Chapter 1 : (written February 1999)

The night was so cold. Miss Chelseah Vanderleigh stared out into the dark night. Her sister Sandra followed closely by. It was so dark that Chelseah could barely see a foot in front of her. The weather had not been good to them the last few weeks and Chelseah was afraid that Sandra was coming down with a fever. Their tattered clothing did not protect them from the elements, and they had not had a proper meal in three months. Chelseah's hair was matted and dirty, Sandra's clothes were nearly in tatters. It was thanks only to Providence that both were standing here today. Sandra's gaunt face reminded Chelseah of a skeleton. The poor child was only skin and bones. Sandra could not possibly weigh more than seventy pounds. Chelseah had to have food to give her and soon. It was hard to get food when one was destitute and vulnerable, and beggars were not given the time of day. Chelseah had gone to the local vicarage, to see if the vicar could help her, but he had only looked on her with disdain. She shuddered at the remembered humiliation, and her heart filled with contempt for the man. So much for being a man of God.

What were they going to do for food? They were in the woods behind a manor, and Chelseah wondered if the people of the manor would be good enough to give her a loaf of bread. It was very late; she could not wake the inhabitants of the house at this hour. Her roving gaze soon caught sight of an abandoned vehicle at the edge of the woods. She and Sandra could spend the night in the old wagon and in the morning beg a morsel of bread from the people there. Chelseah beckoned to Sandra and they crept silently towards the wagon. An old tarp covered it--it would have to do for warmth. Sandra was mute from fever and cold. Chelseah touched her forehead. It seemed to be getting worse by the day and she could not afford a doctor. Chelseah covered Sandra with the tarp and lay down beside her. It was going to be a long night.

Chelseah had been dreaming when she awoke with a start. She had heard a noise and was instantly wary. Ever since leaving Vowchurch any noise or movement around her had aroused suspicion. Even after seven months she was still looking over her shoulder. It would not do to go on like this. Sandra was still sleeping soundly, her uneven breathing showing that something was wrong. The sun was just coming over the horizon, but its rays belied any warmth. The day was still extremely cold, the cold February winds penetrating her thin clothing. Chelseah noticed a flicker of movement inside the manor house. It seemed much bigger in the light of day; it must be that someone influential lived there. In the light of day, the manor looked more like a castle. Its gabled roof stretched far past Chelseah's field of vision and the red brick seemed to glow in the wintry sunlight. Egad, what had she stepped into?

Chelseah continued to stare at the house when an old woman came out and left a loaf of bread cooling on the outside table. It wouldn't be there for long, so Chelseah decided to act quickly. She abhorred stealing, but she would go to any lengths to save her sister's failing health. Slowly, stealthily, like a cat ready to pounce on its prey, Chelseah approached the manor house. She stayed by the cover of the woods so that she would not be seen. In a few minutes she had what she wanted. Cradling the loaf of bread in her hands she turned to head back for the cover of the woods and ran straight into the biggest man she had ever seen. She had been caught.

"Just where do you think you are going with that, miss?" the big, bearded man asked.

Chelseah cowered beneath his gaze. She was afraid of big men in general, and this was the worst one she had ever seen. He was tall, about six feet, and his broad shoulders and hawklike gaze made her tremble. He had crossed his arms over his chest and was staring at her with disdain. The big man's beady eyes squinted darkly at her. When he spoke, she could see that he was missing two front teeth.

"Well? Speak up!"

"I…I…I was d-d-desperate for f-f-food, sir. My sister…."

Chelseah didn't get a chance to finish. The big man took the bread from her, grabbed her by the arm, and dragged her through the kitchen door.

"Someone alert His Grace that this little hussy was caught stealing. I will hold her until you get back."

It took all of two minutes for a servant to return. They had all looked at her with contempt the minute the big man had mentioned that he had caught her stealing. She had tried to get him to go for Sandra, but he had hit her, so she had kept silent. She was even more worried now about going to prison, since the master of the household was none other than Alexander Fairchild, the Duke of Dullingham. She remembered the name. Of all the homes she had to encounter, why did the owner have to be a childhood acquaintance? Chelseah's heart started beating faster and sweat broke out on her brow. Stealing was a very serious offence, and she was very afraid for her life and Sandra's.

"The master said that 'e'll see 'er right now, 'e did," the servant said.

Chelseah was dragged unmercifully up to the master's study. She trembled uncontrollably and sincerely hoped that her remaining dignity could hold its own before the duke's wrath.

When the Duke bade them "Enter", Chelseah tried to hold back but another footman appeared, and she was forced to face Dullingham. He looked very angry--his dark brown hair was standing on end, and his cravat was crooked. He looked as if he had been awakened from a deep slumber. Dullingham's features were taut with barely concealed rage, and his dark brown eyes were on fire. The two footmen bowed low and when Chelseah made to curtsy, she was pushed to her knees. With a nod of his head, the two footmen took their leave. Chelseah was alone. The duke loomed over her.

"Explain yourself," he growled.

"Sir, I…"

Dullingham banged his fist on his desk and gave Chelseah a look that made her cringe.

"I am the Duke of Dullingham and you will address me as Your Grace. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly, Your Grace".

"Good. Carry on."

"My…my sister is very, very ill. We have no place to go and nothing to eat. I thought that you would not mind sparing something for me".

Dullingham banged his fist on the desk once again. Chelseah jumped away from him.

"Do you think that I am some sort of half-wit that I will let some hussy take advantage of me? I do not take kindly to people who play me for a fool."

Chelseah matched his angry look and was able to keep her wits about her.“Your Grace, my sister is in the small farmer’s wagon at the edge of the woods. See for yourself if I am lying.”

Dullingham searched her face and Chelseah found herself squirming under his scrutiny. She was still on her knees, and the duke was at least two inches above six feet. After muttering something about *impertinent chits,* he stalked off. Chelseah was left alone to stare after him.

Chapter 2:

Dullingham charged up the stairs toward his study. The little twit had a sister alright, sick as a dog she was, and she seemed to be not more than five years of age. He hated it when people took advantage of him, but he could not very well turn the woman out with her sister as sick as she was. He had summoned a doctor, but Dullingham believed that the little girl was coming down with the smallpox. He hoped that she did not start an epidemic. On entering the study, he discovered the young woman standing by the fire trying to warm herself. She looked very young then, maybe not more than eighteen, and she seemed vulnerable by the firelight. Dullingham shook himself out of his reverie. He must not think like that for he was dealing with a thief and a trespasser. Chelseah turned when he entered and sunk into a deep curtsy. He cut her off before she could say anything.

"We did find your sister, young lady. Before we go any further, tell me your name."

Should she lie? It wasn't as if he knew her or anything. She didn't want to be traced back to Vowchurch, back to *him.* Chelseah decided to use her mother's maiden name.

"Chelseah Vanderleigh, Your Grace."

"Very well, Chelseah. Give me one good reason why I should not have the magistrate write you up for stealing and trespassing?"

"I…I…was afraid f-f-for my s-s-sister's life, Your Grace. I needed food, and beggars are not accepted around these parts. I even saw the vicar, but he turned us away." Chelseah winced at the remembered humiliation.

Dullingham had to give her some credit. This young woman was honest and held herself with a measure of dignity and pride. That did not mean that he condoned what she had done. It insulted him when someone took what didn't belong to him or her.

"I have called in a doctor to see to your sister. My servants will take good care of her."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

"Don't thank me yet, you little twit. I don't condone what you did, so let me tell you that I am only helping you out of pity for your sister's plight. You will work to pay off your debt. I will give you two weeks, Miss Vanderleigh, and if I so much as hear one complaint, you will be out on the streets where you belong. I hope that I have made myself explicitly clear."

Chelseah nodded. If anything, she *would* not, *could* not, screw this up. Sandra was safe, and they had a roof over their head, and Chelseah had no intention of losing what little she now had.

"How is my sister, Your Grace?"

Dullingham condescended to look her in the eye and answer whatever questions she had.

"She has the smallpox, Miss Vanderleigh. The doctor gave specific orders to those who have not been afflicted with them to stay clear of the contamination. Sandra has been quarantined until she is no longer contagious. Have you had the smallpox, Miss Vanderleigh?"

Chelseah shook her head. She couldn't even see Sandra? That was a blow worse than death. Her dignity nearly deserted her then, but thankfully she was able to keep a good hold on it.

"What am I to do now that I can't see her? She will be crying for me."

"Trust me Chelseah when I say that you will be too busy to even think of Sandra. We shall take good care of her. I will see to that."

With that the butler, a staid, arrogant looking old man, was summoned. Chelseah was to follow any order that Mr. Simmons gave her. Before they left the room Dullingham stopped the butler and whispered something to him. Chelseah hoped that it had nothing to do with her.

Chelseah wished that the two weeks would pass quickly. It had only been two days, and already she was exhausted. She believed that the duke had given specific orders to have her do a measure of hard work to test her endurance. It seemed that the endless round of tasks for her to do included fetching and carrying, lifting and pushing. She did not think that anyone would put up with that for very long. At that Chelseah smiled ironically. She had experienced much worse before.

Mrs. Livingstone, the housekeeper, kept a keen watch over Sandra, and told Chelseah that she was doing very well. Sandra was strong-willed too. She had experienced too much hardship during her short life. Chelseah was thankful that she had five minutes to herself today-it gave her a chance to think. She and Sandra had left Vowchurch seven months ago. *Has **he** been searching for us? Does he know that we are in Cambridgeshire? It is over 200 kilometres from Hereford and Worchester. Would he find them?* Chelseah came out of her daydream with a jolt. Someone was calling for her. She hurried out of her small room in the servants' quarters towards the voice.

"There ye are. We been calling the past quarter of an hour. Mr. Simmons wants to speak with ye."

She found the butler polishing silver in the dining room. She bobbed a small curtsy of respect and stood to the side.

"Finally, you show up. Where have you been, anyhow?… Never mind that, you are to help me serve at table tonight. Now, go and help with the preparations. And mind your manners gel, eh?"

Chelseah nodded her head and curtsied again. It seemed that she had measured up to the test. A butler never asked another servant to serve at table unless he was absolutely sure that the honour was appreciated. Chelseah giggled softly. Maybe she was making headway after all.

Dinner that night seemed excruciatingly slow. The duke had persuaded his ailing mother, the Dowager Duchess of Dullingham, Lady Maria, to dine with him and his younger sister, Olivia. Chelseah had been told of the master's family the first day she had arrived. The dowager duchess never left her room because of failing health (which was probably all in her head, or so the other servants said), and Olivia, young and headstrong, was faced with the prospect of her come-out in May. Olivia looked a lot like her brother, but she had softer features and softer eyes. Chelseah thought her the type of person who would not let her wealth and title get in the way of compassion and kindness. However, appearances could be very misleading, so Chelseah reserved her opinion of that beautiful woman until later. Lady Maria was a different story altogether. She was drawn and pale

and looked as if nothing could please her. Under her green eyes, however, lied a challenge. Chelseah decided to take on that challenge.

The arrogant Duke could easily dominate any room that he entered. His broad shoulders and back, with his finely cut greatcoat and vest, usually took up all the room's space. Chelseah couldn't help but notice his lean features, and the way his jaw and cheekbones were chiselled to reflect the refinery of his upbringing. He held his head like any 'lord of the manor' would, with pride. He seemed a little mysterious. Two days ago, he had been quite condescending and rude, but tonight he seemed drawn and tired. Could it be that there was a measure of kindness underneath that icy reserve? A memory niggled at the back of Chelseah's memory, but it wouldn't materialize. She had known the duke when he would come home from school with some of the other local boys. But they were years older than her and once her friends had graduated from Oxford and moved north, she had never seen the duke again. Now whenever she looked at him, she was drawn to his dark brown eyes; any woman could get lost in that look. The butler uttered a discreet cough behind her. Here she was caught daydreaming again; she would have to watch herself from now on.

Dullingham had been exceedingly annoyed with Simmons when he saw Chelseah serving at table with him. Why did she have to be in his way? He had enough problems on his hands without having to put up with one thieving chit and her innocent green eyes. He could not believe that a woman of her stature could look so innocent and vulnerable. He would have to be on guard so that Chelseah could not work her charms on him. Dullingham did not know what had gotten into him these last few days. He caught himself thinking far too much about those piercing green and brown eyes and light chestnut hair. ***Vanderleigh?*** *Where have I heard that name before?*

"Alex, have you heard a single word that I have said?", Lady Olivia said accusingly.

"I beg your pardon, Olivia. May you please repeat what you said."

"You see Mama, Alex never listens to what I have to say." She pouted. "All he ever does is restrict my comings and goings. It is not as if I will disappear. I wish for more freedom."

"You should listen to your brother, Olivia. I cannot guide you as I should, and your Papa is not around to help. Alex is really the only one who knows best."

Olivia favoured them both with a withering gaze. Why could she never do as she pleased? She caught Chelseah's eye and smiled. Chelseah was hard pressed not to smile back, so she just lowered her eyes and continued serving the soup. Lady Olivia reminded Chelseah of herself when she was seventeen, and it was easy to see why the restrictions the Duke placed on her could put her out of temperament.

"Olivia, I am very weary of your complaints. You have never won with me so why do you try? I swear, Olivia, I may have to hire a chaperone just to keep you in your place."

"Oh no, Alex. You cannot mean it!"

"Olivia, I will not hear another word. You heard what your brother said. You are too young and inexperienced to go on your way alone. Now let the subject drop!"

Dullingham stared in amazement at his mother. He had never seen her come alive like that. She looked as if the wind had tipped the sails of her ship. From then on, the meal was passed in complete silence. Dullingham racked his brain looking for a possible

candidate for chaperone. It did not come. Oh well, he thought, something would come to him eventually.

Chapter 3:

"Olivia, haven't I already told you to stay away from Angus McCrary? His reputation leaves something to be desired and I will not have you around the likes of him!" Dullingham was in a foul mood. He had caught his stubborn sister sneaking off to an assignation with this disreputable man, and all she had to say for herself was that she found his charms 'beguiling'. 'Beguiling', indeed. A more idiotic word he had never heard.

"But Alex, that man wishes to seek my hand in marriage! Can you not at least consider it?"

Dullingham's fist sent a cloud of papers flying off the desk. He seemed to be put out of temper more these days, and his mother didn't help the fact by holing up in her room all day complaining of a headache. The situation was made worse because Dullingham had not slept a wink the night before.

"I will not consider any man's proposal until you decide to use the brains God gave you to act like a Lady! You are making a bad name for yourself, Olivia. What would Father have said had he been here?"

"At least he would have been more sensitive to the feelings of his only daughter. Unlike you, who is a beast and an ogre!"

With those last words Olivia ran from the room, nearly bowling Chelseah over in the process. She had just managed to hold on to the tea tray, which held a Sèvres china teapot and cups when the Duke came storming out of the room. That was the last straw. Chelseah lost her precious grip on the tea tray, and it went flying. The beautiful china fell to the floor and broke into a million pieces. The scalding tea fell onto Chelseah's hand and she uttered a loud 'yelp'.

"Malum!" It was Latin for "damn". "I…I…I b-b-beg your p-p-pardon, Y-Y-Your G-G-Grace…", she said as she began wiping up the broken china.

Dullingham looked about him in some confusion. The accident had happened so fast that he had not had time to assimilate it. And that exclamation. How in the world did a servant-a woman-know how to swear? Let alone in Latin? He bent over to help Chelseah. Chelseah's hand stilled in surprise. The arrogant Duke had condescended to help her?

"I was not your fault, Chelseah. I do not hold you responsible for this."

Chelseah merely nodded. Her hand was burning, and she was shaking. The last time something similar had happened, she … Oh, it did not bear thinking about. So engrossed was she in her task that she did not notice that Dullingham was staring at her.

Why was Chelseah so affected by the little accident? She seemed to be shaking, and he had caught her wiping a tear from her eye. Was she hiding something from him? It wouldn't be the first time that he wondered that about her. He helped Chelseah to her feet.

"Come with me, Chelseah, and I will take a look at the burn on your hand. Does it hurt very much?"

She was so stunned that she nearly stopped dead in her tracks. The Duke of Dullingham was going out of his way for her? This from the man that had called her a *little twit.* She did not want him to see how very much she was affected, so she clasped her hands behind her back and said nothing.

"Do not hide from me, Miss Vanderleigh. I may believe that you are a thief, but that does not make me hard-hearted. I saw how red and swollen your hand is, and you will not leave until I have seen to it. Now follow me!"

Chelseah wanted to salute. He sounded like a commander for the English army troops. Wellington could have used him on the Peninsula. Why was that man so exasperating? Arrogant and disdainful one minute and then kind and generous the next. What else was she to do but obey? Finally, she gave in to her insane desire and saluted to Dullingham's retreating back. She smirked to herself as she followed the Duke to his study.

Dullingham felt confused all over again. Just as he is beginning to understand a little about the mysterious and bewitching Chelseah Vanderleigh, he discovers something completely different. The accident had been no one's fault. If he knew it and she knew it, then why did she act like it was an unforgivable sin? And how much did she hear of his conversation with Olivia? Had she been at the door by pure coincidence or was there some ulterior motive for her presence? True, he had ordered tea, but Simmons was the one who usually took care of that. Was the mysterious Chelseah a liar out to pull the wool over his eyes?

If Chelseah knew anything of what Dullingham was thinking, she did not show it. She must stop making a fool of herself if she was going to provide for herself and Sandra. Why did she have to fall apart like that? It wasn't as if the Duke of Dullingham was anything like ***him.*** Yet, she could not stop thinking of ***him.*** Did ***he*** have to dominate her thoughts, even though she was well away from him? Drat the man anyway. Because of ***him,*** she was always wary of men.

They had arrived at the parlour, and the Duke bade Chelseah to sit down. He found some bandages and liniment and took care of her burn.

Casually, he asked: "What were you doing right outside the door of my study,Chelseah?"

Chelseah knew where this was headed. He still did not trust her. He wanted to know if she was there by chance or not. At least she would not have to lie.

"Mr. Simmons thought it best for me to deliver the tea this morning, Your Grace. He believed that it would be a good lesson for me."

Dullingham only nodded. He was lost in thought. Ever since Chelseah and Sandra had entered his home, he had sensed that there was something else beneath the surface. Something *sinister.* Chelseah acted like a servant, but sometimes she would say or do something that did not belong to her station. She acted cultured, well-read and educated. What was this woman about?

A little later, Chelseah was taking the laundry to be washed, and she heard noises from a small room on the second floor. She knew that she should not stop, but the noises sounded like sobs, and she could not leave them be. Chelseah followed the sounds and discovered that the sobs were coming from Lady Olivia. The room she was in was musty from disuse and Chelseah believed that Olivia wanted to be alone. Chelseah knocked on the door.

"May I be of service, milady?"

Lady Olivia just cried even harder. Chelseah put down the laundry and sat down beside her on the old settee. Slowly, deliberately, she put an arm around Olivia's shoulders.

"Oh, Chelseah, my brother is so unfair! I wish that just once he would listen to my worries and not tell me what to do all the time!"

"Milady, may I be so bold as to give you some advice?"

When Olivia nodded her permission, Chelseah continued:"Have you asked His Grace why he has forbidden you to see Angus McCrary?"

"You heard our argument?"

Chelseah blushed to the roots of her light brown hair.

"I was outside the door, milady, with the tea tray. But the fact is that Angus McCrary is well known hereabouts and no one speaks well of him. He is a thief and a liar, bent on ruining anyone who gets in his way. Bent on seducing women. I have not been here a long while, but Angus McCrary is not a man to be messed with. Your brother is more experienced in the ways of the world. You can learn much from him if you offer to listen to his advice and apply the counsels he gives you."

By that time Olivia had stopped sobbing and was hanging intently on Chelseah's every word.

"But what am I to do? Not very many eligible young men come to Dullingham and I wish so very much to be married."

"Do you have to latch on to the first man who comes your way? There are many men who treat women with respect and kindness, but you must search for the one who is best suited to you. To do that you must *look and listen* to the counsels and advice of others. Do not be too quick to judge someone worthy of your attentions just because he is a man and is able to charm you. Do not close your eyes to his faults."

By then Olivia was completely enraptured. Chelseah made sense. She must tell Alex the wonderful news. She turned and noticed him in the doorway. Chelseah noticed him at the same time, and both could see the fury clearly written all over his face. Dullingham dismissed Chelseah with a flick of his head and an "I deal with you later" threat. Chelseah bobbed a curtsey and left the room almost at a run. Uh-oh, she was in trouble. The look on the Duke's face told her that it did not bode well for her.

Chapter 4:

"Must I lock you in your room and throw away the key, Olivia, to make you use some common sense? Do you not know that it is not proper to confide in a servant, especially one who is relatively new?" Dullingham wanted to say 'liar' instead but refrained. "The servants love gossip and you add more fuel to the fire. When will you learn, my dear sister, that these things are not done!" Dullingham wiped a hand across his forehead. He was exhausted. He was sick of catering to his mother's supposed illnesses and Olivia's temper tantrums. It infuriated him when the servants overstepped the bounds, and Chelseah had gone too far with Olivia. He was angry and they knew it. Olivia stood to her full height, which was quite considerable.

"My *dear brother,* you have not given me a chance to explain. I needed someone to confide in and since your only delight is in curbing my freedom, I could not see how I could confide in you. Chelseah told me something very interesting. She told me that I should listen to your counsels and not fly off the handle every time I wish to have my way. She told me that I could learn from you because you are more experienced."

"*Chelseah* told you that? I did not think her capable."

"Well, she is. And do you know that she also told me what you have been trying to tell me all along—that I should not fall head over heels over someone just because he is a man and exercises his charms upon women? She made me understand my follies, Alex, and I am now more inclined to listen to your advice and accept your guidance."

Dullingham was dumbfounded. Chelseah, the little wench that had tried to steal from him to feed her sister, had made Olivia see reason. Where he had failed, she had succeeded. How did she do it? Dullingham wondered. After one meeting with his sister, Chelseah had turned his sister's foolish starts into prudent ones. Chelseah did have a certain charm about her that was hard to resist. Was that why Olivia was so taken with her? He couldn't credit that Chelseah knew what she was doing. He would have to probe beneath the surface to find out who this mysterious, charming, and 'beguiling' woman really was.

Not an hour later, Simmons nearly charged into Dullingham's study, Chelseah hot on his heels. He bowed deep and low, and looked with unmistakable disdain on Chelseah. Dullingham tried very hard not to smile. The butler looked as if someone had dared dirty his clean halls with their muddy shoes. His dignity appeared greatly offended.

"Your Grace, I believe that a dismissal is in order. Not only does this little twit steal, she takes liberties where they are uncalled for."

"Now wait one moment, Mr. Simmons…"

Simmons looked extremely insulted that Chelseah had spoken without being addressed. "You have not been acknowledged, impertinent chit, so I will thank you to keep quiet."

"That will be quite enough, Simmons. Please leave us. I wish to speak to Miss Vanderleigh alone."

"But…"

"Please Simmons. I said to leave us."

Simmons inclined his head and bowed himself out of the room. Chelseah curtsied before the Duke.

"Your Grace, I did not mean…"

"Think nothing of it, Chelseah."

Chelseah stared open-mouthed at the Duke. "Think nothing of it? Are you sure? You want me to let it go as if nothing has happened?"

"Yes, that is precisely what I want you to do. Tell me something—have you ever been a lady's companion?"

A *what?* A lady's companion? Now what did that have to do with the situation at hand? Chelseah was beginning to think that His Grace had imbibed more than his fair share of the brandy bottle. She looked around the Duke's study for the brandy bottle, hoping to discover whether it was full or not. To her great disappointment, the bottle was quite full.

Mr. Simmons had given her quite a dressing down for not remembering her place and the exasperating Duke of Dullingham had told her to pretend that nothing untoward had taken place. Had the whole world gone mad?

"Please forgive my impertinence, Your Grace, but have you gone mad?"

Dullingham did not know whether to feel insulted or not. In a few moments, he could no longer contain himself. A low rumble began in his chest and he began to laugh. He could see the stunned look on Chelseah's face- she looked as if a lightning bolt had hit her. It took some effort, but Dullingham finally managed to contain himself. He wiped some tears from his eyes and continued his explanation. Chelseah continued staring at him as if he were insane.

"It seems, Chelseah, that you gave some very good advice to Olivia. She really appreciates the fact that you helped her understand me a little better. Olivia told me what you said, and I believe that you are a very wise woman. Tell me something—where did you learn such wisdom?"

Dullingham had made his question sound casual, but he was hoping that Chelseah would shed some light on her mysterious past.

The Duke's question made Chelseah instantly wary. She had spent seven months trying to avoid the many questions that were asked of her and she was not about to elaborate the subject now.

"A person becomes wise in the ways of the world when forced to seek employment and support a young sister."

"You have not told me how you learned so much in such a short time."

Chelseah began to panic. She did not want to dredge up her past, not now, when everything was going so smoothly.

"A young woman is often prey to a young man's unwanted attentions, Your Grace. A woman must be careful when she is all alone in the world."

"And are you all alone, Chelseah?"

"Please, Your Grace, do not bring up unpleasant subjects. If you no longer have need of me, I shall get back to my duties."

Dullingham had to concede that Chelseah was right. She had a right to her privacy, and he should not have pried. However, he could not help thinking that there was something very familiar about her. She carried herself like a lady, and her speech and vocabulary showed at least some education. Her light brown hair with its red

highlights reminded him of someone he had seen before. And the name *Vanderleigh*? It was a rare name, and he had not heard it before. Or had he?

"Your Grace?" Chelseah brought him back to the present with a jolt.

"I am sorry. I was in another world for a minute. No, Chelseah, I do not want you to return to your duties."

Chelseah began to panic again. Was he going to turn her out? Chelseah found her voice and asked:

"Are you turning us out, Your Grace?"

"Chelseah, you must stop worrying. You have paid your debt to me, but the counseling you have given to my sister has real value. I wish to hire you as a lady's companion—to help keep my sister out of trouble." And to test out who you really are, the Duke said to himself.

Chelseah stared at Dullingham for a full minute. Had *she* lost her senses? That pronouncement was enough to make her terrified. Then she thought for a moment. It wasn't as if she had never done it before. She just didn't have much experience, was all. With some trepidation, she accepted the new position. As she left the room to tell Sandra the news, she did not see the look of triumph cross the Duke's face.

CHAPTER 5:

Drat! His hired men had not found them. It was as if they had disappeared into thin air. He had even looked all the way to London and he found nothing. *Nothing!* The man shook with anger. No one got away with double-crossing him and that was final. He would find that dratted woman and her so-called "sister" and make them pay for what they did. He heard a knock on the door.

"My lord?"

"Well, what is it man? Did you receive any news?"

"'Tis the same old story, my lord. Not a trace of her has been found. We have searched England through and through and she is nowhere."

"Well, find her then!", the man roared.

His servant scurried out of the room. My lord sat deep in thought. He had had her in his clutches and she had escaped. Through a small lapse on his part, she and the girl had made their getaway. *Damnation!* He hated it when he lost; that was because he never had. *Until now.* He stood up and made a small cross along his heart.
"As God is my witness, I will not rest until she is made to ***pay***!"

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clothing that had been found in the attic until they had come across a simple green dress that brought out Chelseah's beautiful green eyes. With a few alterations, the ladies had made the dress as good as new. It had been years since Chelseah had felt the soft caress of velvet across her skin. The dress was a high-waisted concoction with a high neckline and puffed sleeves. Under the green overskirt was a satin, light-green, underskirt. At the waistline a green satin ribbon was tied, and it nearly reached the floor. Olivia had twirled Chelseah's hair into a soft bun, and small curls framed her face. She looked again into the glass. She did not think that His Grace would approve.

"Oooh! Chelseah you look so very pretty! Almost like a fairy princess!" Sandra had helped them a little and had watched Chelseah's transformation. The smallpox that had plagued her had not been as bad as the doctor had thought and Sandra had been able to leave the sickroom early.

"Green is definitely your color, my dear. It brings out your eyes and your hair."

"You do not think that it is too frivolous? After all, I am still a servant."

"Oh piffle, Chelseah. You do not really think that I would let you become my companion wearing *that,* do you?"

What Olivia was referring to was Chelseah's old black dress made of a coarse, heavy material. It had been thrown to the floor, and it lay in a crumpled bundle. A more dignified position could not be found for it. The utter absurdity of appearing at a lord's table in serving garb made Chelseah giggle.

"Very well, milady, you win. I will do as you wish."

The women laughed together for a few minutes until Olivia became very serious. She looked to be deep in thought and Chelseah wondered what she was up to. Once Olivia became serious, one never knew what to expect of her.

"What is it, Olivia? You look like the cat that swallowed the canary."

"Mama, Chelseah does not have proper shoes. Wait here. I will return shortly."

Chelseah sighed. What had she gotten herself into? She might not like to admit it, but Lady Maria and Olivia made her fit right in. She was enjoying herself very much. In five minutes, Olivia was back.

"Try these on Chelseah. I believe that we take the same size and I have many pairs of shoes, so I can spare them."

Chelseah slipped her feet into the soft leather slippers. Olivia was right; they were a perfect fit. Olivia and her mother clapped her hands with glee. Chelseah smiled. What would His Grace say when he saw her? Chelseah's stomach twittered in anticipation.

"Come Chelseah, Sandra. I want you to help me dress, and then we will take the evening by storm."

The unsuspecting Duke of Dullingham prepared for dinner wondering if he *really* had taken leave of his senses. He was not sure why he had asked Chelseah to take on the responsibility of becoming a lady's companion, but he would see the results this evening. He wondered what was to come. When Simmons announced that Lord and Lady Scarbaugh had arrived, Dullingham had the strangest feeling that he was walking into the tunnel of doom. He downed the last of his brandy and followed Simmons to the drawing room. The sight that met his eyes on his arrival stopped him dead in his tracks. Was that really Miss Chelseah Vanderleigh, or had an angel flown down to take her place? Dullingham did not know what his mother had done, but she had transformed a dirty,

tattered servant into a beauty. The green that they had chosen for the dress was really becoming. She smiled at him, and Olivia beckoned him over. Dullingham frowned. Was this another one of her 'charm' tactics? He could not be sure. She seemed to fit right in, comfortably sitting next to his mother and sister. It seemed as if she belonged within his circle. Was this an act, or was this woman genuine? Dullingham swallowed and approached the group.

Chelseah felt dizzy. She had seen the Duke's appraisal of her, and he seemed to approve of her dress. He did not look so terrible himself. When he put off his arrogant countenance, he looked very agreeable indeed. Really, he cut a fine figure. Tonight, he was wearing a blue coat over a light brown waistcoat and tan pantaloons. Everything that man seemed to wear showed off his muscular arms and legs to perfection. A tiny gold clasp with the initials AF was all the jewellery he wore.

"Good evening everyone. I see that you have all become acquainted. Olivia, Mama, Miss Vanderleigh, you all look very becoming. Lady Scarbaugh, you are beautiful as always."

"Alex, my boy, you had better watch out or I will challenge you to a duel for trying to steal my wife!"

"Ooh! You are scaring me, Malcolm." Lord Scarbaugh slapped Dullingham good-naturedly on the arm.

"You have found yourself quite a gem in Miss Vanderleigh, Alex. She will be a very good influence on Olivia. Where did you find such a rare jewel?"

"She just fell on my doorstep one day when I was least expecting it, did you not Miss Vanderleigh?"

Chelseah turned a beet red. *The ogre!* He sure had the knack of embarrassing her when she least expected it. How could he throw the memory of their first meeting back into her face?

"You could say that it happened that way, Your Grace."

Just then the staid, old Mr. Simmons announced dinner. He seemed unruffled by the change in Chelseah's status, and he almost ignored her. Lord Scarbaugh offered his arm to his wife and Lady Maria and followed the butler out the door. Dullingham offered his arm to his sister, but Chelseah held back. She did not want to put him out in any way; she would just follow behind.

"Well, Chelseah, are you going to lag behind like a servant all evening, or will you take my arm and let me escort you and Olivia to dinner?"

Chelseah blushed again and took the arm he offered. *Drat the man anyway!* It seemed that everytime she had made up her mind about him, he turned around and became *compassionate* and *kind.* Chelseah shook her head. She would never understand the ways a man's mind worked.

The dinner passed by in a blur for Chelseah. It was wonderful, for Lord Scarbaugh entertained them all with stories of his youthful adventures in the West Indies when he was about twenty years of age. Chelseah's ribs hurt from laughing so hard. As dinner progressed, Chelseah remembered snippets from her childhood—her friends bringing home their friend Alexander, them running amok in the woods near their home. She shook off the memory. It did no good to dwell on it.

As the ladies rose from the table, Alex and Lord Scarbaugh decided to forego their port and cigars in favour of joining them in the drawing room. Alex offered his arm

to his mother and Olivia, Lord Scarbaugh offered his arm to his wife, while Chelseah followed closely behind. She did not mind walking alone for it afforded her time to think. She thought of Sandra, sleeping soundly up in the nursery, and smiled fondly. When the party arrived in the drawing room, Chelseah chose a seat away from the company, near the back of the room. She wanted to remain oblivious, hidden from the duke's often piercing gaze. She suppressed an involuntary shudder; he seemed to have the knack of staring into her soul. It made her decidedly uncomfortable.

Chelseah smiled as Alex led his sister to the pianoforte. So, Olivia was to play for them? How wonderful! Chelseah sat farther back into the shadows, closing her eyes to relish the sound of the music. She remembered back to a time when she had played with her mother, she on the harp, her mother on the pianoforte, her father accompanying them with his rich baritone. She let Olivia's playing wash over her—for a time she was able to forget the danger that threatened. The danger that threatened all that she held dear.

Olivia had finished playing, and Alex had led her back to the settee, when Chelseah felt his presence by her right shoulder. She opened her eyes, to Alex's dark brown stare.

"Will you now play for us, Miss Vanderleigh?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly…"

"Please, Chelseah, it would mean so much to me." This last statement from Lady Maria, whose eyes shone with hope and excitement.

"Very well, Your Grace, if you insist."

Chelseah stood up, squared her shoulders, and prepared for something that she hadn't done in almost a decade. Alex offered her his arm, but she refused, knowing that he would automatically lead her to the pianoforte. They wanted her to play, play she would, but on her own terms. Chelseah headed towards the harp, delighted at the shock that registered on the faces of the assembled guests. As soon as she was settled, she began to play.

The moment the music issued forth from the harp, Alex was lost. This woman, an angel, for none other could play like that, was most definitely not a servant. A servant would never play such a beautiful instrument in his or her lifetime. So, was she a Lady or a very brilliant actress?

Chapter 6:

Later, deep in the night, Chelseah awoke, shaking and trembling. She had been dreaming about ***him*** again, and she was afraid. Chelseah turned to see if she had woken Sandra, but her sister slept soundly by her side. Her bout with the smallpox had left her quite weak, but her strength was gradually coming back to her. Chelseah slowly slipped out of bed, taking care not to disturb the sleeping child, lit a candle and left her room. Since she had become companion to Lady Olivia, Chelseah had a room on the top floor not far from her mistresses' own chamber. The room had been painted a soft blue with small flowers papered all over it. The bed had hanging curtains and large bay windows looked out onto the grounds of the estate. Chelseah found it quite a bit more comfortable than the cramped servant's room she had had below stairs. Once Sandra was no longer contagious, Chelseah had deemed it necessary for her to share her room. During the day, the Duke had hired a local village girl to look after Sandra. Yes, their lives were definitely taking a turn for the better. If only she could stop worrying about the danger that lurked around her. The danger with ***him.***

Chelseah crept silently down to the library. After her nightmare, she could not possibly return to sleep, so she hoped a good book would help settle her nerves. The house was quiet. Chelseah tiptoed into the library and started browsing through the books. When Chelseah had first arrived and had seen the library, it had literally taken her breath away. Mr. Simmons had sent her there to clean one day, and she had longed to run her fingers along the bindings of the leather-bound books. The light from her candle cast a dim glow across the room. Books covered three walls from floor-to-ceiling, and some of them were so old that the pages were falling apart. Now, instead of cleaning, she had every book in the library at her disposal to read. Chelseah clapped her hands quietly, then stopped in front of a portrait above the mantel. It seemed that the serious man who looked down at her saw right down into the deepest recesses of her soul. Chelseah shivered. She did not feel like being reproved for the secrets that she held. She could not help it. She *must* keep mum about all that was ailing her or she would find herself in deep trouble and Sandra would be dead.

Chelseah had not been in the library ten minutes when she heard a noise. She stopped and listened. The house was still quiet. She was about to go back to her browsing when she heard it again. Chelseah whirled, and came face to face with another danger, Alexander Fairchild himself. She looked into his deep dark eyes and felt her resolve falter. It would be easy to trust this man, especially since just the sight of him in his robe made her blood boil.

"What is wrong, Chelseah? I heard a noise down here and I thought that I would investigate."

"I-I-I h-h-had a-a night… I had a nightmare, Your Grace, and I-I thought t-t-that a go-go-good book w-w-would help."

Dullingham was confused. He had asked her a simple question, and yet here she was stammering like a naughty child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. *Confound it!* This woman could befuddle any man's mind. She was in her nightrail, covered by her robe, but that did not hide the fact that she was a woman. Chelseah had unpinned her hair before bed, and it fell in waves down her back. Dullingham shook himself. These musings would not do.

"Would a bit of brandy calm your nerves? You seem wound as tight as a spring."

Chelseah nodded, and Dullingham poured her a drink. He did not seem surprised that she had actually accepted such a drink. She sat carefully on a chair near the hearth by the fire, and drank slowly, anxious to get away from the man who caused turmoil within her.

"Would you like to tell me about it Chelseah?"

Chelseah faltered again. It would be so easy to leave her burdens with someone else, someone who could put an end to them once and for all. It would be easy to find a friend in this man and his trusting eyes. But to trust a man again would be worse than being a slave. Chelseah looked again at the picture above the mantel and felt again the eyes of reproof. She looked away. She could not trust the Duke of Dullingham. Chelseah stood up and made to leave, but the Duke stopped her.

"Chelseah, you are hiding something from me."

"Your Grace, there are secrets in the world that even you cannot know. Please let them rest."

Dullingham conceded to her right to privacy, but he could not help feeling that he could help her if she would let him. The secrets she held felt *sinister,* and he wanted to protect her from any danger. Dullingham could not fathom why he felt he needed to protect Chelseah; for all he knew, *he* could be the one in danger. Slowly, he approached the place where she stood. Chelseah visibly shrank away from him.

"What are you hiding, Chelseah?"

Chelseah shook her head no as Dullingham bent to kiss her. He felt her tense muscles--she feared him. Slowly, deliberately, he kissed her. She felt feverish to his touch, but egad!, she responded. She did not kiss like an innocent; she kissed like a woman. Her response surprised him, and he deepened his embrace. Chelseah pushed him away.

"Please, Your Grace, do not provoke me."

In the candlelight, Dullingham could see her tremble. The light cast her into shadow, but he could clearly see the fear, and the need, written in her eyes.

"Where did you learn to kiss like that?"

Chelseah stammered."L-l-l-like w-w-w-what, Y-Y-Y-Your Grace?"

"Like a woman, Chelseah. You kiss like a woman."

Chelseah looked at him in sheer terror and broke free of his arm. Dullingham tried to stop her from fleeing, but she pushed on. Grabbing her candle and her books, she fled from the room. Dullingham looked dazedly after her. *Now, why had he done that?* It seemed that everytime he got within ten feet of that woman, he became a different person. She could work her charm on anyone. His kiss, however, had not solved the mystery of who Chelseah really was. Was she a woman of the world, or a lady? Did she want to take advantage of him, use him for some unknown purpose? Her response told him that she was not innocent, but her actions did not depict her as wanton. She acted and conducted herself like a lady. *And those books? Would a common servant read Lord Byron and "An Historical Viewpoint on Shakespeare's Masterpieces"?* Dullingham did not think so, and what's more, he could have sworn she muttered in Latin from time to time when she thought that she was alone. He had to be on guard to save himself from the dangerous and mysterious, Miss Chelseah Vanderleigh.

Chelseah nearly slammed her door, but then she remembered Sandra. She closed the door gently and sagged against it, hugging her books across her chest. Her cheeks were flaming, and her heart was beating so fast that Chelseah feared it would knock her over. *Why had she let her guard down?* She had done so once before, she should not have let it happen again. She had not kissed a man since ***him,*** and even then, it had not been the same. The arrogant Duke of Dullingham aroused a need from deep within her soul that she had long thought dead and buried.

Chelseah took a deep breath to calm her nerves. She was even tenser now than she was before. She no longer held any hope of getting back to sleep. *What was she going to do?* Chelseah slid to the floor and buried her face in her hands. She was to accompany Lady Olivia and Dullingham to the local squire's ball next week; maybe she could avoid the man until then. *No, there was no 'maybe' about it.* She *had* to avoid him, or she would fall into the trap of trusting again.

Chapter 7:

It was the day of the squire's ball. Lady Olivia was in ecstasy--this was to be her first country-dance, and she was very excited about it. Since Chelseah had become her companion, there had been a never-ending round of calls made and received, a race against the clock for a new wardrobe for Chelseah, and many preparations for Lady Olivia's come out in May. Lady Maria no longer took to her bed. Dullingham was very surprised at this because he had thought his mother beyond hope. This was another reason that endeared him to Chelseah. Lady Maria had become so engrossed in her new task of turning Chelseah into a beautiful country maiden that she no longer had any time for her illnesses. And amazingly, she was no longer bored. Chelseah brought spice to her life that she never knew existed. Alex was often amazed at the mysterious woman who now lived under his roof. He had not approached her since the kiss, but he had watched her from afar. Most of Chelseah's free time was spent with her sister, but sometimes Chelseah would go off to wander in the grounds alone. Once day, Alex had followed her. Believing that she was unobserved, she walked into a wing of the house that was rarely used anymore. She entered a room that had once been Alex's favorite, curled up in the window seat, and read. She could sit there for hours, Alex watching from the shadows. In those quiet moments, Alex found it hard to believe that Chelseah was capable of any scheming.

"Chelseah, do you think that there will be very many handsome men at the ball tonight?"

Chelseah, Olivia, Lady Maria, and Sandra were putting the finishing touches on Chelseah's new wardrobe. They had been working hard for three days to finish Chelseah's dress before Squire Malhoney's ball.

"Olivia, what kind of question is that to ask?"

Olivia fixed her mother with a withering gaze, and once again directed her question at Chelseah.

"I believe that you will have to wait and find out. Since it is only early afternoon, and we are now officially finished with my dress, how about we take Sandra for a walk in the village? It is too beautiful a day to be cooped up inside. What say you Sandra, miladies?"

Olivia ignored the deliberate change of subject and voiced her acceptance to the proposal. Spring had come early to the little town of Dullingham, and it felt good to feel the sun's warmth once again. Lady Maria decided to remain behind and finish her preparations for the ball and rest a little so that she would be fresh as a daisy to dance all evening. It seemed that there was a mischievous gleam in her eyes when she told Olivia to have Dullingham go instead. Chelseah could not stop her. Lady Olivia was out the door and down the hall before Chelseah could get her bearings. She made a *moue.* She had succeeded in avoiding the man all week and now the precious hold she had on her self-control would be lost. *Damnation!*

"Chelseah, are you listening? You seem to be in quite a daze these last few days."

When Olivia knew that she had Chelseah's full attention, she continued. "Alex said that he will accompany us, but only if you promise to ride to the village. Please say yes, Chelseah. The winter has been so long and cold that it will be good to gallop across the fields fresh with spring grass. Please, Chelseah."

The entreaty in Olivia's eyes made Chelseah give in. She did not want to go anywhere near Dullingham, but if it would please her lady, then she would do it. She put away her sewing, carefully laid away her new dress, took Sandra by the hand, and followed Olivia out the door.

Ten minutes later, Olivia, Chelseah, Dullingham, and Sandra met at the stables. Olivia had found an old, navy blue riding habit that had once belonged to her mother, and it was a perfect fit for Chelseah. Sandra wore a short green dress suitable for riding and her hat held a single tiny feather. Chelseah's hat sat daintily atop her mess of curls, hairs sneaking out from underneath to brush her cheek.. They all looked spiffy, but Dullingham seemed to dominate the scene with his dark tan breeches and brown coat. Chelseah sucked in her breath. *Would he embarrass her as usual? Or would he let her ride in peace?*

Dullingham's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets the minute they saw Chelseah. *Man, but was she ever beautiful!* Dullingham had noticed Chelseah more and more lately, and what he noticed was a great danger to his peace of mind. The navy blue she wore brought out the red highlights in her hair, and she held herself gracefully and serenely. Dullingham scratched his head. *Why did her actions seem so familiar? He could have sworn he had met her before, but where?* Dullingham was pulled from his reverie by Olivia's gentle screech.

"Must everyone stand around in the clouds all day, or shall we get going? You both have seemed out of touch with reality this past week. Come Sandra. We shall choose a pony for you to ride."

Dullingham's eyes locked with Chelseah's. Everyone knew that servants did not normally ride pure-breds, but they all seemed to take Chelseah's riding abilities for granted. When Chelseah tried unsuccessfully to avert her eyes, Dullingham had his answer. Fine, then. If she persisted in hiding things from him, she would just have to accept the consequences. He would fall to her level and play her little game.

"Miss Vanderleigh, I believe that I have just the horse for you. Would you like to ride our prize stallion, Black Thunder? I think that he is the one who is best suited to your temperament."

Chelseah tried to read Dullingham's thoughts, but he kept his eyes hooded. Had he guessed her secret? She would not be surprised if he had, for *that man* was no half-wit. If he could play her game, she could raise the stakes. She would walk right in and grab the bait and show the arrogant Duke of Dullingham who she really was.

"Chelseah, I need your assistance. Can you please do up the back of my dress? The buttons seem to have evaded me."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Lady Maria was deep in thought. Since their ride this afternoon, Chelseah seemed to have a glow about her that was not there before. Was it excitement over the ball, the fresh spring air, or something entirely different? She would have to find out. If only Chelseah would trust her enough to confide in her, maybe she could help with whatever was ailing her.

"There you are, Your Grace. And may I be so bold as to add that you are looking very splendid this evening. Red is your color."

Lady Maria blushed and giggled like a schoolgirl. Truth be told, she had not felt this young or energetic in years. Her dress, a medium-necked, short-backed, satin dress felt soft and billowy against her skin. It felt good to feel young again.

"Thank you, dear. It has been years since I have felt this…what's the word? *Marvellous!* You have changed me Chelseah. Now it's my turn to help you dress."

When Chelseah began to protest, saying something about how servants should not be served by their master, Lady Maria held up a hand.

"Shush, Chelseah. Enough of this faradiddle and nonsense. I will not hear another word of protest from you. You are a beautiful young woman, but how do you expect to be noticed if you hide behind a servant's manner all the time? Turn around now, that's a good girl. I will help you."

Chelseah conceded and let Lady Maria fiddle with her hair. Frankly, she enjoyed being fiddled over. It had been years since she had felt this good. She hoped that her cream and yellow dress would show off her complexion to advantage. Now that it was no longer winter, spring colours were all the rage. She hoped that the arrogant Duke would think twice before making a spectacle of her. When they had ridden out across the fields that afternoon, the Duke had been surprised at her riding ability. *Shocked* was more precise. Chelseah smiled a wicked smile. He would never discover her secret, but he *would* see her as the Lady she was. A lady with a strong heart and a solid head on her shoulders. She would not be taken in by a man again.

Alex had ridden out again after the ladies returned home. He rode with the wind, oblivious to anyone or anything around him. He was lost completely in thought. Chelseah was a lady—of that, he was certain. But there was no one on the social scene named Chelseah Vanderleigh. So who was this charming young lady with the flowing mane of dark hair and dark green eyes? Alex's horse, Fireball, snorted and awakened Alex to the fact that he was nearly at the boundary of his large estate. He rode home to prepare for the squire's ball, wondering the whole way who had taught his sister's companion to ride like a queen.

Chapter 8:

The Duke of Dullingham watched the dancers with disinterest. He stood to one side with Lord Malcolm Scarbaugh, one of his best childhood friends. Malcolm had tried to draw him into conversation but all Alex could think of was Chelseah in her becoming yellow dress.

"Devil take it, Alex. What has got into you?"

"Nothing, Malcolm. I am just in another world."

"Is it that beautiful, young companion of your sister's?"

Alex looked at his good friend with wonder in his eyes.

"Is it that obvious? I am trying to find out who that young woman is."

"You are smitten with her, I can tell. Why do you not ask her? She will probably tell you all you need to know."

"I've tried, Malcolm. But that young woman guards her secrets with her life… Tell me, does the name *Vanderleigh* tell you anything? That name seems very familiar, but I can't seem to trace it."

Malcolm shook his head and fell silent. He turned his attention to where Alex was headed and sent up a tiny prayer. He hoped that whatever was ailing Alex would be solved in due time.

Chelseah had been a success from the moment she had set foot in the ballroom. Dullingham had disappeared, and that was just as well, since Olivia was instantly surrounded by her friends. Chelseah tried to remember the names of everyone to whom she had been introduced, which was not an easy task. She also had to watch for Angus McCrary, since it was rumoured that he was used to coming to parties uninvited. She noticed Dullingham threading his way towards her and she steadied her nerves. She *would* not let him embarrass her.

"Alex, where have you been? You have not asked Chelseah to dance. She has stood up with every man here except you. Come on Alex, you should do your duty." Alex stiffened. He hated to be reproved, and especially by his sister. He cringed under Olivia's bold manner. If she continued in this vein she would not be brought out in May. Dullingham was about to deliver a stinging reprimand, but Chelseah had the situation well in hand. She had dragged Olivia out of earshot of her friends and was giving her a good set-down.

"Olivia, how dare you speak so…so *boldly* in public? You reprimand your brother, who is the Duke of Dullingham, in front of your friends. Have you no respect? You may be a Lady, but you do not act like one. Refined young ladies do not tell their brother and lord that he must do his duty. I think that you owe His Grace an apology, Olivia, and if you continue acting like a spoiled child, I will recommend that your come out be put off for another year. Do I make myself explicitly clear?" Chelseah stood with her hands on her hips and wagged a finger under Olivia's nose. Olivia nodded meekly. She knew she had behaved terribly and would apologize to Alex for it.

"Yes ma'am. I behaved terribly." Olivia walked towards her brother and gave him a small curtsy in sign of respect.

"I am sorry Alex. Only you know what is best for you."

The duke could not believe his eyes. One set-down and Olivia became obedient. How did that woman do it? Dullingham nodded his acceptance and gave Olivia a quick

peck on the cheek. He sent her to her friends and soon, the men were claiming her for the dances. Dullingham approached Chelseah and gently touched her shoulder.

"May I have this dance, Miss Vanderleigh?"

Chelseah wanted to pull away from him, but the look in his eyes stopped her. His deep brown eyes had the look of fire about them and to refuse to dance with the arrogant Duke would add fuel to that stunning fire. She stood up and he led her into the set. The orchestra was preparing a waltz and Chelseah wished with all her heart that she could remember the proper steps. She had worked too hard to get where she was this evening.

As Dullingham led Chelseah through the rhythms of the dance, he could not help but notice how light her body felt in his arms. She was like a feather, light and graceful. She danced with the ease of an accomplished Lady, and he could not help but feel that she was the most beautiful woman in the hall. Even Squire Malhoney's daughters could not compare to Chelseah's lively countenance and radiant smile. She looked as if she belonged among them. She even wore the current style of dress like a knowledgeable lady of fashion. *Who was this beautiful angel that he held in his arms? Could he trust her? Or not?* Chelseah followed his lead flawlessly, without missing a single step. He smiled. For the moment he would just be content to hold her.

Chelseah might have followed the Duke unfailingly, but her stomach had knotted in tension. This dance had brought back many memories and Chelseah feared she might be starting a headache. But how could that be when she was being held by the most powerful man she had ever met? She felt small quivers down her spine; she had never felt this strongly for any man, not even ***him.*** Chelseah savoured the feeling. In Dullingham's arms, she felt safe and secure, like nothing could ever harm her. She knew from experience, however, that appearances are misleading. At that thought, she nearly burst into tears. *Why could she not find it in her heart to trust this dangerous, kind, arrogant man? Would she not be safe if she did?* The tightening of Dullingham's hand upon her waist interrupted Chelseah's musings. She looked up and saw the fire in the Duke's eyes deepen even darker.

"Is something wrong, Your Grace?"

"Chelseah, have you seen Olivia? She seems to have disappeared, and I have just spied Angus McCrary going out on the terrace."

"I am sure that Olivia is fine, Your Grace." Dullingham barely nodded and they finished the dance in silence.

Out on the terrace, Angus McCrary crept up stealthily beside Olivia. She looked beautiful in the moonlight in her white silk dress embroidered with light blue flowers. Olivia nearly jumped out of her skin when she noticed him there beside her.

"What are you doing here Mr. McCrary?", Olivia said in a frantic whisper.

"I have come for an assignation, Lady Olivia, just as you asked. I have come for what I asked for—a moonlight kiss." At that Angus pulled Olivia roughly towards him. She pulled away.

"I have not given you leave to speak to me so, and as I recall, I explicitly told you to leave me alone!"

"I do not take orders from a *chit.* Lady Olivia, I answer to no one." Angus grabbed Olivia's wrist and pushed her against the low stone wall. "You will give me what I want, Lady Olivia."

Olivia raised her hand and slapped him. She was able to wiggle out of his iron grasp.

"If I scream, my friends will come running. You can do nothing, sirrah."

Angus laughed a low, mirthless laugh. "I will not be the one to be blamed Lady Olivia. In these situations, it is usually the woman's reputation that is ruined, not the man's. You are fighting a losing battle Olivia, and I demand to be obeyed."

He pulled her to him once again and would have kissed her had he not heard a sound behind him. He whirled and saw Chelseah, her eyes shooting daggers at him.

"The woman's reputation is only ruined if there are no witnesses, Angus McCrary. I suggest that you step away from Lady Olivia this instant or there will be *hell* to pay."

Olivia gasped at Chelseah's language. She had never heard a lady speak so, but if it would help her out of this troublesome situation, she would not complain.

"I am not at fault here, Miss. Lady Olivia was the one who threw herself at me. It is she, not I, that is the cause of all of this."

Chelseah approached Angus dangerously. Her hands were on her hips, and her lips were drawn into a frown.

"Do not try to take me in, sirrah. I can easily unman you from where I stand, so do not try to squeeze your way out of this situation. Now I will ask you again, step away from Lady Olivia."

Angus seemed to hesitate, and then he smiled a wicked smile.

"I do not have to answer to you for you are only a servant. I can act as I please."

"You will listen to the lady Angus, or I have no doubt that she will unman you. Now I will give you a choice: either you leave of your own volition, and no questions will be asked or I can drag you out of here and then you will regret your ridiculous actions. Which will it be Angus?"

Angus seemed to cower beneath the Duke of Dullingham's fiery gaze. But he would not lose this battle.

"I am not afraid of you, *Your Grace.*"

That was the last straw. Chelseah and Dullingham surged toward Angus and by the time he realised what had befallen him, the Duke had him by the collar and was pulling him towards the terrace doors. Not even one of Chelseah's pins had fallen from her hair, and she turned to Angus McCrary one last time.

"Next time you decide to compromise a lady, sirrah, I suggest you think twice. Filth like you should not even be allowed to walk the streets."

There was a small round of applause from the doors and Chelseah realised that they had an audience. At least Olivia had come out of this with her reputation intact. Dullingham led Angus away, certain that he would never taint their village with his presence again. Chelseah turned to Olivia as the small crowd returned to the festivities.

"Well, milady, now do you realise the importance of a chaperone?"

"I do not understand Chelseah, how could he have turned into such a monster. He had been very kind to me before."

"Let us take a walk, Lady Olivia. I have a story to tell you, and I hope that by my revealing it to you, you will be better able to keep your head on your shoulders when in the presence of a man."

Olivia nodded and linked her arm with Chelseah's. They walked out into the gardens of Squire Malhoney's large estate and were so engrossed in their conversation that they did not notice the shadow that crept silently behind them.

"Do you mean to tell me that really happened? What a mean-spirited, cold-hearted, thug!"

Chelseah had just confided her secret to Olivia and felt only relief in having shared her darkest fears with someone close to her own age.

"Are you going to tell Alex, Chelseah? You can trust him, you know."

Chelseah shook her head. Even if Olivia provided her with a listening ear, she would never fully understand the depths of her despair. She could not trust Dullingham; much as she wanted to, her heart would not let her. She ached so badly inside--yearned for the help and security that only Dullingham could provide her. But her treacherous heart had betrayed her once before--she could not let it do so again.

"Do you understand now why I am so strict about certain things? You can never be too sure how your actions can be construed. You should learn to show yourself 'cautious as a serpent, yet innocent as a dove.'"

"You speak with the wisdom of the gods, Miss Vanderleigh."

Chelseah jumped at the sound of Dullingham's voice. *Just how much had he heard?* She hoped he had only heard her quote from the Bible, or else she would be in big trouble.

"You two have been gone for quite some time. The ball is nearly over. Do you wish to leave now, or wait until the last dance?"

Chelseah looked at Olivia and tried unsuccessfully to suppress her schoolgirl giggle.

"We wish to savour every moment of this wonderful evening, Your Grace."

"In that case, Miss Vanderleigh, will you do me the honour of saving me the last dance?"

Chelseah inclined her head in a gesture of acquiescence and followed Olivia and her brother inside. *What an adventurous evening this had been!*

Chapter 9:

"Well, Hadley, have you received any news? I cannot wait forever." The lord reclined in his favourite chair in his study. He stared at his servant with a look of superiority. "Well?!"

The servant cringed. He did not like his master, but he did not have a choice.

"We have received word that she may be in Cambridge, in a little town not far from Newmarket."

"What is this, do I have nodcocks working for me? I want solid proof, Hadley, not some *word* that she is there. Now get to work and get me some solid proof before I put you out of commission for good!"

The servant nodded and scurried from the room. His master sat deep in thought for some time. If she were there, she would regret having left his side at all. He smiled mirthlessly. Yes, she would regret it.

Dullingham seemed to be having bouts of insomnia since Squire Malhoney's ball. It had been a week since she had saved his sister from an unholy alliance with Angus McCrary and two weeks since he and Chelseah had kissed. Dullingham had to admit to himself that he had not felt this way for a woman in many years. The first time had been a youthful folly on his part, but now he had matured into a man of thirty. It was the first time since acceding to the title a few years ago that he was contemplating settling down and raising a family. There was the dilemma. How could he love or even consider loving a woman whom he didn't even know? Dullingham went to the window of his study and looked out at the beautiful sunny day. Chelseah and Olivia were playing with Sandra. The women had removed their bonnets and were chasing after Chelseah's little sister like they did not have a care in the world. Dullingham smiled. Chelseah never liked to wear her bonnet, and she was always removing it. Real ladies did not run and jump, but Chelseah did not seem to care. That was one thing Alex liked about her—she was very unconventional. He continued watching the trio outside. He had grown quite fond of that little child, Sandra, over the six weeks that Chelseah had been here and he did not relish letting her go. *Why should she go, Dullingham?* his thoughts asked him. Just then Chelseah spotted him in the window and she waved. He waved back. If that woman left as well, where would that leave him? *Blast it, who was that woman?*

Dullingham ran nervous fingers through his dark hair, completely ruining the half-hour his valet had spent on it. He drained his brandy glass and poured himself another. A letter on his desk caught his attention. It was from his friend, Lord Matthew Falcone in London. Dullingham had written to him earlier that month to find out if he could shed some light on the mystery that was Miss Chelseah Vanderleigh. Matthew's letter read:

Dear Alex,

The task that you set me to was not an easy one. It seems that no one remembers the Vanderleighs. There isn't even any mention of them in DeBrett's Peerage. It is as if their legacy has disappeared into thin air. I had to enter the library and search the archives for the information. You're lucky that you're my friend Alex, because for no one else

would I go to such trouble. I hope that the little information I can give you will be of help to you.

The name Vanderleigh goes back a long way. In 1167, there was a sea captain named Carson Vanderleigh who was an honest, hard-working man. Carson Vanderleigh was renowned for his bravery in fighting off pirates, and in 1172 he was knighted by King Henry II and became Sir Carson Vanderleigh. Nothing much is known until about 20 years later, when the Vanderleighs helped put an end to King John's reign. Eventually, their estates grew to include parts of Wales and Western England. In 1375, an earldom was bestowed on the Vanderleigh head, Sir Walter Vanderleigh. The Vanderleighs became well known for their courage and bravery and were well received anywhere they went.

In 1769 the fifth Earl Vanderleigh married a young lady by the name of Marietta St-John. They had one daughter in 1772, and they named her Marguerita. Unfortunately, Marietta Vanderleigh died without leaving a male heir. Her husband Horatio was so devastated that he too died soon after. Marguerita was only seventeen when her parents died, but she inherited all the estates, including the ones in Wales. The nearest male relative tried to inherit the title, but it too was bestowed upon Marguerita. There was outrage in the family, and divisions arose because Parliament had opted to give the title to a woman.

In 1790, Marguerita met and married Ninian Smith-Hewitt, a recently appointed Laird from Scotland. That caused even more divisions in the family, but Marguerita still held the title. The family was upset because Marguerita had married beneath her station. What the family did not realize was that Ninian Smith-Hewitt was not only a laird of Scotland but he was also an English lord. When Marguerita married, she became Marguerita Smith-Hewitt, Countess of Landlyn. (Do not stop now Alex, for there is more to this story). In 1792, Marguerita gave birth to a daughter named Chelseah. She too could not give birth to a son. Ninian was devastated but found a way to keep his title going. In his will, he stipulated that the man his daughter would marry would assume his title while leaving full control of his estates to his daughter. This wonderful family lived in Hereford and Worchester, in the West. Her parents seem to have died, but there's no record of it.

I'm sorry Alex, but the family history ends there. There seem to be no records of that family anywhere. Twenty-three years later and there is not a single trace. Where have they gone? No one knows. I hope all this is satisfactory, Alex. Take care of yourself and do not get into trouble.
Your friend,
Matthew

Dullingham leaned back in his chair and fell deep in thought. So that's who Chelseah was. *Lady* Chelseah Vanderleigh Smith-Hewitt. That was why she acted above her station. She was not a servant. Why had she not told him who she was earlier? Chelseah seemed familiar because he had often visited friends in Hereford and Worchester as a boy, and Lady Smith-Hewitt had often given the young boys milk and cookies. Chelseah had not been more than two or three then, so she could not remember him. Dullingham felt a heavy weight on his shoulders--she had lied. Dullingham's conscience chided him. *She did not lie. It was more like a sin of omission.* Could Chelseah be that ashamed of her family heritage that she would hide it from him? He

thought not. Dullingham did not relish the task that was ahead of him—that of finding out the dark secret that Chelseah held. He was afraid of what she would reveal to him.

Mr. Simmons looked darkly at the small group gathering in the hallway. He would never admit it, but the racket that they caused did not prove that they were well bred. He rolled his eyes. He would never understand the ways of the gentry. Chelseah was giggling like a child and Olivia was no better. He threw up his hands and despaired trying to quiet them. Those women would quiet down in time.

"Chelseah, you sure know how to have fun. I do not believe that I have felt this… excited in years! Now I understand what Mama means when she says that she has rediscovered her youthful vigour."

Chelseah tried not to blush. The fun that they had had chasing Sandra could not compare to anything else. The childish innocence and pleasure in her eyes could never be equalled. Chelseah sighed. It felt good to just let loose and forget about her past. For a few hours, she had forgotten about ***him.***

"Chelseah, I believe that we have disturbed Alex. Look!"

Dullingham was approaching them with determination. He smiled when he reached them, but the smile did not quite reach his eyes. He addressed Sandra.

"Well then, little one, did you have fun outside in the beautiful weather?"

"Yes, Your Grace. But it would have been more fun had you been there."

This time Dullingham's smile was genuine. He ruffled Sandra's curls and turned to the women.

"Thank you for waving, Chelseah. It was the brightest part of my day." He paused. "Olivia? I wish to speak with Chelseah. Will you take Sandra to see the new spring flowers in the solarium?"

Olivia was about to protest, but something in her brother's tone of voice stopped her. She reached for Sandra's hand and they retreated.

"Will you please follow me to my study, Miss Vanderleigh?"

Chelseah nodded and followed him. She wondered what had happened to so alter his mood. His beautiful eyes no longer held burning flames, but all they seemed to contain was a dull sadness. Chelseah fretted and began to panic. She felt a sense of intense foreboding. *Was her new life about to be shattered into a million pieces?* Dullingham motioned for her to take a seat. He poured them both a glass of sherry and stood at the window. Chelseah waited, for she had no idea why he looked so lost and forlorn. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he turned to her. He was so tense that he looked like a coiled spring ready to bounce.

"I believe that we now know enough about each other for you to tell me about your life in Hereford and Worchester, *Lady Smith-Hewitt.*"

Chelseah felt as if she had been slapped. Dullingham had used her full title. How long had he known? At her look of utter astonishment, Dullingham retrieved Matthew's letter and held it out to her. With shaking hands, Chelseah took it from him and began to read. It had been received this morning; that was why today was the only time that Dullingham had addressed her by her official title. Chelseah choked back a small sob. Now she would have to tell him the whole story. That would hurt more than any pain she could have ever felt.

"I think that you should sit down, Your Grace. This is going to be a long story."

Dullingham nodded and took the chair opposite her. He could see the pain and sorrow in her eyes. Chelseah braced herself for the worst. She began:

"Your Grace, please do not take this badly. I did not tell you before because I thought that I would be safer if I told no one about my dark past." In an undertone she said, "I have not realised how foolish I have been until now." Louder, she continued her story. "Your Grace, Sandra is not my sister. She is my daughter. I bore her out of wedlock five years ago when I was eighteen."

Chapter 10:

Dullingham was so stunned that he lost all sense of time. He did not realise how much time had passed until he felt Chelseah's gentle shake.

"Your Grace?"

Dullingham stared at her with hooded eyes. She looked like she was about to cry, and he looked away. He did not want that woman to see how much her surprising comment had affected him.

Indifferently, he said: "Go on, Miss Vanderleigh."

"I lived in Vowchurch, a small, *boring,* village in Hereford and Worchester. My parents taught me to appreciate the simpler things in life, even if we were of the nobility. My life was sheltered. I had never seen London, and the only place I had ever been to were my mother's many estates in Wales. As I grew out of childhood, I longed to be free of the village and everything with it. I wanted to see the world, wanted to travel, wanted to experience many new things. I never fully knew how foolish that thinking was until I was about seventeen."

"Whenever visitors came to the village, a celebration was organised, especially if they were lords or ladies. I think that that was the only time that was exciting. One day, two lords visited and the town was in a frenzy. The lords took the town by storm and swept the young women off their feet. They were both not much older than twenty or twenty-one. One of the young men had a profound impact on me, and we started a friendship. I was barely out of the schoolroom, but I thought that I knew what I was doing. My parents tried to discourage my friendship with this young lord, they did not trust him, but I was very headstrong and would not listen. Finally, they forbade me to see him, and I went along with their wishes. My parents could not stop him from seeing me at church or at the country-dances, however, and there he would work his charm.

One day after church, a few weeks after my birthday, that young lord and some of my childhood friends decided to go for a picnic that afternoon. The young men had been in the village for three months and they were accepted as 'good catches'. My parents had no objections to the picnic since I would be going along with friends that I had known for many years. We all met outside the church that afternoon and went for a picnic. That day was such fun. There was much laughter and song, and we even went berry picking. That was when the beautiful day turned sour.

The young lord asked if he could see me home. Naive as I was, I agreed. We all left the picnic at the same time, but somewhere along the way, the young man and I were separated from the group. So engrossed was I in our conversation, that I did not see where he led me. That young lord led me into the woods and seduced me."

Dullingham felt a knife plunge deep into his heart. Oh, the pain! How could something that horrible have happened?

"By the time the group found out what had happened, it was too late. My reputation was completely ruined. Of course, he denied all wrongdoing and placed the blame solely in my hands. *And the townspeople believed him! The word of a man who had been in town for no more than three months over the word of a young woman who had lived there all her life!* My parents were devastated but they stood by me. One month later, that young lord and I were married. When he found out that I carried his

child, he was ecstatic and he did everything in his power to make me feel comfortable. That was just an act, however, to hide the real motives behind our marriage."

Dullingham could see the pain clearly written all over her face. He closed his mind to it. He could never forgive her for having lied to him. Before he could say anything, she continued her heart-wrenching story.

"My pregnancy was a difficult one. I had many complications and nearly miscarried. In seven months, I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. She was so tiny that I thought she would not survive her first night. But she did and I knew right then and there that my daughter was a fighter. Unfortunately, my husband was not happy. He blamed me for not producing an heir, and he turned away from me from then on. He told me that I was filth, and that I was not fit to even wash his boots. *That man* turned me into a slave, and as Sandra grew, he took his anger out on her. One day, when Sandra was only two, I caught the man hitting her. He instantly regretted it. He never touched Sandra after that day, but I was made to suffer in her place. My life was miserable.

In the meantime, my parents had died, and it was then that I discovered who my husband really was. He was a Vanderleigh cousin, three times removed, and he had seduced me for my title. When I had failed to produce a son, the family line was not continued and my husband, through illegal means, assumed control of my estates. Since it was my fault that he now had a 'worthless' title, I was his scapegoat. He beat me and tried to make me docile and compliant. It worked for a time, until the day that I escaped. I have been running from him ever since. For nine months, I have been looking over my shoulder, hoping to protect Sandra from a dangerous enemy. I also thought that I was protecting myself."

Dullingham felt himself go numb. In a void devoid of any emotion, he asked:

"Is that how you see me, Chelseah? As an escape route from your husband? I knew you were going to be trouble the moment I met you. I cannot believe that I fell for your charm."

"Your Grace, I did not mean to hurt…"

"*I did not mean to hurt you."* He mocked. "That's what they all say. You have lied to me for nine weeks and it stops right here. Pack your bags, Chelseah. I do not want to see you in my sight again. You and your bastard daughter will be on the next coach back home. I have had enough of your lies."

Chelseah nearly fell over backwards. She had known that the arrogant Duke of Dullingham would be upset, but at the very least she had expected him to understand. Now he hated her and he had slandered her daughter.

"Alex…"

Dullingham whirled at her.

"Don't Chelseah. You lost the right to call me Alex the minute you lied to me. You have been dismissed, Miss Vanderleigh. Now, *slut,* take your daughter and leave!"

That was the last straw. Chelseah left that arrogant man's presence, but not before she had given him a stinging slap for the slurs against Sandra. In her room, she started packing. She would not keep the new dresses and gowns that had been lovingly made because the reminder would be too painful. She looked out the window at Dullingham's large estate and saw the master gallop away. Tears sprung up in her eyes and for the first time in a very long time, she cried.

Lord Henry Craven's servant, Mr. Hadley, grinned in satisfaction. They had found Chelseah and were waiting for the right time to take her home. His eyes lit up at the thought of his reward money. He would not have to go into service again. He would be a very rich man. Two other men were with him, and Mr. Hadley gave them the go ahead to proceed as planned. By this time next week, he would have moved up in life.

Chapter 11:

It was early afternoon when Chelseah had taken Sandra by the hand and left Dullingham manor behind. Olivia did not see her leave, for she had gone visiting with her mother and had given Chelseah some time to herself. Chelseah led Sandra down the long gravel drive, away from the pain and memories of the last few hours. It hurt Chelseah to leave, but she would not admit to herself that she had fallen head over heels in love with the Duke of Dullingham. She had known he would not understand; why, then, had she given that man her heart? Slowly, the lonely pair made their way into the small village. Chelseah had kept one of her dresses--the yellow and cream one that she had worn to Squire Malhoney's ball—and she wore it with a sense of pride. Sandra did not look at all like she had done two months earlier, for her face no longer had that gaunt look about it. She was rosy-cheeked and healthy and wore her blue pinafore like a little princess. Chelseah gazed at her daughter fondly. That was what she really was, a little princess. After a half-hour of companionable silence, Chelseah felt a gentle tug on her sleeve.

"Mama", she whispered. "Why did we have to leave?"

Chelseah bent to Sandra's eye level and gathered her into her arms. Sandra only used the term Mama when she was frightened. Chelseah was relieved that she had let Sandra know the story of her birth very early on in her childhood. That way it was easier to accept that not very many people would like them.

"Sandra, there are many things that I cannot explain right now. We left because of necessity. Be sure, my love, that nothing will ever harm you."

Sandra nodded and clung tightly to Chelseah's neck. In a few minutes, they were on their way again.

It was a little after five when they reached the village. Sandra had complained of hunger, and Chelseah had deemed it necessary to stop for a bite to eat before they caught the stage to London. They were just about to enter the small baker's shop when Chelseah heard the galloping of horses' hooves behind her. She turned and saw Lady Olivia ride up on her mare, Chestnut. She slid off the horse's back and approached Chelseah and Sandra.

"I heard what happened, Chelseah. Unfortunately, I had to hear it from one of the servants. Do come back with me, Chelseah. We will work out this situation."

Chelseah shook her head. "I wish it were that easy, milady. Unfortunately, this cannot be remedied. I will bid you farewell, Lady Olivia, and I hope that you find a husband very soon. Be sure to keep your head on your shoulders, mind you."

Olivia laughed and they hugged tightly. As Chelseah stepped away from Lady Olivia she noticed a carriage coming full speed ahead. The crest she noticed on the side made her feel faint. *So, he had caught up with her at long last. He would not encourage a confrontation here in the middle of the street, would he? Chelseah would not put anything past Lord Henry Craven.* She made to embrace Olivia again and whispered in her ear.

"I see trouble coming my way. Take Sandra and go into the bakery and pretend that you do not notice what is going on outside. Mind me, Olivia. When you hear the carriage come to a complete stop, leave the shop and head home on your mare. Do not

make like there is something amiss. Promise me you will do as I say." At Olivia's nod, she continued, "Now get going."

The tone in Chelseah's voice stopped Olivia from protesting. She took Sandra's hand and went into the bakery. Craven would not recognise Sandra after nine months, for she had grown taller and she was now healthier than she had been. Another advantage of their sojourn at the manor was that Sandra no longer wore tattered clothing. She looked like a real lady. Chelseah sent up a silent prayer for her daughter and hoped that her blackguard husband would not realise who she was.

The carriage made its way to the village inn, the Breezing Firs, and came to an abrupt stop. Chelseah watched its progress from behind a farmer's wagon, and soon she heard Olivia and Sandra gallop away. She sighed with relief. Now all she had to do was escape through the woods and she would be safe. She looked at the carriage. *So he had sent Hadley after her. It was just like him to leave his dirty work to the servants*. Chelseah wondered how much that man had been paid to find her.

She sank against the wagon to get her bearings. Hadley had entered the inn; she could make her getaway. Slowly, she approached the neck of the woods. She dared not look behind her for fear of being caught. When she reached the woods, she began to run. It was a few minutes before she stopped for breath, and when she did, she realised that she was not alone. Chelseah made to turn around, but it was too late. She felt the blow to her temple and fell to the ground. The only thought she had before losing consciousness was that the Lord Henry Craven had won the battle once again.

Olivia did just what Chelseah had asked of her, and she and Sandra arrived home fifteen minutes later. Sandra was shaking in her arms; she was one frightened little girl. A footman helped her and Sandra off her mare.

"Is the master at home, Sealy?"

"'E is milady and is quite a tizzy if I may be so bold."

Olivia's eyes narrowed. This was all his doing—she was sure of it. He would hear about this.

"Thank you, Sealy. Please take care of Chestnut."

Olivia made her way into the house with Sandra in her arms. For the sake of the child, Olivia hoped that she could bring her brother back to the world of common sense.

Dullingham stood by the window in the drawing room. He was in a foul mood. He had begun to trust the treacherous Lady Smith-Hewitt, and he felt her betrayal deep within his soul. The fact was, he was angry with himself for having trusted the little twit in the first place. She had been out to pull the wool over his eyes, and he had fallen into her trap. Dullingham walked over to the fire and pitched his brandy glass into the bright flames. Ahhh! It felt good to relieve some of the anger and frustration that was bottled up inside him. Dullingham turned at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. So, Olivia had returned, had she? She would receive such a scold for having gone out alone.

Olivia was seething. Her foolish brother had just turned out the only friend she had ever had. Sometimes she wondered if *he* was the one with no brains. She made her way to the drawing room. Sandra was in complete shock, but she was in the care of the housekeeper, Mrs. Livingstone, and her mother. She would be fine. For now, Olivia had Alex to deal with. She saw him leave the drawing room and come to meet her on the landing. Olivia raised her defences for the upcoming battle. With a flick of his wrist, he

motioned for her to follow him inside. Olivia steeled herself for the fight; she could see the fire and anger in her brother's dark, brooding eyes. Dullingham went to stand by the window and when he turned to her, his face was nearly red with rage.

"Where have you been, *Lady Olivia?* I gave explicit orders for you not to go out alone. You seem to take exquisite delight in defying my authority, Olivia. I have a mind to lock you up and throw away the key!"

Olivia stiffened and straightened to her full height—a full five-feet-eight inches. She could very nearly look Dullingham in the eye.

"You bumble-headed fool! I caught up with Chelseah and Sandra, whom you conveniently turned out without at least consulting me."

Dullingham spoke with a deadly calm.

"You dare to speak to me so? Mind who you are talking to, Olivia."

"I KNOW VERY WELL TO WHOM I AM SPEAKING! You are the one that is blind to the facts as they are. Alexander Fairchild, I never thought that I would see the day when I would be counselling *you,* but I believe that that day has finally come. Chelseah is a wonderful woman, and you turn her out because of one mistake. Can you not see how much she has suffered these past years?"

"I do not wish to speak of her. As far as I'm concerned, she no longer exists."

"Oh. I see. Chelseah did not trust you and you are upset. Let me tell you, Alex, she did not trust you because you are a man. The last time she trusted a man, she was betrayed. It took her a long time to trust even me. Chelseah has had to make many sacrifices to protect Sandra, and if not trusting you means protecting Sandra, so be it."

Dullingham did not seem to accept her words. He stood by the window, his hand on the windowpane, his jaw extremely taut. The storm clouds that had gathered all day threatened to burst any second. Where was Chelseah now? Olivia dropped her severe tone and put her arms around Dullingham's shoulders.

"Did you ask Chelseah what she felt?"

When he shook his head, Olivia went on. "You may be experienced in the ways of the world, Alex, but you are not experienced in the ways of a woman's heart. A woman's heart can become treacherous and fickle at any time, and it is a lot harder for a woman to forgive a betrayal than it is for a man. Think about that."

Dullingham nodded. He felt his cheek where Chelseah had slapped him. She sure could deliver quite a slap. Olivia pulled away from him and was just about to leave the room when the door crashed open. Sandra stood in the gathering shadows, Lady Maria behind her. Sandra's eyes were round and filled with tears. Olivia held out her arms, and Sandra flew into them. She cried into her shoulder. Lady Maria approached her son and daughter.

"Cook found her hiding in the pantry. She was trembling when we found her." Olivia looked about ready to burst into tears as well. She had not yet told Alex about Chelseah's disappearance, and she was afraid of his reaction.

"What is she doing here, Olivia? I distinctly recall having sent her and her mother home."

At the mention of her mother, Sandra started crying all over again. Olivia hugged her tightly and turned to her foolish brother.

"As we were saying our goodbyes, a carriage pulled to a stop outside the Breezing Firs. Chelseah said that it held trouble for her, and she told me to take Sandra and leave."

Dullingham's stomach knotted ever tighter. He felt faint. Chelseah might be in grave danger and all because of a stupid folly on his part. He turned to Sandra. "Do you know who could have been in the carriage, Sandra?"

Sandra sniffed and nodded her head. "T-t-t-the crest showed it t-t-t-to be m-m-m-my papa. Lord Henry Craven has come to take us home."

Dullingham felt the rage boil within him. *Lord Henry Craven.* That detestable wretch was Chelseah's husband? No wonder she had run from him. He was known far and wide for his violence and illicit ways. Rumour had it that he had killed a man, but no proof had ever been found. Dullingham strengthened his resolve. He would find Chelseah if it took the rest of his life.

Chapter 12:

Chelseah awoke to the gentle rolling of the carriage. Her head rested on the back of the seat, and she felt as if she had been attacked by a pack of wolves. She struggled to open her eyes. It took an effort, but she finally managed it. When her eyes were open, she wished she had stayed asleep. Her head was pounding and she felt nauseated. Lord Henry Craven, her much despised husband, stared at her with a wicked grin on his face. She should have known he would not have missed her capture. Chelseah winced as he took the seat next to her. His arm snaked around her shoulders. She tried to pull away but found she was unable. He had tied her arms tightly behind her back and had put a cloth in her mouth to prevent her screams. *So, he had covered all the bases. All the more reason to keep Sandra's whereabouts a secret.*

Craven laughed a mirthless laugh. "You will not get away from me again, Chelseah. Did you think you could play me for a fool and get away with it? I make people pay for their mistakes." He removed the cloth from her mouth so that she could answer him.

"Running from you was no mistake, Henry."

Lord Craven's cold blue eyes narrowed dangerously. "You will refer to me as 'my lord' from this day forward, you impertinent, ungrateful chit."

Chelseah matched him look for look. He would not get the better of her again.

"You have done nothing to merit my gratitude, *my lord.*"

The contempt dripped from her lips. Lord Henry's eyes glittered maliciously. He grabbed Chelseah by the collar of her spencer and brought her face inches from his. She could smell his foul breath. The man had been drinking again.

"Where is the girl, twit?"

Chelseah lifted her chin stubbornly and kept her lips sealed. She would take Sandra's whereabouts with her to the grave.

"I should have known that you would keep my own daughter from me. TELL ME WHERE SHE IS!"

"Sandra stopped being your daughter the moment she was born. You have never wanted her and have made me pay the price for not having born you a son. THERE IS NO WAY IN *HELL* THAT I WILL TELL YOU WHERE SHE IS!"

Chelseah felt the stinging slap even before she realised the impact her words had on her detestable husband. Had she hit Dullingham that hard? she wondered. Craven's slap, coupled with an already aching head, served to push her over the edge. In minutes, Chelseah had fallen into a blissful sleep.

Dusk was gathering and Dullingham Manor was in a frenzy. News of Chelseah's disappearance had spread quickly, and the servants were rushing to fulfil Dullingham's every wish. The truth was that they wanted her back as much as the family did. Dullingham was in his room throwing clothes into a portmanteau haphazardly. It took him ten minutes before he was ready to leave. Olivia burst into his room.

"Alex, it is getting dark, and we have not yet eaten. Do you believe that you should venture out tonight, especially since the storm clouds look about ready to let loose?"

Dullingham noticed the worry lines creasing his sister's beautiful face, and he felt a renewal of pain. He had not realised how much his sister had needed guidance and not just a set of rules. Chelseah had shown him that he could not deal with people that way. She had also been a great influence on his mother—and on him. He had to get her back.

"Olivia, it is my fault that Chelseah is in trouble. I will bring her back if it is the last thing I do."

Olivia nodded and wrapped her arms around her brother's neck. "I love you. Godspeed, Alexander Fairchild."

Dullingham returned his sister's hug and went out the door.

Dullingham was just about to head down the stairs when he saw Sandra hiding under a table in the hall. He got down on his hands and knees and sat down beside her.

"Will my Mama be all right, Your Grace?"

"Yes she will Sandra."

After reassuring Sandra that he would find her mother, he took off down the stairs. Lady Maria and Olivia wished him good luck in his search. Dullingham was almost out the door when he remembered that he did not exactly know where he was supposed to go.

"Olivia, did Chelseah ever say where her husband's estate is?"

"She told me Hereford and Worchester. I believe that he owns an estate called Cravenwood Hall."

With a quick thank you, Dullingham leapt up on his black stallion, Fireball, and left on his journey. The three ladies, Olivia, Maria, and Sandra stood waving goodbye. All hoped that Dullingham was not too late.

It was late when Chelseah awoke again. She had not eaten since lunch, and she was starving. Would her husband deny her even that? Her hands were still bound tightly behind her back, and Chelseah wondered if she would be able to escape again. She laid her head back on the velvet squabs and hoped to relieve some of the tension in her back and neck. She took the time to think of Dullingham. A slow smile spread across her face. Was he now regretting his decision to turn her out and going mad with worry? She hoped that he could find it in his heart to forgive her for her many errors. Chelseah opened her eyes. Henry was snoring on the seat opposite her. She suppressed a shudder. How could she ever be attracted to a man like him? She was glad she was no longer naive enough to fall for his 'charm'. When she sighed, Henry's eyes flashed open.

"Well, well, well. Milady is awake. Did you have a good repose?…Never mind. You must be hungry."

Henry reached into a hamper at his feet and took out some of the food his cook had prepared for his journey. He regretted having to travel through the night, but the circumstances called for it. Henry wanted to have Chelseah home as soon as possible. He rued the day she had run from him. It was her fault that he now had to sleep in his carriage.

Lord Henry sat beside Chelseah. He removed the cloth from her mouth and began to feed her. Chelseah cringed, but she had no choice but to accept his ministrations. Henry would not untie her hands. When Chelseah had finished her repast, Henry decided to find out if she was any more forthcoming with Sandra's whereabouts now that he had control.

"Where have you been for the last nine months, *Chelseah?*"

"Around."

"DO NOT PLAY THE FOOL, CHELSEAH. NOW TELL ME WHERE SHE IS!"

"I will never tell you where my daughter is. You no longer have power over me, MY LORD. Sandra's whereabouts will follow me to the grave."

Henry was saved a violent retort when the carriage came to an abrupt stop. Mr. Hadley knocked on the carriage door.

"We are caught in a downpour, milord. The roads are becoming impassable. We will soon be required to stop."

Lord Henry Craven swore under his breath. On this journey, everything and everyone had conspired against him. He would not lose!

"Where are we, Hadley?"

"Just outside of Melbourn, milord. We have travelled a great distance in eight hours."

Eight hours. Chelseah did a quick calculation, and she found that it was approximately one o'clock in the morning. They would have to stop.

"I have a friend not too far from here. He will help us out of this predicament. He knows how much I value my wife, so he will give us lodgings for the night. Do you think you can ride the five miles to Hawthorn House?" Hadley nodded and soon the carriage was on the road again.

Less than half an hour later, the threesome arrived at their destination. Henry jumped from the carriage and went to inquire if Mr. Lawrence Hawthorn was in residence. Chelseah quelled her growing panic. She would not be afraid! Hawthorn was the other 'lord' that had accompanied Craven to her small hometown so many years ago and had contributed to her downfall. She could not help but dislike the man. Henry appeared beside her.

"We are expected at the House. I expect you to be on your best behaviour, Chelseah."

Henry pulled the cloth back into her mouth and he placed one over her eyes. Her feet were tied up as well, so Henry carried her to the house. Chelseah cursed the dratted man. He and his friend were going to get their kicks out of seeing her trussed up like a piece of meat. She would not let this one item discourage her; there was absolutely no way she would tell them where she had hidden Sandra.

Chapter 13:

It was growing ever darker, but Dullingham's determination never wavered. He had to find Chelseah and bring her back with him. His tired horse plodded slowly across the dirt road. Dullingham's footman, Eddie, galloped up beside him. His horse looked dead on its feet and was foaming at the mouth.

"Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but it's starting to pour and soon roads will become impassable. May we stop for the night? My horse needs a rest."

Dullingham was going to protest when he saw the tired look on his footman's face. He had to admit that it would feel good to stop for the night.

"There's an inn not far. I believe that it is only five or six miles. We will stop there."

The footman nodded and galloped on ahead. Dullingham urged his horse forward, fighting to keep his tired body in the saddle. He checked his watch. Two am. It was time to retire.

The inn, not much bigger than a small cottage, was a welcome relief from the rain and cold. Dullingham sat in front of the fire in a private parlour, contemplating his next move. Was Chelseah headed for Hereford and Worchester, or did that fool Craven have other plans for her? Dullingham shuddered to think that Chelseah was married to the man. He was notorious for his gambling, and the Bow Street Runners had arrested him for murder. Unfortunately, there had not been enough evidence to support the claim and he was set free. He had the gift of charm and was able to manipulate any situation to his advantage. That was what made him ever more ruthless and cunning; when he did not get what he wanted, he would to stoop to any means to get it. Alex stood by the hearth and stared into the flames. He was the Duke of Dullingham. He wielded a considerable amount of power. But was that power enough to save Chelseah from certain ruin?

Chelseah groaned as she awoke. She had had a sleepless night and was in considerable pain. Her husband had not untied her hands or her feet and had left her to sleep in the cold, damp basement of Mr. Hawthorn's manor house. She realised that the cloth had not been removed from her mouth, so she could not call to tell people that she was awake. Chelseah tried to move into a more comfortable position but was unable. Besides having her hands and feet bound tightly, she had been tied to the bed she was on. Oh, that man was sly. He really did not want her to get away from him.

Chelseah had been awake for about ten minutes when Henry bounded into the room. He removed the cloth from her mouth and untied the ropes from around the bed. He helped her to sit up.

"Did you sleep well, my pet?"

Chelseah did not answer him. To do so would give him more ammunition against her. She clamped her lips shut and looked at the floor.

"So, we're a little grumpy this morning. No matter. Chelseah, I will untie you for now. We will not be able to travel today. The roads are muddy and impassable, and plus, it is the Sabbath. We would not want to be unholy by ruining God's holy day."

Chelseah stifled a laugh. Henry? Holy? That was the understatement of the year. He did not want to travel today because he did not want to be caught doing something illegal. That's how it always was—do something wrong, but do not get caught. If you're

caught, you lose. Henry *never* lost. "Divide and conquer"—that was his motto. Finally, Chelseah was free from the ties that bound her, and she massaged her aching muscles.

"What will you do with me now, *my lord?*"

Henry cringed at her contemptuous use of his title. The impertinence of the lower classes never ceased to amaze him. He crept closer to his wife.

"Well, you *impertinent chit,* I have decided to let you remain my wife. And to facilitate matters, I am not taking you back to Hereford and Worchester. Instead, we will proceed on to my estate at Upavon. There, you will answer for your sins against me and against our marriage vows."

I will let you remain my wife? Now it was her fault that he was a blackguard? She made to apologise but stopped just in time. She would not do it. She would not fall under his spell again. She was through begging for this man's mercy. Chelseah was revolted by her husband's arm around her waist. She pulled quickly away and went to stand on the other side of the small basement. She had to put as much distance between them as possible.

While one part of Chelseah's brain fought the charm that Lord Henry Craven exuded, the other part frantically thought of Alex, the Duke of Dullingham. He would not think to come looking for her in Upavon. Chelseah smiled despite herself. It was funny that after all the effort she had put into not trusting him, somewhere along the way, she had fallen in love with the man. And she had explicit trust in him. He would seek her out and bring Sandra back to her. Chelseah stopped her musings long enough to notice that her husband was approaching her menacingly. She must have made him angry by pulling away. Lord Craven looked into Chelseah's deep-set green eyes, and said, with deadly calm,

"Do not think you will get the better of me again, *Lady Craven.* You are my wife. I own you. I do not take kindly to people meddling with my well-ordered plans."

His well-ordered plans were to have a wife to lend credence to his respectability as a nobleman. She knew the man that Lord Craven really was and was proud that she was able to foil him in some way. Henry must have seen the contempt in her eyes, for he grabbed her wrists tightly and pushed her up against the basement wall. His mouth was so close that Chelseah could smell his foul breath. He must have been drinking again because he reeked of alcohol.

"You cannot look upon me with contempt, for it is you who is not fit to even lick a lord's boots. We are going to Upavon, Chelseah, and then we will see who the master is. I will make you want me, pet, and you will not turn away from me again. It's judgement day, *wife.*"

Dullingham woke early the next morning. The sun was rising on the horizon, and it looked to be a beautiful day. *A day to share with Chelseah,* Dullingham thought. He shook himself. It did no good to think like that. He just had to find her, for Sandra. He walked to the window, stepping lightly so as not to awaken his footman. To save time and money, master and servant had shared a room for the night. It did not bother Alex to share a room with his servant. Chelseah had shown him that servants were human beings with the same thoughts and feelings as everybody else, she showed without a doubt that servants could be nobler than noblemen could themselves. He sighed heavily. Would he find the one woman who could bring sunshine into his life? The one woman who sent his

senses reeling and his pulse racing? Alex smiled as he remembered Chelseah's dress at Squire Malhoney's ball. The yellow and cream dress showed off her beautiful complexion and made her green eyes bright. Alex started as he heard his footman come to stand behind him.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace, I did not mean to startle you. Were you planning to travel today?"

Alex knew why Eddie had to ask. It was Sunday, the holy Sabbath, and it would not do to offend its sacredness. He thought about it some. Craven had a two-day lead ahead of them and would more than likely be arriving in Hereford and Worchester very soon. Dullingham decided to risk travelling. He could not afford to leave Chelseah in that insane man's grip any longer than necessary. With a determined nod, he told Eddie to prepare the horses. They would have to leave quickly if they were not to offend the local villagers.

Chelseah stared out the carriage window at the passing scenery. Henry had abruptly changed his mind about travelling on the Sabbath. They were headed towards Upavon at a remarkable clip. Henry had tied her up again and had begun drinking the moment the carriage door had closed. He had fallen into a drunken sleep almost immediately after he had given the order to "Spring 'em". Chelseah squirmed on the velvet squabs of the carriage, vying for a comfortable position. She had tried to break free of the bonds, but he had tied her too tightly. My lord Craven was very anxious to have her home. She sighed. She had to keep her wits about her if she was going to outwit her husband once again. There was no way she would tell that miserable man where Sandra was. As long as her daughter was safe with the Duke of Dullingham and his family, she had nothing to worry about. She smiled as she thought about Alexander Fairchild. Chelseah took wicked delight in knowing that whatever Lord Henry Craven had up his *noble* sleeve, the Duke of Dullingham could foil him in an instant. She trusted him to find her and take her home.

Chapter 14:

"What do you mean there's no one here? There must be." Dullingham scowled at the sour-faced butler who stood at the ready at Chelseah's estate in Hereford and Worchester. It had taken him and Eddie a whole week to reach Chelseah's estate, and to be told that she and her loathsome husband were not in residence sorely tried His Grace's patience. Dullingham placed his arm on the doorjamb and stared hard at the butler.

"I will ask you once more, man, is your mistress, Lady Craven, in residence?"

The butler was so astonished that he nearly fell over. He quickly recovered and showed no outward signs of shock.

"Lady Craven?…But, Your Grace, Lady Craven has not been in residence for the last year."

Now it was Dullingham's turn to look dumbfounded.

"But…But…Is this not her own estate, Cravenwood Hall?"

The words were out of his mouth before Alex fully understood their meaning. Of course. *Cravenwood Hall.* The estate was named after the rat, Lord Henry Craven.

"Can you enlighten me on the events of the past year, Wilkens?"

Wilkens nodded and led Dullingham and Eddie to the study. The hall had a deserted look about it and there was dust everywhere. The furniture was covered with Holland covers and certain rooms were completely desolate. Dullingham wondered why Chelseah had allowed that man to destroy her home in such a way.

The study seemed to be the only room that had been taken care of. It was clean and neat, and the chairs were comfortable and dust free. Dullingham sunk his weary body into the nearest chair and motioned for his footman to do the same. With a glass of strong black coffee in his hands, he settled down to listen to Wilkens' tale.

"Lord Craven decided a year ago to close up this house and move permanently away from here."

"That's it? You mean that there is nothing more to that story?"

"No, your Grace. Lord Craven decided on a whim to remove the lady from her home of many years on a whim. Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but you do not know his lordship. He is a horrid, horrid man. I have been in his employ and have seen how he treats his lady. Trust me, Your Grace, when I tell you that animals are treated better than she ever was. I never saw nothin' but I heard all right. What he did to that poor woman does not bear thinkin' about."

"Where are her parents?"

"They died of influenza about a year after my lord and my lady were married."

At those words, Dullingham once again felt the cold grip of rage in his heart. When he got his hands on *Lord* Henry Craven, there would be hell to pay. He remembered once, when Chelseah had first come to his home, how emaciated she looked and how weary and tired she was. Sandra did not even look like a normal child. The two must have suffered severe beatings at the hands of that blasted man. Eddie spoke up.

"Mr. Wilkens, may I ask if you know where the two are now?"

Wilkens shook his head in acknowledgement of the footman's question. He did not stand on propriety in situations such as these.

"All I can tell you is that milady's parents' estate was not far from here. I believe it is still being lived in, even if only by a lone housekeeper and her husband. Landlynleigh Manor, I believe it is called. Shall I give you the direction, Your Grace?"

"No, I know the way. I visited here a few times in my youth so I know my way around. Let us go, Eddie. I must find Lady Chelseah."

Dullingham and Eddie failed to discover anything at Landlynleigh manor. However, one point of interest that came out in Dullingham's discussion with the housekeeper was that Chelseah owned another estate in Upavon. Maybe there was something to that. Dullingham turned to the ageing housekeeper.

"May I ask if there is anyone else that I may speak with? A lady's maid, or some other person who might know more?"

The housekeeper sunk into a deep curtsy as she shook her head. "There was only one maidservant helping Lady Craven. Her name was Aurora. The rest of us had been given a leave of absence until further news could be obtained. We all found new positions once Lord Craven dismissed most of the servants. Only me an' me husband remained here. No news has been heard from milady since."

"And what of Aurora? Did she go with Lady Craven to Upavon?"

"That I cannot say. Once Lord Craven took Lady Craven away, we never heard any more news of her."

Dullingham refused to become dejected. They would ride to Upavon. The blasted idiot Craven left them no choice. Dullingham slipped a guinea into the housekeeper's hand and thanked her profusely for all her help. In moments they were off again.

Chelseah awoke suddenly. The carriage's lurching had stopped, and they were at a standstill. They had been travelling non-stop for two days, Henry even taking the reins when his footman could no longer go on. Hadley would enter the carriage and sleep off his exhaustion, sneering at Chelseah for the predicament she found herself in. Now it was Henry who was asleep on the velvet squabs. Chelseah tried once again to squirm out of her bonds. She uttered an unladylike expletive when her bonds refused to come loose. Hadley appeared in the doorway.

"Milord, we are arrived. Milord?"

Hadley took the liberty of entering the carriage and shaking his master awake.

Henry shook the man off.

"L-l-l-leave me be, miserable v-v-varmint. (Hiccup) I'm awake!"

Chelseah cringed. Henry's speech left no doubt as to his state of inebriation. He descended the carriage steps and swayed.

"(Hic) Take her in my friend."

Chelseah rolled her eyes as Hadley pulled her from the carriage. He had removed the ropes from around her ankles, and he seized her arm to help her to walk. Chelseah felt the barrel of a pistol in the small of her back.

"You dare try anything stupid, *milady*, and I will have no qualms about shooting you." Hadley whispered in her ear. Chelseah suppressed a giggle. *Qualms*, indeed. The man was getting way ahead of himself.

As the trio entered the foyer of Chelseah's ancestral home, Chelseah could not help but stare helplessly at the now bare walls. Where once proud pictures had graced

the foyer walls, empty spaces appeared. Chelseah cried at the ruin of her beautiful home. Where had the Rembrandts, the Da Vincis, the Michaelangelos, gone? The beautiful marble sculptures that used to grace the stairs no longer existed, and in their place stood the disintegrating pedestals. If Chelseah could have sat on the stairs with her head in her hands, she would have gladly done so. She could not however, so she followed a staggering, drunken, Henry up the stairs to the second floor. What was he to do with her now that he had her home? Chelseah fought the panic, the anxiety that threatened to overwhelm her. She was this man's prisoner, this man's pawn, but under no circumstances would she reveal where Sandra was hidden. Hadley prodded her with his pistol. Where were they going?

The small group entered a room that Chelseah fondly remembered as her father's study. Now the bookcases lay bare, covered with a year's dust and grime. What had been her father's pride and joy, his mahogany writing desk, his globe, his favourite wing chair, the hunting trophies on the mantel, all were missing. Chelseah felt an ache begin deep within her heart, for what had been a labour of love on her father's part to acquire these things, had been despoiled for a labour of greed. Chelseah had no doubt whatsoever that Henry had sold her family's possessions to fend off the many creditors barking at his heels. As they entered the room, Hadley left Chelseah's side to converse with Henry. In moments he was gone, and Chelseah and Henry were alone. Henry approached Chelseah and freed her hands. With her hands free she was able to put as much distance between her and Milord Henry Craven as was humanly possible. With blood-shot eyes and a staggering step, Henry walked towards her. Even as far gone as he was, Chelseah could not mistake the look in Henry's eyes. His eyes held malice, evil, and danger. A danger that Chelseah feared she would never be able to escape from.

Chapter 15:

Chelseah groaned as she awoke the next morning. Henry had not been jesting when he had told her that he would make her pay for what she had done. In a drunken rage, Henry had become violent and had turned on her. He had said that slaves who don't obey their masters deserve to be horsewhipped, and he had been as good as his word. He had taken out a horsewhip and had given her forty lashes. The skin on her back was shredded to pieces and there was dried blood on the bedsheets. Chelseah was so proud that she had not told that insane man where his daughter was hidden. She would rather go to the grave kicking and screaming than to tell that man that the Duke of Dullingham had his daughter. Chelseah got out of bed at the sound of Henry's voice. Before answering, she fell to her knees beside her bed and uttered a short prayer for Sandra, and for Alex to come quickly to her.

Henry was lounging in bed, a brandy bottle at his lips. He smiled wickedly at Chelseah.

"Did you sleep well, *pet*?"

Chelseah sunk into a deep curtsy beside Henry's bed. So as not to provoke another outburst, she left her eyes downcast and answered as demurely as possible.

"Very well, milord."

Henry smiled again and ran his forefinger along Chelseah's cheek. She closed her eyes against the nausea that rose in her throat. It galled Chelseah to have to bow before this horrid, horrid man. How could she have loved him once, so long ago? She came out of her reverie with a start when she realised Henry was ordering his breakfast. His orders stipulated bacon, eggs, toast, ham, cheese, coffee and orange juice.

"And after breakfast, I want my horse saddled. Then while I'm gone, clean out the stables. I want them spotless by the time I return for luncheon. I will require my luncheon in my study immediately after my return. Is that clear, *my pet*?"

"Yes, milord."

Chelseah rose from her post beside the bed and went to fetch Henry's slippers. She brought them towards the bed as Henry rose.

"And, Chelseah?"

Chelseah turned from the open door of Henry's room. She tried to suppress the shudder that went through her body at Henry's tone.

"I will require a bath before breakfast. Bring the hot water and tell Hadley that he is to accompany me on the ride around the estate."

Chelseah curtsied again and was out the door and down the stairs before Henry could utter another word.

An hour later, Chelseah sat at the kitchen table contemplating everything that had happened. Her breakfast consisted of bread and butter, because Henry had seen fit to be skimpy. He had shared the remainder of his food with Hadley, and Chelseah had not even been allowed to eat the leftovers. Those went to the horses. *Her* horses. Chelseah cried to think that her detestable husband had ridden her precious mare, Aphrodite, to exhaustion. The mare had died giving birth three months before. Oh, it just wasn't fair! That man had set out to destroy first her home, then her life, then herself. And he seemed to be winning. Chelseah pounded her fist against the table. *He would not win!!* She would make sure of that even if she had to die at his hands.

A few hours later, Henry returned from his ride.

"I'm really impressed with the stable, *Lady Craven.* You seem very dedicated." Henry had returned from his ride and Chelseah had to stand at attention in the foyer for an "inspection". It took all of her self-control to refrain from throttling the blasted man.

"Your luncheon is ready, Lord Craven. Do you wish to eat in the dining room?"

Henry scratched his beard, pretending to contemplate his answer.

"I believe I shall have my lunch on a tray in my study. Bring it up to me straightaway."

Chelseah sunk into a curtsey and fled to the kitchen. Craven's voice stopped her.

"Chelseah, dear? I feel very dirty from my ride. Bring up hot water for a bath." Chelseah froze in her tracks. This was too much. She had not stopped all morning, especially since she had not eaten much and her back felt as if it were on fire. She straightened her shoulders and walked into the kitchen with as much dignity as she could muster.

Henry was on to another bottle of strong French brandy when Chelseah walked in bearing the lunch tray. He gave her a lazy smile and lifted a muddy foot off the carpet. "(Hic) I-I-It seems t-t-t-that m-m-my bots are muddy. (pause) Hey, lookit, I said 'b-b-bots' instead of 'b-b-b-boots'. (Hic) A-a-ain't I a c-c-crafty one?"

He motioned Chelseah over to him and pointed to his muddy boots. As she set down his tray, and sat before him to remove the filthy boots, her loathsome husband began to stroke her cheek with his dirty hands. Chelseah slapped his hand away.

"I did not give you leave to touch me, sirrah."

For a drunken man, Henry moved with remarkable speed. In seconds he had lifted Chelseah off the floor to face him. He held her arms in a deathlike grip.

"*You dare talk down to a lord, you impertinent, ungrateful, chit?*"

With an inner sense of calm she did not know she possessed, Chelseah stood her ground.

"You are a lord by law only, sirrah, and not by right. You have not earned the right to be called 'my lord', and I will not bow to you. You have no power over me."

Chelseah nearly flew across the room with the force of Henry's slap. For a moment she just lay on the floor, oblivious to anything but the pounding of her head and the spinning of the room. Henry's drunken ravings made no sense, but one thing was clear: he had ordered Hadley to fetch the whip.

It was then that everything changed. Chelseah heard the sounds of chaos echoing from just outside the door. She pulled herself gingerly off the floor and crawled to the door. The sight that met her eyes was a merry one indeed. Her hero, Dullingham, had come to her rescue. That was a foolishly romantic, schoolgirl notion, but Chelseah didn't care. He had come and that was all that mattered.

Inwardly, Dullingham was seething with rage. He had heard what had gone on just moments before and it made him as angry as a bull ready to fight. Craven was going to pay for all of his misdeeds, including the way he had treated his wife and child. When he had entered the house, he had caught Henry on his way to the study with a horsewhip in his hands. Dullingham had pointed the barrel of a pistol at his chest and the whip was abandoned. Now Henry had a predator's look in his evil eyes. He wasn't about to lose just yet.

"So what will it be Craven, surrender or a duel? Take your pick."

Henry's eyes narrowed.

"(Hic) I d-d-d-don't hafta listen to you. I'm a l-l-l-lord. I do whata w-w-want."

Dullingham was about to raise the pistol once again, when he felt cold hard steal against his ribs.

"Put the gun down, Your Grace."

Hadley had snuck up behind him and placed the pistol squarely in his side. Drat, of all the obstacles he had encountered, he hadn't counted on this one.

"Your Grace, put the gun down."

Hadley's voice was hard, cold, and brooked no argument. Dullingham made to lower his gun, when he heard the sounds of a squirmish behind him. Dullingham heard Eddie's squirmish with Hadley, heard Hadley groan as he fell unconscious to the floor. Dullingham was proud of his man. He had a fighter's instincts and had come upon Hadley from behind. Hadley was out cold. One less problem to worry about.

With that statement Henry turned slightly towards Chelseah. Caught off guard, Dullingham's pistol wavered and Henry made his escape. Dullingham fired, but Henry was staggering so badly that the bullet whizzed harmlessly by. With a five-minute lead, Henry made it to the French doors and started up a small ladder to the roof. With a shout of frustration, Dullingham and Eddie followed him. Chelseah went out on the terrace, frightened for the life of the only man she had ever loved—Dullingham.

Henry, staggering, walked along the peak of the manor's roof. Dullingham followed only so far, but he wasn't foolish enough to risk his life for a drunken man. He saw Chelseah staring helplessly at the three of them, her hand to her mouth. Dullingham vowed to make Lord Craven pay for his horrible actions toward his wife.

"Henry, Henry, do come down. You may fall."

Dullingham had decided to try to coax Henry down from the roof, so as to knock at least some sense into that peabrain of his. To Dullingham's utter astonishment, Henry started to sing—a home-made song from the sound of it.

"I am k-k-k-king, I d-d-d-do what I want. I a-a-a-answer to no one. I am ki… Whoa!"

Henry lost his balance. Dullingham tried to go to him, but it was too late. Henry had fallen from the high roof to his death, four stories below. Dullingham stared at Craven's crumpled body and felt no regret. A horrid, horrid man had met his fate.

Chelseah had felt the bile rise in her throat when Henry had tripped. She was not one to swoon, but when she saw Henry fall, she welcomed the darkness that had enveloped her as she fell to the ground in a dead faint.

Chelseah awoke to a blissful feeling. She had never felt anything like it before. It felt like she was floating in a great big sea. She smiled and opened her eyes. Dullingham's eyes were full of concern and worry. Gone was the dullness that had shaded his eyes when he had learned of her betrayal, and in its place were the dark, fiery flames she loved so well. One look into his eyes and she was lost forever. Dullingham's arms were warm and gentle around her, and his chest felt firm against her soft cheek. Chelseah reached up her arms and enveloped his neck.

"Alex…" she whispered softly.

"Welcome back, love."

He kissed her gently, glad of the chance to finally feel her in his arms. The kiss lasted but a few seconds and Chelseah felt a pang of disappointment when Alex pulled away.

"Later, my love. For now, we must get you to bed."

Chelseah nodded in agreement, and Alex helped her to her feet and they headed for home. As the couple neared the doors, Chelseah noticed Eddie and another man carrying something away on a stretcher. Her feet stilled. She headed for the still form she knew to be Henry. Chelseah needed one last moment with her detested husband, for peace, for closure. Eddie and the second man, Gibbs, stopped when they saw her approach.

"I do not think…" Eddie began but was silenced by a look from his master.

Chelseah pulled back the cover on Henry's face. She knelt beside his body and shed one tear. Dullingham kneeled beside her and took her hand.

"I loved him, once. That horrible man fathered my child." Chelseah shivered.

She turned away from Henry one last time and buried her face in Dullingham's chest. His arms encircled her small waist.

"I will not mourn for him. He is not worth it. Take him, men, and throw him into the sea. He is not worthy of a decent burial." With that she turned and walked into the house, never to look back again.

Later that evening, Chelseah and Alex lay outside on the new spring grass and stared at the stars. Dullingham's arms encompassed Chelseah and she felt safe. Secure and *safe*. She closed her eyes.

"I remember that as a child I would come out here and stare at the stars for hours on end. They were my friends. My father never had to look for me; he always knew to find me out here beside my favourite tree. I would fall asleep, and he would carry me inside and tuck me into bed. I miss him."

"Chelseah…"

Chelseah sat up and looked at him. Alex propped himself up on an elbow and took her chin with his fingers. His eyes burned with something that she could not understand. The flames made her blood boil and sizzle and her heart fill with love for this courageous man.

"Chelseah, I love you with a love so deep that it hurts. I have loved you ever since Lady Smith-Hewitt would give the local boys cookies, her little girl with braids helping to serve the tea.." He paused. Chelseah squirmed. This situation made her uncomfortable somehow.

"Look at me. I will wait for you as long as it takes. You have lived through a terrible trial, and I cannot tell you to trust me. Trust is built over time, and no matter how long it takes, I will wait."

Chelseah smiled. Here was a man who, up until a few weeks ago, had been ready to throw her out of his house without remorse. Now she was sitting under the stars listening to him propose to her. Her dream could not have been better. Yet, she hesitated. But when Alex bent to kiss her, she did not pull back. So caught up was Chelseah in the moment that she did not realise when Alex finally pulled away. He pulled her into the security of his arms once again and laid her head on his chest.

"Sleep now, love. We shall speak again in the morning."

Chelseah awoke the next morning feeling better than she had in three weeks. Her bruises were still sore, but they would go away. It was the emotional scars that had her worried. She looked at the sun streaming into her bedroom window and wondered how she had come to be there. Suddenly, it all came flooding back. The stars, the kiss, everything. She vaguely remembered Alex carrying her up the stairs and laying her on the bed. That was the best part. He had done what her father used to do—carry her to bed and tuck her in. For that one small favour, she was eternally grateful. Chelseah got out of bed and went to the window to drink in the sun's rays. Thankfully, she was still fully clothed. His Grace had been the epitome of gentleness.

She walked into what had formerly been her father's study and found Alex asleep on the couch. His dark hair was tousled with sleep, his proud jawline relaxed into a peaceful smile. His shirt was open to reveal a broad chest and shoulders. Chelseah suppressed a giggle and knelt beside the couch. It was not hard to respect this man. She noticed a lock of hair that had fallen across his forehead and reached up and pushed it out of his eyes. Chelseah sat stroking his forehead until Alex opened his eyes. His smile made the brown in his eyes deepen until they were almost black. Chelseah's voice caught in her throat. She kissed Dullingham lightly, but fervently.

"Was that good morning, or have you taken leave of your senses?"

Chelseah slapped him playfully and kissed him again.

"Neither. I love you too, and I wanted you to know that you don't have to wait any longer."

Alex jumped up so fast that Chelseah nearly lost her balance. Before she knew what he was about, he had picked her up and twirled her around the room. Alex had Chelseah laughing so hard that they had to stop for breath. This time their kiss meant much more. This time it held a promise—a promise of love, of trust, of forever.

Epilogue:

One year later…

Chelseah looked around her at the many flowers *and* guests that filled the church. She had to admit that what Alex had accomplished on this day was pure genius. From the humblest of servants to the haughtiest of noblemen, they had all turned out for the Duke of Dullingham's wedding. It all made Chelseah cry. One year ago, she did not believe that she and Sandra would be alive to see this event. Chelseah giggled. She meant to participate in this event.

Chelseah had a few minutes to herself before the wedding, so she took that special time to think. She and Olivia had both made their bows to society at the same time and they had taken the ton by storm. Throughout the spring and summer, Chelseah had guided Olivia in her quest for a husband, all the while being courted by Alex. Chelseah had fallen ever more in love with him, and Sandra was flourishing under the love of his family. It was a warm summer night under the stars when Alex had officially proposed to her and offered her an emerald-encrusted a ring as a token of his affection.

Chelseah had rented a small cottage to live in until she and Alex were married, thus stifling any gossip to be had. The news of Henry's death had spread like wildfire, and most of the ton was relieved to be rid of such a man. The house in Vowchurh had been sold to a merchant, since there was nothing remaining of her family. The house in Upavon had been to run-down to sell, so Chelseah had asked for it to be torn down. It hurt her to see her family homes so completely ruined, but she wanted to be rid of all the memories of that horrible man who had been her husband. Chelseah still had her estate in Wales, and it had surprisingly remained unsullied by Henry's hands. Some of her parents' belongings remained there, and she treasured them with her whole heart and soul.

Lord Carl Falcone, Alex's friend, fell in love with Olivia, and they had been married three months earlier. His brother, Matthew Faclcone, was going to give Chelseah away on this day, her wedding. She and Alex had waited to be married until the scars of her marriage to Henry had gradually worn off. She had learned to trust again, and it brought tears to her eyes to know that someone could so love another human being.

Chelseah jumped out of her reverie as Matthew lovingly tapped her on the shoulder. It was time. Olivia, her maid of honour, straightened her winter white veil and short train and shooed Sandra into place. The three women looked radiant, Sandra in a pale-blue flower girl dress made with satin and Chantilly lace, Olivia in her blue silk crepe, and Chelseah in her flowing winter white *Barège* wedding dress. It was the middle of April 1816, but Chelseah did not feel cold. The love of her new family warmed her to the very core. She smiled as the organ player began the wedding song and waited nervously for her chance to walk down the aisle with one of her best friends on her arm.

Chelseah had eyes for no one but Dullingham as she walked towards the altar. Matthew gently squeezed her arm as a sign of encouragement, and when Dullingham took her hand, all her nervousness fled in an instant. Chelseah remembered nothing of the sermon until the vicar spoke louder to get her attention. Chelseah reddened as giggles broke out over her daydreaming. The vicar repeated his question.

"Do you, Chelseah Alicia Louise Smith-Hewitt Craven, take Alexander James Percival Fairchild as your lawfully wedded husband?"

This was the moment of truth. "I do."

Dullingham's smile seemed to fill the church with warmth.

"And do you, Alexander James Percival Fairchild, take Chelseah Alicia Louise Smith-Hewitt Craven as your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do."

"You may kiss the bride."

Alex removed Chelseah's veil and they kissed. This kiss held the same meaning for Chelseah as it had the first time—it held a promise of love, of trust, of forever. Her love for this man soared until only the two of them existed in their own little world. Chelseah felt Alex's arms around her and she felt safe, secure. But, best of all, she was home.