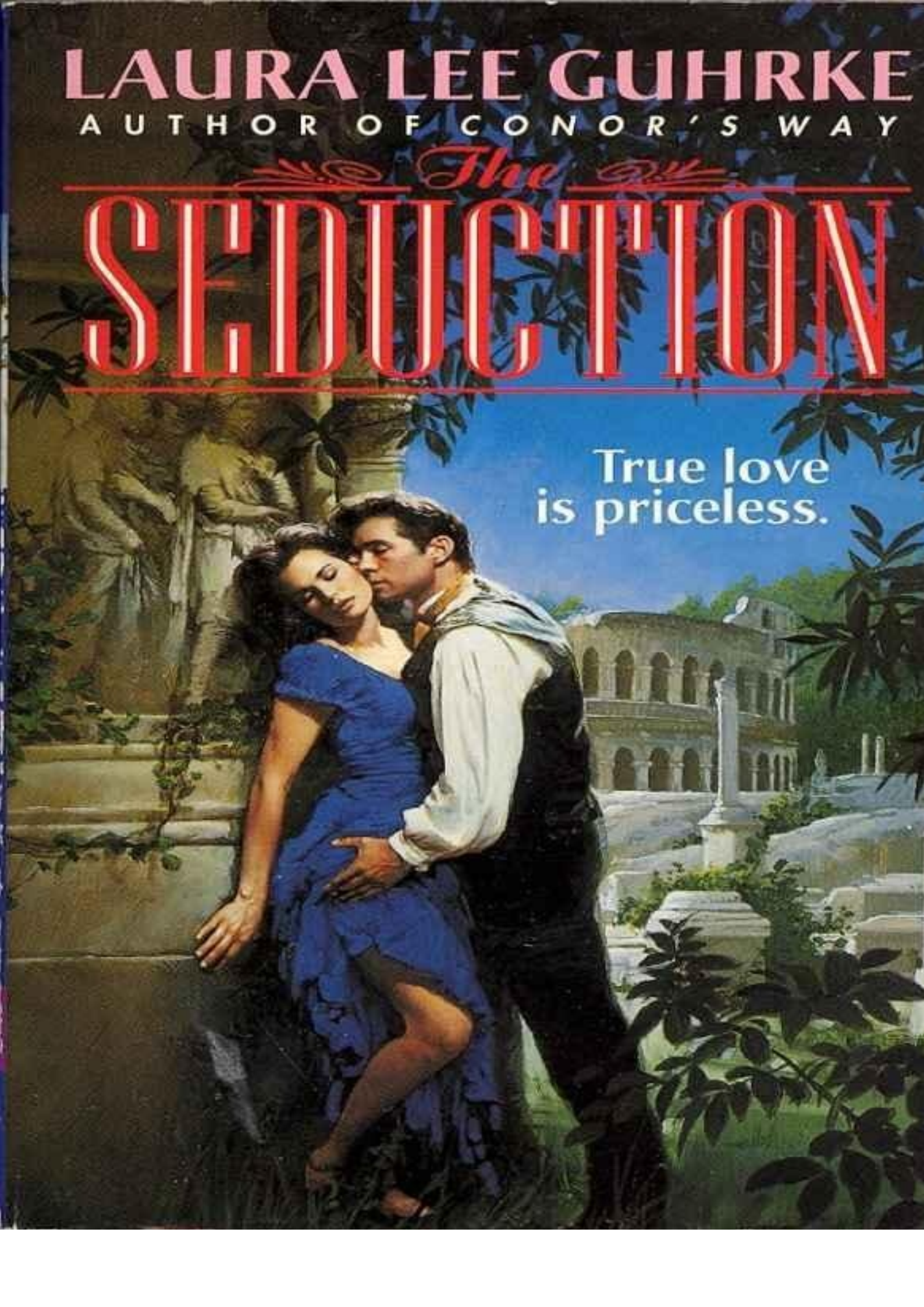


LAURA LEE GUHRKE

AUTHOR OF CONOR'S WAY

The
SEDUCTION

True love
is priceless.



LOVE AT ANY PRICE

"Perhaps we can be friends," Lord Ashton began.

Friends? So that was to be his technique, was it? Margaret was pleased that she had finally figured him out. She grasped the handle of her picnic basket and rose to her feet. "That certainly is a unique approach, Lord Ashton, but I'm afraid you are wasting your time."

He stood up, giving her a puzzled look. "Wasting my time?"

"I'm sure there are many heiresses who would fall for such a gambit," she said, "but I am not one of them. So if you are looking to marry a fortune, you will need to look farther afield. I have no interest in marrying you."

"But all I suggested was friendship."

"After the discourteous way you have behaved toward me, how can you expect us to be friends?"

"I like you."

"Indeed? That is a pity, because I don't like you." His amused laughter followed her as she walked away.



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*The
Seduction*

LAURA LEE GUHRKE



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CLS V 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

Epilogue

*For Sandy Oakes and Rachel Gibson, who
believed in Trevor's story from the very beginning.
This one's for you, with my heartfelt thanks. No one
could have more loyal friends.*

Prologue

Cairo, 1882

Trevor St. James believed in life's simple pleasures. French cognac, a Turkish cigar, silk sheets, and a passionate woman. Tonight, he had enjoyed them all. He leaned back against the headboard and took a sip of the cognac, his gaze slowly perusing the softly rounded form of the sleeping woman who lay beside him. He paused to appreciate the luscious dent in the small of her back before his gaze continued downward. Lucci really did have excellent taste, he thought, admiring the enticing curve of her buttocks.

She stirred slightly in sleep, reminding Trevor that it was not wise to linger here. He set the drink aside. He'd come for a purpose beyond a romp in the sheets, and he couldn't accomplish it if Isabella awakened.

He rose from the bed. In the dim light of the lamp, he dressed without making a sound. He began to search the room, keeping one eye on the woman as he silently opened the drawers of her dressing table.

In the third drawer, he found her jewel case. It was locked, but he easily opened it. Within, he found a treasure of diamonds and pearls, the evidence of Lucci's passion for his young wife. But diamonds and pearls did not interest Trevor. What he sought was far more valuable. More important, it was *his* and Trevor never relinquished what belonged to him.

He had removed three trays of jewels from the case before he found the object of his search. He smiled as he removed the ancient necklace of gold and lapis that Lucci had stolen from him. The British Museum would definitely get their money's worth from this piece.

He pulled from his pocket the paste replica he had brought with him and laid it carefully inside the case. Then he put back the other trays of jewels, careful to return them in the proper order. After relocking the case, he set it back in the drawer exactly where he had found it.

The drawer made a grating sound as he closed it. He glanced at Isabella, but she did not awake. Picking up his jacket from the floor, Trevor tucked his prize into the breast pocket, then laid the jacket across a chair and walked to the bed. He leaned down to kiss that lovely dent in her back, knowing he had to leave and feeling a hint of regret at the prospect. He trailed kisses along her spine and heard a soft murmur of sleepy pleasure from the depths of the pillows.

Isabella turned her head and rose up on her elbows, shaking the dark curtain of hair from her eyes. She looked at him. "So soon?" she asked, her voice still husky with sleep.

He brushed a wisp of hair from her face. "I must go. My ship leaves at dawn."

"Hours away," she whispered, pressing a kiss into his palm.

"Lucci could change his plans, and I don't want him to find me here."

"He won't change his plans. He has gone to Alexandria on business."

Trevor already knew that. But he also knew that Lucci was foolishly besotted by his beautiful wife and might miss her enough to return unexpectedly. He shook his head. "It's too risky. I don't wish to die at the hands of your jealous husband."

Her lips curved into a pout. "You would not be willing to die for me?"

Trevor smiled and caressed her cheek. "No, my sweet. I would not."

"Bastard." The word was soft on her lips, an endearment rather than an epithet.

He laughed as she rolled onto her back and held out her arms. "Stay. Even if he did come and find you here, Lucci would never be able to defeat you in a fight. He's too fat."

"Somehow, that does not ease my mind." Trevor caught her wrists and pulled her arms wide to place

a kiss between her breasts. "And I am his most hated rival."

He released her and sat up, then reached above her head for his cravat, which was draped carelessly over the headboard. He gave her a cynical smile. "But then, I suspect the fact that Lucci and I are rivals in business heightens the pleasure for you, doesn't it, my sweet?"

She stretched like a cat and yawned. "Yes," she confessed. "I've wanted you for a long time, Trevor. When I saw you at the opera tonight, I knew this was the perfect opportunity."

Trevor had known it, too. Isabella thought tonight's pleasures had been her idea, but he'd been planning this ever since Lucci had stolen the necklace from him. He had known all along that his prize would end up in her hands. Lucci always gave the jewels to his wife. He really was a fool. The necklace would bring several thousand pounds on the open market. She sighed, watching as he rose from the bed and walked toward her dressing table. "I wish we had more time together. I don't see when you must go to England anyway."

"I don't have a choice. I am an earl now. That carries certain responsibilities."

"Such as?"

He bent slightly at the knees to see his reflection in the mirror and began to tie his cravat. "According to my mother, they include stepping into my late brother's shoes, marrying a well-bred girl from a respectable—and, it is hoped, wealthy—family, and producing an heir."

"You?" She laughed merrily. "Is that why you're going? To chain yourself to a lifetime of fox hunting and playing the country squire? How dreadfully conventional. A man like you isn't made for a life like that. I don't believe it."

Trevor paused in the act of buttoning his waistcoat and thought suddenly of home, of the green fields and rose-covered cottages of Ashton Park, of roast beef and trifle, of chestnut trees and roaring fires and thick feather mattresses—all the things he'd left behind ten years ago. An unexpected pang of longing hit him, and he made a sudden realization.

"Actually," he said and resumed buttoning his waistcoat, "I'm looking forward to it."

"You're not serious!" She sat up in bed and frowned at him. "Have you fallen in love with some whey-faced English girl on holiday?" she demanded. "Is that what this is all about?"

He pulled on his jacket and met her gaze in the mirror. "What does love have to do with getting married?"

She laughed and fell back against the pillows. "I see that we are very much alike. I, too, married out of necessity." She paused and gazed at him hungrily. "I will miss you, *mio caro*. But when you grow tired of your English wife and your country house and your dismal English rain, perhaps you will return and we will enjoy each other again."

He remembered the necklace and didn't think his return a very likely possibility. Nor did he care. Both of them had gotten what they wanted, and that was the end of it. He started for the door.

"Take good care, Trevor," she called.

"I always do." He paused in the doorway and looked at her. "You should take care as well. Lucci might find out about this little rendezvous of ours."

She seemed unperturbed by that possibility. "If he does, he will be furious, but he'll forgive me, and he'll believe whatever explanations I give him. He always does. He loves me."

"For now."

His skeptical reply and cynical smile shook her complacent vanity for a moment, and she looked at him with uncertainty. "Don't you believe in love?"

Trevor laughed. "After tonight, darling, how can you ask me that?"

"I am talking about the emotion, not the act."

"They are both the same." He saw her frown, her expression one of pique and wounded feminine pride. "What were you expecting? That I would now be as besotted with you as your husband is? Don't pout, my sweet. I know it is not my love you seek, and I am not like Lucci, to be manipulated and made the fool."

He paused then added, "Don't push him too far, Isabella. Even the most ardent husband's passion will fade."

She rose up on her knees, shaking her dark hair back from her shoulders and displaying for him all the charms he was leaving behind. "Will it?"

He studied her exquisite body for a long moment, then said what was expected of him. "No. Perhaps not."

"Do not forget me, Trevor," she whispered.

"Never," he vowed. "I will remember you and treasure this night all the days of my life."

She sank back against the pillows, her scarlet mouth curved in a smile of satisfaction as Trevor walked out the door. But the moment it closed behind him, he promptly forgot her existence.

Italy, 1882

Margaret Van Alden wondered if it was truly possible to die of boredom. If so, she was certain to drop dead at any moment.

The ladies were having tea, a dreaded occasion in Margaret's opinion, and one to be gotten through as quickly as possible. For over an hour now, they had been discussing the scandals brewing back in London, the dire state of everybody's health, and the weather.

The Duchess of Arbuthnot said, "England is so dreary, I'm told. Lady Morton has written to me that the rain is going to drive her mad." She set her teacup back in its saucer and went on, "We are so fortunate to be in Italy just now. It's lovely this time of year. And the countryside is so beautiful."

Margaret glanced longingly out the window at the bright Mediterranean sunshine and wondered why, if it was so lovely, they were sitting in this stuffy drawing room. She racked her brain for an excuse, any excuse, to depart. Perhaps she could suddenly be ill. A headache would do. Or perhaps the shrimp sandwiches. One never knew with shrimp.

"The Italian people are so marvelous," Lady Lytton said. "So charming and unspoiled."

"Quite," the duchess agreed. "Although they are somewhat brazen in their manners."

"More tea, ladies?"

Cornelia gestured toward the tea service, and at the voices of assent, the maid began to pour out. Margaret knew that since this was her father's villa and these were her guests, it was her responsibility to be the hostess, but she felt no guilt at allowing her cousin to play that role. Cornelia was so much better at it than she. Margaret took a chocolate biscuit from a plate and nibbled on it as she weighed the cost to her social status of simply making a mad dash for the door. Or perhaps she could faint.

As she speculated on various ways to escape, she could hear the duchess directing the conversation toward Italian art. "You will find the museums of Italy quite splendid. The Italian masters were so gifted."

Margaret wondered how great a stir would ensue if she opened the window and climbed out.

"Take the sculpture of David, for example. You can appreciate the true talent of Michelangelo when you see it. Such exquisite line and form. So beautiful, so natural—"

"So naked," Margaret put in, unable to stop herself.

The shocked gasps of the ladies answered her. She looked around with wide, innocent eyes and plied her fan with ladylike zeal, but had to bite down hard on her lower lip to keep from laughing at the horrified faces. English ladies were so stuffy, Margaret thought with the staunch patriotism of an American. The Duchess of Arbuthnot's haughty nose quivered with disapproval. Lady Lytton veritably swooned, and her two daughters, Lady Sally and Lady Agnes, stared at Margaret, their rosebud mouths gaping. Although she didn't venture a glance at Cornelia, she knew her cousin was probably sinking through the floor.

Margaret couldn't sum up even the tiniest hint of regret for her outrageous comment, but she did feel a twinge of pity for Cornelia. It was, after all, her cousin's responsibility to launch her in European society, but during the past year, she had not been very successful.

The awkward silence was broken by the arrival of Giuseppe. The butler entered the drawing room and announced, "Lord Hymes."

The ladies stirred, making hasty preparations, and Margaret's faux pas was forgotten. Lord Hymes walked in with all the pompous assurance of the British aristocrat. He greeted the married ladies first, as expected, then moved on to Lady Sally and Lady Agnes, then finally to her.

The gaze that met hers was admiring, making it clear she was the one he had really come to see. But the look in his gray eyes was also coolly assessing, as if she were a painting he was thinking about buying. She might just as well be put on the auction block at Sotheby's and sold to the man with the highest title.

"Miss Van Alden." He bent over her hand in the customary gesture and pressed his lips to her fingers. The kiss was not a long one, as Roger Hastings never stepped beyond the bounds of propriety. Margaret found him incredibly dull.

He released her hand and stepped back. Margaret waited until he sat down, accepted a cup of tea, and replied suitably to the duchess's questions about his health before she gave an exaggerated sigh. "Oh," she moaned, and pressed a hand to her forehead.

Everyone in the room looked over at her with worried expressions. All except Cornelia, whose glance was definitely skeptical. "Oh," she said again and wilted slightly in her chair, praying for the question that would enable her to escape.

Lady Lytton provided it. "Margaret, my dear, are you ill?"

She lifted her head and tried to look convincingly sick. "My head," she murmured. "It's aching dreadfully." She rose and continued in a weak voice, "I'm so sorry, but I fear I really must lie down. Pardon me."

She cast an apologetic glance at the others, then left the drawing room. Once out of their sight, she raced across the tiled foyer and up the stairs. Safely inside her bedroom suite, she shut the door behind her and let out a heartfelt sigh of relief. Thank goodness that was over.

Lord Hymes was probably disappointed at her hasty departure. Maybe he'd take the hint, return to his estates in Durham, or wherever it was he came from, and stop following her about.

Hymes, she knew, wanted to marry her. He had already spoken to her father on the subject, but she had no intention of considering Lord Hymes as a husband. To Hymes, marriage meant landing a rich wife who would get him out of debt.

Well, Margaret certainly met the requirement. Her father had so much money that it made the stodgy old New York Knickerbocker set back home ill to contemplate it. No wonder she had suitors standing in line.

Fortune hunters. During the year she'd been in London, there had been dozens of them, all vying for the Van Alden millions, none of them vying for her heart. She despised some of them, pitied others, but she hadn't fallen in love with any of them. And she found it hard to believe that any of them had ever been in love with her. Hymes certainly wasn't.

Margaret walked through the French doors, out onto the balcony. The sun fell over her like warm honey, and the breeze caressed her face. Her view faced the countryside of wooded hills and meadows. She stared out over the lush, green landscape with longing, wishing she had time to take one of the horses out, but it was too late in the day for a ride. At home in America, she would have thought nothing of it, but on this side of the Atlantic, going out alone, especially in the late afternoon, was an unpardonable breach of etiquette.

She had been thrust into a world where everything exciting seemed to be a breach of etiquette. She shifted her weight restlessly and, not for the first time, she chafed under the rigid rules of high society existence.

A knock sounded on her door. That would be Cornelia. With a resigned sigh, Margaret walked back into the sitting room of her suite and sat down on the sofa. "Come in."

As expected, it was her cousin who entered the room. But, to Margaret's dismay, Cornelia had brought extra ammunition with her. Margaret's father.

Henry Van Alden was a powerfully built man, with piercing gray eyes and a square jaw that clearly showed the determination that had made him one of America's wealthiest men. Just now, he wore a frown that the financiers of Wall Street and Margaret both knew very well. The men of Wall Street would have been intimidated by that frown. Margaret was not.

The pair took chairs facing her. Margaret gathered her defenses and prepared for yet another confrontation about her future. Her gaze moved defiantly from her father to her cousin and back again. "Why don't you give me the lecture and get it over with?"

"Hymes came solely for the purpose of seeing you," Henry said, "and the minute he arrives you plead a headache and leave."

She shot an accusing glance at Cornelia, and her father saw it. "Cornelia didn't tattle on you, miss. The Duchess of Arbuthnot told me, and she expressed great concern over your future."

Margaret found that concern hard to believe and expressed it succinctly. "Hah!" she said in an exact imitation of the cantankerous old lady.

Henry let that pass. "The fact remains that Lord Hymes asked my permission to court you, and I gave it. Hymes would make you a good husband."

"I don't think so."

"What's wrong with him?" Henry demanded, clearly exasperated and puzzled. They'd had many similar discussions during the past year, but Margaret knew he still did not understand her nor the reason she refused one man after another. "He seems a good enough fellow. He's a viscount. Quite a catch, Cornelia tells me."

"Is he? I am informed that he's desperately in need of money."

"So is nearly every other British peer. What of it?"

"He's nothing but a fortune hunter. Doesn't that bother you?"

Her father's frown deepened into a scowl, and Cornelia spoke before the shouting could begin.

"Maggie, you can't expect your father's financial status to go unnoticed. A dowry is always important to a man thinking of marriage. But just because Lord Hymes is a bit short in the pocket doesn't mean his feelings for you aren't genuine. I'm certain he's an honorable man."

"Then why don't you marry him?" Margaret countered gloomily.

Her cousin smiled and moved to sit beside her on the sofa. "I'm already married, remember? I think Hymes really does care for you. I think he wants to marry you for more than your money."

Margaret looked at her cousin with envy. Cornelia had the good fortune to have fallen in love with a man who had more wealth and a higher social position than herself. There was no doubt his feelings for her were genuine. As long as she remained Henry Van Alden's daughter, Margaret would never have that certainty. "Hymes doesn't want a wife. He wants a banker."

"Damnation, Margaret!" Henry's voice exploded like a rifle shot, his patience obviously at an end. "It's important that you marry a gentleman who moves in the right circles, a man who can give you the respect of his name and position. Hymes can do that."

Margaret pressed her fingers to her temples and realized her feigned headache was becoming reality. Respectability mattered so much to her father because it was the only thing his money could not buy. Though the powerful men of New York willingly dealt with him in business, their wives and daughters had closed ranks against the upstart Van Aldens. Hoping the British were more amenable, Henry had taken her to London and placed her in the hands of her cousin. Cornelia had married a viscount the year before and her excellent social connections made her perfectly suited to the task of finding Margaret a titled husband.

Thus far, the experiment had proved a dismal failure. Her father had received many offers for her

hand, but Margaret had no intention of buying her way to respectability by becoming Lady Whatever and had refused every suitor that came her way.

"If I ever decide to marry, it will be for love and no other reason." She glared at her father, setting her jaw in a stubborn line that mirrored Henry's own. "I don't love Hymes," she said through clenched teeth, "and I'm not going to marry him."

"You're twenty-three, and I won't allow you to become an old maid. I intend to see you married before another year goes by. You say Hymes isn't the right man for you? Fine. Then pick another—Edgeware, Montrose, Worthington—I don't care which. They've all offered for you. So choose one and let's get on with it."

The fact that her father could be so oblivious to her feelings made her angry and reckless. "Perhaps I'll just fall madly in love with some starving artist who'll paint me in the moonlight and whisk me away to a quaint little hovel on a Greek island where we can live in sin."

Her shot hit home. "You'll do no such thing!" Henry roared. Margaret knew she had gone too far. "I've had enough of this foolishness. You'll be properly wed to a respected gentleman. I'm getting old and I want grandchildren before I die."

His words caused Margaret's anger to fade away. Her father had been talking a great deal about his age lately. "Don't say that."

"I'm fifty-two. No man on my side of the family has lived past fifty-five, and I probably won't either."

"You're not going to die for a long time yet, Papa."

Cornelia gave a delicate little cough. "Perhaps this discussion should be continued another time. I'm out after six o'clock, and the ball does begin at eight. We must be getting ready."

Margaret shot her cousin a grateful glance.

Henry rose to his feet. "I don't see why women need two hours to dress for a ball," he grumbled. "An hour is more than enough time."

"For men, perhaps," Cornelia replied. "But women require more time to look our best."

Margaret stood up and walked around the table to her father, hoping to make peace. "Don't worry, Papa," she said, linking her arm through his. "I will probably marry someday, if I find the right man. There's plenty of time."

"Time slips away faster than you think, my girl. I want you settled with a husband and children of your own." Henry paused. "You don't believe this, I know," he said heavily, "but love isn't everything, and it really isn't necessary to a successful marriage. I didn't love your mother, and she didn't love me. But we had a good, solid marriage just the same, and we were quite fond of each other."

"Yes, Papa, I know," she said, thinking a lifetime of good and solid and being fond of a man sounded horribly dull. She gave him an affectionate peck on the cheek before she gently ushered him out the door. When he left, she closed the door behind him. "Cornelia, you're an angel," she said, turning to her cousin. "Thank you. I'm so glad that's over. He seemed to take it rather well this time. At least he didn't threaten to disinherit me."

"I do believe he thought you were serious about the artist. Really, Maggie, sometimes you are so outrageous! A Greek island!"

"I think I shocked him with that one," she agreed, walking over to the sofa. "But sometimes Papa can be so overbearing. He thinks he can bully me into doing whatever he wants. And you're no help. Must you keep pushing Hymes down my throat?"

"If you hadn't already refused Lord Edgeware, Lord Worthington, and Lord Montrose, I wouldn't have to." Cornelia's expression became thoughtful. "I know it's sometimes difficult to believe

Maggie, but your father loves you. He wants you to be happy."

"So I am to be displayed all over the ballrooms and drawing rooms of England and the Continent like wares in a shop window? Am I an item to be traded, along with my substantial inheritance, for the price of a title?" Margaret shook her head as she sat down on the sofa. "No, thank you."

"You've been reading too many suffragette pamphlets. Courtship and marriage aren't like that at all."

"Aren't they? If you marry a man who does not love you, marriage is a prison."

Cornelia lifted her hands in a gesture of surrender. "I understand why your father becomes so exasperated with you, I honestly do! Maggie, I have introduced you to dozens of eligible men, yet you reject them all."

"I know what I want, and I won't settle for less. What's wrong with that?"

"No real man ever lives up to your expectations. You dismiss them all without giving any of them a chance to win your affections. You hardly know Lord Hymes, yet the moment you found out he didn't have money, you convicted him as a fortune hunter. You might get to know him before you make such a harsh judgment."

The clock on the mantel struck half past six, and Cornelia jumped up. "Heavens! We can't continue chatting away. We've got to get ready." She ran for the door. "Think about what I've said," she urged. "I'll see you downstairs."

Her cousin departed in a rush, and Margaret reached for the bell pull to summon her maid. The girl arrived within moments carrying Margaret's gown for the party. After Molly helped her dress, Margaret sent her away. She wanted to be alone.

Her father called her foolish. Cornelia called her unrealistic. Perhaps they were right, she thought, staring at her reflection in the mirror above her dressing table. Not exactly a face and figure that would inspire a man's passion. She saw a round face with brown eyes and a wide mouth, ordinary brown hair without a hint of gold or red to make it interesting, and a plump figure that no corset could mold into the fashionable wasp waist. She saw a taller version of the chubby child she'd once been.

Margaret wrinkled her nose at her reflection and sat down. It didn't really matter what she looked like. She could be a troll with a voice like a corn crake and suitors would still be standing by with the pedantic notions of courtship, treating her with kid gloves for fear of spoiling their chances. She had met many men like Hymes, and she was tired of their hypocrisy.

She thought of her friends—Ann, Eliza, Josephine—girls who had grown up in identical circumstances to her own. They were American girls with wealthy fathers and no background, who had gone to London to find titled husbands. They had found them, and they were miserable. Each had discovered that, beneath the aristocratic veneer, their dukes and their earls were cold, unfeeling, unfaithful, and usually in debt. Margaret would not make the same mistake.

She twisted her hair into a simple chignon and secured it with a pair of gold filigree combs. But her hands faltered as she began to fasten a diamond necklace around her throat. She ran the sparkling chain through her fingers without seeing its beauty. She would gladly trade all her diamonds and luxuries for a man who truly loved her, but she was afraid that no man would ever love her more than he would love her father's money.

Trevor followed the butler down a long hall, noting with appreciation the paintings of Italian and Dutch masters that lined the walls. He appraised their value with a knowledgeable eye. When Edward had wired instructions to Cairo, telling him to bring the necklace to the villa outside Rome where he was staying, Trevor hadn't expected the place to be quite so posh. If Edward could afford to let a house like this, he must have even more money than Trevor had realized. He cast an admiring look over his

shoulder at the Rembrandt as he passed through a doorway and onto a portico of marble columns and malachite tile. If he'd known, he'd have upped his asking price for the necklace.

"Lord Kettering will be with you shortly," the butler informed him. With a bow, he departed leaving Trevor to his contemplation of money, especially his lack of it.

Once he sold Edward the necklace, he'd have three thousand pounds. Unfortunately, he would need a great deal more money than that. Trevor thought of the letter he'd received at the dig in Luxor just over a month ago. It was the only letter he'd received from his mother since his departure from England ten years before. She had made no maternal inquiries about the health or happiness of her second son. She had informed him of his brother's death, inquired about his financial situation, talked woefully about the mess in which Geoffrey had left things when he died, and ended the letter with a demand that he come home and do his duty to the family. It was a duty that had been pounded into his brain since childhood, one she knew he would never ignore.

Knowing his mother had a flair for the dramatic and a tendency to exaggerate, Trevor had wired the family solicitor. Collier had been blunt and succinct in his reply. The debts of Trevor's late brother amounted to approximately two hundred thousand pounds, a staggering sum.

Trevor gazed between the marble columns at the Tiber River, staring at the last lights of sunset over the water. He wondered how he was going to repay a debt of that size. He thought of Ashton Park, of the tenants and their families whose livelihood came from Ashton lands, and of the village tradesmen who needed the patronage of the Ashton estates. The weight of his new responsibilities settled heavily on his shoulders. The fate of so many depended on him.

The sound of footsteps on the tile floor interrupted Trevor's musings. He turned and watched Edward approach.

"Trevor," the other man greeted him. "I'm glad you've finally arrived. I was worried." He frowned. "You look the very devil. Why in heaven's name don't you shave?"

Trevor rubbed a hand over his stubbled jaw. "My valet decided I don't pay him enough."

"You don't have a valet, and haven't had one since Cambridge days." He gave Trevor a long, hard stare, then said, "Damned malaria again, I suppose?"

"A touch. The journey from Cairo was pretty bad, I must admit. But I'm taking my quinine and I'm well enough now, all things considered. And yourself?"

"Fine, fine." Edward leaned closer, and his smile faded. "Did you bring it?" he asked in a low voice.

"Of course. Did you think I wouldn't?"

"As I said, I was worried. I know the chances you take, my friend."

"I had a bit of trouble," Trevor admitted. "But I handled it."

"Good. It's a lovely evening. Why don't we take a walk?"

Trevor straightened away from the column and followed the other man. They walked without speaking down a short path of lemon trees to a terrace at the edge of a pond. They continued on down a dock that jutted out over the water. It did not escape Trevor's notice that no one could overhear their conversation from here. He almost smiled. Edward was always so cautious.

He reached inside his jacket to pull a paper-wrapped box from the pocket. He unwrapped it, opened the box, and pulled back the protective layers of cotton to reveal the breathtaking collar of lapis and gold.

Edward gave a low whistle of appreciation. "You certainly didn't exaggerate the value of this piece," he said, taking the box to give the necklace closer examination.

"Eighth Dynasty, of course," Trevor told him.

"Wife of a priest. Unfortunately, there was little else of value in the tomb. It had already been

robbed, but this was missed."

Edward slid the box into the inside pocket of his jacket. "I believe we had agreed on three thousand pounds if the necklace was as you described?"

Trevor gave a brief nod of agreement, and Edward handed him a wad of notes. "You did well," he said. "The museum will be very glad to get this piece for the Egyptian collection."

"Just don't tell them how you got it."

"I never do. So tell me. What delayed you?"

"Lucci. What else?"

Edward was vexed. "That man is proving to be a great inconvenience."

"That's one way of putting it. He stole the necklace from me before I even got out of Henet's tomb. He and his men must have followed me there."

"How did you get it back?"

Trevor gave the other man a wicked smile. "Let's just say that Lucci has an incredibly beautiful and very bored wife."

Edward laughed. "I see. Are you planning to return to Egypt?"

"No. I'm going home."

"I suspected as much. You're the best I've got, and I'm sorry to lose you. But at least I'll be able to see you more often." He paused and gave his friend a long, speculative look. "I heard about your brother, of course. How does it feel to be the earl?"

Trevor turned away and gazed at the swans gliding across the water. "Damned odd."

"Trevor, I have to tell you that I've heard rumors about some, *ahem*, financial difficulties. If I've heard the gossip, then—"

"Then so has everyone else," Trevor finished smoothly, betraying none of the dismay he felt. "Thank you for the information."

"I'm afraid the suicide of an earl does not go unnoticed."

"I suppose not. I'm going to Kent immediately to see for myself."

"When do you depart?" Edward asked.

"My ship leaves from Ostia tomorrow afternoon."

"Excellent. You'll stay the night here, of course. As you can see, there's plenty of room."

Trevor glanced from the luxurious villa in the distance to the lavish gardens that surrounded them. "It's quite a place," he said as the two men began retracing their steps along the path. "The Kettering estates must be doing well if you can afford to let a villa like this. Or does being a director of the British Museum pay that well?"

"Oh, I'm not leasing it. I'm a guest here. The house belongs to my wife's uncle, Henry Van Alder. He's American—millionaire, as you might guess. Made his money in chocolate, but now he's involved in all sorts of ventures."

Trevor wished he had rich relatives.

The two men halted at the steps leading up to the portico, and Edward turned to Trevor. "So, will you stay the night?"

"I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Oh, Henry won't mind. Archaeology is a hobby of his, and I know he'll want to talk with you about Egypt. Shall I have a room prepared for you?"

"I'd be glad to stay the night, if you're sure I wouldn't be imposing on your host. My things are at Signora Calvetti's *spensione* in the Piazza di Angelo."

"I'll send for them." He glanced down at Trevor's rumpled traveling clothes. "Henry and his

daughter are having a ball this evening. Formal dress will be required, I'm afraid."

Trevor shook his head. "I've been out of the ballrooms too long. Besides, I'm a bit tired and I still have a long journey ahead of me. I'll give it a miss, if you don't mind."

"Of course. Malaria is a beastly thing, isn't it? Giuseppe will let you know when your room is ready. We have several other guests staying here for the next few days and breakfast is quite informal. Warming dishes on the sideboard any time until eleven o'clock. Now I must change or I'll be late. You'll excuse me?"

Edward started to go inside, but paused and looked over his shoulder. "It's good to see you again, my friend."

He went inside, and Trevor took a seat on one of the wrought-iron benches in the portico. He sat there a long time, smoking a cigar, watching dusk turn to night. He thought about Edward's comment that rumors were flying all over London and wondered just how much was known. Damn it all, everyone in society knew just how precarious the Ashton situation was, he'd never be able to raise capital. What the hell was he going to do?

Margaret hummed under her breath as she studied the couples waltzing across the parquetry floor. She watched them from her hiding place behind the tall potted palms and ferns that screened a quiet alcove. From here, she hoped to watch the dancing and enjoy the music while avoiding all the men Cornelia insisted on introducing to her.

She took a sip from her fourth glass of champagne. A figure in black suddenly caught sight of her peeking between the palms. Margaret groaned in dismay and stepped back deeper into the alcove, but not before she saw Roger begin walking toward her. She gulped down two hasty swallows of champagne as he came around the palms.

"I thought I saw you hiding back here," he said. "Have I told you how lovely you look this evening?"

"Yes. At least twice."

She watched him struggle for something else to say. He finally managed it. "I'm sorry if I keep repeating myself. But it's true. You look quite beautiful."

"You give me many compliments, Lord Hymes." She took another swallow from her glass. Love, stuff, champagne. She decided to find out how far Roger was prepared to carry on this courtship charade. "Answer a question for me. Just what exactly is it that you find so beautiful about me?"

He stared at her, taken aback by the bluntness of her question. "Well . . ." He paused, studying her. Then he rallied and said, "You have a lovely face."

"Really? What about my hair? Does it look as dark and rich as mahogany?"

A genuine smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He was beginning to perceive her point. "I'd say that's an apt description."

"And do my eyes sparkle like fabulous jewels?"

His smile widened. "No. Your eyes are brown."

She laughed, and so did he. She looked up into his face and realized that when his smile was genuine, when he wasn't saying the things he thought she wanted to hear, he wasn't irritating at all. Only he weren't so perfectly proper.

Still, she studied him for a moment. He did have a nice mouth. She wondered how it would be to kiss a man. Not the tentative pecks on the cheek she had received from the boldest of her suitors, but a real kiss.

A wild, reckless feeling swept over her, along with an overwhelming curiosity. Marrying Roger was something she had no intention of doing, but kissing him, well, that was something else entirely. She drained her glass, then tossed it carelessly into a nearby fern. "The gardens of the villa are lovely by moonlight. Perhaps you would care to see them?"

He stared at her in astonishment. "Now?"

Margaret saw the eager hope in his face and felt a glimmer of doubt, but she pushed it aside. "Meet me in the center of the maze at midnight," she whispered, then left the alcove to rejoin the ball, leaving Roger gaping after her.

The sounds of the party floated toward Trevor as a door opened behind him. Several men wandered out onto the portico to smoke cigars, and he did not want company. He wanted quiet and time to think. He rose and went down the steps toward a maze of high boxwood hedges, finding his way by moonlight. He entered the maze and took the first path, racking his brain for a way, any way, to raise two hundred thousand pounds.

Damn Geoffrey for getting the family into this mess. But then, his brother had always been a fool. Geoffrey, who couldn't be bothered to care about the estates he had inherited or do the work required

to maintain them. Geoffrey, whose main concerns had been the most fashionable knot for his cravat and whether or not the Prince of Wales would invite them to the Royal Enclosure at Ascot again this year. Geoffrey, who wouldn't have known a sensible investment if it bit him, who had always had the arrogant assumption that money just came to peers of the realm by divine right. And now that the family coffers were empty, Geoffrey lay in the family plot with a bullet through his brain.

Trevor wondered if Elizabeth would wear black for the full year and pretend to grieve for her departed husband. Probably not, he concluded with cynical detachment. She hated black.

He took a turn in the maze and found himself staring at a solid wall of boxwood hedge. A dead end. He turned around and retraced his steps for a bit, then took another path.

Elizabeth. The vain and frivolous wife of a vain and stupid man, who cared even less about the estate than her husband did.

In her letter to him, Trevor's mother had bemoaned the dreadful condition of Ashton Park. The roof over the west wing leaked, the carpets were threadbare, and the drains had ceased to work properly more than three years before. Jewels handed down through generations had been sold, family portraits pawned for their gilt frames, and the gold-plated dining service for two hundred, a gift from Queen Elizabeth to the first Earl of Ashton, had long since gone on the auction block.

None of that mattered to Trevor. Jewels and portraits and tradition be hanged. Ashton Park mattered for only one reason: It was his. Leaky roof, worn carpets, bad drains, and all, it now belonged to him.

Trevor took another turn and found himself in a plaza. A fountain, its water gleaming silver in the moonlight, stood in the center. In the shadowy corners were stone benches partially screened by rose arbors and clearly designed for lovers' meetings. He took a seat on the nearest bench and stared between the rose canes at the fountain beyond, turning his thoughts from the past to the future. For the first time in his life, he had something that was truly his own, and, by God, he was not going to lose it because his brother had been an idiot.

The sound of rustling skirts broke into his thoughts, and Trevor leaned forward, watching as a girl strolled into the plaza. Dressed in a ball gown, she was clearly a guest at the party and had come out here for a stroll. She paused quite close to where he sat.

"Why don't you kiss me?"

Her whispered suggestion startled him. He thought for a moment she was speaking to him, but he was deep in the shadows of the arbor and doubted she could see him. Besides, he'd never met her before, and she would hardly make such a charming invitation to a perfect stranger.

Puzzled, he watched as she again whispered to thin air. "Roger, I want you to kiss me."

Tilting her head to one side, she considered that for a moment, then shook her head as if dissatisfied. "No. Too forward. That will never work."

She began to pace back and forth in agitation, preoccupied with her own thoughts and completely unaware of the man less than ten feet away. She stopped and lifted her head to look up at an imaginary partner. "Don't you want to kiss me?"

She sighed. "No, that's not right either."

Trevor realized what she was on about and smiled in amusement. The girl was planning a midnight tryst—obviously her first—and this was a rehearsal of some sort. He studied her with an appreciative eye. He could have told her there was no need to worry. With a woman like this, a man would have to be both blind and stupid to need encouragement.

The moonlight revealed a deliciously generous figure in a velvet gown of midnight blue. He noted the neckline of the dress and tempting expanse of creamy skin that made an inviting path to her cleavage. His gaze moved further down. Fiddle-waisted, her body was beautifully molded, every curve

perfectly proportioned. When she turned her head slightly, he saw her wide, dark eyes, dumpling cheeks, and a mouth definitely worth kissing. He was intrigued, and silently applauded Roger's taste.

The sound of a discreet cough diverted his attention, and he glanced toward the plaza entrance where a man stood, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other. This must be Roger.

"Lord Hymes." The girl beckoned him forward. "I see you found your way through the maze."

The man walked to her side. "Took me a few minutes," he said. "A rather tedious journey."

It seemed the romantic rendezvous was about to begin. Trevor glanced at the entrance again, and realized it was the only one. There was no way for him to escape without being seen. He could simply stand up, rustle the bushes to announce his presence, and make a quick retreat, but he really didn't want to spoil the girl's romantic moment. Besides, he was curious to see if she succeeded in her intention. He would leave if the situation became too intimate, of course. If that happened, they wouldn't notice his departure anyway.

The girl took a step closer to Roger. "I hope it was worth the trouble," she said softly.

Trevor grinned at the girl's hint for a compliment, recognizing it to be the first move in the game.

Roger, however, took no notice of the opportunity she'd given him. He glanced up at the sky. "Lovely night, what? A bit chilly for a stroll perhaps, but warm enough for February."

"Yes, it's a beautiful evening," she agreed, glancing at the moon overhead, then back at the man before her. She gave him a dazzling smile as she leaned closer to him. "Italy is so romantic, don't you think?"

"Er, yes, yes, I guess it is," he stammered, running a finger inside his collar in a stiff and uncomfortable fashion. Trevor's grin widened. What a cold fish, he thought. Was the man frigido, queer, or simply stupid? He felt sorry for the girl, though. It was a shame that such a delectable woman should have to work so hard for a kiss.

Roger cleared his throat. "I must say, I was astonished by your invitation to go for a walk. Delighted, of course, but astonished. You have so many suitors."

"None of my suitors have ever kissed me," she said, abandoning any attempt to be subtle.

Trevor didn't hold that against her. Coy women had never held any charm for him. Besides, subtlety was not going to work with a man like this.

"I should hope not," Roger answered her pompously. "You are a lady of quality. No gentleman would presume to be so forward."

Trevor rolled his eyes. To hell with the proprieties. Kiss her, you idiot. Can't you see that's what she's waiting for?

"Of course not," the girl echoed with such consternation and disappointment in her voice that Trevor choked back a laugh.

"Unless he were engaged to you," the man went on. "Then it would be quite all right, of course." He took a deep breath, as if gathering his courage, then grasped her hands in his and suddenly dropped to one knee. "Margaret—may I call you Margaret?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "I have such sincere regard for you, that I feel compelled to express my feelings. I have a deep fondness for you, and I respect you utterly. You would be the perfect wife for me. Will you marry me?"

The sight of a fastidious Englishman down on one knee in damp grass proposing marriage with the passion of a schoolboy reciting catechism was nearly too much for Trevor.

Despite how silly the man might look at the moment, Trevor knew that most women would have been delighted by such an offer and would have accepted it triumphantly. This woman, however, did not look delighted at all. Nor did she seem to find the situation amusing. Instead, she stared down at the man in astonished dismay. She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again, as if she really didn't

know what to say. This was clearly not what she had been hoping for.

~~A few passionate kisses, some romantic words, yes. But it seemed a marriage proposal had not~~ figured into her plans. Trevor wondered what she would say.

She tried to pull her hands away, but Roger held them fast and went on, "I've been planning to ask you for your hand almost from the moment we met, but I confess that until tonight, I wasn't certain of your feelings for me. You can be so circumspect, my dear."

"Roger," she said, "I'm afraid that you have mis—"

"But your charming invitation to walk in the garden told me that you care for me a great deal more than I realized," he babbled on as if she hadn't spoken.

Once again, she tried to speak. "But I really—"

"Tell me you'll marry me," he urged. "We would be a splendid match, you and I. All of society will envy us."

"Yes, I'm sure they would," she murmured, "but I really don't think—"

"Mother is quite fond of you, you know, even though you're American. She already told me it was quite all right to ask for your hand."

Right-ho, Trevor thought, Mummy has given permission. How nice.

The girl was now trying desperately to free herself. "Oh, Roger, do get up!" she said, finally jerking her hands out of his grip. "I should have known this wasn't going to work. Let's just forget the whole thing."

The man stared up at her in bewilderment. "Forget the whole thing? I don't understand."

"I know you don't. You've made a charming offer. I'm flattered, really. But I can't possibly marry you."

"You are refusing me?" he asked in disbelief. "But you invited me out here! You led me to believe—"

"I'm sorry if I misled you, I truly am. That was not my intention. But we are ill-suited, I'm afraid, and if we were to marry, it would be a grievous mistake for both of us."

Trevor heartily agreed. This was a girl clearly out of the common run, a girl who desired passion even though she was obviously innocent of its ramifications. He doubted Roger was capable of giving her what she longed for, in the marriage bed or out of it.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence before Roger finally spoke. "I see," he said coldly, and stood up. "You're right, of course. It would be a mistake." His voice grew more contemptuous with every word he spoke. "I should have known better than to waste my affections on an ill-bred American. Good-bye."

He bowed stiffly and departed.

"Oh, hell!" she muttered after he had gone. "My first real kiss and he had to act like such a prig and spoil it all!"

Trevor couldn't help it. He burst out laughing.

Margaret whirled around with a gasp. She stared in shock as a man she had never seen before emerged from the shadows, a man of formidable height and wide shoulders, with rumpled clothes, rakish black hair, and an unshaven face. But the clothes were of excellent cut, and his voice, when he spoke, was deep, cultured, and very much amused.

"You can't blame me for laughing." He came so close to her that she had to lift her chin to look into his face. She caught a glimpse of angular features and deep-set eyes, then everything suddenly began to blur. She shook her head from side to side and hastily took a step back, then another, trying to clear her champagne-drugged senses.

"If you step back any further, you'll be in the fountain," he pointed out.

~~Her heel hit the tiled surround of the fountain, and she was forced to halt her retreat.~~ "Who are you?" she demanded.

"I don't know when I've seen anything so amusing in my life," he said without answering her question. "He *is* a prig, and I'm glad you refused to marry him."

She realized that he must have seen and heard everything, and her shock turned to outrage. "How dare you lurk back there in the shadows, eavesdropping!"

"I was here first," he replied. "If you wanted privacy, you should have made certain there was no one else here."

That did not pacify her, but she had the feeling it wasn't intended to. "You should have made your presence known immediately."

"And interrupt one of the greatest moments of a girl's life? I couldn't possibly."

"It was a private conversation!" she shot back furiously.

He smiled at her, a slow, teasing smile, and began to walk toward her. "Somehow, I got the impression it was kissing, not conversation, that you had in mind."

She was humiliated that this stranger had witnessed the embarrassing scene. But she refused to let him show. She tried to gather her dazed wits and muster some dignity. She lifted her chin and gave him her haughtiest stare. "I don't know what you mean."

"No?" He gently brushed her lips with the tip of his finger. The light touch paralyzed her, and she felt her heart pounding hard in her breast. Who was he?

"If you really want to experiment with kissing," he murmured, slowly stroking her lower lip, "you ought to choose a man who knows how to do it properly."

His words galvanized her into action. She grasped his wrist and violently pushed his hand away. "Like you, I suppose?"

"Is that an offer? Of course, I'd be happy to step in for poor old Roger." He leaned closer and added in a confidential whisper, "I promise not to ruin everything by dropping down on one knee and proposing."

His teasing smile widened, and she was certain that he was laughing at her. She opened her mouth to reply, but she could think of nothing sharp enough or scathing enough to shatter his arrogant self-assurance. Hot with embarrassment, dazed by too much champagne, and speechless with frustration and fury, she did the only thing she could think of. She ran away.

Still smiling, Trevor watched her hasty departure until something glittering in the moonlight caught his eye. He picked up the object and whistled. It was a woman's hair comb of gold filigree set with a multitude of diamonds. Toying with the jeweled comb that must be worth over a hundred pounds, he thought of the girl's enticing figure, trembling mouth, and innocently provocative attempts at seduction. It was an unusual and tempting mixture, and he felt a sudden rush of desire. A pity he hadn't been the one to take her for a moonlight walk. Perhaps she might have found her experiment a bit more gratifying. He certainly would have enjoyed it.

The following morning, Trevor was up early. He had noticed the stables during his walk with Edward the evening before, and it had been a long time since he'd gone riding. He bathed and dressed, then went down to the stables.

The head groom took him inside, and Trevor walked down the line of stalls, studying the horses with admiration. Whoever his host was, the man knew horseflesh. He paused thoughtfully beside a gorgeous black mare. The horse gave him a spirited neigh and shook back her mane as if daring Trevor to ride her.

Just then, a man entered the stables who was evidently of some importance. The groom hastened toward him, greeting him effusively.

"Good morning, Roberto," the man said in a booming voice that carried to where Trevor stood. "Bring Cheval, would you?"

The groom hastened away, and the man came up beside Trevor. He gave an approving nod to the mare. "Cinder's a fine horse," he said.

"Is she trained for riding?"

The other man laughed. "After a fashion. But she's very particular about who she allows to ride her. My daughter is one, but I suspect that's because they are kindred spirits. Both of them like to go fast and neither of them are very good at obeying orders."

"A horse doesn't allow you to ride her," Trevor contradicted. "You allow her to carry you."

"Perhaps, but Cinder, like my daughter, has a mind of her own."

As if to prove it, the mare suddenly reared up, pawing the air with her forelegs. She landed hard and then gave the back of the stall a belligerent kick.

Trevor moved into the empty stall next to the mare's. He reached out and grasped the horse's mane, wrapping the long hair around his hand in a firm grip. With his other hand, he stroked the mare's neck in a slow, soothing motion. "Easy now," he said softly. "Easy."

At first, the horse fought against the hold Trevor had on her, shaking her head from side to side to free herself. But he waited patiently, without relinquishing his grip, and, after a few moments, Cinder gave in and quieted.

"Well now," the man said, "she seems to have taken a liking to you."

"She's just biding her time, waiting until I try to ride her. Then we'll see."

The man gave an amused chuckle. "True enough. I'm just about to go out myself. Care to ride along?"

"Certainly." Trevor let go of the mare, then stepped out of the stall. He extended a hand and introduced himself. "Lord Ashton."

"Figured as much," the older man answered, taking his hand in a vise-like grip for the customary handshake. "Edward's told me a bit about you. I'm Henry Van Alden."

Once the two horses were saddled, Henry waited in the stable yard astride Cheval, his roan gelding watching with interest as the younger man mounted the mare. Trevor eased himself slowly into the saddle, careful to avoid any move that might startle the skittish horse, and gathered the reins. He took a deep breath and gave the groom a nod to step back. The moment Roberto was out of the way, Cinder gave an agitated snort, then tried to lower her head to buck, but Trevor kept a firm grip on the reins.

The mare danced about fretfully for a few moments, but once Trevor managed to quiet her, she graciously allowed her rider the privilege of leading her out into the stable yard.

"Excellent," Henry said as Trevor brought the mare to a halt beside Cheval. "You handle horses well."

Trevor sensed from this man that was a very high compliment indeed.

"Edward tells me that you're involved in archaeology?"

Trevor figured that was one way of putting it. "I have been, yes."

Henry pointed to the rolling green hills in the distance. "There's some excellent ruins that way. Care to see them?"

"Certainly." Trevor brushed Cinder's flank lightly with the crop, and the mare followed Henry's roan gelding out of the stable yard.

It was a fine spring morning, and the estate was beautiful. They rode for several miles before

bringing their horses to a halt at the top of a ridge. Trevor looked down at the valley below. In the clearing stood the columns and stones of an ancient Roman palace, only partly excavated.

"My own little project," Henry explained. "I'm working on it myself. It's slow going, of course, since I'm only here three months a year."

"You could hire archaeologists to excavate it for you."

Henry laughed and shook his head. "I couldn't stand it if they found anything without me."

"It's quite an impressive dig," Trevor commented. "Roman architecture isn't my field of expertise, of course, but this looks to be in remarkably fine shape."

"Not bad, not bad. Some earthquake damage, but that's to be expected. Any of the valuable objects that may have been here are gone, of course. But several of the mosaics are perfectly intact." He began a dissertation on Roman archaeology, and explained some of the advanced technology he had discovered on this site, including indoor plumbing.

He looked over at Trevor. "But perhaps I'm boring you with all this talk about Roman ruins. Egyptology is your field, isn't it?"

"Yes. I've been living in Egypt for the past ten years."

"But you've just become the Earl of Ashton, I believe?"

"Yes."

Henry nodded and gave him a shrewd, appraising glance. "I understand you have inherited something of a financial crisis along with the title."

Trevor continued to gaze down at the valley below. "Edward talks too much. And I fail to see how that is any of your business, Mr. Van Alden."

"It isn't," Henry answered good-naturedly. "And Edward didn't tell me anything that hasn't been the talk of London for weeks. I already knew that the late Lord Ashton left his estate bankrupt and that you are without means or credit."

Trevor bit back the curse that rose to his lips. Good God, did everyone in England know about his financial situation? And were they all going to bring up the subject so tactlessly?

As if reading his thoughts, Henry held up one hand in a placating gesture. "I didn't mean to offend you, but as a businessman, I confess I am curious about something. If you had money, what would you do with it? Buy more land, I suppose?"

Trevor thought about refusing to answer, but Henry Van Alden was a very wealthy man, and he knew that wealthy men often made useful contacts. He reluctantly swallowed his pride and shook his head. "Normally, land is a safe and wise investment. But not in these times. With fixed rents and crop prices falling, tenant farming is simply not profitable, and I don't think that is going to change in the near future."

"So what would you do?"

"Industry," he answered. "Mills and factories are the way of the future, and that's where the money is."

Henry eyed him in surprise. "That's not a typical attitude for someone of your position. Most of your peers insist on living exclusively off their land rents, even though it is no longer a profitable source of income for many of them."

"Most of my peers don't seem to have a great deal of sense," Trevor answered dryly. "My brother certainly didn't."

Henry laughed. "Well, this is something I never thought I'd see—an aristocrat who doesn't think it beneath him to be involved in industry."

Trevor turned his horse around to head back to the house. "I am a practical man, Mr. Van Alden."

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