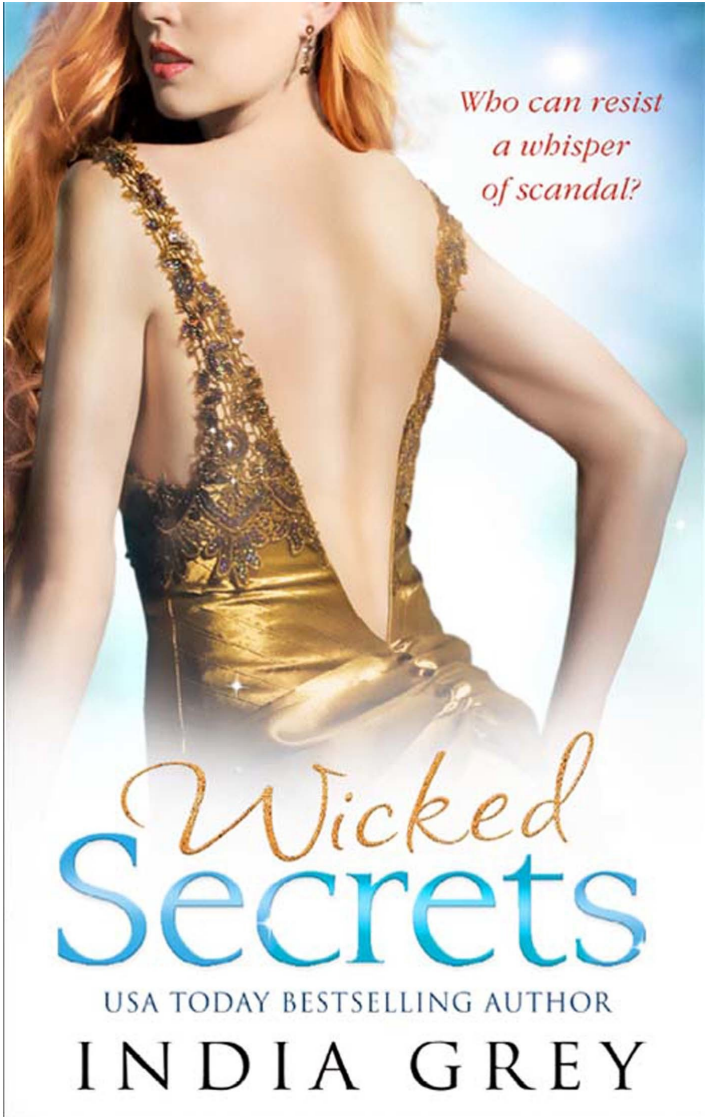

Who can resist
a whisper
of scandal?
Wicked
Secrets
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
INDIA GREY

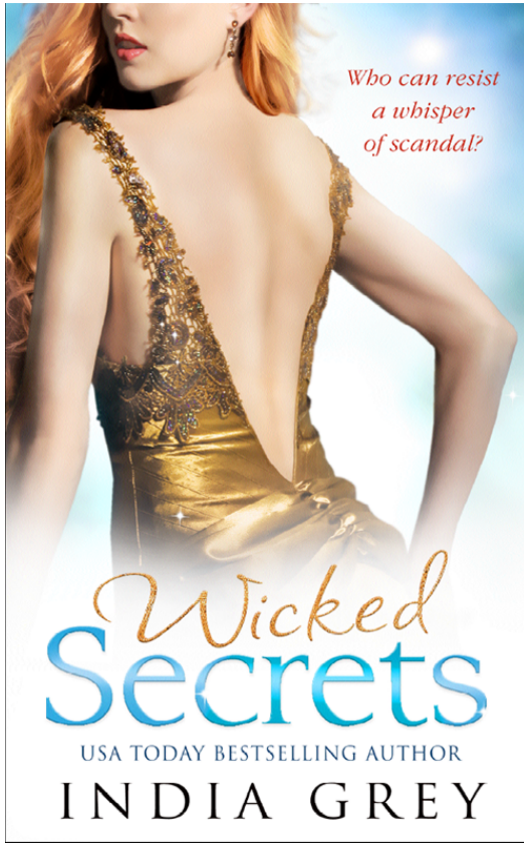
India Grey
Wicked Secrets: Craving the Forbidden

Аннотация

Do you want to know a secret? When Sophie Greenham agrees to do a favour for a friend she doesn't think she'll end up at Alnburgh Castle. Stepping into a world dripping with old-school glamour, her and her knock-off designer handbag do not belong. Pretending to be her gay friend's girlfriend she's out of her depth enough in a world of champagne, chandeliers and chauffeur-driven cars, the last thing she needs is a crush on returning army Major and heir apparent Kit Fitzroy.But scandal and secrets bubble under the surface of even the best champagne…and dark truths about the Fitzroy dynasty are about to be revealed…'I love her books' Penny Jordan 'A timeless, unforgettable romance' Romantic Times

Содержание

About the Author 5
Wicked Secrets 6
Contents 7
CHAPTER ONE 9
CHAPTER TWO 23
CHAPTER THREE 31
CHAPTER FOUR 49
CHAPTER FIVE 60
CHAPTER SIX 76
CHAPTER SEVEN 98
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 110


Who can resist
a whisper
of scandal?
Wicked
Secrets
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
INDIA GREY

About the Author

INDIA GREY's qualifications for a writing career include a degree in English Language and Literature, an obsession with fancy stationery and an inexhaustible passion for daydreaming. She grew up—and still lives—in a small market town in rural Cheshire with her husband and three daughters, loves history and vintage stuff and is a firm believer in love at first sight.

You can visit her website at www.indiagrey.com, check out her blog at www.indiagrey.blogspot.com or find her on twitter.

Wicked Secrets
India Grey

www.millsandboon.co.uk

For my blog regulars
With thanks for listening,
sharing and making me smile.

Contents

Cover
About the Author
Title Page
Dedication
Part One
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Part Two
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Epilogue
Copyright Page

Part 1

CHAPTER ONE

'LADIES and gentlemen, welcome aboard the 16.22 East Coast Mainline service from King's Cross to Edinburgh. This train will be calling at Peterborough, Stevenage…'

Heart hammering against her ribs from the mad, last-minute dash down the platform carrying a bag that was about to burst at the seams, Sophie Greenham leaned against the wall of the train and let out a long exhalation of relief.

She had made it.

Of course, the relief was maybe a little misplaced given that she'd come straight from the casting session for a vampire film and was still wearing a black satin corset dress that barely covered her bottom and high-heeled black boots that were rather more vamp than vampire. But the main thing was she had caught the train and wouldn't let Jasper down. She'd just have to keep her coat on to avoid getting arrested for indecent exposure.

Not that she'd want to take it off anyway, she thought grimly, wrapping it more tightly around her as the train gave a little lurch and began to move. For weeks now the snow had kept falling from a pewter-grey sky and the news headlines had been dominated by The Big Freeze. Paris had been just as bad, although there the snow *looked* cleaner, but when Sophie had left her little rented apartment two days ago there had been a thick layer of ice on the inside of the windows.

She seemed to have been cold for an awfully long time.

It was getting dark already. The plate-glass windows of the office blocks backing onto the railway line spilled light out onto the grimy snow. The train swayed beneath her, changing tracks and catching her off guard so that she tottered on the stupid high-heeled boots and almost fell into an alarmed-looking student on his way back from the buffet car. She really should go and find a loo to change into something more respectable, but now she'd finally stopped rushing she was overwhelmed with tiredness. Picking up her bag, she hoisted it awkwardly into the nearest carriage.

Her heart sank. It was instantly obvious that every seat was taken, and the aisle was cluttered with shopping bags and briefcases and heavy winter coats stuffed under seats. Muttering apologies as she staggered along, trying not to knock cardboard cartons of coffee out of the hands of commuters with her bag, she made her way into the next carriage.

It was just as bad as the last one. The feeling of triumph she'd had when she'd made it onto the train in time ebbed slowly away as she moved from one carriage to the next, apologising as she went, until finally she came to one that was far less crowded.

Sophie's aching shoulders dropped in relief. And tensed again as she took in the strip of plush carpet, the tiny lights on the tables, the superior upholstery with the little covers over the headrests saying 'First Class'.

Pants.

It was occupied almost entirely by businessmen who didn't bother to look up from their laptops and newspapers as she passed. Until her mobile rang. Her ringtone—'Je Ne Regrette Rien'—had seemed wittily ironic in Paris, but in the hushed carriage it lost some of its charm. Holding the handles of her bag together in one hand while she scrabbled in the pocket of her coat with the other and tried to stop it falling open to reveal the wardrobe horror beneath, she was aware of heads turning, eyes looking up at her over the tops of glasses and from behind broadsheets. In desperation she hitched her bag onto the nearest table and pulled the phone from her pocket just in time to see Jean-Claude's name on the screen.

Pants again.

A couple of months ago she would have had a very different reaction, she thought, hastily pressing the button to reject the call. But then a couple of months ago her image of Jean-Claude as a free-spirited Parisian artist had been intact. He'd seemed so aloof when she'd first seen him, delivering paintings to the set of the film she was working on. Aloof and glamorous. Not someone you could ever imagine being suffocating or possessive or …

Nope. She wasn't going to think about the disaster that had been her latest romantic adventure.

She sat down in the nearest seat, suddenly too tired to go any further. You couldn't keep moving for ever, she told herself with a stab of bleak humour. In the seat opposite there was yet another businessman, hidden behind a large newspaper that he'd

thoughtfully folded so that the horoscopes were facing her.

Actually, he wasn't *entirely* hidden; she could see his hands, holding the newspaper—tanned, long-fingered, strong-looking. Not the hands of a businessman, she thought abstractly, tearing her gaze away and looking for Libra. 'Be prepared to work hard to make a good impression,' she read. 'The full moon on the 20th is a perfect opportunity to let others see you for who you really are.'

Hell. It was the twentieth today. And while she was prepared to put on an Oscar-worthy performance to impress Jasper's family, the last thing she wanted was for them to see her for who she really was.

At that moment Edith Piaf burst into song again. She groaned—why couldn't Jean-Claude take a hint? Quickly she went to shut Edith up and turn her phone off but at that moment the train swayed again and her finger accidentally hit the 'answer' button instead. A second later Jean-Claude's Merlot-marinated voice was clearly audible, to her and about fifteen businessmen.

'Sophie? Sophie, where are you—?'

She thought quickly, cutting him off before he had a chance to get any further. 'Hello, you haf reached the voicemail service for Madame Sofia, astrologist and reader of cards,' she purred, shaking her hair back and narrowing her eyes at her own reflection in the darkening glass of the window. 'Eef you leaf your name, number and zodiac sign, I get back to you with information on what the fates haf in store for you—'

She stopped abruptly, losing her thread, a kick of electricity jolting through her as she realised she was staring straight into the reflected eyes of the man sitting opposite.

Or rather that, from behind the newspaper, *he* was staring straight into *her* eyes. His head was lowered, his face ghostly in the glass, but his dark eyes seemed to look straight into her.

For a second she was helpless to do anything but look back. Against the stark white of his shirt his skin was tanned, which seemed somehow at odds with his stern, ascetic face. It was the face of a medieval knight in a Pre-Raphaelite painting—beautiful, bloodless, remote.

In other words, absolutely not her type.

'Sophie—is zat you? I can 'ardly 'ear you. Are you on Eurostar? Tell me what time you get in and I meet you at Gare du Nord.'

Oops, she'd forgotten all about Jean-Claude. Gathering herself, she managed to drag her gaze away from the reflection in the window and her attention back to the problem quite literally in hand. She'd better just come clean, or he'd keep ringing for the whole weekend she was staying with Jasper's family and rather ruin her portrayal of the sweet, starry-eyed girlfriend.

'I'm not on the Eurostar, no,' she said carefully. 'I'm not coming back tonight.'

'*Alors*, when?' he demanded. 'The painting—I need you here. I need to see your skin—to feel it, to capture contrast with lily petals.'

‘Nude with Lilies’ was the vision Jean-Claude claimed had come to him the moment he’d first noticed her in a bar in the Marais, near where they’d been filming. Jasper had been over that weekend and thought it was hilarious. Sophie, hugely flattered to be singled out and by Jean-Claude’s extravagant compliments about her ‘skin like lily petals’ and ‘hair like flames’, had thought being painted would be a highly erotic experience.

The reality had turned out to be both extremely cold and mind-numbingly boring. Although, if Jean-Claude’s gaze had aroused a similar reaction to that provoked by the eyes of the man in the glass, it would have been a very different story …

‘Oh, dear. Maybe you could just paint in a few more lilies to cover up the skin?’ She bit back a breathless giggle and went on kindly, ‘Look, I don’t know when I’ll be back, but what we had wasn’t meant to be for ever, was it? Really, it was just sex—’

Rather fittingly, at that point the train whooshed into a tunnel and the signal was lost. Against the blackness beyond the window the reflected interior of the carriage was bright, and for the briefest moment Sophie caught the eye of the man opposite and knew he’d been looking at her again. The grey remains of the daylight made the reflection fade before she had time to read the expression on his face, but she was left in no doubt that it had been disapproving.

And in that second she was eight years old again, holding her mother’s hand and aware that people were staring at them, judging them. The old humiliation flared inside her as she heard

her mother's voice inside her head, strident with indignation. *Just ignore them, Summer. We have as much right to be here as anyone else …*

'Sophie?'

'Yes,' she said, suddenly subdued. 'Sorry, Jean-Claude. I can't talk about this now. I'm on the train and the signal isn't very good.'

'*D'accord*. I call you later.'

'No! You can't call me *at all* this weekend. I-I'm … working, and you know I can't take my phone on set. Look, I'll call you when I get back to London on Monday. We can talk properly then.'

That was a stupid thing to say, she thought wearily as she turned her phone off. There was nothing to talk *about*. What she and Jean-Claude had shared had been fun, that was all. Fun. A romantic adventure in wintry Paris. Now it had reached its natural conclusion and it was time to move on.

Again.

Shoving her phone back into her pocket, she turned towards the window. Outside it was snowing again and, passing through some anonymous town, Sophie could see the flakes swirling fatly in the streetlamps and obliterating the footprints on the pavements, and rows of neat houses, their curtains shut against the winter evening. She imagined the people behind them; families slumped together in front of the TV, arguing cosily over the remote control, couples cuddled up on the sofa sharing

a Friday evening bottle of wine, united against the cold world outside.

A blanket of depression settled on her at these mental images of comfortable domesticity. It was a bit of a sore point at the moment. Returning from Paris she'd discovered that, in her absence, her flatmate's boyfriend had moved in and the flat had been turned into the headquarters of the Blissful Couples Society. The atmosphere of companionable sluttishness in which she and Jess had existed, cluttering up the place with make-up and laundry and trashy magazines, had vanished. The flat was immaculate, and there were new cushions on the sofa and candles on the kitchen table.

Jasper's SOS phone call, summoning her up to his family home in Northumberland to play the part of his girlfriend for the weekend, had come as a huge relief. But this was the way it was going to be, she thought sadly as the town was left behind and the train plunged onwards into darkness again. Everyone pairing up, until she was the only single person left, the only one who actively didn't want a relationship or commitment. Even Jasper was showing worrying signs of swapping late nights and dancing for cosy evenings in as things got serious with Sergio.

But why have serious when you could have *fun*?

Getting abruptly to her feet, she picked up her bag and hoisted it onto the luggage rack above her head. It wasn't easy, and she was aware as she pushed and shoved that not only was the hateful dress riding up, but her coat had also fallen open, no doubt

giving the man in the seat opposite an eyeful of straining black corset and an indecent amount of thigh. Prickling all over with embarrassment, she glanced at his reflection in the window.

He wasn't looking at her at all. His head was tipped back against the seat, his face completely blank and remote as he focused on the newspaper. Somehow his indifference felt even more hurtful than his disapproving scrutiny earlier. Pulling her coat closed, she sat down again, but as she did so her knee grazed his thigh beneath the table.

She froze, and a shower of glowing sparks shimmered through her.

'Sorry,' she muttered, yanking her legs away from his and tucking them underneath her on the seat.

Slowly the newspaper was lowered, and she found herself looking at him directly for the first time. The impact of meeting his eyes in glassy reflection had been powerful enough, but looking directly into them was like touching a live wire. They weren't brown, as she'd thought, but the grey of cold Northern seas, heavy-lidded, fringed with thick, dark lashes, compelling enough to distract her for a moment from the rest of his face.

Until he smiled.

A faint ghost of a smile that utterly failed to melt the ice in his eyes, but did draw her attention down to his mouth …

'No problem. As this is First Class you'd think there'd be enough legroom, wouldn't you?'

His voice was low and husky, and so sexy that her spirits

should have leapt at the prospect of spending the next four hours in close confinement with him. However, the slightly scornful emphasis he placed on the words 'first' and 'class' and the way he was looking at her as if she were a caterpillar on the chef's salad in some swanky restaurant cancelled out his physical attractiveness.

She had issues with people who looked at her like that.

'Absolutely,' she agreed, with that upper-class self-assurance that gave the people who genuinely possessed it automatic admittance to anywhere. 'Shocking, really.' And then with what she hoped was utter insouciance she turned up the big collar of her shabby military-style coat, settled herself more comfortably in her seat and closed her eyes.

Kit Fitzroy put down the newspaper.

Usually when he was on leave he avoided reading reports about the situation he'd left behind; somehow the heat and the sand and the desperation never quite came across in columns of sterile black and white. He'd bought the newspaper to catch up on normal things like rugby scores and racing news, but had ended up reading all of it in an attempt to obliterate the image of the girl sitting opposite him, which seemed to have branded itself onto his retinas.

It hadn't worked. Even the laughably inaccurate report of counter-terrorist operations in the Middle East hadn't stopped him being aware of her.

It was hardly surprising, he thought acidly. He'd spent the last

four months marooned in the desert with a company made up entirely of men, and he was still human enough to respond to a girl wearing stiletto boots and the briefest bondage dress beneath a fake army coat. Especially one with a husky nightclub singer's voice who actually seemed to be complaining to the lovesick fool on the other end of the phone that all she'd wanted was casual sex.

After the terrible sombreness of the ceremony he'd just attended her appearance was like a swift shot of something extremely potent.

He suppressed a rueful smile.

Potent, if not particularly sophisticated.

He let his gaze move back to her. She had fallen asleep as quickly and neatly as a cat, her legs tucked up beneath her, a slight smile on her raspberry-pink lips, as if she was dreaming of something amusing. She had a sweep of black eyeliner on her upper lids, flicking up at the outside edges, which must be what gave her eyes their catlike impression.

He frowned. No—it wasn't just that. It was their striking green too. He could picture their exact shade—the clear, cool green of new leaves—even now, when she was fast asleep.

If she really was asleep. When it came to deception Kit Fitzroy's radar was pretty accurate, and this girl had set it off from the moment she'd appeared. But there was something about her now that convinced him that she wasn't faking this. It wasn't just how still she was, but that the energy that had crackled around her before had vanished. It was like a light going out. Like

the sun going in, leaving shadows and a sudden chill.

Sleep—the reward of the innocent. Given the shamelessness with which she'd just lied to her boyfriend it didn't seem fair, especially when it eluded him so cruelly. But it had wrapped her in a cloak of complete serenity, so that just looking at her, just watching the lock of bright coppery hair that had fallen across her face stir with each soft, steady breath made him aware of the ache of exhaustion in his own shoulders.

'Tickets, please.'

The torpor that lay over the warm carriage was disturbed by the arrival of the guard. There was a ripple of activity as people roused themselves to open briefcases and fumble in suit pockets. On the opposite side of the table the girl's sooty lashes didn't even flutter.

She was older than he'd first thought, Kit saw now, older than the ridiculous teenage get-up would suggest—in her mid-twenties perhaps? Even so, there was something curiously childlike about her. If you ignored the creamy swell of her cleavage against the laced bodice of her dress, anyway.

And he was doing his best to ignore it.

The guard reached them, his bland expression changing to one of deep discomfort when he looked down and saw her. His tongue flicked nervously across his lips and he raised his hand, shifting from foot to foot as he reached uneasily down to wake her.

'Don't.'

The guard looked round, surprised. He wasn't the only one, Kit thought. Where had that come from? He smiled blandly.

'It's OK. She's with me.'

'Sorry, sir. I didn't realise. Do you have your tickets?'

'No.' Kit flipped open his wallet. 'I—*we*—had been planning to travel north by plane.'

'Ah, I see, sir. The weather has caused quite a disruption to flights, I understand. That's why the train is so busy this evening. Is it a single or a return you want?'

'Return.' Hopefully the airports would be open again by Sunday, but he wasn't taking any chances. The thought of being stuck indefinitely at Alnburgh with his family in residence was unbearable.

'Two returns—to Edinburgh?'

Kit nodded absently and as the guard busied himself with printing out the tickets he looked back at the sleeping girl again. He was damned certain she didn't have a first-class ticket and that, in spite of the almost-convincing posh-girl accent, she wouldn't be buying one if she was challenged. So why had he not just let the guard wake her up and move her on? It would have made the rest of the journey better for him. More legroom. More peace of mind.

Kit Fitzroy had an inherent belief in his duty to look out for people who didn't have the same privileges that he had. It was what had got him through officer training and what kept him going when he was dropping with exhaustion on patrol, or when

he was walking along a deserted road to an unexploded bomb. It didn't usually compel him to buy first-class tickets for strangers on the train. And anyway, this girl looked as if she was more than capable of looking after herself.

But with her outrageous clothes and her fiery hair and her slight air of mischief she had brightened up his journey. She'd jolted him out of the pall of gloom that hung over him after the service he'd just attended, as well as providing a distraction from thinking about the grim weekend ahead.

That had to be worth the price of a first-class ticket from London to Edinburgh. Even without the glimpse of cleavage and the brush of her leg against his, which had reminded him that, while several of the men he'd served with weren't so lucky, he at least was still alive …

That was just a bonus.

CHAPTER TWO

SOPHIE came to with a start, and a horrible sense that something was wrong.

She sat up, blinking beneath the bright lights as she tried to get her bearings. The seat opposite was empty. The man with the silver eyes must have got off while she was sleeping, and she was just asking herself why on earth she should feel disappointed about that when she saw him.

He was standing up, his back towards her as he lifted an expensive-looking leather bag down from the luggage rack, giving her an excellent view of his extremely broad shoulders and narrow hips encased in beautifully tailored black trousers.

Mmm … *That* was why, she thought drowsily. Because physical perfection like that wasn't something you came across every day. And although it might come in a package with industrial-strength arrogance, it certainly was nice to look at.

'I'm sorry—could you tell me where we are, please?'

Damn—she'd forgotten about the posh accent, and after being asleep for so long she sounded more like a barmaid with a sixty-a-day habit than a wholesome society girl. Not that it really mattered now, since she'd never see him again.

He shrugged on the kind of expensive reefer jacket men wore in moody black and white adverts in glossy magazines. 'Alnburgh.'

The word delivered a jolt of shock to Sophie's sleepy brain. With an abrupt curse she leapt to her feet, groping frantically for her things, but at that moment the train juddered to an abrupt halt. She lost her balance, falling straight into his arms.

At least that was how it would have happened in any one of the romantic films she'd ever worked on. In reality she didn't so much fall into his waiting, welcoming arms as against the unyielding, rock-hard wall of his chest. He caught hold of her in the second before she ricocheted off him, one arm circling her waist like a band of steel. Rushing to steady herself, Sophie automatically put the flat of her hand against his chest.

Sexual recognition leapt into life inside her, like an alarm going off in her pelvis. He might look lean, but there was no mistaking the hard, sculpted muscle beneath the Savile Row shirt.

Wide-eyed with shock, she looked up at him, opening her mouth in an attempt to form some sort of apology. But somehow there were blank spaces in her head where the words should be and the only coherent thought in her head was how astonishing his eyes were, close up; the silvery luminescence of the irises ringed with a darker grey …

'I have to get off—now,' she croaked.

It wasn't exactly a line from the romantic epics. He let her go abruptly, turning his head away.

'It's OK. We're not in the station yet.'

As he spoke the train began to move forwards with another

jolt that threatened to unbalance her again. As if she weren't unbalanced enough already, she thought shakily, trying to pull down her bulging bag from where it was wedged in the luggage rack. Glancing anxiously out of the window, she saw the lights of cars waiting at a level crossing slide past the window, a little square signal box, cosily lit inside, with a sign saying 'Alnburgh' half covered in snow. She gave another futile tug and heard an impatient sound from behind her.

'Here, let me.'

In one lithe movement he leaned over her and grasped the handle of her bag.

'No, wait—the zip—' Sophie yelped, but it was too late. There was a ripping sound as the cheap zip, already under too much pressure from the sheer volume of stuff bundled up inside, gave way and Sophie watched in frozen horror as a tangle of dresses and tights and shoes tumbled out.

And underwear, of course.

It was terrible. Awful. Like the moment in a nightmare just before you wake up. But it was also pretty funny. Clamping a hand over her open mouth, Sophie couldn't stop a bubble of hysterical laughter escaping her.

'You might want to take that back to the shop,' the man remarked sardonically, reaching up to unhook an emerald-green satin balcony bra that had got stuck on the edge of the luggage rack. 'I believe Gucci luggage carries a lifetime guarantee?'

Sophie dropped to her knees to retrieve the rest of her things.

Possibly it did, but cheap designer fakes certainly didn't, as he no doubt knew very well. Getting up again, she couldn't help but be aware of the length of his legs, and had to stop herself from reaching out and grabbing hold of them to steady herself as the train finally came to a shuddering halt in the station.

'Thanks for your help,' she said with as much haughtiness as she could muster when her arms were full of knickers and tights. 'Please, don't let me hold you up any more.'

'I wouldn't, except you're blocking the way to the door.'

Sophie felt her face turn fiery. Pressing herself as hard as she could against the table, she tried to make enough space for him to pass. But he didn't. Instead he took hold of the broken bag and lifted it easily, raising one sardonic eyebrow.

'After you—if you've got everything?'

Alnburgh station consisted of a single Victorian building that had once been rather beautiful but which now had its boarded up windows covered with posters advertising family days out at the seaside. It was snowing again as she stepped off the train, and the air felt as if it had swept straight in from Siberia. Oh, dear, she really should have got changed. Not only was her current ensemble hideously unsuitable for meeting Jasper's family, it was also likely to lead to hypothermia.

'There.'

Sophie had no choice but to turn and face him. Pulling her collar up around her neck, she aimed for a sort of Julie-Christie-in-Doctor-Zhivago look—determination mixed with dignity.

‘You’ll be OK from here?’

‘Y-yes. Thank you.’ Standing there with the snow settling on his shoulders and in his dark hair he looked more brooding and sexy than Omar Shariff had ever done in the film. ‘And thank you for …’

Jeepers, what was the matter with her? Julie Christie would never have let her lines dry up like that.

‘For what?’

‘Oh, you know, carrying my bag, picking up my … things.’

‘My pleasure.’

His eyes met hers and for a second their gazes held. In spite of the cold stinging her cheeks, Sophie felt a tide of heat rise up inside her.

And then the moment was over and he was turning away, his feet crunching on the gritted paving stones, sliding his hands into the pockets of his coat just as the guard blew the whistle for the train to move out of the station again.

That was what reminded her, like a bolt of lightning in her brain. Clamping her hand to her mouth, she felt horror tingle down her spine at the realisation that she hadn’t bought a ticket. Letting out a yelp of horror, followed by the kind of word Julie Christie would never use, Sophie dashed forwards towards the guard, whose head was sticking out of the window of his van.

‘No—wait. Please! I didn’t—’

But it was too late. The train was gathering pace and her voice was lost beneath the rumble of the engine and the squealing of the

metal wheels on the track. As she watched the lights of the train melt back into the winter darkness Sophie's heart was beating hard, anguish knotting inside her at what she'd inadvertently done.

Stolen something. That was what it amounted to, didn't it? Travelling on the train without buying a ticket was, in effect, committing a criminal act, as well as a dishonest one.

An act of theft.

And that was one thing she would never, *ever* do.

The clatter of the train died in the distance and Sophie was aware of the silence folding all around her. Slowly she turned to walk back to pick up her forlorn-looking bag.

'Is there a problem?'

Her stomach flipped, and then sank like a stone. Great. Captain Disapproval must have heard her shout and come back, thinking she was talking to him. The station light cast dark shadows beneath his cheekbones and made him look more remote than ever. Which was quite something.

'No, no, not at all,' she said stiffly. 'Although before you go perhaps you could tell me where I could find a taxi.'

Kit couldn't quite stop himself from letting out a bark of laughter. It wasn't kind, but the idea of a taxi waiting at Alnburgh station was amusingly preposterous.

'You're not in London now.' He glanced down the platform to where the Bentley waited, Jensen sitting impassively behind the wheel. For some reason he felt responsible—touched almost—by

this girl in her outrageous clothing with the snowflakes catching in her bright hair. 'Look, you'd better come with me.'

Her chin shot up half an inch. Her eyes flashed in the station light—the dark green of the stained glass in the Fitzroy family chapel, with the light shining through it.

'No, thanks,' she said with brittle courtesy. 'I think I'd rather walk.'

That really *was* funny. 'In those boots?'

'Yes,' she said haughtily, setting off quickly, if a little unsteadily, along the icy platform. She looked around, pulling her long army overcoat more tightly across her body.

Catching up with her, Kit arched an eyebrow. 'Don't tell me,' he drawled. 'You're going to join your regiment.'

'No,' she snapped. 'I'm going to stay with my boyfriend, who lives at Alnburgh Castle. So if you could just point me in the right direction …'

Kit stopped. The laughter of a moment ago evaporated in the arctic air, like the plumes of their breaths. In the distance a sheep bleated mournfully.

'And what is the name of your … *boyfriend*?'

Something in the tone of his voice made her stop too, the metallic echo of her stiletto heels fading into silence. When she turned to face him her eyes were wide and black-centred.

'Jasper.' Her voice was shaky but defiant. 'Jasper Fitzroy, although I don't know what it has to do with you.'

Kit smiled again, but this time it had nothing to do with

amusement.

‘Well, since Jasper Fitzroy is my brother, I’d say quite a lot,’ he said with sinister softness. ‘You’d better get in the car.’

CHAPTER THREE

INSIDE the chauffeur-driven Bentley Sophie blew her cheeks out in a long, silent whistle.

What was it that horoscope said?

The car was very warm and very comfortable, but no amount of climate control and expensive upholstery could quite thaw the glacial atmosphere. Apart from a respectfully murmured 'Good evening, Miss,' the chauffeur kept his attention very firmly focused on the road. Sophie didn't blame him. You could cut the tension in the back of the car with a knife.

Sophie sat very upright, leaving as much seat as possible between her fishnetted thigh and his long, hard flannel-covered one. She didn't dare look at Jasper's brother, but was aware of him staring, tense-jawed, out of the window. The village of Alnburgh looked like a scene from a Christmas card as they drove up the main street, past a row of stone houses with low, gabled roofs covered in a crisp meringue-topping of snow, but he didn't look very pleased to be home.

Her mind raced as crazily as the white flakes swirling past the car window, the snatches of information Jasper had imparted about his brother over the years whirling through it. Kit Fitzroy was in the army, she knew that much, and he served abroad a lot, which would account for the unseasonal tan. Oh, and Jasper had once described him as having a 'complete emotion-bypass'.

She recalled the closed expression Jasper's face wore on the rare occasions he mentioned him, the bitter edge his habitual mocking sarcasm took on when he said the words 'my brother'.

She was beginning to understand why. She had only known him for a little over three hours—and most of that time she'd been asleep—but it was enough to find it impossible to believe that this man could be related to Jasper. Sweet, warm, funny Jasper, who was her best friend in the world and the closest thing she had to family.

But the man beside her was his *real* flesh and blood, so surely that meant he couldn't be all bad? It also meant that she should make some kind of effort to get on with him, for Jasper's sake. And her own, since she had to get through an entire weekend in his company.

'So, you must be Kit, then?' she offered. 'I'm Sophie. Sophie Greenham.' She laughed—a habit she had when she was nervous. 'Bizarre, isn't it? Whoever would have guessed we were going to the same place?'

Kit Fitzroy didn't bother to look at her. 'Not you, obviously. Have you known my brother long?'

OK. So she was wrong. He was every bit as bad as she'd first thought. Thinking of the horoscope, she bit back the urge to snap, *Yes, as a matter of fact. I've known your brother for the last seven years, as you would have been very well aware if you took the slightest interest in him*, and kept her voice saccharine sweet as she recited the story she and Jasper had hastily come up with last

night on the phone when he'd asked her to do this.

'Just since last summer. We met on a film.'

The last bit at least was true. Jasper was an assistant director and they had met on a dismal film about the Black Death that mercifully had never seen the light of day. Sophie had spent hours in make-up having sores applied to her face and had had one line to say, but had caught Jasper's eye just as she'd been about to deliver it and noticed that he was shaking with laughter. It had set her off too, and made the next four hours and twenty-two takes extremely challenging, but it had also sealed their friendship, and set its tone. It had been the two of them, united and giggling against the world, ever since.

He turned his head slightly. 'You're an actress?'

'Yes.'

Damn, why did that come out sounding so defensive? Possibly because he said the word 'actress' in the same faintly disdainful tone as other people might say 'lap dancer' or 'shoplifter'. What would he make of the fact that even 'actress' was stretching it for the bit parts she did in films and TV series? Clamping her teeth together, she looked away—and gasped.

Up ahead, lit up in the darkness, cloaked in swirling white like a fairy castle in a child's snow globe, was Alnburgh Castle.

She'd seen pictures, obviously. But nothing had prepared her for the scale of the place, or the impact it made on the surrounding landscape. It stood on top of the cliffs, its grey stone walls seeming to rise directly out of them. This was a side of

Jasper's life she knew next to nothing about, and Sophie felt her mouth fall open as she stared in amazement.

'Bloody hell,' she breathed.

It was the first genuine reaction he'd seen her display, Kit thought sardonically, watching her. And it spoke volumes.

Sympathy wasn't an emotion he was used to experiencing in relation to Jasper, but at that moment he certainly felt something like it now. His brother must be pretty keen on this girl to invite her up here for Ralph Fitzroy's seventieth birthday party, but from what Kit had seen on the train it was obvious the feeling wasn't remotely mutual.

No prizes for guessing what the attraction was for Sophie Greenham.

'Impressive, isn't it?' he remarked acidly.

In the dimly lit interior of the car her eyes gleamed darkly like moonlit pools as she turned to face him. Her voice was breathless, so that she sounded almost intimidated.

'It's incredible. I had no idea …'

'What, that your boyfriend just happened to be the son of the Earl of Hawksworth?' Kit murmured sardonically. 'Of course. You were probably too busy discussing your mutual love of art-house cinema to get round to such mundane subjects as family background.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' she snapped. 'Of course I knew about Jasper's background—*and* his family.'

She said that last bit with a kind of defiant venom that was

clearly meant to let him know that Jasper hadn't given him a good press. He wondered if she thought for a moment that he'd care. It was hardly a well-kept secret that there was no love lost between him and his brother—the spoiled, pampered golden boy. Ralph's second and favourite son.

The noise of the Bentley's engine echoed off the walls of the clock tower as they passed through the arch beneath it. The headlights illuminated the stone walls, dripping with damp, the iron-studded door that led down to the former dungeon that now housed Ralph's wine cellar. Kit felt the invisible iron-hard bands of tension around his chest and his forehead tighten a couple of notches.

It was funny, he spent much of his time in the most dangerous conflict zones on the globe, but in none of them did he ever feel a fraction as isolated or exposed as he did here. When he was working he had his team behind him. Men he could trust.

Trust wasn't something he'd ever associated with home life at Alnburgh, where people told lies and kept secrets and made promises they didn't keep.

He glanced across at the woman sitting beside him, and felt his lip curl. Jasper's new girlfriend was going to fit in very well.

Sophie didn't wait until the chauffeur came round to open the door for her. The moment the car came to a standstill she reached for the handle and threw the door open, desperate to be out of the confined space with Kit Fitzroy.

A gust of salt-scented, ice-edged wind cleared her head but

nearly knocked her sideways, whipping her hair across her face. Impatiently she brushed it away again. Alnburgh Castle loomed ahead of her. And above her and around her too, she thought weakly, turning to look at the fortress-thick walls that stretched into the darkness all around her, rising into huge, imposing buildings and jagged towers.

There was nothing remotely welcoming or inviting about it. Everything about the place was designed to scare people off and keep them out.

Sophie could see that Jasper's brother would be right at home here.

'Thanks, Jensen. I can manage the bags from here.'

'If you're sure, sir …'

Sophie turned in time to see Kit take her bag from the open boot of the Bentley and turn to walk in the direction of the castle's vast, imposing doorway. One strap of the green satin bra he had picked up on the train was hanging out of the top of it.

Hastily she hurried after him, her high heels ringing off the frozen flagstones and echoing around the walls of the castle courtyard.

'Please,' Sophie persisted, not wanting him to put himself out on her account any more than he had—so unwillingly—done already. 'I'd rather take it myself.'

He stopped halfway up the steps. For a split second he paused, as if he was gathering his patience, then turned back to her. His jaw was set but his face was carefully blank.

‘If you insist.’

He held it out to her. He was standing two steps higher than she was, and Sophie had to tilt her head back to look up at him. Thrown for a second by the expression in his hooded eyes, she reached out to take the bag from him but, instead of the strap, found herself grasping his hand. She snatched hers away quickly, at exactly the same time he did, and the bag fell, tumbling down the steps, scattering all her clothes into the snow.

‘Oh, knickers,’ she muttered, dropping to her knees as yet another giggle of horrified, slightly hysterical amusement rose up inside her. Her heart was thumping madly from the accidental contact with him. His hand had felt warm, she thought irrationally. She’d expected it to be as cold as his personality.

‘Hardly,’ he remarked acidly, stooping to pick up a pink thong and tossing it back into the bag. ‘But clearly what passes for them in your wardrobe. You seem to have a lot of underwear and not many clothes.’

The way he said it suggested he didn’t think this was a good thing.

‘Yes, well,’ she said loftily, ‘what’s the point of spending money on clothes that I’m going to get bored of after I’ve worn them once? Underwear is a good investment. Because it’s practical,’ she added defensively, seeing the faint look of scorn on his face. ‘God,’ she muttered crossly, grabbing a handful of clothes back from him. ‘This journey’s turning into one of those awful drawing-room farces.’

Straightening up, he raised an eyebrow. ‘The entire weekend is a bit of a farce, wouldn’t you say?’

He went up the remainder of the steps to the door. Shoving the escaped clothes back into her bag with unnecessary force, Sophie followed him and was about to apologise for having the wrong underwear and the wrong clothes and the wrong accent and occupation and attitude when she found herself inside the castle and her defiance crumbled into dust.

The stone walls rose to a vaulted ceiling what seemed like miles above her head, and every inch was covered with muskets, swords, pikes and other items of barbaric medieval weaponry that Sophie recognised from men-in-tights-with-swords films she’d worked on, but couldn’t begin to name. They were arranged into intricate patterns around helmets and pieces of armour, and the light from a huge wrought-iron lantern that hung on a chain in the centre of the room glinted dully on their silvery surfaces.

‘What a cosy and welcoming entrance,’ she said faintly, walking over to a silver breastplate hanging in front of a pair of crossed swords. ‘I bet you’re not troubled by persistent double-glazing salesmen.’

He didn’t smile. His eyes, she noticed, held the same dull metallic gleam as the armour. ‘They’re seventeenth century. Intended for invading enemies rather than double-glazing salesmen.’

‘Gosh.’ Sophie looked away, trailing a finger down the hammered silver of the breastplate, noticing the shining path it

left through the dust. 'You Fitzroys must have a lot of enemies.'

She was aware of his eyes upon her. Who would have thought that such a cool stare could make her skin feel as if it were burning? Somewhere a clock was ticking loudly, marking out the seconds before he replied, 'Let's just say we protect our interests.'

His voice was dangerously soft. Sophie's heart gave a kick, as if the armour had given her an electric shock. Withdrawing her hand sharply, she jerked her head up to look at him. A faint, sardonic smile touched the corner of his mouth. 'And it's not just invading armies that threaten those.'

His meaning was clear, and so was the thinly veiled warning behind the words. Sophie opened her mouth to protest, but no words came—none that would be any use in defending herself against the accusation he was making anyway, and certainly none that would be acceptable to use to a man with whose family she was going to be a guest for the weekend.

'I-I'd better find Jasper,' she stammered. 'He'll be wondering where I am.'

He turned on his heel and she followed him through another huge hallway panelled in oak, her footsteps making a deafening racket on the stone-flagged floor. There were vast fireplaces at each end of the room, but both were empty, and Sophie noticed her breath made faint plumes in the icy air. This time, instead of weapons, the walls were hung with the glassy-eyed heads of various large and hapless animals. They seemed to stare balefully at Sophie as she passed, as if in warning.

This is what happens if you cross the Fitzroys.

Sophie straightened her shoulders and quickened her pace. She mustn't let Kit Fitzroy get to her. He had got entirely the wrong end of the stick. She was Jasper's friend and she'd come as a favour to him precisely *because* his family were too bigoted to accept him as he really was.

She would have loved to confront Kit Superior Fitzroy with that, but of course it was impossible. For Jasper's sake, and also because there was something about Kit that made her lose the ability to think logically and speak articulately, damn him.

A set of double doors opened at the far end of the hallway and Jasper appeared.

'*Soph!* You're *here*!'

At least she thought it was Jasper. Gone were the layers of eccentric vintage clothing, the tattered silk-faced dinner jackets he habitually wore over T-shirts and torn drainpipe jeans. The man who came towards her, his arms outstretched, was wearing well-ironed chinos and a V-necked jumper over a button-down shirt and—Sophie's incredulous gaze moved downwards—what looked suspiciously like brogues.

Reaching her, this new Jasper took her face between his hands and kissed her far more tenderly than normal. Caught off guard by the bewildering change in him, Sophie was just about to push him away and ask what he was playing at when she remembered what she was there for. Dropping her poor, battered bag again, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Over Jasper's shoulder, through the curtain of her hair, she was aware of Kit Fitzroy standing like some dark sentinel, watching her. The knowledge stole down inside her, making her feel hot, tingling, restless, and before she knew it she was arching her body into Jasper's, sliding her fingers into his hair.

Sophie had done enough screen and stage kisses to have mastered the art of making something completely chaste look a whole lot more X-rated than it really was. When Jasper pulled back a little a few seconds later she caught the gleam of laughter in his eyes as he leaned his forehead briefly against hers, then, stepping away, he spoke in a tone of rather forced warmth.

'You've met my big brother, Kit. I hope he's been looking after you.'

That was rather an unfortunate way of putting it, Sophie thought, an image of Kit Fitzroy, his strong hands full of her silliest knickers and bras flashing up inside her head. Oh, hell, why did she always smirk when she was embarrassed? Biting her lip, she stared down at the stone floor.

'Oh, absolutely,' she said, nodding furiously. 'And I'm afraid I needed quite a lot of looking after. If it wasn't for Kit I'd be halfway to Edinburgh now. Or at least, my underwear would.'

It might be only a few degrees warmer than the arctic, but beneath her coat Sophie could feel the heat creeping up her cleavage and into her cheeks. The nervous smile she'd been struggling to suppress broke through as she said the word 'underwear', but one glance at Kit's glacial expression killed it

instantly.

'It was a lucky coincidence that we were sitting in the same carriage. It gave us a chance to … get to know each other a little before we got here.'

Ouch.

Only Sophie could have understood the meaning behind the polite words or picked up the faint note of menace beneath the blandness of his tone.

He's really got it in for me, she realised with a shiver. Suddenly she felt very tired, very alone, and even Jasper's hand around hers couldn't dispel the chilly unease that had settled in the pit of her stomach.

'Great.' Oblivious to the tension that crackled like static in the air, Jasper pulled her impatiently forwards. 'Come and meet Ma and Pa. I haven't stopped talking about you since I got here yesterday, so they're dying to see what all the fuss is about.'

And suddenly panic swelled inside her—churning, black and horribly familiar. The fear of being looked at. Scrutinised. Judged. That people would see through the layers of her disguise, the veils of evasion, to the real girl beneath. As Jasper led her towards the doors at the far end of the hall she was shaking, assailed by the same doubts and insecurities that had paralysed her the only time she'd done live theatre, in the seconds before she went onstage. What if she couldn't do it? What if the lines wouldn't come and she was left just being herself? Acting had been a way of life long before it became a way of making a living,

and playing a part was second nature to her. But now … *here* …

'Jasper,' she croaked, pulling back. 'Please—wait.'

'Sophie? What's the matter?'

His kind face was a picture of concern. The animal heads glared down at her, as well as a puffy-eyed Fitzroy ancestor with a froth of white lace around his neck.

And that was the problem. Jasper was her closest friend and she would do anything for him, but when she'd offered to help him out she hadn't reckoned on all this. Alnburgh Castle, with its history and its million symbols of wealth and status and *belonging*, was exactly the kind of place that unnerved her most.

'I can't go in there. Not dressed like this, I mean. I—I came straight from the casting for the vampire thing and I meant to get changed on the train, but I …'

She opened her coat and Jasper gave a low whistle.

'Don't worry,' he soothed. 'Here, let me take your coat and you can put this on, otherwise you'll freeze.' Quickly he peeled off the black cashmere jumper and handed it to her, then tossed her coat over the horns of a nearby stuffed stag. 'They're going to love you whatever you're wearing. Particularly Pa—you're the perfect birthday present. Come on, they're waiting in the drawing room. At least it's warm in there.'

With Kit's eyes boring into her back Sophie had no choice but to let Jasper lead her towards the huge double doors at the far end of the hall.

Vampire thing, Kit thought scornfully. Since when had the

legend of the undead mentioned dressing like an escort in some private men's club? He wondered if it was going to be the kind of film the boys in his unit sometimes brought back from leave to enjoy with a lot of beer in rest periods in camp.

The thought was oddly unsettling.

Tiredness pulled at him like lead weights. He couldn't face seeing his father and stepmother just yet. Going through the hallway in the direction of the stairs, he passed the place where the portrait of his mother used to hang, before Ralph had replaced it, appropriately, with a seven-foot-high oil of Tatiana in plunging blue satin and the Cartier diamonds he had given her on their wedding day.

Jasper was right, Kit mused. If there was anyone who would appreciate Sophie Greenham's get-up it was Ralph Fitzroy. Like vampires, his father's enthusiasm for obvious women was legendary.

Jasper's, however, was not. And that was what worried him. Even if he hadn't overheard her conversation on the phone, even if he hadn't felt himself the white-hot sexuality she exuded, you only had to look at the two of them together to know that, vampire or not, the girl was going to break the poor bastard's heart and eat it for breakfast.

The room Jasper led her into was as big as the last, but stuffed with furniture and blazing with light from silk-shaded lamps on every table, a chandelier the size of a spaceship hovering above a pair of gargantuan sofas and a fire roaring in the fireplace.

It was Ralph Fitzroy who stepped forwards first. Sophie was surprised by how old he was, which she realised was ridiculous considering the reason she had come up this weekend was to attend his seventieth birthday party. His grey hair was brushed back from a florid, fleshy face and as he took Sophie's hand his eyes almost disappeared in a fan of laughter lines as they travelled down her body. And up again, but only as far as her chest.

'Sophie. Marvellous to meet you,' he said, in the kind of upper-class accent that Sophie had thought had become extinct after the war.

'And you, sir.'

Oh, for God's sake—*sir*? Where had that come from? She'd be bobbing curtsies next. She was supposed to be playing the part of Jasper's girlfriend, not the parlourmaid in some nineteen-thirties below-stairs drama. Not that Ralph seemed to mind. He was still clasping her hand, looking at her with a kind of speculative interest, as if she were a piece of art he was thinking of buying.

Suddenly she remembered Jean-Claude's 'Nude with Lilies' and felt pins and needles of embarrassment prickle her whole body. Luckily distraction came in the form of a woman unfolding herself from one of the overstuffed sofas and coming forwards. She was dressed immaculately in a clinging off-white angora dress that was cleverly designed to showcase her blonde hair and peachy skin, as well as her enviable figure and the triple string of pearls around her neck. Taking hold of Sophie's shoulders, she leaned forwards in a waft of expensive perfume and, in a silent

and elaborate pantomime, kissed the air beside first one cheek and then the other.

'Sophie, how good of you to come all this way to join us. Did you have a dreadful journey?'

Her voice still bore the unmistakable traces of a Russian accent, but her English was so precise that Sophie felt more than ever that they were onstage and reciting lines from a script. Tatiana Fitzroy was playing the part of the gracious hostess, thrilled to be meeting her adored son's girlfriend for the first time. The problem was she wasn't that great at acting.

'No, not at all.'

'But you came by train?' Tatiana shuddered slightly. 'Trains are always so overcrowded these days. They make one feel slightly grubby, don't you think?'

No, Sophie wanted to say. Trains didn't make her feel remotely grubby. However, the blatant disapproval in Kit Fitzroy's cool glare—now that had definitely left her feeling in need of a scrub down in a hot shower.

'Come on, darling,' Ralph joked. 'When was the last time you went on a train?'

'First Class isn't *too* bad,' Sophie said, attempting to sound as if she would never consider venturing into standard.

'Not really enough legroom,' said a grave voice behind her. Sophie whipped her head round. Kit was standing in the doorway, holding a bundle of envelopes, which he was scanning through as he spoke.

The fire crackled merrily away, but Sophie was aware that the temperature seemed to have fallen a couple of degrees. For a split second no one moved, but then Tatiana was moving forwards, as if the offstage prompt had just reminded her of her cue.

'Kit. Welcome back to Alnburgh.'

So, she wasn't the only one who found him impossible, Sophie thought, noticing the distinct coolness in Tatiana's tone. As she reached up to kiss his cheek Kit didn't incline his head even a fraction to make it easier for her to reach, and his inscrutable expression didn't alter at all.

'Tatiana. You're looking well,' Kit drawled, barely glancing at her as he continued to look through the sheaf of letters in his hand. He seemed to have been built on a different scale from Jasper and Ralph, Sophie thought, taking in his height and the breadth of his chest. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled back to reveal tanned forearms, corded with muscle.

She looked resolutely away.

Ralph went over to a tray crowded with cut-glass decanters on a nearby table and sloshed some more whisky into a glass that wasn't quite empty. Sophie heard the rattle of glass against glass, but when he turned round to face his eldest son his bland smile was perfectly in place.

'Kit.'

'Father.'

Kit's voice was perfectly neutral, but Ralph seemed to flinch slightly. He covered it by taking a large slug of whisky. 'Good of

you to come, what with flights being cancelled and so on. The invitation was …' he hesitated '… a courtesy. I know how busy you are. Hope you didn't feel obliged to accept.'

'Not at all.' Kit's eyes glittered, as cold as moonlight on frost. 'I've been away too long. And there are things we need to discuss.'

Ralph laughed, but Sophie could see the colour rising in his florid cheeks. It was fascinating—like being at a particularly tense tennis match.

'For God's sake, Kit, you're not still persisting with that—'

As he spoke the double doors opened and a thin, elderly man appeared between them and nodded, almost imperceptibly, at Tatiana. Swiftly she crossed the Turkish silk rug in a waft of Chanel No 5 and slipped a hand through her husband's arm, cutting him off mid-sentence.

'Thank you, Thomas. Dinner is ready. Now that everyone's here, shall we go through?'

CHAPTER FOUR

DINNER was about as enjoyable and relaxing as being stripped naked and whipped with birch twigs.

When she was little, Sophie had dreamed wistfully about being part of the kind of family who gathered around a big table to eat together every evening. If she'd known this was what it was like she would have stuck to the fantasies about having a pony or being picked to star in a new film version of *The Little House on the Prairie*.

The dining room was huge and gloomy, its high, green damask-covered walls hung with yet more Fitzroy ancestors. They were an unattractive bunch, Sophie thought with a shiver. The handsomeness so generously bestowed on Jasper and Kit must be a relatively recent addition to the gene pool. Only one—a woman in blush-pink silk with roses woven into her extravagantly piled up hair and a secretive smile on her lips—held any indication of the good looks that were the Fitzroy hallmark now.

Thomas, the butler who had announced dinner, dished up watery consommé, followed by tiny rectangles of grey fish on something that looked like spinach and smelled like boiled socks. No wonder Tatiana was so thin.

'This looks delicious,' Sophie lied brightly.

'Thank you,' Tatiana cooed, in a way that suggested she'd

cooked it herself. 'It has taken years to get Mrs Daniels to cook things other than steak and kidney pudding and roast beef, but finally she seems to understand the meaning of low-fat.'

'Unfortunately,' Kit murmured.

Ignoring him, Ralph reached for the dusty bottle of Chateau Marbuzet and splashed a liberal amount into his glass before turning to fill up Sophie's.

'So, Jasper said you've been in Paris? Acting in some film or other?'

Sophie, who had just taken a mouthful of fish, could only nod.

'Fascinating,' said Tatiana doubtfully. 'What was it about?'

Sophie covered her mouth with her hand to hide the grimace as she swallowed the fish. 'It's about British Special Agents and the French Resistance in the Second World War,' she said, wondering if she could hide the rest of the fish under the spinach as she used to do at boarding school. 'It's set in Montmartre, against a community of painters and poets.'

'And what part did you play?'

Sophie groaned inwardly. It would have to be Kit who asked that. Ever since she sat down she'd been aware of his eyes on her. More than aware of it—it felt as if there were a laser trained on her skin.

She cleared her throat. 'Just a tiny role, really,' she said with an air of finality.

'As?'

He didn't give up, did he? Why didn't he just go the whole

hog and whip out a megawatt torch to shine in her face while he interrogated her? Not that those silvery eyes weren't hard enough to look into already.

'A prostitute called Claudine who inadvertently betrays her Resistance lover to the SS.'

Kit's smile was as faint as it was fleeting. He had a way of making her feel like a third year who'd been caught showing her knickers behind the bike sheds and hauled into the headmaster's office. She took a swig of wine.

'You must meet such fascinating people,' Tatiana said.

'Oh, yes. Well, I mean, sometimes. Actors can be a pretty self-obsessed bunch. They're not always a laugh a minute to be around.'

'Not as bad as artists,' Jasper chipped in absently as he concentrated on extracting a bone from his fish. 'They hired a few painters to produce the pictures that featured in the film, and they turned out to be such prima donnas they made the actors look very down-to-earth, didn't they, Soph?'

Somewhere in the back of Sophie's mind an alarm bell had started drilling. She looked up, desperately trying to telegraph warning signals across the table to Jasper, but he was still absorbed in exhuming the skeleton of the poor fish. Sophie's lips parted in wordless panic as she desperately tried to think of something to say to steer the subject onto safer ground …

Too late.

'One of them became completely obsessed with painting

Sophie,' Jasper continued. 'He came over to her in the bar one evening when I was there and spent about two hours gazing at her with his eyes narrowed as he muttered about lilies.'

Sophie felt as if she'd been struck by lightning, a terrible rictus smile still fixed to her face. She didn't dare look at Kit. She didn't need to—she could feel the disapproval and hostility radiating from him like a force field. Through her despair she was aware of the woman with the roses in her hair staring down at her from the portrait. Now the smile didn't look secretive so much as if she was trying not to laugh.

'If I thought the result would have been as lovely as that I would have accepted like a shot,' she said in a strangled voice, gesturing up at the portrait. 'Who is she?'

Ralph followed her gaze. 'Ah—that's Lady Caroline, wife of the fourth Earl and one of the more flamboyant Fitzroys. She was a girl of somewhat uncertain provenance who had been a music hall singer—definitely not countess material. Christopher Fitzroy was twenty years younger than her, but from the moment he met her he was quite besotted and, much to the horror of polite society, married her.'

'That was pretty brave of him,' Sophie said, relief at having successfully moved the conversation on clearly audible in her voice.

The sound Kit made was unmistakably derisive. 'Brave, or stupid?'

Their eyes met. Suddenly the room seemed very quiet. The

arctic air was charged with electricity, so that the candle flames flickered for a second.

'Brave,' she retorted, raising her chin a little. 'It can't have been easy, going against his family and society, but if he loved her it would have been worth the sacrifice.'

'Not if *she* wasn't worth the sacrifice.'

The candle flames danced in a halo of red mist before Sophie's eyes, and before she could stop herself she heard herself give a taut, brittle laugh and say, 'Why? Because she was too *common*?'

'Not at all.' Kit looked at her steadily, his haughty face impassive. 'She wasn't worth it because she didn't love him back.'

'How do you know she didn't?'

Oh, jeez, what was she doing? She was supposed to be here to impress Jasper's family, not pick fights with them. No matter how insufferable they were.

'Well …' Kit said thoughtfully. 'The fact that she slept with countless other men during their marriage is a bit of a clue, wouldn't you say? Her lovers included several footmen and stable lads and even the French artist who painted that portrait.'

He was still looking at her. His voice held that now-familiar note of scorn, but was so soft that for a moment Sophie was hypnotised. The candlelight cast shadows under his angular cheekbones and brought warmth to his skin, but nothing could melt the ice chips in his eyes.

Sophie jumped slightly as Ralph cut in.

'French? Thought the chap was Italian?'

Kit looked away. 'Ah, yes,' he said blandly. 'I must be getting my facts mixed up.'

Bastard, thought Sophie. He knew that all along, and he was just trying to wind her up. Raising her chin and summoning a smile to show she wouldn't be wound, she said, 'So—what happened to her?'

'She came to a sticky end, I'm afraid. Not nice,' Ralph answered, topping up his glass again and emptying the remains of the bottle into Sophie's. Despite the cold his cheeks were flushed a deep, mottled purple.

'How?' Her mind flashed back to the swords and muskets in the entrance hall, the animal heads on the wall. You messed with a Fitzroy—or his brother—and a sticky end was pretty inevitable.

'She got pregnant,' Kit said matter-of-factly, picking up the knife on his side-plate and examining the tarnished silver blade for a second before polishing it with his damask napkin. 'The Earl, poor bastard, was delighted. At last, a long-awaited heir for Alnburgh.'

Sophie took another mouthful of velvety wine, watching his mouth as he spoke. And then found that she couldn't stop watching it. And wondering what it would look like if he smiled—really smiled. Or laughed. What it would feel like if he kissed her—

No. *Stop*. She shouldn't have let Ralph give her the rest of that wine. Hastily she put her glass down and tucked her hands under her thighs.

‘But of course, she knew that it was extremely unlikely the kid was his,’ Kit was saying in his low, slightly scornful voice. ‘And though he was too besotted to see what was going on, the rest of his family certainly weren’t. She must have realised that she’d reached a dead end, and also that the child was likely to be born with the rampant syphilis that was already devouring her.’

Sophie swallowed. ‘What did she do?’

Kit laid the knife down and looked straight at her. ‘In the last few weeks of her pregnancy, she threw herself off the battlements in the East Tower.’

She wouldn’t let him see that he’d shocked her. Wouldn’t let the sickening feeling she had in the pit of her stomach show on her face. Luckily at that moment Jasper spoke, his cheerful voice breaking the tension that seemed to shiver in the icy air.

‘Poor old Caroline, eh? What a price to pay for all that fun.’ He leaned forwards, dropping his voice theatrically. ‘It’s said that on cold winter nights her ghost walks the walls, half mad with guilt. Or maybe it’s the syphilis—that’s supposed to make you go mad, isn’t it?’

‘Really, Jasper. I think we’ve heard enough about Fitzroys.’ Tatiana laid down her napkin with a little pout as Thomas reappeared to collect up the plates. ‘So, Sophie—tell us about *your* family. Where do your people come from?’

People? Her *people*? She made it sound as if everyone had estates and villages and hordes of peasants at their command. From behind Tatiana’s head Caroline the feckless countess

looked at Sophie with amused pity. *Get yourself out of this one*, she seemed to say.

'Oh. Um, down in the south of England,' Sophie muttered vaguely, glancing at Jasper for help. 'We travelled around a lot, actually.'

'And your parents—what do they do?'

'My mother is an astronomer.'

It was hardly a lie, more a slip of the tongue. Astronomy/astrology … people got them mixed up all the time anyway.

'And your—'

Jasper came swiftly to the rescue.

'Talking of stars, how did your big charity auction go last week, Ma? I keep meaning to ask you who won the premiere tickets I donated.'

It wasn't the most subtle of conversational diversions, but it did the trick so Sophie was too relieved to care. As the discussion moved on and Thomas reappeared to clear the table she slumped back in her chair and breathed out slowly, waiting for her heartbeat to steady and her fight-or-flight response to subside. With any luck that was the subject of her family dealt with and now she could relax for the rest of the weekend.

If it were possible to relax with Kit Fitzroy around.

Before she was aware it was happening or could stop it her gaze had slid back to where he sat, leaning back in his chair, his broad shoulders and long body making the antique rosewood look as fussy and flimsy as doll's-house furniture. His face was

shuttered, his hooded eyes downcast, so that for the first time since the train she was able to look at him properly.

A shiver of sexual awareness shimmered down her spine and spread heat into her pelvis.

Sophie had an unfortunate attraction to men who were bad news. Men who didn't roll over and beg to be patted. But even she had to draw a line somewhere, and 'emotion-bypass' was probably a good place. And after the carnage of her so-called casual fling with Jean-Claude, this was probably a good time.

'… really fabulous turnout. People were so generous,' Tatiana was saying in her guttural purr, the diamonds in her rings glittering in the candlelight as she folded her hands together and rested her chin on them. 'And so good to catch up with all the people I don't see, stuck out here. As a matter of fact, Kit—your name came up over dinner. A girlfriend of mine said you have broken the heart of a friend of her daughter's.'

Kit looked up.

'Without the name of the friend, her daughter or her daughter's friend I can't really confirm or deny that.'

'Oh, come on,' Tatiana said with a brittle, tinkling laugh. 'How many hearts have you broken recently? I'm talking about Alexia. According to Sally Rothwell-Hyde, the poor girl is terribly upset.'

'I'm sure Sally Rothwell-Hyde is exaggerating,' Kit said in a bored voice. 'Alexia was well aware from the start it was nothing serious. It seems that Jasper will be providing Alnburgh heirs a lot sooner than I will.'

He looked across at Sophie, wondering what smart response she would think up to that, but she said nothing. She was sitting very straight, very still. Against the vivid red of her hair, her face was the same colour as the wax that had dripped onto the table in front of her.

'Something wrong?' he challenged quietly.

She looked at him, and for a second the expression in her eyes was one of blank horror. But then she blinked, and seemed to rouse herself.

'I'm sorry. What was that?' With an unsteady hand she stroked her hair back from her face. It was still as pale as milk, apart from a blossoming of red on each cheekbone.

'Soph?' Jasper got to his feet. 'Are you OK?'

'Yes. Yes, of course. I'm absolutely fine.' She made an attempt at a laugh, but Kit could hear the raw edge in it. 'Just tired, that's all. It's been a long day.'

'Then you must get to bed,' Tatiana spoke with an air of finality, as if she was dismissing her. 'Jasper, show Sophie to her room. I'm sure she'll feel much better after a good night's sleep.'

Kit watched Jasper put his arm round her and lead her to the door, remembering the two hours of catatonic sleep she'd had on the train. Picking up his wine glass, he drained it thoughtfully.

It certainly wasn't tiredness that had drained her face of colour like that, which meant it must have been the idea of producing heirs.

It looked as if she was beginning to get an idea of what she'd

got herself into. And she was even flakier than he'd first thought.

CHAPTER FIVE

ROTHWELL-HYDE.

Wordlessly Sophie let Jasper lead her up the widest staircase she'd ever seen. It was probably a really common surname, she thought numbly. The phone book must contain millions of Rothwell-Hydes. Or several anyway, in smart places all over the country. Because surely no one who lived up here would send their daughter to school down in Kent?

It was a second before she realised Jasper had stopped at the foot of another small flight of stairs leading to a gloomy wood-panelled corridor with a single door at the end.

'Your room's at the end there, but let's go to mine. The fire's lit, and I've got a bottle of Smirnoff that Sergio gave me somewhere.' He took hold of her shoulders, bending his knees slightly to peer into her face. 'You look like you could do with something to revive you, angel. Are you OK?'

With some effort she gathered herself and made a stab at sounding casual and reassuring. 'I'm fine now, really. I'm so sorry, Jasper—I'm supposed to be taking the pressure off you by posing as your girlfriend, but instead your parents must be wondering why you ended up going out with such a nutter.'

'Don't be daft. You're totally charming them—or you were until you nearly fainted face down on your plate. I know the fish was revolting, but really …'

She laughed. 'It wasn't that bad.'

'What then?'

Jasper was her best friend. Over the years she'd told him lots of funny stories about her childhood, and when you'd grown up living in a converted bus painted with flowers and peace slogans, with a mother who had inch-long purple hair, had changed her name to Rainbow and given up wearing a bra, there were lots of those.

There were also lots of bits that weren't funny at all, but she kept those to herself. The years when she'd been taken in by Aunt Janet and had been sent to an exclusive girls' boarding school in the hope of 'civilising' her. Years when she'd been at the mercy of Olympia Rothwell-Hyde and her friends …

She shook her head and smiled. 'Just tired. Honest.'

'Come on, then.' He set off again along the corridor, rubbing his arms vigorously. 'God, if you stand still for a second in this place you run the risk of turning into a pillar of ice. I hope you brought your thermal underwear.'

'Please, can you not mention underwear,' Sophie said with a bleak laugh. 'The contents of my knicker drawer have played far too much of a starring role in this weekend already and I've only been here a couple of hours.' Her heart lurched as she remembered again the phone conversation Kit had overheard on the train. 'I'm afraid I got off on completely the wrong foot with your brother.'

'Half-brother,' Jasper corrected, bitterly. 'And don't worry

about Kit. He doesn't approve of anyone. He just sits in judgment on the rest of us.'

'That's why I'm here, isn't it?' said Sophie. 'It's Kit's opinion you're worried about, not your parents'.'

'Are you kidding?' Jasper said ironically. 'You've met my father. He's from the generation and background that call gay men "nancy boys" and assume they all wear pink scarves and carry handbags.'

'And what's Kit's excuse?'

Pausing in front of a closed door, Jasper bowed his head. Without the hair gel and eyeliner he always wore in London his fine-boned face looked younger and oddly vulnerable.

'Kit's never liked me. I've always known that, growing up. He never said anything unkind or did anything horrible to me, but he didn't have to. I always felt this … *coldness* from him, which was almost worse.'

Sophie could identify with that.

'I don't know,' he went on, 'now I'm older I can understand that it must have been difficult for him, growing up without his mother when I still had mine.' He cast her a rueful look. 'As you'll have noticed, my mother isn't exactly cosy—I don't think she particularly went out of her way to make sure he was OK, but because I was her only child I did get rather spoiled, I guess …'

Sophie widened her eyes. 'You? Surely not!'

Jasper grinned. 'This is the part of the castle that's supposed to be haunted by the mad countess's ghost, you know, so you'd

better watch it, or I'll run away and leave you here …'

'Don't you dare!'

Laughing, he opened the door. 'This is my room. Damn, the fire's gone out. Come in and shut the door to keep any lingering traces of warmth in.'

Sophie did as she was told. The room was huge, and filled with the kind of dark, heavy furniture that looked as if it had come from a giant's house. A sleigh bed roughly the size of the bus that had formed Sophie's childhood home stood in the centre of the room, piled high with several duvets. Jasper's personal stamp was evident in the tatty posters on the walls, a polystyrene reproduction of Michelangelo's *David*, which was rakishly draped in an old school tie, a silk dressing gown and a battered trilby. As he poked at the ashes in the grate Sophie picked her way through the clothes on the floor and went over to the window.

'So what happened to Kit's mother?'

Jasper piled coal into the grate. 'She left. When he was about six, I think. It's a bit of a taboo subject around here, but I gather there was no warning, no explanation, no goodbye. Of course there was a divorce eventually, and apparently Juliet's adultery was cited, but as far as I know Kit never had any contact with her again.'

Outside it had stopped snowing and the clouds had parted to show the flat disc of the full moon. From what Sophie could see, Jasper's room looked down over some kind of inner courtyard.

The castle walls rose up on all sides—battlements like jagged teeth, stone walls gleaming like pewter in the cold, bluish light. She shivered, her throat constricting with reluctant compassion for the little boy whose mother had left him here in this bleak fortress of a home.

'So she abandoned him to go off with another man?'

Sophie's own upbringing had been unconventional enough for her not to be easily shocked. But a mother leaving her child …

'Pretty much. So I guess you can understand why he ended up being like he is. Ah, look—that's better.'

He stood back, hands on hips, his face bathed in orange as the flames took hold. 'Right—let's find that bottle and get under the duvet. You can tell me all about Paris and how you managed to escape the clutches of that lunatic painter, and in turn I'm going to bore you senseless talking about Sergio. Do you know,' he sighed happily, 'he's having a tally of the days we're apart tattooed on his chest?'

The ancient stones on top of the parapet were worn smooth by salt wind and wild weather, and the moonlight turned them to beaten silver. Kit exhaled a cloud of frozen air, propping his elbows on the stone and looking out across the battlements to the empty beach beyond.

There was no point in even trying to get to sleep tonight, he knew that. His insomnia was always at its worst when he'd just come back from a period of active duty and his body hadn't learned to switch off from its state of high alert. The fact that he

was also back at Alnburgh made sleep doubly unlikely.

He straightened up, shoving his frozen fingers into his pockets. The tide was out and pools of water on the sand gleamed like mercury. In the distance the moon was reflected without a ripple in the dark surface of the sea.

It was bitterly cold.

Long months in the desert halfway across the world had made him forget the aching cold here. Sometimes, working in temperatures of fifty degrees wearing eighty pounds of explosive-proof kit, he would try to recapture the sensation, but out there cold became an abstract concept. Something you knew about in theory, but couldn't imagine actually *feeling*.

But it was real enough now, as was the complicated mix of emotions he always experienced when he returned. He did one of the most dangerous jobs on the planet without feeling anything, and yet when he came back to the place he'd grown up in it was as if he'd had a layer of skin removed. Here it was impossible to forget the mother who had left him, or forgive the studied indifference of the father who had been left to bring him up. Here everything was magnified: bitterness, anger, frustration …

Desire.

The thought crept up on him and he shoved it away. Sophie Greenham was hardly his type, although he had to admit that doing battle with her at dinner had livened up what would otherwise have been a dismal evening. And at least her presence had meant that he didn't feel like the only outsider.

It had also provided a distraction from the tension between him and his father. But only temporarily. Ralph was right—Kit hadn't come up here because the party invitation was too thrilling to refuse, but Ralph's seventieth birthday seemed like a good time to remind his father that if he didn't transfer the ownership of Alnburgh into Kit's name soon, it would be too late. The estate couldn't possibly survive the inheritance tax that would be liable on it after Ralph's death, and would no doubt have to be sold.

Kit felt fresh anger bloom inside him. He wasn't sure why he cared—his house in Chelsea was conveniently placed for some excellent restaurants, was within easy taxi-hailing range for women he didn't want to wake up with, and came without ghosts. And yet he did care. Because of the waste and the irresponsibility and the sheer bloody shortsightedness, perhaps? Or because he could still hear his mother's voice, whispering to him down the years?

Alnburgh is yours, Kit. Don't ever forget that. Don't ever let anyone tell you it's not.

It must have been just before she left that she'd said that. When she knew she was going and wanted to assuage her guilt; to feel that she wasn't leaving him with nothing.

As if a building could make up for a mother. Particularly a building like Alnburgh. It was an anachronism. As a home it was uncomfortable, impractical and unsustainable. It was also the place where he had been unhappiest. And yet he knew, deep down, that it mattered to him. He felt responsible for it, and he

would do all he could to look after it.

And much as it surprised him to discover, that went for his brother too. Only Jasper wasn't at risk from dry rot or damp, but the attentions of a particularly brazen redhead.

Kit wondered if she'd be as difficult to get rid of.

Sophie opened her eyes.

It was cold and for a moment her sleep-slow brain groped to work out where she was. It was a familiar feeling—one she'd experienced often as a child when her mother had been in one of her restless phases, but for some reason now it was accompanied by a sinking sensation.

Putting a hand to her head, she struggled upright. In the corner of the room the television was playing quietly to itself, and Jasper's body was warm beside her, a T-shirt of Sergio's clasped in one hand, the half-empty bottle of vodka in the other. He had fallen asleep sprawled diagonally across the bed with his head thrown back, and something about the way the lamplight fell on his face—or maybe the shuttered blankness sleep had lent it—reminded her of Kit.

Fragments of the evening reassembled themselves in her aching head. She got up, rubbing a hand across her eyes, and carefully removed the bottle from Jasper's hand. Much as she loved him, right now all she wanted was a bed to herself and a few hours of peaceful oblivion.

Tiptoeing to the door, she opened it quietly. Out in the corridor the temperature was arctic and the only light came from

the moon, lying in bleached slabs on the smooth oak floorboards. Shivering, Sophie hesitated, wondering whether to go back into Jasper's room after all, but the throbbing in her head was more intense now and she thought longingly of the paracetamol in her washbag.

There was nothing for it but to brave the cold and the dark.

Her heart began to pound as she slipped quickly between the squares of silver moonlight, along the corridor and down a spiralling flight of stone stairs. Shadows engulfed her. It was very quiet. Too quiet. To Sophie, used to thin-walled apartments, bed and breakfasts, buses and camper vans on makeshift sites where someone was always strumming a guitar or playing indie-acid-trance, the silence was unnatural. Oppressive. It buzzed in her ears, filling her head with whistling, like interference on a badly tuned radio.

She stopped, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she looked around.

Passageways stretched away from her in three directions, but each looked as unfamiliar as the other. Oh, hell. She'd been so traumatised earlier that she hadn't paid attention to Jasper when he pointed out her room …

But that could be it, she thought with relief, walking quickly to a door at the end of the short landing to her left. Gingerly she turned the handle and, heart bursting, pushed open the door.

Moonlight flooded in from behind her, illuminating the ghostly outlines of shrouded furniture. The air was stale with age.

The room clearly hadn't been opened in years.

This is the part of the castle that's supposed to be haunted by the mad countess's ghost, you know …

Retreating quickly, she slammed the door and forced herself to exhale slowly. It was fine. No need to panic. Just a question of retracing her steps, thinking about it logically. A veil of cloud slipped over the moon's pale face and the darkness deepened. Icy drafts eddied around Sophie's ankles, and the edge of a curtain at one of the stone windows lifted slightly, as if brushed by invisible fingers. The whistling sound was louder now and more distinctive—a sort of keening that was almost human. She couldn't be sure it was just in her head any more and she broke into a run, glancing back over her shoulder as if she expected to see a swish of pink silk skirt disappearing around the corner.

'I'm being stupid,' she whispered desperately, fumbling at the buttons of her mobile phone to make the screen light up and act as a torch. 'There's no such thing as ghosts.' But even as the words formed themselves on her stiff lips horror prickled at the back of her neck.

Footsteps.

She clamped a hand to her mouth to stifle her moan of terror and stood perfectly still. Probably she'd imagined it—or possibly it was just the mad drumming of her heart echoing off the stone walls …

Nope. Definitely footsteps.

Definitely getting nearer.

It was impossible to tell from which direction they were coming. Or maybe if they were ghostly footsteps they weren't coming from any particular direction, except beyond the grave? It hardly mattered—the main thing was to get away from here and back to Jasper. Back to light and warmth and TV and company. Shaking with fear, she darted back along the corridor, heading for the stairs that she had come down a few moments ago.

And then she gave a whimper of horror, icy adrenaline sluicing through her veins. A dark figure loomed in front of her, only a foot or so away, too close even for her to be aware of anything beyond its height and the frightening breadth of its shoulders. She shrank backwards, bringing her hands up to her face, her mouth opening to let out the scream that was rising in her throat.

'Oh, no, you don't …'

Instantly she was pulled against the rock-hard chest and a huge hand was put across her mouth. Fury replaced fear as she realised that this was not the phantom figure of some seventeenth-century suitor looking for the countess, but the all-too-human flesh of Kit Fitzroy.

All of a sudden the idea of being assaulted by a ghost seemed relatively appealing.

'Get *off* me!' she snapped. Or tried to. The sound she actually made was a muffled, undignified squawk, but he must have understood her meaning because he let her go immediately, thrusting her away from his body as if she were contaminated. Shaking back her hair, Sophie glared at him, trying to gather

some shreds of dignity. Not easy when she'd just been caught behaving like a histrionic schoolgirl because she thought he was a ghost.

'What do you think you're *doing*?' she demanded.

His arched brows rose a fraction, but other than that his stony expression didn't change. 'I'd have thought it was obvious. Stopping you from screaming and waking up the entire castle,' he drawled. 'Is Jasper aware that you're roaming around the corridors in the middle of the night?'

'Jasper's asleep.'

'Ah. Of course.' His hooded gaze didn't leave hers, but she jumped as she felt his fingers close around her wrist, like bands of iron, and he lifted the hand in which her mobile phone was clasped. His touch was as cold and hard as his tone. 'Don't tell me, you got lost on the way to the bathroom and you were using the GPS to find it?'

'No.' Sophie spoke through clenched teeth. 'I got lost on the way to my bedroom. Now, if you'd just point me in the right—'

'*Your* bedroom?' He dropped her wrist and stepped away.

'Well, it definitely won't be here. The rooms in this part of the castle haven't been used for years. But why the hell aren't you sharing with Jasper? Or perhaps you prefer to have your own … *privacy*?'

He was so tall that she had to tilt her head back to look at his face. The place where they were standing was dark and it was half in shadow, but, even so, she didn't miss the faint sneer that

accompanied the word.

'I just thought it wouldn't be appropriate to sleep with Jasper in his parents' house, that's all,' she retorted haughtily. 'It didn't feel right.'

'You do a passable impression of indignant respectability,' he said in a bored voice, turning round and beginning to walk away from her down the corridor. 'But unfortunately it's rather wasted on me. I know exactly why you want your own bedroom, and it has nothing to do with propriety and everything to do with the fact that you're far from in love with my brother.'

It was those words that did it. *My brother*. Until then she had been determined to remain calm in the face of Kit Fitzroy's towering arrogance; his misguided certainty and his infuriating, undeniable sexual magnetism. Now something snapped inside her.

'No. You're *wrong*,' she spat.

'Really?' he drawled, turning to go back along the passageway down which she'd just come.

'Yes!'

Who the hell was he to judge? If it wasn't for him Jasper wouldn't have had to ask her here in the first place, to make himself look 'acceptable' in the contemptuous eyes of his brother.

Well, she couldn't explain anything without giving Jasper away, but she didn't have to take it either. Following him she could feel the pulse jumping in her wrist, in the place where his

fingers had touched her, as fresh adrenaline scorched through her veins.

'I know you think the worst of me and I can understand why, but I just want to say that it wasn't—*isn't*—what you think. I would *never* hurt Jasper, or mess him around. He's the person I care most about in the world.'

He went up a short flight of steps into the corridor Sophie now remembered, and stopped in front of the door at the end.

'You have a funny way of showing it,' he said, very softly. 'By sleeping with another man.'

He opened the door and stood back for her to pass. She didn't move. 'It's not like that,' she said in a low voice. 'You don't know the whole story.'

Kit shook his head. 'I don't need to.'

Because what was there to know? He'd seen it all countless times before—men returning back to base from leave, white-lipped and silent as they pulled down pictures of smiling wives or girlfriends from their lockers. Wives they thought they could trust while they were away. Girlfriends they thought would wait for them. Behind every betrayal there was a story, but in the end it was still a betrayal.

Folding her arms tightly across her body, she walked past him into the small room and stood by the bed with her back to him. Her hair was tangled, reminding him that she'd just left his brother's bed. In the thin, cold moonlight it gleamed like hot embers beneath the ashes of a dying fire.

‘Is it common practice in the army to condemn without trial and without knowing the facts?’ she asked, turning round to face him. ‘You barely even *know* Jasper. You did your best to deny his existence when he was growing up, and you’re not exactly going out of your way to make up for it now, so please don’t lecture me about not loving him.’

‘That’s *enough*.’

The words were raw, razor-sharp, spoken in the split second before his automatic defences kicked in and the shutters came down on his emotions. Deliberately Kit unfurled his fists and kept his breathing steady.

‘If you think finding your way around the castle is confusing I wouldn’t even try to unravel the relationships within this family if I were you,’ he said quietly. ‘Don’t get involved in things you don’t need to understand.’

‘Why? Because I won’t be around long enough?’ she demanded, coming closer to him again.

Kit stiffened as he caught the scent of her again—warm, spicy, delicious. He turned away, reaching for the door handle. ‘Goodnight. I hope you have everything you need.’

He shut the door and stood back from it, waiting for the adrenaline rush to subside a little. Funny how he could work a field strewn with hidden mines, approach a car loaded with explosives and not feel anything, and yet five feet five of lying redhead had almost made him lose control.

He hated deception—too much of his childhood had been

spent not knowing what to believe or who to trust—and as an actress, he supposed, Sophie Greenham was quite literally a professional in the art.

But unluckily for her he was a professional too, and there was more than one way of making safe an incendiary device. Sometimes you had to approach the problem laterally. If she wouldn't admit that her feelings for Jasper were a sham, he'd just have to prove it another way.

CHAPTER SIX

SOPHIE felt as if she'd only just fallen asleep when a knock at the door jolted her awake again. Jasper appeared, grinning sheepishly and carrying a plate of toast in one hand and two mugs of coffee in the other, some of which slopped onto the carpet as he elbowed the door shut again.

'What time is it?' she moaned, dropping back onto the pillows.

Jasper put the mugs down on the bedside table and perched on the bed beside her. 'Nearly ten. Kit said he'd bumped into you in the middle of the night trying to find your room, so I thought I'd better not wake you. You've slept for Britain.'

Sophie didn't have the heart to tell him she'd been awake most of the night, partly because she'd been frozen, partly because she'd been so hyped up with indignation and fury and the after-effects of what felt like an explosion in the sexual-chemistry lab that sleep had been a very long time coming.

He picked up a mug and looked at her through the wreaths of steam that were curling through the frigid air. 'Sorry for leaving you to wander like that. Just as well you bumped into Kit.'

Sophie grunted crossly. 'Do you think so? I thought he was the ghost of the nymphomaniac countess. No such luck.'

Jasper winced. 'He didn't give you a hard time, did he?'

'He thought it was extremely odd that we weren't sharing a room.' Sophie reached for a coffee, more to warm her hands on

than anything. 'I'm not exactly convincing him in my role as your girlfriend, you know. The thing is, he overheard me talking to Jean-Claude on the train and now he thinks I'm a two-timing trollop.'

'Oops.' Jasper took another sip of coffee while he digested this information. 'OK, well, that is a bit unfortunate, but don't worry—we still have time to turn it around at the party tonight. You'll be every man's idea of the perfect girlfriend.'

Sophie raised an eyebrow. 'In public? In front of your parents? From my experience of what men consider the perfect girlfriend, that wouldn't be wise.'

'Wicked girl,' Jasper scolded. 'I meant demure, devoted, hanging on my every word—that sort of thing. What did you bring to wear?'

'My Chinese silk dress.'

With a firm shake of his head Jasper put down his mug. 'Absolutely *not*. Far too sexy. No, what we need is something a little more … understated. A little more *modest*.'

Sophie narrowed her eyes. 'You mean frumpy, don't you? Do you have something in mind?'

Getting up, Jasper went over to the window and drew back the curtains with a theatrical flourish. 'Not something, some*where*. Get up, Cinderella, and let's hit the shops of Hawksworth.'

Jasper drove Ralph's four-by-four along roads that had been turned into ice rinks. It was a deceptively beautiful day. The sun shone in a sky of bright, hard blue and made the fields and

hedgerows glitter as if each twig and blade of grass was encrusted with Swarovski crystals. He had pinched a navy-blue quilted jacket of Tatiana's to lend to Sophie, instead of the military-style overcoat of which Kit had been so scathing. Squinting at her barefaced reflection in the drop-down mirror on the sun visor, she remarked that all that was missing was a silk headscarf and her new posh-girl image would be complete. Jasper leaned over and pulled one out of the glove compartment. She tied it under her chin and they roared with laughter.

They parked in the market square in the centre of a town that looked as if it hadn't altered much in the last seventy years. Crunching over gritted cobblestones, Jasper led her past greengrocers, butchers and shops selling gate hinges and sheep dip, to an ornately fronted department store. Mannequins wearing bad blonde wigs modelled twinsets and patterned shirtwaister dresses in the windows.

'Braithwaite's—the fashion centre of the North since 1908' read the painted sign above the door. Sophie wondered if it was meant to be ironic.

'After you, madam,' said Jasper with a completely straight face, holding the door open for her. 'Evening wear. First floor.'

Sophie stifled a giggle. 'I love vintage clothing, as you know, but—'

'No buts,' said Jasper airily, striding past racks of raincoats towards a sweeping staircase in the centre of the store. 'Just think of it as dressing for a part. Tonight, Ms Greenham, you

are *not* going to be your gorgeous, individual but—let's face it—slightly eccentric self. You are going to be perfect Fitzroy-fiancée material. And that means Dull.'

At the top of the creaking staircase Sophie caught sight of herself in a full-length mirror. In jeans and Tatiana's jacket, the silk scarf still knotted around her neck a lurid splash of colour against her un-made-up face, dull was exactly the word. Still, if dull was what was required to slip beneath Kit Fitzroy's radar that had to be a good thing.

Didn't it?

She hesitated for a second, staring into her own wide eyes, thinking of last night and the shower of shooting stars that had exploded inside her when he'd touched her wrist; the static that had seemed to make the air between them vibrate as they'd stood in the dark corridor. The blankness of his expression, but the way it managed to convey more vividly than a thousand well-chosen words his utter contempt …

'What do you think?'

Yes. Dull was good. The duller the better.

'Hello-*o*?'

Pasting on a smile, she turned to Jasper, who had picked out the most hideous concoction of ruffles and ruches in the kind of royal blue frequently used for school uniforms. Sophie waved her hand dismissively.

'Strictly Come Drag Queen. I thought we were going for dull—that's attention-grabbing for all the wrong reasons. No—

we have to find something *really* boring …' She began rifling through rails of pastel polyester. 'We have to find the closest thing The Fashion Capital of the North has to a shroud … Here. How about this?'

Triumphantly she pulled out something in stiff black fabric—long, straight and completely unadorned. The neck was cut straight across in a way that she could imagine would make her breasts look like a sort of solid, matronly shelf, and the price tag was testament to the garment's extreme lack of appeal. It had been marked down three times already and was now almost being given away.

'Looks good to me.' Jasper flipped the hanger around, scrutinising the dress with narrowed eyes. 'Would madam like to try it on?'

'Nope. It's my size, it's horrible and it's far too cold to get undressed. Let's just buy it and go to the pub. As your fiancée I think I deserve an enormous and extremely calorific lunch.'

Jasper grinned and kissed her swiftly on the cheek. 'You're on.'

The Bull in Hawksworth was the quintessential English pub: the walls were yellow with pre-smoking-ban nicotine, a scarred dartboard hung on the wall beside an age-spotted etching of Alnburgh Castle and horse brasses were nailed to the blackened beams. Sophie slid behind a table in the corner by the fire while Jasper went to the bar. He came back with a pint of lager and a glass of red wine, and a newspaper folded under his arm.

'Food won't be a minute,' he said, taking a sip of lager, which

left a froth of white on his upper lip. ‘Would you mind if I gave Sergio a quick call? I brought you this to read.’ He threw down the newspaper and gave her an apologetic look as he took out his phone. ‘It’s just it’s almost impossible to get a bloody signal at Alnburgh, and I’m always terrified of being overheard anyway.’

Sophie shrugged. ‘No problem. Go ahead.’

‘Is there a “but” there?’

Taking a sip of her wine, she shook her head. ‘No, of course not.’ She put her glass down, turning the stem between her fingers. In the warmth of the fire and Jasper’s familiar company she felt herself relaxing more than she had done in the last twenty-four hours. ‘Except,’ she went on thoughtfully, ‘perhaps that I wonder if it wouldn’t be easier if you came clean about all this.’

‘Came out, you mean?’ Jasper said with sudden weariness. ‘Well, it wouldn’t. It’s easier just to live my own life, far away from here, without having to deal with the fallout of knowing I’ve let my whole family down. My father might be seventy, but he still prides himself on the reputation as a ladies’ man he’s spent his entire adult life building. He sees flirting with anything in a skirt as a mark of sophisticated social inter-action—as you may have noticed last night. Homosexuality is utterly alien to him, so he thinks it’s unnatural full stop.’ With an agitated movement of his hand he knocked his pint glass so that beer splashed onto the table. ‘Honestly, it would finish him off. And as for Kit—’

‘Yes, well, I don’t know what gives Kit the right to go around

passing judgment on everyone else, like he's something special,' Sophie snapped, unfolding the paper as she moved it away from the puddle of lager on the table. 'It's not as if he's better than you because he's straight, or me because he's posh—'

'Holy cow,' spluttered Jasper, grasping her arm.

Breaking off, she followed his astonished gaze and felt the rest of the rant dissolve on her tongue. For there, on the front of the newspaper—in grainy black and white, but no less arresting for it—was Kit. Beneath the headline *Heroes Honoured* a photograph showed him in half profile, his expression characteristically blank above his dress uniform with its impressive line of medals.

Quickly, incredulously, Jasper began to read out the accompanying article.

'Major Kit Fitzroy, known as "the heart-throb hero", was awarded the George Medal for his "dedication to duty and calm, unflinching bravery in the face of extreme personal risk". Major Fitzroy has been responsible for making safe over 100 improvised explosive devices, potentially saving the lives of numerous troops and civilians, a feat which he describes as "nothing remarkable".'

For long moments neither of them spoke. Sophie felt as if she'd swallowed a firework, which was now fizzing inside her. The barmaid brought over plates of lasagne and chips and retreated again. Sophie's appetite seemed to have mysteriously deserted her.

'I suppose that does give him the right to act like he's a *bit*

special, and *slightly* better than you and me,' she admitted shakily. 'Did you know anything about this?'

'Not a thing.'

'But wouldn't your father want to know? Wouldn't he be pleased?'

Jasper shrugged. 'He's always been rather sneery about Kit's army career, maybe because he's of the opinion people of our class don't work, apart from in pointless, arty jobs like mine.' Picking up his pint, he frowned. 'It might also have something to do with the fact his older brother was killed in the Falklands, but I don't know. That's one of those Things We definitely Do Not Mention.'

There seemed to be quite a lot of those in the Fitzroy family, Sophie thought. She couldn't stop looking at the photograph of Kit, even though she wanted to. Or help thinking how attractive he was, even though she didn't want to.

It had been easy to write him off as an obnoxious, arrogant control-freak but what Jasper had said about his mother last night, and now this, made her see him, reluctantly, in a different light.

What was worse, it made her see herself in a different light too. Having been on the receiving end of ignorant prejudice, Sophie liked to think she would never rush to make ill-informed snap judgments about people, but she had to admit that maybe, just maybe, in this instance she had.

But so had he, she reminded herself defiantly. He had

dismissed her as a shallow, tarty gold-digger when that most definitely wasn't true. The gold-digger part, anyway. Hopefully tonight, with the aid of the nunlike dress and a few pithy comments on current affairs and international politics, she'd make him see he'd been wrong about the rest too.

For Jasper's sake, obviously.

As they left she picked up the newspaper. 'Do you think they'd mind if I took this?'

'What for?' Jasper asked in surprise. 'D'you want to sleep with the heart-throb hero under your pillow?'

'No!' Annoyingly Sophie felt herself blush. 'I want to swot up on the headlines so I can make intelligent conversation tonight.'

Jasper laughed all the way back to the car.

Ralph adjusted his bow tie in the mirror above the drawing room fireplace and smoothed a hand over his brushed-back hair.

'I must say, Kit, I find your insistence on bringing up the subject of my death in rather poor taste,' he said in an aggrieved tone. 'Tonight of all nights. A milestone birthday like this is depressing enough without you reminding me constantly that the clock is ticking.'

'It's not personal,' Kit drawled, mentally noting that he'd do well to remember that himself. 'And it is boring, but the fact remains that Alnburgh won't survive the inheritance tax it'll owe on your death unless you've transferred the ownership of the estate to someone else. Seven years is the—'

Ralph cut him off with a bitter, blustering laugh. 'By someone

else, I suppose you mean you? What about Jasper?'

Alnburgh is yours, Kit. Don't let anyone tell you it's not.

In the pockets of his dinner-suit trousers Kit's hands were bunched into fists. Experience had taught him that when Ralph was in this kind of punchy, belligerent mood the best way to respond was with total detachment. He wondered fleetingly if that was where he first picked up the habit.

'Jasper isn't the logical heir,' he said, very evenly.

'Oh, I don't know about that,' Ralph replied with unpleasant, mock joviality. 'Let's look at it this way—Jasper is probably going to live another sixty or seventy years, and, believe me, I have every intention of lasting a lot more than seven years. Given your job I'd say you're the one who's pushing your luck in that department, don't you think? Remember what happened to my dear brother Leo. Never came back from the Falklands. Very nasty business.'

Ralph's eyes met Kit's in the mirror and slid away. He was already well on the way to being drunk, Kit realised wearily, and that meant that any further attempt at persuasion on his part would only be counterproductive.

'Transfer it to Jasper if you want.' He shrugged, picking up the newspaper that lay folded on a coffee table. 'That would certainly be better than doing nothing, though I'm not sure he'd thank you for it since he hates being here as much as Tatiana does. It might also put him at further risk from ruthless gold-diggers like the one he's brought up this weekend.'

The medals ceremony he'd attended yesterday was front-page news. Idly he wondered whether Ralph had seen it and chosen not to say anything.

'Sophie?' Ralph turned round, putting his hands into his pockets and rocking back on the heels of his patent shoes. 'I thought she was quite charming. Gorgeous little thing, too. Good old Jasper, eh? He's got a cracker there.'

'Except for the fact that she couldn't give a toss about him,' Kit commented dryly, putting down the paper.

'Jealous, Kit?' Ralph said, and there was real malice in his tone. His eyes were narrowed, his face suddenly flushed. 'You think you're the one who should get all the good-looking girls, don't you? I'd say you want her for yourself, just like—'

At that moment the strange outburst was interrupted by Jasper coming in. Ralph broke off and turned abruptly away.

'Just like what?' Kit said softly.

'Nothing.' Ralph pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow. As he turned to Jasper his face lost all its hostility. 'We were just talking about you—and Sophie.'

Heading to the drinks tray, Jasper grinned. 'Gorgeous, isn't she? And really clever and talented too. Great actress.'

In his dinner suit and with his hair wet from the shower Jasper looked about fifteen, Kit thought, his heart darkening against Sophie Greenham.

'So I noticed,' he said blandly, going to the door. He turned to Ralph. 'Think about what I said about the estate transfer. Oh, and

I promised Thomas I'd see to the port tonight. Any preference?'

Ralph seemed to have recovered his composure. 'There's an excellent '29. Though, on second thoughts, open some '71.' His smile held a hint of challenge. 'Let's keep the really good stuff for my hundredth, since I fully intend to be around to celebrate it.'

Crossing the portrait hall in rapid, furious strides, Kit swore with such viciousness a passing waiter shot behind a large display of flowers. So he'd failed to make Ralph see sense about the estate. He'd just have to make sure he was more successful when it came to Sophie Greenham.

It was just as well she hadn't eaten all that lasagne at lunchtime, Sophie reflected grimly, tugging at the zip on the side of the black dress. Obviously, with hindsight, trying it on in the shop would have been wise—all the croissants and baguettes in Paris must have taken more of a toll than she'd realised. Oh, well—if it didn't fit she'd just have to wear the Chinese silk that Jasper had decreed was too sexy …

Hope flared inside her. Instantly she stamped it out.

No. Tonight was not about being sexy, or having fun, she told herself sternly. Tonight was about supporting Jasper and showing Kit that she wasn't the wanton trollop he had her down as.

She thought again of the photo in the paper—unsmiling, remote, heroic—and her insides quivered a little. Because, she realised with a pang of surprise, she actually didn't want him to think that about her.

With renewed effort she gave the zip another furious tug. It

shot up and she let out the lungful of air she'd been holding, looking down at the dress with a sinking heart. Her cell-like bedroom didn't boast anything as luxurious as a full-length mirror, but she didn't need to see her whole reflection to know how awful she looked. It really was the most severely unflattering garment imaginable, falling in a plain, narrow, sleeveless tube from her collarbones to her ankles. A slit up one side at least meant that she could walk without affecting tiny geishalike steps, but she felt as if she were wrapped in a roll of wartime blackout fabric.

'That's *good*,' she said out loud, giving herself a severe look in the little mirror above the sink. Her reflection stared back at her, face pale against the bright mass of her hair. She'd washed it and, gleaming under the overhead light, the colour now seemed more garish than ever. Grabbing a few pins, she stuck them in her mouth, then pulled her hair back and twisted it tightly at the back of her neck.

Standing back again, she pulled a face.

There. Disfiguring dress and headmistress hair. Jasper's dull girlfriend was ready for her public, although at least Sophie had the private satisfaction of knowing that she was also wearing very naughty underwear and what Jasper fondly called her 'shag-me' shoes. Twisting round, she tried to check the back view of the dress, and gave a snort of laughter as she noticed the price ticket hanging down between her shoulder blades.

Classy and expensive was always going to be a hard look

for the girl who used to live on a bus to pull off, as Olympia Rothwell-Hyde and her cronies had never stopped reminding her. Attempting to do it with a label on her back announcing just how little she'd paid for the blackout dress would make it damned impossible.

She gave it a yank and winced as the plastic cut into her fingers. Another try confirmed that it was definitely a job for scissors. Which she didn't have.

She bit her lip. Jasper had already gone down, telling her to join them in the drawing room as soon as she was ready, but there was no way she could face Tatiana, who would no doubt be decked out in designer finery and dripping with diamonds, with her knock-down price ticket on display. She'd just have to slip down to the kitchens and see if the terrifying Mrs Daniels —or Mrs Danvers as she'd privately named her when Jasper had introduced her this morning—had some.

The layout of the castle was more familiar now and Sophie headed for the main stairs as quickly as the narrow dress would allow. The castle felt very different this evening from the cavernous, shadowy place at which she'd arrived last night. Now the stone walls seemed to resonate with a hum of activity as teams of caterers and waiting-on staff made final preparations in the staterooms below.

It was still freezing, though. In the portrait hall the smell of woodsmoke drifted through the air, carried on icy gusts of wind that the huge fires banked in every grate couldn't seem to thaw.

It mingled with the scent of hothouse flowers, which stood on every table and window ledge.

Sophie hitched up the narrow skirt of her dress and went more carefully down the narrow back stairs to the kitchens. It was noticeably warmer down here, the vaulted ceilings holding the heat from the ovens. A central stone-flagged passageway stretched beyond a row of Victorian windows in the kitchen wall, into the dimly lit distance. To the dungeons, Jasper had teased her earlier.

The dungeons, where Kit probably locked up two-timing girlfriends, she thought grimly, shivering in spite of the relative warmth. The noise of her heels echoed loudly off the stone walls. The glass between the corridor and the kitchen was clouded with steam, but through it Sophie could see that Mrs Daniels' domain had been taken over by legions of uniformed chefs.

Of course. Jasper had mentioned that both she and Thomas the butler had been given the night off. Well, there was no way she was going in there. Turning on her high heel, she hitched up her skirt and was hurrying back in the direction she'd just come when a voice behind her stopped her in her tracks.

'Are you looking for something?'

Her heart leapt into her throat and she spun round. Kit had emerged from one of the many small rooms that led off the passageway, his shoulders, in a perfectly cut black dinner suit, seeming almost to fill the narrow space. Their eyes met, and in the harsh overhead bulk light Sophie saw him recoil slightly as

a flicker of some emotion—shock, or was it distaste?—passed across his face.

'I was l-looking for M-Mrs Daniels,' she said in a strangled voice, feeling inexplicably as if he'd caught her doing something wrong again. God, no wonder he had risen so far up the ranks in the army. She'd bet he could reduce insubordinate squaddies to snivelling babies with a single glacial glare. She coughed, and continued more determinedly. 'I wanted to borrow some scissors.'

'That's a relief.' His smile was almost imperceptible. 'I assume it means I don't have to tell you that you have a price ticket hanging down your back.'

Heat prickled through her, rising up her neck in a tide of uncharacteristic shyness.

Quickly she cleared her throat again. 'No.'

'Perhaps I could help? Follow me.'

Sophie was glad of the ringing echo of her shoes on the stone floor as it masked the frantic thud of her heart. He had to duck his head to get through the low doorway and she followed him into a vaulted cellar, the brick walls of which were lined with racks of bottles that gleamed dully in the low light. There was a table on which more bottles stood, alongside a knife and stained cloth like a consumptive's handkerchief. Kit picked up the knife.

'Wh-what are you doing?'

Hypnotised, she watched him wipe the blade of the knife on the cloth.

‘Decanting port.’

‘What for?’ she rasped, desperately trying to make some attempt at sensible conversation. Snatches of the article in the newspaper kept coming back to her, making it impossible to think clearly. *Heart-throb hero. Unflinching bravery. Extreme personal risk*. It was as if someone had taken her jigsaw puzzle image of him and broken it to bits, so the pieces made quite a different picture now.

His lips twitched into the faint half-smile she’d come to recognise, but his hooded eyes held her gravely. The coolness was still there, but they’d lost their sharp contempt.

‘To get rid of the sediment. The bottle I’ve just opened last saw daylight over eighty years ago.’

Sophie gave a little laugh, squirming slightly under his scrutiny. ‘Isn’t it a bit past its sell-by date?’

‘Like lots of things, it improves with age,’ he said dryly, taking hold of her shoulders with surprising gentleness and turning her round. ‘Would you like to try some?’

‘Isn’t it very expensive?’

What was it about an absence of hostility that actually made it feel like kindness? Sophie felt the hair rise on the back of her neck as his fingers brushed her bare skin. She held herself very rigid for a second, determined not to give in to the helpless shudder of desire that threatened to shake her whole body as he bent over her. Her breasts tingled, and beneath the severe lines of the dress her nipples pressed against the tight fabric.

‘Put it this way, you could get several dresses like that for the price of a bottle,’ he murmured, and Sophie could feel the warm whisper of his breath on her neck as he spoke. She closed her eyes, wanting the moment to stretch for ever, but then she heard the snap of plastic as he cut through the tag and he was pulling back, leaving her feeling shaky and on edge.

‘To be honest, that doesn’t say much about your port,’ she joked weakly.

‘No.’ He went back over to the table and picked up a bottle, holding it up to the light for a second before pouring a little of the dark red liquid into a slender, teardrop-shaped decanter. ‘It’s a great dress. It suits you.’

His voice was offhand. So why did it make goosebumps rise on her skin?

‘It’s a very *cheap* dress.’ She laughed again, awkwardly, crossing her arms across her chest to hide the obvious outline of her nipples, which had to be glaringly obvious against the plainness of the dress. ‘Or is that what you meant by it suiting me?’

‘No.’

He turned to face her, holding the slim neck of the decanter. She couldn’t take her eyes off his hands. Against the white cuffs of his evening shirt they looked very tanned and she felt her heart twist in her chest, catching her off guard as she thought of what he had done with those hands. And what he had seen with those eyes. And now he was looking at her with that cool, dispassionate

stare and she almost couldn't breathe.

'I haven't got a glass, I'm afraid.' He swirled the port around in the decanter so it gleamed like liquid rubies, and then offered it up to her lips. 'Take it slowly. Breathe it in first.'

Oh, God.

At that moment she wasn't sure she was capable of breathing at all, but it was as if he had some kind of hypnotist's hold over her and somehow she did as he said, her gaze fixed unblinkingly on his as she inhaled.

It was the scent of age and incense and reverence, and instantly she was transported back to the chapel at school, kneeling on scratchy woollen hassocks to sip communion wine and trying to ignore the whispers of Olympia Rothwell-Hyde and her friends, saying that she'd go to hell because everyone knew she hadn't even been baptised, never mind confirmed. What vicar would christen a child with a name like Summer Greenham?

She pulled away sharply just as the port touched her lips, so that it missed her mouth and dripped down her chin. Kit's reactions were like lightning—in almost the same second his hand came up to cup her face, catching the drips of priceless liquor on the palm of his hand.

'I'm sorry,' she gasped. 'I didn't mean to waste it—'

'Then let's not.'

It was just a whisper, and then he was bending his head so that, slowly, softly, his mouth grazed hers. Sophie's breathing hitched, her world stopped as his lips moved downwards to suck the drips

on her chin as her lips parted helplessly and a tidal wave of lust and longing was unleashed inside her. It washed away everything, so that her head was empty of questions, doubts, uncertainties: everything except the dark, swirling whirlpool of need. Her body did the thinking, the deciding for her as it arched towards him, her hands coming up of their own volition to grip his rock-hard shoulders and tangle in his hair.

This was what she knew. This meeting of mouths and bodies, this igniting of pheromones and stoking of fires—these were feelings she understood and could deal with expertly. Familiar territory.

Or, it had been.

Not now.

Not *this* …

His touch was gentle, languid, but it seared her like a blowtorch, reducing the memory of every man who'd gone before to ashes and dust. One hand rested on her hip, the other cupped her cheek as he kissed her with a skill and a kind of brooding focus that made her tremble and melt.

And want *more*.

The stiff fabric of the hateful dress felt like armour plating. She pressed herself against him, longing to be free of it, feeling the contours of the hard muscles of his chest through the layers of clothes that separated them. Her want flared, a fire doused with petrol, and as she kissed him back her fingers found the silk bow tie at his throat, tugging at the knot, working the shirt button

beneath it free.

And suddenly there was nothing gentle in the way he pulled her against him, nothing languid about the pressure of his mouth or the erotic thrust and dart of his tongue. Sophie's hands were shaking as she slid them beneath his jacket. She could feel the warmth of his body, the rapid beating of his heart as he gripped her shoulders, pushing her backwards against the ancient oak barrels behind her.

Roughly she pushed his jacket off his shoulders. His hands were at her waist and she yanked at her skirt, pulling it upwards so that he could hitch her onto a barrel. She straddled its curved surface, her hips rising to press against his, her fingers twisting in his shirt front as she struggled to pull it free of his trousers.

She was disorientated with desire. Trembling, shaking, unhinged with an urgency that went beyond anything she'd known before. The need to have him against her and in her.

'Now … please …'

She gasped as he stepped backwards, tearing his mouth from hers, turning away. A physical sensation of loss swept through her as her hands, still outstretched towards him, reached to pull him back into her. Her breath was coming in ragged, thirsty gasps; she was unable to think of anything beyond satisfying the itch and burn that pulsed through her veins like heroin.

Until he turned back to face her again and her blood froze.

His shirt was open to the third button, his silk tie hanging loose around his neck in the classic, clichéd image from every red-

blooded woman's slickest fantasy. But that was where the dream ended, because his face was like chiselled marble and his hooded eyes were as cold as ice.

And in that second, in a rush of horror and pain, Sophie understood what had just happened. What she had just done. He didn't need to say anything because his expression—completely deadpan apart from the slight curl of his lip as he looked at her across the space that separated them—said it all.

She didn't hesitate. Didn't think. It was pure instinct that propelled her across that space and made her raise her hand to slap his face.

But her instinct was no match for his reflexes. With no apparent effort at all he caught hold of her wrist and held it absolutely still for a heartbeat before letting go.

'You unutterable bastard,' she breathed.

She didn't wait for a response. Somehow she made her trembling legs carry her out of the wine cellar and along the corridor, while her horrified mind struggled to take in the enormity of what had just happened. She had betrayed Jasper and given herself away. She had proved Kit Fitzroy right. She had played straight into his hands and revealed herself as the faithless, worthless gold-digger he'd taken her for all along.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SO IN the end it hadn't even been as hard as he'd thought it would be.

With one quick, angry movement Kit speared the cork in another dusty bottle and twisted it out with far less care and respect than the vintage deserved.

He hadn't exactly anticipated she would be a challenge to seduce, but somehow he'd imagined a little more in the way of token resistance; some evidence of a battle with her conscience at least.

But she had responded instantly.

With a passion that matched his own.

His hand shook, and the port he was pouring through the muslin cloth into the decanter dripped like blood over the backs of his fingers. Giving a muttered curse, he put the bottle down and put his hand to his mouth to suck off the drops.

What the hell was the matter with him? His hands were usually steady as a rock—he and his entire team would have been blown to bits long ago if they weren't. And if he hesitated, or questioned himself as he was doing now …

He had done what he set out to do, and her reaction was exactly what he'd predicted.

But his wasn't. His wasn't at all.

Wiping her damp palms down the skirt of the horrible dress,

Sophie stood in the middle of the portrait hall, halfway between the staircase and the closed doors to the drawing room. She was still shaking with horror and adrenaline and vile, unwelcome arousal and the urge to run back up to her bedroom, throw her things into her bag and slip quietly out of the servants' entrance was almost overwhelming. Wasn't that the way she'd always dealt with things—the way her mother had shown her? When the going got tough you walked away. You told yourself it didn't matter and you weren't bothered, and just to show you meant it you packed up and moved on.

The catering staff were putting the finishing touches to the buffet in the dining room, footsteps ringing on the flagstones as they brought up more champagne in ice buckets with which to greet the guests who would start arriving any minute. Sophie hesitated, biting down on her throbbing lip as for a moment she let herself imagine getting on a train and speeding through the darkness back to London, where she'd never have to see Kit Fitzroy again …

She felt a stab of pain beneath her ribs, but at that moment one of the enormous doors to the drawing room opened and Jasper appeared.

'Ah, there you are, angel! I thought you might have got lost again so I was just coming to see if I could find you.'

He started to come towards her, and Sophie saw his eyes sweep over her, widening along with his smile as he came closer.

'Saints Alive, Sophie Greenham, that *dress* …'

'I know,' Sophie croaked. 'Don't say it. It's dire.'

'It's not.' Slowly Jasper circled around her, looking her up and down as an incredulous expression spread across his face. 'How *could* we have got it so wrong? It might have been cheap as chips and looked like a shroud on the hanger, but on you it's bloody dynamite.' He gave a low whistle. 'Have you seen yourself? No red-blooded, straight male will be able to keep his hands off you.'

She gave a slightly hysterical laugh. 'Darling, don't you believe it.'

'Soph?' Jasper looked at her in concern. 'You OK?'

Oh, hell, what was she doing? She'd come here to shield him from the prejudices of his family, and so far she'd only succeeded in making things more awkward for him. The fact that his brother was the kind of cold-blooded, ruthless bastard who would stop at nothing to preserve the purity of the Fitzroy name and reputation was all the more reason she should give this her all.

'I'm fine.' Digging her nails into the palms of her hands, she raised her chin and smiled brightly. 'And you look gorgeous. There's something about a man in black tie that I find impossible to resist.'

Wasn't that the truth?

'Good.' Jasper pressed a fleeting kiss to her cheek and, taking hold of her hand, pulled her forwards. 'In that case, let's get this party started. Personally, I intend to get stuck into the champagne right now, before guests arrive and we have to share it.'

Head down, Kit walked quickly in the direction of the King's

Hall—not because he was in any hurry to get there, but because he knew from long experience that looking purposeful was the best way to avoid getting trapped into conversation.

The last thing he felt like doing was talking to anyone.

As he went up the stairs the music got louder. Obviously keen to recapture his youthful prowess on the dance floor Ralph had hired a swing band, who were energetically working their way through the back catalogue of The Beatles. The strident tones of trumpet and saxophone swelled beneath the vaulted ceiling and reverberated off the walls.

Kit paused at the top of the flight of shallow steps into the huge space. The dance floor was a mass of swirling silks and velvets but even so his gaze was instantly drawn to the girl in the plain, narrow black dress in the midst of the throng. She was dancing with Ralph, Kit noticed, feeling himself tense inexplicably as he saw his father's large, practised hand splayed across the small of Sophie's back.

They suited each other very well, he thought with an inward sneer, watching the way the slit in Sophie's dress opened up as she danced to reveal a seductive glimpse of smooth, pale thigh. Ralph was a lifelong womaniser and philanderer, and Sophie Greenham seemed to be pretty indiscriminate in her favours, so there was no reason why she shouldn't make it a Fitzroy hat-trick. He turned away in disgust.

'Kit darling! I thought it must be you—not many people fill a dinner jacket that perfectly, though I must say I'm rather

disappointed you're not in dress uniform tonight.'

Kit's heart sank as Sally Rothwell-Hyde grasped his shoulders and enveloped him in a cloud of asphyxiating perfume as she stretched up to kiss him on both cheeks. 'I saw the picture on the front of the paper, you dark horse,' she went on, giving him a girlish look from beneath spidery eyelashes. 'You looked utterly mouth-watering, and the medal did rather add to the heroic effect. I was hoping to see it on you.'

'Medals are only worn on uniform,' Kit remarked, trying to muster the energy to keep the impatience from his voice. 'And being in military dress uniform amongst this crowd would have had a slight fancy-dress air about it, don't you think?'

'Very dashing fancy dress, though, darling.' Leaning in close to make herself heard above the noise of the band, Sally fluttered her eyelashes, which were far too thick and lustrous to be anything but fake. 'Couldn't you have indulged us ladies?'

Kit's jaw clenched as he suppressed the urge to swear. To Sally Rothwell-Hyde and her circle of ladies who lunched, his uniform was just a prop from some clichéd fantasy, his medals were nothing more than covetable accessories. He doubted that it had crossed her mind for a moment what he had gone through to get them. The lost lives they represented.

His gaze moved over her sunbed-tanned shoulder as he looked for an escape route, but she wasn't finished with him yet. 'Such a shame about you and Alexia,' she pouted. 'Olympia said she was absolutely heartbroken, poor thing. She's taken Lexia skiing

this weekend, to cheer her up. Perhaps she'll meet some hunky instructor and be swept off her skis …'

Kit understood that this comment was intended to make him wild with jealousy, but since it didn't he could think of nothing to say. Sophie was still dancing with Ralph, but more slowly now, both of his hands gripping her narrow waist while the band, ironically, played 'Can't Buy Me Love'. She had her back to Kit, so as she inclined her head to catch something his father said Kit could see the creamy skin at the nape of her neck and suddenly remembered the silky, sexy underwear that had spilled out of her broken bag yesterday. He wondered what she was wearing under that sober black dress.

'Is that her replacement?'

Sally's slightly acerbic voice cut into his thoughts, which was probably just as well. Standing beside him, she had followed the direction of his stare, and now took a swig of champagne and looked at him pointedly over the rim of her glass.

'No,' Kit replied shortly. 'That's Jasper's girlfriend.'

'Oh! *Really*?' Her ruthlessly plucked eyebrows shot up and she turned to look at Sophie again, murmuring, 'I must say I never really thought there was anything in those rumours.' Before Kit could ask her what the hell she meant her eyes had narrowed shrewdly. 'Who is she? She looks vaguely familiar from somewhere.'

'She's an actress. Maybe you've seen her in something.' His voice was perfectly steady, though his throat suddenly felt as if

he'd swallowed gravel.

'An actress,' Sally repeated thoughtfully. 'Typical Jasper. So, what's she like?'

Lord, all that champagne and he didn't have a drink himself. Where the hell were the bloody waiters? Kit looked around as his mind raced, thinking of a suitable answer. *She's an unscrupulous liar and as shallow as a puddle, but on the upside she's the most alive person I've ever met and she kisses like an angel …*

'I'll get Jasper to introduce you,' he said blandly, moving away. 'You can see for yourself.'

Just as Sophie was beginning to suspect that the band were playing the Extended-Groundhog-Club-Remix version of 'Can't Buy Me Love' and that she would be locked for ever in Ralph Fitzroy's damp and rather-too-intimate clutches, the song came to a merciful end.

She'd been relieved when he'd asked her to dance as it had offered a welcome diversion from the task of Avoiding Kit, which had been the sole focus of her evening until then.

'Gosh—these shoes are murder to dance in!' she exclaimed brightly, stepping backwards and forcing Ralph to loosen his death-grip on her waist.

Ralph took a silk handkerchief from the top pocket of his dinner jacket and mopped his brow. Sophie felt a jolt of unease at the veins standing out in his forehead, the dark red flush in his cheeks, and suddenly wondered if it was lechery that had made him cling to her so tightly, or necessity. 'Darling girl, thank you

for the dance,' he wheezed. 'You've made an old man very happy on his birthday. Look—here's Jasper to reclaim you.'

Slipping through the people on the dance floor, Jasper raised his hand in greeting. 'Sorry to break you two up, but I have people demanding to meet you, Soph. Pa, you don't mind if I snatch her away, do you?'

'Be my guest. I need a—' he broke off, swaying slightly, looking around '—need to—'

Sophie watched him weave slightly unsteadily through the crowd as Jasper grabbed her hand and started to pull her forwards. 'Jasper—your father,' she hissed, casting a worried glance over her shoulder. 'Is he OK? Maybe you should go with him?'

'He's fine,' Jasper said airily. 'This is the standard Hawksworth routine. He knocks back the booze, goes and sleeps it off for half an hour, then comes back stronger than ever and out-parties everyone else. Don't worry. A friend of my mother's is dying to meet you.'

He ran lightly up the steps and stopped in front of a petite woman in a strapless dress of aquamarine chiffon that showed off both her tan and the impressive diamonds around her crêpey throat. Her eyes were the colour of Bombay Sapphire gin and they swept over Sophie in swift appraisal as Jasper introduced her.

'Sophie, this is Sally Rothwell-Hyde, bridge partner-in-crime of my mother and all round bad influence. Sally—the girl of my

dreams, Sophie—'

An icy wash of panic sluiced through her.

Great. Just *perfect*. She'd thought that there was no way that an evening that had started so disastrously could get any worse, but it seemed that fate had singled her out to be the victim of not one but several humiliating practical jokes. Just as Olympia Rothwell-Hyde used to do at school.

'Pleased to meet you,' Sophie cut in quickly before Jasper said her surname.

'Sophie …'

Sally Rothwell-Hyde's face bore a look of slight puzzlement as her eyes—so horribly reminiscent of the cold, china-doll blue of her daughter's—bored into Sophie. 'I'm trying to place you. Perhaps I know your parents?'

'I don't think so.'

Damn, she'd said that far too quickly. Sweat was prickling between her shoulder blades and gathering in the small of her back, and she felt slightly sick. She moistened her lips. Think of it as being onstage, she told herself desperately as the puzzled look was replaced by one of surprise and Sally Rothwell-Hyde gave a tinkling laugh.

'Gosh—well, if it isn't that I can't think what it could be.' Her eyes narrowed. 'You must be about the same age as my daughter. You're not a friend of Olympia's, are you?'

Breathe, Sophie told herself. She just had to imagine she was in the audience, watching herself playing the part, delivering the

lines. It was a fail-safe way of coping with stage fright. Distance. Calm. Step outside yourself. Inhabit the character. And above all resist the urge to shriek, *'A friend of that poisonous cow? Are you insane?'*

She arranged her face into a thoughtful expression. 'Olympia Rothwell-Hyde?' She said the loathed name hesitantly, as if hearing it for the first time, then shook her head, with just a hint of apology. 'It doesn't ring any bells. Sorry. Gosh, isn't it warm in here now? I'm absolutely dying of thirst after all that dancing, so if you'll excuse me I must just go and find a drink. Isn't it ironic to be surrounded by champagne when all you want is water?'

She began to move away before she finished speaking, glancing quickly at Jasper in a silent plea for him to rein back his inbred chivalry and keep quiet. He missed it entirely.

'I'll get—'

'No, darling, please. You stay and chat. I'll be back in a moment.'

She went down the steps again and wove her way quickly through the knots of people at the edge of the dance floor. Along the length of the hall there were sets of double doors out onto the castle walls and someone had opened one of them, letting in a sharp draft of night air. Sophie's footsteps stalled and she drank it in gratefully. It was silly—she'd spent the twenty-four hours since she'd arrived at Alnburgh freezing half to death and would have found it impossible to imagine being glad of the cold.

But then she'd have found it impossible to imagine a lot of the

things that had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

A waiter carrying a tray laden with full glasses was making his way gingerly along the edge of the dance floor. He glanced apologetically at Sophie as she approached. 'Sorry, madam, I'm afraid this is sparkling water. If you'd like champagne I can—'

'Nope. Water's perfect. Thank you.' She took a glass, downed it in one and took another, hoping it might ease the throbbing in her head. At the top of the steps at the other end of the hall she could see Jasper still talking to Olympia Rothwell-Hyde's mother, so she turned and kept walking in the opposite direction.

She would explain to Jasper later. Right now the only thing on her mind was escape.

Stepping outside was like slipping into still, clear, icy water. The world was blue and white, lit by a paper-lantern moon hanging high over the beach. The quiet rushed in on her, as sudden and striking an assault on her senses as the breathtaking cold.

Going forwards to lean on the wall, she took in a gulp of air. It was so cold it flayed the inside of her lungs, and she let it go again in a cloud of white as she looked down. Far, far beneath her the rocks were sharp-edged and silvered by moonlight, and she found herself remembering Kit's voice as he told her about the desperate countess, throwing herself off the walls to her death. Down there? Sophie leaned further over, trying to imagine how things could have possibly been bleak enough for her to resort to such a brutal solution.

‘It’s a long way down.’

Sophie jumped so violently that the glass slipped from her hand and spiralled downwards in a shower of sparkling droplets. Her hand flew to her mouth, but not before she’d sworn, savagely and succinctly. In the small silence that followed she heard the sound of the glass shattering on the rocks below.

Kit Fitzroy came forwards slowly, so she could see the sardonic arch of his dark brows. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.’

Sophie gave a slightly wild laugh. ‘Really? After what happened earlier, forgive me if I don’t believe that for a second and just assume that’s exactly what you meant to do, probably in the hope that it might result in another “accident” like the one that befell the last unsuitable woman to be brought home by a Fitzroy.’

She was talking too fast, and her heart was still banging against her ribs like a hammer on an anvil. She couldn’t be sure it was still from the fright he’d just given her, though. Kit Fitzroy just seemed to have that effect on her.

‘What a creative imagination you have.’

‘Somehow it doesn’t take too much creativity to imagine that you’d want to get rid of me.’ She turned round, looking out across the beach again, to avoid having to look at him. ‘You went to quite a lot of trouble to set me up and manipulate me earlier, after all.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.