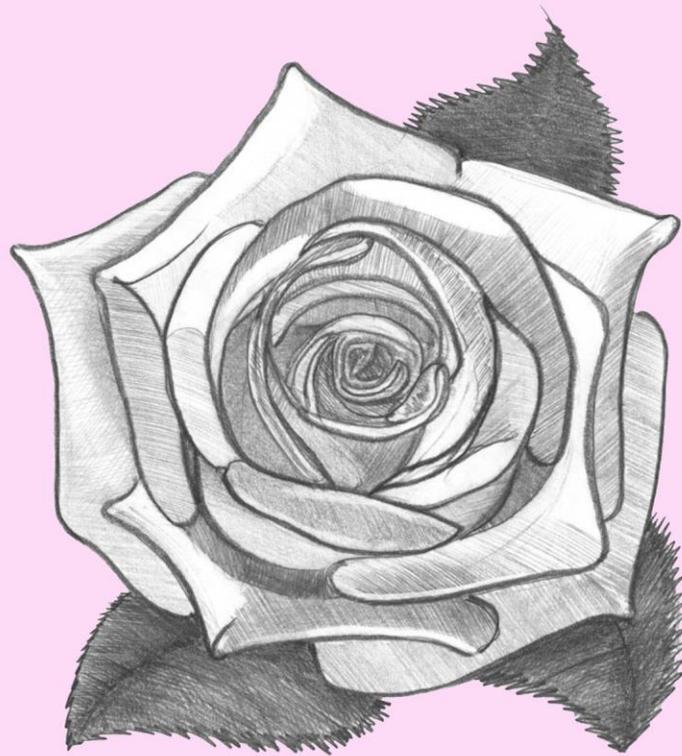


# *John Carter's Conundrum*



JULIE TETEL ANDRESEN



**FREE DOWNLOAD**

## Chapter One

London, 1785

When John Carter stepped into the darkened room, the depressing scent of dust and bodily decay assailed his nostrils. He inhaled and caught a welcome waft of camphor. Though cloying, the laurel wood oil made the air marginally more breathable.

“Close the door behind you!” croaked a thin voice from the depths of the gloom. “The drafts are going to be the death of me.”

“We wouldn’t want that,” Carter replied mildly and did as he was told.

“Hah!” rasped the voice. “I’m dying anyway. Now sit down!”

Thoughts of death had crossed Carter’s mind when he had received, earlier in the day, a summons to the magnificent home of Lord Avery, Fourth Duke of Bradford, on Portman Square. He had become sure of the deathbed scene awaiting him when, upon being ushered into the foyer, the senescent butler had not led him to a receiving room on the ground floor but rather up the grand staircase to the family quarters.

His eyes, adjusting to the candlelit dimness, observed the man shrunk to child-like proportions in the capacious bed on the far side of the room. The body tucked below the covers was frail. The arms, crossed atop the covers, resembled plucked chicken wings. The head, well on its path to skull, sprouted the last wisps of white wiry hair, eyes and cheeks sunken, the whole covered by skin paper-thin.

“No, not that chair,” the duke snapped when Carter moved to seat himself at a respectful distance. “This one, next to me.”

“Yes, Your Grace, certainly,” he said, still in mild tones.

“There, that’s right. I want to see you. Not that there’s anything wrong with my eyesight. Or my hearing! It’s rather my heart.”

“I didn’t know.”

“You wouldn’t have,” the duke grumbled, adding with admirable spirit, “And now you do!”

“I’m sorry.”

“It happens to everyone,” the old man said with an indifferent shrug, but a candle flame caught an errant glint in his eye when he noted, “There’s something to be said

for knowing a man is going to meet his Maker. It's ..." he trailed off then coughed. "Well, it puts a man in a frame of mind to do whatever he wants."

Carter blinked and ventured, "And what you wanted was to see me?"

"Silly question, lad," the duke snapped. "The obvious answer is Yes."

Carter was not offended. He was rather touched to be reduced to a lad and transported back to his youth in Hartsfield.

The duke lifted himself a fraction off the thick clouds of pillows and glared at his visitor for several moments before his torso caved back onto his props. He asked, sharply, "When was the last time I laid eyes on you, boy?"

"A good fifteen years ago, I'd say. Twenty-one I must have been, Your Grace."

The old man nodded then commented, "Developed into quite the figure of a man, I see. 'Braw' your countrymen would say."

"I've heard such applied to myself, yes."

The duke squinted at his guest. "And not bad looking, if I'm any judge of the matter. Not a pretty boy, either."

Carter cast about for a reply and settled on, "Thank you, Your Grace."

The duke's brows lowered and met to form a white chevron. "But I'm *not* any judge of the matter. What say the ladies?"

Carter was not sure of the purpose of this line of questioning so he kept to the demure reply, "Do you remember the Bellows family? I married Mary Bellows, Your Grace. She left this world twelve years ago already."

The duke nodded. "I remember. And since her passing? No current marriage prospects?"

"I've devoted myself to our son, Thomas, and my career."

At this the duke perked up a bit. "I understand you've done well for yourself, lad."

"Well enough."

The duke's laugh was a ghostly rattle. "Modest as ever! I've made inquiries into you, I have." He paused, as if for dramatic effect. "John Carter, a Bow Street runner! A simple boy from the countryside made good in Town."

Carter accepted the praise and forbore to feel the grudge usually engendered when a townspeople attached the derogatory term 'runner' to his profession. "I had the help of some luck."

"And a good deal of skill. It's all in the reports I've had! You seem to have a knack for solving crimes, like the one that brought you to the attention of Sir John Fielding, the Bow Street Magistrate."

"I like to follow evidence, Your Grace. It's satisfying to bring perpetrators to justice."

Carter was about to ask, cautiously, whether his grace now needed his services to bring to justice someone who had perpetrated a crime against the Avery family or the Bradford estate. However, before he could formulate a suitably tactful way to ask the question, the duke said,

"I'm sure your father is proud of you."

"I hope he is, Your Grace."

"And how is his health?"

"He's well, Your Grace."

"Good man, your father. At home is he?"

"With my mother in Hartsfield, yes, Your Grace."

The old man's voice was wistful. "I wish I could see it one last time."

"I'm sure you do. I go there as often as I can and send Thomas there even more often, especially now, during the summer." Carter saw the old man's gaze had traveled out to an invisible horizon and so turned away from his own personal interests and toward his host's. "Your land is in good heart, Your Grace."

His grace grunted. "My son has been doing a good job of it, just as I expected." Despite the compliment, the old man did not sound happy about it. "Bit of a dull stick, Edward is. Oh, stubble it, he's more than a bit of a dull stick. He's a dead bore, and his wife is nigh near insufferable."

Growing up in the shadow of Bradford Manor, where the country grapevine was well rooted and luxuriously branching, Carter was aware that the Fourth Duke and the future Fifth Duke did not enjoy a comfortable relationship. Where the friction arose, no one could say for sure, although various theories – most entirely fanciful – circulated freely.

"Bah! I didn't bring you here to talk about him."

Carter was increasingly curious to learn the reason for this visit but held his tongue. He would pay his grace courtesy under any circumstances. Under these he wished to give the dying man the freedom to do whatever he wanted, as the duke had just said. Because Carter would have imagined his grace had done whatever he wanted his entire life – such was a duke’s privilege – he was not sure what further liberties the deathbed afforded. With no mariner’s star to guide him, Carter interpreted his role to be an attentive first mate on the duke’s final journey out to sea.

Silence fell. A candle guttered. Muted sounds of household activity drifted up. In the street below a carriage rumbled over the cobblestone, horses’ hooves clopped. A gurgling sound guttered in the duke’s throat.

He cleared it and began to ramble incoherently in disjointed sentences and eventually trailed off. At one point he sat up straight in bed and uttered, “The locket! My beautiful Clara!” only to subside again and fall into a coughing fit. He rambled a bit more then said, as if in conclusion, “So, you see, it had been a long time, lad, a very long time.” He closed his eyes. A faint smile curved his wizened lips. “But I found a way. I did. I don’t think I was wrong, either. A debt settled. You scratch my back ... and so forth.” He paused then added, wryly, “No real scratching, of course. Wasn’t up to it! Still, did them a good turn, I think.” He paused again then said with satisfaction. “Yes, a good turn.”

Although this last bit seemed more lucid than his initial ramblings, the whole still made no sense to Carter. However, he knew not to ask for clarification. The duke was deep inside his memories and simply wanted to revisit them. As he spoke his already weak voice dropped to a murmur. Although he had seemed mentally sharp enough despite his physical frailties, Carter began to suspect the duke was experiencing confusion. His suspicion was reinforced when the duke sat up abruptly and said,

“I mustn’t forget to tell you. The first password is Paris, the second is lavender, the room is rose, and the answer to the question of your purpose is ‘None of your business’.” He peered at his visitor. “Do you understand?”

Carter didn’t but guessed what was required of him. He repeated dutifully, “The passwords are Paris and lavender. The room is rose, and I will have an easy time remembering ‘None of your business’.”

“Oh, and you need knock only once, then enter,” the duke added.

“I will do that, Your Grace,” Carter assured him.

“Carry it through, lad. Promise me.”

As a matter of course he said, “I promise.”

The old man fell back again and approved, "Good lad." A moment later a troubled look furrowed his brow and his body twitched.

In some concern, Carter asked, "Are you all right, Your Grace?"

"There's more to tell you," the old man replied. "I'm sure there is, even quite a bit, but I can't remember it just now."

"You'll let me know when it comes to you."

Mental clarity briefly lit the old man's eyes. He said in relief, "Ah, I've already mentioned it. Thank goodness. The letter. I'm sure I sent it." He wheezed, "Almost."

Then he sank again into reminiscence. At first Carter did not know the people or the events the duke referred to, but the longer the old man spoke, the farther he sailed into his early life, as if crossing toward the far shore doubled as a journey backward in time. Suddenly Carter recognized the places the duke was describing, the town of Brad's Ford, the paths, the hamlets surrounding Bradford Manor, one of which was Hartsfield. He spoke of the delights of playing at the mill when he was a boy, some seventy years before it must have been, how the miller patiently showed him the workings of the gears and the waterwheel and cautioned him to keep his fingers clear of the millstone, how the miller's wife fed him unforgettably fresh bread made in the afternoon from wheat ground that morning.

He spoke of spring thaws and rolling meadows, fertile fields, wildflowers in summer, fall harvests and festivals held outdoors when a pleasant nip caught the air, first snow falls and blankets of white shrouding the hills and dales, keeping them safe while they slept. In the thin thread of the voice Carter heard tones of deep love.

At length the duke stopped then said on a sigh, "Surrey." To the ceiling he said, "It's beautiful country, God's country."

"It is, Your Grace," Carter responded almost involuntary, moved by the duke's descriptions. He was profoundly happy Thomas was there now reveling in the bounties of the countryside in the care of his nanny and granddad.

Abruptly the mood in the room shifted. The duke returned to the present and made a noise of profound disgust – whether in reference to his sentimental memories or his withered condition or both.

"Enough," he said in a firmer voice then pointed toward the bedside table. "This is for you. There's a good lad. That's all."

Carter looked as directed and was surprised to see a thick envelope addressed to Mister John Carter. He hesitated only momentarily. The duke clearly wanted him to

have whatever was in the envelope and had called him to his bedside to give it to him. He rose, picked up the envelope and slid it into his inside jacket pocket. He had the odd premonition the envelope held a deed, perhaps to a parcel of land in Surrey.

“Thank you,” Carter said then added, “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

The duke waved a hand dismissively.

“Then I’ll bid you Good Evening, Your Grace.”

The duke grunted. “More like Adieu.”

Carter nodded and crossed the room but paused at the door. He turned back to his unexpected benefactor (if benefactor he was) and ventured, “You were about to say something about this moment of yours, the one all of us pass through. You began, ‘It’s....’ How did you mean to finish that thought?” He prompted, “It’s ....?”

“The moment when character counts and class doesn’t.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Six days later in the London *Times* Carter spied the sober black border surrounding the obituary of the Fourth Duke of Bradford. The funeral was to be at St. Mary the Virgin in Mortlake, which he knew to be on the south bank of the Thames between Kew and Barnes. It was a part of Surrey at the southwestern edge of the city bursting at its seams and likely the established place where the Averys had buried their dead long before they came into the dukedom.

Carter dressed in his navy frock coat and knee breeches, which were not silk but cotton, as were his stockings. He took simple pride in his shirt and stock of lawn, even though he did not intend to be seen. He arrived at the church just as the service was underway and stayed outside, wishing to be present but thinking it unseemly to formally attend. When the mourners crowded into the cemetery on the side yard, he kept out of sight and only went to pay his respects graveside after all the mourners had left and the sexton had finished his job.

Hat in hand, he bowed his head and said a silent prayer for the duke’s spirit. Aloud he said, “It’s a bit of a mystery you’ve given me, Your Grace. Two of them, in fact! I didn’t want to move forward on what may be the solutions until you had departed. So I’m here to tell you that this evening I’ll go to Mayfair to test my first theory, and if I’m right I’ll go from there.”

He twirled the inside rim of his hat several times around his index finger before he said, “I did suspect you’d bequeathed me a deed, but I had not imagined it would be to a townhouse on Bedford Square in Bloomsbury. I’ve gone by the neighborhood now and seen an older woman living there, but I’m sure you know that. You likely even know her – or of her. How and why I’m involved is a puzzle you’ve given me. When I discover the solution I’ll let you know.” He added with confidence in his

skills, "I'll carry it through, Your Grace, as promised."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

Upon leaving the cemetery of Saint Mary the Virgin he returned to town how he had left, namely by way of a ferry at Lambeth. Once again on the north bank he made relatively quick work of the walk through the raucous, brawling streets of Covent Garden to Number Four Bow Street, the Magistrates' Court. There he ran into Thomas Hartwell, a fellow thief-taker, or detective, as they preferred to call themselves. The duo decided to take a hike down Floral Street and rounded a corner to arrive at the Flag and Lamb, a cozy pub run by the comely young Widow Russell. They made a good meal of veal stew washed down with a tankard of lager. When they finished, Carter declined further entertainment, fending off Hartwell's protest that the night was "so young it toddled" with vague noises to the effect he had business elsewhere in the city.

Thus it was that he arrived at the front door of a house at the intersection of Bourdon Street and Grosvenor Hill, Mayfair, at seven-thirty of the clock. This was the exact time and the day of the week, namely Thursday, scrawled at the top of the second document in the envelope the duke had given him. In the first document the establishment was referred to as Diana's. It exuded respectability. The brick pointing of the façade was in good repair, the windows trim, the brass of the door handle and kick plate shined to mirrors. An exclusive gambling hell, he concluded.

There being no knocker, he pulled the chain hanging to the right of the door and heard the bell tinkle inside.

He was surprised when the panel of a cleverly hidden Judas window in the door slid open. He was further surprised to hear the curt demand, "Password."

A very exclusive gambling hell. He pulled his wits together and took a shot. "Paris."

"Second password."

So the old man's wits hadn't been wandering. "Lavender."

"Room?"

"Rose."

A pause. He could just make out the shadow of an eye scrutinizing him. Then, "Purpose?"

He felt a spurt of satisfaction to say, "None of your business."

The panel slammed shut.

Carter stood on the front step long enough to wonder if he had spoken amiss, but finally a key turned, a bolt clicked and the door was opened.

He stepped across the threshold into exactly what he had expected. It was still early evening, so the elegant rooms he glanced to the left and right were far from full, but already a table or two of well-dressed gentlemen were playing cards. He turned his attention to the porter and bore with equanimity the silent inspection of his person. The porter, who was almost as large and muscular as Carter himself, sported a cauliflower ear, suggesting his former occupation as a boxer. More importantly he was visibly unimpressed with the tone and style of Carter's clothing. However, he must have responded in some sense to the authority suggested by the detective's unshakable calm, because he said with a wave of his hand to his left,

"Take the stairs in the back."

Carter nodded and headed through the first room the porter indicated and eventually found his way to a back hallway and the service staircase. Despite his impressive size, he had a light step and easy gait, and he ascended thoughtfully, one step at a time, not his usual two. He figured he was about to meet a select and secretive group of gentlemen with deep pockets and a penchant for high stakes, one of whose members was paying down a massive gambling debt owed to the duke. Carter was aware how jealously gentlemen honored their vows, and he fully expected to be enriched by a handsome ten pounds this week and another ten the next.

He could not have been more wrong about the identity of the debtor or the medium of the exchange.

In the upstairs hallway he had a moment of disorientation until he spied a doorframe on which a rose was painted at eye level. He remembered the instructions to knock once then enter. As he opened the door, he heard a woman from within say,

"I was worried, Your Grace, when you didn't come last week."

He stepped into the room to behold a young woman seated on her knees in the middle of a bed.

Completely naked.

She was in the act of stretching to her right to put a book she had apparently been reading on a bedside table, giving him an unobstructed view of her profile, shapely breasts and curvaceous waist and hips.

She continued, "But you're here now and my mind is at -"

When she turned and saw him she gasped in shock. She groped hastily for the sheet to cover herself but got slightly tangled in its folds, affording him several more long seconds of her beautiful nakedness.

As she fumbled on the bed, his mouth first went dry after which another entirely natural bodily reaction set in and put up a strong fight against his attempt to rein in his galloping thoughts.

When she had the sheet tucked up under her armpits, she said in tones of ringing anger, "Get out!" Then she leaned over to blow out the candle she had been reading by, thereby gaining the further cover of evening shadows.

He was momentarily bemused to behold just how different two bedroom scenes could be, one of rank death, the other of ripe life, both offered to him courtesy of the Fourth Duke of Bedford and in one week of each other.

"I will eventually," he said, recovering his customary calm. "But there are some issues to be sorted first."

She frowned. "Issues?"

"Legal issues."

She looked him up and down. "Are you a solicitor?"

He shook his head. "Inheritor."

She looked blank at first then a wave of comprehension crossed her features. She glanced away, blinking several times, as if trying to hold back an emotion. After a few moments of immobility she gave herself a slight shake and looked back at him, a brow raised in slight contempt. "Oh, no, don't think to hoodwink me for one second that you are his grace's -"

He interrupted, "An inheritor of sorts."

"What sort?"

He withdrew the envelope from his coat pocket and held it up. "You can see for yourself, if you like."

For a moment or two she eyed the oblong of linen paper as if it were a noisome rag. She drew a deep breath then said, "Put it on the foot of the bed." She pointed. "There."

He approached three steps, did as instructed and retreated three steps.

She scooted forward, clinging to her modesty and grasped the envelope. She scooted back, withdrew the contents and unfolded the pages. After a moment she sighed in what Carter interpreted as frustration and put the pages down. She leaned over to her bedside table and relit the candle. She picked the pages up again and began with the first document. She could hardly have read beyond the first sentence when she flicked him a glance and said, not bothering to hide her exasperation,

“You may as well sit down.”

There was only one chair in the room and it was placed a foot to his right. He availed himself of it and settled in. Although there would still have been enough daylight to read outside, the two windows faced east and the evening shadows in the room had deepened to blue gray.

In the light of the candle the room had flushed rose. He took stock. The walls were hung in pink silk, the thick carpet underfoot was raspberry, and his chair was upholstered in a primrose pattern that matched the curtains and several of the decorative pillows on the bed. A dresser with four stacked drawers stood against the wall opposite the windows, its top strewn with porcelain pots and knickknacks, next to which was a small armoire likely containing the clothing she was not wearing.

At one moment she looked up and said, “Mr. John Carter.” She was evidently halfway through the top document, the solicitor’s statement which also bore the duke’s signature.

He nodded. “At your service.”

Her raised brow now suggested skepticism. She returned her attention to the document, and he took the opportunity to study her. He knew all the prostitutes in Convent Garden by sight and most of them by name. The great lot of them he would describe as coarse and only a few merited being identified as passably attractive. By contrast, and in accordance with the laws of the social universe, the duke’s mistress was very pretty, beginning with her alabaster skin glowing in the candlelight, which set off her dark hair, brows and eyes. Her nose was straight, her lips full, her chin delicately pointed.

With an inward turn of humor, he thought she looked rather prim, with the sheet covering her, her hair pinned on top of her head like a proper lady and pretty pearl drops at her ears, likely given to her by the duke. She might have been his granddaughter, one he would proudly introduce to Society. But now that such an idea had come to him, he saw she was older than a dewy debutante. More of her petals were unfurled, and he guessed her age to be twenty-six or seven.

When she came to the end of the solicitor’s letter, she slid it behind the other two.

Upon confronting the second document she frowned in what must have been the puzzlement he himself had felt upon first trying to interpret its ledger-like entries. She, naturally, came to a quicker understanding of it than he had, because she knew the particulars while he had had to infer them, and so it was only a few moments before her lips parted and she tipped her chin up to gaze at the ceiling.

When she had apparently assimilated what was what, she turned her attention to him. Frowning, she asked in nonplussed disbelief, "And now you're taking over?"

The deathbed-promise *I'll carry it through*, so automatically made, caused him an uncomfortable moment. Carry *what* through?

"Those were his grace's wishes, yes," he said with more confidence than he felt.

"It seems –" she broke off, as if searching for the right words. If she hit on 'fantastically unexpected,' they would be in agreement. She bit her lower lip and ran her finger down the columns with the dates, covering a period of the last twelve months, and the numbers that diminished every week by ten pounds, thereby paying off a large debt she apparently owed him. She settled on:

"– gratuitous. I mean, look here, there are only two weeks left in my arrangement with the duke. I certainly knew it, and you must have determined as much for yourself." Her brow lightened and she looked at him speculatively for a moment before returning her attention to the papers in her hands. "Perhaps you have come to forgive these last twenty pounds of debt to various tradesmen around town," she suggested with a hopeful lift to her brow. "They're rather trifling."

So, tradesmen's debts. The tally sheet now made sense. Still, he would not have called twenty pounds 'trifling.'

Before he had a chance to reply, she shuffled to the third paper. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. She looked up at him again, now aghast. "The house? The duke owned the deed to *the house*?"

The duke had, and she had not known – unless she was a very good actress. But, no, he judged the color infusing her cheeks to be real, and her ignorance made him uneasy. His detective's antennae went up, and he wondered, as he had at the duke's bedside, whether the duke had tracked him down for his crime solving skills. Was there something amiss somewhere? What had the duke wanted to tell him but forgot? Carter certainly wanted no part of stolen property or other skullduggery.

However, before he could declare his intention to get to the bottom of the matter, she sat up straight, dropped the sheet and said, "Your hour begins now." She made a sweeping gesture in the manner of an actor ceding the stage to a fellow player. "Pray tell me your stories."

He was startled anew and mightily interested in the view but at least her action suggested she understood the duke's possession of the deed to be a legitimate extension of her existing debt, thereby banishing thoughts of shady business – that is, business any shadier than whatever he had muddled into here.

But stories? The duke came here to tell stories? Carter cast back to the deathbed ramblings. He now had a guess at what “no real scratching” meant. Of course the duke hadn't been up to it. But the old goat had found a way, as he had said, which, under his physical constraints, was apparently to reminisce in the presence of a naked beauty. Carter, now faced with delicious temptation and without physical constraints, speculated *carry it through* could possibly mean more than storytelling. This delightful thought was chased by a quirk of satisfaction he'd had a bath this morning and was quickly quashed by the more realistic interpretation the duke expected him to act honorably, added to which was Carter's dislike and distrust of prostitutes, no matter how high-toned and desirable.

But still –

*Think, man. Think fast!*

He was a man in good health and full vigor, so only one real option occurred to him. Being fair-minded he stopped short of congratulating himself for allowing a woman to settle her debt in the way the duke had established. As calmly as he was able, he said, “Now you see your debt is not so soon to be resolved, but perhaps we can change that if we renegotiate the conditions.”

Her response was a look so fierce he held up his hands in a forestalling gesture.

“I mean only that you may wish to be quit of the last of the tradesmen's debts and in possession of your house more rapidly than under his grace's schedule. Instead of one day a week, then, I propose we make it four.” Seeing he had her attention, he aimed high and added, “You'd be the one to tell the stories, and you would unpin your hair.”

“No to unpinning my hair,” was her immediate response “and No to four days a week.” She offered, “Two.”

He countered, “Three.”

“It will cost another ten pounds if I tell the stories.”

“Ten pounds a week, done.”

She hesitated, likely wondering if she could get him to agree to ten pounds per hour for stories.

“That’s forty pounds in total each week,” he summarized quickly to forestall further negotiation. “Ten pounds per hour three times a week, plus an extra ten pounds per week for your stories.” He wrapped things up. “Let’s agree: Thursdays, as of today, then Saturdays and Tuesdays. We’ll keep to the hour of seven-thirty. You can begin your first story any time.”

\*\*\*\*\*

### Chapter Three

Serena had, finally, seen no other way out. If this oafish intruder – *what had the duke been thinking?!* – had arrived at her bedroom with two damning documents in hand accompanied by a letter from the duke’s solicitors, then he surely had the full measure of the arrangement. She saw no profit in stalling, so off came the sheet.

In the unthreatening presence of the duke, her nakedness had not perturbed her, for his grace had looked at her more like a pretty painting rather than a flesh-and-blood body. Although she felt no active threat from Mr. Carter, her immediate feelings of embarrassment and, indeed, humiliation gave her the inkling she might not so easily accustom herself to this new arrangement.

She had felt a flicker of hope to talk this oaf out of the last twenty pounds her aunt owed the duke. However, when she had turned the page and seen the deed to the house, she had felt the betrayal – this casual transfer from one man to another not only of her business affairs but also her shelter – like a blow to the stomach, and she was demoralized.

“Would you like an amusing story,” she asked, “a sad story or a tender story?”

“Your choice,” he replied.

She considered him. Well-set up, not bad looking, but nothing to swoon over either. She could only guess he likely didn’t have a brain in his head, but she could not deny the prickly feeling spreading under her skin in response to his gaze.

She took a fortifying breath. “Very well,” she said. “My choice.”

Her first, easiest idea was to recount one of the many entertaining stories the duke had told her over the past year. But then she recalled he had also once told her that the good storyteller had both an emotional commitment to the story and an engagement with the audience. The duke had followed this observation by naming the three elements of good storytelling, namely a raft of colorful details, at least one digression and a surprise ending. At the moment she could remember only the outlines of the duke’s various plots and would therefore be unable to embroider upon them properly. So she decided to follow the duke’s very first rule: “Tell what you know.” Hoping that telling a good story might distract her (and her intruding oaf, for that matter) from the ignominy of her current circumstance (the prickly feeling was bad, wasn’t it), she straightened her spine once again and held her head

up.

“This story comes from my neighborhood of Bloomsbury, Mr. Carter.” She looked at him, level. “Since you hold the deed to the property, you already know where I live with my aunt, do you not?”

He nodded.

“Well, then. It’s a story about Mrs. Martha Johnson who lived around the corner from us on Russell Square. She was a character, with her nose in everyone’s business, a wry sense of humor and a great love for her neighbors and the neighborhood. Do you have anyone like that where you live in Town?”

He appeared to give the question some thought then shook his head.

“Too bad! Anyway, we called her the Mayor of Russell Square, and you could find her at her office, which was in reality a bench in the garden square, summer or winter, clear skies or rain. You could go to her with your problems and, if she couldn’t help you solve them, she would give you either lavish sympathy or an astringent scold, depending on what she thought you needed most.”

She was pleased to see she had his attention and so continued, “Here’s the perfect anecdote to bring her to life for you. A family in our neighborhood, the Smiths, went through a rough patch. First Mr. Smith lost his wife, who was also the mother to his young son, Richard, then struggled in his printing business on Malet Street. Richard, who was nine years old at the time, had the idea that what the neighborhood needed was a Lost & Found, which could be housed for free, mind you, at his father’s shop. Richard persuaded his father to print up flyers announcing that lost objects could be brought to Number Fifteen Malet Street and owners of lost objects could address themselves there, describe their lost items and have them returned, again, free of charge. Robert posted the flyers all around the neighborhood. His father thought him quite mad, but since Robert had so recently lost his mother, Mr. Smith decided to humor him. Can you guess what happened?”

The lift of Mr. Carter’s brows was the only sign to suggest he was surprised she had involved him in the story. “The free Lost & Found brought paying customers to the print shop?”

She smiled and nodded. “It worked a charm, and the business thrived!”

She paused long enough that Mr. Carter was moved to further involvement in the story with the comment, “Enterprising.”

“Marvelously so,” she concurred. “Now we skip ahead ten, no, twelve years, and Richard is engaged to be married. Being the enterprising young man you observed him to be, he finds an apprentice to eventually take over his father’s business, and

because it was his heart's desire to become a publican he also finds a pub for himself to buy on Southampton Row – still in the neighborhood, as you may know. We have an engagement party on the square, arranged by Mrs. Johnson of course, and toasts are made. When it comes to Mrs. Johnson's turn she raises her glass and says,

“Richard, love, you have not one but two great blessings in your life now – your beautiful bride and The Dolphin and Swan – and that is so ... what is the word? ... selfish, I guess.”

“The quip was met with a roar of laughter, of course,” she said, pleased to see Mr. Carter's lips turn up. “She knew just how to poke fun.”

She recalled the duke's insistence on the importance of timing. She let her pause lengthen just enough to lure Mr. Carter into thinking she had finished. He obliged her by saying, “So, it's a amusing story you've chosen to tell.”

She held up her index finger and continued, “During this past winter Mrs. Johnson's health declined abruptly. My aunt brought her soups and such. I brought bouquets of flowers. The whole neighborhood did what it could to make her comfortable. Four months ago she lay in her bed and pleaded with Doctor Mitchum to make her well. The doctor knew her outlook was grim, but he had the sense to ask her what she hoped for. ‘I hope to be at my granddaughter's wedding,’ she replied. ‘Cynthia has planned it beautifully, a May wedding. Such an occasion it will be. I want to be there for her.’”

She knew this was the perfect place for another pause.

Again Mr. Carter obliged by asking, “And did the doctor make her better?”

“It wasn't possible, but he did fulfill Mrs. Johnson's wish.”

“How so?”

“He explained the situation to Cynthia, and Cynthia, the best of all granddaughters, persuaded her fiancé to be wed at Mrs. Johnson's bedside.”

“Truly?”

“Yes, and why not? It was no doubt the most beautiful wedding I have ever attended and I was standing in the hallway outside Mrs. Johnson's bedroom with everyone else who couldn't fit in. The immediate family along with the priest and the wedding couple were at Mrs. Johnson's side, vows were exchanged and afterwards the wedding breakfast was a delight, although it was hardly more than passing pieces of cake in haphazard fashion and tossing misaimed sprigs of rosemary and thyme at the happy couple.”

After a thoughtful moment Mr. Carter said, "It sounds irregular."

"Highly," she admitted readily, "but also wonderful. Not a dry eye in the house. Everyone was crying – with happiness to know that Mrs. Johnson had her wish fulfilled." She twirled her forefinger for dramatic effect and made as if to conclude with, "There you have it."

Mr. Carter said, "You've chosen a tender story, then."

"Well, no. You see, Mrs. Johnson died two days later."

"Ah, a sad story."

"You would think. The funeral was a dismal affair. We all missed our mayor terribly. The weather was cold and foggy, bone-chilling really, and so the burial was even more miserable than the church service. The headstone was already there, shrouded in black cloth, and when the coffin was in the ground, the priest had been instructed to lower the cloth, line by line. The headstone read: Here Lies Martha Cleland Johnson. Died March 27, 1785. She lived each day as if it were her last." She deadpanned, "Especially this one."

Mr. Carter could not prevent a slight snort of appreciation. Then he sat back in his chair and appraised her coolly, his countenance impressively impassive. He looked away for a moment then returned his attention to her and said, "For the next story I'll take it in a single register: sad."

Ah. He knew she had led by him by nose in telling her amusing-tender-sad-amusing story. So, not an oaf! She was suddenly even more acutely aware of her nakedness and the prickly feeling of exposure. She hardly knew where to focus her attention. She took refuge in looking out the windows to her left.

"In that case," she said, risking a glance back at him. "I'll tell you the story of the duke and his son."

Was that a gleam of interest she saw in his eyes? It was hard to tell in the candlelight. He sat completely still and waited for her to begin.

She saw this story as more of a straight line rather than a circle, and so she began at the beginning, "When the son of our mutual friend, his grace, was six years old, he asked, 'Father, when are you going to die so that I can inherit?'"

Mr. Carter blinked then looked wary, perhaps imagining another of her story traps. "You're joking."

"I'm perfectly serious."

“What son would think, much less ask such a thing?”

“His grace’s son, evidently. His grace wouldn’t have minded speaking about the succession with Gareth – I beg your pardon if you’re offended by my familiarity, but the duke and I discussed his son by his Christian name. Well, his grace would have been happy to discuss things with Gareth when he reached his majority, for his grace surely had things he wanted to impart. After all it should be the father who initiates such a discussion and at the appropriate time. Do you not agree, Mr. Carter?”

“I agree, yes, certainly.”

“And your father?”

He smiled. “Still very much alive, and I’m grateful for his presence on this earth every single day. However, since my family story is a happy one and I have requested you tell a sad one, I pray you to continue.”

She passed in mental review the many stories the duke had told her about his strange, unnatural son. “I do believe the duke could have been a loving father. I think he even wanted to be a loving father. However, he came to understand that the father-son bond of love had to be reciprocal and that Gareth had none to give him. A turnip he called him once – well, more than once. He speculated that Gareth was the way he was because he lost his mother when he was two years old. Although his grace never said it outright, I believe the lack of relationship he had with his son was the great tragedy of his life, even more so than losing his beloved wife.”

When she paused – not to draw her listener in but rather to consider what to say next – she became aware of a hint of rain. She glanced again to the windows and saw a clear dusky blue of the evening sky. With a spurt of shock, she realized the moist feeling came from inside the room. With a further spurt of shock she realized her large and rather attractive intruder (no use denying it) was having an *effect*. Was it his smile? She had to check a strong impulse to pull the sheet over her nakedness.

At that moment Mr. Carter opined, “Sad, yes, if that’s the story.”

She quickly tugged her attention back on track. “You see, his grace never did get down to the bottom of the problem with his son, so it’s hard for me to convey it to you. Gareth did everything his father wanted him to do.” She held up her hands. “He was dutiful. He learned to ride respectably. He gave his tutors no problems. When he was sent off to school, he never kicked up a lark or got sent down.”

“His grace was upset by his son’s obedience?”

She shook her head. “It wasn’t that. It was his ... detachment, his grace called it. Of course I never met Gareth, so I have no way of knowing. I do recall his grace saying

he was amazed Gareth had found the gumption – that was his exact word – to marry.” She shrugged. “He also thought his daughter-in-law a perfect ninny, but that’s another story.”

She went on to recount various father-son incidents, all very mild, but somehow annoying to his grace. As she spoke, she began to wonder about Mr. Carter’s relationship to the duke, for he was likely of an age with Gareth. However, his grace had neither mentioned a Mr. Carter nor anyone who might fit his description. She would have to consider how much she wanted to get to know him. Her initial impulse was: not at all.

The twilight sky was now awash with the first ink of night. The birds were bedding down, and their activity brought to mind the duke, since the rustling and chirping had served as the background music for his many stories. Itching to cover herself, to protect herself, she glanced at the clock. Wonderful!

“Time’s up,” she declared.

She drew the sheet up and leaned over to retrieve her book from the bedside table. She pointedly did not look at Mr. Carter when he rose and left the room. When the door closed behind him she stared at the page unable to decipher a single word. An unsettling thought rattled in her brain and jangled through her body: she could not risk being attracted to the man who held the debts to her livelihood and the deed to the roof over her head.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Four

In some disgust she tossed the book aside. Now came the moment to grapple with her grief, for grief it should be. The simple truth was she had grown quite fond of the duke. He was courtly, he was witty and he was knowledgeable. He was also on occasion irascible, but she easily attributed his more testy moods to his declining health. At all times he seemed to be honest in his dealings with her – and maybe even honorable in that he had provided her with a painless (once she became accustomed to it) way of discharging her aunt’s debt. She wanted to mourn his passing now but found the effort difficult. His betrayal – she had no other way to describe his decision to transfer the debts and the deed to Mr. Carter – burned, and only one bewildered thought occupied her mind: How could the duke have done her such a turn? Whatever the answer, the affection she had developed for him over the course of this most unusual year was severely shaken.

She got up and got dressed then made her way down the main staircase. She was relieved, as usual, to see the rooms filling up, for she, unlike her aunt, took nothing for granted. She crossed the foyer to Bruiser, as George Wilkins, her porter, styled himself. He had just ushered in a foursome of young bucks.

She pulled him aside. “You should know that his grace has left this world for the

next, and Mr. Carter is taking his place.”

Bruiser nodded wisely then passed a hand over the stubble on his scalp. “I half-guessed when an unknown man came – Mr. Carter, is it, then? Summed him up in a trice I did, Miss Serena. I couldn’t deny him because he knew the drill, but I didn’t think it right for him to go up the main staircase, so I sent him to the back hallway. He must have let himself out by the back door as well.”

“Well done, Bruiser,” she said, knowing the canny porter was worth every penny she paid him. “In the future send him around outside to enter through the back door and be sure to leave it unlocked for him.”

Bruiser nodded. “And you worried as much, didn’t you, that the old man had stuck his spoon in the wall.”

Although she had not phrased her worry so inelegantly, it was the truth: when his grace had not shown up last week and had not sent a note around, she had a passing thought he might have died. However, she had not actively sought out information on the state of his health. Knowing she had only two payments to go, she figured if he had passed on and a creditor was sent around, she would have scrounged the final tally of twenty pounds ... from somewhere in her budget. In the past year she had forcefully grabbed the reins of her aunt’s run-away extravagances – the extent of which she had sorely underestimated, as it turned out.

“Yes, well,” she said, now taking the plunge, “Mr. Carter will be coming on Thursday, Saturdays and Tuesdays for the next few months.”

She had not had a chance to calculate the exact time period. The full sum of that horror, along with the unhappy conversation she was to have with her aunt, could wait until the morning. She prayed for a mistake.

Bruiser looked justifiably confused. “Next few months? I thought – ”

She held up a hand. “We are perhaps more behindhand than I had reckoned. The good news is, Mr. Carter is willing to continue to discharge the debt in the gentlemanly manner established by his grace.”

“With conversation.” Although Bruiser’s expression was blank, his tone nearly comically blended relief and skepticism.

She had never told anyone – not even her aunt – the full truth of the Thursday appointments. Given the duke’s less than robust health, she had easily sold the half-truth that they engaged in an hour of lively conversation. She reinforced the half-truth now with the comment, “Yes, with conversation. Diana’s has a reputation for being a first-rate gaming house.” What this exclusive gentlemen’s club was not she left delicately unsaid.

Bruiser nodded solemnly, pondering his employer's words. Then, apparently bethinking himself of more important matters, he observed, with a professional air, "Mr. Carter might not be the sharpest dresser, but he would show to advantage in the ring. That he would."

She patted her porter on the shoulder and moved on, leaving him to glory-days dreams of slugging a fellow brute into pulp and having the favor returned. She made her way through the rooms lit with beeswax candles where the members and their guests drank French champagne and dined on Scottish salmon, Belgian peas and Italian cakes and ices. The rooms were appointed in the first stare of fashion with leather chesterfields and upholstered wingbacks alongside mahogany tables and sideboards polished so deeply the objects on top of them appeared to float.

"Only the best!" her aunt had always insisted. It was hard to argue with dear Aunt Diana Patton, whose father had lost all at the gambling table. Fortunately, Aunt Diana had not inherited her father's vice. Instead, she had acquired a shrewd understanding of a hard-bit gambler's habit of mind and knew just how to create a successful gaming establishment.

Unfortunately, the accuracy of her eye and ear for the social niceties contributing to her resounding success was in inverse proportion to her head for numbers. Another sentiment she was fond of uttering was "Let's not fall prey to the false economy of wasting money on inferior products in the short term!" Serena could understand the logic. However, she would have been happier if her aunt had displayed a similarly logical understanding of how to secure financial success in the long term.

At the same time Serena had taken on the job of getting the books in the black she had also largely taken over her aunt's job as hostess. After speaking with Bruiser, she proceeded to circulate among the rooms, greeting the peers of the realm, introducing herself to anyone new, keeping the right blend of warmth and distance her aunt had taught her. Her clothing toed the same line, tasteful and attractive but not in the least provocative. It was generally known that a gentleman went to Diana's for the quality of the play and the custom and then went elsewhere for his birds of paradise.

After several hours and at the moment when the gentlemen had drunk enough for the play to go deep, Serena left the premises and took a hackney to Bloomsbury. Diana's made sure to have on hand men with a talent for cards who were better known on the fringes of society. At this point they came forward to raise the level of play.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next morning Serena entered the sunny dining room to see her Aunt Diana at the head of the breakfast table, picking delicately among the crumbs of a muffin on her plate and sorting through her correspondence. She was wrapped in a charming dressing gown of Chinese silk embroidered with lilies whose muted pastels

perfectly complimented her delicate complexion, still clear and pink even as she approached the age of fifty. Her eyes undimmed shone with the blue of a summer sky. Atop her curls, once guinea bright and now burnished to old gold, sat a confection of lace. "It's at my age, dear," Aunt Diana was known to say, "that one sees the effects of a woman who has cared for her face and body – and one who has not."

"Good morning," Serena said, dropping a kiss on the top of her aunt's head before she slid into her place next to her. She poured herself a cup of hot tea from her aunt's favorite Worchester porcelain pot and selected a pastry from the matching platter beside it.

"Good morning, my dear," Aunt Diana returned, casting her critical eye over Serena's frock. "Rather nice. Is it new?"

*Hardly* was Serena's immediate thought. As calmly as she could, she reminded her pretty but scattered-brained relative, "I made an arrangement last month with Mrs. Simmons to change the piping and embroidery on all my summer gowns that are still serviceable."

Her aunt cocked her head and said lightly, "That's right, my love, I remember now. You and your eternal economies!" She scrutinized Serena's ensemble more closely. "But this is a remade dress I haven't seen before, have I?"

"That's right, you haven't. I chose to wear it today because I'm in need of a fresh start." Before her aunt could irritate her by observing that a *real* fresh start meant an *entirely* new dress, Serena continued, "You see, an unpleasant circumstance came to my notice yesterday evening."

Her aunt pursed her lips. "By 'unpleasant circumstance' you can only be speaking of money."

"Yes, specifically a debt."

Her aunt said swiftly, "Don't look at *me* – not like that anyway. You have put me on such a tight leash that I'm sure I haven't overspent in months! Well, not overspent by much. I can check the ledger you want me to keep, but I'm sure I'm not responsible for any debts worth mentioning."

"No, this is a very large debt, one that would be hard to forget," Serena said, unable to resist adding, "even for you, aunt."

Her aunt sighed and smiled the loveliest of smiles. "What a trial I am to you."

And there it was: her Aunt Diana's charm, like a lazy cat that only had to stretch and purr to create an admirer's desire to pet her.

Serena was not entirely immune to it, and her aunt's ready admission managed to take the edge off Serena's anger. Yet the problem was big enough and glaring enough for her to reply a bit severely, "Yes, indeed, a trial, and I'll ask you to please think of the Duke of Bradford."

Her aunt's lips now turned down. "Did I not hear somewhere that he had died?"

Serena held up her hands. "Well, *that* would have been nice to know!"

"Why do you say it like that?"

"Because you knew he and I had an arrangement to pay off what I thought was your sole outstanding debt to him: all unpaid merchants' accounts from Diana's. And then yesterday evening, someone else shows up in his stead, holding all the documents." She held out frail hope that a mistake had been made concerning the deed. "Now, think. Did you owe the duke anything else?"

Her aunt cocked her head again and said, "I don't know."

Serena spread her arms to embrace their surroundings. "This house. Does that ring a bell?"

Her aunt's eyes widened, and she said, as if to explain matters, "Why, now that you mention it, my dear, I recall he helped me out by assuming the deed *two years ago* already. You can't expect me to have remembered that!"

Serena entirely lost her appetite. The most she could do was to fortify herself with a sip of tea. Then she pressed her hands together at her breast. "Now, please, my dearest, think if there are any other unpleasant surprises lurking behind the bushes ... or in another gentleman's pocket."

Her aunt frowned in concentration but apparently got distracted by a stray thought. "You said someone else showed up last evening. Who?"

"Mr. John Carter."

"Who is that?"

"I have no idea who he is nor even where he's from. I couldn't tell from his speech whether or not he's from London."

"Do you not think you should find out?"

"By searching for a common man with the common name Mr. John Carter?"

"Perhaps he's one of the duke's by-blows."

"I've considered the possibility."

"But ... but ...," her aunt trailed off. She gave her head a shake and then had the decency to look chagrined. "I didn't realize you still had your weekly conversations with the duke. I thought the arrangement must have ended quite a while ago."

It was true Serena had stopped mentioning the meetings after the first few months, and since her aunt circulated less and less, she would not have been aware of the duke's comings and goings on Thursday evenings.

"We were two weeks shy of being quits," Serena informed her. "But now there is matter of the house to contend with."

Her aunt's small gasp indicated she had finally grasped the enormity of the problem. "And - ?"

"Mr. Carter and I will continue under the conditions the duke created to pay off the debt."

Her aunt blinked. "Mr. Carter is old and infirm?"

"Indeed, not. Quite the contrary."

"Conversation is it?" her aunt asked cautiously.

Serena smoothed out an invisible wrinkle in the tablecloth and then proceeded to tell her aunt the details of her arrangement with the duke and the renegotiated arrangement with Mr. Carter.

Her aunt assimilated the news then leaned toward Serena and reached out with both hands to cover one of Serena's. She asked gently, "Are you sorry you came to London?"

Despite Serena's less-than-desirable circumstances, her unequivocal answer was still No. She replied, "There was nothing left for me in Kingston after mother died. It took me a while to realize it."

"How I still miss our Jane," her aunt said of her sister.

"Three years ago already, I can hardly believe it." Serena's soft grunt was thoughtful. "I know you wanted me to make a respectable marriage, which I am unlikely to do as a woman in a gambling hell. But I told you at the time and I'll tell you again: your invitation two years ago saved me from accepting the respectable offer I received from the most hideous Squire Stanley, which I was seriously considering!"

“No marriage is better than an unwanted one. When my Henry died, I had other prospects” – here her aunt shook her head – “but no.”

“And now I think you were moved to invite me out of desperation. Was it around that time you were drowning in enough red ink to be pulled out of the River Tick by signing the deed to the house over to the duke?”

Her aunt frowned in concentration. “Quite possibly! I do remember Jane’s repeated assertions from your childhood that you were good with numbers.”

Serena arched a brow. “And then conveniently forgot the reason for your need for someone with a head on her shoulders?”

“Not *conveniently*, dear,” her aunt objected. “It’s just so ... unpleasant to dwell on unpleasant things. It’s a practical matter, really. As a hostess if my mind is consumed with worries then how can I make my paying guests feel comfortable? They are the ones who keep Diana’s doors open.”

Serena perceived the strategic advantage in her aunt’s flightiness but chafed to be the one to bear the uncomfortable consequences of it. A verse from Exodus came inevitably to mind: *The sins of the father will be visited on the children to the third and fourth generations*. Serena’s grandfather had gambled away the family’s good name and fortune. His daughter had built a thriving business built on his vice but couldn’t face financial realities. His granddaughter, in a position to right the economic ship, now hoped to mitigate whatever lingering sin would taint the third generation – if there was to be one, which at her age was looking ever less likely.

Accepting her lot in the family tragedy, she said, “Better to be bared to a stranger than to share a marriage bed with a toad.”

“The lesser of the two evils,” her aunt agreed and left it at that.

Serena wondered, not for the first time, what her aunt might have had to do to survive in this man’s world after Uncle Henry died a good fifteen years ago. More unpleasantness easily sloughed from memory? No doubt. For her part, Serena consoled herself with the thought that a disagreeable marriage to Squire Stanley would have been a form of prostitution – respectable, of course, but prostitution all the same. At least Mr. Carter respected her virtue and left her –

No, better not to think of him at all.

Serena put her free hand atop her aunt’s clasp in forgiveness. Then they unclasped hands, and Serena’s appetite returned.

\*\*\*\*\*

Serena was appalled to discover how quickly the clock ticked toward seven-thirty on Saturday, the minute hand acting like a hurried tradesman leaning forward as he

rushed down the street. She was equally appalled to discover how her dread of being naked before a vital man for the space of an hour did not wholly transform itself into squirming, humiliating embarrassment during it. She was not wholly happy about her circumstance and yet she began to wonder whether a part of her thrilled to her display of chaste nudity.

She had prepared a variety of stories in hopes of a bit of the welcome distraction they had provided her first time around. She had also prepared another small distraction for him: a full pitcher and a glass she had set up on a small table beside his chair.

Mr. Carter entered, gave her a brief bow and, naturally enough, noticed the new arrangement the moment he sat down. He looked at her in inquiry.

"It's for you," she said. "The duke liked to whet his whistle, as he would say, and I thought you too would like something, although I'm the one telling the stories."

He poured himself a glass, took a sip and pronounced, "Lemonade."

She did not mention she had provided the duke with whiskey. Neither did Mr. Carter comment on her tame selection of drink. Instead, he took another sip and said, "Refreshing." He gave a small nod in deference to her. "Almost as refreshing as one of your stories."

"What kind would you like?"

"Your choice," he said with a smile and sat back.

On the one hand she was pleased to see her Audience of One was, by turns, amused or touched or surprised as her stories invited. On the other his presence, on this second occasion, had come to puzzle her. Mid-way through the hour she noticed he took his attention off her and she felt herself calm down. At this point her thoughts turned away from her half-embarrassment-half-stimulation and toward his motives for accepting the duke's rather mild conditions for easing an enormous debt.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Five

Carter had also prepared for Saturday night, but in a different way. On Friday morning he firmly put aside the visual titillation of the night before. It helped that the Widow Russell had chosen him to comfort her in her loneliness and had given him the wink when he and Hartwell had dined at her establishment on Thursday. Thus, instead of wasting time at the Magistrates' Court lost in unfulfilled erotic fantasies, he applied himself to transcribing as faithfully as he could every word the duke had said on his deathbed, even what he could of the mumbling.

When he managed to get the skeleton of the conversation down on paper, he turned

his attention to the latest issue of *The Hue and Cry*, the gazette containing details of crimes and wanted people he and his fellow detectives regularly consulted. He discussed various cases with a few of his cronies and chose one to investigate, pausing every now and then to add to his transcript another of the duke's utterances his memory called forth. By the end of the day he had made headway on a break-in in Cheapside, brought in two pickpockets and completed the duke's deathbed dialogue to the best of his ability.

The duke could have willed him anything and had chosen this most unusual bequest. His detective's best sense told him there was a reason, and he would not be satisfied until he discovered it.

On Saturday evening he let her tell him the stories she wanted. He listened appreciatively but also attentively, hoping to hear anything about almost anything that would justify the duke bringing a Bow Street detective into this alluring picture. He heard nothing. However, he sensed enough of his pretty storyteller's delicate constraint in her situation to, afterwards, make discreet inquiries into the nature of Diana's and just who his pretty storyteller might be. She had revealed little about herself beyond what she couldn't help, namely her beautiful body and proper accent.

By Tuesday afternoon he had investigated the tax records of the gambling hell at the corner of Bourdon Street and Grosvenor Hill, had discovered the identity of Mrs. Diana Patton and the death certificate of Mr. Henry Patton as well as the name of Miss Serena Marsh about whom he found a string leading to Kingston upon Thames.

When he entered the Rose Room at Diana's on Tuesday evening he bowed slightly and took his chair. He poured himself a glass of lemonade and then looked not across to her but up. He remained still and let the atmosphere in the room settle. Without taking his eyes off the ceiling, he said, "I like best the stories you tell about the duke."

He heard her stir slightly. "I'm afraid I might run out of those before the hour is up. I've already told you most of what I know about him personally."

He glanced at her before glancing away again. "That's all right. Any story will do. I knew him one way. You knew him another. I'd like a fuller picture."

He looked back at her and saw her struggle to mask her curiosity about him. However, he had already noted her determination to ask him nothing about himself, and, happily, it served his purposes. He didn't want her to know who he was or what he was about – not yet, anyway. People who didn't realize they knew valuable information about a case were more likely to reveal it if they weren't trying to tell a detective what they thought he wanted to hear.

On Saturday evening, mid-way through the hour, he had begun to notice her

breathing patterns. Although she had been doing her best to hide her emotions, her breathing had indicated she was struggling in a way she likely had not with the duke, and so he had looked away from her. On this Tuesday evening he decided to look at her a little as possible so that she might relax and remember something of importance. He trained his gaze on the bedside table to her left. It was difficult, of course, to keep his eyes off of her. Since Thursday her beautiful breasts with nipples of palest pink had begun to haunt his dreams at night despite the Widow Russell's most flexible efforts to make herself the focus of his attention.

After a moment's reflection she said, "His grace was more interested in relating escapades concerning his friends and acquaintances. You know, colorful stories of the hunt, backstage gossip at the theater or a dust-up at one or the other of his gentlemen's clubs."

Carter made an educated guess. "White's and Brook's."

"That's right." Out of the corner of his eye he saw her lift a pretty shoulder. "He was very middle-of-the-road, I suppose you could say, especially for a duke. He was a decent enough horseman, so I gathered, but he was by no means horse mad or interested in trading horseflesh. That's why his stories were of other people, a flashy rider to the hounds making a spectacular jump over a high hedge only to take a dunking in a stream on the other side. That kind of thing."

"That's already something, isn't it? If he was able to tell the stories, he must have had some involvement in them, if only as a spectator, no?"

"That's true." She began to recount desultory stories, none of which ended up leading him anywhere.

When he thought they had wasted enough valuable time, he asked, "Did he ever tell you anything about a letter?"

"Not that I recall. I'm sure he had correspondents but I wouldn't know whom. His solicitor, at least."

"All right." He took a stab in the dark. "Did he ever tell you a story about a land deal going bad or other transfer of property?"

She considered the question. "No. He tended to his estates, diligently I would say. I had the impression his staff was well trained and loyal. I'm sure he treated his tenants well, and they appreciated him."

Carter tried another angle. "He must have been a fine card player to have belonged to your club."

"We pride ourselves, Mr. Carter, in the quality of play and therefore attract the best

players.” She paused then said, “His grace was a member since my aunt opened Diana’s twenty years ago, making him a charter member. He said he didn’t mind losing to a better player when he himself was playing at the top of his game. However, in recent years he played less, only because he felt some of his skills were slipping. Then this past year ....”

Carter inferred the duke had ceased playing all together and had given himself over to reminiscing in the presence of Miss Marsh’s abundant charms.

“I see,” he said, taking care to hide any trace of disappointment in his lines of inquiry. “Everything you say fits with my impression of the man, so perhaps there is nothing further for me to learn about him.” He said, “I’d be happy to hear one of the stories from your neighborhood. You have a remarkably lively one.”

“Oh!” she said suddenly. “I just remembered. Here’s a good one about his grace. Very out of character for him – or, at least, very out of character for the man we knew.”

He met her gaze then looked quickly away. “Ah?” he queried lightly.

“It happened when he was a young man. Oh, let me see. It’s a very good story and I don’t want to muff it.” She took several moments to organize her thoughts and then launched into the story of the duke’s wife’s family who was related to the Romanovs, the royal family of Russia. “‘Imagine my Clara,’ his grace told me, ‘a cousin of the Empress Catherine!’”

“Impressive,” Carter commented, wondering why she hadn’t thought of this dramatic detail before.

She was evidently wondering the same thing because she said, “I suppose it took me this long to think of it because I was concentrating so hard trying to answer your questions. And it’s strange, too, now that I’ve come to think of it, that he told me this story within the last few weeks.” She added, on a pensive note, “It was, in fact, the very last time he came here.”

Carter took due note.

“It totally slipped my mind,” she said, “and it’s a wonder because I was so entranced by his story, you see. It involves a locket.”

Now she had his full attention. The duke’s mention of a locket and his exclamation of “My beautiful Clara!” had been the very last items Carter had added to his deathbed transcript. He loved the feeling of being a hound on the scent almost as much as he enjoyed beholding a naked beauty.

“A valuable locket, in fact, crafted by a German silver master who worked in Moscow at the end of the last century. As was the custom his initials were stamped on the

back: J.C.G. J. Now let me get this right.... Yes, Johann Caspar Gottlieb Jaeger, if you please! It was a most extraordinary locket, diamond and ruby encrusted, worth a fortune!"

"Did he tell you what was in it?"

"Yes, their wedding portrait on one side and Gareth's baby portrait on the other."

"That makes sense."

"But now here comes the twist. You and I knew the duke when he was steady in his judgments, sober even. In his younger days it seems he was more of a hothead. Well, not a hothead precisely but maybe more reckless or boastful ... I'm not sure how to characterize him."

Carter's hum of interest encouraged her to continue.

"He and Clara had been married a year and a half, Gareth was an infant, and his grace was undoubtedly a proud husband and father. He was playing cards at White's with a group of gentlemen. One was Lord Goddard who had once been a fierce rival for Clara's affections. His grace held a particularly strong hand. In an act of bravado he raised the stakes by placing the locket in the middle of the table. All the other gentlemen folded but not Lord Goddard. For the next few moments the locket's gems glittered in the candlelight, winking with the duke's wealth and mocking the man who had lost Clara's hand."

She paused. He was fascinated.

"Then Lord Goddard laid down his cards. The duke had to swallow his gasp. The two men exchanged a glance, and Lord Goddard must have read the outcome in the duke's eyes, because he reached out for the locket, pocketed it and then sauntered out of the room."

Carter took it all in and clearly saw what his next moves should be. But first he made a mental note of an investigative lesson he had just learned. Then he identified the postscript to her story, "And Lord Goddard has been in possession of the locket ever since."

"As to that, his grace didn't know," she replied.

"And is Lord Goddard still alive?"

"No," she said then added offhand, "His son is a member here, though. I see him rather regularly. He's keen on cards and only plays with the best."

Carter needed a moment to think things through. He stalled by asking, "I imagine the

duke's wife was rather unhappy with this episode."

She actually laughed. "I suppose so, but the duke didn't mention anything about the aftermath, and I was so amazed by his action that I failed to ask! Can you credit his grace doing such an outrageous thing?"

Carter chuckled. "Young men are not known for even temper."

She made an undisguised sound of disgust. Then, pulling the sheet up, she announced, "Time's up."

He said quickly, "I want to improve my card playing skills, and I'm willing to renegotiate our terms, trading an hour of your time here for an hour at the tables. Do you know how to play?"

She blinked as if shocked, but she replied coolly enough, "Of course, I know how to play. It's a professional necessity. So. Are you suggesting we start on Thursday?"

"Yes, Thursday."

"What's your preference? Euchre, Ombre, Whist, Lanterloo?"

"Several of the fellows on Bow Street are mad after 'Loo and faro, so I've played a fair amount of those. Of the others, very little."

She quirked her brows. "Come to the back door at one o'clock." She reached for her book.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Six

Strangely the clock misbehaved in the other direction. Instead of rushing ahead to Thursday at one o'clock, the minute hand dawdled, seemingly content to gaze at the flowers along its path.

To say she had become intrigued by Mr. Carter was an understatement. Nothing he had done thus far made sense to her. On Thursday evening she had been so surprised – and vexed and ashamed and every other scratchy emotion – by the turn of events that she had not been able to fully grasp the reason why a man, by all appearances a commoner, would snap his fingers at twenty pounds and instead take the privilege of ogling her naked. She hardly rated her charms so high. She did not know what line of work Mr. Carter was in, but if he were a footman, twenty pounds might amount to half his annual salary – maybe a third if he worked in a grand house. He did not, however, strike her as a servant. And there was the further mystery of his disinterest in taking possession of the house on Bedford Square. Such a property had to represent a windfall for him, if ever there was one.

Thus far he had made no suggestive remarks, as the duke had done, albeit wistfully, on occasion. She could tell he enjoyed her nakedness, but now he was willing to trade away that pleasure in order to improve his card playing skills? Good heavens, she wasn't feeling disappointment on that score, was she?

Thursday morning she awoke wondering what she should wear for him. Her very next thought struck the first one from the record. It didn't matter. She didn't care. The matter of her toilette was of no consequence. None whatsoever. She had no reason to spare even one second –

She broke off further protestation, threw the covers back and went to her wardrobe to contemplate her choices. How was a woman to dress for a man who had only ever seen her naked? Maybe the particular dress didn't matter, but she could not fool herself she didn't care. She wanted to show him that she was ... what? Not the woman he thought she was, because how could he think of her as anything but a doxy?

She reached for a gown of creamy peach with leaf green embroidery at the neck and hem whose short puffed sleeves showed her arms to advantage. Then, with a flush, she remembered he had seen all of her arms and more. She opted instead for a sprigged muslin with long sleeves whose virginal white could speak for itself.

\*\*\*\*\*

She thought she was prepared to meet him face to face and in the daylight, and she imagined the encounter would be an awkward one. However, the moment he entered the back hallway and immediately filled the space she realized she had underestimated both his size and attractiveness, for she had seen him only in shadows and at a bit of distance. Standing not two feet away from him now she was struck by his presence, which was the combined effect of the muscle that had drawn Bruiser's praise and his easy carriage, which bespoke a certain confidence. He wore his own hair, of course, which was thick and chestnut and pulled back into a queue. She found the gray at his temples an unexpected touch of elegance. His eyes were warm hazel and his lips well cut, as were his cheekbones and chin. His nose was strong and distinctive. He looked absolutely nothing like the Fourth Duke of Bradford.

"No, no relation," he said, by way of greeting. "I am my father's son."

Her mouth fell open.

"What else could you be thinking?" he asked reasonably. "The duke bequeathed me what I can only describe as a small fortune. The possibility of a relationship between us would occur to anyone."

"He had no responsibility for you whatsoever?"

"None."

“Then ... why?”

“I had no idea at first, but my best guess now is that he wants me to retrieve the locket. Once that’s done I’ll go from there.”

Her head started spinning. “But – ?” she began. However, not quite knowing how to finish her thought, she was able only to gesture weakly back and forth between them.

“Ah. Your role? You’re the one who told me what to search for, and you have the means to further help me. You’re clearly the key.”

She felt a spurt of anger and a surge of outrage. She could have told him the story of the locket with all her clothes on. But she couldn’t blame her embarrassment on the big handsome man standing in front of her. Or could she?

She said with all the dignity she could muster, “If it’s principally the retrieval of the locket at issue, I highly doubt the duke meant for you to continue his arrangement with me in the manner he had established.”

He answered with spurious innocence, “A debt’s a debt.”

She felt something crackle between them, a break in the atmosphere, another hint of moisture in the air, stronger now, presaging a summer shower. It was only then she became aware that the encounter had begun so strangely there had been no room for awkwardness. She felt a touch of it now and was at a momentary loss to know what to do. She pulled herself together and realized he was still standing on the threshold.

“I suppose I should say Good Afternoon to you,” she said half-turning away from him, “and invite you in.”

“Good Afternoon, and thank you,” he said with a half-bow.

She led him to a snug corner parlor, which she had turned into her office. Earlier she had raised the blinds and opened both the side and back windows, and thus the space was swimming peacefully in sunlight and fresh air. For the purposes of the card lesson she had pulled the table she used as her desk into the center and surrounded it with four chairs, two of which she had fetched from another room. A pitcher of lemonade and a plate of cakes sat atop a cabinet she used for filing financial records.

The few steps to the room had helped her steady her thoughts. She gestured to his place to her left at the table and explained, “If we get as far as Euchre today, you and I will be in opposing partnerships.” She then asked, “So you didn’t know the duke at

all?"

"He knew my family, yes, but that's not why he passed the particular documents on to me, I'm thinking."

"Well, then, why?"

"Because I'm a detective."

"Detective," she repeated, not quite understanding what he might mean.

"I follow clues to find stolen property and missing persons. I've even solved a murder or two."

At that moment the two men who were to complete their foursome entered the room. They were among those talented card players Diana's kept employed to assure rigorous late-night play. Serena had told the pair the late Duke of Bradford had requested their help in teaching Mr. Carter and had left a sum of money with which to pay them. These men stayed strictly in the front rooms and never ventured into the back, but under these, abnormal circumstances, Serena thought it best to play here, in case any members decided to drift in early. Bruiser, who was family metaphorically speaking, was the only one who knew of Mr. Carter's comings and goings three evenings a week.

One of them looked the large man up and down and held out his hand. "Lucius Parker. Did I correctly overhear you to say you're a Bow Street runner?"

Her guest accepted the proffered hand. "John Carter," he reciprocated and corrected mildly, "We prefer the term 'detective'."

Serena introduced him to Marcus Williams and when they were all seated, Lucius to her right and Marcus across from her, Lucius tossed a well-thumbed pamphlet onto the table.

"I thought you might like to borrow this," he said to Mr. Carter.

Her guest picked it up and read aloud, "*A Short Treatise on the Game of Whist* by Edmond Hoyle." He opened it and browsed through the first few pages.

"Read it, memorize it," Lucius recommended. "If an irregularity in play crops up and if you can correctly recite the rule 'according to Hoyle' you'll score points both on the tally and in prestige."

Mr. Carter thanked him kindly and slipped the pamphlet into his jacket. "I'll be sure and return it to you in due time."

Lucius produced a pack of cards and explained the procedures for shuffling, cutting, dealing and scoring. After completing the opening rituals, which included some shuffling flourishes, he expertly flicked the cards to the players and said, "We're starting with Whist, a trick-taking game like 'Loo, which I'm told you already know. The basic rules are simple enough, and I'll explain them to you as we go. In the meantime, Mr. Detective, tell us why you want to improve your skills."

"To help solve a case I'm currently working on."

"And what case is that?"

"I need to retrieve an object from someone and figure to gamble him for it. More I'm not at liberty to say. When the case is closed, I'll be happy to tell you the details."

Lucius accepted the mild rebuff and finished his deal.

Serena picked up her cards and assessed her hand.

Mr. Carter picked up his cards. "The fact is, I want to buy a membership to Diana's, and I understand I'll need to be on my toes here."

Lucius whistled. "I wouldn't have taken you for foolhardy and, begging your pardon, I wouldn't have taken you for a man who can afford the fees. They're as steep as the play is sharp." He then explained a few of the rules of Whist, which included the process for establishing trumps and taking tricks, and then he recorded the number each player bid.

Serena, seated to the left of the dealer, played the first card and led with the Queen of diamonds.

The turn of play being clockwise, Mr. Carter, to her left, placed an eight of diamonds next to hers and said, casually, "I have an account I can draw down for the membership fees."

Serena stared at her cards and hoped that neither Lucius nor Marcus would notice the heat she felt creep up her chest and neck to her face. Since arriving hardly ten minutes before, Mr. Carter had not stopped throwing her thoughts into a whirl, first surprising her with his profession then with his ability to read, although she had already determined he was an uncommon commoner. He was now astounding her with his audacity to aspire to a membership, to leverage the fee through the deed to her aunt's house and to gamble Lord Goddard for the locket. She should have been happy to have such an easy way to cross off a hefty chunk of debt, but she was too much off balance – was it his proximity, God forbid?! – to do more than concentrate on the play at hand. She did not want to embarrass herself with flubs and sluffs. She needed to concentrate.

She took the trick, as she knew she would, and led again.

The play continued. Mr. Carter quickly got the hang of it but had a lot to learn. On his deal, she trumped his lead, prompting him to comment, "I would not have guessed, Miss Marsh, you held no clubs."

Although she took the trick, he had surprised her yet again by addressing her by name. She looked at him, a slight arch to one brow.

He met her gaze. His smile was languid. "Detective skills, Miss Marsh. Detective skills."

Fine detective skills did not prevent Mr. Carter from finishing in last place after the first round. According to his own, correct estimation, he had continually underrated the strength of his hands. He remained unperturbed in the face of defeat and was comfortable enough with the game to continue with easy conversation in the next round.

Marcus was a quiet one, generally judged by Diana's clientele as a "still water" and a very fine, consistent player. Lucius was a bit more uneven but he had flair and liked to press his advantages. Serena wouldn't have been surprised to learn that in Lucius's spare time he made a side living as a card sharp.

Once the cards had been dealt she felt brave enough to venture more personal conversation. Perhaps it helped that she was fully clothed. "I'm sure we'd all be interested to know, Mr. Carter," she said leading the hand and the topic, "whether you're able to catch every man – or woman, I imagine! – you go after."

"Most," he replied but not in a boastful way, "because the wrong-doers, thinking themselves clever, usually resort to tricks well known in the Magistrates' Court."

"Is that so?" she asked.

"You may have heard the story of Miss Roberts last year. It ran in the *Times* once we solved the case. She desired to rid herself of her debts by marriage yet shrank from the burden of being someone's wife. So her bridegroom was a woman dressed as a man, who called herself Jack Harris, Gentleman. Of course, Miss Roberts thought her creditors could look for Jack Harris, Gentleman for as long as they pleased. Well. One of her creditors eventually made his way to our doors." He glanced around the table. "We immediately suspected an irregular wedding in the Liberty of the Fleet."

"A Fleet wedding," Lucius piped up. "Of course!"

"So we investigated and, sure enough, we tracked Jack Harris back to a Susannah Fleming who naturally gave up the whereabouts of Miss Roberts, seeing as it was in Miss Fleming's best interest to do so."

“What happened to Miss Roberts?” Serena wanted to know.

“I never met with her, but by all reports she was as manipulative as she was beautiful, and she relieved herself of her debts by transferring them to the fool of a man she duped into marrying her, this time legally.”

Serena was impressed. Mr. Carter was something of a storyteller himself. He concluded, “So, most but not all, Miss Marsh.”

She felt bold enough to press the point. “If I were to pursue a career on the shady side of the law, where would I have the most chance of eluding you?”

Mr. Carter laughed at the impudence of her question. “Don’t bother being a pickpocket in Covent Garden. Although you, ma’am, do not have the usual profile of the cutpurse, I have an eye for them and pick up any number of them every week, mostly men but a few women as well. It could be my full-time job, but I prefer more interesting cases.”

“All right,” Serena said. “Pickpocketing is off my list.”

“Foot pads are vile creatures, also easily spotted. So if I were you I’d become a highwayman.”

Serena raised her brows. “A female highwayman? Intriguing thought!”

“I’ve heard tell of one or two. A hat pulled down low and a scarf over the lower half of your face would do the trick. You’d also need a horse.”

“And some kind of fire arm, too, I suppose.”

“Yes, but unloaded. First, bullets are expensive. Second, loaded pistols are dangerous. Third, simply brandishing about a pistol is effective. No one is going to risk discovering if you’ve loaded it or not. Then, too, you have the further protection of a mask.”

Serena considered the merits of being a highwayman. “If you pick the right carriage – one with crests, for instance – a duchess’s broach could bring in enough cash to last a household a good while.”

“That’s the dandy, Miss Marsh,” Mr. Carter approved. “You’ll be further interested to know that most of us detectives are less sympathetic to rich women who lose valuable jewelry at the hands of highwaymen, and so we’re less motivated to waste man hours tracking down objects that should not have been worn on our dangerous thoroughfares in the first place.”

She was also able to perceive a flaw in the occupation. "It does seem like quite a lot of work, being a highwayman. Racing after carriages, holding people up, demanding their jewelry."

"There is that," Mr. Carter agreed, "plus there's the further problem that if I was to learn of a spate of highway robberies in the next few weeks, your door would be the first one on which I would knock."

"In that case," she said mock-seriously, "I should enlist Lucius to do the heavy work on the highway, while I pursue the more gentle work of finding a fence for the jewelry."

Lucius laughed appreciatively. "It's tempting, and a fine pair we'd make, Miss Serena, but" – here he turned toward Mr. Carter – "I'll have no time for thieving over the next few weeks getting you up to snuff for Diana's, Mr. Detective." He ran his eye over Mr. Carter's attire. "And my efforts will include getting you a better frock coat. Rule Number One of the fine card player: Never look like a gull available for a plucking. You'll quickly get a bad reputation when you win. Number Two: Never overdress. No flashy pins and rings!"

"I don't own any," Mr. Carter admitted, "so I'm safe."

Lucius ran his eye over Mr. Carter's plain dress. "Not a flash type, are you? Wouldn't suit. At least proper clothing is something money can buy while card sense isn't – and it seems you have your share of it, although it needs honing."

They broke for cake and lemonade, the latter declined by Lucius who declared the stuff "undrinkable." He then explained the rudiments of Euchre, another trick-tame game with opposing pairs of players. They played on until Lucius and Marcus said it was time they left for the front rooms where some of the "geezers," as they phrased it, were sure to have arrived and would be demanding their attention. They praised their pupil for the improvement in his play over only a couple of hours and departed.

Serena led Mr. Carter to the back door. "I hope you found the lesson profitable," she ventured.

"Profitable and enjoyable," he acknowledged then added with an attractive gleam in the depths of his gold-green eyes, "I'll explain more about the locket on Saturday evening, when we have the leisure to discuss it at length." He gave her one of his half-bows and said, "Until then" and left.

She stood stunned, rooted in place. What was that look he had just given her? And what was her response to it? For she had felt something, there was no denying it. Perhaps her reaction was simply the result of being seated next to him, in close proximity, for so long. But she had sat next to Lucius for the same amount of time

and had felt nothing. She simply couldn't – no, it was impossible – did she actually have ... no, really ... a sense of anticipation, of excitement with no lingering embarrassment? The feeling was so alien she had no idea how to answer the question.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Seven

The cursed minute hand had turned into that strange animal from Australia she had recently heard about. A kangaroo. It sat there on the clock face, doing absolutely nothing, stretching out sixty long seconds as if it were an even longer hour. Then, with no warning, it sprang into action and dissolved an afternoon into a blink of an eye.

Jumpy, that's what she was, and disoriented. She didn't know where to land, emotionally speaking, with her two feet on the ground. Did she wish for seven-thirty on Saturday to come speeding around? Or did she wish for the earth to open up and swallow her – no, him – whole? She couldn't stop thinking of the few hours she had sat next to him, playing cards, the both of them acting as if everything was normal. Of course she would not let on to Lucius or Marcus anything about the strange relationship she had with Mr. Carter, and he, gentlemanly commoner, had treated her with respect. If anything, she suspected he would have defended her honor if Lucius, for instance, had become impertinent. In fact, she suspected Mr. Carter had acted as a deterrent to Lucius's cheekiness, which was occasionally aimed her way when she presided over the front rooms in the evenings. She did, however, catch Mr. Carter once glancing at her dress, his gaze lingering a brief second at the modest neckline. Had he sneaked more than one peek?

Eventually the kangaroo minute hand hopped again and landed on seven-thirty on Saturday evening. Serena was ready, which was to say naked, and seated with her legs arranged as modestly as possible. She had chosen to light a branch with three candles and to set it on the dresser. On the three previous occasions the single candle on the bedside table had illuminated mostly her. She now wanted a clearer view of her visitor.

He arrived on the dot. He entered and naturally noticed the difference in the lighting, which he indicated by a lift of his brows as he looked around. Evidently interpreting her change in staging as an opportunity for further change, he asked before seating himself, "Do I have your permission to shed my jacket? It's a rather warm evening, and I've had it on nearly all day."

She held out her hand, palm up, in a be-my-guest gesture.

He shrugged out of his coat and tossed it somewhat absently over the back of his chair. Then he loosened the stock at his neck, rolled up his sleeves, poured himself a glass of lemonade and got comfortable. Now seated and relaxed, he looked for all the world like a man at the end of his workday who had found his favorite booth in the

pub. He propped an elbow on the armrest, put his chin in his hand and looked into the middle distance at nothing in particular.

The momentary silence that fell was – dare she say? – companionable? At least it was not uncomfortable. She felt exposed, naturally enough, but the prickly feeling was thankfully gone.

“Did you catch any pickpockets today?” she asked.

“One, this morning,” he answered, straightening up. “It’s too easy.”

“Really?”

He wriggled his fingers at the side of his face. “I can always see something in their eyes. A furtive glance accompanied by a too-practiced jostling of the mark’s shoulder. It leaps out as me as I stroll the squares and markets.”

“Do you ever get reward money from the person whose belongings you return?”

He shook his head. “No need. Sir John has found a way for the city to pay us a salary, making incidental crime solving part of the job.”

“Sir John?”

He looked at her then, directly. “Remarkable man, Sir John Fielding. His older half-brother, a magistrate, founded Bow Street by turning his house into what has become our station. Henry Fielding it was.”

“The novelist?”

He frowned, as if searching a memory. “Maybe.” Then his brow lightened. “Anyway, Sir John is responsible for clearing London of the street gangs that used to plague the city. The night watchmen were ineffective, as you’re of an age to remember, and Sir John, with his excellent nose for information – we call him, affectionately, the Blind Beak of Bow Street – assembled a team of the best constables in town and recruited others, such as myself.”

“He’s blind? Truly?”

He nodded. “He had an accident at the age of nineteen and lost his sight. But that didn’t prevent him from starting an insurance company, learning the law and becoming a magistrate in his own right, all the while still able to solve cases.”

“That’s a very good story, Mr. Carter,” she said. “It seems it’s your night to tell them.”

His answering smile was really very attractive, she had to admit and not for the first

time. It softened him. "Tales of crime and the just application of the law make for endless entertainment, I can only agree. But I don't want to steal your thunder."

She could not help herself. "Or the ten pounds a week my stories represent."

He shrugged.

"And anyway on Thursday you told me you'd explain about the locket tonight."

"I'll get to it. There's no hurry."

"No, seriously, Mr. Carter. I do not understand this arrangement."

He took his time while his gaze roamed over her body. "What do you not understand?"

She ignored the feeling his gaze awakened in her. "Surely a detective who is bequeathed a document by which he could reasonably expect to receive an easy twenty pounds would want the money, to say nothing of suddenly inheriting an entire house but then leveraging it to buy gaming privileges in an exclusive club. Would you like to know the exact figure of the membership fee?"

"I discovered it on Monday before I mentioned the draw down."

She must have betrayed her surprise because the look he gave her was an exceptionally lazy one. She held up a hand. "Your good detective skills, I assume?"

He nodded. "I've found out a lot since last Thursday, Miss Marsh."

She had the strong suspicion he was referring to her. Or Diana's. Or both. Thus far she had led a blameless life, so she wasn't worried he had found she personally had run afoul of the law. However, she had been less attentive to the nuisance of taxes and licenses and the like, but there was only so much she could worry about at once. At the moment she was frankly curious what he had learned about her and how he interpreted it.

"Again, Mr. Carter, your actions are not ...." she trailed off, a suitable description just of out reach.

"Not what?" he challenged.

"Not *usual*," she said with a feeling of having found the right word.

After a moment he said, "When I was growing up, here is how my father explained to me how he decided to do whatever he did. He would ask himself, 'How will I justify my actions to John?' For me it's, 'How will I justify my actions to Thomas?'"

She put a hand at her breast. "Your son."

"That's right. How I dealt with the deed to your house was easy. What will happen when I bring Thomas to Bedford Square and say, 'Look, son, at our new house'? It is reasonable for him to ask how I acquired it. It is also reasonable for him to ask what happened to the people who lived in it before it was bequeathed to me."

She was surprised and impressed with his sense of justice.

"Furthermore, the house itself wasn't bequeathed to me," he continued, "the debt to it was, making it even less of mine to take."

"Well, you still could have demanded the twenty pounds of what was left of the debt from the unpaid tradesmen's bills."

He laughed. "Do you not realize, Miss Marsh, how much I am enjoying myself?" He paused then added, "Immensely."

She let her forehead fall to her upraised palm in embarrassment, not the stinging socially unpleasant kind, rather the pleasant feeling of being flattered. Quickly moving on, she asked, "Is Thomas of an age where he still lives with you?"

"He's sixteen, so yes. However at the moment he's in Hartsfield helping his granddad tend the land and being spoiled rotten by his nanny."

She reviewed the mix of vowels she heard in his speech and understood. "That must be Surrey."

"It is. Our hamlet is at the foot of the hill atop which sits Bradford Manor."

She was dying to ask about Thomas's mother but refused to play that card of curiosity. Instead, she said, "Oh, so that's how the duke knew of your family. Did he pay you particular interest?"

He held up his hands. "Not in a way that caught my attention as I was growing up. The old folk in the hamlet used to tell us stories about how the duke, when he was a boy, came around and wanted to learn about everything from plowing to milling. But when he married his interest stopped, and that would have been around the time I was born. We'd see him ride through, for we were on his route to London. He might have waved to us, but he never stopped to speak."

She absorbed this strange new information. "Have we come now to the story of the locket?"

"I suppose we have. Almost from the first I've suspected my involvement was not

about your debt.”

“My aunt’s debt,” she corrected.

“Oh?” He gave a nod in consideration of this new information. “In any case, I believe the duke was using the debt as a means to an end, one requiring my participation. Perhaps, when you’ve heard the story, you’ll have a new insight into his motives, one I have not yet considered.”

He then recounted the deathbed scene. Every now and then she asked for clarification but in general he was in sufficient command of the details to offer a fluent account. Her attention snagged when the duke asked about Mr. Carter’s wife and was informed of her death. Overall she saw why he initially thought his purpose at the duke’s bedside was to provide a spur for his memories of Hartsfield, but then when the envelope came into play, it became clear the duke had wanted to set in motion something he had not been of sound enough mind to make fully explicit.

“It’s the *Carry it through*,” Mr. Carter said at the end of the recital, “that’s been in my thoughts this past week.”

She nodded. “A deathbed promise you’re loathe to break, I understand.”

“Since hearing your stories on Tuesday the only reasonable course of action that has occurred to me is to retrieve the locket and present it to the Fifth Duke. Perhaps I’m meant to return a piece of his mother to him, since he lost her at such a young age. Perhaps the duke thought it might be a way to reconcile with his son from the grave.”

She was forming a clearer picture of Mr. Carter’s motives and a foggier one of the duke’s, which had already been plenty obscure from the moment Mr. Carter entered the Rose Room last Thursday.

“Perhaps the Fifth Duke will reward you for the return of the locket!” she said brightly.

“Miss Marsh,” he said in admonishing tones, “here’s a piece of professional advice. When you are trying to solve a case, never anticipate a payoff. Such thinking gets in the way of a sober review of the facts and of the actions you should take as a result of the review.”

With great civility she said, “I am chastened.”

He chuckled. “And since we’re now in this together, I’d like your help. Please tell me if you think I’m on the wrong track with the locket. Did you hear something in my recital I should reconsider?”

She had accepted without critique his line of reasoning and was now asked to find flaws in it. She drew in a breath and let it out slowly. "Let me see. There's the part where the duke was agitated he'd forgotten to tell you something." She considered further. "But then you said he seemed relieved when it occurred to him he'd already mentioned it, and the very next thing he said concerned a letter, one he was not absolutely sure he had sent." She held up her hands. "He had become quite forgetful, especially in the last couple of months."

"That's a problem. The letter was originally my prime consideration, and I had a thought I would have to make requests at Bradford House and Bradford Manor to check the duke's library desks – perhaps I still can! The locket didn't stand out in my mind at first, because he seemed to be recalling a portrait of his wife and not necessarily the object housing it. Then I heard your story and latched on to it."

"I can see why. Hm. What else did he mention?" She made a wry mouth. "All the details – ah, no, you called them *particulars* – that led you here."

Mr. Carter's smile was self-satisfied.

"He mentioned people. Your father, for instance, and he even called him a good man. He also acknowledged knowing your late wife. Could the Bellows family be involved?"

He shook his head. "You're the key, as I pointed out Thursday, and you've never heard of them or Hartsfield for that matter, so I strongly doubt they figure in."

"If I'm the key, why didn't you just tell me all this from the beginning?"

He gave a very smooth answer about how people, even innocent people with nothing to hide, tailored answers to what they thought an officer of the law might want to hear. "I figured the duke sent me to you because you had got to know him so well, and I had to let you divulge that information without you thinking about it as information."

This explanation made perfect sense. "Amazing."

"You also taught me a good lesson on Tuesday."

"I did?"

"When questioning an informant about a deceased person, say, a murder victim, I've now learned a good detective should always ask the informant about their last conversation with the victim. To discover the state of mind of the victim near his time of death, whether expected or unexpected. So simple! It should have been my first question to you, not one you had to back into. So, thank you."

"You're welcome," said, "I suppose?" She glanced at the clock with a stirring of mixed emotions. "Time's up," she said and pulled up the sheet with a touch of reluctance.

He stood, swung his jacket up his with two fingers and made his way to the door. "I'll see you Tuesday. Once again Thursday will be cards."

A thought occurred to her. "The duke said he had his solicitors track you down and write up a report."

He turned back toward her. "Close enough. It didn't take me long to suspect he'd gone straight to Sir John for that report. When I confronted the Blind Beak with my suspicions, he confirmed them with a hearty laugh."

"So, the duke chose you very specifically."

"We're agreed on that point, yes."

"He clearly thought you worthy of something," she said with a sweep of her hand over the sheet covering her nakedness, "beyond this." She had to ask. "Do you expect nothing from this rather quixotic quest you're on?"

"I expect to come to clarity." He cocked his head to one side. "I expect that whatever the duke has in mind for me – if anything – it will be unexpected."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Eight

Leaving the Rose Room Carter had a feeling of Adam expelled from Paradise, leaving Eve behind. How relaxing it was at the end of the day to shut out the world for a space of time, to bask in quiet pleasure, speaking with a woman. He loved his relationship with Thomas, and he enjoyed their conversations. The lad had a good head on his shoulders, and Carter sometimes turned to his son for advice. But Thomas was of an age where the attention and the care still flowed from father to son. He also enjoyed the companionship of his fellow detectives, chewing over cases, sinking a pint or two at the local. He knew such camaraderie was necessary in his life, and he valued it. But it did not compare to the delight of being in the presence of a beautiful and engaging woman who was, to his further delight, becoming comfortable with her nakedness in his presence – if he was any judge of their easy conversation and the way she sat, full of dignity.

He had ceased feeling Mary's loss long ago, and he did not lack for female flesh. However, since last Thursday he had become aware of the absence of gentle conversation in his life, the intimacy of a man and woman sorting through shared problems, telling one another a good story or two at the end of the day. His thoughts bumped against the thin edge of understanding why the duke would have felt it was money well spent to cover the breathtaking sums of Mrs. Patton's debts by conversing with her niece – looking but not touching, no less.

A problem that, looking but not touching. His thoughts traveled inevitably to the lusty Widow Russell, but he didn't have the heart for her this evening. He still needed the outlet of his skin hitting skin at one speed or another, and since he had opted out of the slow and easy time he would have in the bedroom above the Lamb and Flag, he headed toward more brutal sport at his favorite boxing saloon.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the next two weeks the question "How will I justify my action to Thomas?" began to skim with some regularity around the edges of his consciousness, causing a qualm or two with respect to Miss Marsh. The answer to the question was moot because Carter would never discuss his arrangement with Miss Marsh with his son. Nevertheless the question acted as an ethical touchstone. Carter had had no problem gazing upon her naked beauty when he had assumed her to be a courtesan, but since discovering that she was gently born and bred, he had yet to call time on their meetings, to admit to her the duke had likely *not* meant for Carter to continue in his grace's footsteps.

With simple masculine logic, he decided to keep going until his qualm of conscience grew to a throe of moral rectitude. In the meantime he would enjoy the time he spent with her, clothed on Thursdays playing cards and unclothed on Saturdays and Tuesdays discussing whatever came into their heads. "Carter's quixotic quest," as she had come to all it, was a frequent topic. (He had asked Sir John what 'quixotic' meant and got not only the definition but also a brief lecture on some Spanish chap.)

"Your play has improved significantly, I agree," she said to one of his assertions, "but do you truly think you're ready to go downstairs and establish yourself as a player estimable enough to get in on a game with Lord Goddard?"

"Your Lucius thinks so."

"My Lucius," she returned, "isn't as cautious as he might be."

"One has to be a bit daring to get anywhere in life. I'd still be in Hartsfield if I hadn't overcome my fear of a stranger I noticed lurking in the neighborhood who I was sure was up to no good. I gathered up my courage, confronted him and tricked him into spilling enough information for me to feel justified hauling him to the authorities in Brad's Ford. It was soon discovered he was wanted by Bow Street."

Miss Marsh did not appear as impressed as he thought she might. "Out of curiosity how did this stranger measure in height and build compared to you?"

"His size hardly matters," he replied solemnly.

"Hah! 'Gathered your courage,' indeed, Mr. Carter. Don't get me wrong. I'm appreciative of your detective skills and the work you do protecting the citizens. However, I'm quite sure you frighten more than you are frightened."

"I hope not, Miss Marsh."

"I'm speaking here only of wrong-doers."

"I am relieved."

She merely rolled her eyes then said, "I want you to retrieve the locket from Lord Goddard, you know I do. I just – I just –"

"What?"

"I don't know. I'm worried about the risk."

"What risk?"

"You could end up not retrieving the locket and losing a lot of money in the process. That outcome is as likely as any other."

"True, but I'm willing to try."

"I think you're overconfident."

"Overconfident means I rate my skills too high. I believe I rate them at their correct value."

"It's true you've caught on remarkably well."

All very free and easy, such exchanges.

When she began to provide him more comforts, he did his best not to get ahead of himself and to imagine she was developing feelings for him. One evening he came to find waiting for him a footbath sitting atop a towel on the floor next to a footstool. When he shed his coat and poured himself a glass of lemonade, as had become his custom, he pointed to the new items and asked, "What's this?"

"You can see very well what it is," she said with a laugh. "Yesterday it suddenly occurred to me his grace had me put the footstool away so he could spend the hour with his feet in warm water with Epsom salts. I figured, since we're continuing the duke's arrangement, we may as well do the whole thing. I'm leaving the choice up to you: footbath or footstool."

"I'll take both," he said readily. He sat down and reached for his shoes then hesitated. He looked up, "May I?"

She laughed again. "I don't expect you to put your shod feet in the water. For his

grace the footbath was a necessity. I thought for you it might be less of a necessity and more of a plus. I imagine you walk a lot during the day.”

“I do,” he admitted readily. He unbuckled his shoes, rolled down his stockings and slid his feet into the water. He closed his eyes and said on a half-groan, “Very nice.”

She laughed a third time.

“Epsom salts, you say?” he said, thinking he had been deprived of a woman’s concern for his comfort for far too long. “A luxury, indeed.”

“The slimmest fraction of a farthing of the cost of the salts went into the water, Mr. Carter. Hardly a luxury, or if it is one, it’s one I can afford.”

He opened his eyes. “Always thinking in economic terms?”

“I have to, as you well know.”

Here she made as if to present her body to him, sitting straight and thrusting her breasts slightly forward. He wondered whether she realized what she was doing. Before he allowed himself to respond to the provocation, he sent his thoughts to his boxing saloon and imagined a bruising slug-out in the ring.

“But I’ve got things almost under control,” she continued, “and I’ve learned to hold to a budget and yet not sacrifice the quality that brings the gentlemen to Diana’s. My aunt simply never had an idea how to deal with tradesmen and grocers and apparently grew worse over the years. I’ve had to turn it all around.”

“Here’s something I’ve wondered then. Wouldn’t it be more economical to house your business establishment and your living quarters in the same place?”

She clapped her hands. “The one financial thing my aunt did that has kept our heads above water was likely an accident! When she opened here twenty years ago, as I’ve said, she signed a *fifty*-year contract for rent at twelve pounds a year, which included a thirty-pound surplus for coal. My goodness, I’m sure the owner meant to negotiate a *five*-year contract. Rents in the neighborhood can now be as high as twenty-five pounds a year with coal at fifty. They’re likely to go even higher.”

“I see. Does that mean she took whatever profits she had made over the years and bought in a less expensive neighborhood?”

“That’s exactly right. Then, idiotically – I am not mincing words – lost control of expenses in the last, what, three or four or more years. In any case, when she bought in Bloomsbury a house in Mayfair was above her touch.”

He had no further comment to make and sank into the chair, content to soak his feet

and relax.

After several long moments she asked, "Certainly you must think about money, do you not, Mr. Carter?"

"Being from the country, where most of our needs are met free of charge, I'm still not in the habit of mind to think of every pence and shilling. I never waste them mostly because I never think to buy much. Then, too, with Thomas in Hartsfield for the past month, there's a savings because he's a growing boy and food in town is expensive. In Hartsfield he eats to his heart's content."

"Do you visit him and your parents?"

He looked at his feet and made some splashing noises to give himself a chance to recover from the realization he hadn't visited in more than three weeks, since beginning his arrangement with Miss Marsh. He replied mildly, "I went more often earlier in the summer and will certainly go when next I have free time."

He steered the talk in other directions.

The footbath and footstool were welcome additions to the hour. Topics of discussion never lacked, for the various hands they had played on a Thursday could always be passed in review and dissected on a Saturday or a Tuesday. He was a quick study and had absorbed Hoyle's rules effortlessly, impressing even Lucius with his ability to recite 'according to Hoyle.' In addition to his good weekly coaching, he now joined in any card game at the Magistrates' Court. He was feeling ready to test his new skills in the front parlors of Diana's.

He liked wrangling with Miss Marsh about those skills and found he liked discussing his cases with her as well, since she proved to be an eager audience. One evening he recounted the example of the break-in at a warehouse in Cheapside he had investigated a few weeks earlier.

"An inside job," he said. "I suspected it almost immediately. If you round up everyone who works in an establishment and question them relentlessly, you are bound to discover holes in one or another's account. When the facts start speaking for themselves, you get a confession."

"So, for a break-in you always suspect an inside job first."

"Nine times out of ten that's the case. Criminals are seldom original."

"As you said about irregular Fleet marriages."

"Exactly. Now take murder. When you can absolutely rule out, for instance, a death on a highway by a rogue highwayman then you look to family and friends and from

there you narrow your search to who has the motive of either greed or passion.”

“Surely there are clever murderers.”

“I can imagine all sorts of murders that might be cleverly arranged. However, the detective who sticks to the case and follows the clues will discover in the end a variation, no matter how elaborate, of the usual.”

“You’re probably right. I have no experience with such things, but now I must ask, is it not depressing to constantly investigate the worst of human behavior?”

“Not really,” he replied, surprised he had never been negatively affected. “I think of these cases rather in terms of what my father taught me – another advantage of growing up in the country, I suppose. By the time I was eight years old, he had made sure I could follow the tracks of a pheasant through the woods, understand a cuckoo’s flight pattern as a sign of a rapid weather change coming and distinguish among the ears, awns and glumes of all varieties of wheat from turgid to bard. And that was just the beginning. The Book of Nature my father calls it, and he taught me how to read it. I have simply put my knowledge of nature’s clues to tracking human behavior in the wilds of the city.”

She paused at length before saying, “Lovely.” Then almost meditatively, “I understand why you’re happy your son spends time with his grandparents.”

The trend in conversation seemed to make her sad, so he turned it toward a jolly subject, the upcoming St. Bartholomew’s Fair within the Priory at West Smithfield. Their chat continued merrily.

His heart had come to anticipate a constriction the moment before she would say, “Time’s up.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Nine

On occasion the duke had sighed and said, “If only I were ten years younger, Miss Marsh – well, twenty – I would alter our arrangement!” She would tease him, in turn, about his days as a gay blade, which she doubted he ever had. By contrast Mr. Carter had never once made an innuendo, much less open sexual remark. Yes, he had admitted to how much he enjoyed looking at her, but when she recalled her comments preceding his admission, she saw she had likely forced it, and he had not subsequently pushed the issue. She thought about his restraint. He had not told her he was a detective until he had thought the time was right, at which point he divulged what he had pieced together of the case and then had invited her help with it.

Restraint. It was an attractive feature of his personality. It was odd to think that his control prompted her to wonder what would happen if he lost it, which brought her

to thinking about his sexuality. She had heard snippets of conversation in the front parlors of Diana's to know in which direction men's minds generally ran. For that matter she knew it from Kingston upon Thames and all the ham-handed remarks Squire Stanley often made. The more she got to know Mr. Carter, the more she became comfortable in her skin in his presence, the more she realized he had no need to make suggestive remarks. He was an attractive force unto himself. Women came to him.

She had developed an eccentric relationship with clocks. The hours dragged when she was not with him. The hours flew when she played cards with him on Thursdays, as did most of the hour on Tuesdays and Saturdays when they would compare their approaches to spending money or talk about how he solved his cases. However, there were also moments when the two of them were together, with her seated on the bed, him seated in the chair, and a pause would fall and then extend – not an uncomfortable pause, no. Rather it seemed to hang like the drop at the tip of an icicle in the sun, clinging for an infinite moment, defying the melting heat, until the law of gravity finally roused to exert its force, and the drop disappeared into the puddle below.

In those moments, she became aware of changes both on the surface of her skin and inside her body; and given the quality of the pauses she wondered if he was aware of her bodily changes, as well. They were subtle at first like a pang in her stomach a half-hour before lunchtime or a tickle in her throat not yet insistent enough to cause her to fetch a glass of water. But, rapidly – or was it slowly? – over the days the changes strengthened to resemble real hunger and real thirst and all at once they flowered into a yearning to be close to him, a womanly desire to feel his arms around her.

One of those pauses fell on a Saturday. The birds were bedding down in the soft evening outside the open windows through which a sweet breeze wafted. The candlelight cast a mellow glow over the room. She shifted a little now and again to give him a view of her body from this angle and that. His bare feet were propped on the footstool, legs crossed at the ankles, elbows on the armrests, hands clasped under his chin. The look in his eyes as they rested on her could only be described as brooding. The moment, so round and full, felt infinite.

Just as the last drip of this moment dropped into the puddle she asked, "How did you learn to read?"

He didn't answer at first. Neither did he take his eyes off of her. Then he drew a deep breath, dropped his hands to the armrests and sat back. He looked up and said, "A woman in a nearby village knew the alphabet. She had a crusade, as she called it, to teach it to the children in the neighborhood" – he glanced at her – "even to the girls" – then glanced away again.

When he didn't continue she said, "But you need to know more than the alphabet to

read.”

“Not really,” he countered. “Yes, there are some odd combinations of letters forming not entirely predictable sounds, but for the most part if I would find something to read, I would say the words out loud. When they made no sense in terms of either sound or context, I would try to say them another way.”

“What did you find to read? The Bible?”

His laugh was more of a grunt. “In our hamlet Smitty the Blacksmith had a manual, if you can imagine it.”

“About blacksmithing?”

“Yes, and you may well ask why, because Smitty isn’t lettered, nor have I ever known a blacksmith who is. When I had read through it enough times to know what it was saying, I went to Smitty and read it aloud to him. After every section he’d say, ‘I know that,’ ‘Aye, know that, too,’ ‘Common knowledge’ and the like. When I came to the end he shook his head and said mournfully, ‘Ye’ve wasted a mort of time, John lad, with this reading nonsense’.”

She laughed at his imitation of Smitty’s Surrey accent. “Did your parents object?”

“No, although they were less keen for my two sisters to spend time with the activity.”

“Two sisters?”

“Both married, both younger and both with three children apiece.”

“So you’re a fond uncle, too.”

“Very. And you?”

“I have very little family. Aunt Diana is just about it.”

Another of those pauses fell – that made for two big drops almost in a row – and she realized that enough drops had been falling over the past week to create a puddle at the foot of her bed. If any more drops fell the puddle would spread to lap up against the shore of his footstool. She absorbed the possibility – no, the certainty – they were no longer talking about what they were talking about. They were talking to maintain connection, to find a way to continue the connection, to feel their way to adjusting it.

After a too-long moment she added, “But you probably already know that.”

The lift to his brows seemed to suggest “Hm?”

“I mean your fine detective skills would have already discovered more about me and my family than I would know about you and yours.”

“Ah. As to that, what I know of your family I know from you.”

She was surprised. “How so?”

“Since you live with your aunt I can only assume your mother has passed.”

“That’s true.”

“And your father is gone, as well.”

“Also true. He was a proud second lieutenant, according to my mother. When I was about two years old, he was shipped off to the Americas to fight the French and did not survive.”

He nodded slowly. “I suspected he left your life early on.”

She wondered what clues she had given him. “Yet another advantage of growing up in the country, Mr. Carter. You had a father who taught you to read the Book of Nature, and on the evening we met you said your family story is a happy one.”

He nodded slowly. He could not have been unaware of the atmosphere in the room with the moist air crackling with a sizzling current although no hint of thundershower loomed outside. She felt her nipples peak. She felt an unexpected plumpness where there had never before been a plumpness. This sudden shift from sensual desire to sexual awakening surprised her with the fullness of it. It was seamless in feeling with no sly fissure through which could seep resistance or shame. She felt empowered.

Although likely aware of her state or maybe because of it – and he had to know he was directly responsible for it – he was willing to keep the conversational ball in play. The lazy tones of deep voice hit her below the belly, causing her innards to quiver, “Sir John and his brother before him have established good relationships with men of the law, mayors, sheriffs, deputies and the like all across the country. They thought it was a good idea to have what they call a network to help ferret out fugitives, thieves, murderers and other bad actors.”

“Do they also spy on locals?”

He shook his head. “If the mayor of Kingston on Thames – and, yes, I know your family is from there – was asked to spy on his townspeople, I am sure he would decline any part in the Bow Street project. Sir John has created the cooperation we

have long enjoyed with law officers in nearby Surrey and Kent and now he's extending it to Peterborough and Bath and even York. He's been able to increase his range by conducting all cases with the utmost probity." He smiled, setting her belly to fluttering again. "Probity. There's another one of the many words I've learned since coming to London."

"I see."

"Be assured I had no reason to ask anything about you in Kingston."

Her thoughts darted erratically, completely distracted by her desire to feel his skin next to hers, his lips on hers. The best she could do was to pluck a word from the things he had just said and asked, "Network?"

He nodded. "Until recently the thieves and crooks were more organized than the men assigned to keep the peace. So we're at the beginning of more civil order – or any civil order. I'm glad to do my part."

"Which makes you one of the good ones."

His nod was minimal.

She glanced at the clock then at him. With a catch in her voice she announced, "Time's up."

He held her gaze, not moving a muscle.

A big fat drop gathered and hung on with tantalizing tenacity. As it clung the atmosphere in the room coiled and curled and quivered with tension. She felt a watering in her mouth, between her legs. Her body round and ripe was now naked with desire. The drop splashed and sizzled and invited her to dive in. She chose to be bold. She slid down onto her side and lifted the sheet but did not cover herself with it. Instead she held it open to him in frank invitation.

His response was to stand up and cross to her side. His gaze swept her head to toe then he blinked once and slightly shook himself. He took her chin in one hand and said, with a fiery gleam in the depths of his eyes, "You've done your part. The rest is on my terms." His gaze next roamed her face. "Here, Tuesday, seven-thirty, and be sure your hair is unpinned. In the meantime, on Monday evening you'll point out to me who Lord Goddard is." He turned away.

With a start of anxiety, she propped up on her elbow and asked, "Where are you going?"

"To a boxing saloon."

She frowned. "No, seriously, where?"

He smiled and shook his head. He moved away from her, picked up his discarded articles of clothing and left the room.

When the door closed with a soft click behind him, her cosmic clock fell off its celestial shelf and broke into smithereens. Time ceased to move.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Ten

Carter left with his plan firmly in mind, the strength and, indeed, necessity of which made it possible for him to walk away.

On his way to the boxing saloon he had a better idea how to spend his time. So he reversed course and crossed the river to Lambeth where he rented a job horse and rode the three hours to Hartsfield. Since he arrived home at an unseasonable hour he made his bed in an abandoned shed on the edge of the hamlet. In the morning he was greeted with hugs from his mother and Thomas and a great slap on his back from his father. The day unfolded first with church in Brad's Ford and continued with familiar chores in the fields, working alongside his son and father. Supper was a lively occasion, which included both sisters and brothers-in-law with their six offspring among them. They ate outside, the weather being fine and the massive wooden table under the ancient oak tree standing ready for just such a feast. The sun set on a ruby and gold sky in sumptuous summer, and here in the bosom of his family Carter found as much contentment as was possible for him at present.

He arose well before dawn. His father was there to see him off at the moment before the night ceded to the first hint of day.

"Go back to bed, Dad," Carter said.

His father placed a strong grip on Carter's shoulder. "So, John, tell me. A woman's on your mind, then?"

Carter betrayed himself with a rueful laugh.

"Problems with the lass?"

"On the one hand no, other the other ... perhaps." He struggled to put it into words. The best he could do was, "You see, she's citified."

"It's to be expected, what with you fair citified yourself."

Carter shook his head. "That's not it." His thoughts bumped up against something he could not yet define, and an uncustomary and extremely unpleasant flash of fear shot through his chest.

The old man's grip squeezed. "She'll not resist you."

Carter knew she would have him on one score but he wanted more. "We'll see."

His father gave him one last pat then said, "I'm to bed now, and it's a good rest of the night's sleep I'll have knowing there's a woman to take care of you."

Carter swung into the saddle and rode back under the fading stars, heartened by his father's assurance but unaware of a seed of doubt taking root in the back of his mind. Mid-way through the ride the doubt sprang to life in the full-formed thought: *she doesn't need me*. She wanted him, yes. She'd made that clear. But she didn't need him to survive. Although he might at first have thought her a victim of her circumstances, he was now well aware she was in charge of her life in terms of those circumstances – just as every living being on earth, including himself, including the king, was subject to the constraints of their own circumstances. He turned his thoughts to what he had to offer her and thereby discovered the source of his fear: whatever he had might not be enough. He did his best to shake off the unsettling feeling and knew he'd never forgive himself if he didn't try to win both her heart and her hand.

He arrived in town with time enough to clean up. He presented himself at Number Four Bow Street at nine o'clock sharp when he knew Sir John would start his workday.

Carter arrived at the always-open door to Sir John's office and knocked once on the frame. "I'd like a word, sir."

Sir John invited him in.

Carter greeted Sir John's "eyes," his trusty secretary Basil Turnbull. He took the chair in front of his mentor's desk littered with paper. Carter knew Sir John knew the exact whereabouts and contents of each and every one of the curling sheaves.

Carter came straight to business. He withdrew an envelope and handed it to Mr. Turnbull. To Sir John he said, "I'd like this document legally returned to Mrs. Diana Patton. It's the deed to her house. I'm hoping the letter can be drawn up today and delivered to her tomorrow morning. I'm happy to pay for the services."

Sir John waved a hand then frowned. "No money, but how did you come by a deed to a house?"

"I'm glad you asked, sir, because it brings me to another subject I'd like to speak to you about. I don't need to know the contents of the report on me the late Duke of Bradford requested from you, but it would be helpful if you can think of any reason why the duke would have bequeathed me Mrs. Patton's deed. I can say, quite firmly,

it's a bequest I don't want."

Sir John seemed to hesitate. Then he pinched his long nose, his famous beak, and said to his assistant, "Please excuse us for a moment, won't you, Mr. Turnbull, and please shut the door behind you."

When they were alone Sir John cleared his throat and said, "No formal report about you was written up and delivered to the duke."

"Oh?"

"When you asked me, I only confirmed that, yes, any of the duke's information about you came from me. I didn't know he had bequeathed you anything."

"I didn't mention the bequest at first because I thought I knew what I was dealing with, and it would have been of no concern to you. Now that I've spent some time investigating the matter, it's not at all clear to me what the duke had in mind, and so I've turned to you for any insight you might have."

"I can't help you on the matter of Mrs. Patton, since he never once mentioned anyone by that name to me, but now let me explain why no formal report was ever written about you. About fifteen years ago the duke began to take an interest in us here at Bow Street, that is, shortly after you started working here. Of course news of your citizen's arrest of the infamous Outlaw Bill would have come to his ears given that you're from his neighborhood, as would news that I had hired you."

"Yes, I can understand that."

"And, well, all I can say is that during this time he not only contributed funds to the Magistrates' Court he also invited me to dinner once a year. You were often a topic of discussion."

Frankly puzzled he queried, "I was, sir?"

"You and your father, that is." He paused at some length. "Now that I look back on those conversations, I'm not at all surprised he made you a bequest, strange though it turned out to be. You see, I think, no, I *know* he admired the two of you, the father-son bond you have."

"Bond it is. My father knows me well," Carter admitted, thinking of the pre-dawn conversation they had had this very morning.

"His grace would tell me of the many times he saw the two of you working together or walking and talking together. And I think, well, given the lack of meaningful relationship he had with his own son, he was not only admiring of you and your father but also envious."

“Envious,” Carter repeated, astonished. “Imagine.”

“He liked keeping up with your life in London, the progress you were making in your career. My stories of your successes gave him a vicarious pleasure.”

“Vicarious?” Carter queried. He was always eager to enlarge his vocabulary.

“Living his life as a father through imagining you as his son,” Sir John explained.

Carter was silent for a moment. Then, “Thank you, sir. I better understand the sincerity of his desire to give me something, but I’m not sure what.” He drew a breath. “And I still have an angle on the case which I intend to start working this evening. Where it will all lead is still a bit of a mystery.”

\*\*\*\*\*

He was ready. Learning to play cards was no different nor more difficult than learning to read. He simply applied himself to the task. Observing the Bow Street lads he noticed some of them didn’t keep track of what cards had already been played and, as a result, would discard poorly or miss tricks. They also didn’t control the muscles around their eyes and mouths as they scanned their hands for the first time and thereby provided clues to what they held. Other twitches could be meaningful. Marcus Williams, for instance, was unreadable, but Lucius Parker invariably shifted a fraction in his seat when his hand was very good. Miss Marsh kept a straight face but she tended to hold a strong hand in one hand and a weak hand with two.

At a quarter after ten in the evening he rang the bell at Diana’s and was let in the front door by Bruiser who, upon clapping eyes on Carter’s new finery, visibly started.

“I need to blend in,” Carter explained.

“You’ll never do that,” Bruiser countered.

The rooms were already crowded and Carter wended his way through them slowly, listening to the talk here and there, sizing up the situation. Parker had told him Mondays were always popular and that gaming fever was highest between ten and midnight.

Upon encountering Parker, his mentor looked him up and down and said of his moss green silk ensemble, “The severe style suits you. We’ve already agreed you’re not flash.”

Carter had a quibble. “The tailor wouldn’t hear of not including the frill around the lapels. I could have done without it.”

Parker ran his gaze over the needle lace. "It's a nice touch, understated." He nodded with satisfaction. "You look like a player to reckon with, and wearing your own hair makes you an original, with this set at least. Anyone able to afford the membership fee is assumed to be a gentleman." He nodded again. "So first test passed."

On to the second, then, which involved retrieving the locket. However, since Carter knew he could not possibly have it in hand this evening, he applied himself first to the lesser and more immediate goal of trying to win the exorbitant amount he now owed his tailor. He got to work and had success. Some of it was due to his own skill, some due to the excellent tutelage he received from Williams and Parker and Miss Marsh. In an early game, he recalled one of his Thursday lessons and was able to pull off a tricky finesse. The quality of his play helped to lessen any standoffishness toward him as a newcomer, and he found himself welcome at any table. The clothing might be different than he was accustomed to and the stakes wagered widely divergent, but in the end, men were men.

About those stakes, his three tutors had given him the general idea of betting practices and the sizes they could soar to. Diana's furthermore used a system of counters that had lately come into fashion. The counters were differently shaped according to the amounts they represented and provided by the house; and they were color-coded for each player for ease of settling up at the end of the night. It was still possible, as it had been in the late duke's youth, for jewelry, ivory or even gold nuggets to be tossed into the center of the table. It was odd, though. Carter had expected the thrill of winning and the pain of losing would be proportional to the size of the bet, but he felt nothing more playing at Diana's than he did at the Magistrates' Court. His cool head certainly worked to his advantage. Before the first hour was up he already had enough to pay off his tailor and then some. Thereafter he decided it strategic on occasion to lose.

He was very happy to cross paths with Miss Marsh, to see her eyes widen as she looked at him in his new suit and to watch the furious blush rush up her throat and stain her cheeks. She informed him quietly that Lord Goddard was playing whist in a side room off the left front parlor and that she was now on her way home.

He could hardly wait for Tuesday evening and the real thrill.

He cleared his head. He found the room and joined the small crowd watching the action in the side parlor at the very moment one man said, "That was a fine trick you took, Goddard." Thus tipped off to his quarry, Carter took up a position across the table from his lordship. His choice of where to stand was a precaution. If he were asked to join the group at the table, Goddard could not accuse him of having looked over his lordship's shoulder to study his strategies. At one point Carter was offered a pinch of tobacco from an elegant silver snuffbox and declined it in the way Parker had taught him. He kept his glass full and at his side. In this time of hard drinking it would be out of place to appear too sober.

During a pause in the play Lord Goddard looked around and his gaze fell on Carter. "Does the newcomer have a name?"

He was used to attracting attention. "John Carter."

"*Mister* John Carter?"

"That's right."

"You're bold to wear your own hair like a commoner, *Mister* John Carter."

Few things perturbed Carter less than social rank. He replied easily, "I dislike wasting money on hair powder."

The remark was so unexpected it was met with a roar of laughter.

"But not on the turn of a card," Lord Goddard pursued.

"I'm here," was all Carter said.

The titters accompanying this second unvarnished remark brought an element of tension into the exchange. Thus far, his lordship had not introduced himself, nor did Carter imagine he intended to. Carter had also not addressed his lordship with any deference to rank, nor did Carter intend to. He had already sized up his lordship by his style of play and aggressive overtures and figured such a man to be responsive to straightforward masculine challenge. This was a moment when Carter let his size and calm demeanor do most of the talking.

After a moment Goddard released a soft laugh and commented, "You're a strange one. Do you care to join the play, *Mister* John Carter?"

Carter guessed Goddard was deliberately trying to annoy him with the constant repetition of his name. Carter was by nature a mild creature. He was also not afflicted with the self-righteousness that caused some people to think others needed to be taught their just lessons. However, as he took his seat, he was happy to enter into the spirit of their verbal-sparring-as-boxing-match and deemed the first few jabs Goddard had thrown to land wide of the mark. He decided to keep punching his lordship in the face.

Over the next hour of whist, he dissected his lordship's every bid, discard, twitch of an eyelid and shift in his chair. Halfway through the next hour it was just the two of them left playing, and the game was faro. The intensity of the play had drawn an audience. By the end of the second hour Goddard's frock coat was rumpled and his lace stock and wig were askew. He had lost not only his air of superiority but also a massive amount of his lemon-yellow-marked counters, now piled up in front of his *Mister* John Carter.

“Had enough?” Carter asked baldly.

Goddard frowned then glared.

“Here’s how we’re going to settle up. All this” – Carter waved his hand over the pile – “for a locket.”

Goddard reared back, his face blank with incomprehension. A round of murmurs quickly circulated among the onlookers.

“A long time ago the Fourth Duke of Bradford lost a valuable locket to your father at the gaming table at White’s. I’m here to get it back.”

“Why on earth?” was his lordship’s stunned reply.

“For the Fifth Duke. I want to return it to him.”

The murmurs became a hubbub.

“You’re a strange one,” Goddard managed next.

One onlooker, thinking himself a wit, piped up, “Nay, then, it’s Gareth Avery who’s the strange one.”

More quick commentary sprouted here and there, comments about the Fifth Duke’s inability to look a man in the eye or to follow a sensible train of conversation.

“Are you a friend of his?” Goddard asked.

“More a friend to his late father,” he said, thinking this answer true enough.

Goddard was frowning. “I recall a family story about some legendary card game between my father and the late duke. Can’t remember exactly. I thought it involved a watch. I’ll ask my mother. She’ll likely know where it is. Locket, you say?”

He nodded. “We’ll meet back here tomorrow night around this time.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Eleven

She glimpsed him among the throngs moving through the parlors. It was impossible not to see him because he stood out – and not only by the set of his wide shoulders and the half-head of height he had on most of the men. Rather, in contrast to those guests wearing nip-waist frock coats with elaborate falls of lace at neck and wrist and fluttering with ribbons and sparkling with jewels, Mr. Carter’s unadorned suit quietly communicated a different kind of power. She could not help but respond to

it. When she came face to face with him, she was immediately flustered and aroused and then glad she could make her exit shortly thereafter. On her way out, she noticed him seated comfortably at a card table, playing with his betters as if he didn't have a care in the world. He stood out in many ways and yet he fit in. She paused to imagine what it meant to be a man's man and only vaguely understood the qualities that one man might respond to in another of his sex, independent of social rank.

The next morning she awoke to thoughts of him, thereby plunging her into the usual tangled emotional state she had become used to concerning him. A wisp of an erotic dream involving him came to her, which meant that she had likely woken in an already tangled emotional state, which was further ensnared with delicious spurts of desire flitting through her body. She lumbered out of bed and went to her wardrobe but was unable to do more than to stare blankly at the choice of dresses in front of her. She was roused from immobility only when it dawned on her that her choice of dress didn't matter: she'd be naked when it came around to the most important part of the day.

Everything felt contradictory. At breakfast she was ravenous but could hardly eat. She considered sending Carter a note cancelling their evening engagement at the same time she knew she could hardly wait for it. When her aunt joined her at the breakfast table she had a great impulse to ask for the older woman's advice but the question she wanted answered struck her as both crystal clear and opaque as pea soup and so she had no way to formulate it.

She must have been staring off into space long enough for her aunt to reach out and lay a hand on her forearm. She asked gently, "More financial difficulties, my dear? I promise you I've been keeping to my budget."

Serena pulled her thoughts back into the room. She smiled at her dear Aunt Diana and shook her head. "Difficulties of a very different kind – and an entirely new kind, as it turns out."

"Oh?"

Out of the unspooled mental threads cluttering in her mind she picked out the one true, bright-colored thought and blurted it. "I like him."

Her aunt withdrew her hand and sat back in her chair, placing her arms on the arm rests. "Who, dear?"

Serena glanced at her aunt and laughed involuntarily. "You don't have to look so pleased about it."

"Why shouldn't I? I've never heard you ever say you liked any man. It's natural, so I'm glad."

Serena frowned. "But this one." She shook her head. "I don't know."

"Again, who?"

Serena sighed. "Mr. Carter."

"Ah," her aunt replied, evidently remembering who he was. Then another more forceful and knowing, "Ah! Have you - ?"

"No," Serena broke in swiftly, adding a silent *Not yet, anyway*.

"What is so bad about liking him?"

"He's a detective."

"Good heavens, my dear, that sounds rather shady. Is he some kind of criminal?"

"He's on the other side of the law, as a matter of fact," Serena replied and outlined Mr. Carter's daily activities and what she knew of his life.

When she was finished her aunt said, "Bow Street, yes, I know of the Magistrates' Court there. And am I correct in feeling that he returns your liking?"

Did he like her? She knew he would take what she offered, but did he want anything further? Did she?

To her silence her aunt pursued, "You say he receives a salary and has a stable home life. I don't see an objection to liking him."

She drew a deep breath. "You know mother and I had so little security when I was growing up. I struggled even then to help her make ends meet, and as I grew older I always refused to solve our problems with an unwanted marriage. Coming here was a great chance to claim my independence provided I could stabilize the financial instability. Now I have."

Her aunt acknowledged the point with a diffident nod of her head.

"And now I feel secure. I like the feeling." Serena tapped her forefinger on the tablecloth. "His world is not secure. Although he's big and strong, his profession puts him in constant danger, although he never speaks of it that way." She paused. "His world is foreign to me, and I don't like the thought of entering it."

The two women sat in thoughtful silence until Aunt Diana said, "If you know your heart, you'll know what to do, if and when the time comes."

\*\*\*\*\*

Serena arrived at Diana's in the early afternoon to the extraordinary news of the night before recounted to her by Lucius. He concluded his account of the action in the side room off the left front parlor with the twin predictions, both accurate,

"They'll be talking about it for years! Diana's reputation is assured!"

Serena was astonished. "How much do you think was at stake?"

Lucius grunted. "As to that, your Mr. Carter –"

She colored up and broke in, "My Mr. Carter?"

"I've seen the way he looks at you," he said matter-of-fact then made an impatient gesture so he could get back to the meat of the matter. "It all happened so quickly and we were all so surprised by how things ended that by the time we recovered our wits, Carter had already scooped up Goddard's counters and shoved them back across the table at him. No accounting was done!"

She was silent, simply taking it all in.

"That's what he wanted, right? Some old locket?"

"It's very valuable."

"Must be! But Goddard truly didn't seem to know anything about it."

After another moment she ventured, "His play really did improve rapidly, didn't it?"

"A sharp 'un, your Carter. He had the shrewdest sense of what Goddard held and what he was going to play. It was magnificent to watch."

"He's a fine detective," she said slowly. "A *very* fine detective."

Lucius's grumble was meditative.

Serena laughed, having no difficulty divining Lucius's thoughts. "Reconsidering your possible side career as a highway robber?"

His reply was unabashed. "I'm reconsidering all my side careers, think on!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Slower. Slowest. Such was her comparative and superlative perception of every passing second that afternoon.

Fortunately, since the world stilled turn on its axis, the sun managed to trace its afternoon arc across the sky until it paused to hover in summer splendor on the evening horizon. At seven twenty-five of the clock Serena found herself in the Rose

Room.

She shook out the curtains, fussed with the height of the open windows and waffled at length over the amount of light to have in the room and finally settled on one candle on the bedside table. She unpinned her hair, folded her clothing away in the armoire and climbed onto the bed, plumping the pillows this way and that. She was so keyed up she was about to jump out of her very naked skin. She sat on her knees with her hands crossed at her lap, her rattled nerves hoping she didn't have long to wait.

A knock, the door opened and the object of her incessant thoughts and desires entered the room. She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding and could not help but smile.

His answering smile melted further her already semi-liquid innards. He looked to his chair and for his opener said, "What, no pan of warm water, no lemonade?"

She didn't know how to answer that and figured it to be a rhetorical question. She also didn't understand why he shrugged out of his coat, threw it over the back of the chair and then sat down. The next thing he did was to take off his shoes and roll down his stockings. Then he sat back in his chair, propped his feet on the footstool and set his gaze on her.

She was confused. Perhaps she was supposed to tell a story first? She regretted her decision to place a single candle on the bedside table. If she had chosen a branch to set on the armoire she would have a better view of his expression. As it was, his face was shadowy, smoky blue.

She didn't know what to say beyond, "Thank you for returning the deed to my aunt."

"The house wasn't mine in the first place," was his mild response.

She understood the return of the deed this morning to be his way of relieving her of all obligation. She also understood he wasn't going to refine on the delicacy of his action. Next she tossed out, "Lucius told me a remarkable story."

"Mm-hum."

"Why did you do it?"

He shrugged. "I didn't like Goddard, and that's rare for me, considering I actually like most of the criminals I catch. To be sure, there are some very bad apples in the barrels – the murderers, mostly – but otherwise the miscreants are lazy or confused and some are actually charming. But Goddard?" He shook his head. "Not a criminal. Just arrogant."

She laughed. "No, I mean, you might have been curious about the amount of money at issue. What if what you won is worth more than the locket?"

"Miss Marsh," he said, paused then began again, "Serena love, I've already pointed out to you that I don't want to pervert my pursuit of the case by thinking in terms of an end reward. Even more so do I wish to avoid the trap of grasping at an incidental reward along the way. I highly doubt the duke meant for me to learn to enrich myself through gambling."

"Oh?" she said with an arch of her brows and a coquettish tilt of her head. "And you think the duke meant for us to have a physical relationship?"

With a straight face he said, "I'm convinced of it, yes, and we can proceed with the fulfillment of his wish for us as soon as you get up, walk over here and put your arms around me." So saying, he kicked the footstool to one side.

She laughed and colored up at the same time, any remaining nervousness or confusion evaporating in the liquid heat suddenly sprung to life between them. She got up and took her time walking over to him, the more to let him look, the more to let her enjoy his perusal. When she stood before him, he reached out and, in one movement, brought her against his chest and arranged her legs to straddle him, knees bent, calves tucked on either side of his thighs.

She gasped at the immediacy of the intimacy then wriggled against him to get settled, loving the feel of her breasts against his chest, her crux snug against his crotch. She swooned against him, draping her arms over his shoulders. He slid his arms around her back and pressed her more securely against him. Then he began to smooth his hands, fingers spread, through the masses of the curls cascading down her back. After that he paid considerable attention to her breasts and even, shockingly, kissed them.

"Too many decisions," he said in lazy tones, moving his lips up so that they rested against her neck. "I don't know if I want you to kiss me first or undress me. Ah! Can you do both at once?"

"I can try." She put her lips to his chin and fumbled to find the buttons of his shirt.

"Yes, that's right. I've had an ongoing fantasy, you see, of this chair, which is wide enough to fit us both."

She managed to get his shirt off, if not smoothly then at least completely. The more the expanse of his skin met hers, the more she wanted more. She kissed his cheeks and brow and nose and when her lips met his, they lingered. Such a warm and gentle and friendly kiss, one of promise and passion and luxury. Kissing, more kissing, tongues meeting, finding more ways to tell each other stories. Spellbinding. Bodybinding. Time in the real world stopped to good purpose, turned inside out and

opened onto the infinite new world made for two.

Liking, respecting, embracing, it was a remarkable combination of body and soul. Wanting. Stark, strong, unashamed, righteous. To go further in their embrace she had to hike her arse up and back and lift onto her knees so that she could shimmy his trousers and white clothes down to his ankles. They moved with clumsy grace, not wishing to let go of one another, not even for the convenience that a second of separation would afford them, happy in their tangle of limbs, grunts and laughter. When at last the maximum of skin was against the maximum of skin, they both sighed gustily.

He whispered, "Let me show you the way of it."

"Please."

He grasped her buttocks and began to slide her crux up and down his shaft. The world-for-two became dense and thick with emotion. It cast long ropes of feelings, gathered them, knitted them, braided them, bound them. All bodily awareness disappeared, the coarse world of moaning, fluttering and throbbing. Flesh enmeshed with flesh soared above the coarse to become one flesh then the reverse miracle: out of the one, two.

They came to stillness, panting from the exhilaration of colliding and creating the heavenly shower of stars glittering through their blood streams.

She pressed his fingers through the hair at his nape, lolled her head onto his shoulder and asked, "Can we do this again?"

He nuzzled her neck. "As often as you like."

"Maybe on the bed?" She wriggled against him, "Not that I don't like the chair."

His groan was loud and long. "The bed seems a bit far away at the moment."

She chuckled. "Unmanned are you?"

"Completely," he admitted, "and deliriously happy about it."

She snuggled into him and said, "There's no hurry."

"None at all."

\*\*\*\*\*

The chair served their purposes for a while but eventually they made it to the bed where, wrapped only in shadows and each other they continued to stroke and kiss and murmur until they were ready for another passage. Once finished at last, every ounce of energy spent, every muscle relaxed, he lay on his back and drew her into

his arms. He toyed with her hair and kissed her wherever the fancy struck him.

She flopped her head to one side and upon seeing the clock opened her eyes wide. "I need to go downstairs to circulate." She untangled herself from his arms and sat up. She looked down at the sheet, now stained. "Oh, we're going to need to use protection from now on. We were a bit careless, I think."

He rolled onto his side to look at her. "I brought protection," he said, now shaking his head, "and forgot to use it. Yes, we need to be more careful in the future."

She pinned her hair as best she could and dressed under his watchful eye and with a bit of his help with the buttons.

"You don't want to come with me?" she asked, her hand on the doorknob.

He shook his head. "I had a late night last night and an active day today. You just wore me out, so I'll take some time to rest. Later is soon enough."

"I'll be gone an hour, maybe two." She brightened. "And how I'll enjoy returning to the room when *you're* the one who's naked and in bed!"

As it happened, she was gone no more than fifteen minutes. Lord Goddard had come early and had no intention of staying until midnight to deliver anything to his nemesis of the night before. His lordship asked Serena if she knew where to find Mister John Carter. When she told him she did, Goddard gave her a piece of information that stunned her and prompted her immediate return upstairs. She rushed into Rose Room full of her news, completely forgetting about the pleasure she thought she would derive from seeing him naked on the bed.

Carter took one look at her face and asked, "You have news?"

"Yes, two bits. First, you're a sensation. You're all the talk downstairs, with everyone speculating what will happen when you come later to meet up with Goddard to settle his debt. You'll be besieged with offers to play."

"No, I thank you, and now I have a very good reason to remain right here. Parker can collect the locket in my stead. What's second?"

"The Dowager Lady Goddard gave the locket to one her maids a good twenty years ago."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twelve

He took a moment to adjust to this new information. He pulled the corners of his mouth down. "I suppose it couldn't have been so easy to have a run of spectacular luck at cards one night and then retrieve the locket the next."

"I don't think it was luck," she objected but did not pursue the matter. Instead she asked, "Not cast down, then?"

"It's a set-back, of course, but now I simply have more detective work to do."

"But twenty years ago!"

"A valuable locket should be traceable."

"And very strange, don't you think, that the Dowager – well, she was Lady Goddard at the time – would give away such a valuable item?"

"She had no sentimental attachment to it. Perhaps some dire set of circumstances befell the maid's family and Lady Goddard thought to help them out at little emotional cost to herself."

"So, what are we going to do?"

He paused to think. "Tomorrow morning I'll go to Sir John and ask him to send a letter to the Dowager. He'll explain that he's in the midst of an investigation and she could help him by supplying him with the name and address of the maid to whom she gave the locket. We'll go from there."

"Oh. That makes sense. All right. What do we do in the meantime?"

He smiled and asked, "Can you think of anything?"

She loved his smile. She loved her power. She loved the way he gave her the choice, her passion freely given.

\*\*\*\*\*

On Thursday morning Carter explained his idea to Sir John about contacting the Dowager. In so doing he necessarily gave Sir John the general outlines of the story of his deathbed conversation with the late duke. He also included an account of his meetings with Miss Marsh, carefully edited, and described how they had put their heads together to try and understand the odd bequest the duke had made and what the Duke had meant for Carter to do about it.

Sir John listened thoughtfully and, when Carter came to the end, said, "The pieces you've put together make sense. However, since you've given me no pieces that do not fit – and I am sure there are some – I have nothing around which to build an alternative narrative."

Carter did not believe that Sir John knowing of his junior detective's magnificent desire for Serena Marsh would alter any understanding of the picture he had presented.

"You may well be right, sir, and I'll reconsider everything after I've come to a dead end with the angle I'm currently working. I'm hoping you're still willing to write to the Dowager."

Sir John nodded. "I'll have Mr. Turnbull draft my letter."

Mid-morning on Friday the Dowager replied to Sir John who relayed to Carter the name and address of a Mary Bower, Ten Milk Street.

"Cheapside," Carter said, nodding. He knew the neighborhood well. "I'll be off, then, and if I'm successful I'll want an audience with the new Duke of Bradford as soon as possible."

"Once again, I'll have Mr. Turnbull draft my letter," was Sir John's reply.

Carter was in luck. Mary Bower was still alive, still lived on Milk Street and still had all her wits at a good eighty years of age.

"A locket from her ladyship?" she replied. "Of course I remember!"

Carter was heartened. She was unlikely to have forgotten such a memorable object. However, her reply to his next question not only dashed his hopes but also flummoxed him.

"Pawned it!" she said then thinking back, "Maybe ten years ago it was."

"Pawned it? Not taken it to a jeweler, say?"

"Why would I do that?"

"For the diamonds and rubies. No pawn shop owner would have the cash to cover its worth."

"There weren't no diamonds and rubies. It was a nice enough piece, make no mistake, and I was touched when her ladyship gave it to me. I even wore it for a while, but then I came to an age when I no longer cared to."

Carter's thoughts scrambled, like a tangle of underbrush. Out of the thicket darted two hares, scampering in opposite directions. Either he was a fool who had sent himself on a useless errand or the story the late duke had told Serena had flaws. He chose to chase down the latter hare first.

"What was inside the locket? Do you remember?"

"I had the thing in my possession for a good ten years," she snapped, "of course I

remember. On one side it held a portrait of a couple, likely newlyweds, and on the other side an infant. I never removed the pictures because I liked them, me never having married or had a child.”

“Any distinctive markings?”

She thought it over. “On the back were the letters JCGJ.”

He was about to ask *Do you remember where you pawned it?* then corrected himself to say instead, “Tell me where you pawned it.”

“Joseph’s on Gutter Lane.” She gestured vaguely in the direction.

He thanked her for her help and, thoughts churning, made his way to Joseph’s. He had to duck under the low door with the bell and was immediately swallowed by a profusion of personal possessions their owners no longer needed or could no longer afford to keep: the walls were covered kitchen implements, the ceiling was crowded with musical instruments hanging from wires, one long table held a collection of hats sitting atop old wigs that might find their way into some shoeblack’s box, while another table was piled with old clothes serviceable as rags. At the back squatted several large glass cases piled with jewelry. Carter naturally gravitated toward the cases.

A rather grizzled man, presumably Joseph, responding to the tinkle of the bell at the door, came out from behind the curtain separating the back room. He was still chewing whatever he had been eating, so had to swallow before asking his customer’s fancy.

Carter described what he was looking for.

Joseph nodded with a professional air. “Mary Bower. Ten years, no, nine and a half years ago. It was nice enough to give to my daughter.”

Carter drew a deep breath for patience. “And your daughter is on the premises, perhaps?”

Joseph turned around and shouted, “Jane, come out!”

A younger woman, who fortunately had not inherited her looks from her father, emerged, almost miraculously (to Carter’s mind at this point) wearing a locket around her neck. It was silver and pretty enough. Although for a peeress of the realm it was nothing more than a bauble, he could see why the daughter of a shopkeeper would wear it on a continual basis.

Carter’s first question was, “Did you keep the pictures it came with?”

Jane opened the locket to reveal what Mary Bower – and Serena before her – had described.

“I’d like to buy it.”

Joseph flourished his chin. “It’ll cost you two pounds.”

The haggling commenced, and a few minutes later Carter left the shop with locket in hand and sixty-two pence the poorer.

\*\*\*\*\*

His love’s initial reaction to the object when he put it in her hand mirrored his: puzzled disappointment mixed with relief. They were standing in the back hallway at Diana’s.

“It’s good you got it,” she said, slightly frowning as she examined the locket inside and out, “but what a lot of trouble for something that’s nice but hardly magnificent.” She looked up at him. “Now what? I suppose we take it to the new duke and see if he recognizes the portraits.”

He didn’t think he’d ever tire of looking at her or wanting her. Before answering he kissed her nose. This action led to a full embrace, more kissing and then a quick trip upstairs.

Stretched out on the bed, happy as a man could be, holding his love in his arms, he finally replied, “Yes, we take it to him.”

Snuggling against him, she whispered into his ear, “No wonder Lord Goddard was confused. And notice how I didn’t mention that all his lordship’s lovely counters were worth a bit more than sixty-two pence.”

He chuckled. “You just did, love.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The next day they mounted the steps Carter had trod a little over the month before to arrive at the front door of Bradford House on Portman Square. The same butler who had led Carter to the late grace’s bedchamber ushered them now, at a pace eloquent of age and dignity, to the new grace’s library.

At the desk sat Gareth Avery, the Fifth Duke of Bradford. He made a half-effort to rise at their entrance, as if unsure of the social protocol. He offered the semblance of a greeting then sat back down, waving vaguely toward two chairs opposite. Carter first seated Serena then himself. His gaze fell on the letter laying open before his grace on the desk. Carter recognized the hand of Mr. Turnbull. He’d start there.

“I suppose you’re wondering, Your Grace, why we asked to see you today.”

“Wondering, yes, wondering,” was the reply.

Carter reached out and put the locket on the desk. "Do you recognize the portraits inside?"

His grace picked it up and opened it. He said tonelessly, "Yes, these are miniatures of portraits hanging in the west wing of Bradford Manor."

Carter exchanged a glance with his love expressing the idea *At least we got the locket part right!*

Carter continued, "We thought it may have been your mother's, and we're glad that you can confirm it."

His grace looked up but not at them. He gaze travelled out a window. "I never knew my mother."

"In that case I hope you're glad you've had a piece of her memory returned to you."

His grace did not react as if he was happy – or any other emotion – about holding his mother's long-lost locket.

Out of curiosity Carter pursued, "Do you know if this piece could be part of a collection of jewelry created in Russia, other pieces having diamonds and rubies?"

Here his grace showed a bit of animation when he turned the locket over and said the name associated with the engraved initials, "Johann Caspar Gottlieb Jaeger, yes, a fine craftsman, along with Ivan Shukin, Grigory Plotov and Alexei Zuyev who made the pieces in the Russian jewelry collection from my mother's family. They worked between 1680 and 1714, I've checked, can't get precise dates, but have to be satisfied with what I can find out. That's what my wife says." He added as an afterthought, "My wife has a diamond and ruby set of earrings, necklace and ring she wears. Russian. She doesn't wear it every day. She says once or twice a year. I say three. I've counted."

"What's the locket worth?" Serena wanted to know.

His grace turned the locket over in his hand. "A good ten or fifteen pounds, given the reputation of the silversmith who made it. The etching on the cover is very fine. The locket hasn't been well cared for, so it would be easy to undervalue."

Carter would have responded to his love's provocative whisper, "Still less than the sum of Lord Goddard's counters" but he was distracted by the name on a letter lying on the corner of the desk nearest him.

"Thank you for the information, Your Grace, most interesting, and now I've noticed something." He pointed. "Here is a letter addressed to Miss Serena Marsh."

His grace looked at Carter blankly, as if he had not been introduced to the addressee a few minutes before and as if she had not just gasped.

"I had wondered!" she said.

"May I?" Carter asked, moving his hand between the letter and Miss Marsh.

By way of reply, his grace said tonelessly, "I didn't send it because it isn't franked. If my father had signed his name on the envelope I would have sent it along. But he didn't sign it, so I didn't send it."

Carter didn't need further interactions with this strange man to understand the late duke's problems with his son. He suggested gently, "Since Miss Marsh is here now, perhaps it would be all right if I delivered it to her."

"If you like."

Carter handed his love the letter the late duke had written her and had not got around to sending.

She opened it and began to read. Her brow knit then the color began to rise up her throat and finally her mouth fell open. When she came to the end she turned to the next page in the envelope. Now her eyes flew wide open. She blinked several times then put the letter down. Although the look in her eyes was wrathful, her voice was in tight control when she said, "The mystery has been solved."

"That's good, no?" he asked tentatively.

"Depending on how you look at it," she retorted swiftly. "Would you like me to make a scene here? Or shall we go outside in the street?"

Carter looked at his host who seemed rather detached by the exchange. "I suppose here will do."

With a grand gesture she handed him the second of the two pages in her envelope. "Here is a deed to a tract of land in Surrey. Around Hartsfield, I'm guessing."

Carter took the document and formed the picture of what had happened. He turned to his host and explained, "Your father apparently mixed things up a bit. He put the deed to the land for me in Miss Marsh's envelope and put the deed to Miss Marsh's house in mine." He turned to his love whose eyes were still flashing. "You see, I was right all along. Your aunt's house was never mine to take."

She sent him a baleful regard and held up the late duke's letter. "And this, John Carter, is a letter of introduction: you to me. The duke tells me I can expect a visit

from a very fine detective to whom he's sent the tally of my aunt's debts. He's very sure this fine detective will be able to find a way of wiping out the remaining twenty pounds of debt by uncovering unscrupulous tradesmen who might have overcharged her."

He had to defend himself. "I received only the tally of your arrangement with the duke. I had no way to know anything about tradesmen. You were supposed to tell me that."

"Yes," she said with icy graciousness, "and now we come to one glaring matter."

Glaring it was. Carter would have felt badly except for the evident facts that she looked magnificent in her anger and that he couldn't regret for a moment how their relationship had started and where it had arrived.

"You have nothing to say?" she queried with some scorn. "Let *me* see, then. You called them 'the particulars,' as I recall, of arriving at the Rose Room, which you summarized as having been told the code words *and so forth*. I'm guessing now there was no 'and so forth' and that the duke didn't tell you anything about my arrangement with him!"

He really wished he could talk his way around the problem. The best he could come up with was, "When you dropped the sheet and said 'Your hour begins now. Pray tell me your stories' I will admit to being surprised."

"And you didn't think to say 'Cover yourself?'"

He told the truth. "No, that didn't occur to me."

"Or 'I think I have intruded where I shouldn't, so I will leave now?'"

He shook his head. "No, not that either."

He held her gaze steady and managed to quell his laughter. She finally knew she had been unfairly exposed to him, but she also knew how much he loved her. He saw the struggle with her warring emotions play out of her face.

She resolved her conflict with a noise of disgust. "If we hadn't gone through what we've gone through to get here, and if I had never received this letter, would you have ever told me of the shameless advantage you took of *my* ignorance of *your* ignorance?"

He answered, as if pondering the matter deeply, "Maybe one day, after we'd been married a long time and well settled in together."

"Married?"

He saw no better opening. He stood up then got down on one knee. He took her hands in his. "I love you, Serena Marsh, and am prepared to give you my most valued possession: my heart. Nothing would make me happier than for you to consent to marry me."

\*\*\*\*\*

### Epilogue

Three Weeks Later

Mr. and Mrs. John Carter found themselves in the cemetery of St. Mary the Virgin in Mortlake, standing in front of the Fourth Duke of Bradford's grave.

"Although we wished you could have been at the wedding, Your Grace," Carter explained, "you'll be happy to know your son and his wife attended. We invited him because your son was witness to my proposal."

"We were a bit surprised he came," Serena added, "although now that I've met him, I can see that while he has a firm grasp of estate business he has none of his own consequence."

"Tactfully said, my dear," her husband murmured.

"So I suppose that's why he would lower himself to attend a common marriage ceremony in the church at Brad's Ford and the wedding feast afterwards."

"Or, perhaps, he knew his father would want him to attend," he suggested, "because he – that is, you, Your Grace – are responsible for our union. You wanted us to have each other in the end, and that's the greatest prize. It was matchmaking you were about, we realized, and we've come to thank you."

"Yes, matchmaking, but with one *small* hiccough."

To his grace he said, "And she's bound to plague me with it for the rest of my life."

She sighed. "I will say, about the hiccough, I was glad to know you meant for the two of us to meet in a more traditional way. I thought you had developed a true fondness for me. Now I see you did." She turned to her husband with all her love shining from her eyes. "And you sent me John."

They then took turns recounting the wedding, which took place as quickly as they could contrive, namely the week before, in the little church in Brad's Ford. It was filled to overflowing with the entire population of Hartsfield, friends and neighbors from Russell Square, the full complement of Bow Street detectives, Sir John, Aunt Diana, and villagers from Brad's Ford well known to the extended Carter family. Serena had fallen in love with John's family just as quickly as they had with her and Thomas, in particular, was happy to have a new mother but even happier his father

had a new wife. The country people were delighted to finally meet the new duke, whom they had imagined to be too high in the instep to wish to meet them, but once having met him, they realized the new duke had, as Smitty put it, “a bad dent in his anvil.” Being kind folk they embraced him and invited him to send his children to them whenever the duke and duchess wanted. They would have much to teach the son, and future Sixth Duke, about farming.

“And with that offer,” Carter said, “your Gareth showed real interest in learning about how we do things in the hamlet, which made me think of the interest you had when you were a lad. So that’s something you and your son have in common.”

Serena embroidered on that topic for a bit then said brightly, “One good matchmaking turn deserves another! My Aunt Diana took a liking to Sir John, so my John and I are going to do what we can to bring them together.”

They then went on to describe the beauty of an inn in Surrey where they spent their weeklong honeymoon. When they could think of no more details to recount, Carter said, “One last thing, Your Grace. Although my Serena and I are well suited, as you imagined we might be, I’m sorry to tell you my wife is overly concerned with the pound value of everything”

His wife elbowed him in the ribs and corrected, “I’m good with numbers.”

“Ach,” he scoffed, “she wants me to profit our household from my skill at cards. Me, I’ll prefer to spend my evenings at home.”

“My husband has terribly misrepresented my suggestion, Your Grace,” Serena said. “I merely inquired whether John could see his way, from time to time – that is, if we’re pinched – to finding a good card game and winning what we need.”

“Is that what you had in mind for me, Your Grace?” he queried, mock aggrieved. “That I should gamble for my living?”

“He did send you to a woman from a gaming hell,” she pointed out.

“It’s true he did, and I’ll live with that, and we’ve only begun discussion of perhaps selling Diana’s – that is, after we’ve regularized the, ah, irregularities in its accounting practices with the authorities.” Here he gave his wife a look of reprimand. “For now there’s nothing more to say. My Serena has told me about your rules of storytelling, Your Grace, which include a lot of colorful details and a digression or two, and I hope we’ve provided it.”

Serena reminded him, “You forgot the surprise ending.”

“Isn’t the surprise that we got married, with the twist being it did not matter in the end which deed was in which envelope?”

“No, love,” she said, “and here it is: I’m pregnant.”

He gave a great shout of pleasure, fell in love all over again, and folded her into his arms. Before they turned away to return home to Bedford Square, he said,

“We’ll be back, from time to time, Your Grace, to let you know how things are going.”