

Gareth let out an aggravated grunt as he planted his hands on his hips and scanned the area. She could have dashed home any one of eight different ways, probably more if one counted all the alleys and mews, which he hoped she was sensible enough to avoid.

He decided to try the most direct route. It would take her right on Berkeley Street, which was a busy enough thoroughfare that there might be carriages rolling home from the Mottram Ball, but Hyacinth was probably just angry enough that her primary aim would have been to get home as quickly as possible.

Which was just fine with Gareth. He would much rather see her caught by a gossip on the main road than by a thief on a side street.

Gareth took off at a run toward Berkeley Square, slowing down at each intersection to glance up and down the cross streets.

Nothing.

Where the hell had she gone? He knew she was uncommonly athletic for a female, but good God, how fast could she run?

He dashed past Charles Street, onto the square proper. A carriage rolled by, but Gareth paid it no mind. Tomorrow's gossip would probably be filled with tales of his crazed middle-of-the-night run through the streets of Mayfair, but it was nothing his reputation couldn't withstand.

He ran along the edge of the square, and then finally he was on Bruton Street passing by Number Sixteen, Twelve, Seven . . .

There she was, running like the wind, heading around the corner so that she could enter the house from the back.

His body propelled by a strange, furious energy, Gareth took off even faster. His arms were pumping, and his legs were burning, and his shirt would surely be forever soiled with sweat, but he didn't care. He was going to catch that bloody woman before she entered her house, and when he did . . .

Hell, he didn't know what he was going to do with her, but it wasn't going to be pretty.

Hyacinth skidded around the last corner, slowing down just enough to glance over her shoulder. Her mouth opened as she spied him, and then, her entire body tensed with determination, she took off for the servants' entrance in the back.

Gareth's eyes narrowed with satisfaction. She was going to have to fumble for the key. She'd never make it now. He slowed a bit, just enough to attempt to catch his breath, then eased his gait into a stalk.

She was in for it now.

But instead of reaching behind a brick for a key, Hyacinth just opened the door.

Bloody hell. They hadn't locked the door behind them when they left.

Gareth vaulted into another sprint, and he almost made it. Almost.

He reached the door just as she shut it in his face.

And his hand landed on the knob just in time to hear the lock click into place.

Gareth's hand formed a fist, and he itched to pound it against the door. More than anything he wanted to bellow her name, propriety be damned. All it would do was force their wedding to be held even sooner, which was his aim, anyway.

But he supposed some things were far too ingrained in a

man, and he was, apparently, too much of a gentleman to destroy her reputation in such a public manner.

“Oh, no,” he muttered to himself, striding back to the front of the house, “all destruction shall be strictly in private.”

He planted his hands on his hips and glared up at her bedroom window. He’d got himself in once; he could do it again.

A quick glance up and down the street assured him that no one was coming, and he quickly scaled the wall, his ascent much easier this time, now that he knew exactly where to place his hands and feet. The window was still slightly open, just as he’d left it the last time—not that he’d thought he was going to have to climb in again.

He jammed it up, tumbled through, and landed with a thud on the carpet just as Hyacinth entered through the door.

“You,” he growled, coming to his feet like a cat, “have some explaining to do.”

“Me?” Hyacinth returned. “Me? I hardly think—” Her lips parted as she belatedly assessed the situation. “And get out of my room!”

He quirked a brow. “Shall I take the front stairs?”

“You’ll go back out the window, you miserable cur.”

Gareth realized that he’d never seen Hyacinth angry. Irritated, yes; annoyed, certainly. But this . . .

This was something else entirely.

“How dare you!” she fumed. “How *dare* you.” And then, before he could even begin to reply, she stormed to his side and smacked him with the heels of both of her hands. “Get out!” she snarled. “Now!”

“Not until you”—he punctuated this with a pointed fin-

ger, right against her breastbone—"promise me that you will never do anything as foolish as what you did tonight."

"Unh! Unh!" She let out a choking sort of noise, the kind one makes when one cannot manage even a single intelligible syllable. And then finally, after a few more gasps of fury, she said, her voice dangerously low, "You are in no position to demand anything of me."

"No?" He lifted one of his brows and looked down at her with an arrogant half smile. "As your future husband—"

"Do not even mention that to me right now."

Gareth felt something squeeze and turn over in his chest. "Do you plan to cry off?"

"No," she said, looking at him with a furious expression, "but you took care of that this evening, didn't you? Was that your purpose? To force my hand by rendering me unmarriageable for any other man?"

It had been exactly his purpose, and for that reason Gareth didn't say anything. Not a word.

"You'll rue this," Hyacinth hissed. "You will rue the day. Trust me."

"Oh, really?"

"As your future wife," she said, her eyes flashing dangerously, "I can make your life hell on earth."

Of that, Gareth had no doubt, but he decided to deal with that problem when he came to it. "This is not about what happened between us earlier," he said, "and it is not about anything you may or may not have heard the baron say. What this is about—"

"Oh, for the love of—" Hyacinth cut herself off in the nick of time. "Who do you think you are?"

He jammed his face next to hers. “The man who is going to marry you. And you, Hyacinth Bridgerton soon-to-be St. Clair, will never *ever* wander the streets of London without a chaperone, at any time of day.”

For a moment she said nothing, and he almost let himself think that she was touched by his concern for her safety. But then, she just stepped back and said, “It’s a rather convenient time to develop a sense of propriety.”

He resisted the urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake—barely. “Do you have any idea how I felt when I came back around the corner, and you were gone? Did you even stop to think about what might have happened to you before you ran off on your own?”

One of her brows lifted into a perfectly arrogant arch. “Nothing more than what happened to me right here.”

As strikes went, it was perfectly aimed, and Gareth nearly flinched. But he held on to his temper, and his voice was cool as he said, “You don’t mean that. You might think you mean it, but you don’t, and I’ll forgive you for it.”

She stood still, utterly and completely still save for the rise and fall of her chest. Her hands were fists at her sides, and her face was growing redder and redder.

“Don’t you ever,” she finally said, her voice low and clipped and terribly controlled, “speak to me in that tone of voice again. And don’t you ever presume to know my mind.”

“Don’t worry, it’s a claim I’m seldom likely to make.”

Hyacinth swallowed—her only show of nerves before saying, “I want you to leave.”

“Not until I have your promise.”

“I don’t owe you anything, Mr. St. Clair. And you certainly are not in a position to make demands.”

"Your promise," he repeated.

Hyacinth just stared at him. How dare he come in here and try to make this about her? *She* was the injured party. He was the one who—He—

Good God, she couldn't even *think* in full sentences.

"I want you to leave," she said again.

His reply came practically on top of her last syllable. "And I want your promise."

She clamped her mouth shut. It would have been an easy promise to make; she certainly didn't plan on any more middle-of-the-night jaunts. But a promise would have been akin to an apology, and she would not give him that satisfaction.

Call her foolish, call her juvenile, but she would not do it. Not after what he'd done to her.

"Good God," he muttered, "you're stubborn."

She gave him a sickly smile. "It is going to be a joy to be married to me."

"Hyacinth," he said, or rather, half sighed. "In the name of all that is—" He raked his hand through his hair, and he seemed to look all around the room before finally turning back to her. "I understand that you're angry . . ."

"Do not speak to me as if I were a child."

"I wasn't."

She looked at him coolly. "You were."

He gritted his teeth together and continued. "What my father said about Mary Winthrop . . ."

Her mouth fell open. "Is *that* what you think this is about?"

He stared at her, blinking twice before saying, "Isn't it?"

"Of course not," she sputtered. "Good heavens, do you take me for a fool?"

“I . . . er . . . no?”

“I hope I know you well enough to know that you would not offer marriage to two women. At least not purposefully.”

“Right,” he said, looking a little confused. “Then what—”

“Do you know why you asked me to marry you?” she demanded.

“What the devil are you talking about?”

“Do you know?” she repeated. She’d asked him once before, and he had not answered.

“Of course I know. It’s because—” But he cut himself off, and he obviously didn’t know what to say.

She shook her head, blinking back tears. “I don’t want to see you right now.”

“What is *wrong* with you?”

“There is nothing wrong with me,” she cried out, as loudly as she dared. “I at least know why I accepted your proposal. But you—You have no idea why you rendered it.”

“Then tell me,” he burst out. “Tell me what it is you think is so damned important. You always seem to know what is best for everything and everyone, and now you clearly know everyone’s mind as well. So tell me. Tell me, Hyacinth—”

She flinched from the venom in his voice.

“—tell me.”

She swallowed. She would not back down. She might be shaking, she might be as close to tears as she had ever been in her life, but she would not back down. “You did this,” she said, her voice low, to keep the tremors at bay, “you asked me . . . because of *him*.”

He just stared at her, making a *please elaborate* motion with his head.

"Your father." She would have yelled it, if it hadn't been the middle of the night.

"Oh, for God's sake," he swore. "Is that what you think? This has nothing to do with him."

Hyacinth gave him a pitying look.

"I don't do anything because of him," Gareth hissed, furious that she would even suggest it. "He means nothing to me."

She shook her head. "You are deluding yourself, Gareth. Everything you do, you do because of him. I didn't realize it until he said it, but it's true."

"You'd take his word over mine?"

"This isn't about someone's *word*," she said, sounding tired, and frustrated, and maybe just a little bit bleak. "It's just about the way things are. And you . . . you asked me to marry you because you wanted to show him you could. It had *nothing* to do with me."

Gareth held himself very still. "That is not true."

"Isn't it?" She smiled, but her face looked sad, almost resigned. "I know that you wouldn't ask me to marry you if you believed yourself promised to another woman, but I also know that you would do anything to show up your father. Including marrying me."

Gareth gave his head a slow shake. "You have it all wrong," he said, but inside, his certitude was beginning to slip. He had thought, more than once and with an unbecoming gleefulness, that his father must be livid over Gareth's marital success. And he'd enjoyed it. He'd enjoyed knowing that in the chess game that was his relationship with Lord St. Clair, he had finally delivered the killing move.

Checkmate.

It had been exquisite.

But it wasn't *why* he had asked Hyacinth to marry him. He'd asked her because—Well, there had been a hundred different reasons. It had been complicated.

He liked her. Wasn't that important? He even liked her family. And she liked his grandmother. He couldn't possibly marry a woman who couldn't deal well with Lady Danbury.

And he'd wanted her. He'd wanted her with an intensity that had taken his breath away.

It had made sense to marry Hyacinth. It still made sense.

That was it. That was what he needed to articulate. He just needed to make her understand. And she would. She was no foolish girl. She was Hyacinth.

It was why he liked her so well.

He opened his mouth, motioning with his hand before any words actually emerged. He had to get this right. Or if not right, then at least not completely wrong. "If you look at this sensibly," he began.

"I am looking at it sensibly," she shot back, cutting him off before he could complete the thought. "Good heavens, if I weren't so bloody *sensible*, I would have cried off." Her jaw went rigid, and she swallowed.

And he thought to himself—*My God, she's going to cry.*

"I knew what I was doing earlier this evening," she said, her voice painfully quiet. "I knew what it meant, and I knew that it was irrevocable." Her lower lip quivered, and she looked away as she said, "I just never expected to regret it."

It was like a punch to the gut. He'd hurt her. He'd really hurt her. He hadn't meant to, and he wasn't certain that she wasn't overreacting, but he'd hurt her.

And he was stunned to realize how much that hurt *him*.

For a moment they did nothing, just stood there, warily watching the other.

Gareth wanted to say something, thought perhaps that he should say something, but he had no idea. The words just weren't there.

"Do you know how it feels to be someone's pawn?" Hyacinth asked.

"Yes," he whispered.

The corners of her mouth tightened. She didn't look angry, just . . . sad. "Then you will understand why I'm asking you to leave."

There was something primal within him that cried out to stay, something primitive that wanted to grab her and make her understand. He could use his words or he could use his body. It didn't really matter. He just wanted to make her understand.

But there was something else within him—something sad and something lonely that knew what it was to hurt. And somehow he knew that if he stayed, if he tried to force her to understand, he would not succeed. Not this night.

And he'd lose her.

So he nodded. "We will discuss this later," he said.

She said nothing.

He walked back to the window. It seemed a bit ludicrous and anticlimactic, making his exit that way, but really, who the hell cared?

"This Mary person," Hyacinth said to his back, "whatever the problem is with her, I am certain it can be resolved. My family will pay hers, if necessary."

She was trying to gain control of herself, to tamp down her pain by focusing on practicalities. Gareth recognized this tactic; he had employed it himself, countless times.

He turned around, meeting her gaze directly. "She is the daughter of the Earl of Wrotham."

"Oh." She paused. "Well, that does change things, but I'm sure if it was a long time ago . . ."

"It was."

She swallowed before asking, "Is it the cause of your estrangement? The betrothal?"

"You're asking a rather lot of questions for someone who has demanded that I leave."

"I'm going to marry you," she said. "I will learn eventually."

"Yes, you will," he said. "But not tonight."

And with that, he swung himself through the window.

He looked up when he reached the ground, desperate for one last glimpse of her. Anything would have been nice, a silhouette, perhaps, or even just her shadowy form, moving behind the curtains.

But there was nothing.

She was gone.



## Chapter 17

*Teatime at Number Five. Hyacinth is alone in the drawing room with her mother, always a dangerous proposition when one is in possession of a secret.*

“Is Mr. St. Clair out of town?”

Hyacinth looked up from her rather sloppy embroidery for just long enough to say, “I don’t believe so, why?”

Her mother’s lips tightened fleetingly before she said, “He hasn’t called in several days.”

Hyacinth affixed a bland expression onto her face as she said, “I believe he is busy with something or other relating to his property in Wiltshire.”

It was a lie, of course. Hyacinth didn’t think he possessed any property, in Wiltshire or anywhere else. But with any luck, her mother would be distracted by some other matter before she got around to inquiring about Gareth’s nonexistent estates.

"I see," Violet murmured.

Hyacinth stabbed her needle into the fabric with perhaps a touch more vigor than was necessary, then looked down at her handiwork with a bit of a snarl. She was an abysmal needlewoman. She'd never had the patience or the eye for detail that it required, but she always kept an embroidery hoop going in the drawing room. One never knew when one would need it to provide an acceptable distraction from conversation.

The ruse had worked quite well for years. But now that Hyacinth was the only Bridgerton daughter living at home, teatime often consisted of just her and her mother. And unfortunately, the needlework that had kept her so neatly out of three- and four-way conversations didn't seem to do the trick so well with only two.

"Is anything amiss?" Violet asked.

"Of course not." Hyacinth didn't want to look up, but avoiding eye contact would surely make her mother suspicious, so she set her needle down and lifted her chin. In for a penny, in for a pound, she decided. If she was going to lie, she might as well make it convincing. "He's merely busy, that is all. I rather admire him for it. You wouldn't wish for me to marry a wastrel, would you?"

"No, of course not," Violet murmured, "but still, it does seem odd. You're so recently affianced."

On any other day, Hyacinth would have just turned to her mother and said, "If you have a question, just ask it."

Except then her mother would ask a question.

And Hyacinth most certainly did not wish to answer.

It had been three days since she had learned the truth about Gareth. It sounded so dramatic, melodramatic even—

“learned the truth.” It sounded like she’d discovered some terrible secret, uncovered some dastardly skeleton in the St. Clair family closet.

But there was no secret. Nothing dark or dangerous, or even mildly embarrassing. Just a simple truth that had been staring her in the face all along.

And she had been too blind to see it. Love did that to a woman, she supposed.

And she had most certainly fallen in love with him. That much was clear. Sometime between the moment she had agreed to marry him and the night they had made love, she’d fallen in love with him.

But she hadn’t known him. Or had she? Could she really say that she’d known him, truly known the measure of the man, when she hadn’t even understood the most basic element of his character?

He’d used her.

That’s what it was. He had used her to win his never-ending battle with his father.

And it hurt far more than she would ever have dreamed.

She kept telling herself she was being silly, that she was splitting hairs. Shouldn’t it count that he liked her, that he thought she was clever and funny and even occasionally wise? Shouldn’t it count that she knew he would protect her and honor her and, despite his somewhat spotted past, be a good and faithful husband?

Why did it *matter* why he’d asked her to marry him? Shouldn’t it only matter that he had?

But it did matter. She’d felt used, unimportant, as if she were just a chess piece on a much larger game board.

And the worst part of it was—she didn't even understand the game.

“That’s a rather heartfelt sigh.”

Hyacinth blinked her mother’s face into focus. Good heavens, how long had she been sitting there, staring into space?

“Is there something you wish to tell me?” Violet asked gently.

Hyacinth shook her head. How did one share something such as this with one’s mother?

—*Oh, yes, by the by and in case you’re interested, it has recently come to my attention that my affianced husband asked me to marry him because he wished to infuriate his father.*

—*Oh, and did I mention that I am no longer a virgin? No getting out of it now!*

No, that wasn’t going to work.

“I suspect,” Violet said, taking a little sip of her tea, “that you have had your first lovers’ quarrel.”

Hyacinth tried *very* hard not to blush. Lovers, indeed.

“It is nothing to be ashamed about,” Violet said.

“I’m not ashamed,” Hyacinth said quickly.

Violet raised her brows, and Hyacinth wanted to kick herself for falling so neatly into her mother’s trap.

“It’s nothing,” she muttered, poking at her embroidery until the yellow flower she’d been working on looked like a fuzzy little chick.

Hyacinth shrugged and pulled out some orange thread. Might as well give it some feet and a beak.

“I know that it is considered unseemly to display one’s emotions,” Violet said, “and certainly I would not suggest that you engage in anything that might be termed histrionic, but sometimes it does help to simply tell someone how you feel.”

Hyacinth looked up, meeting her mother's gaze directly. "I rarely have difficulty telling people how I feel."

"Well, that much is true," Violet said, looking slightly disgruntled at having her theory shot to pieces.

Hyacinth turned back to her embroidery, frowning as she realized that she'd put the beak too high. Oh, very well, it was a chick in a party hat.

"Perhaps," her mother persisted, "Mr. St. Clair is the one who finds it difficult to—"

"I know how he feels," Hyacinth cut in.

"Ah." Violet pursed her lips and let out a short little exhale through her nose. "Perhaps he is not sure how to proceed. How he ought to go about approaching you."

"He knows where I live."

Violet sighed audibly. "You're not making this easy for me."

"I'm *trying* to embroider." Hyacinth held up her handiwork as proof.

"You're trying to avoid—" Her mother stopped, blinking. "I say, why does that flower have an ear?"

"It's not an ear." Hyacinth looked down. "And it's not a flower."

"Wasn't it a flower yesterday?"

"I have a very creative mind," Hyacinth ground out, giving the blasted flower another ear.

"That," Violet said, "has never been in any doubt."

Hyacinth looked down at the mess on the fabric. "It's a tabby cat," she announced. "I just need to give it a tail."

Violet held silent for a moment, then said, "You can be very hard on people."

Hyacinth's head snapped up. "I'm your daughter!" she cried out.

"Of course," Violet replied, looking somewhat shocked by the force of Hyacinth's reaction. "But—"

"Why must you assume that whatever is the matter, it must be my fault?"

"I didn't!"

"You did." And Hyacinth thought of countless spat-battles between the Bridgerton siblings. "You always do."

Violet responded with a horrified gasp. "That is not true, Hyacinth. It's just that I know you better than I do Mr. St. Clair, and—"

"—and therefore you know all of my faults?"

"Well . . . yes." Violet appeared to be surprised by her own answer and hastened to add, "That is not to say that Mr. St. Clair is not in possession of foibles and faults of his own. It's just that . . . Well, I'm just not acquainted with them."

"They are large," Hyacinth said bitterly, "and quite possibly insurmountable."

"Oh, Hyacinth," her mother said, and there was such concern in her voice that Hyacinth very nearly burst into tears right then and there. "Whatever can be the matter?"

Hyacinth looked away. She shouldn't have said anything. Now her mother would be beside herself with worry, and Hyacinth would have to sit there, feeling terrible, wanting desperately to throw herself into her arms and be a child again.

When she was small, she had been convinced that her mother could solve any problem, make anything better with a soft word and a kiss on the forehead.

But she wasn't a child any longer, and these weren't a child's problems.

And she couldn't share them with her mother.

"Do you wish to cry off?" Violet asked, softly and very carefully.

Hyacinth gave her head a shake. She *couldn't* back out of the marriage. But . . .

She looked away, surprised by the direction of her thoughts. Did she even *want* to back out of the marriage? If she had not given herself to Gareth, if they hadn't made love, and there was nothing forcing her to remain in the betrothal, what would she do?

She had spent the last three days obsessing about that night, about that horrible moment when she'd heard Gareth's father laughingly talk about how he had manipulated him into offering for her. She'd gone over every sentence in her head, every word she could remember, and yet she was only just now asking herself what had to be the most important question. The only question that mattered, really. And she realized—

She would stay.

She repeated it in her mind, needing time for the words to sink in.

She would stay.

She loved him. Was it really as simple as that?

"I don't wish to cry off," she said, even though she'd already shaken her head. Some things needed to be said aloud.

"Then you will have to help him," Violet said. "With whatever it is that troubles him, it will be up to you to help him."

Hyacinth nodded slowly, too lost in her thoughts to offer a more meaningful reply. Could she help him? Was it possible? She had known him barely a month; he'd had a lifetime to build this hatred with his father.

He might not want help, or perhaps more likely—he might not realize that he needed it. Men never did.

“I believe he cares for you,” her mother said. “I truly believe that he does.”

“I know he does,” Hyacinth said sadly. But not as much as he hated his father.

And when he’d gone down on one knee and asked her to spend the rest of her life with him, to take his name and bear him children, it hadn’t been because of *her*.

What did that say about *him*?

She sighed, feeling very weary.

“This isn’t like you,” her mother said.

Hyacinth looked up.

“To be so quiet,” Violet clarified, “to wait.”

“To wait?” Hyacinth echoed.

“For him. I assume that is what you’re doing, waiting for him to call upon you and beg your forgiveness for whatever it is he has done.”

“I—” She stopped. That was exactly what she’d been doing. She hadn’t even realized it. And it was probably part of the reason she was feeling so miserable. She’d placed her fate and her happiness in the hands of another, and she hated it.

“Why don’t you send him a letter?” Violet suggested. “Request that he pay you a visit. He is a gentleman, and you are his fiancée. He would never refuse.”

“No,” Hyacinth murmured, “he wouldn’t. But”—she looked up, her eyes begging for advice—“what would I say?”

It was a silly question. Violet didn’t even know what the problem was, so how could she know the solution? And yet, somehow, as always, she managed to say exactly the right thing.

"Say whatever is in your heart," Violet said. Her lips twisted wryly. "And if that doesn't work, I suggest that you take a book and knock him over the head with it."

Hyacinth blinked, then blinked again. "I beg your pardon."

"I didn't say that," Violet said quickly.

Hyacinth felt herself smile. "I'm rather certain you did."

"Do you think?" Violet murmured, concealing her own smile with her teacup.

"A large book," Hyacinth queried, "or small?"

"Large, I think, don't you?"

Hyacinth nodded. "Have we *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* in the library?"

Violet's lips twitched. "I believe that we do."

Something began to bubble in Hyacinth's chest. Something very close to laughter. And it felt so good to feel it again.

"I love you, Mother," she said, suddenly consumed by the need to say it aloud. "I just wanted you to know that."

"I know, darling," Violet said, and her eyes were shining brightly. "I love you, too."

Hyacinth nodded. She'd never stopped to think how precious that was—to have the love of a parent. It was something Gareth had never had. Heaven only knew what his childhood had been like. He had never spoken of it, and Hyacinth was ashamed to realize that she'd never asked.

She'd never even noticed the omission.

Maybe, just maybe, he deserved a little understanding on her part.

He would still have to beg her forgiveness; she wasn't *that* full of kindness and charity.

But she could try to understand, and she could love him,

and maybe, if she tried with everything she had, she could fill that void within him.

Whatever it was he needed, maybe she could be it.

And maybe that would be all that mattered.

But in the meantime, Hyacinth was going to have to expend a bit of energy to bring about her happy ending. And she had a feeling that a note wasn't going to be sufficient.

It was time to be brazen, time to be bold.

Time to beard the lion in his den, to—

“I say, Hyacinth,” came her mother’s voice, “are you quite all right?”

She shook her head, even as she said, “I’m perfectly well. Just thinking like a fool, that’s all.”

A fool in love.



## Chapter 18

*Later that afternoon, in the small study in Gareth's very small suite of apartments. Our hero has come to the conclusion that he must take action.*

*He does not realize that Hyacinth is about to beat him to the punch.*

A grand gesture.

That, Gareth decided, was what he needed. A grand gesture.

Women loved grand gestures, and while Hyacinth was certainly rather unlike any other woman he'd had dealings with, she still a woman, and she would certainly be at least a little swayed by a grand gesture.

Wouldn't she?

Well, she'd better, Gareth thought grumpily, because he didn't know what else to do.

But the problem with grand gestures was that the grandest ones tended to require money, which was one thing Gareth

had in short supply. And the ones that didn't require a great deal of money usually involved some poor sod embarrassing himself in a most public manner—reciting poetry or singing a ballad, or making some sort of sappy declaration with eight hundred witnesses.

Not, Gareth decided, anything he was likely to do.

But Hyacinth was, as he'd often noted, an uncommon sort of female, which meant that—hopefully—an uncommon sort of gesture would work with her.

He would show her he cared, and she'd forget all this nonsense about his father, and all would be well.

All had to be well.

“Mr. St. Clair, you have a visitor.”

He looked up. He'd been seated behind his desk for so long it was a wonder he hadn't grown roots. His valet was standing in the doorway to his office. As Gareth could not afford a butler—and really, who needed one with only four rooms to care for—Phelps often assumed those duties as well.

“Show him in,” Gareth said, somewhat absently, sliding some books over the papers currently sitting on his desk.

“Er . . .” *Cough cough. Cough cough cough.*

Gareth looked up. “Is there a problem?”

“Well . . . no . . .” The valet looked pained. Gareth tried to take pity on him. Poor Mr. Phelps hadn't realized that he would occasionally be acting as a butler when he'd interviewed for the position, and clearly he'd never been taught the butlerian skill of keeping one's face devoid of all emotion.

“Mr. Phelps?” Gareth queried.

“He is a she, Mr. St. Clair.”

“A hermaphrodite, Mr. Phelps?” Gareth asked, just to see the poor fellow blush.

To his credit, the valet made no reaction save squaring his jaw. "It is Miss Bridgerton."

Gareth jumped to his feet so quickly he smacked both his thighs on the edge of the desk. "Here?" he asked. "Now?"

Phelps nodded, looking just a little bit pleased at his discomfort. "She gave me her card. She was rather polite about it all. As if it were nothing out of the ordinary."

Gareth's mind spun, trying to figure out why on earth Hyacinth would do something so ill-advised as to call upon him at his home in the middle of the day. Not that the middle of the night would have been better, but still, any number of busybodies might have seen her entering the building.

"Ah, show her in," he said. He couldn't very well turn her out. As it was, he would certainly have to return her to her home himself. He couldn't imagine she'd come with a proper escort. She'd probably brought no one save that peppermint-eating maid of hers, and heaven knew she was no protection on the streets of London.

He crossed his arms as he waited. His rooms were set up in a square, and one could access his study from either the dining room or his bedchamber. Unfortunately, the day maid had chosen this day to provide the dining room floor with some sort of twice-yearly wax that she swore (rather vocally and on her dear mother's grave) would keep the floor clean *and* ward off disease. As a result, the table had been shoved up against the door to the study, which meant that the only way in was through his bedroom.

Gareth groaned and shook his head. The last thing he needed was to picture Hyacinth in his bedroom.

He hoped she felt awkward passing through. It was the least she deserved, coming out here on her own.

"Gareth," she said, appearing in the doorway.

And all his good intentions flew right out the window.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he demanded.

"It's nice to see you, too," she said, with such composure that he felt like a fool.

But still he plodded on. "Any number of people could have seen you. Have you no care for your reputation?"

She shrugged delicately, pulling off her gloves. "I'm engaged to be married. You can't cry off, and I don't intend to, so I doubt I'll be forever ruined if someone catches me."

Gareth tried to ignore the rush of relief he felt at her words. He had, of course, gone to great lengths to ensure that she could not cry off, and she had already said that she would not, but all the same, it was surprisingly good to hear it again.

"Very well," he said slowly, choosing his words with great care. "Why, then, are you here?"

"I am not here to discuss your father," she said briskly, "if that is what worries you."

"I'm not worried," he bit off.

She lifted one brow. Damn, but *why* had he chosen to marry the one woman in the world who could do that? Or at least the one woman of his acquaintance.

"I'm not," he said testily.

She said nothing in direct reply, but she did give him a look that said she didn't believe him for one instant. "I have come," she said, "to discuss the jewels."

"The jewels," he repeated.

"Yes," she replied, still in that prim, businesslike voice of hers. "I hope you have not forgotten about them."

"How could I?" he murmured. She was starting to irritate

him, he realized. Or rather, her demeanor was. He was still roiling inside, on edge just from the very sight of her, and she was utterly cool, almost preternaturally composed.

"I hope you still intend to look for them," she said. "We have come too far to give up now."

"Have you any idea where we might begin?" he asked, keeping his voice scrupulously even. "If I recall correctly, we seem to have hit a bit of a brick wall."

She reached into her reticule and pulled out the latest clue from Isabella, which she'd had in her possession ever since they had parted a few days earlier. With careful, steady fingers she unfolded it and smoothed it open on his desk. "I took the liberty of taking this to my brother Colin," she said. She looked up and reminded him, "You had given me your permission to do so."

He gave her a brief nod of agreement.

"As I mentioned, he has traveled extensively on the Continent, and he seems to feel that it is written in a Slavic language. After consulting a map, he guessed that it is Slovene." At his blank stare, she added, "It is what they speak in Slovenia."

Gareth blinked. "Is there such a country?"

For the first time in the interview, Hyacinth smiled. "There is. I must confess, I was unaware of its existence as well. It's more of a region, really. To the north and east of Italy."

"Part of Austria-Hungary, then?"

Hyacinth nodded. "And the Holy Roman Empire before that. Was your grandmother from the north of Italy?"

Gareth suddenly realized that he had no idea. Grandmother Isabella had loved to tell him stories of her childhood

in Italy, but they had been tales of food and holidays—the sorts of things a very young boy might find interesting. If she'd mentioned the town of her birth, he had been too young to take note. "I don't know," he said, feeling rather foolish—and in truth, somewhat inconsiderate—for his ignorance. "I suppose she must have been. She wasn't very dark. Her coloring was a bit like mine, actually."

Hyacinth nodded. "I had wondered about that. Neither you nor your father has much of a Mediterranean look about you."

Gareth smiled tightly. He could not speak for the baron, but there was a very good reason why *he* did not look as if he carried any Italian blood.

"Well," Hyacinth said, looking back down at the sheet of paper she had laid on his desk. "If she was from the northeast, it stands to reason that she might have lived near the Slovene border and thus been familiar with the language. Or at least familiar enough to pen two sentences in it."

"I can't imagine that she thought anyone here in England might be able to translate it, though."

"Exactly," she said, making an animated motion of agreement. When it became apparent that Gareth had no idea what she was talking about, she continued with, "If you wanted to make a clue particularly difficult, wouldn't you write it in the most obscure language possible?"

"It's really a pity I don't speak Chinese," he murmured.

She gave him a look—either of impatience or irritation; he wasn't sure which—then continued with, "I am also convinced that this must be the final clue. Anyone who had got this far would be forced to expend quite a lot of energy, and

quite possibly expense as well to obtain a translation. Surely she wouldn't force someone to go through the trouble twice."

Gareth looked down at the unfamiliar words, chewing on his lower lip as he pondered this.

"Don't you agree?" Hyacinth pressed.

He looked up, shrugging. "Well, *you* would."

Her mouth fell open. "What do you mean? That's simply not—" She stopped, reflecting on his words. "Very well, I would. But I think we can both agree that, for better or for worse, I am a bit more diabolical than a typical female. Or male, for that matter," she muttered.

Gareth smiled wryly, wondering if he ought to be made more nervous by the phrase, "for better or for worse."

"Do you think your grandmother would be as devious as, er . . ."—she cleared her throat—"I?" Hyacinth seemed to lose a little steam toward the end of the question, and Gareth suddenly saw in her eyes that she was not as collected as she wished for him to believe.

"I don't know," he said quite honestly. "She passed away when I was rather young. My recollections and perceptions are those of a seven-year-old boy."

"Well," she said, tapping her fingers against the desk in a revealingly nervous gesture. "We can certainly begin our search for a speaker of Slovene." She rolled her eyes as she added, somewhat dryly, "There must be one somewhere in London."

"One would think," he murmured, mostly just to egg her on. He shouldn't do it; he should be far wiser by now, but there was something so . . . entertaining about Hyacinth when she was determined.

And as usual, she did not disappoint. “In the meantime,” she stated, her voice marvelously matter-of-fact, “I believe we should return to Clair House.”

“And search it from top to bottom?” he asked, so politely that it had to be clear that he thought she was mad.

“Of course not,” she said with a scowl.

He almost smiled. That was much more like her.

“But it seems to me,” she added, “that the jewels must be hidden in her bedchamber.”

“And why would you think that?”

“Where else would she put them?”

“Her dressing room,” he suggested, tilting his head to the side, “the drawing room, the attic, the butler’s closet, the guest bedroom, the *other* guest bedroom—”

“But where,” she cut in, looking rather annoyed with his sarcasm, “would make the most sense? Thus far, she has been keeping everything to the areas of the house least visited by your grandfather. Where better than her bedchamber?”

He eyed her thoughtfully and for long enough to make her blush. Finally, he said, “We know he visited her there at least twice.”

She blinked. “Twice?”

“My father and my father’s younger brother. He died at Trafalgar,” he explained, even though she hadn’t asked.

“Oh.” That seemed to take the winds out of her sails. At least momentarily. “I’m sorry.”

Gareth shrugged. “It was a long time ago, but thank you.”

She nodded slowly, looking as if she wasn’t quite sure what to say now. “Right,” she finally said. “Well.”

“Right,” he echoed.

"Well."

"Well," he said softly.

"Oh, hang it all!" she burst out. "I cannot stand this. I am not *made* to sit idly by and brush things under the rug."

Gareth opened his mouth to speak, not that he had any idea of what to say, but Hyacinth wasn't done.

"I know I should be quiet, and I know I should leave well enough alone, but I can't. I just can't do it." She looked at him, and she looked like she wanted to grab his shoulders and shake. "Do you understand?"

"Not a word," he admitted.

"I have to know!" she cried out. "I have to know why you asked me to marry you."

It was a topic he did not wish to revisit. "I thought you said you didn't come here to discuss my father."

"I lied," she said. "You didn't really believe me, did you?"

"No," he realized. "I don't suppose I did."

"I just—I can't—" She wrung her hands together, looking more pained and tortured than he'd ever seen her. A few strands of her hair had come loose from its pinnings, probably the result of her anxious gestures, and her color was high.

But it was her eyes that looked the most changed. There was a desperation there, a strange discomfort that did not belong.

And he realized that that was the thing about Hyacinth, the distinguishing characteristic that set her so apart from the rest of humanity. She was always at ease in her own skin. She knew who she was, and she liked who she was, and he supposed that was a large part of why he so enjoyed her company.