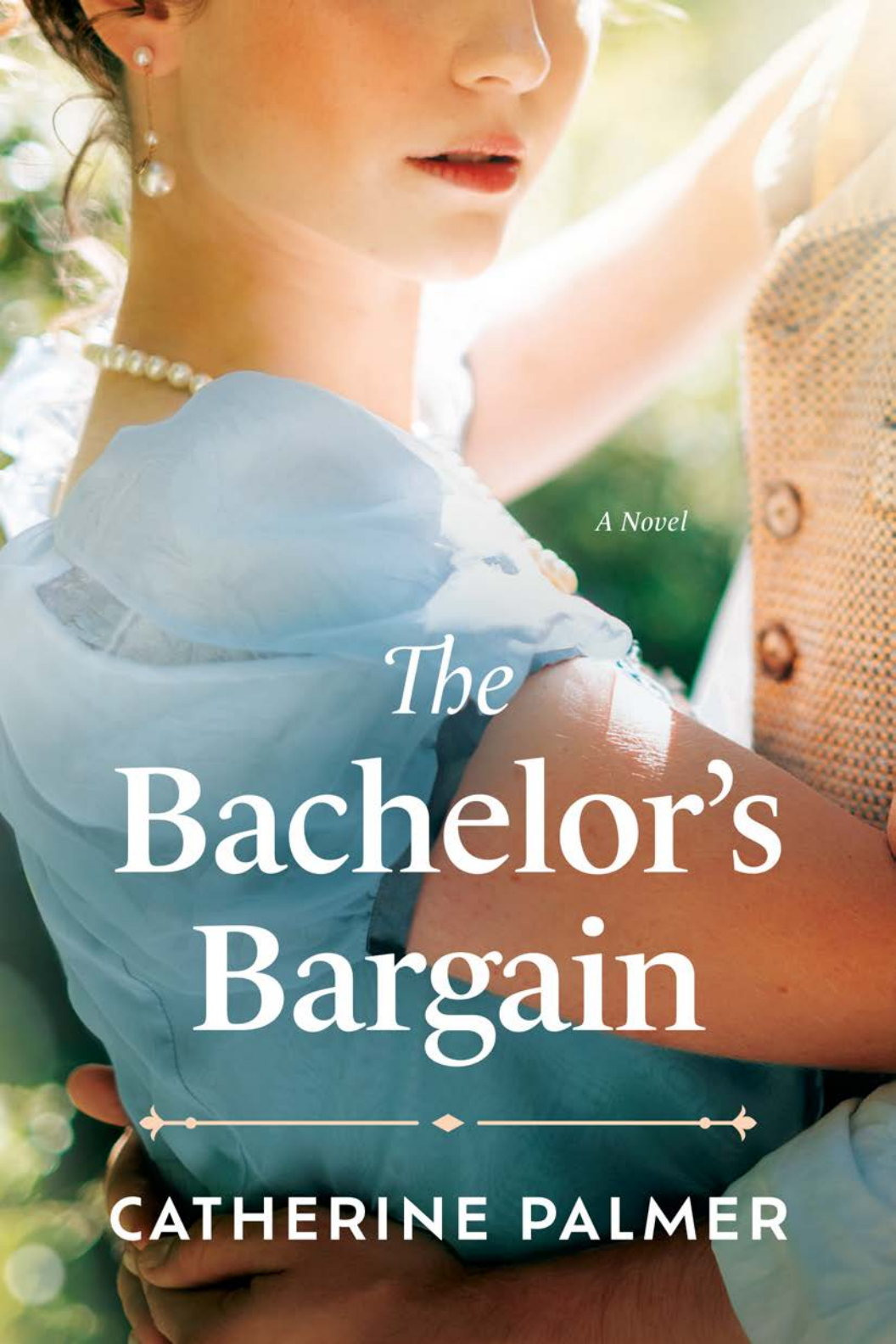




A Novel

The
**Bachelor's
Bargain**

— ◆ —
CATHERINE PALMER

The Bachelor's Bargain

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Bargain**



CATHERINE PALMER



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The Bachelor's Bargain

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Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

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For the newest member of our family,

Phyllis Miller Cummins.

*I love you, and I'm so grateful God
brought you into my father's heart.*

Welcome!

*The LORD directs the steps of the godly.
He delights in every detail of their lives.
Though they stumble, they will never fall,
for the LORD holds them by the hand.*

PSALM 37:23-24

*And we know that God causes everything to work
together for the good of those who love God and
are called according to his purpose for them.*

ROMANS 8:28

A decorative floral illustration in the top right corner, featuring a branch with several five-petaled flowers and small leaves, rendered in a light, sketchy style.

One

DEVON, ENGLAND

1815

Like the finest silk threads twisted and crossed to form a net of gossamer lace, Anne Webster's plan had to be executed perfectly or it would unravel into a thousand strands. The seedcake must be steaming, the ripe quinces baked to perfection, the tea piping hot. The Limoges cup and saucer must gleam in shades of blue and gold on the black lacquer tray. Every facet of the silver teapot must reflect the fire crackling on the grate. Nothing could be out of order, for this afternoon Alexander Chouteau, son of the Duke of Marston, was taking tea alone.

A shaky breath clouded the creamer Anne took down from the Welsh cupboard at the back of the large, dimly lit kitchen. Lifting the hem of her apron, she buffed the silver

vessel. She must not tremble when she poured Sir Alexander's milk. Her voice must not quaver when she offered the sugar. Above all, she must remember to shut the door behind her when she went in. If anyone heard her speaking to him . . . if anyone knew what she had planned . . .

"Anne, do stop your dawdling." Mrs. Smythe slid a dish of baked fruit down the slick boards of the scrubbed pine worktable. The glass clinked as it hit the tea tray. "Sugar those quinces, and be quick about it. I shall not have Mr. Errand screeching at me because the tea was late and His Grace complained at its being tepid. The duchess cannot bear cold toast, and you certainly know how their son demands punctuality."

"Of course, Mrs. Smythe." Anne glanced at the pink-cheeked cook and wondered what the portly woman would do if she knew about the roll of delicate Honiton lace tucked into the pocket of her housemaid's dress.

Mrs. Smythe must never know. If she found out, Anne would be forced to sell her work to the laceman who came out in his chaise every month from London. The long, narrow panel of lace had taken her three months to design, its pattern two months to prick onto parchment, and its silk threads another ten months to weave with her pillow and bobbins.

In France, where it was illegal to own lace, such a panel would be worth a king's ransom. Even in London, the laceman could sell her work for a small fortune, though he would pay her only a fraction of its value. Thus she had designed the pattern for the Chouteau family alone, praying that her plan would succeed. Into this bit of lace she had woven her future.

Quickly Anne took the nippers and broke several lumps from the hard sugar cone. She slipped one lump into her pocket

as a treat for Theseus, the duke's mastiff; then she sprinkled a spoonful of sugar crystals across the peeled quinces.

Dear God, she lifted up in a swift and silent prayer, *please let these satisfy Sir Alexander's exacting tastes.*

As she carried the dish across the kitchen, the chill of the black-and-white-tiled floor crept through her thin slippers and around her ankles. Her toes ached. She had been on her feet since before dawn, and she would work at Slocombe House until the last dinner plate was cleared and washed that evening. In between, she must pray that the duke's son would have the temper to listen to an impertinent, headstrong housemaid, that he would have the patience to inspect her length of Honiton, and that he would have the wit to realize the value of the lace.

As she set the dish of quinces on the tea tray, Anne squeezed her eyes shut. *Lord and Father above, this is my only hope*, she reminded Him. God already knew her dire predicament, of course, but she felt it behooved her to call it to His divine attention one more time. If Sir Alexander paid her even half the market value of the Honiton, she would have enough money to quit her position at Slocombe House and return to her family's home in Nottingham. She could hire a barrister to secure her father's release from prison and save her sisters from the mills.

Satan's workshops, her father called the drafty, machine-filled buildings with their deafening clatter and sooty windows. The mills, he had preached in more than one sermon, caused women to sicken and children to die early deaths. As the eldest child in the Webster family, Anne knew that what her father said was true, and she had supported his association with the Luddites even though their activities had landed him in prison.

Now the family's only hope rested in her hands. Could a length of lace, more air than thread, be their salvation? Anne swallowed at the gritty lump in her throat. It had to.

"Head in the clouds, as usual," the cook huffed as she bustled past with a plate of steaming cinnamon and currant scones. "Have you remembered to put tea in the pot, Anne?"

"Yes, Mrs. Smythe."

"She probably put in coffee." Sally Pimm, the first kitchenmaid, eyed Anne as she sifted salt into a copper pot of soup on the stove. In the scullery a cluster of maids giggled at the notion while they scoured stewpans, colanders, and utensils.

"Will not Sir Alexander be surprised," Sally continued, "if he sips up a mouthful of coffee when he is expecting his afternoon oolong?"

"No more than when his oxtail soup tastes as though it were made with water from the English Channel," Anne returned.

Mrs. Smythe's wooden spoon cracked across Sally's knuckles, and she let out a shriek.

"Have mercy!" Sally cried.

"Then stop your chatter and pay heed to the supper, girl! Shall we all be tossed out on our ears thanks to your heavy hand with the salt? Have this as a reminder!"

Forcing herself to turn a deaf ear on Sally's wails as the cook added another whack for good measure, Anne laid a starched cloth over the tray and set the tea things on it. She knew the kitchenmaid was envious of her position. Under normal circumstances, Anne would have joined the staff as a scullery maid. After several years, she might have worked her way up to second kitchenmaid, first kitchenmaid, and then, possibly, cook.

Circumstances were not normal. After the Luddite riots and her father's subsequent imprisonment in Nottingham, Anne had journeyed by coach to the south of England. In London, she had found a position at Trenton House on Cranleigh Crescent in the tony Belgravia district. Hired as a housemaid, she displayed a wit and propriety that soon elevated her to the station of lady's maid to the widowed homeowner's sister, Miss Prudence Watson. Not long afterward, Lady Delacroix had returned from a sea voyage to the Far East. When the young, wealthy baroness took up residence in Trenton House once more, Anne became her trusted assistant and companion.

In that position, Anne had hoped she might earn enough money to pay for a legal defense for her father. But it was not to be. To the shock of London society, Lady Delacroix fell deeply in love with a common tea tradesman. Their winter wedding stripped her of her title—though not her immense fortune—and she was now known simply as Mrs. Charles Locke. Sadly, she had informed Anne that their association could not continue, for she intended to travel with her husband. He had formed a partnership with two men, one of whom was Sir Alexander. Because of this relationship between the two families, Mrs. Locke had penned a glowing referral that led to Anne's joining the staff of Marston House, also on Cranleigh Crescent.

Despite Mrs. Locke's commendation of the clergyman's daughter, the housekeeper at Marston had intended to put Anne into the kitchen, until Mr. Errand intervened.

"Look at the girl, Mrs. Davies," the butler had intoned, one bushy white eyebrow arching as he inspected the newcomer. "With that face she will be wasted in the kitchen. She has kept all her teeth, her eyes are clear, and though she is no great beauty,

she has a certain grace to her carriage. The letter from Mrs. Locke indicates she may have a measure of wit, as well. Put her in the house, and you will please His Grace, for you know the duke despises the fishermen's daughters we normally get."

Anne had been given a position in the grand home, though she was once again a housemaid and earning very little. While most of the *ton* went to London for the spring social season and thence to the beach for the summer, the Duke of Marston preferred Slocombe, his country house in Devon. And in March, he went there with his wife, his younger son, and most of his staff, Anne included.

Not long after their arrival, however, word came that Miss Prudence Watson had fallen prey to a nervous malady and would benefit from a sojourn away from the city. The duke and his wife insisted she be brought to them at Slocombe, and once again, Anne had the pleasure of waiting upon her as a lady's maid. Anne attended solely to Miss Watson's needs except on Saturday afternoons. On that day, Miss Watson kept to her rooms to write letters, the footmen took their leave, and Anne was given the honor of serving tea to Sir Alexander.

A knock sounded on the door. "Now what?" Mrs. Smythe mopped her forehead. "More charity? Sally, see to them."

"I beg your pardon, mum, but I am in the midst of beating eggs." The kitchenmaid shot a glance at Anne. "Perhaps Anne will do it, if she is not too proud."

"I should be happy to feed the poor if I had the time," Anne said, surveying the hungry men, women, and children who had gathered around the door that led from the kitchen. She could so easily be one of them, and yet she had worked hard to improve her lot. Now she must press forward with her plan.

Touching the lump that was the roll of lace hidden in her pocket, she lifted her chin. "Sir Alexander—"

"Do it now, Anne, and quickly," the cook cut in. "We cannot have them loitering about and gawking at us. The leavings are in a stewpot by the back door."

"But the tea. The duke's son—"

"Ooh, she is in a hurry to be off," Sally Pimm taunted. "Have you an assignation with Sir Alexander today, Miss Webster?"

Anne's cheeks went hot. "He is awaiting his tea."

The cook gave a snort. "Tend the charity first. His Grace's tea has just gone up to the library, where he is meeting with the vicar. The duchess is in the drawing room with two ladies from church, and I am sending theirs now. Sir Alexander's scones will not be ready for five minutes." She pointed her spoon at the door. "See to them or I shall have to tell Mrs. Davies of your impertinence."

Anne grabbed a ladle. "Yes, Mrs. Smythe."

As she hurried past Sally Pimm, the kitchenmaid smirked. "Do not dirty your apron now, Anne. They say Sir Alexander likes his girls pretty, unsullied, and clean. You must try to please him on at least one count."

"Sir Alexander admires respectful manners and silence," Anne retorted. "That is why his attendant at tea today is I and not some other."

In the scullery, Anne stacked clean bowls and spoons in which to ladle the leavings. She must ignore Sally and hurry. Trying to steady her fingers, she loaded a tray with the dishware and carried it back into the kitchen.

The poor of Tiverton village watched her, eyes shining with hope in their dirt-darkened faces. How could she think only of

her own plans when such people were starving around her? Yet she must not let her father go on languishing in prison. And what of her sisters?

"Thank ye kindly, miss." An elderly man tipped his battered hat as she filled a bowl with leavings and handed it to him.

"God bless the duke." A man with no teeth gave her a smile. "And God bless the duchess."

Hurrying down the row of outstretched hands, Anne ladled meat and other scraps from the large pot. *Quickly now, quickly.* In all the months she had served Sir Alexander, this would be his first Saturday to take tea alone. Her only chance to speak with him! If she was late with the tea, he would be in a foul mood and would send her away at once.

"Thanks." A little girl looked up, her tiny face pinched and white as she wrapped one arm around her full bowl. "Be ye an angel from heaven, then?"

"I am but a housemaid, my dear." Unable to resist the child's sweet expression, Anne dug from her pocket the lump of sugar she had saved for Theseus and tucked it into the little one's hand. "There you are. A gift from the duke himself."

The girl turned the lump one way and another. "What is it?"

Anne could hardly imagine she had never seen sugar. "Put it into your mouth."

The child eyed the gift for a moment; then she gingerly placed the small lump on her tongue. "Mmm." Her eyes drifted shut. Long lashes fanned her cheeks. A smile spread across her lips.

The door blew open in the March wind as yet another of Tiverton's needy slipped into the kitchen. Anne took little notice. She knelt before the ragged girl and grasped her sparrow-thin hands.

“For this moment, you are a duchess,” she said softly. “In your mouth is the taste of Christmas plum pudding, black currant ice cream, treacle, and Turkish delight. You are dressed in a gown of fine green silk caught up with rosettes of pink ribbon. At your neck is gathered a length of the most exquisite *Point d’Angleterre* lace. Your hair is braided, looped, and curled. Your skin is scented with fragrant heliotrope.”

“Now that is a good ’un,” a man said with a laugh. “She smells more like coal dust, I should think.”

“Hush!” A woman gave him a sharp elbow. “Do not spoil it.”

Anne watched the little girl drift in the vision she had created. “White gloves slide up your fingers and over your arms, all the way to your elbows. You have in your possession a lace fan figured with tiny Chinamen trotting across a footbridge. On your feet you wear thin slippers of emerald green kidskin. Pale mint ribbons wind around your ankles. You dance like the wind; your voice sings as high and clear as a bird’s; you can draw and stitch and play the pianoforte better than anyone in the realm. In short, my little one, you are the most enchanting duchess in all of England. That is the taste in your mouth. It is dreams.”

“Coo!” The little girl’s eyes popped open, and everyone chuckled as she threw her grimy arms around Anne’s neck. “I almost thought it was true!”

“And well it should be.” The man who had just tramped in from the street swept off his dusty hat and gave the child an elegant bow. “The Marquess of Blackthorne, dear little duchess.” Then he turned to Anne and repeated the bow. “I am at your service, madam.”

Though heavily bearded and scruffy, he possessed a pair of gray eyes that sparkled with fun. What could she do but curtsy in return? "Queen Anne, of course."

"Your Majesty, the pleasure is all mine." Before she could react, he took her hand and lifted her bare fingers to his lips. Warm in spite of the chill outside air, his mouth brushed across her knuckles, lighting a tingle that skittered up her arm. His mustache surprised her in its softness, and she jerked her hand away.

"I beg your pardon!"

"Lavender," he pronounced, straightening. "A clean scent, slightly astringent, with all the promise of spring. Very appropriate."

"I was putting up . . . putting up the linens this afternoon." She shoved her hand beneath her apron. "Tucking lavender among the sheets."

Disconcerted more by her reaction than by the stranger himself, Anne filled a bowl with leavings and handed it to him. Never mind. She must put him aside. He was the last of the charity, and she had not yet heard Sir Alexander's bell. There was still hope. She started down the row again, this time collecting spoons and bowls.

"If yer going to play at peerage, ye will not want to be Blackthorne," the toothless man said to the tall newcomer. "They say the poor man be dead."

"Dead? Good heavens, how did it happen?"

"Met with an accident while traveling in America. Scalped by them red savages."

"Better him than Sir Alexander," a woman uttered in a low voice. "The marquess was nothing but a rogue, he was. Roved

about the country, spent money like water through a sieve, sired babes everywhere he stopped, but could not be bothered to marry here at home and give the duke an heir."

"Good riddance to the blackguard," Anne affirmed. Then she added, "God rest his soul."

"Abominable, was he?" the stranger asked. "Well, the devil take him."

"I should never wish the forces of darkness upon anyone." She set a handful of spoons on her tray. "But an heir apparent has his duties. The Marquess of Blackthorne rightly should have seen to his father's duchy. He was said to wager large sums at cards, and he engaged in more than one duel. He was even known to attend glove matches."

"And bare-knuckle boxing, too," the toothless man confirmed. "If yer bound to play at royalty, man, be the duke. He is well loved by everyone."

"Ah, the Duke of Marston." The tall man turned to the housemaid. "Your Majesty, Queen Anne, be so good as to acquaint me with the health of the master of Slocombe House."

Stacking the used bowls on her tray, Anne tried to suppress her growing irritation with the dusty intruder. She had no time for games. "His Grace is well. He is taking tea in the library."

"And the duchess?"

"With friends in the drawing room." As she approached the man, she realized he was still lounging by the door, his bowl untouched. "You must eat, please. I am to serve Sir Alexander his tea at any moment."

"Is that a royal command, Your Highness?"

Unamused, Anne stared into the man's deep-set gray eyes. In his brown tweed coat with its tarnished brass buttons, though

clearly no better off than his companions, he had a demeanor that spoke of some wit. His features were all of angles and planes, and his nose slashed down the middle of his face like an arrow, straight and determined, nostrils flared slightly. Beneath that uncompromising nose, his mouth tilted upward at one corner. Perhaps he was entertained.

"If you will not eat," she told him, "please give me your bowl."

"My dear queen, I have not finished my inquiry. How fare the duke's daughters, the ladies Claire, Lucy, Elizabeth, Charlotte, and Rebecca?"

"I could lose my position at the house," she shot back, her voice low. "Will you eat or not?"

He took a mouthful of mush and grimaced as he chewed. "The ladies?"

"They are fine, of course, all of them married and gone away."

"Even Lady Rebecca?" He raked a hand through his hair. Coal black, it was a rumple of uncombed curls. "She is young to be wed. What of Alexander, the duke's son?"

"He is to marry in six months' time."

"Is he now? And who is the lucky lady? Not Miss Mary Clark, I hope. She may be a beauty, but she is only the daughter of a baronet. He can do much better."

Anne stared. How did such a beggar know the names and ranks of Society? With his heavy beard, unruly hair, and dark eyebrows, there was an air of wildness about the man. His large hands in their tattered knit gloves appeared so strong as to make him dangerous.

He dipped his spoon into the leavings. "This supper actually

grows on one. Not bad at all, in fact. Alexander is not still dallying with Mrs. Kinnard, the actress, is he?"

"Sir Alexander's fiancée is Gabrielle Duchesne, the daughter of the Comte de la Roche."

"Blast! Has he no better sense than to choose a Frenchwoman? With Napoleon restless and France in a muddle, there is no guarantee she can hold on to her fortune."

Anne pressed the tray into her stomach as Sir Alexander's bell began to jangle on the far wall. Absorbed in his own musings, the stranger tapped his spoon against the rim of the bowl. She had to go. But this last of Tiverton's needy was clearly odd, perhaps even a lunatic, and she did not want to irk him. The others began to file out the door as he straightened, focused on Anne's eyes, and gave her a brief nod.

"Is Smythe in?" he asked.

Surprised at his common use of the formidable cook's name, Anne glanced behind her. "She is seeing to the seedcake and—"

"What of Errand? Is he still butler at Slocombe?"

"Excuse me, but please may I have your bowl?" She tried to grab it as he walked past her into the center of the kitchen. "Sir! You must go out the back way! Please, sir!"

"Mrs. Smythe," he called.

The cook lifted her head from sniffing the seedcake and swung around.

"Mrs. Smythe, have you any gingerbread nuts for my tea today?"

"Awwk!" At the first sight of the man, she dropped the plate of seedcake and threw up her hands. "It is . . . it is . . . it is—"

"Ruel Edward Chouteau, Marquess of Blackthorne." He winked at her as he gave his thick beard a tug. "Not quite as

hairless as the red savages might have wished me. In fact, I am a little on the bristly side, I fear."

"Lord Blackthorne!" Mrs. Smythe shrieked, her tongue loose at last. "Great ghosts, you are dead!"

"On the contrary. I am quite alive and eager for a cup of your finest oolong. And do send for a barber, will you? I shall speak to Errand on my way up. Perhaps he ought to prepare my father with the news that his elder son has arisen from the grave."

"The marquess is in my kitchen!" As Sir Alexander's bell jangled, the cook stepped over the shattered dish of seedcake and shouted at her kitchenmaids as if they might have some explanation for what had just occurred. "He walked into the kitchen from the back! Where is his carriage? Where are his footmen? Where is the valet? Oh, how could we have known it was Lord Blackthorne? He came in with the charity!"

"Calm yourself, Mrs. Smythe. You know, I always believed the only place to learn the truth about life at Slocombe House was in the kitchen. Besides, I must have my gingerbread nuts."

"Gingerbread," the cook repeated. "Gingerbread nuts. It is you! Oh, my stars! Oh, help! Mary and Lissy, run to the larder for ginger and treacle! Sally, find Mr. Errand at once. Anne, see to Sir Alexander's tea, for pity's sake. Gingerbread. We must have gingerbread nuts."

Sucking air back into her lungs, Anne slid the tray of used bowls and spoons onto a kitchen table and picked up her skirts. She edged around the room to avoid the tall man in its center, swept up the tea things, and made for the curtained doorway that led into the hall. Her legs felt as though they had been jellied.

That ragged, dusty specimen of charity was the marquess? But the marquess was dead, scalped, and buried in America. And she'd only just wished him good riddance. She had called him a blackguard. Straight to his face!

"Your Majesty," he called out. "Good Queen Anne."

She paused, every limb suddenly rigid. She could not bring herself to look at him. "Yes, my lord?"

"Would Your Royal Highness be so kind as to extend Sir Alexander cordial greetings from his brother?"

"Yes, my lord," she whispered. "Of course, my lord."

The Marquess of Blackthorne was chuckling behind her as she brushed past the green baize curtain and fled into the hall.



Anne remembered to shut the door. It was the only part of her plan that was not lost. How dare she show Sir Alexander a length of Honiton lace when she had been ordered to tell the man that his brother, the marquess and heir to the duchy, had suddenly returned from the dead? If she failed to carry out her duty, she would be dismissed.

"Set the tea on the table there," the duke's younger son told her as she approached the fireplace. Lounging on a damask-covered chair in the sitting room of his suite, he barely glanced up from the newspaper he was perusing.

Known to enjoy the luxuries of his rank, Sir Alexander cut a fine figure as he drove his gig about Tiverton. In London he was said to shine even more brightly, a veritable star among Society's eligible bachelors. With his tall, slim, well-proportioned physique, thick golden hair, and brilliant blue eyes, he was reputed to have broken many a young lady's delicate heart.

"Sugar, my lord?" Anne asked softly. She had managed to pour his tea without spilling any into the saucer, but she hardly trusted herself with the tiny silver tongs.

"Please." He lifted his head and scrutinized the dish of quinces. "Do pass my compliments to Mrs. Smythe. The fruit appears quite agreeable."

"Yes, my lord." She got the first lump of sugar into his tea without incident. The second landed with a splash. "Milk?" she asked quickly.

"Dare I? I fear it may end in my lap."

"I beg your pardon, sir." Anne glanced up at him. "I shall take the greatest care."

His bright blue eyes greeted hers with a light sparkle. "Pour away, then."

He studied her as she lifted the creamer and tipped it over his cup. She held her breath. *Please, dear Lord, do not let me spill it. Give me strength. Give me courage.*

"Well done, miss."

"Thank you, my lord." She let out her breath.

"Have you served me in the past?"

"I am lady's maid to Miss Prudence Watson, but she does not require me on Saturdays. Your footmen take leave, and I bring your tea."

"Ah, yes. I begin to recall you." He scrutinized her so intently that she felt a heat creep into her cheeks. "Surely, then, you are familiar with your duties and with the proper decorum required of the duke's staff. Are you aware, madam, that you have shut the door to my sitting room?"

"I am, sir."

"Ahh, I see." He settled back in his chair and stretched

out his legs. Deeply set beneath his pale brow, his blue eyes took on a glitter that sent a knot into the pit of Anne's stomach. He did not understand at all, and his shameless advances with the female household staff were common knowledge. She gripped her hands at her waist until the blood drained from her fingers.

If she were to save her father, she must do it now. She must bring out the lace. But if she were to keep her position at Slocombe House, she must tell him about his brother's arrival.

"Pray, what am I to make of this tightly shut door, miss?" Sir Alexander cut into her dilemma. When Anne failed to make an immediate reply, he held up his newspaper, a copy of London's popular daily, *The Tattler*. "Perhaps I should pen a letter to Miss Pickworth and beg her advice in the matter. I might write, 'Dear Miss Pickworth, the housemaid serving my tea today closed the door to my chambers. What shall I do with her?' Indeed, I think a letter is a very good idea. Do bring my pens and inkwell from the—"

"Sir, I beg you will not write to Miss Pickworth," Anne spoke up quickly. The very idea that all London might somehow learn of her indiscretion sent an arrow of fear to her heart. "I closed the door, my lord, because I wished to speak to you in private."

"Privacy between a duke's son and a housemaid? Well now. Have you a certain object in mind?"

Anne watched dark spots dance across her eyes. "Indeed, I do have a purpose, my lord."

"A purpose beyond splashing sugar into my tea and milk onto my lap? This is intriguing. Do you wish to join me in reading Miss Pickworth's latest commentary on Society?" He patted the arm of a nearby chair. "She writes that Miss Prudence Watson's

malady has prevented her from returning to London, though her eldest sister and her husband are soon expected home from their travels abroad. 'No doubt Mr. and Mrs. Locke,' writes Miss Pickworth, 'will deeply desire the company of their dear sister, Society's brightest star. But sadly, Miss Watson remains unwell.' Is that not dreadful information? I wonder if you have any notion as to what can be ailing her."

Anne shook her head. She was not about to inform the man that her mistress appeared to be suffering from a deep despondency of spirit and a strangely nervous disposition. Any little thing might prompt a flood of tears or a collapse into hysterics. The smallest events distressed her, and she seemed to find little purpose or hope in life.

"I cannot say what troubles Miss Watson," Anne told him.

"Perhaps we should invite her to come to tea with us today. She is a beautiful young woman and her company might entertain us both. Or do you prefer to have me all to yourself?"

Anne stared at the newspaper. The lump that had been in her throat all afternoon wedged tight. "As Miss Watson's lady's maid, I should be pleased to increase her happiness in any way possible. But she writes letters to her sisters on Saturdays, and I believe she will not wish to be disturbed."

"You know her well, do you?" Ignoring his tea, he set the newspaper down and stood. "Miss Watson's London residence, Trenton House, is very near to my own family's ancestral home on Cranleigh Crescent."

"Yes, sir. I am aware of that." Anne's mouth turned to glue.

Sir Alexander tugged at the hem of his striped waistcoat and loosened the silk cravat at his neck as he took two steps toward her. She lowered her focus, concentrating on the way

his narrow-cut trousers came together under the instep of his shiny leather shoes.

"Of what else are you aware, miss?" he asked. "Something more than serving tea in the afternoon?"

She dug her nails into her palm. "Yes, my lord."

"How engaging." He reached out and touched the side of her face. "Your cheeks are aflame. A very pretty pink. Let me see your eyes now. Ah, they are brown. A disappointment, for I am partial to blue-eyed ladies."

"My lord," she managed, "I do not wish to speak of my eyes."

"But you did wish for a tête-à-tête with me, did you not?" He reached around and tugged the white cotton mobcap from her head, and her hair spilled across her shoulders. "Oh, dear, brown again. I have never been fond of brown hair, but your figure is—"

"Sir, it is about lace." Anne shrugged away from the fingers that had reached to touch her hair. "I have come to speak with you about lace. Honiton, to be exact."

"Lace?" He looked up, confusion furrowing his brow.

"I was taught lace design by Mr. Samuel Beacon in Nottingham, and he says I am the finest pattern pricker he has ever seen, and certainly one of the cleverest artists. My execution of lace is said to be exquisite." She gulped down a breath, determined to get it all out before he could say another word or reach for her again. "Thinking only of your future happiness with the Lady Gabrielle Duchesne, the daughter of the Comte de la Roche, I contrived to fashion a design with her wedding gown in mind. I have created a length of the most delicate lace, my lord, using silk threads and more than a thousand bobbins."

Taking a step back from him, Anne dipped her fingers into her pocket and brought out the roll of lace. "As you can see," she hurried on, unwinding its length, "I have carefully created the Chouteau family's lozenge. I centered it just here, believing my lady Gabrielle may wish to use the lace on her bonnet or perhaps at her bodice. Bearing your esteemed heritage in mind, sir, I designed a row of English roses along the edge, while ribbons twined with morning glories loop around the lozenge."

When he said nothing, she gathered her courage, lifted her chin, and continued. "Ferns, of course, have been interwoven throughout the pattern to convey the lush beauty of England. As I designed this border, I envisioned a garden of the sort that only my lady's future home here at Slocombe House could boast, a profusion of blossoms, vines, and birds. I have given the lace a certain fragility, you see, thinking of the misty air in the south and wishing the fabric to whisper against your bride's skin in a most delicate fashion."

Forcing herself to meet his eyes, she laid the lace in his hands. "I come boldly before you, my lord, only because of my great reverence for your excellent tastes, knowing that you would wish the very best for your future wife. Had I sold this to the laceman, the crest would be meaningless to any other buyer, and so I . . . I would beg you to . . . to consider a fair price—"

"Alex!" The deep voice rang through the cavernous room like a gong. "Alex, old man, how are you?"

Sir Alexander glanced up from the lace, focused on the man who had just burst into his room, and faded to a deathly shade of white. "Ruel?" Anne's lace drifted to the floor. "Can it be?"

She watched in horror as her months of work, her only hope for her father's freedom, came to rest at the edge of the carpet

beside the fire. Sir Alexander took a step forward, and the sharp heel of his pump impaled the lace.

“Ruel!” he cried, hurrying across the room with the length of lace trailing behind him. “You are alive. But we thought you were gone! We had heard appalling reports that you were dead. Father has been beside himself, sending out parties of inquiry, posting letters left and right. But you are well. Thank heaven!”

The two men embraced, the one a dark pirate and the other a golden youth. Anne looked down at her tattered handiwork, remembering her father in prison and the fiendish lace machines that had put him there. Then she covered her hand where, in the kitchen below, a dusty beggar’s lips had heated her skin. She decided she agreed with his earlier sentiment.

The devil could take the Marquess of Blackthorne.