

Veiled In Blue

An Emperors of London Novel

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Chapter 1

Julius picked up the buffer and passed it over his perfectly polished nails before glancing at his valet. "I'll eat in an hour. Tell the innkeeper to serve the meal here." He put the pad next to the paring knife, absently noting their perfect alignment.

"Pardon, *monseigneur*?"

Julius patiently repeated the information in French. Whatever had possessed him to employ a French valet?

The dapper man bowed and smiled. "*Oui*, my lord." At least he'd learned that much, although Julius preferred his servants to address him simply as "sir."

Someone scratched at the door, and Lamaire went to answer it.

He returned with two letters, which he handed to Julius, carefully avoiding personal contact. Julius took them with a nod. He picked up the knife from the dressing table and broke the seal on the first one. It was from his mother.

Winterton,

Your father and I are expecting your presence shortly, and we trust your visit to your cousin will take no longer than a week or two. This is merely to inform you that your sister and your daughter arrived at the house today and are well. This time I must insist that Helena remain with me. You have not employed a companion for her on a regular basis, as you promised to do. Neither have you remarried. I cannot allow my daughter to live with you if you are unable to offer her the protection she deserves.

I have also invited some other of our acquaintances, and I am sure you will wish to meet them. Lady McComyn, Lady Murtagh, Lady Burton, and several others will be there with their families.

Yours, etc.

Julius swore viciously. Red rage filled his heart and burned in his veins. Damn the woman. By hook or crook, his mother wanted him married again, and she would hold his sister Helena to ransom until he selected one of the candidates of her choice.

Now she had Helena. Helena had been a bone of contention between his mother and him for many years. The duchess desired Helena to become her unpaid companion, the helpmeet for her old age. Julius was equally determined that his sister would have the life she wanted and the husband she deserved. Life with his mother did not bear thinking about.

But the duchess had won a march on him. The women listed in the letter were her particular allies, and their daughters would be firmly under their thumbs. His mother sought to control him through his wife. But if he was to rescue Helena, he would have to go to the Abbey and face her. Otherwise the duchess would never let her go. She would have him married before the end of the summer. In chains for life.

"My lord?" Lamaire stood by him, an enquiring expression on his sharp features.

Restlessly, Julius rose from his chair and took the other letter to the window, gazing out at the bustling inn yard below.

A young woman crossed the inn yard, her clothes simple and a cloth-covered basket on one arm. She progressed until she passed through the great arch that led out of the yard. She bore herself gracefully as she turned her head to smile at a man standing by the door to the taproom, her hips

swaying slightly, her bearing almost regal. Julius smiled. The man doffed his hat to her. That meant she wasn't a doxy, but a respectable female with some business at the inn.

She progressed until she passed through the great arch that led out of the yard. Watching someone else, someone who had nothing to do with him conducting a life, calmed him and helped him to set his infuriating mother out of his mind, at least for now.

The young woman could even be his quarry. His spy, a servant he used to employ who was now working at this very inn, had told him the young woman occasionally came into town to shop on market day. The notion of a woman travelling without an attendant mildly surprised him, but since she presumably had no idea of her importance in the wider world, she would probably think nothing of it. He'd ordered his man to stop for the night here. It wasn't up to the usual standard he insisted on, the rooms cramped and the noise from the taproom too loud, but it would serve. In any case, luck might be with him, and that pretty dark-haired wench could be the one he was looking for. She was dressed respectably, though not fashionably, in a warm cloak with a dull-green-colored gown underneath, ankle length so as not to gather mud. Her basket was covered with a clean cloth, but in appearance, she could be a country wife rather than the granddaughter of a king, albeit a disgraced one.

Julius wrenched his thoughts back to the second letter. The outer part was scarred and creased. It had come a long way to find him. He broke the seal. This was from his brother Augustus.

My dear Julius.

What we suspected is, indeed, the case. Good luck in the hunt.

I trust this finds you well. I will be with you in England before the end of the month, if the weather stays fine.

Yours, etc.

Augustus.

The cryptic communication accompanied a letter he had in his pocket. He pulled it out now and read it again. This was entirely in the code Julius used with his brother, but he had transcribed it.

Here is the information you were looking for. I discovered this letter in the ruins of a house, and I have hopes of finding more. This copy is damaged by fire, so we only have two further names.

Julius had made it his mission to seek out and make safe all the legitimate children of the Old Pretender. They were not, as many supposed, the Young Pretender and his brother, Cardinal Henry Stuart, but the children of an earlier, secret marriage. The son of the last Stuart King of Britain had undergone a clandestine marriage to Maria Rubio, and after his short-lived official marriage, had returned to Maria.

They were political explosions waiting to happen.

Maria had given her children away at birth, either to secure their safety or to keep them hidden or both. She had chosen British tourists to Rome, of which there were legion, and Julius had had the devil of a job tracking them down. Now he had clues to the identity of one more.

Augustus had copied the relevant parts of the letter. It contained names they already knew plus two others. The one Julius was tracing here was from a man who was an academic at Oxford but had married and accepted a modest living in Appleton, Somerset, a few miles away from the inn Julius stood in. He glanced out of the window again. The woman had gone.

Ten miles from the village, Julius's cousin Alex had taken a house, so that his wife could undergo her confinement in peace. Julius's plan was to visit Alex, congratulate him on the birth of his son, and then travel on to his family home, to collect his sister and his daughter. During his visit, he could check the existence of the reverend and his family, ensure the child was cared for, and that nobody knew about her real identity.

But the sight of the woman unnerved him. Who else might be watching for her? And wouldn't a visit from a real life duke's heir cause some comment and cause the very fuss he was anxious to avoid?

Julius changed his plans. He would become Mr. Nobody of Nowhere for a week or two. He would still visit Alex, but he would not reveal his identity to the villagers. The child was a girl, Miss Eve Merton, purportedly the daughter of the Reverend and Mrs. Merton of Appleton. The thrill of the chase stirred inside him. He had a job to do, and by God he would do it before he walked into his mother's trap.

He snapped out his orders in French. "Pack a saddlebag with everything I will need for the next day or two."

"My lord?" Now Lamaire sounded confused, as well he might be.

Julius tipped back his head, closed his eyes, and drew air into his lungs, plans rapidly ordering themselves in his mind. "Go downstairs and hire me a horse. In the morning, use one of my coats and leave as if you are me. Go to my cousin's house. I will give you a note for him."

His last valet wouldn't have turned a hair, but Julius had spent years inuring him to his requests. Now, thanks to the man finding a wife and leaving his service, Julius had to start all over again. "I do not want anyone to know that I have left. I will travel as a gentleman." He thought of something the valet would definitely understand. "It is a delicate matter concerning a lady. *Comprenez-vous?*"

Lamaire's expression cleared. "Ah, I understand! I am most discreet, *monseigneur*. But would you not prefer a dress coat, something to impress the lady of your choice?"

Julius shook his head. "I don't intend to announce my presence in the village."

Lamaire nodded and bowed, the trace of a smile on his lips. "As you say."

That would keep him quiet and on Julius's side, even if the explanation was not completely accurate. The Frenchman would assume that Julius wanted to hide his identity so the lady would not pursue him. Julius could see that by the sidelong glances the man shot him. He could not be further from the truth.

"Pack the brown coat. I will wear the green."

When Lamaire presented him with the emerald green brocade Julius shook his head and indicated the duller one, in plain English cloth.

"That one." When he held his hand out, lace floated over the back of his hand. An ordinary man would not have anything so fine. He proceeded to pull away the neat running stitches and remove the Brussels lace ruffle. Then he unwound his cravat, exchanging both for plainer garments. He would be travelling incognito.

Half an hour later, Julius was on his way. With a pistol in each pocket, a sword by his side, and saddlebags full of clothes and other necessary items, he felt relatively safe. He'd exchanged his wig for a simpler one and his gold-braided cocked hat for an undecorated example. Instead of his sapphire signet ring, he wore a simple worn one of gold. Few would recognize it, but it was enough to identify him if the worst happened and he was waylaid and murdered. A man in his position must always consider that eventuality. The succession could not be put in doubt.

The vile mood engendered by his mother's demands still simmered. Once on the road, he released it. With nobody in sight he let rip, cursing a blue streak. He kept it up for at least half a mile before he could think clearly again. Ever since he had left home to set up his own establishment, his mother had fought to control him. It would not happen now. Or ever.

Julius was no nearer discovering a way to thwart his mother's attempted control of his life, except for one wild thought when he'd first glanced up from her letter and seen the young woman crossing

the inn yard. He was tempted to follow the old legend of the king who'd promised to marry the first woman he saw.

Dusk was falling, and he had to pay attention, or the nag he'd hired would stumble in a rut on this none-too-carefully maintained road.

A slumped figure appeared ahead, someone in a shapeless heap of dark clothes. Since the person was bent over, Julius couldn't discern who or what it was, but he went on his guard, transferring the reins to one hand. He shoved his free hand into his pocket and curved it around the comforting butt of his pistol. Footpads would often appeal to the kindness of travelers. An old trick, but not one Julius intended to fall for now. He tugged on the rein, urging his horse to give the individual a wide berth.

The person straightened and revealed itself as a woman holding a basket, probably the same female he'd seen crossing the inn yard—perhaps even his quarry. He relaxed his grip.

As he approached, she stopped again, and bent once more. When she stood up this time, she gripped the handle of her basket harder than necessary. She had gloved hands, a sign of a gentlewoman. No country wench, this, and no footpad either.

Her shoes, barely visible below her ankle-length skirts, were sturdy, the buckles catching the light of the setting sun. She faltered. She was limping.

Julius drew level with her. He slowed his horse, his chivalrous instincts balking at the notion of passing her.

She glanced around and then snapped her head back to watch the road. Her profile was lovely, her nose straight and true.

"Are you in trouble, ma'am?" he asked her. "May I be of assistance?"

"No, sir." Her voice shook, but no discernible country accent tinged it. "I will manage. I merely caught my foot in a rut. I will be perfectly well shortly."

Julius pulled up and dismounted. "I insist. I am of no danger to you."

Coming to a halt, she put up her chin to glare. "I assure you, sir. I am fine." She bit her lip. "I should warn you that I am armed and I know how to use my weapon."

Julius caught his breath. Despite the plain clothes and tight jaw, she was truly exquisite, one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. The lines of her face were clean and clearly defined, her skin so pure it begged for his touch. Was he tumbling into a different kind of trap, perhaps? He was in peril of falling for his own fantasy.

Smiling, he drew his hand out of his pocket just far enough to show her that he was armed, too. When she shifted on the rough road, her shoes scraping against grit with an audible sound, he was sorry he had shown her.

He drew his hand from his pocket completely, leaving the pistol behind. "I beg your pardon, ma'am. As you can see, I have released my weapon. If you follow suit, I feel sure we shall be more comfortable."

If she bit her lip any harder, she'd draw blood. "Please to go on, sir," she said.

"I wouldn't dream of abandoning a young lady so unprotected."

He meant it. She was terrified of him, and she had good reason. Without a house in sight, they were alone together. It would be a matter of moments to overpower her.

Fortunately, Julius had no such intention, but he had no way of proving that to her. Normally he'd provide his card. Not in this case. He had no visiting cards, and if he started flaunting his wealth, his low profile would not last for long. Money didn't just talk; sometimes it screamed.

“How far do you have to go? Will the next village suit you?” If it did not, he would travel farther. “I will not leave you to be accosted by a real ruffian. Please, ma’am, let me help.”

“Who are you, sir? What are you doing on this road? It hardly leads to anywhere important. If you are heading for Bath, I am afraid you have lost your way.”

Smiling, Julius shook his head, rapidly inventing a history for himself. “I’m a man of business, and I am travelling to see Lord Ripley. I have some papers for him to sign.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders slumped when she breathed out. “Lady Ripley has just been brought to bed.”

“You know them?” he said quickly.

“No, that is, I have met them once, but I cannot claim acquaintanceship. Lady Ripley’s...illness precluded that.” She sighed, her bosom swelling enticingly under her plain blue gown. “Your name, sir?”

“Julius Vernon.” He would not stray too far from the truth in case he was found out. Hiding under a completely false name would make this enterprise too shady. He wanted this woman to trust him.

No recognition of the shortened version of his name shaded her eyes. She touched his hand briefly when he held it out to her. “Eve Merton. My father was the vicar here before his death.”

“I’m sorry.” Julius’s sympathy came automatically, but inside he was crowing his triumph. His luck had held. His quarry had fallen into his hands. The stars were in alignment, and the gods favored him today.

She shook her head. “I’m over the first grief of his passing. He died five years ago.”

He nodded. “Still, losing a parent is never easy. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance, Eve Merton. Can you ride astride?”

She gave him a derisory glance, her mouth turned down, her eyes scornful. “I can claim it as one of my skills.”

He cupped his hands. “Then please take your seat, Eve Merton.”

She placed her foot in his hands and allowed him to throw her into the saddle. Before she settled properly, he swung up behind her. She flinched, but said nothing. He would love to know what was going on in her mind. Did she know who she was? Whose daughter she was in truth?

* * * *

Apprehension clutched Eve’s insides, tightening her throat. Would he prove honorable?

She had taken a rational decision, the only practical one in the circumstances, but she had not reckoned for him riding with her.

Had it not been for tripping on that wretched rut, she would have been home by now, but her foot pained her more than she had let herself dwell on. The hedgerows were of the annoying tight-knit kind with the brittle twigs, so she could not even cut a branch to help her progress. If not for that, she would have been home before nightfall.

Dusk was falling quickly. A female alone on a country road was ripe prey for footpads and highwaymen. If this man was a villain, so be it. Better one than a gang.

Mr. Vernon felt strong and protective. He had to curve his arms around her to control the reins, giving her an unaccustomed sense of being cared for. Normally she did the protecting.

He even smelled good, of soap and something subtle, like an aromatic wood. He used cologne. She found that deeply intriguing. She did not know any men who used perfume. In this district, any that dared would be labeled effeminate, but this man was far from that. Power remained leashed in him, but the easy way he moved and the sheer strength surrounding her demonstrated his essential masculinity.

“Are you staying with Lord Ripley?” she asked.

A pause followed before he laughed. “No indeed. I was hoping I could find somewhere to stay. Do you know of a respectable inn?”

“I do.” The nearest stood opposite her house on the village green. “I can direct you to one, if you wish.”

“I would appreciate it. I confess I’m not used to sleeping in the open.”

“Oh!” She couldn’t allow him to do that.

She felt churlish for not complimenting him on his excellent horsemanship, but she was on edge. His proximity was sending prickles along the length of her spine. She had to lean back, because she would unbalance them and mar his vision if she tried leaning away from him. At least, that was what she told herself when the horse stumbled and she was jolted back against him.

Had she imagined the hum of appreciation rumbling in his throat?

Oh, no, no. She would not succumb to such idiocy. She was far too old for that kind of foolishness, after all. Having attained the advanced age of seven-and-twenty, she should have been long past flirtation and foolish imaginings. Besides, her foot hurt, though she had to admit, not half so much as it had before.

She clutched the handle of her basket to stop herself reaching for his arms to test their strength. The urge to touch him grew unbearable. Before she could stop herself, Eve asked, “Do you own your own business, sir?”

He sucked in a breath, the sound loud in her ear. “In a small way. What made you ask?”

“You have no assistant with you. Men of business often travel with clerks.”

“I have a special relationship with Lord Ripley,” he said promptly. “The matter is fairly trivial, but he will wish to know of it.” He huffed a laugh. “You are very perceptive, Miss Merton.”

“Thank you,” she said primly. “And you have an excellent way with a horse.”

“Thus indicating that not all city men have the same facility. Neatly done.” He shifted in the saddle.

That was when she felt it. She was not the only person affected by their unusual proximity. Knowing she would be walking home, Eve had left off her hoops and wore but a softly padded roll to give her skirt some fullness. Consequently, she felt it. Felt *him*.

A hard ridge, like a rod under his breeches, pressed against the curves of her bottom. Mr. Vernon was sporting an erection. A considerable one, by the feel of it. Eve had never, ever been so close to a man in a state of excitement, at least not knowingly.

She should be shocked, move away, or insist he put her down. He must know his body was misbehaving. What did that mean? She had no idea. Men responded with a physical immediacy foreign to women, or that was what Eve understood.

She did the only thing she could. She pretended not to notice. Holding her body rigid, not moving cost her a great deal of effort, but it was worth it.

Perhaps if she talked about something that might help him. Searching frantically in her mind for something to distract him, she fell on the one sure-fire subject—the weather. “They say this will be a fine summer.”

“Do they? I am beginning to think it will be.” The horizon glowed, the redness of the setting sun coloring the undersides of the clouds scattered over the rapidly darkening sky. “So tell me, Miss Merton, why are you walking alone at dusk? You’re evidently a respectable woman. Surely you should have an attendant with you?”

She laughed. “The maid has better things to do than taking me to and from town. If I had not hurt my ankle, I would have been home hours ago.”

“It can’t be right,” he said.

That was true. Her mother was always criticizing her for taking too many liberties with her person. "One day," she would say and then launch into a number of blood-curdling and totally imaginary situations.

Her body heated when she thought of this man laying her on the hard ground and taking her. Knowing she would probably never have a man in such a situation, Eve had treated such possibilities as harmless fantasies, but now they appeared all too real. She must not turn and press her mouth to his, as the fantasy Eve might.

He had firm, warm lips. They were most likely warm, though how could she know? She never would, and she would not try to find out. But if she had not imagined it, she would not be in this predicament, feeling a man's member hard against her and knowing what it meant. His body wanted hers. Perhaps he hadn't had a woman for some time, or she had given him thoughts he should not have. Then shame on her for thinking them.

Mr. Vernon slowed the horse and picked his way carefully along the uneven road in the growing gloom.

"I am not of marriageable age," she said. "I am of the age when I should be reading to old ladies."

"Is that what you were doing?" He gave no apology for his curiosity.

"As it happens, yes." She swung the empty basket. "There is a home for poor, respectable women in the town. I took some scones and read the newspaper to them. They like to discuss the latest *on-dits* and scandals." And go on and on and on about Eve finding a husband—as if that would ever happen. Eve's portion was so small as to be miniscule, not enough to attract any man. She had reconciled herself to the fact. Even Eve's mother did not create such a fuss, at least not on such a regular basis, but the ladies at the home thought their seniority conferred special privileges on them. "Just like the fairy tale. And have you come across the big, bad wolf, I wonder?"

"Not until I started to walk home."

His chuckle vibrated against her in the most intimate way imaginable. She forced herself not to squirm and closed her eyes, forcing concentration.

"I have been called many things, but not that." He paused, guiding the horse around yet another rut.

"Or maybe I have. But a man of my position has a reputation to consider."

"As a man of business? Are you financier or lawyer?"

"A little of both," he said, "But mostly concerned with land. I am not qualified in law, if that's what you mean."

He spoke to her as an equal. She found his attitude a pleasant change from the men who either took no notice of her at all or treated her like some kind of idiot who couldn't hold a sentient thought in her head for more than five minutes. She would far rather talk to him about anything but the embarrassing staff that reared between them.

"How much farther do we have to travel?" he said.

"Another two miles, perhaps, sir."

"I had travelled farther than I thought, then, when I came across you. I must have been lost in my own imaginings. It's a wonder I didn't stumble long before."

"You're paying attention now."

"I have more than myself to consider."

His words made her feel cared for, if only on a casual, temporary basis. Her anxiety subsided.

"Do you stay long in Somerset?"

"Longer than I had at first imagined." He spoke dryly, as if reluctant.

Her defensive instincts rose. "It is a lovely county, sir. Have you visited before?"

“I have. Yes, it is indeed lovely. Somerset boasts some glorious views. Bath is not far, is it?”

Much to her relief, he spoke about general things and let her tell him about Bath, the kind of people who could be seen in the pump room and the delicacies obtained there. “I have not seen everything Bath has to offer, despite living there for a time and living so close for most of my life.”

“I have lived in London for some time, but I have not yet seen it all.”

“Did you ride all the way here, sir?”

He paused. “Not all. I hired this horse locally. Travelling in a coach can become tedious.”

Especially a stagecoach. They must have been invented to torture ordinary people. “Do you have to send the horse back?”

“Not immediately. I will use it to travel to Lord Ripley’s house. I’m looking forward to my visit. He insisted I come, despite his wife’s condition.”

Had his voice softened when he talked about Lady Ripley? She was a lovely woman, it was true, and stylish with it. Her husband adored her.

“She had no idea what she was getting into when she became involved with an Emperor.”

“An Emperor?”

“The Emperors of London,” he said, amusement touching his voice.

She wished she could see him properly, because the other half of his tone sounded wry, almost jaded.

“Ah, yes. A nickname.” She had heard it, but had not taken a great deal of interest in it. Nicknames were, in her opinion, a frivolity that only the rich could afford to spend time on.

“Their parents took an oath to name their children after emperors of the past,” he said, drawling his words in a way she had not heard before. Then it was as if he had snapped back to attention and his tones regained their crispness. “Lord Ripley’s given name is Alexander.”

“The greatest emperor of them all,” she said.

“Perhaps. Do you have a classical education, Miss Merton?”

“No, sir. By profession I am a governess, so I do have a reasonable education. I was taught the rudiments of Latin, but I teach the feminine arts.”

“Dancing, deportment and flirting?”

She took umbrage at his response, bridling. “Women must know more than the graceful arts if they are to live a fulfilling life.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” He chuckled. “Are you surprised at my response?”

Her heart sank. He probably had a wife. “And your wife is of that ilk?”

“My wife is—” He paused, and the muscles in his arms stiffened. “My wife died six years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!”

“Thank you.” His voice was steady. “Now we are both sorry for the death of someone we did not know.”

It took her a moment to untangle the sentiment. At first, she’d imagined—but that could not be what he intended to say. “It’s always sad when we lose someone.” She had the sensation of moving on uncertain ground, and resorted to the trite comment in order not to make a *faux pas*.

He answered with a grunt, and silence reigned for the last part of the journey. Even his erection had subsided, or he had managed to move it out of the way. She did not dare lean against him to discover the truth.

At last, they ascended the final gentle rise that gave them the view of the church tower.

“That’s the village,” she said.

He sighed, though whether from regret or hopeful anticipation she couldn't tell. Probably the latter. The horse was certainly tired, its head drooping and its gait slower than ever.

"Appleton." He drew a breath, as if to say something else, but must have changed his mind.

"It's a sleepy little place," she said.

"Have you ever been anywhere else? Apart from Bath?"

Some villagers had never even crossed the parish boundaries. "I've been to Wells. I haven't visited London, although I would like to. Perhaps I can get work there."

"Perhaps," he said, but he sounded guarded, as if he didn't think she could do it.

A spark of irritation flashed through her. "I'm a very good governess!"

"I'm sure you are," he answered, and this time his smooth tones sounded perfectly sure.

This annoyed her more than his doubt.

"Are you concealing your true feelings?"

"In my position, I have to do so from time to time."

That didn't exactly answer her question, but she would not press him further. He was a stranger, after all, although this ride into the village had made her better acquainted with his more personal assets.

Her own arousal had settled into a simmering want, a vague sense of emptiness that she still had a great deal to experience in life. She would probably not have that pleasure, or otherwise, since she was in a limbo of respectability that demanded marriage and without the financial wherewithal to attract a suitor.

Her situation left her as the perpetual spinster, of which England had a distressingly high number. She had accustomed herself to the notion, at least she told herself as much. Only in the dead of night did she allow herself to dream about finding a handsome, young, wealthy man who would adore her. In clear daylight, she knew how impossible that was.

They rode over the rise and down to the village. Closing her eyes, Eve allowed herself a few moments of imagined pleasure. She snatched them from life, but she had to admit that being cradled in the arms of a handsome man was not something she would object to if circumstances were different.

His warmth lulled her into a false sense of security, and it was a jolt when he spoke again.

"Is that the inn?"

When she opened her eyes, the glow of the building confronted her. "Yes, you should find a room there."

The inn blazed its welcome, torches shining brightly outside and lamps in the yard, as well as the lighting inside the main rooms. Upstairs a few lights flickered where guests must have been in their rooms.

"Thank you. Where do you live?"

"Oh, not far. I can manage from here, truly."

"I must escort you to your door. No, I would not hear of abandoning a respectable female to the night."

What would her mother say? However, short of leaping from the horse's back, Eve had little option but to direct him to the other side of the green.

In her house on her side of the green, the curtains were open. A light flickered in the window, but only one. "I live here," she said.

"Here?" He sounded surprised, his usual baritone rising.

The house was perfectly respectable, if a little on the small side, but it was far from a rough cottage. Brick built with a good slate roof, the place lacked only space. Her mother had pointed that out when Eve had returned home after her brief sojourn as governess in Bath.

It was almost fully night now. "I must have been mad to think I could get home before dark."

"You will not do that again." He spoke with certainty, as if he had some say over her movements.

He swung from the saddle and reached for her. The horse was too weary to take advantage of his lightened load and stood patiently while Mr. Vernon slid his hands around her waist and lifted her effortlessly to the ground. He did not release her immediately.

Eve held the empty basket like a shield, the only protection she had against more intimate contact.

He smiled down at her. He was half a foot taller than her, if not more. "Do you think you can take your own weight, or should I carry you to your door?"

"Sir!" Scandalized, she opened her eyes wider while heat rushed to her cheeks. The notion of all the residents of the green watching while he picked her up was unthinkable. Or almost. The small part remaining was her romantic self, the part she ruthlessly crushed. It lingered this time to whisper, *What if I let him?* in the dark recesses of her mind.

Showing nothing but polite gratitude, she thanked him kindly. "I daresay you will be away in a few days, so I doubt we will meet again. So allow me to thank you now. I am deeply grateful for your help, sir."

Now, looking directly at him, she sensed danger lurking in the clean-cut features. This man had a wild edge, well concealed but there. Intelligence gleamed in his eyes, together with the wry humor he had displayed during their journey. For one reckless moment, she thought he might tighten his hold, force her to drop the basket, and kiss her. His lips were full, eminently kissable. Not that she had much experience.

The light left his eyes as if he'd forced it away. "I will release you now, ma'am, so you may test your theory. I do intend for us to meet again. Would you have any objection if I called on you?"

"You cannot. My mother is a widow."

"I wish only to see how you are doing and if your ankle is well. Should you object to that?"

She did not. Why not allow herself another slight thrill, another memory? "No, sir. I am past the age of missishness. However you will be busy at Woolton, will you not?" With the owner, Lord Ripley.

"Not all the time." He glanced up. "How far is the house?"

"Another five miles by road. Two if you walk across the fields."

"I see. Then I shall stay here in the village. That way I am sure to see you sometimes, am I not?"

Treacherous hope rose in her breast, but Eve suppressed it. "Indeed you will. There is only one church. Even Lord Ripley and his lady attend, though I doubt we will see them this Sunday."

"No, indeed. His lordship may well be taken up with the new addition to the family." He paused.

By the light of the flickering candle in the window, she made out his clean, clear-cut face and the blue eyes glimmering with promise. His jaw showed signs of golden fuzz, so under the plain conventional wig, his hair must have been fair. She had never found herself drawn to fair men, but she would make an exception in this case. He was well formed, without fault, his hands strong and his shoulders broad.

"Have you finished looking?" He sounded amused rather than offended.

She dragged her attention from his feet back to his face. "I'm sorry. I was—"

"No matter. It's flattering when such a beautiful woman pays me some attention."

She stared up at him, but she could not deny his statement. She had a mirror. Not that her looks were anything but a curse.

End of Chapter One

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