

A
Faithful
PROPOSAL

——
JENNIE GOUTET

SWEETWATER
BOOKS

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Dedication



Dedicated to my mother, Cathy Damron, for the frequent library trips and for inspiring me to read everything I could get my hands on.

ALSO BY

Jennie Goutet

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A Sweetheart in Paris

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Life, Love, and Sarcasm in the City of Light

Chapter One

AUGUST 1812

"We shall arrive within the hour, I daresay. The Pelican assured us we should reach Avebury by two o'clock, which I must say will be a welcome reprieve to this horrid jolting. I swear my teeth are coming loose in their sockets."

Miss Anna Tunstall gave a sidelong glance at her ill-favored companion, not expecting a reply, of course, for she had received little in return for all her efforts these three days past.

Her taciturn companion, however, still had the element of surprise and managed something beyond a monosyllable. "Best be closing that window, miss, as these parts is run by high pads. They'll do over quicker'n ye can stare."

The irritation of a long journey from London with a noiseless young woman, whose grasp at hygiene was tenuous at best, goaded Anna into a retort.

"If there are highwaymen afoot, closing the window won't avert the threat. My, Beatrice, at last you speak. How kind of you to edify me with your conversation, but if you think to frighten me with your Friday face, you are wide of the mark."

Beatrice, a hired companion for the journey and unknown to Anna before they'd set out together, appeared to think she had done her duty in warning the mistress. She lapsed again into silence, pulling the worn cloth traveling bag closer to her chest and looked up to where

the frayed yellow squab met the velvet ceiling of their rented coach. Anna's brother, Stratford, Earl of Worthing, had lent them a carriage for their journey, but it had broken an axle at the last stage. Anna had deemed it best to rent another one rather than delay her arrival by awaiting its repair.

Anna raised her eyes heavenward at Beatrice's sullen contribution and allowed herself the luxury of an internal rant. *Emily Leatham, I will murder you for saddling me with such a creature for a traveling companion.* Quickly her humor got the better of her, and Anna turned toward the window as a smile tugged at her cheeks. *If I don't murder Beatrice first.*

Anna had no one with whom to share her private joke. It was the first time she had been away from Phoebe, her twin, for more than an afternoon, and she began to better appreciate her gentle foil. Phoebe had always been a sober, mellowing presence. Anna could indulge in her flights of fancy and humor, and Phoebe checked her when that humor took her too far. Anna sighed. Without Phoebe, she would have to watch her own tongue. How responsible she must now be.

However, it was worth the trip to see Emily Leatham—droll, light-hearted Emily—whose sense of mischief matched Anna's own. They had certainly found ways to amuse themselves in their first London Season before Emily's husband snatched her up. An added benefit to this visit was that Anna would escape a dreary four weeks playing cards with their Aunt Shae, taking slabs of pork in covered baskets to the poor, or accompanying her brother to visit his tenants as befitted the newly appointed Earl of Worthing.

Even the fun of preparing for her brother's wedding held no appeal when she was more likely to be handed the pork slabs than asked to plan the wedding breakfast. Phoebe always had been the industrious one and urged Anna to go visit Emily, saying in her gentle way that Anna would be missed but not needed, a truth that both relieved and stung. Emily hadn't promised higher treats for Anna's visit than what a country village could offer, but at least no one knew Anna there and nothing would be required of her. No, even without Phoebe's comforting and steady presence, Anna had done well to go to Avebury.

A sharp report rent the air and Beatrice gave a shriek. Anna turned with a start, more alarmed by the maid's reaction than the initial noise. Beatrice had forgotten her earlier objection to looking out the window and was now peering out to see the source of the commotion.

“It’s jest as I warned yer, miss,” Beatrice said. “Them collectors hev come.”

Anna hadn’t time to assimilate Beatrice’s meaning before a shot pierced the carriage from the top of the side panels through the roof. This was much too close for her liking, and Anna’s heart began to hammer in her chest. She wasn’t prone to anxiety, which was a point of great pride for her, but this ruffled even her sensibility, and darkness threatened to edge onto her vision.

Be calm, Anna told herself. She drew a steady breath and smoothed her skirt while she waited.

The carriage had, by now, come to a halt. There were men shouting outside, but Anna could barely make out what they were saying before the door on Beatrice’s side was flung open.

“Out wid ’ee, doxy.”

A man’s bulky frame blocked the entrance. He was of average height and wore brown clothing and a kerchief over his face and had no distinguishable characteristics other than a pungent odor. With a sharp yank, the man pulled Beatrice out of the carriage, and she stumbled and fell on her hands and knees. Then he turned his attention to Anna, staring at her until she was unnerved by his silent regard.

She kept her voice composed. “Well, sir, must I alight as well?”

The man laughed, an unpleasant sound that would frighten Anna if she allowed it. “Ay. Unless ye want me knife stripping thee along with the squabs.”

Anna reached for the door handle at her left, but the man shook his head.

“No, missy—go on. You’ll be getting out right here.”

It meant moving toward the enemy, and Anna swallowed nervously as she obeyed. Thankfully, the man stepped away from the carriage as she slid across the seat.

“Thee.” He waved his pistol at the driver. “Ye stand wid the misses, and if ye be sweet as a lamb I mid let ’ee live.”

The driver of the rented vehicle obeyed the summons and stood next to Beatrice, his gaze fixed on his boots. Anna joined the pair, her expression controlled. A second highwayman trained his pistol on their group. The first ransacked the carriage, cutting into the squabs to look for hidden jewelry, which would not be there, of course. This was a rented vehicle. He must not be a very clever robber if he couldn’t tell *that*.

Something moved in the trees to Anna's left, and the second highwayman turned to see what had caught her gaze. The distraction was just enough for the driver of the coach to take flight, and she watched in amazement as he cut around the horses and sped into the cover of the trees where the robber could not take aim. *Well, how about that.* Anna had assured her brother she would not need a male escort—not that he would have had time for it with his affairs at Worthing and all his attention focused on his upcoming wedding and honeymoon. Now, without the protection of her family, Anna was realizing just how vulnerable she was, and she began to tremble. The driver had completely vanished into the woods before the thief had finished his search.

“What’s this?” The highwayman poked his head out of the carriage. With a glance at his accomplice and then the two women, he laughed. “He left ye, did he? Ha! Liver-hearted.” The thief swung down from the steps, his soft leather boots silent when he hit the road. “Tis nothing to be found. They must be setting snug in yer trunk.”

The highwayman came alongside Anna and tilted her chin while the other scanned the edge of the woods, where she thought she'd seen movement. “Unless it’s on yer person.” He slid one finger along her jaw, and Anna stiffened her spine, refusing to back down from his gaze. For the first time in her insouciant life, she felt cold tendrils of fear creep up her spine.

“It’s in the trunk,” she said, proud to keep her voice even.

Maybe he would be happy with the jewelry, which would be of no great loss to her. She had done well to leave her most precious items at home, and if this could stave off personal harm, she would accept the loss. All this time, Beatrice had said not a word, but before moving over to the trunks that were strapped on the back of the carriage, the thief crooked his finger at her.

“Thee. Open the trunk.”

Beatrice dropped her bundle and followed him to the carriage, where she began to sullenly unwind the straps on the trunk.

“Ye got the look of a dobin rig about ye, girl,” the thief said. “What say thee to casting thy lot wid me?”

Beatrice gave a sniff and worked at a stubborn knot until it came free. “Ye ain’t got nothing I be needing. I know the likes of ye and what a life wid ye is like. I hev my place in the kitchen and ’tis not one as I’d be leaving.”

The thief shrugged. "Have it your way, pullet."

The trunks, now released from their straps, were free for the robber to rummage through. Anna watched her undergarments being flung to all sides, and her fear turned to anger.

"Watch what you do with my possessions," she said. "You need only the valuables. No need to fling my affairs about."

"Ye find the gewgaws then." The robber paused in his rummaging. "What'd ye do? Put them in the bottom of the trunk? Not very accessible-like."

Anna folded her arms. "I'm not going to help someone else to my valuables. You take them but have a care for my things, if you please."

The robber laughed again, this time with real pleasure. "Not often I meet wid a mort such as yerself." He drew her folded gown against his face. "Silk."

After throwing all of the items out of the trunk, he still found none of her valuables. Anna was so astonished, she couldn't refrain from drawing near. The highwayman eyed her and seemed satisfied that her surprise was real. He turned to Beatrice.

"I suppose I know where them sparklers hev gone." He snapped his fingers. "Vixen. Ye'll vamp with me."

Beatrice stamped her foot. "No, I ain't."

The thief grabbed her by the forearm and dragged her to where their horses were tied to a tree, but Beatrice did not go quietly. She shrieked and fought him, greatly hampering his progress, as she continued to scream in short bursts. Anna watched in alarm, wondering if she should attempt to help the girl or flee. *Where was the sack with her jewels and coins anyway? Had Beatrice taken them?* Anna considered what little good she could do in such a situation and was just about to dive into the carriage for a weapon—*her parasol?*—when a hand snaked around from behind, holding her arms in a prison-like grip and clamping her mouth shut. How could she have forgotten there were two of them?

"Ay, poppet," he murmured in her ear. "You'll come quiet now."

Flashes of light pricked at the back of her eyelids as her fear mounted. Anna cast her eyes about at the trees in front of her, searching desperately for help. Surely someone would come. Someone *had* to come. They were near a public road, and Beatrice could summon the dead with her shrieks. Despite the man's threat, Anna screamed—or tried to—but to no avail.

JENNIE GOUTET

The best she could manage were some muffled cries, which came out amid the whimpers.

Suddenly Anna heard another voice. It did not belong to either of the robbers. "Hoi, Ambrose." She felt the highwayman turn in surprise, pulling her with him. Anna had only time to wonder at the addition to their party before she felt the air stir next to her head.

Everything went black.

Chapter Two

*M*r. Henry Aston, known to his chums—but not to his family—as Harry, exited the stables. He led a dray horse that pulled a simple cart. “Easy now, fellow,” he soothed as he led the animal between the tight fence posts. “You were just out this morning, but I need you to make an effort for me again.” He rubbed the horse’s flank before adding, “I know you’re thinking the two in there don’t know how good they have it, but I assure you they’re itching for a good run. They’re just not suited to this cart.”

Although Harry’s speech was humble, his dress spoke of someone of moderate means, and he had the easy, graceful movements of a gentleman. The cart was loaded with items from his kitchen that his French cook, Mrs. Foucher, was pleased to prepare, and he knew she would not despise him for giving away some of her better dishes to the village’s poor. Harry did not possess a celebrated chef—none of the ton would pay him a visit and try to steal his cook away. Mrs. Foucher had emigrated with her family during the Treaty of Amiens and had been recommended by the previous rector. Harry counted her as one of the many blessings of his current living situation.

Harry climbed on the seat and clicked his teeth, encouraging the beast to set forward down the lane that wound through Avebury. Today he was not headed toward the Allintridge Estate or Durstead Manor. He was traveling toward the outlying areas with the modest tenant houses, and then beyond that to the shacks where thieves and poachers dwelled. Harry was determined to break through their leery reception, convinced there was good to be found if only he could coax it out.

The rolling countryside did much to soothe the morning's agitation that had come from receiving his mother's letter recommending yet another eligible female to his attention. Any hope that he could escape his mother's focused attention on his state of matrimony—or lack thereof—simply by leaving London and settling elsewhere had quickly been put to rout. He had been in Avebury eight months, and today marked the eighth letter he had received from her, this time with threats to make the arrangements with Lady Jane's family—who was tolerably pleasing and had at her command twenty-thousand per annum—if he did not make a push for himself. Harry sighed. He would find himself a wife when the right time came. His mother should not think suitable wives dropped down from heaven. *I should have changed religions and joined the priesthood*, he thought in a spurt of rare cynicism.

A greeting from his left had Harry turning in his seat. He squinted into the noonday sun and saw the cheerful face of Mabel Mayne, the squire's wife, walking with her young daughter Amabel.

"Good day, Mr. Aston."

"Hallo, Mrs. Mayne." With a grave nod to the seven-year old girl, he said, "And a good day to you, Miss Mayne. How do you do this afternoon?"

The girl giggled and dropped a blushing curtsy at her mother's bidding. Her mother answered. "Mr. Mayne has promised to bring you a share of the beef he's cured, as well as the berries from our harvest. He hasn't forgotten his tithing."

"Well, give my thanks to your husband and tell him I'll be glad to see him any day. And if he can stay on for a game of chess, all the better."

Apart from the crickets, their voices were the only sounds on the sultry afternoon. Harry thought again how fortunate he was in his living. Good people, beautiful countryside, a noble calling—never mind that his family's opinion differed on this point. He could ask for nothing more than the bounty he had already been given.

"Visiting Haggel End again, are you?" Mrs. Mayne asked. "We brought them some of the lye soap we'd made last week and peeked in on the new schoolroom. The progress they've already made . . . well, it does a body good."

"Indeed. Never mind that only the foundation has been laid. Before you know it, they will be weaving thatch for the roof." Harry gave her a broad smile. "And the soap will be just the thing to encourage the more dilatory toward tidiness. I thank you for your concern for the poor. It does you great credit."

“Well, we can’t expect to have you carry the burden on your own, especially when you don’t have a wife to assist you. There are some visits better suited to a woman.”

“I cannot argue with you, Mrs. Mayne. I appreciate it.” Harry tipped his hat. “If you’ll forgive my haste, I must carry on so I have time to visit everyone in the row there and beyond. I’ve brought some of the ragout Mrs. Foucher prepared, and I believe it will be most welcome for those who’ve had naught to eat.”

After bidding farewell to the squire’s wife, Harry encouraged his dray to pick up the pace, which the horse did grudgingly. It was summer, and the day would be long, but there were parts of the woods he didn’t relish visiting too late in the day. He had already written to his friends in parliament in the short months since he’d arrived about the stretch of road that was frequently attacked by highwaymen. Something needed to be done to protect those passing through. He was well prepared and unafraid today, but why invite trouble if he could avoid it?

Harry’s visits to the crumbling thatched houses achieved the goal he’d set of making progress in gaining their trust, and he managed to convey both the goods and his care for them in a carefully balanced timing act that allowed him to visit as many families as possible. As he finished his rounds and drove down the lane toward the shacks and lean-tos that housed Haggie End’s poorest, his eyes lit on a familiar and welcome sight.

“Tom, what brings you here?” he called out, addressing the plain figure whom he was more accustomed to seeing near the rectory, though he knew the man had his roots in these quarters. Tom Wardle assisted Harry in caring for his livestock and cultivating his small plot of land.

Tom jerked in surprise at meeting Harry so far outside the village, though he knew Harry’s purpose here. Harry had never kept it a secret that he visited Haggie End in hopes of restoring some healthier mode of life to society’s less favored. Tom’s startled reaction brought to mind his earlier demeanor when Harry had first employed him. For months, Tom’s face had worn a mixture of guilt and unworthiness after Harry chose to forgive his theft and employ the man instead. He never wore a look of cunning, however, or Harry would not have trusted him.

“Thought I mid see as how I can help. Like ye be always encouraging me to do.” Tom removed his cap and bowed his head as he shifted sideways, so similar to the Tom Wardle of six months ago.

Harry smiled, willing the man to be at ease. Tom knew he was permitted to come to Haggie End whenever he needed as long as his work at the rectory was completed. Harry didn't press the issue, but before moving on, he said, "When you stop by the house, you might find that Mrs. Foucher has kept you some ragout for your supper."

When Harry left the humble dwellings of Haggie End, his mind was still preoccupied by Tom's strange behavior. He trusted him completely, but he wondered if his servant had encountered some worry that he didn't wish to share with him. Tom had shown great improvement since Harry had offered him a chance to exchange his dubious career for an honest one, but apparently he still had progress to make.

Harry moved on toward the row of tents a half-mile farther into the woods, leaving the packed earth road to head down the darker, narrower path that snaked into the trees. When he came to the fork in the road, he spotted a carriage ahead, pulled off to the side and just visible in the clearing of trees. He squinted, surprised at what looked like the effects of the carriage strewn all over the ground.

It is just as I feared. Harry abandoned the idea of any more visits and steered his cart off the road into the clearing ahead. His alarm increased as he spotted what appeared to be a young lady, unconscious in the grass that bordered the path.

Without wasting a minute, Harry leapt down and ran to the inanimate form, falling on his knees beside her as he felt for injuries. He could not tell much without removing her bonnet, but when his fingers brushed the side of her head, she twitched. Pausing only for a moment, he scooped the woman into his arms—her soft, flowery fragrance penetrating his senses—and carried her to the back of his cart, where he lay her down. He climbed up on the cart bed, removed his coat, and flattened it to slide under her head. She moaned, forming inarticulate words. Her eyes were still closed.

As Harry reflected on his next course of action, an unexpected greeting met his ears.

"'Tis a good thing to be seeing thee, pa'son."

Other than briefly scanning the scene upon arrival, Harry hadn't looked to see if he was alone. He now shot his head up and encountered the gaze of a stocky man in a modest vest and brown trousers that were rolled on top of his boots.

Harry quickly dismissed the idea that it might be the thief by the direct way the man was looking at him. He thought he might have seen

this man in Haggie End before and squinted up from his kneeling position at the face that blocked the sun. "Eli Smith, is it?" he said at last.

"Ay. I be jest calming the horses, them being nervous creetur."

"Smith." Harry glanced at the horses tied to a tree further in the clearing and frowned. "I see. If the horses are still excited, the robbery must have occurred not long ago. Did you see who had a hand in it? Where are the people who were with her? She could not have been traveling alone."

Eli Smith lifted his shoulders in a fatalistic gesture. "'Twas on my way home when I found her. She be laying here, log-like."

Harry looked back at the girl, who was obviously gently bred. She wore a soft linen travel dress and a small, neat poke bonnet that showed carefully coiffed blonde strands underneath. Beyond her clothing, the woman was deathly pale. "How came she to faint?" Harry asked, though he had his suspicions. There was no stone near where she'd fallen that would have knocked her out.

Smith screwed up his face as if in deep reflection but only shrugged.

"Well, then," Harry said. "I'd better get this woman to safety. I'll give you a crown to keep an eye on her things until I can get some men to carry them to Durstead, where I'm taking her. Do you accept? You must not let anyone near them, and you mustn't touch them yourself."

"I'm not opposing an honest day's work. Thank 'ee, sir."

"Very well," Harry said, his gaze back on the young woman. "I shall send someone directly."

Chapter Three

Harry climbed on the cart and took the reins. Gingerly he turned the vehicle, taking care not to jolt the cart more than necessary. Once on the road, he allowed his horse to pick up the pace. The cart went along more smoothly there, despite the grooves in the earth from past rainstorms.

“If you please, sir.”

Harry was startled at the sound of the weak voice and glanced behind him as he pulled on the reins. Leaping from the driver’s seat, he ran to see how he might assist the woman and perhaps find out what had happened. He was not prepared for the sight, however, when he peered over the side of the cart. There he met the loveliest pair of celestial blue eyes he’d ever beheld, and his heart stuttered.

“If you please, sir. Where in heaven’s name are you taking me? And must it be done in such a ramshackle manner?”

Harry had to lean in to hear what she said, but he caught the flash of droll humor underneath her weak voice. “You’ve been held up, miss, which I think you must know, and have fainted.” He gave a reassuring smile. “I’m taking you to Durstead Manor since it’s closest.”

“The very place I wished to be,” the young woman murmured, closing her eyes for a brief spell. Harry was leaning with his elbows on the sideboard of the cart, and she lay her hand on his arm, adding, “I never faint, sir. You must be mistaken. But my head aches dreadfully. There were highwaymen . . .” Eyes still closed, she drew her brows together and bit her lip.

Noticing her fear, Harry was quick to reassure her of his intentions. “I do believe your losing consciousness was helped along. I will do what I can to discover who was behind this.”

The young woman opened her eyes again, placed her hand on the side of the cart, and took hold. At her gesture, Harry ran around and leapt on the back of the cart bed so he could lift her from behind. He now held her arm with one hand and slid the other underneath her back to lift her to a seated position. She smelled of the lilacs growing outside the kitchen of his childhood home, and she turned to look at him, her eyes level with his.

For Harry, all thought fled. When the woman was unconscious, his whole focus had been on getting her the help she needed with all possible haste. With her eyes open, the woman sparked to life, and Harry was mesmerized. Her beauty went beyond the delicate features and wide eyes. It was the intelligence and humor in those eyes that had him spinning. *Here is a soul of unfathomable depth*, he thought.

His arm was still around her, and her face was only inches away. He cleared his throat and attempted a smile. “I’m afraid there is no one to perform the introductions.”

The woman appeared neither disconcerted by the familiarity of his arm around her nor affected by his proximity. *It’s only my heart that’s about to beat out of its chest*, he thought.

She replied, “When we reach Durstead Manor, we may ask Mrs. Leatham to perform the introductions. And then you will learn that I am Miss Anna Tunstall.”

“Miss Tunstall,” he said, committing the name to memory. *Anna*. “I am delighted to make your acquaintance. My name is Aston, and I propose to set you up more comfortably here in a seated position. We will continue the journey at an easy pace.”

“I thank you for your kind offer, Mr. Aston, but I would prefer to sit up properly on the seat beside you. I will not do such an inconsiderate thing as to faint again.”

“I should be loath to disoblige you, Miss Tunstall, but I do not think you are ready to sit in front with me. I should be tempted to put my arm around you throughout the journey to ensure you don’t fall again. It is better you stay here in the cart bed.”

“And be jolted from one side of the gig to the other? Really, Mr. Aston. I will join you in front.” She attempted to stand but instantly went white and was obliged to sit again.

Despite his worry that Miss Tunstall may have sustained serious harm, Harry strove to resist the urge to smile at her headstrong, albeit misjudged, determination. The urge proved too strong for him, however, what with the giddiness of his wildly beating heart and his head swimming from an attraction that felt about as pleasant as being hit by lightning. The corners of his mouth crept into a grin. *I might faint dead away myself.*

“How fortunate that my situation affords you some amusement,” Miss Tunstall said with a quizzical look.

Harry instantly sobered. “I assure you, I find no humor in your situation. Well,” he added, conscientiously, “only a very little, and it is more at myself. My only concern is that you might be made comfortable. And I could see you were a trifle pale to allow for sitting on the bench beside me. However, let me adjust the coat to provide more cushion while you are seated.” He did so, adding, “I would remove my neckcloth too, if I thought it could provide enough padding to protect your head to make up for the lack of delicacy. But I’m afraid it won’t, so we will ride slowly.”

Miss Tunstall allowed herself to be seated with her back to the driver’s seat, his coat behind her to provide some support. When she was thus positioned, she adjusted her skirt to cover her ankles.

“If only you were sporting the toggery of a London gentleman, we might have fabricated even a hammock from the cravat. I now see the disadvantages of country life, for you are wearing only a paltry neckcloth.”

Harry had as yet to move from her side, and he threw back his head and laughed. When she raised her clear eyes to his and he saw the answering gleam of fun, Harry knew the end to his bachelor days had come. He was done for.



The door flung open when Anna arrived at Durstead Manor, and she could see Emily hurrying as fast as her condition would allow.

“I was waiting for you, alarmed that something might have occurred, and now . . . oh dear! I see I had surmised correctly. Mr. Aston, what has happened, and how came you to be involved?”

Despite a sense of dizziness, Anna took a firm hold of the side of the carriage and pulled herself to a standing position. Mr. Aston did not allow her to make it to the back of the cart before he leapt up and insisted on helping her alight. It was not unpleasant to have this attention, and she liked the sturdy feeling to him. Here was no town fop with buckram padding to ape muscles. He was likely Oxford-educated; he spoke well

enough. But he was clearly in trade and not afraid to work. Anna allowed him to assist her to the edge of the cart. Before she could contemplate how to land on the ground, he had already leapt down again—the man was everywhere—and had lifted her by the waist to set her on solid ground.

“Good day, Mrs. Leatham. I was on my way to Haggel End, and I discovered her carriage had been held up. The driver was nowhere to be seen, and apparently her companion was gone as well.” He turned an inquisitive gaze to Anna, for she had not told him how she had traveled. She nodded.

“Miss Tunstall had fainted,” he continued, “helped along by a blow to the head, I’m afraid.” Mr. Aston held her arm as they walked toward the house. Apparently he was determined to see her safely inside, and although she detested feeling like an invalid at any time, she found his strong grasp and the vague scent of soap that followed him pleasant.

“Oh my dear,” Emily breathed. “You must have had such a fright. Did the highwayman make away with anything?”

“Well—Beatrice,” Anna said. “I’m not sure whether I should pity Beatrice or the highwayman, however. I cannot be sure they were not working together.”

Emily gave no other sign than a furrowed brow of having understood as she came to walk at Anna’s side. “Your jewels then?”

“He did not have them—”

“Oh, thank heaven,” Emily said.

Mr. Aston spoke at the same time. “I did not think to ask. How fortunate.”

“No,” Anna corrected. “For someone had already made off with them at the last posting house. At least, that is what I must surmise, for I had packed them at the inn, but they were not to be found when the highwayman went through the trunk.”

“This must be stopped,” Mr. Aston exclaimed. “These *visits* from highwaymen.” His arm tensed with indignation as he assisted her up the stone steps and into the house.

Anna shook her head. “There were no truly precious items among the jewels—nothing of great sentimental or monetary value, but I will need to obtain more money. I shall have to write to Stratford.”

“I am just thankful you are here and in one piece. Did you not promise me your brother would provide you with an escort besides Beatrice?” Emily asked.

Anna made a wry face. “I refused one.”

Emily ushered them into the sitting room, where Mr. Aston eased Anna onto the settee. His face displayed a mix of concern and disapproval. "Your brother should have insisted. It is not fit for a lady to travel alone."

"But I was not alone," Anna said, one eyebrow raised. "I had Beatrice. And the driver."

Mr. Aston pressed his lips together, and Emily smiled and shook her head.

"Mr. Aston, I believe Lord Worthing was no match for his sister. Besides having a fair understanding of how stubborn a sister she can be"—Emily shot an affectionate glance at Anna—"he is fully occupied with bringing his estate into order and preparing for his wedding, which is set for September. I am also at fault because I was aware of the danger on these roads and should have written to Lord Worthing myself to request him to hire an outrider."

"No. You saw fit only to lend me Beatrice." Anna gave her friend a long-suffering glance.

"Oh dear," was all Emily said.

"I must leave you." Mr. Aston addressed both women, but his gaze lingered on Anna. "I would like to see to the retrieval of your trunk and carriage. And . . . perhaps you need a doctor sent as well."

"No," Anna said, while Emily nodded her approval.

"Then I will be off. I will have your trunks sent today, if at all possible." Mr. Aston bowed, and with another dimpled smile, he was gone.

Emily sat at Anna's side. "I've never met Beatrice, but her cousin, Florence, said she might be trusted. You think she was in league with the robbers?"

Anna shrugged. Even that small movement hurt her head.

"I will have to talk to Florence," Emily continued. "She will need to be apprised of the situation."

After musing over the afternoon's events, Emily stood at last and went to the bell. "I will ring for tea, my poor dear. You must have a blazing headache."

After the tea was served, Emily sat on the chair beside the settee and studied Anna in silence. Anna had finally succumbed to the comfort of the cushions. Her head spun.

Emily clasped her hands on her lap. "How do you find our Mr. Aston?" she asked at last.

Anna was certainly not ready to share any thoughts on how she felt about Mr. Aston when even in her private reflections, she could only

muster the feeling of being *aware* of the man. She blinked. “No begging for details of the robbery? Only, ‘how do you find our Mr. Aston?’”

Emily laughed. “I do wish to know everything, and I am more thankful than you can know that you are *safe*.” She grasped Anna’s hand. “But I confess your unexpected meeting with Mr. Aston piques my curiosity because before your arrival, I had thought to present you to him. I wondered what you might think of him because *I* thought he might be an interesting acquaintance for you.”

“Is he not a farmer? Or in trade?” Anna asked, perplexed. Although she had a sneaking feeling, the matter did not weigh so very much with her as his location did. He was not in London, so there was nothing further to discuss. Nevertheless, her unruly mind continued on its own accord. Perhaps she would not be interested in a farmer, but a man in trade. . . . Her father was in trade, and he was a nobleman. A farmer—well, he might stink of pig by the end of the day, although Mr. Aston did not stink of pig. He did not stink at all. He was . . .

Solid. The word came to her unbidden.

“He is not a farmer, nor is he in trade. He is a gentleman,” Emily said with a mischievous smile that did not bode well for Anna. She knew what kind of trouble Emily’s smiles could mean.

“How fortunate for him,” Anna declared, at a loss for what else to say. Then to fill the silence, and perhaps to cover her confusion, she added, “He did not dress like a gentleman. And he drove the rudest vehicle.”

“Oh no.” Emily raised her eyes in studied innocence. “He does not like to set himself above the villagers.”

“I can see that,” Anna said. When Emily offered no further information, she added, “So he is a landowner?”

“He is not,” Emily said. She stood suddenly and walked to the *escritoire* to pick up a magazine, but Anna was not deceived. She recognized the tremor of laughter hidden in her friend’s voice.

Anna looked heavenward. “I am sure you will eventually tell me, but since we have many other things to discuss—like being held up at *gunpoint*—what *does* Mr. Aston do, if he is a gentleman but not a landowner?”

Emily took her seat, her eyes brimming with amusement. “Mr. Aston is our rector.”