A Woman’s Estate

Roberta Gellis

Chapter One

“The most seemingly tender mothers can turn out to be exceedingly cruel and treacherous creatures,” Sir Arthur St. Eyre said. The plaintive tone of his remark fitted ill with Sir Arthur’s powerful frame, well displayed by a coat and breeches molded to him by the best tailor in London, or with his expression of aristocratic hauteur.

Roger St. Eyre, Sir Arthur’s half uncle, guffawed, and Bertram Lydden, his secretary, tittered delicately behind a fine, scented handkerchief, which he held to his lips. Neither paid any attention to Sir Arthur’s expression, partly because they were accustomed to it, but more because they were aware it was an accidental result of Arthur’s features. A long, narrow face, topped by carefully dressed brown hair over a high forehead, was dominated by a high-bridged, aquiline nose that gave Arthur’s rather heavy-lidded eyes the appearance of staring haughtily down its prominence. Unfortunately, the formation of his upper face added a supercilious tinge to the good-humored upward quirking at the corners of his well-shaped lips.

“You are spoiled,” Roger said, his blue eyes sparkling just as brightly as they had in his youth, although his thinning hair was gray and his face showed the marks of fifty-seven hard years. “You have worked Violet as if she were a dray horse, Arthur. Your mother has a right to a little peace. Between the diplomatic tangles Austria and Russia are making and the damned American war, this last Season was very hard on her.”

“If you ask me,” Arthur replied, “it was Joseph and Irma who wore her out. After all, it wasn’t until she went out to Nichée d’Amour—”

He hesitated over the words, Roger wrinkled his nose in distaste, and Bertram shuddered delicately. All the years had not accustomed any of them to the fact that Arthur’s sister-in-law had named her house “Love Nest”.

But the negative reactions were automatic. Roger was so surprised by what Arthur had said, because he knew Arthur to be fond of his younger brother and heir, that he protested, “Oh, come now, Arthur,” before he noticed the lazy fall of the younger man’s eyelids, which betrayed that Arthur knew he was being outrageous.

“Well, wouldn’t it wear you out to be told every five minutes to sit down and rest or to put on a muffler if you were going out—and out for the appalling purpose, no doubt, of inspecting Joseph’s endless array of boars and sows and their squirming litters?”

“No,” Roger answered blandly, giving no sign that he knew he had been caught by Arthur’s teasing. “Pigs are very restful creatures.” However, he said nothing about Irma’s all-too-constant care for every person, young or old, who came within her reach. Irma was the kindest of women, but her unremitting and unquenchable quest to provide safety and comfort for others did tend to rub the nerves.

Bertram giggled again. “But if you find Irma so wearing, Arthur, and Violet persists in her intention of living in Bath, what will you do for a hostess?”

“You could always stop entertaining politically,” Roger suggested quickly. “That would probably be more of a relief to your own party than to mine.”

“Or he could marry,” Bertram offered, flicking the handkerchief and inserting it into his sleeve.

“A man with such kind and sympathetic friends,” Arthur drawled, “might be excused for seeking comfort in the bosom of his enemies. Was there one sprig displayed at the marriage mart this Season whom you would recommend, my dear Bertram?”

“Oh, several,” Bertram replied. “If I had the wherewithal, I’m sure I would marry.” He languidly waved graceful fingers. “But as my tastes tend to luxury and my good sense informs me that love in a cottage soon degenerates to boredom or hatred, I am spared needing to make a decision among the lovely flowerlets.”
“Bah!” Arthur replied. “You know I would murder any girl who threatened to remove you from my employ. Your system of managing my affairs is unique. I would fall into ruin if you left me, because neither I nor anyone else could disentangle it.”

“But there is no need to choose a sprig from the marriage mart,” Roger interrupted mischievously. “There are any number of women somewhat nearer your own advanced years who, for lack of dowry or because of…er…other minor faults—”

“Like a double squint,” Arthur said sardonically.

“Now, now. That would be an unusual case. But if you feel all girls who could not make suitable matches in their first few Seasons have such disabilities, how about a handsome young widow?”

“What? And sleep three to a marriage bed?” Arthur exclaimed. “Not for me! I have no mind to spend my time hearing that I do not measure up to a safely buried—and therefore perfect—mate.”

“I am afraid he is incorrigible,” Bertram said to Roger. “No matter what you say, he will find an adequate reason to avoid taking a wife.”

“That is perfectly true,” Arthur agreed. “No one knows me better than Bertram. And in any case, I invited you here, my dear and devoted uncle, to talk about the country’s affairs, not mine.”

“You started it,” Roger said mildly, “by complaining about Violet.”

“Well, you let it get out of hand,” Arthur rejoined, the plaintive note coming back into his voice. “You were supposed to sympathize briefly and then disclose the information I wanted, feeling that I had been harshly used and needed cheering.”

Roger first closed his eyes, then reopened them and raised them to heaven. “Does it not trouble you at all that we are of opposite political persuasions and that giving you information might smack of disloyalty to more partisan Tories than I?”

“Nonsense,” Arthur said cheerfully. “You’ve just been saying that the Whigs like me less than the Tories—and you have never been a party man. You aren’t even in the government. And you don’t have a seat in the Commons.”

“But I’m one of Liverpool’s friends,” Roger protested, “and much of what he tells me is in confidence.”

“That might be more significant,” Arthur pointed out, “if we had opposing views about the information I want, but you know we do not. I am as eager as anyone in the government to support Wellington and the war in Spain. What’s more, I agree completely that Bonaparte must be removed from power or some method devised to contain and control him.”

“Do you think the latter possible?” Roger asked.

“Frankly, no,” Arthur replied. “Bonaparte is far too clever and completely unscrupulous. You know he will promise anything, then do his best to cause dissension among Russia, Prussia and Austria—no very difficult matter, after all—and as soon as he has gathered strength, attack again.”

Roger sighed. “It won’t need Bonaparte to cause dissension. Russia wants Austria’s Galician territories and whatever Prussia controlled of Poland. To obtain Prussia’s agreement, the tsar offered King Frederick most of Saxony, on the interesting grounds that the king of Saxony had been Bonaparte’s ally—”

“But they’ve all been allies of France at one time or another,” Bertram interrupted.

“Yes, well, I suppose they feel it indelicate to remember that just at this moment.” Arthur’s lips curled with cynical amusement.

“It would certainly be inexpedient,” Roger remarked, smiling, “but I think indelicate is probably just the right word
in this case. I have seldom come across a man more eager to deceive himself than Tsar Alexander."

“Perhaps so, but I don’t think the emperor of Austria would be willing to cooperate in this particular self-deception,” Arthur said.

“Well, no,” Roger agreed, his lips twisting wryly, “although I doubt Emperor Francis himself is the one who has taken notice of it. I understand he prefers making toffee to conducting diplomatic business.”

Bertram flicked his handkerchief out of his sleeve and patted his brow and lips gently. “Oh, so do I,” he murmured.

“Just as well for Austria, probably,” Arthur commented, flashing an amused glance at his secretary, who, for reasons completely obscure to his employer, always pretended he was a fool. “Metternich has ten times the emperor’s brains.”

“Just as well for us too,” Roger commented. “Metternich is not only clever but sensible, and since he isn’t Austrian, his loyalty is never blind, though it’s perfectly firm. However, I don’t believe even Metternich would agree to cede Polish Galicia to Alexander. After all, one can understand that Austria would greatly prefer not to have Russia dominating territories right on her border. It would be much more to Austrian advantage to have a weak, divided state there. What’s more, for years there’s been a tug of war between Prussia and Austria over control of those German statelets between them. If King Frederick gets Saxony, the balance will swing toward Prussian predominance.”

“Obviously, then, pushing France back behind its natural boundaries and leaving Bonaparte in charge is foolish,” Arthur said. “No matter how the cake is divided, no one will be satisfied—and the greater the satisfaction of one, the more indignant and ill at ease the others will be. Ridiculous! Boney will have them at each other’s throats in no time. He must be got rid of completely.”

“Easy enough to say,” Roger sighed, “but who the devil is going to do it? Granted that the army Boney has now is not the quality of the one destroyed in the retreat from Russia and that a good many of his best officers are dead, or minding their own affairs, like Murat and Bernadotte. He still managed to defeat the Russians at Lützen.”

“That so-called victory must have hurt Bonaparte as much as the defeat hurt the Russians, perhaps even more…” Arthur’s voice rose a little, giving his statement an unfinished, almost challenging tone.

“You do have large, flapping ears, don’t you?” Roger remarked, raising his expressive brows. “Where did you hear that an armistice has been proposed?”

Arthur laughed. “At a tea party, of course.”

“Don’t tell me Leonie or Sabrina let it slip!” Roger exclaimed.

“No, certainly not,” Arthur assured him. “I haven’t seen Leonie, and you can’t believe Sabrina would be indiscreet, even to me. If you want the truth, Lady Jersey just whispered a word into my ear.”

Roger groaned. “If I have warned Liverpool once, I have warned him a hundred times not to tell Prince George anything until he wants it to be common knowledge.”

“He must tell the regent something,” Bertram put in soothingly. “After all, he is officially our monarch, even if he has odd tastes in mistresses, and news of the possibility of an armistice seems harmless.”

“It is harmless,” Roger agreed, but his voice was tart with displeasure. “It’s just an example of the way information, sometimes important information, gets spread around.”

Arthur shrugged, dismissing a problem for which he was certain there was not, and would never be, any solution. “But if Boney agreed to an armistice, he must have been hurt. I think if Wellington can bring off a victory in Spain, Austria will declare war against Boney, too.”

“Very likely,” Roger said, amusement replacing his pique, “but even so, to get back to our original point, I have
strong doubts that there will be any demand that Bonaparte give up his throne. Don’t forget that he is married to Emperor Francis’ daughter, so Francis is not going to agree easily to Bonaparte’s deposition. And while Alexander likes to think of himself as the ‘savior of Europe’, he really prefers the French to us. In fact, I believe the tsar is half convinced of the truth of Boney’s claim that it is English ‘inveterate hatred’ that has driven him to wars of conquest. Frederick William will, of course, be too cautious to agree to deposition, in case Boney should somehow return to power and hold it against him.”

“Then it will be up to us to insist,” Arthur said firmly. “I shall raise a Question in Parliament on the subject—and it will also serve the purpose of showing that every support must be given Wellington in Spain.”

“There is the little problem of the American war,” Roger remarked dryly. “However inept the Americans are, there must be some troops to oppose them, or they will overrun Canada.”

“It would be much more sensible to make peace with the United States,” Arthur said aggressively. He knew that the sentiment he had voiced was not popular. By and large the public and the majority in the House of Commons were vociferously demanding that America be beaten to its knees for daring to protest measures the British believed necessary for their national security. “Never have I heard of such a stupid war. It is totally purposeless, nothing but a minor nuisance—”

“I quite agree,” Roger interrupted, laughing, “but we did not start it, and we must protect Canada. It is no fault of ours that the United States declared war two days before the arrival of the ship carrying the news that their principal cause of complaint had been removed.”

“That may be true,” Arthur conceded, “but it is no reason to refuse to negotiate now. To send more troops to Canada is ridiculous. They are far more urgently needed in Spain or Europe. If that stupid business in America were settled, perhaps we might even have a division or two to add to the Prussian-Russian coalition—”

“You are being carried away.” There was reproof in Roger’s voice. “I do not really think you would like to hand over British troops to a Prussian or Russian general to use as he pleases. And to send troops with officers empowered to refuse to carry out the orders of the overall commander would only increase the conviction that England will not fight.”

“What the devil do they think we are doing in Spain and Portugal?” Arthur demanded loudly.

“Dear Arthur.” Bertram’s light voice somehow managed to cut across his employer’s rising excitement. “You know perfectly well that Russia and Prussia are indifferent to what happens to Spain and Portugal. There is no sense shouting at Roger about it.”

Roger laughed again. “I’m not likely to take offense, Bertram. Arthur’s been shouting at me since he was three and discovered injustice.” He rose, walked over to his nephew, who had also risen and gripped his arm affectionately. “You have the information you wanted, and I really must get home in time for dinner. Ask your Question in Commons about getting the government to push for deposing Bonaparte. You will only get a lecture on the politics of the possible. On the other hand, if you can inject some of your common sense into the argument about the American war, you won’t get any violent opposition from Liverpool or Castlereagh.”

“But Roger interrupted him. “Oh, no,” he said, laughing. “That is all you will get from me on that subject. I meant just what I said, no more—Liverpool and Castlereagh will not oppose a peace with America if it can be accomplished without political damage. And speaking of damage—have you heard from Francis Lydden?”

“No a word,” Arthur replied, his face suddenly taking on a worried expression quite foreign to it.

“You should not have allowed Lord Lydden to name you as one of his executors,” Bertram put in, his voice sharper than usual. Bertram was Francis’ cousin, the son of Lord Lydden’s younger brother.

“Probably not,” Arthur admitted, “but he was so very weak. He couldn’t, catch his breath, and he begged me with
tears running down his face to do what was in my power to keep Francis from ruining himself and everyone else.”

“You could not have refused him,” Roger agreed sympathetically. “I could not have done so myself, but it is a thankless task you have taken on—and, I am afraid, a hopeless one. You must not blame yourself, Arthur, if you cannot control Francis’ self-destructive propensities.”

“I think I would have refused, though,” Arthur said, sounding exasperated, “except that I had been told he was on the mend, and I hoped he would recover. Unfortunately, a second seizure carried him off before I could see him again and convince him that I was the last person to whom Francis would attend. That was an odd thing, that second seizure. I spoke to his physician because I was annoyed at not having been warned, and he said it took him equally by surprise. The day before, when he saw Lydden, he was ready to declare him out of danger.”

“One can never predict that kind of seizure,” Bertram said, shrugging.

“That’s true enough,” Roger agreed. “But why would you say you are the last person to whom Francis would attend? I know you two had drifted apart, but I didn’t think it was anything more than a divergence of interests when you went into politics. Had you quarreled with Francis?”

Arthur laughed wryly. “Again and again, but that meant nothing. You know Francis never held a grudge. He was sweet tempered, even if he was bone selfish. No, unfortunately Francis knew I disapproved of his father’s refusal to pay his debts—”

“You didn’t let me finish,” Arthur complained. “I wanted Lydden to pay the tradesmen, not the gambling debts. I thought, you see, that the clubs would expel Francis if he was known not to pay his debts of honor, and that would put a stop to his gambling.” He shrugged. “You needn’t tell me it was foolish. It was a long time ago. I was young. And I never could resist Francis when he came out of one of those fits. He was so pitiful, so remorseful, so damned earnest when he swore he would never do it again.”

“You saved him from debtors’ prison!” Bertram gasped. “I should have known. Did you think sending him off to America would mend his ways? Nothing will,” he added bitterly.

Bertram turned away and walked toward the door, where he paused to pull the bell cord. While his back was to them, Arthur and Roger exchanged a swift glance. They had forgotten momentarily that Bertram’s father had been another Francis. But Bertram senior had not been checked because he had already been in possession of his estate when his proclivity for drink and gambling had become evident. He had ruined himself, reducing his wife and son to penury before he managed to drink himself to death. That was why Bertram was Arthur’s secretary rather than living on his own property on a comfortable income.

Both Roger and Arthur were sorry the subject of Francis had come up. Arthur was particularly disturbed. He had believed Bertram was perfectly happy with his work, income, and the comfortable rooms that were exclusively his in every house Arthur owned. Bertram was free to use any house at any time, whether Arthur was in residence or not, free to invite guests, to entertain, in fact, to act in every way as if Arthur’s property were his own. And every servant on all of Arthur’s estates obeyed Bertram as implicitly as Arthur—perhaps more implicitly, Arthur thought, since he knew himself to be by far the more lenient. Yet twice this very afternoon he had been shocked by his secretary’s bitterness.

When the footman who came in answer to the bell had been instructed to have Roger’s horse brought around from the stable, Bertram rejoined Arthur and Roger, who were talking politics again. A few minutes later, Arthur walked Roger out the large double doors of the library, through the beautifully furnished entry hall, and finally all the way down the broad steps to the driveway, where his hack was being held by a groom.

“Bertram wasn’t joking when he said he wanted to marry, was he?” Arthur said suddenly.

“No, I’m afraid not,” Roger replied.
“Well, why the devil shouldn’t he?” Arthur asked irritably. “His wife would be perfectly welcome to live with us.” He gestured at the huge country mansion behind them. “Surely he cannot think we would lack living space.”

Roger laughed, but then shook his head, his expression becoming sober. “It could not be easy to ask a woman to share his kind of life. You know he would not be considered eligible by many fathers, his ability to support a wife resting, as it does, on your goodwill. You know and I know that Bertram is as much your friend as your secretary, but there is no way he can prove that to a girl’s family. It is not as simple as you would like to make it seem, Arthur.”

“What the devil can I do?” Arthur asked. “I would hate to lose Bertram, but I would gladly—”

“I don’t think you should do anything at all just now,” Roger said decisively. “Just keep your ears and eyes open. If you find that someone in particular has caught his fancy, I imagine it will become obvious what is best to do.”

“Yes,” Arthur said, drawing out the word, and then his heavy lids dropped, obscuring the mischief in his eyes as he added, “I have always found Bertram to have a most discriminating taste. Perhaps I will have a ready-made hostess without my having to marry, after all.”

Chapter Two

“Lady Lydden?” Mr. John Deedes said to his clerk, looking and sounding as surprised as he felt. “Is not Lord Lydden with his wife?”

“No, sir,” the clerk replied. “No one is with her. She is quite alone, sir.”

The solicitor’s face darkened. He could only assume that Francis Lydden and his family had arrived all but penniless, that Francis was drunk and incapable, and that his wife had been forced to come to apply for sufficient funds to make the journey to Rutupiae Hall. It was a dismal prospect. He hated to contemplate the ruin of a fine, old family, but there was little he could do, so he told his clerk to show in Lady Lydden and rose to greet her, bracing himself to meet a woman he was sure would be bitter and in great distress.

Mr. Deedes knew something about Lady Lydden. Although Francis and his father had not parted on good terms, Francis had retained a sufficient sense of responsibility to inform his father when he had married in America and when each of his children had been born. At least, John Deedes thought, Francis had married a suitable girl. Abigail Evangeline Lydden was the daughter of Victor Milford, youngest son of Sir Thomas Milford. The Milfords were a good Dorset family. Why Victor had emigrated to America, Mr. Deedes did not know, but he remembered Lord Lydden’s relief and satisfaction after he made inquiries of the Milfords at the time Francis had written to announce his marriage.

The door opened, and Mr. Deedes came around his desk and hurried forward. He had intended to meet the lady near the door and support her trembling steps to a chair, but the brilliance of the smile she gave his clerk as she thanked him, the erect carriage and graceful motion as she turned toward Deedes and held out her hand, were sufficient evidence that Lady Lydden was in no need of physical support. In fact, it was Mr. Deedes who could have used a prop, and he had some difficulty in commanding himself enough to bow and kiss the proffered hand.

By the time he had seated her, he was enough restored from the shock her beauty had dealt him to tell himself he was a fool. He had assumed from the speed with which Francis married after he arrived in America that he had married for money, to keep body and soul together without being reduced to doing a day’s work. Why that had led him to believe that Francis’ wife would be plain and dull, he could not now understand. He knew that Francis was not the type to discommode himself with a dull, plain wife. Francis was sufficiently insinuating and ingenious to survive—at least for a while—without such a sacrifice.

Plain and dull, Lady Lydden was not. Her rich auburn hair curled fetchingly from under her delightful hat, her lips were full and soft, her nose short and just slightly tip-tilted, her brow broad and beautifully white and the large, long-lashed, violet-blue eyes turned up to him glowed with warm friendliness. Mr. Deedes, who had his own fixed opinions of what gently nurtured females were like, noted Lady Lydden’s sweetly rounded chin but did not take cognizance of how very firm it was. Nor did he think—as someone who knew Abigail better than he did had
remarked—that the strong, white teeth exposed by her enchanting smile looked as if they could take a bite out of the world and grind it down to her purpose.

The smile, however, indicated to Mr. Deedes that his worst fears—that Francis was lying drunk and helpless somewhere and that Lady Lydden could not pay the bills—would not be realized. Deedes could think of only one other reason for her coming alone, Francis was too lazy to do whatever business he wanted done himself and had sent her. As a boy, Francis had never done anything that did not give him pleasure, and apparently he had not changed. Abigail had not been unaware of Mr. Deedes’ scrutiny. She did not mind. She was accustomed to goggle-eyed stares from men who were meeting her for the first time. She was somewhat puzzled, however, at the expressions that had crossed his face, albeit fleetingly. Abigail was also accustomed to reading expressions. The success of a bookshop depends partly upon the ability of its owner or clerk to recommend the type of book a particular customer would enjoy. When Abigail had been about fifteen, her mother grew too ill to serve in their shop, and Abigail had taken over the task of dealing with the ladies who wanted to read novels. After her father’s death, Abigail also assisted those customers with very scholarly tastes. Over the years, she had become very adept at interpreting those small facial movements and body gestures that betrayed what a person was thinking.

“How pleased I am to meet you, Lady Lydden,” Mr. Deedes said, “but I am sorry you had to come here. Had you sent a message, I would have come to you. Lord Lydden should have told you—” His voice checked suddenly as the smile disappeared from her face and her eyes dropped.

Now Abigail understood why the solicitor had looked at her so oddly. He had expected Francis. “Francis—my husband—is dead,” she said.

Her voice, completely expressionless, was much deeper in tone than Deedes had expected, and her eyes were dry when she lifted them. Had he had time to think about the latter fact, he would have been startled, but his shock at hearing that Francis Lydden was dead blocked out all other emotions.

“Oh, heavens!” he exclaimed. “How sorry I am, my lady. Dear, dear, how dreadful!”

“You did not receive my letter, then,” she added quickly, trying to stem the tide of Deedes’ sympathy. Abigail found talking about her husband’s death very painful, not because she missed him or because her love had survived the terrible battering Francis’ habits had inflicted on it, but because she felt that she had somehow failed him, that she should have been able to stop his dreadful, recurrent fits of drinking and gambling. “I wrote to you,” she went on, “as soon as…as soon as I was able to do so, but the war had started by then, and I suppose some accident—”

“My dear Lady Lydden,” Deedes exclaimed, “I am so sorry. I had no idea. Had I known, I would have arranged somehow for an escort to arrange your ladyship’s passage and accompany you. Your ladyship’s journey must have been harrowing in the extreme. I am sure Sir Arthur would have had influence enough in the government to obtain special passports—”

“You are very kind,” Abigail interrupted, rather irritated by Mr. Deedes’ fussy manner and his habit of calling her your ladyship, which jarred on her nerves, “but I had no idea. Had I known, I would have arranged somehow for an escort to arrange your ladyship’s passage and accompany you. Your ladyship’s journey must have been harrowing in the extreme. I am sure Sir Arthur would have had influence enough in the government to obtain special passports—”

Mr. Deedes regarded her with a faint astonishment, as if unable to understand why she had not remained in a state of collapse for nearly a full year. Then Abigail reminded herself that the solicitor had no idea yet when Francis had died. Nonetheless, she restrained a sigh at his lugubrious expression.

“But you should not have been troubled,” he said. “I am sure Sir Arthur would not have wished that in the midst of your grief you—”

“Who is Sir Arthur?” Abigail asked, trying to divert the solicitor from continuing his expressions of sympathy. It made her feel more guilty, because she had felt no sorrow over losing Francis—she had felt relief at his death, and that had shocked her dreadfully and made her miserable.
“Sir Arthur is the second executor of the late Lord Lydden’s—I mean—”

“Yes, I understand,” Abigail hastened to put in. “You mean Francis’ father.”

She could see that Mr. Deedes might flounder for some time in explanations. Francis’ father had also been named Francis, and since both were “late” Lord Lyddens, it would be difficult to disentangle them from one another without using such crude devices as saying “your husband’s father”. Abigail was already amusedly certain that Mr. Deedes was much too nice in his manners not to call his clients by their full panoply of names and titles despite what he knew or thought about them.

Mr. Deedes nodded with relief. “The will,” he continued, cleverly avoiding the problem of names by infusing the document with a life of its own, “named myself and Sir Arthur as executors, to manage the estate until Lord…er…until the heir could return to England and take control himself.”

“I see,” Abigail said slowly. “But the heir is now a child of twelve. I am legally Victor’s guardian—”

“Do not distress yourself, Lady Lydden,” the solicitor soothed, leaning forward to pat her hand—but most respectfully. “I assure you that no eventuality, no matter how unlikely, has been overlooked in the document.”

Abigail hastily lowered her eyes to hide her violent impulse to laugh. She could just see the words the document all in capital letters, so portentously had Mr. Deedes uttered them. In the next moment, however, she realized that what Mr. Deedes had said was not funny at all. If no eventuality had been overlooked in “the document”, that meant legal controls had been established in the will to manage her life and her children’s lives without consulting her or communicating those arrangements to her.

“And what disposition has been made for this eventuality?” Abigail snapped.

A faint flush had risen to her cheeks, and the eyes she lifted to the solicitor had lost their soft violet glow and flashed bright and hard as sapphires. Mr. Deedes, who had just begun another soothing clucking, involuntarily jerked back in surprise. But before he could speak, she reminded herself that her letter announcing Francis’ death had never reached the solicitor, thus, it was unfair to blame him for not informing her of the provisions in the will relating to the condition in which the heir was a minor. Moreover, Mr. Deedes had only her word for it that she was Francis’ widow.

“I am sorry,” she said more gently. “Naturally you will want to see proof of what I have told you before you discuss particulars with me.”

As she spoke, Abigail removed a packet of papers from a small leather case. Mr. Deedes blinked again with surprise. He had been so startled by her appearance that he had not noticed she was carrying anything. In fact, between the surprises her beauty had given him and the shock of hearing that Francis Lydden was dead, he had actually forgotten the need for identification. Recognition of his dereliction from duty was a shock of another kind, and Mr. Deedes hurriedly pulled himself together and accepted the proffered documents.

Although he looked with care at the papers and noted down the authorities who had issued the marriage lines of Abigail and Francis, the baptismal certificates of Victor Francis Milford Lydden, born 17 May 1801, and Daphne Martha Milford Lydden, born 9 August 1803, and the death record of Francis Gerald Bertram Lydden, who had been killed by being struck and run over by a heavy cart, Mr. Deedes had no doubts at all that Abigail and her children were Francis’ wife and offspring. Having made his examination and notes, he handed back the papers.

“It was most sensible of you to bring these records, Lady Lydden,” he said. “I am sure there would have been no problem in any case, but the dowager Lady Lydden… Oh, dear, I mean Lady Hilda Lydden, is sometimes a little… ah…er…”

“The dowager Lady Lydden,” Abigail repeated. “But I am sure Francis told me his mother was dead. Had Lord Lydden married recently? That is, after Francis left for America?”

“No, no, indeed,” Deedes replied, shocked. “Did you not know that Lord Lydden had a stepmother and a half brother and sister?”
“No, I did not,” Abigail said slowly. “Francis never mentioned any family other than his father.”

“Yes, well,” Mr. Deedes’ voice was uneasy, “I fear there was not quite the harmony there should have been in the household. And since I was not absolutely certain that Lord Lydden intended to return to England or…er…what he would wish to do if he did return, I…ah…did not insist that Lady Hilda Lydden, Mr. Eustace and Miss Griselda remove from Rutupiae Hall. And now that the present Lord Lydden is a minor, I—”

Abigail was again amused, although she knew she should not be. It was clear that poor Mr. Deedes was in terror of Hilda Lydden and had not been able to muster the courage to tell her to move out after Lord Lydden’s death. Or was it that he pitied her? Had Hilda Lydden been left virtually penniless? Abigail had heard of the hardships caused by the law that left everything to the eldest son except what had specifically been provided as a widow’s jointure. She had had legal problems enough because she was a woman to feel a surge of sympathy.

“I can see no reason why my mother-in-law or my sister- and brother-in-law should be forced to leave their home,” she said. “From what Francis told me, Rutupiae Hall is a commodious house. I should be glad of company.”

“Commodious—Oh, yes, yes indeed,” Mr. Deedes agreed. “It is not a very large house, no more than thirty or so rooms, excluding the servants’ quarters, but you would not be cramped. I do not believe you would find yourself cramped.”

“No,” Abigail responded dryly, thinking of the house on Williams Street in New York, where she had found ten rooms above the bookshop, three of them tiny attic bedrooms for the servants, large enough. “I doubt I would find myself cramped.”

“No,” Mr. Deedes continued brightly, “if there is any difficulty, I am sure Sir Arthur will be able to solve it for you.”

There was that name again. Abigail felt a mingled curiosity and antipathy as she wondered how much power the executor would have over her. She knew, too, it would be useless to say that she was accustomed to solving difficulties for herself and preferred it that way. Even if Mr. Deedes had known Francis and understood that far from being a help he was a major difficulty himself, the solicitor would assume the trustee of her estate had managed it.

Sharp words rose to her lips when she recalled the complications caused by running a business under a trusteeship—not that dear Albert Gallatin, her trustee, had ever caused her trouble, it was just the inconvenience of needing to obtain his signature for any legal transaction that rankled her. But that was all behind her now, and it was a comfort to know that the bookshop was there and that Albert would make sure it was not run into the ground. If she should find the conditions of Victor’s inheritance too impossible, Abigail thought, they could return to America and remain there until Victor was of age and entitled to take the Lydden estate into his own hands.

The notion of that safe haven gave Abigail a sense of freedom that nearly brought her to say caustically that she would thank Sir Arthur to mind his own business and permit her to mind hers, but she recalled how startled Mr. Deedes had been by her earlier sharpness. It was ridiculous, she told herself, to antagonize the family solicitor unless it was necessary, so she lowered her eyes to conceal the irritation she felt and said sweetly, “But you have not yet told me, beyond saying that he was your co-executor, just what powers Sir Arthur will have, and thus, I cannot tell in what situations I should apply to him.”

“Oh, you may call on him in any difficulty,” Mr. Deedes assured her enthusiastically.

Infuriated, Abigail bit her lip until she had her voice under control. “I should be most reluctant,” she said then, “to impose on a man who, no matter how worthy, is a total stranger to me. What I wish to know is whether I am free to live in Rutupiae Hall, to draw money to pay the servants and to purchase food and clothing for myself and my children, whether I am free to dismiss any servant I find incompetent and to employ others. I am sure Sir Arthur would find it inconvenient if I should call him from his own business each time I found it necessary to order smalls for my son or hire a new scullery maid.”

“My dear Lady Lydden,” the solicitor exclaimed, “of course you are free to live at Rutupiae Hall or in any of the other houses, including the town house—Lydden House—in London. And naturally the staff must be under your
direction, although…er…I hope that…ah…you will not wish to make too many changes. As to ordering…oh dear…er…garments for Lord Lydden, I…such matters are generally left to the valet. And the servants’ wages would be attended to by the bailiff, the butler and the housekeeper, depending—”

“Mr. Deedes,” Abigail said, controlling herself with an effort, “I have no intention, I assure you, of turning Rutupiae Hall upside down or, indeed, of making any changes until I am fully familiar with the place and the servants. These questions were only meant as examples. I wish to know in general, on the one hand, what I am free to do on my own and what expenditures it is fitting for me to authorize—in my son’s name, of course—and, on the other hand, for what actions or expenditures I must seek Sir Arthur’s or your authority. In other words, I wish to hear the gist of the articles of the late Lord Lydden’s will that apply when the heir is a minor.”

Mr. Deedes blinked. Abigail’s voice was still gentle, but there was a force behind it that made him more nervous than Hilda Lydden’s tirades. “The articles of the will?” he repeated.

“Yes,” Abigail said, so exasperated that she completely forgot her intention of discovering what she needed to know without antagonizing the solicitor. “In fact, if there is no specific legal prohibition, I would like to have a copy of the whole will to read and study.”

“But surely,” Mr. Deedes protested faintly, “there is no need for your ladyship to trouble herself with such a complex document. I assure you that your ladyship’s needs and those of Lord Lydden and his sister will be provided for amply. And this is a dreadful season to be in London—so hot and oppressive. Will you not allow me to arrange transport for you to Rutupiae Hall? Sir Arthur will explain to you—”

“I cannot see why Sir Arthur should be required to travel heaven knows how far—”

“Oh, how thoughtful you are!” Mr. Deedes cried with the enthusiasm of relief. “But it is no distance at all. Stonar Magna—that is Sir Arthur’s most important country seat—is no more than ten minutes’ walk from Rutupiae Hall. Sir Arthur is your nearest neighbor. How stupid of me not to realize that you did not know and to fail to mention it. No wonder you have been in so much doubt about these little details, thinking it might be days or weeks before Sir Arthur could be made aware of any difficulty. No, no, he will be instantly able to help you.”

“I see,” she remarked in a colorless voice.

Abigail had forced herself to speak calmly, but she was growing alarmed. She did not like the resistance Deedes was showing to discussing the will with her, nor his anxiety to hurry her off into the country where somehow relatives Francis had never mentioned were established in the house he had spoken of frequently and where this Sir Arthur lived so conveniently close. She was alone with two young children in a country where no one knew her. Who would care if they should all disappear?

A wave of panic swept over Abigail, receding only when she recalled that she was not friendless. She did have a friend in England, Alexander Baring, nor was he a negligible person. Alexander Baring was the head of the great banking house of Baring Brothers and a Member of Parliament. She had met him at the home of Commodore Nicholson, Albert Gallatin’s father-in-law, who also lived on Williams Street, and had later several times entertained him and his American-born wife. Baring was a kind and courteous man and had offered to facilitate her orders and payments to French and English booksellers by doing the foreign banking necessary for her bookshop, despite the fact that ordinarily such small accounts were more of a nuisance than a profit. And over the years, their correspondence had contained many personal friendly notes amid the business matters.

“Will that suit you, Lady Lydden?”

Abigail became aware that Mr. Deedes had been expounding some plan while her mind had first recoiled in fear and then found an answer. She shook her head. “I cannot commit myself,” she replied, curving her lips into a smile. “We only arrived in London late yesterday and I came to you immediately, but I must first inform my friend Mr. Alexander Baring that I am here in England. I am afraid that my letter to him, which went at the same time as the one I wrote to you, has also been lost. Mr. Baring has shown me much kindness, and it would be extremely rude for me to leave the city without informing him of my arrival.”
Mr. Deedes’ face immediately displayed relief and pleasure. “How fortunate!” he exclaimed. “I happen to know that Mr. Baring is still in town—you do mean Mr. Alexander Baring of Baring Brothers, do you not?”

Abigail nodded, her smile warming as she realized that her fears must have been bred out of anxiety. Mr. Deedes could not have any nefarious purposes if he was so delighted at her friendship with Alexander Baring. And, indeed, on the following afternoon when she was invited to tea with Mr. Baring and his wife, Anne Louisa, she discovered that her suspicions of both Mr. Deedes and Sir Arthur St. Eyre were totally unfounded.

“No, no,” Baring said, smiling, when she asked if Sir Arthur were the kind of executor who would plague her, particularly about Victor’s upbringing. “I don’t know him very well, although he’s a fellow M.P. and a fellow Whig—though heaven knows he seems to spend more time attacking the party than supporting it—but I’m sure that he will be more than happy to leave you to your own devices. He’s a bachelor, no children of his own, and I shouldn’t think he has much interest in them.”

“I’m glad of that,” Abigail said, sighing with relief. “I know that Victor will have a lot to learn—and so will I—but I don’t want anyone sneering at him.”

Anne Baring laughed. “I don’t think anyone will sneer at Victor, Abby. Boys are much the same whether—”

A loud crash from somewhere outside the open windows of the small drawing room in which they were sitting interrupted her. Abigail jumped at the noise, but her hostess merely shrugged her shoulders and then laughed again when guilty whispers drifted in.

“I suspect mine are teaching yours cricket,” Anne sighed, “and that must have been one of the windows in the servants’ hall that was broken. How fortunate that William should be home convalescing from measles.”

Abigail started to apologize, but Anne laughed again and shook her head and then grew serious, coming back to what she felt was more important. “Really, it is just as well that Francis’ father did not survive very much longer. If Victor had come to England five or six years from now, it would have been more difficult for him.”

“Francis did teach Victor to ride and was starting to teach him to handle a gun,” Abigail offered. “But, of course there was no land, and I-I felt that all in all it was better for Victor to be in school, even though he missed some of what Francis could teach him—”

“I agree with you completely,” Baring broke in kindly, to spare her the embarrassment of admitting that she dared not allow her son too much contact with his father, lest Victor pick up the notion that Francis’ bad habits were to be emulated. “But give the boy a few months to run free on the estate before you send him off to school again, if that is what you decide to do. But I must warn you that there are only a few suitable schools, and it is not always easy to obtain a place. There Sir Arthur might be helpful, and I will do what I can too, of course. However, there are excellent private tutors available if you prefer that Victor be educated at home.”

“I don’t know,” Abigail confessed.

“My goodness,” Anne protested, “Abby’s only just arrived, and I imagine she had a great deal to do and to think about besides Victor’s schooling.”

“Of course,” Baring agreed, smiling at his wife and then turning to Abigail, “and with Gallatin tied to the Treasury Department in Washington, everything must have fallen on your shoulders, my dear. In a way it is very fortunate that you were not able to come any sooner. Your arrival at the end of the London Season will give you a chance to become acquainted with our ways—not that your own are not charming, but—”

“‘When in Rome, do as the Romans’,“ Abigail interrupted, smiling. “I have every intention of obeying that excellent maxim and never saying ‘But in America, we do such and so, and it is much better that way’, even if I must bite my tongue quite in half to keep it still.”

Both Baring and his wife burst out laughing. “Do you find our ways that awful?” he asked, while Anne cried, “Oh, I know just what you mean.”
Abigail laughed, too. “And I agree completely with Alexander, although he was too tactful to say it outright, that the best place for me is in the country where I can grow accustomed, with the least wear and tear on my nerves and reputation.”

“That is not what I meant at all,” Baring protested, shaking his head at Abigail’s provocative sniff. “I meant that you will have a chance to meet the county families—”

“Especially those who do not come to London and cannot recount your faux pas,” Anne put in mischievously. “Alex made me practice on them, too.”

“You,” her husband said with awful emphasis, “practiced on my innocent family—and enchanted them so completely that they never had the heart to correct you at all.”

“Oh!” Abigail exclaimed. “I have discovered that Francis had a family, too. I cannot imagine why he never spoke of them.”

“Nor can I,” Baring replied, but with a tone of reserve in his voice that made Abigail raise her brows questioningly. Instead of responding to her unspoken query, he continued, “Do not spend all your time at Rutupiae Hall. There are several other estates, and it would be just as well to live for at least a few weeks at each so that everyone will come to know you and Victor.”

“I am willing enough to do it,” Abigail said a trifle tartly, “if I can ever find out where they are and which ones I have a right to use and manage.”

Baring smiled at her. “I will obtain a copy of the will for you from Somerset House. Don’t think too harshly of Deedes. I have had dealings with him before, and he is a very clever man of business—perfectly honest, too. He is just terrified of women, I suspect because he manages property for so many helpless and unreasonable widows. He is not accustomed to dealing with a lady who will understand business. Just go ahead and manage the property in your own inimitable way, my dear. Fortunately I was Lydden’s banker, so you can draw on me for any sum you need. I will see that it is cleared with Deedes.”

“But might that not cause some conflict with Sir Arthur if he is to be held responsible for countersigning the bills?” Abigail asked. “You remember how I had to send every order for payment down to Philadelphia—and then when the capitol was moved, down to Washington—to be signed by Albert. We tried having him sign the bottom of some blank sheets, but that had to be abandoned because Francis found them—” She stopped abruptly as a look of deep sympathy came on Anne’s face.

“Sir Arthur will pay no attention unless Deedes thinks some expenditure is extravagant,” Baring said, glancing swiftly and warningly at his wife. “In that case, Sir Arthur would, I am afraid, have the right to refuse payment, although I have not seen the will, of course, and cannot be sure what arrangements have been made. But I am not concerned about you outrunning the piper, my dear. Unless he is forced to take a hand, I assure you, Sir Arthur will, most gratefully, ignore you.”

Abigail smiled brilliantly. “He could not do me a greater favor,” she began, but had no time to make any further remarks because the Baring sons, trailed by Victor and Daphne, burst into the room and began to justify the accident to the window.

Victor was almost as tall and broad as William, who was two years older, with real muscle rather than baby fat showing under his sweat-wet shirt, but his neck had not yet thickened into the strong column it would be in manhood. There was just a hint of the baby neck, frail and vulnerable, between the broad shoulders and the tensely held head. That neck called to Abigail to gather him into her arms and defend him—although his stance and forward-thrust chin showed he knew he was in trouble and that he was determined not to ask for help. The chin was hers, and the determination. Everything else was Lydden, the fair hair, the bright, light-blue eyes, the handsome regularity of feature.

The tale, told by William, the eldest Baring boy, began with a rather vague excuse, which Victor interrupted. “Beg pardon,” he said sturdily, “but it was me, sir. I’m not a very good bat yet.”
Alexander Baring cleared his throat, struggling to hide a combination of amusement and pleasure, for it was clear that his son had offered to shoulder the blame for his guest and Victor was too well taught to accept such an arrangement. But before he could find the proper combination of words to warn, reprimand and praise all at once, Daphne had stepped up beside her brother and taken Victor’s hand.

“Oh, please,” she said, “it wasn’t Victor, it was me, sir. I begged so hard for a turn that the boys let me, but the bat was so heavy that it turned in my hand and the ball went all awry. I am very sorry.”

Daphne’s large blue eyes, like Abigail’s in shape but much lighter and gentler, looked up appealingly. She did not seem at all the type of little girl that would wish to swing a bat, still being round and soft, puppy-plump. Her hair was darker than her brother’s and already beginning to show the trace of red that would give her a match in maturity to her mother’s magnificent mane, but her features were still childishly unformed—except for the chin, which matched Victor’s to a T and would have explained, had Baring noticed it, both the desire to play cricket with the boys and the unwillingness to hide behind them.

Baring choked, the boys all glared at Daphne, and Abigail and Anne burst out laughing. It was quite clear that the boys expected to be punished more severely for allowing Daphne to commit an “impropriety” than for breaking the window, whereas Daphne had mistaken their confession for an act of protectiveness and was determined not to allow them to suffer for their generosity. Unable to maintain his gravity, Baring also laughed.

“Well,” he said indulgently, “now I suppose you understand one of the reasons why young ladies do not play cricket. Shall we say—?”

“We shall say that Daphne will repay the cost of the broken pane out of her pin money,” Abigail put in firmly, seeing that Baring was going to let her get away without any punishment. “Young ladies must learn to pay their debts as well as young gentlemen.”

“I’ll share,” Victor offered cheerfully, because he knew Daphne’s intervention had saved them a scolding. His mother would have insisted on their paying for the glass in any case, so he considered himself ahead. “I was the one who said to let her bat.”

“But we all agreed,” William protested, not wishing to be outdone in generosity.

“My, my,” Anne remarked, trying not to laugh. “This is going to be a most complicated accounting. Alex will have to work it all out and send you a bill, Abby.”

“Very well,” Abigail agreed, “but he must not forget. I would not want to withhold more than necessary, especially since we must do some shopping while we are in London.”

“Indeed you must,” Anne agreed, suddenly looking thoughtful. She then turned to her husband and, giving him a glance full of meaning, asked, “Might we put off going out of town for a few days, my dear? I would like to accompany Abby on her shopping tour.”

“Certainly,” Baring replied, understanding that Anne was going to explain to her friend the need for patronizing certain fashionable shops, not so much because the style or quality of their goods was better but to prove that she herself was au courant.

Further talk became momentarily impossible because of the noise the children were making, but seeing how much they were enjoying each other’s company, Anne said it would be a shame to part them and asked Abigail whether she and the children could stay for an informal dinner. Abigail agreed at once, the children were sent off to wash, with the warning that they would be exiled to the nursery if they continued to be so noisy when they returned, and Baring excused himself to attend to some business matters.

The advice Anne gave Abigail did not, of course, confine itself to shops but ranged widely over the manners and mores of England’s high society, which the newspapers, Anne told Abigail, giggling, called the haut ton or simply the ton. What Anne said was all the more valuable because she had made the transition herself and knew from personal experience just what would most confound and annoy her American-born and -bred friend. Another woman, who had been as socially successful in the past as Abigail, might have listened with only half an ear or
inwardly dismissed what she was being told, but Abigail paid strict and particular attention—to the point of requesting writing materials and taking notes.

Anne was much flattered by what she felt was her pupil’s respect for her wisdom and searched her memory for every sharp lesson taught her by embarrassment in the early years of her residence in England, even though some of them were painful to recall. However, Abigail’s intense seriousness owed little either to her respect for Anne’s experience or her own considerable common sense. She had been sensitized by her mother early in her life to the need for conforming strictly to the rules of the ton—no matter how idiotic they might seem to her.

Abigail’s mother, Martha Milford, had been severely punished for nonconformity. Having married outside of her class, Martha found that neither her beauty nor her intelligence would provide her with a passport into the society to which her husband’s family belonged. In fact, it was the coldness with which his wife was treated that had convinced Abigail’s father to emigrate to America, where Martha’s origins would be unknown and she would be accepted. Thus Abigail carried both an intense desire to be accepted—not so much for herself as to prove that her mother’s daughter was as good as the best—and a deep resentment that urged her to make fools of the know-nothings who had rejected her dearest mama.

Chapter Three

Two weeks after her informal dinner with the Barings, Abigail and her children bowled in high style up the long drive through the park that surrounded Rutupiae Hall. A note dispatched to Mr. Deedes on the morning after the visit had requested that he arrange transport for them in a fortnight, and he had done so according to the demands of his own high standards of what was owing to his noble clients. Abigail had done nothing to discourage his efforts. A careful scrutiny of Lord Lydden’s will and a long afternoon in Alexander Baring’s office going over accounts had clarified to her what she could afford to spend and what her powers were as Victor’s guardian.

Thus, the post chaise that bore them was the most elegant that could be obtained, and two outriders accompanied them. A few hours behind them a coach followed, carrying a mountain of boxes containing morning dresses, evening dresses, pelisses, hats, cloaks, gloves, delicate undergarments, in fact, a complete wardrobe. Every box bore an irreproachable name, every box was brand new, and each time Abigail thought of them, her eyes sparkled with mischief. About one garment in ten had actually come from the maker named; the remainder, from sources such as the Pantheon Bazaar and others even less respectable, looked no different, cost about one-fifth the price, and were Abigail’s private joke on the snobbish.

However, as they came up the drive, Abigail was in no mood for mischief. Being closed up in a post chaise all of one day and more than half of another with two lively children had brought silent prayers of thanksgiving from her when they had, at last, turned in through the wrought iron gates that closed off the private drive from the public road. Still, caution mingled with her relief when she saw the nervous eagerness with which the gatekeeper and his wife examined her, bowing and wishing her and the new lord and young lady welcome. She had forgotten until that moment what Anne had told her about the number of servants and the custom of turning out the entire staff to greet a new master.

The length of the drive gave her an opportunity to explain to Victor and Daphne what would be required of them, but the incredulous expressions on their faces and the giggles that they uttered led her to expect the worst. Fortunately the solemn attitude of the long line of men and women awaiting them awed her generally irrepressible offspring, and they went down the line, Victor before her and Daphne following, with creditable decorum. Abigail knew that this could not last, however, and she took the bull by the horns and explained to Empson, the butler, and Howing, the housekeeper, that they had better expect the young lord and Miss Daphne to show up in unexpected places.

“It is a larger house than they are accustomed to,” she said, smiling apologetically, “and of course, they are very curious.”

To her relief, her smile was returned by Howing, a gaunt, middle-aged woman whose severe features suddenly lightened. “Don’t you fret, my lady,” the housekeeper responded warmly. “I’ll warn Cook and the maids, and Empson will explain to the footmen. Really, my lady, it will be a pleasure to have young ones about again. They won’t be any trouble.”
“If you think so,” Abigail said, laughing and shaking her head, “it’s because you don’t know Victor and Daphne. But please do tell me if they get in the way. I have not yet had time to decide whether they are to go to school or have a tutor and governess, so they will be quite free and may be too much underfoot.”

“They will be mostly out-of-doors in this weather, my lady,” Empson put in, not unbending so far as to smile but indicating his approval of her confidence by an indulgent note in his voice. “But there are the attics and box rooms to entertain them in wet weather. They won’t get underfoot. Master Francis…” He hesitated and then said softly, “I hope you will pardon my boldness, my lady, and allow me to express for all the staff the sorrow we felt upon hearing of the tragic accident.”

“Thank you, Empson,” Abigail replied.

“It was a pleasure to serve him, my lady. Always thoughtful, he was, with a kind word for all.”

Tears misted Abigail’s eyes for a moment. At least part of what Empson said was true. Drunk or sober, Francis had the sweetest disposition in the world. Even when he was most stubborn in refusing to shoulder his share of any burden, he did it so seductively that most of the time his victims thanked him. If only… She shut off the thought. It was too late for regrets.

“I am glad to know that Francis was a considerate master,” she said, her voice only very slightly unsteady. “You will have to be patient with me, Empson, for the way of life in America is very different, but I assure you that I will learn as fast as I can and that I will do my best to make Victor as well loved by the household as his father was.”

“Thank you, my lady” was all that Empson said, nor did his dignified expression change, but Abigail knew that he was extending a deep sympathy for the dreadful life she led in the appalling wilderness overseas.

Abigail had not the slightest doubt that Empson believed she had been required to cook over open fires and barricade her house against whooping, war-dancing, naked savages. She swallowed desperately, fighting her desire to laugh, and was saved by hearing her son and daughter cry out with glee as a procession of a peacock and his attendant harem stalked slowly around the end of the raised terrace bordering the house.

“Mother, look! Oh look, Mother!” they cried in chorus.

Truthfully, Abigail herself was impressed, and the peacock did his best to deserve the awe with which he was being regarded. Either startled by the children’s voices or reacting to the mass of people, he raised and displayed his magnificent tail, screaming harshly. The house had been no surprise to Abigail or to the children, for Francis had spoken of it often and had described it, in the throes of homesickness, in a grand way he would not normally have done. In fact, he had even mentioned the peacocks—with considerable scorn, for he clearly thought them an ostentatious nuisance—but somehow seeing the exotic creatures tamely walking about brought home in a forceful way to Abigail how different her life would be.

She did not, however, give any outward sign of what she felt. The first and most important rule, Anne had told her, whether in dealing with the ton or her servants, was never to seem surprised, flustered, or nervous. So Abigail smiled and told the children that she was sure Empson would know whose duty it was to feed the birds and that Victor and Daphne might help in the task if they asked politely—but later. Now, she said firmly, it was time to go inside and meet their grandmama-by-marriage and Aunt Griselda and Uncle Eustace.

As she spoke the words, Abigail’s eye caught the faintest flicker of expression on Empson’s face, a twitch of an eyelid, a quiver at the corner of his mouth. Had she known the man better, she would have been sure he was hiding a rather malicious amusement or satisfaction, but it was a most peculiar reaction. Surely, Abigail thought, there could be no cause for amusement, malicious or not, in what she had said. She put the puzzle out of her mind as she nodded assent to the butler’s request to dismissed waiting servants, telling herself that she had probably misunderstood the tiny signals she had seen.

Not long after Abigail had met Lady Hilda Lydden, however, she realized that she should have trusted her well-developed instinct. Just a few minutes after the initial greetings were over, it became apparent to Abigail that no woman would be less likely to enjoy being called “grandmama”—which was, no doubt, the cause of Empson’s
amusement. And the ungracious manner with which Hilda scolded Empson because he had not asked Abigail and
the children to wait while he announced them formally was a good reason for the hint of malicious satisfaction over
Hilda’s discomfiture that she had detected in the butler.

Instinctively, because she liked Empson for the way he had accepted her, Abigail had tried to explain away his
omission by pointing out, smilingly, that the butler’s position was awkward. One could not, after all, expect him to
tell a family who had arrived in their own home to wait while they were announced. In the next moment she wished
she had held her tongue. From the icy silence that greeted her remark, it was very clear that Hilda did not welcome
the reminder that Victor was the new master of Rutupiae and Abigail its new mistress.

Beady black eyes bored into her, and Hilda rose slowly to her feet, fully displaying a clinging gown, which Abigail
had already recognized as being of a color and style more appropriate for a woman thirty years younger and thirty
pounds lighter, and a throat and arms almost covered with expensive jewelry that urgently needed cleaning. Hilda
had tried somewhat unsuccessfully to conceal the gray in her hair, and that too, was dressed in a too youthful, too
dainty style for her features, which had once been handsome, if heavy. Worse yet, her face had coarsened with age
and weight, which made the fairy curls more ridiculous than they must have been in her youth.

“I had hoped to welcome you to Rutupiae,” Hilda said, “but now I fear you might consider it presumptuous of me, a
mere guest, to welcome you to your own home.”

The voice jarred on Abigail almost more than the words—high, harsh and whining all at the same time. Abigail
could feel herself stiffen, but fortunately, before she could burst out with an answer of equal rudeness, a man’s voice
interposed.

“Mama, Abigail was joking! Oh, I may call you Abigail, may I not? I am so sorry. Mama has not the slightest sense
of humor.”

On the words the speaker came forward holding out his hand and smiling. Automatically, Abigail put her hand in
his, and he bent gracefully and kissed it. He was obviously Hilda’s son, he bore a striking resemblance to her.
However, the fact that he was male and in the prime of life made the sharp black eyes, the slightly hooked nose and
the thin although well-shaped lips combine into remarkable handsomeness.

“I am Eustace,” he went on, “and this is my sister, Griselda. You must forgive Mama. When she is nervous, her bark
becomes quite excruciating.”

Abigail turned her head in Griselda’s direction, but she had opportunity for no more than a single glance at the tall,
awkward-looking girl before Hilda’s voice again assaulted her ears.

“And you have given us reason enough to be nervous,” Hilda complained. “How could you be so cruel as not to
notify us of Francis’ death? I understand it was a full year ago. Surely no matter how distraught you were, you could
have managed to scrawl a few words or have a friend write for you. And how could you be so mad as to come from
America in the middle of a war? Don’t you realize that until your son has issue, he is especially precious? He is the
heir.”

Since this was the third time of hearing, Hilda’s strident, peevish tones were less of a shock, and Abigail was better
able to absorb the sense of what had been said. She began to wonder if the voice and appearance had given her a
wrong impression. Hilda seemed concerned both about Francis and Victor, which was generous, considering that
Eustace would have been the heir if neither Francis nor Victor had survived. There were some people who meant
well but had a most unfortunate pattern of expression.

Under the circumstances, Abigail decided it would be cruel to tell Hilda that Francis had never mentioned the
existence of his father’s second wife or her children, and she replied, “I am very sorry that you should have suffered,
but I did write. The ship carrying my letters to you and Mr. Deedes and Mr. Baring must have been taken by the
French or gone down. And there was very little danger in bringing Victor to England. Admiral Warren provided
passports for us, and we transferred to a British ship well within safe waters.”

“I told you, Mama,” Eustace said, smiling. “When we received Mr. Deedes’ note, I said that Abigail must have
written and some accident occurred to prevent our receiving her letter.”

Deprived of one cause for complaint, Hilda found another. “I suppose we must wait dinner for you—or did you have
sense enough to eat on the road?”

It was then that Abigail realized that everyone was attired in evening dress. That made the jewelry Hilda was
wearing more reasonable if not more appealing. “I did not realize that you dined so early,” Abigail said with
poisonous sweetness, “or I would have sent one of the outriders ahead with a note. But we had no more than a bite
of luncheon on the road, so dinner will most certainly have to wait for us. If you will ring the bell for me, please,
Eustace, I will ask Empson to send my apologies to Cook and tell her to hold back dinner for half an hour.”

“Oh, you don’t have to bother with that,” Hilda said, plumping herself ill naturedly down on the chair again.
“Griselda will take care of it. She’s not good for anything besides running errands.”

As ungracious as the tone and remark were, they at least seemed to prove that Hilda was no pleasanter to her own
daughter than she was to anyone else. The only one who seemed to be spared her tongue was Eustace. Still, Abigail
had a feeling that the remark was intended to embarrass her so that she would say a tray in her room would be
sufficient. Another time, Abigail might have agreed, to save the servants trouble, but she did not plan to set any
precedent of meek acquiescence. Nor did she wish to permit any member of the family to intrude between her and
the servants until she had established firmly in their minds to whom power now belonged.

Thus, Abigail insisted she preferred to deal with Empson personally, and before any further argument could be
raised, she rang the bell herself. In the few minutes it took for the butler to come from the servants’ quarters, she
introduced her children, who had been listening in wide-eyed astonishment tinged, Abigail was afraid, with alarm.
They had no experience at all of being unwelcome and were uncertain of how to react to a grandmother who did not
greet them with open arms and cries of joy.

When Empson answered the bell, Abigail simply nodded to Hilda, smiled generally at Eustace and Griselda, and
said she would like to be shown to Lord Lydden’s suite. She braced herself for another round of complaints and
protests, fearing that Hilda had retained possession of the master suite and would fight to keep it, but this time
Abigail had guessed wrong. She did not mind being wrong in the least. It was a relief to know that Hilda had
probably realized that Francis would not stand for it and had not dared go that far. In fact, from the placidity with
which Hilda listened to the order, Abigail reassessed the situation and decided that Hilda probably approved of the
heir taking his rightful place.

As Empson led them up the right-hand wing of the lovely curving staircase that rose from the hall, Abigail gave the
instructions about dinner, including the fact that at least for this evening Victor and Daphne would be eating with
them. She also asked that a maid be sent up immediately so that she and the children could do as much as possible to
tidy themselves.

When she examined the rooms of the master wing, Abigail was even more delighted with the first spark of common
sense she had seen in Hilda. On opposite sides of the corridor, there were two bedchambers, handsomely furnished
for male and female, and two dressing rooms, with a servant’s room off each. According to custom, poor Victor
should have been isolated in the male bedchamber with his valet, Daphne should have been lodged on another floor
in the nursery wing with her governess, and Abigail should have chosen a bedchamber on the ground floor for
herself.

Actually, there was considerable sense in such an arrangement for those accustomed to it, but not for two children
who had been uprooted from their home and transported to a new country and into a house where they had been
made to feel like interlopers. Eventually Abigail would move, well before the time when Victor could be expected to
bring home a bride to occupy the mistress’s bedchamber, but until her children had found their balance and were
secure in their new lives, she herself would occupy the lady’s bedchamber and have a bed set up for Daphne in her
dressing room.

While they had looked at the rooms, the maid had come up with water for washing. Since the coach carrying their
baggage had not yet arrived, there could be no question of changing for dinner. Abigail simply sent the children off
with the maid, telling them to wash their hands and faces in Victor’s dressing room and uttering her usual dire
warnings of what she would do if all the dirt was found on the towels instead of in the basins. When they were finished, the maid was to come back with more water for her. Then she removed her hat and sat down in one of the luxurious chairs to catch her breath and think over the scene in the drawing room below.

At least Abigail now felt she understood why Francis might have tried to forget the existence of his stepmother. And, of course, if he would not speak of Hilda, he could not mention Eustace and Griselda. There did not seem to be anything sinister in the omission. Abigail could easily imagine how much Francis, the most graceful and charming of men, had been offended by Hilda’s manner.

From Alexander Baring’s exposition on Hilda’s financial position as a widow, Abigail guessed that Francis’ father had married her for her money. About half of Hilda’s property, which of course became her husband’s to use as he pleased when they married, had been swallowed up by the Lydden estates. Nonetheless, Hilda had what Abigail considered a more than adequate income from her jointure, which was to be divided between Eustace and Griselda on her death.

Understanding was not much help, though. It was going to be hell to live with Hilda, and there was nothing Abigail could do about it. Abigail could only be grateful that she was much less nice than Francis had been. Serving in a shop accustoms one to dealing with all kinds of people. Some customers had been abrasive, a few actively unpleasant. Abigail feared she would need all the self-control she had learned, for she could not withdraw her invitation for Hilda and her children to continue living at Rutupiae, despite the fact that she now knew there had been no need for any charitable gesture. Nonetheless, to push Hilda out immediately, which Abigail would have loved to do, would be seen by everyone in the neighborhood as crude and inconsiderate, even cruel.

Abigail could just hear Hilda saying, “Hardly a foot in the door and she was telling us to get out, driving us out of the only home my poor children have ever known.” Worse yet, Hilda would be saying it to families in the neighborhood, just those people Abigail hoped to win as friends. Nor was there any way to keep Hilda away from them, since she knew from Mr. Deedes that the dower house, where Hilda was legally entitled to live, was situated right in the park surrounding the main house—not to mention the complication that it was occupied and the tenant would have to be evicted.

Abigail sighed. She suspected she had been deliberately trapped, but she was not certain. Probably Mr. Deedes should have insisted that Hilda leave Rutupiae Hall forty days after Lord Lydden’s death; that was the law. A widow had no right to remain longer than forty days in her husband’s house unless it was specifically willed to her. There was some excuse for Mr. Deedes’ failure; it would take longer than forty days to obtain information from America as to whether Francis wished his stepmother to remain in residence and whether he intended to leave America and come to England. If Francis had survived and decided to remain in America, it would have been better to have Rutupiae Hall occupied than left empty.

Actually, Abigail felt that the excuse was very weak. Mr. Deedes must have known Francis hated his stepmother—Deedes had hinted as much by saying that there was a lack of harmony in the household—and that Francis would never have agreed to sharing Rutupiae Hall with her or even to her living in the place in his absence. But there was another way of looking at it. If Mr. Deedes had requested that Hilda leave and she had refused, it would have created a dreadful scandal to evict her legally. It was unlikely that the solicitor would have taken so drastic a step without specific orders. But once it was clear to the servants who was truly the mistress of Rutupiae Hall, it would be easy enough to make Hilda want to leave.

When the maid returned, Abigail did not waste any time over her own preparations for dinner, and shepherded Victor and Daphne down well within the half hour she had stipulated. The children had been roaming around Victor’s suite, peering into closets and giggling over the possibility that Victor would get lost trying to find his bed and have to shout for rescue. Abigail joined their nonsense gladly when they came to tell her of their discoveries, suggesting that Victor tie a line to his waist so that he could follow it back to a known point. This caused such a burst of hilarity that Abigail was confident the children had regained their spirits.

In fact, they had regained them too well. They made so much noise coming down the stairs and rushing into the hall that she had to warn them that company manners would be necessary, or they would be sent to eat in the kitchen. This threat, however, was the wrong one. An informal meal in the kitchen was far more appealing to Victor and Daphne than sitting still and being proper for two or three hours with adults they did not know well and were not
sure they liked. Both children immediately began to jump up and down and demand to be punished immediately.

Exasperated, Abigail said, “Don’t you dare shame me in front of Hilda. Don’t you realize she thinks we are common barbarians? Do you want to prove her right? Victor, you are now Lord Lydden. Are you going to sit at the head of the table and act like a man or not? And you, Daphne, will you give her reason to say you have not been trained to be a lady?”

She was sorry a moment later for using Hilda as a bugbear, which would not improve whatever slim chance there was to establish a friendly relationship, but there was no time to mend what she had said. And Hilda did not help. First she complained about the noise Victor and Daphne had been making on the stairs and in the hall, and when she saw the extra places at the table, she sniffed audibly and, looking off over the children’s heads, said that dinner conversation among adults was not suitable to children and that she hoped that in the future Abigail would keep them where they belonged—out of sight.

“No,” Abigail said simply. “I am accustomed to having them about and am quite fond of them, you know.”

Chapter Four

The first dinner at Rutupiae Hall was a disaster. Before Abigail could soften her statement by explaining that Victor and Daphne would have their meals served separately as soon as proper supervision could be arranged, another contretemps arose. Eustace, who had been looking with some surprise at Abigail—for it was most unusual to have children dine with adults—for it was most unusual to have children dine with adults—had moved automatically but rather slowly to the master’s chair at the head of the table only to find Victor already seated in it. He had opened his mouth and then closed it very firmly and turned away almost as if he were going to leave the room.

Abigail could feel her heart thumping in her throat, but she forced steadiness into her voice and a smile to her lips as she moved toward the chair at the foot of the table, inviting Eustace to sit to her left and Hilda on her right. She had expected an outraged outcry, but Hilda took her seat without a glance at the chair she must have occupied for years, and although she continued to complain about having to dine with the children, she said not a word about Victor sitting at the head of the table. This forbearance moved Abigail to apologize for not warning Eustace that she had told Victor to take the master’s place. Eustace mumbled a formal acceptance of the apology, but Hilda looked surprised and said that it was his place and if he had to be at the table at all, that was where he belonged.

Abigail was thankful that there had been no time for the cook to try to show off for the new mistress. In her opinion the meal was elaborate enough and lasted far too long. She struggled to make conversation, but Eustace was abstracted, and Hilda’s responses were more the type that kills conversation dead rather than encourages it. The one and only good thing was that Victor and Daphne were remarkably well behaved. Not that they were silent; Abigail could hear their voices nearly all the time, but they were speaking softly. Practiced in letting sleeping dogs lie, Abigail did not glance in their direction for fear her attention would disturb the peace.

As the second course was served, Abigail made one last attempt at opening an unexceptional subject. She offered compliments on the beauty of the gardens. This having been promptly done to death by a spate of strictures on the idiocy of her daughter—for it was apparently Griselda who planned and oversaw the gardening—and the stupidity and stubbornness of the gardeners, Abigail gave up and resigned herself to enduring the remainder of the meal in silence.

That did not suit Hilda either. Abigail discovered that it was not necessary for her to introduce new topics of conversation. Hilda was quite capable of finding her own. From the gardeners she wandered to the odd shape of Rutupiae lands, which were no more than a half mile wide, although they stretched several miles from the bank of the River Stour to the house, and the fact that Rutupiae Hall was so close to Stonar Magna, precluding a proper “wilderness” to stroll in on hot, sunny days.

“But I noticed a very pretty wood at the back of the house,” Abigail remarked pacifyingly before she could stop herself.

“Those belong to Sir Arthur St. Eyre,” Hilda snapped, “all except about twenty yards, and I am not presently disposed to gratify Sir Arthur by trespassing on his property.”
“Trespassing?” Abigail repeated. “I was given to understand that the families were very friendly and that Sir Arthur was too busy with politics to pay much attention to anything else.”

“I cannot think where you could have come by such a foolish notion,” Hilda exclaimed, her peevish whine giving Abigail a strong desire to put her hands over her ears. “Although Sir Arthur is certainly political, we never found him friendly. Lady St. Eyre never invited us to her political dinners. I suppose she did not like the idea that I would be given precedence. Oh, naturally you won’t understand, coming from America as you do, but Lord Lydden was a baron, and Sir Arthur was only a baronet. And as for not paying attention to anything except politics, I can say that Sir Arthur is never too busy to stick his long nose into what does not concern him.”

Involuntarily Abigail looked at Eustace, who had several times softened his mother’s statements. He had at last raised his eyes from his plate, and they met hers briefly, but there was no expression in them that Abigail could read. Then he shrugged.

“The families may have been close at one time, when my father and the late Sir Arthur were alive, but he died some twenty years ago, and the present Sir Arthur seems to have taken his responsibilities very seriously. He and Francis were childhood friends, but after a time he had no taste for Francis’ type of playfulness, so they drifted apart. Perhaps it is that same sense of responsibility that makes him monitor and forbid all expenditures.”

“Necessary repairs,” Hilda cried before Abigail could ask what Eustace meant. “We shall have the roof down on us before Sir Arthur will admit that some attention must be given to this house.”

“Is the roof leaking?” Abigail asked, aghast. Rutupiae Hall was an old house, originally Elizabethan, which had been added to and rebuilt in part over the centuries. The roof of such a structure, with its many joins and odd angles, might easily develop leaks that could cause serious damage from wetting and running along the supporting beams.

“Oh!” Hilda flapped a hand dismissively. “How should I know whether the roof leaks? That was merely an example. However, there is a terrible draught from the drawing-room windows because the curtains are not thick enough. I was misled over those curtains. I will never again trust that sly creature who made them.”

Abigail nodded without speaking, hiding behind a silence that could be construed as agreement. Actually she was thinking with relief that there was no need for any catastrophic confrontation with a tight-fisted executor over curtains for the drawing room. She was also rather concerned. If Sir Arthur were going to contest every sum spent, no matter how small, until Victor reached his majority—and curtains for the drawing room could not amount to a very large sum—she would likely come into serious conflict with him.

She therefore felt more amusement than she might under other circumstances when Hilda explained that, of course, changing the curtains would necessitate replacing the wallpaper, furniture and rugs, also. Since so radical a refurnishing might run to several thousand dollars—Abigail could not yet think quickly in terms of English pounds—it became clear to her that Sir Arthur might be less unreasonable than Hilda had implied. A mild question as to what was wrong with the present furniture soon produced the information that Hilda was tired of the dowdiness of Queen Anne comfort and craved a version of Prince George’s Chinese rococo. Further, Hilda made it clear that she felt the stiff old Elizabethan and Jacobean portraits of Lydden ancestors should be replaced with more modern paintings by contemporary masters. She first suggested stylish portraits of herself and her children, and then, as a second thought, added Abigail and her children, and perhaps one or two landscapes by Constable.

A flicker of sympathy for Sir Arthur passed through Abigail as she wondered whether it was the cost alone that had induced him to veto Hilda’s proposition. Abigail had a vision of a bucolic landscape by Constable against a glaring background of gold, red and black Chinese dragons and pagodas. Even as she repressed the temptation to giggle, Abigail knew it was possible that she was being unfair. There were Chinese wallpapers of great beauty and delicacy that would grace any room and any furnishings. As she had no reason at all to place any reliance on Hilda’s taste, however, she did not feel guilty.

Still, Abigail did not contradict or express any reservations, even when Hilda’s comments on Sir Arthur’s niggardliness centered on expenditures where Abigail agreed even more heartily with the executor, as in his refusal to pay Hilda’s dressmaker’s bills and the cost of an expensive horse for Eustace. Hilda, Abigail knew, could well afford to pay her own bills, particularly as she was living at Victor’s expense instead of supporting her own
Although it was true enough that Abigail was glad she could avoid any confrontation on this subject, she was not
silent out of cowardice. Her mind was busy trying to sort out the contradiction between Alexander Baring’s
favorable comments about Sir Arthur and Hilda’s diatribe against him. It did seem as if Sir Arthur was not too busy
with politics to pay rather close attention to his executor’s duties. On the one hand, this was helpful because he was
protecting Victor’s interests efficiently and bearing the brunt of Hilda’s animosity, which otherwise, Abigail
guessed, would have been directed against herself and possibly against Victor. On the other hand, this close
examination of minor matters like dressmaker’s bills again raised the specter of his interference in her affairs.

There was little to be gained by her speculating, Abigail soon decided. She would have to arrange a meeting with Sir
Arthur and discover for herself whether his close attention was owing to a distrust of Hilda, a most reasonable
attitude as far as Abigail was concerned, or to a general desire to control others, which was sometimes an
unfortunate result of the strong sense of responsibility Eustace had mentioned. Once or twice Abigail glanced at
Eustace, but he had returned to his abstraction, and there was little pleasure in listening further to Hilda’s painful
voice. Thus, it was with considerable relief that she saw the remains of the second course of the dinner removed and
replaced by the sweets and savories.

Just before release finally came, a shout of laughter from Victor, hushed with uncharacteristic rapidity, reminded
Abigail that her children had been models of behavior. It was close to the end of the meal, so she took the chance of
glancing at them and noticed that both were looking at Griselda. Then their eyes caught Abigail’s, and Daphne
began to giggle and Victor joined her. The halcyon period was obviously at an end. Abigail hastily suggested that
the children take a few cakes and excused them from the table. Even so, she made a mental note to reward them for
not adding to her difficulties.

Over the next few days, however, Abigail had no time to pursue her plan for meeting Sir Arthur. The weather turned
wet, and the children’s curiosity and the newness of the house led them into constant mischief. The servants were
more amused than disturbed, but Hilda, having several times discovered a maid repairing the traces of Victor and
Daphne’s passage rather than performing her accustomed duties, fumed over the disruption of their work.

Eustace was no better pleased with the hitches in the previously smooth functioning of the household. Although he
did not complain directly to her, Abigail heard him angrily castigating Empson for permitting the footmen to lead
the children around the house, which made them slow to answer his bell. Abigail was annoyed; she wished he had
spoken to her directly rather than blaming Empson for what was not his fault. Too much of that might change the
warm welcome Victor and Daphne had received from the servants.

Worst of all, by accident—at least, Abigail hoped it was an accident, rather than a deliberate attempt to get back at
Hilda—the children invaded Hilda’s room. That precipitated a major crisis. Both Victor and Daphne apologized,
Abigail apologized, all three explained that it had only been a result of their mistaking the corridor, owing to having
come up the wrong set of stairs. Still, it took a whole day to soothe Hilda’s sense of “having been violated”.

Then Abigail felt she had to face the problem of transferring the management of the house from Griselda’s hands to
hers. But Griselda’s silent shrinking from opposition to any proposal Abigail made, despite her clear terror that her
mother would discover she was not performing her usual tasks, woke in Abigail a mingled pity and exasperation.
Half of her wanted to shriek “Stand up for yourself, you ninny. I won’t bite you!” at the girl, and the other half
wondered if there was any “self” left inside poor Griselda after years of being scorned and scolded by her selfish
mother.

Pity won over exasperation, however, partly because Victor and Daphne kept insisting that Griselda was “the best of
good sports”, although they would not say why, and partly because Abigail was annoyed with Hilda, who was
periodically still lamenting the dreadful shock caused by the intrusion of the children into her private domain.
Inspired by this mixture of emotions, Abigail came down to breakfast with an idea that would protect Griselda and
still leave the real power in her own hands.

This morning it seemed that everything was going to fall into place. Abigail had finally arranged what she felt was
adequate temporary supervision for her children, although not for education. Mrs. Howing, the housekeeper, had
suggested Francis’ old nurse, who lived on the estate in a cottage not far from the Roman ruins that gave Rutupiae
Hall its name. Mrs. Franklin had married a farmer, and when he had died, she had sold the farm because her
daughter’s husband, Price, the head gamekeeper on Sir Arthur’s estate, knew nothing about farming and cared less.

Mrs. Franklin was not young, but she had not lost her touch with children. Over the years, she had taken into her
home, first on the farm and then in her cottage, any of the children of the Lyddens or St. Eyres who, for one reason
or another, needed special, private care for a few weeks or months. She had nursed Griselda over a long
convalescence after she had been desperately ill, first with measles and then with pneumonia. Lady Hilda, Howing
said expressionlessly, claimed she could not bear to see her pale, listless daughter creeping about the house.

Needless to say, this did not improve Abigail’s opinion of Hilda, but she had asked Mrs. Franklin to come to
Rutupiae, had been favorably impressed, and had arranged for her to supervise Victor and Daphne until she either
sent them to school or hired a governess and tutor. Mrs. Franklin had not been very enthusiastic about living at
Rutupiae Hall, but Abigail assured her that it would not be for long, at the most a month or two. The deciding factors
were that Francis had been her favorite nursling and that his children had a special attraction for her.

In fact, Abigail’s discussion with Mrs. Franklin provided another reason for helping Griselda if she could. To her
relief, Abigail found that it was not necessary to tell Mrs. Franklin of Francis’ death because Griselda had taken the
trouble to walk down to her cottage as soon as they heard of it from Mr. Deedes. And it was partly her grief over
Francis’ death that prompted Mrs. Franklin to break her rule of caring for children only in her own home.

The first fruits of the arrangement had appeared this very morning. Victor and Daphne had breakfasted in the
nursery quarters under Mrs. Franklin’s severe but sympathetic eye, then had gone outside. Some of the benefit was
owing to the fact that the sun was shining and the children could explore the grounds, but Abigail was in an
especially good humor because she had not personally had to attend to their washing and dressing.

Then, to her pleasure, she discovered that only Griselda was at the table. Hilda never came down, preferring
breakfast in bed, but Eustace was usually there. Not that Abigail objected to Eustace’s company. Whatever had
oppressed him at dinner that first day seemed to have disappeared, and she generally found him most useful in
dealing with his mother. Today, however, she wanted to talk to Griselda alone because it seemed to her that the girl
was almost as frightened of her brother as of her mother.

Of course, Griselda seemed equally frightened of her. As it was, the moment she came in, Griselda jumped to her
feet, clumsily overturning her cup of tea. “I am sorry I startled you,” Abigail said with a smile, although Griselda’s
ineffectual fluttering dabs at the wet spot on the cloth with a napkin made her want to grit her teeth.

“A dreadful mess,” Griselda gasped. “I am so clumsy. So sorry. I will fetch a maid to—”

“The bell is on the table,” Abigail remarked. “If you ring, the servant will come. Do sit down, Griselda. No, not
there,” she added, ignoring the hunted looks her sister-in-law was casting around the room. “That seat may be wet.
Come to this side of the table and sit near me.”

With a last terrified glance at the door, which, no doubt, meant safety to her, Griselda did as she was told. Abigail
was pleased to avoid further argument because she was eager to explain to Griselda how she wished to divide the
duties of the household, but she would gladly have traded both delay and expostulation for an absence of or even a
reduction in Griselda’s nervousness. Abigail studied the girl for a moment, surprised at how pretty she was. She had
the straight nose and well-formed lips of the Lyddens in a delicate, feminine mold, but her eyes were a soft gray
rather than the sharp, bright blue that Victor had inherited from Francis. Her skin was clear, if slightly sallow—no,
perhaps that was owing to the unsuitable color of her gown—her hair a light golden brown. Abigail wondered why
she had not noticed before—and then Griselda made a nervous gesture and hunched her rather broad shoulders in a
self-effacing way, which Abigail suddenly realized distracted her attention from Griselda’s more attractive features.

“I thought—” Abigail began, only to have Griselda spring to her feet again.

“The tea is cold,” she cried. “I will order fresh tea for you.”

“You have already rung for—ah, here she is now,” Abigail said with relief. “Betty, please put a cloth under where
the tea was spilled, so the wet does not mar the table until it is free to be cleared. I caused a slight accident. And
bring my coffee and some fresh tea for Miss Lydden.” As soon as the maid went out, she hurried on before Griselda could find another reason to flee. “There is no reason why you should carry the entire burden of the housekeeping. At the same time, I realize you would be bored to death with nothing to do—as would I.”

At this point, Abigail took the chance of pausing to allow Griselda to speak if she wished, since it would now be openly rude if she tried to run away. But Griselda had slid farther back in her chair, no longer perching on the extreme edge, and she was staring at Abigail in wide-eyed amazement.

“You said you spilled the tea,” she whispered.

“No,” Abigail contradicted smilingly. “I seldom lie—only when it is absolutely necessary. I said I caused the accident—and that was true. I startled you.”

Griselda dropped her eyes. “You are very kind,” she said in a stifled voice. “I know Mama has not made you very welcome, and—”

“That is not your fault,” Abigail interrupted briskly, not wishing to be drawn into a discussion in which she, or even Griselda, might say too much.

“No,” Griselda replied, “but not everyone would see it that way.”

Abigail shrugged, thinking that there must be those who took out their irritation at Hilda on the nearly defenseless Griselda. “The more fools they,” she said almost angrily, and as Griselda winced, Abigail shook her head and softened her tone. “Now, as I was saying, I do not like to be idle. I am not accustomed to it.”

She thought of telling Griselda that she had managed a business as well as running her own house, but shied away from that confidence. Abigail’s mother had made it very clear that in England, conducting a business was an activity that might cause her to be excluded from the upper levels of society. It was because Martha Milford had been a bookseller’s daughter that her husband’s family would not accept her.

“In America,” she went on, “I ran my own house. Of course, my household was much smaller and less complicated than that of Rutupiae Hall. I do not wish to make a fool of myself or upset the staff.”

“They like you,” Griselda offered.

“I am glad to hear it,” Abigail said, “and I would like to keep it that way. So, for the present, I think you had better continue with the day-to-day chores, such as doing the flowers and approving the menus—” she paused and smiled. “I wouldn’t have the faintest idea of how many courses or what dishes would be suitable for any particular occasion. Someday, when I am a little more settled, you must teach me. I would be in an appalling state if you should leave to marry—”

Abigail’s voice checked as Griselda’s breath drew in sharply and she turned her head away. Unwitting, she had apparently turned a knife in an already painful wound. Had the girl been rejected so openly as to make any reminder unbearable? Or—Abigail’s lips thinned with anger—more likely, had her mother made her feel she was so undesirable as to be incapable of attracting any man? Distressed all the more because she knew any apology would only add to Griselda’s pain, Abigail could do no more than touch her arm gently and talk for a few minutes about how she feared to offend the upper servants by her ignorance. Then, as she saw the flaming red fade from Griselda’s cheek and ear—all Abigail could see of her face—she came back to the more serious part of her subject.

“My part will be approving the work assignments of the staff, hiring and dismissing—whenever either is necessary—settling quarrels and such matters.” Abigail smiled again as Griselda finally brought herself to look at her. “I cannot get into any trouble over those tasks, since Empson and Mowing will really arrange the work assignments and since hiring and dismissal do not, I believe, occur very frequently.”

“My mother’s personal maids come and go,” Griselda said colorlessly.

“But that is none of my affair,” Abigail replied gently. “I will not pay Hilda’s dresser or Eustace’s valet, so I will have no right to any decisions over their employment. However, since you are taking part of the burden of the
housekeeping, I will very gladly pay your maid—or add to your pin money if you would prefer that.”

Griselda’s eyes opened wide, but her shock had nothing to do with Abigail’s offer to pay her. “But Howing and Empson pay the lower servants, including Mother’s maid and Eustace’s valet,” she whispered, horrified. “If they refuse—”

“I have spoken to them about that, Griselda,” Abigail interrupted. “It seems the first Lady Lydden did distribute all the wages herself and had a word with each servant. Your mama did not choose to do so, but I think I will renew the old custom. I feel that a word of praise—or blame—from the mistress four times a year has a stronger effect than the same word from the butler or housekeeper who has been approving or scolding every day. Besides, I need to get to know the staff, even those like the boot boy and scullery maids whom I am not likely to see, and paying them will give me that opportunity in a manner that will not intrude.”

“Oh, dear,” Griselda sighed. “Mama will not be pleased.”

“Perhaps not,” Abigail remarked dryly, “but by your father’s will she has a very handsome income—very nearly as large as Victor’s—and she is not supporting a household and paying for the upkeep of several country houses and a town house in London. I cannot feel that forty pounds a year or even one hundred forty pounds—if Eustace’s valet is paid what seems to be the usual rate—will constitute a dangerous drain on her jointure.”

Griselda’s mouth opened but nothing came out, and she closed it and swallowed hard. However, whatever she had been about to say was lost forever as the hard thud of running feet sounded in the corridor, and Victor, covered with earth and dead leaves and twigs, burst into the room.

“Mother!” he shouted. “Oh, Mother, someone shot at me!”

“Shot at you?” Abigail repeated unbelievingly. “Don’t be silly, Vic. Who would shoot at you? It must have been someone after a hawk or—”

Silently Victor handed over his coat. The blood drained out of Abigail’s face as her eyes fell on it. The collar and upper back of the garment were pocked and torn, and she cried out and turned Victor so that she could see the back of his head and shoulders.

“I’m not hurt, Mother,” Victor said, twisting around again. “I—”

“Where is Daphne?” Abigail cried.

Victor started to answer but stopped when his sister entered the room at a pace only a little slower than his. “Did you see Victor’s coat?” she got out between gasps for air. “Mother! Someone shot at Victor.”

“Yes, I see,” Abigail said, her voice flat with the effort not to burst into tears or hold both children to her in a spate of protective ferocity. She dared not, Victor and Daphne were shocked and surprised but not afraid. She knew she must not infect them with the terror she felt. “I am sure,” she added, “that it must have been a mistake.” With trembling fingers she examined the holes made by the pellets in the fabric of her son’s coat, turning and turning it in her hands. “Where were you when this happened?”

“In the woods,” Victor replied. “We were playing with the tennis balls and racquets, and it was so nice we went out on the lawn over there,” he gestured to the north, “but it got hot out in the sun, so we walked into the woods. I was carrying my coat—”

“He was going to leave it on the lawn,” Daphne put in righteously, “but I said he had better take it. His shirt is thin, and he might get chilled in the shade.”

“Oh, she makes more fuss than you do, Mother. I wasn’t chilled, and there was a toad, a beautiful toad, so I threw my coat over a big bush and stooped down—”

Abigail closed her eyes for a moment to hold back tears of thankfulness, and Daphne asked anxiously, “Are you all right, Mother?”
“Yes, of course,” Abigail said mendaciously. “I was just worrying about what Victor intended to do with that toad.”

“I was telling you how someone shot at me,” Victor exclaimed indignantly. “Never mind about the toad.”

“Very well,” Abigail agreed, “since you didn’t catch it—”

“No, I didn’t, because just then there was this roar, and my coat flew up in the air and fell down right on top of me, and I was so surprised that I fell down too, and the toad got away.”

“Thank God,” Abigail breathed. “Oh, thank God.”

“Oh, all right,” Victor said, making a face. “She might have squashed the poor thing anyway.”

Then he looked anxious. Victor was aware that his mother knew he had planned to hide the toad in Hilda’s bed or, failing that, in her favorite chair, but he felt perhaps it would have been more diplomatic not to admit it.

A gasp of sound, half sob, half laugh, drew Abigail’s eyes from Victor’s revealing expression to Griselda, who, she saw, was as white-faced as she herself must be, but who had just realized why Victor wanted the toad. Knowing her son, Abigail had been in no doubt about his purpose from the beginning, although her simple prayer of thanksgiving had not, of course, referred to the escape of the toad or to being spared Hilda’s fury.

“I almost fell down too, I was so surprised,” Daphne said quickly, loyally trying to distract her mother from her brother’s unwise honesty. “I had just stopped to pick some flowers—” She hesitated, fearing she might have offended Griselda, who, she knew, was in charge of the gardens. “Not that I don’t like your flowers,” she said to Griselda. “They are very beautiful, but in the woods—”

“One must pick flowers. I understand,” Griselda assured her with the first smile Abigail had seen. The smile surprised Abigail, as did the calm tone of voice. Now that Abigail’s shock had diminished enough for her to think about anything other than Victor’s narrow escape, she realized she would have expected gasps and shrieks from Griselda. There might be more to Griselda than Abigail had believed. Her good opinion was reinforced when Griselda went on, very casually, “I hope the noise did not frighten you very much.”

“Not really,” Daphne replied. “I have heard shooting before.”

Daphne spoke in an old-young way that always caused Abigail’s heart to ache because it told her she had not been successful in shielding the child from her father’s weaknesses or her own frustration, pity and disgust. But the next moment the too adult voice and manner disappeared as Daphne’s eyes widened in remembered excitement.

“But when Vic’s coat flew up in the air,” she went on, “and he fell down on the ground, I did get scared. I screamed and screamed.” She giggled and shrugged. “And then Vic got up and yelled at me for being such an idiot, because screaming was useless and what I should have done was—” Daphne’s voice stopped abruptly as she remembered she was supposed to be diverting her mother’s attention from the toad, and she knew her brother’s fury because she had not marked where the creature had gone was not likely to win much sympathy from either adult. “Anyhow, we were both pretty angry at that hunter, shooting so close to a house, and when Vic picked up his coat and saw the shot holes, then we ran home as quickly as we could.”

There was a murmur from the doorway, and Abigail realized for the first time that they had an audience. Her attention had been so concentrated on her children and her own battle to keep from terrifying them that she had not noticed that Howing, Empson, a maid and two footmen were crowded around the entrance to the breakfast parlor.

“Would someone please arrange for the outside men, the gamekeepers and anyone else who has a right to carry a gun on Lydden land, to be gathered together so that I can speak to them?” Abigail said in an icy voice. “I think it needs to be made clear that at least for the next few years there will be no preserving on Lydden land, and no shooting of poachers for any reason.”

“Yes, my lady,” Empson answered, “I will send word out at once. But, my lady, I’m sure as I can be that it was no Lydden gamekeeper that shot at his lordship. You see, he probably wasn’t on Lydden land—or even if he was, the wooded areas north and south of the house are tended by St. Eyre people. Our men are all west, out past the mill and
toward the river. It’s only a few hundred feet past the lawns on either side of the house or behind it that’s Lydden land, and it isn’t worth the keepers’ time to come all the way around the park.”

“What you are saying, then, is that it was one of St. Eyre’s men who fired at Victor?” Abigail asked.

“Not at his lordship,” Empson said. “I mean, if he’d known it was his lordship he would never—”

Abigail stood up, her eyes gleaming with rage. “I think,” she said quietly and yet so ominously that the lower servants melted away from the doorway and even Empson and Howing retreated, “that the time has come for me to meet Sir Arthur.”

Chapter Five

The time it had taken for Abigail to send a note to Stonar Magna and receive one in reply assuring her that Sir Arthur was at home and would receive her at any time did nothing to diminish her fury. Not that she thought the shot had been fired at Victor as Victor. Her rage was not on her son’s account as an individual but for the sake of humanity as a whole.

Although Abigail had been born and lived all her life in a town, she knew all about English game and forest laws. Since her husband had emigrated unwillingly, to escape debtors’ prison, he regretted what he had left behind. Moreover, he knew that his father could not disinherit him, and he expected to return to England with his wife and children. Besides that, he was not at all interested in Abigail’s business, so most of his conversation was about England, about his amusements there—at least, those of which he was not ashamed. The principal of these was hunting, and connected with that was the preservation of game.

Francis’ sweetness of temper had not extended to poachers, and he had spoken with relish of the methods used to discourage them and the punishment meted out to those who were caught. At the time, Abigail had listened with indulgence. Poaching was stealing, and as a merchant she had a dim view of stealing. But now she was far less sympathetic. Breaking a man’s leg in a mantrap was bad; shooting a twelve-year-old child was murder.

Abigail thought of having the carriage brought around so that she could arrive at Stonar Magna with dignity, but driving through Rutupia’s park, out along the road, and then up Stonar’s long drive would take almost half an hour. She was far too impatient to wait that long to tell Sir Arthur what she thought of him, and she realized, as her teeth gritted together in anticipation, that every minute she delayed was making her angrier instead of calmer. But Abigail knew it would be stupid to lose her advantage by scolding like a hysterical fishwife. She would be sensible to forgo dignity and take the ten-minute walk through the woods to Sir Arthur’s house. Possibly the exercise would calm her.

Perhaps it would have had that effect if Abigail had not been carrying Victor’s coat as evidence. Her fingers kept slipping into the tears and holes made by the shot, and cold terror alternated with hot rage all the time she trod the well-marked path between the houses. However, the butler’s astonishment when he found her on the doorstep clutching a ragged coat as if it were her dearest possession was so apparent that a ray of humor pierced the darker emotions that had filled her.

“I am Abigail Lydden,” she said. “Sir Arthur is expecting me.”

“Oh yes, my lady,” the man said, hastily moving out of the doorway and inviting her to enter. “If you will come this way.”

He showed her to a door about a third of the way down what was obviously the great hall of a late medieval castle, all hung with ancient weapons, shields and banners, and furnished appropriately with heavy, carved chairs and settees upholstered in dark leather. The sight annoyed Abigail, the baronial splendor seeming to cry aloud of arrogance and the right of might, so that she hardly took in the smaller room to which she was led.

“If you will make yourself comfortable, my lady,” the butler said, “I will inform Sir Arthur you are here.”

“Thank you,” Abigail replied.

She was tempted to add that she would appreciate not being kept waiting long but did not, and in fact, the remark
would have been wasted. Sir Arthur entered the room only a moment or two after the butler left it, coming forward with a hand outstretched to greet her. Abigail drew in her breath. The face certainly went with the hall, she thought furiously, noticing only the high-bridged nose and the heavy-lidded eyes that seemed to stare down it superciliously.

“I am very happy to meet you, Lady Lydden,” he said.

“I am afraid I cannot return the compliment,” Abigail snapped.

Sir Arthur stopped in his tracks, his eyes widening, his mouth open to pronounce another platitude of greeting, which now stuck in his throat. He looked slightly ridiculous, but Abigail had no impulse to laugh. There was something intimidating about the purposeful, authoritative way Sir Arthur moved, and he had come close enough for her to realize that he would tower over her. But Abigail had learned to deal with feeling intimidated, whether the feeling was imposed deliberately or unintentionally, and she cast an insolent glance over her opponent from head to foot. He was taller than Francis had been and more heavily built. Broad shoulders filled his coat smoothly without need for padding, and the surprise and tension her words had produced showed in the knotting of the hard muscles of his powerful thighs when he stopped short.

Her examination had discovered no weakness in him to bring her comfort, but Abigail’s righteous anger upheld her. She did not wait for him to absorb fully the shock of her response but continued, “It cannot give me much pleasure to meet a man who would order his gamekeeper to kill a twelve-year-old child for the high crime of disturbing his foxes or his pheasants.”

“What?” Arthur gasped, blinking as if she had hit him, and then stiffening with outrage, he said icily, “I am not certain what you are talking about, madam, but you must be in the wrong place and addressing the wrong person.”

For answer, Abigail walked forward and handed him Victor’s coat.

“My God,” he cried on perceiving the condition of the garment, and then an instant later, furiously, “what is the meaning of this outrage? These may be shot holes, but the coat is dry, not a spot of blood on it.”

“Are you regretting that?” Abigail asked angrily and continued without giving him a chance to reply, “My son was not hurt. Thank God, I do not have to accuse you of murder, but it was only by God’s intervention that I do not. Less than an hour ago my son was in your wood. He put his coat over a bush while he pursued a toad—” Her voice began to tremble and she stopped.

As she explained, Sir Arthur had looked down again at Victor’s coat. Abigail was surprised to see him slowly turn paper white. “You say the boy had hung this garment on a bush?”

There was so strong an expression of anxiety on his face that Abigail’s rage began to abate. She took a deep breath and spoke less antagonistically. “Yes, and he was trying to catch the toad, no doubt making the bush move—”

“I am so sorry, so terribly sorry,” Arthur interrupted. “Please believe that I am not trying to deny my responsibility for this dreadful occurrence or to shift the blame, but I swear it was not by my instructions that this shot was fired.”

That annoyed Abigail all over again because accepting and denying responsibility in the same breath seemed disingenuous—to say the least. “You mean to tell me that you make no effort to discourage poachers?” she asked sardonically.

“No, I do, of course,” he replied, but it was plain from the abstraction in his voice that his mind was still on some problem Victor’s torn coat had presented, so that although he heard Abigail’s question, the tone in which it was asked had made no impression. “I don’t like poaching, largely because of the snares they use—the animals suffer. Lady Lydden, where did this happen?”

The mention of the effect of snares on animals considerably softened Abigail’s attitude toward Sir Arthur, particularly as it was said so absentmindedly as to preclude any desire on his part to influence her. She saw now that the gray eyes under their heavy lids were kind and concerned, and she began to regret her hasty attack.

“I am not perfectly certain,” Abigail replied. “The best estimate I can give is the wooded area north of Rutupiae Hall
but farther west than the path. If it is important, Victor could probably point out the place, although perhaps not the exact spot.”

“Good Lord, no!” Arthur exclaimed. “I wouldn’t want to remind the boy of the fright he had.”

Abigail had to laugh. “You are far more likely to remind him of his rage at the escape of the toad. My son is, indeed, very angry about being shot at, but not for the reason you might suppose. He had a nefarious purpose for that toad, I fear, and the ruin of his coat exposed his intended crime before he could commit it.”

For one long moment Sir Arthur’s eyes locked with Abigail’s. Understanding of Victor’s purpose was mirrored on his face. “I am so sorry,” he said with a depth of sincerity that startled her into recognizing that Sir Arthur was regretting the failure of Victor’s plan. Before she could respond to this rather shocking revelation, he dropped his eyes and went on, very wistfully, “Forgive me. I should not have said that, but when Francis and I were children, I never really had the opportunity and he was too kind, despite his detestation. He was concerned for the toad.”

The wistfulness at the lost opportunity for boyhood mischief utterly undid Abigail, who laughed until her eyes were full of tears, hearing with pleasure the deeper male laughter that echoed hers. When she at last caught her breath, she held out her hand.

“Do please forgive me for being so rude, and let me say I am glad to meet you.”

“No, no,” Arthur said. “Considering the provocation, I’m glad that you were only rude. I’m surprised that you didn’t shoot me. But, Lady Lydden, there is something very peculiar about this incident. There is little reason for a gamekeeper to be in that area at all, much less fire a gun there. That bit of wood is no more than a screen between the two houses and a pleasant shady walk on hot days. There is also a good deal of traffic through that piece of woods—the servants coming and going, even quite late sometimes. No poacher in his right mind would set a snare there.”

Abigail stared up at him, all laughter quenched. “Are you trying to tell me that someone deliberately aimed at my son, intending to kill him?”

“No! Good God, no!” he exclaimed. “That is not what I meant at all. The shot was fired at Victor must have been a mistake. All I meant was that either there was a special reason for a gamekeeper to be hidden, ready to shoot with intent to do real harm, which I find hard to believe, or someone was out to solve a personal problem permanently—which means either one of your servants or one of mine has a violent enemy and is in considerable danger.”

“But Victor could not have been mistaken for a man,” Abigail protested. “He’s only twelve.”

“You told me the coat was thrown over a bush,” Arthur pointed out. “It is possible that the way it was spread gave an impression of greater girth, and the attacker may have thought his intended victim was bent over. But this is idle speculation. Let me call my secretary. He will be able to tell us whether there was any special reason for someone to be lying in ambush in the woods.”

He pulled the bell cord, then went to the door to speak to the footman, who appeared almost at once. He had placed the coat on a table when he moved to ring the bell, and Abigail now picked it up, wondering why he had been so strongly affected from the moment he realized Victor had not been wearing it. But her attention was distracted by Arthur’s return and his formal statement of regret over Francis’ death. She made an equally formal reply, but this time when their eyes met, each looked away quickly. There had again been too much understanding in the mutual glance, and both were ashamed of the fact that they were relieved rather than grieved by Francis’ death.

A slightly awkward silence followed, broken, before either could think of a tactful change of subject that would not be too obvious, by the entrance of Bertram Lydden, who stopped short in the doorway and stood staring at Abigail for just a moment. A strong expression of surprise was also mirrored on Abigail’s face, but it disappeared as Arthur made the introductions.

This time it was Abigail who went forward with her hand outstretched. “How glad I am to meet you, Mr. Lydden, and to learn that you were Francis’ cousin. For a moment I thought my eyes were deceiving me. Did you know you
bear a strong resemblance to Francis?"

“Oh, don’t tell him that, Lady Lydden,” Arthur protested, laughing. “You will break his heart. I’m afraid Bertram did not admire your husband, particularly in his manners or his careless mode of dress.”

“There were times when I did not admire them myself,” Abigail said dryly, and then smiled at Bertram. “I am sorry if I offended you. My mother never could teach me to think before I spoke, but I felt Francis was rather handsome, you know, and meant what I said as a compliment.”

Bertram also smiled and gently waved his scented handkerchief. “My dear Lady Lydden, even if you said I resembled Arthur and smelled like a goat, you could not offend me. Any remark at all made by an angel must be considered a rare gift.”

There was no sarcasm in the voice, except when Bertram mentioned resembling Arthur, and the admiration in his expression made a pretty compliment out of words that might have been a gibe. Still, Abigail raised her brows as he took her hand with infinite grace and kissed it.

“I am not quite sure that you have forgiven my blunder,” she said. “All biblical angels seem to say highly disagreeable things. They invariably make horrid threats or predict unpleasant dooms.”

Bertram’s eyes lit with amusement. “Touché,” he remarked, laughing. “That was clumsy. I apologize. What I really meant was that your beauty would compensate me for almost anything you said—and despite Arthur’s naughty attempt to make mischief—”

“I intended no such thing,” Arthur interrupted, and he had not, but he stopped speaking without explaining himself further.

He had realized that he might be presuming too much in his own interpretation of a single glance. Like Abigail, he had spoken without thinking, because he knew that Bertram was another of the small group of people who had not found Francis completely delightful. However, as soon as he made the remark, it came to him that he might have been wrong about Abigail’s disenchantment with her husband. And even if he had not been wrong, she still might not like to have him imply that she had so quickly confessed to an utter stranger her reservations about the perfection of the dear departed.

Abigail smiled at him. There was something very pleasant in the teasing between the two men. It had been clear to her from the beginning that Sir Arthur’s comment had not been made with the intention of denigrating or hurting his secretary, and Bertram’s riposte—calling Sir Arthur by his name without his title and lightly accusing him of intending to make mischief—fully confirmed that the two men were as much friends as employer and employee. Her opinion of Sir Arthur had already improved, and this easy relationship with his secretary raised it higher.

“I am sure you did not, Sir Arthur,” she said. Then, shaking her head and clicking her tongue in pretended disapproval, Abigail looked back at Bertram, extracted her fingers from his lingering grip, and said, “Worse and worse, Mr. Lydden. Now you have left me without a word to say, unless I pretend to a simpering modesty, which would ill befit my years—and do not go from worser to worstest, as Victor used to say, and tell me you mistook me for a blushing maiden.”

“Not blushing—no,” Bertram said with great gravity so that Abigail burst out laughing.

“That’s quite enough of this nonsense,” Arthur put in, but there was a sharpness in his voice that surprised him.

He had not been aware until he spoke that he resented the rapport being established between Lady Lydden and Bertram. And when the idea came into his mind, it shocked him. Not once in any of his love affairs had he felt the smallest desire that his inamorata be denied ordinary social contacts. Once or twice he had felt a prick of pique when a lady preferred another gentleman during an active courtship, but that had nothing to do with this situation. He was certainly not courting Lady Lydden—but neither was Bertram.

While Arthur pointed out that he had asked Bertram to join them for a more serious purpose than to introduce him to Lady Lydden, showed him Victor’s coat, and described the circumstances under which it had been riddled with
bullets, he told himself not to be ridiculous. To feel disappointment because the spark of understanding and 
friendship that had leapt between himself and Lady Lydden was not exclusive was not only foolish but dangerous. It 
IMPLIED that he felt a deeper interest in her than he had felt for any other woman.

That idea disturbed Arthur all over again. To have admired Lady Lydden’s beauty would have been safe and normal, 
but he had hardly noticed how lovely she was until Bertram remarked on it. He had, of course, expected to see a 
beautiful woman—Francis would not have married any girl, even for money—so he had not been surprised. Then, 
between the shock of her greeting and the news of her son’s near escape from death, he had not had time to absorb 
fully her appearance. But that he could care, on such short acquaintance, that she responded to Bertram’s flattery 
was unreasonable.

Bertram was staring at Victor’s coat and turning it in his hands with a deep frown marring his ordinarily smooth 
brow as Abigail expanded what Arthur had told him in reply to his questions. She had noticed that, like Sir Arthur, 
Bertram seemed more alarmed when he learned that the coat had been loosely draped over a bush and, finally, she 
asked why.

“The shot went through, you see,” he replied.

“Well, of course it went through.” Abigail’s voice showed her irritation. “But it would have gone through Victor 
too, if he had been wearing it. I should think you would prefer the situation as it is rather than complaining because my son was not riddled with shot.”

“It isn’t that,” Arthur explained, smiling faintly. “Of course we are greatly relieved that the boy was not hurt, but the 
fact that the shot went through a strong cloth when it was loosely draped and there was no resistance to hold it taut 
shows that the gun was fully charged. When my gamekeepers take out a gun to teach a poacher a lesson, the gun is 
ever loaded with more than a half charge of powder and usually with smaller shot than this appears to have been. 
That way, so long as the gun isn’t right against the man, the worst that is likely to happen is that he will be peppered 
with pellets and have the unpleasant experience of having them dug out.”

“I see,” Abigail said. “And now I understand why you said it was a deliberate attempt to kill someone.”

“There is also the distribution of the shot,” Arthur pointed out. “You see the way the holes are spread out on the 
back of the coat—only a few above the waist, more on the shoulders, and the top of the collar is almost torn to 
shreds. Whoever aimed that gun aimed it from no great distance—shot tends to spread—and aimed it so that the 
central blast was directed at the head—to kill. No gamekeeper would do that, certainly not one in my employ who 
intended to stay in my employ.”

“I cannot believe any of our men did this,” Bertram said.

“I find it difficult to believe myself,” Arthur agreed, “but Simmons was up at the house this morning before I came 
down. Did he say anything to you about any trouble on the estate?”

“I didn’t see him,” Bertram replied. “I-I was out this morning.”

“Out?” Arthur echoed. “So early?”

A slight color rose in Bertram’s face, and he lifted his handkerchief to his lips, then shrugged gracefully. “I felt in 
the need of some air after all the rain we have had—but Simmons cannot have come for any serious purpose, or he 
would have waited or left a message for me.”

“I suppose so,” Arthur said slowly. “Although, of course, Simmons might not consider the pr—…er…interesting 
condition of one of the tenant’s daughters as sufficiently urgent—”

“Oh dear,” Abigail interrupted, seeing the trend of Arthur’s remarks. “You mean one of the men working at 
Rutupiae seduced one of your farmer’s girls. And that makes a kind of sense, for if it were one of the younger men, 
he might not be so far from Victor’s size. But—but no matter how angry the father was, would he want to kill the 
seducer? Would he not prefer to insist on a marriage?”
“Usually, yes,” Arthur replied, “but I can think of certain circumstances offhand, for instance, if he had a good marriage lined up for the girl or if he were a religious fanatic. I admit I can’t think of any of the latter, although—”

“There are a few strong low-church adherents,” Bertram remarked, “but still, I would not have believed—”

“Still, I think you had better send for Simmons and tell him about this,” Arthur suggested.

“I agree.” Bertram raised his brows. “And I think I will also ask Price to have that area patrolled until we can find out who has a grudge against whom.”

He went out on the words, leaving Arthur utterly amazed and Abigail mildly surprised by his abruptness. In Abigail the feeling quickly became compounded with guilt. If Mr. Lydden thought dealing with the matter so urgent, surely she should return to Rutupiae Hall and do what she could from that end. She half turned toward the door, but Arthur touched her arm.

“Don’t go yet, Lady Lydden, please,” he said, gesturing toward a sofa. “I have been a shockingly bad host. I hope you will give me an opportunity to redeem myself. May I offer you some refreshment?”

The words were perfectly proper, but there was again an absent note in Sir Arthur’s voice, as if only half his mind was devoted to what he had said. Abigail felt a flicker of indignation. She was not accustomed to men who did not accord her their full attention. Then, internally, she laughed at herself for being a conceited fool. Still, Sir Arthur was a challenge.

“I don’t think I should stay,” she said. “Should I not try to determine who, among the staff at Rutupiae, might be guilty? Mr. Lydden seemed to feel that the matter was of some urgency—”

“Yes…” Arthur drew out the word, then added more briskly, “but it is useless to start an inquisition until you know what questions to ask. Our assumptions may be totally false and the cause wildly different from any notion we have discussed. Will you have some ratafia?”

Abigail’s brows flew up again. “Brandy, even sweetened, does not appeal to me at this hour of the morning. Coming from America, I am more accustomed to coffee, but I want nothing, really. I had just finished breakfast before I walked here.”

Sir Arthur moved toward the bell cord again, having hardly heard what Abigail said. Bertram’s sudden departure had had a stronger effect on him than on Abigail. He had been much struck by his secretary’s embarrassment when mentioning being out. Only Arthur recognized how unnatural even that faint hint of color in Bertram’s face was, because normally Bertram buried his feelings under his affectations. Coming so hard on the heels of their discussion of the shooting and coupled with Arthur’s memory—sparked by Bertram’s near-flirtatious manner with Lady Lydden—that Bertram had strongly implied a desire to marry and a dissatisfaction with his present situation in life, that hurried exit had awakened in Arthur a dreadful suspicion.

After Eustace, Bertram was heir to the Lydden wealth and property if Lady Lydden’s son should die, and Bertram was not only extremely clever, Arthur knew, but he had an extraordinarily devious mind. If Eustace could somehow be accused and adjudged guilty of Victor’s death, Bertram would inherit. As the thought clarified out of a vague, general uneasiness, Arthur saw that Lady Lydden was looking at him with growing puzzlement and realized that he had neither rung the bell nor replied to her remark. Not surprisingly, the only part of it that stuck in his mind was the comment about coffee.

“If it isn’t just like an American,” he said lightly, “to want something that will throw an English household into confusion and create a dreadful difficulty.”

“I do not happen to be an American,” Abigail replied, much surprised. “My parents were British, and my birth was duly registered with the proper authorities here by my uncle.” Then she recalled being told by Baring of Sir Arthur’s absorption in politics, and because she could think of no reason for his abstraction, she assumed that his attention had, after all, not been centered on her, but on her background rather than her person. “Besides,” she added aggressively, “I cannot see why you should connect Americans with making difficulties.”
“I was only joking,” Arthur said apologetically. “I knew you were British, of course, but I see that my remark was in bad taste. Do forgive me.”

“Oh, I knew you were joking,” Abigail answered. “I was not offended, but I am curious. A joke like that carries a hard core of the truth. I have always found most Americans to be sober, practical and clear thinking, most unlikely to create difficulties deliberately.”

For a moment longer Arthur stood with his hand on the bell cord, fighting what he knew was an unreasonable irritation. He realized that, despite her claim to British nationality, Lady Lydden must have strong sympathies for the American point of view, owing to living all her life in the United States. Normally, that knowledge would have induced in him a desire to exhort and explain—and perhaps use those explanations and exhortations to generate an intimacy, for she was very beautiful. But if she preferred Bertram… Arthur pulled the bell cord with unnecessary force and turned to face Abigail fully.

“You do not consider giving aid to Bonaparte when we are locked in a life-and-death struggle with him a creation of difficulties?” he asked sharply.

“What aid?” Abigail snapped back. “Who do you think has been feeding the British armies in Spain and Portugal if it was not the Americans? Does that sound like giving aid to Bonaparte?”

“No, it sounds like a fine nose for profit,” Arthur riposted superciliously.

“And what is wrong with that?” Abigail’s voice bristled with resentment. She was about to defend the profit motive even more vociferously when she remembered her mother’s bitter remarks about how any personal connection with a commercial enterprise could make one déclassé. “You seem to forget the profit might have been even better if the trade had been with the French,” she said instead.

Arthur uttered a single mirthless bark of laughter. “On the contrary, there would have been no profit, since all American ships would have been stopped or sunk.”

There was more truth in that statement than Abigail wanted to admit, so she shrugged indifferently and said, “You would have to catch them first. H.M.S. Africa and five other ships couldn’t outsail the poor little Constitution, and she outfought the Guerrière and the Java—”

“They were half her size,” Arthur sputtered. Then he drew a breath, looked down his nose disdainfully, and added, “The British do not descend to disguising our ships. There is no particular merit—”


“A seventy-four-gun ship as a forty-four,” Arthur sneered. “The victories of the Constitution are scarcely a wonder, since the Java and the Guerrière—”

Abigail laughed, this time with genuine amusement and so heartily that Arthur stopped speaking. “Oh,” she gasped, “oh, you poor, poor creatures, needing to comfort yourselves with a silly lie like that. America doesn’t have a seventy-four. They hardly have a navy, and I know because Mr. Gallatin, the Secretary of the Treasury, was deeply involved in the plans to outfit what ships were available for this stupid war. I—”

“So you admit it is a stupid war,” Arthur said triumphantly.

Abigail’s violet eyes opened wide. “But of course it is a stupid war,” she said sweetly. “Do you not think it the stupidest thing in the world for a great, rich, powerful nation like England to insult, assault and bully a poor, small, nearly powerless nation like America? There have been times this past year when I was ashamed of being British.”

“Well,” Arthur growled, “you don’t sound British. You sound like a damned rebel—or a traitor.”

“Do you mean that to be a loyal Briton, I must also become an idiot or a liar, to be blind to the truth, and believe only what the government chooses to tell me?” Abigail asked nastily. “I tell you I know the Constitution is a forty-four-gun ship. I have been aboard her. And I know the British navy is filled with bullies who oppress the weak,
because the ship I sailed on was an unarmed merchantman that even had a passport from Admiral Warren. Still, it was stopped, and two seamen were dragged off—"

"Because they were traitors who had abandoned their country in her time of need," Arthur exclaimed passionately, his voice nearing a shout.

"Nonsense!" Abigail exclaimed, equally passionately. "I sailed with Captain Brown, whom I have known for years, and one of the impressed seamen had been with him for five years or more—"

"And we have been at war for more than ten years," Arthur interrupted.

Abigail sniffed disdainfully. "That cannot be of significance in this case, for Billy was in his teens and had sailed with Captain Brown starting as a cabin boy—unless the British usually impress five-year-olds?"

"He was still British," Arthur roared furiously, "and he should be proud to serve his country against that damned tyrant Bonaparte."

"Ridiculous!" Abigail exclaimed, her voice rising to match his. "He was a naturalized American citizen. According to your reasoning, the only Americans that exist are the red Indians—"

A loud sound of throat clearing caused her to stop abruptly. Both Abigail and Arthur turned sharply toward the door, where their eyes encountered the astonished and rather frightened gaze of a young footman. There was a brief silence. Then Arthur drew a deep breath and said in a deceptively calm voice, "Lady Lydden would like coffee. I suppose Cook will know what is suitable to be served with it."

"Coffee, my lord?" the footman repeated, one surprise atop another making him forget his training. "But—"

"Sir Arthur," Abigail protested, refraining with difficulty from laughing at the footman’s horror. She was not certain whether he was more frightened at the idea of putting Sir Arthur’s request to the cook or returning to Sir Arthur with the cook’s reply. "I should not think there is any coffee in the house, nor that your cook is accustomed to preparing the drink. You did not hear me, I fear. I said I had just finished breakfast and desired no refreshment. But I have changed my mind, if you will accord me that female privilege. I would like some tea."

She spoke the final two sentences quickly, fearing that Sir Arthur would believe she was angry or offended by his fierce opposition to her support of the American point of view about the war. On the contrary, in a way she was delighted. Not that she liked his opinions, but that was not important—one could always hope to change opinions. What was significant was what he had not said. Sir Arthur had not told her to mind her needle and leave men’s business to men. He had sneered at what he believed a dishonorable naval tactic, but not at the fact that a woman claimed she knew the difference between a forty-four-gun and a seventy-four-gun ship. And he had not been condescendingly indulgent because of her beauty, either. Abigail was pleased with Sir Arthur and found him a very interesting man.

"Tea, then," Arthur said curtly, and the now red-faced footman disappeared hastily, shutting the door behind him.

"I am very sorry." Abigail’s voice was choked as she addressed her apology to her host’s back, for he had not immediately turned to face her when the footman left. "I am afraid we…frightened your servant."

Her voice began to quiver and she had to stop, but relief for her pent-up emotion was immediately forthcoming. A roar of laughter split the air as Sir Arthur, who had also been struggling to subdue his mirth, gave up and faced around. Then she was free to laugh, too.

"Poor Martin," Arthur gasped. "He’s only just come to us from a very quiet place. He told Waggoner—my butler—that he wanted a larger, livelier household. But I don’t suppose," he went on between chuckles, "that he expected it to be quite as lively as to find host and guest shrieking at each other. I seem to do nothing but apologize to you, but I am sorry for my discourtesy. I do know how to behave to a guest, I swear it."

"I could scarcely complain of your behavior, considering my own," Abigail admitted, smiling. "I have hardly stopped assaulting you with words since I arrived."
Arthur shook his head. “It was natural for you to be distressed when your son had so narrow an escape,” he said, sober again. “And, if you will forgive me for alluding to a topic that you might feel would be better allowed to rest, it is natural for you to regard the American cause in this war with sympathy. I fear, however, that in the United States the wider implications of Bonaparte’s conquests are not fully understood.”

“You may be correct about the ignorance with regard to Bonaparte,” Abigail replied, “although I think there has been a better understanding of the tyrannical aspects of his character since 1810, when he confiscated so many American ships in European ports—which he had invited to come and trade. That was bad enough, but he sold the ships and cargoes without any trial or even any investigation, which, I must admit, the British have never done.”

Sir Arthur grinned and bowed. “You do us the honor of fairness.”

But Abigail did not return the smile. “You are very wrong, however, in believing that I have any sympathy with this war, for I have not, nor have many Americans, especially in New York and the New England states. What is more, I think that even in the western states, like Ohio, the original enthusiasm is much dampened. It was stupid for the British to provoke the Americans too far, and it was idiotic for the Americans to declare war.”

Arthur shrugged. “Some of the provocation was not the fault of the government—it was owing to the hot-headedness or greed of individual naval commanders—but with that lazy lech—ah—with the Earl of Mornington at the Foreign Office, any rational action was not to be expected. Mornington had been viceroy of India, and he seems to have regarded the Americans as equally supine and willing to bow to authority. Thus, he took the most high-handed and inflexible tone—at those few times when he could be drawn from his harem to do any bus— Oh, I beg your pardon.”

This time it was Abigail who grinned. “You need not. I have read a great deal of Eastern literature. You do not need to fear shocking me—but your foreign secretary seems appallingly ill informed. He could not have made a less accurate assumption about the American character. A high tone applied to Americans will drive them into a passion more quickly than anything else. In fact, I begin to feel more sympathy for President Madison’s declaration of war.”

“Be that as it may,” Arthur said dryly, “it was not during Mornington’s tenure that war was declared. Viscount Castlereagh has the Foreign Office now, and he is both clever and painstaking. Indeed, it was under his influence that the Orders in Council, to which Americans objected so strongly, were repealed.”

“Not soon enough,” Abigail countered coolly, “and the question of impressment of American seamen was rudely dismissed. Moreover, from what Mr. Gallatin said to me, the tone of the communications was not much improved.” She saw the slight stiffening in Arthur’s stance and, not wanting to begin another shouting match, shook her head. “I think there is something the British government does not understand about Americans. Because they are a new nation and still raw, because they are aware of their inferiority in power they are all the more sensitive and take offense at that which an equal might understand or be willing to overlook.”

“Now that,” Arthur said thoughtfully, “is a most interesting observation. I must remember it. It might be useful in debate.”

“Well, I hope you will find a better purpose for it than debate. I hope you will pass it along to those who will be involved in the peace negotiations.”

Arthur had turned, his attention being attracted by the opening of the door, which revealed the footman carrying a laden tray. But his head jerked back toward Abigail in response to her final words, and he said sharply, “What peace negotiations?”

“The Russians offered to mediate a peace between Britain and the United States—did you not know?”

“Oh, that,” Arthur replied dismissively. “I would not count on any offer of mediation being accepted by the British government.”

He turned away as he spoke and nodded to the footman. “Thank you, Martin. That will be all.” Returning his attention to Abigail, he smiled. “If you will do me the honor of pouring, I will join you in a cup. I find myself almost as thirsty as after a hot debate in the House.”
Abigail stared at him blankly, shocked at the disappointment she felt over his casual dismissal of any chance of the hoped for peace.

“Come,” Arthur said, gesturing toward the table where the tea service stood, “do pour. And don’t look so downcast. I feel as you do, that a peace between the United States and Britain is of the utmost importance. The government won’t accept mediation, especially by Russia, but there are other ways.”

Chapter Six

Abigail returned to Rutupiae in Sir Arthur’s carriage and in rather high spirits. She had enjoyed her discussions with him enormously, for she was accustomed to talking about serious subjects and had been deprived of that pleasure since leaving New York. In addition, the conversation indicated clearly that Alexander Baring had been correct in his judgment. Sir Arthur was far more interested in politics than in children or estate management. At that point in her thoughts Abigail chuckled, realizing that she had herself completely forgotten to raise some essential personal questions in favor of political ones, such as how fully Sir Arthur wished to exert his executor’s power. However, she was no longer really worried about that.

Her pleasant mood was somewhat disturbed when she summoned Empson after lunch and suggested to him—as delicately as possible so as not to shock his propriety, which Abigail was sure was far more sensitive than hers—Sir Arthur’s ideas on what might have caused the shooting. The butler protested vehemently that none of the men under his authority was involved in any illicit affair or had given any other cause for such an attack. The results with Mr. McPherson, the head groundskeeper, whom Abigail summoned next, were identical. She did not know the man as well as she knew Empson, but circumstances supported his claim because the under gardeners did not live on the grounds and would be unlikely to be found in the wooded area between the houses.

Abigail would not have been troubled if she had thought that each man was simply defending his subordinates, but both gave her reason to believe that what they said was the truth. That left the unlikely probability that a poacher had been so startled by Victor’s sudden appearance that he had fired both barrels of his gun or the frightening possibility that a madman was loose with a grudge so violent as to be indifferent to who was shot.

It was too soon to start worrying about madmen, Abigail told herself. First of all, Mr. Lydden had not returned to report the results of his investigation. And second, there might be other, perfectly logical causes that had not been suggested or examined. In any event, at present Victor and Daphne were being kept busy by Mrs. Franklin in or near the house and would be unlikely to be found in the wooded area between the houses.

Actually, Abigail would have liked to put the incident out of her mind for a while. Her discussion of the war with Sir Arthur had reminded her of her American obligations, and she would have liked to spend the afternoon writing to the book dealers with whom she had done business in the past to let them know she was in England. In addition, she had a number of commissions to procure books for customers who were totally indifferent to the war but keenly alive to and combative about scholarly issues. She had been too busy during her brief stay in London to fulfill those commissions, but she decided she could write now to reserve the books and travel down to London in the next week or two to arrange for their shipment. The journey would take only one day and would not be unpleasant if she did not have the children to amuse. Perhaps, Abigail thought, as she opened the drawer of the writing table and drew out paper and pens, she should also make appointments with the book dealers to examine the stock not generally exposed to private customers with a view to some large purchases for her shop in New York.

She had been startled by Sir Arthur’s vehemence about the war. Her impression had been that the British were annoyed and contemptuous rather than vindictively enraged—rather like an elephant being pestered by a small, snapping, yapping dog—and that any time the United States wished to back down and ask for peace, it would be granted. The news that Britain would not agree to the Russian mediation had been a shock, and what Sir Arthur had told her later had been even more depressing.

She learned from Sir Arthur that Bonaparte had been so badly hurt by two narrow “victories” he had won on 2 May at Lützen and eighteen days later at Bautzen that he had agreed to an armistice. In addition, it now seemed likely that Austria would declare war against France again when the armistice ended. It was not that Abigail regretted the damage Bonaparte had suffered or that the forces against him would be stronger. She had been raised by her parents with a strong anti-French bias. However, she had realized that when Bonaparte was beaten, England would be able
to concentrate her full strength on defeating America.

Abigail was surprised by the strength of her feelings. In the United States she had thought of herself as British and had thought she identified with British interests. It was not until she had become involved in the argument with Sir Arthur that she had realized how much an American partisan she was and how much she resented the British positions. The paper and pens and the letter book into which she would copy her letter to have a record of what she had written lay unused before her as she tried to examine her motives and filter out the effects of her love for individuals she had left behind, her fondness for her home and her business, and other such private factors so that she could consider objectively the rights and wrongs of the conflict. But before she had made much headway, the door of the library swung open and Hilda marched in.

“I really must insist, Abigail,” she said indignantly, “that you leave the management of the servants to Griselda. I do not know what you have been saying to Empson and McPherson, but they seemed quite distracted when they left you. You are confusing them.”

“I imagine they are more frightened than confused,” Abigail replied. “I was not giving them orders but trying to find out who had shot at Victor when he and Daphne were in the woods.”

“Shot at Victor!” Hilda screeched. “Don’t be a goose! The boy was telling a tale to make himself important. No doubt he was imagining red Indians in the woods and got carried away by his game.”

“Games do not tear the collar and shoulders of a boy’s coat to shreds,” Abigail said dryly.

“No doubt he made that up, too.” Hilda cackled. “You spoil those children dreadfully, believing every word they say. You should have insisted on seeing the coat before upsetting Empson and McPherson.”

Abigail had been about to say something really nasty when she realized that Hilda was not implying that Victor had damaged his own coat. Obviously Hilda did not know the boy had brought the garment with him to show to his mother. In fact, it seemed that Hilda knew nothing about what had happened in the morning. Abigail had been crediting her with rare restraint and tact for not talking about the shooting during luncheon, but it occurred to her that Griselda had not told her mother about the accident.

That was puzzling to Abigail only for a moment. Considering Hilda’s behavior to her daughter, Abigail was relatively sure Griselda would have expected to be blamed for something—if not for the accident itself, then for upsetting her mother by telling her of it. Now, without doubt, Griselda would be blamed for not telling Hilda. Not if I can help it, Abigail thought.

Under the circumstances, Abigail suppressed her angry retort and said mildly, “No, a shot really was fired at Victor, but everyone is certain he was not intended to be the target. Nonetheless, we must discover, if we can, who the real target was so that—”

“Real target, nonsense!” Hilda snorted contemptuously. “You are mad! If a shot was fired, it was fired by a poacher. Why upset our butler and chief gardener over that? Your ignorance is appalling. You should have told Eustace to speak to Vastaly, the gamekeeper, or the bailiff, Mr. Jameson.”

Abigail could feel her teeth grit together, but she swallowed her fury because she was beginning to understand it was useless to argue with or explain to Hilda. Her mother-in-law leapt to conclusions that suited her, and her opinions only became more fixed in blind opposition to reasoning or argument. Thus, Abigail first tried to divert Hilda to a less exacerbating subject and, when that failed, hinted broadly that she had letters to write and would like to be left alone. Neither tactic worked, and Abigail was thinking about using physical force to rid herself of her unwelcome companion when the clock on the mantel struck and she was able to say it was time to dress for dinner.

This respite, unfortunately, did not last beyond the actual period that Abigail was in her own rooms. As soon as she entered the drawing room it became clear that Hilda had never stopped talking about the shooting that morning. Her steel-file screech carried all too well across the whole room, although she was plainly addressing Eustace, who stood beside her.

“But it must be St. Eyre’s fault,” Hilda was saying. “There is not sufficient Lydden property for a poacher to catch
anything. I am ashamed of you, Eustace, refusing to inform St. Eyre that his gamekeeper has been careless and your
nephew’s life was endangered.”

“Now, now, Mother,” Eustace answered calmly, “you know the poacher must have been more frightened than the
boy. You may rest assured he will never come near that place again. And as for complaining against Price, I
certainly will not do so over something he could not possibly have foreseen. You know he is married to Mrs.
Franklin’s daughter, and if Nelly were made unhappy over any complaint against her husband, Griselda would be
unhappy, too.”

“Ridiculous!” Hilda exclaimed. “Griselda could not possibly have any feeling for a common creature like Nelly.”
She began to turn to her daughter to obtain confirmation of this statement and saw Abigail coming toward them.
“You are late, Abigail,” she rasped. “Why did it take you so long to dress?” And then, looking down her nose at the
simple dinner gown Abigail had chosen to wear since it was only the family. “One would think you would have
more to show for such a long effort.”

“I…er…rested for a little while,” Abigail replied, tactfully suppressing the fact that she had delayed coming down to
avoid Hilda as long as possible.

“I suppose you are implying that you needed to rest because of the shock you sustained. Well, let me say you
deserved it. It is all your own fault, you know, because you allow those children to run wild. They should never have
been in the wood by themselves. And if you want my opinion, Mrs. Franklin is getting too old to deal properly with
children. I never had so high an opinion of her. Griselda was quite unmanageable for months after she came back,
forever running down to that cottage—”

The diatribe was cut short by Empson’s announcement that dinner was served, and for a little while Hilda
abandoned the topic of who was to blame for the shooting in favor of complaining because Abigail had arranged for
dinner to be served in a small parlor nearer the kitchens than the dining room. Now that the children no longer ate
with them, it had seemed foolish for the four to be seated around the dining table, which was too large even with the
leaves removed. Conversation had been impossible for anyone with a voice that carried less than Hilda’s.

Abigail’s attempt to reduce Hilda’s domination of the talk during dinner had not been a notable success so far, but
the move did make the servants’ work easier and permitted the food to reach the table hot. Moreover, it quickened
the service so that the meal did not last so long, a considerable advantage in Abigail’s opinion. Another advantage,
although a minor one, was that the round table they used had no “head” or “foot”, so that Abigail was saved the
problem of where Eustace should sit now that Victor was no longer at the head of the table. It would have been
embarrassing to insist that the master’s seat should be left vacant, but Eustace had reacted so strongly when Victor
had taken that place that Abigail decided she did not want to go through the changeover again.

When the meal was mercifully over, Abigail considered excusing herself with a “headache” but resisted the
temptation to avoid starting Hilda off on the shooting again. That made her remember that Hilda had been urging
Eustace to complain to Sir Arthur, and she realized that to stop his mother’s nagging he might give in and do so.
Abigail certainly did not want Sir Arthur to be harassed by another complaint, so she waited until Hilda seemed
occupied in criticizing Griselda’s needlework and said softly to Eustace, “There is no need to speak to Sir Arthur. I
have already done so this morning, and he is fully aware of what happened.” She might have told Eustace more of
what had been said but was afraid of attracting Hilda’s attention.

Eustace’s lips thinned with irritation, but then he shook his head. “You must not mind too much what my mother
says,” he remarked. “There was no need to drag St. Eyre into the matter. I am sure it was an accident that will not
occur again. And, really, you must not confine Victor to the house or the lawns. He must get to know the property. If
you are nervous about his wandering in the woods, let him ride—oh, I forgot—perhaps he cannot ride.”

“Yes, he can,” Abigail replied. “Both Victor and Daphne ride quite well. Francis taught them.”

Eustace suddenly looked interested, which both surprised and rather pleased Abigail. She had hoped when she first
heard about Francis’ half brother that Eustace might feel a responsibility—or even a fondness—for Victor and spend
some time with him showing him over the estate and continuing Francis’ tutoring in male sports and other activities.
The cold welcome and Eustace’s reaction to Victor’s seating himself at the head of the dinner table had quickly
killed that hope. Until this moment, there had been nothing to reawaken it, for Eustace had ignored Victor over the intervening days. But perhaps, Abigail thought, noting what was almost a flicker of eagerness in Eustace’s expression, the rejection was mostly a result of shock, and he would get over it.

“However, I do not think,” she went on, “that there are any suitable horses in the stable.”

The remark was a deliberate invitation. Francis, by whom Abigail judged all English gentlemen, would drop everything—if he were not in one of his drinking or gambling fits—to look at horses. He would have leapt into an opening such as Abigail had provided and offered to choose the horses himself, or help choose the horses, or just go along to accompany the person who was to choose the horses. And for just a moment, she thought it was going to work. Eustace’s eyes gleamed and he seemed about to make an eager reply, but then his lips tightened again.

“No,” he said stiffly, “I am afraid that is true. My father did not ride toward the end of his life, and my mother and Griselda have never done so.” He hesitated, and then shook his head slowly. “I do not think any of my horses would be suitable,” he added.

His voice seemed to hold what Abigail felt was a touch of reluctance, and she was startled briefly—until she guessed that Eustace was afraid she might expect him to offer to mount her children and was so ignorant that she would think it selfish of him not to make the offer.

“Oh, no,” she exclaimed, smiling, “of course they would not be suitable. I do realize your mounts would be too much for the children to handle—although I am not so sure that is true for Victor. He seems able to ride anything at all. But they must have their own horses, and I will need a riding mare, too.”

This second subtle invitation received an almost identical response to the first. Eustace seemed about to offer to choose for her the horses she and her children would need, but then his expression hardened, as if he had reminded himself of his resentment against them. However, he did recommend a reliable dealer in Ramsgate, which was not many miles distant. Abigail was a trifle disappointed, but she thought it unwise to press the issue with an overt request. Possibly, if she allowed a few days more to pass, Eustace’s attitude toward Victor might be further improved. Besides, she thought, Eustace might not know a horse from a camel. She had better make the time to get over to the stable and look over his animals and talk to the grooms.

Actually, Abigail herself was a moderately good judge of horses, owing to the fact that Francis could not resist expatiating at length on the quality of any animal upon which his eyes fell. Nonetheless, she was aware that ladies were not expected to visit horse-coper’s establishments. Of course, it was permissible to write to the dealer, who would then bring the horses he believed would best suit the requirements to Rutupiae for approval. But Abigail thought it better that someone look over the whole stock and, in addition, really preferred that someone with more practical knowledge than herself examine the animals.

If Eustace would not, there was always the head groom, but… No, there was Sir Arthur. Involuntarily Abigail smiled as she remembered Mr. Deedes telling her that Sir Arthur would be delighted to be helpful for any purpose. Abigail was not at all sure that choosing horses was part of an executor’s responsibility, but it would be a most excellent excuse to call at Stonar Magna again. Oddly, Abigail did not doubt Sir Arthur’s ability to judge the quality of a horse as she had doubted Eustace’s. There was something about Sir Arthur that proclaimed he would be competent at whatever he did. And for some reason, that thought made her smile again. Unfortunately, the second smile came at the wrong moment, just as Hilda was sure she had made her daughter understand that she must unpick most of the work she was doing because the colors were not feminine enough.

“And what are you two chattering about?” she asked.

The arch tone of the question not only indicated to Abigail that Hilda had been aware of the fact that she and Eustace had been talking, but startled her considerably by its implication that the conversation had had romantic overtones. Such a thought had never entered Abigail’s mind. Eustace was at least five years younger than she and had, in many ways, led a far more sheltered life. She considered him hardly more than a boy.

To make any comment on so ridiculous an implication, however, could only add emphasis to it, so Abigail answered blandly, “We were talking about horses. Victor, Daphne, and I all need mounts.”
“Well, you will have to do without them.” Hilda uttered a triumphant chuckle. “Sir Arthur does not believe horses to be a legitimate charge on the estate. That was what he said when he sent back the bill for the hunter Eustace wished to purchase.”

“No, Mama, he did not believe my horse to be a legitimate charge. He will approve payment for Victor’s horse. Victor is the earl.”

Eustace’s voice was so odd that Abigail’s head snapped around to him, but he was smiling, and she released the breath that had caught in her throat. He was baiting his mother, she thought, although Hilda seemed unaware of the fact and shrugged, saying peevishly that if it were so, Sir Arthur was monstrously unfair because she knew her late husband would not have wished her to have to bear the financial burden of his children.

Abigail’s mouth opened to point out that the late earl knew perfectly well that Hilda’s income was more than adequate, but she closed it firmly. Such a discussion could only lead to unpleasant exchanges that would have no effect on Hilda’s opinion. Overtly she simply ignored everything that had been said, stated firmly that she had not seen enough of her children and left.

Having made the statement, Abigail realized that it was true. She had not seen Victor and Daphne since she handed them over to Mrs. Franklin before she went to tell Sir Arthur about the shooting. A pang of guilt made her rush up the stairs and almost run to the rooms set aside for the children, but both her guilt and her anxiety were a waste of time. Although she was greeted with shouts of enthusiasm, these were only engendered by the hope of snaring another player into the card game Mrs. Franklin had taught them. After an initial hesitation, for the letters Abigail had intended to write were still undone, she laughed and sat down at the table.

One more quiver of anxiety passed through her as she realized the children were gambling with counters, but she suppressed it. She knew that often efforts were made to keep the children of gamblers in ignorance of the vice, but she had long ago made up her mind that was not the path she wished to take for Victor and Daphne. She had made no protest when they learned to play cards from their friends. Instead she played against them, and if they proposed to play for money, she won every penny and refused to lend against any future money they could earn by running errands for the shop or doing other chores. They learned the bitterness of gambling with real coin, for when they played for straws or some other harmless symbol, Abigail played less fiercely—and admitted this to them, pointing out that play for money was always vicious and often dishonest—so the winning and losing became more even.

The method had seemed to work. Abigail heard no reports from Victor’s school or from Daphne’s friends’ parents that her children were any more inclined toward playing at cards, especially for money, than other children. Still, many said such things as gambling were “in the blood”. That was what woke the little quiver of fear each time she saw her children playing cards. But if they were right, Abigail reasoned, ignorance could not prevent the desire from arising, and there was no way to shield Victor, anyway from knowledge of gambling once he went out into the world. All ignorance could do was make the vice more appealing, by making it “secret” and “forbidden”.

Thus, Abigail picked up her share of cards and counters with a smile, while Victor and Daphne giggled and muttered warnings to Mrs. Franklin that “Mother is a regular sharp and will beat us all to flinders if we don’t pay strict attention.”

In fact, Abigail did not play very well that night. Her mind kept wandering to Sir Arthur and whether to ask him openly about the horses and risk a confrontation—although she believed the actual risk was slight—or simply buy the animals and send the bill direct to Baring, who would see that it was paid. However, her original purpose in coming up was fulfilled. After the children had been sent off to bed, Mrs. Franklin reported that they seemed unsathed by their morning’s experience. At different times, both had remarked casually on it and mentioned the hope that they would not be prevented from playing in the woods because of it.

From the point of view of her children’s nerves, that was good news. Abigail was not sure it was equally good news for her. Although she smiled and thanked Mrs. Franklin, she shuddered internally at the idea of permitting Victor and Daphne to wander alone in the woods. The elderly woman, however, showed sharper perceptions than Abigail had expected.

“I did not say it would be permitted, my lady,” Mrs. Franklin said, “but I do not think it would be of the least use to
forbid them—or, perhaps I should say that I do not believe myself capable of preventing them from disobeying such an order.”

Abigail laughed more naturally. “I doubt the angel Gabriel with his flaming sword could keep Victor out of the woods now—and where Victor goes, Daphne trails along behind, unless he can manage to escape her. And, truly, I don’t think there is any further danger. I just—” Abigail left the statement hanging.

Mrs. Franklin nodded understandingly. “Can’t help worrying. Yes, I don’t blame you. But it must have been an accident.” A frown crossed her face as she spoke, and she hesitated.

Abigail’s heart leapt into her throat, but if her expression changed, Mrs. Franklin could not have noticed, for her eyes had fixed on the pack of cards on the table. Then she shook her head and placed her hand on the table to help herself to rise. How ridiculous, Abigail thought. I am confusing twinges of rheumatics with deadly threats. And Mrs. Franklin’s next words seemed to confirm that, because she smiled as she said she had better check that the children had actually gotten to bed after being sent there.

“No, I’ll go,” Abigail said. “I must say good night to them anyway.”

Although both Victor and Daphne were in bed—a miracle that bespoke how tired they were—the good-nights were still protracted. Abigail had to hear from each about the doings of the day, including an enthusiastic rehash of the shooting, which was beginning to take on daring romantic overtones. She made little comment on that, beyond reminding Victor of his promise with regard to the toad, adding to the list of forbidden joys snakes, newts and anything else of a creepy-crawly nature. And when the children were settled at last, she realized she was exhausted too, rang for her maid and went to bed herself.

Chapter Seven

Because she had gone to sleep so early, Abigail woke at cockcrow, feeling no inclination to linger drowsily abed. She had been accustomed to early rising, since it took a long day to manage her household, her business and her family, but she had got out of the habit during the month-long voyage and the subsequent weeks in England. This waking was different. There was no need to put on her clothes hastily and to start at once on the tasks that, however dull, ensured her livelihood and the smooth functioning of her home.

Idly, Abigail went to the window and drew the curtain. I must rise early oftener, she thought, looking with delight on the dewy freshness of the park. The early morning at Rutupiae Hall was filled with peace and beauty. She could see the gentle undulations of the velvety green lawn folding away into the shadow of the woods, and a corner of the garden presented brilliant splashes of color, further decorated by bright sparkles as the low light of the newly risen sun caught a drop of dew here and there.

It was a refreshment to the spirit, and Abigail enjoyed it wholeheartedly, finding herself stimulated and ready to do something. However, she knew that there was nothing to do, unless she wished to join the maids in setting the house to rights. She laughed aloud at the effect that would have on Hilda, but she was not prepared to shock and alarm the servants just to annoy her mother-in-law. It would also have been a perfect morning for a ride, which immediately reminded her of the problem of obtaining suitable mounts.

To ask Sir Arthur or not to ask Sir Arthur? Abigail was no nearer an answer to the question than she had been the previous night, and until she decided, it was impossible to do anything about the horses. She put the matter in the back of her mind to stew, drew on a peignoir and went to the desk in her sitting room to write to the London booksellers. From experience Abigail knew that some mechanism inside her would probably come to a decision by the time she had finished her letters,

The business took longer than Abigail had expected. She had forgotten for the moment that she would have to make her own copies into her letter book. In the shop, one of the clerks had done that. By the time she finished the letters, her maid was waiting to help her dress, and she was somewhat later than usual for breakfast. Abigail hurried down to the breakfast parlor, partly because she was hungry but also because she was afraid she might meet Hilda, who had her breakfast in bed but came down at about this time to sit in the morning room—and that would ruin what had been an unusually pleasant and fruitful morning.
This seemed to be her lucky day, Abigail thought, as she entered to find the breakfast parlor empty. She served herself from the dishes on the sideboard and then rang the bell for Betty to bring her coffee—a drink she had introduced to the household over Hilda’s protests. Coffee was drunk in coffeehouses, Hilda had exclaimed, looking down her nose. It was a drink for men. It was crude and unfeminine to drink coffee. Abigail grinned as she sipped the strong, black brew. It might be crude and unfeminine, but to her taste, it was certainly more stimulating and satisfying than tea.

As she ate, she revolved in her mind what she should say in her note to Sir Arthur. Abigail only realized that she had decided to tell him she intended to purchase horses when she was wondering whether to state her purpose in the note or simply say she had a matter of business to discuss with him and would like to see him when convenient. The realization diverted her thoughts from the note itself to the reasons for the decision. She knew she could have got around him, even if he were angry about the purchase, simply by opening her eyes wide and claiming ignorance. It would be a perfectly adequate excuse for this first expenditure, but Abigail found that she did not wish to use “woman’s wiles” on Sir Arthur. She had enjoyed their equal, if acrimonious, discussion about the American war and did not want to sink into being a “silly, ignorant woman”. And then Abigail grinned again and cast down her eyes, although no one was there to see the expression in them. The truth was, she admitted to herself, that her primary reason was a desire to see Sir Arthur again.

That did not eliminate the problem of what to say in the note, which Abigail was finding surprisingly hard to write. She had lingered in the breakfast parlor until after she heard Hilda come down and go into the morning room. The one advantage of Hilda’s voice and her inveterate habit of complaining, even to the servants, was that one could hear her right through closed doors. When Hilda was safely ensconced, Abigail had moved to the library and settled down to dash off her note—only it would not dash off. Abigail knew the difficulty was being caused by her recognition of how attractive she found Sir Arthur, but the knowledge was not solving the difficulty.

However, the good fairy who was presiding over this morning had not yet abandoned her post. Just as Abigail made an irritated exclamation and crumpled another sheet of paper into a ball, a footman entered to announce that Sir Arthur had arrived and would like to have a word with Lady Lydden, if convenient.

Surprised and delighted, Abigail very nearly jumped to her feet and cried, “Of course it’s convenient,” but she remembered in time the dignity one was supposed to maintain and also that it would be very unwise to allow any hint of interest to cause gossip among the servants. Thus, she pushed away her writing materials and replied in a calm voice, “Certainly. Show him in here, please.”

When Sir Arthur’s tall, broad-shouldered form appeared in the doorway wearing an unmistakable expression of pleasure on his face, Abigail forgot formality, in spite of her intentions. She rose and hurried around the table toward him, saying, “Just the person I wanted to see.”

He stopped and raised a quizzical brow. “I’m not sure whether that is a compliment or whether I should turn and run.”

Abigail laughed. “You have a fine nose for danger, Sir Arthur. I did have a use for you in mind.”

“Did you?” he remarked, his smile growing more pronounced and his voice making the innocent words into a not at all innocent suggestion.

Abigail was a trifle taken aback, although not unpleasantly. Sir Arthur had seemed totally impervious to her charms the previous day, which told Abigail—who did not suffer from false modesty and was aware of the effect her appearance had on most men—that he was either indifferent to women or very, very experienced with them. Plainly he was not indifferent and had reconsidered and found her worthy of notice. He was not nearly as handsome as Francis, but Abigail knew without needing evidence that he was much more successful with women. However, womanizing had not been one of Francis’ faults and he had not been a practiced flirt—which apparently Sir Arthur was. Abigail felt even more interested but quite determined to make him fight hard before he won her.

“I did,” Abigail answered sweetly, “but having seen you again I realize you would not suit—you have only two legs.”
“Two legs!” he echoed, surprise and a horrified indignation, held in check by doubt, having wiped all flirtatiousness from his manner.

“Yes,” she said, opening her eyes into a look of great innocence, “the beasts I need must have four. I do not understand why you look so surprised, Sir Arthur. Surely you did not expect that I would bring horses from America. Victor, Daphne and I need mounts, and I was wondering whether you would be kind enough to choose the animals for me.”

He blinked, choked and then replied as blandly as she had spoken, “Of course I will—and you may be sure—”

“Don’t say it,” Abigail interrupted. “Any comment about the gait of my mount would be in very bad taste.”

Sir Arthur looked down his nose with spurious hauteur. “In bad taste? Me? Heaven forfend. I am known for my delicacy of touch.” And when Abigail choked in turn, he looked even more remotely aristocratic and continued, “I was about to say that you may be sure there will be no need to accept the first animals that turn up, because I could lend you horses. We have every type, from ponies through docile, gentle old reliables to quite spirited but very steady geldings. The family is so large, you see, and while my mother was at home, all manner of children were dumped in Stonar Magna whenever their parents were busy elsewhere. But my mother has decided to live in Bath, and the animals are all here eating their heads off and with nothing to do.”

The expression of comprehending amusement Abigail had been wearing disappeared. Her face and voice filled with gratitude, and she put out her hand and touched him.

“That is a very generous offer, Sir Arthur, and I hope you will forgive me for omitting the polite doubts and hesitations I probably should express. To tell the truth, though I am quite certain that yesterday’s shooting was an accident and will not occur again, the incident has left me a little nervous. On the other hand, naturally, it has awakened in Victor a passion for the woods, but he loves riding. A new horse would distract him easily, and I would feel a great relief if he were out on a horse with a groom in attendance.”

“I am sure you would,” Sir Arthur answered soberly, “and I do not feel your fears to be at all foolish. In fact, I find the incident more and more of a mystery. We cannot discover any cause on St. Eyre lands for even the mildest animosity against any of your servants. Even more puzzling, Price, my head gamekeeper, put out some feelers to the local people, and he is almost certain no poacher was in this area. But there really is nothing to worry about with regard to your children. Word of their presence has been spread to all my people and the village too, and Price and some of his best men are patrolling the entire area. No one will be doing any more shooting for any reason anywhere your children could possibly reach afoot.”

“You are very kind,” Abigail said sincerely.

“Not at all,” he replied, smiling. “It will be an advantage to me, too. And if you are speaking of the horses, that is also to my advantage. You will be supplying fodder and grooms to care for the animals instead of me—and they will be properly exercised for a while, poor things. Don’t mention it. All you need do is come to Stonar with the children so that we can decide which of the horses would be most suitable. When would you like to come? This afternoon?”

“That would—” Abigail stopped abruptly. “Oh, dear, we cannot.”

“Tomorrow morning then?” Sir Arthur asked accommodingly, although he wondered what she had to do that was so pressing as to interfere with obtaining a mount for her son. The notion that she might be expecting a visitor—a male visitor—leapt into his mind. Someone from London, surely, since she had not had time to make local acquaintances—or had she?

“No, unless… You see, we have no riding dress,” Abigail said. “Vic seems to grow a foot a month, and I knew his breeches and boots would never fit by the time we arrived in England, so I just left them. And Daphne’s habit was dreadfully worn, and mine…” Abigail hesitated, blushed faintly and chuckled. “Will you think very ill of me if I confess that I was afraid it would be unfashionable?”

“On the contrary,” Sir Arthur said, smiling broadly, “I think you a woman of excellent sense. To follow the extremes of fashion moment by moment might be foolish, but to present oneself to society in clothing two years out of date—
which is what Americans seem to wear—would be suicidal.”

The prick of resentment Abigail felt at the slur on American fashion—although she knew it to be just from the British point of view—made her voice sharper than she meant it to be when she replied, “I ordered the clothes from a modiste and tailor recommended by the Barings to be sent here as soon as possible, but I assure you that my clothes and Daphne’s were not a charge on Victor’s estate.”

“That is ridiculous,” he snapped, his smile disappearing. “In the first place, Daphne is provided for, as you should have realized. Lord Lydden set aside a very reasonable sum as a dowry, since he knew what Francis was.” He stopped and bit his lip. “I beg your pardon, Lady Lydden. Nil nisi bonum and all that, but—”

“You need not beg my pardon,” Abigail said steadily, “but it would be best to avoid that topic. I prefer, since it is possible without doing them harm, that the children remember their father’s charm and kindness and forget… whatever they knew of his faults.”

“Yes, of course,” Sir Arthur replied. “You are right. I will be careful. But you mustn’t think I would say anything to Victor and Daphne that they should not hear. I was very fond of Francis. One couldn’t help it.”

Abigail’s lips twisted between a smile and a grimace. “No, one couldn’t,” she said with a sigh.

Regret and exasperation mingled in her face and voice—but there was no grief. Sir Arthur experienced a faint pang of guilt. He knew it was wrong to feel satisfaction because his late friend’s wife was not mourning for him. Nonetheless, Arthur dismissed even that faint feeling of discomfort. Had Francis lived, he would have brought disaster to a fine woman, two decent children and an old estate, would have been unable to stop himself, and would have suffered the torments of the damned in his lucid intervals—or should have. In any case, what had happened was for the best for everyone.

“Now, about this nonsense of charges on the estate,” he said briskly, to change the subject. “Naturally, your full support is the responsibility of the estate as long as Victor is a minor. I’m afraid no jointure was arranged for you because it was understood that there had been a settlement made in America. If it is not possible to transfer the principal and income, I suppose—”

“I beg your pardon.” Abigail smiled and shook her head. “I should not have said that. I know the provisions of Lord Lydden’s will. I obtained a copy and read it carefully,” she added, a trifle mendaciously because, if Sir Arthur objected, she did not want Alexander Baring blamed for assisting her.

“You understood it?” Arthur asked uncertainly.

“Well enough to realize that because of Francis’ death you really control the estate,” she replied.

“But why in the world should you think I would object to any rational expenditure for you, and more particularly for Daphne?”

“Oh, I didn’t, not really,” Abigail admitted, rather shamefaced, “but Eustace and Hilda kept insisting that you—”

“The situation,” Arthur interrupted coldly, “is not analogous. Let me assure you that no one is being pinched or deprived. Lady Hilda Lydden has an income large enough to support herself and her children in luxury. I still think it was wrong to make Griselda and Eustace dependent on her, but perhaps there was a reason. Lord Lydden was not a fool. In any case, I had no right and, indeed, neither the time nor the power to do anything about it.”

“For what little it is worth, since I am surely more ignorant than you about those three, I agree with you,” Abigail stated, then she shrugged and smiled impishly. “And I promise I will not redo and refurnish the whole house because the drawing room curtains are too thin.”

“That rankles, does it?” Arthur said a trifle grimly. “Too bad. I did not feel the changes to be necessary, particularly since I did not feel that Hilda would be living in Rutupiae Hall for long. Whyever did you allow—?” He cleared his throat.
“Sheer ignorance.” Abigail sighed. There were other reasons, of course, like the sympathy she felt for any woman whose husband had a right to use up her money and leave her penniless, but she was not about to discuss that subject with a man—not even one she liked as well as Sir Arthur. “Francis never once mentioned them. I had no idea they existed, until Mr. Deedes told me. And I couldn’t push them out the very moment I arrived.”

“No, of course you could not. Besides, they have a right to live in the Dower House, and you would have had to put out the tenant. No, you did what was necessary. But speaking of changes to the house, if you feel there is some alteration, even a structural change that would make your situation more comfortable, do not hesitate—”

Abigail laughed. “Oh, no. Matters are not so bad as that. Fortunately, our tastes are very different. I like to be busy and am beginning to learn about the estate, in which Hilda does not appear to be interested, and I have my children. With one thing and another, our paths do not cross much, except at dinner. In any case, I would not want to make any changes. Victor is twelve and will soon be old enough to make his own decisions. He might develop an interest in the house or he might marry young. It would be ridiculous for me to refurnish to my taste and then have his wife loathe everything I had done.”

“Some men do not marry young,” Arthur said.

Abigail was surprised and a trifle offended. Was he implying that she was the kind of mother who would be jealous of every girl her son liked? “Well, then he may furnish anew or not furnish at all just as he likes,” she answered tartly, “for I do not intend to cling to him. I will be glad and grateful to be free to live my own life as soon as he is able to manage for himself.” Then she cocked her head, looking puzzled. “However did we get onto this silly topic?”

“Hilda seems to bring out the worst in everyone,” Arthur answered, smiling despite the fact that Abigail’s remarks had pricked him. He wondered if for years his mother had longed to be free and whether, perhaps, his demands upon her had kept her from remarrying, though Lady Lydden had said nothing about remarriage, of course. Still, what else could she need to be “free” to do? The whole subject was unpleasant.

Abigail shook her head in mock disapproval of his remark about Hilda, then remembered his regret because Victor had not succeeded in inserting a toad into Hilda’s chair or bed. “I mustn’t think in those terms,” she said, barely restraining giggles. “Heaven knows it doesn’t take much to bring out the worst in me. But, Sir Arthur, you cannot have known I wished to consult you about the horses. I have been so intent on my own concerns that I never asked whether you had some business you wished to discuss or whether you discharged your errand in telling me about the arrangements you have made to ensure my children’s safety.”

“That was one purpose, of course,” he answered, not very truthfully.

Actually, it was his strong impulse to look at her and speak to her again—only to convince himself that the image he retained of her beauty and the pleasure he had in talking to her was grossly exaggerated—that had teased him into finding a reason to come to Rutupiae. He did not let himself think about that, for Abigail’s loveliness and his delight in her had not been exaggerated, and he was not at all sure what he wanted to do about the situation.

“I could have sent a note about that,” he went on quickly, “but I had an idea that needed some discussion.”

“Then had we not better sit down?” she suggested, suddenly realizing that they had been standing—rather close to each other—the whole time they had been talking.

She gestured toward a pair of armchairs flanking the fireplace, now empty and concealed behind a very handsome, fan-shaped decorative screen. Sir Arthur moved toward one of the chairs, standing politely until Abigail seated herself in the other.

“You told me yesterday that your son was twelve,” he said as he sat down. “It occurred to me after you left that he must go to school. Francis went to Westminster—well, so did I—and I thought I would put his name in there, unless you would like him to go to your father’s school. There is also the question of whether Victor will need special tutoring—” The expression on Abigail’s face made him stop and add hurriedly, “Forgive me, I did not mean to imply that Victor is slow or that his education was inadequate. Remember, I have never met the boy and am totally
ignorant of both his background and the system of study in American schools.”

The phrase “he must go to school” was a shock to Abigail. Was this the first step in wresting the control of her son from her? “You are totally ignorant about a lot of things,” she snapped, “such as the fact that I am Victor’s legal guardian. Whether or not he goes to school is my decision to make.”

“I am not at all ignorant that your son is your ward,” he said, much surprised. “But what in the world do you plan to do with the boy if you do not wish to send him to school? How will he make friends? All the boys of his age—at least those I know of in the area—go to school.”

The open acknowledgment that she was Victor’s guardian as well as his mother, and the tone of surprise, which indicated clearly that he had no intention of contesting her right, calmed Abigail’s fear and made her rather ashamed of the violence of her reaction.

“I’m sorry. I should not have snapped at you,” she apologized. “I have already admitted that it takes very little to bring out the worst in me.”

“Apparently so,” Arthur agreed, somewhat ungallantly, “but what did I say to annoy you? I have been outstandingly civil—for me, anyway. I know Bertram says that some of my endeavors to be polite could give a fish a fever, but—”

“Now you are trying to make me feel more ashamed of myself than I do already,” Abigail protested, laughing. She did not wish to discuss her instinctive fear that control of her children would be taken from her—not because she could be proven unfit to raise them but simply because she was female. That fear was tied up with the fact that her father had been unable to will anything directly to her. If he had done so, the money, property and business would have legally belonged to Francis, since all a wife’s property passed immediately into the possession of her husband. Aside from the fact that Sir Arthur might well think such an arrangement right and proper, the whole thing was so complicated to explain. In addition, Abigail did not want to admit to the elegant Sir Arthur that she was a common shopkeeper. It would be far better, she thought, to avoid explanations.

“You have been so very kind in your efforts to protect my children and your offer of mounts,” she said. “And I realize that your advice to put Victor into Westminster was kindly meant.” He made an impatient gesture, and she added, “I know it was not your intention to place me under an obligation, but it was kind, and I should not permit myself to catch fire so easily.”

“Yes, yes, I agree that you have a flammable disposition,” he said impatiently. “I don’t mind that. I just want to know what I said to ignite you.”

Abigail laughed lightly. “Now, now, it is not very civil to agree with me quite so emphatically, you know. You could have murmured something about—”

“Damn it!” Arthur roared. “What did I say?”

For a moment Abigail was so startled that she made no reply. Then she got to her feet, looking anxious. “It was nothing important. Truly, I know it was unintentional, and you did not really hurt me.”

“Perhaps not,” Arthur said ominously, also rising, “but I will soon do so deliberately by wringing your neck if you do not answer my question. My dear Lady Lydden, when I asked the question, I was merely mildly curious. Now I intend to have an answer because I do not choose that you go on believing you can lead me around by the nose quite so easily as you seem to think you can.”

Abigail’s soft violet eyes turned bright and hard as anger brought higher color to her cheeks. “Just how do you think you can obtain an answer from me if I do not choose to give one?” she asked gently.

“By waiting five minutes—if it takes that long—for you to recognize that no man likes to be thought a fool and that since I caught you trying to lead me up the garden path, I deserve an answer.”

For a few seconds longer, Abigail stared at him. Arthur looked back steadily and seriously. Then she sighed, stepped
forward and held out her hand, not in a gesture of feminine appeal but to be shaken as on concluding some business arrangement.

“You are quite right,” she said. “I was avoiding an answer because I do not like to look foolish either. I knew—”

“You need say no more,” Arthur interrupted. “I only wanted you to understand that I was aware of what you were doing.” Then he sighed too, and his lips twisted wryly. “I suppose I should beg your pardon again. You are an exceptional woman, Lady Lydden. Almost any other would have wept and told me I was rude and unreasonable.”

“So you are,” Abigail replied pertly, “but you were also quite right, unfortunately.”

Arthur made no verbal response to her remark, but the clasp of his hand on hers changed subtly and the slow smile he gave her sent a warning quiver along Abigail’s nerves. Still, she did not attempt to extricate her hand, and before either of them could speak, the door burst open and Victor and Daphne erupted into the room.

“Mother, Mother, there’s an old mill,” Victor cried.

“And the wheel still goes round,” Daphne put in.

“Mrs. Franklin asked if we would like to walk down to her cottage with her,” Victor said, his expression lightening. “She wanted to water her plants,” Daphne explained. “It is the prettiest place, Mother—”

“Never mind that now,” Victor interrupted. “She asked about the mill. Mrs. Franklin showed it to us on the way back. Did you know about the mill, sir?” he asked, politely including Sir Arthur in the conversation in the hope that involving his mother’s guest would permit a protracted discussion of the subject.

“Yes, I did,” Arthur replied, looking interested. “It was in use when your father and I were about Daphne’s age, and the miller let us watch and even help carry the flour bags sometimes—but only if we stayed away from the gears and millstones.”

“Yes. Your grandfather had the metal stripped out and sold, but the millstones weren’t worth moving.”


“The miller died,” Arthur replied. “He was a very old man, and the mill was too small to make much profit, so no one else wanted to be miller here.”

“Too bad.” Daphne sighed. “It would have been fun to get flour from our own mill. Anyway, Victor can fish in the
“And swim—” Victor put in.

“No,” Arthur said, and then, smiling into their faces, which displayed a mixture of shock and indignation, “I’m sorry. I hate to put a damper on such delightful plans, but that pond isn’t fit for swimming. The bottom is all silted up with muddy slime, and it’s full of eel grass. As for fishing, there’s nothing worthwhile there. But swimming and fishing are no problem. There’s a spot on the Stour that’s perfect, and only a quarter mile away.”

“But that would be on your land, sir,” Victor said.

Arthur nodded approvingly. “So it is, and I’m glad to see that you understand trespass, but you—and your mother and sister, of course—are very welcome on St. Eyre land at any time. In fact, if your mother approves, I will walk over with you and show you the spot right now.”

“Mother?” the children’s voices blended, and Abigail saw Victor’s head turning to say that Daphne had not been invited.

It was true, but probably only because Sir Arthur did not realize that she would want and expect to go. Since they as yet had no other friends, Daphne was Victor’s shadow, even when he intended to do things that she knew would not interest her, like fishing. She would go anyway, and pick flowers and read. Usually Victor liked her company—she was so obviously admiring—but Abigail could see he was afraid Sir Arthur would not want a little girl tagging along. Abigail had no strong feelings about the subject and ordinarily allowed Victor and Daphne to settle the matter on their own, but she was not in the mood for a squabble or for soothing Daphne’s tears and hurt feelings. Sir Arthur’s warm and easy manner with her children had made her inexplicably happy.

“May I walk with you?” she asked.

“We would be honored, Lady Lydden,” Arthur replied gravely.

Until they reached the pool, Abigail had no chance for a private word with Sir Arthur, since Victor walked with him, talking of fishing and paying strict attention to the path. There were several trails, which led either upstream or downstream to shallower, faster moving portions of the river, but the place to which Arthur led them had been artificially enlarged from a side arm of the river. It was wide and deep, with only enough movement in the water to keep it from becoming stagnant, and it was an exquisite spot. The path opened into a tiny meadow, shaded by large trees, and the bank of the river was starred with kingcups and yellow iris.

Daphne and Abigail stopped to admire the scene, while Arthur led Victor down to the river itself and pointed right and left along the bank to where one could see the side arm dividing from and rejoining the main stream. The best fishing was at those points, Arthur said, and it was not difficult to find a spot to sit, even though it looked as if the brush came right down to the water. Many of the trees had roots that protruded out into the river, and there were niches one could not see from this angle, where trees had fallen or been cut and removed. Victor promptly proposed finding a good spot then and there, and Arthur said Victor might do so but declined to accompany him on the grounds that he was not dressed for plunging about through heavy brush. Having glanced at Sir Arthur’s elegant coat and neckcloth and his pale pantaloons and thin shoes, Victor kindly agreed to make his examination alone.

When Arthur rejoined Abigail, Daphne asked shyly if she might pick some of the flowers, and Sir Arthur said it would make him happy if she did. “It is a shame to waste them,” he remarked, “but there are no ladies in my household, and so the poor flowers simply languish without any attention.”

“Thank you,” Abigail said, as Daphne ran off to gather her posy. “You have managed to make them both very happy.”

“And made you very worried?” he suggested. “Don’t be concerned. This really is a safe spot because it is known all over the area and in both households that I spend a good deal of time here myself—and not at any particular time of day, or even night. The river is incredibly beautiful by moonlight. Will you allow me to show it to you?”

“I should like that very much,” Abigail replied softly.
Chapter Eight

Abigail had hoped that no one except herself had been aware of Sir Arthur’s visit, but Hilda pounced on her as soon as she entered the salon. “One would have expected,” she complained, “that he would have had the courtesy to call on me. It was I to whom he behaved in so rude and unfeeling a manner. In fact, one would have thought he would be ashamed to show his face in this house at all after the expectations he raised—”

“Mama—”

It was a whimper of protest, and Abigail kept her eyes firmly fixed on Hilda so that they would not glance involuntarily at Griselda. Arthur and Griselda? It was unthinkable! Still, there was that incident at breakfast the previous day, when Abigail had mentioned the possibility of Griselda’s marrying and leaving Rutupiae Hall. Griselda had certainly had some bitter disappointment. But it was inconceivable that Arthur— Suddenly Abigail realized that he was no longer Sir Arthur in her mind. She dismissed that diverting thought to concentrate on a far more serious matter. Abigail simply could not believe that a man like Arthur would seriously contemplate Griselda for a wife. But could he have courted her for a joke, just to tease her? That would have been horrible, despicable.

Abigail could not believe Arthur would be so cruel. She remembered the kind eyes, the many thoughtful gestures he had made, the woods to be patrolled, the offer of horses, the warmth to her children. Of course, she told herself, all of that might just be the lures he was displaying for her, but even if it were so, there was no harm in it. Arthur was obviously experienced in affairs of light dalliance and must be aware that Abigail was not only a beautiful woman but one well able to protect herself and thus a worthy partner. Griselda was another matter.

Why should Arthur even think of Griselda, except to pity her? And with the word the horrible possibilities became clear to Abigail at once. If Arthur had been kind out of pity, Hilda was exactly the type to misread the courtesies he had extended. Had Griselda fixed her affection on Arthur because of the kindness, or had her idiot mother convinced her that he loved her? The girl was so starved for affection of any kind that it would not have taken much. Abigail could have wept, but that would only make everything worse.

She became aware that Hilda was now engaged in providing a catalogue of Sir Arthur’s notorious amours all over the neighborhood. Surprisingly, for she admitted to herself that she was interested in the man, she did not feel at all jealous. Although she did not doubt Arthur did, indeed, play with women, Hilda’s list amused rather than infuriated her. So determined a lothario would have little time for politics—or for anything else.

“And you need not look so amused and superior,” Hilda exclaimed waspishly. “If you think you are an exception, you are quite wrong. He gives that impression to everyone.” She uttered a spiteful cackle of laughter when she saw Abigail frown. “Oh, so you have fallen victim to Sir Arthur’s practiced lechery.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you,” Abigail said coldly. “If I was displeased at the scandals you chose to relate, it was because Sir Arthur has been very kind to me. He came to explain to me the precautions he had taken with regard to avoiding another accidental shooting, since my children are likely to wander in the woods a good deal.”

“Precautions?” Eustace remarked, his voice slightly sneering. “What precautions are necessary against that kind of accident? It won’t happen again, anyway. Most probably it was one of his own gamekeepers who panicked for some reason and fired the shot. Arthur’s a fool if he really believes the man would confess.”

“None of his people are honest.” Hilda cackled. “He coddles them too much. They know they can get away with anything, and they do.”

Abigail did not agree with either Eustace or Hilda, but she was more intent on changing the conversation for Griselda’s sake than on defending Arthur’s servants. The attempt she made was a failure, however. Hilda’s mind was like the proverbial immovable object.

Ignoring Abigail’s tempting gambit on the subject of finding a local dressmaker, Hilda said, “I suppose you walked out into the woods with him to make sure the ‘precautions’ he told you about were really taken.”

“I walked out with Daphne,” Abigail remarked with pretended indifference, realizing that any show of the anger and disgust she felt would only confirm Hilda’s ugly innuendo. “Sir Arthur kindly offered to show Victor a good place
to fish and swim, and my daughter felt a bit left out. Since you were watching so carefully, you must have noticed that Daphne and I came back with wildflowers.”

“Oh,” Eustace put in, before his mother could reply, “the pool where there’s a small island in the river? That is a good spot to swim. Is Victor good at it?”

“Quite good,” Abigail replied eagerly. She was delighted both by Eustace’s willingness to divert the conversation and by the fact that he seemed interested in Victor’s liking for the sport. Eustace did seem to be getting over his envy. “But Victor won’t be doing any swimming for a while. He was used to a much warmer climate in America and must grow accustomed to an English summer. Besides, he will have to find a companion for swimming. I would not permit him to do so alone.”

“Yes, of course, that’s only sensible,” Eustace said, seeming almost disappointed, which warmed Abigail’s heart because she felt he was sympathizing with Victor. Then he asked with interest, “Does Victor like to fish?”

“Yes, he does,” Abigail answered, smiling encouragement. “Francis taught him. Are you a fisherman, too?”

“No, not a very passionate one,” Eustace replied, also smiling, “but I do take out a rod now and again. I have some old equipment that I could lend Victor.”

“How kind of you!” Abigail exclaimed. “He will be so delighted. Could I impose on you a little further and ask you to explain how to use it? He was barely eleven the last time Francis took him, you see, and I don’t believe he was allowed to do much with the equipment. He has been fishing since then, of course, but with a string tied to a stick sort of thing. And, naturally, if he damages the rod or anything else, I will have it repaired.”

“Not to worry,” Eustace said pleasantly. “I don’t think I have used the rod I have in mind for him in ten years. In fact, I will give it to him outright. Then he won’t need to worry if something goes wrong.”

Abigail’s eyes glowed with gratitude. “Thank you. Victor will adore you for this.”

“I doubt that it is Victor’s adoration Eustace wants,” Hilda said archly.

Eustace closed his eyes for a moment, but he only smiled at his mother when he turned toward her. Whatever he had intended to say was lost as Empson opened the door at that moment to announce that dinner was served. Worse yet, despite Eustace’s and Abigail’s combined efforts, Hilda managed to drag the conversation back to Sir Arthur time and again during dinner, and several gibes were directed toward Griselda. From these, Abigail was forced to the astounding conclusion that Hilda had tried to induce her daughter to threaten Arthur with a suit for breach of promise, and had been unsuccessful. She could not decide which of the two ideas shocked her more—that any mother could wish to expose her daughter to such public humiliation or that Griselda had found the strength to resist.

As she did far too often, Abigail offered up a prayer of thanksgiving when dinner ended. However, this time she could not bring herself simply to flee to the quiet of her own apartment or to the noisy amusement of her children’s company. Griselda, she was sure, would not be allowed to escape, and Abigail could not bear to leave her to be tormented by her mother. The solution was to send for Victor and Daphne to come down and join her.

For a little while the success of the maneuver hung in the balance. Victor scored the first points by being so volubly grateful over Eustace’s offer of a real fishing rod that Hilda could not get a word in. But when, with grim patience, Eustace took the boy to fetch the rod at once, Hilda made a strong recovery by snidely suggesting that Sir Arthur had spent a very long time in the library with Abigail for a purpose that could have been accomplished by a short note.

Since Arthur had made that point himself, Abigail could not blame Hilda for thinking of it, and she answered calmly. “He also wanted to discuss the subject of school for Victor. Obviously, since I am Victor’s guardian, he cannot make arrangements without my concurrence, and there is much to be talked over.”

“Don’t you let him send your poor little boy off to school!” Hilda exclaimed.
To Abigail’s surprise, an expression of anxiety appeared on Hilda’s face. Abigail had no way of knowing why such an expression should be assumed, but her instinctive reaction was that Hilda was too stupid and too self-centered to be capable of pretense, thus, she was truly concerned. Fortunately, the mingling of surprise and doubt kept Abigail from bursting into laughter at hearing Victor called a “poor little boy”. A less apt description of her sturdy, fearless devil of a son would be hard to find.

“But what will I do if Victor goes to school?” Daphne asked.

“You may go too, my love,” Abigail replied. “Sir Arthur was naturally concerned with Victor, since he must make the recommendations that will gain a place, but you will not be forgotten. Perhaps there is a day school that you could ride to each day if you do not wish to stay at the school all term. Or I could find you a governess who could teach you properly.”

“You are very foolish to be allowing a little girl to make such choices,” Hilda screeched. “Daughters must learn to be obedient.”

“I had rather she learned to be sensible and to manage her own life,” Abigail snapped.

Hilda glanced sidelong at Griselda, who had not uttered a single sound all evening, since that one pathetic protest. “You will have plenty of time to regret your foolishness when your sensible daughter leaves you to die of loneliness.”

“I would never let Mother be lonely,” Daphne cried.

Abigail laughed aloud, although she was furious. “Don’t be a goose, Daphne. You know I am never lonely, because I am too busy. Heaven knows I am always glad to see you, but I am just as glad when you have things to do on your own and let me get on with my work.”

“What work?” Hilda asked.

“At the moment learning to run this house and the estate,” Abigail replied calmly. The children had been warned not to speak of the business in New York, and though Abigail might have been concerned if Victor had been there, she did not even glance at Daphne, who was a careful, less volatile child.

“Run the estate!” Hilda echoed. “What right have you—?”

But before she could finish the question, Victor burst into the room waving his new possession and exclaiming on its wonders and beauties. Abigail let him run on for a time, ignoring Hilda’s outraged exclamations, but when he began to demonstrate casts, endangering the candles and ornaments in the room, not to mention the people—his skill not being equal to his enthusiasm—she realized she would have to divert him.

“Stop now, before you hurt someone or break something, Victor,” Abigail ordered. “You may take it to the pond tomorrow. Also, I have something important to tell you. Sir Arthur offered to try to secure you a place at Westminster—that is a—”

“A school,” Victor interrupted. “I know! It’s the school William Baring goes to. Oh, Mother, that’s good! When can I go?”

Abigail was appalled. She had only wished to divert Victor from the fishing rod and had thought that he would be interested in talking about school but not eager to go because everything on the estate was still so new and interesting. There were a number of reasons not to send Victor away too soon, one of which was finding out whether his American schooling had, indeed, been adequate.

“Well,” she said, “I see that I do not need to ask whether you wish to go or be tutored privately.”

“Oh, no, Mother! I like school, and William will be there. I know he’s two years ahead, but that’s all to the good. He won’t let anyone bully me.”
“Well, then, we will hope a place can be found for you,” Abigail temporized. “Now don’t set your heart on going, Vic. A fine school like Westminster always has more applicants than places, and—”

“But Father went there, and with Sir Arthur and Mr. Baring both asking for a place for me, they’ll make one, I bet,” Victor said ebulliently.

“Make a place where?” Eustace asked as he came in.

“At Westminster. My father went to school there, and Sir Arthur has offered to get me a place.”

“Ask for one, I said,” Abigail reminded him.

Eustace looked startled but did not speak. Noting his expression and the fact that Daphne’s face was still clouded, Abigail suggested that Victor take his rod up to his room temporarily, if he could not bear to put it away with the other fishing gear, and that Daphne consult Mrs. Franklin about schools. She was likely, Abigail remarked, to know what schools the girls in the area attended and how well they liked them. Both children went off with alacrity. Abigail suspected that Victor intended to do more with his fishing rod than put it away and hoped he would not seriously damage the furniture or bric-a-brac in his apartment. However, she wanted to ask Eustace why he had looked so startled at the notion that Victor might go to Westminster and forbore to issue any warning that might make Victor reluctant to leave.

When the door had closed behind her children, she turned to Eustace. “Why did you look so surprised when Victor implied he wished to go to Westminster?”

“Did I?” Eustace said. “I’m so sorry. It’s none of my business, of course.”

“I don’t see why you should say that,” Hilda interposed harshly. “Victor is your nephew, and he is the earl. Do you want to see him ruined, as Francis was?”

“Mama!” Eustace protested. “Francis was Abigail’s husband.”

“Then she must know even better than we how Francis was ruined,” Hilda snapped.

A few minutes before, Abigail had based an opinion on her belief that Hilda was stupid. A remark such as she had just made rather shook that belief, but Abigail was too intent on whatever objections Hilda and Eustace had to Westminster to follow that path of thought.

“I don’t see what Francis’ faults had to do with Westminster,” she said.

“Where do you think he learned such habits?” Hilda asked. “He certainly did not learn them in his family.”

“I can hardly believe he learned to drink and gamble at school,” Abigail protested, a trifle indignant. “Surely the boys are watched and other men who have attended that school show no such propensities.”

Eustace had been listening to the exchange with a frown on his face. Once he had seemed about to speak, then had tightened his lips and said nothing. He listened to another offensive and ill-judged remark by his mother, saw Abigail’s chin come forward stubbornly, and put a hand on her arm.

“It isn’t any of my business,” he said. “You’re Victor’s mother, and you know him best. I can’t even speak from personal experience because I never went to school—and never regretted not going. But I think what Mama is trying to say is that because Francis was a sensitive person, the harshness of school life and the—the teasing and bullying drove him to seek outlets he might not have otherwise found attractive.”

“Francis never said anything about disliking school.” Abigail’s voice, however, was uncertain.

Eustace did not contest her statement, but he raised his eyebrows, and Abigail thought back. Actually she could not remember Francis saying much about school at all. Was that because he had disliked it? After all, in all the years
they had been married he had not once mentioned his stepmother and half brother and sister, and Mr. Deedes had implied Francis loathed them. On the other hand, Francis had not protested when she suggested sending Victor to school, and Francis had been truly fond of his son. In fact, he had actually bestirred himself to investigate the schools in the area to choose what he considered the best for Victor.

“Did Francis speak to you about Westminster?” Abigail asked.

“Good Lord, yes,” Eustace replied. “That was why I was pleased as punch when Mama wouldn’t let me go.” He laughed lightly. “Oh, I said I wanted to go a few times to please my father, but I was really glad to be tutored at home. Francis told me the most horrible stories, not only about being caned by the masters—and some of the brutes enjoy it—but about mistreatment by the other boys. Has Victor been to school?”

“Yes, and he liked it, as you no doubt guessed.”

“I imagine it was a much smaller school than ours here,” Eustace pointed out, “and that its existence is far more precarious. I would suppose that those circumstances made it necessary for the headmaster to be much more careful that his students did not carry complaints home to their parents.”

That remark was so reasonable that Abigail was shaken. She had some doubts about the “horror stories” Francis had told Eustace. Ordinarily Francis was the kindest person; however, if he had disliked his brother sufficiently, he might have been trying to frighten him. But there was also the chance that Francis had been ashamed to admit his misery to his father and had expressed it to Eustace because he did not care about Eustace’s opinion of him. Abigail listened with only half an ear to Hilda deplore the dreadful conditions at the schools and the hardships that she had been too tender to inflict on her son, but they did make an impression on her mind.

It was unfortunate that she had not heard about these things before she had mentioned Westminster to Victor. He would be violently disappointed if he were told he could not go. Not one of the drawbacks that had raised doubts in her would have the smallest effect on her son, and when Victor made up his mind about something, it was difficult and unpleasant to unmake it. Besides, countless British boys had survived their public schools without damage to their minds or persons. Her own gentle father had done so. And Arthur, who was a thoughtful, kind person, surely would not have suggested Westminster if it was so dreadful; after all, he had been there, too.

Abigail thanked Eustace—and Hilda—for their kind intentions toward her son, smiled at Griselda who, she was sorry to see, looked no less crushed and distraught than she had earlier, and excused herself on the grounds that Victor was probably hooking all the precious porcelain ornaments off the mantelpiece and she had better go and stop him. However, she did not go to her son’s room, she went into her own sitting room to think. Unfortunately, thinking did not help her decide. She could only mull over the same ideas. What she needed, she realized, was another opinion.

Truthfully, she did not trust Hilda or Eustace, not because she feared they had an ulterior motive in this case—Abigail could not believe that either had the slightest reason to care whether Victor went to school or stayed at home—but because she simply did not trust their judgment. She trusted Arthur’s judgment, but not on this subject. Not only was it he who had suggested Westminster, but it was apparent that Arthur was self-assertive, sharply intelligent and physically strong. That was a combination that would have protected him from the most adverse situations in school. Of course, these characteristics described Victor too, but Abigail was fearful because of what Francis had been. She did not want Victor tested too harshly.

Suddenly she recalled the slender and willowy form—and the effeminate manners—of Sir Arthur’s secretary, Bertram Lydden. If Bertram had attended public school and survived, Victor certainly could. It would be interesting to hear what he had to say about his ordeal. Even if Bertram had not been to school, he was a clever and observant person, and most of the men he knew had no doubt been educated in one or another public school. His advice would certainly be of more value than Hilda’s and probably than Eustace’s, too. Abigail relaxed as she thought she could walk over to Stonar Magna right after breakfast, when Bertram would most likely be attending to the post or other business, and talk to him.

The next morning, having eluded her son and blessing the spell of unusually dry weather, Abigail walked across the little wood to Stonar Magna. She was briefly startled by the sudden appearance of a man not far from the path, but
he pulled his forelock to her and identified himself as one of Sir Arthur’s men. Abigail smiled and said she was sorry to have made extra work for him and the other gamekeepers and was pleased by his ready reply that it was little trouble and that they had all been shocked by the accident and would be glad to lay hands on any man crazy enough to carry a fully loaded gun in the home woods.

The butler admitted her without hesitation or need for identification this time, although Abigail thought with amusement that behind his wooden expression there was both disapproval of her informal habit of walking to the house and considerable surprise at her request to speak to Mr. Lydden. Nonetheless, he did not, as she had almost expected, say he would inform Sir Arthur but showed her to the same room in which she had waited the preceding day, and not more than two minutes later Bertram rushed in wearing an expression of considerable alarm.

“I’m sorry I startled you,” Abigail exclaimed before he could ask what was wrong. “I only came to ask your advice.”

Although he was obviously greatly relieved, Bertram raised his brows and flitted the handkerchief he had withdrawn from his sleeve and pressed briefly to his face while she spoke. “My dear, dearest Lady Lydden, how could you think you had alarmed me? How can you so greatly underestimate your attractions? Do not all men respond to a summons from you in haste?”

Abigail smiled at him warmly. Although she had only spoken to him once before, and briefly, it was clear to her that Bertram prided himself on his sangfroid and was embarrassed by exposing his feelings. She was grateful to him for his real concern for Victor, even if he felt obliged to hide it behind silly extravagances. Besides, despite all the extravagant words and gestures, Abigail knew quite well that Bertram was not pursuing her, and oddly, not because he did not like women or think she was beautiful. His flirting was, of course, an innocent amusement. Abigail had recognized immediately his true reaction to her—the impersonal appreciation of a man committed body and soul to another woman—because she had seen it in many faithful husbands, like Albert Gallatin.

“You are a very poor conversationalist, Mr. Lydden,” she complained. “You always ask questions that are unanswerable. Do you propose that I say ‘Yes, men do always rush to answer my summons,’ and sound like a fool or say ‘No,’ and sound like a worse fool?”

Bertram chuckled. “I beg your pardon. I did the same thing yesterday, did I not? I had better descend from the higher plane to which you exalt me and become practical. How may I serve you, Lady Lydden?”

“Could we discuss it in a room less likely to be invaded by others?”

Bertram was clearly startled by the request, but he only nodded and led the way to a large, sunny room at the rear of the house, which testified by its shelves and cabinets holding boxes of papers and by a littered table and desk that it was the chamber in which he worked.

“It is not likely we will be disturbed here,” he said with a touch of reserve.

Abigail could not help laughing. “I did not mean that the way it sounded,” she said. “It was only that the subject on which I need advice was one that Sir Arthur proposed to me—no, no,” she exclaimed, laughing again at Bertram’s expression—or lack of expression, for his face had frozen, “the proposal was about Victor, not myself.”

“But I do not know your son,” Bertram protested.

“I realize that, but Victor seems to be a very ordinary boy. In any case, I just wish to ask in a general way whether you think it best for a boy to go to school or to be tutored at home.”

“As you can imagine, Lady Lydden—”

“Do call me Abigail,” she interrupted. “After all, you are a cousin by marriage, and I find I really do not like being Lady Lydden instead of Mistress Lydden.”

Bertram grinned. “Ah, the influence of our strayed Republican colonies. There were…ah…awed whispers around servants’ hall about a slight difference of opinion you had with Arthur.”
“Well, he has this stupid British attitude that if you shout loudly enough at people, you will convince them that you are right.”

“Dreadful habit,” Bertram agreed with downcast eyes and such alacrity that Abigail, who remembered her own voice had scarcely been kept to a whisper, burst out laughing. He looked up at her again, his eyes bright with appreciation. “You are not only a delightful woman, Cousin Abigail, but a most unusual one. I am proud to call you cousin and honored to be asked for advice, for I think you well able to make up your own mind.”

“Yes, usually I am. I had no doubt that Victor belonged in school in the United States, and he was very happy there. In fact, I foolishly mentioned that Sir Arthur had offered to try to obtain a place in Westminster for him, and now Victor is very eager to go.”

“Then I do not see that there can be any need for advice. I was about to say that, as you might guess, I was not happy at school. Nonetheless, I do not think the kind of cloistered life that results from private tutoring is good for a man. I learned a great deal more in school than Latin and Greek.”

“Yes,” Abigail said slowly, “that is what makes me a little doubtful.” And she told him about the discussion the preceding evening.

Bertram shook his head. “I cannot believe it. I was junior to Francis, of course, but he was still at Westminster during my first two or three years there. Francis was one of the stars of the school—good at every sport, a superior scholar, adored by his form and the idol of all the lower forms.” He paused, looking down at his hands, at the handkerchief he was weaving in and out of his long, graceful fingers. “Perhaps that is why I never liked Francis. Envy, just envy. It was most unfair. He was really very good to me—when he remembered, or I should say, when Arthur reminded him, that I was alive… But that is not to the point at all,” he added briskly. “To the best of my knowledge, Francis did not drink or gamble while he was at Westminster. Perhaps the propensity was there, but he would have been expelled had he been caught drunk. In any case, his habit did not develop because he was unhappy at school, I can assure you of that.”

“Did he tell Eustace those stories to tease him, then?” Abigail asked. “It seems most unlike Francis, but if he hated the boy—”

“I don’t think Francis ever bothered to hate. I would say his stepmother and her children hardly existed for him. They were just shadowy nuisances, like a bad servant.” Bertram sighed. “I have just admitted that I didn’t like Francis, but I must also admit that it is far more likely he told Eustace horror stories after his mother convinced Lord Lydden that the boy was too frail to undergo the rigors of a public education.”

“Oh, of course!” Abigail cried, greatly relieved. “He would have done so to permit Eustace to be glad of what he had earlier considered a deprivation.” She laid her hand on top of Bertram’s to still their uneasy motion. “I loved Francis when I married him. In a way, I suppose I still love him, but I haven’t liked him for many years.” She sighed also and then smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Lydden—”

“Mr. Lydden?” he interrupted. “Am I not to be Cousin Bertram?”

“I had to be asked,” Abigail said, laughing. “I would not wish you to think of me as a bold and forward—” She stopped speaking as the door opened and Arthur strode in scowling ferociously. “Oh, my,” she exclaimed, “I had better take myself off at once. I hope the catastrophe that engendered that expression has nothing to do with mine or me, but I don’t wish to find out.”

Chapter Nine

Abigail need not have taken so much care to elude her son. She had underestimated Victor. He had quickly come to the conclusion that it would not be possible for him to begin school before the beginning of the next term, and dismissed the subject to be taken up at a more suitable time. Victor’s mind was not on school but on his new fishing rod. Eustace had explained how to use the complicated mechanism and had demonstrated a few times, and Victor’s natural self-confidence had made him certain he could duplicate his half uncle’s expertise in no time. However, his attempts after he had left his mother the previous night had not been a great success. Victor felt he needed time and
privacy to work on mastery of that fishing rod.

Since Mrs. Franklin had been made aware of Sir Arthur’s invitation to fish, and her son-in-law, the gamekeeper Price, had assured her that no one carrying a gun would be allowed anywhere near either great house, she made no objection when, over breakfast, Victor said he would like to try his luck, and when he was finished went off to fetch his rod. Daphne followed her brother, and Victor was normally so accepting of her company that Mrs. Franklin gratefully turned her attention to practical matters, such as deciding which of the children’s clothes must go to the laundry maid.

But this time Victor did not want his sister’s company. Daphne could be adoringly admiring, but she could also laugh at him most heartily when he came a cropper. He had no desire for her to see him tangle his line and catch his hook on branches and reeds ten times in a row, so he grabbed his rod and ran down the stairs as quickly as he could. Daphne went to her room to fetch a shawl and bonnet. She was quick about it because she knew her brother would be impatient with any delay, but still she was barely in time to see him disappearing down the stairs. She ran after him, calling his name aloud until he stopped, reluctantly, between the doors to the morning room and the drawing room.

“You can’t come fishing with me,” he said. “Fishing is a man’s sport. You would only be in the way.”

“No, I won’t,” Daphne protested, but weakly. It was true that her father had never taken her with them when he and Victor went fishing or hunting, although he had been willing to have her along at other times.

“Yes you will, Daph,” Victor insisted. “You’ll want to talk all the time and you mustn’t. The fish can hear through the water, and talking frightens them. Father told me so.”

Daphne, who had been almost ready to give in, was filled with righteous indignation. “That’s not fair,” she complained. “You know I don’t talk when you tell me not.”

“It’s different for hide and seek,” Victor snapped irritably. “Then it’s only for five minutes. This time it might be hours.”

“Well, I still don’t have to talk,” Daphne said reasonably. “I could pick flowers and——”

“No! I said no, and that’s all!” Victor yelled. “Pick flowers! You silly thing, you don’t know anything about fishing. You’ll make a shadow on the water and frighten all the fish away. I’m going alone, I tell you.”

The door to the morning room opened. “Victor! Daphne!” Hilda scolded. “You are acting like little animals. Ladies and gentlemen do not quarrel in public and do not raise their voices in so crude and coarse a manner, even in private.”

“Sorry,” Victor mumbled, and made good his escape out the door before Daphne had a chance to speak.

Although Daphne realized from various exchanges she had overheard between her mother and Hilda that the two were not often in agreement, she knew quite well that Abigail did not approve of loud arguments, either. She, too, spoke an apology, but she was not quick enough in getting away. Hilda began a long lecture on proper behavior, modesty, and the unsuitability of Daphne spending so much time with her brother. The subject had little in it to hold Daphne’s attention, particularly since she did not like or respect Hilda.

She did not fear her step-grandmother either, knowing her mother would not relish Hilda’s interference. Besides, Daphne thought resentfully, Victor was the one who had yelled. The injustice of being scolded for her brother’s sin fixed Daphne’s mind on the other injustice Victor had done her. He had no right, she felt, to say she would be a bother, without really finding out whether she would be or not. She could be quiet, and she did not need to pick flowers where her shadow would fall on the water. As Daphne came to this conclusion, Hilda shook a finger in her face, which startled her and fixed her attention.

“You are a naughty girl, and your mother spoils you dreadfully and will ruin your life,” Hilda pronounced awfully. “A girl must be obedient to her brother. Remember, when he comes of age, he will be your guardian until you are married, and——”
“No he will not,” Daphne retorted. “Mother is my guardian. Mother says men have peculiar ideas about what will make women happy, so Victor will have no control over me, and if I choose to marry, arrangements will be made, Mother says, so that I will not be a victim of—of any bad habits my husband might develop.”

Daphne was not certain what she had said to make Hilda’s mouth drop open in shock. Perhaps she should not have admitted that she knew husbands could be less than perfect. Nonetheless, she was not so concerned that she failed to take advantage of having reduced Hilda, at least temporarily, to speechlessness. Hurriedly Daphne dropped a perfunctory curtsy and fled out the door by which Victor had escaped, since that was nearest. She ran as fast as she could toward the shelter of the wood, expecting every moment to hear Hilda’s strident voice calling her back—and, indeed, she did hear a faint voice crying her name just as she reached the trees, but she ran on until she could truly say she heard nothing.

It was not until she stopped to catch her breath that Daphne realized she had better stay out of the house at least until lunch. She was not at all sure Mrs. Franklin could protect her from more of Hilda’s lectures, and if she sought out her mother and Hilda recounted to her what Daphne had said about husbands, her mother would get that funny look that somehow hurt Daphne to see. Daphne was annoyed with herself. She should have said “man” instead of “husband” the way mother always did—she would not be a victim of any man’s bad habits. Oh well, it was useless to cry over spilled milk. Very likely Hilda would not say anything because she knew Mother would be annoyed, not sympathetic, if she and Victor were called spoiled. But she had better stay out of sight. Daphne looked around the wood and realized she had run right onto the path Sir Arthur had taken yesterday. That was not surprising. Victor had gone out the door that would take him most directly to that part of the wood, and naturally she had not tried to push through the brush but had taken the open path when she came to it. Daphne stood and looked down the inviting trail of grass. If she followed Victor, he would be very angry. Well, he would be angry if he knew, but what if she came so quietly and remained so quiet all the time that he did not know she was there. Then, when he had caught his fish, she could come out and prove that he had been unfair to her and that he should take her the next time he went fishing. Delighted with her plan, Daphne started down along the path, quite certain she knew the turns that would take her to the pool and the meadow where the kingcups and yellow iris grew.

Victor’s successful escape from Hilda and Daphne put him into a good humor, and he trotted along the path until, not far along it, he reached the first branch. He turned, and after a somewhat longer walk than he remembered—which worried him a little—he found the fork where the right-hand path led to the pool and the one on the left, Sir Arthur had said, led to another place farther upstream. Sometime in the future he might try the upstream spot, but for now Victor wanted a fairly open area in which to learn to cast.

At first Victor was rather tempted to cast from the clearest area. Then it occurred to him that when Daphne escaped from Hilda she might follow him. Victor wrinkled his nose in irritation. Daphne was a nuisance sometimes, but he had found a place yesterday where she would not see him even if she did follow.

There was an old, half-dead fir whose dense net of intertwined roots and heavy layer of needles had so choked the ground that nothing more than a little sparse grass grew near it. The hollow formed in the brush that lined the river was hidden by a slight curve of the bank, and so many of the lower branches had fallen from the tree that there was room enough to cast. Moreover, over the years, the bank of the river had been washed away so that several of the heavy roots protruded out over the water, making a platform on which one could balance quite easily to land a struggling fish.

Victor remembered that Sir Arthur had told him there were paths direct to those places, but he did not want to spend the time looking and he was roughly dressed so he just wormed his way along the bank to this haven. When he arrived, he paused and listened suspiciously, but there was no sound of Daphne calling him, nothing beyond the ordinary sounds of any wooded area. He hesitated once again in his preparations when a brief crackle in the brush behind him made him look around and sigh, expecting to see a tearstained and disheveled sister, but she did not appear and the sound was not repeated. With a sense of relief, Victor loosened what he thought was a suitable length of line and made his first cast.

No one would have called what he achieved the work of a master fisherman, but at least the hook reached the water without catching on anything behind him or over his head, which was more than Victor had expected from his experiences in his room the previous evening. He reeled in, feeling hopeful, and tried again. The second cast, unfortunately, was less successful, dropping into the water just beyond the roots of the tree and catching on
something underneath so that Victor had to lie down and feel around in the water to free his hook.

Not wishing to go through that struggle again, Victor made his third cast standing on the roots as near as he could get to the water. This was the most successful thus far, and he felt it was not an accident. There was a “right” feeling about the way the line had snapped forward over his head. Reeling in and loosening more line, Victor tried several times more and succeeded more often than he failed—and the last time he reeled in he noticed a pucker in the water not far from where his line had gone in.

A quiver of excitement, a slightly quickened beating of the heart—marks of the true game fisherman—passed through Victor. He knew the weather was not the best for fishing, but perhaps his repeated casting had made the fish think there were many insects on the water. With a somewhat trembling hand, Victor threaded his hook with bait, which he had not bothered with before, took his stance on the very edge of the roots, and concentrated his whole being on the feeling of casting “right” while his eyes fixed on the spot where he wanted the hook to go.

As he began his cast, he again heard the crackle in the brush and perhaps the sound of a stick snapping under a foot, but he did not turn his head or relax his concentration. He no longer minded if Daphne arrived, in fact, it would add to his pleasure if she were there when he hooked a fish. The line flew out, straight and true. The hook hit the water just where Victor had wanted it to go, and under the water Victor thought he saw a swirl of movement. He took a deep breath with excitement, just as a tremendous push catapulted him into the water.

Naturally enough, Victor’s first sensation was such rage that he nearly opened his mouth to scream. He felt a hand groping for his shoulder and tried to twist around onto his back and grab it, fully intending to pull Daphne in with him, for he assumed that it was she who had pushed him into the water out of spite. However, he discovered he could not twist around. There was a hand on his other shoulder too, and both hands—large hands that could not possibly be Daphne’s because she could not reach so far—were pressing him down into the water.

Daphne walked along the path, taking more care to be quiet than to arrive quickly. After all, there was no reason to arrive sooner than later. It would be rather dull, she knew, waiting for Victor to finish his silly fishing, and even when he did and she came out of hiding, she did not expect much welcome. Victor did not like to be proved wrong, which he would be if Daphne were so quiet she did not interfere with his fishing, and he would be annoyed. At that thought, Daphne nearly turned back. She hated it when her adored brother was angry with her. However, just then she came to the side path toward the pool and realized that Victor would never take her with him when he went fishing if she did not now show him she could be quiet.

Determined not to be left behind again, Daphne turned into the path, but she was filled with doubts and she had gone a way along before she realized that this path seemed different from the path she had taken yesterday. It was narrower and the angle at which it met the main path was sharper. Daphne hesitated, and then went forward again. The path was perfectly clear. She could not get lost. If she did not find the fork that led to the pool, she could just go back the way she came. She walked on, her eyes scanning ahead for the familiar fork so that she did not notice two other paths joining, the one she trod, one right, one left, some ten feet apart. There! The sense of triumph Daphne felt nearly made her say the word aloud when she saw the fork, and she automatically took the left-hand path and went along it. Then a branch caught at her gown, and when she edged away toward the other side, a thorny bush scratched her cheek. Daphne stopped. This was wrong, she was certain now. She had walked side by side with her mother along the path to the pool, and no branches had touched her. This path was much too narrow.

Annoyed with herself for mistaking the way, Daphne stood still, frowning. It did not seem possible to have made a wrong turn. Then Daphne remembered that she had been running hard when she entered the main path. With a small tremor of fear she realized that she must have run past the right path. She turned hastily, her nervousness increasing as she was scratched again, feeling as if the bushes were closing in on her. She reminded herself that she could not get lost, but through the mist of tears that was forming in her eyes, the path did not look as clear as it had before.

Biting back a whimper, Daphne began to retrace her steps, walking quickly at first, and then, as she was whipped by a low branch that protruded into the path here and there, she became even more frightened and began to trot. She was moving so fast by the time she reached the fork that she almost ran into the brush on the other side of the path, which added to her shock, and she was really running when she caught her balance and started off again.

This path was wider, and the feeling that it must be well traveled calmed Daphne a little so that she slowed to catch
her breath—just in time to see a fork. There shouldn’t be a fork. She hadn’t seen any fork on the way down the path. Which way should she go? Had she taken a wrong path at the fork where she had turned back? She chose the wider of the two trails and ran forward again, only to find still another fork. Wrong! It must be the wrong way, the wrong path. Sobbing, Daphne turned around and ran back to the fork, but there was no other path.

Utterly terrified now, she screamed for Victor, drew breath to scream again, and heard a loud splash. She shouted several times more before the meaning of the noise she had heard penetrated her fear. A splash meant water. Water meant the river. The river meant the meadow. Still sobbing and calling for Victor, Daphne reentered the narrow left-hand fork she had abandoned earlier and began to run, holding up her hands to protect her face and crashing into and through the brush that occasionally blocked her way. She was making a great deal of noise, but she did not care about that. She did not care about anything except finding Victor so that she would no longer be lost.

It seemed very far to her, but eventually she burst out into a small open area beside the water. For a moment her terror increased again because this was not the place she had expected and for all she knew she might not even be near the same river, but then she heard someone coughing and wheezing not too far off to her left. Daphne stopped and drew a long breath of relief. Whoever it was would either take her home or tell her the way. Daphne tried to straighten her dress and bonnet, which were a little the worse for her experience, and began to edge her way past the brush toward the sounds.

The first thing she saw upriver was the pool. She had come out about a hundred feet downriver of the widened area she had been seeking. The next thing she saw was Victor, flailing about with his arms to push himself closer to the shore. He disappeared on the other side of some protruding brush, but Daphne was no longer afraid. She knew where she was now and even knew what she had done wrong. In addition, she felt very pleased with herself for finding her own way to the river and confident because even the strange paths she had wandered had led to a safe, familiar place.

She felt like laughing aloud when she remembered Victor sloshing around in the water, but did not dare. If he heard her, he would never forgive her. Daphne knew the latitude allowed sisters, and laughing at a time like this was well beyond the line. Still, she hurried as fast as she could toward the place she had seen Victor disappear, ignoring the new tears the bushes were making in her delicate dress and the fact that her bonnet was again all awry. She rounded the sheltering brush to see her brother still in the river, clinging to the protruding roots of the old fir and breathing in gasps, his face paper white and his eyes huge as he stared apprehensively in her direction.

“Victor,” she cried, “can’t you get out?”

“Daph!”

Her name was hardly more than a whisper, and his eyes half closed in the faintness of relief. Daphne cried out and struggled frantically through the bushes, fearing he would slip into the water again.


He looked as if he would be, but as she reached the open area and threw herself down on the roots to grasp at him, he shook his head. “Get out of the way, Daph. I can climb up myself.” He managed that, but it was just as well that Daphne was close by, for he teetered on the edge and might have slipped had she not grabbed his arm and steadied him.

“Did you push me in, Daph?” he asked, sitting down suddenly when she had pulled him to the safety of solid ground.

“No!” she cried, uttering a frightened sob and sinking down beside her brother. “No, I wouldn’t. Never. And you saw me coming. I was lost. I took the wrong path and came out all the way down there.”

She pointed, but her brother did not turn to look. He shook his head and hugged himself, trying to stop his body from shaking. “Someone pushed me in,” he said, his eyes too large, “and held me down. Daph, someone tried to drown me.”

“Who?” Daphne whispered, clutching at her brother’s arm and looking apprehensively around the tiny open area.
“Who would try to drown you, Vic? That’s…that’s crazy.”

“I know,” he admitted, his voice shaking. “Of course it’s crazy, and I have no idea who it was. I thought I saw a fish rising, and I made a cast and—and someone gave me an almighty push on the back. I thought it was you, Daph. I thought you were angry because I wouldn’t take you, and so you pushed me for spite—”

“No!” Daphne cried again. “No, Vic—”

“I know it wasn’t you,” Victor said, shivering hard in spite of his arms wrapped tightly around himself. “I know it wasn’t you, because the person held me down. No matter how mad you were, Daph, you wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh Vic, I’m afraid,” Daphne whimpered. “I want to go home. I don’t want to stay here.”

“Nor me,” Victor agreed, but he was shivering so hard he had some difficulty getting to his feet and staggered against his sister, who cried out as the wet from his clothing seeped into hers.

“You’re so wet, Vic. That’s why you’re shivering,” she assured him, trying to convince herself that her fearless and nearly all-powerful brother was not shaking with fear. “Take off that soaked coat and put my shawl around you. You’ll feel warmer, and you can take it off before we get to the house.”

Oddly, Daphne’s assurance that he was not afraid did much to steady Victor’s nerves. The horror of the few minutes when he tried to kick and struggle against the pressure holding him underwater, only to feel his feet catch so that he could not raise them either, was fading. He remembered too, that when he had pushed hard against what had caught his feet, the grip on him had loosened so that he had moved forward into deeper water, and his head had come up into the air. He laughed shakily.

“A fine cake I’d look wearing your shawl. But I will take off my coat. You’re right. It’s cold. My shirt will dry as soon as we get out into the sun.” His voice had sounded steadier, and that made him feel better, as did the realization that his knees no longer felt like jelly. He let go of Daphne and pulled off the sodden coat. “Let’s get out of here,” he said.

Chapter Ten

“What the devil do you mean by that?” Arthur growled ferociously.

Abigail stiffened slightly at the tone, but she spoke in a dulcetly reasonable voice. “When a gentleman enters his secretary’s office wearing an expression that would give second thoughts to Caligula, one must assume that the gentleman is displeased about something. I only—”

“Second thoughts to Caligula!” Arthur roared. “Are you trying to insult me, or are you merely ignorant?”

“Arthur—” Bertram began, but Abigail waved a hand at him imperiously, and her voice cut across his.

“Actually, I thought I was flattering you. A scowl that could make Caligula think twice must be a powerful weapon.”

Both men now stared at her, Bertram pressing his handkerchief to his lips and Arthur with astonishment replacing the rage on his face.

“Good heavens,” Abigail continued, her voice now softer but coolly contemptuous. “I have been worried about whether Victor’s preparation was adequate for a good English school, but now I am beginning to wonder whether I should send him back to America for a decent education. If my allusion was above your heads—”

“You are a bluestocking!” Arthur exclaimed in an accusatory tone.

Ostentatiously Abigail lifted her skirt three or four inches, showing very pretty ankles clothed in thin white silk, and looked down at them. “I did not think I had picked a color so unsuitable to my gown.”
Bertram gasped, struggling against laughter, cleared his throat and said, “No, I am afraid you are not acquainted with our…er…patois. ‘Bluestocking’ is the name given to a…ah…scholarly female.”

“From your tone, I suppose you mean a learned goose,” Abigail remarked sharply. “Perhaps I do qualify. My father was a don until he married, and he enjoyed teaching. I enjoyed learning. I am sorry you feel that to be a male prerogative.”

“You had better get a pitcher of cold water, Bertram,” Arthur said. His face was perfectly sober, but the crinkles at the corners of his eyes were a telltale sign of internal laughter. “She has burst into flame again and may need quenching.”

“Arthur! You are being deliberately offensive,” Bertram protested. “I swear you have the manners of a stoat.”

“But she told me herself she had a flammable disposition,” Arthur pointed out with injured innocence. “You would not wish our guest to be utterly consumed by the flames of her temper. I was not suggesting you douse her at once, you know, only that we be prepared.”

But Abigail had not risen to this bait. She stood smiling gently, her eyes fixed on Arthur but clearly not seeing him as her mind was filled by some enchanting inner vision. “Stoat,” she murmured, “how marvelously apt. A most beautiful animal, as vicious as it is lovely, and given to screaming at the top of its lungs for no reason at all. There are other characteristics, too—”

“Abigail!” Arthur thundered.

She looked at him, innocently inquiring. “Oh, are you just complying with the metaphor, or is there a reason for your shrieking?”

There was a brief silence. Then, as if none of the foregoing conversation had taken place, Arthur said, “I hope Bertram was able to satisfy whatever need made you call on him.”

Abigail did not reply at once because a most delightful idea had crept into her mind. Had that scowl with which Arthur had entered the room been there because she had asked to see Bertram rather than himself? And if so, could it be because Arthur was jealous? An extra touch of color rose into Abigail’s face, accompanying a pleasant but dangerous warmth she recognized in her body. She had not felt it since Francis' death, and rarely even with Francis since he had destroyed her trust in him. She saw Arthur’s lips tighten and spoke hurriedly.

“Yes, thank you. Our business was finished, and I really must not intrude any longer. I am sorry to have annoyed you by trying to insert a note of levity when I saw you come in so angry. It was just that my conscience is rather sore because with one thing and another, like that accident in the woods, my children and I seem to be taking up a great deal of your time and causing you a good deal of trouble—”

“Why are you babbling?” Arthur asked quietly. “I may have the manners of a stoat, but I can assure you that I will not try to intrude on any private business you have with Bertram.”

Abigail sighed. “My business with Bertram was not at all private. He can tell you…” She paused to look around for confirmation, and both she and Arthur were surprised to find that Bertram had slipped silently out of the room while they were quarreling.

“I’m afraid Bertram is not a very gallant defender,” Arthur said. “He seems to have absconded, leaving you to hold the bag.”

“Hold the bag?” Abigail echoed.

“Sorry, that must be another British idiom with which you are not familiar. The bag, in our terms, would be the one into which the conies and pheasants ‘just jumped’—in other words, a poacher’s illegal take.”

“Oh, you must mean that he left me to face whatever punishment would be meted out alone.” Abigail smiled. “I suspect during our conversation I gave Bertram plenty of reason to believe I could defend myself without help from
him, but actually I’m glad he is gone. It makes it easier to explain why I wanted his advice. You will be annoyed with me again, and with a certain amount of justice, for I have been allowing Hilda and Eustace to throw me off balance. I should have known better, but they couldn’t have had any ulterior motive, so when they both spoke so strongly against sending Victor to school and even tied public education to Francis’—”

“I believe I knew Francis better than any of them,” Arthur remarked coldly. “Why didn’t you come to me for advice? Why Bertram?”

“Well, that should be obvious,” Abigail replied tartly. “You only have to look at Bertram to know that he would be the butt of every bully and nasty mouth in any school. If he had gone to school and survived, I didn’t have to worry about Victor.”

Arthur took a step closer and smiled down at her with shining eyes. Although there had been no contempt in Abigail’s voice when she spoke of Bertram—indeed, there had been a friendly warmth—no woman spoke in those terms of a man to whom she was physically attracted. He had been a fool. Bertram was no rival. He had been stupid to be so furious when he heard she had come and asked for Bertram, but helplessness did breed fury in Arthur, and he had known that he could not and would not try to take Abigail away from Bertram, no matter how much he wanted her for himself.

The general warmth that had touched Abigail earlier flooded her again as Arthur moved close, and his expression generated even more dangerous signals in her—an increasing sensitivity in her breasts and a sense of moisture between her thighs. She knew she should move back away from him before he touched her, but she did not want to. Desperately she found her voice.

“And I want you to know, because a woman does not like to look a fool any more than a man does, that I was not taken in a bit by that ‘noble’ statement about not intruding into my private business with Bertram. Honestly, if I ever heard a more sinuous, sneaky—”

“Just like a stoat,” he murmured, and bent and kissed her.

He had not embraced her, only put his mouth to hers in such a way that he offered a sensual invitation Abigail knew she could accept or reject. She almost pulled away as the thought flashed through her mind that he had no right to put on her the onus of agreeing to an intimate relationship on so short an acquaintance. Almost simultaneously, however, she found another interpretation of the gesture, that she was too strong and intelligent a woman to need or desire any implication of being forced. And by the time it was possible to compare the two ideas, it was far too late to do so. Having given her a moment to recoil and found that instead she allowed their lips to cling together, Arthur’s arms had come up to hold her, and the tentative kiss had become far more demanding.

For a little while longer Abigail permitted the caress to continue, enjoying the sensations of her own body and those she guessed Arthur was feeling. She remembered vaguely that she had not intended to yield to him so easily, but she could not remember being so strongly drawn to any man—not even to Francis, she admitted to herself. Still, she was not out of control and knew this was not the time or the place for what they were doing. Somewhat reluctantly she placed one hand against his chest and withdrew her head. At the same time, she raised the other hand and ran the forefinger around the edge of Arthur’s ear and down his neck. He sighed and allowed her to break the kiss, but he did not let her go.

“I suppose I should say I am sorry for taking advantage of you in my home—”

Abigail giggled. “Are you implying that I yielded to you in abject terror because I knew that no matter how I fought and screamed, you would have your dastardly way with me? No doubt your servants are all so corrupt that they would ignore my pleas for succor.”

“Idiot!” Arthur exclaimed tenderly, chuckling. “I doubt you would wait for succor if you wanted it. Most likely you would have stamped on my toes and crippled me for life. No, but I should have waited and approached the subject more diplomatically.”

“Is there a diplomatic way to seduce a woman?” Abigail asked with interest.
Arthur promptly tightened his grip so quickly and so forcefully that Abigail let out a startled squeak as the air was ejected from her lungs. “I will get to the subject of seduction in my own good time,” he told her severely, while she gasped for breath, “but I will give you a piece of tactical advice right now. It is unwise to give free rein to your clever tongue during captivity.”

Abigail laughed, stretched her neck and kissed him on the nose. “There, I have paid my ransom.”

“Must I let you go?” he asked. “Without even a demand for a higher ransom?”

“That is blackmail, not diplomacy,” Abigail complained, but she paid another ransom—a somewhat larger fee—without struggling. In fact, she did not move away at once but, when their lips parted, dropped her head to rest against his shoulder.

“Dearest,” he murmured anxiously, touching her hair with his lips, “have I hurt you somehow?”

“No.” She sighed, pulling away but smiling up at him as she freed herself. “Only that it felt so strange and so pleasant to be in a man’s arms again.”

“Come back, then,” he begged, reaching for her.

Abigail shook her head. “A very tempting idea but neither a safe nor a sensible one. We have been very fortunate that Bertram has not returned, nor anyone come looking for him, but I do not think we should press our luck further. I think, perhaps, I should go home.”

“And send me a note saying you are very sorry for the misunderstanding, but—”

She started to laugh, and then realized that he had not said it to be amusing. There was a note of mixed anger and anxiety in his voice, and she took his hand. “Why should you say that, Arthur? You must know that I am not a silly chit out of the schoolroom nor a fashionable flirt. I am a full-grown woman and I know my own mind.”

He could not tell her that a “note of withdrawal” seemed to be the standard second move—almost like a chess gambit—for ladies about to embark on a little affair. For one thing, a gentleman did not speak of his conquests, particularly to another woman. For another, Arthur could not understand why a reaction that ordinarily amused him had angered and distressed him when he thought he perceived it in Abigail. Unable to reply, he only lifted the hand she was holding and turned it so that he could kiss hers. She cocked her head at him and then shook it, suddenly understanding that his reaction must have come out of his wide experience with other women.

“No,” she said, “I am not turning coy for fear you will think ill of me. If you are fool enough to believe me a promiscuous woman—”

“For God’s sake, Abigail,” he protested, “don’t begin that.”

She laughed. “No, I promise I will not. I only just realized that you thought I was about to play coy because I yielded too easily to begin with. What I wanted to say was that no amount of protest could change your mind if you thought—”

“No!” he exploded. “I don’t! In fact, no one except a veritable innocent babe could act as silly as you or tread with such heavy-footed inelegance on every single attempt I have made to inject a little romance into—”

“I’m sorry,” Abigail said, feeling stricken. She knew she was businesslike and practical to a fault. Francis had blamed her for it often, but she had no idea she had been sounding that way to Arthur.

“Oh God, now I’ve hurt you,” Arthur murmured, pulling her back into his arms roughly. “I was joking, darling. You are a total refreshment to my spirit. I adore you. I have adored you since the moment you said you were not pleased to meet me.”

“Oh, no, you didn’t. You were quite furious.”
“Not nearly as furious as I was when I thought you preferred Bertram to me,” he admitted, laughing.

“Then you are as silly as you say I am,” Abigail said. “Who could prefer Bertram to you? No, seriously, Arthur, I
even realize that I am probably making a grave mistake in beginning this kind of relationship with a man who
clearly has had as much experience as you do, but I find you quite irresistible.”

She had rendered him speechless for a moment once more, and before he could find words, she shook her head
again. “I know that sounded as if I were trying to drag you into a profession of eternal love or even a proposal of
marriage, but neither is true. I want you to know that I truly understand this is not—”

He shut her mouth with a kiss, hard and passionate but quite brief, then lifted his head. “Abigail, be quiet! It is quite
clear that no one has ever made love to you. What the devil did Francis talk about when you were courting? No,
don’t tell me, you idiot. Has no one ever told you how exquisitely beautiful you are? That your lips are sweet as—”

He hesitated, trying to find a simile that was not trite.

“Ambrosia?” she offered in a tiny voice, rather choked with suppressed laughter.

Arthur raised his hands, which had been embracing her waist and hips, and put them around her throat, by which he
dragged her a few steps to a sofa, littered, like the rest of the room, with papers. Releasing his grip on Abigail’s neck
with one hand, he swept the papers to the floor and plumped himself and his prisoner, who was laughing so hard she
could barely stand anyway, down on the sofa together. A cloud of dust rose, making both of them sneeze so hard
that he lost his grip on her completely. Abigail flung her arms around Arthur’s neck and clung to him, whooping
with laughter.

Both quieted after a while, and Arthur kissed her hair and her face gently. “I have never met a woman like you,” he
murmured. “Never.”

Words that had not once entered his mind in any of his amorous adventures—love, forever, until death do us part—
rose to his lips. He managed to suppress them, but just barely. He had lied to other women, it was part of the game,
but even so, he had never done it willingly, only when they forced him by ridiculous demands they knew quite well
he could not and would not fulfill. But he would not lie to Abigail, not even if the truth cost him her…he sought for
a word, and it was love. That was very strange. He could not remember associating love with any of the other
women—desire, excitement, triumph as at the capture of a prize, satisfaction, sometimes even comfort—but not
love. Ridiculous, he thought, I am not even sure what the word means.

Abigail had spoken the exact truth when she said she knew it was not wise to enter a relationship with a man of such
wide experience with women. The chances were strong that at Arthur’s age he had formed the habit of inconstancy
and that no woman could hold his attention for long. She must not allow herself to become too attached to him,
Abigail told herself. She must remember that she could not either require or expect faithfulness from such a man.
Although he would not hurt her if he could avoid doing so, neither would he change the habits of a lifetime over one
more affair.

On the other hand, she had also spoken the truth when she said she found him irresistible. Why that was true, she
was not sure. Heaven knew, she had not lacked for male attention at any time of her life. She had been assiduously
courted before marriage, constantly invited to extramarital adventures while Francis was alive, and almost besieged
with offers after his death. Arthur’s comment that no one had ever made love to her had been as far from the truth as
one could get. Too many men had extolled the beauty of her eyes, her hair, her face, her hands—in fact of every
aspect of her person decency allowed them to mention. Suddenly it occurred to her that it might have been Francis’
selfishness that made her fall in love with him. He had showed by his attention and desire that he thought her
beautiful, but he had never talked about her at all. He had talked about himself.

Abigail smiled and responded with small crooning sounds of pleasure as Arthur’s lips moved from her cheek briefly
to her lips and then down to her throat. It was certainly no similarity to Francis that had attracted her to Arthur. He
was not at all handsome, and the aura he exuded—if one took away the elegance—was of authority, integrity and
rock-solid reliability. Not very romantic characteristics, Abigail thought, but lovable ones. Actually, Arthur was
almost exactly the opposite of Francis in every way, except, perhaps, in not trying to tell her she was beautiful as
soon as he got her alone. But even that was different, really, for Arthur did not talk about himself. He was far more
interested in others. Even in this gentle, skilled preparation for love... Abigail shuddered. Somehow Arthur had
loosened the tie of her gown and was exploring the top of her breasts with his warm mouth.

“Don’t, Arthur,” she said softly, bending her head to kiss his ear and take the sting from her denial. “You are making
me very—willing, but there is no place to go. I could not—not here, with the expectation of being intruded upon
every moment.”

He paused, letting his mouth rest where it was for a moment longer, and then lifted his head. “Sorry,” he muttered,
and then cleared his throat and took a deep breath. Abigail was almost as stirred sexually by his glazed look of
desire as by what he had been doing, but still she was grateful that his self-control was strong enough to preclude his
urging her to couple with him then and there. Had he pressed her, she feared she would have yielded. It would have
been wrong, perhaps fatal to any further relationship, an ugly experience, groping and grasping in a half-clothed
huddle with most of their attention really on listening for an intruder rather than on each other.

“You are quite right, my darling,” Arthur said, lifting her face so he could look at her. “But I hope you are not going
to say there can never be a time or place for us.”

Abigail sighed. “I do not wish to say it, but, Arthur, to make an assignation for that sole purpose...” Her voice
faltered, and she steadied it, but it was very low when she continued. “Somehow, that is ugly to me. It is not that I
am unwilling...”

She had lowered her eyes so that she would not have to look at him, even though he held her chin, but now she
raised them. To her surprise, she saw he was smiling slightly, his expression very tender.

“You are more romantic than you believe, my love,” he said softly. “Did you think I would say ‘I will come
tomorrow at three of the clock’ as if your body was for sale? I am not a boy to snatch at green apples. I know they
are sweeter when they are ripe and fall into my hand by happy happenstance.”

“Yes, let’s get out of here—into the sun to dry you off,” Daphne said, echoing her brother’s words and starting
toward the edge of the river to work her way through the brush back to the meadow.

Victor hesitated, looking at the water, but there was nothing in the calm, peaceful ripples sparkling in the sunlight to
recall the terror he had felt. He picked up his sodden jacket and followed a few steps, then stopped and called
“Wait,” just as Daphne was about to disappear behind a bush. “I have to find my rod,” he explained.

It took an effort of will to step out on the roots, but with Daphne watching, Victor was ashamed to seem afraid. And
no one could sneak up on him again, he told himself; his sister was facing out into the little clearing and would see if
anyone came. He went down on his knees and looked into the water. He saw the rod almost immediately, but it was
not easy to reach. After a moment’s struggle Victor realized that he was already soaked to the skin. He could not get
any wetter by getting into the water to retrieve the rod. Without even thinking about it, he slipped off the roots.
Daphne cried out and he called back, “It’s all right, Daph, I didn’t fall in. I can’t reach the rod from the roots.”

But Victor still could not reach the rod from where he stood. Muttering curses that neither his sister nor mother
realized he knew, he ducked under the water. To his relief, his hand fell on the reel at once, and he started to rise,
only to feel again a pressure on his back—but this time a single terrified jerk freed him, although his shirt was torn
and his cheek harshly grazed by an underwater root as his head came up.

Somewhat shaken, Victor swore silently that in the future he would fish from parts of the bank where no roots
protruded. As he came out of the water and sloshed up on the bank near his sister, he demanded her shawl to dry his
fishing rod. This sparked an argument, which Victor finally won by pointing out that the shawl was already stained
and torn in several places and that using it to dry the rod could do it little harm—and, he said temptingly, she could
then blame the total condition of the shawl on him.

By then they had reached the meadow. Daphne surrendered her shawl, and Victor sat down in the grass to attend to
his dripping fishing rod, but he did not remain there long. The weather was changing, the sun had disappeared
behind heavy clouds, and a sharp breeze had sprung up. Victor shivered, and Daphne did too, rubbing her arms and
complaining that she was cold. Victor got to his feet and handed back the shawl. It was one thing to be scolded
mildly for adding to the dirt and possibly the rents in the shawl, it would be another thing entirely if Daphne were to fall ill. That would make his mother really angry. “It isn’t any warmer here,” he said. “We had better—”

“Victor! Daphne! Whatever has happened to you?” Both children started and stared down the meadow at a man dressed in a manner they had never seen before in their lives, and both gasped with terror.

Chapter Eleven

“Fa-father?” Victor croaked.

“No! Don’t be frightened. I am not a ghost,” the man exclaimed, hurrying toward them. “I am Bertram Lydden, your papa’s cousin. Dear me, I had no idea I had grown to look so very much like Francis.”

As he came nearer and out of the shadow of the trees, the resemblance faded, leaving just enough familiarity of feature and voice to give the children a feeling of comfort and confidence. They ran forward, both speaking at once of their adventures, so that Bertram could make little sense of what they said, but one thing was clear—Victor was soaking wet and shaking with cold. Bertram pulled off his coat and told Victor to put it on.

“It will get all wet, sir,” Victor pointed out. “I’ve been in the river. Some lunatic pushed me in!”

He might not have protested, for he was very cold, but the coat was of a delicate pale blue with large pearl buttons, far more elegant than any garment Victor had seen his father or grandfather wear.

“Pushed you in!” Bertram exclaimed. “No, never mind about that for a minute. Put the coat on. I know it will get wet. It is more important that you don’t take a chill. Now, come with me, quickly.”

He hurried them along the path, and they went willingly, for it was apparent that the clouds were thickening and that it might begin to rain at any moment. Both exclaimed, however, when he turned left rather than right as they reached the main path.

“We are going to Stonar,” Bertram said. “It’s much closer. Hurry now, before it starts to rain. As soon as I have you warm and dry, I will send you home by carriage.”

“But Mother will be worried if we don’t get in in time for luncheon,” Daphne protested.

“I think your mother is at Stonar, talking to Sir Arthur,” Bertram said, “but if she has gone home, we will send a footman over with a note saying you are safe.”

No one spoke again until they were approaching one of the back entrances to the manor house and Bertram said, “I think it might be best to take you both to my room and set you to rights before I inform your mother. She might be a little upset if she saw you both looking like something left out overnight.”

“Oh, thank you, sir,” Daphne said, “but I don’t think I can mend my gown or shawl—”

“No.” Bertram laughed. “But we can brush the burrs and twigs out of your clothes and hair—and set your bonnet to rights. And I am sure Victor should get warm before he begins any explanations. It is very hard to be convincing when one’s teeth are chattering. And while you are cleaning up and getting dry, you can tell me all about what happened to you. I haven’t really understood.”

Neither Victor nor Daphne voiced any objection to this plan. Both had wanted to recount their thrilling experiences to their mother, but on second thought decided that Mr. Lydden, who was so kind and sympathetic, might be a safer audience. Daphne realized that her mother might not be entirely pleased that she had gone off by herself to follow Victor when he had said he did not want her. It was more likely that when she described her fear of being lost she would be told she got what she deserved, and that she would be set to mending her gown as punishment instead of being praised for finding her way. Victor also had his doubts. True, he had done nothing wrong. He had been given permission to fish, but still, a second coat had been ruined, and if the wetting had hurt his fishing rod…

“Do you think my rod is damaged?” he asked anxiously as they were shepherded up the back stairs to the floor
where Bertram’s suite was. “Uncle Eustace only gave it to me yesterday.”

“Eustace?” Bertram repeated. “Eustace gave you the fishing rod?”

Mr. Lydden’s voice sounded so different that Victor hesitated on the stair and started to turn and look at him, but Bertram urged him on up, and Victor thought he had better explain. “Yes, you see Mother had told him about Sir Arthur giving me permission to fish near the pool, and he said he had this old rod. It didn’t look old to me, but he said he hadn’t used it in years and I could have it for my own. It is mine. I didn’t take it without permission.”

“It’s true, Mr. Lydden,” Daphne put in. “Uncle Eustace did give Victor the rod.”

“I believe you,” Bertram said, his voice still oddly preoccupied. “I never doubted that you were telling the truth, Victor.”

“Then you think I’ve spoiled it?” Victor asked, his voice shaking a little.

Bertram laughed. “No, of course not. Don’t worry about the fishing rod. Fishing rods are made to get wet, you know. I will look at it, though, and make sure it has come to no harm.” As he opened a door and urged them through into a small, private sitting room, he added, “Sorry if it seemed I wasn’t paying attention. I just thought of something I had forgotten to do, but it can wait until later. Now, you wait here just a minute, Daphne, while I get something for your brother to wear and find a brush for your clothes.”

Daphne was a little surprised when Mr. Lydden really did come back in just about a minute from the inner room to which he had taken Victor, and she was very gratified both by his kindness in gently brushing her clean and by the close attention he gave to the tale of her adventures. He wanted to know every little detail, right from the beginning, and although he tsked gently and said smilingly that she should not have followed her brother, he admitted that it was mostly Hilda’s fault for lecturing her. And he asked very kindly if she had been much frightened at seeing her brother pushed into the river.

“I didn’t see it. I was still in the woods when I heard the splash. By the time I got to the river, Vic was sloshing around toward the bank. First I thought he fell in, but he looked terrible, so then I thought maybe he had got sick.” The door to the inner room opened just then and Victor came out, wrapped in a sumptuous dressing gown that was considerably too large for him. Daphne giggled, and Victor, after an initial scowl, laughed too.

“You look very grand,” Bertram said. “I hope you are warm now. Daphne has been telling me that she wasn’t with you when you went into the river. Are you sure you were pushed, Victor?”

“I didn’t jump into the water for fun,” Victor answered angrily. “I heard this crackling in the bushes, but I thought it was Daphne, so I didn’t pay any attention, and then someone hit me on the back, hard.”

“Did you see anyone?” Bertram asked.

Victor shook his head. He wished Mr. Lydden would stop asking questions. Remembering what had happened made him feel cold and shivery again.

“I see. Where were you when this happened?”

“Upriver of the pool, under that old fir tree.”

“Good Lord, didn’t Arthur warn you the branches of that tree are forever coming down? Usually they don’t do any harm, but I was once hit on the head and nearly stunned.” Bertram hesitated and then went on slowly, as if the first few sentences he had spoken had nothing to do with what he was now saying. “I hate to tell your mother about you having been pushed into the river. She was very worried by that stupid shooting accident.”

“But that had nothing to do with me!” Victor exclaimed in surprise. “That was only an accident.”

“I know it had nothing to do with you,” Bertram agreed, “but it happened in the woods—and now this.” He fell
silent, watching the realization come into Victor’s face that this second almost-fatal adventure might cost him his freedom.

Victor was, indeed, as worried as Bertram hoped he would be. He had been afraid his mother might forbid his playing in the woods after the shooting. If he told her that he had been deliberately pushed into the river, she would certainly put the woods, the river, and probably everything but the front lawn out of bounds. Victor’s unpleasant train of thought was broken by Mr. Lydden’s voice.

“Hmmm. Is there any chance you could have been knocked into the water by a falling branch? You know, the noise in the brush might have been caused by a gust of wind, and that could easily have brought down one of the big dead branches. If you were right at the edge of the roots and bent forward a bit to watch your cast hit—”

“But he was held down in the water,” Daphne said.

Her voice wavered between question and statement. When she had seen Victor, white-faced with terror, she had had no doubts about the tale he told her. Now, safe in Mr. Lydden’s sitting room and supported by his comforting adult presence, she began to wonder whether Victor had really been pushed. It seemed so unlikely. Could he have embroidered a slip caused by a blow from a tree branch into an attempt to drown him to prevent her from laughing at him?

Victor turned his head to look at her, his face puzzled. “I was held down,” he said. “But you might be right even so, sir;” he went on slowly, then described how he had been caught under a root for a moment when he went under the water to pick up his rod. “If I had gone deeper under the roots, it might have felt like hands holding me down. I-I was a little frightened.”

“If you were only a little frightened, Victor, you are a great deal braver than I,” Bertram said, smiling. “I probably would have drowned from being too afraid to worm my way out.”

Daphne thought Mr. Lydden’s eyes looked strange in spite of the smile, and then she looked away because she suspected they were full of tears. Men did not cry, but Mr. Lydden was different from most men. He looked a lot like Father, but he was even kinder and more gentle. His voice was softer and his hands so delicate and quick as he listened to her and picked burrs from her dress and straightened the tangles in her hair—which her father would never have bothered to do.

Victor smiled back at Bertram. Mr. Lydden’s praise had eased a faint feeling that he had been very foolish in jumping to the conclusion that someone had actually tried to drown him. The more he thought about being hit by a branch and caught under the roots of the tree, the warmer and safer Victor felt. He had been frightened when he was in the water, of course, but he had been mostly occupied with his struggle to get free. It was after he had come up into the air and put together the hands holding him down and the fact that it could not have been Daphne teasing him that he had become really terror stricken. The idea that someone had deliberately tried to drown him was so unendurable that after he had stated it to Daphne, he had put it out of his mind. Now, although he felt slightly embarrassed, he wished he could hug Mr. Lydden as he had sometimes hugged his father.

“So I guess that’s what happened,” Victor said, with a self-conscious laugh. “I got banged into the water by a tree branch and caught under the roots. Well, I’m glad no one’s trying to kill me.”

“I’m glad too,” Daphne put in. “I told you you were crazy when you said someone tried to drown you, Vic.”

“Now, don’t tease your brother, Daphne,” Bertram said. “He is a very brave and very sensible young man.”

Victor swelled with pride at being called a young man in addition to being told he was brave and sensible, but he did not lose sight of another advantage in his experience having been a simple accident. “Then I guess there’s no real reason to tell Mother about it,” he remarked with elaborate casualness. “It would only worry her, and I won’t fish there anymore. There are plenty of other places.”

Bertram laughed. “I don’t think we can go as far as that. Your coat isn’t going to dry too soon, and the rest of your clothes are too covered with mud to escape needing explanation.” He laughed again at Victor’s expression. “You think your mama will forbid you to go fishing or out into the woods, but I believe I have an answer to the problem.
Part of the trouble is that you don’t know these woods. Suppose I suggest that you go about with a companion who does know them?”

“We have Mrs. Franklin,” Victor said doubtfully.

“She is a fine woman,” Bertram stated, “but not very fit for running about in the woods. What you need is a young fellow interested in the same things you are—”

“Oh, no,” Daphne cried and then covered her lips with a hand.

“Now what—” Bertram began.

“She thinks that if I have a friend, I won’t let her come with us,” Victor explained. “Don’t be silly, Daph. I won’t desert you, I promise.”

“No, I’m sure you wouldn’t, Victor,” Bertram said, “and I will tell Dick Price—who is the fellow I have in mind—that he is to show you things that will interest Daphne as much as you. I am sure he knows where the birds nest, and where there are baby rabbits, and if I know Dick, a fox den.”

Both children exclaimed with pleasure, and Bertram left them to discuss the idea while he ran down to break to Abigail the news that her son had met disaster again. He did not find her or Sir Arthur in his office and was only just in time to hail them as they strolled across the lawn in the general direction of the path to Rutupiae Hall. Since, in the exigencies of convincing the children that Victor’s experience had been an accident, he had forgotten to put on another coat, Arthur ran toward him asking what was wrong, and Abigail, with eyes like saucers and a death-white pallor, waited, unable to move at all.

“Nothing is wrong,” Bertram called, permitting Arthur to stop and draw a deep breath and Abigail to release the breath she had been holding.

“Or, at least,” Bertram went on with a smile when they were all close enough to speak in normal tones, “no harm has been done. I’m sorry to have startled you by forgetting my coat, but Victor was wearing it, and it is very wet.”

Now Abigail smiled. “That Victor! You are right, Arthur—and you too, Bertram. That devil must go to school. If it is not one batch of trouble he is mixing, it is another.”

“He is a very nice boy,” Bertram said, “and this time quite innocent of intending to make trouble.”

“He is always innocent of intending to make trouble,” Abigail said, and then smiled wryly, thinking of the toad, and added, “Well, not always,” which made both men laugh. “What happened this time?” she asked.

Bertram explained about the falling branch and Victor’s subsequent immersion, mentioning, but barely, that the boy had had a fright by being caught against one of the submerged roots for a moment. Abigail shook her head and sighed, but it was clear she was not really distressed by the incident. She was accustomed to Victor getting into and out of trouble with natural obstacles like rivers and hills. Arthur stood staring at his secretary for a while and then lowered his eyes to his boots, which he seemed to be examining with great distaste.

“I’m glad you aren’t too angry or worried,” Bertram said as he finished the tale. “I suppose he has had similar experiences in America, but I must confess that I am just a little troubled. It seems to me that Victor must have gone with a group when he had adventures in New York, whereas here he was quite alone.”

“Oh, dear, you mean he didn’t take Daphne? That was foolish. I must speak to him about that. If he were to twist an ankle or fall out of a tree, we might not be able to find him. You are right, Bertram, of course. He must not go about all alone.”

“But I don’t think Daphne is enough,” Bertram said. “If he had been really tangled under those roots, I’m not sure she could have got him loose in time, and she isn’t any more familiar with this area than he is. If she had to leave him to fetch help, she might get lost herself or become confused about where she had left her brother.”
“But I can’t forbid him to leave the house.” Abigail uttered an exasperated sigh.

“I didn’t mean Victor should be forbidden to explore,” Bertram explained. “He really must get to know the countryside. I was just about to suggest that he be accompanied by someone knowledgeable enough and strong enough to keep him out of trouble.”

Abigail frowned with indecision. “That sounds good, but if the person is uncongenial or too cautious, I’m afraid Victor might—”

Bertram laughed. “I thought of that. No, I think Victor will like this lad, and he has sisters, one just about Daphne’s age, so he knows what girls like. Arthur, I thought Dick Price might be just the person to keep an eye on Victor and Daphne.”

Arthur had ended his inspection of his boots and looked up at Bertram when he suggested a guide and companion for Victor. Now his eyes were very thoughtful as he said, “I agree. I should have thought of that myself. Dick is only about fifteen years old himself and won’t keep telling Victor that this or that is dangerous. On the other hand, he’s a solid, reliable boy, my head gamekeeper’s son, and knows the woods better than he knows his own face. He’s a good-natured boy, too. I don’t think he’d set Victor against letting Daphne tag along with them.”

“Your head gamekeeper’s son,” Abigail repeated, frowning thoughtfully. “Dick Price…”

“Is there something you don’t like about the idea?” Bertram asked. “I doubt the boy will presume on his relationship with Victor later—”

“What?” Abigail asked, and then shook her head and laughed. “You mean being American-raised, Victor might not know the difference between gentleman and servant? Don’t underestimate Victor. I hope he will not become a snob, but he appreciates the fact that he is an earl. No, I was thinking about this Dick Price. The name was familiar. Isn’t Price the man who married Mrs. Franklin’s daughter? That would make Dick her grandson.”

“Yes,” Arthur replied, and smiled. “You won’t have to worry about Dick’s behavior. He adores his grandma, and is terrified of her, too. I’ll explain to Dick. Would you want him to walk over every morning, or—?”

“I’d prefer, if his parents didn’t mind, that he live at Rutupiae,” Abigail replied. “Do you think he would be uncomfortable if I asked him to stay with the menservants at the Hall? If so, I suppose I could ask one of the gardeners to take him in.”

“Let his grandmother decide,” Bertram suggested. “And I think you had better come and speak to your children before they imagine that you plan to murder them.”

They walked back to the house together but separated at the door. Arthur went into the library and rang for Waggoner. He directed the butler to send one man to summon Dick Price and another to obtain clean, dry clothing for Victor from Mrs. Franklin. Bertram led Abigail to his apartment, found another coat to wear, and then went off.

She was surprised when the children did not recount what had happened over and over at great and boring length, but realized that they must have worked off their first excitement and enthusiasm on poor Bertram. She had liked him from the first, despite his silly mannerisms, and she liked him even better now.

In fact, Daphne and Victor seemed more interested in their prospective companion and spent most of the time until Victor’s clean clothes arrived in planning what they would do and where they would go, only occasionally turning to their mother for approval. This she gave without really having listened, relying on Arthur’s confidence that Dick would put a halt on any adventure that might be too dangerous.

What Abigail was really thinking about, with some chagrin, was that Bertram had interrupted Arthur and her before they had really decided what to do. Actually, now that she thought back on it, she realized that Arthur must have deliberately avoided any further discussion of their relationship after they left Bertram’s office. Abigail nodded absently to a question from Daphne, as she wondered why Arthur had cleverly led her into a discussion of estate management rather than continuing his wooing.

There were as many answers to that question as she had moods, of course. Back at Rutupiae that evening, Abigail
was feeling bored by Hilda’s uninterrupted monologue of complaints. Eustace had unexpectedly gone off to visit
friends, and his mother seemed to take his decision as a personal insult. Abigail did not blame Eustace for not telling
Hilda his plans in advance, since she would certainly have nagged at him incessantly about them, but she wished he
had given her a hint so that she could have made some excuse to skip dinner herself. In her depression, Abigail
almost came to the conclusion that Arthur had made up his mind she was too much trouble and had been trying
politely to back out.

By morning, however, Abigail’s spirits had risen, and she was convinced that Arthur was simply trying to find a
“romantic” answer to their problem. She now wished sincerely she had not raised any stupid objections, and she
waited eagerly for a note or visit so that she could tell Arthur she would rather have him than romance. The note
when it did come was a dreadful disappointment. Arthur wrote that he had sent a letter to his and Francis’ old
housemaster at Westminster and was reasonably sure a place would be found for Victor at the end of the long
vacation. Meanwhile, Bertram was making arrangements for the vicar to judge the boy’s competence and tutor him
if any weak spots were found in his background. Daphne would be welcome to attend with her brother if Abigail
wished. He apologized for writing rather than coming to speak to her, but he had business to see to that day.

Abigail buried herself in estate and household accounts that morning and then was tempted out to accompany her
children to gather wild strawberries in a hidden valley Dick knew of. Actually, she enjoyed herself so much and was
so tired by the exercise—for it was a long walk there and back, and gathering berries is not easy work—that she had
her dinner on a tray, went to bed and slept. In the morning she told herself firmly that there were other men in the
world. The fact that she was beginning to make sense of how the estate ran gave her much satisfaction, and the next
day the riding clothes Abigail had ordered arrived.

A note to Stonar brought an immediate invitation to come and examine the available mounts, and to Victor’s and
Daphne’s tumultuous joy, they were allowed to choose horses from the St. Eyre stables so they could go riding at
once. After seeing him atop several different animals, Arthur lent Victor not only a strong and lively gelding hack
but a somewhat elderly hunter on whom he was to learn jumping under Arthur’s supervision. Daphne had a small
mare, quieter than Victor’s mounts but by no means a sluggard. And Abigail was given a sleek, gray creature called
GoGo, who lived up to her name but had a mouth so soft that she was instantly obedient to the lightest touch on the
reins.

Abigail knew enough about horses to utter a surprised protest when she saw the animal, for a horse of that quality
was worth several hundred pounds and could never have been kept for the convenience of visitors. For Arthur to
lend her so valuable an animal would be most indiscreet, but his smile silenced her, and later, after she had tried
GoGo’s paces and confessed herself enchanted, she learned that the mare had been purchased especially for her and
that it was assumed the price would come out of the Lydden estate. Abigail knew better and was a trifle uneasy
about accepting so expensive a gift. Did it put her in the situation of selling herself?

She put the question to Arthur quite frankly when they were walking together later, and he laughed so hard he had to
sit down on a stump, which wreaked havoc on his pale buckskin breeches. After that he reproved her severely for
being crude and improper and for putting him in bad graces with his valet. Then he pulled her down on his lap to
kiss and call his soul’s delight. But he had not answered her question—unless his frank amusement was his answer
—and he had not proposed any place of meeting where more than a few kisses would be possible.

Nonetheless, Abigail believed that Arthur thought her worth his trouble, and she did not worry much about being
bought for the price of a horse, but still she felt she spent far too much time concentrating on the man. Even if his
professions of love were sincere, Abigail knew that the relationship could not be permanent. She would never marry
again. Never, never would she permit herself to be legally less than human just because she loved a man. Marriage
would mean that she had no rights at all over the children to whom she had given birth in such pain. A man who was
not even their father could send them away or imprison them at home, forbid her to see them… anything. Abigail
shuddered. She did not believe Arthur would act like that, she was sure he would not. He was stable, honest and
intelligent. But she still would not give him or any other man that right, thus reducing herself to a state in which she
had no more rights than a dog or a horse.

To protect her children was most important, but even after Victor was legally independent, Abigail knew she would
never consider remarriage. Why should she endure the small indignities of being a wife—the knowledge that even
the clothes she wore did not belong to her, that her husband had the right to strip her naked and sell even her breast
bands and pantalettes? Why should she need to go with outstretched hand and lowered eyes to beg for a few pounds of her own money, money that was no longer hers only because she was a wife?

On the other hand, if she desired independence, Abigail realized that she must accept its drawbacks. With no legal bond to hold him, it was likely that eventually Arthur would slip away. She was not certain that even marriage would keep Arthur completely faithful, but she did not doubt that as his wife, she would not only always be first in public attentions but also last—the woman to whom he came in sorrow or trouble—with only a little slip in the middle, perhaps, for spice. Without marriage, she must remember, she was nothing but the spice herself. Thus, it was wrong to think so much about him.

It was not that Arthur was so fascinating, Abigail assured herself, but that there was not much else to think about. Careful examination of the estate accounts and visiting and questioning tenants and observing their land both with and without the estate agent, Mr. Jameson, had convinced Abigail that Jameson was an honest man who knew his business. A few decisions that had seemed harsh to her had, it turned out, been forced on him by Eustace. However, he explained that it was not fair to blame Eustace too much, because he had been acting in his father’s name just before Lord Lydden’s death and did not wish to be accused of making a judgment that damaged the estate. Abigail understood but nonetheless ordered that the more lenient path be taken where possible. After that, it was quite clear that any further intrusion into the management of Rutupiae would be unnecessary.

The children also were off her hands and safely occupied. What with Mrs. Franklin to oversee their meals and wardrobes, riding with steady well-trained grooms, exploring the estate under the safe guidance of Dick Price and being tutored by the vicar, Abigail rarely saw Victor and Daphne. She had not had so little to do for many, many years, and she understood why Arthur filled so many of her waking thoughts. He was the one challenge that faced her. Nonetheless, it was not the best thing in the world for her. The more she thought about Arthur, the stronger her appetite for him grew.

Chapter Twelve

Had Abigail known what was occupying Arthur’s time so fully, she would have been highly flattered. The “business” he mentioned in his note all concerned her. After he had purchased GoGo, he turned his attention to a place he could “show” her that would be private, empty and yet fitted out so that they could make love. That took considerable thought, but Arthur at last recalled there was a secluded cottage that had been built for an “eccentric” cousin.

Arthur smiled involuntarily when he remembered the cottage because as a child he had greatly feared the place, believing his cousin was insane and tucked away in the woods for safekeeping. He had later discovered, because his curiosity became stronger than his fear, that it was not true. Cousin Algernon was very peculiar—he insisted on dressing as a woman, which was why privacy was required—but on all other subjects he was perfectly rational. Before the old man died—in a dimity nightgown and mobcap—he and Arthur had become good friends.

Because it was so secluded, the cottage was unoccupied, yet it was fully furnished. Arthur rode over, found it dusty and musty after two years of disuse, but it had been soundly built and was in need of no more than a good cleaning. After ordering the cleaning, the house was restocked with staples—tea, wine, cheese, biscuits—and the bed was made up. Now all Arthur needed to do was find an excuse to bring Abigail there and an explanation for why an unused cottage was ready to receive two lovers. There were plenty of excuses and reasons, but none that would not make Abigail immediately suspect that the cottage was his regular love nest. Arthur shuddered at the thought.

Normally the exercise of preparing a reasonable explanation would have been an amusing pleasure to be solved in an hour or so after more serious political problems had been examined. Arthur found, however, that he could not concentrate long either on politics or on Abigail because another problem, far more painful and unpleasant, came to his mind. Bertram, closer to him than his brother for many years, was in serious trouble and would not even discuss the matter with him. That was bad enough. Worse was Arthur’s sick fear that Victor Lydden was the source of Bertram’s agony of spirit.

Even Abigail had been startled to see Bertram running out of the house without a coat after Victor’s accident. Until that moment, Arthur would not have believed that Bertram could be driven out in his shirtsleeves if the house were afire. Yet something had so disordered his mind and spirit that he had not remembered to put on a coat—something
buried under that cock-and-bull story of a branch hitting Victor hard enough to push him into the river. It was not possible. Any branch large enough to do that had fallen from that tree long, long ago.

At the time he had said nothing for Abigail’s sake. She had been frightened enough by that accidental shooting… Accidental? Accidental shooting, a near-accidental drowning, what would be the next “accident”? But later, when he and Bertram were alone, Bertram had refused to consider whether the two incidents were connected, had refused to admit there was anything odd about the boy falling into the river. Bertram insisted that it need not have been a large branch. If Victor were at the edge of the roots and leaning well forward to look into the water, a mere tap could have sent him in. Arthur had then asked outright what was wrong, and whether there was anything he could do to help. Bertram had laughed at him, insisting that he was imagining things—but there had been tears in his eyes, which his flicking handkerchief had not been able to conceal completely.

The ugly thought that Bertram would be heir to the Lydden estate if Victor should die and Eustace be convicted of causing his death crept back into Arthur’s mind. Bertram had left him with Abigail, Arthur remembered, and by his own admission had met the children near the pool not long after the accident had taken place.

No! It was ridiculous, Arthur told himself, utterly and completely ridiculous. Bertram could not and would not. The trouble was Arthur knew Bertram loathed Hilda and Eustace. They had made his life miserable when he and his mother had been given shelter at Rutupiae after his father’s death had disclosed his utter ruin. It was by no means impossible that Bertram would enjoy destroying Eustace. But to murder a boy who had done him no harm, who clearly liked him…Bertram could not!

Having forcibly rejected his suspicion of his friend, Arthur remembered two encouraging facts. The shooting could have been manipulated so that it seemed Eustace had done it, but if Victor had drowned, it would have been virtually impossible to prove that Eustace was involved. Bertram was far too clever to use so uncertain a device. More important, it had been Bertram who suggested Dick Price as a guard and guide for Victor—and who had left Dick’s instructions to Arthur. That was certainly evidence that Bertram did not want any accident to befall Victor.

Arthur was comforted by this path of reasoning, but he could not forget the matter. He wondered briefly whether Eustace could be at the root of the trouble, but then dismissed the notion. Eustace was no fool, whatever else he was, and would realize he would be the first suspect if any harm befell Victor.

Then Arthur realized that what was bothering Bertram might not be related to Victor directly. Could Bertram desire Abigail? Was that why anything to do with her children became so important as to wipe all his usual priorities from his mind? Arthur had only considered the situation from Abigail’s point of view because he had been afraid that Abigail favored Bertram. But twice Bertram had left them alone abruptly when he could have stayed. Arthur frowned unhappily. That was exactly how Bertram would act if he had fallen in love with Abigail, because he would feel he had nothing material to offer her—which was true. And it would be a sensible response to expose himself as little as possible.

“Damn!” Arthur said aloud.

He had remembered Bertram’s inadvertent disclosure the day Roger had come down from Stour that he was not content with his situation and that he wished to marry. Arthur sighed. He would have to be particularly careful in his behavior to Abigail in public. It would be cruel to expose Bertram to the knowledge that he was her lover. He sat for a while thinking about what to do, but oddly the possibility of backing out of the affair—which would have been his first idea had Bertram desired any of his earlier mistresses, because Arthur valued Bertram far more than any of those women—did not occur to him. Finally he wondered whether to warn Abigail. If he told her, she would be careful not to seek out any more private conferences with Bertram, but could she completely conceal her knowledge? It was bad enough to fall hopelessly in love, no need to add the bitter gall of pity to Bertram’s troubles.

He had just about decided to ride over to Rutupiae Hall and see if he could discover, without actually telling Abigail about Bertram, how she might react, when a clamor in the corridor leading to the front door made him step out. He could not imagine what could have created such a disturbance and stood, stunned, as footmen carried in trunk after trunk.

“Love, I am so glad to see you!” a soft, slightly breathless voice exclaimed.
“Mama.” Arthur blinked and swallowed.

He adored his mother, but she could not have chosen a more inconvenient moment to arrive. Although she made no overt comment, Arthur knew she did not approve of his love affairs. Her objections were only partly on moral grounds, Arthur guessed. He was pretty sure that she felt he would have married if he had not found so many willing partners. In general, Arthur did not really mind his mother’s disapproval. She was not so uncivilized as to display any open signs of hostility to his mistresses, but he was appalled by the idea that she might feel any animosity to Abigail. Different as they were in appearance and manner, Arthur knew they had much in common, and he wanted very much for them to be friends.

He also knew it was useless for him to hope his mother would not notice if he and Abigail became lovers. What it was about him that changed, he could never discover, but his mother invariably knew within a day or two when he had won his prize and consummated his affair. Internally Arthur groaned. He could not expose Abigail to his dear mama’s cool disdain. He would have to give up any idea of actually making love to her. The renunciation aroused a shadow of sensation in his loins, and he decided he would have to think of something else.

Lady St. Eyre’s tinkling laugh fell into the little pause before it became awkward. “Don’t look so overjoyed, Arthur! This welcome is overwhelming me.”

“Damn it, Mama,” Arthur protested, “I’m not unwelcoming, I’m stunned. The last letter I received from you was a panegyric on the perfections of Bath and your utter and complete delight with living there. Then here you are without a word of warning.”

“Oh, are you short of space?” Violet asked, her eyes bright with amusement. “Arthur, what are you up to?”

This time he groaned out loud. “What the devil could I be up to here in the country? Perhaps I should ask what you are up to. Bath is surely more fertile ground for mischief than Stonar Magna.”

“Oh, it is,” she agreed, laughing so infectiously that Arthur grinned in sympathy. “You have discovered one of the reasons I have fled to your protection.”

“Are you being pursued?”

“Alas, yes!”

“I will tell Waggoner to mobilize the footmen and ready himself to resist all invaders.”

“Lunatic!” his mother said fondly, turning toward the drawing room and pausing for him to open the door.

She pulled off her fetching hat and tossed it onto a table, exposing beautifully coiffed hair that retained just a touch of its original gold. Her light summer gown was a shade darker than her hair, not the pale yellow suitable to a girl but still a cheerful color. It was high waisted as fashion decreed but rose to the neck, where a brown ribbon gathered it into a soft frill, far more flattering than a low décolletage, which would have exposed the crêpey skin of neck and bosom. For a moment Arthur stood silent, admiring her. Unlike many women who had been great beauties, his mother made no pretense of being younger than she was, and thus was more attractive. Ill-chosen as her moment for arrival was, Arthur found he was delighted to see her settle into her favorite chair.

“I told you you would get into trouble going off on your own like that,” Arthur said. “You are entirely too softhearted and do not know how to say no. Who is besieging you?”

“The maddest pair you ever saw, Arthur,” Violet St. Eyre admitted, giggling like a girl. “One is an octogenarian general who keeps offering to show me his scars, and the other—I blush to say it—is younger than you, much younger, I fear. And they glare at each other!”

Arthur howled with laughter.

“And they dog my footsteps and push each other to hand me up into my carriage or both summon a chair for me so there are two and the chairmen quarrel.”
“Stop!” Arthur gasped. “My ribs hurt.”

“In any case,” Violet continued, “it was very hot in Bath. I have discovered that summer in a town is not pleasant. The heat seems to get caught in the paving stones and the brick of the buildings. And another thing, I thought I had better come home and make Francis’ widow welcome.”

Arthur blinked. “Francis’ widow?” He had almost forgotten that Abigail had been Francis’ wife. Hastily he added, “How did you know she had arrived?”

“Arthur, you are a lunatic. Everyone in the neighborhood has written,” her voice hesitated fractionally as she took in her son’s expression and then went on smoothly, “that Francis’ American wife has settled at Rutupiae Hall. Do you mean to tell me you have not gone over there to pay your respects?”

“No, no. I mean, yes, I have been to Rutupiae, but…well, actually, Abigail came here first. We have had some odd goings-on. Now, Mama, she walked over and I cannot believe anyone… Will you stop looking at me like that? Someone shot at her son. He wasn’t hurt, but his jacket was all to ribbons. Would she be expected to wait for me to make a formal call under the circumstances?”

“Poor girl,” Violet said. “That was a shocking welcome. I hope you caught the man. But never mind about that. Arthur, sometimes you keep your brains in your back pocket. Didn’t you realize that everyone was waiting for you to give some sign that Abigail—is that her name?—is socially acceptable.”

“What the devil do you mean?” Arthur erupted crossly. “Why should anyone think she isn’t acceptable? In the first place, she isn’t American, she’s one of the Somerset Milfords, niece to the present Sir Thomas—at least I think the old man is still alive—and she was Francis’ wife; she’s the dowager Lady Lydden. You can’t tell me that anyone in this neighborhood would listen to Hilda’s claptrap.”

“No, Arthur, there’s no need to shout at me,” Violet said calmly. “You know you only do so when you realize you are in the wrong. Ordinarily no one would pay too much attention to Hilda Lydden’s nasty remarks, but people simply cannot resist a scandal. It is ridiculous to say no one would know Abigail came here alone and on foot. Servants gossip to each other, and every house in the area doubtless knew by the next day. Nor is it sensible to say she is one of the Milfords from Somerset as if it were common knowledge. How would anyone know that? You did not, I am sure, until Mr. Deedes wrote to you of it. And knowing what Francis was, I am sure everyone suspects she is an innkeeper’s daughter or worse.”

“Oh, damn and blast,” Arthur sighed, “you are right, of course. I should have given a dinner, but I never thought of it. And who would be my hostess?” he finished accusingly.

“You could have asked Leonie,” Violet remarked, smiling. “After all, Stour Castle is close by, and Roger’s wife is your aunt. But I guessed as soon as I got Angela Vernon’s letter that it would be necessary to welcome Abigail formally, so I wrote to everyone that I had asked you not to do anything until I could arrive. I was fond of Francis, and it is only right that I should do what I can for his wife and children. So I shall find out—”

“Violet!”

The door had opened quietly, and Bertram had come in. He moved quickly and gracefully to the chair in which she was sitting, raised her hand and kissed it. She laughed, put her free hand behind his head and pulled him down so she could kiss him affectionately. Then she shook her head at him.

“I can excuse Arthur,” she said. “His head is always in the clouds between urging war against Bonaparte and peace with America, but how could you overlook the need to—”

“Violet!” Bertram exclaimed reproachfully. “I did not overlook anything. I knew your sense of duty would bring you home, and I knew the delay would do Abigail no harm. It has given her a chance to settle, to become a little accustomed to our ways and everyone will assume we were waiting for you before we made our move.”

“Dear Bertram,” Violet said, “someday I shall find a point to which you do not have a reasonable reply—but perhaps I had better not. The shock might kill me.”
Arthur had stood silent during this exchange, watching Bertram and his mother. Now he collapsed in a chair, stretching his long legs out so that the footman who had followed Bertram into the room a few minutes later almost tripped over his feet as he set down a tray of tea and tiny cakes.

“Poor Martin,” Arthur said. “We seem to give you a hard time in this house.”

“Oh no, sir,” Martin replied with sincerity. “It is a very interesting household.”

Violet sneezed, Bertram coughed and Martin took his departure, while Arthur laughed aloud. He knew Bertram and he knew his mother. On the surface their meeting had been normal, but Arthur was certain that neither was really at ease. Each was trying to pass some message to the other without his knowledge. In a sense, that was annoying, but Arthur was having a hard time restraining a broad grin. Bertram must have sent for his mother, and it must be that they were trying to tell each other that he was still unaware of it.

The deception was obvious, and in her fear of giving herself and Bertram away, his mama had done so by blaming Bertram for not reminding Arthur of the need to give a dinner for Abigail. His dear mama was perfectly correct. It was inconceivable that Bertram could forget such a thing, thus, he had not mentioned it deliberately, probably to give Violet a good reason to come home. It flicked through his mind that had Bertram intended harm to young Victor, the last thing he would have done was to bring Violet back to the house, since she was perceptive and intuitive. In fact, Arthur felt thoroughly ashamed of his suspicions, and although he still could not guess Bertram’s purpose, he was not worried about it. Actually, he was so relieved, he could have kissed them both—but he did not want to deprive them of the innocent pleasure of thinking they had fooled him.

The one drawback to the situation was the effect it would have on his relationship with Abigail. Now Arthur realized he had been a fool not to think of introducing her to the neighborhood himself. If he had done so, his mother’s coolness to her would have been put down to jealousy. It was his punishment for greed, for wanting to keep her to himself. Fortunately, he had done no harm that could not be corrected. His mother would see that Abigail was accepted, and he was sure they would become friends—if Violet did not perceive that Abigail was his mistress. With a sigh Arthur resigned himself to a longer period of celibacy than he had intended to endure.

“Arthur!”

He looked up from the tray of cakes at which he had been staring. “What is it, Mama?”

“Oh, you are impossible. What are you dreaming about?”

“Whether Wellington will give us a substantial victory before the alliance between Prussia and Russia falls apart and in time to convince Austria to declare war,” Arthur lied blandly.

Violet uttered a martyred sigh. “I grant you it is an important subject, Arthur, but not one about which you can do anything, whereas you will be the host of this dinner party we are discussing.”

“But I am sure you and Bertram have arranged everything perfectly,” Arthur said plaintively. “I have no appointments to interfere, and if I did, Bertram would know more about them than I, anyway. I was merely waiting for you to tell me what to do, and it seemed reasonable for me to apply my mind to a subject for which it is fit—”

“Do you not like Abigail Lydden?” Violet asked, looking a trifle startled.

“Of course I like her,” Arthur replied coolly. “I cannot think of anyone, except perhaps Hilda, who would not. She is intelligent and beautiful—and a very good mother too, I think. When we are not shouting at each other about something, I find her excellent company. What the devil has liking Abigail to do with listening to the details about a dinner party?”

“The party is being given for her, after all,” Bertram pointed out. “We assumed you would be interested in who was to be invited.”

“Why?” Arthur asked. “You and Mama surely know better than I who can bless or damn in the ton. I only know who controls the most votes for seats in the Commons, and I doubt that would be of any help, since Abigail is
obviously not going to stand for Parliament—although I wouldn’t be surprised if she would like to do so.” He paused to allow a few exasperated comments to pass over his head and then asked, “Well, what have you decided?”

“Thursday,” Violet said. “That is soon enough to show that I did come for that purpose and still will give those who have a previous engagement time to cancel it.”

“Excellent.” Arthur stood up. “I might as well ride over and explain to Abigail what she is about to endure. Is there anything else she needs to be told? Are you going to invite Hilda?”

“I hate to do it,” Violet said, “but not asking her would mean leaving Griselda out too, and that would be unkind. Besides, Abigail has to live with Hilda, and I doubt she would thank us for providing her mother-in-law with another source of complaints.”

Arthur smiled his agreement and went out. Bertram and Violet continued to talk about the guest list for a few minutes, but as soon as it was certain Arthur would not return, she said, “I think he has finally found a woman with whom he can live. Thank you for writing, Bertram. Did you hear him, poor innocent, pretending indifference and admitting that he shouts at her? Can you imagine Arthur shouting at any of his previous lights of love?”

Bertram laughed. “No, but to be fair, that was only because none of them had brains enough to discuss any subject about which he cared.”

“I don’t think so,” Violet said thoughtfully. “I think it was because he wasn’t enough interested in any of them to care what their opinions were.”

Arthur found Abigail in the library reading a thick letter, which she put into a drawer as she rose to greet him. “Doom has befallen us,” he announced, crossing the room and taking her in his arms.

“At least we will be together,” she replied, laughing.

“Yes, but that’s just what we won’t be,” Arthur said morosely. “I had just got everything fixed. I had found a cottage well within riding distance but very isolated, and I was working on a good reason why an empty cottage, which is not, I repeat, not a place I customarily bring my paramours, should not only contain tea, wine and biscuits but a bed all made up to receive us, when—”

“Arthur, you are quite mad,” Abigail exclaimed before she pulled his head down and kissed him soundly.

“He does everyone say that to me?” he asked indignantly.

“Because you do things in a very, very odd way,” she murmured against his lips. “When you had gone to all that trouble to arrange a place to take me by surprise and sweep me romantically off my feet, you are not supposed to spoil the surprise by telling me all about it. However, I am becoming very abandoned. Shall I pretend you did not… er…blow the gaff?”

Although he had intended to make light of the whole subject and had definitely decided, before he saw Abigail, that he was not going to increase his frustration by caresses that could lead nowhere, Arthur’s mouth fastened on those provocative, murmuring lips. One hand slid down from her shoulders to her buttocks to press her tight against him. Abigail was taken by surprise, because Arthur had been responding for the past few days to similar teasing with an expectant half smile plus a brief, if hungry, kiss and sometimes no more than a playful slap. Before she could think, her body flamed into response, and she lifted herself on her toes to put the pressure of his hardened rod where it would ease her need. In the next moment she had pulled free, blushing. Even with Francis she had never been so forward. To play with words was one thing, to use her body so crudely was another.

“Oh, we mustn’t,” she gasped. “Empson or one of the men is sure to be here in a few minutes with wine or something. When he announced you, I told him to bring what he thought proper until I was more certain of the correct thing myself.”

He did not answer but, standing with hands clenched, half turned away.
“I’m sorry, Arthur,” she whispered. “I shouldn’t have teased you, but you seemed to enjoy it before—”

“I did enjoy it, but then I expected that it would only be a few days—” He turned to face her fully, held out a hand, and smiled wryly. “Never mind, my darling, it isn’t your fault, but unfortunately, I’m not mad to tell you about the cottage. Or, I guess I am, but in the other sense of the word. I’m not going to get to sweep you off your feet, at least, not for a while. In fact, we are going to have to be very careful.”

“Whatever has happened?” she asked.

“You are about to be introduced to the local gentry,” he replied.

She smiled at him uncertainly. “Do you expect me to be so overwhelmed with visitors and invitations that I will no longer have time for you?”

He laughed, although he was aware of a prick of jealousy. “No, but it is my mama who is going to introduce you. I was a damned fool not to do it myself, but… Damn! I don’t know whether I really didn’t think of it or whether I didn’t want to share you. In any case, I have landed us in the soup.”

“Do you realize I have no idea what you are talking about?” Abigail remarked. “Of course, I will be very grateful to your mother for taking the trouble to sponsor me, but what has that to do with—with your nefarious plot to—to damage my virtue?”

Arthur could not help laughing, as he knew she intended by using the high-flown verbiage of a very bad novel. “My nefarious plot will have to wait. Mama does not approve of the…ah…light play of love—at least when I am doing the playing.”

There was a short silence while Abigail stared blankly at Arthur. At that moment, the door opened and Empson himself carried in a tray with bottles of wine and glasses as well as a squat silver pot and the odd-shaped cups in which coffee was served. Abigail thanked him with a mechanical smile and, when he was gone, turned back to Arthur.

“Are you not a little past the age to be afraid of your mother?” she asked.

Arthur was so surprised that he just stared back. Then he exploded, “Don’t be a fool! I’m not afraid of her, but she can hurt you.”

Abigail flushed with rage. “I am not a child,” she snapped viciously. “I am no longer even a ‘minor under the law’. I am an adult female who can manage her own life. I have not allowed you to kiss me and paw me because I desire your protection or desire that you procure your mother’s protection for me. I am very capable of taking care of myself. I wanted you, but now I am not so sure—”

“Abigail,” Arthur said, his voice overriding hers, “will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

Abigail was so stunned that she simply stared. It was apparent that Arthur was not joking and that he meant what he said, yet there was an odd look about him, almost as if the words had taken him by surprise. He came a step nearer and took her hand.

“I love you,” he said softly. “I did not know how much until this moment when it came to me that someday I might lose you. I am not such a fool as to think marriage can enforce love—I know it cannot, but I believe it to be the fullest expression of love and—and it is all I have to offer to show what I feel.”

Most of Abigail’s shock had worn off while Arthur was speaking, and she found herself filled with a tremulous gladness. He had offered his ultimate proof of love, not a small matter for a man who had so long resisted marriage. Nor could she doubt he wanted her for herself alone. He knew that what dowry she had, if any, might be unattainable. Yet under her gladness, there was a small uneasy doubt. Had his offer been stimulated by her cry of independence? Could the driving impulse—even if Arthur did not recognize it himself—be a desire to tame a woman who had been so bold as to say she did not desire or need a man’s authority over her? Abigail examined her lover’s face and put the ugly thought away.
“You will not lose me,” she assured him, coming still closer and putting her free arm around his neck. “If my hand and my word will satisfy you, I would be proud and happy to consider myself and to have you consider me your wife. I swear I will be faithful and love only you—but I cannot marry you, Arthur. I am honored, and I love you, but…one marriage was enough for me.”

“You still feel bound to Francis? Did you love him so much?” he asked harshly.

She kissed him gently. “No, Arthur. Do not waste time and thought on Francis. I certainly do not feel bound to him. If I did, I would never have let you touch me, and I would have made my inaccessibility plain at once. As to love—I suppose I did love him as a man at one time, although I cannot remember it. All I remember is caring for him as one cares for a child with a deformed mind. It is a very strange, bitter kind of love, mixed with shame and hatred. One cannot break loose from it—but one does not desire to renew it, either.”

“In God’s name, Abigail,” Arthur exclaimed, “you cannot think me another Francis.”

She pulled his head down and kissed his lips, then pulled back a trifle. “No, that is not what I meant. I was only explaining that I do not miss Francis and never have missed him. And I think you are as near his opposite as it is possible to be without losing his good qualities—for he had some. That is not why I do not wish to be your wife legally. I… You heard what I said when I was angry. Angry or not, that was true. I simply wish to be free. I do not wish to be protected.”

Arthur looked down into the beautiful face raised to his with mingled regret and relief. He loved Abigail in a way he had not cared for any other woman, and he had offered marriage because he had needed desperately to demonstrate that difference to her—and to himself. But he was not really sorry she had refused him, especially since she had also said she loved him and given her word to be faithful. Naturally Arthur had heard such promises many times, but he did not judge Abigail by the women who had broken their words with such frequency. She would be faithful, he was sure—unless he gave her reason to withdraw her commitment.

Although Arthur had not been constant in the past, he was certain he would give Abigail no cause for doubting his faithfulness to her. He was very tired of ephemeral affairs, and yet he shrank from being held on a tether, needing always to consider another person’s feelings and convenience. Even small, everyday matters were changed by marriage. He would have to remember, for instance, to warn his wife if he would not be home for dinner or if he met someone and wished the friend to dine with him.

Worse yet was the necessity of attending a wife’s entertainments. Arthur restrained a shudder. He had been dragged by his mistresses to enough brainless tea parties and musicales and operas, when no one listened to the music or the singers and would not let him listen. With the mistresses the situation was endurable because he knew he could end it whenever he grew sufficiently tired of it, but with a wife there was no end. Slowly Arthur smiled. He had the best of both possible worlds—a beautiful and intelligent woman who was all his, and no chains.

Chapter Thirteen

Violet St. Eyre called on Abigail the next day. Unfortunately, Arthur and Abigail had not had time to thrash out the subject of his mother’s attitude toward their relationship, because they had been interrupted by Victor and Daphne, sent home by the vicar, who was not feeling well. The children were so happy to have some extra time to spend with their mother that Abigail did not wish to send them away, particularly since they might associate her dismissal with Arthur’s presence. It was not surprising, therefore, that Abigail received Arthur’s mother with considerable reservations.

These did not last beyond the first few minutes of the visit, during which Violet, looking over her shoulder like a hunted thing, said breathlessly, “You will think me quite mad, but I must tell you what I have to say very quickly. I think Hilda saw me coming in, and she will no doubt be upon us as soon as she realizes I am not waiting to be shown into the drawing room. How clever of you, my dear, to use the library as your sitting room. I could not imagine how I was going to get you away from her. What I want to know is whether my featherbrained son actually told you that I would be giving a dinner party on this Thursday coming to introduce you to our neighbors. I hope you do not think it interfering of me, but they think, because of the way Francis drank, you know, that you might be an innkeeper’s daughter and also that you are an American.”
“Which is worse?” Abigail asked, unable to prevent herself from laughing.

Violet sank into a chair. “I am not at all sure. Perhaps being American. I wish for your sake that this wretched war had never started—and the American naval victories will make things particularly hard.”

“I wish the war had never started too,” Abigail said, her voice sharp, “but I do not begrudge the Americans their little victories. British behavior in this war has been appalling! For the first time in my life, I have been ashamed to admit my nationality.”

“Two of them!” Violet announced in a tragic voice, raising her eyes to heaven. “Arthur has never had sense enough not to espouse the most unpopular cause available at the top of his lungs in public, but you are a woman. Surely you know there are better ways to make a point.” She paused and frowned, then said, “Mind you, from time to time I have had my doubts, particularly about encouraging the Indians to join the fighting, but… No! I will not allow myself to be distracted to inessentials!”

“You consider a war an inessential?” Abigail asked.

“No, of course not, not in a general way,” Violet replied with an impatient gesture, “but when one’s purpose is discussing a dinner party, it certainly is. My dear Abigail—oh, may I call you Abigail? When I say Lady Lydden, I think of Hilda, and that is awful. Heaven, now I sound as waspish as she. You will think me not a bit better.”

Abigail laughed again. “I prefer Abigail, thank you. What would you prefer me to call you?”

“Didn’t Empson say? I do beg your pardon, I am Arthur’s mother, Violet St. Eyre. No, I understand now. Please call me Violet. I know I am much older than you are, my dear, but everyone calls me Violet, except toadeaters and tradesmen. I suspect I haven’t enough dignity to be ‘Lady St. Eyre’. But what I was about to say to you before I ran off the track was that, although there certainly are more important things than dinner parties, that is not true while you are planning and making the dinner party.”

“Well, I must admit,” Abigail agreed gravely, although her eyes twinkled with amusement, “I have always concentrated on my dinner parties while I was giving them.”

“Very good,” Violet said, “but to come back to a more important point, must you espouse the American cause so passionately with everyone?”

“I do not intend to,” Abigail sighed. The question had been put with such earnest anxiety that she could not be offended, nor could she help liking Violet very much. “But I am so irritated by the injustice of the British position, like a big bully picking on a poor, helpless mite that has nothing but its pride.”

“Now there,” Violet pointed out with satisfaction, “you have a point you can make in perfect safety. Perhaps if you were to substitute ‘a big strong person’ for ‘bully’, you might even wake a little sympathy for the American cause—that is, if you cannot manage to refrain from speaking of the subject at all.”

“Perhaps no one will bring it up.” Abigail shrugged. “If I have time to think, I won’t speak, but very often, unfortunately, my tongue works before my brain.”

As she spoke, Abigail realized how she had arrived so quickly at such terms with Violet St. Eyre that she was not only listening to her advice without resentment but truly wishing she were capable of taking that advice. Nor had the wish anything whatever to do with fear. Abigail had put together Violet’s genuine desire to speak to her alone and the fact that she really did not have anything to say that required privacy and had come to the logical conclusion that Violet simply wanted to meet her under informal and unstrained conditions.

It was very clear that Violet had come to Rutupiae not only determined to like Abigail but aware that Arthur was interested in her. Abigail was sure the tone Violet took in speaking of him was one she used only when convinced the other person was as fond of him as she was herself. Moreover, Violet knew a great deal about her. Yet what Arthur said to her before the children interrupted them proved that he had not written to his mother about her. Could Hilda have written to warn Arthur’s mother that a widowed harpy was about to hook claws into him? If so, the information had apparently had an effect opposite to what was intended.
The old adage that thinking of the devil was tantamount to calling him seemed to be true. No sooner had Hilda come into Abigail’s mind than the door opened and she entered the room.

“Oh, here you are, Violet,” she said. “I was wondering what happened to you.”

“I am so scatterbrained, Hilda,” Violet lied without a blink. “I told Empson that I would find my own way and then mistook the door and came into the library instead of the drawing room, but I found Abigail, so all was well.”

Hilda sniffed disdainfully, making it clear that she thought so little of Violet’s mental abilities, she was not surprised that after years of visiting she should not know one room from another. Sometimes it was fortunate, Abigail thought, as she asked Hilda to sit down and join them, that the woman was so able to believe only what she liked. But Hilda would have none of sitting in the library and insisted they all remove to the drawing room. Abigail and Violet yielded without argument, and Hilda seemed to regard that as a triumph. She was quite benign when she had waved them to seats.

“So you are back again,” she said to Violet. “I thought you would find it unwise to leave Stonar Magna to live on your own.”

Abigail saw Violet’s lips tighten, but all she said was, “I found Bath to be too hot at this season. And imagine my delight when I discovered that Francis’ widow had managed to come to England despite the war. I am looking forward to seeing the children, and I am giving a dinner to welcome Abigail to the neighborhood and to introduce her to our friends.”

“I cannot see why you think that necessary,” Hilda remarked ungraciously. “Abigail is the dowager countess of Lydden, and people should call on her. I do not understand why they have not.”

“Perhaps because they do not know who she is—aside from Francis’ widow, I mean,” Violet suggested.

“Should that not be enough for them?” Hilda puffed up like an affronted pigeon. “What can you be thinking of, Violet? Francis was a Lydden. How could anyone think he would marry unsuitably? Abigail’s family may not be quite the equal of ours, but who could doubt that she is a gentlewoman?”

While Violet explained that not everyone had her perfect faith in Francis, sparking an argument that Abigail had no desire to join, Abigail thought that Violet had not mentioned her being American to Hilda. She wondered whether that was because she felt Hilda was too unaware of public affairs to know about the war or because the possibility of being an innkeeper’s daughter—or a shopkeeper’s, for that matter—was really a greater disgrace. Of course, Violet might only be amusing herself by making Hilda, who had never liked Francis but had enormous family pride, defend the black sheep. Still, Abigail thought, she had been right in keeping the bookshop to herself, and she would continue to keep any business she did for it secret.

Oddly enough, by the next day it almost seemed that Hilda had been right in saying that Violet need not have arranged to give a formal dinner for Abigail. Carriages began to roll up the drive to Rutupiae Hall, and ladies handed out visiting cards of varying degrees of elegance and asked whether Lady Abigail Lydden was at home for visits. Fortunately Abigail had been out riding with Victor and Daphne when the first visitors came. She looked with dismay at the cards they had left and, without bothering to change from her riding dress, rushed to Stonar and asked for Violet.

Waggoner looked at her with a kind of mingled amusement and despair and led her toward the small back parlor that Violet preferred to the grander reception rooms. It was pure coincidence that Arthur came out into the corridor and saw her.

“Abigail,” he said with pleased surprise, “did you ride over?”

“I cannot speak to you now,” she said hurriedly. “I must see Violet.”

“What the devil—” he began, but she passed him and entered Violet’s parlor.

Arthur stood staring at the closed door for a blank moment and then burst out laughing and followed Abigail in time
to hear her wail, “But how will I know? Of course I have more sense than to receive unsuitable people, but how can I know from a card who is who?”

“You can peek through the curtains,” Arthur said mischievously. “Oh no, that won’t work. The library does not look out on the drive.” Both women turned toward him, and he caught at his chest dramatically as if something had struck him in the heart. “Ah!” he cried. “If looks could kill, I would be stretched cold on the floor.”

“And so you deserve to be,” Violet remarked severely, although both she and Abigail were laughing. “But in a way Arthur is right, my dear,” she said turning to Abigail. “I do not think anyone unsuitable would call, which is what he means. After all, I am sure everyone knows that Hilda is still living at Rutupiae, and she would warn you if… But when I think about it that will not serve. Hilda is entirely too particular. She would not receive a number of local families I think you should know and would enjoy knowing. I will make a list for you. Arthur, be useful. Amuse Abigail until I have noted down the names.”

“Delighted,” Arthur responded promptly. “I only wish all your schemes for making me useful were as agreeable. Come, let us sit here—”

“Not here,” Violet protested. “You know I will be drawn into your conversation if you stay here. Go away. Go walk in the woods for half an hour.”

Smiling, Arthur obediently opened the door and led Abigail out. “What is your wish, my lady?” he asked, with a provocative smile. “Shall we walk in the woods?”

“No, this riding skirt is not at all comfortable for walking,” Abigail replied absently, still thinking of the subject of visitors and realizing that her free time would be much restricted once she became part of the social life of the area. “Let’s sit in the library,” she said.

“Is that because you think we are less likely to be disturbed there or because you are strongly drawn to books?” Arthur teased.

Abigail flashed a glance at him. Did he know what her relationship with books really was? If so, it had not prevented him from asking her to marry him. However, it might easily have been a chance remark. “If you want the truth,” she said pertly, “I find library furniture more comfortable than the stiff, spindly pieces in drawing rooms.” But the emphasis on books had reminded her of letters she had received from several booksellers in London about the volumes she had ordered, and suddenly she saw a solution to the problem she and Arthur had not yet had a chance to discuss.

“You have made a total conquest of my mother,” Arthur remarked, as they settled onto a sofa.

“She has made a conquest of me,” Abigail replied, smiling. “And you deserve a scolding for giving me so false an impression of her. You left me believing she was a sour-mouthed Tartar.”

“Only because you jumped down my throat so fast I never had a chance to explain,” Arthur pointed out with a spurious air of indignation. But then he frowned and said seriously, “She isn’t sour-mouthed, Abigail, and she isn’t a Tartar, but what I said is true nonetheless. It…my love, you have no idea how happy it made me to see that there was real liking between you. It would break my heart to destroy it, and yet I…I am not willing to forgo loving you.” He took her hand. “Beloved, will you not reconsider and marry me?”

Abigail shook her head nervously. “Don’t be angry with me, Arthur. I will not marry again.” She smiled pleadingly. “Not even to please Violet. But something did occur to me. Jameson asked me to arrange with Mr. Deedes for certain changes in the terms of payment for the leases of two tenants. I was going to write, but…but I could go and speak with Deedes instead.”

“Why the devil doesn’t Jameson write to Deedes himself?” Arthur asked, saying the first thing that came into his head while he wondered what was wrong with him. Only yesterday he had decided the situation was just as he wished, and now, before he thought, he had again urged Abigail to marry him.

Abigail stared at him, thinking his instincts as a landlord had made him miss the significance of what she had said.
She wondered if it would be necessary to state what she meant in cruder terms as she explained, “Because the subject came up before Lord Lydden died but when he was too weak to be troubled, and Eustace refused to agree to the changes. Jameson felt Eustace might have already told Deedes to stick to the letter of lease. That was why I felt I should go to London myself rather than write.”

“It will be hot as the hinges of hell in London,” Arthur remarked.

“Good,” Abigail retorted, quite annoyed with the lack of understanding Arthur was showing. “Then perhaps I will thaw out. You do not seem to realize that it is much warmer in America than it is in England.”

“And what am I to do while you are gone?” Arthur asked. “Visit friends?”

Abigail was torn between the desire to flounce out of the room in disgust and tell him in the lowest language she knew what the real intention of her trip to London was, until she realized she had also misunderstood him. “If you think that would be best,” she agreed, with a half smile, “but is there no political business that would take you to London? I prefer to tell as few lies as possible.”

“It would not be difficult to arrange,” Arthur said thoughtfully.

His voice was flat because his mind was working on several different levels at once. Most directly, he was thinking that he would ride over to Stour and speak to Roger, who could easily arrange to have one of his friends in the government ask Arthur to come to Town for a day to discuss something or other. At the same time, he was wondering whether that would be enough to deceive Bertram. Arthur was still worried about Bertram being in love with Abigail and did not want him to be tormented by thinking about them together. And he was also wondering if the separation would make his mother less perceptive about the change in his relationship with Abigail.

Over all these practical considerations hung a delicate veil of joy and expectation. Often, hearing those friends who had married for love speak about their brides, he had wondered why they did not immediately take what they seemed so much to desire. Now he knew. If the best chance in the world to make love to Abigail had presented itself at that very moment, he would have resisted the temptation in order to retain the vision he had of a perfect time and place with leisure to sit and talk, to laugh and love, and no need to part and pretend in their separate homes that no momentous event had occurred.

“You do not seem very happy,” Abigail said, a tremor of uncertainty in her voice.

He moved closer and drew her into his arms. “You are wrong,” he murmured, and kissed her nose and then her chin. “If I could live at yours? Or were you intending that we stay at the same hotel? Perhaps you have heard that there is much freedom with regard to affairs of the heart in the British upper classes? That is not untrue, but discretion is necessary. One may not flaunt one’s love with impunity.”

“But I—”

He silenced her with another brief kiss. “Abigail, it does not matter whether you were about to say ‘I don’t care’ or ‘I will not be hurting anyone’. The second, oddly enough, is not considered an excuse and is a cause for even closer scrutiny by the tattling old cats. And even if you were willing to endure ostracism, it would hurt me to see you left out and ignored. More important, you must think of Victor and Daphne. How do you think Victor would like hearing his mother called ‘whore’ at school? And although Daphne is only nine, memories are long in our ingrown society. Are you willing to take the chance that she will be tainted by your reputation?”

She was staring at him with horror, and he shook his head. “I did not mean to frighten you to death, love, nor certainly to frighten you enough to back away from me. As long as you maintain a decent decorum, I swear to you
there will be no consequences. In fact, the hint of a romantic intrigue will make you even more desirable as a guest. Abigail, I love you. I want you. But I would not take you if I thought it would hurt you, or your children. Trust me, my love.”

Abigail let out her breath in a long sigh and allowed her head to fall onto his shoulder, listening with only half an ear to his plans. They betrayed again what she already knew, that Arthur was an old hand at such arrangements. She could, indeed, trust him to cover their tracks, but she had her first quiver of doubt regarding the absolute wisdom of clinging to her independence. She pushed it away. If necessary she could live without any man, but she could not allow herself to become less than a slave to one again.

Whatever uneasiness Abigail continued to feel throughout the following week was buried under new impressions and occupations. The first thing Abigail discovered was that the flood of welcome now descending on her was not spontaneous but the direct result of Violet’s formal dinner. Many more people came than had been invited, of course, because those who had received invitations told others, and everyone was curious about Francis’ American-born bride now that Violet St. Eyre’s approval had guaranteed her respectability.

Abigail was grateful for Violet’s list. Some of the visitors, often those whom Hilda approved with nods and smiles of satisfaction, were very tedious but their names were never on the list. Those who were listed sometimes caused Hilda to rise and leave the room, but they were the ones Abigail found most interesting.

She did not see Arthur again until the night of Violet’s party. Returning the visits had taken all her free time. She could have spread out the chore, but she wanted to complete these obligatory calls as soon as possible, partly because she was aware that she would be leaving for London soon after the dinner and partly because she had been successful in discovering who among those who had come to make her acquaintance had children of ages suitable to be playmates for Daphne and Victor. It was these families with whom Abigail was eager to become friendly, although she knew she must return visits in strict order of precedence. Violet’s advice was again invaluable, and she managed to accomplish both purposes so that, to their intense joy, Daphne and Victor now had acquaintances of their own ages.

On Thursday evening as she was dressing to go to Stonar, Abigail had another qualm of uncertainty about refusing Arthur’s proposals and becoming his mistress. She realized it was only owing to Violet’s kindness that she was able to look forward not only to this enjoyable evening but to many others, for notes of invitation to similar dinners and entertainments were now delivered each day. Violet’s kindness also extended through every aspect of Abigail’s life. It did not seem fair to repay that kindness by frustrating Violet’s dearest desire, which was not to keep her son for herself, as Abigail had once suspected, but to see him married and with an heir. Abigail had discovered that it was not moral indignation that fueled Violet’s disapproval of her son’s love affairs but the fact that they diverted him from the need for a wife.

The discovery came quite naturally during a discussion Abigail had initiated by commenting about how easily Victor seemed to have absorbed not only the idea of being an earl but a semblance of the correct behavior, adding that he might be imitating Arthur.

“I wish Arthur did have a son to imitate him,” Violet said, her face suddenly looking older and very worried. “Oh, it isn’t because I have any silly fancies like Hilda about inheritance in the direct line. It’s just that my poor darling Joseph will hate being the head of the family so much. The St. Eyres have always been political, and Joseph isn’t. He is quite a brilliant farmer. He is actually growing very rich out of farming and pig breeding. Arthur laughs, but it is quite as important as politics.”

Although Abigail did not agree and did not really think Violet believed her own words, she realized they had been spoken out of Violet’s love for her younger son. She had murmured something soothing about it not mattering if Joseph did not take the usual seat in the House of Commons and play his part in the political scene.

“No,” Violet had replied, “he will do it, because he has such a very strong sense of duty, but he will be miserable. And the worst of it is that the misery is likely to spread down to another generation because little Joseph is not being brought up right—at least not right insofar as being Sir Joseph of Stonar Magna. Oh, my dear, I am so worried about that boy. Naturally, Joseph encourages his son to be interested in his own estate; he must do so, but if Arthur lives to a good age, it is little Joseph who may inherit, and his son may prefer farming and breeding pigs to politics by that
time."

Abigail had laughed aloud, and after a moment’s surprise, Violet had joined her. It was a funny perspective, generations of pig breeders struggling with their own disinclination to be members of Parliament. But as she sat before her dressing table while her maid twitched a curl here and there to touch her forehead and cheek and set a sparkling comb into the high knot of hair from which three long curls fell over her right shoulder, Abigail did not feel at all like laughing. Although she had told herself there could be no permanence in her love affair with Arthur, Abigail had certainly envisioned the period as being one of years rather than months—and the proposals of marriage she had received indicated that Arthur did not take the affair lightly either. But the longer Arthur was content with her, the more fixed would become his disinclination for marriage.

Almost certainly he would find a moment tonight to tell her what he had arranged. Should she refuse to go? How could she explain her refusal? It was impossible to tell Arthur the true reason. He would be furious with Violet because no matter what she said, Abigail was sure he would believe Violet had told the story deliberately to interfere with their affair. And if she said she was afraid of being compromised, he would just ask her to marry him again and be furious with her if she refused.

“You are lovely, madam.”

The soft voice of the country-bred maid was full of admiration, but Abigail smiled at her largely out of relief for having her train of thought broken. She had felt her eyes pricking with tears at the notion that Arthur would be hurt and angry. She would think of a way, she promised herself, to allow them to part as friends, but that would be impossible if she denied him completely. In any case, she thought, smiling involuntarily as her eyes caught her image in the cheval glass, he would kill her if she said no to him while wearing this dress.

There was something to be said for London modistes over American ones, Abigail decided as she examined herself more carefully. The blue-violet of her underslip not only matched her eyes and brought out the color of her dark red hair, but was of a soft and clinging silk, cut barely to cover the nipples of her breasts and mold itself to every lush curve of her body. There were no sleeves or straps; the slip was prevented from leaving her naked to the high waist, where it was tightened with gathers and ribbons just under her breasts, by being attached to a silver gauze overdress so thin as to be nearly transparent. It was that “nearly” that made the gown enchanting rather than vulgar, for the sparkling overdress swirled about her like smoke, blurring the outlines of her bare shoulders, arms and breasts, masking what the underslip revealed.

Berating herself for being so disgustingly vain, but nonetheless feeling more cheerful, Abigail went down to the drawing room where Hilda was waiting, and Griselda, who had probably been waiting until Abigail came down, entered the room nearly on Abigail’s heels. At the sight of Griselda, Abigail’s spirit took another upward leap. Probably for the first time in her life, Griselda was becomingly dressed. Abigail had never ceased to be irritated by the inappropriateness of Griselda’s clothes. What was more, she guessed that Griselda was aware that the gowns she wore made the worst rather than the best of her, and consequently was even shyer and more awkward.

There had previously been no opportunity to interfere, but the dinner party provided one and, having lain in wait for Griselda and forced her to acknowledge that her mother ordered all her dresses for her, Abigail had ruthlessly dragged her faintly protesting sister-in-law into Sandwich and ordered an evening dress made for her. Most of the trouble seemed to be caused by Hilda’s delusion that she was—or at least could appear to be—a young matron. This she carried over onto Griselda, dressing her daughter in the pallid pastel shades, ruffles and flounces suitable to a very young girl.

At any age such styles must have looked silly on so tall and gawky a girl as Griselda. Now, in her mid-twenties, they made her pathetic and ridiculous. That she knew it was proved by the gown she chose for herself—after considerable urging from Abigail. The color was a soft, dusty rose, the fabric a dull, flowing silk crepe, and the style plain, the low bodice tucked into narrow pleats over the breast, which continued over the shoulder to the back, the pleats being held in place by a thin band of gold ribbon. The skirt, like the bodice, was edged in gold and had some simple but attractive gold embroidery around the hem. It was almost straight, with just enough fullness so it would not impede walking, and fell into a demi-train. The color of the gown warmed Griselda’s pale complexion, the pleats filled in her rather flat bosom, and the straight fall of the skirt made her statuesque rather than too tall and awkward. Moreover, as she walked, the trained pulled the dress back just a little, outlining provocatively the long line of her
thighs.

“How lovely you look, Griselda!” Abigail exclaimed as she came in.

“Lovely!” Hilda screeched. “She looks like an old woman. She—”

“No,” Abigail interrupted firmly, “she looks like a very handsome young woman—not a girl, but a young woman. That dress is my gift to Griselda. I like it. And in any case, it is too late for her to change. The carriage is already waiting, and I do not choose to be late to a dinner at which I am the principal guest.”

“I am Griselda’s mother,” Hilda screamed. “I know what is right for her.”

Abigail raised her brows. “And I am the mistress of Rutupiae Hall until Victor brings home a bride. I am now going out to the carriage. You may come with me, you may walk to Stonar Magna, or you may miss the dinner. The carriage will not wait for Griselda to change, nor will I permit it to come back for you. And I will not take you without her. A mother who knows what is best for her daughter would not think of leaving her if she ‘felt too ill’ to attend a party in honor of her sister-in-law.”

Chapter Fourteen

Having said she was leaving for the party, Abigail turned and suited the action to the words, abandoning Griselda to whatever fate she chose for herself. Before she had reached the front door, Griselda was beside her. The girl’s face was pallid, and her eyes wide and blind with terror. She marched forward as if she were going to her execution—but she went. However, in her agitation she had left the door to the drawing room open, and a screech like that of an outraged harpy followed her out. Griselda jerked as if she had been hit. Empson flung open the front door, and Abigail propelled Griselda through it and into the carriage, but she did not give the order to start the horses. As a businesswoman, Abigail had a fair acquaintance with bullies, and she knew that it was characteristic of them not only to torment those weaker than themselves but to knuckle under to those stronger.

True to her expectations, the door had hardly closed when Empson opened it again to tell the coachman to wait, and only a few minutes later Hilda herself came out and was helped into the carriage. Of course, Abigail had not looked far enough ahead. She had not had to live with the bullies she had successfully confronted over business matters. One advantage had been gained. Hilda’s wrath was so completely directed at Abigail that Griselda escaped entirely. Fortunately, arrival at Stonar Magna stopped Hilda’s tirade, but her furious glare was fixed on Abigail as they entered to face their host and hostess, who both exclaimed in surprised pleasure over Griselda’s appearance.

As they offered their formal welcome, Arthur glanced once more at Griselda, who was edging away from them, then looked at Abigail, and seemed to choke on his next remark. Although Violet had been equally surprised by Griselda’s appearance, she was no more than well pleased by Abigail’s, since it did not arouse in her the sexual response it woke in her frustrated son. Acutely, she guessed at the cause of Hilda’s thundercloud appearance, and throwing herself bravely into the breach, she managed to engage Hilda in conversation for several minutes, even involving her in greeting the next group of guests to arrive.

By then, Griselda had disappeared into the drawing room, but from the corner of her eye Violet saw Leonie and Roger St. Eyre together with Lord and Lady Kevern, who had arrived only a moment earlier, advancing with obvious purpose on Abigail. Violet cast her eyes up to heaven in silent prayer but without much hope. Damn Hilda, she thought. If it had not been for her, she could have warned them to stay off American politics. Now the fat was going to be dumped into the fire.

“So you are the American,” Leonie cried, immediately proving Violet’s worst fears to be true. “Alors, but I am glad to meet you! You will tell my Roger the États-Unis is not a greedy beast seeking to swallow Canada. C’est vrai, n’est pas?”

“That is not a civil greeting, Leonie,” Roger remarked, laughing. “One does not say one is glad to meet a person because of that person’s nationality. It implies one would not care for the person if her background was different, and I will tell you that I would be glad to meet Lady Lydden no matter from what country she came.”

“Lecher,” Leonie whispered, quite audibly. “Keep your hands off or I will scratch out your pretty blue eyes.”
“Leonie, you will drive me mad!” Roger exclaimed. “Is this a time and place for such foolery? Poor Lady Lydden —”

Abigail’s attention was drawn away from whatever else Roger was about to say by a gentle hand laid on her arm.

“Do please forgive my foster parents.” The voice was as soft as the touch, and Abigail turned toward a beautiful silver-blond woman. “I am Sabrina Moreton, and this is my husband, Perce. I suppose I should have said Lord and Lady Kevern, but I would be glad if you would call us Sabrina and Perce. I want to assure you that despite all appearances to the contrary, my cousin Leonie and her husband, Roger, are not quarreling.”

“Oh, I knew that,” Abigail said, smiling at Sabrina. “If I looked a trifle dazed, it was because your cousin seemed so approving of my being born in America. Everyone else regards it as if it were a rather unmentionable disease.” She turned the smile on Leonie. “Is…how do I address—?”

“You call me Leonie, or Lady Leonie, and Roger just Roger or Mr. St. Eyre if you wish to keep him at arm’s length —but I see already there is no need. Dear Arthur will protect you. As to why I am Lady and he not Lord, it is a long story, not now worth telling. And you understand, I am sure, that it is not only for being American that I am glad to meet you. You are very beautiful and,” Leonie winked broadly at her, “you are cleverer than most pretty women. Nor, I must tell you at once, am I a republican. Not at all! I say pouf to a silly government where each two years they change the head of state.”

“Every four years,” Abigail put in quickly as Leonie paused to take breath. “It is the representatives, those who sit in what is like the House of Commons, who are elected every two years!”

“You see,” Leonie said triumphantly, looking from Roger to Perce, “I said she was not a fool, this one, that she would know more than the inside of her kitchen and drawing room.”

“Yes, well, I agree,” Perce put in blandly, “but I think we should stop blocking the passage and go into the drawing room. And if you would stop talking for five minutes, Leonie, you might even get the answers you want.”

“The perfect diplomat,” Sabrina murmured, touching her husband’s hand affectionately as they moved into the drawing room.

Momentarily recalled to a concern for Griselda, Abigail looked around for her and discovered that she had taken refuge beside Bertram, who seemed to have kindly drawn her into conversation. Relieved of responsibility, at least temporarily, Abigail returned her attention to Sabrina’s remark.

“I understand,” she said, “that it is a necessary skill for a diplomat to know when to use a feather and when a hammer.”

The blank stare, which had made Abigail wonder how so exquisite a woman as Sabrina had come not only to marry but clearly to love a man who looked to be not much better than an idiot, focused on her for a brief flash. In that instant, Abigail recognized the keen intelligence behind what she now realized was a carefully cultivated vacuity of expression.

“That’s very true, Lady Lydden,” Perce drawled. “Odd thing for a woman to say, though.”

“That is an even odder thing for you to say,” Abigail riposted. “You cannot tell me your wife or Lady Leonie do not know as much or more.”

“Certainly,” Perce agreed promptly. Then he added with extreme gravity, “Have to say it, even if it weren’t true, you know. In their presence, you know. Get my ears pinned back for implyin’ they were ignorant.”

Abigail sputtered into laughter while both Leonie and Sabrina accused Perce of having a depraved and evil sense of humor. He had spoken so seriously that all of them had given him their full attention, not realizing he was teasing until the whole statement had been made.

But before the rest of them had quite finished laughing, Leonie cocked her head at an inquiring angle and asked,
“Mon vieux, appeler un chat un chat. Why do you try to draw us from the topic of America?”

“Belle mère,” Perce replied with good-humored exasperation, “it is impossible to do anything but call a spade a spade in your presence. The answer is, I do not know, but when you spoke, I saw an expression on Violet’s face that said this was a subject that should be avoided.”

“That’s because of me,” Abigail offered.

Apologies immediately flowed from all her companions, who assured her that they knew she was not really American but a British subject from a respectable, landed family.

Abigail laughed. “I am not sensitive about being called an American. That is not why Violet did not wish the subject raised.” Having stopped, she realized she had said both too much and too little and could not let the matter rest there. “I-I lose my temper,” she added, and then shrugged helplessly. Seeing she had only made matters worse, she finished defiantly, “I may be British, but I do not approve of the British position or of many of their actions in this war.”

“You do not think we should fight Bonaparte?” Roger asked neutrally.

“Bonaparte? What has Bonaparte to do with the war?” Abigail caught their amazement and shook her head. “I meant the American war.”

“It was not of our making,” Roger said quietly.

Abigail opened her mouth, and then closed it and smiled with great deliberation. “It is a silly subject. Instead, let me say how very pleased I am to have this opportunity to meet you. Arthur has mentioned all of you, and do forgive me for not asking sooner, you must see that I tend to get carried away, I wish you would call me Abigail instead of Lady Lydden. Having been called Mistress Lydden for so many years, I feel rather a usurper—and besides, every time you say Lady Lydden, Hilda looks at us.”

“My,” Sabrina commented with admiration, “that was almost as masterly as one of Perce’s divagations. Did you promise Violet not to discuss the American war?”

“Now that is very wise if you are going to talk to Angela Vernon or Mrs. Basingstoke,” Leonie put in, nodding approvingly. “They would be shocked and angry if you did not wave the flag and cheer for any tactic that would reconquer what they still think of as the rebel colonies.”

“This is assuming they realize either that the so-called war of liberation is over or that there is a new war going on with America,” Roger put in with a shrug.

Leonie frowned at him and made a shushing gesture. “In fact,” she continued, turning back to Abigail, “they would doubtless call you a rebel and most likely cut you dead the next time they saw you. But you need not worry about us, ma petite. Not that we will agree with you. Pas du tout. Perhaps we will even shout at you, but we will love you all the better for speaking your mind and never, never cut you dead.”

“Does it not occur to you, my beloved Leonie,” Perce said with a grin, “that what Violet might have been trying to avoid was a shouting match about the American war in her drawing room? I would imagine the argument must surely apprise just such persons as Angela Vernon, who is entering the room, and others of her ilk of Abigail’s unpopular opinions.”

“Bien sûr,” Leonie agreed. “Do you think I am such a fool as to shout at Abigail in Violet’s drawing room? I will take her home with me or visit in her home if I wish to scream at her.”

There was a moment of silence in which Perce and Roger both smiled fondly at her, and then Lady Vernon reached them and was introduced. She obviously knew Abigail’s background, but Roger’s remark about her seemed well deserved, for her conversation with Abigail did, indeed, smack of the sophisticate condescending to the poor little colonial. Mrs. Basingstoke was more of the same. Neither, as Roger had implied, seemed to realize that America had become an independent nation or that the Americans were at war with the British. They commented unfavorably on
American fashions and manners and required Abigail to agree that she was relieved and delighted by her removal from the wilderness. Violet had followed them, but she quickly abandoned Abigail to divert Hilda from joining Bertram and Griselda when she saw that Abigail was struggling with mirth rather than temper.

Fortunately, before she disgraced herself, Lady Vernon and Mrs. Basingstoke were replaced by Mrs. Cowper and Lady Walters. These two ladies were even more removed from any scenes of life larger than those in their dressing rooms and nurseries, but Abigail found no difficulty in talking about clothing and children, although from time to time she cast a brief, longing glance at the Keverns and St. Eyres. But they, too, were engaged in small talk. Perce, Roger and Arthur had tried to coalesce, but they had been reprimanded and driven apart to do their duty now that all the guests had arrived.

Dinner was soon served and partial relief from boredom was at hand, for, as guest of honor, Abigail was seated at Arthur’s right hand. Unfortunately, protocol seated Hilda at his left and Lord Vernon on Abigail’s other side. The time Arthur was able to devote to her was delightful, although obviously he could say nothing about their trip to London at the dinner table. Nonetheless, a brief glance and touch said enough. Abigail knew the arrangements had been made. She felt herself flush slightly with excitement, just as she was required to turn to her other partner. This move left her time to think. It was not that Lord Vernon neglected to give her his attention. Indeed, he seemed ready to devote all his time to her, but his interest was exhibited solely by trying to look down her dress to see what little the garment did not reveal, Abigail found him somewhat heavy at hand.

But when Violet gathered her ladies to leave the men to their wine, the worst was over. Abigail knew she was approved, there was a word and smile for her from all the ladies, but most of them clearly found her less interesting than their cronies. The usual cliques gathered, with Violet moving from one to the other for a few tactful words, but Sabrina and Leonie came directly to Abigail.

Sabrina said softly, “Would you mind telling me what you know about the war, Abigail? Perce and I expect to be returning to Russia soon as part of the embassy there. Do you know the name Count Rumiantsev?”

“Indeed I do,” Abigail replied. Could the mission the Keverns were to go on be related to the mediation of peace by the Russians despite what Arthur had said? “He is the Russian chancellor and has proposed that the tsar try to find terms of agreement to end the war.”

Looking rather startled, Sabrina asked, “Is that generally known in America?”

Abigail frowned. “Yes. Well, I believe so. The story was published in the NationalIntelligencer and other newspapers.” Then she smiled. “Of course, we have our Lord and Lady Vernons and Mr. and Mrs. Basingstokes, too. There are none so blind and deaf as those who will not hear or see.”

“And what was the reaction?” Leonie asked.

“It would depend upon what part of the country,” Abigail replied, “but I believe it was generally favorable. I know that President Madison and his Cabinet are very strongly in favor of the mediation.”

“There!” Leonie commented forcefully. “I have said from the beginning that the Americans do not want Canada. What would they want with a large, cold wilderness? They have more than enough of their own since Jefferson bought Louisiana from the French.”

“Certainly no one in the New England states wants Canada,” Abigail agreed carefully, “and if there were such ambitions in some of the western states, like Ohio, I think they have reconsidered.”

“Is this all general knowledge?” Sabrina asked. “I mean are you sure the desire for peace is serious?”

“I have a better source than most,” Abigail confessed, smiling. “The Secretary of the Treasury, which is the most important office next to that of the President, is my trustee and dear friend. In fact, that is how I know President Madison is totally committed to the Russian mediation. He is sending Mr. Albert Gallatin to join Mr. Adams, the Russian ambassador, and several others to be commissioners to negotiate the peace.”

“To Russia?” Leonie asked. Simultaneously Sabrina repeated, “Is sending. Forgive me, Abigail, and do not answer
if you do not wish, but surely this is...er...not an ordinary, chatty piece of news.”

“No, but Albert had to explain that he could no longer manage my property, and he knows how eagerly I desire peace, so he wrote what he knew I would feel was good news.”

“But it is not!” Leonie exclaimed. “How could the President assume England would agree? I know the offer of mediation was refused firmly last winter.”

“The Americans were not interested last winter, either,” Abigail said. “It was only in the early spring, before I left New York, that the President accepted Dashkov’s suggestion. I am sure it was hinted by the Russians that this government had also reconsidered.”

“Not at all—and there is no chance they ever will,” Sabrina said.

“That is disgusting!” Abigail exploded. “But your fine armies will do you no good in America. If you think that you can win a war, you are very wrong!”

“Hush!” Leonie whispered. “Remember, we promised not to shout in Violet’s drawing room.”

“I am sorry I raised my voice.” Abigail spoke more quietly, but her color was high and her eyes blazing. “But I am not at all sorry for what I said. If the English government believes the United States can be conquered, they are utter fools. It could not be done thirty years ago, and the population has now nearly doubled. There will be no pitched battles with your red-coated soldiers, but little boys as well as grown men will shoot them from behind the trees. They will all fight—even the women.”

“We had heard that the New England states might rather welcome us.”

The male voice behind her made Abigail start. She was surprised that the men had spent so little time with the wine and thought she saw some looks of discontent cast at Arthur—but not from Roger, who had placed a hand affectionately on his wife’s shoulder, or from Perce, who came around the sofa on which she and Sabrina were sitting to stand in front of her. But she was not about to back down and looked boldly up into Perce’s face.

“You heard that from that blithering idiot Francis Jackson, I suppose,” Abigail said. “New England opposed declaring war, but not, I assure you, because they wish to accept colonial status. They will fight as hard as any other to keep England out. I cannot imagine how such blind fools obtain appointments in the diplomatic service. Does the government wish to be misinformed?”

“Certainly,” Arthur said, grinning. “It is dangerous and costly but far preferable to needing to think about something unpleasant.” Then he looked at his family reprovingly. “Who set her on fire this time? I warn you, she has a flammable disposition. She told me so herself.”

“Be quiet, Arthur,” Roger said seriously. “Abigail has something to say that is worth hearing. My dear, we are not baiting you, and I agree wholeheartedly that Jackson’s manner is not conciliating—”

“To say the least,” Abigail interrupted. “And that is all wrong for dealing with Americans. Because he was sympathetic, Mr. Erskine obtained a most useful agreement. And if your government had not issued threats and deadlines through Mr. Baker after the news of the cancellation of the Orders in Council—”

“The American government is as much at fault,” Arthur cut her off loudly, “and no better at appointing diplomats. Your Mr. Russell could not wait to get his bags packed and brush the soil of Britain from his heels.”

“And I do not blame him!” Abigail’s voice rose also. “Since the only replies he received to the second, more moderate message the President sent concerning grounds for revoking the declaration of war was that it was ‘more covert and therefore more objectionable’, what had he to stay for?”

“Children!” Leonie cried. “The drawing room is neutral ground. Sheathe your weapons.”

“Let us abandon the subject of who is to blame,” Roger suggested. “It is too late to worry about that now. I am really
interested in why Abigail is so sure the New England states are as opposed to making peace as the western states.”

“Opposed to making peace? Not at all!” Abigail exclaimed. “I do not think any of the states are opposed to making peace. I was just telling Sabrina that Mr. Gallatin is leaving—no, he must have already left—for Russia to be part of a commission to make peace. But Sabrina said that England was not willing to make peace.”

“No, we have misunderstood each other,” Sabrina said. “I meant there was no chance the Russian offer of mediation would be accepted.”

Abigail looked from one face to another. “Is that not the same thing? Now that Bonaparte is so much weaker, does not the British government think it can crush the United States completely?”

“Bonaparte may be weaker,” Perce put in, “but I don’t think anyone discounts his ability to produce surprises. What I think you fail to understand, Abigail, is that the British refusal of Russian mediation has little to do with not wanting peace. What Britain does not want is the Russians meddling in her affairs. Tsar Alexander may be opposed to Bonaparte, but that does not mean he likes the English—and Rumiantsev comes near to loathing us.”

Abigail caught the implication at once. “Can you mean that the whole offer to mediate peace was an attempt by Count Rumiantsev to make trouble?”

“Heaven knows what he has in mind,” Perce said. “But no, I do not mean to leave you with the impression that Rumiantsev is mad or that he does not wish to help America if he can. He is, in fact, a most astute person. The offer to mediate peace comes from two causes. The first is simple. Russia and almost every other nation in the world wish to see British maritime power curbed.”

“Well, that is certainly unfair, but—”

“Do you want to understand what is happening or don’t you?” Arthur challenged. “Listen for a minute.”

“Sorry,” Abigail said meekly.

Perce laughed. “I do tend to run on, and this is a dinner party. Why don’t we—”

“Please,” Abigail urged, “I am not being polite. I am truly interested. One of my dearest friends has set out on a long and dangerous mission. Please tell me why it must be useless.”

The sincerity in Abigail’s voice convinced Perce. It also startled Arthur. One of her “dearest friends”? What did that mean? And about whom was she speaking? In all their conversations, she had never mentioned any deep regret for a friend left behind.

“The second reason Rumiantsev offered Russian mediation is very complex because it involves both Tsar Alexander’s personality and the form of the Russian government.” He watched Abigail’s face, but it was absorbed and intent. Clearly she had been honest when she said she was interested. “England is a monarchy,” he went on, “but the government, with the agreement of Parliament, really holds the power, not the king. In Russia the tsar still rules absolutely. Often our poor king—or at present the regent—dislikes the ministers with whom he must work. This can cause some difficulty, and compromises are made, but the tsar need make no compromises. If he becomes disillusioned with a minister, the minister is dismissed.”

“Are you oversimplifying, Perce,” Roger said.

Perce nodded. “A little, but not in any way that will affect what I am trying to explain to Abigail. For reasons that would take far too long to detail, Count Rumiantsev has lost much of Alexander’s confidence. On the other hand, Rumiantsev is an old man, partly crippled by a stroke, and Alexander is too kind to take away his office. Tsar Alexander is a good man. He has high ideals. He sees himself at this time as the savior of Europe. The result is that Rumiantsev hopes that he can provide his master with an opportunity to mediate a peace with the western continent, thereby allowing him to think of himself as the savior not only of Europe but of the world. Thus, he will reestablish himself in his master’s good opinion.”
Abigail shrugged. “So his purposes have an element of selfishness. I cannot see that as a valid reason to throw away an opportunity to end a stupid, useless war.”

“Ah, but you have forgotten the primary reason Rumiantsev has, the envy of Britain’s maritime power,” Roger pointed out. “A mediator must be neutral, and I am afraid, Alexander is not neutral about British maritime strength. Since it is principally maritime problems that are the basis of the present conflict——”

“What you mean is that England is afraid the tsar will agree with America,” Abigail interrupted.

“Afraid?” Arthur snapped. “It is not a question of fear. The British do not choose to wash family linen in public.”

“The United States,” Abigail snapped back, “is no longer part of the British ‘family’. Perhaps if you could get that through your thick heads, a great deal of trouble could be avoided.”

“Abigail has a good point,” Violet said calmly before Arthur could reply at the top of his lungs, which he clearly intended. She joined their circle and seated herself in an armchair opposite Leonie. “I have always said there are few heads thicker than those of the men at the head of the government. It is probably either a necessary or an acquired condition. So many brickbats are thrown at their heads. Doubtless they get hard from the constant pounding.”

Everyone laughed, and the tension dissipated. “But the problem remains,” Abigail sighed. “To say the government has thick heads and should think in a way they do not will not end the war.”

“I do not know what will end it if the Americans insist on Russian mediation.” Roger shook his head.

“What does that mean, Roger?” Arthur asked. “Is the government willing to negotiate directly?”

“I cannot give an absolute answer, but I know they would consider direct negotiations seriously, whereas they will fight until doomsday rather than let Tsar Alexander mediate.”

“Well, what would your dear friend say to that?” Arthur asked Abigail aggressively. “I think perhaps your ‘dear friend’ on the peace commission would be afraid to negotiate without a biased mediator to support him.”

The emphasis on “dear friend” almost wiped the importance of the political discussion from Abigail’s mind. Arthur’s jealousy brought his role as lover to the forefront of Abigail’s mind, and she answered him without heat. “I don’t know. I don’t think Albert would object to direct negotiations, but the decision is not his, and unless he knows there is that possibility… I don’t understand how matters got to this state. Why has your government not made clear to Count Rumiantsev that you will not negotiate through Russia?”

“My dear,” Perce said, “we have tried our best to make it clear. I believe Lord Cathcart has all but shouted in his ear and drummed on the table. What is more, we have communicated our unwillingness directly to the tsar. You said yourself there are none so deaf as those who will not hear. Perhaps Rumiantsev believes he can convince us, or perhaps it only suits his purposes to feed Alexander’s vanity with American applications for his help.”

“You mean you think Rumiantsev is not telling Mr. Adams the truth?” Abigail asked.

“Unless it is Mr. Adams who does not wish to hear,” Arthur remarked.

Abigail shook her head and smiled wryly. “Oh, no. If there is bad news, Mr. Adams will hear it. He is a very good man and a very clever man, but not at all a cheerful one.”

“You seem to know everyone in the government,” Roger commented.

“No, only those who lived in the New England states and who are readers. You see, most of them would stop in New York on the way home from Philadelphia or, more recently, Washington, and they would come to buy books from—from my father’s favorite bookseller.”

Abigail was appalled at what she had almost let slip and became much more cautious about answering other questions. In fact, she took much less part in the conversation, which quickly moved to Wellington’s maneuvers in
Spain and what Bonaparte’s answer would be when Metternich presented an offer of mediation on relatively generous terms, the dissolution of the Duchy of Warsaw, the liberation of Hamburg, the withdrawal of all French troops from Prussia’s territory, and the restoration of Dalmatia to Austria. Abigail listened without close attention while Arthur protested that Bonaparte must be deposed because he would keep any treaty he signed only until he had gathered strength enough to break it, and Perce shrugged and said he did not think it mattered what terms were offered, because Bonaparte was contemptuous of the forces ranged against him and would not accept terms.

It was these subjects, Abigail saw, that were of primary significance to everyone except herself. Perce and Sabrina had been curious about the war with America because of Russia’s interest in it, not because the war itself was important. From the rapidity with which the subject was dropped when she did not keep the discussion going, it was clear that the American war was considered by the English little more than a nuisance. What was more, that was almost certainly the government attitude, because Perce, Roger and Arthur were not common country squires. Arthur was an active Member of Parliament, Perce was in the diplomatic service, and Roger, who held no official position, was clearly—from the way he spoke about Lord Liverpool—a close and influential friend of the prime minister.

Abigail felt oddly resentful at the indifference exhibited toward the United States. Would it help Albert, she wondered, to know how unimportant American affairs were to the British government? He was so clever. Could he possibly manipulate some advantage to America out of the British neglect? Then she was shocked at her thoughts. She was British herself. How could she consider passing information to the enemy? The enemy? Dear Albert and Hannah and all her other friends were now enemies? Nonsense. Besides, anything that would help to bring peace would be of as great advantage to England as to the United States.

Chapter Fifteen

By the time Abigail set out for London, the idea that had come to her the evening of the dinner party had become a firm conviction. The more she learned about the war against Bonaparte, the clearer it became that food and other commodities from America were necessary and the depredations made by American privateers on British shipping were damaging, although by no means crippling. Thus, if she could supply information that would sooner bring peace, she would not be a traitor but a patriot.

Not that Abigail was thinking about war and peace—except in personal terms—when the Rutupiae carriage took her into Sandwich, where a post chaise was waiting to carry her to London. Although she looked calm, she was shaking inside with a mixture of nervousness and relief. The relief stemmed from escaping Hilda, the nervousness came from doubts about what she was doing. It had seemed very simple, almost innocent, when she suggested to Arthur that they meet in London. Now it did not seem simple at all. It seemed quite dreadful to set out deliberately to live with a man she had known for only a few weeks, a man she had no intentions of marrying.

To add to her fear and uncertainty, Arthur had, to her mind, behaved very strangely. Instead of telling her what he had arranged, he had insisted on her setting an exact date for her departure and choosing a hotel at which she would arrive. He had made the whole thing sound so exciting and inviting that she had not uttered a single protest—and then he had disappeared. When she had ridden over later in the afternoon to obtain more information, Violet told her that Arthur had been called away suddenly over some political matter. Abigail could see, however, that Violet was angry and embarrassed, and she realized Arthur’s mother believed he had set off in pursuit of a woman. This, of course, made Abigail even more uncomfortable since she was aware of the reasons for Violet’s anger and knew, though Violet did not, that she was the cause. She might not have gone at all, except for three reasons. The most important was that she had delayed the discussion of the leases with Mr. Deedes too long to leave the matter to a letter. Quarter Day was 24 June. The method of payment must be settled well before then. Secondly, she knew that if she did not obtain some relief from Hilda’s berating her for inspiring rebellion in Griselda and nagging at Griselda for disobedience and unfilial behavior, she would doubtless do something quite unforgivable—like murder. Not that she knew which one she would murder. Hilda was unbearable, but Griselda asked to be stepped on by never fighting back.

Least important in rational terms, but a strong driving force to Abigail, was that there was no way to tell Arthur she was not coming. She had no address for him, and she was afraid and ashamed to ask Violet. Perhaps he did not deserve the courtesy—he had, after all, been dreadfully high-handed with her—but she simply could not bear to
disappoint him. It seemed cowardly and unfair. She did not need to go through with the assignation, she told herself. She could stay in a hotel, one or another would have rooms for her in this slack season. And she did have business to transact with Mr. Deedes and with a number of booksellers, particularly Lackington, and also with Alexander Baring, who, Anne Louisa had written, would be in Town for a few days.

But what she would say to Arthur, she had no idea. It would be impossible to invite him to her room in the hotel, of course, and she was much afraid he would not accept her refusal passively. She shuddered at the idea of a loud quarrel in the lobby. Nonetheless, she must refuse. It was too crude, too forward… Abigail had a sudden memory of lifting herself along Arthur’s body that day when a playful gesture had gone too far, and she shuddered again, but for a different reason. Must she refuse? No, she would not decide—not yet.

Realizing she had again been around the track of a treadmill in which she seemed to be imprisoned, Abigail resolved she would not think about it anymore and opened Sense and Sensibility, a novel she had been intending to read for some time. However, because she had been in this state for several days, now certain she would not fall in with Arthur’s arrangements, whatever they were, now wavering indecisively toward the opposite point of view, she had slept poorly. The post chaise was a luxurious one, but the road from Sandwich to Canterbury was not in prime condition, so that the carriage swayed about. Thus, despite her feeling that Miss Jane Austen had written something superior to any similar work she had read, Abigail was soon asleep.

She woke when the horses and postilions were changed at Faversham, but did not elect to leave the chaise. Her nap had refreshed her, and she intended to have luncheon at the next stop, which would be at Gad’s Hill. Mr. Deedes had recommended the Sir John Falstaff as quieter and more convenient than the posting inns in Rochester, and Abigail had liked it very much when she stopped there on the way from London to Rutupiae. The road from Canterbury to London was one of the best in England. Abigail again opened Sense and Sensibility and was soon utterly absorbed in the problems of the Dashwoods. She was actually startled when the carriage rattled to a halt and looked up from her book with bemused eyes to see the door open and Arthur waiting to help her down.

Fortunately she reacted automatically to the hand held out to assist her, making it seem as if she had expected to be met. Arthur smiled at her brilliantly, and the innkeeper, who had come out, bowed and assured her that Mrs. Luvve’s private parlor was ready for her. The name struck her dumb momentarily but just as she was about to ask a stupid question, Arthur said, “I hope you were not too nervous doing the first two stages alone, my love, but it would have meant another two days if I had come all the way home, and you know we could not afford the time.” His remark filled up the few last seconds until he could lead her to the private parlor and close the door. There, Abigail still had no opportunity to speak, because he caught her in his arms and kissed her.

“My darling, were you frightened?” he asked as he lifted his lips from hers. “I would have met you at Sandwich, but I was afraid your coachman or groom might catch sight of me, and so many of the postilions from Sandwich know me that I did not want to wait for you at Faversham. Will you forgive me for making you travel alone?”

“I’m not frightened,” she replied, feeling dazed, “only surprised.” And then she remembered what the landlord had called her and began to laugh. “Oh, Arthur, what a name! How could you?”

He laughed too, but he continued to hold her against him. “It was your fault, really,” he said. “You gave me so little time. I left for Town right after I spoke to you and drove all night. Then I had to find an agent who did not know me—which was not so very simple because, in the first place, I had never rented a house in my life and hadn’t the faintest idea of how to go about it, and then I discovered there are not very many men who deal with houses in suitable parts of London, and many of them are agents for people I know. By the time I obtained the name of a man I did not know without giving away why I wanted it, I was so addled that when he asked my name all I could think was that I was doing this for love—and obviously I couldn’t hesitate when asked for my name—so I said love. At least I made him spell it L-u-v-v-e.”

“Poor Arthur,” Abigail murmured.

His arms tightened around her, and then relaxed. “I must let you go. The innkeeper will be in here in a moment with our food, and I am afraid he would think it odd for a husband to be so passionate. But I was afraid you would not come, Abigail. I knew you must have a thousand doubts and second thoughts. I love you.”
Abigail felt like singing with joy and bursting into tears at the same moment. He had countered every objection she could have made before she mentioned it, and her body had turned traitor the moment he touched her. If she believed him, there was nothing high-handed about what he had done. It was she who had convinced herself that he had already made arrangements, yet how could he have done so before she had told him when she would go to London? What could be more thoughtful than to come to meet her because he feared she might be afraid to travel alone and to judge so carefully the first spot he could join her without any chance of damaging her reputation? And how could she worry about his thinking her crude and forward when he held her so tenderly and said he was afraid she would not come?

Nonetheless Abigail could not help suspecting he had made arrangements earlier and disappeared deliberately after she set a date so that she would not have a chance to protest or back out of her bargain. And could he possibly believe she would be afraid to travel a major post road during the day, or was his arrival at this midway point another device to prevent her from changing her mind? Yet if he were so eager for her company as to invent the devices she was imagining, could he think ill of her? Or were all the devices, even the tender uncertainty in his face at this moment, well-practiced procedures? Other women must have had doubts also.

He had her face cupped in his hand, and he leaned forward and barely touched her lips. “Abigail?”

What did it matter? Abigail asked herself as the warm fullness of his mouth brought a response from hers that instantly flooded through her body. The trouble he had taken proved his kindness. Whatever he thought of her he would keep to himself—and it was she who had rejected marriage. She was a hopeless fool to allow herself to become so serious and dramatic.

“I did have second thoughts,” she admitted, and then smiled mischievously at him, “but you have a very strong advocate.”

“Strong advocate? Abigail, you haven’t—”

“Hilda,” she interrupted. “Whenever my purpose wavered, she was right there telling me I had turned her daughter into a monster and that my own would turn on me and, if she did not cast me out in the snow to starve, would banish me to the cold corner of the room. And—”

The door opened, and the landlord brought in a tray of cold, sliced meats, cheeses and other tempting morsels, thin-cut bread and butter, a pitcher of lemonade and a large pitcher of ale. A maid followed with a tea service and glasses. Arthur seated Abigail and himself and permitted the maid to serve them. He had been laughing at her description of Hilda’s behavior, but his eyes were wary, and when the maid left the room, he shook his head at Abigail.

“That was very clever, darling, but you should not have done it.”

“What in the world do you mean?” Abigail asked, so surprised that her glass of lemonade remained suspended halfway to her mouth.

“Did you not get that dress for Griselda just to make Hilda so angry she would not pry to discover where you would be staying in London?”

“No!” Abigail exclaimed indignantly. “What a disgusting, devious mind you think I have. And how could you believe me so cruel as to use Griselda for my purposes. She is a person, not a thing.”

“But it was not cruel,” Arthur protested, and put down his ale to touch her hand. “It was a kindness that would serve a double purpose. Griselda looked lovely—probably for the first time in her life—and she knew it.”

“I am not as clever as you think,” Abigail said. “I simply could not bear to look at the girl in one of those yellow or blue abominations her mother makes her wear.” Then she looked down at her plate. “I-I did not think of needing an address. I did not expect to be away long enough for anyone to wish to write.”

“That is no problem,” Arthur assured her. “You can send a note to the hotel saying you will be staying there one night, and they will hold any letters that come for you. And you can change the date if you like. They are
accustomed to that.” He was silent for a moment and then leaned forward to touch her cheek. “Come, my love, I have not changed into a monster. Eat your lunch. You may say no to me at any time. I love you, Abigail.”

“I do not wish to say no,” she replied in a small voice. “But for all my bold words, I think I am ashamed.”

He held out his hand and she put hers into it. “I will make an honest woman of you at any moment you desire,” he told her, smiling.

Abigail shook her head, but she was comforted and turned to her meal with better appetite. They talked of general matters, politics—avoiding the war with America—and the estate, and when they left the inn, Arthur did not come into the chaise with her, choosing to ride alongside until it was necessary to change horses again. By then, Abigail had been traveling for eight hours, less the hour and a half spent in the inn, and she was tired. It was remarkably comforting to have Arthur’s strong arm around her to steady her against the occasional jolting of the carriage and to rest her head on his shoulder, particularly when it got quite dark and began to rain hard. She did not realize that she had fallen asleep again or how deeply she had slept—right through the noise of London streets and the clatter of the wheels on cobblestones—until she was wakened by Arthur’s kiss and his voice telling her they had arrived.

She was again too dazed to do more than accept passively when he helped her from the carriage and into the shelter of an umbrella held solicitously over her by a tall footman. The door was wide open and a golden glow of light stretched a welcoming carpet toward her. Arthur laughed at her gently because she stared around with so much surprise as he led her quickly into a small but well-appointed parlor, where he tenderly undid her bonnet and removed it.

“Shall I take you up to your room now, or would you like a few minutes to come awake, my love? Or a glass of wine or cup of tea? I have coffee in the house, but you will have to instruct the cook how to make it, so I cannot offer you any now.”

Abigail blinked. It seemed odd to rush upstairs the moment they got into the house, but she realized she had given Arthur reason to believe she was wavering. He might think that once they had been together, she would feel it was too late to worry anymore. Although she was faintly repelled by the notion of making love all dusty and tired from traveling, she felt she owed him ease of mind and agreed to go up at once. And then almost laughed aloud at her stupidity when she saw the maid waiting in her bedchamber with water and towels.

“I hope you will find it comfortable,” Arthur said, as he opened the door for her. “It is not very large, but you do have a dressing room. My room is just through that door.” He gestured, kissed her brow and added, “Don’t dress for dinner tonight, Abigail. I know you are tired. I will go and get clean now and leave you to do the same.”

“Thank you, my love,” she said, “I am rather tired. If you do not mind, I will make it an early night.” And then turning to the maid, said, “Just pour the water. Then go and tell Cook we will be ready to eat in half an hour.”

When Abigail had washed and the maid had recombed her hair, she discovered she was not at all tired and that she was at ease for the first time in days. She was not certain whether that was because the house felt like home, whether Arthur’s unvarying consideration for her had at last convinced her to trust him, or whether her own final commitment had brought her peace. The house certainly played a role. It was just about the size of the Williams Street house in New York, and the furniture, more sturdy than elegant and used without too much care by many tenants, also had a familiar feel to it. But the sympathy in Arthur’s smile when she said she was tired and would make an early night, which might easily have meant she would not invite him to her bed, had also helped.

On the other hand, his thoughtfulness also posed a problem because it placed on Abigail the responsibility for making the first move again. However, she found that passed over with ease also. As she came down the stairs, Arthur said, “You look very much better now, my dear,” and she only needed to reply, “I feel much better, not at all tired now.” It was all very comfortable. They talked during dinner about Abigail’s children. Arthur had told her a few days earlier that there would be a place for Victor at Westminster, but they had had no time to discuss the matter. Now Abigail said that the vicar was sure Victor would have no trouble in keeping up with the work, and they went on to talk of what the boy would need to take to school.

Arthur did not stay at the table to drink when the meal was over but brought his second glass of wine with him into
the parlor, where he asked about Daphne. While Abigail answered that Violet had suggested Lady Eleanor Holles’,
which happened to be the school one of Daphne’s new friends attended and that she had written to secure a place for
her daughter, she thought gratefully that Arthur was not making the mistake of drinking too much. Far too often
Francis had promised much and performed little because he was too sodden with wine. Drink, Abigail had learned,
inflames the mind but incapacitates the body.

The clock chimed ten. “Shall I ring for the butler?” Abigail asked. “Do you want some tea?” and then more
hesitantly, “Or a glass of brandy?”

Arthur chuckled, rose from his chair, and extended a hand to help her from hers. “Do you think my courage needs
support?” And then, more softly, “Does yours?”

Abigail shook her bent head mutely, and Arthur lifted her face so he could place a quick, light kiss on her lips. “Go
up now, my love,” he said gently. “I will just tell the servants that they may close the house.”

The words were so ordinary, so much what a husband would say to a wife, that the quiver of nervousness Abigail
had felt, although she denied it, quieted. Nonetheless, she undressed very quickly and sent the maid away, fearing
that Arthur would come in while the girl was in the room. Not that there was anything wrong with a husband
entering his wife’s room while her maid was there, but Abigail felt awkward about it. As the door closed, she
regretted what she had done. Waiting alone in the dark would be worse, she thought, but the idea had hardly formed
before the door to Arthur’s room opened and he stepped through.

The night candle he carried lit his face and showed that his hair was tumbled out of its usual smoothly combed style.
Plainly he had undressed as quickly as she. Abigail smiled and drew breath to speak, but never got a word out. She
had not realized Arthur could move so fast. Nonetheless, he had set down the candle, closed her mouth with his
own, and pulled off the light coverlet to expose her before she could say anything. As his body came down against
hers, the dressing gown he was wearing fell open, fell away, and she realized that he was naked under it.

Startled by what almost seemed like an attack, Abigail stiffened, afraid he would mount her and take her before she
was ready. However, for a moment nothing more happened, Arthur simply held the whole length of her body against
his while he kissed her hungrily. As her surprise dissipated, excitement followed in its wake. The lack of large
movements in their bodies seemed to generate an abnormal sensitivity in her. She could feel the rise and fall of
Arthur’s chest when he breathed, the tiny trembling of the muscles of his abdomen and thighs, the heat and pressure
of his hard staff between them.

She was flooded by a desire more urgent and more violent than she had ever felt with Francis. Her arms went around
him, one hand tracing the barely perceptible ridges of his spine, the other scratching gently at the backs of his legs
and probing between them. A deep, muffled sound rose from his throat and he bucked against her, his arms
tightening their grip until Abigail could scarcely breathe. In the next instant, he had let her go, pulled back, seized
her nightdress and brutally ripped it away from her body.

Abigail gasped with surprise and gasped again as he lowered his face to her breasts. His violence had made her
expect him to bite her, but instead his tongue licked out, passing over one nipple and then over the other, the
movement of his head from side to side so swift that the sensation seemed continuous. Abigail began to shake with
need. She pulled at him, too lost in desire to find words for what she wanted, but words were not necessary. Arthur
came astride her, arching his body so that his mouth did not leave her breasts. She felt for him, positioned him,
embracing him with her legs and tightening them about him fiercely as he thrust to drive himself deep, deep.

She heard him saying something, groaning, but she could not listen, could not wait. She heaved against him, flexing
and relaxing her legs, feeling him begin to move in rhythm, his body shuddering as he fought to hold back a climax
that could not be controlled because she drove him faster and harder and would not let him be still. But it did not
matter, for in the same moment that he cried out despairingly, her own voice rose, choked and savage, as ecstasy
tore her apart.

For a moment after she felt nothing beyond the slow waves of receding pleasure, then a sense of surprise stole over
her at her actions. Francis had loved her and had tried to please her. Before she had learned despair, she had learned
to enjoy his lovemaking, she had welcomed it, but never in the way she had urged Arthur. Fortunately, before shame
could follow surprise, he spoke.

“Dream woman,” he sighed, “dream woman. Are you real? If I let you go, will you disappear?”

Relief from the fear she had shocked or disgusted him made Abigail mischievous. She grasped his head and held it where it was, buried in her neck. “Who is your dream woman?” she whispered so that the sound of her voice could not betray her. “Say my name, O clever man who can utter praise that any woman might accept as her own.”

“Honi soit qui mal y pense,” Arthur said, laughter and indignation mingling in his voice. “I am innocent. Your name is Abigail, and you have a dreadful, suspicious character.”

“Perhaps so,” she agreed, letting go of his head and chuckling, “but I doubt that you have been innocent for a very long time, and by all accounts, my suspicions are justifiable.”

He slid off her but continued to hold her so that their bodies touched. “I do not know who has been telling you tales,” he complained, “but if anyone claims I like women in droves, it is a lie. I have many faults, but being that kind of fool is not one of them.”

Abigail snuggled contentedly against him. “Well,” she admitted, smiling, “Hilda told me you were a rake and a lecher, but to do what she claimed, you would have had to start at about three years of age—and even at that, I doubt you would have had time to eat or sleep.”

He chuckled and hugged her, rubbing his cheek affectionately against the top of her head.

“No,” Abigail went on, serious now, “it was you who told me, Arthur. The tone of your voice, the way you look at a woman—not obscenely, I have had looks enough like that and they are repellent, not exciting. I cannot describe it, but you are…practiced…skilled.”

He was silent for a while and then said, “I will not try to tell you there has never been another woman, but I hope you will believe that I am not merely going without feeling through a well-worn routine. Abigail, I have never before thought of staying in the same house with any woman. In fact, the idea was always revolting to me.” There was another little silence before he added, rather huskily, “And I have never in my life behaved as I did to you. I could not wait, and I was sick with fear afterward that I had hurt you or frightened you, but it was done before I could stop myself.”

For a moment Abigail was puzzled and then realized he was referring to the way he had torn off her nightgown. “I shall be sure in the future not to place any impediments in your way,” she said, smiling into his shoulder, “and I am glad to hear that it is not a necessary preliminary, for obviously it would grow quite expensive.”

He could not help laughing, but he drew her still closer and murmured, “Dream woman. Any other would have pouted at me even if she were not really angry. You are perfect. You even felt my need and answered it.”

They lay embraced for a few moments longer, but it was warm in the room, and Abigail became aware of the damp stickiness of the perspiration caused by their violent activity. She pulled away a trifle. Arthur sighed, but did not try to hold her, turning flat on his back. Perversely, the moment they were separated, Abigail felt chilly. She sat up, intending to reach for the coverlet Arthur had tossed to the foot of the bed, but the light from the night candle he had not bothered to blow out sent a gleam across his sweat-shiny skin that attracted her eyes.

The dim glow highlighted his strong neck and the swelling muscles of his shoulders and biceps. There was less definition of the musculature of his broad chest because the light was dim and the curly light brown hair, growing in a wide V to the navel, obscured the strong curve of the pectorals. Still, Abigail could make out a deep shadow, emphasized by the sparser growth of hair. His hips were narrow, his belly flat and also lightly ridged with muscle.

Abigail blinked sleepily, wondering idly how a man whose main interests seemed to be politics and women kept his body so hard, then smiled, remembering that gentlemanly pursuits included much riding, driving and walking—the first two of which, at least, took strength—and even such activities as fencing and boxing. A faint movement in the deep shadow between Arthur’s strong thighs made her half-closed eyes widen, and she turned to find him, not asleep as she had thought but looking at her. A hand reached out and pulled her down.
“And do you like what you see?” he whispered into her ear, pressing her against him so that she could feel his hardening shaft rising against her.

As he spoke, one of the arms that held her slid down her body in a silent, sensuous appeal. An automatic protest rose to Abigail’s lips, but she did not utter it. Much to her surprise, a lazy response stirred in her. Nonetheless, she knew that if Arthur expected another explosion of passion from her, he would be disappointed.

She felt his mouth on her hair and raised her face for his kiss, but before their lips met she whispered, “Do not expect too much of me. I have never been so—so quick or—or so eager before, and I do not think—”

He did not let her finish and did not answer because his mouth was busy with more interesting activities than making words, and his hands played with assured skill over her body, producing an exquisite effect. Since he had praised rather than been shocked by her earlier uninhibited response, Abigail felt freer with Arthur than she ever had with Francis. She explored him with hands and mouth too, touching, scratching, kissing—fascinated and excited by his soft moans of pleasure, by his pleas to her to continue and to desist so intermingled that it was clear he wanted both simultaneously, and by his spontaneous sensual movements.

It was a very different lovemaking—long and lingering. And although climax again came almost as soon as Arthur mounted her, it came in rolling waves of pleasure rather than with tearing violence. Abigail had completely forgotten her last words before they began their love play, but when they were at peace Arthur suddenly laughed. She made a sleepy, inquiring sound, too tired to ask a question in words.

“You see, there was nothing to ‘think’ about,” he whispered in her ear naughtily. “First you shelled the nut with a good hard blow, and then you brought out the meat, whole and perfect.”

Chapter Sixteen

Having been married for many years, the feel of a man’s body beside her in the bed was comforting to Abigail. She turned in her sleep and threw an arm across the broad, warm male chest and a leg over his hips. What had been comforting to Abigail, however, spelled danger to Arthur. Ordinarily, he did not dare allow himself to fall asleep in the bed of a mistress lest he sleep too long and a maid or jealous husband find him there. Thus, when her movement woke him and he saw light through the ill-fitting curtains, he almost leapt out of bed. Panic sent his heart, pounding fiercely, right up into his throat, but he controlled his first impulse long enough to look at the woman beside him—whereupon he sighed and relaxed.

The tensing of his body communicated itself to Abigail, who tightened her grip a little and murmured a wordless sound meant to reassure an uneasy sleeper. Her confidence sent a tide of joy through him. It was another proof of her innocence—no woman who cheated in love could be so indifferent to who lay beside her. But that was the least of his pleasure. He had never thought that Abigail was other than faithful. The lift in his spirits was on his own account, generated by the knowledge that there was, at least for now, no need for concealment, no need to creep out of this warm bed, struggle into clammy clothes, and steal out into a chill, damp morning. He sighed with satisfaction. There was no need even to remove to his own room. Abigail’s embrace told him he was welcome to lie with her as long as he liked, that she was indifferent to the custom that sent a man back into his own solitary bed after the act of love was over.

Idly he wondered why the custom had begun, and then smiled at himself. In so many of the marriages made these days both husband and wife desired as little of their mates’ company as was possible. Arthur drew back his head just enough to see Abigail’s face. No, he could not imagine ever wishing to see less of it, not so much because it was beautiful as because, even smoothed and motionless in sleep, it was full of her character—little lines of laughter around her mouth and at the corners of her eyes, and two very faint vertical creases between her brows that marked her frowning concentration or fits of fury. The years might take away the beauty, but they could not change what was really Abigail, and he would not tire of that.

He felt a stirring of desire, but she was sleeping so soundly that he did not wish to wake her, and delight made him smile again. There was no need to grab and cram. This sweet would be there for him later in the morning or on the coming night. He shifted his hips to settle her leg more comfortably over him, put his own arm around her, and drifted easily asleep.
It was Abigail’s movement that again wakened him, but this time without anxiety. She was inching her way out of his grasp, plainly intending to get out of bed without disturbing him. Playfully Arthur clutched her tight to him, growling, “And where do you think you are going, me beauty? Tryin’ to escape, eh?”

“Oh, don’t squeeze me,” she gasped. “You’ll find yourself swimming.”

He laughed but let her go at once, and she fled to her dressing room. Then, thinking her idea excellent, he went into his own room and emptied his bladder. Still, by the time Abigail returned, he was lying at ease with his arms behind his head. He noted with amusement that she had not only relieved herself but combed her hair and put on a delicate peignoir.

Lifting an eyebrow, Arthur said, “That was not a very romantic remark for your first greeting to me.”

Abigail sniffed disdainfully at his teasing. “It would have been even less romantic if I got you all wet. Believe me, that was not the moment for sweet nothings. And it was all your fault anyway. I was in such a hurry to get into bed that I didn’t—” She stopped abruptly. Arthur had reached toward her and in shifting from his face to his hand, her eye had been caught by an odd object on his nightstand beside the bed. It was a limp sack of some membrane she did not recognize but of oddly familiar shape. “What is that?” she asked.

Arthur smiled. “It is called a condom, and it is my way of redeeming my promise to you that you would have no reason to regret loving me. Did you think I would be so careless of you, my darling, as to get you with child? There are other ways of preventing it, but I find this the least disturbing to my partner and myself.” He raised his brows at her look of astonishment. “Perhaps I should not have left it there, but I thought you might be familiar with the device. After all, Daphne is nine… Are you displeased?”

“No, of course not,” Abigail replied. “I am grateful. I suppose I was a fool, but I never gave a thought to becoming pregnant.” She shook her head. “I don’t think Francis used such a thing, but I don’t know because we didn’t—” She stopped speaking abruptly again and made a helpless gesture, unable to mention their foreplay in words and feeling uneasy. It was not fair, she thought, to talk about Francis, so inferior in every way to Arthur.

He sat up swiftly and drew her to him, again delighted at what he felt was the perfect balance in her character. More than one of his mistresses had complained to him of his husband, and although he realized it was a way of justifying their relationship and in most cases knew what was said was true, he still found it distasteful. He found it as crude for a woman to denigrate one man to another as for a man to boast of the women who yielded to him. And Abigail’s shyness with regard to talking about their lovemaking he found as charming as it was foolish.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, hugging her gently and affectionately. “I did not mean to pry, only to reassure you.” And then he plucked at her peignoir and asked in a teasing tone, “Why did you put on this silly piece of fluff? Did you not promise to put no more impediments in my way?”

She laughed and pushed him away. “That is not an impediment, it is an expression of vanity. There is less beauty in the naked body than in one partially concealed. And it is too late in the morning to be complaining about impediments. If my maid does not scratch at the door any moment, I will suspect that she is listening outside it.”

Arthur sighed. “That is the horrid truth, and besides I am very hungry. All that exertion makes a man—”

“Out!” Abigail cried, blushing and laughing. “You are shameless and want to make me the same.”

“Yes,” Arthur agreed with sublime simplicity, but he fled the room laughing as she threatened to hit him with a pillow snatched from the bed.

Nonetheless, he was surprised and not terribly pleased to find her setting a full plate down on the table when he entered the breakfast room. Arthur was accustomed to eating alone or with other men, like Bertram, who would not think of expecting him to serve them or of trying to serve him and would allow him to read his newspaper or his mail in peace, unless there was important business that had to be mentioned. In a hardly conscious rejection of her company, he went directly to the sideboard and began to select from the dishes that were there.

Abigail glanced at him and immediately sat down and turned her attention to her food without saying anything at all.
When he had brought his plate to the table and picked up a newspaper from the pile lying there, she silently took another, noting that he had picked up the Morning Post and pleased that it was not the Sun, which was particularly rabid against America. Propping the Times in front of her, she soon became thoroughly absorbed, although there was no very important news, and she was so startled that she barely kept herself from jumping when he spoke.

“Have I yet told you this morning that I love you, Abigail?”

“No, and it is very dear of you to do so, considering that I have invaded your breakfast table,” she replied, smiling. “I beg your pardon, but I was hungry too, and I find it impossible to make a hearty breakfast with a tray balanced on my thighs.”

He smiled back but still looked uncomfortable, and Abigail guessed that the sentence must have been intended to mollify her. She was casting around in her mind for what Arthur thought he had done to annoy her and was just about to assure him that she was as content as he to read the paper without conversation when he asked, “What would you like to do today?”

The source of his unease immediately became clear. Abigail grinned. “I really should demand that you accompany me on a shopping expedition or take me for a stroll in Hyde Park to look at the swans, just to see the look on your face and test your devotion. Unfortunately, such a test of your devotion would be as much of a trial to me as to you. The truth is that I prefer to shop without an impatient or long-suffering man in attendance, and what I really wish to do is to finish the charming book I was reading by Miss Jane Austen. However, if you insist that we suffer together—”

“Tease!” Arthur exclaimed.

“But I did not tease you,” Abigail pointed out, widening her eyes innocently, and then laughed. “I am sure you have business you would like to do now that you are here in London. Please do it. I have my own little business to do—and it is interesting and important to me even if you might find it foolish.”

Abigail had spoken lightly because she did not want Arthur to guess that she had real business to conduct, but then was hoist on her own petard. He believed her, since he had no reason not to, and thus remained doubtful, concerned that she would be bored because there were no other women for her to call on or to visit her, no parties to attend. She then had to assure him vehemently that she truly preferred to have time to herself, fearing that in his kindness he would insist on keeping her company and so prevent her from visiting the booksellers she wished to see and from speaking to Alexander Baring, who, according to Anne Louisa’s letter, would only be in the City that day and the next.

Arthur recognized the sincerity with which she was urging him to amuse himself in his own way and not trouble himself about her, but misinterpreted it completely, assuming that it was for his sake she was insisting they go separate ways. He also realized that if he did not agree to go off, Abigail would not be able to enjoy his company for fear he was not enjoying hers. Thus, he thanked her for her consideration, finished his breakfast, and went out to track down various political acquaintances—such as clerks and secretaries of government departments—who were not fortunate enough to be freed from their work even when Parliament was not in session.

Less than half an hour later, having summoned the carriage hired for her convenience, Abigail, too, was out of the house. Her first call was on Alexander Baring, who came out himself to show her into his office, exclaiming in surprise at seeing her in London.
“Did you write to Anne that you would be here?” he asked. “I cannot remember her mentioning it to me.”

“No,” Abigail replied, “I didn’t expect to be in Town when I last wrote to her,” and explained the business she had with Deedes that had to be completed before Quarter Day quite truthfully except for blaming the innocent Jameson for not telling her early enough to write. “And since I was here and knew you were too, I thought I would ask a favor of you,” she finished.

“Whatever I can do, my dear,” he assured her.

“I will not keep you to that,” Abigail said, shaking her head. “I hope you will not think what I wish is wrong or dangerous, but if you do, you must not do it.”

“Wrong and dangerous?” Baring repeated, undecided whether he should laugh or not. “Whatever in the world are you thinking of, Abigail?”

“I received a letter from Albert Gallatin about a week ago,” she said seriously. “The purpose was to tell me that he was about to transfer my business to me by deed of gift.”

“Why the devil is Gallatin still acting as your trustee?” Baring asked. “He should have made over the property to you as soon as Francis died. A widow can hold property in her own name.”

“Now, Alex,” Abigail protested, “you know Albert would not have held the trust a day longer than legally necessary. I had asked him to remain as trustee after Francis died because I knew I would have to bring Victor and Daphne to England and I wanted him to keep an eye on the business.”

“You should have sold it.” Baring shook his head. “It is ridiculous to try to run a business at the other end of an ocean.”

“Possibly,” Abigail said. She did not agree at all, but she did not want to argue that subject at the moment. “However, that is not what I came to see you about, and I do not want to waste your time. I know you must have more than enough to fill the few days you spend here. The reason Albert felt he had to deed the business back to me was that he cannot look after it. He has been appointed to a peace commission—”

“I know,” Baring interrupted. “He wrote to me also to arrange credit. He is on his way to Russia, it seems.”

“Yes, but I am afraid he does not know—I do not believe anyone in America knows—that the Russian mediation has been rejected and that there is no chance that it will be accepted in the future.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“From Roger St. Eyre and Lord Kevern.” Abigail hesitated and then asked eagerly, “Could they have been mistaken?”

“No,” Baring replied. “I wish Madison were not so set on dealing through the Russians. I know our government will never agree to do so.”

“But Alex,” Abigail said eagerly, “I am not at all sure Madison is set on dealing through the Russians. Do you not see that if Rumiantsev is not telling Mr. Adams the truth about the British rejection of Russian mediation, he may not be telling Lord Cathcart the truth about the American willingness to negotiate directly either? And it is not as if Mr. Adams and Lord Cathcart were likely to be talking to each other. I know Mr. Adams. He will seize on any excuse not to attend a social function and would certainly not go to any attended by Lord Cathcart if he could avoid it. He is simply not the kind to have a friendly chat with the ambassador of a country with which his is at war. That would mean that Chancellor Rumiantsev is the only contact between them.”

“What are you getting at, Abigail?” Baring asked, frowning.

Abigail watched him doubtfully, wondering whether the frown betokened puzzlement, distaste for a woman mixing
herself into politics, or, worse, a feeling that she was being disloyal to England. Nonetheless, she spoke firmly. “Mr. St. Eyre and Lord Kevern said that they believed Lord Castlereagh and Lord Liverpool might be willing to have direct talks with the commission about making peace, but someone must make sure that Albert and Mr. Adams know this possibility exists. If Rumiantsev will not tell them and Lord Cathcart believes they are set on Russian mediation, how are they to find out and request permission from the President to negotiate directly with England?”

“Hmmm.” Baring’s wordless remark was thoughtful, not accusatory.

Relieved, Abigail continued eagerly. “I would gladly write to Albert about it, but what in the world could he in turn write to Mr. Madison—that some woman in England had told him Rumiantsev was lying to them and that the British government would consider direct negotiations? Can you imagine the President’s reaction?”

Baring burst out laughing. “Madison might be one of the few men who would listen. He knows the value of his Dolley. But I see your point, Abigail. Yes indeed, I see your point. I have never known St. Eyre to be wrong when he offers an opinion, but it will be better if I write to Castlereagh and get a statement directly from him. When I have an answer, you may be sure I will write to Gallatin. I must write to him in any case.” He paused and stared thoughtfully past Abigail, then looked rather purposefully at her as he continued slowly, “If for some reason Lord Castlereagh does not wish me to make this communication, I will let you know and…er…I will leave it to your discretion—which I value very highly, my dear—to do as you think best.”

Abigail digested that last remark and the expression that accompanied it with a decided feeling of relief. Nonetheless, after a moment she asked, “You do believe it would be of benefit to England as well as to America to have peace? I know that—that some of my friends think I am prejudiced because of my long residence in America, but it seems to me from what I read in the papers that England also suffers from the limitation of trade.”

“It does indeed,” Baring replied emphatically and without any hesitation. “The loss of the American market for our manufactured products has hurt business, and the depredations of the American privateers is disrupting trade with the West Indies and even South America. Peace would be of considerable benefit to this country.”

Her conscience salved and her determination set to do whatever she could to forward the peace effort, Abigail was now as ready to drop the subject as Baring was. She asked about Baring’s children and told him that her son would also be attending Westminster College when the term began. They chatted for only a few minutes, Abigail being conscious that her friend was a very busy man who would somehow have to make up the time he had spent with her. His parting from her was as friendly as ever, and he pressed her with such cordiality to let him know if she heard any further news that might relate to America that Abigail felt sure Alexander Baring did not regard her visit as a nuisance or a waste.

She drove off in the highest of spirits to Lackington’s bookstore. Having instructed the coachman that she would be some time in the shop, Abigail entered and then stood staring like a bumpkin. It was the sheer size that astounded her. Her shop could have fit into one corner of this huge emporium. The high room was filled from floor to ceiling with shelves of books, and above the large circular counter in the center of the room, the ceiling was open, showing balconies, also filled with books, rising to the roof of the building. However, when she gathered her wits and approached the counter to ask for Mr. Lackington, it soon became apparent that her direct management of her father’s business after his death had aroused a curiosity about her equal to her astonishment.

At first there was a little confusion because she gave her name as Lady Lydden rather than Abigail Lydden. She was told that Mr. Lackington had retired. But when she mentioned her letters and her order of books for America, she was recognized. Mr. Allen, the active partner, came to take her into his office, where she could wait while a messenger went off to tell Mr. Lackington she had arrived.

“But I do not wish to trouble him,” she protested. “I could go to him, if he is elderly or not well. He has been so very kind to me all these years—”

Mr. Allen smiled. “He is not a young man, but, praise God, his health is good. He comes to the shop now and again, particularly when a library has come into our hands, to value the books. I assure you he will enjoy this outing, and I know he wishes to meet you. He has become fond of you over the years, Missus—I mean, Lady Lydden.”
Obviously Mr. Lackington did not live far from his shop, because he came in just at that moment and trotted over quite briskly to kiss her hand and welcome her. He had also heard the tail end of Mr. Allen’s speech, because he smiled at him and said, “It is no doubt only in the United States that one can find a countess who not only manages a bookshop but can read Hebrew and Greek.” Then turning back to Abigail. “I am very pleased to meet you, Lady Lydden.”

“And I to meet you, Mr. Lackington. But why did you not tell me you were retired? There was no need for you to trouble yourself to transmit my orders. I could have written to Mr. Allen—or even to a good clerk.”

“It was no trouble,” he replied, patting her hand. “You had shocks and trouble enough and did not need the added worry that your orders would not be properly filled. It was a pleasure to correspond with so courageous and well educated a lady. And now, what can I do for you?”

“Well, I must arrange for shipping the books I ordered,” Abigail said, “but I would like to impose upon you personally just a little more, Mr. Lackington. I am very much afraid that this terrible, stupid war will grow worse and that trade will be cut off between England and America. You have always advised me most kindly about what to stock. I would like to buy and ship a stock in preparation for such an occurrence. I hope it will not happen, but if it does, my shop will have books to sell—and if it does not,” she finished smiling, “books do not spoil or grow stale, so I will have lost nothing.”

“Some go stale,” Allen remarked wryly.

“Not the ones I recommend,” Lackington said jocularly. Then he said to Abigail, “Let me first show you around the shop. Tastes must be different in America, and also there may be items that you know particular customers would like. Then let me give the matter of stock a little thought. Tomorrow or the next day you can come again, and we will discuss a list.”

There were, Abigail discovered, four more rooms in addition to the large central chamber and balconies that had amazed her. She was completely entranced and had quite a pile of books, as many for herself as for her customers in New York, when Mr. Lackington returned and asked if she would do him the honor of sharing a luncheon with him. She agreed with alacrity, knowing he would enjoy discussing the books she had selected. Actually, they became so lost in their literary conversation that Abigail realized she would not have time to go on to Hatchard’s bookstore, but it did not matter, for she could do that the next day.

Pleasantly tired, Abigail was happy to settle on the sofa with Sense and Sensibility when she arrived at the house on Mount Street. She had hardly begun to read when Arthur arrived and asked guiltily if she had been very bored.

“Not at all,” she responded cheerfully. “I was out all morning also, and have hardly had a chance to open my book.”

Arthur smiled, feeling relieved. He had never understood why women enjoyed ordering and being fitted for clothes. He found going to his tailor an unutterable bore, but he was grateful for the difference between the sexes, and he was grateful that Abigail was not like some women, who demanded male company even to go to a modiste. They said they needed a man’s opinion, but Arthur had always felt it was simply another device to exercise control over the men who believed they ruled the roost. Not that Abigail seemed to want to tie him to her apron strings, he thought. In fact, she seemed quite determined not to place any restrictions on him at all—and oddly, that did not please him as much as it should.

“I am glad you managed to amuse yourself so well,” Arthur said, “but where did you tell the shops to send their bills? I will pay them, of course—”

“Oh, no, you will not,” Abigail exclaimed forcefully. “I do not buy what I cannot afford to pay for myself. You had me at a disadvantage when you offered GoGo. I could not argue with you in front of the grooms and stableboys, and if you will not charge the Lydden estate with her price, I cannot force you. Unfortunately, I am already too fond of her to send her back to you, but you will not catch me unaware again.”

Arthur was somewhat taken aback by her vehemence, into which he could read only one meaning. “I did not mean to offend you, Abigail,” he said apologetically. “You cannot think I am trying to…to buy you. I only want to make
you happy and to express my admiration and affection.”

A good part of Abigail’s violent refusal was owing to her fear that Arthur would discover that she had not been shopping and then would want to know what she had been doing, so she was happy to abandon the topic. She smiled at him and held out her hand. When he took it, she pulled him down toward her so she could kiss him.

“I know that you are not trying to buy me,” she murmured when their lips parted. “I was not offended, but—but it is better for me to pay my own way. Now, sit down and tell me what you have been doing. I am sure that will be much more interesting to me than my activities could be to you.”

Arthur laughed. “You are remarkably fair-minded, my love, but I must say that there is not much of interest to hear. There is, however, a good deal of tense expectation. Metternich is now known to be about to propose that Austria mediate a peace. I believe Perce mentioned that at the dinner.”

“Yes, he did,” Abigail agreed. She was delighted that she had diverted Arthur from her activities and was very willing to discuss Bonaparte or anything else that would interest him. “But I remember too that Perce seemed convinced that Bonaparte would not accept.”

“Oh, he may accept a meeting to discuss a peace,” Arthur said, “because his army is composed of raw recruits and a longer truce may suit his purposes. I think that in the end he will refuse the terms offered—unless those terms are his own. We know what terms the Austrians have agreed to offer, but whether they stick to them or not depends on what happens in Spain. If Wellington wins a major victory there, the agreed terms will be offered, and Austria will almost certainly join Russia and Prussia if Bonaparte does not accept them. Unfortunately, if Wellington should lose or be unable to draw the French into a conclusive battle, Russia and Prussia might agree to even more lenient terms, and Austria’s declaration of war would become much more doubtful.”

“How likely is a victory in Spain?” Abigail asked.

“Quite likely,” Arthur replied. “That is what has everyone chewing his fingernails. Wellington is a brilliant general. He has outflanked the French by getting the army over what were considered impassable roads in the Trás os Montes Mountains, and he has crossed the Ebro with only a few skirmishes that have cost virtually no casualties. But whether he will be able to bring the French to battle in time cannot be known.”

“If Wellington drives the French out of Spain and Austria joins the war,” Abigail remarked thoughtfully, “you will have Bonaparte between the jaws of a pincer. Surely then he will make peace.”

She was thinking that if the war in Europe ended, there would be less need for American grain and cattle to feed the troops in Spain, so England would be less indulgent about allowing trade to continue despite the war. Worse yet, Britain’s navy would no longer be occupied in fighting French ships and keeping European ports blockaded. The full force of the navy could be exerted against American shipping, and the transports, now so busy bringing men to Spain and other places in Europe, could be employed to carry war-hardened veterans to Canada to fight the ill-trained American militiamen.

“I hope not,” Arthur said, surprising her. “Perce is right about Bonaparte only abiding by a treaty as long as it suits his purposes. If we don’t put him down now, when his army is the worst it’s ever been, we’ll have the whole thing to do over again from the beginning. I’ve seen it once already when Mr. Fox signed the Peace of Amiens.” He laughed. “I almost got myself thrown out of the party over that because I talked myself hoarse against making peace. But damn it, I knew Pitt had been right about opposing that peace. Boney only kept it until his army was up to strength and resupplied—and that’s just what he’ll do again if he signs a treaty this time.”

Abigail shook her head. “Is he mad?”

“I don’t know,” Arthur replied seriously. “In the beginning, he wasn’t. Now…I don’t know.” Then he hugged Abigail quickly and stood up. “Enough. Here I am nattering away about war and peace—about which we can do nothing—when what I really came home early for was to tell you I have a box for the theater tonight, if you wish to go.”

Abigail was delighted to agree, but she was less pleased when she learned that she had underestimated Arthur’s guilt
for having left her alone. Not only did he have theater tickets for every evening, but he had given a great deal of thought to amusing her during the day. On the excuse that she must not seem as green as grass when the Season began the following year, he took her to the Tower of London to see the animals and the crown jewels, to the exhibition room at Somerset House to see the paintings, to Bullock’s Museum and the British Museum, and for a sail on the Thames.

In fact, Arthur had so many new plans for each day that Abigail was soon at her wits’ end to escape him. It was not that she had grown tired of his company or was not enjoying herself, she could not remember being so happy at any time in her life, except perhaps for the months when Francis had been courting her. And even then, it had been different. Francis would never have taken her to museums or picture galleries. She and Arthur had much more in common, similar curiosities about the treasures of history and the new science, similar tastes in art and music. It would have been much easier to escape him if she had not been so enthralled with what he had to show her. He felt her real enthusiasm and was stimulated to share with her still other interests.

On the third day in London, Abigail finally made time just before she went to bed to write to her children and to Griselda to say that she found she had to remain in Town some days longer and that they could reach her at Mr. Claridge’s hotel. Then she wrote to Mr. Claridge to hold a room for her for one night on the following Friday, knowing, although her heart sank at the thought, that she really could not remain away from home for more than ten days. She hated to think of parting from Arthur. Their easy companionship was as wonderful and fulfilling as their passionate lovemaking. To be Arthur’s wife would be very different from being Francis’, Abigail thought, and then checked herself sharply—it would be no different in terms of helplessness and frustration. But if the children did not seem to mind her absence too much, perhaps she could stay longer.

She had just finished her note to Mr. Claridge when Arthur, wearing a very grand dressing gown—and not a thing under it, as usual—came through the bedroom and into the dressing room and asked idly, “To whom are you writing, my love?”

From Arthur’s tone, it was clear that the question was meaningless, just the first words that had come into his head as he entered the room. Nonetheless, in the light of her earlier thoughts, it stung her. Now she could answer or refuse to answer, show him the letters or refuse to show them, just as she pleased. Had Arthur been her husband, he would have had the legal right to read anything she wrote, to approve it, alter it, or destroy it—just as he pleased. Abigail’s lips tightened.

“Are you asking to see my letters?”

“No, of course not,” Arthur replied indignantly. “It is an abomination to read other people’s mail.”

“Yes,” Abigail agreed, and then suddenly laughed. How ridiculous to punish Arthur for the world’s sins, with which he, poor man, had very little to do. “I am sorry,” she said. “I was thinking of something unpleasant, and it rubbed off on you.” Then she told him what she had written.

“Friday.” His voice was flat. “Will you really leave so soon?”

Abigail stood up and put her arms around his neck. “You are a very wonderful person, Arthur. You have managed to make me understand that you would very much like me to stay and yet have not urged me to do so.” She kissed him lightly. “Believe me, you do not need to urge me. I want very much to stay. I am sure that Daphne and Griselda will write back. Victor may or may not. Let me see what they say. Perhaps I can stretch the time.”

“Not long enough,” he said softly, pressing her tight all along his aroused body. “It can never be long enough.”

Chapter Seventeen

The first letters Abigail received from home were very cheerful. Victor did not write at all, which was a good sign. He never wrote unless he was unhappy or wanted more spending money. Daphne wrote that she missed her but that Aunt Griselda was “lots of fun”, and if Victor decided to do something “too horrible”—Abigail finally translated this from other clues to mean that Victor had taken out a gun under the tutelage of Vastaly, the gamekeeper—Aunt Griselda always found something truly interesting for her to do. Griselda wrote that the children seemed busy and
happy. Victor and Daphne both had been invited to visit other children and had invited friends to Rutupiae several times. There had been picnics for mixed groups of boys and girls, Daphne had taken several girls to sketch at the old mill, and Victor had taken his friends fishing. Both outings had been great successes. And when they were not busy with their new friends, they explored the estate with Dick or rode with a groom.

Reading not only the words but between the lines, Abigail decided that she need not hurry home. She wrote again, saying that since no crises were impending and she herself was enjoying her stay in London, she would remain in Town a little longer. A note dispatched by a footman to Mr. Claridge altered the date of her reservation, and Arthur’s relief at their reprieve led him to throw the theater tickets in the fire and drag her up to bed at an indecently early hour—which was just as well because they did not actually get to sleep until very late. Had they gone to the theater first, they would not have had a chance to close their eyes before it was time to get up.

They had a few more halcyon days before the footman who went each morning before breakfast to fetch letters, if there were any, from Claridge’s, brought another pair for Abigail from Rutupiae. There was no difference in tone in Daphne’s note. She seemed to be happy—her big news was that Mrs. Franklin was teaching her some elegant new embroidery stitches—and from what she reported of Victor’s doings, he was both learning about and enjoying the people who would be his tenants and dependents in the future. There was, however, something somehow different about Griselda’s letter.

The events she reported were insignificant in themselves. Eustace had returned from his visit. Victor had asked permission to join a friend who was being taught to jump and had been annoyed because Griselda felt she had no right to authorize the activity, which could be dangerous. Daphne was waiting eagerly for her mother because a friend who was an only child was going on a week’s holiday to the seashore and wanted Daphne to accompany her but again, Griselda did not feel empowered to give permission.

Irritated by Griselda’s overanxiety, Abigail was about to write permission for both Victor and Daphne to join their friends when she wondered whether it was overanxiety or whether Griselda knew something about the families that she felt made their children unsuitable friends for hers. Although she knew that Arthur did not like conversation at breakfast, she turned toward him and asked if he knew the Keriells and the Ellingtons.

He lowered the newspaper he was reading and smiled involuntarily, thinking how silly it was to bury himself in the news when he could talk to Abigail. “John Keriell?” he repeated the name of Victor’s friend, frowning as he ran the local gentry through his mind. “Oh yes, by all means let Victor practice jumping with the Keriell boy. The family is sporting mad, and I’m sure Keriell will keep an eye on the boys himself. Now, who was the girl Daphne wants to keep company?”


A shadow crossed Arthur’s face. “Poor child. I have never seen the girl at all, but I know the parents. It would be perfectly safe for Daphne to go if she likes, but I understand the little girl is a cripple and very frail. Will not Daphne be bored?”

“Probably not. She had a friend in New York who was confined to a chair, and they seemed to get along very well. Daphne is a motherly creature. Thank you. I’ll write and tell Griselda to approve both projects.”

Abigail finished her breakfast and then went to the writing table in the parlor to compose her answers to Griselda and Daphne, but she was no longer easy in her mind. It was clear that both families were acceptable. Then why all the fuss? Abigail tried to tell herself that Griselda was simply the kind to make a mountain out of a molehill, but she could not rid herself of the feeling that Griselda wanted her at home and that it had nothing whatsoever to do with Victor’s riding lessons or Daphne’s trip to the seashore. Determinedly she throttled her suspicions. If something had been wrong, Abigail told herself, she would have sensed it in Daphne’s letter first.

Still, when Arthur followed her into the parlor a few minutes later and asked her if she would forgive him for putting off their projected visit to see Carlton House, the prince regent’s residence, she could barely restrain a sigh of relief.

He explained that there was a hint in the paper of “revelations from the Foreign Office concerning a peace”, and went on, “That must mean that Metternich has informed Lord Castlereagh that Bonaparte has agreed to discuss a
treaty or an extended armistice, but I want to obtain the details. I’m sorry to leave you with nothing to do—"

“No,” Abigail said, “don’t apologize. I do have a few things to take care of that I have been putting off every day because I preferred to go sightseeing with you. The splendors of Carlton House will wait for us. I will be glad to get my business out of the way and off my mind.”

Arthur looked at her for just a moment, but she had already turned back to the writing desk and picked up her pen. He was a little hurt. Her remark about putting off her own activities because she preferred his company was flattering, but there had been a sense of relief under the last sentence about getting her business out of the way that implied the business was serious, that possibly it was as much for the business as for him that she had come to London. And it was not the meeting with Deedes. She had made arrangements for extended payments of the rents on the morning after she had written to Rutupiae that she would stay longer in Town.

At the door he glanced back once more at Abigail and had the strangest sensation. Arthur did not read many novels, but his mother did. Occasionally when Violet found an exceptional passage—whether it was exceptionally good or exceptionally silly—she would read it aloud to him. One of the silliest he had heard had been the ravings of a peculiarly idiotic heroine extolling her feelings about seeing the hero. She had said that “her heart turned over in her breast”—and suddenly Arthur had a name for what he felt. Unfortunately, the association of his emotion with that stupid, simpering heroine was so embarrassing that his tenderness for Abigail, which made him hesitate to part from her even for a short time, was immediately replaced with rage.

Quite unaware that Arthur had perceived her relief or any of the emotions that had followed that perception, Abigail concentrated on finishing her letters to Griselda and Daphne as quickly as possible. As soon as they were folded and directed, she ordered the carriage brought around, thanking God that she only had to look for books that were out of print. Anything new she could order by letter directly from the publisher. Hatchard’s was her first stop. The books she had ordered were ready, and Mr. Hatchard was most helpful in directing her to collections that might interest her customers. Still, choosing books takes time, particularly for a lover of them. Abigail had to touch the beautiful bindings, read a line or two. It was after eleven before she was able to finish her browsing and arrange for payment through Barings Bank.

Then she was delayed by Mr. Hatchard’s concern over shipment. He asked whether he should wait for an American vessel, which might at the last minute be forbidden to carry cargo because of the war, or take the chance of sending the books to a neutral port, where they would have the best chance of being transshipped to a vessel ultimately going to New York. Having first mentioned that there would be a shipment from Lackington’s that hopefully would go at the same time, Abigail quickly decided on the latter method. Mr. Hatchard beamed at her, obviously thinking she had greater trust in British ships; however, that was not the reason for Abigail’s decision. She was afraid that the law prohibiting all American trade with Britain, which Mr. Madison had been demanding before she left the United States, might have been already passed, in which case there might not be any American ships available to carry her books.

Her visits to two other booksellers were brief, just to pick up a single book at one and two at the other, but it was just past noon when she arrived at Lackington’s. There she told the clerk that unless Mr. Allen wished to speak to her himself, she could see no reason to trouble him, as she only wanted to make arrangements for shipping the books they were holding for her and making sure they went at the same time with the shipment from Hatchard’s. The clerk was assuring her that he would take care of the matter, when her name was called and she turned to meet Mr. Lackington’s delighted smile.

“No this is a most excellent coincidence,” he said. “I was going to write to you as soon as I had eaten my luncheon. I have just been looking through a recently purchased library—a sad occupation, for its late owner was a longtime customer and friend. However, there are several books you had requested that we did not have on hand. Come, my dear, will you not share my luncheon, and then I will show you the books.”

It was, of course, impossible for Abigail to resist this invitation both out of courtesy and out of curiosity. Nor was it possible to hurry luncheon. Abigail was conscious of the passing time—until she saw the books. Then she could have kissed Mr. Lackington out of gratitude. At first glance she noticed at least a dozen over which several clients would be willing to come to blows and would pay any price named, and there were also many that she coveted for herself. She began to choose and had completely forgotten everything beyond her delight in the treasures before her
until Mr. Lackington returned to take his leave.

Then she realized it was very late and said she herself must go, asking that her selections be divided—those for customers to be shipped with the others going to America, most of the books for herself to be sent to Rutupiae, and a few to be wrapped to take with her to read immediately, Pride and Prejudice, a second novel by Miss Austen published earlier that year, a volume of Goethe’s Dichtung und Wahrheit, and handsome copies of the Bacchae by Euripides and Satyrica by Petronius.

Mr. Lackington had protested when she admitted the books were for herself, and she laughed and agreed that the work by Euripides was no doubt very violent and that by Petronius was probably highly improper—which was why her papa had never permitted her to read them—but she felt she was old enough now. He tut-tutted and shook his head, and she promised, to soothe him, that if she found the material shocking, she would not read on.

By then the clerk sent to summon her carriage came to say it was at the door, and Abigail left for the house on Mount Street, tired but satisfied that she had at last finished her business dealings and could put the affairs of the store out of her mind. She wondered whether Arthur had been able to obtain the information he wanted and hoped his interpretation of the statement in the newspaper was correct, rather than that Bonaparte had actually signed a peace treaty. Peace would be a disaster for America.

Shel was still feeling rather guilty about what she knew were misplaced loyalties when she entered the parlor and found Arthur sitting there idly reading one of the morning’s newspapers. “I am so sorry, Arthur!” she cried. “I was sure you would not come back until dinnertime. Have you been waiting long?”

“I came home for luncheon,” he replied without expression. “Apparently I misunderstood what you said. I thought you only had a few little chores to do.”

“Well, they were only little chores,” she said, feeling dreadfully ashamed of lying to Arthur, “then I stopped in at a bookshop. That is always a disaster for me because I completely lose all sense of time, and Lackington’s is so enormous. I should have known better, but I cannot resist.”

Arthur was surprised at the excuse Abigail offered but felt a tremendous relief. He, too, could lose hours in a bookstore. He grinned at her forgivingly. “You need not look so guilty. There is nothing particularly heinous in visiting a bookshop. It is less ruinous than visiting a modiste, anyway. What did you get?”

Abigail handed him the package, thinking that he had the sweetest disposition. Even Francis, who was very good-humored, might have been irritated if he had been waiting for her for hours, probably with news he wanted to discuss. “I’ll ring for tea,” she said, “or would you like a glass of wine?”

He did not answer her question, but lifted his eyes from the undone package of books and asked, “For whom are these?” as he separated the Goethe, Euripides, and Petronius from the Austen.

“Oh dear,” Abigail sighed, “I had forgotten that you did not approve of redstockings—no, no, I remember, it is bluestockings. I should have told the footman to carry them upstairs, but I had no idea you were here, and I wanted to take a peek at them. I am afraid they are for me, Arthur.”

“You should have looked more carefully before buying them,” he said, his voice icy. “All three are in the original languages.”

Arthur was relieved that his voice had emerged flat and dry, with no hint of the pain he felt. In a violent reaction from his relief he was suddenly sure that Abigail was lying, that her guilty expression when she mentioned the bookshop had covered some other activity. He was so furious that he never wondered what she could have to hide. All he knew was that she could not have spent more than five minutes in the bookshop if she did not have time to notice the books she bought were in foreign languages. Where had she been all day?

“Oh of course they are in the original languages,” Abigail said defiantly, aware that he was annoyed but thinking it was because she was too learned. She was not willing to conceal what her father had taught her as if she were ashamed of it. “One loses so much in translation. I have read some of Goethe’s earlier works, Werther and Iphigenie auf Tauris, and I enjoyed them very much. He is a powerful writer. Bacchae is the only play by Euripides that I have not
read. Papa did not like it. And, of course, he would not have Petronius in the house lest I sneak a look at it, so I
decided, now that I am all grown up and have plenty of time, to discover what Papa was concealing from me.”

“Are you trying to tell me you can read German, Greek, and Latin?” Arthur asked furiously. “I do not believe you.”

“You do not believe me!” Abigail exclaimed, equally furious. “What kind of a fool would I be to lie about a thing
like that?” She took a few steps and snatched one of the books he was still holding out of his hands. Opening the
book at random, she began to read in quite faultless Latin and then translated. “‘Every kiss wounded me, every trick
the depraved woman could invent, and still I did not know whether I was more angry with the boy for taking my
mistress from me or my mistress for corrupting my boy.’”

On the last few words her voice faltered, not because she was uncertain of the translation but because she had
realized what the words meant. Satyrica was not the kind of book to read aloud. She stared angrily at Arthur,
blaming him for her embarrassment as well as for his masculine arrogance, then slammed the book down on the
table and reached for another.

Arthur was equally enraged and embarrassed, not by the sentence Abigail had read or even by her ability to read it—
which implied her ability to read the Greek and German also—but by the stupidity of what he had said. It was
obvious that she would not claim to understand a language if she could not, particularly when a book in that
language was in his hand. His fury at himself reflected back at her, and he did not stop to think that her ability to
read the books she had purchased removed his original cause for anger. Instinctively he yanked away the books.

“Why the devil does any woman need to know all those languages?” he snarled, and threw those he was holding
down on the table.

Although the question obviously acknowledged that Abigail could read the languages, it was scarcely one that was
likely to soothe her. “Why the devil does any man need to know them?” she shrieked. “Women have brains the same
as men and could use them just as well if they were not suffocated at birth. I enjoy reading and thinking, and if you
do not like it—so much the worse for you. You need not remain in my company.”

“Since you are so hot to claim the privileges of an enlightened mind, why don’t you stop behaving as if you
deserved your name,” he snapped.

Abigail knew quite well that Arthur was referring to the fact that the generic name for maidservants was “Abigails”
and that he was accusing her of lacking the proper delicacy and dignity of an upper-class lady. Widening her eyes
into a stare of innocence, she said dulcely, “I cannot imagine what you mean. If you were not so ignorant, you
would know that Abigail is a Hebrew word that translates as ‘my father is joy’. I can see nothing derogatory in being
named Abigail.”

Arthur stared down his high-bridged nose at her for a long moment and then, helplessly, began to laugh. “But I am
not so ignorant that I do not know the meaning of your second name,” he gasped. “Evangeline from the Greek
means ‘bringing good news’. Whoever named you seems to have been very glad to have you—and so am I.” He
reached out and touched her cheek. “Abigail, you are the best news I have ever had in my whole life. Forgive me,
and try to believe that I am not disapproving of your scholarship.”

She shrugged. “Fortunately for me, it does not matter what you think. I can afford to be indifferent to your
disapproval and even to pander to your self-conceit by tucking my books away where you will not see them.”

“But I don’t want you to tuck them away,” he said softly. “I would like to know what you think about Goethe and
Euripides. We do not have to go to the theater or some other place of amusement every evening. We could talk of
books—”

The eyes Abigail turned on him made Arthur drop his hand and step back. “So you can gently guide the strivings of
my feeble female intellect?” Her voice was deadly soft, rich with contempt. “I do not need you to patronize me,
Arthur. It was—and still is—my business to know a great author from a merely good one. I made—and make—my
living by knowing one Greek and Latin and Hebrew text from another. I kept a shop in America—a bookshop—and
my main business was with male scholars, who depended on my opinion and my recommendations for what they
should buy and read. I and my children would have starved, Arthur, and that drunken, useless sot Francis, who was too noble, too high-bred, to serve in a shop, would have starved also, if all those brilliant, scholarly men had not agreed with the recommendations of this ignorant, silly woman and continued to buy from my shop rather than from other booksellers.”

She shrugged again and began to move around the table toward the door, but Arthur caught at her arm and held her. “For God’s sake, Abigail, I didn’t know. I couldn’t know—and anyway I wasn’t patronizing you, damn you. I really would like to know what a sensible woman thinks of Goethe and Euripides. Sometimes women have a completely different outlook on a subject, which sheds new light on it. My mother has pointed out more oversights and stupid errors in government bills than most of my fellow M.P.’s, but Mama doesn’t read—except novels and poetry.”

Abigail was looking at him with a very puzzled expression. “Are you trying to avoid acknowledging what I said about keeping a shop?” she asked. “I understand that shopkeeping is not at all a well-bred activity.”

“No, it’s not,” Arthur replied dryly, “but it’s a more sensible one than starving. I certainly don’t care. In practical terms, I wouldn’t tell Lady Vernon or Mrs. Basingstoke, but Roger and Leonie would enjoy hearing about it. They kept a shop, too—in Paris during the revolution. Roger pretended to be a gunsmith. It wasn’t elegant, but it was better than being guillotined as a traitor or an English spy.” He drew her closer, unhappily aware that although she did not try to fight free of him, there was an inner resistance in her. “Abigail, I love you. I’m sorry I snapped at you when you came in.”

“Men always get annoyed if they have to wait,” she said rather indifferently.

The remark was a reply to Arthur’s apology, but it had little connection with what Abigail was thinking. She could see that Arthur’s statement that he did not care about the shop was only half true. Almost certainly he did not care about her activities while she was in the United States, however, the swift change of subject after comparing her business with Roger and Leonie’s—which doubtless had been gratefully abandoned after they were safe—was significant to Abigail. Plainly he cared too much for her to abandon her because she was in trade, but the fact still made him uncomfortable.

Unaware of Abigail’s thoughts, Arthur answered what she had said. “No, it wasn’t the waiting,” he explained. “It was—I just felt you were eager to get rid of me this morning, and it set me on edge.”

Abigail was surprised that he had been able to pick up her mood and glanced at him, only to be surprised again at the pain she could detect in him despite the controlled neutrality of his expression. She realized for the first time that she must have hurt him, and that made her understand how unfair she was being. Arthur had not meant to hurt her any more than she had meant to hurt him. He could not help the prejudices he had been raised with—either those against women or those against trade. It seemed odd, though, that he should be so vulnerable, considering that she was scarcely the first woman in his life. Then she thought that might be the reason. He might have been hurt in the past by women who had lied to him and used him for purposes that had nothing to do with affection. Sorry for the pain she had unwittingly caused him, Abigail relaxed into the curve of his arm.

“I was glad to have a day to myself,” she admitted gently, “but not because I was eager to be rid of you, Arthur, only because I felt I had better not make my business dealings too obvious. Perhaps I should have told you.”

Arthur was so relieved to feel the resistance fade from her body that he managed to swallow the impulse to ask angrily whether she had come to London to be with him or to order books. He had always been aware when other women used him, and most of the time he was merely amused, sometimes slightly annoyed if he disapproved of the usage. It was different with Abigail. He had been so sure she had devised this plan only to be with him. Worse yet, he was shaken by the knowledge of how close he had come to losing her altogether, and had no wish to test the strength of the bond between them again.

“I’m glad you weren’t so bored with my company that you needed a breath of fresh air,” he said.

Abigail smiled and extricated herself gently from his arms, but she held his hand and squeezed it. “You are never boring, Arthur. I must pay you that compliment and add to it that you are the only young man about whom I have ever been able to say that. Papa was never boring, and a number of the men who used to come to the shop were
willing to talk about interesting things—but they were all graybeards with canes.”

“I am too frightened just now to dare again say I do not believe you,” Arthur said lightly, hoping Abigail would think he was joking and not realize that he was speaking the exact truth, “but were there no gentlemen under ninety who spoke to you?”

“Oh, hundreds,” Abigail replied, going to the bell pull and ringing for a servant. “And many of them would insist that I serve them, even if my clerk was idle. They were amusing for twenty minutes—after all, I am not so unfeminine as to have shed my vanity and it is pleasant to hear oneself praised—but after twenty minutes, few were able to avoid repeating themselves, and then they bored me half to death. Do you want tea or wine, Arthur?”

“Were you often subject to insult?” he asked in a strangled voice.

“Insult?” Abigail repeated, turning to face him. “Oh, no. My dear, you are thinking of the condition of shopgirls in England. In America, I was a person to be respected. A bookseller with a good business—and mine is good, I assure you—is not considered common.” She smiled at him cynically. “Rich businessmen are the nobility of America. I am not really as out of place as a countess as you might think.”

“Don’t put words into my mouth, Abigail,” Arthur snapped, anger at being baited taking the place of hurt.

She laughed aloud as she seated herself. “There!” she said. “You sound much more like yourself. And you still have not told me whether you want wine or tea.”

“Wine,” he growled, just as the footman opened the door, his irritation at her bold admission that she was managing him mingled with amusement. Abigail was never boring, either. By turns she could drive him mad with fear, rage, or love, but never for a moment was she dull. “Yes, wine,” he repeated, and sighed. “I need it.”

Abigail gave the order and then frowned. “I hope that only refers to our personal difference and not to the news you obtained about Metternich and Bonaparte.”

Arthur looked at her blankly for a moment, and then realized that he had come home bursting with excitement to tell her something wonderful. It was his frustration at having no one with whom to share his news that had reminded him of Abigail’s eagerness to go out alone. Remembering what he had heard at the Foreign Office lifted the small cloud that had remained on his spirits, and he smiled.

“No, nothing to do with that,” he said eagerly. “In fact, I will have to ask for another glass so that you can share my wine in celebration. Wellington has won a great victory in Spain. I told you, I think, that he had got his army through the mountains and outflanked the French. They met at a place called Vitoria, and Wellington beat them, took all their guns, and sent them running for France with Bonaparte’s brother Joseph, the puppet king Boney forced on the Spanish, leading the way.”

“Hurrah!” Abigail cried, infected with Arthur’s enthusiasm and forgetting for the moment the effect the victory might have on the American war.

Arthur leaned down and kissed her. “Well, it’s not quite time for hurrahs yet. Bonaparte’s Marshal Suchet is still holding Catalonia, and there are a number of fortress cities still garrisoned by the French. It may be a few weeks more before Wellington can drive for the Pyrenees, but Bonaparte is finished in Spain.”

By the time Arthur was finished talking, the footman had returned with a tea tray and Arthur’s wine. Abigail, who drank very little, said she hoped Arthur would not think her unpatriotic if she drank to Wellington’s success in tea, and Arthur, who correctly associated her distaste for wine with Francis, laughed and replied that it would be most appropriate because the general liked women to be feminine. However, after she took her patriotic sip standing and reseated herself, Abigail had remembered what the end of the war would mean to the United States and remembered that Arthur had originally set out to discover whether or not Bonaparte had accepted Metternich’s offer for Austria to mediate peace.

“Am I right in assuming that Bonaparte knew he had lost Spain and that the article in the paper this morning hinting he agreed to the peace conference was true?” she asked.
“Yes, it was true,” Arthur replied, sitting down beside her and putting his glass on the table, “but I don’t think Bonaparte can have had the news from Spain yet—or at least, he hadn’t had it when he accepted Metternich’s offer. That, I understand, was made on the seventeenth and Vitoria was fought on the twenty-first. Information is slower coming from Paris than from Spain because Wellington sends a courier direct, whereas anything from Paris must go by way of Austria or Prussia.”

“But Bonaparte will have heard of the defeat of his army in Spain, perhaps that the whole country is lost to him, long before the peace conference,” Abigail said. “Do you think that might make him accept the terms offered? I remember that Perce said they were generous.”

Arthur shrugged. “I am not a fortune-teller, but I agree with Perce. If Bonaparte has a grain of sense, of course he will accept.”

Abigail’s heart sank. If Bonaparte made peace now, there would be plenty of time to send the hardened troops that had been fighting in Spain to Canada before the winter storms and before the cold made fighting on the northern front very difficult. It would be safe enough for Lord Liverpool, the prime minister, to send the troops, Abigail thought sadly, because Bonaparte would not make peace if he could restore the strength of his army in less than a year. But even a year of the full power of Britain turned against poor little America might be too long. Not that America would yield and accept colonial status again, but the country might be forced to accept harsh and humiliating peace terms. In turn, these might cause such dissension among the states that the union might be shattered.

Abigail’s worried frown made Arthur ask, “What is it, my dear?”

“But did you not say,” she reminded him anxiously, “that that would be the worst thing for us and for everyone because Bonaparte would only use the peace to rebuild his armies and then find some excuse to break the treaty?”

“Yes, I did,” Arthur replied, “and I am not the only one who feels that way. I have heard that Castlereagh intends to do his best to induce Prussia and Russia to make the terms harsher, but I do not think he can succeed. The trouble is that the Russo-Prussian alliance is very shaky, and they have always complained that the British do not do their part, which makes them resentful of any suggestions. Their response is always that we do the urging and they do the fighting and bleeding.”

“But how can they say that?” Abigail’s voice was now full of indignation. “This is only a small country. We cannot have a large army. We do not have enough men who can be spared from the fields and other business. Our strength is in our navy. And we saved Spain and Portugal single-handedly.”

Arthur smiled at her fervor. He knew now that although Abigail was prejudiced in favor of the United States and had strong republican sentiments, that did not in the least imply any affection or even softness toward Bonaparte. He had learned in other discussions with her that this attitude was owing little to her parents’ influence but much more to the treachery with which Bonaparte had treated American merchants and ship owners, some of whom were her personal friends. Still, he was beginning to think that her attitude was more typical of many Americans and of the government of the United States too, than many men in Parliament could be brought to believe.

“I’m afraid they have never agreed that Portugal and Spain were of great importance,” he pointed out. “And I admit that Portugal is mostly our trading partner. But there is no use in worrying now. The truce between the French and the Russians and Prussians is to be extended until the seventeenth of August. If Castlereagh and Liverpool were not already of my opinion, I might have urged Roger to try to point out to them the dangers of a peace with France, but they will do all they can to prevent it without any prodding. So—”

“Why can you not speak to Castlereagh or Liverpool yourself?” Abigail asked, before he could finish. “Are they so high and mighty that they speak only to other ‘lords’? Are baronets not sufficiently important?”

Arthur laughed aloud, not only because of Abigail’s low opinion of the British social system but also because he suddenly felt very warm and happy. It was clear she was indignant on his behalf because she felt he was wise and important and should be consulted.
“No, no,” he said. “They are not that foolish. You did not attend when I said they would listen to Roger, who, after
al, does not even have the rank of baronet. I’m afraid it is a matter of party, my love, and has little to do with their
opinion of me as an individual. Roger is a Tory, but I am a rebel against family tradition and have embraced the
Whigs—most unwisely as it turns out, for most of the time I have as little sympathy with Whig foreign policy as I
have with the domestic policy of the Tories. Alas,” he admitted comically, “neither party loves me much.”

“Oh, party!” Abigail exclaimed angrily. “That is an even more foolish reason than rank for dismissing good advice.
My friend Albert Gallatin has often been the main target of the most vicious attacks by the Federalists just because
he is so brilliant. I thought this government would be above such petty notions, but I see it is just the same. Just
because you are cleverer than your fellows, I will lay odds your so-called friends look aside while your enemies fall
on you to tear you to pieces.”

The cold stab of jealousy Arthur felt when Abigail spoke of her “friend Albert Gallatin” melted under the warmth of
her ire for his sake. He could not help laughing again at her antiparty ferocity, however, even while he assured her
he was well able to take care of himself and found his mid-parties position very useful.

“They do not love me, but they accredit me as a man of honesty and principle—which I hope I am—and when I
speak, they do listen. I have pushed more than one close vote in the direction I wanted it to go. I have a kind of
power, and though I do not approach the government directly, I have methods of communicating with them.”

“Through Roger.” Abigail nodded and then shrugged. “Every government seems to be the same, more ruled by petty
spites than by large issues, but I suppose if it gets the work done, one should not complain.”

“No doubt women would run it better,” Arthur said slyly, enough recovered now to tease.

“Alas, no,” Abigail confessed, her eyes wide with pretended innocence. “You see, women are human, so when they
are not forced into unnatural behavior, they are very much like men. I do not think you would see a hairsbreadth of
difference in the government if women ran it.”

Arthur caught her into his arms, almost overturning the table, and squeezed her until she squeaked with pain amid
her laughter. Then he relaxed his arms and kissed her both tenderly and passionately. “Beloved, beloved,” he
murmured when their lips parted, “you are the delight of my life. I cannot imagine being without you.”

Abigail dropped her head to his shoulder and slid closer. “It will be very hard to part,” she agreed with a sigh. “I
suppose we will be able to meet in that cottage of yours, but it will not be the same. And I must go soon. There is
something in the letter I received from Griselda today—not a direct statement like ‘I wish you would come home’—
just a hint, a feeling that she is not easy.”

He had known it had to end, of course, but he had not permitted himself to think about it, expecting each day that he
would grow a little impatient of always needing to consider Abigail’s comfort and pleasure or even just a trifle bored
and tired of her. Instead he had grown more comfortable during the day, more eager to touch her and love her every
night, more thrilled to see her face when he woke every morning. Now that she spoke of parting, a sense of panic
gripped him. It did not matter that they were not really parting, that she had told him as plainly as she could that she
still wished to be his mistress. That was not important. As much as he loved her body and despite the fact that he had
found with Abigail a height and range of passion no other woman had induced in him, it was not their sexual
relationship he needed. He needed Abigail, to talk with, to laugh with, to quarrel with each day and every day at
whatever hour the impulse struck him. But he knew that she was right, that she must leave. In fact, he was bitterly
ashamed that he had sacrificed her to his need and let her stay so long.

Arthur’s face was impassive, the heavy-lidded eyes and high-bridged nose as usual drawing notice from the
sensitive mouth. That had thinned a little with pain, and the corners of the lips were tucked back defensively. This
time Abigail recognized the small signs that betrayed his unhappiness, and she stroked his arm.

“You are very good not to tease me to stay or to tell me that I am imagining things,” she said.

“Unfortunately, I do not think you are imagining things.” Arthur’s voice was as expressionless as he could make it.
“I have been selfish and thoughtless because you give me such joy, body and soul, that I could not make myself be
sensible—but Griselda has probably been hearing wonderings about what you could be doing so long alone in London, and I am sure Hilda is doing more than wondering.”

Abigail pressed her lips briefly to Arthur’s neck, taking in the mingled odors of clean linen, a bare touch of some scented material, powder or lotion, he used after shaving, a tang of sweat. She wished it was not only midafternoon, that they had instead had their dinner and come home from their evening’s entertainment so she could suggest they go to bed, but even if Arthur did not think it indecent to make love before dinner, the servants would feel it was very odd behavior indeed for a married couple.

“If I thought it was only that,” she told him, “I would not leave. Don’t laugh at me, but the letter is…strange, almost as if Griselda is…is afraid.”

Arthur’s mind immediately leapt to that still-unexplained gunshot that had nearly killed Victor and Bertram’s inexplicably odd behavior. And then he thought of Griselda, of the way her hands trembled and how nervous and breathless she became every time he spoke to her, although she had known him all her life and could not possibly believe he would hurt her or be unkind. Griselda was afraid of her own shadow. Not, he reminded himself, that that made any difference—his fears were not baseless and Abigail must go home. The panic had subsided as the idea grew familiar, but it had been replaced by a dull, hollow misery.

“Abigail, will you not marry me?” he asked softly. “It must be as clear to you as to me that we live well together. Will you not do me the honor of marrying me?”

“Oh, thank you, Arthur,” she said, sitting up and smiling. “You are very sweet to worry so about me, but I do not think a few vague rumors can harm my reputation—and anyway,” she added, with a laugh, “you have already given me the perfect excuses for lingering. I can describe all my sightseeing—the picture galleries, the museums, the Tower. Everyone may think I am mad, but they will not think me abandoned.”

“No,” he said urgently, “you do not understand. I assure you it is not your reputation or your social status I was thinking about. Abigail, I cannot bear the thought of living without you. I want you at my breakfast table every day—”

“Good God!” she exclaimed, trying to stem the tide. “Never has a woman received such a compliment.”

“Not from me, anyway,” Arthur remarked forcefully. “I have told you a thousand times that I love you, but when I think of living separately, I know that is not the way love should be expressed. I love to join our bodies, Abigail, but that is not all I want from you. I want—I need to join our lives.”

She realized that this time she could not divert him and recognized the depth of his feeling. Her body and her soul wished to fling themselves into his arms and cry, “Yes, yes, I love you, too. Let us be one.” Only her mind stood coolly aloof and reminded her that for a woman being one with a man meant just that—he was one, and she was nothing. She had no rights, not over her property, not over her children, not even over her own body. Not that Abigail feared Arthur would do anything dreadful to her children or her property or commit a crime so that she would be in danger of imprisonment—but what if he did not like what she was reading? He had the right to take the book from her forcibly; he had a right to forbid her ever to read a book again. She did not think he would, but…

“I cannot,” she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. “I cannot marry, ever again.”


Abigail’s lips parted, but no sound came out. How could she explain to Arthur? He was honest and honorable. He would manage Victor’s estate with perfect integrity—he was doing so already. There could be no doubt he would never do anything deliberately to hurt her or her children—and out of his kindness, his consideration and his care for her, he would destroy her. By all logic, his first act after they were married would almost certainly be to sell her bookshop. It would make no difference if she begged him not to. He would explain patiently, as if she were an idiot and did not know it herself, that it was not a good thing socially to cling to the bookshop and that it could not be managed efficiently at long range. He would point out that the money could be invested, and she could have the whole income for her own use, which might be more than she could realize from the store because of the expenses
of running a business.

Abigail was certain Arthur would give her the whole income—but he would never understand that he was tearing out half her life and throwing it away. If she tried to tell him of the pleasure it gave her to buy books and know that her acumen in choosing made the profit of the store rise, he would pat her kindly on the shoulder or kiss her and laugh and offer her a puppy to play with or a new piece of jewelry. He would never understand—and there would be nothing she could do to stop him.

“I cannot,” she cried, pulling away from him and jumping to her feet, her voice rising hysterically. “I cannot be anyone’s wife. I must be myself. I must be free.”

“Abigail!” Arthur exclaimed, also getting to his feet. “What do you mean? Is there some legal impediment? Do you think you are ill? If it is the law, I will get a special act of Parliament to bend it if I must, and—”

“No,” Abigail said, controlling herself with an effort. “There is no impediment. I simply do not wish to marry again.”

Arthur did not believe her. He was certain she was hiding some ugly secret—perhaps this was her crazy way of keeping her promise to some other man to whom she had sworn to be faithful as she had sworn to him. Rage and jealousy tore at him, but he was too proud to expose such feelings.

“I can no longer accept that,” he said quietly, coldly. “I love you too much to live apart. I no longer desire a casual bedding now and then when we can squeeze it in between other activities. I wish to share my life with you—everything, every day, my whole life. If you do not love me enough to share yours with me, then it would be better for me to abandon my hopes and desires altogether and learn to live without them.”

Abigail stood staring at him, tears slowly welling over her lower lids to streak her cheeks as she realized her brief hope of love and freedom combined was over. Her breath caught in hiccups of grief, her body trembled with the desire to yield, to fall into the strong arms that would always support and protect her, but her mind coldly ran through his speech and pointed out that what was sharing for a man was a total giving up of everything for a woman, and that all the beautiful words amounted to a clear and simple statement that if he could not dominate her completely, he did not want her at all. Sobbing, she shook her head mutely and ran out of the room.

Chapter Eighteen

Pain was a goad that reinforced rage. Arthur stood looking at the door, fighting the impulse to follow Abigail up the stairs and beat her secret out of her. Frightened by the vicious intensity of that desire, he fled the house. He was not aware of how the next few hours passed, but he eventually found himself walking, drained and exhausted, along the embankment of the Thames. Although still hurt and angry, he was no longer a danger to anyone. Wearily he made his way back to a major thoroughfare, where he hailed a cab to carry him back to Mount Street. He had no idea what he would do or say if he found Abigail waiting for him, but he was spared that problem, for she had not come down from her room. For a few hours longer he sat watching the fire in the parlor, his eyes fixed on the flames, his mind dull and blank. Eventually, he told the servants to close the house and went up to his room to undress, lie down on the narrow bed he had never used, and stare into the dark. Had he heard a sound from Abigail—the door to the other room still stood invitingly open—he might have given up and gone to her. But there never was a sound except those normal to a person sleeping comfortably. That easy sleep and the door left open—contemptuously, he thought, as if she believed him so much a slave to his lust that he would not be able to resist the temptation—stiffened his hurt pride.

He would not even close the door, although the knowledge that it was open tormented him. He put the refusal down to his desire to show Abigail she could not force him into a relationship on her terms, but he was also afraid that if he got close enough to her to shut the door, he would go the rest of the way and end up in her bed. At last the pain that kept him awake tired him out. An hour or two before dawn, his burning eyes closed.

Abigail had not been in any condition when she ran up the stairs to notice whether a door was open or closed. She had been torn apart between the agony of losing Arthur and her terror of losing what was to her the bedrock of her existence, her last refuge, the one thing she knew she could keep alive by her labor. No effort she could make had
been able to save her mother or her father. Francis, weak reed though he was and no loss, she would also have saved if she could, but she could not. Everything died, everything except the shop. If she married Arthur, even he could die—but then she would not have her bookshop anymore because he would have sold it.

She cried and cried, until there were no tears, until each sob caused a tearing pain across her chest, until she was so exhausted that her body slipped into a sleep so deep it was near unconsciousness. She never heard Arthur come in or come up to bed. If she had, she would have closed the door because she was afraid that if he came to her and made love to her, she would have yielded.

The first streaks of real light were mottling the sky when Abigail stirred. Only half awake, she moved more toward the center of the bed, unconsciously seeking Arthur. The shock of finding the bed empty really woke her, and she flung back the bed curtain before she remembered what had happened. The first thing she saw after that memory was the open door. And she was halfway across the room before she realized that she was on her way to Arthur—to tell him what? Nothing had changed. Trembling, Abigail backed away and fled into her dressing room, where somehow, despite her tear-blinded eyes, she found fresh clothing, took off her soiled and crumpled garments, and dressed again. She could not stay in the house, not even to have breakfast; she did not trust herself.

Quietly Abigail snatched up her purse, inched past that insidiously beckoning open door, and got out of the room. Once in the corridor she felt stronger. She was terribly sad but able to do what she knew was right. It was not only for herself that she resisted marriage, it was for Arthur, too. She loved him now, but if he sold her shop and controlled her life in other ways, she knew she would end by hating him. At least she had never hated Francis. Perhaps, she had never loved him deeply enough to generate hate, but she loved Arthur enough, and he would never understand and be cruelly hurt. He was right. It was better to learn to live without love than to learn to live with hate. Time would pass and heal them, and perhaps afterward they could be friends.

Even the servants were not yet awake. Abigail slipped into the parlor and went to the writing desk. It was near the window, and when she drew back the curtain she found it was light enough to write. Surprisingly, the words came very easily from her full heart.

My dearest, my beloved, please forgive me. I do not know what you think of me, but I beg you to believe that it is not lack of love that drives me away from you. I cannot do what you desire of me, and I cannot tell you why—not for stubbornness or a wish to conceal my motives but because you would not understand them. You will be angry at me for writing this, but if I tried to explain, I think you would be angrier and more hurt. If you have any affection left for me, please send my baggage to Claridge’s hotel and do not attempt to see me.

She folded the note and addressed it formally, sealing it with a wafer and writing “Lydden”—a name the servants would not know but would identify the note to Arthur—across it, and leaving it on the breakfast table, where she was sure the footman would place it across Arthur’s serving plate as he did with her letters. Then, waiting her chance, she slipped out the back door soon after it was opened and through the alley to Mount Street. While the streets were empty, she made her way to Hyde Park and sat beside a tree in a quiet area.

By nine o’clock, although she had not been noticed, she emerged. She had eaten neither dinner nor supper the day before, and by this time the demands of her body would not be denied. Fortunately, it did not take long to find a hackney coach and have herself driven to the hotel. She told a tale of having come away from a friend’s house early because of a family emergency. Since she was known at the hotel, she was received with sympathy. A room was found for her, and breakfast was brought up at once. Mr. Claridge himself followed after a decent time and assured her he would arrange for a post chaise to take her home. Later in the afternoon her bags arrived, and early the next morning she left for Rutupiae.

Arthur did not wake until nearly noon, and he woke with a full recollection of what had happened. Rested and more rational, he lay quietly reviewing what had been said and cursing himself for a fool. Jealousy still made him sure that Abigail’s refusal to marry him was owing to some love affair in America. Perhaps the man was married and they had exchanged some lunatic vow—she could have sworn that she would wait until he was free or never marry unless it could be to him. Despite the pangs of jealousy, Arthur smiled wanly. That was Abigail all over, jumping in headfirst and swearing crazy vows—and then keeping them. The smile faded, and he lay with closed eyes battling his rage.
It did not take long. Arthur had learned painfully that rage was a poor weapon except in physical attack. He shook his head and again called himself a fool. What earthly difference did it make that Abigail had mistakenly believed she loved a man in America? Whether or not she had loved Francis, she must have been frightened and lonely when he died. It was natural for her to lean on some man and fancy herself in love. Not only was it stupid to be jealous of a rival thirty-five hundred miles away, Arthur told himself, it was even stupider when he had nothing about which to be jealous. He knew Abigail cared for him. The problem was not how to make her stop loving another man and love him—that had happened without his even trying—the problem was how to extricate her from the situation in which she had enmeshed herself.

Arthur closed his eyes against the sense of despair that flooded him. If he had not conquered his jealousy, he had at least submerged it enough so that it no longer clouded his view of what he had done. Instead of calming Abigail, who was nearly hysterical, and gently extracting the cause of her resistance, he had presented her with an ultimatum. He groaned softly. How many times had he pointed out in speeches that ultimatums work only with the stupid or the helpless, that they are immoral in those cases and with any other subject only produce an opposite effect? Abigail was neither stupid nor helpless. How could he have said those things to her?

Eventually Arthur got up and dressed. He did not look for Abigail in the adjoining room, nor when he went down the stairs did he expect to find her anywhere else in the house. Now that rage and jealousy no longer obscured everything else, he knew what had happened the night before as clearly as if he had been watching. That open door had been his last chance, not because Abigail had left it open deliberately but because she had been too upset to realize it was open. Once she had regained command of herself, she had left, he knew that without looking or asking for her, but he shivered slightly when he saw her note and hesitated to open it.

The contents renewed the whole cycle of jealousy, fury, and misery. His first impulse was to rush off to Claridge's and demand to see her. Fortunately, he too was ravenous, having also missed two meals the previous day, and by the time he had eaten, he realized that to insist on seeing her was another ultimatum. In any case, it could accomplish nothing. So personal and sensitive a discussion could not be carried out in the public lobby or restaurant, and it was impossible for Abigail to permit a male visitor into her room. Had he been desperate, he would have tried anyway, but he realized it was not necessary. Since he was Victor's trustee, sooner or later matters of business would bring them together. As much as he hated the idea, he knew it was better to wait so that the memory of his stupidity would fade from Abigail's mind.

He told the servants there had been a death in Abigail’s family, that he had taken her away very early, as soon as the first, worst paroxysms of her grief had passed, and that he would be leaving himself later that afternoon. He asked that a maid pack his wife’s clothing and his own and that the servants be assembled so that he could pay them, assuring the distressed butler that they would be paid for the full month. After he had a hackney coachman deliver Abigail’s bags to Claridge’s, he had gone to the estate agent to arrange for the closing of the house and then to one of his clubs, where he had left his own luggage. Then he had walked, and walked, and walked. It was the only way he could prevent himself from ordering a post chaise and rushing home to wait for Abigail, and he knew he must not do that. For both of them to leave and arrive almost at the same time would certainly raise doubts in the minds of those closest to them.

With considerable self-control, Arthur remained in London for another ten days and arrived at Stonar Magna late enough so that he did not need to speak to anyone except his valet that night. By morning, he had himself well under control. He noticed that Bertram was somewhat stiff and reserved both at breakfast and later when he presented the accumulated mail and estate problems, but Arthur assumed that was because his secrecy had put his secretary’s nose out of joint. Bertram was the one person to whom Arthur usually confided the name of his current mistress and where he would be so that he could be reached in case of dire emergency. This time he had left Bertram in ignorance, not because he doubted his secret would be kept but because he was afraid Bertram was also attracted to Abigail and would suffer.

Some of the correspondence was important, a few of the estate problems were absorbing. Arthur found a great relief in having something to think about that would divert him from the painful round of self-accusation and equally painful hope that had occupied his mind since Abigail had left him. He worked steadily, having luncheon brought to him rather than joining his mother and Bertram, but his concentrated application defeated his purpose in the end by depriving him of new material.
By midafternoon, only the dullest routine matters remained to be done, and Bertram asked rather pointedly whether Arthur suddenly thought him incapable of writing standard apologies and refusals to the endless requests for money, time and company that flooded the desk of a public servant. Arthur laughed, made some excuse, and left Bertram to his work. Idly thinking of taking a rod out on the river, he wandered into the small drawing room through which he could reach the gun room.

“So you have come out at last.”

Arthur started slightly and turned toward the voice. “Mama. I did not see you there.” He was about to apologize for not finding a minute to say good morning to her but could not think of a good excuse. The truth was that he had been so absorbed by his occupation that he had not been thinking about his mother.

“You are disgusting!” Violet’s voice shook with fury and grief.

Totally stunned by this unexpected attack, Arthur simply stared. He had known his mother might think he was off on the hunt again and that she might be annoyed with him, but she had never, even when he was much younger, made any direct reference to his love affairs. In the beginning he had believed she did not know. Later he realized she had always known but understood him too well to lecture and argue, which would only have made him stubborn and perhaps resulted in excesses.

“It is no wonder you have tried to hide from me,” she continued when he made no answer. “I have often grieved over the fact that you could not find a woman to suit you and made do with shallow substitutes, but I have never before realized that it was you who was shallow, that all you sought was an outlet for your lechery. I never knew that instead of grieving I should have been ashamed of you—bitterly, bitterly ashamed. I never thought you could be so crude, so unfeeling, so… so disgusting.”

“What are you talking about?” Arthur got out. “Mama, what do you think I have done?”

Violet got to her feet. “Do not make me sicker of you than I am,” she said scornfully. “Do not pretend to me that you did not induce Abigail to meet you in London, seduce her, and then discard her. I am through with you, Arthur, finished. I have waited for you because I wanted to speak my mind to you once and for all, but I will leave this house tomorrow, and I do not want to see you or speak to you again.”

She began to move toward the door before Arthur caught his breath, but she had not reached it before he roared, “Just you wait, damn it. Why the hell didn’t you ask me what had happened before you made up a lot of nonsense? For your information, I did not seduce and discard Abigail. In fact, I have asked her to marry me twice—no, three times.”

Since Arthur had never in his life raised his voice to his mother, Violet had stopped from shock as soon as he shouted. Now she stood with her hand over her mouth and her eyes wide. “Oh, Arthur, I am so sorry. Do you mean you were not the man she went to meet in London?”

“No—I mean yes, I was the man, and for God’s sake don’t begin making up crazy stories about Abigail now. She did nothing in London to make me change my mind. I asked her to marry me before we decided to go, and I asked her again just before she left me.”

He stopped speaking abruptly and sat down in the nearest chair as if his strength had failed. Violet came back and sat down, too. “I know Abigail loves you,” she said softly. “That was why I accused you unjustly. I could not think of anything besides your telling her you had no serious intentions and were tired of her that could make her so terribly unhappy. She did her best to conceal her feelings from me, but she gave herself away when she tried to talk about the things she had seen in London. I knew you had taken her, they are all your favorite haunts.”

“I know she loves me.” Arthur stared down at his hands. “She has said so over and over. And now you will ask why we are not setting a date if she loves me and I love her and wish to marry her.” He stopped and took a breath to steady his voice. “I don’t know, Mama. I don’t know. She says she cannot marry me.”

“She cannot?” Violet repeated. “Oh God, do you think Francis is still alive in a bedlam or that in her distress and confusion after his death she perhaps married someone unsuitable and—”
“No.” Arthur heaved a sigh, part relief and part exasperation at his continued inability to see a way to extricate Abigail from what he thought was her dilemma. Although the discussion had put a new edge on his pain, it had lightened the dull despair that had weighed him down. He felt much better now that he was able to tell someone about his puzzlement and grief.

“Francis is dead,” he went on slowly, reciting facts while he sorted out just how much it was safe to tell his mother. “He was picked up and recognized by neighbors after he was killed. I have seen his death certificate and the depositions that accompanied it. And, not to put a fine finish on a piece of dross, Abigail may have been shocked when Francis was killed, but she suffered little distress and no confusion. There is nothing of the frail, dependent flowerlet about Abigail. Anyway, she has assured me there is no legal impediment. The problem is inside her, but I cannot understand what she was trying to tell me. All she would say was that she had to be herself and had to be free.”

Arthur hoped uneasily that his mother would not pursue the problem too closely. It would not do, he had decided, to tell her his guesses about Abigail’s temporary attempt to assuage her loneliness in America. He could appreciate Abigail’s sense of honor, no matter how much it hurt him, but his mother might not.

Actually, Violet came much closer to understanding the truth than Arthur had. Even though she had never met any of the problems that had plagued Abigail and given her so sharp an appreciation of the independence of the widowed state, “be herself…be free” woke an echo in Violet’s heart. Violet’s husband had appreciated her as well as loved her. She had suffered few of the frustrations endured by many women, and she had loved her husband dearly. Nonetheless, the words meant something to her they could not mean to Arthur. It flicked through her mind that she was herself and free and had little inclination to marry again either, but she crushed down that thought as it applied to Abigail and Arthur. He needed a wife and an heir. Joseph and his son needed to be released from the threat of inheriting Arthur’s position and estate. Abigail really would be much happier as Arthur’s wife. There must be some way to work out a compromise.

“And then,” Arthur went on grimly, “instead of behaving like a rational human being, I acted like a lunatic and said that if she would not marry me, we had better not be lovers either.”

Violet did not reply, partly because she had a dreadful desire to laugh, which would have been very unkind to her unhappy son. It was not that she failed to feel sympathy for him but that the turnabout struck her funny. It did serve Arthur right, having spoken so ill of marriage and resisted it so long, to fall in love with a woman who did not wish to marry.

“What am I to do, Mama?” he asked.

There was so much misery in the question that all the humor of the situation deserted Violet. She offered what comfort she could but admitted she had no immediate answer. This idea and that flitted through her mind, but before she could make any concrete suggestion, a crash of thunder and gust of rain broke off the discussion. She and Arthur both leapt to shut the windows that stood wide open. They had been so absorbed in their conversation that they had not noticed the storm rolling in from the sea, a few miles away.

That sudden storm caught Abigail and her daughter when they were halfway to the old mill. Abigail had done her best to hide her depression from Victor and Daphne but had succeeded only partially. The children did not seem to realize she was unhappy, but they sensed something was wrong and had developed a disconcerting tendency to cling to her, figuratively, of course, by including her in all their activities.

Actually, Abigail had no objection. She found going to picnics and escorting a group to examine the Roman ruins for which Rutupiae Hall was named and which were carefully preserved about half a mile from the house, diverted her somewhat. The dull depression that held her never left her completely, but it was assuaged by her children’s lively friends. Originally that afternoon had been reserved to call on the Ellingtons to discuss the details of Daphne’s accompanying them when they took their invalid daughter to the seaside, but a tear-spotted note had come for Abigail the preceding evening saying that little Charlene had been taken ill suddenly and seriously. The holiday, Charlene’s mother wrote sadly, would have to be put off until her daughter had recovered.

Daphne had been very upset, for she was fond of Charlene, who occupied her long hours of enforced idleness with
books and shared Daphne’s love of reading. Casting around in her mind for something to divert her daughter, Abigail remembered the child’s excitement about the old mill and that Griselda’s letter had mentioned the place as Daphne’s choice of a picnic spot. That evening Abigail had found a way to mention casually to Daphne the fact that she had never seen the old mill, and had been delighted to see a spark of enthusiasm replace the concern in her daughter’s face. Thus, she and Daphne had set off for the mill even though there was a hint of thunder off to the east.

They had run back and found shelter in the stables, and a few minutes later Eustace had ridden in, soaked and cursing, to be followed by Victor and his groom. Victor was equally soaked, but he thought it great fun to have been caught out in a violent storm. When Victor heard that his mother and sister had intended to go to the old mill, his eyes lit up.

“I haven’t been since—oh, since I don’t know when. And I’ve never been with Dick. Mother, Dick knows the most interesting things. Let’s all go tomorrow.”

“I’m not sure,” Abigail began, but Victor seemed rather crestfallen and pointed out that between riding lessons, studies with the vicar, and other appointments he had made, he would not have another free day all week.

“And you said we would move to one of the other houses next week,” Victor reminded her, “and I’ll be off to school the beginning of next month, so we won’t be able to go until next summer.”

“Are you leaving Rutupiae, Abigail?” Eustace asked.

“Not permanently,” she replied, smiling, “but I know Victor must become acquainted with the other Lydden properties, and the people must get to know him, so I thought we would visit Hawkhurst for a week, then stay at the old manor at Lydden for two weeks. Meanwhile Mrs. Franklin can get their boxes for school ready—”

“But Abigail,” Eustace protested, “I am afraid you will find Hawkhurst and Lydden very uncomfortable. Hawkhurst is no more than a large farmhouse. Mama never stayed there. And the so-called manor at Lydden is not much better.”

“Why is that?” Abigail asked curiously. “Since the title comes from Lydden, I would have thought it would be the main seat.”

“It was once,” Eustace answered, “but one of my ancestors was a little peculiar. You see, back in 1580 or so the Lydden of the time got a rush of classics to the head. Somehow he induced Queen Elizabeth to grant this stretch of land to him so he could investigate the Roman ruins. He was so intent on it for the next twenty years and spent so much digging up Roman artifacts that Lydden castle was allowed to fall to ruin. Then he got into a battle with the St. Eyres, who were already here and had been trying to get the same piece of property, although for different reasons. It grew quite nasty, I understand, and Rutupiae was built for spite and entailed so that it can’t be sold and must be lived in. Naturally, no one thought it worthwhile to put up another big house, so Lydden Manor is a manor in name only.”

“I won’t mind that,” Abigail said. “Coming from America as I do, I am quite accustomed to smaller houses, and the children enjoy anything new.”

Eustace frowned. “But no one has lived in either place for years. There’s no more than a caretaker in the house. Everything will be damp and moldy—”

“Good gracious!” Abigail exclaimed. “Then it is surely time someone stayed there at least long enough to be certain the houses are sound and to discover, if they are not, what repairs must be made. I shall write at once so that sufficient staff to care for us can be brought in. Yes, all right, Victor,” she said to her son, who was showing signs of impatience, “we will go to the old mill tomorrow if it does not rain.” Then she turned back to Eustace. “I had no idea the other houses might be in bad condition. I am so glad you told me.”

Eustace seemed stunned by the glow of gratitude with which Abigail thanked him and the determination she displayed to visit the other properties. It was also clear to Abigail that he was not at all pleased by her reaction to his warnings, so she made her escape before he could recover from his surprise and point out that there was no need for
her to go to either of the houses. She could easily obtain a detailed report of their condition. Abigail knew this perfectly well, but since her reason for moving was a desire to be away from Rutupiae before Arthur found some reason to force a meeting, she did not wish to have the point made.

By dinnertime she had found a counterargument—the old saw that the farmer’s boot is the best manure, or in words that applied better to her case, the landlord’s eye is the best paint. To her surprise Eustace did not mention the matter, and Abigail most willingly allowed the conversation to drift where it would or, more often, to lapse completely into another whining monologue from Hilda. These no longer troubled her at all, for her own thoughts were sufficiently painful and absorbing to deafen her to Hilda’s voice.

Abigail wrote her letters that evening and managed to catch Griselda in the corridor for long enough to ask whether she would like to come to Hawkhurst and Lydden. Griselda was a puzzle that Abigail could not fathom, and that was interesting enough to pierce the oppression of her spirits. She was ready to swear that Griselda was no longer afraid of her, and what she had heard from Daphne and Victor about Aunt Griselda convinced her that there was a delightful and amusing person buried under the awkward, meek exterior. But since the dinner party, it had been almost impossible to get Griselda alone. Either she was not visible—and where she disappeared to, Abigail could not guess—or she was sitting with her mother.

Griselda glanced apprehensively over her shoulder at the drawing room door when Abigail stopped her. “Mama would not permit it,” she said. “I am sorry. I would have liked to come, but I know she will feel she cannot spare me.”

“Well, will you come with me and the children to the old mill tomorrow?” Because of Griselda’s nervousness, Abigail spoke softly. She clutched at anything that would occupy her mind and keep her from brooding about Arthur, and once out of the house perhaps they could talk more freely and she could pry enough information out of Griselda to solve the oddities in her behavior.

“If I can, I will slip out and join you,” Griselda said. She spoke even more quietly than Abigail had, so softly that Abigail had to lean closer to hear. “Do not wait for me or look for me, but if I can come, I will.” And then, loosening her wrist gently from Abigail’s grip, she said more loudly, “Mama is waiting for me. I must go.”

Despite Griselda’s warning, Abigail was surprised not to see her at the breakfast table. Only Eustace was there when she came down, and he seemed hurried and abstracted, so she made no real attempt at conversation. He left only a few minutes later, but Abigail did not mind. She was pleasantly occupied in deciding what would be best to take for a picnic lunch, for both Victor and Daphne had assured her there would be enough to occupy them at the old mill for the morning and early afternoon.

They left at about ten o’clock, a good time because the dew was dried from the grass, but the sun was not yet hot enough to make the walk unpleasant. All of them were burdened. Young Dick Price carried the heavy picnic basket and would also have taken the rug on which they were to sit, except that Abigail insisted on carrying that. Victor had an assortment of nets and jars for catching and confining the denizens of pond and meadow, and Daphne had a rush basket containing oddments of rag, which she intended to wet to keep fresh the flowers she wished to pick, and several small bowls and a trowel for taking up plants by the root. Under Griselda’s guidance, Daphne was growing into a passionate gardener.

Abigail was surprised by feeling rather cheerful as they made their way toward the mill. It was the first true break in her despondency, and she welcomed it with gratitude, even though she knew it was temporary and could be destroyed by any little upset. She felt she was safe, however, for the next few hours. The children were in high spirits, very glad to be together, for these days there were seldom just the two of them. What was more, Dick was keeping them both interested, now pointing out to Victor a bird’s nest or a tiny path made by some small beast and next showing Daphne a shy flower or a plant that the kittens in the barn would adore. Thus there seemed little chance of a quarrel between the children that would spoil Abigail’s peace. Even the path was lovely, well marked by its smooth and close-clipped growth of grass, speckled with sunlight and shadow, and musical with birdcalls.

After about twenty minutes’ walk, they turned off into a much rougher trail, too narrow for all to walk abreast. Victor and Daphne, who had started a discussion about whether Victor should keep his catch for a few days or let them go before returning to the house, went first. Abigail and Dick followed, and she asked a question about the life
and duties of a gamekeeper, to which he replied eagerly enough to convince her that succeeding to his father’s position was truly what he desired out of life. Actually, Abigail could understand his enthusiasm. It was a varied and interesting kind of life, if hard, and she was just about to ask another question when Victor called, “There it is.”

Abigail looked ahead and saw a modest stretch of ground that now had the appearance of a roughly mown hayfield but which she knew must have been a small cleared area surrounding the house and mill. To her right was the ruins of a house, to her left was the millpond, and just ahead was the mill itself—more sturdily built and thus in a less ruined condition than the house—with the water-wheel on the far side and a half-overgrown road running beside the stream that ran the mill. The wheel was still turning slowly, though Abigail could see that several of the buckets on the edge were broken.

“How lovely!” she exclaimed, and Victor and Daphne, who had waited on the edge of the path for her verdict, both laughed and began to run toward the mill.

“Wait,” Dick called, starting after them, “don’t—”

Whatever else he was about to say was drowned in a woman’s shrill scream and the almost simultaneous crack of a gun. Abigail shrieked, “Down! Get down!” and leapt toward her children just as Dick collapsed and a second blast went off. Victor and Daphne were standing still, openmouthed with shock, and Abigail wailed with terror as she ran, knowing she could never reach them in time—but no third shot was fired, and she dragged her children to the ground, trying to get them both beneath her body. Beyond the thundering of her heart, she could hear the screams of the woman—and then those stopped.

Chapter Nineteen

Hours and hours passed—perhaps as much as ten minutes in real time—while Abigail first held her breath and then tried to breathe silently as she listened for the faint crackle of the attacker’s footsteps approaching in the dry stubble. None came. There were no sounds except those of her children breathing and of the wind moving through foliage. Finally Abigail heard a moan, which she knew was Dick, and she lifted her head to peer around fearfully. Nothing. Did that mean the attacker was gone? Or was he?—she?—waiting until someone stood up to make a suitable target? Carefully Abigail slid herself off her children and whispered to them to crawl as flat as they could back to the path. She turned toward Dick and then gasped in horror, for he was just climbing dazedly to his feet.

“No, don’t!” she cried. “Lie down.”

But he did not drop down to safety, only turned his head toward her, and she gasped in horror again because the eye she could see was glazed and senseless, and the other side of his face was a sheet of blood. For a terror-filled moment self-preservation struggled with her need to save another human being, and then she realized that the gun would have already been fired, had anyone been waiting in hiding to shoot. Dick was wavering dangerously, about to fall, so Abigail climbed hastily to her feet. She held her breath for the few seconds it took her to reach him, because it had occurred to her that he might not be the target for whom the gunman was waiting—but still no shot was fired, and she caught Dick and eased him to the ground, almost convinced that the attacker was gone.

Nonetheless, she was not ready to test the truth of her conviction, and she held Dick still with one arm while she scrambled in the picnic basket near them for a napkin with which to stop the bleeding. She had just managed to extract a handful of linen when Daphne cried out, and Abigail dropped the napkins and jumped to her feet to protect her children. But she saw them at once, quite safe, standing together at the opening of the path.

“Aunt Griselda,” Victor called, pointing.

Abigail whirled to look. Griselda was coming across from the mill, staggering and weaving, holding a hand to her head. Her gown was torn and filthy, and a long bleeding scrape marred one arm. Abigail’s eyes flashed from Griselda to Dick and back again, trying to decide who needed her help most, and in that moment of hesitation both children ran by her toward their aunt. Abigail’s shock of fear dissipated as quickly as it rose. Griselda must have sneaked out of the house early, before her mother rose, to meet them at the mill, and somehow she must have come across the gunman, who no doubt fled when he realized someone had seen him.
Later, she told herself, later you can work it all out. Now don’t let Dick bleed to death. He was, in fact, stirring again, mumbling about poachers, and Abigail got down beside him and told him to lie still. She could hear Griselda trying to control her sobs as the children helped her closer, but she was fully occupied with washing Dick’s face with lemonade—since she had no intention of allowing anyone to approach the stream for water. At last she found the wound, a long tear in the scalp, deep enough to show a white glint of bone beneath. Abigail swallowed sickly. The blood had not bothered her much, except for its quantity, because Victor had often returned home with a bloody nose or cuts and scrapes from his rough play. That gleam of white and the way the loose scalp lifted, however, were sickening. Hastily she padded one napkin over the area and tied it firmly in place with another.

Then she turned to Griselda, who was no longer sobbing, although her breath was still uneven. “Will you be able to walk as far as the house?” she asked anxiously as Griselda sank to the ground near her. “I think we must leave here as soon as possible.”

“He’s gone,” Griselda gasped. “He hit me, knocked me down, and ran.”

The whole side of her face was swollen. Abigail thought it must have been a violent blow and that she must also be bruised from her fall. Would it be better to go for help and leave Dick and Griselda here? No, she did not dare do that. If Griselda had recognized the man… They must leave at once. Perhaps shock had sent the gunman running, but if he thought Griselda had recognized him or could identify him, he would certainly come back and try to kill her.

“Yes, but he might come back,” Abigail pointed out shakily. “We must go at once.”

Griselda closed her eyes for a moment, but then she stiffened her body. “Yes, I can walk,” she said.

“Daphne, you help Aunt Griselda,” Abigail ordered, “and you come and help me with Dick, Victor.”

“The baskets—” Daphne began, practical despite being shaken.

“Someone from the house will come for them,” Abigail assured her, and Daphne went obediently to help steady Griselda, who was getting to her feet.

Although he was clearly sick and dizzy, it was not difficult to get Dick on his feet. There was sense—and fear—in his eyes now, and he obviously knew that they had been attacked. Abigail, Dick, and Victor went first down the rough trail, and Griselda followed with Daphne. During that walk, Abigail was terrified because it seemed to her that this short stretch was the place where the gunman could lie in wait. She said nothing because someone had to go down the path, and it was better that they all go together. But her fears were not realized, and when they came out into the well-used path she took a deep breath of relief.

Abigail’s first consideration had been safety. Now that that had been achieved, she wanted to know who had fired those shots and why. Dick seemed steady enough to manage with just Victor’s help, so Abigail stopped and waited for Griselda to catch up.

“Who was it?” Abigail asked, putting her thought into words.

“I don’t know.” Tears ran down Griselda’s face, and she shook despite her effort to control herself before Daphne. “I was sitting on the bench against the wall of the mill that faces the millpond, and I thought I heard someone moving in the mill. At first I paid no attention. The wheel creaks, and it makes the building creak and groan, but I kept hearing noises that didn’t match the movement of the wheel. Well, the village children sometimes come to play in the mill. They are not supposed to because the building is not safe, so I decided to go in and send them home.”

“Mrs. Franklin told us we must not go into the mill,” Daphne confirmed, her voice slightly shaky, “and I don’t think I want to go there anymore.”

Griselda’s arm tightened around the little girl. “Oh,” she said, much more firmly, “you mustn’t feel that way. I think what might be best is for your mama to order that the building be repaired and changed a little so that a nice family could live there. Then you could often come to have picnics and play near the millpond.”
“That is a most excellent idea, Griselda,” Abigail said heartily and gratefully. She had been wondering how to prevent the mill from becoming a nightmare that would haunt her children. “I will send for Mr. Jameson when we get home and have the repairs and renovations put in hand at once, so that when we come back people will be living in the mill. Then no one could ever hide in it again.”

Not long after Abigail and her children had left the house, Violet set out to call on her. Just after breakfast was not a usual time for a formal visit, but Violet had decided to try shock tactics, and the early hour would prevent interruption by Hilda, who usually did not come down for breakfast, or by other visitors. When she heard that Abigail had set out for a day-long picnic with her children, Violet hesitated a few minutes, wondering if she should follow.

Violet had intended to tell Abigail that her reason for arriving at such an unusual hour was that Arthur had come back “from wherever he had gone” in a terrible state, and she wanted Abigail to come to dinner that evening to cheer him. If Abigail refused, Violet reasoned, the refusal would give her an excellent chance to pry. If she accepted, observing her with Arthur might give a hint as to what Abigail feared. Following Abigail to her picnic would certainly show her that Violet felt the situation was urgent, but it might also make her suspicious, Violet feared.

The few minutes of indecision, however, were a few minutes too long. By the time Violet had decided that following Abigail would do more harm than good, Hilda had learned of her arrival and had hurried down from her room to receive her, all agog for bad news. Unable to think of a rational excuse either for coming or for leaving, Violet allowed herself to be shepherded into the morning room to find time to think. Half an hour of Hilda’s company, she told herself, was a deserved punishment for being slow of wit. She should have gone out to her carriage to decide what to do as soon as she learned Abigail was not in the house, instead of dithering about in the hall.

The best Violet could do to explain her early call was to give Hilda, with breathless excitement, a harmless piece of gossip. She was certain that Hilda had already heard it, since it was more than a week old, but that had the advantage of permitting Hilda to feel superior to her. At least that plan worked well, and Violet had little to do besides nod her head at intervals while Hilda told her when and where she had heard the item first and recounted several less savory rumors about their neighbors. During this monologue, Violet’s eyes frequently strayed toward the window, so it was she who first saw the battered procession approaching the house. With a desperate effort, Violet repressed her impulse to cry out with shock. She had no idea what had happened, but she was determined that Hilda should not know of it through her unless Abigail wished to tell her, so she dragged her eyes back to Hilda’s face.

“Why, whatever is wrong with you, Violet?” Hilda asked. “You have turned white as a sheet.”

“A faintness,” Violet whispered, instantly seizing on her chance of escape. “I am so sorry to cut short our visit, but I must go home.”

“Perhaps you had better lie down for a while,” Hilda sneered. “You always were a weakling, Violet. I do not suffer from these turns.”

“My medicine is at home,” Violet improvised, rising from her chair. “It will do me no good to lie down unless I take it.”

“Let me summon Empson to escort you,” Hilda said, annoyed and indifferent.

But Violet was at the door and out before Hilda had finished speaking. She ran down the corridor toward the back of the house and out the French doors of the library, intercepting Abigail’s party on their way to the servants’ entrance at the rear just in time to hear Griselda insist that she did not need a physician.

“If Mama hears—” Griselda began, and then bit her lips as she saw Violet.

“She will make a terrible fuss,” Violet finished for her, knowing quite well that was not what Griselda had been about to say. “And you would never hear the end of it, either. Abigail, let me take Griselda to her room and help her change her clothes. If I think she needs to see a physician or the apothecary, I will come and tell you.”

“Thank you,” Abigail said, still too shocked and worried to be bothered by the fact that it was Arthur’s mother who
had come to her assistance.

By that time the party had been noticed by one of the maids, who must have exclaimed, for the cook and several others came running out. After a short period of confusion, very trying to Abigail’s tense nerves, Empson and Howing arrived and quelled the storm. A groom was sent for the apothecary, Mrs. Franklin was summoned to attend to Dick, who was settled in the housekeeper’s room, and Abigail was free to take her children upstairs to calm them and change their clothes and hers.

Fortunately, Victor and Daphne had cheerful and resilient temperaments. A discussion of what renovations of the mill would be necessary so that a reliable family could live in it and then of the proposed visit to other Lydden properties seemed to remove the shock and horror of the attack from their minds. At least they showed no desire to cling to their mother and began a very typical argument, shouting back and forth between half-open doors as they dressed about whether it was too hot to play in the tennis court and, if it was, whether to take the racquets out on the lawn or go for a ride.

Abigail had to clench her teeth to prevent herself from forbidding them to leave the house, but she knew that would negate all her efforts to divert their minds. Thus, she left them to their discussion, only telling them that she would be in the library later if they wanted her and that they were not to go out before luncheon, which would be served very soon. They would be safe that long, she told herself, and then she would think of something else. But as she started for the library she remembered Griselda.

Violet had decided there was no need for Griselda to see the apothecary and had stopped to tell that to Abigail before she went home, but there was something to do with Griselda that nagged at the back of Abigail’s mind. Then she recalled her fear that the attacker would think Griselda could identify him. That might not occur to Griselda, Abigail realized. Because the girl knew she had not recognized the man, she might feel as if he knew it, too—and that was not at all true. Griselda must be warned.

Thus, instead of going down the stairs, Abigail began to cross the balcony that connected the two wings of the staircase to reach Griselda’s room in the other part of the house. She was about halfway across when the front door burst open, without a knock to herald the invasion, and Arthur strode in. Surprise robbed Abigail of defenses so that she cried out with relief and longing. The sound betrayed her, although it was not loud. Arthur looked up, crossed the hall, and ran up the stairs. Before Abigail could gather her wits enough to decide what to do, she was caught tight in his arms.

“Are the children all right?” he asked.

Whatever shreds of resistance Abigail had left were melted away by that question. Had he asked if she were all right, she would have been able to pull away and answer him calmly, even make false, civil conversation—like asking when he had returned to Stonar. Instead, she clutched at him and began to tremble, although she managed to say, “Yes, I left them arguing about whether to play tennis or go riding after luncheon. Oh, Arthur, do you think it is safe for them to go out? I didn’t want to frighten them by telling them they must stay in the house—”

“You did just right,” he assured her, kissing her hair. “Don’t worry, I’ll think of something to occupy them if you want them to stay in. How is Dick?”

“Mrs. Franklin stepped up to say he seemed to be quite well,” Abigail said with a sigh of relief, “except for a bad headache, of course. The apothecary sewed up the wound and told her that the skull did not seem to be injured. Dick is quite sensible and remembers everything that happened, but his grandmother will keep him abed until we are sure there is not more wrong than appears. Oh, I forgot to send anyone to tell his mother and father. I must—”

“My mother has taken care of that. In fact, I met Price coming over here. He is wild. He seems to think the two shooting incidents are connected and that the intended victim is Dick.”

Abigail lifted her head to stare at Arthur. “It is possible. Dick isn’t much taller than Victor, and their hair is about the same color. If the man only saw the back of Victor’s head… Of course, Dick is a good deal broader, but Victor’s coat was spread over a bush…”
“Let us go where we can sit down, Abigail,” Arthur suggested.

His face was so hard and his voice so grim that Abigail murmured, “The library,” and was grateful that Arthur retained his comforting grip on her while they went down the stairs and closed themselves in the room.

“The answer might be as simple as Price believes,” Arthur said, “because there are some local people who have a grudge against the man—but Abigail, I am having trouble believing that anyone sane would attempt to shoot Dick in the middle of the day when he was accompanied by three others. Think how many opportunities there have been to shoot Dick when he was alone.”

“Sane?” Abigail echoed, and then her breath caught. “There were two shots,” she whispered, starting to shake again, “and I think the second was fired after Dick fell.”

“Steady, love,” Arthur pleaded. “I know you have had about all you can take today, but can you tell me what happened?”

“Yes, of course I can,” she said, drawing a deep breath to steady herself. Actually it took only a few minutes to describe the events from when they had reached the mill to the moment when Daphne had seen Griselda. At that point, Abigail’s voice faltered, and then she cried, “Griselda! Oh, Arthur, she saw him! She said she did not recognize him, but will he know that? I was just going to warn her when you came in.”

“You were going to warn Griselda? May I ask about what?” Hilda’s strident voice startled Abigail so much that she cried out, and even Arthur jumped. Both turned furious faces on her, but she stared back disdainfully, secure in the knowledge that she had done no wrong. If people were stupid enough to embrace in public rooms where anyone might enter, even servants, whether the door was closed or not, then they deserved to be embarrassed.

“And what is going on in this house?” she went on. “The servants seem to have gone insane. It is quite time for luncheon, but none is served. No one answers my bell. I am forced to come looking for you myself, and I must say, Abigail, that I am shocked at—”

“Someone shot at us from the old mill and wounded Dick Price,” Abigail interrupted, holding on to her temper with an effort. “The servants have been busy—”

“All of them?” Hilda made an ugly grimace. “Oh well, naturally they would take any excuse to shirk their duties,” she remarked sourly, and then asked, “What has any of this to do with Griselda?”

Abigail was furious with Hilda for her complete indifference to everything beyond her own comfort and for the way she was now staring at Arthur’s arm, which he had defiantly left around Abigail’s shoulders. Nonetheless, she hesitated before she answered, remembering how Griselda had said she would try to “slip out and join them” at the old mill. Although she was reluctant to betray the fact that Griselda had intended to meet them, she realized there was no way to conceal what had happened. What could Griselda say to explain the bruises she bore? And all the servants had seen her come back with them.

“Griselda saw the man who shot at us,” Abigail said. “He knocked her down when he made his escape.”

“Do you mean to say that wicked girl went to the mill with you?” Hilda screeched. “I forbade her to go anywhere with you. I told her if she ever again connived privately with you, as she did over that disgusting dress, she was no daughter of mine and could leave this house and make her own way in the world.”

“Are you mad?” Abigail gasped. “You threatened to put Griselda out of my son’s home? Do you think I would permit Victor’s aunt to beg for charity from other friends or relations?”

As the enormity of what Hilda said made its full impact, Abigail’s voice had grown louder and louder, and she had risen to her feet. Now she understood why Griselda had been avoiding her since Violet’s dinner party, and she was not certain which infuriated her more—Hilda’s nearly insane desire to dominate Griselda or Griselda’s stupidity in believing her mother’s threats.

“She is my daughter!” Hilda shrieked hysterically. “Mine! I can do whatever I like with her. I will not have a
disobedient daughter in the house with me.”

“Fine!” Abigail bellowed. “Then you can go. Go live anywhere you like, but leave Griselda here. I need Griselda. She manages the house and garden for me. You—”

Arthur was standing by Abigail’s side and now he took a painful grip on her arm, interrupting her. “Lady Lydden,” he said, his deeper, stronger voice overriding even the strident tones in which Hilda was attempting to answer Abigail, “you are overwrought and saying what you do not mean. No affectionate mother could wish to punish a daughter as obedient as Griselda so severely for such a small fault. And this is no time for a discussion so important to your comfort. Abigail has had a dreadful experience and is naturally upset. Let me call your maid to you. When you have recovered yourself, we can talk more calmly.”

Fury still distorted Hilda’s face, but the habit of bowing to male authority had made her listen to what Arthur was saying. Moreover, Hilda realized that Arthur’s remark about Griselda might seem true to anyone who did not understand the circumstances. She had never thought it would be necessary to carry out her threat. In the past she had boasted to all her friends about how her careful training had made Griselda the perfect daughter. Hilda did not want to be laughed at for deceiving herself. She would need time to make clear to everyone how Abigail had poisoned her daughter’s mind and how unnatural and cruel Griselda had become.

Worse, it had penetrated Hilda’s mind that her generosity in having Griselda continue to run the household had made the girl more important to Abigail than she was. And there was nothing she could do about it! Impotently Hilda glared at Abigail, but she dared say no more, so she turned on her heel and left the room.

The moment she was gone, Abigail wrenched her arm out of Arthur’s grasp. “I can fight my own battles,” she snapped.

“Don’t be an idiot!” Arthur snapped back. “You were in such a temper, the next thing you would have done was order her to go. Then where would you have been?”

“Shot of Hilda,” Abigail yelled. “Do you have any idea what it is like to eat dinner every evening with that—that—”

Arthur laughed. “I’m sorry, love. If I thought it would have worked, I would have let you say it. But you know she will never go willingly, and if I had let you order her to leave, you would have been faced with the choice of backing down or calling in the bailiffs to put her out physically.”

“Oh,” Abigail cried, stamping her foot in frustration, “I don’t know who enrages me more—Hilda, with her monumental selfishness, Griselda, with her unbelievable stupidity, or you, with your damned male superiority.”

Upon which, she burst into laughter, and he seized her and kissed her. But when their lips parted, she pushed him away gently, and her expression was worried. “I don’t know why we are quarreling about who will live here,” she said with a sigh as she sat down. “I am growing afraid to be here myself.”

Arthur nodded as he seated himself beside her, his expression also serious. “Yes. There is something very unhealthy going on.” He hesitated for a moment and then continued quickly, “Abigail, I hope you do not think I am trying to take advantage of the situation, but I would like you, the children, and Dick and Griselda too, to come to Scotland with me.”

“Scotland!” Abigail repeated. “I was going to visit Lydden and—”

“Too close, too populous,” Arthur objected. “In each case there are large towns where a stranger could stay without drawing notice. My dear, I cannot believe this violence is truly directed at you or your children for any real reason, and yet…”

Abigail stared at him without replying, and he took her hands comfortably in his. “I will not stay if you feel you cannot trust me—or I will stay on any terms you like. I have not given up, Abigail. I still want you as my wife, but we can quarrel about that when we have solved this mystery.” He smiled wryly. “I would rather have you to quarrel with than not have you at all.”
“Oh, you vain creature,” Abigail said with a smile, “thinking I was hesitating because I feared you. It is perfectly true, of course. I ran away in London because I knew if I remained, I would yield—and that would have been a tragedy for both of us in the end.” He started to speak, but Abigail shook her head at him and went on firmly. “I said I could not explain. If we are to…to be able at least to quarrel, you must accept that. In any case, I was not thinking about us, which was why I called you a vain creature. I was wondering whether it would help to run away to Scotland. Sooner or later we must return.”

“Yes, but there would be two months in which to try to discover who is doing this. And even if no answer is found, in September the children will be off to school, where you may be sure they will be well protected. Once they are safe, we will be less vulnerable.” He stopped and looked away, then went on, “Abigail, I do not want to increase your worries, but I feel I must warn you—do you realize that the person was deliberately lying in wait at the mill and must have known you would be going there? That means—”

“Oh yes, I realized,” she interrupted. “But it does not narrow the field much. I suppose all the servants knew. Victor and Daphne run about in servants’ hall pretty freely and talk about everything. The grooms knew because we were discussing it in the stable. And any one of them might have mentioned it to others.”

“So we come back to the fact that either Dick or you or one of your children was the target.”

“It was Dick who was shot,” Abigail said, her voice shaking only a little.

“Yes, but if your memory is correct and Griselda screamed before the first shot was fired, her cry may have spoiled the man’s aim.”

“I thought of that too,” Abigail whispered, “and if he missed his real target, that target must be Victor, and that first shooting was not an accident. But no one could want to shoot Victor—unless for the inheritance? Eustace?”

Arthur took her back into his arms, and one part of him responded with joy because her arms slid so naturally around him, but actually he had embraced her as much to hide his face from her as to comfort her. He was afraid she would see the sick fear in his eyes. Bertram had left the house early that morning. He had told Arthur that he wanted to visit a property some distance away that was being managed by a new bailiff whose accounts did not satisfy him. Abigail’s question had reminded Arthur of that, reminded him that if Eustace were accused and convicted of killing his nephew, Bertram would inherit. Arthur could not tell Abigail—not until he had questioned the bailiff and others and discovered when Bertram had arrived.

Once again Arthur fought the monstrous suspicion. He told himself it was ridiculous. It was more likely that Price was right and Dick was the target. And there were other possibilities that were certainly no more farfetched than that a man who had always been honest and honorable should plan to murder a child. Whoever the real culprit was, Arthur decided, it would be dangerous for Abigail to fix her suspicions on Eustace and think Victor was safe when his uncle was not around.

“It was the first idea into my head when I heard,” Arthur said, muffling his voice by pressing his lips to her hair, “but—no. Whatever Eustace’s faults, stupidity is not one of them. He would be the first person to be suspected. If Victor had been having accidents, I might suspect Eustace was behind them, but he would not shoot Victor. All I can suggest is that whoever attacked you is not sane.”
“But why attack Victor?”

Arthur was silent a moment. It was better for Abigail to be wary of everyone than to fix her suspicions on the wrong person. “It is possible someone has a grudge against the earl of Lydden or against the whole family. The old man was not bad or cruel, but he would suddenly come to a sticking place—as he did with Francis. After paying his debts time and again, he suddenly refused and would actually have let Francis be sent to debtors’ prison. It might have been something very minor—a tenant whose lease was not renewed or the terms not eased, a poacher sent to prison or a petty thief transported. In some men, a seed of hatred can last and grow.”

“But Victor is only a little boy,” Abigail cried. “Who could blame him?”

“Only a madman,” Arthur said grimly. “That is why I want you in Scotland. Madmen are persistent and can be damnably clever. It would not be difficult to find out about the other Lydden estates and follow you there. It is not likely, but I do not think we should take that chance. You will all be safe in Scotland. The estate is well away from any large place a stranger might come on business. The villages are small, and every person is known to every other—not to mention the speech. Any Englishman would be noticed immediately.”

Arthur went on, soothing her by telling her more about the Scottish estate and how Daphne and Victor could move around without restraint and yet be carefully watched. His mind skidded again into its personal pit of fear, and he reminded himself that what he had said was especially true for Bertram, who was known to everyone. Bertram could not come within miles of the place without being reported. Abigail hardly listened, aware of little beyond the ebbing of the fear she had finally faced—that someone was trying to kill her son. It was enormously comforting that Arthur had the means and the will to protect her children.

It was not until he asked, “Then you will come?” that Abigail realized there was one problem she had not considered at all—Griselda. Because the attacker might think that Griselda could identify him, she was in as much or more danger than the rest of them and must leave Rutupiae. But if she had a hopeless love for Arthur, it would be torture for her to accompany them. Abigail hardly listened, aware of little beyond the ebbing of the fear she had finally faced—that someone was trying to kill her son. It was enormously comforting that Arthur had the means and the will to protect her children.

Abigail sat up and let her arms slide from around Arthur’s neck to his shoulders. “The children and I and Dick, if he is well enough—yes. I will have to talk to Griselda. If she does not wish to accompany us, perhaps she can go to London or someplace else. She could start out with us and then—”

“Whatever you like,” Arthur said quickly. He kissed her once more, then let her go and stood up. “I must go home and send an express to Glendessary to tell them we are coming. We will leave in the morning—and that should be reason enough for Daphne and Victor to stay in this afternoon. They will be busy packing. It will be a long trip and some of it very rough and better done on horse-back, so Victor can also oversee getting the horses ready. Anyway, I will be back this afternoon to cover any details we may have missed.”

He was halfway to the door by the time Abigail had got to her feet. “Arthur,” she called after him. He stopped and turned, about to come back, but she shook her head. “I only wanted to say—I love you.”

His eyes, under their heavy lids, smiled. Abigail had no idea how he created that expression, but it was the only description that fit it. And then his lips curved, just a trifle at the corners, making him look quite wicked. “I intend to take gross advantage of that statement, you know,” he said softly.

Abigail laughed. “Why do you think I made it?”

A comical expression of chagrin rapidly replaced the naughty invitation on his face. “Damn!” he exclaimed. “I forgot I was the one who was supposed to be resisting. It is very unnatural.”

“Not at all,” Abigail assured him with mock seriousness. “I will give you a book that shows how it is done—Fielding’s Joseph Andrews.”

Now he lifted a brow. “Delaying tactics, my love. For some reason you don’t want to talk to Griselda—I don’t
blame you; she is the most tiresome girl—"

“No, no, she isn’t, Arthur," Abigail said quickly. “I have grown truly fond of her, and the children adore her.”

He lifted his brow even higher but did not say anything else, only making a slight sardonic bow as he went out the door. Abigail was a little annoyed both by his too quick perception of anything she felt and by his seemingly total lack of perception about Griselda. But Arthur had been perfectly right about her not wanting to talk to Griselda. No matter how Abigail dealt with the subject of going to Scotland, she knew it would hurt Griselda—and Griselda had had enough pain in her life. Nonetheless, the girl could not remain in Rutupiae to become the sole target of a madman. Abigail squared her shoulders and made her way to Griselda’s room.

There was no answer to her first knock, but she persisted, calling softly, “It is Abigail, Griselda, I must talk to you.” Then the door opened, and she gasped. Griselda’s face was shocking—blue and purple and very swollen. “Oh, you silly girl,” she cried. “Why did you say you did not need the apothecary? I will—”

“But I don’t need him,” Griselda insisted. “What could he do for me? He cannot reduce the colors, and I am not hurt beyond bruises.” She hesitated and then said, “Please come in,” and closed the door carefully, adding in a rather low and trembling voice, “I have thought of a tale to explain—”

“I am sorry,” Abigail interrupted, “it is too late for explanations. Your mother knows you were at the mill. But how could you be so silly, Griselda, as to believe I would permit Hilda to drive you out of the house? I hoped we were better friends than that.”

“Mama can be very…very insistent,” Griselda said, but she spoke as if she hardly heard her own words, and she sank down into a chair as if her legs had become boneless.

“You were never afraid of being put out!” Abigail exclaimed with sudden understanding. “She threatened you with something else. What was it?”

Griselda looked out into nothing, then turned to Abigail with a faint, sad smile. “It is nothing to worry about now. Mama is very strong and will live, I daresay, for a long time.”

Abigail blinked. “She has the power to leave you out of her will? I see. Well, you needn’t let that worry you, either. I promise you that you will never be without a home or adequate care. And Eustace—”

“Please do not listen to Eustace’s assurances that he will provide for me!” Griselda cried, and then, shaking her head, tried to laugh. “Now that is silly. Mama is alive and well and likely to be so for a long, long time. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“About what happened this morning,” Abigail said slowly, but her mind was really turning over the fearful exclamation about Eustace.

“I cannot tell you much more,” Griselda said. “I have thought and thought because there was something odd I saw—I thought I saw—just as I came up the stairs. I could swear he was wearing fine boots. But I may not be remembering correctly. I was so surprised to see a man with a gun instead of mischievous children, and the rest of his clothing was common. He wore a rough coat and a countryman’s hat, pulled down, with a neckerchief or a scarf that covered the lower part of his face. That was all I saw—except the gun. I was so frightened, I could not tell you the color of the coat or…”

Her voice faded away because Abigail was shaking her head. Actually, Abigail had been unable to listen attentively to the beginning of what Griselda told her because she was still so startled by Griselda’s lack of trust in her brother. Abigail finally managed to push the idea away and concentrate, but she knew that what Griselda was telling her would be no help in catching the gunman, and she wanted to get the painful blow she must deal the poor girl over with as quickly as possible.

“I am less worried about what you saw than what the madman who shot at us saw,” Abigail said. “What I am afraid of is that he saw you, and clearly.”
“I suppose he did,” Griselda replied, “but what can that matter?”

“If he saw you and recognized you, it is likely that he will feel you could have recognized him,” Abigail pointed out. “I don’t want to frighten you, but if such a person feels you are dangerous to him, he might try to silence you.”

Abigail’s voice had been gentle, and she took Griselda’s hand to offer comfort, but Griselda did not look at all alarmed and, although she pressed Abigail’s hand gently in appreciation of her support, she said calmly, “If he had wanted to kill me, he could have done so at once. He could have beaten my head in with the butt of his gun. Even if he ran because he was frightened and only later thought I might know him, I do not think there can be any danger for me. After all, I would surely have already named him if I could, so what would be the use of trying to kill me now?”

“You may be right,” Abigail answered slowly, “and Dick’s father thinks the intention was to avenge some spite against himself by harming his son—but even if that were true, only a madman would make his attempt when there were three other people there who could be hurt or, for that matter, help Dick if he were only wounded. And madmen do not usually think logically. In any case, my dear, I am too fond of you to allow you to be exposed to danger and too worried about my children to remain here.”

“Mama will not let me go with you,” Griselda said flatly.

“Your mama has nothing to say about the matter,” Abigail retorted. “I say you are to go, and that is that. And I will see you do not suffer for it. Sir Arthur thinks we will be safest at his Scottish estate in Glendessary.”

Abigail said the last sentence quickly, watching Griselda’s face. Her pretty hazel eyes widened with a look of barely suppressed excitement and joy. Abigail’s heart sank, for she could only believe that the emotions were engendered by Griselda’s desire to be near Arthur. She hated to wipe out that small hope of happiness, but she knew Arthur would be completely exasperated if Griselda sat in corners staring at him worshipfully or fluttered about offering to run errands or fetch things for him.

“My love,” Abigail added hurriedly, “before you say you wish to come, I must tell you two things. The first is that arrangements can be made for you to go elsewhere—to London, if you like—if you do not choose to come with us after you have heard the second—which is that Arthur and I are lovers. If you feel that our relationship would make you uncomfortable—”

“I am not so much of a prude as that,” Griselda interrupted with a faint smile.

Abigail was so surprised that she burst out, “But…but I thought you…you had a tendre for Arthur!”

“Sir Arthur?” Griselda exclaimed. “Oh no!” And then she blushed so hotly that tears rose to her eyes. “That was Mama,” she said in a stifled voice. “She thought she could force me on him, trick him in some way so that he would feel obligated to offer for me. It was dreadful. Every chance Mama could find, she made me approach him, but as soon as I could, I ran away. Bertram helped me.”

Although Griselda’s voice had faded to a whisper on the last three words, Abigail had to acknowledge that the girl gave no evidence of fighting shock or jealousy. The bruises made her expression hard to read, but the only strong emotion she seemed to feel was shame at her mother’s efforts to trap an unwilling man into marriage.

“Do you not find Arthur attractive?” Abigail asked curiously.

For an instant Griselda looked anxious, and then she shook her head. “I hope I do not offend you,” she said shyly, “but you asked me before if we were not good enough friends for me to trust you—and I must do that. I believe Sir Arthur to be a fine, kind man, but I must admit it has always puzzled me why so many—” She stopped abruptly and her eyes widened and again filled with tears. “Oh, forgive me, I didn’t mean—”

Abigail laughed. “I am well aware of Arthur’s…er…past rakish proclivities. You need not be afraid of shocking me or hurting me. I am very glad you will be able to come with us without feeling uncomfortable, and I beg your pardon for prying into your private life, but you looked so eager and excited when I mentioned going to Scotland that I was afraid my dear Arthur’s fatal charm had unintentionally bewitched you.”
“Oh no,” Griselda replied, smiling. “I would have been equally delighted whether Sir Arthur were coming or not and no matter where you said we were going. You see, except for an hour or two once in a while, I have never been anywhere without Mama.”

Chapter Twenty

Arthur was somewhat less delighted than Griselda when he learned that she would accompany them, but by the time they reached the house near Glendessary, he was in a mood to embrace the world. An express letter had overtaken them on the road, and its contents seemed to eliminate Bertram as the man who had shot at Abigail’s party from the mill. In the warmth of his relief, Arthur would have found his worst enemy delightful company, however, even when the glow had faded he had to admit that Griselda was a different person when freed of her mother’s influence. He found her gentle wit amusing and was surprised to discover that when she could be drawn into conversation, she was quite intelligent.

Nonetheless, she made him slightly uncomfortable. Despite the fact that she was taller than Abigail and not really physically fragile, Griselda seemed extremely delicate—as if a single harshness would crush her nearly out of existence. Arthur found himself not only speaking to her in a gentle voice but examining every word he addressed to her lest it contain a hidden meaning that could hurt her. He did not mind because he enjoyed the remarks and grateful smiles his care won, but it was still a relief to turn to Abigail, to whom he could say anything that came into his head without the slightest concern that her robust spirit would be damaged.

And despite Arthur’s care, Griselda remained quite shy of him and confessed to Abigail that she found so dominant a man overpowering. She looked with a mixture of terror and admiration at Abigail, who argued with Arthur freely, sometimes at the top of her lungs, when their opinions diverged. In time, Griselda grew accustomed to it and was even amused as she realized the participants were not quarreling and not hurting each other, although each was quite sincere about the subject under discussion. But in the beginning of the visit, she preferred to spend her time with Daphne and Victor. It was an arrangement that worked out very well because it permitted the children to become aware only very slowly that Sir Arthur and their mother had a special fondness for each other. Since this knowledge grew concurrently with their own growing affection for him, it was no great shock.

The developing affection was mutual. Although Arthur was a bachelor, he was accustomed to children since his relatives often left offspring who were problems for one reason or another with his mother. He had liked Abigail’s children as soon as he met them because they were hers. As he grew to know them, he liked them for themselves. Now he was learning to love them. He talked gravely of books and plants with Daphne and enjoyed her serious and absorbed efforts when she was permitted to preside at the tea table. He showed Victor the forest that covered much of the estate and discussed with him the culling and management of the elk herds, the necessary balance between forest for the game animals, grazing for the sheep and cattle, and tillage for the turnips and potatoes, which were the people’s staple foods, together with the small amount of oats, barley, and wheat they grew.

The nights were Abigail’s. They had been exhausted the evening they arrived and by rights should have tumbled into sleep as soon as they were in bed, but neither Arthur nor Abigail could sleep, and as soon as the house was quiet they met each other in the narrow corridor that separated their rooms, each afraid that the other would be reluctant. Later, they laughed heartily about that, but at the moment the proof of the other’s desire only added fuel to the flames, and they came together in an explosion that was made all the more brutal by the need for silence. Because she knew she must not cry out, Abigail bit Arthur so hard in the convulsion of her climax that he bled. And in the morning she would thank God that the climate of Scotland was so cool because it would permit her to wear a long-sleeved, high-necked gown that would conceal her bruises.

When it was over and they had caught their breath, they whispered their simultaneous apologies. Then they cosseted and cuddled each other. First Abigail bathed Arthur’s shoulder with cold water and dried it until the bleeding stopped, then he began to kiss all her bruises. When his lips reached her mount of Venus, she crossed her legs over his head and pulled his body around so that she could return the compliment he was paying her. One advantage of the position was that neither could cry out.

They had slept after that. Arthur knew he should go back to his own bed, but he simply could not find the resolution to do so. Abigail was already asleep, and he had shrugged and snuggled closer, thinking with a tinge of satisfaction that if they were caught she would have to marry him. He had wakened before dawn, however, in a cold sweat of
fear, knowing that he did not want marriage on those terms—not with Abigail. But the solid darkness showed there was still time. Arthur told himself he only meant to kiss her gently while she slept, but she woke at once with a response that made it clear to him he had been deceiving himself and his intentions went a good deal further than one kiss.

Half asleep and still dulled with fatigue, they made a long, lingering process of their act of love. They stroked each other and played with fingers and lips on every sensitive spot. Arthur even took a long time in entering, sliding himself along and between the nether lips, letting only the head enter, stopping altogether with the tip of his shaft just touching her to suck at Abigail’s breasts. Oddly, although she knew she would come to climax as soon as he began to thrust in earnest, Abigail was not impatient. And when he at last yielded to his own need, her joy came in a pulsing flood that nearly deprived her of her senses—but was never so acute that she had to grip him convulsively or grit her teeth against screaming.

When he finished that time, Arthur did not lie beside her kissing her gently and murmuring love words. Groaning softly, he dragged himself upright and went away. Abigail lay looking into the dark, knowing why he had gone, knowing that if she wanted the comfort of his body beside her through the night and in the morning, she would have to marry him. She pushed the thought away and found sleep.

It became harder and harder to avoid the thought of marriage. Arthur came every night, and every night it was clear it was harder for him to go and harder for her to let him go. They did not always make love; however, they felt a deep and ever-growing need for each other—to touch, to lie embraced, to exchange a lazy word or two about the day’s activities or the children.

As August passed, Abigail kept Arthur with her later and later. She was happy enough during the day and while he lay beside her at night, but when she was alone in the dark, her dread of going back to Rutupiae haunted her. At first it had been only a little weight on her heart, but night by night it grew until it was like a black mountain, suffocating her. She was not afraid of whoever had attacked them. The terror of that incident had faded with time. When she did think of it, she had the feeling that it had all been some kind of mistake, that the man in the mill had been expecting something or someone other than her party to come out of the woods. Certainly nothing worse had befallen her children in Scotland than a scraped knee or a twisted ankle. In any case, after only one or two days at home, Victor and Daphne would be safe in schools where they would be under supervision almost every moment. It was the loss of Arthur she dreaded.

She tried to tell herself it was ridiculous, that there was no question of losing him, that she could see him every day if she liked and that they could make love at the cottage whenever they wanted. But she knew she was lying to herself. If they found it difficult to part now, knowing the other was only across the corridor and knowing they would be together again at the breakfast table, what would it do to them to live in separate houses? She and Arthur would suffer the constant irritation of being close, but not close enough to find each other in minutes to offer a tidbit of news, exchange a laughing comment, or confide a sudden idea. They could meet every day, but not spontaneously, as those who live together do. The ease would be gone; they would be in a hurry to transmit everything they had been bottling up and the joy of the exchanges would be lost. Worst of all she feared the meetings to satisfy their sexual tension. They would be far more frustrating than these nights in Scotland.

Day by day it became plainer to Abigail that Arthur had been right. The kind of love they shared was married love, and it was not possible for them, because of her obligations to her children and Arthur’s to his political activities, to defy convention and live together except in the married state. She knew she would either have to marry Arthur or break free of him completely. And the children’s fondness for him was another complication. Alone in the dark she wept softly. For what reason was it better to learn to hate the man you loved, because you could not have enough of him or because he was doing everything in his power to care for you and protect you?

The night before they started for home, Arthur made love to her with a desperate intensity that told Abigail he had come to the same conclusions she had. When they were finished, he lay very still, but she knew he was not sleeping. She realized he must feel like someone whose dearest friend had suddenly tied him down and begun to torture him and refused to give any reason for what he was doing. That was unfair. Even if Arthur could not understand and was angry, he had a right to know why she did not want to marry him.

“It is mostly the bookshop,” she said.
If Abigail had doubted how closely their minds were attuned, his reply would have been answer enough. He did not ask what she was talking about. He did not sound in the least surprised by the peculiar introduction of a subject neither had mentioned after she had confessed in London to ownership of the bookshop. It was quite apparent that he understood she had begun to explain, if she could, why she had refused him. His voice was very gentle, his arm closed a little more tightly around her when he said, “But I told you I did not mind the bookshop.”

“You did not mind it as something done in the past a long way away, but you would mind if your wife was a bookseller.”

“It would certainly be ridiculous for my wife to be a bookseller,” Arthur agreed mildly, confused by what she had said.

His heart had leapt at her first statement with the hope that Abigail had been silly enough to have refused him because she thought it necessary to protect him from marrying a person beneath him. Her next sentence had killed that hope. Arthur decided he had to take the chance of a gentle probe.

“You were a bookseller to earn your livelihood,” he went on. “Surely you cannot think you would need for anything once you became my wife.”

“I knew you would not understand,” she said.

Her voice was quiet, dull, and hopeless. Arthur could feel the wet of her tears on his shoulder although she did not sob. “You have not told me very much, my dear,” he pointed out, “although I am beginning to guess that you wish to keep this bookshop. And you are quite right. I do not understand. It is silly to own a shop in America when you are in England and the countries are at war. Nonetheless, my love, if that is your sticking point I assure you that I will marry you gladly, even as the owner of a bookshop.”

“And then you would own it.”

This time there was a long moment of silence before Arthur answered. “Now you do have to explain yourself,” he said carefully. “I would like to know what accusation I must defend myself against. Do you think I will rob you of whatever income the shop brings or—”

“I knew you would be angry,” Abigail sighed. “You know quite well I do not think you would rob me. I think you would quietly sell my shop as soon as you thought I had forgotten about it and carefully invest the money for me—and give me every penny of the interest as well as a diamond necklace, or whatever you thought would please me best, to distract me when I discovered what you had done.”

Since a very similar notion had flitted through Arthur’s mind, there was another silence. Then he said, “Very well, I will give you my word not to do anything without your express permission.”

She shook her head. “I should be sure your word would bind you. My head is sure, but my heart is not. And I am afraid you have offered your word without really considering what it means. I would not be a silent owner. I will be doing the business of the shop.” She felt the arm that held her stiffen. He did not like that. The tears that had stopped flowing while she was speaking filled her eyes again. “And it is not only the shop, my love,” she went on. “I hate the state of a married woman. I hate the knowledge of helplessness.”

“What the devil does that mean?” Arthur asked, and this time his voice was angry. “What do you think I will do to you if you become my wife?”

“Nothing!” Abigail cried. “It has nothing to do with you. I knew you would not understand. Have you ever been utterly powerless? Do you realize that a married woman does not own the clothes she wears? That her husband has the right to sell them? Has the right to take from her what she has earned by her own labor? That if a husband commits a crime, a wife, no matter how innocent, can be imprisoned for it?”

She was shaking, and Arthur, who had relaxed his grip on her when he asked his angry question, put both arms around her and held her tight. “I am not Francis,” he said, but she began to cry despairingly, and he realized she was not blackening him with the tar of Francis’ habits. He understood she did not fear that he would sell her clothes or
get into a drunken brawl for which he could not pay the damage so that she would be threatened if payment was not made. Her very soul was scarred.

“Hush,” Arthur murmured, rocking her in his arms. “Hush, my love. I will find a way. Roger will know, or if he does not, he will know whom to ask.”

Abigail’s soft sobs stopped abruptly. “You mean there is a way for us to marry and still let me be free and independent?”

Arthur had not been thinking along that line at all. He had really hoped that Abigail would find all the legal arrangements so confusing and tiring that she could be convinced to accept a relatively standard contract, perhaps containing a clause about her damned bookshop. At worst, whatever she owned could be settled on her in some way. He was aware that Sabrina’s property was secured in such a way that her husband could not touch it and the income from it went direct into Sabrina’s hands. However, Sabrina could not sell the lands or control the invested capital without the approval of a group of trustees, so Arthur did not think of her as being free and independent. The words annoyed him.

“What do you plan to do with this independence and freedom you crave?” Arthur asked with considerably less tenderness in his voice than the last time he spoke.

“Nothing,” Abigail said and kissed his neck.

“Then what the devil do you need it for?”

Her tears had dried; her heart was pounding with joy. There was a way! There was a way to be a wife and still to be free! The irritation in Arthur’s voice told her that the path to her goal might not be either easy to find or easy to lead Arthur along, but it was there. Now it was worthwhile to try to make clear to Arthur why they had to find and walk that path. If only there was a way to explain so that he would not feel she did not trust him, a way to express the need to have the right to make a choice, even if she never used it.

“In a way I do not really know,” she said quietly. “I not only love you, Arthur, I know you. I know you would never do anything to hurt me, that you will care for me and provide for me with great generosity. Yet, if I were your slave, unable to live except by your charity—”


“There is no difference I know of between the two states except that a man cannot sell his wife—at least, I think he cannot, although I have heard of cases—”

“Abigail! Are you insane? What do you mean there is no difference between a wife and a slave?”

“I do not know all the law,” she answered, pulling free of his lax arms and sitting up, “but a slave cannot own anything, and neither can a wife. A slave cannot choose his place of domicile, and neither can a wife. The law gives permission for a man to beat his slave, and it gives permission for a man to beat his wife. A slave cannot do anything to control the destiny of his children, and neither can a wife.”

Arthur sat up too and placed his hands gently on her shoulders. “My God,” he said, his voice soft with horror, “what did Francis do to you?”

“Actually nothing,” Abigail replied, “but when he was drunk and I would not give him money or I refused to pay his debts, he would threaten me, so I went to a judge to learn what rights I had. I was afraid Francis would grow worse, you see. And I learned I had no rights at all. If Francis borrowed money or bought what we did not need and could not afford, I could be put into debtors’ prison. Francis could force me to move away from the shop, or he could take our children away, or… The details do not matter, but if you can point out the difference between a wife and a slave, I will be glad to listen.”

“A wife is loved, and that love is her protection,” Arthur said rather coldly. “And I am not a drunkard or a gambler.”
Abigail cupped his face in her hands. “I said before that my needs and my fears have nothing to do with you. I was trying to explain why I used the word ‘slave.’” She felt his head pull back, away from her caressing hands, and she tightened her grip a little. “No, Arthur, listen. When a person is abjectly in the power of another, there is a pall of fear—no, fear is too strong a word for what I mean—a pall of anxiety that distorts the hearing and vision of the one who is powerless. What might be meant as a light jest or a loving reminder comes to sound like a gibe or a threat, and this breeds resentment.”

“I cannot believe this.” Arthur cut her off and pulled away. “You cannot tell me that my mother spent her life in fear of my father, misinterpreting and resenting everything he said to her.”

“No,” Abigail agreed, “because she had been taught to bury such feelings and never had any reason, since your father was a good husband, to uncover them. Besides, I do not think your mother has my flammable disposition.”

“This is ridiculous,” Arthur said, ignoring the analysis of his mother Abigail had offered. “By now I am accustomed to your temper. Why should I suddenly change if we were to marry?”

“I do not say you will, but men are known to exact considerably different behavior from their wives than they endured from the same women during courtship.”

This was true enough, and Arthur stared at Abigail, fuming. “Oh, and do you plan to have a legal agreement to cover my behavior, too?”

“I will not need one,” Abigail pointed out, “if I control my own income and my children and have the right to live where I please. If we cannot agree, I would simply go away.”

“Do you think I would try to hold you if you really wished to leave me?” Arthur snarled. “I give you my word I would not.”

“Arthur,” Abigail said gently, touching his hand, “you are asking me to accept your word about many things. Why are you not willing to accept mine that I will do nothing of which you would disapprove with my freedom and independence, except buy books for my shop, and I promise to do that so discreetly that no one will know. We have lived together these two months, plus those ten days in London, and all that time I have been completely free and independent. Have you any complaint of my behavior to you?”

There was an ominous silence, and Abigail’s breath caught. She thought she had failed. Then Arthur’s deep chuckle made her gasp with joy and fling her arms around him with such force that he fell back on the pillow.

“How dare you ask such a question?” he growled, hugging her so hard her ribs creaked. “How dare you? Your behavior to me is one long offense. If I say the sky is blue, you say it is gray—”

“Only when it is raining,” Abigail suggested in a meek little voice that made Arthur laugh again.

“You are the most contumacious, quarrelsome female I have ever come across in my life,” he went on severely.

“I am not contumacious and quarrelsome,” Abigail said, biting him. “I am simply a rational being, and when you say something that is clearly irrational, I must—”

Arthur made a wordless noise, a mixture of growl and laugh that was perfectly expressive of his mingled exasperation and amusement, and muted his mischievous tormentor by kissing her. Abigail worked her arms out from behind his neck, running one hand down along his body to stroke his buttocks and the back of his thighs while the other played gently with his ear. He groaned softly.

“We have to be up early tomorrow,” he whispered against her mouth, but his hands were already caressing her.

“Then perhaps you had better stop,” Abigail murmured, insinuating a hand between them to touch him more intimately.

He turned so that he was flat on his back and moved his leg to allow her hand freer movement. “Perhaps,” he
admitted, then sighed and shuddered as Abigail ran a nail ever so gently around the bared head of his shaft, “but I think…oh God…I think…yes, just there…oh, ah…I think…”

It was perfectly clear that he was not thinking at all, but since he had one of Abigail’s breasts cupped in his hand, running his thumb back and forth across her nipple, and the fingers of his other hand were very busy between her thighs, she was in no condition to criticize. Her own soft exclamations were no more sensible than his. In fact, a slightly complaining note soon entered her voice, and she slid her hand across her lover’s thigh to tug at him in a silent appeal for him to mount her.

When her caresses ceased, Arthur uttered a deep sigh, and the slight, involuntary thrusts of his hips in response to her touches stopped. “I think,” he said rather breathlessly but more firmly than might be expected as he seized her and lifted her over him, “that I will punish you by making you do all the work this time.”

“Oh, dear heart,” Abigail sighed as she eased herself down and wriggled them into perfect joining, “if this punishment fits my crime, I must be sure to commit that crime again very often.”

The punishment was so delightful and came to so satisfactory an ending that it was not until Arthur left her that Abigail realized nothing had been settled. He had not agreed that he would accept a marriage in which his wife was not bound by the customary laws. He had, in fact, cleverly diverted her when she had made the telling point that if he wanted her to accept his word as to his future behavior, he must be willing to accept hers.

Still, Abigail was happy as she snuggled into her blankets—for it was growing very cold at night in the Scottish hills—even though she missed Arthur’s warmth. There was a way, she thought, smiling into the dark and feeling free of the mountain of misery that usually settled on her when Arthur left. She would find the way and find a solicitor who would wrap up the meaning of whatever articles must be signed in long, complimentary phrases that would not hurt her darling’s pride. Then, although perhaps he would never understand, they would both be free to live and quarrel, laugh and love.

Chapter Twenty-One

No more about marriage was said between Abigail and Arthur during the journey home, although both thought a good deal about the subject. Abigail was very happy; she would have bubbled over like warm champagne except that Arthur’s mood did not match hers. He was not angry or bad tempered but rather somber, as if something was worrying him. Naturally, Abigail assumed that he was trying to digest the unpalatable idea of a wife who could not be forced into obedience but must be trusted to do for love what others did because they had no choice. She was not angry because he could not accept the idea immediately or joyously. Partly because of her own frustrations, Abigail understood that it was hard to give up power. Because she felt sympathy with his struggle, she moderated her joy and was more gentle than usual, trying to show him that he did not have to own her to make her compliant with his mood.

Actually, Abigail misinterpreted the reasons for Arthur’s thoughtfulness. Because he had not intended to marry and his mother and father had had few conflicts with each other, Arthur had never had any reason to question the situation of a married woman. In addition, Arthur had been so deeply shocked by Abigail’s identification of wife and slave that he had instinctively rejected her remarks as a hysterical reaction to her marriage with Francis. The notion, however, would not leave him. Now whenever he thought “wife”, he also thought “slave”, and the idea sickened him.

One of the things that had drawn Arthur into the Whig party in opposition to his family’s longstanding affiliation with the Tories was his violent opposition not only to the slave trade but to slavery as an institution. Although he had long outgrown belief in Rousseau’s “noble savage”, neither could he accept that primitive ways of life made black, brown or red men less than men. He had noted that people of those races who were educated like white men acted like white men, particularly if the education began when they were children. And even if those were exceptional cases, as his opponents argued, to his mind they proved the direction in which the races were tending and that they had a right to develop freely without being preyed upon. He had spoken again and again in the House in favor of abolition of slavery; how ridiculous it would be for him to embrace it in the form of marriage.

The first time that notion occurred to him, he had told himself it was nonsense. Women were different, weaker
vessels, in mind as well as in body. It was the standard answer, equivalent to the arguments of those who supported slavery on the grounds that other races were subhuman, and Arthur was too self-aware, too intelligent and analytical, to be able to deceive himself for long. There was evidence enough in his own family to contradict the “weaker vessel” theory. His mother had more political sense than many men elected to office. Leonie had been as heroic as any man during the revolution in France. Sabrina was as good a diplomat as any man on the Foreign Office staff, and Abigail was certainly a better classical scholar than he was.

The last resort his mind found was that Abigail had exaggerated or misunderstood the legal situation, or that it was different in the United States than in England. This conclusion seemed very logical, and he determined that as soon as he had got through the business that had piled up while he had been away in Scotland, he would ride over and speak to Roger, who would be able, he was certain, to show him the flaws in Abigail’s statements. Then he could explain to her that she had been mistaken and that a wife was not a slave by English law. Having convinced himself that such injustice could not exist in reality, Arthur felt much more cheerful, and the last few days on the road were very merry, with everyone in the highest spirits.

Since the whole household came out to greet them at Rutupiae Hall, his parting from Abigail was necessarily formal, but even that did not matter. All the shadows were gone from her eyes, and she squeezed his fingers in a small, hidden gesture of intimacy when he kissed her hand in farewell. He already ached for her body because it had been impossible for them to be together at all in the inns in which they had lodged during the journey home, and he knew he would miss her bitterly all day every day, but only until they could be married, and now that she was willing, that could not be long delayed.

Arthur’s pleasant self-delusion had its first collision with reality that very evening. Although his doubts concerning Bertram’s involvement with the attacks on Victor had been resolved, he still worried about whether Bertram was concealing a desire for Abigail. Therefore, he had wished to consult his mother before telling Bertram that Abigail had agreed to marry him. He was reasonably sure Bertram had guessed by now that he cared for Abigail and she for him, but he wanted to make his announcement in the way that would be least painful.

Thus, Arthur had waited until they had all parted for the night and then tapped on his mother’s dressing-room door. He was rather surprised when she came to let him in herself and said so.

Violet shook her head, gestured him toward a chair, sat down herself, and smiled. “My love, it was perfectly plain that you were bursting with some news you wished to impart privately either to Bertram or to me, so I thought I would read for half an hour before I rang for my maid.”

“I had no idea I was so transparent,” Arthur said, grinning. “I hope you are more perceptive than others, but I am too happy to care. Abigail has agreed to marry me.”

“I am so glad for you, Arthur.” Violet’s eyes shone with pleasure, and amusement, for she had guessed what he was waiting to tell her as soon as she had had come into the house. “She is exactly the right woman for you,” Violet continued, “and I know you will be very happy. You can ride over and ask the vicar to read the banns tomorrow, and—oh, does Abigail know a notice must be sent to the Gazette to announce the betrothal?”

Arthur had grinned even more broadly at Violet’s first words. He had known she would be pleased, but as she went on speaking, he began to look very surprised. He was eager to marry as quickly as possible to regain all the privileges of a husband—like sleeping through the night in Abigail’s bed when it suited him and seeing her lovely face each morning. Still, his mother’s haste seemed almost indecent, as if—

“I haven’t got her with child, Mama,” Arthur said in a shocked voice. “There is no need for such haste that I cannot speak to the vicar on Sunday after the service.”

“Then why—?” Violet began, and realizing in the next instant what such a question implied, cried, “Oh, Arthur, I did not mean that you are not worth marrying or that Abigail does not love you—” but his expression made her put her hand to her lips and fall silent.

“What did you mean?” he asked, and before she could answer he added, “You are a very beautiful woman still, Mama, and you are by no means too old even now to marry again. You cannot tell me you have not had many
opportunities to do so. Why have you remained a widow?"

“I loved your father,” she replied.

“Yes,” Arthur agreed, lifting a brow sardonically. “And I remember that for a few years after his death you did not
dance or flirt. Moreover, I am very sure that you remember Papa with great tenderness, but, my dear, dear Mama,
you cannot pretend you have been a grieving widow for the past ten years at least.”

Violet shrugged. “It is more comfortable to be a widow. I can do what I like when I like. I can buy what I like—”

“Are you saying that Papa kept you short?” Arthur interrupted, rather horrified.

“No, no, of course not,” Violet assured him. “In fact, I never outspent my pin money—it was very generous. It was
merely that your father liked to—to know what I was doing. But there was never a harsh word about money between
us, only—only sometimes he would laugh at me, or point out that something I had done was foolish, or say he could
have got a better price if I had asked him. He was always right, Arthur, and never angry or unpleasant, and, indeed,
as I grew older it happened much less frequently, but,” she laughed, a shade awkwardly, “somehow I always felt just
a tiny bit…uneasy. And there were other small things, all very small, and I never minded because I loved him so, but
—but I now prefer that no one has the right to tell me what to do or oversee me—”

She had been gazing past him, not to conceal her expression but because she was seeing the past, and when her
thoughts reached the present again, she focused her eyes on her son, and stopped speaking abruptly. Then she said,
“What is it, Arthur?”

“Did you feel like a slave?” he asked.

Violet burst out laughing. “How can you ask such a silly question? Of course not! A slave! How ridiculous you are.
How could I feel like a slave when your father loved me so dearly? I felt cherished.”

Or smothered, Arthur thought, the scales having been peeled from his eyes. However, he had no intention of
distressing his mother by peeling the scales of self-delusion from hers—if she was self-deluded. She had been
cherished, and she was not a fighter like Abigail, although she was just as clever—perhaps cleverer. Caught in a
silken net, his mother would not struggle to tear it apart and perhaps destroy herself and everything else in the
process but work gently at the knots here and there until she made it comfortable or escaped entirely.

“Arthur, what has got into you?” she continued. “Your father and I were very happy together. I do not believe he
was ever unfaithful to me or gave me a single real cause for grief. Why do you look so grim?”

Arthur shook his head and smiled wryly. “I didn’t realize I was looking grim. I believe you, Mama. You have not
shattered my illusions and broken my heart.”

He had, of course, never doubted the happiness of his parents’ marriage. The thinned lips and set expression his
mother had so aptly termed grim had been engendered by the fact that the very phrases he had formed in his mind—
a silken net was a trap, however silken it was—proved Abigail’s point. It was true that Abigail might have
exaggerated the intensity of the feelings his mother had buried, but there must be some truth to her contention that
all wives did sometimes feel helpless and resentful.

Still, he did not believe that the law could be as unreasonable as Abigail implied. He felt she was mixing up the
results of affection—for he was certain it was love rather than fear that had made his mother docile—with the
mandates of the law. In any case, he was not going to describe to his mother Abigail’s rather extreme views on the
conditions of matrimony. On the other hand, it was quite clear his mama was not going to accept any light dismissal
of his troubled expression. She would not put her hands on her hips like a fishwife and demand the truth or
pugnaciously accuse him of lying, the way Abigail would. Involuntarily, Arthur smiled. His mother was a wonderful
woman, but he was very tired of being watched, wheedled, and trapped. Fortunately he had a perfect red herring at
hand with which to distract Violet.

“And if I was looking grim, it has nothing to do with you and Father,” he went on. “I guess my mind was really on
what you said first. I’m afraid that it will be some time before we can get the banns read.”
Arthur went on to point out that his relationship with Abigail was complicated by his being the trustee for her children and executor of her husband’s estate and that conditions of conflict of interest might be said to exist. “But what I really wanted to talk to you about,” he added, “I mean the reason I didn’t just announce the fact that Abigail had agreed to marry me as soon as I came in, was that I wanted to ask what you think is the best way to break the news to Bertram.”

“Break the news to Bertram?” Violet echoed. “I am really beginning to think you’ve gone mad, Arthur. Why should you need to break the news to Bertram? Bertram will be delighted.”

The certainty of her statement wiped the question of marital legalities from Arthur’s mind. What had been a diversion had become of primary importance. If it was not a hopeless love for Abigail that was causing the reserve in Bertram’s manner—what was it?

“I think you are mistaken,” Arthur answered, hoping he was not exhibiting more than a simple concern for Bertram’s feelings would merit, and went on to tell Violet of his suspicions concerning Bertram’s desire to marry.

Violet frowned thoughtfully. “You may be right about his wish to have a wife and family,” she said slowly. “I have felt that something was troubling him recently, but I assure you it is not Abigail in whom he is interested—if he has any particular woman in mind. He is fond of her, but not that way, as you would have discovered in a minute if you had not been so worried about hurting him.” Violet paused and reconsidered what she had said in the light of Arthur’s revelation, then added, “No, I am sure. Whatever is on Bertram’s mind, it is not Abigail.”

Arthur’s heart sank. The report he had had from the bailiff of the estate Bertram had visited had cleared Bertram of being the gunman, but he could have employed someone else. No, that was ridiculous. Bertram was much too clever to put himself into the hands of some villain. Yet the only result of the investigation to discover who had fired the shots from the mill had been proof that Dick was not the target and that it was likely no local person had been involved.

Beyond that there had been virtually no evidence to indicate who was guilty, although Price had harrowed the area with a fine-toothed comb with the aid of his fellow gamekeepers. First, Price and the Rutupiae head gamekeeper, Vastaly, questioned every owner of a gun on both estates and in the surrounding villages until they knew where each person capable of firing the weapon had been that morning. Then, they had enlisted the help of gamekeepers and bailiffs on neighboring estates—and the man had to come from within walking distance because no horse had been tethered within the vicinity of the mill, nor could anyone outside of the vicinity have known that Abigail and her children intended to picnic there.

“So you have any idea—” Arthur began, then stopped because he was not sure he wanted his mother prying gently at Bertram’s secrets.

But Violet was already shaking her head. “No, and I do not think we should try to find out,” she said. “When Bertram has worked things out—or come to a point where he knows he cannot work them out—he will tell one of us. He is a very private sort of person, Arthur, but he does love you—and me, a little, I think. If he needs help, he will come to you or me. If he does not need it, he will be angry and embarrassed if we intrude.”

Arthur nodded agreement, a good deal soothed by his mother’s confidence in Bertram. She was a keen judge of character and knew Bertram as well and as long as he did. Again he told himself he was a fool to doubt a man who had proved himself honest and loyal time and time again. Relieved, Arthur yawned and stretched and rose from his chair saying that he would take himself off to bed, as he had a full day to look forward to on the morrow.

This was true enough, as a session of Parliament was to open in a few weeks, and there were drafts of bills to be read and commented upon and several articles he had been asked to write for other bills in preparation. But none of the business in hand was really urgent. Bertram had sent anything that needed immediate attention to Scotland by express. So, after Arthur had answered the few important letters that had arrived while he was on the road, his mind began to wander.

First Bertram sighed in exasperation, then he laughed and said, “Go. You are doing me no good here. Just be sure to tell Abigail that you are allowing the government of England to fall to pieces while you are idling away your time in
Arthur smiled dutifully and then said, “I should have told you before. I have asked her to marry me, and she has agreed.”

“Oh, thank God!” Bertram exclaimed fervently. “The happy event cannot take place too soon. Perhaps once you are married I will be able to hold your attention for more than five minutes at a time.”

There was such obvious pleasure under Bertram’s teasing that Arthur had to admit that his mother was right and he had been mistaken in suspecting that Bertram was in love with Abigail. In one sense that was delightful, for he would no longer have to bite his tongue each time he felt like talking to Bertram about his loved one—either to damn her for her intransigency or to become lyrical about her. But if a suppressed desire for Abigail had not been Bertram’s secret… And then Arthur really felt like a fool. The woman might not have been Abigail, but if there was a girl Bertram wanted to marry and she was out of reach, Arthur’s courtship might still have generated a strain in him.

Suppressing a strong desire to urge Bertram to tell him who the girl was and promise to arrange everything—which might well be more than he could perform—Arthur looked down his nose in his best nuisance-quenching manner and said, “I have a very good memory. It seems to me that the last time I was in this office you drove me out with complaints that I was intruding on your territory.” Then abruptly changing his tone and expression to one of deep injury, he added dramatically, “I am doing my best to please you, but nothing—”

“Go,” Bertram ordered, struggling not to laugh and flicking his handkerchief at Arthur as if he were a fly, but as Arthur punched him gently and affectionately on the shoulder and pushed back his chair, Bertram said, “No, wait. I must find our copy of Lydden’s will, and I think instead of annoying Abigail, who must be very busy getting the children ready to leave for school, you had better ride over and show it to Roger. Our solicitor will have to work out any complications with Deedes, but Roger is the one to pick out any point on which suit could be brought to get rid of you as executor and trustee.”

“You are quite right.” Arthur’s lips thinned. “It might not occur to Deedes that particular care is needed to prevent Eustace from instituting suit since there is no apparent profit to be made from the appointment, but that is because Deedes is not sporting mad. Eustace could make a very good thing out of the trusteeship. He wouldn’t have to pay for another horse or gun until Victor was of age. No one could prove they weren’t bought for Victor.”

Bertram twiddled his handkerchief and picked at his sleeve and coat, removing infinitesimal—or imaginary—pieces of fluff. Arthur watched him and put a curb on his impatience. He was aware of Bertram’s sensitivity with regard to the “honor” of his family and realized that a battle was raging in his friend between the need to tell Arthur something that might be important and the need to conceal the unpleasant fact because it would blacken a Lydden. As Arthur expected it would, Bertram’s sense of loyalty to him triumphed.

“He’s a reckless devil too,” Bertram said with obvious reluctance.

“Reckless?” Arthur repeated, really surprised. “He’s a damn good horseman and a crack shot, but I never thought of him as reckless. In fact, I’ve always thought of him as rather tame.”

“I didn’t mean that Eustace was reckless about his precious skin,” Bertram remarked. “But he’s reckless enough to pay his debts and other bills out of the estate and take the chance that Victor wouldn’t prosecute his own uncle when he came of age. Anyway, that appearance of gentleness Eustace projects comes from years of handling Hilda.”

Arthur frowned. “But he hasn’t any choice about that. She holds the purse strings, and she’s mean enough to cut him off if he doesn’t dance to her piping. And that’s really Lydden’s fault. Why the devil did the old man leave Hilda’s whole fortune to her instead of dividing it up in a reasonable way or making some other arrangement for Eustace? I thought it must have been a provision of their marriage contract, but it doesn’t say that in the will—and usually that kind of thing is stated.”

“Didn’t you know why?” The note of bitterness was sharply apparent in Bertram’s voice and prepared Arthur for a nasty disclosure, but he was still surprised when Bertram added, “Eustace forged the old man’s name to pay some
“Gambling!” Arthur was appalled. All he could think was that the trait did run in the family and that Victor would break Abigail’s heart.

Bertram seemed to guess what was in Arthur’s mind and shook his head. “The losses were nothing. The kind one suffers on a bad night in a fashionable club. Eustace simply decided paying them would leave him too short, so he wrote a draft and signed his father’s name.”

“Good God!” Arthur exclaimed, but as the immediate shock receded an oddity struck him, and he frowned. “How did you come to hear of it?”

A blaze of fury lit the single glance Bertram flashed at Arthur. Then he lowered his eyes to his own fingernails. “I knew because my uncle had first accused me of paying for my luxuries by signing his name to bills. Fortunately, my taste is very different from Eustace’s. I was able to prove that I had never been a client of any of the establishments where payment was made by forged draft. When the last forgery showed up, and my uncle discovered it was Eustace, he wrote to me and apologized.” Bertram paused and then added bitterly, “Do you want to see the letter?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Arthur said irritably.

“Sorry.” Bertram smiled. “Except for the revered ancestor who had a passion for Roman ruins, the Lyddens used to be the dullest and most proper family in England. My father seems to have broken precedent, and everyone rushed to emulate his bad example—Francis, then Eustace.”

Arthur raised his brows. “What you need is a good go at the family records. That would cure you of revering your ancestors. Anyhow, it’s nonsense. I can’t say you are dull, my dear Bertram, but you are quite sickeningly virtuous—and Victor is a clear refutation of any hint of enfeeblement in the line.”

Bertram laughed. “Yes, I think he is, but I am in awe of your singleness of purpose, Arthur. No matter what we begin to talk about, you come round about in the end to Abigail—or something to do with Abigail. Just let me get the papers you will need, and you can go. I have no time today to listen to raptures.”

But when Arthur returned from his visit to Roger, he was not in the mood for raptures. Not only had Roger foreseen complications in arranging matters so that Eustace could not bring suit for conflict of interest, but Arthur had discovered that Abigail had not been exaggerating. In 1765 the great jurist Blackstone had summed up the status of married women. By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law—that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage… For this reason, a man cannot grant anything to his wife, or enter into covenant with her, for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence…and the courts of law will still permit a husband to restrain a wife of her liberty…

Although Roger was not a solicitor, he knew a great deal about the laws concerning women because he had married a wife far richer than himself, and her cousin Sabrina, their foster daughter, was also a considerable heiress. Roger had expended thought and effort in finding a legal way of protecting his own wife and Sabrina from their husbands by creating, through the Court of Chancery, an equitable, separate estate that a married woman could hold as feme sole, free of her husband’s control.

Right through the stunned recognition that a wife was even less than a slave—because a slave was at least recognized as a separate entity—Arthur found it surprising that Roger should secure Leonie’s property in such a way that he could not touch or manage it except by her direct permission.

“Didn’t Leonie trust you?” he asked.

Roger laughed. “It had nothing to do with Leonie. She was rather annoyed with me when I explained it all to her, but I am nearly twenty years older than she, and there is always a chance, no matter how slim, that one will fall on his head in the hunting field and recover with a twisted brain. Besides,” he looked keenly at Arthur, “I had no desire at all to have anything Leonie was not willing to give me simply because she loved me, and to constrain her by the common law regulating matrimony would mean that I did not trust her, would it not?”
“That is just what Abigail said.” Arthur stared back at his uncle. “Has she spoken to you?”

“Not since that dinner your mother gave,” Roger replied, his eyes bright and interested. “I imagine that congratulations are in order?”

Arthur sighed and described the conditions under which Abigail had consented to marriage.

“A very clever girl.” Roger nodded approval. “I believe you will be very happy with her.”

The words held some comfort for Arthur and yet annoyed him, too. As he rode home, he mused on the fact that everyone kept telling him that he would be happy with Abigail. But when he considered the past months, it almost seemed that he had not been happy since he met Abigail. He had been happy before she turned his life upside down; he had been calm and contented. If he had not known the peaks of joy Abigail had brought him, he had not known the constant turmoil and the depth of misery she had brought him, either. And it was not likely to get any better, Arthur reminded himself. She would be as independent of him after their wedding as before it. Part of Arthur felt warm and righteous, but there was an odd sense of doubt in him as well.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was significant of his emotional condition that Arthur’s doubts always disappeared with his first sight of Abigail. He felt a fool, but during the months of legal wrangling he could not mention his uncertainties to her. Not that Abigail took any part in the quibbling or was even much aware of it. As soon as she understood that Arthur was himself arranging to protect her possessions, she abandoned any idea of interfering in any way. All she had wanted was the independent ownership of her bookshop and its income. Since she had never had any fears that Arthur would be unfair or unkind to her or her children, that possession was enough. If the unimaginable took place and marriage turned Arthur into a monster, she could flee to the United States with Victor and Daphne, where distance and independence would protect her.

Naturally, it was Abigail’s indifference to every aspect of the marriage settlement aside from the articles concerning her shop that spurred Arthur into providing protections of her freedom that had never entered her mind. Thus, it was the beginning of October before the betrothal could be announced. Even then, the date for the wedding could not be set because the arrangements devised to defeat any attempt to challenge Arthur’s position as executor and trustee of the Lydden estate were far more complex than those for establishing a separate estate.

Arthur’s problems were only intensified by the fact that Eustace appeared totally indifferent to the possibility of raising a question of conflict of interest. In view of Eustace’s attitude, the solicitors were puzzled by Arthur’s hairsplitting, and even Bertram seemed to grow doubtful about the wisdom of expending so much time and effort to defend a position that was not under attack. Now and again Arthur wondered whether he was transferring his uneasiness about the terms of his marriage to the terms of his trusteeship, but he persisted.

Abigail had also begun to have doubts about giving up the total independence she was enjoying. Before they had left Scotland, she had felt as if she would be torn apart by her desire for Arthur because his nearness would mount a constant assault on her senses. After returning to Rutupiae Hall, she soon realized that her fears had largely been generated by her imagination. Because she was busy, first with her children and, after they left for school, with details concerning the estate that had piled up over her two months’ absence, she felt little stress. And then Arthur was seldom at Stonar Magna during September. Most of the time he was in London, very much occupied between the conferences with solicitors about the legal arrangements for their marriage and the political events.

There had been important developments in the war against France during August and September. The truce had ended on 10 August and on the eleventh Austria had confirmed her alliance with Prussia and Russia by declaring war. Although Bonaparte repulsed the Austrians at Dresden on 26 August, his marshals were not so successful. Vandamme, who pursued the retreating Austrian troops, was trapped by the Prussians and lost about twenty thousand of his thirty thousand men. Oudinot was thrown back by von Bülow in his attempt to take Berlin, and when Ney repeated the attempt on 6 September, worse befell him. He lost twenty-four thousand men and eighty guns. In fact, all through September a series of minor defeats were inflicted on the outlying French forces, and the foreign troops that made up a considerable part of the Grande Armée began to defect. By the end of September, the army Bonaparte had built up since the beginning of the truce had been nearly destroyed.
Naturally, as soon as news of these events reached England, debate began about how far it was necessary to pursue the war. Since England supported the Prussians and Russians with huge subsidies, some members of Parliament were in favor of an early peace to ease the burden of taxes, even if it meant allowing Bonaparte to keep part of the territories France had overrun. Despite the fact that most of those who wished for an early peace were members of Arthur’s party, he was unalterably opposed to any treaty that would leave Bonaparte as ruler of France. He felt that it would be more expensive in the long run to make peace because Bonaparte would be at war again, treaty or no treaty, as soon as he gathered sufficient strength.

Arguments on this subject against men he supported on other causes sometimes became personal and bitter, but at least Arthur had the comfort of total and enthusiastic agreement from Abigail when he drove out from Town to see her and report on the progress of the legal affairs. Her fervent support of his ideas was particularly satisfactory because he was certain, even after their formal betrothal, that it was totally sincere and owed nothing to ordinary female pacification of her male.

It was fortunate that Arthur was too absorbed in his activities to analyze Abigail’s reactions. He was more than clever enough, had he thought the matter through, to realize that her enthusiasm for his opposition to an early peace owed more to her fear for America and her friends there—for should peace be made, England would be able to apply her full strength against America—than to any absolute conviction about the need to depose Bonaparte. Even more fortunate was the fact that he did not notice how tepid was her interest in their betrothal. Again his preoccupation with legal details and political maneuvering allowed him to accredit to womanly delicacy her failure to urge him to cut short the bickering over details. Even a few moments of unclouded thought would have made him laugh at himself. Abigail had many virtues, but patience and female delicacy were not notable among them.

If Abigail did not push to hurry the wedding, neither did she try to delay it. She had given her word that she would marry if she could be assured of independence, and Arthur had more than fulfilled his part of the bargain. Besides, it soon became clear that with regard to being her lover, Arthur had weakened only during the time they were in Scotland when he felt that she and her children might be in danger. He would kiss her and caress her until they were both half crazy, but he would not make love. And when she complained—once even been driven to begging and weeping—he soothed her as best he could but insisted that he wanted a wife, not a mistress, and would not settle for less.

They were married very quietly on 20 December as soon as Victor and Daphne came home from school, only a few days after all the legal work was complete. When Arthur arrived on the fifteenth with a special license and the obvious intention of dragging her off to church and to bed that very day, Abigail had protested that she could not marry before her children arrived. To this Arthur agreed at once, but when she suggested waiting until after Christmas, he refused. Abigail then pointed out that he had told her it was traditional for the St. Eyres to gather at Stonar Magna for a family celebration, and it would be a good way to introduce her to the entire clan. Arthur had recoiled in horror from the notion.

“First of all,” he exclaimed, “if you are implying that my family might object, I must tell you that they have no right to do so. I am the head of the family and am the arbiter of propriety within it.”

“Heaven help your family,” Abigail interjected.

“Quiet,” Arthur ordered. “I am propriety itself. Who, may I ask, has been complaining bitterly about my ‘antique morality’ these three months and more? In the second place, I am not a lunatic—whatever you may think—and I have no intention of allowing you to meet the odds and sods that make up the St. Eyres before we are married. Afterward it will be too late for you to back out.”

Although Arthur was joking, he had touched a rather tender spot in Abigail’s conscience. She smiled at him and shook her head, but she raised no more objections when he settled on the twentieth. Indeed, she had to admit that the choice was clever and considerate because it was the day after Victor and Daphne would arrive. Arthur felt the wedding would just blend in with their general excitement and thus stand out less and have less chance of hurting them or bringing their father to mind. A second reason was that marriage on the twentieth would permit him and Abigail a few days of peace before the descent of what he called the ravening horde.

Arthur felt a pang of conscience when he rejected Abigail’s suggestion that they delay their wedding until the St.
Eyres arrived. He knew he would be depriving the large and lively family, most of whom he truly loved, of the intense pleasure of teasing him unmercifully about at last being trapped into marriage and also celebrating his wedding with exuberant joy. However, for some reason he could not agree to wait even the few days. He found all sorts of reasons, including his aching physical need for Abigail, but he rejected the real driving cause—an uneasy feeling that she might slip away from him.

Kindest of all, Arthur proposed that he and Abigail remain in Rutupiae until the twenty-fourth, which would give Victor and Daphne a sense of continuity and make moving to Stonar just when all the other guests were arriving seem more like a visit than a great change in their lives. Until New Year’s, there would be too much going on all the time for them to brood over having a new father, and the oddity of it would wear away. Then they would have a few days after the guests left to get used to the house, he said thoughtfully, and by the time they returned at Easter, Stonar Magna would seem like home. As Abigail thanked him, she wondered how she could be such a fool as to consider for a moment whether total independence was preferable to marriage to such a man.

A quiet, private wedding seemed to be the best solution. Griselda attended Abigail, and Bertram served as groomsman. The only guests were Alexander and Anne Louisa Baring, Roger and Leonie, and Violet. Perce and Sabrina had left for Vienna in August to join the diplomatic mission that was part of Tsar Alexander’s entourage. Hilda and Eustace did not attend. Hilda had been so furious when the betrothal was announced that she had left Rutupiae on a round of visits to her sisters and brothers after openly accusing Arthur of trifling with her daughter’s affections and marrying Abigail only because she gave him a better hold on the Lyddens estate.

Eustace had accompanied his mother, and Abigail was not sorry to be rid of him. He had been irritatingly attentive to her from the time she returned from Scotland until her betrothal was announced. That seemed to have shocked him, and he turned angry and sullen. The behavior was completely incomprehensible to Abigail. She had made no particular effort within the family to hide her love for Arthur, and she was totally unaware that Eustace had expected her to turn to him when she was at last rejected by her rakish and inconstant lover. Abigail was thoroughly infuriated when Griselda explained that Eustace and her mother, who often talked to each other in her presence as if she did not exist, assumed from the infrequency of Arthur’s visits that he had tired of her. Eustace was preparing to step into the breach when Arthur “broke her heart”. Then Eustace would offer to marry her “despite her past immoral relationship”. The whole idea seemed so ridiculous and disgusting that Abigail thanked God that Hilda and Eustace were gone, and dismissed the whole subject from her mind.

Nothing could have been more unlike than Abigail’s first and second weddings, both physically and emotionally. The first had been a major social event for her parents’ friends and business acquaintances, and she had been wildly eager to assume the bonds she did not really understand. This second time, although she desired Arthur more than she had ever desired Francis and had good reason to be eager—for she had learned through the mostly good-natured envy of the neighboring families how magnificent a catch she had landed—she was filled with doubts. However, the quiet ceremony calmed her, and the behavior of the guests at the wedding breakfast reassured her even more. In some ways it hardly seemed like the celebration of a marriage. Everyone was far more interested in talking politics than congratulating the bride and groom.

This was not really surprising, since both Arthur and Alexander Baring were members of Parliament and Roger was deeply involved in government through his friend Lord Liverpool, the prime minister, even though he held no office. Moreover, events were moving very fast. Bonaparte had lost the disastrous battle of Leipzig shortly after Arthur and Abigail had been betrothed, and the echoes of the defeat of the “invincible Emperor of France” were still vibrating through Europe. The British army in Spain had had further successes and was actually on French soil.

Ordinarily the talk would have concentrated on these events and on the efforts of Bonaparte to rebuild still another Grande Armée, but in this case at least two of the group had a deep interest in a different war, minor and secondary as it seemed in England. There had been changes in the situation in America, too. Commodore Perry had defeated the British fleet on Lake Erie in September, and General Harrison had recaptured Detroit from the British and invaded Canada in October. The British general Henry Proctor had fled, abandoning his baggage. Furthermore, the chief of the Indian allies, Tecumseh, had been killed, and the federation of Indian tribes he headed had been broken.

Baring spoke soberly to Abigail about the American situation, deploiring these victories, even though they had been somewhat deflated by the withdrawal of Harrison from Canada soon after the battle and the failure of two other attempts to invade English territory.
“It will only make peace harder to achieve,” Baring said irritably. “These little victories mean nothing when viewed in the perspective of the whole war, and they infuriate our people.”

Abigail’s head agreed with what her friend said, but her heart leapt with a fierce, if rather surprising, joy when she thought of the American successes. Still, she answered calmly enough, “You may think it nothing, but to the Americans, the death of Chief Tecumseh and the destruction of his league, which now nearly eliminates any new fear of Indian attacks, means a great deal. The use of the savages by the British is considered most dishonorable by all Americans, even those who most bitterly oppose this war.”

“It is common British custom,” Roger pointed out. “The British army has always used native troops, most successfully in India.”

“That is quite different,” Abigail replied rather sharply. “Those troops are incorporated into the army and trained—and they are used against rebellious native governments. In America the savages have simply been armed and allowed to do as they like. There have been several cruel massacres of prisoners, quite unnecessary and, to my simple mind at least, totally inexcusable.”

Roger laughed. “There is nothing simple about your mind, my dear, and I suspect there are others who feel uneasy about some of the actions taken in this war. You must understand, however, that the small number of troops stationed in Canada and the inability to send any reinforcements, owing to the war in Spain and on the Continent, made necessary the use of whatever weapons lay to hand.”

“Perhaps,” Abigail conceded, then shrugged. “As long as there will be no further opportunity to use the Indians, I can see no purpose in arguing about them.”

“No,” Arthur put in, “but having employed them in action raises other problems. I do not know whether any treaty has been signed, but the fact that they must be considered allies might make it necessary to include them in any peace arrangement.”

“I do not think the American government will make any concessions about the Indians,” Abigail said. “In the new states and the western territories, feeling is very strong on that subject. Possibly if the territory of Louisiana had not been purchased, the more moderate sentiments of the original states could have prevailed, but so large an investment mandates full use of the land.”

“What do you mean, full use of the land?” Arthur asked heatedly, quite forgetting he was not arguing with a political opponent but with his new-made bride. “The United States cannot simply seize Indian property just because they purchased France’s claim to that territory.”

As unaware as her husband of the unsuitability of their conversation, Abigail frowned thoughtfully. “I do not think it is fair to say the government simply seizes Indian lands. I believe there is usually some payment or exchange of goods. I admit, it is not a subject in which I was much interested, living in New York as I did, but Albert would sometimes talk about the problems of dealing with the Indians.” She smiled, and her expression cleared. “And I cannot believe that any arrangement made by Albert would be unjust. He is the fairest and most honest man in the world.”

What Arthur saw in his new wife’s face made his heart contract. Abigail had not looked as warm and joyful when she took her vows at the altar only a few hours before as she did now at the mention of this damned Albert, whose name kept coming into her conversation. Arthur was struck so hard by jealousy that he could not speak, but Alexander Baring saved him from making an utter fool of himself.

“I agree that Albert Gallatin is a paragon of virtue,” Baring said, half laughing, “but even if he has urged or made equitable arrangements for the Indians in the past, this situation is different. If the tribes are not protected by some mention in any peace treaty made with England, the American government might claim that the Indians were vanquished enemies and deprive them of their lands as reparations.”

“Come now,” Anne Baring exclaimed, turning away from her conversation with Leonie and Violet and laying a hand on her husband’s arm, “I have seldom heard a sillier argument. As far as I know, there is no immediate plan for
negotiations on any terms. Did you not tell me, my love, that the Cabinet had refused for a fourth time Rumiantsev’s proposal to mediate?”

“True enough, Anne,” Baring replied, “but I have received very favorable answers concerning direct talks from the American commissioners. Unfortunately, they only have authority to act under Russian mediation, but they hinted strongly that if Lord Castlereagh would suggest direct negotiations to President Madison, the President would give his approval without delay. Naturally, I passed the message to Castlereagh, and I have reason to believe that he acted on it.”

Anne laughed. “Very well,” she conceded, “you are not quite as silly as I assumed, but still this is no time to be discussing such matters. This is Abigail’s wedding.”

“But Anne,” Abigail protested, smiling, “I could not have a better wedding gift than Alex’s news. I am so glad to learn that direct negotiations between England and the United States are possible. I have been very worried about the failure of any chance of peace. You must realize yourself that once Bonaparte is beaten—”

“Let Arthur and Alex worry about what will happen when Bonaparte is beaten,” Anne said, her pleasant voice unusually sharp. “It is not a suitable topic for women.”

Alexander Baring put his arm around his wife in a comforting gesture. “Talk of the war makes her a little nervous,” he said.

Abigail felt dreadfully guilty, realizing that Anne must be far more worried than she. Anne had family as well as friends in America, but before Abigail could think of any easy way to change the topic, Arthur said aggressively, “I cannot see why you think that Bonaparte is at his last gasp, Abigail. One of his problems in the past has been the lack of reliability of his foreign troops, but his new army—”

Leonie and Violet, who had now also joined their group, combined to cut him off and forbid any more talk about so grim a topic, but Abigail squeezed his hand gratefully, aware that what he had said had been just an oblique, and therefore more convincing, device to reassure Anne. But even after politics had been declared out-of-bounds, there was little to mark the occasion as special.

Later the men rode out for a while, and the women talked of their children and grandchildren and of the coming Season in London. After dinner, Roger and Leonie left. The evening passed quietly and pleasantly. Bertram played, and after a few whispered words from him, Griselda sang. Abigail was amazed by her voice, it was slight but beautifully pure and sweet. And when Griselda was tired, they all sang—rather discordantly but with much pleasure and laughter. Finally, the Barings reminded their hosts that they must be up early to travel home the next day. Bertram escorted Violet back to Stonar Magna, and Arthur and Abigail went up to bed.

Abigail had warned him when he proposed staying at Rutupiae that he would be inconvenienced by the lack of a dressing room because she was still using the countess’s bedchamber and Victor was in the earl’s suite. The door between Victor’s rooms and hers could be locked, and Daphne now had her own bedchamber so that Abigail herself had a dressing room, but it was not suitable for Arthur. He had smiled at her, his eyes half-closed, and said, “I think I might just survive such an inconvenience,” but there was such sensual promise in his indolent murmur that Abigail had felt herself flush.

Now, as they entered the room, Abigail automatically reached for the bell to summon her maid, but Arthur caught her hand. “My valet is not here,” he reminded her, “and I am not the self-mortifying type that likes to suffer alone. No valet for me, no maid for you.”

Ridiculous as it was, considering that she and Arthur had been lovers, the tension dissipated by the pleasant day had rebuilt in Abigail as they came up the stairs, but she could not help laughing at the injured indignation in Arthur’s voice. “You should have gone onto the stage,” she said. “I cannot think where else adequate use could be made of your talent for projecting utterly false emotions with such conviction.”

“Don’t be silly,” he replied, laughing also. “I have a far more interesting and difficult audience in the Commons. If I can convince them—” He stopped abruptly, shook his head, and took her gently into his arms. “Have you become so
spoiled by being a countess that you can no longer undress yourself? You have come down in the world today, I am afraid. You are only a baronet’s wife now, so you must be content with somewhat less elegance. Will you take me for substitute, my love? I will gladly play maid.”

He was speaking playfully. Abigail now knew that in wealth and influence the St. Eyres far outstripped the Lyddens, title or no title. Nonetheless she wondered whether there was not a thread of uncertainty in his voice under the teasing. If there was, it was her fault. She felt guilty, and she put her arms around his neck and kissed him lightly. “Then just to show you that I am quite content with my reduced state, I will play valet.”

They played in more ways than assuming roles, removing one article of clothing at a time and using the slow revelation of each body as an excuse for a lingering form of foreplay that Abigail had not expected. On both earlier “first times”—in the house in London and in Scotland—Arthur had been sudden, even violent, in his lovemaking. This time, although it was plain enough that he was extremely excited, he was in no hurry to bring their sensuous play to its natural culmination. He caressed each part of her body as it was exposed, her arms and legs, her back, her breasts and belly, breaking off from time to time to come back to her lips. But each time their heads were close enough, he whispered in her ear, “For the rest of our lives, Abigail. For the rest of our lives.”

At the moment, Arthur could have been reciting the multiplication tables or uttering curses in Chinese. His voice was an additional caress, the faint breath in her ear as he whispered sent thrills over her body, but the words themselves were meaningless. Her brain recorded without comprehending. All she understood then was the need to draw him into her and to give and receive the ultimate pledge of love.

In the morning, however, the words came back to Abigail with an oddly dichotomous effect. One part of her could not help being enchanted by her husband’s joy in their permanent union, but in the back of her mind was the knowledge that no woman had been able to hold Arthur for very long. In that sense, “for the rest of our lives” could almost be a threat—although she knew very well that Arthur had not meant it that way. There was no sense in worrying that bone, she told herself. Only time could prove the case one way or the other.

It was easy enough to dismiss that problem, for Abigail had a more immediate worry. She realized that in London and Scotland, she had not truly shared Arthur’s life. There was little in common, she suspected, between Arthur’s normal activities and the pleasant make-busy days of sightseeing and amusement-seeking in London or the lazy country occupations with which they had filled their time in Scotland. What a selfish beast I am, she thought, all wound up in whether I will be satisfied. Poor Arthur, I’ve never considered him at all.

Without realizing it, she patted his hand lovingly and then was startled by a low chuckle. Arthur’s bare arm slid behind her neck and pulled her onto his chest. The worried expression alone might have hurt him, but combined with the tender touch it soothed him. Although he was not certain what had brought the faint frown to Abigail’s brow and the slight, sad downturn to her lips, he knew the concern was on his account.

“Not to worry, love,” he said. “I’m not at all regretting throwing my cap over the windmill.”

“I wasn’t thinking that,” she replied, smiling. “It just came to me that I may not be at all a suitable wife for you. I am not the most tactful creature in the world, and that cannot be a good characteristic for a political hostess.”

“You picked a fine time to think of it.” Arthur laughed out loud. Could that have been the reason for his odd feeling that Abigail had been looking for a way out? If so, he had been a great fool, for the fact that she had never raised the point was proof of her desire to marry him. He hugged her tightly again and bit her ear. “It’s too late now,” he pointed out. “All you can do is pave hell with energy and hope for the best.”

“Pave hell with energy?” Abigail echoed.

“Have good intentions, my love,” Arthur explained, first stretching luxuriously and then lifting himself on one elbow to better see his bride and pick the best target for his mouth. “Have you never heard that the road to hell is paved with good intentions?” He chuckled again and began to run his tongue around her ear. “But you will get plenty of chance to practice tact over the next two weeks.” His speech was becoming slurred and absent as Abigail responded to his invitation by sliding her hands down his body, but he managed to finish. “You will find my family can be extremely unrestrained. They will all jump on you with both feet if they disagree with you.”
The threat did not much alarm Abigail, and when they moved to Stonar on the twenty-fourth to welcome their guests, she found her confidence was justified. It was true that the St. Eyres were outspoken and opinionated, but most of them were also intelligent and kind. Arthur endured the jokes and teasing with a combination of easy good humor and smug satisfaction that delighted Abigail by making very clear his contentment with his marriage. The two weeks they spent as a family party passed in a whirl of friendly argument and energetic amusements, and Abigail knew when they dispersed that the St. Eyres had taken her to their hearts.

Equally important, it was soon apparent that her fears about being an inadequate—or rather, embarrassing—hostess for her husband were unnecessary. After Daphne and Victor returned to school and Violet to Bath, Abigail and Arthur moved to the St. Eyre mansion in London, taking Griselda with them. It was too early for the purely social events of the Season, but anyone concerned with politics was in Town, and every evening there were dinners, large and small, either to host or to attend. It was clear that the final convulsions of the war in Europe were about to take place, and the two topics of conversation at every dinner were the terms of peace and the rather unsavory trades and bargains being suggested by the various nations that hoped to fatten on the corpse of the French empire.

In these discussions Abigail had no difficulty at all in holding her own and making her husband proud of her. As long as no one mentioned the American war—and events in Europe were far too fascinating to be put aside for talk of minor skirmishes thirty-five hundred miles away—Abigail’s opinions were orthodox. Moreover, since her emotions were not at all involved in such matters as who would absorb Saxony or rule in Spain or Italy, her opinions were always stated in a calm, pleasant manner, and she was always ready to listen with genuine interest to contrary arguments.

Thus Abigail was a great success with both Arthur’s friends and opponents. Seeing the way her husband looked at her and talked to her, Arthur’s opponents actually courted her subtly, hoping that if they could convince her of the validity of their ideas, she would influence Arthur. And sometimes she did—although they would have been horrified if they knew her method. The techniques of business served Abigail very well in her new life. She recognized easily enough the attempts to make her a wedge to “open” Arthur’s mind, and simply told him frankly who was doing it and why. If she agreed with the arguments presented though, she would support them.

These direct methods sometimes caused shouting matches that drove Griselda and Bertram from the room with their hands over their ears, but Arthur and Abigail found their “free exchange of ideas” very refreshing. Any real difference of opinion was swiftly smoothed out in the marital bed, which they continued to share all night, every night, in a most unfashionable manner. As the days slid into weeks and the weeks into months, Abigail forgot she had ever had any doubts, and Arthur recalled his only on a few occasions when some chance remark indicated that Abigail had not been where she had said she would be. She always had a good reason and never looked either startled or guilty, so Arthur told himself he was being a fool and buried his uneasiness in the darkest part of his mind.

There was one subject on which Abigail was not being perfectly honest. Although little attention was paid to the American war over the first few months of 1814, she did not forget that the end of Bonaparte would mean trouble for the United States, and she set about winning her husband over to the American cause. When she wished, Abigail could be subtle, and before 6 April, when Bonaparte abdicated and renounced the throne of France for himself and his heirs, Arthur began to see a great deal of sense in Baring’s position—that peace and strong trade balances with America were worth more than petty revenge.

Not all the credit for this change in Arthur’s views was owing to Abigail’s influence. Part at least, was simply his sense of mischief and fondness for being the devil’s advocate. Most of his fellow M.P.’s, he had discovered, were rabid against America largely because they still thought of the United States as a collection of rebel colonies and resented any independent action they took. Arthur now realized he had also suffered from that disease, but Abigail, and to a certain extent Alexander Baring, with whom he was now very friendly, had cured him.

The general public and many members of Parliament believed that America had declared war only to assist Bonaparte. Arthur had never agreed with that, but in the past he had regarded as petty American complaints against impressments and other British naval practices. He had felt strongly that during the life-and-death struggle with Bonaparte, the practices were necessary, however, now that the war had ended, he was willing to consider that some allowances might be made for a new nation’s pride. In fact, once the heady events of Bonaparte’s fall were over, Arthur found the desires and opinions of Americans—as related by Abigail—more and more interesting. Quite often
Arthur transmitted the information she gave him to Roger, who also found it very interesting and passed it along to Lord Liverpool, although, naturally, Roger did not mention Abigail was the source and implied that the information came from Arthur himself.

At the time, Lord Liverpool was in no mood to make concessions to the United States. President Madison had very quickly accepted Lord Castlereagh’s offer of direct negotiations, and notes concerning the place in which the meetings might be held were being exchanged, but the British were in no hurry to begin the talks. Orders for a tight blockade to lock Americans into their own country and bring economic ruin had gone out early in the year and were being implemented by April. In addition, arrangements were already under way to transfer hardened veteran troops from the European campaign to Canada and to ships detailed to raid American coasts. It was the intention of the British government to give the nasty rebellious little upstart that had challenged them a sound beating and then dictate their own terms of peace. Still, Lord Liverpool made a note of the fact that Roger’s nephew had considerable expertise in American affairs, a commodity sadly lacking in his own party.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The concern Abigail felt over the end of the war in Europe was to some extent mitigated by a letter she received on 12 April. It was much delayed, having been sent to Rutupiae, where Mr. Jameson held it for a few days longer while he finished work on some documents that needed Arthur’s approval. The letter was not marked urgent, and it seemed most economical to send all the papers in one packet. The packet was set next to Arthur’s place at the breakfast table with other letters that had come in the morning’s post. When he got to it, Arthur took one look inside, saw Jameson’s heavy, square handwriting, and pushed the whole thing across to Abigail, who, though it was most unfashionable, always joined her husband for breakfast.

“I’ve no time for it, love,” he said, “and you know more about Rutupiae anyway. Read it through for me and tell me what you want done.”

Abigail felt like saying she didn’t have time for it either, and then was shocked at her desire to shuffle the responsibility for her son’s property off to Arthur. It served her right, she thought, as she drew out the thickest and dullest looking document. If she had not demanded independence, Arthur would never have thought for a moment of asking her to mind Victor’s affairs. Sighing, she left unopened a pile of social notes and began to read. Two leases later she was interrupted by Arthur, who kissed the top of her bent head and said he was off to see Lord Howick, that he did not know whether he would be home for luncheon, but he would certainly be home for dinner unless he were summoned to the House, which he did not expect.

“No, don’t come home for luncheon, Arthur,” Abigail said, looking up at him. “I have a Venetian breakfast at Lady Sarah’s, and that means I won’t be home until three o’clock or so. And you had better be home for dinner since we have guests coming. Oh, I wish Griselda hadn’t insisted on going back to Rutupiae. She could have done the menus and seen Butler and Cook and all the rest for me. I thought she was having such a good time. Her ball card was always filled and—”

“Damn it all, I wish she hadn’t gone too,” Arthur interrupted tartly. “Bertram was not pleased at being asked to escort her home, and he’s been like a bear with a sore head since he got back. I wish— No, I’m not going to say it again, and I’ll be late if I don’t go now.”

He tipped her face up and kissed her lips, but he was still frowning as he went out of the room. Abigail heaved a brief sigh and thought irritably that Francis’ family was as infuriating as he himself had been. She was very annoyed with Bertram and blamed him for Griselda’s departure. Abigail was almost certain that Bertram had had a bitter quarrel with her, for she had heard him shouting at someone and later had found Griselda in tears. At the time Abigail had not associated Bertram’s fury and Griselda’s tears, but when he had been so very ungracious about escorting Griselda home—which had really surprised Abigail because usually Bertram was protective of her—it had occurred to Abigail that the two incidents might be connected. She had not mentioned her suspicion to Arthur because she knew he was already disturbed about Bertram, and it seemed senseless to add to his worries.

But perhaps it was as much her own fault, Abigail thought, because she had unwittingly provided a refuge. In the interests of making peace so that she and Griselda would not be driven mad by Hilda, Abigail had invited her mother-in-law and Eustace to use Lydden House in London for the Season. Since Hilda’s other choices were to stay
in the country (unthinkable!) or to rent a suitable house (equally unthinkable, owing to the expense), she had rather grudgingly accepted Abigail’s olive branch.

This was a mixed blessing to begin with, since it meant that Hilda and Eustace had to be included in the guest list of any large ball Abigail gave and also invited to some family dinners. Naturally, Hilda had used these opportunities to complain that Abigail and Arthur, rich as they were, forced her, a helpless and impoverished widow, to pay her own expenses. This was irritating but not important. Far more irritating was the fact that if Hilda and Eustace had been at Rutupiae, Griselda might have thought it the lesser of the evils to stay in London—but perhaps not. Griselda was far too sensitive. Still, she could not help that, poor thing, and Bertram who knew her well, should not have scolded her so harshly, no matter what the reason. Abigail sighed again. What was done was done, and there was no sense worrying about it now.

Returning to the lease, Abigail turned the page and exclaimed with irritation. Surely she had told Jameson that the question of repairs must be more clearly defined. All this lease said was that the landlord agreed to “keep the property in good repair”. That was far too vague and not at all what Abigail meant. She was willing to supply materials—that was a landlord’s responsibility since the pens and buildings would remain on the property even if the tenant left—but the tenant must supply the labor.

She took the packet with her and went to her writing desk to get her letter book, wishing to be sure she had already written to Jameson and made her intentions clear to him before she blamed him for ignoring her instructions. But the letter book was not there. Abigail said several words that would have shocked anyone who heard them. Now she remembered that the drawer had been too full and she had sent back to Rutupiae with Griselda all the letter books except the one holding the copies of her replies to invitations and social notes here in London.

Thoroughly exasperated but hoping that Jameson had perhaps included some explanation for the phrasing he had used, Abigail shook everything out of the packet. The letter he had included, smaller and more compact than the other papers, skittered across the table and into her lap. She lifted it and uttered a brief cry of pleasure at the sight of Albert Gallatin’s familiar handwriting. Albert had written to her from Russia describing his frustrations at the lack of movement in arranging peace negotiations, and she had replied, warning him that the end of the war with France would make Britain more intractable. She had written again after the New Year to tell Albert about her marriage to Arthur, but had not had an answer. Eagerly she broke the seal, then felt a little disappointed when she saw only a brief note, however, the contents made up for everything else. Albert obviously had not received her last letter. He had written from Amsterdam on 22 March to say that he had received permission from the British government through Baring to visit England, was leaving for London immediately, and expected to arrive about 9 April.

Abigail jumped up and hurried to the bell pull to ring for a footman. When he arrived, she told him the note she was writing must be delivered to Alexander Baring, and he was to try the Baring home first and then the bank. She wanted Albert’s address in London. Lady Sarah would have to do without her company at the breakfast. She had to see Albert as soon as possible. Yet after the note had been dispatched, Abigail sat staring blankly into space. However deeply her sympathies were engaged with the United States, she was an Englishwoman. To urge her own husband and everyone else she could influence to make peace was legitimate, because peace would be to Britain’s advantage as well as to America’s. But to pass military information to Britain’s enemy was entirely different. Would it not be treason to tell Albert what she had heard?

Only two days earlier, at a tea attended mostly by political wives, Abigail had learned that Admiral Cochrane intended to capture Washington. The tidbit had not been meant for her ears. In fact, it was her own name in the phrase “for goodness sake, don’t tell Abigail or Anne” that had attracted her attention. Since her name and Anne Baring’s coupled that way almost certainly meant the news referred to America, Abigail had strained to listen while remaining unseen. Unfortunately, because of the cacophony of voices around her, she was unable to determine who was speaking. This made her uncertain of the value of the information she had obtained. It might be only a rumor.

Abigail had told herself that the speaker was just trying to make herself important. Everyone knew that the admiral intended to raid the coast, so to name Washington was believable and would make her seem particularly in the confidence of someone high in the government. Still, Abigail felt frightened because the information might be true and she did not understand what the capture of the capital of the United States would mean. If Washington were taken, would that mean the end of the war? Would that mean that England would rule America again? No, not that, she assured herself, because she had heard many discussions about who should rule France after Bonaparte was
deposed, and despite differing opinions, it was clear that France would remain independent. Still, France was rich and important, and the United States was poor and insignificant.

Yes, and would it do anyone any good to defeat and ruin America? Abigail wondered angrily. This was different entirely from defeating Bonaparte. He wished to conquer and rule all Europe. The United States did not wish to conquer or rule anyone and was fighting only to protect its own rights and citizens. That thought was so partisan that it made Abigail a trifle uneasy. She had heard a good deal of talk before she left New York about driving the British out of Canada and uniting that territory with America. Still, there was no question of that happening now, because the army in Canada had been reinforced by veteran soldiers, and in any case attacking Washington had nothing to do with Canada.

Resentment rose in Abigail when she thought of the experienced British troops fighting against the untrained American volunteers. Most of them were only plowboys with romantic ideas about being soldiers—Albert had told her that. It was unfair, like a bully beating a child who had picked up a stick because he was frightened. And what good would it do Britain to conquer America? The people would never accept British rule.

There were some fanatics among the Federalists who were talking and writing about separating from the United States and becoming colonies again. Abigail had seen reprints of their speeches and articles in newspapers in London. Those sentiments might deceive the British because they wanted to believe them, but Abigail knew the people in general would violently oppose submitting to the king. And even the most passionate Federalist would find that his enthusiasm for the colonial state would not last a week after the first imposition of British taxes.

Suddenly Abigail remembered an argument Arthur had had about the punishment of France by depriving her of territory and demanding reparations. He had taken the position that no reparations be asked and that no French territory should be ceded to other nations, only conquered lands be freed and allowed to choose their own governments. This had astonished the man to whom he was speaking because Arthur had always been so adamant about depriving Bonaparte of his throne.

But the two were entirely unrelated, Arthur had pointed out. It was necessary to remove Bonaparte from leadership in self-defense. His thirst for conquest was not likely to be extinguished by losing a war, and if he were left to rule France, he would lead her to war again very quickly. On the other hand, if France were not bled and not humiliated, the new ruler and the people would be only too happy to live in peace. Trade would be quickly renewed, and all would benefit.

The merchant’s heart in Abigail stirred, and her lips thinned with determination. That was what was important—peace and renewed trade. Well, the capture of Washington and the humiliation of America would not produce those results. In fact, it would surely infuriate the people and arouse resistance. Then the revolution would begin again, and the hatred would be burned deeper into American souls—and that was wrong.

Memory of the proud and independent congressmen and senators who were her clients and some also her friends wrenched Abigail’s heart. She bit her lip and then sighed. Even if it were technically treason, it was right to save America from defeat because that would benefit Britain in the end. Besides, she thought with wry humor, now ready to acknowledge a personal motive that she could no longer ignore, there was no way she could face Albert while knowing something that might help America and yet not tell him.

Abigail drew out another sheet of paper and wrote to Albert, saying how delighted she was that he was in London and asking him to call on her as soon as he could or to set a convenient time for her to call on him. Then she looked up at the clock, wondering when the footman would return. She did not have long to wait, however, it was not the footman who relieved her impatience but Alex Baring himself. Her note had caught him just as he was about to leave for the bank, and he had decided to come in person to answer her.

“How kind of you,” Abigail said, smiling but very surprised. “But really, it was not necessary to come. I only need Albert’s address. His note saying he was coming to England was directed to Rutupiae and took so long to get to me that I had no chance to write back and invite him to come here directly. It is silly and expensive for him to stay in lodgings. He would be much more comfortable with us while he is in England, and I am sure that he and Arthur will enjoy each other’s company very much.”
“Yes, I suspected that was what you had in mind,” Alex said, “but it would be a grave mistake for Albert to accept your offer. For him to associate himself closely with the opposition party will not endear him to the government.”

“But it has nothing to do with party,” Abigail cried. “It’s true that I cannot say he dandled me on his knee when I was an infant, but we have known each other since I was a child. He has been my friend for almost twenty years. What in the world has party to do with—?”

“My dear Abby,” Alex said soothingly, taking her hand. “You don’t understand. I do not think anyone in the government really cares with whom Albert associates. What I fear is that they will be seeking excuses for delay and dissatisfaction, and a too great intimacy with the opposition could give them a cause to refuse to meet and confer with him.”

“But that is ridiculous,” Abigail protested. “The very few men who have recognized that there is some justice in American complaints have been Whigs. It must be only natural that—”

“Natural or not,” Alex interrupted again, his voice more firm than soothing this time, “there is a chance that such association might be used against the commission. You must know, Abigail, that peace with the United States is not at present desired by the public at large or by most of Parliament. Although I do not believe that either Lord Castlereagh or Lord Liverpool is infected by the popular hysteria and demands for ‘punishment’ of America, there is a good possibility that the only reason they suggested direct negotiations was to prevent further offers from the tsar to mediate a peace without offending him.”

“My God,” Abigail exclaimed, “is everyone in this country mad? Can they not see that the economy of England is being hurt? Do they wish to continue paying taxes to support a war forever?”

“Most are not thinking at all,” Baring conceded dryly. “They are inflamed by the victory over Bonaparte and feel that a further victory is only a matter of closing a hand already poised over America and crushing it. And you should realize the government must consider the effects of going against popular sentiment.”

Abigail frowned. “I do realize it, but I cannot see why that should prevent Albert from staying here.”

“I do realize it, but I cannot see why that should prevent Albert from staying here.”

“Only because you do not wish to see,” Alex said reprovingly. “Consider what the newspapers will make of the fact that one of the American commissioners is living in the home of a Member of Parliament and being wined and dined and invited to the most exclusive social events.”

“Oh dear,” Abigail sighed.

Seeing that she was weakening, Alex continued his attack. “And there is another reason why you and Arthur, above all, should avoid being classed as Albert’s friends. So far, I believe Castlereagh has not associated Arthur’s expertise about America with the fact that he has a wife who was born there. In other words, I hope he and Lord Liverpool assume that Arthur’s espousal of the cause of peace derives from an impersonal study of economic and political factors rather than a prejudice for the United States based on purely personal reasons.”

“It is not based on purely personal reasons,” Abigail said quickly, blushing a little. “I have pointed out the bad effects of the war, but Arthur is not such a fool as to accept something simply because I say it. He has been studying—”

“I know, Abigail.” Baring laughed. “I have been supplying him with information—hard facts concerning trade in pounds per year—but I fear he would never have thought of investigating closely enough to be convinced had you not prodded him. You know and I know that the reason for his interest is irrelevant. Nonetheless, if notice is drawn to the fact that Arthur’s new wife is American born and that he is intimate with one of the American commissioners, any hope of his opinions being regarded seriously by the government would be gone.”

Abigail thought that over and sighed again. Alex was right. If there were any chance at all that her friendship with Albert would prove damaging to his mission, they must avoid each other. But what about the information she had concerning the attack on Washington? Would Alex—? As the idea began to form in her mind, Abigail dismissed it. Alex might be eager for peace with the United States for financial reasons—and perhaps, a little to ease Anne’s fears—but he would never pass military information. The recognition that Alex would consider what she planned to do...
very wrong made Abigail’s conscience twinge. Possibly he would not even agree that military defeat for the United States would do more harm than good. However, Abigail felt that she had reasoned it all out carefully and must do what she thought right.

“Very well,” she said. “I suppose I must accept that, but I would like to have Albert’s address anyway. I must write to him at least once and explain why I did not reply to his note and tell him I am married. I will be discreet, I promise.”

“You are too clever to be otherwise.” Alex smiled at her and handed her a slip on which was written a Seymour Street address.

When Alex had taken his leave, Abigail tore up the note she had written to Albert and scribbled another saying, “I am below in a cab. If you are alone, may I come up? I must speak to you.” Then she rushed to her room, dressed without summoning her maid, and quietly left the house. She walked to Bond Street, where there were many elegantly dressed ladies, and hired a hackney cab to take her to Seymour Street, sending the driver up to the apartment with her note. A bare five minutes later, Gallatin’s son James came rushing out to greet her fondly and escort her up the stairs, where, on the landing, she was enfolded in Albert’s paternal embrace.

At first, neither could make sense of what the other was saying because Abigail was trying to explain why she had not replied to the letter from Amsterdam, and Gallatin was trying to calm her and discover whether her urgent-sounding note meant that she was in trouble. Finally, however, he drew her into the parlor where they sorted out the most immediate news, caught their breaths, and stood smiling delightedly at each other for a few moments more.

Abigail was very happy in her new life, yet it was so good to see someone who had been part of her old life that tears came to her eyes. As she looked at her friend’s face, she felt he looked worn, although his rather round countenance was no thinner and he was now smiling. Nonetheless, she thought there were more lines around his small, well-shaped mouth, and the kind, dark eyes under their heavy brows seemed somewhat sunken. As he saw her eyes brim, Albert took her hands and drew her close again.

“Dear Abigail,” he said, in his charmingly accented English, “why do you weep? I ask again, is all well with you?”

“Very, very well,” she assured him, smiling through the tears. “It is only so good to see you. I had no idea how much I missed you and dear Hannah and everyone else I left behind until suddenly you were there—I mean here.”

Laughing, Albert squeezed her hands, then let them go and invited her to sit down, taking a chair near hers. Then he turned to his son, who was still standing, and said, “If you wish to go, James, you may go. I am sure Abigail will excuse you.”

“Indeed I will,” she affirmed, waving at the young man. “I know you will be bored to death by our ‘and how ares’ and ‘do you remembers’ about people you either know too well or do not know at all.”

James smiled and thanked her and bowed his goodbye. His father looked fondly at the closed door for a moment. “I hope you truly do not mind James going, my dear,” he said. “He is very eager to look up Barthelemy de Gallatin, who was a colonel of the Grenadier Guards in the middle of the last century. Just a little streak of the romantic, to which I cannot object. You know, I took James because I thought it would be good for him to see something of the world, but he has done me such excellent service as a secretary that I shudder to think that at first I doubted my wisdom. I felt, young as he is, that he might distract me from my work.” As he said the last words, he shrugged and sighed. “Not that there has been any work to the purpose…”

“No, of course I do not mind,” Abigail replied. Then she took a deep breath and went on hurriedly. “In fact, it is a most fortunate circumstance that he wished to leave. I have something to tell you that I would not want any third person—not even James—to hear. I am about to commit treason, Albert.”

“No, you are not,” Albert said firmly, knowing his Abigail. “At least, not this moment. You are going to stop and think first.”

But for once Abigail was not acting on impulse. She had done her thinking already, and she explained the path of her reasoning quickly and clearly, summing up, “A bitter defeat and shameful concessions for America can only
mean another war and more and more hatred, which cannot benefit either nation.” Having heard her out, Albert nodded.

“It is what the English do not understand,” he said sadly. “They are so convinced of the advantages and superiority of being British that they cannot believe anyone could object to being united to their nation, even in a totally subordinate condition. They call us ‘rebels’ and hate us for any success because it pricks their pride.”

“Now you are going too far,” Abigail soothed. “The most violent opinions are expressed by those who write articles for the newspapers and need inflammatory ideas to sell their sheets. The common folk may believe these things, but I assure you the leaders are not so foolish.”

“Mr. Baring is not so hopeful as you are,” Albert remarked with a sigh. “Are you certain you are not saying to me what you wish to believe?”

“Mr. Baring is not a dreadful traitor at heart,” Abigail pointed out, smiling wryly. “He truly desires an end to the war, I assure you. But he would prefer, I fear, that peace be a magnanimous gift of a victorious Britain to a defeated United States rather than a treaty between equals.”

“It will not serve,” Albert sighed, shaking his head. “You know, Abigail, that submission will only breed resentment, which must, in the end, bring a renewal of war.”

“I do indeed know it.” Abigail agreed, her lips thinning with determination. “And England has just had a very great victory over a dreadful tyrant. She does not need to crush a hopeful young nation. Albert, you must get word to President Madison that the British intend to attack Washington in July or August. If they are driven off, it will be much easier to make peace.”

“Attack Washington in July or August!” Gallatin echoed. “But why? I had hoped that we might have a treaty by then.”

Abigail shook her head. “No, you will not, at least not unless you are willing to concede every demand that is made, no matter how shameful. You see, with all the troops freed from the war against Bonaparte, there are high expectations of another speedy victory, and I am sure the government intends to delay real negotiations until the outcome of the attacks in Canada and on the coast is known. But if the United States can hold its own or win a few battles, the government will begin to count the costs of a war so far away and the loss of trade, and will think better of a fair peace.”

Gallatin looked intently at the lovely woman seated opposite him. “Abigail, how do you know this? You were never interested in politics in America or—”

“In America I had my living to earn. I had no time for politics. Also, somehow I thought it not right for me to have opinions about the governing of a nation to which I did not belong. But here, politics is my major interest. My husband is a Member of Parliament, and I am his hostess. I swear you can rely on what I have told you.” Abigail hesitated, then added, “Well no, I am not perfectly sure about the attack on Washington, it is true. That might be a rumor, but I thought it could do no harm to be prepared, and it might be a disaster if no defense were made. About the government’s attitude toward peace, I am certain. My husband’s uncle is one of the prime minister’s closest friends, and he discusses freely with us Lord Liverpool’s attitudes—anything that is not confidential, of course.” She hesitated and shrugged. “No one considers American affairs important enough to be confidential.”

“Am I wasting my time here?” Gallatin asked.

“No,” Abigail replied hastily. “I am sure Lord Castlereagh, Lord Bathurst—he is the colonial secretary—and even Lord Liverpool will receive you privately. How can it be a waste of time to come to know them, even if they are not presently willing to discuss substantive issues? And small things may be settled that will save time later.”

The clock on the mantel chimed, and Abigail jumped. “Heavens,” she cried, “I have been here a dreadfully long time, and I promised Alex I would be discreet.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Albert asked, and then looked shocked. “Surely you cannot believe anyone would think
ill of our friendship. I am old enough to be your father!”

“Only if you started very young,” Abigail teased.

“Twenty-one is not so young to have children, you naughty girl,” he said, trying to look severe but failing.

Abigail had already sobered, and she began to explain Alex Baring’s reasoning. She was disappointed when Albert agreed that it would be better if they were not publicly known to be good friends. Now that she had seen him again, she hated to give up the pleasure of his company and the chats about people and places they both knew. But Albert pointed out an additional problem, one that had not occurred to Baring because it never entered his mind that Abigail would consider passing information that might help America against England. Albert reminded her that her husband’s uncle might talk less freely if he knew she was seeing one of the members of the American mission.

“Not that I wish to encourage you to betray any secrets,” Albert said, his eyes twinkling, “but since we agree so well on what would be best for both England and America…”

Abigail did not respond to the gentle teasing. Her forehead was creased in thought. “I do not think it would be wise for me to come here if I have something to tell you,” she said, “and we have just agreed that you cannot come to me. Ah! I know. If James can call at Lackington’s bookshop every day or two, I could leave a note for him there, and he can leave one for me if you wish to speak to me. Of course, in any emergency you must write or come direct to the house—I will give you the direction. Discretion can be carried too far.”

It was, of course, fashionable to be a little late to social affairs. Hostesses counted on it to cast a last-minute glance over their arrangements. To be nearly two hours late, however, was not at all usual, and not what Abigail had intended. After Baring had convinced her that it would not be wise to acknowledge her friendship with Albert publicly, she had changed her mind about missing Lady Sarah’s breakfast, and when she set out for Seymour Street she had expected to stay with Albert only half an hour and go on to Lady Sarah’s, arriving well within the period for fashionable lateness.

Still, a Venetian breakfast was not meant to be a formal entertainment, and Abigail knew that a large number of guests had been invited. The guests would wander about through the reception rooms and the garden, choosing what they wished to eat from a buffet, often a little at a time, and sitting at little scattered tables now with one and then with another. Abigail thought she might be able to enter quietly and mix with the guests in such a way that each thought she had been with a different group earlier. She had slipped through the garden gate, found her hostess and complimented her laughingly on being so popular with her guests that there had been no opportunity before to mention how very delightful the affair was.

Since Lady Sarah received Abigail’s tribute with a pleased smile and no look of surprise, Abigail felt her plan had succeeded, concealed a sigh of relief, and made light conversation. Lady Sarah’s attention was soon drawn away, and Abigail moved toward the drawing room to chat with others. Through the open doors, however, she heard the strident bray of Hilda’s voice and hurriedly turned away. She was going to have to listen to Hilda at dinner, and that was enough.

Reminded about the dinner, Abigail realized it was an excellent excuse to circulate rapidly to impress her presence on as many people as possible. To each she said how sorry she was not to have been able to stop to talk at length earlier, adding that she wanted at least to say goodbye, as she was on her way out to prepare for her own party that evening. During the height of the London Season, this was a common situation, as two and three social events often took place every day. No one doubted Abigail’s excuse, nor were the people she chose to tell surprised at not having been invited since they were not in political circles and assumed it was a political party.

Actually, Abigail was giving only a small private dinner for a few of her neighbors in Kent, which was why Hilda and Eustace had been invited, and it was Hilda who was nearly her downfall. Having outstayed her welcome at Lady Sarah’s, owing to her need to detain her hostess for half an hour to complain of the draft from the doors open to the garden, the service and some of the dishes, Hilda was rather late in arriving at Abigail’s party. She and Eustace entered after all the other guests.

The moment she laid eyes on Abigail, Hilda brayed, “Where were you this morning? Lady Sarah said you were
coming to her breakfast, but you weren’t there.”

“Of course I was,” Abigail replied, but her breath had caught for an instant and guilt made her color rise.

“Oh no, you were not,” Hilda insisted. “I wanted to speak to you about allowing Griselda to go home. If you did not need her, you could have sent her to me instead of letting her go to Rutupiae, where she will just indulge her idleness and lachrymose humors. I could make use of her very easily.”

A double fury gripped Abigail, partly simple rage at the possible disclosure of her little deception but also because she wondered if Hilda was not right. Perhaps she should not have given in so easily to Griselda’s desire to go home. Her flush deepened as she said, “I was at Lady Sarah’s, Hilda. There was an awful crush—”

“I looked all over for you,” Hilda interrupted, her beady eyes gleaming with spite at the sight of Abigail’s discomfort. “I couldn’t find you.”

“If Abigail says she was there, I’m sure she was, Mother,” Eustace suggested soothingly.

Somehow, his statement made everything worse. The other guests had paid little attention up to that point. There had been a momentary hiatus in the conversation when Hilda’s strident voice made her accusation, but being well acquainted with her constant complaints, the guests had gone back to their talk as soon as she mentioned Griselda. After Eustace’s assertion, however, an uncomfortable silence fell.

“I was there,” Abigail exclaimed, her voice shaking with ill-controlled rage. “I don’t know where you looked for me. You were in the drawing room—I heard your voice. I was out in the garden. If you don’t believe me, ask Lady Sarah. I spoke to her and to Lady Lade and to Miss Power. Perhaps I was a little late in arriving. I had business to attend to this morning.”
If anyone asked, Abigail intended to mention the leases that had come from Jameson at Rutupiae, but the actual business that had made her late was in her mind, and her color, which had been fading as she saw several amused glances cast at Hilda, rose again. Abigail was satisfied. She knew the hidden amusement was because her company felt she had been deliberately avoiding Hilda. Unfortunately, Abigail never glanced at the one face she should have examined, but it never entered her mind that her husband could have any doubts about her.

Arthur put a hand casually on the mantelpiece and looked down into the fire. The graceful indolence of his posture proclaimed his contempt for and disinterest in any hint of the scandal Hilda clearly wished to imply—but his eyes were blind with pain. Where did Abigail go? Arthur wondered. Whom did she see? Five, no six times now, his attention had been drawn to the fact that she had not been where she claimed she would be. Each previous time, any doubt that had flickered through his mind had been soothed by the easy indifference with which she explained. This time the ease was gone. Arthur knew his wife. This time she had done something of which she was ashamed.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Arthur had been prepared for a dreadfully dull evening since he was not at all interested in social gossip. Twice a year at Stonar Magna and once during the Season he was host to his neighbors from Kent at a “select” dinner party. Violet had explained this to Abigail—in fact, before she went to Bath she had left for her daughter-in-law what amounted to a book of instructions on obligations and proper behavior. She had also told Arthur she would not spend the Season with them.

“I will come for two or three weeks at the end of April or the beginning of May,” Violet had said, “to see my own friends, but it is Abigail who must be acknowledged as your hostess, Arthur. Besides, I want to see spring in the country again.” She smiled slightly. “I don’t suppose you know, my love, but I was a country girl. I loved your father more than daffodils and violets, but I have not seen them except cut and dying, poor things, for almost thirty-five years. I cannot tell you how happy I am to have no obligations to drag me to Town. I will stay with Joseph and Irma and see spring as it is meant to be.”

Although he concealed it well, offering Abigail nothing but support and assurances, Arthur had been a little worried about how his American-bred wife would manage and feared that between her temper and her all-too-forthright nature she would offend people and be “cut” by social leaders. To his delight, Abigail had adhered faithfully to Violet’s book of instructions, and with its help—despite being hampered by so different a background—had slid efficiently through the social-shark-infested waters of a London Season and the complex political tangle. In one way her background was helpful; to be a successful shopkeeper, particularly in a bookshop where most of the clients were upper class and well educated, she had learned to hold her own without offending.

Abigail’s adaptability had rather surprised Arthur because in private he so easily generated explosions from her volatile temper, but he had been very proud of her success—until this evening. For the first time, as he stared into the fire, he allowed himself consciously to wonder whether his wife was a supremely good actress. Did she turn her strong opinions on and off according to the person and situation? Was that look of perfect honesty no more than a mask like those the actors in ancient Greece once wore? And what of the looks of love, the perfect physical response to his passion—were they too perfect?

At that point, just when the pain became too much to bear, Waggoner announced that dinner was served, and years of rigid training induced in Arthur the correct response. The movement—offering his arm to Hilda, who was the lady of highest rank, seeing her to her chair, going to his own—reduced to a dull ache the spasm of agony that had seized him. Then there were hours of the kind of talk that barely touched the surface of Arthur’s brain. For once he was grateful for Hilda. She talked at him, neither needing nor expecting any reply. But even when he turned to Lady Vernon, he was able to listen and answer while his deeper thoughts ran on a different path.

They veered wildly from an impulse to attack Abigail and wring the truth from her, to utter rejection of his own suspicions. What, after all, were those suspicions based on? A blush or two. He knew that Abigail blushed with rage. He had seen her do so often enough. Certainly Hilda had given her reason enough to be angry. Why was he so sure she was blushing with guilt? Was it not because of his own previous life? Was he equating Abigail with the many women who had not been where they said they would be because they were—illicitly—with him?
A glance down the table showed him Abigail talking pleasantly with Lord Vernon—about horses, no doubt, since Lord Vernon seldom talked about anything else. There was nothing in her face or manner that he could identify as different, yet his heart contracted, and anger roiled under his polite attentiveness to his partner. She is guilty! his mind raged. Guilty and ashamed! However, Arthur was not insane, and he fought down the impulse to jump up and demand an immediate answer—and when the fury subsided, the doubts returned.

In fact, Arthur had judged Abigail correctly—if for the wrong reason. Abigail was not much more interested in horses and hunting than Arthur was in gossip. Thus, as Lord Vernon pontificated on the subjects he knew best, she nodded and smiled—and her mind wandered to her most recent source of irritation. Further consideration of Hilda’s accusation had brought home to her a realization of what she had done. She had committed treason! She did not regret the thing itself because she was so sure it was best that America not be defeated, but she wished someone else had passed the news. If it got about that Arthur’s wife had betrayed Britain to the American enemy, either he would have to separate from her or he would be finished in politics. He might be finished in any event. Who would trust a man who blabbed military confidences to his wife? It would not matter that she had not obtained the news from Arthur and that he might not even know. He would be blamed anyway.

Later, after dinner was over and the party was back in the drawing room, some playing whist and others chatting, another aspect of the situation came to her. Arthur himself would despise her if he knew her to be a traitor. She remembered now his fury when she had first defended America. Just because Arthur was too wise to be vindictive and agree with the common demand for reparations and the humbling of the “rebels” did not imply that he would agree the United States must not suffer any major defeat. And even if he understood the eventual bad results of a successful British attack and correspondingly harsh treaty, he would never accept her method of preventing it.

This revelation gave Abigail considerable food for thought. Guilt urged her to confess and promise amendment. Practical common sense bade her to hold her tongue. There was no reason on earth why poor Arthur should suffer for her decision to act as a spy, and to tell him would be to place him in the unenviable position of either condoning what she had done or denouncing her to the authorities. Not that Abigail seriously feared her husband would betray her, but he would be made uncomfortable by the knowledge that, strictly speaking, he should have done so. And, a little rebellious voice whispered inside her, even if he does not betray that you have spied for the United States, he will make you promise never to do it again, perhaps never to see Albert again.

Partly because of the absence of their minds, both host and hostess were even more cordial than usual. Still, no matter how warmly their guests were pressed to have one more cup of tea and told that it was still early, at last the evening came to an end. By the time the door closed behind the last two guests—Hilda and Eustace, naturally—Abigail had decided firmly that for his own good Arthur must never know what she had done. She smiled at him and then sighed.

“Another duty done, thank God,” she remarked. “They are good people, but so dreadfully dull.”

“Yes,” Arthur agreed stiffly, and then asked in a rush, “Where were you, Abigail?”

The question shocked her. It had not occurred to her that Arthur would not, like all the others, simply assume that Hilda was trying to blow a nothing up into a scandal. Since no other reference had been made to Lady Sarah’s breakfast during the whole evening, Abigail had put that matter out of her mind. She had prepared no explanation—all she knew was that she dared not tell the truth.

“I was at the breakfast,” she repeated, and seeing the disbelief and anger in his face, her guilt and fear combined to make her angry, too. “How dare you?” she gasped, and then her voice rose in rage. “Are you equating me with the whores you have played games with all your life? I can assure you that if I were of a mind to sample the field, I would not have bothered to marry.”

Arthur stood staring down at her, knowing what she said was true. First he felt a wash of relief because his initial reaction was to the natural connection built up in his mind over the years, husband-cuckold. Then he felt ashamed momentarily, realizing that his past experience of the many married women who seemed only too eager to find their satisfaction outside their vows had distorted his view. But he knew too, that Abigail’s anger was wrong, not natural for her. She should have laughed at him or kissed him and explained. Something was hidden behind that anger. He shook his head.
“I am not accusing you of having an affair,” he said, “but I am also certain that although you may have appeared at Lady Sarah’s, it must have been a very brief appearance.”

Abigail also knew she had made the wrong response. That threw her further off balance, and she panicked. In desperation she cried, “It is none of your business.”

“What?” Arthur exclaimed, his voice also rising. “You are my wife. Everything you do is my business, and it is my right to know—”

“No!” she shrieked. “I am a person, not only a wife.” And she whirled and ran up the stairs and into her dressing room, where she slammed the door.

Once there she leaned, shaking, against the wall, thanking God that it was not her custom to have her maid waiting for her. If Abigail did not summon her by eleven, she left a nightgown and peignoir lying ready for her mistress and went off to bed. It was much more enjoyable, Abigail had found, to get Arthur to help her should she find difficulty in undressing. Indeed, the sight of her nightclothes brought to Abigail’s mind the many times she had called him to her assistance, often when she could have managed very well herself. She uttered a sob and shuddered.

Abigail knew she had no right to say what she had said. Arthur never treated her as less than a person who had every right to normal privacy. He never examined her letters—either those that came to the house or those she sent out. Even when she asked him to frank them for her, he scrawled his name on them without bothering to look at the address. This very morning he had passed the material from Rutupiae to her with hardly a glance. She must tell him something, but she could not tell him the truth. And then a chill of fear passed through her. Alex would tell him…

With that thought came an enlightenment that might bring salvation. Abigail paused a moment longer to collect her thoughts, and then hurried through the bedroom, breathing a sigh of relief when she saw that the door to Arthur’s dressing room was not shut. She was only just in time, he was in the act of crossing his room to close the door.

“Arthur,” she called, “don’t shut me out.”

He hesitated, then came into the bedroom and pulled the door closed behind him. From that Abigail knew that he had already rung for his valet, and she would have only a few minutes. If she had not convinced him she was telling the truth by the time his man announced his arrival by tapping on the door, Arthur would use that as an excuse to leave her.

“Forgive me,” she began. “I had no right to say that.”

He shrugged. “It is your mania,” he admitted, his voice cold. “I suppose I should have phrased my objection to your refusal to explain differently.”

“No, I don’t mean that. I mean I had no right to say it was none of your business—but I was still angry because you thought I would cheat. I never would, Arthur, never. I don’t believe I will ever love another man as I love you, but if it should happen, if something should change the way we feel about each other—I would go away. I would never live with you and cheat you.”

He looked down into the lovely violet eyes brimming with tears. He could barely resist her statement of love. It was a struggle not to take her in his arms and say all was forgiven, that he did not care what had delayed her. Yet if he did that, Arthur knew he would feel a fool, feel that he was being manipulated like a puppet, or worse, like a beast whose brain was ruled by his genitals. Even knowing, he almost yielded. It was Abigail who saved him. She had paused to sniff and steady her voice, but he was just about to draw her to him when she shook her head and went on.

Abigail was not stupid. She had seen the struggle in her husband’s face, and she knew she had won. She could stop right now, and he would never ask again—but a little sore spot would remain where she had bruised his pride. To tell him what she had planned, even though it was no longer necessary, would ease that—and save any new questions being asked if Alex Baring happened to mention his visit.

“And worse than that,” she added, biting her lip, “the only reason the idea that you suspected me of being unfaithful came into my head was because I was furious that you didn’t believe me. I thought I had been so clever. I had made
everyone think that Hilda was simply trying to create trouble—and you saw through me. Oh, Arthur, I’m sorry. One minute after I ran up, I knew how stupid I was. You noticed because you cared more than any of the others. Francis would never have noticed.”

“Perhaps he was fortunate.”

“Now you are just being spiteful,” Abigail said with a very tentative smile. “I did have a reason for not wanting to explain to everyone why I was late. You see, I had a note from Albert—” She hesitated as a blankness flickered across Arthur’s expression and, assuming it was because he did not recognize the name, continued, “Albert Gallatin. He has been appointed one of the members of the peace commission and has come to London. We were close friends in the United States, and I wished to invite him to stay with us while he was here.”

“Stay with us?” Arthur repeated.

Gallatin’s name had aroused a familiar pang of jealousy, but it was stilled suddenly when Abigail said she intended to invite the man to live with them. One does not invite a past lover to one’s husband’s home, particularly if one has unassuaged longings. Arthur was about to second the invitation enthusiastically, but was prevented by Abigail’s further explanation of her need for Gallatin’s address, Baring’s visit and her reluctant agreement not to see Gallatin while he was in London.

“But I had to write to him to explain,” she said, “and that took a while, and then—well, perhaps I was just silly and carried things too far, but I thought I would prefer not to send one of our footmen, so I walked to Bond Street and sent a jarvey with the message. And I had to go to the breakfast because of our dinner tonight. I could not send a message that I was unwell because Lady Sarah might have heard about it and been offended. But if I told the truth about why I was late, I might just as well have gone to see Albert, so I slipped in by the gate and—and just pretended I had been there all along.”

About the middle of this disquisition, Arthur’s valet tapped. Abigail hurried the last few sentences to finish, and Arthur shook his head when she was done, but he could not help smiling at her. Nonetheless, he did not take her in his arms and call out to his valet to go away, as he sometimes did, to that sober gentleman’s disgust. He turned toward the door, glad that there was no need for words at that moment. He wanted time to think. He had been the battleground of too many fierce emotions in too short a time. Being rid of his clothes would give him a breathing space in which to decide whether he had heard enough and wished to drop the subject or had more questions to ask.

But as he was eased out of his tight-fitting coat and his boots were drawn off, Arthur wondered why he felt there might be questions. Everything that Abigail had said and done after he entered the bedroom was as “right” as her behavior when Hilda and Eustace left was “wrong”. To fly into a rage and then apologize and explain was typical of Abigail, and the explanation was equally typical. Still, there was something...something... Pantaloons, shirt, underlinen, and stockings were so expertly removed that Arthur was hardly aware of being stripped. Automatically he rejected the nightshirt and nightcap his valet proffered, ignored the man’s reproving expression, and slid his arms into a heavy silk dressing gown.

All the time Arthur had picked at what Abigail had said, especially every word that referred to Gallatin, but there was nothing to disturb him. In fact, the open desire to have Gallatin as a guest, the openly expressed pleasure of knowing he was in London, and then the disappointment at being deprived of his company were honest. Arthur felt he was being unreasonable and pushed his doubts back into the dark corner where they had lived so long already as he went into the bedroom again, shed the dressing gown, and got into bed. Abigail sat up and kissed him on the nose.

“Are you still cross?” she asked childishly, and then when he shook his head, “do you think Alex was wrong? Could we invite Albert to stay with us?”

Arthur almost said yes to the last question out of eagerness to meet Gallatin, but he was too honest and also too convinced that peace with the United States would be economically and politically valuable to deny that Baring’s arguments were valid. Arthur was also aware of a problem that Baring had not mentioned. The government was unhappy over the idea of releasing tens of thousands of soldiers, made useless by the end of the European war, into a depressed economy in which there would be no employment for them. Thus, some ministers argued that sending the
troops to Canada and pursuing the war would have double benefits that would offset the expense.

This only made it more likely that excuses would be sought to delay the peace negotiations, and Arthur was forced to put aside his personal preference. “No,” he said. “I am afraid Baring is right. I do not know how the government will react, but it is better as things are to offer them no provocation.”

Abigail slid an arm around his neck and pulled him down with her. “I’m sorry,” she sighed. “You and Albert would enjoy each other.”

The words were a balm. Abigail might have her faults, but Arthur could not believe she was so depraved as to tell her husband that he would enjoy the company of her lover. Happily he drew her closer and met the lips lifted toward his. Her arms tightened so convulsively around him that he was startled, but she relaxed before he could free his mouth to ask a question. And then her hands were moving over him, hands that had learned his body far better than any other ever had, that could find just those places that were unendurably exciting to him. In return, he stroked Abigail’s responsive body, feeling the nipples rise and harden on her breasts and the tiny shudderings in her thighs as his fingers sought out her most sensitive places. He forgot all doubt, lost in a purely physical dimension in which sensation ruled alone.

It was not until he was dressing the next morning that slight oddities struck Arthur. The way Abigail had responded to his first kiss was more like a drowning person being rescued than a wife who had good reason to expect to be kissed. What was more, although Abigail always enjoyed making love, usually she was as mischievous about that as about everything else. By now she could play him as Paganini played the violin, and since their wedding, she had done just that. Abigail clearly favored a long and interesting foreplay and usually interspersed her most sensual manipulations with others more playful and teasing, which kept his ardor in check. That had not been true last night.

Arthur’s hands froze on the intricate folds he was making in his elaborately tied neckcloth. Acting? As the word formed in his mind, he knew it was wrong. Arthur was experienced with all kinds of women telling all kinds of lies, and he was aware that acting skill, no matter how great, could not counterfeit certain responses. Jealousy flicked him again, but before he could torment himself with the notion that another man’s image filled his wife’s mind as her body responded to his caresses, the jealousy was quenched by his memory of the way she said she would not cheat him. Not another man, then. Still, the feeling that Abigail was hiding something was very strong.

His fingers resumed their delicate work, tied the final bow, and inserted the jeweled pin exactly right for the hour of the morning and the meeting he was scheduled to attend. His eyes, however, were absent as his valet eased him into his coat, straightened his waistcoat, and gave a last careful brushing to coat and pantaloons. He was gratified by his master’s patience; often Arthur would spurn the last tiny details, pointing out that two minutes after he stepped out of the house his boots would be dusty and his coat and pantaloons speckled with airborne fuzz and soot.

There were only two subjects on which Abigail was peculiar, Arthur was thinking as his valet’s brush passed over his shoulders. Her independence and America’s. Damn her, he thought, I’ll give her independence. I will beat her with a stick no thinner than my thumb—which, Arthur had learned to his horror during his search of the laws regarding marriage, was legal in certain American states—if she’s brewing mischief. The notion was not, of course, serious, only an irritable response to a sense of unease. But that too passed when a light comment of Abigail’s over breakfast reminded Arthur that they had quarreled—not about some abstract topic, but about a personal matter—just before making love. He nearly laughed at himself. How could he have been so silly as to seek abstruse reasons for the way Abigail had acted when so obvious and natural a one had been overlooked.

Nonetheless, the abstruse reasons worked under the skin. Arthur found himself more and more fascinated by the politics and economy of the United States, and that interest gave him a good reason to ask Baring to arrange a private meeting with Gallatin. He was subtly unsettled by that. Although Gallatin was over fifty and mostly bald, he had an extraordinarily brilliant mind, a charm of manner, and a dry wit that Arthur knew Abigail would find irresistible. And it was no help to discover that though Gallatin loved Abigail, he plainly loved her as a daughter.

It was impossible to blame Gallatin, but the meeting produced another uncomfortable effect. Arthur found himself infuriated because he could not help liking and admiring the person who might be his wife’s ideal. That exposed a fact he had tried to hide from himself. It was ridiculous at his age to be so much in love as to want Abigail to think he was the best and most wonderful person in the world. For the first time Arthur realized that he had put off love
too long. In youth the pangs might be equally violent, but they are mingled with many other violent hopes and fears. By his time of life, everything had found a balance—everything except love.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Although Abigail had no idea that her husband had a specific person in mind, she did now realize that he was jealous. Francis had never been jealous, and she was both flattered and amused by Arthur’s possessiveness. Abigail understood very well, however, that jealousy is not amusing to the person suffering from it, and she wished to protect Arthur as much as possible. That meant that she must be either at home or in irreproachable company at all times. This would have been no trouble to Abigail had she felt free to explain that whenever she was late or missed an engagement completely, she had been buying books. But she had also realized that Arthur preferred not to be reminded that she was still a shopkeeper.

Unfortunately, Abigail could not put off her book buying until Arthur came to trust her better, because at this moment the end of the war in Europe provided a way to circumvent the trade embargo between England and America. The books could now be sent to France, which was not at war with the United States, and shipped from there. But Abigail feared this would not be possible for long. She had already heard complaints about France’s willingness to trade with America and felt that a cessation of this trade might be made part of the peace agreement.

Since Abigail had no desire to torment Arthur or to remind him of her “common” employment as a shopkeeper, she began to take great care not to miss or be late to appointments, confining her business to the mornings. Fortunately, Arthur usually left the house about nine, and the managers of Hatchard’s and Lackington’s shops were both understanding and obliging. Abigail was permitted to come before the stores opened to the public and also to examine stock in the storerooms. Still she could seldom remain more than an hour or two before rushing home to dress for a social engagement, and more visits to the bookshops were necessary than could be explained by the most avid reading habits.

This made Abigail uncomfortable because she had promised Arthur to be discreet, and she developed the habit of scanning the street around each shop for anyone she knew who might see her as she came out. Soon she was presented with a puzzle. There was a street idler who always seemed somewhere in the area, no matter which shop she was in. By the third time she saw him, Abigail, became “aware” of his presence, but she did not associate it with herself because such men often ran errands for shopkeepers or carried parcels for customers. However, when she caught a glimpse of the same man walking on her own street, she felt that to be very odd. He was on the other side and going in the opposite direction rather quickly. Nonetheless, he did not belong in the elegant residential neighborhood in which she lived. Her neighbors had their own servants to run errands and carry parcels.

It was no more than an odd coincidence, Abigail told herself, but she could not help watching for the man—and finding him and realizing that he was following her. First she was simply amazed, unable to understand what it could mean. All too soon, however, it occurred to her that the watcher must be a result of her husband’s jealousy. Fury swept her. Had Arthur been at home when the idea came to her, she would have attacked him for his lack of trust. But as she reviewed in her mind the contemptuous things she would say to him, pity replaced rage. Then she thought of explaining gently and again assuring him that she would never betray him, but she knew that would not help. If Arthur were so far gone as to set a spy on her, he would be beyond reason.

She was so sorry for him, realizing that he must be in agony to do such a thing, that she thought of giving up her attempt to stock her shop before France was forced to stop trading with America. Then she decided that changing her behavior abruptly might make him feel worse. Let the man watch, she thought. After all, she was doing nothing of which she was ashamed. Once Arthur had heard enough of his spy’s reports, perhaps he would come to understand that it was useless to have her followed.

Still, knowing that someone was watching her made Abigail feel very peculiar. She could not resist looking for the man, and one morning when she stepped out of Hatchard’s, he was missing. Surprised, she paused at the curb wondering what that could mean, then shrugged and started to cross the road. She had taken no more than three or four steps when a carriage that had been passing on a cross street swerved, picked up speed, and came directly at her. For a minute, Abigail was frozen by surprise, unable to believe what she saw—that the horse was deliberately being driven diagonally across the road to run her down.
A shout from somewhere behind her broke Abigail’s paralysis, and she screamed and jumped back, then turned to run, but the sound of hooves and the rattle of wheels was upon her. With a strength born of terror she leapt forward, felt a heavy blow on her left arm that threw her toward the walk, felt herself falling—and then nothing.

Abigail woke to a severe headache, intensified by the sound of several voices. Her immediate reaction was that her children had come into her bedroom and were chattering in the background, and she said crossly, “Oh, do be quiet. I have a dreadful headache.”

The voices stopped at once, but as Abigail spoke, she became aware of other aches and pains and that she could not be in her bed. The surface on which she was lying was hard and lumpy. Unwillingly she forced her eyes open and saw the face of the clerk with whom she dealt at Hatchard’s. He was pale, and his voice trembled when he spoke.

“We have sent for an apothecary. He will be here in a moment. Do, please, lie still, Lady St. Eyre.”

For a moment, Abigail closed her eyes again, lost in confusion—and then she remembered. The pain of her headache diminished as rage and amazement filled her mind. Her eyes opened, and she asked, “Did you see that carriage being driven at me?”

“I did,” another voice replied, and Abigail saw that it was Mr. Hatchard himself. “I had just come to open the door. Whoever was driving meant to run you down.”

Abigail closed her eyes once more. A wave of agony far more terrible than the pain in her head was tearing at her. No one in the world could wish her dead—except her jealous husband. Was it the man who had been following her, so surprisingly absent, who had been driving the carriage? The question restored her sanity, which for a moment, had seemed to be slipping away. Even supposing Arthur’s sufferings had reached a point at which he wished her dead, he was not such a fool as to order her killed by someone else. That would place him in the power of her murderer—unless he intended to kill his agent also after she was dead.

“I must go home,” Abigail said.

Both the clerk and Mr. Hatchard began to protest and expostulate, but Abigail ignored them, concentrating for the moment on trying to discover whether she had been hurt worse than she thought. The damage, except to her clothing, which was torn and filthy, seemed rather less than she had expected, however. Her headache was already fading to a dull throbbing, and though she was bruised, her knees and palms scraped, it seemed that she had managed instinctively to protect herself from more than the initial blow dealt by some part of the carriage and a bump when her head came into contact with the walk. The apothecary, who came just as she was attempting to sit up, agreed that she had sustained no serious injury and would recover best in her own bed.

Mr. Hatchard sent at once for his own carriage and accompanied her home. The furor when she arrived was trying, but she would not answer questions and was soon in her own room, where her maid sponged off the dirt, applied arnica to her bruises and scrapes and put her to bed. To her surprise, Abigail fell asleep at once. When she woke, the first thing she saw was Arthur, sitting by the bed and wearing an expression of great anxiety.

“What is wrong?” Abigail asked, then tried to sit up and gasped as every muscle in her body seemed to shriek in protest.

The pain brought instant recollection of what had happened. She stared for a moment at her husband, who cried, “Lie still,” as she moved, and jumped to his feet. Looking at him, she wondered how she could have been so silly as to suspect him, and she smiled. Now that her head was clear, it seemed so obvious that it must have been one of those young lunatics trying to prove how well he could drive by missing her by an inch.

Arthur had gone down on his knees by the side of the bed and dropped his head onto her hand. “You could have been killed,” he said, his voice shaking.

“Yes,” Abigail agreed, “and I wish I had seen the young fool who thinks he drives better than he does. If I had been able to recognize him, I swear I would have had his breeches down and paddled his behind myself. But I am not really hurt, darling, so let us not—”
“Abigail,” Arthur interrupted, raising his head and looking desperately worried, “it was not a sporting vehicle. Hatchard saw it. It was a post chaise. My dearest heart, I beg you to tell me what you are hiding from me. I do not care what it is, but I cannot protect you if—”

“But Arthur,” Abigail exclaimed, round eyed with surprise, “you must know I am not hiding anything at all. The man you have had following me must have told you that the only place I go—aside from my breakfasts and teas and routs and such—is to several bookstores.”

There was no immediate reply. Arthur stared at her, totally dumbfounded. Finally he said, “Why the devil should I have anyone follow you?”

By then Abigail had remembered that she was, indeed, concealing something from her husband. However, it was simply not possible that her revelation of the plan to attack Washington could have anything to do with either the man who had followed her or the attempt to run her down. She stared back at Arthur for a moment, then said, “Help me to sit up. It’s hard to think flat on your back.”

There was a brief exchange about whether she was well enough, which Abigail won by pointing out that she was starving and would have to sit up anyway to eat. A hearty appetite being an excellent sign, Arthur propped her up on pillows and rang for a servant. However, when the flurry of activity was over and Abigail was quickly devouring a hearty tea, she came back to Arthur’s question and explained her reasoning. Although it was clear to Abigail that he was slightly embarrassed, which confirmed to her that he was jealous, she was also sure from his manner that he had nothing to do with the man who had been following her.

They discussed the matter for some time, but neither could think of a rational—or, for that matter, irrational—reason either for the watcher set on Abigail or for the attack on her. Arthur exclaimed in exasperation that he could not understand why intended mayhem seemed to follow Abigail and her family. Then he paused and frowned, but when Abigail asked what had occurred to him, he shook his head and replied that there was something in the back of his mind, but he could not put a finger on it. At last they abandoned the subject, after Abigail had promised to go nowhere without a stout footman in attendance if Arthur could not accompany her herself.

Abigail was able to describe the watcher, but it was over two weeks before she was ready to pick up her ordinary life, and he never appeared again. After a while, although she kept her promise to have someone accompany her whenever she left the house, Abigail began to wonder whether she had only imagined being followed. The incident with the post chaise was certainly not her imagination, since Mr. Hatchard had seen what happened, but she could not believe it was a personal attack on her. It seemed far more likely to her that the driver was one of those wild, sadistic young men who liked to frighten and injure people, but one who was too clever to chance recognition and thus had rented an anonymous vehicle.

Content with her rationalizations, Abigail put the whole unpleasant incident out of her mind. She had more than enough to think about. Although she was too battered to be seen at balls or other social events, Arthur’s family rallied around so that she was not bored or isolated. Most days cousins or aunts appeared to relay gossip, and most evenings a pleasant, small, family party would gather. One evening when only Roger and Leonie were there, Abigail asked directly about the status of the negotiations with the United States.

Roger frowned. “The Americans have presented their papers, the commission has been recognized, and it is decided to have the meeting in Ghent.”

“Ghent?” Abigail echoed. “I thought it was to be somewhere in Sweden. No, never mind that. It is far more important who is appointed to meet with them.”

“Admiral Lord Gambier, Mr. William Adams and Mr. Henry Goulburn. I—”

Abigail had been staring at him incredulously as he recited the names, and then cut him off. “Who?” she asked. “Who are these men? I thought myself acquainted with the political scene, but I do not recognize a single name.” By the time she had got that far, her face was flushed, and her eyes hard and bright. “Is this meant as an insult?” she exclaimed, her voice rising.
“No, not that,” Roger assured her hastily.

Both Leonie and Arthur, who had been chatting on a sofa near the pianoforte, rose and came toward them, Arthur saying sharply, “Abigail! You cannot mean what you have said,” and Leonie simultaneously asking, “Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

Despite her anger, Abigail could not help laughing. “I am not insulted, Arthur,” she explained, and then added furiously, “It is the American peace commission that has been insulted. The government has appointed a set of nobodies to deal with them.”

Arthur shook his head disgustedly. “You have no tact, Roger.”

“I have no tact?” Roger countered. “You are a fine one to talk.” Then he turned back to Abigail. “My dear, you have friends in the United States and are concerned for them, but you must recognize the fact that American affairs are very minor compared with those taking place in Europe. Our best people are, of course, being reserved for the conference in Vienna.”

“Oh, yes,” Abigail retorted, “not to mention that the government is not at all eager to make peace. They want to use the ships and troops no longer needed to fight Bonaparte to crush the United States.”

Roger shrugged and then patted her hand. “I wish I could say no to that, but I cannot. On the other hand, you must be reasonable, Abigail. Lord Liverpool is responsible to his country and his party. Naturally he wishes to make the most advantageous peace possible.”

“But it will not remain advantageous,” Abigail pointed out, sighing. “You do not know Americans. I do. If Britain forces an unsatisfactory peace on them, they will fight again. In fact, no matter what the government agrees to, the citizens are likely to go right on fighting if the British try to occupy what they think of as their territory—not openly, of course, but like…what were they called in Spain?”

“Guerrillas,” Roger said, his voice bleak.

He was aware of the damage done to the French army by the roving bands of Spanish and Portuguese peasants. They had killed hundreds—not many, perhaps, compared with the thousands lost in full-scale battles. But, by picking off messengers and small groups and not only killing but mutilating them horribly and leaving the corpses exposed, the guerrillas had almost destroyed communications and morale among the French.

“Would they really?” Arthur asked.

“Not in New York or Philadelphia,” Abigail replied, “but in the territories—along the Canadian border, which Britain might like to change, for example—they would. I honestly don’t think Britain would gain anything by a peace that was unsatisfactory to the United States.”

“That is a point to be remembered and considered,” Roger said seriously. “But to go back to the men who have been appointed, I want to assure you again that they were not chosen as a deliberate insult. They are not men of weight and moment, true, but that is because Liverpool, Castlereagh, and Bathurst want to retain the real power of negotiation in their own hands. Truthfully, there is so much prejudice against the United States that, quite aside from the need for skilled diplomats in Vienna, there are no men of any consequence willing to negotiate. They would be willing to state the British terms, but not in a manner that permitted discussion.”

“What about you?” Abigail asked aggressively.

“I am going to Vienna,” Roger said with a wry smile. “Liverpool wants an independent view of what is being done and said there.” He hesitated and then went on. “I have not forgotten you, Abigail. I mentioned to the prime minister that the commission was very weak—and I suggested he add Arthur to it.”

“Arthur?” Abigail cried, looking hopeful, but Arthur exclaimed, “Damn you, Roger, do you want me to have a stroke?”
Roger laughed. “It almost gave Liverpool a stroke when I first suggested it, but he began to think it over and smile to himself. I think he realized what torture it would be for you. He does not love you, Arthur.”

“But Arthur,” Abigail gasped, “I thought you agreed with me that a good peace with America would benefit all.”

“I do,” Arthur replied, “but desiring peace is one thing. Making it, engaging in weeks or months of niggling arguments over minute points of law and equally minute parcels of land and having to say one thing one day and something exactly opposite, perhaps, the next, according to the fluctuations of someone else’s thoughts and temper, would drive me mad.”

“In any case,” Roger put in, as he saw argument in Abigail’s eyes, “Liverpool decided he could not do it. It would be bad enough if you had been an ordinary member of the opposition, Arthur, but you are such a persistent gadfly and have done so much damage by upsetting votes at the last minute that he felt the outcry from his party would be too violent.”

“I see.” Abigail sighed. “But what about Gambier, Adams, and Goulburn? Are they likely to be less prejudiced than the others toward America?”

“No,” Roger admitted, “but they have no real power. Had men of consequence been appointed, some authority would have had to be placed in their hands, and that might have resulted in a very abrupt end to the negotiations—which is not what the government wants. Gambier, Adams, and Goulburn will be told what to say, and their instructions are to refer all replies back to Castlereagh or Liverpool.”

“But it is likely to take forever to come to an agreement that way,” Abigail said. “Is this not just another way to put off making a treaty?”

“No, I think not,” Roger answered thoughtfully. “At least not the main purpose. Had they merely wished to delay discussions, our government would not have suggested London as a place for negotiation. For dragging one’s heels, Gothenburg, which was the American suggestion, would have been far better because replies would have taken over a week rather than a few days. No, the important reason, I believe, is to give the government the greatest flexibility in reacting, according to what happens both in America and in Vienna.”

Abigail was not very satisfied with this argument, but three weeks later she found herself supporting it to Albert Gallatin. She had met him at Lackington’s shop in response to a note delivered by a clerk and, having quietly beckoned him into one of the small side rooms, which was empty, greeted him fondly. He returned her hug and found a smile for her, but Abigail realized he was deeply depressed.

Although Gallatin had been less shocked than she at the men appointed to negotiate for the British, since he was not at first aware what nonentities they were, he had been greatly disappointed that no minister—not even the colonial minister, Bathurst—would take part in the discussions. Gallatin had not, however, allowed himself to become discouraged. He had pinned his hopes for a more serious and favorable attitude toward the peace commission on intercession by Tsar Alexander, who was coming to England.

Gallatin had hoped that the tsar, who was known to be sympathetic to the American cause, would grant him an interview and, after he had explained the situation, be willing to apply pressure to the British. The first hope was fulfilled; Alexander had come to London on 10 June, and Gallatin had obtained a private interview with him. Unfortunately, Alexander had said with regret, he could do nothing. He had already made several unsuccessful attempts to soften the British attitude, he told Gallatin, and further interference would, he felt, do more harm than good.

“If we are only going to Ghent to be humiliated,” Albert said quietly, although his eyes were angry, “perhaps it would be better not to meet at all.”

“No,” Abigail replied, trying to sound reassuring as she expounded Roger’s views about why Gambier, Adams, and Goulburn had been appointed. “But I must warn you,” she ended, “that I think there was a reason Roger did not wish to mention to me for choosing Adams and Gambier. It will be useless even to broach the subject of impressment. The admiral will, I think, refuse to discuss it at all, and Adams is a specialist in marine law.”
“British marine law,” Gallatin said, frowning. “I do not know, Abigail, but I greatly fear this conference is a waste. The single issue the President stressed was an end to impressment. If the British will not even discuss it—”

“But does it matter anymore?” Abigail asked in a troubled voice. “Now that the war with France is over, the navy will be discharging men, not looking for more. Is it not possible just to…to avoid the issue?”

“Abigail,” Gallatin protested, “it is a matter of principle.”

“But is a principle that has no practical value worth fighting over when America cannot win?” she asked stubbornly. Then she lowered her voice to add, “Remember what I told you when we first met. I believe veteran troops have already been dispatched.”

Gallatin made a despairing gesture. “We have some powers of discretion, but not, I think, on that subject. Never mind, my dear. I did not really ask you to come here to talk about this, and I should not have done so, for I see I have made you unhappy. What I wished to tell you is that I have word that the British commissioners will depart for Ghent about July first, so James and I are leaving London in a few days. We will go first to Paris, where I will see General de Lafayette, who has been most kind and helpful. Perhaps he can arrange meetings for me with others who can be of help.”

Abigail expressed her regret that she had not been able to see more of her friend while he was in London, and then the hope that when the treaty was signed he would come back and visit her. Gallatin shook his head and sighed. “I will go home as fast as I can. I miss Hannah—I cannot tell you how much—and the children. It has been good to have James with me, but I long for home.”

In a certain way, Abigail understood what Gallatin felt—not that she wished to return to America, but she was tired out by the intense social and political activities in which she had been engaged for months. She was looking forward with great anticipation to seeing her children and being principally a mother again. School ended for Daphne on 5 July, and Victor would be finished on the tenth. Abigail made sure there would be no guests and no other social obligations for two weeks so that she could concentrate her full attention on her children. She wanted to be sure that they were both happy in their schools and that they were not being subtly changed in any way of which she did not approve.

After that there would be visitors—some family, but mostly political colleagues with whom Arthur wanted to discuss issues in a relaxed atmosphere, but the schedule would be easier, and being in the country would give her more freedom. Abigail had felt foolish with a burly footman dogging her every step and had compromised by going out very seldom on private expeditions after her accident.

She had also looked forward to periods of total idleness once she was back in Stonar Magna, for she had accumulated a number of books during her repeated visits to the bookshops and had had little time to read while in London. Although her expectations of pleasure in being reunited with Victor and Daphne were fulfilled and she found, despite a spate of complaints from both, that neither had any real problems, her hopes of much time to herself were not realized. The very day after she and Arthur arrived, she received a note from Griselda with a request from Empson and Howing for her ladyship to call at Rutupiae Hall when she could spare them the time. Abigail gritted her teeth with exasperation. She had received letters from Griselda regularly all through April and May, and there had been no hint of dissatisfaction among the staff. After Hilda had returned to Rutupiae at the end of May, Griselda had written less frequently, and the tone of the letters was strained. Abigail had assumed that Hilda was making her daughter’s life miserable. She had been sorry, but there was nothing she could do, and she had put the matter out of her mind. Now, however, she realized that Hilda may have been making more lives than Griselda’s miserable.

Hoping that her guess was wrong, Abigail walked across the woods to Rutupiae at a time when she was almost certain that Hilda would be out visiting. She was right about that and also about the fact that the breach between mother and daughter had not been healed. Griselda was at home, Hilda “punishing” her by refusing to take her along on the visits.

Unfortunately, Abigail had also been right about the fact that Hilda had been making trouble. Griselda was plainly
embarrassed, but she explained that her mother seemed to believe that now that Abigail had married and left Rutupiae, she would no longer be concerned with the servants she had left behind. Hilda had decided to be avenged on those she felt “sided with” Abigail and been “unfaithful” to her. She had given orders to dismiss several servants, and when Empson and Howing had said they had no power to do so without Abigail’s permission, she had called them liars and had tried to make Mr. Jameson dismiss them. Jameson, of course, had said the household staff was outside of his responsibility, but by then the butler and housekeeper were so offended that they wished to give notice. Griselda had begged them to reconsider, at least until Abigail could speak to them.

This Abigail did at once, summoning them to the library, assuring them of her support and confidence and pointing out that though Hilda might be made uncomfortable by a less efficient staff if they left, it would be Victor and Rutupiae Hall that would suffer in the long run. Since both had worked at Rutupiae all their lives and did not wish to leave, they were easily mollified. They admitted they were accustomed to Hilda’s behavior but this time had been alarmed, thinking that Abigail, indeed, might have lost interest in Rutupiae and they might be dismissed and refused references.

By the time Abigail had pacified Empson and Howing, news of her arrival had spread and Mr. Jameson came to her before she could leave the room. He wanted to know whether estate problems were now to be referred to her or to Sir Arthur. Abigail promptly said “to me”, and Jameson as promptly told her that he had a number of subjects that needed discussion and approval as soon as she could give him some time. He had not been at all pleased when Abigail originally indicated that she intended to take an active part in managing the Lydden estate, but he had changed his mind over the months he had worked for her.

Abigail frowned. “Is there anything very urgent? I promised the children we could ride to the mill and meet the… Broadbridges. Is that the right name?”

“Yes, my lady, Broadbridge is the name,” Jameson replied. “Most excellent people, who will be glad to have Lord Lydden and Lady Daphne and their friends visit whenever they like. As to ‘urgent’, my lady, only one matter I feel I must mention at once. I changed the repair clause in the leases as you directed, and explained to the tenants. They have agreed, and the leases have been sent on to Mr. Deedes. But it was my understanding that Sneath’s lease was not to be renewed—that was in the letter you wrote in March. I had told him to go, but Mr. Lydden said—”

“Let me get my letter book, Mr. Jameson. So much has happened that I don’t remember what I wrote.”

In fact, Abigail did not really remember Sneath or why she had objected to his tenancy and hoped the letter would revive her memory. She went to her desk and opened the drawer in which her letter books were kept, but the last—the book Griselda had taken back with her—was not there. Repressing an unladylike exclamation, Abigail turned back to Jameson. If she asked Griselda for that letter book and Griselda could not remember at once where she had put it, the girl would feel dreadful. It was not worth the bother.

“It isn’t here,” she said to Jameson. “Miss Lydden may have forgotten to put it here, or I might not have told her to do so.” She hesitated and asked, “Do you feel I was unjust about Sneath?”

“Not at all,” Jameson replied. “I was delighted when you told me you wanted a new tenant on that land. I would have complained about him myself, except that I never liked him, not from the time Mr. Lydden insisted he be put on old Tooker’s farm. The old man was getting beyond the work, I know, and he had had very bad luck, losing his two older sons. Still, the youngest boy was getting into the way of farming and would have done very well in a matter of a few years. Tooker had always been a good tenant, and I felt his lease should have been renewed, even if the farm were not producing what it could for a while. Well, that’s neither here nor there, but I was afraid you would think as Mr. Lydden did when I complained about Sneath—that I was prejudiced against him.”

Abigail smiled at him warmly. “You are far too good at your work to allow personal prejudice to blind you to a well-run farm, Mr. Jameson, and you know that I do not always agree with Mr. Lydden on the way the estate should be managed. If you think my decision about Sneath was fair, I am confident it was. Tell him again to go, no matter what Mr. Lydden says, and if Tooker and his family have not found another place that they like, you can ask them to come back.”

“Thank you, my lady,” he said. “It is truly a pleasure to work for you.”
“Thank you,” Abigail replied, and laughed. “I hope your opinion remains as good after I tell you that in a week or two I intend to unloose Victor on you. I would greatly appreciate it if you would sometimes take him about with you when you visit the farms. Sir Arthur will do what he can, but Victor must come to know his own lands and tenants, not those of Stonar.”

“You honor me, my lady.” Jameson smiled and shook his head. “Lord Lydden may not be very interested in what I have to show him, but some of it will sink in, and in a few years he will feel very differently.”

“I think so too,” Abigail agreed, “because, you know, Francis used to talk about Rutupiae, and Victor sees that Sir Arthur, whom he admires, is interested in and concerned about the land.” She looked at the clock on the mantel and tchck’d irritably. “I must go, but I will be here by ten tomorrow morning, and then I will come regularly until we have gotten through everything.”

But Abigail’s desire to leave was thwarted once again. As she opened the door, a footman was coming down the corridor toward her. He informed her that Hilda had returned and was waiting for her in the drawing room. For one moment Abigail considered asking the footman to say she had already gone, but she knew Hilda would scold him, and if he weakened and confessed—or Hilda learned some other way that she had been there—more hard feelings would be generated.

Sighing, Abigail went to the drawing room, only to be greeted with a screech of “What are you doing here? This is no longer your house. By marrying Sir Arthur—”

Abigail’s fury with Hilda, which had been overlaid by her satisfaction in soothing Empson and Howing and her talk with Jameson, woke to renewed life. “You are entirely mistaken,” she snarled, cutting Hilda off mid-screech. “Victor is still my son. I am still his guardian, and Sir Arthur is still his trustee. All those facts add up to make me mistress of Rutupiae Hall until my son comes to his majority.”

“That cannot be true,” Hilda shrieked. “You cannot have Rutupiae’s interests as much at heart as those of Stonar. There is a thing—a legal thing—”

“If you mean conflict of interest,” Abigail broke in again, her sense of triumph and satisfaction cooling her anger, “you are both mistaken about my feeling for my son’s property and ignorant of the facts. Sir Arthur made very careful arrangements to permit us to remain guardian and trustee without any conflict of interest.”

“Mr. Deedes will hear of this!” Hilda yelled. “He will know how to prevent a greedy, treacherous foreigner from grabbing everything.”

“Mr. Deedes was involved in making the arrangements to assure my continued control of the estate, and it will be useless for you to torment him to change them, for he cannot do so.” Abigail spoke quite calmly now, mentally blessing Arthur again and again for his foresight and care. “I am still mistress of Rutupiae Hall—and as such, I am warning you not to meddle with the staff. I will tell you plainly and clearly that Mr. Empson and Mrs. Howing and most of the other servants are necessary to me, to Victor and to Rutupiae. You are not. You may live here if you like. You may not distress my servants. If you do, I will have you removed from this house, no matter how dreadful the scandal. I will call in the bailiffs if I must.”

Hilda fell back in her chair, so outraged that she could not speak, and Abigail turned away without waiting for her to catch her breath, only to see Eustace standing by the open door, which he had seemingly been too stunned to close. The sight annoyed Abigail, for she had vented her anger and did not want Hilda further embarrassed by knowing that the servants had heard her being put in her place. Thus, she decided to give Eustace a taste of the same medicine and turned on him. “And I manage the farms too,” she added. “Sneath’s lease will not be renewed.”

Then she walked past him and went toward the front door, but before she reached it, Empson emerged from a side passage and hurried to open it for her. Abigail almost gave him a dressing down, too. She knew he had been in that passage only in order to listen. She controlled herself, however, realizing that it would be useless and unwise to lash out at Empson, particularly that day. Then, although his face was as wooden as ever, Empson glanced up as he bowed and said, “Thank you, my lady.”
Somehow, the fact that he seemed to have guessed what she was thinking and to have confessed, apologized and answered her without saying a single word about the subject restored her mood. With the return of her good temper, Abigail remembered to inform Empson that she would be back the next day in case of any difficulty and to ask him to tell Griselda to find the letter book she had brought back from London and put it in the top drawer of her desk.

This request caused one more furor, but one of which Abigail remained unaware. When Empson transmitted the message, Griselda frowned and muttered that she had put the copies of Abigail’s letters in that drawer. She went to look herself, assuming Abigail had not seen the letter book in her haste. But when she found it really was missing, Griselda became hysterical and accused her mother and brother of stealing Abigail’s correspondence.

Eustace sprang to his feet and slapped her hard. “You feebleminded, mewling bitch,” he snarled. “You’re always interfering in what does not concern you. Anyway, what would Mama or I want with Abigail’s letters?”

Griselda cowered away, shielding her face with her arm and sobbing.

“Do not strike her, Eustace,” Hilda shrieked. “She deserves it, but the next thing you know, she will be off to Stonar Magna to complain to Abigail—you know she has toadied to her—and we will be put out of our home.”

Eustace grasped his sister’s arm. “You would not do that, would you?” he asked. His voice was soft now, but there was a threat in it. He stared into Griselda’s face, watching her eyes grow more and more frightened, then he shook her arm and let her go. “Bah! You are an idiot. The letter book must be there.”

He returned a few minutes later, carrying the book. “God, what fools!” he exclaimed as he entered the room. “Did you not think to look on the ledge below the drawer? It must have been on top, and when Abigail opened the drawer, it was pushed back and fell down. Or perhaps Mr. Jameson added something and pushed it down.”

Griselda looked stricken and even more frightened. She stared at Eustace with dilated eyes and a hand to her lips, but he paid her no attention, going to the fireplace to set the letter book on the mantelpiece. As he raised his arms, Griselda gave a gasp, buried her face in her hands, and began to sob. Eustace gave an exaggerated sigh and turned toward her.

“Oh, very well,” he said in a bored voice, “you are forgiven. Do not continue to make those revolting noises—or, if you cannot stop, go away.”

Still hiding her face and crying as if her heart were breaking, Griselda fled.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Four mornings of concentrated application had settled the estate matters about which Mr. Jameson had doubts and had proved an ideal way to exercise GoGo as well. Abigail found that walking through the wood made her nervous. She knew it was ridiculous, but they had never caught the man who fired at Victor, and she found herself thinking about that incident and looking over her shoulder both the first and second times she had gone to Rutupiae. It was more pleasant to ride the long way down the drive from Stonar to the main road, and then up the drive to Rutupiae.

Sometimes Abigail started early and rode quite a distance before settling down to work, and the exercise made the work a pleasure. In fact, when it was done, she felt somewhat regretful and asked almost wistfully whether Mr. Jameson would need her again. Misunderstanding, he assured her that he would not need to trouble her anymore now that he was certain what she wanted done. However, he pointed out that Abigail had been away from Rutupiae a long while, and some tenants had personal problems they wished to bring to her. Abigail nodded, feeling both pleased and remorseful; she had forgotten.

“Tell them that I will be here and welcome anyone who wishes to speak to me every Tuesday and Thursday from ten in the morning until half after noon. I think, if you do not mind, I will use your office for that. I am afraid the library might be rather awesome to them.”

“Yes,” Jameson agreed, “they’ll speak more freely in my office.”

There were other advantages to riding, Abigail discovered. If she left GoGo at the stables, she had only to walk
across the yard to Mr. Jameson’s office, and there was no chance at all that she would encounter Eustace or Hilda in
the house. Actually, Abigail was not too eager to meet Griselda, either. Griselda had been so distraught over the
letter book, stumbling over apologies and unable to meet Abigail’s eyes even after Abigail had said half a dozen
times it did not matter, that Abigail could barely resist shaking the girl and screaming at her. It was far better for
both of them, Abigail thought, not to see each other until Griselda calmed down.

It was not until the end of August, when life had settled into a pleasant, easy routine, that Abigail was able to begin
her regular morning visits to Rutupiae. By then Victor and Daphne had had their fill of their mother’s attention and
were ready to renew local friendships and activities. The neighbors had paid their formal calls, Abigail had returned
most of them, and invitations were beginning to arrive. Their first guests had arrived and departed, and another
group was due the following week. Abigail gave them little thought; they would cause no trouble. The staff at Stonar
Magna was accustomed to many guests and virtually ran itself.

More important than all else was that Bertram seemed to have recovered his spirits. He was no longer silent and
morose, doing his work but avoiding all other contact with her and Arthur as much as possible. True, Arthur said he
was not really back to normal, that there was still something troubling him, but Abigail could not see it—Bertram
was as she had known him when they first met. In any case, there was no sense worrying about what could not be
helped, she had told Arthur. Shortly after Bertram had returned to London from escorting Griselda home, he had
rejected Arthur’s offer of any help with such fury and violence that Abigail felt—and Arthur agreed—that they had
better let Bertram deal with his problems alone. Even if Arthur were right and Bertram had not recovered
completely, at least he was no longer like a dead man at the dinner table.

The single dark spot in Abigail’s bright July was Albert Gallatin’s letter saying that the British delegation to the
peace conference had never arrived. However, by the end of the month she was assured that they were, indeed,
under way, and a second letter—really no more than a note—from Albert confirmed that they had arrived on 7
August. Abigail was very eager for news about the proposals being made, but unfortunately for her, none of the
political visitors scheduled for August were at all interested in the American question. They told her little, and that
little was all very discouraging. Worse yet, Arthur had suddenly turned his back on anything to do with America and
would not discuss it with anyone.

This distressed Abigail so much that about ten days after the British delegation had arrived in Ghent she had stopped
Arthur when their guests had left the drawing room and gone to bed and angrily accused him of being lazy and
selfish, indifferent to the losses and suffering of war because he wished to avoid a job he thought unpleasant. He
shook his head, but he turned away to fill a glass with wine and sipped it without looking at her or answering her.
Caught in the grip of temper, Abigail would not accept the refusal to discuss the topic further.

“Answer me, Arthur,” she insisted.

“You know I am neither lazy nor indifferent,” he said. “I was joking with Roger about his suggestion to Liverpool,
but I am not suited to negotiation. I am too aware that I would do more harm than good by my impatience with
necessary protocol and too clear a statement of the issues. I would not have accepted the appointment.”

“I cannot believe that anything you did could be worse than the stupidities that Goulburn is committing,” Abigail
cried. “He is supposed to know something about America, but he is worse than the others. At least you understand
which issues are of real importance. Arthur, ask Roger to suggest you to Liverpool again. I am so afraid the
conference will fail.”

“For God’s sake, Abigail, let me be.” Arthur put down his glass so hard the thin stem cracked. He dropped the bowl
of the glass to the table and turned on his wife. “Do you not realize that with regard to the question of peace with
America, I am between the devil and the deep blue sea? Even if Liverpool would reconsider, I would have to
refuse.”

Startled by his anger, Abigail came closer and asked more quietly, “Why?”

“Because as a member of the commission, I would be required to make the best arrangement I could for my country
—and that would not please you at all, my dear,” he snapped, his voice bitter.
That isn’t true, Arthur,” Abigail protested, but there was no aggression in the statement, and her eyes pleaded for understanding. “I am sure that the best peace for Britain is one that the Americans can accept without shame. Do you not agree with that?”

Arthur sighed and drew her close, leaning his head against hers. “Whether I agree or not is not the point, Abigail. As a member of a negotiating team, I would be required to try to obtain agreement to the articles the government proposes, not write my own.”

“Even if you knew the articles were bad or unwise?” Abigail asked in a small voice. “Could you not explain to Bathurst or Liverpool why such articles were rejected and thus save much hard feeling, perhaps even the breaking off of the negotiations?”

He hesitated as if thinking over the subject and then said, “No, I cannot take the chance. My love, you do not, I fear, realize how deeply you are committed to the American cause. I cannot become involved in a situation in which urging what I feel to be my country’s best interests may cost me my wife.”

Abigail pushed away, out of his embrace, so she could see his face. “Good God,” she breathed, “you believe that. Arthur, my darling, whatever have I done to make you think that any political difference could affect my love for you? I swear that even if you were as rabid against the United States as the Courier, I would go on loving you.” She took his face between her hands and smiled at him. “Our life would most likely be a very uncomfortable one, with arguments day and night, but have you not yet come to trust me to separate impersonal quarrels from personal ones?”

He took her hands from his face and held them between his own. “I wish I were sure that you do regard American affairs as impersonal.”

“I am sure,” Abigail replied. “Why should you doubt it?”

“But because there are people, real people that you know involved.” Arthur dropped his eyes and released her hands. “You have friends…close friends…”

Of course,” Abigail said, feeling very puzzled. “But Arthur, even if some dreadful thing happened to those I care for, it would not be your fault. I would be very sad—heartbroken—if harm should befall my friends, but I would not love you the less.” She raised a hand and touched his chin. “Look at me, Arthur.” And when he did, she said very earnestly, “Even if it were your fault, I do not believe I would love you any less.”

The fact that she did not seem to understand what he meant by “friends”, that she had again said she loved him, made him ashamed of himself. Her eyes were unshadowed and hid nothing. He touched her cheek gently. “Perhaps I have been very foolish—” He finally smiled back at her, but with a cynical twist to his lips. “And perhaps you do not understand yourself. In either case, I still feel it much for the best that Liverpool did not take up Roger’s suggestion—and I have no intention, whatever you say, of offering myself up as a sacrifice.”

Now what objection can you find to helping advance a good cause?” Abigail asked, a note of asperity stealing into her voice.

Partly because her assurances had comforted him and partly because he felt the matter had been settled and there was no chance of his being involved, Arthur felt much happier. He laughed and said lightly, “Mostly that I could not win, whatever I did. As Roger said, Liverpool does not love me. It is far too likely that he would discount any suggestion I made, just because I made it. And, Abigail, my love, although I agree with you on some points, I disagree on many others.”

“How do you explain American affairs to your friends?” Abigail snapped. “Have you, too, succumbed to terror of the ‘American threat’? Do you, too, feel that America must be crushed now so that she will not in the future rival Britain? How can you—?”

“I have certainly succumbed to terror of one American threat,” Arthur teased.

“Which—” Abigail had begun, and then realized he was joking. “Monster!” she exclaimed and threw her arms around his neck. “I am not an American or a threat.”
“So you say,” Arthur pointed out after he had succumbed again—though not to terror—and kissed her, “but I find it hard to believe.”

His voice was light, still teasing, and Abigail could see that he was more at ease than he had been when the conversation started. Nonetheless, she realized that as her concern increased, she must have become less and less subtle in pressing her points. She did not abandon the topic of American affairs completely or change her pro-American viewpoint—that would only have made Arthur more suspicious—but she tried to be more moderate.

Although all her care only amused Arthur, who saw through her easily enough, to her chagrin, the discussion and her change in behavior did affect him. Thus, when Roger arrived at Stonar Magna unexpectedly on 31 August specifically to discuss certain demands the government was making of the American peace commission, Arthur did not, as he had previously done, refuse to talk about the subject. Having listened to Roger explain the British desire to create a buffer between Canada and the United States by demanding that America cede territory to the Indians, which neither the British nor the Americans could later purchase, Arthur shrugged.

“I would assume this is a device for breaking off the negotiations—”

“No, not at all,” Roger interrupted.

“Then the demand is ridiculous,” Arthur said impatiently. “Surely Bathurst must realize that he is asking the United States to cede about one-third of their territory to the Indians? They have just purchased part of it from France. Would you be likely to agree to such a condition?”

Roger frowned. “I am not sure Bathurst does realize the extent of the territory involved,” he said slowly, “but extent is a point that can be discussed. The American delegation has refused to recognize the article. They claim that it was not involved in the cause of the war. But surely they must understand that we now require a safeguard against another attack on Canada and for the tribes that were our allies.”

Arthur looked at Abigail, who had, surprisingly, not said a word during Roger’s explanation. “Well?” he asked. “What do you think?”

“Have these demands been made in writing?” Abigail asked.

“I don’t know,” Roger replied, surprised. “What does it matter?”

“If they have not been put into writing,” Abigail answered, “the government should withdraw them at once. If they are written, it is too late. The commissioners will send them to the United States by the next ship, they will be published in every newspaper, and they will utterly destroy any opposition to the war in America.”

“You are joking,” Roger said, his voice appalled. “Surely you are joking. The American government would not publish a diplomatic proposal.”

Abigail laughed at his expression. “Oh, yes they would. And even if President Madison and the cabinet did not wish to do so, some clerk or other functionary would carry the news—”

“But the papers would not print it,” Roger stated. “Their licenses would be revoked.”

“Newspapers are not licensed in the United States,” Abigail replied, laughing again. “They may be damaged by an outraged public, but the government has no control of them. It is an amendment to the Constitution that every citizen, so long as he does not preach the overthrow of the government by violent means, is free to say, write or print anything at all. But even if it were not so, this demand for territory is too good a weapon. Mr. Madison is far too clever not to use it to silence those who have opposed the war.”

“But it is not a demand for territory,” Roger protested.

Arthur had been watching Abigail with a look of mingled approval and relief. He had expected her to fly into a rage or burst into tears when Roger described the British conditions for peace. Instead of arguing against the conditions, however, she had warned Roger about the trouble they might cause. Her moderation reassured Arthur. He relaxed,
and in a lifelong response took up the cudgels for those he perceived as the underdog.

“The Americans will certainly see it as a demand for territory,” Arthur said with a wry smile, “particularly since I cannot find that any Canadian territory is included in the area to be ceded.”

“Some is,” Roger insisted defensively, and when Arthur laughed, added, “You cannot expect the victor—”

“In any case,” Arthur interrupted, “the Americans will not accept the terms. They will insist on making their own peace with the Indians. After all, they must live with them, and they will not accept our attempt to interfere, any more than we would permit Russia to interfere between us and them.”

“They may be forced to accept,” Roger said.

“Do not count your chicks before they hatch,” Arthur remarked. “Do you not remember what Wellington said about fighting over hostile territory? It will cost a fortune to subdue the Americans to the point where they will cede territory—and I do not think Parliament will support the government in this proposal either—not to mention what the other nations will make of it at Vienna.”

“And do not say the other nations will not know,” Abigail added. “I assure you that they will be told.”

Roger looked uncomfortable but did not deny that news of the proposal would get to the other delegates in Vienna. He argued for a few minutes more that it was not a demand for territory, but Arthur’s responses made him look more and more discontented, and at last he sighed and admitted that Liverpool and he might have been somewhat self-deceived in their interpretation of the conditions. After he left, Arthur lifted Abigail’s chin and smiled into her worried eyes.

“It’s all right, love,” he said comfortingly. “Lord Liverpool is not a brilliant man, but he is a very conscientious one. He will listen to what Roger has to say and will think it over carefully.”

Abigail sighed. “I hope so,” she replied soberly. “I know you think I am only concerned for my friends in America, but that is not true. I have been over some of the taxes with Mr. Jameson, and if they are raised, I will have to raise the rents. I am afraid some of Victor’s tenants will be severely hurt by that.”

“I am well aware of it,” Arthur agreed. “Many of my own people are in no better case.”

Over the next week political affairs receded from Abigail’s mind, and she sent Mr. Jameson a note to say she would not come to Rutupiae on Tuesday and Thursday as usual because she was too busy getting Victor and Daphne off to school again. She was relieved to see that both seemed quite willing to go, although Victor did voice his regret at having to part with Dick Price. Still, he knew he would see the gamekeeper’s son on each vacation, so it was not difficult for Abigail to distract him by giving permission for him to travel with only a servant as the older boys did. Daphne wanted Abigail to come, however, so she did and stayed a day to see her daughter settled.

Abigail set out for home in an extraordinarily lighthearted mood. When she realized her pleasure was owing to being rid of her children, she suffered from a few pangs of guilt, but she shrugged those off. Victor and Daphne would never know how glad she was to be able to give her undivided attention to her husband. She was very surprised at how much she had missed Arthur during the short separation and was so eager to get back to him that she traveled in long stages and arrived after dinner, very tired and very glad of having that excuse to go directly to bed. However, she did not sleep. She did not expect that Arthur would keep her waiting long.

He did not, but when he came into their bedchamber, it was immediately apparent to her that he had something on his mind. Abigail sat up straighter and asked whether anything was wrong.

“Not wrong,” Arthur said, sounding glad that she was willing to talk, “but I have received a most peculiar proposition from Liverpool through Roger. It seems the prime minister would like me to go to Ghent and advise the British commissioners, but without any official appointment or duties.”

Abigail opened her mouth and then closed it without speaking. Arthur raised his brows, amused by what he thought was an effort at self-restraint, but then he saw that her expression-was uncertain and unhappy. His amusement faded,
and he asked, “What is it, Abigail?”

“My first impulse was to urge you to accept,” she said slowly, “but on second thought, I am not sure. I wonder if Lord Liverpool just wishes to have you out of the House and unable to interfere with his plans on taxes and reform. To be an unofficial advisor would place you in a dreadful position and very likely would be useless, too. If you are not a member of the commission, why should the others listen to your advice?”

Arthur sat down on the bed and took her hands in his. “My dear, I don’t believe you are saying what you think. You were about to urge me to accept, I agree, but you haven’t said what really changed your mind.”

To his surprise, Abigail blushed, but she raised her eyes to his and smiled rather wryly. “I find that my devotion to right and justice is not so deep as I thought. It’s only that I would miss you so much if you went. That isn’t a very valid objection, but I can’t see why I should have to miss you if your being in Ghent would not do any real good.”

Arthur pulled her to him and kissed her hard. All along he had assumed that Abigail’s recent moderation with regard to American affairs was less indifference than policy. That might still be true in a general way, Arthur thought, but it was not true on a personal level. Clearly Abigail valued his company above his possible ability to help make a peace treaty. The knowledge took him another long step away from the fear that if he differed from her on this question, it would affect their relationship. Beyond that, buried deeper because he was ashamed of his jealousy, was a sense of relief that she did not beg him to go so that she could be near her idol, Gallatin.

“You goose,” he said, smiling. “If Goulburn can take his wife, why should I be without mine?”

“I thought they might consider a person born in America not…oh, I don’t know…”

“Nonsense. You may be a bit prejudiced, but there can be no question of your loyalty,” Arthur said.

He hugged Abigail again as she burrowed her face against his shoulder, not realizing that his remark had reminded her of her painful and uneasy conscience. If not for that, she might have urged him to accept, now that she knew she would not be left behind. Instead, she asked, “Have you decided what to do?”

“No, I wanted to talk to you. I wrote to Roger that I would think about the idea, but even with the best will in the world to help, I believe I would be useless. You are quite right that the unofficial position will be awkward, especially since I am known not to be a favorite with the government. Worse yet, Liverpool and Bathurst will be responding to suggestions from Castlereagh, who will be sending instructions from Vienna, quite unaware of anything I have said or done.”

When he said that, Abigail pulled away so she could look at him. “But Castlereagh will know that you are with the peace delegation because Roger will be going to Vienna soon and will tell him,” Abigail pointed out, then paused doubtfully and added, “unless, of course, Castlereagh dislikes you even more than Liverpool does and—”

Arthur laughed. “Actually Lord Castlereagh rather likes me, and I him. You see, I have always supported the war against Bonaparte, even in opposition to my party, and Castlereagh used to be Secretary for War…” He let his voice drift off, looking into the distance, and then his lips twisted. “Oh, damn Roger!” he exclaimed. “He’s too clever by half. I see what that devious legal mind of his has worked out. I’ll murder him.”

“What do you mean?” Abigail asked.

“Liverpool needed a reason for sending Roger to Vienna that would not offend Castlereagh, who’s a touchy devil—and even if he were not, he wouldn’t like the idea that Liverpool had sent someone to keep an eye on him. I am to serve two purposes in Ghent—as Roger’s reason for being in Vienna, that is, to tell Castlereagh why I had been sent to Ghent and explain my opinions on America. And Roger does feel that peace with the United States is necessary, although he may not agree with your notions of what the terms should be, so he hopes I can do something to help.”

Abigail was in a quandary. She wanted very much to go to Ghent, but she knew that urging Arthur would be the wrong move. First she must discover some logical reason for a rapid right about-face from hinting he should refuse Liverpool’s offer to demanding that he accept it.
“Let it go for tonight,” she said, kissing him on the neck. “Perhaps you will get some news or something will happen in the next few days that will push you one way or the other.”

“A most excellent idea,” Arthur agreed, lifting his head so that his chin would not impede the path of her lips.

One arm supported her, and he began to pull at the tie of his belt with the other. Abigail hastened to help, taking advantage of the loosening of his robe to extend her explorations. Her tongue found his nipple, moved from one to the other. They were not as sensitive as hers, but sensitive enough so that he shivered and sighed, sliding down flat and carrying Abigail with him. When he stroked her, he realized he had not removed his robe, but by then he felt it would be too much trouble. It had fallen open when the belt was untied, and it did not impede Abigail’s hands or mouth. Her nightdress was another matter, but it was of fragile construction and did not interfere for long.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When Abigail suggested that events might determine whether they went to Ghent, it almost seemed she had had the ability to predict the future. The very next day there was news from America. In two battles on Chippewa Plain, General Brown had defeated a British force and taken their guns. However, Brown could not hold his ground, and British expectations of sufficient military gains to make the United States agree to their terms were not significantly dimmed. Nonetheless, Abigail was encouraged. Although she did not yet want to urge Arthur to go to Ghent, she began to prepare to leave Stonar. Her first step was to ride to Rutupiae and tell Mr. Jameson to let the tenants know that anyone who wished to speak to her would have to do so in the next week or two because she expected to leave the area soon.

There were more people than she expected on the following Tuesday, and she had to send several away with the promise that she would see them on Thursday. Thus, although it rained hard Wednesday and was still dark and misty Thursday morning, Abigail decided she would not skip her promised visit. Being unaware of what she had said to her bailiff, Arthur argued that it was ridiculous to go out in such weather. It took Abigail a while to convince him she must go without explaining why, but he agreed grudgingly that if the tenants came, some of them having walked long distances, she must honor the appointments she had made.

By the time she won Arthur’s reluctant agreement, Abigail was later than usual, and she rode at a spanking pace. As a result, GoGo slipped on some wet fallen leaves as she turned on the main road just past the gatekeeper’s lodge. The mare managed to keep her balance, but Abigail had a fright and realized that there might be other spots equally treacherous. She moderated GoGo’s speed and began to keep a careful watch on the road ahead, but the mare had not been exercised because of the rain, and she was eager to go. Insensibly the pace increased again and was back to a fast canter as they came up the long drive to Rutupiae Hall.

Although she was not totally aware of how fast she was going, Abigail was paying strict attention to the surface of the drive, particularly at anyplace where it was edged with trees or ornamental bushes that could shed leaves. Thus, she was startled by the movement of a peculiar, thin shadow that stretched across from a handsome oak to a stand of rhododendrons. Instinctively she pulled up on the reins, but GoGo was moving too fast to stop. Suddenly the shadow was under the mare and her front legs were somehow tangled by it so that she was falling forward. With a cry of surprise, Abigail threw herself out of the saddle toward the grass verge of the drive. GoGo went to her knees, neighing in distress, floundered, found her footing again and bolted.

Because she had been subconsciously prepared for a fall, Abigail was not really surprised. She landed hard, but on the grass with her hands extended to protect her, and even as she fell, she was aware that she had been ready and would not be injured. Her concern was for her mount, and Abigail was struggling up and turning toward the road seconds after she landed, only to be tripped so that she almost fell again. Without thinking, she grabbed at the unstable object that had lifted so suddenly under one of her feet. It moved once more in her hand, and then she screamed as loud as she could and screamed again and again.

The rope, for it was a rope that had been strung across the road and pulled tight to trip the mare, went slack. The screams choked off as terror closed Abigail’s throat. She began to back away from the bushes, where she could hear twigs breaking and see something dark moving. Run, she thought, run—but she could not because her legs had started to shake. Defensively she raised the riding crop that was still hanging from her wrist, and then in the distance there were voices. The hope of help released the paralysis of her voice, and she screamed again and then once more
as the branches closest to her moved.

Still, no one emerged from the bushes. There was a pull on the rope, but Abigail’s hand was frozen to it. Though the tug jerked her forward, she could not let go. Terror lent her strength. She pulled back and struck out viciously with the crop, though she had no target. An obscenity was shrieked in a voice so distorted by rage that it was unrecognizable, but the rope came loose into the road, and a fierce crackling began in the bushes. This time the sound marked a retreat.

Abigail knew that she should run down the line of rhododendrons to try to see who came out, but she could not force herself to move. The reaction of the physical shock of falling and the emotional shock of fear at last overcame her, and barely conscious, she sank down on the road. Fortunately, the men who reached her first did not know her well. They were tenant farmers, who had come in from a side gate in the park and had been making their way to the house. Having seen GoGo flash by without a rider and then hearing screams, they had expected to find a woman who might be badly hurt. Thus, they assumed Abigail was hysterical when she tried to explain about the rope and the person who should be pursued. She did not blame them, because she was crying and knew she was not making herself clear, but the delay ensured that whoever had tried to kill her got safely away.

This time there could be no doubt in Abigail’s mind that there had been a deliberate attempt on her life. She knew one was seldom killed in a fall from a horse, but it did happen. And from what had occurred after she fell, she understood that her death was not to be left to chance. If GoGo had not slipped and she had not been prepared, she would probably have fallen more heavily and painfully and would have been left shaken and relatively helpless for a while. In those few minutes, whoever had stretched the rope across the drive expected to emerge from the bushes and either break her neck or crush her skull with a stone. Probably the latter, because a stone could be artfully arranged to testify to accidental death.

“But why?” she asked Arthur furiously. “Whom have I ever hurt? Who could profit from my death?”

They were together on the sofa in Abigail’s private sitting room with Arthur’s arm around her shoulders. He had not let go of her from the moment he took her into his arms when he arrived in Rutupiae.

“I don’t know,” he replied. His face was still rigid with shock. “At first I must admit I thought the attacks were meant to remove Victor so that someone else could inherit the Lydden estate, but harming you could not advance that purpose—at least…” He shook his head and then said softly, “If I could guess, even guess, I would take my guesses apart with my own hands until I found the answer.”

His voice, although soft, was so cold, so deadly, that though she knew it was not directed at her, Abigail shuddered. Arthur tightened his grip on her and began to reassure her that she was safe, but she shook her head.

“I’m not frightened now, Arthur, but you are too angry.”

“Too angry? Someone tries to kill my wife, and I am too angry?”

“Yes,” she said, “because it must be a—a lunatic. There can’t be any profit in killing me. I can only think that it must be someone who—who resents the fact that I love you. Perhaps that first shot at Victor was an accident. It could have been, darling. Then the incident at the mill happened after we became lovers, and the other attempts were after we were married.”

Arthur stared at her, closed his eyes for a moment, and then looked off into space. “It’s true,” he admitted, “but if you suspect one of my…er…past loves, I just cannot believe it. Beloved,” he said softly, “I always chose with care, women who would not be hurt, and except for a few who were greedy and were not satisfied with what I was willing to give, I have always parted on good terms.”

Abigail looked slightly startled. “Oh, I never thought of them. What I meant was that some man might have believed what I offered to him as casual courtesy meant more. And then, when I chose you, believed I had injured him or played him false and decided to punish me. Am I being conceited?”

Now it was Arthur’s turn to look surprised and then thoughtful. “No, you are not being conceited at all. In fact, in a totally crazy situation, that does seem to make some kind of sense. Was there anyone?”
She shook her head. “No, or if there was, I never noticed. The chances are that it is someone I would never think of needing to keep at arm’s length—a boy or a shopkeeper to whom I was polite. And of course, I never had eyes for anyone except you, Arthur. From that very first quarrel we had about impressment—”

Her voice was cut off as Arthur enveloped her in his arms, holding her tightly against him. Abigail could feel the slight tremor of his muscles, and she freed a hand and stroked his face.

“I can’t bear it,” he said. His voice was flat, but Abigail knew it was because he was fighting to keep it steady so as not to frighten her more. “Abigail, I simply cannot bear to let you out of my sight, and yet—”

“I cannot live a prisoner. I would go mad,” she protested, but she spoke gently, aware of his agonizing frustration at his inability to protect her. “And it would not do any good,” she added, her voice trembling a little with the realization of what she was about to say. “You see, whoever it is no longer needs to try to pretend that an accident has taken place, because the presence of the rope betrayed intent to do harm. No one could protect me if—if he should shoot from a distance.”

There was a little silence. Abigail drew in her breath as her husband’s grip tightened painfully, glanced at his face and then away. She was almost more frightened by the naked rage exposed by Arthur’s expression than by the idea that someone hated her enough to want to kill her. Anger and fear for her had peeled away the layers of urbanity imposed by her husband’s training and exposed the primitive violence, the desire to rend and tear, only there was no one to attack.

“Arthur,” she whispered, “you are hurting me.”

“My darling, I’m sorry.” He relaxed his grip and bent to kiss her hair. “If only I could take you away—” And then, suddenly the look of rage and frustration was gone. Arthur’s eyes lit. “I’ll tell you what we can do, Abigail,” he said, his voice eager and excited. “We can go to Ghent. It’s not a large city, nor the type that attracts visitors looking for a good time. And there’s an English garrison there, so I can learn if any Englishman arrives after we do. Meanwhile, Bertram and Jameson can scour the neighborhood for anyone who has been acting peculiarly or has a history of any kind of eccentricity.”

Relief made Abigail burst into tears. She had not realized, until Arthur offered an escape, how frightened and trapped she had felt. But when her fit of weeping was over, her spirits bubbled up into excited exclamations about seeing Europe and questions about when they would leave and what they should take.

To that question Arthur replied, laughing, “Money. Anything you neglect to bring can be purchased for good English gold. It is not so far from Ghent to Paris, and peace negotiations are likely to be a leisurely activity for an unofficial advisor. We can take a side trip or two for shopping.” Then he grew more serious. “As to leaving, I think we should go as soon as possible and as privately as possible.”

The final words sobered Abigail too. “I must tell the children, and should I not also tell Griselda so that— Oh heavens, I must send to Rutupiae and ask how Griselda is. I seem to remember someone saying she had fainted when she heard of my fall.”

“Fainted?” Arthur repeated. “But why? She cannot have thought you were injured in the fall.” He hesitated and then said slowly, “It would be better, I think, not to see Griselda before we leave and not to tell her anything.”

“Arthur,” Abigail cried, “you cannot think Griselda had any part—”

“No, no,” he soothed, “I am sure Griselda is fond of you and would not deliberately hurt you for anything in the world, but she is not the wisest or strongest willed person.”

“And she has been behaving very strangely since we came back from London,” Abigail mused. “She seems to feel guilty about something—and frightened too, and the more I try to soothe her, the worse she gets.” Abigail sighed. “I think you are right, Arthur. I will just send a note saying that we had to leave in a hurry for some political reason or other and that I am not sure where we will be staying but that in an emergency, Bertram will know where to reach us. But what about the children? I don’t feel I can go without telling them.”
“Of course you must tell Daphne and Victor,” Arthur agreed, “but I think we should stop and visit each of them so you can explain fully. They might feel put out if they believed we were taking a pleasure trip and not including them. If you tell them the purpose is political, they will be delighted to have escaped coming with us.”

“Are you sure you have never been a father?” Abigail asked teasingly. “Your understanding of children is suspiciously acute.”

“It is my memory that is acute,” Arthur replied, drawing himself up in a playful pretense at offended innocence, but when Abigail stuck out her tongue at him, he laughed and explained. “No, it is true. My parents did not subscribe to the general opinion that the less one sees of one’s partner in life or one’s children, the better. They liked to be together and to have us with them, and I suppose that was admirable, but the result was that all too often my vacations were spent in a damned dull city while my papa performed some service for his country. There were times when I bitterly envied my friends who were neglected by their parents.”

Although Abigail did not believe Arthur had really resented traveling with his parents—his deep affection for his mother and the fondness with which he spoke of his father were clear—she recognized that his advice was valid. And three breathless days later when they arrived at Westminster, the technique worked perfectly. Victor expressed his sympathy for his mother and stepfather for having to go to Ghent and did not exhibit the slightest regret at missing the opportunity to go with them. Of course, Abigail had described Ghent as a small, dull town in Flanders—which Victor associated with weaving and wool from his geography lessons. Then too, the excitements of the new term, the first in which Victor was not a “new boy”, had not yet had a chance to pall.

“We will be back before vacation,” Abigail assured him, “and we will stop to visit on our way back. If you need anything or have any questions, write to Bertram.”

Then she leaned forward to kiss him goodbye, and Victor started to rear back, caught Arthur’s eye, sighed, and suffered the embrace. Arthur shook hands gravely, knowing that Victor’s “grown up” dignity would be much damaged by a hug from his stepfather. Later, however, he had his chance with Daphne, who bounced into his arms and squeezed him tight when he promised to bring her a large parcel of the lace made in Ghent. She had been less put off than Victor by her mother’s description of their goal and purpose, but Arthur’s offer did much to assuage her disappointment at being left behind.

The visits to the children’s schools, both near London, were fitted around several meetings Arthur had with Lord Bathurst, the colonial secretary, who showed him the latest draft being prepared for submission to the American delegation. Although Indian affairs were no longer a sine qua non of the treaty, to Arthur’s dismay they still took up a good part of the note. When he went to Walmer Castle, however, to discuss with Lord Liverpool just what he was expected to do—having extracted from Abigail, who wanted to stay at Stonar to pack, a promise that she would not leave the house at all in his absence—Arthur learned that Bathurst had spent a great deal of verbiage on a condition that Liverpool himself seemed willing to abandon.

In fact, although the visit started out as a coldly formal meeting between men who disliked each other heartily, it soon became more cordial. Both Arthur and Lord Liverpool wisely kept to the subject of making peace with America, and here they were in essential agreement. Moreover, Liverpool respected Arthur’s opinion on this subject because the predictions Arthur had made had all been confirmed. The Americans had rejected a second, softened proposal on the Indian question as firmly as the first.

In addition, Castlereagh had written to warn Liverpool that the continental powers were displeased with the blockade of the American coast and had expressed disgust with what they felt was a desire in the British for acquisition of American territory. The continued war with America, Castlereagh had written, particularly over what seemed to be territorial demands, was stiffening the resistance of Austria, Russia and Prussia against far more important proposals the British needed to put forward in Vienna. Thus, above all, Liverpool did not want the negotiations broken off in such a way that the British government would be blamed for making unreasonable demands.

Although his own party was likely to profit from such a situation, Arthur freely pledged to do everything in his power to prevent a termination of the negotiations. But when he and Abigail first arrived at Ghent, he wondered whether he had bitten off more than he could chew. It became clear immediately that Goulburn was conducting the
negotiations despite the seniority of both of the other members of the delegation, and Goulburn did not agree with Liverpool’s objectives. The third note, which Arthur had seen in draft form when he spoke to Bathurst, had been edited, mostly by Goulburn, to be more insulting to the Americans. The proposals had not been changed, only the tone heightened—and it was too late for Arthur to do anything because the note had already been delivered.

Abigail had been so pleased and excited by what Arthur told her of Liverpool’s intentions that she had almost forgotten that Arthur had agreed to come to Ghent because of the threats to her life. Now she was furious. At lunch, after Arthur told her the result of his morning conference, she proposed that they meet privately with “her dear Albert” and explain the problem to him. Albert would know what to do, she assured Arthur, and she was equally sure that although Gallatin’s name appeared last on the list of commissioners, he really dominated the delegation.

Arthur stared at her lovely face as she spoke. He had never seen her look more alive, more beautiful, her eyes brilliant, her cheeks slightly flushed with anger—or was it anger? Perhaps it was desire that made her glow from within, and was that desire for peace or for Albert Gallatin? Suddenly a monstrous suspicion came into his mind. Was everything Abigail had said and done since he told her about Liverpool’s offer only a clever device to get him here to Ghent? She had told him not to go, but only when she believed he would not take her. After that, she had changed her mind. Although she had not openly urged him to go to Ghent, wasn’t that because she guessed that open urging would stiffen his resistance? Had there been a rope involved in her fall? Was it possible that GoGo had simply stumbled, and Abigail—she was so clever—had remembered his distress about the accident in London and used a real accident to panic him into leaving England?

At this point, Arthur realized his suspicion was monstrous, the result of a ridiculous jealousy. He knew that Abigail and Gallatin would never have any physical relationship—but that, a nasty voice inside sneered, was because Gallatin would recoil from such a relationship in horror. Would Abigail? And even if she had not allowed herself to think in those terms, her seemingly abject respect for Gallatin enraged Arthur. She did not think her husband was wonderful, she would quarrel with him and pick over every word he said. But Gallatin—Arthur could just hear her simpering to her idol, “Yes, Albert. Of course, dear Albert.” And she wanted to run to him with a tale that would make the British delegation seem dishonest and unreliable.

“Absolutely not!” Arthur thundered. “One word, just one word to the Americans of what is said privately among us, and I will drag you away from here, by the hair if necessary, and lock you up to keep you safe when I have you in England. Have you no sense of loyalty? Have you no trust in my ability to deal with Goulburn?”

Abigail recoiled, shocked by his violence. “But how can it be disloyal to make clear that it was not the intention of the British government to insult—”

That was the wrong answer. Had Abigail said “Of course I trust you” and made no further reference to Gallatin, Arthur might have submerged ideas he knew were unworthy and given Abigail some rational reasons to avoid the American delegation. As it was, he made a number of disparaging remarks about the United States and the delegation as a whole and left the room, slamming the door.

It was unfortunate that Arthur retained just enough self-control and was actually enough ashamed of what he felt to refrain from mentioning Gallatin. Had he done so, he would no doubt have precipitated a battle royal, but as soon as Abigail’s head cleared she would have figured out what was causing Arthur’s peculiar behavior. She already understood that her husband was jealous. A senseless personal attack on Gallatin—a man with whom Arthur was not even acquainted, as far as Abigail knew, but one she spoke of often in terms of admiration—would have made his suspicions clear to her. But on her own it would never occur to Abigail that her husband could be jealous of Gallatin, because she thought of jealousy only in terms of physical love.

Left without a clue, Abigail could only associate Arthur’s violent reaction to her desire to inform Gallatin of the true state of Liverpool’s intentions with her husband’s earlier expressed fear that she was too committed to the American cause. She considered this seriously and decided that her original conviction that the best thing for both nations was to make peace was not only still valid but was exactly what the British government desired. The two questions Arthur had flung at her had nothing to do with the case, she told herself. No doubt he could handle Goulburn, but the insulting note had already been sent. And her loyalty was irrelevant if Britain’s good was best served by a seeming disloyalty.
On the other hand, Abigail was sure the rest of the British delegation would see the situation just as Arthur did, and she was equally sure that Arthur would fulfill his threat and take her away from Ghent if he found she was in private communication with the Americans. Nonetheless, Abigail was determined to do what she felt was right. Arthur would be busy for several hours each day. If she prepared carefully, Abigail thought, she should have no trouble arranging a time and place of meeting. Albert loved to walk. She could pick a different spot for each day of the week and set a time when she would be there if she could. Albert could walk by at that time if he were free, or he could send James.

Arranging the first meeting would be the difficult part, and Abigail knew she would have only a few days while the American commissioners conferred over the British note and prepared a reply. A spark of fury ran through her. That Goulburn! Even his wife was totally unsatisfactory. Because she was so nearsighted that she could hardly tell one British delegate from another, she was most reluctant to meet the Americans. To reinforce that reluctance she complained of being ill and that the care of her baby exhausted her completely—despite the presence of one or more trained nursemaids. Thus, social relations between the American and British delegates were on a men-only basis, and there was no chance that Abigail would see Gallatin at a dinner or tea.

“Oh, what a fool I am!” Abigail muttered. Instead of proposing to Arthur a clandestine meeting with one of the American commissioners, which did smack of disloyalty, why had she not suggested inviting both delegations to tea? But even as the idea formed, it was rejected with a shudder of horror. Abigail realized she did not dare meet some of the Americans in public. Albert knew and understood her situation. The Swiss nobility from which he sprang were not nearly as disdainful of connections with “trade” as the British, but had foibles and prejudices of their own. Unfortunately, the other Americans might not be as sympathetic to her desire to hide her past, and Mr. Russell and Mr. Adams both knew her as a New York bookseller.

Even if there were no malicious intent to reveal the fact that she had been in business in America, the expressions of surprise at seeing her and the explanations necessary to explain why she was now Lady St. Eyre instead of Mrs. Lydden would betray her background. Nor could she invite the Americans alone unless Arthur discussed such an invitation with the British delegation and obtained their approval. To irritate Goulburn, Adams, and Gambier by ignoring them would only lessen Arthur’s influence. Besides, once Russell and John Adams knew she was Arthur’s wife, it was possible, although not likely, that one of them would mention her and her bookshop during one of their all-male dinners. All around it would be best if she met only Albert and James.

How? Well, the first step was to explore the city. Abigail rang for a servant and bade him arrange for a carriage to drive her around and for an English-speaking guide who could show her the notable sights and point out the best shops. She returned late for tea, but in an excellent mood, for everything was done, and she had several parcels—and the servants as witnesses that she had only shopped and looked at places of interest. They had passed the Hotel d’Alcantara, where the American commissioners were living, because Abigail’s guide was sure she would be curious, but she had not asked to see the place nor seemed to pay more than cursory attention.

What Abigail had noted, however, were shops, parks, and ancient churches all suitable for the meetings she envisioned, and not far from the Hotel d’Alcantara she had seen a shop that sold lace. There she had chosen several yards of the delicate material, which she requested the shopkeeper deliver for her. With the parcel went two notes, one to Hannah Gallatin, for whom the gift of lace was intended, and one to Albert, explaining the gift and asking him to meet her the following day at the ancient cathedral of St. Bavon.

It was a doubly effective place to meet. For one thing, Abigail could ask her maid to accompany her because she knew the girl would be reluctant to enter a Catholic church. For another, Arthur would find nothing suspicious about the time she spent there because it was filled with famous works of art, including a notable altarpiece by the van Eycks. Her only difficulty would be in preventing her husband from accompanying her—and that, Abigail decided, would be best accomplished by pretending that her visit to the cathedral had been unplanned.

Abigail was so content with her accomplishments that the reason for her activity had faded into the background. She was therefore truly surprised when Arthur greeted her by jumping to his feet and snarling at her, “Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for you for hours.”

“But I am only a few minutes late for tea,” Abigail exclaimed. “What on earth is wrong with you?”
There was a moment of silence, and then Arthur seized her arm. “What the devil are you up to, Abigail?” he asked grimly. “Don’t try to pretend you don’t remember what happened at lunch.”

By then, of course, Abigail had remembered Arthur’s violent reaction to her suggestion they meet privately with the Americans, which had set off her private enterprise. She remembered his threat too, and her mind raced, seeking an answer to her husband’s question that he could accept.

“No, I haven’t forgotten,” she said, trying to make her voice sharp rather than shaky. “And I still think you are wrong not to try to explain the tone of that note to the American commissioners. I was furious when you slammed out without giving me a chance to explain myself—”

“So? What have you done?” Arthur’s voice was still harsh, but his grip on her arm was less painful.

“I went shopping.”

Arthur stared at her. “What?”

“I have a bad temper,” Abigail said, her lips quirking slightly as Arthur raised his eyes to heaven. “I don’t mind letting it loose at you or at other people who care for me, but you should realize that I could never have run my shop if I let it loose at everyone. I have learned not to act when I am very angry.” She shrugged. “So I got a guide, toured the city, and went shopping while I thought over what you said. I still think you are wrong, but I do see that you have a problem.”

“Do you?” Arthur asked bleakly, letting go of her and starting to turn away.

The last thing he wanted was for Abigail to have perceived his jealousy—partly because he was ashamed of it, but even more because of a sick desire to prove to himself that he was right, that she thought him nothing compared to the idol of her youth, that she had set another man before him in her mind and heart. He believed she had gone shopping and sightseeing, but he did not believe she had given up her plan to see Gallatin. And she was clever, so clever. If she guessed he suspected her, she would be sly enough to hide her meetings with the man completely.

As the idea of spying on Abigail flashed through his mind, Arthur was sickened by it. But he had been in agony all afternoon, alternating between hating himself for attacking Abigail without reason and hating her because he was sure she had run off to Gallatin. And then she had come back, all easy smiles. Did that not show how little she cared for him? Their quarrel had caused her no agony. But if he could prove her false, he was sure he would be able to close off all his pain, to pull her out of his heart and into the ranks of other women who had betrayed him without hurting him—because they were nothing.

Arthur’s voice was so cold, his expression so bleak when he uttered that “Do you?” in response to her statement that she saw he had a problem, that Abigail blinked, then caught at him. “Arthur, I love you,” she said. “I swear that I will love you just as much, whether or not peace is made.”

The political reference startled him, and a wash of shame made him turn back, pull her against him and kiss her hair. Her scent, the familiar shape in his arms, woke a stab of need for her that betrayed his vulnerability and reminded him that the reassurance she offered was valueless. All it meant was that he would remain second best to her.

“Most likely you will, my dear,” Arthur managed to get out.

Abigail told herself that it was only because his mouth was muffled that his voice sounded so strange. She tried to look up at him, but her head was caught under his chin, and then he asked, “What problem did you perceive?”

“You perceived it,” Abigail replied. “I was only forced to concede that it existed—I mean the question of loyalty. I am now willing to admit that it might be awkward for you to explain what Goulburn has done. And it also might create a distrust of the British delegation, which would do harm.”

As she spoke, Abigail could feel Arthur relax. She was glad for his sake that his tension was eased, but she was as puzzled by his relief as she had been by his earlier cold anxiety. It made Abigail nervous not to be able to understand what was causing her husband’s reactions, and she stepped back and looked up at him, but his face was in its
“haughty” mode—eyes half-lidded and seeming to look contemptuously down his long, elegant nose, and a very slight half smile on his lips.

“Exactly so,” Arthur said. “And it is not at all likely that the tone of the note will cause a rupture in the negotiations. After all, the other proposals have all been rewritten by Goulburn and must have been even more offensive.”

“I never thought of that,” Abigail admitted with a smile, and then added indignantly, “Why didn’t you say that, instead of shouting that I was disloyal?”

“Perhaps because I am British,” Arthur remarked dryly, “and it irritates me that my ‘British’ wife is only concerned with American feelings.”

If he had not said that, Abigail might have changed her plans, but the statement reminded her that Arthur was not really sympathetic to the American cause. He wanted peace, but on the best terms for Britain. Abigail, on the other hand, felt that Britain, a rich, strong nation, could yield a little to a nation that was poor and weak and now nearly bankrupt because of the war. If the information she could pass to Albert made it possible for the American commissioners to resist some British demands and negotiate a better treaty, Abigail thought resentfully, then she would pass that information gladly.

Buoyed up by her naughty decision, Abigail made a light reply and then exclaimed over her thirst and the lack of a tea tray. Having rung for the tea, she described the shops she had been in, the purchases she had made, and her plans for seeing the city.

“Alone?” Arthur asked.

“No,” Abigail responded promptly. “I promise I will not go alone. Today I asked the landlord to provide a guide. I have not forgotten that a lunatic can be very clever, and, though I know it is not likely, it is possible that we were followed.”

The reminder made Arthur go cold. He wondered if he were a lunatic himself to let jealousy torment him when Abigail’s life might be in danger. He sat down beside her on the sofa and took her hand. “Shall I come with you, love?”

“Not tomorrow,” Abigail said decidedly, and since offense was the best defense she could think of, smiled archly and added, “You’ve been sour as a pickle all day today, and I know that trailing around to one shop after another will make you bad tempered all over again. I will take my maid tomorrow, but after that I will be delighted to have your company. The guide told me that there are many beautiful paintings in the churches. I would like very much to see those with you. What I am going to do tomorrow is choose some French silk to have made into nightdresses to be trimmed with the lace I bought today. You are very hard on nightdresses, Arthur.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Arthur had laughed at Abigail’s remark about the nightdresses. It was true that he had torn several, and he and Abigail had a running argument about the fact that she wore one at all. He said it was unreasonable to put on a nightdress when she would have to remove it only a few minutes later. She said it was indecent not to do so. Her real reasons, as both well knew, had nothing to do with decency or reason. Abigail was aware that the glimpses of her body in the flimsy garment and the erotic touches of bare flesh through it were initially far more provocative than total nudity, and both found an occasional, seemingly violent destruction of the illusory barrier highly erotic. Actually, little damage was done; Abigail had quickly learned to use fragile thread and loose stitching in putting her nightdresses together so that Arthur tore the seams, not the fabric, and seams could quickly and easily be resewn.

Unfortunately, Arthur’s laughter had been so mixed with pain that it did more harm than good. The sexual implication brought too vividly to mind the fact that a full nine months after marriage he was more, rather than less, in love with his wife. It was not only sex, of course, that was just a symbol of the whole relationship. As he found Abigail more sensually satisfying than any of his previous sexual partners, so too did he find her more stimulating company than any other person, including men. He could only bear to be away from her during those periods in which separation was necessary, because he knew they were not really separated, that he would come home to find
her presiding over the tea table or making ready to go out for the evening, or flying into the house just after he arrived, breathless from some activity she never explained.

He spent a sleepless night made all the more miserable because he could not toss and turn or even leave the bed. He did not want Abigail to know he could not sleep. She would ask him why, and he could scarcely tell her that what kept him wakeful was his inability to decide whether or not to spy on her. Arthur was sick with shame, but he could not fight the compulsion, the need to know whether her refusal of his company was because she had arranged to meet Gallatin.

Shame, however, could not break the compulsion Arthur felt to discover whether he was as important to Abigail as she was to him. He left early “on business”, but his business was to rent a closed gig he himself could drive, in which to follow his wife. The shame grew deeper with each stop Abigail made, with each parcel carried by her maid into or out of the shops she visited. Arthur very nearly gave up, but he was urged on by a desire for full proof. If she finished her shopping and returned to their hotel, he would know once and for all that she was not deceiving him. And when at last it was clear that her carriage was on its return journey, Arthur did not know whether to weep over the disgusting thing he had done or laugh with joy.

His relief had come too soon, however. Abigail’s carriage passed by the cathedral of St. Bavon, then slowed and turned back, stopping at last in an open area not far from the front of the church. As he went by, Arthur caught a glimpse of Abigail standing by the open door of the carriage, apparently talking to her maid inside. Because he had believed his trial was over, Arthur’s fury at this “betrayal” was so enormous that he dared not stop at once. He felt that if he confronted her and found her with Gallatin, he would try to kill them both. Half blind with rage and pain, he drove around the side of the church, telling himself he already knew the worst, that he needed no confirmation of her treachery. But amidst the fury and despair there remained a persistent little hope. The carriage had gone by, then turned back. Could that not mean that Abigail had stopped on impulse?

Arthur told himself he was being a fool, that he was only going to expose himself to greater disillusionment and greater pain, but the compulsion to cling to that small hope was stronger even than that which had driven him to follow his wife in the first place. He saw another door into the church and did not fight his need any further, stopping his horse and rented gig nearby. He knew he had no right to be there at all, that he had no right to deny his wife a friendship that must be innocent, but he could not bear the idea that she had so great a need for Gallatin that she would lie to him to meet the man. Only, perhaps she had not lied.

It was the horrid little hope that dragged him into the church and forced him to stand in the shadow of the entryway, staring around. He could see nothing at first, but he heard footsteps and then saw a shaft of light appear and disappear as a door at the other side of the building opened and closed. Was it one pair of footsteps or two? Had there been the murmur of voices or not? But the hope had grown stronger. Abigail could not have been in the church longer than ten or fifteen minutes, and that was not long enough to spend with someone you adored when there was excuse enough in the paintings on the walls to remain for much longer. He reached to open the door, convinced he would see Abigail going down the steps or entering her carriage alone, but the door had not been latched, and the touch of his hand moved it just a little.

The sound of voices froze him, but before rage could grip him again, words came clear in a young, very young, male voice. “But are you sure you do not wish to look over the paintings more carefully? I would be glad to stay as long as you like.”

There was a smile in the tone in which Abigail spoke as she replied, “No, I will come back with my husband to examine the art more carefully. He knows so much more about it than I do. It would be a waste of time for me just to gape at the pictures, but I was delighted to find that my guide had not exaggerated when he spoke of them yesterday. Now I must not keep you longer. It was a delightful surprise to see you, but you must get back as soon as possible.”
Arthur did not hear the protest he was certain the young man would make. He had moved silently away from the door and hurried back across the cathedral and out to his carriage. And, although he knew what he had done was utterly despicable, he was far too relieved and happy to allow his conscience to trouble him. His hope had been fulfilled. He was sure now that Abigail had stopped at St. Bavon’s on impulse and that she had met the young man with whom she was speaking—probably some secretary to the American delegation—by accident. He chuckled as his gig came around to the front and he saw Abigail withdrawing her hand from her persistent swain’s grip. Poor girl, she was having the devil of a time getting rid of the starry-eyed youngling.

That was not quite what was taking place in the cathedral porch. James Gallatin had not protested against leaving. In fact, he had already turned away when Abigail called him back to ask him once more not to forget that no one was to know where the information had come from.

“My husband would not approve at all,” she warned. “If he hears of it, he will leave and take me with him and make sure I cannot help again.”

James assured her that he understood, then thanked her again for news that would provide hope to sustain his father. “It is so hard for Father,” he said, taking her hand and squeezing it gratefully. “Mr. Adams is so irritable and unreasonable, and everyone is so angry and dispirited that all but Mr. Clay seem to believe it hardly worth the effort to answer these notes. Father was afraid to leave them, even for the short time it would take to meet you, but he will come after they have written their reply.”

They talked for a few minutes more, deciding that Abigail would begin to come to the assigned meeting places at the beginning of the next week. Then she gave James’ hand one last squeeze and drew her own away. A gig rattled by, and Abigail said, “I must go now. Give your father my love and tell him not to lose hope. I am sure that all will turn out for the best.”

She went down the steps, James waving goodbye as she looked over her shoulder and then turning back into the cathedral. Abigail did not see him wave. Actually she had looked over her shoulder only to make sure that they could not have been seen by her maid, who was waiting in the carriage. Satisfied that James had never been visible from where the maid was sitting, Abigail told the driver to return to the hotel. Arthur was waiting for her again, and she felt a little apprehensive as he jumped to his feet when she entered the room, but this time it was only to wrap her in a hard embrace and kiss her with a passion quite unsuitable to the place and hour.

“You are quite mad,” she exclaimed, laughing, when she freed her lips. “Yesterday you bit my head off—”

“And today it is only your tongue I want,” Arthur interrupted, laughing also. “No, I wanted to prove that I am not always sour as a pickle. Was that not a sweet kiss?”

“Sweet?” Abigail echoed. “Not at all. It nearly scorched my bonnet. If you will let me take off that impediment, though, we can try again.”

“Come into the other room, and I will do even better,” Arthur offered.

“But—”

“It will give me a chance at some other garments,” Arthur teased, “since you feel that I have wrought too much havoc among your nightdresses.”

His tone was light, but the tight-knit pantaloons he wore showed clearly that he was not joking. It was a crazy thing to do only a few minutes before she usually rang for luncheon to be brought, but her husband’s obvious desire and the very oddity of the time he chose excited her. She did not reply overtly, only put her hand into his and allowed him to lead her into their bedchamber. There, Arthur removed the offending bonnet, bent to kiss her again, and tickled the back of her neck. Abigail was so surprised that she laughed into his mouth, but he only tickled her tongue with his. The combination of sensations was strangely erotic, so that she put her arms around his back to give herself leverage and pressed against him.

Arthur, however, was bent on mischief. He pushed her hands lower, to his buttocks, so that their pelvises remained
in tight contact, and then leaned back and tickled her around the ribs and across the breasts. Abigail convulsed, twisting and squirming and growing more and more excited. She could have defended herself with her hands, but she was unwilling to relax the pressure that forced Arthur’s hips against hers. Meanwhile, Arthur’s other hand was busy at her back, undoing her dress.

Fortunately the garment had buttons and when loosened could be pulled down or it would have gone the way of the nightdresses—not that Abigail would have cared. Arthur had to pull away for an instant to yank the dress past their hips, but since he chose that moment to run his tongue down into her cleavage, Abigail jerked tight against him again the moment the garment fell. Arthur gasped as his swollen shaft was titillated by the easing off and then the increase in pressure against it. He pulled the straps of Abigail’s shift off her shoulders, snapped the ribbon tie, and dragged it down to follow her gown—and all the while he tickled and teased so that Abigail writhed and struggled, laughing and pleading but clinging to him, her fingers working at his buttocks and lower thighs, seeking the opening between his legs.

Abigail’s arms were not long enough to reach his genitals, but the attempt was making Arthur squirm and catch his breath. He fumbled at the button on her pantalettes, but by then anything he did tickled Abigail, and she wriggled her hips uncontrollably, setting off in him such waves of pleasure and urgent need that he tore off the button and pushed her back toward the bed, tugging the pantalettes down at the same time. Naturally, as soon as these reached her knees, Abigail was hobbled and this set her off laughing yet again, but the bed was just behind her, and she fell backward onto it with Arthur atop her.

Abigail was ready, very ready. She did not want to wait until Arthur struggled out of his clothing, for the tight-fitting boots and jacket of a gentleman were not easy to remove. She clung to him as she kicked the pantalettes off completely, not realizing that the movements of her legs were creating an unbearably erotic sensation for her husband. He groaned aloud, pushed her higher onto the bed, and lifted himself just enough to unbutton the flap on his pantaloons and open the slit in his underclothes.

Abigail’s laughter checked, and a thrill of violent excitement shook her. The fact that Arthur was dressed, coat, boots, and all, while he sought blindly and urgently to impale her brought back an illustration in an erotic book a customer had ordered and she had peeked into. She had not looked further because her relationship with Francis had already deteriorated and she did not wish to be incited to seek his sexual attentions, but the memory of that one picture had remained with her, implying all kinds of exotic delights. Gasping with need, she pushed Arthur’s straining shaft just a little downward to the ready sheath, threw her legs around him, and heaved, sobbing with relief and an already bursting joy.

Abigail never did understand what had set Arthur off that morning. She put it down to some accidental word or gesture too minor for her to remember since it was never hard to arouse her husband sexually. What was important to her mind was that he had not asked her where she had been or what she had been doing. Nor, in the weeks that followed, did he display any undue interest in her comings and goings, which was just as well because it was necessary for her to meet Gallatin several times.

The first week in October, the British delegation was informed in a triumphant note that Washington had been captured and burnt. Clearly Liverpool and Bathurst thought this military reverse would bring the Americans to heel. Arthur’s first reaction was horror, not at the fate of Washington but because he would have to tell Abigail. But to his intense surprise, she did not burst into angry recriminations against the British but against the Americans.

“Oh, those fools! Those thick-headed asses!” she exclaimed, tears of fury rising to her eyes. “They knew it was coming and did nothing.”

Thrown off balance by Abigail’s unexpected response, Arthur was driven to defending the Americans. Everything he had planned to say in defense of the British action was now useless and, worse, might sound like crowing over a defenseless enemy. “They are not so foolish as it might look,” he soothed.

“How can you say that,” Abigail raged, “when—” She stopped abruptly, realizing she had been about to admit that she herself had warned Gallatin that an attack on Washington had been planned. To cover the lapse, she stamped her foot as if anger were choking her, then added, “Is not the aim of every conqueror to take the capital city of the enemy?”
“It is a convenient symbol,” Arthur agreed, “but only practical when the place can be held, which is clearly impossible with Washington.”

“Impossible?” Abigail echoed, forgetting the rage that had been partly born of fear for her friends. “Why?”

Arthur explained about the forces necessary to hold a hostile city and the problems of supplies and communications. As he spoke, a frown gathered, and finally he growled, “God, it was a stupid thing to do. There cannot be the slightest military advantage, aside from looting, which I fear may have been one of Cochrane’s purposes. We will be called barbaric and vindictive. This will only make more trouble in Vienna.”

Abigail took hope from Arthur’s remarks. She had been wrong, apparently, in thinking that the attack on Washington would have catastrophic effects. And from further discussion she learned that because the Russians desired to make Poland part of their nation and the British opposed this plan, the tsar was using every event in the war with America and every article in the peace proposal to show that England also had territorial ambitions and had no right to criticize Russia’s.

“Actually,” Abigail said to Gallatin when she met him the next day, “that is not really fair. Britain does not covet American territory.”

“No?” he replied with a sardonic lift of his brows.

But Gallatin’s sarcasm was muted by the easing of his depression. He had been nearly hopeless when he came to meet Abigail, reflecting the emotions of the entire American delegation. All of them expected a total rejection of the last note they had submitted and a renewal of demands that they would consider even more outrageous than those first proposed. Abigail had assured Gallatin that was not the purpose of the British government, but that they were still hoping to obtain some advantage in a different way.

She grinned. “It is not the territory that they want. They call it a frozen wilderness. But the government does hope to restrain American expansion and, of course, to protect the fur traders. Don’t worry too much, Albert. When all is said and done, they are far, far more concerned with the balance of power in Europe. A few do fear the growth of the United States and predict that it will be a rival in maritime power and trade in the future, but most are contemptuous.”

“And this shameful victory will make them more so,” Albert responded, shaking his head. “Are you sure, Abigail, that they will not reject our note outright and make greater demands?”

“I suppose the note may be rejected—they have rejected all the others—but Arthur told me that Bathurst’s letter specifically said no new demands would be made. I personally think they will try to rush you into signing an agreement, perhaps on the basis of utiposseidetis.”

Gallatin nodded. It was reasonable enough if the British expected to make military gains to suggest an agreement where each side would keep whatever territory it possessed on a particular date. However, in the case of a great maritime power and a nation with an enormous and unprotectable coastline, such an agreement was out of the question. The British might take and hold for a brief time, just long enough to meet the terms of the agreement, some or all of the great seaports of the United States. Not that they would intend to remain in possession of those cities. They would use them as bargaining counters to gain other territory.

Meanwhile, Abigail glanced up at the sky. It had been gray when she started out, and it had darkened progressively until now there were imminent signs of rain. She had delivered her news and should go, she thought. She did not want her husband to connect her with what she was sure would be unexpected resistance in the American commissioners. There had been several gray days so that Arthur probably would not question her going out, but he would certainly wonder what could have been important enough to keep her out in the rain.

“I must go,” she said.

“Of course,” Gallatin exclaimed, waking from his abstraction. “You must not be wetted.”

She smiled at the odd usage. Although he had been speaking English for over thirty years, Albert had not lost the
foreign lilt in his words and an occasional peculiar way of saying things. They shook hands, and Abigail hurried back along the canal to the small cafe where she had parted from her footman, whom she had sent on an errand. When he returned, he obtained a vehicle to transport them back to their lodgings.

Actually, it would not have mattered if she had come back drenched to the skin, for Arthur did not return until late that night. The British commissioners had received the government’s draft answer to the latest American note, and Arthur intended to be with them while they reworked it. As Abigail had warned Gallatin, Bathurst and Liverpool were willing to abandon the proposal about the Indians, except for a face-saving mention, in order to obtain a signed agreement that each side retain the territory it possessed at the termination of hostilities. Arthur was eager to state this in the gentlest language possible, but wanted to include a pressing demand that the agreement be signed immediately and hints that refusal to do so would result in a stiffening of the terms as British military successes continued.

The reworked note was delivered to the Americans on 8 October, but the information that there were no new demands in the light of the victory at Washington was not received with the humble gratitude the British expected, nor did the demand for an immediate agreement produce much response. On 13 October the Americans submitted their reply, and it was just as unyielding as ever. True, they agreed to “restore the Indian nations to all the rights, privileges and territories” they enjoyed before the war, but such a vague commitment was meaningless. If the Indians were returned to the prewar condition for a week or a month, the terms of the treaty would have been fulfilled.

Arthur was infuriated by the Americans’ stubborn refusal to give an inch, particularly as the reactions from the European community were just what he had guessed. Word that a peace was agreed upon would have muted much of the criticism. As it was, newspapers in France and other nations had called the burning of Washington an act of wanton barbarism, and general opinion had swung even more to favor the underdog. Under the circumstances, Abigail did not want even a shadow of suspicion that she had done anything to stiffen the American delegation’s resistance. She confined her few outings to genuine shopping. It was not a great hardship, since the weather was dreadful and she had nothing worthwhile to tell Albert anyway.

A week later, there was a drastic change, however. Arthur returned to their lodging less than an hour after he had left it. Abigail was not surprised, since there was little to do until Liverpool and Bathurst had a chance to examine the American note and reply, and Arthur did not find Goulburn, Adams and Gambier scintillating company. She looked up and smiled welcomingly, but there was so odd an expression on her husband’s face that she hastily put down her book and went toward him.

“Something has happened,” she said, putting out her hand to take his, “but I cannot guess whether it is good or bad.”

“Neither can I.” Arthur sighed and then laughed, adding, “It seems that we should not have crowed so loudly over our ‘victory’ at Washington. The Americans have redeemed themselves. Cochrane landed Ross and his troops for a similar raid on Baltimore, and they were driven off with considerable loss. Ross is dead.”

“I am sorry for that and for the men,” Abigail said, squeezing Arthur’s hand sympathetically.

His lips twisted. Abigail was both tactful and honest. She was sorry for the killed and wounded, he was sure, but she was not sorry for the British loss. Then he shrugged. The truth was that he had never approved of the coastal raids Cochrane planned. If they had intended to hold the cities, they could have been exchanged for more useful territory in Canada, but occupation was not planned. That reminded him that he had not given Abigail all the news, there had been an even more unwelcome loss.

“That’s not the worst of it,” Arthur continued. “Our squadron on Lake Champlain was defeated, and Prevost retreated without any real battle from an American force a quarter the size of his at Plattsburg.”

“Good heavens!” Abigail exclaimed.

She was obviously surprised, and as Arthur gave her what details he had, he could see she was not really pleased, either. Abigail herself was too puzzled by her own feelings to try to hide them. Hearing that the raid on Baltimore had been beaten back had given her a sense of satisfaction. Overtly the raids were supposed to strike terror into
America and prove the helplessness of the United States in the face of superior British naval and military forces, however, Abigail suspected the real object of the raids was looting.

The fiasco at Plattsburg was different. Abigail did feel pride in the tiny American fleet that had fought so doggedly on Lake Champlain and felt proud too, of the American troops that had stood their ground against an obviously superior force. But she did not like hearing that the British had retreated, either. Her emotions showed clearly on her face, and Arthur leaned forward suddenly and kissed her.

“I’ll make a good Briton of you yet,” he said, laughing.

Abigail shook her head and sighed. “I wouldn’t have wanted Prevost to win,” she confessed, “but to run away… Oh, I’m being ridiculous. I hate the thought of a battle and people getting killed and maimed. You would think I would be glad of Prevost’s retreat, but I’m not.”

Arthur laughed again, understanding the dichotomy in her emotions, and then asked curiously, “Was it luck, do you think? I mean beating Ross at Baltimore and the business on Lake Champlain. Are the Americans better soldiers and sailors than we think?”

“Why are you asking me? What does a woman know of war?” Abigail looked and felt astonished.

“Because you were there for the first year of the war, and you are not the kind—woman or not—to ignore so desperate a matter,” Arthur replied a trifle sharply, but he saw her question meant more than it asked, and he went on to explain. “Bathurst wants the delegation to propose uti possidetis formally for setting territorial claims, and I want to argue against it if it is likely we will lose more land than we gain.”

“I don’t think there’s much danger of losing much land,” Abigail said slowly. “I’m sure President Madison has abandoned any notion—if he ever had any—of taking Canada. The army is not good enough. Even the generals are volunteers, and the troops are no more than plowboys or city apprentices. But they will fight to defend their own property. Anyway, isn’t it odd to be proposing uti possidetis after a loss?”

“I suppose Bathurst expects better news. An attack on New Orleans is planned, and—”

Abigail clapped her hands to her ears. “Don’t tell me what military actions are planned. I don’t want to know.”

It was Arthur’s turn to be astonished, but he was instantly contrite. It must be dreadful, he thought, taking Abigail in his arms and holding her comfortably, to know that your friends might be subjected to the violence of war and not be able to help them. Sensibly, he did not offer sympathy, other than his embrace, realizing that he would only be dwelling on the subject and making her feel worse. Instead, he pointed out that Bathurst had dropped a number of demands in this latest note, thus improving the possibility of peace—and, if peace were signed, there would be no more raiding.

Abigail found a smile for him, and soon after, a messenger came bearing a note from Admiral Gambier to say that Goulburn had decided to prepare Bathurst’s note to be delivered to the Americans the very next day. “He does not say so,” the admiral wrote, “but he hopes the American commissioners will not yet have heard the news about Baltimore and Plattsburg and thus be more amenable to reason.”

Since Arthur’s opinion was very different from Goulburn’s—Arthur felt it slightly more likely that uti possidetis would be accepted while the Americans felt they were winning—he asked Abigail whether she would mind if he left her. She assured him vehemently that the negotiations came first, repeating with a smile that once peace was agreed upon, she would have no further worries. His mind on how to manage the intractable Goulburn, Arthur gave no more thought to Abigail’s reaction to the proposed raid on New Orleans.

The American answer came quickly—a flat and absolute rejection of uti possidetis, coupled with an infuriating reminder that Britain persistently claimed no territorial ambitions. Thus, the American reply stated, as far as the question of territory was concerned, they would agree only to a mutual restoration of whatever territory had been taken by either party.

The British commissioners were furious at this intransigent rejection of a proposal so moderate compared with their
earlier demands. Goulburn wished to break off negotiations. Arthur himself was angry enough to agree with him but was restrained by his knowledge of Abigail’s bitter disappointment should that happen. He could not prevent Goulburn from hinting in the letter he sent to Bathurst with the American note that further discussions would be useless, but his own letter suggested a new approach rather than a rupture. The British government, he pointed out, had made all the proposals thus far. Why not ask the Americans to state their ideas? At worst, the British commissioners could have the pleasure of writing haughty rejections for a change; at best, some reasonable ideas might emerge.

It was while he was writing this letter that it occurred to Arthur that Abigail’s reaction to his mention of a raid on New Orleans was most peculiar. New Orleans was part of the Louisiana Territory far to the south and west of New York. It was nearly impossible for Abigail to have any friends there. He thought of the way she had blocked her ears and begged him not to tell her about plans for military action, and a faint sense of disquiet ran through him. Then he shrugged it away. Like the rest of Europe, Abigail plainly felt the United States to be an underdog and did not want to hear of the possibility that it would be whipped.

Arthur’s suggestion was accepted by Liverpool, and the British note suggesting that the Americans submit a “project” was delivered on 31 October. Feeling this was a hopeful sign, the American commissioners received the note with unusual cordiality, and Goulburn thought that perhaps some notions of compromise could be suggested to them in a social situation. Coincidentally, Mrs. Goulburn had a remission of her ailments, and her child was behaving—or the nursemaid was more efficient than usual—so a tea party was arranged.

Abigail received the invitation with something less than enthusiasm. In fact, she cried, “Oh, no!” when she read it at the breakfast table, causing Arthur to look up from his own letters in some alarm.

“Must I go?” she asked, when she had explained.

“Yes, of course you must,” Arthur said, laughing but rather puzzled. “I know you are not enamored of Mrs. Goulburn’s company, but you will not need to endure much of it. I am sure the American commissioners will all be invited and even some of the secretaries. You will have plenty of protection from Mrs. Goulburn’s vapidities.”

“But it’s the Americans I want to avoid,” Abigail cried.

“Why?” Arthur looked at her blankly. At first the statement made no sense to him at all. Then the jealousy that lay scarcely buried in him stirred to life. Was she so fond of “her dear Albert” that she feared to expose herself if they met in public?

“Because Mr. Adams and Mr. Russell know me,” Abigail replied. “Both have been to my shop in New York on their way home from Philadelphia or Washington, and I am not at all sure either one would understand that it would do me harm to mention my business.”

The answer was perfectly logical. Arthur was both relieved and annoyed with himself. “Not to worry,” he said. “We are very unlikely to be mixing much with the members of the British commission once we return to England. It won’t matter a bit if your friends do talk about the shop.”

Abigail smiled at him as if he had solved her problem, but actually the answer she had given him was less than half the truth. She did not relish the idea of exposing her connection with trade, but she had a more compelling reason not to meet her American friends. Ever since Arthur had told her of the planned attack on New Orleans, she had been torn by indecision as to what to do with the information. She could not feel that a raid on New Orleans could be important enough for her to commit another act of treason, but a face-to-face meeting with Albert and the others would make her feel guilty and miserable about withholding a warning. Still, believing that peace was near, Abigail resolved to say nothing, until she learned on the very morning of the tea party that Bathurst had asked Lord Wellington to take over command of the British forces opposed to the United States.

To Abigail it seemed that such a request must preclude any real intention of making peace. Panic-stricken, she did not think of asking even such simple questions as where Wellington was and when he would take up his command, or whether he would be willing to fight in America. All she could think was that Wellington with inferior forces had beaten the best of Napoleon’s generals. It seemed certain to her that with an army of well-trained veterans, superior
in numbers and quality of arms, Wellington would sweep away any army the United States could muster.

Panic left little room for logic. Abigail’s fears were only confirmed when she asked Arthur whether the news were true and he admitted it, but told her that he felt Wellington would not agree to go. He explained the reasons at some length and added that if Wellington were to go to Canada, he would have full powers to make peace. Actually, Arthur assured her, Wellington would be more an emissary than a general, but Abigail was not really listening. She believed Arthur was only telling her what he thought would give her comfort. She was very much afraid that the news about the attack on New Orleans would be of no help—it would come too late or be ignored—but she could not now withhold even the smallest assistance she could give.

It was apparent as soon as the Americans entered the rooms set aside for the party in the Lion d’Or that Abigail’s personal fears had been unfounded. Albert’s awareness that no special link between them should be evident prompted him not to linger over his greeting. And, although Mr. Russell and Mr. Adams did recognize her, they had clearly been warned not to betray the fact that they had known her in America. Neither said anything about the bookshop, and Abigail could only hope that nothing else of importance was said either, for very little of her attention was given to the various conversations in which she was involved. She was waiting impatiently for the moment when the rooms would be crowded and noisy enough that she and Albert could escape for a few minutes without their absence being noticed.

To facilitate her plan, she kept a surreptitious eye on her friend and tried to keep herself physically in his vicinity. Abigail was no novice at social maneuvers and was careful to avoid the notice of Mrs. Goulburn and the British commissioners. The only one she did not watch was Arthur. She no longer cared whether he noticed that she sought Albert out. The worst he would do was to take her back to England, and because she had given up any hope for peace, that would be a relief.

And, of course, Arthur did notice. He saw the sidelong glances cast at Gallatin, saw that wherever the man moved, Abigail soon followed. Yet there was more fuel for pity than for jealousy in what he saw. He was sure Abigail was aware her attraction to Gallatin was unhealthy and unrequited. She had not tried to keep him with her when they greeted each other. Yet to his eyes it was as if she were drawn by a magnet, unable to keep away, although she resisted desperately.

Arthur was sick at heart. He tried not to watch, but found his eyes on Abigail as often as hers were on Gallatin, and he saw her yield, at last, to what seemed to him an irresistible temptation. She and the young man to whom she was speaking moved to join Gallatin’s group, and after a few minutes Gallatin and Abigail drifted away from the others and went out the door into the corridor. Arthur replied automatically to the remark that had been addressed to him while he told himself it would be better to let Abigail have her pathetic few minutes alone, but he could not bear it. She had looked entirely too relieved and happy when she laid her hand on Gallatin’s arm.

Abigail had indeed been delighted at the combination of circumstances that permitted so quick and easy an escape. She had been talking to James Gallatin, from whom she did not need to conceal her purpose, just when casual circulation brought Albert to a spot near the door of the room. She only had to say, “I want to have a word with your papa in private,” instead of manufacturing excuses to terminate a conversation, and when they reached Albert, the natural pause in the talk of the group as she and James were welcomed permitted her to ask about Albert’s wife, Hannah, and the younger children. Since the subject was not of general interest, it was only natural that they should step aside from the others. A moment later Abigail was able to say she had private information for him, and they slipped out of the room.

The corridor was empty, and Abigail moved quickly toward a curtained window at the end, saying, “There is to be an attack on New Orleans. I do not know when. Perhaps my news is already too late.”

“I hope not, and I hope they make better use of it than the warning you gave about Washington,” Gallatin said, then shrugged. “My house was burnt, but at least the furnishings were saved, and Hannah and the children are safe, so it does not matter.”

Abigail bit her lip. “I’m sorry about the house, Albert, and I have even more bad news for you. Bathurst has asked Wellington to take charge of the armies in Canada.”
Gallatin looked startled and stopped short in the middle of the corridor. “That can have nothing to do with New Orleans. Wellington is in Paris. It would be some time before he could reach Canada, but it is still bad news. It sounds very much as if the British government intends to continue the war.”

“Well, you can hardly blame them,” Abigail said crossly. “They have moderated all their demands, and all you say is no, no, no. Even I feel that you are being unreasonable. Really, Albert, I am sure this project you are preparing is a last chance. I know Goulburn advised ending the negotiations after your last note. You must yield something. You must present some token compromise—”

“You do not understand,” Gallatin interrupted. “In a federation of many geographically different states, like the United States, very diverse interests must be considered. The northwestern states wish to forbid the Indian fur trade with Britain. The states bordering on the Mississippi wish to forbid the use of that river to Britain. The northeastern states insist on retaining their right to fish in the waters near Canada and dry their fish in Newfoundland. Not only must we try to obtain a reasonable peace from Britain, but we must consider the special interests within our nation.”

“That is utterly ridiculous!” Abigail exclaimed, stamping her foot. “Did you not hear what I said? Your jumped-up backwoodsman generals and volunteer colonels will be pitted against Wellington. He will wipe up your armies as a scullery maid wipes up ants. If you do not yield a little now, you will lose everything.”

Gallatin shook his head. “Abigail—”

She made a grr sound of frustrated rage and burst out, “You and the others are a bunch of pigheaded mules—” A choked laugh brought an abrupt end to Abigail’s impassioned speech, and she turned angrily toward the sound, but when she saw that it was Arthur, she beckoned impatiently to him to join them. “Tell him,” she said to her husband, “tell him that if they do not offer some sensible compromise, Britain will have no choice but to exert every bit of her power to bring the war to a quick end.”

Arthur approached smiling and extending a hand to shake Gallatin’s—a remarkable feat of self-control for a man who was divided in his feelings between wanting to hide in a hole and roar with laughter and embrace them both. It was very fortunate that Arthur had an active sense of humor and knew he could be an unmitigated ass when his emotions were involved. He had come out of the room boiling, intending to confront his wife with her sick attachment to a man who cared for her only as a daughter and tell her that he would not accept the remainders of her love for another man.

Abigail’s furious exclamation and the ill-tempered stamp of her foot had stopped him in his tracks both mentally and physically. He realized that this was the second time a kind fate had saved him from making a damned fool of himself and possibly from ruining his marriage. There would be no third time, he resolved, as he listened to Abigail at her best and her worst—as opinionated and acerbic as ever she was with him. Apparently “dear Albert” was no idol, and what he had taken for a lovesick urge had been a sound, practical desire to deliver a political warning to a man who knew and trusted her. Arthur did not think her method was exactly suited to diplomacy or conducive to inspiring a desire to compromise, but he was not worried about that.

The final deathblow to any lingering doubt was the eagerness with which Abigail urged him to join them. Very clearly the only passion she felt was a passionate desire to make a political point. Arthur shook Gallatin’s hand with pleasure and with his other arm embraced his wife. He knew that he should pick up her lead and try to convince the American that concessions must be made, but he was far too happy to care about political expediency.

“A reasonable project would be most helpful,” he said, “but Abigail is too fearful for her friends in the United States. I have my doubts that Lord Wellington will be sent. With Russia growling about war to keep Poland and Austria and Prussia snarling at each other over Saxony, I fear Lord Wellington will be too valuable here.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Arthur’s honesty had little effect on the terms of the treaty proposed by the American commissioners, for, as Albert had told Abigail, their own regional needs, pride and jealousy were preeminent. Fortunately these were so conflicting that compromises within the delegation made a certain vagueness in the proposals necessary. And perhaps the threat of a more vigorous prosecution of the war contributed to the covering letter that went with the
project, stating that the Americans were “ready to sign a Treaty placing the two Countries in respect to all the subjects of difference between them, in the same state that they were at the commencement of the present War, reserving to each party all its rights, and leaving whatever may remain of controversy between them for future negotiation.”

Nonetheless, the project would have been rejected out of hand except for largely extraneous circumstances. In Vienna, the allies who had so recently defeated Napoleon were threatening to attack each other. In England, there was growing resistance to the taxes necessary to continue the war in America, and the manufacturers most involved in trade with the United States were impatient and angry at the administration. Last but not least, Lord Wellington was very unenthusiastic about the prospects of any military operation in Canada.

Thus, instead of a rejection, Bathurst wrote to Goulburn that the government would negotiate on the basis of the proposals the Americans had submitted and made it clear in a private note that Liverpool was eager to bring the treaty to a conclusion. But the continual backing down from haughty demands rankled bitterly in the colonial secretary. Lord Bathurst had a less philosophical temper than Lord Liverpool and, because he had been most deeply and directly involved in the negotiations once Castlereagh left for Vienna, knew he would bear most of the criticism raised against the treaty.

Lord Bathurst was in the mood to blame someone for something during the final stages of the negotiation, but no real opportunity arose until early in December, when he received a letter from Bertram Lydden, Arthur St. Eyre’s secretary. This, after a paragraph explaining that a terrible struggle between loyalty to his employer and to his country had delayed his revelation, accused Abigail St. Eyre of being an agent for the American government. Enclosed were copies of Abigail’s letters to Gallatin and a record of all the mornings she had spent in bookshops where, the letter stated, she had met American spies and passed information.

Had Bathurst’s level of frustration been lower, he would have sent the letter on to Arthur with a covering note warning him to control his wife better. At this stage of the game, prosecuting Lady St. Eyre would be useless even if they could prove a case against her, which, on the basis of the evidence provided, was unlikely. In addition, it was most doubtful that Liverpool would even allow an investigation, since Sir Arthur was the nephew of an old and valued friend.

Still, Bathurst needed to tear into someone, and he associated Arthur closely with the unsatisfactory peace that was being concluded. What was more, Arthur was a member of the opposition party who did not need to be considered for political reasons. It would give Bathurst great satisfaction to accuse Arthur of duplicity in not warning him of his wife’s American sympathies. He could even say Arthur had taken a viper to his bosom and carried that viper into the peace negotiations, where doubtless she had spread her poison.

Since a warning would give Arthur time both to find excuses and to cover his discomfiture, Bathurst simply wrote asking him to leave Ghent at once and bring Lady St. Eyre with him when he reported to the colonial office in London.

“Well, the peace is made,” Arthur remarked when he had read the letter at breakfast.

Abigail dropped her own letters and stared. It had not seemed to her that there had been any forward motion since the agreement to use the American “project” as a basis of negotiation. In fact, she would have said that the bickering over details was more acrimonious than ever.

“Made?” she echoed. “You mean a treaty has been signed?”

“Not quite,” Arthur admitted, “but it must be all over except the shouting of hurrahs. I have here an order from Bathurst to return to England at once.”

“But could that not mean that the government intends to break off the talks completely?”

“No,” Arthur replied, smiling. “You know that Wellington has said even he could make no real progress against the Americans unless the Great Lakes were under British control, and the government cannot afford to try again and fail again on the lakes. Wellington was their last hope. They must make peace, and they must make it quickly because
the Russians are using the war to cast an ugly light on every suggestion Castlereagh makes for a territorial settlement in Europe. And finally, Bathurst asked me to bring you to the colonial office with me. There can be no reason for that except his desire to thank us and dismiss us.”

An uneasy quiver ran through Abigail. Could her meetings with Gallatin have been noticed and reported? And what if they had been, she thought defiantly. Albert was an old and dear friend. She was certain that no one had heard what they discussed. All she had to do was say they had talked only of personal matters, his family and their common friends.

Still, she did not want Arthur to know she had deceived him, and she asked nervously, “But if the treaty is all but decided on, why does Bathurst order us home? Not that I will be sorry to go. I have been worried about how near it is to Christmas. We must be there when the children come home. But I still think it would be more natural for us to remain to the end so that you can discourage Goulburn from oversetting everything at the last minute.”

“Ah, my sweet innocent,” Arthur said, laughing. “It is plain that you are a novice at politics. Bathurst is recalling me so that the opposition—of which I am a member—will get no credit for ending the war. Nor does Bathurst wish it noised about that his own people were so ignorant and incompetent that he needed me to help them. And I promise, you need not worry about Goulburn. He is as eager to get home as you are. He understands that peace must be made and will put no impediments in the way now.”

Abigail could not quell the feeling that the sudden summons was somehow wrong and that it was odd that Bathurst should want her to come to his office with her husband. If he even remembered that Arthur was married and that she had accompanied her husband, she would have expected a polite thank-you note—but perhaps he did not want to put even so much into writing. She shook off the thread of worry and smiled at Arthur.

“I am glad to hear that Goulburn understands, but I think it unfair that you should get no credit for all your hard work.”

After laughing even harder at that naive remark, Arthur explained that he was grateful for Bathurst’s secrecy. “It may save me having brickbats thrown at me by my own party.”

“But they want peace,” Abigail protested. “I have seen reports of several speeches attacking the war and—”

“I fear, my love,” Arthur pointed out wryly, “that my fellow Whigs are far more interested in making trouble for Liverpool’s administration than in making peace. If the war continued and grew sufficiently unpopular, it might force a new election, topple the Tories, and bring the Whigs into power again. They will love me no better for depriving them of a useful cause.”

“Disgusting,” Abigail pronounced, but Arthur only laughed at her again.

“All politics are, and yet they are the only way to achieve any good, for absolute rule by one man is an invitation to disaster, and anarchy is worse, being a disaster in action.” He pushed aside the remains of what he had been eating and stood up. “I will go and let Goulburn and the others know I have been recalled and then make arrangements for traveling home. When do you think you can be ready, Abigail?”

“Tomorrow,” she said promptly. “There are only the clothes to pack. I have been sending all the presents I have bought home as I filled a packing case. There is one only half full, but—”

“We can stay a day or two while you fill it,” Arthur said so gravely that Abigail replied, “Oh no, I can put other—” before she realized he was teasing her and thumbed her nose at him.

After that, she was too busy writing farewell notes and overseeing the servants’ hurried packing to worry about Bathurst’s letter again. Abigail was mildly sorry not to have time to say goodbye to Albert in person, but she knew he would understand—and she was very glad indeed to be done with meddling in diplomacy. Now that peace was only days, or at worst weeks, away, the anxiety diminished, as did the sense of responsibility she had felt for the welfare of the country in which she had been born. It was as if she had owed a debt to the United States for sheltering her and her parents, and she had now paid that debt and was free.
The problem that occupied her and Arthur on their way back to England was the one they had left there. Who could have tried to kill her—and why? No answer had been discovered, although Bertram had written that he had done everything possible by way of investigation and had sent regular reports on his attempts to solve the mystery. It did not occur to either of them that the recall to England was part of that pattern even when Lord Bathurst, having greeted them so frigidly that Arthur’s back stiffened with offense, uttered his accusation of Abigail.

“Are you accusing my wife of being a spy?” Arthur roared. “On what do you base this idiocy—aside from the fact that she was born in the United States?”

“On a letter from your own secretary,” Bathurst replied with grim satisfaction. “Mr. Lydden suspected her activities and determined where and when she met the agents to whom she passed information.”

Both Arthur and Abigail were so shocked that they stood staring. In the dead silence, Bathurst passed the letter he had received to Arthur. He looked at it, but his eyes were filled with tears, which he would not permit to fall, and the words were nothing but a blur. Meanwhile, Abigail, who was not nearly as upset as Arthur although she was bitterly hurt by the treachery of a man she had thought was her friend, had recovered enough for her sense of self-preservation to begin to operate. The pain of Bertram’s betrayal was dulled by the need to defend herself, yet she dared not say anything lest she tell Bathurst more than he already knew.

Abigail was badly frightened because she did not realize that Bathurst intended to do nothing more than embarrass Arthur. Driven by her need to discover of what she was accused, she pulled the letter from Arthur’s hand. Before she could read it, though, Bathurst began to detail its contents, finding his own sharp dissatisfactions somewhat eased by the despairing expression of his victim. He did not realize that Arthur was not hearing a word he said.

Because Abigail was insignificant to him, only the device used to punish Arthur and ease his own anger and frustration, Bathurst did not look at her. Had he done so, he would have been warned by the growing expression of hope she wore. Abigail knew her letters to Albert were totally innocuous, and she had witnesses who could testify that she had met no one in the bookshops and that her activities there were innocent. Her one guilty exploit in England, when she told Gallatin of the proposed attack on Washington, and the meetings in Ghent were not mentioned.

“I am sorry you have been so sadly misled,” Abigail said calmly when he had finished.

Bathurst’s eyes shifted to her. “Misled?” he repeated angrily.

“I cannot imagine why Bertram Lydden should put so ugly an interpretation on my letters and behavior,” she said. “If you have read the copies of my letters, you must know there is nothing in them of a traitorous nature. Mr. Gallatin is a very old friend. I have known him since I was a child, when he married Hannah Nicholson, a dear friend of my mother’s, and he was my trustee after my father’s death. Surely it could not be wrong for me to write a personal letter to him relating common news just because he was an American?”

“The letters are irrelevant,” Bathurst snapped impatiently, trying to dismiss her defense. “It is these meetings with agents of the United States—”

“I met no one in any bookshop that I visited,” Abigail interrupted, her voice sharp. “So, unless the clerks there or Mr. Hatchard or Mr. Lackington are agents of the United States—”

“Madam,” Bathurst interrupted, sneering, “even if you were a bluestocking of the most passionate nature, there would be no sense to so many visits to these shops at such early hours of the morning.”

Abigail hesitated as if she were unsure of herself, but there was triumph hidden by her downcast eyes. At last, when she felt Bathurst was savoring her confusion and defeat, she said, “I do have a secret, Lord Bathurst, but it is not of a political nature. I hope you will be gentleman enough, in recompense for your unkind accusation, to keep it in confidence. It is unfair of you to cause my husband so much pain when you could have discovered the truth by asking Mr. Hatchard and Mr. Lackington. I own a bookshop in the United States. Because I feared the war would stop all commerce, I was purchasing a large number of books to ship to America, and Mr. Lackington was kind enough to allow me to come before the store was crowded with customers.”
“You own a bookshop?” Bathurst’s voice rose with incredulity. “Why?”

Abigail knew that question had to come, and she had been seeking for an answer that would satisfy Bathurst without hurting Arthur. She could not bear to say aloud in Bathurst’s presence that her shop was a defense against her husband, a safe haven if he should prove unsatisfactory as had Francis—and as she thought it, she knew it was no longer true. Her trust in Arthur was as complete as her love for him. Then why did she cling to her shop, for she still did not want to sell it.

Abigail smiled and shrugged. “It is…oh, like a pet or a diversion that has real meaning. Perhaps I have a strange sense of humor, but it has amused me mightily to do business right under everyone’s nose without being suspected of so crude an occupation. There are many reasons. In any case, why I choose to own a bookshop is not to the point. If you will send for Mr. Lackington, he will tell you that I have purchased books from him for many years, and the clerks in his shop and Hatchard’s will testify that I spent my time choosing books, not meeting American agents.”

For a moment Bathurst looked as if he would like to strike Abigail, but instead he bowed and said, “That will not be necessary. Naturally, I would not like such an accusation spread about among tradespeople. You would not lie about a subject so easily proven. I apologize, Lady St. Eyre, but you must understand I could not ignore information from a source so close and confidential.”

From the corner of her eye Abigail saw a slight movement of Arthur’s body and knew he had winced at the reminder of Bertram’s perfidy. She had been holding the papers Bathurst had handed over and was suddenly aware that sight of them would also hurt her husband. Besides, she did not want those papers left in Bathurst’s hands. She did not trust him to destroy them, and that was dangerous. Even if he did not use them, someone else might find them in the future. Mr. Lackington was old. Mr. Hatchard did not know her as well and might even think that the attempt to run her down, which he had witnessed, was proof of her involvement in some desperate plot. She might not be able to prove her innocence in the future.

Surreptitiously Abigail began to fold the papers, intending to tuck them into her muff. However, she did not want Bathurst to ask for them, and the best way to achieve that was to make him wish to forget them. Actually, though Abigail did recognize the truth of his defense—that it was impossible for him to ignore an accusation of spying from Arthur’s own secretary—she was still furious with Bathurst. His manner had been unpleasant, as if he were obtaining some pleasure from the accusation, and she was disgusted with the contempt in his tone when he said “tradespeople”.

“But I am not at all afraid that such honest men as Mr. Lackington and Mr. Hatchard would spread an ugly story they know to be untrue,” Abigail said, her eyes brilliant with rage and her tone vicious. “I would prefer that my name be cleared by their testimony before I leave this office. I would not like it said that I had had time to solicit testimony from them to protect myself.”

“Lady St. Eyre!” Bathurst protested.

“In fact,” she sneered, “I wish I could be as sure that the gentlemen who are my husband’s political enemies would be as careful of my reputation as my friend Mr. Lackington has always been.”

Bathurst gaped, unprepared for so open and acute an attack from a woman, and while he was still stunned, Abigail turned a little away, openly finished folding the papers, and thrust them into her muff. The angle of her body concealed what she was doing from Arthur, who was looking straight ahead, but not from Bathurst. However, he paid no attention to her taking the papers, merely repeating, in an even more shocked and protesting voice, “Lady St. Eyre!”

Having obtained her objective, since she was now sure that Bathurst would be ashamed to ask for the papers, Abigail smiled forgivingly. “I apologize if I have been misled myself,” she remarked. “Perhaps your intention in not ascertaining the truth of these accusations was to protect me. If so, I thank you—and I hope you will not suffer any reawakening of your suspicions—”

“No, no,” Bathurst interrupted hastily. “But in any case, that would be impossible because you will not want to buy books—”
'Why not?' Arthur asked.

His voice was silky smooth and cold as ice. He had been jolted out of his misery by the vicious tone in which Abigail had spoken. From what she was saying, he understood that she had cleared herself of the accusation made against her and was now on the offensive. Despite his pain and confusion over what Bertram had done, Arthur could not help being amused by Bathurst’s stunned retreat, and in an attempt to conceal his impulse to grin, he had continued to stare ahead with a frozen expression. But in his opinion Abigail had accepted a truce too quickly and cheaply. Arthur felt she needed more protection.

"The shop is my wife’s amusement," he continued, his voice carrying a barely veiled threat. "No one in our social circle except myself—and you, my lord—knows of her little game. If a rumor of it should be spread—"

"Don’t be a fool," Bathurst snarled—and, in fact, it had never entered his mind to expose Abigail. "I only meant that with the treaty all but signed, Lady St. Eyre could carry on her business in a more leisurely fashion and not need to buy in such large lots. If I had intended to do any more than bring this to your attention privately, St. Eyre, it would have been within my right to have both of you arrested and ensured a public scandal."

"And possibly brought your own government down by so manifestly arbitrary and unjust an action," Arthur riposted with a lifted brow.

"This is getting us nowhere!" Bathurst exclaimed. "I have apologized to Lady St. Eyre, and I give you my word of honor that every aspect of this conversation will be utterly and completely forgotten."

"Very well, my lord, the matter is settled," Arthur said, bowing stiffly. He had extracted a promise he could rely on and knew that if he pushed the subject further, he might arouse a dangerous enmity instead of merely dislike balanced by caution. "I will accept your word gladly."

But, of course, the matter was not settled. As soon as Arthur and Abigail were in their carriage he said, "I cannot believe it. I simply cannot believe that Bertram would do such a thing to us."

"Neither can I," Abigail replied. "Arthur, this must be the result of some misunderstanding. I do not trust Lord Bathurst at all. Perhaps he made the accusations and Bertram was trying to defend me by showing him my letters and telling him where I was when I seemed to be missing—"

"How would Bertram know where you were?" Arthur asked.

Abigail was silent for a moment, and then shook her head. "I don’t know, darling, I don’t know. But there isn’t any reason for Bertram to do such a thing."

"And what purpose would it serve?" Arthur asked. "Bertram would know the accusation could be disproved. Why —" His voice checked suddenly, and then he went on in a low, angry tone. "It brought you back to England. It brought you back to England where you would be exposed to new attacks…"

"Not Bertram!" Abigail cried. "Oh, please, Arthur, let’s not talk about this anymore. We must go home to Stonar and see Bertram and ask him why. There must be a reason, and we will never find it by guessing."

Having delayed no longer than necessary to obtain the necessities for a night on the road and inform their servants that they should follow them to Stonar Magna as quickly as they could with the baggage, Abigail and Arthur set out. It was impossible to reach Stonar that day, but they traveled until it was too dark to go farther safely. Neither had much appetite for the simple meal the inn was able to serve, but at least both were very tired and they slept as soon as they got into bed. Little was said, since Abigail’s plea not to discuss the subject was sensible, yet neither could think of anything else to talk about.

It was an infinite relief to walk up the broad steps of Stonar Magna the following afternoon and be greeted by Martin’s surprised and delighted welcome. Whatever Bertram had done or intended, their doubts would soon be resolved, and the sickening emotional swings from hope to despair would be over.

Before he had even shed his coat, Arthur asked, "Where is Mr. Lydden?"
“I don’t know, sir,” the footman replied, deftly catching Arthur’s coat as he pulled it off.

“Will he be back for dinner?” Abigail asked, beginning to unbutton her pelisse.

“I doubt it, my lady,” Martin replied, shifting Arthur’s coat to his arm and stepping behind her to ease off her pelisse. “He’s been gone over a week, and Mr. Waggoner—”

“Over a week!” Arthur and Abigail echoed in chorus, evidently dismayed. The news was the final proof of Bertram’s guilt, for it seemed he must have fled as soon as he had written the letter to Bathurst. “Did he say where he was going?” Arthur asked.

“No, sir,” Martin replied, beginning to look distressed himself. “He didn’t even tell Mr. Waggoner he wouldn’t be eating dinner, and Cook—”

“Ask Mr. Waggoner to come to me in the library, please,” Arthur ordered.

Martin looked even more distressed. “Oh, sir, we haven’t no fires. We didn’t know—”

“Ask the housekeeper if we may use her room,” Abigail suggested. “Mr. Waggoner can come to us there while you get fires started. Oh, and please warn Cook that we will need a meal. Tell her not to fuss. We know that she cannot do much in so short a time.”

But when they were settled and the butler appeared, what he had to say reopened the whole question. “Mr. Lydden did not give me any warning that he would be away,” Waggoner said, “and you know that is not Mr. Lydden’s way. He is always most considerate.”

“What did he take with him?” Arthur asked.

“Nothing, sir,” Waggoner replied. “Not so much as a toothbrush or his razors. Nor he didn’t go on horseback neither,” he added, losing control of his grammar in his anxiety. “When he didn’t come home after dark, I was sure he had come to grief, and I sent to Mr. Price, and he sent all the men out to look for him.”

Arthur and Abigail stared first at Waggoner and then at each other. Finally, Arthur turned back to the butler. “You found no sign of him at all?” he persisted.

“No sir, nothing.” Waggoner shook his head emphatically. “And we sent grooms all up and down the roads and into the towns for fear he might have been run down by accident by someone who didn’t know him and took him away to be treated. No one’s seen him or heard about him nowhere, from Sandwich to Ramsgate to Canterbury.”

For a long moment there was silence while Arthur tried to think of something else useful to ask. Finally, he shook his head and looked at Abigail, but she also shook her head. An idea had occurred to her, and she was furious with herself for not thinking of it sooner, but it was not something she wished to discuss in front of the butler.

“Thank you, Waggoner,” Abigail said. “You have certainly done everything that could be done. We will ring if we can think of anything else.”

Arthur looked a little surprised, but he made no protest as the butler left the room, and before he could ask a question, Abigail said, “Oh Arthur, what fools we were. Bertram cannot have sent that letter to Bathurst, because he could not have obtained copies of my letters to Albert. Do you not remember? Griselda took my letter book home with her when she left London, and I never bothered to get it back.” Then she drew a sharp breath. “I meant to,” she said, staring into space, remembering. “I looked for it, but it was not in the drawer where I kept the old ones, and Griselda acted so strange when I mentioned it that I dropped the subject, and then I forgot about it.”

Arthur was looking at her as if she had given him a million pounds in gold. “Damn me for an idiot!” he exploded, jumping to his feet. “I never really looked at that letter. I should have known Bertram would never do such a thing. I should have guessed it was a forgery. Now I’ll have to go back to London—”

“No, Arthur,” Abigail said, jumping up too and ringing the bell. “I have all the papers with me. I just stuck them in
my muff in Bathurst’s office because I-I didn’t trust him.”

Arthur laughed. “Thank God for your suspicious mind, my love, but Bathurst really isn’t that bad. He has been under a severe strain, and—” He broke off as Martin opened the door and said, “Bring Lady St. Eyre’s muff up to us, please, as quickly as you can.” But when the footman had hurried out, Arthur’s face lost its expression of joy. “I’m afraid he’s dead, Abigail,” he said.

She nodded, unable to speak, her eyes full of tears. She had realized what must be the answer to Bertram’s disappearance while Arthur’s mind was still on Bathurst. “But why, Arthur?” she sobbed. “Why?”

“Because he would expose the letter as a forgery, I suppose, but—” He broke off as Martin entered and held out the muff to him. Nodding thanks and dismissal, he pulled the papers out and unfolded them. “It’s a damned good forgery,” he said after looking at the letter. “As a matter of fact, the handwriting might have fooled me for a while, but the phrasing is all wrong.” He refolded the papers and pushed them into an inner pocket of his coat, then brought his eyes back to Abigail. “But if the purpose of the forged accusation was to get you back to England and Bertram knew nothing of the letter, why should he be killed at all? Once you proved your innocence, the fact of forgery would be irrelevant.”

“Bertram knew who it was,” Abigail said. “Arthur, I wonder if Bertram suspected all along, right from the beginning when someone shot at Victor. Remember, after Vic fell in the river that Bertram suggested Dick Price be hired to accompany him, and then there weren’t any more accidents until someone tried to shoot Dick at the mill.” Then she frowned and shook her head. “No, that doesn’t make sense. What happened to Victor cannot be connected—”

“Yes, it can,” Arthur interrupted harshly. “I have been an utter ass. Even if I had doubts at first, I should have realized the truth as soon as the attacks on you were begun. When we married you moved to Stonar and took Victor with you, which meant he would not be in reach even on his holidays. If you were dead, my darling, who would be Victor’s natural guardian and where would he live?”

“Rutupiae,” she whispered, “and Eustace would be his guardian.”

Arthur nodded. “Eustace.” His voice was soft and casual, and there was no particular expression on his face, but Abigail shivered.

“Eustace tried to kill us both? Because Victor was the earl and Eustace wanted to be?” Abigail’s voice shook.

“Yes. And he was the first person I thought of when you showed me Victor’s coat, but I dismissed the idea. Eustace is no fool, and I thought he must realize he would be suspected immediately. I suppose he felt it would be called an accident, but—”

“But why should Bertram protect Eustace?” Abigail cried. “If he guessed Eustace had made an attempt on Victor, why—”

“Family pride. He didn’t want the Lydden name blackened with a really revolting scandal.”

“He risked Vic’s life because he was afraid of a scandal?” Abigail gasped.

Arthur turned to her and took her in his arms. “No, love, because telling us wouldn’t really have done any good and might have actually endangered Victor more. He had no proof, so there was no way to stop Eustace by locking him up or forcing him to leave the country. And once the suspicion was aired, you would have had to forbid Eustace to live at Rutupiae. That’s where Bertram felt the danger might have grown more acute. As long as Eustace was at Rutupiae, I suppose Bertram felt he could keep an eye on him. Remember how suddenly Eustace left on a visit after Victor fell—or was he pushed—into the river?”

Abigail shook her head unbelievingly. “But Eustace came back. How could Bertram believe he could control Eustace after that attempt on us at the mill?”

“I think he might have told us then,” Arthur said, “but I took you all off to Scotland, and then Victor went to school, where Eustace couldn’t get at him. Then we were married. I guess he felt Victor would be safe at Stonar—and he
still had no proof.”

Abigail began to cry again. “And now he’s dead, and we still have no proof.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that yet,” Arthur soothed. “I am going to Rutupiae. I think Eustace will confess and tell us what he did with Bertram.”

Chapter Thirty

Abigail cried out in protest, for she feared for Arthur’s safety, but he laughed at her. Calmly, with a gentle smile on his face, he went to his dressing room and changed into rather stained leather breeches and a comfortable shooting coat. Abigail followed on his heels, weeping and pleading, but his smile never varied, and although he made soothing noises at her, it was plain he hardly saw her. Abigail began to feel sick as well as terrified, and when he was ready, she clutched his arm and shook it.

“Are you going to kill him?” she cried.

Arthur hesitated, and the smile finally disappeared. “No,” he said regretfully. “That would create legal problems. Nor can I bring Eustace to trial; Bertram would not have liked that.” He shrugged. “I’ll get a written confession and then put him on a ship to—to Australia. We have a most insalubrious colony there. The knowledge that I hold his confession will keep him from returning to England—if he survives.”

Frightened as she was, Abigail realized that Arthur was making good sense. Eustace would be punished for his crime, the scandal involved in his leaving the country would be minor, and Victor would be safe. She could not find any logical protest except that she was afraid Arthur, rather than Eustace, would be hurt, and her husband had already laughed that away. She followed him down, silent with terror, until she realized he was heading for a side door. Then she caught at him again.

“A gun!” she gasped. “Arthur, you will need a gun.”

He stopped and looked at her. “For what?”

“For protection! To threaten Eustace!”

“Don’t be a fool!” he exclaimed, pulling free of her grasp. “What good would it do to shoot him? I need him able to write and able to travel.”

He started for the door again, and Abigail cried, “Wait. I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t think you should,” Arthur said, pausing momentarily to frown at her over his shoulder.

“It was me and my son he tried to kill,” Abigail said, adding with a sob, “and Bertram was my friend, too.”

“If you want to come…” Arthur shrugged. “I’m going to the stable to pick up a horsewhip. Get a cloak so you won’t freeze, and meet me at the path.”

Shock deprived Abigail of speech for a moment, and by the time she echoed, “A horsewhip!” Arthur was gone. And while she was still staring after him, trying to reorient her thinking, Waggoner came through the doors that led to the servants’ quarters at the back of the corridor.

“There you are, my lady,” he said with relief. “Cook wishes to know——”

“Never mind about dinner.” Abigail cut him off breathlessly. “Tell Cook not to prepare anything that can spoil—and get me a cloak, a pelisse, anything—quickly. I must go out.”

Surprise flickered on the butler’s face and was immediately suppressed. He hurried away and returned with a heavy cloak Abigail did not recognize but flung around herself without question as she went toward the front door. Although it seemed to her the height of madness to confront a murderer with a weapon no more lethal than a
horsewhip, she was still much less fearful. Arthur might not regard any danger to himself, but she knew he would not have agreed so easily to her decision to accompany him if she might be in danger.

As Abigail hurried around the house toward the path that led to Rutupiae, it occurred to her that Arthur’s choice of weapon was not so foolish. It was almost time for dinner. Eustace probably had no idea that he was suspected and would be unlikely to be carrying a pistol at his own table. And Arthur was an expert whip, a top sawyer. Abigail had seen him touch the lead horse in a tandem pair on any spot he wished from the unstable seat of a high-perch phaeton.

The footman who opened the door for them at Rutupiae looked stunned and tried to say something, but Arthur pushed past him and flung open the door to the drawing room. It was empty. Abigail stopped, reaching for his arm. She had suddenly remembered Griselda and wanted to spare her the horror that was to follow. Her husband had moved forward too quickly, however, and she feared to cry out, so all she could do was run after him. When he pulled open the door to the dining parlor, she was still a few steps behind. His voice came back to her, indolent and infinitely cold.

“Where is Bertram, Eustace?”

Over Arthur’s shoulder, Abigail could see Eustace getting up from the chair at the head of the table—the earl’s chair—but it was Hilda’s voice that replied, and there was no fear in it, only surprise and indignation.

“Are you mad, Arthur? How should Eustace know where Bertram is?”

Abigail had reached the door now, although her legs did not seem to be working properly, and she saw that Griselda was not at the table. “And where is Griselda?” she cried, terrified. Griselda had seen the man who shot at them from the mill. She had not recognized him then, but having murdered Bertram, could Eustace have decided she might remember some gesture that would betray his guilt?

“You are both insane!” Hilda screeched, but there was fear in her voice now. She had glanced at her son, and her eyes had remained riveted on his face, which was pasty gray and distorted with rage and terror. “Griselda is sick,” she went on, even more loudly as if to distract attention from Arthur’s question. She had at last torn her eyes from Eustace’s face. “And we have not seen Bertram for months.”

“Eustace has seen Bertram,” Arthur said with a grim travesty of jocularity as he moved forward into the room. “Eustace was the last person in the world to see Bertram.”

“No!” Eustace got out, his voice a terrified croak. “I never liked Bertram or he me, and—”

The whip, which had been loosely coiled in Arthur’s hand and almost hidden while his arm hung straight down, flicked out and touched Eustace’s cheek. He and his mother screamed simultaneously, and just at the same moment the door at the back of the room swung open for Empson, who was carrying in the first course of the dinner. Greeted by two loud shrieks and the sight of the horsewhip lash recoiling and snapping forward for a second strike, Empson also uttered a startled cry and tried to step backward, only to be struck forcefully by the door as a footman came running in response to the screaming. The impact of the door, impelled by a brawny arm, sent Empson flying forward, and the tray, laden with several large dishes of food and serving pieces, flew up and out before Empson fell to his knees.

Food and silver sprayed in a wide arc, just as Arthur’s whip struck Eustace again. Eustace had already been poised to run, and the pain as the lash nicked his skin a second time narrowed his world to a single need born of a single terror. His need was to escape Arthur, in whose calm and smiling face he saw the knowledge of all his crimes and the promise of being flayed alive. Empson’s disaster hardly impinged on his consciousness. Eustace turned, twisted to avoid the onrushing footman, and darted through the door.

None of the others had quite the same singleness of purpose. Although Arthur automatically retrieved his lash, his attention, and Abigail’s, was drawn to the flying dishes and food. The footman, who had not recognized Arthur and had intended to prevent any further attack on his master by charging the intruder, was paralyzed midstride by the havoc he had created. For Hilda, the domestic catastrophe was a welcome diversion from the terrible revelation of her son’s guilt. She permitted Empson’s mishap to blot out everything else and rose to her feet shrieking.
“This is the last offense! You are dismissed! Dismissed without a character! Leave the house at once! This moment!”

As if the sound of her voice had freed him from his surprise, Arthur leapt over the strewn dishes and ran out the door. Abigail started after him, but the sight of Empson’s face, eyes and mouth distended with horror, made her stop.

“Never mind, Empson,” she said. “It was not your fault. Clean up in here as quickly as possible. Something far worse than spilled soup has happened.”

“No!” Hilda screamed hysterically, falling back into her chair. “No! No!”

Abigail glanced toward her, feeling faintly guilty at leaving her alone in her agony but too anxious about whether Arthur had caught up to Eustace to remain. As she went through the door she found herself almost hoping Eustace would escape. She knew it was foolish, that if he were not caught and dealt with, Victor would always be in danger, but she shrank from what Arthur intended to do to wring a confession from him. Then she was through the butler’s pantry and out into a corridor where for an instant she hesitated, unsure of which way to go, but there was a maid standing with mouth agape, staring toward the door that separated the servants’ quarters from the main body of the house.

Then Eustace had not run toward the back door to escape. Renewed terror closed Abigail’s throat and lent wings to her heels as she ran toward the gun room. If Eustace had not made for the stables, then he had gone for a weapon. As she reached the open door, she heard the snap of Arthur’s whip, a scream from Eustace, and then a heavy thud. The light from the corridor showed Arthur lifting the whip, swinging the lash toward him to free the tangled end from the pistol he had pulled from Eustace’s grasp, but Eustace was raising a second weapon from the table. Abigail screamed at the top of her lungs. The gun jerked in Eustace’s hand. A roar of sound followed, so loud that it seemed to throw Abigail backward. She screamed again as she fell with a heavy weight atop her.

“Are you hurt, Abigail? Are you hurt?”

The words came through in the interval in which Abigail drew breath to scream again, and she realized that the weight that had hit her was Arthur. “No,” she gasped. “Are you? What was that noise?”

“His gun exploded,” Arthur said, lifting himself and helping Abigail up. “In the dark he must have overloaded it in his hurry. I’m sorry to have knocked you down, darling, but I was afraid you would be hit by a fragment. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Never mind me,” she said. “Eustace will load another gun—”

“Eustace will never load another gun,” Arthur said calmly. “He must have been knocked unconscious since he isn’t screaming, and he is sure to have lost his hand. I had better tie up his arm so that he won’t bleed to death. Will you ring and send one of the servants for a physician, love?”

There was, of course, no need to ring a bell. The noise of the explosion had penetrated the farthest reaches of the house, and half the staff was running into the hall. Abigail turned to face them.

“There has been a terrible accident,” she said. “A groom must ride at once to fetch a doctor.”

“He had better get Sir John Keriell, the J.P., first,” Arthur said, coming up behind her. His face was rigid and rather pale. “I’m afraid Eustace is dead. Some of the fragments seem to have hit him in the face and penetrated his brain.” Instinctively Abigail turned toward the gun room, but Arthur’s broad shoulders blocked her view, and he gently put an arm around her. “There’s nothing you can do, love,” he assured her, “and it isn’t a very pleasant sight.”

Abigail sighed. It was just as well that Eustace was dead, better for everyone. She could not grieve for Eustace or for Hilda, who had taught him the blind, self-indulgent selfishness that even encompassed murder, but how could they find Bertram now? She shuddered in Arthur’s arms and buried her head in his shoulder. It was terrible that they should not even be able to give Bertram a decent burial.
Meanwhile, Arthur was telling one of the footmen to get him a blanket with which to cover Eustace, ordering one of the maids to send Hilda’s personal maid to her, and driving the rest of the servants back to their own part of the house. The crowd around them melted away, all except for one trembling figure. Arthur had started to bend his head toward Abigail, when the pale pink dress caught his eye. “I told you—” he began, and then his voice softened. “Griselda—”

“Is he really dead?” she whispered.

Abigail freed herself from her husband’s grasp and hurried to put her arms around her sister-in-law, who was shaking so hard she could scarcely keep her feet. “I’m sorry, Griselda,” she murmured.

“I’m not,” Griselda gasped, although her eyes were fixed and staring with horror. “I’m not sorry. He tried to kill Victor and you, Abigail, and—”

“For God’s sake, if you knew, why didn’t you tell us?” Arthur snarled. “You could have saved Bertram’s life, you fool.”

“Bertram isn’t dead,” Griselda got out between sobs. And then she began to laugh with tears streaming down her face. “I did save his life, but—”

“Where is he?” Arthur roared.

“In Mrs. Franklin’s cottage,” Griselda whimpered, recoiling from Arthur’s violence. “Oh, don’t be angry with him, don’t.”

“Arthur, be quiet,” Abigail cried. “Griselda, don’t be silly. Arthur isn’t angry at Bertram. He’s only so relieved to learn that Bertram is alive that he cannot wait to see him.”

“But don’t scold him,” Griselda sobbed. “He knows how foolish he was, and he is so weak—”

Abigail urgently signaled at her husband to give assurances and go away, but too late. Arthur had already asked, “What happened?”

He was obviously trying to moderate his voice and his impatience, but Griselda’s dithering and timidity made him grit his teeth. This, naturally, did nothing to calm Griselda, and her attempts to answer his question were almost unintelligible. All they could make out was that Griselda blamed herself for Bertram’s reluctance to expose Eustace and thus for his injury. It was not until Arthur had promised twice not to reproach Bertram for “her crime” and assured her she was forgiven that Abigail was able to get her into the drawing room and seated. Arthur went to lock the gun room door, and Abigail concentrated on soothing Griselda, who she now realized was in the last stages of physical and nervous exhaustion.

“My dear,” Abigail began, “you must try—”

At that moment the mantel clock chimed six, and Griselda jumped to her feet. “I must go!” she cried. “I must go at once! Oh, I am already late. Bertram will think I am in danger. He may try to come here, and he is still too weak.”

Despite her anxiety, Griselda could hardly control her exhausted body and had taken only a few steps when the door opened and Arthur appeared. Abigail had already laid her hand on Griselda’s arm, and now she said, “Arthur will go. Come, my love, sit down again. You are too upset and too tired. She is afraid,” she said, turning to Arthur, “that Bertram will be worried about her and try to come here. She thinks him still too ill—”

“Yes, I’ll go, of course, and I’ll take him back to Stonar, where he can be more comfortable. If Keriell comes before I get back, Abigail—”

But Abigail had been watching Griselda’s face as she led her back to her chair, and the expressions that played across it plus the statement of Bertram’s deep concern for her explained several puzzling things.

“No, Arthur,” Abigail exclaimed. “Bring Bertram here. It is closer. He will be just as comfortable. And you will not
be tempted to plague him with business every ten minutes.”

Arthur’s lips parted to protest Abigail’s unfair accusation, but the wink she gave him and the fact that speed was essential kept him quiet. Griselda cried out faintly about Arthur being gentle and tried to follow, but it was obvious that she would be outdistanced in minutes, and she uttered a sob and sank down onto a sofa.

“Now I know you are terribly tired,” Abigail said, “but you can’t be such a goose as to think Arthur would say anything to distress Bertram. He loves Bertram. Do stop crying. You and Bertram are both safe now.” She hesitated and then took Griselda’s hand. “My dear, how long have you and Bertram been in love? And why did you not tell me or Bertram tell Arthur?”

“I have always loved Bertram,” Griselda sighed. “He is so gentle and so handsome, and I think he began to care for me when Mama tried to…to make a marriage between me and Sir Arthur. As to why he did not speak of it, at first he thought I might wish to be Lady St. Eyre. And we had nothing. I knew Mama would not settle anything on me.”

“What difference did that make?” Abigail asked. “You could have lived at Stonar with Bertram. Surely you could not believe Arthur would not have welcomed you.”

Griselda dropped her head. “Partly it was because Bertram is so aware of how good Sir Arthur is to him. He feels he does not merit the generosity with which he is treated. To ask for still more…”

“Nonsense!” Abigail exclaimed. “Bertram is like Arthur’s other self. I do not know what we would do without him. He is invaluable.”

Griselda looked up and smiled gratefully. “I knew that, but… Mostly it was my fault, really. I was afraid of Sir Arthur and of the life led at Stonar, too—all the political dinners. Here, Mama was quite happy if I sat in a corner, but at Stonar, even before Violet left, I would have been expected to take part and after…” Griselda shivered. “Bertram told me then that Sir Arthur would be glad to have me act as his hostess. I-I could not.”

“But Griselda,” Abigail protested, “you grew to like Arthur in Scotland. I am sure you did. And once we were married you must have known that—”

“It was too late then,” Griselda interrupted. “Bertram knew about Eustace then, although I did not. In fact, I was—I was upset when Bertram did nothing after I told him I had changed my mind and was willing to live at Stonar. And then…then we quarreled.”

“In London. It was a quarrel with Bertram that sent you home.”

“Yes.” Griselda smiled again and uttered a very faint giggle. “He was jealous. Bertram was jealous of me. I could not believe it. I thought it was just an excuse, that he had changed his mind and no longer wanted to marry me.”

“Why should he not be jealous?” Abigail asked gently. “Your dance cards were always filled, and there were several gentlemen who were interested seriously.”

“Oh, I hope not,” Griselda replied, looking troubled. “I would hate to give anyone pain. I have never cared for anyone but Bertram, and he was sorry he had accused me of flirting, which I did not, truly. As soon as you all came back to Stonar, he apologized and said he would speak to Sir Arthur, but he had not found an opportunity before… Do you remember when you asked for your letter book?”

“Yes, of course. You should not have been so silly as to get so upset—” Abigail paused at the violent shake of Griselda’s head.

“That was when I discovered it was Eustace who had shot at you at the old mill,” Griselda said, shuddering. “He said the letter book had fallen behind the drawer, but I knew that was impossible. At first I was just angry and disgusted because I knew he had taken it—Eustace was always a snoop. But then he turned and raised his arms to put the book on the mantelpiece, and I-I suddenly recognized the set of his shoulders when he lifted the gun, and his boots… I wanted to tell you. I was frightened to death, but Bertram would not let me tell. He did not want me to be branded as the sister of a murderer.”
Tears rolled down her cheeks again, and Abigail soothed her, assuring her that it did not matter. Then Abigail tried to convince her to go to bed, but Griselda insisted she was not at all tired and that she must see Bertram to be sure that moving from Mrs. Franklin’s cottage had done him no harm.

“He nearly died,” Griselda whispered. “I thought he was dead, I only pulled all the rubble off him to see him once more, to kiss him once more.”

“Pulled the rubble off him?” Abigail echoed.

Eustace buried him in a pit in the Roman ruins. He thought he had killed him—or that he would die of his head wound because he would be too weak to dig his way out. I told Bertram not to meet Eustace, not to trust him, but he wouldn’t listen. He wouldn’t even tell me where they were meeting. But I knew Eustace better than he. I followed…” Her voice broke, and her eyes were staring wide with remembered horror. “It was dark, and I was too far behind to help, but I saw Eustace burying him.”

Griselda began to shake, and Abigail knew she was on the thin edge of real hysteria. Although Abigail had a million questions to ask and was curious to hear the rest of the story, it seemed better to wait until Griselda was calmer or, if Bertram were well enough, let him explain. Since Abigail also knew it would be impossible to discuss anything else, she supplied Griselda with a diversion by reminding her that a room had to be readied to receive Bertram. The lure was strong enough. Griselda took a deep breath and levered herself to her feet, saying she had to speak to Mrs. Howing and get the maids busy at once.

When Griselda was gone, Abigail realized that she felt rather shaky herself. The long journey in the jolting post chaise, followed by grief, anxiety, terror and now relief had exhausted her, but she had barely let her head fall back on the cushions of the sofa, it seemed, when Empson was standing before her, saying her name.

“Sir John Keriell is here, my lady, and desires to know the…the circumstances of the accident.”

Abigail looked at the butler but his face was a blank mask. “Has Sir John seen the—seen Eustace?”

“Yes, my lady,” Empson replied. “I answered the door myself and took him directly to the gun room. Sir Arthur had entrusted me with the key when he told me to have a cot prepared to be used as a stretcher and send it with four men to Mrs. Franklin’s cottage. As soon as I opened the door for Sir John, I told him you were here and said I would ask if you could receive him.”

“Thank you, Empson,” Abigail said.

The words were what she would have said in any case, but her voice and expression showed how deeply she meant them, that she understood a faithful servant was a treasure above jewels. The way the butler had phrased his answer told Abigail that no one except he had spoken to the justice of the peace and that he had told Sir John nothing at all.

She went on thoughtfully, “I will see Sir John at once, of course, but there is very little I can tell him. I do not at all understand what happened. Sir Arthur and I came here to ask Miss Lydden if she knew where Mr. Lydden had disappeared to—and after that I became very frightened and confused. Sir Arthur will have to explain the rest.”

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“Yes, my lady, that is very clear,” Empson said. “I will bring Sir John. Shall I also bring some wine and cakes?”

Abigail relaxed and nodded. She was sure Empson would relate to Arthur what she intended to tell Sir John as soon as he was in the door, and Arthur would take over from there. But in the end, she did not see Sir John at all. Arthur had returned while Empson was speaking to her. Since Griselda, who had been hovering watchfully, ran out to meet them as soon as they approached and neither she nor Bertram were any longer trying to conceal their relationship, Arthur left her to settle Bertram and went to talk to the justice of the peace.

By then, the doctor had also arrived. His testimony would be necessary at the coroner’s inquest, but even before he made his statement, Sir John had no doubt that Eustace had met his death by misadventure. He accepted Arthur’s explanation for why Eustace should have loaded and fired a gun when he was dressed for dinner. He was sure that there was a good deal more to the story than what he heard, but he asked no questions because he had seen the horsewhip Arthur had dropped just inside the door, with the other pistol still tangled in its lash. No crime had been
committed. It was perfectly clear that Eustace had overloaded a pistol, and it had exploded and killed him while he was trying to shoot someone else.

The doctor then went up to see if Hilda needed him, and when he had left her an opiate to help her sleep, he went on to see Bertram. Meanwhile, Arthur had seen Sir John out and come back to tell Abigail what he had said to the J.P. and that Bertram seemed to be recovering. In turn she explained what she had learned from Griselda. Before she was quite finished the doctor was shown in and reported that although it was a miracle that Bertram was alive at all, he was now in surprisingly good condition.

“A few days more of rest and very gentle exercise—sitting up in a chair and then walking about the room—” The doctor stopped and harrumphed, aware that Sir Arthur and his lady did not need these details. “But there, Miss Griselda will take care of everything. There’s no need for me to repeat what I said to her. At Mr. Lydden’s request, I wish to assure you, Sir Arthur, that Mr. Lydden is quite well enough to talk to you. And privately, I would advise you and Lady St. Eyre to go up and let him say what he must as soon as possible. Whatever it is, it is preying on his mind, and he will not be able to rest properly until it is off his conscience. And I hope you will assure him—”

Abigail was already on her feet. “It is only a sick fancy, Doctor. Mr. Lydden has done nothing wrong. He is worried because he could not accomplish what no one could have accomplished. It was not his fault he was struck down.”

“That is perfectly true, Doctor,” Arthur added. “You know Bertram has been my friend for many years. He has an overscrupulous conscience, that is all. I suppose I was wrong not to let him explain at once, but I already knew the truth, and I feared the effort would be too much for him.”

The doctor nodded, and his bright eyes glanced quickly in the direction of the gun room, but he said no more. Abigail and Arthur saw him out on their way up to Bertram’s room. When she saw him, Abigail cried out with horror, for the whole side of his face was blue and maroon and green and yellow with bruises. She rushed forward and bent over the bed.

“Oh, my darling, darling Bertram, I am afraid to touch you, but I wish I could kiss you and hug you. I am so glad you’re alive.”

He looked at her with sorrowful eyes, and there was no shade of affectation in his voice when he said, “Even though you were nearly killed because of my pride and my stupidity? I—”

“Don’t enact me any Cheltenham tragedies,” Abigail interrupted, laughing. “I know you think you are cleverer than anyone else, but if you tell the truth, you will have to admit that you never guessed it was Eustace who tried to run me down in London. It was only after he brought GoGo down with that rope that you put the two things together and figured out that once I was dead, Victor would have to go back to Rutupiae so Eustace could have another try at him. And when you did work it out, Arthur had decided to take me to Ghent. You knew I would be safe there.”

Abigail had taken his hand while she spoke and squeezed it comfortingly. “Yes,” he said, returning the pressure, but looking at Arthur, “that’s true, but—”

“But nothing. Abigail is perfectly right,” Arthur broke in. “I never suspected you of such a passion for dramatics. Once I had taken Abigail to Ghent, she was safe, and Victor was safe in school. It was perfectly reasonable for you to try to get proof of what Eustace had done and get him out of the country. Besides, if there is any blame to be laid, it must surely be laid at my door, not yours. If I hadn’t been such an idiot as to suspect you—”

“Me?” Bertram gasped, pushing himself more upright. “Of trying to kill Abigail?”

“No.” Arthur grinned. “Of trying to kill Victor and putting the blame on Eustace.”

An expression of total outrage appeared on Bertram’s battered countenance. “So I could inherit? What a disgusting idea! What had I ever done—?”

“Your bruises are turning purple,” Arthur said. “Cool down. Actually, I thought of Eustace first, but it seemed incredible that he would do such a thing, knowing he would be the first to be suspected. And it was your own fault that I was afraid you had something to do with it. When Abigail brought Victor’s coat to show us and I asked what
Simmons had to tell you that morning, you told me you had been out, and you looked damned queer when you said it.”

“I had gone out to meet Griselda,” Bertram said. “I should have told you, but—”

“It was my fault,” Griselda put in, leaning forward from her chair on the other side of Bertram’s bed.

“If anyone else says anything is his or her fault, I shall throw myself on the ground and drum with my heels,” Abigail announced firmly.

Bertram’s free hand moved in a characteristically graceful gesture. “It is more elegant to have the vapors,” he fluted in his usual affected tone of voice. Then he sobered. “I don’t want you to think me a complete fool. I hadn’t said anything to Eustace about suspecting him, you know. I was going to warn him after he pushed Victor into the river, but by the time I got to the house, Griselda told me he was packing to go on a visit, and I thought he had been scared off.”

“Yes, and we know why you didn’t say anything after the incident at the mill,” Abigail told him. “I have only just remembered that Eustace was in the stable when we made our plans to picnic there. But why in the world did you agree to meet him at night at the ruins?”

“The triumph of hope over experience,” Bertram sighed. “That was stupid, I suppose, but I had a pistol, and I had no idea he had any reason to want to hurt me. He came to Stonar and told me he was deep in debt and had to leave the country secretly. The road is less than half a mile from the ruins, and he said he would have a carriage waiting for him there. He asked me for money, suggesting that I draw on Arthur’s funds, but I didn’t have to do that because I had been saving.” He turned his head and smiled at Griselda.

“Good God,” Arthur said, “that would have fooled me too. And I wouldn’t have minded if you had drawn on me. It would have been cheap at any price to be rid of him so easily.”

“I thought so,” Bertram agreed. “But I had a few thousand. My expenses are low, and you pay me very generously. And when I handed over the money, I was going to tell him that I had found the man in London who had been watching Abigail for him, so that he wouldn’t be tempted to come back. But I never had a chance to threaten him. He came up behind me and hit me without a word. Why? Do you know?”

Arthur told him about the forged letter. “I suppose he intended to cover your death by making us believe it was you who had fled the country, having first stolen a substantial sum from me. But how could he believe I would not recognize the forgery?”

“Perhaps he didn’t realize Bathurst would show you the letter,” Bertram suggested. “And I don’t think he ever recognized that you had political importance or realized that Bathurst would not want to make too much trouble for the nephew of Liverpool’s friend. You were only Sir Arthur, and Roger, a mere Mr. St. Eyre.”

“Yes, but also Eustace was like Mama,” Griselda sighed. “He always believed what he wished to believe, and I am sure he was deep in debt. Mama never gave him much. I think he had been forging bills in her name as he did with Papa long ago. She had been complaining about her accounts to Mr. Deedes. I wrote a letter only two weeks ago. Eustace must have been growing more and more desperate.”

“I tried to save him,” Bertram said, disengaging his hand from Abigail’s so he could take Griselda’s in both of his own. “I understood that whatever he did, he was still your brother.”

Griselda looked appalled. “Oh, Bertram, have I brought all this on us through being foolish? I didn’t realize you were trying to spare me pain. I thought you wished to avoid a scandal.”

“Griselda!” Bertram protested. “I wasn’t too happy about having an intended murderer in the family, but I wouldn’t have risked Victor’s life for that. I thought you loved Eustace.”

Griselda shook her head sadly. “He wouldn’t let me love him. I don’t know why he enjoyed tormenting me, but even when he was a little boy, he did things on purpose so that I would be punished. He was…cruel.”
“Well, that makes no difference now,” Abigail said briskly. It was time, she felt, to change the subject, and she intended to provide one sufficiently attractive to divert everyone. “We must have the banns for your wedding posted as soon after the funeral as is decent. Tomorrow I will speak to the vicar. When you are married, you can live here at Rutupiae. Griselda can continue to take care of the house, and it will be no trouble for Bertram to walk over to Stonar every morning to his usual duties.” She laughed and raised her brows. “After all, he has been walking in the other direction even more often. And now there is only the question of Hilda. Do you want me to—?”

“Abigail!” Arthur exclaimed, his voice slightly choked with laughter. “Haul in your team. You are riding roughshod over two people’s lives.”

Bertram laughed aloud. “I have not the smallest objection, since her plans, although admittedly precipitous, are exactly what Griselda and I would like best.”

“And about Mama,” Griselda put in, “I wish to assure you that she really did not know what Eustace was about, nor would she have condoned it if she did. She has always accepted Victor’s right without resentment.” She smiled sadly. “She worried because she felt Abigail was spoiling him. She never understood that she had done anything wrong with Eustace and me.”

“I never thought your mother was involved,” Abigail said softly.

“No,” Griselda agreed. “You understood her very well.” She shrugged. “I think she might not wish to stay at Rutupiae now, but if she does, Bertram will be able to manage her, and she will behave differently to me because I will be a married woman.”

Abigail had her doubts about that, but she said nothing. There would be time enough in the future to deal with Hilda if necessary, and right now Bertram was looking very tired. Arthur had seen that too.

“I think I had better take my wife away,” he said. “She has done all the arranging possible here. I will have to point her in another direction—perhaps at Vienna. The loose ends there should keep her busy for a while.”

Actually, there were enough loose ends to keep both Arthur and Abigail busy right where they were. Arthur had all the business that Bertram had put aside for him while he was at Ghent, in addition to everything that had piled up after Bertram had been injured. Abigail had similar duties in Rutupiae. Then there were the funeral arrangements and wedding arrangements and preparations for the family gathering at Christmas. On 23 December there were three particularly welcome arrivals—Victor, Daphne, and a letter from Lord Liverpool thanking Arthur for his efforts and announcing that a peace treaty had been signed by the British government and sent to Ghent for the signatures of the Americans.

In the joy and confusion of welcoming the children and listening to the momentous events they had to recount immediately, the last item was pushed into the background. Arthur did not get around to telling Abigail about it until they were in bed. Her joy at the news reminded Arthur of a flicker or two of doubt that had been aroused in him. When he thought back on some of Abigail’s behavior, now that he was no longer blinded by fearing she had some strong emotional involvement with Gallatin, Arthur began to suspect that there might be some fire behind the smoke of Eustace’s accusation. Clearly Eustace had picked the wrong evidence, but the basic assumption might not have been so far out of line.

“ar something more important on my mind in Bathurst’s office,” Arthur said when Abigail had finished expressing her joy over the peace treaty, “and perhaps I felt it would not be safe or wise to ask before this, but—are you a spy, my love?”

Abigail looked at him warily. She knew those drawling tones and look of indolence could be a danger signal, but what she had done was the one secret she had kept from Arthur, and she wanted the slate to be clean.

“If you are asking me whether I am in the pay of the American government, the answer is no,” she said, “but I must admit that I have transmitted information—” She paused and eyed her husband, then finished aggressively. “And I will again too, if I think poor little America is being bullied by—”

Arthur laughed aloud and muffled her mouth with his. “Hush,” he whispered into her ear when he was certain she
had been subdued. “You must be careful what you say. Don’t you know that they can hang a husband for the treason committed by his wife as well as vice versa?”

“No!” Abigail exclaimed, horrified. She knew Arthur was not angry, but it was dreadful to think she might have made serious trouble for her husband. “Oh, I never would have done it if I had known you could be blamed.” She sat up in her indignation. “You see,” she said, “how pernicious the laws are. You, who are totally innocent, might have been ruined just because the stupid law insists on an impossibility—that two people can literally become one.”

“Yes, my little firebrand,” Arthur agreed, drawing her down into his arms and untying the first of the ribbon bows that held her nightdress together. “Tomorrow we will begin a crusade to change the law, but tonight I intend to try to fulfill its conditions.”

About the Author

Roberta Gellis was driven to start writing her own books some forty years ago by the infuriating inaccuracies of the historical fiction she read. Since then she has worked in varied genres—romance, mystery and fantasy—but always, even in the fantasies, keeping the historical events as near to what actually happened as possible. The dedication to historical time settings is not only a matter of intellectual interest, it is also because she is so out-of-date herself that accuracy in a contemporary novel would be impossible.

In the forty-some years she has been writing, Gellis has produced more than twenty-five straight historical romances. These have been the recipients of many awards, including the Silver and Gold Medal Porgy for historical novels from the West Coast Review of Books, the Golden Certificate from Affaire de Coeur, the Romantic Times Award for Best Novel in the Medieval Period (several times) and a Lifetime Achievement Award for Historical Fantasy. Last but not least, Gellis was honored with the Romance Writers of America’s Lifetime Achievement Award.
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