

BEVERLEY EIKLI

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Chapter One

It was not the name by which she knew him. Since inheriting the title, he'd won celebrity as a poet and become the darling of the gossip columnists. Adelaide's mother couldn't keep those snippets of the real world from her, though she tried.

James. Fifth Viscount Dewhurst. Adelaide closed her eyes against the afternoon sun and tried to block her last memory of him: desperate, pleading. Not the James she knew – the irrepressible charmer who knew no woman could resist him, least of all Adelaide.

Tristan must have misinterpreted her shocked silence for memory failure, for he squeezed her hand and repeated, 'Lord Dewhurst. I'm talking about my old friend, James.' Very gently he added, 'He and his wife were very good to you, if you remember.'

If you remember ...

Her husband's reference to her previous life was almost more painful than the reference to James, though panic quickly succeeded shock at his next remark.

'James is coming to visit us? *Here?*' She gripped Tristan's arm tighter and concentrated on the path. One foot in front of the other, head down so she didn't stumble on the stones that bordered the hydrangeas from the neat gravel walkway.

Tristan continued to talk in the measured, comforting tone he used when her equilibrium was unsettled. In the past he'd sought her reassurances that she was comfortable with his plans; that there was nothing he'd neglected to facilitate her comfort. Always Tristan put Adelaide's feelings first. Not today.

Tristan was too excited at the prospect of seeing his boyhood friend to recognise her horror, assuming Adelaide would be delighted to play hostess since she'd foolishly voiced the desire just last week to entertain more often.

She remained silent as she walked at his side, contemplating

her own strategy if this visit was a *fait accompli*. She just needed to know when, so she could prepare.

'At the end of the week!' She repeated Tristan's calmly delivered answer to her question in the tone Black Jack, the South American parrot she'd owned in Vienna, used to mimic the death throes of a man at the end of the gallows. A good thing her husband considered Adelaide an invalid, that he'd misconstrue the flare in her eyes, the gasp as she pressed against the pain in her side – her heart?

'Adelaide, you are discomposed. Perhaps I should not have invited James without consulting you, but I thought since ...' Concern clouded his kind blue eyes as he trailed off.

'He was very good to me.' She whispered the old litany. It's what Tristan liked to believe.

'He was. Shall we go back to the house?' He stooped to cup her face in his hands, as tender with her as if she were another of his rare hothouse blooms. As if she might wilt at the suggestion of anything beyond the ordinary, the mind-numbingly mundane.

And yet today she more than wilted as she stumbled on the smooth, carefully raked gravel path. Her heart was in danger of tearing in half. *James. Here, at Deer Park ...?*

She pushed away the fear, straightening of her own accord. Adelaide could be a good deal stronger than Tristan believed her. Than her mother painted her.

'So silly of me,' she murmured, smiling as she tucked her hand once more into the crook of her husband's arm, firming her step, indicating with a nod that they continue their usual morning walk. Minutely managed and predictable. Around the path that bordered the maze, over the little bridge and across the lawn, skirting the deer park beyond the iron gated border to the dower house where her mother would be waiting. Keeping up the pretence of recovery in response to his troubled gaze, she added, 'Really, I'm perfectly fine.'

How many times had she made similar reassurances? Of

course, she hadn't been fine when Tristan had made her mistress of Deer Park three years before; a marriage offer she'd only accepted because she believed she'd be dead of grief within the twelvemonth. And if not dead, then at least free of her mother. Neither had happened.

'So James has left Milan.' She forced herself to say his name. It came out as a faint thread of sound.

James. He needed to stay far across sea and land if she were to have any peace in this life.

'James's father died three months ago so of course he must return from the Continent and take up his responsibilities at Dingley Hall.' Tristan stopped and put his hands on her shoulders to study her more closely. 'Darling, you're very pale. Perhaps we should call Dr Stanhope—'

'No!' She truncated the hysteria in her response, adding with commendable calm, 'Please, let us carry on.'

Tristan was clearly not convinced by her assurances, but he returned to his commentary as they walked sedately through Deer Park's beautiful gardens. 'James's standing has changed with his father's death, and now that his book has become a sensation so have his fortunes. He'll be able to put to rights all that his father almost destroyed through his love of gaming.' He gave a half laugh. 'I'm told my old friend is nearly as famous as those fellows up in the Lakes. I daresay I should read *The Maid of Milan* before he arrives. Perhaps you'd enjoy it, Addy.'

The Maid of Milan. Dear God! An image of herself and James, naked limbs entwined upon a vast expanse of white linen tablecloth in the Villa Cosi after the guests had gone, seared her brain.

No, she was getting beyond herself. James had continued living in Milan with Hortense, the wife he despised. Of course there'd have been other women after Adelaide had been dragged, screaming, from James's arms. Adelaide could not be James's *Maid of Milan*. Not after the terrible finale to their affair. In three

years Adelaide had heard nothing from him. Nothing, except that one terrible, terrible letter ...

She nodded weakly, forcing herself back to the here and now, noticing Tristan's limp was more pronounced than usual. He hated his disability while embracing Adelaide's weakness. She clenched her gloved hands, breathing away the panic, about to quiz him on his health when he forestalled her, the normal resolve of his firm mouth sweetened by reminiscence. 'I haven't seen James since his marriage to Hortense, and they were newly-weds, just like Cassandra and I.'

Trying to calm her breathing, Adelaide studied her husband's strong, handsome profile for some sign that he was testing her. The fear of losing Tristan's high regard was always with her now. How much easier it had been when she'd felt only indifference towards her husband.

But he was not testing her. Of course not, for he believed Adelaide as pure as the driven snow and as delicate as a porcelain vase. Why would he question her when she'd been so very careful with the truth?

Her mother had seen to that.

But this was not about her, she could see that as she studied the uncharacteristic excitement that roiled in his eyes and the agitation with which he mused upon the past.

'The happy foursome,' Adelaide said, smiling weakly, recalling Tristan's tales of the convivial friendship shared by Tristan and James, and the neighbouring young women they'd married: Tristan's first wife, Cassandra, his childhood sweetheart, who'd died five years before he'd married Adelaide, and James's first wife, Hortense, Tristan's cousin, who'd died three years ago.

For so long Adelaide had felt no jealousy and little curiosity. Lord, she'd felt almost nothing for two years.

The fact that James and Tristan had been boyhood friends had seemed of no importance when she and her mother had arrived at Deer Park for what was to be a one-week stay while they

looked for other lodgings. Hortense had asked the favour of her cousin Tristan on behalf of Adelaide's mother, Hortense's mentor. Naturally Hortense wanted Adelaide as far away as possible from James.

An irony, then, that Adelaide had married Tristan. Hortense must have railed at that.

Now James was coming and Adelaide had no idea where his loyalties lay.

'Do you miss Cassandra? Am I anything like her?' Swallowing down her anxiety, she slanted an enquiring look up at him. He'd given her an avenue to change the subject.

Tristan raked his hand through his buff-coloured curls, fashionably long about the forehead, then touched her face. She'd not thought him as handsome as James until recently. Now his chiselled features and air of studied calm appealed so much more to her than James's careless passion.

She was moved by the thickening of his voice. 'Cassandra has her place in my heart but, Addy, I swear, until I met you I knew nothing about *true* love.'

She could not meet his eye and hoped he'd not misinterpret her lack of response. In the early days of their marriage she'd not troubled to hide her disinclination for his attentions, but now, the truth was she was too choked by emotion to know what to say.

She continued to walk, silent, gaze focused on the middle distance, her expression betraying nothing. Nothing of the terror that James's visit would disrupt the peace she'd finally found in her life, or of her admiration of her husband's fine character, his handsome looks, his noble aspirations which to her surprise, she who was so shallow, was beginning to share. Tristan had presence though he was not one to worry about his appearance beyond ensuring he was in line with fashionable trends. He was comfortable in his own skin, decided in his views.

Determined as to what was morally correct.

'You seem preoccupied, Addy. I shouldn't have mentioned your

departure from ...'

He trailed off and Adelaide waited, her breath coming faster, fear replaced inexplicably by the desire for him to touch upon the *forbidden topic*. Suddenly she felt infused with the strength to tackle the lie her mother had concocted to explain Adelaide's invalidism. Perhaps it was the danger posed by James's return that crystallised how much more Tristan deserved than Adelaide had given him.

Not that she could ever give Tristan the whole truth – his love for her would never survive that – but she could at least begin to assert herself. Transcend the lie her mother had fabricated that had made Adelaide acceptable to Tristan but which had shackled her to a life of deception.

Tristan left his sentence unfinished as he slid his gaze across to her mother coming across the bridge to fetch her.

She fought to steady her voice. 'I'm glad you're so happy, Tristan.'

'More than I can say. James and Hortense were very fond of you, you know. But you seem anxious.' The concern in his blue eyes was genuine. How many women were lucky enough to be granted a second chance with a man of Tristan's calibre? Not only had he fallen immediately in love with her, but his fortune – which her mother had found so irresistible – came with an unexpected title, to boot. Not that any of that had mattered back when Adelaide had wished for death rather than marriage.

'A slight megrim, that's all.' The familiar lie tripped off her tongue. She couldn't remember when she'd last had a megrim. Her robust body continued to betray her, yet the pretence of delicacy was ingrained in her.

The flare of disappointment that clouded Tristan's expression reminded her it was Thursday.

'I'm sure it'll be quite gone by this evening,' she reassured him, bolstering her own smile as feeling shot through her heart. Thursdays were becoming increasingly fraught as she welcomed

her husband to her bedchamber for the weekly duty visit. In the first two years of marriage that's all it had been; a duty as she lay in the dark and let Tristan do to her what a husband did. She didn't even think of James, for it would have sent her mad – more than she already was – to dwell on what she'd lost, knowing she'd never feel love and passion in her life again.

She slid another glance up at Tristan and was surprised at the little thrill she felt to see how affected he was by her reassurance she would be well enough for him to bed her. He wanted her, desired her.

And she was starting to desire him. No, she very definitely *did* desire him.

Maybe she could respond tonight, though he must never discover her true nature. Her lustful impulses would only shock him and threaten the security for which she had traded everything else in her life. It was what her mother always said, though lately Adelaide's feelings for her husband were giving her the strength to challenge her mother's strictures. Surely Tristan could only be delighted at some spark of feeling from her?

His soft kiss upon her brow made her restless for more. Tonight she would meet Tristan halfway. Her mother need never know.

'Mrs Henley is here,' he whispered, giving her shoulders a squeeze and smiling a guileless smile, for how could he know how dangerously he had tilted her world by his invitation to a man she'd hoped never to see again? 'And I must go, for I have an important paper to write.'

She gripped his wrist to stay him. 'You take your responsibilities as the local MP seriously, Tristan.' She bit her lip, wanting to convey something of what she felt when the avenues open to her were so limited. 'I'm proud of you.'

He looked taken aback, as well he might. Adelaide had not voiced such a sentiment, before. She tilted her head, warming to her theme: her admiration for her worthy husband. 'You are firm

in your convictions, even when all is lost.'

Smiling at his unconcealed amazement, she released his wrist as she prepared to meet her mother. She wanted Tristan to know how much she'd started to take an interest in the events which concerned him, that she was preoccupied with more than her own supposed frailty. She might wait a little, though, to tell him she'd begun reading, with growing interest, the pamphlets and news-sheets he discarded. Her mother declared he'd dislike Adelaide voicing strong opinions, and as much as Adelaide believed her mother mistaken, she had the power to make Adelaide's life a misery if she overreached herself. 'Public sentiment is that the ringleaders of this latest agitation should hang. You preach moderation, Tristan, and *I* would not hang them, either, but those in power are not so tolerant – are they?'

'Tolerant?' He seemed to look at her with new interest. 'I should like to hear your views, Addy. The law believes that men who seek to overturn society should definitely hang.'

Adelaide smiled her first easy smile. 'I care more than you think. And I follow the issues that interest you, though we might not have discussed politics together in the past. I'm starting to feel well again, Tristan.' A glorious inner glow was permeating her body, infusing her with the strength and moral courage needed to acknowledge the past sufficiently to embrace the future. With Tristan by her side, it could be a good one. She took his hand, bringing it to her lips. 'You ask me my views on what is tolerant? I believe nothing is black and white. When people are judged they should be judged on what is in their hearts as much as by their deeds, for sometimes unintended consequences are the result of passionate beliefs ... or naiveté.' She brought it back to the men standing trial though she could have been speaking of herself. 'Men who cannot feed their families have no choice but to resort to desperate acts.'

There was appraisal in his eyes, and she wished her mother wasn't nearly upon them. 'Perhaps this evening you might

expand your views, Addy. I'm a lucky man to have married a woman whose intelligence matches her beauty.'

'James, now Lord Dewhurt, is coming to stay.' Adelaide made sure she said the words while Tristan was still within hearing in as conversational a manner as possible.

Adelaide was almost amused by the horror on her mother's face and the stricken look she sent Tristan's retreating back before she gripped Adelaide's arm and hurried her down the path towards the dower house, well out of earshot. They passed the lychgate and continued down the drive. This was no conversation to be had presiding over the seed cake that awaited them in her little drawing room where they could be overheard by servants.

'Dear God, Adelaide, *when?*'

The only time Adelaide's ennui was unfeigned in her mother's presence was in response to her mother's overreaction. She shrugged as if the matter were of little concern to her. 'The end of the week, I think Tristan said.'

'Then you must go away! You can't possibly remain at Deer Park with James in the same house.'

Adelaide slanted her mother a pitying look. 'Where do you suggest I go, Mama?' she asked. 'Since we returned to England you have cut off all contact with any of the old society we once enjoyed.'

'Don't blame me for what I did only for your sake, Adelaide! Stop this!' Mrs Henley breathed deeply though she did not slow her rapid footsteps. '*Why* is James coming here?' Her voice held suspicion. 'Tristan knows nothing—?'

'It's perfectly reasonable James should visit and just surprising he didn't do so earlier. Tristan and James were boyhood friends, Mama, and James was married to Hortense. You accepted her assistance—'

'I didn't expect you'd marry Tristan or that James would visit.'

Adelaide lengthened her stride, enjoying the less languid pace and a rather grim satisfaction at her mother's disordered wits.

Her mother rounded on her. 'You cannot see James. Dear God, you must know that.'

If it wasn't so tragic Adelaide might have laughed at the way her mother's mouth twitched, her anger at being unable to engineer this matter to her satisfaction so obvious.

She was not surprised by the older woman's solution to the conundrum, though she was quick to knock it on the head. 'No, Mama. I refuse to succumb to some dreadful malady the entire time he is here. Besides, what does it matter? What happened is well in the past. I have had no contact with James in more than three years and I am Tristan's loving, loyal wife and'—she gave emphasis to the words—'always will be.'

'It's not *just* you I worry about,' her mother muttered.

They were at the gates. The driveway swung out from manicured gardens through the deer park, a dense two miles of ancient elms, to the main road which connected London with three hours of indifferent travelling. James had written from London. James was three hours away.

Very firmly, hoping desperately it was true, she told her mother, 'I am no longer the easily led child James knew.'

Mrs Henley clenched her jaw and closed her eyes as she paused on the path leading to the front door of the dower house she occupied by the entrance to the park. She appeared not to have heard. 'James swore to me after the—' She cut short the words, opening her eyes to her daughter's trained upon her.

After the child, Adelaide wanted to scream. The child that had died within the hour of being born and which she'd never held. But the topic was forbidden. Her mother had taken control of her life and shut her out of it the moment she'd learned the ghastly truth. Her mother – and James – had organised everything.

Now James was acting alone and her mother was not happy.

'I'm sure he meant every word of his reassurances, Mama,'

Adelaide muttered, forcing a faster pace towards the dower house. 'But for whatever reason, and it may even be that Tristan insisted upon it, James is coming to stay. Now please, stop making more of this than need be. I'm a happily married woman and I shall do my husband the courtesy of ensuring that the hospitality his friend enjoys reflects well on a man of Tristan's station. That is *all* that is required of me.'

Adelaide often wondered if the Thursday night ritual had been different when Tristan was married to Cassandra. Perhaps it hadn't been a ritual. Probably not. And certainly not as restrained.

Who had set the agenda?

Tristan certainly had in this marriage between them. The intimate dinner for two, the most elaborate meal of the week unless there were visitors, which was rare though Adelaide enjoyed entertaining. Tristan feared it exhausted her strength.

After the servants cleared the dishes from the grand mahogany dinner table Adelaide would rise gracefully, leaving Tristan to his port and coffee. On every night but Thursday she would retire to the drawing room where Tristan would join her and they'd read companionably or discuss the safest of the local and newsworthy events while she sewed or embroidered until bedtime whereupon a kiss at the top of the stairs before they repaired to their respective apartments signalled the end of the day.

On Thursdays, however, Adelaide would make her way to her apartments to prepare herself.

Milly would brush out her rippling titian tresses – red-gold, thick and the envy of her former schoolmates – while Adelaide would support her chin on her clasped hands, enjoying the sensation as she gazed unseeingly at the looking glass, ears attuned to the sound of Tristan's soft tread. Sometimes he was so stealthy he'd catch her by surprise and mistake her intake of

breath for something else. Fear.

Tonight, the routine was no different.

‘Thank you, Milly, that’ll be all.’ He was here, and Adelaide was holding out her hand so he could raise her and settle her comfortably on the chaise longue by the fire.

‘Are you sure you’re warm enough? Perhaps another cushion?’

‘Mama’s been telling you I’m in a decline again.’ She dressed up the censorious tone with a smile. ‘I don’t know what I need to do to convince you I’m as robust as’—she grinned—‘that opera dancer who’s taken London by storm. What’s her name? Kitty Carew.’

‘Kitty who?’

She was surprised at his apparent shock.

‘Miss Carew, famous for her titian tresses and singing voice, has been enjoying enormous popularity since taking the lead role in Covent Garden. I’m not a complete recluse. Surely you’ve heard of her?’

Adelaide hoped Tristan’s frown didn’t stem from any particular disdain for actresses in general, since that’s what she’d always wanted to be.

And was, she reflected painfully.

But he smiled as he drew her across his lap so her head was tucked up beneath his chin. ‘Miss Carew may be famed for her lovely hair but it cannot compare with yours, Addy.’ Adelaide stretched languidly and snuggled against him as he went on, ‘Your mother says I must take extra care for you’re still not fully recovered from your chest inflammation—’

She put her finger to his lips, surprised at the shiver it sent through her. ‘It’s all in Mama’s imagination. I’m perfectly well.’ Reaching up, she tried to wind her arms about his neck and draw down his head level with hers, but he would not give her access. Resigned, she relaxed back in his gentle embrace, acknowledging the brush of his lips upon her temple with a sigh. Her husband set the standard between them. Affectionate, controlled. Unvarying.

'I thought the chive and butter sauce that accompanied tonight's fillet of sole was particularly good.' Idly he stroked the length of her arm as they both gazed into the dancing flames.

'Has James confirmed his arrival?' There. She'd said it. Much better to get it out in the open. No doubt her Mama had said something to Tristan about her health in the hopes of at least postponing the impending visit. 'I'll need to prepare.'

'Sunday. Three days. I've assured your mother you are keen to do more entertaining. Are you sure you're not cold, my love?'

Was it not obvious that the accumulated longing created by his ministrations had to have an outlet somewhere? Her body was his – he might as well use it as a source of pleasure. Adelaide suppressed her sigh of frustration. Her ideas on pleasure and duty were so at odds with those of her mother's, yet, until recently, she'd never considered testing her mother's convictions. She shivered again, this time from both fear and anticipation.

'Three days,' she repeated, enjoying the warmth of his embrace while she could. In the meantime she played the game, spouting banalities when all she wanted to do was slip between the sheets and feel her husband's warm, naked body against hers. God knew, she could act a charade with the best of them.

Not that she intended putting her acting skills to the test when James arrived. It would be far too dangerous. James was a wild card and Adelaide was not about to jeopardise the new-found love she'd discovered with her husband. She'd thought on it all day and realised that her mother was right: she couldn't see James.

Tristan held her tighter. 'Not too short notice? You will be marvellous, as always.'

It was time. Rising, he scooped her up and carried her to the bed, closing the door between her private sitting room to block out the light before blowing out the candle beside her bed as he pulled back the covers and laid her on the soft feather mattress.

She trembled as the cool air brushed her exposed skin, and she closed her eyes in pleasurable anticipation of soon feeling the warmth and weight of her husband bearing down on it.

Extraordinary how the delicate balance had shifted in the past few months. In the early days of her marriage, when Adelaide had railed against a marriage of her mother's choosing, she'd always appreciated that Tristan was kind and considerate. It was not so hard when she could switch her mind off and inhabit a different plane while Tristan made love to her.

But how much harder it was now, to suppress the desire that consumed her in the marital bed.

Now, as Tristan moved above her, Adelaide had to tense against succumbing to the waves of pleasure which started at the tips of her toes and radiated upwards. If she released the demons of lust prowling the depths of her depraved soul, would Tristan start questioning every fiction her mother had invented? Would the opening of her heart have unintended consequences and instead sound the death knell to the tiny shoots of happiness just beginning to sprout within her heart?

Despite the courage she'd built up earlier to reveal something of what she felt inside, Adelaide knew she couldn't take the risk. She must continue to let Tristan, who regarded these weekly nocturnal episodes as a necessary function in their quest for a longed-for child, simply do what a husband did.

She tensed as he finished and squeezed her eyes shut, conscious of the tear that slid down her cheek, hating herself for not being everything Tristan believed of her, wishing at least that her soul was not black with sin.

Usually, Tristan's swift withdrawal was followed by a kiss on the cheek, signalling he was ready to leave her to her rest. Tonight, to her surprise, he continued to cradle her in his arms. His warm breath tickled her ear. 'Do you mind if I stay a little longer?'

'Of course I don't.' How wonderful if he stayed the entire night.

Dangerous, though. She'd wrap her legs around him, bury his head in her breasts and use every feminine wile she'd ever learned to coax him into gasping raptures. If her mother's prophecies came true, she'd be risking the comfortable security of both of them if Adelaide gave any hint of the shocking, wanton creature that lurked dangerously close to the brittle exterior she cultivated with increasing difficulty.

"Tristan?"

He raised himself on one elbow to regard her through the gloom and Adelaide summoned her courage to ask what had been occupying her mind for some weeks now. It was only when she opened her mouth to speak that she realised how greatly her hopes rested on his answer. 'If we are unable to have a child, could we perhaps adopt a baby girl from the Foundling Home?'

He touched her cheek and the regret in his tone sent her hopes plunging. 'I know how you long for a child, my darling but it would be unfair to the child.'

'We'd be giving it a home when it might otherwise die in the workhouse, Tristan. How is that unfair?'

'Likely as not the infant would have been born in sin, Addy.' He looked regretful. 'We live in a judgemental society. Imagine the life of pain we would subject this child to? While this little girl would grow up with every material comfort, she would never be fully accepted by society.' His arms tightened around her. 'You're trembling, Addy. I know you're disappointed and I'm sorry.'

With difficulty, Addy forced out the words. 'Do *you* think like this, Tristan?'

There was a degree of comfort to be gained by his robust response. 'You know I don't. I'm just reminding you that society is harsh.' She wished he hadn't elaborated when he went on, 'Reputations count for everything. Imagine if we then had a natural born child who became her sister? How would our adopted daughter feel when she was overlooked by suitors who courted our natural daughter, purely because,' he hesitated, 'of

her tainted birth. Such things count for too much, I agree. But a woman's reputation – and that naturally includes the assurance she was born in wedlock – is the most precious of commodities.'

For ten minutes her husband held her, silent and unmoving. Then, with a soft kiss on the cheek, Tristan slipped silently out of her bed and, doubtless imagining she was enjoying sweet and dreamless slumbers, left her to return to his own apartments.

The following afternoon Tristan was working in his study when he was disturbed by a series of determined raps upon his door. With a frown, he put down his pen. He knew it wasn't Adelaide's knock. The two parlourmaids, Daisy and Kate, rapped softly and discreetly. Mrs Henley's was loud and demanding. Adelaide's, he thought, smiling, was just perfect.

Perfect, just like her.

Not for the first time he wondered how she could have a mother like Mrs Henley. In response to his call, the woman sailed into his study like a Spanish galleon waging war on a British sloop. He had no defences.

Except the veneer of good manners. He'd cultivated inscrutability to a fine art, for he was a man of politics now. He needed to be inscrutable in Mrs Henley's presence if he wasn't to give offence. The truth was, he couldn't stand the woman. Yet she was the unofficial weather vane in his marriage to her daughter, regulating the delicate balance that prevented Adelaide from slipping into the emotional abyss.

As a result, Tristan had had to exorcise a little part of himself. The exuberant passion he'd enjoyed with Cassandra must forever be kept in check so as to regulate the calm relations required to prevent Adelaide from potentially fatal overexcitement. The fiery impulses of his youth must never override good judgement, though Mrs Henley was a perpetual challenge, as was her ally, Dr Stanhope.

At least Mrs Henley got to the point as she took the seat closest

to the fire and began without preamble. 'Do you consider it wise to have James Treloar here as your guest?'

Nevertheless, the question surprised him. Crossing one leg over the other, he corrected her. 'You mean Lord Dewhurst? I thought James and Hortense were your friends?' His smile was pleasant but he was seething. Was there no satisfying this woman? She stipulated the strict rules he must adhere to in his dealings with his wife to prevent her spiralling into nervous hysteria. Did she intend to vet his choice of friends, too?

'Hortense was an angel.' Mrs Henley dropped her eyes. 'Sadly, she is now *with* the angels, but I have no doubt she, too, would agree that it is far too great a risk to Adelaide's delicate sensibilities to be confronted by James, such a potent reminder of a terrible episode in her life.'

He was at a loss. 'Really, Mrs Henley, I had thought that an old acquaintance – one to whom you both owe a great debt – would be a positive influence. The horrors Adelaide endured occurred *subsequent* to her departure from James and Hortense, do not forget. I worry about Adelaide's lack of society. I cannot shield her from everything simply because it *may* bring back memories and besides, her health is improving. She needs stimulation.'

Mrs Henley made no attempt to match his patient tone. The pause before she spoke was the calm before the storm. Lord, he might wish Adelaide was more responsive during their mild discussions, but he quickly sent up a prayer of thanks she'd not inherited her mother's obduracy in protesting the single-minded rightness of her views. Mind you, he reflected, lately Adelaide seemed a good deal more responsive in all matters. He was prevented dwelling on this by Mrs Henley's anger.

'At the time that you made clear to me your interest in Adelaide you swore you would abide by my recommendations to ensure her continued mental and physical well-being should she consent to be your wife.' Mrs Henley leant forward. Her hard green eyes, so different from Adelaide's calm, endlessly patient

moss-green ones, flashed fire.

He felt trapped. 'The fact I have not seen James in ten years does not alter the fact that he is one of my dearest friends. Your fears are groundless, Mrs Henley. James and his wife were good friends to you and Adelaide in Vienna and Milan. I do not believe Adelaide's health will be compromised by his visit and unless Adelaide herself requests it, I stand by my invitation.'

'Do not even bring up the subject again with Adelaide!'

With an effort to rein in his irritation – vast – he managed, crisply, 'I have lived intimately with your daughter for three years, madam, and I believe that not once have I acted in a manner either thoughtless or counter to her delicate constitution.' He rose, not caring it was the height of rudeness; he was inflamed by her insinuation that he fell short in his duty of care towards his wife.

'If you will not write and put it to Lord Dewhurst's conscience as to whether his visit is advisable, Lord Leeson, then I will!' Furiously, Mrs Henley rose, whisking aside her skirts as she brushed past him. 'Adelaide has made great gains during the past year. Bringing back the past has the potential to make a complete invalid of her.'

'I wanted to elicit your feelings on the matter, sweetheart.' Tristan's unexpected presence in Adelaide's private sitting room was a welcome surprise. He looked so troubled her heart melted as she put down her pen, then hardened as he went on, 'Your mother maintains even mentioning the subject is detrimental to your health, but Addy'—he bent down and put his hands on her shoulders, and the light friction of his thumbs stroking the bare skin of her collarbones created wicked sensations, though she managed not to squirm—'for once I want to be the judge of what's good for you.'

'A liberating idea.' The irony of her tone made him raise his eyebrows as she went on with what she knew was

uncharacteristic briskness. 'Mama believes she is the only qualified judge when it comes to my well-being. I wish you would allow me more say as to what is good for me. But you ask whether I object to James's visit? No, Tristan. James is your friend and any friend of yours is welcome here.'

Her heart warmed at his thankful smile yet she had no intention of being at Deer Park when James came. She'd already sent a letter to her Great-Aunt Gwendolyn with details of their hasty visit. Adelaide knew her mother and her aunt did not get along, and in fact Adelaide hadn't seen Aunt Gwendolyn since she'd been a young girl, so it gave her a little thrill to set a plan in motion that her mother would dislike but could hardly object to. Adelaide didn't care where she went, so long as she went somewhere.

James and Tristan could catch up on the past ten years without her.

Glancing at the piece she'd written for anonymous inclusion in the local newspaper, she conjured up her most disarming smile for the man whose patience and moral fibre were the antithesis of everything she'd known prior to coming to Deer Park. Tristan was her future. Maybe she should tell him about the article she'd been asked to pen after her first opinion piece had been so well received, though she'd never tell him about the poems she'd written, back in her wild days. Nevertheless, she wanted him to know she was so much more than he thought her.

When she returned, Adelaide intended being the architect of her dealings with her husband. Her mother could no longer dictate everything that happened between them, though she would try. No, Mrs Henley would find that Adelaide was not as biddable as she had been the past three years. For when Adelaide was in love, she was not biddable at all.

As for James – well, she and James had nothing to say to one another.

Chapter Two

Adelaide was not surprised by her mother's visit the next afternoon, for they'd not taken their customary morning walk together. She received her in her private sitting room, rang for tea and cake and faced her coolly across the richly carpeted expanse of flooring.

'Before you say a word, Mama,' she began, not moving from her semi recumbent position on the chaise longue. 'James's visit will go ahead, but I have decided the best course is to tell Tristan after tea that you have received a letter requiring us to pay an urgent visit to Great-Aunt Gwendolyn.' It felt good to do the dictating, even if she was only arranging a course of action that would be more preferable to her mother than remaining at Deer Park.

'I'm glad to hear it.' Mrs Henley took a seat and poured herself tea. 'Let us say no more on the subject. The past is the past and you must concentrate on proving yourself a good wife to Tristan.' Her gaze took in the plush surroundings, the many small touches Tristan had overseen in the hopes it might please Adelaide. He'd commissioned her favourite artist to paint the friezes and the room was often filled with flowers he'd ordered.

'I am a good wife.' Adelaide focused on her tea and hoped her mother would drop the subject. 'I always will be.'

'A good wife provides her husband with an heir, if not a nursery—'

'I do my duty, mother,' Adelaide ground out, trying to block out thoughts of what it cost her these days to ensure she appeared *only* to regard it as a duty.

'As long as you strike the right note. Yes, you must do your duty, Adelaide, but you must never hint that it is an act you welcome.' The gimlet stare made her shudder.

'You've told me all this, mother, and I swear, Tristan would

never guess—’

‘He’d better not, Adelaide, because you’ve been given a chance most women in your situation are not.’ Again, her mother’s eyes roamed over the room’s lavish appointments. ‘Tristan loves you, Adelaide, but he will not – I promise you – if he so much as suspects the weakness and depravity of your character. You have ever been a disappointment but you are all I have and I am all you can rely upon. I thought I’d trained you well, that you were of my mould. How wrong I was.’

Familiar though this litany was, Adelaide once again fought the familiar shame which threatened to swamp her, though she refused to succumb to the tears that had sprung so readily to her eyes in the early days. In the six months after she and James had been parted and she’d been dragged from Milan back to Vienna before being shipped off to England, all she’d done was cry.

‘Nevertheless, as your mother, I have stood by you and I remain determined that you shall not squander this God-given opportunity. Tristan’s continued high regard is our only salvation, Adelaide. Remember that. Now come.’ Draining her tea cup, Mrs Henley rose. ‘Let us go downstairs and find Tristan so we can tell him of Aunt Gwendolyn’s letter.’

With helpless frustration, Adelaide trailed after her mother. Once again Mrs Henley had taken charge. Adelaide’s ideas of independence seemed suddenly hopeless, for if they ran counter to her mother’s, she knew who held the power.

At the moment, it wasn’t Adelaide.

Mrs Henley knocked and they entered as Tristan rose, his forced smile replaced by one of pleasure when he saw Adelaide. He took a step forward, extending his hand for hers, the flare in his eyes as intense as the day she consented to be his wife, and Adelaide felt an unexpected jolt somewhere in the region of her heart, her determination bolstered to bridge the distance between them, despite the oppressive presence of her mother, always a footfall away, it seemed.

‘Tristan, I—’

She stopped, pulling back as a warm, fragrant breeze stirred the papers on his desk.

The French doors from the garden had been thrown open, and the heavy tread of Hessian boots upon the wooden floor pulled their attention towards the muslin curtains which swirled in eddies, silhouetting the shape of a man: a slender man of middle height – the only ordinary thing about him – dressed in a black cutaway coat and buff breeches, who materialised before them like a young demigod, smouldering with an enthusiasm he did nothing to inhibit, for good manners were always in abeyance to the passion that ruled James’s life.

‘Tristan!’ Tossing his low-crowned beaver upon the ottoman, James strode forward, arms outstretched, his voice taut with emotion.

Nearly four years, it had been, and from first impressions it was as if nothing had changed. Inky curls framed his delicately boned face and his eyes were like coals burning the fire within. No, nothing had changed, she could see, for James was still like a coiled spring, eager for love, eager for life, as ready to give as he was to take ... without discernment.

Adelaide froze with nowhere to go, tense with premonition while shafts of sensation, painful and familiar, tore through her.

Could this really be happening? Unwillingly, her gaze was fixed upon James’s profile, dusted with dark stubble, tapering up to angular cheekbones delineated with the slivers of sideburns sported by the fashionable Corinthians of the day.

In four years he could not be so unchanged whereas she ...

She touched her face, her heart. She was a mere husk of what she’d once been. Tristan knew nothing of the passions that burned within her when her heart was engaged – and she didn’t know if he ever would, for suddenly she felt reduced to nothingness by the force of James’s personality. She’d been his equal once – a woman of fire and vitality – and she’d loved him

with a savagery that her mother claimed bordered on insanity. She'd been a child, thrust into adulthood by this charismatic older man. *Married* older man. But as she looked between the two men before her it was Tristan who made her heart beat faster, as much with longing as with fear of what he would think of her if he knew the truth.

James had not seen her; his gaze was focused entirely upon Tristan, and Adelaide was astonished to see a different kind of pleasure light up Tristan's face as he was enveloped in a welcoming embrace far less restrained than her husband was used to.

'Forgive me for coming early, Tristan. I had no choice.'

'Nonsense!' The pleasure in Tristan's voice was like nothing Adelaide had ever heard. 'You'd be welcome if you climbed through the window at midnight for no better reason than you needed a bed. So good to see you, James. It's been far too long.'

She had been forgotten. Rooted to the spot, Adelaide could only wait to be acknowledged, but how she wished she could melt between the floorboards.

'When I heard the weather promised rain and worse, tomorrow, I admit I acted with my usual thoughtless spontaneity—'

James halted, perhaps alerted by movement just beyond his peripheral vision, and Adelaide caught her breath, wiping her sweating palms nervously on her skirts as he turned his head to peer into the gloomy recesses beyond Tristan's shoulder.

And as her glance met the familiar grey eyes of the one skeleton in her closet she'd hoped to consign forever to her past life, she felt the thread of happiness she'd found with Tristan pull dangerously taut.

The fire in James's eyes changed to something different at the sight of her; the telling stillness of his normally active, healthy body indicated that his senses were fully alerted, and Adelaide felt hers answer with a sensation akin to having her steady world

ripped from beneath her feet, leaving her to spiral into orbit until her mother's icy tones ripped through the silence.

'James, I trust you are well.'

'Mrs Henley. I did not see you.'

They greeted each other with courtesy, concealing the brittle antipathy Adelaide knew lay just below the surface.

Her mother took a step as if to shield Adelaide from his dangerous influence. 'We had not expected to see you, either, James, as you were due tomorrow and Adelaide and I'—she feigned regret—'have been summoned on an urgent visit to my aunt in Lincolnshire.'

Tristan swung round to face Adelaide who dropped her gaze and blushed. Leave the explanation to her mother. How she wished she could be incinerated to a little pile of ashes with no more of the worries and charades that were her lot. Instead, she had to remain stoic, keep steady, pull taut that wayward trembling mouth and corroborate her mother's lie. 'So lovely to see you again, James. Unfortunately, yes, Mama and I must leave immediately.'

Tristan looked more disappointed than she'd expected. 'Why, Addy, this is news to me. An indisposition of your aunt's? Surely you must have heard it after the post arrived?'

Yes, decidedly havey-cavey Adelaide silently agreed. Leave answering that one to dear Mama. It was all too much effort to abide by the falsely polite drawing room responses required of her in this hothouse hellhole.

Her mother drew herself up. 'Adelaide was very fond of her great-aunt. The news was a shock and my poor girl is feeling not quite the thing and needs to lie down. Don't you, my dear?'

Tristan bowed to Mrs Henley as Adelaide took a step to follow her. 'My commiserations, ma'am. I shall arrange for an early departure tomorrow morning once I learn more of your requirements, for of course you cannot leave today. No doubt you'd be so kind as to pass onto Mabel the changed

circumstances?’ He nodded, smiling.

It was a clear dismissal. Even her mother had to concede that by the time they were packed it would be too late to begin their journey today and that arrangements for James had to be made.

Adelaide darted a glance at James, wishing *she’d* volunteered to arrange an extra setting at dinner and have the Blue Room made up for their unexpected visitor. Then she could hasten away now, leaving them *all* behind.

Instead she was trapped, unable to dwell on what she read in James’s face for the brief second her gaze unwittingly returned there.

No, she couldn’t do this. She turned to follow her mother out of the room.

‘Addy, don’t fret over your great-aunt alone in your chamber. I’m sure James wants to see you before you leave tomorrow.’

Oh God, Tristan. Don’t do this to me. With a firm, sweet smile plastered onto her face, Adelaide turned back. *Another megrim perhaps? Yes, she was always having them, wasn’t she? It was plausible.*

‘James and Hortense were so good to you and your mother—’

‘Indeed they were, but I’m very tired, Tristan.’

‘As is James, for he has ridden all the way from London, but a glass of Madeira will help you both sleep better.’ Tristan was already at her side, taking her elbow and leading her into the drawing room, settling her on the small two-seater Egyptian sofa in front of the fire. With his back to them as he organised the drinks, Adelaide followed his movements. No, she had nothing to say to James. Instead, she nodded and smiled as Tristan carried on a cheerful monologue amidst the chinking of glass and pouring of the wine.

‘Lord, I can’t tell you how good it was to see you striding into my study when I was expecting you tomorrow, James. Ten years it’s been, d’you know that?’

‘Too long.’ James looked at Adelaide and the corners of his

mouth turned up in that secretive smile he used only for her. 'Forgive me for bursting in on you like that.'

'You haven't changed, James.' Bearing drinks, Tristan could not contain his boyish pleasure. 'Impulsive as ever. Hortense thought she could change that, poor girl.'

The silence was suddenly heavy as Tristan took a seat beside Adelaide. She wanted to curl right into him for protection. Instead, she took a small sip of her wine as James replied, 'Hortense wanted to change the world and together with Mrs Henley, she tried. I admired their dedication to the unfortunates who swelled the prison ranks, but I felt I was better placed trying to effect change through words rather than actions.' He took a measured sip of his wine. 'Unfortunately, Hortense didn't see it that way.'

Tristan shook his head. 'Poor Hortense. How greatly disappointment changed her when once she'd been so lively.'

James's laugh rang hollow. 'We made our peace in the end.'

Adelaide squeezed shut her eyes. How bitterly Hortense had hated her and with good reason. Yet Hortense had never loved James as Adelaide had.

'What a joy she finally was blessed with the child she longed for,' said Tristan, trying to lighten the tone. 'Charlotte is her name, isn't it? But what a tragedy Hortense did not live long enough to see her child grow up. I take it that is why you've been looking for a wife.'

Adelaide stifled her gasp as she moved closer to her husband. Right now she needed the security of Tristan's proximity but, as ever, he seemed to be just out of reach.

She curled her toes inside her dainty green slippers, aware of James's furtive glance as she stared at her hands. Oh God, what could she possibly contribute to this conversation?

James stretched out his legs as he'd only do amongst friends. 'As I mentioned in my letter, Miss Wells and I were due to wed at the end of the month but the death of her father has delayed our

nuptials until late August.'

'Tell me more about this Miss Wells.' Tristan rose to refresh their wine, leaving Adelaide feeling exposed and vulnerable.

'She grew up in London, like Adelaide'—he nodded in her direction—'and also joined her parents in Vienna when she'd finished her schooling. Miss Wells and I met last year at a military ball after I'd returned to Vienna. Her father was a friend of General Waldenberg.'

An interesting similarity, Adelaide thought vaguely, wondering if Miss Wells's mother were as violently opposed to gaiety as Adelaide's, until James said, 'Alas, her mother died several years ago, leaving Miss Wells entirely alone but for an elderly aunt who has reluctantly agreed to chaperone Beatrice on occasion during the season.'

Adelaide murmured, 'How sad,' but Tristan was more robust. 'We look forward to meeting Miss Wells, don't we, Adelaide? How is she bearing up under this double loss?'

Adelaide darted a look when James did not immediately answer. She was surprised by his response.

'Miss Wells,' said James, not looking at Adelaide, 'is one of the most remarkably self-contained young women I've met.'

'Then she is your ideal mate,' Tristan laughed. 'The sobriety to your passion, the cool head to your unfettered brilliance.'

Adelaide focused her gaze on him, admiring the mobility of his face. He knew what response was required in any situation. Well, if one discounted the intimacies of their marriage. He wasn't like James who somehow was equally passionate in joy and love as he was in sorrow.

'So, other than you and an apparently indifferent aunt,' Tristan went on, 'Miss Wells has no one.'

Adelaide pushed aside the emotion that threatened to engulf her. For so long she'd felt she had no one and didn't wish it upon anyone. She touched her husband's shoulder as she rose, then turned to their guest.

‘Congratulations, James. I’m so sorry I’ll not see you again as Mama is determined on an early start.’

‘And as Mrs Henley is as determined as her former protégée, Hortense, you’ll be seeing dust as dawn breaks.’ Tristan’s response was humourless. ‘Unless the weather moves in tonight.’

‘I don’t think that’d be enough to stop her,’ James murmured.

Adelaide heard the men laugh and raise their voices in more lively conversation as she took the stairs to her bedchamber. She paused at the top. Not for the first time she wanted to turn right and head for Tristan’s apartments so that he would find her curled into his feather mattress when he retired later.

Instead she turned left, heading for her own. Alone.

Alone and sick from the churning in her stomach.

Almost dragging her feet she turned the doorknob and entered her room where Milly had stoked up the fire and was waiting for her with a welcoming smile and a warm mug of sweetened milk.

‘I’ve a nice supper for you, miss, as the master said you were feeling poorly after your walk and I wondered if you’d be up to dining with them this evening.’ She pushed Adelaide down onto her dressing table stool and began to rub her shoulders. ‘Poor miss, the megrim’s bad tonight? Master were that worried about you. Said he hoped you’d see out a whole evening but was afraid your nerves weren’t up to it—’

‘He *said* that?’ When had this been? No doubt after her mother had cornered him, she thought bitterly.

Milly began removing Adelaide’s hair pins. ‘Well, it were Mrs Henley what used the words “nerves”, miss. ‘Parrently Mrs Henley told the master all about how delicate you was feelin’ and said to make sure you drank your warm milk.’ The girl continued to chatter while Adelaide stared stonily into the looking glass and wondered if Tristan, himself, had ever used the word ‘nerves’ to describe her moods. The idea filled her with horror. Hortense had succumbed to nerves and Adelaide had witnessed her slow and steady decline. In three years her

mother's protégée was transformed from an intense, passionate and clever young woman into quite simply a bag of nerves. One who jumped at the slightest movement and saw conspiracies everywhere.

'And now you must eat your supper, miss, and have a good night's rest, for Mrs Henley has organised for a dawn start and is quite determined the weather will hold until you're well on your way.'

Grimly, Adelaide echoed James's earlier sentiment. 'If Mama is determined upon it then I'm quite sure the weather will hold.' Moving to the fire, she settled herself in front of her supper tray. But she had no appetite and after several mouthfuls pushed away her plate and put her hands to her head.

'You really are poorly, miss,' sighed Milly as she turned back the bed covers and picked up Adelaide's nightrail which had been warming over the fire screen. 'The master will fret. How about a nice drink of your milk, then? Or just one more bite?'

'One more bite for the master,' Adelaide agreed, obediently taking a mouthful. 'I'd do anything to please the master, don't you know?' Exhaling on a sigh, she turned so Milly could undress her, adding under her breath, 'if he'd only ask.'

To be continued ...

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