

# RIPE FOR PLEASURE

By Isobel Carr

Excerpt

## Chapter 1

London, May 1783

There was someone in her room.

The floorboards creaked, the wood protesting in its small, shrill way. Muffled footsteps sounded across the room, the tread far too heavy to be that of her maid. Viola Whedon froze beneath the covers, holding her breath. A faint line of candlelight licked though a crack in the bed curtains. Her heart beat surged in time with the ticking of the mantle clock, a thready, sickeningly fast vibrato.

“It’s got to be here.” A man’s voice, thick, angry, and entirely unknown to her.

“May’hap we missed it in the last room?” Another man, no more familiar than the first.

Viola carefully folded the covers back, the slight rustle of feathers and linen as loud as the clatter of iron-shod hooves on cobbles to her ears. She peered carefully out, not disturbing the curtains. Two men stood by the mantle, both squat and solid. The kind of men one passed near the docks or saw emerging from the slum of Seven Dials.

Just the sort of ruffians she’d have expected Sir Hugo to hire. Apparently stopping her annuity wasn’t revenge enough for the man. Or perhaps one of her former lovers who’d refused to buy his way out of her memoir had come up with a more dastardly method of stopping the publication?

Despite the warm May night, Viola shivered. Did they know she was here? That this was her room?

One of the men held a candle, while the other explored the mantle, clumsy fingers roughly caressing the wood. He made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat and spat. Viola clenched her jaw, revulsion pulsing through her. If only she were the heroine of a novel with a pistol under her pillow . . . if only she weren’t alone in her bed.

The baronet’s men weren’t going to find her manuscript—not where she’d hidden it—and she wasn’t going to simply wait for them to beat its location out of her. She needed the money that the manuscript would bring. Couldn’t live without

it in fact, thanks in no small part to Sir Hugo. And she planned on living to spend that money as extravagantly as possible.

Viola took a deep breath, the familiar scent of her perfume and hair powder and crisp, clean linen not at all comforting, and steeled herself for a mad dash across the room. She was closer to the door than they were. She had surprise on her side, and they'd left the door wide open.

She slid her feet over the side of the bed, eased the curtain back, and sprinted for the door. A startled oath burst from both men. Within seconds, they were pounding down the corridor after her, heels loud upon the uncarpeted floors, clearly not afraid to raise the whole house. One of them caught her hair and pulled, hard. She yanked her head free, vision blurring as she lost a chunk of hair.

Viola swung around the corner and half fell down the stairs, bouncing off the wall at the landing and skidding down the last flight, clutching at the banister to keep from falling. Her only footman lay face down on the floor in the entry hall.

Viola vaulted over him. Her hands shook as she fought with the lock and wrenched the front door open. Please let there be someone on the street. Please.

Her pursuer grabbed hold of her nightgown; threads popped and the gossamer nettle fabric tore. Viola screamed and struck him in the face with her elbow. He went staggering back, cursing. Warm air rushed over her as she ran down the front steps, searching the street for any sign of life, for any chance of rescue.

#

His cousin was a fool.

Leonidas Vaughn ran his fingers lightly over the cold hilt of his sword as two lumbering shapes slipping over the gate and into the small garden of No. 12 Chapel Street. A horse blew its breath loudly through its nose in the stable behind him. A cat slunk by and disappeared into the dark recesses of the mews.

It was so like Charles to make a brash, frontal assault when the situation plainly called for subterfuge. For subtlety. For seduction. But nothing he'd said had changed his cousin's mind. Charles saw only what he wanted to see. Saw only what he wanted: A fortune waiting to be claimed.

It had only been a few months since they'd buried their grandfather. A bare week since they'd marveled at the cache of letters among the mountains of papers pertaining to Leo's newly inherited estate. And in the days since he'd followed his cousin back to Town, Charles had already set the wheels of the hunt in motion . . . Just as Leo had known he would. The fevered gleam in Charles's eyes had been all too clear as letter after letter revealed the details of the King of France's attempt to support Bonnie Prince Charlie's bid for the English throne.

They'd always dismissed their grandfather's tales of hidden treasure and family tragedy as the stuff of legends. No different than the stories of Shellycoats and Kelpies Leo's mother had told them when they were boys. But the tragedy of Charles's family was real enough, and it seemed the treasure was too. The small packet of treasonous letters left no other conclusion possible. Though the assumption that it was still waiting to be found—like a princess in a tower waiting for the first kiss of love—was questionable.

True or not, two villains from the stews weren't going to find it. But their intrusion would give him the opening that he needed. A chance to make the lady of the house beholden to him. And all he'd had to do to earn that opportunity was spend a few nights lurking outside her house waiting for his cousin to strike.

A single point of light sprang out of a ground floor window, licking feebly at the casement as though trying to escape. The flicker slowly disappeared and reappeared from one window to the next, one room to the next. When it flashed from what had to be a bedroom up on the first floor, Leo left the mews and circled back to the front of the house. The night watchman toddled past him, one hand securely gripping his baton. Leo held his breath. If his bird took flight while the watch was present, his plan would come to naught. He needed her beholden to him and him alone.

The night watchman turned the corner. His halloo of "all's well" echoed back faintly. Leo smiled into the dark. Any minute hell would break loose in No. 12. All he had to do was wait. Charles's men would deliver Mrs. Whedon directly into his hands.

A scream rent the humid darkness, bringing every detail sharply into focus as his pulse leapt to meet it. A woman in nothing but her nightclothes erupted from the house. Her hair flamed in the lamplight as though it were afire, red-gold curls tumbling down to her hips. Mrs. Whedon. With that hair, it could be no other. Not a maid or a housekeeper, but the lady herself. His luck was in.

Her eyes met his, and the night seemed to stretch. He could see terror there, a layer of anger below it, all the more intense for its impotence. Curses raced after her, low and guttural, intermixed with the sound of heavy, booted feet coming down a flight of stairs.

Leo shot out one hand and caught a flailing wrist, hauled her around, and held her fast. A scent that was pure summer--grass on a warm day, flowers drowsing in their beds--washed over him. "Men. In my house." Her voice was shaky, the words clipped laced with fury. Her hand trembled, and she balled it into a fist, twisting in an attempt to free herself.

Leo thrust her behind him as a man in a dark coat came flying down the steps, a knife clutched in one hand. He drew his sword, using his left hand to hold Viola in place. It was only a dress sword, and though razor sharp, the rippled facets

of the pastes covering the hilt were less than reassuring in the moment. Mrs. Whedon clutched his coat, hampering him. A breath shuttered out of her and her hand tightened, pulling him back.

“Where is it, bitch—” the man choked off as he hit the wall and his gaze locked on Leo’s sword. He fell back a step, clearly assessing things, eyes darting about the empty street.

Leo shifted his stance, leveling his blade. “Wake the neighbors,” he said over his shoulder.

His coat swung free. A flash of white and gold moved past the edge of his vision. Thank God. Mrs. Whedon wasn’t famous for doing as she was told, but then what woman was? An unholy pounding resounded down the street as she beat against the door, the steady beat marking time as the seconds ticked by. His cousin’s gutter rat stared him down, not a hint of fear in his eyes.

The man’s head sat upon his shoulders like a rock set on a stump. His jaw was heavy, and his mouth hung open as though it were too small to contain his tongue. Not large enough to be a prize fighter, he had a menacing air all the same. A mad butcher’s dog on the loose, capable of violence far in excess of his size. He hefted the blade, shifted his weight. Then with almost lazy disinterest, he thrust his knife into his boot and sauntered away, whistling. He turned into the entry of the mews down the block, nothing but the sharp notes of his ditty marking his presence, until that too dissipated into the gloom.

Leo glanced back over his shoulder. His quarry stood on her neighbor’s porch, watching him. His hand shook as the rush of confrontation left him. He lowered his sword to hide it. He couldn’t afford even the slightest sign of weakness. Not now. Not when Mrs. Whedon stood not four feet away.

“The knocker’s off the door,” she said matter-of-factly, one pale hand clutching the torn neckline of her gown. “No help there.”

“Finally drive one of your protectors to murder, ma’am?”

A small smile curled the corner of her mouth as she descended the stairs, one slow, deliberate step at a time. Naked feet appeared and disappeared below her hem. Her toes gripped the ground. Her arches flexed, slim ankle bones leading up to a flash of calf with every step. Her wisp of a gown slid from her grip, exposing one pale shoulder and a great deal of pale décolletage.

A deliberate maneuver. It could be nothing else. Like all women who rose to the top of her particular trade, Mrs. Whedon was a consummate performer. She had to be. Even under circumstances such as these. Gone was the fleeing victim, replaced by a feral Venus. Leo swallowed hard, trying not to stare, wanting to touch, to reach out and grab. To possess that startling beauty, if only for a moment.

What man wouldn’t?

“Possibly, my lord.” Her reply jerked his attention away from her breasts. He’d been reduced to staring like a green boy by that damn wisp of a gown. “There were two of them, by the way.” Her voice dropped, becoming an intimate, throaty entreaty of its own. “Intruders I mean, not protectors.”

Leo smiled in appreciation. Lord knew she’d had more than two protectors. She clearly knew exactly who he was, though their paths had never formally crossed. Paying for a bedmate was both repugnant and utterly unnecessary when the world was brimming with willing widows and unsatisfied wives. Besides, younger son that he was, he didn’t command anywhere near the kind of fortune it took to secure a highflier like the one standing before him, even had he desired to do so.

A rivulet of sweat slid down his spine, like the ghostly touch of a past lover. He forced himself to ignore it, shifting his attention instead to the house. Armed intruders were far safer opponents than Mrs. Whedon. Especially when she was only a thin layer of cloth away from being naked. Even in the dim light, he could clearly make out the teasing circles of her nipples and the shadow at the apex of her thighs.

Lust grabbed disdain by the throat and shoved it down. Leo held his breath for a moment, searching for the control that seemed to have deserted him. Yes, he wanted her. And he meant to have her before all this was done. It was integral to the entire plan. But it would be on his terms, not because he allowed himself to be swept up in the drama and illusion of this not-so-chance rescue. And certainly not because he’s paid whatever price she might have in mind.

Leo turned away from her and strode into her house, making a vague gesture for her to follow. Inside, hysterical sobs greeted him. Two maids sat at the bottom of the stairs in a sea of flannel wrappers. A much older, harassed-looking housekeeper stood over them, nightcap askew, a large kitchen knife clutched in her hand.

One of the maids looked up and hiccupped, her face red in the candlelight. “He’s dead. We came down when we heard you scream and found Ned like-like . . .”

Mrs. Whedon pushed past him, her hand perfectly steady as she shoved him aside. “Is there anyone else in the house, Nance? Did you see another man?” The sobbing girl shook her head from side to side, her hand covering her mouth.

“Back door was open though, ma’am,” the housekeeper said.

“Then it’s likely your other intruder has also left the premises.” All four women turned to look at him as though he’d sprung from the ground like a fairy toadstool. The little maid sucked back another hiccup.

He picked up one of the candles and set his foot on the first tread of the staircase. “Stay here while I check the house. No, one of you had best wait out on the steps for the nightwatch.”

The housekeeper nodded her grizzled head and turned toward the door. Leo put her, the sobbing maid, and the dazzling Mrs. Whedon firmly out of his mind as he crept up the stairs.

The house was utterly quiet. Soft, dark room after soft, dark room greeted him. The mantles had been swept clean, pictures ripped from the walls. A clumsy attempt to be sure. The treasure had to be better hid than that. A porcelain figurine lay smashed on the floor of what appeared to be the only occupied room--Mrs. Whedon's, judging by the faint layer of *Eau de Cologne that permeated the space.*

Leo set the candle down and sheathed his sword. The men were gone, and his cousin had never been inside the house in the first place. A personal assault wasn't at all Charles's style. There was no point in roaming about armed like a buccaneer on the deck of a ship.

Her room was surprisingly simple. Plainer, in fact, than his own. It was hardly the lair of a woman famed for wanton indulgence.

No paintings or prints adorned the walls. The curtains surrounding the bed were a deep, solid blue. No embroidery to enliven them. No trim to soften them. The bedclothes spilling from between them were nothing but crisp, white linen. No silver brush sat atop the dressing table. No profusion of scent bottles lay scattered atop its surface. In fact, the only decoration appeared to be a mirror, a bit tarnished about the rim, and the smashed figurine.

Leo crouched down and scooped up a few of the larger, opalescent shards. Two legs ending in cloven hooves. A delicate head, ears pricked. A white hind. A creature straight out of legend. Something not unlike Mrs. Whedon herself.

## Chapter 2

Viola yawned and poured herself another cup of tea. She fingered the hot, aching mark that ringed her wrist. In a few days she'd be sporting a blue-black bracelet where her rescuer had manacled her wrist.

It had been a long night, hours spent waiting for the night watchman to summon the constable and for poor Ned to be taken away. Viola shuddered and swallowed a mouthful of lukewarm tea. Her stomach protested, and she set the cup aside.

She'd paced and drunk tea and watched with slightly horrified fascination as her rescuer stepped into the breach. He handled absolutely everything with the swift efficiency of a man who was used to giving orders, all the while giving every indication that he'd much rather be doing anything but helping her.

There were now a handful of hulking footmen guarding the house, and the hall had been cleaned by a swarm of women who'd arrived from his own home along with the footmen. He'd sent her own maids back to bed, an act of kindness that she couldn't easily dismiss.

It was fascinating. *He* was fascinating.

Lord Leonidas Vaughn. The Corinthian with the mismatched eyes. One blue, the other green, and both of them cold as the North Sea in February. Viola knew exactly who he was. One of the Mad Vaughns. The second son of the Duke of Lochmaben.

His grandfather was renowned for having intentionally burned down an entire wing of the family seat in a fit of rage, his father for kidnapping his bride from the steps of the church as she was arriving to wed someone else. And only last year, one of his cousins had been tried for the murder of his valet. He'd been acquitted, but all the same . . . there were rumors and stories of the Vaughn family's quirks and indiscretions going back to their knightly ancestor who had supported Queen Eleanor against her husband, Henry I.

Viola had been close enough on several occasions to judge those mismatched eyes for herself, but she'd failed to find them as arresting as the rest of

London. Not until tonight, when she'd run headlong into him, while wearing just this side of nothing. Suddenly she'd been transfixed, for his famously frigid gaze had been anything but cold.

Viola stretched until her joints strained and her elbows popped. There was no point in dwelling on those eyes of his. He was notorious for never having kept a mistress, a fact much bemoaned among the ranks of the fallen, and she had neither time nor use for cicisbei. She was a retired Paphian, whose most lucrative annuity had suddenly been stopped. Only the money from her memoirs stood between her and debtor's prison, and the payment she'd received for the first volume was very nearly gone. But the offer she'd secured for the second volume would keep her in coal and lobster patties for years to come . . .

She wasn't an actress, couldn't sing or dance—at least not well enough for a career on the stage—and at seven-and-twenty, her days as one of the reigning belles of the fashionable impures were behind her. It was time to make do or suffer the lot of so many other fallen women: the slow slide down into common whoredom. A decline from which recovery was impossible.

Viola knew what she was, and she didn't regret the choices that she'd made, but she'd be damned if she'd let the sacrifices be for naught. She'd prepared so carefully, planned so thoroughly—and been ruthless enough as she did so to earn the enmity of more than one man—only to see everything swept away by a few investments that had turned out badly and the actions of one petty baronet.

She'd kept her side of their bargain, but the very day the book had been published, Sir Hugo had reneged on the deal they'd made, canceling the annuity he'd promised in return for her lapse in memory. And after making only two quarterly payments. A pittance.

Did he think she wouldn't find a way to revenge herself? That she was stupid enough to put all her recollections in a single volume? The more fool he if he did.

She picked up the head of her smashed figurine and turned it over in her hands, watching the light play over the opalescent glaze. The last remnant of her girlhood. A gift from her father only days before she'd eloped . . . She set it in the saucer of her cup and rose to pace toward the window. It really wasn't worth mourning.

If she was going to indulge in that particular emotion, she had far more valuable losses she could contemplate: love, innocence, and reputation, all gone in one fell swoop. Viola swallowed a mouthful of air, pushing the faces that swam up from the recesses of her memory back where they belonged. Back where she kept them carefully partitioned and locked away.

Viola twitched back the curtain. A cloudless blue sky and a stream of sunshine greeted her. A small herd of sheep rambled down the street, their young

shepherd marching along beside them. A glossy coach pulled by four bays rattled past in the other direction, the livery of the footmen bright against the dark finish of the coach.

Just another May morning. Everything seemingly the same as the day before. Perfect. Beautiful. *Unbearable*.

A loud rap on her door made her jump. She turned to find Lord Leonidas framed in the doorway, his head nearly scraping the lintel. It was as though her house was simply unable to contain him. How had she never noticed he that was so tall?

His disordered hair was a deep auburn in the sunlight; strands escaped his queue and hung down at the temples. In candlelight it was merely brown. It made her almost sick how badly she wanted to tuck those stray bits back into place, just to have an excuse to touch him.

His expression held both lust and revulsion, and not a little bit of self-loathing. An intriguing mix, as though he were aware of the contradiction. Men were usually so much clearer about their wants and needs, and they so rarely bothered to be squeamish or apologetic about them. To want, to lust, to need, that was enough.

#

Leo paused before entering Mrs. Whedon's boudoir, a sudden stab of lust burning away exhaustion. She'd pulled a flowery dressing gown over her wisp of a nightgown, but the sun blazing through the open window outlined her long limbs and trim waist perfectly through the thin cloth. Light filtered around the curve of her breast and sparked her hair into a blaze around her head and shoulders. A Botticelli goddess without the half shell.

She dropped the curtain, and the room plunged into semi-lit darkness. She became merely an extremely beautiful woman, rather than something approaching the celestial.

Thank God for that.

"So what am I to do now?" Viola stepped toward him, and the whole room seemed to shrink.

"Go to bed, ma'am."

Her mouth quirked up, mocking him, as though she knew it was all that he could do not to beg to join her. As well she should, practiced coquette that she was. She could probably smell lust half-way across town. It was her stock in trade after all, no different from a tailor knowing the hand of his cloth.

"Practical advice, my lord. Will you be taking it yourself?"

Leo's mouth went dry. Was that an invitation or a taunt? His cock twitched, clear about what answer it wanted.

"Yes, ma'am," he ground out. "I was only stopping to take my leave. I'll return this afternoon to await the arrival of Mr. Addison's men."

One elegantly straight brow arched as she stared him down, moss green eyes unblinking. There was a stillness about her that was fascinating, reminiscent of a doe as the baying of hounds washes over her and she takes stock of her options before erupting into flight. It made it hard to look away from her. Impossible really.

Leo caught himself and yanked his wandering mind away from her. He was tired. That was all. He was tired, and sleeplessness always fantasies and gave luster to otherwise mundane objects. She couldn't possibly be as beautiful as she looked at that moment. No woman could.

Annoyed with himself, Leo nodded, turned on his heel, and left. If he stayed a moment longer, he'd tumble into bed with her, and that wouldn't do at all. Falling under Mrs. Whedon's spell was the last thing he could afford to do.

## Chapter 3

Charles burst into the Red Lion on a wave of gin. Leo allowed the upper edge of his newspaper to sag. The general din of conversation ended abruptly as his fellow League members watched Charles drop into a vacant seat.

A sprig of hope unfurled in Leo's chest at the sight of him, only to die just as quickly. Charles's hair was ruffled and hilly in its queue, as though he'd pulled it hastily back without the aid of a comb. His cravat hung loose and open about his throat, and his coat was nothing short of a disaster: a large water spot marred one whole side from shoulder to waist.

His disheveled state did not bode well. Charles had a mercurial temper: One moment he was amenable, jovial, the best of fellows, the next he was anything but. He could turn on you quick as a mad dog, and today they weren't even beginning with Charles in a good frame of mind.

"Long night?" Leo dropped the newspaper on the table and waved a hand. The owner's daughter appeared as though summoned by a spell. She twisted her calico-coated hips through the crowd with practiced ease and set a steaming cup of coffee before Charles.

He didn't even reach for it. Charles just stared at Leo over the table. Hate scuttled through the recesses of his eyes, unmistakable even in so brief a flash. Where had that come from? How had he missed its inception?

Leo had been hoping that today, in light of his lack of success, Charles would listen to reason, would be open to joining forces . . . if what the letters hinted at was true, there was more than enough money there for both of them.

From across the room, Gareth Sandison caught Leo's gaze, his brows raised inquiringly. Leo gave him the slightest of no's. If Charles meant trouble, best not to antagonize him by bringing Sandison into their shared secret quite so publicly.

Leo pushed the steaming cup toward his cousin. Charles's gaze dropped, and his hand closed around it like that of an automaton. He raised it up and blew on it, holding it with unsteady hands. "A long night . . ." He sounded pensive, but the anger laced beneath it was evident if you were listening closely. "You should know, Cousin. You were there, after all."

Leo sipped his own coffee and let the comment settle. The warm, earthy scent of the coffee house washed over him.

He and Charles hadn't been as close of late as they had been as boys. Leo had been hoping for something very different when he'd invited Charles to Dyrham Hall after their grandfather had died. Some small part of him was still hoping . . .

"Charles—"

"No." His cousin slammed his cup down hard enough to send coffee sloshing over the rim. He yanked his hand away and shook off the steaming liquid. Leo held his breath.

All around the room, heads rose, attention shifting to Charles as though he were a fox scampering through a kennel of hounds. His cousin's mouth flattened, lips almost entirely disappearing.

"No, Leo." Charles's voice shook, and the vein in his forehead stood out in stark relief. "The money doesn't belong to your family. And it wasn't your family that suffered after the forty-five because of it. It was mine. Mine!" The final word erupted out of Charles. Spittle sprayed across the table, trailing behind like a comet's tail.

"We're both Vaughns," Leo kept his voice soft, low, as though he were speaking to a frightened horse, "and the fortune in grandfather's letters doesn't belong to either of us. It belongs to the King of France, or to the Cardinal Duke of York if you prefer, but I for one have no intention of giving it to either of those bastards."

Charles wiped his mouth on his sleeve and gave a bark of laughter, but it didn't reach his eyes. They stayed flat as those of a fish in a monger's basket. "I'm only a distaff-Vaughn. We might share blood, but we're not the same family."

Leo opened his mouth to protest but his cousin raised his hand to forestall him. A pale band on his ring finger marked a loss Leo had thought impossible. Things must be far worse than Leo had ever imagined if Charles had gambled away his father's ring.

Hand still held up like a shield, Charles said, "You'd say I was raised a Vaughn, but you'd be wrong. I spent every damn day of my childhood having my face rubbed in the fact that I was a poor relation. A duty. A burden."

Leo frowned. It was impossible that his cousin could say that, could he feel that. Or it should have been. "You're my father's favorite sister's son. My father—"

"I'm a MacDonald." Each syllable was clipped, harsh, emphatic. "The son of a disgraced and broken house, but I'm going to reclaim my birthright. My place in the world. And that money is the key to it all." Charles leaned forward, hands

gripping the edge of the table, knuckles white. “You don’t need it, Cousin. You’ve got an entire estate to entertain yourself with thanks to Grandfather. Let it be.”

“You know I can’t do that, Charles. What I have is a house that at present isn’t capable of—”

“Just stay out of it, damn you.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Don’t cross me on this, Leo.” Charles stood up and shook out his rumpled coat. The soft pile was smashed askew, making it dull and rough. He turned to go, but stopped before stepping away from the table. “That money is there for the taking, and I mean to have it. Neither you or that whore are going to stop me.”

Leo watched his cousin go with a sour feeling in his stomach. He’d seen Charles work himself up about things in the past, but this cold fanaticism was something new. There was no hope of his seeing reason. Charles was beyond that now.

It wasn’t just about the money. Leo turned his cup between his fingers, absently studying the blue transfer pattern of birds and tea houses, wishing he could simply let it go. Dyrham Hall was small, barely more than a house and a few acres of pasture, but it was also beloved, a love he and his grandfather had shared along with their passion for horses and hunting.

The estate was simply too small to support itself, let alone to support the care of the hunters that were its reason for existence. If Leo wanted to live there, to make a life there, he was going to need money. Quite a lot of money, actually. Far more than his younger son’s portion.

Besides, whatever else Mrs. Whedon might deserve, she didn’t deserve Charles. Especially in his present mood. No one did.

Leo was pulled from his introspection as his friends, Sandison in the fore, descended upon him. Most of them had been friends since they were boys, all except Dominic de Moulines. The Frenchman--bastard son of a French comte and his island mistress—had been inducted into the League when he’d come to London to give a fencing demonstration.

Roland Devere pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his tobine coat and mopped up the table, fastidiously careful to keep his cuffs clean, before sitting down. Sandison simply sprawled at his leisure, prematurely silver hair swinging loose, looking very much as though he’d slept in his coat. Knowing Sandison, he probably had, if he’d slept at all. The others took the remaining empty seats and stared at Leo expectantly.

Devere wadded up the handkerchief and sent it sailing toward Anthony Thane, who caught it in midair and dropped it onto the folded newspaper.

“Anything we can help you with?” Thane said, glaring at Devere.

“Not at the moment.” Leo tossed back the last of his coffee and set the cup aside. “Just a family squabble.”

De Moulines shook his head, just the way Leo’s older brother did when he knew he was lying. “*Non*. No such thing with you damn Vaughns, this we all know. Mad, the lot of you.”

“Besides,” Sandison cut in, “MacDonald was quite loud: money, the forty-five, poor relation, birthrights.”

“From across the room it was all very intriguing,” Devere said.

Leo held back a smile. Devere was always looking for an adventure and Sandison, despite his sleepy appearance, was all too keen when it came to schemes and puzzles. While de Moulines was a fire eater, ready to fight on the flimsiest of provocations. Only Thane could be counted upon to keep a cool head.

“No,” Leo said, answering Thane and ignoring the others, “at the moment it’s nothing but a family squabble. For now you’ll have to excuse me, I’m off to call on Mrs. Whedon, and that most certainly isn’t something I need any of your help with.”

Devere’s eyes narrowed and Sandison went off in a peel of laughter, while the other two choked on their coffee. Leo shook his head at them and refused to be drawn in. He reclaimed his hat and swordstick from The Red Lion’s porter, and set off briskly toward St. James’s Park.

His cousin’s refusal to see reason still chafed, but it wasn’t all that surprising. The cards had been dealt and the bets laid; there was no going back now. He stopped in the middle of the walk as a plan began to take shape.

A covey of giddy demireps out for an airing swirled around him. They sized him up as they went by, the stench of stale perfume and cheap cosmetics swirling in their wake. He could feel them weighing the cut of his coat, the expense of his boots, the value of his purse. They could probably guess his worth as well as any moneylender.

Leo adjusted his hat and flipped his swordstick up smartly under his arm as they drifted off slowly so he wished to catch them he might. One of them smiled back over her shoulder, displaying her fine neck and an expanse of straight and surprisingly white teeth. Leo shook his head, causing her to whip back around. Her walk took on a decided flounce, skirts swishing, bouncing erratically over the false rump beneath them. He had a much more alluring conquest in mind. Beside Mrs. Whedon, the gauche girls before him in their rouge and patches didn’t stand a chance. Just the thought of her set his mouth watering, made his pulse rise with expectation.

Leo plucked his watch from his pocket and thumbed the tortoiseshell case open: Three-eighteen. He quickened his pace. He was going to be late to meet Addison’s men, and he had a serious bit of seduction to get underway. A vision of

flame-colored hair, slightly damp and tangled, hanging over him like a Bedouin's tent made him inhale sharply. The loamy scent of the park washed over him, reminding him of her perfume.

He even knew exactly how to put his proposal to her . . .