

A COMPROMISING SITUATION

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For Nedra —
who always believed and who read everything

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CHAPTER ONE

The three girls laughed as they fell down in the spring grass, indifferent to what this might be doing to their white pinafores, and Miss Maeve Midden, suddenly and unaccountably, wished that these were her girls. Her mouth curved with a rare smile. The unaccountability for the feeling was easy enough to trace. She had long ago put away wishes for children or a family of her own. She had put it away as she had put away every other hope a young girl cherishes. In this world, a governess had no use for dreams.

However, with a breath of warmth in the March breeze and the sun brilliant on the green lawns and a lively al fresco party before her view, the sharp longing in her chest would not stay boxed in its tight compartment. It wormed its way out and crept up to her throat, winding up to her travel-weary mind like some clever, intimate serpent. And, as did the serpent in Eve's garden, it whispered insidious thoughts to her.

Why couldn't these be her girls, even if only to teach? Why, by the time the youngest was out of the schoolroom, the eldest would have married and would more than likely have a child who would be of an age to need a governess. She might stay with such a family for years...she might have a home again.

A small sigh escaped, and she only knew that it had slipped past her guard when she heard it echo in the elegant drawing room in which she stood. She shook her head and started to turn away from the open casement windows that reached to the floor. But the smell of cut grass and warming earth slipped in through the parted French windows, and she gave into the guilty indulgence of picturing a very large family of girls, all in great need of a governess. That was what she needed. Oh, how very badly she needed them.

Three positions in less than three years was beginning to make her seem...what was the word Mr. Jessup had used when she had first presented herself at his agency? Ah, yes...unsteady, as if she were a chair with a short leg on one side, or a carriage with a wobbly wheel. It seemed not to matter that the brevity of her employment was not due to any lapse in the performance of her duties. It did not matter at all. No, a woman only had to be born to accept blame and consequences, she thought bitterly.

She chided herself for that thought. She had vowed not to regret her choices. Nine years ago, she had made a promise to herself to only look ahead. And that was exactly where she should be

looking, with both eyes firmly open and fixed on the reality of her present life.

She turned from the window and pulled back her shoulders, feeling as she did the tug of strained seams in her second best gown. She smoothed the brown wool and took a less shallow breath. Over eight years in service had worn out the dress, and her as well if she was now giving in so easily to such grim musings.

She touched the letter in her reticule for a bit of luck, listening to the paper crumple. The letter had been few in its particulars. The hurried scrawl read almost as if Mr. Jessup—of Hastings, Hastings and Jessup Employment Agency, Pultney Bridge, Bath—had dashed off the missive while the postman was calling out his cry for the last post. It had at least been particular in noting that the situation called for a governess to a "young lady." Emphasis on the singular. Maeve thought back to the girls on the lawn. They must be friends who were visiting, or perhaps a neighbor's children.

She glanced around the room, taking in its rich appointments, the gold silk wall coverings and fashionable furnishings which showed off Mr. Chippendale's fine workmanship. One girl—and perhaps a greatly indulged child to judge by this display of wealth.

Maeve imagined the house must have been in the family for centuries, for the stone exterior of the house seemed a jumble of styles that somehow managed to find a harmony between its fortified walls and more modern wings, its towers and chimneys, and its vast number of mullioned windows. This room itself was large, with a tall plastered ceiling and a pleasant view of the north lawns.

It struck Maeve as a house well-suited to a large and boisterous family, but if she could not hope for a large family, at least she could place her hopes for an equal emphasis by Mr. Jessup on the "young." Young and greatly in need of a governess.

A girl's voice cut into Maeve's speculations, shrilling into the room through the open windows. "But I tell you, I am too old for a governess! I won't have it. I just won't!"

Oh, dear. It sounded as if the "young lady" was not that young after all, but was definitely quite that spoilt.

A slow, deep baritone followed the girl's pettish soprano. "When your opinion is required, I shall inform you. Until then, you shall do as you are told. And you are to have a governess until you learn some manners."

A chill, which had nothing to do with changeable spring weather, chased along Maeve's skin under her wool dress. She knew a tyrant when she heard one, and this man had the inflexibility of hundred-year oak in his voice.

Just as she thought that, he spoke again, his voice gentling with patience, even if it did sound fraying on the edges. "Now, is this to become another of your unanswerable arguments, with you saying you won't, and my saying you will? Or will you act your age and do as you are bid?"

"I am sixteen, and I won't be treated as a child!"

Sixteen, Maeve thought, her hopes sinking to the worn soles of her traveling boots. Why must they always be sixteen and a year away from their debut to society? Well, this position just would not do, not for her or the girl.

"You will be treated as you act, Clarissa..." the man said, his voice so sharp now that Maeve cringed for Clarissa. She knew too well what it was to be on the receiving side of such unkindness.

The gentleman's next words had Maeve's sympathy changing into alarm as he shouted, "Put down that flower pot, miss! You will not demonstrate the very reason why you need a—"

Pottery crashed against stone and then the French windows slammed fully open.

Between the billowing curtains, a girl stood, trembling with anger, her expression both cross and startled. Golden hair, in a riot of curls, framed a stormy, heart-shaped face. Blue eyes the

color of a summer sky swam with tears, and more tears trembled on long, dark lashes. She was a little thing, but so perfect that Maeve stared in open-mouthed awe of such beauty.

Just behind Clarissa, Maeve glimpsed the architect of the girl's distress.

He stood directly behind the girl, seeming as startled as Maeve by her sudden inclusion in this argument.

He was dark. Very dark. The only lightness in him came from his white shirt and cravat. A black coat lay smooth over wide shoulders. Black riding breeches and boots covered his legs. His hair and eyes were also black, or so dark a brown as to seem inky, and years under a hot sun had tanned his skin to nut brown. He had a lean face and a strong nose, and a forceful aura of command came into the room with him.

His dark eyes narrowed with irritation as they rested on Maeve, and his black eyebrows pulled tight together.

"I beg your pardon," Maeve said, hastily dropping a curtsy and immediately lowering her gaze to the floral pattern on the carpet. A governess did not eavesdrop—or if she did, she had better be wise enough not to admit it—and a governess never, but never boldly stared at her betters. "I am Miss Midden. The footman, that is...well...I was told to wait here."

She looked up, floundering suddenly as she met the stormy blue eyes of the girl—Clarissa the gentleman had called her. The softly ringing tones of that name suited her angelic beauty. Maeve felt a tug of empathy for the troubled child, for she could still remember her own desire to grow up far faster than had been wise.

"I have come at a bad time, I see. And I probably should not have come at all," Maeve said, blurting out the honest truth. She turned and met the gentleman's dark-eyed stare. Her nerve faltered. The set of his determined jaw made him look an uncomfortable man to go against. But what choice did she have? She simply could not take on yet another short-term employment.

She stepped forward, her wool skirts softly hushing. "I am sorry for intruding. Mr. Jessup seems to have made a mistake in sending me here, for I—"

"Miss Midden."

The man's voice cracked across the room, startling Maeve again, throwing off her entire train of thought. The golden-haired Clarissa swung around to shoot a look of burning resentment at him.

"I am Colonel Derhurst. This is my niece, Clarissa Derhurst. Make your curtsy, miss."

Clarissa sullenly bobbed and then, chin lowered, continued to glare at her uncle.

"Derhurst?" Maeve asked, both confused and a touch relieved. "Oh, but that must be the mistake. I was engaged by Mr. Jessup of Hastings, Hastings and Jessup Employment Agency for Lord Rothe's household."

"Yes, I am Lord Rothe," the dark gentleman said, his expression turning even darker. "Formerly colonel in his Majesty's Rifles."

"I don't need a governess," Clarissa said again, flinging out this graceless phrase as if it were a gauntlet slapped down for a challenge.

However, Maeve saw the troubled look that haunted the back of Clarissa's defiant stare. She went at once to the girl's side, unable to ignore that unspoken plea for aid and comfort.

"Of course you do not," she said, choosing agreement as the surest way to cast a damper on any argument. "And I came expecting a child, not such a grown young lady as yourself. So since this is not a situation that suits either of us, I will leave, and I am sorry if my arrival caused you any distress."

The storm clouds hesitantly parted in Clarissa's eyes, but her uncle interrupted.

"Nonsense. Whatever you expected, Miss Midden, I am certain we can reach an agreement as to your employment here. Clarissa, you may wait in your rooms while we discuss this. Miss

Midden, please come with me to my study."

He strode briskly to the main door and held it open, a look on his face that boded ill for any who crossed his orders.

Clarissa stood for a moment, her eyes glittering, her just budding bosom rising and falling with agitation. "Oh, how I wish you were dead instead of my father!"

With that she ran from the room.

Staring after the girl, the colonel muttered, "That makes two of us."

Maeve glanced at him, wondering if he was regretting the loss of his brother or the burden of his niece?

He straightened as soon as her gaze fell on him, and gestured to the doorway. "Please, this way, Miss Midden."

She had never known anyone who could make such a simple request sound like such a complete order. However, after so many years in service, she knew how to obey.

Lowering her eyes again, she stepped into the hall and followed the colonel to a smaller room which seemed to overlook a hedge-garden. She tried to keep her eyes respectfully downcast as she stepped into the room, but the odors of tobacco and books and leather teased her nose. She glanced up, taking in the sight of oak bookcases that rose up to a ceiling where plaster shaped an intricate design of garlands and rosettes. Leather armchairs faced each other beside a cheerful fire that took the chill off the room, and another large, leather chair sat behind an enormous mahogany desk.

His lordship strode to the desk, with its tidy stacks of papers, his boots muffled by a deep, Oriental carpet.

Maeve stood and waited. Her heart pounded uncomfortably in her chest. Her bonnet had started to give her a headache. Oh, what had Mr. Jessup landed her in this time? And how was she to convince Lord Rothe, Colonel Derhurst, or whatever he wished to be called, that this was all a mistake?

"Sit," he said, gesturing to one of the leather armchairs.

Goaded by his curt tone, she asked, "Am I to take that as an 'at ease', sir?"

The corner of his mouth jerked up and then fell again. Now that she was near enough to see his features, she noticed that he had a sensitive mouth, well shaped with a full lower lip. It was a pity that he continually pulled its shape into a grim line. Sun might have darkened his complexion, ruining it, but he had a lean, intelligent face, with a high forehead and strong cheekbones. He was too thin, she decided. His cheeks seemed almost gaunt. And the energy in him could unnerve anyone, for it filled and overflowed the room.

He was, overall, an uncomfortable, unyielding man, and the sooner she ended her association with him and this household, the sooner she could find a lasting position.

"At ease, indeed," he remarked. He strode to the windows and he stood with his hands clasp behind his back. "You have a male relative in the army, I take it?"

"No. My familiarity with the term comes from my last but one house. The youngest son was quite army mad."

He turned to look at her, his dark eyes narrowing again, either with disapproval or perhaps to sum her up, she could not quite decide. With a nod, he strode back to his desk. "Sit or stand as suits you. You will forgive me if I sit while I go over your papers. Mr. Jessup assured me your references are in order. I've drawn up a schedule for you to follow and I wish to make clear—"

"Sir!" she said, growing exasperated with him.

He looked up and frowned again. "There is a problem with my giving you employment, Miss Midden?"

"Yes, there most certainly is. The problem is that...well, I am looking for a position with

younger children."

He stared at her blankly. Her mouth dried under that unwavering stare and her skin itched. She resisted the urge to fidget.

"Have you perhaps considered hiring a companion for your niece?" she asked. "A girl nearer to Clarissa in age?"

"I have considered any number of things, including shipping her off to one of those dam...those dashed finishing schools for ladies, only her mother would hold a weeping marathon at the thought of being parted from her 'dear angel'."

"But if her mother is alive, why can she not—"

"Lady Rothe, my sister-in-law, does not leave her rooms."

Maeve blinked at such an absurd idea. "Not ever?" she asked, her curiosity stirred.

"Never...or at least the servants report she hasn't left them since my brother died this past winter. They have the devil of a time cleaning around her and that pack of yapping lap dogs she keeps."

"Poor Clarissa," she said softly, thinking of that high-strung girl, alone in this house with an unsympathetic uncle, a mother lost in grief, and perhaps no company her own age. No wonder she was troubled and acting up a bit.

A sharp, derisive laugh drew her attention back to the colonel. "Poor Clarissa? We will see if you are still saying so a month from now."

"Sir...Colonel...my lord...I do not plan to stay a month."

He folded his hands on his desk and stared at her with those dark, sardonic eyes. This time she did fidget. She twisted the strings of her reticule around one gloved finger.

"And how do you plan to leave?" he asked. "My carriage brought you here from York. My carriage is the only way back. And in this part of West Yorkshire, you are not likely to find transportation for hire."

She lifted her chin. "If you were to be so unkind as to deny me transport, I do have legs and can walk. A few miles..."

"It's nearly thirty miles."

"Thirty or three hundred, I am not averse to hard work!"

"Good. Then you should stand up well to the demands my niece and her mother put upon you." He turned back to his papers. "The schedule is here, along with your payment in advance for the first year. If you decide you have had your fill of my niece in a month's time—and I would not blame you if you do cry craven—then you may leave us with my blessing." He glanced up. The corner of his mouth lifted a fraction and his dark eyes gleamed. "You may also leave in my carriage."

That gleam in his eyes and the slightly twisting of his mouth must be what passed for humor in him, she decided. It looked remarkably like sarcasm. No wonder he so irritated his niece. He could irritate a saint.

She glanced down at the packet on his desk, twisting her hands together. A year's salary...in advance. And she only had to stay the month. Oh, the man was a devil to tempt her with so much money. Why, with such funds, she might even actually be able to afford a few weeks on her own with nothing to do and no one to answer to. And a new dress. Her mouth almost watered.

Straightening, she met his stare. "It would be wrong for me to take your money without earning it. And I am looking for a position with young children."

"Clarissa only looks grown. I assure you she could match any babe's tantrums, so you may as well take the money and stay," he said, frowning as if she was making a complicated matter of something painfully simple.

He got up and came around the desk. Her impression that he was too thin vanished, for in

close proximity he seemed to tower over her. He was very broad of shoulder, and solid muscle lay encased under his dark clothing. She would not be intimidated, however.

"My lord, I—"

"Please, call me Colonel or call me Derhurst. I feel damn, I mean, dashed silly being called my lord, and I am forever wanting to look behind me to see who is really being addressed. I am even still signing my letters Derhurst."

He seemed so exasperated by his own title that she had to look down to suppress a smile. "Colonel, this is quite an impossible situation."

"Only because you are making it so," he said, and gave a deep sigh.

She glanced up. He had stepped back to the window and he stood there with one hand dragging his hair back. It was an absentminded gesture, a habitual one, she would guess. It gave an unexpected flash of insight into his thoughts. Clarissa was not the only beleaguered soul in this house.

That intangible air of command which charged the space around him did not abate, but doubt shadowed his eyes. He still looked the perfect military man—it was etched into his erect bearing, his curt language. But the feeling swept through her that he was also a man struggling to come to terms with a world turned inside out. His brother had died, obviously leaving him a family he seemed not to know how to manage and an inheritance he must not have expected. She knew from her own past the panic of being flung into a strange world, and sympathy for him rocked her heart.

But she could not afford to think of others before herself. These people had property and family. In time, they would all learn to cope with their new situation and loss. She had. While she...well, if she stayed with them, it would be for a year at most. She would not go with them to London. She *could* not. Then it would be four positions in four years and where would she go next? No, she could ill afford the luxury of sympathy for others, she told herself sharply. She lived in a hard-hearted world. She also must be hard-hearted.

The colonel straightened, glancing around him as if realizing that he stood in a house, not a field tent. He frowned and strode back to his desk. He did not look at her, and Maeve had the impression that he needed those few moments to reassemble that façade of iron control.

"Miss Midden," he began after a moment, his tone even, "Your conscience is commendable, but I urge you to take my offer. I have money, but I have neither the time nor the desire to deal with the vapors produced by a sixteen-year-old hoyden. While you, to put it bluntly, have time and need money."

"Colonel, you almost sound as if you wish that your niece were a private under your command whom you could deal with by courts martial or flogging." The reproof slipped out before she realized, and she pressed her lips tight together. She did not care if she lost this position by offending him, but she could not afford the habit of speaking her own mind.

He glanced up at her, his eyes narrowed again, but she felt proof against that stare of his now that she had seen the uncertainty it hid.

"Do not underestimate the value of a flogging to reform someone's character," he said, and he asked, his voice sharp, "How long have you been a governess, Miss Midden?"

"Nearly nine years," she answered with a touch of pride that she had lasted that long. "Almost six with an academy in Bath and three with private families."

"Well, in that time I would have thought you would have learned not to be impertinent."

That did it. Habit or no, the man needed to be shown that others had feelings—herself included—and he could not simply ride roughshod over everyone.

"The truth is sometimes impertinent," she said, a long-dormant anger awakening in her. "But that does not make it any less the truth. And I am not at all surprised that you find your niece

difficult to manage, for you order and demand when you need to listen and understand."

The amused gleam came back to his eyes. "That is exactly why I need you, Miss Midden. All I know is how to order and demand. I am, as you accuse me, an unbending man who can command a brigade, but I am lost when it comes to dealing with one single girl. Please, stay at least until I might find someone to take your place. Will you not grant me that small compromise?"

Logic urged her to listen to him, even as her heart warned her that staying held too many dangers. She became attached far too easily to places and to people. But how attached could she become in a month? And how lovely to have the luxury of looking for a new position with a present salary assured.

She took a breath, feeling her dress pinch around the bust. She stared at the packet of money on his desk.

"I will make this bargain with you, sir. I will stay as a paid companion to Clarissa just so long as it takes me to find a new position. I cannot in good conscience take a year's salary, but you may reimburse me for my work and for the expense of my coming here, and you may frank my letters of application."

"Can I do that?" he asked, frowning suddenly, a deep furrow appearing between his dark eyebrows.

"Do what. Frank a letter? Well, if you are indeed a lord, you should be able to sign your name to any letter for its free post."

"Damn...I beg pardon." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Here I've been laying my letters out, waiting for one of the servants to post them, only they're waiting for me to sign them. No wonder the pile grows daily."

Maeve bit her lip and fought to keep from making any comment. Oh, the poor man. He really was quite lost at being a lord. However, he wanted a governess for his niece, not for himself, so it was not for her to offer advice.

"Well, at least it's settled between us. You are staying."

He rose and came to stand before her, so that she had to look up at him, and for the first time, he smiled, really smiled. It transformed his face, softening the harsh lines, allowing her to see how attractive his mouth could be when it curved. His eyes lit so that they glowed like black opals.

"Thank you, Miss Midden," he said, his voice so low that it vibrated in her chest.

Maeve's mind stopped working. She could only dumbly stare back at him, her face flushed hot and a curious tightness in her chest.

He turned away, saying, "I'll ring for someone to show you to the Blue Room, where you will stay."

She dropped a hasty curtsy before she turned and fumbled her way out of the room.

Outside of his study, she slumped against the oak door, holding tight to the brass doorknob, needing its support.

Oh, you silly, silly girl. After all these years, you would think that you of all people would be immune to the havoc that can be caused by masculine charm. But it seemed she was not immune. And who would credit that the very stiff, tyrannical Colonel Derhurst, the lord who did not feel himself a lord, could offer up such a warm and charming smile.

However, she had fallen once for a man's careless smiles, and once was enough to risk and lose a heart. She was not going to do so again.

Andrew sat at his desk, watching his steward's three daughters romp upon the east lawn. He knew he ought to be studying his ledgers, or looking at the architect's plans to rebuild the wing that had burnt in his grandfathers time—yet another task Phillip had undertaken but never quite finished.

Poor Phillip...and damn Phillip. Why did he, of all men, have to go and die? He'd been a hale forty-six two summers ago when Andrew had last been home upon leave. Phillip had barely sprouted his first gray hairs in his thinning dark hair, and he had talked endlessly about how he and Dorothy still hoped for a boy, and perhaps this year would be the one in which they produced a sibling for Clarissa. As with so many of Phillip's plans, that one had also been more talk than action.

It was a damn strange world, Andrew mused, that took one man from his home and left another one behind who should have died on some battlefield years ago. That world also seemed to have served Miss Midden her own ration of odd turns, if he knew anything of the matter.

Her current position as a governess might force her to spike her guns, but he'd seen her biting off her first thoughts, and that flush of irritation she had fought down. She might bury herself under an ugly bonnet and an ill-fitting dress, but she had once been a lady of quality, he would judge.

Well, at least she was not a timid, cringing creature. Clarissa would have rolled up such a woman in a day. No, Miss Midden had nerve and opinions. She was proud, in fact, and he knew enough about the world to suspect that pride of hers had brought her to this lowly station. She probably had spurned the charity of relatives.

Ah, well, if he was reduced to idle speculation about a governess and her past, it was a sure sign he would make no more headway with his paperwork today. *Damnation.* It served him well that he had come home to such a tangle of papers. He had left his homecoming too long. However, the letter informing him of Phillip's death had found him just after Vitoria, and struggling to keep order in an army that wanted to loot the fallen city. He'd had no time to think of going home, and with the push from Spain into France looming before the army, he had thought his duty lay with his men, not his family. He had delayed through the autumn and into winter, when campaigning normally came to a halt. He'd gone to Wellington then, offering to stay on through the last battles against the French. But the Beau saw better where Andrew's duty lay, and told him to go home. It would all be over by that spring, Wellington had said.

And, indeed, to judge by the reports in the paper, the war soon would be ended.

Ah, but he'd rather be in France facing Soult than here facing these damn papers, and Dorothy, and his duties. But duty was duty, and it was time to tell Dorothy that her precious child had been put into someone else's control.

He glanced at his desk and realized that Miss Midden had not taken with her the packet he had prepared. She had not wanted a year's salary. Well, she would have something to tempt her to stay. He pulled out a crisp ten-pound banknote, nearly two month's salary for her position. She might have a conscience, but women were practical at heart, after all. He also took up the schedule for her, for he was damn well going to establish some order in this household.

He knew he ought to summon a footman or a maid to take up the papers. But he had a desire to see what Miss Midden thought of her room, and if she was well settled. He had, after all, a strong interest in seeing her happily—and firmly—ensconced. It would be more difficult for her to remove herself from comfortable quarters. So, he took himself up the stairs, his stride covering two carpeted steps at a time.

At the top, he took the left turning to the occupied wing, and since Miss Midden's door was open, he paused in the threshold, unexpectedly surprised.

CHAPTER TWO

He had thought her taller. And not so attractive. The shock of just how attractive she looked lanced through him, sharp and startling for being so unexpected. Perhaps it was merely the size of the bed chamber that made her seem so small and slim. The room had been a state bedroom in the time of Charles I and it still carried the baroque splendor of that era. In the grand room, with its rich blue hangings, Miss Midden seemed more a girl than a woman.

She stood with her back to the door, looking out the window onto the front lawn, the blue velvet curtains held back with one small, white hand. Her brown hair lay as smooth as a cap, pulled into a braided knot of some sort at the back, but stray wisps emphasize the slender elegance of her long neck. She had thrown off that wretched brown bonnet and it lay on the bed, sagging alongside her brown coat. He had a view of the back of an equally brown dress. The fabric shone with age and the seams looked ready to rip, given a deep enough breath, and he started to picture the sensual curve of shoulder and white skin that such a rip would offer up to his view.

Guilt for such thoughts flamed though him. He had no business speculating about an employee's form. He cleared his voice and she turned, her mouth forming a small "O" of surprise. Her eyes lowered at once, but darted back up as if she could not contain her curiosity.

He held out the papers, feeling monumentally awkward. "You forgot these."

The words seemed abrupt to him, but did a lord apologize to a governess for intruding? His new protocols baffled him, for he was not about to copy his father's stiff and stilted manners.

As a younger son, he'd always been on easy terms with the servants. He had ignored the training given to Phillip, and with the army, rank was a thing easily grasped and automatically ordered. Since his homecoming, however, he had felt the watchful stares of the servants upon him and had seen their expressions of disapproval and dismay. He was not doing things as Phillip had done them. Damn Phillip. *And damn me for being such a blockhead as to have never paid any mind to what a lord should or should not do.*

Miss Midden stepped across the room to take the packet, her booted feet light upon on the carpet. She lowered her gaze again, but a slight smile turned up her lips. "Thank you. But I would have been pleased to come back down to see you, if you had sent someone to fetch me, my lord."

It was a small correction, and he wished suddenly that more of his household staff would give him such gracious guidance. He liked to know where he stood. But then, that sort of gentle correction was her stock-in-trade, was it not?

He folded his hands behind his back. "I wanted to make sure you were comfortable. The room—it will suit you? It's not too small?"

He knew it was not. The blue room with its painted ceiling and canopied bed had awed two hundred years of guests to Rothe House. It seemed that Miss Midden did not impress so easily. There was a knowing glint in her eyes that almost shouted, *I know you put me here to lure me into staying.*

"I shall be quite comfortable for a month or so," she said, giving him a firm look that said she would not change her mind.

Her eyes were actually gray-blue, he saw, not the brown he had thought them in his study. Another surprise. And the laughter lurking in them caught him off-guard.

Not a pretty face, he thought, with its oval shape and unremarkable features. Nothing to tempt a man. But he liked her eyes. He liked Miss Midden, as well, he decided. She was forthright and strong-willed. Those traits would do splendidly for Clarissa. So how did he make up Miss Midden's mind for her that she was to stay?

"I thought you would prefer to have a room near to Clarissa," he lied, and then added without a qualm about another falsehood. "We are short of bed chambers. My grandfather had a habit of throwing his candle across the room to douse it, and one night his valet was not quick enough into the room to douse the bed curtains."

Miss Midden's lips thinned. Did she disapprove of his irreverent story about his grandfather? But he again caught that elusive glimmer in her eyes. Ah, she was not disapproving. She was trying to preserve propriety, for a smile would make her look less like a prim governess.

"How very unfortunate," she said, her voice soft. "Was the resulting fire large?"

"It carried off most of the west wing," he answered honestly. "My father never got around to rebuilding, and then my elder brother always meant to rebuild but never did."

"It seems a shame that you might break with such a family tradition by actually rebuilding, my lord."

Humor danced in her eyes, pulling an answering smile from him. "I am as poor at family traditions as I am unpracticed at being a lord. Address me as Lord Rothe or as my lord only if you wish to ensure I do not answer. Colonel Derhurst, Derhurst, or a simple sir will suffice to get my attention, Miss Midden."

"A 'simple sir' is the last address I would give you...Colonel." She did smile this time. She also opened the packet. Her eyes widened slightly at the ten-pound banknote and her fingers trembled, but the money seemed forgotten as she frowned over the schedule he'd drawn up for Clarissa's instruction.

"Is there something the matter?" he asked, making certain that his tone did not invite her to say 'yes'. He had perfected that tone with his aides and counted on it now to ensure her compliance.

"No...nothing," she began properly enough. She veered off his expectations by adding, "It is just...well, do you not think that perhaps this is a touch rigid for a girl of sixteen? I mean to say, an hour of French every day at ten o'clock..." She looked up at him. "What if on a particularly fine day we wish to do an hour of botany in the gardens instead of French? Unexpected events do happen—with girls of sixteen that is."

Andrew felt the line between his eyebrows tighten. "Clarissa needs discipline. She needs structure. There has been no order in her life since her father died last June, and her mother spoils her with an unseemly amount of freedom."

"I don't wish to be impertinent, but unseemly by what standards?"

"For someone who does not wish to be impertinent, you are near to doing just that," he shot back, scowling at her and beginning to reconsider the many virtues of Miss Midden.

"I beg your pardon, it is just that what is unseemly in a mature woman must be overlooked in a child as a habit that will soon pass. If Clarissa is child enough to still warrant a governess, then you must not judge her by the standards society sets for a grown woman."

"You argue against your own earlier excuse that Clarissa is too old for a governess."

"Ah, you are right. And in that case, this schedule will not do at all, for it is a schedule suitable for a child. So if I may, I will adapt your hours to better occupy a young lady. I have great experience with young ladies of sixteen and seventeen, so I am certain you must wish to leave me some room to apply my expertise."

Andrew's brow now hurt from frowning so hard. Somehow, he had been outflanked, and there was nothing for it but to retreat, regroup and count his losses later. To do otherwise would only make him look ridiculous—and he knew damn well that that was not suitable for a lord.

"Yes...well...I shall leave you to make your schedules and present them to me. But I must insist upon some regular hours. And I should introduce you to Dorothy—Lady Rothe, Clarissa's mother. She will not like you, but you need not let that bother you in any fashion."

"She has already made up her mind against me?" Miss Midden asked. She turned away so that he could not see her face to see if any worry lay behind her cautious words. She folded her banknote—she was keeping the bribe, he noted with satisfaction—and his schedule and placed them in her reticule on the dresser.

As he started down the hall with her, he explained, "My sister-in-law dotes on her dogs and on her daughter, whom she believes is already a perfect paragon. She does not take well to interference."

"Well, perhaps then it would be best then to introduce me as a paid companion."

She said this in such a reasonable voice that for a moment he was tempted to go along with this. However, it seemed far too like a concession in the silent battle of wills that he had started with his late brother's wife.

When he had returned home last month, he had requested a doctor to call upon Lady Rothe. There was nothing physically wrong with her, so he had requested that she attend her duties and her daughter. Lady Rothe accused him of being heartless. He accused her of having grown lazy. That interview—and three other in succession—ended with Lady Rothe in tears and him slamming out of the room and out of the house to ride off his ill humor. He was not going to cave into Dorothy's passive warfare.

What with the last push of the French Army out of Spain last fall, it had taken him too long to end his military obligations and take up his duties at home. But he was damned if he would allow Dorothy to punish him for that. Nor was he going to allow her laziness to ruin his niece.

As they approached Lady Rothe's chambers, Miss Midden paused and laid a soft hand on his arm. "Please, Colonel. It would make my time here far more productive if I began on a good footing with Lady Rothe."

She had very small hands and she wore no ornament, save for one gold ring on her littlest finger. She wore no perfume, only the clean smell of soap adorned her. He frowned, but he did not wish to lose his governess on her first day of hire.

"Very well. If that is what you wish. But I warn you, I will make it clear that you are to have charge of Clarissa."

Miss Midden nodded, her eyes downcast again, and he wished that she would look up so that he might have a glimpse into her eyes and into what she was thinking. He distrusted her acquiesce. He suspected that too much went on in that quick mind of hers for it to bend so easily to the will of others.

Turning away, he opened the door to Lady Rothe's rooms.

CHAPTER THREE

Maeve settled one hand over her stomach to control her nervousness. It was silly, this desire to have Lady Rothe like her. She would be here only a month, perhaps six weeks at most, as agreed upon with the colonel—Lord Rothe, she reminded herself, though she found it as difficult as he to think of him as a lord. Still, she did not look forward to being employed in a household where she might be actively disliked.

Looking about her, Maeve tried to gain some sense of the mistress from the surroundings.

The bed chamber into which she had followed the colonel was large and everywhere she looked seemed to be some carved ornament or plaster cherub. It was rather like stepping into a gilt-edged meringue—all white spooony curves and too sweet for her taste. Propped up by pillows, Lady Rothe sat upon a large bed at the opposite end of the room.

The lady, too, seemed all fussy white lace and flounces and curves. Her face was round and pink as a child's, her ample curves smoothing out any hint of wrinkles. It was difficult to set her

age, but she seemed far too young to be confined to her bed by infirmity. Gold curls peeked out from a frivolous lace cap, and large blue eyes regarded the colonel and Maeve with a wary petulance, as if Lady Rothe expected an unpleasant scene and was already bracing for it. Books lay about her, scattered about like a child's playthings.

Amid the books and beside her ladyship, three black and white King Charles Spaniels sprawled on the bed, their pink tongues dangling, their bulging dark eyes echoing the guarded belligerence of their mistress. The dogs began to growl as the colonel approached.

"Hush, Conrad. Manfred...quiet. No, sit down, Theo. Stay, all of you," Lady Rothe said, laying down her book upon the bed. The dogs began to resetttle, pushing books out of their way for a cushioned spot, and Lady Rothe turned her stare back to the intruders.

That forceful glare held a glint which reminded Maeve strongly of Clarissa's willful gaze, and Maeve's nerve began to falter. This was no fretting invalid, but a woman who looked unhappy and capable of making a very uncomfortable scene.

Maeve glanced up at the colonel, hoping that by some amazing miracle he might have changed his mind about hiring her. However, he looked grimly determined, his eyes narrowed, his jaw set. Her stomach knotted itself again. *Oh, dear, indeed.*

The colonel folded his hands behind his back. "Dorothy, this is Clarissa's new..."

Please do not say governess, Maeve silently prayed.

"...companion," the colonel finished, hesitating an instant over the word.

Maeve hid a smile. She would have to find some way to thank the colonel for that small concession, but not by staying on. Not if Lady Rothe was so set against anyone interfering with her daughter's upbringing.

"Companion?" Lady Rothe said, her tone echoed by a dog's low growl. "Oh, hush now, Theo," she commanded and turned back to the colonel, peering at him as if she needed spectacles. "A companion for Clarissa? But there are nearly half a dozen girls in the neighborhood who are near to her age and she can readily visit with any of them." Lady Rothe's eyes widened. "She is a governess, isn't she? You ignored my expresses wishes and have hired a governess for my little darling..." Tears began to well in the large blue eyes. "It is not enough that I lost Phillip. Now, you mean to take my darling angel from me!"

The dogs rumbled as Lady Rothe fumbled for a handkerchief. Her search disturbed the blackest of the trio—Theo or Conrad or Manfred, Maeve could not tell which—and the spaniel jumped up, knocking Lady Rothe's book to the floor.

Maeve moved without thought, bending down to pick up the leather-bound work.

"I have told you, Dorothy..." the colonel began.

Lady Rothe let out an even larger sob.

Maeve glanced from one to the other. A sense of guilt stung her that while this argument was none of her making, it was very much centered squarely on her presence here. She had some responsibility to smooth matters as much as she might. Only how was she to do so without making an enemy of one or the other?

She glanced down at the book in her hands and found sudden inspiration.

"Oh, you are reading *Marmion*," Maeve said, staring at the leather binding and not daring to look up. She could feel the stares of the potential combatants hot upon her skin, and if she looked up now she would forget her courage. She babbled on. "Sir Walter is quite one of my favorites. I adored *Lady of the Lake*, and I hear he is to have a new work out this year."

"Wherever did you hear such a thing?" Lady Rothe demanded, her tone suspicious, as if no one of Maeve's insignificance could ever hear anything important. But Maeve caught one weak shade of curiosity in her ladyship's tone.

She glanced up to confide, "Well, Mrs. Durbin, my last employer, she kept a correspondence

with Mrs. Armitage, who lives in London and who has an acquaintance with Miss Fanny Burney—"

"Not *the* Fanny Burney...the authoress?" Lady Rothe asked, astonished reverence thickening her voice.

"The very one. And Miss Burney wrote to Mrs. Armitage who passed the news on to Mrs. Durbin who told me that Mr. Scott had delivered a new work to his publisher and it was his best yet."

"Oh, my, what wonderful news. Oh, you must come and sit down here with me, child, and tell me more. Theo, do stop growling. You must not mind Theo. She is always cross when she is woken from her naps. Oh, go away, Andrew. Do you not see we have much to discuss here. What did you say your name was?"

"This is Miss Maeve Midden," the colonel said, picking up as if he had not been interrupted. He planted his booted feet wide and looked not the least inclined to "go away" as he had been bidden. "And I did not hire her to be your companion, Dorothy."

"No, of course, not," Maeve said, stepping forward. "But it is quite understandable that Lady Rothe would wish to speak to me, to ensure I share her sensibilities and views. Is that not so, my lady?"

"Oh, yes, yes, but tell me, did you not adore *Camilla* by Miss Burney? I cried positive rivers when I read it...oh, it must be years ago. It is still quite one of my favorites."

"You must also favor Mr. Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* to have named your dogs for his characters," Maeve said, sitting on the edge of a chair that was positioned near the bed.

With that the two women began to chatter about books read, comparing gothic novels, conversing like true blood-sisters of the inked tale. Colonel Derhurst listened to them, baffled and frustrated. He thought once about interrupting, but as he fidgeted, Miss Midden shot him a look that stopped his words upon his tongue.

It was a look that conveyed many messages, and the odd thing was that he understood every one of them far better than he understood the ramble of authors and book titles tumbling from her lips. That look of hers held a plea, an offer of gratitude for his silence, and the edge of warning that she was well in command and he had best stay out of it. All of that came from those gray-blue eyes in just a flash, a frown, and a lifted eyebrow. He responded to it with a silence that came mostly from astonishment that she could convey so very much in such an economical fashion.

Tugging on his watch fob, he listed to the ladies agreed to dislike Byron—poetry, Lady Rothe declared, made her head ache with its rhymes. And he began to think well of Miss Midden's handling of the matter. Dorothy had not yet broken into angry sobs.

Finally, Miss Midden rose. "But I have kept you too long from your story, my lady."

"Dorothy. You must call me Dorothy. It is almost more than I can bear to hear my title, for it reminds me of my recent loss." Her eyes began to tear again with amazing ease.

Maeve heard a grinding sound and glanced over to see the colonel's jaw tense. It was his teeth grating, she realized. She smoothed her skirts, wishing they were made of something stiff so they might rustle and cover the colonel's impatience with her ladyship's display of excessive sensibility.

"I am so very sorry for your loss...you must be terribly lonely," Maeve said, handing back the book to her ladyship.

"Thank you, my dear." Dorothy looked up and over her handkerchief and fixed a haughty stare on the colonel. "There are those who have no understanding when it comes to matters of the heart."

"And what a blessing that is," the colonel muttered.

Dorothy's face flushed, and Maeve interrupted before a new battle began. "Colonel, perhaps you could take me to talk with Clarissa now?"

"Yes, Andrew, take our dear Maeve to meet Clarissa. But you must come back to sit with me after dinner tonight, my dear. I always take dinner in my rooms for my constitution has not been robust since my...since I lost my dear, dear husband."

Maeve caught the vexed spark in the colonel's eyes, and hurriedly said, "I shall be happy to come, and I will bring Clarissa with me as well."

And he cannot object to that, Maeve decided, for if she knew anything about men, he was a man who would enjoy an evening with his paper and little other company.

Maeve started for the door, hoping to make a graceful end to this interview. The dogs set to yapping again, and as the door closed behind them, Maeve could still hear her ladyship hushing the animals.

"Your skills extend to wider age range that I expected, Miss Midden," the colonel remarked dryly as he led the way down the hall. "But while I will not argue with your tactics—not after seeing you so handily win that skirmish—I hope you will keep in mind that your primary object is to deal with Clarissa, not her mother."

Maeve stopped and turned towards him, irritated. "I am glad you do not want to argue, but I could wish that you might refrain from thinking of those around you in terms of battle and offense and defense. It does rather sound as if you regard your own family more in the nature of enemies to be subjugated, instead of loving relations."

She did not expect him to smile, but he did. It swept her irritation out from her like a wave knocking her feet from underneath her.

"You may save your instruction for Clarissa, Miss Midden. She is in grave need of it, while I am long past mending my ways," he said, striding ahead to lead the way.

Maeve could only meekly follow, and wonder if the colonel was right not only about his niece's need for guidance, but about his own lack of need.

*

It turned out that Maeve did not get an immediate, formal introduction to Clarissa. Now she was wanted, the girl could not be found. She was not waiting in her room as ordered, a fact which brought the set look back to the colonel's mouth. The reprieve left Maeve with time to rest and change before dinner. Rothe House kept country hours, meaning that dinner came early, at five.

Unpacking and folding her clothes into the large mahogany wardrobe, Maeve realized how very little space her possessions took up. She had one good dress, a black bombazine for Sunday, her schoolroom dress which was a soft gray wool that could withstand the markings of chalk wiped from slate boards, her brown traveling dress, and a much faded blue walking dress. With two petticoats, a nightgown, and a few unmentionables, her entire range of clothing took up less than half the wardrobe's space.

She could remember a time when she'd had a new dress every week—but that was a lifetime ago.

She put aside such memories and left to ask the housekeeper, Mrs. Henderson, about a pressing for her brown dress. After some debate, she had decided that dinner did not quite warrant her black dress. She found Mrs. Henderson a nervous, thin woman, but friendly and kind. That was a stronger lure to stay than even the money had been, for it had been years since she had received such consideration.

However, staring at her reflection in the mirror before dinner, and running her hands down

her newly pressed dress, Maeve firmly told herself, "You will keep the future in mind, for once, miss. For this is ideal time to find a house with six girls in it, all at under age eight."

She nodded at her reflection, trying to be cheered by what she saw. She had never been pretty, and the years had taken away much of youth's dewy grace. Her skin—her one vanity—was smooth and white as it had when she was nineteen. But she was twenty-eight now. Her cheeks were hollow, not plump and rosy, and the shadows under her eyes grew darker every year. She pinched her cheeks to give them some color and left her room in search of Clarissa.

She hoped for a few words in private with the girl. She wanted to put to rest any notion that she was here as that much dreaded commodity—a governess. However, the colonel was already downstairs in the drawing room to which the footman had directed her, and Clarissa was with him, looking defiant but cowed.

That man had a rare talent for putting women into a temper, Maeve decided after glancing from Clarissa's trembling lips to the colonel's grim face. She silently wished his military promptness to perdition.

Clarissa came forward, her manners dutiful, but her blue eyes held dangerous glints of fire.

Sixteen and wishing she were twenty-two, and beautiful in the bargain, Maeve decided. A combination that could easily make for disaster. She knew that all too well from her own experience—and she had not even been beautiful. Only willful.

"How do you do," Clarissa said, announcing each word with a rehearsed clarity. "I understand you are to instruct me in deportment, manners, and becoming conduct."

Maeve guessed that the colonel had put those words into the girl's mouth. *Oh, bother the man, why had he said all that to the child?*

Smiling, Maeve folded her hands in front of her. "Did he also tell you that I am to stay only a month or so? In that time, I hope I may offer you my friendship, and what knowledge I have of the world is at your disposal. But you are too old for a governess and you have a mother, so perhaps I may be something in between?"

With a lift of her pointed chin, Clarissa shot an indignant look at the colonel. "You didn't say she was not to stay."

"The duration of Miss Midden's employment is something for myself and Miss Midden to decide. You may concern yourself with learning to behave."

Thankfully, the butler came to announce dinner and Clarissa had to swallow whatever retort simmered inside her.

The colonel offered his arm to Miss Midden, who would rather have avoided that honor, but she was the eldest woman in the room, even if she was only an employee and not a guest. She placed her hand on his sleeve, noting that it was rather pleasant to walk into a dining room on a man's arm, particularly such a firm arm.

Blushing at her thoughts, she lowered her stare to her plate and kept it there.

Dinner slipped past with conversation that was as bland as the food. The boring conversation did not surprise Maeve, not with Clarissa threatening sulks and the colonel ignoring his niece. But Mrs. Henderson had seemed a competent housekeeper, so why did she put up with such poor fare from the cook? Maeve spent the meal speculating on whether the plain food could be credited to the colonel's preferences, or to a kitchen trying to cater to the invalidish Lady Rothe?

After the last course was removed, Miss Midden rose. "Will you join us directly, Colonel?"

"I never touch port, but I will stay to blow a cloud...it's a habit my niece does not care for."

Clarissa wrinkled her nose, which seemed to amuse the colonel. "It does not suit my niece's idea of a lord, but I am not about to give up my cigarillo after dinner to fit her notions."

"Then we shall leave you to your smoke," Maeve said, and left with Clarissa.

The girl said nothing until they were seated in the drawing room where Maeve had first met

Clarissa that afternoon. It had grown dark outside, but a merry fire in the carved fireplace and several dozen candles warmed the room.

Maeve glanced around, admiring the paintings on the walls—one particularly fine one of a horse. She needed some gambit to draw Clarissa into regarding her as something other than a ball and chain. She noticed the pianoforte in the far corner of the room and asked, indicating it, "Do you play, Clarissa?"

"A little," the girl answered, her voice indifferent. She glanced at Maeve from the corner of her eyes.

Maeve guessed at once that the girl was waiting to see if a reprimand would come for such a curt answer, but she was not about to be goaded into making the mistake of presuming to correct Clarissa. She waited, wondering if her silence would urge the girl's conscience do the rest.

Clarissa fidgeted with the ribbons on her dress, and added, "My uncle does not seem to like it when I play. And I cannot blame him, for the pianoforte never seems to hold a tuning. I think the damp got into it this past winter."

Maeve smiled. Clarissa had proven she at least had some sense of decorum.

The fire cracked, emphasizing the silence in the room. Maeve sat still, staring at the leaping flames. Their warmth was welcome, for the spring nights grew chill after the sun had set. Perhaps she should bring up the weather as a suitable topic to discuss? Or the history of the house...or the furniture?

"Did you know that I am named after Mr. Samuel Richardson's heroine, Clarissa Harlow?"

Maeve looked up to study the girl. She sensed a test here behind this odd, graceless question. Would Clarissa dismiss any replay which failed to demonstrate an understanding of why she had launched this particular conversational gambit?

"Really?" Maeve said, stalling for time and realizing that Clarissa was not quite the spoilt, empty-headed child she seemed. There was direction and planning behind this question, and while Clarissa might be a handful, there was need behind her misbehavior.

She ransacked her memory for any details of the book, but she could only remember it as an unpleasant tale of a girl seduced to her doom by a charming man.

"I do not recall the particulars," Maeve said, striving for honesty. "But I seem to remember Mr. Richardson's Clarissa as rather silly. Did she not pine away or some such thing?"

Clarissa frowned and gave an impatient and childish shrug and Maeve wondered if she had said the right thing.

With a tone worldly beyond her years, Clarissa said, "She starved herself to death. Over a man. I should never do that."

Maeve resisted the urge to smile at the contrast between Clarissa's attempt at bored sophistication and her still childish face. "A wise choice."

"But she did have adventures," Clarissa went on. "And she was rather fearless to act as she did. Only she ought to have married Lovelace, you know. He begged her to. And my godmama who lives in London swears that a reformed rake always makes the best husband."

Maeve decided that Clarissa's godmama had no business putting such utter nonsense into this girl's head. She did not wish to spoil's Clarissa's charming innocence, but too much of that commodity led only to ruin.

She fixed a firm stare on the girl. "Actually, rakes are generally selfish men who really should never marry. And I have found that it is difficult enough to reform one's own character without trying to take on the improvement of someone else."

Clarissa's eyes took on a challenging glitter. "But are you not here to improve me? To remake my character?"

Ah, so that is where we are heading, Maeve thought, relaxing. "I have it on your uncle's

authority that your mother believes you to be perfection. How could I improve upon that? And that brings to mind a request from your mother that we visit with her this evening. Perhaps read with her a bit."

With a huge sigh, Clarissa slumped against the couch, looking less like a young lady of uncertain temper and more like an unhappy child. "But I read with mother every night."

Maeve heard in the girl's voice the desperate plea of the young for new horizons. Sympathy tangled with her resolve to maintain her emotional distance. She was not staying. It really was none of her concern.

"I am certain she appreciates it," she said.

Clarissa gave a deep sigh. "Perhaps. But she doesn't love me. Not the way she loved my father. No one cares about me. I am nothing but a pawn to be used by her...and by my uncle."

This statement left Maeve floundering between amusement at such theatrics and shock that Clarissa could confess any such thing to a near stranger.

"I am certain that is not so. Your mother's sole concern is your well-being, and as for your uncle...well, you are his brother's only child. How could he not care for you?"

The girl's glance slid to the doorway and back, as if confirming they were as yet undistributed. An uncomfortable sensation chased along Maeve's spine—the sensation of having stepped into a puddle and having not yet found the bottom with her foot.

"Ah, but you don't understand," Clarissa said, her voice lowering dramatically, "My mother was once in love with both the Derhurst brothers. She broke Uncle Andrew's heart when she chose to marry his brother. My uncle fled into the army. Now he uses me to punish her. And he hates me because I remind him of the woman he loved and can never have, for it is immoral for a man to marry his brother's widow."

Maeve tried to think of some answer to give to this...this romantic exaggeration. Before she could, the door to the drawing room opened and the colonel stepped in.

He looked as dark as a phantom in his evening clothes, his expression abstract, and such a bleak look in his dark eyes that Maeve's heart gave out a small cry of recognition for someone else who has known deep suffering.

Oh, dear, could Clarissa possibly be right about him?

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