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What Price Love?

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Extract

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Newmarket, Suffolk

"I had hoped we'd have longer in reasonable privacy." Letting the door of the Twig & Bough coffee shop on Newmarket High Street swing shut behind him, Dillon Caxton stepped down to the pavement beside Barnaby Adair. "Unfortunately, the sunshine has brought the ladies and their daughters out in force."

Scanning the conveyances thronging the High Street, Dillon was forced to smile and acknowledge two matrons, each with beaming daughters. Tapping Barnaby's arm, he started strolling. "If we stand still, we'll invite attack."

Chuckling, Barnaby fell in beside him. "You sound even more disenchanted with the sweet young things than Gerrard was."

"Living in London, you're doubtless accustomed to far worse, but spare a thought for us who value our bucolic existence. To us, even the Little Season is an unwanted reminder of that which we fervently wish to avoid."

"At least with this latest mystery you have something to distract you. An excellent excuse to be elsewhere, doing other things."

Seeing a matron instructing her coachman to draw her landau to the curb ten paces farther on, Dillon swore beneath his breath. "Unfortunately, as our mystery must remain a strict secret, I fear Lady Kershaw is going to draw first blood."

Her ladyship, a local high stickler, beckoned imperiously. There was no help for it; Dillon strolled on to her now-stationary carriage. He exchanged greetings with her ladyship and her daughter, Margot, then introduced Barnaby. They stood chatting for five minutes. From the corner of his eye, Dillon noted how many arrested glances they drew, how many other matrons were now jockeying for position farther along the curb.

Glancing at Barnaby, doing his best to live up to Miss Kershaw's expectations, Dillon inwardly grimaced. He could imagine the picture they made, he with his dark, dramatic looks most commonly described as Byronic, with Barnaby, a golden Adonis with curly hair and bright blue eyes, by his side, the perfect foil. They were both tall, well set up, and elegantly and fashionably turned out. In the restricted society of Newmarket, it was no wonder the ladies were lining up to accost them. Unfortunately, their destination—the Jockey Club—lay some hundred yards distant; they had to run the gauntlet.

They proceeded to do so with the glib assurance that came from untold hours spent in ton ballrooms. Despite his preference for the bucolic, courtesy of his cousin Flick—Felicity Cynster—over the last decade Dillon had spent his fair share of time in the whirl of the ton, in London and elsewhere, as Flick put it, keeping in practice.

In practice for what was a question to which he was no longer sure he knew the answer. Before his fall from grace and the scandal that had shaken his life, he'd always assumed he would marry, have a family, and all the rest. Yet while spending the last decade putting his life to rights, repaying his debts of social and moral obligation, and reestablishing himself, his honor, in the eyes of all those who mattered to him, he'd grown accustomed to his solitary existence, to the life of an unencumbered gentleman.

Smiling at Lady Kennedy, the third matron to detain them, he extricated himself and Barnaby and strolled on, casting his eye along the line of waiting carriages and their fair burdens. Not one stirred the remotest interest in him. Not one sweet face even moved him to curiosity.

Unfortunately, becoming known as a gentleman with a hardened heart, one unsusceptible to feminine enticements, had piled additional fuel on the bonfire of the ladies' aspirations. Too many now viewed him as a challenge, a recalcitrant male they were determined to bring to heel. As for their mothers, with every year that passed he

was forced to exercise greater care, to keep his eyes ever open for social snares, those traps certain matrons set for the unwary.

Even those select ladies with whom he occasionally dallied discreetly in the capital weren't above hatching schemes. His last inamorata had tried to convince him of the manifold benefits that would accrue to him should he marry her niece. Said benefits had, of course, included her fair self.

He was beyond being outraged, beyond even being surprised; he was close to turning his back on the entire subject of marriage.

"Mrs. Cartwell, a pleasure to see you, ma'am." Taking the hand the haughty matron extended, he shook it, bowed to the vision of loveliness sitting beside Mrs. Cartwell, then stepped back and introduced Barnaby. Always interested in people, Barnaby exchanged platitudes with the lovely Miss Cartwell; cravenly grateful, Dillon stood back and let him have the stage.

Mrs. Cartwell was monitoring the exchange between her daughter and Barnaby, the third son of an earl and every bit as eligible as Dillon himself, with absolute concentration. Reduced to the redundant, Dillon's mind returned to the matter he and Barnaby had retreated to the Twig & Bough to discuss, until they'd been ousted by the invading ladies. They'd chosen the quieter shop catering to the genteel element rather than the club coffeehouse favored by the racing fraternity for the simple reason that the subject of their discussion would set ears flapping and tongues wagging among the racing set.

Another racing scandal was precisely what he was working to avoid.

This time, he wasn't engaged on the wrong side of the ledger; this time, he'd been recruited by the angels, to wit the all-powerful Committee of the Jockey Club, to investigate the rumors of race fixing that had started to circulate after the recent spring racing season.

That request was a deliberate and meaningful vote of confidence—a declaration that the Committee viewed his youthful indiscretion as fully paid for, the slate wiped clean. More, it was a clear statement that the Committee had complete faith in his integrity, in his discretion, and in his devotion to the breeding and racing industry that the Committee oversaw, and that he and his father before him had for so long served.

His father, General Caxton, was long retired, and Dillon was now

the Keeper of the Breeding Register and the Stud Book, the two official tomes that together ruled the breeding and racing of horses in England. It was in that capacity that he'd been asked to look into the rumors.

Rumors being rumors, and in this case issuing from London, he'd recruited the Honorable Barnaby Adair, a good friend of Gerrard Debbington, to help. Dillon knew Gerrard well, had for years, through their connections to the powerful Cynster family; Barnaby had recently assisted Gerrard in solving a troublesome matter of murder. When Dillon had mentioned the possibility of a racing swindle, Barnaby's eyes had lit.

That had been in late July. Barnaby had duly investigated, and in August had reported that while the rumors were there, all were vague, very much of the strain that horses people had expected to win had instead lost. Hardly a novel happening in the racing game. There'd seemed little substance, and no real fact behind the rumors. Nothing to warrant further action.

Now, however, with the first races of the autumn season behind them, something rather odd had occurred. Odd enough for Dillon to summon Barnaby back.

In the peace of the Twig & Bough, he'd related the details of three separate attempts to break into the Jockey Club, along with reports of some man asking about "the register" in local alehouses, rough taverns catering to the dregs of the town.

They'd just finished discussing what was known of the inquisitive man—an Irishman by his accent—when the influx of ladies had rousted them. Dillon's office in the Jockey Club was their current goal, the only place they might conclude their sensitive discussion in some degree of privacy.

But it was slow going. Escaping Mrs. Cartwell, they fell victim to Lady Hemmings. As they left her ladyship, Dillon seized the chance created by two groups of ladies becoming distracted by their own gossip to quickly steer Barnaby between two carriages and across the street. They lengthened their strides; by the time the ladies noticed they'd slipped sideways and escaped, they were turning into the long avenue flanked by tall trees that led to the front door of the Jockey Club.

"Phew!" Barnaby shot him a glance. "I see what you mean. It's worse than in London—there are few others about to draw their fire."

Dillon nodded. "Luckily, we're now safe. The only females ever glimpsed within these hallowed precincts are of the horse-mad sorority, not the husband-hunting packs."

There were no others, male or female, presently on the path leading to the front door; easing his pace, he returned to their interrupted discussion. "These break-ins—if someone's asking about 'a register,' odds are they mean the Breeding Register, presumably the target of our would-be thief. Nothing else within the Jockey Club has any real value."

Slowing to an amble, Barnaby looked at the red brick building standing squarely at the end of the shady avenue. "Surely there are cups, plates, medallions—things that would be worth something if melted down? Isn't it more likely a thief would be after those?"

"Most of the trophies are plated. Their value lies more in what they represent, not in their commercial worth. And this thief's not a professional, but he is determined. Besides, it's too coincidental—someone asking about 'the register,' and shortly after, someone tries to break into the club where the one item referred to in Newmarket as 'the register' resides."

"True," Barnaby conceded. "So how is the Breeding Register valuable? Ransom?"

Dillon raised his brows. "I hadn't thought of that, but such a tack would be dangerous. Loss of the Breeding Register would stop all racing, so using it in such a way, essentially holding the entire racing fraternity to ransom, would very likely prove an unhealthy experiment. If the Breeding Register disappeared, I would expect to see it magically reappear within three days." He glanced at Barnaby. "This industry isn't short of those prepared to take the law into their own hands, especially over a matter like that."

Barnaby frowned. "But I thought you said it was the Breeding Register our would-be thief was after?"

"Not the register itself—the set of books—but the information it contains. That's where the gold lies."

"How so?"

"That," Dillon admitted, "is something I'm not *precisely* sure of—it's a function of what the information is to be used for. However, in light of our earlier rumors, one possible use leaps to mind."

He met Barnaby's blue eyes. "Horse substitution. It used to be

prevalent decades ago, before they implemented the present system. One horse would gain a reputation for winning, then, in one race, the owners would substitute another horse, passing it off as the previous winner, and the punters would lose. The owners would be in league with certain bookmakers, and would pocket a nice cut from the lost bets, as well as pocketing even more from bets they or their friends laid *against* their 'champion' winning."

"Aha!" Barnaby's eyes narrowed. "Unexpected losses—as have been rumored to have occurred over the spring season."

"Just so. And that's where the Breeding Register comes in. It's an obligatory listing of a horse's bloodlines confirming its right to race on English tracks under Jockey Club rules. Bloodlines are fully documented in the Stud Book, while the register is essentially a licensing listing—every horse has to be approved and entered before being allowed in any race at any track operating under the auspices of the Jockey Club. *However,* along with the horse's name and general details, each register entry contains a physical description supposedly sufficient to ensure that a given horse, with given name, age, bloodlines, and racing clearance, can be distinguished from any other horse."

Dillon snorted. "Impossible to be a hundred percent certain always, yet armed with those descriptions, the race stewards at the tracks monitor all the starters before every race, and reexamine and verify all the placegetters after the race has been run. That's why horses have to be entered for races weeks in advance, so the stewards can be issued with copies of the descriptions each starter should match."

"And those descriptions come from the Breeding Register held here in Newmarket?"

"Making the stewards' copies is what my register clerks do, at least during the racing seasons."

"So why would our would-be thief be interested in the descriptions contained in this register? How would it benefit him?"

"I can think of two ways." Dillon looked ahead; they were nearly at the Jockey Club's door. "First, if his master was planning to substitute for a champion he owned, he'd need to be sure what points feature most highly in the register description, because the substitute horse would absolutely have to possess those points to make the substitution work."

Halting before the pair of shallow stone steps leading up to the club's double doors, he faced Barnaby. "The second possibility is that whoever has sent our thief is planning a new substitution, but hasn't yet located a suitable substitute horse. Scanning the descriptions in the register would take time, but would unquestionably identify the best possible match for a substitution."

He paused, then added, "Bear in mind that in a substitution racket, the substitute only has to pass the prerace check, which is the least detailed. Because the substitute finishes out of the places, it's not subjected to the more stringent check conducted after the race."

Barnaby frowned. "So what we might have here is an already established racket that ran certain substitutions last spring and escaped detection, plus an Irishman, presumably acting for some owner, looking to gain access to the Breeding Register to facilitate further substitutions."

Dillon nodded. "And as to whether the former is directly linked to the latter, logically there's no reason it has to be. But I'd lay odds they're connected."

Barnaby softly snorted. "It certainly has that feeling."

They turned to the club's front door. Both paused as through the central glass pane they glimpsed the club's doorman, inside, hurrying to reach for the latch.

Sweeping the doors wide, the doorman bowed obsequiously, almost tripping over his toes as he stepped aside to allow a lady to pass through.

Not just any lady. A vibrant vision in emerald green, she halted on the top step, taken aback at finding herself facing a masculine wall.

Her head, crowned with a silky tumble of blue-black curls, instinctively rose. Eyes, an even more intense emerald than her elegant gown, rose, too; widening, they locked with Dillon's.

Barnaby murmured an apology and stepped back.

Dillon didn't move.

For one incalculable moment, all he could see—all he knew of the world—was that face.

Those eyes.

Brilliant green, glinting gold, they lured and promised.

She was of average height; standing two steps up, her glorious

eyes were level with his. He was dimly aware of the classical symmetry of her heart-shaped face, of perfect, very white skin, fine, almost translucent, of delicately arched brows, lush black lashes, a straight little nose, and a mouth a touch too wide. Her lips were full and blatantly sensual, yet instead of disrupting the perfection of her beauty, those distracting lips brought her face alive.

Like a callow youth, he stood and stared.

Wide-eyed, Pris stared back and tried to catch her breath. She felt like one of her brothers had punched her in the stomach; every muscle had contracted and locked, and she couldn't get them to relax.

Beside her, the helpful doorman beamed. "Why, here's Mr. Caxton, miss."

Her mind whirled.

To the gentlemen, he said, "This lady was asking after the register, sir. We explained she had to speak with you."

Which one was Caxton? Please don't let it be *him*.

Tearing her gaze from the dark eyes into which she'd somehow fallen, she looked hopefully at the Greek god, but fickle fate wasn't that kind. The Greek god was looking at his sinfully dark companion. Reluctantly, she did the same.

His dark, very dark brown eyes that before had appeared as startled as she felt—she doubted he often met ladies as dramatically beautiful as he—had now hardened. As she watched, they fractionally narrowed.

"Indeed?"

The precise diction, the arrogantly superior tone, told her all she needed to know of his social rank and background. The flick of inherent power brought her head up, brought the earl's daughter to the fore. She smiled, assured. "I was hoping to view the register, if that's possible?"

Instantly, she sensed a dramatic heightening of their interest—a focusing that owed nothing to the quality of her smile. Her gaze locked on Caxton, on the dark eyes in which, unless she was sorely mistaken, suspicion was now blooming, she mentally replayed her words, but could see nothing to explain their reaction. Glancing at the Greek god, she saw the alert look he sent Caxton . . . it was her accent that had triggered their response.

Like all the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, she spoke perfect English,

but no amount of elocution lessons would ever remove the soft burr of her brogue, the stamp of Ireland on her tongue.

And Rus, naturally, was the same.

Tamping down the sudden surge of emotion—trepidation and expectation combined—she looked again at Caxton. Meeting his eyes, she arched a brow. "Perhaps, now you've returned, sir, you could help me with my inquiries?"

She wasn't going to let his beauty, or her unprecedented reaction to it, get in her way.

More to the point, his reaction to her gave her a weapon she was perfectly prepared to wield. She would do anything, absolutely anything without reservation, to help Rus; running rings around an Englishman and tying him in knots barely rated.

Dillon inclined his head in acquiescence and gestured for her to reenter the building—his domain. Her distracting smile still flirting about her even more distracting lips, she swung around, waiting for the doorman to step back before passing through the portal and into the foyer.

Climbing the steps, Dillon followed her in. He'd noted the calculation that had flashed through those brilliant eyes, was duly warned. An Irish lady asking to see the register? Oh, yes, he definitely would speak with her.

Pausing in the foyer, she glanced back at him, an innately haughty glance over her shoulder. Despite the dictates of his intellect, he felt his body react, yet as he met those direct and challenging eyes, he had to wonder if she, her actions, her glances, were truly calculated or simply instinctive.

And which of those options posed the bigger danger to him.

With a distant, noncommittal smile, he gestured down the corridor to the left. "My office is this way."

She held his gaze for a heartbeat, apparently oblivious of Barnaby at his shoulder. "And the register?"

The suggestion in her tone had him fighting a grin. She wasn't just fabulously beautiful; she had wit and a tongue to match. "The latest volume is there."

She consented to walk down the corridor. He followed by her shoulder, half a stride behind. Far enough to be able to appreciate her figure, her tiny waist and the curvaceous hips the prevailing fashion

for slightly raised waistlines did nothing to disguise, to imagine the length of leg necessary to run from those evocatively swaying hips to the surprisingly dainty half boots he'd glimpsed beneath the hems of her emerald green skirts.

A small flat hat sporting a dyed feather sat amid the thick curls at the back of her head. From the front, only the tip of the feather was visible, curling above her right ear.

He knew enough of feminine fashion to identify both gown and hat as of recent vintage, almost certainly from London. Whoever the lady was, she was neither penniless nor, he suspected, his social inferior.

"The next door to the right." He was looking forward to having her in his office, in the chair before his desk, where he could examine and interrogate her.

She halted before the door; he reached past her and set it swinging wide. With a regal dip of her head, she moved into the room. He followed, waving her to the chair facing his desk. Rounding the wide desk set between two tall windows, he took the chair behind it.

Barnaby quietly closed the door, then retreated to an armchair set to one side, opposite the bookcase in which the latest volume of the Breeding Register resided. Briefly meeting Barnaby's eyes, Dillon understood he intended being the proverbial fly on the wall, leaving the questions to him, concentrating instead on watching Miss . . .

Returning his gaze to her, he smiled. "Your name, Miss . . . ?"

Apparently at ease in the straight-backed chair, comfortably padded with arms on which she'd rested hers, she smiled back. "Dalling. Miss Dalling. I confess I've no real idea of, nor interest in racing or racehorses, but I was hoping to view this register one hears so much about. The doorman gave me to understand that you are the guardian of this famous tome. I'd imagined it was on public display, like the Births and Deaths Register, but apparently that's not the case."

She had a melodic, almost hypnotic voice, not so much sirenlike as that of a storyteller, luring you to believe, to accept, and to respond.

Dillon fought the compulsion, forced himself to listen dispassionately, sought, found, and clung to his usual aloof distance. Although uttered as statements, he sensed her sentences were questions. "The register you're referring to is known as the Breeding Register,

and no, it's not a public document. It's an archive of the Jockey Club. In effect, it's a listing of the horses approved to run on those racetracks overseen by the club."

She was drinking in his every word. "I see. So . . . if one wished to verify that a particular horse was approved to race on such tracks, one would consult the Breeding Register."

Another question parading as a statement. "Yes."

"So it *is* possible to view the Breeding Register."

"No." He smiled, deliberately a touch patronizingly, when she frowned. "If you wish to know if a particular horse is approved to race, you need to apply for the information."

"Apply?"

At last a straight, unadorned question; he let his smile grow more intent. "You fill out a form, and one of the register clerks will provide you with the required information."

She looked disgusted. "A form." She flicked the fingers of one hand. "I suppose this is England, after all."

He made no reply. When it became clear he wasn't going to rise to that bait, she tried another tack.

She leaned forward, just a little. Confidingly fixed her big green eyes on his face, simultaneously drawing attention to her really quite impressive breasts, not overly large, yet on her slight frame deliciously tempting.

Having already taken stock, he managed to keep his gaze steady on her face.

She smiled slightly, invitingly. "Surely you could allow me to view the register—just a glance."

Her emerald eyes held his; he fell under her spell. Again. That voice, not sultry but something even more deeply stirring, threatened, again, to draw him under; he had to fight to shake free of the mesmerizing effect.

Suppressing his frown took yet more effort. "No." He shifted, and softened the edict. "That's not possible, I'm afraid."

She frowned, the expression entirely genuine. "Why not? I just want to look."

"Why? What's the nature of your interest in the Breeding Register, Miss Dalling? No, wait." He let his eyes harden, let his deepening suspicions show. "You've already told us you have no real interest

in such things. Why, then, is viewing the register so important to you?"

She held his gaze unwaveringly. A moment ticked by, then she sighed and, still entirely relaxed, leaned back in the chair. "It's for my aunt."

When he looked his surprise, she airily waved. "She's eccentric. Her latest passion is racehorses—that's why we're here. She's curious about every little thing to do with horse racing. She stumbled on mention of this register somewhere, and now nothing will do but for her to know all about it."

She heaved an artistic sigh. "I didn't think those here would appreciate a fluttery, dotty old dear haunting your foyer, so I came." Fixing her disturbing green eyes on him, she went on, "And that's why I would like to take a look at this Breeding Register. Just a peek."

That last was said almost tauntingly. Dillon considered how to reply.

He could walk over to the bookcase, retrieve the current volume of the register, and lay it on the desk before her. Caution argued against showing her where the register was, even what it looked like. He could tell her what information was included in each register entry, but even that might be tempting fate in the guise of someone allied with those planning substitutions. That risk was too serious to ignore.

Perhaps he should call her bluff and suggest she bring her aunt into his office, but no matter how intently he searched her eyes, he couldn't be sure she was lying about her aunt. It was possible her tale, fanciful though it was, was the unvarnished truth. That might result in him breaking the until-now-inviolate rule that no one but he and the register clerks were ever allowed to view the Breeding Register for some fussy old dear.

Who could *not* be counted on not to spread the word.

"I'm afraid, Miss Dalling, that all I can tell you is that the entries in the register comprise a listing of licenses granted to individual horses to race under Jockey Club rules." He spread his hands in commiseration. "That's really all I'm at liberty to divulge."

Her green eyes had grown crystalline, hard. "How very mysterious."

He smiled faintly. "You have to allow us our secrets."

The distance between them was too great for him to be sure, but he thought her eyes snapped. For an instant, the outcome hung in the balance—whether she would retreat, or try some other, possibly more high-handed means of persuasion—but then she sighed again, lifted her reticule from her lap, and smoothly rose.

Dillon rose, too, surprised by a very real impulse to do something to prolong her visit. But then rounding the desk, he drew close enough to see the expression in her eyes. There was temper there—an Irish temper to match her accent. It was presently leashed, but she was definitely irritated and annoyed with him.

Because she hadn't been able to bend him to her will.

He felt his lips curve, saw annoyance coalesce and intensify in her eyes. She really ought to have known just by looking that he wasn't likely to fall victim to her charms.

Manifold and very real though they were.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Caxton." Her tone was cold, a shivery coolness, the most her soft brogue would allow. "I'll inform my aunt that she'll have to live with her questions unanswered."

"I'm sorry to have to disappoint an old lady, however . . ." He shrugged lightly. "Rules are rules, and there for a good reason."

He watched for her reaction, for some sign, however slight, of comprehension, but she merely raised her brows in patent disbelief and, with every indication of miffed disappointment, turned away.

"I'll see you to the front door." He went with her to the door of his room, opened it.

"No need." Briefly, she met his eyes as she swept past him. "I'm sure I can find my way."

"Nevertheless." He followed her into the corridor.

The rigidity of her spine declared she was offended he hadn't trusted her to go straight back to the front foyer if left to herself. But they both knew she wouldn't have, that if he'd set her free she'd have roamed, trusting her beauty to extract her from any difficulty should she be caught where she shouldn't be.

She didn't look back when she reached the foyer and sailed on toward the front doors. "Good-bye, Mr. Caxton."

The cool words drifted over her shoulder. Halting in the mouth of the corridor, he watched the doorman, still bedazzled, leap to swing open the door. She stepped through, disappearing into the

bright sunshine; the doors swung shut, and he could see her no more.

He returned to his office to find Barnaby peering out of the corner window.

"Sweeping away in a regal snit." Turning from the window, Barnaby took the chair she'd vacated. "What did you make of that?"

Dillon resumed his seat. "A very interesting performance. Or rather, a performance of great interest to me."

"Indeed. But how did you read it? Do you think the Irishman sent her?"

Slumping back, his long legs stretched before him, fingers lightly drumming his desk, he considered it. "I don't think so. For a start, she's gentry at least, more likely aristocracy. That indefinable confidence was there. So I doubt she's directly involved with the Irishman asking questions in hedge taverns. However, were you to ask me if the Irishman's *master* sent her, that, I think, is a real possibility."

"But why ask just to *look* at the register? Just a peek, she said."

Dillon met Barnaby's gaze. "When she first encountered us and the doorman said one of us was Mr. Caxton, she hoped it was you. You saw her. How many males do you think would have remained immune to her persuasions, the persuasions she might have brought to bear?"

"I wasn't swayed."

"No, but you were on guard the instant you heard she was interested in the register, and even more once she'd spoken. But she, and whoever sent her, wouldn't have expected that."

Barnaby humphed; he regarded Dillon. "But you're immune, impervious, and unimpressionable in that regard." His lips quirked. "Having set eyes on you, hearing that you were Caxton, guardian of the register, must have been a most unwelcome shock."

Dillon recalled the moment; a shock, yes, but unwelcome? In one respect, perhaps, but otherwise?

What he had detected in that first moment of strange and unexpected recognition had been an element of flaring curiosity. One that had affected him in precisely the same degree.

"But I take your point," Barnaby went on. "After one peek, why not two? And after two, well, why not let the darling girl pore over the register for an hour or two. No harm if it's in your office—and no great misery to have to watch her while she pores."

"Indeed." Dillon's tone was dry. "I imagine that's more or less how matters would have transpired had I been more susceptible."

"Regardless, her advent now gives us two immediate avenues to pursue. The Irishman and the attempts to break in here, and the startlingly beautiful Miss Dalling."

Energized, Barnaby looked at Dillon, then grimaced. "In light of the tendencies Miss Dalling has already displayed, I'd better play safe and leave you to investigate her. I'll focus on the unknown Irishman and anyone who can tell me anything about people loitering after dark in this vicinity."

Dillon nodded. "We can meet tomorrow afternoon and share what we've learned."

Barnaby rose. Meeting his eyes, Dillon smiled wryly. "While trawling through the hedge taverns, you can console yourself with the thought that following Miss Dalling will almost certainly result in my attending precisely those social events I would prefer to avoid like the plague."

Barnaby grinned. "Each to our own sacrifices." He snapped off a jaunty salute, and left.

Seated behind his desk, his gaze on the now-empty chair, Dillon thought again of Miss Dalling, and all he now wanted to know.