

CHAPTER 1



C. 1888

"*Y*ou have to find someone, son. It's rapidly getting to the point where people are going to start to talk..." Lord Littlefield gave his son a worried look.

The son in question took another sip of his drink, a small smile forming on his lips at his father's agitated tone, which had gradually become more and more desperate every time they had this conversation, starting from the time he'd barely graduated from school.

Now, almost ten years later, he knew that the old man was practically apoplectic about the fact that—although they had more than enough money, a prestigious title that went back almost to the Conqueror, as well as land not just here, in England, but on the Continent, where they'd also picked up another few minor titles—he had yet to set his cap for any female.

Not a one.

Bram had gracefully ducked every single debutante who had

been presented to him at every charity event, every tea, and every ball he attended, which was essentially every single eligible female in English upper-crust society. As he was now a ten-year veteran of such things accounted for the fact that he hadn't attended very many of them in the past five years or so. In fact, he'd negotiated a treaty with them such that he allowed his parents to choose two of them per year, which they inevitably chose to sacrifice him to during the Season, so that he would get to see more girls than at any other time.

It wasn't as if he was insecure or shy because he was ugly or even unpleasant to look at. He wasn't spectacularly good looking, either, although he leaned more towards nice looking than not. He was unusually tall at six-foot-four, which intimidated a lot of the smaller women, whom he knew thought him to be too big. He could well understand why, since it seemed that some of them barely made it past his waist. Bram was also brawnier than pretty much any other man in his set as he was an avid sportsman who preferred to keep fit. He thoroughly enjoyed drinking and eating well, but he endeavored to make sure that he didn't run to fat, as his father had, spending a certain amount of time each week at his club, where he swam and played tennis regularly.

He'd inherited his maternal grandfather's mop of unruly dark brown hair that wanted to curl and wave and which staunchly resisted his attempts to tame it, so he refused to worry about it, no matter how much his mother tried to get him to "do something about it".

Aside from shaving his head, he wasn't exactly sure what she meant by that, nor was he much interested in finding out what inevitably outlandish remedy she might have in mind.

They were more than well-to-do enough that he was always impeccably turned out, although sometimes he preferred not to be, especially when he was riding. He was hardly a slave to fashion. He'd spent a bit of time in America, after he'd finished college, and

had come back with what his parents had considered to be bad habits, one of which was riding Western. He kept a complete set of Western gear for the quarter horse he'd brought back with him, too—and tended to ride Liberty in jeans and a chambray shirt, which scandalized his mother thoroughly enough that she procured a solemn promise from him that he would never do so anywhere else or, Heaven forefend, in front of anyone else.

And his taste for American whiskey was at least equally scandalous to his father.

If his parents had any complaint about him, it was that he had a—well-deserved—reputation for being careful with his money, which was not necessarily a bad thing, considering that venerable families were beset by financial difficulties that often originated with their progeny's profligate habits.

He was also unapologetically dominant, although not aggressively so, but he also tended towards the taciturn, which was a combination which many women—even the mothers—found off-putting, especially when it seemed that he was determined to glower down at pretty much anyone who approached him. It was a technique that he had learned early on in this unwanted pursuit and that he employed when he was bored, and he was bored a lot at those kinds of things. Deliberately appearing unapproachable at his size meant that he was usually only surrounded by old family friends who knew him, his own set of close friends and the occasional female who had likely known him since he was in short pants and thus wasn't in the least intimidated by him, but was also most likely already attached, going to be attached soon, or for whom he felt more brotherly towards than romantic in the least.

Most men his size had jovial demeanors so as not to appear too imposing and were often big teddy bears. Bram was a bear, all right—a grizzly.

Dismayed at his son's usual lackadaisical response to his very valid, very weighty concern, his father lowered his voice, as if he

was going to talk treason. "You aren't..." He shifted in his chair uncomfortably. "You're not, well, you don't, uh, prefer the company of, uh..."

"Men, Father?" It didn't help his furious blush that his son began to laugh uproariously at his suggestion. "I will be more than glad to relieve you of that concern, at least."

When he'd recovered, Bram drew a long breath, crossing the room to stand behind his father, looking out the bow window there. "The truth of the matter is—as I have told you before—that I haven't gotten married because I have yet to feel any particular interest in any of the women I have met."

"Well, stop being so damned picky, son, and get on with it! You do not need to be interested in a woman—you just need to marry her! Do you think I'm going to live forever? Look at what happened to poor Alisa's parents! I'm not on my deathbed, but I can't pretend that it's not looming—and, no, I'm not sick." He was heartened to see that at least his son looked a bit worried at his mention of his own death. "But I want a grandson! And I wouldn't object to a couple of granddaughters to spoil silly, either! At this rate, I'm going to be dead before I see you married with children! Your mother is beside herself with worry about the situation—now, pick *someone*. At this point, we'd be glad for almost anyone—and get me some grandchildren on her to fill this house!"

"Yes, Father."

David Littlefield knew that dismissive, put upon tone. He sighed, knowing that, as usual, he had gotten exactly nowhere with his son. As he took a sip of his drink, the young man asked, "On another, entirely unrelated, topic, are we really going to allow that...girl...to live with us?"

His father's eyes narrowed on him. "Why would you be against it? Her parents stood up for us at our wedding. Her father was my best man, her mother—"

"I know, I know, her mother was Mother's maid of honor."

"Yes. They were our close friends for decades, and now their

daughter—having been orphaned by her parents' terrible, tragic accident—needs us. Kent and Marjorie had asked us, long ago if we would take in their daughter if anything should happen to them, and we agreed. We will honor our obligation, and she will become a member of this family."

"Hmm." Bram sounded wholly unimpressed. "You must admit that there is the possibility that—especially as she is an American of—somewhat less than pristine status—she could cause some sort of scandal that might negatively affect the family."

"You don't even know her—I think you met her once when you were about eighteen. She must've been all of five or so. That was more than a decade ago. How can you dislike someone and cast such aspersions on her character when you don't know her?"

"The only thing I remember about her was that she was a little brat, not that I spent much time around her. I don't dislike her. I dislike the situation, Father. It seems fraught with nothing but pitfalls...I don't know. I don't mean to sound inhospitable—"

David interrupted caustically, "Oh, I bet you will find a way to do so, anyway; but go on."

Unfortunately, his father was long since immune to his glare. "Aside from the fact that we are opening ourselves up to potential disgrace, we're also now going to be responsible for her upkeep, her debut, her education—I would think she'd need a finishing school at the very least, since she's American—and eventually—hopefully as quickly as possible—her trousseau and her dowry. If I recall correctly, her parents weren't all that well-off, but as a member of this family, she will have to maintain a certain standard, which will come out of our pockets."

"My pocket, you mean?" his father asked pointedly.

His son blushed slightly. "Yes, sir," he said, although he hardly sounded chastised in the least and indeed hadn't since he was about eight or so, regardless of his father's efforts to curb his behavior, which hadn't been destructive or nasty or anything. He was just

stubborn and determined to have his own way, and he would not be corrected.

Well, he would be, but nothing would come of it, and now he was well beyond correction.

And, the truth was that Lord Littlefield had long since turned over the control of the family finances to his son, who had quite a head for making money, something he had demonstrated even before he'd gotten his degree, using his stallions to create a veritable dynasty of offspring, at almost two hundred quid a go. By applying his own talents, as well as those he had learned at school, Bram had grown the family fortune to nearly double—literally—in the six or so years since he had taken the reins.

"And all this for a young woman who is not even a blood relative."

"She is, as far as your mother is concerned, and she will not be dissuaded."

Sighing at his son's intransigence, Lord Littlefield leaned heavily on his cane as he got up from behind his desk, causing Bram to frown even more darkly, watching him shuffle his way to the door. What the older man had said about his possible death, as well as the vagaries of life as illustrated by the unexpected deaths of his good friends, made him realize quite starkly that his father was an old man. He'd never really noticed—or rather, allowed himself to accept that fact—until now. And what was almost more distressing for him to realize was that his father was right to speak to him as he had, as much as he was reluctant to admit it.

David stopped at the door, opening it but turning back to his son. "I gave them my word, Bram. That has to mean something."

Bram bowed his head in respect. "Yes, Father, it does. When will the pesky little baggage be here?"

"Within the next week, I believe."

"Thank you, Father. And, in regards to what we were talking about before, I shall endeavor to do as you asked."

The older man looked stunned, and Bram smiled.

It was the first time he'd ever agreed with his father in any way except sarcastically about that particular topic, but then, he'd never really considered his father's mortality in the equation, preferring to put that eventuality off into the future somewhere, when it might not be as far away as he'd like to think.

His father bowed his head. "Thank you, son."

Bram turned back to the window and stared out of it, brooding, and consuming much more of his father's good brandy before turning in.



"OH MY WORD, this is certainly a beautiful house!"

"It's a manor, actually, Alisa. Belden Manor. Some of it was built in the fifteenth century."

She hated to seem like a rube, but she couldn't help herself. Her head swiveled quickly back and forth. There were so many beautiful things to take in—the architecture, the furniture and paintings—it was all just gorgeous!

Alisa actually allowed herself to stand in the middle of the large, impressive entrance hall, not even bothering to take off her coat or anything, and simply twirl once, slowly, as her eyes scanned up and down, trying to take it all in.

Unfortunately, she nearly ended up on the ground as, while she was facing the front door, she stepped on something—two somethings, actually—that were unexpectedly lumpy on the floor and lost her footing.

Luckily, the owner of the two large somethings, which happened to be his big feet, was quick on them, reaching out and literally lifting her off the floor with stunning ease and placing her back onto hers, setting her down just in front of him, then letting her go as if he was worried she had contaminated him in some way.

Although what she really wanted to do was turn and run, she forced herself to ignore those impulses, meeting dark eyes that

glared down at her in a wholly unfriendly manner and bravely keeping hers there. "Oh, dear, I am so sorry to have stepped on you! Please accept my sincere apologies!"

"You would do well to watch where you step, miss," he intoned sternly.

Alisa swallowed hard. "I shall certainly endeavor to do so in the future."

"My lord," he prompted when she would have turned away from him.

"M-my lord," she dutifully repeated, taking a step away from him, but not before checking where his feet were in relation to hers.

That is how Lady Littlefield found them. "I see you two have—"

Alisa's yelp of surprise interrupted her as the butler, Daniels, sought to help her remove her coat, which was a courtesy she was not used to. Her cheeks blushed brightly. "I'm so sorry. I'm a bit nervous, I guess."

Lady Littlefield was looking loving and patient, perhaps even a bit amused around the edges, as she had been since collecting her, bless her heart, but the enormous man standing next to her—Lord Whatever—whose toes she had most certainly crushed, was most distinctly not.

Although she knew it was too much to wish for, she certainly hoped that he was not the older woman's son. She didn't fancy having him glowering at her across the breakfast table every morning.

"Please relax as best you can—I know it's a new environment for you, but we want you to feel comfortable in your new home." She drew Alisa closer to her side. "Bram, this is Alisa Thurgood. Alisa, this is my son, Bram."

Sighing internally at her bad luck, she put her hand out to him, but he turned and bowed low over it, kissing the back instead of shaking it. "Miss Thurgood, I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

He certainly didn't sound very delighted.

"I am very happy to meet you, my lord." Alisa wondered if she should have curtsied, but then, considering her lack of grace, he'd most likely have to rescue her before she hit the floor again, and she wasn't at all sure she could depend on that gentlemanly impulse from him again.

"Oh, I don't think we need be that formal. I do so hope you'll come to see us as your family, as I did your dear late parents. You should call me Charlotte and Lord Littlefield, David, and Bram here—"

"Lord Beldon."

"Don't be ridiculous, Bram. That's much too formal."

His mother was already on to another topic, missing the way he caught Alisa's eye and said quite deliberately, "No, it is not, Mother. That's the American coming out in you, but we are in England."

Lady Littlefield dismissed her son's tendency to be a stickler for protocol. "Oh, pshaw!"

But Alisa got the point. "Lord Belden" it was, although she wondered why his father was a Littlefield and he was a Belden, but she wasn't going to understand the intricacies of the British nobility in five minutes, and she certainly wasn't going to ask him about it, so she let it go.

"Why don't you go upstairs, Alisa. My maid, Hollis, will take you to your room so that you can rest before dinner."

"Thank you very much, Lady—Charlotte."

"If you would follow me, miss?" Hollis asked, heading for the stairs.

But Alisa resisted going upstairs for the moment. She stood in front of the two of them—one warm and loving and the other distinctly not, and said what she wanted to—what she knew she had to—before she lost the nerve to do so. "I just want to say how thankful I am that you've brought me to your lovely home and into your lovely family." She was determined to reserve judgment about

the son, regardless of how unwelcoming he was being presently. "I shall do my best not to make you regret it."

Charlotte hugged her gently and warmly. "We are very happy to have you here, my dear, and we hope that you'll be very happy. Now, go up and lie down. If you need anything, just pull the cord by the bed and one of the maids will come see to you. Dinner is at nine, but we usually have drinks beforehand in the drawing room."

"Thank you. You're too kind."

She hadn't thought that she was tired, but when she got upstairs, Hollis having drawn the curtains and turned down the bed, she was surprised to find that she drifted quickly off to sleep.

Although she hadn't had any problems getting to sleep, when she woke, all of the worries she'd had about being here had come home to roost. She was a simple girl—her parents were well to do, but certainly to nowhere near the extent that she was currently experiencing.

Alisa didn't think that even her nicest dresses—even those she would wear after her period of mourning—would suffice for how grand this place was. She was already feeling like the poor relation, and she wasn't sure how long she could stand it, not that she really had any other choice. Her parents' other friends and her relatives were quite eager to offer their sympathies, but only Lord and Lady Littlefield had offered to take her in, and Lord Littlefield had handled both the money her parents had left her as well as the sale of the house, so there was literally nowhere for her to go back to.

There was a soft rap at the door as she sat up. "Yes?"

A young girl appeared, dressed in a maid's outfit and carrying an armload of her clothes. "Lady Littlefield sent me, miss. I'm Evie. I'm usually the head housemaid, but I've had some training as a lady's maid, and Lady Littlefield hoped that I might be able to help you get dressed for dinner."

"Oh, thank you, Evie—I would love to have your help in anything and everything!"

The girl went through her dresses as she hung them up and Alisa tried not to notice the disappointed look on the maid's face.

"Well, I guess this one will have to do," she said, holding up the best mourning dress she owned.

"I'm sorry—I guess I'll need to get some new clothes if I'm to stay here."

Evie smiled. "I think Lady Littlefield already has you scheduled in at Madame Yvonne's for some time next month. That's what I heard, anyway. She makes the most divine dresses, and it must've cost his lordship a pretty penny for her to get you in there so soon. She's got bookings—mind, of only the finest ladies—over six months out, I heard."

She held the garment out for her to step into. It was a plain, deep mauve dress, as she was still in mourning for the next few months, that didn't do much for her fair complexion. It washed her out badly, but Evie did what she could, wrestling her unrepentantly uncooperative hair up in a fashion that both compensated and complimented and was much better than she'd ever been able to achieve on her own. She had decided to eschew jewelry during this period and was wearing plain kid shoes that had been dyed to match her dress.

Alisa was surprised to see that, when she came down, an older man in formal dress was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. "Little Alisa, you have grown up to be such a beauty!"

"Lord Littlefield?" she queried, not quite sure whether it was him or not.

"Yes, my dear." He refused her offer of a hand and instead kissed her in the Continental fashion—on both cheeks—hugging her gently. Then he offered her his arm and escorted her into the drawing room, which was a large, magnificently appointed room that somehow still managed to seem somewhat cozy with its groupings of beautiful chairs and couches that were designed to encourage conversation.

Charlotte was already in her usual seat in the corner of the

couch furthest from the fire, her son sitting opposite her in one of the wing backed chairs.

He rose immediately when she entered the room. Lord Littlefield brought her directly over to his son and began to introduce them.

"We've already met, Father," Lord Belden allowed, as if it had been an entirely distasteful affair for him.

"Oh, I hadn't realized that."

"I told you just before you left to meet her in the great hall—you're getting so forgetful, David." To Alisa, Charlotte said, "Come sit by me, darling," patting the cushion next to her on the couch.

Only too happy not to spend any more time near the angry giant, Alisa did as she was asked. Aware that she was the object of his scrutiny—and that he obviously found her lacking in every possible department—she found it hard to concentrate on what Charlotte was saying, although she seemed to be able to get by with a smile and a nod.

But she grew increasingly nervous about her ability to fit in with these people, however welcoming some of them were.

And it didn't help when Daniels announced that dinner would be served, and Lady Littlefield rose, taking her husband's arm, leaving the glowering giant to reluctantly offer her his, after which he did nothing to stem his enormous strides nor did he lower his elbow, so that she was forced to practically jog alongside him or give up and be dragged, as well as keep her hand practically level with her head in order to reach his crooked elbow.

She wouldn't have been surprised if he'd pulled her chair out from under her when he seated her, but he didn't. Luckily, the dining room table was big enough that she could almost get lost in it, letting the family converse with themselves without comment as she quietly consumed what was undoubtedly the best food she'd ever had in her life.

Although her mother had done her best to teach her good manners, she knew she was sorely lacking there, too, so she did her

best to hang back when each new course was served, so that she could watch what they all did and mimic it.

"Alisa, dear, how are you feeling after your rest?"

"I'm feeling well, thank you, La-Charlotte."

The older woman turned to her husband and said, "I've told Alisa that we're her family now and that she should call us all by our Christian names."

Her husband seemed fine with that, although Alisa didn't miss how Lord Belden choked on that particular pronouncement.

"Perhaps a bit of water would help with your throat, Lord Belden," she offered in a slightly false, solicitous tone.

The older two were deep in conversation, and his voice was deliberately deep and soft when he warned, "As long as you don't forget that is who I am to you and that I have not given you permission to use my Christian name, Miss Thurgood, then I think my throat will be just fine, as will your *derrière*."

She blushed brightly, knowing that he had just said something that he should be severely scolded for, at least—called out for, if she'd had a beau—but nothing happened, of course, except that she was forced to consider just what it was that he'd threatened her with. Was he actually saying that, if she slipped at some time and called him Bram, he was going to *spank* her?

It didn't bear thinking of! Something like that should never be said in polite conversation amongst anyone, much less between a gentleman and a lady, although, apparently, that was not a tenet of etiquette to which the lofty Lord Belden subscribed, nor did he consider her a lady, obviously.

Alisa set about ignoring him, since there really was little else she could do about his abominable behavior. She hadn't set herself an easy task, though, since he was seated directly across from her, and she could feel his disapproving gaze on her at different points during the long meal, although she assiduously refused to look at him for the rest of the evening—even when the hostess announced that, as they were dining *enfamille*, they would not split tonight.

The four of them withdrew to the drawing room again, where the ladies enjoyed a cup of tea and the men their port. They also lit up cigars, asking if anyone minded and looking directly at her. Alisa knew that they sometimes gave her breathing problems, but she was not willing to inconvenience him, in particular. He already hated her quite enough, although she had no idea how she'd managed to achieve that, since she'd just arrived.

She intended, instead, to retire early, although she got involved in a conversation with Charlotte over going to the dressmaker's, reiterating a stance that she had espoused during their carriage ride home from the station—that she didn't want to be a bother or cost them a lot of money or time.

Bram, who was standing talking with his father, felt his ears prick up at that interesting tidbit of information.

The smoke became quite thick and strong, however, and it caught up with her quickly, until she practically had to run from the room—unable to even excuse herself—to go outside, into the cool night air.

"What is it?" Charlotte, when she finally caught up with her, was horrified that she seemed to be having a problem breathing.

To her horror, everyone seemed to have appeared behind her. Even Daniels had followed them all out. "Fetch Dr. Hayes," Lady Littlefield commanded.

"No!" There was a long pause as she attempted to drag the cool, clean air into her uncooperative lungs until she could speak again. "A strong, hot cup of coffee, p-please."

She was surprised to hear that it was Bram who commanded Daniels to get her the coffee but also sent someone to get the doctor.

Between labored breaths, she kept repeating how sorry she was to have ruined her first evening there, saying how badly they must think of her and beginning to cry.

Charlotte was in full motherly mode, not having been able to

mother Bram in some time. Even Bram told her not to worry about it. He was actually the most help out of all of them.

He literally scrunched himself down so that he can see her face where she had her shoulders hunched over. When he spoke to her this time, his tone was unlike anything she'd heard from him, soft and soothing and gently encouraging. "No crying, little one. You know it makes things worse. Think of pleasant things, instead. Do you like to ride?"

She refused to answer him, panting raggedly, trying to catch her breath.

In a sharper tone, he practically commanded, "Alisa, answer my question. You don't have to speak—simply nod yes or no."

She turned her head towards him, snarling—as much as she could when she hadn't much air to work with, "Why is it?" Pant. "That I'm Alisa." Breath. "To you, but..." Wheeze. "You are Lord Belden..." Breath. "To me?"

She swallowed hard and drew as deep a breath as she could at the moment to continue as fervently as she could—which was not very, "I do not give you permission to use my first name, Lord Almighty Belden."

Realizing that she might well have allowed her tongue to sign her death warrant, she was nonetheless amazed when he threw back his head and laughed at her breathless little rebellion. "Touché, little termagant. But you still haven't answered my question. Just one word will do."

"Yes," she breathed.

"Good. We have a fine stable full of horses for you to ride when you're feeling up to it. But I want you to try to slow your breathing. I know you're having trouble with it, but neither crying nor panicking will help. Try to concentrate on my voice and breath with me, slowly, in a calm, measured fashion, in and out."

At first, she wasn't even trying, and he leaned forward. "Do you remember my implied threat if you called me by my first name?"

Well, the same thing applies here, I'm afraid, if you refuse to obey me now."

Now she was blushing and wheezing, but he'd gotten her attention, as well as her acquiescence. This time, when he breathed in, so did she, mimicking him as best she could.

And he was full of praise for her efforts, encouraging her to try to relax and think of nothing else but his voice and her own breathing.

Bram heard his mother comment to his father sotto voce, "I had forgotten that Timothy Garvey—Lord Stancliff's son—had the same kind of breathing problem while they were growing up together, and Bram was always able to help him with it, too."

When the coffee arrived, hot and black and strong, he held it out to her. "Sip this. It'll help."

She turned to him, looking at him as if he was one step above a dolt. "I know. I asked for it."

Again, he laughed heartily, still guiding her to breath with him in between sips.

The doctor arrived near the end of the attack, when she was standing straight again, encouraged by Bram, who had offered his hand when she'd decided to uncurl herself, and, although she'd not availed herself of his assistance, at which he was not particularly surprised.

She was still wheezing some, but in much less respiratory distress than she had been, and on her third cup of coffee, the effects of which had helped her breathing but left her trembling. Bram was near her, but he didn't hover, giving her plenty of room to breathe, but keeping a close eye on her at the same time.

"I'd still like to examine you, if I could," the doctor proclaimed.

"I don't think—" Alisa began, about to tell him that she was fine, not wanting to cause any more trouble than she already had.

But before she got any further, she found herself swung up into the giant's arms as his long legs ate up the distance to her room.

"I don't need to be seen by the doctor!" she hissed up at him.

"Yes, you do," he returned implacably. At the pace he was going, they were going to beat everyone, including the physician, to her room.

Bram motioned for a hall boy to follow them in and left the door open behind him, too, for propriety's sake, as he leaned down to arrange several pillows against the headboard before gently placing her there in an upright position.

"Thank you, Lord Belden."

He almost grinned down at her, as much as he didn't want to. "You're welcome, Miss Thurgood."

"But I still don't want to see the doctor. There's no need for the fuss—or the expense. I don't want to be a bother. I'm embarrassed enough as it is to have done this—and on my first night here, too. What must your parents think of me?"

At that, Bram leaned down so that he knew she would be the only person who heard what he whispered, in a tone that brooked no disobedience. "You are going to be examined by the good doctor if I have to hold you down on the bed, myself, in order for him to do so."

Her shocked look only made him raise an eyebrow at her, as if he wished she would dare him to do just that entirely uncivilized thing so that he could prove to her that he most certainly would do exactly as he'd said.

"And as for what my parents think of you, you're an answer to their prayers. Mother's, in particular." Alisa looked up at him skeptically. "She's in Heaven. She always wanted a daughter," he explained. "And my father—once he met me—began to agree with her, I think."

She almost wanted to laugh at his self-deprecation but managed to stop herself from doing so.

And then his parents and the doctor all poured into the room, along with Daniels and the girl who was probably tending her, and the almost pleasant moment was lost.

"Miss Thurgood is quite worried about being a bother and

incurring any expense," he announced to the room. "I was just doing my best to reassure her that she need have no concerns in either quarter."

His father wore a surprised expression upon hearing that, but Charlotte looked genuinely horrified at what her son had told them, coming over to Alisa's bedside to hug her, then hold her hand. "Oh, my dear, you must never worry about that. You are the precious daughter of my very dear friend, and I—we all..." she said, although Alisa knew that she was including one more person than she ought to. "We all would do anything for you."

"Lady Littlefield, would you like to remain for the examination, please?" the doctor asked, eager to examine his patient, despite how recovered she appeared to be.

"Would that be all right with you, Alisa?"

"Of course."

The others took their cue and exited the room to wait in the hallway. Lord Littlefield's son managed to amaze him again by appearing more than somewhat concerned and actually pacing a bit as they waited.

A little while later, the doctor invited everyone back into her room, telling them that she was doing well and that she should be fine. He did caution the young lady against staying in closed rooms with anyone who smoked.

"But, Dr. Hayes, sometimes it bothers me, and sometimes it doesn't," Alisa pointed out.

"Better to remove yourself than to chance it, child," Bram interjected sternly before the doctor could respond.

He nodded at Bram. "That's quite correct, my lord. I've left her something in case she has problems sleeping—the coffee has made her understandably jittery, although she tells me she's unlikely to avail herself of it, it's there, regardless."

Alisa's eyes somehow found Bram's, at that, and he was giving her an expectant look that she was already beginning to detest, as if

he was going to try to mandate that she use the medicine, so she diligently avoided looking at him again.

Everyone thanked the doctor for his efforts—Alisa, the most profusely—as they began to shuffle out of the room.

And then she said something that had everyone turning to look back at her in stunned silence. "Would you please send the bill to me, Doctor?"