



*Deborah
Simmons*

THE
GENTLEMAN
THIEF



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The Gentleman Thief

Deborah Simmons

Botheration! — Why her family had elected to spend an entire season in boring Bath, Georgiana Bellewether couldn't fathom. Nothing to stimulate her inquisitive mind ever happened here--until the night Lady Culpepper's emeralds were stolen! Now, if only she could keep her mind on the case and her hands off the enigmatic man in black--the beguiling Lord Ashdowne...!

As the newly made, ever-responsible Marquis of Ashdowne, Johnathon Saxton bemoaned the lack of excitement now marking his days. But when quixotic, exotic Georgiana Bellewether literally tumbled into his arms, he knew he'd caught himself an armful. The woman was a disaster in the making!

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Chapter One

No one took Georgiana Bellewether seriously.

To her utter dismay, she had been cursed with the lush curves of a cyprian, sprightly blond curls and big blue eyes that had often been compared to limpid pools. People took one look at her and decided that she didn't have a brain in her head. Of course, most men didn't think women intelligent anyway, but in her case they could conceive her to be nothing except a gooscap.

It was mortifying.

Her mother was a dear, rather flighty character, her father a genial, rotund squire, and Georgiana had no doubt that she would be happier had she taken after them. Unfortunately, of the four Bellewether progeny, she was the sole child to have inherited the characteristics of her great-uncle Morcombe, a noted scholar with a keen mind. Since her first toddling steps, Georgiana had devoured all manner of study, surpassing the skills of the family governess, the local academy for young ladies and her brother's tutor with equal fervor.

Her own particular talents leaned toward the solving of mysteries, and she often cursed the female form that kept her from life as a Bow Street Runner. Instead of following clues and daringly capturing criminals, she was forced to content herself with voracious reading and the unraveling of small puzzles that were presented to her in Chatham's Corner, the hamlet where her father reigned jovially as both squire and sheriff.

But this year, she vowed, it would be different. Her family had repaired to Bath for the summer, and Georgiana intended to make the most of her new location. Surely, in the famous resort town she would come upon at least one poser worthy of her skills! And certainly the wide and varied populace must be possessed of a more discerning nature than the rural inhabitants to whom she was accustomed.

Unfortunately, after a week spent visiting the Pump Room and strolling the avenues at the most fashionable hours, Georgiana was forced to admit her disappointment. Although she had enjoyed exploring, thus far she had met the same sort of genteel types with whom she was already familiar. Worse, not a single conundrum had she come across.

With a sigh, Georgiana glanced about the reception rooms of Lady Culpepper's lavish town house, eager for a diversion at the first real ball she had attended, but she saw only the usual assortment of dowagers and gouty gentlemen who populated Bath. Several misses, younger than herself, were there with dotting mamas, hoping to snare a husband among the resort's visitors. Unfortunately, Georgiana had yet to meet one with more on her mind than marriage.

She dismissed them all only to have her gaze arrested by an elegant figure dressed entirely in black. Now there was a puzzle, Georgiana thought, her eyes narrowing. It didn't take someone of her particular talents to realize that the appearance of the Marquis of Ashdowne was most unusual, for the haut ton no longer favored Bath as they had a half century ago. Handsome, charming noblemen of Ashdowne's ilk stayed in London or followed the Prince Regent to Brighton. Or, Georgiana speculated they spent their time at scandalous parties held in their huge, elegant country homes.

Not for the first time since she had heard of his visit, Georgiana thought Ashdowne's sudden interest in Bath was decidedly odd. She would have liked to find out why he was here but had yet to wrangle

an introduction. He had arrived just a few days ago, sending all the young unmarried ladies, including her sisters, into a flutter of excitement, and it was difficult to see him through the crowd of women who surrounded him.

He had let one of the fashionable houses in Camden Place, and this was the first the general populace had seen of him. He was here supposedly to take the waters, but Georgiana found the idea absurd, for he was not quite thirty and not reputed to be ailing. Make that *definitely not* ailing, Georgiana amended, as the group parted, affording her a good view of the man.

He was the very picture of health. Indeed, the Marquis of Ashdowne might well be the healthiest man Georgiana had ever seen, she decided, with a swift intake of breath. He was tall, probably six feet in height, and slender. Not skinny, mind you, but broad shouldered and muscular, though not in a bulky sort of way. All in all, the marquis possessed a grace and bearing Georgiana had not expected in one of the overfed, debauched members of the ton.

Lithe. That was the word that struck her as her attention traveled up the elegant, expensive clothing to his face. His hair was dark and sleek, his eyes a startling blue, and his mouth was... Georgiana could muster no description for it, with its lush curves and a small indentation above his upper lip. Ashdowne, she realized, swallowing abruptly, was handsome beyond belief.

And awake on every suit.

The knowledge came to her with a shock, for although Georgiana was all too aware of the misjudgments to be made based upon outward appearance, she assumed that someone that rich and powerful and beautiful could not possibly be blessed with brains, too. But she was wrong, for just as she blinked in amazement at his features, the Marquis of Ashdowne met her gaze with his own, bright with intelligence. Had Georgiana been the fanciful sort, she might have thought him aware of her scrutiny, for it seemed as though he had singled her out of the crowd most particularly.

Georgiana drew back, ashamed to be staring, and when one of Ashdowne's dark brows lifted in response, she colored. Fanning herself, she deliberately looked away. She had only been studying the man, as she would anyone else, and she grimaced in annoyance at his intimate glance. Ashdowne probably thought her just another one of the smitten females who practically swooned at his charm.

Whirling around, Georgiana was nearly halfway across the airy reception room when she realized that she had missed a golden opportunity for an introduction. Botheration! She snapped her fan in disgust for she knew better than to let her personal feelings interfere with an investigation. She could hardly imagine a Bow Street Runner abandoning his case because one of his suspects eyed him with too much familiarity.

With a small sound of irritation, Georgiana turned back toward the way she had come, but already her place had been filled by other women, both young and old. Then her mama appeared, cajoling her to dance with a young man, and Georgiana, from long experience, knew better than to argue.

Mr. Nichols, Georgiana soon discovered, was a nice enough fellow, here with his family from Kent, but as he spoke haltingly on such bland topics as the weather and the society of Bath, Georgiana's attention wandered. Although she kept craning her neck in an effort to see Ashdowne, when she finally spied the marquis, he was heading out to the garden with a young widow who apparently had abandoned her mourning most precipitously.

Georgiana frowned as Mr. Nichols met with her again during the dance, and she nodded absently at his questions. She really had no time for such inanities! Unfortunately, she recognized all too well the dazed expression on her partner's face. If focused, it would no doubt rest upon her curls or her white throat, or worse yet, the alarming expanse of pale breast that her mother insisted she expose as fashionable.

He paid no attention to what she was saying, of course, and at times like these, Georgiana was often tempted to whisper of insurrection or confess to a murder, in an effort to jolt her audience into awareness. Her admirers usually fell into two camps: those who paid no heed whatsoever to what she said, and those who hung on her every word.

Unfortunately, the latter were of no more use to her than the former, for she always failed to engage them in any kind of meaningful discourse. The sapskulls agreed with everything she said! She supposed she ought to be used to it by now, but nevertheless, Georgiana felt a twinge of disappointment.

Her mother was always extolling the virtues of marriage and parenthood, but how could Georgiana even entertain the notion of a life spent with a man such as this? Yet how was she, in her small venue to acquaint herself with anyone else? Education among the gentry was a haphazard business at best, and even those with a modicum of schooling seemed to be struck dumb by her appearance.

It was the curse of her existence. And so she discouraged them all, much to her mother's disappointment, and resigned herself to a life of spinsterhood, where she might have the freedom to finally dress and act as she wished, providing her great-uncle Morcombe left her the stipend he had promised. Not that she wished him to pass on in the near future.

It was with much relief that Georgiana realized the set was coming to an end, and she sent Mr. Nichols happily off to fetch her an ice, which granted her a slight but much desired reprieve from his company.

"Isn't he wonderful?" her mother gushed into her ear. "I have it on good authority that he will come into a lovely piece of land in Yorkshire from his grandfather, which ought to provide him with a thousand pounds a year!"

The earnestness in her dear mother's face prevented Georgiana from dashing the woman's hopes with a scathing reply. If not Mr. Nichols, then some other gentleman would be forced upon her, so she simply nodded absently while searching the room for Ashdowne. To her surprise, he had joined in the dancing, moving with a grace that caused a fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach.

"Please, excuse me," she said, moving away from her mother with a distracted air.

"But Mr. Nichols..."

Ignoring her mother's protest, Georgiana slipped into the crowd. Although she lost sight of Ashdowne, she was pleased to be free of both her dear mama and Mr. Nichols, and so she made her way slowly through the press of people, watching and listening. It was one of her favorite pastimes, for there was always the chance she might overhear information that could come in handy. Not gossip, of course, but something pertinent to her investigation.

In this case, talk about Ashdowne.

Unfortunately, she didn't hear much of use, only that he was so dashing and charming, etcetera, ad nauseam. He had been a younger son, coming into the title after the death of his brother a year ago. He appeared to have settled into the title quite nicely, according to one knowing matron, and did not hold himself above the rest of the world, as evidenced by his most gracious manner. Etcetera. Ad nauseam. The conversations were much the same. All the gushing over Ashdowne became positively annoying, and, perversely, she became even more determined to find the man guilty of something.

"Ah, Georgie!" Stifling a groan, Georgiana turned to find her father standing beside her with a sober-looking gentleman. Another potential suitor for her, she surmised, fighting the urge to run screaming from the room.

"Mr. Hawkins, here she is, my eldest daughter! Lovely girl, just as I told you, and such a clever thing. I'm sure you will find her most interested in your scholarship!"

Georgiana, knowing her dear father all too well, gathered that *he* was not, and was eager to pass his new acquaintance on to herself.

"Georgie, love, this is Mr. Hawkins. He's newly arrived at Bath, too, and hoping to find a living here, as he's a vicar and very learned."

Georgiana pasted a smile on her face and managed to greet Mr. Hawkins with a modicum of civility. He was attractive in a rather severe way, but something in his gray eyes told her that he was not the kind of gentle, unassuming soul as was their own Vicar Marshfield.

"A pleasure, of course, Miss Bellewether," the man said. "But a lady such as yourself could hardly be expected to understand the intricacies of philosophy. Indeed, I suspect that most men would be hard-pressed to match my knowledge, since I have devoted my life to its study."

Before Georgiana could argue that she was a devotee of Plato, who had, after all, founded the science of logic, Mr. Hawkins went on. "And, I must admit that Rousseau has fallen out of favor, what with the unpleasantness in France. However, I cannot see how he can be blamed for what befell the unfortunates there."

"So you believe that—" Georgiana began, but Mr. Hawkins cut her off with a sniff.

"But, then, the most enlightened men have often suffered for their genius," he declared.

It didn't take Georgiana's keen faculties to determine that the pompous vicar counted himself among the persecuted academics, and Georgiana's spark of interest was immediately and firmly doused. She would find no intellectual stimulation here, for Mr. Hawkins obviously was in the habit of expounding—not conversing.

Stifling a yawn, she stood there while he tossed off long words and theories in a strange mix that left her certain he understood very little of what he was spouting. No wonder her father had been so eager to be rid of the man! Georgiana was rapidly reaching her limits of endurance, too.

"Ah, there is our hostess!" she said, in an effort to break away, but Mr. Hawkins would not let her go so easily.

"Humph! I am surprised that she has opened her home to so many of her social inferiors, for it has been my experience that those of her rank are rarely cordial to the less fortunate."

Although Lady Culpepper was prone to the condescending air of the nobility, Georgiana did not find her any worse than most. "I admit that she could be more gracious, but—"

"Gracious?" Mr. Hawkins cut Georgiana off with an unbecoming scoff, an odd vehemence in his voice. "The lady and her kind are not known for their courtesy to others, but lord their wealth and power over the rest of us. I find them frivolous beings with no concerns except their own selfish caprices!"

Mr. Hawkins's sudden venom surprised Georgiana, but then, as swiftly as it had come over him, the mood was gone, replaced by a rather bland expression. "However, a man in my position must do his best to mingle with society," he added, as if begrudging his chosen career.

"I would think it your vocation to convince people to be more charitable," Georgiana noted idly.

Mr. Hawkins responded with a patronizing smile that made her bristle. "It is to your credit that you would think of such things, but I can hardly expect such a beautiful lady to understand the complexities of my position," he said, and Georgiana was tempted to boot him into a new position with a good swift kick. "Indeed, I vow that you, Miss Bellewether, are the saving grace to a tedious evening spent in ill company."

If Georgiana had thought the man too full of himself to have noticed her presence, she was sadly mistaken, for even as he spoke warmly of her, his gaze drifted tellingly to her bosom. And for a religious man, he was studying her a little too avidly for her taste. "You must excuse me," she said abruptly, and hurried off into the crowd before he could launch into another lengthy discourse.

After slipping through the assemblage, keeping her eyes and ears attuned to anything of interest, Georgiana halted behind a tall potted plant, a large fern of some sort, where she listened to several conversations, all of them exceedingly dull. At last, growing restless, she was about to depart when there was a shuffling nearby and the sound of whispered voices, which, as everyone knew, invariably signaled something interesting.

Moving unobtrusively closer, Georgiana peered through the greenery in an effort to catch a glimpse of the speakers. She saw a rather sturdy looking gentleman with a sadly receding hairline whom she immediately recognized as Lord Whalsey, a middle-aged viscount. Rumor had it that he was dangling for a rich wife among those who came to Bath, and, indeed, he was a popular one with the ladies, if a bit full of himself. As she peeked under a particularly large leaf, Georgiana could see him hunched next to a younger man with a rather pinched face, and the two appeared terribly serious. She leaned closer.

"Well? Do you have it?" Whalsey asked, his voice betraying an agitation that immediately seized Georgiana's attention.

"Er, not exactly," the other man hedged.

"What the devil? I thought you were going to get it tonight! Demn, Cheever, you swore you could manage this, you—"

"Hold on there," the man called Cheever said in a placating tone. "You shall have it all right. There's been a complication, that's all."

"What kind of complication?" Whalsey spat. "And it better not cost me more!"

"Well, I've run into a bit of difficulty locating it."

"What do you mean?" Whalsey cried. "You know very well where it is! That's why we came to this deadly dull backwater!"

"Of course, it's here, but it's not lying about in plain view, now is it? I've got to make a search for it, and I haven't had a chance because some bloody idiot's always around!"

Forgetting about Ashdowne, Georgiana held her breath and stuck her head right into the foliage.

"Who?" Whalsey asked.

"The servants!"

"Well, tonight's your chance, you dolt! What are you doing standing here?"

"I might as well enjoy a bit of the evening while I'm out, mightn't I?" Cheever said smoothly. "It hardly seems fair that you're dancing and frolicking while I'm doing the dirty work!"

Whalsey's face turned florid, and he opened his mouth as if to shout, but, to Georgiana's disappointment, he appeared to recover himself, lowering his voice until she had to strain to hear. "If you're angling for more money, I told you I haven't a penny to—"

Frustrated by the inaudible words, Georgiana leaned forward a little too far. The plant, berthed in an elegant urn, tipped slightly and, caught in its growth, she too swayed precariously. With a low gasp, she reached for a heavy leaf, hoping to right both the shrub and herself, but lost her balance. For one moment, Georgiana seemed to hang in the air, staring at the horrified faces of Lord Whalsey and Cheever.

So intent was she upon the fleeing twosome as they hurried away that Georgiana did not see the other man approaching. Only after she veered violently in the other direction in an attempt to regain her footing did she glimpse him. And then, of course, it was too late. Both she and the wretched plant toppled directly into him, sending all three of them to the floor in a heap.

Vaguely Georgiana heard startled gasps from around her as she struggled to separate herself from the thick leaves. She was on the carpet, her legs all tangled up with those of the man who lay beneath her and her gown had risen scandalously to expose her ankles. Worst of all, she had missed hearing more about the nefarious plot she was certain the two men were hatching. Botheration!

Blowing away a fat curl, Georgiana pushed off the floor in an effort to sit, only to hear a pained grunt from below as her knee connected with a certain portion of male anatomy. With a cry of dismay, Georgiana jerked upward, but she was stopped by her twisted skirts and fell forward once more.

More gasps went up from around her and then Georgiana felt firm hands upon her waist as she lifted her head only to recoil in horror at the face that came into view. Dark brows were no longer raised in arrogance but lowered in a disturbing manner that made the elegant features below them appear rather fierce, while that compelling mouth twisted into something resembling a snarl. "For God's sake, stop wiggling!" he said.

"Ashdowne!" Georgiana breathed. She had a moment to blink in alarm before the hands at her waist lifted her effortlessly upward and then they were both upright, the marquis setting her on her feet. She took a faltering step backward, but he held on to her, and Georgiana suddenly became aware of the heat generated by his touch. Like fire, it burned through the thin silk she wore, igniting her skin and sending warmth rushing throughout her body.

Curious. Georgiana glanced at her companion and stared, transfixed. He was just that much more beautiful up close, his eyes so blue as to make her own seem insipid instead of limpid, and Georgiana felt an odd dipping sensation in the pit of her stomach. As she gaped, he released her and stepped back, his handsome face wearing an expression of extreme annoyance as he raised one slender hand to brush a smattering of dirt from his elegant silk waistcoat. To her dismay, the marquis was looking at her as if she were an irritating bug he would like to squash— or at least be rid of.

Jolted from her stupor by the realization, Georgiana muttered her apologies in a hushed whisper that sounded like the breathless nonsense of a swooning admirer. And then, Georgiana, who thought herself past the age of blushes, felt a fiery stain rise in her cheeks as embarrassment claimed her. She was *not* one of those marriage-mad misses, and she desperately sought the words to convey that to his lordship. But her halting excuse was cut short by the arrival of her mother, along with two servants, who hurried to clean up the spilled soil.

"Georgie!" Wincing at the sound of her pet name called out loudly, Georgiana did not hear Ashdowne's murmured platitude. And before she could question him, he tilted his head and moved away, as if all too relieved to quit her company. To her dismay, Georgiana found herself surrounded by her mother and her sisters, while he disappeared into the crowd.

"Georgie! What on earth were you doing—inspecting the shrubbery?" her mama asked, eyeing the nearby plant as if it ought to explain itself. When it did not, she turned to her daughter.

"Lovely girl, but not too graceful, I fear." Her father's booming voice made Georgiana grimace, as did the titters of her sisters. Must her whole family make so much of this?

"Are you all right, Miss Bellewether?" As if things were not bad enough, Mr. Nichols had found her again. And how could he not, considering the spectacle she had made of herself? "I say, one can hardly move in this dreadful squeeze, and to clutter the floor with obstacles..." He shook his head, his gaze drifting down her wrinkled clothes to her ankle. Hastily Georgiana smoothed her gown and sighed as her mother urged her to a nearby chair and Mr. Nichols forced upon her the ice that was now sadly warm.

While they fussed, Georgiana fought the urge to leap to her feet and flee their attentions. Worse yet, she felt as if all eyes in the room were upon her—a terrible prospect for someone who was trying to be unobtrusive. She had bungled royally—and just when she was finally hearing something interesting.

Scowling with exasperation, Georgiana waved her mother away and searched the crowd for any sign of Lord Whalsey and his cohort, but all she saw was Ashdowne. Although he appeared to be speaking with the hostess, his eyes were on her, his mouth curved in condemnation as if he held her entirely responsible for the recent debacle.

Botheration! She had not asked for his help, nor had she even seen him tendering it, so he could hardly blame her if his efforts went awry. She would have done better without him, she thought, her cheeks flaming, and she had a notion to tell him so, but her opportunity for dialogue had once again slipped

away. And it was all her own fault!

A Bow Street Runner would not have gaped like a schoolroom miss at a pretty visage, but would have made the most of the chance encounter, asking Ashdowne what he was doing in Bath, judging his answers and slyly maneuvering him into an admission of...something. Georgiana wasn't sure what exactly, but she was determined to find out.

She glanced toward the subject of her musings and nearly started in surprise, for he was gone once again, Lady Culpepper now being deep in conversation with a turbaned matron. Amazed, Georgiana blew out a breath, disturbing one of her curls, and shook her head. The man seemed to appear and disappear in an instant, and she decided it was a good thing she was not given to whimsy, or she might suspect him of preternatural abilities.

"...like limpid pools." The sound of Mr. Nichols's voice brought her attention back to him, and, pasting a smile upon her face, Georgiana tried to show more forbearance than was her wont. She managed the task for a few minutes before abandoning her efforts and excusing herself.

Telling her mother that she needed to freshen up after the mishap, Georgiana instead roamed the room looking for Whalsey and Cheever, to no avail. When she caught a glimpse of Mr. Hawkins bearing down upon her with grim intent, she fled out into the garden, where she breathed a deep sigh of relief.

The night air was scented with the spring flowers that lined secluded walkways, lit only by the glorious display of stars overhead. Another young lady might have found magic in the evening, but not Georgiana. She wondered who was out there in the darkness. Had Whalsey and his cohort adjourned to a more private location to discuss their suspicious business? Only Georgiana's innate good sense prevented her from indulging her curiosity and slipping onto the paths herself.

With a sigh, she cursed the gender that made her prey to the designs of men and subject to the confining strictures of society. A Bow Street Runner could easily go wherever he wanted, whether a midnight garden or the seediest neighborhood in London. Ah, what a wonderful life, she thought, never pausing to wonder how such a fellow would manage to gain entry to a party such as this one. She spent long, delightful minutes enjoying the illustrious career that could have been hers, if only she had been born a man.

Georgiana might have remained there forever, lost in pleasant musings, if not for a loud giggle that erupted behind one of the nearby shrubs. With a sigh, she decided it was time to return to the party before she saw the kind of assignation that was of no interest to her—the romantic sort. No doubt her mother was searching for her, for it was growing late, and the rather staid Bellewether party would be heading home soon.

With one last glance at the dark lawn, Georgiana turned and slipped through the French doors into the reception room, prepared to find her family, when a bloodcurdling scream rent the air. Stunned, she turned toward the sound and caught sight of the hostess, Lady Culpepper, rushing down the main staircase, accompanied by the turbaned matron she had seen earlier.

Both women looked distraught, and Georgiana hurried forward. She reached the bottom of the steps just in time to hear the turbaned woman babble something about a necklace, and then the cry went up carried through the crowd faster than any wildfire: '*Lady Culpepper's famous emeralds have been stolen.*'

As news of the theft flew through the reception room, the rest of the house and, presumably, all of Bath, Georgiana, who had refused to budge until she heard the whole of it, was privy to the first breathless report of the turbaned woman she later identified as Mrs. Higgott.

Weeding through the babbling to the bare facts of the matter, Georgiana learned that the two women had been discussing Lady Culpepper's jewelry when Mrs. Higgott expressed admiration for the emerald necklace, well-known among the ton as the pride of her collection. Lady Culpepper, either graciously or vainly, offered to show off the piece and the two went to her bedroom, where they found the jewel case open upon the bed, the piece in question gone and the window open.

Since a servant had been stationed in the hall outside the door all evening, it was assumed that the thief somehow managed to scale the side of the building, a feat that engendered nearly as much talk as the burglary itself. Although Georgiana forced her brother Bertrand to accompany her on a tour of the grounds afterward, there was nothing to be seen in the darkness, and all her efforts to question the two women were turned aside. Indeed, the party quickly broke up out of consideration for Lady Culpepper's terrible loss, with everyone expressing shock at the commission of such a crime in quiet Bath.

Everyone, that is, except Georgiana.

Chapter Two

Thrilled at the first true challenge to her abilities, Georgiana rose early the morning after the incident and seated herself at the rosewood writing desk in the drawing room, where she put to paper every detail she could recall of the evening and the company. Unfortunately, she had been unable to view the scene or question the principles, but she was very thankful to have been present during the actual theft.

The mystery itself was a positively splendid one, not your average crime, but obviously a well thought out and daring perpetration, and Georgiana smiled absently as she made note of that which she deemed important. The time, of course, was of interest. When had Lady Culpepper last been in the room before returning with Mrs. Higgott? And what of the servant outside the room? Had he heard anything? Was he truly there all night, or had he left his post?

And what of the room itself? Did it open onto any others? Georgiana would dearly love to look for any clues the thief had left behind, including the jewel case itself. From what she could understand from the two women's ramblings, the container had been left behind, despite the gems that remained inside it.

Georgiana frowned. Why steal just the necklace? Had the thief been pressed for time, or hindered by what he could carry with him? A man who scaled the exterior wall could not be hampered with a bulky parcel, but Georgiana found it difficult to believe that someone had gone to such lengths to gain entry. Perhaps the fellow had tossed up a rope, she thought. Uncertain of the logistics of that sort of thing, she vowed to ask Bertrand. And she fully intended to view the building in the daylight.

If only she could see the room itself! Something about the open jewel box sounded familiar, but, unable to place the memory, Georgiana made a quick note of it and then pulled out another sheet of foolscap upon which to name her suspects. Her hand nearly trembled with the force of her excitement for here not only was a challenge to her skills, but an opportunity. If she could solve this puzzle and present the culprit's name to the authorities, she might finally receive the respect she craved.

Resting her chin on a hand, Georgiana smiled dreamily as she imagined the accolades due her, especially if she managed to recover the stolen jewels! More important than praise, however, was the possibility that she could make a name for herself, and she enthusiastically pictured a future filled with investigations as people from all over the country came to consult her, Georgiana Bellewether.

Heaving a sigh of delight at such pleasant fantasies, Georgiana nevertheless turned her attention back to the task at hand, for she must first determine the identity of the man who had taken Lady Culpepper's necklace. Although the burglar might be someone unknown to her, a member of the criminal community who had lain in wait for his chance, logic argued against it. No common cut-throat would rob a house on a night when it was filled to brimming with guests and servants.

Whoever had done the deed did not waste time ransacking other rooms, but knew just where to go to find his prize. Georgiana abruptly dropped her hand and lifted her chin as the conversation she had overheard behind the plant came to mind. She had known from their whispers that Lord Whalsey and Mr. Cheever were plotting something nefarious, but little did she imagine the two men capable of a crime of such epic proportions!

With a grim expression, Georgiana tried to copy down everything the two had said, including Mr. Cheever's complaint that he was hampered in his efforts to "get it" by the presence of servants. Oh, it

was really all too simple, Georgiana thought, and as visions of acclaim once more rose to mind, she placed Mr. Cheever and the man who hired him first upon her list.

But, as promising as the two men were, Georgiana still intended to consider all possibilities, and so she wondered just who else at the house that night might be responsible. The culprit could be a servant, she thought, though such instances were rare, and who among them during the busy party would have found time to scale the building? She wished that she might question those in Lady Culpepper's employ in order to obtain all pertinent information.

As to the guests, Georgiana found it difficult to name too many candidates among the genteel inhabitants of Bath. Most she deemed not clever enough to pull off such a scheme, while others were too honest and bland to suddenly take up a life of crime. But as she thought of all those simple faces, Georgiana suddenly remembered the vicar and his vocal contempt for the wealthy. Frowning, she wondered if the good cleric could have managed to steal the necklace. The venom in his words had disturbed her and, without hesitation, she counted him as her second suspect.

Once more, considering everyone she had seen, Georgiana easily dismissed the dowagers, the gouty old men and the young ladies as incapable of entering and escaping through the window. No, the culprit was definitely someone agile, slender but with the strength to climb, graceful undoubtedly, and...dressed all in black?

Georgiana's eyes narrowed as an image of Ashdowne, dark and elegant, filled her mind. Ashdowne, who seemingly appeared and disappeared at will, certainly looked as if he could do anything, including scale the side of a building, and his strength had been evident in the way he lifted her with ease off his prone body. The memory made Georgiana flush with an unwelcome heat, as did the knowledge that the handsome nobleman had reduced her to a yammering ninny.

Georgiana scowled, angry with herself and at the man who was so carelessly capable of rendering her speechless. He was up to something, and she knew it! He was far too...healthy to need the waters. Of course, his presence in Bath might well be due to a lady, Georgiana realized with an odd surge of disappointment. All too often, gentlemen of the ton dallied with wives, widows and other available females. But somehow Georgiana had expected more from the possessor of those startlingly intelligent eyes.

And as she considered the women who had been in attendance last night, Georgiana was hard-pressed to come up with viable candidates. To her mind, the ladies present did not look worth the effort, but she was not a man, and everyone knew that their thoughts were unpredictable, at best. Georgiana had seen Ashdowne with the widow, but she had gone on to dance with others, while he was nowhere to be seen. As usual. And in the end, it was his unexplained disappearances that convinced Georgiana to add his name to the list of suspects with a flourish.

Although she had no liking for Mr. Nichols or any of her other admirers, in all good conscience, Georgiana could not include them, for none seemed to possess the wherewithal for so daring a burglary. And even should she have misjudged them, according to Bertrand, the young bucks were congregated in the card room during the time of the robbery, engaged in some sort of wagering. She had questioned her brother thoroughly and accounted for those few young men who might have the necessary agility.

Which left very few suspects. Of course, it was possible that the burglar was someone outside the

party, abetted by a knowledgeable insider, a prospect that Georgiana found most frustrating. She was simply going to have to obtain the names of all the guests and talk to the servants—and to Lady Culpepper herself.

Putting aside her list of suspects, Georgiana swiftly penned a note to the lady, begging to call upon her as soon as possible concerning a matter of gravest importance. She decided to send a servant round this very morning with the message, for the sooner she gathered her information, the better the chance of retrieving the stolen gems.

Although the theft had been brilliantly executed, Georgiana did not doubt her own abilities, and she envisioned a swift resolution to the mystery. Mr. Cheever's pinched features rose in her mind only to dangle there uncertainly, for somehow he did not appear capable of such cleverness. Indeed, as much as she tried to fight it, Georgiana felt an unwitting admiration for the culprit. Here, at last, was someone worthy of her own talents. She sighed and sank her chin onto one hand.

It was simply her ill luck that he was a criminal.

After waiting impatiently throughout the morning, Georgiana finally received a response to her missive, and, hurrying off to avoid her sisters, she arrived at Lady Culpepper's elegant home shortly after noon. There she was shown into a salon, where the hostess was seated upon an elegant wing chair, a luncheon tray on the table beside her.

"Come in, young lady!" the older woman called in a shrill voice, and Georgiana stepped forward into the lavishly appointed room, with its carved white marble chimneypiece and cut-glass chandelier. The furnishings looked much as they had last night, but Lady Culpepper appeared far older in the daylight that streamed in through the tall windows.

Georgiana felt the noblewoman's assessing gaze upon her as she took a seat. "Thank you for seeing me, my lady," she began politely, only to be met with a sour expression.

"And well you should be grateful," Lady Culpepper said. "I have refused all callers today, as befitting my distraught condition. So tell me, what is this matter of grave importance you have to discuss? Do you know anything about my necklace?" Georgiana nodded, and the older woman leaned forward, one bony hand clutching the mahogany edge of the chair. Her eyes glittered shrewdly, and Georgiana realized that Lady Culpepper was no fool.

"Well?" she asked impatiently.

"I have reviewed the incident with the information at my disposal and have narrowed down the suspects to a likely few," Georgiana answered. At Lady Culpepper's odd look, she added, "I consider myself most adept at the solving of mysteries and hope to come to a definite conclusion soon. However, I would like to speak with the servants, if I may, and ask you a few questions."

"Who are you?" Lady Culpepper demanded.

"Georgiana Bellewether, my lady," she answered, wondering if the woman was forgetful. If so, that might put a different slant on the case, making it more difficult to ascertain the time of the theft.

"A nobody!" Lady Culpepper said in an imperious tone. "Just what makes you think you can barge in here—"

"But you invited me, my lady," Georgiana protested, earning a rebuking glance for her interruption.

"You, young lady, are impertinent! I agreed to see you because I thought you knew something about my stolen necklace!"

"But I do!" Georgiana said. "I can help you, if—"

"Bah! The help of a silly girl who thinks she knows more than her superiors!"

"I assure you that my abilities are quite well-known at home, though here in Bath—"

"Home! A tiny village of no importance, I am sure!" Lady Culpepper sniffed, and Georgiana decided another tack was called for at once.

"What have you to lose, my lady?" she asked. "I want no reward, but only wish to assist you as well as I may."

A look of avarice flashed in the older woman's eyes at the mention of a reward. "And you will most certainly have none," she confirmed. A moment passed in which Georgiana met her glare impassively, and finally Lady Culpepper sniffed, her chin held-high. "Very well. Ask your questions, but quickly, for I have more important matters demanding my attention than to indulge the whims of every silly girl in Bath."

In the few minutes that Lady Culpepper allotted her,

Georgiana discovered that the jewel case had been found open, its other contents left intact. The door was locked, and the servant stationed to watch it swore that none had entered.

"And why did you set the servant to guard your room? Does he do so at all times or only during entertainments at your home?" Georgiana asked.

Lady Culpepper appeared startled by the question, then she lifted her chin to look down her nose at Georgiana. "That, young lady, is none of your affair. Enough of these questions!"

"But, my lady!" Georgian protested. Unfortunately, all her efforts to see the premises were met with haughty refusals, as were her requests to talk to the servants, while Lady Culpepper grew increasingly short-tempered.

For her part, Georgiana was unimpressed with the noblewoman. The more she spoke, the more Lady Culpepper resembled a fishwife, and Georgiana wondered about her antecedents. Biting back a sigh, she persevered as best she could. "Can you think of any servant or guest at the party who would do such a thing?" Georgiana asked.

"Certainly not!" Lady Culpepper answered. "One hopes that none of one's acquaintances is a foul criminal! Of course, this is Bath, not London, and it is no less than what I deserve for opening my home to the ill-bred rabble that frequent this city. I assure you that as soon as I have my jewels back, will be returning to London, where I am far more selective in my invitations."

Georgiana refrained from mentioning the higher incidence of theft in the more notorious city, but nodded in a placating manner before continuing. "You have no enemies or those who might seek to target you in particular?"

Georgiana noted the sudden paling of the older woman's face with interest. Whether Lady Culpepper was angered by the very suggestion of malice or by the truth of it, Georgiana could not tell. "Begone with you, child! I have wasted enough of my time with this nonsense!" she said, her tone brooking no opposition.

With a wave of dismissal, Lady Culpepper called for the butler to show Georgiana out, and there was nothing to do but thank the ungracious woman for her time. As Georgiana took her leave, she could not help feeling dissatisfied. She was struck by the uncharitable notion that the obnoxious woman deserved to have her jewels stolen, but firmly quelled such thoughts, for it would not do to let emotions color her investigation.

Once outside, Georgiana told the startled butler that she was going to have a look around the grounds and walked into her ladyship's garden without a qualm, leaving him sputtering on the doorstep. She made her way slowly to the rear of the building, where she stood staring up at the reported locations of the bedroom windows. The view was much better in the daylight, and Georgiana noticed an arched pediment that curved above them—as well as upon the windows below.

Blinking at the sight, she wondered if, instead of scaling the side of the building, the culprit had simply slipped into another room and out onto the pediment to climb inside Lady Culpepper's bedroom. The footing for such a feat looked quite precarious, and Georgiana's heart began hammering fitfully at the idea, for she did not like heights in the slightest. However, an agile man who was unafraid and trained in such dexterous movements might well—

"Harrying the plants again?"

Georgiana was so lost in thought that the abrupt sound of a caustic voice close by startled her and she whirled around, sending her reticule swinging wildly. It connected quite firmly with the form of a man she had not realized had come to stand behind her.

"Oomph!" he said, laying a hand upon his patterned silk waistcoat. "What do you have in there, rocks?"

Georgiana's gaze flew from the slender gloved fingers to the handsome face, where one black eyebrow climbed upward, and she blinked in horror. "Ashdowne! I mean, my lord! I beg your pardon!"

The marquis's beautiful mouth turned down at the corners as he smoothed the elegant material, drawing Georgiana's attention across his broad shoulders and wide chest to his flat abdomen. The sight seemed to make her own far more rounded stomach dip and pitch, and with effort, Georgiana tore her gaze away and back to his face. "What are you doing here?" she asked suspiciously.

The black brow lifted again, above eyes brimming with distaste. It was a look Georgiana recognized from the night before, and once more she felt like an insect that the marquis found particularly annoying. While she stared, he tilted his head to the side as if to better study the strange specimen that was she.

"I've come to offer Lady Culpepper my condolences, of course," he said, his tone implying that his movements and their cause were none of her business. "And you?" he asked, glancing rather pointedly toward the side of the building that had so occupied her interest.

"Yes, I was just doing that myself," she muttered, trying to marshal her wits. If Ashdowne had been

attractive at night, dressed all in black and moving at one with the shadows, he was startlingly so in the daylight, the sun catching the even contours of his face and glinting upon his golden skin. His dark lashes were thick and lustrous, his blue eyes so vivid that they stole Georgiana's breath, and that mouth...

When she found her gaze lingering, Georgiana wrenched it away to look down at her toes. If the simple sight of the man wrought such havoc with her senses, then she would do better to inspect the ground at her feet, she decided with some aggravation.

"Ah," Ashdowne said in a voice that told her he did not believe her explanation for an instant but was too much of a gentleman to argue. "I don't believe we've been properly introduced, Miss—"

"Bellewether," Georgiana said, relieved to find speech much easier when she had no real view of the marquis. "I, uh, should beg your pardon for, uh, knocking you down last night."

"I must say, I think a potted plant hardly the place for an assignation," Ashdowne said, and Georgiana's gaze flew to his face.

"Oh! I was not..." As the words left her mouth, Georgiana realized her mistake. Just one glance at those lips and already she was becoming stupid! Fighting back a snort of disgust, she turned toward the flowering shrubs that carved pathways through the rear of the property and lifted her chin.

"I was not meeting anyone," Georgiana declared. When silence met her protest, she frowned. "Actually, I was listening and learning, a habit of mine, you might say, for you never know what interesting things you can discover."

"Ah, gossip," Ashdowne said in a tone of dismissal.

Georgiana stared at his neck cloth, determined to be able to speak to the man without swooning. "I am not concerned with rumor or innuendo, but facts only—facts, in this case, pertinent to the events of last night," she said. "You see, I have a knack for solving mysteries, my lord, and I intend to lend my talents to the resolution of the theft that occurred here yesterday evening."

Georgiana looked up in challenge, but Ashdowne's expression was unreadable. He neither scoffed at her declaration, nor did he appear particularly threatened, and she had to stifle a surge of disappointment that her bold words did not result in his immediate confession to any number of misdeeds. He only tilted his head, as if to study her in that way of his which she found vastly insulting.

"And just how do you intend to do that?" he asked. His lovely lips curled wryly, and Georgiana suspected he was laughing at her. Unfortunately, it was an attitude with which she was more than familiar.

It was the curse of her appearance. If only she looked like Hortense Bingley, the spinster who haunted the lending library at Upwick, or Miss Mucklebone, a bluestocking who wore thick glasses and was known to brandish her cane at tart-tongued youngsters. Once, during her schoolroom years, Georgiana had borrowed a pair of spectacles from a classmate in an effort to be taken more seriously, but her parents had put a stop to that immediately upon her return home. And so she had to bear the scorn of those who took her at face value, including, apparently, the marquis.

"I intend to discover the culprit through simple reasoning, my lord," Georgiana said, tossing her curls.

She was so annoyed that she managed to eye him directly without feeling anything except contempt. "By studying the facts, eliminating all but the most probable of possibilities, and drawing a conclusion." With a curt nod, Georgiana began moving. "And now, if you will excuse me, I must be on my way. Good day, my lord."

"Don't hurry away," Ashdowne said, and to Georgiana's consternation, he fell into step beside her. "I find your comments most fascinating. Please tell me more."

A sidelong glance at his restrained expression told Georgiana that he did not believe her capable of doing what she claimed. Few men did, but somehow his skepticism riled her more than usual. If he had so little faith in her abilities, why was he pretending interest? Georgiana scowled suspiciously. "I hardly think so," she murmured, keeping to her pace.

"But I find these methods you spoke of most interesting," he said. His blue eyes were suddenly intense as they met her own. To Georgiana's relief, they had reached the front of house, where Ashdowne presumably was headed to make his call, and she seized the opportunity to escape that intent scrutiny.

"I fear I must be on my way, my lord. Perhaps another time," she murmured, her hand trembling as it found the gate. And then, aware that she was acting rather rudely, but resentful of the way he seemed to be toying with her, Georgiana slipped away without a backward glance. As she hurried onto the street, she heard no steps behind her to indicate the marquis's entrance into the house, and it took all her will not to turn around to verify the speculative gaze she sensed was upon her.

It was only when she had reached the corner that Georgiana realized she had once more let pass a golden opportunity to question the man. Fast upon the heels of that discovery came self-censure. Never before had she behaved like such a pea-goose with someone! Ashdowne, it seemed, had a most peculiar effect upon her.

The knowledge was decidedly lowering.

Georgiana stood in the Pump Room surveying the crowd and leaning on one foot in an effort to rouse her weary limbs. She felt as though she had been waiting here forever, hoping to catch a glimpse of Lord Whalsey, who usually made an afternoon visit. Indeed, everyone appeared at the social hub of the city sooner or later, on a daily basis, more often than not.

At least that's what Georgiana told herself to strengthen a resolve that was sadly slipping. Although Whalsey would be wise to conduct himself in his accustomed manner, she knew that he might even now be racing toward London with his booty. It was a discouraging thought, for how was she to follow? Again Georgiana cursed the limits of her gender, which prevented her from pursuing her prime suspect wherever he might go.

Unfortunately, she could only look for him in the Pump Room, and she had to admit that she was becoming weary of her watch. Her sisters had long ago left for a walk in the Crescent and her other acquaintances dispersed to hillside climbs or carriage rides. Only Bertrand, content to do nothing, lounged in a corner chatting to a couple of young men she had tried her best to discourage.

Georgiana was able to turn them aside more easily than usual today because they, along with everyone else, were occupied with discussion of the theft, including wild conjectures as to the culprit. She had listened to the speculation with some impatience, for rumors were growing apace. Most of the dowagers were certain a group of ruffians had moved to Bath to terrorize the town, and it was all

Georgiana could do not to scream in exasperation at such nonsense.

The theft was not the work of a gang, but one man alone, Georgiana thought, shifting to her other foot. A vision of Ashdowne as he had been last night, all in black, swam before her, and she dismissed it. Although he was certainly suspicious, she was here to concentrate on Whalsey and his cohort, who were the most likely candidates.

Blinking, she searched the room once again, and her hours of vigilance were rewarded when she caught a glimpse of the viscount. He moved through the crowd, greeting his favorites among the middle-aged widows, before finally settling down with a serving of the odoriferous water for which Bath was famous.

"Lord Whalsey! Good afternoon!" Georgiana said, stepping forward boldly. They had been introduced briefly a few days before, but she saw no recognition in his eyes, only a spark of interest as they focused eagerly on her bosom. Hiding her annoyance, Georgiana forced a smile. "I did not see you leave the ball last night. Did you depart early?"

The inquiry, innocent though it was, made Whalsey start, and his gaze moved up to her face in what could only be described as a most anxious manner. Georgiana felt a surge of triumph rush through her, though she held it firmly in check. "And what of the fellow who was with you? Mr. Cheever, wasn't it?"

Whalsey, his mouth working silently, looked guilty as sin, and Georgiana wondered just how swiftly she could bring him to justice. "Look here, Miss...Miss..."

"Bellewether," Georgiana answered with a confident smile. "You two seemed to be discussing something frightfully important, and I was wondering if—"

He cut her off with a choked sound, his face growing red and mottled. "I hardly think—"

"Did you accomplish all that you intended?"

With an alarmed expression, Whalsey rose to his feet. So eager was he to escape her probing that his hand swung from his side, knocking over the cup and sending the contents splashing up the front of Georgiana's muslin gown. Shocked by the dash of hot water, she stepped back only to come up against a stand used by the orchestra.

For a brief moment, Georgiana teetered there before losing her balance entirely and crashing backward, taking the support with her. It struck the violinist, who fell into one of his fellows, and before long the musicians were all collapsing into each other like a set of dominoes. After a series of loud, wailing screeches that accompanied their downfall, the music came to an abrupt halt and silence descended as every head in the Pump Room turned toward Georgiana.

Her skirts entangled with the stand and one arm stuck through the bow of the violinist, Georgiana watched dejectedly as Lord Whalsey made a hasty escape. Blowing out a breath to dislodge the curl that had fallen across her face, she blinked when a gloved hand appeared before her. Glancing upward, she felt an odd sense of disorientation at the sight of Ashdowne, tall and handsome and collected, leaning over her.

"You, Miss Bellewether, are dangerous," he said with a wary scowl. Nonetheless, he pulled her to her

feet just as easily as he had the other night, and one look from him had the musicians rising without complaint to continue their concert. As if by decree, the other visitors turned back to their conversations, and Georgiana could only gape in wonder at a man who could wield such heady influence.

"Thank you. Again," Georgiana mumbled as he led her away from the orchestra. "You have come to my rescue more than once."

"I admit, Miss Bellewether, that you appear to have a penchant for mishaps, and I count it my ill fortune to be in the vicinity," he noted with a wry grimace.

Was that an insult? Georgiana wondered as she struggled to discreetly pull the wet material of her bodice away from her chest. Although dampened muslin was rumored to be all the rage among the more daring London ladies, she had no desire to display her body so unerringly beneath the clinging fabric.

From somewhere, Ashdowne produced a shawl, which he dropped over her shoulders, but not before his blue gaze traveled the length of the front of her in a rather stimulating perusal that caused the tips of her breasts to stiffen in response. Curious. Plenty of other men had stared at her bosom without causing such a reaction, Georgiana thought, wrapping the shawl around her tightly.

It was a measure of her own flustered state that she did not note where Ashdowne had obtained the garment or that she did not find his rather intimate study annoying. Indeed, she knew a strange sort of thrill to have attracted his attention in that manner, which was only fair considering that the very sight of him usually reduced her to an unparalleled state of idiocy.

Ashdowne, however, looked none the worse for his brief display of interest. His expression was that of a man wearied beyond endurance, and Georgiana began feeling like a bug again. If only she could actually sprout wings and fly away...

"I suspect these disasters are all part and parcel of your unusual...pursuits, but I'm beginning to think that you need someone to keep you out of mischief," he said.

Georgiana blinked. Surely a marquis would not bother himself to complain to her father about her? Nor, as far as she knew, were there any laws against accidents such as the one that had just taken place.

What could the man possibly do to her? Georgiana wondered. But then he smiled, his elegant lips moving into a positively decadent curve that well answered her question. *Anything he wants*, she thought with the last of her wits.

"And since I seem to be the one most affected by your antics, perhaps I should apply for that position," he said, stunning her speechless.

Chapter Three

Johnathon Everett Saxton, fifth Marquis of Ashdowne, lifted one dark brow in surprise at the expression on his companion's face. Over the years, he had received a wide variety of looks from the ladies, but never had one eyed him with anything bordering on alarm. As usual, Miss Georgiana Bellewether's reaction was far from ordinary.

Perhaps his offer to act as a sort of keeper for the errant young woman was none too flattering, but her obvious dismay was not exactly what he had anticipated. The Saxon good looks and a certain rakish charm had assured Ashdowne of more than his share of the fair sex, while now, as marquis, he received far too much attention for his taste. Somehow the thought of being sought only for his title put a damper on his previous enthusiasm.

But Miss Bellewether could hardly be accused of chasing after his name, Ashdowne mused. Although the chit ought to be grateful for his attention, she appeared flustered, irritated and nearly panicked, as if she found him objectionable in some way. Apparently it was his misfortune that the only woman who was not inclined to be his marchioness was some kind of lunatic. A *dangerous* lunatic, he qualified grimly.

He had not suspected as much at first. Upon sighting her at Lady Culpepper's ball, Ashdowne had been momentarily taken with the young lady, as would any normal male, for Georgiana Bellewether had a body that might cause a lesser man to drool into his neck cloth. With those lush curves, that mop of blond curls and the delicate oval face of an angel, she would have been toasted as a diamond of the first water in London, with offers flying at her head, despite her simple background. Or she could have reigned over the demimonde as the most sought after of cyprians.

Of course, all that success was dependant upon her silence—and her stillness, Ashdowne thought. Unfortunately, once Georgiana Bellewether began moving, all hell was inclined to break loose, for she was probably the clumsiest creature in all of Christendom. A veritable accident in the making, she had managed to knock him to the floor last night, an ignominious experience that still stung. Luckily the tumble hadn't hurt anything except his pride, or else the evening might have gone awry in more ways than one.

But that episode was the least of it. Since then, she had hit him with the world's heaviest reticule and single-handedly brought down an entire orchestra. Ashdowne would never view the words *strike up the band* in quite the same light again.

Not only was she disaster prone, but the young woman fancied herself some sort of investigator! Although nearly every man at the ball had a theory about the Culpepper robbery, few would claim themselves capable of catching the thief, and certainly no lady would admit interest in such things! Ashdowne didn't know whether to laugh or ship her off to Bedlam.

And so he did neither, but watched her carefully. Long ago, he had learned to listen to his instincts, which were buzzing and hissing most alarmingly in connection with Miss Bellewether. Perhaps it was the physical danger she represented to anyone fool enough to get close to her, or something else. Ashdowne didn't know.

He had to admit to some curiosity as to what disaster would next follow in her wake, so possibly his interest amounted to nothing more than the same bizarre fascination that drew people to public

hangings. It was only human nature to want to witness calamity, and despite the past stifling year, Ashdowne still called himself human. Whatever the reason, like a man flirting with his own doom, he could not seem to ignore Miss Georgiana Bellewether.

She was diverting, to say the least, and barring the recent trouble with his sister-in-law, Ashdowne could not remember when he had last been so intrigued. It was startling to realize just how mundane his life had become since assuming the title. He had not set out to embrace a life of boredom. Far from it, for he had always held his stolid, conservative brother somewhat in contempt.

It was only after that gentleman had keeled over from apoplexy and the title had been thrust upon him that Ashdowne had realized what a tiresome business it all was. Of course, he could have refused the responsibilities that fell to him, but too many people, from farm tenants to servants staffing the family seat, depended upon him now. And so he had immersed himself in the business of being Ashdowne, and although he didn't regret it, he felt as if he had been swimming for some time and had just now come up for air. Only to find himself in a fog induced by the young lady at his side.

"This, uh, really isn't necessary," Miss Bellewether said. She spoke in a breathless voice, as though she had barely recovered after her misadventure in the Pump Room, and certainly a dousing with Bath water could steal your breath away. Ashdowne knew his had been sadly short after just looking at her, especially when the wet muslin had clung so delightfully to her pert nipples.

He forced his thoughts in a different direction. Gad, he must have been too long without a woman if he could be stirred by this wretched female! "Let me at least see you home," he said, smoothly stifling his wayward lust. "Where are you staying?"

Ashdowne listened with approval to her mumbled direction, though he knew her address already. He made it his business to learn everything that might impact upon him and his plans, and he had discovered all that he could about the bothersome Miss Bellewether, Lady Culpepper having proven quite helpful in that regard.

The outraged matron had complained at length about the impertinent young woman who invited herself in only to claim that she was going to solve the theft. And all through Lady Culpepper's shrill diatribe, Ashdowne had struggled with his own incredulity. He knew that common citizens rarely bothered to intervene in a criminal case, let alone a genteel female. What was the chit about?

Ashdowne's gaze traveled to the lady in question, though he found it difficult to equate the self-proclaimed investigator with those bobbing blond curls. He shook his head in wonder. Obviously Miss Bellewether had recovered herself, for she no longer clung fiercely to the shawl he had borrowed from a matron, but neither did she seem at ease. She was staring straight ahead, her chin lifted, as if prepared to make some pronouncement, and Ashdowne found himself leaning close to hear her next inanity.

"I appreciate your assistance, my lord, but I assure you that I am not singling you out for any sort of..."

"Torture?" Ashdowne suggested wryly.

Although he had not thought her capable of it, the little miss made a face that evidenced some backbone behind that beribboned and beruffled exterior. Tossing her gorgeous curls, Miss Bellewether gave him a mutinous expression that Ashdowne found oddly charming. He must be truly desperate for

diversion. "But, tell me, how is the investigation going?" he asked, to deflect her wrath.

Miss Bellewether, however, did not look appeased. "It is going quite well!" she answered, as if daring him to dispute her. "In fact, I am quite certain of the identities of the perpetrators."

"Perpetrators?" Ashdowne asked. "Then there is more than one?"

To his surprise, she slid him a suspicious glance, and Ashdowne wondered what she saw when she looked at him. Apparently, it was something that nobody else noticed, and the thought sent a shiver up his spine, as if someone were walking on his grave. Unnerved, he rolled his shoulders beneath his finely tailored coat as he awaited her answer.

But when it came, it was as astonishing as anything else she had ever said. "I do not feel at liberty to discuss the case," she muttered, refusing to look at him.

Uttered with all seriousness, her words stunned Ashdowne from his pose of practiced charm into a startled stare. Who did this mop-haired minx think she was? For a moment, he didn't know whether to laugh or to strangle her. Unfortunately, they were in full view of several others who were strolling the streets, so the latter was not really an option, and the former would not further his cause.

With an effort, Ashdowne forced himself to swallow the sharp retort that came to his lips while he tried to appear humble. But since the pretense was not part of his usual repertoire, he was not too successful. "Well, I certainly wouldn't want to interfere with your investigation," he said smoothly. "Quite the contrary, in fact. Perhaps if I were to offer my help to you, as an assistant of sorts, you might feel comfortable speaking more...freely."

His companion gave him a sharp look that told him she thought he was teasing her, but Ashdowne waited expectantly.

"Oh! I've never considered..." she began, only to trail off.

Ashdowne remained impassive as her blue eyes studied him, though it was a trifle difficult when he really wanted to get his hands on her neck—or perhaps lower, where an expanse of luscious white breast peeked above the edge of the shawl.

"That is, I have always worked alone," she mumbled, gazing down at her toes.

It was a habit she had when with him. Although Ashdowne was not certain what it signified, he did not believe it had anything to do with modesty or deference, much to his regret. "Ah, but perhaps, as a man, I could be of some use," he suggested.

She glanced up at him with a startled expression, a flush staining her cheeks, and Ashdowne felt an echoing interest in his breeches, along with an absurd sense of triumph. At least the chit was not wholly indifferent to him, if she thought he had offered to accommodate her in a purely personal fashion.

"I meant that I might be able to move easier than yourself amongst the male members of society, in places where you, for all your wherewithal, cannot be expected to go," Ashdowne qualified. She stared up at him, and for a moment he felt transfixed by those blue eyes. They had stopped before her residence, and he stepped closer, an odd sort of anticipation buzzing in his veins.

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