

Two Hearts In Time

By Eugenia Riley

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Time Travel Romance

Eugenia Riley Classic

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Two Hearts In Time

by
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Prologue Galveston, Texas Early 1990's [Back to Contents](#)

Amid the revelry, a heart was breaking.

On this Valentine's Day, Mardi Gras was in full swing in Galveston, Texas. The mid-winter night was crisply cold as gaudy, colorful floats swept down the historic Strand during the Momus Grand Parade. On the decks of the moving spectacles, costumed, masked figures tossed out beads and doubloons to the cheering crowd. In keeping with the "Gay Nineties" theme, the vehicles represented everything from a late nineteenth century billiard parlor, to a lacy gazebo, complete with eye-gazing lovers, to a miniature circus, to a lawn game of croquet. In the street, jovial spectators mingled with carnival clowns and jugglers. The numerous turn-of-

the-century, three- and four-story red-brick buildings lining the famous old thoroughfare greatly enhanced the mood of historical ambiance.

Pushing a cart laden with Victorian Valentine's Day jewelry, twenty-year-old Amanda Brewster wended her way down the crowded sidewalk, passing gentlemen attired in striped sack coats and straw hats, ladies wearing flowing, frilly, Victorian style dresses. Amanda assumed most of the revelers were headed for a costume ball at a nearby hotel. A fleeting smile curved her lips as she watched a barbershop quartet drift past, singing, "Let me Call You Sweetheart" in rich harmony. She wished she could share the heartfelt gayety of the crowd; normally, she adored all things quaint and old-fashioned. But Amanda had known too much tragedy during her brief lifetime to feel light-hearted tonight. Even the drab, outdated dress she wore was a constant, painful reminder of her own devastated life.

A laughing thirtyish couple in Gay Nineties attire paused before Amanda's cart, the woman crying out in delight as she spotted the gold, ceramic and silver Valentine's Day pins, locket and bracelets. She caught the man's sleeve. "Oh, David, look - how lovely. We must buy one of these."

Catching the man's glance, Amanda explained, "These items have been donated by local craftsmen to benefit the Strand Preservation Society."

The man nodded, smiling at the lady. "Pick one out, Amy."

The woman fingered a gold pin depicting a cupid about to release his arrow. "This one is so charming."

"It's my favorite, too," Amanda put in.

"Then we'll take it," her companion said.

The man paid for the pin and proudly attached it to the lady's dress. "Thanks, miss," he said to Amanda. "Enjoy Mardi Gras."

The two dashed off, laughing. The man's last words, however well-intentioned, seemed to taunt Amanda: *Enjoy Mardi Gras*. How could she possibly take pleasure from anything right now?

Amanda caught her reflection in a shop window. She saw a tall, pretty blond woman with her hair in a bun and an air of tragedy in her dark blue eyes. The nineteenth century style dress she wore fit her badly, its hem dangling several inches above the tops of her old-fashioned, button-down, granny type shoes. The black Kashmir shawl draped about her shoulders appeared meant for a woman much older

And it was. Indeed, everything Amanda wore had been meant for someone else. For Amanda had taken her grandmother's place at the parade tonight. Two weeks ago, mere hours after she had finished sewing her old-fashioned costume for the carnival, Gran had died peacefully in her sleep. The memory brought a tear to Amanda's eye. Gran had so looked forward to doing her part for the Preservation Society

Despite her terrible grief over losing her grandmother, Amanda had felt duty-bound to take her place tonight. Only she hardly felt up to the challenge as the merrymaking surrounding her seemed to mock her own pain.

Amanda had been impelled to be so strong for so long - throughout Gran's funeral and the reading of her will. Thankfully, Virginia Brewster had died with her affairs in order, and the settlement of her modest estate would present no undue complications. Amanda had inherited Gran's Victorian cottage in the East End Historical District, and the money in her bank account. The account held sufficient funds to ensure Amanda's graduation from college in two more years.

While to the world, Amanda might appear a young woman with much to live for, in her own eyes, she felt she'd reached a dead end in life. She had no family left, her parents having been accidentally drowned during a tragic flood in the Texas Hill Country when she was only a small child. Amanda had been safely at home with a babysitter when the violent storm had swept through a neighboring ranch where her parents had gone for a barbecue.

At six, Amanda had gone to live with Gran. She'd been a sober, quiet child who had preferred to spend her time reading craft and decorating books to being with other children. She was much the same way today

An elderly couple stopped by her cart, the man picking up and thoughtfully examining a glittering necklace sporting a beautiful heart-shaped locket with a watch inside it. He winked at Amanda. "Time and love. Two of my favorite sentiments. I think I must buy this for my sweetheart here."

The lady clapped her hands and beamed with happiness. "Oh, Bill - it's so lovely!"

"Not nearly as lovely as the years you've given me," the man

responded gallantly, taking out his wallet.

After the transaction had been completed, the chain fastened about the lady's neck, she smiled kindly at Amanda. "Aren't you cold, dear? That shawl looks so flimsy."

Amanda flashed a frozen smile. "I'm fine, really. Have a great evening."

"Take care, dear," the man added.

Amanda poignantly watched the pair move on. What a sweet little couple. The woman's smile had reminded her of Gran . . .

She wiped another tear and observed a float moving past in the street - this one bearing a recreation of H.G. Wells's famous Time Machine, with a man in old-fashioned garb waving from his seat inside the fantastical-looking device. The enchanting display swept past to the cheers of the crowd. On its side beneath the platform, Amanda spotted a strange coat of arms - a Roman chariot whose sides resembled ancient armorial shields, and inside the vehicle, a warrior driving winged Pegasus. How quaint and fanciful, she thought.

Oh, how Amanda wished Gran could be here to share the beauty, the whimsy, especially on Valentine's Day. How she would have loved it. Gran had been gregarious, outgoing - the exact opposite of her reserved granddaughter. Yet the two had shared a love of old-fashioned things; in fact, they had planned to vacation this spring in London and Manchester, to experience firsthand Gran's British heritage. Amanda had so looked forward to their trip; as a student of interior design, she loved English architecture and

especially, anything having to do with the Victorian age. Gran had even taught her how to do Victorian style embroidery and petit point . . .

A trio of rowdy teenage boys streaked by Amanda, side-swiping her cart and almost overturning it. "Hey, lady, watch where you're going!" one of them called back impudently.

Amanda righted her cart and glowered after the boys; their brash rudeness seemed almost as cruel as a slap in the face. Suddenly, she could be strong no longer. What was she doing here, anyway? She'd been a fool to try to wear a mask of false gayety tonight, even as grief was tearing her apart. She didn't belong here . . . simply didn't belong.

Was there any place left for her now? Any haven where she wouldn't feel this wrenching heartache?

Amanda turned the corner of a three-story brick building to have a moment alone. Strangely, the celebration around her seemed to recede.

That's when she saw him. Stepping toward her, almost like a vision materializing out of the shadows, was a tall, dark, masterfully handsome gentleman in a black frock coat and a silk top hat. A chill washed over her at the sight of him. Something about him seemed out-of-sync; in his British, Prince-Albert-type attire, he didn't really fit in at a Gay Nineties celebration.

He stepped closer, his dark eyes seeming to impale her. She noticed that he carried in one hand a nosegay of violets, in the other, an old-fashioned Valentine's Day card, a heart-shaped masterpiece of pearls, lace and cupids.

He spoke with a heavy British accent. "Good evening, miss."

"Good evening," she replied.

He frowned. "What brings you out on this godforsaken night, and what demon has possessed you to stand on this dark, dangerous corner alone?"

His deep, mesmerizing voice and quaint manner of speech unsettled Amanda, until she realized he must be taking the carnival mood to heart and mimicking the formal speech of the 1890's. Perhaps he was wearing a recycled costume from the "Dickens on the Strand" festival celebrated here each December.

"I had to take my Grandmother's place tonight, to sell this jewelry," she explained, gesturing toward her cart.

He scowled, glancing from the merchandise to her face. "Your grandmother sent you out, unprotected and unchaperoned, to sell these cheap trinkets in the Strand?"

What strange questions he asked. Amanda's chin came up, yet her voice faltered. "She wasn't able to be here herself. . . ."

He stepped closer, staring at her intently. "You have the saddest eyes I've ever seen," he murmured. "Why are you so unhappy, miss?"

Scalding tears flooded Amanda's vision, along with astonishment that this utter stranger could make her feel so vulnerable with just a few, kind words. "Because I've lost everything that matters to me," she answered brokenly.

"I'm sorry. You're far too young to have known such anguish." He edged even closer, his eyes filled with keen

compassion. "For you, my lady," he added gallantly, handing her the Valentine's Day card and the violets.

Taking the items, Amanda glanced up at him, amazed and moved, losing herself in the sculpted beauty of his face, the mesmerizing depths of his eyes. "Thank you, sir, but you really shouldn't ... "

Amanda wasn't allowed to finish, for the stranger's head dipped down and his lips claimed hers.

Normally, Amanda would have felt terrified at this unsolicited advance of a stranger - yet instead, she felt enraptured, transported, even strangely at home. The stranger's kiss was everything she had ever dreamed a kiss could be - magic, tenderness, exhilaration, mystery. Indeed, the heat of his mouth so captivated and excited her that the night seemed to whirl around her and the ground no longer felt steady beneath her feet. The violets and the Valentine slipped through her fingers, landing on her cart, and the stranger's arms came up tightly around her, melding her softness to his hard frame. She moaned and poured herself into the dazzling moment.

When the stranger released her, Amanda was trembling, dizzy, deeply shaken. A sense of unreality swamped her even as she noticed the sudden fog that curled about them, along with an unnerving quiet, a bone-piercing chill.

Disoriented, Amanda stumbled toward the corner, vaguely thinking that she must continue with her duties. Bracing her hand against an unfamiliar street lamp, which cast its odd, yellowish glow through the mists, she gaped up and down an expanse of ancient,

alien, four- and five-story brick buildings and storefronts.

Good God, what had happened to her? The Galveston Carnival was gone, and she stared, dumbfounded, at the old-fashioned horse-drawn carriages and omnibuses that rattled past on a cobbled street. The quaint conveyances sported lamps attached to their sides or fronts, and were driven by cloaked and hatted coachmen. In the distance beyond the looming buildings, Amanda could swear she spotted the silvery glow of a river!

Panic flooded her, making her reel both mentally and physically. She glanced wildly at the street sign that read "Strand," and then at the words, "The Strand Magazine" etched on a nearby storefront.

She trembled violently. She was on the Strand all right - but what Strand was it?

"Miss - are you all right?"

The stranger who had kissed her had rounded the corner to join her. He gazed at her with grave concern. She stared back, electrified.

"Where am I?" she cried.

"You are where I presume you have been all night, miss," the stranger replied with a bemused frown. "You are in the Strand, in London."

A cry of horror and confusion escaped Amanda, and once again, the night began to spin around her. As she crumpled toward the ground the stranger reached out, catching her in his arms just before she fainted dead away.

Chapter One

London, England

1851

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"Burgess! A hand here!"

Justin Cartwright, Earl of Lockridge, barked a command to his coachman, who had just left the nearby carriage upon spotting his master with a woman out in the Strand.

Arriving at Justin's side, Burgess, heavily attired in a wool greatcoat and top hat, glanced askance at the scene. His lordship stood on the corner with the female in his arms - t'was a shop girl by the looks of her, or one of the wretches who sold flowers in Covent Garden. She appeared to be in a swoon, and wore only a dark broadcloth dress, with no wrap on this beastly cold night.

"Bless my soul, your lordship, what goes on here?" Burgess asked, his breath forming white puffs on the frigid air.

"The young lady has fainted," his master explained in a clipped voice. "We must fetch her to the carriage."

Burgess was aghast. "Begging your pardon, my lord, but where did you come by the likes of her?"

"She was selling jewelry in the Strand."

Burgess snorted contemptuously. "Didn't I warn you a body

should not be out and about on a heathenish cold night like this, with ruffraff such as her out to pick your pockets? I told you this was no time to be taken your constitutional into Covent Garden, my lord."

Standing there holding the girl in the bitter chill, Justin had reached the limits of his patience. Burgess had always been a meddlesome sort, but, unfortunately, he was also a family institution. "Damn it, man," he snapped. "Will you cease your infernal lecturing and give me a hand here? The wench may be frail, but I'll swear she's growing heavier by the instant."

"Aye, your lordship," the mollified coachman said. Spotting a heap on the walkway just around the corner, he dashed off, returning momentarily with a black shawl, a nosegay of violets and a Valentine's Day card. Extending the items toward Justin, he queried, "Would these objects belong to her?"

"Aye, and her jewelry cart is somewhere hereabouts as well," Justin replied. "Why don't you find it while I fetch her to the brougham?"

As his employer strode off with the woman, Burgess searched the immediate vicinity but was unable to spot the cart. "I see nothing else, your lordship," he bellowed, hand cupped around his mouth. "Mayhap an urchin from St. Giles' rookery already absconded with the lady's trinkets. Didn't I warn you a body should not be out and about - "

"Yes, yes. Very well, man, let's be about our business," Justin called back irritably.

Burgess bounded off after his employer. "Where shall we be takin' the miss?"

"Home - to Portman Square," Justin replied firmly.

"Ye gads!" Burgess retorted, half running to keep up with his master's long-legged stride. "Ye can't be taken' the likes of her, dead away in a swoon and no doubt diseased as a rat's nest, home to the stay with the Dowager! Why, the gal is likely eaten up by the pox, or burning up with fever - "

"Enough, Burgess," Justin retorted. "We're taking her to Cartwright Hall, and cease your carping."

"But your lordship, there must a more suitable place for her - at a church, or mayhap the Society for the Protection of Young Females - "

"The door, Burgess," Justin commanded as they arrived at his stylish brougham.

Before Burgess could react, one of the liveried footmen sprang off his perch and opened the door for his master. Justin climbed inside the two-seater cab with the still-unconscious woman in his arms.

Seconds later as the brougham rattled off down the cobbled street, Justin stared down at the creature he held. He still only half-believed he had rescued this lowly girl in the Strand. But, as an honorable gentleman, he'd really had no choice, for he very much feared his own untoward behavior, his brashly kissing this young woman, had caused her the terrible fright that had resulted in her swoon.

But why had he spoken with her in the first place, then given her the nosegay and Valentine intended for Lady Cynthia? Why had he kissed her? Why had he followed her to the corner and then

caught her in his arms when she fainted? Burgess was surely right - the girl was most likely a menial who lived in the nearby tenements, and he had no business fetching her home to Cartwright Hall.

Yet there they were bound, through some gut-level decision on his part that he only half-understood. He did know something about this young woman had compelled him, captivated him, from the instant he'd laid eyes on her, rounding the corner with her cart. Indeed, there had been something very strange and mystical about their entire meeting - almost as if it had occurred on another plane .

...

A passing street lamp cast its wavering glow over her pale features, and he thought of how lovely she was, this young street hawker, of how mesmerized he had felt when he first gazed into her lost blue eyes. She had spoken with a strange accent - American, by the sound of it.

He recalled the pain in those lovely orbs, and her words, "I've lost everything that matters to me." Had that very statement compelled him to kiss her - and afterward, to bear her to his carriage? It had been almost an earth-shattering encounter - indeed, at the moment of their kiss, the ground beneath his feet had hardly felt stable.

As the carriage turned north on St. James toward Mayfair, Justin thought of the door in Belgravia that he would not darken tonight. Cynthia would be disappointed in him. He had been bound for her Valentine's Day gathering when the impulse had come upon him to stop by Covent Garden to buy her a nosegay. Upon leaving the market he had selected a Valentine in a nearby shop about to

close its doors. He had then headed back for his carriage, the perfect gentleman, bound for an evening of courtship.

He had told himself it was time. His wife, Genevieve, had been killed two years past in a tragic accident. Once the requisite year of mourning had expired, Lady Cynthia, Genevieve's cousin, had made it clear to all of London society that she aimed to pursue the eligible widower. While Justin had hardly been an eager party to Cynthia's machinations, the city's elite had long ago assumed that a match between them was preordained. Indeed, Justin had bowed to the inevitable tonight by purchasing the flowers and Valentine.

But his courtship of Cynthia had never begun, for Justin had given the items intended for her to a comely wench he'd met in the Strand. And at that very moment, he had lost himself in the loveliest blue eyes he had ever seen, and had feasted on the sweetest lips he had ever tasted.

He glanced down at the girl again, tenderly brushing a wisp of hair from her brow. He wondered idly who *truly* had been rescued tonight.

Moments later the brougham came to a halt before a sedate-looking town house off Portman Square. Burgess swung open the carriage door and Justin bore out the young woman.

As one of the liveried footmen sprinted up the path and opened the heavy door for Justin, he bore his charge past the Palladian facade and into a home of lavish proportions. The small foyer led directly into the grand salon with its towering dome - a Robert Adam triumph of gilded plaster fretwork, pale yellow and

blue hues of paint and roundels of Italian art.

He was barely inside the salon when the butler, Carter, glided up in his black cutaway and starched shirt. "My lord," he murmured, bowing and glancing in confusion at the woman in his employer's arms. "We hadn't expected you home so early. Has there been - " he inclined his head meaningfully toward the woman - "some mishap?"

"I simply came across an old friend in need," Justin replied curtly. Heading past the bemused butler toward the staircase, he added, "Please have Lady Bess's maid inform her that I'd be much obliged if she'd meet me in the guest room on the third floor."

"Yes, my lord. As you wish."

Justin bore the woman up the magnificent circular staircase with its wrought iron railings and banister, its marble-wainscoted stairwell and walls decorated with elegant, softly lit sconces, classical carvings and magnificent oil paintings. On the third floor, he turned into the guest room and laid the woman down on the Sheraton daybed just inside the door. In the darkness, he approached the bulk of the dresser and fumbled for a moment while lighting the oil lamp. Wavering light spilled over the room.

Justin turned to stare at the woman who lay, still blissfully unconscious, on the bed. He caught a sharp breath. He had thought her pretty in the shadows of the Strand, but here in the light of the room, he saw at last how truly exceptional she was. Her face was beautifully sculpted, her brow smooth, her cheekbones high, her chin strong, her mouth wide and full-lipped. Her wealth of silky blond hair was pinned in a chignon, with numerous, enticing tendrils

pulling free.

Justin shook his head in disbelief. Despite her modest attire, the girl was quite tall and beautifully proportioned and she clearly had the face of an aristocrat.

Why had she been selling cheap trinkets in the Strand?

"Justin? My dear, what goes on here?"

He pivoted to see his mother enter the room in her satin robe and lacy nightcap. Bess Cartwright, Dowager Countess of Lockridge, was a small, gray-haired woman with a sweet, round face. Justin knew her to be a genteel lady accustomed to commanding respect, but also a fine human being who never lacked compassion or warmth. Bess had single-handedly raised her son after a fever had claimed the lives of both Justin's father and his younger twin sisters, back when he was only four.

Justin turned to peck the little woman's cheek and fondly hugged her. "Good evening, Mother. As it happens I've brought home a bit of a surprise."

The Dowager turned to peer at the stranger laid out on the Sheraton bed. "My kingdom, Justin!"

"Indeed," he concurred ruefully.

"Who is the girl?" Bess demanded.

He sighed. "She's a street vendor. I found her selling trinkets in the Strand near Covent Garden."

"Forevermore!" The Dowager appeared flabbergasted. "But why would you bring such a creature here?"

Justin sighed. "She fainted, Mother. I think she is in need of our help."

"Oh, my. You were always such a thoughtful lad - but this." The Dowager leaned over and felt the girl's forehead. "Mayhap the girl is ill? But, then, she doesn't feel feverish. What brought her to the Strand this night?"

"She told me she was compelled to sell jewelry in her grandmother's place."

The Dowager gasped. "Blessed saints. What sort of person would send her grandchild out alone to earn her livelihood on the cruel, dangerous streets?"

"She said her grandmother was unable to perform her duties tonight," Justin explained. "I took that to mean there was some indisposition - or worse."

Bess stared at the girl sympathetically. "Oh, the poor dear. But why is she unconscious?"

Justin restrained himself to keep from blurting out his guilty secret - that he feared his bold kiss may have overwhelmed the girl. "I'm not sure. But I do know she's an American, obviously just off the ship from the Colonies. Perhaps she became disoriented - "

Bess held up a beringed finger and nodded vigorously. "Indeed. Why, London would seem a veritable maze to an American. And that skimpy dress she's wearing would not keep a flea warm on a bitter night like this."

"Aye," Justin concurred.

"But the fact remains - what are we to do with her?"

Justin removed his hat and drew his fingers threw his shiny black hair. "I don't know, Mother. Perhaps you might have some use of her here?"

"Perhaps." Bess gazed at the girl again. "She is quite a striking thing."

"Indeed she is."

Bess frowned as she peered more closely. "Why, she has the face of an aristocrat!"

"So you noticed that, as well."

"How odd." Bess laid a finger alongside her cheek. "Of course, if she were to stay here, we would need some pretext . . . Perhaps, then, we could help her get on her feet and secure a post."

"A fine idea."

"We can give the matter additional thought tomorrow. In the meantime, perhaps we should summon a physician."

"I agree."

"Why don't you dispatch a footman for the surgeon, while I call the maid to get her undressed and into a gown?" Bess suggested.

"Certainly, Mother. You are most kind."

As he turned to leave she added, "By the way, did you get by Cynthia's?"

He smiled sheepishly. "No. You see, I had stopped by Covent Garden to buy Lady Cynthia a bouquet, then I came across the girl . . ."

"It's just as well," Bess said, waving him off. "As I've mentioned before I do feel that you and Cynthia would never suit. She's too high-strung - too much like Genevieve" Bess bit her lip, her voice trailing off.

But a mask had already closed over her son's features.

"Mother, I think I am quite capable of judging for myself just who may or may not be right for me."

She patted his arm and slanted him an apologetic glance.

"I'm sorry, son. I know the subject still pains you."

Justin cleared his throat. "Yes. Well, I'd best see to the fetching of the surgeon, then."

He turned to leave, only to halt at his mother's sudden gasp.

Pivoting toward the daybed, he asked, "What is it?"

A reply wasn't necessary, as mother and son gazed down in fascination at the young woman who now regarded them both with wide, alert blue eyes.

Chapter Two

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Amanda opened her eyes, gazing past the faces of two strangers at a magnificent ceiling adorned with plaster medallions and gilded etchings of leaf and vine.

With a gasp, she sat up, staring at her surroundings in astonishment and disbelief. She was in a large Victorian bedroom, complete with richly detailed Brussels carpet, carved rosewood chairs with tufted silk damask upholstery, a four-poster tester bed with a magnificent counterpane of wine-colored jacquard silk and windows adorned with hand-painted roller shades topped by embroidered portieres of iridescent green.

Had she somehow been spirited away to one of Galveston's old Victorian mansions?

She gazed back at the strangers again, recognizing the handsome gentleman who had kissed her on the Strand. Unbidden, a feeling of excitement swept over her as she drank in his beautifully chiseled face and a pair of deep-set brown eyes focused on her so intently. He appeared to be about thirty years old. Next to him stood a gray-haired lady whom she assumed was a female relative.

Amanda tried to analyze what had happened to her. One minute, she had been selling jewelry on the Strand; the next, the

man had given her the Valentine and kissed her. Afterward, she had stumbled toward the corner, and had spotted - Good Lord, was it horse-drawn carriages? And, in the distance, a river?

But that was impossible!

"Where am I?" she asked the man.

He flashed her a kindly smile. "Are you feeling all right, miss?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Now, please, tell me where I am."

"Don't you remember?" he asked patiently. "You fainted, in the Strand. And I've brought you here, to my home off Portman Square, where you will be cared for under the chaperonage of my mother."

Amanda stared at the little woman. "Your mother?"

"Yes." Turning to the woman, he added, "May I present Lady Bess, Dowager Countess of Lockridge."

"How do you do?" Amanda murmured. Glancing at the man, she added, "And you are?"

"Justin Cartwright, Earl of Lockridge."

"Pleased to meet you both," Amanda muttered, stunned by the British titles, and once again taken aback by the man's formal speech. "I had not realized we have English nobility living here in Galveston."

The man and woman exchanged a perplexed glance.

"Galveston?" the man queried with a dark frown. "But you are not in America, young woman."

"I'm not?"

As Amanda stared at him, flabbergasted, the woman

murmured, "The young lady is obviously quite confused and disoriented, Justin." She smiled at Amanda. "Is Galveston the place whence you hail in the Colonies?"

"Yes." Glancing from mother to son, Amanda was certain she had fallen into the clutches of two lunatics. "Look, I appreciate your kindness in rescuing me, but now I really must go - "

"Leave?" the mother queried. "But where would you be bound, on such a bitter night?"

"To my home in the East End," Amanda replied firmly.

"The East End!" Justin Cartwright exclaimed. "Why, we cannot allow you to return to those nefarious slums alone."

Amanda's face heated with anger. Unsteadily, she rose to her feet and bravely faced the man down. "Look, you may live in a grand Victorian mansion, but let me assure you, I don't live a slum. Now if you'll excuse me - "

The man caught her arm gently but firmly. "Young lady, we do not even know who you are - or if you are physically well."

Amanda raised her chin. "My name is Amanda Brewster. I am just fine, and please let go of me - now."

He did so at once, muttering an apology, while the little woman cried, "Brewster! Tell me, dear, are you one of the Manchester Brewsters?"

Amanda considered that for a moment. "My forebears did come from Manchester."

"Why, she must indeed be one of them," the little woman continued excitedly, turning to her son. "As you know, Teddy Brewster was Marquess of Sutton and quite wealthy in his own

right. Teddy and my father were classmates at Eton, and our families always were close. But a devilish eccentric that man was. About thirty years past, Teddy gathered up his entire family - eight children and his wife, as I recall - and spirited everyone off to live in America." She peered intently at Amanda. "Are any of your people with you now, dear?"

Amanda shook her head. "My parents were swept away by a flood when I was only six. Afterward I went to live with my grandmother - "

"Ah, your grandmother," Justin put in. "Is she the one who brought you back here to England?"

Amanda stared at him, stunned by his question, especially as she recalled the planned trip to England that she and Gran had never gotten to take. "Sir, I do not live in England," she said coldly.

"We realize you consider America your home," the Dowager deftly smoothed over. "Does your gran reside with you in the East End?"

Amanda sighed. "She did - until her death two weeks ago."

"Oh, you poor dear," the Dowager sympathized. "There's so much cholera and fever near the docks. Now you're all alone in the world?"

Confused by the references to cholera and fever, Amanda replied guardedly, "Yes, I am."

The Dowager turned to her son. "Justin, we cannot allow this young lady to return to those dangerous tenements tonight."

He sighed. "I agree." He glanced sheepishly at Amanda. "However, neither can we force Miss Brewster to stay here against

her will."

Amanda felt relieved to hear the man acknowledge that they had no intention of coercing her. Meanwhile, the Dowager smiled at her guest. "My dear, as a friend of your family's, I consider it my bounden duty to offer you my protection and the hospitality of our home, until a suitable situation can be found for you."

Amanda shook her head. "Thank you for your kindness, but I wouldn't dream of imposing - "

"'Tis no imposition at all," the woman insisted. "'Twould be a scandal if you did not stay the night here. Tomorrow, if you insist, we can discuss finding other lodgings for you, and if you wish, we can gather your things from whatever rookery you abide in near the Thames - "

"Near the Thames?" Amanda echoed. "You speak as if we actually *are* in London - "

"But we are," Justin declared vehemently. "And if you have somehow convinced yourself that you are elsewhere, young lady, then this is only additional proof that you should not be gadding about anywhere in your present, confused state - "

"Wait a minute!" Amanda cried. "You're saying we're actually in London, England?"

"Indeed," the man replied.

Amanda shook her head in disbelief. "What year is it?"

"Why, it's the year of our Lord, 1851."

Amanda staggered on her feet and the man caught her arm.

"Are you all right?" he asked with grave concern, eyeing her pale face.

Her voice was barely audible. "Would you both just leave me alone for a moment - please?"

"Certainly, dear," Lady Bess replied with a smile. "You've had a most trying experience, and you do need your rest. Why don't we straighten out all of this in the morning? I'm sure you'll find a suitable sleeping garment in the armoire - and I'll have the maid bring in tea and help you dress for bed."

The two slipped from the room, leaving Amanda to stare down at her own trembling hands. What had happened to her? Had she truly landed in the clutches of a couple of crackpots? But then, how could she explain what she had seen, and what had happened to her, back on the Strand?

Amanda glanced again at the room. As a student of interior design she was astounded by the priceless Victorian antiques surrounding her - the ornate Staffordshire urn in the corner, the Sheraton chair next to the carved mahogany desk, the Wedgwood vases on the fireplace mantel of white Carrara marble.

She moved over to the window and raised the painted shade, gasping as she gazed out from the third-story window. In front of her stretched rows of Georgian and Palladian town houses, as well as open expanses and squares dotted with trees. In the distance, she spotted numerous huge, looming baroque or classical buildings and assorted gothic church spires. Sooty black clouds banked the entire urban expanse.

She turned from the scene, electrified. Twentieth century America this clearly wasn't!

Pausing by the dresser, she spotted the nosegay of violets

and the old-fashioned card that Justin Cartwright had given her earlier. She picked up the Valentine, and an eerie feeling crept over her as she stared at an angelic, adorable cupid with his bow, surrounded by a froth of lace, pearls and silk fringe, and the message in flowery script: "Two hearts beating in time."

Amanda gasped. Cupid had obviously released his arrow - more likely, an entire quiverful! - then had sent her hurtling off . . . where? She set down the card, still only half-believing Justin Cartwright had given her this out on the Strand.

Most critical of all, which Strand had it been? The Strand in Galveston, Texas, or the Strand in London, England?

Numbly, she went to sit on the bed, her eyes widening in shock as she sank deeply into the feather tick. She stared at the potpourri in the pink lusterware dish on the bed table, and glanced from the delicate taper in its pewter holder to the oil lamp gleaming softly on the dresser.

Oh, God, what had happened to her? One minute, she had been in Galveston. Then a handsome, mesmerizing stranger had kissed her, the earth had moved beneath her feet, and the next minute -

She had turned a corner in time.

While Amanda struggled to gain her bearings, Justin and his mother sat downstairs in the magnificent drawing room, their figures outlined in the gaslight spilling down from a glittering chandelier. The Dowager reclined on a blue velvet Grecian couch, while her son sat across from her in a Chippendale wing chair. A fire blazed in the

hearth that flanked the seating area, its roaring flames heating the lavish room with its high, plasterwork ceiling, its floral Aubusson rug, its gilded harp and black mahogany pianoforte.

"What shall we do about the young lady?" Justin asked as he sipped his tea in its Paris china cup.

Bess's expression was thoughtful. "This may sound odd, but

"Please be candid."

"I feel quite drawn to the girl," she confessed.

He smiled ruefully. "To be frank, so do I."

"She seems well-bred and educated, yet there's also something so gentle, so lost and compelling about her."

"Aye," he murmured.

"Besides which, the girl obviously needs our protection," Bess continued. "She's young and impressionable, as well as a foreigner who is totally ill-equipped to deal with the perils of our society here. Indeed, I shudder to think of her fate should we allow her to return to the streets as she desires."

"I agree," Justin said gravely.

Bess nodded firmly. "I've a mind to take the girl under my wing."

"You do?"

Her expression turned poignant. "You know how I always mourned the loss of your twin sisters. Only three when the fever took them – and your beloved father, as well."

"I know, Mother," Justin murmured sympathetically. With a cautious frown, he added, "You see this girl as a substitute, then?"

She gestured expansively. “The girl is obviously of aristocratic lineage. Why, come to think of it, she even resembles Eleanor Brewster, Teddy’s wife. Who is to criticize us if we take in this orphan from an old friend’s family?”

Justin had to smile at his mother’s less-than-scientific logic. Bess Cartwright, while an upstanding, take-charge sort, possessed a streak of whimsy that had always amused and intrigued her son. She was also well-known throughout London society for her benevolent pursuits and generous heart.

“How far do you plan to take this?” he asked.

“I’d like to see the girl in a suitable post – or better yet, in a proper marriage.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You aim to launch her, then?”

Bess sighed. “We’ll have to see how it goes and what her feelings are. But, with the season nearly upon us, it does seem a prime opportunity. I see no reason why Amanda should not fit in. Of course, as an American, she would need some instruction in the ways of our society – “

“Indeed she would.” He scowled. “What do you think of her mad claim that she is living in America even now? Do you think it’s possible she may be a trifle touched?”

Bess shook her head. “Think of what the girl has been through – traveling to England, losing her beloved gran and only living relative, then being forced to take to the dangerous streets alone, compelled to sell cheap trinkets to keep body and soul alive – “

“Aye, ‘tis a tragic story,” he concurred with a sigh. “The

young lady could definitely benefit from our assistance.”

Bess was thoughtfully silent a moment. “Son, I know you dislike hearing the subject brought up – “

“Speak your mind, Mother,” he said wearily.

“I realize you feel compelled to marry and beget an heir now that your mourning period for Genevieve is over, but I must say that for you to marry Cynthia would be a grave mistake.”

While Justin was silent, a muscle working in his jaw betrayed his emotion.

“As you know, I am quite a believer in providence – “

“What are you saying?”

She smiled wistfully. “I’m saying that, isn’t it odd that you went out tonight, intent on courting Cynthia, and instead brought home this lovely, genteel girl?”

His brow was deeply furrowed. “Are you inferring that the encounter was more than happenstance?”

“Am I?” Bess replied with an enigmatic smile. “Why do *you* think you brought her home with you?”

An ironic laugh escaped him. “A very good question.”

“Son, I’m merely asking you to consider the girl,” Bess said primly. “That is all.”

Justin was silent, a bemused smile pulling at his lips.

As Justin prepared for bed, he was still mulling over his mother's words. *Consider the girl*, she had implored. If only she knew that he was considering pretty Amanda Brewster even now. Indeed, he had thought of little else besides this lovely, destitute

young woman, ever since he had spotted her in the Strand.

Had it been providence that had brought this mysterious, charming girl to him tonight, and had prevented him from beginning his courtship of Lady Cynthia? Had his mother spoken the truth when she'd told him that his marrying his dead wife's cousin would be a disastrous mistake?

He sighed. His first marriage to Genevieve, Cynthia's cousin, had certainly ended in ruin. Justin had always blamed himself for her death. If only he hadn't been arguing with her on that fateful day when the accident had occurred. But unfortunately, their entire marriage had been fraught with conflict. Genevieve had been impetuous, high-strung, altogether too loose with her tongue - and with his money.

He again considered his mother's warning. To be brutally honest with himself, Cynthia *was* perhaps too much like her deceased cousin.

Yet the possibility of courting Cynthia Spalding had offered Justin the perfect opportunity to assuage his terrible guilt over Genevieve's death. He knew that Cynthia was determined not only to become his countess, but also to gain control of the fabulous Spalding jewels that had passed into his control on Genevieve's marriage to him. Moreover, a marriage to Lady Cynthia would be quite proper, no doubt begetting him an heir.

But couldn't the very passions that had destroyed his first marriage spell disaster for his second?

Now there was this girl, this Amanda Brewster. Lovely, sweet and fair. *Consider her*; his mother had said. With gentle

Amanda, would he - would *she* - be safe from his own destructive passions?

Recalling the raw splendor of their kiss, he wasn't at all certain.

Nevertheless, for the first time in two hellish years, Justin Cartwright slipped the silver mourning ring, with its oppressive band of black, from his finger

Chapter Three

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Amanda had a dream.

Gran was smiling at her as she handed her a gift - a beautiful Victorian hatbox. Amanda gasped as she opened the lid and gazed at the wondrous lacy Valentine inside, inscribed with the words, "Two hearts beating in time . . ."

Amanda awakened with a smile, finding herself in the same splendid Victorian bedroom where she had fallen asleep last night. She glanced about in surprise and delight. So she hadn't merely dreamed of traveling to Victorian England - she truly was living in the past! With awe, she watched sunlight dance across the Brussels rug and shimmer in the wine-colored, silk bed hangings.

Someone had raised the shades and drawn back the draperies; radiant light spilled in. Amanda spotted a maid at the dresser - a rosy-cheeked woman dressed in black, her uniform embellished by a white, lacy apron and matching house cap.

"Good morning, my lady," the woman said, approaching the bed. "I've placed your tea on the dresser, and her ladyship the Dowager said to tell you she'll be pleased to meet you directly for breakfast downstairs in the dining room."

"Thank you," Amanda murmured, sitting up.

"May I assist you with your toilette, my lady?" the woman added.

"No thank you. I prefer to take care of that myself."

"Very well, my lady." Curtsying, the maid slipped from the room.

Amanda got up and quickly donned her clothing from last night. Somehow, the dream of Gran had eased her mind. Was this amazing excursion into the past really a gift from beyond? Had her grandmother sent her here to learn something? What was the significance of the gift in her dream? Was her apparent time-travel experience truly the journey to England that she and gran had never gotten to take?

Amanda found it amazing that, only yesterday, she had been living in Galveston, Texas, in the 1990's, cruising down Broadway in her small car and listening to Foreigner on her radio. Was she missed back on the island? Was her car still parked on the same street off the Strand? What would happen if she did not reappear? Would her neighbors notify the police? Would she eventually end up in the files of *Unsolved Mysteries*?

Amanda smiled sadly. Who was to miss her, really, now that Gran was gone? Her few casual friends back in Galveston? The half dozen or so boyfriends who had cynically dumped her when they learned she wasn't prepared to put out on their first or second date? Perhaps she was too old-fashioned to ever really belong in the twentieth century.

She thought about the dark, dashing Englishman who had rescued her last night, and his dear little mother. Lord Justin's

mesmerizing good looks fascinated her; Lady Bess's kindness reminded her poignantly of Gran.

Of course, if she were to stay here, she would need to find a way to support herself. While she wanted to get to know Lord Justin and his mother better, she could not depend on the charity of these strangers, however kindly they might be. She had her pride and her independence, after all.

Still, why not play out the role some fanciful cupid had assigned her on Valentine's Day? Why not put the question of the future - her future back in Galveston - on the back burner for now and simply enjoy this fascinating sojourn into the past?

Who was to say she wasn't better off here?

Moments later Amanda joined Bess Cartwright downstairs in the dining room. Bess, attired in a regal gown of burgundy silk, was already seated and nibbling on a scone when Amanda appeared in the archway of the sunny room.

"Good morning, my dear," Bess called brightly, gesturing toward the place set out for her guest. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you." Amanda slipped into her chair, gazing in wonder at the gorgeous china, gleaming silver and impeccable linens laid out on the fine Hepplewhite table. "I hope you rested well, too, Mrs. Cartwright."

"Please, call me Lady Bess," the Dowager replied, pouring Amanda a cup of tea.

Amanda murmured a thank-you and took the china cup and saucer. "I'd be honored to call you Lady Bess. Actually, I must be

making all kinds of blunders in addressing you and your son - "

The Dowager waved her off. "Oh, do not fret yourself, my dear. I've always found the manner of addressing the British peerage a ridiculously pompous, convoluted affair. But I do suppose we're stuck with it. And the protocols can be learned - if one is interested."

"You are very kind, and of course I'm interested." Amanda took a sip of her tea. "This is excellent."

"We brew it from spring water specially piped in from Hertford," Bess explained. "The springs far surpass the noxious water of the Thames, which produces an unhealthful libation, if you ask me."

Amanda nodded, taking a roll from the basket in front of her. "Where is Lord Justin?"

Lady Bess sighed. "He's at an emergency meeting Lord Russell called at Downing Street. As an American, you're probably unaware of our politics here; however, Parliament is in a terrible muddle at the moment, between the debates over free trade, papal encroachment and the various reform movements. Indeed, Lord Russell's administration is tottering even now, and may not survive the week. Justin, as a staunch supporter of the Prime Minister, is gravely concerned."

"I'm sorry to hear this."

Bess waved her off. "British politics - always some tempest in a teapot. Let's talk about you, my dear."

Amanda slanted Bess a warm smile. "You were most kind to let me stay here last night, but now - "

"Now, we wouldn't dream of having you go off anywhere else."

Amanda sighed. "Mrs. Cartwright - that is, Lady Bess - I cannot possibly continue to impose - "

"But you're not imposing at all!" Bess cut in stoutly. "I've so enjoyed your company, my dear, and I'd be bereft without you. Furthermore, as a friend of your family's, it would be unforgivably remiss of me not to extend to you our continuing hospitality. Besides, how would you support yourself out on your own? Selling trinkets in the Strand will never do - "

Amanda thought quickly. "Gran taught me to do sewing and needlepoint."

Lady Bess beamed. "Splendid, then. As it happens, I have an entire chestful of new linens in need of monogramming and embroidering before they can be set out. Indeed, I cannot possibly complete our spring airing out without your assistance - "

"Lady Bess - " Amanda protested.

Bess shook a finger at her guest. "Now, not another word, you stubborn girl. It's been ages since we've had a delightful guest such as yourself, and I simply refuse to hear any more of this treason about your gadding off. As it happens, Justin has mentioned wanting to take you for a drive later, so in the meantime, we'll be off to Oxford Street to select a suitable frock for you."

Amanda's eyes grew huge. "Lady Bess, I cannot possibly allow . . ."

Amanda continued to protest, but in the end, her arguments were futile and she grudgingly consented to meet Lady Bess in the

grand salon at eleven, after the Dowager completed her morning letter writing.

Heading upstairs later on, Lady Bess felt quite pleased with her triumph over Amanda. Being with the girl again had only confirmed her intuition that this young American was a true jewel. Besides, Bess had a feeling Justin was already quite taken with her, and Bess welcomed Amanda's influence over her son. Indeed, she hoped the girl's bright presence might divest Justin of his unhealthy desire to court the high-strung Cynthia - an interest which Bess knew was motivated entirely out of guilt over Genevieve's death.

Yes, having the girl here was a true stroke of fortune, Bess decided. Today, she actually looked forward to answering the normally tedious letters and invitations that poured in daily. She would mention Amanda Brewster to all of her friends, and see that this young lady was immediately received in all of the proper circles.

When Amanda descended to the grand salon an hour later, Lady Bess still had not appeared. She sat down on a tufted velvet ottoman and amused herself by studying the ornate statuary and lush ferns, and by gazing upward at the magnificent dome with its gilt-edged plaster fretwork.

Momentarily, she heard a commotion out in the foyer, and a tall, red-headed woman charged in with the butler at her heels. The lady, sharp-featured, sallow-complexioned and looking to be in her early twenties, was obviously of the aristocracy - as her elegant carriage dress, fringed mantle and plumed hat seemed to attest.

She stared rudely at Amanda. “Who are you?”

Amanda stood. “I’m Amanda Brewster.”

The woman sniffed disdainfully as she took in Amanda’s modest attire. “Well, Miss Brewster, aren’t you aware that menials curtsy in the presence of a lady?”

“I beg your pardon?” Amanda was stunned.

“But, Cynthia,” interjected a cold, firm voice, “let me assure you that my dear guest is very much a lady herself.”

Both women turned to watch Lady Bess Cartwright glide down the staircase, her bearing regal.

“Good morning, Lady Bess,” the newcomer said stiffly to her hostess.

“Good morning, Lady Cynthia,” Lady Bess replied. “May I present our houseguest, Lady Amanda Brewster, the granddaughter of my dear old friend, Teddy Brewster of Manchester.” Turning to Amanda, she added, “My dear, may I present Lady Cynthia Spalding?”

Amanda glanced uncertainly at Cynthia.

“How do you do?” Lady Cynthia inquired archly, barely nodding to acknowledge the other woman, and contemptuously not offering her hand.

“Pleased to meet you,” Amanda added, her voice equally frigid.

“So, Cynthia, how can we be of assistance?” Bess went on.

“I was hoping to catch Justin in,” Cynthia said, nervously plucking at her gloves. “After he failed to appear at my party last night, I grew concerned that he might be indisposed – “

“I see,” Bess murmured. “Did my son promise you he would attend?”

Cynthia colored. “Well, no – it was quite an informal affair, but Justin gave me the impression . . . At any rate, is he well?”

“He’s perfectly fit, and meeting with Lord Russell at this very moment,” Bess assured her. “And I’m sure you’ll forgive him for not attending your little soiree – “ she paused to smile brilliantly at Amanda – “since we did have our lovely houseguest from America to entertain.”

Cynthia’s color darkened to an unbecoming shade of green; she slanted a malevolent glance toward Amanda. “I had not realized Lord Lockridge was interested in such – American upstarts.”

“Oh, Justin has always found the ladies of the Colonies to be enchanting,” Bess replied smoothly. Her voice took on a menacing frigidity. “And furthermore, I’m sure you were jesting just now when you referred to my guest as an upstart, since, as I’ve already informed you, Amanda is eminently a lady in her own right.” Before Cynthia could comment, Bess rushed on, “Now, if you’ll forgive us, dear Cynthia, Amanda and I are on our way out shopping. Otherwise, we would most assuredly invite you to join us for luncheon.”

Cynthia’s scornful gaze flicked over Amanda’s plain frock. “Ah, yes, it does appear your guest is in dire need a proper wardrobe.”

“Oh, that,” Bess put in, laughing. “Dear Amanda’s trunk was lost at the docks when she arrived yesterday, and we’ve had a devil of a time trying to find her a suitable garment. We finally had to

prevail upon one of the maids to lend us something. You see, Amanda is so tall, slender and lovely, isn't she? At any rate, what a pleasure to go shopping for a brand new wardrobe for such a splendid creature. I can't remember when I've had so much fun. I'll swear, having dear Amanda here makes me feel twenty years younger – and I've noted a new spring in my son's step, as well."

While Cynthia glared at her hostess with chest heaving, Amanda could only shake her head in complete admiration of the Dowager.

Amanda and Lady Bess shopped on Oxford Street, amid charming Mayfair. Bess insisted on buying Amanda a stylish braided Worth dress with matching jacket, a derby hat with feathers, a pair of gloves and fine leather slippers. She also bought Amanda some dresses and lingerie for immediate wear, and then proceeded to flabbergast her guest by ordering for Amanda an entire new wardrobe. Amanda's numerous protests were stoutly ignored. By the time they returned to the town house off Portman Square, Amanda had all but given up on trying to circumvent the strong-willed Dowager. She did promise herself that somehow, she would find a way to repay Lady Bess.

As the two women entered the salon, with the footman at their heels juggling numerous boxes, Justin came forward to greet them, looking quite dashing in his single-breasted morning coat, dark trousers, ruffled linen shirt and satin-edged waistcoat.

"Amanda, how lovely you look," he said, admiring her in the elegant Worth ensemble, which Bess had insisted she wear

home.

“Isn’t she ravishing, son?” Bess put in, beaming. “Now you must take her out and show her off.”

“Indeed, that’s precisely why I’ve stopped by,” Justin said with a grin. “I thought Amanda might enjoy a drive about town – and perhaps an early supper at Simpson’s.” He glanced at her. “What do you say?”

“I’d be delighted,” she replied. “Just let me put these things away and freshen up.”

Amanda went off upstairs, the footman trailing behind her with the boxes

Watching her leave, Bess whispered behind her hand to Justin. “We’d best have a chat, son. I’m afraid Lady Cynthia came round earlier and created a bit of a scene.”

“Bloody hell,” Justin muttered.

Chapter Four

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Half an hour later, Justin escorted Amanda into his brougham, and she was stunned to spot on its door the same enchanting coat of arms she had seen on the time machine float back in Galveston - a Roman chariot/shield, with a handsome warrior driving winged Pegasus. Amanda's sense that she was meant to be here, in the London of 1851, was growing stronger by the moment.

As they rattled away from Portman Square, the two smiled shyly at each other, the cozy intimacy of the coach adding to the romantic mood. Amanda marveled at the sense of breathless excitement she felt whenever she was with Justin.

"My, that is a splendid frock," he murmured, eyeing her appreciatively.

"I tried to keep your mother from spending all her money on me," she replied morosely, "but I got nowhere fast."

He chuckled. "You must know Mother is totally taken with you, Amanda. She'd be devastated if you left us now." He patted her hand. "Please don't."

Would you be devastated if I left, Justin? she thought, her heart beating madly at the very thought of the question she could

not bring herself to ask him.

Aloud, she said, "I just don't like feeling - well, obligated to anyone."

"But you're not," he protested. "Indeed, we are beholden to you. I can't remember when I've seen my mother so happy."

Amanda fell silent. How could she argue with that?

They were now moving through a gorgeous, tree-lined park, and she spotted a massive, soaring glass structure being constructed in the distance. "Justin, what is that?"

"The Crystal Palace," he explained. "The craftsmen are working furiously on it even now. It will be the grand hall of the Great Exhibition in May."

"Why, it's fabulous."

"I'll take you there on opening day," he said with sudden eagerness. "Indeed, I'd be proud to show you off at Queen Victoria's ball to celebrate the opening."

"You would?" she asked, surprised and thrilled.

"The theme will be Scottish." His dark gaze roved over her, gleaming with pleasure. "I should think you would look quite fetching as a Highland miss."

Amanda turned away, blushing, and feeling somewhat confused. Was Justin teasing her? Or, did he actually intend to court her, when she was a mere stranger about whom he knew next to nothing?

"It does sound like fun," she murmured.

Abruptly, Justin caught Amanda's chin, forcing her to look at him and meet his solemn gaze. Her heart thudded as his gloved

fingers and dark gaze seemed to burn into her.

"Amanda, I do hope you don't think you're still in America?" he asked with concern.

Pulling away from his unsettling touch and gaze, she turned to stare out at the park, at a parade of riders strutting about on blooded horses, and other members of the gentry gliding by in handsome carriages. "No, I do very much realize I'm in London," she replied ruefully.

He cleared his throat. "Amanda . . . I've been meaning to apologize for my ungentlemanly conduct last night. I've even wondered if my untoward attentions were not precisely what caused your confusion - "

"But they were not," she protested, turning to look at him.

He held up a hand. "Please, hear me out. Truth to tell, I don't know what came over me. It is quite unlike me to try to force my attentions on a young lady in such a brash manner. There was just - something about your eyes - "

She reached out to touch his hand. "Justin, you needn't apologize. I really found your kiss quite sweet."

"You did?" He appeared amazed. "What an odd, fascinating creature you are."

Again feeling self-conscious, Amanda turned away, gazing out at a row of stylish Mayfair stores, watching two ladies disembark from their fine carriage and enter a millinery shop. "How was your meeting with the Prime Minister?"

Justin sighed. "Parliament is under siege at the moment - indeed, I'm due at the House of Lords even now." He flashed

Amanda a quick grin. "However, let's not concern ourselves with such tiresome matters - I've been looking forward all day to this outing with you."

"Have you?" She blushed in pleasure. "You are most kind."

He gazed at her intently then, and reached out to stroke her cheek, again setting off a firestorm of emotion and excitement within her.

"I'm not kind, Amanda," he stated flatly. "You'll do well to remember that."

Amanda was stunned and unnerved, feeling almost as if he had slapped her rather than caressed her. "Why would you talk about yourself that way?" she asked in an incredulous whisper.

He was silent for a long moment. At last, he said stiffly, "My mother informed me of your encounter today with Lady Cynthia."

Amanda nodded dismally. "Yes. Your finding me last night kept you from attending her party, didn't it? I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he quickly said. "I really didn't care to attend that stuffy affair."

Suddenly, she snapped her fingers. "The Valentine and nosegay you gave me were intended for Lady Cynthia, weren't they? No wonder she was so angry this morning! Justin, you shouldn't have - "

"I chose to give them to you, Amanda," he cut in vehemently.

"You chose?" she repeated.

His dark gaze impaled her. "I wanted to give them to you."

She stared at him and he stared back. All at once, the

tension and electricity hanging in the air between them was so thick, Amanda could not bear it. Her heart seemed to skid and skip a beat, then lurch into an even more frantic rhythm.

"Amanda . . ." he murmured, leaning toward her.

"What?" she cried.

She felt Justin's arm curl possessively about her waist, watched his dark, mesmerizing face descend toward hers, and thought her heart would burst with anticipation and longing.

"My God, you are so lovely," he murmured huskily, then his head ducked down further and he kissed her.

Desire and exhilaration soared in Amanda. Justin's kiss was intoxicating, so warm and thrilling. His tongue teased between her lips, and when she gasped, he seemed to suck her very breath into his body. Amanda feared she would die of the delightful, dangerously potent sensations settling deep inside her.

"Oh, Amanda," she heard him murmur when at last he pulled away. "I'm going to be so very bad for you."

She was silent, feeling bemused by his comments, and still half-dizzy from his masterful kiss. Her eyes sought his face to gauge his feelings, but he had already turned away to stare at a passing trio of street vendors, his expression abstracted.

"You know, you may have saved me from a catastrophe – or so my mother thinks," he murmured after a moment.

"How is that?" she asked.

He sighed, then said tightly, "Cynthia was the cousin and closest friend of my first wife, Genevieve, who was killed in a tragic accident two years past."

“Oh, Justin, I’m so sorry,” she murmured, her own confusion forgotten in her concern over him.

His shrug seemed to belie his pain. “Over the past year, I’ve become aware that Cynthia has, shall we say, set her cap on me – and not discreetly so. Although my mother is convinced we will never suit, the rest of London society already has Lady Cynthia and me joined at the hip, even though I hadn’t planned to start courting her – “

“Until last night?” Amanda supplied.

“Aye.”

“And I stopped you?”

He stared directly into her eyes. “I would say you arrested me – thoroughly.”

Amanda could barely hear him over her own pulse pounding in her ears. And still, he regarded her with such riveting intensity.

“Justin, why did you kiss me a moment ago?” she finally managed.

His arm curled about her again, and his lips hovered so close to hers, she could feel his warm breath, arousing her like the most powerful aphrodisiac. “Because you have the saddest eyes I’ve ever seen – and because you looked so lost.”

Tears flooded Amanda’s sad eyes. “And you say you’re not kind – “

“Not at all, darling,” he murmured as his skilled mouth claimed hers once again.

Justin showed her the sights of London. She was amazed and captivated by the sedate majesty of Buckingham Palace, the gothic wonder of Parliament, which Justin explained was still under reconstruction, after the old Palace of Westminster had burned down in 1834. They circled verdant St. James Park, passing the pageantry of the Horse Guards inspection near their barracks. Heading toward the center of town, they moved through Trafalgar Square with its fine view of the National Gallery. They watched the quaint trains leaving Euston Station. Amanda loved glimpsing the stately splendor of the many churches, and listening to the mellow toll of their bells.

Yet she quickly discovered there was much misery amid the splendor. Some of the stateliest courts and streets were bounded by appalling slums and workhouses. In the East End in particular, the oppression of the masses was apparent in the sobering facade of Newgate Prison, the sordidness of the maze-like rookeries and the seaminess of the docks. When Amanda remarked on some of the wretched conditions to Justin, he replied that, along with Lord Russell, he was working in Parliament to effect reform in the areas of enfranchising the poor, restricting or eliminating child labor and establishing public education. She listened with growing respect and again wondered why Justin would call himself "unkind." Or was she simply another charity he felt duty-bound to support?

They passed the forbidding Tower of London, Lord Christopher Wren's soaring Monument to the Great Fire and London Bridge, eventually making their way back to the center of town and the Strand. Traffic was much thicker this late in the day,

with numerous carriages, omnibuses and even high-wheeler bicycles competing for space on the cobbled streets. They glided past pillared Somerset House on the Thames and even passed the very corner where Justin had found Amanda last night. Staring at the spot where he had first kissed her, Amanda felt an eerie feeling slide over her.

Eventually they stopped at the popular Simpson's-in-the-Strand and shared a hearty supper of mutton with vegetables, sweet breads and toffee pudding. Amanda noted that the staff at the restaurant treated "Lord Lockridge" with almost cloying deference and respect.

During the meal, she asked him why she had heard several people today refer to him as "Lord Lockridge," when his name was actually Cartwright, and he explained to her about his various titles. When pressed, he delivered a head-spinning lecture on the protocols of addressing the British peerage. By the time they left the eatery together, with Justin planning to attend an evening Parliament session after he dropped Amanda off, she was happy, sated and drooping. In the brougham, she nodded off to the soothing clip-clop of the horses' hooves. Her head rested against Justin's shoulder . . .

In the fading light, Justin stared down at Amanda, looking so lovely and so trusting beside him. How he had enjoyed being with her today, and how sweet had been her kisses! His male pride basked in having this destitute girl dependent on him - indeed, the darker side of his nature relished having her under his complete control. He adored her gentle manner - especially as compared to

his high-strung first wife, and her self-appointed successor, the Lady Cynthia, who was in such a snit at the moment. He smiled ruefully, realizing that his mother had been right; Lady Cynthia would make quite an ungovernable wife.

But this girl . . . He glanced again at Amanda. This lovely creature would be so biddable. Unlike Cynthia and her predecessor, Genevieve, this girl would never provoke him to passions he would later regret.

If only he could keep his baser desires for her curbed.

He tenderly stroked Amanda's cheek, leaning over and kissing her in her sleep. How warm and delicious she tasted, how tempting.

Justin groaned. He was not going to be good for this girl. Not at all.

Chapter Five

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In the days following their outing, Justin became immersed in the turmoil at Parliament, with Lord John Russell's administration increasingly under siege and then defeated on February 20th. Amanda saw him only at a few meals, at which times he appeared quite tense and preoccupied. Still, she basked in the occasional smile he cast her way, the glint of admiration in his dark eyes when he regarded her.

Amanda realized that Justin had definitely awakened something passionate in her the day they had gone sightseeing together, and she continually hoped that, when his life became less chaotic, he would want to pursue a relationship with her. She gloried in memories of their shared kisses, and her yearning for him only intensified.

She longed to get to know him better. In so many ways, he remained a mystery to her. Was it just his British reserve, or was he still mourning the wife he'd lost two years ago? Did he still love her? And what were his true feelings toward Lady Cynthia, the woman he had planned to court? Did he regret meeting Amanda on

that mystical corner in time, and being diverted from his original goal?

Despite these doubts, Amanda's sense that she was *meant* to be here in mid-nineteenth-century London grew stronger with each passing day. She realized she had Justin to thank for that sense of grounding. He'd made her experiences seem so real and visceral.

Lady Bess helped to fill the void created by her son's absence; Amanda was becoming most fond of the Dowager. Bess took her guest on daily rounds of social calls amongst her closest friends. Amanda was introduced to the grand dames of London society and sampled tea and crumpets in their lavish drawing rooms. There, listening to gossip about the coming season, the new crop of debutantes and what matches would likely be made with the most eligible bachelors, Amanda picked up on many social nuances of Victorian society. She learned how to hold her teacup, how members of the peerage and gentry were addressed, and what subjects were, and were not, appropriate for a lady to discuss.

With Amanda quickly becoming a subject of great curiosity among the aristocracy and gentry, ladies began to call at Cartwright Hall to meet this dazzling young American. Bess Cartwright had taken under her wing. While Bess invariably introduced her guest as "Lady Amanda," at first, there seemed some confusion as to Amanda's exact place in the household. One middle-aged caller, the pretty and vivacious Millicent Sneed, Lady Ogden, upon eyeing the petit point dresser scarf Amanda was working on, exclaimed to Lady Bess, "My stars, I've never seen such fabulous Berlin work! If

your guest is ever in need of a post, Lady Bess, I know of a shop on Bond Street that would welcome her with open arms."

Lady Bess melted the caller's enthusiasm with a frosty glare. "Lady Ogden, I must inform you that Lady Amanda is neither a paid companion nor a poor relation here. We consider her a cherished member of our family, and as such, it would be totally beneath her station to seek employment of any kind."

The chastened Lady Millicent at once apologized. "Lady Bess, I'm deeply sorry. I did not mean to insult your guest. I was merely - so overwhelmed by her talent - "

"Ah, yes, Amanda will be the catch of the season, don't you agree?" Bess answered, skillfully smoothing over the awkwardness. "What a lucky man her future husband will be."

"Indeed," Lady Ogden concurred, flashing Amanda a brilliant smile. "And I do hope both of you - as well as Lord Justin - will be attending my ball Thursday next - sort of a pre-season soiree, now that most everyone is back in town."

"Amanda and I shall be looking for our invitations in the post," Lady Bess responded wisely.

"You'll receive them at once," Lady Millicent assured her.

And thus, Amanda's place in society was secured, even as she was again left wondering if she wasn't imposing on the kindly dowager and her son. After Lady Millicent left, she said tactfully, "Lady Bess, perhaps I should seek employment on Bond Street. That way, I can be responsible for myself, and can also repay - "

"Merciful saints!" Lady Bess cried, flinging a hand to her breast.

Amanda became alarmed, as Lady Bess had grown deathly pale. "What is it?"

Lady Bess's voice came weak and fluttery. "I feel faint. Summon Dexter at once."

Amanda bolted from her chair. What followed on Lady Bess's part were histrionics of the first order, worthy of the campiest Shakespearean troupe. The footman dashed in with Lady Bess's smelling salts, and two additional servants had to be summoned to bear the "prostrate" Dowager upstairs to her suite. Amanda spent the entire afternoon alternately holding Bess's hand, wiping her brow, and struggling to reassure her that she wouldn't leave, amid Bess's endless lamentations over Amanda's plotting to cruelly "abandon" her.

Although Amanda knew Lady Bess to be about as helpless as the steam locomotives she'd seen leaving Euston Station, nevertheless, she did not again dare to bring up the subject of leaving Cartwright Hall.

On the eve of Lord and Lady Ogden's ball, a mood of great excitement gripped Cartwright Hall. Justin, who had joined the ladies for an early supper, was in a jubilant frame of mind as Lord Russell's administration had just been restored, following days of upheaval at Parliament, which culminated with the failure of the Tories to establish their own regime.

After the evening meal, all three retired to dress for the ball. A maid styled Amanda's hair in a smooth chignon interlaced with delicate flowers, then helped her into her fabulous red ball gown - a

full-skirted Worth masterpiece with low, lace-trimmed décolletage, tight waist and exquisite lace overskirt. Amanda left the room carrying the silk and ivory fan Lady Ogden had sent her along with her invitation - ostensibly in apology for the matron's presumptuous remarks the day she had come calling.

Amanda lifted her skirts and carefully maneuvered her way down the several flights of stairs to the drawing room. There she found Justin alone, sipping brandy, and looking devastatingly handsome in his black velvet cutaway jacket, ruffled linen shirt, white silk cravat and black trousers. His thick, jet-black hair gleamed in the soft light.

He looked her over with great admiration. "Amanda, how beautiful you look." He set down his sniffer, stepped forward and took her hand, kissing her fingers through her lacy glove.

Amanda blushed with pleasure even as the scent of his bay rum thrilled her senses. "You look quite handsome yourself, my lord."

He chuckled at her manner of addressing him. "You're becoming accustomed to our ways here, aren't you?" Abruptly, a shadow crossed his eyes. "Do you miss America?"

She considered this a moment, then shook her head. "Actually, I'm really enjoying getting to know the country of my forebears. I feel strangely at home here."

"I want you to consider England - and Cartwright Hall - your home." He reached out, gently caressing her cheek. "I've missed you, you know."

His words and warm touch ignited a torrent of longing

within her. All at once, she could barely breathe, especially as he stared at her so intently.

"You've been busy, haven't you?" she asked.

"Ah, yes, the trials and tribulations of Parliamentary politics." He pivoted to pick up a velvet box off the pedestal table, then turned and extended it to her. "A peace offering."

Taking the box, Amanda was mystified. "But Justin, you have no reason to make peace with me."

"Don't I?" He winked at her. "Any other young lady your age would throw hysterics to have been neglected so shamelessly, and would milk the situation for all it was worth."

She stared at him, electrified by his words, her heart all a flutter at the teasing laughter in his eyes. Justin was definitely flirting with her - indeed, his words implied that they were to have a continuing relationship. She was thrilled beyond belief.

"Open the box, Amanda," he directed.

She did, gasping as she spotted a fabulous ruby pendant inside, dangling from its sumptuous gold chain. Speechless with wonder, she glanced up at him, and found he appeared eminently pleased with himself.

"It belonged to my favorite aunt," he explained. "When Mother told me of the vibrant color of your gown, I knew I must give you the pendant."

"B-but I cannot accept this," she finally stammered. Remembering an idiom used by one of the matrons who had come calling, she added, "It's too dear."

Justin didn't reply at once, taking the necklace from the box

and opening the clasp. "You're too dear," he whispered intensely, leaning over and kissing her.

Oh, he was so skilled. His mouth claimed hers expertly as he clasped the ruby drop around her neck. With a groan, he clutched her closer, his hand teasing the curve of her breast. Amanda arched into his delicious touch and moved her tongue enticingly against his lips.

Abruptly, he pulled back, his expression dark and brooding.

She stared at him confusedly. "Justin, what is it? Didn't you enjoy kissing me?"

He laughed ruefully. "I enjoyed it far too much. Indeed, perhaps I should have Mother give you a stout lecture."

Her chin came up. "And why is that?"

His dark gaze raked over her. "If you are this readily distracted, darling, think of how easily you might be seduced."

Amanda's face flamed and her hand moved to take off his necklace. "You must think I'm some fast woman, trying to compromise your sense of high morality - "

With a groan, he caught her hand. "Darling, don't," he implored. "I'm being a cad, I know. I'm not displeased with you, I'm disappointed in myself. All I can think of is how much you tempt me, and how jealous I'll be of every man who looks at you tonight."

At his passionate words, Amanda was surprised her wobbly legs supported her. Still, she managed to assert, "Those feelings are good, Justin. Why should they make you annoyed with yourself?"

He spoke sternly. "You would not be particularly pleased, young lady, had I brought our encounter to its natural conclusion."

"Are you so sure?" she asked recklessly.

She heard his stunned intake of breath. "You, miss, are a vixen," he scolded, shaking a finger at her, "and doubtless in dire need of a strong husband."

"Whatever you say," she teased back.

His voice was far from steady as he extended his arm to her. "I say it's high time for us to leave."

She fought a giggle and placed her hand on his sleeve.

As they headed for the door, he cleared his throat.

"Amanda?"

"Yes?"

"Save the first dance for me?"

Delight shone in her eyes. "Of course."

In the corridor, he added, "On second thought, save *every* dance for me."

Despite his chivalrous words, Amanda felt bemused. Why did Justin blow hot one minute, cold the next? Was it just a matter of strict morality on his part? Or was he truly fighting his feelings for her?

The Ogden ball was held in a lavish, well-lit Roman villa, one of the few stately homes gracing Regent's Park.

Justin, Amanda and Bess were received by the Ogdens in their stunning gold-paneled and frescoed ballroom. Amanda was enthralled by the costumes of the ladies - brilliant ball gowns

complimented by pearl necklaces and glittering tiaras. She was equally impressed by the impeccable attire of the men - formal black cutaways and ruffled white linen shirts with diamond studs. So captivated was she by the combined ambiance of the event that it was all she could do to remember the various social protocols - how to address the Baroness of Sheffield, and to curtsy for the Duke and Duchess of Rochester.

Justin introduced her to Lords Russell and Palmerston, as well as to several other cabinet ministers who were there with their wives. She also met the elderly Duke of Wellington, who had just successfully rallied Parliament to return Russell to power.

An awkward moment came when Lady Cynthia Spalding arrived with her parents. When she spotted Amanda sipping punch with Justin and a couple of his friends, she shot the girl a look of pure venom.

Justin squeezed Amanda's hand. "Don't mind her, dear."

But Cynthia hardly took her defeat gracefully. As the ballroom began to fill up, she huddled off with a half dozen of her debutante friends, and soon, several of the young ladies were turning to stare rudely at Amanda as they tittered among themselves.

In the hour that followed, gossip seemed to spread like wildfire through the ballroom, and soon, Justin became aware that he and Amanda were being snubbed. Conversations he initiated became strained and brief, and several of his acquaintances conspicuously avoided him and Amanda. Indeed, even as Justin was attempting to introduce her to a prominent grand dame, the

woman had the gall to mutter a lame excuse and stalk off!

By now, the increasingly chilly atmosphere was quite apparent to Amanda, as well. Their first few minutes at the affair had been wonderful, but now they were being met with pointed stares and cold snubs.

"Justin, what is happening?" she whispered to him.

"I suspect Cynthia is at work," he replied with disgust. "My dear, would you please go sit with my mother and Lady Ellsworth for a moment?"

Amanda dutifully went off to sit with Bess and her good friend. Justin strode off to interrogate one of his cronies, Darby Middlesex.

"Tell me, what treachery is making the rounds tonight, Darby?" Justin demanded without preamble.

Darby, something of a dandy, toyed nervously with his cravat. "Well, hello, Justin, old man. I'm afraid there has been some dreadful gossip circulating through the ballroom."

"Damn," Justin muttered. "Tell me what is being said."

Darby hesitated. "I really don't want to be the bearer of bad tidings - "

"Out with it," Justin commanded.

Darby sighed. "What I'm hearing is that you truly have the nerve, to show up here tonight with your mistress." Spotting the rage glittering in Justin's eyes, he hastily held up a hand. "Ye gads, old man, don't shoot the messenger. You can rest assured *I'm* not spreading this treason."

"You're right, and I'm sorry," Justin said, sighing. "If you'll

excuse me?"

Justin headed back toward Amanda, his heart sinking. He was eminently aware that, given the high moral tone set by Queen Victoria, the slightest hint of scandal often meant social ostracism in London society.

That vindictive witch Cynthia! Due to just a few words of cruel gossip, Amanda could well be ruined. Already, Cynthia's malicious lies had spread through the ballroom like an insidious wave. Now, none of the ladies would speak with Amanda tonight - none of the men would ask her to dance. Invitations for the fetes and soirees of the coming season would never be forthcoming.

Damn it, how could he quell the escalating disaster?

Staring at the many who regarded him with snickers and snide glances, he made a decision. He would for damn sure show the gossips what he thought of their idle treachery. He strode over to the dais and spoke with the musicians. Then he strode directly to Amanda, bowing before her.

"May I have this dance?" he asked.

She smiled radiantly and gave him her hand.

Justin led Amanda out onto the dance floor and whirled her about to a Chopin waltz. No other couples dared to join them, but Justin did not care. He clutched Amanda close and gazed into her eyes the entire time. Let the world see that they had nothing to hide! he thought fiercely. Let the world know that nothing mattered to him more than this incredibly lovely young lady he held in his arms

Amanda was gliding on air. Of course, she had felt appalled and hurt by their reception earlier, but now, none of that seemed to

matter. Justin was holding her so close, staring at her as if she were the only woman on earth who existed for him. She could hardly bear the rapture - she felt so special and cherished. She realized she was living every woman's fantasy, even by twentieth century standards - to go back to enchanting Victorian times, to be courted by a dashing gentleman. She loved this man, she realized achingly. Loved him so much . . .

When the waltz ended, stunned silence gripped the room. Then a wondrous thing happened. The elderly Duke of Wellington stepped forward in his splendid dress uniform with its many gleaming medals. Bowing gallantly before Amanda, he asked her to dance.

This time, no other couple dared *not* to join them on the floor.

Amanda was in heaven as she swirled about with the dashing Duke, amid the other couples. First she had danced with the man she loved with all her heart. Now, she was waltzing with the hero of Waterloo. She was living a moment of history - her very own moment!

On the sidelines, Justin watched Amanda glide about with Wellington. What a lady she was. His heart burned with pride for her.

Justin realized the evening could not possibly end on a higher note. When the Duke released Amanda, he gathered her and his mother, and the three of them left the ballroom with heads held high.

Chapter Six

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The following morning, the Earl of Lockridge paid a call on Lady Cynthia Spalding.

Cynthia, elegantly attired in a frock of green silk with a lace bodice and sleeves, received Justin in the elegant drawing room of her Belgravia mansion. He stood as she entered the room, regarding her coldly.

"Why, Justin, what a pleasant surprise," she preened with a bright smile. "Do sit down and I'll ring for tea."

"I prefer to stand," he replied in a chill tone. "And don't bother with tea. This is not a social call, and I think our business can be conducted forthwith."

"Business?" she repeated innocently. "Perhaps this subject would best be taken up with my father?"

He laughed ironically at her oblique reference to a marriage proposal. "Cynthia, I must admire your gall. How dare you insinuate I would be the least bit interested in pursuing matrimony with you, following your reprehensible conduct last night."

She feigned shock and outrage. "*My* reprehensible conduct? I assure you, I have no idea what you are talking about - "

"Oh, don't bother to deny it," he cut in. "The entire town is

aware that you wish to take my late wife's place as the next Countess of Lockridge."

Her face heated. "Justin, simply because I hold you in high esteem - "

"Do you? Or do you seek to elevate yourself in my eyes by ruining the prospects of the young American lady who is currently the guest of my mother and myself?"

"That American upstart is perfectly capable of ruining her own prospects," Cynthia retorted spitefully. In a more placating tone, she added, "Justin, please, let's sit down and make our peace."

"I have no intention of making peace with you, Cynthia," he stated flatly. "Actually, you have engineered your own defeat."

She paled. "What are you saying?"

"You have subjected a guest in my home to possible social disgrace through your cowardly lies. Consequently, as a gentleman of honor, I have no choice but to marry the young lady to silence the gossips."

Cynthia was aghast. "You mean you would marry that - "

He lifted a hand in warning. "Take care how you speak of the future Countess of Lockridge."

"Justin, surely you have lost your mind!" she cried, wild-eyed. "This - this young woman - will never be accepted here."

"Indeed, she will," Justin asserted, "and you are going to see to it that Amanda's place in society is secured."

Cynthia laughed incredulously. "You're mad."

"Not at all. After I leave, you are going to go calling,

Cynthia. You will visit every gossip in town with whom you committed your perfidy last night. You will inform one and all that a ghastly mistake has been made - that you know for a certainty now that Lady Amanda is as pure as the driven snow, and that all of the lies were started by a vindictive servant who was dismissed from Cartwright Hall after being caught stealing the family silver."

Cynthia was shaking her head. "Now I'm certain you belong in Bedlam. Why would I do this, Justin?"

He smiled bitterly and called over his shoulder. "Dexter!" Catching Cynthia's bemused expression, he added, "You see, my dear, I've been aware all along that it is not my name you want so much as it is the Spalding family jewels."

Both stood silently glaring at each other as the footman, resplendent in his livery, strode in and placed a small wooden chest on the inlaid mahogany tea table. Justin nodded curtly to the servant; Dexter bowed and slipped from the room.

Justin flipped open the chest, revealing a glittering heap of gorgeous tiaras, rings, necklaces - ruby, diamond and emerald jewelry of every description. Cynthia's gaze became riveted on the dazzling jewels, her expression one of avid greed.

Running his fingers over the fabulous array, Justin smiled mockingly at her; she glared back with avarice and hatred blazing in her eyes.

"It isn't fair!" she cried, fists clenched. "Those jewels should have been mine. Grandmother gave them to Genevieve instead of me because Genevieve was her favorite. And now you have them"

"But you shall have them, Cynthia," Justin drawled cynically,

"In due course, if you behave yourself."

Cynthia was so stunned, she could only stare at him.

"Do I have your attention now?" he asked mildly.

"Totally," she spat back. "Speak your mind, Justin."

"These jewels will be sent to you on the first anniversary of my marriage to Lady Amanda Brewster - providing you undo the malicious lies you have already spread and do no further harm to my bride's reputation following our nuptials."

Cynthia was silent, chest heaving, features clenched with fury. "You scoundrel."

A vein jumped in his temple. "I don't care what your opinion is of me, but I swear, Cynthia, if there is the slightest hint of scandal, the slightest sully of Amanda's name, during my first year of marriage to her, I will blame you and no one else, and you may consider this arrangement to be null and void. Do I make myself clear?"

"Eminently!" she snapped.

"Do you agree to my terms?"

"Yes." She raised her chin. "But how can you know I won't try to ruin Amanda after the year has ended?"

His smile was frightening. "I won't be transferring a formal deed of ownership, my dear. If you ever again try to harm Amanda in any way, I'll reclaim the jewels as my own."

She laughed contemptuously. "But that is absurd. How can I possibly trust you?"

His voice was lethally soft as he snapped shut the lid of the chest. "You will, Cynthia, because, unlike you, I am a person of

honor."

Taking the chest of jewels, Justin turned on his heel and strode from the room.

Late that afternoon, Amanda was summoned to Justin's study.

She rapped softly on the door, and heard him call, "Enter."

She slipped in quietly, admiring the paneled room with its many leather-bound books and the gleaming cherry wood desk. Most of all, she admired the handsome man sitting behind the desk.

Justin smiled and stood. "Amanda. Come right in."

He came forward, took her hands and led her to the Jacobean chair in front of his desk. She felt giddy in his presence, especially as his warm, strong hands gripped hers. He had removed his jacket, and looked so appealing in his flowing white shirtsleeves and brocaded waistcoat. A curl had pulled loose from his normally impeccably groomed hair, and now dangled over his forehead, only increasing his allure.

She sat down and smoothed down her skirts of lightweight blue wool. Instead of resuming his own seat, he parked his hip on the edge of the desk and stared down at her intently, exciting and unnerving her, especially as she noted how his trousers pulled at his strong thigh muscles.

"Have you been enjoying your time here?" he began.

She smiled. "Oh, yes, very much. I find all the rounds of shopping and calls with your mother fascinating. Yesterday, she took me to visit the National Gallery. The oil paintings were divine -

Constable and Turner and Reynolds. The entire exhibition was magnificent - I could spend a week there." She sighed. "I just wish there were some way I could repay you and your mother for all your kindnesses."

"And when will you get it through that lovely head of yours that it is we who are indebted to you for so splendidly gracing our lives?"

"You are most kind," she murmured. Then, realizing what she had said, and watching him raise an eyebrow, she held up a hand and added vehemently, "I don't care what you say. You *are* kind, Justin."

He chuckled. "How old are you, Amanda?"

Taken aback, she replied, "Why, I'm twenty."

He nodded, his expression relieved. "Good. You look fresh and fair enough to be sixteen, but I'm relieved to hear you're old enough."

She paled. "Old enough for what?"

He thoughtfully stroked his jaw. "Ordinarily, I would take up this matter with your father, or even your grandmother. But since there's no one . . ."

"No one for what?"

He took her hands and stared down at her solemnly. "Amanda, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Stunned, she shot to her feet. "What?"

He grinned. "Don't look so flabbergasted. I'm asking you to marry me."

"But - but why?"

He shook his head ruefully. "My, you are direct."

"And I would appreciate a direct answer, Justin."

"Very well, then. I am in need of a wife - and an heir."

"Oh." Her spirits sank. "Then you're proposing a marriage of convenience?"

"A rather cold way to put it."

"But accurate?"

He did not respond.

She snapped her fingers. "Does this have anything to do with last night?"

His expression grew guarded. "What do you mean?"

She laughed dryly. "Justin, don't try to humor me. I was hardly accepted by your exalted society here."

He gave a groan. "Amanda, I didn't want to have to bring this up - "

"Bring what up?"

"What happened last night - for which I humbly apologize - really had nothing to do with you."

She spoke through gritted teeth. "Oh, come on. You can't think I'm that naive and gullible."

"But it's true."

"Then you'd better tell me what last night meant - right now."

He nodded morosely. "I'm afraid there's been some malicious gossip - started by Cynthia."

Amanda paled. "What did she tell people - "

"Please, dear, there's no sense repeating - "

"Tell me what she said – now."

Miserably, he confessed, "I'm afraid she spread it about the ballroom that you are - "

"Yes?"

He sighed heavily. "My mistress."

"What?" Amanda cried. "Why would she say that?"

"She had hoped she and I would become a couple. And you know what they say about a woman scorned."

"Now you feel you must rescue me?" Amanda asked bitterly. "Make an honest woman out of me, so to speak?"

His appeared crestfallen. "No, dear, that's not my motive at all."

Tears filled her eyes. "Isn't it? I don't hear you saying you love me, Justin. Tell me, do you love me?"

He was silent, his expression dark and brooding.

She had her answer. Blinded by emotion, she fled for the door.

But Justin caught her, pulling her roughly into his arms, holding her there.

"No! No!" she cried, trying to wrench herself free from him. "I don't need your help. I don't need your pity."

"But darling," he whispered intensely, "I need you."

Justin kissed her, smothering her low cry. As always, the heat of his wonderful lips decimated her own control. The fingers that had tensed against his chest slowly uncurled, and soon she slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him back with all the emotion welling in her heart

At Amanda's sweet surrender, a tremor of emotion shook Justin to the roots of his being. What had he done to deserve such sweetness? He pulled her to the nearby settee and settled her onto his lap, cradling her against him. She moaned softly as he continued to kiss her tenderly.

"Amanda, I really do want to marry you," he murmured against her hair.

"What of Lady Cynthia?" she asked breathlessly. "She'll still do her best to ruin us both - "

"No, she won't," he assured. "All she really wanted was Genevieve's jewels - and I've promised her those in a year, if she behaves herself."

Amanda pulled back, aghast. "I can't allow you to give in to blackmail like that."

"It's not blackmail. It was all my idea. You see, I've never wanted to keep Genevieve's jewels. I've always intended to give them to Cynthia. That is, unless you should want them - "

"Heavens, no."

He smiled and brushed a tear from her cheek. "Didn't you say you wanted to repay me?"

Amanda could barely speak over the emotion constricting her throat. "But that wouldn't be repaying you."

Tender amusement shone in his gaze. "Wouldn't it?"

She stared at him with her heart in her eyes. "No. It would be giving me what I most want in the world."

She heard him groan, then he crushed her close, his arms trembling about her. "Oh, God, Amanda. I wish you wouldn't say

things like that. I could well lose my head."

She lovingly kissed the strong line of his jaw. "But isn't that what marriage is supposed to be all about? Falling in love - losing one's head - and one's heart?"

His arms tightened about her. "You're so young, so idealistic. I wish I could live up to your expectations."

She drew back. "Won't you?"

He smiled sadly, dodging her question. "Well, what do you say? Will you marry me, and make my mother a very happy woman?"

Disappointment lanced her. "What about you, Justin? Will I make you a very happy man?"

"Indeed, you will, darling," he murmured, and kissed her again.

Lady Bess was beside herself over their announcement, weeping with joy and hugging them both. She had the footman fetch their best brandy for an impromptu celebration at dinner.

There followed weeks of whirlwind activities as the banns were read, the wedding costumes prepared. Several of Bess's prominent friends threw fetes or soirees to honor the betrothed couple. While Lady Cynthia was present at several of these affairs, and treated the couple with cold courtesy, there was no more unpleasant gossip to spoil the days prior to the wedding.

They married at St. Margaret's, Parliament, and Lord Russell himself was present, as well as several of his ministers and other members of the House of Lords - and, of course, all of Justin

and Bess's friends. Amanda felt as if living a dream as she stood next to Justin in her beautiful satin wedding gown in the wonderful old gothic church. She gloried in every second of the marriage ceremony, lovingly repeating her vows, tears filling her eyes at the moment when Justin placed the gold band on her finger - and later, at the end, when his lips briefly, tenderly claimed hers. She didn't know if this man loved her, but at this moment, she had enough love in her heart for them both.

The wedding breakfast was a festive affair held back at Cartwright Hall. Justin seemed in a jovial mood as he sat next to Amanda, both of them joining in the many toasts.

Once the guests had departed, Amanda excused herself and went up to her room to change. After the maid helped her out of her wedding dress, corset and petticoats, Amanda dismissed her. Then she heard a knock at her door.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Justin."

She smiled. "Come in."

Justin entered the room and closed the door, only to stop in his tracks as he spotted his bride standing across from him, wearing only her sexy camisole and bloomers. His gaze raked over her hungrily, pausing on the lush breasts that strained against the fine lawn of her camisole. Burning desire coursed through him, and he was stunned at the intensity of his response to her.

"I'm sorry," he muttered tightly. "You're not dressed."

She licked her lush lips in invitation. "And you're my husband."

Justin's meager control snapped. He crossed the room in brisk strides and hauled the vision of femininity into his arms. Her sweet scent further inflamed his raging senses as he kissed her with consuming hunger. His fingers roved her body and dug into her softness, settling her firmly against him.

"You have no idea what you're doing," he said roughly, nipping at her ear. "I could devour you alive, pretty girl, right here and now."

She pulled back to stare up at him in hurt and confusion. "Justin, why does it make you angry that you want me?"

He stepped back, drawing a ragged breath. Spotting her wrapper laid across a nearby chair, he picked it up and awkwardly draped it about her shoulders. "I'm sorry. Actually, I've come to beg your pardon. I must leave for an important session of Parliament. I'm sponsoring a bill on worker reform, and the vote tonight could be critical."

"But it's our wedding day," she whispered, unable to hide her disappointment.

"I know," he murmured, stroking her cheek. "I'll make it up to you. And perhaps while I'm gone, you might have the maids move your things into the suite adjoining mine?"

It was on the tip of Amanda's tongue to ask why she wouldn't be sharing his bedroom - then she remembered this was Victorian England. He might well be scandalized if she suggested such a rash move - and surely he would come to her later.

"Of course, Justin," she said.

He kissed her cheek and turned for the door. Her hopes

sank when he pivoted to look at her one last time, his expression that of a cold, remote stranger.

"I'll be late. Perhaps t'would be best not to wait up for me."

Amanda proudly lifted her chin. "I don't care how late you are. I'm your wife and I'll be waiting for you."

At her words, a muscle worked in his jaw and he blinked rapidly. But he made no comment as he turned and left her.

The encounter troubled Amanda as she and the maids moved her things to the suite adjoining Justin's. Obviously, her husband wanted her - she had hardly imagined the stark lust in his eyes, the searing ravishment of his kiss, or the hot hardness of his body pressing into hers. Still, he did seem to be fighting his own desire for her. Perhaps as the proper English gentleman, he considered it vulgar and wicked to lose control that way. Or perhaps his emotions were still too caught up in his previous marriage.

Well, whatever the cause, his bride was determined to change his mind.

That evening, Amanda dressed in the lacy nightgown Lady Bess had given her as a wedding gift. She waited for Justin to appear, slightly nervous yet giddy with anticipation over the night to come.

Amanda felt particularly happy that she was a virgin. While she was no prude, back in her own time, she had never found the right man to whom she wanted to give herself. Now, she felt so grateful that her gift would be given to Justin alone.

The hour grew late and still her husband did not appear. At

last she heard him moving about in the next room. She waited for what seemed an eternity, but still he did not come to her. She paced, agonizing endlessly. Did Justin truly not want her in his bed?

Finally, she swallowed her pride and entered his room without knocking. He whirled to face her, was wearing a brocade dressing gown, and smoking a cigar.

He snatched the cigar out of his mouth; his gaze seemed to consume her flesh. "Amanda, is something wrong?"

She stepped forward. "Yes, something is wrong. It is our wedding night, and you still haven't come to me."

He swallowed hard. "The hour is very late - I had thought you would be sleeping."

She stepped closer. "I'm not. I'm wide awake - and here I am."

He stared at her again. "My God, you're ravishing."

But as she moved closer, he held up a trembling hand.

"Justin - what is it?" she cried.

"The gossips," he said in a tortured voice. "It will not do for us to have a child too soon, Amanda."

She felt as if he had just thrown ice water in her face, and her voice reflected her wounded feelings. "Is that all you care about, Justin Cartwright - the gossips? Is that why you married me - strictly for the sake of propriety, and to save my sacred reputation? And now you can't even bear to touch me?"

His eyes were anguished. "No, Amanda, that's not true at all."

Tears were blinding her. "You're not unkind, Justin

Cartwright," she said in a breaking voice. "You're cruel!"

She fled his room.

After Amanda left, Justin damned himself a fool. He'd been an idiot to let Amanda go just now - and even more of a dolt to think that he could marry this ravishing young woman and keep his feelings safely shut away.

His bride had looked so delectable just now - just as she had earlier today, when he had all but thrown her down on the bed and devoured her alive. He knew his rejection of her had cut her to the quick, yet he had felt compelled to send her away for her own good.

Over the past weeks, Justin had hoped to learn to curb his runaway feelings, to keep his raging thirst for Amanda within acceptable limits. But he had failed dismally; if anything, his need for her had only intensified. It was the prospect of losing control that frightened him the most; if Amanda could make him lose control of his passions, then it followed she could also make him lose control of his temper. This he could not abide. He had destroyed one woman with his anger, and he could not risk ruining Amanda's life, as well. He loved her too much now. He loved her enough to live with the hell of not having her.

In the opposite suite, Amanda felt devastated over Justin's rejection. Why had he married her? Strictly to silence the gossips? Did he indeed still love his first wife? Did he still miss her? Had he made her his bride because she was young, impressionable,

malleable? Because he could control her, hold her at arm's length while he remained physically and emotionally faithful to a dead woman?

Oh, yes, he must have wanted her for just these reasons - he had certainly manipulated her quite successfully so far. Not to mention, he seemed determined to quash any spark of passion he might feel for her. What a fool she had been to fall into his trap, to consign herself to a loveless marriage that would satisfy outward appearances only.

Chapter Seven

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Amanda was a bride without a husband.

The next few days brought no change to the pattern. Justin was gone much of the time, at Parliament sessions or at his club on St. James Street. When he was home, his attitude toward his bride was polite and aloof. He never visited her bed.

Amanda tried to keep herself busy, joining Lady Bess on social calls and helping her take baskets to the poor. When she saw firsthand some of the misery of the London slums, she tried to take comfort from the fact that Justin was working to change the appalling conditions. Yet as she began increasingly to realize how magnanimous both Justin and his mother were, she had to wonder again if she were little more than a charity case to them both.

While she tried to keep her days full, her nights were pure torture. Emotionally she felt devastated. She loved Justin with all her heart and could not figure out the reason for his perplexing withdrawal, or even the true reason he had married her. He couldn't love her as she loved him - if so, he would never spend another night apart from her.

She began increasingly to fear that the roots of his problem could indeed lie in his first marriage. One afternoon at tea, Amanda

questioned Bess about this.

"I've been wondering about Justin's marriage to Genevieve," she remarked. "Did he take it very hard when he lost his wife?"

Bess glanced at Amanda in astonishment. "It was a difficult period for us all."

Amanda restrained her private irritation at Bess's smooth dodge. She tried a more direct approach. "How did Justin's first wife die?"

Bess sighed and set down her tea cup. "I think it best that you ask Justin about that."

"But he doesn't talk to me about anything," Amanda replied in frustration. "Please, I'm only trying to understand him."

Yet Bess was unrelenting. "I think that when the time is right, Justin will speak to you of Genevieve."

Amanda was growing desperate. "Lady Bess, at the risk of embarrassing you, I must be frank. Justin never visits my bedroom."

Lady Bess emitted a small, shrill laugh. "Oh, my dear. You can rest assured that when the time is right, Justin will do his duty to provide an heir."

Amanda was crestfallen. "Is that all the English think a marriage is about? Performing one's duty and producing heirs?"

Bess reached over to pat the girl's hand. "Of course not. I know Justin is quite devoted to you."

"I wish I could know this," Amanda muttered bitterly.

Another week passed, with no change. Amanda's spirits grew increasingly depressed.

Then Amanda ran across Lady Cynthia at a tea given by Lady Stanton of Belgrave Square. That afternoon the drawing room of the lavish town house was crowded with stylishly dressed ladies; Amanda tried her best to mingle, while avoiding her nemesis. But while she was in the dining room helping herself to a scone, Cynthia strolled in.

"Well, is married life agreeing with you, Lady Amanda?" she began snidely.

"I'm doing just fine, thank you," came Amanda's stiff reply.

"I feel so sorry for Justin," Cynthia went on with an air of tragedy.

Amanda's blue eyes shot sparks at this jibe. "Let me assure you, Lady Cynthia, that Justin is in no need of your pity."

"But isn't he?" she went on with a poisonous smile. "Due to some idle gossip - which I must tell you, I had no part of - Justin has been forced to marry beneath his station."

Amanda's patience was wearing thin. "Justin would never marry simply to silence the gossips."

Cynthia laughed scornfully. "Then, my dear, you have no idea of the high moral standards of our gentlemen here - not surprising, since you are from the Colonies. Let me assure you that Justin had no choice after the talk got around regarding his - " she sniffed disdainfully - "American houseguest."

Amanda's tone was icy. "*If* you'll excuse me, Cynthia?"

But as she started off, Cynthia caught her arm. "You must know you will never take Genevieve's place," she hissed.

Amanda shook herself free of Cynthia's grasp. "What do

you mean?"

Cynthia continued with vindictive relish. "Justin loved her desperately. Unlike you, she was a lady in every way - polished in all the social graces, and an expert rider. Why, they rode together in Hyde Park every day, and Genevieve was always the toast of the town." She laughed cruelly. "What a fool you are to think Justin could ever love a gauche little commoner like you."

Amanda stormed out of the room without saying a word.

Cynthia's cruel words haunted Amanda. While she knew the woman was motivated by spite, she couldn't help but feel the diatribe might have contained a grain of truth. She already feared Justin *had* married her solely out of his Victorian sense of high morality, to silence the gossips, just as she suspected he still loved his first wife. Jealousy ate at her every time she remembered Cynthia's saying that Justin and Genevieve rode together each day at Hyde Park.

Well, she could learn to ride, too. She would become even more skilled and polished in all the social graces than Genevieve had been. She would transform herself into the genteel lady Justin was bound to love.

Amanda decided her first step should be to take riding lessons. She would keep the lessons a secret, and later surprise Justin. Amanda consulted the groom at the Cartwright Hall stable, and he recommended a riding master who could give her equestrian lessons at Hyde Park. Each day, she took out a sleek black Arabian from the Cartwright Hall stables, and met the riding master

in the park. She paid for her lessons, and for her riding habit, with the pin money Justin and Lady Bess kept insisting she accept.

In the days that followed, Amanda learned how to sit properly on a side saddle, how to walk, trot and canter her horse, how to make turns. She noted that, each afternoon, tree-shaded "Rotten Row" at Hyde Park became a haven for the fashionable - dandies cantering their magnificent blooded horses, ladies gliding past in their elegant carriages, or riding their own splendid mounts. Even "trollops" were present in their gaudy gigs and tawdry clothing, taking outings along the row and trying to catch the attentions of passing gentlemen.

As Amanda became more expert at riding, she too caught the stares of society - particularly, of the gentlemen present in the park each afternoon - and she knew it would be only a matter of time before someone mentioned to Justin seeing her there. Thus, only two weeks after she began her lessons, she sent her husband a note at his club late one morning: "Please meet me at Hyde Park, Rotten Row, today at five-thirty. Love, Amanda."

When the appointed hour came, Amanda was a' titter with excitement, not certain whether Justin would appear or not. Wearing her blue serge riding habit and feathered hat, she trotted her Arabian up and down the lane, searching for any sign of her husband. Then, even as she was cantering her mount down the row - past men who stared and women who grudgingly admired her prowess - Justin suddenly leaped out in front of her horse. He appeared enraged.

The frightened horse reared, and Amanda almost came

unseated before she managed to bring him under rein.

Features white with fury, Justin grabbed the horse's reins. "Get off that horse!"

Amanda was stunned. Never before had she seen her husband like this. She felt as if he had struck her. Not a word of greeting, or of admiration - only a deadly cold, "Get off that horse."

"Justin? What is it?" she cried.

"Damn it, madam, I said get off that horse." And he reached up and roughly hauled her out of the saddle.

As her boots hit the hard ground Amanda felt humiliated, mortified. Justin was creating a dreadful scene. Everyone in the lane was staring at them, and several bystanders were snickering among themselves. But her husband seemed oblivious as he wordlessly dragged her off toward his brougham.

"Please!" she beseeched. "My horse."

Justin barked a command to the footman. Dexter sprang off his perch and sprinted over to grab her mount, leading him back and tethering him to the rear of the carriage. In the meantime, Justin had propelled his wife inside the cab.

The trip home passed in stony silence. Amanda could not believe the granite-faced, implacable stranger sitting next to her was actually her husband. This man - cold-blooded, near-violent - bore no resemblance at all to the kindly, soft-spoken Justin she knew.

At Cartwright Hall, he caught her hand in a steely grip and pulled her up the three flights of stairs to his bedroom. He did not speak until they were safely behind closed doors.

He snatched her note from his pocket and held it up in a

trembling hand. "What is the meaning of this, Amanda?"

"I - I wanted you to see me ride."

He blinked rapidly. "*Meet me at Hyde Park*," he quoted with a sneer. "Do you delight in being cruel?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she cried, exasperated.

He held up a fist. "Don't you ever, *ever* again let me see you on a horse."

"Never? But why?" she demanded.

"Because, I command it, that is why."

"Because you command it?" Amanda's vision flooded with red at his arrogance. "Or is it because Genevieve was an expert rider, and you'll never again let another woman presume to take her place?"

"How dare you say such a thing!" he shouted. "Furthermore, you are my wife and you will obey me."

The passion and turmoil of weeks burst in Amanda. "I will not," she asserted, recklessly defying him. "And I don't consider this to be a binding marriage since it has never been consummated. Which means I'm *not* your wife and I don't have to obey you."

Naked rage burned in his eyes. "That," he snapped, "is about to be remedied."

Too late, she realized his intent. He lunged for her; she lunged for the door. He caught her easily, lifting her up into his strong arms and bearing her, kicking and protesting, to his bed.

He tossed her down on the feather tick and threw himself on top of her, his body hard and very aroused. She caught a

frightening glimpse of his fierce, determined features, then his mouth descended on hers.

Amanda sobbed beneath him, tortured by heartache and confusion. She wanted him so – but not like this.

Then a curious thing happened - rage became tenderness, anger, tears. She felt the harsh tremor shaking her husband, as if something had broken inside him at that moment.

He pulled back and caught her face in his hands, his own expression stunned and contrite. "Amanda. Oh, darling, I'm so sorry."

She held out her arms to him, unable to bear another second of the agonizing rift between them. "Love me, Justin," she beseeched. "Please, just love me."

"Oh, God," he cried. "Why must I want you so?"

With these anguished words, he crushed her close, kissing her with passion and urgency. She kissed him back hungrily, no longer afraid, but breathlessly aroused.

Justin's warm lips trailed down her throat. He opened the jacket of her riding habit, pushing aside her corset and camisole. Amanda cried out; she had never felt anything so wrenchingly pleasurable. She thrust her fingers into his thick, soft hair and clutched him tightly to her, moaning words of encouragement.

Abruptly, he pulled back, staring at her with desire-blackened eyes as he hastily doffed his jacket, waistcoat, shirt and cravat. She feasted her eyes on his muscular chest, with its thick tufts of black hair, as he reached down and undid her garments.

He stared at her avidly and caught a sharp breath. "You're

so incredibly beautiful."

Her heart pounded in joy and sweet tears filled her eyes.

Justin covered her with his muscled body again. In the haze of desperate want, everything happened so quickly, their kisses and caresses soon demanding an ultimate joining. She arched against him eagerly; his mouth quelled her soft sobs as he made her his utterly. In the wake of the discomfort, pleasure swept her, along with a feeling of sublime bliss at being one with her husband at last. Amanda clung to him, reveling in the intimacy, the melding. Together, they rode the crest of mindless passion toward a sweet riot of feeling . . .

When it was over, when their hearts, their breathing, at last quieted, neither seemed to know how to react. Justin moved off his wife, staring at her with awe and uncertainty. Feeling confused and vulnerable, she righted her clothing, got up and went toward the door, reaching for the knob.

Abruptly, she was grabbed, turned and all but slammed into the door. Justin's mouth descended on hers ardently, his fingers popped buttons on her jacket, and then his hand caressed her boldly . . .

"Please, don't go," he whispered intensely, and pulled her back to his bed . . .

Chapter Eight

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The next morning, the Earl and the Countess of Lockridge shared an early breakfast in the dining room.

The atmosphere was so strained, Amanda reflected that it was almost as if the electrifying night of passion between them had never occurred.

But it *had* occurred, and she would never forget this! Justin had loved her almost to insensibility. He had awakened her repeatedly, claiming her hungrily in the shadows of the night. While she might still doubt his love for her, she could never again doubt he desired her.

Even though now, he was again an implacable stranger seated across from her, his shirt linen perfectly pressed, his jet-black hair gleaming, his jaw smoothly shaven, his expression cool, remote, the lips that had roved intimately all over her body tightly pressed as he sipped his tea.

Why was he acting this way toward her, when she knew of the desires raging just beneath the surface?

He caught her perusal and smiled briefly. "Are you all right,

Amanda?" he asked awkwardly. "I mean, I hope last night that I didn't - "

"Hurt me?" she supplied, staring at him in anguish and defiance. "You're hurting me now."

At last she witnessed his facade cracking; a muscle worked in his jaw, then he lifted a trembling hand to his brow. "Amanda, please don't do this."

"Why are you acting this way?" she demanded. "Last night, you were like a different person - and now you're shutting me out of your life again."

He clenched his fist on the tabletop. "That different person you saw last night, Amanda - it's the part of my nature that might well harm you."

"What? You must be joking."

He stared at her with pain-filled eyes. "Last night was a mistake."

"How can you say that?"

"It wouldn't have happened at all," he continued tightly, "except that, when I saw you riding in the park - "

"Why did that enrage you so?"

He stared at her incredulously. "You actually don't know."

"Know what?"

"I had assumed that by now, my mother - someone - would have told you - "

"Told me what? Quit talking in riddles, Justin."

He sighed heavily. "Watching you ride in the park yesterday frightened me."

"But why?"

He swallowed hard, then whispered, "My first wife was killed in a riding accident in Hyde Park - "

"Oh, my God!" Amanda cried, her hands flying to her face.

"We were arguing when it happened." Justin spoke with raw emotion. "If only I hadn't distracted her at the very moment her horse stumbled . . . Then she was thrown - a massive injury to her brain. She never regained consciousness."

"Oh, Justin, I'm so sorry," Amanda said abjectly. "If I had known, I never would have taken riding lessons." Then, as realization dawned, she gasped, "Oh, no! I've been such a fool."

"What do you mean?"

She laughed cynically. "I've played right into Cynthia's hands. She was the one who told me you could never love me - because I wasn't a polished lady like Genevieve, because I couldn't ride like she did - "

"Damn her!"

Tears were now spilling out of Amanda's eyes. "Oh, Cynthia was so subtle, so clever, to drop that sentence about you and Genevieve riding in Hyde Park. She knew I would snatch up every word, so desperate was I to make you love me - "

Justin rounded the table and touched her shoulder, staring at her with tortured eyes. "Amanda - darling, don't."

"And now I have hurt you more than I could ever have imagined," she continued heartbrokenly.

He reached down and brushed a tear from her cheek. "Please don't do this to yourself. When you think about it, Cynthia

has only harmed herself."

"What do you mean?"

"First, she started the gossip that brought about our marriage. Then, she tried to drive a wedge between us again through her recent remarks to you. Instead, she brought us together last night."

Amanda was silent, staring at him.

He cupped her chin in his hand and gazed at her tenderly. "Darling, in time, when I learn to control my own nature, we'll be together. I promise you."

Yet Justin's attempt to reassure Amanda had only shattered her hopes, especially when he had reminded her that gossip alone had precipitated their union. "You still love Genevieve, don't you?" she asked fatalistically. "You won't let anyone take her place. You won't allow yourself to feel anything for me, will you Justin?"

"You don't understand," he said in a broken voice.

"You're bad for me?" she supplied bitterly.

This time, it was Justin who could not speak; he could only watch Amanda with forlorn eyes as she got up and went to the door.

Before leaving, she turned. "So last night was a mistake? How can you say Cynthia brought us together? We're apart now, aren't we, Justin? I'd say Cynthia has won."

After Amanda left, Justin felt bedeviled by conflicted emotion. That harpy Cynthia! He was tempted to go strangle her for her latest perfidy - and then he groaned at the very thought of such

violent, reprehensible conduct.

Still, due to Cynthia's manipulations, he'd learned something about his bride, yesterday and last night. Amanda was not just a tractable young girl he could bend to his will; she was a strong-willed, passionate woman determined to demand her due in this marriage. Far from being disappointed in her, Justin loved her for her pride and spirit. Making love with her last night had been paradise, and so addictive that he burned to possess her again even now.

That was the scariest part of all. Why couldn't she understand that he wanted their marriage to work, but he must somehow exorcise his own inner demons first?

When he'd seen Amanda riding in the park yesterday, he'd become scared too death - and more enraged than he'd ever felt in his life. Given his explosive burst of temper, it was a miracle he hadn't hurt her badly. And the way he'd lost control afterward, devouring her sweet, innocent body in his bed . . . Justin was well aware that his passions, when properly provoked, could be as destructive as they were potent.

He mustn't risk losing control again as he had yesterday. He couldn't hurt his wife. He simply couldn't.

That afternoon, with heavy heart, Amanda went calling on Lady Ogden in Regent's Park. She secured the name of the shop on Bond Street that could use a talented seamstress, then went by the couturier and secured a post for herself. After letting a room at a nearby hotel, she went back to Justin's town house, secretly

packing her bags. Before she departed, she left a note for Lady Bess, thanking her profusely, saying she was all right, not to worry, but that her and Justin's marriage had unfortunately failed. She promised to come calling in a few days.

She left her wedding ring on Justin's dresser. She did not of course leave her new address.

She went back to the hotel by hansom cab, unpacked and had supper in her room. Later, she cried herself to sleep

In the middle of the night, her door crashed open. Amanda clung to the bedcovers, terrified as she glimpsed the dark form of a man looming in the doorway.

"What in God's name do you think you're doing?" her husband shouted at her.

"I can't bear this sham of a marriage any longer!" she cried.

"Do you have any idea of the hell I've been through trying to find you?" he demanded.

"I don't care," she flung at him heedlessly.

In his rage, Justin kicked over a chair. "You are my wife, Amanda, and you belong in my home! Never again will you run off this way, do you hear me?"

"Well, if I'm your wife, then you'd better make me come back to you!"

He did, but not in the way she would have liked. He crossed the room, forced her wedding ring back onto her finger, scooped her up in his cloak and bore her resisting body down to his carriage.

During the long drive home, he uttered not a single word.

Half an hour later, Amanda found herself back in her own room, lying in her cold bed, heartbroken, bereft and weeping into her pillow . . .

Chapter Nine

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Loving Justin was tearing Amanda apart.

She thought about this on May 1st, while the two of them were in his brougham, en route to the opening of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park. Justin persisted in treating her with remote civility. She was dying by inches each day she remained with him.

Perhaps, being from the late-twentieth century, she simply expected too much intimacy from a marriage. Perhaps this empty pretense was all one could hope for from a Victorian union. She didn't know how much longer she could bear to stay with him - yet she knew of no way of escape.

The Crystal Palace in Hyde Park was a marvel of nineteenth-century technology. Joseph Paxton's design resembled a mammoth greenhouse, fashioned of millions of panes of glass, with a huge, soaring dome.

Justin and Amanda followed the crowds inside. The atmosphere in the enormous exhibition hall was bustling and dazzling. Thousands of elegantly dressed ladies, gentleman and entire families strolled through the verdant courts, past fabulous indoor fountains and stately statues. The exhibits ranged from the fascinating and equally loud Machinery Court to the dark gloom of

Pugin's Medieval Court, with its somber crypt and ancient armor. Justin and Amanda marveled over the displays of art, china and lace, and were intrigued by the new machines: one that sewed clothes; another that reaped crops; and a third that cooked food with gas jets. Amanda mused ironically that, while Justin must be enthralled to find these machines so innovative and modern, she was equally charmed to view contraptions so quaint and old-fashioned.

Justin and Amanda had little time to study the exhibits before Victoria and her entourage arrived to officially open the exhibition. Amanda had heard many times that the Prince had taken a very active role in the planning of the international fair, to the Queen's immense pride.

The crowd parted, a hush falling over all in homage to the Queen. On the front rows, the men bowed and the ladies curtsied as Victoria passed with Prince Albert, the young Prince of Wales and the Princess Royal. The royal family was followed by the Bishop of Canterbury and the rest of the entourage.

Amanda curtsied deeply as the Queen glided by, passing close enough to touch her and Justin. Amanda couldn't resist glancing up to more closely study the royal couple. Victoria wore a fashionable gown with train, and a white head-piece topped by her crown; Prince Albert wore his dashing dress uniform.

As they passed Victoria turned slightly to stare at Amanda, her gaze direct and cool. Amanda hastily lowered her eyes.

The group paused on the center dais, and the crowd remained hushed as the Archbishop of Canterbury blessed the opening. A more informal atmosphere prevailed afterward as the

Queen and her party toured various presentations.

Later, Justin and Amanda were in the Machinery Court, admiring a new electric telegraph machine, when a colleague from Parliament took him aside.

Cynthia strolled over to join Amanda, flashing her usual, poisonous smile. "Why, hello there, Amanda. You poor dear - to be snubbed by the Queen that way."

Though taken aback, Amanda gave Cynthia her frostiest glare. Her enemy's tendency to pop up this way was becoming most annoying. "What are you talking about?"

Cynthia feigned a look of horror. "You mean, you didn't notice the way Victoria stared at you - the contempt in her eyes? The Queen cannot abide Americans, you know. You can ask anyone about that."

"I certainly wouldn't ask you," Amanda retorted.

"And Justin had such a promising political future, too," Cynthia lamented. "I've heard whispers about him becoming a cabinet minister in time. But if his wife is never received in the Queen's court, especially given the fact that the Queen and her Prince take such an active role in the affairs of state . . ." She clucked to herself. "How very unfortunate. I'm afraid once it gets around that Justin has fallen into disfavor through his marriage, his political future will be doomed."

Amanda was seething. "I made the mistake of believing you once, Cynthia. I won't do so again."

She stormed off to find Justin.

Despite her bravado to Cynthia, the words of Amanda's rival tormented her later that day as she rode home with Justin. That night, with hundreds of other members of the peerage and gentry, they were due at Buckingham Palace for the Scottish ball Victoria and Albert were hosting to celebrate the opening of the fair. As a member of the peerage Justin had been invited, but Amanda knew that this was not the same as an invitation to court for his wife. Was it true then, that, as an American, she would never be received by Victoria, and consequently, Justin's political future would be impaired? The very thought brought a wave of dejection crashing over her. Justin stood to accomplish so much - Amanda knew he might well help shape British history through his support of various reform movements. Now would she ultimately be responsible for sabotaging his goals and undermining his political promise?

She shivered slightly, again remembering the Queen's cold scrutiny. She had heard of other brides receiving invitations to Victoria's court, but so far, she had not. Had she been a fool to think she could truly fit in here?

Amanda could not remember ever feeling this low. Not only did Justin's future appear threatened; her entire marriage seemed doomed. Why keep up this pretense, when Justin would likely never love her, and she could only hurt him?

Unable to bear the uncertainty any longer, she turned to him. "Justin, are we ever going to have a true marriage?"

He appeared very taken aback. "My, but you are frank."

"I have to know where I stand."

He reached out to stroke her cheek. "I thought that this

summer, when we go to my estate in Kent, we might try for our heir."

"Try for our heir?" she repeated ironically. "Will we ever again make love?"

He turned away in torment. "My God, Amanda - the things you say!"

Tears filled her eyes. "Do you think that by then, Justin, you'll be able to touch me without feeling anything?"

He turned to stare at her. His eyes were crazed, his voice agonized. "I'm afraid that day may never come, my love."

She almost sobbed aloud at his saying, "my love," words he would surely, never really mean. "Why are you trying to kill everything we have together?"

He clenched a fist; a muscle jumped in his jaw. "You don't understand," he said hoarsely. "I lost control and caused a woman's death."

"Justin, just because you were arguing with your wife when she had her accident doesn't make it your fault - "

"I was responsible," he insisted.

She lifted her chin. "Well, I'm not afraid of you. I'll risk it."

"I won't," he uttered tightly.

At last tears spilled over and she asked brokenly, "You *do* still love her, don't you?"

He caught her hand and spoke vehemently. "Amanda, I swear, I don't love her. I don't think I ever really did."

Her laugh was anguished and bitter. "If you didn't love your wife, then I'm sure that only makes you feel all the more guilty over

her death. You're still bound to her, aren't you? You're going to lock yourself up in your shame over her death for the rest of your life. You won't ever allow yourself to love me. Can you deny it?"

He was silent; she had her answer.

Amanda's heart was broken.

That evening, when she should have been dressing for the Scottish ball, she was pacing her room. She would never fit in here, she realized dismally. Just as Cynthia had said, she was an outsider, an American upstart. Worse yet, her husband would never love her.

Yet, if she fled, she knew with a terrible certainty that Justin would come storming after her again. After all, his commitment was to propriety, to preserving the illusion of a happy marriage.

Amanda could not bear living this lie any longer. And she knew the only way she could truly escape Justin would be to go back to her own time.

But how? How could she make her way back to America and the late twentieth century, when she had no idea how she had gotten to nineteenth century England in the first place?

She had to try.

Perhaps if she went back to the Strand, she might find answers there

An hour later Lady Bess burst into her son's room without even knocking.

"Amanda is missing!"

Clad in his dressing gown, Justin whirled to face his mother.

"What do you mean?"

"I went to her room to see her in her costume and she is gone."

"Are you certain she isn't somewhere else in the house - "

"No. I've already had the servants search."

"Damn," Justin muttered, his eyes wild with anxiety.

"Justin, I demand to know the nature of the rift between the two of you," Bess went on. "Ever since you married Amanda, I've seen nothing but sadness in her eyes. And then there was the incident last week - when she disappeared and you brought her back home in the middle of the night."

He sighed. "Mother, I can't allow myself to possibly destroy Amanda as I did Genevieve."

"So you neglect her shamelessly? I can't blame her for leaving you, under the circumstances."

"You don't understand," Justin said passionately. "I could hurt her - ruin her - like Genevieve."

"Balderdash!" Bess declared. "It is you, son, who does not understand that Amanda is nothing like Genevieve. Furthermore, you cannot throw away every hope of happiness for the both of you out of fear that you'll repeat the mistakes of the past."

He raked a hand through his hair. "Go on to the ball, Mother. I'd best get dressed and go find Amanda."

"A word of advice, son," Bess added firmly.

"Yes?"

"If you can't give Amanda what she needs, don't go after her."

Chapter Ten

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If you can't give Amanda what she needs, don't go after her.

The infinitely wise words of his mother haunted Justin as he ventured out in his brougham in search of her. He'd ordered his coachman to take him to the Strand - instinct told him she might have returned there. Would she be there, and safe? Had she already been accosted by some thief or ruffian from a nearby rookery?

Oh, God, if only he could be given another chance!

He realized his mother was right. Thanks to him, his marriage had been an empty shell. He might have brought Amanda home forcibly last week, but she had still been lost to him. This time, he couldn't bring her home unless he was willing to change. He may have destroyed one marriage through his passions, but now he was destroying a second one through his fear. How ironic that, through the best of intentions, he had brought about the very disaster he had most dreaded. He had hurt terribly the young wife who wanted nothing more than to love him with all her heart.

If he found her, he would give her exactly what she needed - what both of them needed - for the rest of their lives.

Half a block away from the corner where he'd first met Amanda, Justin spotted an elderly flower lady out with her cart. He barked out a command to Burgess to halt the carriage, then leaped out and purchased a nosegay of violets. The poor woman almost fainted over the gold sovereign Justin insisted she accept.

With the flowers in hand, Justin sprinted off toward the corner. *Let her be there*, he desperately prayed. *Please, God, let her be there.*

Amanda stood just around the corner, weeping in sheer frustration. "I want to go back!" she cried helplessly, unsure just what god or fate she was attempting to summon. "Please, I must go back!"

She had been trying for the better part of an hour to leave her corner in time. She had tried prayer, pleading, threats - nothing had worked. She seemed to be stuck here, caught forever in the unendurable agony of loving a man who could never love her. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

And then she saw him, approaching her through the fog in his Prince Albert frock coat and top hat, a nosegay of violets in his hands.

"You have the saddest eyes I've ever seen," he whispered, and caught her to him fiercely and kissed her.

For a split second, Amanda was in heaven, sobbing into Justin's mouth, clinging to him. Then she remembered, and shoved him away angrily. "No! No, I won't let you do this to me again."

"Amanda, please, come home," he begged hoarsely.

"Please forgive me. I promise you, it will be different this time."

"No!" she cried desperately. "It's too late. You don't care about me. All you care about is appearances."

"That's not true."

"It is. I'll never fit in here."

"You will," he insisted. "Not that it matters. What matters is our being together."

"No, I won't believe your lies again. You don't even know how I got here."

He hauled her close. "Yes, I do know," he whispered intensely. "I know I came for you, Amanda. I know I needed you in my life desperately. I know we met on some other, mystical plane. I know the entire experience was so unreal, so jolting, that I haven't really been able to think about it, much less talk about it, as yet. But I do know love brought you here to me - and that same love is going to hold you. I won't ever let you go, do you hear me? I won't!"

His fervent words were tearing a huge hole in the wall she'd erected around her heart, but still she protested. "You don't love me. You can barely abide to touch me."

He stared into her eyes, his own gaze haunted. "Oh, pretty girl, you're so wrong. I've loved you desperately from the very moment I laid eyes on you, but I feared my passions would destroy you, just as I destroyed Genevieve. You see, with her, we fought constantly, until the anger, the passion, became so caught up together that I could not tell one from the other. And then she died, all because of me . . ."

At his obvious pain, she had to reach out to him. She gently touched his cheek with her gloved hand. "Justin, Genevieve's death was an accident. You must stop punishing yourself. I want that much for you. Promise me you'll quit blaming yourself."

His hand tightly clutched hers. "Stay and make me do it."

She stared at him, electrified.

He caught her face in his hands and spoke vehemently. "You see, I want it all now, Amanda. I love you too much to be afraid anymore, to let my fear destroy you as I now know my passion never could."

Her restraint broken at last, she fell into his arms. "Oh, Justin, do you truly love me and want me?"

"Yes, darling." Feverishly he kissed her. "Now, come home with me and let me prove it."

He held her in his lap all the way home, his mouth tenderly nuzzling her cheek, her lips, his strong hands caressing her. She clung to him, her happiness so profound that her throat ached.

Back in his bedroom at Cartwright Hall, he undressed her and kissed every inch of her.

She undressed him and kissed every inch of him.

They fell across the bed together, deliriously aroused. They kissed and loved each other, then clutched hands tightly and rocked together, gazing into each others' eyes, letting the tension build until it was unendurable, then surrendering to an ecstasy so complete it left both of them gasping and crying out their love . . .

Much later, she kissed his neck. "Will we talk about that

night when you first found me?"

"Darling, we will talk about everything," he promised, "except the possibility of you ever again leaving me. You, Countess, are going to grace my life - and my bed - from this moment on, and forever."

"Will you stay and make me do it?" she asked achingly.

Abruptly, she was rolled beneath him. His ardent passion was all the proof she needed.

Epilogue

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The following morning, the Countess of Lockridge received her invitation to appear at Victoria's court. When a pleasantly surprised Amanda showed the invitation to Justin, and told him of her previous fear that she would never be accepted by Victoria, due to the Queen's chilly perusal of her the previous day, he only laughed and replied that many others had previously mistaken Victoria's natural reserve for cold disdain.

Amanda wore her wedding dress and the prescribed feathered headdress to her brief court appearance. She managed to bow before Victoria, and - following the brief, pleasant words they exchanged - to back away gracefully, without stumbling. Afterward, Victoria remarked to one of her ladies-in-waiting, who then remarked to Lady Stanton, who then remarked to Lady Bess, that the Queen felt the occasion had gone off "quite splendidly," and that she'd found the young American to be "so fresh and lovely."

Not long thereafter, Justin was elected to the Privy Council, and whispers were heard about a future cabinet post for him.

Lady Cynthia Spalding received the Spalding family jewels by special messenger, several weeks ahead of schedule, on

February 14, 1852. Included with the chest was a hand-written announcement of the birth of Justin's son and heir, Justin Cartwright III, 5th Viscount of Leeds, born on that very day.

Lady Cynthia went into a goblet-smashing frenzy and shattered all of the Baccarat.

After she spent her rage, Cynthia passed the balance of the day gloating over her fabulous jewels and planning the ball she would host to show them off.

Amanda was in bed, Justin by her side, as she nursed their tiny son who so resembled her handsome husband. On the night table was the Valentine Justin had just given her - a delicious froth of lace, ribbons and pearls, inscribed with the words, "Two Hearts in Time."

Lady Bess had just stopped in to visit the small family, gushing over her grandson. Then the Dowager had gone off to finish writing the birth announcements so that Amanda could rest.

Amanda stroked the baby's soft cheek. "He doesn't look like a Viscount at all," she murmured wonderingly.

Justin chuckled. "He looks like a baby - the most perfect baby I've ever seen." He kissed Amanda tenderly. "Thank you, my love. He's the best Valentine's Day present ever - as are you."

"Thank you." With tears of happiness shining in her eyes, she whispered, "I feel equally blessed by both of you."

A bemused smile pulled at Justin's mouth. "I wonder how Cynthia responded when she received the jewels - and the announcement of Justin's birth."

"I'd say Cynthia got precisely what she deserved," Amanda responded wisely.

Justin chuckled. "You know, I think you may be right, darling," he murmured, kissing her again.

As the three snuggled together contentedly, Amanda felt almost as if she could see Gran looking down from the heavens, smiling over her granddaughter's happy family. During the past year, the bond between Amanda and Justin had only deepened and strengthened. The two lovers had shared so much - everything, just as her husband had promised, that second night he'd rescued her in the Strand. She'd told him all about her world. He'd showed her more of his. They'd found their time together - forever.

Amanda smiled at Justin and he smiled back. She realized she had gotten to take her trip to England after all - and she had found her home.

On Valentine's Day, she had been given a gift - the gift of love.