

The Audacious Abduction

Chapter One

*Late October 1810
Portland Place, Bath*

“Here they are,” Annabel said, sailing into the front bedroom on the left with the bowl of late pink roses she’d just finished arranging. “Aren’t they lovely? Mrs. Enderby’s neighbor is reputed to have a positively uncanny way with them—*oh!*” She set the flowers on the dresser and frowned at her maid, Winters, and her friend Eliza Denton, who were just plumping the pillows on the bed. “I was going to do that next!”

“You were going to do no such thing,” Eliza said sternly. “Making up beds when those ribs are still not entirely knit? I’ve never heard of such a notion.”

“Truly, my lady, Dr. Lee and Mrs. Coope both would tell you that you should not exert yourself in such a fashion,” Winters added.

“Thank you, but I didn’t ask you to come here to manage my housekeeping for me,” Annabel. “Mrs. Enderby should have—”

“Mrs. Enderby is hovering over her cakes in the kitchen, my lady,” Winters volunteered. “She wants to make sure they’re done to a turn. Having a Russian countess to stay has quite turned her head, Jane-the-greater says.”

“I don’t blame her. English countesses are so *passé*.” Eliza winked at Annabel. “Though I must say that I myself have a lively interest in meeting Countess Lieven, as I had thought about including a Russian lady in my next story. Now, aren’t you supposed to be resting right now?” She took Annabel’s arm and led her toward the door.

“I think you’ll find that Dorothea is not just any Russian lady,” Annabel commented, letting Eliza draw her to the stairs down to the drawing room.

“I will be very surprised—and disappointed—if she is,” Eliza replied, a smile in her voice.

Three weeks had passed since Sally had brought Annabel and Winters to Bath, famed for its healing hot springs, to recuperate from that shattering night in Brighton. Annabel had never been to Bath though it wasn’t all that far from Belsever Magna, but Grandmother Shellingham came every spring to take the waters. Thank heavens it was presently October and not April.

Because she had been in no condition to arrange Will and Martin (and Gus’s) return to Eton for the start of the term, she had been forced to ask her mother to do it, on the pretext of a bad case of influenza caught in Brighton that her doctor had sent her to Bath to recover from. Because Bath was not very far from Belsever Magna, she had been hard pressed to keep her mother from coming to nurse her. Imagine if Mama had arrived and found her with her blackened eyes and other injuries! Fortunately, Grandmother Shellingham had pointed out that there were enough doctors, surgeons, and apothecaries in Bath to cure a thousand cases of influenza, and convinced Mama that going to Bath and bringing the contagion back would be imprudent indeed—especially as Papa was the world’s worst patient. Annabel had written her grandmother

a sincere thank-you letter, carefully not mentioning her interactions in Brighton with Eggy and Bunny.

Not that she hadn't wished Mama to come and fuss over her a *little*. One of the Lady Patronesses was always there with her; Sally herself had stayed in Bath for nearly two weeks, and Emily Cowper had come for ten days. Dorothea Lieven was due to arrive today for her stint—part emotional support and part protector, just in case. But they were her friends and colleagues, not her mother. So when Sally had suggested that she invite Eliza Denton to bear her company as well, Annabel had gratefully acquiesced. Eliza, bless her, had come at once and seemed to understand precisely the amount of fussing she needed.

Their landlady, Mrs. Enderby, fussed over her too—unfortunately. She was the widow of a prosperous merchant who had bought this house in Portland Place, uphill from the Royal Crescent and the Circus, shortly before his death. Mrs. Enderby assured them that he had left his dear Catherine quite comfortably off, but she enjoyed taking in paying guests for the company.

"I like a bit of life around me," she'd confided over an overburdened tray of tea, lemonade, and four kinds of biscuits the day they arrived. "Just genteel folk, of course, come to take the waters." Her eyes had gleamed when Annabel mentioned her grandmother's annual visit to the city. "I would be delighted to have the dowager marchioness stay with me. You tell her to write me and I'll make her as comfortable as I know how. Much more than Mrs. What's-her-name in Laura Place."

Annabel smiled and nodded and resolved to do no such thing. While Mrs. Enderby did indeed do her best to make them all comfortable, she was also insatiably curious about Annabel and her condition, dispensing numerous hints and leading statements along with endless tisanes and fortifying possets. Sally had been especially good at keeping her at bay, since she was capable of out-talking just about anyone when she wanted to.

After having Sally and Emily to stay—two countesses!—Mrs. Enderby had been disappointed with the arrival of plain Mrs. Denton. Fortunately, the expectation of Dorothea's coming had bucked her up considerably. Annabel had been tempted to tell her that plain Mrs. Denton was in truth a Famous Author just to see what she would do, but of course had not.

"Being here—that is—I...er, I'm not keeping you from working, am I?" she asked Eliza diffidently as they entered the drawing room to wait for Dorothea. "If you've got another story to write—"

Eliza snorted. "Oh, yes, you're so demanding that I barely have a moment to myself. Annabel, you silly thing—you don't know how happy I am to be here and not at home doing a poor job of helping my housekeeper make blackberry cordial and parsnip wine. What do you think I'm doing when you're napping or visiting Mrs. Coope?"

The first week or so after arriving in Bath, Annabel had been too weary and in pain to do more than drink the draughts of wretched-smelling water from the Pump Room that Winters fetched her twice daily, visit Mrs. Coope, the cousin to whom Mrs. Dunk had directed her who had an ancient, hidden hot spring in the cellar of her house near the old city walls, and submit to the poultices and lotions of Dr. Lee, the distinguished physician whom Sally was paying a great deal of Mr. Almack's money to pretend he had never heard of, much less treated, Lady Fellbridge.

Now the dreadful bruising and lacerations on her face and limbs were at last fading,

and while her ribs were still uncomfortable her wrist felt nearly as it ought. Really, she could almost call herself well again—if it were just a question of her body.

Her spirit was another matter.

“Let’s go for a walk,” she said suddenly.

“A walk?” Eliza looked up from the newspaper she’d picked up. “Now? But won’t the countess be here any moment now?”

“Just a short one. She’ll understand if we’re not here the instant she arrives. And it will give Mrs. Enderby a chance to have Dorothea all to herself for a few moments.”

Eliza regarded her for a moment, then nodded. “Let me go up to put on my hat and pelisse.”

Annabel followed her back up the stairs to let Winters help her on with hers. It had been uncomfortable at first for her bruised and battered body, but she had found that rambles in the common lands behind the house—Portland Place was removed from the more densely populated part of the city, which was why Sally had chosen it—were one of the few things that helped when the memories became too much. She let down the veil of her hat as she and Eliza gained the street and turned their steps toward the mowed fields at its upper end. She’d rather come to appreciate this addition to her wardrobe: not only did it keep her from being recognized—it did not seem wise to telegraph her whereabouts or the fact that she was not dead to any of the duke’s supporters who might be in Bath—but it also meant she did not need to guard her expression when the thoughts she was trying to out-walk caught up with her. Like now.

Annabel knew that, despite her injuries, what she and the Ladies had done in Brighton had been successful. They had kept a French agent from kidnapping Princess Charlotte, the king’s granddaughter and heiress to the throne; they had stopped hundreds of hostile French ghosts from being introduced into the houses of the highest in the land. And they had found proof that Lady Frances Dalrymple, once a trusted Lady Patroness herself, and her brother, the Duke of Carrick, were at the heart of a broad, villainous plan to oust the king and his family and take the throne with the help of Napoleon Bonaparte, turning Britain into a client kingdom of the French empire.

But now what? If only she had some idea how they could stop the duke and Frances...and find Quin. He had vanished on that dreadful night in Brighton with them and the Mellishes, the Dalrymple family’s loyal—and dangerous—retainers, leaving no sign as to where they had gone.

She still had nightmares about that night.

Sally, ever practical, had sent a pair of trusted footmen from Almack’s to make discreet inquiries in the towns near the duke’s seat in the west of Scotland and in Edinburgh. So far, there was no word of them there.

Then where *were* they? If they had gone to stay with one of the duke’s supporters, they could be anywhere in Great Britain. Which meant that until the duke chose to reveal his whereabouts, there was no way of knowing where Quin was—and Annabel was almost frantic with worry. The duke had seemed most displeased with Quin when he found them in Mrs. Dunk’s shack on the beach. What if Quin had been seen, later, by a stray Mellish sending Dorothea to find her? The duke—and Frances—were ruthless if they sensed disloyalty. She had good reason to know that—

“You’re thinking about Geoffrey again, aren’t you?” Eliza said.

“How do you know that?” She stopped walking and turned to face Eliza, smiling at her from two paces behind. “Oh. I’m walking too fast, aren’t I?” she said ruefully.

“That, and your shoulders are somewhere up around your ears.” Eliza caught up with her and took her arm.

Annabel forced them to relax. “Am I that transparent?”

“Yes, but don’t be embarrassed. I’m worrying about him too.”

Annabel nodded. Eliza’s late husband had been Quin’s best friend at university, and Quin had helped Eliza and her sons after his death. “It’s...if only I knew whether he is safe!”

“Is there a chance that he might have been able to write you a note or letter, but sent it to London or to your estate?”

“I’ve wondered that—but I don’t know. I wrote to my steward at Chalfont Abbey and to my butler in London to forward any letters to me here, just in case, but haven’t received anything from either of them.”

“Perhaps he thinks it’s safer for you if he doesn’t.”

“Yes, I’ve thought of that too. He—he asked me to marry him. In Brighton,” she added in a rush.

“Oh, my dear!” Eliza squeezed her arm, then laughed. “It was about time. I was afraid I’d have to lecture him the way I used to his godson when he was recalcitrant about doing his lessons.”

Annabel smiled. “I would give a lot to be in the room when you did.”

“Except I don’t think I’ll ever be able to lecture him again, if—no, when—he comes back safe.” Eliza gave herself a little shake. “We *must* believe he will. I personally can’t believe anyone capable of getting the better of him. Certainly not that tin-plate duke.”

Trust Eliza to find the perfect name for him. “I’m so glad you came.”

“I am, too, if only to meet your Russian lady.” She glanced behind them. “Do you suppose we ought to go back to the house? I thought I saw a carriage on the road a moment ago, over there.”

“That’s the Gloucester Road, I think, not the one she’ll be coming in on from London. But I expect we ought, even if it’s such a lovely afternoon,” she said regretfully. It *was* beautiful; the honey hue of the mowed fields complemented the pale glitter of the Cotswold stone from which most of Bath was built, and the soft, moist air and oblique rays of the October sun added their own gilding, so that the whole world seemed to be made of gold.

“I can’t imagine that any other season could exceed the loveliness of autumn here,” Eliza agreed as they turned their steps back toward Portland Place. “Do you suppose that this air might be just as health-giving as the waters?”

“It certainly smells better,” Annabel said, taking a deep breath. Her ribs barely complained; perhaps it *was* healing.

And if it was, then she should think about returning to London soon. It would be mostly empty of fashionable society right now, but that would mean fewer distractions while the Lady Patronesses figured out how to stop the Duke of Carrick from launching his coup. But how would they do that? They needed to know more—who his allies were, how advanced his plans...and what he would do next. Sally had to be doing all she could at this very moment; surely all the Ladies were. Even Georgiana was coming back from her repairing lease in the country, Emily had said when she was here.

It was time she did, too.

Sure enough, as they came around the corner of the last house from the common to Portland Place, a dark maroon traveling chariot with a team of job horses harnessed to it

could be seen drawn up before Mrs. Enderby's house. That lady herself, her flyaway gray hair even more flyaway than usual, was bowing Dorothea into the house. On the pavement Samuel, the footman, stood by looking bewildered while a woman who could only be Dorothea's maid upbraided in a foreign tongue a pair of enormous, bearded servants in curious but picturesque garb as they extracted more trunks and portmanteaux from the boot of the chariot than seemed possible. The post boys stood with their horses, goggling at them all, while Mrs. Enderby's cook and the kitchen and scullery maids could be seen peering with great interest from the railings by the area stairs.

But after taking in this scene in a quick, sweeping glance, Annabel's attention was wholly drawn by a second carriage pulled up before Dorothea's, being looked after by a vaguely familiar-looking man. A curricule, it was—a little worse for some splashed mud, perhaps, but its dashing yellow paint could not be obscured by mere road dust. Nor could the handsome pair of match bays who were harnessed to it—a pair she had often driven behind and knew well—

"Quin!" she breathed, just as Eliza gripped her arm and gasped, "Geoffrey!" As one, they ran the short distance down the street and up the sedan chair ramp to the house, Annabel barely noticing the growing discomfort in her ribs. How had he found her here? Had he escaped Frances and the duke—permanently or otherwise? The afternoon sun seemed to glow even more brightly. Quin was here!

Mrs. Enderby had already gone inside, but the quick patter of their half-boots on the pavement must have been loud enough to draw Dorothea's attention, for she had paused on the front step, shading her eyes. "By the blessed mother, are you so happy to see me that you must run to greet me?" she called, sounding very amused. Her traveling pelisse and hat, including the ribbons and ostrich tips decorating it, precisely matched the maroon of her carriage. "You are looking much better than when I last saw you in that hideous Brighton, *ma chère*."

Annabel pressed her hands to her sides and tried to find enough breath to speak. Eliza had no such difficulty. "Mrs. Enderby! That curricule—is Lord Quinceton here?"

"Quin *here*?" Dorothea said sharply, looking around.

"Oh, my lady, there you are!" Mrs. Enderby thrust her head out the door again. "Arrived just a minute before her ladyship here, he did. A lord, is he? He wouldn't give his name but seems very desirous of seeing you. He's just right here. If I'd *known* he was a lord I would have sent him up to the drawing room, but seeing he wouldn't tell me his name I didn't feel quite right sending him up there—"

Thanks to some miracle of geometry and Mrs. Enderby's sense of self-preservation, which enabled her to leap out of their path just in time, Annabel and Eliza made it through the open door without tripping over each other, through the vestibule, and into the hall.

A man clad in a dusty caped driving coat was just rising from a bench set below the stairs, hat in hand. "Your ladyship," he said in a voice expressive of something between relief and apprehension, bowing to Annabel as he did. "Thank god I found you!"

It was not Quin. It was his valet, Somers.

* * *

Though she would, in retrospect, have enjoyed a good faint just then to relieve her feelings, Annabel did no such thing. "Somers! What are you—that is, where is—is your

master with you? Is he here in Bath?" She clutched Eliza's arm. "Eliza, you've met Somers, have you not?"

She herself had met Quin's valet in Epsom, where he had sat guard outside Quin's monstrous tent (the memory of which lifted the corners of her mouth even at such a moment.) He had seemed a resourceful person; she also knew that Winters had enjoyed his company in Brighton on several occasions. *I shall have to tell her he's here*, she thought. After she found out where Quin was.

"Yes, indeed." Eliza, bless her, still seemed capable of speaking quietly and in complete sentences. "Somers, you will greatly relieve Lady Fellbridge and me if you will inform us of Lord Quinceton's whereabouts. Is he in Bath?"

"No, ma'am," he said reluctantly. "I wish he were!"

Annabel's elation withered as quickly as it had bloomed. "Where is he?"

Poor Somers opened his mouth, then glanced past Annabel and Eliza. "I...ah...don't think..."

Annabel turned. Dorothea, Mrs. Enderby, Dorothea's maid, Samuel the footman, and Dorothea's two manservants, each bearing a trunk on a broad shoulder, crowded the vestibule, gazing wide-eyed back at her. Whether the cook, the kitchen maid, and the scullery maid were there too could not be discerned.

Dorothea was the first to regain her senses. "Madame, would you be so good as to direct my maid to my chamber, so that she may see that my trunks are brought in properly?" she said to Mrs. Enderby. "And I believe that Lady Fellbridge and the rest of us are in great need of a quiet room and, if it can be managed, some refreshments."

That seemed to release everyone. "My cakes!" Mrs. Enderby gasped, remembering.

"They be fine, mam! I took 'em out of the oven jes' a moment ago," a voice called from behind the trunks. Evidently Cook *was* there. "I'll just go and pour the tea. And send Jane here to fetch a bottle of the apricot cordial from the cellar."

"Oh, thank goodness," Mrs. Enderby breathed, then shooed everyone aside. "This way, your ladyship, if you please," she said.

"You—come with us," Dorothea said to Somers as she passed him.

"Certainly, ma'am!"

At the top of the stairs, Dorothea didn't pause but marched into the drawing room with Annabel, Eliza, and Somers while Mrs. Enderby shepherded the servants up the next flight.

"The door, if you please," Dorothea said to no one in particular as she took Annabel's arm and drew her to the sofa.

Somers leapt to close it.

"Good." Dorothea directed Eliza and Somers to chairs with a glance, then folded her hands in her lap. "What," she demanded, "is going on here?"

"We thought—" Annabel said.

"We saw—" Eliza said at the same time.

"I was told—" Somers began.

"*Nyet!*" Dorothea's very curls seemed to bristle with exasperation—which they probably had, Annabel reflected. "It is not at all helpful for you to speak all at once. You first, *ma chère amie*," she said to Annabel. "How do you do here? You seem much better than when last I saw you."

"I'm quite well—that is, much improved," she amended at the pointed "ahem!" from Eliza. "Well enough for Mrs. Denton and me to have been enjoying a walk just now

when we saw Quin's curricule..." She turned to Somers. "If he isn't in Bath, then where is he? Do you have a message from him, perhaps? Is he somewhere nearby?" It would be a tremendous relief to know he was near, even if she could not see him right away.

"Your ladyship, I—" He swallowed convulsively, and Annabel realized that the poor fellow was close to—was it exhaustion, or something worse? Her hopes dimmed further. "He is not...ill, is he? Or—"

"No! But—" He glanced at Dorothea and Eliza, then looked at her. "I'm not certain I ought to say more at this time."

"Whatever you would say to me, you may say to Countess Lieven and Mrs. Denton. They are fully in my confidence."

Dorothea was watching him curiously. "I take it, then, that Quin is alive, but all is not well. Do you know where he is?"

Somers grimaced. "Only about thirty-odd miles northeast of here, your ladyship. At Sayre Hill."

"His *house!*' Eliza exclaimed. "Of course!"

Annabel knew that Sayre Hill was Quin's family's principal seat, somewhere in the Cotswolds. "Is it really only thirty miles from here?"

"Yes, ma'am. But it might as well be in the antipodes," he added.

"Why do you say that?"

Just then, the doors to the drawing room were flung open. "Here we are!' Mrs. Enderby announced, bustling into the room. "Did you think we had forgotten you? Poor Lady Lieven, you must be sorely in need of refreshment! But I am happy to tell you that your belongings will all be in your room shortly."

In Mrs. Enderby's wake her parlor-maid, Jane-the-Greater (so called to distinguish her from the more slightly-built kitchen-maid, Jane-the-Lesser, who despised the name) staggered in under the weight of an enormous tray. Somers leapt to his feet to relieve her of it—the decanter of apricot cordial seemed in danger of toppling to the floor—and set it on a table.

"Oh, thank you, my lord!" Mrs. Enderby beamed at him. "So kind of you! Please excuse me for not seeing you up here earlier, but as you may see, we are all at sixes and sevens today! Jane, you may go, but please inform her ladyship's servants that they may go to the kitchen for a bite as well." She seated herself by the tray and looked it over critically. "Oh, I do hope she didn't take those cakes out of the oven too soon. Now, I can never remember who ought to be offered something first, but I should think Lady Lieven could do with something after being stuck in a chaise all day—not that it isn't a perfectly lovely one," she added. "I do think maroon an especially handsome color for a nobleman's equipage. Now, I have tea in case you'd prefer a hot drink—though I can't think you'd have taken a chill on such a clement afternoon—or there's lemonade or my apricot cordial from last year which I think came out very well, but then it was a good year for the fruit." Without waiting for an answer, she poured out a cup of tea, added sugar and milk, and smiled coquettishly at Somers. "May I trouble your lordship to hand this to Lady Lieven? Yes, that's right. Now, I imagine Lady Fellbridge would like a cup of tea as well. Warm drinks are much better for those recovering their health, I've always observed. But you would scarce credit she'd been unwell, would you, my lord—not with those roses in her cheeks. One doesn't have to look far to find the one who put them there, does one?" She practically winked at him. "You may bring this cup to her, and see for yourself."

Annabel gave him an apologetic look as he brought her the tea. Mrs. Enderby had somehow got it in her head that Somers was here to see her as a *suitor*, of all things...and how were they supposed to discuss the true reason why he was here when Mrs. Enderby was happily dispensing tea and cakes in what was, after all, her own drawing room? Still, she could at least correct her misapprehension about Somers. "Mrs. Enderby, I'm afraid you're—"

"What was that, Lady Fellbridge?" But she was already turning to beam upon Somers. "Now, I'm sure your lordship would prefer something other than tea. 'Cat lap' was what my dear Mr. Enderby used to call it, and I must say that I think he was justified in doing so, for all the tabbies of Bath do like to sip their tea as they gossip away! I shall pour you a glass of my cordial, shall I? Gentlemen do seem to like it—not that I entertain many here, being a widow in quiet circumstances—"

"Did you say that my servants were to have refreshments in your kitchen?" Dorothea said suddenly, with an arrested look.

Mrs. Enderby paused in the middle of unstopping the apricot cordial. "Why, yes, I did. I thought they might—"

"And you have your servants there—a kitchen maid or two? Do you have a chef, or a cook?"

"Gracious!" She gave a little laugh. "A cook, of course. What would I be doing with a chef in my hou—"

Dorothea sighed. "Oh, *chort*. My Grischa and Igor—they should not be left alone with just women about them. They are very—how does one say it in English? They are very—"

Mrs. Enderby had set down the cordial and was already on her feet, looking pale. "Will you please excuse me, your ladyships—and my lord too?" she said to Somers. Before he could politely rise or react in any way, she had fled.

Annabel tried to not laugh, but failed. "Oh, Dorothea!"

"What?"

"Poor Mrs. Enderby! What a fright you gave her!"

"If, Dorothea said loftily, "she had waited a moment, I could of course have explained everything to her."

"Of course," Annabel said drily.

Eliza was regarding Dorothea with awe. "That was the most extraordinary demonstration of extreme presence of mind that I have ever seen—unless your servants are indeed—"

Dorothea snorted. "No. Misha and Igor are terrified of women, and will likely be cowering in a corner with teacups upon their knees, muttering prayers under their breath. They seem to have this effect on young women, they tell me, and are at a loss fo . But your Mrs. Enderby won't know that, and will stay down there to protect everyone's virtue and leave us in peace to talk. Now then," she said to Somers. "What were you saying?"

He stood up and bowed to her. "I must agree with Mrs. Denton's assessment—that was masterfully done."

"Pshh." She shook her curls. "The situation only wanted managing. Pray, continue. What is Quin doing at his house with those...those *people*?"

Annabel concealed a smile. Only Dorothea could invest the word 'people' with such contemptuous loathing.

Somers resumed his seat and was silent for a moment, as if ordering his thoughts. "I—I think perhaps that I ought to start at the beginning, if I may. When we left Brighton."

Dorothea glanced at Annabel, one eyebrow raised. After an instant's pause—how much did he actually know about the deadly double game his master was playing with the Duke of Carrick?—she nodded. They would have to be careful, at least until they knew what he knew. "Please do that, Somers."

"Thank you. It was the night of that concert at the Black Porpoise. You were there, ma'am," he said to Annabel.

"Yes, I was," she said, and barely shivered. "For part of it."

"I recall Miss Winters being concerned by your having left." He paused, and Annabel guessed he would very much have liked to inquire after Winters. "After it, I returned to my lord's lodgings. He was not there, but then he very rarely was in the evening. The duke and Lady Frances demanded a great deal of his time."

She remembered the mingled happiness and pain of seeing him at the duke's house so frequently, every day, but enduring being treated by him as the merest acquaintance. "Yes, they—yes."

"Indeed. It was my custom in the evenings to take a short walk after dining, then return to my lord's rooms to await him. I was slightly but not unduly concerned when he had not returned by midnight; he occasionally was out later. By one o'clock I was more so. I was very worried indeed by the time he did return shortly before two, especially as he was in a state of extreme upset. He paused and looked keenly at Annabel. "He told me you were dead, ma'am."

Eliza gasped aloud. Annabel made no sound, but it wasn't until Dorothea had reached over and untwisted them did she realize that her hands were clenched in a tight knot.

"I believe a glass of that cordial would be welcome for all of us," Dorothea said.

Somers leapt up and poured, bring Annabel the first one. She took it with a strained word of thanks. Oh, poor Quin! How devastated he must have been...in fact, just as she had over these last weeks of not knowing where he was or if he were well and whole. "But surely he knows by now that I am not!" she said after a sip from her glass.

Somers shook his head. "I don't know, my lady. When I last saw him, neither of us knew that. It wasn't until I got to London—"

"No," Eliza put in. "In order, if you please. And no more dramatic pronouncements. I don't believe my heart can stand it, and *I* write novels."

Somers reddened slightly but returned her smile as he handed her a glass. "I am sorry, ma'am. I've rather felt myself to be living in the pages of a novel these last weeks. Only it's deadly serious, isn't it?" He paused, then continued, "As I said, he told me that Lady Fellbridge was dead and that the duke and his sister were leaving Brighton that night, and that we were accompanying them. Or rather, that they were accompanying us to Sayre Hill, where they would all live as quietly as possible for a few weeks until...until any unpleasantness blew over. We left the hotel almost within the hour."

"You did not travel with the duke?" Dorothea asked. "I am astonished Frances permitted it."

"I don't believe my lord could have stood it. He was...not himself, and I believe he feared he would give away his true feelings if he were confined to a carriage with them. I know that he only tolerated them, ma'am, for his own reasons," he added to her. "He

said he told them that he wished to go on ahead to prepare the house for them. Even though we went to London first to leave the curricule and took a post chaise to Gloucester, we still arrived two days ahead of them. Enough time for the staff to ready the Royal Suite for the duke." His mouth twisted. "Both Charles the First and the Second stayed there at different times. The duke liked that."

Ah, so he must have some idea of what was going on. "What happened next?"

"For the first few days, not very much. Then all the Mellish servants arrived, and Lady Frances took great pleasure in wandering through the house and criticizing the arrangements, much to the dismay of my lord's housekeeper, Mrs. Adams, who scurried behind her, meekly taking notes about what her ladyship thought needed improvement. The poor woman felt as if she'd disgraced him; we had to talk her out of resigning on the spot.

"We need not have bothered, because a day later, we were all shocked to hear that she had been... 'retired' is how it was put, but had basically been sacked. She would likely have been stepping down in a year or two anyway as her eyesight was failing, but the way it was done, with that cow—er, Lady Frances practically oozing syrup as she wished Mrs. Adams a well-deserved rest. The only thing that kept the rest of the staff from grumbling too much was that his lordship quietly gave her £500 as she left. At least she would be comfortable, going to live with a niece in Minchinhampton."

"That was extraordinarily generous of him!" Dorothea exclaimed.

"Geoffrey is an extraordinarily generous man," Eliza said quietly.

"He is indeed, ma'am," Somers said. "I have reason to know that very well. But the rest of his servants took cold comfort from that. They all assumed that his lordship was about to make Lady Frances an offer. Why else would he have dismissed such a valued servant as Mrs. Adams, if not to please her? And no one was happy at the thought of her as their new mistress.

"The next day was the cook's turn. She'd not been there as long as Mrs. Adams, but was still well-enough liked—except by Lady Frances, who was very unhappy that there was no 'proper' porridge at breakfast and that the pastry in the game pie at dinner was a little too flaky and had caused his grace to cough after inhaling a crumb. His lordship gave her an equally generous gift as she left."

"These are not the actions of a sane man," Dorothea pronounced. "To dismiss your housekeeper and your cook within a day of each other? Madness! What is wrong with Quin?"

"The Mellishes," Annabel said.

Somers nodded. "That was exactly it, ma'am. Two of Mr. Mellish's aunts stepped into the positions at once."

"Pfft." Dorothea shrugged impatiently. "But why? What does it matter whether one's cook has one last name or another, so long as the dinner is on the table when asked for? And what concern is it of Frances's? It is not her house."

"It is a means of control." Eliza's face had grown pale. "And of possession."

"Possession?" Dorothea's lip curled in distaste. "But why is he allowing her to do it? We know he does not care for her, and he cannot be afraid of her!"

"I don't think he is." Eliza turned to Somers. "Whose idea was it that they should go to Lord Quinceton's house?"

"I believe it was Lady Frances's. My lord did not specifically say so, but that's the impression I received."

“Hmm. I expected as much. What happened next? More dismissals?”

He looked at her a little suspiciously. “All four of the footmen. They made Lady Frances uneasy, it seems. The day after that, the head coachman. Then the first and second housemaids.”

“Housemaids? How thorough of her,” Eliza said drily. “All of whom were promptly replaced by Frances’s servants?”

“Yes, ma’am. More Mellishes.”

“Was the butler sacked next?” Dorothea asked, clearly intrigued in spite of herself.

“No, your ladyship. He handed in his resignation the same day that my lord sent me to London.”

“Ah, I wondered what he would choose to do with you,” Eliza said. “What excuse did he find to send you to London?”

“To close up his rooms. He hadn’t opened Quinceton House for some years but still used a bedroom and the study there, and wished me to fetch back his belongings from there as he did not expect to be returning for some time.” Somers had been gazing down at his lap. Now he looked up at her. “How did you guess, ma’am?”

She smiled sadly. “Because I know him. And I write novels, as I said earlier.”

“What are you two talking about?” Dorothea demanded. “Why did he send you London if not to do what he requested?”

Somers gave her an apologetic glance. “The day after I arrived, I was packing up his lordship’s things with the help of his groom Jasper, who’d just arrived from bringing back his bays from the first stage after Brighton where he’d changed them when we left. A letter arrived at the house, post-paid, addressed to me, and enclosing a note for Jasper. His lordship was dismissing us both. Jasper was to have his curricule and bays and a sum of money my lord had arranged for him to receive from his bank. I was to have whatever of his personal belongings I cared to have, plus another sum from the bank. I was to leave the keys to the house with the bank when we went for our money, and that was it. We were no longer in his employ.”

“Do not judge him too harshly,” Eliza said. “It is only that he could not bear to give you his *congé* in person.”

“This is nonsense!” Dorothea cried. “Why is he doing this?”

“To protect his people,” Annabel said simply.

“Precisely,” Eliza agreed. “Just as he tried to do to us.”

“To protect us? From Lady Frances?” Somers was incredulous. “But she’s—well, isn’t she a bit of a fool? I cannot see that she’s at all dangerous—”

“She is extremely dangerous,” Annabel said, remembering Lord Rossing. Would they ever know what she had done to him and Lady Rossing? “As is the duke, who told your master I was dead—because he had just done his best to kill me, and left me on the beach in Brighton for the tide to finish the task.”

Somers gaped at her in horror. “Good god!”

Dorothea was frowning. “If we are discussing danger to anyone, especially Lady Fellbridge, I should like to know how you learned that she was here.”

He gave a small start. “I beg your pardon—I should have said. It was an accident, as it happens. I—*we*, now, as poor Jasper was in the same situation—were in something of a daze after receiving that letter from my lord. Neither of us wants to leave him, so we spent the next few days staying in the mews at Quinceton House—we hoped that he would not mind—trying to think of anything we could do about it. Jasper carried the

bays a great deal—I expect he finds it soothing. I walked—all over St. James and Mayfair, and around and around the parks—until one morning I found myself in Chesterfield Street.”

“Ah,” Dorothea said.

“I, er, remembered that you had lived there, ma’am,” he said to Annabel, his face reddening. “Since the knocker was up on the front door, I thought that I would enquire after”—he coughed slightly—“after Miss Winters. It seemed a little odd to me that there were no signs of mourning on the house, but I went to the servants’ entrance and knocked. A kitchen maid let me in and fetched your butler. I don’t know which of us was more taken aback when I offered my condolences and asked if Miss Winters had found a new place yet; he looked exceedingly puzzled and said she was at her usual place with you, though away from home at present.”

Annabel smiled. “I imagine he was thoroughly confused. Pray continue.”

“I suspect I confused him further as I grew quite...er, animated, and he made your cook give me a glass of sherry with an egg beaten into it and saw to it that I drank it. But I could not help myself; it seemed like a sign, ma’am. If you were alive, then maybe his lordship could be saved as well. I asked Mr. Hanscomb for your direction; he was reluctant to give it, as he said you had been ill and were away to recuperate. I’m afraid I misled him somewhat and indicated that my interest was solely in corresponding with Miss Winters. He did not fully approve of that, but I was...persistent. Jasper and I left London at dawn the next morning, and though it took longer than I expected, here we are.” He glanced down at his feet, then up at her. “I cannot help feeling, your ladyship, that there something...*providential* about your being here, and his lordship just half a day away.”

Half a day. Annabel clutched that thought to her. Quin was alive and only half a day away.

“But that is excellent,” Dorothea said. “When do we leave?”

“Leave? I doubt that Quin is receiving callers just now,” Eliza said.

“No, not to call on him,” she replied impatiently. “To rescue him.”