



**THE
TWICE JILTED
DUKE**

The Twice Jilted Duke

By Lara Temple

The jolt woke Max. The earth tilted, slipped, and then stopped.

Max drew in a deep breath and regretted it as the air formed icicles all down his throat and into his lungs.

Brutus gave a ragged snort, finally driving Max fully alert.

He'd fallen asleep in the saddle. At least he hadn't fallen from it. Or perhaps he had been about to, and Brutus, after years' experience from the long marches through Portugal and Spain, had decided to recall his master to his surroundings.

Such as they were.

Max rolled his aching shoulders and looked about. His feet were half frozen through his boots and his cheeks felt like they might crack if he so much as blinked. Brutus's mane was covered in a dusting of snowflakes and Max leaned forward to brush them away. It was one thing for him to almost freeze to death; quite another for Brutus. After six years of faithful service carrying him across Portugal, Spain and France, suffering thirst, famine and enemy fire, his horse deserved better than to become a hunk of frozen meat on the side of a country lane.

Where in Hades was he?

His last memory was of a rutted country road covered with a powdering of snow that was turning sullen and grey as the afternoon waned. He must have slept longer than he'd realized because afternoon was long gone and the snow had been gathering.

'You should have woken me sooner, Brutus,' he said, his voice as stiff as his half frozen body. Brutus gave another snort, more disdainful than the last. 'Fair enough. It's my job to navigate. Yours to keep us moving.'

He turned in his saddle, trying to get his bearings, and saw the gleam of light.

'More luck than sense, Brutus. Come, let's see if we can find some warmth, inside and out.'

The Golden Giant was grossly misnamed.

The tiny roadside inn looked like it might implode under the weight of its own thatched gables and Max doubted it had seen any gold this side of the century. But the steam-blurred windows were bright with firelight and the small stables were clean and already playing host to a few mules and sway backed nags. Max left Brutus to be brushed down and fed by a silent, aging ostler and entered the inn.

From the equine occupants of the stables he'd expected there to be other guests, likely marooned travellers like himself, but the sight that met him as he entered the public room was completely unexpected.

It was full to the brim – in fact, it looked like every soul within miles was pressed into the inn's public room, and not only men but even some women and several young lads seated on the innkeeper's counter.

From the darkness outside it appeared the only building around so where the hell had all these people come from? And, even more to the point, why? The tankard of ale the landlord placed in front of him was cracked, and the ale, though decent, was hardly a sufficient attraction to brave such weather.

The only place there was any space was an invisible circle which formed around Max himself as he made his way towards a bench in the back. Clearly he was being given space.

At first he thought it was his scar. It had certainly put off people in London, and at least once with spectacular effect. But as he thawed out of his apathy he noticed quite a few of the people present were even more damaged than he.

This recognition was followed by the realization, both sad and strangely comforting, that he was not the only decommissioned soldier in this tiny inn. Which was peculiar, to say the least.

Max drank the rest of his ale and ate the bread and surprisingly good cheese that followed it, and tried to gather the strength to go find the pallet in a narrow back room which the innkeeper informed him was the only accommodation the inn could offer.

He was just rising when a hush fell on the room. For a moment he thought it was some reaction to his movement, perhaps his scar was even more intimidating than he had realized, but then the man seated closest to him patted the table and leaned over, whispering.

'About to start.'

That was it. Something in the quiet certainty of those words made him resume his seat.

The hush shifted to a murmur of approval and a squeaking of benches and chairs as bottoms settled more comfortably.

'Good evening, everyone.'

Max straightened abruptly at the voice, and not merely because it was female and well-bred.

It was older and deeper – definitely deeper – but the last time he had heard it was in an orchard probably not many miles from there. Being told one was a blind fool was hard to forget.

The men and women answered almost as a chorus.

'Good Evening, Miss Walsh.'

Miss Walsh. Emma Walsh, younger sister of the woman who had jilted him seven years ago and then gone and made a fool of both of them only last week.

He could still hear Charlotte Walsh's voice as she turned and saw him seated on Brutus at the end of Rotten Row in Hyde Park, her beautiful golden curls peeping from the high poke bonnet lined with silk as cornflower blue as her eyes. The same eyes that widened alarmingly as her gaze took in the damaged skin along his cheek and jaw. Even in shock she was a picture of soft loveliness, but her voice was high and unnatural as she blurted out that damning sentence.

'Oh *no*, Max! You were once so handsome!'

Her expression of horror had been almost comical. Something a poor actress would adopt in a stage farce when confronted by a poorly constructed Gothic spirit. It had marred her own beauty, but less permanently than his scars.

He wondered if she would have found the strength to hide her aversion if she had been better prepared for the state of his face. Probably. His newly earned title and fortune were some incentive to practice. Or perhaps he was being unjust to her. At least her response had been an honest one, unlike most of her dealings with him seven years ago.

Even as these thoughts rose up in his mind like bile, they fell back again because Miss Emma Walsh began to speak.

It hardly occurred to him to wonder what on earth she was doing in this place, reading a book to this motley crowd, when her voice and the story she began reading pulled him away from that sordid scene in Hyde Park and straight into the story she was reading.

"...all he could see from the cliff was the empty desert and far, far on the horizon a faint puff of smoke as the riders vanished between the ragged hills. Between them the Nile twisted like a great silvery snake, shimmering with venom. Scarred crocodiles sunned themselves among the papyrus reeds, their jaws open with delight at the prospect of more fools wishing to reach the temple on the other side. Their gaping jaws emitted no sound but in the whisper of the wind he could hear their warning - You shall not cross. Not whole, at least.

'The Sprite Queen took Gabriel's hand, her palm a wisp of breath against his hot skin. 'It must be done, Gabriel. But I have no power once we touch water. It is that or accept that Jephthah has won.'

A rumble of denial and condemnation spread like thunder through the room. The same man who bid Max sit tapped his fist several times on the table, muttering under his breath.

'Never! Never!'

Emma Walsh looked up from the book, her grey-blue eyes alight with laughter.

'Do you think Gabriel will balk at a few crocodiles?' she challenged and the rumble became a roar of 'nay!'s.

To Max's memory, Emma Walsh herself had certainly not balked at much. At least not seven years ago. But otherwise she had changed quite drastically. The scruffy girl of seventeen was gone and with it the rather serious frown that often marred her pixie-ish face.

Charlotte had often called her the family cuckoo because she looked so different from the ethereal Walshs – smaller, with brown rather than golden hair, and grey-blue eyes rather than the dazzling crystalline blue of her older sister and brother.

That day in the orchard Emma had warned him that Charlotte would not marry him on his soldier's pay, not even for the Dukedom he might eventually inherit should his uncle die without issue. And they had argued. As usual. Unlike her lovely older sister, Emma had a gift for rubbing people the wrong way. That summer they had argued so often Mrs Walsh had begun concocting all manner of excuses to ensure her daughter disappeared when he came to call.

But though she was as argumentative as Socrates with a thorn in his backside, she had been quite right about her sister. His offer of marriage had been accepted with all due flattery, but the excuse of their state of mourning for her father's death earlier that year coupled with his departure for the war, eased her way to postpone any official announcement. He was hurt but not surprised when her letters, never very informative, spaced out. He himself was finding corresponding with her slow going.

He *was* surprised and hurt to hear of her very advantageous marriage to a marquess a year later, though.

He was even more surprised to receive a letter from her a year ago. When he didn't answer, being too taken up in recovering from the effects of an ambush in the Pyrenees to even manage a polite dismissal, it was followed by more letters.

The crowning glory reached the day after the battle of Toulouse, achieving an impressive feat of postal delivery. It was a tangle of flowery sentences about youthful mistakes, how hard and lonely it had been for her when he left to war, the impact of the loss of her husband, and even a hint that Lord Vincent had taken advantage of her youthful credulity. The latter made Max raise his brows – he knew poor Robert Talgarth from school and the fellow was far too amiable for the role Charlotte Walsh cast him in. The letter had ended with a flattering assertion that her heart had always been his. If he could but return safely to England, perhaps...

She was, in short – widowed, far less wealthy than she wished to be, and willing/waiting.

He had been amused, annoyed, a little flattered, but not very curious.

His answer had been accordingly polite and completely non-committal. He had no interest in renewing his acquaintance with Charlotte Walsh. But when he returned to London curiosity had won out after all and he had gone to view the only woman he had been foolish enough to love and who now offered herself so prettily to a man she had not seen in almost seven years.

He hadn't chosen Hyde Park as the place to renew their acquaintance. Fate had made that choice. He had recognized her immediately, standing in a small group of men and women on the grass several yards from where he was riding along Rotten Row with a fellow officer.

She was still strikingly beautiful and he waited a little uneasily for the thudding heartbeat that had accompanied encounters with her near his uncle's home at Nethercote.

They did come but for the absolutely wrong reason. She turned, recognition lighting her eyes but then as her gaze moved over his face the feline contentment vanished and the words burst out of her, high pitched and protesting, like steam escaping a kettle.

'Oh, no, Max! You were once so handsome!'

He knew the effects of shock and could not really blame her for such childish crudeness. Shock tended to strip people and wrong-foot them. But when she turned away, her hand gesturing to him to stand back, as if he was threatening to approach, her second sentence was no longer born of shock but directly from her own callousness.

'That is not fair! You should have warned me ~~you were deformed!~~'

Even with all the bustle of the park the hush around them was audible. Despite everything he felt anger and disappointment – at himself and at her. But also pity – he knew with some guilty satisfaction her precious society would hold her accountable for such crude cruelty. Others might cringe at the damage to his face, but they were rather more careful about revealing their distaste.

It was precisely as Emma Walsh had told him that day in the orchard:

'Lottie will never love you as much as she adores herself. She won't trust you unless you idolize her. You may be well-looking but that isn't enough. You must either showcase her or provide her the means to do so. Deep down she knows you won't idolize her, and since the current Duke is only forty and might even remarry and bear issue, she cannot count on spending his wealth and title as a certainty.'

'And yet she agreed to wed me,' he'd shot back, angry and more hurt than he ought to have been at the spiteful words of a plain younger sister.

'And yet she has not set a date for the marriage, despite your pleas, has she?' Emma had replied, hands on hips, her brown hair in its usual tangle, and her grey eyes in full storm. He'd wanted to dismiss her words as spiteful and jealous but they touched his own unease too sharply for that.

How old would Emma she be now? If Charlotte was twenty-five, Emma would be twenty-three. Charlotte had hardly changed, but Emma looked very different from his memory. She had certainly learned to smile. Her eyes slanted upwards at the corners, two dimples bracketing a surprisingly full mouth. Against all reason he tensed as her gaze moved over her crowd. And stopped. The stormy blue grey became very evident as her eyes widened, her gaze moving over his face. His scar tingled as her eyes slid down the raw slice of the bayonet.

He waited for her to mirror her sister's response. Her eyes didn't slink downwards or away as people so often did but compassion was almost worse than disgust.

Then she smiled again, a totally different smile. It bore recognition, pleasure, and a peculiar wistfulness.

He straightened on the rickety bench, utterly present.

His heart, which had been working away with boring monotony, suddenly set off like a barrel bouncing down a boulder-strewn hill.

His hands and feet had been thawing all too slowly but they suddenly blazed and every hair on his body rose on alert. It was like the call of '*Voltigeurs!*' while riding through the ravines in the Pyrenees.

It lasted no more than the space of a few breathes. When he surfaced from his shock she had already picked up reading where she stopped. He didn't listen, didn't hear a word, just sat in shock as his body slowly unraveled the chaotic tangle it had plunged into. Until all that was left was the insistent throbbing that stretched from his throat to his groin – a column of utterly surprising agony.

Not once in all his thirty years had he experienced such a cannonade of lust. He certainly hadn't expected to feel it for a young woman with only passable looks who knew him for a fool and spent a whole summer long ago picking fights with him.

The groans dragged him back to reality. The shifting and shuffling as people rose. The man next to him leaned in again.

'She'll be back on Wednesday if you're in the area, soldier. But not here. At the House.'

'The House?'

'Hope House. That's why you're here, aren't you?'

'I...no. I am on my way to Nethercote.'

The man sat back.

'Forgive me, I thought... seeing as you're a soldier.'

'I am. But what is Hope House?'

'House for the likes of us. Back from the war and down on our luck. If you need a roof over your head for a day or a month and help finding honest work. Just half a mile away and Miss Walsh usually does her readings there but the painters were in the big hall and Mrs Reed, a real dragon, she is, said she won't have us all brushing against her newly painted walls until they're good and dry, so Miss said we'd take the public room here rather than miss the reading. Every Monday and Wednesday evenings.'

He nodded and left, smiling at Emma as she stood by the innkeeper and his wife. Max stood too, waiting for her to turn to him as he knew she must. His mind and body had calmed again, giving him hope that that peculiar attack had been the result of bone-weariness and the memories of years ago dredged up by the embarrassing encounter with Charlotte and his imminent return to Nethercote.

He remained by the wall as she spoke to the members of her audience as they slipped out into the cold night. By the time she turned to him he was himself again. He waited for her eyes to fall from his scar but her gaze fixed on his with the same disconcerting directness he remembered from seven years ago. She crossed the room and stood on the other side of the wooden table.

'Hello Max. What on earth are you doing here?'

Max. She had always insisted on calling him Max, no matter how often her mother corrected her. It had annoyed him as well. Now it was a direct assault on his equilibrium so he went about setting the boundaries.

'Good evening, Miss Walsh.'

She smiled, pressing her mouth into a prim line and sinking into a curtsy.

'Good evening, your grace. Now, what on earth are you doing at the Giant?'

He sighed at the futility of scolding Emma Walsh into behavior becoming of a gently bred young woman. If her stickler of a mother hadn't succeeded despite very impressive efforts, he was unlikely to have any noticeable effect

'I was on my way to Nethercote but my horse had enough. So I stopped. From your presence here I gather I am closer than I realized?'

She nodded.

'Nethercote is just two miles due west but in the dark you could have missed the turning. Mr Bidds could organize a gig, if you still wish to go. Are they expecting you?'

'No. I wasn't certain I was heading this way until I was halfway to Dorset. I only meant to ride to Richmond Park but somehow...'

Her eyes widened and again he saw compassion and, peculiarly, approbation. As if such an absurd act made absolute sense.

'Well, in that case I don't suggest you descend upon old Mr and Mrs Farraday after dark. It would likely give

them a seizure to have the new master show up close on midnight. But as far as I know The Giant, despite its name, has no accommodation. Where is Bidde putting you up?’

‘I have a choice between a pallet in the attic or the stable...’

‘The stable! Most assuredly not! You could stay the night at Hope House. We are rather full but if there are no beds I can double with Mrs Greeley. Then you could have my bedroom.’

My bedroom.

The thought of Emma Walsh’s bedroom sent another spurt of frantically unwelcome fire through his already shocked body. The absurdity of feeling everything and more he had wondered if he would feel on seeing her sister, but for this very unpredictable young woman didn’t lessen the sensations by one iota, just layered embarrassment on discomfort.

‘Thank you, Miss Walsh, but I wouldn’t dream of evicting you from...Actually, why *are* you staying at this... Hope House?’

‘I work there. Mama sold the cottage after Lottie came out of mourning and went to live with Lottie in Town but I chose not to join them so I live at Hope House and help Mrs Greeley. She is General Greeley’s widow and in charge of the house, and in charge of me as well, for that matter as she is my godmother and it is thanks to her Mama has agreed to leave me behind. Given what happened in London last week I think the least I can do to alleviate Walsh shame is offer you my bed.’

He wished she would stop mentioning her bed. Once he had a decent night’s sleep these strange reactions would likely disappear. Exhaustion could do strange things to a man, he knew all too well.

‘You are not responsible for your sister’s behavior.’

‘I know, but I still want to push her into a millpond for being such a silly fool. After Mama’s ludicrous letter I almost decided to go to London and box her ears. I know it probably doesn’t comfort you in the least but I still think you’ve had a narrow escape. Even since Talgarth died she’s convinced herself she should have waited for you rather than wed him, especially when it became known you were a war hero and doubly so when you inherited the Nethercote title and fortune sooner than expected when poor Alfred fell under a carriage. I’m awfully sorry she broke your heart again but I should warn you that Mama is hard at work convincing her to concoct a pretty apology.’

He smiled. It was the orchard all over again.

‘I have every faith it will be convincing. However, you can save your mother the bother and tell her I had no intention of offering for Charlotte even before her reaction to this horror’ – he indicated his scar – ‘I daresay you want your pound of flesh by having me admit you were right seven years ago?’

Her eyes widened and to his shock she reached out and touched her fingers to the ridged flesh alongside his neck.

‘It’s not a horror, Max, so pray do not be foolish. Does it still hurt?’

He shook his head, battling another spear of heat that sent his heart into a clumsy gallop.

This was becoming embarrassing. He ought to send her on her way and put an end to this peculiar and utterly misplaced intimacy. He opened his mouth to wish her good night and something else entirely came out.

‘Sometimes it burns. A little.’

She nodded.

‘Dr. Ames at the House has some knowledge of scarring. I don’t mean to minimize your case, but there are a few men there with far more extensive scars and wounds. My sister is an even greater fool than I thought. What on earth was Mama on about? I think you look better like this. You were far too handsome for your own good before. The devil to Charlotte’s angel as Mama liked to say. She only wished your eyes were blue instead of grey, she felt that was a better aesthetic with Charlotte’s cornflower eyes.’

He tried to frown and failed.

'I see you still say precisely what you think, Emma Walsh.'

'It saves time. Were you really not planning to offer for Lottie? She was convinced you would.'

'Good lord, based on what?'

'You wrote to her.'

'I felt ignoring her completely would be construed as sour grapes. She wrote me a dozen letters to which I responded, eventually, with three lines saying I was sorry for her loss.'

'I think she construed that as being you were sorry for your loss.'

He burst out laughing, rubbing at the protesting skin along his cheek.

'Since you are being so direct, you will oblige me by making it absolutely clear to her, and to your mother, that I have no intention whatsoever of making another offer, no matter how much she succeeds in masking her disgust. I have no doubt she will find a perfectly suitable replacement quite quickly. No doubt she always had other prospects in mind; I doubt someone as savvy as she placed all her eggs in such a frayed basket.'

Her eyes sank from his, the first sign of evasion since she looked up from her reading and twisted his world on its axis. Without thinking he covered her clasped hands. They were chilly and he tucked them closer between his.

'You always worried too much about matters that weren't under your control...'

He long lashes rose for a brief moment and then dipped again but not quickly enough to hide the shine of tears. It shocked him far more than her sister's public display of disgust.

'Emma...' his voice was hoarse and her lashes rose again, showing a blaze of fury.

'Sometimes I hate Lottie! How dare she... I could... She never did deserve you!'

'Don't be so hard on her, she is what she is. To be fair, I don't think anyone deserves me at the moment.'

She snatched her hand from his and he stopped himself for reaching for them again.

'Because of that scar?' She scoffed. 'Are you really so vain you think it diminishes you?'

'I don't think it's an improvement but no, not because of that. War leaves much more potent scars than the visible ones. I was very lucky, luckier than most, but I'm too... weary to be interested in a wife or society. All I want is to reach Nethercote, hopefully find all is in order as my steward assures me, and do nothing but read and ride for a year. At least.'

She brushed the damp from under her eyes and tugged a handkerchief out of an oversized reticule.

'That is a lovely dream but the moment the county hears you are in residence you will be besieged. So you had best be prepared.'

'I'm rather hopeful the tales of my deformity will discourage that kind of attention.'

She rolled her eyes.

'No one but my fool of a sister is likely to regard your scars against all your other assets.'

'Ah, you think it balances out against a dukedom and a fortune?'

'Are you searching for compliments, your grace?'

'And if I am? Will you oblige?'

'Very well. Aside from falling in love with my sister I always thought you were the most intelligent man I met. Will that do? Oh, my goodness, Max - you're blushing!' She burst into laughter, sitting down on the bench with

a thump.

He rubbed his cheek again, as if that could erase the embarrassment. But he sat down nonetheless. She might be thoroughly disconcerting in his present addled state but he felt more present and himself than he had in... ages. Perhaps the ale in this ancient tavern was bewitched.

'I *thought* Mama was exaggerating.' She continued, still giggling. 'She was convinced you were so overcome with yearning you accosted Lottie in the park, did you?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I should be begging yours on behalf of my horrid family. Mama wrote that you were so impatient to see Lottie you accosted her in the park.'

'Good God, your mother and sister were born under the same delusional star. I didn't even know she would be in the park. I was out riding with a friend and I certainly had no intention of even calling on your sister. When I saw her the only emotion I felt was annoyance that I would have to be polite. Then she...'

He stopped. He didn't want to burden Emma with her sister's foolish words. But clearly he had underestimated London gossip.

'You needn't try to wrap it in clean linen, Max. My friend Alvie was there and wrote telling me precisely what Lottie said. I am quite pleased that society still has enough decency to shun her for her behaviour. I think that is why she is so mortified. Mama wrote that she wondered if it were best to come home for a few weeks until it all blows over. And of course so that Lottie can apologize to you in person.'

He grimaced and she frowned, the little line between her brows appearing. At least that had not changed.

'Are you truly not in love with her any more, Max?'

'Would it be horrible to admit my sentiments didn't survive a year of separation? Either the war cleansed her from my system or I must be a very fickle fellow. I honestly have a hard time imagining what my life would have been like had we married. If I had returned from the war like this and we both had no choice but to make the best of a bad deal. That lecture of yours in the orchard annoyed the h...well, annoyed me, but you were quite right to warn me.'

Her lashes dropped again and a stain of color bloomed across her cheeks, making his fingers itch to touch that spreading heat. He removed his hands from the table and temptation.

'You remember that.'

I remember quite a bit about you. How strange.

But I don't remember this. This is new.

There was something in the Walsh family what was clearly very bad for his health. And heart.

'I remember. You managed to be both infuriating and adorable. You haven't changed.'

The blush turned from rose to beet and she stood.

'I should go now. I still think you should come to the House. You will be more comfortable.'

In your bed? I won't sleep a wink.

'I will see you safely there and return to the Giant. I have slept in far worse places, believe me.'

'You needn't bother escorting me, I know my way.'

'Even if you are mad enough to walk around alone and in the dark on a country lane, do you honestly think I could go to sleep not knowing if you arrived safely?'

'Jem, the innkeeper's son, usually sees me there.'

'Well, I shall see you safe this time. And stop arguing with me, you are only delaying the inevitable.'

She closed her mouth.

'Very well, your grace.'

'See how easy that was?'

'Easy for you. I am only conceding because you look tired enough to fall asleep standing.'

He sighed, trying not to smile.

'I'll take capitulation in whatever form it arrives. Lead on, MacDuff.'

'It is *lay* on. Why does no one ever get that right?'

'Because 'lead on' is an improvement on the original.'

'An improvement on Shakespeare? Heresy!' She fastened her cloak and his fingers twitched with the need to adjust the velvet cape over her hair.

'I'd forgotten you prefer dead people to live ones.'

'Not always. Have you no scarf?'

'I told you, I wasn't planning on a long ride.'

'Hmph. I shall find you one at the house. Mrs Greely is a keen knitter.'

'If this is another attempt to make me cry off escorting you, it is impressive, but it has still failed.'

She sighed and they set out into the dark.

The wind had dropped but the air was still and cold and they walked swiftly and arrived sooner at a large stone house than he wished.

Candlelight flickered from some of the windows of the big house and he had to admit it looked more inviting than the squat inn down the lane.

She turned by the door, the hood of her cape falling back as she looked up at him, her hand outstretched.

'Sleep here tonight.'

His body heard what it wanted to hear, beating back the cold and the emptiness. He took a hurried step back, shaking his head. She sighed and shrugged.

'Will you at least send word to the house tomorrow that you arrived safely at Nethercote so I do not have to imagine you lying frozen in the snow for want of some common sense?'

'I promise. Besides, I must return on Wednesday for the next reading.'

'You mean to come again?'

'Of course. I must know what happens next.'

One month later...

'Leila knew love was never intended for her kind, and she had no such expectations. So when love came she hid it deep inside the caverns of her soul and turned her back on it though it blazed hotter than the August sun. But even the best hiding places must eventually be abandoned or they become graves. And so when she stood at Gabriel's side above the valley and felt his pain strike sharper and deeper than the swords that decimated her family and dreams, she finally said the words that would bring either damnation or release:

'It was only ever you, Gabriel, my one and only love.'

The End.'

Emma shut the book with a thuck that reverberated in the hushed silence of the room. There was some snuffing and handkerchiefs were more visible than usual. Clearly none of those present wished to accept that verdict that the book was done and they must step out of this world forever.

Max had greater worries to contend with.

Rather, worry – singular. She was seated in an armchair facing the room, her wavy brown hair drawn back, showing the sweep of her profile that had become imprinted on his mind these past weeks as he attended each of her readings, watching that lovely landscape from his chair by the window.

There was much more room in the Great Hall of Hope House and from this angle he could watch her as she read without her looking up and catching him staring and making him lose his concentration and sending him into those absurd spirals of heat and lust.

His hope that they might not survive a good night's sleep and a decent meal had proven unfounded. They'd only taken hold and woven a tighter and tighter web about his soul each time he saw her. Sneakily his mind had suggested that familiarity might undermine this strange fever so he'd allowed himself to be drawn into the workings of Hope House in between dealing with the duties of his new position and estates.

In fact, it was Hope House and its demands that made the latter bearable. Winter meant many more veterans needed housing and feeding and he'd offered to help with the refitting of an old wing of the building to meet the house's growing needs. He'd not only contributed funds but joined the builders and carpenters. He liked working side by side with other soldiers. This was a far more natural world to him than that of the slew of local gentry which insisted on paying their respects to the new duke.

He enjoyed the physical exertion and tried to keep his mind on the sawing of wood for beds and not on wondering what task Emma was engaged in at the moment. She and Mrs Greely, a tall, bluff and handsome woman in her fifties, would often come by with refreshments and he waited for those moments with all the anticipation of a soldier waiting to set up his tent and rest after a long day's march.

The value of every day was becoming marked by whether he had succeeded in stealing a few moments conversation with her. It was embarrassing but undeniable. Her reading nights were particularly valuable because he'd set the precedent of following her into the little study she shared with Mrs Greely where they accounts were kept and she would bring out General Greely's brandy and they would talk about everything and nothing.

Familiarity was thus far failing miserably as an antidote.

Not even the blessedly short visit to the neighborhood by Charlotte and Mrs Walsh had ruined his mood. It had temporarily caused Emma to frost over in her dealings with him, though.

He knew her better now – well enough to realize her withdrawal was born of worry, rather than anger. She obviously still thought it was inevitable that he would fall under Charlotte's spell once more.

He'd done everything to discourage Charlotte and her mother without being uncivil and that merely for Emma's sake. But after a week of declining invitations on the grounds that he was exceedingly busy with his new responsibilities, they had taken a path that had demanded firmer action. While he was hard at work with the others lugging the newly made beds into the rooms they had arrived at Hope House in the finest promenade dresses London modistes could supply, like two peacocks strayed into Seven Dials.

Mrs Greely had naturally invited them to stay for tea but her hospitality had not extended to making them otherwise comfortable. She'd sat like a disapproving gargoyle on a cathedral wall while Emma poured the tea, while Mrs Walsh tried to sparkle with wit and condescension, and while Charlotte had been charming and sweet and utterly transparent.

He'd been civil for Emma's sake but with every passing moment of Emma's obviously uncomfortable silence he'd resolved to put an end to whatever delusions the Walsh women labored under. So when they'd finally stood to leave and capped it all with an invitation he join them for tea at the house they leased in the village

the next day, he'd accepted. Since the subtler message of avoiding them had not made his point, it was clearly time to make it unequivocally clear to both mother and daughter there would be no repeat of his proposal.

He'd done precisely that, and though Charlotte had momentarily resorted to tears, it had been clear her heart wasn't in this battle. They'd both left her mother weeping in the parlor as she'd seen him to the door and even wished him well. He little doubted it had been a mixture of stubbornness and vanity that had brought her along with her mother and she was relieved not to have to have received another proposal.

'I rather like being a widow, you know,' she had confided in the corridor. 'There are so many possibilities.'

'Handsomers ones, too.'

She'd blushed at that, but laughed, reminding him she did, after all, share some characteristics with Emma. 'I was beastly, wasn't I? Everyone said so, though to be fair it *was* a shock. Now I've grown accustomed it is not quite so bad. And if you turn your head to the good side you are still quite the handsomest man of my acquaintance.'

He'd laughed at that all the way back to Hope House. He'd wanted to share that with Emma but he'd arrived just as everyone was settling for the Wednesday read so had to contain himself in patience. This final chapter of the final book of the Desert Boy series Emma had been reading had taken longer than usual, or at least felt longer.

The denouement of the tale, reuniting Gabriel and the Sprite Queen, had carried the interest of the audience, so perhaps only he had noticed that Emma's reading had been less spirited than usual. He worried sometimes that she worked too hard as she and Mrs Greely struggled to accommodate so many soldiers newly released into the world and struggling like him to find their way, though unlike him they did not have a fortune and a home awaiting them.

No, Nethercote was not a home. It was a house. A very large and moderately comfortable one, but not yet a home. A home meant more than a roof over one's head. He felt far more at home in Hope House than he did at Nethercote.

In any case, familiarity had definitely not worked its magic. Or perhaps it had – an entirely different form of magic.

He remained by the window as the room emptied. For once Emma did not smile at him as she went to return the book to the shelves.

'Did your visit to town fare well, your Grace?'

Your Grace.

He could not tell if that was a good or a bad omen.

'It fared excellently. Thank you.'

The book hit the floor with a thump and bounced under an armchair. She cursed and bent to retrieve it, the plain muslin dress her mother had tutted at the previous day molding itself to her backside. He shoved his hands into his pockets but did not look away from the very pleasant view nor did he try to fight the surge of heat that swept from his chest to his groin. He'd given up on trying to deny the attraction a couple weeks ago. And as she finally straightened with the rescued book and shoved it into its slot before turning to face him, chin up and her lips pressed together with determination, he abandoned trying to deny the other charge his mind had been levelling at him almost from that first evening at the Giant.

He had gone well and truly mad.

Because in a matter of weeks, even days, he'd become convinced this girl, this woman, was everything he wanted – the axis of a world he was searching for, the one person who answered the inner voice he hardly even knew existed.

'It is late, your grace, and snowing. You should make your way to Nethercote before the road is impassable.'

'It was close to impassable when I made my way up. I would wager the drifts are several feet high already,' he replied conversationally, moving towards her. She crossed her arms and stepped back against the shelves.

'Then it was foolish to come. You should have returned directly to Nethercote. Or were you too excited to come share the news?'

'I did not wish to miss the final chapter of Gabriel and Leila's journey after all the travails they had to suffer. It was a moving finale and I was in a sentimental mood.'

'Sentiment can be costly. The roads will be dangerous in the dark. You had best speak with Mrs Greely about staying in one of the new rooms for the night.'

She slipped past him and towards the door but he followed.

'There are no mattresses made yet. You would have me sleep on wooden slats?'

'I am certain something could be arranged.'

'Last time I was stranded you offered your own bed. Have I fallen so far in your estimation, then?'

She paused at the door but did not turn.

'If no other arrangement can be made, you may have my room.'

He came to stand beside her, his hand on the knob, his heart thumping uncomfortable as he stepped out onto the ice.

'I think I am more likely to fall asleep on a cold floor than in your bed, Emma. My imagination is already running riot at the thought.'

'You must be giddy indeed at your betrothal. It is not like you to jest at my expense, Max.'

'I am neither betrothed, nor jesting, Emma. I thought I had made myself absolutely clear both to you and to them than I had no intention of offering again for Charlotte. After yesterday's horrific tea I realized I had to make myself crystal clear, which was why I accepted their invitation. I thought such a discussion was best conducted in private. I didn't think you would jump to a conclusion that went counter to everything you knew of me this past month.'

'You were besotted with her once and she is even lovelier today than seven years ago.'

'In truth I like her better now than I did then, but I am not besotted with her and the thought of marrying her or anyone but one fills me with something approaching panic. And before you start feeling sorry for her, she was quite relieved at being rejected. She says she quite likes being a widow. I think the only one to be pitied here is your mother, but I'll refrain. Now are we done with that nonsense?'

She stood for moment in silence, her shoulders tense, her eyes downcast and her mouth tightly held. He wished he could read her. Perhaps he was completely wrong that there was a growing affinity between them. Perhaps all she saw in him was a friend.

He stepped back.

'I'm sorry, Emma. I didn't mean to embarrass you. Good night.'

She nodded briefly and hurried out, not even bothering to close the door behind her. Any thought he'd had of applying to Mrs Greely for a bed went with her and he headed down the corridor to the doors leading to the stables. They'd built a covered passageway from kitchens to stables but it was still mortally cold outside and he hunched over, shoving his hands deep into his pockets until he reached the stables and found Brutus, happily munching on hay in the back stall.

'Sorry, Brutus. Time to go home.' Again that word rankled. Brutus stopped his munching and stared, wide-eyed, at the madman, daring him to act on that threat. 'I'd rather stay, too, old boy, but I'm not very welcome

here at the moment...'

'That's not true, Max.' Emma was out of breath and she had on nothing more about her than the silk shawl she'd worn during the reading. Her cheeks were red but he could not tell if it was from exertion, cold, or embarrassment or all three. 'Of course you are welcome here. You mustn't ride out in that storm in the dark.'

His unruly heart picked up speed again and Brutus gave a huff and went back to his hay.

'You needn't be concerned; I won't end up frozen in a ditch. It is no more than two miles on open roads. Besides, if I stay tonight, by morning all this snow might truly make the roads impassable and then you will be stuck with me in earnest.'

'We will take that risk. Come back inside.'

'Emma...'

'I'm sorry I was so rude.'

'You weren't rude. You were laying down boundaries. That is your prerogative. I did not mean to make you uncomfortable with my attentions.' He could hear how stilted his voice was and wished he were either felt less or was more articulate about it. Here he was, a grown, experienced man, and he had not a smidgen of a notion how to court her. She was watching him as if he were a half-wit, too. He turned back to Brutus. 'I really should leave.'

She grabbed the sleeve of his coat.

'No, wait. This is all my fault. I thought...I was certain you would fall back in love with her.'

'For heaven's sake, could we please put all talk of your sister behind us? I am thoroughly bored by it. Even if I was not in love with you I would not consider marrying her.'

Her hand tightened on his sleeve and her jaw slackened. His own words rang in his ears. Had he truly just said that? Dropped it on her like a bale of hay? God help him, he deserved to be run through all over again.

'Perhaps...perhaps you should go inside. We, uh...could discuss...that is...we might talk...Damnation, Emma, just go inside before I make more of a fool of myself. I should have kept quiet and wooed you properly. I'm sorry if I frightened you...'

'I'm not frightened,' she said, her voice little over a whisper. 'No, that's not true. I'm terrified, but only because I so wish it to be true. Perhaps I *should* go inside. Tomorrow you will wake and wonder what on earth made you say such nonsense. I shan't remind you.'

She untangled her hands from his coat but he caught them and held fast, as he would to a branch when teetering over the cliff face.

'You wish it to be true?'

'Please go, Max.'

'No. Do you wish it to be true? Answer me, Emma.'

She tugged her hands from his and covered her face.

'I did seven years ago. I never meant to feel like this again. I don't want this. It hurts too much...'

'You...seven years ago? You were just a child.'

'I turned eighteen while you were courting Lottie. I was only child enough not to realize how much I cared until she broke your heart and mine broke for you. And now I had to wait to hear whether she had won you once more and I couldn't bear it...'

He wrapped his arms around her, his heart throwing itself against his ribs in great booming thuds. He shut his eyes, absorbing her words, the joy and pleasure they brought with them, the comfort of her closeness, the

sweet hunger fed by her feel and scent. He tried to subdue the avaricious clamoring of his body as it absorbed the warmth of her curves pressed against him. Holding her was a wonderful agony. It felt so damn right. It *had* to be right.

Try not to ruin it, Max.

'Marry me.'

She wriggled out of his hold and if he could have slapped himself for his clumsiness, he would have.

'Wait, don't run away. I don't mean to press. Take all the time you need, Emma. We can continue as we are for...for as long as you wish.'

'You...I could not possibly marry you, Max.'

'Is it the scar?'

'Of course it is not the scar. I don't care a tinker's curse for the scar. But I am no proper duchess, Max.'

'I would hope not. I much prefer an improper duchess. You will make a perfectly improper duchess.'

'Pray don't make me laugh. This is serious, Max.'

'I am well aware of that.'

'You *are* serious.' Her voice was barely above a whisper. Then she shook her head. 'No, you couldn't possibly be serious.'

'I beg your pardon; I am as serious as this snowstorm.'

'I don't...I *can't* believe you. You are not quite in your right mind, you know. I know the war has affected you, and coming to Nethercote with all its responsibilities and now with Lottie and mama descending upon you...'

'Not one of those truths bears any weight with my loving you. I might wish I'd never met your sister so you would not have seen me for the callow fool I was but then I would not have met you. I can't unmake my mistakes, Emma. But this is not one of them. I love you. What on earth can I do to convince you?'

'I don't know.' Her voice was agonized, her eyes wide and bright and scared. Her arms were wrapped about her and he realized she was shivering even in the relative warmth of the stables. He must be a little mad to be proposing to her in the stables in the middle of a stormy night under the curious stares of Brutus, a droopy-lidded dray horse, and a mule.

'Do you at least wish it to be true?'

She swallowed, her throat stretching. So did the silence. Finally the words burst from her.

'Yes. More than anything.'

He'd held his breath that long and it shuddered out of him.

He touched her arm where it wrapped about her, then her cheek, cold and warm. Then he cupped her face, his fingers capturing every sensation – the softness of her earlobe, the thudding pulse below it, the short soft hairs at her nape.

Emma.

Mine.

Home.

'Well, then. Isn't it nice when wishes come true?' he asked as he drew her into his warmth.