

Could she really run away? Her parents would not expect it, which would make the task so much easier. This was a benefit to being the dutiful daughter, the proper young lady who never strayed from protocol and always behaved with decorum. She could simply walk out the front door and vanish.

Glancing at the white lace gown hanging from a hook on the wall, Regina allowed the idea of running away to capture her imagination more fully. She'd worn the dress when she'd made her debut at the Coventry ball three months earlier. It had been altered slightly this afternoon by a maid tasked with turning it into her wedding dress. In Regina's opinion, too much lace and silk netting had been added, but she supposed it would do. She stepped forward and touched the fabric, letting it slide between her fingers. The bonnet she would wear sat on her dressing table, with additional silk netting sewn onto the brim to create a frothy ruffle that descended toward the back where it fell away in a big voluminous tail.

Regina allowed a sad chuckle. She would look like a cake in this.

Her brow puckered even as she pulled the gown into her arms and pressed it against her chest. What would life be like for her if she married Stokes? It wasn't as if she loved some other man. And yet, the realization that they wouldn't dance with each other or ride together or enjoy the sort of active life that was meant for people their age was a blow. Instead, they would live like old people, imprisoned in some large manor somewhere.

She laughed bitterly. What good would her title do her then? What solace would she find in having done her duty when even Stokes had made it clear that he had no desire to marry? Indeed his features had softened with gratitude when she'd said she would find a solution. But could she go through with it? She clutched her dress tighter. If she sought refuge with friends her father would find her. The inevitable would only be delayed. So where would she go?

She pondered these questions for hours while pacing her bedchamber floor, until she was sure she must have worn out the sheen. Each question left her more indecisive and unsure than the last. At some point during the night, she'd put on her wedding gown and matching bonnet for no other purpose than to confirm how ridiculous she would look. She still wore it now as the darkness began to recede to the corners of her room. Dawn was breaking and she'd soon lose her chance to leave.

Could she be brave and do the unexpected? Could she face the unknown alone?

"I have to," she murmured. It was time to put herself first for a change. Only then would she stand a chance of building the sort of future she wished for – a future she hadn't even known she wanted until today. But the truth was that she dreamed of falling in love and of being loved in return. She longed for compatibility with a man strong and healthy enough to be her partner for life.

Glancing at her cheval glass, she considered the woman reflected back and made her decision. "I have to save myself and Stokes from misery."

But first, she had to get changed.

So she reached for the end of the ribbons that held her bonnet in place and prepared to give them a pull when the sound of an upstairs door closing caused her to pause. The servants were already rising. There wasn't any more time.

Giving a resolute nod, she abandoned the thought of putting on a more practical dress, eased her bedchamber door open and stopped to listen. The clock in the hall chimed five. Soon the maids would start cleaning the downstairs rooms.

With this in mind, Regina stepped into the hallway and headed toward the stairs. Descending them on her tiptoes, she made her way into the foyer. No one was about yet. The front door was right there. Unguarded.

Regina moved toward it, unbolted the lock, and opened the door to cool morning air. Mist sat low in the street, concealing most of the buildings. Heart pounding, she glanced back over her shoulder once before stepping outside, closing the door behind her, and breaking into a run.

She wasn't sure where she was going exactly, but she had to get out of Mayfair before someone saw her and forced her to go back home. The wrath she would face there would likely surpass what her father had shown toward Marcus last night.

Turning onto Piccadilly, she raced toward a side street and almost skidded into it in her haste to escape the clatter of hooves from a carriage somewhere behind her. This was madness. Good God, what was she thinking? Perhaps she ought to go back before anyone realized she was missing. But her feet didn't slow, they just kept going as if propelled by the part of her brain that refused to accept what her parents were doing. Why would they force such a hasty wedding upon her or Stokes? Why was her father so unrelenting? It was almost as if this match mattered more to him than she did.

Regina's chest tightened against the air being forced in and out of her lungs. She had no idea where she was now, she reflected as her slippers struck the pavement with increasing speed. The streets and buildings were unfamiliar, though still somewhat respectable.

Something clanged behind her, causing her to dart down a street to her left where she almost smashed into a man. He staggered sideways, his hand briefly touching her elbow as she swerved around him.

"Looking for a groom?" His drunken voice turned to lewd laughter. "I'll help you out!"

Ignoring him, Regina continued on her way with increased determination. The silk netting and lace billowing out around her merged with the thickening fog in a ghostly effect. Three streets later, her toe caught an uneven spot on the ground and she tripped, stumbling forward with a gasp. Her arms cartwheeled as she made a desperate attempt to maintain her balance. But her body was angled too far forward, and her speed only added momentum to the fall that now seemed inevitable.

Until her entire front connected with something warm and wonderfully solid that instantly stopped her descent. An arm came around her, bracing her against the person who'd caught her, and Regina instinctively started to struggle.

"What the devil?" a masculine voice muttered. "Be still, damn it!"

Regina gasped and looked up at the man who now held her.

A pair of coffee-colored eyes stared down into hers with mesmerizing intensity. Raven locks protruded at haphazard angles from beneath the brim of a velvet top hat. Expressive eyebrows drew together in wonder, puckering a prominent forehead and drawing Regina's attention toward the man's nose. It was elegantly shaped in a chiseled straight line that slanted toward a neatly trimmed moustache. The dense hair hovered above a wide mouth that presently smirked at her with what could only be described as lethal amusement.

Recognizing him from all the sketches she'd seen in the newspapers over the years, she blurted the first thing that came to her mind. "I know who you are." Carlton Guthrie's notoriety was such that not knowing who he was would have been impossible. His smirk became more pronounced as the edge of his mouth curled upward. "You're the Scoundrel of St. Giles."