

INDIGO MOON

DARK LORDS AND DANGEROUS LADIES, BOOK 5



PATRICIA RICE

Indigo Moon
Patricia Rice

Copyright © 1988, 2017 Patricia Rice
First Publication: New American Library 1988
Book View Cafe, 2017

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portion thereof, in any form.

This is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Published by Rice Enterprises, Dana Point, CA
Cover design: Kim Killion
Book View Café Publishing Cooperative
P.O. Box 1624, Cedar Crest, NM 87008-1624
<http://bookviewcafe.com>
ISBN 978-1-61138-713-1

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

Thank You.

BOOK ONE

*. . . he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed.*

—Shakespeare, Othello

CHAPTER 1



LONDON, ENGLAND, 1812

“SINCE WHEN DOES HOLLAND HOUSE GIVE ENTRANCE TO WIFE-beaters?” the doddering viscount sniffed with disdain to an equally aged companion, whose head nodded in continual agreement.

The subject of this attack strode past, head turning neither to the left nor to the right as he entered the throng in the reception room.

“A scandal to do with his wife,” a voice whispered behind him.

“ . . .mysterious, but isn’t he dashing, Mona? Just look how dark he is, like some Corsair.”

“Bessie, come away from there. What would Mr. Evans think if he heard you were taking after the likes of that one?”

“But he’s a hero, mama, decorated in Corunna, they say. . .”

“ . . .rutting bounder, I say. All those medals represent is a propensity for violence, if you ask my opinion.”

Austin Atwood, Earl of Heathmont, grimaced to himself but

continued to ignore the whispers that followed him like a rustling breeze through the anteroom of Holland House. He had only one purpose here, and once it was served, he would remove himself from the hostile society he had avoided these past years.

Though he walked with a pronounced limp, he held his shoulders proudly. His striking visage, though not handsome in the conventional mold, continued to draw stares as he waded through a tide of pastel debutantes, doting mamas, and bored gentlemen. Though born to this aristocratic society, he moved with a determined stride unfitting for this indolent crowd.

Gaining the portals of the ballroom, the earl paused just within the archway. Crystal chandeliers glittered over an array of jewels and silk gowns, interspersed with the more sedate attire of gentlemen in black silk breeches and long-tailed frock coats. But even the gentlemen sported diamond stickpins and gold watch fobs and their black silk and polished leather gleamed subtly in the brilliant candlelight. This impressive array of wealth could scarcely be ignored so easily as the whispers behind him, particularly for one so sorely lacking in funds as he.

Taking the time to orient himself before diving into the unknown, Heathmont glanced about, noting that friends and acquaintances from earlier days were few and far between. Most of them had outgrown the marriage mart and moved on to other, more sophisticated circles. The debutantes and their escorts here tonight were of a younger generation, and his only familiarity with them was through the identity of their watchful parents whose older daughters he had once escorted about this same room. If it were not for the political maneuverings conducted in the back rooms, he would never have entered this rarefied circle again.

His bored glance fell upon a golden statue nearly hidden by

a potted palm at his elbow. Ignoring the statue's rather large companion in frilly pink, he allowed himself to be distracted. Blondes seldom interested him, but the still grace and unusual coloring of this particular piece of art gained his passing admiration. In this hothouse of gardenia petal complexions, the golden and rose hues of the young lovely's cheeks glowed like dawn after a moonless night.

Stepping back and lounging against the wall for a better view of this exotic creature, the earl noted with disappointment the girl's extreme youth. It seemed a pity to waste all that extravagant loveliness on an empty-headed child, but it didn't prevent his admiring the vision.

Gowned in shimmering gossamer that must have cost its weight in spun gold, the girl seemed oddly oblivious to the crowd of people jockeying for position around her. Flaxen curls had been neatly coiffed on top of her head and dangled fashionably about her oval face, and she carried the requisite fan to flirt and flutter, but she the provocative appurtenance hung lifelessly from her wrist. Instead, she seemed to be gazing with nearsighted intensity into the crowd of dancers.

A familiar voice hailing him diverted the earl's attention.

"Heathmont! There you are. I'd about given up on you, though I'd scarcely blame you for avoiding this squeeze." A slender man of about the earl's own age pushed absently at the bridge of his nose, as if adjusting nonexistent spectacles.

"If you want something, you have to work for it, Averill," the earl replied, focusing his attention on this one friend who had not deserted him. "Have you found out anything yet?"

The elder son of a younger son of a duke, Averill Beresford—commonly known as Emery for obscure reasons—held no lands of his own, but his position in society was secure and unquestioned. Enormously liked by all his acquaintances, he never had reason to question the company he kept on his own

account, but his anxiety for his sardonic friend showed in his expression.

"It's the times, Heath." Averill shrugged apologetically. "The duke is in the briars over this Regency business, being a Tory and all and not knowing when or if Prinny will change his mind about the cabinet. He has to be everywhere at once. My father will reach him sooner or later."

The earl frowned at this news and his attention drifted. Clad in a tailored coat of black suiting that had been purchased in his younger days, his shoulders shifted restlessly within its confines. Though he had lost a stone or so since those grain-fed days of his youth, he had gained an athletic strength that did not fit well in court dress.

With the knowledge that the duke and his cronies would not attend this reception, the earl lost interest in the evening. Feeling the black mood coming upon him again, he slowed its arrival by returning his gaze to the golden child nearby.

To his surprise, the girl's charming features suddenly lit with a candle glow of expectation that captivated him. With an unexpected twinge of envy, Heathmont searched for the lucky man who merited such a smile.

A young gentleman arrived in the entry with a self-important tread, his slender frame impeccably tailored, his immaculate lawn cravat expertly tied, and his quizzing glass discreetly hung on a silver chain. This young dandy would have only been a greenling when Heathmont last attempted London society, and his name escaped him. Still, the youth gave the appearance of a respectable young lord and the ideal candidate for a marriage-minded young miss.

Bored with the commonplaceness of this tableau, the earl gave the girl one last glance, only to be caught by the sight of two tears sparkling in wide jade eyes. Long lashes quickly swept toward delicate cheekbones, but not in time to hide the telltale trace of a teardrop.

Frowning, the earl sought the young lordling again, only to discover the cad bowing before the plump miss in pink and deliberately ignoring the golden girl at her side. Heath had been subject to enough cruel cuts himself to not recognize one when he saw it, and his long-buried anger asserted itself.

With haughty aloofness he elbowed aside the simpering miss and her young lord, and with a gallant bow he smiled his pleasure at the young girl in gold.

"My dance, at last, I believe?" he murmured with masculine warmth.



STARTLED, AUBREE LOOKED UPWARD INTO THE DEEPEST PAIR OF blue eyes she had ever seen. They dominated a weathered face of arrogant sophistication and crinkled at the corners in lines of humor. With relief at this opportune intrusion, she rashly gave the stranger her gloved hand and bestowed a brilliant smile upon him.

"I thought you would never arrive," she announced with false gaiety, ignoring the stares from those who listened to their every word.

He led her toward the dance floor but cursed under his breath as the musicians struck up a waltz. With a grim set to his lips, he circled her waist and began the tortuous steps.

Sunk in her own thoughts, Aubree didn't question her partner's curses and thought little of the jerking gait that guided her around the room. The pain welling up inside her overwhelmed all else, and she struggled to overcome tears.

"Smile," her partner commanded between clenched teeth. "You'll fool no one with that long face."

In the habit of dancing mindlessly, exchanging only meaningless pleasantries with young men whose features all blurred together, Aubree had dismissed her partner, as was her habit.

Startled by his command, she woke up to the reality of this stranger who held her more tightly than was proper.

"No man is worth tears," he said tersely.

"We were to be married," she replied. Now that he had drawn her from her misery, Aubree studied her partner.

He was nearly twice her age and obviously out of place among this crush of the Season's most eligible candidates, unless he were some miss's older brother. She frowned as she turned her considerable concentration on determining his identity.

"You will have ugly lines upon your brow if you continue frowning in that manner. What do you mean, 'were to be married'? Surely no man in his right mind breaks off an engagement with the Season's loveliest maiden?"

Aubree ignored his flattery, returning her mind to the subject at hand, the one cutting her insides to ribbons. "My father would not even speak with him. There was an exchange of letters, I believe, but Geoffrey has not spoken to me since. I had hoped. . ."

"That the callow brute would go against your father's wishes? You are naive, my dear."

She threw him an aggravated glance, but his mocking gaze did not swerve.

"My father *promised*! He said I might have my choice, so long as I made it before my next birthday. I chose Geoffrey, and my father will not even consider him. He has broken his word!"

Amused by this revelation and the complacency with which the chit accepted the fact that she could have any man of her choosing, Heath drew her out further. It relieved the boredom and he certainly could not complain of the company. She moved like a feather within his arms, almost making the torment of this dance bearable.

"Then, if you love him, you must fight for him. He is being

polite and obeying your father's wishes. Make him realize the man you choose must be able to stand up against your father," he stated lazily, humoring her.

A sparkle of light lit her green eyes. "Do you think I might? How?" she demanded.

Heath shrugged. "A gentleman's pride is his weakest point. He cannot tolerate being ignored, nor jilted for another. You cannot capture his attention more effectively than to pretend he doesn't exist."

A hint of mischief gleamed. "You speak from experience, sir?" she asked.

With a sense of foreboding gained by many years of living on the thin edge of trouble, Heath studied her merry eyes. "Mountains," he advised.

She peeped up at him through lowered lashes. "Would you, by some chance, know a gentleman willing to help me convince Geoffrey he has been forgotten?"

Black humor turned Heath's lips up at one corner at this not so subtle question. He knew the gossip mill better than anyone, knew how clacking tongues could destroy lives and reputations, overthrow monarchies, and make heroes of villains. In a time when few could—or would—read, gossip took the place of news. But to use gossip to attain a goal rather than destroy one had a radically different twist to it that appealed to his satiric mood. To turn his scandalous reputation to good use would be an edifying experience, but a rather dangerous game to play, even if it would idle away the tedious hours of cooling his heels at the back doors of the powerful. He shook his head.

"Do not look at me, my lady. Just my presence would be sufficient to ruin your reputation. We both will have a difficult time of it as it is explaining away this dance."

Wide eyes stared with open curiosity. "Are you so terrible a person as that?"

A sardonic curve tilted his lips. "In the minds of men, yes."

The shadow of wariness disappeared, replaced by decisiveness. "So long as you are no danger to me, I don't give a fig for my reputation. Will you help me?"

The earl frowned. "Your reputation is everything. Without it, you are alone in the world."

"Again, spoken from experience?" she replied. "But then, without Geoffrey, I shall truly be alone in the world. My father will disown me when I refuse to marry one of his hatchet-faced politicians."

Heath fought to keep from laughing out loud at this description of the gentlemen he had been pursuing. It might be enlightening to know this chit better. Just to look upon her would certainly relieve his black humor.

"I will take great care to treat you with the utmost circumspection so no questions can be raised against you, but just the whisper of my name should flush out your young dandy if he has your interest at heart."

A hint of speculation danced in long-lashed eyes. "Might I ask what you have done to gain this reputation?"

"You may not," Heath replied sternly. "Suffice it to say that we shall have great difficulty finding anyone to properly introduce us. If we are to make your beau anxious, we will have to meet in public places."

She smiled unworriedly. "You were talking with my cousin earlier. Perhaps he could introduce us. My aunt would never object, then."

"Your cousin?" Heath raised his eyebrows. He could not imagine how this single-minded nymph could have noticed to whom he had spoken, nor could he imagine anyone condescending to speak with him. Surely she would have been carried off the dance floor by now if either her aunt or cousin had been paying the least bit of attention to their rash charge.

"There he is." She glanced over his shoulder to a point near

the entryway where they had met. Then her face lit with a glee that could not be contained. "And there is Geoffrey. Could you not look down upon me with consuming passion or something? He looks positively livid."

The earl chuckled and obliged by pulling her more intimately into his embrace and managing not to trip as he swirling her in a graceful circle that billowed her skirts in a most indecorous fashion.

He bent to whisper in her ear. "Beware, little one, you play with fire when you play with men's passions."

CHAPTER 2



AS HIS ENCHANTRESS LED HIM STRAIGHT TOWARD EMERY Beresford, the Earl of Heathmont chuckled in black delight. He should have recognized the resemblance between the golden-haired nearsighted cousins. And now having some understanding of who this determined young miss might be, Heath realized he had plunged into waters well over his head. He raised a cynical eyebrow as Beresford accosted him.

"Heath, have you gone mad?" his friend demanded.

Ignoring this rudeness, Heath answered politely, "The lady says we have not been properly introduced, Beresford. Would you be kind enough to do the pretty?"

If his friend noted the sarcasm, he ignored it, turning instead to his rebellious young cousin. "Your aunt is looking for you. You know how she is when she thinks she has misplaced something. You had best return to her at once."

Green eyes flashed with fury. "Emery Beresford, how can you be so rude? If you do not make the introductions at once, I shall do it myself."

Beresford rubbed his nose, glared at his cousin and back again to Heath's noncommittal expression. Then, he sighed

with resignation. "The sad thing is, she would, too," he muttered.

At Heath's look, Beresford shrugged and made a halfhearted introduction. "Lady Aubree Beresford—Austin Atwood, fifth Earl of Heathmont." He glowered again at his wayward friend. "If you have not already surmised, she is the duke's daughter, and a more spoiled, willful brat you will never find. If you retain any sense at all, you will run at the sound of her name."

Serenely accepting these insults, Lady Aubree curtsied. "An earl, that is excellent. Geoffrey will be furious." She straightened and smiled sweetly at her cousin. "You are still angry with me for stealing that mare from you. That isn't gentlemanly, Emery. Give Peggy my regards and be certain Lord Heathmont finds my direction properly."

With an all-encompassing smile, she swept away in the direction of a slight, elderly lady who frantically searched the crowd, clutching at the sleeves of passersby in pursuit of her elusive niece.

Heath followed the sway of slender hips beneath gossamer gold until lost in the crowd, then turned his amused expression to his boyhood friend. "The story of the mare, Emery?"

Beresford groaned and ran his fingers through the wispy remains of his hair. "At Tattersall's. She went to *Tattersall's*, by Jupiter. She marched through the stables with only her groom in attendance, and the little witch chose the best damned piece of horseflesh on the market. And she bid it right out from under me. Didn't even know it was her until afterward. Bid it just as cool and calm as you please. The whole damn place was jumping up and down at the prices we were offering, and she didn't twitch a muscle. And you know what she said to me after? Said the damned mare had a nicked hock she wanted to treat. A thousand pounds, I tell you, for a nicked hock! You don't know what you're getting into, Heath."

The earl refrained from smiling at his friend's nervousness.

He did not mean to strain this one loyal friendship for a passing fancy, but he was a trifle disappointed in Emery's reaction. Wryly, he offered Emery the opportunity to back out. "Would you rather this notorious abuser of women stay away from your lovely but exceedingly young cousin?"

Beresford gave him a look of exasperation. "Any man who survives the attention of Aubree and the Duke of Ashbrook has received punishment enough for all misdeeds, real or imagined. I'll warn you now, your cause is not helped by standing between the two. They will chop you into mincemeat and stomp on your bones to rip at each other."

The earl accepted this warning placidly. "It sounds a good deal more diverting than licking boots," he mused.



THE TOPIC OF THIS CONVERSATION ARRIVED HOME IN A SWIRL OF cloaks and laughter, offering to dance with her father's solemn butler and sending her maid into gales of glee as she curtsied prettily and danced with the hat rack when refused the butler's hand.

She was seventeen years old, wealthy and beautiful, and in London for the first time in her life. She had danced with a dashing gentleman who had made her feel as lovely and sophisticated as the elegant ladies she had glimpsed on the streets. She had her whole life ahead of her and the wits to know she could do almost anything she wanted should she put her mind to it.

Why should she bemoan the fate that had made her father a powerful duke who terrorized even the strongest of souls? Lord Heathmont was right. Her husband must be a man unafraid to challenge the duke. If Geoffrey could not stand up to him over a matter as important as this, he was not the man she thought.

Wistfully, she swept up the three Siamese kittens that came bounding down the stairs into her arms. If only the right man could come along before her eighteenth birthday.

Aunt Clara gazed worriedly upon her later that evening, though Aubree did her best not to notice. Sitting before her bedroom fireplace in her nightshift, she giggled in delight at her lap full of playful kittens.

She made a clown face at her frail relative's expression. "Aunt Clara, you are worrying again. There is no need of it, really there isn't."

Since she was actually Aubree's great-aunt and apparently feeling her age, Clara lowered herself to the wingback chair at the fireside before taking up a kitten. "Aubree, my child, I know it has been a long time since I have been part of London society, not since your mother's coming-out, if I remember rightly. . ."

Aubree knew the tale. Thirty years ago her aunt had been an attractive, ambitious matron who had successfully snared one of the city's most eligible bachelors for her young charge. After the crowning success of marrying her niece off to a wealthy duke, she had retired to the country with her laurels.

Clara sighed and tried again. "Aubree, you simply cannot entertain men who have not been introduced to you. Your family is trying very hard to acquaint you with only the right sort of people. You are much too young and inexperienced to make that distinction for yourself. And to waltz with a man you have only just met. . . and at your age. . ." The shock was almost too much for her, and she shuddered.

Aubree whispered in a kittenish ear and grinned at the answering purr. She loved Aunt Clara, but her high spirits were more than the frail old lady would ever understand. Until now, she had attempted to hide her escapades, but this time she needed her aunt's cooperation.

"Auntie, I have apologized for worrying you, but you really

have no cause for concern. Lord Heathmont is an eminently respectable gentleman, a friend of Emery's, and nearly old enough to be my father. He is in London only a short time and is looking for diversion. I am bored to tears with stuffy assemblies, and since Papa evidently intends to choose my husband for me, I see no reason why I cannot enjoy myself a trifle before I must be shackled to some dull politician for the rest of my life. What can an occasional ride in the park harm, particularly if my cousin attends also?"

Of course, Aunt Clara had known Aubree all of her seventeen years and knew her propensity for trouble, but her aunt never quite understood her true intentions. She sighed in frustration.

"It would be better had your brother lived. At least, he had the talent to make you mind and served as a buffer between you and your father, but now. . ."

A flicker of sadness shadowed Aubree's thoughts as she remembered the proud young marquess who had been her father's only heir. Perhaps she modeled her suitors after him, and no other met the standards. Even Geoffrey fell short of her memory of her brother, but who could live up to such a hero? Even the duke had not been able to stop his only son from fighting at Nelson's side—and dying for a cause that was not yet won, even five years later.

Cursing the foolishness of men and war, Aubree placed the kittens in their box and rose to stand beside her aunt. "I can never be Henry, Aunt Clara. I have tried, but I only disappoint Papa more. Soon, I will be married, and you need not worry about me anymore. Can you not allow me this little bit of freedom now?"

The affection between them was real, and her aunt sensed the plea that was not spoken. She nodded sadly, hugged her, then paused for one final shot. "I trust you, Aubree, but that earl of yours is no gentleman, I fancy. Remember the injured

hawk whose broken wing you set?" At Aubree's nod, she continued, "He bit your finger and flew away when he needed you no longer. I'll not allow that to happen again, my dear. You keep your cousin with you."

After her aunt departed, Aubree climbed into bed and buried her face in the pillow, trying to hold back the tears. How could she make her aunt understand that the cynical earl offered a cure for her own wounds and not the other way around? Geoffrey's cut had injured deeply, more than she would admit. Her father's rejection of her had shadowed her entire life; to be rejected by the man she had chosen to marry was a humiliation too deep to be borne.

But never would she let anyone know it.



THE EARL ARRIVED AS PROMISED, HIS AGED HESSIANS GLEAMING with new polish, his biscuit-colored trousers snug and revealing the trim hips and flat stomach of a man accustomed to vigorous exercise. The deep blue of his square-cut coat accented the similar coloring of his eyes, and though the thick mass of chestnut curls falling upon his brow had not been deliberately styled in the classic mode, he succeeded in resembling any statue of a Greek god Aubree had ever seen.

She smiled hesitantly as he entered the salon, dominating the delicate Sheraton pieces with his athletic grace and air of the outdoors. If it had not been for his limp, she might have frozen in panic at her foolishness in inviting this stranger here. As it was, she urged him into the most comfortable chair.

Entering behind his friend, Emery lifted his eyebrows at her maneuver, but he sensibly held his tongue. This was only a polite social call of twenty minutes after all.

Aubree opened innocently enough by introducing Aunt Clara, who sought to place the earl's ancestors in relation to

her own. Delighted to learn Heathmont's mother was the younger sister of a close friend of her youth, Clara occupied the first five minutes with her chatter before the tea arrived.

Emery paced nervously, narrowly avoiding tripping on the Aubusson carpet, accidentally upsetting the Sevres snuffbox on the mantel, and nearly colliding with the new Hepplewhite table, until Aubree grew exasperated.

"For pity's sake, Emery, either put your spectacles on or sit down and have some tea. My father is not about to stroll in anytime soon, and he will not cut the throat of his future heir in any event. Why didn't you bring Peggy? She must certainly grow bored sitting at home while you're gallivanting about."

The earl hid his amusement as the future Duke of Ashbrook obediently lowered himself to a tapestried sofa at the command of a tiny chit of a girl. Though she lacked the polished sophistication of her London-bred peers, Lady Aubree Beresford obviously had learned the lesson of power and command. Relaxing, Heathmont spread his long legs out more comfortably and waited for the Punch and Judy show to begin.

"Peggy stays home for a very good reason, as you well know, Aubree. A lady in her condition does not show herself in public," Beresford explained, as if to a very slow child.

"Stuff and nonsense, Emery! Is all the world to pretend women don't have babies? Perhaps we are to believe babies come from heaven, delivered directly to the doorstep of good little girls and boys? If that's the case, heaven is enormously fond of those poor creatures down by Covent Garden and the docks."

"Aubree!" Aunt Clara intruded, aghast.

Beresford glowered. "Aubree, we are not animals to parade ourselves as nature made us! I don't know how you grew up to be such an uncivilized heathen, but even you must admit the necessity of clothing ourselves."

At the dangerous gleam in green eyes, Heath hastened to interrupt. "Lady Aubree is correct in some respects, Beresford. Why should we hide away our women as if we were ashamed of them, while the men strut and preen like roosters over their accomplishments? But I doubt if this is a topic for the tea table, my lady. Perhaps you should apologize to your aunt and find a more suitable subject?"

"Apologize?" Aubree stared at him as if he had developed two wings and horns, but his frown warned her that she needed his help, and she complied with alacrity.

"I do apologize, Aunt Clara. I shall learn to speak with more circumspection."

Heath could almost hear her silent vow: *Until after she was married.*

"Perhaps Lord Heathmont would do us the favor of describing his home and neighbors? You are from Devon, I believe you mentioned, my lord?"

Since this was the next-to-last topic he wished to discuss and Heath suspected from the mischievous gleam in the lady's eye that the little minx knew it, he felt himself aptly repaid for his coercion. He steered clear of the subject of his neighbors and launched into the topic of the sailing to be had from the coast.

The remainder of the visit passed innocuously, and Heath was rewarded with the promise of Aubree's company for a ride in the park on the following day. It would be interesting to see how much she would try to pry from him during his short stay in society.



OUTSIDE THE DUKE'S FASHIONABLE PARK STREET RESIDENCE, Beresford halted. "Devil take it, Heath! You cannot mean to court a chit nearly half your age. Even if I know there is no

truth to the gossip about you, you have no cause to taint Aubree's reputation with scandal. She's a greenling—and a willful brat, admittedly—but a gentleman. . .”

“I have long since resigned the position of gentleman, Beresford,” Heath replied. “The young lady knows what she wants and I am only helping her to obtain it. Courtship plays no part in it. With the proper handling, I believe I can help my own cause as well. The young lady and I understand each other.”

His nearsighted friend looked dubious but resigned. “You had best know what you are doing, Heath. I'll not be in the briars over that tyke again. I'm too old for it.”

The earl snorted disrespectfully and climbed into his waiting phaeton. “You have a wife and child to keep you young, my lad. Allow me my few eccentricities.”

Knowing something of his friend's troubles, Beresford grimaced. “What you need is a good woman, Heath, and I don't mean that high flier you were with the other night. Pity Peggy's not up to the mark right now. She'd match you up with just the thing. A sizable dowry can always make a man's coffers sing a different tune.”

Heath scowled. “I have nothing to offer a wife, and I'll not be indebted to anyone. The subject is closed.”

Women were no longer a part of his life—not the marrying kind, leastways. Other problems were uppermost in his mind as he made his plans for the courting of the duke's only daughter. The girl herself scarcely came into it.