

## THE RELUCTANT LANDLORD

By Susanne Marie Knight

"I am certain this is an excellent house, Aunt Hattie. It will suit us, truly it will." Walking into the front sitting room for the first time, Miss Katrina Jones set down her tattered valise and crossed her fingers. She glanced around, then held her breath.

Her words echoed in her mind; she wished she had not said them. This room mocked her dubious assertions. The sitting area bore the marks of heavy wear and abuse. Dirt and grime everywhere. No loving hand had dusted the fireplace or the bric-a-brac for many a year. From the water stained ceiling, to the drab window draperies, cobwebs shone like undiluted silver, reflecting the late afternoon light.

*Great Aunt Hattie will have a fit of the vapors.*

As Katrina unbuttoned her serviceable pelisse, she scanned the room again. The Chinese paper covering the walls definitely had seen better days. Its pink lotus blossoms and gnarled miniature trees gapped open at the seams, exposing the dingy plaster wall underneath. It would take a great deal of work to flatten the curled edges of the paper-hanging.

Katrina caught her lower lip on the edge of her teeth. *Oh, dear. What will Great Aunt Hattie say?*

The furniture had not fared much better. The entire length of a Chippendale settee sported threadbare upholstery. A sudden sneeze could unleash the straw stuffing from beneath the fabric. One side table tottered precariously on three wooden legs, which explained why it had been propped against the wall.

Katrina sighed. The room did not exactly radiate warmth or prosperity. Faith, it did not even welcome them.

After taking off her wet pelisse, she shook the snow from her bonnet. A few droplets of water would make no difference to the scuffed parquet floor beneath her feet.

If this was the condition of the main receiving room, what was the rest of the house like? Great Aunt Hattie would likely suffer a severe fright.

Katrina shuddered and braced herself. Any minute Hattie's tirade would begin.

And so it did. Her hands on her padded hips, Harriet Jones sailed into the room. "Balderdash! The address is unsuitable. Mincing Lane, indeed! Whatever was the Countess of Udall thinking, saying she had the perfect property for--"

Hattie took a vast quantity of air into her large mouth. Then came the ear-splitting shriek. "Katrina!"

Breathing heavily, Hattie crammed a handkerchief into her fist, and mopped her brow. For once, no flood of words spewed forth, but her great bulk fairly vibrated outrage.

Katrina took one look at her great aunt's bulging eyes, and steered Hattie away from the fragile settee. A sturdy hard-backed chair was what she needed. Setting her down,

Katrina removed the older woman's favorite silk poke hat, and waved it back and forth to create a soothing breeze. Hattie's scalp shone through her thinning grey hair, glistening with sweat from the exertions of the day.

For a long moment, peace reigned. Hattie fingered the carnelian stone ring suspended on a chain around her neck and seemed to find a measure of comfort from it.

Katrina hesitated to disturb the quiet. Then, one of her renegade curls dripped melted snow onto Hattie's powdered cheek.

Again, her great aunt shrieked.

"Dear Aunt Hattie. Please, you must not distress yourself. Pray, relax. I will get your vinaigrette. It has been a very long day for us."

The chair creaked, protesting Hattie's weight. Patting her ample bosom, she groaned. "Oh my! Oh, oh my! To think the last of the Jones' should be reduced to living in a...a hovel! If my father, your great grandfather, were to see us now, he would expire on the spot!"

Since the gentleman in question rested beneath England's soil more years than Katrina numbered to her age, she wisely did not reply. Instead, she knelt beside her great aunt and waved the silver bottle of aromatics under Hattie's nose.

The older woman was not placated. Dabbing at her eyes with her white handkerchief, Hattie made sniffing noises. "The house smells," she complained into her handkerchief.

Katrina bit her lip. The sitting area did have an odor about it. Probably from disuse. It smelled like musty wood and age-old dust. Still, considering the condition of the room, it could have smelled worse.

"A good airing will cure that." She hurried to a side window to pry it open. Brushing cobwebs aside, she left the window cracked, hoping the frigid outside air would ventilate the room.

Poor Hattie. Removed of animation, her slackened face revealed her vulnerability. Katrina needed to be more sympathetic toward her great aunt. After all, Hattie neared her seventieth year. And it had been an arduous journey from East Bergholt, Suffolk, to London. The weather had not cooperated one jot. Brisk November winds had blown snow across the inadequate roads making it difficult to see. Katrina's eyes still stung from the strain. She pitied the unfortunate coachman.

And her stomach ached from the worry.

It was not easy leaving the only home she and Hattie had known. As Hattie had mentioned--many, many times during the trip--uprooting to an uncertain location in the metropolis of London left her sensibilities in shambles.

But Hattie *had* to realize that they had nowhere else to go. It was either Mincing Lane or the streets themselves. They had no funds to speak of; no reserves to fall back on. No, it was not easy at all.

Placing her arm around her great aunt, Katrina murmured, "Do not worry, Aunt Hattie. I shall make a fire right now. And I will have this place cleaned up in a trice. You know I

have a knack for this sort of thing.”

That much was true. Necessity bred aptitude. And Katrina developed talent because of need. While their friends and neighbors relied on servants to cook and clean, the Jones’ only had Katrina--Katrina and their devoted maid, Devon.

Dear Devon. She had at least two years back wages due her.

Pushing Katrina’s arm aside, Hattie fluttered her hanky, punctuating her remarks. “When it comes to household matters, I own you are a wonder, but can you alter this building’s location? Mincing Lane and Thames Street? God in Heaven!”

Her excess flesh jiggled and twitched in a dance all its own. “Katrina! Cits and merchants for neighbors. Unacceptable! Monstrous! Why, just down the street, the Tower of London looms large over our heads.”

Hattie paused to remove a white lacy mob cap from her reticule. Covering her sparse hair with it, she moaned. “They behead people in the Tower, you know. Indeed, several royals lost theirs. What a pass I have come to--Harriet Jones, the daughter of a baronet, living in the shadow of the Tower. Oh, I can never hold my head up among the ton again!”

Hiding her smile at her great aunt’s inadvertent pun, Katrina eased down and rested her head on her bent knees. Faith, Hattie would try the patience of a saint, and Katrina laid no claim to that distinction. Hattie *enjoyed* her fretful state; it would do no good to point out that over sixty years had passed since the last head rolled at the Tower.

Hattie groaned again. Katrina straightened her tender back. Time to get to work.

She walked to the fireplace and opened a tinderbox situated on top of the mantelpiece. Bending low, she rubbed the piece of steel against the flint, and waited for sparks of fire. After only a few tries, tiny plumes of smoke rose from rags inside the tinderbox.

“How very obliging!” She smiled, and carefully nurtured the fire. Soon crackling flames from the ready logs in the fireplace filled her with a contented warmth. The smell evoked memories of her childhood home.

Without thinking, she brushed her dirty hands against the skirt of her gown.

Hattie’s self-pity must have given way to indignation. She pounded her beefy fist against the armrest. “If this house is the best my friend the Countess of Udall can provide, I shall sever our connection!”

Katrina smoothed a wisp of hair back behind her ear. *Patience. I must exercise some patience.*

Sitting on a wooden stool, she rummaged through her valise. “Dowager Countess, Aunt Hattie. And you are fully aware you would never do that. We need every friend we have. Being one of the genteel poor does not exactly raise our stock among the *beau monde*, you know.”

She retrieved a small framed picture from her bag. A likeness of her dark-haired mother smiled up at Katrina; the green eyes seemed to sparkle happiness. It had been painted before her mother married. A rare portrait by prospering East Bergholt artist, John

Constable, the painting was the only valuable her father had not sold. To protect it, Katrina had hidden the picture among her undergarments. Unfortunately, her own silhouette portraits of her mother had not escaped her father's depraved pilfering.

Katrina lightly touched the image of her mother's bow-shaped lips, and allowed her gaze to linger on the portrait. Except for the color of her hair, *she* could have been the subject of the painting.

Kicking off her snow-stained half-boots, she dragged the stool over to the fireplace, then gingerly stepped up on it. "I shall hang Mama's picture right now. It will make us feel more at home."

"Do be careful, Katrina! Here you are, not in this house five minutes, and already you are acting the hoyden. This house is a bad influence, I tell you! Cits and merchants. What will become of us?"

Her back to her great aunt, Katrina heard the rustling of the older woman's bombazine gown. *Pacing. She must be pacing. How can I make her understand that we have no choice but to accept this lodging?*

On her tiptoes, Katrina reached up and, from over the mantel, removed an uninspired painting depicting a winter's scene. Its years of dusty neglect rubbed off on her hands. Again, she wiped her fingers on her dull grey travel dress. Odd thing for the Dowager Countess of Udall to own such an unkempt house no matter the location.

"Katrina!" Hattie shouted.

Guiltily, Katrina turned around.

"Come down from there this instant! You will fall. Oh, my heart! I fear I have heart palpitations. Get me my vinaigrette."

*Not again!* Katrina sighed. She gave her mother's picture an apologetic look and jumped off the stool.

In spite of Hattie's blatant agitation, she somehow managed to carefully arrange herself on the bulging settee cushions. "You unkind child. Now I feel an attack coming on."

She clasped her pudgy hand to her breast, waiting for Katrina to attend her.

Katrina retrieved Hattie's constant companion, the silver bottle, and waved it under her great aunt's nose. Soon she would calm down.

Fluttering her white handkerchief, Hattie closed her eyes. "I blame the Countess of Udall for this pass we have come to. Indeed, I do. She takes after that rapsallion son of hers. His wickedness must have rubbed off on her. He has mistresses around every corner!"

That thought must have excited Hattie for she propped herself up on one elbow. "The latest *on-dit* is that the villainous Earl of Udall has ruined Lord Ivanbraugh's youngest brat. Udall's wife's sister, for Gad's sake! Can you believe? He, who was responsible for his wife's death, wooing the sister! 'Tis unnatural. It exceeds the bounds of good ton. The very idea!"

Hattie's enthusiasm spent, she fell back on the cushions. "The man has no consideration, no fine sensibilities, I tell you. He is a heathen!"

As her great aunt inhaled deeply, Katrina exhaled. After enduring hundreds of these “nervous” episodes, she was certain Hattie would eventually drift off to sleep. Seeing the withered eyelids still closed, Katrina returned to the fireplace. She lingered by the flames for a moment.

“Well, girl?”

“Well what, Aunt Hattie?” Katrina turned around but the older woman lay still in her repose.

“Have you no say about the Earl of Udall?” Hattie’s question came out with a sigh. Her fretful voice soon would give way to fitful snores.

Katrina hung her mother’s portrait, then studied it. Constable’s image of Amanda Jones soothed Katrina and gave her strength.

She shrugged. “I would say the *on-dit* is highly unlikely, Aunt Hattie. A man cannot marry his wife’s sister, anyway. As for whether he is responsible for his wife’s death, you know gossip never flatters anyone. I daresay the Earl is like any other man--no better and no worse than most.”

Squinting at the painting, she adjusted the left corner to make it level.

A male voice broke through the silence. “Bravo, my dear. I hardly expected to find a champion in this unlikely section of London.”

“Oh!” Katrina lost her footing. Grabbing onto the mantel, she half-turned to look at the intruder.

Where had he come from? Why hadn’t he waited to be announced? The cut of his elegant clothes clearly proclaimed great wealth as compared with the background of the dilapidated sitting room. Obviously one of London’s Corinthians--a man about town. The gentleman placed his dark greatcoat and beaver hat over a chair, then he scanned the room.

While he did, she scanned him. His cream stockinette breeches boldly outlined his muscular thighs. The tight molding of the chocolate brown tail-coat revealed more of his powerful physique. He was a man in his prime--a true nonpareil. Goodness, he put a maiden to the blush!

But, who was he? His impertinent gaze slowly traveled from her disheveled hair to her stocking feet. She pushed back one of her oddly colored locks and, as if she could hide them, curled her toes. It was one thing for her querulous aunt to call her a hoyden, but quite another when a Corinthian of the first stare personally observed that Katrina Jones was indeed unconventional.

She could tell from his expression that he did not think much of her. Who could blame him? Her much patched gown would not set anyone off to advantage. And she felt grimy from the trip.

Stepping down from the stool, she lost her superiority in height. He was like a mountain, so she lifted her chin for courage. “I demand to know who you are, sir, and what you are doing in my house.”

The man gave her a smile that mocked her, and then bowed. "I am the villainous Earl of Udall."

Katrina met his gaze. The heat of embarrassment inflamed her cheeks. She glanced at Hattie but the woman's closed eyes and heavy breathing told Katrina all she needed to know.

Faith, she was virtually alone with London's most notorious rake. Perhaps she better awaken her great aunt.

Lord Udall cleared his throat, claiming her attention. "And, as for what I am doing in your house, I beg to differ with you, dear girl. This house belongs to me. I hold the title, and I do have definite plans for it."

The Earl...smirked. There was no other word to describe it; his lips curved upwards into a smirk.

"My plans do not include you and your...charming companion," he continued.

Hattie's loud snore emphasized his words. He grinned in acknowledgment.

Katrina grasped a nearby chair's armrest and dropped into the seat. Her mind began to spin. This could not be happening. Losing their home in East Bergholt, packing up their meager possessions, begging charity from the Dowager Countess of Udall, and now this. It was too overwhelming.

"You cannot mean to dislodge us from this house!"

"I can, and indeed, I shall." The Earl seemed to take perverse pleasure in Katrina's distress. He clasped his hands behind his back and strolled around the room.

Rubbing her temple, Katrina protested. "Your mother agreed to let this house to us. I--"

"My mother is not in full possession of her faculties."

He said this outrageous statement as if he were commenting on the weather! Katrina stared at him. His inflexible brown gaze impaling her, he returned her stare.

Heavens, he was a cold fish. Surely he would show more emotion than this over his mother's condition. But just this afternoon, the Dowager Countess had seemed as sane as anyone. Perhaps even more so.

"Yes, I see I shocked you. I should have had my mother secluded long ago, although she is an annoyance to only me, no one else." He ran his hand through his thick, dark hair. "No matter. You are Miss Jones, I presume?"

Katrina mutely nodded.

"Good." Barely giving her a glance, Lord Udall walked over to the side window and raised his hand to someone outside.

What was he looking at? Katrina shifted in her seat until she spotted a waiting carriage. From inside the coach, a tiny hand gloved in frilly pink returned the Earl's greeting.

Lord Udall smiled ever so slightly, then faced Katrina. "Have no fear, Miss Jones." He raked his gaze over Hattie's rotund body. "You and your aunt shall be amply rewarded

for this inconvenience. As I said before, I have plans for this house. Indeed, the occupant I have chosen awaits without. She grows impatient to take up residence--very impatient. As do I."

His tongue flickered over his lips. That action gave Katrina the shivers. So this was how a London rake acted--the same as an East Bergholt rake. The Earl had no feelings, no sensibilities, save his own carnal desires.

From his outward appearance, he might have been a handsome specimen, but deep inside, his heart was as dark as coal.

Reaching into his waistcoat, he pulled out a small blue pouch. So intent was he with the pouch, that he did not notice he also pulled out a black velvet box. It dropped to the uncarpeted floor without making a sound.

She pointed to the box. "You drop--"

"These guineas will reimburse you for any hardships you believe you have suffered." The Earl jiggled the blue sack.

With a shrug, he threw the pouch next to her feet.

He obviously thought his business was concluded, for he strode to a looking-glass on the wall, then adjusted his cravat.

Katrina narrowed her gaze. So Lord Udall thought he had disposed of her, hmmn? Neatly bribing her so that he could install his latest mistress at this address. Taking a look at her mother's portrait, Katrina straightened her shoulders. *I think not.*

Picking up the coin sack, she sauntered over to the Earl. After rearranging his cravat, he realigned the stripes on the painted buttons of his tail-coat.

She raised her gaze. Faith, what a dandy!

Preoccupied with his image, he did not see her. She hurled the bag at his chest.

He flinched from the blow, then caught the coins. "What the devil!"

"Lord Udall." She gave him a smile of her own, albeit a little shaky. "I am not accepting your money for a simple reason--my great aunt and I are not leaving this house."

Balling his fists, he tightened his square jaw, giving her a stare that would quell the dead. "Indeed?"

Behind her back, Katrina crossed her fingers. She would not let him intimidate her! "My great aunt and I signed a lease with the Dowager Countess of Udall in good faith. As far as I am concerned, it is a legal document. I am afraid you will have to evict us."

"By God! You cannot be serious!"

His disbelief amused her. Obviously this man rarely faced opposition. It would do him good to experience a setback or two.

She tried to keep her lips from curving upward. "Oh, but I am, My Lord. Quite serious."

"You dare--you dare to defy me?" The Earl swung around and hammered his fist against the wall. The impact left a hollow in the Chinese paper. He stared at the

indentation, then stared at her.

It took no stretch of the imagination to assume he would have rather hit her. She took a step back.

Through clenched teeth, he hissed, "Make no mistake, Miss Jones. By this time tomorrow, you and your tartar aunt will be gone from my abode." He towered over her. One blow from his fist would have sent her sprawling on the floor.

But, Katrina balled her own fists. She could not lose. She just *couldn't*.

Out on the street by this time tomorrow, he had said.

She blinked. Time? Yes, of course, the morning papers! Batting her lashes at him, Katrina had the upper hand and knew it. "I venture that story will make excellent reading in *The Times*."

As she tapped her finger against her chin in a steady rhythm, she smiled sweetly. "Yes, I can visualize the headline: Hard-Hearted Earl Forces Destitute Females Out On The Street. A titillating piece of gossip, I should think. I wonder what I should say when the reporters question me?"

From the corner of her eye, she observed him. The white showing through his knuckles was quite unnerving. She held her breath.

Lord Udall moved toward her. His large bulk placed her completely in his shadow. She gulped.

But then he paused. Although his gaze never wavered, he spoiled his impassive demeanor by chewing on his lower lip.

As if committing her appearance to memory, he raked her with his gaze again. "I do not take kindly to being thwarted, Miss Jones. You will regret this."

It was a threat--an undeniable threat.

He grabbed his coat and slammed his beaver hat on his head. "Good day!"

A rush of air followed the Earl's departure and Katrina's resolve with it. Sinking into a chair, she wiped her forehead. "Heavens!" She felt fortunate to have gotten out of that situation alive. Titled or otherwise, he was a beast. All men were beasts; she knew that for a fact.

Hattie still snored peacefully, oblivious to the tempest that had swirled in the room.

Katrina inelegantly stretched out her legs and inadvertently kicked the black box that had fallen out of the Earl's pocket. She picked it up and ran to the window. Perhaps he had not left yet.

As he took a step up onto his carriage, he looked back at the house. Spotting her, his expression hardened.

Such an unpleasant man! Instead of returning his box, she decided to enrage him. She smiled and waved good-bye.

He slammed the carriage door shut.



Violent, too! She sat on the window ledge and listened to his deep voice filter through the glass. The words were muted, but then his fancy companion's high pitched screeching broke the quiet. Faith, it almost broke the glass in the window. The screaming seemed to go on forever. My, but the woman was angry. Better in Lord Udall's ears than in Katrina's!

Turning away from the window, she opened the velvet box. A sapphire and diamond bracelet sparkled brightly in the dull sunlight.

Katrina gasped. It must have been worth a fortune. Although she was not knowledgeable in the ways of the world, clearly, these jewels were meant for Lord Udall's paramour, as payment for services rendered.

Slipping the bracelet onto her wrist, Katrina admired the way it glittered. She would never have anything so valuable on her wrist again. It felt heavy, though--somehow oppressive.

What would it be like to be the Earl's mistress?

At that unmaidenly thought, she flushed. No jewels were worth selling oneself to *that* man. Or any man.

Still, the sapphires and diamonds had a compelling glow. What she would not give to see the Earl's face when he discovered he misplaced it. And when he realized his loss, he would have to break the news to his vocal companion.

For the first time in months, Katrina laughed. She hoped Lord Udall had ear muffs. If his shrew of a mistress' response to losing her love nest was any indication, then over the loss of this trinket, she was bound to be as cross as crabs! She would plague him until the cows came home.

Splendid! Katrina could not think of anyone who deserved the ill-fortune more.

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From inside his crested drag, Quentin Thornhill, the Earl of Udall, rolled a slow boil. Good God, for a Monday, this day bore all the markings of time better spent remaining in bed. How had this ruinous day followed on the heels of such an agreeable weekend?

Saturday night, at White's Club, he had won the deed to this dwelling on Mincing Lane--an ideal location to house his current interest, the willing Juliet Dufay. But that dolt, Sir Ralph Buckingill, instead of doing as he had been told, came 'round the next day at Udall House, and handed the deed to Quentin's mother. And the Dowager, for whatever perverse reason, rented the house to provincial nobodies--the Jones'.

Devil take it, was everyone out to thwart him?

Turning to Juliet, Quentin studied the effects of her temper tantrum. Uneven blotches of red spread from her plump cheeks to her dangling earlobes. Her now puffed eyelids gave her an appearance of a tawny screech owl; she sounded like one, too. The delicate membranes in his ears vibrated from her displeasure.

Gad! To think he had wanted to spend this day taking his pleasure with her.

"Juliet, or whatever your name is, you give every indication of behaving like a fishmonger's wife. I suggest you desist your ranting and give me time to think of a solution to our dilemma."

The sudden quiet slapped at his ringing ears. Good. Signaling the carriage driver, Dibbs, to proceed, Quentin again caught a glimpse of the grey-garbed vixen by the window of his newly won house. To be outwitted by a mere slip of a girl was humiliating, to say the least.

He chewed on his lower lip. Miss Jones' hair was a most strange color combination: sun-ripened maize--almost white in its intensity, yet streaked by coppery brown. Most unusual. Yet he was certain he had seen this mixture before. But where? And why was he waxing poetic over a thing as mundane as a woman's hair?

He flexed his right hand; it was only slightly tender. For some reason, she made him lose his self-control. Damn the girl, he had not resorted to punching walls since...since his brother died.

Juliet's harsh voice caused him to start. Hell and blast! When vexed, she sounded like two tom cats brawling.

"Udall, why are you letting that...that brass-faced wench have her way? What hold does she have on you? After all, you *are* an earl." Juliet pouted. "I told all the girls at the theater about the Earl of Udall being my new protector. Fairly in awe, they were. I told them you had lodging for me."

Juliet said the last statement in an accusatory way.

The theater. Yes, that was where this exotic bird of paradise belonged--in the theater. Whatever had he been thinking? Why had he removed her from her artificial environment?

The corners of his lips curved upward in a halfhearted smile. While Juliet Dufay could boast of being blessed in abundance with those feminine charms he desired in a woman, truth be told, he fancied her only because Nathan Morelock offered her *carte blanche* first.

The Baron Morelock--a despicable fellow. But who was having the last laugh now?

Quentin looked out the carriage opening at the grey and white misted Thames River. The snow disguised the city's ugliness. Living in London in the wintertime was a mistake. Another error in judgment. He was accumulating quite a list.

Juliet pulled on his sleeve. Flaring his nostrils, he stared down his nose at her.

Her heavily rouged face whitened. "Oh, my dear Udall! You know how I adore you." She pecked his cheek and flashed a smile.

At the sight of her slightly yellowed teeth and vivid lips, he turned away. Decay on the river's docks, decay in the room at Mincing Lane, and decay by his side. He could not escape from decay.

Tugging on his sleeve again, Juliet simpered into his ear. "I can't wait 'til you visit me at the new house. What will be the address, I wonder? 'Twill be so...so fine! You *will*

get me a house, won't you, ducks? After all, now that I'm under your protection, my friends do expect it. So green they'll turn. Oh, I am glad I picked you instead of Morelock."

She gave Quentin another kiss and fingered his hair.

Wiping his undoubtedly reddened cheek, Quentin brushed away her annoying hands. "*If you please.*"

Good God, an octopus had fewer arms than she had.

Placing her tiny pink-gloved hands in her lap, she murmured her apologies.

More than ever, he wished he could have set Juliet up at that hole-in-the-wall house and be done with it. What was he to do with her now? That blasted Jones chit. Who would have thought she would have the effrontery to refuse his offer? Actually throwing his guineas at him--a sad lack in manners! Even if he had thrown them first...

He stroked his chin.

"Udall, dear."

Quentin frowned. Devil take it, if he didn't have an urge to stuff Juliet's ermine muff down her mouth. One of these days, someone would rip the very chords from her throat. One day, maybe quite soon.

He eyed the creamy column of her neck.

The silly fool batted her blackened lashes at him. "Oh Udall, didn't you say you bought me a gift? A small trifle from Rundell and Bridge's, mayhaps?"

Her painted blue lids blinked rapidly. The breeze alone would have chilled him.

Take what they could get--that was womankind's motto. His deceased brother's wife, Therese, was a perfect example. Therese always squeezed until she drew blood. Then she squeezed for more. Damned termagant, too.

Reaching into his waistcoat, Quentin felt the bag of coins. Snuff box, pocket watch, and handkerchief, but no velvet box. He patted the sides of his tail-coat. "Where the devil...?"

"Ooh, Udall, you are a naughty gent for teasing your poor Juliet! Give over, where is it?"

He brushed aside her probing hands. His inspection finished, he fell back against the plush squabs of his carriage.

"Gone," he breathed. Where had he lost it?

"Gone?" Juliet screeched. She savagely rocked his arm back and forth. "You mean to sit there and tell me you don't have my bracelet?"

Damn common harlot. Her outburst attracted attention from passersby. Quentin signaled Dibbs to increase their pace.

Her arms upraised, the woman screeched again. As the drag accelerated, she lost her balance. She landed on the carriage floor.

Quentin eyed her dispassionately. How had she known he bought her a bracelet? And the shop name?

Ignoring her outraged face, he smoothed down his abused brown coat sleeve. "I suggest you refrain from damaging my tail-coat. My valet will be most vexed."

"Your coat be damned! Jack told me you picked out a bracelet at Rundell's--for me--for Miss Dufay!"

She propped herself back on the cushions and pointed her finger at Quentin. "Jack's a messenger boy there. He *told* me you laid the blunt down for a dazzler--what with diamonds and sapphires--to match my eyes."

Quentin dissected her with his gaze. Her scarlet lip quivered. The black box had fallen out of his pocket back at the house--back when he gave Miss Jones her *congé* money. He was certain of it.

Juliet's voice lost its power. "Jack said it was worth two whole ponies!"

In truth, the trinket cost three ponies, or seventy-five pounds, but who was counting? Quentin raised his eyebrow.

She blushed, the natural red diffusing into the unnatural rouge. "Jack is a, er, a friend of mine." A tear slid from her eye, marking a black path down her cheek.

Since Quentin remained unmoved by her feminine wiles, her fury re-ignited. "You beast!" She pounded on his thighs. "You heartless swine! *Where is my bracelet?*"

Taking out his handkerchief, he yawned into it. "The bracelet? I believe my new lodger, Miss Jones, has it."

Juliet let loose with a slew of language more foul than the streets of London.

Although he considered Nathan Morelock despicable, he had not thought him a blockhead. What *had* the man seen in this veritable harpy?

His decision made, Quentin tipped his hat to the absent Miss Jones. Although she had frustrated his purpose--again, he applauded her. Unknowingly, she saved him from making a big mistake. Juliet Dufay now had just one final gift coming to her: the gift of a good-bye.

He looked outside. Spotting the sign for St. James' Street, he rapped on the ceiling of his drag. Dibbs understood the signal. The carriage stopped, and Quentin opened the door.

"Udall, what--?"

"Enough words, my dear Juliet. Indeed, I have had enough of your words to last a lifetime."

Stepping down from the carriage, he shrugged into his greatcoat. "Intemperate weather," he pronounced.

"Udall--"

"Quiet, my dear."

Turning to the coachman, Quentin ordered, "Take this, er, lady back to Drury Lane, Dibbs. We have seen the last of her."

His face impassive, Dibbs bowed.

The woman fell to her knees. "No, no, please, Your Lordship. I promise--"

How quickly Juliet changed her tune. The good Lord above had done man a disservice by creating woman.

"Do you walk, My Lordship?" Dibbs questioned.

Quentin perused the grey stretch of sidewalk ahead of him. "Yes, a fine day for a stroll."

Exhaling into the cold November day, he watched the frosty breath rise from his mouth. He took the sack of guineas from his pocket and threw it at Juliet. He had no fear that she would throw it back at him.

She snatched the bag from the air. Satisfied, he forgot about her. "Yes, I shall walk up to my club."

As he passed Dibbs, Quentin lifted his weary eyebrow. "Who knows? Perhaps I will play a game of piquet. If Lady Luck refuses to smile at me, I have just the thing to wager. Perhaps the victor would care to win a deed to a house on Mincing Lane."

He rubbed his chin. "Hmm, an excellent idea!"



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