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**LISA KLEYPAS**  
**I Will**

## CHAPTER ONE

*London, 1833*

It was not easy to ask a favor of a woman who despised him. But Andrew, Lord Drake, had always been beyond shame, and today was no exception. He needed a favor from a morally upright woman, and Miss Caroline Hargreaves was the only decent female he knew. She was proper and straitlaced to a fault...and he wasn't the only man to think so, judging by the fact that she was still unmarried at the age of twenty-six.

"Why are you here?" Caroline asked, her voice threaded with quiet hostility. She kept her gaze fastened on the large square frame propped by the settee, a wooden lace stretcher used to reshape curtains and tablecloths after they were washed. The task was a meticulous one, involving sticking a pin through each tiny loop of lace and affixing it to the edge of the frame until the cloth was drawn tight. Although Caroline's face was expressionless, her inner tension was betrayed by the stiffness of her fingers as she fumbled with a paper of pins.

"I need something from you," Andrew said, staring at her intently. It was probably the first time he had ever been completely sober around her, and now that he was free of his habitual alcoholic haze, he had noticed a few things about Miss Caroline Hargreaves that intrigued him.

She was far prettier than he had thought. Despite the little spectacles perched on her nose, and her frumpy manner of dressing, she possessed a subtle beauty that had escaped him before. Her figure was not at all spectacular—Caroline was small and slight, with practically no hips or breasts to speak of. Andrew preferred big, voluptuous women who were willing to engage in the vigorous bedroom romps he enjoyed. But Caroline had a lovely face, with velvety brown eyes and thick black lashes, surmounted by dark brows that arched with the precision of a hawk's wing. Her hair was a neatly pinned mass of sable silk, and her complexion was as fine and clear as a child's. And that mouth...why in God's name had he never noticed her mouth before? Delicate, expressive, the upper lip small and bow shaped, the lower curved with generous fullness.

Right now those tempting lips were pulled tight with displeasure, and her brow was furrowed in a perplexed expression. "I can't conceive of what you could possibly want from me, Lord Drake," Caroline said crisply. "However, I can assure you that you won't get it."

Andrew laughed suddenly. He threw a glance at his friend Cade—Caroline's younger brother—who had brought him to the parlor of the Hargreaves family home.

Having predicted that Caroline would not be willing to help him in any way, Cade now looked both annoyed and resigned at his sister's stubbornness. "I told you," Cade murmured.

Not willing to give up so easily, Andrew returned his attention to the woman seated before him. He considered her thoughtfully, trying to decide what approach to use. No doubt she was going to make him crawl...not that he blamed her for that in the least.

Caroline had never made a secret of her dislike for him, and Andrew knew exactly why. For one thing, he was a bad influence on her younger brother Cade, a pleasant-natured fellow who was far too easily swayed by the opinions of his friends. Andrew had invited Cade along on far too many wild evenings of gambling, drinking, and debauchery, and returned him home in a sorry condition.

As Cade's father was dead, and his mother was a hopeless feather-wit, Caroline was the closest thing to a parent that Cade had. She tried her best to keep her twenty-four-year-old brother on the straight-and-narrow path, wanting him to assume his responsibilities as the man of the family. However, Cade naturally found it more tempting to emulate Andrew's profligate lifestyle, and the two of them had indulged in more than a few dissolute evenings.

The other reason that Caroline despised Andrew was the simple fact that they were complete opposites. She was pure. He was tarnished. She was honest. He tailored the truth to fit his own purposes. She was self-disciplined. He had never restrained himself in any regard. She was calm and serene. He had never known a moment's peace in his life. Andrew envied her, and so he had mocked her mercilessly on the few previous occasions when they had met.

Now Caroline hated him, and he had come to ask for a favor—a favor he desperately needed. Andrew found the situation so amusing that a wry smile cut through tension on his face.

Abruptly he decided to be blunt. Miss Caroline Hargreaves did not seem to be the kind of woman who would tolerate game playing and prevarication. "I'm here because my father is dying," he said.

The words caused her to accidentally prick her finger, and she jumped slightly. Her gaze lifted from the lace stretcher. "I am sorry," she murmured.

"I'm not."

Andrew saw from the widening of her eyes that she was shocked by his coldness. He did not care. Nothing could make him feign sorrow at the passing of a man who had always been a poor excuse for a father. The earl had never given a damn about him, and Andrew had long ago given up trying to earn the love of a manipulative son of a bitch whose heart was as soft and warm as a block of granite. "The only thing I'm sorry about," Andrew continued calmly, "is that the earl has decided to disinherit me. You and he seem to share similar feelings about my sinful way of living. My father has accused me of being the most self-indulgent and debased creature he has ever encountered." A slight smile crossed his lips. "I can only hope that he is right."

Caroline seemed more than a little perturbed by his statement. "You sound proud of being such a disappointment to him," she said.

"Oh, I am," he assured her easily. "My goal was to become as great a disappointment to him as he has been to me. Not an easy task, you understand, but I proved myself equal to it. It has been the greatest success of my life."

He saw Caroline throw a troubled glance at Cade, who merely shrugged sheepishly and wandered to the window to contemplate the serene spring day outside.

The Hargreaves house was located on the west side of London. It was a pleasant Georgian-style manor house, pink-washed and framed by large beech trees, the kind of home that a solid English family should possess.

“And so,” Andrew continued, “in an eleventh-hour effort to inspire me to reform, the earl has cut me out of his will.”

“But surely he cannot do so entirely,” Caroline said. “The titles, the property in town, and your family’s country estate...I would have thought they were entailed.”

“Yes, they are entailed.” Andrew smiled bitterly. “I’ll get the titles and the property no matter what the earl does. He can’t break the entailment any more than I can. But the money—the entire family fortune—that is *not* entailed. He can leave it to anyone he wishes. And so I’ll likely find myself turning into one of those damned fortune-hunting aristocrats who has to marry some horse-faced heiress with a nice fat dowry.”

“How terrible.” Suddenly Caroline’s eyes were lit with a challenging gleam. “For the heiress, I mean.”

“Caro,” came Cade’s protesting voice.

“That’s all right,” Andrew said. “Any bride of mine would deserve a great deal of sympathy. I don’t treat women well. I’ve never pretended to.”

“What do you mean, you don’t treat women well?” Caroline fumbled with a pin and stuck her finger again. “Are you abusive?”

“No.” He scowled suddenly. “I would never physically harm a woman.”

“You are merely disrespectful to them, then. And no doubt neglectful, and unreliable, and offensive and un-gentlemanly.” She paused and looked at him expectantly. When Andrew made no comment, she prompted with an edge to her tone, “Well?”

“Well, what?” he countered with a mocking smile. “Were you asking a question? I thought you were making a speech.”

They regarded each other with narrowed eyes, and Caroline’s pale complexion took on the rosy hue of anger. The atmosphere in the room changed, becoming strangely charged and hot, snapping with tension. Andrew wondered how in the hell a skinny little spinster could affect him like this. He, who had made it a lifetime’s habit never to care about anything or anyone, including himself, was suddenly more troubled and aroused than he could ever recall being before. *My God*, he thought, *I must be one perverted bastard to desire Cade Hargreaves’s sister*. But he did. His blood was pumping with heat and energy, and his nerves simmered relentlessly as he thought of the various ways he would like to put that delicate, innocent mouth to use.

It was a good thing that Cade was there. Otherwise Andrew was not certain he could have stopped himself from showing Miss Caroline Hargreaves exactly how depraved he was. In fact, standing up as he was, that fact was soon going to become all too obvious through the thin covering of his fashionably snug fawn-colored trousers. “May I have a seat?” he asked abruptly, gesturing to the chair near the settee she occupied.

Unworldly as she was, Caroline did not seem to notice his burgeoning arousal. “Please do. I can hardly wait to hear the details of this favor you intend to ask, especially in light of the charm and good manners you have displayed so far.”

God, she made him want to laugh, even as he wanted to strangle her. “Thank you.” He sat and leaned forward casually, bracing his forearms on his knees. “If I want to be reinstated in the earl’s will, I have no choice but to indulge him,” he said.

“You intend to change your ways?” Caroline asked skeptically. “To reform yourself?”

“Of course not. My cesspool of a life suits me quite well. I’m only going to *pretend* to reform until the old man meets his maker. Then I’ll be on my way, with my rightful fortune intact.”

“How nice for you.” Distaste flickered in her dark eyes.

For some reason Andrew was stung by her reaction—he, who had never given a damn what anyone thought of him. He felt the need to justify himself to her, to explain somehow that he wasn’t nearly as contemptible as he seemed. But he kept silent. He would be damned if he would try to explain anything about himself to her.

Her gaze continued to hold his. “What role am I supposed to play in your plans?”

“I need you to pretend an interest in me,” he said flatly. “A romantic interest. I’m going to convince my father that I’ve given up drinking, gambling, and skirt chasing... and that I am courting a decent woman with the intention of marrying her.”

Caroline shook her head, clearly startled. “You want a sham engagement?”

“It doesn’t have to go that far,” he replied. “All I am asking is that you allow me to escort you to a few social functions...share a few dances, a carriage ride or two... enough to start a few tongues wagging until the rumors reach my father.”

She regarded him as if he belonged in Bedlam. “Why in heaven’s name do you think anyone would believe such a ruse? You and I are worlds apart. I cannot conceive of a more ill-suited pair.”

“It’s not all that unbelievable. A woman your age...” Andrew hesitated, considering the most tactful way to express himself.

“You are trying to say that since I am twenty-six years old, it naturally follows that I must be desperate to marry. So desperate, in fact, that I would accept your advances no matter how repulsive I find you. That is what people will think.”

“You have a sharp tongue, Miss Hargreaves,” he commented softly.

She frowned at him from behind her glinting spectacles. “That is correct, Lord Drake. I am sharp-tongued, I am a bluestocking, and I have resigned myself to being an old maid. Why would anyone of good sense believe that you have a romantic interest in me?”

Well, that was a good question. Just a few minutes ago Andrew himself would have laughed at the very idea. But as he sat close to her, his knees not far from hers, the stirring of attraction ignited in a sudden burst of heat. He could smell her fragrance—warm female skin and some fresh out-of-doors scent, as if she had just walked in from the garden. Cade had confided that his sister spent a great deal of time in the garden and the hot house, cultivating roses and experimenting with plants. Caroline seemed like a rose herself—exquisite, sweetly fragrant, more than a little prickly. Andrew could scarcely believe that he had never noticed her before.

He flashed a glance at Cade, who was shrugging to indicate that arguing with Caroline was a hopeless endeavor. “Hargreaves, leave us alone for a few minutes,” he said curtly.

“Why?” Caroline asked suspiciously.

“I want to talk privately with you. Unless...” He gave her a taunting smile that was guaranteed to annoy. “Are you afraid to be alone with me, Miss Hargreaves?”

“Certainly not!” She threw her brother a commanding glance. “Leave, Cade, while I deal with your so-called friend.”

“All right.” Cade paused at the threshold of the doorway, his boyishly handsome face stamped with concern as he added, “Just give a shout if you need help.”

“I will not need help,” Caroline assured him firmly. “I am capable of handling Lord Drake by myself.”

“I wasn’t speaking to you,” Cade replied ruefully. “I was speaking to Drake.”

Andrew struggled to suppress a grin as he watched his friend leave the room. Returning his attention to Caroline, he moved beside her on the settee, placing their bodies into closer proximity.

“Don’t sit there,” she said sharply.

“Why?” He gave her a seductive look, the kind that had melted many a reluctant woman’s resistance in the past. “Do I make you nervous?”

“No, I left a paper of pins there, and your backside is about to resemble a hedgehog’s.”

Andrew laughed suddenly, fishing for the packet until he located it beneath his left buttock. “Thanks for the warning,” he said dryly. “You could have let me find out for myself.”

“I was tempted,” Caroline admitted.

Andrew was amazed by how pretty she was, with amusement glimmering in her brown eyes, and her cheeks still flushed pink. Her earlier question—why anyone would believe he would be interested in her—abruptly seemed ludicrous. Why would he *not* be interested in her? Vague fantasies drifted through his mind...he would like to lift that dainty body in his arms right now, settle her on his lap, and kiss her senseless. He wanted to reach under the skirts of her plain brown cambric gown and slide his hands over her legs. Most of all he wanted to pull down the top of her bodice and uncover her pert little breasts. He had never been so intrigued by a pair of breasts, which was odd when one considered that he had always been interested in well-endowed women.

He watched as she turned her attentions back to the wooden frame. Clearly she was distracted, for she fumbled with the pins and managed to prick her fingers yet again as she tried to fasten the lace properly. Suddenly exasperated, Andrew took the pins from her. “Allow me,” he said. Expertly he stretched the lace with just the right amount of tension and secured it with a row of pins, each miniature loop fastened exactly on the edge of the frame.

Caroline did not bother to hide her amazement as she watched him. “How did you learn to do that?”

Andrew regarded the lace panel with a critical eye before setting it aside. “I grew up as the only child on a large estate, with few playmates. On rainy days I would help the house keeper with her tasks.” He gave her a self-mocking grin. “If you are impressed by my lace stretching, you should see me polish silver.”

She did not return his smile, but stared at him with new curiosity. When she spoke, her tone had softened a few degrees. “No one would believe the charade you propose. I know what kind of women you pursue. I have talked with Cade, you see. And your

reputation is well established. You would never take an interest in a woman like me.”

“I could play the part convincingly,” he said. “I’ve got a huge fortune at stake. For that I would court the devil himself. The question is, can you?”

“I suppose I could,” she returned evenly. “You are not a bad-looking man. I suppose some might even regard you as handsome in a debauched, slovenly sort of way.”

Andrew scowled at her. He was not vain, and rarely considered his own appearance other than to make certain he was clean and his clothes were decently tailored. But without conceit, he knew that he was tall and well proportioned, and that women often praised his long black hair and blue eyes. The problem was his way of life. He spent too much time indoors, too little time sleeping, and he drank too often and too long. More often than not, he woke up at midday with bloodshot, dark-circled eyes, his complexion pasty from a night of hard drinking. And he had never cared...until now. In comparison to the dainty creature before him, he felt like a huge, untidy mess.

“What incentive were you planning to offer me?” Caroline asked. It was clear that she would not consider his plan; she was merely interested to discover how he would have tried to entice her.

Unfortunately that was the weak aspect of his scheme. He had little to entice her with. No money, no social advantage, no possessions that would allure her. There was only one thing he had been able to come up with that might be sufficiently tempting.

“If you agree to help me,” he said slowly, “I will leave your brother alone. You know what kind of influence I am on him. He is in debt up to his ears, and he is doing his best to keep pace with the pack of miscreants and degenerates I like to call friends. Before long Cade is going to end up exactly like me—rotten, cynical, and beyond all hope of redemption.”

Caroline’s expressive face revealed that this was exactly what she feared.

“How far in debt is he?” she asked stiffly.

He named a sum that astonished and sickened her. Reading the horror in her eyes, Andrew experienced a surge of predatory satisfaction. Yes...he had guessed correctly. She loved her younger brother enough to do anything to save him. Even pretend to fall in love with a man she despised.

“That is only the beginning,” Andrew told her. “Before long Cade will be in a pit so deep that he’ll never be able to climb out.”

“And you would be willing to let that happen? You would simply stand by and let him ruin his life? And impoverish my mother and myself?”

Andrew responded with a casual shrug. “It is his life,” he pointed out matter-of-factly. “I’m not his keeper.”

“My God,” she said unsteadily. “You don’t care about anyone but yourself, do you?”

He kept his expression blank, and studied the scuffed, unpolished surface of his very expensive boot. “No, I don’t give a damn who gets dragged down with me. But if you decide to help me, I’ll take care of Cade. I’ll make certain the others in our set don’t invite him to their clubs or their favorite bawdy houses. I will ensure that all the list-makers I know—and believe me, that is a considerable number—will not extend him credit. He won’t be allowed into any high-stakes games in London. Moreover, if I am reinstated in my father’s will, I will assume all of Cade’s financial obligations.”

“Does Cade know about your plan?” Caroline was pale and intent as she stared at

him.

“No. But it would prove his salvation.”

“And if I refuse to accept your offer?”

A hard, somewhat cruel smile curved his lips. His father’s smile, Andrew thought, with bitter self-awareness. “Then your brother is on the path to hell...right alongside me. And you will be left to pick up the pieces. I would hate to see your family’s estate sold to pay off Cade’s debts. Not a pleasant prospect for your mother, being forced to live off the charity of relatives in her old age. Or you, for that matter.” He gave her an insultingly thorough glance, his gaze lingering on her bosom. “What skills do you have that would earn enough to support a family?”

“You fiend,” Caroline whispered, visibly trembling, though it was impossible to discern whether her emotion was fear or anger, or perhaps a mixture of both.

In the silence, Andrew was aware of a twisting sensation somewhere in his chest, and suddenly he wanted to take it all back...reassure and soothe her...promise her that he would never allow a bit of harm to come to her family. He had a terrible feeling of tenderness that he struggled to thrust away, but it remained stubbornly lodged within him.

“What choice do I have?” Caroline asked angrily, forestalling any repentant words from him.

“Then you agree to my plan? You’ll pretend to engage in a courtship with me?”

“Yes...I will.” She sent him a simmering glare. “How long must this last? Weeks? Months?”

“Until the earl reinstates me in his will. If you and I are sufficiently convincing, it shouldn’t take long.”

“I don’t know if I can bear it,” she said, regarding him with patent loathing. “Exactly how far will this charade have to go? Words? Embraces? Kisses?” The prospect of kissing him seemed as enthralling as if she had been required to kiss a goat. “I warn you, I will not allow my reputation to be compromised, not even for Cade!”

“I haven’t thought out the details yet.” He kept his face unreadable, although relief shot through him in a piercing note. “I won’t compromise you. All I want is the appearance of pleasant companionship.”

Caroline sprang from the settee as if she had suddenly been released from the law of gravity. Agitation was evident in every line of her body. “This is intolerable,” she muttered. “I cannot believe that through no fault of my own...” She whirled around to glare at Andrew. “When do we start? Let it be soon. I want this outrageous charade to be done with as quickly as possible.”

“Your enthusiasm is gratifying,” Andrew remarked, with a sudden flare of laughter in his eyes. “Let’s begin in a fortnight. My half brother and his wife are giving a weekend party at their country estate. I will prevail on them to invite your family. With any luck, my father will attend as well.”

“And then to all appearances, you and I will develop a sudden overwhelming attraction to each other,” she said, rolling her eyes heavenward.

“Why not? Many a romantic liaison has begun that way. In the past, I’ve had more than a few—”

“Please,” she interrupted fervently. “Please do not regale me with stories of your

sordid affairs. I find you repulsive enough as it is.”

“All right,” he said agreeably. “From now on I’ll leave the subjects of conversation to you. Your brother tells me that you enjoy gardening. No doubt we’ll have enthralling discourses on the wonders of manure.” He was satisfied to see her porcelain complexion turn mottled with fury.

“If I can manage to convince a single person that I am attracted to you,” Caroline said through gritted teeth, “I vow to begin a career on the stage.”

“That could be arranged,” Andrew replied dryly. His half brother, Logan Scott, was the most celebrated actor of the day, as well as being the owner and manager of the Capital Theater. Although Andrew and Logan had been friends since childhood, they had only recently discovered that they were related. Logan was the by-blow of an affair the earl had conducted with a young actress long ago. Whereas Andrew had been raised in an atmosphere of luxury and privilege, Logan had grown up in a hovel, frequently starving and abused by the family that had taken him in. Andrew doubted that he would ever rid himself of the guilt of that, even though it hadn’t been his fault.

Noticing that Caroline’s spectacles were smudged, he approached her with a quiet murmur. “Hold still.”

She froze as he reached out and plucked the steel-framed spectacles from her nose. “Wh-what are you doing? I...*stop*; give those back....”

“In a minute,” he said, using a fold of his soft linen shirt to polish the lenses until they gleamed brightly. He paused to examine them, and glanced at Caroline’s face. Bereft of the spectacles, her eyes looked large and fathomless, her gaze slightly unfocused. How vulnerable she seemed. Again he experienced an odd surge of protectiveness. “How well can you see without them?” he asked, carefully replacing them on her small face.

“Not well at all,” she admitted in a low voice, her composure seeming fractured. As soon as the spectacles were safely on her nose, she backed away from Andrew and sought to collect herself. “Now I suppose you are going to make some jest at my expense.”

“Not at all. I like your spectacles.”

“You do?” she asked with clear disbelief. “Why?”

“They make you look like a wise little owl.”

Clearly she did not consider that a compliment, although Andrew meant it as one. He couldn’t help imagining what she would look like wearing nothing *but* the spectacles, so prim and modest until he coaxed her into passionate abandonment, her small body writhing uncontrollably against his—

Abruptly aware that his erection was swelling again, Andrew shoved the images out of his mind. Damn, but he had never expected to be so fascinated by Hargreaves’s spinster sister! He would have to make certain that she never realized it, or she would have even more contempt for him. The only way to keep her from guessing at his attraction to her was to keep her thoroughly annoyed and hostile. No problem there, he thought sardonically.

“You may leave now,” Caroline said sharply. “I assume our business is concluded for the time being.”

“It is,” he agreed. “However, there is one last thing. Could you manage to dress with a bit more style during the weekend party? The guests—not to mention my father—

would find it easier to accept my interest in you if you didn't wear something quite so..."

Now even the lobes of her ears were purple. "Quite so *what?*" she said in a hiss.

"Matronly."

Caroline was silent for a moment, obviously suppressing an urge to commit murder. "I will try," she finally said in a strangled voice. "And you, perhaps, might engage the services of a decent valet. Or if you already have one, replace him with someone else."

Now it was Andrew's turn to be offended. He felt a scowl twitching at the muscles of his face. "Why is that?"

"Because your hair is too long, and your boots need polish, and the way *you* dress reminds me of an unmade bed!"

"Does that mean you'd like to lie on top of me?" he asked.

He slipped around the door of the parlor and closed it just before she threw a vase.

The sound of shattering porcelain echoed through the house.

"Drake!" Cade strode toward him from the entrance hall, looking at him expectantly. "How did it go? Did you get her to agree?"

"She agreed," Andrew said.

The words caused a flashing grin to cross Cade's boyishly handsome face. "Well done! Now you'll get back in your father's good graces, and everything will go swimmingly for us, eh, old fellow? Gaming, drinking, carousing...oh, the times we're going to have!"

"Hargreaves, I have something to tell you," Andrew said carefully. "I don't think you're going to like it."

## CHAPTER TWO

Caroline sat alone for a long time after Lord Drake left. She wondered uneasily what would become of her. Gossip would certainly abound once the news got out that she and Drake were courting. The unlikeliness of such a match would cause no end of jokes and snickers. Especially in light of the fact that she was notoriously particular in her choice of companionship.

Caroline had never been able to explain even to herself why she had never fallen in love. Certainly she was not a cold person—she had always had warm relationships with friends and relatives, and she knew herself to be a woman of very deep feeling. And she enjoyed dancing and talking and even flirting on occasion. But when she had tried to make herself feel something beyond casual liking for any one gentleman, her heart had remained stubbornly uninvolved.

“For heaven’s sake, love is not a prerequisite for marriage,” her mother had often exclaimed in exasperation. “You cannot *afford* to wait for love, Caro. You have neither the fortune nor the social position to be so fastidious!”

True, her father had been a viscount, but like the majority of viscounts, he did not possess a significant amount of land. A title and a small London estate were all the Hargreaves could boast of. It would have benefitted the family tremendously if Caroline, the only daughter, could have married an earl or perhaps even a marquess. Unfortunately most of the available peers were either decrepit old men, or spoiled, selfish rakes such as Andrew, Lord Drake. Given such a choice, it was no wonder that Caroline had chosen to remain unwed.

Dwelling on the subject of Andrew, Caroline frowned pensively. Her reaction to him was troubling. Not only did he seem to have a remarkable ability to provoke her, but he seemed to do it intentionally, as if he delighted in stoking her temper. But somewhere in the midst of her annoyance, she had felt a strange sort of fascination for him.

It couldn’t possibly be his looks. After all, she was not so shallow as to be undone by mere handsomeness. But she had found herself staring compulsively at the dark, ruined beauty of his face...the deep blue eyes shadowed from too little sleep, the cynical mouth...the slightly bloated look of a heavy drinker. Andrew possessed the face of a man who was determined to destroy himself. Oh, what terrible company he was for her brother Cade! Not to mention herself.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of her mother, Fanny, who had returned from a pleasant afternoon of visiting with friends. Strangers were often surprised to learn that the two were mother and daughter, for they did not resemble each other in any way except for their brown eyes. Caroline and Cade had inherited their late father’s looks and temperament. Fanny, by contrast, was blond and plump, with the

mercurial disposition of a child. It was always disconcerting to try to converse with Fanny, for she disliked serious subjects and did not choose to face unpleasant realities.

“Caro,” Fanny exclaimed, coming into the parlor after giving her frilly plumed hat and light summer wrap to the house keeper. “You look rather displeased, dear. What has caused such a sour expression? Has our darling Cade been up to his usual pranks?”

“Our darling Cade is doing his best to ensure that you will spend your final years in a work house,” Caroline replied dryly.

Her mother’s face wrinkled in confusion. “I’m afraid I don’t understand, dear. What do you mean?”

“Cade has been gambling,” Caroline said. “He is going through all our money. Soon there will be nothing left. If he doesn’t stop soon, we’ll have to sell everything we own...and even *that* won’t fully satisfy his debts.”

“Oh, but you’re teasing!” Fanny said with an anxious laugh. “Cade promised me that he would try to restrain himself at the hazard tables.”

“Well, he hasn’t,” Caroline replied flatly. “And now we’re all going to suffer for it.”

Reading the truth in her daughter’s eyes, Fanny sat down heavily on the pink brocade settee. In the grim silence that followed, she folded her hands in her lap like a punished child, her rosebud mouth forming an O of dismay. “It’s all your fault!” she burst out suddenly.

“My fault?” Caroline gave her an incredulous stare. “Why on earth would you say that, Mother?”

“We wouldn’t be in this predicament if you had married! A rich husband would have provided enough funds for Cade to indulge his little habits with his friends, and taken care of us as well. Now you’ve waited too long...your bloom has faded, and you’re almost *twenty-seven*...” Pausing, Fanny became a bit tearful at the thought of having an unmarried daughter of such an advanced age. Pulling a lace handkerchief from her sleeve, she dabbed delicately at her eyes. “Yes, your best years are behind you, and now the family will come to ruin. All because you refused to set your cap for a wealthy man.”

Caroline opened her mouth to argue, then closed it with an exasperated sound. It was impossible to debate with someone so inured to the concept of logic. She had tried to argue with Fanny in the past, but it had served only to frustrate them both. “Mother,” she said deliberately. “Mother, stop crying. I have some news that might cheer you. This afternoon I received a visit from one of Cade’s friends—Lord Drake... do you remember him?”

“No, dear. Cade has so many acquaintances, I can never keep them all straight.”

“Drake is the Earl of Rochester’s only legitimate heir.”

“Oh, that one.” Fanny’s expression brightened with interest, her tears vanishing instantly. “Yes, what a fortune he will come into! I do indeed remember him. A handsome man, I recollect, with long, dark hair and blue eyes—”

“And the manners of a swine,” Caroline added.

“With an inheritance like that, Caro, one can overlook a few tiny breaches in etiquette. Do tell, what did Lord Drake say during his visit?”

“He...” Caroline hesitated, galled by the words she was about to say. She did not dare tell Fanny that the courtship between her and Drake would be only a charade. Her mother was a notorious gossip, and it would be only a matter of days—no, hours—

before she let the truth slip to someone. “He expressed an interest in courting me,” Caroline said, stone-faced. “Toward that end, you and I will allow him to escort us to a weekend party given by Mr. and Mrs. Logan Scott, to be held within a fortnight.”

The news was almost too much for Fanny to digest at once. “Oh, Caro,” she exclaimed. “An earl’s son, interested in *you*...I can scarcely believe...Well, it’s nothing less than a miracle! And if you can bring him to scratch...what a fortune you will have! What land, what jewels! You would certainly have your own carriage, and accounts at the finest shops...Oh, this is the answer to all our problems!”

“So it would seem,” Caroline said dryly. “But do not get your hopes too high, Mother. The courtship hasn’t yet begun, and there is no guarantee that it will lead to marriage.”

“Oh, but it will, it will!” Fanny practically danced around the room. Her blond curls fluttered and her well-rounded form jiggled with excitement. “I have a feeling in my bones. Now, Caro, you must heed my advice—I will tell you exactly how to set the hook and reel him in. You must be agreeable, and flatter his vanity, and give him admiring gazes...and you must never, never argue with him. And we must do something about your bosom.”

“My bosom,” Caroline repeated blankly.

“You will let me sew some quilted lining into the bodice of your chemise. You are a lovely girl, Caro, but you are in definite need of enhancement.”

Assailed by a mixture of outrage and rueful laughter, Caro shook her head and smiled. “Quilted lining is not going to fool anyone. Especially not Lord Drake. But even if I did manage to deceive him, don’t you think it would be a great disappointment on our wedding night to discover that my bosom was false?”

“By then it would be too late for him to do anything about it,” her mother pointed out pragmatically. “And I would not call it a deception, Caro dear. After all, everyone must try to present herself or himself in the best light possible...that is what courtship is all about. The trick is to disguise all the unpleasant little faults that may put a man off, and maintain an air of mystery until you have finally landed him.”

“No wonder I have never caught a husband,” Caroline said with a faint smile. “I’ve always tried to be open and honest with men.”

Her mother regarded her sadly. “I do not know where you have gotten these ideas, dear. Honesty has never fanned the flames of a man’s ardor.”

“I will try to remember that,” Caroline replied gravely, fighting the temptation to laugh.

“The carriage is here,” Fanny said with a squeal, staring out the parlor window at the vehicle moving along the front drive. “Oh, it is so fine! All that red lacquer and a Salisbury boot and crane neck, and what a fine large wrought-iron baggage rack. And no less than *four* outriders. Hurry, Caroline, do come and have a look.”

“I had no idea you were so versed in the features of carriage construction, Mother,” Caroline said dryly. She joined her mother at the window, and her stomach clenched with anxiety as she saw the Rochester coat of arms on the side of the carriage. It was time for the charade to begin. “Where is Cade?” she asked.

“In the library, I believe.” Fanny continued to stare out the window, enthralled. “That dear, dear Lord Drake. Of all Cade’s acquaintances, he has always been my favorite.”

Amused despite her nervousness, Caroline laughed. "You didn't even remember who he was until I told you!"

"But then I recalled how much I liked him," Fanny countered.

Smiling wryly, Caroline wandered from the parlor to the small library, where her treasured collection of books was neatly stacked in the mahogany cases. Cade was at the sideboard, pouring a snifter of brandy from a crystal decanter.

"Are you ready to depart?" Caroline asked. "Lord Drake's carriage is here."

Cade turned with a glass in hand. His features, so like her own, were stamped with a scowl. "No, I am not ready," he said sourly. "Perhaps after I drink the rest of this bottle, I will be."

"Come, Cade," she chided. "One would think you were being sent to Newgate instead of attending a weekend party with friends."

"Drake is no friend of mine," Cade muttered. "He has seen to it that I am deprived of everything I enjoy. I'm not welcome at any hazard table in town, and I have not been invited to a single damned club for the past two weeks. I've been reduced to playing vingt-et-un for shillings. How will I ever earn enough to repay my debts?"

"Perhaps working?"

Cade snorted at what he perceived was a great insult. "No Hargreaves has occupied himself with trade or commerce for at least four generations."

"You should have thought of that before you gambled away everything Father left us. Then we wouldn't have to attend this dratted weekend party, and I would not have to pretend interest in a man I detest."

Suddenly shamefaced, Cade turned away from her. "I am sorry, Caro. But my luck was about to turn. I would have won back all the money, and more."

"Oh, Cade." She approached him and slid her arms around him, pressing her cheek against his stiff back. "Let us make the best of things," she said. "We'll go to the Scotts' estate, and I'll make calf eyes at Lord Drake, and you'll make yourself agreeable to everyone. And someday Lord Drake will be back in his father's will, and he will take care of your debts. And life will return to normal."

Suddenly they were interrupted by the house keeper's voice. "Miss Hargreaves, Lord Drake has arrived. Shall I show him to the parlor?"

"Is my mother still in there?" Caroline asked.

"No, miss, she has gone upstairs to put on her traveling cloak and bonnet."

Wishing to avoid being alone with Drake, Caroline prodded her brother. "Cade, why don't you go welcome your friend?"

Evidently he was no more eager to see Drake than she. "No, I am going to show the footmen how I want our trunks and bags loaded on the carriage. You be the one to make small talk with him." Cade turned to glance at her, and a rueful grin spread across his face. "It is what you will be doing all weekend, sweet sister. You may as well practice now."

Giving him a damning look, Caroline left with an exasperated sigh and went to the parlor. She saw Andrew's tall form in the center of the room, his face partially concealed as he stared at a landscape that hung on the wall. "Good day, my lord," she said evenly. "I trust that you are..."

Her voice died away as he turned to face her. For a fraction of a second, she thought that the visitor was not Andrew, Lord Drake, but some other man. Stunned, she

struggled silently to comprehend the changes that had taken place in him. The long, trailing locks of his dark hair had been cut in a new short style, cropped closely at the nape of his neck and the sides of his head. The alcoholic bloat of his face was gone, leaving behind a marvelously clean-lined jaw and hard-edged cheekbones. It seemed that he must have spent some time out-of-doors, for the paleness of his skin had been replaced by a light tan and the touch of windburn on the crests of his high cheekbones. And the eyes...oh, the eyes. No longer dark-circled and bloodshot, they were the clear, bright blue of sapphires. And they contained a flash of something—perhaps uncertainty?—that unraveled Caroline’s composure. Andrew seemed so young, so vital, remarkably different from the man who had stood with her in this very parlor just a fortnight ago.

Then he spoke, and it became evident that although his outward appearance had changed, he was still the same insufferable rake. “Miss Hargreaves,” he said evenly. “No doubt Cade has seen fit to tell you that I have upheld my part of the bargain. Now it is your turn. I hope you’ve been practicing your love-struck glances and flirtatious repartee.”

Somehow Caroline recovered herself enough to reply. “I thought all you wanted was ‘the appearance of pleasant companionship’...those were your exact words, were they not? I think ‘love-struck’ is a bit much to ask, don’t you?”

“This past week I’ve gotten a complete accounting of Cade’s debts,” he returned grimly. “For what I’m going to have to pay, you owe me ‘love-struck’ and a damn sight more.”

“You have yourself to blame for that. If you hadn’t taken Cade along with you so many evenings—”

“It’s not entirely my fault. But at this point I’m not inclined to quarrel. Gather your things, and let’s be off.”

Caroline nodded. However, she couldn’t seem to make herself move. Her knees had locked, and she strongly suspected that if she took one step forward, she would fall flat on her face. She stared at him helplessly, while her heart thumped in a hard, uncontrollable rhythm, and her body flooded with heat. She had never experienced such a response to anyone in her life. Awareness of him pounded through her, and she realized how badly she wanted to touch him, draw her fingertips down the side of his lean cheek, kiss his firm, cynical mouth until it softened against hers in passion.

It can’t be, she thought with a burst of panic. She could not feel such things for a man as immoral and depraved as Andrew, Lord Drake.

Something in her round-eyed gaze made him uncomfortable, for he shifted his weight from one leg to another, and shot her a baleful glance. “What are you staring at?”

“You,” she said pertly. “I believe all your buttons have been fastened in the correct holes. Your hair appears to have been brushed. And for once you don’t reek of spirits. I was merely reflecting on the surprising discovery that you can be made to look like a gentleman. Although it seems that your temper is as foul as ever.”

“There is good reason for that,” he informed her tersely. “It’s been two weeks since I’ve had a drink or a wh—a female companion, and I’ve spent nearly every day at the family estate in the proximity of my father. I’ve visited with tenants and managers, and I’ve read account books until I’ve nearly gone blind. If I’m not fortunate enough to die

of boredom soon, I'm going to shoot myself. And to top it all off, I have this damned weekend to look forward to."

"You poor man," she said pityingly. "It's terrible to be an aristocrat, isn't it?" He scowled at her, and she smiled. "You do look well, however," she said. "It appears that abstinence becomes you."

"I don't like it," he grumbled.

"That is hardly a surprise."

He stared down into her smiling face, and his expression softened. Before Caroline could react, he reached out and plucked her spectacles from her nose.

"My lord," she said, unsettled, "I wish you would stop doing that! Hand those back at once. I can't see."

Andrew extracted a folded handkerchief from his pocket and polished the lenses. "It's no wonder your eyes are weak, the way you go about with your spectacles smudged." Ignoring her protests, he polished them meticulously and held them up to the light from the window. Only when he was satisfied that they were perfectly clean did he replace them on her nose.

"I could see perfectly well," she said.

"There was a thumbprint in the middle of the right lens."

"From now on, I would appreciate it if you simply *told* me about a smudge, rather than ripping my spectacles off my face!" Caroline knew she was being ungrateful and thorny-tempered. Some part of her mind was appalled by her own bad manners. However, she had the suspicion that if she did not maintain a strategic animosity toward him, she might do something horribly embarrassing— such as throw herself against his tall, hard body and kiss him. He was so large and irascible and tempting, and the mere sight of him sent an inexplicable heat ripping through her.

She did not understand herself—she had always thought that one had to *like* a man before experiencing this dizzying swirl of attraction. But evidently her body was not reconciled with her emotions, for whether she liked him or not, she wanted him. To feel his big, warm hands on her skin. To feel his lips on her throat and breast.

A flaming blush swept all the way from her bodice to her hairline, and she knew his perceptive gaze did not miss the tide of betraying color.

Mercifully, he did not comment on it, but answered her earlier remark. "Very well," he said. "What do I care if you walk into walls or trip over paving stones when you can't see through your damn spectacles?"

It was the most peculiar carriage-ride Andrew had ever experienced. For three hours he suffered under Cade's disapproving glare—the lad regarded him as an utter Judas, and this in spite of the fact that Andrew was willing to pay all his debts in the not-too-distant future. Then there was the mother, Fanny, surely one of the most empty-headed matrons he had ever met in his life. She chattered in unending monologues and seemed never to require a reply other than the occasional grunt or nod. Every time he made the mistake of replying to one of her comments, it fueled a new round of inane babble. And then there was Caroline sitting opposite him, silent and outwardly serene as she focused on the ever-changing array of scenery outside the window.

Andrew stared at her openly, while she seemed completely oblivious to his perusal. She was wearing a blue dress with a white pelisse fastened over the top. The scooped neck of her bodice was modest, not revealing even a hint of cleavage—not that she had much cleavage to display. And yet he was unbearably stimulated by the little expanse of skin that she displayed, that exquisite hollow at the base of her throat, and the porcelain smoothness of her upper chest. She was tiny, almost dolllike, and yet he was spellbound by her, to the extent of being half-aroused despite the presence of her brother *and* mother.

“What are you looking at?” he asked after a while, irritated by her steadfast refusal to glance his way. “Find the sight of cows and hedges enthralling, do you?”

“I have to stare at the scenery,” Caroline replied without moving her gaze. “The moment I try to focus on something inside the carriage, I start to feel ill, especially when the road is uneven. I’ve been this way since childhood.”

Fanny interceded anxiously. “Caroline, you must try to cure yourself of that. How vexing it must be for a fine gentleman such as Lord Drake to have you staring constantly out the window rather than participating in our conversation.”

Andrew grinned at hearing himself described as a “fine gentleman.”

Cade spoke then. “She’s not going to change, Mother. And I daresay that Drake would prefer Caro to stare at the scenery rather than cast her accounts all over his shoes.”

“Cade, how vulgar!” Fanny exclaimed, frowning at him. “Apologize to Lord Drake at once.”

“No need,” Andrew said hastily.

Fanny beamed at him. “How magnanimous of you, my lord, to overlook my son’s bad manners. As for my daughter’s unfortunate condition, I am quite certain that it is not a defect that might be passed on to any sons or daughters.”

“That is good news,” Andrew said blandly. “But I rather enjoy Miss Hargreaves’s charming habit. It affords me the privilege of viewing her lovely profile.”

Caroline glanced at him then, quickly, rolling her eyes at the compliment before turning her attention back to the window. He saw her lips curve slightly, however, betraying her amusement at the flattery.

Eventually they arrived at the Scotts’ estate, which featured a house that was reputed to be one of the most attractive residences in England. The great stone mansion was surrounded with magnificent expanses of green lawn and gardens, and an oak-filled park in the back. The row of eight stone pillars in front was topped by huge sparkling windows, making the facade of the building more glass than wall. It seemed that only royalty should live in such a place, which made it rather appropriate for the family of Logan Scott. He was royalty of a sort, albeit of the London stage.

Caroline had been fortunate enough to see Scott perform in a production at the Capital Theater, and like every other member of the audience, she had found Scott to be breathtaking in his ability and presence. It was said that his Hamlet surpassed even the legendary David Garrick’s, and that people would someday read of him in history books.

“How interesting that a man like Mr. Scott is your half brother,” Caroline murmured, staring at the great estate as Andrew assisted her from the carriage. “Is there much likeness between you?”