

“A Terrible Beauty”

Season of the Furies - Book 1

a novel by

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© May 18, 2012

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Dedication

For my Mother who made a habit of placing pivotal books in my hands knowing that they would lead me somewhere. Her choices that led me here – “The How and Why Book of Florence Nightingale” and “Nurses Who Led The Way.” Nurses were among my first heros – right next to Wonder Woman. Many of us realize that they are actually one in the same. I also dedicate this book to Florence and Mary who didn’t understand the meaning of ‘no,’ nor the term, ‘a woman’s place,’ and to the thirty-eight other brave female souls who walked through the doors of Barrack Hospital and changed the future.

Prologue

Barrack Hospital, Scutari, Constantinople, Turkey

November 5, 1854

The stench struck her before they'd even reached the hospital entrance – the stench and the sound of hundreds of men moaning and crying for help. Belle lifted her handkerchief to cover her nose, fighting the impulse to gag as she leaned heavily against railing of the steps. It was as if the very odors of death, rot and contagion had formed an impenetrable wall, halting their progress. The air was thick with flies, their constant buzz creating an audible hum throughout the area. The insects landed on their caps, their cloaks, crawling on them – too many of them to be driven away. She looked around frantically for anyone, anything the least bit familiar. One of the nurses bumped into her back and Belle heard her gasp.

“I can't do this,” the young woman said. Belle thought her name was Molly. “I can't go in there. I won't.”

Good, I won't be the only one to run away, Belle thought as she turned to grasp the other woman's hand. Surely no one would blame them for leaving. No one could. A movement in front of her caught her eye. Miss Nightingale, her face, a study of calm, stood at the entrance to the maelstrom. Her very presence commanded obedience from the women who'd come to know her and to trust her as they trusted no one else. Her voice called out clear and strong and Belle clung to it as if it were a rope pulling her out of a roiling, black sea. “Ladies,” she began, “we are trained to ease suffering and the sights and sounds of suffering, even as egregious as these, must never deter us from our duty. Nursing is not a job to be laid down when it becomes too difficult. It is a calling, a vocation. I ask you for the sakes of the men in this desperate place to begin as you mean to go on. It is not only myself who asks this of you, but it is your Queen as well. Just as surely as these men showed so much bravery under fire, you too must now show the courage of your conviction. Care for the sick and wounded. Help them as you can and if nothing else, ease their passage from this world. The next few weeks will be among the most difficult of your lives, but with determination and our faith in God, we will prevail.”

Tears threatened Belle's eyes – tears of humiliation because for all of her noble intentions she'd been so willing to cut and run before they'd even begun. And where would she go anyway? “Begin as you mean to go on,” she whispered to herself. Belle turned to the white-faced Molly and linked arms with her.

“Come on, Molly,” she said, trying for bravado, but only managing a sound above a whisper. “We'll face perdition together. Besides, we've spent all our money on our kits.” They clung arm in arm as they moved up the steps and Belle attempted a slight smile as they passed Miss Nightingale. The other woman inclined her head in acknowledgment.

Belle heard there had been a fire at Barrack Hospital and the evidence remained. Soot still smeared the walls and the floors were completely burned away in some places. She concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. The smell inside was much worse than outside and Belle fought to keep from vomiting. She was certain that the only thing preventing

any of them from fainting was their fear of contact with the floor. Filthy straw lay everywhere, trapping blood and worse against the slippery wood. Rats darted brazenly down the corridors, unnoticed by the orderlies who were powerless to stop them given their sheer numbers.

Open buckets of human waste were scattered haphazardly among the rows of wounded soldiers. The men themselves lay abandoned on rotting piles of straw used as makeshift pallets. Those with enough strength, tried to knock away the rats who sought to feast on the men who had no strength left to defend themselves from the rodents' onslaught. Those who'd died, however, suffered the worst indignities of all from the rats' attack. One by one, the nurses succumbed to the filth and devastation around them. Molly ran to the closest window. Belle kept walking, tears running down her face, her head turning back and forth to look at the dying men who lay in agony in the tattered and blood-soaked remnants of their uniforms. Some called for help, reaching their trembling hands towards her. They had no blankets, no medicine because the supplies were still being unloaded from the ship. Belle felt weak and useless. She had nothing to offer them, nothing to bring them comfort nor peace – not even hope.

Two of the orderlies pushed past her, cursing her for getting in their way. They dragged the body of a soldier off a straw pallet, and carted him off. A wave of stench hit Belle as they passed her and she was unable to hold down the gore rising from her stomach. She barely made it to the window in time. Once she began retching she feared she would never stop. With every gag she remembered how she'd come to be here in this place that God, himself had turned His back upon. She hated her stepfather. She hated Michael Lassiter. God, she even hated her mother at this moment for being so weak and foolish as to marry that monster. Most of all, she hated herself, because if Andrew Lassiter ended up in this hell hole, she was the person who'd put him here.

The days passed in a blur. Endless, mind-numbing hours of scrubbing the wards – floors, walls and windows with Eau de Javelle and carbolic solution. Miss Nightingale had brought supplies from England, purchased with donations, as well as with her own funds. It gave Belle a sense of pride to know that her mother's jewelry suite had gone for such a noble purpose. She'd never have been able to stand the sight of the amethysts again, much less bear to wear them. The orderlies put the bedsteads together, grumbling the entire time at having to follow the directions of a woman. Even the most resistant of them was no match for Miss Nightingale, however. Under her orders sewer drains were repaired and the waist buckets cleared away. The decomposing rats beneath the floor boards were removed and any holes repaired to deny access to the vermin. Wounded soldiers received baths and clean nightshirts before being transferred into actual beds where they received regular food, water and what medications were available.

Belle stored the last bottle of carbolic solution and then began counting and storing the bottles of zinc sulphate. She frowned as she checked the inventory list. Two bottles of ferric chloride and three of camphorated vinegar were missing. She'd have to check the supply closet they'd set up in the sixth ward. Perhaps they'd been placed there by mistake.

"My hands are so cracked they keep snagging on the bandages and linens," Molly complained, stretching her back, "and my Ned used to love my hands. 'Mol,' he'd say, 'I never knew hands could be pretty 'til I seen yours.' Now look at them." She held up her hands for Belle to examine. They were cracked and raw. So were Belle's, but she still sympathized with the other woman. A year ago she'd had long fingernails and a maid who'd rubbed rose water and glycerine

into her skin daily. She smiled wistfully. “There’s lanolin salve. We’ll smell a bit like mutton I expect, but we’ve smelled worse.”

Molly chortled. “Better than goose grease.” The other young woman put a hand on her hips and studied her friend for a moment. Belle knew what was coming – the inevitable questions about why was she here and not tucked away somewhere in England, happily married with several children. She’d kept her distance from the other nurses, friendly in a quiet, reserved way, but nonetheless remote. Of all the women only Molly continued to ignore her polite, but firm boundaries, claiming a particular kinship with Belle since they’d faced the horrors of Barrack Hospital together on the day of their arrival. Molly believed that kinship granted her special license to press Belle for answers and Belle couldn’t refute her logic. The two young women may have come from vastly different backgrounds, but they still had much in common. They’d both known sorrow and loss. Molly, only a few months older than Belle, had already buried her husband and their child.

“You never talk about your people,” Molly began.

“I’m not much of a talker,” Belle said as Molly came to stand beside her.

“No, you’re not and I can’t help feeling it would be better for you if you were. You keep too much inside yourself, Belle. Everyone says so.”

“Everyone is entirely too curious about me. There’s nothing to tell.”

“No, I suppose not,” Molly returned shrewdly. “Except where you learned to hold your knife and fork the way you do, or why you drink your tea like you was sitting in a parlor with some duchess or other. You speak like quality and I’m thinking that before you took your training you’d never done a real lick of work in your life.” Belle turned back to the crate she was unpacking, but Molly, as usual, would not be put off. “So I’m thinking there’s a real story here, Belle. Why else aren’t you married to some handsome, young gentleman. A face like yours can make a man overlook a lot.”

“Somethings are best left alone, Molly.” Belle said, quietly.

“Maybe. Just so you know you’re not alone should you ever need to talk.” Belle met her eyes and saw the kindness there. “We all came here to help for our own reasons,” Molly continued. “Some reasons better than others, I suppose. Just know that I’ll stand as your friend no matter what.”

Belle felt a lump form in her throat and she longed for the emotional release of a good cry. She’d lost her capacity for tears, though, at least the ones for herself, shortly after arriving in Scutari where the world was one enormous wound that never healed. She wanted to tell Molly that if any of the nurses had known Belle before her fall they would have despised her. She wanted to confess her list of crimes and explain why she’d committed them – to tell Molly the whole sorry mess her life had become before being brought to the hospital on Harley Street. However, now was neither the time, nor the place. Instead she whispered, “Perhaps one day, Moll, when I’ve sorted it out myself.” Molly nodded and squeezed her arm.

Sudden commotion in the corridors caused both woman to abandon their tasks and follow the sounds. Within moments their matron had them scurrying into position at the admittance tents. The ships from the Crimea, carrying the wounded from the battle of Inkerman had landed. Now all their training as nurses, all their preparations would be put to the test.

Belle took her place in the reception tent ready to clean and tend the wounded before they were taken into the hospital. Before the day ended she would help tend more than fifteen hundred men and boys and among them she would find her salvation.

Araby

Chapter One

London, February 1853

“The Bloomquists hold such haphazard affairs,” Lady Arabella Winston remarked to her friend behind the confines of her fan.

Lady Katherine Saunders gave her own fan a dismissive flick. “They invite all manner of people with no real regard for their suitability,” she agreed. “There's definitely mutton loose amongst the lamb tonight.”

Both young ladies surveyed the ballroom from the relative seclusion of the potted palms used to decorate the northern end of the room. Their faces held similar looks of haughty disdain, a warning to others not to trespass on their privacy. The ballroom was their kingdom and other debutantes, as well as young gentlemen, knew better than to garner their displeasure. Lady Katherine and her friend were members of an exclusive and notorious trio of young beauties known as, The Furies. Earning their wrath led to crushing set downs, missed social opportunities, even outright ostracism and Lady Arabella Winston, known to fashionable society as ‘The Incomparable Araby,’ was their leader.

The Furies glided through the ballrooms and salons of London rending hearts and hopes at whim, three nineteen-year-old goddesses united by their power to captivate those around them. Their gowns were not merely fashionable, they set the fashion. Their wit was pointed and as far-reaching as a javelin. The Furies' power was absolute, their judgments, inescapable and without mercy. For marriage in fashionable society was an earnest business and never something to be left to chance. Fierce rivalries were commonplace when competing for the season's crop of available peers and no one was better at outdistancing the competition than The Furies.

Lady Katherine brushed at an errant crease in her gown, her lips forming a displeased pout. It was all artifice. Katherine Saunders didn't pout. She held a keen intelligence coupled with a rapier wit and used both freely. However, she'd recently decided that a slight, pouting expression, used sparingly, made her more alluring to a certain young viscount. “One can hardly navigate the ballroom without treading on some member of the merchant class or another. Don't they have curfews for commoners, or something?” she asked. She tugged at the wrist of her glove in annoyance. “Where's Sarah, by the way? She should be here by now. I want to know what happened. Nobody's so much as mentioned Damaris Kingsford all night.”

Araby drew a steadying breath at the mention of her rival's name. She'd longed to remain at home this evening. It was only her wish to avoid another confrontation with her stepfather that forced her to attend this evening's event. “You just mentioned her yourself,” she replied coolly, though she was far from feeling the boredom she affected. So many things remained at stake for her, for them all. Damaris hadn't come to any real harm she reminded herself, and the entire incident may have been successfully covered up. Still, if connection were made between the

Furies and Damaris Kingsford's abduction, then society's patronesses would exact swift and terrible retribution against all three of them.

The abduction scheme was a desperate attempt by Araby's stepfather, to ruin Damaris Kingsford, thereby eliminating her as Araby's rival for Jules Wentworth, the Earl of Arland and heir to the Strathmore dukedom. Araby only hoped the Furies would emerge unscathed from last week's series of catastrophic events. She could worry about securing Arland later. Perhaps Damaris had been returned home with none the wiser – an unlikely outcome if Lord Elkton, her stepfather's fellow conspirator had his way. Araby shuddered delicately.

Lord Elkton, a man of questionable grooming habits, was a lecherous hanger-on who'd gambled away his own fortune long ago and needed a well-dowered bride to refill his coffers. Damaris Kingsford, in spite of her ordinary ancestry, suited his needs perfectly. Her guardian had settled a sizable fortune on the girl making her near irresistible to a man of Elkhorn's stamp.

Araby would feel better once Sarah, an avid indulger in scandal sheets, penny dreadfuls and lurid gossip, appeared and told them what tales had made the rounds of today's salons.

As if summoned by her friend's thoughts, Sarah Jane Melbourne hastened through the crowd, clusters of her mahogany-colored ringlets bouncing around her jaw-line. Without a word Araby led them all towards the terrace. Once outside, she held up her fan to insure no one spoke before she'd satisfied herself that none were close enough to overhear them.

“What have you heard?” she asked Sarah without preamble.

“She's safe, no thanks to us,” the other girl replied, her tone a blend of fear and anger. Sarah had always operated as conscience for The Furies, restraining their actions before any lasting damage occurred. Araby wished that they'd listened to her a week ago before everything with Damaris Kingsford had gotten so far out of hand.

“Good. That's an end to this dreadful business,” Katherine stated. “When Arland returns...”

“It's hardly the end,” Sarah continued, her eyes still searching Araby's face. “They're married.” Araby's stomach dropped to her knees.

“Damaris and Elkhorn?” Katherine whispered.

Sarah shook her head. “Damaris and Arland.” Araby gripped her folded fan so hard its spines made a cracking sound. The night spun around her. She'd known it was a possibility once Arland learned the truth and set out to rescue Damaris. Still, she'd believed her own hold on Arland great enough to prevent his complete defection. Katherine placed a hand on her shoulder. Araby jumped at the unexpected contact. Oh God, what would become of her now. “What will he do to me?” she whispered, not realizing she'd spoken aloud, however softly.

“Arland will likely tarnish all our names,” Sarah began, “and it's no more than we deserve. This is by far the worst thing we've ever done.” Her head drooped as if the shame was almost too much to bear.

Katherine glared at her, “Arland is the least of her problems, you dolt.”

“True enough. His father is a duke and then there is Damaris' guardian to consider as well. Once word reaches him...” Sarah's voice trailed off. There was no need for her to finish her statement.

Araby fought the panic threatening to engulf her. There was someone much more lethal to her than either of those men. She drew in a ragged breath. Where could she go? What could she

do? He'd guess that she was the one who'd written Arland about the abduction. He'd learn of the marriage and this time her stepfather might just kill her. Oh God, how would she ever protect her mother?

"There are other peers, Araby," Katherine said quickly. "Many of high rank. You can still pull off a fabulous match. Arland can't sully any of our names without doing the same to his precious Damaris. Married or not, she would still be at the center of a scandal and Arland's sister will make her debut next Season. His father will see the sense of remaining silent, even if he does not. So will Damaris' guardian, come to that. None of them want scandal at their door. You still have your reputation. You are still the Incomparable."

It was too much to take in. All her plans had gone so hideously wrong. Arland could still destroy them all with just a few well-placed words. She never should have written him that note, even anonymously, yet if she hadn't.... Ultimately her stepfather would blame the failure of his plot on her. This called for a swift change in strategy.

Araby made a quick calculation. The Grantham's affair was in two days, another ball in three. If she could get through the evening, perhaps begin a mild flirtation. "Who's here tonight?" she demanded. "Someone who will suit."

"Lansing, Coltrane. Marshwell has his eye on Sarah, so no good looking there." Katherine patted a straying silver-blond curl back into place. She paused and gave her fellow Furies another of her shrewd looks. "Iredale. He's recently back from the Continent. He's presently a viscount and one day he'll become a marquess. His purse would give Croecus a run for his money."

"Eminently suitable," Sarah murmured drily.

Katherine laughed, a light, but brittle sound. "You'd do well to look to your own future, Sarah, but that's a lecture for another time and place. I suggest we return to the ballroom ladies." She reached out and pinched Araby's pale cheeks. "Best foot forward. Remember, Arland can't touch us without inviting scandal into his own house. Certainly your family will be...disappointed at the news of his marriage to that little nobody, but with Iredale in your pocket, you will be all right." She gripped her friend's shoulders as if to steady her. "Trust me on this."

Araby nodded, fighting to stop the spinning sensation in her head. She lifted her chin and curved her mouth into a stunning smile by sheer strength of will. Everything would be fine, she told herself as they entered the ballroom. It had to be. After all, she was the Incomparable Araby and any titled man would be thrilled to claim her as his bride.

Katherine sighed. "Oh, Lord, don't look now but here comes your spaniel." Araby turned to look over her shoulder. Andrew Lassiter, youngest brother to the Earl of Stowebridge crossed the room and moved steadily towards them. He was all she needed to make a further disaster of the evening – an impoverished third son trying to claim her attention when she had none to spare. Her stepfather would be less than pleased if he noticed Drew at her side again and the man would be volatile enough tonight once word of Arland's marriage circulated throughout the ball. Araby prayed her stepfather remained in the card room. He and his cronies usually played deeply enough that they rarely paid attention to any gossip floating about. She watched the young man wend his way through the crowd towards them. Every so often someone in one of the groups he passed would stop him to make an offhand comment and more often than not the comments drew

laughter from the other people. Drew's face stiffened and colored slightly before he continued on his way.

"For Heaven's sake, why don't you set him down hard, Arabella?" Katherine demanded with a flourish of her fan. "The boy is a menace."

If they only knew how much of a menace he really was, Araby thought. Andrew Lassiter had the power to ruin any chance she had of landing a peer simply by making a careless remark to the wrong person. He was far too observant for his own good, or for hers. He'd once witnessed the results of her stepfather's burst of temper first hand and correctly surmised the source of her bruised forearm a few days later. Araby had tried laughing denials, aloofness, even cajoling him to let matters rest, but the boy was determined to be her champion, completely ignorant of just how dangerous a man her stepfather could be.

"He's a sweet boy," Sarah remarked as she gave Katherine a stern look. "He's just a little young, that's all."

"You mean immature. He's no younger than any of us, but he's firmly tied up in his mother's leading strings. Besides, he was always such a sickly child," Katherine replied, her lip curling ever so slightly in distaste. "The last thing you need tonight is him frolicking at your feet like an over-exuberant pup, Araby. You have no time to waste if you want Iredale secured by the end of the Season."

"I know," she murmured. She'd learned from experience that the best way to deal with Andrew Lassiter was to grant him a country dance, flirt enough to render him incapable of cohesive conversation and then embarrass him. Nothing too harsh, but something guaranteed to make him turn red and garner a chuckle or two at his expense. He'd keep away from her for the rest of the evening.

Katherine made an exasperated sound as the young man stopped in front of Araby. He included all three of them in his bow as he greeted them in turn. "Lady Arabella, Miss Melborne." He delivered a slight pause. "Lady Katherine." Katherine stared down her regal nose at him. She hadn't missed his slight. Her father was of higher rank than Araby's and Sarah, though the grandniece of an earl, was only the daughter of a knight. Katherine should have been acknowledged first. Andrew Lassiter, Drew to those he counted as friends, knew exactly how to deal with Lady Katherine Saunders' derision. His mouth turned up ever so slightly at one corner. Araby dropped her gaze and pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. Really, Katherine could be so high in the instep – a trait learned at her mother's knee and constantly drilled into the girl since childhood. Not many young men held their own against Katherine and Araby felt a surge of admiration for Drew.

"Lady Arabella, I was hoping you had an unclaimed waltz," he said clearly and without even a hint of nervous stammering. He looked up at her with sincere adoration and Araby realized that if Drew were allowed to come into himself he would one day be not only handsome, but charming and perhaps even a little commanding. She steeled herself against softening towards him. It would only endanger them both.

"Hope springs eternal, as they say," she drawled as she arched one of her perfectly shaped eyebrows. She knew the effect suited her. "Don't you ever get tired of being rebuffed, Drew?"

“Yes,” he replied with candor, “but not enough to stop asking for a waltz.” His blue eyes held a soft, open expression and when Araby looked closer she saw the one thing in them more dangerous to her than anything else – sympathy. She immediately bridled. If he'd heard the whispers of Arland's hasty marriage to Damaris Kingsford, so had others. She looked out over the ballroom trying to discern any twitters, or sneers cast in her direction. There was nothing apparent and she turned her attention back to Drew. How dare he feel sorry for her. He was not even her social equal, not here in her kingdom where cachet counted more than social rank. Very well. In short order he would find his sympathy misplaced. He could have his waltz, but she doubted he would be smiling by the time it ended.

“As luck would have it I have saved the next one.” She gave him a smile that other men had called bewitching. Clearly, Drew thought so as well. “For right now you may escort me to the refreshment table.” Drew offered his arm. His eyes gleamed with happiness and his grin widened. Araby placed her hand in the crook of his arm and nodded to her friends. No, Drew Lassiter would not dance attendance on her this evening. She could guarantee it.

“You look lovely tonight, Lady Arabella,” Drew said once they were out of earshot of her friends. That...that color suits you.”

“Really?” Araby asked, slanting her gaze at him artfully. She knew how to tease. “And what color would you call it, Drew?”

“Pink, I suppose...I...I really don't know.” He was nicely flustered, but then he surprised her. “All I know is that it glows around you like a rose arbor in full bloom. You're this light in the very center, beautiful, yet so fragile. What color is it?”

She looked away from him, fumbling with the fan she held in one hand. “The draper called it Romantic Rose,” she murmured. Why did he have to say such things to her? Why did he have to notice what she tried to keep hidden? Just then a noise caught both their attention. It was a single, heart-wrenching cry, and a young girl ran towards the doorway, her chaperone in hot pursuit.

“What's happened to Miss Stevens?” Araby asked, tracing the path of the girl's flight back to its source. Then she knew. Three young men stood laughing, two of them apparently congratulating the third.

Drew made a sound of disgust. “I see Bennet hasn't lost his taste for tormenting the helpless. Miss Stevens was tonight's quarry. Each of them danced with her and then staged a mock argument over who would claim the supper dance.” At Araby's raised eyebrow he continued. “The idea was to make her believe she'd taken at last and then dash her hopes by letting her know it was all a joke. Charming, isn't it?” He spoke the last bitterly. Drew had plenty of experience being set up to look the fool amongst her set and much of it came at her own hand. She didn't like Bennet, however. He was never satisfied to simply give clever set downs. He was cruel and he never knew when to stop.

“They did it to impress you,” Drew stated flatly. “Miss Stevens is a cit, an upstart American with no family connections to protect her. Muriel Cathcart and Susannah Grantham suggested the prank and told Bennet that humiliating the girl would amuse you.”

“What makes you think it didn't?” she countered.

“Because I'm intelligent enough to see what's in your eyes even if they aren't,” he answered mildly.

It was true. Inwardly, she seethed for the girl. Lucinda Stevens was pleasant enough. She had no idea how to dress and her manners were beyond gauche, but she'd tried to learn by watching the Furies closely when she thought none of them would notice. She simply had abominable taste in both hairstyles and clothing. Still, Miss Stevens voice was pleasant to the ear – slow, but rich and sweet, like warmed honey.

Araby shrugged, "Bennet is unpleasant and everyone knows it. People ignore his behavior because he's so wealthy. I may not agreed with his performance tonight, but he and I have both thrown our share of barbs, Drew."

"You don't throw yours at those who stay out of your way," Drew said. "Granted, you did cross the line more than once with the things you said to Damaris Kingsford. Still," Drew paused, his eyes looking meaningfully into hers "we both know you had your reasons for that."

Araby glared at him, her heart fluttering in her chest as she remembered her current predicament. She made a quick search of the ballroom with her gaze. If she couldn't snatch up Iredale she might well be stuck with the likes of Edmond Bennet. The very idea made her blood run cold. A man like that enjoyed the hunt and the capture, but not the having. She had no doubt that in a marriage to him the best she could hope for would be indifference. Her thoughts turned away from Lucinda Stevens and to her own problems. A third son with no money of his own could never help her. Only securing someone like Iredale would put the catastrophe of Arland's sudden marriage safely to rest.

The opening strains of a waltz began and Drew led her to the floor. Araby firmed her resolve for what she must do. Tomorrow morning she would remember this waltz and despise herself for her treatment of Drew, but tonight she'd do what was necessary for both their sakes.

Chapter Two

Michael watched his youngest brother toy with the food on his plate, his irritation building with every scrape of tine against fine porcelain. "For pity's sake, Drew," he snapped, "if you're not going to eat with that fork at least stop endangering Fiona's china pattern with it. Our sister-in-law will have your hide if you put scratches on her beloved Spode, that is if I don't choke the life out of you first." He crisply refolded the newspaper he'd been attempting to read since his brother's arrival in the breakfast room and set it down sharply on dining table. His brother regarded him balefully from across the table.

"Pardon me for disturbing you," he murmured, "I suppose I'm not as hungry as I thought."

The door to the breakfast room opened and the Dowager Countess of Stowebridge breezed in on a frothy swirl of organza. It was clearly a gown designed with a much younger woman in mind and certainly a woman with more subdued tastes in color than the alarming shade of orange his mother favored. It looked as if every ruffle on Bond Street had found its way into their breakfast room. Michael winced at the startling gown before he could temper his reaction. Not that it mattered. His Mother only saw what she wished to see and that was rarely Michael. The brothers rose in unison to greet her. She cooed and kissed Drew's cheek, fussing over the small portions of food on his plate. He flushed a dull shade of red, embarrassed by his mother's coddling. She dipped her head slightly to Michael in cool acknowledgment.

"Late night?" Michael murmured to his brother. Drew's expression turned from mournful to miserable.

"I suppose that's it," he said, dropping his eyes to his plate.

"More than that I should expect," Lady Stowebridge remarked. "Fresh coffee, if you please, Jamison," she instructed the footman. It never mattered if the footman had just replaced the coffee or not, Lady Stowebridge insisted on freshly made coffee whenever she appeared for breakfast. She held firmly to her belief that servants were a lazy lot and would pass off stale food as fresh if given the opportunity. Michael assisted her into her chair. The dowager countess fluttered her finger at one of the footmen and the young man quickly began filling a plate for her. By this time, the household had grown used to his mother's demands and the footman presented a filled plate for her inspection in remarkably short time. Lady Stowebridge pinched her mouth in dissatisfaction before nodding her acceptance of the footman's offering. She then attacked her meal with vigor making Michael glad he didn't bear the cost of feeding her.

"You shouldn't waste time sulking over that spoiled creature, Andrew," she said around a mouthful of sausage. "Plenty of young women know they would be fortunate to secure your interest. Not that I'm in favor of you settling on someone so quickly, mind, and you could certainly do better than Baron Seaton's stepdaughter."

Drew flushed. "Mother, Lady Arabella is daughter of an earl and the granddaughter of an marquess." He darted an embarrassed look at his brother. "She has her pick of gentlemen," he muttered into his cravat, "and as everyone is so fond of telling me, I'm a third son and I have no title coming to me. Now, can we please drop the subject?"

Lady Stowebridge charged ahead, unaware, or uncaring of her youngest son's wish to let the subject go. "Nonsense. I believe the Winston girl is simply playing hard to get, though she thinks too much of herself by half, if you ask me. Lady Arabella should consider herself lucky to have caught your eye at all." She nipped off a bite of toast and chewed it thoughtfully. "Still, you snaring a debutant of such standing would certainly be a feather in my cap. You must remember that a young girl, especially an Incomparable, expects to be wooed boldly, Drew. You must work to sweep her off her feet." Their mother waved her toast for emphasis and came perilously close to catching the footman with her arm. "A grand gesture is what you need, something romantic. 'Faint heart never won fair maid.'" She laughed archly. "Your father learned that lesson quickly enough, I can tell you." Probably from one of his opera dancers, Michael thought, because the old earl had never particularly enjoyed his wife's company, nor cared whether she felt sufficiently wooed or not.

"I believe Drew would have a much better time exploring life outside of a ballroom at his age," Michael stated with a wink to his brother. "Sow a few wild oats and leave this chit to her ballroom swains."

"I'm quite certain that's what you would think," Lady Stowebridge said repressively. "Thankfully Andrew has better sense than to follow in the footsteps of a reprobate."

Michael fixed her with a cool stare. There it was, the gauntlet she'd been toying with since her return to town for the season – Michael's unscrupulous past and his efforts to darken his family's reputation. His mother played with the ruffle at the neckline of her gown nervously. Good, Michael thought. Let her remember that he was no longer dependent upon the family estate for his income. Every farthing he had came at the cost of his own sweat. It hadn't been handed to him by an accident of birth. Sweat and blood – his as well as others. He returned his attention to his plate intent on guarding the direction of his thoughts.

"Really though, Drew, you must stop making such a target of yourself among Edmond Bennett and his set. I fear if you don't stop being so awkward, you'll give the Winston girl a disgust of you. Why, it was all the talk last night how she led you on with a waltz and then...."

Drew sprang up from the table as if he'd been stuck with a pin, his face aflame and his shoulders hunched. "Excuse me please, I have correspondence I must see to." He bolted from the room, leaving his mother calling after him in her shrill, carrying voice.

"Never mind, dearest, I shall brew you a pot of your tonic tea. That always makes you feel so much better." Drew never even slowed down, not that Michael blamed him. Clearly, the boy had good survival skills. That tea was an abomination and had turned his brother's stomach more often than eased it.

"Well, really, I must say." the dowager's curls bobbed beneath her lace, morning cap as she shook her head. "I don't understand that boy sometimes. Certainly Henry never acted this way. Of course, Drew always was a sensitive child. He had such a delicate constitution too." She snapped her fingers and a footman placed another rasher of bacon on her plate. "He gets it from me, you know," she said in a confiding tone. "People with truly refined, artistic souls like us can have their dreams crushed so easily. It's such a trial to be so sensitive." She shook her head, popped a piece of bacon into her mouth and sighed as she chewed on it. She reminded Michael of a masticating cow.

"What happened last night?" Michael asked, refusing to acknowledge her words.

“Lady Arabella granted Drew a waltz and then delivered a rather cutting setdown afterwards. She’s known for them. I fail to see what the fuss is all about. She’s no prettier than she ought to be and her lineage is not nearly as good as ours. Araby this, Araby that. She’s all your brother talks about. Apparently, last night’s cut was particularly cruel.” His Mother put down her knife and fork and glared at Michael. “Drew was devastated, Michael. Really, someone needs to give that young woman her comeuppance. Perhaps then she’d have the good sense to notice your brother.”

Michael smiled at her, a chilling effect, he knew. “We actually agree on something, Mother. Now, tell me about this chit.

“I think we’re all assembled,” Katherine said, as the last of the parcels and maids were loaded in the hackney. Lady Katherine met every plan, social or otherwise, with the foresight and determination of a seasoned military campaigner. Her endless ability to organize everyone around her frequently crossed the line from talent to irritating behavior. Still, with today’s undertaking all the Furies recognized the benefit of a well-ordered strategy.

As far as any of their parents knew each young lady was shopping in the company of the other two. A small lie – innocent enough to Sarah’s parents, but one that would bring swift retribution to both Katherine and Arabella, should the truth of today’s mission come to light. Once the girls were seated in the Saunders’ family coach and underway, they began to talk about the only things that held any real interest for them, the Season, the latest gossip, the Season, who was expecting an offer and of course, the Season.

“I refuse to believe that Muriel Cathcart can land anyone above the son of a knight. For Heaven’s sake, the girl has no refinements whatsoever and her grandfather was a barrister.” Araby patted the cluster of glossy black curls that trailed over one of her shoulders. “Besides she clomps her feet like an old cart horse when she dances.” The other girls laughed.

“I like that,” Katherine exclaimed, “and I hereby rename her, Muriel Carthorse. Lord, remember her at Miss Harkness’ Academy?” she asked. Her question only caused more laughter. “Damaris Kingsford was almost as bad, but at least she could be taught.” The laughter abruptly died.

“Leave it to Katherine to kill a mood.” Sarah frowned at her friend and then glanced anxiously at Araby. “It will be all right, dear. Iredale danced with you twice at the Bloomquist’s ball and called on you the next day. You’ll see. Things will work out.”

“I’m certain you’re right, Sarah,” Araby replied, trying to hide her concern behind a smile. She knew neither of her friends were convinced by her attempt.

“Has the baron questioned you about Damaris’ rescue?” Katherine asked.

Araby sighed, “Not yet, but I’m certain it’s only a matter of time.”

“It might be a considerable amount of time,” Sarah interjected. “My Mother attended the Summerfield tea yesterday and learned that Damaris and Arland have gone on a wedding trip to Devon – one of the family’s holdings tucked away from prying eyes and too many questions. Both families are working hard to put about that theirs is a love match.”

Katherine gave an indelicate snort. "They are grinding the rough edges off Damaris, more likely. She's always been a little too common for my tastes."

"At any rate," Sarah continued, sending Katherine a suppressive look, "Arland is the only one who could possibly connect the rescue note to Araby and he's nicely out of the way."

"He might not realize I'm the one who sent it," Araby allowed. "I didn't sign it, but undoubtedly Damaris has told him both Katherine and I were involved in the abduction." She reached out and gripped her friend's hand. "When people are called to account for this, Katherine, both you and Sarah will be implicated." Tears of remorse filled her eyes. "I'm so sorry to have dragged both of you into this mess."

"I for one have no regrets," Katherine stated coolly. "Given the same situation, I'd do it all again."

"Me as well," Sarah patted Araby's knee. "You are both as dear to me as any sisters could be. I will stand by you any day come what may. Don't forget that there are others far more responsible in this matter than any one of us. If the entire story comes out so will the truth."

Araby's tears spilled down her cheeks. The truth was sordid and ugly and she doubted it could spare either her, or her mother from her stepfather's vengeance. If the truth of her existence came out, Araby could forget making a prestigious marriage. She'd be lucky to make any sort of descent marriage at all. Emotion closed her throat hindering further discussion, but thankfully cool, collected Katherine broke the somber mood.

"That's all well and good, but we have a mission today, ladies, and we must give it our full attention." With that Katherine opened the satchel on her lap and pulled out an enormous pair of shears. "I'm determined to succeed, even if it takes both of you to hold Miss Stevens down."

Twenty minutes later The Furies arrived at the residence of Miss Lucinda Stevens. Although they were told that she was not at home, the Furies saw no reason to let that fact deter them. They pushed past a protective butler, two footmen and the chaperone to gain entrance into the young woman's bedroom. Their own retinue of servants followed in their wake – a veritable armada of starched caps and aprons. Miss Stevens sat curled up in a window seat staring at the outside world. Her head turned quickly towards them as they entered and everyone could see that her eyes were red and puffy from crying.

Katherine spoke first, pulling her shears from her satchel and brandishing them in the air. "Enough waterworks," she commanded. "We've come on a mission of retribution." The poor girl eyed the shears fearfully and Katherine continued in a tone of grim satisfaction. "Miss Stevens, surrender your ruffles. They make you look like a pastel meringue."

Three hours later the American heiress stood in front of her dressing mirror unable to credit the change in her appearance. "I can't believe what you've done," she marveled. "I look quite...quite..."

"Lovely," Katherine supplied, positively beaming with pleasure.

Sarah ran to the girl's side and clasped her hands with her own, unable to hide her delight. "You'll take immediately. What man could resist you? And we've taken a pledge to cut any young man who does."

Araby stood across the room from them allowing herself a small, but triumphant smile. All the poor girl had needed was proper clothing, a hairdresser to teach her maid the right styles

for her mistress' hair and the elimination of those infamous ruffles. Each of The Furies had donated an unworn gown from their own wardrobes; of which there were many. While their maids had worked diligently to alter the clothes and salvage what they could from Miss Steven's own unfortunate wardrobe, Madame Marchant, the Season's premiere modiste had measured Lucinda, taken notes and promised new gowns and day dresses within a week. Araby basked in the glow of Lucinda's smile. Perhaps today, made up in some small way for her own dreadful treatment of Drew.

Bennet and his friends had laughed when she'd mocked him from the cut of his coat to his dancing skills. Drew had been devastated – as she'd intended. He was all that was kind and caring. That was his problem. He'd seen too much and if she didn't succeed in keeping him away from her, there was no telling what the Baron would do to either of them. After Drew left the ball Araby had never felt more miserable, or more heartless. Whether or not she succeeded with Iredale, she'd never forget the cost of that night and the look of betrayal on Drew's face.

Katherine's voice returned her to the business at hand. "Remember, you mustn't be hurt if Araby and I don't acknowledge you much after tonight. We have our own consequence to consider, after all." Katherine examined each of her fingernails, buffed to perfection as always. "We have decided to continue lending you our support – quietly, of course. You shall become a moderate success, I should think." Araby and Sarah looked at each other and shook their heads. Katherine could be so very condescending. It was what she'd been bred to be, even though it ran very contrary to her true nature. Katherine's mother could frighten the devil himself into blind obedience.

"Never mind," Sarah hugged Lucinda briefly. "I shall always acknowledge you. We'll have that nasty Edmond Bennet begging you for a dance before the week is out," she declared.

"I don't know how to thank you all," Lucinda said in her warm, southern drawl. Tears of gratitude filled her eyes. "You've been so good to me and I'm...I'm just, well...nobody."

Araby stepped forward. She thought of the lessons she'd learned at her nurse, Gertie's, knee – The Golden Rule. Everyone mattered and how you treated them, regardless of their rank defined you as a person. She remembered Drew's pale face last night. She'd certainly defined herself clearly enough during the past two years, hadn't she – sniping at girls she considered to be any challenge to her role as the Incomparable, humiliating those who weren't if she could make herself look clever in the process. She'd helped execute the ruination of a girl of good family and betrayed an astute young man whose only sin was to offer her compassion and kindness. "You're not a nobody, Lucinda," she said softly.

"Yes, she is," Katherine replied matter-of-factly. "She has no connections other than Lady Bramwell and those are tenuous at best." She looked at the three of them as if she were merely explaining an examination question they'd all gotten wrong. In Katherine's mind she was and she nodded for emphasis. "Lucinda really is a complete nobody." There was a slight pause and then the other three girls burst into laughter much to Katherine's confusion.

Michael lounged against a pillar at the back of the Grantham's salon. The cut of coats might alter, the lines of dresses change, but the affectations and the petty intrigues remained the

same. Only the cast of characters differed. Their hostess' decor however, was a rather inventive recreation of Greek Revival. Unfortunately, it had lost a great deal in her particular interpretation. The friezes on the walls were trite, the work of a skilled painter, but not a singular artist. They were laden with sentimentality, but light in any true artistic depth. He buried a sigh as he continued to watch the audience. Musical evenings were located at the third level of Hell right beside country dances. Michael continued searching for his quarry. She was the real reason for his attendance tonight. He meant to see that she kept her claws sheathed around his brother permanently. Ah, there in the third row. Diamond and gold hair pins glinted amid her thick locks of dark hair. Few people could carry off yellow, he admitted, but she could. No vapid lemon-colored silks for this girl, though. The shade of her gown made her look as though she'd draped herself in the very glow of the sun itself.

More than half the eligible men of the ton carried a torch for her from what he gathered, Drew included. She held little appeal for Michael, though. He liked bedding women – hot blooded ones who knew what their bodies were for and enjoyed using them. Lady Arabella Winston though undeniably beautiful, was a doll all trussed up in splendid gowns and artifice. She toyed with society as if it were a shiny bauble created strictly for her own amusement. There were always one or two of them in every year's crop of debutantes who were more calculating and ruthless than the others. This year there were three.

The Furies, they called them. He eyed them sitting together in a row, one pale, blonde, one with rich, reddish-brown curls and the last with hair the color of a raven's wing. They were three uncommonly lovely girls, he'd give them that. One day, after they'd grown disenchanted with their advantageous marriages, he might enjoy sampling them in his bed. The dark one, Araby, would be first. Young Andrew had very good taste.

After he'd finished interrogating his mother about the Araby chit, Michael had taken Drew around to his sport club and then on to Tattersall's to view one of the auctions. Opportunities to spend time with his younger brother were far fewer than Michael liked, but between business meetings and the renovations to his new townhouse his life was more a series of obligations than preferences.

Michael's relationship with the rest of his family had never been particularly close. Since he'd returned to England successful, but still very much the prodigal son, he'd made peace with his eldest brother Henry, even starting a rudimentary friendship with the man. Not easy to do, given their parents' mutual dislike of their middle son. It was one of the few things they'd agreed upon during their marriage. Once Henry and his wife returned from their tour of Italy Michael fully intended to continue building his friendship with his eldest sibling.

The audience gave a round of polite applause signaling the end of an uninspiring, even dreary performance. Michael adjusted his position so that Lady Arabella would pass him as she made her exit. She moved gracefully, her head held high by her long, slender neck. It was a neck meant for collecting a string of slow, sensual kisses from earlobe to collarbone and damned if Michael didn't feel a tug of envy for the man lucky enough to give them. Her smile dazzled the beholder, but he noticed as she moved closer to him that it did nothing to warm her lovely, cognac-colored eyes. Cold and calculating. Oh, he had her number all right. She turned and addressed one of her friends.

“That was truly ghastly. If she’s an accomplished musician, I’m Chopin. A Hereford steer would have better command of a violin than she does and a lighter touch. There were times I wanted to knock the instrument right out of her hands – excuse me, hooves.”

Her friend’s laughed appreciatively. Michael agreed with her assessment of the young lady’s musical talent, but the girl in question was also their host’s daughter and Lady Arabella had made no attempt to lower the sound of her voice. Two young men began whispering to each other and likewise made little attempt to hide their amusement.

“No wonder her skirts are so ridiculously full,” remarked the slender blonde on her left. “they’re designed to hide her bovine lineage.”

The other girl’s remark was not only bad form, it was also callus. By tomorrow half the younger set would be openly mocking Miss Susannah Grantham. Michael abruptly stepped in front of the girls.

“Good evening...ladies,” he said, pausing long enough before the last word to make his inference about their lack of manners clear. Only the little auburn-haired chit had the grace to look embarrassed. He surveyed Arabella Winston with a narrowed gaze, putting enough assessment in it to discomfort her. She was tall for a female, but not nearly as tall as he. Somehow, though, she still managed to look down her nose at him. She brushed past him without a word and the other girls followed her lead. Well, well, well, she was an audacious little brat and in desperate need of a lesson in behavior.

Conversation and laughter flowed by him as he made his loop around the ballroom. Then Michael heard a rich, silvery, trill of laughter and knew instinctively to whom it belonged. As if she sensed his presence, Araby Winston turned towards him as he strolled by. He kept moving, watching her just long enough to know that her eyes followed him. Excellent, he thought, let the game begin.

He already had her measure. Despite Drew’s refusal to see the reality of the situation, Michael knew, as did everyone else, she had no interest in a third son. She wanted money and a title. Had Araby Winston truly cared for his brother, Michael would happily settle a considerable amount of funds on them upon their marriage. However, she clearly was not the sort of girl to care about anyone but herself.

Michael suffered through his own season of reckoning, as he’d come to call it. His heart, long since hardened against the foibles of that overused expression, love, had eventually recovered. He put passion and lust in their proper places now and disregarded any female pretensions to finer feelings. Drew would learn as well. Michael now had a fortune large enough to entice even the strictest marriage-seeking mamas and their perfectly turned-out daughters, but Drew did not.

Michael followed his quarry with his eyes. She glanced back at him and then spoke to one of her companions from behind her fan. His smile broadened into a grin. Later during the dancing he’d partner Arabella Winston whether she liked it or not and he would teach her the true meaning of the term, ‘setdown.’
