

A PROPER MISTRESS

Shannon Donnelly

For Marsha —
may you always find the courage to choose happiness

Bookseller's Best Finalist, Golden Quill Finalist, Orange Rose Finalist

"With its excellent characterization, polished prose, and humor, Donnelly's latest Regency is a supremely satisfying, deftly plotted delight."
— Booklist, American Library Association, John Charles

"...delightfully offbeat romp with an engaging set of young lovers and a good cast of supporting players...highly enjoyable" — Romantic Times Top Pick - 4½ Stars

"I highly recommend A PROPER MISTRESS, and can't wait for Ms. Donnelly's next book...." — Five Roses - Escape To Romance, Marlene Breakfield

CHAPTER ONE

"Beauty ain't required, but she's got to catch the eye," Theodore Winslow said, striding across the small salon, one hand fisted behind his back and the other gesturing in the air. "I mean, I'm supposed to be smitten. But she can't be at all acceptable—only she can't be too coarse, either, mind. My father would twig to it at once. No, she must have manners enough that hanging out for the respectability of marriage seems obvious. And it would be best if she had red hair—m'family knows I've a weakness for red hair. But I'll leave that detail to you."

"Red hair," Sallie Ellis repeated, her tone thoughtful.

Theo turned from the window that overlooked the small, quiet square near Covent Garden. Was he making a mull of it? Sallie had a rather calculating look in her bright, blue eyes. A look he'd come to know a good deal about of late. Between his dealings with the temperamental Antonia and the greedy Davina, he'd seen more than he ever wanted to of that look.

But this was not his last hope. No, if Sallie named a sum beyond reason, he would simply walk out. He would, indeed. Only the pressure of time passing nibbled at his heels. He'd had that terse note from his father nearly a week ago: Had the squire acted on his threat already? Well, if he had, he'd just have to unmake his will again. Theo frowned. Law wasn't his strong suit, but he was certain wills could be made and unmade. To be on the safe side, however, he would waste as little time as possible, a course that better suited him anyway. Blazes, did he hate waiting.

"Course, I'm fond enough of blondes as well," he added. There, that should widen the field and bit and keep the price within means. One had to pay for being too particular. He had learned that lesson years ago when buying his first hunter.

"Mmmmmmm," Sallie said, now tapping one finger against her plump and powdered cheek. For a woman past her prime, she still had a round enough figure to be easy on a man's eye, Theo thought. Yes, nice curves that a fellow would enjoy having his hands around, and a dimple in her right cheek. But those shrewd, assessing eyes of hers left him wary.

Theo glanced around the room again, eyeing the red velvet drapery and the red damask hung on the walls. Rather rich looking, he thought. Cream painted wainscoting kept the room from overpowering, but those sticks of furniture and vases and whatnots had the look of having cost ridiculous sums.

And was Sallie now calculating how much she could raise her usual rates? Well, least he could admire the paintings in the room while he waited—lovely nude women in all of them, with bits of classical white drapery at their heels. Heavens knew why a female could go dancing around in the altogether in ancient times, but not now. Must be that the weather had cooled off a touch.

Clearing his throat, Theo stretched his neck. His blasted neckcloth felt tight as a noose, though it had seemed fine this morning when he'd tied it at The Queen's Head where he'd been staying since he'd got to London three days ago. He hoped he looked as cool a customer as ever stepped through Sallie Ellis' painted red doors. Trouble was, he wasn't at all accustomed to dealing for his women. Why should he when he'd always been able to find a willing tavern wench, or a maid with a roving eye, or even a country girl with a flirting glint to her eyes? Women seemed to like him, though he didn't know why. He wasn't a patch on Terrance.

Still, he needed a certain type of female just now—one as could be hired, and he was done dealing with actresses. Lord, was he ever.

So he had made his way to Sallie Ellis. Terrance had recommended the establishment some time ago, in one of those bits of advice he had tossed at Theo over the years. "Good girls there,"

he'd said, his voice only a little slurred at the time from a night out with Theo. "Clean of body, and not of mind. And Sallie will give you a fair price."

Well, that part he wanted. As to how good the girls really were—well, he wanted one that wasn't too good. No, he had a feeling he would be better off with one more than a little bad.

Sallie had been staring up at a corner of the room as if she was trying to recall a name or a number. The longer she stared, the more Theo wanted to fidget. He rocked forward on his toes and back on the heels of his riding boots, wishing this was over.

It was Terrance's fault, of course. Most things were. Only he didn't hold Terrance to blame, really. No, Terrance was a good gun, a great fellow, the best of brothers, and very much the wronged party here.

But he did hold his father at fault for trying to manipulate him and Terrance yet again. And by heavens it stopped here and now.

Or it would soon as he got home.

He gave a grim smile. He could hardly wait to see his father's face when he made his announcement.

"It is possible that I may have someone for you," Sallie said, her accent too carefully cultured to be natural for her. She put down the china tea cup and saucer that she had had in her lap. "However, you said you would need a gal for a week or more? Couldn't you make do with three days of her time?"

"Three days!" Theo said, his voice rising with outrage. "What, am I to gallop her to Somerset and back? Well, you may think again on that. I need her a week, perhaps more, and I've brought fifty guineas, with a hundred more to pay at the end of it. And that ought to buy well more than three days!"

Sallie's eyes widened and her accent slipped as she breathed, "Coo, that's a right nice bit of the ready."

Scowling, Theo pressed his lips tight. Devil a bit, but he should have waited for her to name a price. Still, she seemed to be rethinking herself now, and if he brought this off for the sum he named, he would be thankful. Davina had wanted four hundred guineas, after all. And for only four days. Actresses! He ought to have known their seeming concern for a fellow's plight always amounted to nothing more than a sham. That was their trade, after all. Far better to hire a woman whose trade was making a fellow honestly feel better.

Sallie still had not answered, so he asked, brow furrowed and already starting to wonder where he might try next, "But if you cannot spare a girl so long, I—"

"Now, now, Mr. Winslow, let us not be hasty," Sallie said, her accent again acquiring the smooth gloss of the upper class. "I consider it my duty to never let a gentleman leave my house unsatisfied. So let us put our heads together. Are you certain you could not make do with a brunette? No—I see by the look in your eyes that would not do. You gentlemen are so particular about some details. But for such a long time...well, that does seem rather worth more than a hundred and fifty."

Theo stiffened. He had reached the end of his patience. "Well, I don't see how. It's a guaranteed sum, and who's to say she might otherwise sit idle here, not bringing you a penny!"

Sallie chuckled. "Oh, Mr. Winslow. My girls never sit idle, though they do lay around a bit." She laughed at her own coarse joke, and Theo tried to summon a smile, though he found himself rather offended by such vulgarity.

Devil a bit, if Sallie had a girl anything like herself, she'd be perfectly horrible. Just what he wanted, in fact.

A soft knock sounded on the door and a moment later a black pageboy in cream satin—turban, coat, and breeches—came in. He carried a note on a silver tray, balancing the tray in one hand, and holding the note down with the other. But when he reached Sallie, he took his hand off the note and offered the tray with a small, well-practiced bow.

"Your pardon, Mr. Winslow," Sallie said, taking up the note. "The business of pleasure is far from pleasure itself."

She waved a plump hand for the boy to go away, her rings flashing, and he bowed himself out as she tore open the note and scanned it. She rose with a shake of her gold satin skirts, those blue eyes of hers even more calculating, enough so that Theo founds himself shifting uneasily from foot to foot.

"A trifle I must attend, Mr. Winslow. Do help yourself to wine or brandy. I promise to be back in just a moment with perhaps a most excellent solution." She offered a brilliant smile, her teeth white and small, and the charm that had built this house swept over him, sweet as honeysuckle. It would, no doubt, become just as cloying over time, but for now, he found himself setting aside his doubts about her and grinning back, and wishing he had just a bit more time to spend here.

Lord, she was a bit of a rogue—and if she were twenty years younger, he'd hire her for the job. But it wouldn't do to bring home a ladybird his father's age. No, the squire would see though that in two seconds.

"Now, don't you slip away," Sallie said, wagging a finger at him.

With a flirtatious wink, she left, hips swaying enough to catch a gentleman's eye—Sallie prided herself that she knew all the tricks of her trade.

However, as soon as the door closed behind her, she pressed her back to it and glanced heavenwards. "Thank you," she said, the words heartfelt.

Here she'd been thinking just this morning she might not have the ready at hand to pay the rent on her townhouse this month, and had been cursing those girls of hers what had run off with that dratted Frenchman.

She ought to know better than to cater to the foreign trade, but he had flashed a fistful of banknotes and she had let her own rules slip. Business first, she taught her girls. Or tried to. And what did she get for not keeping to her own rules—why, he had upped and run off with Bette and Jane, two of her best, leaving his bill unpaid as well. That's what she got! Gone off to Paris, Jane had said in the note she had left behind. All three of them. Why it wasn't even decent!

And without so much as a single day's notice.

In the normal course of things, it would not have mattered. She would have replaced those two within the month, for there seemed an endless supply of girls in London with foolish hopes and no skills to hire out but what God gave them.

Sallie shook her head. She had been one of those girls. But she'd learned. Oh, she had learned. And she tried to teach her girls well, too. Survival and success depended on a hard head and an even harder heart. But with two girls skittered off only just yesterday, and three more laid low by the influenza this past week, she had been looking at her books and fearing some of her jewels might have to go into hock before the end of the month. She gave a small shudder. Her jewels were her retirement, and she'd rather have a tooth pulled than be parted from so much as a single pearl. Once they started going, after all, no telling but what she might end up on the street.

And that wasn't for Sallie Ellis mind!

But along comes this young gent with his ready money—and those lovely blue eyes of his.

She gave a small sigh. Oh, to be twenty again—or even thirty—and able to hire herself out.

But she had given up that side of the business. Still, he could tempt any girl, what with that thick black hair of his, which did not seem to want to stay in place. She'd already guessed he'd strip as fine as any prize fighter she'd known—all that masculine broad shoulders and long, hard muscle. Oh, didn't she just have a weakness for a tall gentleman. And didn't he just have a mouth for kisses, all finely made and with that quirk at the side when he smiled. It'd be a lucky girl who had him for her job.

Sallie glanced at the note in her hand, mouth tightening. 'Course, odds were that Molly wouldn't see it that way. Of all the foolish things for a woman to have in a whorehouse, Molly had principals. Sallie gave a small snort. *Principals!* Well, when it came to keeping her house in style, Sallie had but one principal—her house came first.

So she fixed a smile in place and headed toward the kitchen.

She stopped as soon as she entered, entranced by the rush of enticing aromas—roasting meat, a heavenly mix of onion and curry from a simmering pot, the yeasty fragrance of baking bread. With it came the comfortable chatter of gossip passing around between Molly and the between-maids.

Sallie smiled. It had been a lucky day indeed when she'd met up with Molly Sweet.

Painted a sunny yellow, the kitchen lay at the back of the house. Two sash windows and a door looked onto what was now a kitchen garden, where once there'd only been a square of grass. Molly's doing that. A skylight had been set into the ceiling last year, making the room bright, and a silver chain hung down from it, to open the glass cover and cool the room.

In the far corner, copper pots hung from a circular iron rack that dangled from the tall ceiling. Shelves wound around the room, displaying china serving dishes as well as provisions, the only one of which Sallie could identify was the tall, white cone, ready to be scraped for sugar.

Underfoot, scrubbed stone floors gleamed a soft cream, and just now the room seemed crowded with bodies and noise. For a moment, Sallie frowned as she added up just how much Molly cost her in staff. A white-clad scullery maid sat on a three-legged stool, peeling potatoes. Another, also dressed in white—who also did for upstairs at times—rolled pastry out on the large, rectangular oak table in the center of the room. And young Alice—a girl not yet ten who Sallie had found on the streets six months ago—stirred the steaming pot on the latest innovation, an enclosed brick stove.

The fireplace had also been put to use, roasting a joint of mutton. Robert, the black page boy, sat near the hearth, turning the spit, his turban gone and an apron over his satin coat and breeches. He stared at the meat as if already concentration on his portions.

Watching all of this, poking into everything, was Molly.

Well, Molly's staff certainly cost a goodly sum, but Sallie had to admit that her cooking also brought in trade—and there weren't anything so generous as a man with *all* his needs met.

With her mouth starting to water from the assault of aromas, Sallie straightened and reminded herself of business first. She hadn't gotten ahead, after all, by letting distractions deter her from her goals. She glanced around once more and said, a warm smile in place, "Molly, ducks, spare a minute will you?"

Turning from the table where she had been supervising the rolling out of pastry by the between-maid, Molly used the back of her hand to push away a red curl that had escaped her white cap. She offered a flour-streaked smile. "Sallie, I hardly expected you so prompt. And I do beg pardon for intruding—I know you were with a gentleman, but I must talk to you about the tarts."

Sallie almost frowned. At fourteen, she had fled a Methodist upbringing, and at times it still

seemed to her that Molly's endless smiles were more of a sin than anything else that went on in her house. It just wasn't...wasn't seemly for anyone to be so cheerful. Life was hard. Earnest. But after five years, she ought to be used to Molly always looking for sunshine, even on the darkest days.

She stuffed down her irritation. "Yes, ducks, but the tarts can wait."

Molly gave a shake of her head. "That's just it—they cannot."

Sallie almost let out a sigh. What with her figure and hair, and that sweet voice of hers—quite the proper one, too—Molly could have made a fortune if she'd taken to the other side of business. But she'd had a proper upbringing before she'd been orphaned and abandoned to the world and that showed in more than just her voice. Such a pity to waste her talents in a kitchen, of all the silly things!

Molly dusted the flour from her hands, onto her apron, as she came forward to explain her disaster. "Alice is just back from the market and there's not an apricot to be had—even though it is high summer. I know how particular Lord Alvanley is about them, but do you think we might get away with serving peach tarts instead, and just hope he does not bite into one? I mean, more than half the time, he just wants to see we have his favorite on the sideboard."

"Oh, bother the tarts, ducks. We've other business." Taking Molly's hand, Sallie pulled her from the kitchen.

"But the tarts must go in within the hour, or I'll never have time to finish the rest of the baking!"

"It'll wait," Sallie insisted, and she stopped in the hallway and stood before Molly. She ran her stare down and up over Molly, tapping one finger against her cheek. For a moment, she hesitated at what she was about to do. But she thought of the money—always a good thing to do. Yes, and she'd make it a fair share between them. Fair enough, at least. After all, she was the one who'd met the gentleman and had thought of Molly.

With a nod, she straightened. "The apron must come off. And the cap, too."

She suited actions to the words, snatching the white lace-trimmed cap as Molly sputtered a protest. Spinning the younger woman around, Sallie pulled loose the ties to Molly's plain, starched apron.

"What are you doing?" Molly said, a hand going up to push at her tumble of curls, and baffled by Sallie's actions.

It was Molly's one pride that her hair could shine like polished copper when brushed and arranged. But in a kitchen with open flames, long hair could be a dangerous asset. She hadn't done more than tie up the long curls this morning and stuff her cap on, for she had sleep late. Which is why her baking was not yet done.

And it seemed it might never get done today. Well, life was always interesting at Sallie's house.

Sallie's plump, stubby fingers closed on her shoulders and Molly allowed herself to be pulled around again. But when Sallie tossed apron and cap onto the floor, Molly snatched them back. "Really, now. What has gotten into you?"

"I want you to meet a gentleman."

Molly froze. Anger fired, sizzled through her, warming her skin. She'd thought this business settled at last between them, but it seemed it would never be.

"Sallie—" she started, her tone warning, but Sallie was already shaking her head and starting to lead her upstairs, an arm over her shoulders.

"It's not like that, ducks. He's not looking for a tumble. And he's got fifty pounds in his

pocket—all just meant for you!"

"I do not care if he...fifty pounds?" Molly stuttered over the words as the sum registered. She did not care to think of herself as mercenary, but she had learned to be as practical as any girl in Sallie's house. And fifty pounds! Gracious, that deserved more than practicality. That sum merited full consideration. But she still had her worries.

Eyes narrowing, she asked, "Fifty pounds for what, exactly?"

"Nothing much. He just wants some fancy piece to act up a bit in front of his family—you know, carry on as if you're enamored with him. Why, you could consider it a holiday, almost. A paid one at that! I wouldn't ask, ducks, but then I thought to m'self, I thought, Sallie, why not just offer our own dear Molly a chance at some of the easiest money ever. You've been good enough to me, ducks, and I'd like to help you get that inn you talked about wanting so dearly."

Sallie grinned.

Molly hugged her apron and cap even tighter. It had been such a mistake to sip too much of that lovely sweet port Sallie had bought Christmas last. That was the one holiday when the house closed, and Molly had always delighted in fixing a proper feast for the girls. But last year, with the candles guttering low, and the smell of pine in the house, and the goose and ham and mincemeat pies and plum pudding eaten, she had sat with Sallie. And she had drunk too much and started to talk about her dream of an inn—a place where she could be mistress and make a respectable name for herself as a cook.

Oh, she never ought to have confided so much.

The next day Sallie had again suggested a means for Molly to double her income. And Sallie had not stopped offering persuasion until Molly had threatened to walk out. However, she knew—and Sallie did, as well—that her threat carried no real weight. Respectable London houses were not like to hire a cook whose only reference came from a house of ill-repute. And life in another house such as this might not prove so comfortable.

But Sallie had relented. At least she had back then.

Chin raised, Molly fixed her employer with a firm stare. "What else does he want for his fifty pounds?"

Sallie started up the stairs again. "That's just it, ducks. He may have the ready at hand, but you have the goods, he needs, so to speak. And what he needs is not a good time between the sheets, but a smart girl who can handle herself well—which means, you name the tune, and he pays the piper!"

A shrewd look had come into Sallie's eyes as she spoke, and Molly knew she had been unwise to show any interest. How could she even think of hiring herself out to some stranger? She knew the answer, however. She still could remember what it had felt like at twelve to be cold, hungry and alone—and terrified. One could do anything, given the right circumstances.

So what would she do for fifty pounds?

She earned twenty pounds a year from Sallie, and with London prices being what they were, she managed to save but five or six pounds a year. Last year she had tucked away a solid nine pounds and six pence. But with fifty pounds in hand, she would have enough at last that she could start to look for that inn she wanted.

Her own place.

Her thoughts spun faster and faster, imagining it—the tidy kitchen garden, a front parlor and a upstairs as well, and a kitchen with windows that looked out to the garden, and room for her own chickens and geese and ducks, and...and they had reached the landing on the first floor and stopped outside Sallie's best parlor.

Sallie smiled at her and clucked a thumb under her chin. "Look, ducks, I've always told you that keepin' company with any gentleman on a paying basis is safe as houses. Set the terms up front, and you can't go wrong. And all this gent wants is a gal who'll pretend to be his bride and mortify his family. That ain't much work for the kind of money he's offerin'."

Molly frowned. "Pretend to be a bride? That sounds a bit daft—or is this some sort of wager?" She might be the cook in a bawdy house, but even she knew that betting occupied a good deal of any fashionable gentleman's attention.

"He ain't touched, ducks." Sallie glanced behind her at the parlor door before she looked back at Molly, her eyes sharp as drops of ice. "But you just look 'im over for yourself afore you make any final answer."

Suspicion chilled Molly's skin. Just what was Sallie plotting?

In truth, she would never call Sallie wicked. Sallie might have the morals of a London stray tabby and be as canny as one, but she had her own sort of code, odd as it was. Molly had never seen her offer any unkindness to any of her girls, and to be fair, she had never coerced any girl into service. From the tales the girls told of other houses, such consideration was not always the case. Still, Sallie had a sly look to her just now, as if she had not been completely honest.

But if she said the gentleman only wanted companionship, perhaps that was the case. And there was that lovely temptation of fifty pounds.

"Come on," Sally urged. "Just meet him at least. What's the harm in that?"

Molly took her lower lip between her teeth and glanced at the closed parlor door. That seemed to be all the hesitation Sallie needed, for she grabbed Molly's hand, saying, "I always knew you for a fly one."

Sallie might think her knowing, but right now she felt quite the opposite. Her chest tight, Molly asked, "Should I perhaps change my gown first?"

"Oh, he won't be looking at that, ducks. And don't you fret that he won't take to you—he's partial to redheads."

Molly's stomach gave a lurch as if she had just pulled a burning pie from her enclosed oven. Just after they had first met, Sallie had introduced another gentleman with a fondness for redheads to her—a florid-faced banker to whom Sallie had tried to sell Molly's favors. A few pungent words from Molly had changed his mind about his preference, and she'd had more words with Sallie until the shouting had gathered the attention of everyone in the house. After Molly had broke every vase in her room, and smashed one chair even, Sallie had agreed to Molly's terms that she worked in the kitchen or not at all. They had gotten along very well on those terms since.

But now a tremor of apprehension fluttered into Molly at the thought of having to meet up with any gentleman in Sallie's house.

She thought of everything else she had been through in her life—the barely remembered early years in India, the long voyage home with her heart still grieving, that time alone in London when she'd not known a single soul, and that desperate time in the workhouse. She squared her shoulders. She had been through worse than this.

And hadn't her late uncle always told her: "A soldier stands fast, Molly-may."

She could still hear his gruff voice. He had certainly faced his own death brave enough, so to honor his memory she would face this gentleman.

After all, she had made no promises that she would agree to this preposterous bargain.

Still, she had to take a breath as Sallie pulled open the gilt-edged door to the drawing room. She found her apron and cap plucked from her cold hands, and a hand pushing on the small of

her back as Sallie whispered to her, "And if you don't think those are the loveliest blue eyes you've ever seen, you're blind, ducks."

With a firm shove, Sallie sent Molly into the room.

The gentleman turned from where he had been standing near the window and Molly blinked.

Gracious, those were indeed the loveliest eyes. Quite the most startling shade of deep blue, like the sky at twilight. They stared at her with a startling intensity from a face that she had not expected either, and which had her blurting out the first words that came into her head.

"Why, you're hardly more than a boy yourself! Why ever do you want to go hiring a woman from this house to act as your bride?"

CHAPTER TWO

At the sight of a short, curvaceous redhead being thrust into the room, Theo started to smile. But those tempting, full lips parted and her words cut into him like a butcher's knife. *Hardly more than a boy!*

Eyes narrowing, he glared at her, his mood souring into a return of her critical judgment. Young, was he? Well, she was not what he'd call aged. Not the least. And she was a bit on the small side. And plump. Yes, decidedly plump, with an oddly fresh look to her for a girl from this house. Faint freckles dusted her nose and cheeks, as if she were a country lass, not a London harlot. But, like many a redhead, she had skin smooth as cream under the freckles.

However, he was being critical of her, he reminded himself. This whole business rode on her, after all.

Only as he tried to find fault, he found himself thinking that that pert nose of hers and that nicely rounded chin and that oval face were all attractive enough. And she might not be too plump, for those curves kept distracting him in a way he rather liked.

But he at once realized the truth.

Sallie must have coached her. Yes, that must be it. She had come in, determined to show him that she could be a shrew.

His shoulders eased and he offered a smile. "Lord, you could shave the hair off an ox with that sharp a tongue. But you don't have to put on any airs for this—I've no need for you to try and sound a lady."

"Airs?" she said, sounding rather affronted.

"Oh, don't you worry, Mr. Winslow," Sallie said, stepping into the room and pausing only to kick back with her foot at some bit of white cloth that now lay in the doorway. Theo could not quite see what it was, but it almost appeared to be the ties to an apron. An absurd notion that.

"Molly here can speak a proper Cockney, she can," Sallie said as she turned to the girl, and Theo could almost swear that Sallie winked at her.

Understanding appeared in the girl's eyes—wide-set, green eyes, Theo noticed, quite fetching, with a sparkle that glimmered like dew on new grass.

Turning to him, the girl said, her words only a little hesitant, "Yes, I suppose I...I mean, 'course I can...ducks."

Theo frowned at that awkward speech. Was the girl shy? Is that why she had to be pushed into the room? That wouldn't do. It'd take a girl with brass to face his father and not crumble, spilling the whole tale out as well, no doubt. That was one of the reasons he had decided he needed either an actress or the sort of woman who was hard as February ice.

Tucking his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets, he frowned and tried to put on what he hoped

appeared an all-business attitude. No need to let Sallie see that his pulse—and his hopes for carrying this off—had both lifted. She'd only try to raise the rates along with it.

"Come here, then, and let's have a look at you," he said.

The girl stiffened, color pinking her cheeks as if she was embarrassed that he wanted to inspect her. Didn't she get this every night when she paraded herself to be sold?

Sallie put a hand on the girl's back and pushed her forward. "Go on, ducks. No need to hold back as if you was waiting to hear how much he'd pay. We all know the terms, so we can all be nice and friendly."

The girl shot a rather odd look at Sallie—a look Theo could almost swear held a good deal of resistance. Had she not yet agreed to this?

"What's the problem here?" he asked, glancing at Sallie. "Is she shy?"

Sallie's smile widened, but before she could speak the girl answered. "I am not the least shy. And you do not—I mean, no need to talk about me as if I weren't here...ducks."

The endearment came out in a rather hostile tone and Theo glanced at her, misgivings tightening his shoulders. He rubbed the back of his neck. Perhaps he had been wrong to state his attraction to redheads—they could have the devil's temper. But she did have quite the most glorious tumble of curls. Copper highlights glinted in the red, along with golden threads and darker mahogany tones. She also had the sort of figure to draw any man's notice—round, high breasts and hips that just begged for a fellow to take hold. Not too plump in the least, really.

"I beg your pardon," he said. *And an awkward thing it is to be apologizing to a prostitute as if she were a lady.*

It dawned on him that her high-and-mighty attitude struck the perfect note. Yes, he needed a female who seemed to have long claws well into him, and wasn't about to let go. She had brass, right enough, and not just in the color of her hair.

Starting to smile, he came forward. "Perhaps, Sallie, you should start us off with a proper introduction?"

Sallie agreed at once. And Molly found herself unable to say much of anything as Mr. Winslow—Theodore Winslow, she learned—kept smiling at her. He had a dimple near the left corner of his mouth and the most disarming smile. It put a mischievous gleam in his eyes, and made her want to smile back in a ridiculous, empty-headed fashion.

He took her hand with his ungloved one. She glanced down at his touch. Strong fingers closed over hers. Her mouth dried. Lifting her hand, he touched soft, warm lips to her skin, before he turned her hand over and pressed a kiss into her palm. Hot pleasure washed through her.

A week with him would be no hardship. Oh, gracious, what was she thinking? Was she thinking? Why, she hardly knew him!

She wet dry lips with the tip of her tongue and said, the words tripping out without any grace, "You still have...haven't answered my question. Why do you need to hire a bride?"

His smile disappeared, blue eyes darkened and she found herself facing a rather daunting gentleman. He dropped her hand. Cool air brushed her skin where a moment ago his fingers had held hers.

"Molly Sweet, eh? Well, that, my sweet Sweet, is my business. Just play your part as a vulgar sort of grasping female before my family—or at least enough so to get me disinherited—and we shall all be happy."

She blinked up at him. *Disinherited?* She had heard of odd situations that required a gentleman to marry to gain an inheritance, but she had never heard of one where a pretend bride

would lose a legacy. Perhaps he was just a bit touched upstairs?

But while she did not know as much about men as did Sallie, she had spent years enough dealing with London fishmongers, grocers, and merchants that she could judge a man. And this gentleman had an honest look to him. He also had an obstinate set to his mouth, and the pulse beat rapid in a jaw clenched tight.

Stubborn as a street dog with a bone to chew, she decided.

"Very well, if that's your business, then what part is mine?" she asked.

Black eyebrows lifted with arrogant affront. "I beg your pardon?"

"Well, what am I to know about you? How did we meet? How did you come to fall in love with me—at least I presume you did since you proposed marriage? And why are you taking me to meet your family? Why not just run off with me? And how can I act anything if all you tell me is just to be vulgar? Oh, and grasping—just what am I to be grasping at?"

His frown tightened into a scowl. "Devil a bit, but you like questions! She always so impudent?" he asked with a glance at Sallie.

Before Sallie could say, the girl answered back. "Will you stop talking around me, as if I were not here! I am not some horse for hire. And I require at least some information before I say yes to this...this bargain."

"Not much of a bargain for my purse," Theo muttered. Folding his arms, he glared at the girl. Perhaps he should walk out now. Only, blazes, but she exactly suited his requirements, freckles and all. No proper lady would ever have such a common complexion. And if she could raise his hackles with just a few words, she should be able to provoke his father into one of his rages. Which is what he wanted.

The satisfaction of finally serving his back father some of his own trickled through him. Dropping his arms to his sides, he decided to humor her curiosity. He had few enough options just now, after all.

"If you must have a story, you may make up whatever you wish. Just make it believable, and I should think it obvious that what you're grasping for is a ring on your left hand. As for why I'm taking you home—oh, make something up there, too. You want to inspect your future manor, or some such thing. And for the rest, you can say the utter truth—that we met in a brothel and that I bought your time." He grinned. "My father will have an apoplexy if you do, in fact."

She stared at him, eyes widening and face paling. "What! Do you want to kill him."

"Of course not. Must you be so literal? I already told you I just want him to cast me off. That shouldn't be so difficult to understand? And now you can tell me if you're my girl, sweet Molly Sweet—and was there ever such a badly named female as you, for you're as tart as lemons!"

"Some consider that a fine taste. Besides, it sounds as if you want a female who'll make you trouble," Molly shot back to him. Remembering she really was supposed to be talking more like Sallie and not herself, she pressed her lips tight. What answer should she give him on his proposition, either in her own words, or with Sallie's odd mixture of London Cockney and artificially polished tones?

If he had seemed a libertine, if his face had shown signs of hard dissipation, or if he were not so sinfully handsome, she would have said no at once. Even for fifty pounds. But she had no sense of danger from him—and her perception for that had been well honed by the past dozen years of her life.

He could be no more than in his mid-twenties, she guessed, and he sounded honestly desperate to be rid of this inheritance. She could not imagine why. She had never been willed more than her mother's locket and her father's sword—both now long gone, taken from her when

she'd been found on her own at the London docks and sent to St. Marylebone. But how lovely to have someone care enough to bequeath something to one—only he seemed not to think so.

So did she help him or not?

And did she help herself to fifty pounds?

But when she took a breath and looked at the situation, the blunt truth was that she wanted to go with him. The money just made it all the more tempting.

It surprised her, this sudden fierce ache. This longing. Shocked her to her core. But she could not deny that he had a face and form made to put ideas in any female mind—and it made her look to her future and wonder if she would ever have such a chance as this again. A fine gentleman of her own. Even if only pretend. Even if only for a week.

Well, she had to be honest about it. She wanted to pretend with him.

Even if it did not last.

What, after all, did last—good or bad?

Brushing her fingers along her hand where his lips had touched her skin, her face warm, she glanced from him to Sallie.

Why not agree? Sallie thought it easy money. And he might kiss her hand again. Course he might try to kiss a few other parts of her, as well.

Sallie gave an encouraging nod and lifted her eyebrows as if to compel agreement. With that, Molly made up her mind. It would not be the biggest risk she had ever taken, but it did rank up there.

Still, she had taken a risk to come home to England after Uncle Fred had died. She had taken a greater risk to hire on with Sallie and escape any return to St. Marylebone, with its overcrowded rooms and its stench of poverty and hopelessness. If this adventure only led to a week with him, well, she could think of worse things.

The trick would be to make certain this did not become one of those worse things.

Squaring her shoulders, she stretched as tall as she could. "If I have your word as a gentleman that you'll never do more than I allow, then I shall...that's to say, I'm your girl, ducks."

The blue eyes blazed again. "Word as a...? Never do...? Just who is footing the bill, here, my girl?"

"Now, now, Mr. Winslow," Sallie said, smoothly inserting herself and laying a hand on his arm. "We agreed on terms, and they're quite generous, given as you're not paying near to a full night's rate for Molly's time."

Not near to a full night's rate? Theo glanced at the redhead, impressed and rather curious now. There must be something quite extraordinary under that dress of hers to command more than a hundred and fifty for a full night. Blazes, but what talents did she have?

Sallie leaned closer to him, her voice low and teasing his imagination. "Where else, I ask you, will you find just what you asked for?"

He frowned. Molly was all a fellow could ask for. Sharp tongue and all. And to have her for a week—well, perhaps this was a standard ploy to squeak a few more quid from him. With a week's time, he might well find a way to soften that tongue of hers and her mercenary attitude. He'd coaxed more than a few ladies into changing their mind about what they'd offer.

"Very well, Miss Sweet, you have my word as a gentleman that I won't do more than you allow. But in turn I want a guarantee. If I'm not disowned, then I owe you nothing!"

Sallie put a hand on her hip. "You don't want much do you now! Molly's time for free if you don't get your way."

"You said you liked your gentlemen to go away satisfied. Well, that's what I'm asking for."

He raked his glance over the girl again. "Or don't you think you'll be able to carry this off?"

The girl stretched taller, though her head still only came to his shoulder—and it would rest nicely there, too, he thought.

"Twenty-five pounds for my time, no matter the outcome. And the balance then if you are disowned."

"Ten," he countered.

"Twenty."

"Done." He grinned at her. "Do we seal our bargain with a kiss?"

Dark-reddish eyebrows lifted. "At those rates? I think not. But here's my hand on it."

He took her hand, noticing that traces of white powder dusted her skin—trying to hide her freckles, he wondered? Lifting her hand, he flecked his tongue across her skin. Flour, of all things! Must be some new beauty secret.

He forgot about that when she flushed deliciously, pinking up like a maid of May, in fact.

Pulling her hand away, her eyes glittered and her lips parted as if she looked ready to offer back another of her saucy answers, but Sallie caught her arm.

Leading her from her room, Sallie called back, "I'll just see she's packed and ready within the hour."

"Quarter hour, mind. It's a warm day and I've left Terrance's team being walked long enough as it is."

"Hour? Quarter hour? But what about my tarts?"

Theo frowned at such an obscure comment from the girl. But Sallie merely waved it aside, promised she'd see to all. She had Molly out the door in an instant and the door closed behind them.

Molly turned to her, already shaking her head. "I cannot possibly leave today. There are instructions about the kitchen—Edna shall have to manage it while I'm away."

"Ducks, if Edna can't run that kitchen after being with you for near on two years now, she's a half-wit, and I don't think she'd fancy you callin' her that to her face. Why she's probably already got your pastries done and finished."

"But...but I only have menus made up until Saturday."

Sallie linked her arm with Molly's as she started up the stairs to the girls' rooms. "Send me more in the post—or, better yet, Edna can use some from last month. It's the food that goes off, not the bits of paper you write it all down on."

"But I..." *I have no more excuses*, Molly thought, panic spiraling loose. She thought of the gentleman, with his skin-tight buckskins and his beautiful blue coat, and his silk-embroidered yellow waistcoat so casually worn. And she found one more almost sensible reason to cling to. "I have nothing to wear that looks as if I am a...a hired woman."

Oh, gracious, what have I just leapt into?

Sallie gave a scornful glance to Molly's dress. "Ducks, you haven't enough gowns to look even half proper, let alone improper. We'll have to see what Jane left. She took her best with her, but she spent what she made on her back putting cloth on it, so there ought to be something. A few stitches to take up the hems and they'll do. Now stop havoring. You said you'd do it, so stop thinking why you can't. Just think of the money, ducks. It what gets me through anything."

"The money," Molly repeated, pressing a hand to her stomach. It was just that those blue eyes no longer dazzled and that handsome face no longer overwhelmed—how did a man ever get such beauty? Such hard, masculine beauty. Even features and a firm chin and a straight nose ought not to have such an effect. But they did. As had those dark eyebrows set low over his eyes,

which flattened and quirked and lifted to display his every mood.

She could think again without those broad shoulders looming before her. Without him in the room, restless and somehow drawing all attention. And the images dancing through her mind were all disaster—she was about to go off with some gentleman she did not even know.

Of course, she had done almost the same when she had met Sallie—and that had turned out well enough.

Still, she had learned enough about caution, so she turned to Sallie, desperate for advice. "What am I to do if he doesn't honor his word—if he wants, well, if he tries to make me act like one of your girls?"

"That's easy, ducks. Smile, put a hand on your hip, and name a price that'll take the interest right out of him."

Molly thought about that. And she thought of those intense, direct eyes of his and the impression she had of focused concentration. "I could name five hundred pounds and he still might say he would pay."

"Oh, he might say it, but you just ask for coins in your open hand before anything else opens wide, and see if that don't act like a dash of cold water."

"That actually sounds like Mr. Tipton's usual attitude," she said. Sallie turned a questioning stare on her, and she added, "He's the fishmonger who comes on Thursdays."

"Well, you want to make sure you ain't a trout with your mouth gapping open to be hooked by this flash gent, or any other. Remember that, or you'll be agreeing to more than you think you will now. And just you remember, too, every woman may have her price, but every man has his limits. Most of 'em start with his purse. Now, let's see how those dresses look. You're going to have to be dazzlin', 'cause it's going to take us longer than a quarter hour to turn you out in style."

#

By the time Sallie finished, Molly no longer recognized herself. Nell and Harriet, seeing the door open to Jane's forsaken room, had poked their heads in—eyes sleepy and hair tumbled and still in their night wrappers. Sallie's house kept late hours and late mornings. Sallie hustled them out, saying to Molly afterwards, "Never does to stir up jealousy, and you don't want them thinking you're stealing their trade."

"Gracious, I suppose I am. Do you think they'll be angry with me?"

"Not if you don't go talking about the money. Always brings out the worst in folks, if you do. And don't you let that gent of yours start talking price with you, either. You don't want him thinking he can argue you down. That's why the girls always leave it to me to set the rates."

Molly paused in smoothing a hand over a rather pretty scarlet jacket that Jane had left behind. "I almost forgot—what should I give you of the fifty pounds as your share?"

Sallie abruptly buried herself in Jane's half-empty wardrobe. "Lord, the girl had more clothes than in a Drury Lane play, no wonder she couldn't pack them all. And don't you worry over my share. I took my percentage off the top as usual, so that fifty pounds is yours right and proper." Emerging from the wardrobe with a peacock-blue silk gown in a paisley pattern, she held it up. "Now see if this'll fit, and then we've got to get a trunk packed."

The dress did fit—or near enough. It laced up the back, and had to be tied loose, for Jane was slimmer. "I'm almost spilling out the top," Molly protested as she looked at herself.

"That's the point. Hold still while I pin it. You'll have to hem it later. I'll have Nipton pack you a sewing kit," Sallie said, speaking of her own maid.

With that, she sent Molly off to her room to change into a stripped walking dress and to finish her packing.

Ten minutes later, Sallie reappeared, smiling like a cat with a full belly and feathers scattered around her, and with her hand over the shift-pocket sewn into her underdress.

Uneasy with what that secret smile might mean, Molly asked, "You seemed pleased about something?"

"Oh, just settled a few things with Mr. Winslow. I think you'll find him right easy to deal with. Always such a pleasure to find a flash cove who knows how to act a gent. Now, mind you, no talking money with him! And don't you look just grand in that dress!"

Molly glanced down at herself. The stripped walking dress, in lime green and canary yellow, was cut narrow, the muslin so fine that it brushed her skin, soft as cream. Over it she wore a solid green Spencer, the short jacket cut so close that Molly felt almost like meat stuffed into a sausage skin.

"Just one thing you need, ducks. Hold on a tick."

Sallie hurried from the room, coming back a few minutes later with a straw bonnet. An extravagant brim rose up, trimmed with two green ostrich feathers and artificial cherries.

Settling the bonnet in place, Sallie tied the yellow silk grosgrain ribbons under Molly's chin. "There, that's the prize. Now, let's show you off to your gent."

"My gent," Molly repeated, a tickle of pleasure and uncertainty dancing through her.

She had on her own gloves and boots, but nothing else was hers. Not even the silk stockings, found at the back of Jane's wardrobe. "I can do this," she muttered. "For fifty pounds, I can do this."

Sallie followed her down the stairs. "Low, grasping, vulgar—that's what he wants. You can be as bold as those stripes you're wearing."

"Bold," Molly echoed. How in heavens did Sallie's girls go through this night after night, going off with gentlemen they hardly knew? She had often wondered, and had been a little envious, for some of the girls had often told her that she had no idea of the pleasure she was missing. Now, however, she began to wonder if the girls had left out any mention of the anxiety of such casual meetings. Or perhaps they did not notice.

Still, she'd done well with her bargain. He had agreed to her terms, and she had Sallie's advice to help keep him to his promise. And he looked gentleman enough that he would keep his word—besides, he had something he wanted from her, other than her person. He wanted his disinheritance gone, and for that he needed her cooperation. That alone reassured her that he would keep his part of this arrangement.

With such thoughts tumbling through her, and with her breath short and her nerves taut, she came to the top of the stairs, looked down into the hall where Mr. Winslow waited, his tall beaver hat in his hands, and she smiled.

He glanced up, his expression set tight those blue eyes flashing, and Molly wanted to turn around and go back to her kitchen.

CHAPTER THREE

Theo glanced up, his attention drawn by the squeak of a stair and his temper worn with waiting. A quarter hour he had said—that had been at least three quarters of an hour ago! He parted his lips to issue a rebuke, and then he saw her. A pleasurable shock scorched through him.

Gone was the plain white gown, replaced by something in bright stripes. The fabric clung to

her hips and hinted at the soft narrowing of her waist before disappearing under a short, dark jacket that fit as near to a second skin as any man could wish over ample, high breasts.

Lord, but she looked about as far from respectable as a woman could get. He smiled. But, glancing up at her face, he saw what almost looked like apprehension in those wide, green eyes.

Ah, knows she kept me waiting and she's sorry for it, he thought, in a mood now to be pleased.

"Blazes, but my father will throw us both out of the house with you done up like that!"

She seemed to grip the newel post even tighter as she frowned and asked, "Is something wrong? I thought the dress quite—quite attractive?"

He grinned. "It's more than that. Now, come along. Your carriage awaits my sweet Sweet. However did you come up with such a name?"

"By being born with it," she said, her tone sharpening. She started down the stairs, and he watched, his attention caught by the sway of hips and the hint of trim ankle he glimpsed as she lifted her skirts for each step.

Two steps above him, she stopped, dropped her skirts and gave him her gloved hand. "I am putting myself in your care, Mr. Winslow."

The gesture and the words carried an odd grace, as if she honestly meant them. And a swell of protective instinct rose. Short, petite fingers lay in his grip, slim and fragile as fine china. He frowned. Quite ridiculous, of course. A jade such as her must care only for the size of a fellow's purse. This would be no more than a trick of her trade to stir a fellow's interest.

Blazes, she was good at it, too.

Still, they had a game to play now. So he tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. Might as well start treating her as if she honestly were his intended—it'd take a bit to get accustomed to the thought of having a female attached to him.

And he fought down the shiver of apprehension. Hadn't Terrance always warned him against too much of an attachment to any female? 'Course, it would have been a fine thing for Terrance to have heeded his own advice, but Terrance never did. So it was now up to Theo to pull his brother's irons out of this particular fire.

With a tip of his hat to Sallie—who had his fifty pounds in her clutches now—Theo settled his high-crown beaver at a jaunty angle. And he said to Molly, "Hope you don't mind traveling in an open carriage."

The page boy leapt up from his chair to open the front door for them, and Theo led his vulgarly dressed pretend bride from Sallie's house.

Soon as he got her to the front steps she stopped, and he glanced down. Her eyes had brighten and widened. "Gracious, that's your carriage?"

He glanced at the curricule, and almost wished it were. Black, with touches of red trim and red painted wheels, it looked sleek and expensive; Terrance had always preferred how the light-bodied curricule handled on the road to the precarious perch of the high phaeton. Burke, Terrance's groom, short and slight, his face weathered by the sun and dressed in black coat and trousers, his hat at a rakish angle in imitation of how Terrance wore his, stood beside the heads of a pair of bay horses.

The sun pulled flashes of red from the fit, brown bodies of the compact pair of horses. Black tails were banged flat at the bottom and black manes lay to the left in perfect order. About the only thing in his brother's life that ran smoothly was his stable, Theo thought, a touch of pride stirring. Of course, a fellow ought to have a well run stable.

"My brother's curricule," he explained. Unable to resist boasting, he added, "The suspension is

quite the latest—S-springs, don't you know. And you won't see a pair as well matched as these. They're Terrance's, too. I figured he owed me at least their loan, for they've bottom enough to handle the drive to Somerset if you don't try to gallop the whole distance.

"Now, come along and up with you. You'll sit next to me, and I've a rug, if you wish. It may be warm now, but we'll pick up a breeze on the road."

Fitting his hands to her waist, he found that she indeed had a figure just made for a fellow to hold. Soft as sin in all the right spots. He let his hold stay longer than he needed to before he lifted her into the front seats above the large carriage wheels. She seemed not to notice his touch and he found that a little irritating. Of course she must be well used to being handled by gentlemen, but he still found himself wanting her to be more aware of him.

Oh, stuff it. She's a hired woman!

Stepping up into the carriage, he picked up the reins and called out to the groom, "Let 'em go, Burke."

The groom stepped away from the tossing heads of the bays. They started forward, the white of their legs flashing. Over-grained and under used, Theo had always thought. And he had been glad of finding them tucked in the mews behind the house that his brother kept in London. And the surly Burke, too, who'd helped the horses into harness after a suitable bribe had softened his stance against Theo borrowing so much as a leather strap.

As the carriage swept away from Sallie's house, Burke swung himself up and into the small seat behind Theo and Molly. He leaned forward and said, his tone impertinent and rough with a West Country accent, "Now you mind, don't you go tippin' us over!"

Theo glanced back at him. "Tip us—? Just you hold your tongue, or I'll set you down again."

"Ha. See if you can! I'm going where those bays go."

"Then stubble it. Terrance may pay you, but the day I can't handle the ribbons better than he ever did is the day I take up driving cart horses. Tip us over!"

He glanced at Molly Sweet who stared at him, wide-eyed and looking a touch alarmed. She gripped the edge of the black coach hood that had been folded back and which could be lifted over them in case of bad weather.

"I've never tipped over any carriage," he told her, but had to admit, "Well, other than that first cart, and that wasn't my fault for that blasted pony ran off with it. So settle back and enjoy yourself, my sweet Sweet, and we'll be to Winslow Park in no time."

She offered a weak smile and turned her face forward. But, he noted with a touch of irritation, she did not let go her hold on the edge of the carriage hood.

So much for thinking her to be what she looked—a sweet, trusting soul.

#

Two hours later, Molly sat on the green verge beside a hard, dusty road. The leaves of an oak shaded her as she watched Theo—they had progressed to first names within a half an hour, when passing through Hounslow. She had been delighted to see London streets and houses give way to countryside. They had attracted a few stares while in town—no doubt due to the smart carriage—but with leaving the city they also left behind the street gawkers and other carriages. So far only the mail coach for Bath had passed them on the road.

True to his claim, Theo did drive well. At least she thought he did. He set the pair of bays to a steady trot, easing them back when they tried to break into a canter to follow the galloping mail coach, and smoothly guiding the pair as if the reins were extensions of his arms.

With white clouds dotted the blue sky, drifting idly, rather like fat, lazy sheep, and the weather fair, Molly had begun to relax and enjoy herself.

Her companion had not much to say for himself. He stared ahead, jaw set, eyes dark, as if brooding about something—that bone of contention of his, she thought. Or perhaps the groom's insults to his skills. Shrugging off his mood, she had sat back against the padded leather cushions—the carriage rocking from the horse's brisk trot, the breeze cool on her face, ruffling the ostrich feathers against her cheek—and had given herself to the parade of aromas.

Smells of the city—horse dung, chamber pots emptied into the streets, coal fires—gave way to cut hay, cow pastures, and teasing wisps of flowery scents that she could not identify. It was new enough that she did not even mind the dust, dry as the road was from summer and a day without rain. She had been to India and back as a child, but since her return to London, she had never been further than an excursion to Richmond Park. Vague memories of her earliest years stirred of green countryside—but they slipped away.

Time slipped past fast enough as well, until, on an open stretch between any village or town, one of the horses started to bob its head. Cursing under his breath, had pulled the carriage to a halt, easing it off the road and onto the grassy verge. After jumping down from the carriage, he strode to the horses' heads, the groom already there ahead of him to hold the animals.

The two had set to arguing, blame and curses flying like smoke from cooking oil spilled onto a fire.

Molly had waited, but she had grown bored and stiff. Climbing down from the carriage, she glanced around her. The gentlemen, bent over as they were to stare at the horse's leg, had seemed not to notice and that suited her.

She had walked a bit, and found it too warm to do more, and so she had found her seat under the oak tree. And still Theo and his groom, Burke, stared at one of the horse's front legs, lifting it, putting it down, feeling down the back of it, all the time conferring in low voices, both of them frowning and looking a little guilty.

In the warmth of the sun-dappled shade, Molly's eyes began to drift closed.

"Well, he's lame!"

Eyes startled opening, Molly straightened. Theo's voice sounded tense with anger.

Arms folded, he stood next to her, glaring at the carriage where Burke had begun to unbuckle harness straps, his face set into deep, frowning lines. "Thrown a shoe, and gotten himself a stone bruise by the looks of it. Blazes, but these roads are hard as iron! I'm going to have to send Burke back to Twyford for a fresh pair."

"Won't a new shoe help?"

He glanced at her. "Did you not hear me say he'd bruised his frog with a stone?"

"Frog? I thought he was a horse?"

Theo rolled his eyes and began to drag off his driving gloves. "The frog is the soft part of a horse's hoof—could you walk after pounding your foot on a rock if all I did was to put new shoes on you? You dashed well could not. No, he'll need a few days rest. Burke will have to walk them back, and there's no telling how long it will take him to bring a fresh pair."

"Can he not ride the one horse and lead the other?"

He shot her a scornful glance and said, his tone dry, "These are carriage horses."

"Oh," she said, nodding as if this made any sense to her. The horses she recalled from her childhood in India had been trained for both riding and driving, but perhaps that was because they had all been military horses. She also had distant memories of her father taking her up before him, and her mother had ridden. But London had held no opportunity to renew any

acquaintance with anything equine. One had to be rich to afford a horse.

Glanced up at Theo, she studied his scowling face. "It could be worse." He turned to her, so she offered a smile. "It could be raining."

With a sigh, he threw himself onto the grass next to her, careless of how it might stain his coat or his bluff buckskin breeches. "Or it could have been a ligament—Terrance would skin me for that. Still, it's damned nuisance. I'd hoped to make Hungerford today—and there's the cost of sound horses to be had now. I hadn't expected that. Well, I shall just have to hope I can fetch the bays back sound again before Terrance finds out."

"Would he really—skin you?"

Propping himself on his elbow, Theo took off his hat. He dragged his hand through his hair, disordering it utterly so that one black lock fell over his lined forehead. "Blister me at the least."

"Really? How awful!"

Theo lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Oh, he's a capital fellow really—quite the best of brothers. But he does have a temper worse than your own."

"I do not—that is, I don't have no temper, ducks. Least not much of one."

"Oh yes you do. Hold on a bit, Burke has them unharnessed and I'd best give him enough blunt to get a decent pair. Lord knows what we'll get, but if they're too dreadful, I can change 'em when they're blown."

He rose.

Molly watched, admiring the easy grace with which he moved. A breeze ruffled his hair like a lover's hand.

She glanced down at the hat and gloves he had left beside her. He did not wear cologne, she noted. Pulling off her own gloves, she smoothed a finger across the fine nape of the beaver-skin. He seemed a gentleman who disliked encumbrances. Was that why he wished to be rid of his inheritance?

He finished giving money and instructions to the sour-faced Burke, who grumbled words of doom for both of them when Terrance learned of this, and Burke started walking back along the road, the horses led behind him.

"Poor Burke," Molly said, as Theo stretched out in the grassy shade beside her.

"Poor what?"

"Well, to have to walk miles in the heat and dust. And he seems so unhappy about this."

He offered up a sudden grin, which crooked his mouth. "I have never seen a day when 'poor Burke' hasn't been anything but the worst doomsayer in England. You'd think he'd be happy working in a stable that boast the kind of horseflesh as my brother owns. But don't you go pitying him. He's well paid, and he'll get to Twyford and demand the best ale for himself and their best care for his master's horse. And he'll get them, too."

"You sound rather fond of him."

"Oh, Burke's a good enough sort. Once you get past the sour side of him. Taught me how to ride in fact."

"What? He hardly looks old enough to be shaving!"

"That's his size. I've a suspicion he had ambitions once to ride as a jockey—he certainly did for my father for a time."

"And why did he not continue? Did something happen?"

He glanced at her, eyes puzzled and black eyebrows lowered flat. "My sweet Sweet, I don't go inquiring into the personal lives of my father's servants. It would be damned prying and rude of me!"

"As I'm being now?" She turned away. Propping up her feet, she folded her hands on her knees.

"Taken a pet now?" he asked, his voice coaxing.

She wouldn't look at him. "No, I have not."

"Oh, come along. We've hours to pass, and I don't fancy spending them staring at sheep and grass."

Glancing at him from the corner of her eyes, she asked, "Does that mean I may ask prying, rude questions then?" She added a belated, "Ducks?"

"I suppose it does," he said, his eyes lightening with humor. "Though it don't mean I'll answer them."

"Then I'd rather talk about myself. Did you know that I once lived in India? I am rather proud of that, for I think it gives me a touch of the exotic. Don't you think, ducks?"

"No. But you must have looked exotic there—that red hair and pale skin among all those Hindus."

"Not all the natives are Hindu—but they are all rather remarkable people. I rather miss them. And the food. Oh, the spices are heaven. And the land is one of the most extraordinary contrasts of beauty and harsh ugliness. But I don't miss the heat. Not at all. But what about you? Have you traveled?"

He stood and stripped off his coat, which he tossed to the ground beside his hat before stretching out again. He looked even better, she thought, sneaking an admiring glance, without his coat on. The white sleeves of his shirt billowed loose, and his waistcoat hugged his lean, muscular body.

Propping himself on one elbow, he plucked a blade of grass and began to chew on the pale end of it. "Not particularly. Though it's my plan to do so after my father disowns me."

"Won't that upset your mother—and your brother?"

He gave a short, harsh laugh. "I don't see Terrance being upset in the least about anything. And my mother's dead."

She nodded and said, her tone matter of fact, "Mine is too."

Theo lay still for a moment, surprised. He had expected, and braced himself for, her to offer the usual artificial sympathy for his loss, the sort that generally masked the unspoken relief that tragedy had struck elsewhere. Now he realized how harshly he had spoken, in anticipation of any pity from her.

She seemed not even to notice, however, for she just sat there with her knees pulled up close to her, looking more like a girl than a woman of ill-repute.

Lifting her head, she undid the strings to her bonnet, and he smiled as she took it off. What a pleasure she was to look at, with that glorious hair and those enticing curves. No wonder she cost what she did for a night. And he had her for far more than that—'course, it was all supposed to be look and no touch, but he had not yet tried to persuade her into just a bit more.

"I was—what, ten—no, I was nine when she died," she said, eyes distant. "Cholera. Everyone dreaded it. At least the Europeans and English did. The natives had a rather fatalistic view—karma—they called it, I think." She turned to him. "What about you? How old were you?"

He lifted a shoulder and looked away, not wanting to touch those memories. "I hardly remember."

She made an understanding sound and he glanced at her again. She had her cheek resting on her hand and her head turned toward him, and she looked adorable.

"What do you think is better—to have lots of memories?" she said, rocking herself gently.

"Or to lose a parent before it really matters? I had a younger brother, but he died on the voyage to India. I only know about him because my mother once showed me a locket with a snippet of his hair. And I could only feel guilty, for I honestly could not work up even a single tear over him."

He sat up and leaned closer. "That's it exactly. I can only remember my father making everyone dress in black, and no one allowed to do anything. No running, no playing. I used to escape to the woods just so they wouldn't see me enjoying myself while everyone else went around with faces like black clouds."

"It's difficult, isn't it? My uncle used to say that tears are only about feeling sorry for yourself, for if you believe in a heaven, you ought to be happy for anyone who's gone there. He used to say he liked to think of them as having gone off to Brighton for holiday."

Theo gave a snort. "Brighton? Not exactly my idea of heaven. But who do you mean by them?"

"Why my father and mother, of course. I lost them both—such an odd way of putting it, as if I mislaid them, but it sounds so harsh to just say they died."

He stared at her. She had not a trace of self-pity in her eyes or expression, but gazed back at him, a slight smile lifting her lips, her eyes bright.

"You are an extraordinary woman," he said, his voice soft. Her laugh bubbled loose, giggly as a girl's. He couldn't help but grin back. "What? What is so funny about that?"

"I'm as ordinary as you can find—other than for my hair. Plain Molly Sweet, a bit of a girl with no family and not much else going for her other than God's grace. And there are times I wish that stretched just a bit further than it has for a common girl like me."

He sat up. "Now who filled your head with such nonsense? Common! Does Sallie tell you that?"

"Oh, no, Sallie's been one of the better blessings. But the workhouse...." Even in the warmth of the day, she shuddered.

He knew little enough about such places, other than that they were established to help the poor—give them shelter at the least, and perhaps opportunities to find a position if someone came to them. Frowning, he asked, "I thought they're supposed to take care of you in such a place?"

With a shake of her head, she looked away. "I don't want to speak of it." She looked back, smiling, her accent roughening again. "Let's talk of good memories, ducks. Why don't you tell me about your brother?"

And so he did, happy to amuse her.

He told the story of how he had once followed Terrance, thinking to discover his brother's favorite fishing spot but had instead found his brother intimately entangled with a neighbor's wife. And how Terrance had first brought him to London and shown him the gaming hells to avoid and the brothels to frequent. And how Terrance and he had once held up the mail coach. "We actually didn't steal anything—we only wanted to see if anyone would actually 'stand or deliver' but Terrance's horse kept wanting to bolt with him every time he started to shout and I just about fell off my own horse laughing."

She had laughed at that herself, and he decided he could not have asked for a better audience. At the more outrageous stories—such as the time Terrance was caught at a ball in an indiscreet position with not one, but two ladies, both of them older than himself—her cheeks pinked. And he found himself wondering how she had managed, at Sallie's house, to keep the ability to blush.

He also found himself telling more and more of the disreputable stories, just to see her mouth

pucker with prim disapproval, as if she had no such similar stories in her own past.

With a rueful laugh, Molly shook her head. "Your brother sounds an incorrigible knave—and you sound proud that he is."

"Incorrigible? Now that's a fine word, coming from you."

"I'll have you know—" Molly broke off her protest, realizing she had been about to proclaim her virtue. Face warm, she lifted one shoulder. "Some of us are bad because we don't have much choice in it."

And she would have added more disapproval of his brother, except that she had heard the pride in Theo's voice. Even during the worst stories, it had been there—a thread of admiration for his brother's daring, his lack of concern for what others thought, his growing notoriety.

In truth, his brother sounded a disaster. But to say that to Theo seemed as if it would only be courting an argument.

As she thought on it, she realized a pang of envy lay under her faultfinding.

How lovely to have someone to care about. To have close family and ties.

She straightened. Might as well wish to have wings. She really had to keep in mind that she had come with this handsome fellow for his fifty pounds.

Only it was rather difficult with him gazing at her, a bemused smile lifting the corner of his mouth, his eyes sparkling with some mischief.

"Penny for your thoughts, ducks," she asked, curious now just what did stir that light in his eyes.

His smile widened, and he said, "I'm thinking about how much I want to kiss you."

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