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The Duke

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

London, 1814

Many years ago, as a curly-headed youth on grand tour, he had fallen madly in love with beauty and so had stopped in Florence to take drafting lessons from a bonafide Italian master. Starry-eyed and romantical, he had followed the light-winged muses south to the Bay of Sorrento, where he had first heard the ancient Italian proverb "Revenge is a dish best served cold." He was an old man now, without illusions, cold and canny as a scheming pope. Beauty had betrayed him, but decades later, oddly enough, here on this gray English day, the Sicilian proverb held true.

A neat, slight-framed man, James Breckinridge, the earl of Coldfell, gripped the ivory head of his walking stick in gnarled fingers that ached with the needling April rain. He permitted his footman to assist him down from his luxurious black town coach while another held an umbrella over him.

The slumbrous quiet in this place was like a church, but for the pattering of the rain. He turned slowly, looked past the servants' blanked faces, past the jagged wrought-iron fence, into St. George's Burying Ground on the Uxbridge Road, just north of Hyde Park. Three weeks ago, he had buried his young bride here. Under a chilly gray drizzle, where the hill curved green, her marble monument rose

like an angry needle to the smoke-colored sky. Beneath it, just where Coldfell had expected to find him, stood the tall, powerful, brooding silhouette of a man; wind-blown and lost, the wide shoulders slumped as the gusty rain blew his black greatcoat around him.

Hawkscliffe.

Coldfell's mouth flattened into a thin line. He took the umbrella from the footman. "I shan't be long."

"Yes, my lord."

Leaning on his walking stick, he began the slow ascent up the graveled path.

The thirty-five-year-old Robert Knight, ninth duke of Hawkscliffe, appeared unaware of his approach, stony and immobile as the monument. He stood in bleak granite stillness, the rain plastering his wavy black hair to his forehead, running in chilly rivulets down the stark planes of his cheeks, and dripping off his rugged profile as he stared down at the yellow daffodils that had been planted on her grave.

Coldfell winced at the ungentlemanly intrusion he was about to make on the other man's grief. Hawkscliffe was, after all, the only one of the younger generation he respected. Some of the old-school pigtail Tories found the young magnate's views alarmingly Whiggish, but none could deny that Hawkscliffe was twice the man his weak-willed father had been.

Why, Coldfell reflected as he hobbled up the path, he had seen Robert become a duke at the age of seventeen, managing three vast estates and raising four wild younger brothers and a little sister practically single-handedly. More recently, he had heard him deliver speeches in the Lords with a cool force and eloquence that had brought the whole house to its feet. Hawkscliffe's integrity was unquestioned; his honor rang true as a bell of finest sterling. Many of the younger set, like Coldfell's own idiot nephew and heir, Sir Dolph Breckinridge, considered the so-called

paragon duke a rigid high stickler, but to wiser heads, Hawkscliffe was, in a word, impeccable.

It was pitiful to see what Lucy's death had done to him.

Ah, well. Men would see in a woman what they wanted to see.

Coldfell cleared his throat. Startled, Hawkscliffe jerked at the noise and spun around. Tumultuous emotion blazed in his dark eyes. Seeing Coldfell, his dazed expression of pain took on a stab of guilt. With his honorable nature, it had no doubt tormented the duke to have wanted an old friend's wife. Himself, he had never been that chivalrous. James nodded to him. "Hawkscliffe."

"Beg your pardon, my lord, I was just leaving," he mumbled, lowering his head.

"Stay, Your Grace, by all means," Coldfell answered, waving off the awkwardness. "Keep an old man company on this dreary day."

"As you wish, sir." Narrowing his eyes against the rain, Hawkscliffe looked away uncomfortably, surveying the jagged horizon of tombstones.

Coldfell hobbled to the brim of the grave, cursing his aching joints. When the weather was fine, he could hunt all day without tiring. But he had not been energetic enough for Lucy, had he?

Well, she had had her fashionable London burial, just as she would have liked. Having died at his house just outside London, she had a spot in the most exclusive cemetery in the city, complete with a Flaxman funerary monument, the height of good taste, sparing no expense. And well he should have to pay for this most expensive mistake—an old man's folly, he thought bitterly. Beauty indeed was his weakness. With nothing to recommend her but a magnificent mane of flame-colored hair and the most luscious thighs in Christendom, the twenty-six-year-old Lucy O'Malley had been an artist's model in Sheffield before she had bewitched him

into making her his second countess. He had sworn her to keep quiet about her background, devising a false one for her. At least she had given *that* pledge sincerely, eager as she had been to join the ton.

Coldfell was merely glad he had not been forced to bury Lucy next to Margaret, his first wife, who was reverently enshrined at Seven Oaks, the ancestral pile in Leicestershire. Ah, wise Margaret, his heart's mate, whose only fault had been her failure to give him a son.

"I am—very sorry for your loss, my lord," Hawkscliffe said stiffly, avoiding his gaze.

Coldfell slid a furtive glance at the duke, then sighed, nodding. "It's hard to believe she's really gone. So young. So full of life."

"What will you do now?"

"I leave for Leicestershire tomorrow. A few weeks in the country will help, I warrant." A visit to Seven Oaks would also take him out of the way of suspicion when this man carried out the deed for him.

"I'm sure you will find it soothing," Hawkscliffe said—polite, automatic.

They were both silent for a long moment, Hawkscliffe brooding, Coldfell reflecting on the uneasiness of living anymore in his elegant villa in South Kensington with its four pretty acres of sculpted gardens—the site of Lucy's death.

" 'Lay her in the earth. And from her fair and unpolluted flesh may violets spring,' " Hawkscliffe quoted barely audibly.

Coldfell looked at him in pity. "Laertes' speech on Ophelia's grave."

The duke said nothing, merely stared at the carven letters on the monument: Lucy's name, her date of birth and death.

"I never touched her," he choked out abruptly, turning

to Coldfell in impetuous anguish. "You have my word as a gentleman. She never betrayed you."

Evenly, Coldfell held his gaze, then nodded as though satisfied, but of course he had already known.

"Ah, Robert," he said heavily after a long moment, "it is so strange, the way they found her. She went out to our pond every day to sketch the swans. How could she have slipped? Perhaps my brain is muddled with grief, but it makes no sense to me."

"She could never slip," he said vehemently. "She was graceful . . . so graceful."

Coldfell was taken aback by his ferocity. This was going to be easier than he'd hoped.

"Did your servants report anything strange that day, my lord, if I may presume to ask?" pursued the duke.

"Nothing."

"Did anyone see anything? Hear anything? She was in earshot of the house. Could they not hear her cries for help?"

"Perhaps she had no time to cry out before she fell beneath the water."

Hawkscliffe turned away again, his firm mouth grimly pursed. "My lord, I have the blackest suspicions."

Coldfell paused, watching him. "I wish that I could put your mind at ease, but I'm afraid that I, too, am haunted by severe doubts."

Hawkscliffe turned and stared penetratingly at him. His dark eyes glowed like hellfire. "Go on."

"It doesn't add up. There was no blood on the rock where they said she . . . struck her head. What am I to do? I am an old man. These sore limbs are weak. I haven't the strength," he said slowly, emphatically, "to do what a husband should."

"I do," vowed Hawkscliffe.

The earl felt his dry soul thrill to the resolve in the fiery young man's eyes.

"Whom do you suspect?" Hawkscliffe asked in tautly leashed savagery.

Coldfell had never seen the man look so wild and fierce. He had to hide his glee. All he need do was utter the name, provide a target for all that churning wrath, then Hawkscliffe would duel and the viper who had turned on him would be struck down. He was not above playing Lucy's devotees against each other to save himself and his sweet, flawed daughter, Juliet. What else could he do? He was nearly seventy, a little weaker every day. Dolph was in his prime, a brutally skilled hunter who had been blooded at the tender age of nine with his first stag.

The tremor that moved through his limbs was real. "May God forgive me," Coldfell said under his breath with a look of distress.

"Whom, Coldfell? Do you know something? I know this was no accident, even if the coroner said it was. You and I are not fools," he said hotly. "She was in that pond for four days before they found her. There is no telling what else might have been done to her before she was killed."

"I see our fears run a similar course, Robert. To think that she might have been . . . violated. Oh, God." He leaned on Hawkscliffe, who steadied him. "It's almost worse than her death itself."

Hawkscliffe's chiseled jaw tautened. "My lord, I beg of you. Tell me what you know."

"I don't *know*, Robert. I only suspect. Lucy said to me once—"

"Yes?"

Coldfell paused. So hungry for someone to punish, someone to blame, he thought, passing a shrewd glance over Robert's face, assessing his features like an artist preparing to sketch his portrait. It was the hard, noble face

of a warrior. His raven hair flowed back richly from his broad forehead; beneath his wide, flared, charcoal black eyebrows, his piercing eyes burned with iron will; his hooked nose was aquiline, hawklike, his mouth, firm and clamped, yet there was a sensitivity about his lips that captivated women.

"She said there was a man who . . . frightened her."

"Who was he?" Hawkscliffe demanded.

Coldfell drew a breath and looked away, knowing he was handing down a death sentence.

He was glad of it.

"My nephew, Your Grace," he said, cool as a consummate Italian. "My heir, Dolph Breckinridge."

"Oranges here! Penny apiece, sir, thank you and good day! Who's next?"

In the hustle and bustle of a gray day in the City, she was as out of place as the bright, sweet oranges she sold on the hectic corner of Fleet Street and Chancery Lane, handing them out like small suns to the dark-clad working gentlemen who gusted by between the worlds of government and finance—Westminster and the City, respectively. Bank clerks and barristers, city scrubs, journalists, hacks, tailors, respectable shopkeepers—even a passing deacon who was hurrying toward St. Paul's stopped in his tracks at the sight of her, then, like the rest, was irresistibly lured.

If Miss Belinda Hamilton at all divined that it was some indescribable quality in herself that brought male foot traffic to a halt, she showed no sign of it, all businesslike efficiency, counting out change with her cold-reddened fingers poking through ragged gloves, determined, in all, to take her coming down in the world with a true lady's uncomplaining grace.

A few months ago, she had been preparing giggling debutantes for their entrance into Society at Mrs. Hall's

Academy for Young Ladies; now, here she was, tenaciously clinging to the outermost rim of respectability by pride alone.

A wheat blond tendril of her hair blew against her rosy cheek as she looked up at her next customer and gave him his change with a fresh smile, weary but cheerful.

"Oranges, here! Who's next, please?"

One of her regulars stepped to the fore, a portly barrister from one of the nearby Inns of Court. His black robes billowed and he sent her a chagrined smile as he clamped his legal wig atop his beefy head to keep the thing from blowing away. His gaze skipped down the length of her.

Bel looked away, picking out a large bright orange for him. She gave it a polish with the end of her apron, then leashed her large pride by sheer dint of will and put out her hand expectantly. "A copper, sir," she sighed.

The barrister hesitated, then placed in her hand, not a coin, but a paper bank note that almost blew away. Bel knit her brow and looked at it more closely. *Twenty pounds!* She suppressed an appalled gasp and pressed the note back into his sweaty palm, revolted, though it represented a sum equal to almost three months' worth of this work. "No, sir. *No.*"

"No?" he asked, with a glow in his small eyes. "Do but consider it, my dear."

"Sir, you insult me," she said, dealing him a frosty set-down like a baroness in a drawing room instead of a desperate and nigh-penniless girl alone on the streets of the great city.

"I'll double it," he whispered, leaning closer.

She lifted her chin. "I am not for sale."

At her grand, withering stare, his heavy-jowled face turned beet red. He fled in embarrassment, his wig slipping askew. Bel shuddered slightly, scratched her forehead to gather her ruffled composure, then turned to deal hur-

riedly with the rest of her customers. It hadn't taken long to realize that not all of them wished to buy oranges, a fact she politely allowed herself to ignore.

After her last customer had gone, she bent down over her large oval basket and began straightening up her oranges in tidy rows.

"Hey, ye wee bit o' muslin!" yelled one of the rough-faced costermongers across the street. "We ain't gonna tolerate you on our corner much longer, girly. We got mouths ta feed. You're runnin' us outta shop!"

"Aye, why don't you go make yer money on yer back?" yelled his companion. "Why hawk oranges when you can get more sellin' your pretty *peaches*?"

They roared like drunken Huns at their own hilarity.

"Shut up, you cretins!" she belted back in a rough-and-tumble tone that would have shocked her girls at Mrs. Hall's. But really, rudeness was all that got through to such low, vulgar creatures. They interpreted good manners as weakness or cowardice—and it was imperative in her circumstances not to show fear.

"You don't belong out here, Miss Prissy. Just a matter o' time till you're some rich man's ladybird."

"I am a gentleman's daughter!"

"Aye, you look like it in those rags."

They guffawed and she glanced around in belated, ladylike embarrassment just in time to see little Tommy, the street sweep, nearly get run over by a hackney coach. His brother, Andrew, yanked him back by the scruff of the neck in the nick of time. Gasping at the close call, Bel stifled her exasperation.

"Andy! Tommy!" she called.

"Hallo, Miss Bel!" The roguish, underfed pair waved.

She beckoned them over. They nearly plunged out under the wheels of a dray cart, and when they reached her side of the street safely she scolded them to be more careful,

then gave them each a few pennies and an orange. With a troubled countenance, she watched the two ragged youngsters scramble back to their post, Tommy peeling his orange while Andrew plied all his merry charm trying to persuade a passing gentleman in a top hat to let him sweep the crossing before him.

She had thought her lot was bad until she discovered these children. They were an inspiration to her, with their high hearts and happy-go-lucky spirits in spite of the hellish conditions they endured. The streets were crawling with them—homeless, shoeless, half-naked, and starved. She had only become aware of the true, horrifying scale of the problem one frigid night in January, when snow had covered London in the greatest blizzard in memory. While the rich had held a winter festival on the frozen Thames, she had gone looking for Andrew and Tommy with the intent of bringing them into her single-room lodgings in a ramshackle City tenement, at least to give them a roof over their heads. Searching everywhere, she had been at last directed by a surly girl to a dark building that looked like a deserted warehouse. Upon stepping inside, she had raised her lantern and beheld a mass of shivering children huddled together. There must have been seventy of them.

This was a flash house, Andrew had explained when she found him there. The youngster hadn't needed to tell her what her adult reason instantly grasped—here, the boys were apprenticed as thieves, the girls as prostitutes. It had been the most shocking and horrible moment of her twenty-three years. Never in all her days as a refined country gentlewoman of Oxfordshire had she ever imagined such a nightmare.

The worst part of it was how little she could do to help. She didn't have the arrogance to tell them not to steal when they were starving. The greater crime was the heartless penal code that would hang any child over seven for a theft

of five paltry shillings. All she could do besides lend a hand at the relief societies was to give the little wretches affection, mind them as best she could, and nag them to go to church.

She saw Tommy drop a piece of his orange on the ground and quickly pick it up, brush it off with his grubby fingers, and pop it into his mouth. She heaved a sigh and turned away just as a flashy, all-too-familiar phaeton turned the corner and began rolling toward her.

Her face paled. Her empty stomach clenched and made a knot. She quickly bent down and heaved her basket up into her arms as the thunder of the horses' hooves grew louder.

God, please don't let him see me.

As she strained with the basket and began hurrying away, the sleek phaeton slowed to a halt alongside her, traces jingling. She clamped her jaw, realizing it would gratify her tormentor too much if she fled. Better to stand and hold her ground, unpleasant as their long war was. Turning slowly, she braced herself for battle as the flamboyantly dressed Sir Dolph Breckinridge leaped down from his equipage, his requisite cheroot dangling from the side of his mouth.

Abandoning his phaeton to his groom—who had a black eye—he swaggered toward her. He was tall, tanned, and sinewy, with short-cropped sandy hair. Grinning, the glowing-tipped cheroot clamped between his wolfish white teeth, he was the very picture of what she had taught her girls at Mrs. Hall's to fear as A Nasty Man.

"Don't come near me with that thing," she warned.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered—today it amused him to obey her.

He tossed the cheroot carelessly onto the pavement and crushed it under one of his expensive champagne-polished boots, then stalked her slowly—just as he had for the past

eight months. Since the early autumn of last year, Sir Dolph had been utterly, destructively obsessed with her. She had no idea why. Perhaps it was merely his nature to fix upon one object until he had captured or destroyed it. She only knew one thing for certain: Everything that had befallen her was his fault.

With a cold expression she turned away and walked on, carrying her basket of oranges. She could smell him coming after her. He always wore too much cologne.

"Going somewhere, my heart?"

Bel merely sent him a withering glare and turned to the passersby. "Oranges, here!"

His dashing smile widened, revealing his chipped tooth, the result of one of his countless brawls, as was his off-center nose.

Dolph was proud of his battle scars. Possessed of no sense of decorum whatsoever, he was wont to start pulling off his clothes at the slightest provocation in order to give anyone he met the chance to stand in awe of his illustrious scars. He was especially proud of the one that slanted across his muscled chest where a bear had once swiped him during a hunting trip in the Alps. Bel had seen the scar, God knew. He had shown it to her the first night they'd met, to her astonished humiliation, considering that they had been at a Hunt Ball. She only wished the bear had been more determined.

Dolph rubbed his hands together and feigned a shiver. "Chilly out here today. Bet you're hungry."

"Oranges! Sweet oranges, here, fresh from sunny Italy!"

"It's your last chance to change your mind about going to Brighton with me. I leave tomorrow. There will be other ladies present, if that's your concern." He waited, but she continued to ignore him. "The Regent's mistress is giving a rout at the farmhouse by the shore. Me and my friends are invited—"

"Oranges, a penny apiece!"

He growled in exasperation. "Of all the women in the world that I could have, doesn't it mean anything to you that you're the one I pick?"

"If you're going to come and bother me every day, you could at least buy an orange."

"A penny, right? Sorry, I don't carry such small change," he said with a short laugh. "Oranges give me hives and besides, why should I help you? You are a naughty thing, always running away from me. How much longer do you plan to put me off?"

"Until it works," she muttered, carrying her basket down the street.

Following her, Dolph laughed with gusto. His groom led the phaeton's team after them, following them down the street at a respectful distance.

Bel looked away in desperation, longing to catch a glimpse in the crowd of a scarlet uniform and then to see her darling, wayward Mick Braden marching toward her, come home from the war. Why, he was *Captain* Mick Braden now since his gallantry on the fields of France, she thought with a rush of pride in the cocksure young officer from her tiny home village of Kelmscot—the man she had more or less planned on marrying since she was sixteen.

"Bel, sweet, you're a noble quarry, but it's time to give up the game. You've proved yourself as resourceful as you're stubborn, as clever as you are fair. Every move I've made, you've countered with admirable spirit. I applaud you. Now, for God's sake, stop this nonsense and come home with me. You're disgracing yourself."

"It is honest work," she replied through gritted teeth. "Oranges, here!"

"Do you doubt my affection?"

"Affection?" She turned to him and set down her basket so harshly the oranges rolled about. "Look what you've

done to me and my father. When you care for someone, you don't ruin their life!"

"I took that life away from you so I could give you a better one! I'm going to make you a countess, you thankless chit."

"I don't want to be a countess, Dolph. I only want you to leave me alone."

"Oh, I'm so sick of you and your airs," he sneered, grasping her arm. "You *are* mine. It's just a matter of time."

"Let go of me this instant."

His grip tightened with raw power. "Nothing is going to stop me from winning you in time, Bel. Can't you see? My actions *prove* my love."

"Your actions prove you are selfish beyond imagining."

His eyes narrowed to angry slashes. "Be fair—"

"Fair?" she cried as he released her arm. She jerked back. "You had my poor father thrown in the Fleet. You got me fired from the finishing school. We lost our house!"

"And you can have it all back—just like that!" He snapped his leather-gloved fingers, staring lecherously at her. "Just surrender. Say you'll be my wife. You can't win this one, Bel. It's not as though my offer is improper—anymore," he added with a slight sulk.

"You are supposed to marry Lord Coldfell's daughter."

"What would I do with a feebleminded deaf-mute for a wife? I daresay I deserve better than that."

"Dolph, that is unkind. You know I am engaged to Captain Braden," she said, stretching the truth just a bit, because their long understanding wasn't an actual, formal betrothal.

"Braden! Don't say that name to me. He is nothing! He's probably dead."

"He's alive. I saw the list in the *Times* after Toulouse."

"Then where is he, Bel? Where is your hero? In Paris?

Celebrating King Louie's return with the French whores? Because I don't see him here, if he loves you so much."

"He's coming," she said with far more conviction than she felt.

"Good, because I can't wait to meet the chap and thrash him. You're not marrying him."

"Well, I'm not marrying you. I know too well what you are." With her basket tucked under her arm, she lifted her chin and walked on.

"Oh, you are a proud wench," he said with a quick, dangerous sneer, but he schooled it to a taut, angry smile. "Very well. You still refuse to submit to me. Not today. Not yet. But soon."

"Never. You are wasting your time."

"Sweet, foolish, beautiful Miss Hamilton." His gaze moved possessively over her body. "You claim to know my nature. Don't you see that the more you run away, the more lusty I grow for the chase?"

She took a backward step, gripping an orange, half prepared to hurl it at him to drive him off.

With a gleam in his eyes and a smirk on his lips, Dolph took out another cheroot. "Until next time, sweet. I'll be in Brighton for several weeks, but rest assured, I will be back." He lit the cheroot, blew the smoke at her, then turned and climbed back up into his phaeton. With a roar, he whipped his cowering horses into an instantaneous gallop.

Flinching at the crack of leather, she stood at bay until his fancy phaeton had rolled away. The two costermongers across the way shouted mocking names at her that she was learning to dread with a whole new understanding. She ignored them, swallowed hard, and glanced down the street, praying to catch a glimpse of a smart red uniform, but there was still no sign of her rescuer yet.

After she had sold the rest of her oranges, it was time for her daily visit to Papa at the Fleet, where he had been

incarcerated since Christmas for a debt of a little over three thousand pounds. The walk to the hulking, redbrick prison on Faringdon Street was long and chilly, and with every step, Bel fretted over the holes in her kid half boots. She dreamed as she walked of the snug, cozy, rose-covered cottage where she had lived in Kelmscot, a quaint village on the Thames a few miles outside Oxford.

Her father was a gentleman scholar and admittedly a bit of an eccentric. Alfred Hamilton liked nothing better than to while away his days poring over the ancient illuminated manuscripts that were his passion, or haunting nearby Oxford University's awe-inspiring Bodleian Library. Papa and she had lived a quiet, placid life that moved at the stately pace of the river, but then Dolph had come along and bullied their creditors into prosecuting her father for his unpaid debts. Papa had always been absentminded about such things. Bel tried to mind financial matters in their household, but, like a guilty child, her father had concealed from her just how seriously he had compromised the family finances with his uncontrollable fervor for snatching up any illuminated manuscripts that crossed his path. Ergo, he soon landed in the Fleet.

Moving hastily to London to be near him, Bel had found work at Mrs. Hall's posh finishing school in the hopes of mitigating their troubles, but then Dolph had contrived to have her dismissed. He had wanted her helpless and bereft of resources so she would have no choice but to turn to him for help. She shook her head to herself as she walked. *That* she would never do.

As the Fleet's huge, arched entrance came into sight between the towering walls of the prison yard, she grew nervous and began mentally rehearsing her plea to the warden to extend her just a fortnight's credit, at which time she could pay her father's chamber fees in full.

Doubt gnawed her as she trudged toward the huge front

doors. Realistically, she knew the chances were slim that any plea of hers would move the lumbering, scar-faced man. The Lord Himself writhing on the cross probably could not have moved the warden of the Fleet, who had been hardened, she'd heard, by years of overseeing prisons in the convict colony of New South Wales. He had even managed women's prisons, it was said, so she expected no chivalrous treatment based on her status as a Lady of Quality.

The various jailers and guards knew her from her daily visits. One of them conducted her through the long, rectangular lobby. As they neared the warden's office, she heard his deep, rough voice through the open door as he matter-of-factly abused one of his subordinates, citing codes and regulations like a true petty tyrant. She trembled at the thought of having to throw herself on the mercy of such a man.

As the guard led her past the office, the warden's colorless eyes, devoid of emotion, flicked to her. He was standing behind his desk, a big, square, brawny man with skin as weathered and tanned as a saddle. He had a whitish-pink scar that scored his brow and cheek and ran all the way down to his jaw. A ponderous ring of keys hung by the pistol and bludgeon at his belt. He nodded to her as she passed, then she could feel his gaze following her.

She shuddered as the guard led her up to her father's cell, though she knew the way herself by now. Arriving before the solid wood door, she wearily gave the guard the necessary coin. He pocketed it with a greasy smile, then turned the key and admitted her.

When she walked in, she found her father, Alfred Hamilton—dreamer, violin player, medieval scholar—in a state of absorption, poring over one of the rare and precious manuscripts that had landed him in debtor's prison. His round spectacles were perched on his nose. His snow

white hair, wild and woolly, stuck out in all directions from under his beloved velvet fez.

"Hello?" she called in amusement.

At her greeting, he looked up in surprise, startled back into the present century. Then his lined, rosy-cheeked face broke out in a wreath of smiles, as though he had not just seen her yesterday and the day before that.

"What light through yonder window breaks? Why, it's Linda-bel!"

"Oh, Papa." She strode in and hugged him. He had called her Linda-bel since she was knee high and it was typical of him, since he seemed to do everything backwards. He sat down on his stool again. She stood beside him and affectionately patted his shoulder. "How are they treating you today? Have you had your dinner?"

"Yes, a mutton stew. I fear I shall turn Irish with all the mutton I eat," he exclaimed, clapping his thigh as he chuckled. "How I should love a good English steak. Ah, beef stew and a clutch of dinner rolls like you used to make—heaven!"

"Well, if turning Irish is the extent of your woes, I'm glad. You seem in good spirits."

"Always, my dear, always, though not everyone around here can say the same. Why, just this afternoon, I went down into the courtyard and saw so many long faces that I took my violin and entertained the whole block with airs from the North country. Soon some even took to cutting a reel. I don't mind telling you I received a rousing ovation!"

"Well done!" she said, laughing. She knew old Alfred had charmed most of the guards and all the other prisoners with his buoyant, gentle nature, his violin playing, and his tales of ancient chivalry, of dragons and knights and maidens fair, all of which helped to while away the hours of endless ennui for those imprisoned here.

For now, he had the stronger prisoners and some of the

kinder guards looking out for him, but the Fleet was no gentleman's club, and her gentlemanly father had never been exposed to such a place before. With such thoughts weighing almost constantly on her mind, her laughter ebbed away.

He lowered his spectacles on his nose and peered at her. "Now, now, I know that look. You mustn't worry over me, little damsel. The clouds will part. They always do. You just look after yourself and your young charges. Teaching is the noblest profession in the civilized world. Mind you, after your silly debutantes have finished their proper posture and walking lessons, tell them it never killed any young lady to remove the book from off the top of her head and open it for a change. Just like I taught you."

"Yes, Papa." She looked away.

Her father was a hopeless optimist, but surely he would not be so cheerful if she had not kept the truth from him. Determined not to worry him, she had been keeping up appearances, putting on a brave face. She had not told him of her unjust dismissal from Mrs. Hall's.

"Don't forget your Milton," he added. " 'The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.' You look at these four walls and see a jail cell, but I see—an enchanter's study," he declared with a sudden grin.

"Oh, Papa. It's just—I don't know how I'm ever going to get you out of here. It's such a lot of money. You are my father and I would never reproach you, but sometimes I just wish . . . that you had *sold* the manuscripts instead of donating them to the Bodleian Library."

A rare, stern look of disapproval knit his bushy white eyebrows. "Sell them? Daughter, for shame! Think on your words. These are priceless works of art that I salvaged from the hands of unscrupulous dealers. Can you

sell beauty? Can you sell truth? These books belong to all humanity."

"But to buy them, you spent the money that was earmarked for our rent and our carriage and our food, Papa."

"And I am the one who shall suffer for my principles, am I not? I consider myself in fine company in that regard—Saint Paul, Galileo. Well, you have everything you need, don't you? The school gives you room and board and other girls to talk to."

"Well, yes, but—"

"Then fret not over my welfare. In this life, we make our choices and we pay the price. I'm not afraid of whatever my fate holds."

"Yes, Papa," she murmured, lowering her head. She stewed at his deluded lecture but didn't dream of telling him that he was comfortable in his enchanter's study only because of her constant toil and sacrifices. Instead she brought their visit to a close. He no doubt was eager to get back to his work on the moldering text. She kissed him dutifully on the cheek and promised to return tomorrow. He patted her on the head fondly, then the jailer let her out.

She steeled herself as she followed the guard back down the stairwell. It was time to face the warden of the Fleet. The door at the back of the long lobby was open. She saw the prisoners shuffling inside from the courtyard, returning to their cells. It had begun to rain again. Bel heaved a disgusted sigh to think of her holey boots and the long walk home.

She tapped the guard on the shoulder. "May I speak to the warden privately for a moment, please?"

"Oh, sure, missy. He'll be 'appy to meet you—privately," the guard said with a knowing leer.

Bel scowled at him, but a moment later, she was shown into the office. The big, hulking warden rose at her entrance but did not smile. The guard closed the door as he left.

"Thank you for seeing me," she said nervously. "I am Miss Hamilton. My father, Mr. Alfred Hamilton, is in cell one-twelve-B. Do you mind if I sit?"

He sliced her a military nod. She eased warily into the chair across from his desk. She glanced around the small, cramped, gloomy office. There were racks of rifles fixed to the wall, a locked ammunition box, and a coiled bullwhip on a nail.

"What seems to be the problem?" he asked, brusque and impatient, his rough voice tinged with an Australian twang. Lord, but he made her nervous.

"Well, sir, you see, ah, the thing is—this month I'm afraid I have somehow come up short in regards to my father's chamber fees. I—I'm very sorry and I promise it will never happen again, but if you could just see clear to give me an extra fortnight just this once, then I could pay in full. . . ."

She faltered as his leathery face hardened. His skeptical stare seemed as though he half suspected she had spent the money on gin or something equally disreputable.

"This ain't no moneylender's, miss."

"I realize that, but . . . surely something can be done." She attempted to smile winningly at him. "I already work several jobs, but some young friends of mine needed shoes for the winter. . . ." Her voice trailed off. His expression told her clearly he didn't want to hear her excuses. "I'm in quite desperate straits, sir. That is all."

"Haven't ye menfolk to help ye? No brothers? Uncles? No husband?"

"No, sir, there's only me."

His gaze slid downward. "Well, let's 'ave a look." His keys jangled as he sat down at his desk and flipped through his ledger, then fingered a column. "Appears we've never 'ad delays on your account before."

"I have certainly done my best," she agreed, feeling a faint spark of hope.

"Mm-hmm." He sent her a glance with a gleam in his cold, glassy eyes that made her shrink back from him slightly. "Well, now." He stroked his scar. "Under the circumstances, I'm sure we can arrive at some satisfact'ry arrangement. Let me think on it. Jones!" he bellowed abruptly, summoning his assistant. "Call me carriage around for the young lass."

"Sir?" she asked, wide-eyed.

He looked at her after his assistant had disappeared. "You arrive here every day on foot, Miss Hamilton, so I've noticed. It's pourin' rain. My man will drive you home."

"Thank you, sir, that's very kind, but it's not necessary—"

"Yes, it is. G'day." Having summarily dismissed her, the warden of the Fleet went back to work.

"Good day," she replied uncertainly, rising. With a frown of gnawing uneasiness, she went back out to the front of the prison. She did not want to accept a ride from the man. It was far from proper. On the other hand, she didn't want to offend him, either, since he held Papa's fate in his hands. She bit her lip in indecision as she stood under the arched entrance while the rain fell, cold and dismal. She was essentially a practical woman. What if she got sick from walking home in this weather? She couldn't afford to miss a day's work. It wasn't as though the man would be in the carriage with her.

A battered ex-hackney coach pulled up, drawn by a sway-backed nag. A driver in a soggy top hat beckoned her over. Hesitating only a moment longer, Bel dashed over the pavement and let herself up into the cab.

All innocence, she told the warden's driver where she lived.

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