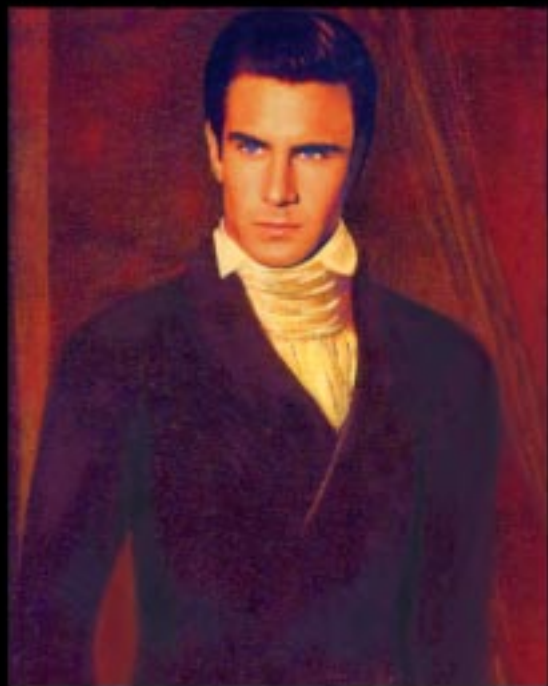


*Family
Portrait*



Sharon Sobel

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For Ken.

My first date, who still
knows how to show a girl
a good time.



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Chapter 1



Whenever he showed his face in London, the scores were once again tallied against him.

David Ashworth, Lord Stratfield, demonstrated patience for many things, but imprisonment in a small coach smelling of wet wool blankets was not one of them. He used the sleeve of his jacket to wipe the dampness from the windowpane and squinted out onto the dreary scene.

A gust of cold, rain-drenched wind tunneled up the broad entry of St. Paul's Cathedral, lifting the black and lavender crepe skirts of the ladies and tossing off the hats and solemn dignity of several of the gentlemen. Carriage after carriage approached those hallowed steps, and took its place in the long line formed behind the hearse, it was easy to imagine how the fashionable occupants hesitated, and then summoned all their courage, before daring to risk the havoc of the storm.

"Damn!" He touched the brass door latch, ready to make a quick escape and thereby avoid the

interminable line of dark carriages queued before his own. The gentle curve of the street allowed him a generous view of the broad entrance to St. Paul's and a careful scrutiny revealed all he needed to know. The one person whom he must avoid already enjoyed the privilege of center stage.

Perhaps "enjoyed" was too strong a word, for the wind wrapped Lady Constance Bretton's wet skirts about her cadaverous legs and tore her thin gray hair from the haven of her hooded cape. And yet, she did not seem mindful of this, nor of the long line of mourners behind her who might be more anxious than she to procure a good seat at the funeral of the great artist Benjamin West.

Lady Constance's whole body seemed to be engaged in an animated discussion with three other ladies, who were as much abused by the disagreeable weather as she. One of them stood with her back to Lord Stratfield. He noticed her most particularly. She stood nearly as tall as a man, but Nature graced her with the well-turned ankles characteristic of a particularly fine female form.

"What is it, David? What is it you see?" His cousin Lady Sophia Ambrose inquired. "Not another accident involving some poor street urchin! And at nothing less than a funeral! I could only—"

Lord Stratfield turned reluctantly from the window which had begun to fog.

"Well? What is it?" Lady Ambrose repeated.

“What might have compelled you to dash out of turn and into this storm? My company perhaps? I remember when I—”

“No, dear Cousin. Never would I willingly escape your company, your good humor and your excellent conversation. But for my mother and young Joshua, is there anyone I love better than you?”

Stratfield knew his relation's good humor allowed her to think kindly about his ironic cut to her conversation which could prove, at best, interminable. He did genuinely love Sophia. Slowly he removed his incriminating hand from the door latch—whatever the reasons for his impatience, the desire to escape from his gossiping cousin was not one of them. Who else remained so steadfast, so supportive, when all of London society abandoned his family and could speak no good of them?

“Hmm.” Lady Ambrose turned to glance out her own window, but Stratfield saw in it the reflection of the smile she attempted to hide from him. “When you earnestly proclaim you can only number among your loves your own mother, a young child, and a matronly cousin who has seen far too much of the world, I believe it can be said there is a serious lack in your otherwise healthy life. Are there no shepherdesses wandering through the hills at Ambleside? No enchanted maidens locked within the walls of a castle?”

She turned back to face him, and his rather obvious attempt to shut her out of his thoughts. “Too bad Lady Lydia escaped you... and to marry a merchant!”

Stratfield did not share her disappointment, or her inclination to be censorious. Society already judged against him in the affair, and Lady Ambrose loyally ruled against Lydia. It was old business—one for which he paid with the coinage of youthful confidence. The less said on the subject, the better.

The carriage lurched forward, and Stratfield looked out to see the quartet of women who previously blocked the path of the stream of mourners who were beginning their advance on the cathedral. The tall one moved slightly away from her companions and stood with her face raised into the rain. Her gray hood slipped off to reveal hair so dark the droplets upon it shone like jet.

“Well?” demanded Lady Ambrose. She edged along the seat so she could peer upon the same and more interesting view. “Who catches your attention?”

She pressed her nose against the pane and, in doing so, looked as young and inquisitive as little Joshua, who remained at White Ash with David’s mother, Lady Stratfield. He realized how much he missed them both, and resolved to finish his business in London as soon as possible.

“No one of note, dear Cousin. I only find it unfortunate and ironic that of all the people in this

crush, we shall be forced to acknowledge the harpy at the gates of hell.”

“Not Lydia? Come all the way from Antwerp and the shop she undoubtedly keeps with her husband?”

“Now you are being hard on poor Lydia. I understand she lives like a queen and provided her wealthy husband with several heirs to the kingdom.” Stratfield remembered a time when he wanted to be the father of those as-yet-unborn children, though scarcely past being a child himself.

“No one you say?” Lady Ambrose knew him too well. She squinted her myopic eyes, an affliction known only to her closest relatives and, of course, her servants.

Stratfield diverted her attention. “It looks like Lady Constance herself is waiting to usher us into Mr. West’s funeral. Do you not think she looks rather self-important up there on the steps, as if she is the principal mourner? Ah well, when she sees me, she may believe she is. And to think she might have been my mother-in-law...” Stratfield’s words faded.



Lord Stratfield was wrong. Not about the identity of the harpy, whose face appeared in too many bad dreams, but about the point at which they were to intersect.

By the time the grand carriage with the Stratfield crest finally pulled up to the carpeted granite steps, the many officials called upon to manage the huge international crowd at the funeral of so famous a man had already ushered all those who tarried outside through the portals of the great cathedral. Lady Sophia Ambrose looked disappointed that her own entrance would therefore receive no particular note; but one quick look from Stratfield convinced her a frivolous protest on her part would not be well-received.

For once, her intuition proved absolutely correct.

Stratfield, at thirty, had tempered much of the youthful bravado guilty of getting him into some trouble in the past. He wanted nothing more than to avoid a confrontation. Any conversation with Lady Constance might turn to the subject of Lydia, their former relationship, and finally to young Master Joshua Ashworth and the circumstances of his birth.

Stratfield felt quite ready to weather the storm and the gossip, but there could be no good reason for rain to fall upon an innocent child.

He stood patiently at the curb while Sophia extricated herself from the carriage, then swept his cousin as efficiently as possible up through the line of mourners and into St. Paul's.

The hall glowed brilliantly with the light of a thousand candles and, as if this did not sufficiently distract from a somber mood, the noise echoing

from the crowd and bouncing off the massive vaulted ceilings rivaled the cacophony of the gaming rooms at Almack's.

Stratfield, at the vantage point of his considerable height, looked thoughtfully around the great anteroom while plotting the best course for their entrance into the sanctuary. Several old friends raised hands in greeting, and he recognized the coldly speculative stare on the faces of others. To all he offered just the briefest nod. Sophia chattered happily about nothing at all.

Suddenly he became aware of someone watching him most particularly, though aloof from the animated crowd. Feeling uncomfortably warm, he reached up with his free hand to loosen his cravat as he uneasily scanned the crowd.

He saw her almost at once, though she stood so still she might have been mistaken for one of the statues of the dead on the columns of the cathedral. He also saw, even at a distance, features rivaling the elegance of the stone-carvers' models. Her nose might have been classically chiseled and her lips sculpted full and slightly apart. Large bright eyes, gray or possibly green, boldly observed and measured him. And the hair—all that dark, shining wayward hair! Stratfield had not guessed at her unconventional beauty when he studied her back and form from the foggy window of his carriage, but somehow it did not surprise him now.

His reaction was something else altogether. He

tried to cough away the lump in his throat.

“Are you not well? Can it be our London air? You are not used to it, David. And this dreadful rain! You might have caught a cold. And at a funeral, no less. That is very bad luck, you know. Why, just last week I heard about Lord John—”

“No, Cousin Sophia, fear not. I am not about to succumb to funeral vapors. More like the candle smoke. Surely Mr. West does not need all this light to see the way to heaven.”

“How would you know, you clever boy? Do we ever really know what goes on in people’s lives?”

Stratfield thought, somewhat ungenerously, if anyone did know, it would be Sophia. But he dismissed the thought, and looked again towards the dark-haired woman. She still studied him, making him wonder if she somehow knew what went on in his life.

“Of course not, Sophia. Do I not know that fact better than most?”

Lady Ambrose responded by drawing in her breath, so loudly that several people broke off their conversation. Realizing her gaffe, she looked quickly for an excuse for her dramatic response.

“Why, look who is there! It is Margaret Delius and her girls! They are not hers, of course. You know they could not be sisters by the very look of them. They are the daughters of her two brothers, the two most irresponsible idiots that ever lived. The brothers, not the girls. Well, you know as much

about such things as I—”

“That men are idiots? What are you suggesting, my dear?”

Lady Ambrose giggled, and so out of place was the sound as it echoed, that she attracted an audience for the second time in a few moments.

“You are absurd! No, but you may be aware that the tall one, the one with all that impossible hair, is the daughter of someone you knew quite well. Did you ever meet? No? Well, come along. It is Lord Peter Wainwoode’s girl. His only child with the late Lady Wainwoode.”



Lady Amelie Wainwoode flushed and raised a shaky hand to her damp hair. How stupid she felt! To think she could be so bold as to stare at a man and not expect to pay some consequence! All she wanted to do was to somehow intimidate him. His cursed family had managed to ruin her life and all her expectations! And now here he was, dragged along by sweet Lady Ambrose, who could not possibly know the beast she pulled in tow.

Of course, he did not look very beastly. Not really. As he came closer, Amelie felt surprised to see he stood even taller than he first appeared, taller than herself. This was a rare privilege for someone of her height, who always looked men eye-to-eye and rarely danced in a gentleman’s

shadow. Not that she had any intention of dancing with him, ever.

But something about his appearance captivated her. If they chanced to come together without any of the burden of their family histories, her feelings might be very different and more generous.

His hair shone as dark as hers and weathered the elements with equal abandon. In his case, however, his windblown locks created a crown of curls on his forehead and behind his ears, completely erasing the line etched by his top hat. This he held in fingers long and strong and possessing none of delicacy typical among men of the *ton*.

The line of his mouth, brushstroke straight, made him look quite solemn, but telltale creases revealed a pattern of laughter to be the norm. Indeed, Amelie could imagine his whole face transformed. His enlarged pupils reflected the black capes and jackets of the company of mourners and made his eyes quite dark. These first impressions were hastily noted, but as he and Lady Ambrose came close, she recognized his most defining feature—his nose had once been broken and remained set in an uneven line. How engaging it would be to paint such a landscape!

“Margaret! Margaret Delius! Imagine finding you here!” Lady Ambrose called cheerfully, as she stopped in her tracks. The tall man nearly ran into her, but then paused, bowing to hear something

the lady whispered in his ear. He nodded, answered her, then looked up to smile directly at Lady Constance.

But Aunt Delius demanded the attention of the newcomers.

“Dear Sophia! How good to see you! But why surprised to see us? Surely you knew Ben West as a member of my late brother’s coterie? Of course we came to show respect. My nieces, particularly Lady Amelie, knew him well.” Margaret Delius smiled at the large man, encouraging an introduction.

Amelie glanced at her cousin Elizabeth and thought her smile encouraged even greater familiarity. Traitors! Did they not already know the identity of this man?

“Of course,” murmured Lady Ambrose. “Forgive me. Allow me to present my cousin, Lord Stratfield, of White Ash, in Ambleside. You would remember his mother, Lady Stratfield, the beauty of her season.”

The introduction opened a raw wound for Amelia. She reflected on how Lady Stratfield had managed to capitalize on her beauty for a good many years.

“Indeed, I remember her well,” said Aunt Delius agreeably, perhaps indifferent to what Lady Stratfield had cost them. “And here are my nieces: Lady Amelie Wainwoode, Peterson’s daughter, and Miss Elizabeth Bedford, the daughter

of my younger brother who now lives in the Canadian provinces. And Lady Constance—” her voice trailed off as Constance slipped out of their circle and disappeared into the crowd. Amelie thought about following, but Aunt Delius caught her and Elizabeth by the elbows and said, “Miss Bedford is reputed to be the beauty of this season.”

Lord Stratfield, for whom this *bon mot* was issued, bowed gallantly in the tight arena.

“It is a pleasure to meet the three of you, for I am almost a stranger to your city. But perhaps my cousin does not wonder why you have come, but, rather, why you dare to brave the elements.”

Elizabeth smiled sweetly and blinked up at him. “I wondered at it myself, my lord. In fact, I told Aunt Delius I could scarcely imagine a funeral would be worth the effort, unless it were my own.”

Stratfield smiled politely, and Amelie realized she should like nothing better than to hear his voice again.

“I wonder at your amazement, my lord,” she spoke up. “Benjamin West was a very great artist, though an American. He may have learned his coloring from a Cherokee Indian, but he worked in the same Roman studio as Sir Joshua Reynolds,” Amelie hesitated, aware of her aunt’s attempts to signal her into silence. “And he was a member of the Royal Academy, an honor denied even our own George Romney.”

Stratfield rubbed his chin, looking as if this

fact were incomprehensible. Amelie could not imagine why it should matter to him at all.

“It is an elusive honor denied to many men,” he said finally.

“And women,” Amelie shot back, without thinking.

Aunt Delius gasped, and then covered herself with a delicate cough. Elizabeth extricated herself from her aunt’s hold.

“Will you be in town for long, my lord?” Elizabeth asked. “There is a very busy social calendar upon which I am certain you may intrude.”

“Thank you for thinking of it,” he answered politely, though his gaze strayed back to Amelie. A drop of water fell from his hair and ran down his cheek. “But I have come just for Mr. West’s funeral and to settle several affairs of business.”

“How exciting for you!” Elizabeth cried, though Amelie could not imagine her cousin would truly have found it so.

“Yes, I believe it will be,” he said and looked across at Amelie.

She wanted to hear that deep, North Country voice, though not in a tone and manner oddly threatening to her. She wondered what business brought him to town. “And did you know Mr. West personally?” he asked her.

“Indeed we did!” Aunt Delius broke in.

“He was my friend,” said Amelie, in a voice cracking as it emphasized the *my*. “I could have

been no more than five years old when he came to my father's studio while we were summering in Penzance. The two men exercised a great deal of patience when they allowed a small child to dabble with their watercolors and splatter paint across very large canvases. Those were among the happiest days of my life."

"Her mother was still alive, poor dear," said Aunt Delius, as though that explained everything. "She died less than a year later, never letting on about her illness."

"I did not realize Penzance such a fashionable resort," Stratfield said. An usher came behind him, looking very annoyed, and reminded them Mr. West waited within. Stratfield responded with a nod, and gave a broad sweeping gesture to indicate the ladies should precede him into the sanctuary.

"Penzance was far from fashionable," said Amelie as she passed him. "There were few there but artists and their families. And the pirates, of course. My father thought it paradise."

"A pity he did not remain there," said Stratfield angrily into her ear. Amelie turned to face him, but was momentarily disarmed by eyes which, when freed from the dark reflection of the mourners, flashed the most extraordinary shade of violet.



Only two days after the funeral of Benjamin

West the Hamilton Gallery, on King Street, opened its doors to the *ton* so they might admire and purchase the beautiful canvases of the elusive Mr. Arthur Warrens. His broad brushstrokes and brilliant use of light and dark chiaroscuro were a hallmark of his familiar cityscapes. His works already enjoyed widespread recognition, yet no one had met the artist.

Thus it was rather fortunate that the paintings spoke for themselves—the mysterious artist would or could not. If Warrens moved among the fashionable patrons of the art world, or among the speculative buyers, or mingled among the merely appreciative, he remained silent and unknown.

As a result, curiosity as much as admiration brought a large crowd to the Hamilton Gallery on this day. Everyone knew a particular fame would go to the first member of society who could identify the actual figure of Arthur Warrens.

No one knew who he was, or from whence he came, or for whom he worked. The director of the gallery insisted all arrangements had been accomplished by messenger, and the carriers who delivered the huge canvases were either ignorant or sworn to secrecy. Gossip among the *ton* speculated the mysterious Warrens might well be a member of the Royal Family, or one of the more notorious rakes of their own fashionable set. Whatever the case, when a new collection of Warren paintings appeared, expectations ran high that the event

might be the occasion for the man to finally reveal himself.

Lady Amelie Wainwoode moved quietly and unescorted through the gallery crowd. She was not eager to join any particular group. Aunt Delius frowned on her attendance and pointed to the damage her reputation might suffer; but Amelie needed some diversion. The sadness she felt from the death of an old friend mingled with her discomfort from meeting with Lord Stratfield at West's funeral. She also confessed to some curiosity towards the reception of the paintings.

As she passed through a large archway into the next room, several ladies of fashion stood laughing with two gentlemen. Admiration of the paintings was obviously the farthest thing from their minds. One of them turned, and Amelie recognized Lady Augusta Swallow. The woman had boasted at a recent dinner party that Arthur Warrens had agreed to begin a series of portraiture, beginning with her own. If he indeed promised such a thing, one would have hoped he could have found a more pleasing prospect to inaugurate his new genre.

Lady Swallow looked up and across the room. Her dark eyes squinted at Amelie, who stood blocking out the bright light. Not wishing to be recognized, Amelie moved quickly, to study the painting on the wall to her right.

The canvas offered a view of a row of town-

houses, looking very much like the street on which she lived with her aunt and cousin. Yet it offered a different perspective, and in a light foreign to any of the fashionable residents of that elegant neighborhood. The bright golden sunlight, casting long shadows across the street, announced the dawn, and the start of a workday for those who labored belowstairs and on the streets. Most ladies of quality never saw such a sight, nor would they have any interest in rising before noon.

Amelie saw more than just a quiet vista. The painting offered a delicate commentary on the ladies of her class—an admonishment of the frivolous manner by which they spent the hours of their days. She realized with embarrassed surprise that the resigned sigh she heard must have come from herself.

“I can see you rather like it,” Stratfield’s unexpected voice from behind her shoulder startled her. Amelie might have tripped if he had not caught her securely by the elbow.

She wrested her arm away, but did not turn around. She would not greet him in a manner befitting a lady until she knew his reasons, his motives for seeking her company. She felt his gaze upon her back and suddenly wished her hair more elegantly styled. That is, her heart wished it, even as reason told her it did not matter. A lifetime of familiar insecurities made her feel unworthy of admiration and appreciation. Well-practiced,

Amelie dealt with such deep-rooted feelings with some degree of equanimity, and small slights or barbs could not be made to matter.

Until now.

The deep voice, with its slight slurring of the “L,” and small hesitations between syllables, was so close Amelie could feel the warmth of Lord Stratfield’s breath caressing her ear.

“Arthur Warrens certainly masters his palette, does he not? His canvases are so light and airy one might almost call them delicate. It is a remarkable touch for a gentleman.” His voice held almost a challenge.

“You speak as if you know the man,” Amelie replied softly, still looking at Warrens’ street scene. A less courageous part of her wished to dash into the canvas and escape to its sunlit depths. But her curiosity compelled her to remain in Stratfield’s company; for if he knew the secret of Arthur Warrens’ identity, she very much wanted to hear it.

She took a step forward, measuring a safe distance, and turned around to confront him.



Lord Stratfield carefully calculated the best means by which he might command Lady Amelie Wainwoode’s attention. But when faced with her questioning, and slightly anxious gaze, he felt

oddly indecisive. Her green eyes and the slight rise of her delicate brow revealed her concern. But for the presence of people all around them, he might be tempted to give her reason for greater concern by pulling her into his arms. Her mouth had become an unexpected distraction—but this was the stuff of fantasy, having nothing to do with his true mission in London.

“The artist has not revealed himself to me,” he answered carefully. “At least, not yet. But do you not believe it possible to know an artist, or a musician, or a writer by his creation? I think it as unique as a signature, or as the scent of a woman.”

Stratfield knew he already worked a sort of seduction upon Lady Amelie, and purely on the power of his words. He dared not imagine what might happen if he followed his more primitive inclinations.

She hid her nervousness well. He admired her unyielding gaze until she bit down on her lower lip, blanching the delicate flesh. He followed her tongue as it gave a quick, wet caress to her lower lip.

“And what, my lord, do you imagine you know of Arthur Warrens?” she asked coolly. She held her expression for several moments and then, unexpectedly, smiled at him.

Stratfield suddenly thought the gallery uncommonly warm. It would serve him well to hasten this confrontation and make good his escape.

“Why, I believe him a lonely man, preferring to paint landscapes rather than people, and catching even those in moments of the day when he might be guaranteed solitude.” He paused, having inserted one deliberate lie, and he waited to see if Lady Amelie would respond to it. When she showed not a flinch, he continued with renewed confidence. “This view of Winslow Street, for example. The only ones up and about at this hour would be servants and shopkeepers.”

“Perhaps Mr. Warrens is one himself. These paintings might represent a world with which he is intimate.” She continued to smile but she did not seem to be amused. Indeed, she sounded defensive and angry.

Stratfield’s imagination did not need to stretch very far to understand the reason why.

“I would wager he does know this world, even though he is young and inexperienced. No, let me say my piece,” he insisted, anticipating her protest. “I am certain he does not come from the working classes, for he could then have little time to produce this volume of works.”

He lifted his hand to indicate the broad vista of the canvas and nearly touched her shoulder. She took a half step to the side, but her gaze never left his face. Something glinted in their green depths, and he lowered his hand at once. Temptation contrived to make him a traitor to his own greater mission—it must be resisted.

“Do you suppose Mr. Warrens is a gentleman?” Lady Amelie asked and laughed briefly, indicating the absurdity of this notion. Stratfield felt the cut of her censure and double meaning and knew it had been intentionally directed at his reputation.

“He would hardly be the first,” he said tightly. “We have been known to produce a few creative geniuses. A gentleman might be compelled to paint for expression—”

“Or for money,” Amelie interrupted, then looked as if she bit her tongue.

“Or for money,” repeated Lord Stratfield solemnly.

Lady Amelie nodded. “It is rumored Arthur Warrens will soon begin a series of portraiture with Lady Swallow as his first subject. If true, perhaps he does desire commissions, for portraiture, unlike landscape, guarantees compensation. If true, this disproves your theory about the artist preferring to work alone. He will not keep his identity secret if he is to spend weeks in someone’s parlor, like a prize vase or candlestick.”

“You sound as if the thought disturbs you. Why so? If poor Warrens needs the money, then he should be very happy to be a guest of his patron for as long as it takes to complete his work.” Stratfield hesitated a moment before continuing, and bent forward to examine a small detail in the corner of the painting. He noted the distinctive line of Warrens’ signature. “And, as a matter of

some interest, the next parlor in which he shall be a fixture shall be White Ash's, for his first commissioned portrait happens to be my own."

He remained bowed over the landscape, but spared a glance to gauge her response. It gratified his sensibilities to see a telltale blush spread across Lady Amelie's face, though in anger or frustration he could not say. But it was all the answer he needed.

"I believe you are mistaken, my lord," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. "I heard Lady Swallow speak of it with great assurance, only minutes ago. She is to be his first."

Stratfield straightened and moved on to the next painting. The Thames, a study in gray and green, surged under the weight of a winter storm. The image might well be calmer than the storm brewing in this very room and had the advantage of complete containment. By contrast, Lady Amelie nearly trod on his heels as she followed him.

"She may have been misinformed. Or Warrens will soon tell her differently, if indeed, he undertakes the business of portraiture. He is already committed to complete a work begun by another with, ah, similar affinities. But I am to be the first, my lady."

Stratfield heard the arrogance in his words, and the vaguest sexual innuendo in his tone, but felt no regrets. He came prepared to deal sternly with

those who stood in the way of his quest. Yet, Lady Amelie Wainwoode proved to be somewhat more difficult than he expected. He found himself wishing her not so cursedly beautiful, especially when she was in high dudgeon.

“Y... you speak with a great deal of certainty for someone who admits he only knows the artist by the work produced. How could you be so sure he would wish to paint you? Or finish another’s work?” She faltered a bit over the words, but rallied to confront him again.

Stratfield recognized a rare defiance, but would not relent.

“You could say I have my means. I daresay you know something of my scandalous reputation—probably made even darker by rumor. Perhaps I would not be above blackmail to get what I desire?” Lady Amelie drew a short breath and blushed again. He felt his resolve almost slip away. “Oh come now, even a sheltered lady such as yourself knows of what I speak?”

“How dare you—”

“I dare a great deal, Lady Amelie. But surely you understand how readily, how effectively, blackmail might be accomplished?”

Her green eyes reflected the stormy image of the Thames.

“I am beginning to think rumor could not possibly make your reputation dark enough. No *true* gentleman would even speak of such things

to a lady, and certainly never brag about his past scandalous behavior. And you are wrong again if you imagine I have lived a life of simple luxury and indulgence. As you well know, a title guarantees nothing but a lofty level of respect, which you abused. Still, I am not so very sheltered as you might imagine!”

“I am glad to hear it,” he said, now believing they both understood the rules of the game. But as he prepared to make the next move, Lady Amelie Wainwoode turned sharply on her heel and marched indignantly from the gallery.

Chapter 2



Amelie wondered if she might beg off from the evening's festivities by claiming to have a headache. She felt in no mood to dance, nor to participate in idle conversation, nor to renew her tug-o'-war with Lord Stratfield. As she descended the long flight of stairs that separated Aunt Delius' well-appointed townhouse from her attic artist's studio, she recalled using the excuse of a headache three times in the last four weeks to avoid balls and dinners. Eagerly attended by her aunt and cousin, the events meant nothing to her.

However, if she persisted, dear Aunt Delius might forbid her the use of the studio and blame the paints and chemicals, with which she regularly worked, for the impairment of her health. Until recently, Aunt Delius demonstrated great tolerance for the whole covert business. She moved her servants to lower quarters, and outfitted the light, airy attic studio to Amelie's specifications. In turn, she reaped financial rewards from the sales

of many a painting. But once her nieces became marriageable age, and likely to make advantageous matches, Aunt Delius became increasingly impatient. No longer could Amelie spend her time isolated from the company of others.

Not surprisingly, Aunt Delius intercepted Amelie at the first landing.

“Dear child! I came to arouse you! Elizabeth is already dressing.” Her aunt studied Amelie with a critical eye and the younger woman knew she was to be treated to an inventory of her faults and the likely ways to minimize them. She was not disappointed.

“The green silk, I should think,” Aunt Delius pronounced. “It makes one notice your eyes and not your wanton black hair. With a small lace in the bosom, leaving ample evidence of your charms. And— Oh!”

Aunt Delius raised Amelie’s hands to closer scrutiny and nodded when she saw paint, and not blood, upon her niece’s fingers. Amelie was not sure it made her aunt feel any better.

“What is to be done?” Aunt Delius asked, surely thinking of an enduring solution, and not simply the immediacy of this evening’s event. Nevertheless, she settled on the simplest answer. “You shall borrow my long white gloves with the jade buttons—how fortunate they have returned to fashion! And you must keep them on, even while you dance. They hide a multitude of sins,

and Lady Jersey shall think you most elegant.”

“Aunt Delius,” protested Amelie as her aunt pushed her towards her bedchamber where, undoubtedly, the green silk gown and the requisite lace were already laid out on her bed. “If you believe my painting a sin—”

“Darling child! What are any of our sins next to those of my brothers? That is, I mean to say, Elizabeth’s beauty and your superb talent—” Aunt Delius’ hand pushed against unresisting air.

Amelie turned to face her. Here, at last, came the moment to understand certain things rarely mentioned in the Delius household. Recent circumstances gave urgency to Amelie’s quest for illicit knowledge, things which might well have remained hidden if Lord Stratfield never arrived in town. If she continued to despise him, as she fully expected, she needed something more substantial than rumor and innuendo to fuel her contempt.

“What of my father’s sins, Aunt? His abandonment of me and the loss of his estate were irresponsible, but he was not the first to leave a girl child under the protection of a woman, or to waste a fortune. We know he went to White Ash. What, precisely, was his relationship with the lady of the house? You need not look at me so; I am old enough to deal with the facts calmly.”

“Certainly you are, my love. But now I see Lord Stratfield and I am sure I do not want to prejudice Elizabeth and you against him. He cuts

a very fine figure.”

Amelie bit down on her lip, envisioning his fine figure a little too vividly for comfort.

“You need not concern yourself, dear Aunt. He is anxious to return to his home; he said it more than once. I believe London holds no attractions for him.” Amelie paused, hearing her own words, and knew she regretted the fact they were probably true. “But I am rather more interested in what attractions my father found at White Ash. Attractions sufficient to keep him from London for more than ten years.”

Aunt Delius sighed as she released the long pent-up vapors of a closed and secret compartment.

“I blame Lady Stratfield, of course. Both my brothers adored her during her season and I thought they would come to blows. But she ignored the two of them—and at least a dozen other beaux—when she chose Lord Stratfield, a rather dignified and courtly gentleman from the North. He gave her one son, and died not long thereafter.”

“And my father? Did he cause Lord Stratfield’s death?”

“Good heavens, no! Are you mad? Your father traveled to White Ash at the lady’s invitation, some time later; it apparently gave him leave to stay for the rest of his life. Thereafter, I could only contact him through Lady Stratfield and his solicitor in town—so vague he remained about his location.”

“And yet, no one doubted some scandal existed?” Amelie asked, bitterly. Surely, her father’s guilt was why he never came home.

“Mind you, I know nothing for a fact,” said Aunt Delius. “For all I know, my brother camped out in a cave, and went to White Ash only once in a while for a good meal.”

“I do recall him as being very lean; perhaps he did not have a keen appetite?” Amelie offered in a low voice.

“We cannot even guess at his appetite.” Her aunt’s voice sounded prim. “I only know he did a good deal of painting while there, and he sold some of his work to pay your expenses.”

“But he lost everything else?”

“So he did. But perhaps they did not matter to him.”

Amelie saw the hard truth in those words and could not dispute them.

“If you wish to know more, you should appeal to Stratfield himself,” Aunt Delius’ words broke through Amelie’s self-pitying reverie.

“Aunt Delius, I hardly imagine it is a subject to ever come up between us.”



And yet, Lord Stratfield vowed it would.

He stood among the guests at Mrs. Marlowe’s lavish ball, knowing full well he was the object of

interest for a good many. Yet his regard was with only one other. He knew to expect her, and even assured of it by his cousin, but still could not see her in the crush. If she begged off, as most ladies expecting a renewed confrontation might do, he surely saw no purpose in attending tonight. And time was short.

“There... There she is. Talking to Lady Swallow by the stairway.” His cousin Sophia tapped his elbow. “In green.”

“Indeed.” Stratfield briefly touched Sophia’s gloved hand. He started away, hoping she did not see his brief, unguarded reaction to the lady.

How could he not have noticed Lady Amelie before? The vivid color of her gown set off the darkness of her hair and the creaminess of her skin. Its stylish cut revealed the soft angles of her shoulders and the high curves of her breasts to great advantage—an opinion undoubtedly shared by the several young men who circled around her. He walked quietly through the crowd, trying not to attract any friends who might deter him from his mission.

“Ah! Look who is here! Still in London, Lord Stratfield? I would have thought you weary of our town ways.” Lady Swallow looked up as he approached. “I prefer to believe you seek me out to demand a dance, but I rather think it is my lovely companion who attracts you.”

“Lady Swallow. Lady Amelie.” Stratfield

bowed graciously, a smile on his face for the older woman. “You tempt me, Lady Swallow. But I did not dare imagine you had a free dance yet available.” He also did not imagine Amelie had repeated anything of their last meeting or Lady Swallow would not be so cordial.

“You silly boy! How you flatter me!” Lady Swallow sighed gratefully, which was, after all, exactly the response in order. “But my friend here has many still open,” she added artlessly.

“Does she, now?” Stratfield inquired in mock surprise. He turned and looked appraisingly at Amelie, quite satisfied when he saw her color rise. Even so, the emerald of her eyes never left his gaze. “Well, I shall endeavor to fill them,” he said. “Will you grant me the first? I hear the music just beginning.”

Amelie’s expected retort died on her lips. Stratfield felt only relief. If she had protested his effrontery, Lady Swallow would demand to know why. And that would serve him ill.



“You look rather extraordinary in green, my lady.” Stratfield recited the prose very much like an ardent suitor, “It makes me think of the meadows and lawns at White Ash.”

“I did not dress to particularly satisfy your homesickness, my lord,” she quipped loftily.

“Green is among my favorite colors of the palette.”

“Of the palette?” he queried, and Amelie wished she could recall the word.

“Yes,” she hesitated, “I do... dabble... a bit.”

“I wonder if you might ever be persuaded to dabble a bit at Ambleside. It provided excellent inspiration for your father.”

“I am *sure* it did,” Amelie answered a bit too tartly. “But I am not necessarily inspired by the same subjects. One could take just as much pleasure in a vase of flowers. A teaspoon of sugar. A small garden on a foggy night.” A pair of violet eyes on a man, she added to herself.

“But think of the advantages of scope,” he went on. “A broad canvas can be better filled with a lake or a wood or a beach than with a teaspoon of sugar.”

He hit upon a nerve, though he could not know it.

Amelie studied his irregular, strong profile as they positioned themselves for the start of the dance. He greeted Aunt Delius as she passed, pausing for a moment of conversation. His gentleness towards her relative softened some of Amelie’s resolve.

“I know just the scene of which you might be speaking,” she spoke softly. “My father painted a large canvas of my mother and myself upon the strand at Penzance during our last summer there

together. I often think of it. How the lady and the child appeared so utterly lost against the waves and the sky. And somehow that came to reflect me in the story of my father's life. I well know where he went, as do you. But I do not know what became of the painting. It would mean a great deal to me to see it again."

Stratfield said nothing at first, but turned to face her some steps from the dance floor. He held both of her hands and looked down at them.

"Perhaps it will come to light some day soon," he spoke too boldly.

If Amelie ever had reason to distrust him, there was nothing more incriminating to her than those words. She opened her mouth to speak, but he silenced her by taking an extraordinary liberty. She felt the tug on her hand and even then was not sure what he intended, until cool evening air tickled her arms, slowly stripped of their dignified protection.

"I cannot dance with a lady who will touch me only with her gloves," he hesitated as his fingers brushed against the pulse at her wrist.

"It is quite the fashion, my lord," Amelie suddenly sounded quite as giddy as Elizabeth.

"And yet it is not one many gentlemen seem to prefer."

He raised her bare hand toward his lips, but paused again when it was some inches away. His thumb rubbed over the colorful evidence of her

craft. The red paint staining her fingers looked even brighter here than at home. Her embarrassment, it seemed, was not complete. He brought her hand up to his lips, whereupon his nose unavoidably breathed in the indelible odor of the mineral spirits Amelie used in a futile attempt to make her hands presentable.

“A rare and unusual perfume.” His gaze finally met hers. “And yet it is somewhat familiar to me. I marvel how it suits you, for I find it both exotic and tart.”

The arrogance of this man! He could not help but know what marked her hands, an odor not even tempered by perfumed soap and powder, and yet he felt the need to goad her with it! Amelie was momentarily full of unspoken argument and protest when the first notes of the quadrille sounded.

And then, inexplicably, over the course of the dance, and the long evening that followed, much of her ill humor dissipated. She somehow forgot the practical turns of her life and its painful realities. Indeed, Amelie would have been compelled to admit she took as much pleasure in the ball as did any other fashionable young lady lucky enough to have been on Mrs. Marlowe’s selective invitation list.



The gentler instincts of romance and fantasy inspired by the seductive powers of sweet music and handsome partners were dashed out in the brightness of the next morning's light. Amelie arose late, knowing her headache, this time, was genuine, and wishing nothing more than the cursed Lord Stratfield would already be on his way back to his beloved White Ash.

How came she to dance with him, so often and so closely? How had she allowed him the liberties of removing her gloves and bringing her refreshment? Why did she let him see her pain over her father's abandonment? He, the son of the siren who forever prevented Lord Wainwoode's homecoming, could surely only gloat at his family's allure over hers. And yet, there was something in his demeanor, in his attentiveness, in his compelling eyes—

"My lady?" Tess, the youngest of the household maids, revealed nothing more than the lacy edge of her bonnet from behind the chamber door.

"I am awake," Amelie admitted reluctantly, in a hoarse voice. "Please tell me it is not yet afternoon."

Tess giggled, and came through the door. She looked absurdly cheerful in her dark blue uniform.

"Very nearly, my lady. Mrs. Delius and Miss Elizabeth bade me wake you."

"Why? They cannot particularly desire my presence, for I left them not five hours ago, I believe."

"Your aunt reminds you she has her calling

hours today, and she expects you will be in demand.” Tess paused, perhaps wondering if Amelie would find the next bit of gossip satisfying. “Miss Elizabeth said you cut quite a pair with Lord Stratfield and everyone remarked on it.”

Amelie groaned and sank back into her pillows. She wondered, ungenerously, if Stratfield had put something in the drink he brought her, or if he had made bets upon his seduction of her in the gaming room. Men, even gentlemen, were not above that sort of thing. And ladies, knowing the full extent of his reputation, would be providing similar tallies on their relationship—though in the coinage of gossip.

“Mrs. Delius thinks it very likely his lordship will call on you today,” Tess offered encouragingly.

Her words did empower Amelie, though not in the way she expected.

Amelie pulled herself from her warm cocoon, and stood barefoot on the small rug she once hooked herself. Her feet were sore from so much dancing and her head felt as if it were stuffed with rags. She wavered a bit, and then pulled herself upright.

“Do tell my aunt I shall be indisposed today. If I dare to venture from this room, it shall only be to escape to my studio, which is so far from the parlor as to make any casual visiting an impossibility. Do tell her that.”

Tess mumbled something under her breath.

“What was that, Tess?” Amelie asked a little more clearly, a little more firmly.

“Mrs. Delius is not going to be happy,” Tess repeated, looking none too happy herself.

Amelie rubbed her forehead and pushed away a bit of matted hair. “On the contrary, I think she will be delighted. She and Elizabeth and our friends may speculate all they want about the events of last night, and I will not be available to contradict them. And then when, or if, Lord Stratfield appears, they will be able to add more coals to their fire. It is an excellent strategy.”

Looking at the poor girl’s face, Amelie knew Tess really had no idea what this or any other strategy might be. In truth, she argued her point for no other purpose than to clarify it for herself, and it appeared to make sense. In any case, it made her headache go away, so it could not be a bad thing.

Now, there were other things that needed to go away. But even as she diverted her attention by brushing out her long hair in slow strokes and washing her face and arms most carefully, she could not so easily dismiss the images of Lord Stratfield coming readily to mind. If he were anyone else—a shopkeeper, a solicitor—she would be prepared to see the good in him and perhaps encourage him. But he was the son of the woman who robbed her of something dear, her father’s presence, her father’s love. Stratfield was

also the man who had jilted a fashionable lady, and now held a disreputable history. She did not think his nose was broken by a fall from a horse. In addition, he was arrogant, presumptuous, and she felt sure, quite dangerous.

Amelie scarcely found the energy to apply herself to her appearance today, and she doubted Tess would dare to intrude on her again. So she simply plaited her hair into a single long queue down the center of her back and fixed it with a bit of ribbon. She went to her wardrobe and pulled out an old rose muslin gown and a pair of worn slippers.

As she pulled on her soft, comfortable clothes, she imagined they provided a sort of armor for her. If anyone attempted to draw her down from the sanctuary of her studio to the fashionable crowd in the parlor, it would be evident she could not possibly appear thus, nor would it be practical for her to change and then present herself. Again, an excellent bit of strategy.



In the elegant guest rooms of his cousin's townhouse, Lord Stratfield tolerated the fawning attention of his borrowed valet. He was not accustomed to it, nor did he especially appreciate it. Sophia had insisted and he would not have her unhappy. On this day, she sent in the man with most specific directions, and Stratfield did not

have to ask why it was so.

He made more than a bit of a fool himself last night, for nothing courts disaster as readily as a public seduction. But he never imagined Lady Amelie Wainwoode would agree to remain in his company for almost the entire evening and be so compliant and good-natured. She certainly never gave him reason to believe she could be won so easily and he scarcely resembled an honorable suitor in his manner or words with her.

Therein remained the problem. Cousin Sophia let him know this morning of the expectation among their set of a proposal. Evidently, there existed much envy on the part of even those who were prepared to despise him only a week before. Some had already placed bets on whether or not Lady Amelie would return with him to White Ash when he departed London, as he originally planned, at the end of the week.

In fact, he did have a proposal in mind, and he did indeed intend to entice the lady to White Ash. But it was not precisely—nay, not at all—the proposal society expected. If an understanding of his true intentions came to light, his reputation would be so utterly beyond redemption, they would shut the gates of London against him if he ever were to return to the city.

And what of Lady Amelie? She defined “beautiful” in a way that consigned other women of his acquaintance to be merely pretty. And she

probably proved too clever for most men, for she somehow always managed to deflect him from his avowed purpose. She stood quite tall, which appeared, in itself, rather intimidating. And she possessed a talent which would not be looked upon with approval by most. To what purpose could a lady ever exercise talent of that sort?

And yet, he knew he wanted nothing more than to confront her in her studio. Catch her surrounded by the craft he knew she practiced regularly and so well, and present the proposal for which he traveled to town in the first place. In all this, he remained certain and resolved, and he had been for some days.

But her responses to his effrontery last night somehow managed to put him entirely off the mark. He came prepared for sarcasm, for evasion, for the sharp barbs of her wit. Instead, he danced with the very model of a lady of society, who seemed prepared to receive his attentions.

He did not trust her at all.

“I am sorry my man, but this will not do,” he said irritably to the valet. “I should hang by the knot of my cravat, which will make me poor sport for battle.”

The man took no offense and gently pulled Stratfield’s fingers away from the dark silk before he ripped it entirely to shreds.

“Shall I get you armor, my lord?” the valet grinned.

“I daresay it would provide but feeble protection. Armor did not help against the Normans, and I fear I am up against a greater foe—a clever woman.”



Amelie occasionally moved away from her canvas to gaze down upon the street and assess the traffic coming and going through her aunt's parlor. Her perspective was not advantageous to identification, however, and she retained a much better notion of the hats the ladies wore than the features of their faces.

There were gentlemen too, of course, though they all looked pretty much the same from four stories above the street.

Deciding this to be a futile exercise, she concentrated instead on her painting. The roses were beginning to look rather limp in their vase of warm water. Amelie felt a bit limp herself, for she remained tired from last night's exertions, frustrated by her own weakness, and hungry for having eaten too little since awakening. She did not dare venture down to the kitchen, but if Tess happened to climb up to see her, she would ask for some fruit and cheese.

The knock on her door therefore seemed provident, all the more so because it was not announced by the usual sound of feet dragging up

all those stairs. Amelie's stomach groaned in anticipation as she worked on a tedious bit of thorn, not looking away from her canvas.

"Oh, do come in, Tess! I hope you have brought me something to stave off hunger, for I am near famished!"

Amelie heard the door open and close as she applied the finishing strokes to the thorn and began to wipe off her brush.

"I have left the sweets in the parlor, I am afraid, and bring only myself," a male voice responded.

Amelie put down her clean tool and tried to form the words capable of removing this intruder most effectively and immediately from her studio. She cleared her throat and turned to face him.

He scarce showed the signs of exhaustion accompanying the climb of most people up three flights of narrow stairs. His dark hair remained neatly brushed off his brow and his cravat sported a clever knot which had not been pulled from his neck. She saw his broad chest rise and fall beneath his blue jacket, but his breathing seemed steady and a good deal easier than her own. She realized, to her own chagrin and shame, he provided the answer to hunger of a different sort.

"This is not at all proper, my lord," she said, without preamble.

He bowed his head in apparent acquiescence, but then contradicted it by pointing to her canvases.

"And this, I suppose, is proper? A young lady

of title and fortune preferring a cramped attic work space to her guests in the parlor?" If he intended to provoke her, he succeeded admirably.

"There may be a title, but there is no fortune, my lord," she spat back at him and picked up the brush again. "My father wasted it all and lost his estate, preferring to idle his time away in Ambleside than to secure his family's future. But you know this as well as any of the gossip mongers here in town, for your family witnessed that decline and did nothing to remind him of his responsibilities!"

"I think you misrepresent us all, my lady," he said softly, and the violet eyes grew dark. "Your father worked all the time he remained at White Ash, and sold his paintings to provide for you. He trusted his sister, your aunt, and I believe he thought you would be happier with her than with him. Perhaps he was wrong."

"I cannot see that it matters to—"

"It matters no longer," Stratfield interrupted. "And if it makes you feel any happier, not a day passed but I wished him away from us. But it is not to renew these old wounds that I have come to London. There is some business I have put off for far too long."

"You allude to it often enough, my lord. But certainly it is none of my business to know what yours might be. I only wish you well in it, so I might never suffer your intrusions again."

As if accepting an invitation, Stratfield sat down upon the only chair in the room and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Therein lies our problem, for not only will I demand you suffer my intrusions, but also that you come to understand this business of mine very well.”

Amelie said nothing, but remained stiff-backed at her canvas, waiting for what would come.

“Your father was a great landscape painter, but occasionally tried his skill at portraiture.”

Here was no real surprise. Her father would not be the only artist desiring to broaden his range. Perhaps the increasing demands of her own upkeep necessitated the move from the landscapes he loved to more practical commissions for the gentry. She said nothing, and Stratfield went on.

“In the last year of his life, your father worked on a rather large portrait of myself, in the grand scale appropriate for the long hallway in which my forbidding lineage is always on display. I hated the project, but my mother thought it necessary. And, as your father already showed signs of illness, a matter of some urgency. Her instincts proved correct, for he died before completing it.”

“So you seek me out for matters of business about which I have known nothing,” Amelie said tersely. “I will therefore take your word as a gentleman that such a portrait was commissioned, and I will offer you, as a gentlewoman, the return

of the money you paid for a task not completed. Will that do? Is this what you have come all this way to accomplish? My solicitor would have been very happy to—”

“It is not the money. Your father would take no money from us. But it is the most ardent wish of my mother to see this portrait finished—and in the style the artist originally intended. She cared very much for Lord Wainwoode and she cares very much for me. It is not unreasonable to believe the completion of this work would give her infinite pleasure.”

“Are you not the very gentleman who boasted to me, you would have Arthur Warrens do your portrait before all others? Suggesting he remained under some obligation to you to do so?” Amelie felt very reckless, treading on very, very thin ice.

Stratfield said nothing. His eyes watched her though they were partially closed and he held his arms rigidly across his chest. He looked very forbidding at that moment, a fitting candidate for his hall of ancient ancestors. Watching him thus, Amelie knew with absolute, dreadful certainty he possessed a power over her no one else who knew her secret would dare exercise. She felt a wave of nausea pass, leaving her trembling in its wake.

“I am asking Arthur Warrens to return with me to White Ash, to spend some months in the country air, to complete a work awaiting satisfaction. Arthur Warrens’ style possesses an eloquence few

others can rival and none can imitate, though it is very reminiscent of that of my mother's old friend, Lord Wainwoode. Who else but Arthur Warrens can accomplish the job?" His rigidly crossed arms broke free from the stiff knot he made of them and he reached from where he sat to grasp Amelie's cold hand. "Who else but Arthur Warrens can finish the project so ably begun by her own father?"

Amelie swayed slightly on her feet and would have fallen if Stratfield had not so firmly tethered her to his own strength. Here was the knowledge at which he hinted and the blackmail of which he already spoke. And his business: nothing less than her own humiliation.

"And what will poor Warrens get in return for her enforced captivity at White Ash?" she asked, sounding much braver than she felt.

For once, Stratfield looked indecisive. But Amelie did not make the mistake of thinking him weak. She saw how he judged and weighed the matter. She held her breath until he answered.

"Why, she will get the guarantee of my secrecy. I have no real desire to expose a lady of talent to the censure of society. The gossip would be merciless. But I should have no recourse but to do so if I cannot get her to agree to my terms. I would therefore be compelled to reveal Arthur Warrens' true identity." He rubbed his thumb over the delicate joints of her hand, caressing, coaxing her.

Amelie tried to pull away, but could not.

“But secrecy may not be enough to tempt her, and so I have something else possibly even more precious than the pursuit of her career.”

She stopped struggling, waiting to hear the confirmation of her fondest hopes.

“I have, in my collection, a magnificent painting by Wainwoode of the beach at Penzance. The sky is brilliant in its tone; the sun is cast in gold on the horizon. A lovely woman sits in the foreground, clasping her hat against the stiff wind. And, with her mother’s skirts wrapped protectively around her, stands a very little girl with her arms raised in carefree delight. It is quite the most wonderful painting I have ever seen, and I believe the daughter of the artist is very much interested in it.”

“And if she does not agree to your terms, is it your intent to destroy it?” Amelie asked sarcastically.

“Never,” he said quickly. “But I can promise her... you... this: if you come, and finish your father’s portrait of me, it shall be yours.”

Amelie once again felt the stiff, cool breeze of Penzance lift her heart and soothe her spirit. She closed her eyes and conjured visions long suppressed, little caring what her tormentor thought.

“Was it the hope that I possessed the painting and that you might persuade me for it, that made you so willing to dance with me at Mrs. Marlowe’s ball last night?” His voice came, insistently.

Amelie shook her head lightly, and returned abruptly from Penzance. Of what importance could that be? She looked down to where he still sat, looking up at her with more than one question in his eyes.

“Not at all, my lord, for nothing could have been further from my mind.” Amelie felt disconcerted by the fact he seemed to know too much about all her desires and her thoughts. She had no wish to gratify him by proving him correct. “It... it is only I am so unaccustomed to dancing with partners taller than myself, I could scarce resist the opportunity. Nothing else.”

“I see,” he said slowly, and rose to his feet. Stature was measured by more than physical height in her world, and Amelie, fearing she already sacrificed too much to this man, felt she might have dropped a few notches in his estimation. She hoped her distress was not evident.

“You will come with me, then? To White Ash?” he asked.

“I will think on it,” she responded quietly.

It was neither a promise nor a pronouncement. But when he finally allowed his hold on her hand to loosen, they both knew it did not matter.

Stratfield had Lady Amelie firmly in his grasp.

Chapter 3



Stratfield stood at the rocky edge of the puddle Londoners fondly imagined to be a lake and stared down at his own distorted reflection. A few dead leaves floated through his watery hair and his torso. Foreshortened, his image had the unaccustomed proportions of a pugilist. It was not a comforting reflection. The ache of old remembered pain became suddenly palpable, and his fingers found their way to the bridge of his nose and down the uneven ridge responsible for giving his face its unique character.

He knew how it felt to win the skirmish, the battle and the war. He once fought a good many weightier foes than an uncommonly tall and clever Englishwoman who seemed to know just what she wanted and how to accomplish it.

He already achieved exactly what he set out to do during his brief tenure in London. Why, then, could he not feel even the smallest triumph at coercing Amelie Wainwoode to leave the safety

of her family and friends to return with him to White Ash? Why, after making her an offer most would consider generous and compassionate, did he somehow feel he had cheapened them both?

The protests of a starling rudely awakened Stratfield from his brooding reverie. He looked to where the little creature challenged a family of ducks to the handful of bread crumbs a small child had just spread upon the still water.

Stratfield's first thought, innocently enough, was of little Joshua, who regularly raided the pantry at White Ash. The local wildlife had grown accustomed to his treat of fresh-baked breads intended for the family dinner. The lad would be waiting for him when he returned, and their reunion would be full of the stories of their separate adventures of the past few weeks. Stratfield tried to imagine what notes of his own activities might be fitting for a small boy's ears. Certainly, he would need to compose some explanation as to why a beautiful young woman would suddenly intrude her presence on their cheerful and private little household.

The determined starling risked the uneven bottom of the lake and managed to steal a desirable morsel from the mouth of a slow-witted duckling. A splash of water rained down on the sleek black feathers of the brazen thief and beaded into an array of jewels reflecting the hazy sunshine.

Stratfield, plagued by a more immediate

memory, brought his hand away from his face. He resolved to overcome this momentary weakness for a dark haired beauty. Not only would he compose a satisfying story for young Joshua, but he would also somehow manage to control himself.

He walked along the bank, and then along a path.

Amelie Wainwoode was not the most beautiful woman he ever met, and she certainly was not the most agreeable. Her height might be intimidating to a lesser man and her keen bold stare to a greater one. Even he, immune to most feminine charms, needed to pause to recollect his thoughts as he gazed into the unwavering green depths of her eyes. He reminded himself it was pure and simple business—and not seduction—bringing her into his home.

But her hair! He remembered the woven gold of his former intended, Lydia, with her tight coronet and how he once longed to feel it, unbound, between his fingers. By contrast, Lady Amelie's long jet hair always looked like someone had already made himself free with it, stealing the coronet and leaving black jewels. He envisioned the glossy shine of her hair when he first saw her near the steps of Saint Paul's. How tempted he felt to moisten his finger in the jeweled dew of one lone raindrop clinging tenaciously to an errant curl.

Stratfield thrust his suddenly restless fingers

into the pockets of his long coat.

So must Ivanhoe have felt when he turned—though only momentarily—from his beloved flaxen-haired Rowena to the exotic beauty of Rebecca. There must have been desire; that would be undeniable. Attraction? Most certainly. And all the more so because the object of his interest remained forbidden to him. And what of need? Did Scott's war-weary hero yearn for some center of peace and healing? Or did the sight of Rebecca's black hair and long capable fingers ignite passions that were anything but redemptive? Was he beginning to feel similarly for Lady Amelie?

He must compose his thoughts.

Stratfield knew himself to be no latter-day Ivanhoe. Neither had he intentions of fashioning Amelie Wainwoode as the heroine of his story. He needed her, though for no other reason than to see his mother happy. And, perhaps, just a bit, to assuage some sense of old revenge against her family. It seemed a bad business, but he would not now be deterred by the sight of a pretty face. Ivanhoe aside, Stratfield was made of sterner stuff.

Thus resolved on his plotted path, how could he accompany her all the way to White Ash with any degree of equanimity? He imagined the closeness of the carriage, the strained conversation, her cool indifference coaxing her into sleep, her

hair coming loose against the cushions in the compartment—

She needed a companion. That much was certain. And it should not be he. Dare he ask her silly cousin, sweet-faced Elizabeth, to accompany her to White Ash? But when he remembered Ivanhoe's dilemma, he decided dealing with Rebecca was difficult enough without introducing Rowena into their midst.

Sophia would be an agreeable companion. But could his cousin be trusted to refrain from incriminating gossip and revelations? And would she not guess the reason why her cousin could not trust himself alone with his guest? And delight in it?

No, there would be no help in London.

Stratfield turned a corner, wondering how he managed to walk so far, and realized he stood just down the street from Margaret Delius' house. He squinted up into the sunshine and could just make out the outline of the frame of an attic window, but no lovely face surveyed the street below. Might Amelie be working in her studio this very moment?

Undoubtedly, she was packing an excess of her belongings, without which she could not survive the wilds of Ambleside nor the scrutiny of his country neighbors—and cursing him all the while.

He really did need to find a companion for her. For the safety of them both.



“Who is she?” Amelie demanded. “What connection can she possibly have to Lord Stratfield and to me? If I wished to endure the company of a complete stranger, I would elect to take the coach!” Aunt Delius looked affectionately at her oldest niece, and reached to tuck a recalcitrant ebony curl behind the girl’s ear.

“Your melodramatic ranting makes me wonder if you would have done better to exercise your talents on the stage, rather than on canvas, my dear,” her aunt said playfully.

Amelie remained unamused.

“It would have served me well, if I were you. The Stratfields seem disposed to entertain artists when it pleases them to do so, but they might not be so tolerant towards actresses. Lord High-and-Lofty would not stoop so low.” Amelie rubbed a thumb over the bristles of a well-used paintbrush and considered it unworthy to make the journey with her. “Unless, of course, this Miss Wistfell is just such a person. Some lightskirt he met at the theatre.”

“Dear girl! How can you talk so! Lord Stratfield assured me the woman traveled all the way down from White Ash for the sole purpose of keeping you company during the long ride. Stratfield himself will ride alongside the carriage.”

Amelie stabbed the soft bristles into the palm of her hand. “Is my company abhorrent to him,

then?" she asked angrily.

"Perhaps he merely fears for his life." Her aunt smiled and bit down upon her lower lip. "I am not sure I blame him."

Amelie laughed; her good humor and her courage both restored at once. "It is true I can find no good in him. The only wonder is that you and Elizabeth do so quite readily. Did you not warn us very clearly about his faulty reputation? Should we not be prepared to distrust him on all counts?"

"I must confess to a change in heart," Aunt Delius said defiantly. "I believe it came on during the evening he partnered you for more dances than could possibly be considered proper."

"Then you admit his improper behavior is what recommended him to your good favor?" Amelie argued, though gently. She knew precisely for what her aunt prayed.

If she had witnessed the older woman being charmed by anyone else in this manner, and so earnestly eager to promote a relationship she should condemn, Amelie would have been amused. But Aunt Delius' anxiety to see her niece off and away, in the company of a strange woman, to the home of a notorious man, to a place far beyond the reach of any of their friends, could only be a sign of desperation. And Elizabeth, making no pretense other than offering up a few nice words about how much she would miss her older cousin, seemed just as eager to see her go.

“We will miss your beautiful work in your studio,” Elizabeth said, really meaning it would be a delight to rid the house of the noxious odor of mineral spirits.

“He is a very handsome, very agreeable man,” added Aunt Delius, her meaning even more obvious.

Amelie paused in her late-hour packing to look upon the faces of the two women who had been her constant companions for most of her life. She knew they only wished her well and happy. But in these particular hopes they surely were misguided.

“You cannot imagine I go for any reason other than to finish my father’s work,” said Amelie gently, trying to quell their unbridled enthusiasm. “I shall do what I must and return home immediately.”

She did not mistake the looks of disappointment on the faces of her dear relatives.

“What if he asks you to stay? He may wish other paintings done.”

“I am not interested in staying longer. Besides, if he wanted another painting done, it would most likely be a companion piece to the one I will be finishing. That would mean there is a Lady Stratfield waiting for him, one who is not his mother. And it would simply defeat your purpose in having me stay longer, would it not?” As an argument, it seemed unanswerable.

Aunt Delius looked visibly deflated.

“But if he is as inconstant as rumor suggests, then I need not worry,” Amelie continued cheerfully. “The unfortunate woman would not remain on his estate for long and, well, neither shall I. There would be nothing to detain me.” But then she envisioned violet eyes, and a distinctive, crooked nose—

“Are you bringing enough?” Aunt Delius began her attack from another flank and looked doubtfully at the wall of trunks piled high in the entrance foyer. She pushed against the rigid structure with the toe of her slipper.

“If I packed any more, I would have to sit on the lap of my companion, which surely is more intimacy than one should share with a total stranger.” Amelie looked down at her aunt, saw her real concern, and decided it unkind to tease her. “Besides, Lord Stratfield assured me my father’s easels and paints remain pretty much where he left them—”

“I am not as interested in your paints, my dear, as I am in your dinner dresses,” Aunt Delius retorted. “Did you bring the rose brocade? The green lace? Good: it is one of my favorites. The yellow shawl? The cream muslin?”

Amelie’s head bobbed up and down, as she dutifully acknowledged each selection.

“And I packed my blue paint smock so you need not worry about the rest. I am sure he will never see anything but what I wear to cover

myself while I work.”

“Even so. The blue silk? The gray linen...?”

Amelie was grateful she possessed only a modest wardrobe, for this marked the third anxious inventory in twenty-four hours. Each time, some of her ersatz theatrical skills had also been called into use as she pretended casual indifference to the various selections journeying with her to White Ash. In truth, Amelie took more care with them and worried more about her appearance than she had in years.

“The lace reticule!” Aunt Delius clapped a small hand over her open mouth. “I meant for you to take it! Let me call for—”

“I am sure it is unnecessary. I have my mother’s silk, my new linen, and a crocheted pocket. My carpetbag—”

“Your carpetbag! What use is baggage at a country ball! For I am sure Lady Stratfield will present you to their country society. I expect she will host a private ball in your honor.” Aunt Delius clapped her hands with pleasure.

“That surely would be very generous of the lady. Particularly towards one who will be little more than a servant in her home,” Amelie said coolly, dampening her own fires as well as her aunt’s.

Elizabeth opened her mouth, surely to lend support to Aunt Delius’ expectations. But her words were silenced by the interruption of a commotion

just outside their door. The three women faced each other in a small circle, and hugged a last, anxious farewell in silence.

“Shall I open the door, ma’am?” Wainwright, the butler asked, though he already pulled on the handle.

The three women turned as one to face the sunlight.

Amelie saw the carriage and admitted to herself it looked very elegant. She knew country squires did not go about escorting their guests in hay wagons, but felt unprepared for the grand vision before her. The dark wood of the box gleamed, as if recently painted or polished, and was mounted on gold-toned wheels. The family crest shone conspicuously. Lace curtains adorned the small windows, promising the inner accommodation would likely be as elegant as the outward appearance.

“Oh, splendid,” breathed Aunt Delius in obvious approval, though Amelie believed her admiration was not for the large coach, but for the lovely creature who exited it and now stood in their doorway.

The woman, short, small-boned, with silvery blonde hair, peered into the house a little doubtfully and then turned back to locate her companion. Amelie, her heart beating erratically, wondered at it herself, but then heard Lord Stratfield’s voice giving orders about one thing or another.

“Well,” the woman sighed and then smiled. “I shan’t wait for a formal introduction.”

She came through the doorway, into the shadows of their small foyer. “I’m Caroline Wistfell,” she announced cheerfully. Her short bonnet slipped down onto her narrow shoulders as she looked up at them. “His lordship, who is somewhere about, sent for me so I might accompany Lady Amelie Wainwoode to White Ash.”

Miss Wistfell studied each of the three women before her in turn, and as her gaze focused a second time at Elizabeth, Amelie decided to break the silence. “I am Lady Amelie Wainwoode,” she said, stepping forward. “And this is my aunt, Mrs. Delius, and my cousin Elizabeth. You are welcome in our home.”

“Would that I could stay,” Miss Wistfell said under her breath. “But Lord Stratfield is in rare form and very anxious we depart.”

As if rehearsed, Stratfield’s authoritative voice barked again, and two well-dressed grooms appeared in the doorway. Requiring no more introduction than the appearance of the trunks along the wall, the men bowed briefly and started towards them.

“Would you like to refresh yourself while the men load the coach? Your journey from White Ash must have been long and tedious.” Amelie remembered her manners even if Lord Stratfield did not.

“To be honest,” said the young woman, looking furtively behind her, “I slept all the way. I know the scenery is lovely, and there are great things to see in London, but my work at White Ash quite wears me down. The prospect of sleeping for so many hours appeared Elysian.”

“You poor dear,” said Aunt Delius and studied their guest for several minutes in silence. Amelie knew her thoughts; the girl said she worked on the Stratfield estate, and yet looked—and sounded—nothing like a servant. “What can you do that exhausts you so?”

“Why, I’m governess for the little boy. I assumed Lord Stratfield explained the circumstances to Lady Amelie. He’s only six—Joshua Ashworth, I mean—and until he goes off to school, I am responsible for racing about with him. He’s a dear, but it is quite tiring.”

“A little boy? No, we had not heard,” said Aunt Delius and raised a neatly plucked eyebrow at her nieces. “And does he live at White Ash with his mother?”

Miss Wistfell hesitated a moment, biting her lower lip. “His mother? No. I couldn’t say. I’ve only been told he is a relation, and Lord Stratfield is his guardian. But he is most certainly an Ashworth.”

“The name, of course,” murmured Aunt Delius, and gathered the young women protectively about her. The men lurched about the foyer under the

weight of the trunks.

“And the look,” added Miss Wistfell. “I have never seen eyes like that on any but relations.”

Again on cue, Lord Stratfield made his presence known. He knocked briefly on the open door, dodged the attack of the moving trunks, and arrived safely at the ladies’ small circle. Amelie studiously gazed upon Miss Wistfell’s pearl brooch.

“Ah, I see I am too late to make my introductions,” he said without the slightest hint of remorse. He took Aunt Delius’ hand into his own and found encouragement in her smiling face.

“Indeed, we have just met Miss Wistfell,” said Elizabeth, and offered him her hand, too.

“I took the liberty, my lord, seeing you busy,” Miss Wistfell added, speaking with an easy familiarity.

“Perhaps not as busy as you were impatient!” Stratfield teased, and three of the ladies laughed along with him. The absence of the fourth seemed as apparent as the silence of a flute in an orchestra. Amelie felt she could not avoid him forever, but delayed acknowledgment until the expectant silence became too insistent.

She finally looked up into his face, and there read an uncertainty running counter to his confident air. She hoped he felt the sting of her cool appraisal and reproachful air and understood how very much she despised him. And yet, the fact of her contempt seemed now as painful to herself as

she could ever hope it could be to Stratfield. It confused and bothered her, but in the rush of their departure, could not be readily analyzed.

She understood only that he represented something more to her than the face of her enemy. Though he abused her sensibilities and found her weaknesses with the skill of a warrior, she believed she recognized doubt in the midst of his assault, and discerned a certain wariness. She preferred to believe she hurt him as well, as she did even by refusing to offer her hand in polite greeting. He seemed a man accustomed to getting what he wished, and she doubted he ever needed to resort to desperate measures to achieve his ends.

She distrusted him, and wanted very much for him to understand that. He had not yet broken any promises, but she believed him capable of anything.

He finally looked away from her, and down at Caroline Wistfell, who happily chatted with Aunt Delius and Elizabeth. What, she wondered, compelled him to bring this cheerful parrot to London to serve as her escort? They would have hours together, during which Amelie hoped their little compartment would encourage a feminine conspiracy of shared secrets and delicious gossip. Stratfield would ride alone, outside, and, she hoped, be tormented by uncertainties.

If he happened to glance in their direction, Caroline Wistfell would undoubtedly reward him with a sweet smile or casual wave through the

window. If he caught Amelie's eye, however, she would reward him with the lowering of the curtains.

Amelie looked out the open door, to where the magnificent coach glowed in the sunlight. It seemed a pity to travel on such a day; if only it rained and thundered, she might relent and leave the curtains lifted, to fully relish his discomfort and momentary defeat.



“It’s quite lovely, isn’t it?” Caroline Wistfell asked. The two young women now knew each other at least three hours longer and were quite comfortable in their intimate cocoon. “I mean, the scenery. What with the hills and trees and all. I wonder if you don’t wish to stop the carriage at once and paint the landscape before you.”

Amelie looked out the window before answering her enthusiastic companion. The congested streets and tall buildings of London disappeared after the first half hour of their journey, and a green pastoral landscape dominated their view for quite some time. Even so, she felt unprepared for the grandeur of the countryside, wherein the colors of earth and sky dictated a richer blend of tints than previously on her palette. It was magnificent. She would like nothing better than to remain right here and do exactly as Miss Wistfell suggested. But she knew proprieties and—more to the point—could not

guess how much the governess appreciated her possession of artistic talent.

“Do you suppose sopranos pause in the middle of their day and sing out their hearts when ere they hear a mockingbird or lark chatter?” Amelie answered somewhat cynically.

But Caroline Wistfell met her head on. “Yes, I daresay they do. If they are truly inspired singers. If their music comes from their soul.”

The words seemed a challenge, one readily answered by someone like Arthur Warrens. But Lady Amelie reluctantly backed down.

“And the same must be said for the truly great painters of our time. Joshua Reynolds, surely. Gainsborough. Romney. Our own dear Mr. West, who died but recently,” Amelie said carefully.

“Oh yes, I know. Lord Stratfield appeared most eager to go up to town for the funeral. He greatly admired the American, as he does Arthur Warrens, whom you must add to your list, my lady.”

Amelie turned to look at her companion, wondering if the remark was as guileless as it seemed. But Miss Wistfell looked sincere enough, staring back at Amelie with her large blue eyes.

“Lord Stratfield already owns several of Warrens’ landscapes. There is a very large canvas of Westminster in the library.”

Is there indeed? Amelie wondered. She loved that painting and still regretted the need to sell it.

But then, her aunt and cousin very much wanted a trip to Bath that season, and necessity ruled over sentiment.

“I grant you Mr. Warrens might be included in such illustrious company,” she acquiesced. “But it surely is nothing to me. Lord Stratfield insists I finish the portrait my father began some years ago. He fancies our styles are similar and I should be able to pick it up without leaving a seam, so to speak.” She glanced out the window and saw Stratfield riding close beside their compartment. He turned to face her and seemed to be waiting expectantly. She dropped the curtain between them.

Miss Wistfell laughed then, and Amelie guessed her charade unmasked. The governess must have known her other identity from the start, appreciating the true nature of her business at White Ash. Amelie frowned, wondering at Miss Wistfell’s own relationship with her employer.

“Forgive me for laughing, my lady,” purred Miss Wistfell. “But Lord Stratfield willfully misrepresents the case. I can’t imagine you would wish to continue work on a portrait more than six years old, even if begun by your noble and talented father. The man in it is most certainly not the same one whom you prefer to shut from view. The nose is much altered. I should say the whole air, the whole bearing, of the subject is different. You mustn’t let on I’ve said it, but Lord Stratfield looks like a boy on the unfinished

canvas. And he, most decidedly, is one no longer.”

Miss Wistfell sounded as if she knew.

Thoughts raced through Amelie’s mind, coming too fast for sensible speech. Her father was only dead a year, and she naturally assumed the paint barely dry on the work she prepared to resume. Why had he stopped work so long ago? Why would Lord Stratfield wish for it to be completed after all this time? And the question irritated her for some time: why did it need completion by Amelie Wainwoode?

“Well, I can pass no judgment until I have actually seen the portrait,” said Amelie, casually, willing to commit to nothing. “And, I suppose I must take a better look at Lord Stratfield. I scarcely noticed his features,” she glibly lied.

Miss Wistfell slanted a glance towards Amelie knowing—as only another woman could—she had indeed noticed.

“Then you shall see for yourself. When I first came to White Ash, he was off on a campaign on the continent. When he returned, I recognized much belatedly the same man as him on the portrait. He would never forgive me for saying it, but I thought him much improved.” Caroline Wistfell smiled, sphinx-like, hinting only slightly at knowing things Amelie did not, and might not ever know.

Amelie wondered if this talk with Miss Wistfell came under the banner of ‘gossiping with

servants,' but sensibly reconsidered. A governess was neither below nor above stairs, and accustomed to treading carefully in between. Miss Wistfell certainly did not behave like a servant. And, besides, Amelie had to admit to more than a little curiosity about the household in which she intended to spend some months of her life.

"A campaign?" she asked quickly, holding on to a loose thread in Miss Wistfell's companionable speech. "Is Lord Stratfield a younger son, then? Or does he have a particular affinity for the military life? I have not heard it."

"And I daresay you have heard a great deal," mused Miss Wistfell. "As did I, before I came to White Ash. But, in truth, I never understood why he went off when he did, nor does anyone ever talk about it. He remains the only son of the late lordship, who was already dead at the time. Lord Stratfield was estranged from his mother then, though it is not my business to know the circumstances capable of separating a mother from her child. I only know when I came to White Ash, he was away, Lady Stratfield was ill, and a tiny baby demanded my full attention." Miss Wistfell sighed, perhaps in remembering she would soon be running about the fields with him again.

"Is it not unusual for a governess to be engaged for one so young? Might not a nurse be more fitting? Did his parents hire no elderly retainer to care for him?"

“Joshua’s parents? There is no one whom the little boy can call ‘mother’ or ‘father.’ Though I’m sure that he’ll have his suspicions when he’s older.” Miss Wistfell started to plait the ribbons on her bonnet and Amelie could see her hands shook quite aside from the rhythmic swaying of their carriage. “And, as for me, my circumstances led me to seek honest employment, preferably in the household of a gentleman. I accepted a rare opportunity and have no regrets.”

Both the words and a sudden defeated look on the woman’s face made Amelie realize Caroline Wistfell might not be as young as she originally thought her. The bold, bright look seemed suddenly a little faded, and more tired than would come about from chasing after a small boy. Amelie hated herself for feeling a rush of complacency on seeing it, and immediately sought a way to redeem herself from her own treacherous feelings.

“I understand,” she said sympathetically. “I would not be coming here myself if it were not necessary for me to earn something of my own keep. It is purely a matter of business, you see.” She winced as she said the last.

“And you a titled lady!” said Miss Wistfell in surprise, but with an apparent acceptance of companionship. “I’m sure there must have been hundreds of opportunities to make a successful match!”

Oh dear. Did the governess really think her so

old? Hundreds of opportunities? Two or three, perhaps.

“But it did not happen, my dear,” said Amelie on a note of superiority. “So far no one even tempts me.” She realized she blushed, and admitted to herself it was not quite true.

“Then we shall both be Lord Stratfield’s supplicants,” said Miss Wistfell, patting her companion’s hand. “We shall both rely on the whim of his lordship to keep us employed and happy.”

Amelie thought the latter beyond Stratfield’s responsibility, but said nothing. She briefly held her new friend’s hand in her own, and allowed the lush, rolling landscapes to imprint their splendid images into her soul.



The driver bellowed something and Amelie stirred herself into wakefulness. She had closed her eyes to green fields and dark wood, and now realized the broad blinding vision before her was smooth, still water, reflecting the brilliant rays of the late afternoon sun. Two days had passed since the start of their journey.

“It’s Lake Windermere,” Caroline Wistfell said in her ear, confirming Amelie’s happiest suspicions. “If you look just off to your right, you’ll see the village of Ambleside. There’s the church spire.

Ned kindly warned us of its approach, so we could see to our appearance before arriving at White Ash. I guess the good man is long accustomed to Lady Stratfield's vanities."

Vanities? Amelie realized she had scarcely given the lady a thought, having been so well informed by her aunt that Lord Stratfield's mother lived reclusively. She suddenly realized there might yet be another personality to reckon with during her stay at White Ash, and felt even more agitated than before.

"Are we very far?" Amelie asked, and started to feel for stray hairs and slipping pins.

"Very close, my lady. Ambleside was named by a very ancient Lord Stratfield, in honor of the wife he courted there. It's a very romantic story, but then, the whole area is charming. I suppose it is inevitable with all the lakes and waterfalls, mossy woods and green lawns. Quite a different scene from London, I know."

"I suppose my father thought so too. He spent many years of his life here, and I have no reason to believe he felt anything but happiness."

Miss Wistfell made no answer to this, and looked determinedly out the window.

"There!" she pointed again. "On the rising plain. Do you see the towers of White Ash?"

One could not miss them. Whatever Amelie envisioned the Stratfield country estate to look like, it did not measure to this. More like a French

chateau than the heavier, solid structures built by generations of British squires, White Ash rose through the tall pines and inevitable ash trees to assert its proud dominion over the lovely landscape. A symmetrical line of slim towers seemed like white lace against the blue sky and several small pennants waved frivolously from the ramparts. As such, this glimpse of White Ash would have been enough to hold in memory for a lifetime, but there was yet another chateau, in reflected detail, floating up from the smooth surface of Lake Windermere.

Amelie gasped her admiration, and felt she could forgive her father for desiring to stay here.

“It is lovely, isn’t it?” asked Miss Wistfell, with the pride of possessiveness. “It’s been home for me for so many years now. And yet I never seem to grow accustomed to its beauty. I can’t help but imagine you should wish to take some time off from your portraiture and spend an afternoon sketching White Ash. It would be something very special to take away with you—something to remember us by.”

The words were well meant, but it seemed Miss Wistfell made it clear that while *she* called White Ash home, it was no more than a stopover for Lady Amelie. And, indeed, how could it be disputed? Amelie regretted being here altogether.

A gentle rap against their door prompted Miss Wistfell to pull up the curtain on the far side of

the carriage, and wave cheerfully to Lord Stratfield. Amelie thought he seemed inordinately pleased at this pleasantry and felt a pang of guilt for her denials during their journey. She raised her hand to join Miss Wistfell's in greeting, but he already looked away, to where two workers leaned on their hoes in a large green meadow. Miss Wistfell pressed her hand to the glass and also acknowledged the two men.

"It won't be long before you get to meet everyone here, Lady Amelie," she reassured her companion.

"I will not be here long enough for it to matter. I will be busy with my work, you know." Amelie answered primly. She did not say but implied she little expected to socialize with the members of the household.

"But of course you will have much time to yourself! Lady Stratfield longs for good company—especially those who can tell her what's amiss in town! And his lordship will not always be around to sit for you. Even now, I believe he's to travel on to York."

"He will be away, then?" Amelie asked faintly. "Then I should be grateful for your company, inasmuch as you are now the only person here whom I know."

Caroline Wistfell chuckled. "But that won't be for long. Look who approaches—"

Amelie edged forward on her seat, preparing

herself for what she knew would be important introductions. They passed under a wide archway and through a white brick wall, and into the large park of the estate. But she only saw a little urchin, commonly dressed, with longish tousled dark hair.

The carriage came to a sudden stop and Amelie, seated precariously, almost fell to her knees. She heard Ned exchange a few words with the boy, and thought he might jump up onto the seat and drive the rest of the short distance to the house. But instead, the latch to the carriage rattled and released, and the newcomer broke into their small, private space. As the carriage moved on, the urchin threw himself into Miss Wistfell's open arms, and pressed himself against her slim breast.

Lady Amelie realized the boy was anything but common.

His hair was long, but well cut and shiny. His clothes, though made of cotton and flannel, were clean and showed only the signs of daily wear. And he quickly released himself, smiling and content, remembering his good manners.

"You are Lady Amelie Wainwoode," he said in a childish, but refined voice, and gave what would have been a bow had he not been perched on the cushions of the carriage. "I am Joshua Reynolds Ashworth, at your service."

Joshua Reynolds, indeed! These Ashworths were most serious in their artistic patronage, or at least, in their appreciation. Who else would have

so named a child?

“I am pleased to meet you, Master Ashworth. And happy to make the acquaintance of two people who promise to make my stay happy at White Ash.”

The little boy grinned up at her, and a shaft of sunlight fell across his face. Amelie knew that look almost at once. She recognized whose face this might have been before the experience of time and accidents of war changed it. The nose appeared babyish, but grew straight in a slender line up to his peaky brows. And the eyes, deep set, large, bright, were violet.

Caroline Wistfell obviously knew what she saw and understood what she thought. Amelie turned slightly and caught that knowing look in her eyes.

“But we’re not the only ones, Lady Amy,” said the boy familiarly, euphoniously falling into the use of a nickname Amelie had not heard since her father used it years before. “David wrote us all about you, and made Carstairs pull lots of interesting things out of storage. Paints and things.”

“Joshua, you must remember your manners,” said Miss Wistfell in a serious voice, but one kind enough to allow Amelie to realize discipline was probably a very casual affair here at White Ash.

“Oh yes, of course. And Lady Stratfield is very anxious to meet you too,” said the boy, missing the point of his governess’ reprimand altogether.

“I heard her tell Mrs. Carstairs to send for her immediately on your arrival.”

Amelie felt surprise and some gratification at this news but just nodded, unable to keep her gaze from Joshua’s face. He was a beautiful boy. She believed her judgment was not influenced by his startling resemblance to Lord Stratfield. She studied him with some objectivity, and thought of the customary problem of portrait painters who needed to apply some flattery onto their canvases.

Here, as would also be the case with his near relation, flattery would be unnecessary; nothing could be more complimentary than the beautiful truth.

Joshua studied her as intensely, though he must have been thinking very different thoughts.

“Do you like David?” he said at last, and the line of his brows lifted slightly. He looked out the window and waved frantically at the man. Miss Wistfell hiccupped.

“If you mean Lord Stratfield, your guardian, then I can only say I hardly even know him,” Amelie answered in an attempt to be serious. She began to understand why Miss Wistfell seemed unable to be strict with her charge of him. “And, as I shall need him to be very still and quiet while I paint his portrait, I daresay I shall hardly get to know him much better.”

“But Lord Wainwoode always let us talk while he painted. He let me play with his paints—and

paint on paper.” The poignancy in the boy’s voice matched Amelie’s own thoughts. She remembered the summer in Penzance, when she could not have been much younger than Joshua now, and how she too played happily underfoot. She wondered if her father remembered it when he allowed this child the liberty of his studio.

“And did you like Lord Wainwoode?” she asked, echoing his question to her.

He opened his mouth to answer, and Amelie saw the gap of a missing baby tooth, making him look very vulnerable. But the look—and the answer to her question—disappeared in the moment the carriage pulled up alongside the columns in front of White Ash. Joshua scrambled out the door and appeared at Stratfield’s side in less time than it took for Amelie to tie the ribbon on her bonnet. She glanced furtively from beneath its broad brim to see Stratfield quickly dismount and pull the child up into his arms. Joshua buried his face in the rough wool of the man’s riding coat and wrapped his legs around his waist.

One of the grooms held the swinging door open, and reached into the compartment to offer assistance to the two forgotten ladies.

Amelie came out first and stood unsteadily on the gravel drive. She stretched her stiff arms and looked curiously around her, thinking it a private moment. In this, she was wrong. But the person who witnessed her brief display seemed so familiar

Amelie felt an immediate bond.

At the head of the stairway, her arms crossed over her breasts, a woman stood so like little Joshua she could have been his mother—or grandmother. Tall, graceful, with dark hair holding only the smallest hint of gray, she wore her years as well as her simple dress and broad-brimmed straw bonnet. A bouquet of fresh cuttings lay indecorously wrapped in plain paper by her feet; she stepped over it as she started down the stone stairs.

“Lady Violet Stratfield,” murmured Miss Wistfell, reverently.

“Violet?” asked Amelie on a note of surprise.

“Why yes,” said Miss Wistfell and paused a moment before adding, “Mrs. Carstairs once told me the lady was named for the extraordinary color of her eyes.”

Amelie would have liked to ask more, but as the Lady of White Ash approached the carriage, the moment vanished.

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A writer for most of her life, Sharon Sobel is the author of several novels, short stories, and works of fiction. She earned her PhD in English Language and Literature from Brandeis University and is currently a professor of English at Norwalk Community College in Connecticut.

Business and pleasure have taken her and her husband, and their three children on travels throughout the world, where she does research for her writing. Other interests, include serving on the Board of Trustees of the local Historical Society, and the board of the newly-formed Connecticut and Lower New York (COLONY) Chapter of Romance Writers of America.

Though a native New Yorker, Sharon has lived with her family for almost twenty years in an eighteenth century Connecticut farmhouse, surrounded by stone walls, old plantings, and overgrown meadows. Her computer, somewhat newer than the antiques surrounding it, is rarely turned off.

Family Portrait, in its untried primary draft, was one of the first romance novels Sharon wrote. At the time, Lady Violet Stratfield seemed comfortably, joyfully, middle-aged to her. Now, somehow, the lady has become marvelously youthful and very wise.

You can email her at srsobel@mail.com.



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