

A Historical Regency Romance

Heart of the Diamond



CARRIE BROCK

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To my husband, who inspired and never complained.

To my son, who never doubted his mom.

To all of my family for supporting me.

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Chapter 1



Shropshire, England 1819

Lady Nicole Langley did not want to be engaged, but she also had no wish to die.

Nicki's heart pounded until it echoed inside her head. She clung to moisture-slick lattice and hoped the ancient structure showed enough tenacity to stick to the brick facade of Rosewood Manor. She looked down. The thought came to her that most young women would choose to stroll through the moonlit gardens below on the arm of a gentleman, not be in danger of falling to their deaths in the midst of the foliage while attempting to visit one.

But then, at the age of two and twenty, she accepted the fact that she would never be like most women.

With a fortifying sigh, Nicki turned her attention back to the project at hand—her intention to meet with one gentleman in particular. Teddy Bartholomew, childhood friend and Nicki's first love, now returned to England after six long years.

A quick gust of wind gave her a nudge; the trellis swayed slightly.

With a gasp, Nicki tightened her grip. She pressed her face into cool leaves of ivy and clematis. Her eyes closed to wait for the frantic beat of her heart to slow. Softly, she whispered a quick prayer. The wind stilled, as though in answer to her plea.

Falling two stories to her death might have appealed to Nicki when she awoke this drizzly Shropshire morning engaged to be married to an ogre, but now she was of a different mind. After all, this endeavor, if successful, would set right that insufferable wrong. All she must do is live long enough to reach the window above.

With a deep breath, Nicki released one handhold and fumbled through the ivy for another. That grip secure, she took a step up. Her arms and legs trembled slightly from the unfamiliar exertion. Dancing steps, lessons in etiquette, and corsets did not condition one for climbing.

Nicki risked a peek up toward her goal. She could see that the window to Teddy's bedchamber stood open, though the room appeared to be dark.

He must be here.

The note delivered to her this afternoon in the Langley Hall stables had instructed her to come to their "usual meeting place." Though he had been out of the country for six years, Teddy would not have forgotten their daring escapades that always began by her climbing the trellis to his room.

Another determined breath and she continued on. For not having climbed up the side of a house in a good many years, Nicki made quick work of the remainder of the journey. Her success had a good deal to do with the last minute inspiration that had come to

her when she stumbled over a pair of her brother's abandoned trousers. They fit her snugly, but hindered her less than petticoats and an empire gown cinched tight beneath her breasts. Besides, the filmy fabric would have been shredded by this point. Her attire would not shock Teddy—he knew her too well.

The trellis ended abruptly several feet below the decorative wrought iron that framed the window. Intimidated, but not deterred, Nicki balanced herself on one of the topmost rungs and eased herself upward. The rough surface of the bricks caught at the sleeve of her linen shirt, but she grasped the frame and hauled herself up and over the casing.

“Ted...”

The heel of one riding boot tangled in the tassel rope of the velvet drapes as she stepped forward. Nicki managed an ungraceful tumble to her hands and one knee on the bedroom floor, while her other foot remained securely snared by the cord.

Exasperated, Nicki jerked free of the rope. At the same instant she heard a loud, ripping noise. She felt her derriere and sighed in relief. The curtains had torn, but her brother's breeches remained intact.

As she rose to her knees, she dusted off her hands. Her hair, which had been hastily tied back before leaving home, fell in tangled curls about her shoulders and down her back. The pins had scattered with her fall.

For several moments, Nicki groped about the frayed rug, encountering only several holes. No ribbon. No pins. She sighed. At this moment she had no time to waste on hair accessories.

She was on a mission.

Nicki climbed to her feet, swiped at her trouser

legs one last time and squinted into the darkness. “Teddy? Are you here?”

A heavy silence met her words. Could he be downstairs at this late hour?

She returned to the ceiling-high window and pushed back each side of the dust-laden draperies. At the sight of the moon, Nicki paused. Its radiance glimmered through clouds that wisped over its surface like coal dust.

She shivered as she looked down into the once-famous rose garden—the pride of this manor long ago. Undulating patches of light and dark moved and flickered over the hulking shapes of overgrown rose bushes like the souls of creatures who had once dwelt in the sunshine, but now were banished to darkness. An enchanted place fallen under a terrible curse. Nicki sighed in regret and sadness.

“I wondered if you would come. You have kept me waiting, my dear.”

Nicki spun at the words, her gaze sweeping the dimly lit room. No matter how long she had been away from Teddy, she would recognize his voice. That certainly was not it.

“Who’s there?”

A movement from the farthest, darkest corner caught Nicki’s gaze. Shivering, she backed toward the window. She could make out the shape of an overstuffed chair, then the silhouette of a man materialized into a standing position before the bulky piece of furniture.

He stretched languorously, raising long arms over his head. “I must have fallen asleep. Is it midnight?” His voice filled the room again. Deep, resonant—a heated blade slicing through wax.

Nicki's heart skipped a beat, then raced to catch up. She took another step back just as a sharp gust of wind caught the curtains, causing them to billow out. The heel of her riding boot again snagged in the ancient fabric.

"Deuce take it!" she snapped.

Nicki struggled to jerk her foot free with as much decorum as possible. She certainly did not intend to turn around and bend over to extricate herself, thus providing the stranger with a clear view of her unseemly attire, not to mention the portions of her body the trousers revealed too well.

Holding her breath, she looked up to see the man moving toward her with long, deliberate strides. She froze, completely at a loss.

As he approached her through dappled shadow and light, Nicki had the eerie sense that one of the tallest, most frightening specters from the garden had slipped into the room with her. She experienced a twinge of alarm, but had no time to further assimilate her reaction before the man knelt beside her.

Feeling like a complete and utter goose, Nicki lifted her foot so her heel could be extricated from the velvet. The man clasped her ankle gently, then slipped the torn fabric free with ease. As she watched his actions, it occurred to her that his hair appeared to be darker than she expected, and at the back it touched his shoulders. The scent of sandalwood, soap, and something else—brandy—surrounded her. Soothing, oddly hypnotic.

"Please forgive my lapse in manners." He spoke softly as he released her ankle.

As he straightened, Nicki followed his progress

with growing alarm. Never had she set eyes on a man so exceedingly tall.

This was definitely not Teddy.

“I am somewhat rusty at extricating ladies from my bedchamber curtains before a proper introduction.”

The voice sounded so close. Too close.

Nicki moved a safe distance from the window coverings—and the man—though not far enough to bar escape through the window if it became necessary. She strained to make out his features, but he had chosen a position in a patch of darkness—a living, breathing part of the night.

Who was this stranger in Teddy’s house?

“I...” She cleared her throat. “I am truly sorry to disturb you. This *is* Sir Theodore Bartholomew’s room, is it not?”

The man turned slightly to survey the surroundings of silhouetted bulky furniture, his hand going to his chin. Nicki heard the soft scrape of fingers across stubble.

“Hmm.” He twisted back to face her, and she knew with absolute certainty she had never seen shoulders so wide. “I suppose it was. Once.” He sounded amused.

Recalling her mode of dress, Nicki longed for the return of the curtains to hide behind. Self-conscious, she reached up to smooth her hair, then recalled the lost pins.

She was a mess.

Nicki glanced to the window. She could flee. Surely he would not stop her. As quickly as the desire came to her, she swept it aside. She had come to see Teddy and would not leave until she had done so. Drawing on her inner strength, she clenched her hands

together, and was startled to find them as cold as the stones.

Then she realized what the stranger had said. *Was* Teddy's room? Impending doom lurked in his choice of words, but Nicki valiantly fought her rising panic. There had to be a simple explanation for this man's presence in Teddy's bedchamber. Surely she would be informed of it at any moment.

"Please. I have come on a matter of the gravest import and Teddy is the only one who can save me. He sent a message only this afternoon. He *must* be here!"

"I have no doubt your situation is desperate, but as you can see Teddy is not here. By the bye, my name is Blake Dylan."

She took a steadying breath, which only resulted in a sudden light-headedness. What had her stepmother told her? A lady does not give her name to a man unless they have been properly introduced. "Very well, Mr. Dylan. I shall await his return."

"I would prefer you call me Blake."

Nicki might be a country miss who had never had a Season in London, but she knew she should not be speaking to this man, and she especially should not address him by his given name. "I said I shall await Teddy, sir."

Dylan chuckled softly and rested his hands on his hips. "Perhaps your odds of finding a man at home would improve greatly if you called during the daylight hours. Of course, that would be quite a mundane task for a young lady with your obvious taste for adventure."

Nicki's fragile patience collapsed, releasing a spark of anger. "This is not a matter to be discussed over a

cup of tea, Mr. Dylan, and I did not come here for a lecture on propriety! Please tell me where I might find Teddy Bartholomew.”

“He is in America.”

“America?” Her hopes cracked. In seconds they would shatter into tiny fragments. “No, that... that cannot be. The note...”

A long pause stretched the silence before Dylan’s smooth voice filled the room again.

“You are under a misconception, my charming little intruder. I last saw your Teddy in a saloon in Boston. He was quite indisposed. You see, the man has trouble holding his brandy and had just lost Rosewood Manor in a game of cards—to me.”

Nicki stumbled back a step. A soft cry escaped her lips before she could stifle it. She did not want to believe it, yet she knew better than anyone of Teddy’s three loves. Dylan spoke of two. Nicki was the third. In just that order.

Dylan shrugged his broad shoulders. He continued as though unaware of her distress. “So you see, this is *my* room, not Teddy’s.”

She shook her head in denial. Impossible. Teddy could not have lost Rosewood.

“It was *I* who sent you the message.”

“You...!” Nicki’s breath left her in a rush, cutting off her words.

She could not seem to draw air into her lungs. Why would this Dylan person send her a note leading her to believe Teddy had come back to Rosewood? She pressed her fingers to her temples and struggled for breath.

Teddy still in America? Impossible. She had risked everything—pinned all her hopes on believing Teddy

had most opportunely returned to England to save her.

The room dipped alarmingly. Her knees threatened to buckle as she fought to remain upright. The air grew too heavy to breathe.

“There now, do not go fainting on me.”

Dylan’s warm, strong arms slipped about her rib cage as he eased Nicki to the carpet. She closed her eyes. Her head rested against his chest as she concentrated on breathing.

“Things cannot be bad as all that.” His deep voice rumbled against the back of her head, compounding her dizziness.

For several seconds, her mind continued to spin. Gradually, the whirling subsided. Never having experienced such an occurrence before, Nicki waited for whatever would happen next.

“Are you conscious?”

Nicki thought she detected a note of concern in Dylan’s voice. She kept her eyes closed as she weighed her options. Blast it all. What should she do now? He thought she had fainted. It served him right. But she knew when she awakened the difficulties would remain and she would have done nothing more than make a cake of herself before a perfect stranger. This stranger had apparently set out to purposefully deceive her. Why? She must learn the truth.

Nicki twisted slightly within Dylan’s secure hold and reached around to push herself away—only to touch warm, smooth... bare skin.

Merciful heaven, she was being embraced by a naked man!

She froze. The heat from his body infiltrated her fingertips. It intensified, projecting tiny pinpricks

along her palm. Nicki snatched her hand away. Slowly, she raised her gaze to his face. In the dimness she could vaguely make out high cheekbones and a strong jaw. Brandy scented breath whispered across her cheeks, caressing—not entirely unpleasant. Nicki tensed and searched for something intelligent to say.

The note.

At that moment, a muffled knock sounded from across the room. After an agitated rattling of the door-knob, the door flew open. Nicki opened her mouth to scream, but Dylan tightened his hold about her middle, nearly cutting off her air. She managed only a pitiful squeak.

With growing horror, Nicki stared as the door rebounded off the wall. A harried gentleman in robe and slippers entered the bedchamber bearing a dip. The flame danced wildly in its brass holder. Nicki suddenly recognized the Bartholomew's butler, Chester. Close on his heels came a man of medium height brandishing a pistol.

Her mouth dropped open.

The man's pants were pushed into his riding boots and an evening jacket had been hastily thrown over his nightshirt. He looked very much like his sleep had been interrupted by an emergency.

Chester cleared his throat. "My lord, the Duke of Billington—"

"Papa!" Nicki gasped.

Her father pushed forward, the tassel of his nightcap flying out to smack the butler across the mouth. "Unhand my daughter, you fiend from hell!"

Nicki's gaze snapped to the man at her side. My lord? Fiend from hell?

The moon chose that opportune moment to appear and, combined with Chester's rushlight, shone across a face seemingly chiseled from granite. Dylan's pale eyes were locked on her father. The skin on Nicki's arms prickled. If this man's eyes had been weapons, Jonathon Langley would have perished on the spot.

"Ah... Billington. We've been expecting you. Lovely night, is it not?"

"Get your hands off my girl before I put a lead ball in you!"

"It would please me to no end to get my hands off your daughter, but she has just experienced a shock. If I release her, she might collapse and suffer an injury."

Her father's blue eyes bulged and his normally healthy complexion took on an alarming purple hue. Nicki's concern deepened. She could not recall ever seeing him in such a temper—and if anyone had, it would have been her.

"Devil take you, what did you do to Nicki? Your fight is with me!"

"I have no wish to fight with you or your daughter, Billington. She came here believing she would find Theodore Bartholomew—and found me instead."

Though Dylan's speech remained almost bored, Nicki felt tension in the taut muscles of his powerful arms she now clutched. Heat scalded her cheeks. She jerked her hands away and clasped them together at her throat.

She looked up to see her father's gaze fastened on her. His expression softened when he made eye contact. This was the father she knew.

"If you'd come to me before charging out of the house, I could've explained Ted hadn't returned."

Tears welled up before Nicki could stay them. She used her elbow to push herself more firmly from the man holding her. This time he did not restrain her.

Why was this happening? She had only wanted to speak to Teddy. Nicki rose and moved to stand several feet away from Dylan. Feeling suddenly chilled, she crossed her arms over her chest.

Curious, she glanced at the man to find him still hunkered down with his elbows resting on his knees. His loosely clasped hands dangled between muscular thighs clothed in light colored fabric. Nicki thought she saw the wink of a gem on a ring he wore on his index finger. She raised her gaze.

Now that his torso was clearly visible to her, she better understood her father's distress. At least Dylan was not naked, as she had first believed.

Her gaze continued upward to his face and she discovered he had been watching her inspection. Heat flamed her cheeks.

With a wry grin, he raised from his crouch. His muscles were sleek and taut. Nicki's errant gaze dropped to his hips, clad in fawn-colored breeches so snug he might as well have worn nothing at all. The chill of only moments ago fled before the sudden onslaught of liquid warmth. She struggled again to bring her breathing under control.

Completely at ease, Dylan turned and strode away into the shadows where he paused before an enormous bureau and removed the glass covering from a lamp.

Guilt struck Nicki hard when she realized she had watched the play of muscles across his... posterior... with flagrant fascination. She excused her behavior with the thought that she had a deep respect for Greek

sculpture and this man was truly a masterpiece.

A crack of flint against stone caused Nicki to start. Dylan replaced the globe over the flame and the added illumination chased any remaining gloom from the bedchamber.

An unperturbed Dylan turned to lean a bronze shoulder against the dark cherrywood bureau. He crossed his arms over the wide expanse of his bare muscled chest.

“Chester, remind me to install more chairs in my bedchamber. I was unaware of the neighborly custom of visiting a man in the middle of the night, but then I have been out of the country for some time. Also make a note that I shall have to hone my climbing skills as well if I am to return the courtesy. It seems one enters a neighbor’s house through the window—or through the door brandishing a weapon. The window seems slightly more civilized, though I am not certain yet which is the more dangerous.”

“As if you were ever civilized, Dylan!” interjected Nicki’s father.

Nicki gaped at her father. Such rude outbursts were uncommon, even for him. “Papa, whatever are you doing here?”

He sputtered, the skin of his face reddening once again. “Well... I... the note...”

“I believe your father is here to protect your virtue, my lady. It seems you have landed in a... situation.”

Her father glanced uncomfortably toward the butler. The tassel of his nightcap dropped over one eye. “It might be best to continue this conversation in private, Dylan.”

One brief nod from his new master and Chester

bowed stiffly and left the room. The door closed with a crisp click.

Calm as Lucifer himself, Dylan returned his attention to the intruder. "Whether we speak alone or in the presence of an army of servants, the damage is done."

Her father looked at her for an instant, then at the gun in his hand. His face flushed as he stuffed the weapon into the pocket of his brocade jacket. "My daughter's betrothed to another. We'll take our leave now and just forget this matter. I don't know what game you're playing, Dylan, but I won't be a part of it."

"Oh, I think you will take part, Billington." Blake Dylan lifted his hand and curled long fingers to survey his nails.

Nicki could see the ring clearly in the lamp light. It looked like the head of an animal and it had two white jewels for eyes. Diamonds. Chills raced over Nicki's skin.

"Proper procedures must be followed. I have no desire to face an angry fiancé with pistols at dawn." Dylan looked up to fasten his compelling gaze on the man before him. "You know what must be done. Perhaps better than I."

Nicki looked back and forth from the stone-faced Dylan to her father, who had gone deathly pale and appeared in danger of collapsing. She had the uncomfortable feeling she had opened a book in the middle.

"Don't do this, Dylan. She has nothing to do with our troubles."

Stiffness claimed the handsome features of Dylan's face. "I beg to differ, sir. She is a threat to my honor."

The cold words sliced through the tension in the room. Nicki rubbed her arms. "But, sir, no harm has

been done.”

Both men ignored her as they continued to stare daggers at each other.

“What think you, Billington? Do you agree no harm can come from this night? Will you try to fob off a ruined girl to uphold a betrothal? I suppose you would if your honor has no importance to you. But I will let it be known that I was willing to take the proper action. Will you do the right thing?”

Nicki’s father hesitated.

“Yes, devil take it.” He tugged at the collar of his nightshirt, the familiar gesture testimony to the extent of his discomfit.

“I now understand where your daughter gets her colorful vocabulary. At any rate, the matter is settled. I trust you will see to the other gentleman.”

Her father nodded. He glared at the frayed Persian carpet, his jaw working spasmodically. Unnerved by her father’s demeanor, Nicki returned her attention to the man across the room.

Silver. His eyes were silver framed with incredibly long, black lashes. Like the eyes in the ring. His gaze flashed to her and Nicki flinched. She stood mesmerized, incapable of movement.

“Congratulations, my lady.” Blake Dylan smiled, but without warmth—merely a baring of white teeth. “It seems we are engaged.”



After seeing the Langleys to the door, Blake Dylan returned to his bedchamber. Moonlight streamed in the open window and drew him across the room. He

pressed his clenched fists against the frame and stared at the distorted image of his face in the double panes of glass. None of the turmoil raging through his soul showed in his features.

Never reveal your emotions. That was his father's creed. Blake had perfected it.

With a fierce shove, he slammed the window closed. The glass rattled in the frame. He examined his reflection in the glass.

When he turned away, his bare shoulder brushed the ragged edges of the torn curtain. He paused to trace the rip with his index finger. Langley's daughter. Who would have thought she'd enter the house through a second-story window?

He had fallen asleep in the chair while going over the Rosewood accounts as he awaited the arrival of the Langley's daughter. The candle had burned out as he slept, yet the darkness worked as a useful tool. After the tearing sound had awakened him, he found he could watch the girl without allowing her to see him clearly.

His first day in residence at Rosewood—and already his plans were set in motion. When he arranged for the note to be delivered to Nicole Langley, he half expected her to visit him circumspectly in the daylight hours, despite Teddy's description of his meetings with the girl. The unmarried women of Blake's acquaintance did not visit men in their bedchambers in the middle of the night. Certainly not dressed in trousers. Nicole had surprised him—something that did not happen often.

The man he had stationed at the Langley mansion had been told to watch for a young lady to leave the

house, then deliver the second note to Billington. His success was obvious.

Carefully laid plans always paid off in the end.

Before passing a fortnight in England, Blake had become engaged to the woman he sought—the daughter of the man he had hated for years and the one true love of the deceitful Teddy Bartholomew. Too easy.

Blake conjured up the list of details he had stored away in his mind regarding Billington's oldest daughter—tidbits of information provided by Bartholomew. Headstrong, daring, witty, and mischievous.

Considering her volatile personality, he had no reason to be surprised at her behavior this evening. A girl who would slip vodka into her stepmother's afternoon tea would dare a great deal.

Tonight she had come in search of Theodore Bartholomew and wound up his instead. There had to be some justice in that.

A soft tapping on the door intruded into his reverie. "Enter."

Chester hesitated in the doorway. "I noticed the light under the door. You have not yet retired, my lord?"

"Sleep eludes me." Blake smiled slightly. "Too much excitement, I suppose."

"I must offer my apologies, sir. The duke was quite agitated and I was concerned he might discharge his weapon. I acted wrongly in bringing him to you."

Blake waved his hand impatiently. "Chester, you have my permission to do whatever necessary to calm any irate fathers waving guns."

"The Duke of Billington is normally a reasonable man. It must have been his worry over Lady Nicki that had him so out of sorts."

“Odd,” Blake arched a brow. “On the one other occasion I chanced to encounter Billington, he was equally disgruntled. I must bring out the worst in him—wouldn’t you say, Chester?”

The butler’s mouth tightened into a small bow, as though he had just bitten into a particularly sour lemon. “I am certain I would not know, my lord.”

“At any rate, we shall be seeing a good deal of the duke and his daughter.” Catching sight of a shiny object on the faded carpet, Blake bent to retrieve a lady’s hairpin. “I have gotten myself engaged, Chester. The Langley girl certainly is attractive.”

“Congratulations, sir. Lady Nicki was ever a pretty thing and she does have an appealing enthusiasm for life.”

“Is that what you call it? I was inclined to find her reckless and somewhat foolhardy, but then I have not had the pleasure of her acquaintance for as long as you have. How long have you known Lady Nicole, Chester?”

In the light of the dip Chester held, his austere features seemed to soften. “Lady Nicki’s mother, bless her soul, brought the girl to Rosewood from the time she was a babe. If I may be so presumptuous, my lord, Lady Nicki has an aversion to being referred to as Lady Nicole. When she was but four years old, I thought it unseemly to use the abbreviated version of her name, but the little thing held her breath until she turned blue. It was then the duchess assured me that everyone was to call her Nicki, including the servants.”

“Interesting. Rewarding blackmail. So Lady Nicole came to Rosewood with her mother?”

Chester stiffened slightly, but continued. “Until she

was seven or so. When the young miss was but four or five years, she took it in her head to follow Master Teddy about. Most lads of ten would have sent her packing, but not Master Teddy. He treated Lady Nicki like a sister. When he went to school at Oxford, she was devastated.”

At the mention of the university, Blake clenched the cool metal hairpin in his hand. “She must have been twelve or thirteen by that time.”

“Why, yes, I believe she was thirteen. Ah... when the young master came down from school, those were joyous times. Wherever the pair of them were, trouble soon appeared. So full of life, those two.”

Blake scowled, unclenched his fist and turned to place the hairpin on the polished surface of the bureau. “I believe you called it enthusiasm. I should think Lady Nicole well beyond the age of such foolishness. As my wife, she must learn to carry on in a dignified and decorous manner. This sneaking into second story windows will stop.”

“As you say, my lord. Forgive my prattling. It must be the lateness of the hour. If you have no further need of my services, I shall retire.”

“Off to bed with you, Chester. We shall both need our strength for the days ahead.”

“Of course, my lord. Have a pleasant sleep.” Chester bowed stiffly before he backed from the room and closed the door.

Blake returned to his vigil at the window, bracing his hands on either side of the glass. How could he sleep now?

Visions of slim hips and thighs provocatively revealed by those outrageous trousers raced through

his mind; as did her hair of palest gold which tumbled in curls to the tantalizing curve at the base of her spine. Once having looked into her eyes a man would never forget their color—like the sea where it fades from the shore, a curious blend of deep blue tinged with green. When those beautiful eyes drew a man in, he would not be satisfied until he had tasted her full mouth with that pouting lower lip, soft and pink, and moist where her tongue had touched...

Good God, had it been so long since he had been with a woman? This was Billington's daughter, not a bloody siren.

Blake pushed himself away from the window, stalked to the bureau, and doused the lamp. He had come here for a purpose and he could not allow an intriguing little firebrand to distract him.

There would be time to fully savor the sweetness of that adorable mouth at a later date—after he had exacted his revenge.



Nicki squirmed on the bare back of her horse. She had always thought side saddles horrid contraptions, but now realized they had their uses.

She risked a peek at her father. He rode just ahead, his countenance stiff, annoyance bristling from him. If he had his way, she would most likely be on her feet and tied to his saddle so he could drag her all the way home to Langley Hall.

When she compared that scenario to her recently accomplished engagement to a man her father labeled a “fiend from hell,” Nicki thought she would prefer

being dragged behind her father's horse.

How could matters have gotten in such a tangle? When the note arrived, she had forced herself to remain calm and not rush immediately to Rosewood. She had set out this evening filled with such high hopes, certain that with Teddy's help she could extricate herself from an intolerable engagement to the odious Duke of Melton. If anyone could assist her out of such an untenable position, it was Teddy.

Nicki nibbled her lower lip. Now she was free of the Duke, but she had not meant for the engagement to transfer to another. At times, her plans simply failed to go forward as she imagined.

Still, this disaster could be laid entirely at her father's door if one truly thought it out logically. If he had not burst into the room like a madman, she could have returned to Langley Hall with nothing more than injured dignity. No one would have been the wiser, and Blake Dylan would have failed in whatever cruel scheme he had concocted.

Much as she hated to admit it, Nicki knew her father's over-reaction stemmed from his love for her. Of that she had no doubt. She sighed. Her own feelings must be put aside for the moment.

"Papa, I am sorry. Truly I am."

His shoulders stiffened and he drew himself up. "I've warned you about carrying on in such a careless manner, girl. Now look at the pickle you've landed us in. The Duke of Melton is a powerful man. It may not have been the best marriage, but it was a fitting one. He could make trouble for me."

Nicki urged Adonis forward until she and her father rode side by side. She stole a quick glance at his

face as she attempted to gauge his mood. “You seemed to know that wretched man who has stolen Teddy’s inheritance. Surely you can convince him this was an unfortunate misunderstanding.”

“No, Nick. There’ll be no reasoning with him. The man hates me. Besides, he went to the trouble to bring this incident about. It doesn’t bode well for either of us.”

“Why would a man who dislikes you purposefully get himself engaged to your daughter? It makes no sense.”

Her father reached up and batted the tassel of his nightcap aside. “Blake Dylan has never behaved as expected. He must be in England because of his father’s death. Now he’s got the title, the Earl of Diamond.” Her father shook his head dolefully. “They’re known for their coldness. What the devil were you about sneaking into his bedchamber in the middle of the night?”

So Blake Dylan was an earl. Nicki tightened her hold on the reins, causing Adonis to jerk his head in protest. “I thought I was to meet with Teddy.”

“Even so, you had no business behaving so recklessly. And just look at you, daughter. Dressed like a boy and riding astride. It’s a miracle Dylan went through with his plan. I’ve raised a hoyden. That man’s getting more trouble than he knows.”

She bit back the retort that sprang to her lips. Her father did not understand—would never understand. He would never know how stifled she felt by the ridiculous restrictions she was forced to endure.

Most likely he would have preferred that she climb Teddy’s trellis in a proper gown. She prided herself on

her cleverness in wearing her brother's trousers, as the foresight had most likely saved her from serious injury.

"There now, don't go sulking on me. Truly, Nick, what am I to do with you? You charge off without a thought to your reputation—or mine, for that matter. I shudder to think what might've happened if I hadn't shown up when I did."

"Heaven forbid that I might have gotten myself engaged or something equally as dreadful!"

"Nicole Langley, I'll have none of that!" Her father scowled in her direction. "You've put me in a devilish position. Melton was quite taken with the idea of having you for a bride. And what of Mina's Season? Melton agreed to finance your sister's coming out. I'll not be getting tuppence out of Dylan!"

Chagrin replaced Nicki's ire. She had forgotten about Mina's Season. If she were any sort of sister she would have quietly accepted the marriage to Melton, if only for the financial stability the match meant for her family. Her thoughts flashed to her stepmother.

Her desire for martyrdom dissipated.

"I will do my best to make the situation turn around, Papa. Mina will have her Season. I swear it. Even if I have to spend my inheritance from Grandmama to see that she does."

Her father reached over and pressed her hand. "That money's to be yours upon your marriage—only yours."

"But I would gladly give up every shilling for Mina, Papa."

He sighed and ran his finger inside his collar. "You are my oldest, Nick, and my brightest. I know you'll behave as a good daughter should. Besides, marriage

isn't so bad, girl. I don't know why you've got such an aversion to it."

The full moon ducked behind a cloud and Nicki silently praised its discretion. How could she tell her father that it had been his marital experiences that had soured her forever on the matrimonial state?

She had been ten years old, one year younger than her brother Shelby was now, when her mother died. Her father had told her and Mina that Marguerite's heart had failed, but Nicki had known the real truth.

Nicki turned her thoughts to her father's wedding three short months after Mother's death. The woman her father married so swiftly had been the same he kept as his mistress. Angelica Dalton, the youthful widow of a baron from Yorkshire. Beautiful, elegant, charming... and Nicki hated her.

"Nicki? Are you sulking?"

Hiding the torment carefully from her father—from the world, she lifted her chin. "I am not afraid of marriage and I am not sulking. Do not worry, Papa, I surrender. If I do not marry your Earl of Diamond, it will be through no device of mine. I give you my word."

His face brightened immediately, just as she had known it would. "That's my girl."

Nicki glanced at the dark silhouettes of trees on either side of them and the moonlight flitting through the branches, as nebulous as the fairies of her favorite childhood tales. She would honor her promise to her father and not plan any more daring escapades.

Still—there were a great many natural occurrences that could interfere in a courtship. It was her duty to see to it that as many took place as humanly possible. She had avoided marriage for four years, struggling

against her father's many attempts to get her engaged. She had made a vow long ago. A vow she could not break.

Then with the delivery of two notes, a man had successfully entrapped her into a second engagement. Disastrous.

Yet if there was one thing Nicki had learned in her twenty-two years on this earth, it was how to make use of a disaster.

She shivered, recalling those silver eyes. Nicki feared she just may have met her match in the Earl of Diamond.

Chapter 2



“What is he like, Nicki? Is he horribly old?” Mina, wearing a gown of rich magenta that set off her black hair and fair skin to perfection, paused next to Nicki’s canopied bed. With exquisite grace, she straightened the corner of the rose coverlet before she crossed the room to sit on the delicate stool in front of the dressing table.

Nicki thrust her hands into the sleeves of her ice blue day gown while their maid, chubby red-headed Lucy, valiantly maneuvered the cloth to keep the seams from splitting.

“He did not seem so very old, but it was somewhat dark.”

“Heavens, Nicki! You could have been ravished! If Papa had not arrived when he did...”

Nicki snapped her brows together in the manner her stepmother deplored. “Papa says he is an earl. Men of high birth do not go about ravishing young ladies... do they?”

Mina’s perfect oval face took on a concerned expression. “But you *were* wearing Shelby’s trousers of all things! And you *did* climb in his bedroom window in the middle of the night. Perhaps he thought you

meant to involve him in a romantic tryst.”

“That is utter nonsense! He is the one who sent the note.”

Nicki waited for her sister to vacate the stool before she dropped onto the velvet cushion. “Can you believe it, Mina? He has taken Rosewood away from Teddy—and over cards, of all things! Teddy must be devastated!”

Concern fled Mina’s expression to be replaced by disdain. “It was gambling that caused Teddy and his father to leave England one step ahead of their creditors. I’m truly amazed they kept Rosewood as long as they did.”

“That is extremely ungenerous of you.”

Lucy picked up a shiny gold brush and began to drag it through Nicki’s tangled hair while Mina fussed with several bottles and jars situated in a jumble atop the dressing table.

Nicki watched her sister absently. “Teddy was broken-hearted when he and his father left for America. He swore to me he would return one day. This Earl of Diamond must have tricked him, as he tricked Papa and me.”

Mina unstopped a bottle, dabbed the lid against her throat. She rolled her eyes heavenward. “Teddy was always a spineless boy who assisted you in all sorts of pranks, and then stood silently by while you took the blame and the punishment.”

Nicki shook her head in denial. The movement jerked a strand of her hair temporarily from Lucy’s fingers. Mina simply did not understand. No one did.

“I was not nearly so clever as he, and so I was caught.”

“Devious, you mean. He never once stepped forward

to protect you. Heaven knows you've never been able to maintain a straight face in a lie, and you were just too honorable to try to protect yourself. Teddy knew that and he took advantage."

The words hit too close to the mark, but what Mina did not know was that it had been Nicki's choice to protect Teddy. For reasons no one else knew, she had dared not allow Teddy to get into trouble. He was her best friend—her only friend—and she would have sacrificed much more than punishment to keep him safe. That was the way of their friendship.

She sighed. "Discussing Teddy and the past does not help me out of the pickle I have gotten myself in."

At the sight of her own reflection above Nicki's in the dressing table mirror, Mina reached up to smooth her gleaming black tresses. Nicki smiled. Not one hair appeared out of place.

Mina's sapphire blue eyes, a trait strong in the Langleys, met Nicki's gaze in the glass. "You went there to seek Teddy's help in freeing you from your betrothal to Melton. The mission was a success. You're freed from your engagement."

Nicki made a face at her sister. "How insightful of you, Mina! You forget that I am now saddled with a different intended. My situation has not changed in the least."

"The Earl of Diamond. A romantic title. You shall be the Countess of Diamond. Besides, you did say the gentleman is not old. Is he handsome at all?"

A vision came to Nicki of finely honed features set in uncompromising lines, eyes of the palest grey, wide shoulders and a stomach that resembled Emma's washboard, breeches that clung to the prominent

muscles of his thighs like a second skin...

“Good heavens, it is hot in here!” Nicki grabbed up a feather and beadwork fan and wielded it with a vengeance. “Is he handsome? I suppose so, in a ruthless sort of way. But he seemed entirely too used to ordering people about, and I do not intend to be one of those people!”

Mina touched a pale hand to her throat, her eyes wide. “Did you say ruthless? I overheard Papa and Angelica arguing this morning. She said that since Dylan left England in disgrace, he’s turned into a colonial barbarian and would use his new skills to enact his final blow. What do you suppose she meant?”

Lucy turned Nicki’s face toward the window to better accomplish her purposes in hair design. Nicki strained to meet her sister’s gaze. “The earl and Papa do not like each other, but as for the earl being a barbarian, he did not behave like one. It was Papa who shouted and waved his pistol about. Do you think the earl might have a change of heart after sleeping on the matter? Papa and I could not have presented a flattering impression.”

Nearby, the decorative brass door handle rattled loudly, then the door burst open. Lucy shrieked and pins scattered. A boy with a head of riotous black curls stumbled into the room, all the while retaining a firm grasp on the doorknob.

The Langley blue eyes shone from a face much like Mina’s. “He’s here, Nick! He looks like Satan hisself dressed all in black, and his eyes is freezin’ everyone!”

“Shelby Langley!” Nicki pressed her hand to her chest, as though the gesture could slow her racing

heart. "You must apologize at once for frightening the life out of us!"

Her brother shuffled his feet, tracing the pattern of a pink rose on the carpet with the toe of his shoe. "I didn't mean to scare you, Nick, but I was in a hurry, y'understand."

"Of course, Shelby, now you may tell us who is below stairs." Nicki's mouth twitched, but her voice sounded sufficiently firm to her own ears.

"Your intended, the Earl of Diamond. He looked straight through Simms. The old vulture actually stammered! Never saw Simms flustered. Thought the man was made of stone."

Nicki's stomach fluttered as though a dozen butterflies had taken flight inside. She took a deep breath and forced the feeling away. "I have *never* seen Simms flustered, Shelby. I hope you did not come screaming from the hall like a banshee."

"The earl never *seen* me." Shelby rolled his eyes. "He was too busy scarin' the starch out of the servants."

"Thank you for informing us of the earl's arrival, Shelby. I am certain he will first speak with Papa. I will await summons."

Her brother dashed from the room. Moments later his excited voice floated back to them as he found another audience. Clenching and unclenching her hands in her lap, Nicki realized her fingers had turned to ice. She twisted around to look up at her sister.

Their gazes locked. Mina shrugged. With a smile Nicki jumped to her feet. Together they raced to the door and into the hall. Their slippared feet made no sound on the thick floral carpet as they sped down the long corridor to the landing.

Nicki halted at the end of the hallway where the gallery overlooked the foyer below, then crouched down to peer through the intricately carved posts of the banister. Mina's hand pressed into her shoulder as she leaned over Nicki to gain a better view.

Scanning the hall below, Nicki thought for a moment that Shelby had played her false. Then she saw the earl.

He faced the opposite wall of the gallery intent on studying the painting that hung there. Nicki caught her breath. He seemed so at ease, as though he had stood in this particular foyer a thousand times.

Nicki leaned forward to gain a better viewpoint. He was incredibly tall, just as she remembered from last night. But in clothing, he appeared much larger. She blushed at the thought.

A charcoal jacket encased his broad shoulders and the muscles of his strong thighs flexed beneath black breeches. Her heart picked up several paces as she recalled the portion of his anatomy now hidden by the back of his coat.

Knee-high Wellingtons hugged his calves; the glossy leather reflected the shimmer of light from the small chandelier overhead. This man resembled none of the local boys Nicki knew. Though the earl dressed no more extravagantly, the differences remained. Perhaps it was the proud set of his chin, or the confidence in his stride. The Earl of Diamond was a sleek blooded stallion amidst the neighborhood cart ponies.

Nicki noted the way the ends of his black hair curled slightly over his collar to touch his shoulders. Savage, certainly, but in a refined way. The simple act of looking at him caused a breathless sort of anticipation to

curl in her stomach. Who was this man, and why had he endeavored to become engaged to her?

The earl turned and Nicki jerked back, slamming into Mina's legs. With a gasp, Mina grabbed for Nicki to right herself. The reverse momentum sent Nicki stumbling backward.

With desperation born of sheer panic, Nicki tried to hang on to her sister. Her fingers slipped from Mina's forearms and Nicki flew back several feet to land in a heap of muslin and petticoats on the hardwood floor. Slowly, she sat up, aware of a distinct discomfort in the vicinity of her tailbone. She was greeted by Mina's horrified stare.

Weakness washed over Nicki. *Merciful heaven, she had fallen into the gallery.* Hoping against hope, Nicki glanced to her right through the newel posts. Perhaps the incident had gone unnoticed.

"Good morning, Lady Nicole."

Her heart lurched in her chest and heat flamed up her throat and into her cheeks. She got to her feet with as much grace as she could muster and moved to rest her palms on the rail. "My lord. Lovely morning, is it not?" Her voice came out stilted and unnatural.

The corner of the earl's mouth twitched slightly. "There is a bite in the air, but not overly unpleasant. I hope you did not injure yourself?"

Nicki ignored the muffled squeak Mina uttered at his words and shook her head. "It was nothing, a snag in the carpeting. It catches me frequently."

He nodded, maintaining a serious mien, as though her explanation were entirely plausible. "I see. I have an aversion to snags myself. Always trips one up when one least expects it."

She took a deep breath and clenched the railing. "Have you come to speak with my father?"

Lord Diamond clasped his hands behind his back and Nicki noted the sudden tautness of his finely sculpted jawline. "I have."

She nibbled at her lower lip before rushing ahead. "He can be quite excitable, but means well. Last night..."

"You are breathtaking this morning."

The words, softly spoken, sent Nicki's thoughts fluttering. She reached up to touch her hair and remembered that Lucy had only styled one side before Nicki rushed from her bedchamber to spy on the earl.

"Thank... you," she said hesitantly, certain her cheeks must be as dark as red wine by now. She turned slightly so that the earl could view only her finished side. "I fear that a misunderstanding has..."

"I am enjoying this conversation, but perhaps you could come down into the hall? Looking up at you is giving me a crick in my neck."

"Oh." Frantic, Nicki glanced at Mina then back down at Lord Diamond. She could not go downstairs looking like this. The man had called her breathtaking but he would certainly expire for lack of air if he obtained a closer view of her odd taste in coiffures.

"Nicki, could you come here, please," called Mina from farther down the hall.

"Coming!" Nicki responded immediately, then offered the earl an apologetic smile. "If you will please excuse me, my lord? It appears I am needed elsewhere." She had not meant to sound quite so cheerful.

His silver eyes sparkled. "So it seems. Good day, my lady."

With a brief curtsy, Nicki lifted her chin and walked at a sedate pace from the gallery. She held herself in check until she had left the earl's sight, then bolted down the corridor past the faces of Langley ancestors who frowned from dark canvases.

Mina ushered Nicki through the white-framed doorway leading back into her room, then closed the door and collapsed against it.

Heart pounding, Nicki faced her sister. "How positively awful!"

Lucy glanced up from her position on the floor, pins protruding from her clenched lips. She shook her head in exasperation and returned to scouring the patterned carpet for the remainder of the lost hairpins.

"I'm so sorry, Nicki." Mina slipped down the smooth painted wood, as though her legs would no longer support her.

Feeling as though she had entered a frightening new world, Nicki moved to sit next to her sister. She tucked her ankles beneath the hem of her dress. "He must think I spend more time on the floor than on my feet."

"I thought him quite understanding," Mina offered.

"He seems more frightening today. Did you notice he would not let me discuss the events of last night?" She twisted her hands together in her lap. "What am I to do, Mina?"

With a slight smile, Mina covered Nicki's cold fingers. "Papa will take care of everything. Don't worry, sister. He would never marry you to a monster."

She wanted to believe Mina's words, but Nicki could not shake the feeling of hanging suspended by a velvet ribbon over a vast precipice—a ribbon held by

the Earl of Diamond.

“I am not so certain of that. At this point, Papa might wed me to the devil himself just to be free of me.”



Blake watched until the charming, disheveled Nicole slipped away. He realized with amusement, and a small degree of pleasure, that she had been spying on him.

His humor dissipated as he dropped his gaze to the pristine white tile gleaming beneath his boots. It was time—time to face Jonathon Langley.

He turned to examine a painting gracing the wall to his left. A watercolor of a summer garden. The soft hues darkened and disappeared as Blake slipped inside the dim room of his mind that housed his memories.

He had been hardly more than a boy. Young, headstrong, naive. Billington would have gladly murdered him then, but had instead chosen humiliation. Blake vowed this time would be different. This time *he* would hold all the cards.

Blake moved away from the painting to survey the other framed pieces of art gracing the combination floral and stripe papered walls. His gaze flickered over his reflection in a mirror across the hall, then paused on a vase of hothouse flowers.

In more ways than one, Billington would find him much changed. Blake had grown from the boy into the exact image of his father, Barrett Dylan, dead these past two months. The same hardness shaped his mouth, the same coldness infused his grey eyes.

Diamond eyes—a trait that had remained strong in the Dylans throughout the centuries.

Over time, Blake had learned what a powerful weapon his gaze could be. It was just one of the weapons he planned to employ against Billington.

Muffled voices could be heard from down the hall. Blake turned and watched the butler approach. The man walked silently on the tips of his highly polished shoes, as though tacks hurt his heels.

“His Grace will see you in his study.”

Blake set his jaw. The time had come.

“If your lordship will follow me.”

The butler spun abruptly and glided away in the direction from which he had just come. Blake’s riding boots impacted against the tile with crisp clicks, but the slim man before him moved without a sound.

After passing several closed doors, the butler paused next to an open doorway, turned and bowed stiffly. “The Earl of Diamond, Your Grace.”

Jonathon Langley met Blake at the entrance to the room. “Diamond.” He held out his hand to Blake. “Thank you, Simms, that’ll be all.”

Blake took the other man’s hand in a firm grip.

A man’s handshake revealed a great deal, and Billington’s felt hot and moist. Blake glanced to his right, but the butler had disappeared. The duke ushered him into the room and closed the door.

Blake paused next to an authentic-looking suit of armor to orient himself with his new surroundings. He had passed from the subdued elegance of the hall into what resembled a crowded attic. As his eyes adjusted to the low lighting, his hearing sharpened until he heard the crackle of a fire. Wind whistled through a

window not seated properly.

The duke slapped his hands together, then rubbed them vigorously. "This way."

Blake followed Billington across a carpet that appeared to writhe beneath his feet in swirls of black, brown, maroon, and blue. The duke skillfully avoided a stool shaped like a mushroom, and a half dozen bronze serpents littering the floor in no logical pattern.

Billington moved behind an immense desk of scarred English oak situated before an arched window. With a sigh, he took a seat and motioned Blake to an armchair on the opposite side of the desk. Blake carefully dodged a table nearby that leaned precariously on three legs and sat in a high-backed chair. The cushion had little padding and left much to be desired in the way of comfort. Blake also noted he faced the window, which on a brighter day would have been a distinct disadvantage.

The duke cleared his throat, then stared at the surface of his desk as though he had never seen it before. He busied himself with moving aside several untidy stacks of papers.

While Blake waited, he took in Billington's burgundy jacket, which appeared to be constructed of the same fabric as the heavy velvet curtains framing the narrow window at his back. His cravat had been skillfully tied, but had a tendency to drift off toward the left shoulder. A dollop of some unrecognizable food item stained the white shirt beneath the tie and became visible each time the cravat strayed.

It looked like a great brown eye winking at him.

Blake crossed his legs, folded his hands in his lap, and fastened his gaze on Billington's flushed face.

“Well now!” Evidently satisfied that he had cleared a sufficient spot in the midst of the disorder to rest his elbows, the duke cleared his throat again and ran a finger beneath the edge of his cravat. “Good of you to come. I... before we discuss your marriage to my daughter, I want to put certain matters behind us.”

Blake smiled slightly. “Oh? I had thought those matters best left to their... fitful slumber.”

“Not that easy, my boy. I know it was you who sabotaged my business ventures. Cleaned me out. Cost Nicki her Season in London. I’m willing to forgive and forget that nonsense and to... welcome you into my family.” The speech, forced from a tightly clenched jaw, lacked the proper inflection necessary to lend it truth.

Blake raised a brow. “I have been in America these past six years, Billington—as you well know. Since it was your actions that caused my banishment from England, I hardly believe you are now willing to embrace me as a son.”

“Yes, well...” Jonathon fumbled in his jacket and withdrew a handkerchief. He mopped the perspiration from his forehead and stuffed the linen back inside his pocket. “I tried to set that right. Went to your father and told him I was mistaken—but Diamond wouldn’t hear none of it. Said you was too headstrong and the entire ugly business would be a good lesson to you.”

The words pierced Blake’s defenses and struck a nerve. He tensed. “That sounds like my father.” Offering a vague smile, he forced himself to hold on to indifference. “In the end, perhaps he was not far from the mark. I have done quite well for myself in America. I shall be in a position to amply provide for

your daughter.”

“She was betrothed to the Duke of Melton, y’know. We had a marriage contract in place and Melton agreed to pay off my creditors and finance a Season for my younger daughter Wilhemina. Said he’d provide a residence in town. You saw to it that I lost my place in town.”

Yes, he had. That particular victory he celebrated in Boston with an attractive young widow. Her late husband, rest his soul, had left her an excellent wine collection.

Blake tented his fingers and watched Billington for a long moment. “Melton’s offer was generous. From my brief encounter with the Lady Nicole—I would say overly generous. But she is now engaged to me. I, on the other hand, will not buy a bride.”

Billington methodically cracked each knuckle of his left hand. The chords of his neck stood out, and Blake mentally gauged how much further the man could be pushed before he exploded.

“I ask that you reconsider, Diamond, or by God I’ll accept Melton’s offer after all.”

Blake gave a shout of laughter. “Nonsense. Melton would not come within miles of a ruined girl, though she might possibly be quite striking when dressed appropriately. You have only my offer—or install her in a convent. I would discourage the latter suggestion. Your daughter does not strike me as possessing the proper temperament for a life of religious seclusion.”

“Damn it all, Dylan! It was your doing that got her into your room in the first place! I don’t know what you’re about but I won’t allow my girl to be caught in the middle of our feud.” Jonathon stood abruptly,

sending his chair teetering toward the window before it righted itself with a muffled thunk. “I told you I tried to talk to your father. He said you were already bound for America.”

Blake unsteeped his hands and ran one long index finger across the battered wooden chair arm. The Diamond signet ring, the face of a wolf with diamonds for eyes, caught his attention for a moment. “I agree you were not the sole player in that little scenario and I suppose I should feel fortunate that you chose to drag me before my father rather than call me out.”

The memory came back in a flash like death-cold lightning. Langley, furious, demanding Blake’s punishment. Then the unyielding anger in his father’s silver eyes. Blake thrust aside the memories.

“After all these years I continue to wonder if my honor would have been better served by a duel rather than banishment.”

Billington moistened his dry lips with his tongue, then glanced to a table close by. Blake followed his gaze to several crystal decanters filled with amber liquid positioned on a glass tray surrounded by sparkling glasses.

“You might’ve told me at the time that you were acting for another,” murmured the duke.

“You were not open to discussion, as I recall.” Blake laughed again, the sound a harsh rasp in his ears. “The other party involved was my friend. If he felt it his duty to come forward, he would have.”

The duke lost whatever inner battle he had waged and strode to the side table. He lifted the stopper from one decanter, splashed a generous serving into a glass, and started to drink. He stiffened suddenly, and raised

the glass in question. Blake waved his hand in denial.

Billington downed the liquid, gasped, then slammed the glass onto the tray with a clatter of crystal. After squaring his shoulders, he turned to face Blake. The polished mahogany wall at the man's back glowed with an inner light and Billington's face appeared deathly pale in contrast.

"The whole damned business got out of hand, Dylan. We'd be better off to forget it ever occurred."

"As I said, I did not come here to discuss the past, but the future—of which your daughter is now a part. Am I correct in my assumption?"

The duke took a deep breath. He looked as though he might toss his breakfast. Blake knew the feeling of another person maneuvering your life well. Billington lifted his gaze to Blake. "I see no alternative. What date did you have in mind? Perhaps the fall?"

"I have business to attend to in America, therefore I must insist on expediting the wedding. You shall have a month to prepare."

"That isn't much time. Nick hasn't had time to get used to you yet, or to the idea of leaving home."

"Such is life. My business always takes precedence over my personal life."

"Very well." Langley stood straighter, striving for dignity. "I must ask one thing, Diamond. You've refused to cooperate in my other requests, but there are several things I must insist on."

Blake leaned forward, resting his elbows on the chair arms. He feigned boredom. "Yes?"

Emotions dueled across Billington's face like a well-enacted theatrical event. Anger, frustration, wounded pride. "Nicki's a fine girl and she deserves

happiness. If you plan on getting revenge against me through her—then I must withdraw my acceptance of your offer. I'll not have my girl's heart broken."

Blake leaned back slowly, linking his hands behind his neck. "Still doubting my honor, Billington?"

The duke's color returned in a rush. "Devil take it, she's my daughter! I won't see her done in."

"You may rest assured I do not go about preying on innocent females, no matter what you once believed. And your other request?"

Billington made a move as though he would once again pop his knuckles, then thought better of the gesture and instead rested one hand between two buttons of his shirt and the other behind his back.

"I don't mind having a quiet wedding here, but I'd like to have my close family present. Nicki's my oldest, y'understand."

Blake rose and held out his hand. This time Billington's grip was dry and firm. "I have no objection to a few family members being present. My steward shall come around tomorrow to retrieve the necessary documents."

"But... won't you be wanting to see Nicki now?"

After considering the suggestion briefly, Blake shook his head. "I do not believe so. She and I will see quite enough of each other when we are wed."

Billington scowled and ran a finger beneath the edge of his cravat once again. The brown spot flashed, then ducked back beneath the folds of the tie. Blake's lips twitched, but the duke appeared too preoccupied to notice.

"There'll be hell to pay when I tell her Mina won't be getting her Season."

Blake maneuvered his way through the collection of downtrodden furniture and gaudy figurines to the door. He paused with his hand on the knob, then glanced back at Billington. "If Lady Nicole is displeased with the price you negotiated, that is your problem—not mine."

"But..." Billington bit off the words.

A thought occurred to Blake. "I nearly forgot one stipulation to the contract. You will forego any claim to the inheritance Lady Nicole will receive upon our marriage. Good day, sir."

When he left the room, the door closed sharply behind him. He heard Billington let out a roar. The butler appeared, silent as a cat, to hand over Blake's cloak and hat.

As Blake left the house, he paused on the front porch to draw the fresh air deep into his lungs—and waited for the familiar thrill of success to fill him. He should have been exultant. After all, victory belonged to him.

So why did he not feel like the victor?

Blake donned his beaver hat and flung his cloak around his shoulders. A lightness entered his gait as he strode down the stone steps, then took the graveled path leading around the side of the house to the stables.

The courtyard stretched before him in quiet solitude. Banbury, his bay gelding, stood tied to a carved railing in front of the stables, head drooped, one hoof crooked, waiting for Blake to finish his business.

The thought of Jonathon Langley facing his own daughter set a smile tugging at the corners of Blake's mouth, though he did not envy the man the task before him. Last night, Blake had witnessed the lengths to

which the Lady Nicole would go in order to get her way. She would not take her father's news calmly.

The grin broke free, the expression foreign and unnatural. It had been a long time since anything had truly amused him. From what he had seen of Nicole Langley thus far, the entertainment had only just begun.

Chapter 3



Branches of the shrubbery grabbed at Nicki's hair and clothes and scraped her hands as she emerged into the tiny clearing near the abhorrent trellis of Rosewood. Her boots sank slightly into the softness of decaying leaves.

A three-quarter moon reflecting off the aged bricks of the manor house granted Nicki plenty of light. Still, she eyed the climb with trepidation. Certain parts of her anatomy still suffered from last night's expedition, but she simply had no choice in the matter.

She must speak with the earl.

With a sigh, she bunched the skirt of her riding habit and threw the voluminous folds over one arm. Her father had made such a clatter over her use of Shelby's trousers she could not justify using them again. Before leaving the house, she had taken the precaution of donning her thickest pair of ribbed silk stockings and her riding boots. They would have to suffice.

She grasped the latticework with one hand and stepped up, only to swing backward and slam into the side of the house. With effort, she regained her balance

and dropped to the ground. Several seconds passed before she gathered enough courage to brave the trellis again. Battling the weight of her skirts, she managed only a few yards before she ran out of breath.

She looked up, gauging her progress. Had the window been so high last night?

Determined, she pressed on. She could have come to call in the daylight hours, but Lucy, the cowardly wench, had nearly fainted at the suggestion that she accompany Nicki to Rosewood. Obviously her cowardice stemmed from Shelby's tirade about the earl's resemblance to the devil. Mina had been equally as stubborn. Nicki thought her sister's reticence quite unbecoming, since it was for her future Nicki intended to bargain.

Several minutes later she reached the top of the trellis. Reaching for the window frame with one hand, Nicki secured her grip. Her arm trembled as she pulled herself level with the glass.

Merciful heavens.

The window was closed.

Nicki pushed at the frame in an attempt to raise the window, but she could not get enough leverage to hold on and use her strength at the same time.

One of the slats snapped beneath her foot and Nicki slipped. Frantic, she hung on with one hand while fighting free of the skirts still draped over her other arm. Her fingers scraped along the wood. She grabbed the sill with her other hand. With all her weight on one foot, the other piece of lattice gave way. Desperate, Nicki dug in with her fingers.

Her heart thundered in her ears. Then she thought she heard the screech of the window sliding open.

“What in the...?”

Nicki’s fingers scraped along the wood toward the edge.

The moment she thought she would surely fall, strong hands grasped her wrists. Swinging freely in the air, Nicki finally summoned the courage to open her eyes and look up. She met the clear gaze of the Earl of Diamond.

Relief washed over her, then a surge of temper surfaced through the fear. “How could you have closed the window so tightly!”

Surprised amusement flickered across the earl’s face as he dragged her toward the opening. “How thoughtless of me, Nicole. May I call you Nicole? We are soon to be married, after all.”

Nicki’s skirts snagged on the broken sill, leaving her hanging half in and half out the window, though blessedly safe.

“I prefer Nicki, thank you.” She lifted her hips and attempted to scoot further inside the room while the earl tugged with admirable energy. “No one calls me Nicole but...”

Nicki’s words drifted off as she realized her boots had slipped slightly. She curled her toes, but to no avail. One boot then the other slid from her feet. It seemed an eternity before a soft crackle and two clunks sounded from below.

“Oh, my. I hope no one was passing by.”

Now the earl laughed with genuine humor. His face lost much of the harsh arrogance. “I believe you are the only person with whom I am acquainted who is inclined to moonlit climbs, my dear.”

After gaining a better hold on her upper arms, he

stepped slightly to the right and pulled. His breathing intensified. Nicki feared her arms would pop out of their sockets, or her skirt would be torn from her body, before Lord Diamond would admit defeat.

Abruptly, she popped free. When her right foot encountered the side of the casement, the force of her kick propelled the earl several feet back into the room at an alarming speed. With Nicki clinging tightly to his neck, he stumbled backward, all the while struggling to maintain his balance. She cried out—a long, drawn-out sound. His footing gave way and they hit the floor with a bone-jarring crunch that abruptly silenced her.

“Thank you, Nicole. That was exceedingly helpful.”

His voice rumbled in his chest, vibrating through her fingertips. With her hands pinned between their chests, she could feel the steady beat of his heart and the flutter of her own. Her entire being burned with embarrassment.

The earl had gallantly cushioned her with his own body.

“I... I pride myself on being helpful.” Nicki lifted her face from his pleasantly cologned neck and, after pushing her hair back from her face, gazed into his eyes. “I am quite resourceful, you see.”

His fleeting smile caused her stomach to clench. “I am quickly discovering that fact.”

Nicki crawled off him and scrambled to her feet so she might straighten her skirts. Her skin tingled and burned and she feared she might never catch her breath. The feel of his touch lingered on her upper arms.

She promptly bumped into a side table, sending crystal bottles clattering against each other.

Fingers trembling, she swiftly straightened the

items into what she hoped resembled their former order, then risked a peek at the earl to see if he had noticed.

He was on his feet. The only sign of agitation was the rigid thrust of his fingers through his tousled dark hair. A stray lock slipped over his forehead, giving him a rakish look. With a determined tilt of her chin, she schooled her features into what she hoped resembled a brave expression.

He wore a white shirt, the ends untucked from the waistband of his black trousers. The ends of his cravat hung loose and she could see dark chest hair at the opening of his shirt. Heat suffused her cheeks once more and she dropped her gaze to his feet—which were bare.

Suddenly self-conscious, Nicki wriggled her toes beneath her skirts, acutely aware she wore only stockings as her boots lay amongst the rose bushes outside. An entirely too intimate situation by half.

The Earl of Diamond strolled to the bedside table where he turned up the oil lamp. After locking his hands behind his back, he trained his gaze on her. How she hated that unruffled manner of his. Not to mention his stern expression. It most certainly boded a lecture.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of *this* visit?”

She took a fortifying breath. “A matter of the utmost urgency.”

He arched a brow. “Where you are concerned, my dear, is there any other kind?”

Nicki chose to ignore his sarcasm and instead scanned the room. She paused, then studiously ignored, blankets turned down invitingly on the enormous canopied bed. She spied a side chair that stood against the wall near the window. Nicki hurried

toward it.

“Please, make yourself comfortable, sir. We have much to discuss.” She perched on the edge of the chair to face the earl.

“Oh? Then I shall take a seat. Pray continue.” He pulled a chair away from the wall near the bedside table and sat in the center of the room facing his unexpected guest.

Nicki met his gaze steadily, which was somewhat difficult as he had the most piercing silver eyes. It seemed an unfair advantage, but for the moment she was pleased to have his audience, and the devil take the pesky details.

“I understand you met with my father this morning on the subject of our forthcoming marriage.”

Lord Diamond tensed, though he tried to appear casual as he linked his hands behind his neck. “That is no secret,” he replied. Nicki’s eyes were drawn to the corded muscles of his forearms. “And the content of that meeting is strictly between your father and myself.”

Her temper flared. She jerked her gaze back to his face. “I beg your pardon, my lord, but that is a deucedly obtuse thing to say!”

“Please, Nicole—if you are going to continue dressing me down, at least call me by my given name. Blake will do.”

She averted her gaze from the opening of his shirt front, which had spread wider due to his pose. “Blake?” Should she use his first name at this stage of their relationship? “Oh—that is a nice name. I, on the other hand, do not like to be called Nicole. Only my stepmother calls me that. At any rate, my lor... Blake, since I am the one marrying you and not my father, I

believe the content of the meeting certainly does involve me. I was somewhat set down when you left the Hall directly after speaking with Papa. I had thought you would be interested in—in relaying information.”

“Ah.” His smile flashed and her heart leapt in response. “I now see I should have been more astute. I assure you I shall not be so remiss in the future. Certainly not if my neglect results in you risking your life in the middle of the night.”

Nicki waved her hand impatiently. “It was my fault entirely for paying too close attention to proprieties. A gown, even a riding habit, is not the logical attire for climbing. Still, you could have left your window slightly cracked, as a gentleman should.”

“Since you will not be risking your neck with such antics in the future, I see no need to belabor the issue.”

“Of course. I will get to the point. Blake, I have come to convince you to change your mind.”

He removed his hands from his neck and crossed his arms over his chest. “Pray tell, Nicole, do you expect me to back out of our engagement because you have a penchant for climbing in my bedroom window?” Amusement trembled in his words. “I find the habit rather endearing, though I will unlock the library doors from now on so you may enter my room in a more conventional manner.”

She nibbled at her lower lip for a moment. “You have missed my point, sir, and I believe you did so on purpose. I wish you to reconsider following through with the contingencies of the marital contract my father worked out with Melton.”

“I will not discuss these matters with you and you will go at once to your father and inform him his tactic

did not work.” Blake drew his dark brow together in icy impatience.

Not even her father blew hot and cold so quickly.

“You have proven you are well acquainted with tactics, sir, more so than my father. He would never condone my coming here like this—or ask that I petition another man on his behalf.”

Blake leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. When he tented his fingers the eyes in the ring on his index finger sparked as though the creature depicted had blinked. “I am unconvinced, but pray continue.”

The image of Mina’s tear-filled blue eyes appeared in Nicki’s mind and lent her fortitude. Her sister deserved a happy future and Nicki meant to see she was not disappointed. “My father told me none of the details of your conversation, but I was able to learn some of the finer points from another. Having done so, I must beg you to reconsider.” Nicki rushed on, sensing he intended to interrupt. “Several years ago, Papa suffered extreme financial losses. He sold off all he could, including our house in London and several properties in Yorkshire. He was still unable to meet his obligations. There was no chance of a Season for me.”

When his scowl deepened, she continued before he could interrupt. “Oh, I never regretted that fact. I am quite content here with my horses. But Mina is not like me. She will be eighteen next month and she has dreamed of going to London. You see, she is a beauty and I am certain she will be a sensation.”

“Quite touching.” The dryness in his voice assured her he had not been moved in the least.

Nicki pressed her hands together in her lap to keep

from twisting them and revealing her anxiety. “Papa cannot go about London if it is known that creditors are hounding him. Mina might be thought a fortune hunter.”

A muscle flinched in his square jaw. “You ask a great deal of a man that you met in the darkness of his bedchamber. If I can have you without stipulations, why should I be willing to sacrifice anything?”

Slowly, Nicki inhaled, then released her breath. She must go forward. “If you do not agree to my requests, I shall simply disappear. It would break my heart, but I would do so rather than marry you.”

The earl shook his head curtly. “Your threat does not frighten me.”

“It should. You left England in disgrace once. Now that you are the Earl of Diamond, you have the opportunity to start afresh. That will be difficult when word spreads of your shabby treatment of the Duke of Billington’s daughter. How will London react when they learn the poor girl was already engaged to be married...”

“Enough! You have made your point.” He no longer bothered to mask his anger.

“I did not wish to resort to such measures, sir, but you arrogantly refused to see reason. After all—is it not your fault that I am no longer engaged to Melton?”

A clock on the bedside table chimed the hour in delicate tones. Midnight. So late? Blake turned toward the sound, throwing his harsh features into startling display. The coldness of his voice reached out to surround her.

“You may not realize it now, but I have saved you from a hellish life chained to a lecherous old man. I

feel I have already been charitable despite the fact that your father once took something from me that can never be replaced. His suffering is mild in comparison to my own.”

Nicki recalled terrifying stories Teddy had told her as a child of men turning into wolves at the stroke of midnight. If she had ever met a man that met the description of a predator, it was the Earl of Diamond. Her gaze studied Blake carefully, but he remained outwardly unchanged. She rubbed her arms to ward off the chill.

“I know nothing of what ill you harbor toward my father, and I will not judge who has suffered the greater harm. Are you willing to accept my terms?”

A long silence met her words. Then the earl chuckled, causing Nicki to start in surprise. “What a manipulative little negotiator you are. I should have met with you this morning. Yes, Nicole, I agree to your terms. I will send my man around first thing in the morning with a letter to your father outlining our discussion tonight, and I will come myself in the afternoon for tea.”

“You will not reveal my part in your decision to change your mind?”

“I will keep your secret, but only because it suits me to do so.”

Nicki leapt from the chair, pressing her hands together over her heart. “I promise you, sir, you will not regret your generosity!”

The earl rose and stepped toward Nicki. Scarcely controlled power surged beneath the polish of his movements. Her breath quickened. All cognitive thought fled when he stood close. His scent surrounded

her, hypnotized her. She had not realized the weakness she had for sandalwood and spice.

“Generosity is it? Perhaps I should demand payment.”

“Payment?” She stared up into his face, mesmerized by the tenor of his voice and the intensity of his gaze. “I have nothing to give.”

One side of his mouth turned up slightly at her words and Blake reached out to cup her chin. Nicki shivered as the heel of his thumb traced her cheekbone.

“You are mistaken, my dear. Your simple gifts are worth a king’s ransom.”

She fought the rising heat that coiled inside her at his words. What was happening to her? “I have given you nothing, my lord.”

His low, bitter laughter shattered the moment and Nicki jerked away from his touch. “Not yet, but I will keep a tally of your debts, Nicole. When the time comes, I shall demand payment in full.”

“You toy with me, sir. I do not like it.”

He grasped her upper arm in one hand. “You had best be going before I come to my senses and exact recompense here and now.”

Nicki forced away the last moments of their encounter and chose instead to bask in the glow of her good fortune. She allowed Blake to drag her toward the door leading to the outer passage and waited as he released her arm only long enough to retrieve a pair of Wellingtons from just inside the entrance.

The light from the wall lanterns along the hall reflected off the highly polished boots as Blake donned first one then the other. He grabbed her arm again to pull her toward the staircase.

Nicki could have danced for joy. Her father's debts would be paid; Mina would have her Season; and she had been the one to bring it about.

She stumbled on the first stair. Reality intruded and she took her eyes off the broad back in front of her to concentrate on maintaining her footing. When they reached the first floor, Blake veered off to the left and pulled Nicki into the library. She tripped in the darkness, but his strong grip saved her from falling.

He paused only long enough to ensure she had recovered her balance, then he drew the heavy drapes away from the French doors. Moonlight touched the veranda and shimmered across the stone path winding through the garden.

Soon heavy blooms would weight the thorny stalks of rose bushes that gave Rosewood its name. Their heady fragrance would permeate the air like a room full of debutantes. But now, they sadly needed pruning. As a child, Nicki had believed the beautiful garden enchanted. It was as though a curse had been placed over Rosewood and only magic could return the allure and grace it had once known.

Blake stopped without warning and Nicki bounced off his formidable back. "Oh! Excuse me, I had no warning you were through dragging me about."

He glanced around at her and Nicki saw the white flash of his teeth in the darkness. "I am far from through with you, my little adventuress. I believe your boots fell in these bushes."

She looked doubtfully at the menacing shrubbery where nasty thorns certainly lurked in the dark leaves, and offered Blake her brightest smile. "Shall I hold the stems back while you search?"

A muscle in his jaw flinched slightly, and Nicki could have sworn his silver eyes sparkled. "I have a better plan. While you are retrieving your footwear, I shall go to the stables and saddle a horse."

Nicki touched his arm, then snatched her hand away quickly. "I am perfectly capable of finding my way home, Blake. I have been coming here since I was a small child."

He reached out to lift her chin. "I realize you are a frighteningly resourceful female, but I am your intended. This is as good a time as any for you to realize that as my wife, you will not risk your neck unless I am present."

Nicki frowned. He had sounded just like her father. "That is arrogant and self-serving. I shall never have any fun at all, especially if I must await your company."

Blake laughed and withdrew his hand from beneath her chin. "I am an experienced guide in adventurous matters, my dear. I think you will find I can take you on wondrous expeditions."

"Oh dear!"

"I did not mean to shock you, Nicole."

She shook her head. "Shock me? Oh, no, your proposal sounds most intriguing. I have always enjoyed a rousing adventure. No, I was merely recalling your plan to come for tea tomorrow. I will not be home from my fishing expedition until after one o'clock. I hope that does not wreak havoc with your schedule."

"Fishing expedition?"

She grinned. "My brother's blood price for secrecy. I find bribery forestalls scenes such as we experienced last night."

"I have not been angling since I left England.

Perhaps I shall join you. When will you be going?"

The thought of spending more time with him, even with Shelby present, sent alarm shooting through Nicki. "We will leave at nine o'clock in the morning. It's dreadfully cold in the morning."

He shrugged. "I think I can survive."

"And wet. It's sure to rain."

"I shall be certain to take all necessary precautions."

Nicki bit her lip, thinking furiously. "Shelby has only one pole..."

"I have a pole, I have a cloak to protect me from the rain, and I am generally out of bed long before nine o'clock. I shall come for you in the morning."

Unable to argue further without being rude, she sighed. "Shelby shall adore your company, but are you certain?"

"Nine it is. Now, I distinctly recall seeing one boot land in that direction." He motioned toward the largest of the rose bushes, then strode away into the darkness.

Somehow, the garden seemed more sinister without his presence at her side.

She shook off the sensation. As she carefully separated branches in search of her riding boots, she wondered if perhaps she had been too generous in her bargaining. Mina awaited Nicki's return to hear the results of the meeting with the earl this evening. She would be ecstatic when Nicki told her she would have her Season.

It seemed everyone would be getting something from this union. Everyone, that is, except her.



Blake saddled Banbury quickly and grabbed one of the worn cloaks hanging on a peg near the stable door. He found Nicole waiting for him near the front porch and drew his horse to a halt beside her.

“You came to Rosewood on foot?”

In the moonlight, her face appeared as pale and ethereal as that of an angel. “I did.”

“Then you shall ride with me back to Langley Hall.”

The tightening of her lovely mouth dispelled any resemblance to heavenly creatures. “I believe I shall walk alongside your horse, thank you just the same.”

With a slight pressure of one knee, Blake urged Banbury to sidestep closer to Nicole. “The hour grows late. If you are afraid, let me assure you I shall comport myself with the utmost restraint.”

“I am not afraid!” Nicole lifted her chin. “I merely felt some concern for the horse.”

Blake laughed. “This great beast? He will scarcely notice the addition of a person as light as thistledown. Come. Give me your hand.”

“Very well, but do not say I did not warn you.”

Blake tossed the frayed edges of cloak aside, bent down and grabbed Nicole’s wrist. He then half lifted, half tossed her onto the horse so that she sat sidewise in front of him with her fanny nestled between his legs. Nicole, after flashing him an alarmed glance, sat ramrod straight and clenched her hands beneath the folds of her skirt.

He wondered at her sudden shyness. “Lean into me.”

Ignoring his suggestion, she continued to balance herself over the neck of the horse until Blake took the reins, thus encasing her within his arms.

“Lean against me. I will not allow you to fall, Nicole.”

Hesitant, she did as he suggested. Her head came to just beneath his chin and Blake could not resist breathing deeply of the fresh rose scent of her hair.

Certain now that Nicole rested securely before him, Blake pressed his heels into Banbury’s sides and the horse set off.

Blake listened to the steady clop of shod hooves striking the ground and of the night creatures with their shrill and haunting calls. As a child, Blake had been frightened of the dark. As an adult, he welcomed its discretion.

Nicole stubbornly faced the road ahead, as though he would go away if she ignored him long enough. A chill in the air made tiny puffs of mist before their mouths.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

She stiffened. “A little.”

“Share my cloak.” Without awaiting permission, Blake arranged the wool fabric over her shoulders. “You will have to hold on to the edges. I fear I haven’t enough hands.”

She turned her back more squarely against his chest and took the ends of the cloak. Their fingers brushed and Blake heard a quick intake of breath.

“Thank you,” she whispered as she maneuvered the cloth so she could keep her head outside the garment.

Blake forced his attention to the road ahead, though such a feat took every ounce of will power he possessed. Nicole fit against his heart as though she had been made especially to rest there. He cleared his throat.

“Are you warm enough now?”

She nodded. A tendril of her hair brushed his nose and got it to itching.

“Why did you come out into the night without a cloak?” He had to take the reins in one hand and reach up to scratch.

“This habit is of a heavy fabric and I knew the walk would get my blood flowing to keep me comfortable.”

Blake’s blood flowed as well, but from the proximity of one certain young lady, not from any amount of exercise. And he was decidedly uncomfortable.

“Have you no fear of bandits or wild creatures of the night with an appetite for tender morsels such as yourself?”

She sat up slightly in order to glance around. “I think you are the most dangerous creature in this vicinity, my lord, and I seem to have fallen directly into your clutches.”

“Me?” He chuckled. “I am harmless.”

Her eyes glowed large and dark in her pale face. “Would Teddy agree with such an observation?”

The mention of Bartholomew set Blake’s teeth on edge, like biting down on ice-cold metal. “He got as he deserved. That is all I intend to say on the matter.”

In the undulating moonlight, Blake could see Nicole nibble at her lower lip. “Could you not have taken something else from him? Why Rosewood?”

If she knew all he had taken from Teddy, she would leap off the horse and run screaming into the woods. But it was nothing in comparison to all Teddy had stolen from him. “He had nothing to offer—nothing but a vague promise of gaining the inheritance of a young girl. I chose not to wait for him to victimize an heiress.”

She scrutinized him, as though hoping to see past his cool veneer and cryptic remarks. Finally, she sighed. “You must be mistaken. Teddy would never—”

Purposefully, Blake pressed his heels into Banbury’s sides and the horse surged forward, tossing Nicole against Blake’s chest and silencing her defense of Bartholomew. “I had best get you home before I have your father once again scouring the neighborhood in his nightclothes armed with a weapon.”

Nicole curled her fingers into the fabric of his cloak to better secure her balance. “You have a disagreeable habit of interrupting me, my lord.”

“Oh? I believe you said I was the only predator about these parts. Let me assure you, Nicole, that you are well protected in my hands.”

She turned her face away, but not before Blake saw the shadow of uncertainty flicker across her features. “You have a strange notion of protection.”

“Not really.”

One day Nicole might understand that his actions had saved her from a fortune hunter, that she was the heiress Teddy had intended to fleece. But the time had not yet come for that revelation. She would not believe him if he spoke now.

“It is your desire that I trust you to protect me when you have not bothered to hide your dislike of my father?”

He shrugged. “You are not your father.”

No, Blake did not intend to inflict any hardship on Nicole.

Her slender body stiffened in his arms. “That is where you are wrong, my lord. If it is in my power to keep any of my family from harm—I will do so.”

“Beware.” He leaned close to whisper the words in her ear. “You traverse paths best avoided, my lovely Nicole.”

Once again she twisted in his arms to stare into his face. So lovely. So determined. “You ask too much. Surely you have realized by now that I do not frighten easily.”

Moments passed before Blake realized he gripped the reins tightly. Then Banbury broke through the line of stately trees and the stone facade of Langley Hall loomed grey and forbidding before them.

A strange tightness grabbed at Blake’s chest. “There is a first time for everything, my dear.”



Nicki watched Blake ride into the darkness, his cloak billowing behind him. A large, forbidding specter. Then the night swallowed him, or he became a part of it—Nicki could not be certain which. She was shivering when she opened the front door and slipped inside.

A single lamp burned low on a nearby table and aided Nicki in her journey up the stairs. Another wall lantern flickered, guiding her down the hall to her bedchamber.

As she softly closed the door, she heard a rustle and a squeal and turned just as Mina leapt from the bed and rushed to meet her.

“I’ve been beside myself, Nicki Langley! Where have you been all this time?”

Nicki shook the skirts of her habit, sending leaves and twigs fluttering to the rose carpet. “I hid in the woods and watched the earl’s window until I saw a light.”

Anxiously, Mina searched Nicki's face. "Did he agree to your proposal?"

"My argument was simply irrefutable. He could not resist me."

"Do you mean it?" Mina wrapped Nicki in a tight embrace. "Oh, Nicki! I'm to have a Season?"

Surrounded by the freshness of lavender and her sister's joy, Nicki admitted the risks she had taken this night had been worth each nerve-harrowing moment. "He agreed to pay Papa's debts, rent a townhouse, and finance your Season."

Mina gave one last squeeze before releasing her. "You are the best sister! I will never forget what you have sacrificed for Papa and for me. I know you always believed you would marry for love."

"I want your happiness, Mina, and that means going to London. I told the earl you would take Society by storm. You must not let me down."

Nicki let Mina pull her onto the high, canopied bed. She understood her younger sister's excitement and wished she could share in her pleasure. Tucking her legs beneath her, Nicki watched as her sister perched on her knees, then grabbed up a pillow and squeezed it to her nightrail-clad breast.

"Tell me everything. What did he say? Was he difficult?"

"Most certainly he was difficult. He is like no one I have ever met in my life." Nicki plucked at a spot of mud on her skirts. "Yet... somehow, I sense his hardness is a facade. What do you suppose could have occurred between he and Papa to cause such bitterness?"

"I wish I knew. Papa and Angelica did not mention the reason—as though it were by an agreement of

silence between them.”

Nicki shook her head in amazement. “You were eavesdropping again. Goodness, Mina, one day you will be caught and Papa’s image of your innate goodness will be hopelessly tarnished.”

“No one tells us the interesting tidbits. It is my responsibility to keep us apprised.”

“And you are quite good at it. Between your spying and Shelby’s blackmail, I feel I am sadly lacking in criminal skills.”

“Nonsense,” Mina laughed. “No one can climb as well as you.”

Nicki grimaced. “So well that I climbed right into the trap set by the Earl of Diamond.”

“Well... yes. But Lord Diamond is much younger than Melton. That’s encouraging,” her sister offered with forced optimism.

“Is it? Or shall I simply have to wait much longer for him to die and leave me to spend his fortune in glorious freedom?”

After she abandoned the sadly creased pillow to her lap where it rolled aside and dropped to the floor, Mina twisted a dark curl around one finger and set to examining the strands intently. “You might enjoy marriage to a young, healthy man.”

The suggestion elicited a gasp of outrage. “Enjoy marriage? Bah! He is already issuing demands. I shall be no more than a prisoner. Unlike our Papa, Blake Dylan is not the sort to be charmed and distracted. I fear I shall be hopelessly under his thumb.”

“Good Heavens, dearest, you make it sound like a death sentence.”

“Death is too easy. Quick, painless.” Nicki took

one of the undamaged pillows and set it in her lap so she could smooth the pale blue satin. “Marriage holds women captive—torturing them. Do you think Papa tells his buyers that his spinster daughter assists him in the research for breeding prime horseflesh? What do you think the earl will say when I ask to start up my own stables? He may not say anything. From what I have seen of him thus far, he will simply lock me in the attic with the bones of his other seven wives. Admit I am right, Mina, if a subject has nothing to do with housekeeping or babes, we are not to be consulted.”

Mina tossed the curl she had been examining over her shoulder and gave Nicki a stern look. “I truly hope you did not start this morbid and self-pitying tirade in front of the earl. Papa is well used to you—but I should think a new husband needs time to acquaint himself with your novel ideas. A gradual exposure over time is definitely your best course of action. I know you have little patience, but you should try some restraint in this instance.”

She knew the wisdom of her younger sister’s advice. Mina’s instincts were always on the mark. Still, the two of them were different, and Nicki had ever found Mina’s instruction difficult to follow. Mina calmly assessed a situation, then arrived at a logical solution. Nicki preferred a snap decision and immediate follow through. The only problem with that procedure was that small imperfections had a way of cropping up, landing her in additional trouble. Her father called it being too highly strung and vowed he had worked many years at overcoming his own careless tendencies. Recalling the rather wild picture he presented in the Earl of Diamond’s bedchamber the previous night,

Nicki wondered at the success of his efforts.

“Nicki! I do wish you would stop drifting. I was saying how pleased Angelica will be to return to London. These years away have been quite miserable for her.”

At the mention of her stepmother, tension raced through Nicki’s entire body. “I have done this for you and Papa. If I could have added one more stipulation it would have been that Angelica be excluded from your Season.”

Mina rolled her eyes heavenward. “Don’t be rid...”

A soft knock interrupted Mina. “Nicole?”

Nicki stared at Mina in horror, then down at her riding habit. Heart pounding a mile a minute, she scrambled off the bed and with Mina’s help untucked the bedclothes. She had scarcely slipped beneath the covers when the door opened and Angelica stepped into the room.

First, she scrutinized Mina sitting straight-backed on the bed, then her emerald gaze swept to Nicki who had drawn the covers up to her chin. The pillow Nicki had held plopped to the floor to join its counterpart.

“Girls? It is so late. What are you about?” Calm, unperturbed, Angelica’s tone never changed, no matter the situation.

“Angelica, we were just...” Nicki floundered for a word.

“Talking,” Mina piped in with particular brilliance.

“Yes, talking. How late is it, by the bye?”

Elegant as always, Angelica wore a hunter green dressing gown of shimmering satin and matching slippers. She crossed her arms over her chest and glanced about the room.

“Nearly one o’clock, I should think. I thought I heard a noise and came to investigate. Did you hear a horse outside, by chance?”

“A horse?” Nicki’s heart gave an uncomfortable jolt. “Heavens, no. Do you suppose one of the thoroughbreds got out of the stables?”

Angelica held on to her long auburn braid and bent to pick up a leaf from the carpet. “I should think that highly unlikely, unless someone took one out.”

Staring at the leaf as though it was an adder, Nicki licked her lips and drew the coverlet closer about her chin. “At this time of night. I should think not. Have you heard anything, Mina?”

Silence stretched long and Nicki looked at her sister. “Have you, Mina?” she prompted.

“No!”

Nodding, Angelica advanced further into the room. “Are you chilled, Nicole?”

After coming in from out of doors and still wearing her heavyweight habit, Nicki was quite the opposite. “I was, but now I am quite cozy, thank you.”

“Your cheeks are flushed. Are you coming down with a fever?”

Nicki longed to duck beneath the bedclothes as Angelica reached out to brush her soft, cool hands against Nicki’s forehead. “I am fine, Angelica, really. You need not bedevil me.”

A shaky laugh broke the silence and Mina gained her voice. “Really, Nicki, you needn’t be so short.”

Angelica straightened and smoothed her hands along the hips of her dressing gown. “Actually, your skin is quite cool. Almost as if you had been out of doors.”

After the meeting with Blake Dylan, Nicki had no patience with this cat and mouse nonsense. She opened her mouth to say as much when Mina interrupted.

“The window was open and I shut it because Nicki was cold.”

Meeting Angelica’s steady, green-eyed gaze, Nicki thought she saw a flicker of despair. But that could not be. “It is time you were abed, Mina. The earl may come calling tomorrow; we wouldn’t want Nicole yawning and falling asleep in her tea.”

Mina laughed, or rather gave a nervous twitter, as she climbed over Nicki to slip off the bed. “Good night, sister.”

“Good night,” Nicki responded, but Mina had already dashed from the room.

Angelica sighed and bent down to retrieve the pillows from the floor. Her gaze met Nicki’s as she leaned over her and placed the pillows on the other side of the bed. “You do realize it would be completely foolhardy to embark on any more late night escapades, Nicole.”

Clenching the covers, Nicki nodded.

“Sleep well.” With one last long look, Angelica glided across the room, then slipped quietly into the hall. As the door closed behind her stepmother, Nicki curled on to her side, staring at the moonlight shining through her window in tremulous prisms of light and shadow.

Foolhardy, perhaps, but necessary. Somehow she had to make the best of an impossible situation. That is, until she arrived at a solution for extricating herself.

If only Teddy would come back. She needed him more now than ever before, but the pale-eyed Earl of

Diamond had claimed Rosewood. It seemed a bleak prospect that Teddy would return to England now that all ties were severed.

All ties save one.

Nicki slipped from beneath the covers, then hurriedly unbuttoned her habit. Catching the heel of one boot with the toe of the other, she tugged off first one, then the other. She could no more extinguish her dreams than she could stop breathing. From the moment she had pressed her hand into Theodore Bartholomew's at the age of four, her fate had been sealed. Staring into his boyish face, meeting his twinkling amber eyes, Nicki wanted never to be separated from him.

In her stocking feet, she padded across the carpet to her wardrobe and opened the door. She grabbed out a nightgown, then returned to toss it upon the bed while she removed her habit.

Teddy had always felt the same connection and he would sense her need and return, just as the knights of old appeared at the opportune moment to rescue their lady loves. Teddy was her knight in shining armor, no matter what Mina believed.

Nicki dropped the white nightgown over her head, then fastened the many tiny buttons up the front. She would go along with this marriage for now. Tomorrow, she and Shelby would suffer the earl's company on their fishing trip.

After dousing the lamp at the bedside table, Nicki swiped the leaves from the sheets and climbed into bed. For a long while, she stared into the darkness.

She would not give up on Teddy. She could not. To do so would break her heart.

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From the moment I first saw *Gone With The Wind*, I knew I wanted to write historical romance. Not just write it, but do it so well that I could transport readers into another world for a time, sweep them up in romance and adventure, and leave them sighing when they complete that last sentence. I look for that spark between the hero and heroine in books I read and those I write—the battle of wills between two people who belong together, but face challenges within and beyond their control to reach their happy ending. That’s what I love about romance.

I work full time as a legal assistant for a law firm in Oregon; am married, and have a wonderful son. My home overlooks a city on one side and mountains on the other with an abundance of wildlife tromping past our windows regularly, which upsets to no end the tame animal life in our household.

Several years ago, my husband approached an author at a local bookstore signing and came out with her business card and an invitation to call her. I was mortified that he would do such a thing. She turned out to be very helpful and directed me to the Romance Writers of America organization where I could pursue my dream of being an author and develop my craft. I followed her advice and the effort has paid off.

I am so thankful to my husband for giving me that initial push, to that author for her patience and wisdom that put me on the right path, and to my supportive family, mother, grandmother, sisters, and son who never doubted that his mom would some day be “famous.”

I love to hear from readers at cbrock@ramcell.net.



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