

Miss Gabriel's Gambit

RITA
BOUCHER

In love, as in chess,
a cunning strategy is needed
to capture a king



9 780380 770908



503999>

**“I SHOULD NOT,”
SYLVIA MURMURED.**

“You could use the air,” David urged quietly as he whisked her off in the direction of the open terrace doors. “You look as pale as a ghost.” Without thought, he reached out to touch her cheek.

Sylvia leaned against the balustrade at the end of the terrace. She felt the touch of his fingers, light as a puff of wind on her skin. She closed her eyes and savored the sensation as he traced the line of her cheek. The sounds of the ballroom became distant echoes, mere background to the tempo of his breath as she felt it on her cheek.

His lips touched hers. In a magical instant, the gentle kiss deepened as he gathered her to him holding her close, burying his fingers in the silk of her hair . . .

“As delightful as it is original,
MISS GABRIEL’S GAMBIT
is another championship
performance by Rita Boucher.”

Mary Jo Putney

Other Regency Romances from Avon Books

By Rita Boucher

THE SCANDALOUS SCHOOLMISTRESS

By Nancy Richards-Akers

LADY SARAH'S CHARADE

MISS WICKHAM'S BETHROTHAL

By Jo Beverley

EMILY AND THE DARK ANGEL

THE FORTUNE HUNTER

MY LADY NOTORIOUS

THE STANFORTH SECRETS

By Loretta Chase

THE ENGLISH WITCH

ISABELLA

KNAVES' WAGER

THE SANDALWOOD PRINCESS

VISCOUNT VAGABOND

by Kasey Michaels

THE CHAOTIC MISS CRISPINO

THE DUBIOUS MISS DALRYMPLE

THE HAUNTED MISS HAMSPHIRE

THE WAGERED MISS WINSLOW

by Marlene Suson

DEVIL'S BARGAIN

THE FAIR IMPOSTOR

Avon Books are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchases for sales promotions, premiums, fund raising or educational use. Special books, or book excerpts, can also be created to fit specific needs.

For details write or telephone the office of the Director of Special Markets, Avon Books, Dept. FP, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10019, 1-800-238-0658.

Miss
Gabriel's
Gambit

RITA BOUCHER

AVON BOOKS  NEW YORK

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

MISS GABRIEL'S GAMBIT is an original publication of Avon Books. This work has never before appeared in book form. This work is a novel. Any similarity to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

AVON BOOKS

A division of
The Hearst Corporation
1350 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10019

Copyright © 1993 by Sonia Crowne
Published by arrangement with the author
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 92-93922
ISBN: 0-380-77090-3

All rights reserved, which includes the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever except as provided by the U.S. Copyright Law. For information address Alice Orr Agency, 305 Madison Avenue, Suite 1166, New York, New York 10165.

First Avon Books Printing: April 1993

AVON TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND IN OTHER COUNTRIES, MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN U.S.A.

Printed in the U.S.A.

RA 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my parents,
my mother who gave me her love of words
and
my father, who taught a little girl
to play the game of kings.
The most valuable gifts are intangible.

One



An unnatural silence pervaded the dark-paneled room at White's. An occasional whisper, a stifled cough and the passing clatter of carriage wheels were the only sounds as all eyes focused on the bespectacled man seated before the table. David Rutherford pulled the crumpled envelope from his pocket and reverently broke the seal.

After scanning the contents, he reached across the table to the chessboard, selecting the lacquered black queen. He held it suspended for a moment, acutely aware of the expectant faces of the small audience of chess aficionados. Then, with a theatrical flourish, David placed it on the diagonal opposing his king. A collective sigh rippled across the room.

"Check," he declared solemnly, "and mate."

The silence was complete once again as David inspected the board, but it was obvious that there was no escape. Shaking his head bemusedly, David rose, his chair scraping the floor. Like an awakening sleeper, his brown eyes scanned the room until they lit on the familiar face of Ivan Petrov.

"There is no hope," David spoke at last, pulling at his rumpled cravat.

"Have I not been saying so," Petrov said, his slow, Russian-accented English emphasizing the mournful

tones of his declaration. "Is been apparent for nearly a year now; you were in serious jeopardy."

"Still, one clings to the possibility of salvation," David professed with a sigh, pushing a shock of unruly dark hair from his brow. "Nonetheless, Ivan, you are correct. I must confess myself surprised that it lasted quite this long."

"Is over," Petrov said, shaking his head sadly, his hollow cheeks brushing against absurdly high shirt points.

"The King is dead," David admitted.

Old Lord Garth stirred from his doze in a deep leather chair, waking with a start as the sound of David's deep bass voice carried across the room.

"Farmer George gone?" Garth sniffed, unable to credit his ears. "What do they say about the King, young man?" he asked, poking Petrov with a cane.

Petrov looked down his prominent nose at the old man. "Is all over, milord," the Russian repeated. "The game is up."

With amazing agility, Garth lifted his considerable bulk from the chair and shuffled off to share the news with his cronies.

Amidst the murmurs of sympathy, David shrugged himself into his loose-fitting jacket. For a moment, he stood before the table staring thoughtfully at the array upon the chessboard as if somehow he had mistaken the configuration. But no, it was as Petrov had said. The outcome had been apparent now for a long time. Still, it was difficult to believe that the game was truly done.

Petrov echoed his thoughts. "Is amazing, David. How many years has it been since you are losing game? Never in all mine years in India."

David smiled as he thought back to the last time he had been trounced on the chessboard. "I was sixteen," he said. "My father had brought me to Philador."

"François-André Philador?" Petrov said, his eyes lighting in amazement. "Who was writing *L'analyse du jeu des Échecs*?"

"The same. The *Analysis of the Game of Chess* was his masterwork, but he made much of his income playing here in England," David recalled. "When I first met him, poor Philador was desperately trying to return to his family in France after the revolution, but Robespierre had proscribed him from the country. He was suffering from gout and was glad of the money that my father paid for my tuition, I daresay. I played with all the impetuosity of youth, feinting and sacrificing. Philador bided his time, let me batter myself against his defenses, then tore me to shreds. I learned a great deal from those games that we played."

"Is difficult to be picturing you playing recklessly, David," Petrov said. "In all these years, I have always been regarding you as model of caution. The many games that we have been playing in India, you have never moved from impulse."

"I have seventeen additional years in my dish now, Ivan," David remarked regarding the board once more. "Still, I wonder if a little panache might not have served me better this time than caution. My opponent made audacity into a virtue."

As the group of chess enthusiasts gathered round to reprise the game move by move, David withdrew to the window and stared out upon the rain-drenched street. Defeat was a strange sensation—in truth, one that he had certainly become unaccustomed to. But surely, this melancholy feeling was not entirely due to the loss of a game. Outside, umbrellas moved through the downpour like so many darkened moons. The chill of England's spring permeating his very bones, David found himself longing for the warmth and sunlight he had found during his years in India, for the vivid colors of silken saris and

flowers. By contrast, his native land seemed cold, an empty place.

And now, with the conclusion of this chess game, one more tie to England and the past was severed. It was startling to realize that this game by post had been the single constant in his life these past few years. After his father's death there had been no other personal ties to home. The defeat of his king was far more than the end of a game, it was the closing of a chapter in his life.

"There he is!" Lord Garth cried, entering the room once more. He was followed by a grim-faced George Brummel and Hugo, Lord Highslip, one of the Beau's lesser disciples. Garth pointed a fat finger at Ivan. " 'Twas he who said it."

"Ah, Petrov, is it?" Beau Brummel asked, lifting his quizzing glass disdainfully.

Petrov nodded nervously, inordinately pleased that the English arbiter of fashion remembered his name.

"Garth avows that you told him the King is dead," Brummel said.

"Yes, b-b-but . . ." Petrov stuttered, his English deserting him.

"Ye see?" Garth said triumphantly. "I told ye, Brummel. Prinny is King now."

"I would not go offering to help choose the coronation garb yet, George," David interposed, returning from his place at the window. "I am afraid Lord Garth is somewhat confused. The king that he refers to is there." He pointed to the board. "I have just concluded a chess game."

"And who was foolish enough to play against you, David?" Brummel asked, his expression relaxing. "I trust you won, as usual?"

"Actually, it was my king that went down, George," David admitted with a rueful grin.

"Indeed!" Brummel said, surveying the configuration of pieces in surprise. "I would have wagered

that no man on earth could surmount you on the chessboard. Yet you appear to have been trapped quite handily."

"But the King!" Garth exclaimed once more, annoyed at being ignored.

"Chess, Lord Garth," David said loudly, picking up his fallen piece to illustrate. "My king was defeated."

"Oh," Garth said. "No funeral or coronation then?"

"None," David said, keeping his face solemn with effort. "It was but a game. My apologies for disturbing your rest, milord."

"A serious matter, the death of kings," Lord Garth muttered, his jowls shaking in irritation as he returned to his chair. "Young people make light of everything these days."

"Old fool," Brummel said as he fingered the fallen king. "Still, I am rather glad that Garth roused me from my place at the bow window, for now that I hear the actual truth, I find the doddering lord's pronouncement about the King's death far more likely than the reality of you losing a game. How did this debacle occur?"

"It is a long story, gentlemen," David said.

"Ten years long," Petrov added.

"Perhaps I ought to sit then, for a ten-year story," Brummel declared. "A drink, perhaps? For surely such momentous events deserve an appropriate libation."

A footman scurried off discreetly and soon David, Brummel, Petrov and Highslip were all seated round the table, glasses and brandy before them.

"To the death of kings," Brummel proposed, raising his glass.

"Treasonous pups," Lord Garth muttered from his corner, closing his eyes.

"And now, whose hand am I to shake?" Brummel said. "Petrov?"

"Not I," the Russian said, stroking his chin. "More

likely to be winning at fisticuffs with Mendoza than to be beating David at his game."

"Then where is your opponent?" Highslip asked, pouring himself another glass of brandy.

"Here," David said, pulling the wrinkled letter from his pocket once again. "It came in the mail this morning. Queen takes pawn to fatally check the king."

"A game by post?" Brummel asked.

David nodded. "It began in India ten years ago, during my soldiering days. My father put me in touch with an old friend of his who was also pawn-mad, and we have been playing move by move via correspondence the past decade."

"Ten years! Longest game I ever heard of," Highslip said.

"Indeed, it might have been a bit shorter had I not been required to return to England unexpectedly, to attend to my late uncle's affairs. This letter containing the fatal move took nearly three months to catch up to me."

"How tedious," Highslip scoffed but he fell silent under Brummel's jaundiced stare.

"I find it most intriguing," Brummel said. "The wait between moves must have been interminable."

"Yes," David admitted, his tanned face alight as he recalled those days. "But for me the wait was part of the excitement. Oftentimes, I would find myself pondering the board in my head, wondering what his next move might be, and as the game developed . . ." David trailed off, flushing. "I am sorry, gentlemen. I tend to forget that chess is not a passion for most people as it is for me." He filled his empty glass once more.

"Better than many passions I can think of," Brummel allowed. "And far simpler than others. Women for instance."

"Is truth," Petrov paused to down his liquor in a

single swallow. "In chess, moves are set, rules determined. But women?" He shrugged his shoulders. "They are making rules as they go, and changing them mid-game."

"They are inherently erratic," David said, his voice rasping from the effects of the brandy. "The fair sex is incapable of logic. Emotion rules the day. That is why I believe that women are unsuited to games like chess where reason is all."

"I am knowing some decent female players," Petrov said, his tongue loosening with the liquor. "Mine sister plays excellent game. Always loses, but putting up damned good fight."

"Women do have some inherent qualities which might be assets in chess," David owned, watching the liquor swirl in the glass before he downed the amber fire. He knew he was drinking far more than he ought, yet the warm, mellow feeling seemed to fill some hollow within. "Their natural disposition to deceit and treachery could make them formidable—if it were coupled with superior male logic."

"Heaven forbid." Brummel laughed. "I vow, the very thought of such a female makes me shudder."

Petrov frowned. "Mine sister is treasure, a jewel," he said in defensive tones.

"I am sure your sister is a delightful chit," Brummel hastened to say, knowing the young Russian's hot temper. "I meant no offense. But what David says is true. Women like your sister can grasp the game, but only on a more rudimentary level. I have yet to meet a woman who can play chess with the skill of any reasonably expert man, let alone defeat someone with David's skill at the board."

"Who would wish to meet so unnatural a creature?" Lord Highslip muttered. "No doubt she would be one of those Friday-faced bluestockings."

"You need not fear any such confrontation, Highslip, for no such woman exists," David asserted,

his tongue feeling heavy. "Still, I must admit, the idea is intriguing. A female who could best me at the chessboard . . ."

"But as you are saying, no such female Goliath is existing, mine friend," Petrov said, raising his glass. "To those incomprehensible creatures," he proposed. "Both the delight and demon of our sad existence." He downed the remains of his glass and blinked, owl-like, at the company. "Speaking of demons, mine cousin Dorothea asks why she is never seeing you at Almack's, David?"

"I shall tell the Countess Lieven that you style her so, Petrov," Brummel said, a wicked gleam in his eye.

"Be telling her what you will," Petrov said with morose dignity. "I am having no need to court my cousin's favor. Is certain she plans to be marrying me off one way or another. And I am suspecting that she has plans for poor David here. Is talking of him with matchmaking look in her eye. She commands that you are coming next Wednesday."

"I refuse to be fodder for the matrimonial cannon," David said, sounding much like a petulant child. "I will simply not go."

"You cannot be refusing," Petrov said, aghast at the very idea of such defiance. "You will be making enemy of one of most powerful women in the *ton*. Is tantamount to command, David. She is *Patroness*."

"I was unaware that a patroness is the equivalent of the Almighty," David declared.

"Damned close to it," Highslip said. "Petrov is right. You must go to Almack's, else you commit social suicide."

"'Twould be equally suicidal for him to attend looking like that," Brummel commented.

"And what is wrong with my clothes?" David asked, rising slowly.

Brummel suddenly felt a twinge of misgiving. It was one thing to tweak the nose of a man like David

Rutherford when he was sober. His intellectual bent and soft-spoken ways tended to cause his friends to forget his sheer physical power. Rutherford's six-foot frame was not one of those gaunt physiques that made one think of a toothpick, and he was as formidable with his fists as he was on the chessboard.

In fact, it was his prowess with his fives that had cemented the peculiar friendship between the arbiter of fashion and the unkempt nabob. At first, Brummel had been inclined to dismiss Rutherford, because of his dress, as one worthy of the Beau's notice only by the occasional caustic remark. But one night, when he and Rutherford chanced to leave the club together and were set upon by footpads, David had handily dispatched the attackers. Brummel owed David his life, and now, the man society styled "Beau" had set upon a way to repay the debt.

"What is wrong with my clothes?" David repeated in puzzlement, slumping back into his seat.

"Everything," Brummel said, acerbically, determined to take his friend in hand. "Weston would cringe at that coat, and I have yet to determine the precise purpose of that sorry sight hanging at your neck."

"You mean this?" David asked, picking up the end of his neckcloth to polish his spectacles.

Brummel groaned. "You are hopeless, David. How will you ever attract the fair sex if you disdain proper dress? I ought to despair of you."

"Do so, by all means, George," David said. "For my Sikh valet has told me that I am a hopeless cause. 'Tis just as well, since I have no wish to attract eligible members of the predatory sex. My freedom is far too dear to me. Perhaps you might be so good as to convey your negative opinion to the Countess Lieven? In my sorry garb I am surely unfit for the floor of Almack's."

"Oh, she will have you." Brummel sighed. "Doro-

thea always gets her way. I would wager that you will soon be dressed, trussed and leg-shackled, David. Nothing can save you."

"I have no intention of getting caught in the parson's mousetrap, George," David asserted. "Moreover, I refuse to be wrapped up like some prettified parcel. The contents of the package are the same regardless of the ribbons about it."

"But one must make an effort," Highslip said.

"Why?" David asked, blinking as he tried to focus his eyes. He knew he was well on the way to being foxed, but the brandy seemed uncommonly smooth as he downed the contents of his glass. "If I were looking to wed, I have shekels aplenty, a decent bloodline, don't look like a leper. That's all the women want, anyway. But I am not looking to be a lifetime prisoner. Not now, likely not ever. I simply refuse to play Lieven's game."

"You forget your newly acquired title, *Lord Donhill*, although you disdain to use it. The words 'your ladyship' are music to any woman's ear," Brummel said, toying with his quizzing glass.

"Pah! A mere baron." David waved his hand in dismissal, then poured the brandy unsteadily, spilling nearly as much on the table as in the glass. "'Tis not as if I am an earl, like Highslip here."

Highslip nodded in silent agreement.

"You underestimate your attractions, David," Brummel protested earnestly, "and the skill of your opponents. This is a woman's game, one where your vaunted skills of logic will only work against you."

Petrov tipped back his glass. "Why are you not making your own rules then?" he asked, his eyes rolling as his head drooped slowly to the table.

"The very thing!" David said, his thoughts coming together in a dance of drunken logic. He beckoned to a nearby footman. "Fetch the book," he demanded, and the servant quickly returned with White's bet-

ting book, pen and inkwell. David's shaky fingers moved through myriads of wagers regarding the progress of raindrops, the outcomes of horse races and courtships, until he found himself a blank spot. In a faltering hand, he scrawled upon the ledger, then passed the book to Highslip.

"I, David Rutherford, will only marry the woman who can beat me in a game of chess," Highslip read. "Famous! You have assured your freedom forever."

Brummel frowned. "I cannot like it," he said. "It seems an unfair wager."

"How so?" Highslip inquired.

"What incentive is there for any female to try?" Brummel asked. "Assuming she might not wish to marry him."

"Is absurd. David is rich as Croesus, titled besides," Petrov said, raising his bloodshot eyes once more. "Is contradiction, Brummel."

"Consider the character of our mythical chess-playing female. She would undoubtedly be a woman of quality, for no female of the lower classes would have the ability to become expert at so intellectual a pursuit. I posit that our mythical fair Goliath might even have a modicum of taste," Brummel said with a sniff. "No woman of gentle breeding would give David a second look attired so. I have seen better-dressed dustmen on a Sunday."

"I shall add a thousand pounds to sweeten the pot," Highslip announced. "That way if the female is addled enough not to wish to wed him, there shall be some incentive to take him on."

"Excellent idea, Highslip. Even though your pockets are to let, I suppose that it is not too imprudent to make such a pledge. It is unlikely that you will be required to pay it," Brummel said, his lip curling sarcastically. He touched his finger to his chin in thought, his eyes alight with a speculative look as he gazed at David. "But that is not enough. Every effort

must be made to assure that this shall be a sportsmanlike proposition. Therefore, I give you, Highslip, the charge of dressing David appropriately for the length of the Season."

"Surely that would take a veritable miracle worker," Highslip said.

"I would only entrust someone with the most exquisite taste for the task, Highslip," Brummel said smoothly.

Highslip preened himself at the compliment. "Why, thank you, Brummel, I do try to keep up the standards. It is just . . . well . . ." He looked at Rutherford, who sat with elbows on the table, chin in hand, neck linen soaked in splashed liquor. The earl shrugged his shoulders eloquently. "It seems almost the undertaking of Sisyphus."

"A most noble effort, Highslip. For the sake of sport," Brummel said, inclining his head graciously. Far better the earl undertake to dress David, for it would not do at all if the Beau's own protégé would fail in the realms of fashion. "I, of course, shall supervise." He added his scrawl beneath David's, recording the full details of the wager. "I vow, you shall be transformed, David. Nonetheless, you will enter the sacred portals of Almack's in utter safety, for surely the woman does not exist who could trounce you on the board."

David frowned, not at all sure if he wished to act the role of clay in Brummel's and Highslip's hands, but he shrugged that thought aside. With the terms of the wager set, he was safe from the harridans and harpies. "Now that my future is secure, gentlemen," he said, rising unsteadily to his feet, "shall we raise a glass to the one who *did* rout me? My worthy opponent, Sir Miles Gabriel."

"May he rot in hell," Highslip said sullenly.

David dropped his glass in astonishment; its con-

tents spewed across the chessboard. "What was that, Highslip?"

"Sir Miles? The old curmudgeon stuck his spoon in the wall nigh on a year ago," Lord Highslip said.

David relaxed visibly. "It is ill to speak so of the dead," he scolded. "Even though the Sir Miles you speak of must be some other man, for this was posted just three months ago." He took off his spectacles and held the letter close to his eyes so he could make out the wavering scrawl. "This is Miles Gabriel of Northumberland. His estate is named the Crown Beeches."

"Aye," Highslip said. "And there he was buried just last February. My estate marches with his. The old man was always toying with a chessboard. Don't know of any other baronet named Miles Gabriel in those parts."

David shook his befuddled head, trying to clear his thoughts. "But that is impossible. I have his letter."

Brummel took the paper from Rutherford's hand. "'December 10, 1810,'" he read. "How very extraordinary, David. It appears that you have been playing chess with a dead man. And more's the shame of it, he has beaten you."

Sylvia Gabriel paused as she descended the stairs of the elegant Berkley Square townhouse. It was well into midmorning and the delightful effect of the sunlight streaming through the stained-glass rosette above the main door held her momentarily entranced. When she was a child, the shimmering reds and golds and greens had always seemed to her like the rays of some faerie's wand coloring the delicate Chippendale pieces in the elegant foyer with wondrous magic.

"Sylvia. Are you dawdling again?"

Mrs. Gabriel's petulant call roused Sylvia from her reverie. The young woman hurried down the remain-

der of the steps as her Aunt Ruby bustled into the room, tugging on her gloves as she walked.

"Did you mend the tear in my wrap, Sylvia?" she asked.

"Yes, Aunt Ruby," Sylvia said, handing her the delicately embroidered shawl. As her aunt examined the repair critically, Sylvia held her breath. It had taken the better part of the morning to reweave the filmy threads. But apparently Aunt Ruby was satisfied since she wordlessly returned the shawl, presenting her back so that her niece might drape it upon her.

"Now where is Caroline?" Mrs. Gabriel's florid face darkened with a frown as she posed the question. "The hour is already late and we must visit the modiste as well as the milliner. Sylvia, go and see what is keeping the girl," she demanded, ignoring the presence of a maid who stood nearby.

Despite the fact that it was an errand more suited to a servant, Sylvia gratefully grasped at the excuse to be gone before her aunt found reason for yet another petty scold. As Sylvia hastened up the stairs, she prayed that her cousin was ready for the expedition before Aunt Ruby's formidable temper crossed the border between annoyance and fury.

"Oh, Syl," Caroline wailed as soon as Sylvia entered the bedchamber. "I cannot locate my celestial-blue bonnet and my maid is nowhere to be found. I do not understand what happened to it, for I am sure it was at the corner of the wardrobe shelf."

"Daisy has the afternoon off, Caro. Remember her sick mama? Now, there is no time to dawdle; let us find the bonnet and hurry you away," Sylvia said, an unintentional sigh escaping her.

"Mama is in one of her moods, I take it," Caroline said, shrewdly, "and has been venting it upon you again."

"It is enough to upset anyone, bringing a daughter out in her first London Season," Sylvia said, peer-

ing into one of the myriad boxes that lined the wardrobe's extensive shelves.

"That is no excuse for the way that she treats you," Caroline said. "Why, it was bad enough when she did not replace Miles' governess and set you to tutoring him, but since we have come to town, I vow she has been treating you almost as if you are an upper servant."

"It is good to be of some use, Caro," Sylvia said quietly. "Far better than being a burdensome charge upon the family. Besides, I enjoy teaching young Miles. He is quite precocious for a boy of nine years and very eager to learn."

"Only because he adores you, Syl. I cannot count how many governesses and tutors our precocious Miles sent packing before he inherited the title and we came to live at Crown Beeches. Still, I cannot see how you bear Mama's treatment. You should be coming with us to Bond Street, visiting the modistes and shops. It is shameful that our uncle's confounded will has brought you to such a pass," the young girl said, tossing a hat carelessly upon the floor. "And disgraceful that my mama is too purse-pinching to stand you the cost of a Season."

"To what purpose, Caro?" Sylvia asked, picking up the bonnet and smoothing out the pink silk ribbons, replacing it carefully in its box before taking up the search once more. "I have no portion, not a penny-piece to my name. Indeed, it is lucky that there was a fund set aside for my brother Will's tuition at Oxford, else we would be in a worse bumble-broth."

"But you are so beautiful. Surely you could find a husband," Caroline protested. "I vow, even in the plainest of gowns, you turn heads everywhere we go. You could be like the Gunning sisters. Why, they both wed dukes—and 'tis said that the Duke of Hamilton was in such haste to wed Caroline Gunning that he used a brass hoop from the bed curtains

as a wedding ring. Both the sisters were empty of purse."

"That was well over fifty years ago, Caro," Sylvia said, smiling at the girl's enthusiasm. "I would imagine the way of the world has changed. Men no longer marry a pretty face without it being attached to a healthy dowry." *As well I know*, she added silently. "But now, where could that dratted bonnet have gone? Which shelf did you say?"

"The middle," Caroline replied.

"Then I shall have it for you in a trice," Sylvia said, plunging into the wardrobe once more and emerging to wave the missing hat triumphantly. "My Abigail was always losing things upon that middle shelf, for there is a hollow in the cabinet that allows things to slip to the back."

"This was your room?" Caroline asked, her face flushing in mortification. "Oh, Syl. I am so sorry."

Sylvia shook her head, annoyed that she had been so remiss in that slip of tongue. "I do not grudge it to you, widgeon, and do not worry yourself, for you will find it devilish chilly here if the family chooses to winter in town. Still, by then you should be married."

"With a husband to keep me warm?" Caroline giggled.

"Caro, do not let your mother hear you speaking so vulgarly," Sylvia warned. She tied the ribbons beneath the girl's chin. "Now fly, else your mama might take it upon herself to come seeking you. I can just imagine what she will think of the mess that this room is in."

"Daisy will take care of it when she returns," Caroline said with assurance, giving her cousin a light kiss on the cheek. "Bond Street, beware, for I am on my way."

Sylvia laughed as Caroline flounced out the door, but the smile faded as the sound of her aunt's shrill

tones wafted up the hall and she caught the mention of her own name. As she quietly closed the door, Sylvia had little doubt she was being blamed somehow for Caroline's sluggishness. From the window, Sylvia watched the footman hand Caroline and her mother into the antiquated carriage. Once the lumbering vehicle turned the corner, Sylvia let the curtain drop and sat heavily upon the bed, looking at the wallpaper of sea-green silk. Was it only six years ago that she and Uncle Miles had chosen the pattern? It had been so exciting. They had come early to town, before Aunt Ruby was due to join them as chaperone for Sylvia's Season. For all her travels abroad with her parents, Sylvia had never truly seen London and Uncle had taken her to see all of its attractions—the Tower, Astley's Royal Amphitheatre, the opera. But then he had become ill and they had returned to Crown Beeches.

For a moment, Sylvia allowed herself to wonder what would have happened if she had been allowed that spring in London. So many girlish dreams had been put aside since then, visions of a marvelous fair-haired man who would see beyond her face and figure into her very soul, value her for what was within. Perhaps it was fortunate never to have been given that opportunity, she thought, for foolish dreamers make the most stupid mistakes. It was frightening to think how close she had come to giving herself to a dream, a man who, when viewed in the clear light of truth, was only the faintest shadow of her imagination. She sniffed, brushing the tears of self-pity from her cheek.

"Syl?" a voice called. The door flew open after a perfunctory rap and a young boy came running into the room. "Boniface said that you were in here. Why are your eyes red, Syl?"

Sylvia sought refuge in a rebuke. "No gentleman

comes racing into a room like that, Miles. You shall exit and enter the room properly. Immediately."

Miles thrust out his lower lip defiantly.

"Immediately, young man," she commanded. "For if I have to wait too long for your compliance, I doubt we shall have any time to play this morning."

The boy's belligerence faded and he ran out the door, closing it loudly behind him. Sylvia glanced at the mirror and dabbed a bit of Caro's powder over the telltale redness as Miles knocked loudly.

"Who is it?" Sylvia asked.

"'Tis I, Sir Miles Gabriel," the boy intoned, deepening his voice. "May I have your highly esteemed permission to enter the chamber, Miss Gabriel."

"Enter, kind sir," Sylvia said, dropping a mock curtsy as she opened the door. "Sir Miles."

Miles bowed stiffly and Sylvia was hard-set to match his air of false dignity. Her lower lip began to tremble, but Miles' face remained perfectly placid. When he took her hand, serving it a smacking-wet kiss, Sylvia burst into laughter.

"I win!" Miles asserted with a chortle. "I out-faced you."

"Indeed you did, you wretched boy," Sylvia conceded. "However did you manage to keep your countenance during that performance?"

"By doing just as you said. I thought of something extremely serious—Mama in one of her fits of temper," the boy said, then watched in dismay as his cousin's face fell. "I'm sorry, Syl. Was that why you were crying?"

Sylvia shook her head. "You are too curious by half, Miles. I have a mind to declare you a cheater, for my hand is as wet as a mop. That kiss could not fail to discompose me. Now, come, let us repair to the schoolroom and get to our lessons."

Miles groaned. "I didn't cheat. There ain't need to punish me so."

"No, youngling, I should not have accused you wrongly, for I vow you are becoming almost as good at keeping a straight face as your namesake. Dear Uncle Miles always said that the ability to keep your opponent from reading your visage was the most important gambit of all."

"And I am good?"

"Very good," she said fondly. "Now, we do geography today and as our subject is India, I shall tell you the story of what occurred between my papa and the Rajah of Ranjipoor. He wagered a chess set, you see, made of gold and silver."

"Truly?" Miles asked.

"Truly," Sylvia answered, raising her hand in avowal. "The pieces were carved of lapis and ivory, and I shall finish the tale if you are upstairs before me." With those words, she hitched up her skirts and raced up the wide staircase. The boy, with a whoop of dismay at her head start, followed swiftly.

TWO



The Sikh moved with silent steps, his spotless white turban and jacket a vivid contrast to the dark velvet of the curtains. With a swift motion, he pulled the draperies of the bedchamber open, letting a flood of sunshine into the darkened room.

The figure on the bed stirred, pulling the covers over his eyes with a woeful moan. "Damn you, Harjit. Have you no respect for the dying?"

"It is not imminent death that plagues you, sahib," Harjit Singh replied with the familiarity of lengthy employment, "but the effects of a surfeit of liquor upon a man who rarely indulges. If I disturb you, sahib, it is only upon your orders to wake you without fail before twelve of the clock."

"There is no need to shout, Harjit," came David's muffled voice from under the covers. "Belay those orders, close those curtains and allow me to die in peace."

There was a choking sound, something of a cross between a cough and an arrested groan. The Sikh ran to the bedside with the washbasin just as David cast up his accounts.

"There now," Harjit said as he placed the bowl aside to wipe the sweat from his master's brow. "With your stomach purged, you shall be feeling much improved, I think. Here, drink this."

The cup of brew that had somehow materialized in the Sikh's hand smelled noxious and looked twice as vile as its odor, but David downed it at once, willing to try anything that would dull the dreadful hammering in his skull. He lay back on the pillow, utterly drained, feeling a flush of heat as Harjit's concoction spread through his body.

"I have had such strange dreams, Harjit," David murmured weakly as the pounding receded. "There was a curious wager . . ."

"Regarding chess and your marriage," Harjit supplied as he tossed the contents of the bowl out the window into the garden below. The Sikh's lips curled slightly upwards. The gardener had been quite vocal in his remarks about "'eathen furriners."

David sat bolt upright, wincing at the pain in his head. "Then it was real."

"Indeed, sahib, I had the whole from Petrov-sahib's groom, who delivered you early this morning. Lord Highslip has already sent a note round that you are to meet him at Weston's establishment at precisely two this afternoon. I am to meet with his valet for instruction in the art of properly dressing a gentleman."

David threw the servant a baleful look. "You are most pleased by this, I take it, Harjit Singh. Ever since you entered my employ you have been bullying me to enter the ranks of man-milliners."

Harjit bowed. "I only do your will, Rutherford-sahib. If you had no desire to dress in a manner suiting your rank, who am I, your humble servant, to thwart your wishes?"

"Humble, humbug," David said, putting a cautious foot on the lush carpet. The world whirled for a moment and settled into a somewhat normal perspective. "Get me my clothes, O humble servant, but do not try to trick me up like some Bond Street loungee just yet. I have a few hours of comfort left

before Highslip suits me, boots me and styles me—and damme, I shall enjoy them. The brown jacket, Harjit!”

On his way to the wardrobe, the Sikh's sure step faltered. “Not the dung-coat, Rutherford-sahib,” he begged. “It is an offense to the eye, the execrable handiwork of a dog's son who masqueraded as a tailor. Do you so hate me, milord, that you thus humiliate me before the world?”

“I do not know why you malign that garment so, for it is wonderfully comfortable. And I'll have the buckskin breeches as well,” David added, taking wicked pleasure in Harjit's woeful expression. “And do not call me ‘milord,’ Harjit.”

“You are a most contrary individual, sahib,” the Sikh said, surprised at his master's vehement tones. “Why do you not wish me to address you properly?”

“Because there will be no such nonsense between us, my friend,” David said with a frown. “You have given your loyalty and friendship to David Rutherford, not some trumped-up lordling. I cannot tell you how many people have been falling over themselves to fawn upon me in these months since I inherited my distant cousin's empty title and the huge pile of debts that accompanied it. Now that I am a new-gilded lord, I have suddenly become worthy of their notice. No, Harjit, do not ‘milord’ me, for now that I have lent myself to this accursed wager and the sartorial predominance of that popinjay Highslip, I may have need of someone to remind me who I truly am.”

“As you wish, Rutherford-sahib,” Harjit said, presenting the brown woolen coat as if it were made of some vile substance. “But it is a pity if you believe that this wretched discard from an offal heap reflects your true self,” he mumbled under his breath.

Within a half an hour, David was tooling his high-perch phaeton through Mayfair. As he skillfully

threaded his team through the dense traffic, he heartily wished that he were on his way to Northumberland to pay his condolences to the Gabriel family. It would have been a splendid means of avoiding Brummel's scheme to set him on the road to fashion. Unfortunately, Lord Highslip had been certain that the Gabriel family had recently come to town for the Season, and as David dismounted from his vehicle, he could see that the polished brass knocker was prominent on the door of the Berkeley Square address.

David presented his card, almost laughing aloud, at the footman's utter consternation.

"Milord?" the servant asked, hesitantly, unable to resolve the contrast between what he read and what he saw.

"I come regarding Sir Miles," David said, recalling the purpose of his visit, becoming somber all at once. He would miss Sir Miles dreadfully; the very thought that the game was forever at an end was almost beyond bearing.

"Sir Miles?" the footman said, brightening. "I shall bring up your card to him immediately, milord. Do you care to wait in the drawing room?"

As the look of confusion cleared from the servant's face, David's spirits soared. It seemed that Highslip's pronouncement regarding Sir Miles' death was merely a wretched error. *Should have known better than to trust the judgment of a besotted man*, David thought as the footman hurriedly lit the fire in the empty, chilly room and bade the guest be seated in a well-stuffed leather chair. David smiled, anticipating Highslip's dismay when he was confronted with his blunder. 'Twould confound the pompous idiot indeed to find that he had mistakenly declared his old neighbor dead and buried.

David chuckled, looking about him at what was obviously a man's room, its furnishings chosen more

for comfort than for feminine fashion. No Egyptian chaises or lacquered chinoiserie here; just walls of shelves, overflowing with leather-tooled bindings. He rose to run his fingers over the plethora of books on chess, opening at random a text in what appeared to be Arabic, only to shelve it when he spotted the latest edition of Allgaier's treatises. But David rapidly found that he could not concentrate on the German and he returned the book to its place. Restlessly he roamed the room, trying to anticipate what he would say. Over the years, he had dreamt of this meeting, rehearsed it in his mind, but all the well-thought-out phrases now seemed silly. Sir Miles' letters had been an anchor in David's turbulent life; the game, the only sure order in a world where the rules were few.

Near the window was a simple wooden chessboard and David noted with satisfaction that the configuration exactly reflected the inevitable denouement of last night's game. Suddenly, he felt calm. How foolish to act as if Sir Miles were some stranger when there was no one on this earth who knew him half so well. He stared into the fireplace, watching the tongues of flame lick the coals, as he remembered the man's letters, full of wry wit and sound advice. Certainly, there was no need to be nervous.

"Milord?"

David whirled at the sound of that soft voice to confront a vision. At first, he wondered if his drunken dreams were still plaguing him, for no real woman could be so exquisitely beautiful. A plaited crown of blonde hair framed a face of the kind that Botticelli had adored. Eyes the color of a stormy green sea regarded him from beneath dark-lashed fringes. Porcelain cheeks began to glow a delightful red, as ripe-cherry lips began to thin into a frown. David tried to recall himself, but could not help letting his gaze linger on the delightful contours of her

lush figure. Even the concealing folds of her shapeless black merino gown could not entirely mask the temptations of this Lilith.

Sylvia took a deep breath, trying to control her growing anger, and decided to return the stranger's rude gaze measure for measure. It had been a mistake to come down in answer to the peculiar summons, she could see that now. Far better to have sent the footman to seek out Boniface—Lord Donhill, indeed! Even as a novice to the fashionable world, Sylvia could see that the garments on the man's tall, muscular frame looked as if they had been pieced together by a tailor with more cheek than skill.

She felt an absurd longing to straighten his cravat and sweep that thatch of coal-black hair from his eyes until, in a gesture of chagrin, he brushed it aside himself, giving her a glimpse of eyes so deep brown in hue that they put her in mind of the rich earth at tilling time. A shaft of sun streaming through the windows touched him as he removed his spectacles, polishing them absently on that woeful neckcloth. A peculiar sparkle seemed to light his face, making him seem almost like a little boy who has been caught at some mischief.

"I must apologize, Miss . . ." he said, his lips twisting into an appealing smile.

"Gabriel, milord," Sylvia said, schooling her countenance to blandness. She resisted the desire to tell him to put his apologies into the pocket of his hideous coat and leave. Although his dress was less than fashionable, the man did have a title and, most assuredly, Aunt Ruby would be furious at missing this unlikely lord's call. It would be a sin beyond forgiveness were Sylvia to offend any man who might be viewed as a likely suitor for Caroline, especially a noble one. Still, if Sylvia's cousin was his

lordship's object, why had the footman insisted that the visitor had come to call on a mere boy of nine?

"Miss Gabriel," David said, feeling more than a little ashamed at putting Sir Miles' kinswoman to the blush, "I hope that you will forgive me for my uncommon rudeness, but, to be blunt, I was startled. I assume that you are aware of your unusual looks. It is somewhat unsettling to be confronted with a living image of a seraph this early in the morning, particularly when one has spent a somewhat iniquitous night."

Sylvia found herself relaxing at his jocular tone and his disarming honesty. Still, she thought that it would be a serious error to let her facade fall.

"Indeed," she said quietly. "I have no sword, milord, so I fail to see how you could mistake me for an avenging angel."

David's eyes widened in surprise. Comeliness and wit? David returned his glasses to the bridge of his nose. No, those green eyes were devoid of expression; that exquisite face was fatuously blank. Perhaps he had misread her earlier expression of anger, for the woman who stood before him now seemed utterly empty of any emotion. Had she sized him up and dismissed him because of his casual attire? It would not be the first time that he had been cut because of his sartorial heedlessness, but nonetheless, he felt a strange stirring of disappointment. A pity that Miss Gabriel seemed to lack the humor and spirit that would have animated those chiseled features.

"I have come to see Sir Miles," David said, his voice formal once more.

"He shall be down shortly," the stone angel said, in clipped tones.

David cast about for some topic to fill the growing silence. Perhaps the weather? The latest *on-dit*? But then he did not know the latest gossip so it would

have to be the weather. Surely that would not be too much for a woman of even limited intellect. In David's narrow experience it was almost a certitude that women endowed with superior beauty were short-changed in the attribute of wit. Once beyond the set topics of climate and gossip they inevitably foundered and sank in the seas of intelligent conversation. He was relieved when the knock came at the door, but instead of the elderly Sir Miles, a young boy of about nine burst into the room.

"I'm done with my lesson, Syl. Now may I meet Lord Whatsisname?"

"'Lord Donhill,' Miles," she reproved, then introduced him to their guest. "May I present Sir Miles Gabriel."

The boy made his leg, but David did not see. He turned abruptly to the window, hoping to conceal his shock and disappointment as the web woven of hope and fancy was torn to shreds. It was clear now that Highslip had been correct. The old baronet was dead. A few moments passed before David dared to show his face again. Fortunately, the years of chess play had given him infinite practice in commanding his features. However, he could not quite control the betraying quality of roughness in his voice.

"I am sorry, lad," he said, extending his hand. "I was expecting your uncle."

"Uncle Miles died over a year ago," the boy said sympathetically. "Surely everyone knows that."

Although his features were now impassive, Sylvia had seen Lord Donhill's face before he had turned away; the pain in his eyes had mirrored the ache in her own heart. Despite Uncle Miles' multitude of eccentricities, Sylvia had loved her uncle dearly and it was clear to see that Lord Donhill, too, must have held the late Sir Miles in great affection. Her curiosity roused, Sylvia was about to question Lord Donhill but, to her surprise, he bent down before the boy,

squatting until the two were eye-to-eye. Sylvia smiled at the sight of that awkwardly bent, lanky frame, warming to the man instantly. It was a rare adult that realized how intimidating a grown man's height could be to a child. Lucky indeed that Lord Donhill did not favor fashion, for a pair of skin-fitting breeches could not have stood the stress of the powerful thighs that were limned by the tautened fabric.

"I lived very far away," David said. "In India. Your uncle and I were good friends, but we had never met face-to-face."

"I never heard of ■ Lord Donhill," Miles said, cocking his head inquiringly. "How can you be friends if you never met?"

By post, Sylvia thought, an uneasy cold feeling spreading through the pit of her stomach as she digested his words. She felt much as if she had swallowed one of Gunther's famous ice confections whole, her mind racing giddily as she considered the unlikely possibility that the consequences of her deceit were coming to roost on her doorstep. However, the more she tried to convince herself that her fears were foolish, the more certain Sylvia became that her worst nightmares were about to come true. Her uncle's correspondent had often declared that he would never leave India. *No, it was absurd.*

"I have only recently become Lord Donhill, just as you are a relatively new-made Sir Miles. My name is David Rutherford," he said, taking off his glasses and polishing them in a forlorn gesture before slipping them in his pocket.

David Rutherford. The pronouncement of the name cut the last thread of Sylvia's hopes and she felt herself falling into the abyss of her own making. Somehow she had always pictured her uncle's chess-partner as an older gentleman, close to Uncle Miles in age. Still, would that have made her actions any

less improper? Sylvia doubted that Aunt Ruby would see it in that light, much less forgive her scapegrace niece were she to hear the whole. Deliberately, Sylvia cleared the confusion from her mind, concentrating on the problem before her. Knowing David Rutherford, the truth would undoubtedly be the best solution.

"Famous! I've heard all about you," the boy exclaimed. "I vow, you play chess nearly as well as my cousin—"

"Miles," Sylvia interrupted quickly, "can you ask Boniface to see to some refreshments for our guest?"

"Why not just ring?" Miles asked, but he was forestalled by Sylvia's quelling look. "I'll go get him," he mumbled. "Can't you just say you don't want me to listen?"

Once more, David found himself alone with the stone angel.

"I am sorry, milord. Had I known your identity, I would have spared you this," she said. "However, the footman is a new one and he quite insisted that you wished to speak to my young cousin."

There was a curious tone to her voice, one that he almost would have styled warmth. Absently, he patted his pockets in search of his spectacles.

"Sir Miles spoke quite fondly of you, milord," Sylvia said, choosing her words carefully. "Your letters and the game were a joy to him, particularly in the last months of his illness. Even when he could no longer think clearly enough to play, he bade the game continue."

There was a sound of voices in the entryway. Surely Aunt Ruby and Caroline had not returned so soon—but the high-pitched nasal tones were unmistakable. Sylvia felt a growing tide of panic as she looked upon David Rutherford's face and considered her options. If she were to tell him the whole now, without any preamble, there would certainly be

questions, questions that would take far too long to answer. Discovery would be inevitable, since Aunt Ruby would be upon them in a matter of moments. There was only one possible move.

"I know it was most improper, milord," Sylvia said in a rush. "My younger brother William could not bear to leave the game unfinished, and it was he who continued the play in the months that followed our uncle's passing. In a way, it was his tribute to a man who was most dear to the both of us."

"I would certainly have acceded to continue the game, if that was his concern," David said, feeling a twinge of annoyance.

Sylvia hung her head guiltily. In truth, she had feared that he would put an end to the play upon hearing the news. "Your last letters had mentioned some business difficulties," she said weakly, praying that William would forgive her for the lie that she was putting in his dish. "I believe my brother meant to spare you the additional burden until you were on your feet once more. However, I soon realized that it was wrong to keep the news from you. I myself sent a letter informing you of Uncle Miles' death."

"Unfortunately, I never received your letter. I suppose that, like my other correspondence, it will reach me in time. After all, I only received your brother's final move last evening. And if the final moves were his, I must congratulate him upon his tour de force," David said. "Is he at home?"

"No, milord," Sylvia said, "he is down at Oxford."

"He plays splendidly," David said. "Nonetheless, Miss Gabriel, I do not enjoy being made to look a fool. The truth would certainly have spared me a great deal of trouble. I knew that Sir Miles had been ill, of course, but I fear that I paid it scant attention; his health was never of the best."

His wistful tones caused Sylvia agonies of guilt, but the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs re-

mind her of her danger. Aunt Ruby would be angry, so very angry. "I know that it was wrong to deceive you, milord, but I beg you, do not hold it against my brother and do not tell my Aunt Ruby, I pray you. She and Will do not get on well and I fear if she hears of this she will cause him no end of trouble. Please, milord."

"No, I shall say nothing," David agreed, moved by the sincerity of her plea. So the stone angel does have a heart after all, he thought as he fumbled for his glasses once more to better view the effect of emotion on that marble face.

Just as he found the proper pocket, the door flew open. When he saw the sight framed by the doorway, he wished that he had never taken the spectacles from his pocket.

"Milord! We did not expect callers when we are so soon come to town," Ruby Gabriel said coyly.

David would not have believed that a woman who looked to be well over fifty could simper so, but simper she did, pulling a young chit in tow. Like a ship of line, floating amidst an ocean of unbecoming ruffles and furbelows, the woman plunged forward into the sea of introductions and neatly maneuvered her daughter to the side of the prize, himself. To her credit, the girl seemed rather reluctant to be put forward, but her mother was a force too strong to resist.

"My daughter, Caroline Gabriel, milord," Mrs. Gabriel declared.

As she advanced, David edged back slowly until his knees met the edge of a chair. Masterfully cornered, he bowed and planned his defensive position.

"Delighted, Miss Gabriel," he said.

"Would you take a glass of ratafia, milord?" Mrs. Gabriel said in tones more commanding than inquiring.

David knew that if he seated himself, he was lost. A change of tactic was definitely in order, a strategic

retreat. "I am sorry, Mrs. Gabriel—" He was forestalled in mid-sentence by a look from Miss Sylvia Gabriel, the green eyes eloquent, pleading.

"Sylvia, see to some refreshments," the termagant aunt demanded, directing the girl a fulminating look that could not be misinterpreted. If he departed suddenly, the stone angel was in the broth, there was no mistaking it, and David felt his annoyance melt into pity. It would cost him little to remain for a brief visit and do the pretty. If that would stay the shrew's anger then he would do it, he resolved.

"I should enjoy that, Mrs. Gabriel," David lied.

Sylvia Gabriel left the room, casting a grateful glance behind her.

"I do hope that you will forgive my foolish niece for presenting my son," Mrs. Gabriel said, frowning. When Boniface had informed her of the visitor, Mrs. Gabriel had consulted with her abigail, who was a veritable walking Debrett's, and determined that David Rutherford was of that rarest breed, monied gentry. It would not do at all if Sylvia were to steal a march on her cousin, despite their visitor's decidedly casual mode of dress. Still, lords were certainly allowed their eccentricities, especially wealthy lords. "The simpleton should have realized that Lord Donhill would not seek an interview with a nine-year-old boy."

"Actually, it your footman who assumed it was the child I wished to see," David said stiffly, somewhat confused by his irritated reaction to the woman's disparaging tones. After all, had he not made much the same assessment of the girl? "It was a natural mistake on your servant's part and I cannot be sorry of the error. We had an opportunity to speak of the late Sir Miles, who was a dear friend."

Mrs. Gabriel digested this information with a scowl. So it was not Caroline that he had come to call upon. "Still, Sylvia should not have put herself for-

ward so, but then, what can one expect from a girl who was raised almost entirely by a bachelor uncle? The child has not the vaguest idea how to go on in society."

"Indeed," David said. "Then your task is formidable, madam, for I understand that introducing a young lady to the *ton* is a vast undertaking. To care for both your daughter and your niece will be a double effort."

Mrs. Gabriel's florid face flushed even more and David noted absently that her stocky neck was nearly as red as a rooster's comb. Just then, further conversation was forestalled as the butler entered with cakes and ratafia. Sylvia, however, did not reappear and David found himself wondering about the girl's place in the household scheme. Although he usually did not concern himself with matters of dress, it was clear by contrast that her clothing was far inferior to the garments of her cousin and aunt. He would wager that they each wore a year's worth of Harjit's wages on their backs; yet, Sylvia had been garbed simply.

Finally, the butler withdrew.

"My niece's circumstances . . ." Mrs. Gabriel began.

"What Mama is trying to say is that Sylvia is not to come out with me," Miss Caroline declared, finding her voice at last. "And I think—"

But David was not destined to hear what the girl's thoughts were upon the matter. Her mother finished the sentence, giving her daughter a glance of warning.

"It is a pity, milord, that poor Sylvia's circumstances are at such a pass. Sir Miles was the oldest Gabriel son and my dear departed husband was next in line, so my little Miles inherited the title. Sylvia is the daughter of the youngest brother, John."

"John Gabriel?" David queried.

"You have heard of him?" Mrs. Gabriel asked, surprised.

David nodded. "Truly, I wonder that I did not make the connection long ago. John Gabriel was one of the foremost chess players of the previous century. Why, Gabriel's Gambit is one of the most lethal attacks that the game has ever known. He was the brother of the late Sir Miles, then?"

"Yes. Although they were separated in age by nearly a score of years, John was as chess-mad as his oldest brother. I can only thank my stars that my dear Horace was spared the malady," Mrs. Gabriel proclaimed vehemently. "For I can tell you that chess has caused a great deal of misery in this family. That pawn-crazy fool John dragged his family all over Creation in search of the perfect game, and of course, Miles, my other brother-by-marriage, was always staring at the board. 'Tis no wonder that Sylvia has not the foggiest idea of how to get on." She observed his face, hoping for some reaction, but finding none, she added, "Bad enough that Miles had no notion of suitably educating the girl, but to so utterly ruin her future! I vow, he must have run quite mad in his old age, with his will full of chess mutterings. Do you know that he actually requested that no proper period of mourning be observed? As if we would be so lost to propriety to bring Caroline out only a month after his death!"

Despite his annoyance at Mrs. Gabriel's malicious tongue, David found himself intrigued. "Chess mutterings?"

"Sylvia and her brother had a fortune, you see, of which our uncle was sole trustee," Caroline broke in. "Precious objects and things that their papa had collected in his travels as well as money, but upon Uncle's death, not so much as a sou was found."

"If only John had been prudent enough to leave his children in my care," Mrs. Gabriel declared with a

sniff. "However, I suspect that poor Miles had lost it all upon the Exchange and that idiotish will was only a way of trying to excuse himself. To think that Sylvia is destined to remain forever on the shelf."

"Sylvia thinks that the treasure is all hidden away somewhere and that the chess puzzle that Uncle set in his will contains the key," Caroline added.

"Nonsense," Mrs. Gabriel said forbiddingly, deterring her daughter by taking firm hold of the course of the conversation. "Sylvia is brass-noddled; for, of course, no stone has been left unturned in search of the money. But I am sure that Lord Donhill has heard enough of our family problems. Caroline, why do you not tell Lord Donhill of our plans to refurbish the house? Caroline has chosen the most delightful furnishings, *à la Chinoise*, for this room, milord. I vow, I cannot match her taste."

"I find that difficult to believe, madam," David said, repressing a shudder. Once the subject of modish decor was exhausted, the topic was forcefully turned to the doings of various members of the *ton*. Luckily, as the woman prattled on endlessly about people that she obviously did not know, there was no need for David to do little more than nod in what he hoped were appropriate places. He pondered the mystery of the chess puzzle until he was roused by the mention of Brummel and his fashionable eccentricities. A surreptitious glance at the china clock upon a nearby table showed that the hands were at half past one and he sent a grateful thought heavenward. Downing the last of his ratafia in a gulp, David rose and made his farewells, suddenly devoutly grateful that he was promised to Highslip, Brummel and the tailor at two.

"'Tis most unfair!" Miles exclaimed, kicking at the leg of a schoolroom stool. "'Twas me Lord Donhill came to call on."

"I know, Miles," Sylvia said in soothing tones as she pulled a book from the shelf. "But we have both been sent upstairs and there is little we can do about it. Now, let us get back to our geography."

"No," Miles declared with a pout, stamping his foot. "I won't."

Sylvia sighed. There was no dealing with the boy in this moody state and in truth, she could not blame him as she understood his feelings well enough. She, too, had been summarily dismissed. There had been no need for Aunt Ruby to articulate the warning in her eyes. Sylvia was not to return to the drawing room. She had little doubt that despite her obedience to her aunt's unspoken wishes, the woman would ring a peal over her head. Still, it could be far worse, Sylvia thought, replacing the atlas upon the shelf and going to the door of her chamber.

The governess' room was far more luxurious than most quarters of its kind. A thick carpet covered the floor and Sylvia had furnished her nook with the delicate Chippendale that her aunt had cast off in favor of more stylish accoutrements. The large attic windows commanded an incomparable view of Berkeley Square; the corner window overlooked the garden. Nonetheless, when Sylvia had found that she was to share the nursery with Miles, it had been a bitter blow. At least, in her uncle's Northumberland home, she had been able to hold on to some shred of pretense. There the servants had still deferred to her as mistress, a matter of no small irritation to her aunt. In the shelter of Crown Beeches, she could still believe that the money would be found, her position restored—and since she was past her majority, she would be completely free of her aunt's control.

Now that they were in London, however, only the sympathy of Boniface, her uncle's old butler, kept her from the general lot of governesses. Neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring, those poor women usu-

ally wandered the netherworld between upstairs and below, finding respect in neither. No, Sylvia corrected herself, there was one other major item that separated her from the realm of service. Aunt Ruby paid her servants, but as an impoverished relation, Sylvia received nothing but cold charity.

Even now, Sylvia ventured a guess, Aunt Ruby was pouring the entire sad tale into Lord Donhill's sympathetic ears. "*Poor Sylvia, cheated by her wicked uncle, cast upon our mercy . . .*" What utter rubbish, as if the penny-squeezing woman had spent a groat on either Sylvia or her brother since it had been determined that the money had disappeared. Slamming the door behind her, Sylvia threw herself upon her bed, blinking back angry tears. Bad enough to be made into an object of pity, but for Aunt Ruby to toss Uncle Miles' reputation to the winds, poisoning David Rutherford against him . . . It was not to be borne.

She turned onto her back, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling. There was no help for it. It would be foolish beyond permission to storm downstairs to throw Aunt Ruby's barley-water charity into her face. Besides, Sylvia tried to convince herself, it was undoubtedly better this way. If Aunt Ruby behaved with her usual lack of grace, Lord Donhill would probably take his leave forever. There would be no further questions as to who had conducted the correspondence chess game. Strangely enough, the thought that she might never see David Rutherford again left her feeling utterly bereft.

You should be relieved, she berated herself. *It is over.* There would be no more stealthy searches through the mail, hoping to intercept David's letter before it came to Aunt Ruby's hands. Yet all she could do was mourn as this final link to a happier past was severed. The game was ended at last.

When Uncle had become too ill to write anymore,

Sylvia had known that she should have informed David. However, over the years, she had come to know and respect her uncle's correspondent; indeed, she had thought of him on a first-name basis. Sylvia had often read David's letters aloud to her uncle and they had laughed together over David's wry observations about life in the army; the vivid descriptions of the East reminded Sylvia of those wonderful years that she and Will had spent in India with Mama and Papa.

Then, at the end of each letter, there was always the next move. Uncle Miles would stand before the gold-and-silver board, lifting the lapis piece as if he were some high priest performing a sacred rite. Together they would ponder the possibilities, racing to the shelves to consult the chess texts, arguing strategy, and their opponent's intent until the wee hours of the morning. It would take days of debate, until at last, they had chosen their reply.

Ten years. It was hard to believe that so much time had passed. She had been a mere girl in plaits when the game had begun, but Uncle had made her a part of it from the start. Sylvia's father had recognized his daughter's native talent, nurturing it until he and his wife were killed in a carriage accident. Luckily, Uncle Miles had also encouraged his young niece's love of chess, helping her to hone her skill until she eventually had surpassed him. Indeed, her uncle had often joked that David Rutherford was playing a far wiler opponent than he realized, for no male could ever hope to follow the twists of a female mind.

And now, the precious board with its inlaid squares was gone, disappeared along with all the other treasures into some secret cache. Sylvia could not bring herself to believe that her uncle had mispent her fortune and she hoped that David would come to the same conclusion, even though the two men had never had the opportunity to meet. Uncle

Miles had come to view his chess correspondent in light of a close friend. Perhaps that was why Sylvia had always assumed that David was a much older man. As it was, Sylvia judged that David looked to be about thirty. Behind those spectacles, his eyes had seemed wise and kind.

"Syl?" A questioning whisper came from beyond the door. "May I come in?"

Sylvia rose and smoothed her skirts. "You may, Miles," she called.

The boy entered, hanging his head. "I'm sorry, Syl. 'Tisn't your fault, I know."

"No need to worry, Miles," Sylvia said. "The truth is, we are both a bit blue-devilled."

"I vow, it must be worse for you. Fancy meeting the 'India player' after all this time," Miles said, glad at being so easily let off. "Did he find a way out of your trap?"

"No," Sylvia said, smiling triumphantly. "He called it a 'tour de force.'"

"Must have shocked him to the marrow, being trounced by a girl," Miles said. "Wish I could've seen his face."

"He does not know, Miles," Sylvia said, her forehead furrowing as she was assailed by her conscience once again. During the latter years of Uncle's illness, David's letters had been her lifeline. She had read them again and again. The very thought that that source of comfort might cease had driven her to deceit. Since she had usually acted as her uncle's secretary, the handwriting in the letters had undergone no change. Sir Miles' style of address was simple to mimic and so, during her uncle's illness, the replies to David's letters had been as much Sylvia's own as the responses to the chess moves.

Now, as she looked at the boy's puzzled face Sylvia realized that there was little choice. She had told young Miles about the correspondence game because

of their shared passion for chess, never dreaming that the "India player," as Miles called him, would ever set foot in London. Now, the child would have to become a party to the deceit. "I told him that Will took over the play," Sylvia said.

"Will!" Miles scoffed. "Your brother don't know a pawn from a pastor. Might as well've told the 'India player' that *I* brought the game to the end."

"You are quite skilled, Miles," Sylvia said. "But by no means are you on a level with Lord Donhill. He might have wished to put you to the test and then we surely would have been caught out. William is at Oxford and unlikely to appear and put me to the lie."

"Don't see why you didn't tell him the truth. That would have set the cat amongst the pigeons. Especially with that wager of his," Miles said, his eyes shining.

"Wager?" Sylvia asked.

"Jack the footman got it from Lord Donhill's tiger," the boy informed her eagerly. "I heard when I went seeking Boniface, accidentally of course. Know you don't hold with gossiping, but this is famous. Seems last night his lordship got utterly cup-shot."

"Miles," Sylvia warned, "if you are about to tell one of those dreadful stories that you glean from the servants, I do not believe that I wish to hear the rest of this. Now let us return to our lessons." Even though she was bursting with curiosity, she turned and walked back to the schoolroom.

"Syl," Miles groaned, and followed her, tugging at her arm. "'Tis awfully important. In fact, you could be Lady Donhill."

"Are you ill, youngling?" Sylvia smiled at his earnest face. "I vow, you are sounding quite daft."

"Lord Donhill wagered that he would only marry the woman who could beat him at chess," Miles proclaimed. "And you've already trounced him. There's

a purse of a thousand pounds besides. Oh, Syl, you've only to tell him and he'll be forced to honor his wager."

"That is ridiculous, Miles. Who would make so foolish a bet?" Sylvia asked, even though she knew it entirely possible. Her own father had taken outrageous changes, hazarding fortunes on the outcome of a game that he rarely lost. "Besides, even in the unlikely event that the gossip is true, the game was not entirely mine. I was only fourteen years of age when David Rutherford's correspondence with Uncle Miles began ten years ago."

"But you beat him once," the boy insisted. "And you could trounce him again in an instant. He's rich as the Golden Ball and a lord besides. Take him up on his challenge, Syl."

"Miles," she said, taking the boy by the shoulders, "even if Lord Donhill made so foolish a wager and I were so forward as to win his challenge, it would be unfair to press him to keep a pledge made in a moment of drunkenness. He was Uncle's friend and I consider him mine as well."

"But you'd be a good wife," Miles protested. "You're a bang-up-to-the-mark chess player and you don't even scream at snakes."

"High praise, indeed," Sylvia said with a laugh. "But he would not love me and love is the most important part of a marriage."

"Love," Miles sneered, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "You sound just like Caroline sometimes. 'Love this, love that,' sighing like a mooncalf all the time."

"Someday, Miles, you will understand."

"I hope not," Miles vowed vehemently. "A wager's a wager. What if some other female steals a march on you?"

"I doubt it." Sylvia chuckled. "There are not many chess players of either sex who could match David Rutherford," she said. "Besides, what would your

mama say if I should play him and lose? You know how she hates chess and thinks it no fit game for ladies. If she did not believe me the rankest of amateurs I doubt that she would tolerate a board in the house. As for challenging a man for a wager, I suspect that would put me beyond the pale."

"But you could win it, Syl," the boy declared once more, but he desisted at last when he saw his cousin's obdurate expression. There was a sound from below and Miles ran to the open window, glad of the distraction.

"Look, Syl," he called, beckoning her to the sill. "Look at those matched grays; ain't they fine?"

Sylvia watched as David Rutherford leapt lightly into his vehicle. The sun glinted on his silver-handled whip as he chanced to look up, saluting the waving boy with a flourish. Sylvia backed away, flushing in shame that Lord Donhill might have seen her gawping like some country greenling.

"Nothing behindhand about those horses," Miles said, waving enthusiastically until the carriage was out of sight. "If it were me, I'd hazard him in a minute."

Sylvia sighed. "No, Miles; and I hope that you will not betray me. If your mama should find out what I have been about, then I have no doubt that she would cast me out on the street."

"Not me," Miles said, stoutly, offended at the very suggestion. "Still—"

"Sylvia!" There was no mistaking that shrill voice and with a sympathetic look, Miles scampered to a seat, taking up a book just as the door swung open to admit his mother.

Sylvia closed her eyes for a moment, bracing herself for the tirade that was sure to come. For some reason, David Rutherford's face came to mind. As she listened with feigned meekness to her aunt's ha-

rangue, Miles' words echoed in her head. *"I'd hazard him in a minute."*

Sylvia had always thought those Minerva Press heroines who submitted to fate with stoic resolution were fools. It was humbling to realize that she was no less of a ninny at heart. In all likelihood, she could best David Rutherford, but no matter what silly wager he had made, Sylvia hoped that she would never serve a friend so poorly. Still, as Aunt Ruby's whine hummed in her ears, such fine feelings were but small comfort.

Three



A puff of clouds drifted in the sky above Green Park, momentarily obscuring the weak spring sunshine. Sylvia held the reins of her horse loosely as it ambled along.

"I vow, Syl, I do not know how you bear Mama these days," Caroline said, her lowered voice barely audible above the slow clip of the horses' hooves. She glanced behind to satisfy herself that the groom and her brother were beyond hearing. "As if it is your fault that the house is almost empty of callers. Mama keeps harkening back to the time before Uncle Miles' illness. To hear her tell of it, the invitations and the callers came in a veritable flood when you were about to make your curtsy to the *ton*. Lady Harwell called the other day, and when she found out that the Miss Gabriel of the house was not you, she left in a huff and put a flea in Mama's ear to boot."

"Lady Harwell was a particular friend of my mama's," Sylvia said apologetically. "If my Season had gone on as planned, years ago, she had expected to assist with my introduction to society."

"It is so sad that Uncle Miles became ill and you were forced to return to Northumberland before your Season," Caroline declared sympathetically, then,

characteristically, flitted to another subject. "Lord Donhill particularly asked after you yesterday."

Sylvia's fingers tightened upon the reins, her knuckles whitening in anger, but her voice remained controlled. "Lord Donhill came to call?" she asked, feigning a casual air.

"Oh, yes," Caroline said absently, looking up at the sky. "Dear me, look at those gray clouds above the trees. Lord Donhill called while you were out matching that lace for Mama. Do you think it will rain?"

"The lace that she sent me to return in the end," Sylvia said in clipped tones. Obviously, Aunt Ruby had expected that David Rutherford would call and had deliberately sent her niece on a useless errand.

"He seemed somewhat disappointed to miss you," Caroline said, tearing her attention from the sky momentarily. "And you would not believe the change, Syl. Lord Donhill is now all the go, almost a veritable pattern card of fashion. Although I must say that he was not nearly so fine as his friend, Mr. Petrov. You should have seen him. I vow, he is the most handsome man I have ever seen in my life—so dashing and so charming. His manners are most delightful."

"Yes," Sylvia said, stifling a sigh. "Lord Donhill would be so."

"Lord Donhill?" Caroline drew her horse to a stop, looking confusedly at her cousin. "Why, it is Mr. Petrov of whom I speak. Lord Donhill is far too old; he must be well past thirty," she said. "For all Mama's prosings about his wealth and title, I would not marry him, even if he had not made that strange wager."

Sylvia laughed at the arrogance of her seventeen-year-old cousin. "A veritable Methuselah," she agreed, feeling relieved although she could not say why. "So Lord Donhill has become a Bond Street beau."

"Not quite. His cravat was rumpled and askew,"

Caroline said, urging her mount forward once again. "It is all part of that infamous wager of his. I vow, Mama was quite distressed when she heard of it."

"So it is true," Sylvia said. "His wife will have to win him in a chess match."

Caroline nodded. "And a purse of a thousand pounds if she should be so foolish as to forgo him. According to the latest *on-dit*, half the eligible females in London are engaging chess masters. I am glad that you pronounced yourself an indifferent chess player, else Mama would have you tutoring me. You get along well enough on the board with Miles, though."

"Lord Donhill is no stripling and a far more formidable opponent than your brother," Sylvia said quickly, David's image coming sharply to mind. Somehow, his deplorable mode of dress had made him no less handsome. She wondered sadly if her aunt would ever allow them to meet again. "It is unlikely that a come-lately to the game could best him."

"I suppose," Caroline said, with a toss of her head. "Still, I am glad he is ineligible as a suitor because of his wager. I much prefer Mr. Petrov." A stiff breeze began to blow through the branches of the trees, causing Caroline to clamp her hat firmly to her head. "It will rain, I just know it, and my new hat *à la militaire* will be utterly ruined. Perhaps if we turn back now?" she wailed, reining in her horse once more.

Miles rode up just in time to hear his sister's declaration. "Aw, Caro," he moaned. "Are you made of sugar? A little rain never hurt anyone."

Sylvia controlled her frisky animal with a light touch as she added her voice to Miles'. "I doubt that it will rain anytime soon, Caro. See, the sun is coming out once more."

"I am positive that it will rain," Caroline said, with a pout. "And the ostrich feathers in my shako will be drenched. We shall have to go home immediately."

Sylvia took a deep breath and nodded her head at the groom. "I suppose—" she began.

"Go home yourself!" Miles yelled, cutting Sylvia off. "You selfish beast. Invite yourself along for a ride with us, riding slow as treacle to show off your new habit, but that ain't enough. Angry that there ain't no one about so you can preen yourself, conceited looby!"

Sylvia knew that she ought to rebuke the boy for his rudeness, but from Caroline's flush, she knew that Miles had struck upon the truth. She herself had wondered at the girl's sudden eagerness for exercise.

"A fine one you are to talk, Master Rudesby," Caroline retorted. "You would rather see a small fortune ruined than forgo your ride."

"Ain't just my ride," Miles said. "'Tis Sylvia's too. If you take the groom home, we all have to go back. Who told you to wear the silly hat anyway? Makes you look like Wellington's sister, with a nose you could hang a lamp upon."

The groom began to cough violently and Caroline's brown eyes fairly snapped in fury. Once more, Miles had scored on a sore point. Unfortunately, she had inherited her mother's prominent proboscis. From the look of the girl's clenched fists, Sylvia feared that Caroline might actually come to blows with her brother. Apparently, so did Miles, for he dug his heels into his mount and was off across the field.

"I shall chase him down," Sylvia said as she caught the groom's inquiring look. "You stay with Miss Caroline under those trees that we just passed. You should be safe there in the unlikely event of a shower, Caro."

Caroline gave her cousin a tight-lipped nod. "Mama says that you ought to whip him and I find myself thinking her right. He is growing quite insolent."

Sylvia did not trust herself to reply, afraid that she

might say that Miles had given his sister as much as she deserved. Sylvia cantered off in the direction that Miles had taken, fairly certain that he was heading for his usual favorite spot out toward Buckingham House. Still, once she was out of sight, she deliberately slowed her horse's pace, determined to enjoy some semblance of an outing despite Caroline's tantrum.

Sure enough, Sylvia found the boy waiting for her upon the open field.

"Syl!" he called, waving at her cheerfully. "I hoped that it would be you coming after me."

"You were very naughty, Miles," Sylvia said, mustering as much anger as she could. "You should not have provoked Caro so."

"Someone ought to," Miles said, walking his horse toward her. "I daresay she has become the veriest prig since we came to town. She sounds more and more like Mama every day. Besides, didn't you get to ride?" He smiled mischievously.

"At what cost?" Sylvia asked as she dismounted. "You know very well that this morning's events will get back to Aunt Ruby one way or another."

"I'm sorry, Syl. I didn't think of that," he said.

"Well," Sylvia said, relenting at the boy's crestfallen expression, "I was glad of the ride."

The two walked their horses together in companionable silence for a moment, delaying their return, when suddenly a magnificent mare raced into the clearing. Astride her was a man in white, his costume contrasting vividly with the animal's coat of stark black.

"Cor!" Miles whispered in awe. "A Hindu!"

"No, Miles. 'Tis a Sikh. You can tell by—" But before Sylvia could finish her sentence, a large, spotted dog burst from the brush in a blur of speed, nipping at the heels of the mare. The horse reared in fright,

kicking at the mongrel with flaying hooves while his rider struggled to retain his seat.

To Sylvia's dismay, the Sikh flew from the saddle, landing in a crumpled heap at the edge of the wood, while his mount galloped away in terror, pursued by the cur.

"Miles, go get the groom and Caro, quickly," Sylvia ordered, helping the boy up into his saddle.

"I shall go after the horse," Miles declared as he caught up the reins.

"You shall not!" Sylvia commanded in a voice that brooked no contradiction. "Not when a human being needs help. Now, off with you." She swatted his horse's rump and, leaving her own mount to graze, ran toward the fallen man.

She knelt down beside the Sikh, noting in relief that he was still breathing, but other than chafing his hand, Sylvia was totally at a loss as to what to do. She had never tended anything more serious than a scrape. He moaned and stirred slightly and Sylvia was reassured.

"Do not worry," she said in Hindi. "Soon someone will come. Soon."

The liquid brown eyes flew open. "The horse?" he whispered. "I must seek my master's mare," he declared, attempting to raise himself, but he closed his eyes once more as dizziness overcame him.

Sylvia rose to her feet, praying that Miles would soon arrive with the groom, but instead the dog burst from the bushes once more, racing toward her. Frantically, Sylvia looked about her for some weapon. In desperation, she snatched up a fallen branch and placed herself between the animal and the man lying senseless upon the muddy ground. The dog stopped short, ears flattening against his head as he growled at her menacingly.

"Get away!" she screamed, waving the stick. "Go home!"

But the hound only bared its teeth in reply and lunged forward.

"Spots!"

Sylvia heaved a sigh of relief as the dog turned and loped toward a short, heavysset man who was striding out of the woods. As he came closer, his shabby coat and tattered boots became apparent, but his uncouth appearance was far less fearsome than the speculative look on his face as he drew nearer.

"Well, well. What have you brought to ground here, m' boy?" the man said, eyeing Sylvia with a lascivious leer.

Sylvia shivered as his words confirmed what his expression had told her. She was little more than prey. A glance at the prostrate Sikh made it clear that there was no hope of help from that quarter. As Spots' master devoured her with his gaze, Sylvia prayed that Miles would put in a quick appearance. Until then, Sylvia swallowed hard as she brought up her makeshift club once more; there was only herself to rely on.

"No need for that, m' beauty," the man said with a gap-toothed smile. "Just a liddle kiss to thank me for calling the 'ound off."

"'Twas your cur that caused all the difficulty," Sylvia said, her voice shaking. "If you do not leave immediately with your dog, I shall have you hauled before the magistrate."

"I'm quakin' in me boots," he chortled, sneering at what was clearly an idle threat. "Would ye like t' see Spots do some of 'is tricks? Ye've already seen 'is best. Got 'im trained to bring down any rider likely to 'ave a goodly purse on 'im. Put down yer stick, missy."

Miles, where are you? Sylvia wondered desperately, her heart racing as her attacker advanced, the unpleasant sound of his laughter sending a shiver of

foreboding up her spine. Raising her cudgel high, she prepared to swing.

"Spots!"

At the sound of his master's voice, the dog lunged forward, jaws snapping. Sylvia felt a stab of white-hot pain as sharp fangs raked her fingers, causing her to release the branch and clutch her throbbing hand.

The man laughed as Sylvia backed away, stumbled and fell to the ground. Through a haze of pain and fear, she saw something gleaming in the Sikh's sash. Her right hand was useless, but she reached with her left to pull at the jeweled handle of the ceremonial *khanda* that all Sikh men wore. The wicked blade glistened in the sunlight as she pushed herself to her feet, awkwardly swiping the air before her.

"Now, you son of a cur, now I shall spit you and your accursed animal on one blade," Sylvia waved the weapon wildly, hoping that her attacker would not realize that she had not the foggiest notion of how to use the dagger. She hurled Hindi curses at him, howling and dancing about like a madwoman. "I shall send you to your vile ancestors," she threatened. "I am Kali, the she-demon!"

The man started to back away, but the dog was unimpressed. Perhaps sensing the core of fear at the center of Sylvia's lunatic display, the animal lunged at her once more, only to veer sharply to the side as the report of a pistol echoed through the clearing. Whining piteously, the dog returned to his master, who clutched at a suddenly spreading redness about his shoulder. The wounded man turned and ran, stumbling into the woods, the dog following close on his heels. There was the sound of hoofbeats as a horse passed Sylvia in pursuit.

Sylvia's legs seemed to melt beneath her; she sank to her knees, weak with relief. The residue of fear left her scarcely able to breathe, her heart hammering as

if it would beat itself from her breast. The *khanda* slipped to the ground as she clutched at her aching hand, watching the unknown rider disappear into the trees.

Suddenly, she heard a twig snap behind her, but before she could turn, a hand touched her shoulder. Her fear returning full force, Sylvia attempted to twist away, throwing herself flat upon the ground to grab at the fallen *khanda*, unwittingly taking her new assailant down with her. Stones dug into her stomach as she fought to free herself from the weight upon her back. Her throat produced nothing but a ragged choking sound as she tried to scream.

"Easy, easy, Kali," a somehow familiar voice said. "Calm yourself, she-demon."

Abruptly the weight shifted, then was gone. The restraint removed, she rolled, grabbing the dagger as she staggered to her feet. Breathing raggedly, Sylvia attempted to focus through a haze of terror.

"You can put the *khanda* down now, Kali," David urged softly, cursing himself for a fool. He should have known better than to come at her from behind and startle her so. Primal fear had pushed her beyond reason; the feral instinct of self-preservation was all that he could see in those green eyes. He doubted that Sylvia even recognized him in her present state. "The he-demon is gone and there is no need to cut my Weston coat to shreds, however you might deplore the fit."

Memory at last penetrated the curtain of shock. Her arm slowly dropped to her side, the blade slipping from suddenly lax fingers with a soft thud as its point embedded itself in the muddy ground.

"Much better," David said with relief as he watched awareness return to her face. "You are safe, Kali."

As she stood watching him in trembling silence far more disturbing than any tears or female frenzy, Da-

vid moved toward her, uncertain. His senses urged him to gather her into his arms, to hold her, comfort her, but any move on his part might drive her into panic once more. So, as the moments passed, all he could do was watch and wait for the inevitable onset of hysteria.

"You—called me—'Kali'," Sylvia whispered, her voice coming out in something of a croak. "If you heard that much—milord, why in heaven's name—did you not chase the devil off sooner?"

"Unfortunately, with all your dancing about it was difficult to get a clear shot," David said, his face splitting into a relieved grin at this unexpected scold. Although her voice and demeanor were still strained, there would likely be no sobbing or weeping. A most remarkable woman, indeed. How had he ever thought her deficient in wit? "I do not usually carry a pistol on my person, but Ivan and I were just returning from Manton's. Harjit was to meet me here with a fresh horse and then take my weapons home."

"Your servant!" Sylvia exclaimed, looking anxiously at the prone figure of the Sikh. To her relief, the man's eyes were open and aware.

David made a tentative move in Harjit's direction, but the Sikh shook his head, clearly indicating that the lady needed the attention more. David nodded agreement. Miss Gabriel's eyes were wide and unblinking. She was still skating close to the brink of panic. "You gave a masterful performance, Miss Gabriel."

"Indeed?" she said, taking deep ragged breaths. Although the sun was on her back, she felt horribly cold. His voice was a soothing balm but his timbre verged on the treacle tones that one would use to quiet a child. She refused to be patronized. "Sh-shall I consider the stage then?"

"I am sure that you would put Mrs. Siddons upon her mettle," he said, glad of her mocking retort. Her

words were coming almost in gasps and she was shivering violently. Peeling off his jacket, David draped the garment over her trembling shoulders.

"Would I match her excellent Lady Macbeth, do you think?" Sylvia asked, pulling the jacket close about her, grateful for the warmth. In her still-agitated state she found the scents of horse and man that rose from the fabric curiously comforting; even the frantic thump of her heart seemed to slow.

David could not help but admire the courage that allowed her to joke after an incident that would have left most women—and some men—in need of a vinaigrette. However, her face, he noted, was still stark-white. "You would make an excellent murderess, but a most untidy one," he said, deliberately emulating her tone of gallows humor in an effort to erase the terror from her eyes.

"You, milord, are something of a mess yourself," Sylvia said, smiling at last.

Even beneath a coating of mud, there was something about that smile that made his heart skip a beat. "That is most unfair of you, Lady Macbeth, or should I say 'Kali'? You are responsible for my roll in the mud. But then, there are some, including my friend Ivan yonder, who claim that untidiness is my natural state," he said, wiping ineffectually at his breeches and noticing a familiar scarlet shade. "Blood!" he exclaimed. "You are bleeding, Miss Gabriel."

Immediately crossing the space that separated them, David laid gentle hands upon Sylvia in an effort to discover the location of her wound. She stood quiescent as he examined her, finally finding the source of the bleeding.

"'Twas where Spots scratched me, I believe," she murmured. "'Tis nothing."

"Your pardon if I differ, Kali." He gently spread the hand upon his, shaking his head, his insides

clenching at the sight of the jagged wound. A rapid fumble through his pockets revealed no trace of a clean handkerchief. With impatient hands, he managed to unwrap the linen stock from his neck, using an end to wipe away the cake of mud and blood. Neckcloths did have some justification for existence after all, he reflected.

"It appears far worse than it is," David said, looking up at Sylvia in relief. To his dismay, he saw a worried frown on her brow. "It will heal, Miss Gabriel, I promise you. The dog only nipped you, although I suspect that you may carry a scar of this day's work."

"It is not my hand that troubles me, milord. It is—" Her eyes perused him from head to foot. She had ruined his elegant clothing. He was half-covered in mud from the lawn of his shirt to the tip of his Hessians. "I am so sorry about your garments, milord."

"My clothes," David said in surprise. He had been all but certain that it was the thought of the scar that was the source of her serious expression. "Do not give them a thought, Lady Macbeth. Why, it will be but a small matter to clean them. 'Out, damned spots!' " he intoned, as Petrov rode up beside them.

Sylvia began to giggle helplessly. "'Out, damned spots' indeed!"

"While you are standing here quoting your Shakespeare, the evil one got away. Is still my thought that you should have been shooting to kill," Petrov said as he dismounted. "Is she having the hysteria?"

David looked at Sylvia, who was chortling so hard that the tears were beginning to fall. "It would seem so," he said.

"No," Sylvia declared between giggles. "Spots was the name of the wretched cur."

But David did not smile as he cut away a clean section of the neckcloth with the *khanda* and carefully wrapped her wounded hand. "You are right, Ivan. I

should have killed him," he said with quiet menace as he looked at Sylvia's blood-streaked habit and tearstained face.

"Could have been worse," Petrov said, helping the Sikh to rise. "Just as well you were not killing the rogue, though. In this country, magistrates are getting involved; such simple matters are becoming too messy." Suddenly his face lit with a smile that transformed his mournful visage. "A pun! I am understanding now. 'Out, damned spot,' from the Shakespeare play, no? *Hamlet*?"

"*Macbeth*," David corrected absently as he finished binding the wound.

Harjit salaamed toward Sylvia awkwardly. "You have saved my life, mistress," he said softly in Hindi. "It is a debt which I can never repay."

"It is not to me the obligation is owed, but your master. In truth, it is I who am the greater debtor, for it was more than my life he saved. My honor was rescued as well," Sylvia replied in the same tongue, regaining her composure at last.

David looked at her in surprise, flushing at her praise. "Where did you learn Hindi?"

But before Sylvia could answer the question, Petrov let out a despairing wail. "By my mother's soul, David. Look at you! Your riding jacket," he cried. "Is mud upon it. You use your neckcloth for bandage. Your knees are bloody, *ai!* Muck and grass stains will be remaining upon your breeches forever."

"Cut line, Ivan," David said, casting him an annoyed glance. "You are not my nursemaid."

"Highslip will be having my head," Petrov proclaimed tragically, his accent gaining added flavor with emotion. "Your new riding costume is shumbles, all within an hour. You are having to change before we meet Brummel for breakfast, David. Then off to Weston's for you, mine friend."

"That is *shambles*, Ivan," David said, smiling. "And

I shall be damned if I set foot in that pin-pusher's parlor again. If you do not cease this arrant nonsense, I swear that I shall find the first mud puddle that I may, dip my boots in it and splatter you as well."

Petrov recoiled in horror, as if the mud puddle were imminent. Sylvia let out a peal of laughter, causing the men to look upon her in shocked surprise. It was an infectious sound, neither light nor musical, but a wholehearted invitation to mirth. Soon, both David and Petrov were claspng their sides and even Harjit's lips were stretched in a broad smile.

"Hallo, Syl," Miles called, galloping across the field, followed by Caroline and the groom. "Are you all right? Caro would go slow; didn't want to lose that confounded hat," he said disparagingly as he slid from his horse.

"Is a most charming hat, a crime to lose so beautiful an adornment," Petrov said smoothly as he helped Caroline dismount. "Entirely suitable to your loveliness."

Caroline's annoyed expression disappeared. She gazed into the Russian's worshipping face. "You see, dear brother," she said, the very picture of sisterly sweetness. "I told you there was no need to go haring off neck-or-nothing. Sylvia did not need us at all."

Despite his declaration that he would risk damnation rather than another encounter with Weston, David Rutherford was once more consigned to purgatory at the tailor's hands. That afternoon, both Highslip and Brummel added their adamant demands to Petrov's. Thus, David found himself swiftly transported yet again to Bond Street and stripped to his smallclothes. The damp chill bit at his bare legs as he stood still, fearing to move in the pin-infested

half-finished garments. Raindrops fiercely pelted the windows of the Bond Street shop, but David was far away, thinking of Sylvia. When they had delivered her home, her aunt had given her the devil of a time, rebuking the girl as if the vile attack had been her own fault. It was beyond bearing, yet there was seemingly nothing that he could do for her. David was roused from his reverie by the sound of raised voices.

"I say, the yellow!" Highslip asserted, picking up a bolt of silk, his eyes alight.

"With his skin? Are you mad?" Brummel disagreed in emotional tones. "'Twould cause David to look hopelessly sallow."

"But surely a touch of color . . ."

"Darker shades are far more becoming," Brummel stated, his gaze stony.

"Please," David groaned. "We have been at this for the better part of an hour now. I feel like a veritable pincushion. My limbs ache and my neck is stiff from standing like a piece of pasteboard. Can we go home?"

"Now, now, milord," Weston said as he entered the fitting room carrying a bolt of deep-blue fabric. "We shall be finished shortly." The master tailor proceeded to unwrap a length for Brummel's inspection much in the manner of a magician producing a miracle from thin air.

The Beau rewarded him with a pleased nod. "Excellent, Weston" he said, fingering the cloth critically. "This blue is just the ticket."

David blinked in disbelief. "But it is nearly the exact shade of the one we examined half an hour ago."

"'Nearly' is insufficient," Lord Highslip sniffed, shaking his head disapprovingly. "A gentleman's sartorial splendor must be perfection itself. Why, I spend well above an hour each morning refining the appearance of my neckcloth."

"I can well believe it." David snorted derisively. "Ouch!" he yelped as Weston stuck him with a pin.

"My apologies, milord," the tailor said, twitching the sleeve of the garment into place, "but you do persist in moving. These broad shoulders require careful fitting for the proper result."

"I can barely move a muscle in your damned jackets," David said, looking murderously at his tormentor, half-suspecting that the man had pricked him on purpose. "All I did was shrug my shoulders and the thing came apart. Do not make this one so tight."

Weston looked at Brummel and shook his head. "I cannot, Mr. Brummel. I simply cannot do it," he said, rolling his eyes heavenward.

"I shall speak to him," Brummel said, watching as the tailor left the room muttering in dismay. The Beau turned toward David, who was shrugging off the half-finished garment with a sigh of relief.

"You agreed to the wager," Brummel said, in much the same tones one would use to chide a recalcitrant child.

"I pledged to dress properly," David said, pushing his spectacles further up upon his nose. "I did not expect to submit to torture."

"If you would not persist in ruining your garments," Lord Highslip said in a sneering voice, "you would not require so many trips to the tailor. Ripping coats to shreds with a shrug, mud on your riding costume, blood on your linen . . ."

"I explained all that," David said, looking at the earl belligerently. "What would you have had me do? Leave her to bleed to death?"

"Highslip!" Brummel stepped between the two men. "Would you stop behaving as if David did the damage deliberately? Before he left us, Petrov himself testified that the ruin was unavoidable."

David gave Highslip a satisfied smirk.

"However," Brummel continued, "you must re-

place the injured garments, David, with clothing of equal quality and stop abusing Weston. The man is an artist of the highest order and you must treat him with care."

It was Highslip's turn to curl his lip.

"Now, while we wait for Weston to return, tell us a bit more about the incident this morning," Brummel said, feeling rather like the father of two unruly sons and sensing the need for an immediate diversion. "Who is this Amazon that defended your servant?"

"I would not style her an Amazon, George," David said. "She was, however, most courageous and undoubtedly the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"And what is the name of this vision?" Highslip asked derisively. "Were you wearing your glasses?"

David glared at Highslip. "Her name is Miss Sylvia Gabriel, the late Sir Miles' niece."

"It is unlike you to speak in such superlatives, David," Brummel said, intervening once more. "I shall look forward to making her acquaintance during the Season."

"It is unlikely that you shall have the opportunity," David said with a frown. "The girl has no dower to speak of and her aunt means to keep her under wraps."

"A shame, if she has half the beauty you say," Brummel said.

"Indeed, he does not do her justice," Lord Highslip said softly, a strange look stealing across his face. "Sylvia is perfection, an Incomparable in every way."

"You know the girl, Highslip?" David asked.

"I do," Highslip said. "My estates march with her uncle's land in Northumberland. I was well acquainted with Sylvia; in truth, we had something of an understanding."

"Did you?" David queried, the very idea somehow disturbing.

Highslip nodded, his eyes narrowing in anger as he spoke. "Sad thing when mere money comes in the way of true love. I suspect now that Sylvia regrets her choice. She could have come away with me."

"You proposed a runaway match?" Brummel asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise. Lord "High in the Instep" Highslip, as they styled him, was a notable stickler for propriety. It was hard to credit that he would so much as put a toe beyond the pale of proper behavior.

Highslip nodded. "Not strictly honorable, I know, but such was the depth of my feelings. I think that if she had loved me well enough, we could have gone to Gretna. Unfortunately, my regard was not returned."

David looked at the popinjay peer with a leery eye. Something about his story did not quite ring true. Still, there was no telling what a woman might do. In his experience, love was given much lip service, to be sure, but money and position were all that mattered in the end. Shekels won over sentiment every time. Perhaps Miss Gabriel had thought to entertain Highslip's suit for his title, and, David granted grudgingly, the earl's looks were above the common.

Still, David found it difficult to believe that Sylvia Gabriel had heartlessly jilted Highslip. There was a gentle strength about her that would preclude such behavior. Moreover, David could not help but think that Miss Gabriel had been uncommonly sensible to avoid a lifetime sentence with the elegant earl.

"I account avoiding Gretna to the girl's credit," Brummel praised, pursing his lips. "A woman of valor, beauty *and* reason. Damme, 'tis a crying shame that the most interesting female of the Season seems doomed to remain in the shadows. The chattering chits that it has been my misfortune to meet make

me yawn with boredom. Unless . . ." he cogitated aloud, a slow, sardonic smile dawning. "Such courage should not go unrewarded."

"And what do you have in mind, George?" David asked, uneasily. "Miss Gabriel's aunt is dead-set against presenting her niece. While Caroline is well enough to look upon, Sylvia casts her cousin completely in the shade."

"Ah," said Brummel, "but that is precisely her merit, David. We shall contrive to make Miss Sylvia Gabriel fashionable. So fashionable, in fact, that her dear aunt will find that she cannot do without her."

"It will not do," Highslip protested. "Sylvia has no dowry."

"Beautiful women have been known to wed without the benefit of gilding," Brummel stated. "What better reward for bravery than a husband, eh? Gentlemen, I hereby declare that Miss Sylvia Gabriel is the most desirable woman in London. Now, I shall go seek Mr. Weston."

David was able to hold back until Brummel quit the room, then he burst into such a fit of laughter that his spectacles slid dangerously low on his nose.

"You think he jests?" Highslip asked, tight-lipped with annoyance.

"He must be joking," David said, the room reverberating with his bass chuckle. "The sheer presumption . . ."

"To the contrary, dear Donhill. Nothing could be simpler. Within the week, I would wager, Sylvia Gabriel will be the reigning Incomparable and there is nothing we can do to stop it."

Four



David soon found that Highslip had spoken no less than the truth. Brummel played his pawns in polite society with the finesse of a master. A few casual words in the correct ears and soon, Sylvia Gabriel's name was upon every tongue. Her bravery was applauded, her beauty extolled and rumors of a mysterious lost fortune were carefully promulgated until the *ton* was in a veritable tizzy, craving an encounter with the unknown paragon.

At the house on Berkeley Square, Mrs. Gabriel was at a loss to cope with the sudden flood of interest in her empty-pursed niece. She banished Sylvia to the nursery, claiming to the crowds of callers that the poor girl was overset by her ordeal. Caroline was pushed forth into the distinguished company, but it was plain even to the doting Mrs. Gabriel that once the visitors found that Sylvia was not to be seen, they were not disposed to linger, despite Caroline's many charms.

Knowing the attention of the *ton* to be as fleeting as a child's, Brummel moved rapidly. The sun had not set thrice since the incident at Green Park when, with David and Petrov in tow, the Beau presented himself at the Gabriels' door. The tide of callers was at high crest, the large salon filled to capacity with nary an empty chair to be had. Yet when Brummel

and his party were announced, vacancies beside the hostess mysteriously appeared.

As the Beau did the pretty, a curious hush settled over the room as all awaited the pronouncement of the oracle of fashion. The atmosphere was much like the air of anticipation around the pit before a cock-fight, for Mrs. Gabriel was obviously a prime target for Brummel's famed sarcasm. Her clothing, with its surfeit of fripperies, was quite tasteless and her mannerisms bordered on the vulgar. It appeared certain that the reigning monarch of the mode would rip this encroaching female to shreds.

Unfortunately as time passed, it seemed that they were destined to be disappointed. The Beau's claws were seemingly sheathed. He confined himself to polite inconsequentials. However, those who knew him best were not fooled, recognizing the gleam of devilish intent behind Brummel's otherwise bland expression.

"How unfortunate that your niece continues to be indisposed," he said, his smile chilly. "I confess myself let down, for I came expressly to congratulate her upon her brave actions."

"Bishop checks queen," Petrov whispered under his breath. "He informs that the girl has his interest."

With his elbow, David nudged the Russian to silence.

"You are acquainted with my niece?" Mrs. Gabriel asked with a croak of surprise.

"Only by her excellent reputation," Brummel allowed. "But I am looking forward to meeting her once the Season begins. As we all are." He scanned the crowd. "One can only hope that she will soon recover, so that we may express our admiration."

David watched in amusement as the visitors nodded their heads in agreement, like a collection of puppets. As for Mrs. Gabriel, her jaw opened wide, almost as agape as the mouth of a child's nutcracker.

David imagined that he could hear the whirring of gears as she cracked the shell of Brummel's statement to reveal the kernel of his intent.

The Beau skewered the woman with his eyes while he delivered the coup de grace. "I must admire you, Mrs. Gabriel." He inclined his head in a gesture of approval. "I vow, few relations would be kind enough to stand their kin for a Season, what with your own lovely daughter to launch."

"Game is ending, mine friend," Petrov mumbled, watching with delight as Caroline flushed delicately, flattered at Brummel's notice. "She is cornered. Check and mate."

Petrov was undoubtedly correct, David realized as he marked that Mrs. Gabriel too was flushing, albeit far less prettily. She could not escape Brummel's maneuver without seeming the most miserly of mushrooms, accounting mere money of more import than familial obligation. Denial of her imputed generosity would mean the loss of Brummel's tacit approval and, likely, society's censure.

"My apologies, Mrs. Gabriel," Brummel said, raising his quizzing glass. "Did I mistake the matter? You *are* sponsoring your niece's debut, are you not?"

Mrs. Gabriel had no choice but to smile and acquiesce weakly. "The poor darling would have none of it, at first," she lied. "I vow, the girl is so proud; she don't want to take so much as a farthing from me, her own aunt. Nonetheless, I decided that she ought to have a Season, despite the fact that she don't have a penny-piece to her name and that she is fully four and twenty." Mrs. Gabriel smiled inwardly, having in one sentence ensured that Sylvia would present no serious competition to Caroline. Sylvia's beauty and courage might be universally praised; however, praise cost nothing. Ultimately, the serious suitors would go to the girl with the dowry rather than the poverty-stricken spinster. Indeed, she noticed more

than one look of consternation amidst the general expressions of approval.

"Draw?" Petrov questioned quietly, but David shook his head. From the look on Brummel's face, he had not yet made his final move.

"Is that so?" Brummel asked, making a show of wiping his quizzing glass before placing Mrs. Gabriel under the scrutiny of his lens once more. "I had understood that your niece is something of an heiress."

"Indeed, she *was*, once," Mrs. Gabriel pronounced with no little satisfaction. "But when Sir Miles passed on, not a trace of the fortune was found. Every last penny had been withdrawn from the banks. Not that my brother-by-marriage misspent it, mind," she hastened to add as she saw the dawning of disapproval among her audience. "He squirreled it away somewhere. All records vanished."

"Indeed," Brummel said slowly. "So there is the distinct possibility that the money will be found."

"It would be misleading to say so," Mrs. Gabriel disputed, speedily attempting to damp such speculation. "Heaven knows that we have tried to locate the treasure, but the late Sir Miles' will was a model of confusion. I believe the poor man was out of his head with all his mutterings of 'fool's mates' and other such chess terms."

"Ah, if the clues are in chess jargon, then my friend Donhill here might be able to help. He breathes, eats and sleeps the game," Brummel said. "And he certainly owes your niece a favor, for 'twas his servant's life that she saved."

"The man is playing two boards in tandem, David; you are pawn, I am thinking," Petrov said softly, his lips twisting wryly. "Is checkmate again."

David nodded in discomfited agreement. Although he had given some thought to Sir Miles' chess will, he could not like being so publicly committed to a cause that might very well be hopeless. From the

speculative looks being cast his way, it seemed that Miss Gabriel's marital prospects would be largely determined by his success or failure.

As if guided by some inner clock, Brummel arose at the correct time, bowing over Mrs. Gabriel's pudgy fingers as he made his farewells. In a mere twenty minutes, he had accomplished most of his goals. Sylvia Gabriel had been elevated to the ranks of eligible maidens, although her fortune was phantom and her person seen by but a few. Brummel devoutly hoped that the girl was as much a beauty as his friend asserted, for it would not do to have anything less than a stunner imbued with his cachet. However, Brummel had no intention of relying exclusively on the likelihood of locating the lady's inheritance. There was one last sortie to attempt.

"You have my admiration, madam," Brummel proclaimed, pouring liberally from the butter-boat. "Your generosity is beyond compare. Even though your brother-by-marriage is at fault for your niece's difficulties, you were not obligated to provide for Season and her marriage."

David held his breath, stunned by Brummel's sheer nerve. The implication was clear. Not content with the mere promise of a Season, the Beau had opted to inveigle for the pledge of a dot as well.

But this time, Mrs. Gabriel held her ground. "I only wish that I could provide dear Sylvia with a dowry. My own Caroline was, of course, extremely well provided for by her late papa, but it is all I can do to provide Sylvia with an entree into society. One can only hope that Sylvia's fortune will be recovered." The quality of her voice reflected her skepticism.

Brummel took the setback in stride. "Indeed," he said reflectively. "Stranger things have been known to occur. I bid you farewell, generous madam."

"Pooh." She waved her hand in dismissal. "'Twas the least I could do."

"And you may be sure, it will be the absolute *least* she can do," David muttered darkly to Petrov as Brummel went triumphantly out the door.

For Sylvia, the days that followed seemed like traveling in the midst of a whirlwind. Over Miles' protests, she was yanked from the nursery and dragged on a rapid tour of shoddy shops and second-rate seamstresses, for true to David's prediction, Mrs. Gabriel was doing the least she could. Yet, despite the inferior quality of the establishments, the mediocre modistes exerted themselves once they heard the name of their customer. Here too, Brummel's efforts had borne fruit. The patron saint of English fashion had given Sylvia Gabriel his blessing. A damaged bolt of green silk was procured at a pinch-penny price, an unpaid-for riding habit was altered. Bit by bit, by dint of a skillful bit of cutting, a snatch of concealing embroidery, Sylvia was outfitted in a plethora of bargains. The more aspiring seamstresses were eager to introduce their wares to the modish world and exerted themselves to produce garments that would garner the notice of the *ton*.

Moreover, Mrs. Gabriel's determination to deprive her niece of the frills and furbelows that adorned Caroline's clothing worked in Sylvia's favor. The simplicity of Sylvia's gowns only served to accentuate her classic beauty; the dark colors that Mrs. Gabriel chose to contrast her niece's age with Caroline's youthful pastels lent Sylvia an air of sophistication and distinction.

Any pleasure that Sylvia might have drawn from her new finery, however, was nearly destroyed by her aunt's incessant groaning at the unnecessary expense. Every groat was begrudged and the delivery of every garment elicited a litany of grievance. Some-

how, Sylvia was blamed for the turn of events that necessitated this depletion of her aunt's purse.

Still, even Mrs. Gabriel's constant grumbling could not utterly surmount Sylvia's excitement as their carriage crept up King Street to Almack's. As the lines of carriages disgorged their well-dressed passengers, Sylvia felt a thrill of anticipation. Although Almack's was often denigrated for its stale cake and inferior orgeat, it was the dearest dream of every well-born maiden to pass through the assembly rooms' portals, to dance every dance and, perhaps, find true love while treading a measure to the strains of the orchestra. Even though her head told her otherwise, Sylvia's heart still felt the force of those long-ago girlish dreams.

Nonetheless, Sylvia told herself that she harbored no delusions of love at first glance. Without a dowry, a decent suitor was less than likely, as well she knew. Idly, she wondered if she would encounter Hugo, Lord Highslip, at Almack's, for she knew that he was in town. Although she had called him "Hugo," there was something about him that had always caused her to be mindful of his title, as if the earl's diadem had been forever fixed upon his head.

With half an ear, Sylvia listened to her aunt's list of strictures yet again. Sylvia was not to put herself forward, not to smile overly much, not to talk too frequently or dance too boisterously. In short, she was adjured to fade into the shadows. It seemed that no matter how Sylvia comported herself, the evening would provide her aunt with a multitude of nits to pick. As their conveyance edged to the entry and Aunt Ruby set forth more rules of behavior, Sylvia thought glumly that she might better have remained home to play chess with Miles.

Thoughts of chess led inevitably to thoughts of David Rutherford. Would he be at Almack's? she wondered, conjuring up his face in the semidarkness of

the coach. The very prospect of his presence caused her spirits to rise. Chiding herself for her foolishness, Sylvia decided that it was most unlikely that Lord Donhill would appear at the Marriage Mart's primary temple, especially since he had gone to such lengths to protect himself from the parson's mousetrap. The terms of his notorious wager teased at the edge of her mind and she shoved those treacherous thoughts aside immediately.

"Sylvia! Why are you daydreaming? We have arrived," Aunt Ruby pouted in annoyance as she compared her daughter's looks to those of her niece. Somehow, Sylvia had contrived to make her gown look far better than it had seemed in the shop. Although it had not appeared so in the fashion plate, the dress was adorned with elaborate easing, accentuating the column of her neck and the whiteness of her shoulders. Sylvia had coiffed her hair in a simple Psyche's knot and a natural glow of excitement precluded the need for pinching cheeks.

Mrs. Gabriel gave a pat to her turban and composed her features, knowing there was no help for Sylvia's unwanted presence. Since Brummel's visit, vouchers for Almack's had arrived with gratifying speed. Invitations to routs and balls were piled upon her desk. The Beau's patronage had macadamized the road to social acceptance; although Mrs. Gabriel would not deign to acknowledge it, Sylvia's attendance was a small price to pay for his cachet. Still, Mrs. Gabriel vowed to make sure that Caroline was not eclipsed by her beautiful cousin.

"Sylvia," she said, her voice barely audible above the noise from within, "I feel that I must tell you that somehow word of your ended engagement to Lord Highslip has become public."

The girl blanched. "B-but how?" she stammered.

"I have no notion," Mrs. Gabriel said. "But while you are no longer suitable as a wife, I would not

have you interfere with Caroline's chances to be a countess. Do you understand?"

"Of course, Aunt Ruby," she whispered, trying to quiet the turmoil within. It was humiliating to think that all the *ton* might know of Highslip's rejection.

Strains of music wafted from the nearby ballroom as Lord Highslip attempted to tweak David's neckcloth into place. "I cannot understand it, Rutherford, now that your valet is recovered," he said in exasperation. "At first, I thought that the problem lay with that Hindu man of yours."

"Harjit is a Sikh," David corrected, his irritation growing as the earl continued to fuss and fidget with his collar.

Highslip waved his hand. "No matter. Whatever he is, I can only conclude that he is not at fault. For regardless of who has the dressing of you, the result is inevitably the same. Within the space of a few moments, your shirt points have wilted."

"I am sorry, but I tend to sweat," David said, his apology blunted by his belligerent tone as he squirmed like a little boy beneath Highslip's grasp.

"Gentlemen do not 'sweat' and even were they so vulgar, perspiration is no excuse," Highslip drawled dismissively. "However, if that were all, I would not be dissatisfied. Look at your neckcloth, man."

Obediently, David looked down his nose at the snowy folds, holding up a bit of the linen and crumpling it in the process. "It is still there. I have not taken it off."

"Would that you had," Highslip muttered. "When we left my rooms, it was tied into a perfect, crisp Mathematical; now it is beyond repair. Have you been using it to polish your spectacles again?"

"No, I swear." David raised his hand in affirmation. As he brought it down, he ruffled his fingers consciously through his hair, throwing the artfully

styled Brutus into careless disarray. "My spectacles are safe upon my nose."

Highslip groaned as he watched Rutherford's wanton desecration of his painstakingly produced coiffure. Stepping back, the earl eyed his sartorial apprentice with growing dismay. "Your linen is askew again and somehow your coat has gotten wrinkled between my doorstep and Almack's. I cannot fathom how that is possible. And your stockings!" he moaned. "There is a splatter of mud on your left ankle. I would vow on my dear mama's grave that we have not been near a drop of mud. We have not had rain this week past!"

"Your coach, perhaps?" David questioned, his eyes lighting with devilish pleasure as he deliberately goaded the dandy.

"Always immaculate," Highslip said, thrusting out his chin pugnaciously. "I have yet to encounter a speck of soil in any of my conveyances, yet dirt seems to be attracted to you as if you were a veritable magnet. Were it not for my promise to Brummel, I vow I would wash my hands of you."

"Indeed, you might be well advised to do so. Is that a speck of dust I see on your left sleeve?" David asked, making as if to touch the cuff in question.

Highslip backed away. "I would not be surprised if you were contagious. Well, I have done the best I can. I doubt that Brummel himself could do better."

Brummel stood in the doorway, his amusement at their brangling changing to annoyance with Highslip's last statement.

"Think you so, Highslip?" Brummel asked, raising his quizzing glass in disdain. Pursing his lips, he eyed Rutherford in patent disapproval. "A marked improvement, David," he said slowly. "But then, *anything* would have been an improvement."

Highslip reddened at the implied criticism.

David tugged at the linen that hugged his neck

like a veritable noose. "I vow, Adam was a fool when he put on those blasted leaves in Eden. I am sure that had he realized it would lead to the neckcloth, he would have been content in his nakedness. Not another lecture on the importance of being well-dressed, I pray you, George."

"No, you heathen." Brummel barked with laughter. "I have not come to preach to you, merely to tell you that Miss Gabriel has arrived. I may deplore your taste in tailoring matters, Donhill, but your eye for the fair sex is impeccable. There is no need for me to create her an Incomparable, for she is one without my assistance."

As David entered the ballroom and saw Miss Gabriel crossing the floor, he could not help but agree with Brummel's assessment. The unusual green shade of Miss Gabriel's gown accentuated her porcelain coloring and the candlelight glinted in her hair, burnishing it to the color of new-minted gold. Yet, despite her outstanding looks, her face lacked animation and for a moment, he was reminded forcibly of their first meeting. Once again, her countenance was a study in marble, closed and emotionless as she turned her head mechanically and looked upon the assemblage. Then those green eyes met his and David saw beyond the facade that she affected. Her anguish was obvious, as was the likely cause, for Mrs. Gabriel's glowering looks were all too easy to interpret. Although she was making an attempt at hiding it, the woman's jealousy of the attention that her niece was garnering was patent. Miss Gabriel was in obvious need of rescue and David abruptly determined that he would act the part of her champion.

However, he soon found that he was not the only would-be knight on the board. By the time he had crossed the floor, he found her besieged by a crowd of young swains eager for an introduction.

"La, Lord Donhill," Mrs. Gabriel said, tapping him

on the arm with her fan, "I declare myself surprised to see you at Almack's of all places."

David suppressed a wince. The woman wielded her fan like a club, and the logic of her statement was no less of an assault. Why had he come to the very place he had vowed to avoid like the plague? The terms of the wager had not required that he endure the crowd of eager mamas, callow youths and simpering misses. Where had his wits gone? David wondered. He had endured hours of Highslip's high-handed management, been primped, polished and apparelled under that popinjay's paw, and for what purpose? Certainly, Mrs. Gabriel seemed singularly unimpressed by the marked improvement in his appearance. Indeed, by the short shrift she had given him, he deduced that Miss Caroline Gabriel had no potential for chess. Even as he made an attempt to reply to her sally, the matron turned her attention to Lord Highslip, who had made no wagers impairing his eligibility.

"Caroline, darling, look who is come—dear Lord Highslip," the woman proclaimed loudly, as if the earl was long-lost kin, rapping him soundly on the arm.

But even had she knocked him on the noggin, Mrs. Gabriel would have been unable to direct Highslip's attention to Caroline, for it was clearly Sylvia who claimed his gaze. While David was long accustomed to reading faces, he was hard-put to name the expression that passed across Sylvia Gabriel's countenance. Was it regret, he wondered, that she had whistled a titled suitor to the wind? As for Highslip, his usually bland mask slipped for barely a fraction of a moment, but it was long enough for David to perceive the raw desire burning in the earl's eyes.

"As beautiful as ever, Sylvia," Highslip said at last, a slight hesitation in his drawled compliment.

"Am I indeed, Hugo?" Sylvia said, her tones cold and clipped. *Even without gold?* her eyes asked him.

David wondered at the air of tension between them. The crackle of feelings imbued the atmosphere with an electricity of emotion. Even Mrs. Gabriel could detect the silent current, for her color was becoming alarmingly beet-red in hue as the earl continued to stare.

"May I have this dance, Miss Gabriel?" David found himself asking, looking toward Mrs. Gabriel for permission to dance with her niece.

With a glowering nod, Mrs. Gabriel gave her assent, while Highslip gazed angrily after them.

"I account myself lucky to steal you away, Miss Gabriel," David said, trying to fill the awkward silence.

"Is he still staring at me, milord?" Sylvia asked under her breath, a pasted smile upon her lips.

David glanced in Highslip's direction. "No, Miss Gabriel," he said softly. "He has recovered himself and is engaged in a conversation with your cousin." The girl relaxed visibly, the tension in her posture easing as the orchestra began to play.

"I feel almost a Bartholemew Fair freak," Sylvia said, thinking aloud. "It seems as if every eye is upon me. I vow, 'tis hard enough to bear without Hugo acting the fool."

David stiffened. Although Highslip's behavior had been inappropriate, surely her rejected former suitor deserved more sympathy. "Men have forever been making fools of themselves over beautiful women, Miss Gabriel, so you are scarcely a freak," he said, ruefully recalling hopeless infatuations in his past, when he had been without title or purse. "Brummel has pronounced you an Incomparable. Is not that type of attention gratifying?"

"Think you so, milord?" Sylvia asked. Although his voice was even and his smile pleasant enough,

her reading of his expression detected an unfavorable set to his jaw, a glint of reprimand in his eye. He disapproved of her for some reason. Surely he could not fault her for the uncommon notice that she was receiving? "I did not campaign for the title, sir, and now that I have been granted the dubious honor, I suspect that it will only cause me grief."

"There are some who would put marriage in the grievous category, but I have never met a female who looked upon it so," David said. "We had supposed that between your uncommon looks and Brummel's approbation, you would certainly be able to snare some man."

"'We'?" It took all of Sylvia's skill to keep her visage calm, but she could not keep the snap of anger from her voice. The events of the past days were suddenly becoming clear. "So my sudden popularity has not come *ex nihilo*. Who is 'we,' milord?"

David fingered his neckcloth uncomfortably as he tried to extricate himself from the results of his foolish move. "'Twas Brummel's idea, actually," he began, clearing his throat. They were parted momentarily by the pattern of the dance and he prayed that her anger would wane somewhat by the time the figure rejoined them. However, that was not the case. Although a placid facade was fixed on her face, her eyes were spitting sparks as they linked arms.

"Who else is in on this plot of yours?" Sylvia asked, in tones of poisoned honey.

"We had only meant to help you, Miss Gabriel," David explained weakly. "Your desperate situation, I mean."

"My 'desperate situation,' as you call it, has only been made more untenable by your interference," Sylvia whispered, nodding briefly toward the corner that her aunt occupied. "Look you and tell me what you see."

"Well," David allowed, "her expression is somewhat annoyed. Now she is speaking to Caroline."

"Who is obviously not dancing," Sylvia lamented. "And, knowing my aunt, I will be to blame for it."

"I am sure that your cousin will find a suitor, Miss Gabriel," David said, feeling a pang of guilt as he realized the likely truth of her conclusions. "As you shall."

"I know you meant well, milord," Sylvia said. The hangdog aspect in his eyes reminded her forcibly of young Miles' aspect when one of his brainstorms had gone awry, and her indignation abated. "However, do you honestly believe that I could find a worthy suitor who would overlook the absence of a dowry?"

David looked at her, astonished that she should have any doubts on that point. Yet Miss Gabriel did not seem to be fishing for compliments; her manner was entirely serious. There was an underlying bitterness in her voice that told him she had reason to believe her words.

"A man may admire a showy piece of horseflesh, milord, but if it has little else to recommend it, he will not buy it," Sylvia stated flatly, aching inside as she recalled her past hurt and disappointment. "At present, Lord Donhill, my looks are more a curse than a blessing. My appearance bars me from seeking a respectable position, for what woman with husband or son would be blind enough to hire a governess with a face that tempts men to indiscretion? I will, therefore, forever be dependent on Aunt Ruby's charity."

It was a statement of fact, not vanity. David marveled that she had actually considered the possibility of employment, and felt saddened that his old friend's niece had come to such a pass. Although his compliance with Brummel's plan had initially been halfhearted, he now pledged himself fully to Miss Gabriel's assistance.

"Not all men are so mercenary," David said. "But if you despair of marriage, Miss Gabriel, what do you want?"

"My freedom," Sylvia replied at once. "To be quit of Aunt Ruby's grudging charity."

"Marriage would do that," David pointed out. "You would be beyond your aunt's authority."

"And completely under another's, merely in a different form of servitude," Sylvia said. "'Tis the same thing to be white's pawn as black's—the moves are limited."

"And you would be queen." Amused by the reference to the game, David continued the chess analogy. "With complete freedom of the board." But before Miss Gabriel could reply they were separated by the figure of the dance again. She moved gracefully, executing the steps with airy precision before she returned to his side.

"To be a queen requires a treasury, milord," Sylvia said with a regretful smile. "Unfortunately, mine seems to have been permanently misplaced."

"Then I must find it, Miss Gabriel," David vowed.

"I have tried for this past year," Sylvia reminded him. "We all have."

"Ah," David said smugly, "but my knowledge of chess is far superior. I am sure that those clues your uncle left will be far more intelligible to a master of the game than one with limited skills."

"I doubt it; the clues are too confusing, even for a master." Her candid declaration elicited a startled expression from Lord Donhill, and Sylvia, realizing her error, hastened to recoup. "I hope that you will forgive my frankness, but I feel that I can talk to you honestly, Lord Donhill. Uncle often read your letters to me and it is almost as if you are something of an old friend."

"Surely not an *old* friend," David bantered, as he

circled round her and bowed in answer to her elegant curtsy.

"Ancient," Sylvia replied as they came together once more, a teasing light in her eyes. "I had envisioned you as a grizzled old gent, balding, with a Moorish cap upon your head, the tassel waving to and fro as you pondered your moves."

"And you, my girl, were described as a mere member of the infantry. A terror in plaits who prattled incessantly," David declared, recalling Sir Miles' brief mentions of his niece.

"And in your mind, I remained eternally in the nursery, just as you were my uncle's elderly, faraway crony," she mused. "Strange, the elaborate pictures that our imaginations create from mere assumption, usually far better than the reality."

"To the contrary, Miss Gabriel. I find myself preferring reality," he said, surprising himself with his own sincerity. "An intelligent, beautiful woman is infinitely better than a chattering schoolroom minx."

"Why, that is by far the best of compliments, milord," Sylvia said, a smile banishing her serious expression. "No man has ever credited me with a brain-box before; most males do not look beyond my face."

"Then most men are fools, Miss Gabriel," he said, looking into the depths of her eyes. The candlelight imbued them with a topaz glitter, making them glow with a lambent flame.

The tempo of the music increased and they changed partners. There was no further opportunity for conversation until David reluctantly brought Miss Gabriel back to her aunt's side. It was easy to see that the girl's evaluation of the situation was on the mark, for the look that her aunt gave her would have done credit to Medusa.

"I hope that you did not find Sylvia's ways too forward, Lord Donhill," Mrs. Gabriel said, favoring him

with a pasteboard smile. "I fear my niece has not yet learned that her countrified conduct is inappropriate for town."

"Indeed, Mrs. Gabriel, I found her irreproachable. Your tutelage does you credit," David commented, larding on flattery liberally. "In fact, I would be grateful if your daughter would favor me with a dance."

Mrs. Gabriel nodded graciously. Although his monstrous wager made Lord Donhill ineligible, he was well enough to dance with and, as Brummel was the man's bosom friend, it would not do to give offense.

David was delighted to find that, except for her unfortunate nose, Caroline did not resemble her mama in the least. Freed of Mrs. Gabriel's crushing presence, the young woman chattered freely, flitting from topic to topic with the abandon of a conversational butterfly as the steps of the dance joined and parted them. It required little of David's concentration to nod appropriately as he mulled over Sylvia Gabriel's situation. He owed it to the memory of his late chess partner to solve the mystery and clear his name. Unfortunately, there were many who shared Mrs. Gabriel's opinion that the late Sir Miles had frittered away his nephew and niece's inheritance. David found himself wondering about William Gabriel, Sylvia's brother. Perhaps a letter to Oxford might be in order? After all, two brilliant chess players pondering the same problem were far better than one. However, David was brought up short in his contemplations by a question from Miss Caroline Gabriel.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Gabriel?" he said, noting her look of annoyance.

"I vow, you are just like Sylvia, ever listening with half an ear," she said with a pout. "I wondered if your friend Mr. Petrov ever attends Almack's."

"His aunt, the Countess Lieven, is a patroness, so

I suspect he does make an occasional appearance," David replied. "However, I believe that he had an engagement for a chess game at White's this evening."

"Chess." Caroline made the word a sigh. "How I hate that game, milord. It has ruined my dear cousin's life. Oh, my!" The girl bit her lip and her brow wrinkled in worry.

"Whatever is wrong, Miss Gabriel? Have I trod upon you? I confess that I am not the best of dancers," David said.

"Oh, no, milord. It is far worse, I fear. Lord Highslip has returned once again with your friend Brummel. It is too bad that the earl chooses to make a cake of himself like this. Poor Sylvia—if he continues in this vein it is bound to add credence to the dreadful talk that has been making the rounds," she said, shaking her head sadly.

Indeed, a glance confirmed that Highslip had returned to Miss Gabriel's side and was behaving like a veritable moonling.

"Really," Caroline said in exasperation, "one would think that the wretch would be ashamed to approach her, after all the damage that he has done."

"Whatever do you mean, Miss Gabriel?" David asked, his full attention upon her now.

"I really ought not to say," Caroline pursed her lips as she lowered her voice conspiratorially. "When Highslip found that all of Syl's money was gone, he jilted her. It broke her heart and I fear that she will never recover from her unrequited love."

Although David was surprised that Miss Gabriel would confide her cousin's secrets to a near-stranger, he made no attempt to stem the flow of gossip.

"It is too bad of him to be making an exhibition of her and blowing her reputation to flinders. Especially when he made it clear last year that he had to marry to fill his purse," Caroline whispered indignantly. "And after she had defied Uncle Miles' wishes in the

matter by continuing to entertain the earl's suit! It was a bitter blow for Sylvia, I suppose, to find that Uncle Miles had been correct about Lord Highslip's character all along."

"And they were engaged?" David asked, encouraging further revelation.

"Not officially," Caroline allowed. "Uncle Miles would not countenance it. However, Syl was due to come into control of her affairs and Uncle could not have stopped it then. Only the family and Lord Highslip knew of the matter and so, when the earl cried off, we had thought it buried. But apparently that is not the case. Lady Jersey just taxed me with it, and although I told her the truth of it, I suspect that she did not believe me."

They parted to exchange partners and Caroline had flown to another subject by the time she returned to David's side. Still, the girl had given him ample fare to chew. There was little doubt in Lord Donhill's mind that Caroline Gabriel's account of the affair was more faithful to truth than the earl's. David's regard for the dandy dropped from minimal to nil. Highslip had sought to place Sylvia Gabriel in the role of jilt, when it was he who had done the injury.

After David returned Caroline to her mama, he pondered his moves. Ambling about in a desultory manner, David caught snatches of whispers. Even seemingly favorable comments about Miss Sylvia Gabriel were tinged with the green of jealousy. A hasty consultation with Brummel confirmed the worst: the story that Miss Gabriel had entertained Highslip's suit and then high-handedly spurned him was gaining wide circulation.

"I would like to do Highslip's neckcloth up good and tight," David muttered.

Brummel shook his head. "Now, now, David. That would remedy nothing."

"What can we do?" David asked.

"Very little, I am afraid," Brummel admitted with a shrug. "There are far too many tabbies who are envious of Miss Gabriel's looks. All we can attempt is to tell the true tale, but even then, I suspect that the winds of gossip will not blow in her favor."

"I fear we have done her no good, George. With such talk going about, I doubt that she will be able to find a husband as we had hoped," David said, looking mournfully at Sylvia. "I ask you, was there ever such a fool as Highslip? To jilt any female because she has lost her funds is contemptible, but to forsake a woman like Sylvia Gabriel is an act of sheer stupidity. Any man of intelligence would take her in a trice, even if she had only a shift to her name." The thought of Sylvia in a shift flashed through David's brain and the room suddenly grew warm.

Brummel smiled knowingly. "There is one way to teach the dog a lesson, David. Find her fortune and Highslip will be well-served for his perfidy."

David grinned in understanding. "Bad enough to lose the girl, but if the fortune was there all along . . . I vow it will send him into apoplexy. I shall do it!" he pledged, pulling off his spectacles to polish them excitedly.

"Your linen," Brummel reminded him.

David looked shamefacedly at him. "Sorry, George. Shall I attempt to retie the thing?"

Brummel waved his hand in dismissal. "Might as well try to revive the dead," he sighed. "'Tis too far gone."

David hurried off to speak to Sylvia regarding her uncle's will.

"Far gone, indeed," Brummel murmured softly. "I sincerely hope the lady plays chess."

Five



“Perhaps I ought to go back to Crown Beeches,” Sylvia said, putting aside her tambour frame and going to the window. A curtain of rain fell, pounding in heavy drops against the pane. “The whispers have gotten worse, I fear. The chill looks that I get almost make me shiver.”

“On the contrary, Syl,” Caroline said, leafing idly through Ackermann’s fashion plates. “You get the warmest of looks from the male contingent. ’Tis just the females that wish you to China or someplace equally distant. There are none that hold a candle to you, cousin.”

Sylvia looked at Caroline sharply, but could detect no trace of resentment upon her face or in her voice.

“I am no beauty. I know that,” Caroline said with a smile. “But I am well enough to look upon past the nose.”

“Mr. Petrov seems to think so,” Sylvia said, returning to sit beside her cousin.

“Pooh, he thinks of nothing but his chessboard,” Caroline declared. Nonetheless, she blushed, thinking of the Russian and his dark mournful eyes.

“Not when he called the other day,” Sylvia pointed out. “He was looking at you all the while.”

“You know full well that he only accompanied Lord Donhill to discuss Uncle’s will. ’Tis only the

chess puzzle that fascinates him, not my *beaux yeux*." Caroline sighed. "He follows Lord Donhill like the tail to a dog."

"Unfortunately, we had no chance to talk of the will, the parlor was so crowded," Sylvia said glumly.

"With all your suitors," Caroline said, laughingly.

Sylvia shook her head. "Do not call them so, please."

In a teasing voice, Caroline ticked off the names on her fingers. "Lord Entshaw seemed quite taken with you, and I thought Mr. Colber's eyes would quite pop out of his head."

"Lord Entshaw puts me in mind of a balding slug; he is fifty if he is a day, with hands that are forever straying. Your mama was in alt at this condescension, for slug though he may be, he is a *titled* slug." Sylvia grimaced. "As for Mr. Colber, his staring is but a trifle compared to Hugo's gaze. I vow, last night I could feel his eyes following me about the room. Everyone could not help but remark it. It was most discomfitting. I should leave, Caro."

"You cannot let Lord Highslip chase you from town, Syl," Caroline said, putting her magazine down to take her cousin's hand. "I vow, if it were not so monstrous annoying, it would be quite romantic. It seems if Highslip will not have you, he seeks to ensure that no one else will."

Sylvia looked at the girl in surprise. Although Caroline was not known for her perception, Sylvia considered her pronouncement with growing concern. During Hugo's courtship, Sylvia had accounted his excessive jealousy as a sign of his regard; now she wondered if Caroline's conjecture had hit the mark. Certainly, it would explain the earl's *outré* behavior as well as the rumors that had suddenly become rife. As much as Aunt Ruby disliked her, Sylvia could not credit that the woman would deliberately spread such information about a member of her own family.

Even in his youth, Highslip had always been un-

commonly possessive, issuing dire warnings about trespassing upon Highslip land to the local children, often enforcing his rules with his fists, Sylvia remembered. From the recesses of memory, she dredged up an incident, recollected, in the main, because of the great agitation that it had caused Uncle Miles. It had occurred soon after she and Will had come to Crown Beeches. Even then, Hugo's family had been floating down the River Tick. In an effort at economy, Hugo's father had sold a hunter, one that his son had greatly prized, to Sylvia's uncle. However, before the horse could be sent to its new owner, Hugo rode off upon it, neck-or-nothing, bringing the animal back utterly ruined. The hunter had to be destroyed.

Sylvia felt a cold finger of fear running up her spine. Unfortunately, if Hugo had deliberately set out to ruin her chances, there was little she could do. "What rubbish," Sylvia said, as much to herself as to her cousin. "It sounds like the plot to one of those Minerva Press novels that you devour, Caro."

The girl grinned sheepishly. "Actually, it is from *The Viscount's Vengeance*. Edward—he's the hero—attempts to thwart the heroine's marriage to an Italian nobleman who is really a loathsome fiend. Would you care to read it?"

"I doubt that it would be instructive in my case," Sylvia said wistfully as she took up her needlework again. "It is unlikely that anyone shall wish to wed me, especially with Hugo behaving so untowardly."

"A posy arrived from Lord Donhill," Caroline said, attempting to cheer her cousin. "It arrived before Mama went up to rest."

"I saw it, and one was sent for you as well," Sylvia said. "Lord Donhill is merely being kind."

There was a knock at the door.

"Enter," Caroline called, picking up her fashion plates once more with a sigh as Boniface opened the door. "I suppose that you are right about Lord

Donhill. After all, neither of us are likely to attempt to check him and wed him."

"Then we may enter in safety, Ivan," Lord Donhill said as the butler ushered the two of them into the drawing room. "I vow, everywhere I turn these days, I face importunate ladies with chessboard at the ready. Why, only yesterday I was challenged by a widow who was near twice my age and certainly twice my girth."

"And what did you do, milord?" Caroline asked with a coquettish smile.

"Quaked in my boots and prayed to the spirit of Philador, Miss Gabriel," David said, the twinkle in his eyes belying his somber demeanor. "But I need not have worried; the woman was the rankest pawn-pushing amateur, as most females are. Your sex has more important matters to occupy your pretty heads—fashions and other such folderol."

Sylvia busied herself with her embroidery, taking in deep breaths and keeping her tongue between her teeth. Still, it was difficult to resist the temptation to call the chess master to account for his denigrating braggadocio.

Petrov seated himself and began a quiet conversation with Caroline while David took a chair beside Sylvia.

"I have come to fulfill my promise, Miss Gabriel. My apologies for calling so early, but there seemed no other way to have private speech with you," Lord Donhill explained. "If you will but set your uncle's puzzle before me, I shall attempt to solve it."

It was difficult for Sylvia to maintain her annoyance in the face of his enthusiasm. Lord Donhill's wet Hessians were dripping on the Aubusson carpet. His dark curls hung damply across his forehead and she felt a strange urge to smooth them back. His glasses had fogged with the effect of rain and he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe them

clear. Sylvia noted this visible trace of Brummel's influence with amusement, but the unshuttered effect of those deep brown eyes was most unsettling and she found herself caught in their depths, unable to look away.

"Do you have the will?" David asked, setting the spectacles on his nose once more.

Sylvia blinked and shook her head. "No, I am afraid not. I have requested a copy from the solicitor. However," she hastened to add, seeing his disappointment, "I do know the clue by heart." She set the frame aside and, closing her eyes in concentration, she began to recite.

*"Yea, dance with a fool, I shall not allow
you to wed him anyhow.
For though I may be buried and dead,
no fools' mate shall ye take to your bed.
And when you seek to tread your measure,
you shall recall these words with pleasure.
King's pawn black, king's pawn white,
bishop's move black and black's move knight.
Knight to rook's fourth move again.
Queen to rook's fifth, bishop's mate at end.
Seek the board and step at leisure,
and you shall uncover the Rajah's treasure."*

She opened her eyes to find Donhill staring raptly at her. "My uncle was a better chess player than he was a poet, I fear."

"I would say so," David agreed, recovering himself. He scrambled to recall the words of the poem, having been utterly distracted by the woman who recited it. "The Rajah's treasure', I suppose, is the fortune your father amassed in India?"

Sylvia nodded.

"And the 'fool's mate' is Lord Highslip?" David guessed.

Sylvia's blush was a confirmation. "Uncle objected strongly to the match. He told me that I ought to give other men a chance. In fact, his will stipulated that the family travel to London immediately for a Season and that no mourning should be observed. Perhaps Aunt Ruby was right and Uncle was out of his head, for he had always been something of a stickler for proper behavior," Sylvia speculated. *Which was why he never wished it known that I play chess*, she added silently. *Chess is no proper woman's game.*

"A Season would certainly have been out of the question," David agreed. "And the chess puzzle seems somewhat out of kilter."

"Certainly it is one of the eight classic fool's mates," Sylvia mused. "Except that black takes precedence and White's limitations." She flushed as she realized that David was looking at her. "Coming from a family such as mine, milord, one cannot help but absorb something of the game. I was my uncle's secretary for several years and he taught me a bit." Sylvia hoped that her hedging had satisfied him.

"I would have expected as much, both your father and uncle being premier chess players," David said.

"They were indeed," Sylvia said, seizing the opportunity to turn his attention from herself. "Papa devoted his life to the game, traveling all over Europe, the East, even the Americas, searching for worthy opponents. He would win and lose fortunes."

"Mostly win, I would suspect."

Sylvia nodded. "He rarely lost a game, even when it would have been more politic to do so. One pasha nearly had him beheaded for daring to trounce him, but we escaped. Mama disguised him as her maid, hiding him in a *chador* and veil." She giggled at the recollection of her dignified papa in skirts.

"Truly?" David asked in surprise.

"The costume is in the attic somewhere, I believe, among the trunks and cast-offs if you do not credit

me. We traveled everywhere with my parents. The family was rarely in the same place for more than a month," Sylvia said. "There were so few players that could match Papa, you see. He always had to move on to fresh competition."

David heard the traces of wistfulness in her voice. "It must have been a strange life for a child."

"It was certainly unusual," Sylvia agreed. "There were times that I wished for a proper home, but I do not think that either of us, my brother Will or myself, would have really wanted it any other way."

Her eyes had a faraway look, as if focused on those distant lands, and her lips curved upward dreamily, but the smile disappeared as she continued.

"However, Mama . . . It was extremely difficult for her. We lived like nomads, constantly packing and unpacking. I think that she almost hated chess. When I was very small, I recall playing with the pieces and Mama knocking them out of my hand and beginning to cry."

"Why did your mama tolerate it then?" David asked.

"She adored Papa," Sylvia said. "And despite his devotion to chess, I think that he loved her. It is just that she wanted to come first. Every woman wants to be above all else in a man's life."

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears and David wondered if she were thinking of Highslip, who had put money before love. Was Caroline correct? Was her cousin still nursing a broken heart despite the fact that the man had been proven an utter blackguard? How typical of females, to waste their regard on men who were unworthy of them. It was easy to understand why Sir Miles had gone to such extreme lengths to protect his niece from Highslip, and David's resolve was firmed. Brummel was correct; locating her fortune would be the best revenge for the suffering that Highslip had inflicted upon her.

"Given what you have endured due to chess, Miss Gabriel, I find myself amazed that you do not hate it as much as your mama did."

"Oh, no," Sylvia declared, "'Tis not the game that causes the difficulties, 'tis the player. It makes no matter if it is faro or the Fancy, some people allow themselves to become obsessed, to allow the game to dictate all aspects of their lives. My father was merely one of many such people, milord."

David made a show of polishing his spectacles, avoiding her frank gaze. Did she number him among the obsessed? he wondered. After all, he had never allowed chess to control his life—or had he? It was a distinctly disconcerting thought.

"Would you mind dropping the title? Call me David, please," he requested, pushing the wire frame back upon his nose. "After all, as you pointed out last evening, we are something in the way of old friends."

"And you too may use my given name," Sylvia agreed. "Well, David, where shall we begin? I suppose I need not tell you that the moves in Uncle's will were tried on every chessboard in Crown Beeches. We even ripped them apart in the hopes that we would find some hidden compartment within the squares, but there was nothing."

David thought for a moment. "Clearly, it was your uncle's intent that you come to London in short order after his demise. Have you searched the chessboards here?"

"I had never considered that," Sylvia said, her excitement growing.

With Caroline and Petrov's enthusiastic assistance, Sylvia and David hunted down every chessboard in the house. From the lacquered Chinese chessboard to young Miles' wooden board in the nursery, every square was closely examined, played upon in the

manner prescribed by the late Sir Miles' rhyme, in addition to using all eight variations of a fool's mate.

"Is that the last of them?" David asked, surveying the sad remains of Miles' chessboard. The thick inlaid squares of the board in the nursery had seemed to conceal a hollow and so the searchers had taken it to pieces. "There is nothing here."

"Sylvia has a little one in her room," Miles stated.

"'Tis but a small pocket set that was my father's," Sylvia said, going into her bechamber and bringing out a teak-and-mahogany case for them to view. She opened it to reveal a tiny board with peg pieces. "As you can see, there can be nothing concealed in it."

"Your cousin is being sleeping in the nursery, Miss Gabriel?" Petrov asked in astonishment.

Caroline flushed in embarrassment and Sylvia went over to squeeze the girl's hand.

"It is none of Caro's doing, you may be sure. I am naught but a poor relation, Mr. Petrov," Sylvia said, trying to smile. "And so, it seems, I am destined to remain." She turned abruptly toward the window, unwilling to let the others see her disappointment. Despite her doubts, a small seed of hope had grown; now, as it withered and died, the future stretched out before her like an endless desert. Tears trickled silently.

A footman rapped at the nursery door. "Miss Caroline, Miss Sylvia, Mrs. Gabriel requests that you return downstairs immediately if you are done with your tour of the house. Leastways, that's what Mr. Boniface told her you were up to."

"Thank you, Robbie," Caroline said to the servant, "and thank Boniface as well for his quick thinking. We shall be down in a trice." She put her hand on Sylvia's shoulder. "I shall tell Mama that Miles required your attention, Syl. That should give you a few moments to compose yourself." She kissed her cousin on the cheek and started out with Petrov and David,

but in the hallway David hesitated and went back to the nursery.

"Don't worry, Syl," he heard Miles say. "'Tis only another twelve years and then Mama can't tell me what to do anymore. I been thinking, if I got to marry somebody, might as well be you. You can play chess and you fly a kite better than any girl I know, you don't cut up stiff at frogs and snakes neither."

"High praise indeed," Sylvia said, kneeling beside the boy and gathering him close for a hug. "We have missed our usual Friday-morning kite fly in Green Park. Shall we go next week? I fear it cannot be earlier."

"Can we, Syl? That'll be famous. And you mustn't worry; you can stay with me till we get married," Miles added, squirming slightly.

Reluctantly Sylvia let him go and looked up to see David standing in the doorway. "You needn't have waited for me, David," she said softly. "I shall be fine. As you no doubt heard, I have received a most honorable proposal."

"Indeed I did," David said, offering his hand to the boy. "You are a very discerning young man, Miles. Ladies who do not cut up stiff at frogs and snakes and go kite-flying every Friday are the rarest of breeds."

"You can marry her now, if you want," Miles said, cocking his head thoughtfully. "Won't be able to do it myself for a few years."

Sylvia's tearstained face broke into a smile. "Trying to fob me off already, you young scamp! You cannot trade wives about like marbles, and besides, Lord Donhill cannot marry anyone, unless he loses his wager."

"But, Syl!" Miles began to protest.

She spoke quickly to stanch him, knowing that the boy could easily spill her secret. "Even if I could trounce him, Miles," she said, "I would not, you

know. I could not abide a life dictated by a game. I saw what it did to my mama, how it hurt her. People's lives are not pieces to be lost and won by skill or luck. I want to be loved fully, to always be first in someone's heart."

"Guess you'll just have to wait for me, then," Miles said, cheerfully. "Want me to put the box away?"

Wordlessly, she handed Miles the small chess set and he scampered out of the room. She rose and saw angry lines upon David's brow. She groaned inwardly. Obviously, he had taken personal offense at her words.

"I did not mean to rebuke you, David," she said, trying to contain a growing sense of annoyance. She had spoken no less than the truth.

"You did," David contradicted stiffly. "Females understand nothing about wagers, about honor."

"And men do?" Sylvia said, shaking her head in doubt. "I am full to the eyes of men and their strange concept of honor. A titled man may woo a woman for her purse—that is honorable—yet a female who courts a man for money is an adventuress. A man may mount a mistress, yet a woman who plays the game is a slut. My uncle hides my money—"

"For your own protection," David said, his jaw tightening.

"And I am well protected now!" Sylvia mocked, her eyes narrowing. "An unpaid governess, a free maid-of-all-work, dependent upon my aunt's *gracious* charity for the remainder of my life. Unlike myself, you, at least, were given some choice, milord. But you have doomed yourself to remain alone all the rest of your days and because of your wretched honor you will stick to a stupid vow, made in an hour of drunkenness. Fie upon such honor, milord." She whirled, obvious dismissal in the stiff posture of her back.

David stared after her in disbelief. The girl had ob-

viously been upset by disappointment. Still, as he went slowly down the stairs, her words echoed after him.

"Did you enjoy your tour, Lord Donhill?" Mrs. Gabriel asked when he had returned to the drawing room.

"Lovely place, isn't it?" asked a familiar voice from behind him.

David turned to face Lord Highslip. The elegant earl smiled superciliously and David felt a surge of anger. How dare he come here, after what he had done to plague Sylvia? It was not to be borne.

"You are improving," Highslip noted with a patronizing sniff. "I vow, your neckcloth looks almost decent."

"Does it?" David asked rhetorically, reaching out to grasp the delicate folds of Highslip's linen. "I have always wondered how you tie this. A Mathematical, is it not?"

"Was!" Highslip snapped, his lower lip jutting in annoyance. "You have quite ruined my neckcloth, sirrah. 'Tis lucky indeed that I know you to be untutored in civilized ways. Were anyone else to do that, I might call him out."

"You need not accord me any special privileges if I offended you," David said, his voice dangerously smooth.

Petrov sprang up and took David by the shoulder, steering him toward a chair.

"Lord Highslip is telling us that you have been starting something of a fashion," Petrov said, trying to soothe his friend. He had never seen David like this, snarling like a wolf in winter. What was he thinking, provoking a duel in a drawing room? "The betting books are being full of wagers, men saying they will not be marrying ladies who cannot out-fence them or out-shoot them or outdo them in some other way."

"I say 'tis wicked," Mrs. Gabriels' jowls shook as she scowled at David.

"I must agree, Mrs. Gabriel," Highslip said, his lip curling derisively now that the woman had clearly shown where her favor lay. "Marriage is a most felicitous state, a blessing to be rejoiced in. Hiding behind a wager is the height of foolishness."

"I am so glad you think so!" Mrs. Gabriel chortled in delight. "Do you not agree, Caroline darling?"

"Of course, Mama." Caroline nodded obediently, looking down at her lap to hide her mortification.

"She is such a good girl. She sews, milord, and her voice is so fine . . ."

"Maybe she should be opening up her mouth so he can be looking on her teeth," Petrov muttered glumly as Mrs. Gabriel went on with her list of Caroline's fine points. "I am changing mine mind. Go, grab his neckcloth again and I be your second. Or better, I grab."

"I cannot understand why she receives him," David mumbled. "He has all but spoiled her niece's chances and yet she entertains his suit for her daughter."

"Is simple. Rook outranks pawn and English earl bests nephew of Russian grand duke," Petrov whispered mournfully.

Sylvia came to the door, then halted, her eyes wide with shock when she saw Highslip sitting in her aunt's parlor. She would have turned to leave, but Aunt Ruby's eyes issued a silent command.

"Sylvia, have you finished with Miles' lessons?" Mrs. Gabriel asked, her question emphasizing the girl's inferior standing in the household. "Why do you not join us? Lord Highslip has come to pay a call upon your cousin."

Sylvia felt as if she had been transformed to a mechanical toy, her limbs obeying her in jerky movements as she took the vacant chair by the door and

picked up her embroidery. Although Hugo addressed barely a word to her, she could feel his eyes, his hungry burning gaze upon her. She plied her needle heedlessly, creating a tangled mess amidst the delicate pattern as she prayed for time to pass.

"Did you know, Lord Highslip, that dear Sylvia has several suitors?" Mrs. Gabriel remarked archly. "Lord Entshaw has sent the most remarkable flowers and Mr. Colber has been most particular in his attentions as well."

"Entshaw is old enough to be her grandfather," Highslip said, his voice suddenly cold. "And Colber is but the grandson of an upstart tradesman. Surely you do not entertain those suits."

But Mrs. Gabriel was oblivious to his disapproval. "Beggars cannot afford to be choosy, milord. I am sure, being a sensible girl, Sylvia will do the wise thing. Is that not true, Sylvia?"

Sylvia looked up, her chess training standing her in good stead. Not by so much of a quiver of her lip did she betray her humiliation. "You are correct, of course, Aunt Ruby. Oftentimes, we are not given much of a choice."

Although her voice was steady, David could feel Sylvia's silent misery and felt the rebuke in her words. Her face was stark-white against the blue of her morning gown and she returned her eyes to her needlework. His anger simmered as Lord Highslip conducted his sham courtship of Caroline, casting covert glances all the while at Sylvia. It was clear that Mrs. Gabriel did not hold him to account for his actions. In fact, she was doing all she could to promote her daughter as a potential countess.

There was no stopping the ticking of the clock, and as much as David hated to leave, both he and Petrov had stayed well beyond what was proper for a morning call. Petrov's face was like a thundercloud; and

once they left the house he burst into a torrent of words.

"What is being his game?" Petrov exploded. "He woos one while making goat's eyes at the other."

"Sheep's eyes, Ivan," David corrected as he sprang into his silver high-perch phaeton.

"Sheeps, cows, goats! Is no difference. Animal is animal and Highslip is animal!" Petrov said, climbing in beside David. "I must be rescuing the girl!"

"I quite agree, but what do you propose, Ivan?" David slapped the reins urging the horses forward. "We cannot force Mrs. Gabriel to bar Highslip from the door."

"There is only being one possible move," Petrov declared, his dark eyes smoldering. "Marriage!"

"You would marry Miss Gabriel?" David asked, his heart sinking. It was a perfect solution. Petrov was of good family and had well-lined pockets; he was an excellent match for a woman in Sylvia's circumstances. Yet the very notion of Sylvia wed to his friend caused a melancholy feeling that was almost like physical pain. "I had no notion that you were so fond of her."

"I am thinking, David, that maybe you are being blind, even with your glasses. I am loving her from the first minute I see her," Petrov said, smiling bemusedly, his normally brooding face alight with a whimsical joy. "Her voice is like angel's, eyes like reindeer and her face is reminding me of mine own dear mother."

David recalled the miniature of Madame Petrov that hung in Petrov's rooms, but could recall absolutely no resemblance to Sylvia. His mother had dark hair and a rounded face with a hooked nose exactly like her son's ... exactly like ... David burst into laughter.

"I am not seeing what is funny," Petrov said, deeply offended. "Situation is being very serious."

"I know, my friend, I know, and I wish you happy. It is Caroline you speak of?"

Petrov looked at him incredulously. "You are thinking I talk of Sylvia. *Nyet, nyet*. Is Caroline for me from the start." He fell silent, noting his friend's relieved expression. It was obvious which way the wind was blowing there and Petrov realized that David was quite oblivious to his own feelings. "I am finding myself pitying Caroline's cousin." The Russian probed cautiously. "She is pretty girl and Lord Highslip could be ruining her chances, I think."

"Yes, she is very beautiful," David said, recalling Sylvia's face aglow with excitement as they had searched for the treasure. "Perhaps it was foolish to get her hopes up, Ivan. If we cannot find her fortune, it would be a bitter blow."

"Poor girl," Ivan said, shaking his head sadly. "Is shame if she is forced to be marrying man like Entshaw or Colber."

"She shall not!" David said, glaring at him.

But Petrov merely shrugged. "Is she having choice, mine friend? Unless you are finding her fortune, David, is nothing for it."

"Brummel said that the gossip would, like as not, blow over soon. The broth of scandal grows cold quickly," he mused, an ache spreading in his chest as he thought of Sylvia wed to that toad Entshaw or the mushroom Colber. David pushed his spectacles up on his nose, peering intently ahead as if through the lenses he could somehow discern a solution to the conundrum. "Maybe the will itself contains some clue."

David's face was, for once, unguarded and the Russian noted the determined, angered set of his friend's jaw and the swell of emotion in his voice. Petrov felt a pang of deep depression as his suspicions were confirmed. David was speaking from his heart although he did not yet seem to realize it. Per-

haps, Petrov thought, it was just as well so. A wager, once set, could not be broken, and there seemed no remedy to the impossible terms that David himself had made.

Six



As Brummel had predicted, the attention of the *ton* was soon diverted by other, far juicier scandals than a long-ago jilt. Nonetheless, as the days passed and the dazzle of Brummel's patronage lost some of its glisten, Sylvia became merely a lovely face without a prayer of a fortune. David was no closer to solving Sir Miles' riddle than he had been before. The late baronet's man of law had only one scrivener who was old as Methuselah and uncommonly slow. Hopefully, the sizable *pour boire* that David had promised would add some speed to his scrawl.

David greeted the porter at the door of White's absently, wondering what his next move ought to be. Surely, he had to do something, for he was in large part responsible for Sylvia's current dilemma. Her aunt was hounding her to accept Lord Entshaw's suit and although Highslip had curbed his outrageous behavior, David had seen him watching the girl covertly, like a starveling dog eyeing a bone.

So deep was David in his thoughts that Ivan Petrov's voice from behind caused him to whirl, his fists automatically at the ready.

"There is being another challenge, David!" the Russian said, stepping back cautiously. "But it is not being from me."

David shook his head apologetically. "Forgive me,

Ivan. I am unaccountably distracted these days," he said, accepting the sealed missive from his friend.

As he broke the wax and read the contents, a small group gathered around him.

"Who is it to be now?" Brummel asked, in tones of patent boredom. The challenges had become an almost common occurrence, more nuisance than sport since most of David's adversaries barely got to mid-game.

"A Lady Helena Balton. Do you know aught of her?" David asked.

"Well enough to look upon, though something of a bluestocking" was Brummel's evaluation. "Her papa's pockets are forever to let so I suppose that is why she challenges you, David. She figures she has naught to lose but her reputation and lose it she shall. I doubt that she could beat you."

"Will you see to the arrangements, Ivan?" David inquired with a growing feeling of distaste as the knowing laughter erupted around him. He had eaten nothing since breaking his fast in the morning, but even as he ordered his supper, David doubted that the queasy feeling in his stomach would be stilled by a meal.

Was this to be his destiny? To be forever challenged by pitiful chits at their last prayers? To be importuned constantly by women greedy for his wealth or his name?

"Why so glum, David?" Brummel gave him a tight-lipped smile. "Surely you have no need to fear. You will defeat her as handily as you did all the others, I vow."

David could not help but agree, yet the name Balton had a strange resonance. He had heard it before, and connected to chess, he was sure, but where? As he searched his memory he ate his meal, scarcely tasting a morsel. Around him, he could hear the quiet murmur of voices and the muffled thump of

chess pieces being moved about the board. When reminiscence yielded no clue, he decided that he had probed enough. Resolutely, he pushed the puzzle to the back of his mind, hoping that it would answer itself if left alone, as questions often did.

To distract himself, David wandered about the room, seeking comfort in the familiarity of the circle of chess aficionados whose company he had cultivated since his return to England. The "pawn-pushers," as they were called by the other club members, had claimed this corner of White's, making it their own. Here, chess was paramount. As David passed, stopping to watch and comment, his friends looked up at him distractedly, favoring him with an occasional myopic smile as they listened to his opinions.

"But we have not finished, Petrov!" Freddy Dare's petulant protest elicited several demands for silence, and David watched as Petrov rose from the table.

"We finish tomorrow," Petrov said, scribbling to note the position of the pieces. "I go to Harwell ball."

"A ball, Petrov?" his partner proclaimed in disbelief. "But we are in the midst of a game."

"If you are not liking it, I concede," Petrov said, tipping his king to the board then sweeping a bow. "There are being more important things than chess, Freddy. An angel awaits. Good night."

The young man stared after the retreating Russian as if he had uttered a blasphemy. "Have you ever heard the like, Lord Donhill?" he asked. "What has come over Mr. Petrov? I have never known him to leave when there is a game in progress."

"I believe it is a malady that strikes even the best of us," David said morosely. There was little doubt that Sylvia would be at the Harwells' and he had half a mind to follow Petrov. Yet what could he tell her? There was no news regarding her fortune. The words of Sir Miles' puzzle sounded like a senseless litany in

his mind. He could not bring himself to face her, to see her eyes ask that silent question only to witness hope die yet again. He could not watch old Entshaw eyeing Sylvia with that possessive air as he danced with her. Mrs. Gabriel was gloating openly over the elderly lord's interest and David cursed himself roundly for his interference, ruing the day that he had agreed to Brummel's ill-conceived scheme. Because of their meddling, Sylvia might be forced to become an old man's bed warmer. David listened with half an ear as young Freddy droned on about Petrov's foolishness.

"I hope I shall never be stricken by love," Freddy said devoutly. "Damme if I ever quit in the midst of a game for a petticoat."

"I shall take Ivan's place, if you like," David offered, hoping that the game would distract him from his blue-devils. The young man nodded eager agreement and David slipped into the vacant seat. He moved mechanically, with only a fraction of his attention on the board, yet countered his opponent with ridiculous ease. The late Sir Miles' rhyme echoed in his head. *Yea, dance with a fool . . .* And play with a fool, David thought glumly as Freddy moved his bishop into an obvious trap.

Lord Roberts headed for the door. "Leaving so soon, Roberts?" David asked. "I had hoped for a game later."

"Another night, perhaps," Lord Roberts said. "I had promised my wife that I would look in on the Harwell ball. Launching a daughter this Season, y' know," he added with a smile. "A fine gel. Does her mama proud."

"Shame how the fellow is in his wife's pocket. A quarter-century of servitude—he's been married that long," Freddy grumbled as he watched the older man leave. "You're lucky indeed, milord, that you'll

never be under petticoat government. I have an inclination to match your wager."

Freddy looked at David with an expression approaching reverence and David felt a trifle uneasy under the young man's worshipping gaze.

"Before you do so, Freddy, I suggest you improve your game," David said, moving his bishop across the board to take Freddy's bishop and trap the king. "*Échec et mat*, I believe."

"My word, mate it is!" Freddy cried. "I had not seen that coming at all. Is that one of Philador's gambits? Can you explain it to me, sir?"

"Gabriel's," David said as he rose, suddenly eager to put as much distance as possible between himself and his young acolyte. "I shall teach you the play, but another time perhaps."

David scanned the tables, but there were few other pawn-pushers present. The more mature players, like Lord Roberts, had long ago taken their leave, seeking the comforts of home and hearth or the enjoyment of other interests. David felt a twinge of envy as he recalled the older man's obvious esteem of his wife and daughter, his touching eagerness to be at their sides. The remnants in the room were of an age with Freddy, mere striplings, most with intellects as wooden as the chess pieces they played. They came to this corner of White's because chess had suddenly become fashionable, with any luck, on the morrow they would more than likely flutter off elsewhere seeking some other modish pursuit. Their immature faces were vapid, childishly eager, and hopelessly callow. The only countenance in the room with a claim to character belonged to Brummel.

"Ah, Brummel!" David latched on to his friend in relief. "Care for a game now?"

"Not now." The Beau demurred. "I am off to the Harwells' Ball."

"I shall join you," David declared, rolling his eyes in Freddy's direction.

"Of course," Brummel agreed, understanding at once. Stripling worship was uncommonly tiresome.

"We shall stop at my apartments, if you do not mind," David said, looking down at his rumpled clothes. "I cannot attend in such a state, do you not agree?"

For once, the Beau was nonplussed.

"He is staring again, Caro," Sylvia whispered between clenched teeth. She tried to fix a smile on her lips as she gazed out upon the sea of faces, conscious of her aunt's eyes upon her. Mrs. Gabriel hovered nearby, watching her niece's every expression and gesture, waiting for some gaffe that she might criticize. Sylvia attempted to change the direction of her thoughts, telling herself that she was being foolish. The Harwell ball was a crush, with people so closely packed that there was barely room to raise an elbow. Yet, even though she could not see him, Sylvia felt as if an insect was creeping upon her skin and knew that somewhere, Hugo was watching.

"You imagine it, coz," Caroline said, shielding her face with the flutter of her fan. "Highslip has been all that is proper these days past, hoping to turn me up sweet. Besides, if staring was a crime, I vow half the men in the room would be bait for gaol. You look lovely, Syl."

Indeed, the middling modistes had outdone themselves. Sylvia's gown shimmered when she moved, as panels of silver cloth revealed themselves amidst folds of pure-white samite. When the pattern had been planned, Sylvia had thought that the irregular gussets necessitated by the imperfections of the fabric would make her look like a tatterdemalion, but instead, the design gave the impression of continuous motion, as if the dress had a life of its own. By con-

trast, the burnished metallic gleam of the bodice made the halo of her golden hair seem like a flame alight amidst the glow of the tapers that lit the room.

There was no jealousy in Caroline's compliment, for she had seen Ivan Petrov at the door. As the Russian crossed the room, she knew from the look in his eyes that she was the only woman he saw.

"Miss Gabriel," he said, bowing over her hand.

Although his voice was punctiliously formal, Caroline felt the caress in its rich overtones.

"I do not see Lord Donhill," Sylvia remarked teasingly. "I had thought the two of you came as a set."

Caroline felt a stir of pity for her striking cousin as she discerned the disappointment beneath the deliberate lightness of her voice.

"He was being engaged in a chess game, Miss Gabriel," Petrov said, and threw a questioning glance at Caroline, who nodded ever so slightly. The situation, it seemed, was going from bad to worse, for over these past few days it became increasingly clear that the affections of Caro's cousin were also entangled in this mess. Petrov felt a wave of guilt, for David's foolish wager had been his suggestion. Yet, he thought fatalistically as he looked at his beloved, all life was a tragedy. He could only hope that destiny would be kind to his friend.

"Of course," Sylvia said, bile rising in her throat. "A chess game." She had no right to be annoyed, although, unaccountably, she was. Lord Donhill had not promised his presence but somehow she had expected it. Thus far, he had been at hand at nearly every entertainment that the Gabriels had attended, smoothing over the awkwardness that she felt, rescuing her from the hands of those whose intentions were insincere and attentions were too warm, distracting the boring Lord Entshaw or the ardent Mr. Colber.

"Where is dear Lord Entshaw?" Mrs. Gabriel asked Petrov, as if he had caused the elderly peer's absence.

Petrov shrugged. "I have not been seeing him since this afternoon at your parlor," he replied.

"You did promise him the first dance when he called this afternoon, Sylvia?" the matron asked, in tones more threatening than questioning.

Sylvia nodded weakly. Her aunt had made her feelings on the matter explicitly known. Sylvia's subtle efforts to discourage Entshaw's attentions had not gone unnoticed. She was to make every attempt to bring him up to scratch—or else. The dire promise in Aunt Ruby's eyes had made Sylvia shiver.

"Are you talking of old Entshaw?"

The sound of Hugo's voice so close nearly caused Sylvia to jump.

"Poor old Entshaw," Lord Highslip drawled. "I am surprised you did not hear of it. A terrible accident—but then, the doddering fool was never known to have a skilled hand at the reins."

Mrs. Gabriel went pale at this talk of Sylvia's suitor in the past tense. "Is he . . . d-d—" She stut-tered, unable to utter the final word.

"Thankfully, he was not killed," Highslip said, patting the matron's hand comfortingly. "Although I doubt that Lord Entshaw will be dancing for some time to come. His injuries were severe."

"That is grievous news," Brummel said, having caught Highslip's last few words. "I saw Entshaw only this afternoon at White's. An accident?"

Highslip nodded gravely. "That high-perch phaeton he drove like a madman. A phaeton much like that owned by Donhill."

There was something in Hugo's tone that was disturbing, but Sylvia would have brushed it off as another of her imaginings had she not caught the venomous look that Hugo directed toward the doorway. David stood there, his gaze sweeping the room

and lighting upon her in an instant. His hand unconsciously strayed to his neckcloth, setting it askew in an effort to smooth the linen. Sylvia could not help but smile at the boyish gesture. As he crossed the floor toward her, she could read a promise in his face, an assurance that was almost as real as a comforting hand upon the shoulder. There was nothing to fear now that he had come. Sylvia gave herself a mental shake. She was being unconsciously silly, yet David's very presence bolstered her courage. Even Hugo was endurable, now that David was near.

Sylvia reminded David of a wild creature, cornered and afraid. Those wide green eyes spoke to him silently with a message that was part plea, part warning. The fingers that touched his in brief greeting were chilly, but he did not allow his grasp to linger as he longed to, aware of Mrs. Gabriel's icy gaze.

"We were just talking of poor Lord Entshaw's accident," Mrs. Gabriel said pointedly.

"Yes, I heard of it in the entry. 'Tis hard to credit. Entshaw is an excellent whip," David said.

"You own a phaeton," Mrs. Gabriel said reproachfully.

"I do," David acknowledged, feeling much as if she was accusing him of some unspeakable crime. Mrs. Gabriel glared at him, as if he were somehow responsible for the fashion for phaetons and Lord Entshaw's wreck.

"Inherently unstable vehicles," Highslip pronounced. "I would not own one."

"Even if he could afford one," David said sotto voce to Sylvia, and was gratified to see a twitch of her lips, though she tried not to smile. Her pallor alarmed him. "How foolish of Lord Entshaw to involve himself in an accident," David said more loudly, "for now he must forgo his dance with you, Miss Gabriel. If I might claim the privilege?"

Before her aunt could protest, he had whisked Syl-

via off in the direction of the floor, but they skirted the dancers and went toward the open terrace doors beyond.

"I should not," Sylvia murmured, knowing that her aunt would not approve.

"You could use the air," David urged quietly. "It is far too close in here and you look as pale as a ghost."

"Why, thank you for the compliment, milord," Sylvia said, stepping gratefully out onto the terrace. She breathed deeply, trying to calm the frantic beat of her heart. "Poor Lord Entshaw," she murmured, moving away from the door and into the shadows. "'Tis reprehensible of me, I know, but I feel relief,—as if I have been delivered from certain disaster."

David said nothing, sensing her need for silence. She looked toward the night sky, her profile silhouetted against the darkness with the classic beauty of a Greek statue.

"What am I becoming, David?" she whispered. "How can I feel this way when a man has nearly met his death?"

She drooped like a wilting flower, her head bent in shame as she spoke in self-loathing. It surprised David that she should feel so, considering that Entshaw's suit had been nothing but a plague to her, but her fine sensibility touched him. Sylvia presented an adamant aspect to the world, seeking protection behind a facade of cold indifference, much as he did himself. Yet behind that marble exterior was a compassionate woman that she allowed but a privileged few to know. That core of vulnerability intrigued him, creating an emotional need to protect, to shelter her from further harm.

"Was your aunt pressing you that badly?" David asked. Her expression was composed; only her lack of color and a slight quiver of her lower lip betrayed the extent of her agitation.

Sylvia leaned against the balustrade at the end of

the terrace. "I used to think that I was strong enough to withstand anything, but Aunt Ruby is like water upon a stone, wearing me away bit by bit. I was beginning to fear that eventually I would agree to her demands if only to be rid of that constant whine."

By the glow of moonlight, he was relieved to see that the color was returning to her cheeks. As she turned to him, he caught his breath. This was no statue, but a woman of flesh and blood. David tried to halt the direction of his thoughts as the desire to defend her turned into another type of desire. He knew that he had no right—no right to touch that marble skin, no right to yearn to hold her or, for that matter, any other woman of gentle birth. In assuring his freedom from entanglement, he had bound himself in the ropes of a despicable dilemma. There had never been any allowance in his life's strategy for a woman.

Although David had found pleasure in the company of the fair sex, the companionship that he had craved had always seemed to be of a uniquely male capacity. Friendship had been inextricably linked with the fellowship of the chessboard. Those ephemeral creatures known as females had moved in and out of his life like so many pawns, useful in their way but only worth passing attention. Certainly, not one of them had ever caused him to even contemplate the exchange of his freedom—until now. Yet, even as David considered the notion of wedlock, he realized that his wager had removed that possibility from the realm of likelihood. Marriage was the only honorable defense for a female in Sylvia's exposed position, yet he could not offer that option, even if he wished. No one could fault him. Even so, it was unsettling to discover that there was no comfort in knowing that his freedom was forever assured. A tear, limned in silver light, slid silently down her cheek, and without thought, he reached out to brush it away.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, the phrase seeming woefully inadequate. The feel of that warm alabaster melted his effort at control. He struggled, grasping desperately for his hold upon honor, but principle was a poor dam against an overwhelming tide of longing.

Sylvia felt the touch of his fingers, light as a puff of wind on her cheek. She trembled within as she looked into his eyes, trying to read those pools of darkness. There was far more in those words than a mere apology. Was he sorry for her? Sorry for himself? She could not bring herself to ask, but closed her eyes, savored the sensation as he traced the line of her cheek, prayed that he would forget himself for just a moment. *Does he feel more than friendship?* she wondered. *Does he feel this strange awareness, as if something wonderful and frightening is about to happen?* Although she could not see him, she was conscious of his closeness. The sounds of the ballroom became distant echoes, mere background to the tempo of his breath as she felt it on her cheek.

"I'm sorry," he repeated as his lips touched hers. In a magical instant, the gentle kiss deepened as he gathered her to him, holding her close, burying his fingers in the silk of her hair.

She heard his heart beating, felt the steady pulse on his neck as her hands twined round him. His scent mingled with the smell of lilacs from the garden and the clean linen that pressed against her cheek as he leaned down to kiss her once more. It was foolish to allow this, unconscionably foolish, but the move, once made, could not be taken back. She had crossed over some invisible boundary into a realm of wonder. Love. She put a name to her feelings at last, weeping with the joy of discovery. Her thoughts whirled giddily. If she told him that she had already trounced him on the chessboard, surely the

terms of his wager would be satisfied. If he loved her, it would be so easy. If he loved her . . .

It was the salt of her tears that recalled him; required all his strength of will to step back. As he watched her trembling hand reach up to touch her lips in a bewildered gesture, he wanted desperately to gather her in his arms once again, but his conscience would not allow it. "I must apologize," he whispered. "I did not mean to let it get out of hand. It will not happen again."

Opening her eyes once more, Sylvia felt the ache of disappointment. His demeanor was one of concern and guilt. From his words, it seemed likely that his kiss had been little more than an offer of comfort that had gone awry, not a token of love. Sylvia had been kissed before, yet even when she had been affianced to Highslip, she had never yielded herself so wholly. She turned away, leaning on the balustrade for support as she composed herself, chiding inwardly for letting him slip past her defenses. Only a green girl would have been so swept away by a simple kiss. Yet she knew that there had been nothing simple about that kiss, at least for her.

She faced him once more, her face a smiling mask of perfect porcelain. Once again, Uncle Miles' training stood her in good stead. Not by so much as a quiver did she betray the depths of her disappointment and hurt, although her thoughts were gyring round like a child's whirligig top. There was little point in telling him now. As young Miles had often pointed out, David would likely feel honor-bound to marry her, and she had no wish to bind him with honor if she could not win him with love. She moved away, then made an effort at banter.

"I have ruined your neckcloth, David," Sylvia said, attempting a smile. "'Tis a shame, for it was nearly perfect."

"Brummel would be pleased to hear you say so."

David tried to match her light tone, but his voice was husky. "Sylvia, I . . ." he began tentatively.

"Do not try to explain," she said softly, hoping that she could salvage something from this awful moment. "It would be foolish to fuss over the gesture of a friend."

David's face betrayed no emotion although her casual dismissal cut him deeply. His senses were still reeling. The sound of his own heartbeat was pulsing in his ears, yet she seemed utterly calm as she reached up to check the state of her coiffure. Had it meant so little to her? Yet, as he regained control, David told himself that what he felt was pique. She had not dissolved, as women often had in his experience, into a quivering lump of adoration. His impulsive action had very nearly spoiled the first real friendship that he had ever shared with a female, and that would have been a shame. Luckily, Sylvia seemed to have far more sense than he. She deserved far better than furtive embraces in the garden, and hide-in-the-corner kisses were all he could offer. Playing games with fire would be foolish. He ought to be glad that her heart was not involved.

In silence, David offered Sylvia his arm and they returned to the ballroom. To his annoyance, Highslip was waiting by the door; from the dark look upon the earl's face, David wondered just how much Highslip had seen. Sylvia's grip tightened upon David's arm. She too was obviously concerned.

"Your aunt was seeking you, Sylvia," Highslip said, his voice deceptively silky. "I shall return you to her."

"No need, Highslip. I shall bring her back," David said.

"Best straighten out your neckcloth first," Highslip said, the poisonous look he directed at David saying far more than his seemingly casual words. "Or better still, go and size up the competition."

"Competition?" Sylvia asked, seizing the opportunity to distract Hugo.

"'Tis no secret," Highslip grinned maliciously. "The chess master has been challenged by Lord Balton's daughter. She is here tonight, with her drunkard papa."

"Lady Helena?" Sylvia queried.

"The same." Highslip's lip curled. "Horace Greenvale's girl."

"Greenvale?" David repeated, in growing concern. Greenvale was almost as much of a legend in the world of chess as the great Philador. Now David knew why the title had been vaguely familiar, although he had been unable to connect it to the family name. Although he was confident in his skills, Horace Greenvale's daughter might be a force to be reckoned with.

"Poor Helena," Sylvia said, shaking her head sadly.

"Do not pity her yet," Highslip sneered. "Perhaps our David will finally meet his Goliath."

"If you recall, Hugo, Goliath came away the loser," Sylvia said, annoyance creeping into her voice. "Yet I pity her, as I feel for all the sacrifices in this little wager game of yours, milord."

"No one forces these women to challenge me, Sylvia," David said, seeking to defend himself.

"Helena's father gambled away the family fortune on the chessboard, milord. You represent a hope that she cannot resist—a future, a husband, a home," Sylvia persisted, understanding Helena totally because the same longing echoed within herself. "And doubtless the same was true for many of the others who have challenged you."

"You are being unfair," David countered, feeling uneasy as he recalled the countenances of the females who had faced him across the chessboard. Although their motives might have differed, it was much as Sylvia said. The women had all shared a common air

of desperation. It was foolish, he told himself, absurd to feel compassion for those pathetic females—and yet he felt a sudden pity for Lady Helena. Sylvia had made her into more than an opponent. Suddenly, Lord Balton's daughter had become a human being, and that was dangerous. "I am taking something of a risk," he said, reminding himself as much as Sylvia. "What if I lose and I am suddenly obliged to marry an utter stranger who wants only my title and fortune? It is not beyond the bounds of possibility."

"It would be a fitting lesson, David," Sylvia said, softening, the thought of losing him to Helena Greenvale beyond bearing. "Someday, you might find yourself facing your Nemesis, but I doubt she will be named Helena. The Greenvales have always relied too heavily on strong offense, neglecting their pawns. At least," she added quickly, "Uncle Miles always claimed so."

"I shall remember," David said gravely. "I shall mind my pawns, Sylvia, I promise."

"Do mind your pawns," Highslip broke in with a sneer. "You had best be on your mettle, Donhill, else you shall find your perpetual bachelorhood ended by that whey-faced bluestocking. A terrible fate indeed. And if not her, there shall be another and yet another."

Highslip's mocking snigger seem to follow David as he returned Sylvia to her aunt's side.

"Mr. Colber has been waiting, Sylvia," Mrs. Gabriel scolded. "You had promised him the next dance." She all but pushed her niece into the pudgy young man's arms and out toward the floor. She flicked open her fan as she turned to face David. "As for you, Lord Donhill," she said, her low tones conversational, but her tiny pupils like chips of gray ice, "do not trifle with Sylvia under the pretense of finding her treasure. As Lord Highslip has pointed out, you can only further ruin her chances."

Highslip! David caught the earl's eye across the room and Highslip raised a glass in mock salute, smiling derisively.

"After all," Mrs. Gabriel continued, "what can you honorably offer, milord?"

"Nothing." David said, achingly aware that although Mrs. Gabriel's motives were less than pure, she spoke no less than the truth. "I have nothing to offer." He watched helplessly as Colber swept Sylvia away into the crowd of dancers, then turned to go.

Sylvia sat down wearily in the dark library of the house on Berkeley Square, sighing as she eased her feet out of their satin slippers. She rubbed her big toe, wincing at the ache. If clumsiness was a measure of infatuation, Mr. Colber was obviously head over heels and Sylvia had felt those heels for much of the two dances that he had claimed. As for head, Sylvia thought ruefully, Mr. Colber did not have much to recommend him above the shirtpoints—and if his purse was not included, there was precious little below the neck as well. Yet Aunt Ruby had obviously decided that Colber was to replace Entshaw as the suitor designate; if Sylvia wanted any peace, she would have to play the game by Aunt Ruby's ever-changing rules.

Uncle Miles' mahogany chess set cast dark shadows in the moonlight from the window and Sylvia lifted a wooden pawn, feeling the familiar shape of the polished wood as she tried to recall all she could about the Greenvale style of play. Lord Balton's daughter would be no match for David. Or would she? Was Helena playing the same game as Sylvia, concealing her intellect behind a socially acceptable facade? If David were defeated by a stranger, a woman who did not love him, it would be the ultimate irony.

Sylvia stared out into the night, remembering the

feel of his arms around her, and sighed. There was no longer any doubt in her mind; she loved him, and it was equally clear that he did not share her feelings. How embarrassed he must have been! Sylvia felt her face growing hot at the memory. To find himself being seized by a lovesick female when all he had aimed to do was console. He had left immediately after delivering her to Aunt Ruby. Whatever did he think of her now? How could he know that her feelings for him had been growing long before she had ever met him?

Through his letters, she had come to respect and admire David Rutherford, and now, that very regard was an insurmountable obstacle. She knew that she could win him, yet she could not bring herself to challenge him, to force him into marriage. Tonight had only confirmed her resolution, for David's feelings toward his mercenary challengers were obvious. She had no wish to earn his contempt, or, if she were to lose, his pity. Besides, she told herself, she had no wish to suffer as her mother had, to be forever second to knights and bishops, kings and rooks. But the very thought of losing him made her wonder if she was being the worst of fools. She threw the pawn to the floor, watching it skitter off into the shadows.

"Miss Sylvia?" Boniface's silhouette loomed in the doorway.

Sylvia was glad of the dark, hoping that the servant could not see the tears on her cheeks. "Yes, 'tis I, Boniface. I am afraid my feet were too tired to carry me up the stairs."

"I thought it was you, miss, for your aunt and cousins rarely use the library. A letter arrived for you after you had left for Lady Harwell's ball. Do you wish me to light a taper?"

"No, Boniface," Sylvia said, ruefully. "I have no wish to set my aunt to stewing. You know her policy

about unnecessary use of candles. I shall read it upstairs."

Taking the envelope, Sylvia dragged herself up to the nursery. Young Miles was snoring away, and she pulled the cover to his chin and kissed him gently. As she straightened, she noticed the kite and reel standing at the ready by the boy's bed and groaned softly. Tomorrow was Friday; she had promised him that they would go kite-flying. Miles had been talking of nothing else for a week, reminding her of her word in a child's less-than-subtle way. Sylvia knew that, in all likelihood, the boy would be bustling about at dawn's first light, "accidentally" waking her.

At best, she would get a scant few hours of sleep, she thought as she went to her room, sorely tempted to fall into bed begowned. Instead, Sylvia forced herself to undo the endless row of buttons, regretfully thinking, as she finally placed the gown in the wardrobe, of the days when her abigail had done such trivial tasks. As she sat down upon the bed, a faint crackle reminded her of the envelope that Boniface had given her. It bore the seal of her late uncle's man of law. She opened it up excitedly, her fingers tracing among the "heretofores" and "whereases" as she searched for some clue. The scrawl wavered and her eyes drifted shut. Sylvia fell asleep clutching the letter in her hands and David in her dreams.

Seven



The cold vapor was as damp as the fog that rose from the Thames. It wrapped itself around David like a macabre lover, touching him with icy fingers. The mist-filled room was much like the one at White's, but was utterly empty except for the gilt table and chairs holding the huge chessboard, its white squares inlaid with silver crowns, the black with golden guineas. David knew that he was dreaming, yet that knowledge was no comfort against the nameless terror that waited in the shadows. He struggled against sleep but he was powerless to break the spell of dreams, powerless to change the course of events. He seated himself as the mists stirred with the murmur of high-pitched voices; vague shapes filled the darkness until, as before, a woman took form. She took the chair opposite, her face hidden by the shroud of vapors. However much he tried he could not see her face. In the darkness behind her the amorphous shadows whispered, their laughter like the sound of wind through trees in winter. He knew that they were laughing at him.

"Your move," the woman said, her voice rasping and harsh.

"*Your move. Your move,*" the wraiths whispered like the chorus in a Greek play.

David examined the board carefully and took the

obvious opening. "Check and mate," he called triumphantly, attempting to move his queen, but the queen was stuck fast to the board.

"You cannot move the queen," the woman said, malice in her voice.

"That is unfair," David said.

"Unfair! Unfair!" the ghostly women echoed, but they chided him, not her.

"You lose, milord," the challenger sneered, her face taking shape at last. It was Mrs. Gabriel, her florid face reddening as she poked him with an iron finger. "You shall marry me."

"Marry me. Marry me. Marry me," repeated the voices.

"I shall not," David said, attempting to rise and leave as he had in previous dreams, but to his horror he found that he was chained to the board. "You have cheated."

"I concede." Mrs. Gabriel laughed. "But if you will not have me, then you shall play us all, milord."

"Play us all. Play us all, Play us all . . ." The faceless figures crowded toward him, reaching, laughing mockingly. "Play us all. Play us all."

The words reverberated in David's ears as he sat bolt upright in a tangle of sheets. The substance of the dream faded into a jumble of images of chessboards and ghosts, but the aura of fear remained as palpable as the clammy sheen of sweat upon his chest. He breathed slowly, deeply, then fumbled for his glasses, hoping that they would return the world to its proper perspective. With the spectacles in place, David focused on the reality of the morning sunlight that streamed through the windows until his heart stopped galloping.

"Ah, you are awake, sahib," Harjit said as he peered into the room, frowning at the sight of David's weary, pale countenance. "You slept poorly again."

"I have had more restful nights," David admitted, stretching his aching limbs as he rose to perform his morning ablutions. "This time, Mrs. Gabriel appeared, if you would believe it." He shuddered at the memory.

"From what you have told me that one is enough to terrify the most stalwart of men. It is no wonder that you cried out in your sleep," Harjit observed, shaking his head. "These dreams have plagued you every night this week past. Perhaps you should consult a soothsayer?"

David gave a short bark of laughter. "I need no soothsayer to tell me the source of my dreams, Harjit. What I need is coffee—dark, strong coffee." As the Sikh left to do David's bidding, the sense of foreboding returned, a piece of the night's horror creeping about in the daylight. The dream had been stronger than any of his previous nightmares.

It was the Greenvale girl, of course, David decided as he poured water into the china basin which sat upon a stand near the bed. For the first time, he was being faced by a female who might present something of a challenge. But he had been faced by far greater hurdles before and they had never disturbed his sleep. There was more to these nightmares, far more. Some unknown danger lurked in those shadows, stronger than any threat upon a chessboard, but the warnings were of no consequence until he could put a name to the threat.

Harjit returned bearing a tray and David wrapped himself in a robe before seating himself at the small table in the adjoining sitting room.

"Ah, coffee, the brew of life's blood," he said, sniffing appreciatively. "I can almost feel my eyes opening."

Harjit poured the steaming liquid into the delicate porcelain cup and handed it to his master. "There

was a letter for you, sahib." He picked up a silver salver with an envelope upon it.

David recognized the seal. "So, it would seem that even an ancient hand moves faster when greased by a few coins," he said as he broke the wax.

"Even the gods themselves have been known to be propitiated by a judicious bribe," Harjit agreed. "I shall fetch your breakfast."

"The trick is knowing which god is playing with your fate," David mumbled to himself. "And who is the proper one to bribe." He skimmed through the document, jumping over the legal hedges with an ease born of long business experience until he reached the substance of the late Sir Miles' will.

There was a myriad of small bequests to friends and retainers, even one to himself, "my teakwood chessboard to my dear friend, David Rutherford of Bombay." Doubtless it had been sent to India and was even now waiting in his home there.

As David read through the old man's last testament, he mourned his chess partner once more. He had fully intended to travel to Crown Beeches and meet Sir Miles once his business in London was completed. He had even carried the bundles of letters with him from India as material for reminiscences that would never occur now.

His musings were disturbed by a knock at the door.

"Mr. Petrov, sahib," Harjit announced.

"Ivan? Before noon?" David asked incredulously, setting down his coffee cup with a clatter.

"I am needing your help, Dahvid," the Russian said, his pronunciation betraying his agitation. "I am to be meeting Caroline this morning and you must be coming with me."

"Is this some strange Russian custom? To have a friend accompany one upon an assignation with a

lady?" David asked, laughingly. "Here in England we usually conduct our tête-à-têtes by twos."

"Is why I am asking you," Petrov said. "Her cousin is being there with her. I am wishing you to protract Sylvia, so I can be talking with Caroline."

"Distract," David corrected. "You wish me to distract Sylvia."

"Is what I have been saying!" The Russian declared, rolling his eyes in annoyance. "You detract Sylvia."

David chopped some sugar from the lump on the tray, staring into the cup as he stirred the sweet into the brew. The thought of facing Sylvia again so soon was almost unnerving. After he had left the Harwells' ball the previous evening, David had fully intended to follow Mrs. Gabriel's advice and keep his distance from her niece for a time. Even in the cold logic of the light of day, the memory of last night's embrace still had the power to set his heart racing. Still, despite the knowledge that he might be courting disaster, he wanted to see her. David slipped off his glasses, rubbing his eyes wearily.

"Maybe you could be talking to her about the will?" Petrov suggested, seating himself and accepting Harjit's silent offer of coffee. "Is will you have there, no?"

"Yes, the damnable will," David confirmed, picking up the sheaf of papers. "I have it here and I fear, Ivan, that there seems precious little to discuss."

"Nothing unusual?" Petrov asked woefully.

"The baronet's bequests are all within the normal realm, the dispensation of trinkets and tokens mostly," he said, replacing his spectacles once again. "Gifts of money to old pensioners, a pianoforte to his niece Caroline—"

"She plays divinely," Petrov broke in.

"I am sure," David said acerbically, finding his

place in the document once again. "His chess library to . . . Sylvia? How odd . . ." He looked at his friend.

"Is being a clue, perhaps?" Petrov said, seizing eagerly on the excuse. "You must be asking."

"Very well, Ivan," David agreed. Perhaps Petrov was right. It certainly was an unusual legacy to bestow upon a female. "I shall accompany you. Harjit, has the new blue superfine jacket arrived from Weston?"

"No, sahib," the Sikh informed him.

David rose and strode toward the wardrobe, pulling it open to stand before it.

"Where do we meet them, Ivan?" he asked, tilting his head in consideration as he eyed the array of clothing.

"Park," Ivan said. "They take the boy flying kite."

David recalled the scene in the nursery, Miles' tow-head nestled on Sylvia's shoulder. "*You fly a kite better than any girl I know. You don't cut up stiff at frogs and snakes neither,*" the boy had said. Well, David could only hope that she would not cut up stiff because of a moment of moonlit madness. Certainly, she had reacted well the previous night—so well, in fact, that it verged on the annoying.

"I shall wear the dove-gray jacket," David decided, lifting the sleeve. "The trousers to match."

Petrov nearly dropped the cup of coffee from his fingers, shaking his head in disbelief. "Highslip is making convert of you, I am vowing."

"I am merely following the terms of the wager," David declared loftily. "Highslip has nothing to do with it."

And Miss Gabriel everything, Petrov thought glumly, not daring to venture to speak the thought aloud.

Above Green Park, a puff of clouds scudded across a sky of clear blue. The hour was still too early for

the invasion of nannies, maids and children that was sure to come on such a fine spring day. Sylvia, Caroline and Miles had the grounds to themselves; a maid hovered discreetly in the background. The boy licked his finger and held it up to the wind to ascertain its direction as the tail of the kite lashed about, almost like that of a living creature.

"You see, Syl," Miles called, exulting. "Look! I almost have to keep it from flying. It's the best kite we ever made."

"It surely is," Sylvia said, stifling a yawn as she watched the painted diamond shape dance in the breeze.

"Why don't you hold the kite up, Caro," Miles suggested, noticing his cousin's weariness. "I'll run with it."

"I think not," Caroline said, seating herself beneath a tree. "It might muss my hair."

Miles threw his sister an exasperated look. "Why did you come anyway?" he asked.

"Give it here, Miles," Sylvia intervened, although she would have liked to hear the answer to the question. Caroline's sudden taste for fresh air was not the least believable. "She would just tree it anyway," she whispered, taking the kite from the boy.

Miles grinned in agreement as he let out the line and waited for the breeze.

"Now!" he shouted.

His pudgy legs pumped as he ran into wind, pulling the string while he looked over his shoulder at the kite. Sylvia watched as he raced across the field, the kite weaving and dipping behind him. It was lifting but not high enough. All at once, it crashed to the ground.

"Bother!" he cried, winding in his reel as he went to examine the kite. Luckily, it was undamaged. "Ain't enough of a breeze," he complained, panting with effort as Sylvia came up beside him. Caroline's

laughter came floating across the field. "Like to see her get it flying!"

Sylvia looked at the boy in sympathy. He was utterly winded from his effort. "Shall I give it a try?" she asked.

"You didn't get much sleep last night," Miles observed guiltily.

"I could use the run," Sylvia said, realizing that it was true. The restless energy within her needed some release. She was tired of keeping herself constantly under tight rein. In the small world of the *ton*, it was as if she were constantly upon exhibition, every move watched, every expression analyzed, every utterance assessed. Now that she knew herself to be in love with David, she needed to be especially wary of her words. She must not let him know the true depth of her feelings.

"You are a prime goer, Syl!" Miles praised, picking up the kite and holding it aloft.

Sylvia gathered up her skirt, holding the reel in her other hand as she ran into the wind.

"Faster, Syl!" Miles called. "The wind's caught it."

She could feel the resistance as the diamond of wood and paper sailed aloft and she paid out more line. Although the kite was now soaring above the trees, she did not want to stop running; she was savoring the sheer joy of unfettered motion, the feel of her blood pounding in her ears, the warmth of the sun upon her cheeks. Sylvia flew across the open space, the pins falling from her hair, heedless of everything but the thin string that connected her to the sky.

David stood at the edge of the field, thinking that he had never seen Sylvia more beautiful. Her hair streamed out behind her like a cloud of golden gossamer shimmering in the spring sunlight. Upon her face was an expression of wonder, a smile of elation

that had little resemblance to the social facade of polite nonchalance he had seen of late. The cold wall of unapproachability had utterly disappeared. The kite sailed above her, miming her dance. For it was like a dance, David realized, much like the prancing of a long-stabled filly let out into pasture after a hard, cold winter.

"Look, Lord Donhill! Look how high we got it!" Miles called.

Sylvia whirled at her cousin's words. Lord Donhill? What in the world? She saw Mr. Petrov standing near the tree where her cousin sat and knew at once why Caroline had risen at an unheard-of hour to come kite-flying. Her aunt would be furious if she were to find out about this assignation and Sylvia had little doubt upon whose head the fury and the blame would fall. David was smiling, and Sylvia realized the picture that she must present. Her hair had come all unpinned and was falling about her shoulders in a mane. The faded blue dress that she wore was one of her oldest garments, not even fit to give the servants but hitherto perfectly suitable for the rigors of kite-flying. She must look a veritable gypsy, she thought as she handed the line to Miles before walking back toward her cousin, the thought of wringing the girl's neck at the fore of her mind.

"Sylvia," Caroline said, having the decency to blush at her cousin's murderous expression, "who would believe that Mr. Petrov would find us here?"

"Only an utter flat," Sylvia said, refusing to play the game of pretense. "Oh, Caro, whatever will your mama say should she find out of this "chance" meeting?"

"Daisy will not tell," said Caroline, gesturing toward the maid. "Neither will Miles; for all his fits and starts he is no telltale. That leaves only you, Syl."

"I am not being fond of deceiving either," Mr. Petrov said solemnly. "But your aunt is meaning to

force Lord Highslip on your cousin. Do you wish this?"

Sylvia's countenance had become closed once more. "No," she said, softly. "I would not want you to marry Hugo, Caro."

The expression in her eyes betrayed something of her inner turmoil and David wondered if it was entirely for her cousin's sake that Sylvia agreed to assist in foiling her aunt's plans. There was an adamant quality to her words, as if she would move the very earth to prevent Highslip's proposal.

"Oh, thank you, Syl," Caroline said, rising to hug her cousin close. "I knew that I might depend on you."

"You have mine thanks as well, Miss Gabriel," Petrov said warmly. "And now, we must talk, Caroline and I."

"I think we are being dismissed," David said. "Shall we go help Miles with the kite?"

Sylvia tried to calm the tempest of emotion within as she fell into step beside David. His very proximity was enough to send her soaring like Miles' kite, to rise and fall with the currents of his looks, his words. It was unforgivably dangerous to allow herself to be swept away like this, to fly upon the memory of last night's moment, stolen in the darkness. But it was like trying to quell a storm. She watched Caroline and her beau enviously, vowing that she would not allow Hugo to destroy her cousin's happiness. "I will not let Hugo have her," she said, half to herself.

Sylvia's words were quiet, but they had the force of an oath, throwing David into confusion. Was it possible that Sylvia still desired the earl for herself? Certainly, it was no business of his if she wished to wear the willow for that conceited fop, and yet, the thought that she might be unable to see beyond Highslip's handsome, stylish facade was curiously irksome. There was malice in the earl, a true malev-

olence that manifested itself in that wicked tongue of his. He would never marry Sylvia, not without her fortune to line his pockets. Fortune . . . David's thoughts ran to the will. What if the chess library held the key? It would certainly give her the means to marry Highslip.

"Did you receive a copy of the will?" Sylvia asked.

It was almost as if she could read his mind. David nodded. "I read it through briefly," he admitted, his native honesty warring with his desire to spare her from Highslip.

Sylvia laughed. "Briefly is the only way to read it, for I freely confess that grinding legal prosing to be far better than a lullaby," she said. "I saw nothing unusual."

David's sense of honesty won. "The bequest of the chess library," he said, reluctantly. "That seemed most unusual to me. Did you think it might be a clue, Sylvia? Why else leave a chess library to a female?"

Why indeed? Sylvia thought, scrambling for a logical explanation for her uncle's disposition of his most treasured possession. "My brother Will is terribly careless with books," she lied. "And some of Uncle's volumes are quite unusual. I suppose that he trusted me to take care of them properly." She prayed that he would accept her gambit. "I did think that it might be a clue though. I went through every one of the books thoroughly, both here and at Crown Beeches, and I found nothing. As a matter of fact," Sylvia suddenly recalled, "I did come across something that might be of use to you. Uncle wrote down the details of almost every game that he played. In his youth, I believe, he frequently played Horace Greenvale. If Lady Helena's manner of play is in any way like her father's, Uncle's play-book could be of help to you. I shall loan it, if you wish."

David berated himself. She was offering him her

help in retaining his freedom, yet all he could feel was a profound sense of relief that her fortune remained lost. As long as she was poor, she was safe from Highslip. "Thank you, Sylvia, I would appreciate the book," David said.

She avoided his eyes, afraid that he would discern the truth. It was utter selfishness that had prompted her offer: that and the fear of losing him to Helena Greenvale. She wanted him to win, as much for her sake as for his. It was a foolish hope, she knew, but if given time he might come to care for her and then she would reveal her chess-playing skill so that she might release him from his wager. But until that unlikely day, she did not dare reveal her feelings else the fragile friendship between them might be broken. That was to be avoided at all cost, for it would be more than she could bear to lose him completely.

David sensed her discomfort and thought he knew its source.

"Sylvia, about last night . . ." he began.

"There is no need," she murmured.

"Oh, yes, there is," David asserted. "I would not have it hanging here between us. We were friends; I would have us remain so."

"We still are friends, David," she said, focusing upon Miles' kite. She would not cry. She would not let him know what that kiss had done to her. Before that kiss, she had been able to lie to herself, to half-convince herself that she was not in love with him. Now, there was no denial, only profound pain.

"I'm sorry," David said. "Doubtless, I am not the first man who has ever made a fool of himself because of your beauty."

Fool. The word made itself heard above the others. He counted the kiss an act of idiocy, prompted entirely by her looks. She was glad that he found her attractive—and yet, perversely, she cursed her own beauty. In a strange way, he had not really kissed *her*

at all, just her shell, the chimera of her appearance. He accounted her in the same way that one would a lovely painting or an excellent sculpture: one might admire a work of art but it was foolish to kiss it.

"Oh, no, milord," Sylvia said, taking refuge in ridicule. "You are certainly not the only one who has acted so foolishly, by no means. I would not stoop to compare your kiss with the myriad of others that I received."

In some contrary way, her statement was in no manner comforting to David. The thought that he was but one among many who had tasted her lips was almost a shock. There had been an innocence to her kiss, a delight that sprang from new experience.

"Although I lived in the country, milord, I was no hermit. Uncle saw to it that I attended the usual run of balls and dinners," Sylvia added, running on when she saw that he was taking her in seriousness. "I have had odes written to my eyelashes, sonnets to my earlobes and rhymed couplets, if you would believe it, to my nostrils. Why, one young man even composed an epic to my anatomy—much of it mere speculation, of course."

"Of course," David agreed weakly, wondering just where conjecture had ended and knowledge had begun. To his surprise, Sylvia began to laugh, interrupting the morose direction of his thoughts. Suddenly he realized that she had been tweaking him.

"You minx," he chided, chuckling despite himself.

"If you could but have seen your face, David. Truly a Friday-faced countenance." Sylvia giggled.

"What's so funny?" Miles inquired as he played the kite on the breeze.

"Nothing, youngling," Sylvia smothered a grin.

"Awful lot of fuss for nothing, if you ask me," Miles grumbled.

"He's right, you know," David said. "It is a lot of

fuss about nothing. Pax?" he asked, offering his hand.

"Pax," Sylvia agreed, putting her palm in his, enjoying the grasp of his strong fingers as they shook hands with the mock solemnity of two children. She squinted up at the kite, knowing that she could always claim that the sun had caused the tears in her eyes. *Nothing*. He accounted the kiss as nothing. The flame of hope was flickering low indeed.

"Did you find anything else of interest in the will?" she asked, moving the conversation away from the dangerous topic of the previous evening.

"I had not known that your uncle had left me a chess set," David said.

"Unfortunately, due to the sorry state of affairs after Uncle's death, I was unable to have it sent off until several months had passed," Sylvia said, bending down to pull a blade of grass and twisting it distractingly in her fingers. "There was much debate over the clause in Uncle's will forbidding the customary mourning."

"I would imagine so," David said. "Apparently, your aunt was willing to sustain a financial loss rather than defy the proprieties. Your uncle left a substantial amount of money to finance your debut with Caroline."

"But only if Aunt Ruby repaired to London immediately after Uncle's death," Sylvia said. "The money went to charity instead."

"Obviously, Sir Miles wished you to go to town right away, even to the neglect of all custom," David said. "He offered considerable incentive, but why?"

Sylvia laughed, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice. "Why indeed! 'Tis a question that I ask quite often. Uncle Miles disliked Hugo from the start. 'Twas the only thing we ever quarreled over. Uncle knew that I would have control over my father's fortune within the year, and I am sure he realized the

state of his health would not give him time to attempt to change my mind. His testament dates just before he fell into his final illness. Hugo urged me to marry him then, when Uncle was too much out of his mind to naysay us, but I would not leave Uncle Miles."

Was the regret in her tone for the missed opportunity? David mentally applauded his late chess partner for his bold final move. Although Sylvia obviously did not realize it, her uncle had shielded her from a fate far worse than poverty.

"Hugo was the one man who did not seem intimidated by my looks, you see," Sylvia said, feeling a sudden need to explain her attraction to the earl. "He is so handsome himself. He was utterly devoted to me, polite, considerate, seemingly all that one would wish in a husband. He listened to me, David. Hugo was the first man who actually accounted that I might have more wit than a child's wax doll." Yet, she realized, she had never trusted him with her innermost thoughts. Hugo had not even known that she played chess, for she had felt that he might disapprove. There was always some part of her that had held back, waiting, until David had kissed her.

"Lord Donhill, Syl, look!" Miles called.

The two watched as the boy played the line expertly, causing the kite to swoop and sway like a gaudy bird. Higher and higher it flew, pulling the length of string to the limit. Suddenly a gust of wind blew, bending the crowns of the trees with its force, almost tugging the reel from Miles' hand. The boy held fast, desperately trying to pull back against the force of the billow of breeze, until the taut line snapped and the kite sailed away free, carried aloft over the treetops and out of sight; as the now-empty looping line fell from above.

Sylvia and David hurried to the boy's side. Caro-

line and Ivan too saw the mishap and abandoned their tête-à-tête by the tree.

"Oh, Miles, I am so sorry," Sylvia said, taking the reel from Miles' fingers and winding in the string. She put her hand on the boy's shoulder as he manfully struggled against tears. "We shall build a new kite," she promised.

"No, we won't," Miles said, his lower lip trembling. "You don't have time for anything any more, not even lessons. Mama says that you are going to marry that awful Mr. Colber and go far away to live and I won't see you hardly ever."

"That is not true, Miles," Sylvia said. "I shall not marry Mr. Colber. Remember, I am pledged to you."

"Truly?" Miles asked, brightening.

"Truly," Sylvia vowed solemnly. "As for the kite, youngling, I shall find the time."

"Miles, can you not see how tired Sylvia is?" Caroline asked, glaring at her brother. "Mama is running her ragged planning my come-out ball, and you wish her to exhaust herself over your silly kite?"

Once Caroline pointed it out, David noticed how drawn Sylvia looked, remarked the shadows under her eyes and the pallor of her complexion.

"I'm sorry, Syl," Miles said contritely. "We ain't been flying much anyway. Don't trouble yourself about it."

"We shall start on it immediately once we get home, never you fear," Sylvia said, looking significantly at Caroline.

"Perhaps we should be getting back," Caroline said reluctantly. "Mr. Colber is due to call upon Sylvia this afternoon and Mama wished us to return early."

"Your mama is entertaining his suit?" David said incredulously.

"Aunt Ruby would serve tea to the devil himself

were she convinced that he was sufficiently warm in the pocket," Sylvia said.

"Is not the title she is being concerned with?" Petrov questioned anxiously. "Entshaw was lord, a peer."

"No," Sylvia said. "Although rank is certainly a consideration, I believe that lucre is her primary love."

A smile stretched across Petrov's lean face. "Is most wonderful news, Miss Gabriel," he declared. "Wonderful!"

"Whatever do you mean, Ivan?" Caroline asked. "I had thought that you were poor as a church-mouse."

"And still you love me, my sweet," Petrov said, looking at her fondly. "But poor, I am not."

David began to laugh. "Something of an understatement, would you not say, Ivan?"

The Russian reddened, tugging at his collar as if it had suddenly become too tight. "I do not know how to be saying this, Caroline."

"Shall I?" David asked.

Petrov nodded.

"Ivan is a partner in my business, Miss Gabriel," David said. "He just did not wish anyone to know that he had soiled his hands in trade. I believe his assets more than equal my own—and I am considered something of a nabob."

Caroline looked at Petrov, her eyes wide with questions.

"Is true," Petrov said, weakly. "I do business. Are you still loving me, Caroline?"

"You Russian idiot!" she exploded. "Of course, I love you, even though you are rich!"

Miles looked from his sister to Petrov, utterly baffled. "You are angry because he told you that he has money? Why?" he asked Caroline.

"Because Mr. Petrov concealed something of great

importance," Caroline declared, sniffing in high dudgeon.

"But you liked him without the money anyway," Miles said. "So why are you acting like you have bees in your brain?"

"Why indeed?" David asked. "You are a lucky man, Ivan, to know that Miss Gabriel values you for yourself and not your fortune."

"Yes," Petrov said proudly. "The luckiest of men. And now, no more meeting behind your mama's back, Caroline."

"Well, you should have trusted me," Caroline said, softening, unable to maintain her anger in the face of Petrov's happiness.

"In everything, my sweet," he murmured, taking her hand.

David felt a stab of jealousy, watching the two exchange whispered confidences as they walked together.

"I am so happy for them," Sylvia said. "I am sure that my aunt shall not oppose the match now."

Happy for them, or for yourself? David wondered. *Highslip is available once more.*

"Do people always act stupid when they're grown-up?" Miles asked, tugging at David's sleeve. He was panting, half-running to keep up with the stride of the adults.

"Sometimes," David said, glad for the interruption of his direction of thoughts.

"I don't know if I want to grow up," Miles said.

"I am afraid you have no choice, m'boy," David said, hoisting the child onto his shoulders to straddle his neck. "Unfortunately, some of us grow up later than others," he murmured to himself.

Miles squealed with delight. "Thank you, sir. This is famous! Almost as good as being up in a tree."

"David, your jacket!" Sylvia exclaimed. "'Tis all muddy now from Miles' boots."

"Why, so it is," David agreed, ruefully, "but my young friend here seemed a trifle worn from his tangle with the wind."

She looked at him. His hair was tousled, his glasses had slid to the tip of his nose and the perfection of his cravat was spattered with mud; and she laughed. "I almost believe I prefer you this way, David. Disorder suits you."

"As perfection suits Highslip?" David retorted, then regretted his mention of Highslip almost at once. Sylvia's face became shuttered and she fell into a silence that lasted until they parted at the park gate.

That afternoon, in the parlor, Sylvia could scarcely keep her eyes open as the gilt clock ticked away the time. Her aunt refused to excuse her until Colber paid his promised call. Even the knowledge that Hugo was watching her in his usual surreptitious manner could not keep her from drowsing and the endless drone of gossip was surprisingly soporific. More than once, a jab from Caroline's elbow jerked Sylvia awake.

"Ah, Mr. Brummel." Mrs. Gabriel greeted the dandy with pleasure as he entered the room. It seemed that her pointed warning to Lord Donhill the previous night had not alienated the arbiter of fashion as she had feared.

Brummel did the pretty, seating himself beside his hostess and regaling her with the latest *on-dits*.

"You do not say!" Mrs. Gabriel exclaimed. "A vast fortune?"

Sylvia sat upright with a start, jarred by her aunt's loud voice.

"Rich as Croesus," Brummel assured the matron solemnly. "An inheritance is what I heard."

"Why, Mr. Petrov is so modest," Mrs. Gabriel said, more in annoyance than approval. She had almost let

that bird slip from her hands. A rich Russian who was, she reminded herself, well-connected was worth far more than an out-of-pocket earl. She gave Lord Highslip a calculating look. 'Twas best not to put him off yet, she decided, not until Caroline's nest was feathered. However, encouraging Petrov would require enduring Lord Donhill and perhaps angering Highslip. It was a risk she would take.

"He does not flash his blunt like some. Colber, for instance—poor devil—was always waving his purse about. 'Tis that what got him into trouble, I suppose," Brummel said.

"What trouble, Mr. Brummel?" Caroline asked.

"Surely you have heard, Miss Gabriel," Brummel said. "Mr. Colber was set upon by thieves as he was leaving his club last night. They beat him severely and left him for dead. It is unknown if he will recover."

The room began to whirl as Sylvia looked into Hugo's eyes. There was a glint of triumph in that hard blue gaze. It was absurd—and yet, as she thought of Colber and of Lord Entshaw's mysterious accident, a dread certainty rose within her. She remembered the horse that her uncle had purchased from Hugo's father so long ago.

Mrs. Gabriel gave a cry of dismay as Sylvia slipped into a swoon. "The poor dear, she is quite overset, for Mr. Colber was most attentive to her," she said.

No one saw Highslip smile as a footman carried Sylvia from the room.

Eight



Lord Highslip sat before the bow window at White's, staring out into the darkness of St. James Street. Brummel, Alvaney and their crowd were at Carlton House disporting themselves with Prinny, so Highslip could trespass upon the sacred spot with impunity. Those members of the club who thought to rebuke him immediately thought it better to leave the earl be when they saw the formidable expression upon his face.

Indeed, Highslip had reason to brood. He was out of pocket three hundred pounds, money he could ill afford to lose, and worse still, the blunt had been an utter waste. Helena Greenvale had failed.

It had seemed an excellent plan at the time. Highslip had approached Lord Balton's daughter, dangling David Rutherford before her like a carrot before a mare, but the Greenvale chit had proven far cannier than he had anticipated. Although Helena had considerable confidence in her skills, she had hesitated to challenge Lord Donhill, demanding some surety for the risk to her reputation should she fail to win. Helena had deemed the possible damage to her character worth five hundred guineas, but Highslip had managed to discount the price of her good name to three hundred. The shrew had required her payment in advance, win or lose.

For a short time this afternoon, it had seemed that Highslip had invested wisely. Helena had played her match boldly, striking blow after blow until it seemed that Donhill would be subject to an utter rout, but the man had only been biding his time. Bit by bit, the chess master had driven her back into abject defeat.

Three hundred pounds, thrown away. Highslip clenched his fists as he contemplated the pack of creditors that had begun to haunt his door. It was little consolation that Helena's payment had come from Colber's purse. The only thing that was keeping the duns at bay was the possibility of his marriage to Caroline Gabriel, yet even that hope of financial salvation seemed more remote. Her mother, the greedy bitch, had smelled the possibility of money, now that the fact of Petrov's fortune had become widely known. At Almack's Mrs. Gabriel had allowed the Russian to dance with her daughter twice, while restricting the earl to only one country dance. Petrov would have to be taken care of, Highslip decided, but it was far too soon. Three accidents to Gabriel suitors in so short a time would certainly be remarked.

Highslip glared at the carriage lamps passing in the street below as he considered his options. He would have to bring Caroline to heel before they put him in the Fleet. Luckily, the miss seemed biddable enough, and was passing pretty too, except for that unfortunate nose. But when compared to her cousin, Caroline came out the complete loser.

Sylvia . . . that marvel of female flawlessness . . . Highslip's blood boiled as he thought of the woman who had nearly been his—a face as perfect as his own, a form that would make the gods envious—snatched from him at the lip of the grave by that querulous old fool of an uncle. Breaking the engagement to Sylvia was by far the hardest thing that

Highslip had ever done, but there had been no choice. Love alone would not support. Poor girl, she had been overcome with relief the other day not to be put upon any longer by that purse-proud cit. The way that she had looked at him just before she had fainted had made him long to tell her of his secret gallantry on her behalf, but he could not. She loved him still, he knew, although her heart had been necessarily broken by the failed betrothal.

Yet, Highslip wondered, his eyes narrowing, was her heart growing somewhat fickle? As he recalled the picture of Sylvia in Donhill's arms, the blood rushed to the earl's face, infusing his countenance with a devilish cast. Unlike Entshaw and Colber, David Rutherford was not a true threat, the chess wager making him wholly ineligible. Highslip had hoped that la Greenvale would rid him of Donhill, but now, he would have to make other plans. First, though, he would have to find some sop to throw the creditors until he plighted his troth.

Highslip rose, turning from the window. The hour was late and he had little doubt that a likely flat could be found for fleecing, one deep enough in the bottle and warm enough in the pockets. Like the answer to a prayer, Highslip spotted a group of three young sprigs, green as April and half-foxed by the looks of them.

"Sir," one of them began, "would you know where I might locate Lord Donhill?"

"In hell, I hope—" Highslip began, then cut himself off as he recognized the boy. Sylvia's eyes stared out from a young man's countenance, her delicate features hardened in a masculine visage. He cast about in his mind for the youth's name. "Why, I vow, 'tis young William," the earl said, putting on a mask of joviality. "What brings you to London, lad?"

The young man's face flushed with embarrassment as he identified Lord Highslip. Although he was un-

familiar with the details of his sister's broken betrothal, he knew that the earl had caused her a good deal of grief. "I have come at Lord Donhill's request, milord. He wishes to speak to me regarding my late uncle."

"Dear Sir Miles," Highslip said, wearing a suitably sorrowful expression. "We all miss him so." Unlike his sister, William's face was ridiculously simple to read. Even as the earl did his utmost to lull the lad's uneasiness, a scheme began to take shape in his head. "Unfortunately, I left Lord Donhill at a ball; I doubt that he will be here at all tonight. Surely you will find him at his residence tomorrow morning."

The young man nodded, about to take his leave. "Thank you, Lord Highslip. I shall see him then."

His companions gaped in awe. Lord Highslip, the noted Corinthian!

It could not have gone better had Highslip planned it so. "I find myself alone this evening," he said. "Perhaps you and your friends might care to accompany me about town for a bit."

The reluctant William did not have a chance. His friends clearly would not have forgiven him had he refused this golden bit of good fortune, an opportunity for them to see London in the company of the famous Lord Highslip.

"Thank you, milord," William answered. "It would be an honor."

"Hsssst, Syl!"

At first, Sylvia thought she was still dreaming. She sat upright in her bed, wondering where David had gone. He had been holding her in his arms, whispering words of endearment.

"Syl!"

The hissing syllable came again through the open window, punctuated by a spatter of pebbles against the pane. Sylvia drew on her robe and peered out the

window to the garden below. "Will?" she whispered. "Whatever are you doing here?" Luckily, the nursery stair connected with the garden door and she was able to go directly down to let her brother in.

"Syl, oh, Syl." Will broke into a sob as Sylvia hugged him to her. "I have been such a fool . . . an utter fool."

She smelled the liquor upon his breath. "It will look better in the morning," she said comfortingly. "Although you will have the devil of a head. I shall get you past Aunt Ruby."

"No, Syl," he moaned, disengaging himself from her arms. "'Tis far worse than being cast-away, I fear."

The expression of utter despair on his face was frightening. "Did you get sent down, Will?" Sylvia whispered in dread.

"Would that it were that simple," Will groaned, sitting on a nearby bench, his head in his hands. "I have lost five hundred and fifty pounds tonight, Syl."

Five hundred and fifty pounds. Aunt Ruby would never agree to pay that enormous sum to tow her nephew from the River Tick. As it was she begrudged every groat she spent on the lad above what Uncle Miles had provided for schooling. He had obviously assumed that the missing fortune would be found.

"How?" she asked, sitting down beside him.

"Cards. Don't ask any more," Will said, ashamed to reveal who held his vowels.

"You must request some time," Sylvia said, her mind racing frantically for a solution. "Meanwhile, Aunt Ruby must not find you like this. Your old room is still unoccupied; doss yourself there tonight and I will have a talk with Boniface."

"What shall I do?" Will groaned.

A number of bitter retorts flew through Sylvia's

head, but she held her peace. Recriminations would do little good now. "Get some sleep," she advised. "It will look better in the morning," she repeated, trying to convince herself as much as her brother.

"I doubt it," Will said.

So do I, Sylvia thought to herself as she mounted the stair.

Luckily, the house on Berkeley Square was all a-dither with preparations for Caroline's ball. William's sudden presence was scarcely remarked as Mrs. Gabriel bustled about in a frenzy, bringing half the staff to the brink of resignation. It was left to Sylvia to console the cook and mollify the maids as well as organize the bulk of the arrangements. Mrs. Gabriel's constant carping was almost welcome, nearly taking Sylvia's mind off William's revelation; but any distractions were temporary at best. William moved about the house like a shadow, offering his help with the backbreaking task of moving the furnishings that cluttered the small ballroom after Mrs. Gabriel's fit of refurbishing.

When the last stick of furniture was removed to the attic, Mrs. Gabriel stood at the door surveying the empty room. "No!" she proclaimed at last. "It shall not do. It is far too old fashioned."

"But, Aunt Ruby," Will protested weakly, gazing at the exquisite black-and-white-tiled marble floor. "Uncle Miles completely redid this room scarcely two years ago. Hired a gang of Italians to do the stonework. I recall him saying that it cost him a fortune."

"Wasted!" Mrs. Gabriel pronounced. "This room is certainly not the mode. We shall use the large gallery for the supper room instead. It is more convenient to the kitchen and the grand ballroom in any case. We must clear that room."

Sylvia sighed at the squandered effort. She had made the suggestion previously, but Aunt Ruby had

ignored her. William looked at their aunt with a martyred expression. Poor Will. Unfortunately, it was unlikely that his labors of contrition would do any good once Aunt Ruby discovered the true extent of his sins. Undoubtedly, she would demand that the boy pay his debt from the funds Uncle Miles had set aside for his education—and that would mean no less than the destruction of Will's future.

Aunt Ruby swept off with Will trailing behind her. Sylvia leaned against the jamb, trying to find some way out of this predicament, but there was no clear move. Damn Uncle Miles. She could forgive him for hiding her father's fortune in the hopes of protecting her from Hugo, but it was unfair that Will should suffer for her stupidity. Her brother had done nothing to deserve the loss of his inheritance, yet it was gone with hers.

"Sylvia."

It was as if he had been conjured up by a thought. Sylvia turned in surprise to find Hugo standing there, regarding her with a look that made her feel decidedly strange. "It is rather early for callers," she said, her discomfort growing as he continued to stare.

"The door was open," Highslip said at last. "I have come to talk to you, Sylvia."

"I cannot think what we have to say to each other, milord," Sylvia said, attempting to sweep past him, but he grabbed hold of her arm.

"Do not be foolish, my girl," Highslip said, enjoying her struggle. "You would not wish your aunt to find out about your brother."

His tones of soft menace caused her to cease her effort to get away. "What do you know of Will's situation?" she asked warily.

"We shall discuss this matter privately?" Highslip said, gesturing toward the empty small ballroom.

* * *

David arrived at the house on Berkeley Square to find things at sixes and sevens. No one was attending the door, yet servants were everywhere, polishing and cleaning. David clutched the dragon kite in his hand, wondering if he ought to return at another time, when young Miles came down the stairs in a rush.

"I saw you from the window in the nursery," he said breathlessly. "What a wonderful kite! Will you fly it? Can I come?"

"Actually," David said, holding out the fantastic construction of wood and paper, "this is for you. The children of the Orient fly kites like these and I had this made." The delight on the boy's face was well worth the price, David decided.

Miles took the red-and-gold dragon reverently in hand. "Wait till I show Cousin Will this!" he declared.

"Your cousin William is here?" David asked, glad that the lad had responded to his letter at last. "When did he arrive?"

"Oh, the other night," Miles said vaguely. "Mama has him moving furniture in the ballroom, I think." A servant brushed by, nearly causing a rip in the paper. "I shall put this in the nursery now, before it gets broken. Thank you, Lord Donhill." He flashed a smile before running upstairs with the kite trailing behind him.

David decided to seek William Gabriel out. With his outstanding chess skills, perhaps the young man might be of some help in solving Sir Miles' chess puzzle.

"The terrace is so lovely this time of year," Highslip said, throwing open the French doors. "Shall we sit outside here, in the sunshine? You are looking a bit peaked. That harridan aunt of yours is running you to rags."

"You obviously did not come here to discuss my health, milord," Sylvia said, watching his face with growing uneasiness. There was a cat-in-the-cream-pot expression there that she could not like.

"Oh, but I did, my love, I did—and you ought not to call me 'milord,'" Highslip said.

"And you ought not to call me 'my love,' she retorted. "You gave up any right to that more than a year ago."

Highslip plucked a lilac from a nearby bush, crushing the delicate blossoms in his fingers. "You always wore lilacs, Sylvia," he said. "Every time I smell that scent it haunts me—as you do. I have never forgotten you. Never. I knew that someday you would be mine."

Sylvia looked around in growing dismay. It had been unwise to come out here with him alone. "What do you wish to tell me about Will?" she asked, putting the stone bench between herself and Hugo.

"You still love me, Sylvia. I know you do," Highslip whispered, almost to himself.

In her childhood in India, Sylvia had seen a mongoose confront a cobra, seen that rising hooded head glaring at the furry creature with a mesmerizing evil. Now she understood the paralyzing terror of a cobra's gaze.

"You see, I hold your brother's notes, my love. Five hundred and fifty pounds of his vowels, and I know exactly what your dear aunt would do were she to find out about his little peccadillo." He spoke conversationally, as if he were talking about the weather.

"You are a true friend, Hugo," Sylvia said, holding her voice steady. "How like you to protect dear Will."

"Oh, I shall protect him, Sylvia," Highslip said. "As long as it is in my interest to do so. I want only one thing in return. You."

"I cannot marry you, Hugo," Sylvia said. The scent of crushed lilacs rose in her nostrils as he drew closer. She willed herself not to flinch as his hand touched her shoulder.

"Marriage? I had not mentioned marriage," Highslip said, throwing back his head in laughter.

The sibilant hiss of the sound caused Sylvia to shiver in the sunlight.

"You wish to protect your brother from the terrible fate that befell your two suitors, do you not? Dreadful things happen to those who do not pay their debts of honor. Thanks to your damned uncle, you have nothing," Highslip said. "Nonetheless, I want you, Sylvia."

"You are offering me *carte blanche*," Sylvia said, trying to contain her revulsion. Beyond the fact of Will's debt, she had little doubt that Hugo would do her brother harm if she tried to thwart him. The earl was mad.

The small ballroom was empty, but the sound of laughter guided David to the open terrace door.

"I love you, Sylvia. I own a delightful house on Marybone Lane which shall be yours—and once I marry Caroline, you shall have jewels, clothes, everything that you would ever need to adorn your beauty."

David stopped in his tracks. It was Highslip's voice, he would swear it.

"Tell me that you love me, Sylvia," Highslip demanded. "Tell me that you will come away with me and be my mistress."

David knew that he ought to leave, but he stayed beside the draperies, listening.

"I need time to consider, Hugo." Sylvia's voice came drifting through the open doors. "This is a serious move."

"Do you wish to be your aunt's dogsbody for the

rest of your days?" Highslip asked, his voice petulant. "Fetching and carrying like a servant? You could have everything for the asking, Sylvia—everything, if you would just be mine. Your cousin's fortune would provide well for you, and it is only fitting that you share it, having been cheated out of your inheritance. Besides, you love me. Tell me you love me."

"I love you, Hugo." The soft words seemed to be wrung from her, but David heard them clearly, his heart sinking. The little fool was actually considering Highslip's offer of *carte blanche*. It was all David could do to keep from bursting upon them and venting his disgust.

"I knew it," Highslip declared, his voice triumphant.

It needed little imagination for David to envision what happened in the long silence that followed. Highslip was holding Sylvia in his arms, kissing her. David waited in agony for the quiet to end.

"I shall await your answer, my love. Meet me here the night of Caroline's ball," Highslip said.

David quickly hid himself behind the draperies until the sound of Highslip's footsteps faded from the room.

Sylvia held her breath, waiting until she could be sure that Hugo was gone. His embrace had left her feeling soiled, as if she had been touched by something unspeakably filthy. A wave of nausea nearly overcame her; her legs felt near to buckling as she sat down upon the bench. *A madman's mistress, with five hundred and fifty pounds to be the price for her soul.* The sound of approaching footsteps at her back set her to trembling. Hugo was returning; she could not let him see her fear for there was no telling what he would do if he realized just how much she loathed him. *It is a game of chess* she told herself. *Do not let the oppo-*

ment see your weakness. Thus, Sylvia was able to rise steadily, turn with a semblance of a smile, but the false expression vanished when she saw David. His face was like a thunderstorm ready to break.

"A delightful garden," he said, coming to stand beside her. "Perfect for a tête-à-tête."

"You heard," Sylvia stated flatly, searching his eyes, flinching inwardly at the contempt she saw there. "You do not understand."

"I heard enough," David said. "Enough to know that Highslip has offered to make you his paramour and that you are in a fair way to accepting. Do you seriously think that he would marry you once your cousin Caroline refuses him? For you know that she intends to have Ivan. You would be a fool to think that Highslip would wed you for *love*." He made the word into a sneer. "However, if you are seriously considering entering the realms of the demimonde, I think you would be foolish to consider the post until you have entertained all bidders."

"All bidders?" Sylvia repeated, a sour taste rising in her throat.

"Myself, for instance," David remarked, the idea coming to him suddenly. "You would do far better for yourself under my protection. I would double Highslip's offer: a house in St. John's Wood with the title in your name, a pair and carriage and, of course, the usual clothing and jewelry."

"I see," Sylvia said, anger rising through her like a ramrod stiffening her spine. The moment of weakness had passed. How dare he? How could he believe that she would act so infamously? "But we are speaking of twice the usual, are we not?" she said woodenly. "What would that be in pounds and pence, milord? For being new to this game, I would know the stakes."

He named a sum that made her gasp involuntarily.

"I can well afford it, Sylvia. Consider that Highslip

might leave you high and dry," he said. Her face had become a block of marble set with glittering emeralds that pierced him to the marrow. She would be, by far, the most expensive mistress that he had ever mounted—yet he felt that it was well worth the price to save her from Highslip. There was something in her calm, steady gaze that made him uneasy. It was as if she had retreated to some distant place within herself and he was hearing her voice from afar.

"Indeed, one cannot be too careful. Used goods are cheap," she said, looking him straight in the eye.

It was as if she was discussing the price of tea or rubber or some other commodity, not herself. David squirmed uncomfortably as the silence lengthened.

"I care for you, Sylvia," David said. "I think we would deal well together."

"How interesting," Sylvia observed, cocking her head to one side as she spoke. "You claim to care for me, yet you would make me your whore."

"You cannot be such a fool as to think Highslip loves you?" David asked. "Highslip loves only himself. You have no hope of an honorable offer from him."

"I know," Sylvia said, her lips curving wryly. "I know Hugo far better than you think, milord. As for love, do they not say, 'Far better the devil you do know than the devil you don't'? I have suddenly found that I do not know you at all."

"I think that this would be the better move."

"Do you?" she asked. "Damn you, I am tired of being forced into moves by men who think to manipulate me like a pawn. I must needs pay for their stupid plays; my uncle, Hugo, Will and now you, milord. I have no hope of an honorable offer, so you make me a dishonorable one."

"I am not the first," David pointed out.

"Truly, I am in alt," Sylvia said, her voice touched with sarcasm. "I am transported! Two slips on the

shoulder in less than ten minutes. I vow, even the beaux of White's would hesitate to wager that such would occur. Now, which should I select, milord—the nabob, or milord the earl? I shall have to consider most carefully whose bed I choose to warm."

Somehow the thought of her in Highslip's bed acted as a goad. "You might add this to your calculations," David said. He pulled her into his arms, covering her lips with his. His tongue parted her teeth, probing the depths of her mouth as his fingers gathered the silk of her hair, twining its strands into a shimmering rope that held her in thrall.

Sylvia moaned softly as she felt his questing hands, her eyes stinging behind closed lids while her throat ached with sadness. All restraint was gone, replaced by a burning desire that seared her very soul. He frightened her, but not as Hugo had. What she feared was her own flaring passion. How was it possible to be divided into two separate people? One half of herself stood apart, an observer that commented coldly in her mind as the other half yielded, to be swept away on a tide of sensation.

But the knowledge that she loved him gave rise to a growing bitterness. She was not even to be left with an illusion, a memory of a sweet moment in a moonlit garden. Instead, there would be only harsh sunlight and the smell of dying lilacs. The cold observer commented on the betrayal of her body as her arms went round his neck of their own volition, drawing him closer to her. Her dearest dream had become a nightmare and suddenly, she was whole once more, whole and angry. Her fingers reached to his hair, grasping it and pulling it with a force that made him cry out and knocked his spectacles from his nose. Disoriented, he loosed his hold upon her and she took the opportunity to move away.

"Sylvia," he sputtered, "what the devil are you about?"

"I had decided that I had enough of a sample upon which to base my decision, milord. You, sir, are the superior lover. Having determined that, I have decided that I have given enough of my wares for free."

David could see her, but her features were somewhat unclear, and for a moment he felt as if he had been transported to the world of his recurring nightmare, where all was blurred with distortion. He sought to reason with her. "I had thought that we were friends, Sylvia. Surely that would be a good beginning."

"I too had thought that there was friendship between us, David," she said, her anger waning to sadness. "But now I see that I was wrong. Friends do not believe the worst of each other. I am sorry, but I am afraid I cannot oblige you, milord."

"And you will go to Highslip?" he asked, bending to search the ground for his glasses.

"Perhaps," some devil within prompted her to say. "I owe you my thanks, in a way. For I am now aware of the value of the only commodity I truly own—myself. And I begin to think that you cannot afford me."

David felt at a total disadvantage. There was something in her voice that mocked him, yet he could not discern her expression. He felt about the ground.

Somehow, Sylvia could not bear to see him scrabbling about so. "I fear your trousers will be quite ruined, milord," she said, picking up the glasses. "Here are your spectacles."

He got up and reached out. The frames were slightly bent, but the lenses were intact. "It is a lucky thing the glass is not broken," he said, a trifle petulantly. He slid them back on his nose, bringing the world into focus once more. "I cannot see a thing without them." He looked at Sylvia and saw the tears streaming down her face.

"It seems to me, milord, that you do not see a great deal even with their aid," Sylvia commented softly.

He took a step forward.

"No," she said. "Do not touch me again."

"I only wish to help you," he said.

"Help yourself, you mean," Sylvia said, unable to keep the anger from her voice. "Is that what you wanted all along, milord? Was all this nonsense about solving my uncle's riddle a pretense, so that you might insinuate yourself into my family? My father used that strategy often, infiltrating his opponents' ranks gradually, then wreaking havoc. And you have brought chaos to my life. 'Tis your interference that has brought me to this pass, and now you present yourself as the solution to my difficulties. A rather neat gambit, I would say; but I refuse your offer, David Rutherford. I do not want your help."

Her voice was calm, but the flow of tears continued unabated. "Because my uncle was your friend, I shall give you a piece of advice. Stay away from me, else you might find yourself in a dangerous position," she said. If Hugo were to somehow get wind of David's less-than-casual interest in her, he could be in serious jeopardy.

"And as a friend," David said quietly, "I would warn you against Highslip."

"You are not my friend, milord. I find you never truly were. As for Hugo, that is my affair."

Sylvia turned and fled from the garden to the nursery stair.

David took off his glasses, polishing them absently as he tried to control the turmoil within him. As he reviewed his words, they seemed totally clear, his proposal to Sylvia perfectly logical—and yet he felt that he had missed some critical move, that there was some flaw that he had overlooked. He left the garden feeling a sense of absolute loss, and as he departed the Gabriel household, as unremarked leaving as he

had been entering, David suddenly knew the critical piece that he had ignored. He loved her. As he reexamined the course of events, he realized that Sylvia had spoken no less than the truth. He had wanted her, almost from the start, but had ignored his feelings because there had been no honorable path to pursue.

The overheard conversation in the garden had presented him with a neat solution to his problem; he wanted Sylvia, but there was no reasonable route to her affections. A dishonorable route had presented itself and he had taken the move like a green player, not pausing to think of all the possible consequences. Now he had lost her, and, seemingly, this foolish move could never be taken back.

Sylvia threw herself into the preparations for Caroline's ball, running about the house in a veritable frenzy of activity, trying to keep her thoughts at bay. Yet, at odd moments, the memory of David's face haunted her, his look of utter disgust, the insult of his kiss. Hardest of all to bear was the absolute betrayal of her own emotions. The morning's events ought to have utterly cured her of any feelings for that wretched man, but she knew that she loved him and likely always would. His offer had been the worst of affronts, yet a part of her was tempted to accept, told her it would be preferable to be David's lover, even temporarily, than Highslip's slave forever.

"Sylvia," Will called, meeting her later in the afternoon upon the backstairs.

The smile upon his face made her hope that he had come up with some solution to his dilemma.

"I have spoken with the fellow who holds my vowels," Will declared enthusiastically. "He has promised to give me all the time I need, says he is sure that we might work something out. A capital

fellow. I am sorry to have troubled you, Syl. I ought not to have dumped this in your skirts."

It was all Sylvia could do to keep from screaming at her brother whose face was beaming with male superiority. *He wants me to work it out as his mistress, you looby! A capital fellow indeed!* But, with a speed born of habit, she calculated the possible consequences of such a move. Will would undoubtedly feel constrained to challenge Hugo to a duel. Hugo would without any question kill the boy. So the alternatives were either, Will's ruin or Will's death—or, she added reluctantly, *her* ruin.

Sylvia patted her brother on the hand. "That's splendid, Will," she lied. "But you must realize that the debt must be paid."

"I have reckoned that if I set aside a portion of my quarterly allowance at a rate of—" Will began.

Sylvia realized that she would indeed scream if she had to suffer through Will's careful calculations, and cut him off abruptly. "Another time, please. I am terribly busy."

"You look utterly fagged," the young man said with a brother's brutal honesty.

"Thank you, Will," Sylvia said with a sigh as she continued the climb to the nursery. She found Miles in the schoolroom, racing to and fro with an enormous kite hanging behind him.

"Lord Donhill brought it for me," the boy volunteered. "Ain't it the most wonderful kite ever? The eyes are real gilt. You think we could go flying it with Lord Donhill soon?"

"I think not," Sylvia said, collapsing into a chair before the barrage of questions. "Lord Donhill is a very busy man. And right now, I am afraid your mama cannot spare me."

"Pooh!" Miles exclaimed. "You are always too busy to have any fun these days. How long is it till Caro's stupid ball is over? Can we go after?"

"One week," Sylvia said, bowing her head. One week before she must give Hugo her answer. Once more, she weighed all the alternatives, considered all the consequences, but there was no solution. She was trapped; any way that she looked at it, it was check and mate.

"One week?" Miles spoke as if it was an eternity. "Do you think Lord Donhill could come then?"

"I do not know, Miles," Sylvia said, wearily. "Somehow, I doubt it."

"If you were married to him, we could see Lord Donhill all the time," Miles said, swishing the kite round his head.

Sylvia looked up, startled.

Miles saw her strange expression and continued on the same tack, driving his point home. "You could beat him at chess and marry him and then he could come kite-flying."

"But you wished to marry me, dear boy," Sylvia said, her eyes shining. Out of the mouths of babes, they said.

"Well, if you married Lord Donhill, he might get me more kites," Miles said.

"Wretch!" But contrarily, Sylvia rose and hugged him close, disregarding his squeal of dismay.

"Be careful," he cried. "You shall wreck my kite!"

She let Miles go and beamed. "We shall go kite-flying after Caro's ball," she promised. "And to Gunther's for an ice."

"Really?" Miles eyes opened wide. "Gunther's?"

Sylvia nodded.

"And what about Lord Donhill?" Miles persisted, refusing to let the matter die. "Will he come?"

"I suspect," Sylvia said, a slow smile dawning, "that it might take Lord Donhill some time to recover."

"Is he ill?" Miles wondered, worried. "He seemed quite fine to me this morning."

"No, he is not ill," Sylvia said. "But he will take his medicine nonetheless, and it may be rather hard to swallow."

Miles looked at Sylvia in puzzlement, then decided to keep his peace. Sometimes, with grown-ups it was better not to ask questions.

Nine



White's was unnaturally well-populated for so early upon a rainy morning. Flocks of fashionable sprigs pestered Ivan Petrov, trying to discern the truth of the rumors regarding Lord Donhill's anticipated chess contest. Brummel's expression matched the gray mizzle that prevailed out of doors as he dispersed the hangers-on with an icy stare and gestured the Russian to a seat at the bow window overlooking St. James Street. Neither of the men noticed Lord Highslip lounging at the corner, hoping to overhear their conversation.

"I cannot like it, Petrov," Brummel said, shaking his head. "David has agreed to all of this 'Madame Échec's' conditions without question."

"Everything she asks," Petrov agreed miserably. "Without doubt this woman is clever. No other challenger has been thinking to disguise self to protect reputation, but is not that gives me worry, Brummel. Is almost seeming to me David is wishing to lose."

"He would not lose deliberately!" Brummel exclaimed, drawing himself up in indignation at the very thought.

"*Nyet, nyet,*" Petrov corrected himself hastily. "Never would he be doing so. Is just that these past days, he cares for nothing."

"No, I fear that he cares too much," Brummel said,

then deliberately changed the subject. "He has agreed for the game to be timed by some sort of hourglass contraption. How does that work precisely?"

"Is simple device," Petrov explained. "Two hour-glasses, one for each. His hourglass running, David makes move, stops his hourglass, sets challenger's running. Is finished her move, she is starting his going again. Is going on till one is winning or sand is running out."

"And if the sand runs out, it is forfeit?" Brummel asked.

"Is correct," Petrov said, his expression worried. "One is losing by check mate or time. I am never seeing David play this way before."

Highslip quietly withdrew from his listening post, smiling in satisfaction. Perhaps this mysterious female would succeed where Helena Greenvale had failed. While the odds were still decidedly in Lord Donhill's favor, Highslip decided to risk a wager upon Madame Échec. Even a small bet could pay off handsomely.

Just before the appointed hour, 37 St. James all but emptied as a parade of umbrellas proceeded from White's down the street to the Cocoa Tree chocolate house, the chosen meeting place. Even for so sacred a cause as a wager, no female could be allowed to trespass in the male sanctum sanctorum.

"Are you not going, Byron?" Brummel inquired, noticing the poetic lord still reading by the fireside.

"Life is too short for chess," Byron said, returning his attention to his volume. "Perhaps I shall stop by later."

As he went out the door, Brummel reflected that David's fate might very well be decided before Byron bestirred himself. With those damnable hourglasses taken into account, contrary to what the poet said,

the game of chess might prove to be too short—and at stake was nothing less than David's life.

At the chocolate house, David sat before the table setting up the board. A young man hesitantly came up to him, his boyish looks oddly familiar.

"Good luck, Lord Donhill," the youth said, extending his hand shyly. "I am sorry that we have had no chance to meet before. I am William Gabriel."

"Ah, Gabriel," David said, his confusion clearing. The lad resembled his sister, heartbreakingly so. It was a pity that the young man had not come up sooner; his aid might have been of use. Unfortunately, there had been a bitter finality in Sylvia's words. "*I do not want your help,*" she had told him, her feelings upon the matter painfully clear. Nonetheless, David decided, it was not her fortune alone, it was her brother's as well. "I have been longing to meet you over the chessboard. There are some matters that we must needs discuss."

"Chess? Me, sir?" The young man gave a bark of laughter. "Surely you jest? M' father was hard-pressed to teach me the rudiments."

"There is no need for false modesty," David said with a smile. "I know what manner of player you are."

"David, here is second sandglass," Petrov said, grunting as he set the other hourglass with its base of heavy mahogany into place. "Madame Échec, she is getting white pieces?"

"As a master of courtesy," David agreed, then turned to William once more. "I would like to speak to you later, Gabriel."

The youth nodded and withdrew to join the crowd. David frowned after him, thoughts of Sylvia rising in her brother's wake. But banishing Sylvia's image only gave sway to other worries. The simple task of arranging the board caused him to wax uneasy. Even as he set the last piece into place, he be-

gan to wonder if he was being foolish to allow Madame Échec to set the pace of the game. He pushed idly at the hourglass, watching the sand run down in a steady stream. One hour's worth of time in each glass for a total of two hours. Two hours to decide the rest of his days. Unbidden, Sylvia's words came to mind. "*People's lives are not pieces to be lost and won by skill or luck.*" No matter of luck there, he had well and truly lost her by his own stupidity. Now, it seemed to matter little if he lost himself.

David heard a high-pitched snigger, the sound as familiar as a filthy song that cannot be erased from memory however much one tries. It was Highslip's laugh.

"I am wagering against you," the earl called when he noticed that he had caught Donhill's attention.

"'Tis your money to lose," David replied, his casual shrug belying the smoldering anger within. If Sylvia was foolish enough to accept Highslip's blandishments it was none of his concern, but David would be damned if he would bankroll her seducer. His apathy diminishing, David tipped the hourglass back, emptying it once again to set it in readiness. Would that time could be recalled so easily.

There was a stir at the door. Wagers and speculation ceased momentarily as the crowd gave way for the dark figure. She was swathed from head to toe in swirling robes. The voluminous black fabric yielded no clues as to age or form. The heavy dark veiling shielded her face from even the most penetrating of eyes. She moved toward the chair with a silent grace that suggested youth.

"I am Madame Échec. My conditions have been met?" she asked.

Her voice was low and throaty with age or guile; the accent could be true French or a mere disguise, it was impossible to determine. David gestured toward

the hourglasses, about to speak when Petrov stepped forward.

"To the letter, madame, we have been obeying your demands. However, before we are beginning, is one requirement I am proposing," the Russian said.

The black-cloaked head inclined, listening.

"Lord Donhill risks everything, you—nothing. If you are losing, you must unmask yourself," Petrov demanded. "Or else you may be retiring now, your identity safe."

There was a general murmur of approval, for the beaus of St. James had been less than pleased to be deprived of their sport. The woman stood for a moment, her posture one of indecision.

"Very well," her muffled voice replied, slowly. "I shall hazard it."

Petrov stepped back, glad that he had secured his friend at least this small advantage. Madame Échec would have some cause to be nervous now, and that anxiety would likely make her vulnerable. Although none but a close comrade could have discerned it, David seemed less than his usual imperturbable self. Petrov began to fear for him. It did not auger well that Madame Échec was confident enough to risk the revelation of that which she had taken great pains to conceal. Indeed, many others seemed to be thinking upon the same lines, for the whispered odds against Madame Échec were decreasing.

At David's gesture, she seated herself before the white pieces, her gloved hands touching the mahogany base of the hourglass as she tilted first one, then the other to and fro.

"It is well," she whispered. "Shall we begin?"

It was like being within the realms of his nightmares, David decided as he automatically responded to her opening move with king's pawn and flipped her sand to running. The faceless figure reached out with confidence, advancing her pieces in a mere mat-

ter of seconds, setting the sifting sand with a swiftness obviously born of long practice. Forgetting to set her hourglass running after his move, David chided himself for stupidity, knowing that his hesitation could very well cost him the game. The world narrowed to the space of sixty-four squares of black and white.

Madame Échec developed her strategy rapidly, knowing her opponent's penchant for careful defense. As she stopped her time and set his running out, she studied his face. Although the veiling obscured her vision somewhat, she could see the small signs of growing nervousness: the tightness of his jaw, the lines around his eyes.

"Your move, madame," David said, tipping her glass with a pleased smile.

She could hear the whisper of hushed approval. He had her trapped in a fork, his knight poised to take either rook or bishop. Madame Échec was glad of the curtain concealing her face as she moved the rook aside to sacrifice the bishop. Would he discern what she was planning? she wondered as she set the flow of sand.

David paused for a few seconds, examining the board, but the inexorably shifting sand was almost a discernible force. A quick check showed that they were nearly even, Madame Échec leading by but a few minutes. Yet those few grains of time might make a crucial difference if she chose to draw the game out. He took the bishop.

Beneath the veil, Madame Échec grinned with delight. He could still recoup, withdraw himself from the brink of disaster, but it was clear that he was taking the bait. Deliberately, she drew his attention to the other side of the board, feinting an attack with her knight. She leaned back to watch, feeling the sweat run down her neck. What with the veiling, the heavy *chador* and the press of bodies, the heat was al-

most beyond endurance, but she would endure—she had to.

David saw the opening immediately and took advantage of the seeming carelessness. "Échec," he said, bringing his queen across the board. He tilted her hourglass with triumphant flair, then leaned back to polish his glasses casually.

"Blast," Highslip cursed under his breath. "He is winning, damn him."

David set his spectacles to the edge of the table momentarily as he massaged his eyes. There was a clattering sound from the street outside and the shouted imprecations of draymen. A woman screamed and the crowd rushed to the doorway.

While everyone's attention was temporarily directed elsewhere, Highslip saw his chance. He reached out to sweep Rutherford's glasses to the floor.

The men filtered back indoors as Madame Échec moved her rook forward to protect her king. She then set David's time running. "Your move, milord," she growled, redirecting him to the game.

David's fingers reached for his glasses, but there was only empty space.

"Halt the clock!" he demanded. "My spectacles are gone." Petrov stopped the sands from running. "No one move!" David warned. "No one—" There was a heart-sickening crunch, and then Petrov bent down to pick up the lenses.

Madame Échec chanced to notice Lord Highslip, who was standing near the Russian. His visage was a mask of polite regret, but she could discern the glow of triumph as Petrov handed David the shattered glasses; one lens was completely broken.

"You!" David pointed an accusing finger across the board. "You deliberately caused my spectacles to be destroyed. Did you think that I would concede to such tactics?"

Her voice, although muffled, was filled with cold hauteur. "Indeed, I did not, *milor'*," she whispered, her fury rising. "I deny your reprehensible accusation. How could I have touched your spectacles?"

To demonstrate, she leaned across the board, the sweep of her gown threatening to knock over the pieces as she reached toward where his glasses had been. David caught a whiff of camphor and some other scent which he could not quite place.

"Then there is being no choice but postponement," Petrov said. "Until the spectacles are made anew."

"No!" Madame Échec vowed with quiet vehemence. She would not go through with this again. There was no time. "We shall continue the game. Were I a man, I would duel with you, sir, for falsely naming me a cheat. Instead, I shall take great pleasure in trouncing you."

"You have my apologies, madame," David said, realizing that she had spoken the truth. She could not have tampered with his glasses. "But I am now a one-eyed man, and a blurry-eyed one at that. How do you propose to play on?"

"If you are blind, then I too shall be blind, *milor'*," she said, turning her back to the board. "I will play from memory, if you shall do the same. You have played blindfolded before, no?"

David blinked, but the hazy world would not come into focus. He knew that there would be no awakening from this bizarre moment, for this was reality. Fleetinglly, he thought of postponement, but knew that after his false charge of cheating and her gallant offer to play blindly herself, it would be an act of unpardonable cowardice to refuse. Resolutely, he quashed the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. The air of mystery was a deliberate distraction, an effort on her part to seek an advantage by putting him on the defensive. The inability to read his opponent's face had been a distinct disadvantage; now, he

realized with satisfaction, she would be unable to study him.

"I must trust someone to turn the glasses for me," Madame Échec murmured as she wondered who to appoint. They were all his friends. Then her gaze fell upon a familiar figure. "Will you do the honors, Lord Byron?"

"I thought life was too short for chess, Byron?" Brummel asked, repeating the poet's words sardonically.

"Ah, but this seems more than a mere game of chess," Byron replied, limping to the front of the room. "There was a loud noise from St. James Street and I looked up from my book to find White's utterly deserted. So I decided to come and see for myself—and lucky that I did, else I would have missed this cataclysmic event. I applaud your bravery, Madame Échec, and account it a privilege to be the keeper of time in this battle between the sexes."

"Ivan, will you keep my glass?" David requested.

Petrov took his place by the hourglass; David turned his chair around, visualizing the board in his mind. He saw every piece clearly, standing as they had just before the world had gone to a blur.

"Your last move, madame?" he asked once the picture was fixed in his head.

"Rook, milor', to thwart your check." The answer drifted from behind him.

"Set the glass moving, Ivan," David said, sending his bishop sailing across the board in his mind. "Bishop to my queen's third rank."

Madame Échec countered with a move by her knight. Her eyes were closed and her mind shut to everything but the sound of his voice.

It seemed to Petrov that the pace of the game had increased. They called out their moves in rapid succession, scarcely leaving enough time to shift the piece and turn the glasses before the next move was

called. He concentrated on his task single-mindedly, knowing a lost second could well cost David the game and his freedom. Even so, a part of him watched the board, marveling. David had never played so well, but the shrouded woman was his equal. Perhaps, Petrov worried, more than his equal.

"Knight takes pawn—*échec*," Madame *Échec* called, ignoring the titters of laughter that erupted. *Ignorant fools! They could not see beyond three moves upon the board.* She would not oblige them by failing; too much was at stake. *Take the knight.* The thought was a prayer. *Take the knight and be damned.*

"Queen takes knight."

When she heard the smug, condescending tone in his voice, it was all that she could do to keep from jumping up and shouting with glee. Although David did not yet know it, he had just sealed his fate. "Castle, queen's side," she said, barely keeping the triumph from her voice.

There was a gasp from the chess aficionados at this seemingly risky move, but David saw with dawning dismay what she was about. In one swoop, she had shifted the entire focus of the board, weakening his ability to attack. He responded, desperately trying to marshall his forces once more, but it was of little use. Madame *Échec* attacked aggressively, bringing her reserve into play with swift skill, hammering at him until his king was completely cut off, cornered.

"I believe that is *échec et mat*," she crowed. "Do you not agree?"

"David—your time!" Petrov urged. "Is nearly being up, you must move."

"My time is up, my friend," David said wearily, rising to turn and look at the dark figure. "It is checkmate, madame. You have beaten me." He reached for the fuzzy figure of the king, toppling it in a gesture of defeat.

Madame *Échec* rose, wheeling to face her oppo-

ment. His eyes were dull and glassy, like a man walking in the midst of sleep.

David eyed his nightmare, knowing full well what was expected of him, yet the words stuck like a fish bone in his craw. He cleared his throat. "I suppose this means you shall marry me," he said, rebelling with every fiber of his being as he choked out the words.

"Hardly a gracious proposal, eh, Donhill?" Highslip remarked as he gleefully raked in the results of his wagers.

David glared in Highslip's direction. "Do you expect me to get on my knees to the woman?" he asked.

There was a cheer from the crowd.

"Do it up proper, Donhill," Highslip called. "Act the gentleman."

"Yes," said the muffled lady, slipping off a dark glove to reveal a smooth-skinned hand. "I believe that you ought to do it so."

David walked slowly toward the dark figure, then bent in stiff obeisance until his buff-trousered knee was flush with the floor. He captured the proffered hand that peeked from the voluminous black sleeves, clasping her fingers so tightly that he could feel her wince as the fragile bones ground together.

Madame Échec saw the dark curly head bent before her and felt a thrill of pleasure. All of his remarks about females and chess were being disproved. She had truly brought him to his knees. Yet, when those deep brown eyes glared up at her, the expression in them reminded her of an animal caught in a trap before the hunter. She, of all people, knew what it was to be caught, seemingly trapped, without hope of escape, and regretted the evil impulse that had led her to heed Hugo's malicious suggestion. "Milor'—" she began.

"Will you marry me?" he asked, the words grating

past clenched teeth as the crowd around him guffawed. Except for Petrov and Brummel, and Byron all were laughing, enjoying the spectacle of his humiliation.

There was no appeal for mercy, only rage sparkling in those earth-toned depths. He was a man bending his head at the chopping block, awaiting the stroke of the executioner's axe. The words were wrenched from him; despite the calm delivery, she could only guess at the agony they caused. Her feeling of triumph dissolved rapidly into a maelstrom of mixed emotions. "*Will you marry me?*" The phrase that she had longed for echoed in her mind, the culmination of all her plans; yet now she wavered.

As she had contemplated it before, it had seemed the most delicious of ironies to eschew a slip on the shoulder for a wedding ring. Although she had every right to say yes, as she had intended, she could not. David had wanted her, but he did not love her. It would be hell to endure that inequity of feeling for the rest of her days. He would despise her for forcing him into marriage—and despite what he had done, she still loved him, loved him with all her being. For that reason, she decided to give him his freedom.

David waited in an agony of anticipation, the silence stretching as they all awaited her undoubted answer. Looking away from that veiled face, he felt an utter fool, knowing that he would be obliged to spend the rest of his days with this unknown—all for a drunken wager. Sylvia had been correct; now he had lost everything in his life that was worthwhile. He gazed at the woman's hand, the only part of her that he could see. At least it was smooth and slender, a young hand with delicate nails, marred only by a jagged scar. He blinked, moving closer to peer at the healing skin. Once jogged, his memory went rapidly to that morning in Green Park, a ragged wound caused by a vicious cur.

Sylvia? As he looked at the familiar scar, all began to make sense. William Gabriel's protestations of ignorance regarding chess, her inadvertent slips that revealed her knowledge of the game. Had she planned this all along? No wonder she had refused his *carte blanche*; why choose the post of mistress when one could be a wife? She had deliberately concealed her expertise in the hopes of trapping him.

Well, she had brought him to his knees—and now, she would claim his name and title in the manner of all greedy females. However, she might find that being Lady Donhill was not so easy a position. Once married, she would be utterly in his control. The thought brought a smile to his face. She would be taught a lesson. Surprisingly, David found himself relaxing. It was something of a relief to know that his wife-to-be was neither a crone nor a cow-faced ape-leader. Certainly, he would never lack for a chess partner.

"Milor'," she said again.

The sound of her voice directed his attention upward once more and he tried to pierce the layer of veils. The smell of camphor was stronger now. Had she not once mentioned that her father had used this garb to escape a pasha's wrath? *Sylvia* must have gotten it from the trunks in the attic that she had once mentioned. There was no longer any doubt in his mind. It was *Sylvia*.

"You do me no honor at all if you marry me out of foolish obligation," she declared, her voice low as she pulled her hand from his. "I say you 'nay,' milor'. For I have vowed to marry only a man who can best *me* at chess."

The crowd gasped. Highslip went as white as his neck linen.

David rose dizzily. She had rejected him. The prize in her grasp, she had thrown it away. A feeling of

profound relief gave way to a realization that he had just been heartily insulted. Why?

"I shall take the thousand pounds as my forfeit. You may dispose of your person as you please," Madame Échec laughed, her voice throaty.

She swept David a mocking curtsy, its grace erasing any lingering doubts about the female chess master's femininity in all minds but one.

"She is no woman!" Highslip growled. "I demand proof that the terms of the wager have been discharged. Show us you are a female."

David's initial shock changed to amusement, as he wondered how she would handle this problem.

But she had come prepared. "I have no intention of disclosing my identity, sirrah. However, if you shall summon a maid, I shall prove my sex."

A scullery maid was brought from the Cocoa Tree's kitchens and the two were closeted for a short time while the members of White's congratulated David on his narrow escape. He wondered just how lucky he was.

"She be a mort awright," the kitchen maid said, gesturing broadly as she pointed toward the shrouded woman's chest. "Ain't no man got a pair like 'ers."

Sylvia blushed beneath her veil. The gathering of gentleman laughed heartily. "Well, Highslip," Brummel urged, "time to pay up."

Highslip reached into his pocket, pulling out a wad of bills, so lately collected from the losers. He counted painstakingly until the full sum that he had just won was exhausted, then reached into his purse once more to fetch the remaining sum, nearly the entire amount he had fleeced from young Gabriel's friends. Although his winnings were nearly gone, his stranglehold upon Sylvia remained. He still retained William's vowels.

"Here!" Highslip said, throwing the bills to the table with such force that some scattered to the floor.

"How gracious of you, milor'," she said, her sarcasm plain as she bent to gather the fallen paper. She sat down and began to count aloud. "Nine hundred, nine hundred and twenty . . . nine hundred and fifty . . ." she said, coming to the end of the bills. "Fifty pounds short?" The swathed head faced Highslip and somehow all could tell that her silent regard was accusing. Highslip reddened, fumbling in his pockets once again until the shortfall had been remedied. She folded the money carefully, rose, turned, and swept from the room like a dark cloud as the crowd stared after her in amazement.

At the window, David marvelled as the indistinct dark-clad figure stepped into a waiting hackney carriage. Sylvia had planned it all so well from start to finish. Obviously she had known from the beginning that she could beat him, yet she had let him go. Bit by bit, the pieces of the puzzle came together, only the full picture was nearly as confusing as the parts.

As the carriage rolled out of sight, David sought Sylvia's brother, pulling him to a private corner to converse. "You meant it when you said that you could not play chess?" he demanded.

"Aye," Will said. "That is why your letter had me wondering, milord. 'Tis my sister who's the pawn-pusher, not I, but you'll not tell her I said so?" he begged anxiously. "Uncle never liked to have her skill noised about, thought it unwomanly. And now as I've seen this Madame Échec, I know why. I have never seen so formidable a female."

"How long was your uncle ill?" David asked.

"Months," Will answered. "Out of his head in pain more times than not. Sylvia was a brick; nursed him right up through the end."

"Played chess with him?" David wondered aloud.

"I should say not," Will declared. "Uncle wasn't in any condition to wield a spoon, much less a chess piece. After all she'd done, that foolish will was doubly a shame. At least some of us are lucky, milord, for you have had the devil's own luck today."

"The devil's own luck," David repeated, although his emphasis upon the words differed. It was increasingly obvious that Sylvia had been the correspondence chess player. In fact, David reflected in growing bewilderment, it now seemed that she had rejected him twice. There had been no need for today's farce. All Sylvia had needed to do was to claim him, for she had already won his hand and his fortune through the post. Was she so besotted by Highslip that she would eschew an offer of marriage to take up the earl's *carte blanche*? It was the only answer that David could find. He would make her see reason, he vowed. Bidding farewell to William, David started to seek out Petrov, only to bump into a pillar. The first move, he decided, was to procure a new pair of spectacles.

As the rain pummeled the moving carriage, Sylvia quickly shed her disguise, folding it into a parcel as they turned onto Picadilly. She covered her hair with the large-brimmed bonnet, pulling a light veil down to obscure her features just as the carriage pulled up near Devonshire House, as she had instructed. She paid the driver, secure in the knowledge that he would no more be able to describe her than any of the crowd in the Cocoa Tree. Nonetheless, she turned up Stretton Street, avoiding the more direct route to Berkeley Square, taking a roundabout way home. Soaked to the skin, she shoved the bundle of clothing into a dark corner of the mews to be retrieved later, then went around to the front door.

Sylvia entered to find her aunt and Caroline listen-

ing to Will's account of the chess match. The circuitous walk had permitted her brother to precede her.

"... and she let him go, you say?" Aunt Ruby was asking, her mouth agape.

"Not merely set him free," Will declared, "humiliated him to boot. Made him get down on bent knee to propose, only to reject him."

"I cannot say but it serves the conceited wretch right," Aunt Ruby said with a sniff. "I think the woman was the worse fool. Imagine, rejecting a purse like Donhill's and a *title* as well."

"They say that she must be something of a nabob herself," Will said. "And I would concur. Her clothing was of a type that I had often seen in the East when I was a boy."

"Nabob or no," Caroline said, "it was still rather cruel to cause him to kneel before her."

"Do you think so?" Sylvia said, her cheeks burning despite herself. "What about his cruelty to the other females who have challenged him to the ruin of their reputations?"

"I thought you were fond of Lord Donhill," Caroline said, surprised at her cousin's vehemence.

"I have little respect for any man who could needlessly stake his entire future on the outcome of a game," Sylvia said, eyeing her brother significantly.

Will reddened at the implied reference to his gambling losses.

"What a pity," Caroline sighed. "Still, Lord Donhill is free now, free to marry whoever he might choose. The matchmaking tabbies will be in alt." In consternation, Caroline clamped her mouth shut as she noted the growing gleam in her mama's eye.

"He has a title," Mrs. Gabriel purred, "and money."

Suddenly, Sylvia found she could endure no more. "I am going upstairs," she announced, "to change into some dry clothing." No one paid her the slight-

est notice as she went past the main stairway to the small ballroom. As she crept out the French doors to the garden, Sylvia noted that the black-and-white marble had been polished to a high gloss even though the room was not to be used for the ball. She paused for a moment, memories stirring in the rainy mist. Had she been needlessly cruel to David? He doubtlessly hated Madame Échec for his humiliation. Still, Sylvia thought, lifting her chin proudly, he had dishonored her in far more personal a manner. David Rutherford had deserved what he had gotten and more, far more. There was no cause for regret.

Yet, as Sylvia surreptitiously slipped out through the garden door to the mews to retrieve her bundle, she was honest enough to acknowledge that Caroline was partially correct. There had been no real purpose to cause him to abase himself other than petty revenge. Nonetheless, she comforted herself, it would make no difference; David would never know Madame Échec's identity. As Sylvia made her way up the back stairs to the nursery, she heard her aunt haranguing Caroline below, hoping to redirect the girl's affections toward Lord Donhill.

Strange, Sylvia mused as she reached the nursery door, how her daydreams had been played out with such exquisite irony. In the back of her mind, she had always known that David was hers for the taking. She would challenge him and he would lose, but declare himself the winner still, for her dreams would always end with his avowal of love. It seemed one of fate's crueller jests that Sylvia had released him from the bondage of his wager only, in all likelihood, to see him marry another. David was now a prime catch who could look far higher than a dowerless girl who had nothing but a pretty face to recommend her. Even disregarding the absence of a marriage portion, Sylvia knew that one did not offer to wed a woman who was previously worthy of a mere *carte blanche*.

There was a shout as Sylvia opened the nursery door. "Make way!" Miles warned as he rushed past her, Lord Donhill's dragon kite whipping behind him.

"Did you do your lessons?" she demanded, her annoyance rising as she saw his books open as she had left them.

"Not yet," Miles said, ignoring the danger in her voice.

"Now!" Sylvia ordered, wrenching the kite from the boy's hands. As she glared down at him, he watched the kite with trepidation, his eyes beginning to glisten.

"You're holding it too tight!" Miles wailed, his lower lip trembling. "You're going to break it."

Sylvia bowed her head, unable to meet his tearful gaze for a moment as shame filled her. It was unconscionable to take her anger out upon the boy. After all, it was not his fault that she still loved David Rutherford, Sylvia thought miserably as she set the fragile kite gently upon the shelf. "Sorry I snapped at you, youngling," she said, returning to his side and tousling his hair by way of an apology. "Finish your lessons now and perhaps, if the day clears, we may sneak out later and launch your dragon into flight."

Miles brightened at the promised treat and wiped away his tears. "Don't wonder that you're peevish, the way Mama has you working. Why, you're soaking wet."

Sylvia glanced down at her sodden gown. "So I am. I had best go change. There is still a great deal to do before tomorrow night. We want Caroline's ball to be a success," she proclaimed with false brightness.

"Don't care if it is or isn't. I won't get to see anything of it anyway," Miles complained, his mouth drooping. "Mama says I'm to stay put in the nursery and not set foot downstairs."

"Come, Miles, it is all grown-up nonsense any-

way," Sylvia said. "Dancing and chitter-chatter and the like, nothing of interest to a fellow like you."

"Except the food. Cook won't let me down in the kitchen, says I'm underfoot, but I can smell it all the way up here. It's torture, I tell you, knowing I'm not going to get a bite of it!"

"I shall make sure you get your share," Sylvia laughed. "Go to my room tomorrow night and stand by the corner window, the one that looks over the garden." Casting her eyes around the nursery, she sighted a paintbrush-filled basket in the corner. After emptying the brushes onto the shelf she detached the reel from the kite and tied the line securely to the basket. "I shall come to the garden after supper. Then you lower the basket, and I shall fill it for you."

"The whole basket?" Miles asked with a delighted grin.

"The whole basket," Sylvia promised, raising her hand in solemn avowal. Then a shiver caught her un-awares.

"Get out of your wet things, Syl," the boy urged. "If you catch an inflammation of the lungs, you won't be able to get me anything tomorrow night."

Sylvia's laugh at the boy's words was punctuated by a loud sneeze. Hurrying to her room, she closed the door behind her before finally peeling off her rain-drenched clothing. After she had dried herself and changed her gown, she opened her reticule to remove the roll of bills, unfolding them carefully. A thousand pounds! She had never held so much money at once. Sylvia set the notes in piles by denomination as she counted them out. Less the five hundred and fifty that Will owed Hugo, she would have four hundred and fifty pounds of her own. As Sylvia spread the *chador* out to dry, an idea began to take shape.

What had been done once could likely be done again. As Sylvia's father had proven long ago, there

were fortunes to be made upon the chessboard. She was every bit her papa's equal at the game of kings. With four hundred and fifty pounds as her stake, she could leave London and David Rutherford behind forever. As the mysterious Madame Échec she might travel once more, roaming wherever fancy and fortune took her. Hugo had been right in one respect: she had no wish to spend the rest of her days as her aunt's dogsbody. The very man who had sought to shackle her was the unwitting source of her passage to freedom. It was a delightful thought. Although he would never know it, the earl had provided her with the means to release herself from bondage.

Sylvia folded the money carefully, then bent to pull the small braided rug before her bed aside. After prying up the loose floorboard, she placed the bills in her hidden cache. As she restored all to its former order, she could hear Miles singing a rhyming song, his high reedy voice penetrating the closed door. Leaving him would doubtlessly be the most difficult thing of all, she thought, her throat tightening. Caroline would marry her Ivan. Will had not truly needed her for years, but Miles would miss her. Even so, Sylvia knew that if her life as Madame Échec were to succeed, she must seize the strategic moment or else the opportunity would be lost.

The sun was beginning to break through the clouds as Sylvia went to stand at the window to contemplate the future. It would be a difficult existence, living forever behind a veil of secrecy, but it would enable her to live a life of her own choosing. A life of freedom, she told herself, subject to no will but her own, limited only by her skill and wit. Yet, despite the possibilities of adventure and wealth as Madame Échec, the days ahead seemed to hold little promise. For those days would be lonely, without family, without love. Without David.

Ten



“**Y**ou look real nice, Syl,” Miles declared. “Almost better than the ladies at Astley’s Amphitheatre.”

Sylvia grimaced at the comparison to the less-than-demurely-dressed equestriennes at the famed riding show. “A high compliment indeed,” she said, knowing that in truth the boy meant it as the sincerest of accolades. “Will you dance with me, kind sir?”

Miles bowed and Sylvia took his hands, whirling him about the room. Her gown had been created for movement; the full skirt caught the air in a billow of creamy white lace, while beneath the frothy drapery a slip of jade-green satin shimmered in a soft glow as she moved. Two rouleaus of white satin served the dual purposes of ornamentation and cleverly patching together two short lengths of the fabric that would otherwise have been insufficient. A corsage of the same white, set with a panel of lace, hugged her breast, while the full sleeve, slashed with lace, set off the alabaster expanse of her neck and shoulders.

“The coaches are beginning to come,” Miles said as Sylvia loosed his hand. He ran to the nursery window to watch the guests arrive.

Sylvia hastened to complete her toilette. With all the last-minute preparations for the ball, there had been scant time to dress. Carefully, she pinned her

hair into a simple knot. The small mirror in her room told her that she had never looked better, but she could not completely erase the furrow of worry at her brow. Her small satin reticule held five hundred and fifty pounds, payment in full of her brother's debt to Hugo; nonetheless she knew that discharging Will's obligation would not be easy. Hugo was a dangerous man to thwart. She recalled Entshaw and Colber with a shiver. She would have to disappear and soon.

"Remember," Miles called, "the garden after supper. I shall let down the basket."

"And I shall fill it," Sylvia promised, chasing away her dark thoughts temporarily. She blew him a kiss as she went out the door. "Just be waiting at my window."

"Caroline's ball is crash," Petrov remarked as he and David tried to negotiate his way through the sea of elegantly clad elbows.

"Crush," David corrected automatically, his eyes searching the crowd for a glimpse of Sylvia. "It is a *crush*."

"Why do you repeat what I am saying?" Petrov asked. "Is you they come to see, David. You are *on-dit*."

"How the mighty have fallen," David commented acerbically.

"I am thinking, was after you took her knight when the falling was beginning," Petrov said, proceeding to analyze the game.

"It was just an expression, 'How the . . . ' Oh, never mind." David sighed, deciding that it was not worth a lengthy explanation. Unfortunately, it seemed that the Russian was correct. David's name was on every tongue. As they made their way across the room, he could hear the barely suppressed titters, the hushed snatches of conversation. However, the whispers did

not concern him so much as the fact that Sylvia was seemingly nowhere to be found. Suddenly, he saw her coming down the main stair. Midway, she paused, scanning the room as if she were looking for someone. Her cat's eyes met his, touching him briefly, their anger like a razor's edge. Did she hate him now? David wondered, his heart sinking. Was that why she had chosen to bring him to his knees?

"David, is that you?"

Startled, David turned to find Brummel regarding him through his quizzing glass. "What is the matter now, George?" David asked, his voice sarcastic. "A spot on my sleeve? My cravat awry? Mud on my pumps?"

Brummel smiled in his usual wry way. "I vow, 'tis extraordinary. I cannot find anything amiss with your attire. I had quite thought that once the wager was over, you would revert to your former havey-cavey ways. In fact, I bet on it. And now, I find you looking most presentable and have lost a good fifty pounds for it."

David glanced back at the stair to find that Sylvia had disappeared into the crowd. "I am sorry to have cost you money, George, but I have learned that we can never go back to what was, however much we may wish it."

From the melancholy expression upon David's face, Brummel guessed that his friend was talking of more than his mode of dress. "I must salute your courage," the Beau said, changing the subject. "Hazarding the parson's partisans without your chess-board to shield you. Why, every matchmaking mama in town is here tonight to cry 'View, hallo'—and you, my lad, are the fox. You have eluded the matrimonial hunt long enough, by unfair means, and they fully intend to bring you to ground now that you are lawful game."

"Hardly." David snorted. "What woman would

wish to marry so sorry a specimen as I, beaten by a mere chit, if the description of the maid at the Cocoa Tree is to be believed." Where had Sylvia gone? Was she even now meeting with Highslip as she had promised him when he had made his offer of *carte blanche*? He had to find her.

"Do you actually think that anyone of them gives a tinker's damn that some intellectual Amazon can surpass you in pawn-pushing?" Brummel asked. "Your unfortunate experience only enhances you in feminine eyes, for there is nothing more appealing to the heart of the gentle sex than a proud man who has been humbled. They would heal your wound, heaven help you."

Brummel looked at David in exasperation, for it was quite clear that the man had heard nothing of his sage advice. "If you are looking for Miss Sylvia Gabriel, she has gone toward the supper rooms, I believe," he said with a sniff. "And never say I did not warn you before you proceeded upon the path to matrimonial doom."

"Thank you, George," David said, then hurried off toward the supper rooms. However, Sylvia was not to be found among the tables of lobster patties and cold meats, nor, David realized with a sick feeling, was Highslip anywhere to be seen.

"Sylvia? I believe she was heading for the back garden," Will supplied upon being asked by David.

David recalled that the small ballroom opened out to the garden. He surreptitiously slipped inside. The moonlight from the open French doors illuminated the checked pattern of the marble floor, causing the white squares to shine with an iridescent glow. David crept outside, his years as a soldier allowing him to move with silent swiftness toward the sound of Sylvia's voice.

"Have you had your fill?" she asked tenderly.

David hesitated, wondering just what he was

about to interrupt. He hid himself in the shrubbery, not daring to go further.

"You forgot the cakes." Miles' voice came piping from above.

"Greedy goose!" Sylvia laughed. "I shall fetch you some cakes. Be waiting with the basket in another half hour. I am sure that what I have given you thus far shall tide you over."

"The ones with the cream," Miles called.

"Cream it is," she agreed.

David felt weak with relief. She was merely sneaking food to her young cousin. But before David could reveal himself, he saw a silhouette in the ballroom door.

"Sylvia?" Highslip stepped into the moonlight.

Sylvia moved into view, the glow upon the white lace causing her to look as ethereal as a beam of quicksilver.

"I am here, Hugo," she said.

David was surprised by the tone of her voice; it was as cold and distant as the moon itself.

"So, my love," Highslip said, advancing toward her, "when will you come away with me? Everything is arranged. You have only to pack your bags."

"Do you have Will's vowels?" she asked.

Highslip pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and waved it before her.

"I am prepared to discharge his debt," she whispered.

Highslip laughed triumphantly, handing her the paper before pulling her into his arms. David began to realize that there had been far more to the earl's dishonorable proposal than he had understood. He was about to rise from his hiding place, to pull Highslip's hands from her and break every bone in the fop's body thereafter, but a shriek from the earl precluded him. Highslip doubled over in obvious pain. "You punched me," he groaned.

"I am afraid I shall have to upset your arrangements, Hugo." There was mockery in Sylvia's voice as she pulled away from him.

"You shall pay dearly for that," Highslip said, his eyes narrowing. "Do you think to cheat me of what is rightfully mine? Your person, Sylvia, or five hundred and fifty pounds."

"Here!" Sylvia tossed her reticule at his feet. "Five hundred and fifty pounds, milord," she said exultantly. "The full sum of my brother's debt to you." She watched as he pulled the roll of bills from the mouth of the satin sack and counted it incredulously.

"Where did you get the money?" Highslip asked from between clenched teeth.

"That is none of your concern, Hugo," Sylvia said with airy hauteur. "Clearly, I have resources of which you are not aware. I will not be your mistress, Hugo, yours or any man's."

"Do you still hope for marriage, Sylvia?" Highslip sneered. "Let me assure you that any suitor of yours shall meet a fate similar to Colber's and Entshaw's. London is a dangerous city and one can never tell what might happen."

"No," Sylvia said softly, "I have no hopes of marriage."

"Not even to Donhill?" Highslip asked, his voice soft and deadly. "For you seemed to be rather fond of him on the Harwell terrace. He is free now that he has lost that damnable chess game. A thousand pounds it cost me. A thousand pounds."

Sylvia controlled a frisson of fear at the stark mask of hatred upon Hugo's face. She forced herself to look at him directly. "Donhill is nothing to me, Hugo. Besides, as you yourself said over a year ago, who would be so foolish as to marry a female without a penny-piece to her name, however lovely she might be?"

"That is true," Highslip said, broodingly. "I love you, Sylvia, but I cannot marry you; you understand."

"Yes," she whispered. "I understand."

"I shall not let anyone take you from me," he vowed, his eyes wild. "You are mine, Sylvia, mine or no one's!" He turned and walked from the garden. His footsteps echoed as he passed through the empty ballroom.

When she was sure that he was truly gone, Sylvia leaned against a tree, taking long, ragged breaths like a spent runner. She closed her eyes, feeling flaccid as a child's rag doll letting the relief wash through her. For a moment, she had been afraid that Hugo would do her physical harm. Now, her course was plain. There was no choice; she would have to leave before Hugo vented his mad jealousy upon some imagined suitor or upon David. Madame Échec was her destiny.

"He is quite mad."

Startled, Sylvia opened her eyes to find David standing before her, concern in his eyes.

"There is a leaf upon your shoulder, milord, and a twig in your hair," Sylvia said, her voice weak. "Doubtless, souvenirs from your listening post. If eavesdropping is your new avocation, let me warn you that it shall play havoc with your clothing. Or did you merely wish to apprise yourself of the current asking price for my favors? Do you now wish to raise your bid?"

"I owe you an apology, Sylvia," David said, worried at the wan look upon her face.

"So pay your penance and be done with it!" Sylvia snapped. "As you have obviously heard, I am a dangerous woman. Association with me can adversely affect your health."

"I would like to help you," he began.

"Dear heaven!" she exploded. "Is this to be another

of your infamous offers of help? First you help me into a Season and Hugo's notice. Then you proceed to help me with my uncle's puzzle, only to further complicate matters. And lastly, you offer me *carte blanche*. I do not know if I can survive any more of your help, milord." She took huge gulps of air, endeavoring to calm herself, but the burden of fear, anger and weariness had become too great to bear. She could no longer contain the sob that wrenched loose from her throat. Somehow, she found herself enfolded in David's arms.

"It will be all right, Sylvia," he whispered, soothing her as he would a child. "It will be all right."

Her sorrow was like a storm in its fury, wracking her body in a tempest of emotion until she stood limp in his arms, utterly spent. David held her, stroking her hair gently, murmuring quiet words of comfort. The knowledge that he had utterly misjudged her plagued him, but her words twisted like a knife in his breast. "*Donhill is nothing to me.*" Sylvia had evaded Hugo's attempt to force her into his bed this time, by dint of her skill. However, from what David had heard, it was clear that Highslip would not be so easily routed. She would have to be protected—yet, David thought ruefully, he had already been too free with offers of protection. Somehow, he would have to undo the hurt he had caused, move with care if he ultimately hoped to win her.

"Your linen is wet. All the starch is gone."

The calm tone of her muffled words caught him by surprise. "The devil take my linen," he said roughly. "Highslip is the problem that we must needs deal with."

At the mention of Hugo's name, Sylvia reluctantly disengaged herself from David's grasp, leaving his temporary haven. She would not allow him to put himself into danger for her sake.

"I shall deal with Highslip."

Her eyes gleamed fiercely, like a feline's in the dark. The strength of Sylvia's spirit was admirable, but David had no illusions as to her ability to deal with a madman. "Do you think the money you won as Madame Échec will put him off for any length of time, Sylvia? 'Tis you he wants."

Sylvia gasped. David knew that she had humiliated him. "How?" she asked, despair filling her voice, wondering who else might be aware of her identity. "How did you find out?"

"No one else knows," he hastened to assure her, reaching out to steady her. He turned her hand, tracing the healed line of the scar gently. "'Twas this that gave you away, the wound where that dog bit you. Only I saw, so you need not fear. Once I knew you were Madame Échec it was easy to surmise the rest. It was you that played the game by post, wasn't it?"

Sylvia nodded. "Uncle was far too ill, that last year."

"And you wrote the letters as well?" A nod confirmed his suspicions. "I sat up all last night re-reading them. Kept them all, you know. You mimicked your uncle's style well, but it was your thoughts, your voice in those last letters."

"I was all alone," Sylvia attempted to explain. "Will was off at school and Uncle was dying." She turned away. "Although Uncle encouraged me to play, he thought that prowess at chess was somewhat unsuitable for a female. Most men hate to be bested by women, so I did not dare reveal myself for fear of how you might react."

"True enough," David said, recalling his own feelings on the matter. "Look at me, Sylvia." He touched her lightly, turning her to face him once again. "Why did you refuse my offer of marriage?" he asked, searching her face. "Did you hate me so much be-

cause of that unfortunate offer I made that you would not have me, even as a prize?"

"It was because I could not hate you that I refused you," Sylvia answered softly. "Even though you did not know it, there were years of friendship between us, a friendship far too strong for my anger to break. When I saw you kneeling there, I knew that I could not force a marriage without love upon you. I could not harm you, however much you had hurt me."

Without love, David agonized, the words tearing at his soul. *Be grateful, you fool*, he told himself. *You have acted like an utter knave, impugned her honor—be glad that she does not hate you*. He swallowed the bitter gall that rose in his throat and seized upon the only thread of hope. "Can we be friends again, Sylvia?" David begged, his heart aching. Friends. At least it was a start. She cared for him. If she would let him into her life once again then he might be able to build upon that comradeship. "I am sorry that I hurt you. It is just that I was afraid that you would go to Highslip, afraid that he would do you harm. It was the only way that I could think of, short of marriage, to keep you safe, Sylvia. And unfortunately, in my position, I could not offer to wed you."

"You must have a very low opinion of my common sense, milord," Sylvia said, a warm feeling glowing within her at the thought that he would have married her to protect her from Highslip.

"I shall deal with Highslip," David vowed, "as I would any threat to a friend."

Sylvia looked at him sadly. Never before had "friend" seemed so painful a word; doubtless, she would never be anything more to him. It was unlikely that she would be able to content herself with the crumb of friendship when she was starving for the whole cake. It would be exquisite torture, watching him court others as he surely would. Madame Échec was still the best solution to her problems.

Once she removed herself from the scene, Hugo would no longer be a threat to either her or David.

Sylvia found her voice once more. "I too owe you an apology, milord. I should not have brought you to your knees that day."

"I am glad you did, else I would never have known it was you," David said. "You play remarkably well. In fact, I have reviewed that game in my mind over and over, and I am stunned by that brilliant gambit you used mid-game. You must publish it. A variation on your father's strategy, was it?"

"My own actually. I helped formulate the original Gabriel's Gambit," Sylvia said distractedly, her senses still spinning from his touch. "I have no desire for notoriety so I doubt that I shall ever publish." A fear rose within her. "You will not tell anyone of Madame Échec's identity?"

"Of course not!" David exclaimed, taken aback. "Though I think it a shame that you hide your talent, I would not betray you. We are *friends*."

"Yes," Sylvia said. "Honor has been satisfied all round. We are friends."

There was a rustling sound behind them and they turned. A basket was descending from the window above.

"Cream cakes," Sylvia sighed. "I shall fetch your cakes in a few minutes, Miles," she called. "Wait at the window for me."

"I'm starving," came the reedy wail as the basket was withdrawn. "Come back *soon*."

"He shall likely be sick to his stomach in the morning," Sylvia commented as she and David walked toward the ballroom.

"Every boy deserves a chance to gorge himself silly at least once in his lifetime," David said, pausing to let her through the door. From within the house came the distant strains of the orchestra, striking up a waltz. The empty floor gleamed invitingly. "Do you

think Miles' sweet tooth could wait for a few moments? Would you dance with me, Sylvia?" he asked.

Sylvia hesitated. They had never waltzed together and she wondered if it would be wise.

"To seal our newly cemented friendship?" David cajoled softly.

It would do no harm, Sylvia decided. Hugo would not see them dancing here in this secluded room. One last dance with David. It would be a memory to cherish in those empty years ahead. Wordlessly, she moved closer. David put his arm about her waist, taking up her other hand as they stepped onto the black-and-white marble floor of the small ballroom and began to move to the rhythm of the distant music.

David knew that he was holding her far closer than he ought, but he did not care in the least. The satin of her full sleeve brushed up against his cheek and he breathed in the soft lilac scent of her hair, trying to fill the empty feeling within himself. He had been a fool to think that he would be satisfied to have her merely as a mistress. Forever was what he wanted, with all that an eternal pledge implied: home and children and loving even when that blonde hair was as silver as moonlight. But that knowledge had come too late. He should have sent Brummel and the wager to hell, and gone after his heart when he had the chance. Caution had rarely lost him a chess game, but now he was on the brink of losing the most important match of his life. He was a novice playing against hopeless odds in a game that had no rules.

Sylvia leaned against David, the faraway music not nearly as loud as the beat of her own pulse. Now she knew why the waltz had been condemned as the most dangerous of dances. It was intoxicating to move so closely in tandem, joined in rhythm to a man that she loved absolutely. She closed her eyes,

whirling in darkness, feeling the touch of his hand, the fluttering caress of his breath upon her cheek.

The world spun in a pattern of black and white as David led her to the music, wishing that he could command them to play on, that he could suspend time itself so that he could hold her in his arms this way forever. Black and white, black and white, the floor passed beneath them, black and white, black and white. Nearly dizzy with motion and desire, David looked down at the marble tiles, then came to an abrupt halt.

Jarred, Sylvia opened her eyes and peered anxiously at David's stunned face. "What is wrong, David?"

"Count the tiles, Sylvia!"

"What?" Sylvia asked in growing bewilderment.

"The black and white tiles," he said, his eyes aglow with excitement. "Think upon it! Your uncle's will commands you to ignore the convention of mourning and sends you immediately to London for your come-out ball—"

"To a ballroom redone not less than two years ago, when Hugo began to court me," Sylvia said breathlessly, realization dawning. "A chess puzzle set to be played—"

"Upon a huge chessboard!" David concluded, continuing his count. "Fourteen squares long. Too many."

"Look!" Sylvia pointed to the center of the room. The moonlight shone full upon a patterned border. There within its center was a perfect square of alternating two-foot black and white tiles.

"Eight by eight. A chessboard," David said, his face nearly splitting with a grin. "Now call out the rhyme."

Sylvia began to recite slowly.

*"... And when you seek to tread your measure,
you shall recall these words with pleasure."*

*King's pawn black, king's pawn white,
bishop's move black and black's move knight.
Knight to rook's fourth move again
Queen to rook's fifth, bishop's mate at end.
Seek the board and step at leisure,
and you shall uncover the Rajah's treasure."*

David stepped upon the tiles in sequence. As he touched on the final square there was a click from behind him. He turned to watch openmouthed as a panel in the wall slid aside.

"Dear heaven," Sylvia whispered, grasping his hand. Together, the two stepped into the concealed room, where the moonlight illuminated the glistening hoard of the Rajah's treasure. Sylvia recognized many of the valuables that her father had accumulated upon his travels. She reached for a velvet box, opening it to find her mother's diamonds.

David saw shelves filled with banded piles, all carefully labeled—money, deeds, certificates and notes undoubtedly worth a fortune in themselves. At the center of the room stood a small stand with a gold-and-silver chessboard upon it. The pieces were carved in semiprecious stone and were set in the configuration of a fool's mate. In the center was a piece of paper. David picked it up, shaking off an accumulation of dust before handing it to Sylvia. Beside the board was a tinderbox and candle-holder. He lit the taper, holding the light aloft as Sylvia read.

"'My dearest child.'" The paper in her hand trembled as she recognized the familiar scrawl. "'I knew that you would solve the puzzle and I hope that you will forgive an old man's interference. I love you dearly and would not have you shackled to a man such as Highslip. By now, I am sure that he has revealed his true nature and you are safe. Forgive me, Sylvia. It was the only move that I could make. My love always, Uncle Miles.'" Her voice quavered as she

read his final farewell and the tears ran down her cheeks.

"Shall I find your aunt?" David asked.

"No." Sylvia shook her head, smiling ruefully. "I do not think that I could bear Aunt Ruby quite yet. 'Tis certain she would look at this hoard and advertise that I now have enough of a dowry available to secure me a duke. However, Will ought to know. 'Tis his fortune as well. You will likely find him at the supper table."

As he went off to seek Sylvia's brother, David cursed his abominable luck, wishing that he had made his feelings plain prior to the treasure being found. The value of what they had discovered in the secret room was beyond reckoning; Sylvia was now a very wealthy woman. Combined with her looks and wit, her newfound fortune would allow her to look as high as she wished; certainly higher than a mere baron who was something of a minor nabob, a man who had not valued her enough to offer her marriage when he had the chance—a man who had placed honor above love.

Lord Highslip sat in a corner of the grand ballroom watching the door for Sylvia's entrance. From his vantage point, he could see the entrance to the small ballroom and the garden. He waited impatiently, pulling the wad of bills from his pocket to count them once again. Where had she gotten the money? Certainly not from her pinch-purse aunt. He could have sworn that her uncle had not left her a feather to fly with.

The door to the small ballroom opened and David Rutherford looked around before hastily pulling the door closed behind him. Highslip's expression hardened. "Rutherford," he whispered angrily to himself. "He is free now, damn him, but he shall not have her. He shall not have her." When Rutherford had disap-

peared into the supper rooms, the earl rose to head for the small ballroom.

Within the hidden vault, Sylvia exclaimed with delight as she located familiar treasures, keepsakes that she had thought lost forever. Except for the tidiness, it was almost like exploring a pirate's cave, she thought as she traversed the narrow chamber. The long, thin room paralleled the small ballroom for its full length. She heard a sound behind her and turned eagerly, expecting to see her brother.

"Look what we have found, Will," she said, the words dying on her lips as she saw Hugo, his eyes glittering sharp as daggers' edges in the semidarkness.

"Look, indeed!" He fingered the open jewel case, pulling out the diamond necklace and slipping it in his pocket. "So you have found your uncle's hoard at last; you are an heiress," he spoke softly, laughing at her expression of consternation. "Now there is nothing standing in the way. You can marry me now. You will come with me."

"Of course, Hugo," Sylvia said, realizing there was no getting past him in the confines of the narrow chamber. She prayed that David would find Will and return in a hurry. There was a look in the earl's eyes that frightened her. He was beyond reason, beyond sanity. She tried to keep her voice calm, soothing, as she picked up a rope of pearls and waved it before him. "It will take but a few seconds to gather a few things. We are quite rich now."

"Do you think to delay me?" Highslip took the candle from her hand and set it upon the table. "I saw Rutherford. He was with you, wasn't he?" He shook her by the shoulders. "Wasn't he?"

She nodded weakly.

"You shall not cheat me this time, Sylvia. I will have you—and your fortune." He steered her out of

the vault and through the French doors into the garden. "By the time I am done with you, you will have no choice, you see." Hauling her by the hand, he pulled her toward the door to the mews.

No one would hear her scream. The noise from the ballroom would drown out any sound that she could make. Desperate for a way to save herself, Sylvia noticed the basket hanging from the window and deliberately tripped. "Where are you taking me, Hugo?" she asked as loudly as she dared, as he dragged her up roughly.

"To our little love nest on Marybone Lane." Highslip leered. "That shall do for now. In a week or so, you shall be glad enough to go to Gretna with me, I suspect. I doubt that Rutherford will want you then, even with a fortune in your pocket. I fully intend to make sure of you, my dear."

As he pulled her out to the mews, she could only hope that Miles had been listening.

David returned to the small ballroom with William in tow. The young man entered the treasure room, clearly astonished at the accumulation of wealth. Sylvia, however, was nowhere to be found. As David started toward the garden to seek her out, a small figure barreled through the French doors.

"Lord Donhill . . . was waiting for my cream cake . . . heard him talking. He's taken her, Lord Donhill," Miles said breathlessly. "He's taken Sylvia!"

"Whoa, child." David knelt and held the boy by the shoulders, trying to make sense of his frantic speech.

"Lord Highslip's got Sylvia," Miles said slowly, the tears coursing down his cheeks. "Went out through to the mews . . . heard it through the window."

"Where is he taking her?" David asked. "Do you know, Miles? Tell me exactly what he said."

The boy nodded, catching his breath, "Marysomething Lane. I didn't hear," he wailed.

"Marybone?" David suggested recalling Highgate's catalog when he had offered Sylvia the position of mistress."

"Yes!" Miles agreed. "Marybone!"

"You've got to help her, milord . . . He's a bad 'un, I know it. Pinches the maids when they can't do anything about it . . . Don't want him to pinch Sylvia."

"He will not pinch Sylvia, Miles," David said, his jaw set in determination. "Not if I can help it. I shall bring her back, never you fear."

"What is all the commotion about?" William asked, coming out of the treasure room. "Miles, what are you doing down? Your mama—"

"Highslip has abducted Sylvia," David cut in. "Tell Ivan Petrov what has occurred, William. Keep it quiet if you can." He felt a tug on his sleeve and looked down at Miles once more.

"You said to tell everything Lord Highslip said, and I forgot . . . He said that he will make sure of her. How do you make sure of someone, milord?" Miles asked.

"Dear God," David muttered, then hurried out to fetch his carriage, praying that he would find her in time.

Eleven



Sylvia put a hand to her aching head. As the room gradually came into focus, she saw Hugo's leering face at the foot of the huge bed that held her. What had happened was not a nightmare but horrifyingly real. She groaned.

"I was beginning to think that I had hit you too hard," Highslip said, rising from his chair. "You were taking your time coming to."

In a way, it was almost laughable; he made it sound as if Sylvia's delay in returning to consciousness were somehow her own fault. "My apologies," she said, shifting upon the lumpy mattress to surreptitiously gain a sense of her surroundings. The pink-and-gold furnishings were in cloying bad taste, and above the bed, a fresco of naked cherubs upon the ceiling were indulging in distinctly un-cherublike behavior. All around her the heavy scent of old perfume lingered, permeating the carpets and draperies. No particular genius was necessary to realize that this was a Cyprian's chamber.

Hugo was coming toward her, a mocking smile distorting the shape of his mouth. She pulled back to the corner of the bed, the metallic tang of fear upon her tongue. It was but a small comfort to realize that she was still fully clothed; no telling how long that state might last.

"So coy," Highslip sneered. "Are you that shy with Rutherford, Sylvia?"

The mention of David's name acted as an antidote to fear. He would come back and find her missing. Miles would tell him where she was. *Play for every minute*, she told herself, remembering one of her uncle's cardinal rules. *In a timed game, keep your opponent off balance.* Time? She had no idea how long she had been unconscious. "Why did you hit me, Hugo?" she asked, deliberately erasing all expression from her face.

The non sequitur caught him off guard. "I did not expect you to remain quietly in the mews while I collected my carriage," Highslip said. He seated himself on the bed; to his surprise, her countenance remained utterly calm.

"Quite true," Sylvia said, keeping her voice steady. "I find there is often difficulty with moves made upon the spur of the moment. One cannot think the consequences through fully. For instance, when I am discovered missing this evening, it will also be found that you have gone. Suspicion will, of course, fall upon you."

"And how would you have avoided that?" Highslip asked, feeling somewhat flustered. He had expected screaming, weeping, pleas for mercy; instead, the woman sounded as if she were an Oxford don, lecturing him.

"Too much time has passed already," Sylvia said, choosing her words with care. "However, were it me, I would return to the ball and mingle with the guests. That way, when the disappearance is discovered, I would be able to act as surprised as the rest, thereby averting any inquiry."

"Ah, but you are wrong!" Highslip declared, his lips twisting in a crooked smile. "Barely a half hour has elapsed since we left, and I have only to drive a few minutes to find myself at Berkeley Square once

again. There are some advantages in having a mistress' residence so close. I fully intended to return to Caroline's come-out, now that I have you safely hidden away. However, I cannot leave you to your own devices."

"You do not trust me, Hugo?" she asked, sarcasm creeping into her voice. It was a mistake.

He pulled her to her knees upon the bed. "I trusted you. You were pure, untouched, but you forgot that you belong to me. Entirely to me. So beautiful," he whispered hoarsely, his lips nuzzling her throat. "You will always be mine, Sylvia. Only mine." His fingers went round the slender white column of her neck, tightening in slow pressure. "Remember."

The sinister sound of his laughter whistled in her ear as his grasp tightened. The glazed, unfocused look in his eyes terrified her. He was utterly mad, perhaps mad enough to choke the life from her. "You would kill the golden goose before the egg is laid, Hugo?" she gasped as the room began to spin.

"Quite right." Highslip shook his head as if clearing it. "'Twould be unconscionably foolish to see you dead, before bed and wed." He cackled at his own wit, then stopped abruptly. "But how shall I restrain you?" He let her fall as he rose to search the room, his eyes lighting upon a crystal decanter of brandy.

Sylvia shivered upon the bed as he picked up the liquor, his eyes gleaming. "It makes me sick to my stomach, Hugo. I shall only vomit it up." He made a disgusted face and put the decanter down on the stand beside the bed, knocking over a small vial.

"Yes," he murmured, picking up the glass container. "This shall do quite nicely." He opened the stopper and put the vial to his lips, taking a swallow.

Sylvia tried to control her trembling body as he approached her.

"Have a drink, m' dear?" He laughed, a sly look upon his face as he shoved the vial under her nose.

Laudanum, she thought with a sinking feeling, recognizing the smell. Her uncle had taken it in his last months to ease the pain.

"How is it that you are still standing, Hugo, after drinking such a dose?" she forced herself to ask.

The question distracted him for a moment. "Oh, I am quite accustomed to the stuff. Takes far more than a little dribble to send me to the arms of Morpheus, but you, m' dear, will only require a few drops. Not too much, mind, for I do not want a corpse in my bed later, merely enough to keep you from running off."

Yanking her hair, forcing her neck back, he held the bottle to her lips. "Drink," he demanded. "Or I shall have to knock you unconscious."

Tears pricked at Sylvia's eyes as she felt the liquid trickle down her throat.

"That's it. Take your nepenthe and be glad of it, for I will allow you none later when it might dull the pain." He laughed in anticipation. "For I fully intend to punish you, my girl, for your dalliance with Ruth-erford."

Hugo threw her upon the bed and for a moment she feared that he had forgotten his intention to return to Caroline's ball. "They shall be looking for me soon," she reminded him.

"So they will," he said, adjusting his hat as he headed to the door. "Wait for me, m' dear."

"As if I have any choice," Sylvia muttered to herself as she heard the click of the lock, the sound of his retreating footsteps. She made herself rise, her legs trembling beneath her as she tried to retch the laudanum up, but it was too late. Unsteadily, she rattled at the door, checked the one window, but it was shut fast. With growing disorientation, she made her way back to the bed, watching in fascination as the candle on the table began to dance strangely, becom-

ing a nimbus of light that illuminated the brandy within the decanter until it glowed like amber.

Shaking her head, Sylvia tried to concentrate upon an imaginary game of chess, but the pieces transformed themselves into people. The white knight wore David's head; the black king was Hugo. The pieces moved ahead slowly, inexorably. She knew that there was nothing she could do to stop them. *Focus upon something*, she told herself, turning a head so heavy that it seemed to be made of stone. The fluid in the crystal container on the table sparkled upon the glass facets. *Had Miles heard?* she wondered idly, but that had somehow become unimportant. *So pretty, the way the light shines upon the liquid. Find a way out, must find a way out.*

A thousand thoughts spun out of control, some coming sharply into focus in a moment of profound clarity before whirling giddily out of sight. *So this why people lived in bottles . . . would be glorious if not for Hugo . . . He would kill her sooner or later, probably sooner . . . utterly queer in the nob . . . she would never marry him . . . Uncle was right . . . Don't think about it . . . focus on . . . David . . . so idiotic to have hidden the truth. Foolish pride . . . never to have said, "I love you," and damn the consequences . . . Hugo would return and . . . so pretty, the light . . . A weapon . . . on the cut glass . . . cut . . . glass . . . Glass cuts!*

Sylvia reached for the decanter, its weight dragging down her hand. It was too heavy. "You must," she told herself. "You must." With supreme effort she smashed it against the headboard of the bed, noticing with detachment that she had cut her finger. She put the bloody gash to her mouth, sucking as she tried to gather her dissembled thoughts. *Too weak to stand against him . . . Only one other way out.* A tear ran down her cheek as she thought of David. Sorting through the glass, Sylvia chose a particularly wicked-looking jagged shard. Pulling up the sleeves of her

dress, she traced the wavering, thin blue lines at her wrist with unsteady fingers. The flushed face in the looking glass on the dressing table opposite the bed regarded her with bewilderment. Was that her? She stared at the dark circlet forming round her neck, recalling the strange look in Hugo's eyes while he had all but choked the life from her. *To think that she had once considered marriage to that madman. Aye . . . dance with a fool . . . she was waltzing round with David . . . whirling black and white . . . A rich woman now, but not a penny to Hugo . . . rather die . . . If it were done, when 'tis done . . . Lady Macbeth said that, but that was murder, not suicide . . . 'twere well it were done quickly . . . Where was all the blood coming from? . . . Oh, yes, her finger . . . out, damned spot.* Sylvia looked wonderingly at the spots of scarlet on her jade dress. It was utterly ruined.

Through the foggy haze, she heard the sound of approaching footsteps on the other side of the door. She put the shard unsteadily to her wrist, but it was too late for a clean death. The key turned and the door swung open. "No!" Sylvia screamed, terror imbuing her with sudden strength. "I won't let you!" She sprang up with a cry, rushing at the man with the point upraised.

"Sylvia!" David caught her hand as the wicked piece of glass struck downward, barely missing his cheek. She struggled, her eyes wild as she snarled like a cornered cat. *What had Highslip done to her?* he wondered as he attempted to wrest the weapon from her hold. Her hair was disheveled; a streak of blood was smeared across her face. With growing rage, he noticed the marks on her neck and the blood upon her skirts and bodice. She reeked of brandy. "Hush, my Kali, hush!" His throat tightened with emotion.

"Oh, you are not Hugo," Sylvia said, confusion creeping across her face.

"No, 'tis David." Although it was difficult to con-

trol his voice, he forced himself to speak, running on in a nonsensical jumble in an attempt to try to calm her. "There is no need to cut my jacket. Mr. Weston would take it amiss—after all, you have already ruined one. You should not play so much with sharp objects, Sylvia, you get hurt. Let me help you, Sylvia."

"David?" She spoke uncertainly, her tongue heavy, letting the shard slip to shatter upon the floor. "I thought you were Hugo, coming back to rape me. I do not have to kill you then. You are my friend."

"Yes, sweetheart, I am your friend. You do not have to kill me," David said. She'd spoken slowly, as if with effort. Had Highslip forced drink upon her? "Where has Highslip gone?"

"Went back to the ball. Divert suspicion. I am glad that it's you."

"Are you?" David asked, realizing that his hands had become slippery with blood, her blood. He mulled over her words while attempting to locate the source of the bleeding, sighing with relief when he found the cut on her finger.

"Your neckcloth will make a good bandage. Ruined anyway . . . all bloody. I am always ruining your clothes, David." She sighed mournfully.

"You may ruin my entire wardrobe and welcome," David said, unwinding the length of white cloth.

"So glad because I don't have to kill myself now. Would have before Hugo came back and had his way with me, if my hands had been steady. Complex business—killing yourself, deucedly difficult to find the right place. I was trying, but the veins kept moving. Messy too. Ruins your clothes. Bled all over," Sylvia babbled, staring at him wide-eyed.

There was a grim determination below the rambling chatter. Taking one look at her solemn face, David locked his arms around her, drawing her close. His blood chilled at the horror in her matter-of-fact

description of contemplated suicide. Only a few minutes more and he had little doubt that she likely would have found those elusive veins to slit her wrists.

"You make me feel so safe." She nestled beneath his chin, closing her eyes in bliss, then opening them as she felt his body tremble. "Are you chilly, David? For I believe you're shivering. I am *wonderfully* warm, *wonderful*." She reached up, brushing his hair back from his forehead. "And you are perspiring, yet you quiver with cold. How peculiar. I fear you are sickening for something." She stroked his hair slowly. "I have always wanted to do this. It is perpetually in your eyes. Like a little boy."

Indeed, he too was growing warm; as her fingers ran through his hair, he felt his slim control disappearing. Like a friendly cat, she rubbed herself against him, murmuring words of concern. It was ironic beyond measure that *she* was attempting to comfort *him*. Only the utter trust in those eyes penetrated the heat, forcing him to release her and set her at arm's length.

"You do not like holding me?" she asked sadly, her lower lip trembling.

"To the contrary, Sylvia. I like holding you entirely too much," David said, his voice deep with emotion and desire. "You are flying high, my love, and I would not take advantage."

"'Tis not drunk, but laudanum, if you would know," she pronounced solemnly, moving closer once more, putting her hands around his neck, kneading the tense muscles. "You are wound tight as a spring, David. You ought to relax. Here . . ." She removed his spectacles. "Your eyes are almost like a woodland in March, all brown but with a hint of spring."

Opiate . . . her inebriated yet lucid behavior began to make sense. The pupils of her eyes were wide dark pools banded by green. "If I relax myself, Syl-

via, there will be the devil to pay." David laughed ruefully, putting his glasses back on.

She felt the chuckle rising through his chest, the movement of his ribs tickling against her as she moved closer still. She caught hold of a stray thought. "Did you call me 'my love'?" she asked, eyeing him glassily.

"I believe I did," David said, his lips drawn irresistibly to brush her forehead.

"Does that mean you *love* me?" *There were two Davids. Most disconcerting to have them both nod like that.*

"I love you," David and David said.

"I am so glad!" Sylvia declared. "Two Davids and both in love with me! Which of you shall I kiss first?" To solve the problem, she closed her eyes, pulling his mouth down to meet hers.

Her kiss was tender, timid with innocence as his fingers tangled themselves in the silken coils of her hair. Honor warred momentarily with desire as David fought for control, but the temptation was too great. Desire won as soon as David tasted the velvety sweetness of her mouth. She moaned softly, pulling him tighter, closer, and his hand brushed aside the last of the remaining pins in her hair to let it cascade down her back in a flow of molten gold. When she opened her eyes at last, he saw a fire in that glowing green. "David," he heard her whisper hoarsely. "Please . . ." But before she could complete her request, her eyes lost focus, the lids slowly closing as she went limp in his arms.

David hoisted her up, her head cradled tantalizingly against his shoulder while he carried her down the stairs. As he placed her into the carriage, she stirred, whimpering as he covered her with a blanket. Within a few minutes they were behind the Gabriel house at Berkeley Square.

Miles was waiting at the garden door. "Sylvia?" he asked anxiously.

"Is sleeping in the back of my carriage," David said, smiling reassuringly at the boy. "Get William or Mr. Petrov."

Miles obediently ran off and soon came back with both his cousin and the Russian. David lifted Sylvia from the seat, reluctantly handing her into her brother's arms.

"Where is he?" David asked Petrov.

There was no need to specify which *he* was meant. "The supper rooms," Petrov said, uttering a Russian obscenity. "Filling his mouth."

"I will kill him," Will promised, tears forming in his eyes as he looked upon his sister's bloody face. "I swear I shall kill him."

"No," David said, starting forward. "I have reserved that pleasure for myself. I feel I have earned that right."

Will took one look at David's hard expression, his bloody clothing, and nodded slowly.

"Not here. It would be bad move, causing much scandal," Petrov said, putting a restraining hand on his friend's shoulder. "We are being convincing the *ton* that your Sylvia is gone because of finding the treasure. She is resting, overdrawn."

"Overset," David corrected automatically, his eyes narrowing as he formulated his plan. "You are quite right, Ivan. Much as I would enjoy wiping the floor with the earl, I shall have to wait. Highslip will no doubt leave as soon as he thinks it safe. You and William let him go when he pleases, for I am certain he will return to Marybone Lane. Then, I vow, every minute of fear, every drop of blood, shall be paid for with a cent-percenter's interest."

Sylvia moaned softly. "David?" she whispered.

"You are safe, my love," he said, reaching out to stroke her cheek gently. "I will be waiting for Highslip at Marybone Lane. Meet me at my rooms

once Sylvia wakens, Ivan. I should be through with him by then."

It was to be hoped that Sylvia would recall nothing, David told himself as he took up the reins. Highslip, the tawdry room, her brush with death would all be forgotten. Sylvia had been too full of laudanum to be truly conscious of anything. And the kiss? Likely, she would never retain the memory of a kiss on the edge of insensibility. That would be his own private treasure, something that she would never remember and he would never forget.

David prowled the morning room like an angry tiger, pausing momentarily before the window to stare, unseeing, at the morning sunshine, trying to rein in his temper.

"I waited till dawn, Ivan." He spoke from between clenched teeth. "The sun had nearly crept up before I realized that something must have gone awry. Damn you!"

"It was only way." Petrov was seated at the table, fidgeting nervously with a napkin. "I was sending word as soon as all was done."

"The devil take you, Ivan!" David crossed the room. His fist slammed down on the table, rattling the china, causing the coffee to spill from its saucer. "You had no right!"

"I am having every right!" the Russian said defiantly, rising to his feet. "I am sorry to be depriving of your vengeance, but it was only choice."

David's answer was an angry glare.

Petrov looked at his friend; the dark shadows beneath David's eyes told the tale of the sleepless, anxious night. Indeed, Petrov had not slept himself. "You know I am being correct," he said wearily. "Arrest of Highslip is meaning scandal for mine Caroline and her family, for your Sylvia, too. Are you wanting that? Is worth it to tear Highslip apart with bare

hands, no jury or judge? I offer him sure imprisonment or death by his own hand. He chooses pistols and now all *ton* is thinking he kills himself because of debts. No scandal."

David scowled angrily at Petrov, the sense of what he was saying slowly penetrating his rage. "And Sylvia?" he asked at last.

"All town is talking of the Gabriel fortune." The Russian gave a sigh of relief. "They are believing our story, and mine Caroline's mama is at sevens and eights. Is saying how happy she is for her niece and nephew, but really, she is tearing out her hair for how she has been treating them like peppers."

In his anxiety, David did not even bother to correct the Russian's English. "But Sylvia, man! How is she? You have not told me a blasted thing about Sylvia!"

"Slept all through night, but is awake now. I came here as soon as I found out. Girl has devil of the head this morning," Petrov responded. "Caroline said that she has been—how you say? Shooting the dog."

"Shooting the cat, Ivan," David said glumly, still feeling cheated and betrayed. Nonetheless, he had to admit the Russian was right. The scandal would have been enormous had David given the earl his just due.

"Perhaps you should be bringing Sylvia some of your man's amazing headache potion, David," Petrov suggested hopefully. "It might be helping."

"Excellent idea. It might be just the thing," David said, seizing upon the excuse to visit Berkeley Square.

At David's request, Harjit mixed up a bottle of his vile brew and soon the two were on their way to the Gabriel house.

"You were right, of course, Ivan, to do as you did," David admitted reluctantly as they drove up Hyde Park Corner.

"I know. It was right move." The Russian accepted the apology with a shrug of his shoulders.

As he toiled up Berkeley Street, David recalled Sylvia's words last night in Marybone Lane. Of course much of it would have to be discounted. She had been chirping merry, entirely top-heavy as the result of the laudanum. "*You are my friend,*" she had declared solemnly—yet there had been far more than friendship in the way her arms had twined about him and more than friendship in those fuddled eyes.

How much would she remember? David wondered. Would cold sobriety prove that her feelings had merely been nothing more than gratitude and relief? He found himself hoping that the scene at Marybone Lane was entirely forgotten, as much for his own sake as Sylvia's. If Sylvia came down from the altitudes with her memory intact, his confession of love might very well return to haunt him. The realization that his feelings were far more than mere friendship could easily destroy the fragile tie between them. Yet if she recalled nothing, would he have the courage to give voice to those feelings once again, in the clear light of day?

Unfortunately, it soon appeared that David would not have the chance to find out. Mrs. Gabriel received the proffered cure from David and firmly advised him that Sylvia was not up to company. But the woman did take the time to point out the various congratulatory floral tributes that her niece had received from a marquis, a wealthy earl and even a duke, all but telling David outright that he was running a poor last in the titled-suitor stakes. Petrov gave David a look of apology as he accepted Caroline's invitation to stay.

As David took up the reins to his phaeton, he felt something hitting his hat. Blasted birds! Then he saw a marble roll to the floor of his equipage.

"Lord Donhill!"

David looked up to see Miles hanging out the nursery window above. "Come round to the mews," the boy called.

David drove his carriage to the alleyway. He stepped down as the door to the garden swung open. Miles put a warning finger to his lips, then led David inside by the hand.

"Sylvia said to be on the lookout for you," Miles whispered. "Said Mama wouldn't let you in if you were anything less'n a duke." He took David up the back stairs, leading him to a bedroom upon the second floor. "Sylvia ain't in the nursery anymore, now that she's plump in the pocket," the boy explained as he opened the door. "Go on. I'll stand watch in case someone comes up."

David entered, knowing that it was wholly improper.

"David, I thought I heard your voice." Sylvia rose from a chair by the window.

He scrutinized her carefully, fists clenching as he caught sight of the vivid imprints on her neck. The earl's end had been far too easy.

Self-consciously, she pulled the collar of her dressing gown higher upon her neck to cover the marks that Hugo's fingers had left. "I am told that it will fade."

"Are you well, Sylvia?" David asked, his voice deep with emotion as she gestured him to a seat. She seemed profoundly uncomfortable, looking everywhere but at him. How much did she recall of what he had said last night?

"As well as can be expected after swimming so deep in the laudanum bottle," she said, trying to gather her courage as she sat down opposite him. Every waking moment had been spent trying to determine what had actually occurred at the house on Marybone Lane, but the line between opium-induced dream and reality was difficult to discern. Had she

truly heard David speak of love, or was it all a poppy-blossom wish, born of a union between the drug and her disguised imagination? The speech that she had so carefully prepared deserted her as the memory of the way she had clung to him returned. Surely, no mere hallucination could be so complete, replete with the texture of his jacket, the clean smell of his hair, the taste of his lips. Had she actually invited him to kiss her? she wondered miserably. How could she have been so incredibly forward? Imagination or reality, the soul-searing memory of the way they had possessed each other when their lips had met was enough to put her to blush.

"I should not be here," David said stiffly, as the silence lengthened. Her discomfort was a palpable thing, apparent in her restraint, the flush that spread to her cheeks. There was so much that he wanted to say, but he was afraid to speak now. Pretty speeches had never been his forte and as he searched for the appropriate phrases to tell Sylvia the true depths of his feelings, his spirits began to ebb. Trite clichés, every one. *My life is empty without you. I need you. I love you.* The tension increased in intensity until it was almost a physical pain to be so near her and unable to gather her into his arms.

"I wanted to thank you, David," Sylvia began hesitantly, throwing the words into the gathering pool of frustration.

"What are friends for?" He could feel the muscles of his face stretching into a smile, his lips like pieces of India rubber. In a moment he would snap.

"To be honest, David, I do not think we can remain friends." She raised her eyes to meet his, trying to read his face, but found it utterly wiped clean of emotion.

"I can understand," David's voice was toneless. She had recalled last night and had taken him in disgust. The game was over. It was time to retire from

the play a graceful loser. He rose dully, painting a last impression of those features in his mind. *I shall return to India*, he decided. At least he would thus be spared the pain of watching others court her. "I had best go now."

It was agony to watch him leave. Sylvia had hoped that he would make the first move; in matters of love the man led the game, that was the rule. She struggled with her pride, knowing that if she did not play a gambit of her own, she might very well lose him forever. David's hand was reaching for the knob when she found her voice. She was not her father's daughter for nothing; sometimes it was necessary to risk all upon instinct. "Please, David. Stay, please." At first, Sylvia thought that he had not heard her plea, but slowly he turned, his face impassive.

"Why?"

The word was stark, but there was something in his eyes that sparked Sylvia's hopes. The jade-and-lapis chessboard upon the table near the window caught her attention. Will, feeling extremely guilty for his part in the Highslip affair, had brought it upstairs, wishing to please her, "*To pull you out of the doldrums*," he had said. She rose and crossed the room to take David's hand, pulling him to the chessboard, then motioning for him to be seated.

"You want me to play chess with you?" David asked, utterly bewildered. Was the drug still affecting her behavior?

"You think me addled, no doubt," Sylvia said, reading the puzzlement in his eyes as she moved her king's pawn forward.

To his surprise, she then reached over and moved his pawn as well. "I am beginning to think so," David said, watching as she moved her king's rook pawn.

"I think I am, actually," Sylvia said as she put his knight into place. "It is time to put all the pieces

upon the board." She took a deep breath. "Did you say that you love me, David Rutherford?" At that question, his mask vanished, replaced by a look of agony. The moments seemed to lengthen interminably as she awaited his answer.

"Yes."

"And did I tell you of my feelings?" Sylvia questioned eagerly, joy welling up inside her at the wealth of longing in that single syllable.

"I did not credit anything you said or did," David sputtered. "You were drugged."

"And just what did I say or do?" Sylvia asked, a smile tugging at her lips as she advanced a pawn desultorily.

"Nothing," David prevaricated, still unsure as to exactly how much she remembered.

"Do you call that kiss you gave me nothing?" Sylvia laughed.

"'Twas you that initiated the kiss," David retorted defensively.

"Now I recall. You were being damnably honorable while I was acting horribly brazen." She picked up his bishop, moved it into place and then went back to her side of the board to advance her pawn yet again.

"The drug," he reminded her. Her moves thus far had been ridiculous. He turned his attention from the board to her face. For once her countenance was an open book. What he saw written there caused his heart to soar.

"No, David," she said, shaking her head. "It was not the drug that caused me to act so, although the laudanum might have served to let loose the truth. I remember that kiss, David, every second of it until I slipped into darkness. If you never kiss me again, there shall never be another to match it. You see, I love you. I think I always have, from your letters, and certainly from the time I first met you." She set

the final piece in place, forcing herself to meet his questioning gaze, wondering if she would find the answer she hoped for. "Now 'tis your move."

David looked at the array on the board before him. "A fool's mate?" he asked. "Why?"

"I once made a foolish statement that I would not wed a man who could not best me at chess," she explained softly.

"You do not think I could trounce you in a fair match, woman?" David asked laughingly. *She loved him.* He felt as if a great weight had been loosed and he was floating like one of Sadler's balloons. The strategy upon the board could not could not have been plainer to discern. She had set herself up for a loss in one move. "This is cheating, Sylvia. Shall we play a real game to see who comes up the winner?"

"No!" Sylvia said emphatically. "I find myself coming round to Lord Byron's opinion. Life is too short for chess, and I have no wish to play by the rules anymore. If you move correctly, you shall have the rest of your days to match yourself against me. I warn you, though, this will likely be the last time I shall deliberately lose."

"A challenge to a lifetime tournament. How can I resist?" David rose, smiling as he came round to her side and took her hands, raising her to her feet. "I say you 'check.'" One hand touched her shoulder, moving her close, while the other reached over to the table, slipping his queen into position. "You do know what this means?"

The depths of her emerald eyes were sparkling. "Mate?" Sylvia asked hopefully, her hands reaching out to straighten his wayward neckcloth.

"Most definitely mate," David said, his fingers gently tracing the outline of her lips. "And a forfeit. We cannot forget the forfeit, my Madame Échec." He bent to claim his prize.

Lord Donhill and Sylvia had been awfully quite for a very long time. Miles cracked the door silently, his eyes rolling in exasperation as he saw the two of them locked in a tight embrace. The boy wrinkled his nose as he shut the portal to resume his lookout post and ponder the strange ways of the adult world.



If you enjoyed this book,
take advantage
of this special offer.
Subscribe now and get a

FREE Historical Romance

No Obligation (a \$4.50 value)

Each month the editors of True Value select the four *very best* novels from America's leading publishers of romantic fiction. Preview them in your home *Free* for 10 days. With the first four books you receive, we'll send you a **FREE** book as our introductory gift. No Obligation!

If for any reason you decide not to keep them, just return them and owe nothing. If you like them as much as we think you will, you'll pay just \$4.00 each and save at *least* \$.50 each off the cover price. (Your savings are *guaranteed* to be at least \$2.00 each month.) There is **NO** postage and handling – or other hidden charges. There are no minimum number of books to buy and you may cancel at any time.

*Send in
the Coupon
Below*

To get your **FREE** historical romance fill out the coupon below and mail it today. As soon as we receive it we'll send you your **FREE** Book along with your first month's selections.

Mail To: **True Value Home Subscription Services, Inc., P.O. Box 5235
120 Brighton Road, Clifton, New Jersey 07015-5235**

YES! I want to start previewing the very best historical romances being published today. Send me my **FREE** book along with the first month's selections. I understand that I may look them over **FREE** for 10 days. If I'm not absolutely delighted I may return them and owe nothing. Otherwise I will pay the low price of just \$4.00 each; a total \$16.00 (at least an \$18.00 value) and save at least \$2.00. Then each month I will receive four brand new novels to preview as soon as they are published for the same low price. I can always return a shipment and I may cancel this subscription at any time with no obligation to buy even a single book. In any event the **FREE** book is mine to keep regardless.

Name _____

Street Address _____

Apt. No. _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

Telephone _____

Signature _____

(if under 18 parent or guardian must sign)

Terms and prices subject to change. Orders subject to acceptance by True Value Home Subscription Services, Inc.

77090-3

A DANGEROUS GAME

Suddenly eligible after inheriting a barony and a vast fortune, dashing David Rutherford devises a clever scheme to defeat the army of marriage-minded maids who now flock to his door. He will wed only the miss who can best him at a game of chess.

Pretty but penniless Sylvia Gabriel is scandalized along with the rest of the *ton*, by the new Lord Donhill's proposition. However, her beloved brother's gambling debts are considerable—and an unscrupulous earl has offered a sizable reward to any woman who can beat Rutherford at his own game...and then eschew the lord's hand. But by accepting the challenge, resourceful Sylvia is leaving her heart more vulnerable than her king. And when knight takes queen, mate can be the only possible outcome.

ISBN 0-380-77090-3



77090



0 71001 00399 4