

**THE FIVE KISSES**

**BY  
KARLA DARCY**

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## **DEDICATION**

**For Diane Capri**

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## The Five Kisses

Gillian Foster stabbed the poker into the logs and sparks rose like fairy dust to dance up the chimney. Heat from the fire pinked her cheeks. She reached up to refasten a chestnut curl that had come loose from the Psyche knot. Her eyes swung to her bedroom window and in the gathering darkness, she could make out the crenelated roofline of Maynard Hall, country seat of the eighth earl of Elmore, Lord Chadwicke Kendale.

Chad.

The vision of dark, piercing eyes appeared in Gillian's mind and her heart beat faster. The very vividness of her reaction to the apparition was daunting. To break the spell, she cast her eyes on the travelling cape lying across the green velvet chaise longue. Picking up her candle, she headed for the door. The black skirt of her mourning dress swirled around her with the gentle hiss of silk. She left the bulging portmanteau leaning against the oak wardrobe and, without a backward glance, went out into the hall.

Even after two months, the emptiness of her father's room jolted her; each day she awoke with the expectation that it had all been a nightmare. But, when she passed the open doorway she was reminded anew that her father was gone forever and she tried to take comfort from her memories of the scholarly, absent-minded man who had raised her. Some days the pain was less intense. She set the candle on the table beside the bed. Stroking the soft nap of the brown velvet edging on the comforter for the last time, she blew out the candle and left the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

She tried not to think about the evening ahead but as, she stood at the top of the stairs, her eyes were drawn to the kissing bough suspended in the center of the foyer. Apples tied to the red satin ribbons dangled from the circle of rosemary. The candle she had left on the hall table flickered and the shiny apples swayed, caught in the errant draughts of the hallway. Her hand tightened on the walnut handrail as she stared at the mistletoe nestled in the heart of the greenery.

The kissing bough and apples and Chad. She had fought all day not to think about him but he was wound up so inexorably with all her memories. The tall case clock in the drawing room chimed six. If he were coming tonight, he would not arrive until much later. Gillian sat down on the top step, tucking her skirts around her for warmth. Perhaps she needed to think about the past before she took the fateful step that inevitably would seal her future.

## The First Kiss

Gillian swung her feet over the edge of the hayloft. Squire Bassington's barn was cold but she was not uncomfortable since she was out of the cutting sting of the December wind. Her father had chuckled when she offered to go to the squire's for some apples for the kissing bough. Knowing it was her favorite fruit, he suggested she take two baskets.

She bit into the apple, sighing as the sharp flavor filled her mouth; she ate slowly savoring every bite, her mind floating in pure sensation. When she finished it, she licked the last of the juice off her fingers with businesslike precision. She inhaled deeply, feeling contented. She loved the musty, pungent odors of the old barn. The squire's land was close enough that even in winter she could slip away to the barn when she needed to escape the confinement of the schoolroom. Both the squire and her father knew she used the hayloft as her hidey-hole. It was a place to be alone, a place where she could think and plan and, best of all, a place to dream.

She heard the creak of the side door and stilled the motion of her feet. The voices were muffled beneath the loft and she hugged the basket of apples in her lap as she leaned forward to see who had entered. Recognizing Lester Wheatley, the son of the innkeeper, Gillian shrank back. She hoped he would not discover her presence. The heavily built boy was a bully, delighting in teasing the smaller village children until they cried.

The other boy came out from under the loft and she immediately identified the black hair and gangly body of Chadwicke Kendale, son of the Earl of Elmore whose land adjoined her father's small holding. Chad was older than Gillian, thirteen to her nine. She did not know him well, although her father had tutored him before he went away to school.

"What have you got in there?" Chad asked, pointing to the cloth bag in the bigger boy's hand.



"Wait'n you'll see." Lester opened the top of the bag. He reached in and brought out a small animal. Gillian caught her breath as Lester tied a long thong around the neck of a shivering kitten. Holding the loose end of the strap, he dropped the animal on the ground.

"Be careful. It's just a babe," Chad said, kneeling down to get a closer look.

"Don't be such a gudgeon. It's only a cat, that's what."

"I can bloody well see that. Wizard! Look at those ugly black patches on its back."

Bent on mischief, Lester was unimpressed with the outward appearance of the animal. He reached for a pitchfork leaning against the wall and tied the kitten's tether to the end of the handle. Gillian bit her lip, knowing she could not sit quietly in the loft and watch the boys hurt the cat. Her hand brushed the basket, forgotten in her lap, and her eyes narrowed. Her fingers tightened around the largest of the apples. Satisfied that she was well prepared, she waited calmly for the right moment to spring her attack.

"Have a care," Chad cautioned as the bigger boy tugged on the leather leash. "Don't pull on that!"

"Stubble it! I want to see if the cat can fly."

He raised the pitchfork and as the thong tightened on the kitten's neck, Chad threw himself at Lester, knocking the implement from his hand. For a moment the boy remained still, the only sign of his anger, the flush of red that rose to his face. Then with a bellow of rage Lester's fists flashed out in a flurry of blows that knocked the slimmer boy to the ground. From the hayloft above, Gillian could see the dazed look in Chad's eyes and knew the fight was nearly over.

As Lester brought his fist back for one more punishing blow, she raised her hand and threw the apple with all her might. She heard the bully cry out as the projectile hit him but she did not wait to assay the damage. Reaching into the basket for another apple, she launched each missile with deadly accuracy, smiling grimly as finally the boy threw his arms over his head and raced out the open barn door.

"Oh, I say, that was well done," Chad said, voice tinged with awe as he looked up at the loft from his position on the ground.

"Are you all right?" she called down.

"Bloody nose is all." He brushed the tumble of black curls out of his eyes, his forehead furrowed as he stared up at her. "Who are you?"

"Gillian. Gillian Foster."

"Professor Foster's daughter?" At her nod, he grinned. "I remember you now. You used to have long red pigtails and your front teeth were missing. Can you still spit so far?"

"No." She shook her head with wistful regret. "My teeth grew in and it rather threw off my aim."

"Pity." His face was sad for a moment but then his mouth creased in a smile that lightened his countenance. "At least your throwing is right on the mark. Good show, Gillian."

She returned his smile, feeling a glow of satisfaction at his words.

He stood up and brushed the dust off his breeches. Finished, he moved to stand just beneath her, one black eyebrow arched in question. "Would you like some help in getting down?"

Gillian was just about to tell him that she was quite capable of managing the wooden ladder when something strange happened. His face was turned up to her and she found herself staring into the most wonderful brown eyes she had ever seen. Surrounded by an almost girlish profusion of black lashes, Chad's eyes were deep-set and so dark there were no pupils visible. Suddenly she could feel herself flushing and there was a strange quivery sensation beneath her skin. Without conscious thought, her mouth opened and she spoke in a breathless voice she barely recognized as her own.

"I would rather like a bit of help," she said. "The basket will be awkward on the ladder."

"Don't worry," Chad said. "I'm coming up."

He raced to the ladder and climbed it with the agility of a monkey. Gillian was barely on her feet before he was beside her, reaching for the nearly empty basket of apples.

"I shall go first so that you will not be afraid of falling," he said.

Although normally Gillian would have bristled at the suggestion she might be afraid, she contented herself with a nod of the head. She was impressed when Chad skinned down the ladder, setting the basket on the floor and returned to her side without evincing any sign of breathlessness.

"Can you handle your skirts?" he asked.

Until his mention of her clothing, she had not given them a thought. Normally she was alone when she scrambled up and down the ladder. Now, in his presence, she realized that her dress and petticoats represented a definite handicap to a modest descent. However with

newfound aplomb, she raised her chin and indicated that he should precede her. She turned her back to the open space and, gathering her skirts decorously to the side, she began to descend, steadying herself with her free hand.

"Don't worry," Chad called from below. "I shall catch you if you fall."

She was just about to snort in disdain when the heel of her boot caught in the hem of her dress. She had to clutch at the rung above her head to keep from tumbling backwards. Her heart was hammering in her chest as she continued downward. She was almost at the bottom when hands grasped her waist and Chad lowered her the remainder of the distance. Carefully he set her on the packed earthen floor. He was considerably taller than she and Gillian had to tilt back her head to examine him more closely. A pitiful meow interrupted her scrutiny.

"Oh, the cat!" she cried. "Where are you, puss?"

Gillian spotted the end of the pitchfork and followed the leather leash behind a barrel of grain where the kitten was struggling to get loose.

"Poor darling," she crooned, untying the thong and scooping up the quivering ball of fur.

"It's not hurt, is it?" Chad asked, kneeling down beside her.

"I don't think so." Without the least bit of self-consciousness, Gillian turned the cat over. "It's a he," she announced.

Chad extended a finger and stroked the underside of the cat's chin, grinning at her when the animal began to purr. "What'll we do with him?"

"We'll get some more apples and then I'll take him home with me. He shouldn't be out on his own." She looked across at Chad. His face was dirty, his lip was split and puffy and his nose had bled all down the front of his shirt. "I think you had better come home with me too."

The boy cleaned up considerably better than the cat. In no wise could the animal be judged adorable. Unusual would be the best one could hope for. He was gray and white with a smattering of oddly shaped black patches on his coat. Aside from the strange markings on his fur, the chunk missing from one of his little ears ended any pretensions he might have had to beauty. Naturally Gillian thought he was precious.

"Will your mother let you keep him?" Chad asked.

"My mother died when I was born. Papa takes care of me," Gillian said, her voice matter of fact. Head cocked to the side, she eyed Chad's bruises and bloodstained shirt. "Perhaps you should come with me while I talk to Papa. Looking at us, he will see how much trouble we had

saving the cat," she said, flapping the skirt of her dress which was liberally covered with hay and smudged with dirt.

The disheveled threesome knocked at the library door, waiting for the deep voice of Professor Ethan Foster to call admittance. Gillian was delighted to discover her father standing over the mahogany table that was spread with open books, one on top of each other in higgledy-piggledy fashion. She knew that when he was involved in his research he was less likely to scrutinize her requests with the attention he would give them at other times. She came to stand beside him and without looking up, Ethan put his arm around her, bringing Gillian close to his side.

She snuggled against his old tweed jacket that smelled of the woods and the smoke from the fireplace. She giggled at the surprised expression in Chad's eyes. His father must not be much of a hugger, she guessed. She had seen the Earl of Elmore at church and it appeared that the unsmiling man never forget that he possessed a title. Thankfully Chad was not so puffed up in his own conceit. From the shelter of her father's arm, she winked at the slightly embarrassed boy and immediately his face relaxed into a grin.

"How is your project going, Papa?"

"Exceedingly well," came the rather absent reply. "I have been able to trace much of Sir Hans Sloane's life. There are some gaps, of course. It is most vexing that I cannot find where he was the year before he succeeded Sir Isaac Newton as President of the Royal Society."

"Perhaps he was travelling," she suggested.

"Excellent thought, Gillian. Searching for more plants for his herbarium, I would wager. I'll have to check into that possibility. Was there something you wanted, poppet?" he asked, stroking her hair even as he leaned over to turn the page of one of the books.

"Chad Kendale and I rescued a kitten."

Gillian held out the scrawny cat for her father's inspection. Startled by such an occurrence, Ethan turned away from his books. He brought his face down to the cat's level to peruse the mottled furball in his daughter's hands. Unmoved by the scrutiny, the kitten stared back, his eyes never leaving the shaggy gray eyebrows that wiggled over the top of gold-rimmed spectacles.

"It doesn't look like much of a specimen," he declared.

"He's had a bad day," Gillian said, rushing to the kitten's defense. "I'm sure he'll be quite, eh, handsome when he's older. Might I keep him, sir?"

Although less than enthused by the idea, Ethan took one look at his daughter's expression and rolled his eyes in defeat.

"I suppose it will be all right," he said. "Only keep it out of here."

"Oh, I will," she said, standing on tiptoes to give her father a grateful kiss.

"That's a good girl," Ethan said. He turned to show her to the door when he spotted Chad. "Hello, young sir. Have you arrived for a lesson?"

"Oh, no, Professor. I came in with Gillian."

"Excellent," Ethan said, an expression of relief crossing his face at the thought that his research would not be further interrupted. "Well, run along now. You best see to the cat."

"Who is Sir Hans Sloane?" Chad asked as they returned to the kitchen.

"Papa's writing a paper to deliver in London. Sloane was a famous collector. He was a doctor too. And you'll never guess," she said lowering her voice to a whisper. "He treated sick people with live millipedes and crabs' eyes."

"You're bamming me," Chad scoffed.

"Am not. Papa read it to me right out of one of his books." She waited to see if he would challenge her but, when he shrugged in acceptance, she grinned and changed the subject. "Do you think Patch would be a proper name for the cat?"

Chad tipped his head to the side, his face screwed up in thought. "I'd say topping good," he announced. He edged over toward the kitchen table. "May I have one of the apples?"

Gillian started to shake her head but, caught by the eagerness in the dark eyes of her new friend, she relented. "But just one. We need the rest for the kissing bough."

She set the kitten on the hearthrug as Chad snatched an apple from the basket. He bit into it, the sound sharp in the otherwise quiet kitchen. His tongue snaked out to catch the juice that ran out of the corner of his mouth. Gillian watched in fascination as he devoured the fruit. It was obvious that he loved apples as much as she.

"Would you like to come to our Christmas party?" she asked. "We have one every year. People from the village are invited and of course the squire and his wife. Some of Papa's students will be coming. The party's on Friday. There'll be ever so much food," she finished breathlessly.

She knelt down on the rug, lifted the kitten into her lap and fussed with it, all the time waiting nervously for Chad's reply. Somehow an affirmative answer was most important.

"I'd like to come," he announced. Then with a casual salute he sauntered across the kitchen and out the door.

Chad did come to the Christmas party and, despite the fact he was heir to the Earl of Elmore, he fit in well with the other guests. While the adults congregated in the drawing room, the children were permitted to play games in the kitchen and the back parlor, with occasional forays into the dining room for sustenance.

The party wore on, becoming less formal. Chad and Gillian, along with the other children, took turns hiding behind the draperies in the foyer to watch as the ladies were kissed beneath the mistletoe. When the squire's wife took over the piano and began to pound out "Bernie Bough", the adults returned to the drawing room, much to the children's disappointment.

"Just when things were getting interesting," Chad said.

"There's still one apple left," Gillian said, staring up at the kissing bough.

"Go on, Gilly!" someone shouted. "Stand under it and pay the forfeit."

Gillian hesitated. It was not that she was reluctant. She'd had her eye on the apples all evening and felt one kiss was a small price to pay for her favorite fruit. However she'd never been kissed before and was not eager for the other children to discover her ignorance.

Stalling for time, she said, "There is no one who can reach the apple."

There were giggles and a rustle of movement among the children. Gillian squirmed in embarrassment, wondering how she could get out of the awkward situation. Suddenly Chad stepped forward.

"I can reach the apple," he said. His voice cracked on the words but he winked to indicate he was quite willing to save her as she had saved him a few days earlier.

Gillian relaxed, determined to enter into the spirit of the game. With exaggerated gestures, she sashayed across the hall, pantomiming the simpering young women she had watched earlier. She flipped her curls with one languid hand and fluttered her eyelashes outrageously in Chad's direction.

He played along, acting the part of the amorous gallant. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a snowy white handkerchief. He fluttered it under his nose then made an elegant leg, sweeping the hand holding the handkerchief close to the floor. He straightened up, leaned

forward and kissed her with a resounding smack. On tiptoes he reached up and unfastened the apple which was presented to her with great ceremony, amid the cheers and applause of the other children and some of the adults who had come to investigate the cause of such hilarity.

Everyone said it was the greatest fun, almost like watching a play. Gillian laughed along with Chad and it was only later when she was tucked up in bed that she had time to think about the evening. Her first kiss had been much different than she had expected. She was surprised that Chad's lips had been so warm and firm. More surprising yet was the funny, shivery feeling she had in the pit of her stomach when he kissed her. It was like falling, a curious but not unpleasant sensation.

The uneaten apple rested on the table beside her bed. She had found it in her pocket when she came upstairs. It was strange that she hadn't felt any desire to eat it. After all she had earned it.

## The Second Kiss

Gillian threw down the rope she had been pulling and turned to glare at Chad. Her breath ballooned out in the frosty air. She stamped her feet on the frozen ground, wishing she had worn something more substantial than her half boots. She was inordinately proud of them but the shiny red leather was ill-suited to hauling the Yule log through the woods. She had wanted Chad to see how well her boots and mittens complimented her new black cape with the military braiding. Excited about his own news, he hadn't even given her fashionable ensemble a glance.

Reminded of her grievance, she hurried into conversation, "I still don't see why you have to go up to London right after Christmas. From what Papa says the town will be light of company."

"That's quite the point of it," Chad said. "Mother feels I need a touch of town bronze and since I have learned that it is pointless to argue with her, I will go. Besides I would much prefer to make my mistakes when not under the eagle eyes of the old biddies who line the walls at every ball. When the season starts, I shall be up to snuff, ready to take my place in society."

"Piffle!" Gillian waved a hand, dismissing his pretensions to a proper place among the ton as if they were inconsequential. "You will miss the best of the trout fishing, is all. Now that you're the earl you've become a dead bore."

She knew part of her ill temper was due to the fact that she was feeling abandoned. Perhaps if Patch were still around to rub against her ankles she would not feel so friendless. For five years the ugly little cat had comforted Gillian when she seemed most inconsolable. A month ago she had found her furry friend lying dead at the edge of the woods, his unusual markings blending with the mottled colors of the autumn leaves.

And now Chad was leaving.

Since that winter day when she had taken him home, Chad had become an unofficial member of the Foster household. Not only had he become her friend, but he had developed a



strong relationship with her father in the last five years. When he was home from school, he spent as much time with them as he did at home.

Gillian treated him with the casualness of an older brother and they were privy to each other's thoughts and dreams. They fished and hunted together, rode and walked in each other's company. On the occasions when he remained for supper, her father guided the conversation so that both Gillian and Chad were able to discourse on a broad range of subjects.

All of this had changed several months earlier when the Earl of Elmore was killed in a hunting accident. At eighteen, Chad was catapulted into a situation he had not thought to face for many years. No longer a carefree youth, heir to a title, he was now the eighth earl with all the responsibilities of his rank and fortune. He had estates to visit, tenants to contend with and social obligations to fulfill.

Despite all of Gillian's carping at him, she was proud of the way Chad, after his initial shock and grief, had taken control. He had assured her that his change in status would not affect their relationship but even at thirteen, she knew that nothing would ever be the same again. When Christmas was over, he would leave for London. Once he took his proper place in society there would be an unbridgeable gap between them.

Chad threw an arm around Gillian's shoulders and gave her an affectionate squeeze. "Have done with your sulking. It's much too cold to stand out here and argue. Miss Pennington promised that she would have sticky buns and cherry tarts for our party. I'm positively starving."

Gillian snorted. "You're always starving. I would be as fat as Squire Bassington's pig if I ate as much as you do. That's if Penny would let me eat as much as I wanted."

"Miss Pennington is an admirable woman." He picked up the rope she had thrown down on the snow, pressing it into her mittened hand.

"You only say that because she fair dotes on you. She's most impressed that I am friends with an earl."

"Hah!" Chad nudged her and they began to pull the Yule log, once more in charity with each other.

"I suspect it was your mother who suggested to Papa that I ought to have a governess to curb my hoydenish behavior." She peeked sideways to see if her guess was correct but he stared ahead, his expression giving nothing away. "I vowed I would not like Miss Pennington but of

course I assumed she would be some starchy spinster who would make me learn stitchery and other useless occupations and would cry rope if I misbehaved."

"Oho, the truth is out," Chad crowed. "Miss Pennington has quite won your loyalty after only six months. What a paragon!"

Gillian grimaced in dismay. "I must confess that I quite like the woman. Although I blush to admit it, Penny even makes embroidery lessons interesting. And she was not horrified when she learned I was quite mad about fishing."

"I'm glad it has worked out. At your age it's fitting that you have another female to answer your questions."

"I believe the pictures in the book you stole from your father's library answered most of my questions."

Although Chad resolutely directed his eyes straight ahead, the tips of his ears reddened much to Gillian's delight. She could feel the laughter rising to her lips and quickly dropped the rope to muffle her giggles in the wool of her mittens.

"What a horrid child you are," he declared archly.

The reminder of such a monumental transgression proved too much for him. Whooping in good humor, he scooped up a handful of snow and threw it at her. Gillian dropped her hands and her laughter rang out through the woods as she retaliated in kind. They pelted each other with snowballs until they were gasping for breath. Flopping down on the Yule log, they brushed the snow from their clothing, grinning companionably.

"I still remember my chagrin when I discovered that far from answering your questions, the pictures merely added to your curiosity." Chad noted the flush of color that rose to Gillian's cheeks and chuckled as he reached out to straighten the saucy red hat on her curls. "Your interest in my anatomy was nothing short of brazen."

"But as I recall you showed very little interest in mine," she complained. "It was quite the most lowering experience. Papa was very sweet when I came to him in tears. I told him that my body was nothing like the pictures in your book."

"So that's how my father found out. There was the very devil to pay. He caned me and sent me off to my loathsome cousin Waldo's for the remainder of the summer"

"Even though he did hire Miss Pennington, Papa was a dash more understanding." Gillian's voice was soft in remembrance. "He took me into the library and showed me some of

the art books he kept in the glassed bookcases. There were beautiful women in various stages of dishabille. He told me everyone's body was different but that each one was beautiful. There was one woman in particular who was especially lovely and she had no feminine curves at all. I remember I used to stare at myself in the mirror and think of her. It gave me hope that one day I might be pretty too."

Chad caught the forlorn quality in her voice. Taking in the drooping shoulders and bent head of his friend, he said, "But, Gillian, you are going to be a beauty someday."

She peeked at him shyly from behind the cover of her lashes. "Do you really think so?"

"Of course I do," he declared stoutly.

Chad noticed with surprise how much her body had changed over the summer. The awkward coltish body was far more rounded now. Gillian's face had lost the plumpness of childhood, thinning out to hint at a more womanly shape. Set above the high cheekbones, her eyes seemed larger and more heavily lashed. All at once he recognized the truth of his words: Gillian was becoming a beautiful young lady.

With that realization, the tenor of his thoughts changed. He had never considered her as anything but his friend and it troubled him that he had suddenly become aware of her as a young, shapely female. Staring down into her eyes, he noted the trust and innocence in the green depths and berated himself for his improper thoughts.

He stood up, making much of the snow melting on his Hessians. He pulled Gillian to her feet and, with a bluff camaraderie, he handed her the rope and encouraged her progress by chattering about the harmless details of his Christmas duties as the new earl. By the time they reached Gillian's house, Chad was able to speak to her in his usual bantering tone.

"Hello, the house," Chad called.

Miss Pennington opened the door and Gillian shouted her traditional greeting. "We bring the Yule log. Let the celebrations begin!"

Gillian apologized to her governess for the dirt and snow they dragged across the threshold but the older woman waved her hand in dismissal. She helped them off with their coats and mittens, then set the kettle on for tea. Chad reached for one of the pastries and she smacked his hand.

"Not yet, young sir. There's more work before the feasting." She shooed him to sweeping the floor as she and Gillian set out the china and silver for their tea.

Christmas was Gillian's favorite time of year. She loved the secrets and the preparations and the traditions. She couldn't wait to see how Penny liked the evening's entertainment. Although she had been angry when her father hired her, over the last few months Gillian had become very fond of her governess.

Miss Pennington was tall and thin with an elegance of manner that indicated she came from a refined background. She never spoke very much about herself which lent an air of mystery to her that Gillian found intriguing. She never received any letters or packages. There were no visits home and although Penny was invariably polite and cheerful she did not encourage any relationships outside of the Foster household.

Gillian had originally fantasized that Miss Pennington had become a governess after a disastrous love affair. However the brisk competence of the plain-faced woman suggested the real reason might be far less romantic. She was quite old, Gillian thought, perhaps even in her thirties. With her gray-streaked hair, unremarkable features and her quiet demeanor, she was not unattractive only self-effacing. Unless one noted her eyes. She had lovely gray eyes that looked at the world with an unruffled serenity that Gillian found soothing.

"Come along, slowpoke," Chad said. "Everything's ready."

His voice brought Gillian's thoughts back to the present. He had rolled the Yule log onto a long runner which he was dragging down the hall to the drawing room. Ethan had pushed back the pocket doors and folded back the carpet to clear a path to the fireplace. Chad did most of the heavy lifting, struggling to wedge the log into the fireplace. Gillian handed him the pieces of last year's Yule log that she had saved for kindling. While her father rolled out the carpet, Miss Pennington helped arrange three chairs in a circle before the hearth.

When the preparations were completed to Ethan's satisfaction, he indicated that the governess should take a chair while Gillian and Chad lit the candles around the room. When all the candles were burning except for the large red one on the mantelpiece, Ethan bid them to take their seats. Gravely, he shook Chad's hand. He kissed Gillian on the cheek, smiling at the shine of excitement in her eyes. Standing in front of the Yule log, he struck a Lucifer and lit the candle on the mantel, then turned and smiled warmly at the governess.

"We welcome you, Miss Pennington, to your first Christmas in our home." Ethan bowed to her and handed her a small box topped with a red satin ribbon. "It is a Christmas Eve tradition

in our family that a new guest at our table receive a gold coin so that he or she will not go penniless into the new year."

Penny's fine-boned face lit with pleasure as she rose to her feet to accept the present. She nodded graciously to Gillian and Chad but dipped into a very proper curtsy for Ethan.

When she was seated again, Ethan's deep voice rumbled in the quiet room. "In the village where my ancestors were born, at the time when Oliver Cromwell ruled, the town crier went door to door ringing a harsh hand bell."

Chad picked up the battered iron cowbell that had been placed beside his chair. He remembered how thrilled he had been the second year he had joined the Foster celebrations when Gillian permitted him to ring the raucous bell. He had been a child of fourteen then. Now at the advanced age of eighteen, he thought he was too old for such juvenile displays but he discovered the clanging of the bell seemed to break the bonds of tension that had wrapped him tight since his father's death. He wondered if he would grow to resemble the earl but it came to him that the title did not have to confer arrogance and stiffness. It was up to him to take himself and his consequence less seriously. Vowing to remember that, he raised the bell again and rang it with abandon while Gillian shouted encouragement and the two adults covered their ears.

With a new awareness, Chad silenced the metal clapper with his hand but the sound echoed in the corners of the room. He blinked to bring himself back to the present and his eyes touched Professor Foster's and in their depths he saw understanding and approval.

"Thank you," Chad said quietly, his heart filled with happiness.

Ethan waited for silence and as the tension began to build again, he spoke. "The Puritan bell warned those within the sound of its clatter that no celebration of the Christmas season would be tolerated. In this household we welcome the holiday as a time of rebirth. We want all to know that our celebration has begun and so we have found the sweetest sound to announce our joy and invite all to join us in our festivities."

With one hand Gillian raised a string of three bells and with a slim metal rod in the other, she hit each bell in succession. The first chime was high with a sweet clarity that held the attention. The second note was lower, complementing and intensifying the first. The third chime was lower still, adding the final ingredient to the rich blend of sounds. The tones rose to the ceiling, dissipating slowly and lingering in the memory long after the room was silent.

From the pocket of his jacket, Ethan took out a sprig of ivy and handed it to Gillian. "I give you this token, daughter, to indicate that a female will have the rule of the house in the coming year. Use your power with wisdom and grace."

"I will," she said. She accepted the cutting and carried it to the front door where last Christmas's ivy hung. She exchanged the two sprigs, returning to the drawing room to lay the old ivy on top of the unlighted Yule log. Grinning at Chad, she returned to her chair.

"With the fragments of last year's Yule log I will light the new one," Ethan said. He took a slender piece of kindling and set it in the flame of the candle on the mantel.

Gillian sighed in satisfaction as her father set the glowing end among the rest of the kindling. He blew on the wood and the fire caught and held. She peeked at Miss Pennington, delighted with the pleasure on the older woman's face.

Turning her head to the other side, she watched the flickering light of the fire playing across Chad's face. He had changed. It might have been the death of his father and his new responsibilities that made him look different. Whatever it was there was a new maturity to his expression and his bearing. She had not noticed how handsome he had become with his black curls and smoldering dark eyes. She could feel a lump rise in her throat as she wondered if this would be the last year he would join their festivities. He was an earl now and was going up to London to take his place in society. Would he come back?

As if he had heard her thoughts, Chad turned toward her and smiled. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a piece of paper. Gillian laughed, inordinately pleased that he had remembered to bring his letter to Father Christmas. She dug in her pocket for her own.

"Well, children," Ethan said. "Throw them into the fireplace and we shall see if you will get your wishes."

Gillian let Chad go first, watching as he threw his letter into the back of the fireplace. Wriggling with excitement, she followed suit, waiting anxiously to see if the flames would consume the parchment. With a flutter of white, the two letters danced upward until the draft caught hold of them and pulled them up the chimney.

"Not even singed," Gillian bragged, hugging her father in her enthusiasm.

She smiled at Chad, noting with satisfaction the hint of triumph in his eyes. He was still not too old for such childish games. If this were to be their last shared Christmas Eve celebration, she was grateful that he could enter into the spirit of the festivities. She glanced up at her father

and realized that he was aware that Chad's departure for London would change their relationship forever. She took comfort from the compassion in his eyes and raised her chin to show that she understood. Ethan patted her shoulder then took her empty chair. Gillian remained in front of the brightly burning Yule log, ready for her part in the proceedings.

"In his youth, Papa knew a man called John Newton," Gillian said. "He had not seen him for many years when he heard that a minister by that name was holding a lively prayer meeting in the Parish of Olney. Papa went to hear the preaching and found that it was indeed his old friend."

Gillian turned toward Miss Pennington anxious to see her reaction to hearing this story for the first time. By the shine in her governess's eyes it was apparent that the woman was enjoying the evening very much. Since Penny was especially fond of history, Gillian spoke directly to her.

"The minister proclaimed that he had once been an infidel and a libertine. He had gone to sea, carrying items from Liverpool to Africa. He traded his goods for slaves. One night he couldn't sleep and went up on deck. It was Christmas Eve."

Ethan cleared his throat and Gillian grimaced at the lowered eyebrows of her father.

"Well, we don't know exactly what night it was," she said in defense of her fabrication. Then lowering her voice, she said, "It makes a better story, Papa."

"Nothing is as good as the truth, poppet," her father said. "Wouldn't you agree, Miss Pennington?"

"The truth is always best, Professor Foster," she replied formally. There was a twinkle in her eye as she noted the exasperation on her pupil's face. "However there is such a thing as dramatic license, Gillian. Perhaps you might just say that no one knows for sure what night it was but that it might very well have been Christmas Eve."

"Good show, Miss Pennington," Chad said, grinning his approval.

Slightly mollified, Gillian continued with her story. "It seemed very cold on deck and John wondered if it might be Christmas Eve. It was a very dark night and below decks he could hear the groans of the slaves. Suddenly he knew that it was wrong to take away anyone's freedom and he vowed to change his life. At journey's end he came home to England and became a minister. When he began to preach he thought it was important for the people to understand

that no life was so bad that it couldn't be saved. He wrote songs in the vicarage, late at night, when no one else was awake."

Hearing Chad's snort, she quickly added, "And sometimes he wrote during the day, although he never liked that very much. Papa went to the weekly prayer meetings when he could because he liked to visit with his friend afterward but also because he liked to hear the music. Of all the songs he heard there was one that was his favorite. He thought it would make a wonderful ending to our celebrations."

Then without the slightest bit of self-consciousness, Gillian began to sing. Her voice was a sweet childlike soprano, perhaps all the more beautiful because it was untutored. Unaccompanied, the words were clear, catching and holding the attention:

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind but now I see."

When she finished the song, there was absolute silence. The perfection of the music had woven a spell of magic over the occupants of the room. Her father's face was filled with pride and Gillian went to him, pressing a kiss on his cheek as he gathered her into his arms.

"Merry Christmas, Papa," she said, snuggling close.

"And to you, daughter," came the gruff reply.

Gillian approached her governess, sensing that the sheen of tears in Miss Pennington's eyes was not from unhappiness but merely from the emotion of the occasion. "Greetings of the season, Penny," she said, kissing her on the cheek.

"Your song was lovely, child." The older woman hugged Gillian then beamed at the gentlemen. "What pleasure you have all given me tonight."

And finally Gillian stood in front of Chad. Every year she had kissed his cheek but suddenly she was shy and the salutation did not come naturally. He was a peer of the realm and, what was almost more daunting, an adult. She could not bear the thought that he might think her actions childlike. She wanted to tell him some of this but her awkwardness was so new she could not find the words.



As if he sensed her uneasiness, Chad stood up and bowed very formally to her. He did not kiss her but instead took her hand and led her over to the two adults. While he spoke with her father, Gillian went with Miss Pennington to the kitchen to bring in the tea. The pastry tray was piled with tempting confections and Chad's mouth stretched into a wide grin when he spotted the cherry tarts which were his special favorites. In honor of the occasion, Gillian was permitted to pour. Plates were filled as she passed around the tea.

"I fear I shall fall into a decline, when I am in London," Chad said, licking a drop of cherry filling from the corner of his mouth. "No one makes tarts with as light a hand as you, Miss Pennington."

"Thank you for your kind words," the older woman replied. "Although we will miss you, I suspect your time in town will prepare you well for the rigors of the season."

"I hope so but I wish I did not have to leave so soon. Tomorrow I will be tied up with my duties so I will have to leave shortly. I know we do not normally exchange Christmas presents but I wanted you to know how much joy I have found in this house." He stood up, crossing to the burlap wood table in the corner. He removed three packages from the lower shelf, amused at Gillian's outraged expression. His tone was teasing as he returned to the tea table. "Admit it, Gillian. If you had known they were there, you would have badgered me all day to tell you their contents."

"I would not," she said, sniffing in high dudgeon, but she was much too curious and excited to resist the lure of the gaily-wrapped presents. "Hurry and open your gift, Papa" she begged.

"Even at my advanced age I must admit I enjoy a surprise," Ethan said as he unwrapped the oddly shaped present. He sighed with appreciation as he stared down at the soapstone carving in his hand.

"You will probably recognize Guandi, the God of War. I remembered you showing me pictures of some of the figures in Sir Hans Sloane's oriental collection. When I was in London earlier this year I found this copy and hoped you would like."

"My boy, I could not be more delighted." The pleasure on Ethan's face was ample confirmation of his words. "The detailing of the carving is quite above the ordinary. Look at the precision of the miniature cuts in the battle dress. What an excellent gift. You are indeed a thoughtful young man."

Chad's face reddened at the compliment and to cover his awkwardness he handed Miss Pennington her package. She opened the wrappings to discover a beautifully tooled leather book.

"Perhaps a book is not an original idea, ma'am," Chad said, "but I hope I am beforehand in giving you this autobiography. Despite the fact the man is from the Americas, I am to understand that Benjamin Franklin was a very interesting personage."

After accepting the pleased thanks of the governess, he turned to Gillian who was trying hard to control her impatience. Chad placed a small box in her hands and watched with amusement as she tore off the paper. She opened the velvet top of the jewelry box and gasped at the necklace lying on the satin lining. Suspended from a fine gold chain was a golden apple.

"I asked your father if it would be permitted to give you such an extravagant present," he drawled, pleased by the stunned look on Gillian's face. "I was sorry that I was not here when Patch died but I thought this would remind you of the day we found the kitten and the great apple fight."

"Oh, Chad, it is beautiful," Gillian said, holding the necklace up for her father and Penny to see. She slipped it over her head, touching the pendant where it lay, warm against her skin. Looking down, she sighed in pure happiness as the golden apple caught and held the light.

"I am glad you like it," he said. "I wish I could be here tomorrow to give you Christmas greetings but I fear I must be going."

With little ceremony, he bade the adults a good evening. In the foyer, he accepted his hat and caped greatcoat from Gillian. His eyes were steady on her face as he wound a scarf high on his throat in preparation for the short walk to Maynard Hall. A smile touched his mouth as his gaze rose to the kissing bough.

"Don't be sad, Gillian," he said, hugging her with great affection. "It is not as if I will never return."

At the reminder that he was leaving, she buried her head against his coat. She squeezed her eyes shut, fighting back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her. She didn't want him to think she was a baby but it felt as though her world was falling apart. Sniffing once she tipped her head to smile bravely up at him.

"I have already given you the apple, Gillian, now you must pay the forfeit," Chad said.

The leather of his gloved hands was cold against her skin, as he smoothed back the curls that tumbled around her face. Her heart quickened at the gleam in his eye. He bent his head and kissed her on the mouth.

Then he was gone. Gillian stood in the open doorway, watching as he strode down the snowy lane.

"This last evening will always be in my memory," she whispered. "Merry Christmas, friend of my heart."

## The Third Kiss

"Stop tugging at your neckline," Miss Pennington hissed.

"Why didn't I notice how low it was when I had my last fitting?" Gillian stared down at her bodice, appalled by the expanse of skin above the satin ruching.

"It's not too low. Look around you, child. You are the height of fashion," the governess replied, nudging her young charge as they approached the entrance to Squire Bassington's ballroom.

"I'll probably catch some dreadful inflammation of the lungs. Or I'll lean over the buffet table and my bosom will fall out," Gillian finished gloomily.

"A proper young lady never mentions her body," Penny said. There was an archness to her voice that would have served as a set down if the twinkle in her eyes had not belied the words. "Besides, by plucking at your neckline you will draw attention to it which I assume is the very thing you are trying to avoid. Stand up straight and you will begin to feel more comfortable."

"Is that like: close your eyes and think of England," Gillian asked pertly.

Penny stopped in her tracks, torn between shock and amusement. "My stars, child! Where on earth do you pick up such phrases? One would think I haven't spent five arduous years trying to teach you the art of ladylike behavior. After Christmas I shall have to set you to penning essays on the difference between feminine wit and coarse speech."

"Are you coming, Gillian?" Ethan said, holding out his arm to escort her into the ballroom. As she laid her hand on the sleeve of his jacket, he looked at her over the tops of his gold-rimmed spectacles. "Ah, my dear, just yesterday you were still in the nursery. Yet tonight you appear all grown up. Perhaps that explains why Robert Worthington has spent so much time at the house. And I thought it was just to show respect to his old tutor."

Gillian could feel the tide of color rising to coat her cheeks and prayed that she would not break out in nervous blotches. She tried to keep her voice neutral as she answered. "Mr. Worthington has always enjoyed your company."

"Mr. Worthington, is it," he said. "It was Robbie when you punched him in the nose."

"I never did!" She looked around to see if anyone had overheard such a libelous statement. "Surely I could never have done such a thing."

"To my recollection, you have always been the model of deportment," was Penny's acerbic comment.

All at once Gillian had a clear vision of a furious Robbie, bloodied handkerchief clutched to his nose, threatening never to play with her again. She could not recall what had caused their argument but it reminded her that her respectable behavior was of recent vintage. Until this year she had been more comfortable in the hunting field than in the drawing room. Her only interest in the young gentlemen of the neighborhood was as fishing companions.

Gillian squeezed her father's arm and gave Penny a wistful smile. "It is very difficult being eighteen." She grimaced at such an admission. "Some days I cannot believe how mature I have become. When I look at younger girls, I feel quite top lofty. A moment later, the rules of propriety tighten around me and I miss the freedom of being a child. I'm not sure I want to be all grown up."

"The realization that you do not know all the answers is the beginning of wisdom." Ethan chuckled. "Perhaps there is hope for you yet, poppet."

Hearing the pride in her father's voice, Gillian braced her shoulders, buoyed by his approval. She touched the gold apple on the chain around her neck. Since Chad had given it to her, she had worn it as a talisman. Thus fortified, she sailed into the ballroom and greeted the squire and his wife with a confidence she had not felt earlier. Once the amenities had been satisfied, she joined the younger set, searching out her best friend Nelda Bassington, the soft-spoken daughter of the squire.

"Greetings of the Christmas season, Nelda," she said, kissing her best friend on the cheek. "You are certainly in looks tonight."

Although they were the same age, Gillian felt like Nelda's big sister owing to the disparity in their heights. Gillian was tall for a woman, able to stand eye to eye with most of the

men in the county. She had always felt like a veritable Amazon next to the petite, golden haired girl with the doelike eyes of blue.

Gillian had not paid much attention to the squire's daughter in their younger days. Nelda was far more comfortable with feminine activities like needlepoint and sketching, while she preferred the rough and tumble adventures to be found in the out of doors. It was only in the last few years that they had been thrust together at neighborhood social affairs. Once they discovered a common interest in books and the theatre, they were soon nattering away like bosom bows.

"Everyone has been asking for you," Nelda declared. "Where ever have you been?"

"It was my dress. Do you think it is too revealing? Everyday my chest seems to grow bigger," Gillian groaned.

"At least you have one," Nelda complained, looking down at her own neckline. Wide ruffles of soft lace billowed over the flattened bodice of her yellow satin dress.

"Do not despair. Your body may change yet. Besides it is most inconvenient. In another year I will be bubbling out of all my clothes like the opera dancers I have heard about."

"Who has been talking to you about such creatures?"

"Philip Favel-Chapenham. I think he wanted to impress me with how sophisticated he was. He was in London at the theatre and saw a woman with a dress of dampened muslin." Gillian put her mouth close to her friend's ear and whispered. "Philip said you could see her titties right through the material."

A rush of color flooded Nelda's face and she clapped her hands over her mouth to hold back a shriek of horror. Her eyes were enormous, pools of dark blue above the white of her mittens. When she could speak with some composure she gave Gillian a speaking look.

"You should not speak so," she said, shaking her head in despair. "Just imagine if someone were to overhear."

"Penny is always prosing on about such a dreadful possibility." Gillian tried to look contrite but suspected such an expression was beyond her acting abilities. Diplomatically, she changed the subject. "Your party is surely a success. Everyone has turned out in fine state."

"Mama is in high alt," Nelda confided. "Her only disappointment was that the Earl of Elmore was unable to attend due to a previous commitment in London."

"She invited Chad?"

"Mama was hoping he might bring his future countess to Maynard Hall for Christmas."

Gillian snorted, then looked around to be sure Penny was not within hearing distance. Her governess had warned her about making such a vulgar sound. "Chad has been engaged for six months and we have not seen as much as the back of his carriage. I cannot think that he would invite Lady Chesterley here when he has not been home for Christmas in the last four years."

"I know that, but Mama always wants to insure the social coup of the year. It would raise her consequence to extremes if she could be the first to introduce Edwina Chesterley to the county."

Knowing how important the battles for ascendancy in society were to Nelda's mother, the girls smiled at each other. They might have been less tolerant, if the squire's wife had not been so reasonable in other things.

"I wonder what she is like," Gillian mused. "When I was growing up, Chad was my very best friend. I think of him so often. It came as such a surprise when I heard he was to marry. I guess I held out the hope that when he finally came home we would still be friends."

"You will always be friends," Nelda said, her voice crisply bracing.

"That's true but it will not be the same if he is married." Gillian cleared her throat, blinking back a sudden rise of tears. Determinedly she smiled at her friend then let her eyes scan the ballroom. "With such a squeeze I just noticed that Robbie is not here. Where on earth can he be?"

There was no immediate answer to her question for the music was starting and her first partner came to claim her. She smiled with pleasure as they took the floor, for she loved the graceful movements and pattern of steps to each dance. Giving herself up to the expertise of her partner and the rhythm of the music, she thought about Robert Worthington.

Robbie had been one of her father's pupils. He lived only two miles away, so that Gillian had known him all her life. She had always treated him with the most casual good humor, never thinking of him as anything but a friend. It was about a year ago, that she first realized he was singling her out, making a point to speak to her at every social event. She knew he was waiting for some sign that she returned his affection but for the longest time she had been unable to give it.

It was true when she told Nelda that Chad's engagement had come as a shock. She had been depressed from the moment she had heard the news. She supposed it was the sudden realization that her childhood was coming to an end. It was time to consider how she wanted to

spend the remainder of her life. Much as she loved life with her father, she wanted a home of her own and children. For that she would have to marry.

The week after she had made such a momentous decision, Robbie called to pay a visit. The day was warm and they walked in the woods, cooled beneath the shading canopy of trees. They talked easily, as old friends. She noted Robbie's good-natured face and gentleness of manner. He had the ruddy complexion of a farmer and mischievous blue eyes. Best of all he was at least a quarter of an inch taller than she. By the end of the walk, Gillian had given him to understand that she would not be against getting to know him better.

"I understand, young lady, that this is my dance."

Ethan's voice brought Gillian out of her reverie and she smiled a welcome as she heard the first strains of the waltz.

"Is it only because Robbie is not here that I am so honored?" he asked as he led her out onto the floor.

"Not at all, Papa," she cried. "It is a genuine pleasure to be so well partnered."

It was true. She was comfortable dancing with her father, for he had taught her all the steps. She remembered Miss Pennington playing the harpsichord while her father swirled her around the drawing room until they both were breathless.

"I assume Robbie will be here later." Gillian nodded and Ethan noted the blush on her cheeks. "No need to color up. He is a good lad. Perhaps not an intellectual giant but not a dunderhead either. You could do worse."

"There is nothing for it, Papa. I would be at my last prayers if I waited for a man with your wisdom and learning."

A laugh rumbled in his chest. "True, my dear. But do not attempt to turn the subject by appealing to my pride. Robbie is a likeable young man. He has an honest heart and I see no meanness in his temperament. He has the advantage of being an only son. He will inherit a prime estate, close on to the area where you've been raised. You would not have to give up family and friends if you married thus. It would seem that the young man is smitten. Do you return his affection?"

"He is a great friend of mine," she temporized.

"That's a good start, daughter. I would never consider giving my permission to a match if there was not liking between you. But is there more?"



"I-I'm not sure." She sighed and rested her head against his shoulder, giving herself up to the movement of the dance. "Before I came this evening I thought I knew the answer to that question. How can I know if I am making the right decision?"

Gillian stared up into her father's face, hoping to find some clue in his expression. There was the gentlest of smiles on his lips and the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled with amusement.

"It would be very easy to advise you, dear child," he said. "If I did not have the greatest confidence in your judgment, I would be tempted to guide you to what I think is the proper decision. However, it is you who will have to live with the consequences of your actions. When the time comes to give an answer, listen to your heart."

Ethan returned her to Nelda's side and after talking to both girls for several minutes, he excused himself.

"Have you ladies saved me a dance?"

Gillian jumped at Robbie's voice so close to her ear. She turned to him with a cry of exasperation. "You will frighten us both to death, Mr. Worthington," she snapped.

"Fustian!" Giving her a look of disdain, he reached up automatically to smooth the cowlick that threatened to break through the control of his pomade. Not only was his hair the color of wheat, it was almost as unmanageable. "You are no simpering maiden, Miss Foster, subject to the vapors. Perhaps Nelda here has sensibilities but you are made of sterner stuff."

"Fiddlesticks!" She snapped her fan shut and slapped him on the wrist before he could say anything more.

"Now what are you going on about, Gillian." His tone was aggrieved. "You are probably angry because I am late. I realize I have missed the opening sets but Nelda's father assures me the musicians will continue late into the evening. Don't be cross. My horse had a fall and injured his leg. I had to leave him at the inn in the village. Despite my lateness, I hope you've saved me a dance." He turned to include Nelda who had remained silent throughout their wordplay. "Darling Nelda, intercede for me with Gillian and I shall sign any blank spots on your dance card. I am expert at the country dances but I must admit my waltzing is considered far superior to most."

"There is nothing I can say to Gillian that you have not already announced," Nelda said. "But do sign my card for I see Oliver Lancet coming to claim me."

With much good humor, Robbie signed her dance card then turned to take Gillian's. "What luck, my girl! You are free now. You must have saved this for me for I know you could fill your entire card without my assistance. Even though you love to dance I'd much prefer to sit this one out. Couldn't we find a quiet corner? I would like to speak with you."

Gillian's heart lurched at his words. Could he be intending to make her an offer tonight? She was not prepared to give him an answer. She glanced sideways, catching the frown on his face as he scanned the room for a place to sit. In a flash, she realized he did not plan to swift her off to some empty room. If she hadn't panicked like some ninnyhammer, she would have known that he was much too proper to ask for her hand without first speaking to her father.

"There's a settee in that small bay. I suppose it's unoccupied because it's so close to the chaperones." Taking his hand, she led him around the periphery of the room. The alcove turned out to be nicer than it had first appeared. A profusion of plants from the squire's hothouses lent an air of seclusion that did much to appease Robbie.

"Not bad by half, Gillian. And right under the noses of the gossiping old biddies."

He handed her into a corner of the gold damask settee, then lowered himself, perching on the edge of the cushion as if ready for flight. Although Gillian was convinced he would not propose, she worried that he might declare his undying affection or something equally embarrassing. For once she could think of nothing to say. Her brain was numb. She cast about for a neutral subject, settling on horses as the least dangerous of topics.

"How is Pelligren's leg?" In the aftermath of such a sparkling conversational gambit, a bubble of amusement threatened to send Gillian into whoops of laughter.

"Pelligren?" It was evident that Robbie's mind was not focused.

"Yes, Pelligren. Your horse," she added for clarification. "You said you had to leave him at the inn."

"Oh, my horse. He's better. Had a bad fall and hurt his leg."

"Will there be any permanent damage?"

"To the horse?"

"Yes, to the horse." She giggled at his total inability to concentrate. "Who did you think I meant?"

"Well I don't know, to be sure. You're the one asking the stupid questions. I don't want to talk about horses."

Gillian immediately felt guilty for finding amusement in his inattention. She knew why he was nervous and she hoped he would not think she was making fun of him. "I'm sorry, Robbie. I should have asked you what you wanted to talk about."

"I want to talk about me. I mean us." He stopped, took a deep breath then plunged ahead. "I'm going to London tomorrow on business. I'll be gone several days. When I return, I'd like to come for a visit. I would like to speak to your father, unless you feel that it would be presumptuous of me."

The words burst from Robbie's lips as if they had been rehearsed until he could say them automatically. She took note of the tightly clenched hands and the pained expression on his face. She hesitated. She liked Robbie very well but did she want to marry him? Did she want him to speak to Papa? She remembered her father's words: when the question was asked, she would know the answer.

"It would not be presumptuous of you to speak to Papa," she said.

Her voice was so low that Robbie had to lean forward to hear her words. His face was so close that she could see the light of happiness that glowed in his eyes at her response. Perhaps in another setting he would have kissed her but in the crowded ballroom, he could only reach across and squeeze her hand.

Gillian had not realized how nervous she had been at the beginning of the evening. Once her talk with Robbie was concluded she was able to throw herself into a full enjoyment of the party. She had always loved dancing and she had a bevy of partners who were more than willing to exhaust themselves on the dance floor. It was after a particularly vigorous country dance that Gillian decided to treat herself to a solitary respite. She found a spot where she might see without being seen and, behind a screen of potted palms, she eased her much abused feet out of her slippers.

Keeping a wary eye out for the ever-observant Penny, Gillian spotted her father and the squire just returning from the buffet table. Deep in conversation, the two men stopped, oblivious to the fact they were totally blocking the doorway. Gillian watched the rainbow of figures twirling around the dance floor, wriggling her toes in time to the waltz.

In a soft blur of satin, Nelda glided by in Robbie's arms. A golden ringlet lay against the girl's flushed cheek and Gillian thought her friend had never looked so fetching. She wondered why Nelda had not accepted any offers. She was well dowered, although even without it, Gillian

suspected, her friend's sweet disposition and beauty would have drawn suitors from near and far. Nelda was popular but she treated everyone equally, never showing a preference for any of the young gentlemen who flocked to her side.

The music ended and Nelda dropped into a formal curtsy as Robbie bent over her hand. He raised her up and led her off the floor, seating her in one of the gilt chairs along the wall. Gillian smiled at Robbie's courtly manner as he bowed once more before turning away.

If Gillian had not been observing them, she might have missed Nelda's reaction to Robbie's departure. The girl's features contracted as if she were in the grip of intense pain. In an instant her countenance cleared and a lovely smile appeared to give Nelda an air of quiet serenity. Gillian blinked. It had been such a fleeting change of expression, that for a moment she thought it might have been a trick of the light. With a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, Gillian recognized the flash of emotion she had seen in Nelda's eyes. Her best friend was in love with Robbie Worthington.

For a long time Gillian sat behind the potted palms until she was able to rejoin the party. When she said her goodnights, she schooled her expression so that Nelda would never know that her secret had been discovered. Only in the security of her darkened bedroom did Gillian shed a tear with the knowledge that she might lose Nelda's friendship when she married Robbie.

The next morning she slept late, talking little at the breakfast table. By late afternoon she was totally out of sorts. She read for a while and finally began to work on a new stitch for her sampler under Penny's critical eye. She did not have much enthusiasm for the work so she was delighted when she heard the sound of a carriage arriving. From the window she watched as a hackney, horses lathered from an extensive trip, stopped at their door. Her father let in the visitor and led him down the hall toward the library. After a few minutes, her father returned and opened the doors of the drawing room.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Pennington," Ethan said. "There is a gentleman here to see you."

He crossed the carpet and presented her with a calling card. She took it gingerly in her long fingers, tilting it toward the light. By the blankness of her expression it was apparent she did not recognize the name.

"Eldridge Thackery is a solicitor," Ethan explained. "He has come from London expressly to see you on a matter of business."

For the first time since Gillian had known Penny, the older woman appeared flustered. "What do you suppose it is about?"

Ethan smiled. "Mr. Thackery is a very proper gentleman and refused to give me any hint of the intelligence he wishes to impart. No matter what the information however, I feel certain you will be able to deal with it. You are a woman with more sense than most men I know."

Penny blinked at the enthusiastic compliment of her employer. Her mouth twitched in amusement and her confident manner returned. "Thank you, Professor Foster."

"I have left Mr. Thackery in the library," he said, escorting the governess to the foyer. "If I can be of any service I will be here, trying to keep Gillian from listening at the door."

"Papa!" Gillian cried, glaring at him in reproach.

"No need to look at me so, poppet," he said, winking at her. "We will hear Miss Pennington's news in good time."

Although Ethan feigned indifference, Gillian noticed that he never turned the pages of the book he was reading. She held her sampler but her mind was occupied with so much curiosity that she could not concentrate enough to sew. For almost five years, Penny had received no mail or visitors; she had never gone away to visit anyone. It was as if the woman had no family or past life. What did the arrival of the solicitor signify?

It was an age before, the library door opened. Footsteps sounded down the hall and Gillian caught a glimpse of a dapper little man who gravely shook Penny's hand before he left the house. When the older woman turned toward the drawing room, her face was so pale that Gillian cried out.

"Quickly, Papa, some brandy."

Gillian helped Penny to a seat by the fire, rubbing her cold hands until Ethan returned with a decanter and glasses. He poured the liquor, handing one to the governess and raising another to his own lips. Penny took a sip of the amber liquid. She gasped for breath but the color returned to her cheeks.

"Well done," she said. "That was just what I needed."

"Was it dreadful news?" Gillian asked.

"In actual fact, no." Penny shook her head as if she were having trouble coming to term with the information she had just received. "Mr. Thackery informed me that a relative I did not know has died and left me a veritable fortune."

"Never say!" Gillian cried.

"What excellent news, Miss Pennington," Ethan said. He raised his glass in a salute.

"Mr. Thackery was my great aunt's solicitor. He is a dash older than I and at first acquaintance appears to be totally devoid of humor. I do not know how well we shall deal together since my every comment appeared to offend him. He was clearly expecting tears not laughter at such good fortune."

"What now, Miss Pennington?"

"The worthy solicitor has informed me that I have inherited an estate called Fieldings in some quiet village two days from here." Her imperturbable tone could not hide the fact that Penny was very well pleased.

"You will be leaving us?" Gillian wailed. She was ashamed of the tears that filled her eyes at the thought of her friend and companion's departure. "Oh, Penny, what a selfish beast I am! Please know that I am thrilled for you but I am desolated at the thought of how much I will miss you."

Miss Pennington opened her arms and Gillian did not hesitate to accept the embrace. Over the last five years a loving relationship had been forged between the two of them. They cried for the imminence of their parting and the possible loss of this friendship. Even Ethan had to clear his throat several times before he could congratulate Miss Pennington anew on her good fortune. Eventually order was restored.

"Now, Gillian, knowing what a lively imagination you have, I fear this revelation will come as a bitter disappointment. There was nothing dramatic, sad or mysterious about my becoming a governess." Penny smiled at the chagrined expression on her pupil's face. "For years you have speculated over the romantic disasters that might have forced me into such a life. The reality of it is that I like children and I always wanted to be a teacher. When my parents died, I had no responsibilities except to myself. I decided to go out as a governess and see how I liked it. You and your father made my first post very enjoyable indeed."

Gillian was so fond of Penny that she was delighted to learn that her friend had not become a governess out of unhappiness. She had imagined such dire scenarios in her younger days that the very conventionality of Miss Pennington's wanting to be a teacher would have been a dreadful let down.

Penny took another sip of brandy and continued speaking. "All my life I have dreamed of opening a school but of course I did not have the resources. Now I do. I am going to see if my new estate would be suitable for such a venture. If not, I will sell it and find something that is. The redoubtable Mr. Thackery will return to escort me to Fieldings. I know it is dreadfully short notice but I would like to leave in three days' time."

"So soon?" Gillian cried, tears threatening once more.

"If I were needed I would remain, but you have no need of a governess. And if I am correct in my assumptions, very soon after Robbie returns, you will not have any need of my services. At my age, child, there are not endless years ahead."

Once it was decided that Miss Pennington would be leaving, there were endless details to consider. The next day sped by in a flurry of activity but by teatime of the second day, the frenzy had abated.

"How is your packing coming, Miss Pennington?" Ethan asked as he took a sip of tea.

"Most of my boxes are filled. It is strange how much one can accumulate in five years. I trust Mr. Thackery will have enough room for my things. He is already put out at my lack of propriety." She rolled her gray eyes in amusement. "He was most horrified when he discovered I would not be accompanied by an abigail. We will be two days on the road. I think he fears his reputation will be in tatters."

Both Gillian and Ethan burst into laughter.

"He could always bring his valet along for protection," Gillian suggested.

"Speaking of valets," Ethan said, "I ran into Chad's man Royce in the village. He told me the earl arrived at first light."

"Chad is home?" Gillian asked in surprise. "Why ever has he returned so close to Christmas? What do you think it means? Did he bring Lady Chesterley?"

"So many questions. I only wish I had the answers." Ethan's hand hovered over the pastries, trying to choose between the plum and the cherry filling. He decided on the plum, took a bite and chewed with deliberation. His eyes twinkled at the impatience written clearly on his daughter's face. Patting his mouth with the linen napkin, he took a sip of tea before continuing. "All I know is that the earl came alone save for Royce. Though Chad's man was loathe to be caught gossiping, he did confide the fact that the trip was quite sudden. He also stated that Chad's

fiancée would not be joining him. On my return from the village, I left my card at Maynard Hall with a note bidding him welcome."

"Do you think Chad will call, Penny?" Gillian asked wistfully.

The older woman glanced across at Ethan, seeing in his compassionate gaze a confirmation of her own suspicions. She sighed and patted Gillian's hand. "I don't know," she said. "We don't even know what has brought him home, quite unannounced. For the moment, you need something to occupy your time, young lady. There are books to be packed and some notes to be written, if you have a mind to help me."

"Of course, I will."

Gillian's voice was less than enthusiastic but Penny pretended not to notice. "Excellent. After all, I would not want to keep the proper Mr. Thackery waiting. It is too bad that we will be gone before Robbie returns from London. That young man would find much enjoyment in meeting the little solicitor, would he not?"

Thus reminded of her suitor's impending arrival, depression settled around Gillian. She had spent the time while Robbie was away trying to decide what answer to give him. She had even gone so far as to list his virtues and his failings on a sheet of paper. The fact that his good points far outweighed the bad could be taken as a positive sign. Each night before she went to sleep, she reviewed her findings and made a decision. Unfortunately, it was never the same answer two days in a row.

Perhaps Penny was right. If she kept busy she would have less time to worry. With the firm resolution to banish all troubling thoughts from her mind, she rose to help clear away the tea things.

It seemed to Gillian that she did not have a moment of free time until she was ready for bed. Penny had kept her running most of the evening and even her father had chores for her to do. She shivered as she slipped the linen night rail over her head. It was cold in the room but she opened the draperies so that she could watch the falling snow, the flakes a sharp white in contrast to the blackness of the night sky. Standing in front of the window, she glimpsed the lights of Maynard, visible through the leafless trees.

Why had Chad come home?

She snuggled under the comforter, and as the warmth seeped into her body, she dozed, drifting in and out of a dream where she accepted Robbie's offer of marriage. The wedding was



in the drawing room. Her father leaned against the mantelpiece, smiling proudly. Her bride dress was beautiful and she twirled to show off the lace medallions on the skirt. She raised her head but above the bride's dress it was Nelda's blue eyes and golden curls that wavered and melted into the darkness.

Gillian came awake with a start. Her mind was fuzzy, still caught on the edge of the troubling dream, not yet fully returned to the reality of the moonlit bedroom. Something hit the window with a sharp ping and she jerked upright. For a moment she heard nothing and then it happened again. Identifying the sound, she was not afraid. Someone was throwing stones at the window.

In a twinkling she was out of bed and across the room. She rubbed at the frost coating the glass until she had cleared a small patch. The snow had stopped and she could see a man, dark against the whiteness of the ground. She unlatched the window, sucking in her breath at the icy blast of wind. The figure moved and she recognized Chad.

"I'm coming," she whispered.

She closed the window, clenching her teeth to keep them from chattering. She slipped her arms into her dressing gown but did not take time to locate her slippers. Quietly she slipped out of her room, gliding soundlessly past her father's door. She wondered what time it was and, as if in answer to her question, the clock in the drawing room chimed two.

Guided by the light from the upstairs hall window, she found the walnut handrail and followed it downward into the darkness of the foyer. Sliding back the bolt, she pulled open the heavy front door. Chad eased over the threshold and then helped her close the door. They tiptoed into the drawing room and closed the pocket panels so they would not disturb the rest of the household.

Without a word Chad handed Gillian into the overstuffed chair close to the hearth. She curled her feet close to her body and tucked the dressing gown around her for additional warmth. Noting the shivers that shook her body, Chad reached for the poker and stirred up the banked fire. He placed a small log on the embers, kneeling down to blow it into life. In the flickering glow, his face was all light and shadow, almost haggard. His eyes, hidden in dark pockets, gave him an air of menace that would have frightened Gillian if she did not know him so well.

"I probably shouldn't have come," he said.

"I'm glad you did."

There was something wrong. She heard a whisper of pain in the deep rumble of his voice. If they had still been children she would have asked what troubled him but he was a man now and there was distance between them. They had lost their ease of communication.

He was twenty-three, she thought with some amazement. His life was in London now and in the last five years she had not seen much of him. She wished the light were better so that she could see him more clearly. From what she could tell he was very tall and well proportioned. He had lost the soft prettiness of his youth. His face was unlined and there was an elegance and refinement of features that marked him as an aristocrat.

"Tomorrow.... Or, more properly, today," he amended as he glanced ruefully at the clock, "I will be leaving."

"Back to London?"

There was the slightest hesitation before he answered. "Yes. And from there I cannot say. I have bought a commission."

"I see," she said, although she was shocked at his words.

"Have you no questions?" He crossed to her chair, glaring down at her. His face was harshly shadowed and there was an air of controlled violence in his stiffly held body. "Where is your facile tongue? Is there nothing you would ask?"

"No," she answered. His tone was cutting but she did not flinch, keeping her eyes steady on his face. She wanted so much to ease the hurt that was so clearly manifest in his voice. "Would it help to tell me?"

For a moment she thought he had not heard. He whirled to face the fire, and then, as if he had made a decision, he flung himself down on the carpet in front of her. He eased his back against her chair and tipped his head back until it was resting on her knees.

She touched his hair, surprised at the softness of the black curls. She did not speak. Her fingers were gentle, light strokes against his lined forehead. Like the ebbing of the tide, she could feel the tension draining away until his brow was smooth beneath her fingertips.

"You will hear eventually that Lady Chesterley has broken our engagement and that in despair I have joined the army. In part it is true. I do feel as if I were inconsolable."

Chad spoke without facing her, his eyes intent on the flickering blaze, his voice detached, almost indifferent.

"I have been away a great deal in the last several months. My other estates are not as well run as Maynard. I had heard rumors about Edwina's conduct in my absence but I refused to give them much credence."

He laughed, the sound jarring in the soft glow of the fire lit room. In the hush that followed, Gillian remained silent. The fingers of one hand stroked his temple and the other rested on his shoulder to remind him of her presence.

"Last week Roger Hornsby invited me up to his shooting box for several days of hunting. The second day the weather turned foul and we decided to give it up. I was anxious to return to London. Edwina had been put out that I would be missing a masquerade party. It was well into the evening when I returned. Stopping only long enough to change clothes and locate my domino, I left for the party."

"You do not need to tell me more," Gillian said, moving restlessly. At her words his body jerked and beneath her fingers the muscles tensed. Despite her reluctance to hear any more, she said, "Unless in the telling you will find some ease."

"Ah, Gillian, what a friend you are. I will give you no details that would offend your innocence." He relaxed against her and she could feel the loosening of his tight muscles.

"The man hosting the party was no particular friend of mine. Although nothing has ever been proved against him there have always been rumors of his depravity. Edwina was frequently in his company and, when I cautioned her, said she found him amusing. I did not pursue it." He paused as if considering his own guilt in the matter. After a few minutes, he continued. "It was very late when I arrived and I could not find Edwina. The party was very lively and had spread through the lower floor. When I could not locate her below, I went upstairs to the private rooms."

Gillian closed her eyes, envisioning the scene, less from what he said than what he left unsaid. There was disillusionment and betrayal in his voice and she wished she could take the hurt away as she had done when Chad was a boy. The ache of bumps and scraps were easily soothed away in the child but the painful scars of the grown man were beyond her ability to heal.

"The proper Lady Edwina Chesterley was in a card room with the host and several of his friends. She was dancing on the table wearing only her shift. They were gaming for her favors and although they did offer me a chance to enter the lists, I chose to absent myself. I called on her the next day and gave her the honor of breaking the engagement."

There was silence when he finished. Gillian did not insult him by offering sympathy. He reached up to touch her hand and their fingers entwined. They remained thus, taking solace from each other until the fire began to burn low again. Moving stiffly, Chad stood up, turning to stare down at Gillian.

"You will catch a dreadful chill if you remain here." As she thrust her feet out from under her nightgown, he muttered. "Bare feet. Egads, Gillian, whatever are you about? Here."

Before she could protest, he reached down and scooped her up into his arms. She had always felt awkward about her height but he made her feel like a veritable lightweight. He lowered her enough so that she could slide back the pocket doors. Once on the thick carpet of the foyer, he set her down. Gillian was used to being taller than most men she knew, so it was a surprise to discover that she only came up to Chad's chin.

"I'm sorry if my words have troubled you," he whispered. "I have missed you and I could not leave without seeing you."

His eyes moved over her face, taken aback at how much she had changed. She was no longer a child. He had heard Robbie Worthington wanted to marry her and he was pleased that she would make such a good match. Even in the moonlight he could see that he had not been mistaken all those years ago. She was on the brink of womanhood, her innocence and innate goodness shining with the brightness of the virgin snow outside. He wished that he could see her when she finally blossomed. He knew her well and there was passion lying dormant within her.

"Keep me in your thoughts," he said.

"I will. And in my prayers."

She could not bear to see him leave. Her hands pulled at the lapels of his coat. She was grateful for the darkness that hid her blushing cheeks. Feeling like the most brazen of hussies, she raised her eyes to the kissing bough and waited.

Thankfully Chad had never been a slowtop. He bent his head, covering her mouth with his own in a kiss of such tenderness that Gillian thought her heart might break. It was goodbye and she forced herself to let him go, although she knew that in his present state she could have held him.

And then he was gone.

The cold air that swirled around her ankles sent shivers up her spine. Her skin absorbed the chill, until her entire body was frozen, and she wondered if warmth would ever again penetrate the empty corners of her heart.

"Come along, sweetheart."

"Papa, Chad was here."

"I know, dear. I heard him."

Ethan half carried Gillian upstairs, removed her dressing gown and tucked her beneath the comforter. He sat on the edge of the bed, holding her hand, until the enveloping warmth eased the tremors of her body. In the stark moonlight, there was a stunned expression in her eyes.

"I didn't realize I loved him," she whispered.

"Does he love you?"

"No. He is the earl and I am only a friend from his childhood." There was no self-pity in her voice. She was far too practical for that.

"Robbie will be home in two days' time," Ethan reminded her.

"I know. I dread hurting him but I would not make him happy, Papa."

"You have always made me happy, daughter. And very proud."

Ethan rose and leaned over to kiss her on the forehead. He opened the door into the hall, then turned to the silent figure on the bed. "Perhaps you might remind Robbie of Nelda's attractions." At the gasp of surprise from his daughter, Ethan chuckled. "I may be old, child, but I am not blind."

Gillian made a sound that was halfway between a gurgle of laughter and a sob. "Good night, Papa. I love you."

## **The Fourth Kiss**

"Don't tell me you are breeding again," Gillian cried when Nelda had removed her fur cape. "How perfectly wonderful!"

"It is, isn't it?" Nelda folded her hands complacently atop the magnificent bulge at her waistline and smiled beatifically. "It's something I seem to be particularly good at. Three children in less than three years should gain me some sort of award. My darling husband is strutting through London, quite the cock of the walk."

"Well, if Robbie gets too full of himself just remind him that if he hadn't been so slow in offering for you he could have had four by now." Gillian hugged her friend and led her over to the silver and blue striped sofa in the drawing room.

Nelda shook her head. "I'd better not sit there. It looks entirely too soft and you will have to call for help to pry me out of the cushions. Here would be better." Once she was settled comfortably in the armchair, she looked across the tea table, her face set in somber lines. "My dearest friend, I cannot tell you how distressed I was not to be here when your father passed away. It was such a shock when I received your letter."

"Never fear, Nelda. I know full well how fond you were of Papa. It was very sudden. He did not seem to be ill but he just kept getting frailer. Then one morning I found him in the library. I thought he had fallen asleep reading but when I touched his shoulder I knew he was gone."

At her words, tears rose in Nelda's eyes, overflowing and running down her cheeks. It was Gillian who found the handkerchief in her reticule.

"When I'm increasing, I am a veritable watering pot," Nelda said, dabbing at her eyes with the scrap of lace. "Pray forgive me. It is I who should be comforting you."

"In the last two months, I have cried enough tears. I'm only glad that you've returned in time for Christmas. I was not looking forward to it this year." Gillian crossed to the bell pull. "Can you stay for tea?"

"My dear, I live for teatime," Nelda drawled, patting her stomach. "And lunchtime. And suppertime."

"How are the children?"

"Little Rob is a hellion and naturally the pride of his father. Olivia is absolutely exquisite. Even though I risk your thinking I am biased, I tell you she is the sweetest most adorable child in the world. You will love her."

Gillian beamed across at her friend. It had been apparent from the moment of their marriage that both Nelda and Robbie were supremely happy. It was a pleasure to be in their company, because their joy in each other spilled out to enliven every occasion. For Gillian it had been that much more special since she had kept them as friends.

"I fear you will find us all deadly dull," Gillian said. "Your children will keep you from getting bored now that you are away from the excitements of London."

"Piffle!" Nelda said. "London can be boring. No wonder there is so much gossip. We always see the same people and go to the same balls and such. Any news helps to break up the monotony of the days."

"Well, I look forward to you filling me in on all the on dits. I am sadly behind in all the social news. I have not been to London in three years."

"And why not, may I ask? It's not as if you hadn't enough invitations." Nelda glared across at her friend. "Both Robbie and I have begged you to come but you always fob us off with some shabby excuse."

Gillian laughed. "I was in London the year after you married but after I had my surfeit of the theatre, it began to pall. Ah, here is our tea. Thank you, Maddie."

The servant girl placed the silver tray in front of Gillian then busied herself setting out the napkins and silver. Nelda licked her lips in anticipation as she eyed the plate of sandwiches and pastries.

"The other day Robbie asked if I were going to have a pony," she said as she reached for a cucumber sandwich. "I am considerably bigger than I was with Olivia."

"Maybe it'll be twins," Gillian teased as she poured out the tea.

"Bite your tongue. With my luck it would be male twins. And believe me, my dear, boy children are a handful."

They chattered easily while they ate. After hearing all the local gossip, Nelda asked about Miss Pennington.

"She was terribly fond of Papa and quite devastated by the news of his death. We correspond regularly. In fact I just received a letter from her." Gillian poured another cup of tea. "The school has been a great success. She started small, the first year only four girls but this year there are twelve. She has tailored the entire curriculum not only to educate the young women but, more to the point, to teach them a trade. You know how Penny always lectured us on the fact that we should not depend on a man for our happiness. Now she is planning to turn out a whole corps of women who have learned to be independent."

"How revolutionary." Nelda pursed her mouth into a moue of distaste "I am not at all sure that I approve of such ideas although I can see by the shine of your eyes you are in full agreement."

"Yes, but then I had a very irregular upbringing. Papa himself gave me a copy of Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman." Gillian laughed at her friend's expression. "No need to look so appalled, Nelda. You are one of the lucky women who has a husband who respects and adores you. Your value in Robbie's eyes is not solely because you are a good breeder. He knows you have intelligence and he encourages you to think for yourself. How extraordinary it is that so few men treat women this way."

"Well, I suppose you are correct that Robbie does bring out the best in me. I have seen other men who are constantly belittling their wives until the poor things become nothing more than a weak echo of their husbands. My apologies for appearing critical." Nelda's expression lightened. "Please give Penny my fondest greetings when you write her again."

Gillian wiped her fingers on her napkin. "In actual fact, I may be seeing her after Christmas. She invited me north for a visit and I have been debating whether or not to go."

"I know that sidelong expression, Gillian Foster. There's more to the story than just a simple visit. I'm right, aren't I?"

"No need to act so smug. There is more but at this point I haven't made any decision yet."

"Give over, do. I am fast losing patience!"



"No need to bully me," Gillian said. "Penny asked me to join her as one of the teaching staff. She thinks I need something to do now that Papa is gone. It is a relatively tempting offer."

"Don't be a looby!" Nelda said inelegantly. "You'd traipse off to the north of England to teach a packet of runny nosed girls how to get on in life? I begin to wonder sometimes if you have more hair than wit. You are missing Ethan and feeling downhearted at the thought of Christmas without him. By all rights I should bundle you up and take you home but I know how stubborn you are. You would sneak out a window and walk back here."

"Ah, Nelda, how I have missed you," Gillian said, smiling warmly at her friend who was trying desperately to maintain the vexed expression on her face.

"Just promise me you won't do anything until after Christmas. I would not want my dinner ruined."

"Heaven forefend that you should miss a meal!"

Gillian stared pointedly at her friend's girth. Nelda was just opening her mouth to reply when she caught the joke. Her blue eyes widened and she let out a great whoop of laughter. Gillian joined in, and they laughed until they were both breathless. It immediately returned the conversation to a lighter plane. Finally it was time for Nelda to leave. She had started to rise, when she clapped a hand to her forehead and dropped back into her chair.

"I almost forgot to tell you the most wondrous news. Robbie saw Chad last week."

"Chad is in London?" Gillian's heart was beating so heavily she could feel it in her throat. For a moment she could barely breathe. "Is he well?"

"Yes, except for a small scar near his temple. He was wounded at Waterloo and I gather it took forever for him to get back to England. Some sort of mix up. At any rate, Robbie ran into him at Sweet's Racing Club where they had a chance to catch up on the news. He said Chad looked pale but reasonably healthy. He's grown a beard."

"What kind?" was all Gillian could think to ask.

"Robbie didn't say. He was too busy crowing about our ever increasing family. Chad didn't even know that Robbie had married me. Can you imagine, for all the time we have spent in London, this is the first that either of us have seen him." Nelda frowned across at Gillian. "We have heard much about him, and none of it good. When Chad was not off somewhere saving the empire, he was cutting a swath of devastation through the female population in London. I heard the whole corps de ballet went into hysterics on hearing he had been wounded."

Gillian had also heard rumors of Chad's conduct. Women, gaming, horse racing and even violent behavior. She had never known how much of what she heard to believe. Eventually she decided to close her ears and her mind to the gossip. She would think of him as she had last seen him. It was not that she doubted his ability for wickedness; it was only that she did not choose to dwell on it. If it was true she hoped that the core of morality that was so much a part of Chad would eventually surface. She would have to pray that it would happen before he gave himself up to depravity.

"Is he coming home to Maynard?" Gillian asked.

Nelda didn't know and since the hour was getting late, they made their goodbyes. After her friend had gone, Gillian sat for a long time in the drawing room, thinking over all of the news that they had shared. She was restless for the majority of the evening. She could not find a book that would hold her attention. She knew she did not have the concentration to work on her stitching. The night closed in and the drawing room grew cold. At midnight, she banked the fire, picked up her candle and started up the stairs.

At the quiet knock on the front door, she stopped. Her skin tingled with presentiment and it took all her control not to dash down the stairs. For one moment she debated not answering the summons but there was inevitability to the repeated knock on the oak panel.

It was Christmas again and, if her guess was correct, Chad had returned.

Her pulse beat in her throat and she tried to compose herself. She could hear the wind howling outside and she placed the candle beneath a glass dome to protect the flame. Her hands shook as she drew back the bolt. A cloud of snow billowed through the opening and when it cleared, she saw him.

How different he was, she thought. She could find only a shadow of her childhood friend in the devastatingly handsome man who entered. There were deep lines etched on either side of a patrician nose and wrinkles radiated from the corners of his eyes. His face was thin and even in the flickering candlelight she could see the pallor beneath his skin.

There was snow in his black hair, reflecting the strands of gray at his temples. She liked the beard, which was neatly trimmed, only covering his upper lip and his chin. The dark hair framed his mouth, accentuating the generously sculpted lips and drawing her eyes like a magnet. The last time they had stood beneath the mistletoe, he had kissed her. Her lips tingled in remembrance.

"I saw your light and I couldn't wait until morning. Robbie told me about your father. I'm so sorry, my dear."

The compassion in his voice broke through Gillian's hard won self-possession. Tears filled her eyes, overflowing and spilling down her cheeks. He pulled her into his arms, fitting her against his body as if she belonged there. His voice was gentle as he whispered words she could not hear for the sobs that wracked her body.

The storm of weeping passed and she lifted her face. He stared down at her, a smile of bemusement playing across his face. His dark eyes sparked with an intensity that she did not understand, almost as if he were seeing her for the first time. He brushed the tumbled curls off her forehead and kissed her temples. Her skin was sensitive to the silken brush of his beard and the firm texture of his lips. She closed her eyes and relaxed as his fingers moved to massage the back of her neck. He kissed her eyelids and her cheeks. His lips touched hers in the tenderest of caresses.

She drew in her breath in a deep sigh of contentment. He kissed the corners of her mouth, sweet feathery kisses. Excitement raced through Gillian's body and she felt as if she were going to swoon. Her heart throbbed in rhythm to the movement of his mouth. A tension built within her as he repeated the pattern, his lips blazing a trail of fire. Forehead. Eyelids. Cheeks.

When he finally kissed her lips, she was jolted by the flood of sensations that shot through her. The last time he kissed her, she had tried to envision what it would be like to have Chad make love to her. She had wanted him to see her as a woman grown and she had wanted his caresses with all of her heart. She had longed for him in the dark nights of her soul. Abandoning all reason, she gave in to the pleasure.

Her muscles relaxed and she pressed against him, the line of their bodies blending and flowing together. She moaned as his kiss deepened but his mouth was different now. His lips, which had coaxed a response from her, demanded one. His hands moved over her body with a familiarity that was almost an insult. Suddenly aware of the inappropriateness of their embrace, she struggled to free herself.

Chad resisted her efforts to break away. For a moment Gillian feared he would not set her free and she could not hold back a small cry. Although her physical struggles had not penetrated the passion that consumed him, he stiffened at the sound of her distress. With a muttered oath, he released her.

Gillian remained in place, her head bent, trying to control her rapid breathing and the agitated beating of her heart. Her face burned and she still could feel the imprint of Chad's hands and lips on her body as if he had forever marked her.

"Look at me, Gillian." Chad's voice was commanding and she raised her head in obedience. He towered above her, staring down at her in silence. His eyes were dense pools of dark brown, unreadable in the shimmering pattern of light and dark that played across his face. "I did not mean to frighten or offend you. My experience has been with women of a different breed. You are an innocent and will need time to adjust to my loving you."

His eyes rose to the kissing bough. He shrugged in frustration and with a swirl of capes moved to open the front door, striding out into the frigid night.

"I will return," he said.

Gillian quickly bolted the door as if she could hold back the devil. She pressed her hot forehead to the icy oaken panels and listened to the echo of Chad's voice in her mind, the words more threat than promise.

## **The Fifth Kiss**

The clock in the drawing room chimed eight. Gillian could not believe that she had been sitting on the stairs for two hours. When she stood up, she became uncomfortably aware of the aching stiffness of her body. The chill of the night had crept into her bones as her mind floated back through time, to review her relationship with Chad.

Last night he had said he would return and she knew he would come tonight.

She descended the stairs, smiling at the mistletoe caught in the flickering light of the hall candle. She was glad she had hung the kissing bough. Though strictly speaking it was not considered appropriate in a house of mourning, she knew her father would have been cross with her for neglecting tradition. Papa had loved the Christmas season, reveling in the feelings of joy and rebirth. Tonight she felt very close to her memories.

In the drawing room she set more logs on the fire and moved around the room, lighting the wall sconces and the candelabra on the harpsichord. She wanted no darkness to add to the sadness that threatened to engulf her. In the morning she would be leaving for the north to become a teacher at Miss Pennington's school. She knew she was running away and was ashamed of her cowardice. There was no alternative. Chad was a fire in her blood and if she stayed she would succumb to his gentle seduction.

Chad was the Earl of Elmore and eventually he would marry a titled lady who would give him the heirs he needed. She knew in her heart that as the daughter of his tutor, the only place she could have in his life was his mistress. Love him as she did, she could not accept such a position.

"Papa keep me strong," she whispered as the knock came and she hurried to open the front door.

"Merry Christmas," Chad called as he burst through the door, carrying two wicker baskets. One was considerably larger than the other, but the tops of both were similarly covered with red and green-checked material and the handles were surmounted by large red satin bows.

Gillian eyed the baskets with misgivings before she had the courage to look up into Chad's face. Much as she had resolved to be strong, she was not proof against the infectious enthusiasm of his grin. She tried to keep her expression grave but she could feel the corners of her mouth trembling with suppressed laughter. "Merry Christmas to you, too, Chad," she replied shakily.

Setting the baskets on the floor, Chad proceeded to brush the snow off the shoulders of his cape, grinning when he showered her with some of the glistening flakes. The cape was unfastened and thrown over the newel post. He dropped his hat on the hall table, stripped off his gloves and stuffed them into the inverted crown. Finished at last, he picked up the baskets and led the way into the drawing room.

Gillian followed him, slightly flustered that he behaved more like the host than a guest. She watched as he set the baskets on the hearthrug, then, fingers of one hand stroking his beard, he surveyed the room. Without a word, he set about rearranging furniture. When it was completed to his satisfaction, two comfortable chairs were pulled up close to the fire with the low tea table between them.

"Sit here," he ordered, patting the back of one of the chairs.

Gillian knew she should resist Chad's maneuvering, but she was already caught in the spell he was weaving. Shrugging away her suspicions, she moved to the chair he held for her and sat down.

"My chef, Monsieur Hubert, has prepared a special feast for us. He was slightly put out when I would not agree to let him serve it but I explained that his presence would be *de trop*."

While he was speaking, he whipped off the red and green checked material that covered the top of the bigger basket. He lifted out a heavily embroidered linen cloth, which he spread on the table. Then with military precision he set out china, crystal, silverware and an array of delicacies that practically overloaded the table. In the very center, he set two shiny red apples.

"It all began with apples. Apples and a cat," he said as he uncorked the wine and poured the golden liquid into the wineglasses. "I explained this to Monsieur Hubert and, while not quite understanding why it should be important, he has done his best to oblige me in my whimsy.

Everything here is made with or from apples, including this"-he displayed the bottle-"which is a special apple wine I discovered in France many years ago."

At Chad's thoughtfulness, Gillian could feel a lump rise in her throat and a film of tears forced her to blink rapidly. Despite her best efforts, one tear slid down her cheek to the corner of her mouth.

"You must not cry, Gillian," Chad said, his voice slightly ragged. "I discovered last night that I have little control where you are concerned. I cannot comfort you because if I touch you I will not want to talk. And there is much I need to tell you."

"I'm all right." She gave a watery sniff and wiped her eyes.

Still keeping a cautious eye on her, Chad reached for his wineglass and raised it. "We will drink as old friends. And to prove my friendship, I will let you fill your plate first, although in all fairness I should warn you that I will be particularly offended if you eat all the meringues."

"I don't think I can eat anything," Gillian apologized. "You know we should not be here, alone in the house at this hour."

"Alone? My man Royce told me a maidservant lived with you. What have you done with the woman?" he asked accusingly. "You know the one. Aggie? Addie?"

"Maddie," Gillian mumbled. "I sent her to visit her sister."

"How very enterprising, my dear." At the speculative tone of his voice, her head jerked up and he chuckled at the flush of color invading her cheeks. "Why, Gillian, such a wicked plan. You knew I would come back tonight and you were planning to seduce me."

"I was not!" she denied hotly. "Maddie wanted to spend some time with her sister before we left."

Gillian's hand flew to her mouth as if she would pull back the words she had blurted out. By Chad's raised eyebrow and arrested movement, she knew it was too late. She raised her chin in defiance, refusing to flinch beneath his narrowed gaze. They remained thus, eyes locked together until he broke the contact by turning away. He walked to the fireplace, gently placed the wineglass on the mantelpiece and stared down into the flames.

Even if she could think of something to say, Gillian's mouth was too dry for speech. She waited, her body taut with tension, until suddenly she heard the sounds of a low chuckle. She bristled with resentment that Chad could find any humor in the present situation.

"What an idiot, I am," he said. He turned to her, shaking his head in chagrin. He dropped to his knees beside her chair and grinned roguishly. "Were you running away from me?"

"No." She let her eyes roam at will over his handsome face. She wanted desperately to touch his beard but kept her hands firmly knotted in her lap. "I was running away from myself."

"And why would that be?" When she dropped her head and did not answer, a frown appeared on his face and his voice took on a nervous edge. "You must tell me. Why were you leaving?"

"Because I love you."

"Ahhhh!" There was such relief in his sigh that she looked up in surprise. "For a moment, my dear, I was in despair. I have gone about this stupidly. If I am correct, you thought I planned to seduce you."

"Don't you?"

"No need to sound so disappointed." He held up his hand for silence when she would have spoken. "Everything in good time. In actual fact I am much too tired for such exercise. I only just returned to Maynard Hall in time to pick up Monsieur Hubert's offerings and bring them here. I have spent the day in the saddle, completing three very important errands."

"What were the errands?" she asked, curious despite herself.

"The first one was to get a special license."

Chad's eyes glistened at the look of wonder on Gillian's face. He reached inside his jacket, withdrew a heavy parchment and with great reverence laid it in her lap. With shaking fingers she opened it and silently read the contents. Her chin trembled as she tried not to cry.

"But I can't marry you," she wailed.

"What a contrary woman you are. Perhaps I will have to seduce you after all because then as a fallen woman you will have to marry me. Come along now, Gillian, tell me you will."

"I can't. You have to marry someone with a title and an enormous dowry. You are an earl."

"So that's the reason. You must not be such a snob, my darling. An Earl, indeed. First and foremost, I am a man. And I love you with all my heart. I think from the moment I saw you up in the hayloft, hurling apples to save me and an unprepossessing kitten, I've loved you. It took me a very long time to discover that fact but now that I have, I plan to keep you by my side forever."

"Are you positive? You won't regret it?"



For answer, he rose to his feet, pulled her out of her chair and into his arms. He kissed her until she was breathless but managed to maintain enough control to place her back in her chair, out of temptation.

"You must be strong for both of us, my girl. We are going to be married very properly tomorrow evening. My second errand was to stop in the village and speak to the vicar who has graciously agreed to marry us in the chapel at Maynard. Even now Monsieur Hubert is putting the finishing touches to our wedding supper. Thanks to Nelda and Robbie's assistance, everyone in the county has been invited. Have you any complaints as to the arrangements? Any questions?"

She beamed at him and he returned her smile. Without words, their eyes traded all the secrets they had kept from each other over the years, until finally Gillian ended the silence.

"What was the third errand?" she asked.

"To find you a Christmas present. That was what took me the longest," he said. He reached down to the small wicker basket, forgotten until now, and set it in her lap. "You will have to be an exceedingly good and loving wife for all the trouble I have taken to find you the perfect present."

Gillian carefully pulled back the green and red-checkered cloth. Nestled in the bottom of the basket was a kitten. The pretty red ribbon around the cat's neck looked incongruous against the gray fur dotted with oddly shaped black patches. Yellow-green eyes squinted up at Gillian and with a cry she reached in to pick up the tiny animal.

"Patches must have paid a visit to every female in the county. I had hundreds to choose from but this one resembled him most. Do you like him?"

"I love him. We shall have to name him after his father." She cuddled the kitten against her breast, smiling lovingly at Chad. "Thank you, my dearest friend. He is the most perfect Christmas present. I only wish I had something to give you."

He took the kitten out of her hands and returned it to the safety of the wicker basket. "Perhaps you do," he said.

"Chad!"

Amid the sighs and whispers, the kitten began to purr.

**THE END**

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Thanks so much for being supportive of writers and the world of books.

## **About the Author:**

Karla Darcy lives with her husband, several tame geckos and an occasional friendly snake on the Treasure Coast on the east side of Florida. She has always felt she lived in the Regency period in a past life. Her early writings were musical comedies and humor columns so it was an easy transition to the romantic and humorous style of Regencies. Lovely dresses, masked balls and witty conversations which contained saucy double entendres were the perfect cup of tea for this author.

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**BONUS MATERIAL: First Chapter**

**THE MASKED HEART**

**BY**  
**KARLA DARCY**

**Presented By:**  
**Glades Publishing**

## Prologue - 1807

"An actress, my dear," Lady Yates said, "is merely a slut who can sing."

"Aunt Haydie!"

Lady Haydie Yates sniffed at the shocked expression on her niece's face. "This is no time for missish airs, gel. Might as well know what you're getting into before you make the first misstep."

Blaine Margaret Meriweather shifted uncomfortably on the satin settee and tried to face the older woman with a worldly air she was far from feeling. Smoothing the skirt of her black mourning gown, Blaine looked warily at the upright figure in the wing chair and tried not to flinch under the steely glance of the golden-hazel eyes so like her own.

"I realize, Aunt Haydie, what I propose would be considered outrageous by some, but I thought you, of all people, might have more sympathy with my idea. After all, you have always told me a woman should not be held back by the conventions of society."

"No need to quote me, Blaine. I am well aware of all my tiresome preaching." The sixty-year-old Haydie waved her blue-veined hand in a dismissing gesture. "I am not unalterably opposed to the plan but I must be sure you are aware of all the pitfalls to this freakish start. A young gentlewoman does not become an actress without losing a great deal."

"It seems to me, aunt, that there is little left to lose." Sadness tinged Blaine's voice and she swallowed back the rising lump in her throat.

"Thus speaks youth," Haydie said. "Believe me, child, there are things more important than money and land in the balance here. I cannot imagine what your father would think of such a decision."

"I can." A sad smile tugged at the edge of Blaine's generous mouth. "He would shout down the house while my stepmother Juliette would sniffle into a lacy handkerchief, her violet eyes awash with tears. Ah, Aunt Haydie, I miss them so."

"It was blessedly quick, child," the older woman said in bracing tones, then she snorted in annoyance. "A lot of trumpery that kind of statement but one must hold on to something. In all truth, I cannot believe that either your father or your stepmother suffered long after the carriage left the road. Your father was not one who would have been a cheerful invalid and Juliette was already terrified of growing old. She would have been devastated over any form of disfigurement. Perhaps my words are harsh, Blaine, but one can only deal with the present. They were a charming, improvident pair. And my brother's inability to think beyond today has landed us all in the soup."

Blaine sighed and leaned wearily against the back of the settee, noticing the worn spots on the satin upholstery. As her eyes roamed around the drawing room, she was aware that all of the furnishings needed attention. The room was clean enough. She had seen to that herself, but she ought to have considered redoing some of the coverings and adding new draperies. Now it was too late.

She had been in charge of the household, since she was fifteen, the year Valerian was born. Then her stepmother, having finally presented a male heir to her husband, demanded that they remove to London for the season. Blaine had been delighted with the responsibility of the estate and equally pleased to be with her half-sister Fleur and the new baby who were also left behind at Weathers. For six years, the three children had seen little of their parents except for Christmas and occasional houseparties. They had been happy years but now with the death of her father and stepmother, Blaine could see that their comfortable way of life was truly threatened.

"Now, child, tell me about this cork-brained scheme."

Haydie's voice interrupted Blaine's musings and she tried to gather her thoughts. Without hesitation, she declared, "I would like to go to London and become an actress."

"I heard that part of the plan," Haydie said dryly. "It's the rest that I'm waiting to hear."

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I haven't worked out any of the details." A puckish grin widened her mouth and she peered through a cloud of dark lashes at her formidable relative. "I have given our difficulties a great deal of thought and I truly believe that this might be the answer to our present situation. You must admit, Aunt Haydie, that if we are not in the River Tick, our ship of state is sinking fast."

"Cheeky gel!" The old woman's words were snapped but there was a twinkle in the wise, old eyes that did not go unnoticed.

Blaine's face sobered as she continued. "According to the lawyer, everything has been left in trust for Valerian until he is twenty-one. Val is only five now. For the most part the estate is self-supporting. I have gone over the books very carefully with Higgins, the estate manager. With stringent economies, we should all be able to survive but, in actual fact, we will live no better than our tenants for the next sixteen years. Worse, we will have nothing in reserve in case of some unlooked for casualty."

"I cannot believe Cedric arranged things so poorly!" Haydie reached out for the glass of sherry on the table beside her. She took a bracing sip then cocked her steel-gray head to the side as she stared at the portrait of her brother which hung above the fireplace. "On second thought, I can well believe it. At times, my dear, your father was a thundering lackwit. He assumed, like most of us, that he would live to his dotage."

Blaine's eyes rose to the portrait and she smiled. Her father was dressed in his hunting pinks, seated on a low stone wall, his hand on the head of his favorite hunting dog Knolly. In the background was Weathers, the country home of generations of Meriweathers. The warm golden tones of the Cotswold stones shone like a beacon at the end of the narrow, tree-shaded lane. The land around the house was flat, perched as it was on the edge of Salisbury plain in Wiltshire. Tears sheened Blaine's eyes at the thought that they might eventually be forced to sell the house which was Val's patrimony. Never! She vowed silently and pulled herself erect to face her aunt with determination.

"We need money, Aunt Haydie," she announced. "Our tenants depend on us to help them in an emergency. There are no dowries for either Fleur or myself and there is nothing for Val's schooling. Papa wanted him to go to Cambridge and for that he will need tutors. Our governess can hardly prepare him."

"You're right, my dear. Frau Puffentraub has been fine for you and now Fleur, but Val must go off to school," Lady Yates agreed. "I have wondered in the last few days if it might not be a kindness to release the good frau to find another position."

"Let Puff go? Oh Aunt Haydie," Blaine cried, a stricken look on her face as she thought of the sturdy little governess who for so many years had stood as mentor and friend.

"Buck up, child," Haydie said bracingly. "We'll manage. After all, I have my money."

"Oh no! Papa left that allowance to you and you mustn't even consider spending it on us."



"Save it for my golden years? A thoroughly lowering thought." Haydie snorted and took another hearty sip of the sherry. "Wish Ceddie had thought to leave you girls a dowry. That would be more to the point. Despite my allowance, there's not enough to scrape together to interest even a London Cit."

"For myself, I don't mind," Blaine said. "It's Fleur I worry about. She's going to be so beautiful, Aunt Haydie. Even at eleven, one can see her potential. Hair the color of sunshine and those lovely violet eyes, soft and velvety like pansies. With her beauty she could marry anyone and yet, by the time she's eighteen, we won't have enough for a season, let alone a dowry. It's an almighty shame."

Lady Yates smiled at the protectiveness of her niece for her half-sister. Blaine's mother had died when the girl was eight and, a year later, Cedric, anxious for an heir, married Juliette Montclair, a young French émigrée. The motherless child had welcomed her new stepmother and was overjoyed at the birth of her half-sister Fleur. In the six years that followed, Juliette miscarried time after time and Fleur's care and entertainment fell primarily to Blaine. In Haydie's opinion, Blaine rather spoiled the girl but it was easy to do when faced with the angelic face and sweet temper of the child.

It was not that Blaine Margaret was a dowd. At twenty, Blaine was already a beauty. Her loveliness was far more classical, reminding one of an ancient Celtic princess. Her looks were not in fashion but Haydie suspected she would gain the title of "Incomparable" were she to go to London. She was tall with a gracefully rounded figure. Her skin was tanned instead of the sickly white that most debs preferred. She had high cheekbones, a wide mouth and enormous goldish-hazel eyes. These attributes alone would have made her quite noticeable but added to this was a thick mane of white blond hair that flowed down her back like a stream of satin. Once seen, she would not be forgotten.

The problem was that in Wiltshire the girl saw virtually no one. Haydie pursed her lips as she remembered chiding Juliette for not bringing Blaine to town for the season. She suspected the woman was slightly jealous of her stepdaughter, although to give the devil her due, she had never been outwardly unkind to Blaine. Treated her like a housekeeper and nanny but then the girl herself had accepted the role with joy. Blaine had little idea of her own possibilities in the marriage mart and now this foolishness.

"Why have you decided to become an actress?" Haydie asked abruptly returning to the original argument.

"Because I think I would be good at it and I am little fitted for any other sort of work."

"The thought of you working at all does not sit well with me, child."

"I know, Aunt Haydie," Blaine said, her voice soft with understanding. "But it is the only answer. We need money and I am young and healthy enough to try to earn it. I have given this a great deal of thought and I truly believe I have hit upon a solution. With my youth and appearance, I have little chance of a position as a governess or housekeeper. For a while I was considerably angry that my looks should count against me but then I realized that only in one profession would my appearance be a decided advantage."

"In point of fact, I can think of another profession," Haydie drawled, earning a blush from her discomfited niece. "Sorry, Blaine. My sharp tongue got the best of me. I shall try to be more circumspect in my comments. Pray continue."

"When faced with the realities of our situation, it would be truly missish of me not to consider such a step. Even if I could find some more respectable employment it would not improve our finances a great deal. A companion or governess usually receives no more than room and board. There is little employment open to a woman that could result in a good income." Blaine sighed heavily. She had given this a great deal of thought and hoped that her aunt would see the reasonableness of her decision. "The theatre seems the answer to my prayers. I think my appearance would gain some attention and I actually do have a talent for acting and singing. It will take some time but I truly believe I have a chance of being successful. Besides, Aunt Haydie, I see few alternatives."

In silence, Haydie raised her silver-rimmed lorgnette to better scrutinize the girl. "Are you fully aware of the kind of life the women of the theatre world lead?"

"Yes, ma'am." Blaine raised her chin, her eyes unwavering under the older woman's gaze. "I have heard talk."

"Lord love you, child! Talk indeed. The gentlemen of the town go to the theatres to pick out their latest light o'loves. The women are coarse, loose-moraled and pass through the men's hands like the cards in a gambling hell. Is this the sort of life you wish?"

"Of course not," Blaine said. "I have heard that some women conduct themselves properly. You told me yourself that Mrs. Siddons was quite acceptable."

"Unfortunately, Sarah Siddons is an exception. She is a woman of strong principles. Unlike most, she has been able to adhere to a strong liaison. She's been married for years and has three children. Of course now she is at least fifty, not a flighty chit of twenty. Temptation is easy to avoid if not offered," Lady Yates intoned ominously. "The moment you set foot on stage, there will be a lineup of gentlemen from Covent Garden to the Haymarket, all quite eager to initiate you in the pleasures of the boudoir."

"Aunt Haydie!" Blaine said, covering her flushed cheeks with her hands.

"Are you objecting to my general statement or to the fact that I label them pleasures?" Haydie asked. "After a week in London, I suspect you'll be hard pressed to force a blush to your cheeks."

"It doesn't have to be that way," Blaine said. "You told me yourself that if a woman behaves in a ladylike manner, then she would be treated as such."

"That is true in a drawing room, but not likely in a theatre."

"Aunt Haydie, can't you help me? I can only guess at the kind of situation that exists in the theatre. With Papa and Juliette away so often, I have not even been out much in Wiltshire society. I truly believe that my idea is a good one but I am the veriest of babes concerning London."

Blaine rose and paced in front of the older woman whose face was set in disapproving lines. She was silent for several moments then turned to face her aunt. "When you married Uncle Neddy, he was a soldier and against your family's wishes you followed the drum. I'm sure that army life was far different from the society you had been brought up in, yet you survived. In order for Val and Fleur to survive, I must go to London. Will you help me?"

"And if I refuse?" Lady Yates raised the lorgnette, her hazel eyes unwavering.

Blaine blinked under the harsh gaze but raised her chin in determination. "Much as I would hate to go against your wishes, Aunt Haydie, I am going to London."

There was silence in the room as the old woman attempted to outstare the young girl. Slowly a smile curled the edges of Lady Yates' mouth.

"Good show, my dear." Haydie relaxed in her chair, saluting the startled girl with her glass of sherry. "Come and sit down. And don't look so surprised. I would never condone a whim but, as it seems you are determined to set your feet to the boards, I would be sadly remiss in not giving you all of my assistance."

Blaine crossed the carpet in quick strides, hugging her aunt with enthusiasm. She collapsed on the couch in relief, well aware that, despite her strong words, without the woman's support she would never be able to consider such a venture. Lady Yates was an unconventional woman even in the enlightened year of 1807. With her advice, Blaine felt assured of success.

"It just so happens that I can give you some help," Haydie said, smiling benignly at the girl. "I had an Abigail who was quite mad about the theatre. Tate is working at Covent Garden as a dresser. I will send you to her and I will also send a letter to Sarah Siddons with whom I have some acquaintance. You could have no finer mentor. The woman is magnificent. On stage and off, she maintains the highest standards. Her friendship may afford you some protection but, as an additional insurance, I will send Sergeant McCafferty with you."

Sarge had been batman to Lady Yates' husband. He was well above the normal height with a build that would dwarf an elephant. The combination of a lantern-jawed face and heavily-lidded eyes of an indeterminate color tended to be extremely intimidating when set above an enormous bull neck. Blaine had loved the gruff servant, since she was a small child. For all his ferocious looks, he was a gentle giant. Although she would feel safe in his care, she hesitated.

"How can I take Sarge?" she asked. "He has always been in your household."

"I have decided to remain here with Fleur and Valerian," Haydie said calmly. "If you are off to London, someone must remain to fortify the battlements. No Friday-face, if you please, miss. This is not self-sacrifice on my part. My days of gallivanting are over. I have little enough to keep me occupied and besides I have found a real enjoyment in the children."

"I hadn't thought of how much I shall miss them," Blaine said, a quiver in her voice that matched the lost look in her golden eyes. "I hate to leave them after such a tragedy, but at least I can feel more at ease, knowing you will be here."

Having a fair knowledge of the risks her favorite niece would be taking, Haydie feared for the girl. Blessedly the young had little conception of the evil that predominated in the world. As she took in the innocent glow that surrounded Blaine, she had little doubt that her beauty would bring her to the notice of the London audiences. However it was this very radiance that would make her the target of the jaded rakes who flocked to the theatres, circling like birds of prey over a downed sheep.

Silence filled the room as the old woman stared thoughtfully up at the picture of her brother. Her mouth was pursed in displeasure and she tried not to show her anger at the realization of how his care-for-nothing attitude had led her niece to such a dramatic pass.

"No time for dark thoughts, child," Haydie said, swallowing a lump in her own throat. "Now is the time for planning."

"Naturally no one must know of your plans. It would be social disaster for both you and the children. You are too young to appreciate the scandal that would erupt if word of this became known. I cannot stress this enough and hope you will be discreet about your background when you arrive in London."

Blaine's eyes darkened at the thought of such a deception but she was wise enough to take her aunt's words to heart. "I will be careful, ma'am. But what about the children and the neighborhood?"

"It seems to me," Lady Yates continued, "that we shall have to put it about that you have gone to London to care for an aged, and no doubt crotchety, relative. Perhaps a cousin of your father's. The Meriweathers never did anything with any great success, except breed. Always whelped with the steady frequency of rabbits."

At this latest outrageous comment, Blaine fell into whoops of laughter. The amusement did much to encourage her for the coming adventure. Although part of her still feared the unknown, there was a core of excitement that she could not gainsay. There was an air of fantasy to the plan, almost as if she were going to a masquerade ball. She would hold to that thought and then she would not feel so shattered at the thought of parting from her family and all she held dear.