

Chapter One

London 1816

"We've done it!"

Lucia Wright looked around for the source of the exclamation, knocked her knife off her plate and made a futile grab for the implement as it skittered across her lap and down the front of the tablecloth, leaving a trail of butter grease and orange marmalade in its wake. It came to rest against the table leg just out of her reach. With an apologetic glance at her friend Eugenie, she returned her attention to the informal, bustling breakfast table at the Bayles' home—a much livelier meal than she could ever imagine having at home in the country with her brother and sister.

Eugenie's sister Sophie waved a buff-colored card with a triumphant flourish before setting it in front of her father. "An invitation to the Adrington soirée."

"Congratulations, my dear." Mr. Bayles smiled as he spoke to his daughter but kept his attention focused on a slice of toast as he succeeded in spreading marmalade just to the very edge without running over the sides. Only then did he look up to speak to Sophie directly. "You've worked with exceeding diligence to make the acquaintance in time."

"And put in a fair bit of unwarranted flattery," Eugenie added with grin.

"What was that about flattery?" Mrs. Bayles asked, her hand poised in midair as she prepared to strike the lethal blow to the shell of her boiled egg.

"Nothing directed at you, Mother," Eugenie assured her. She winked at Lucia, then turned her gaze toward the door. "Ah, morning mail. I thought I heard the bell a moment ago. You'll forgive us if we read at the breakfast table? It is rude with a guest in the house, but you see, we shall all behave as if you were one of the family."

As if waiting for his cue, a footman entered and began circling the breakfast table, depositing a few cards in front of diners who received them with varying degrees of interest. To Lucia's surprise, a letter appeared in front of her plate as well—a letter addressed in Helen's faint, half-inked scrawl. She reached out to take the folded paper into her hands but could not bring herself to open it.

"I see that my sister already usurped your role as the bearer of good tidings, Allen," Eugenie offered sympathetically to the footman as he turned away.

Allen nodded, a hurt expression barely visible in his eyes.

"Do you see what I must contend with here?" Eugenie asked Lucia. "Sophie, you are the cruelest sister imaginable. The one joy that man gets is to be the conduit of communication, and you have to go and wrest the letter from his hand."

"He never took hold of it, actually." Sophie sucked at a paper cut on her finger. "I saw the postman from the window and managed to reach the—"

"You did *what*?" Mrs. Bayles demanded, pointing her spoon accusingly at her daughter.

"Nothing, Mother." Sophie suppressed a giggle, casting a guilty glance at both her sister and Lucia before resolutely focusing her gaze on her plate.

"I heard something about the door," Mrs. Bayles insisted.

"No, I was, um, pacing the *floor*. Waiting for the post."

"Oh." Mrs. Bayles' expression faded from disbelief to disinterest.

Lucia glanced at the letter in her hand, then tucked it under her plate. Why would Helen have written so soon? Lucia had only reached London the previous evening, so her sister would have had to have posted the letter less than a day after Lucia's departure. Could something disastrous have transpired in such a short interval? It seemed unlikely, and yet...

"Look, look at this one!" Sophie hoisted another card to wave about the table, this one the hue of dried pea soup.

"That is truly a hideous color," Eugenie pronounced. "Nothing that color should be permitted to exist."

"Not the color, you cake. The crest. The Earl of Rathley. An invitation to his ball, as well."

Lucia kept her gaze focused on Eugenie and Sophie so that she would not look at her sister's letter.

"No more than we expected, of course." Mr. Bayles eyed his toast from another angle. "Since his cousin—"

"Yes, yes, I know," Sophie interrupted. "But it's a relief to have the invitation in hand. And then Tulliver has secured tickets for the opera for tomorrow." She stuffed a piece of cold partridge into her mouth.

Mrs. Bayles slammed her cup of chocolate onto the table, setting all the dishes clattering as she glared at Sophie. "You really must not do that, dear!"

"oo 'at?" Sophie appeared stunned at her mother's outburst.

Eugenie leaned in toward her. "Talk with your mouth full, dear sister."

Sophie swallowed. "What did I do, Mother?"

"You should not refer to the baronet as 'Tulliver'. It is most unseemly."

"He does not mind it."

"Does that mean it is acceptable for her to speak with her mouth full?" Eugenie demanded.

Lucia smothered a laugh, thoroughly enjoying the feminine repartee she had not experienced since her days in school.

Mrs. Bayles ignored Eugenie and kept her gaze riveted on her other daughter. "Have you actually addressed the baronet in such an informal fashion?"

Sophie shrugged. "On occasion."

"Oh, dear." Mrs. Bayles shuddered.

"And with your mouth full of bacon, too, no doubt." Eugenie affected a shudder that would have been sufficient for both herself and her mother.

"We shall discuss this later," Mrs. Bayles announced with a meaningful look at Sophie.

"Ahem." Mr. Bayles looked up. "Would you please stop shuddering? You've set the dishes to rattle again."

"Sorry, Papa."

Mr. Bayles then turned his gaze to Lucia for the first time that morning. "What is our guest to think? You two girls prattling on about bacon and earls while the poor girl is trying to read a letter."

Silence hung almost palpably over the table for exactly three seconds.

"I am sorry, dear. Do not mind us a bit." Eugenie patted Lucia's hand. "Is that a letter from one of the twins?"

"It...it is." Lucia looked down at the paper under her plate with some reluctance. It was far more fun to observe the Bayles family antics than to contemplate those of her own family.

"I hope all is well at home?"

"I hope so too. I've not had time to read as much yet."

"You mean you've not had the opportunity." Eugenie smiled. "We have been nattering on too much. I promise to keep as silent as the grave while you read your letter. You must as well, Sophie."

"I must what?"

"Must promise to keep silent as the grave."

"The grave?" Sophie grimaced. "Can we not pick something a little less morbid for the breakfast table?"

"Very well. As silent as...for the life of me, I cannot think of something silent."

"I wonder why?" Mr. Bayles sighed.

"Never mind. Silent as the grave." Eugenie nodded at Lucia. "I promise."

Lucia picked up the letter warily. "Perhaps I should read it later."

"Nonsense. It is from your family. You must read it now. We will keep silence." Eugenie looked around the table with a ferocious gaze. Then her expression abruptly changed. "Oh—is that the card from the Adringtons?"

"I must say, Eugenie, if ever I came across a grave as noisy as yours, I would send for an occultist straightaway." Sophie handed the card to her sister.

Eugenie's eyes widened. "I am so sorry, Lucia."

"Lucia, I think you may as well learn to ignore your dear school chum and go ahead and read while she is talking," Sophie offered.

Lucia forced a smile. "If you must know, my sister's writing is rather...difficult to decipher. It takes a bit of concentration to read one of her letters."

"I comprehend you perfectly," Eugenie replied with a conspiratorial nod. "My sister also writes with a dreadful hand."

Lucia smiled again. Would that handwriting were the only difficulty! The inanity of her sister Helen's prose, interspersed as it was with miscellaneous measured observations, made it virtually impossible to discern the actual news of the letter. Yet with Geoffrey in the house, Helen was sure to have news of some sort, the only question being whether her news was slightly bad, amusingly bad or terribly bad.

Due to some miracle—or perhaps the fresh rack of toast Allen had just placed on the table—the room fell silent long enough for Lucia to plunge into her sister's narrative with grim determination.

After a few horrendous minutes, Lucia pulled herself free from her sister's words when she realized someone was speaking to her. "I'm sorry. What did you say?" She could not even have told who had called her.

"I said, you've picked a most fortuitous time for a visit, Miss Wright." Mr. Bayles waved his toast, which was still unmarred by any signs of consumption. "What with the earl's ball, the opera and now the Adrington soirée, your visit could not get off to a more splendid start. What say you?"

"I must go home." Lucia set down the letter with determination.

"What?" Mrs. Bayles' empty chocolate cup clattered to the table.

"Surely you jest, Miss Wright." The toast faltered in Mr. Bayles' hand.

Eugenie leaned over to Lucia and patted her arm with reassurance. "I know you worry about your brother and sister. And after a good visit, you will—"

Lucia shook her head. "I must go home now. Today."

Eugenie abandoned her toast with only the faintest hint of reluctance. "Perhaps we'd better excuse ourselves from the company."

"Yes, thank you." Lucia stood, faltering a bit as she stepped on the knife she had knocked off the table earlier. "I need to...but, Eugenie, you need not—"

"Oh yes, I need to." Eugenie had bounded to her feet and pulled Lucia halfway to the door before she could protest.

"Do you not want to finish your—"

"No. Let us go. A pleasant morning to you all!" Eugenie waved cheerily as she pushed Lucia out the door and into the hall. Once outside the room, her grin vanished. "We will discuss the matter upstairs."

"Eugenie, this is not for—"

"I will not let you leave this time." Eugenie dragged her toward the stairs.

"But you do not understand." Lucia wrenched her arm free. "Geoffrey —"

"I will not stand by and let Geoffrey ruin your life."

"Well." Lucia smiled weakly. "I am afraid it's rather a bit too late for that."

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"So you see," Lucia stared at the chest of drawers in Eugenie's bedroom as she concluded her narrative, "I have to go home now."

"No, I do not see. I think it is wonderful that Geoffrey's taken a pastime."

Lucia snorted in derision, her embarrassment at the rude sound eroded by her disgust at the contemplation of her brother's habits. "Geoffrey does not take up pastimes. He takes on occupations."

"So? Whatever he chooses to call it, it will keep him busy and it will keep him out of the house."

"If any of the house remains," Lucia muttered.

"What?"

"Listen, Eugenie. You don't understand about Geoffrey. He...proceeds with rather more zeal than sense. When Geoffrey took up the practice of law, he stole our neighbor's horse so he could then offer representation in a conversion action. He was most distressed when Mrs. MacGill refused his offer to represent her in her suit against himself. When he wanted to be a blacksmith, he decided he could get the hottest fire from the fireplace in the main drawing room. He started building a forge—we've never come up with a good way to cover the scorch marks on the floor. In preparation for his planned life as a naval officer, he sank the tea chest and two chests of flatware in a mock battle in Blackridge pond. Last month, he decided he was going to be a chimney sweep, despite the fact that he's nearly eighteen years of age and taller than many full-grown men. He got stuck somewhere between the flue to the dining room and the one leading to his bedroom. It took three local men the better part of an afternoon to free him—and he was still occasionally coughing up wads of black phlegm when I left." She smacked her hands together with a sigh, wishing that once, just once, her family could manage without her having to oversee every minute detail of daily life. "I never should have gone off. He simply cannot be trusted on his own."

"But he's not on his own. Your sister, Helen, is with him and she can take care of him for a few weeks. Or your stepfather—surely he might help."

"Helen is not much better, I'm afraid."

"What? I knew Geoffrey was always a bit of a difficult cracker, but you've never let on that Helen, that dear young thing, was... Well, how bad is she?"

"Not as bad as Geoffrey, of course. Not yet, at least. And her...eccentricities aren't so dangerous. Of course, one day she did fall into the river while collecting her daily sample, but on the whole—"

"Her sample?"

"She collects samples of river water at certain times of the day."

"Oh. That sounds rather...scientific of her."

"Yes, she catalogs her samples in a very studious manner, and some of her findings have even piqued interest at the Royal Society." Lucia sighed. "I just wish she wouldn't insist on keeping all of her collections."

"So she cannot keep an eye on your brother."

"No. Not unless he decides to take up a career as a gill of river water or a measure of garden soil."

"But your stepfather, now, surely he can help."

Lucia shook her head sadly. "I am the only one who can take care of them. My stepfather rarely comes near the house. Or the county, for that matter. I think he cannot bear to see how they are. Or perhaps they remind him too much of Mother. Who knows? He has his solicitor ensure that we've adequate funds to keep the estate, but not enough to run away. And so there we shall all stay, as he says, 'perfectly comfortable together for all our days'."

This time it was Eugenie who snorted. "Perfectly dreadful together, I'd say."

Lucia smiled. "It's not dreadful at all. I love Helen, and Geoffrey too. He really is the sweetest boy. And I know they love me. We've enough money to meet our needs. And so we *shall* all be 'perfectly comfortable' for —"

"Rubbish. If you were perfectly happy, you would not have come here."

"But that was a mistake, I told you. I simply wanted to see your family again. And to see London as —"

"As a grown lady. The places we were not allowed before."

Lucia let a small giggle escape her lips. "Yes, exactly."

"You cannot see those places if you leave now."

"I know," Lucia sighed, "but Geoffrey —"

"How is it that Geoffrey controls your life even when he is miles away?"

Lucia sighed again. "I've told you of his previous forays into the working world. Now Helen tells me he intends to take up hunting."

"Good. The exercise will be splendid, and it is only dangerous for the fox, you know."

"No, not hunting for sport. Geoffrey intends to 'put meat on the table', as she phrased it. He's secured a rifle and has been shooting at targets in the garden. Helen said he takes the occasional shot at the chickens in the Johnson's yard. Apparently Geoffrey's next intended occupation is to work as a poacher. Mr. Johnson has never had much patience with Geoffrey. And *he's* said to be an excellent shot." Lucia shook her head, resignation already pushing aside all thoughts of the exciting visit she had anticipated for nearly a year. "So you see, I must return home."

Eugenie nodded as if in agreement, but something in her eyes indicated that she did not agree at all.

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"Would you like to have Peggy arrange your hair?"

"No." Lucia could barely conceal her frustration as she paced in front of the chest of drawers in Eugenie's room for the third day in a row. "What good would that do?"

"It would save the wear on the carpet from you pacing back and forth."

Lucia sank into the nearest chair. "I am sorry. I just do not see any point to all this fuss. I should be packing to leave, not primping for somebody's soiree." It was unfair for her to take out her aggravation on her friend, but the constant worry for Geoffrey and Helen's safety had worn her nerves to shreds. Never before had she felt so helpless.

"You cannot leave until Father is ready to escort you. Unless you've brought money to hire a private carriage?"

Lucia looked down at the floor, twisting her slipper around the leg of her chair. "No, I have not."

"That was not fair of me and I am sorry. You should not travel on your own in any case. And while you wait for Father, you may as well enjoy the attractions of the city you came to visit."

"I came to visit you and your family, not a city."

"You came for both, and I perfectly understand. But to use your own argument, it would be poor manners indeed for you to leave without a proper visit. You've not had full benefit of our company yet."

"Very well, you know I've agreed to stay on until Saturday. But I do not see why I must accompany you out tonight."

"You must accompany me because any unattached *femme* in her right mind would sell her soul for an opportunity to meet the gentlemen of Adrington's acquaintance."

"I'm not in the market, Eugenie."

"We'll see about that."

Chapter Two

"You realize that you are not truly obligated to marry her."

Edmund Rutherford turned at the sound of his friend Adrington's low voice. "Oh, but I am," he answered softly as they watched a small circle of ladies and gentlemen flirt with one another across the room.

"No court in the land would hold that promise enforceable. And a breach of marriage suit may be paid off like any other," Adrington insisted.

One of the ladies in the group they watched, dressed in a sheer yellow gown that glowed almost translucent under the bright light of the chandelier, tipped her head back too far and uttered a coarse laugh that echoed off the polished marble floor.

Edmund closed his eyes for a moment but did not allow himself to turn away. "The promise was made on her mother's deathbed. Her family relies upon the connection, the acquisition of the title. My mother promised hers that our families would be joined forever by the match." He shook his head. "Such a promise cannot be set aside like an inconvenient contract for the sale of a horse."

"So you would have yourself bound to the purchase of that animal, whether or not you want it, regardless of the fact that it might perhaps have been ridden before?"

Edmund sighed. "Choose your words with care, sir, for though you are my closest friend and we stand in your house, I will not let you cast aspersions on my intended bride."

"Who said anything about Miss Newman?" Lord James Adrington smiled. "I thought we spoke of horses. Come, I do not believe you have yet paid your respects to Mother and Aunt Darlet."

Edmund allowed himself to be turned away toward the back of the room where older ladies and gentlemen not inclined to dance or speculate on the matches to be made during the season had already begun to size up potential whist opponents. The same annoying laugh echoed across the floor behind him, but now he no longer had to watch Jeanne.

He only had to listen. Every so often, as he exchanged pleasantries with Adrington's older relations, he could discern Jeanne's voice above that of the others, followed by that almost ribald laughter. He could imagine the flirtatious flip of her eyelashes, her pouting lips, a playful slap on a companion's arm—all gestures of which he had long since tired but other gentlemen seemed to still find intriguing.

Why, then, could one of them not be engaged to marry her instead?

"Rutherford, I do hope you will excuse me. I must see to some other guests. I suggest you try some of the Madeira—it is good enough to enable you to forget your troubles with remarkable speed."

Edmund nodded. "And everything else as well, I imagine. Very well, I shall endeavor to obtain a healthy glass of your remedy."

But once Adrington had left his side, Edmund decided to seek solace not in drink but in solitude. Because he had to think.

For the past two years, he had tried every imaginable means of discouraging Jeanne Newman from sustaining the betrothal arranged for them at her birth. But she would not be discouraged. Nor would she keep her flirtatious behavior in check. Any words from him seemed only to encourage her to greater indiscretions. Or else it would lead to a tearful scene where she begged him to set a date, accusing him of breaking the promise and failing his obligation.

For some time now, he had used his mother's poor health as an excuse, but such justification could not be used forever, and indeed his mother's condition had improved to the point where she herself encouraged him to set a date.

He knew, of course, that he should simply accept the arrangement—a very common circumstance to which other men, and ladies, too, resigned themselves as a matter of course. Heaven knew there were enough examples even in his own family. Loveless marriage was the rule rather than the exception.

But Edmund wanted to be the exception. He at least wanted to live out his days in a home with a woman for whom he bore some respect, if not outright affection. For Jeanne, he felt only a mild loathing mingled with pity. She deserved better than that. He wanted better than that. And Jeanne possessed sufficient beauty and fortune to secure a better suitor once she let go of her attachment to him.

So he would force her to let go.

In his deliberations, he wandered down the hall from the ballroom into a small, unoccupied parlor where he paced back and forth like a great caged animal. Two hideous chairs with ridiculous clawed feet took up nearly one entire side of the parlor, so he could cross to the fireplace at the other end of the room in only three steps.

Two, if he lengthened his stride.

The gilt framed mirror above the mantel reflected dark creases on his forehead as his scowl deepened with each turn about the room. What else could he possibly do? He had tried asking her, tried reasoning with her, warned her of the pitfalls of an unhappy marriage. He had tried to discourage her by being inattentive. When that failed, he attempted the opposite extreme, hoping to frighten the girl. Unfortunately, his forward behavior only served to encourage her further.

And now, he had little time left.

He had to somehow make himself so undesirable that Jeanne would not be able to bear the thought of marrying him. If she ended the engagement, then he could not be faulted for breaking the promise.

So what would make him so very undesirable? He could threaten her with violence. Lord knows he had been tempted to often enough over the years. But he might well end up in Newgate or the criminal wing at Bedlam. Even the prospect of spending the rest of his life with a shrew was not enough to tempt him to risk that fate.

But what if he were sent away someplace only temporarily? Perhaps he could act irrational—not dangerous, but simply mad, as if he'd entirely lost his sense of reason. They would hide him away in a private madhouse for a time, Jeanne could continue her season in London and she might well have secured a good husband before summer. Then he could “recover” and quietly return home. His friends would eventually forgive the deception. And while his own chances of making a decent match would be none too great after such an episode, the chances with such an experiment still exceeded the chances without it, which appeared to be zero.

Tonight would be the perfect time to begin. With so many in attendance to witness his behavior, Jeanne would be mortified.

Edmund stopped pacing and stared at his reflection from across the room. The dark scowl had been replaced by a look of fierce determination. He crossed the small room with one great leap, his reflection drawing closer and larger and even more determined.

And that's how it would start. He would make a ridiculous leaping entrance back into the ballroom.

He took a deep breath and marched toward the door, anxious to begin before he could give any attention to the nagging thought that perhaps there were aspects of this plan he had not considered.

This was a time for action, not consideration.

The buzz of voices as he approached the ballroom indicated an even greater number of guests in attendance than earlier. A full audience to view his performance. Withers, the Adringtons' butler, smiled as Edmund approached, but the smile evaporated as Edmund pushed him aside and leaped into the room.

Just as he had done in the tiny red parlor, he leaped across the floor, covering as many of the colored tiles as possible with each stride. In no time at all, he had crossed the room, so that he had to stop abruptly to keep from crashing into the punch bowl. He turned and began to traverse the floor in the opposite direction, deliberately ignoring all comments voiced by other guests. In the middle of his third leap, he was pinned under the arms and dragged unceremoniously from the floor by none other than Adrington himself, with some assistance from the Viscount Mountdale.

“The musicians have not prepared us for this one, yet, old boy.” Adrington pulled him to his feet as they reached the perimeter of the room.

Mountdale sniffed his breath. “What have you been drinking?”

“Get away, Candlesnuffer!” Edmund pushed them both aside, leaped into the middle of the floor, then began counting out tiny steps. His friends soon tackled him again, but he twisted away, rolled, then jumped to his feet with a laugh and capered

over to the side of the room where a bevy of comfortable chairs invited matrons past their prime to sit and watch the proceedings.

He collapsed into a chair bedecked with cushions. "Pillows love me," he sighed. His contented reverie lasted until Adrington and Mountdale caught up with him. Before they had him in their grasp, Edmund writhed between them and dashed over to the nearest window. "I'll jump off this ship!" he announced. But the window wouldn't open without more of a struggle than he had time to offer. So he made his exit through the more convenient, albeit less dramatic, doorway with Adrington and Mountdale in close pursuit.

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"Lucia, you cannot remain behind that plant all evening." Eugenie reached out as if to scold an errant child.

Lucia tried to plead with her eyes, apparently to no avail. "I really thought this the best solution, under the circumstances."

"Well, you thought incorrectly. You'll attract all sorts of the wrong attention back there, with just enough of yourself visible through the leaves that you look like some sort of tropical plant display in Kew Gardens."

Lucia brushed away a large leaf that kept inserting itself in her ear. "That is rather what I feel like at the moment."

"Then come away, for goodness sake. We were scarcely in the ballroom three minutes when you disappeared, and I finally find you out in the hallway hiding behind a potted palm."

"I'm afraid I opened a rather large gash in the back of my gown," Lucia whispered. "And you insisted that I—"

"Take off your petticoat. I remember. I still think that's the best way to show the dress—and your figure—to the best advantage."

"Only now I'm displaying more of my figure than is considered appropriate in these circles." Lucia pushed the leaf out of her ear again.

"We can fix the gown, dear girl, never fear." Eugenie frowned. "However, we cannot fix it while you remain embedded in greenery. I suggest you stand in front of me and we'll walk together to an empty room where we can have the gown mended in private."

"I suppose that does make more sense." Lucia slid carefully from her leafy bower, planting herself firmly in front of her friend. The two of them shuffled slowly down the hallway, away from the ballroom.

"You can take bigger steps, you know. I can keep up."

"I just don't want to get too far—ouch. You stepped on my heel."

"Sorry. Let's try this room." Together, they shuffled to the first available door, but as Lucia reached for the knob, the sound of laughter made her reconsider. "Next room, I think."

"Yes. Wait, now you are getting ahead of me. How on earth did you —"

Lucia waved for her to be quiet. "I'll tell you when we get inside." She reached for the handle of the next door, pausing to listen before she opened it. This door opened into a small parlor decorated in a garish combination of red and gold, completely devoid of human company. "This should work. Hopefully this room will not be wanted for a few minutes. Does your maid carry needle and thread with her?"

"Of course! Do you suppose yourself to be the first ever to stand in need of an emergency seamstress? Though I confess, I've not known anyone to be in such dire need." Eugenie cast an appraising gaze at Lucia's gown. "How did you...?"

"I backed into the knight."

"What?"

"That suit of armor near the punchbowl. I stepped back to allow Mrs. Bracegirdle to pass before me."

"Thoughtless old biddy."

"She did not realize, I'm sure. In any case, I stepped back too far and felt cold metal on my back. I immediately jumped away, but the back of my gown had grown rather attached—caught on a gauntlet or something. And so, we—my gown and I—separated." Her lips puckered in a giggle. "I suppose you could say we had a falling out."

"Yes, I'd definitely say that!" Eugenie snickered. "So before you fall out any further, I shall go fetch Peggy." She flounced out the door, still giggling but taking care not to open the door any wider than necessary. Just before closing it, however, she stuck her head back inside. "Do not go away."

Lucia grimaced. That obviously wasn't an option. In fact, the only option was to either sit in one of the ugly clawfooted, red upholstered chairs or stand and gaze at her wavy reflection in the hideously ornate, gilt framed mirror. Since this latter option would leave her exposed backside open to view from any who might open the door, Lucia chose the former and seated herself in one of the creaking old chairs.

The Adringtons seemed to keep a lot of ancient furnishings about, though the larger rooms she had seen certainly contained enough modern furniture and décor to indicate the family's ability to maintain the latest fashions when they so chose. That suit of armor in the ballroom, though, was purely gothic. Very odd. Now that she remembered, it had been arranged to look as though the knight was reaching to grasp a cup of punch.

Lucia started to giggle again.

The door burst open and a young man hurtled into the room, slamming the door closed behind him. He took a deep breath, leaned against the door, then started when he caught sight of Lucia in the chair.

Neither of them said anything for a moment.

"Good evening," Lucia said at last. Though she had never made this young man's acquaintance, it seemed rude not to say anything under the circumstances.

He brushed an unruly shock of dark hair from his face and bowed. "Good evening."

"I think he went in here!" The door burst open again, this time admitting two more gentlemen, one of whom she recognized as the host, Lord Adrington.

The young man who'd first entered immediately dropped down on all fours and howled.

"He's barking mad," Lord Adrington's companion whispered.

The howling ceased, and the young man looked at the occupants of the room with sad puppy eyes for a moment, his gaze resting at last on Lucia.

Then he started barking.

Lord Adrington and his companion looked from the barking gentleman on the floor to Lucia, nodding. "We must get him out of here."

"But we cannot very well take him back out among company."

"Hmm. Excuse me, Miss..."

"Wright," Lucia replied, after she tore her attention away from the barking gentleman and realized that Lord Adrington was speaking to her.

"Miss Wright, this is most unseemly, but perhaps under the circumstances we might ask you to move to another room?"

Lucia felt her face flush to the roots of her hair. "I-I am afraid I cannot."

The young man on the floor stopped barking.

"I see." Lord Adrington nodded slowly. "Hmm. Then we will have to find another place to secrete him. I'll check for a room upstairs. Mountdale, you try to clear the hallway of any guests until we can get him up the back stairs."

Mountdale scratched the side of his head. "Do you think it safe to leave him here?" He nodded toward Lucia.

The young man on the floor scampered over to the chair opposite Lucia's and wrapped his paws—that is, his hands—around a chair leg.

"I am not sure we have much choice at the moment. Get a servant to stay in the room with Miss Wright. I'd better bring some strong-arm assistance."

"Excellent idea." Mountdale leaned out into the hallway. "You, there! Set down that tray and come in here at once."

"*Comment, Monsieur? Je ne parle —*"

"What? Never mind. Just come *in* here." Mountdale dragged an older servant in by the arm and planted him next to Lucia's chair. "Stay with her, do you understand? Do not leave this room."

The servant looked uncertainly from one face to the other, then nodded.

"Good."

"We shall return in a moment, Miss Wright."

Adrington and Mountdale quit the room in haste, leaving Lucia alone with the nervous servant and the unusual young man, who was now scratching his leg against his elbow. Within a few seconds, he ceased this odd movement and began to sniff at the servant's legs. Then he growled.

"*Mon Dieu!*" The servant looked helplessly at Lucia.

"Arf!"

One bark was sufficient to send the servant scurrying for the door.

"Wait!" Lucia started to stand, but remembered why she had to remain in the chair. Her reticule tumbled to the floor. "I believe Lord Adrington wished you to remain here."

The servant shook his head as he reached for the doorknob with trembling hands.

"I do not think he will hurt you," she said.

Without looking back, the servant wrenched open the door, flung himself into the hallway and yanked the door closed behind him.

Chapter Three

The young man on the floor next to her remained still, once again watching Lucia with the sad-eyed gaze that reminded her of a lost puppy.

And they were gorgeous eyes. Bright, rich blue framed by thick, dark lashes that fanned the air when he closed them briefly to take another deep breath.

What a horrid, ghastly shame. This beautiful young man—a gentleman of substance, from the look of his dress and his manners when he first addressed her—had less of his wits about him even than Geoffrey. For Geoffrey had not yet taken up an occupation in the animal kingdom.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured softly, barely aware that she’d spoken aloud.

“Why?” The young man sat up, looking now much more human.

“Why?” Lucia sat up straighter herself, wondering how to answer. If this gentleman was anything like Geoffrey, he would not be aware that his behavior was anything beyond ordinary. “Because...because your friends have left you.” This was a lame answer indeed, but one that at least should not put the gentleman on the defensive.

Far from it, in fact. He smiled. It was a friendly, confident smile that warmed the space between them. “I expect they’ll be back rather soon.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” And then hopefully they’d leave again so that Peggy could repair her gown in privacy. Although, for the moment, it was strangely pleasant, things being just exactly as they were.

That made no sense at all. Why should it be pleasant to be trapped in a room with a madman, handsome or no?

He reached over to pick up her reticule. Then, with admirable agility, he leapt to his feet and handed it to her with a slight bow. “Yours, I believe?”

“Yes, thank you.” Her gloved hands felt enormously clumsy as she accepted the bag from him.

“A nice party, is it not?” The young man seated himself in the other chair and looked about the room as if gazing on a large assembled company.

“Err, yes.” Lucia had actually seen very little of the party, but she supposed the festivities carried on well enough in her absence.

“I do believe, though, that it is about time for Adrington to bring his decor into the nineteenth century.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at this ghastly collection! Kept on display only to remind the rest of us how long the family has held its estates.”

"That seems a rather uncharitable judgment." She sat back with a frown. "I wonder, would you voice such opinion in front of the family?"

"I have done, on many occasions." He grinned. "To no avail, obviously."

She felt her eyes widen with surprise. "Oh. And you were not concerned that you might offend the sensibilities of your friends?"

"No. After all, 'He that departs with his own honesty for vulgar praise doth it too dearly buy'."

"Yes, I do agree with that, but there are times..." Where had she heard those words before? From a book of plays? Sermons? Poetry? The quotation seemed so familiar.

"Would you care to dance, then?"

She blinked. "No. No, thank you. I-I promised that I'd remain in this room."

"We can dance here." He bowed. "I'd be honored."

"No." The gentleman was mad, however engaging his appearance. Moreover, had the Prince himself asked her dance, she could rise only if the chair somehow remained miraculously attached to her backside.

"Why not? I see you are not engaged to dance with anyone else."

Lucia struggled to think of an excuse that would not offend him. "I... There's no music in here."

"Music? You require music. Very well, I shall sing for us. 'A bonny lass one day went walking,'" he began in a fine baritone, "'met with a gent and set to talking—'"

He stopped abruptly, and she had the sickening sensation that he was going to drop to the floor and howl again.

But he did not. "This will never do for a dance. Not at all." He tossed back the unruly lock of hair that had descended across his forehead again. "A string quartet, I think, don't you?" Without waiting for a reply, he began to hum a low, steady cadence. "There's the cello." Then he started humming again in a slightly higher pitch, a tune that seemed to echo the first. "And the viola. Now for the violins." He hummed a melody that started very slow and sweet but soon swelled to an intricate pattern. "I wish I had another mouth. It's not easy to hum two parts, you know."

Lucia laughed aloud, not caring if the sound should call attention to the strange *tête-à-tête*.

"And now, for the dance." Still humming, the young gentleman began to step in time to the music. "This is about the right tempo, I believe."

Lucia sat forward, tapping her heels lightly to the tune as he danced.

"And now for the partner." He leaped over in front of her chair and pulled Lucia to her feet. "I believe I've requested the honor—"

She squealed as she jerked away, landing back in her chair with a most unladylike thud.

The gentleman looked at his hands, which had clasped hers only a second before. He smiled sadly at her. "Ah, well, *ma chère*, 'twas not to be, I suppose."

Lucia made no answer because there was none to make. He spoke the truth, but it was a regrettable truth and one that did not bear repeating. Though handsome and engaging and, wonder of wonders, attentive to her, he was clearly removed from the better portion of his senses. Perhaps that was why he was so attentive.

It was not a pleasant thought.

The door swung open with no warning this time. The gentleman in front of her dissolved to the floor, barking as he scampered over to the corner behind the vacant chair.

"Grab him!"

Adrington, Mountdale and two men dressed in livery followed the barking man into the corner, one of them carefully shutting the door with a glance into the hallway.

Lucia began to propel her chair in the opposite direction. With four men blocking her view, she could no longer see her erstwhile dance partner, but a snarling sound issued from the corner that indicated he was still back there somewhere.

"Ouch! He bit me!"

The door opened again. "I think this was the room, but..." Eugenie peered inside, squealing at the sight of the men scuffling in the corner. "Most definitely not!"

"I'm here. Over here." Lucia waved forlornly.

"Oh, dear." Eugenie grimaced. "What are they—never mind. We've got to get you out of here!"

"Yes. I quite agree. But..."

"I have an idea. Wait in here, Peggy." Eugenie shoved the confused maid into the room. "I'll be right back."

"Eugenie!" Lucia begged. "Don't leave me like this!"

But the door shut again.

Both Lucia and Peggy turned their attention to the cursing mess of masculinity not six feet away. Somehow, the snarling, barking gentleman managed to crawl through the tangle of his pursuers to scamper over to the opposite corner. Though he was panting from exertion and sporting a number of scratches and torn clothing, his eyes danced with laughter as if he thoroughly enjoyed eluding his captors.

They rapidly followed him, of course, so that Lucia and Peggy now enjoyed a bit more breathing space on their side of the room.

"Lucia." Eugenie's head appeared at the door again. "Oh, good. You're still here."

"Where else would I be?"

"I've brought some help." Eugenie entered, followed by Sophie and another lady who was clearly amused by the spectacle that met her eyes. "Lucia, may I present Miss Caroline Glaisher. Miss Glaisher, this is Miss Wright."

"Very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Wright." Miss Glaisher exhibited a graceful curtsy, rising with the ghost of a smile on her face.

"Yes, yes." Lucia waved them over. "I'm pleased as well. This is a most fortuitous time to make new acquaintances. Now, Eugenie —"

"It's quite simple, really. The four of us will surround you, and walking close together, we'll make our way down to another room. You can hide behind the curtains or —"

"I understand. Peggy, if you would be so good as to step behind me back here." Lucia indicated the space next to the chair. "And Eugenie, you take the other side." Lucia cast a glance toward the men in the room, but they were so engrossed in their efforts to capture the elusive barking gentleman that they seemed unlikely to notice the deficiencies in her gown. She stood and took a step away from the chair, and the other ladies immediately closed in to surround her, with Eugenie standing so close it was as if she was affixed by glue. Sophie and Miss Glaisher led the way as the fivesome shuffled slowly toward the door.

Which then opened again, admitting two more gentlemen, these decidedly older than the others already in the room. "We heard odd noises coming from this room and wished to—oh, excuse me, ladies." The first older gentleman bowed. He and his companion attempted to move aside so the ladies could make their egress, but bunched together as they were, the feat was simply impossible.

"Oh, just hit him with something and have done with it."

The latecomers turned their attention from the ladies to the other men in the room. "I say."

"It's a wonder we didn't hear more."

"Hardly." He tapped his ear. "It's a wonder we ever hear anything, these days."

A particularly loud howl cut short all attempts at conversation in the well-populated room.

The howl itself was in turn cut short by an angry thud.

"I believe that was sufficient." Mountdale nodded with satisfaction.

"More than," one of the footmen commented *sotto voce*.

"I do not believe he will be up to trouble us for some time." Mountdale replaced a hefty crystal vase on the mantel beneath the mirror.

"If he's ever up again at all," the other footman muttered.

"Perhaps it would be better if he is not." Mountdale eyed the insolent footman crossly as he stuffed a collection of red silk flowers back into their crystal enclosure.

"Are you saying you hit him that hard deliberately?" Adrington asked.

"I am simply stating the obvious. Edmund Rutherford has clearly lost all sense of reason." Mountdale sniffed. "If it were me, I'd rather be dead."

After the moment of silence that followed this morbid pronouncement, the ladies' procession suddenly set in motion at double speed. Adrington, Mountdale and the footmen prepared to remove Lord Rutherford from the room. The two most recent arrivals, however, desired to lay eyes on the young gentleman who had caused all the commotion. And so began an impossible snarl of human traffic, as the men sought to squeeze past the women, the women struggled to exit *en masse* and everyone tried desperately to avoid touching one another.

By the time Lucia and her party finally reached another room and completed emergency mending procedures on her gown, the soirée was more than half over and Lucia had missed most it.

But she'd seen enough.

* * * * *

As pain gradually forced Edmund into a conscious state, he became aware that he must have grown an extra head during the night. The throbbing ache was more than could be contained in one head alone. Or perhaps his skull had simply been cleaved in two—he could now feel a definite split along the back of his head.

He groped his hands around on the pillow, wondering if his brains might have spilt out onto the bed.

It was not his bed.

Behind the pillow in his own bed, he would have felt a gap before the wall, enabling him to stretch out his full length without hitting anything.

Here when he reached up, he touched hard, cold wood just beyond the pillow. Carved wood. His fingers traced up several inches of engraved design. He could not detect the pattern, but he was willing to bet it was an ugly one.

He was somewhere in Adrington's house. In one of the heirloom rooms, stuffed full of furniture that had in been in the family since the reign of Charlemagne or some such. Though the family would not part with these dubious treasures, they generally hid them to a certain degree.

He must be upstairs in one of the less fashionable guest bedrooms used by distant family members.

He sighed. He could not remember coming up to bed last night. He must have drunk himself into a stupor to avoid speaking with Jeanne so that one of the servants had to see him up to bed.

But he had not taken a single drink the previous night. The memories now flooded back with painful intensity. Images swept over him in waves, as if he watched excerpts from the life of another. Leaping through the ballroom, growling and barking at Adrington and the others. And speaking with a shy young lady he'd never met before.

And would never meet again, no doubt, after she witnessed last night's performance.

He had put on quite a show. An odd sense of pride welled up as he reflected on his feat. With but a few minutes' work, he had convinced everyone that he had lost his wits. He had not planned in advance how to act crazed. He simply started and...everything seemed to just happen.

Did that mean he really was crazy, or close to it?

After all, it had been rather enjoyable, up to a point. It had been quite fun to push past somber, self-important cliques in the ballroom, fun to scramble around on the floor barking like a dog and fun to speak with an unknown lady without giving any thought to propriety or common sense.

In a sense, he was free. Free to behave however he chose, without regard to whether it was the right thing to do. No one could hold him responsible now. After all, he was crazy.

Now if he could just figure out a way to end an evening without being chased, collared, and pummeled on the head, he could be in for a rather entertaining season. And by the end—no, much sooner than that—Jeanne would realize that she could not possibly marry him.

Then he would be truly free.

Chapter Four

"Well, if you do have to leave so early in the season, at least you have the satisfaction of knowing you've witnessed the biggest debacle of the year." Sophie munched thoughtfully on a piece of toast.

"Debacle?" Lucia paused, her spoon held in midair above her teacup. "I thought the Adringtons threw a lovely party."

"Certainly they did. For the first quarter of an hour. Then Lord Rutherford turned it into a rout. He was quite funny, though. 'Get away, Candlesnuffer!'" she mimicked. "Depend on it. No other event will match the excitement of the Adrington soirée."

"What if the gentleman," Lucia knocked her spoon off the saucer as she reached for the teacup, "Lord Rutherford, that is, puts in an appearance elsewhere during the season? Might that not be just as 'exciting' as you say?"

Sophie chewed on that thought, as well as her toast, for a moment. "I do not believe his family will let him out in company anytime soon."

Visions of the scenes her own brother might cause in a crowded ballroom swam before Lucia's eyes. "Yes," she agreed readily. "I can believe that."

"So you leave tomorrow, then?"

"Yes." *Thank goodness.* The events of last evening made Lucia realize how truly urgent it was for her to return to her home and her place caring for Geoffrey and Helen. What if they should get into a crowd and take fright? Either might behave just as the unfortunate Lord Rutherford had done. Or worse. If she were home with them, she could ensure such disasters did not have the chance to develop.

She wondered whether Lord Rutherford had someone to keep similar watch over him.

"Where is Eugenie? I would think with this being your last day in London, she would be affixed to your side."

Lucia smiled. "One might think. But I have not seen her this morning. Peggy said she was dressed and out at an unusually early hour." She winced when she noticed a tea stain spreading across the tablecloth near her cup and wiped at it with a napkin.

"You know," Sophie reached for another slice of toast, "you missed the biggest scene last night. At least I think you did. How long were you hiding in the hall before Eugenie dragged you into that little parlor?"

"I don't know." Lucia couldn't imagine that she had missed much.

"Were you in the ballroom when Lord Rutherford – and it does indeed sound odd to refer to him by that title under the circumstances – started to dance?"

"No." But he had asked her to dance. Was rather persistent about it, in fact. "With whom did he dance?"

"Oh, he did not dance *with* anybody. That is, he actually did not dance at all. He took great leaps about the room," she demonstrated with the butter knife, "like the dancers in the opera. It was quite funny. He knocked the Earl of Osterbridge into the Dowager Countess Fortescue and her turban fell right into his punch. She was quite mortified, for she is grown nearly bald and now everyone knows it. I'm glad, after the nasty things she said about our neighbor, Sir Reginald last year."

"Indeed?" Lucia wanted to ask what the Countess had said, but she also wanted to hear more about the young man's leaping dance. The more she thought about it, the more the latter topic interested her.

Sophie looked at her freshly buttered piece of toast as if unsure quite what to do with it. She cut it into quarters. "Yes, quite an entertaining evening. I wonder if I might compose a song about the countess's bristling bald head."

That was one topic Lucia did not care to hear more about. "Did Lord Rutherford do anything else out of the ordinary? I mean, besides what we witnessed in the parlor."

"Let me see. Other than rolling on the floor, shouting nonsense words, barking like a dog and trying to jump out the window – no, nothing out of the ordinary."

"Oh." He did truly sound mad. Why did that notion fill her with such despair? She really did not even know the man.

"Do you suppose he might just have been really in his cups?"

"No," Lucia answered with a catch in her voice. She could not be absolutely certain, of course, but the young man who spoke to her in the intimate parlor did not have the demeanor of one who had been drinking, and there was no aroma of wine or spirits on his breath.

"Were you and Peggy in that parlor with him for very long?" Without waiting for an answer, Sophie rushed on. "I do think it was rather splendid the way Lord Adrington and Viscount Mountdale took control of the matter, don't you? Both handsome gentlemen, but I think the Viscount carries himself better. Eugenie prefers Lord Adrington, but says that both of them are spoiled fops. I must disagree with that." She picked up a square of toast, considered it for a moment, then set it down and cut it into triangles. "I don't think even Eugenie believes that herself. I believe she rather fancies Lord Adrington and doesn't want to let on. In fact, I shall tell Lady Georgiana Adrington so the next time I see her."

"You wouldn't!"

Sophie looked up with a wicked grin. "Wouldn't I?"

"That is terribly cruel. If Eugenie has no interest in the gentleman, you've spread false rumors. And if she does, it is even worse, for you've put her in an embarrassing position indeed."

"No worse than when she threw a fox at me last year at Vauxhall Gardens. In front of my whole party."

"She threw a fox at you?"

"Well, she did not actually do the throwing, as she was a member of the party at the time. I believe she had one of the footmen lie in wait." She popped a tiny toast triangle into her mouth.

Lucia shook her head. "I still don't understand."

"For my birthday last year, we made up a party of friends and took a trip to the gardens. While we were walking about, we passed a small grove of trees. Then a fox jumped out—or rather, was thrown out—in front of me. It was quite a shock, as you can imagine. I'm afraid I screamed rather indecently. And I hiked up my dress and cowered against one of the gentlemen of the party. Only for a moment, mind you, until I recovered. But the damage was done. For the rest of the season, I was known as the 'Screamy Mimi'."

"What makes you think Eugenie was responsible? Why on earth would she—"

"Oh, she confessed. We had a bet, you see. We'd had a discussion about hunting, and I said foxes were rather sweet, meek creatures and it was a shame to set great dogs and men on horseback to hunt them down. Eugenie said they were vermin that would bite you as soon as look at you and that I would be afraid of one if I saw it face-to-face."

"And so she—"

"She had to have someone throw it at eye level in order for me to see it 'face-to-face'. That's how she explained it, anyway. I believe she did it just to make sure I really screamed in front of all those people."

"Ah. So you desire revenge."

"Naturally. I've only been waiting for a good chance. And this seems it. For I believe Eugenie really does have an interest in Lord Adrington."

Lucia looked over the remains of her breakfast. She had eaten little of her toast and bacon, and while she disliked waste, she had been unable to persuade herself to take another bite for the last quarter of an hour. It seemed unlikely she would do so now. "Sophie, I understand your desire for revenge—"

"Do you? I do not see that quality in you. I'm sorry, I should not interrupt."

Lucia leaned closer, hoping to impress on Sophie the need for restraint and some sense of familial loyalty. "This is much more serious than being embarrassed in front of a party of friends."

"First of all, I was not merely embarrassed before a party of friends—it was a slow week for gossip, so everyone in the *ton* knew of the event within two days. Second, the matter of Eugenie's interest in Lord Adrington is not a serious matter because it will not signify. The Adringtons are so far beyond us they would never consider a match with anyone in our family. We were extraordinarily fortunate even to be invited as one of the

lowest guests at their enormous gathering. We can only hope to clutch at one of the other guests on the lower rung of the ladder. To aspire to the top is ludicrous.”

Hearing the matter set forth so bluntly was a bit of a shock. But it made sense. Lucia supposed that had she spent more time in society, she would become as pragmatic about marriage matches as Sophie.

“I will see Lady Adrington at a small party in a few days’ time. That should be just the place to enlighten her.”

Poor Eugenie. Though Lucia could well believe her capable of setting up the fox episode for a bit of fun, she knew her friend would never stoop to the meddling machinations her sister Sophie now outlined. Eugenie had far too much respect for others to even think of such a thing.

* * * * *

He would have to tell someone. Edmund had spent the better part of the morning playing scenarios in his mind in between bouts of blissful slumber. Now, finally, he felt a little more himself. He could even sit up in the bed without too much difficulty, so long as he moved very slowly.

Bright light filtered through the cracks in the window shutters. It might be late into the afternoon, for all he knew. A tray sitting on the table in the corner offered an unappetizing array of breakfast food, however, so he assumed his initial assessment was correct—he had spent only the entire morning in bed.

And no one wanted to talk to him this morning.

But he had to talk to someone. If he were to keep up this ruse, he needed to ensure that at least one person knew that underneath the façade, he was still himself. One person to whom he might occasionally confide. And one person who could help him prove, when it was all over and Jeanne safely married to someone else, that he was indeed quite sane.

He would be ruined in society, but his friends might one day forgive him.

Who could he choose for a confidant? Who would be able to keep this secret until events played out as he planned?

Edmund looked longingly at the pot of coffee on the table. Certain to be cold as the Thames, and probably as cloudy. Was it worth the effort to drag himself over to pour a cup anyway? He could ring for a servant, if any were brave enough to enter while he was awake.

Curiosity suddenly overcame the headache. He slid off the bed, padded gently across the floor and reached for the door handle. It turned, but the door did not open. They had locked him inside.

So his choice of confidants might be severely limited, if he needed to divulge the secret any time soon.

His sudden burst of energy now drained away, Edmund sank into a chair near the table with the untouched breakfast tray.

Adrington would be sure to stop in sometime during the day. It was, after all, his house. And he would dearly love to enlighten his friend. The look of anguish on Adrington's face last night, which Edmund had so blithely ignored at the time, now came back to haunt him. His friend thought him lost entirely. And unfortunately, for the time being, he would have to let him continue to think so. After his performance last evening, essentially ruining the party, he could hardly saunter into Adrington's study and admit he had engaged in a calculated ruse.

For that reason, there was no one in the house in whom he could confide.

Who else?

Mountdale was not clever enough to keep the secret. In fact, he probably wouldn't even understand the need for secrecy.

But perhaps one of the other members of his club...

He could tell his valet, if he had one. It had seemed disloyal to interview replacement candidates right after Mayer's death, but the days soon turned to many weeks. He had been without a valet for longer than he realized.

It looked as though his best option would be to find a suitable confidant at White's. If he hurried to dress now, he should have plenty of time.

But not if he remained locked in his room.

He stood and looked about for a bell pull, but could see none. Perhaps the less elegant guest rooms had not been outfitted with such devices. So on the rare occasion when a guest found himself locked in his room, presumably to prevent him from biting another member of the household during the night, he would simply have to stay put until someone thought to check on him.

But how long would that be?

Edmund walked back to the door and pounded on it three times. "Open up!" He pounded several more times. "Is anyone about?"

No answer. No sound at all, in fact. It was as if all occupants had deserted this section of the house, like rats fleeing a ship in a storm.

Perhaps they had. After all, he had provided a storm last night.

He smashed his fist against door in a careless, sloppy blow that nearly broke his knuckles. He would have to use more sense than that. Hit hard and straight on.

Or quit banging on the door altogether.

If Adrington and his guests heard frantic hammering and pounding on the door, they might not be terribly anxious to let him out. He would have to wait, perhaps act as though the episode had never occurred. Once he'd found someone to confide in, then he could act the crazy man again.

* * * * *

"Lucia?" Eugenie rapped on her door. "Are you within?"

"Yes." Lucia pulled the bedroom door open and beckoned for her friend to step inside. "Come in."

Eugenie remained in the doorway. "No, no, I want you to come downstairs."

"I will soon. I need to finish packing my trunk."

"Just for a moment. Please?"

Lucia smiled. "You are as impatient as a child. But I really do need to finish. I promised your father my belongings would be ready to be delivered this evening, since we leave so early in the morning."

"You no longer need to concern yourself about that." Eugenie grabbed her arm.

"But I promised your father —"

"He will not mind. Trust me." Eugenie pulled her into the hallway.

"Eugenie!" Lucia laughed. "You are behaving in a ridiculous fashion."

"I have something to show you. A surprise."

Lucia allowed herself to be propelled down the stairs where Eugenie parked her in front of the door to the first parlor.

"Now, close your eyes."

"Eugenie!" Lucia found her friend's enthusiasm contagious—she could barely contain a fit of giggles.

"Close both eyes, if you please!"

"I am. I am!"

"Very well," Eugenie intoned with mock solemnity. "I shall now say the magic incantation—words that will keep you in London so you can enjoy the season."

"What in the —"

"You cannot interrupt the magic! It could prove most dangerous." Now Eugenie apparently had trouble maintaining her serious demeanor, for a sound very much like a giggle escaped her lips as well. "If you mess up the incantation, who knows what might happen?" She mumbled something about eating toads and remaining in town for an impossible length of time. When Lucia began to laugh, Eugenie put a hand over her eyes. "Keep them closed!" She turned the squeaky knob and opened the door with a tremendous yank. "You may open your eyes now."