

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Michael was woken from his dream by a loud knocking. When he opened his eyes he was dazzled by the brightness and numbed by the breath-snatching chill. Suddenly he felt an even cooler shaft of air across his back as the front door of the cottage creaked open. "Are ye there, young Master?" called a man's voice.

"Can you see anything, Jed?" said another.

Utter panic gripped him as he leapt to his feet, wrapping a blanket around his unclothed body. Curled at his feet lay Felicity, beautiful, enchanting, blissfully asleep. If she were discovered now!

"Mr Barnes sent us down to check on ye," said Jed, peering over the wall of snow filling the porch through which he had cut a slot but which still obstructed his view into the cottage. "Its bad everywhere."

"Ay," said a voice from behind him, "it must be all o' ten feets in depth at Bourne Bottom."

"We thinks the 'state's cut off, young Master. Nothing, no man nor creature can get in or out. The wife, she says its the work of God, a punishment for some dreadful wickedness! But we're all out trying to clear some routes so as Christian folk can go about their peaceful business this Christmas morn."

"Oh! Happy Christmas to the two of you," mumbled Michael, praying that Felicity would not wake.

"And to ye, young Master! You be all right then?"

"Yes," said Michael, running his hand through his hair and still squinting. "I slept in the living room in front of the fire as the bedroom was so cold. Its nearly gone out. I'd better revive it."

"Ah, what you need is the warmth o' a good woman aside you," said the voice from outside.

"That's enough o' that kind o' talk," said Jed. "So, ye'll be all right, then. We'll be telling Mr Barnes that, then. An' we'll be a-clearing the track during morning so ye can get up to the House. That were our instructions."

"That's right," said the voice. "That's what Mr Barnes said to do."

"Ah, good," said Michael, making his uncertain way to the door, trying to obstruct the view across the living room. "Tell Mr Barnes I am fine and thank him for thinking of me."

"Oh, I 'spect they told him up at the House."

"Well, thank him just the same. And wish him a Merry Christmas from me!" With a sigh he pushed shut the door, pushed the bolt home, and went back to the fireside where Felicity was sitting up, looking dazed. "It is Christmas morning," he said softly, stirring the remaining embers of the fire. "That was a couple of the estate workers. They came down to ensure that everything was all right. And they are out, all of them, clearing the roads and tracks."

"Do you think they saw me?"

"No. I did my level best to obstruct their view and you would be partly hidden by the settee. But they gave me quite a turn, I can tell you. I am not use to all this subterfuge."

"Nor am I," she said, not without a trace of bitterness.

"And, as it is Christmas morning, I have a present for you. I would have given it to you yesterday had things worked out differently. I have to admit I agonised over what to buy you, and ended up with this. I hope you like it. It is gold."

"Oh, Michael! It must have cost a small fortune! I will wear it - I would wear it, what ever it is made of."

Outside it had stopped snowing but the scene before them as they peered through the frosty window panes was of a shapeless wilderness. Features such as the roses and clematis-strewn fence line were reduced to no more than a gentle ruffle in the white carpet.

"They are proposing to try and clear the track and the estate roads during the day," Michael repeated.

“It seems a shame that they should have to spend their Christmas Day spoiling something so beautiful,” she mused. “It is a real Christmas!” He put out his hand and took her arm. Something in the manner in which he did it must have communicated his intention. “No,” she said. “Not again. Not yet.”

Michael withdrew his hand. “Je t’adore,” he said simply.

“Moi aussie,” she said smiling. “Alors, mon cher - I must get dressed and get you some breakfast!”

“I’ll have a look and see what is in the larder, apart from snow.” And, still wrapped in his blanket he padded, bare foot, out into the stone floored kitchen. “The Estate will be swarming with workers today,” he called, “but if they manage to clear the track and the Drive, I’ll take you home in the car, providing I can dig it out. You may have to keep your head down. I know, I shouldn’t be talking now about taking you home! This, the two of us together, should go on for ever.”

“And so it should,” she said softly. “Now more than ever.” Perhaps Michael did not hear her or, if he did, did not catch her meaning, because he went on talking about his arrangements to go up to the House for Christmas lunch, and how her sister would be growing anxious about her.

On and on. As she prepared breakfast it seemed to Felicity as if he was intent on being rid of her as soon as possible. “Stop it!” she cried, sharply. “We can talk about these matters later. You are making me feel like some mistress, or worse, who has to be despatched as soon as she has served her purpose. For the present let us enjoy our breakfast together, in the same spirit as we spent last night.”

“I am sorry. I just thought you would be worried about getting home.”

“Well I am not! Not for the present! Indeed, I do not think I ever felt less like going home! Do eat you egg before it becomes cold!” Then she laughed. “Good gracious! We are together only a few hours and already I am talking like a wife!”

“And I love it!” he stressed. “Say it all again, just for me.”

She did not oblige him, but sat and ran her fingers over the gold snake that entwined her wrist. “I will always treasure this,” she said, looking down. “It is the first thing you have given me. I will treasure it, for always.”

“I do have to go up to the House, you know.”

“I know, but I think you are acting like a schoolboy who is worried about being late for school! I am sure that they will be appreciative of the conditions.”

“It is not that. I am worried that they may well send someone here, as it were, to fetch me!”

“If they do that you will have to go, of course, and leave me to my own devices. I can manage. I will have a look in the larder to see how much food is left. I am sure we could survive for a few days yet if it came to that.”

“You are thinking of staying?”

“I am thinking that if they cannot clear the roads or the weather gets bad again, I may be forced to stay here. You could be stranded up at the House!”

“I would try to get back!”

“And what reason would you give for acting like a madman? You could hardly say you were in love!”

“I would think of something. I am just worried that you will be discovered. And there’s the woman who changes the linen. She didn’t come yesterday. She might try and get here today.”

“On Christmas Day?”

“What reason could you give?”

“I would think of something!”

It was just after the clock had struck half past eleven that Felicity called anxiously to him from the window. “Quick!” she said, “there’s someone approaching on horseback!”

Michael could not believe his eyes. There, clad in black and leading one horse from the back of another, was the person he least wanted to see. “It’s Christina!” he exclaimed.

“So that is what Lady Christina looks like. I must say she looks a weeny bit plump! She is not slim and lithe like me! Go out, Michael, and meet her! Go on!” These last words were hard for Felicity to say, to have to offer up her lover to the woman who was about to take possession of him from her. Her inclination was to take him in her arms and tell Lady Newington's daughter that he was hers, Felicity's, and that she would not let her have him. But Lady Newington's daughter appeared to have all the trumps in the deck. For a start she had a superior claim on Michael. Had he not promised himself to her and signed papers? Then, she was on the Newington Estate, in a foreign land as it were. Third, Christina was sat astride a large Chestnut and showed no inclination to dismount. It would be rather hard to argue with an adversary who is already occupying all of the high ground. All she, Felicity Joyce Lightfoot, had Michael Stephen Quentin Bernstein in her possession. Possession is nine tenths of the Law, she thought. And, all is fair in love and war. Nevertheless, if she was ever to confront Lady Christina and fight for the hand and attentions of her lover, it would be on her ground and at a time of her choosing. That would be only if the battle was not already lost.

“Halloo!” called Christina in a rather throaty voice. “I thought I would ride down and collect you. This is about the only practical means of travel on the Estate at present and even this is not entirely safe! You can ride, can't you?”

“After a fashion,” he said, visualising him riding off with Felicity mounted beside him.

“Come along then! Do get some suitable clothes on and mount up!”

“I won't be a minute,” he called and dived back into the cottage. Behind the door, out of sight of the woman he was to marry, he embraced and kissed the woman he loved. “It has been wonderful,” she whispered, “being here with you for this last day. It was fate.”

“And now I must go.”

“I know,” she said soothingly.

“Keep out of sight and stay here until I come back.”

“I'll see.”

“Promise!”

“No, I will not promise,” she pouted. “I will see. Now, go!”

Felicity stood behind the door after it had closed and listened to the horses crunch the snow under-hoof. The sound gradually retreated into the distance until she could hear it no more. Then, for the first time she could remember, she burst into quite uncontrollable tears.

Michael's father did not come down to lunch. Sophie said something about some important, pressing, work to be done, so a tray was taken up to him. Michael wondered what could be so important, then thought of Felicity and wished that he could have cited something important that would have justified him lunching at the cottage and, perhaps, spending the afternoon there. Instead he found himself, after lunch, alone in the library with Christina. It seemed to be the worst of all scenarios. Mark and Natacha were filling the Music Room, Helen and Sophie were having a tête à tête in the Drawing Room, whilst Angela had disappeared altogether. It had crossed his mind to try and avoid Christina, but he did not have a room to retreat to, so he sat in a chair amongst the books and closed his eyes.

“I was having a long talk with your father on the way down,” said Christina, ignoring his pretence to be asleep and opening the writing desk. She took out a large bundle of papers.

Michael groaned inwardly and sunk further into the armchair. “Is that the novel?” he asked.

“Don't be silly!” she snapped. “This is the new one. The other is published and done with.”

“Oh yes, of course,” he said wearily.

“I told him,” she continued, “that I thought your career isn't progressing quickly enough. This survey thing appears to be dragging on and on. And you are still only an articulated pupil as far as I can understand. I told your father that it really was not good enough and that certainly it should not be an impediment to the announcement of our engagement.”

“I suppose not. What did he say?”

“He agreed. I pointed out there is the matter of the religious instruction which is also not progressing at the rate it should!”

“I am trying very hard. It is very difficult. Perhaps it is Father Thomas - he may not be a very good teacher.”

“You certainly are trying, according to Father William! Why do you have to ask so many questions? Or disagree and take issue with nearly everything that Father Thomas says? Why can you not just sit there, listen, and accept the teachings?”

“I thought I am suppose to achieve some sort of perfect understanding.”

“You are supposed to understand, and to say it is your intention, that your wife will be allowed to continue in her faith and that any children will be baptised, raised and educated as Catholics. You are not being converted.”

“Do you want children?” he asked suddenly.

“No!” she said sharply.

“No? Isn't that rather out of the spirit of the Faith? After all, the word matrimony means duty of Motherhood, Father Thomas says.”

“I do not wish to be lectured on the ins and outs of my religion, least of all by you, Michael. I do not intend to have children - at least, certainly not to start with. They would get in the way of my career. I expect you to respect my wishes in this matter in every respect.”

Michael closed his eyes again. “Why are we getting married, then?”

“Don't be silly,” she said curtly. “Because our parents have agreed it. Because I am the youngest daughter of a somewhat impoverished titled family. Because - I don't know! Because we are!”

Christina immersed herself in her examination of the papers, correcting words, indicating text that was to be moved, chewing the top of her pencil whilst she selected the next phrase to be assaulted. Michael pictured the cottage, set there in the woods, alone in the snow, and in it he pictured Felicity. He had only to get up now and walk out. It was not that easy. To hell with his father, his inheritance, his career, Christina, the contract, the instruction, and what people might or might not think of him! All that was required of him was to stand up and walk out. No more, no less. If he did that, something he had done a thousand times, ten thousand times, in his life, in a short time he would be back in Paradise. It should be so easy!

“I know you have a lover!” Christina's words, loud in his ear, electrified him. Panic rampaged unchecked through his body as pressure seemed to expand inside his head, crushing thought, thrusting inwards, outwards, blotting out the room, extinguishing consciousness. So, she knew! She had known all along! She had just been playing with him, waiting for the moment when she would drive the knife home. But how in God's name did she come to know? Oh, there were a thousand ways, as many ways as the grains of sand. Perhaps it had been the two men at the door that morning. One had caught a sight of Felicity's delicate little foot, provocatively pointing out from beneath her cover. Or they had seen her clothes, or some other sign that someone else was at the cottage with him. Perhaps the wife at the gatehouse had overheard his telephone call and added two to two. Or, maybe Miss Muir had said something, innocently, and Christina had executed the addition of the sum. She could even have told his father! That was what they had discussed in the car! That was why his father had not come down to lunch. He would not have been able to face him across the table without the most dreadful of scenes, something which would have quite spoiled Helen's day. No, better to leave it to Christina, she of the long knives, to carry out the assassination in the library.

So this was it, the revelation, the confrontation, the denouement! In a way he would be glad to have it all over, to have it all out in the open. He was pleased that he would no longer have any reason to lead this double life, this pretence, poised on the edge of a precipice, always likely to be plunged forth into a bottom-less chasm. He could not begin to imagine what would happen, what would be said to him, what would be done to him, or where he would be at the end of the day. No doubt he would be dragged backwards and forwards over red hot coals and instructed to give up Felicity. The question was, what should he say? Should he fight to keep her? Say that she is more important to him than all the rest of it? Or should he just apologise and say that it would not happen again? “I am sorry?” he said

hoarsely.

“What?” said Christina. “Did I wake you?”

“You said something about a lover.”

She laughed sharply. “I have this habit of saying things I have written out loud, just to hear what they sound like. It was a line from my book. Go back to sleep.”

He closed his eyes once more and sunk back into the chair, trying to recover his composure. The danger was passed, for the present, but a deep, sharp, fear gnawed away at his heart. When he tried now to visualise the cottage and Felicity inside it, the vision was not at all clear.

“Of course you must stay tonight, Michael,” Helen told him. “You cannot possibly go back to the cottage, not in this weather. Why, the Estate is barely open to the outside world. No, you shall stay here tonight!”

“Of course,” said Michael, conscious that Christina was watching him. Natacha was working her way through the Chopin Preludes, aided by Mark who was demonstrating the expertise he had gained in turning pages of music.

“I do not have a lot to do,” he announced, “but what I do I shall do with great precision and panache! You will see!”

“They only come to see the pages turned!” complained Natacha, and started playing.

“What did my father say?” whispered Michael as soon as he was sat beside Christina.

“Say? Say about what?”

“About us? About our engagement? About my career?”

“Our engagement? I would like to announce it at Mother's New Year Ball, but no-one will let me,” she said sulkily.

“But what did he say?”

“Your father? He agrees with me and said he would take all the appropriate steps!”

“Agrees with you? About what? What did he mean?”

“I don't know what he meant. I didn't dare to ask him for the details. I am only interested in the outcome. You should ask him yourself!”

Michael slumped back in his chair, feeling exasperated. Once again, here were people talking about him, deciding his future, and he had no say in it. “He hardly talks to me. He hardly ever talks to anyone as far as I can see.”

“Well, that is not my experience. He found him charming and most considerate on the journey. I trust that you take after him.”

“I dearly hope that I don't.”

“And ask Mama. She says that he cannot do enough for her.”

Michael stared at Natacha's long supple fingers as they found their obedient way across the key board. A sense of numbing, paralysing, doom started to spread through his body. Soon it would reach his fingers and he would never be able to play again. Soon he would be quite, quite, helpless. “But he must have said something to indicate what he intends,” he protested mildly.

“He just agreed with me,” she hissed. “We agreed that the whole thing is taking far too long! Mama agrees, too. It is time that you and I announced our engagement and if I really had my way it would be here and now, tonight!”

“Please, no. Let me at least finish my work down here. Let us wait until I am back in London. It will only be a few weeks. What will a few weeks matter when we will have the whole of our lives together?”

Christina turned to look at him, her face taugth and determined, her eyes ablaze. “Very well,” she said. “A few weeks. Make sure that it is only a few weeks, and make good use of them!”

Michael sat still and silent. His sister played another Prelude but he was only half-aware of the fact. He realised that he felt that he now wanted nothing but to simply get it all over and finished. If it was his lot to marry this plump harridan, then so be it. If it was unannounced, then the sooner the announcement, the better. But there was still this small voice, crying out where his soul bordered on the wilderness. What about Felicity? What of

their meetings and their need for each other?

He would have to part from her. He would have to say “goodbye” and walk away. Somehow he would have to find the way of voicing what they both knew but would not speak about. He would have to expose their deepest fear. It was hopeless and that they would never again see one another.

No! He could not contemplate that, let alone say it! Yet it would have to be said. They would have to part and when they did, it would have to be clear cut and final. If they continued to see each other it would only plunge them both into a fresh depth of torment. And there was the continuing possibility of Christina finding out about them. No, when they did part it would be final.

He felt wretched and suicidal. Whilst around him music flowed, people talked and laughed and celebrated Christmas, he descended into a personal black pit of dread and misery. No matter how many times he told himself that there was life after Felicity, he remained unconvinced. The most that there might be was bare existence.

“What about the religious instruction?” he whispered.

“Mama is to talk to Father William. You father has offered to make a generous donation to the Church and Mama thinks that bearing in mind your progress, the dispensation should be forthcoming early in the New Year.”

“I will not be able to complete the survey whilst the weather's like this,” he said stubbornly.

“Then perhaps it should be completed by someone else,” she said sharply. “What about that assistant of yours? Surely he has learnt something by now? Is he not capable? Really, Michael, I sometimes wonder if all you do is be obstructive and invent reasons to delay our wedding!”

“I do not! I don't really care when you announce the engagement. Announce it now if you wish!”

“That would be a little pointless. Everyone here knows that we are to be married. I expect they all think of us as being engaged!”

“Then please wait until I have completed my work down here and I am back in London. Do this one thing for me, Christina. Wait until I have finished down here then we can make out formal announcement.”

“Very well,” she said and turned to look at Natacha who had reached the penultimate Prelude. “As soon as you are back in London it shall be announced. I will tell Mama.” Michael sighed and breathed deeply. The cord had been pulled tight and knotted again. Now it seemed there was no possibility of escape.

When, next morning, he returned to the cottage he found it cold and empty. The range and the fire were both out. And Felicity had gone.

Lady Newington had sent out the invitations in early December for the small Ball she planned to hold on New Year's Eve. Her daughters had told her she was too late, that everyone worth inviting would already have committed themselves on this most important night of the local social calendar. However to her delight, and the amazement of both Angela and Christina the level of acceptance was pleasingly high. Amongst those who did accept was Moira after persuading her Arthur that it was not unthinkable for him to think of rubbing shoulders with titled and landed people. Nor should he think that he should feel out of place. He would be with her and she felt she could go anywhere!

If the fact that Arthur might go presented a new dilemma for Michael, it also presented Arthur with the problem of how to tell Michael he was invited without sounding as if he were engaging in one-up-man-ship. Eventually he brought himself to tell Michael that Moira had received an invitation. “Is she planning on going?” Michael asked.

“Yes, I think so. She has asked me to escort her. Have you been asked? I ask because I know that you have been up to the House several times and you said you would be staying down for Christmas.”

“I haven't received a formal invitation,” Michael told him.

“Will you take Miss Lightfoot if you are invited?”

“I don't think she would be able to go,” Michael replied. That was good as far as it went, but the spectre of Miss Muir or even Arthur saying something out of place, no matter how innocent, haunted him. He found that he could not bring himself to mention the ball to Felicity. How could he, when he could not take her? He expected that she would mention it when she came to the cottage and was relieved when she did not. No doubt she knew about it through her sister. No doubt it was in her mind and may have been the reason why she did not raise the prospect of them seeing the New Year in together. She would have known that his presence at the Ball was mandatory. Being with her at the New Year was not a course open to him to follow.

Any function held in the admittedly small ballroom at Newington would be a glittering occasion. The room was panelled with mirrors set in ornate gilded frames and decorated in gold and silver. Two large crystal chandeliers, which Helen had lowered from their customary high position for the night, bathed the dancers in a brilliant light which was reflected from every corner. Mr Bernstein declared that the holding of the Ball was an unnecessary extravagance, especially when it ran to as many as five new gowns for the ladies of the families. “Nonsense,” said Helen, “it will be a little beacon of light in what is, otherwise, a rather dull decade. Certainly in Dover and East Kent it will be! And it will be the perfect occasion for the announcement of Christina's and Michael's engagement!”

On hearing of this plan Michael summoned up all his sparse forces of opposition and gave Father Thomas such a particularly bad time on the day after Boxing Day that Father William felt compelled to advise caution in the matter of making an announcement. There was no doubt that the dispensation would be forthcoming, given what Mr Bernstein proposed, but it was politic that Father Thomas was satisfied too, and that might require a little longer. Michael assured Christina it was not a problem, said that they should stick to their understanding, and Helen was allowed to drop the idea although right up to the event she was given to vent her frustration on Matthews.

As the few brief days after Christmas passed, and the New Year came nearer, Michael's desperation and fear increased. He was haunted by the picture of him, Christina at his side instead of Felicity, being confronted by Miss Muir. One of them was bound to say something out of place. Christina might introduce him as her intended husband. Moira might ask how Miss Lightfoot was. There seemed to be no escape from this kind of outcome. He could not dissuade Miss Muir from going. He could not think of any way to stop Christina from being there. It was hard to think of a plausible excuse why he should be absent. He began to envy his father. At least, if he wished, he could remain in London and send a message that business prevented him from enjoying the company on what he trusted would be a joyous occasion for all. If only he could write such a note!

“I will have to appear a stranger, of course. I mean, not one of the family.”

“That seems silly,” said Natacha, “and not very kind. To think you will not even acknowledge your own sister.”

“It seems farcical to me,” said Christina, with a snort.

“You know that I am not known down here. You did agree that whilst I am here I would remain so.”

“I know!” said Christina. “A period of temporary madness, my dear,” she said to Natacha.

“I trust it does not run in my family! I cannot believe that he means to hold to your promise? Women promise all manner of things. What a day of reckoning it would be if we were to be held to them!”

“Well, Christina did promise,” said Michael sullenly, “and I am holding her to it!”

“I will expect you to dance with me! I am not dancing the evening away with that dreadful Armitage boy!”

“Of course I will dance with you,” sighed Michael. “But not every dance.”

“You will dance with me as often as I determine. I will go and mark my card, and yours, right now!”

“You had better not dance with him too often,” laughed Natacha, “else you will get something of a reputation for continually dancing with that young upstart surveyor. I will take

some of the burden and I am sure Angela will help as well.”

“I wouldn't be too sure of that,” Christina growled.

“Nat's right,” said Michael hopefully, “you wouldn't want to be seen as flighty because you danced all evening with the young man who - .”

“Who? Who what?”

“Nothing,” murmured Michael.

“And me, flighty?”

“You know what people say.”

“They do talk,” assured Natacha. “I sometimes wonder what they say about me and Mark. The truth of it is we are just good friends, no more than that.”

Michael exchanged glances with Christina, a gesture that made his heart race slightly. “I am sure that there will be eligible young men, other than this Armitage creature who you appear to dread, there.”

“Oh, Mama has invited a selection of local gentry, dignitaries and professionals. I was surprised that she could draw up a list so quickly and even more surprised that some many of them were able to accept. It speaks volumes for their acceptability in Society. And it is years since we held any kind of function here at Newington. I am almost dreading it.”

“Oh,” said Michael, mentally crossing his fingers, and praying to Father Thomas's god, “I expect it will be a wonderful evening.”

Michael hardly recognised Arthur when he met him at the punchbowl. “Goodness me,” he said, “you do look smart!”

“So do you,” said the assistant, cheekily. “And, I say,” he added in a low voice, “We met Lady Newington when we came in. Isn't she beautiful! And who are the other beauties with her? I didn't really catch their names. I was too taken with Lady Newington!”

“That's the wife of an eminent City Banker next to her, and one of the two daughters, in lilac, next to her.”

“She's pretty too!”

“You had better not let your fiancée hear you say things like that!”

“I suppose not. You won't tell her, will you?”

“Of course not.”

“I thought you said you didn't have an invitation,” Arthur said suddenly.

“I didn't have a formal invitation when I told you that. I just sort of got myself invited.”

“Super! It's dazzling, isn't it?”

“I suppose so,” said Michael looking around. “Don't you feel a little out of place here?”

“No - I try not to think about it. Do come over to say hello to Moira.”

Michael could not think of any excuse to avoid the dreaded meeting. Better to get it over with whilst Christina was still welcoming guests. “I have been asked to come over and say hello to you,” he said. “Hello, Miss Muir.”

“I am disappointed that you had to be asked to do it,” she said. The words sounded a little coquettish, but Moira's pretty eyes flashed with hostility and suspicion as she looked at Michael and then around the ballroom. “Felicity is not here, then?” she added, tersely.

“No.” It was a question that he had prepared for, yet when it was asked, even though Christina was not within earshot, his mind went numb. “Are you enjoying the evening?” he mumbled. “I trust you will save at least one dance for me, if Arthur will permit.”

“Of course I will permit it,” Arthur said jovially. “Have as many as you like!”

“Very well,” said Moira, “I will put you down for the next waltz. You can dance, can you? Other than make others dance?”

Michael checked his card. “Yes, I can dance. And I am down for a number of dances, but not that one. It is yours, Miss Muir.”

“What are you doing to Phoebe?” hissed Moira as soon as he led her out. “Felicity!”

“Doing to her? How do you mean?”

“What are your intentions? She use to be a good, moral, God-fearing, Christian girl before she met you. Now she has given up going to Church and, although I am not sympathetic to her religion, for her that's totally wrong and out of character. She would not suddenly give it up unless someone was exerting a strong, bad, influence over her. And now she has taken to staying out all night, and with a man! You are ruining her, her name, her reputation. You will ruin her career and her life unless your intentions are honourable. Are they honourable, Mr Bernstein? Or are you just intent on leading her astray?”

Michael looked around to ensure that no-one of either family was within earshot. The fire in Moira's eyes, the intensity and passion of her attack, alarmed him. He was not sure what to do other than listen.

“She was my best friend,” she continued. “We grew up together and I think I know her as well as anyone alive. At least, I thought I knew her until you came along and started to corrupt her. I do not know the Felicity I see today. She has changed and it is you that have changed her. You have changed her out of all recognition, Mr Bernstein. You have!” Her voice rose slightly and alarmed Michael. He was sure that people were looking and could see Natacha and Mark not far away in the crowd although they might no have noticed him yet.

“Can I confide in you, Miss Muir?” he said softly, steering her away from his sister. “May I take you into my - our - confidence. Not just mine, but Felicity's?”

“I suppose so.”

“The truth is that we find that we do love each other, deeply and purely, but we've agreed that there is no future in it for us. Felicity does not want to marry because of her dancing - she may have said as much to you in the past. And I am faced with the prospect of going back to London shortly. We have discussed it at length and concluded that the most sensible thing to do is part. When I go back to London we will part and go our separate ways, probably for ever.”

“You must be heartbroken!” she said coldly.

“I am philosophical about it.”

“And Phoebe?”

“She is being philosophical too.”

“I am not sure that I believe you, but what ever you do, make sure that you do not hurt her. Felicity and I may not see eye to eye about many things at present, including you. I dare say that we will never see eye to eye on some matters even if you do go, but she is a sweet, pure, and vulnerable creature. Do make sure that you do not hurt her. I will not forgive you if you do.”

“Nothing could be further from my mind,” said Michael, wishing the dance was over.

“You seem to have had a lot of dances with Lady Christina this evening,” said Arthur as all eyes were on the hands of the large clock that stood at one end of the ballroom. “That is her, in the lilac, isn't it? Do you think she has taken a fancy to you?”

“I think it is more a question of lack of competition,” said Michael looking around to see where Christina was and wondering if he should seek her out before the clock chimed.

“You think so? I was beginning to wonder if it was more than that. I couldn't really ask her to dance with me more than once or Moira might have been jealous. She tells me that you and Miss Lightfoot are to finish seeing each other.”

“Sort of. We have more or less agreed that. She has her career to pursue and I will have to return to London.”

“You haven't considered staying on at the Canterbury office then?”

“No. There isn't the work. I will have to go back to Town, and what with her dancing, it seemed the best thing.”

“A case of off with the old and on with the new, then? That's what Moira said.”

“It is nothing of the kind!”

“Then why is Lady Christina heading in this direction? I am sure that she is not coming for me!”

“I thought I would never find you!” exclaimed Christina. “I have been looking all over for you! Have you been hiding?”

“No,” said Michael sheepishly. “I have been here, talking to Arthur.”

“And I had better go and find Moira before it is too late,” the assistant said, tactfully.

“I am sure that we could have announced it this evening,” said Christina, softly, once the New Year had been sung in. “I really do not think that the small matter of a couple of weeks instruction should have been allowed to affect matters. We will get the dispensation, you may be certain of it.”

“There is my position, and you did promise. I must maintain the illusion that I have created down here, just until I finish. All of this is complicating matters. Announcing our engagement would have only made things worse. Arthur, for example thinks you have taken a fancy to me.”

“Taken a fancy to you? That's a laugh! Well, how will these people feel when they learn the truth?”

“I don't know. I do not really care. I will be back in London by then.”

“It will still appear deceitful and underhand. They will think that you have traded on their good will.”

“Only a little, and that was unavoidable. They will soon forget it. They will probably soon forget me. And if anyone says anything I will simply ask how they would have reacted had they known the truth about my family and connections.”

“And you'll be finished down here in a couple of weeks?”

“A few weeks, and weather permitting.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

It was not the first time he had promised Christina something.