

An Excerpt from

Minerva
Spencer

Notorious

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#RebelsOfTheTon
#MinervaSpencer

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For Marla

Chapter 1

London
1817

Drusilla Clare plied her fan, using it for its intended purpose—cooling—rather than its expected purpose—flirting. After all, who would flirt with her?

“Dru, you’re doing it again.”

At the sound of her name, she looked at her companion. Lady Eva de Courtney should not, by all rights, have been sitting beside Drusilla in the wallflower section of the Duchess of Montfort’s ballroom. Eva was not only the most beautiful debutante in London this Season, she was also richly dowered.

But she was also proof that pots of money and a gorgeous person were not, alas, enough to overcome a fractious personality or notorious heritage. Or at least her mother’s notorious heritage. Because it was a well-known fact that the Marquess of Exley’s first wife and Eva’s mother—Lady Veronica Exley—had not only been a ravishing, mesmerizing temptress who’d driven men of all ages insane with desire and yearning, she’d also been barking mad.

Eva, reputed to be every bit as lovely as her dead mother, had neither the desire nor the charisma to drive anyone mad. Except perhaps her stern, perfectionist father.

“What, exactly, am I doing?” Drusilla asked Eva, who’d

pulled a lock of glossy dark hair from her once-perfect coiffure and was twisting it into a frazzled mess.

“You’re frowning and getting that look.” Eva thrust out her lower jaw, flattened her lips, and glared through squinty eyes.

Drusilla laughed at her friend’s impersonation.

Eva’s expression shifted back to its natural, perfect state. “There, that’s much better. You’re very pretty when you laugh or smile.”

Drusilla rolled her eyes.

“And even when you roll your eyes.” Eva’s smile turned into a grin. “Come, tell me what you were thinking when you were looking so thunderous.”

Drusilla could hardly tell her friend she’d been wondering when Eva’s gorgeous but irritating stepbrother—Gabriel Marlinton—would make an appearance, so she lied. “I was wondering if Lady Sissingdon was going to fall out of her dress.”

They both turned to stare at the well-endowed widow in question.

Eva snorted and then covered her mouth with her hand. Drusilla couldn’t help noticing her friend’s previously white kid glove now had something that looked like cucumber soup—one of the dishes at dinner—on her knuckle and a stain that must be red wine on her index finger. Drusilla could not imagine how Eva had managed the stains as she had not been wearing her gloves to eat.

Eva’s violet-blue eyes flickered from Lady Sissingdon’s scandalous bodice back to Drusilla, and she opened her mouth to speak but then saw something over Drusilla’s shoulder.

“Gabe!” She shot to her feet and waved her arm in broad, unladylike motions.

Drusilla slowly swiveled in her chair while Eva attracted not only the attention of her stepbrother, but everyone in their half of the ballroom. She knew she should remind her friend to employ a little decorum—it seemed to be her duty in life to

keep Eva out of scrapes—but her heart was pounding, her palms damp, and her stomach was doing that odd, quivery thing it seemed destined to do when Gabriel Marlinton entered her orbit. Something he'd been doing on an almost daily basis since the beginning of the Season, when he'd begun escorting his sister—and, by extension, Drusilla—to every function under the sun.

He stood near the entrance to the ballroom as the majordomo announced him. His name—as always—sent a frisson of excitement through the crowd. The women in the room— young, old, married, widowed, or single—raised their fans or quizzing glasses, the better to watch him.

The men, also, took notice of his arrival. Especially the clutch of men who slouched near the entrance— young bucks who looked as if they were undecided about whether they should remain at the ball or leave to engage in some vile, masculine pursuit. The men closed ranks as Gabriel walked past them, like a pack of wild dogs scenting a larger, more dangerous predator.

One of the group, Earl Visel, a man with perhaps the worst reputation in London—if not all of England—said something to Gabriel that made him stop.

The two faced each other, Visel's cronies hanging back as their leader stepped closer to Gabriel. They were, Drusilla realized, both tall, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped men, although Visel was pale, blue-eyed, and blond while Gabriel was golden and heavy lidded, with hair that put her in mind of a glowing coal.

Whatever Gabriel said to Visel caused the men behind the earl to erupt into a flutter, the gabble of voices audible even over the noise of the ballroom. Visel was the only one who seemed unoffended. In fact, he threw back his head and laughed.

Gabriel appeared not to notice the reaction his response

created among the ball's denizens and scanned the crowd just like the Barbary falcon he resembled, his full lips curving into an easy smile when his eyes landed on his sister. His gaze kept moving and Drusilla couldn't help noticing how his expression turned to one of mocking amusement when he saw her. She told herself his reaction was entirely natural, especially since she'd done everything in her power to provoke and annoy him for the last five years.

She also told herself that she disliked him because he was everything she despised in the masculine species: arrogant, too attractive for either his own or anyone else's good, assured of his superiority, and so accustomed to female adulation he would never have noticed Drusilla's existence if she hadn't forced him to.

But she knew she was just lying to herself.

The real reason she disliked him—if that was indeed the emotion she bore him—was because Gabriel Marlinton made her dislike herself, an emotion she'd believed she'd rooted out years ago. Every time he came near her, she was forced to recall her own less-than-prepossessing appearance. Drusilla knew she was not ugly, but she certainly could never be called pretty. No, handsome was the best she could ever hope for. Not that she cared about such superficial and vain matters. Yet another thing she told herself.

"Gabe!" Eva was bouncing up and down when her slipper caught on the grubby hem of her white gown. An audible *riii-iiiiiiiiip!* drew the attention of everyone in the vicinity.

Her face, so happy only a second earlier, collapsed into a frown. "Oh bother."

It was a big rip, but nothing Eva hadn't done before.

Drusilla laid a hand on her friend's forearm. "Don't worry, Eva, I have plenty of pins and we'll fix it in a trice," she said as Gabriel stopped in front of them.

"Good evening, ladies." He greeted his stepsister by kissing

her on both cheeks in a foreign fashion Drusilla secretly found charming. He never greeted Drusilla that way. But at least today he smiled at Drusilla after hearing her volunteer to fix Eva's gown.

"You have an excellent friend in Miss Clare, Eva. Not to mention a forward-thinking one to come armed with so many pins."

Drusilla tried not to bask in the grateful—almost warm—glance he shot her. Instead, she narrowed her eyes and dropped a slight curtsy. "Mr. Marlinton."

He appeared not to notice her cool greeting. "You two ladies are looking in fine fettle this evening. Is that a new gown, Eva?"

Eva snorted at his poor attempt at fraternal flattery. "You are such a dunce, Gabe. How can a person tell one bland white gown from another?"

He laughed at her rough words. "It is not very ladylike to call one's brother a dunce, Evil."

Eva smacked him with her fan, but Drusilla knew her friend reveled in both the pet name and the brotherly affection; who wouldn't? Drusilla had no siblings—half or otherwise—and could only imagine what it would be like to have such a playful, teasing relationship. She was fond of her Aunt Violet, of course, but their relationship was neither close nor particularly deep. And she'd loved her kind but distant father, but he'd rarely had the time to spare for her when she'd been a girl, and he'd died when she was only fourteen, and still away at school. And that was the sum of her family, at least any she knew.

Drusilla did not understand how Eva managed to view the delicious man as nothing more than a brother. After all, not only did the two share no blood, but they'd just become acquainted with each other a little more than five years ago.

It was beyond maddening; just *thinking* about Gabriel Marlinton made Drusilla swoon, but Eva seemed perfectly comfortable abusing him, physically mauling him, or ordering him around.

Eva grabbed his arm, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, her expression chiding but affectionate. “You’re so late—it’s almost the supper dance. I thought you might not come tonight.”

“It was wretched weather just this side of Epping, so that slowed me down. But I gave you my word I’d be back tonight. You should know I always keep my word.”

Gabriel looked from Eva to Drusilla, his warm smile still in place, but his eyelids lowering over his vivid green eyes.

“And how have you been, Miss Clare? Organized any prison rebellions while I was away?”

She sighed and unfurled her fan, adopting her most bored expression. “That never grows old, does it, Mr. Marlinton?”

He chuckled. “I’m a man of simple pleasures.”

Drusilla snorted. His *pleasures* provided more fodder for *ton* gossip mills than a dozen young bucks bundled together. If only ten percent of the rumors were true, then his pleasures were anything but simple.

“And I did *not* organize a prison rebellion.”

“Ah, that’s correct—you merely provided the funding.”

Drusilla sighed. The incident he was referring to had taken place last year, when a group of militant prison reformers used the money she’d given them to provide necessary items for prisoners to stage a gaol protest that led to hundreds of pounds of damage and the escape of four hardened criminals who’d been slated for transportation. It had not been the best of months for her and she’d resolved to donate only to causes she was personally affiliated with, or those advocated by the members of her small, intimate reform group.

She gave him a contemptuous smile. “Surely you can come

up with something more recent to irk me about after so many months?”

“Oh, I don’t know, it seems like a rebellion *and* an escape should be good for more than a few months of irksomeness.” He turned to Eva. “Or is that irkishness?”

Eva chortled. “You’re such a ninny, Gabe.”

“*Ninny* would not be my first choice of word,” Drusilla muttered.

His eyebrows arched high in mock confusion. “Whatever do you mean, Miss Clare?” He turned to his sister. “Do *you* know what word she means, Eva?”

“I don’t think *you* want to know what word she means, Gabe.”

He turned his distracting emerald gaze back to Drusilla, his lips curving in a way that made her breathing hitch. “Oh, but I do. Tell me, what word *would* you choose for me? *Witty? Handsome? Clever?*”

“The word I had in mind is hardly the type I wish to use in public, Mr. Marlington.”

His eyes lit up. “Do tell, Miss Clare—where *do* you prefer to use such low words?” She ignored the question, but he was undeterred. “I must know how a proper young lady like yourself even knows of such words? Please—I am in danger of perishing with curiosity.”

“I’m afraid you must perish.”

He clutched his heart and grinned. “Cruel beauty.”

Any heart palpitations she’d been experiencing from prolonged proximity to him dissipated at his words, which could only have been mockingly meant: Nobody could call her a beauty. Unless they were ridiculing her. Luckily such taunting only served to strengthen her resolve.

“As diverting as it is to contemplate your premature departure”—he laughed but Drusilla continued undaunted—“I’d much rather discuss your week in Newmarket, which—”

“Why, Miss Clare! I’m flattered you noticed how long I was gone and whither I went. It makes me believe you must have missed me.”

“Believe whatever you wish, sir. But also keep in mind that I notice pestilence, famine, and war—but that hardly makes me miss them.”

He threw his head back and laughed, and Drusilla tried not to feel proud but failed.

When he looked at her next, it was with eyes shining with humor and . . . admiration?

“What is the saying of the great English playwright, Miss Clare? “Methinks thou dost protest too much?”

Drusilla goggled in mock amazement. “My goodness, Mr. Marlinton—quoting Shakespeare? It appears you *did* learn something at Oxford besides gambling, pugilism, and cocking.”

“Not true, Miss Clare. I’m afraid any Shakespeare I know I learned from my position in the pit at Drury Lane.”

Drusilla’s face flamed like a torch. *Surely* he could not be alluding to his *notorious* exploits with the actresses Giselle Fontenot and Maria Beauchamp?

He winked at her.

Drusilla’s eyes widened; that was *exactly* what he was alluding to.

His lips curved as he watched her face color and comprehension dawn. His green eyes pierced her protective façade and went straight to her overactive brain, as if he could see the images her imagination provided—images of this gorgeous man cavorting with his two ravishing lovers—and as if he could *hear* the bubbling caldron of jealousy within her.

Drusilla swallowed and unclenched her teeth, pulling her eyes away from his knowing gaze, ignoring the distracting sensation that pulsed in her belly and lower: a sensation she’d become accustomed to, courtesy of Mr. Marlinton.

She looked across the room, searching frantically for some-

thing that would free her from his attention and the mortifying reactions it created in her body. Her gaze landed on a vision of blond perfection, and inspiration struck.

“You will be pleased to know Miss Kittridge has been inconsolable in your absence.”

His dark auburn brows arched in surprise, but his gaze was already turning toward the east side of the ballroom, to where the luscious Miss Kittridge stood.

Drusilla gritted her teeth against the crushing knowledge that he'd known *exactly* where the other woman was without searching, as if beautiful people possessed some type of homing ability that allowed them to locate others of their kind.

And Lucinda Kittridge was, without a doubt, beautiful. She was also extremely wealthy—even more generously endowed in that area than Drusilla. And if that wasn't enough, she was four years younger and *far* more favorably blessed with charm. She was a blonde, blue-eyed angel with the body of a succubus and a mind like a military strategist, at least when it came to marriageable men. But as lovely a package as she was, her family business—England's largest abattoir—mitigated against her ever catching a peer. So she'd set her sights on the next best thing: a man related to many powerful peers by blood. Gabriel Marlinton suited her needs to perfection. He might be steeped in notoriety and of dubious parentage, but his family connections were second to none. Drusilla knew full well Miss Kittridge and her mother had been angling for him since the first evening he'd appeared in London society.

Miss Kittridge looked up from her throng of admirers toward Gabriel, as if they were joined by some invisible bond, and Drusilla hated herself for drawing the perfect, wealthy heiress into her conversation with the gorgeous, irritating fortune hunter.

She bit her lip at that unkind thought; calling Gabriel Marlinton a fortune hunter was nothing more than spite on her

part. Not only did he have a respectable independence, but he'd never pursued Miss Kittridge. Quite the reverse.

The delectable debutante—known among the *ton* as “the Kitten”—had made her preference for Mr. Marlinton clear whenever the opportunity arose. Both she and her social-climbing parents would overlook Gabriel's notorious past and scandalous liaisons thanks to his connections to the Marquess of Exley and the Duke of Carlisle, two of the wealthiest and most influential peers in the land.

While the *ton* might consider Gabriel Marlinton, the exiled son of the former Sultan of Oran, a baseborn outsider, there were few people either brave enough—or stupid enough—to voice such thoughts. To be blunt, his aristocratic connections were far too impressive for anyone to ignore him, no matter how much some people might like to.

“I don't care for the Kitten.”

Drusilla and Gabriel turned away from Miss Kittridge at the sound of Eva's voice.

The delicate but disheveled beauty was chewing on yet another raven-colored curl she'd pulled from her disastrous *coiffure* and staring speculatively at the woman in question.

Gabriel gently detached the curl from his stepsister's hand and tucked it behind her ear. “Why is that, Evil? Because she is almost as pretty as you?”

Eva elbowed him in the ribs—hard.

Gabriel clutched his side. “Lord, you're such a barbarian.”

Rather than appear chastised, Eva grinned, pleased with the accusation.

“Tell me, why don't you like the Kitten?” Gabriel persisted.

“She only looks all soft and cuddly like a kitten. I think she is rapacious and sharp clawed beneath all her pretty fur.”

Drusilla agreed with her friend's astute observation. How

was it that men did not notice there was something hard about the exquisite and seemingly sweet heiress?

Gabriel cut Drusilla a sly glance. “And what about you, Miss Clare? Do you also dislike Miss Kittridge?”

“I have not wasted a second’s thought on her,” she lied.

His lips twitched, as if he knew how Miss Kittridge’s open attraction to him—and his reciprocation of it—ate at Drusilla like an acid when she was alone at night. Or during the day. Or anytime the horrid thought gained purchase in her mind.

She scowled at him.

“You’re not really going to offer for her, are you, Gabe?” Eva’s brow was furrowed with concern and Drusilla’s body clenched as she waited for his answer, the suspense painful.

But the annoying man merely smiled, as if he could sense her agony and enjoyed prolonging it.

Drusilla assured herself that was impossible: Gabriel Marlinton could not know how she felt for him, not after she’d employed her considerable intellect to conceal her humiliating infatuation.

“Are you, Gabe?” Eva repeated, asking what Drusilla could not.

He shrugged. “You know how Mama has been these past few months, Eva. One of us must become leg-shackled before the Season is out if we’re ever to have any peace in our lives. And since *you* are showing no signs of doing so, it seems that I must fall on my sword.”

“I couldn’t agree more. You *should* fall on your sword for the good of the rest of us; just make sure that sword isn’t the Kitten.”

He smiled down at his half sister, who was staring pensively at the sword in question.

Agony and futility as sharp as needles stabbed at Drusilla’s heart. Was he so blind that he thought the Kitten might actu-

ally like—or love—him for who he was? Or maybe he didn't care about such things? Perhaps his only requirement when it came to a mate was a pretty face?

He eyed Drusilla with amused speculation, as if she'd just spoken out loud. "And what is your opinion, Miss Clare—because I know you will have one."

"Please, fall on whatever sword you wish."

He laughed with obvious delight.

But the thought of Gabriel Marlington married to the Kitten made Drusilla want to fall on a *real* sword. It also made her want to slap the smug look off his perfect features.

Instead of doing either, she used the only weapon left to her: her wit.

"You seem terribly confident that your unsavory antics won't sour Miss Kittridge's parents' eagerness for you and your suit, Mr. Marlington."

He turned to Drusilla, arrested. "How flattered I am that you take such an interest in my, er, suit, Miss Clare. And my antics."

She flicked a nonexistent piece of lint from the puffed sleeve of her pale blue gown. "Not interest, sir, merely an objective observation."

"Ah, I see. But tell me, Miss Clare, just what *unsavory* antics have you heard about?"

A wave of heat began to make its journey up her neck. She compressed her lips, as if that could somehow stop the tide. "I can only imagine."

"Can you? I'm all agog to hear the fascinating fruits of your active imagination."

Drusilla narrowed her eyes in what she hoped was a condescending and repressive fashion and gave him a deceptively sweet smile. "I hardly need to cudgel my brain to invent antics for you, do I, Mr. Marlington? Not when you are so good at providing all of us with real examples. Your notoriety is legend

and tales of your behavior—or should I say *misbehavior*—abound, many of them as entertaining as an evening at the . . . theater.” There, let him chew on *that*.

But if she had hoped to discompose or embarrass him with a veiled reference to his notorious liaisons, he disappointed her. Instead he gave her a smile of genuine delight

“Ah, Miss Clare, I never imagined you to be the type of woman to pay any mind to scurrilous gossip.”

Drusilla widened her eyes in mock wonder. “Oh? Please, *do tell*, Mr. Marlinton,” she said, echoing his earlier words. “I’m *all agog* to hear the type of woman you imagine me to be.”

He leaned toward her and said in a voice so low that only she could hear, “My imaginings are not the type of thing I can discuss in public.”

Drusilla took a hasty step back and bumped into a passing dandy, the impact enough to send her sprawling.

Gabriel’s response was quick and unobtrusive as he set a light hand beneath her elbow to steady her, giving the other man a dismissive nod before releasing her arm.

“The heat in here is quite oppressive, is it not?” He was looking at her with something suspiciously like concern.

She ignored her palpitating heart and his question, eager to move the subject away from herself and back to him.

“We were speaking of your recent trip to Newmarket, I believe,” she said. “It has been disappointingly quiet thus far, but it is still early days, Mr. Marlinton. Tell me, what stories can we expect? Reckless wagers? Impromptu mills? Duels? Orgies?”

He grinned in a way that made her wish she could take back her words. Or at least that last one.

“Orgies?” he repeated.

Her face became impossibly hotter.

“You *do* have an active imagination, Miss Clare. I should

dearly love to hear your thoughts on orgies. Not to mention how I fit in with such speculations about orgies.”

“Quit saying *orgy*,” she hissed.

“You started it.”

“You sound like a twelve-year-old, Mr. Marlinton.”

His lids lowered and heat burned through her body, the conflagration hottest between her tightly clenched thighs. “*Orgy*,” he whispered.

Eva’s laughter broke the terrifying trance. “You two! Always funning one another.”

Drusilla and Gabriel turned to stare at Eva in amazement. How was it that she failed to recognize the hostility that characterized the relationship between her best friend and brother?

But Eva was gazing across at the beguiling debutante, oblivious to their astonished expressions. “It looks like you aren’t the only one chasing the Kitten, Gabe.”

Lord Visel had approached Miss Kittridge while Drusilla and Gabriel had been sparring. The girl—and her mother—were preening at the unprecedented experience of having attracted the interest of a duke’s heir, no matter how scandalous the man’s reputation for outrageous and reckless behavior.

If seeing his nemesis paying court to Miss Kittridge caused Mr. Marlinton any heartache, he certainly did not show it.

Instead he turned to his sister. “I heard the marquess picked up Gerald Hine’s chestnuts at Tatt’s?”

The stepsiblings began talking horseflesh, a subject that seemed to occupy at least three-quarters of Eva’s mind.

As much as Drusilla yearned for Gabriel Marlinton’s attention, she was weak with relief when she no longer had it. Sparring with him always made her feel as if she’d barely survived a treacherous journey. She relaxed and permitted herself furtive glances at his irresistible person, behaving just like a glutton at a banquet in Dante’s Third Circle of Hell.

Dru had no idea what Gabriel’s father had looked like, but

the former sultan and the Duke of Carlisle's daughter, Lady Euphemia, had certainly produced a heavenly son. Not only was he one of the most stunning men in the room, he was also one of the most distinctive. His speech was still quite heavily—and charmingly—accented. His appearance, as well, was rather exotic, his bronze complexion standing out among the pale, pasty-faced crowd of young bucks. And his hair? Well, that was truly his crowning glory. It was a dark, burnished auburn of a sort she'd not seen on any other person. It was true that all of the Marlingtons had red or reddish hair, and his mother—the marchioness—had particularly lovely copper curls. But Gabriel's hair was almost black with a sullen crimson undertone.

His nose was a great hawk's beak that should have made him ugly but instead served to keep him from being too perfect. It also heightened his resemblance to his illustrious maternal grandfather, the Duke of Carlisle.

Last, but certainly not least, were his eyes.

Drusilla heaved a half-worshipful, half-disgusted sigh, which earned her a quick questioning glance from the sooty-lashed, almond-shaped green orbs in question. She returned his mild querying expression with a haughty, superior stare she'd perfected years ago. He recoiled as if she'd reached out and poked him. Or kissed him.

The thought sent heat flaring through her body. Her *entire* body. She looked away. God save her if he ever had any idea of just how fascinating she found him. Or at least his person. No, that was not true. She found *all* of him too interesting. Which was unfortunate. If it had been only his appearance, she would have gotten past her obsession quickly. But he was also clever and funny and brave and mysterious and something else for which she had no word—but which made her tingle all over when she was around him. What woman could resist such a combination?

What she felt for him was something she kept deeply bur-

ied: a secret so mortifying she'd never even exhumed it and taken a look at it herself.

Couples began assembling for the next set, and Gabriel glanced around.

"Where has Mrs. Peel gone?" he asked, surveying the room for Drusilla's aunt, who was acting as their chaperone tonight.

"She didn't feel well and has gone to the retiring room to rest," Drusilla said.

His full lips thinned. "You two should not be here alone, unsupervised."

Drusilla bristled at his chiding, but Eva smacked him on the arm with her fan. "We're not toddlers, Gabe. Besides, we aren't alone: we're with *you*."

Gabriel shook his head at his sister but let the subject drop. Instead he asked, "And what are you both doing over here in the corner?"

Drusilla called him Gabriel in the privacy of her own mind. And why not? After the way she'd treated him these past five years, it was unlikely he would ever invite her to use his Christian name in real life.

"We like it here," Eva said.

He frowned down at his tiny stepsister. "You shan't meet any nice young men if you hide in the back."

"Lord, Gabe, you sound just like Mama: *nice young men* indeed. You should know better. You're the only *nice young man* within spitting distance."

His gaze flickered ceilingward, as if rendered speechless by his sister's vulgarism.

"Besides," Eva continued, either undeterred or unaware of her stepbrother's reaction. "Dru and I have already met every young man in London—nice or otherwise." She gestured to the aisle of empty space around them with her fan, which Drusilla noticed no longer closed properly. "And they can *see* where we are perfectly well if they are interested in dancing."

All three of them looked across the room toward the clutch of men Gabriel had passed—several of whom were looking in their direction, but not—Drusilla was sure—with any interest in dancing.

Eva was right. The young men of the *ton* had no interest in either of them. They shunned Eva because of her long-dead mother. And they ostracized Drusilla for philosophical reasons: *her* philosophies, to be precise.

While Dru didn't have a shocking family secret or keep two mistresses in the same house, she was just as notorious in her own way. It wasn't just the prison break she'd inadvertently funded, but her views on marriage and the rights of women that had relegated her to the fringes of society. Not even her considerable wealth could lure suitors.

The young men weren't staring at Drusilla and Eva, but Gabriel.

Lord Visel, in particular, seemed to be watching him. Women might swoon over Gabriel Marlington, but a good number of men seemed to dislike him. Drusilla could only imagine it was jealousy or envy that elicited such animus.

Eva elbowed him in the side again. "Now that you're here, Gabe, you can dance with Dru."

If Drusilla hadn't been staring at Gabriel like a condemned woman eyeing her last meal, she might have missed the lightning-fast expression of irritation that crossed his handsome features. But she *was* watching and she *did* see it. And when he cut her a quick glance, she could see that *he* knew *she* had seen it. And she wanted to kill her well-intentioned friend.

"Er, but what about your gown?" Gabriel said lamely. "Doesn't it need mending?"

Drusilla snatched her friend's arm before Eva did something even more humiliating, like beg Gabriel to dance with her.

"Yes, Eva, your gown. We must go and fix it."

Eva's sudden flush said she realized she'd been too impul-

sive. She glanced from Drusilla's mortified expression to her brother's wooden one. "You'll be here when we return, Gabe?"

"I'll be here. With Mrs. Peel temporarily out of commission, it appears I am your chaperone as well as your companion." The smile he gave his stepsister was warm and protective. And then his green eyes flickered past Drusilla as if she wasn't even there and settled on the lovely Lucinda Kittridge.

Chapter 2

Gabriel watched the two girls head toward the door leading from the ballroom to the ladies retiring room. Should he follow them to ensure they weren't meddled with? He shrugged the foolish thought away. Who the devil would meddle with them inside a room bursting with women? The retiring room was probably the safest place in the house for two young girls—safe, at least, when it came to their virtue. Not that a roomful of women was necessarily safe. Gabriel had grown up around mostly women and knew they could be just as dangerous—*more* dangerous, really—than most men.

He considered the matter of their absent chaperone, Mrs. Peel, his eyes sweeping over the clutch of nearby matrons. He did not recognize any of his mother's acquaintances or he would have approached them and asked for help. Although the marchioness had told him his chaperoning duties were ornamental, Gabriel couldn't help his concern. In Oran his half sisters had never been allowed outside the palace without proper covering. But here?

Gabriel glanced around the room at the various necklines. He was still shocked at the dresses women would permit their eighteen-year-old daughters to wear. The English aristocracy

seemed to have no trouble sending their daughters out into public half-dressed despite their puritanical attitudes toward sex and sexuality.

Well, there was little he could do about the situation tonight. He would seek out his mother tomorrow and raise the subject of Mrs. Peel, who was quite an elderly woman and had appeared to feel out of sorts often this past month. He believed the two girls required a more robust chaperone, but he could hardly suggest that to Miss Clare as Mrs. Peel was her aunt.

Miss Clare.

He snorted. The name brought to mind the face of one who perplexed and annoyed him more than any other woman he had ever met. More than any person, really. Even his half brother Assad—who'd tried to kill him more than once—had not been so tiresome.

Gabriel knew he wasn't alone when it came to his feelings about Eva's bosom friend. He'd heard other men talking about the sharp-faced, sour-tongued—but exceedingly wealthy—daughter of the late merchant king Edgar Clare. She was critical, brutally direct, and sanctimoniously opinionated with everyone, but she seemed to save a little extra judgement for Gabriel. Or at least it seemed that way over the past few months he'd been accompanying Eva and her friend to every wretched event.

When Eva had first written to him about the wonderful friend she'd made at her finishing school—his mercurial and awkward sister's *only* friend outside her family—Gabriel had been overjoyed.

But then he'd met Miss Clare.

Gabriel pursed his lips and shook his head. Just look at her tonight: she was a girl of one and twenty who devoted all her time, money, and efforts to charitable works and dressed like an aged spinster.

Not that he disapproved of her more modest necklines and

voluminous petticoats; no, he thought her gowns were appropriate for a girl her age, if not always a flattering color or cut. Nor did he mind her devotion to worthy causes. However, he did find her superior attitude toward him grating. She behaved as though he were a savage libertine with no self-restraint. Restraint was probably her middle name—or perhaps it was Censorious.

Miss Clare comported herself like a woman of forty. Older, really. Gabriel's mother, the Marchioness of Exley, behaved with more girlish spontaneity than Drusilla Clare.

Gabriel would like to have wiped her superior smirk off her face and told her the truth about where he'd spent the past week—*not* raking at Newmarket but down in Brighton on *serious* business—but that would have been foolish, considering how sensitive this particular business was. Besides, it wasn't as if Drusilla Clare's opinion of him mattered a jot. In fact, he *hoped* she imagined him off gambling, cocking, and whoring.

Ha! Drusilla: even her name was enough to dampen a person's spirits.

Gabriel snorted at his own stupidity. The first notes of a reel filled the cavernous ballroom and he saw the set had formed while he'd been woolgathering. The luscious Miss Kittridge glared at him from over the head of her short, squat partner.

Gabriel smiled and gave a slight shrug, earning a decidedly *unkittenish* glare and angry toss of blonde curls.

Perhaps he'd ask her for the next set—which was the supper dance, a waltz.

He waited until the steps brought her around again and she could see him, and then he mouthed the word *supper*. Her eyelids lowered and her frown melted away. She hesitated a long moment before giving him the slightest of nods.

Gabriel experienced a slight pang of something at her acceptance—disappointment? He shook the thought away. So

what if they had little in the way of conversation? It was true she seemed to have an excessive interest in clothing—or at least in talking about clothing—but why should that matter? Lucy Kittridge was breathtaking and charming—and she *did* resemble a kitten, albeit a wicked one. Gabriel could—and had more than once—imagined her being something of a tigress when it came to the sensual part of marriage. But no matter how appealing such thoughts might be, Gabriel suspected the magnificent Miss Kittridge would not be pleased to find herself saddled with another woman’s child. No, marrying Miss Kittridge was not in his future.

Lord. He couldn’t think about that right now.

He took out his watch and frowned: the girls had been gone far too long for the mere mending of a hem. What had Eva gotten up to now? He sighed and made his way toward the ballroom exit. It was time he take his chaperoning duties seriously and go find his sister and her annoying friend.

“You’re angry with me for suggesting Gabe dance with you, aren’t you, Dru?” Eva asked from behind her, having to trot to keep up with Drusilla’s longer—and angrier—stride.

“Of course I’m not mad,” she lied, tossing the words over her shoulder. “Oh my, there is a dreadful crush, Eva. We’ll never get in.” They both stared at the women thronging the room that had been set aside for wardrobe catastrophes and critical gossip sessions.

Drusilla glanced around. “Come,” she said, leading her friend away from the noisy, crowded chamber.

“Where are we going?” Eva asked as a footman leaped forward to pull open a door.

“To the conservatory, where we can sit down and rest a few moments.” The door closed behind them, and the sudden hush in the corridor made her voice sound loud. She spoke in

a softer tone. "We can fix your hem and take a few moments of peace and quiet."

"There is a conservatory?"

"Yes, I believe it was one of the first of its kind in the city."

"How do you always know about such things?"

"It's no secret, Eva. I read about Abingdon House long ago, in a guidebook to fine London houses." Her lips twisted into a self-mocking smile. "Little did I know I would one day be allowed to actually set foot in this holiest of holies." Dukes did not, as a rule, invite the daughters of tradesmen to their houses. But they occasionally made exceptions for the very wealthy ones, especially if they had five unwed younger sons.

And of course Eva had been invited; she might have madness in her veins but she also had a dowry that was greater than most other aristocratic misses as well as august connections that went all the way back to before the Conquest. It was ironic that two of the Season's greatest prizes were also its biggest lepers.

Drusilla chewed her lower lip and hesitated. "I believe it is this way," she said, taking a short corridor that led to the back of the house. There were candles in the sconces, but not enough to indicate this was a part of the house intended for ball guests. Drusilla didn't care. She needed some peace and quiet to recover from her brush with Gabriel Marlinton, just as she always did.

She had hoped protracted exposure to him this Season would eliminate her more severe reactions to him, but her attraction had become stronger, rather than weaker, the more she was exposed to him.

Drusilla opened the door at the end of the hall, and they both froze and stared: it was a magical place, a huge room constructed from hundreds of panes of faceted glass.

"My goodness," she whispered, stepping inside. Outside, it

was a rare night in London when even a few stars were visible, the moon surrounded by silvery wisps of clouds.

“It’s fabulous,” Eva said, her head tipped back as she gazed through the plate glass above their heads. “And it smells *divine*.”

It did. It smelled of fresh earth, citrus from the potted trees, and a dozen kinds of flower.

“This is *so* much nicer than that stuffy ballroom.” Eva extended her arms and spun in a circle, laughing, her white muslin billowing around her, its tattered hem dragging.

Drusilla opened her reticule, which held more items than most people’s medicine chests—it was her way to always be prepared for any emergency—and rooted for the small paper with pins.

“I’m dizzy,” Eva said in a breathy voice, landing with a thud beside Drusilla on the stone bench.

“Let’s see the damage, Eva.”

Eva swiveled on her bottom and put her feet across Drusilla’s lap, flopping back onto the bench. Drusilla couldn’t help smiling; Eva behaved like a girl half her age—unaffected and childlike. She’d always been this way. When they’d been at school together, most of the other girls had either teased Eva or avoided her entirely, put off by her wild and unpredictable behavior. It was true that a person could never guess what Eva might do in any given situation; she seemed to lack the filter other people were born with.

Of course, those same girls had taunted Drusilla, too, albeit for different reasons. She was a merchant’s daughter, a girl with the smell of the shop about her.

Dru and Eva had been inseparable almost from the moment they’d met each other at Miss Barnstaple’s Academy for Young Ladies.

Eva had made school not just bearable for Dru, but enjoyable. But then, between their third and fourth years, Eva had become ill and not returned to school. That last year without

Eva had been miserable. As had her first two Seasons without her friend.

Eva should have had her first Season last year, but she'd taken a long time to fully recuperate. Drusilla knew her friend had made the most of her illness, hoping her parents would forget about a Season altogether. But this year she'd been forced to make her debut at the grand old age of nineteen, almost twenty.

Drusilla placed the last of her pins in the ripped hem and examined her repair work.

"This will not last long if you are not careful," Drusilla warned her friend.

"Careful? Do you mean with all my dancing?"

Eva was so lovely it was hard to believe she lacked for dance partners, but Drusilla knew it to be the truth. Her friend's unpredictable and unconventional behavior appeared to frighten off potential suitors as much as the rumors of madness. She didn't help her situation by sitting in corners with Drusilla.

Eva took a deep breath and swung her feet down, stood, and lifted the hem of her skirt to examine it. "As good as new," she pronounced. "Are you ready to return to the ballroom?"

Drusilla wasn't. This room was far too magical to leave, but . . . "I suppose I'd better go check on Aunt Vi and—"

Eva laid her hands on Drusilla's shoulders and smiled down at her. "You stay here and take a few moments to rest. I'll check on her."

Drusilla gave her friend a dubious look. "Are you certain?"

"Quite."

"But it will be supper and your brother will wonder what has become of you."

"I'll tell him all is well after checking on your aunt, and then I'll return and we can enjoy this beautiful, magical garden together until after supper, when we can ask Gabriel to take us

home. Is that not an excellent idea?" Eva looked hopeful. She was constantly seeking ways to either get out of *ton* functions entirely or leave early. Drusilla knew she shouldn't encourage Eva's behavior, but . . .

"Promise you won't go anywhere, Dru?"

"I promise, just—"

"Good—then I'll be back soon." Eva spun and headed toward the door at an unladylike trot.

"Don't forget to check on Aunt Vi first," Drusilla reminded her.

Eva did a clumsy pirouette, stumbled, and then laughed before pulling open the door. "I shan't," she called out, and then disappeared.

Well, that was Eva: unable to behave like a lady no matter how often she'd been disciplined in school. Drusilla envied her friend her carefree nature and her ease when it came to doing exactly what she wanted—no matter the consequences.

She glanced at the spot Eva had just vacated. Why not? Why was she always so proper? It wasn't as if anyone was ever watching her. Eva had stretched out on the bench without a care in the world. So could she.

Feeling as naughty as if she were displaying her garters at Almack's—not that she could ever hope to secure a voucher for that venerable establishment—Drusilla lay back on the bench and balanced her reticule on her midriff. She closed her eyes and forced her tense body to relax in this unusual position.

Pictures of Gabriel Marlington immediately formed behind her eyelids. She grimaced. Why must she be afflicted with this stupid infatuation? Could there be anything more pitiful than a homely wallflower yearning for an arresting, attractive Corinthian? Because that was exactly what Gabriel Marlington was. Even with her dismal knowledge of male pursuits, Drusilla knew he rode, shot, fenced, and boxed superbly.

And then there was the way women behaved toward him.

A groan of frustration slipped from her, and she bit her lower lip. They say eavesdroppers never hear good about themselves, but in Drusilla's case, she never heard anything good about Gabriel when she listened to the conversations of others. Oh, it was nothing too horrid—he didn't torture animals, nor was he cruel to small children—but he was, it was loudly whispered, a slayer of hearts.

It appeared that tales of his wickedness only made women wilder for him. Even smart women like Drusilla were not immune to such charm and male beauty.

She'd pondered her obsession with Gabriel Marlinton for *years*, long before she'd heard tales of his mistresses—*plural*—or seen the amorous widows stalking him, or watched him bewitch one woman after another.

Drusilla was not, in the main, attracted to bright and shiny objects. She'd always believed that if she ever did marry, it would be to a man who was kind and gentle and devoted to the same causes as she was. Not that Gabriel was not kind and gentle—at least to his family. And apparently the Kitten.

Thinking about Gabriel and the Kitten was like abrading her soul with a cat-o'-nine-tails. How could a person make themselves stop wanting something they could never have?

She punished herself by envisioning them together.

Yes, some sage inner voice praised her flagellating behavior, that is the way—face your fears head-on and you will conquer them.

Drusilla pictured them dancing—waltzing—together. She didn't have to imagine it because she'd seen it times beyond counting. Separately they were perfect; together they were almost too perfect to look upon.

Next, she pictured them *kissing*. She'd seen people kissing more than once. Oftentimes the more fortunate people—the beautiful people—believed they were unobserved at the balls, routs, and picnics that comprised the Season. They should have

realized the walls had eyes. Or, to be more precise, the wallflowers had eyes. And what else did they have to do with those eyes but watch those around them?

Thankfully, Drusilla had never actually seen Gabriel and the Kitten kissing. She knew the Kitten had probably schemed to orchestrate such a thing, but Gabriel—for all his wild ways with widows and actresses—was the very image of propriety around maidens.

Still, Drusilla could imagine them embracing, his powerful shoulders sheltering the Kitten's delicate frame, his hands, elegant and strong, one splayed on the small of her back, the other cradling her head like a priceless and fragile object. His lush, sensual lips—lips that were almost as expressive as his brilliant, flashing eyes—pressed against the Kitten's perfectly bow-shaped mouth.

The horrifying image shifted in her mind's eye, and Drusilla smiled dreamily at the new picture: *her* in Gabriel's muscular arms.

She let her body relax on the unforgiving marble bench and enjoyed the mental image. What a rebel she was, sprawled on a bench in a conservatory during a ball. Alone. She was wicked and her aunt would scold her if she found out.

She sighed, telling herself to get up—to go back and join the bouquet of wallflowers—but her eyelids were so heavy . . . so heavy. And it was so peaceful . . . so . . .

“What have we here?”

The low voice penetrated her dozy state at the same time that something warm touched her cheek.

“A sleeping beauty,” the same voice murmured. “Not the one I was looking for but you will have to—”

Drusilla's brain awoke from its slumber, and her eyes flew open to find a face looming over her. She shrieked and jerked into an upright position—or at least tried to—slamming her forehead into his nose.

“Oww, dammit, that bloody hurt!” Her assailant staggered back

Drusilla tried to sit up, but her legs had somehow become tangled in her skirts and she began to slide off the bench, her fingers scrabbling to grip the smooth stone, her other hand stupidly clutching her reticule rather than participating in her rescue.

Powerful hands clamped on to her shoulders. “Quit your bloody squirming or you’ll land on your head.”

Moonlight slanted across his face, and Drusilla gasped and jerked away. It was Lord Godric Visel—a handsome, sneering libertine who’d never had a second to spare for her in the past.

“Unhand me,” Drusilla demanded, jerking away and then sliding off the back side of the bench in the process.

“Bloody hell.” He caught her up in his arms before she could fall, lifted her, and then dropped her onto her bottom with an undignified thump. “There.” His hands steadied her. “Will you quit already, Miss Clare? I’m only trying to—”

And then, suddenly, he was gone.

Chapter 3

Even when he'd been at war with his brother Assad, Gabriel had not felt such hot, unadulterated rage. He'd often heard the saying "to see red" but hadn't believed it until now. Not only was he seeing red, he was *feeling* it. He was swelteringly, brain-cracklingly hot.

The suppressed emotions of the past months boiled over, the memories of untold slights and jabs he'd silently endured from Visel without capitulating to his desires to either plant the man a facer or meet him at dawn.

"What the bloody hell do you think you are doing?" He forced the words through his clenched jaws. "Well?" he demanded, and then realized he was gripping Visel's neck far too tightly and loosened his hold.

The earl's mouth was moving, but Gabriel could not hear the words. He leaned closer.

"I thought it was your mad sister stretched out on that bench and I was going to—" The words were hardly a croak, but they acted like fuel on an already raging fire.

Gabriel banged the man's head against the thickly leaded panes, setting the rectangles of glass chattering like hundreds of teeth.

“You bloody bounder,” he snarled.

Visel’s mouth stretched into a leer, his eyes bulging, his nostrils flaring—and he *laughed*; the bastard *laughed*.

Gabriel was vaguely aware of a hand on his shoulder.

“Mr. Marlinton? Please! *Gabriel*, you must *stop*.”

He glanced from the hand to its owner. Miss Clare was not her usual neat-as-a-pin self. Her hair had come down in several places and silky brown spirals framed her usually supercilious face. Her gray eyes were round and her pale cheeks had bloodred slashes of color that made her appear lively and quite pretty.

Gabriel shook off the bizarre observation.

“Are you all right?” he asked, only slightly loosening his grip on Visel, who was trying to break free, snorting and snuffling like a pig hunting truffles.

“Yes! Yes, I’m fine. *Please*, he didn’t hurt me. You must let him go before you kill him.”

Gabriel looked from her to his captive, who stared at him with fury-filled eyes. Why did this man *hate* him so very much? He shook his head at the pointless thought and shoved Visel away while releasing his grasp on his neck.

The earl staggered to one side and then plopped down on the flagstone floor like a piece of rotting fruit falling from a tree. His attractive face was an ugly, splotchy red, his lips almost purple, and his bulging, bloodshot eyes made him resemble a bloated rockfish pulled up from a great depth. The scent of stale alcohol filled the air.

Gabriel felt, rather than saw, Miss Clare sway beside him, and he turned just in time to slide an arm around her. Some part of his brain made the unexpected—and unwanted—observation that she felt soft and womanly beneath her ugly, prim gown.

“Steady on, Miss Clare,” he said to the top of her head, holding her shaking body against his.

She muttered something into his shoulder.

He turned slightly and slid his other arm around her waist; he told himself it was only to hold her upright “What was that?”

“You might have killed him.”

He gave a humorless chuckle. “Hardly. Please, hold on to me if you fear you might faint, Miss Clare.”

She turned until she faced him, gazing up at him through huge pupils, her hands resting lightly on his shoulders. “I’m so sorry, I was foolish. I—I shouldn’t have been here.”

Gabriel agreed, but there seemed no point in saying so. “Where is my sister? She told me she was coming back here.”

“I don’t know.” She sounded much better, much calmer, and much more herself. Gabriel watched in fascination as her cool, competent expression put itself together right before his eyes.

“Can you stand unassisted?”

“Yes, I—” She stopped, cocking her head. “What was that?”

It took Gabriel a moment to understand what she meant. It was like the susurrant of waves on a beach. But some primitive part of his brain must have known even before he spun around: It was the sound of people whispering. Lots of people.

He shoved Miss Clare behind him and stepped between her and the small crowd that had assembled in the doorway, but he knew it was too little, too late: Everyone would have seen them with their arms around each other. At least a dozen heads bobbed in the entrance, men and women, their eyes darting from Visel to Miss Clare to Gabriel.

Nobody spoke.

He glanced down. Visel was scooting sideways like a crab fleeing an incoming wave, the slick heels of his dancing shoes skittering as he tried to gain a foothold on the smooth floor.

The man was having entirely too much difficulty controlling his person, and Gabriel realized he was drunk—very drunk.

“Dammit!” Visel swore, pushing back against the glass and scrambling awkwardly to his feet, his breathing an audible soughing in the near silence of the conservatory. His heavy-lidded eyes slid from Gabriel to Miss Clare, his brows pulling together over his nose until they resembled a solid blond hedge. He opened his mouth, but another voice interrupted whatever he was going to say.

“Dru? Gabe?” Eva was pushing through the bodies blocking the doorway as if they were a bothersome thicket of weeds. “What is going on?” She sped toward them in her heedless, headlong way, her blue-violet eyes round with shock as she stared at the swaying form of the earl. “What have you done?”

Visel’s too-pretty face screwed into an ugly sneer. “Well, if it isn’t Mad Mary herself—come to rescue the barbarian bastard and the shopgirl, have you?” He laughed. “I think you’re too late for that, sweetheart.”

Gabriel’s body moved toward the other man before his brain knew what he was doing. But this time Visel was expecting him and met him head-on.

“You are *drunk*,” Gabriel grated between clenched jaws as they grappled with each other, well matched in size and strength if not in sobriety.

Visel’s choked laughter filled the conservatory. “I might be, but I’d say the same things sober, Marlinton. What are you going to do about it?”

Before Gabriel could answer, Visel twisted one arm out of his grasp and swung wildly. His fist clipped Gabriel’s jaw hard enough to send a cascade of stars across his vision, and he lost his grip on Visel’s other arm. He lunged toward him just as several hands landed on his shoulders.

Gabriel ignored the frantic voices behind him and the vio-

lent handling, his eyes locked with Visel's. The earl straightened up and pushed his sweat-damp blond hair from his forehead, his eyes narrowed to slits.

At least four sets of arms tightened around Gabriel's arms and shoulders and held him steady.

Visel walked up to him, close enough that the hot, sweet stench of alcohol made Gabriel flinch. Close enough that he could see the almost mad glint in the other man's eyes. "You assaulted me, Marlinton; I demand that you meet me for this."

"No!" Eva and Lady Drusilla yelled in tandem.

The men ignored them.

"Let him go," Visel snapped at Gabriel's captors.

The hands fell away, and Gabriel heard the shuffle of feet as they quickly moved out of range.

Gabriel took a card from his coat pocket. "Here is my direction. Viscount Byer and I share the house. He will receive your man." He flicked the small rectangle at the earl, and Visel flapped clumsily to catch it.

He stared across at Gabriel with a hatred that should have left him scorched to a cinder, a fanatical expression of glee on his face. "Finally," he said, and then shouldered past Gabriel and strode toward the exit.

Finally? What the devil did *finally* mean?

"Nooooo!" Eva's anguished cry snapped Gabriel out of his daze. Luckily, Drusilla had her arms wrapped around the much smaller woman or she would have attacked Lord Visel.

Visel cut Eva an unpleasant smile but didn't pause. The crowd parted to let him through and then dispersed more quickly than rats exposed to daylight. No doubt they were sprinting back to the crowded ballroom to spread the word. Gabriel needed to get his sister and Miss Clare out of here.

"Where the devil is your aunt?" he asked Miss Clare.

Eva answered. "I just spoke to Mrs. Peel," she said, her eyes wide, shocked—frightened. "She is quite ill, but I think she—"

"She is *very* ill." Miss Clare's cool, quiet voice cut through his sister's words like a blade. "She takes a potion to fight most of the pain, but it can become quite bad at times."

Gabriel threw up his hands. "Then why is she *here*, at a ball, engaged in such frippery? If my mother had known, she would have engaged somebody for you both."

Miss Clare pursed her lips. "She is here because it is her *wish*, Mr. Marlinton. We are all the family we both have, and she does not want me to be alone." She swallowed hard. "Although now I can see I might have made a terrible mistake giving in to her." This last part was spoken more to herself. She looked up. "I thought Eva and I were perfectly able to care for ourselves."

Gabriel snorted, even though he knew recriminations were not helpful. "Yet here you were. Alone. And you, Eva? Why were you not here with Miss Clare? You left me almost a quarter of an hour ago." He flicked Eva a scalding glance.

"I'm sorry, Gabe. It's not Dru's fault." Eva reached out and took his arm, and it was all he could do not to snatch it away. "I'd just left Mrs. Peel, who wanted me to fetch a—"

"We don't have time right now. Word of this will reach your father's ears before we set foot in the door." He glanced at Miss Clare. "I'll take you back to your house on the way."

"She's staying with me tonight, Gabriel—at Exley House."

Gabriel squeezed his eyes shut and muttered every vile curse he knew. She was under the marquess's roof? That meant she was his lordship's responsibility—or Gabriel's, by extension. His stepfather and mother would strip the hide off his back, and they had every right to do so.

The door to the conservatory opened, and Mrs. Peel entered with two other women. She raised a narrow, pale, shak-

ing hand to her mouth when she saw her niece. Gabriel thought she might collapse then and there.

The other women, however, were alert and watchful, like avid, sniffing bloodhounds scenting a kill.

“Come,” Gabriel said to the girls, ushering them toward the entrance. “Let’s get you out of here while we can.”