

Where's My Hero?

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Against the Odds

Prologue

If any man knew how to hold his liquor, it was Jake Linley. God knew he'd had a lot of practice at it—and it was a good thing, too, otherwise he'd be staggering drunk at the moment. Unfortunately, no matter how much he drank this evening, it was not going to numb the bitter awareness of what he could never have.

Jake was tired, and hot, his caustic resentment seeming to rise with each moment he spent in the luxurious, crowded cavern of a ballroom. Separating himself from a group of friends, he wandered to a gallery that bordered the room, glancing at the sky that loomed dark and cool beyond a row of glittering windows. At the end of the gallery, Robert, Lord Wray, was surrounded by a smiling throng of friends and well-wishers, all of them congratulating him on the betrothal that had been announced an hour ago.

Jake had always liked Wray, a pleasant enough fellow whose combination of intelligence and unoffensive wit made him welcome in any company. However, at this particular moment, a feeling of contempt coiled inside Jake's stomach as he glanced at the man. He envied Wray, who didn't begin to realize the extent of his good fortune in having won the hand of Miss Lydia Craven. It was already being said that the match was more to Miss Craven's advantage than to Wray's, that her social position would be greatly advanced when her fortune was joined to a well-respected title. Jake knew better. Lydia was the true prize, regardless of her family's common origins.

She wasn't a conventional beauty—she had her father's black hair and his wide mouth, and a chin that was a bit too decisive for a woman. Her figure was slim and small-breasted, falling short of the voluptuous standards that were considered so desirable. But there was something irresistible about her—perhaps it was the charming absent-mindedness that made a man want to take care of her, or the intriguing touch of playfulness that lurked beneath her pensive facade. And of course there were her eyes...exotic green eyes that seemed out of place in such a sweet, scholarly face.

Sighing grimly, Jake left the overheated gallery, stepping out into the cool spring night. The air was humid and fecund, weighted with the fragrance of damask roses that burgeoned from the terraced gardens below. The wide, stone-flagged path stretched along a series of narrow box-edged beds filled with geraniums and a heavy misting of white feverfew. Jake wandered aimlessly along the path, almost to the

end, where it curled gently into a set of stone steps descending to the lower gardens.

He stopped suddenly as he saw a woman seated on a bench. Her profile was averted as she hunched over something she held in her lap. Being a veteran of London soirees and balls, Jake's first assumption was that the woman was probably waiting to meet a lover for a few stolen moments. However, he experienced an instant shock of recognition as he saw the dark silk of her hair and the decisive lines of her profile.

Lydia, he thought, staring at her hungrily. What in God's name was she doing out here alone, so soon after her betrothal had been announced?

Although he had made no sound, Lydia's head lifted, and she beheld him with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. "Dr. Linley."

Drawing closer, Jake saw that the object in her lap was a little wad of notes, which she had been scribbling with a broken pencil stub. Mathematical equations, he guessed. Lydia Craven's obsession with such masculine pursuits as math and science had been gossiped about for years. Although well-meaning friends had advised the Cravens to discourage such unorthodox interests, they had done the opposite, taking pride in their daughter's adroit intelligence.

Shoving the objects hastily into her reticule, Lydia sent him a frowning glance.

"Shouldn't you be inside with your fiancé?" Jake asked in a gently mocking tone.

"I wanted a few minutes of privacy." She sat up straighter, the shadows playing softly on the sleek lines of her body and the molded white silk of her bodice. The indentation between her winged black brows and the moody set of her mouth were so antithetical to the image of a starry-eyed bride-to-be that Jake couldn't restrain a sudden grin.

"Wray doesn't know that you're out here, does he?"

"No one does, and I'll thank you to keep it that way. If you will kindly leave—"

"Not before I offer my congratulations." He approached her lazily, his heartbeat accelerating to a swift, strong rhythm. As always, her nearness aroused him, quickening his blood and sending frantic messages to his nerves. "Well done, Miss Craven—you've caught an earl, and a rich one at that. I suppose there is no greater achievement than that for a young woman in your position."

Lydia rolled her eyes. "Only you could make congratulations sound offensive, Linley."

"I assure you, my good wishes are sincere." Jake glanced at the space on the bench beside her. "May I?" he asked and sat before she could refuse him.

They studied each other intently, their gazes locked in challenge. "You've been drinking," Lydia said, catching the scent of brandy on his breath.

"Yes." His voice had thickened slightly. "I've been toasting you and your fiancé. Repeatedly."

"I appreciate your enthusiasm for my betrothal," Lydia said sweetly, pausing with expert timing before adding, "or is it enthusiasm for my father's brandy?"

He laughed gruffly. "Your betrothal to Wray, of course. It warms my cynical heart to witness the ardent devotion you display for each other."

His mockery brought a flush of annoyance to her face. Lydia and the earl were hardly the most demonstrative of couples. There were no intimate glances, no seemingly accidental brushes of their fingers, nothing to indicate even a modicum of physical awareness between them. "Lord Wray and I both like and respect each other," Lydia said defensively. "That is an excellent foundation for a marriage."

"What about passion?"

She shrugged and tried to sound sophisticated. "As they say, that is only fleeting."

Jake's mouth twisted impatiently. "How would you know? You've never felt a moment of real passion in your life."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because if you had, you wouldn't be entering into a marriage that contains all the warmth of last night's table scraps."

"Your characterization of my relationship with Lord Wray is completely wrong. He and I desire each other a great deal, if you must know."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes I do! But I refuse to divulge details of my private life merely to prove you wrong."

As Jake stared at Lydia, his body was flooded with longing. It seemed impossible that she would be wasted on a man as civilized and bloodless as Wray. He let his gaze fall to her mouth, the soft, expressive lips that had tempted and tormented him for years. And he reached out to close her upper arms in his hands, her flesh warm and supple beneath the layer of silk. He couldn't help himself—he had to touch her. His fingers moved in a slow upward glide, savoring the feel of her. "You've let him kiss you, I suppose. What else?"

Lydia inhaled sharply, the framework of her shoulders light and tense in his hands. "As if I would answer such a question," she said unsteadily.

"It probably hasn't gone much farther than kisses. There's a certain look about a woman who's been awakened to passion. And you don't have it."

In the four years of their acquaintance, Jake had rarely touched her. Only on occasions of obligatory courtesy, such as helping her across a rough patch of ground, or when they had exchanged partners during a country-dance. Even during those perfunctory moments, his response to her had been impossible to ignore.

Staring into her shadowed green eyes, Jake told himself that she belonged to another man. And he cursed himself for wanting her, even as his body hardened with desire and all rational thought began to dissolve in a swirl of heat. He faced a lifetime of nights without her, of kisses they would never share, of words that could never be spoken. In the scheme of things, the next few moments would not matter to anyone but him. He deserved to have at least this much of her—he had paid for it with years of longing.

His voice was low and unsteady as he spoke. "Perhaps I should do you a favor, Lydia. If you're going to marry a cold fish like Wray, you should at least know what desire feels like."

"What?" she asked faintly, her gaze bewildered.

Jake knew it was a mistake, but he didn't give a damn. He bent his head and touched her lips with his, softly skimming, his large body trembling with the effort to be gentle. Her mouth was tender and sweet, her skin gossamer-smooth as he spread his fingertips along the edge of her jaw. Catching a light, elusive taste of her, he searched for more, the pressure of his mouth intensifying. Lydia's hands fluttered against his chest...he sensed her indecision, her surprise at the reverence of his embrace. Grasping her wrists carefully, Jake pulled them around his neck. His tongue searched the hot silken depths of her mouth, the slight penetration bringing him infinite pleasure. He wanted to fill her in every possible way, to sink inside her until he found the relief he had craved for so long.

Lydia's helpless response destroyed the remainder of his self-possession. She leaned hard against his chest, one of her slim hands sliding beneath his coat to find the body heat that was trapped between the layers of his garments. Her touch excited Jake beyond bearing, beyond sanity, and he realized incredulously that it wouldn't take much more than this for him to explode in climax. His body was clenched and hard all over, his veins throbbing with unspent desire. The effort of making himself let go of Lydia drew a groan from behind his tightly clenched teeth. He tore his mouth away from hers, breathing harshly as he fought for self-control. Sardonicly he reflected that with all his experience, he had never been so unraveled by a mere kiss...one from a virgin, at that.

Struggling to her feet, Lydia tugged at her gown and straightened her skirts, while the night air made her shiver. After a long time, she spoke with her face averted. "That was quite instructive, Linley," she managed to say breathlessly. "But from now on, I shan't require any more lessons from you." And she left him with impetuous strides, as if she could barely keep from breaking into a run.

Chapter 1

There were two ways to pick a husband—with your head or your heart. Being a sensible young woman, Lydia Craven had naturally done the former. Which was not to say that she didn't care for her future husband. As a matter of fact, she was very fond of Robert, Lord Wray, who was kind and affable, with a quiet charm that never grated on the nerves. He was handsome in an approachable way, his refined features providing the perfect framework for a pair of intelligent blue eyes and a smile that was employed somewhat judiciously.

There was no doubt in Lydia's mind that Wray would never object to her work. In fact, he shared her interest in mathematics and science. And he mingled easily with her family—her unconventional, close-knit family, which had been blessed with enormous wealth but possessed a singularly undistinguished pedigree. It was a high mark in Wray's favor, that he could so easily overlook Lydia's ignoble ancestry...but then, as she had reflected wryly, a prospective dowry of a hundred thousand pounds would be a savory condiment to even the most plebeian of dishes. Since Lydia's come-out at the age of eighteen two years earlier, she had been ardently pursued by a legion of fortune hunters. However, as a peer who had come into his own sizeable inheritance, Wray had no need of Lydia's money—another mark on his side.

Everyone approved of the match, even Lydia's overprotective father. The only mild objection had come from her mother, Sara, who had seemed vaguely perturbed by her determination to marry Wray. "The earl seems to be a fine, honorable man." Sara had said while she and Lydia had wandered through the gardens of the Craven estate in Herefordshire. "And if he is the one that you've set your heart on, I would say that you've made a good choice...."

"But?" Lydia had prompted.

Sara had stared thoughtfully at the rich planting of golden kingcups and yellow irises that lined the neat, brick-paved walkway. It had been a warm spring day, the pale blue sky embossed with fleecy clouds.

"Lord Wray's virtues are indisputable." Sara had said. "However, he is not the kind of man that I imagined you would marry."

"But Lord Wray and I are so much alike." Lydia had protested. "For one thing, he is the only man of my acquaintance who has actually bothered to read my article on multidimensional geometry."

"And well he should be admired for that," Sara had said, her blue eyes sparkling with sudden wry amusement. Although Sara was an intelligent woman in her own right, she had freely admitted that her daughter's advanced mathematical reasoning was far beyond her own understanding. "However, I had hoped that you would someday find a man who might balance your nature with a little more warmth and irreverence than Lord Wray seems to possess. You are such a serious girl, my dearest Lydia."

"I'm not *that* serious," she had protested.

Sara had smiled. "When you were a little girl, I tried in vain to coax you to paint pictures of trees and flowers, and instead you insisted on making lines to demonstrate the difference between obtuse angles and orthogonal ones. When we played with blocks and I began to build houses and towns with them, you showed me how to construct a dihedral pyramid—"

"All right, all right." Lydia had grumbled with a reluctant grin. "But that only serves to demonstrate why Lord Wray is perfect for me. He loves machines and physics and mathematics. In fact, we're considering writing a paper together about the possibility of vehicles being powered by atmospheric propulsion. No horses necessary!"

"Fascinating," Sara had remarked vaguely, leading Lydia away from the paved path and wandering to a wildflower meadow that stretched beyond a grove of fruit trees.

As Sara had lifted her skirts ankle-high and waded among the thick carpeting of violets and white narcissi, the sun shining on her chestnut hair, she had looked far too young to be a matron of forty-five. She had paused to scoop up a clump of violets and inhale their heavy perfume. Her speculative blue eyes had regarded Lydia over the brilliant knot of flowers. "In between all these conversations of machines and mathematics, has Lord Wray ever kissed you?"

Lydia had laughed at the question. "You're not supposed to ask your daughter things like that."

"Well, has he?"

As a matter of fact, Wray had kissed Lydia on many occasions, and Lydia had found it enjoyable. Of course, she had led an extremely sheltered life, and she'd had no basis for comparison, except...

Suddenly the image of Jake Linley had appeared in her mind, his dark golden head bending over hers...the sweet, dark fire of his kiss, the pleasure of his hands on her body...and Lydia had shoved the thought away immediately, as she had a thousand times before. That night had been an anomaly that she would do well to forget. Linley had only been toying with her—the kiss had been nothing more than a prank fueled by one glass of brandy too many. She had not seen Linley at all in the three months since then, and when they next met, she would pretend to have forgotten all about the episode.

"Yes," she'd admitted to her mother, "the earl has kissed me, and it was very pleasant."

"I'm glad to hear it." Sara had let the violets spill from her fingers in a vibrant shower of fluttering petals. She'd rubbed her perfumed fingertips behind her ears and darted a slightly mischievous glance at Lydia. "I would not wish for your marriage to be mostly cerebral in nature. There are many joys to be found in a husband's arms, if he is the right man."

Lydia had hardly known how to reply. Suddenly she'd felt heat gathering at the crests of her cheeks and the tips of her ears. Although Sara was discreet about such matters, it had always been obvious that Lydia's parents were a passionate couple. There were times that her father would make an oblique remark at the breakfast table that would cause Sara to splutter in her tea...times when their bedroom door was inexplicably locked during the middle of the day...and then there were the private glances her father would sometimes send her mother, somehow wicked and tender at the same time. Lydia had to admit that Wray had never looked at her that way. However, few people ever experienced the kind of love that her parents shared.

"Mama, I know what you are wishing for," Lydia had said with a rueful sigh. "You want all of your children to find true love, as you and Papa have. But the odds of that happening to me are approximately one in four hundred thousand."

Long accustomed to her daughter's habit of translating everything into numbers, Sara had smiled. "How did you decide that?"

"I started with the number of eligible men in England, and estimated how many of them might be appropriate for me in terms of age, health, and so forth. Then I assessed the number of possible outcomes to meeting each one of them, by observing a random sampling of our married acquaintances. At least half have fallen into indifference for each other, a third have been separated by death or adultery, and the rest are content, but not what anyone would call soul mates. According to my calculations, the chance of finding true love compared to the number of total possible outcomes for the process of husband hunting is one to four hundred thousand. And with odds like that, I will be far better off marrying someone like Lord Wray, rather than wait for a lightning strike that may never happen."

"Good Lord." Sara had exclaimed, clearly appalled. "Lydia, I cannot think how a child of mine has come to be so cynical."

Lydia had grinned. "I'm not cynical, Mama. Just realistic. And I've gotten it from Papa."

"I'm afraid so," Sara had said, briefly raising her gaze heavenward, as if in supplication to some inattentive deity. "Dearest, has Lord Wray ever told you that he loves you?"

"No, but that may come in time."

"Hmmm," her mother had said, staring at her dubiously.

"And if not," Lydia had said cheerfully, "I'll have all the time I want for my mathematical studies." Seeing how distressed Sara appeared to be by her irreverence, Lydia had gone and hugged her impulsively. "Mama, don't worry," she'd said into her mother's flower-scented hair. "Everything will be all right. I'll be very, very happy with Lord Wray. I promise."

* * *

Sara soaked in a large porcelain bathtub, hoping that the steaming water would help ease the tension in her shoulders and back. The tiled bathing-room was lit by a single lamp, the gentle flame shining softly through the etched-glass globe. Sighing, she rested her head against the mahogany rim of the tub and considered what to do about Lydia. Her other children, Nicholas, Ash, Harry and Daisy, were always getting into scrapes and charming their way out of trouble. Lydia, on the other hand, was responsible, intellectual and self-controlled, possessing a head for numbers that rivaled her father's.

Since her come-out two years earlier, Lydia had kept her suitors at bay with a distant friendliness that had led many disappointed young men to claim that she was made of ice. That was far from the truth. Lydia was a warm and affectionate girl, with a reserve of deep passion that was waiting to be tapped by the right man. Unfortunately, Lord Wray was not that man. Even after a six-month courtship, he and Lydia showed no signs of having fallen in love. To Sara, their amicable relationship seemed more like that of a brother and sister than of two lovers. But if Lydia was content with the arrangement—and she certainly seemed to be—was it right to offer any objections? As a young woman, Sara had been allowed the freedom to find her own husband, and her choice had been unconventional by anyone's standards. Lydia certainly deserved the same opportunity.

Thinking back to the days of her courtship with Derek Craven, Sara slid a bit lower into the water, while her toes idly pushed soapsuds from one side of the tub to the other. Back then Derek had been the owner of the most notorious gaming club in England, making a fortune by exploiting the greed of his aristocratic patrons. By the time Sara had met him, Derek had already been a legendary figure, a penniless bastard who had eventually become the wealthiest man in London. No one, least of all Derek himself, would have claimed he was a feasible match for a young woman as unworldly as Sara had been. And yet they had been drawn together irresistibly, too desperate for each other to make any other choice.

That was what bothered her about Lydia and Lord Wray, Sara realized. One had the sense that their relationship would always remain at a safely tepid level. Of course, Sara was well aware that in upper circles love matches were considered to be tastelessly provincial. However, she had come from the country, raised under the tender guidance of two parents who had loved each other deeply. As a young woman she had wanted to find that for herself, and as a mother, she certainly wanted no less for her children.

Sara was so intent on her thoughts that she did not hear the sound of someone entering the bathing-room. Suddenly she was startled by the sight of a waistcoat sailing to the wooden chair in the corner... followed immediately by a dark silk necktie. As she began to sit up, a pair of muscular forearms slid around her from behind, and she felt her husband's gentle mouth at her ear. Slowly he pulled her back against the warm porcelain wall of the tub.

"I missed you, angel." he whispered.

Smiling, Sara relaxed back against him and toyed with the edges of his rolled-up shirtsleeves. Derek had been away in London for the past three days, negotiating a deal between his telegraph company and the South Western railway to lay new telegraph lines along the tracks. Although she had kept herself busy in his absence, the days—and nights—had seemed very long indeed.

"You're late," she said, her voice tipped with a flirtatious note. "I expected you to return by suppertime. You missed a very fine sturgeon."

"I'll have to dine on you, then." His large hands plunged beneath the water.

Giggling, Sara turned to face him, and her mouth was instantly captured in a searing kiss that unsettled her breath and spurred her heartbeat to a new, urgent cadence. Her fingers gripped the hard planes of his shoulders until the fabric of his shirt was splashed with water. When their lips parted, a little skipping sigh came from her throat, and she lifted her lashes to stare into Derek's lavish green eyes. She had lived with him for more than twenty years, and yet that vibrant, audacious gaze still never failed to make her senses leap with pleasurable excitement.

Derek cradled the side of her face, his thumb smoothing the dappling of water flecks across her shining cheek. He was a big, black-haired man, with a scar on his forehead that lent an agreeable ruggedness to his handsome face. Outwardly the passing years had wrought little change in him, except to weave a few strands of silver into the hair at his temples. And as always, he possessed a devilish charm that often lulled people into forgetting the predatory nature that lurked beneath his elegant facade.

Derek's alert gaze moved over her face. "What is the matter?" he asked, sensitive to every nuance of her expression.

"Nothing, really. It's just that..." Sara paused and snuggled her cheek into the warm cup of his palm. "I talked to Lydia while you were gone. She freely admitted that she is not in love with Lord Wray—and she is determined to marry him anyway."

"Why?"

"Lydia has decided that she will probably never find a soul mate, and therefore she should choose a husband based on practical considerations. She claims that the odds of anyone attaining true love are negligible."

"She's probably right about that." Derek commented.

Drawing back from him, Sara frowned. "Do you mean to say that you don't expect our children to be as happy in their marriages as we are?"

"I wish for nothing less, for every single one of them. But no, I don't necessarily expect that they will each find true love."

"You don't?"

"A man or woman can spend a lifetime searching for a soul mate and never find one. In my opinion, Lydia is wise to choose prime goods like Wray, rather than wait until the best picks are all gone. I'll be damned if my grandson will be sired by some third-rate fortune hunter."

"Oh, good Lord," Sara exclaimed with a strangled laugh. "Between you and Lydia, I don't know who is more exasperating. What about hope, and romance, and magic? Some things cannot be explained by science, or measured in mathematical calculations." Reaching over the edge of the tub, she played with the dark hair revealed by the open neck of his shirt. "I waited for *my* true love, and look what it got me."

Sliding his hand behind her neck, Derek urged her face closer to his. "It got you twenty years of marriage to a ruthless scoundrel who can't keep his hands off you."

Her breath hitched with a laugh. "I've learned to live with that."

His mouth glided to the soft hollow behind her ear, while his fingertips roamed over her wet shoulders. "Tell me what you want me to do about Lydia," he said against her skin.

Sara shook her head and sighed. "There's nothing to be done. Lydia has made her decision, and one can hardly fault her choice. Now I suppose I shall have to leave everything in the hands of fate."

She felt Derek smile against her neck. "There's nothing wrong in giving fate a push in the right direction. If the opportunity presents itself."

"Hmmn." Considering various possibilities, Sara picked up a ball of soap and rolled it between her palms.

Derek stood and unfastened his shirt. He let the garment drop to the floor, revealing a lean, powerfully muscled torso and a thickly furred chest. His hot gaze slid along the water-blurred shape of her body. "Aren't you finished with your bath yet?"

"No." Sara smiled provocatively, running her soapy hands over her leg.

His hands moved to the fastenings of his trousers. "Then you'd better be prepared for some company," he said, and the note in his voice made her shiver in anticipation.

Chapter 2

In two days, Lydia would become Lady Wray. The weeklong celebration had already begun at the Craven estate, with nightly soirees, balls and lavish suppers. On Sunday, the festivities would conclude with a ceremony in the family chapel. Guests had come from all over England and the Continent to take part, until every private house, guest cottage and tavern in Herefordshire was filled. The twenty guest rooms in the Craven manor were all occupied, and visiting servants swarmed below-stairs like bees in a hive.

It seemed to Lydia that every question directed to her lately had centered around the subject of her nerves, with the general expectation that any proper young lady should be suffering from fits of bridal agitation. Unfortunately Lydia felt quite calm—a pronouncement that seemed to perturb everyone who heard it. Perceiving that her composure might

somehow reflect badly on Lord Wray, Lydia tried to work up a twinge of anxiety, a shiver, a quake or a twitch, all to no avail.

The problem was, marrying Lord Wray was so sensible that Lydia saw no reason to be nervous about anything. She wasn't even worried about the wedding night, for her mother had explained such matters in a way that had robbed them of any fearful mystery. And if Wray proved to be as adept at lovemaking as he was at kissing, Lydia rather expected to enjoy the experience.

The only thing that troubled Lydia was all of this infernal entertaining. Ordinarily she was accustomed to days of tranquility, during which she could ruminate and calculate as long as she wanted. Now, after approximately one hundred and twenty hours of endless feasting, toasting, talking, laughing and dancing, Lydia had had enough. Her mind was seething with ideas that had nothing to do with romance and matrimony. She wanted to have done with the wedding and be free to work on her latest project.

"Lydia," Wray chided with amusement as he interrupted her furtive attempts to write some notes during a huge soiree on Friday. "Working on your formulae, are you?"

Guiltily Lydia slipped a scrap of paper and a pencil stub into the little fringed silk bag that dangled from her wrist. She looked up at Wray, whose lanky form towered over hers. As always, his appearance was immaculate. His smooth, dark hair gleamed with a thin veneer of pomade, his evening suit was precisely tailored, and the knot of his black silk necktie was perfectly centered.

"I'm sorry," Lydia said with a sheepish smile. "But my lord, I just had the most interesting idea about the probability analysis machine—"

"This is a soiree," he told her with a playful wag of his finger. "You're supposed to dance. Or gossip. Or linger at the refreshment table. See all the young ladies enjoying themselves? That's what you should be doing."

Lydia sighed grumpily. "I've done all that for two hours, with at least four more to go before the evening is done. I've had the same conversation with ten different people, and I'm tired of discussing the weather and the condition of my nerves."

Wray smiled. "If you're going to be a countess, you had better get used to it. As a newly-wed couple, we'll be mixing in society quite a lot when the season begins."

"Lovely," Lydia said, and he chuckled.

"Come walk with me."

Taking his arm, Lydia accompanied Wray on a sedate stroll through the circuit of entertaining rooms. Wherever they went, they were greeted with approving smiles and murmured congratulations. Lydia knew that they made an attractive couple, both of them slender and dark-haired. It was obvious that Wray was a man of scholarly pursuits, with his fair complexion, his noble forehead and his beautifully manicured hands. There was nothing he loved better than long, intricate conversations concerning a wide variety of subjects. He was a sought-after guest for supper parties, where he would entertain the table with the perfect blend of wit and erudition. His academic dabbings were regarded with general approval, for a gentleman could follow his interests as long as he remained a dilettante and didn't seek to earn money from them.

They stopped to converse with a group of friends, and Lydia grinned ruefully as she saw all the signs of

Wray settling in for a long discussion. Using her painted silk fan as a screen, she rose on her toes to whisper to him. "My lord...let's slip away together and find a private place. The conservatory, or the rose garden."

The earl smiled and shook his head, answering in an undertone that no one else could hear. "Absolutely not. Your father might find out."

"You're not really afraid of him, are you?" Lydia asked with an incredulous smile.

"He terrifies me," Wray admitted. "In fact, of all the points that Linley made when he advised me not to propose to you, that was the hardest to refute."

"What?" Lydia stared at him with open-mouthed astonishment. "Which Dr. Linley—the old one, or the son?"

"The son," Wray replied with a grimace. "Damn, I didn't mean to let that slip out. Perhaps you would be so kind as to overlook that last remark—"

"I most certainly will not!" She scowled at the discovery. "When did Linley advise you not to propose, and what were his reasons? The intolerable ass, I'd like to tell him—"

"Lydia, hush," Wray counseled softly. "Someone will hear. It was nothing, just a brief conversation we had before I approached your father to ask for your hand. I happened to mention to Linley that I was going to propose to you, and he offered his opinion on the matter."

"A negative opinion, I gather." As Lydia struggled to control her temper, she felt a wash of color sliding over her face and throat. "What were his objections?"

"I don't remember."

Annoyance nearly suffocated her. "Yes, you do. Oh, don't be a gentleman for once, and tell me!"

Wray shook his head and replied firmly, "I shouldn't have been so careless with my words. It doesn't matter what Linley's objections are, nor anyone else's. I am resolved to have you as my wife, and that is that."

"Resolved?" Lydia repeated, making a comical face.

Wray touched her gloved elbow. "Let us join the others," he urged. "We'll have all the time in the world for private conversations after we're married."

"But my lord..."

He propelled her toward the gathering of friends, and they all proceeded to chat with relaxed idleness. Lydia found it impossible to keep her attention focused on the conversation. Silently she stewed and fumed, becoming increasingly irate. Even before now, she had considered Jake Linley to be the most provoking man she had ever known. How dare he try to dissuade the earl from marrying her! She wondered what he had told Wray—no doubt he had made her sound like a very bad bargain indeed.

Linley had done nothing but mock and annoy Lydia ever since they had met four years earlier, when she had twisted her ankle at a game of lawn tennis. It had been during a weekend party at a friend's estate, to

which many prominent families in Herefordshire had been invited. After Lydia had injured herself during an energetic volley, her younger brother Nicholas had helped her hobble to the shade of a luxuriant maple tree.

"I believe the Linleys are here." Nicholas had told her, carefully easing her down to a cloth spread on the velvety lawn beside the remains of a picnic they had enjoyed earlier. "You sit here while I fetch the doctor." Old Dr. Linley was a kind and trustworthy man, who had helped deliver the last two of the Craven brood.

"Hurry," Lydia had told him, managing a pained grin as she saw three eager young men approaching. "I'm about to be besieged."

Nicholas had grinned, suddenly looking exactly like their father. "If any of them tries to examine your ankle, just look queasy and threaten to cast your accounts all over him."

As her brother had scampered up the hill to the main house, Lydia had indeed found herself under siege from enthusiastic suitors. She'd been helpless to do anything but sit there while the throng of men had plagued her, one of them pouring a cup of water, another pressing a moistened cloth to her forehead, another bracing his arm behind her back in case she felt faint.

"I'm perfectly all right," she had protested, smothered by their attentions. "It's just a twisted ankle—no, Mr. Gilbert, there is no need to look at it—please, all of you—"

Suddenly the three ardent young men had been shooed away by a brisk masculine voice. "Go on, all of you. I'll see to Miss Craven." Reluctantly they'd turned tail and left, and the newcomer had lowered to his haunches before Lydia.

For a moment she'd actually forgotten the throbbing pain in her leg as she'd stared into the stranger's dark-lashed gray eyes. Although he'd been well dressed, he'd been a bit rumpled, his necktie a bit too loose, his coat unevenly pressed. He'd looked to be about ten years older than herself, possessing a masculine vigor that she'd found vastly appealing. Sometimes, extremely handsome men seemed a bit vacuous, perhaps even a little effeminate, in their physical perfection. But this one had been all male, with boldly drawn features and thick, wheat-colored hair that had been cropped close to the back of his neck. He'd smiled at her, his teeth a flash of white in his tanned face.

"You're not Dr. Linley," Lydia had said.

"Yes, I am." He'd extended his hand to her, still smiling. "Dr. Jake Linley. My father sent me in his stead, as he is deep in a glass of port and didn't fancy walking down the hill."

Lydia's fingers had been enclosed in a firm clasp that had sent a pleasant ripple of sensation along her arm. Good Lord, she had heard tales of the old doctor's dashing eldest son, but she had never met him before. "You're the one with the wicked reputation," she'd said.

Releasing her hand, he'd regarded her with laughing eyes. "I hope you're not the kind to hold a man's reputation against him."

"Not at all," she'd told him. "Men of ill repute are usually much more interesting than the respectable ones."

His gaze had slid over her in a quick but thorough investigation, starting at the tumble of her wavy black

hair, and ending at the protrusion of her toes from the frothy mass of her white ruffled skirts. One corner of his mouth had lifted in a coaxing half-smile. "Your brother said you'd hurt your leg. May I have a look?"

Suddenly Lydia's mouth had gone dry. She had never been so unnerved by anyone in her life. Her chin had dipped in a shallow nod, and she'd held very still as Jake Linley had grasped the hem of her skirt and eased it upward a few inches. His expression had become businesslike, his manner impersonal, but all the same she'd felt her heart begin to clatter madly in her chest. She'd glanced at his down bent head, while sunlight had spindled through the maple leaves and caused his hair to glitter with every shade from gold to dark amber. His large, gentle hands moved over her leg.

"Just a mild sprain," he'd said. "I would advise you to stay off it for the next couple of days."

"All right," she'd replied breathlessly.

Defly he'd bound the swollen ankle with a linen napkin purloined from a nearby picnic basket. "My bag is in the house," he'd murmured. "If you will allow me to carry you inside, I'll bind your ankle properly and apply some ice...and give you something for the pain, if you like."

Lydia had responded with a jerky nod. "I'm sorry to be such trouble." She had gasped as he'd lifted her carefully against his chest. His body had been hard and muscular, his shoulders sturdy beneath her hands.

"Not at all," he had replied cheerfully, adjusting his arms around her. "Rescuing injured damsels is my favorite pastime."

To Lydia's everlasting chagrin, that first encounter with Jake Linley had started a wild infatuation that had lasted approximately four hours. Later in the day she'd happened to overhear a snippet of conversation between him and another male guest at the weekend party.

"Damn, Linley," the guest had remarked, "now I see why you became a doctor. You've managed to get under the skirts of every attractive woman in London, including Craven's daughter."

"Only in a professional sense," had come Linley's sardonic reply. "And I assure you, I have absolutely no interest in Miss Craven."

The comment had hurt and mortified Lydia, deflating her romantic imaginings with unpleasant abruptness. From then on, Lydia had treated Linley with coldness whenever they'd met. Through the years, their mutual antipathy had increased until they couldn't be in the same room together without launching into an argument that caused everyone else to scurry for cover. Lydia had tried to be indifferent to him, but something about him provoked her to the depths of her soul. When she was with him, she found herself saying things she didn't mean, and brooding about their fractious encounters long after they had parted company. During one of their battles, Linley had given her the infuriating nickname of "Lydia Logarithms," which family and friends still occasionally used to tease her.

And now he had tried to thwart her betrothal to Wray.

Hurt and furious, Lydia thought once again of the night her betrothal had been announced...the astonishing moment when Linley had kissed her, and her own mortifying response to him. If his actions had been designed to mock and confuse her, he had succeeded brilliantly.

Bringing her thoughts back to the present, Lydia decided that she could not bear another moment of the inane chatter that surrounded her. She stood on her toes and whispered to her fiancé. "My lord, my head has begun to ache, and I want to find a quiet place to sit."

The earl regarded her with a concerned gaze. "I will accompany you."

"No," she said hastily, "there is no need for that. I'll go to a private corner somewhere. I would prefer you to remain with our friends. I'll return in a little while, when I am feeling better."

"Very well." A teasing glint entered Wray's blue eyes. "I half suspect that my dear Miss Lydia Logarithms is going to sneak away to puzzle over some mathematical formula."

"My lord," she protested, scowling at his use of the hated nickname.

He chuckled. "I beg your pardon, my sweet. I shouldn't tease you like that. Are you certain that you don't want company?"

"Yes, quite certain." Lydia gave him a forgiving smile and left him with a promise to come back soon.

As she made her way out of the crowded ballroom, it was all Lydia could do to keep from running. The air was thick with the smells of flowers, perfume, sweat and wine, and the endless hum of chatter made her ears ring. She had never wanted to be alone as much as she did in this moment. If only she could reach the privacy of her bedroom...but there was no way to get there without going through a gauntlet of people who would insist on stopping her for mind-numbing conversation. Spying her mother, who was standing with friends near the French doors that led to the outside gardens, Lydia went to her at once.

"Mama," she said, "it's stuffy in here, and my head hurts. Would you mind terribly if I disappeared for a little while?"

Sara stared at her with concern and slid a slender, gloved arm around her waist. "You do look rather flushed. Shall I send a servant to fetch you a headache powder from the housekeeper's closet?"

"No, thank you." Lydia smiled as her mother removed a glove and pressed a cool, soft hand against the side of her face. "I'm fine, Mama. I'm just...oh, I don't know. Tired, I suppose."

Sara regarded her with a gently perceptive gaze, sensing Lydia's frustration. "Has something happened, darling?"

"Not really, but..." Lydia tugged her mother aside and glowered as she whispered back to her. "Lord Wray just told me that Jake Linley advised him not to marry me! Can you conceive of such arrogance? I'd like to bludgeon him with the nearest heavy object, the intolerable, petty, selfish cad..."

"What reason did Dr. Linley give for his objection to the match?"

"I don't know." Lydia let out an explosive sigh. "No doubt Linley thinks that I'm beneath Wray, and that he could do far better than me."

"Hmmm. That doesn't sound like him." Sara stroked Lydia's back soothingly. "Take a long breath, darling. Yes, that's better. Now, there is no reason for Dr. Linley's opinion to distress you, as it seems to have had no effect on Lord Wray's desire to marry you."

"Well, it *does* distress me," Lydia muttered. "In fact, it makes me want to smash something. How could Linley have done something like this?" To her disgust, she heard a note of dejection in her own voice as she added, "I've never understood why he dislikes me so."

"I don't believe that is the case at all," Sara replied, giving her a comforting squeeze. "In fact, I think I may know the reason for Dr. Linley's opposition to your betrothal. You see, I *was* speaking to his mother just the other day when we happened to meet at the milliner's, and she confided to me that he—"

Sara broke off as she saw a new arrival in the ballroom. "Oh, the Raifords have arrived," she exclaimed. "Their daughter Nicole had her second child just a fortnight ago, and I must ask about her. We'll talk later, darling."

"But Mama, you have to tell me..." Lydia began, as her mother sailed away toward her friends.

The evening was becoming more aggravating by the minute.

What in God's name had Linley's mother said about him? Filled with frustration, Lydia went to the French doors and slipped outside. Without hesitation, she headed to the one place where she knew she could be alone—the estate wine cellar.

All through her childhood, the wine cellar had been her favorite retreat. She and her younger brothers had always been fascinated by the large underground room with three chambers, each filled with hundreds of racks of amber and green bottles papered with foreign labels. It was reputed to be one of the finest collections in England, stocked with an extravagant variety of rare and expensive champagnes, brandies, ports, sherries, burgundies, clarets and cordials.

In the farthest chamber, a bench, a cupboard and small table served as a place to uncork bottles and sample their contents. Lydia remembered countless games in which she and the rest of the Craven brood had played pirates, spies, or hide-and-seek in the shadowy recesses of the cellar. On occasion, she had sat at the wine table and worked out some mathematical puzzle, relishing the silence and the fragrance of aged wood and spice and wax.

Opening a heavy wood door, she headed down a short flight of stone steps. Lamps had been left burning to accommodate the underbutler's frequent trips to the cellar to obtain wine for the guests. After the hubbub upstairs, the blessed quietness of the cellar was an unspeakable relief. Lydia sighed deeply and began to relax. With a rueful smile, she reached up to rub the taut nape of her neck. Perhaps she was finally experiencing bridal jitters, after worrying for days that she *didn't* have them.

A quiet voice disrupted the shadowy serenity of the cellar.

"Miss Craven?"

Looking up with a start, Lydia beheld the man she least wanted to see. Ever.

"Linley," she said grimly, dropping her hand to her side. "What are you doing here?"

Chapter 3

In the musty, densely shadowed atmosphere, Jake Linley's tawny, sunlit coloring was even more striking than usual. Somehow it did not seem appropriate for him to be underground, even for a temporary visit to a wine cellar. Even though he was her adversary, Lydia had to acknowledge that he was one of the most attractive men she had ever met. Linley was not much older than Wray, but he was infinitely more seasoned. His worldliness was all the more apparent because of the way he tried to conceal it with irreverent lightness. Seeing the ironic flash of his smile, and the loose, easy grace of his movements, one could easily be deceived by his devil-may-care charm. But his eyes betrayed him. The light gray depths were filled with the weariness of a man who had seen and experienced need far too much and had never quite found a way to escape the painful realities that his profession occasionally forced on him.

"Your father gave me leave to have a look down here," he said.

That was hardly unusual. Lydia was well accustomed to the interest that visitors took in her father's renowned wine collection. However, it was a singular stroke of bad luck that Linley should be perusing the racks at the same time that she had come here in search of privacy.

"Have you seen enough?" Lydia asked, not without an inward wince at her own rudeness. Her mother had raised all the Cravens with inviolable standards of politeness. However, Jake Linley's presence was too much for her to endure. "Because I would like to be alone."

His head tilted slightly as he fixed her with an intent stare. "Are you feeling unwell?" he asked. "If so—"

Lydia interrupted with a scornful sound. "Please don't bother to display any concern for my welfare. I know better."

Jake Linley approached her slowly, coming to stand in a pool of subdued lamplight. How unfair it was for a man to be so perfidious and yet so handsome. He wore the austere scheme of formal black-and-white, with a gray silk necktie that flattered his translucent eyes. The perfectly fitted clothes hung elegantly on his lean, powerful frame, but as always, he seemed just the slightest bit disheveled, as if he had been stretching and tugging irritably at the confining garments. The subtle signs of disarray practically begged a woman to neaten his necktie and straighten his waistcoat, the intimate gestures that a wife would make toward her husband.

"Why do you think my concern is false?" he asked.

Resentment—and some even more painful, unidentifiable emotion—caused tight knots to form in Lydia's stomach. "Because I know how you tried to convince Lord Wray that I wasn't good enough for him, and thereby prevent him from proposing to me."

His eyes narrowed. "Is that what he told you?"

"Not in those exact words. But you did advise him not to marry me, and for that I will never forgive you."

Linley sighed somewhat grimly and stared at the ancient stone-flagged floor. He seemed to be contemplating some complex problem that had no answer, much as Lydia had felt the first time she had realized that a negative number could have no square root.

"You're right," he admitted flatly. "I did advise Wray not to marry you."

"Why?"

"Does it matter now? Wray disregarded my counsel, you accepted his troth, and the matter will be concluded in about thirty-eight hours."

Lydia regarded him with sudden sharp interest. "Counting down the hours, are you?"

At that undirected shot, Linley actually backed away a step. His eyes glinted warily, as if she had struck too close to a vital secret. "I will leave you to your privacy, Miss Craven. My apologies for disrupting your solitude."

He turned and left, while Lydia glared after him. "You'll apologize for that, but not for what you said to Lord Wray?"

He paused momentarily. "That's right," he said without looking at her, and ascended the steps.

Lydia strode to the farthest chamber and dunked herself onto the creaking wooden chair. Slamming her silk purse on the table, she shouted a frustrated groan and dropped her head in her hands. A soon-to-be bride should not feel this way, confounded and agitated and angry. She should be happy. Her head should be filled with dreams. In all the novels that she had read, a girl's wedding day was the most wonderful occasion of her life. If that was true, then she was once again out of step with everyone else, because she wasn't looking forward to it at all.

She'd always wanted so badly to be like everyone else. She had always tried to emulate her friends and pretend interest in dolls and indoor games, when she had infinitely preferred to climb trees and play army with her brothers. Later, when her female cousins had been absorbed in fashion, romantic intrigue and other girlish amusements, Lydia had been drawn into the fascinating world of mathematics and science. No matter how much her family loved and protected her, they could not shield her from the snide rumors and whispered asides, implying that she was unfeminine, unconventional... peculiar.

Now she had finally found a man who was universally regarded as a splendid catch, and he even shared her interests. When she married Lord Wray, she would finally belong. She would be part of the crowd, instead of standing apart from it. And that would be a relief.

Why, then, wasn't she happy?

Lydia rubbed her aching temples as she worried silently. She needed to talk to someone who was wise and understanding and could help clear away the inexplicable pangs of disappointment and longing that Jake Linley caused. Her father. The thought soothed her immediately. Yes, she would find her father later tonight. She had always been able to tell him anything, and his advice, though bluntly worded, was always reliable. Feeling marginally better, she pulled a wad of paper and a pencil from her purse and arranged them on the table. Just as she began to write a long string of numbers on a scrap of paper that had already been blackened with previous scribbling, she heard the sound of footsteps.

Scowling, she looked up and beheld Linley's setface. "Why are you still here?"

"It's locked," he said curtly.

"The outside door? But that's not possible. It would have to have been barred from the outside."

"Well, it has. I put all my weight on it, and the damned thing wouldn't budge."

"There's another door in the second chamber, that leads up to the butler's pantry," Lydia informed him. "You can leave that way."

"I've already tried that. It's locked as well." Frowning, Lydia propped her chin on her hand. "Who would have barred the outside door, and why? It must have been an accident. No one would have reason to lock us in here together...unless..."

"Unless?"

"It could have been Eugenia King," Lydia said wrathfully. "She's wanted revenge on me ever since I managed to catch Lord Wray, when she had set her cap for him. Oh, she would love to cause a scandal by contriving to have me compromised by a libertine like you, not two days before my wedding." As another thought occurred to her, she shot him a slitted glance. "Or perhaps *you* arranged for this. It could be part of your plan to thwart my wedding to Wray."

"For God's sake," he said irritably, "I was in the cellar first, remember? I had no idea you were going to appear. And I don't care whether you marry the earl or not. I only gave my opinion when he asked for it."

Dropping the pencil to the table, Lydia turned in the chair to face him. Her indignation boiled over as she replied, "Apparently you gave it with great enthusiasm. No doubt you were all too happy for the opportunity to make derogatory remarks about me."

"I didn't make derogatory remarks about you. I only said—" Linley closed his mouth abruptly.

"What?" Lydia prompted, clenching her fist against the scarred surface of the table.

As his gaze searched hers, the silence turned to thick and intimate that Lydia could hardly breathe. For the first time, she and he had the freedom to do or say whatever they wished, and that made the situation potentially...explosive.

After a long pause, Linley asked softly, "Why do you give a damn what I think?"

Feeling trapped, Lydia stood and moved away from him, heading to the nearby racks that extended from floor to ceiling. She ran her finger across a row of wax-sealed corks and inspected the gray smudge of dust that accumulated on her fingertip. "I suppose I can't resist trying to solve a puzzle," she said eventually. "And I've never been able to figure out the source of the discord between you and I. It's obvious to everyone that we've never gotten long. Is it because of my family's origins? The fact that my father was born illegitimately, and his gaming club days—"

"No," Linley said swiftly. "I would never hold that against him, or your family. I have nothing but admiration for your father and what he's made of himself. And my family's origins are not better than

yours. As everyone knows, the Linleys are hardly a bunch of blue bloods." He smiled darkly before continuing. "But as much as I esteem your father, there is no disputing that he's also manipulative and domineering, and he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants. And he also happens to be as rich as Croesus. In other words, Craven is the father-in-law from hell. Wray is completely cowed by him. Your father won't hesitate to make your husband dance to whatever tune he plays...and no marriage can tolerate that kind of interference."

"I won't let Papa bully him," Lydia said defensively.

Linley responded with a derisive snort. He half-sat on the table, one foot swinging idly. "Your husband needs the ballocks to stand up to Craven without your protection. And Wray doesn't have them. Sooner or later, he'll resent you for that, almost as much as you'll resent him."

Lydia would have given almost anything to be able to contradict him. "A man can change," she said.

"Even if he does, that won't alter the other pertinent fact."

"Which is?"

The uncertain lamplight made his rumpled hair shine like antiqued gold, and gleamed on his smooth-shaven skin. "You don't love each other."

Lydia was unable to speak, her pulse racing wildly as he approached her. She wasn't aware of backing away from him until she felt the wine rack against her shoulders and heard the rattle of bottles.

Moving closer, Linley braced his hands on either side of her, his fingers curling around the ironwork braces fashioned to hold the bottles in place. He stood much too close, his body towering over hers. Lydia's nostrils were filled with his fragrance, the freshness of soap overlaying the warm, salty maleness of his skin. She took a deep breath, and another, but somehow her lungs wouldn't seem to work properly. How strange it was, that until now she had never realized how big he was. She was above average height, and yet he loomed over her, his shoulders blocking out the frugal lamplight.

His fingers flexed on the ironwork. "You should marry a man who would sell his soul just to spend one night with you."

"How do you know that Wray doesn't feel that way about me?" she whispered.

"Because if he did, you wouldn't be so damned innocent right now." A flush crept over the crests of his cheekbones and the bridge of his nose. "If you were mine, I never could have waited all these months without—"

He broke off and swallowed audibly, his breath striking her lips in light, hot puffs. As he leaned closer to her, she could almost feel the animal heat of his body.

Her thoughts scattered wildly as she realized that he was going to kiss her. She felt the heat of his hands close around the back of her head, cradling, supportive. His face lowered to hers until everything blurred, and she closed her eyes. There was a velvety brush against the corner of her mouth...another at the vulnerable center of the lower lip. His mouth settled on hers by slow degrees until he had caught her in full, moist possession. Suddenly Lydia felt drunk, just like the time last Christmas when she'd had two large cups of rum punch and had spent the rest of the evening in a pleasant, knee-weakening fog.

She swayed dizzily and was immediately caught and held against the solid length of his body. He kissed her more deeply, nudging her lips apart so that he could taste her with gentle, urgent strokes. The pleasure of it shocked her. Her mouth opened feverishly beneath his, welcoming the hot, gliding insinuation of his tongue. He gave it to her slowly, making her writhe against him. Her fingers slid into his thick hair, pulling his head harder over hers, and a soft sound came from deep in his throat.

Abruptly he took his mouth from hers, gasping harshly. "Damn. I shouldn't have done that, I'm sorry." His thumb passed tenderly over the pliable curve of her lower lip, and he stared at her with a flare of longing that astonished her. "I'm sorry." he repeated. "I'll let you go now...." His arms loosened, but he seemed unable to take them from around her. "God, Lydia," he whispered hoarsely, and his head lowered again.

His mouth took hers compulsively, savoring her helpless response. Lydia felt his hands travel downward, one pressing her hips more tightly against his, while the other slid beneath the round weight of her breast, lifting it slightly. The heat of his fingers sank through the thick silk of her bodice. He stroked the stiffening peak with the pad of his thumb, circling lazily while he kissed her over and over, unlocking a greed that frightened her with its intensity.

With a low whimper, Lydia wrenched herself away from him, somehow making her way to the wine table. She sat down hard in the chair, drawing in huge gulps of air, while her damp hands pressed flat to the worn surface of the table.

Jake remained by the wine racks, resting his forehead against a shelf. Finally he stepped back and dragged a hand roughly through his hair. Lydia saw the tremor in his fingers and heard the deep shiver in his breath. "I've got to get out of here." he said gruffly. "I can't be alone with you."

Lydia waited until her heartbeat slowed before she attempted to speak. "Linley...Jake...what kind of game are you playing?"

"It's not a game." His pale eyes stared directly into hers. "I've wanted you since the first time I saw you."

"But that can't be true. I overheard you telling someone that you had no interest in me."

"When?"

"The first day we met, after you'd bound my ankle."

"You were only sixteen," he replied sardonically. "I would have sounded like a depraved old lecher if I'd admitted to being attracted to you."

"The night of my betrothal, when you kissed me...that was because you were attracted to me?"

"Why else would I have done so?"

Her cheeks burned at the memory. "I thought you were merely trying to embarrass me."

"You thought—" Jake began with an incredulous look, then broke off abruptly. "Hell. You're going to be married in two days. Is there any point in discussing it now?"

Lydia felt very odd, rather despairing and angry, as if she'd lost something she'd never had in the first place. As if she had somehow been cheated out of something. "You're right," she agreed slowly, "there is no point in discussing it now. Nothing would compel me to change my mind about marrying Lord Wray."

Jake was silent at that, his eyes shadowed, the set of his mouth vaguely sullen.

"Wray and I are compatible in every way," Lydia said, feeling the need to emphasize the point. "For one thing, he's the only man who has read my paper for the *Journal of Practical Science* —"

"I read it," he interrupted.

"You did?"

Linley smiled slightly as he saw her astonishment. "Only the first part."

"What did you think of it?"

"I fell asleep during the part about congruent and disjoint tetrahedra."

"Tetrahedra," Lydia corrected with a slight smile, knowing that to someone other than a mathematician, her paper would have been dull indeed. "Well, I hope I provided a good night's rest for you."

"You did."

She laughed, and they stared at each other for a moment of unexpected, artless delight. Slowly Lydia relaxed against the back of the chair. "If you don't like mathematics," she said, "then what *do* you enjoy?"

"Fishing for trout. Reading newspapers in coffeehouses. Walking through London at dawn." His gaze fell to her lips. "Kissing in wine cellars."

She bit back a smile at the roguish comment.

"Tell me what you like," he said.

"Billiards, and architecture, and water coloring— even though I'm wretched at it. I also like playing cards, but only with my father, as he is the only one who can ever defeat me." *And also kissing in wine cellars*, Lydia thought wryly. Standing, she rummaged through the cabinet beside the table, unearthing a corkscrew, a wax scraper, and a pair of tasting glasses. "I know something else you'll like," she said, gesturing with an empty glass to the rack nearest him. "Look to the right of the bottom row—the bottle with the gold and green label. A d'Yquem Sauterne... the nicest port you've ever tasted."

Crouching to reach the bottle, Jake sent her a quizzical glance.

"We may as well," she said. "Who knows how long we'll be trapped down here? Sooner or later the under-butler will come to fetch more wine, but in the meantime we may as well make the best of things."

Jake drew the bottle from the rack and brought it to the table. Expertly he ran the scraper around the seal of the cork, then reached for the transverse handle of the corkscrew. Lydia was mesmerized by the movements of his hands, so graceful and deft as he twisted the metal spiral into the cork and eased it from the glass throat of the bottle. Recalling the gentle skill with which those large hands had stroked her face and fondled her breast, Lydia felt a

twinge of pleasure low in her stomach.

After pouring two glasses of the heavy, purplish-red liquid, Jake gave one to her, seeming to exert special care not to brush her fingers with his own. "To your wedding," he said brusquely, and they clinked the glasses. As Lydia drank, the heady flavor of rare wine rolled over her tongue and trickled sweetly down her throat.

She resumed her seat in the chair, while Jake removed his coat and half-sat on the table. "What are you working on?" he asked, glancing at the paper she had left near her purse, with its peppering of mathematical symbols.

"I'm developing a set of formulae for a probability analysis machine. Some friends from the London Mechanical Museum are designing it, and they invited me to collaborate."

"What would you do with it?"

"It could be used to calculate the outcomes of games of chance, or even for more serious purposes, such as military or economic strategy." Lydia warmed to the subject as he listened attentively. "My friends—who are much more mechanically inclined than I—have devised a system that uses brass cogs to represent numbers and symbols. Of course, it will never be built, as it would require thousands of specialized parts, and it would take up an entire building."

Jake seemed vastly entertained by the notion. "All this work for a hypothetical machine?"

"Are you going to make jest of me?" Lydia asked with raised brows.

Jake shook his head slowly, continuing to smile. "What a remarkable brain you have." The comment did not sound mocking at all. In fact, his expression was admiring.

Lydia sipped at her port, trying to ignore the sight of the way his trousers pulled tautly over his muscular thighs. He was a resplendently masculine creature, a rake with soul-weary eyes.

With no effort at all, she could stand and lean into the inviting space between his thighs and pull his head to hers. She wanted to kiss him again, to explore his delicious mouth, to feel his hands stroke her body. Instead she remained seated and gazed up at him with a gathering frown. She couldn't help speculating on how many other women must have felt this same attraction to him.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I am wondering if you are as much of a rake as they say you are."

He considered the question carefully. "I'm not a paragon," he admitted.

"You have a reputation for seducing women."

Jake's face was inscrutable, but she sensed the discomfort that her comments had caused him. He remained silent for so long that Lydia thought he wasn't going to reply. However, he forced himself to meet her gaze and spoke stiffly.

"I've never seduced anyone. And I would never sleep with someone who had sought my professional services. But on occasion I do take what is offered to me."

The cool, dark interior of the cellar enclosed them in a cocoon, insulating them from the outside world, where unmarried girls did not discuss indecent subjects with wicked rakes. Lydia knew that she would never again have the chance to talk intimately with the man who had plagued and fascinated her for so many years.

"Why?" she asked softly. "Because you're lonely?"

He shook his head. "No, it's not loneliness. It's more of a need for...distraction."

"Distraction from what?"

Jake could have deflected the question easily. Instead, he stared at her steadily, his eyes bleak. "Without false modesty, I'm very good at what I do—but in my profession, encountering death and pain is inevitable. At times it's hell on earth, trying to help someone with a fatal wound or an incurable disease, having a husband beg me to save his life, or a child asking me not to let his father die. Often in spite of my best efforts, I fail. I try to find the right words, to offer comfort, to give an explanation of why things happen...but there are no words." His face was partially averted, but she saw a faint flush of color rise in his tanned cheek. "I remember the faces of every patient who has died under my care. And on the nights that I can't stop thinking about them, I need something...someone...to help me forget. At least for a little while." He glanced at her warily. "Lately it hasn't worked so well."

Lydia had never imagined that he would speak to her with such raw honesty. He had always seemed so eternally self-confident, so invulnerable.

"Why do you continue to be a doctor, if it causes you unhappiness?" she asked.

His throat tightened with a catch of laughter. "Because there are days when I manage to do the right things and help someone to survive in spite of all the odds. And sometimes I am called upon to deliver a baby, and as I look at the new life in my hands, I'm filled with hope." He shook his head and stared at the wall as if he were gazing across a great distance. "I've seen miracles. Once in a while, heaven smiles on the people who need it most, and they receive the greatest gift of all—a second chance at life. And then I thank God that I'm a doctor, and I know I could never be anything else."

Lydia stared at him with a stricken expression, while her heart seemed to contract with a peculiar, sweet pain.

Oh, no, she thought in a riot of confusion and panic.

In one scalding moment, all her smug complacency had been ripped away. She feared that she was in love with a man she had known for years...a man so familiar and yet so much a stranger.

Lydia said unsteadily, "I want to ask afavor of you."

His golden head lifted. "Yes?"

"Tell me the worst things about yourself. Be very honest—admit your worst faults, and make yourself sound as unappealing as possible."

He let out a low, rich laugh. "That's easy enough. But I'm not going to admit my faults without hearing about yours as well."

"All right," she said cautiously.

Jake took a sip of wine, his eyes narrowing slightly as he regarded her over the glass rim. "You first."

Perched on the edge of the chair, Lydia held her own glass in both hands and pressed her knees together tightly. She gave a resolute nod.

"To begin with, I am not socially adept. I don't like to make small talk, I'm terrible at flirting, and I don't like to dance."

"Not even with Wray?"

Lydia shook her head with an awkward smile.

"Perhaps you just haven't had the right partner," Jake said softly.

The rhythm of her breathing changed as their gazes meshed intimately. "Why have you never asked me to dance?"

"Because I don't trust myself to hold you in public."

Lydia colored all over and took a huge gulp of wine. She struggled to bring her mind back to her original line of thought. "More faults...well, I'm too impatient with people, and I hate inactivity, and I am something of a know-all..."

"No," he murmured with obviously manufactured surprise.

"Oh, yes," she replied, smiling ruefully in response to his teasing. "I always think I know best. I can't help it. And I hate to admit that I'm wrong. My family claims that I would argue with a lamppost."

Jake grinned. "I like strong-willed women."

"What about stubborn, unreasonable ones?" she asked with a self-deprecating grimace.

"Especially those, if they're as beautiful as you." He finished his wine and set the glass aside.

The compliment sent a ripple of pleasure through her. "Do you like to argue?" she asked breathlessly.

"No. But I like to make up afterward." His gaze stole over her body in an indiscreet sweep. "My turn now. We already know about my scandalous past. I'll also confess to a complete lack of ambition. I prefer to keep my life as uncomplicated as possible. I have few needs, aside from a nice house in town, a

good horse and the occasional trip abroad."

Lydia found that difficult to absorb. How different he was from her beloved father, whose appetite to succeed and conquer was seemingly limitless. The ability to be content with what one had... was that a fault or a virtue?

"What if you came into a large inheritance?" she asked, throwing him a skeptical glance. "Would you really give it all away?"

"To the first charity or hospital I could find," he said without hesitation.

"Oh." Frowning, Lydia regarded the blunted points of her knees through the layers of her skirts. "I suppose that marrying an heiress would be out of the question for you, then."

"Yes."

She continued to frown. "It would hardly be such a terrible fate, marrying into money. Having lots of servants, and nice things, and a large estate—"

"It's not what I want. Moreover, I would go hang before I became known to everyone in London as a damned fortune hunter."

"Even if it wasn't true?"

"It wouldn't matter if it was true or not. It's what everyone would say."

"Then we should add prideful to your list of faults," Lydia muttered, setting aside her glass.

"Without a doubt," he replied, his gaze daring her to protest. When she managed to hold her tongue, he smiled slightly and continued. "And unlike you, I have a great appreciation for the pleasures of inactivity. After a busy week of running about London seeing to patients, I like to laze about for hours, talking, drinking, making love..." He paused before adding frankly, "Particularly the last."

Lydia's brain suddenly conjured an indistinct image of his tawny body stretched over snowy white sheets. Dear Lord, what would it be like to make love with him for hours? "No doubt it is easy for you to find women who—" She stopped as her face flooded with color.

His face was inscrutable. "Usually."

"Have you ever fallen in love?"

"Once."

Lydia felt an unpleasant sting of jealousy. "Did you tell her how you felt?"

He shook his head.

Another question rose to her lips, despite the fact that Lydia didn't really want to know the answer. "Do you love her still?"

Pinning her in place with a speculative stare, he responded with a wordless nod.

Suddenly Lydia felt cold and miserable, when she had no right to be. Jake Linley was not hers. He had offered no promises or vows of love, he had only said that he wanted her. And despite her lack of experience, she was aware that love and desire could exist independently of each other.

"Is it someone I am acquainted with?" she asked dully. "Did she marry someone else?"

Jake stared at her in the burgeoning silence, his large body visibly tense. The way he leaned forward conveyed a sense of energy that would soon break free of all constraints.

Oh, the way he looked at her, his eyes light and hot in his shadow-tricked face. She would swear on her life that he felt more than mere desire for her. "Not yet," he said huskily.

Her heart began to slam against her ribs with almost frightening violence. "Who is she, Jake?" she managed to whisper.

He gave a soft groan and stood, hauling her impatiently against his body. "Who do you think she is?" he said, giving her a little shake. Then he seized her mouth with his.

The remnants of her self-possession shattered. Jake kissed her with tender fury, while his hands wandered compulsively over her body, molding her tighter, harder against him. "I adore every quarrelsome, terrifyingly logical inch of you," he said, dragging his mouth over her cheeks and chin and throat. "I love it that you're as smart as hell and not afraid to let anyone know it. I love your green eyes. I love the way you are with your family. My beautiful Lydia—"

"You idiot," she choked, tearing her lips away. She had never been so overwrought. "You *would* wait until thirty-eight hours before my wedding to tell me this!"

"Thirty-six and a half."

Suddenly the insanity of the situation struck Lydia as funny, and she began to gasp with laughter. "I love you, too," she said, overcome with a sense of the absurd. Jake kissed her more aggressively then, until her insides felt hot and molten, and her body ached with need.

She laid her hand on the side of his face, the masculine scrape of close-shaven bristle making her palm tingle. "You've never indicated that you felt anything for me other than scorn."

"I've never scorned you."

"You've been an absolute devil, and you know it."

He had the grace to look somewhat penitent. "Only because I knew that there was no chance of ever having you. It made me a little testy."

"Testy—" Lydia began indignantly, and he smothered her with his lips once more. Passion flared between them in a swift, white-hot conflagration. Panting, she opened fully to his demands, letting him explore her at will. His tongue teased hers, savoring the flavor of wine mingled with the intimate taste of her mouth. She felt the tremor that shook him, and gloried in the realization that he wanted her with a desperation that rivaled her own.

Ending the kiss abruptly, Jake held her at arms' length, as if their physical proximity posed a mortal danger.

Lydia curled her hands gently around his wrists. "Why are you so convinced that it would be impossible for us to be together?"

"Isn't that obvious?" he countered tightly. "How can I ask you to accept a life that is so much less than what you've always had? As Lady Wray you'd want for nothing, and your children would be members of the peerage. You can't give that all away to become a doctor's wife. More often than not, I have to leave the house in the middle of the night to attend to someone, and during the day the place is always overrun with patients. It's bedlam. And on top of that, I'm not wealthy, and I have no wish to be, which would require you to make a sacrifice that you would probably come to regret."

"I would have to sacrifice something in either circumstance," Lydia pointed out. "Either I marry a peer who doesn't love me, or a professional man who does. Which would cause me more regret?"

"Before tonight, you had no objection to marrying without love," he said sardonically. "Why does it suddenly matter?"

"Because I didn't know how you felt! You never gave me a reason to hope. And if I couldn't have you, I thought I might as well take Lord Wray." She rubbed her wet eyes with the heels of her hands. "I've always cared for you—why else do you think we perpetually strike sparks off each other?"

His mouth twisted wryly. "I just thought I had a special talent for annoying you."

A breathless laugh escaped her, and she seized the lapels of his coat in her hands. "I want you," she said urgently. "I want you in every way, forever."

He was shaking his head before she even finished the sentence. "You might change your mind later. Do you really want to take that risk?"

Lydia was no coward, nor was she a fool. She understood how many obstacles lay between them, and how difficult it would be for two such strong-willed people to accommodate each other. But she was a Craven, and Cravens were notoriously relentless when it came to getting what they wanted. "I'm a gambler's daughter," she pointed out. "I'm not afraid of taking a risk."

Jake regarded her with a rueful smile. "What about making the sensible choice?"

"Some choices are so important that they have to be made by the heart."

Taking her hand, he kissed her fingertips one by one. "When did you decide that?" he asked from behind the screen of her slender fingers.

Lydia grinned recklessly as she sensed that his resistance was deteriorating. "Two minutes ago."

"Don't allow your decisions to be influenced by physical desire," he warned gently. "Trust me, when the afterglow has faded, you will see things in an entirely different light."

Although Lydia was well informed about physical passion, that particular word was unfamiliar. "What do you mean, 'afterglow'?"

"God help me, I want to show you."

"Then do," she said provocatively. "Show me what an afterglow is, and when it's gone, we'll see if my feelings extend beyond physical desire."

"That could be the worst idea I've ever heard."

"One little afterglow," she coaxed. "It shouldn't take too much effort. I already feel as if a thousand fireflies are dancing in my stomach."

"Definitely the worst," he said darkly.

Determined, she brought her body against his and stood on her toes to embrace him. Her soft mouth grazed his cheek and jaw, while her hand glided down the exciting length of his body, from the solid plane of his chest to the sturdy vault of his ribs. And lower. Excited and abashed, she explored the hard, heavy rise of his erection, her fingers curving over the jutting shape. He groaned faintly and caught her wrist. "My God. No, wait... Lydia, I'm dying for you... for so long I..." He pulled her hand away and fumbled at the back of her gown, popping silk-covered buttons from the tiny loops that tethered them.

She felt the bodice sag, the heavy celery-green silk dropping to the damp crooks of her elbows. Breathing heavily, Jake lifted her and sat her on the table then reached for the front of her corset. He displayed an outrageous familiarity with female undergarments, unhooking the lattice of stays with an ease that even Lydia couldn't have matched. The corset, still warm from her body, was dropped heedlessly to the floor, and her body was left soft and unconfined save for the fragile muslin of her chemise. Lydia swallowed hard, experiencing a flicker of uncertainty as his large body came to stand between her thighs, his trouser-clad legs nearly disappearing in the gleaming mass of her skirts.

"For a man who claims not to be a seducer," she said, "you show a remarkable lack of hesitation."

His fingertips brushed the strap of her chemise over her shoulder. "I'm making an exception for you."

Her shaky laugh ended in a soft moan as she felt his hot, moist mouth graze the side of her neck. He murmured soft words of reassurance as he held her, caressed her, nudged her chemise ever lower until she was obliged to pull her arms completely free of it. Bending her backward, hooking his supportive arm beneath her, he nuzzled the tender weight of her breast. His breath teased the pale pink nipple, and his lips rubbed lightly over the very tip. Finally, after she was flushed and taut, and pleading for more, he drew the entire peak into his mouth. His tongue swirled over her in velvety passes, preparing her for the exquisite nip of his teeth.

She arched up to him in unequivocal surrender, amazed at how easy it was to trust him. It seemed impossible that she could have thought of him as her adversary, this man who made her feel so cherished and safe. Even in her innocence, she sensed the ferocity of his desire, but his every movement was exquisitely gentle and loving. His hands stole beneath her skirts, caressing the shape of her legs through the layers of silk stockings and muslin drawers. Entranced by his softly questing kisses, Lydia didn't notice that he had untied the tapes of her drawers, until she felt him tugging them down past her hips.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered, pausing to cuddle and reassure her. "I just want to give you pleasure. Let me, Lydia, let me touch you..."

Unable to resist him, she relaxed into the hard curve of his arm, shivering a little as he pulled the drawers

from her legs. His fingers slipped behind the vulnerable back of her knee, sliding easily over the thin veil of silk stocking. He left trails of fire wherever he touched, inside her thighs, down to her ankles, gliding along the outside of her legs until he reached the naked curve of her hip. Panting for breath, she focused on that warm, large hand, suddenly wanting him to touch her in the secret place between her thighs, where she was damp and pulsing and swollen. As she felt the curve of his smile against her cheek, she realized that he was teasing her deliberately.

"Jake," she gasped. "Please. What you're doing...it's unbearable, I'm going mad ..."

"Then I'll have to do it some more," came his devilish whisper, and he traced a light, tormenting circle inside her thigh.

A whimper caught in her throat, and she clutched at his shoulders, her fingers digging into the resilient muscle. He was merciless, letting his fingertips graze the edge of the dark triangle of curls between her thighs. Finally, when her need had built to an urgency that was almost painful, she felt him part the plump cleft and stroke the flesh that ached so sweetly.

"There," he murmured, his fingers circling the slick opening of her body and gliding to the delicate peak above. "Is this what you want?"

She could only respond with an incoherent sound, while delight immolated her. He kissed her deeply, while at the same time he slid one finger inside her melting flesh. Her moans were absorbed by his ardent kisses, and the intimate channel of her body clung tightly to the gentle invasion. He stroked inside her, his touch deft, gentle, rhythmic, seeming to relish the wild quivering of her body.

Driven into a sensuous frenzy, Lydia clawed helplessly at his shirt-covered back and his waistcoat, frantic to feel the hard body and warm skin beneath his clothes. Oh, God, she wanted him to be naked, for him to cover her body with his own, and ravish her for hours.

"How soft you are," he whispered raggedly, withdrawing his finger to stroke and play with her once more. "Lydia, the things I want to do to you ..."

"Do them *now*," she managed to say through her clenched teeth.

He gave a husky laugh and carefully lowered her to the table. The scarred wood was hard on her back, the edge of it digging into the backs of her knees as her legs dangled helplessly.

"Don't stop, don't," she implored as she felt him rummaging beneath her skirts.

He pushed her legs wide apart, and his hot breath fell against her inner thigh. Dazedly she realized that he was sitting on the chair, with his face just above the tangle of private curls. An unthinkable notion crossed her mind...surely he wasn't going to...no, it wasn't possible...but his arms hooked beneath her knees, and as she groped clumsily to stop him, he grasped her wrists and trapped them at her sides.

A low cry escaped her as she felt his mouth touch her, lavishing her with wetness and scalding heat, and the slippery caress of his tongue. He suckled her leisurely, making a sound of primal enjoyment as he tasted the feminine liquor of her body. His hands released her wrists when they trembled and relaxed in his hold, and he moved to grasp her clenching buttocks in his palms. His tongue found the tiny place where sensation had accumulated in a burning knot, and he flicked it with lush strokes. She sobbed as pleasure rushed through her in waves and billows and endless ripples.

Even after the last eddies of sensation had faded, and she was quivering with exhaustion, Jake seemed reluctant to leave her, his mouth continuing to nuzzle her fragrant, salty flesh.

"Jake," she moaned, struggling to sit up, the table creaking with her movement.

He stood and cradled her head against his shoulder, and they shared a kiss that was subtly garnished with her own intimate flavor. "How is that for an afterglow?" he asked hoarsely.

"I want more of you." Lydia reached for the front of his trousers and pulled inexpertly at the placket of concealed buttons. "All of you," she clarified throatily, her fingers brushing against the thick, straining shape of him.

"God, no." He jumped back as if scalded. "I'm not going to debauch Derek Craven's daughter in his own wine cellar. For one thing, you deserve better than that. For another, he would probably castrate me by some medieval method."

"I don't know where everyone gets these ideas about Papa. He is really the kindest, most wonderful—"

"Father-in-law from hell," Jake muttered, recalling the comment he had made earlier. He heaved a sigh and picked up Lydia's discarded corset. "Well, one thing is certain—I'll handle him a damn sight better than Wray would have."

Lydia fumbled with her chemise, then sat still as Jake hooked the corset around her. "Does that mean you're going to propose to me?" she asked hopefully.

Expertly he pulled the drawers up over her ankles. "We'd better negotiate first."

Lydia hopped from the table and pulled the undergarments back into place, tying the tapes neatly. "There is one other fault of mine that I forgot to mention." The satin of her skirts rustled as she let them drop back into place.

"Oh?"

"*I hate to compromise.*"

"So do I," he said, and they shared a rueful grin.

Jake went to pour another glass of wine. He drank deeply, then regarded Lydia with a steady gaze. "There is one point that I can't yield on. If we marry, I won't accept your father's money, or that damned obscene dowry. If he wants to establish an account that is yours alone, so be it. But you'll have to accept the kind of life that I can provide for you. That means no gifts of mansions and fine carriages and the like from your family."

Lydia parted her lips to argue, then closed her mouth. If that was what he required to retain his pride and self-respect, she would have to adjust to it. For heaven's sake, how much did she need to be happy? She would have her work, and a pleasant life, and most of all, a husband who loved her. That was infinitely more appealing than a luxurious but empty existence as Lady Wray.

She went to him and linked her arms around his waist, thrilling in the freedom of touching him. "What about the money that I earn from my work? Would you have an objection if I kept that?"

His brows drew together. "Is that a hypothetical question, or have you actually earned some?"

Her shoulders lifted in a modest shrug. "I've made a little here and there, inventing things. Last year I designed a relay modification for telegraph companies...and I have this idea about atmospheric propulsion..."

"How much have you made so far?" he asked suspiciously.

"Just a few thousand."

"How many thousand?"

"Not more than, say...twenty." The sum was nothing compared to Craven standards, but Lydia knew that the average person would probably consider it significant.

Jake closed his eyes and downed the rest of his wine.

"I'm sorry," Lydia said hastily. "It's just that Cravens can't seem to help making money. There's my father, of course, and then my mother has earned quite a lot from her novel-writing, and last year my brother Nicholas took it in his head to start a shipping company with propeller-driven vessels—"

"Nicholas is *eighteen*," he said, staring at her with patent disbelief.

"Yes, that's why Papa said he could only have two ships to start with..." Lydia's voice trailed away as he sat heavily in the chair and clutched his head in his hands. "Jake?"

"I give up," he said in a muffled voice. "Dammit."

"Does that mean you don't want to marry me?"

"It means that you can keep your own earnings, but what I said before still holds—not a shilling from your father."

"That sounds fair—" she began, and jumped a little as she heard the distant clank of a latch and the scrape of a door opening. The door that led to the kitchen, Lydia thought. It had to be the under-butler, finally sent to bring up more wine. She glanced down at herself and adjusted the waist of her gown, raising a hand to the pinned-up coils of her dark hair. Unfortunately, her coiffure was a bit disheveled, and her lips felt kiss-swollen, and she suspected that anyone who saw her would immediately know what she had been doing.

Jake's sardonic smile confirmed her worries.

They waited expectantly, and in less than a half-minute, the under-butler appeared. He froze with a gasp as he saw them, his small, wizened face turning pale at first, then becoming rapidly infused with color. His distress was obvious as he wondered whether to acknowledge them or hurry away.

"Good evening, Mr. Feltner," Lydia said calmly.

The servant found his voice. "Begging your pardon, Miss Craven!" He turned and fled, his short legs churning.

Lydia glanced at Jake. "He's going to tell Papa," she said. "Don't worry, I'll go to him first, and soften him a little—"

"No, I'll handle it," Jake replied firmly.

A smile spread across Lydia's face as she saw that he was not intimidated by the prospect of confronting her irate father.

Jake stared at her, arrested. "God, what your smile does to me..." Reaching her in two strides, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her soundly.

Lydia responded eagerly, then drew her head back. "Are you going to propose now?"

"I was considering it, yes."

"Before you do, I want to ask you something."

Tenderly he smoothed a stray lock of hair back from her face. "What is it?"

Her lips curved with an uncertain smile. "Will you stay faithful to me, Jake? With all your experience, I wonder if one woman will be enough for you."

Jake winced as if she had touched a raw nerve, and pain darkened his eyes. "Sweetheart," he whispered. "I've never regretted my past behavior as much as I do in this moment. I can't think of any way to make you understand how precious you are to me. I would never stray from you—I swear it on everything I hold dear. To come home to you every night, to sleep with you in my arms, is all I've ever wanted. If you could bring yourself to believe me, I would—"

"Yes, I believe you." The naked sincerity in his voice was unmistakable. Lydia smiled and caressed his lean cheek. "We'll have to trust each other, won't we?"

He covered her mouth in a long, passionate kiss and held her so tightly that she could hardly breathe. "Will you marry me, Lydia Craven?"

She laughed giddily. "Yes. Though everyone will say we've gone mad."

He grinned and kissed her again. "I'd rather be insane with you than sane without you."

* * *

The moment Jake emerged from the cellar with Lydia, a footman approached him with the message that Mr. Craven would like to see him in the library without delay.

"That didn't take long," Jake muttered, reflecting that the under-butler had certainly wasted no time in going to Craven.

Lydia sighed grumpily. "I suppose while you talk to Papa, I had better go find Lord Wray. Blast, how

am I going to explain all of this to him?"

"Wait until after I deal with your father, and I'll help you with Wray."

"No," she said immediately, "I think it would be better if I spoke to Wray privately."

"He may not take the news well," Jake warned.

"You might be surprised," came her dry response. "Although the earl's pride might suffer some temporary damage, I have no doubt that his heart will remain inviolate." Her earnest green eyes stared up into his. "Are you certain that you don't want me to help you with Papa?"

Jake smiled as he looked into her upturned face. She was so much smaller than he that he was both amused and touched by her desire to protect him. "I'll manage," he assured her and gave her waist a squeeze before letting her go.

After going to his guest room to neaten his appearance and comb his disheveled hair, Jake went to the estate library. The heavy door had been left slightly ajar, and he knocked on it briefly.

"Linley," came a dark, quiet voice that seemed to belong to the devil himself. "I've been expecting you."

Jake entered a handsome room with walls covered in stamped and embossed burgundy leather. His future father-in-law was seated in a massive leather chair beside a heavy mahogany desk.

Though he had met Derek Craven on various occasions throughout the years, Jake was struck as always by the outsized presence of the man. Craven carried his power quietly, but he was clearly a man of consequence, a possessor of secrets, a man who was regarded with fear and respect. The amount of wealth Craven had accumulated was nearly incalculable, but it was not at all difficult to imagine him as the cockney youth he'd once been...dangerous, wily and completely without scruples.

Craven viewed him with menacing calculation. "Do you have something to tell me, Linley?"

Jake decided to be blunt. "Yes, sir. I'm in love with your daughter."

Clearly the revelation did not please Craven. "That is unfortunate, as she is going to marry Lord Wray."

"At the moment there seems to be some doubt on that point."

The black brows drew together in an ominous scowl. "What happened in that cellar?"

Jake met his gaze squarely. "With all respect, sir, that is between Lydia and me."

In the silence that followed, Craven seemed to be considering the options of dismemberment, strangulation, or a simple bullet to the head. Jake forced himself to wait patiently, knowing that in Craven's view, no man would ever be good enough for his daughter.

"Tell me why I should even begin to consider you as a potential husband for Lydia," Craven growled.

As he stared into Craven's hard green eyes, Jake recalled that Craven had no family other than his wife and children...no relatives...no knowledge even of the woman who had given birth to him. Naturally that made his family even more precious to Craven. He would never allow Lydia to be hurt or mistreated.

And from a father's perspective, Lydia would be far better served by a marriage to an academic-minded peer than a commoner with a tainted past.

Jake sighed inwardly. It was not in his nature to be humble. On the other hand, it appeared to be the only way he could convince Craven to give his blessing to the match. "I have my faults, sir," he admitted. "Many, in fact."

"So I've heard."

"I know that I'm not good enough for her. But I love Lydia, and I respect her, and I want to spend the rest of my life taking care of her, and trying to make her happy. The reason that I've never approached her before is that I believed Lord Wray was a better match for her."

"But now you don't?" Craven asked sardonically.

"No, I don't," Jake replied without hesitation. "Wray doesn't love her—not as I do."

Craven considered him for a long, uncomfortable moment. "We have some things to discuss," he said curtly. He gestured to a nearby chair. "Have a seat—this will take a while."

For the next three hours, Jake was interrogated in a relentless manner that would have frayed the nerves of the scrupulous and upstanding of men—which Jake was not. It was rumored that Craven knew everything about everyone, but Jake had never fully believed it until now. The man displayed an alarmingly acute knowledge of Jake's financial circumstances, his personal history, pranks he had played at school, women he'd slept with and scandals his name had been connected to. Good God, Craven seemed to know more about him than his own father did. And as Jake had expected, he was merciless in demanding an accounting of matters so private that Jake was tempted more than once to tell him to go to hell. However, he wanted Lydia badly enough to endure this ruthless drumming of his pride with atypical humility.

Finally, just as Jake thought that Craven was going to take some perverse delight in denying him after all, Craven let out a long, taut sigh.

"I'm going to withhold my final approval until I determine for myself that this is what my daughter truly wants." His green eyes flashed balefully. "But if she convinces me that she does indeed wish to marry you, I won't stand in your way."

Jake couldn't restrain a sudden smile. "Thank you," he said simply. "You won't regret it, sir."

"I already do," Craven muttered, standing to return Jake's vigorous handshake.

Epilogue

"Mama, Lydia's kissing someone in the hallway, and it's not Lord Wray!"

Seated by the bedroom window with a cup of tea in her hand, Sara smiled at her youngest daughter, Daisy, a plump and vivacious five-year-old. Hurrying to Sara as fast as her short legs could propel her, Daisy climbed into her lap. Sara winced only a little as she saw that Daisy's hands were sticky with strawberry jam that was smearing her white lace nightgown.

Derek was shaving at the washstand, his mouth tightening as his gaze met Sara's in the looking glass. Clearly he was annoyed by the news of his daughter's torrid embrace with Dr. Linley, but Sara knew that he had grudgingly reconciled himself to the fact that his daughter would soon be Mrs. Linley, and not Lady Wray.

She and Derek had talked well into the night about the situation, and Sara had reassured him that she believed it was all for the best.

"Mrs. Linley only recently told me that she thought her son was deeply in love with Lydia," she had told him. "And he is a fine young man, Derek, even if his past has been a bit...adventurous."

"Adventurous?" he had repeated with a scowl. "With the swathe he's cut through London—"

"Darling," she had interrupted gently, "a man can change. He truly seems to love Lydia. And I've never seen her as happy as she was this evening—she was positively transformed."

"I wish to hell that Linley had transformed someone else's daughter," Derek had grumbled, making her laugh.

Bringing her thoughts to the present, Sara smoothed her daughter's tangled brown curls. As the child began to explain further details of Lydia's conduct with Linley, Sara tried in vain to hush her. "That's all right, Daisy. You can tell me later."

"Yes, but she was letting him put his hand on her—"

"Don't tattle, darling," Sara interrupted hastily, seeing Derek's growing scowl. "You remember when we discussed that the other day."

"Yes," the child said sullenly. "You said I should only tell on someone when they're going to get hurt."

"Well, Lydia is not in any danger."

"He was kissing her *hard*," Daisy said after a moment's thought. "And he *was* hurting her, Mama, because she made a noise—"

"That's enough, Daisy," Sara said with a sudden gasp of laughter. "I'm certain that he wasn't hurting her unduly."

Derek sluiced his face, wiped the last trace of shaving soap from his jaw, and heaved a sigh. "My grandson was going to be an earl," he said glumly. "Now he'll probably be a sawbones like his father."

Daisy jumped from Sara's lap and went to her father, raising her arms to be picked up. "Is Lydia going to marry Mr. Sawbones, Papa?"

Derek lifted her against his chest, his gaze turning warm. "It would seem so."

Her little hand patted his freshly shaven jaw. "Don't be sad, Papa. I'll save all *my* kisses for *you*."

He chuckled suddenly, stroking her tangled brown curls. "Give me one now, then," he said, and she pressed her jam-sticky cheek to his.

The nursemaid appeared, telling Daisy that it was time to wash and dress for the day, and the child wriggled from her father's arms.

After the door had closed behind them, Sara went to her husband and smoothed her palms over the striped silk robe that covered his hard chest. "All my kisses are for you, too," she told him.

"They had better be," he said and covered her lips with his. The kiss stirred her senses pleasantly, and she linked her arms around his neck, enjoying the wicked caress of his mouth.

"Only four more to go," she said when his head lifted.

He played with the long braid that hung down her back and let his hands roam intimately over her body. "I'm afraid I don't follow you, angel."

"Our other children," she explained. "I'm going to help each of them find true love, just as I helped Lydia."

Picking her up with ease, Derek carried her to the bed. "Helped her in what way?"

"I gave her the opportunity to talk in private with Dr. Linley," Sara told him. "I was certain that if they just had a bit of uninterrupted time with each other, they would acknowledge their feelings, and then—"

"Wait," Derek interrupted, his green eyes narrowing as he dropped her to the mattress. He crawled over her and braced his elbows on either side of her head. "You're not telling me that *you* were the one who locked them in the damned cellar...are you?"

She smiled impishly. "You told me to give fate a push in the right direction, if I found the opportunity. And I did."

His expression was incredulous. "I didn't mean for you to trap my innocent daughter in the cellar with a womanizer like Linley!"

"Lydia wasn't trapped. She could have left any time she wanted to."

"The doors were locked!"

"Not all of them." Seeing his incomprehension, Sara smiled complacently. "Don't you remember the little passageway that goes from the back of the cellar to the conservatory? The children still use it when they play pirates. Lydia knew full well that it was there. The only reason she remained in that cellar with Linley last night was because she wanted to. And it turned out perfectly, didn't it?"

Derek groaned and dropped his head to the mattress. "My God. I'm not certain whom to pity more, Linley or myself."

Knowing exactly how to disarm him, Sara parted the front of his silk robe and tangled her legs with his. "Pity yourself," she advised, her small hands wandering busily inside the garment. "You're about to be ravished."

She felt Derek smile suddenly against her neck. "I do the ravishing around here," he informed her...and he proceeded to prove his point.

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LISA KLEYPAS graduated from Wellesley College with a political science degree. As a longtime Avon Books author, her novels have appeared on both the *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* bestseller lists. In 2002, she was awarded the RITA Award from Romance Writers of America for best novella. She resides in Texas with her husband and two children.