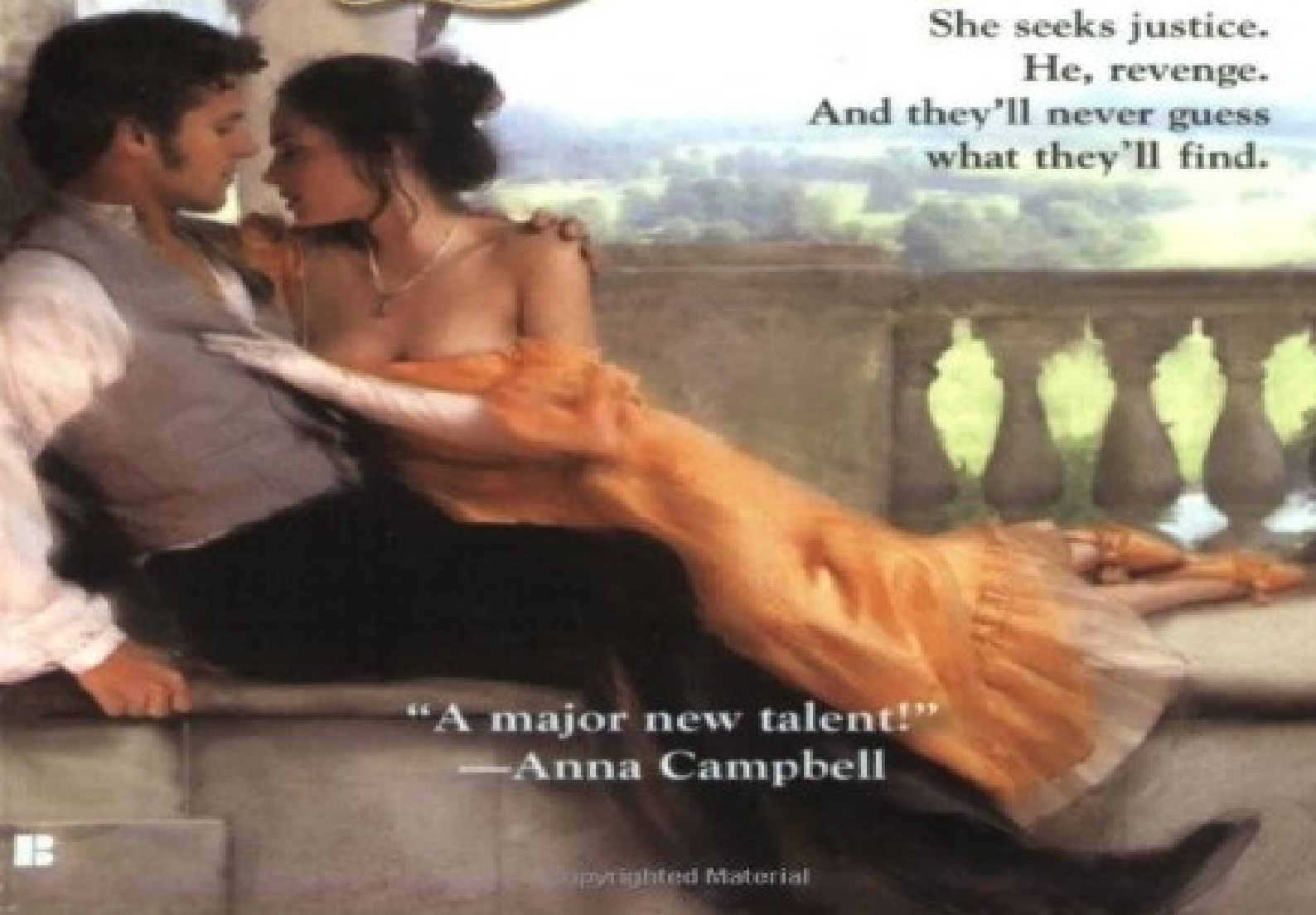


CHRISTINE WELLS

Author of
Scandal's Daughter

THE DANGEROUS DUKE

She seeks justice.
He, revenge.
And they'll never guess
what they'll find.



"A major new talent!"
—Anna Campbell

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~~“Put this writer’s name on your list of authors to watch.”*~~

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“A spirited heroine, a scandalous past, a bewildered rake: Christine Wells gives us a charming story, rich with historical delights.” —Anne Gracie

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Books by Christine Wells

SCANDAL'S DAUGHTER

THE DANGEROUS DUKE

THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

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*For Cheryl,
my beloved mother, my rock.*

*And for Ian,
my father, with love and admiration.*

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And to a funny, bright, talented bunch of women—the Romance Bandits, my sisters-in-crime. Thank you for being you.

He will come for me, I know it. And when he does, there'll be no resistance. Only pleasure, as deep and dark and sinful as this mad desire that plagues me.

Will I regret the ruin that awaits? No, it will taste too sweet, I think ...

London, 1817

DANGLING a man upside down by the ankles outside a London ballroom was not how Maxwell Brooke had anticipated spending his first Thursday night as the Duke of Lyle.

In fact, since he'd never expected to inherit the illustrious title in the first place, he hadn't developed expectations about the matter at all.

But if he had ever considered it, he might have anticipated a damned sight less trouble and a damned sight more comfort than he'd been granted thus far.

He'd spent four nights in a dank, draughty cavern of a house where the fireplaces belched smoke and the kitchens were so far from the dining room every meal was served cold. From there, two days' sodden journey by an antiquated and equally draughty coach had brought him to town.

And now, when finally he could look forward to a pleasurable evening seducing his fair hostess—"Lemme up, guv! I don't mean no harm, honest." The hoarse plea barely reached Max's ears against the freshening wind, but it caught his wandering attention.

Exasperated, he frowned down at his captive. What a sorry sight! A thin, twisted body, spindly legs with wiry tufts of hair sprouting through the sparse weave of his stockings, ankles that felt like bundles of twigs in Max's big hands. The pathetic, featherweight of the man. He couldn't see the fellow's face from this angle, but he'd wager it was purple by now.

Max was tired of holding him, that was certain. He'd expected his victim to crack long before this. Someone must have paid him handsomely for his silence. Perhaps Max should beat the truth out of the fellow, but he rather thought a solid blow might kill the little ferret and he didn't want to get blood on his evening clothes.

Conscious of the ball in progress behind him, Max spoke just loudly enough for his voice to carry to his victim's ears. "My friend, do you know the penalty for treason?"

Spindleshanks kicked out in a panic, nearly freeing one leg from Max's grasp.

"Don't struggle"—Max tightened his grip until his fingers bit into the man's flesh—"or I'll drop you through no fault of mine."

The man yelped. His squirming halted abruptly. Max grunted, bracing his hips against the balustrade for extra support.

"We'll try again, shall we? Tell me who you are and what you were doing lurking in Lady Kate's gardens."

"I told you, guv. I didn't mean no harm. I've ... I've a message for her ladyship."

Satisfaction flooded Max's chest for the first time since this business began. Instinct had told him the evening might bring him a fresh lead, and instinct had been right.

So, his hostess's saintly brother had tried to get a message to her, had he? Very clever to choose the night of a ball, when servants and guests came and went at all hours.

Did Lady Kate suspect she was being watched? Did she know that her brother, the Reverend Stephen

Holt, was in prison? Clapped up in irons, allowed no visitors, no legal representation. Not even a fair hearing.

And Max had put him there.

He gave Spindleshanks a rough shake. “Tell me your message and I’ll make sure her ladyship gets it. Gasping and wheezing, the man renewed his pleas. “Aw, have an ’eart, guv! I’m to give my message to her ladyship and no one else. My business wiv the lady being what you might call personal, like.” Better and better. Max smiled grimly, scarcely aware of the burn in his shoulders and arms. There could be little doubt why such a disreputable-looking specimen should have private business with a society hostess.

Lady Kate Fairchild. Max knew her by sight, but since the fire and Holt’s incarceration, Max had made it his business to investigate Holt’s sister thoroughly. He hadn’t discovered anything to her discredit. The childless widow of a former member of Parliament, Lady Kate possessed a curiously spotless reputation for a woman in her sophisticated circle of acquaintance. At seven-and-twenty years of age, she was a wealthy woman and showing little inclination to remarry, according to his aunts. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the memory of his great-aunts, Grace and Millicent, so fragile and shaken in the aftermath of the fire. The devastation the blaze had caused at Lyle Castle was almost incomprehensible, even to him. Max had taken charge of the household, which was in dire need of a master. He’d investigated and swiftly concluded that the fire had been deliberately set. By the time he’d left, he’d gained control of practical matters, but he wasn’t equipped to deal with outpourings of grief. And the weeping. God, the tears. Oceans of them had been sobbed down his coat in the past few days. He shifted uncomfortably, the memory of his inept attempts at consolation fresh in his mind.

Well, he wasn’t good at offering sympathy—he’d rather stick needles in his eyes than wade through that emotional soup again—but he could do one thing for the bereft and grieving. He would make those murderers pay.

At the Home Office, they called Max “the Fixer,” the man they called when a job was too sensitive or too dirty to handle through official channels. He dealt with the gutter scum, the villainous, and the corrupt. He anticipated little difficulty apprehending the disorganized band of rebels who’d set fire to Lyle Castle. All he needed was for the Reverend Holt to spill his guts.

“Oh! Who’s there?”

A feminine voice behind him made his head snap around. He cursed his lapse in vigilance. How had she managed to surprise him? His hearing was preternaturally acute.

The woman hesitated, as if she might draw back into the ballroom.

Yes, go, he thought. He couldn’t release his prey, and he’d rather not explain what he was doing.

But the musical voice persisted. “Is that you, Your Grace?”

The figure shifted, and the light from the flambeaux on either side of the doorway flared over her face. Lady Kate Fairchild.

For one frozen, unsettling moment, Max forgot why he was there. She moved forward, and the soft light behind her silhouetted intriguing curves beneath her white silk gown. Her hair was piled high, with one thick chestnut ringlet curled invitingly on her breast, and wispy tendrils escaped here and there to tickle her temples and nape. Though modestly cut, her gown showed enough of her creamy bosom to make his hands itch to explore.

Max watched her walk towards him, struck by the way she moved. Her Grecian robe stirred and rippled, caressing her slender, almost fragile body. Its skirts flared on a sudden gust of wind, allowing him a glimpse of slender ankles, crisscrossed by the straps of her gold Roman sandals.

Desire bunched inside him and rose in a powerful surge— hot and needy. Despite the circumstances, he had a compelling urge to drop what he was doing—literally—and pursue the opportunity this sudden encounter presented.

Damnation! He didn't need this. He couldn't allow a woman to distract him, even for a moment. Seduction might well play a part in his plans—certainly, seducing Lady Kate would be no hardship—but first, he must find out how much she knew and what she planned to do about it. Then he'd find a way to use her to wring information out of Stephen Holt.

Max inclined his head, the closest he could get to a bow in the circumstances. "My lady." He continued to shield his victim from her with his body, but he didn't hold out much hope that she'd go away and leave him to finish his business with the fellow. Best to brazen it out, he supposed. Lady Kate carried herself with unruffled grace, as if she hadn't a care in the world. Somehow, he doubted she was so sanguine. It couldn't be chance that brought her onto the terrace, where someone waited for her with a message. She must have arranged this meeting tonight. He narrowed his eyes and focused on her face. "I thought you'd have joined your guests at the supper table by now."

"Yes, everyone is in the dining room, but I was obliged to slip out here first and repair a tear to the hem of my gown. So provoking!" She rolled her eyes and extracted a pin from her reticule. "Mr. Bellingham might be a political lightweight, but light on his feet he is not!" Apparently oblivious to the faint grunts and groans of his companion, she joined Max, talking all the while. "Would you mind holding my reticule? I just need to ... Oh! I do apologize." Her gaze fixed on his hands, which were still wrapped around his victim's ankles. She peered over the balustrade. "It rather seems you have your hands full already."

He looked down, feigning surprise. "Now, how did that get there?" She gave him a quick, oblique glance, then leaned over to see his victim better, giving Max a magnificent view of her breasts. High and round, they were, despite her fairylike figure. Not as big as his usual—

"He looks dreadfully uncomfortable," she said. "I suppose this is one of those juvenile pranks my brothers used to delight in. But the poor fellow! All the blood must be rushing to his head." She raised her voice. "Are you all right down there?"

"Help! Help me, my lady. Please!" Spindleshanks managed a feeble struggle, as if to emphasize his weakness.

She drew back, delicate fingers fluttering over her lips. "Oh, dear. I do hope you won't drop him. With the prime minister here, I mean. How would I look with a dead body in my garden and half the government in my dining room?"

Max could almost have smiled. He had to hand it to her. Cool as Gunter's ices, when she must be dying for news of her brother. "It would certainly make your party memorable."

"My parties are always memorable. I don't need a corpse in my rose beds for that." She bit her lip. "Oh, do let him up. You are making me nervous. Indeed, I shall very likely fall into hysterics."

Anyone less likely to fall into hysterics would be difficult to find. Unwillingly amused, he complied, releasing one ankle to reach down and grab the seat of the man's breeches. Max hauled him back over the balustrade and set him on his feet.

"This poor excuse for a human being says he has a message for you, my lady." He bunched the man's collar in his fist and shoved him forward. "Perhaps he will give it to you now. What's your name, fellow?"

Spindleshanks bent forward, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. He mumbled something

unintelligible.

Max shook him. "Stand up straight when you address a lady."

"Ives," said the fellow between gasps. "Harry Ives."

Her ladyship observed the man dubiously. What an actress! Siddons was nothing to her.

"A message for me?" she repeated, the picture of bewilderment. "But why were you skulking out here? Why not deliver it the usual way?"

Before Ives could answer, she said, "Oh, never mind. Go and await me in the servants' hall. Tell the butler I sent you. I'll be down in a minute."

Ives threw Lady Kate a hostile glance, but he muttered something Max didn't quite catch and shuffle away.

Max didn't detain him. He was far more intrigued by the lady before him. After all, he'd attended this party for the express purpose of deepening their acquaintance. He'd expected Lady Kate to be another Society bore, but the mettle she'd shown so far in their encounter made him anticipate his task with pleasure.

They both watched Ives's retreating form. After a long, taut pause, Lady Kate met Max's gaze fully for the first time.

Eyes the color of French cognac, framed by an exotic wedge of black lashes, stared into his, then widened a little, as if in surprise.

He stilled, a strange shock of awareness holding him suspended, frozen in a sliver of time. It was a curious sensation, one he'd never experienced before.

He'd admired many women but he'd never reacted to any of them like this. A potent mix of emotions swept through him—desire, excitement, fascination, even tenderness. And all the while a beat in his brain said: *Not her. Not now.*

She recovered first, with a small shake of her head. Touching her temple with a hand that trembled slightly, she turned away. "I had best return to my guests."

Finally, he found his voice. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

She halted with her back to him. Her head turned slightly, so he could see her profile, limned by candlelight from the ballroom. "Forgetting something? What do you mean?"

He strolled up to her, taking his time, drawing out the moment. When he stood behind her, close enough to feel the warmth of her body, he stopped.

He saw the ripple in her slender throat when she swallowed. Her lips parted to draw in a quick breath. Reaching around her, he closed his hand over hers and took the pin she still held. He could have sworn she shivered at his touch.

He wanted to put his other arm around her and cup her breasts in his hands. He wanted to set his lips to that vulnerable spot at the junction of her collarbone and throat, above the gold filigree necklace she wore.

But only his breath touched her there, stirring soft chestnut tendrils, before he stepped back, allowing her to turn around to face him once more.

"Your hem," he said. "Didn't you say you needed to pin it?"

Her face flushed. She lifted a tentative hand to her cheek. "Oh, yes, of course. Give it to me and I'll ___"

Max smiled. "No, I insist. Allow me."

He knelt before her, running his fingers around the hem of her flimsy garment. She was so still, she might have been holding her breath. When his fingers brushed her ankle, she started and quickly stepped back, whisking the silk from his light grasp.

Max looked up and caught a wild expression in her eyes.

~~“Where is the tear? I can’t seem to find it,” he said, careful to keep any suggestion of irony from his tone.~~

“Rather more to the left,” she replied, regaining her composure. “Do be quick about it, sir. I could have done it myself in half the time.”

He found the small rent in her hem and gave a silent whistle. Score one to the lady. He had not expected to find her excuse for lingering on the terrace genuine.

He repaired the tear quickly and tweaked her skirts into place, resisting the urge to touch her again.

Straightening, he held his arm out to her. “Your guests will wonder where you are. Shall we?”

She stared at his arm as if it were a snake ready to strike her. “Oh, no. Do, please, excuse me. I must see what that fellow wanted. Go in to supper and I shall be there in a moment.”

He raised his brows. “Why would you leave a party to see what that ruffian has to say? Were you expecting him?”

“Of course not!” she said lightly. “I’ve never seen him before in my life. But he’s made me curious, and I can never rest until I have satisfied my curiosity, you know, no matter how trivial the matter might be.” She gave a small hiccup of laughter that might be described as a titter. Strange. She didn’t strike him as the sort of female who habitually tittered.

So she wanted him to think she was just another vapid female, did she? She intrigued him more every moment.

He could have made it more difficult for her but he decided to let her go. He would follow her and eavesdrop. One more loathsome act to chalk up on his account. He’d be glad when this business was over.

Max bowed. On impulse, he captured her hand to raise it to his lips. “I shall see you soon, Lady Kate. I look forward to pursuing our acquaintance.”

If the brush of his mouth on her gloved knuckles affected her as it did him, she didn’t show it. She swept him an elegant curtsey, and there was a glitter in her smile.

“No more than I, Your Grace. No more than I.”

KATE hurried out of the ballroom, along the servants’ corridor. Had she allayed Lyle’s suspicions? She didn’t think so. He was far too acute for her peace of mind. Thank Heaven Ives hadn’t given her away.

Why had the duke been so rough with him? Had he guessed why Ives was there?

Stephen’s incarceration was not common knowledge, but Lyle probably knew about it. The old Duke of Lyle had granted Stephen his living at the local vicarage, after all.

London buzzed with gossip about the new duke’s inheritance. She seemed to recall someone mentioning that he had worked at the Home Office until recently, which made it even more likely that he knew where Stephen was and why he was held.

A most ... *unsettling* man, the Duke of Lyle.

He’d seen her with Ives and he was intelligent enough to put two and two together. If she wasn’t careful, she might end up in prison, too.

Kate shivered, remembering the way the moonlight struck his thick black hair as he bent to fix her gown. She’d known a fleeting urge to set her hand in that coarse mass and run her fingers through it. His hair was slightly longer than fashionable and brushed in no recognizable style. The new duke was no fashion plate, that was certain, though his coat was well tailored, setting off his height and his broad shoulders to perfection.

Lyle might be careless of his own appearance, but those hard, gray eyes saw too much. A dark thrill had shot through her body when his fingers brushed her ankle. And when she'd met his gaze ... Kate shut her eyes. Despite the threat he posed to her, she was inexplicably, powerfully drawn to him, and that was even more dangerous.

She slipped down the steps, cautiously peering over the rail to the bustling kitchens below. Had Ives done her bidding or simply given up and gone away? She placed no dependence on his reliability. But then Stephen hadn't much choice but to trust the man, she supposed.

"My lady!" A hoarse whisper came from a darkened doorway to her left.

Thank goodness. She hurried down the stairs and slipped into a room where the empty preserving bottles and other odds and ends were kept.

Ives was there, waiting for her with an aggrieved expression.

"What news?" she whispered, trying to keep her skirts well clear of the dusty floor.

"You didn't oughter 'ave pretended not to know me up there, my lady. That big brute could have taken it out on my hide, what's more."

"I saved you from him, didn't I? How was I to know he'd be lurking out there in wait?"

Ives shuffled his feet and lowered his head. The light glanced off his balding crown. "Seems I deserve somefink in compensation, like. For the pain and suffering on account of that hulking fellow got the wrong end of the proverbial."

Her eyes narrowed. "You mean you want more money. Well, I won't pay you a penny more until you can convince me you have information that's worth the expense, you shifty little man."

She tapped her foot. "Come on, out with it. I don't have all night, you know. How does my brother?"

A gleam stole into the rheumy eyes. "Clapped him in irons, they have. In a cell by hisself so he can't corrupt the other prisoners. No visitors, not even a solicitor, I'm told."

Kate's blood turned to ice. "How can they do that? He has done nothing wrong!"

"C'n do anything they like to rabble-rousers these days, can't they? No questions asked."

"My brother is not a rabble-rouser. He is a man of God. Perhaps he might have spoken out against injustice, but he would never countenance rebellion, particularly a violent one." She blew out a breath.

"I must see him."

Ives hunched his shoulders. "You can't. They ain't allowing no visitors."

She looked at him suspiciously. "How do you know he is in irons if no one can see him?"

Ives tapped the side of his nose. "I have me ways, I have. But I can come and go without anyone kicking up a fuss. You would stand out like a sore thumb, my lady, forgiving the impertinence. Best give me any messages you want to send him."

Kate scrutinized his face with narrowed eyes. Was he telling the truth, or finding another way to line his pockets?

The question was moot. At the moment, Ives was her only link with Stephen. She must take the risk. "I want you to get a message to him. Do you think you can do it?"

Ives thought about it. "P'raps I could at that." He fingered his chin and eyed her sideways. "It'd cost you, though. A pretty penny in bribes to the guards and such like."

"How did I know you'd say that?" She sighed. She really had no choice. "How much?"

Ives named a sum that seemed far too high, but how was she to know? Thankfully, her experience in bribing prison officials was limited.

"You can have half now, and half when I have Stephen's answer. I'll send someone down with a purse for you."

She bit her lip. "Ask him to get word to me of anyone who might help him. Tell him I have exhausted

my own store of favors. No one in the government is prepared to help a man who has encouraged revolt, not even the son of a peer.”

Ives rubbed his chin. “Not my place to say it, my lady, but I’ll say it all the same. It’s my belief Mr. Stephen don’t want to be freed. Sticking to his principles, he is. Making a protest, like.”

Since this was her greatest fear as well, she cut Ives off. “You are quite correct. It is *not* your place to say it. I must go now, but don’t forget what I said. Bring me that message from my brother if you want the rest of your money.”

“Yes, my lady. Of *course*, my lady.” Ives bowed with an unctuous smile.

No, she didn’t trust him. She didn’t trust him at all.

At the top of the stairs, Kate gripped the banister and breathed deeply, momentarily overwhelmed by the difficulties she faced. For a fleeting instant, she wished she could share the burden with someone. Her father was too frail to be drawn into this coil and her elder brother was in Vienna. Her sisters were wrapped up in domestic concerns; they’d be of little use in this crisis.

She could not think of anyone else in the family who would be sympathetic to her cause. Staunch supporters of Liverpool’s government, every one of them, convinced revolution was set to sweep the country.

Kate blew out a frustrated breath and hurried back to her guests. Why did Stephen have to be so confoundedly noble? Instead of taking one of the many livings within their father’s gift, he’d accepted an offer from the old Duke of Lyle, who was reputed to be one of the harshest land-lords in the country.

Instead of an easy, pleasant life, Stephen had set his bantamweight against the might of a duke. He’d been walking on a knife’s edge for two years, careful not to irritate his noble patron sufficiently to be sent away, yet shifting, persuading, cajoling, campaigning subtly for reform.

Then the old duke had died and Stephen had seen the chance for a fresh start. What had happened after that, she was not sure.

She knew a fire at the big house had killed a number of the duke’s relatives who’d gathered there after the old duke’s funeral to hear the will read.

Her brother could have had nothing to do with that, of course. But there he was now, sitting in jail in the most degrading of conditions. The son of an earl, too proud to ask for help.

Was it a coincidence that the new Duke of Lyle had been on the terrace tonight and intercepted Ives? She shivered. No. Of course it was not. Nothing that man did would be anything but utterly calculated, not even the heat of passion she’d glimpsed in those stern gray eyes.

She must remember that.

AFTER supper, Kate mingled with her guests, conversing, making introductions, shepherding reluctant young gentlemen to dance.

The Duke of Lyle had been watching her all evening. She knew it the way she always knew when someone stood behind her, even if they didn’t touch her or make a sound.

Kate tried to remain unaffected, neither staring back at him, nor going out of her way to avoid his regard. But the constant prickling at the nape of her neck told her he still watched, like a wolf stalking his prey. She wondered if this sensation affected small woodland creatures shortly before becoming a predator’s evening meal.

But she was no shy fawn. She was the daughter of an earl, the widow of a member of Parliament. Women couldn’t vote, but many still played a significant role in politics. Without her help and connections, Hector would never have risen so high.

There must be a way she could use her influence to help Stephen. With regret, her friends in the government had all refused their assistance. It infuriated her when she thought of all the advice she had given over the years, the secrets she had kept.

Her gaze focused on Peter Daniel, who had been her greatest hope. She could ruin him with a word, but he would not help Stephen. She would not forget that.

Short of lobbying the prime minister, there was only one avenue left. She must try to persuade the Home Secretary to free her brother.

Lord Sidmouth was the man responsible for the legislation invoked to put Stephen behind bars. She didn't know Sidmouth well, but perhaps he would help her, if only out of regard for her father's contribution to the party. Kate worked her way around the ballroom, seeking her quarry. Eventually, she found him.

Speaking with the Duke of Lyle.

Her heart pounded. Could the man read minds? The thought of pleading for clemency for her brother with the duke there was horrifying. She must get Lord Sidmouth alone.

She gave instructions to the orchestra, then slowly skirted the room, pausing every so often to speak with her guests, making her way by degrees to the side of the ballroom where the gentlemen stood watching the dancing.

The duke saw her coming. Despite her subtlety, he'd known she headed his way. He almost seemed omniscient, though that was an absurd fancy. She did not like the heat in his gaze. Those burning eyes seemed to read her mind, penetrate to her soul.

Bracing herself, she approached. "Duke. Lord Sidmouth." She smiled at them impartially, wondering if they'd already discussed her situation.

Sidmouth would have made a good card player. His expression betrayed nothing. "We were just discussing your triumph, Lady Kate." He gestured about him at her crowded ballroom. "Something above the ordinary run of entertainments this season. My compliments."

She couldn't care less about frivolous things like balls at this moment, but she accepted the compliment graciously. "Thank you, my lord." Waving her fan in a leisurely way, she turned to the duke. "It is hot in here, don't you agree?"

"Very," said Lyle, his gaze insolently raking her body.

Her cheeks flamed. Confound it, how desperately she wished she did not blush! Then she realized he was trying to embarrass her, to throw her off the scent.

Kate narrowed her eyes at him. "My throat is quite parched. Would you fetch me a glass of water, please, sir?" *Preferably from the bottom of the Thames.*

Ordering a duke to fetch and carry for her was perhaps equal in insolence to his own conduct. As a duke, he might be affronted; as a gentleman, he must accede to her wishes. It was the oldest trick in the book to get rid of a man, but sometimes simple maneuvers proved the most effective.

He took the order without a blink. "It would be my pleasure, Lady Kate."

Stupidly, Kate was disappointed. He was going to give in as easily as that? She'd thought him a worthier foe.

But the duke did not take a step towards the supper room. A slight lift of his finger and one of her tiresomely efficient footmen materialized at his elbow.

Without taking his gaze from her face, the duke murmured, "Fetch your mistress a glass of water, will you, Arnold?"

She started at his use of the footman's name. "How—" No. She would not give him the satisfaction of voicing her surprise. A chill skittered down her spine. How did he know so much?

Kate glanced at Sidmouth, who looked a trifle bemused at their byplay. She would not give up. She must find a way to see him alone before he left the ball. There would be no other opportunity to speak with him privately without causing gossip.

The orchestra struck up a waltz. She'd almost forgotten she'd instructed them to do so. She must not let the duke throw her off balance like this.

Doing her utmost to ignore Lyle's disturbing presence, she turned the full brilliance of her smile on the Home Secretary. "Oh, how fortunate! I do love to dance the waltz. Dear Lord Sid—"

A hard, masculine arm clamped around her waist and swung her into the dance.

One look that lingers a heartbeat too long. He turns his head. The crowd shifts. He is gone. He steals my breath. Will he steal my heart as well?

KATE'S heart bounded into her throat. Her stomach pitched. As the duke whirled her down the room she even felt a little dizzy, as if she'd drunk too much champagne.

His hand imprisoned hers in a tight, unforgiving clasp. There was something almost brutal in the way he held her, though onlookers would see nothing amiss.

Panic fluttered in her chest. He couldn't keep her against her will in the middle of a crowded dance floor. She knew that, but she had to call on every ounce of self-control to stop herself from fighting to break free.

With every nerve clamoring, urging her to take flight, Kate watched other dancers slide past as if they moved behind a wall of glass. The trail of light from candles, the glittering jewels and silks went by in a blur. The noise of the crowd was muted, distant. All she could feel and see and hear was Lyle.

She tried to block him out—the arms of tempered steel, the breath that stirred her hair, the strong leg that propelled them down the room, the broad chest that seemed to inch closer with every turn. His infernal heat. She felt it, even through the fabric of clothes and gloves.

Inwardly, Kate shook herself. For goodness' sake, she was acting like some silly debutante waltzing for the first time. She had more courage than this! She would not cower before the Duke of Lyle. He might have won this battle, but she would win the war.

Lyle spoke. "You are remarkably silent, my lady. Is something the matter?"

She raised her gaze to his face. A perfect, polite, social mask. To look at him, anyone would think he was civilized. "I *shall* speak with Sidmouth, you know."

He gave her a lazy smile. "Perhaps you should thank me for a lucky escape. The Home Secretary is an execrable dancer."

"It was not for the pleasure of dancing that I wanted his company," Kate said. "But I suppose you know that."

He shrugged. "I might guess. You wish to talk him into freeing your brother."

Lyle knew Stephen was in prison, then. Of course he did. He seemed to know everything about her, including the names of her servants. "In that case, I'm surprised that you are not attempting to secure his release yourself, my lord duke. Stephen is now a dependent of yours, is he not?"

The duke gave a grim smile. "It is not my practice to condone seditious clergymen, however altruistic their motives. But I do try to intervene when I see someone wasting their time. Feminine charm will not work with Sidmouth, Lady Kate. He has a lot riding on this issue." Lyle's gaze dropped to her mouth. "You had far better work your wiles on me."

She glared, trying to ignore the hot flush stealing over her. How she itched to slap that arrogant face! "I have no intention of *working my wiles*, as you call it, on anyone."

He tilted his head. "No? How disappointing."

For Stephen's sake, she couldn't let him distract her like this. She took a deep breath and tried to steel

the conversation back on course. "Sidmouth has no case against my brother, and if it weren't for these atrocious new laws, he wouldn't even attempt to hold him."

Lyle's fingers squeezed her hand so hard she almost yelped. Harshly, he said, "You don't know what you're talking about. Have you any idea what your brother has been doing these past months?" She didn't know, but she refused to be cowed. "No, because no one will tell me! But why so secretive? Why hasn't my brother's arrest been reported in the papers? An earl's son jailed for sedition? Now *that* is news." She raised her brows. "Unless the government has reason to suppress the information ..."

From the flare of Lyle's eyes, she knew she'd scored a hit. She followed up her advantage. "Does the cabinet really think there'll be a revolution? Or are they simply shielding themselves from fair criticism with this abominable legislation?"

The duke's austere features tautened. "I must repeat: you don't know what you're talking about. You're dabbling in dangerous waters, my lady. Go back to playing the political hostess and leave the real politicking to those who understand how these things are done."

Kate suppressed a gasp at his rudeness. Moments passed before she could master her fury. She managed to shrug. "I'd be offended by that remark if I didn't know that men always take that dismissive tone when a woman scores a telling point against them."

"I'm not interested in scoring points, madam." The duke's voice lowered to a growl. "And if you think this is a game, it shows exactly how naive you are."

Her frustration threatened to boil over. Of *course* she didn't treat securing her brother's freedom as a game.

But instead of rushing into intemperate speech, Kate forced herself to remain silent. Obviously, nothing good could come of arguing with someone so pigheaded. He must think her a fool if he assumed she didn't take Stephen's imprisonment seriously.

Familiar though it was, the duke's condescending attitude incensed her. Over the years, she'd learned to turn off patronizing remarks with a smile, knowing she had more political acumen in her little finger than her husband, a member of Parliament, had possessed in his entire body. Why, then, did Lyle's low opinion of her intelligence rankle?

She considered. Perhaps instead of trying to correct his false assumptions, she might use them to her advantage. Men often told her things precisely because they underestimated her—politicians and peers alike. Some used her as a sounding board for ideas; others saw her as a neutral party in whom to confide.

Kate narrowed her eyes, as if to bring the past into perspective. Come to think of it, she knew an awful lot about the members of the present government.

"I mistrust that look," murmured the duke. "What scheme are you cooking up now?"

"Scheme?" She smiled. "Oh, nothing of the sort. My mind simply wandered, that's all. I was thinking how interesting my years as Hector's hostess were. You know, I really owe it to posterity to publish my memoirs." She darted a look upwards, and saw that the duke's face had hardened to sharp planes and angles.

"So many fascinating stories," she continued. "And a few, *tiny* peccadilloes here and there to spice up the brew. Well, rather more than a few, actually, and some of them not so tiny." She fluttered her eyelashes. "I think it would make interesting reading, don't you?"

He searched her face, and maddeningly, she sensed him relax. "You wouldn't do it. You don't have it in you to create a scandal like that. Not the proper Lady Kate."

That mocking mention of her good reputation fueled her fury. "I would do *anything* to get my brother

out of that place. Don't cross swords with me, my lord duke, or you will see what I have in me to do. She saw that his disbelief wavered, so she went in for the kill. "In fact, I've kept a diary of these fascinating anecdotes. Written in code, of course, no names mentioned. But it will be a simple thing to turn the diary into something more readable. I don't know why I never thought of it before." She almost quailed at the duke's murderous expression. She wouldn't be surprised if his hands closed around her throat to choke the life out of her in the middle of her own ball. But his violent reaction showed her ploy might work.

It took all her courage to face him when a lively sense of self-preservation told her to break from his hold and run. Forcing a lightness into her voice that she was far from feeling, she added, "Of course, my brother were free I could easily forget there ever was a diary. In fact, I—"

"Shut up, you little fool!"

The dance ended before Kate could summon a retort. She longed to fight Lyle with all guns blazing, but out of regard for propriety, she made herself sink into a deep curtsy.

He bowed, still holding her hand tightly enough to crush her fingers. She winced and shot him a fiery look, but he ignored it. His features had returned to their customary impassiveness, though his gray eyes blazed under hooded lids.

She would have pulled away then, but his grip made it impossible. He drew her hand through the crook of his arm and compelled her to move with him through the crowd.

Furious, she tried to disengage herself but he held her captive. Any more effort to get away and this would soon turn into a tussle. She gritted her teeth and went with him, searching for an opportunity to escape in a dignified fashion.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lord Sidmouth bow his head to listen to something a soberly dressed young man murmured in his ear. Quickly, Sidmouth nodded and headed to the door in the young man's wake.

He wasn't leaving? Kate's heart pounded as she moved through the crowd at the duke's side. When would she gain another chance to speak with the Home Secretary? It was not as if she, a lone female, could call on him the next day. She must see him now.

A voice behind her made Kate jump as if a gun had gone off in her ear. "Dear Lady Kate, don't run away. You promised the next dance to me."

The duke halted, allowing her to turn around. Her husband's old friend Peter Daniel held out his arm to her in a clear act of chivalry. Had her distress been so obvious? She darted a quick look around but no one else seemed to take any notice.

Kate snatched at the chance for escape. "Of course, Mr. Daniel. How could I forget?"

Daniel gave her a fat wink and watched as she tried to free herself from the duke.

"Daniel," said the duke, stepping forward. His tone was a warning. "Go away."

Fat chuckles boomed out. "Oh, come now, Lyle. You can't keep the greatest beauty in the room to yourself. Lady's promised to me! Do you wish to fight me for her? Pistols at dawn, eh?"

Daniel raised his quizzing glass to observe Lyle's tight grip on Kate's wrist. Kate marveled at his courage. She held her breath to see what Lyle would do.

His gray eyes burned into Daniel's. His grip relaxed on her wrist. He didn't release her, but Kate lost no time in tugging her arm free and sinking into a curtsy. "Do excuse me, sir. The sets are almost made up."

Lyle had no choice but to let her go or risk a ludicrous scene. He bowed, and with a look that told her he had not yet finished with her, he walked away.

Kate blew out a breath of relief, watching him melt into the crowd. Now she needed to escape Daniel

There wasn't a moment to lose. Sidmouth might have left already.

Daniel quirked a brow. "His Grace appears put out. What have you been saying to him? Stinging him with that tongue of yours, my precious little wasp?"

Kate regarded him coolly. She didn't want to discuss the duke or their disagreement, and she still hadn't forgiven Daniel for refusing to help Stephen.

However, she acknowledged he'd done her a service in rescuing her from the duke.

He waved away her thanks. "Oh, don't mention it, my dear. I'm far too old for dancing, but for you, anything."

Kate glanced to the door. "Then would you mind terribly if I excuse myself, sir? We are about to run out of claret cup and the old tabbies will be up in arms if there is none to be had."

Without giving Daniel a chance to reply, she left him and hurried in the direction she'd seen Sidmouth take.

A cursory search of the parlor where refreshments were laid out told her Sidmouth was not there. He wasn't in the card room, either. Had he left? She questioned the footman stationed at the front door, but he hadn't seen Lord Sidmouth depart.

"I think you'll find him in the green drawing room, my lady," said her butler, the epitome of quiet efficiency. "I saw his lordship go in not five minutes past."

He must have slipped away with the younger man for a private discussion. Some urgent government business, perhaps. If she weren't so desperate, she wouldn't dream of interrupting, but given the circumstances, it was a perfect opportunity.

Kate hurried back upstairs. Instead of turning right at the top to head for the ballroom, she turned left and slipped along the corridor. She tapped on the door to the green drawing room, then opened it.

A large hand shot out and clamped over her arm, yanking her inside. It wasn't Sidmouth's.

The duke spun her around and kicked the door shut behind him. "Looking for me?"

She glanced wildly about. Sidmouth wasn't here. They were alone.

Her heart lurched, then plummeted to the pit of her stomach. The shadows made his features more pronounced—the aquiline nose, slightly crooked, as if he'd once broken it; the hooded eyes, with the thick, straight brows. The uncertain light leached the color from his face until he seemed a creature of jet and marble and ice.

"I was looking for Sidmouth."

Lyle's jaw hardened. "You won't learn, will you?" He pulled her hard against him, jerking her head back with the force of it, and the resemblance to anything cold and inanimate vanished.

Flesh and blood male pressed against her, hot and vital. She hadn't been so close to a man since long before Hector died, and never like this. Lyle looked as if he might devour her whole.

"Let me go!" Her words fell too loudly in the empty room. To her annoyance, they held an edge of panic. Why had she sparred with him? She'd suspected this duke was no gentleman, yet she couldn't resist.

They were alone. If anyone found them, her honor would be compromised. She couldn't scream. That *would* cause a scandal. It would be undignified to struggle. Not that she could have done much. She could barely move without rubbing her body against his.

"Take me back to the ballroom, sir!"

He laughed. "Oh, I don't think so."

And then he kissed her.

There was nothing gentle or gentlemanly about the duke's assault. Strong arms tightened around her, one hand cupping her head, fingers thrust into her hair, holding her steady against his brutal mouth.

She gasped and his tongue surged in to tangle with hers. The shock of it almost stopped her heart. No one but Hector had ever kissed her on the mouth, and his kisses had been dutiful, tight-lipped, and brief.

But this man ... Lyle's kiss ravaged her until she was breathless and her lips felt bruised. And like some witless debutante, she stood there practically swooning in his arms. She should struggle. She should scream. The kiss was a punishment and a warning, nothing more.

Yet the heat stabbed her loins and her heart pounded and arousal streaked through her body like lightning through a summer sky. His scent was a subtle mixture of sandalwood and man, his lips hot and dry and firm. Every breath, every touch excited her more. Who could have guessed the mouth that had sneered at her so contemptuously in the ballroom could elicit such a fever of desire?

This must not be happening. She detested him, didn't she? And she'd thought the feeling was mutual. But despite the promptings of her brain, her body yielded, softened, molded itself to his.

He shifted and his torso dragged against her breasts, making her nipples tingle and ripen. Fierce, magnetic yearning welled up inside, so intense and unexpected that she gripped his lapels to anchor herself.

Lyle murmured something and the hand at her nape gentled to a caress. His mouth slowed to a leisurely exploration, as if he knew she'd surrendered, as if he'd won. She sensed his satisfaction in the softening cling of his lips, in the confident stroke of his tongue, in the slight relaxation of his embrace.

Suddenly, reason clawed to the surface. What on earth was she doing? She'd been returning his kiss! Furious with herself, Kate twisted in his arms, struggling to break free, but that only made him tighten his hold, trapping her hands between their bodies. She stamped on his instep, and when that produced nothing but a low grunt, she used the only other weapon she had—her teeth.

She bit down viciously on his lower lip until she must have drawn blood. Kate winced at inflicting such pain on him, but Lyle didn't even flinch. When she finally unclamped her teeth, the duke lifted his head, still holding her hard against him.

"Vixen," he said, the trace of a laugh in his voice. "Next time, I'll bite you back."

He trailed a finger down the sensitive skin of her throat and pressed just above her collarbone.

"There." And he bent to kiss the spot.

Kate's knees nearly buckled. Shuddering, she jerked her head away. She tasted the salt of his blood on her tongue, and the intimacy of it horrified her.

In this short encounter, Lyle had done to her what no other man had dared. And he'd thrown her into utter confusion.

"There won't be a next time." She could have killed herself for the querulous note that came into her voice. "I shouldn't have allowed it to happen once."

He tilted his head. "You think you had a choice in the matter? Well, that is refreshing."

She hated him, but no more than she hated herself for such weakness. She could have stopped him if she'd wanted. For heaven's sake, there were hundreds of people in the ballroom a few yards away who would have come running if she'd screamed.

She should scream now.

But she wouldn't.

Oh, but he was dangerous. They'd barely met and look what she'd let him do to her! The fire of shame flooded her cheeks, where there'd only been a flush of excitement before. It was as if she'd completely lost control of herself, a terrifying thing to contemplate.

She wished he had not chosen to exercise this strange power over her, especially now, when she needed a clear head ...

Oh, God, *Stephen*. Guilt flooded her. She'd forgotten him! This was no time for allowing herself to be distracted. There was too much at stake.

She spoke between gritted teeth. "Release me, if you please."

Before she'd finished the sentence, she was free.

Kate stepped back and saw that the duke breathed hard and fast. For a bare instant, she caught a feral light in those gray eyes, but it was quickly doused, leaving them the usual shade of polished granite. She wished she possessed as much command over herself. Just remembering the feel of his fingers tangling in her hair made her breathless and hot.

She wrestled with her embarrassment. "Don't *ever* do that again!"

"I could think of few better occupations for that mouth of yours." He raked a hand through his hair.

"Do you know how many ears were flapping in the breeze as you outlined your little plan?"

"Don't be absurd. No one else could have heard me. Everyone was moving around too much."

"Your conversation bordered on treason, ma'am. What will happen when your victims find out you intend to expose their dirty little secrets? I would not give a penny for your life if that got about."

She swallowed hard. He was right. She courted danger by speaking her threats so openly. She'd not thought of that, principally because she'd never intended to publish the memoirs. The diary was utterly fictitious. She had more sense than to commit such sensitive information to paper.

On the defensive, she matched his biting tone. "If you'd simply explained that to me instead of manhandling me in this fashion, I might well have listened. Did that occur to you?"

"It did." He smiled. "But speaking would not have been nearly so pleasurable."

"For you, perhaps! I am not accustomed to being treated like this."

His eyes gleamed. "No?" he said softly. "Poor Lady Kate."

The understanding in his expression horrified her. She must get away from him. He saw far too much. Still smiling, the duke advanced towards her. She backed away, but he advanced until her shoulders pressed against the wall.

There was nowhere to go, and she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to run. God help her, this man fascinated her even more than he frightened her.

He nodded slowly, as if he sensed her reaction and understood.

"Lady Kate, your brother knows where the rebels who set fire to Lyle Castle are hiding. He will be released *if* he cooperates and tells the authorities what they wish to know. If not—" He shrugged, leaving the rest to her fertile imagination.

So that was the root of it all! She knew *Stephen* could not have been directly involved in the uprising.

"But how do you know he has this information?" she countered. "It seems unlikely these arsonists would tell my brother where they were going."

"My dear, he has admitted it," said the duke, almost gently.

Oh, *Stephen*! She could have howled at his naivety. He'd as good as hanged himself with that admission.

The duke traced her cheek with one fingertip and her skin shivered at his touch. "Perhaps you could persuade him to do the right thing. I might arrange for you to see him, if you promise me you will try."

She held still, trying to ignore the sheer power of that light caress. She needed to think, not feel.

The realization dawned on her. He expected her to take his side against her own brother? He must rate his attractions highly.

She stared coolly into his eyes. "Whatever he has done, sir, my brother has my full confidence and support."

But she lied. She didn't give a fig about Stephen's principles. She would do *anything* to get him out of prison. But Stephen wouldn't bend to pressure or threats if he thought he was doing right. Her persuasion would count for nothing.

Lyle's palm cupped her cheek, and a strange light entered his eyes. Not tenderness. Perhaps compassion?

For the second time that evening, Kate felt as if something had sucked the air out of her lungs. He was going to kiss her again, and the worst part was she longed for that complete possession almost as much as she feared it. She could have screamed with frustration at her helplessness. Usually, she had not the slightest difficulty making men keep the line.

Her gaze fixed on the trace of blood where she'd bitten him, a dash of crimson against the duller red of his lip. As he moved closer, the image blurred and swam. She closed her eyes until his breath brushed her mouth, willing herself not to lean in to him.

At the last possible moment before they touched, he drew back.

He laughed softly. "I can almost see the cogs whirring in that busy mind of yours. I'd like to know what you're thinking, Lady Kate. But since I'm not certain whether you're in earnest about publishing these memoirs, let me give you some advice. Destroy the diary and forget you ever knew those secrets. Knowledge can be a dangerous thing."

The next moment, he was gone, closing the door behind him with a decisive snap.

The sound dislodged the thick haze of desire that clogged her brain. Her mind sprang into action, working furiously.

With the duke's disclosures in this room, all hope of persuading Sidmouth or anyone else in the government to help Stephen was gone.

Stephen's arrest hadn't been based on a misunderstanding, as she'd wanted to believe. By his own admission, he knew the whereabouts of wanted criminals, arsonists who had staged a violent insurrection against the family of the Duke of Lyle.

No one would sympathize with a man, even a vicar, who aided such felons. Perhaps Stephen believed in their innocence, or perhaps he did not want to send men to their deaths by informing on them. Either way, if he hadn't been persuaded by imprisonment, there was no chance he'd listen to her. So, no help through official channels. Nor would Stephen help himself. It seemed now she had little choice but to use the only weapon she had left.

The duke had turned wild in the ballroom when she'd mentioned writing her memoirs. The mere threat of publishing them had acted on him like a spur to a stallion's flank.

He was desperate to stop her seeing Sidmouth. Perhaps even as Lyle had kissed her so passionately, he'd been deliberately delaying her search until Sidmouth left. Confound the man! And confound her for letting him dupe her. She didn't doubt she'd missed her chance.

Anger at the way he'd used her ripped a strangled cry from her throat. She bit her lip hard, almost as hard as she'd bitten his, trying to bring her emotions under control.

Calm. Calm. She'd save her fury at his tactics for later.

Now, it was enough to judge that her instincts had been right. Knowledge might be dangerous to her, but she could also use it as a powerful weapon. If wielded judiciously, it might save her brother. Even if Lyle was right and she put herself at risk by threatening the government, the risk would be worthwhile if it meant Stephen might walk free.

She narrowed her eyes and started to plan.

Oh, yes. Knowledge could be a *very* dangerous thing.

MAX spent the rest of the evening in the card room, but his mind couldn't have been farther from the play.

He brooded over that scene with Lady Kate. Why had he let her goad him like that? Why hadn't he restrained himself? Instead of taking her in a slow, smooth seduction, he'd frightened her with force and hungry kisses.

He had rather disconcerted himself, if it came to that. He'd almost made a scene, stealing that dance from Sidmouth, something he'd never felt remotely tempted to do in his entire life.

Fortunately for him, his hostess was a consummate lady. She hadn't betrayed her fear or her fury to anyone watching. Only he had felt her go rigid beneath his hands, seen the pulse that beat in her throat, heard the little gasp she gave when he took her in his arms to dance.

He had to admit it. He'd been jealous. Jealous of Sidmouth!

Not a rational reaction, but when Lady Kate had smiled at the Home Secretary like that, and almost commanded him to waltz, the need to keep her to himself had overtaken him. He'd almost punched Daniel in the face when he'd claimed his dance. The older man's suggestion of pistols at dawn had struck him as far too civilized. What the hell was wrong with him?

He was a professional. There was no excuse for rushing his fences like that. He couldn't afford to let passion rule him. He couldn't afford to make a mistake.

But he'd already been soft with her, hadn't he? The most efficient way to get the information he wanted was to abduct Lady Kate and hold her to ransom against the brother's cooperation. Had he not found her so likeable and appealing, he wouldn't have hesitated.

And he couldn't even plead the likely consequences that deterred him from carrying out the plan. He could abduct her without fear of reprisals. Lady Kate would be anxious to maintain her spotless reputation, so she'd hardly raise a hue and cry about her kidnapping once he set her free. In condemning him, she'd ruin herself, and Lady Kate was a woman who prized her honor highly.

When the hand of cards came to a close, Max scanned the room, surprised to find it almost empty. The other gamesters must have departed for their clubs. He saw his cousin Romney lounging in the corner and made his way to him.

He jerked his head. "Come on. We're leaving."

With an acquiescent grunt, Romney followed. As they reached the landing, he cocked an eyebrow in Max's direction. "Did you speak with her?"

"Lady Kate? Yes, I did." He paused. "She is far more trouble than I'd expected."

Romney's mouth quirked up appreciatively. "Gave you curry, eh? Easy on the eye, though, ain't she? Brains, too, if you like that sort of thing."

Max barely suppressed a growl. In spite of himself, it seemed he did like precisely that sort of thing. More than liked it, in fact.

He shouldn't have been so rough with her, but the way she'd babbled on, getting herself deeper and deeper into hot water, he had been fierce with fear on her behalf. Anyone could have overheard those thinly veiled threats.

Suddenly, he wondered if Daniel had heard them. Was that why he'd come to Lady Kate's aid in the ballroom? It was a possibility he couldn't ignore. He'd deal with Daniel later.

Besides the danger she posed to his own cause, Lady Kate was a danger to herself. If she made good her promise of blackmail, one of two things would happen—either Sidmouth would cave in and free Stephen Holt, an outcome that would throw Max back to square one in his investigation, or Sidmouth would refer the matter to Faulkner, head of covert operations.

Faulkner would have no compunction. If Lady Kate posed a threat to the security of the realm, he

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