**Chapter Three**

One month and one day remaining…

Letty experienced the sensation of falling and it woke her with a start. It took her a few moments to focus in the daylight, but when she did two pairs of identical blue eyes were staring down at her. Frightened, she had intended to scream; the strangled mewling noise she managed was really quite pathetic.

‘Shh...’ said one of the pairs of eyes kindly. ‘Everything is all right. You are safe here.’

She could make out the blurry edges of the speaker’s face. Dark hair. Smiling. Next to him stood another man who looked strikingly similar. They were definitely related. The same dark hair, the same deep blue eyes, but he was frowning. She knew those eyes.

‘My brother rescued you from the road,’ the smiling man said, stroking one of her hands, ‘You have had a bit of a fever and you are badly bruised, but miraculously you have made a very fast and splendid recovery. What you need to do now is rest. Give your body time to heal. In a few days, you will be as fit as a fiddle.

’Letty tried to speak, to ask where she was. However, her mouth felt so woolly, her tongue would not move. Her eyes flicked to the frowning man and he continued to frown, until the smiling man next to him gave him a sharp nudge in the ribs and he forced himself to smile. It did not touch his eyes. Letty could not quite make out whether the emotion swirling in those fathomless blue depths was concern or annoyance.

‘Why were you tied up and wandering in the woods?’ The smile slipped off his face as he stared down at her.

Again her stupid tongue would not move and she made some garbled sound.

‘Leave her be, Jack. You can interrogate the poor girl once she is better.

’Interrogate? Were these men her enemies, too? She did not recognise either of them as her uncle’s or the Earl of Bainbridge’s men—yet that didn’t mean they were not in their employ.

‘Here, Letty, take this medicine. It will help you to sleep.’

She was powerless to stop the spoon being pressed against her lips and recognised the bitter taste of the liquid. Laudanum. The exact same drug her uncle had forced down her throat before he had handed her over to Bainbridge. Letty struggled as best she could. To her surprise, it was the frowning man who came to her aid. The one with the familiar deep blue eyes.

‘Stop it, Joe. If she doesn’t want it, you shouldn’t force it on her,’ he commanded.

The young man instantly withdrew, concern etched on his handsome face. ‘I don’t want her to be in pain, Jack. She needs to sleep.’

Apparently, enough drops of the liquid had already entered her system because her eyes were suddenly very heavy. She felt another hand touch her face softly. She knew immediately whose hand it was and also knew she liked this man’s touch.

‘That’s a good girl. Close your eyes, sweetheart. Everything will be all right...’

\* \* \*

It was still dark when she woke properly, but not so dark she could not see. Opening both eyelids, however, proved to be problematic. The left one would not open at all. The room was strange. The bed was warm and comfortable, and every bone in her body hurt like the devil.

The only illumination in the room came from a solitary candle on the nightstand and the moonlight streaming through the uncovered window panes. Letty tested her arms and found that she could, in fact, now move them. The tight cord her uncle had bound her with was gone then. Those bonds had left their mark on her wrists though; they were both sore and painful. She reached her other hand over to touch the opposite arm and felt her left wrist bound with bandages. More bandage bound her upper arm. She attempted to sit up, but gave up when her head began to spin and pound once again.

Bringing her hand to her face, Letty felt her swollen lip. It was sore still, although the cut caused by Bainbridge’s signet ring was healed over. She must have been here asleep for hours for that to happen. Or days? Further probing led to the discovery of a huge lump on her temple. It was hot and tender, the bruising spread over the front of her forehead and just above her left eye. The lid felt swollen and explained why it was so difficult to open. She probably looked a fright. Her hair felt gritty and matted with a substance she did not recognise, but suspected was mud. She was also beyond thirsty.

For a few minutes she simply lay there, wondering what to do and trying to take in the unfamiliar surroundings. The bedchamber was large and simply decorated. There was a plain, mahogany dressing table against one wall and a matching, and equally enormous, wardrobe on the opposite one. The small nightstand next to her and the bedstead were the only other pieces of furniture. The heavy curtains at the leaded windows hung open, giving her a good view of the night sky beyond. The steady patter of raindrops on the glass suggested that the dreadful weather had not improved at all. The window was closed, but not barred or locked. That was a good sign surely—unless she was so high up escaping from the window was an impossibility. There were lots of castles in Scotland, after all, and the walls and ceiling did have an air of the ancient about them, although the ceilings were too low to belong to a fortress.

Letty scanned the rest of the room for clues. There was one large rug on the wooden floor. It looked to be good quality despite its obviously advanced age. The lack of artwork on the walls or little knick-knacks strewn about gave the room a distinctly impersonal feel. She had no idea whether she was in an inn or a private house and, as she was completely alone in the room, there was nobody to ask. There was also nobody to help her. However, the bedchamber door was open, which made her feel better. If she was a prisoner, then her captors would hardly leave her unattended with the door open—not after what had happened in the carriage. Perhaps she was safe at last?

Slowly, Letty shuffled her body to a more upright position, pausing to let each new wave of dizziness pass. Her shoulder throbbed, the wrist on her left hand was still immensely painful and her left ankle was also a bit tender, but other than that she had escaped the carriage remarkably in one piece. Stretching out her good arm, she could just about touch the rim of the cup on the nightstand. She used the soles of her feet to push forward a little more until she could grab the top of the cup with her finger and thumb. Judging by its weight, she thought the vessel must be filled with liquid. However, the flimsy grip she had on it was not strong enough. The cup slid out of her fingers and crashed to the wooden floor below, taking the precious fluid with it.

The noise created a flurry of activity, accompanied by manly-sounding grunts, on the floor on the other side of the bed. A bewildered dark head appeared first, blinking eyes heavy with sleep, taking in the surroundings as he dragged one hand over his face and through his unruly hair. ‘You’re awake!’ he slurred, peering at her through semi-closed eyes.

‘Sorry,’ she croaked, ‘I dropped the water.’ Letty did not recognise him as one of her abductors, but there was something oddly familiar about him. Bizarrely, she had the distinct impression she could trust him and that she was safe with this complete stranger. Then she remembered him as the man who had prevented his accomplice from forcing more laudanum on her. If either of them had meant her harm, she was certain he would have held her down so the drug could be properly administered.

‘It’s all right.’ Stiffly, he raised himself to his feet and stretched his back and neck before shuffling around the bed to the nightstand. He was tall, and from what she could make out, broad to go with it. Older than her, but not by more than a few years. She felt a pang of guilt for inconveniencing him, whoever he was. It could not be very comfortable, or warm, sleeping on the floor. With his back to her he poured a fresh cup of water, then sat on the mattress next to her and guided it carefully into her good hand, wrapping his warm palm around her chilled fingers until he was sure that she could manage it alone. Letty greedily drank every drop so he refilled the cup without her having to ask. ‘It’s the laudanum,’ he explained gruffly. ‘My brother says it makes you thirsty.’

How his brother knew this, she had no idea, but he was right. Letty could not remember ever needing to drink quite as much as she did at this moment. She sipped the second cup more slowly, feeling self-conscious as he watched her. Even befuddled and crumpled from sleeping on the floor the man in front of her was very pleasant to look at. He was nothing like the men she had known in the ton. His hands were obviously used to hard work and had felt calloused when they’d rested briefly over hers.

‘My name is Jack Warriner, in case you were wondering.’

Jack Warriner was also a man who spent a great deal of his life outside. Even in the poor light of the bedchamber she could see evidence of a tan—tiny white crinkles fanned out from the corners of his eyes suggesting that he often squinted in the sun. Yet his accent was not coarse and his diction unmistakably pointed to that of a gentleman. The untucked, and undone, linen shirt he still wore emphasised his wide shoulders and strong arms. The thick column of his throat would look strangled in the high collars favoured by the men in society. And what gentleman of means would sleep on the floor next to an injured stranger? Such an onerous task would be delegated to a servant while the master slept. Unless he was her guard and was merely lulling her into a false sense of security? He was the sort of large, imposing man who would be suited to the job.

Letty watched him carefully as she finished the last drops of her water before passing the cup back to him.

‘More?’ he asked, lifting the stoneware jug for emphasis and she shook her head gingerly. ‘You gave us quite a scare, Letty, I don’t mind telling you.’ How did he know her name? ‘I found you in the road. You passed out, no doubt from all of the trauma and the cold, and you’ve been out like a light since. My brother Joe is training to be a physician. He patched you up, so you probably have him to thank for saving your life.’ His tone, his delivery was matter of fact. ‘Do you remember how you came to be bound and gagged and wandering alone in the forest?’

Before she answered his questions, she had a few of her own before she trusted him with the truth. Her uncle was no fool. He would offer an impressive reward to anyone who found her. His own future depended on her marrying the odious Bainbridge. And if the Earl was looking for her and retrieved her...well, she already knew how cruel he could be. She pretended to think and then shook her head. The motion caused a fresh wave of dizziness which he spotted.

‘Lie still. Try not to move your head too much.’

‘Thank you, sir. You are being very kind.’ Letty attempted a smile in the hope he would not realise she was already suspicious.

‘Call me Jack,’ he said with a wave of his hand, ‘everybody else does.’ The corners of his own lips curved upwards slightly, giving some respite from the perpetual frown he had worn since he had awoken, but it was still not a smile. He stared at her awkwardly for a few seconds before speaking again. ‘Would you like some more medicine?’

She shook her head. The black void that came with the laudanum would rob her of any control. Besides, if she needed to escape quickly from here then she needed to be lucid. She also needed to plan an escape route.

‘Can you tell me where I am...Jack?’

He sat back down on the mattress again, disregarding any of the rules of propriety, and sighed, as if answering questions was a great chore to him. ‘You are in my home. Markham Manor. In deepest, darkest, dankest Nottinghamshire. Retford is the nearest village, almost three miles away, but if it’s a proper town you need, then Lincoln is probably the closest.’ That put her in the north of England. Just. A long way from Gretna Green at least. ‘I found you near the woods a good mile away. Soaking wet and frozen stiff. I reckon you had been out in the storm for a couple of hours before I came along. I have no idea where you sprang from either and since nobody has come to claim you, I think we can assume whoever tied you up was not able to follow your tracks. My brother Jamie has battened down the hatches in your honour, in case they come visiting, and is taking turns with my youngest brother Jacob to keep watch, so you are safe.’

For some inexplicable reason, Letty believed him. She had actually done it! She had escaped Bainbridge and now she was hidden in a house. Her relief must have been obvious because he shot her a dubious look which suggested he did not believe her pathetic claim to have no memory of the event.

‘What day is it?’ The passing of time was her only hope now, yet she had no idea how long she had been here.

‘It is past midnight so it must be Friday.’

Letty risked another tenuous shake of the head. She could not work out how much longer she needed just from that information. ‘The date?’

Intelligent eyes sought hers and she had the uncomfortable feeling that he could see into her very mind and knew she was lying. ‘As I said, it’s past midnight, so I suppose that would make it the fourth.’

‘I see.’

‘Yet you have not enquired as to the month, so I must assume you remember some things. Are you sure you have no memory of what happened?’

Letty looked down towards her hands. This man had been nothing but kind to her so lying to him made her uncomfortable—but there was no guarantee he wouldn’t be tempted by a ransom, so with no other choice she did it anyway.

‘I do not recall the accident at all.’ She would never, ever forget it. Her heart began to knock against her ribs at the falsehood and her palms felt sweaty. What she was claiming did not sound plausible to her own ears.‘

Do you remember any details about your family, Letty, so that I might be able to inform them of your predicament?’

Letty would rather die than admit the truth. If her uncle knew where she was then her life might as well be over. Correction—it likely would be over and pretty sharpish, too, if he and the Earl of Bainbridge’s hideous plan came to fruition in the next few weeks. No matter what, she needed to stay hidden until then. She stared down at her hands again and shook her head. ‘I am afraid I do not... My head feels so dizzy.

’Whilst this was true, she only mentioned it to stop him probing further. Lying was not something that had ever come naturally to her. Her mother and father had always caught her out when she had tried to do it, joking that her guilt was plainly written all over her face. Just in case he could read it in her eyes, Letty hastily closed them with a sigh, but not before she saw scepticism in his own intelligent blue gaze. ‘Perhaps I will feel better with a little more sleep,’ she mumbled, trying her level best to sound exhausted rather than terrified of imminent exposure, and felt him rise from the mattress next to her.

‘Perhaps I should fetch my brother so he can check on you. You have been very ill.’

There is no need to wake him at such a late hour. I have already inconvenienced you and your family enough. I shall sleep for another few hours, I think.’

She heard, rather than saw, him hesitate for a few moments as he decided whether or not to grant her request. ‘I will be right here next to you should you need anything,’ he said gruffly, perhaps a touch begrudgingly. Then she heard the rustle of blankets and the sound of him easing his big body back down on to the hard, uncomfortable floor.

Letty was peculiarly grateful that he did not intend to leave her alone in her current state. She felt too vulnerable and his solid presence was strangely reassuring. ‘I am so sorry for being so burdensome,’ she added lamely, hoping to convey to him her appreciation for all that he was doing for her despite the fact she was lying through her teeth. He grunted in response, but offered no soothing words to contradict her nor did he make any attempt to prolong any conversation between them. She heard him punch the pillow into shape and hoist the covers over himself as he settled into a suitably comfortable position to sleep in.

Whilst Jack Warriner lacked the gentlemanly politeness she was accustomed to, Letty could not help but admire his honesty. He did not want her here, she was a huge burden, but he would not turn her away just yet either. She would be safe here, temporarily. It was a small weight off her mind. A day or two of respite in this remote oasis was a blessing to be sure, although she would have preferred not to have been flung from a speeding carriage in order to have achieved it.

On the other hand, neither her uncle nor the odious Earl was likely to take her escape lying down. Now she was out of their clutches, if she managed to make it intact for her twenty-first birthday, both men were now in very precarious positions indeed. She was not entirely sure what the penalty for abduction, forced marriage and then bridal murder was—but she would be extremely surprised if either of them was allowed to live if they were ever sentenced for the crimes. They would move heaven and earth to find her, and to silence her, and they would endeavour to do so well before the fourth of January.

Letty could not afford to rest on her laurels while she recovered. She needed a plan. A proper plan this time, which would keep her safely out of harm’s way until it was too late and she would have full control over her inheritance. She also needed to think of something to tell her clever, reluctant host. Bumbling excuses were not going to work indefinitely on him. But could she really risk telling him the truth? Until she knew more about the situation and the man himself, it would surely be prudent to keep quiet. In the last few days, Letty’s blind trust in mankind had been smashed to smithereens with a pickaxe. Trusting anyone after what she had been through was not going to be particularly easy.

To her side, she heard the steady deep breathing of a man already lost in slumber. Letty had never shared a bedroom with a man before. A few short weeks ago such a scandalous act would have brought ruin to her name. Then she had cared a great deal about her reputation—as if it was all that mattered. Of course, she had not realised her life and liberty were in danger and she had believed she would be free to select the husband of her own choosing from the ranks of willing gentleman who swarmed around her at every social function. Her enormous fortune gave her the pick of the bunch, so there had been no need to be hasty. Years ago, when she was young and foolish, she had even written a list of attributes the lucky candidate must possess. He had to be handsome, witty, titled, an excellent horseman, a connoisseur of the theatre, a patron of the arts, the absolute envy of all her friends and, of course, and most importantly, he had to be hopelessly in love with her.

Whilst she had managed to find suitable gentlemen with nearly all of those qualities, the last one was always the sticking point. After several Seasons her youthful hopes had become quite jaded. So far, she had not found one man who she was wholly convinced loved her, Letty the woman, rather than Violet the Tea Heiress. Her huge fortune, instead of giving her a reassuring sense of comfort, had become a massive weight on her shoulders. Did anyone of her acquaintance actually like her for herself? Or was it merely the piles of pound notes and all the luxury that came with her legendary generosity that drew people to her? She could never tell.

There was one promising candidate who was already close to proposing marriage—the Duke of Wentworth. However, Letty could not quite fathom him out either. Until she did, there was no way she was going to commit to something as permanent as marriage. She was still young; what was the rush? Besides, for a while now she had been distracted with other thoughts. Ideas of actually doing something with her fortune, something that mattered, something which gave her shallow, empty life some purpose. Perhaps create a home for foundlings? Other orphans who were all alone in the world, just as she was, but who did not have the benefit of a fortune to keep them safe, fed and warm. Unfortunately, while she had been lamenting the huge burden of her fortune and what to do with it, and putting off journeying on the path to find her one true love, she had neglected to consider her uncle’s personal ambitions for her money or the fact that she was bound by law to do his bidding until she reached the age of majority.

Which was only one month away now, give or take a few hours.