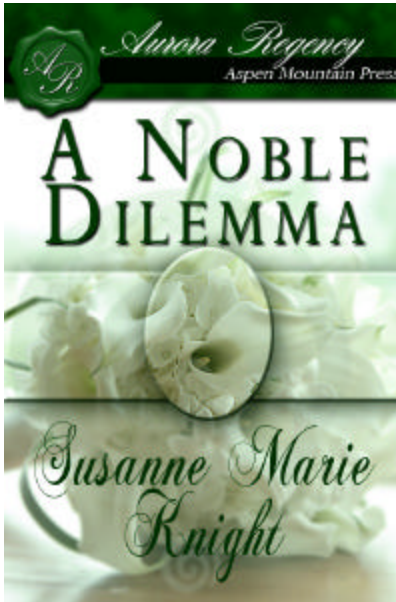


Excerpt of *A NOBLE DILEMMA* By *Susanne Marie Knight*



Bethany has a guilty secret that if discovered, will scandalize Polite Society and her new love, the Earl of Ingraham. What would Jane Austen do??

WHAT WOULD JANE AUSTEN DO??

Bethany has been taking care of Great Aunt Cordelia for five years. When her aunt passes away, Bethany is without a home. A distant relation, David, the Earl of Ingraham, comes to her rescue by offering her a London Season so she can attract an eligible suitor. While Bethany agrees to the London visit, she has other plans for her future. She hopes to support herself by writing a novel, following in the footsteps of her favorite author, Jane Austen. But society frowns on ladies engaging in trade, and so does David, who is smitten not only by Bethany's beauty, but also by her honorable character. Bethany becomes starry-eyed over David, and frets about her guilty secret, even as she agrees to further her intrigue by acting as secretary to one of the royal dukes, Prince Augustus. Can everything be made right so Bethany can find a solution to this noble dilemma?

Prologue

Not only was the July day excessively warm, but so was the parson's son. Warm, not in temperature, but in his attentions to young Miss Hasbrouck. He—

"Bethany! Where are you? I need you," a querulous voice called out from the next room.

Bethany Branford sighed. "Coming, Great Aunt Cordelia." With great reluctance, she set aside

her goose-quill pen and paper, along with the parson's son's intentions toward young Miss Hasbrouck.

Although Bethany's novel wasn't intended to be autobiographical, she could admit the character of the parson's son was patterned after Mr. Jarvis, the local blacksmith from the nearby village of Bamburgh, Northumberland. Mr. Jarvis was, of course, a good man to know when one's horse threw a shoe. However he did exhibit a tendency to linger his sooty fingers against one's worn, but clean gloves.

At least, he did to Bethany's gloves when she had business at the blacksmith's.

"Bethany!"

She pushed away from the writing desk and hurried into her great aunt's bedchamber. Technically, Lady Cordelia wasn't her great aunt. When Bethany was ten years old, her widower father had married Lady Cordelia's niece. He and his second wife experienced six years of happiness before both succumbed to ague, leaving Bethany an orphan with a very small dowry.

"Here I am, Great Aunt Cordelia," Bethany said as brightly as she could despite the fumes of camphor imprisoned within the sickroom walls. "How are you feeling? May I bring you something?"

Over the years, Lady Cordelia had made a career out of her ill health, but now the Grim Reaper was truly taking her to task. Folds of skin hung heavy on a body that no longer enjoyed eating. Her penetrating blue eyes had lost their luster. A complexion that had once been the toast of the Beau Monde--at least according to Lady Cordelia--was now yellowed and bilious.

"A cup of tea, my gel." The old woman appeared shrunken in size and lost amidst the pillows as she sat hunched over in her massive bed. "I could use a spot of nice hot tea to loosen the bowels." Even after five years of tending to Lady Cordelia, Bethany still blushed at such plain speaking about bodily functions. She leaned over and kissed Lady Cordelia's withered cheek. "Would you care for anything to eat, Aunt? Crumpets? Scones?"

Lady Cordelia never did, but there was always a first time.

The old lady wet her lips as if hungry, but shook her head. Only gruel-like food passed her lips nowadays.

Bethany's heart went out to her.

When she returned with the silver tea service, she poured a cup for her great aunt.

"Ahh, delicious. Simple pleasures are the best, aren't they, my dear child?" As she placed the cup back into its saucer, her hand shook. "Bother! The body fails. Soon, yes, very soon, I shall pass onto my Maker. Then you shall be free. Free to find a worthy partner and marry."

A shiver ran through Bethany. She felt almost as if she were already walking on her great aunt's grave. Five years seemed like forever to a girl of sixteen. Now she was a woman of one and twenty, serving as a companion and nurse for all that time. She'd had few spare moments to pursue her own interests or to meet eligible gentlemen.

The small village boasted few bachelors, Mr. Jarvis notwithstanding. By the same token, her dowry of only fifty pounds was not a substantial draw either. So it seemed she would never have the felicity of knowing the wedded state.

Ah well. She shrugged. She did need an income, however, and for this she had a plan. She dreamed of supporting herself through her novel writing. She dreamed of becoming an author.

Of course conventional thinking stated a lady only dabbled in the art of writing; a lady wrote for personal fulfillment. One never wrote for the money.

Bethany withheld a secret chuckle. Fie on conventional thinking!

A low groan from the bed captured her attention. As she glanced at Lady Cordelia's long-suffering face, a stab of worry lanced through Bethany again. She feared her relation had the right of it: the Great Leveler would soon knock at the door for her great aunt, bringing with him blessed relief from pain...and then oblivion.

Bethany reached over to gently squeeze her great aunt's hand. She blinked back tears. Dear Lady Cordelia Greyle was going to her greater reward. Without permission, a tear trickled down her cheek--a hot, salty tear for both Lady Cordelia and for herself.

Chapter One

"What do you think, Davy?" Lady Petunia twirled around the library as a spinning top might after just being launched. "I must know your decision."

David Greyle, the fourth Earl of Ingraham, looked up from his overcrowded desk to regard his sister's trim and fashionable form. He had just returned from Paris. The blasted war was over, thank the heavens. But catching up with all the business correspondence waiting for him at home after six months abroad was, most assuredly, going to be the very devil.

He frowned. What had Petunia been talking about? He took a stab at the obvious. "You look a rare sight, Pet. You always do. Marriage agrees with you."

She was a delightful girl, her coloring as light as his was dark. Dressed to perfection in a half-mourning jaconet round gown over a pale grey sarsonet slip, she looked as fine as fivepence...and she knew it.

For a brief moment, he wondered who had died, but quickly dismissed the thought as inconsequential.

He continued his perusal. Petunia's honey blonde hair swept atop her head in a mass of appealing curls that threatened to tumble down about her slim shoulders at the slightest shake. Her locks wisely stayed put however, for her personal maid would have, no doubt, been dismissed otherwise.

The new Viscountess Weatherhaven spoiled this vision of loveliness by pouting and stamping her small slippered foot. "You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?"

Such a termagant! Lord Weatherhaven certainly had his hands full. David pushed away from his big, oppressive desk and stood. He reached over and tugged on one of her curls.

He could not help but grin. She was still so easy to tease. Being a big brother had its privileges.

"David Petruchio Greyle! Stop that. You stop this instant."

Ouch. Leave it to Petunia to dredge up his detested middle name.

Fearing she might hurl one of his books at him, he curved his arm around her waist and led her to a straight-backed chair. "Sit. Let us cry peace, shall we? I must confess, I was woolgathering whilst you spoke."

He sat on the edge of his desk in front of her. "You have my full attention now. Satisfied?"

She folded her arms across her chest and said mulishly, "Visiting the continent hasn't improved your manners, Davy. Don't you serve refreshments to your guests?"

You are not a guest but a pest.

He prudently held his tongue. Now that he had Petunia in a good humor, it would not do to spoil it.

Leaning out into the corridor, he instructed Stevens the butler to take care of this trifling detail. Then he returned to the edge of the desk. "Now, my patience runs thin. What, exactly, did you come to my townhouse for?"

"You do know our Great Aunt Cordelia passed away around a fortnight ago?"

The Greyle family tree was very large. Although he had only one sibling, there were cousins galore, aunts and uncles, and on and on. Not to mention his mother's side of the family. But the name did ring a bell.

"Lady Cordelia Greyle. Did she live in Northumberland near the Scottish border?"

Petunia beamed. "The very same. I hardly knew her, of course, but I must say, 'twas a grand funeral, worthy of the Greyle name. So many relations came to pay their respects and offer me best wishes on my marriage. 'Tis a pity you could not attend."

He kept his own counsel on the matter. Given the choice between a village funeral and Parisian entertainment, he definitely preferred the latter.

Stevens entered with refreshments, including sweet apple fritters, one of Petunia's favorite desserts from her childhood. Her gaze fastened onto the fried dough as if she was inwardly warring whether to grab a few. Greedy gobbling might be appropriate behavior for a six-year-old, but certainly not for a young matron of three and twenty.

Restraint won out. She performed her hostessing duties instead.

David took a gulp of coffee. "So tell me, what does Great Aunt Cordelia's passing have to do with me?"

Petunia sipped her coffee and fluttered her long lashes at him. "You remember Lady Cordelia was our father's dearest aunt? I would like to honor her memory by taking care of her companion. Well, more like nurse, really. Invite the girl to London, introduce her around. Perhaps she can find an eligible *parti*."

"Good luck with that." Matchmaking was none of his business. At the mature age of nine and twenty, he had eluded the parson's mousetrap entirely. God willing he had a few more years of freedom left before he would need to get leg-shackled.

Petunia finally succumbed to temptation. She picked up an apple fritter, then gently bit off the end. Apple chunks, thick with cinnamon sauce, gushed out onto her hand.

"Oh! I forgot how messy this is."

Smiling, David reached into his tailcoat, removed a linen handkerchief, then leaned over to give it to her. Would the Viscountess Weatherhaven ever grow up?

He returned to the edge of his desk, confident that he had adequately handled whatever concerns his sister had wished to place on his plate.

He was wrong.

"Davy, I cannot sponsor the girl. Weatherhaven insists he and I must travel to Paris before the winter sets in. 'Tis your duty—"

"My duty? What is this companion to me? Do you see this?" He swept his hand across the length of his overburdened desk. "All pressing matters demanding my attention. I have neither time nor

inclination to play nursemaid to either a slip of a girl or to an antidote—whichever the companion may be. This summer's harvest was dismal. I need to make certain my tenants do not suffer. The prime minister has said the nation faces a stormy winter—literally and figuratively. Lord Liverpool has the right of it. So, Pet, if you wish to take on the responsibility of this unattached female, be my guest."

"That's just it, Davy. I want her to be your guest."

He smiled without mirth. "Your wants are not up to me to fulfill. Take them to Weatherhaven."

"But you are the head of the family and she is our cousin." Petunia set her cup on the saucer and looked at him expectantly.

David left the corner of his desk to sit back in his chair. He took a deep breath, then released it. As the fourth Earl of Ingraham, he supposed that was true.

Blast.

"Tell me about this person," he ordered.

"I don't know much about her. Only saw her briefly. The poor girl had so many details to handle at the funeral. I'm certain she had not a moment of rest. Busier than a honeybee, she was." Petunia tsk-tsked. "But to the point, Miss Branford is her name. Her father married Cousin Marta, daughter to Lady Anne, Cordelia's sister."

David rubbed his temple. It was the devil having so many relations. Who could keep them straight? "Miss Branford's age? Disposition? Portion?"

"Twenty or so years, I believe," was Petunia's prompt response. "As for disposition, she must have a soothing one because she took care of Lady Cordelia for five years. And dowry, well, it cannot be substantial."

"Parents?"

"Orphaned."

"Hmnm." Looking after an invalid, especially when one was so young said a great deal about Miss Branford's stamina. She deserved a reward for her dedication.

David walked toward the library's large bay window. The late afternoon sunlight streamed in, warming him as he watched several fashionable carriages pass by.

"Send for the chit, then. There are still three weeks left of the Little Season—a golden opportunity for the girl to meet an eligible parti."

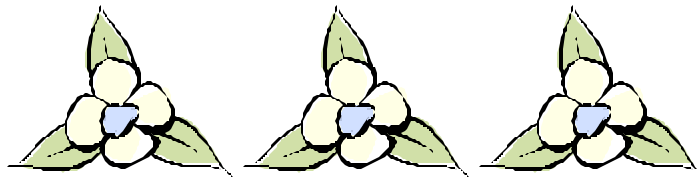
His sister joined him by the window. "But Davy, where will she live? She cannot stay here in a bachelor's residence."

"The townhouse will no longer be a bachelor's residence when our mother returns from Bath in a few days. I daresay she will be pleased for the excuse to take a young miss under her wing—introducing Miss Branford to polite society." He placed his hands on Petunia's shoulders. "Your role in this, my Pet, is to take part in these festivities, for as long as you are in London. If I have the time, I shall squire you ladies to a ball or two. With the backing of the Earl of Ingraham, Miss Branford might take. If fortune smiles on us, she might even receive an acceptable offer."

Petunia clapped her hands together. "Oh, I hope so! I am certain Miss Branford will be excessively grateful."

"Just so. And now I must bid you good day."

After his sister placed a kiss upon his cheek, she took her leave. David dismissed Petunia, indeed, all silly females from his mind and returned to his work. Whether the unknown Miss Branford would be grateful mattered to him not a jot. What was most important in this affair was to have it successfully concluded.



With no regrets on leaving behind the small village...and the parson's son, Miss Hasbrouck entered the post chaise bound for London. Her new position as governess awaited, and she prayed her new employer would consider her a rare find. She—

"Oooh! Here we are in Lunnon!" Elsie, the young housemaid who had been sent to bring Bethany to her mistress, jumped up and down on the squabs of the Countess of Ingraham's elegant barouche.

Bethany stopped writing and put her goose-quill pen and papers away. Wide-eyed, she stared out the window at the huge city of London. Here was a new chapter in her life, and she was more than eager to turn the pages. The long, tedious journey from Bamburgh to England's capital had given her a chance to not only indulge in writing, but also plan her future. She gulped. Truth be told, the city was overwhelming but not in a good way.

People, people everywhere! On either side of her carriage, so many men of every shape and size, in every type of dress warmed on the sidewalks and the cobblestone road it was a wonder her coach could proceed at all.

Peddlers pushed wobbly carts loaded with fresh fruits and vegetables; their voices shrill and

piercing as they hawked their wares. A few worn-looking women begged for food from these vendors, but without success. Poverty-stricken men huddled in groups on the street corners, gesturing wildly...menacingly...angrily.

The tall, strange buildings, one right after the other, loomed on either side of the narrow street. They blocked the late afternoon sunlight, casting a pall over everyone contained within the manmade cavern. These congested edifices surrounded the carriage, which added to the grim atmosphere.

Bethany pulled her new black scarf tighter around her. All mourners at Lady Cordelia's funeral had received scarves and black gloves. Bethany, for one, was glad for the added warmth of the scarf. Her pelisse had seen better days and was no match for the cool October weather. A chill invaded the barouche, along with pungent, offensive smells arising from the street.

She shivered. Naturally, she was still in mourning for her great aunt and it seemed London imitated her grief, and mourned as well.

Bethany was tired. Tired of death. Tired from handling the funeral arrangements, seeing to all the mourners' various needs and comfort and dealing with the solicitor about the sad lack of money. Right now all she wanted was peace and quiet so she could grieve without distraction. And then get on with her life.

And write.

She sighed.

"It won't be lon' now, miss. Grosvenor Square be only a few more blocks." Elsie turned to stare out the window. "Excitin', isn't it, miss? I just love the hubbub 'n all the things to do in Lunnon."

Hubbub had no appeal for Bethany. "Please, tell me again about the Countess of Ingraham, Elsie. Is she very kind? Are you certain she is looking forward to having me as a guest?"

The answer was obvious; after all the Countess had sent the vehicle for her, hadn't she? But Bethany need the extra reassurance.

The maid bobbed her head with youthful enthusiasm. "Yes, miss, I'm assured her ladyship is. I got it on the best authority as I have not, as yet, met her ladyship. The butler, Stevens, let it slip to the cook, who then told the housekeeper, who whispered it to us maids that her ladyship's married daughter be quite determined for you to visit."

Bethany blinked, trying to digest that convoluted sentence. Nowhere in that chain of words was the information she sought. Oh well, perhaps the Countess would consider Bethany a rare find, too.

She could dream, couldn't she?

The carriage stopped in front of a magnificent townhouse. The building was a fine example of the Palladian style of architecture. It had four Corinthian columns and three marble arches at the entryway. Very, very impressive. And quite out of Bethany's realm of experience.

The coachman opened the carriage door and helped her down. After thanking him, she waited for the maid.

Elsie shooed her on. "Go ahead, miss. I'll take care of your baggage."

Bethany nodded then proceeded up the front steps of the townhouse. She stood by the black hardwood door for just a moment, then inhaled a sharp breath for courage.

There. Better. She picked up the brass knocker and rapped it twice against the door.

A small man in a grand uniform and white curly wig—perhaps it was the butler, Stevens?—opened the paneled door. His dark gaze traveled from her threadbare pelisse to the standing barouche in the street. He then inclined his head. "Welcome to London, miss. Please do come in."

He held the door open wide. "I am Stevens, miss. You must be weary from your long journey. We were not expecting you until tomorrow."

"Thank you, Stevens." She stepped into the townhouse. "Yes, the coachman made good time."

After one look at the elegant black and white-tiled anteroom, Bethany's shoulders slumped. She was as out-of-place as a donkey in a stable of fine steeds.

Stevens took her pelisse and bonnet. "This way, miss." He showed her to a blue drawing room, and waited until she entered. "I shall inform the master of your arrival."

She sank down on a blue-flowered settee. The pale celestial blue walls, the polished hardwood floors and the blazing fireplace had to cost more than the sum total of all her worldly possessions.

Never mind, she chided herself. She had more important things to think about. Master, Stevens had said. Who was the master here? The Countess' husband? Why would the butler inform the earl instead of the Countess?

So many questions. She touched her now throbbing temple to smooth away the pain.

The enameled door opened and in stepped the most handsome gentleman she'd ever laid eyes on. He was tall, so tall she had to lift her gaze to take in the length of him. His dark hair hung in tousled curls on his forehead while his long sideburns edged the line of his cheekbone. Dressed in a dashing woolen jacket, nankeen breeches and leather Hessian boots, he appeared as if he'd just entered the townhouse from an afternoon stroll. .

And speaking of eyes, she couldn't discern the color of his. His eyes widened at the sight of her. Then he frowned.

She quickly stood and curtsied.

The young man hesitated for a second, and then bowed. "Good afternoon, Miss Branford. I trust you enjoyed a pleasant journey."

"Thank you, sir. I did."

After she spoke, silence hung in the air and he seemed loath to break it. The man flicked his gaze over her, adjusted the cuffs on his jacket and paced along the ornate side table, all at the same time. He certainly wasn't inclined toward conversation.

She tilted her head. Surely this young man could not be the earl. But whomever he was, his manner left a good deal to be desired.

"Excuse me, sir, but you have me at a disadvantage." She kept her voice level and cool. "I am quite unaware of your identity."

He stopped and lifted an eyebrow.

"Indeed?" He made another small bow. "My apologies. I am David Greyle. Lady Petunia is my sister."

As if that explained everything, he settled into a tub-shaped chair situated across from her and seemed intent on keeping his gaze upon her person, all the while drumming his fingers against the armrest.

Bethany struggled to recall, but no knowledge of a Lady Petunia nor David Greyle entered her brain. "Forgive me, sir, but I'm not acquainted with Lady Petunia. Perhaps I am in the wrong house. I was invited by the Countess of Ingraham to visit—"

"To be sure, there has been no mistake." He waved a negligent hand. "I am the Earl."

She blinked rapidly. She'd never met Lady Ingraham either, but if the woman had a married daughter as Elsie the maid had said, surely this man was too young to be the father. He could not be above thirty. Did that mean the Countess and the Earl's marriage was a January and May connection?

How romantic! She looked at Lord Ingraham with new awareness. Her heart beat faster. He was such a handsome young man with commanding eyes, determined chin and a fine masculine form.

A more tedious thought intruded. Then again, perhaps he only married for money in order to refurbish an impoverished estate.

How very prosaic. She looked down her nose at him. After all, he was rather ill-mannered.

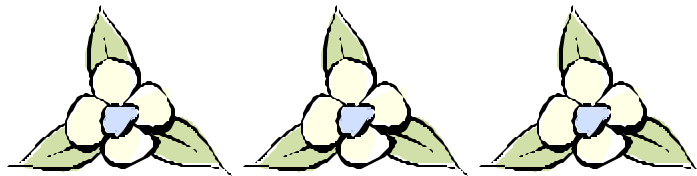
Lord Ingraham jumped up, causing the tassels on his Hessian boots to swing with the violence of his act. "Tea. Would you care for some?" He didn't wait for her reply, but instead walked to the door. "I will have Stevens see to it."

Without a backward glance at her, he left her alone in the drawing room.

How extraordinary. What a very odd man. And what an inauspicious beginning to my visit.

She bit her lip. *Oh, I hope Lady Ingraham is more hospitable.*

Bethany tucked a stray lock back into her chignon, folded her hands in her lap, and waited for the edgy earl's return.



Good God! David closed the drawing room door, then leaned against it to collect himself. Miss Branford was the loveliest creature he'd ever seen.

For a moment he luxuriated in the agreeable sensations her pleasing countenance produced, then abruptly cast them aside.

Doing it too brown, Greyle.

To be sure, the girl's fine features marked her to be a diamond of the first water. A rare jewel. However, there were many such jewels to be found in polite society, to say nothing of the *demi-monde*.

So what made this diamond different?

As he strode down the corridor, he continued to ponder his houseguest. There was something exotic about her looks. Perhaps the darkness of her eyes...the gracefulness of her neck...the fullness of her lips.

Greyle! He ran his hand through his hair, disturbing its careless symmetry. *Put a cork in it. Miss Branford is under your roof, under your protection.*

David slipped into his library, quickly wrote a note, then sealed it. Once again in the corridor, he searched for the butler and came upon him in the dining room, supervising the polishing of brass and silver.

“Stevens,” David gestured for the man to join him by the entry door. “Two things. First, send an assortment of refreshments in the drawing room for Miss Branford and myself.”

The second was a rather delicate matter. He lowered his voice. “And send a footman to the Weatherhaven residence on Berkeley Square to request Lady Petunia’s presence here immediately. Have him give her this.”

He handed the note to the butler. Inside was an earnest plea for his sister to spend the night, or for however long was needed, in the event Lady Ingraham had forgotten her commitment to quit Bath and chaperon Miss Branford. His mother was a good sort, but she tended to forget what she was saying as soon as the words left her mouth.

What a devil of a contretemps!

Here was this young thing, fresh from the country, now housed in a bachelor’s abode. Should the London tabbies get a hold of this juicy tidbit of gossip, Miss Branford’s reputation would be ruined.

Stevens bowed and immediately set off to make the arrangements. Which meant David was free to return to Miss Branford. He had left his guest alone for too long.

Bracing himself for only God knew what, he reentered the drawing room. This time, however, he purposefully did not close the door—for propriety’s sake.

“My apologies, Miss Bran—”

By the stars, she had fallen asleep! Reclined against the back of the settee, she lay with her head turned and one arm hanging down over the cushioned armrest with the other hand limp in her lap.

He stepped closer for a better look. She appeared uncomfortable in that awkward position so he gently lifted her arm to her lap.

The movement did not awaken her. Since she was quite unaware, he was at leisure to peruse her comely form.

He took advantage of this fact, admiring the long line of her neck, her determined chin, the hollow of her cheek and the dark fringe of lashes curved in repose. A few tendrils of hair escaped her unstylish bun to curl softly about her face.

She wore a grey muslin frock caught under the bosom by a green satin ribbon. Both the satin and the muslin were nearly threadbare in spots. It was a simple gown, too plain for anything other than doing household chores.

Which meant her other apparel would most likely be in a similar state of unsuitability.

He had better make arrangements for a few visits to a modiste...and include the extra expense in his budget.

David turned away from his country cousin's appealing visage. With a fashionable wardrobe, Miss Branford would be all the crack. She would not remain on the Marriage Mart for long.

He took another look at her. Perhaps he should allow her to sleep in private.

Stevens entered the drawing room, pushing a refreshment cart. The cart's wheels squeaked on the hardwood floor so David held up his hand to stop the butler's progress, then signaled that he should leave.

Stevens noticed the recumbent Miss Branford. He nodded, and walked very quickly over to David. "The footman has left to deliver your message, my lord," Stevens whispered.

He bowed then left the room. Unfortunately, he closed the door. Its resounding thud reverberated throughout the room.

"Oh!" Miss Branford jumped. "Oh, pray, forgive me, sir. I must've fallen asleep."

"Make yourself easy, my...Miss Branford."

Blast. 'My dear' had almost slipped out. He needed to guard his inappropriate warmth. "It is important that you feel comfortable here. After all, Grosvenor Square is your new home. For a time, at any rate."

He rolled the squeaking cart over to the settee. "Stevens will serve—"

"Do allow me. I would like to make myself useful." She stood beside the cart. "Coffee or tea?"

"Tea. Plain." He took a quick turn to the window, but no liveried carriage had stopped in front of the townhouse. When the devil would Petunia arrive? Or, more to the point, when would his mother?

He returned to his chair and watched the graceful way Miss Branford moved as she handed him the cup. The material of her muslin gown clinging to her feminine curves, initiating an improper response within him.

A heavy weight sat upon his broad shoulders. Even the cheery crackling from the fireplace couldn't dispel the growing trepidation of his spirits.

After she sat, an awkward hush filled the drawing room.

He cleared his throat. "The Countess, as yet, has not returned from Bath."

She stared at him as if wondering why this news would concern her. The innocent! Obviously she had little experience in the ways of polite society.

“However,” he continued, “Lady Petunia shall arrive shortly.”

Puzzlement lined her brow but she withheld any questions she might have had.

He admired her reticence. He—

Greyle!

Lord, here he was, drooling over her as if he were but a lad in leading strings again. How foolish could he be?

When the drawing room door opened, David turned to whomever entered as a lifeline.

“Bless me! Here you are, Ingraham. Where the deuce have you been? Been looking everywhere for you. Have you forgotten our dinner engagement?”

In strode Henry, Baron Penning, the most affable man of David’s acquaintance. Of middling height, Penning had a wiry, muscular build much to the approval of pugilist champion Gentleman Jackson.

Penning continued his march inside, then stopped abruptly when he noticed Miss Branford. “Lud, man, who have we here? Pray introduce me to your fair inamorata.”

Damn the fellow. David shot out of his chair. “Penning, allow me to introduce my *cousin*, Miss Branford, lately of Bamburgh, Northumberland.”

Miss Branford behaved very properly. “I’m pleased to meet you, sir.”

“The pleasure is all mine. Indeed.” Penning made an adequate bow. “Ingraham has all the luck, he does. My cousins look like pasty fishmongers, while his resemble angels.”

She gave him a saucy smile and cast her lashes downward. “Would you care for some tea, sir?”

“Indeed I would,” Penning bellowed, as if taking tea was an extraordinary idea. His tanned face flushed. “Indeed I would. A dash of cream, please.”

Blast. Miss Branford was not officially on the Marriage Mart, but by the way Penning was behaving, she had already attracted her first suitor.

By the bye, what was her given name?

David brushed that thought away. “Grab a seat, Penning. M’sister will be arriving at any second.”

Devil take it, his friend grabbed David's chair, which meant the only logical seat left was on the settee next to Miss Branford.

Delaying the inevitable, David glanced outside. A dimly lit street empty of carriages greeted him.

He turned back around. "Lady Petunia and the Countess are to show Miss Branford the sights. Take her about, introduce to society."

Miss Branford handed Penning his tea, then focused an unnerving gaze on David. "If it is not too much trouble, sir, I also would enjoy visiting Hookham's Library."

"You're of a bookish turn of mind, hey?" Penning slapped his knee, to the detriment of his tea. Some liquid sloshed into his saucer. "I'd be happy to escort you. Hookham's is near Gentleman Jackson's boxing saloon. Whilst you browse the titles, I could throw a few punches."

David sat at the opposite end from his guest. "No need for that, Penning. The Countess will be delighted to journey to Old Bond Street."

"Lady Ingraham? She reads?" Penning could not contain his astonishment.

Miss Bradford's eyebrows lifted in an expression of concern. "Sir, I can forgo a visit to Hookham, if it is inconvenient for your wife."

"My wife?" A momentary panic invaded David's system. He stared at Miss Branford to discern whom she was talking about. Then it hit him like a thunderbolt.

Penning, ill-mannered fellow that he was, guffawed.

David inclined his head. "My apologies, Miss Branford. As that lady does not yet exist, I pondered your meaning. My mother, Olive Greyle, is the current Lady Ingraham. Should I marry, she will then become the Dowager."

Miss Branford's cheeks shone with a rosy hue. Her hands shook, her voice quivered. "Oh! Please forgive me. I-I did not know."

As both he and Penning sought to put her at ease, the Blue Drawing Room door opened.

"Here I am, Davy, to save the day." Petunia, dressed in a particularly bright shade of yellow, forged ahead to the settee in a manner befitting a well-established society matron. "Good afternoon, my dear Miss Branford. We met briefly at Great Aunt Cordelia's funeral. Do you remember?"

David leaned forward to get Miss Branford's attention. Hard to get a word in edgewise once Petunia got started. "Miss Branford, this is my sister, Lady Petunia, newly married to the Viscount Weatherhaven."

Normally he would not include so much information in the introduction, but in the light of Miss Branford believing him to be married, he did not want to perpetrate any additional misunderstandings.

A dazed expression overtook Miss Branford's lovely features. "I am pleased to meet you, Lady Petunia. I am afraid I do not recall having the pleasure. There were so many people..."

"Of course, of course. Not to worry. Lord Penning, good to see you again, too." Like a shot, she changed topics again, now addressing David. "How fast good news must travel! The polite world must already know about our delightful cousin's visit."

If it did, it was by Petunia's mouth, not his.

She glanced at Miss Branford and clucked. "Gracious, here we are, chattering about like magpies, while Miss Branford is in dire need of rest. You haven't allowed her time to freshen up since she arrived, have you, Davy?"

He glanced at his guest. She did look pulled down. He sighed. "No, I am afraid I have been remiss. Petunia will show you to your room, Miss Branford."

"Thank you, sir." She stood and made a brief curtsy. "I appreciate your hospitality."

Reciprocating with a bow, he took note of her poised movements. "As I have a previous engagement this evening, I shall look forward to the pleasure of seeing you tomorrow, Miss Branford."

Penning remembered his manners and bowed as well.

David watched both ladies leave the drawing room. With another sigh, he sat back down. "My peace and tranquility are at an end, Penning."

His friend gulped down the rest of his tea, then rushed over to the sideboard. "You've the right of that, Ingraham, to be sure. Women tend to cut into a gentleman's peace. To fortify ourselves for the whirl of activity ahead, let's break open the brandy."

"Pour generously for mine." David extended his hand for the glass. Already he felt the irksome effects of having an attractive, unmarried female running rampant in the house. Deuced awkward indeed!

