

***Proper Conduct***

**Shannon Donnelly**

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For Dad and Ole and fathers everywhere

*Best Historical Romance - Winner Winter Rose*

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Heavens, what has he done now?* Penelope thought, an uneasy prickle dancing down her spine. She stared out the window to the front paddocks, where her father stood with Squire Winslow, and the certainty crept into her that despite all her efforts, her father had found yet another folly into which he could toss the last of their money. And this time, perhaps even Harwood itself would be lost to them.

Frowning at herself, Penelope tried to focus only on the reality before her and not on her own dark thoughts.

Sunlight kissed with the last breath of summer slanted through the windows that stretched nearly from floor to ceiling in the tidy study. Outside, a brisk wind stirred the row of tall elms that marked the far boundary of Harwood Manor. It was only a day spent with the household account books that had left her gloomy. Columns of numbers that refused to tally often did.

But the disorder in the books on her desk could no more be ignored than could the black horse who now stood in the drive.

Frowning, she glanced at the horse again.

A shrill whinny—sharp with demand and fury—had pulled her attention from the household books and drawn her to the window. She'd glimpsed her father, hatless, his sandy hair tugged into disordered wisps by the wind, standing in front of the white post-and-rail fencing that enclosed the paddocks.

He was a good figure of a man still, and Penelope had her own height from him. He rode and walked enough that age had but thickened his figure, and in his loose brown coat and buff breeches, yellow waistcoat and cravat tied in a simple mailcoach style, he looked like the country gentleman he was.

He ought—with his patrician nose and pale, soft blue eyes, and his comfortably craggy face—be a father for whom a daughter could have fond affection. A father of whom she could be proud. Instead, that too-familiar disillusionment crept into Penelope.

*Oh, why could he not at least drink it away, or stake it at cards, or do something I could honestly despise?*

But there were no vices for which she could take him to task. Just unwise decision after ill-advised blunder.

Uncomfortable with such undutiful feelings, she turned her attention to the man next to her father.

Squire Weston's stocky figure, ancient black frock coat and black slouch hat made him instantly recognizable. Under the brim of his hat, his face glowed ruddy, and not from the bite of an autumn wind. All Halsage knew that the squire loved a well-set table as much as he did his brandy. And few blamed him, for as a widower he had no one to look after him, and he had sons with devil enough in them as could drive any man from sobriety.

The squire had been gesturing, as if waving to someone to hurry, and Penelope glanced down the drive to where two grooms led a horse up the graveled drive, with its patches of bare dirt that showed their inability to afford its maintenance.

Large and dark, with grooms dangling from the long lead lines like puppets, the horse seemed to survey the men as if selecting a target. Rearing, he struck out at one groom. He came down on all fours and balked, planting his hoofs in rebellious defiance.

From the arched, heavy neck and its size, Penelope knew he must be a stallion. An unpleasant one at that. Realization had struck like a hammer against her chest.

He had to be Squire Winslow's stallion—the one she had heard about. The grooms struggled to get the horse to move forward, toward the gate that her father had opened, and she could only guess that her father had bought the animal.

Warmth drained from her face as the stallion squealed again and lashed out with a vicious kick. The groom dodged, and his fellow on the opposite side jerked on the lead. Swirling that direction, the horse lunged forward and the man ducked into the paddock, the horse bounding after him. Instead of turning to break free, as would most horses, the animal spun around to attack again, rearing up on powerful haunches to lash out with his forelegs.

Scrambling over the railing, losing his hat, the groom struggled out of reach just as the other man swung the gate closed. Even so, the horse slammed his massive, dark body into the railing, and then raged along the fence, seeking some means to come after the men again.

"Oh, heavens," she muttered to herself, rubbing her arms with her hands.

All Halsage had heard the stories. One of Winslow's stable boys nearly killed. A mare meant for breeding so savaged that she was a month laid up in her stall. Penelope's stomach tightened. What did her father plan now? Raising race horses? As if anyone would breed to such a mad animal, despite the famous Eclipse bloodlines that the squire had bragged the horse possessed.

And how much had he paid for that dangerous renegade?

She glanced back at the estate books, uneasy. Local talk had it that the squire had paid nearly eight hundred pounds for that stallion. A ridiculous sum. And he was a man notoriously tight of purse as well as short of temper. He would not have parted with that horse for anything less than what he paid.

That thought terrified her. The estate had produced just a hundred and sixty two pounds this year. If those funds—and more—had gone to the horse, would they now have to live on credit? Or had Father mortgaged the house itself to pay for this new venture?

The squire and her father started down the drive, the grooms following, and Penelope straightened. Heavens, if the squire himself—a man noted for having mounts and dogs as bad tempered as himself—did not care to face this stallion, what hope had anyone at Harwood? Which meant the horse must be returned. Of course the squire would be reluctant to have back such a devil, but if she convinced her father that he must be sensible he could, in turn, be adamant with the squire.

He would have to be.

She started for the door, searching for arguments. How could she make Father see sense? Her conscience pricked at her. Oh, heavens, would she sound too like a nursemaid following an errant charge rather than an obedient daughter? Well, she would have to manage. After all, she had not only her sisters to think of, but her mother as well, and she could not imagine what might become of them if circumstances became any more strained.

"But that has not happened yet," she muttered to herself.

Striding down the stairs, she sorted through different approaches, discarding each idea that came to mind.

Though they lived in the largest manor in Halsage, it was now a house half-closed to save costs and starting to show neglect in odd corners. The lead roof really did require more than another set of patches, but harvests had been so very slim that year.

And if this horse had cost them....no, she would not think about that.

Oh, heavens, if only she could take complete control of matters. However, she was but a daughter. And to date it had been almost enough that she had convinced Father to allow her to help with the accounting, since they could no longer afford a steward or any sort of man of business. She had been able to ensure that payments to the local tradesmen came before any other expenditure, but her efforts to convince her father there was not the money for any more schemes seemed to meet with only failure.

Penelope scowled. If only he had not started with that first ruinous investment. Every venture since had started with him assuring both herself and her mother that each would at last put them on stable ground. Or if only she had a financial independence with which she could look after her mother and her sisters.

But she might as well wish to be nineteen again, and short and vastly pretty as well, for all the good that did anyone.

As she reached the main hall, which lay in the older part of the house, paneled and dark, a distant, high-pitched screech echoed from the library, startling her from her thoughts.

*Heavens, what now,* she thought, her a frazzled edge tearing loose inside her?

Muffled voices, one of them far too low to be mistaken for either of her sisters, echoed from the library that lay just off the hall.

Her frown tightened. Of course, it might be Bridges, their butler, but she rather doubted that. Not if Cecila was also in the library.

Hesitating, she glanced at the front door. Her first duty ought to be to go after her father, but he might still be with the squire, and she could not, as a respectful daughter, make demands in front of their neighbor and his grooms.

And what were the odds that Cecila entertained another Winslow?

That thought decided her. Cecila was drifting perilously close to ruining herself with one of those wild Winslow lads, and that Penelope could not allow.

Besides, it would take but a moment to sort out Cecila. It would take a bit longer, she rather thought, to convince her father that he really must get rid of that rogue of a horse.

With that in mind, she strode across the hall to the library and pushed open the half-ajar door. Her sisters turned toward her at once, and Penelope's mouth thinned with disapproval.

Cecila had been bending over to look up the chimney of the fireplace and she straightened now with a guilty start. Large enough to hold a roasting ox, the hearth—built as part of the medieval hall before the stairs and main entrance had been added—lay empty and dark. Soot streaked Cecila's cheek, emphasizing its soft curve, and a dusting of ash lay over her best bronze velvet gown and her golden-brown hair.

Taking in the gown, and the care Cecila had taken to tie up her curls, Penelope's glance swept the room for the masculine presence that must accompany such efforts. However, she noted only Sylvain, their youngest sister, who stood near the windows and the heavy burgundy drapes, her chin down and a similar guilty look upon her face.

With her red-gold, wispy hair, and her vague blue-gray eyes, Sylvain seemed a younger copy of their father. At eighteen, she actually ought to rival Cecila in looks, but she was too thin, too quiet, and too removed from the world. Penelope frowned at Sylvain's high-necked and high-waisted dark green gown, which was torn at the hem and mud-stained and her faded shawl looked more fitting for a kitchen rag. For a moment, Penelope had no idea what her sisters might be up to, but a flutter of white wings revealed the cause of the commotion. An owl, one white wing still drooping from an injury, perched on the drapery rod above Sylvain. Its eyes huge and dark in its flat, heart-shaped face, it swiveled its head as if seeking an escape.

Penelope let out a long breath.

Thankfully, at least, it seemed that Cecila had not decided to flout convention yet again by entertaining one of the Winslows with no better a chaperone than Sylvain and her owl. She must have been mistaken about having heard a man's voice.

Her hands relaxed and she put a smile in place, even though it felt tired on her face. "Really, Sylvain. Has Father not said that you must not bring Mr. Feathers into the house?"

Sylvain's wide mouth pulled into a mulish line and a muttering of words slipped out. Penelope caught only a few of them, "Mrs. Merritt...mice...pantry."

She almost shook her head. Their cook would no doubt take a broom to any owl brought into her kitchen. However, she did not have the heart to tell Sylvain that, so she said, "Yes, dear, but you really must allow Mrs. Merritt to deal with that. Now, do take Mr. Feathers outside."

"I cannot. He scared him."

"He?" Penelope asked.

Sylvain gestured with her shawl to the fireplace. A man's muffled cursing and a fall of ash pulled Penelope's full attention to the barren hearth and Cecila.

The girl's cheeks pinked, but she merely folded her hands before her and focused her eyes on the bookcase, as if one of the worn leather-bound volumes had just become of inordinate interest.

Penelope folded her arms. "Cecila, who is in the chimney?"

"Theo's stuck," Sylvain muttered.

Cecila shot a glare at her younger sister, but Penelope remained focused. "Really, Cecila. You are quite as bad as Sylvain, but you are two years older and ought to have a better sense of decorum."

Her cheeks pinked brighter, but Cecila's chin lifted. "As if I have done anything wrong! The...that is, Mr. Winslow has been helping me find the Harwood treasure." She shot another glare at Sylvain. "And he is not stuck."

Another muffled curse and a scattering of ash from the chimney made a lie of Cecila's defiant words. She at least had the grace to blush deeper, Penelope noted, so that her ears reddened.

However, this just would not do.

Theo might be the younger of the Winslow brothers, but that did not seem to slow him in following his brother's wild lead. If even a quarter of the neighborhood gossip had it right, neither man was a fit acquaintance for any lady. But, more than that, Penelope disliked that he seemed willing to encourage Cecila's childish belief in the old fable of there being an ancient Harwood treasure buried by some ancestor on the property. Such rubbishing tales only led to disappointment and heartache, and that was not the future she had planned for her sister.

*Well, I am yet again to be cast as persecutor,* Penelope guessed, as she watched her sister's blue-green eyes darken with rebellion. But it had to be done.

At another dusting of ash, Penelope unfolded her arms and strode toward the chimney. "For a man who is not stuck, he seems none too pleased with his predicament. Perhaps he is simply too absorbed and needs the distraction of a tug on his boots?"

Cecila looked ready to argue this, as if to deny the slightest of flaws in Theo Winslow, but another muffled curse made her hesitate. Penelope stepped into the wide, tall hearth and Cecila reluctantly joined her.

"He was only trying to help search the places where we have never looked," she muttered, and then sneezed at the soot which floated around them.

Penelope let that comment pass. It seemed too obvious to point out that no one had climbed up the chimney for a good reason—as in what could possibly be there. And, after a hundred and sixty years, the treasure said to have been hidden from the Roundheads had likely never existed. Either that or some other Harwood had long ago unearthed and spent it—a far more probable occurrence.

For now, however, Penelope simply wanted Theo Winslow out from the chimney and gone from the house. If only she could ban him forever. But their lands marched with the Winslow's and his banishment would only tempt Cecila to meet him in secret in the woods, the pastures, or some equally unsuitable location.

A puff of soot trickled from the chimney, making Penelope wrinkle her nose and draw back. "Mr. Winslow, please stop wiggling until we have hold of you, and then you may push on the count of three while we pull."

The boots that dangled in the darkness of the inner hearth stilled. Penelope took hold of the left and glanced over to see that Cecila, her face grimaced in distaste, had done the same with the right.

With a silent prayer that Theodore Winslow wore his boots cut too tight to easily slip off, Penelope counted to three, squinted her eyes closed, and pulled.

For a moment, it seemed as if the boots moved in her hands. She vowed to herself that if they all they succeeded in removing were his boots, she would send to the stables for Mrs. Merritt's son, Peter, who also served as their only groom, to come and tug on Winslow's stocking-clad legs.

Soot began to crumble loose around her. With a choking billow, Theo tumbled down, knocking Penelope backwards and off her feet. She fell onto the carpet. He fell into the empty hearth, swearing in a colorful stream of rude curses.

Waving her hand before her face, Penelope coughed. The ash of ancient fires swirled around her as she opened her eyes to glare at him. "Mr. Winslow, kindly watch your language. There are ladies present."

White teeth flashed in a grin, and Penelope wished to heaven he had as much sense as he had charm. Black-faced, as filthy as a sweep, he sat in the hearth, his dark hair made lanky and spiked by soot and twigs, and his clothing a ruined mess. Soot slashed across his straight nose, and his high-cheekbones, making him look far too much the dashing ruffian.

"Damn...beg pardon, I mean dash, but I could swear my fingers almost touched something," he said.

An instant's hope flared in Penelope, and she crushed it at once, knowing it for the poison it was. As girls, they had heard the story of the Harwood treasure, hidden centuries ago. She and her sisters had spent hours searching the house. An amusing task for childhood. Of course, they had found not so much as a glimpse of gold, or anything more than discarded, broken furniture in the attic, rooms of dust, and stored books in forgotten rooms. The most exotic item found had been the hideous porcelain Chinese figurines of lions, which had recently gone off to auction. But she was not going to start believing in such tales again. No, she was now far too pragmatic for that these days, thank heavens.

Conscious that she must look nearly as ragged as Theo Winslow—Cecila certainly did—Penelope rose with an impatient dusting of her own, sensible dark-brown gown.

"Mr. Winslow, what you no doubt felt was the bird's nest which now decorates your hair. Thank you so much for dislodging it. Cecila, you had best go and change. Mr. Winslow, I am certain, can find the front door on his own."

Now on her feet, Cecila turned a blazing glare on her sister. "Really, now! At least I know better than to leave a gentleman to find his own way out."

Penelope kept her tone even as she regarded Theo Winslow. "As do I, my dear. But we are speaking of Mr. Winslow."

Under the soot, Theo's cheeks reddened and his blue eyes darkened. He came to his feet, sputtering a protest about the inference that he was no gentleman at the same time Cecila did, and he turned on her. "I can fight my own battles, damn it."

Cecila stiffened. "Can you? And you could also slip up that chimney and down in a trice, as well. She is my sister and I will sort this out."

"You will not!"

With that, the squabble began in earnest and as voices rose Mr. Feathers set up a whistling screech and Penelope resisted the urge to put her hands over her ears and flee.

She disapproved of Theo Winslow's language, but she could bear it for the sake of seeing Cecila treat him more like a sibling than a lover. She waited for a moment in which to interrupt.

Oddly enough, both Cecila and Theo cut off their words on their own and their stares widened and shifted as one to the doorway behind Penelope.

An uneasy chill settled across Penelope's shoulders, and she swung around at once. Someone had entered—and she could only hope it was not Mrs. Graves, the worst gossip in the neighborhood. She would be bound to spread a tale about this scene that did no one at Harwood any credit.

But two gentlemen stood in the doorway, strangers both, and Penelope could only stare at them and blink in surprise.

## *CHAPTER TWO*

Dark haired, with the quality of London apparent in the smooth fit of their heavy greatcoats and the close cut of their buckskin breeches, the two strangers seemed a rather imposing pair. Mud spattered their white-topped riding boots, and each carried a tall, black beaver hat.

The taller of the two—a gentleman with brown hair and eyes—smiled. He dressed with casual indifference and his even features and straight nose might have been called handsome, but pox marks cragged his cheeks.

The other gentleman, black haired and black eyed, was more than handsome by anyone's standard. But something, perhaps the unsettling intensity in his black eyes, stirred an uneasy awareness in Penelope. He had a strong jaw and a strong nose that matched the long, lean face. Black brows flared over his dark eyes and his skin held the tones of strange lands in a golden hue. Next to his companion, he seemed the more compact of the two, looking naturally graceful and far more at ease than did the other gentleman. But it struck Penelope that with his dark exotic looks, he seemed almost as out of place in this room as was Sylvain's owl.

He gestured with his left hand and hat back toward the hall, his greatcoat opening to show a glimpse of blue coat and a richly embroidered waistcoat. "Pardon for intruding, but your manservant seems to have abandoned us. Is this not Harwood?"

Penelope's cheeks warmed. Something really would have to be done about Bridges, despite Father's insistence that what he lacked in experience he made up for with a strong back and a willingness to double as a valet. He might cost only two pounds a year, a fraction of what a butler ought to command, but after a month of service, Bridges still seemed to have no idea how to deal with visitors. Perhaps because they had so few.

However, he really must learn not to leave guests standing in the hall.

Striding forward, all too aware of her own disheveled state and wishing she had at least heard the knocking on the front door so that she might have had some warning, Penelope forced a smile. "I beg your pardon. Bridges must have gone in search of my father, but he is not at home. And yes, this is Harwood. I am Miss Harwood, in fact."

She had extended her hand to the gentleman, and he took it, his own hand encased in the softest leather she had ever felt. *Oh, he must be very rich to afford such luxuries*, she thought, and then she chided herself for being mercenary enough to notice and shallow enough to be envious.

His grip closed tight and warm over hers and his mouth curved into an enticing smile. "How do you do?"

Her mind blanked as that broad hand enveloped hers and a male scent, spiced with a touch of musk, wrapped around her like a spell. Her lips parted and her pulse quickened. She stared into eyes so black they seemed endless.

With a start, she realized that she ought not to stare like a child, and she glanced down at his gloved hand which still held hers.

*Stop being such a goose! He no doubt smiles at everyone just so.*

And then she went utterly cold as he said, his voice as rich and dark as the rest of him, "I'm Nevin, and this is my cousin, Bryn Dawes."

She forgot that he held her hand clasped in his. She forgot the presence of others. She forgot everything except that it was a Dawes who had first led her father and her family into the start of financial ruin with that canal scheme.

Pulling away, her mouth thinned, she tried to stifle the instant antipathy that swept into her. She ought not to judge this man by his predecessor, but she would be a fool not to be cautious. Blood will out, after all. And the one time she had met the previous Lord Nevin six years ago, he had seemed affable. He had also proven himself a man who bettered his own fortune at the cost of others. That seemed a family trait.

Or so rumor told.

Over a year ago, she had heard that the title had passed from the previous Lord Nevin to this one, and gossip of unscrupulous dealings in the matter had reached even this corner of Somerset. Penelope had not listened closely to the whispers—she really wanted nothing more to do with any Dawes. But she had hoped at the time that the Daweses might keep to cheating each other instead of involving others in their schemes.

However, here was the current Lord Nevin, looking arrogant, prosperous, and entirely unsettling. What did he want with her father? Oh, why had she not paid more heed to the talk of last year so that she would better know what sort of man stood before her? And why did this fellow not at least pretend enough manners to have waited in the hall, even if he had overheard their voices coming from the library?

He glanced around the room, his expression aloof. "I have business with your father. Do you know when he might return?"

*Business!* Shock settled cold in Penelope's stomach. She had to bite back the impolite remark that her family could not afford any more business with his.

Instead, she lifted her eyebrows and gave him a cool glance, one calculated to show complete indifference. "I doubt he will be home for some time. You had best write if you wish to make an appointment to see him."

"I have written. Repeatedly. Which is why I am here to settle matters in person."

*Settle matters?* Oh, heavens, this did not sound good at all. "My father keeps an erratic schedule. I doubt you will be comfortable waiting. Mr. Winslow was just le—"

A shriek from Sylvain's owl cut across her words and Penelope startled and shot a glare at her sister, but Sylvain's attention remained focused on her owl, which had started to inch away from the girl's attempts to net it with her shawl.

Penelope let out a frustrated breath, and Nevin's voice—pitched low, his tone sarcastic—reached her, "Doesn't she have a lure?"

She turned back, ready to blister him for presuming to comment on her sister's allure, or rather its lack. But as her gaze locked with his, she realized her mistake and her cheeks tingled. A *lure*. For the owl to chase. Of course. How stupid of her.

Embarrassed, and in even less charity with him because of it, she said, her tone sharp, "Well, of course she does. My sister is quite accomplished with...with owls."

The owl screeched again, making a liar of her. She ignored it and stared at his lordship, silently defying him to voice another criticism. Heavens, did Sylvain have lures?

Nevin glanced at her, and a flicker of amusement flashed in those dark eyes, further disconcerting Penelope. She did not want him laughing at her family.

"Then she should train her friend to come when he is called," he said. Pursing his lips, he let out a shrill whistle.

The owl stopped its retreat and swiveled its head toward the sound, which Nevin repeated.

Penelope stared at him, her lips parted. What sort of lord was he, that he could imitate owls? And remarkably well, at that.

With a slow, easy gesture, he pulled a white handkerchief from the pocket of his greatcoat, wadded it in his fist and tossed it out in a low arc. The owl watched the fabric, then swooped down to pin its 'kill' to the carpet.

Sylvain moved at once to capture her wayward pet. The owl hopped away from her, but it had not the strength in its injured wing to fly upwards, and she scooped up the bird in her faded, torn shawl.

She offered Penelope an apologetic glance, gave Cecila a scornful one, ducked a hasty curtsy to the London gentlemen before muttering a good day and fleeing the room with her struggling, screeching owl.

*One trouble gone, but too many remaining*, Penelope thought, scowling at Lord Nevin. If only she could bundle him and this other Dawes out so easily.

Nevin turned back to her from having watched Sylvain leave, his eyes still bright. As his gaze met hers, his lip curved and she realized that he seemed to be enjoying making her uncomfortable. A proper gentleman would hardly do such a thing, and it confirmed her instant dislike of him. It also confirmed that if she did nothing else this day, she would drill into Bridges's mind that he must never again leave any visitor standing in the hall, but should show them into an unoccupied room—any unoccupied room.

With a thin smile, she folded her hands. "If you would rather wait, I can show you to the drawing room." *And you may stay there until you are heartily sick of the place*, she thought, her smile widening as she thought of the dank room, with its unlit fireplace and its north exposure.

If they were lucky enough, these Dawes men would grow impatient and leave. She could not imagine a greater blessing.

Nevin had been staring at her, his dark eyes assessing, as if taking her measure. She gave him back his stare, with one she hoped seemed as assured, though in truth she had to wiggle her toes in her slippers to keep from further fidgets.

"We will wait," he said, his tone curt.

She nodded. With a word to excuse herself to Theo Winslow—and a warning glare at Cecilia to behave—she turned and swept past the Dawes men to lead the way to the drawing room, which lay across the hall from the library. She made no offer of refreshments, for she wanted them to know full well how unwelcome they were.

Once in the drawing room, she hesitated. With its heavy red brocade drapery and its formal furnishings from the last century, the room seemed altogether too depressing. Its high, ornate plaster ceiling and its impressive length had once held upwards of a hundred guests. But now there were not even candles in the wall sconces and her slippers echoed hollow against the parquet floor.

She could not do it. She could not leave them in such bleakness. Striding to the windows, she drew back the drapery. The weak light barely reached the corners of the cavernous room, but it was better than nothing. At least they would not be able to see the dust, nor the faded spots on the wall where paintings, now sold, had once hung.

She dropped a stiff curtsy. "Do excuse me, Lord Nevin, Mr. Dawes. I have other duties to attend."

And she hoped she sounded suitably daunting. Heavens knew, Nevin looked that way, his expression dark and unreadable. It irritated her no end that she looked a charwoman with the soot in her hair and on her gown, while he looked...well, never mind how he looked, she told herself, all too aware of his graceful attraction. Besides, she had no need to impress a Dawes.

Now if only they would grow bored or cold, or both, and leave.

With that thought, she shut the door on them and strode back to the library to ensure that the other bothersome man in the house was shown out.

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"A distinct chill to our reception," Nevin said, eyeing the gilt-edged door that Miss Harwood had closed behind her. He did not strip off his gloves, nor remove his greatcoat. Judging from the cold air on his face, he would do better to keep them. His hat had not been taken by the boyish butler who had admitted them to the house, so he set it down on a rosewood drum table. "How long do you think we shall be forgotten?"

With an absent smile, Bryn threw himself onto a brocade couch and sprawled there, his booted legs stretched before him. "'And yet a spirit still, and bright, With something of angelic light.'"

"Angelic? Did we meet the same Miss Harwood?"

Bryn glanced up. "The same...? Oh, not that one. 'A maid whom there were none to praise, And very few to love.' The other miss, not the one with the owl, but the one intent on her argument with that gentleman-chimneysweep. But perhaps the 'maid whom there were none to praise' found our intrusion unforgivable?"

Nevin's mouth twisted. "None to praise? Oh, I should think her regarded as a paragon in her community. No doubt a lady of great virtue and standing, and quite willing to tell you so—her displeasure came in response to our names, cousin. Not to the form of our arrival."

"Did it?" Bryn said, his voice drifting and his stare already distant.

With a shake of his head, Nevin turned away to study the view from the window. He knew his cousin well enough by now to know that look. Poems—his own and lines penned by others—

must be swirling in Bryn's mind, and there would be nothing sensible from him until his muse quieted.

Folding his hands behind his back, Nevin stared absently at a tidy garden, its rose bushes already cut back and its flower beds as carefully contained as had been Miss Harwood.

He ought to have expected her reaction. By now, he ought to know that his name always brought those stares. The kind ones offered condescension. The proud ones—like the starchy Miss Harwood—treated him to contempt. The rest attempted to ignore his existence, just as his uncle had once tried to obliterate him.

*Poshrat.* That was the Romany word for him. Half Gypsy, and as much an outcast to his mother's people as he was with his father's kind. But he would change that.

He was Baron Nevin now, a man with title and position. He had fought and gained his rightful inheritance and his sister had married a lord. And now he would remake what the world thought of him.

By God he would.

A frown tugged at his mouth. The proud Miss Hardwood was just the sort of female he had met most often in London, disdainful ladies whose smiles chilled and who pulled their skirts aside when his identity became known. But how did she justify such lofty contempt when she kept such a ramshackle house—an owl loose, and some fellow who looked a well-dressed sweep dripping soot on the carpet, and a butler who did not look old enough to shave?

Yet, with all that, she had folded her hands primly before her and had done her best to stare him down.

A smile tugged at his mouth.

Ah, but that one knew her worth.

She also had a figure for a man to admire, with generous curves, and a spark of something interesting which had kindled in her eyes when he had taken her hand. She had seemed not to care that she looked more scullery maid than lady, with her worn dress, and her brown hair soot-darkened, and a dusting of ash across her cheek. And he liked how she had leapt to her sister's defense. Accomplished with owls, indeed.

But then he had said his name, and he had felt the cold sweep into her, more chilling than this room.

Turning away from the garden, he glanced around the room she had left them in—another indication how little she thought of him, to have left him in this unused corner of the house. Not even candles to light and not so much as a splinter of wood in the grate.

Well, this might be an insult to Lord Nevin, but to a half Gypsy who had grown up traveling the road, this seemed quite comfortable. She would have to do better than this if she thought to make him turn tail and run.

His smile widened at the thought.

He had forced more than a few in London's select circles to overlook the sin of his birth in favor of the title he had fought to regain. It helped, of course, that his sister had become countess to the Earl of St. Albans. Not that anyone called St. Albans respectable. But an earl's influence still carried weight, even if that earl had a black reputation. And Nevin had used St. Albans's influence, as he used whatever tool he needed, to recover what had been stolen from him after his father's death.

Still, it had not been enough. Not yet.

His uncle had stolen more than a title from his late brother's son. The man had caused harm to a dozen others—he'd lied, cheated and it was a blessing he was dead. Whatever it took, Nevin would now make the world see that his title and name held something of honor again.

And the Harwoods would be the tools he used to do that.

Bryn sat up suddenly and turned to him. "Winslow! Of course! 'And I am black, as if bereav'd of light.' That fellow by the hearth must be Terrance Winslow's brother. The family resemblance for getting into trouble is far too strong to be a coincidence."

Nevin smiled. He had no idea what Bryn quoted now, but they had time to pass. He came closer and sat down on the arm of the couch, leaving one booted foot swinging. "Who is this Terrance Winslow?"

"Terror Winslow, they called him at school. He was a few years older than me, and ran with a far different set at Winchester, but I remember the scandal when he was sent down. Something to do with the headmaster's daughter."

"Daughter? What, as a mere schoolboy?" Nevin asked. He had never seen the inside of a school himself. At the age of a school-boy, he had been barefoot and learning to read Gypsy signs left upon the road as to which great houses tolerated a camp in their woods and their rabbits snared for dinners. But he knew enough of the polite world to know the ages at which a boy from a good family went to public school, and that would have put Terrance Winslow in his early teens at the most.

"Oh, he was a terror even in short pants," Bryn said, and then embarked into his stories. Nevin listened, amused, but that slight thread of unease slipped into him as Bryn talked. His cousin had the ability to make friends easily, and as he spoke with affection for school days past, Nevin felt that otherness in himself grow stronger.

His own youthful stories would be of broken-down horses, bought for little and then fattened and sold as younger than they were. Or of how he had distracted farmers at fairs, while his sister cut bulging purses. Not exactly the sort of tales meant to endear one—not even to family.

So he listened to Bryn, and smiled and tried not to feel the gulf that lay between them. His past had made him old already, with one life already lived as a Gypsy.

But that life no longer owned him. The wandering, the struggle to survive, even the tight bonds between him and his sister and mother, and with the faithful Bado, who had traveled with them, were things of the past.

A pang for what had been lost surged in him, but he let it lay, knowing it would pass, no more than a cloud across his mind. A lord could not sleep under the stars and travel the road. Not if what he wanted was his place in Society.

Besides, his mother had finally married Bado this past summer, and the two of them roamed the road yet, comfortable in that life as he had never been. And his sister had a home, as well, and a family of her own on the way.

So he listened to Bryn's stories, and immersed himself in his cousin's past.

An hour later, Bryn's voice had worn thin and finally even he ran out of scandal to remember. Nevin's temper had shortened as his fingers chilled. He had expected to wait, but this had become intolerable.

Pulling his watch from his waistcoat pocket, he flipped open the gold lid and noted the time. He pocketed the watch again, and began pacing, his long strides taking him down the wall to the empty fireplace and then back again to where Bryn sat. At least it kept him warm.

Ten laps of the room later—more than enough time to study the three age-darkened portraits on the wall—he glanced at his watch again.

Quarter to three. Dark in another hour and a half, he judged. And his resolution to have done with this task as soon as he could was fading with the daylight.

Pocketing his watch, he started for the door, stopping only long enough to take up his hat. "Come along, cousin."

"Ah, salvation is at hand. I had begun to think you meant to wait 'till judgment day. 'A dog starved at his master's gate.' That's what we'd be by morning's light. And parched as well. I could do with a mug of ale, or something more warming."

"Oh, we shall come back well fortified," Nevin said, leading the way into the empty hall. He glanced around, but not so much as a footman waited. Ramshackle, indeed.

"Back?" Bryn asked, wincing. "Not back to London? I sense a crusade in the making. Only what will you do if Mr. Harwood should prove as starved as his daughter and just as determined not to have any dealings with the likes of us?"

Nevin's mouth curved. How like Bryn to make this his battle as well. 'Us' he said, when he knew full well that his own reception would have been far different had he arrived on his own. He had no Gypsy blood in him. But Bryn had honor. When his father had been proven a scoundrel, Bryn had given up all claim to the title. *How could he be so unlike his father*, Nevin wondered? But, then, how could two brothers be any more unlike than his own father and Bryn's?

In the hall, he turned to offer some light comment to Bryn, but the swinging open of the heavy oak front door interrupted, and he turned to face the older man who had paused on the threshold.

*Harwood*, Nevin thought, noting the resemblance to the daughters of the house—the same height and shape of face as the eldest and the same coloring as that child with the owl.

"Harwood?" he asked to confirm his assumption.

Hatless, sandy hair windblown and face ruddy, Harwood's glance sharpened. "You have the advantage of me." Then worry tightened his forehead. "This isn't about a bill of some sorts? In my day, a tradesman looked a tradesman, but millers dress like lords these days. But I won't be dunned on my own doorstep. No, sir. I simply will not have that."

Nevin's mouth tightened. First to be put aside, and now to be accused of being in trade. These Harwoods seemed determined to drive him away. However, he had his task to remember, so he forced a polite tone. "I am Nevin. This is my cousin, Bryn Dawes. And this has nothing to do with bills."

Harwood's expression softened, though his pale eyes still seemed wary. "Nevin? Oh, yes, I had your letters about some new scheme you wanted to put forward to me. Do forgive me, but you've wasted a trip, you know. I've done with such investments. No head for it. But where's my manners? I've not even offered my condolences on your father's passing, and I should have written you that much at least."

"That would be my father you mean," Bryn said, his tone hollow.

Nevin sent a sharp glance at his cousin. Bryn had not been close with his father. Even now, he shied away from speaking about the man, which told Nevin far more about Bryn's confused feelings than Bryn would ever want known. Nevin thought of the painful gap in his own life. He had known his own father only through the stories told to him by his mother. But how much worse to have known and despised one's own blood?

Ah, but such thoughts had no place in the lightness of civil conversation, so Nevin turned back to Harwood with a smile and a ready answer. "Thank you, but could we not speak to you in a more comfortable setting than the hall?"

"But of course, of course. Do forgive me," Harwood said, coming forward to shake their hands and usher them up the stairs. He looked perplexed at the odd line of inheritance, from uncle to nephew, instead of father to son, but Nevin did not want to go into his family's shameful history, and he guessed that Harwood would be too much the gentleman to ask.

He was right.

With a strained smile, Harwood led them into a snug, book-lined study. Ringing for a servant to come and take their coats and hats, he offered refreshments, adding, "I believe there might be a spot of brandy yet in the cellars."

Nevin declined the brandy, but accepted the offer of wine, and Bryn moved at once to the books that lined one wall of the room, drawn to them like a hound to scent. The youthful butler, Bridges, responded to the summons and managed to take their coats as Harwood maintained a polite flow of chatter, asking about their journey and how long they stopped long in Somerset.

Such trivialities wore at Nevin's already tired patience, but he accepted a glass of burgundy and gave back conventional answers. Bryn joined them, asking Harwood if he had actually read William Cobbett's *The Parliamentary History of England*.

That set them off.

Not only had Harwood read Cobbett, but he had strong views on that gentleman's suggestions for far too revolutionary reforms. Nevin listened as Harwood and his cousin swapped names and book titles—long and short—and he knew himself to be out of his depth. *It is not as if I have never read anything*, he told himself, frowning. But they might as well be speaking French, or Latin, or any number of other languages that a gentleman ought to know.

And which he knew nothing about.

The gulf of difference between him and the civilized world began to widen, and he tried to hold onto his scorn for such things. Books and words, after all, could be used by any gentleman as justification for every sin in the world. As his uncle, a learned man, had done. Actions showed better a man's true character. And all this talk left him restless and eager to have done with his errand.

He waited until he had finished his wine, and decided good manners could ask for no more. Trying to keep his tone even and not too abrupt, he interrupted at the next pause in their discussion, saying, "Mr. Harwood, I actually came to see you because of old business between our families. And I think it's time we discussed that."

### ***CHAPTER THREE***

Harwood's forehead bunched into well-worn lines. He blinked, as if unable to adjust to this sudden change in topics. "Old business?"

"The canal venture that my uncle brought you into," Nevin said.

Harwood sat down heavily in a leather chair, his face sagging, his gaze losing focus. He did not want to dredge up such painful memories. His age settled in him, sapping his strength. How had he become this old man? How had youthful dreams and energy gone so quickly?

His words came out heavy and slow. "Oh, that business."

Then the old rancor began to rise—and with it came the despair. Such folly. Such waste. Useless, of course, to blame anyone but himself. He had been the one who had gambled his family's security. He had to face that fact. He had to keep remembering, for how else could he keep from repeating that mistake yet once more?

He had promised Matilda, after all. And Penelope as well. After that last venture. He really could not put them through any more.

Still, the urge stirred in him. That wonderful tingling anticipation and start of excitement at the thought of a new endeavor. That proof that youth could still fire in his veins.

Perhaps this time....

*Don't be a bloody, damn fool, you old, silly man!*

Did he not think the very same thoughts every time? Did he not succumb to the lure of his own good intentions? And had not every enterprise turned sour?

Past time he learned caution. Yes, indeed. He ought to have kept his interests firmly fixed in the country. That is exactly what he would do. He had made a new start already in that direction with the purchase of this stallion—a son of the great Whalebone, with an ancestry that boasted Herod, Matchem, and the peerless Eclipse. Yes, by God, now he had done something solid and real, for the horse stood in his own paddock. So he had no need to listen to this temptation of other speculations.

Straightening, he glanced at Nevin. "Your uncle was a lucky man to get out when he did. Damn lucky. I wish to heavens I had, but what is it they say about wishes and horses and beggars riding? I never did have a mind for business, I fear. No, never did."

Nevin put on a polite smile, but he had to clench his back teeth at Harwood's praise for his uncle.

Luck had had nothing to do with the late Lord Nevin's slipping out of that financial disaster—or several others. His uncle had known when he'd come to Harwood that that canal scheme was near to failing, and he had sold out at a profit, leaving Harwood to bear the losses. The papers that Nevin had inherited, along with his title, had told the story clear enough.

Of course, no actual law had been broken. The deceit had been a sin of omission, a lack of truth, rather than any open falsehood. While this had not been the only shameful secret in his uncle's legacy, it rankled the most for, to Nevin, it was a betrayal of friendship. He found that appalling. A Gypsy—even a *poshrat*—knew better than to steal from his own kind. But his uncle had never made that distinction. Not even with his own blood.

However, this was no simple matter. Even his cousin had cautioned him, saying, "If Harwood's a man of pride, he won't want charity, and you'll only insult him if you offer it."

Nevin had seen the truth of that. He would feel the same were the situation reversed. But he had found another way.

Or so he thought he had.

Setting down his wine glass, he began again. "Sir, I must tell you that things were not what you thought. In fact, you—"

"No, no, my lord," Harwood interrupted, holding up his hand to stop Nevin's words. "I am too aware I made bad judgments."

"Yes, but, my uncle did—"

"He did what he thought best for himself, sir. And that is enough said on it. I shall not hear anything more. Spilt milk and barn doors and all that. Your uncle is dead, and it is best not to speak ill of him now, and that failed business is best left buried with him and the past."

"But he left you—"

"I know exactly in what state I was left in, my lord," Harwood said, his tone louder and his face reddening. The look in his eyes sharpened, and then he said, his voice quieting, "There is nothing to mend it. I hold the responsibility for my own past actions."

Nevin heard the unspoken message in Harwood's words. Harwood knew that he had been duped. He knew, but he saw himself as the one to blame. For he had been the one who had put his trust into the wrong hands. Well, Harwood might stubbornly wish to avoid this, but Nevin had his own certainty of his duty.

"Very well, if you do not wish to talk of the past, what of the future? There is an opportunity in London that...."

"Yes, yes. You wrote me of it. And I set your letter aside, meaning to write you that I no longer deal in such matters. You have made your trip for nothing."

Frustrated, Nevin glanced at his cousin, who offered a sympathetic shrug. The plan had seemed so simple. Since Harwood would not answer his letters, Nevin had intended to see him in person. He had taken pains to find a fail-proof venture that would recoup a good deal of what Harwood had lost. All it required was Harwood to invest his funds, and he would have ten times his investment returned, at the least.

He had not counted, however, on Harwood being so...so obstinate.

Eyes narrowing, Nevin set his jaw. Harwood might be making this difficult, but Nevin had grown up with a far more arduous life than this. And he would not add to the disgrace his uncle had created by turning away from the task of restitution.

"Mr. Harwood," he began again, trying to keep his voice reasonable. "I quite understand that you must be reluctant to enter into any enterprise put forward by my family. However, if I could explain the details, you would see that this is an opportunity that cannot do anything but succeed."

Harwood's shoulders sagged and he shook his head. "My lord, they all seem so to me when they are explained."

Nevin met the man's stare and saw battered pride in those faded eyes. He understood now why Harwood had not answered his letters. The man looked haunted by too many past failures and terrified of yet another one. Still, there was a flicker of interest. He could swear it. Only how could Harwood be convinced into agreement?

An angry heat stirred inside Nevin, and he sent a few curses that his uncle's soul might now be paying for what he had left behind in this world. The man had robbed far more than this man's pockets. And he saw now that he had set himself a more difficult task than he had anticipated. After all, what man wants to be burned twice by the same fire?

Abandoning his plans, he started making new ones. If he had learned nothing else in life, he had learned how to adapt.

"I quite understand, sir. It takes a wise man to know his limits."

Harwood's face softened, and his body relaxed. "Just so, my lord. But if I cannot give you the satisfaction of having won an investor, let me at least offer you dinner. We're quite informal, so no need to worry that you haven't a change of clothes, but Bridges can show you to a room where you may wash the dirt from you. And we'll speak of more pleasant matters, shall we?"

Nevin hesitated, half-tempted to decline. He had a fair idea that Harwood's notion of pleasant matters meant more talk of books he had not read. Only there stood Bryn, eyes alight, his face more alive than Nevin could ever recall seeing. And Harwood gazed at him with expectation, obviously pleased to offer his hospitality. And Nevin thought of the too proud Miss Harwood and her likely reaction at having to sit down to dinner with him.

His mouth quirked. Would she claim a headache to avoid his company, or had she enough spirit to face him? And what would she look like without the soot?

Well, if he did not stay to dinner, how could he find a way to change Harwood's opinion in his matter? And how could he possibly turn away from the chance to taunt Miss Harwood with his presence?

He gave Harwood a smile and the low bow that his brother-in-law, the earl, had spent months criticizing until Nevin had gotten right. "We should be delighted."

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She cleaned up well, Nevin decided.

The high color on her cheeks and the militant spark in her eyes gave her something more intriguing than the conventional beauty of her younger sister. So did her height, for when they met in the drawing room, her eyes were almost level with his own and her stare as haughty as a duchess's. He now knew exactly how a duchess looked, for he had met two of them this past year, only to be shunned by one and accepted by the other after charming the pack of dogs that followed her about. All that had been excellent training for Miss Harwood's icy stares.

He also suspected she had dressed for battle—or at least to impress him. No, not to impress, he decided, looking again at her, appreciation for that lush figure of hers stirring. Rather, she meant to show him she cared nothing for his opinion, he decided.

The dress, something the color of autumn leaves, suited her, pulling flashes of red from her loose brown curls, hugging the curve of her breasts and hinting at an alluring swell of hips. But the gown lacked the flounces and ribbons he had seen this past season on the most fashionable London ladies. No doubt, he and his cousin did not deserve her finest wardrobe.

In fact, Penelope had agonized over her appearance, once she had gotten over her displeasure that the Daweses had been invited to dine, and after she had settled poor Mrs. Merritt's agitation at what to serve a lord on such short notice.

Sorting out Mrs. Merritt had been the easier task, for Penelope had simply told the housekeeper to toss away the menus for the week and serve most everything tonight. She would not have these Dawes men thinking Harwood too poor a house to set a proper table.

Then she sent Cecila to help Sylvain into some suitable garb and faced the task of sorting out her own dress.

Anything in silk seemed too formal—and far too much as if she wanted to show herself to advantage. But a sensible, high-necked morning gown might look as if she could not afford anything better. That would not do at all. Which led her back to evening gowns. After pulling out three, and discarding them all as too revealing, too ornate, or too much for a country dinner, she decided on a russet gown in merino wool, four years old and quite out of the current mode. However, trimmed with gold braid and with a black and gold shawl over her elbows, it set the tone of elegance she wanted.

She had sorted through her jewelry before deciding to do without. She did not want *him* to think that she dressed to honor his presence, after all.

Oh, what in heaven had Father been thinking to invite a Dawes to dine!

If she had found out about the invitation before it had been offered, she might have pointed out how awkward this must be. And with all the fuss it caused, it meant that she still had not had a chance to bring up the issue of Squire Winslow's stallion.

Well, that would hold until after dinner when their guests departed. In fact, she would see Father then and would both insist that he send back the horse as well as inform him that

Theodore Winslow was spending far too much time with Cecila. Yes, everything could be sorted out then.

For now, she had to smile as her father formally introduced her and her sisters, and she had to think up polite chatter to fill the awkward time before they went in to dine.

Cecila, thank heavens, seemed inclined to follow her lead in giving Lord Nevin and his cousin a chilly reception, though Penelope suspected that was due in part to Cecila's mortification at having been seen covered in ash. And while Sylvain, in blue-dotted muslin, looked more her eighteen years of age and less the schoolgirl hoyden, Penelope trusted her to keep her distance. Shy as her owl, Sylvain kept her gaze down and never spoke to company unless compelled to do so. Ordinarily, Penelope would have done all she could to encourage her youngest sister to participate, but tonight she was quite happy to allow Sylvain to keep her reserve.

Now, if only she could make her father see that was how he ought to treat these Daweses as well.

But he and Mr. Dawes had taken up what seemed an ongoing conversation over the intentional symbolism within Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*—a subject on which Penelope had no opinion, having read very little by the poet. And so it was either talk to Lord Nevin or allow her sisters to speak to him. She would as soon permit them to talk to the devil, for at least they would know to be wary of Lucifer's brimstone charm.

With a bland smile in place, she turned to Nevin. "Fine weather we have been having, is it not?"

He stared back at her, his eyes glittering with some secret amusement and his lips—the bottom one full and sensual, the top slim and ascetic—curved at the corners.

*Contrasts and conflicts*, she thought. Even in the shape of his mouth. He wore elegant clothes, but a hint of something uncivilized lay in those dark, exotic looks. He moved with controlled grace, but there seemed gathered about that well-shaped figure an unsettling restlessness. And for all that he was a lord, his manners did nothing to set others at their ease, but almost seemed too overbearing.

He wanted the world on his own terms, she decided, as she waited for his reply.

When he merely gazed at her, she tried another conventional topic, thinking he must have decided her question unworthy of an answer.

"Do you stop long in Somerset?" she asked, her smile still in place, although it now felt stiff.

One eyebrow, black as a demon's heart, lifted a fraction. Again he made no answer.

Her own temper fired and she pressed her lips tight to keep from saying something utterly rude. Was he deaf? Or did he wish to stare her out of countenance? Well, she was no schoolgirl to be easily ruffled.

She widened her smile. "Perhaps, my lord, we ought to continue to stare at each other like mute savages?"

His lips curved even more, and he said, his voice rough velvet, "Is that not what you already think me?"

Heat rushed to her cheeks and her irritation mounted. She had not been made to blush in years and it frustrated her that he could bring the color to her cheeks with only a few words. Well, two could be so blunt.

"Do you honestly care what I think?" she asked. "Your lack of answers would indicate that you do not."

"I think it goes the other way around—do you care what I would answer to such inane questions?"

She bit her lower lip, and Nevin wondered if she had just bitten off an honest answer. Honest, but quite improper, he guessed. Would she retreat back into mouthing courteous nothings? He hoped not.

The color had deepened on her cheeks, an attractive rose that highlighted the delicate bones of her face and left her eyes shining. She had darker brown lines in the iris of her eyes, he noted, like the facets of a gem. And he liked her better this way, with her temper—and her poise—near to lost, instead of so chilly and civil.

She lifted her chin. "I care, sir, to make polite discourse. That requires an answer to a question, and questions meant to elicit a pleasant exchange of wit."

"What wit is required for the weather? I must state the obvious, or invent something other than what can be seen out any window. As to my stopping in Somerset, I suspect the answer you wish is that I stop not at all."

Penelope bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep herself civil. She counted to three inside her head, and forced a smile, and a civil question. "Is that the answer you would give me?"

He smiled. "It is if you would have a lie."

"I would rather the truth."

His dark eyes danced. "Ah, but I thought you wanted polite discourse?"

"What—can you only manage one or the other?" she asked.

"Can anyone manage both?"

Penelope frowned. "So you imply that I am not honest if I am polite? Well, I will tell you that it is possible to balance the two."

"Is it? Are you honest and polite when you make conversation with me, asking questions that interest neither of us?"

"Oh, I am greatly interested in how long you stop in Somerset, my lord," she said, her jaw tight.

Something flashed in those black eyes—something hot and not the least bit domesticated. Then he said, his voice silky, "How flattering that I interest you."

Oh, she had known it. Not one of these Lord Nevins were to be trusted. They had more charm than anyone deserved. And he had taken her words and twisted them to his own meaning.

She tried to form a polite answer that would remove any illusions he held about the nature of her interest, but only childish denials leapt to mind.

Thankfully, Bridges entered to announce dinner.

Smiling, Nevin offered his arm as if they had indeed been talking of nothing but the weather. Manners demanded she accept, so she placed her hand on his arm while wishing him to perdition.

They dined at country hours, and in the old-fashioned style, with dishes already laid upon the table when they came in to the square, high-ceilinged room. Still tense next to Lord Nevin, Penelope glanced at the table and her shoulders loosened one knot. Against the white damask tablecloth, silver sparkled, china gleamed soft—its pattern of strawberries wound around the edge of the dishes—and crystal goblets glistened in the candlelight.

Mrs. Merritt had done the house proud, with a joint of beef, a dish of leaks, white mushroom fricassee, what looked like a trout on a platter, the pair of wild ducks meant for Sunday next, two sauces and a cream soup in a tureen. Penelope could only hope the housekeeper had kept something for the second course, and that there had been time to bake cakes for dessert. They

would at least have the apples from Mr. Holloway's orchard, for Sylvain had come home just yesterday with her dress hiked up to carry the pilfered fruit.

Father continued to talk of books and authors—he and Mr. Dawes had moved onto comparisons of Greek translations of Plato—but when the talk moved to the recent novel by Miss Austen, Cecilia joined the conversation, quite ready to speak of such lighter works.

That left Lord Nevin, seated between Penelope and Sylvain, to think of something for them to discuss—other than to ask for dishes to be passed his way. Penelope decided that if he addressed one word to her, she would answer with cold monosyllables that would show him that he did not intimidate her, nor did he interest her.

However, she had not the opportunity.

He turned to Sylvain and, bending his head close to hers, said something that actually lifted her stare from her soup and then pulled a quiet reply.

Wary, ready to jump in to protect her sister, Penelope strained to hear the low conversation. But the literary discussion ranged far louder on the opposite side of the table. She sent a frown at Cecilia, hoping her sister would quiet, but she was far too intent on expressing her preference for any novel with at least one foundling or orphan, a ghost, shameful family secrets, and more adventure than just ordinary people talking at each other.

Penelope glanced again at Lord Nevin and Sylvain and she nearly dropped her soup spoon.

Sylvain was actually smiling. Then Nevin leaned closer to say something and Sylvain covered a small giggle.

Alarms rang though Penelope like church bells. She tried to remain calm. How much harm, after all, could Nevin do in one evening? But worry ate at her peace. How little had it taken for her to succumb to Jonathan's charm? He had not had the advantage of Nevin's dark, enticing looks and look what damage he had done.

She tried to taste her soup, but memories tightened her stomach. She had promised herself to do everything possible to keep Sylvain—or Cecilia—from ever having a Jonathan of their own. Which meant that something ought to be done about Lord Nevin before the worst happened.

When Bridges came in to remove the first course and lay out the second—helped by Mrs. Merritt's gangly son, who seemed wide-eyed at being able to glimpse a real lord—Penelope took the opportunity presented.

Turning to Lord Nevin, she asked, "And what brings you to see my father, my lord?"

The pulse beat rapid in her throat. She ought not to ask such a direct question, but Nevin had already stated his preference earlier for such impolite plain-speaking. Now she would see if he had meant it.

He turned to her, his black eyebrows lifted as if she had surprised him. He hesitated a moment before he answered, "I came to offer him an investment opportunity."

The bite of grouse pie in Penelope's mouth turned to dust. Heavens, exactly what she had feared. Business. The chance to lose the rest of their fortune—and Harwood, too.

All too aware of his stare on her, she had to take a long drink of wine before she could swallow. "Really?" she asked. Her voice sounded too bright and she drank another sip of wine.

"Yes, but he would not discuss the matter."

Penelope glanced at her father, who sat smiling as Cecilia argued her preference for Sir Walter Scott's novels rather than his poetry. The tightness in her chest loosened. He had remembered his promise, after all. *Oh, bless you, Father.*

She glanced back at Lord Nevin. Well, he must know that he wasted his time here, and he would soon enough leave Harwood.

It struck then how she could deflect Nevin's attention away from Sylvain, and it was not entirely fraudulent, she told herself. But she thought of her earlier argument that manners could also be honest. Well, she was interested in hearing his answers on this. And she would say nothing to him other than the truth.

Yes, that would do nicely.

Putting on a brilliant smile, she fixed her full attention on him. "Why do you not tell me about this venture, for I should be happy to speak to my father of it?"

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