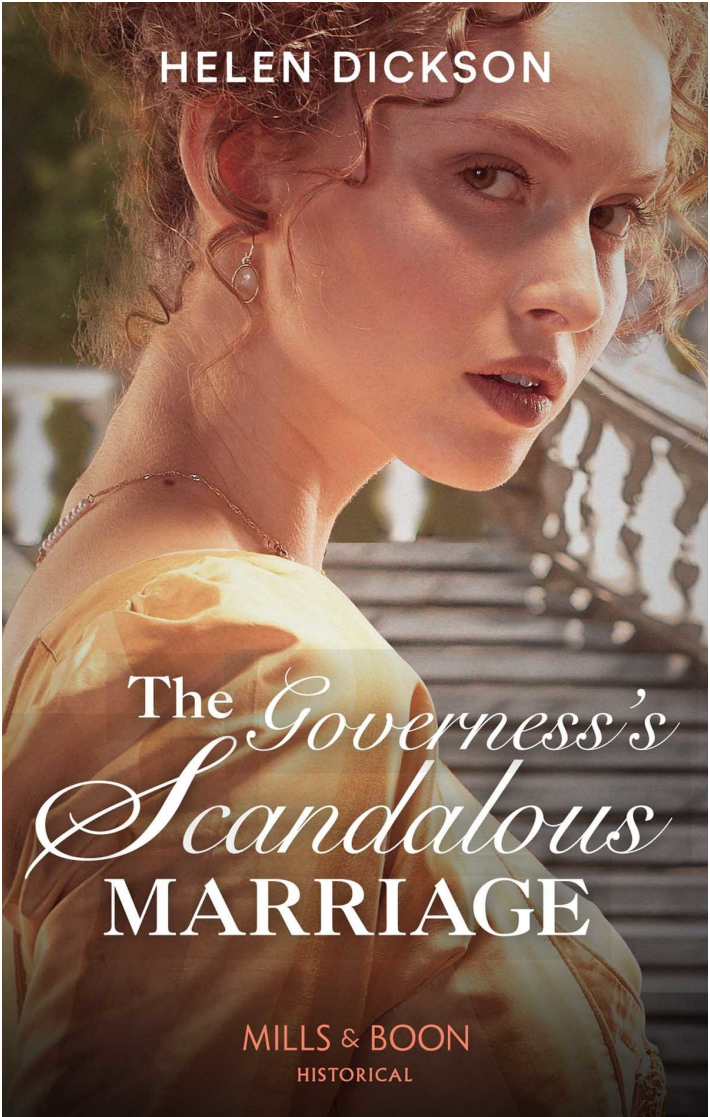
HELEN DICKSON
The Governess's Scandalous MARRIAGE
MILLS & BOON
HISTORICAL

Helen Dickson
The Governess's Scandalous Marriage

Аннотация

A ruined governess… …and a marriage born of scandal! When penniless Linnet Osborne takes a job as a governess, she’s shocked to discover her new employer is none other than Christian, Lord Blakely! They once shared a passionate embrace which almost forced them to marry. Christian is no less compelling now—so much so that Linnet is tempted to explore beyond those fleeting kisses… But that would mean they’d have to wed!

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A ruined governess

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HELEN DICKSON was born and still lives in South Yorkshire, with her retired farm manager husband. Having moved out of the busy farmhouse where she raised their two sons, she now has more time to indulge in her favourite pastimes. She enjoys being outdoors, travelling, reading and music. An incurable romantic, she writes for pleasure. It was a love of history that drove her to writing historical fiction.

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Prologue

Cairo, Egypt—1814

The Englishman heard the wail of the muezzin and the cries of the street pedlars hawking their wares up and down the narrow alleyways. Neither the grilling heat, which beat down on his head with relentless force, nor the persistent flies had the effect of delaying him. Beggars tugged at his clothes, whining for alms, but he paid them no attention as he carried on his way. Tall, with broad, muscular shoulders, deep chest and narrow waist, his handsome features, bronzed by the Egyptian sun, were ruggedly hewn. He was Lord Blakely of Park House, situated in Sussex, England.

There was an urgency about him. If he delayed any longer the ship would leave without him. All passengers were bidden to be aboard by five o'clock. Two hours.

Hailing an empty *hantoor*, drawn by a skinny horse, he gave the driver an address and told him to hurry.

The man nodded vigorously. 'I take you there.'

The Englishman didn't ask how much it would cost him, he simply climbed aboard. The conveyance made good speed, the horse clopping briskly through the narrow streets with their pungent smells of spices mingled with open drains. Obstacles got in their way—bullock carts and laden donkeys, crowds of

men and women with baskets on their heads and hips, myriad children, their dark eyes ringed with kohl, who ran beside the cart holding out their hands for the Englishman's coin.

At last the cart halted in front of a house set back from the road behind high iron railings. Asking the man to wait and telling him that he would pay him handsomely if he took him to his ship, the man climbed down and rang a bell attached to a tall gate. A stout middle-aged Egyptian waddled down the path and opened the gate.

'I have business with the lady, Mrs Marsden,' he said. 'My name is Christian Blakely. My ship sails shortly and I am pressed for time.'

The Egyptian smiled. 'Mrs Marsden is expecting you,' he said in excellent English.

Christian followed him up the steps of the veranda and through a bead curtain.

An elderly Englishwoman dressed entirely in black appeared holding the hand of a young girl.

'Mrs Marsden?' Christian said, not having met her before.

'Yes—I am Mrs Marsden and this is Alice.'

Christian's manner was brusque. Seeming reluctant to look at the child with a shock of black curling hair, not unlike his own, and large brown eyes regarding him with an inquisitive melancholy stare, he felt his face harden into an expressionless mask. He had not set eyes on the child before either. He remembered the day five years ago when he had learned of her

birth. He knew he would never again feel the anger, resentment and wretchedness that had seized him then.

The child's mother was Selina.

Selina, the ambitious daughter of a military man, had been his father's mistress, a woman whose sole interest in life was money and position. His father had both, but since he already had a wife the position as Lady Blakely was denied her. She was much younger than his father and he had been completely dazzled by her—there was something about her that would convince a man he would find warmth in her arms. She had wheedled money out of him at an alarming rate—especially when the child came along. Selina made her daughter a bargaining tool that she used to the full. It was unfortunate for her that his father had died, but, not one to rest on her laurels, Selina had soon found another lover to fund her needs.

Christian had encountered her on several occasions and had summed her up immediately. Selina was beautiful, but there was a coarseness about her that his father seemed oblivious to. Aware of Christian's disapproval—he made no attempt to conceal it—she would fix him with a bold and penetrating stare, leaving him in no doubt that she would happily and brazenly exchange the father for the son if he showed willing.

At the beginning of his father's affair with Selina, Christian had tried to reason with him. He had begged his father to leave her and return to his mother, but to no avail. A furious row had ensued with his father, a powerful and controlling man, telling

Christian that he forgot himself, that his private life was not his concern and neither was his mistress. A keen Egyptologist, his father had left for Cairo shortly after this bitter confrontation. Selina, already carrying his child, had accompanied him.

Such a course was unbelievably cruel to his mother. Christian had watched her endure the pain of marriage to a man who had nothing but contempt for her. Why a woman whose nature was tender and loving continued to harbour any affection for him, since his father was a blackguard whose treatment of her was deplorable, was one of life's inexplicable mysteries. She had died shortly after his father had left for Egypt for the last time. Christian was certain the cause of her demise was a broken heart.

His father's actions destroyed what feelings Christian had left for him. Frequent absences from his life as a boy and later as a youth had prevented a closeness from developing between father and son. On the occasions when Christian had been at home, his father's controlling attitude and insistence that Christian learn everything there was to learn about running the estate so that he could pursue his own pleasures had instilled a deep resentment within him. As a result of his father's behaviour, Christian had no appetite for marriage, which to him didn't seem a source of happiness. When he married he would not be doing so expecting to be made happy by it. He would prefer not to marry at all, but if he was to secure an heir he could not postpone the inevitable indefinitely.

'We are ready to leave,' Mrs Marsden said.

‘Where is she—Selina? She hasn’t come back?’

Mrs Marsden shook her head. ‘No. She isn’t coming back.’

Christian picked up the baggage waiting by the door and carried it out to the *hantoor*. Mrs Marsden followed him, asking him to help Alice. This he did, placing her on the seat. He looked at the child and quickly looked away, trying to defend himself against the rising and violent tide of anger directed against this small being, whose entry into the world had destroyed so much that had been precious to him.

Angry, relentlessly so and unable to understand why he should feel like this for an innocent child who had not asked to be born, his face resolute and without expression, Christian ordered the driver to head for the ship which was to carry them to England.

Chapter One

London—*1814* A ball held in honour of the Duke of Wellington's return to England following his success in *the* Peninsular War

Lord Blakely, the Earl of Ridgemont, idly looked into the hall below. He was the stuff ladies' dreams were made of, fatally handsome and with the devil's own charm. Here was manner, bearing and elegance that could not be bought or cut into shape by a tailor. He was one of those enviable individuals whose breeding would show through even if he were dressed in rags. Christian was a fiercely private man, guarded and solitary, accountable to no one. To those who knew him he was clever, with an almost mystical ability to see what motivated others. To his business partners it was a gift beyond value, because it provided insight into the guarded ambitions of his adversaries.

The Christian Blakely who had recently returned from Egypt was very different from the one who had left a year ago. The changes were startling. In contrast to the man who had lounged about the gentlemen's clubs and ballrooms with bored languor, it was a more serious Christian Blakely who had returned. Deeply tanned by the Egyptian sun, he was muscular and extremely fit,

sharp and authoritative, and although he charmed his way back into society, there was an aura about him of a man who had done and seen all there was to see and do, a man who had confronted danger. It was a reserved aura that women couldn't resist and which added to his attraction.

Christian was as quick as any other man to look at a beautiful woman. Raising a lazy brow, with mild interest he watched one now passing slowly among the throng. With a good deal of pleasure he allowed his gaze to dwell on her. She was petite, like a girl, with a hand-span waist. There was elegance and grace in every step she took and she had a perfect, unselfconscious way of walking. In the company of an older woman wearing a striking black and red mask and a young gentleman who bore a similarity to the object of his gaze, she was surrounded by other beautiful ladies. She held her head confidently high as she appeared to mingle with the other guests, a slight smile playing on her pretty lips.

A white wig, short and softly curled, covered her hair. Long white gloves encased her arms and the mask covering the upper part of her face matched the pale gold of her high-waisted dress and the series of ribbons and bows that decorated the bodice and puffed sleeves. Her only adornment was a scintillating teardrop pearl on a thread of gold nestling comfortably in the shadow of her pert young breasts. For a brief moment their eyes met and then he looked away when she passed from view.

A solid block of elegant equipages, stretching all along the

street, deposited the cream of London society and foreign dignitaries before the portico of Corinthian columns of the very grand and awe-inspiring Stourbridge House on the Strand. Lord and Lady Stourbridge were giving a masquerade ball at their magnificent residence to celebrate the return of the Duke of Wellington to England following his success in the war against Napoleon Bonaparte in the Peninsula. All England was rejoicing and no one could talk of anything else.

Light streamed from large windows and the moon reflected its silver sheen on surrounding rooftops. The black and white marble hall was filled to capacity with guests greeting each other and being received by their perfect hosts. Lady Stourbridge, one of London's most popular socialites, was tall and statuesque and attired in blue satin, her light brown hair fussily plumed and bandeauxed. Lord Stourbridge, a man who believed his worth was measured by the cut of his cloth, was pink cheeked beneath his elaborately curled wig and corpulent—a result of too many excesses at the dinner table. He was a pompous, grandiose character, his appearance impressive, from his high collar and bright yellow waistcoat, to his buckled shoes. He was smiling broadly, looking genial and avuncular as he and his wife gave their complete attention to their guests, making each one feel like the most important person in the house.

Lord Blakely watched as the guests strolled along corridors and spilled out on to the wide terrace, descending the shallow flight of stone steps into the torch-lit gardens below. The buzz of

chatter and laughter drifted in through the open doors. Pausing at the entrance to the ballroom, he glanced inside without much interest. Two huge chandeliers with crystal drops hung from the stuccoed ceiling, flowers were bursting out of urns and music filled the air. This whole affair was like attending a magnificent theatre and no expense had been spared.

The ladies were attired in their finest, their heads adorned with elaborate swaying plumes and ribbons, their throats and fingers dripping with exquisite jewels. Christian's gaze lingered on those expensive gems, calmly assessing their worth, before moving on to admire and evaluate the fine paintings adorning the walls. A lady brushed against him. He turned to look at her. She was an attractive woman, but it was not her pretty face that caught his eyes. It was what she was wearing about her throat. He stared into the verdant depths of an emerald necklace. Gleaming with regal fire, it motivated him into action, but he was not interested in rubies or diamonds but something else—something much more valuable to him.

* * *

The masked ball was filled with beauty and elegance. Footmen in scarlet and gold livery stood to attention. Finding it all magically impressive, Linnet Osborne absorbed every detail. Above her head chandeliers, dripping with hundreds of thousands of crystals, were ablaze with blinding light. She could not have imagined such a spectacle. It was the most lavish affair she had ever attended. There was such gaiety and so much colour,

the people behind the masks inspired with a sense of boldness, of daring as the carnival atmosphere of the ball invaded each and every one of them. But she became increasingly apprehensive as she mingled with so much elegance and wealth and felt a strong impulse to run from it all and leave. She was conscious of the simplicity of her attire among so much flamboyance. Unfortunately she was wearing the one and only gown she owned that was suitable for such an occasion and she could not afford another. For her the evening could not be over soon enough.

Suddenly her feminine senses tingled. Sensing she was being watched, Linnet looked up at the gallery that circled the upper storey of the house. She looked straight into the eyes of a stranger. He was leaning against a marble pillar, an expression of utter boredom on his handsome face. He was extremely tall with powerful shoulders. Through the balustrade she saw that white-silk stockings encased his muscular calves. Unlike the other gentlemen, who were dressed like peacocks in a multitude of bright colours, he was clad in a blue-velvet coat and breeches, the curve of the cut of the coat allowing full display of the gold embroidered waistcoat. Her attention was focused entirely on him. Had she wanted to look away she could not have done so. She had never seen such a figure of masculine elegance. He looked so poised, so debonair. His habitual air of languid indolence hung about him like a cloak. His thick hair, drawn back and secured at the nape, was as black as the mask which covered the upper part of his face, his taut skin, a dark bronze.

The cold eyes behind the mask made her shiver. As he met her gaze, the expression in his eyes was half-startled, half-amused, and something else—something slightly carnal that stirred unfamiliar things inside her and brought heat to her cheeks. It was impossible not to respond to this man as his masculine magnetism dominated the scene. She was struck by the arrogance in his stance, an arrogance that told her he knew everything about her, which made her feel uneasy. Perhaps, she thought, he would have looked at her differently had he known how miserable she was, her heart heavy like a stone in her young breast. Love and passion were unknown to her—waiting to flourish in the warmth of a man's eyes.

Quickly she looked away.

Stiffening her spine, Linnet snapped open her fan. She picked up her skirts with her free hand, and followed in the wake of her Aunt Lydia with her brother Toby by her side along with her cousin Louisa and Harry Radcliffe, the young man Louisa was to marry. As she began to ascend the elaborate marble staircase, Linnet assumed an expression of fashionable ennui. The beautiful setting and the laughter spurred her on through a sea of nameless faces into the ballroom, where she was swept along by the music and the dancing. She didn't lack for partners.

* * *

It was during the break for refreshments that Linnet realised she hadn't seen Toby all evening.

Noting her unease, her aunt tapped her arm with her fan.

‘What is it, Linnet? Is it Toby you are looking for?’

‘Yes. I—I don’t know where he can be.’

Although a smile stretched her lips, her aunt’s eyes were cold. She looked at Linnet with disdain. ‘Perhaps you should try the card room, Linnet. Isn’t that where he spends most of his time?’

Linnet’s heart sank. ‘I—I hadn’t thought... He said he wouldn’t...not tonight.’

‘Really, my dear,’ her aunt said, with a meaningful lift to her brows, ‘you know him better than that.’

‘Yes, I do, Aunt. Excuse me. I—I will go and look for him.’

Linnet was relieved to escape her aunt’s overbearing presence. Tall and statuesque, Aunt Lydia was a striking woman with dark brown hair and pale blue eyes. Her sole ambition in life was to entertain and ingratiate herself with the social elite and she was a stickler for propriety. Her husband had been killed in a riding accident, leaving her an extremely wealthy widow—a widow who saw that none of her wealth reached her impoverished niece and nephew at Birch House in Chelsea. Lydia’s dislike for Linnet and Toby—the poor relations—radiated from her. Linnet knew this, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Anger and disappointment at her brother’s recklessness burned inside Linnet. At twenty years of age, Toby was two years younger than Linnet. Toby was a man of expensive tastes and, in his reckless desperation to improve their lot, he was in danger of gambling everything away, including their wonderful home in Chelsea, where they lived alone, now their parents were both

dead.

Ever since their father had died when Toby was a youth, leaving them almost destitute—their situation worsened by Toby's propensity to gamble—Linnet's life had been a constant worry. No one knew what the wrenching loss of both their father and his income had done to her and Toby, or understood the humiliation, shame and heartbreak of it all and how it felt to be forced to live in shabby, penny-pinching gentility.

Trouble was looming, which would be too big for Linnet to handle. Her greatest fear was that they would be left with no choice but to sell the house, which would break her heart. Every day was a struggle to make ends meet, a struggle in which it seemed that defeat was waiting to mock her. Linnet felt as if she were constantly banging her head against a stone wall—and there had been too many stone walls of late. She had contemplated seeking work of some kind and would consider anything that would bring her some income. If only she had someone to talk to, someone to advise her. She was sick with worry and striving and she felt tired. What would become of them?

Linnet had begged Toby countless times to give up his reckless way of life, for if he did not heed their situation then he would find himself in gaol—or worse. But Toby was so wrapped up in his own self-indulgent world he always became angry and defensive and found Linnet's persistence to try to reform him extremely irritating. Now, her resolve to find him before it was too late sent her towards the room where the card tables had been

set up, believing she would find her brother there.

Inside the room the noise was muted so as not to distract the players. There were a lot of people throwing away their money sitting around the green baize tables, and even more standing around watching the games of whist, Hazard and other games that took the guests' fancy in this paradise of chance. Standing in the doorway, Linnet scanned the groups of people clustered around them, where several games were in progress, but there was no sign of Toby.

Relief flooded through her, but she was left wondering where he could be. She did not linger, not wishing to draw undue attention to herself, but it was no easy matter for Linnet was exquisitely attractive, a figure of elegance, one who instinctively drew a second, lingering glance. There was not a thing she could do about it, for it was innate, like drawing breath. She was unaware that in her plain gown she was scintillating and far more alluring than if she had been adorned from head to toe in jewels.

She was also unaware of the attention of the gentleman who now observed her appearance in the card room—the same gentleman who had noted her arrival at Stourbridge House, his eyes following her with an interested gleam. Linnet was in no mood to return to the ballroom, so she turned away from the card room and wandered from room to room, looking for her brother.

She wandered into a quiet part of the house, where the passageways were dimly lit. When a door opened further along she paused and watched in amazement as her brother emerged,

his hand in the pocket of his coat. There was something furtive in his movements and the way his eyes darted up and down the passage. Linnet was immediately suspicious that he was up to something.

'Toby! What are you doing here? I've been looking for you. Why are you not with the other guests?'

'Linnet—I—I was just—'

'Just what? What have you got in your pocket?'

Toby's face reddened. 'Nothing—nothing at all.'

'Yes, you have. Show me,' Linnet demanded, holding out her hand.

Knowing she wouldn't let him go until he'd showed her the contents of his pocket, Toby slowly pulled out what looked to be a piece of jewellery.

Linnet stared at it, not fully comprehending at first what it was. But then something she had heard her aunt talking about resurrected itself and she could not believe what she was seeing—what Toby had done. Lord Stourbridge was a keen archaeologist and loved all things Egyptian. He was excited and vociferous about the artefacts he had recently brought out of Egypt and he proudly boasted of his finds to all and sundry. His treasures were much talked about, especially a recently acquired necklace of solid gold.

Linnet looked at him accusingly. 'So, not only do you gamble away every penny we own, now you are a thief. How could you, Toby? How could you do this? I have no doubt you are not in this

alone and that one of your associates has put you up to it. How did you know where to look?'

'It wasn't difficult. I gained inside knowledge of the house from one of the footmen employed by Lord Stourbridge.'

'I imagine the footman was well paid for the information and the man who would be guarding the room has gone for his supper.' Hearing laughter coming from close by and being quick, efficient and decisive, she snatched the necklace out of his hand. 'Go back to the ballroom and show your face to Aunt Lydia. I'll put this back.'

A look of panic appeared in Toby's eyes. 'You can't. There are others depending on this.'

'If they want the necklace, then they can come and get it. I will not see you go to prison, Toby. Where did you get it from? Tell me.'

'There's a small black box in the chest facing the door,' he told her petulantly. 'You can't miss it.'

Linnet watched Toby hurry down the passage before opening the door to the room he had come out of. Attaching her fan to her reticule, with her heart in her mouth she slipped inside, closing the door softly behind her.

There were lighted candles in sconces on the walls, casting light and shadows in the room. Looking around, she saw it was a treasure trove of antiquities. Lord Stourbridge was very proud of his collection of ancient relics. The walls were hung with all kinds of artefacts, from African spears and shields to

brightly coloured frescoes depicting Egyptians' daily lives and mosaics from ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. Stuffed animal heads leered down at her. Shoving herself away from the door, she slowly moved into the centre of the room, pulling off her gloves and shoving them into her reticule. Amulets of ancient gods, bronze figurines, wooden statuettes and objects taken from Egyptian tombs that the dead had used and enjoyed in life, were displayed on plinths and shelves.

Moving across the room, Linnet was unaware of the door opening and a tall figure slipping inside. She stood quite still, the music from the ballroom fading as she gazed in awe at what she saw. She had never seen anything like it. Brought from her reverie by laughter somewhere outside the room, Linnet told herself she would have to hurry if she was to accomplish her task successfully. Almost at once she recognised the wooden chest Toby had described to her, one Lord Stourbridge had recently brought from Egypt that held his latest collection of treasures.

With her heart beating loudly in her ears, Linnet quickly moved towards it and lifted the lid. Looking inside, she did a quick search of the contents. Seeing a wooden box, tentatively she lifted it out and looked inside, certain this was the box where the necklace belonged.

Removing the box, she looked at the necklace in her hand, letting it trail through her fingers in solitary splendour. It was a lavish piece of jewellery, made up of five rows of solid gold links inlaid with lapis lazuli and joined by a central gold clasp in the

shape of a scarab. Each lapis lazuli stone was like no other in a combination of blue, black and gold. It was truly magnificent. Even to her inexperienced eye Linnet knew it would require a significant level of skill to produce. Out of interest, there were other items in the chest she would have liked to look at more closely, but she told herself she had to hurry. Time was of the essence. The longer she remained in the room, the greater the risk of her being caught. She was about to place it inside the box when a voice rang behind her.

'I wouldn't do that if you value your life,' it said.

She felt a frisson of alarm as all her senses became heightened. She spun around to see who had spoken. A man emerged from the shadows and moved menacingly towards her. Edging into view with a cynical twist to his lips, he allowed the shifting light of the candles to illuminate his features. As she watched him her throat tightened and fear jabbed her in the chest. It was the same man who had drawn her attention earlier. The closer he came brought a waft of gentle cologne that touched her senses and she became aware of his catlike litheness. She could feel the energy flowing from him and could sense the danger. He hardly made a sound as he walked towards her, his eyes never leaving her face, his step surprisingly light for his size.

Linnet had to look up into his face, he was so tall. He was close, so close she could see the fine lines at the corners of his mouth and the glitter of his black eyes behind the mask. They seemed to bore through her, the gaze so bold and forward that

her eyes slowly widened and for a brief moment she held her breath, frozen by his steely gaze.

The man saw the wary look of a trapped but defiant young animal enter her transparent eyes, eyes the colour of a tawny owl behind her mask. Her face was uptilted—deep inside he felt something tighten, harden, clarifying and coalescing into one crystal-clear emotion. He found himself wishing he could see her face. Her eyes blazed with defiance. There was an elfin delicacy from the little he could see of her face and a pert little point to her chin. Her lips were full and the straight cut of her gown revealed the curves of her slender body beneath. He knit his brows as he searched her eyes.

'Do you normally inspect the ladies you meet with such thoroughness?' Linnet demanded suddenly, with a voice like frosted glass.

An impudent smile curved his lips. 'You don't like it?'

'Not one bit.'

His smile broadened. 'Whoever you are, you look extremely lovely—as rare a jewel as the one you are holding. Too bad you are a thief. I like what I see.'

Her lips tightened at the chauvinistic remark. 'Things aren't always what they seem.'

'No? My eyes do not deceive me. But please do not be alarmed. You will come to no harm if you behave yourself.'

The sound of his voice, deep and resonant, sent a thrill of fear down Linnet's spine, and she trembled for some unknown reason.

He continued to look at her searchingly—the warm liquid of his dark gaze missed nothing. 'Behave myself?' she uttered bravely. 'If you lay one finger on my person, I swear I will scream.'

'I have no intention of touching you,' he replied calmly. 'Be assured that nothing was further from my mind and to scream would be your greatest folly. What do you think would happen to you if Lord Stourbridge should find you—an intruder, if my judgement serves me correct—in this room, about to steal his greatest prize? A most foolhardy act.'

Linnet's fear increased, pricking her consciousness that she had been caught in what must seem to be a criminal act. The certainty of what would happen to her was beginning to loom monstrously large in her mind. Her mind tumbled over in a frenzy. What could she do? With the man blocking her way to the door, it was impossible for her to escape. Straightening her spine, she faced him with outward calm, looking at him for a long, thoughtful moment, estimating her chances of getting out of that room with her dignity intact.

'This isn't what it looks like,' Linnet said, hoping to convince him. 'I wasn't stealing it.'

'No? Try telling that to a magistrate. My eyes did not deceive me. I caught you red handed.' Taking the necklace from her, he held it up to the light, the gold links trailing through his fingers like droplets of shining water. He sighed his appreciation, his casual manner and his outward calm out of keeping with the seriousness of the situation.

‘It’s a beautiful piece—hard to believe it’s been buried for nigh on three thousand years. Do you know anything about it?’

‘No—only that it is worth a considerable fortune.’

He smiled thinly. ‘Of course you do, otherwise you would not be here to steal it. Allow me enlighten you. Jewellery made of lapis lazuli was a status symbol in ancient Egypt. It was a symbol of power and status. The Egyptians believed it offered protection and symbolised truth. They valued it more highly than gold. The scarab you see is believed to ensure resurrection and eternal life and generally to bring good luck. Amulets in the shape of scarabs were used in connection with burials and were intended to protect the dead from all dangers which faced them in the future life.’

‘Really?’ Linnet remarked with a hint of sarcasm. ‘Thank you for the lesson, but do you mind telling me what you are going to do?’

‘What do you expect me to do? You are a common thief—and not a very good one otherwise you wouldn’t have been caught out.’ Holding her gaze, he moved closer. ‘Mention this to anyone, Miss Whoever-You-Are, and you can kiss your freedom goodbye.’

Linnet blanched at the threat and stepped away from him. ‘Will you tell Lord Stourbridge?’ Fear filled her heart, but she would not make a spectacle of herself with weakness and tears.

He looked at her, so small and slender. There was a sweet elfin delicacy to what he could see of her face below the mask. He wondered at the colour of her hair beneath the white wig and

he knit his brows as he studied her. She was studying him with equal measure. Drawn to her eyes, peering at him through the holes in her mask, he'd never seen such incredible eyes—they were indeed the unusual shade of tawny, he thought, and they had depth and glowed, almost as if they had hot coals burning behind them. When he had made his presence known, she had looked agitated and her expression had been one of intense fear.

'I haven't made up my mind.'

Suddenly a thought occurred to Linnet and her eyes opened wide. 'Why are you here, sir, in this room? Are *you* by any chance a thief also?'

'All I will say is that I am here to claim what is rightly mine.'

'Which is?'

'This,' he replied, indicating the necklace.

'How do I know you are telling me the truth? People are not always what they seem—and not to be trusted.'

'You will simply have to take my word for it.'

'I can't do that.'

'I give you my word as a gentleman.'

'A gentleman does not steal other people's property.'

'I told you. I am not a thief.'

'Then I can see we find ourselves in something of a dilemma.'

'Why? Because you are here for the necklace and you do not like to be cheated out of it? You may not be so eager to take possession of it if you knew more about it,' he remarked, with a quiet casualness as he admired his possession.

‘What is there to know?’

‘That a curse is believed to be cast upon any person who seeks to own it. The curse does not differentiate between archaeologists or common thieves. Allegedly it can cause bad luck, illness and even death.’

Linnet blanched. Even though the knowledge of the curse terrified her, she refused to let that terror overtake her. ‘You are only telling me this to scare me.’

Shrugging his shoulders, the man shook his head. ‘Not at all. I am merely stating a fact. Ancient Egyptians believed that they should protect their tombs by magical means or curses. Curses are placed on sacred objects and possessions to stop people from disturbing them. Inscriptions on tombs often speak of the deceased coming back to life to seek revenge should anyone dare to desecrate their resting place. The curse is what will happen to anyone who does not heed the warning.’

‘Do you believe the curse exists?’

‘I know of at least two men who took possession of the necklace who met untimely deaths—one violently and the other died of a mysterious disease.’

A cold tremor trickled down Linnet’s spine. The stranger turned his dark eyes on her. She looked away, biting her lip—there was something unpleasant about what he said that put a different slant on the necklace. Telling herself it was all mumbo-jumbo, she shook herself and looked at him. The line of his jaw was hard and behind the cold glitter of his dark eyes lay a

fathomless stillness.

'It is an interesting tale, but I think it is just superstitious nonsense. I do not believe that beings can exact revenge from beyond the grave.'

'Beings that possess unknown and seemingly evil qualities,' he stated flatly, keeping his voice soft, knowing he was deliberately trying to make her question her desire for the necklace.

'Nevertheless, it was all a long time ago and Egypt is a long way away. I am not afraid of such things. I refuse to let them scare me.'

'Then does that mean you are unwilling to relinquish your claim?'

'Yes.'

His voice was condescendingly amused as he tried not to look too deeply into her eyes, eloquent in the fear she was trying so hard to hide. He smiled. 'Then I suggest we play for it. Would that be agreeable to you?'

Christian knew he should not give her the impression that he was a thief, that he should explain his reason for taking the necklace, which was completely innocent and that he was its rightful owner, but he found he was enjoying teasing her and could think of nothing that would please him more just then than to prolong their encounter. There was something about her that touched a hidden spot within him that he had not felt for a long time. It would give him no pleasure to have her arrested. No pleasure at all.

‘If you refuse to relinquish it to me, then I will have to. What do you suggest?’

‘A wager,’ he suggested.

Linnet’s eyes narrowed. If playing for the necklace was the only way she could secure it and put it back in its box, then that was what she must do. ‘What kind of wager?’

A leisurely smile moved across the stranger’s face. ‘By your actions you seem to be hell bent on self-destruction.’

Linnet’s eyes flashed with a feral gleam. ‘That is my affair.’

‘I agree, but you cannot deny that you have got yourself into an impossible situation. You are too reckless by far.’

‘What is life without a little danger?’ she replied wryly.

Christian laughed lightly. ‘My feeling exactly. So—let us play a game of chance. The best of three.’ Putting the necklace back into its box and placing it on top of the chest, he produced two dice from his pocket.

* * *

Raising her eyebrows, Linnet gave him an ironic look. The man was infuriatingly sublime in his amusement. She was self-willed, energetic and passionate, with a fierce and undisciplined temper, but her youth, her charm and her wit had more than made up for the deficiencies in her character. She was proud and spirited and so determined to have her own way that she had always been prepared to plough straight through any hurdle that stood in her path—just as she was about to do now. It dawned on her that she was making an idiot of herself, but her wits had been

put somewhat out of sorts by their exchange so far. If she weren't so desperate to replace the necklace that Toby had stolen, she'd cheerfully tell the man to go and jump in the Thames.

'You even came prepared, I see.' Linnet glanced at the dice suspiciously. Should she ask to inspect them? she wondered. On second thoughts, perhaps not. They looked quite ordinary, yet she was hardly an expert in these matters—Toby would have been able to tell if they were loaded at a glance. It would appear that she would have to trust this infuriating stranger.

The handsome stranger stepped towards a table. She followed, feeling his eyes intently upon her. His hands were the hands of a gentleman, his fingers long and tapering. But if he was a gentleman—a nobleman for all she knew—then what had turned him into a thief? She looked up at him, meeting eyes as black as his mask. He was tall, lean, muscular, giving the appearance of someone who rode, fenced and hunted. She recognised authority when she met it and his personality was so strong that she was certain that with a lift of one of his arrogant eyebrows, or a flare of a nostril, he could make one tremble with fear. She guessed him to be in his late twenties.

There was an aggressive confidence and strength of purpose to him. She detected an air of breeding about him, a quality that displayed itself in his crisp manner and neat apparel. His eyes, holding hers captive, seemed capable of piercing her soul, laying bare her innermost secrets, causing a chill to sear through her. She felt overwhelmed by his close presence and he seemed

to invade every part of her. She thought it miraculous that she managed to keep her head.

'Would you like first throw?' he asked.

'No, you can go first.'

'I must point out that I never wager on uncertainties.'

'That's an arrogant assumption. Are you saying that I will lose?'

He bowed his head in deferential respect. 'I would not be so bold. I would not dare. I suspect it would be more than my life is worth. All I am saying is that I intend to win.'

Clearly in no hurry, he caressed the dice in the palms of his hands and then rolled them over the table's polished surface. They rolled over and over before finally stopping close to the edge, showing two and five. Next it was Linnet's turn. Collecting the dice herself, she rolled them carefully, breathing a sigh of relief with the dice showing six and three.

'The first roll to you,' he said, scooping up the dice masterfully in his hands.

His second throw showed five and five. Linnet followed with a disappointing three and one. There was a certain sense of triumph in the look he gave her. He was confident. He believed he would win.

'We are even,' he said. 'Well—this is it—the decider.'

Holding her breath Linnet bit her lip as she watched his throw. Six and five. Picking up the dice, she sent up a silent prayer, knowing in her heart that she wouldn't match his high score. The

dice seemed to roll for ever. At last they stopped rolling and showed double five.

'Oh, dear,' she said as disappointment swamped her.

'Oh, yes,' he mocked, scooping up the dice. Losing no time in claiming the necklace, he slipped it into his pocket along with the dice.

Linnet watched him, feeling anger towards the stranger for catching her, but most of her anger was directed against Toby for putting her in this position and also at herself for getting caught and being bested at the dice. She tightened her lips. Resentment burned in her breast and heated her cheeks. 'I don't suppose you would change your mind and take something else?' she suggested, knowing it was a futile question, but hoping he would.

Behind the mask his eyes went darker than dark and his voice was soft but cutting. 'No, I'm afraid not.'

'What would you have done had I won?'

His lips curved in a slight smile. 'As to that, little lady, you will never know.'

Christian saw the intensity in her eyes, the defiance to accept that she had lost and the ill-concealed anger. Her hands were clenched. He had watched her soft white hand as she had rolled the dice and he got the impression that this young woman was like two people—outwardly she was like the consummate actress, but underneath there was something else—something he now picked up on and it wasn't the underlying steely quality he'd expected.

She was small and slender, her hands small like a child's that

could easily slip into a pocket—a necessary asset to a thief. This was not a woman who lost easily. 'Of course you could choose something else to steal—although I wouldn't advise it. Should you be caught and a constable called, then the consequences for you would be dire indeed.'

'As they will for you, should you be caught with the necklace in your possession. I do not believe you have a claim to it, otherwise you would have taken it without rolling the dice. You are a thief, sir, and as likely to hang as any other thief.'

He laughed in the face of her ire. He knew he should enlighten her and tell her he was no thief. He should explain that his father had unearthed it in Egypt. Aware of the value of this precious object and knowing it was a target for thieves, he had approached Lord Stourbridge, also in Egypt, who was to return to England before him. He had given it to him for safekeeping and this ball to which Christian had been invited, with Lord Stourbridge's lawyer's permission, had been the perfect opportunity to retrieve it. Yes, he should tell her the truth, but he was enjoying her company and wished to prolong it a while.

'Dear me. You have a strange preoccupation with seeing me hang. As a gentleman and a peer of the realm, I assure you that will not be my fate. You must know that London is a dangerous and corrupt city. Crime abounds and though the legal system has its limitations, allowing criminals to flourish, that does not mean that they cannot be caught. So have a care lest I inform Lord Stourbridge of your intention to steal from him.'

* * *

Linnet's face blanched beneath the mask. The utter humiliation of being arrested and publicly conveyed out of the house by a constable, and subsequently brought before the magistrate and thrown into prison for thieving, would be mortifying. 'I will not take anything else,' she said quietly, the words almost sticking in her throat. 'There is nothing else that I want.'

* * *

Having got what he wanted, Lord Blakely was surprised to find he was reluctant to leave his female thief. A vision of what she might look like without the concealing mask caught hold of his imagination. He knew nothing about her, yet the strength of his desire was unexpected. He was certain this young woman possessed a healthy concern for her skin and he felt that fear was the determining factor in her decision not to take anything else from Stourbridge's collection.

'The evening need not end here.' He moved closer, his eyes appraising.

* * *

His voice was deep and seductive and brought a warmth to Linnet's cheeks. She stood in shock beneath his leisurely perusal —and was she mistaken, or did his gaze actually linger on her breasts? His close study of her feminine assets left her feeling as if she'd just been stripped stark naked. The gall of the man, she thought with rising ire. He conveyed an air of arrogance

and uncompromising authority which no doubt stemmed from a haughty attitude which was not to her liking. Recognising his obvious admiration, she suddenly became aware of the boldness in his eyes, his masculinity and the impropriety of being alone in this room with this stranger.

'Please don't come any closer,' she murmured, her tone less commanding than she'd intended.

* * *

The huskiness of her voice entered Christian's ears like a caress. It was as tempting and appealing as her body and the lustrous eyes looking back at him from behind the mask. Both aroused him in an unexpected way and this bewitching young woman aroused a hungering ache he hadn't known in a long time. Lust and desire were collecting heavy and thick deep in his body and he sensed she could fulfil his needs and bring some brightness to his life after many months of darkness. The conviction was profound. He narrowed his eyes, mentally stripping her of her delectable gown, draping her instead in a diaphanous fabric that was so light her body would be open to his gaze. The thought warmed his body and encouraged his erotic thoughts. Alluring and provocative, she was a natural temptress. Christian had to fight the insane impulse to take hold of her lithe, warm, breathing form, crush it beneath him and kiss her soft, inviting lips. He wanted her and he had methods of persuasion and powers of seduction to call on if necessary. Thoughtfully he contemplated the young woman before him and, drawn by an

urge that was stronger than reason and eager to see the fullness of her features, he raised his hand to remove her mask. Aware of his intent, she immediately shoved his hand away and backed away.

'Please don't touch me.'

His smile was slow, sensual and brilliant. 'I would dearly like to see your face. I am more than willing to take you under my protection for the time you are here.'

'I am perfectly capable of protecting myself,' she retorted, shocked by his temerity, 'and I do not intend remaining longer than I have to.'

'Pity. I was already imagining an evening of pleasure.'

'With a thief, sir?'

'If that is indeed what you are,' he said softly, 'then yes.'

His eyes captured hers, a lazy, seductive smile curving his lips. His stare travelled over her before coming back to her face. He lifted one eyebrow slightly in a silent challenge. Something in his stare quickened her pulse. There was a sweet warmth in her chest. They stared at each other for a moment, with just two yards between them. Linnet barely realised she was holding her breath. Bowled over by the delicious magnetism of the man, she felt herself being drawn towards him, knowing she should step back and walk away, but she was too inexperienced and affected by him to do that. 'You don't even know me.'

'No, I don't, but I am willing to remedy that situation. What is your name?'

'That is for me to know, sir. I do not intend sharing the

personal details of my life with a perfect stranger.'

* * *

Lord Blakely tilted his head to one side and regarded her with a critical, masculine eye. He was becoming more intrigued by her by the minute. He wondered who and what she was. Earlier he had seen her with an older woman and assumed she was this young lady's chaperon. It would appear he had been mistaken. An unprotected female roaming the passageways of Stourbridge House led him to think that perhaps she was an actress or even a courtesan, forced to earn her living as best she could. She had charm and feminine graces in abundance—eminently agreeable qualities in a mistress.

* * *

Linnet drew a deep breath. Those dark eyes seemed to see more than she wished him to see. She was aware that her body trembled slightly as she tried to figure out a way of extricating herself from this situation that seemed to be running away with her. This man seemed determined to detain her and she suspected he did not give up easily. 'If you are suggesting what I think you are, then your proposal is most indecent. If you are here in pursuit of pleasure, then you must look elsewhere.'

Even as she said the words Linnet knew that because of the inferior role she had assumed he could not be faulted and the difference in their social status—if indeed he was a peer of the realm, as he professed to be—was an open invitation to seduction. Ladies did not infiltrate events such as this alone and

with criminal intent.

'I'm sure we could come to an arrangement that would suit us both. I assure you that you will find me most generous.'

'I do not think I would care for your kind of generosity.'

'Are you not tempted to know me better? I think you would find it interesting to discover more.'

'I doubt it. You think too highly of yourself, sir.'

'*That* is a failing indeed.'

He shocked her when he touched her gently under her chin. Linnet caught her breath sharply as he tilted her face upward and looked into her eyes.

'Perhaps you are afraid, is that it?'

Her heart pounded at the light but sure pressure of his warm fingertips against her skin, but she managed to meet his gaze squarely. 'I'm not afraid of you, sir. I'm not afraid of anyone.'

'I'm relieved to hear it.'

He continued to peer down at her, into her very soul. A lazy, seductive smile passed across his mouth, curling his lips, and Linnet felt herself being drawn towards him, knowing she should step back and walk away, but she was too affected by him to do that. Feelings she had never experienced before began to appear within her and she could not deny that she was attracted by him. Belated warning bells screamed through her head and her eyes became fixed on his finely sculptured mouth. As he came closer still, to her helpless horror she knew he was going to kiss her.

When he reached out and took her hand, drawing her into his

embrace, she knew she was trapped as securely as a rabbit in a snare.

Chapter Two

Linnet was mesmerised by him. He was standing very close. She could smell the sharpness of his cologne and feel his presence. Like a magnet, it was drawing her to him and she hadn't the will to resist, nor did she want to. A smile played on his lips, curving gently, a lovely smile, and an errant wave had fallen across his brow. The heat of his closeness was making her warm and the feelings coursing through her body spoke of desire, not love, not even infatuation. It ached for him to touch her, her lips ached for him to kiss her. Her heart suddenly started pounding in a quite unpredictable manner. He was looking into her eyes, holding her spellbound, weaving some magic web around her from which there was no escape.

'I—I should go,' she whispered. 'Please let me go at once.'

'Not a chance,' he murmured. With his arms around her he held her tightly against his chest.

The strength of his embrace and the hard pressure of his loins made her all too aware of the danger she was in, that he was a strong, determined man, and that he was treating her as he would any woman he had a desire for. Resolutely she squirmed against him. A strange feeling, until this moment unknown to her, fluttered within her breast and she was halted for a brief passing of time by the flood of excitement that surged through her.

'It's useless to resist me,' he said huskily. 'Relax. I'm not going

to hurt you.'

The darkening of his eyes, the naked passion she saw in their depths drew her even more to him, but it was his tone and not his words that conquered her. She relaxed against him, her entire body beginning to tremble with desire. Her head swam and she was unable to still the violent tremor of delight that seized her, touching every nerve until they were aflame. There was nothing she could do to still the quiver of anticipation as he lowered his head and covered her mouth with his own. The shock of his lips on hers was one of wild, indescribably sweetness and sensuality as he claimed a kiss of violent tenderness. In silent permission she opened her mouth to his and what followed evoked feelings she had never felt before. That was when she realised the idea of resisting him was ludicrous and a gross miscalculation of her power to deny him, for the kiss went through her with the impact of a broadside.

His lips caressed and clung to hers, finding them moist and honey sweet, and for a slow beat in time hers responded, parting under his mounting fervour. She leaned against him, melting more closely to him, as though the strength had gone from her. All her will began to crumble and disintegrate. The moment was one of madness. The sweetness of the kiss, the yielding to it, of willingly parting her soft lips for his searching tongue, made her confused with longing. Unconsciously, and too naïve to know how to hide her feelings, her arm rose and slid over his wide, masculine shoulders and she slipped her hand behind his

neck, a movement which, in her inexperience, was an act of pure instinct to Linnet, unaware that it might convince this stranger that she was no different to any other woman he had made love to. Seemingly aware of her weakening, he raised his head and stared down at the softness in her eyes.

'Please,' Linnet whispered, trying to sound firm but without conviction. 'We should stop. This game has gone on long enough.'

'Games are for children. This is something between a man and a woman.'

'But...'

He silenced her with his lips, kissing her long and deep and hard. He closed his eyes, intense desire for this woman torturing him. As he caressed and kissed this sweet young woman, his flesh betrayed his need, rising up against his will. He was hungry for her and could hardly restrain himself from flinging her down on to the floor and making love to her.

* * *

Imprisoned by his embrace and seduced by his mouth and strong, caressing hands, which slid down the curve of her spine to the swell of her buttocks and back to her arms, her neck, burning wherever they touched, Linnet clung to him, her body responding eagerly, melting with the primitive sensations that went soaring through her, her lips beginning to move against his with increasing abandon as she fed his hunger, unwittingly increasing it. When he slid one hand down to her buttocks and pressed her to him, she became acutely conscious of her

innocence. She was lost in a dreamy limbo where nothing mattered but the closeness of his body and the circling protection of his arms.

Not for a moment did he break the kiss that was inciting her. His mouth was hungering, turning to a heated, crushing demand. What she had felt in the beginning became raw hunger, cindered beneath the white heat of their mutual desires. It was sudden, the awakened fires, the hungering lust, the bittersweet ache of passion such as Linnet could never have imagined.

When he finally drew his mouth from hers an eternity later, Linnet reluctantly surfaced from the glorious Eden where he had sent her, her face suffused with languor and passion, her eyes luminous.

'Well, well,' he murmured, lightly touching her lips with his own. 'I seem to have awakened a temptress. You're the most direct, self-willed woman I have ever met, traits I admire in any woman, but you are also so damn lovely and desirable.'

His words affected Linnet like a douche of cold water. Stepping back, she glared at him, trying to regain control of her rioting emotions. 'You should not have done that... We—we shouldn't...'

* * *

Struggling for control, finding it with effort, Christian swept a lock of dark hair from his brow. 'Come now,' he managed to say, smiling, though he himself was shaken by the moment. 'It was only a kiss—an innocent kiss, nothing more sordid than that.' But

he was not convinced by his words. With her ripe young body, moist lips and large liquid bright eyes, he was led to think that he had never caressed any woman that had evoked his imagination as much as she did. The lingering impression of her lips on his, of their thighs pressed together, had done much to awaken a manly craving that had gone unappeased for some months.

* * *

'You call what you just did innocent?' Linnet whispered, still trying to come to terms with what had just happened between them.

Raising his hand, he traced a finger gently down the curve of her warm, flushed cheek. 'It was a kiss—a kiss that could lead to other things—if you would let it.'

Linnet looked at him with a renewed light in her eyes, under no illusion as to what he was asking of her. He was smiling now, a lazy, masculine, supremely confident smile, a gentle promise in his expression and the flickering depths of his eyes that drew her in. It held her spellbound for the longest moment as a plan began forming in her mind, a plan so shocking she hardly dared enlarge on it. It caused her heart to pound so hard she could scarcely breathe, for it was a plan no gently bred young lady would dare think of, let alone consider.

She had been raised to believe that young ladies of quality must not abandon the restrictive codes of behaviour that governed their conduct without fear of censure, but with one stroke, this stranger had presented her with an answer to her

problem. Despite having caught her in the act of what he mistakenly thought was stealing, he was obviously attracted by her. On a stroke of desperation all her fears and wretchedness, all the worries for the future, came hurtling back to her and she thought that maybe she could turn the situation to her advantage. By giving herself to him on her terms, perhaps she could retrieve the necklace, return it to its rightful place and exonerate Toby of any wrongdoing.

The plan sent a chill down Linnet's spine, but it did not shock her. The misery that Toby's gambling had caused her over the past months had come to a culmination when this man had made his presence known to her and drained her of all feeling so there was hardly any emotion left in her. If her capacity to feel had been intact, everything inside her would have protested and rebelled against the plan forming in her mind. But with her feelings and emotions subdued by the anxiety of the situation her brother had created, Linnet's thoughts were entirely practical. She was driven by desperation. She and Toby had been impoverished for a long time and she was determined they would not become beggars. If there was a way of saving herself and Toby from homelessness and starvation, then she would do everything in her power to do so. Afterwards, the shame would be something she alone would have to live with.

'I am not afraid and I have a mind to test your generosity and exact my revenge—to recoup what I have just lost to you. If I were to lay down terms of my own, would you accept them for

an evening of pleasure?'

'Terms?'

'An evening of pleasure in return for the necklace you have just taken from me?'

He frowned. 'And your terms are not open for negotiation?'

'No. Take it or leave it,' she said, her voice low and direct, her lovely eyes challenging.

* * *

He had to give her credit, Christian thought to himself, fighting down a rush of disgust. At least she was honest about what she wanted. And he had to respect her honesty and courage, if not her standards. Her decision to consider his offer was anything but respectable. He wondered how, in a matter of moments, he had gone from thinking of her as a thief, then as an opponent in a game of chance, to seriously considering inviting her to share an evening of pleasure.

He had not had a serious relationship with a woman in a long time, nor had he wished to. All his romantic entanglements had not been permanent and were soon forgotten. As a youth when he had witnessed his father's affairs and his mother's heartbreak, he had spent years of evasion, trying to avoid affairs of the heart, ignoring the whispers and sighs of women eager to shackle him with matrimony. And he had succeeded, believing himself immune. Deep inside, what his father had done, his betrayal of his mother and the tragedy of her death still haunted him. He had deliberately put the memory away, not wanting to look too

carefully, but now, when he looked at this young woman whose name he did not know, he found it rising to the fore. He had always diligently avoided becoming deeply involved with any woman in the romantic sense and it would be no different with this young woman, should she consent to his request.

Christian still didn't want that kind of relationship. But he had only recently returned from Egypt after an absence of almost a year and if he was to dispel his dark thoughts, how much easier he would find it with a lively young woman such as this with sweet young flesh as a diversion. Despite her illicit occupation, there was a forthright quality about her, a freshness with an intriguing hint of mischief in her lovely eyes that drew him like a moth to a flame.

'I am tempted,' he replied.

* * *

Feeling somewhat light-headed, and unaccustomedly bemused, held by his intense gaze, Linnet knew that if she was not careful she would fall under his spell. Sensual pleasure still spiralled through her and her body ached with a need she had never experienced before. If she were honest with herself, she would admit to feeling a measure of curiosity about what an evening of pleasure with this man held. Feeling slightly faint, shocked at the extremely unladylike drift of her imaginings, Linnet looked away. It was madness, she knew, but she didn't want to leave him, to widen the distance between them. She looked at him once more, the sheer wickedness of the slow,

lazy smile he gave her making her catch her breath. She was trapped by the dark eyes behind the mask that were searching her face intently, a question in their depths, a question she could not have answered even if he'd asked her. She was surprised when, seeming to come to a decision, a change came over him and he stepped away from her.

'As much as I would like nothing more than to share an evening of pleasure with you, I regret I must decline. The necklace is important to me.' Turning from her, he strode towards the door. 'I advise you not to linger in this room and from this moment on take on a more suitable occupation for a young woman. 'Tis a dangerous profession you have chosen. You appear to be intelligent, so I am sure you care about yourself, about what you do—but not enough, it would seem, if you decide to carry on stealing other people's property. Perhaps you don't have enough faith in yourself—or pride.'

'I do believe in myself,' she confided softly. 'You were mistaken in what you saw. I didn't steal the necklace. I was putting it back.'

He turned and looked back at her, reminding himself that here was no innocent. But he could not help but wonder at the gist of what she had said. He was troubled by the intensity of her statement. It had been a flash of unguarded candour—and honesty, maybe?—which surprised him. It was born of deep conviction—and perhaps more than a little pain. There was an intensity in her eyes behind the mask, showing in their depths

a strong will that as yet knew neither strength nor direction. He was surprised at the feelings of tenderness she aroused in him.

'Perhaps what you say is the truth. How would I know? I only know what I saw. But a word of warning. Those who make thieving their profession are destined for an early death on the gallows. Think on. If you are indeed a thief, then the next time you get caught, the person you rob will show you no leniency.' Christian inclined his head slightly. 'It has been a pleasure meeting you. I doubt our paths will cross again.'

On that note, giving her a farewell salute and a cheeky, knowing wink—a playful, frivolous gesture that infuriated her—he went out, closing the door softly behind him.

* * *

Unbeknown to Linnet, had she told him the truth about her reason for being there, he would have readily alleviated her fears and given her an explanation of his own purpose for being in Lord Stourbridge's Egyptian room. This being the case, she could have left knowing Toby would not be arrested for theft. As it was they had both misinterpreted the other's reasons and parted taking their mutual distrust with them, and she was left with the nagging fear that Toby was not out of the woods.

Making his way to the ballroom, Christian saw Lord Stourbridge strutting and posing among his guests like a colourful bird of paradise. Despite his flamboyant, larger-than-life appearance, he was a shrewd businessman who had made a large fortune in clever investments. He was also, like Christian's

own father had been, interested in ancient relics and was a keen collector, often travelling to the Holy Land and Egypt with the hope of discovering some precious relics to add to his private collection. The two men had been drawn together by their shared interest.

On seeing Christian, Stourbridge moved towards him.

'Why, Blakely. It is a profound pleasure to see you again. So glad you came.'

'Thank you for inviting me.'

'Lord Stourbridge fixed Christian with an investigative stare. 'Your father's death must have come as a shock to you. What was it? His heart?'

Christian nodded.

'Unfortunately it's one of the hazards of being in Egypt—the heat, you know. Although there are other hazards that play havoc with travellers and explorers alike. They are likely to encounter serious difficulties and indeed great dangers.' He smiled blandly. 'Might I say that like so many persons of our mutual acquaintance I am totally sympathetic to what happened to your father. We met out there. As I believe my lawyer has informed you, I have some of his artefacts among my own collection. The necklace in particular is a beautiful piece, of great value. Thieves are a problem out there. He wanted to make sure it was brought back safely. I was glad to be able to help.'

'I thank you for that and I trust you won't mind if I tell you the necklace is now in my possession.' He patted his pocket.

‘Father bequeathed it to the British Museum, along with some other pieces he uncovered. It will be on display shortly.’

‘I’m happy to hear it.’ Lord Stourbridge was about to turn and walk away when he paused and asked almost hesitantly, ‘What about the child—Alice? I seem to recall...’

‘She is with me—here in London,’ Christian quickly replied. ‘I—trust I can rely on your discretion on that matter, Stourbridge.’

He nodded, thoughtful. ‘You can depend on it. Wouldn’t want to besmirch your father’s memory, Blakely.’

‘Thank you. I appreciate that.’

As Christian walked away, he put all thoughts of the child from his mind. Instead his thoughts were of the young woman he had invited to spend the night with him. A smile touched his lips. He had enjoyed deceiving her into believing he, too, might be a thief. He need not have challenged her to a roll of dice for possession, but he had enjoyed playing the game. It had been worth it.

* * *

Alone now the stranger had left her, fully aware of the enormity of what had just happened, Linnet realised how fortunate she had been to be let off so lightly. The man could have raised the alarm and had her arrested and she would have been unable to prove her innocence. Instead he had bested her and taken that which she had gone to great pains to replace.

The more she thought about it, the more she became convinced that whoever the man was, he was still a thief and if

the roll of the dice had gone in her favour—which she doubted—he would not have given her the necklace. It had been important to him. Realising how stupid she had been and that he had duped her, Linnet stared at the closed door with a firestorm of humiliated fury.

Returning to the ballroom, she was impatient to leave. She found Toby and told him to summon the carriage. Thankfully they had come in their own carriage so they didn't have to wait for Aunt Lydia. Behind the mask Linnet's eyes searched the lively, chattering throng, looking for the tall, black-haired man. At first, to her immense relief, she failed to locate him, then, just when she was beginning to think he had left, she saw him.

He stood with a boisterous group of young gentlemen on the other side of the room, a head taller than any of them. With a crush of people milling around them, it couldn't be better for her. Linnet was calm now, icy calm. She had been thrown by his surprise appearance, it had unnerved her, but now she was back in control. She made her way out of the ballroom, eager to put as much distance as she could between her and the irascible gentleman. She was on the point of leaving the ballroom when the dance ended. She paused and glanced back, seeing the stranger's head above the crowd. At that moment he turned his imperious head and his bold, rebel's eyes locked on to hers and he smiled, raising his fingers to his head in a salute, a lazy cocksure smile, with humour and a warning of the danger to them both if anyone should discover what had transpired between them in

Lord Stourbridge's Egyptian room.

Audacious as ever, she thought, as she watched the lazy, confident smile on his face. How she would like to wipe that smile from his handsome face. She returned his smile and turned away, becoming swallowed up in the crowd of people vacating the dance floor. No one tried to apprehend her as she left the house.

* * *

Linnet hoisted herself into the carriage. The agonising tension she had been under since she had entered Lord Stourbridge's Egyptian room still showed on her face. She saw the anxiety on Toby's face. He clearly regretted stealing the necklace and, despite everything, she knew he cared about her safety and would be vastly relieved to see her back safe.

'Did you manage to put it back?' he asked.

She nodded. 'It went to plan,' she said, looking away. Toby didn't have to know what had happened in Lord Stourbridge's artefacts room. Besides, she didn't want to talk about it.

'I'm sorry, Linnet. I don't know why I agreed to do it.'

Linnet believed him. Toby indulged in any form of gambling, but stealing other people's property was not his forte. Ever since he had fallen in with a wrong crowd—young men who drank, gambled and seduced their way through life—he had changed. Being masters of manipulation the crowd played on Toby's desperation and knew how to use the right combination of charm and menace to ensure his absolute loyalty to the group. Toby also

owed them a fortune in gambling debts, which made it impossible for him to refuse whatever they asked him to do. If it were not for the china and other quality objects in the house which Linnet sold off from time to time without Toby's knowledge, they would be unable to make ends meet.

'You know I hate what you do, Toby. I shudder to think what Father would say.'

Clearly feeling guilty, Toby looked away, unable to look into her eyes. 'I know you do and I will try to make things better.'

'It's about time you did,' Linnet said sharply. 'Do you take so little interest in my happiness? I hated what I had to do tonight. I hated it—the anxiety and the misery of it all. I thought I would die a thousand deaths. I will not do anything like it again. You can't steal, Toby. It's a terrible thing to do.'

'Damn it all, don't exaggerate! The theft of the necklace was to have been my friends' biggest haul yet and would have brought a sizeable fortune.'

'For them, Toby. Remember that. What worries me is that if you carry on gambling as you do, your luck will run out and you will be thrown into a debtors' prison.'

Toby turned to her, his eyes holding a hard glitter. She was accustomed to the mask-like expression he used when he didn't wish to discuss what he did, things of which he was ashamed.

'Stop it, Linnet! Don't make a fuss. That won't happen, I'm going to make sure of that. Besides, what other way is there if one wants to gain greater position and a place and power in society?'

‘Work, Toby. Honest work. You cannot go on as you do indefinitely. There are lots of people who prefer good honest work without resorting to gambling and stealing other people’s property.’

‘What kind of work could I possibly do?’ he protested crossly. ‘I’m not one of the labouring classes, I’m a gentleman—’

‘A penniless gentleman,’ Linnet was quick to remind him. ‘Grow up, Toby, and take responsibility for yourself. There must be something you can do.’

‘I am a connoisseur of wine,’ Toby retorted, raising his arm with a flourish. ‘I suppose I could look for something in that line if the fancy takes me.’

Linnet threw him an exasperated look. He could be such a child. It was always the same when she tried to make him discuss things seriously. However, he was speaking the truth. He had been trained for nothing but how to be a gentleman of leisure. As much as she loved her brother, she had no illusions about him and could not ignore the fact that he was inclined to laziness.

Linnet hated the influence of the men he had become involved with. Some of them had been dragged up on London’s meanest streets and were scoundrels, thieves and gamblers of the highest order. Toby had met them in the gambling haunts he frequented with his rakish friends and had been quickly seduced by their gains at the tables. They talked of riches and offered to help pay off Toby’s debts, debts he could repay when his circumstances improved, and Toby fell for every word that dripped from their

mouths. He steadfastly believed that his association with his new friends was a new and profitable beginning for him and further confirmed the belief that he was in full control of his own destiny and could have whatever he desired. How wrong he was.

Linnet absently pushed back a strand of honey-gold hair that had escaped her wig. The problem of how they were ever going to pay off Toby's debts weighed heavily on her mind. 'I fear greatly what will become of us, Toby. Perhaps you should consider contracting a favourable marriage to help pay off the debts.'

Toby shrugged. 'I've thought of it, but, apart from Caroline, who as you know I would gladly settle down with at the drop of a hat if her father would allow it, there is no one else I wish to marry.'

Linnet knew this to be true. Caroline Mortimer was the youngest of Sir George and Lady Mortimer's five daughters. Toby had become smitten with her when he had met her at a social event twelve months earlier. She was the one good thing that had happened to him in recent months. She was quiet and gentle and he professed to love her dearly. Sir George and his wife were in favour of a match between them, but Toby knew that if Sir George became aware of his gambling debts he would pull back.

'You should marry, Linnet—someone with money.'

'Without a dowry who would marry me?'

'Someone who would wed you for your own sweet self. If you were to marry a man of means and consequence the creditors

would back away.'

'But I have no desire to marry. Must I remind you that the mess we are in is of your own making. They are your debts, not mine,' Linnet remarked, raising her chin and looking away from him, hoping it would indicate the depth of her disappointment in him and that when he realised it, he would begin thinking differently, which he did. He immediately looked contrite and, taking her hand, he gave it a gentle squeeze.

Aware of the intensity of her feelings and her fear, Toby softened. 'I'm sorry, Linnet. None of this is fair on you, I know. If anyone's to blame for tonight it's me. I will try harder. I promise.'

From the way he looked at her Linnet knew that he recognised the truth contained in her words. 'I know you will,' she replied while not holding out much hope. Exasperating as she found it, she loved her brother more than anyone else and couldn't imagine living without him. But she was afraid, more afraid than she had ever been in her life. Afraid not just for Toby and herself, but for the whole future.

'Look, I know how difficult this is for you,' Toby said. 'I've been thinking. I know we said we wouldn't accept Aunt Lydia's invitation to go to Richmond for the celebration of Louisa's betrothal to Harry, but maybe we should. It was good to see them tonight. Cousin Louisa is your age and it benefits you to have some female company.'

Linnet could not deny that the idea of visiting her cousin appealed to her. She was piercingly lonely. She lacked female

companionship and the love and affection of their mother, who had passed away several years earlier, followed so quickly by their father. She and Toby both knew the invitation to Louisa's betrothal celebrations had been issued half-heartedly. Aunt Lydia, their mother's sister and a widow of eight years, was a hard, unfeeling woman who looked on them as poor relations she would rather distance herself from than have in the house. She had offered to chaperon Linnet to the ball tonight under sufferance and both Linnet and Toby were aware of that. But they were her nephew and niece and she was duty bound not to ignore them. She toadied to the elite—money and position carried more weight than goodwill and good intentions.

Besides, Caroline Mortimer was Louisa's friend so it was highly likely that she would be present, which would cheer Toby.

* * *

Three days after the Stourbridge ball found Linnet accompanied by Toby going into the city to make one or two small purchases. Linnet loved to come and browse the shops, with everything the merchants possessed displayed behind windows along the Strand and the courts and passages leading off it, even though she couldn't afford to venture inside most of them. Today the Strand was crowded and bustling, with carriages and drays and sedans passing to and fro in a never-ending stream. Merchants and traders and hawkers of wares mingled with people of all occupations and positions and gentlemen in military uniforms. She breathed in the different smells from

freshly baked bread and hot pies.

Suddenly confusion erupted when a dog appeared out of nowhere, yapping ferociously and baring its teeth. It ran into the street in front of two stationary bay horses hitched to a carriage. One of the startled horses gave a snort of alarm. It reared in the shafts, its hooves awkwardly flailing the air, before coming down to earth and lunging forward, unsettling the other horse. It tossed its head back and forth, the whites of its eyes rolling. The open carriage swayed precariously, the driver losing hold of the reins as he was flung out on to the ground, while the elderly lady and small child inside the carriage gripped it for dear life.

Linnet had completed her shopping and was heading towards the carriage further along the street where Toby had told her he would wait, when she paused to watch what was happening. Seeing the horse's nostrils flared and its ears pulled back, Linnet suspected the horse was about to bolt with its partner in the shafts meaning the lady and child were in danger of being flung out on to the street. She had to try to prevent it from happening. Linnet was accustomed to handling horses, so, acting swiftly and unafraid, she dropped the bag that held her few practical purchases on the ground and stepped into the path of the agitated horse, holding her arms wide and uttering soothing words in an attempt to calm it down. Thankfully it seemed to work for the horse became still. Taking hold of a loose rein, Linnet continued talking to it while she ran her free hand gently along its quivering silky neck.

The driver had picked himself up and come to her aid, calming the other horse.

'It's all right, miss. I'm grateful to you for calming him down—that wretched dog, running out like that. I'll take him now.'

Linnet passed over the rein and, retrieving her purchases, went to make sure the lady in the carriage was unhurt. She had a comforting arm around the child—a girl perhaps four or five years old with curly dark brown hair peeking out from beneath her bonnet. Her face showed confusion and she was clearly anxious and frightened. A tear rolled down her cheek. Linnet climbed up into the carriage and sat facing her. Leaning across, she smiled at the weeping child, producing a handkerchief. 'Here, let me wipe your face.' Gently she dabbed at the tears of the child, who was looking up at her with solemn brown eyes that reminded her of a wounded puppy. 'What is your name?' she asked.

'Alice,' she whispered.

'Is that so. Well, I think that's a lovely name.'

Linnet directed her gaze at the lady, who was of slight build and in middle age, dressed in black and unadorned—the same clothes a nursemaid or a housekeeper would wear. Her eyes were grey and melancholy surmounted by firm arched brows. The general impression was of physical frailty, but the face revealed pride and obstinacy, although she did look slightly shaken as she tried to comfort the child.

'Everything is all right now,' Linnet told her, speaking quietly in an attempt to calm the lady. 'Your driver is with the horse.'

‘I can’t thank you enough for your brave intervention. But for your prompt action we would have been tossed out of the carriage. I am so grateful.’

‘You have no companion with you?’

‘Oh, yes. My employer is conducting some business further along the street. He will be back shortly.’

‘Then if you like, I will wait with you until he returns.’

‘I would appreciate that. You are very kind.’

Linnet smiled into the lady’s kindly face. Despite the shock of being rocked about in the carriage, she now sat ramrod straight. Apart from her hat being slightly askew she appeared recovered.

‘It’s the least I can do.’

‘This is Alice,’ the lady said. ‘She is my charge until my employer can find a governess for her. I am Mrs Marsden.’

‘You are Alice’s nursemaid.’

She nodded and smiled. ‘I suppose I am—although I’m getting a bit long in the tooth now to be looking after little ones. I’ll be able to take a back seat when she has a governess to take care of her.’

Linnet glanced at her sharply. ‘Your employer is looking for a governess, you say?’

‘That is correct.’ Seeing she had pricked Linnet’s interest, she tilted her head to one side and studied her with interest. ‘Do you know of anyone who would be interested by any chance?’

‘Why—I—I was thinking of myself. I have been considering seeking employment for a while now.’

‘Do you like children, Miss...?’

‘Osborne. Linnet Osborne and, yes, I do like children.’

‘And your education?’

‘I was educated at Miss Reid’s Academy in Kensington.’

‘Splendid. Well—if you are interested I will mention it to my employer—although he is a very busy man and tends to leave household matters to his housekeeper and where Alice is concerned to me, of course. Would you consider the position?’

‘I will—although I shall have to speak to my brother. Since our parents passed on there are just the two of us.’

Mrs Marsden looked down at the child, who had been listening intently. A little smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. She seemed to be assessing her and when her eyes ceased to regard her so seriously and her smile gradually broadened, which was a delight to see, Linnet returned the smile.

Linnet enjoyed talking to Mrs Marsden. It made her realise how isolated she was at Birch House with just Toby and the housekeeper for company. Glancing down the street and seeing Toby striding towards their carriage, she excused herself on the understanding that Mrs Marsden would contact her at Birch House when she had spoken to her employer.

* * *

Having witnessed the entire incident, but being too far away to be of immediate assistance, Christian hurried towards the carriage which contained Alice and her nurse, their safety paramount to all else. He had seen a young woman step out into

the path of the frightened horse and calm it down. He was too far away to see her clearly, but her prompt action had brought what could have been a serious situation under control, although it was an extremely foolish thing to have done. Stepping in front of an out-of-control horse was dangerous, but he was glad that she had.

Seeing that all was well and the normal order of things had been restored, he paused momentarily to acknowledge an acquaintance.

* * *

Walking in the direction of her carriage and seeing the tall gentleman ahead of her, Linnet's eyes opened wide in overwhelmed disbelief. Thankfully he was in deep conversation with another gentleman and was unaware of her presence. He had appeared too suddenly for her to prepare herself. Momentarily immobilised in the cataclysmic silence that seemed to descend on her, her right hand pressed to her throat, Linnet was incapable of speech or action as she stared at the man as though she had seen a ghost. There was hardly a moment when she didn't relive the humiliation of being caught by the stranger. Now, three days later, the scene was as raw and mortifying as it had been when it had taken place. The memory brought with it a black mask and dark eyes and the memory of frustration and desire mingled with her embarrassment.

As her mind raced in wild circles, her thoughts tumbling over themselves, Linnet thought she must be seeing things—that she must be suffering from some kind of delusion. But

even without his mask, all her senses remembered the tall and arrogant-looking man with the dark penetrating eyes. It was the stranger she had met at the Stourbridge ball, the man who had kissed her so ardently and suggested she spend the night with him. She knew him by the rich, hypnotically deep voice as he spoke to the other gentleman and the sudden heat that sprang to her cheeks that was her own response to him.

Linnet had adamantly tried not to think of him, but despite herself a tremor of remembered passion and bittersweet memories coursed through her. The continuation of the desire he had awoken in Linnet confounded her. She was still reeling from the impact of him, shattered by the power of the physical attraction she felt for him. She had never realised she had been capable of such intense passion. Nothing in her experience had prepared her for what he had done to her, or the emotions he had aroused, triggering off an explosion of sensuality the like of which she could never have imagined, prompting her to respond in a way that astounded her. As shock waves tingled up and down her spine, she hurried on by, averting her face.

* * *

But Christian, his acquaintance having said farewell and gone on his way, had seen her and gave her his full attention. He saw a young woman attired in a dark blue informal dress, fitted jacket and matching bonnet covering her hair. Looking into her tawny-coloured eyes when she looked his way, he felt a frisson of recognition. It was the young woman who had so intrigued

him at the Stourbridge ball. Even without her white wig and the concealing mask he knew it was her. He was as surprised as she clearly was and didn't realise she was the young woman who had just averted a major disaster when one of his carriage horses had nearly bolted.

Taking her arm when she was about to hurry on, he smiled. 'So, it is you. I thought I recognised you—even without your mask.'

The two stared at each other for a long moment and Linnet was conscious of an odd feeling wrenching her stomach as she helplessly berated herself and the instinct that had driven her to leap unthinkingly to the rescue of the elderly lady and child about to be flung out of their carriage. Pulling herself together, Linnet wanted to turn on her heels and run, but in a moment, common sense prevailed over the embarrassment which had taken hold of her.

Stepping back, she said, 'I beg you will excuse me, sir. I am in a hurry.'

'Not in such a hurry that you cannot pass the time of day with —how shall I put it—an old friend.'

'You are not an old friend and we have nothing to say to one another...'

His smile deepened and a look came into his eyes that Linnet did not care for. 'I seem to remember that we had a great deal to say to one another at the Stourbridge ball.'

* * *

Momentarily distracted, Christian glanced at the driver of his carriage who had climbed inside. Taking advantage of the distraction, the woman dragged her arm from his grip and turned and slipped into the crowd. By the time he looked again, she had disappeared. His eyes searched for her among the crowd of people milling about on the street, but there was no sign of her. His disappointment was profound. He could not believe that he had allowed her to slip through his fingers.

The simple truth was that he was strongly attracted to the young woman and she was far too beautiful for any man to turn his back on. Having seen her today without her disguise, he was astounded by the force of his feelings. He was quite bewildered by the emotion he felt in his heart. He couldn't really describe what he felt for her because he didn't have any words. All he knew was that he felt strange—different from anything he had ever expected to feel.

Only now when he had returned from Egypt after sorting out his father's affairs was he beginning to get his life under control. Eventually he would marry, but until that time he did not want a woman in his house, at his table or in his bed. He could satisfy his physical needs well enough with women seeking diversion for a few night hours, women who wanted from him what he wanted from them.

And yet he wanted this young woman whose kiss had roused emotions in him like no other woman ever had before her. He had to find out who she was. She had run from him but he was

determined to find her. Someone must know who she was.

* * *

Reaching the carriage, Christian was relieved to see the occupants were no worse for the incident which could have resulted in injury but for the stranger's prompt action to calm the frightened horse.

Preoccupied as he was with thoughts of the young woman who had just escaped him and determined to find her—starting with Lord Stourbridge who might know the lady she was with at the ball—Christian only half-listened as Mrs Marsden gave him an account of the conversation she'd had with the young woman who had rescued them, telling him that she was well educated and was considering seeking a position as a governess. Christian knew by the hopeful expression when she looked at him that she wanted him to say he would consider giving her employment. He was to leave for his estate in Sussex the day after tomorrow and had no time to seek a governess for Alice. Trusting Mrs Marsden's judgement completely, he told her to go ahead and employ the young lady if she considered her suitable.

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