

Felicity Bennett stood in the park in the center of Berkeley Square and stared at the mammoth town house before her. She had never seen a house with so many windows, and in this gray, dreary city, she had never seen one so white. London's morning fog had yet to burn off and hovered oppressively around the other town houses, shrouding them in gloom. But the fog did not deign to touch this house. The white facade glittered in the shaft of sunlight, just emerging from the fortress of low-hanging clouds.

Felicity took a deep breath. It was not like her to be intimidated, and if she did not muster her courage soon, walk across the park, and knock on that door—that mammoth door with the golden lion's head door knocker—she was going to be late for her appointment.

Late for what was to be her first day of employment.

That would not do, especially after all the pains she had taken to arrive punctually. There was the hour-long walk from the rectory to the posting house, the eight hours on the mail coach—crushed between a portly woman and a man who sounded as though he might cough up his lung—and the harrowing hansom cab ride to her present location.

She had traveled all night without sleep and with little more than a small wedge of cheese and some three-day old bread for sustenance. She was exhausted and ravenous, but she would not allow those feelings to surface. She pushed the fatigue and the hunger down and focused on the time ticking away.

Her father always said that there was no time like the present, and Felicity always agreed. But that was because she did not mind cooking dinner or studying her mathematics or sweeping the floor. She did very much mind going to work for some snooty aristocrats who, if they were like all the others she had known, would be condescending and hypocritical. In short, Felicity did not look forward to a life of servitude.

But really, what choice did she have? The alternatives...

She almost jumped when she saw a movement to her right. She turned sharply when a man dressed in tight breeches, a fitted coat of navy superfine, and a stark white shirt with a perfectly tied cravat stepped out from one of the trees in the park and beckoned to her. Felicity blinked at him, certain he was an illusion—ferverly *hoped* he was an illusion. Could she ignore him? Could she pretend she hadn't seen him?

He beckoned again, this time adding an impatient glare, so with a furtive glance at the town house, she hurried to meet him. "What are you doing here?" she whispered stepping behind a tree and hoping she was out of sight of the house. "You shouldn't be here."

"My fiancée finally arrives in Town, and I'm not allowed to see her? Rubbish." His words were only slightly slurred, which was a good sign. And his fine clothes another good sign. Perhaps he was winning at the tables. Perhaps he would leave her in peace.

"How did you know where I would be? I haven't even met the family or secured the position."

He winked at her. "I have connections." He tapped the jaunty hat tucked under his arm. "Don't you forget that." He reached out, probably to poke her arm, but she quickly moved out of his reach.

He chuckled and gave her a long perusal that made her want to pull her pelisse tighter over her bosom. "They'll like you." He nodded. "And they're rich. Very rich. Just what we're looking for."

That was not at all part of her criteria, but she didn't contradict him. "I only hope the pay will be adequate. How much did you say you owe the creditors?"

He grinned. "Anxious to get rid of me, are you?" He leaned closer, and she could smell the spirits on his breath. "I told you. For twenty-five pounds I will make our little agreement go away." He snapped his fingers, and she jumped in spite of herself. "If you can't pay up by the first of the year, well, then, prepare to have the banns called, *darling*."

She shuddered. Once the idea of marrying Charles St. John had been her favorite fantasy. Now, she would avoid it at all costs. Why hadn't her father seen through him? Why hadn't she? Twenty-five pounds might as well have been a million, but she had to find a way to earn it.

"I understand the conditions. And you stay away from the house." She gestured to the town house behind them. "If they see you with me—"

"Yes, yes." He waved a hand. "A—" He squinted at her. "What's your position again?"

"Governess," she said through clenched teeth. Would he not just go away!

"A new governess should not be engaged. The quality don't like it." He leaned in again, and she held her breath. "The quality won't like me. Pay up or I might just knock on the door and introduce myself. See how long your fancy position lasts then."

"I'm certain that won't be necessary," she said, but he was already moving away.

"I'll find a way to speak to you in a day or so. I'll send a note or prowl around the garden."

"Charles, no—" She was wasting her breath. He was already too far away to hear her. She sighed and swallowed back the frustrated tears that stung her eyes. How she wished her father was still alive. How she wished she could have been there at the end, snatched her father's pen away, done something, *anything* to prevent her betrothal to that—oh! She couldn't think of a word bad enough.

She watched Charles St. John stroll away, his hat now on his head at a rakish angle, and tried to pretend that this would not end in disaster. Of course, that was no way to think before she went into that elegant town house. She had to be confident. With that in mind, she lifted her small valise, squared her shoulders, and began marching toward the huge structure. It grew larger the closer she came, towering over her like an alabaster oak. Her heart began to pound and her legs wobbled like jelly, but she grit her teeth and kept walking. She was no coward, and she bore her gaze into that ornate door knocker.

Finally she stopped before it, her eyes level with those of the gold lion's. He looked friendly—in a violent, hungry sort of way. She reached toward the open mouth, complete with sharp golden teeth, grasped the heavy ring dangling there and rapped three times. Hard.

Her hand dropped to her side, and belatedly she wished she had a basin of water with which to wash the grime from her face. Surely she could not look as bad as she felt...

No matter. The wealthy and titled rarely stooped to acknowledge the likes of her—daughter of a poor vicar. She heard the sound of a lock being turned, and the door yawned open to reveal a tall, distinguished man in black.

"Good day," he intoned. His voice sounded as friendly as the lion's teeth looked.

"Good day." Felicity's voice came out in a squeak, and she automatically cleared her throat. "I mean, good day. I'm Felicity Bennett. I'm here to see—"

Oh, Lord. What was the name of the lady of the house? The meeting with Charles had flustered her, and now she could not remember the details of the letter of employment.

One would have thought she had committed it to memory, given the number of times she read that letter, but the small, vital detail of the lady's title had apparently danced away.

The butler raised his eyebrows, and Felicity smiled tightly. "I have an appointment with Lady—" She drew the word out, hoping the title would come to her. But, no, her mind remained a fresh slate.

Curses!

"*Duchesse*," the butler corrected, and immediately Felicity remembered. "The *Duchesse de Valère*."

"Felicity Bennett." Her tight smile did not waver. She was probably not as obsequious and fawning as the usual visitors to the house, but neither was she an imbecile. She knew the correct forms of address. "I'm here to see Her Grace."

The butler nodded, his expression giving nothing away. "Her Grace is expecting you."