

Prologue



White's, May 1818

The crowd gathered around the card table signalled one of two things—either somebody was about to win a substantial sum or somebody was about to lose the shirt off his back. The spectacle drew Ross Jameson like a moth to a flame. At the card table sat the Earl of Runcorn, eyes wide and sweating profusely, as Viscount Denham idly gathered up the ridiculously large pile of banknotes he had just won from the middle.

Ross wandered to his friend Carstairs, knowing that he would clarify the situation perfectly. ‘What’s afoot?’ he murmured as he took a sip of his drink.

John Carstairs copied the motion, his eyes never leaving the drama at the table. ‘Denham has just cleaned Runcorn out. There is over a thousand pounds on that table.’

Ross was not surprised. Runcorn had been on the path of self-destruction for years and Viscount Denham did enjoy parting a fool from his money.

Denham stood and smiled smugly at his opponent. ‘It has been a pleasure, Runcorn.’

The beaten man blinked rapidly, obviously in a state, and then reached into his jacket pocket with the air of a man about to do something completely stupid. He pulled out a large, official-looking document and practically threw it into the middle of the table.

‘The deeds to Barchester Hall,’ he announced with desperate zeal. ‘It is unentailed and surrounded by excellent parkland and fine pasture—I will wager all I have lost against the house.’

The assembled crowd sucked in a collective breath.

‘What sort of man comes to a card game with the deeds to his house?’ Carstairs hissed under his breath.

‘The sort who is fool enough to lose it,’ Ross answered calmly. Runcorn was not the first man to gamble away the family silver, and doubtless he would not be the last.

The rest of the crowd were anxiously waiting for Denham to respond to the challenge. This was exactly the sort of thing that they lived for—the prospect of seeing one of their own ruined.

Denham had still not sat down again, but he was regarding Runcorn with open curiosity—to Ross it was obvious he was rejoicing in his own good fortune.

True to form, Denham was going to make the fool suffer. ‘I seriously doubt that the property is worth much more than three thousand,’ he said dismissively, ‘but I am a reasonable man. Under the circumstances I will—’

Ross cut him off before he could finish. ‘I will take the wager, Runcorn.’ He tossed an enormous bundle of banknotes onto the table. ‘Five thousand against your house.’

The crowd gasped audibly at this interesting and

totally unexpected turn of events. Excited words were exchanged and one or two men pointed out that Ross's challenge was poor form. This was Denham's game—he at least should claim first refusal. But such a vulgar upstart as Jameson would not understand the proper way things were done in polite society. Others simply marvelled at his apparent generosity. Five thousand against some old heap of bricks was well over the odds.

Ross ignored them. Instead he watched Runcorn eye the cash greedily and knew exactly what the blithering idiot was thinking—he could cover his losses and pay some debts with such a healthy purse. Gamblers like Runcorn could never see past the pathetic hope that their luck was about to change.

'Done!' Runcorn exclaimed excitedly, his gaze never leaving the money.

Ross watched Denham's pale eyes narrow briefly before he reluctantly stood aside to allow him to sit in the chair he had just vacated. 'What are we playing?' Ross asked casually, although he knew already that it was piquet.

Poor Runcorn really did not stand a chance. Many considered piquet less of a risk than hazard, but in truth it was much easier to cheat if one was so inclined. With hazard, chance and luck might scupper even the best player, but piquet was predictable for somebody with Ross's brain. He motioned for the cards to be dealt and took another sip of his drink before slowly picking up his hand.

The cards he had were good, so he discarded them and picked up five duds. It would not do to trounce the fellow completely from the outset.

Runcorn easily won the first rubber and visibly

sagged in relief. The man really was a terrible player; it was no wonder Denham had cleared him out. He wore his emotions on his sleeve. For the second deal Ross purposely played clumsily, and made it appear as if his final winning trick was a fluke. The third hand he played dead straight and won, but he threw the fourth for the sake of entertainment. The crowd and the atmosphere made it fun.

Runcorn was far too careless, and nerves made him sloppy. He was so grateful for each point that he lost track of the cards dealt and obviously had no concept of what was left on the table—a rash and stupid way to play such an easily rigged game. Hell, if he were so inclined as to feed in a few additional face cards, he doubted the man would realise. However, he just wanted to beat Runcorn—not meet him on Hampstead Heath at dawn.

As the penultimate hand was being dealt Ross caught John's eye. His friend made a show of checking his timepiece—an unsubtle reminder that they were due elsewhere—and Ross stopped toying with his prey. He played every card with calculation and took every trick. By the end of the *partie* Runcorn had begun to panic. Large beads of sweat rolled down the side of his face and dampened the high, pointed collar of his fashionable shirt.

That detail also spoke volumes about the man, Ross mused. It was well known that the Earl of Runcorn had run up huge debts with every reputable tradesman in London—and some very *disreputable*. He had long been spending above his means, but instead of curbing this recklessness Runcorn chose to affect a façade of wealth that did not fool anyone—least of all Ross. He

made it his business to track fellows like that, so it was difficult to feel sorry for him.

The final hand was dealt in silence as the onlookers tried to conceal their glee. At best, Runcorn needed thirty points to beat him. Such a feat was possible for a skilled player, with a keen awareness of the game. Unfortunately that was not Runcorn. He lacked both skill and awareness. In fact he lacked any prospect of basic common sense as well, but—as with so many of his ilk—he had no concept of his failings.

Ross decided to lull the hapless earl into a false sense of security. Runcorn won the first two tricks because Ross let him, and lost the third badly because of his own stupidity. In desperation he played his one good card too soon. As a result he won the fourth trick, but had nothing higher than a jack left in his arsenal for the rest of the game.

As Ross held two kings and a queen Runcorn's defeat was not only inevitable but decisive. His face took on a white, then an increasingly green tinge as Ross's points rose past the number where he stood even the slightest chance of recouping his losses. When his final card was trumped by the King of Hearts, Runcorn buried his head in his hands as applause broke out around them.

Ross quietly picked up his five thousand, and the folded deeds, and put them safely into his inside pocket. Now would definitely be a prudent time to make a hasty exit.

Quietly, Viscount Denham came up behind him and whispered in barely audible tones, 'I see your luck continues to hold, Jameson.'

Ross nodded curtly. He had just ruined a man; he did not need to gloat. Nor did he need to spend one more

second in Denham's company that he did not have to. The man made his flesh crawl.

At that moment the Earl of Runcorn lurched to his feet, unaware of the fact that he had knocked his chair over in the process. 'Well...well played, sir,' he stammered—out of ingrained politeness rather than respect, Ross assumed—and then he turned to the assembled crowd and inclined his head. 'If you gentlemen will all excuse me for a minute?'

Ross watched him stumble towards the door and his eyes flicked back towards his friend in unspoken communication. John nodded in understanding and slipped out of the crowd to follow Runcorn. He would know what to do.

'I wonder, Jameson,' Denham said silkily, 'is it the thrill of the game that draws you or is it merely the pleasure of thwarting *me* that you continually seek?'

The sound of a single shot ringing out prevented Ross from having to answer.

Everybody rushed towards the door that led out to the marbled hallway of the gentlemen's club. Before he even reached the hallway Ross had a premonition of what he would see, but he followed regardless. John, of course, was already there, and his shocked expression told the onlookers everything they needed to know.

An eerie silence settled over them as they took in the gruesome scene. The alabaster walls of White's were decorated with violent splatters of Runcorn's blood, which had already started to trickle in their journey downwards. A growing pool of crimson oozed slowly across the black and white marble floor around the body while the pistol he had used to blow his own brains out was still smoking in the earl's twitching hand.

Denham turned to Ross with a malicious gleam in his eye. 'Well, that should certainly give the newspapers something to print tomorrow.'

Chapter One



Just over one year later...

Lady Hannah Steers read the letter again with mounting excitement. If Cook was to be believed then this was finally her chance to set things to rights.

‘What is that dear?’ her Aunt Violet asked, curious to see any sort of letter, such were their rarity.

‘It is a letter from Cook with news from Barchester Hall. That blackguard now intends to move in. Can you believe that?’

‘Oh, dearest, I do wish that you would try to forget about that place,’ said Aunt Beatrice with concern. ‘It is time that you moved on with your life.’

Both her aged aunts were wearing twin expressions of pity, and Hannah felt her irritation rise at their continued lack of understanding. How did they expect her to move on with her life when the single most important part of it had been stolen away? Barchester Hall was all she had left.

‘Aunt Beatrice,’ she stated, with as much patience as she could muster, ‘I cannot move on until I see Ross

Jameson swing from a gibbet. In the meantime, somebody has to expose his true character to the world.'

'Nonsense!' her aunt replied. 'He will get his comeuppance—but you are not the person to see that he does. You have five thousand pounds from your father sitting in the bank and you are still young enough to find a husband.'

Ha! As if *that* was ever going to happen now. After the scandal, no man worth his salt would touch her—regardless of her aunts' continued optimism. Nor did she want to put all her faith in one man again—any man for that matter. The last few years had taught her that she could function perfectly well on her own.

'You need to enjoy your life now. All this bitterness towards Mr Jameson is not healthy. In fact we know nothing certain about him at all. Are you even sure that he is as guilty as you believe? No charges were ever brought, after all.'

Hannah felt her blood begin to boil at that suggestion. 'Do not give that despicable rogue the benefit of the doubt. I can assure you that he does not deserve such kindness. All my enquiries and all the evidence I have gathered leads me to exactly the same conclusion. He is a villain and a swindler—make no bones about it. But he has covered his tracks well. Any man who can wheedle his way into society with such low-born connections has a particular talent for deceit. Of course he is charming, and his fortune has bought him entry into some of London's finer homes, but there are still a goodly number of the ton who continue to turn their backs on him. They know what he truly is. The gossip columns are full of his salubrious exploits.'

'Need I remind you that your brother's exploits also

made regular appearances in the scandal sheets?’ her Aunt Violet pointed out. ‘And we all know that George was not an angel. And most of society would still turn their back on *you*—not that you deserve it, of course—so I am inclined to ignore that particular point.’

Her two aunts shared a pointed look and Hannah sighed in frustration. She *had* featured briefly in the gossip columns too. Quite spectacularly, in fact—and none of that had been true either—but she would not let that distract her. The stories might have been false, but they had not been founded in fairytales. Everybody—her own fiancé included—had been convinced of her guilt before the cruel words had even made it to the papers. They had only printed the news.

‘I know that you do not share my desire to have him brought to justice, but I cannot stand by and let him ruin Barchester Hall. It is my home and I love it. I have to at least try to get it back. And, whilst I do agree that in the main society is fickle and not to be trusted, there has been too much written about him for it all to be false. There is at least one story a week, usually involving either women or his dubious business dealings, and he never denies them. Why would he allow such things to be printed if they were not true? He would have grounds to sue for libel. Do you know that one newspaper even went as far to suggest that he killed his own father?’

‘Surely not!’ Aunt Violet covered her open mouth with her hand.

At her aunts’ twin expressions of horror she clarified what she had read. ‘Well, perhaps not directly. He surrendered his father to the authorities for the reward money and upon his testimony the man was transported to the colonies. He died on the passage over.’

‘That does not make the man a murderer, Hannah,’ Beatrice said in relief.

‘But it *does* give us some insight into his character, Aunt. He betrayed his kin. He did not deny it. What sort of a person does that?’

Neither of the older women could think of a suitable response, which led Hannah to believe that they did actually agree with her on that score.

‘Barchester Hall is his now,’ Aunt Beatrice said kindly, and patted her hand. ‘You must reconcile yourself to that sad fact. It is lost to our family for ever.’

‘Not if I can prove that he came by it dishonestly,’ Hannah countered vehemently. ‘Perhaps then there is a chance that it can be returned to the family. If not, when Jameson is behind bars the Crown will sell it, and—as you rightly point out—I have five thousand pounds sitting in the bank to purchase it if such an opportunity presents itself.’

She was quite prepared to do whatever it took to go home again. She felt as though she were slowly dying here. Days, weeks, months, *years*—all had merged into one never-ending stream of monotony that left her so despondent that at times Hannah struggled to get out of bed.

Years ago she had been so vibrant—so full of life and hope and fun. Where had that effervescent girl gone? This prolonged period of exile had sucked all of the joy out of her heart and she was tired of feeling imprisoned. If only she could go home to Barchester Hall... Then perhaps she might once again blossom into the woman she had once been and live the life she deserved.

Aunt Violet shook her head slowly. ‘But, dearest, we are in the wilds of Yorkshire and Barchester Hall

is two hundred miles away. How exactly are you going to achieve all this from such a distance?’

Both her aunts still thought of her as a child. She knew quite well the futility of attempting such a thing from their tiny cottage on the moors. Hannah stifled the slow grin that threatened to spread across her face. She was no longer the green girl she had once been. Complete ruination had a way of hardening one’s character, so she had every intention of pursuing any opportunity that presented itself—no matter how tenuous. But there was no way her aunts would support her if they actually suspected what she was up to. Cook’s letter had thrown her a lifeline that she intended to grasp with both hands. This was her chance to have a different future.

‘On a separate note,’ she said after several minutes of silence, ‘Cook says that Jane Barton has invited me to visit her for the summer.’

She had not spoken to the girl since the last ball they had attended together—just before Hannah had been banished to Yorkshire so spectacularly—but her aunts did not know that. None of her old London friends had spoken to her since that dreadful ball either. They had all taken her guilt for granted. Not that she would ever discuss those shameful facts with them... The lie would give her an excuse to get away for a month or two at least.

‘That’s nice, dear,’ Violet said kindly as she picked up her embroidery. ‘You *should* go and stay with her. It will be good for you to spend time with somebody your own age for once. You have been cooped up here with us old ladies for far too long.’

Aunt Beatrice heartily agreed. ‘A good holiday will sort you out and take your mind off this silly revenge

business. You might even meet a nice gentleman and be swept off your feet. Wouldn't that be nice?'

Hannah smiled politely at the familiar suggestion. Both women were convinced that the only route to her future happiness was with a man. Normally she would have set them straight on that score immediately. The very last thing she needed was a man in her life. It was thanks to men that she was in this predicament in the first place. However, if her aunts were hopeful that she would change her mind and be open to the idea of marriage they would actively encourage her to take a little holiday.

'I suppose...' she said a touch wistfully, and stifled a triumphant smile when she watched her aunts exchange a pointed look at her apparent sudden change of heart. 'Perhaps enough time has passed.'

'It has been seven years,' Aunt Beatrice said excitedly. 'It will all be forgotten. Besides, you are such a pretty girl, Hannah. You always did turn heads. And you are so thoughtful and caring—you deserve the chance of a family of your own. I firmly believe that once you meet the right gentleman he will not care one whit for silly gossip that is so many years old. But for that to happen you need to be with people of your own age—like Jane Barton. You should write to her at once and accept.'

'I shall make the arrangements, then,' she said, rising.

And now that she had the entire summer free she could take advantage of the very interesting information that Cook had told her. Not only was Jameson moving in to Barchester Hall, but he had asked Cook to advertise for a housekeeper. Finally she'd have an opportunity to

study the beast in his lair. All applications were to be sent to Barchester Hall, and Cook had been given the responsibility of sifting through them and selecting the most suitable candidates for him to interview in London next week. Jameson did not want his busy lawyer to be burdened with such mundane things.

Hannah's application would be one of the few that he would see.

Hannah sailed out of the room without looking back. If she was going to make it onto the post in the morning she had much to do. Firstly she had a letter of application to write. Then she had references to forge. And at some point this evening she would also have to pack up her meagre possessions ready for the trip.

Fortunately her wardrobe was so dire already that she did not have to purchase new clothes to resemble a servant. Her existing clothes were drab and plain enough already. She probably did look a little too young to be a housekeeper, but she could scrape her hair into an unbecoming bun and perhaps affect some sort of disguise that would make her appear more suitable.

By hook or by crook she *would* be Ross Jameson's new housekeeper. It was her only real hope of getting some of her life back.

Ross folded his arms over his bare chest and stared at Francesca. What he had seen in her all those months ago he could not fathom. She was a selfish, self-centred, mean-spirited and manipulative wench with far too much to say for herself.

'You need to leave now—and this time I want you to leave the master key you charmed from the doorman.' For emphasis he stuck out his palm and waited.

‘Oooh, Ross, we both know that you don’t mean that,’ she cooed as she lay back against his pillows and began to unlace the front of her low bodice. ‘Come to bed and I will make you forget all your anger.’

Once upon a time he would have happily taken her up on the offer. Despite her intrinsic character flaws, Francesca had always been a good tumble. He had, of course, paid dearly for that privilege—but the harpy could keep the jewellery and the fripperies he had given her. It was the least he could do, he supposed, but facts were facts.

‘I think that you are forgetting one *tiny* detail, Francesca, and it is one that I cannot overlook. Our arrangement was supposed to be exclusive for its duration.’ And Ross knew she had been dallying elsewhere these last few weeks.

‘I would never have strayed if you had taken more of an interest in me.’ Her rouged lips pouted and she slowly pulled her bodice open.

Two very large, very round breasts stared back at him in open invitation. She did have a point, he supposed. He had lost interest in her. In the last few months he had been so busy with his work that he had scarcely had time for her. However, that did not give her carte blanche to seek entertainment from another benefactor before they had formally ended their arrangement. That was just basic good manners.

‘I have it on good authority from Lord Marlow himself that he is more than happy to support you going forward,’ Ross explained calmly. ‘It will, I am reliably informed, suit you very well too—seeing as you have been inviting him over this last fortnight for a bit of a trial run. I do not actually have the time for a mistress

at the moment, so let's just let bygones be bygones and leave it at that.'

Francesca bristled and stuffed her exuberant breasts back into her dress. 'You will come back to my door begging for it. You wait and see.'

The fact that he had not done so in over two months did not appear to have registered.

'Well, in the meantime I think you had better hand over that key and give it back to the doorman. I would prefer it if you did not turn up to my lodgings unannounced in the future. You gave me quite a scare.'

She had as well. One minute he had been enjoying a deep and dreamless sleep and the next he had felt her hand clamp around his privates. But then again Francesca had never been particularly subtle.

With a huff she fished the key out of her reticule and slapped it into his open palm, but she made no attempt to rise from her semi-reclining position on his bed.

'Are you sure you don't fancy one last ride, Rossy-Wossy? For old times' sake?' Francesca gave him her best come-hither smoulder and began to inch her frothy skirts slowly up her open legs.

'Here we are, mum.' The bedroom door crashed open and Reggie filled the frame with his enormous bulk. 'Your appointment is here, Ross,' he said, smiling, oblivious to the fact that he had not knocked and had brought a complete stranger into Ross's bedchamber without any warning whatsoever.

With a long-suffering sigh Ross walked towards the door. 'Thank you, Reggie. But do you remember I told you that visitors should be seated in the parlour and given a cup of tea?'

Reggie nodded his enormous mousy head and

looked contrite. ‘I remember, Ross. Sorry...’ He turned towards the wide-eyed woman next to him and used one of his meaty arms to manhandle her out through the doorway. ‘I have to sit you in the parlour and make you tea, mum.’

Ross closed the door and grabbed a fresh shirt. This was not exactly the way he had planned to start his day. First he had been forced to deal with Francesca, and now he had probably frightened off the only reasonable applicant he’d had for the job of housekeeper. He doubted the woman would even stay—she had looked so outraged at the scene she had just witnessed that she was probably halfway to Mayfair by now.

‘Who is *she*?’ Francesca snarled as she finally deigned to rise from his bed. ‘Is she your new mistress?’

Ross heaved a long-suffering sigh. ‘She *was* applying for the post of housekeeper at Barchester Hall—not that it is any of your business. But I should imagine she is already outside hailing a hackney, thanks to you and Reggie.’

Ross stalked to the door and headed towards the parlour. To his complete surprise the woman was in there. She sat primly, balanced on one edge of a chair, looking as though she was likely to bolt at any moment. Ross arranged his features into the most apologetic and friendly smile he could muster. Perhaps he could salvage the situation with his usual charm?

What was he thinking—of *course* he could salvage the situation with his charm. It was what he did best.

His search for a housekeeper thus far had been fruitless. Who knew that hiring servants was such an onerous task? Not having ever had a need for servants before, Ross had had no idea how problematic the pro-

cess could be. He was offering a good salary, and more than the usual amount of time off, but so far every woman he had interviewed had been totally unacceptable. One had been obviously drunk, the second very peculiar and actually quite frightening, and the third had been so old and creaky she'd looked as if she might keel over at any minute.

Perhaps even decent servants were snobs? He had no title. He was not even a gentleman. And everyone in London knew that. Ross made no secret of his past because he was not ashamed of it. He might well have grown up in the gutter, but he had clawed his way out with determination. He had even taught himself to read and write. Now he had an impressive fortune and the reputation of being the canniest businessman in the city—a position that gave him both status and power, which in turn provided the kind of safety and security he had always craved.

He was a person to be reckoned with rather than someone who lived at the mercy of others. It was gratifying to know that his services were in demand from the great and the good—it gave him a sense of satisfied achievement.

Apparently all that made no difference when one was hiring staff. This one was the last application he had received—there were no more candidates left—and even if she *did* look much too young to him, he was prepared to overlook a great many faults so long as she was even partially suitable.

If he did not have a housekeeper then he could not realistically begin renovating his new house. He certainly did not have time to hire all the tradesmen and servants himself, and somebody had to be around to su-

pervise them. Especially now that the new ships were taking up so much of his time.

He could hardly go and find a butler. Reggie had got it into his head that *he* was going to be the butler, and Ross could not bring himself to shatter the oaf's dreams like that.

'I am so sorry for the way we were introduced, Mrs...er...' *Blast*, he had forgotten the woman's name. 'Mrs Preston,' the woman said tightly, and she peered at him coldly over the rims of her unflattering glasses.

'Yes, of course.' Ross gave her his most dazzling smile, but when it became clear that the woman had absolutely no intention of reciprocating it slid off his face despondently.

Already he was predisposed to dislike this woman. She was regarding him with complete distaste and ill-concealed disapproval. He hated it when people did that, and unfortunately it was an occurrence that happened far too often—especially since the newspapers had begun to immortalise his supposed exploits in print. However, somewhere in the back of his mind he quite liked the ruthless blackguard's reputation he had had foisted upon him. It portrayed the image that he was a force to be reckoned with—and surely that could not hurt in the long run?

The woman was still staring at him distastefully, as if he were the lowest of the low. This really was *not* a good start to the interview—although he did realise that the sight of Francesca sprawled on his bed might have shocked Mrs Preston, so he decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

'I think we might have got off on the wrong foot,'

he explained benevolently. 'What you just saw was not quite as it might have appeared.'

He grinned boyishly. That usually won over even the most hardened matron—but not this one. She stared at him levelly—a feat that was made all the more uncomfortable because her bright blue eyes were magnified in the thick lenses of her spectacles to such an extent that he was reminded of a frog.

'Really? How else should I construe what I just witnessed?' She was watching him so steadily that it made him feel like an errant child.

'Francesca arrived out of the blue,' he clarified, although why he felt the urge to do so was beyond him. 'Nothing untoward happened.'

'Perhaps not this morning,' she stated coldly. 'But I think it was plainly obvious that you and the lady have a...a special relationship. Am I correct?'

Ross felt his hackles rise at her sanctimonious tone. He certainly did not need to explain himself to this woman. Or to anybody, for that matter. He would be paying her wages. He certainly did not care whether or not she found *him* suitable.

'Mrs Preston, I am a single man and these are bachelor quarters. I am sorry that Reggie inadvertently exposed you to my bedchamber—but what happens in that room is none of your concern.'

He steeled himself for the woman to storm out, but she stayed resolutely where she was, chewing her bottom lip nervously.

The awkward silence was broken by Reggie, stumbling in with a laden tea tray. He smiled proudly at Ross and deposited the tray heavily on the side table. Hot tea sloshed out of the teapot and bathed the haphazard cups

in brown liquid. Undeterred, Reggie poured tea into one of them and thrust it, without a saucer, at Mrs Preston.

‘Here you are, mum, a nice cup of tea.’ A large, hot drip fell onto her skirts, and she shrieked in pain and immediately stood.

‘Oh! Let me help, mum!’ Reggie began to use the hem of his own shirt to mop up the mess, rubbing it ineffectually over the woman’s wet clothing, unaware that in doing so he was also—shockingly—rubbing her thighs.

To begin with she appeared mortified by this indiscretion, but then the most peculiar thing happened. Her features softened in sympathy and she allowed Reggie to try to help—even though he really wasn’t. It was only then that Ross witnessed the look of stark panic in the big oaf’s eyes—the look he had when he realised he had done something wrong but had no idea how to fix it.

‘It is perfectly all right now. I was merely a bit shocked.’ One of her hands came up and touched Reggie’s enormous shoulder gently. Then she squeezed it for good measure, in a comforting manner that belied her previous cold expression.

Like an obedient sheepdog, Reggie stepped back and stood awkwardly. Then once again the harsh woman surprised Ross.

‘I like one sugar in my tea.’ This was accompanied with a genuine and kind smile that instantly made poor Reggie feel better about being such a clumsy fool. As if in an afterthought she glanced back at Ross, and her features froze again.

‘Here we are, then,’ said Reggie, proffering the second cup of tea to Mrs Preston as if it were the Crown Jewels and she was the Queen.

Mrs Preston glanced at Reggie's eager expression and her tense pout relaxed. Her lips curved in a lovely smile and she thanked him politely. 'This looks perfect. You clearly have a talent for making tea exactly the way a person likes it.'

Reggie beamed with pride and gave an embarrassed little chuckle—already won over by this strange conundrum of a woman.

The fact that she had shown such kindness to the big oaf made Ross soften towards her immediately. She was not all bad if she could do that—most people wouldn't. Reggie usually terrified them. Perhaps she was simply nervous. Or shy?

'You have excellent references, Mrs Preston,' he said eventually, while taking the cup that Reggie proffered. 'Can you tell me what type of household you last worked in?'

Hannah tried to relax and formulate a sensible answer that sounded a tad more friendly. 'Nair House was not a grand residence, Mr Jameson, but I oversaw a staff of ten,' she lied.

It would not do to claim that she had vast experience of running a stately pile like Barchester Hall—such a falsity would be easily exposed—but she did want to give the impression that she was capable.

'I oversaw everything from menu planning and budgeting to dealing with disputes amongst the servants.'

Hannah schooled her features into a neutral mask to cover her disgust at being with him. She had heard that Jameson was a shocking libertine, but she had not expected to be confronted with such overwhelming evidence of his debauchery straight away. The sight of the rumpled bedclothes and that overpainted woman wan-

tonly sprawled across them, skirts raised suggestively to her knees, had been bad enough—but then her eyes had encountered their first sight of Ross Jameson, and that had been frankly outrageous.

He was a huge bear of a man—showing far more exposed skin than a gentleman would deem proper. Of course a gentleman would not have the body of a farm labourer either. Jameson was solid and muscled—a sure sign of his coarse upbringing. Men of class were more willowy and less...*sturdy*. He probably looked ridiculous stuffed into a tailored coat. She supposed that less discerning women would describe his rumpled black hair and twinkling green eyes as handsome, but he used those good looks to his advantage. He appeared to Hannah exactly what he was—a charming, dangerous and duplicitous rogue. She certainly would not trust him as far as she could throw him—which, she conceded, was not likely to be very far.

It was also obvious that his minion—Reggie?—was severely lacking in intelligence...although she supposed that he had not been employed for his ability to think strategically. He had a wide, square jaw and a nose that had been so badly broken he looked as if it had simply melted into his face. But she had already realised that behind that frightening façade he was a bit slow and was desperately seeking approval. Poor fellow. It was obvious he just needed looking after. However, she was certain his main duties were to protect his nefarious master and to threaten or maim anybody who did not fall into line. How the authorities allowed Jameson to live freely within society was indeed a mystery.

‘Would you tell me a little about your house?’ Hannah asked, aware that she had not made the best first

impression and keen to make amends. Everything hinged upon her getting this job.

‘Barchester Hall is situated around twelve miles from London,’ he replied with a smile. ‘I am afraid that at the moment it is a bit of a wreck. Externally, the house is solid, and the grounds are lovely, but it has been shockingly mismanaged by the previous owner for many years and that shows.’

His glib condemnation of her brother and the home she loved so much rankled, but she managed to hide her anger. She could not properly gauge his expression through Aunt Beatrice’s reading glasses, and the thick lenses were beginning to give her an awful headache.

‘Obviously I need to make some urgent renovations. The whole interior needs remodelling, furniture and things will need to be bought to replace what is there currently, and I will need to recruit enough decent staff to run the place. Do you have experience of recruiting servants, Mrs Preston?’

Hannah nodded. This was one thing that she could talk about without lying. When she had lived at Barchester Hall they had had great difficulty retaining staff. This had been largely due to the fact that her brother had had a tendency not to pay their wages on time, if at all, and she’d constantly had to replace the never-ending line of servants who had refused to stay.

‘Yes, indeed. I have had to recruit many suitable servants and I am well aware of the sorts of things that entice the best servants to work at a house.’ Wages were their main priority. That she knew for a fact.

‘You look a little young to be a housekeeper.’

‘I am thirty-five, sir.’ Hannah smiled tightly and hoped that she looked drab enough to be that age. The

brown day dress was the most awful thing she possessed, and the lace cap, which she had bought as an afterthought yesterday, covered her wheat-coloured curls. 'I can assure you that I am eminently suitable for the position.'

'Hmm...'

He had picked up one of her references and was reading it.

Hannah could feel her one chance slipping away. She opened her mouth to speak but Jameson spoke again before she could say anything.

'I think that I have heard—and seen—everything I need to. Reggie is already smitten with you. That is good enough for me.' He turned to Hannah with a friendly smile. 'Congratulations, Mrs Preston—the position is yours. I will expect you at Barchester Hall next weekend. Please leave me the details of your lodgings so that I can send you the necessary formalities.'

He stood up and shook her hand vigorously and then walked her towards the door at a brisk pace.

Bemused, Hannah could do little but smile at her unexpected good fortune—although she was unsure exactly how it had come about. 'Thank you, sir,' she managed to mutter before she found herself standing alone again on the street as the door closed firmly behind her.

Not quite believing her luck, and just in case he retracted his offer, she decided not to tempt fate. She scribbled the inn's address on a piece of paper and popped it through the letter box before hurrying to the nearest waiting hackney. Finally, after seven long years, she was going home.