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Regency Brides: A Promise of Hope

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“With exquisite dialogue, beautiful descriptions, and careful attention to detail, Carolyn Miller continues to draw her readers into a magnificent Regency world with her newest novel. . . . The romantic tension pings with unrequited love which still simmers beneath the surface of two wounded hearts. *Winning Miss Winthrop* is a beautiful journey of healing, hope, and forgiveness.”

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“Books like *Winning Miss Winthrop* remind me why Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer have been longtime favorite authors of mine. . . . While many modern-day authors are able to dress their stories in an admirable reproduction, few are able to re-create the tone and essence of the era with the authenticity Carolyn Miller displays.”

FICTION AFICIONADO, blog,
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MRS. HALE

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THE MAKING OF
MRS. HALE

CAROLYN MILLER

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The Making of Mrs. Hale

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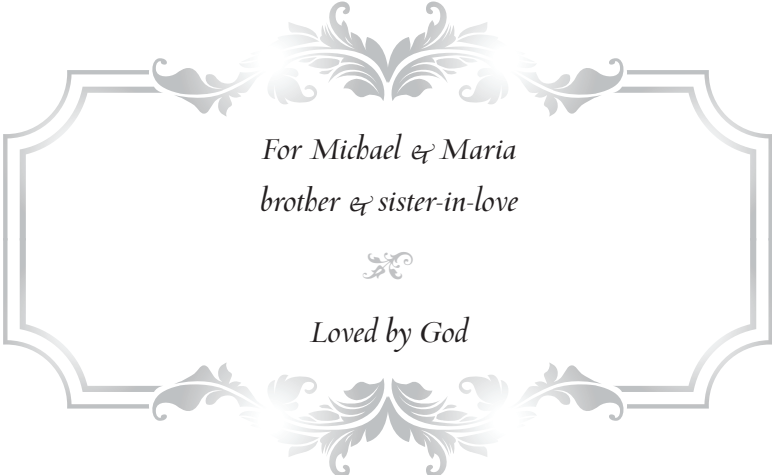
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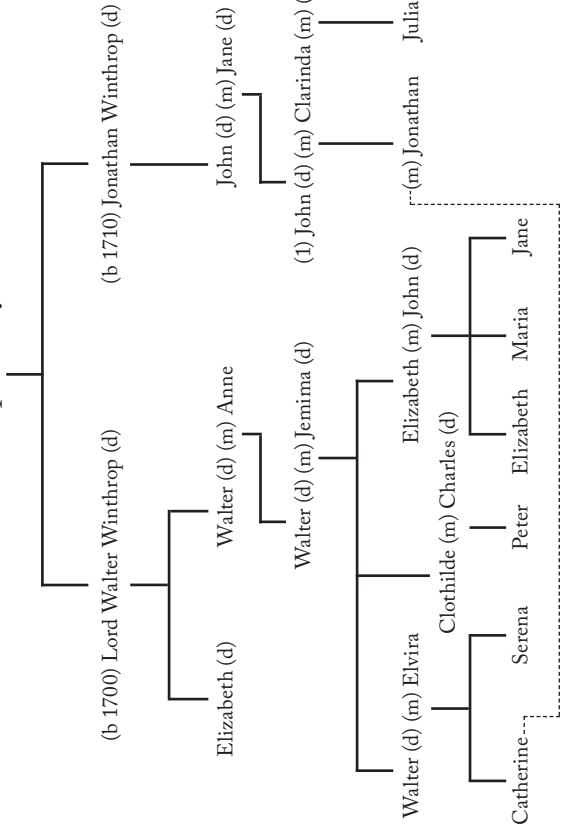
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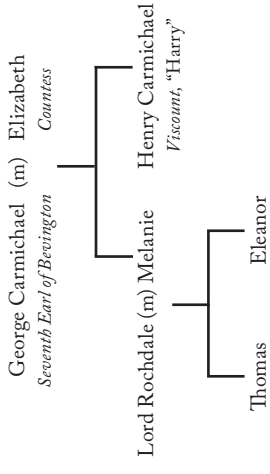
*For Michael & Maria
brother & sister-in-love*

Loved by God

Winthrop Family Tree



Carmichael Family Tree



 CHAPTER ONE

Cavendish Square, London
October 1818

JULIA HALE LIFTED a weary hand and rapped on the yellow painted door. *Please let him be in. Please!* Whom she murmured to she did not know. The last person to pay her any heed had only wanted payment, and when she could not offer what he wanted, he'd sought payment of a vastly different kind. Which was why she now stood here. Hoping, begging, desperate for a miracle.

To no avail.

As the door remained closed, the now familiar ball of hopelessness swelled within, pushing against her chest, pushing against her thin veneer of self-control. She should have known it was too much to ask for help from a God she scarcely believed in, who would turn His back on her now even if her faith were as deep as Jon's. Stifling fears, she tugged at the blankets and peered at her tiny bundle. She *had* to do something. Perhaps God would respond to the innocent, even if He turned His back on the guilty. And this was her last hope; every other avenue had closed. All that remained were the paupers' homes, and she'd heard what those places were like. Nothing on this earth would induce her to leave a child in such a place.

Arms aching, feeling heavier than lead, she rapped again. *Please answer. Please!* She had seen the lights last night. Someone *was* home, even if it were just the servants kept to mind the house while the Earl

of Bevington attended his estates in Derbyshire. Why wouldn't they answer?

Another fit of coughing wracked her body, sending fire through her lungs and up her throat. She placed a hand on the iron balustrade as lightheadedness swept through her again. But she'd had no opportunity to rest, and no money for medicine even if she could. When the spots cleared from her vision she peeked at the face asleep in the blankets. Thank God the babe had not caught her illness. Not yet.

She bent down to place the bundle back in the willow basket, tucked the blankets around to protect from the damp morning air. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice scratchy and raw. "I cannot help you anymore."

Blissful ignorance was the only response, one she was growing more accustomed to as the days dragged on. How long had it been since she'd been deemed worthy of anything more than a scrap of attention? Three months? Six months? More?

She bent to press a kiss on the downy head before rapping a final time on the wooden doors. Still no answer.

With a final desperate glance at the basket, she stumbled down the marble steps, grasping the balustrade for balance. God forgive her, but she had no choice.

Guilt pressed heavily on her heart. She tugged the dark hood closer, hiding the dirty, stringy locks of fair hair of which she had once been so vain. Not that anyone would recognize her now. That girl had existed in another world, one that now often seemed more fairy story than real.

She stumbled over a broken cobblestone, refusing to look behind. That way lay regret. But she *had* tried, had hoped to somehow see this wasted life redeemed, at least in part, through her actions today. Though what lay ahead of her now she could scarcely imagine. Was she now considered a fallen woman? Or had she been regarded as such since her flight from Bath all those months ago? A blur of tears filled her vision. Foolish, *foolish* girl . . .

A street sweeper glanced at her, his lip curled in derision. She did not blame him. She looked exactly what she was: pitiful.

Somehow, she stumbled on. God help her—what *would* she do now? Where could she go? Who could save—

“Miss? Can I help you?”

A well-bred voice, a youthful voice. Julia peered over her shoulder, blinked. Shook her head as if she could clear the blurriness. The lady—if lady she was, dressed in a most odd ensemble—seemed to own a poise Julia had never known, yet appeared younger even than Julia.

“You came to Lord Carmichael’s house?”

The lady knew Lord Carmichael? Was she a maid? Julia swallowed. “Yes.”

“I am the viscountess.”

Julia blinked again. No.

“Please, is there some way we can help you?”

She moistened her lips before managing to rasp, “He’s married?”

“Yes.” The lady smiled, glowing with internal satisfaction, tinged with something almost like surprise, as if she couldn’t believe her good fortune.

Envy tugged within. Oh, how well Julia remembered those days.

“We’ve been away,” Lady Carmichael continued, “and only returned two days ago.”

Julia nodded, surprise filling her as the viscountess drew closer and offered a hand, helping her to her feet. What an unusual bride Henry had chosen.

Conscious she was being watched carefully, she stuttered, “I-I s-saw the lights last night and knew someone must be in. Nobody is in Berkeley Square, or Portman. I don’t know . . . Mama . . . Jon.”

Where *were* they? Mama almost never left town, and Jon’s business interests made his staying in London something of a necessity. Surely he hadn’t been serious about retiring to that dreary corner of Gloucestershire?

Her arm was gently clasped, and she was led back to Bevington House, away from the prying eyes of the street sweeper. Now she noticed her benefactress had bare feet, undressed hair. What an odd woman! Was she serious about being Henry’s bride? Oh, if only she could remember—

“You left your basket—oh, it’s empty.”

Julia gasped. “No! Oh, no!” What could she do? She had failed! Who could have taken—? Guilt misted her senses, and she stepped back, desperately searching for the culprit. But she had passed no one! Oh, where could he be?

“There you are!”

She swiveled back to the now opened door, stifled another gasp. Lord Henry Carmichael, dressed in a quilted dressing gown, held a white bundle and a bemused expression. His white teeth flashed as he smiled at the lady dressed equally *dishabille*. “Serena, can you tell me why we have a baby on our front step?”

“A baby?”

Serena? A memory flashed. A black-clad, cool-eyed schoolgirl. Henry—her Henry—had married *her*? The lady drew closer, her expression now even more alive with interest, alert with piercing intent.

She swallowed, heart thudding, as the viscountess’s breath caught, her expression clearing into comprehension.

“Julia?”



Spain

Major Thomas Hale shifted, the perpetual ache from the hatch of welts on his back easing a mite as the pressure released. He drew in a breath and opened his eyes. The nightmare remained.

A dark, dank cell with barred window. A sloshing sound. A screech of laughter. Babble in a foreign tongue. He glanced at the other occupants. Grimy and unkempt as he, no doubt wishing they had never agreed to be ensnared by fortune’s fickle fancy, and thus be caught in this dire situation for—how many months now? He peered at the wall, counted the strokes denoting the days as if he didn’t already know, as if—by some miracle—he might have miscalculated, and this episode not be near as severe as he knew it to be. Five months. Five months!

Pain rippled through his chest. He'd been absent for almost half a year. A mission that should have taken a quarter of that time had been thwarted by lies and loose lips. A rumble of indignation churned within. How could the Crown abandon them, leaving them to rot? He peered across at young Desmond, whose right foot held all the signs of gangrene, the black decay creeping a little farther each day up his leg. How much longer did the lad have? Weeks? Days?

A creeping sound, like the slither of rats, slid through the room. He swallowed the bile. Muttered a curse. Wished for a boot to throw at the perpetrator. Settled for a barked utterance, not dissimilar to that which he used to bark at men a lifetime ago when his majority meant something.

The creature scuttled away. The room lapsed into silence. Desmond's half-crazed moanings had ceased. Benson wouldn't speak. Smith and Harrow, the two men with whom he'd communicated the most, had retreated into despondency. Fairley had been taken away two days ago. Thomas shivered. He dared not think on his fate.

How could a simple desire for gold have led them to utter misery? It was not as though they had engaged in anything illegal. The Crown itself had endorsed such activity. And it wasn't as if he'd been motivated by greed. He swallowed regrets, focused on the truth that he'd *had* to do something; his prize money was near all spent trying to establish themselves respectably enough so she did not feel a whit of deprivation. His fingers clenched. If only he'd planned things better, if he had not listened, had not succumbed—

“*Señor.*”

Thomas blinked, refocusing, his gaze cutting through the dimness to the creature at the door.

She smiled. “I *weesh* you would not reject me.” She tipped forward, her soiled garments doing little to constrain her buxom figure. “Just a *leetle* talk, eh?”

He swallowed. Magdalena might be just another ploy used by the guard to get them to admit to their supposed crimes, but she was certainly the least unattractive one.

“You were not so cold last time, *señor*,” she continued provocatively, in that lilting, wheedling voice.

Guilt speared him. He closed his eyes. *Forgive me*, he cried within, turning away from temptation. God forgive him, but he’d stupidly thought he could learn something, possibly even learn a means of escape.

He’d learned something, all right. Learned that even the comeliest wench in Spain could be responsible for guilt every bit as lethal as that inflicted by thoughts of his wife.

His wife. *Oh God*, his wife. As the instrument of torture sauntered away with a lewd comment and a ribald laugh, his thoughts clattered. What was she doing now? How could she have borne so much time apart? Had she given up on him? Probably. Wretchedness echoed within. Still, she at least had options. She could always return to her family, even if he would stake his life that they’d take care never to receive him, should he ever return to the land of the living. He hoped, regardless of what happened, that his Jewel would not forsake him completely.

“H-Hale?”

A whimpering sound drew his attention to the prone figure nearby. “Desmond?”

The boy gasped, before emitting a series of piercing shrieks. “Get it off! Get it off! It’s eating me!”

Thomas stumbled from the pallet, hurrying to the boy’s side. A large rodent was indeed nibbling at the boy’s foot. He grasped the furry pelt and slammed it at the wall where it splattered with a sickening, satisfying thud.

The boy’s eyes turned to him, his teeth chattering. “I c-cannot do this anymore. Please, *please* make this stop.”

His heart wrenched at the hopelessness he saw in the boy’s eyes, hopelessness reflected in his heart. “I wish I could. But we have told them all we know.”

A tremor ran up the boy’s frame. “They will never believe us.” He groaned, the low sound soon changing to an ear-splitting shriek.

“Desmond, calm yourself.” If the lad weren’t injured he’d slap him.

“I want to die! I want to die! I want to—”

“You there!” A heavily accented voice growled from the door. “Shut up!”

“I want to die! I want to die! I want to die!”

Thomas shook him fiercely. “Desmond, you must be quiet, else they will—”

A heavy boot knocked his feet from under him, and he crashed to the floor, his jaw cracking on the refuse-smearred stones. He tried to push to his feet, but a musket butt smashed against his temple, felling him once more.

Panic reared within as the guards dragged Desmond to the door. “Leave him! He’s just a boy! He knows nothing—”

The business end of the musket poked at his face. “*Cállate!*”

He pushed to his knees, begging them in English, in Spanish, in French, but Desmond—his high-pitched cries continuing—was dragged from view.

Head throbbing, Thomas staggered to his feet, the taste of blood trickling into his mouth. He stood at the bars and shouted for mercy, but he could barely hear his own voice over Desmond’s shrieks.

There was a shot.

Desmond’s cries ceased.

And the now familiar soul-numbing despair crashed over him as he sank to his knees.

CHAPTER TWO

JULIA SHIFTED RESTLESSLY in the darkness, her movements jerky, her breath tight in her chest. The man leered at her, his lips drawing back in a grin that arrowed fear deep within. Why had she thought this a good idea? She lowered her gaze and moved past him, hurrying to the stairs where the woman had said her room was. Step after creaking step. The corridor was dim, the flickering light from the candle she held revealing a ceiling draped with cobwebs, like something she imagined from *The Castle of Otranto*. Her heart hammered, and she clutched her precious bundle closer to her chest. A whimper rose from within, and she forced herself to shush aloud, the sound an explosion in the unnatural quiet. She counted the doors: one, two, three, until she reached hers. Carefully shifting her bundle between her chin and shoulder, she moved the candle to her left hand, then grasped the door handle and moved inside the room.

“Wotcha want ’ere?” A voice growled. A figure sat up in the bed.

She had the wrong room!

Muttering an apology, she hastened outside, turning swiftly into the *real* fourth room on the right, and quietly closed the door. How she hoped the man didn’t think her a woman of easy virtue and follow her here! How she wished she could lock the door for protection.

She carefully laid her burden on the sagging bed before shifting a spindly chair, the only other piece of furniture in the room, to the door. Her small trunk containing her meager possessions had been placed just within the door; she moved this atop the seat. At least she

would hear any intruder, even if the flimsy chair would not hold them at bay for very long.

Weariness escaped in a silent sigh as she eased down next to the tiny child, her shoulders slumped in defeat. How her body craved rest. She could sleep for a week. But responsibility still nagged. She quickly undressed him. Sure enough he had soiled himself, and would doubtless soon awaken if he were not cleaned and dressed appropriately. And she could not permit the rash on his little body to worsen. She pushed to her feet and examined the pitcher of water dubiously. It might not be fresh but it would have to do. Another trudge to the trunk and she pulled out the last of the linens, eyes filling as she wished for the hundredth time to have brought more. The exchange of soiled linen for clean woke the babe, startling him into weak cries. Poor baby. She nestled him to her chest, the hungry mewling tugging at her.

"I'm sorry I cannot help you," she whispered. Giving him what he craved was impossible.

When her arms felt like they must surely snap, the babe's cries faded to exhausted whimpers, then silence, and she carefully wrapped him once more and placed him in the bed.

How she wished to sleep, too, but that rash would never heal if she did not wash the linen. She eyed the worn rag beside the enamel bowl, evidently left there for cleaning purposes, and quickly washed her face, feeling momentarily fresher as the past two days' grime lifted from her skin. No wonder the people downstairs had looked at her askance.

After cleaning the soiled linen as best she could, she draped it in front of the fire, stirring the coals into something that might actually dry the cloth and take away the room's chill, a chill that puffed her breath into tiny white clouds. From downstairs came a shout followed by raucous laughter. An eerie whistle blew around the window frames, like the sound of moaning spirits. Would she be safe? Shaking her head at her ridiculous thoughts, she pulled back the covers carefully, laid the child down, and slid between the too-thin sheets. She pulled the covers up to her chin, careful not to cover the baby, then blew out the candle and closed her eyes.

Darkness drew heavy around her, within her, pressing against her, tugging her to sleep—

A sound came, like the scurry of tiny feet. She shuddered. *Please God, let there be no mice tonight.* There was a trip, the tread of heavy feet in the corridor. Her heart thundered. She could hear a drunken murmuring, something she had heard many times before, something she knew would lead to bad things, things no gently bred young lady should ever have to know about. She closed her eyes again and prayed the drunk would stay away. *God, protect me . . .*

A faint noise intruded. A swish of curtains being dragged apart. Light seeping in. Someone scuttling about—

“Who’s there?” Julia sat up in a hurry, blinking as the light startled her to alertness. “Oh!”

A maid dressed in dark blue with a white apron and mobcap curtsied. “Begging your pardon, miss. Lady Carmichael sent me to see how you be.”

Lady Carmichael? Julia put a hand to her head. Who—? Where—? Had that been a dream, or was she living in one now?

“They have been quite worried about you, sleeping as long as you have and all.”

“How long . . . ?” she rasped.

The maid handed her a glass of water. “Nigh on two days, miss.”

“Two days?”

The maid nodded. “Her ladyship was getting quite worried.”

Julia swallowed the water, reveling in the sweet freshness slipping down her throat. Oh, she could drink gallons, her sudden thirst unable to be quenched.

The maid placed the empty glass on the small table beside the bed then gestured to the door. “Shall I arrange for some food to be sent up?”

“I’m not—” Her stomach grumbled, making a liar of her. “Yes, please.”

“Very good, miss.” The maid curtsied and disappeared, gone before Julia could correct the misnomer.

Julia pushed herself higher in the bed, glancing around the room.

The bedchamber was painted a soft green, trimmed with cream. Silk curtains gracefully framed a window she judged overlooked the mews, their fabric an exact match for that trimming the bed's canopy and covers. She fingered the lace detailing the pillowcase. No small amount of money had been spent on making this room as beautiful and comfortable as possible. She peeked under the covers. Gone was the tattered rag of a gown she had spent too many days and nights in. Vague memories swam of a hot bath, a meal. But why could she not remember this Lady Carmichael person? A memory tugged, but was smothered under a foggy wave of tiredness as she yawned again.

The door opened mid-yawn, admitting the maid followed by—

“It’s you!”

“Dear Julia. Finally, you rejoin the land of the living.” The elegantly dressed blonde woman smiled. “I had wondered if you remembered meeting me. We only met a couple of times, as I recall.”

“I—of . . . of course,” Julia stammered. Though the cool-eyed young lady of her vague memories bore little resemblance to the elegant society matron standing before her now.

“It was over eighteen months ago, so I would not blame you if you had forgotten. And of course, I was just a schoolgirl then, and being married to Lord Carmichael was really the furthest thing from my mind.” She sank to the velvet-covered chair. “I am pleased to see you awake. We were beginning to worry about you, seeing as you slept so long.”

The door opened again, admitting another maid carrying a tray of food that was soon carefully deposited before Julia on the bed. Toasted bread, strawberry jam, butter, eggs, and most pleasing to see, a steaming pot of tea. The maid poured the tea before withdrawing to the corner. Julia eyed the food, her mouth salivating. Her stomach growled insistently. But manners recalled from long ago refused her to eat.

Lady Carmichael gestured to the plate. “Please do not refrain on my account. You need all the nourishment you can get, it would seem.”

Julia glanced at her, then, upon receiving a nod of reassurance,

began eating. After a few minutes, her insides spasmed, and she fought to hide a wince. It had been so long since she had eaten heartily, no wonder her body protested.

"Now, Anna is here to help you choose something to wear." Lady Carmichael gestured to the maid, who offered another curtsy. "I'm afraid we had to burn the gown you wore on arrival, and we were not precisely sure of your measurements. But never fear, we shall have a *modiste* arrive and you shall be dressed appropriately soon enough. In the meantime, I have some of my own gowns available for your use, though I rather fear they shall swim on you a little."

Julia forced herself to swallow another bite of eggs. "Thank you, Lady Carmichael."

"Oh, it is no trouble. And, please, call me Serena, just as I hope you don't mind if I call you Julia. We are related by marriage, after all." Because Serena's sister had married Julia's half brother, Jon. At her nod, her hostess continued. "I cannot tell you how relieved we are to see you awake. I suppose I should not be so surprised, as the doctor said it was probably just exhaustion."

A doctor had seen her? Julia shivered. What else had happened while she had been unconscious, reliving the nightmares of her journey? She dropped her gaze, focused her attention on carefully slicing the toasted bread into triangles.

"No doubt you will be relieved to know the doctor has pronounced your baby healthy."

A corner of toast caught in her throat. "He's not—"

"Such a handsome young man," murmured Anna, coming forward to pour Julia another glass of water, which she accepted with murmured thanks.

"Yes, he is, and quite well-behaved. It appears he didn't seem to miss his mother *too* much," Serena said, her smile almost wistful before dimming a little. "He is a charming boy. It seems he's managed to keep the staff quite entertained these past days."

"Such a pet, with that lovely red hair," the maid offered.

"Yes." Her hostess gave Julia a long appraisal. "I'm sure that must have proved something of a surprise."

Two pairs of eyes gazed at her expectantly. What could she say but the truth? Or at least a version of veracity. "It was a surprise," she finally admitted.

Serena nodded, before rising. "Well, I shall leave you to the rest of your meal. Please don't hesitate to ask Anna for anything." Her smile warmed again. "We are so *very* pleased to see you."

"H-have you spoken to Jonathan yet?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid he and Catherine are in Paris at the moment."

So that was why the London town house was vacant.

"You did know they had married?"

"Yes." The newspapers had reported her brother's marriage even hundreds of miles away.

"Henry has sent a letter, though. He expects it to reach them in the next week or so."

Julia nodded. "And Mama?"

"Lady Harkness accompanied them. Apparently she needed to see the fashions again, although we suspect it was more to keep an eye on little Elizabeth." Something akin to envy flashed across her features before her expression cooled. "Her grandchild."

She blinked. "Jon is a father?"

"And Catherine is a mother." Again, that flash in the blue eyes. "Now, I must leave you. Please excuse me." Serena offered a smile that looked somewhat forced before exiting the room.

Leaving Julia reeling. She was an aunt? What else had happened in the time she'd been away?

"Now, miss." Anna held out two gowns, one pale pink, one light blue. "Which would you prefer?"

"I . . ." It had been so long since she'd seen such pretty gowns, since she had even had a choice, her mind felt numbed by indecision. "I cannot choose. Which would you recommend?"

"Well, the pink is a very pretty color, and is nice and warm—it's quite cool outside, you see. And the blue would help bring out your eyes, so . . . shall we say the blue?"

Julia nodded.

"I think you will look very fine, miss. Besides, I cannot imagine you would wish to go outside today, seeing as it's so cold and windy out, and—if I might say—you still have something of a nasty cough."

Julia glanced out the window, the view eliciting another shiver, as if she still braved the cold and windy elements herself. Thank goodness someone had been here at the town house. She did not know how she would have survived the elements had they been away, too. And as for poor, sweet Charles . . .

Her heart wrenched. "Where is Charlie?"

The maid's eyes lit. "Oh, is that the name of your son? Never mind, miss, the housekeeper is taking good care of him."

"I . . . I would like to see him, if I may."

She cringed. What was she doing, requesting permission from a servant? Exactly how far had she fallen from the girl she once had been?

The maid smiled. "Well, of course you can, miss. Just as soon as you're dressed. Now, are you quite finished with your meal?"

Julia pushed away the remnants of her breakfast, slightly horrified to discover that she seemed to have dragged her bread crusts through the trail of egg yolk on the plate. Had she been *that* hungry?

The maid picked up the tray, bobbed a careful curtsy and exited, leaving Julia with a moment's peace. She sank into the feather-stuffed pillows, stretching in another unladylike action as she luxuriated in her surrounds, and the thought of being cared for. How long had it been since she had been pampered in this way, since she'd been the object of someone's attention? How long since she hadn't had to fight and claw and do whatever was necessary to protect herself? She could not remember.

The door opened and the maid returned. The next half hour passed in a delightful dream as she was once again provided with hot—hot!—water for bathing, and the daintiest of undergarments—"Lady Carmichael apologizes if the sizing isn't quite right"—and the delightful gown offered before.

"Now, miss, let's get you dressed. Yes, slip your arms in here, and like so. Oh, that's such a pretty color for you. Now, I shall do the

buttons for you if you like. And shall I do your hair? Yes? Wonderful. Now just sit here, and let me take care of you.”

But even as these moments reminded her of who she once had been, the sense of things being right did not truly resound until little Charles was back in her arms. He blinked sleepy eyes then appeared to look at her with a wondering expression, as if unsure who the pretty lady in the pretty dress was.

“Hello, my little man. Yes, it is me under all this finery.” She rubbed a hand over his copper curls. “Don’t we make a pretty picture, you and I?”

She snuggled him close to her breast, cradling his soft curls with her hand. Sorrow twisted within. Poor wee mite. Had anyone ever mourned at that mound of earth in the Scottish churchyard? She blinked away the burn at the back of her eyes.

Anna finished her duties and moved to the door. “His lordship and her ladyship await you in the drawing room.”

Julia nodded, even as she felt the ease dissipate, the words pricking at the bubble of security. It would not do to imagine all would be well, that she could simply slip into her former life, that there would be no further judgment or consequences for her sins. Sure, and she held a consequence in her arms even now! How would they cope if she told the whole truth? At least it was only Henry and his wife, two people who would be far less likely to winkle the truth in its entirety from her than Jon or her mother may. *Their* disappointment she would prefer to put off for as long as possible.

Julia pulled Charles close and whispered, “We will have to make the best of things and pretend.”

He gave a gurgle which she took as affirmation. Holding the boy as her shield, she rose to follow the maid who waited in the hallway, while her thoughts flew frantically, alternately collecting then rejecting partial, hurtful truths as she wondered what would be most believed, and what would evoke their sympathy—and not their rage.