

One

1806

Manali House, six miles east of Bath, England

‘Miss Fripp, I was hoping I might find you here.’

The pencil fell to Mary’s lap, and she lifted her gaze to the silhouette, blocking the sun. Miss Fripp? Her husband, James, was her senior by more years than she cared to count. She didn’t correct the gentleman standing before her in the garden—many had made the mistake of believing her to be James’s daughter, not his wife.

Shading her eyes with the flat of her hand, she admired the man’s neatly fitted moss-coloured velvet tailcoat, his brilliant white cravat and, in the sudden change from shadow to light, the planes of his face came into focus—high cheekbones, a long, somewhat sharp nose and startling hazel-green eyes that glinted in the sunlight. His skin wore a healthy glow yet there was a weathered look about him of a man who spent a lot of time out of doors. She detected a musky, very masculine scent.

‘Francis Howard Greenway.’ For some unknown reason he emphasised the name *Howard* before making a sweeping bow, a

heavy lock of his reddish hair falling over his high forehead. 'At your service, Miss. I've been requested by Captain Fripp to quote on repairs and renovations to the house and stables.'

She leapt to her feet. He had? She'd rather hoped James would discuss the proposal with her before he made a move. He was aware of her interest in architecture and her feelings for her home, the house Papa had built. In a surprising mood of bonhomie, spurred no doubt by the quantity of brandy he had consumed, James had told her of his intention to have the house and stables 'brought up to scratch'. He'd discovered a local architect who had studied under the famous architect John Nash in London and believed he could negotiate a reduced price. He'd failed to mention he'd already made a start. 'You've spoken with my husband?'

A hint of colour stole across Mr Greenway's cheeks. 'I beg your pardon, Mrs Fripp. Unfortunately, Captain Fripp appears to have forgotten our appointment and I took it upon myself to appraise the house and its surrounds.'

How unusual. Mudd, stable master and general factotum, rarely approved any unescorted visitor, and since Papa's death he'd extended his role as groom to that of guardian. He must have taken James into town because Mudd wouldn't allow anyone to roam the grounds alone.

Mr Greenway lifted his chin and surveyed the vista. 'I thought perhaps I'd find a vantage spot to survey the house.'

She'd sat and listened to James's grandiose ideas but when he'd spoken of tacking a new wing on the side of Papa's simple Palladian country house to accommodate additional reception and gaming rooms, she'd made the foolish mistake of lamenting the resulting loss of symmetry. She'd decided the addition of a portico might balance James's proposed additions. Her gaze darted to her sketchpad, still lying beneath the tree where it had fallen

when she'd jumped up, and she bent to retrieve her drawing but Mr Greenway moved faster. 'May I?'

She nodded and with damp palms waited while he studied her sketch. 'It would seem we are of like mind. The house is a delightful example of Palladian architecture, influenced by Inigo Jones, no doubt. It would be a great shame to detract from the classic features, such harmony, clarity and order—and, as you have so rightly shown, perfect symmetry. The addition of the portico is a touch of genius ...' With her sketchpad dangling from his fingers he strolled off, examining the building from various angles.

Mind afire, she scampered after him, skipping steps to match his determined stride.

Finally she caught up when he settled on the grassy knoll overlooking the house, her sketchpad still in hand. He'd pulled out a measuring compass and stubby pencil and with a few deft strokes adjusted the height of the portico.

A feather-light breeze tickled her skin, and she bit back a curl of annoyance. She should be pleased at his interest, but a sense of violation overtook her. Stepping closer, she studied his handiwork.

'Do you think perhaps ...?' She bit back her words. Who was she to question a man who had studied under John Nash?

'There!' He gave a satisfied grunt and held up her sketchpad. 'I believe that has corrected your errors.'

'Errors?' No, simply a different vision. Her skin prickled again—definitely not caused by the breeze.

'Indeed. There are certain principles which should be adhered to as laid down by Sir William Chambers, architect to their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and Princess Dowager of Wales. Anyone who purports to have an interest in architecture should study his treatise.'

Her shoulders dropped and her foolish pride slipped. Papa's library contained a great many books on architecture, some of

which he'd brought back from India. It was an interest he'd developed over the years, and one they'd shared, but she'd never heard of Chambers. 'There is a manual?'

'Not so much a manual, a treatise laying down the basic principles of architecture. I have found it invaluable.' He pocketed his measuring compass, patting to ensure it was securely lodged.

'How I wish I could pursue my own interests.' The words popped out of her mouth before she had time to think. She must have taken him by surprise because he flinched, tipped up his face, and deep in his eyes she caught a momentary flicker of something unexpected—quite what she couldn't be sure.

'You have talent, a talent that should be fostered. You should travel, expand your view of the world.'

'I am a married woman, Mr Greenway. My husband requires that I remain at home.' Ready to dance to his pipe and drum. Perhaps matters might be different if she had fulfilled her obligations and provided the necessary heir and spare, but in the three years since their marriage she'd failed. She hadn't managed to conceive, and James was rapidly losing patience.

'Why should marriage prevent you from furthering your interest in architecture?' He held her gaze, and her reply flew away with the birds.

He wouldn't understand. Papa had determined her life: her home, her education and the arrangement of her marriage, and she'd blindly accepted first his authority and, after his passing, that of the husband he had chosen for her.

Mr Greenway's gaze narrowed, his intense scrutiny making her cheeks burn. 'There is nothing to prevent a woman displaying an interest in architecture. Besides, this is your home, is it not? And isn't it a woman's role to manage the household?'

'The internal functioning perhaps.' Truth be told, not even that. Mrs Rudge, the housekeeper and cook James had employed,

ruled the house with her wooden spoon and barely tolerated any interference. ‘Not the building or repairs to the house. That’s why Captain Fripp has engaged you.’

‘Tosh and nonsense. There are plenty of women who have an interest in architecture.’ Her cheeks grew warm as his face broke into the most engaging smile. ‘Lady Elizabeth Wilbraham is but one example—the first to pave the way. She was responsible for the design and fit-out of her own home, Wotton House, in Buckinghamshire.’

Mary’s heart leapt. How could she have forgotten? Papa had attributed the beautiful sash windows he’d installed in the library to Lady Wilbraham’s designs. ‘I wish I could have met her.’

She shook her head at her stupidity. A peeress wouldn’t have entertained a woman of her standing, the country daughter of a retired sea captain. And it was beside the point.

‘She passed away almost one hundred years ago,’ she added.

‘But her genius remains—Wotton House is a perpetual reminder of the lasting value of classical architecture. Have you not visited London and seen the work of Sir Christopher Wren? Lady Wilbraham was his sponsor.’

‘I have never travelled beyond Gloucestershire.’

‘A matter that should be remedied. Your husband may have mentioned that I spent several years in London studying under Nash—my designs have been exhibited at the Royal Academy. I, too, prefer the neoclassical style.’

‘Neoclassical ...’

‘Grand scale and simple geometric forms, the use of Greco-Roman motifs and proportions, a dramatic use of columns, rather as you have here.’ He tapped the page in her sketchbook then handed it back. ‘I must take my leave. I will submit my designs to Captain Fripp. My brothers, John and Olive, will undertake the necessary repairs and structural improvements required before

work can progress. In the meantime, work on your drawings and we can compare our thoughts. Good afternoon, ma'am.' He replaced his hat, straightened his moss-green coat and with a long, loping gait disappeared down the carriageway.



The days passed in a haze as Mary scoured the shelves holding Papa's architectural books and found references to Christopher Wren, another west countryman as it turned out, but no mention of Lady Wilbraham. She found plenty of tomes revealing the splendours of Ancient Rome, Athens and the Mughal Empire, but nothing like the book by Chambers that Mr Greenway had mentioned. She thought of little else in the intervening days, while she worked on her plan for the house, filled with a longing for Mr Greenway's opinion. James remained absent, in London according to Mudd, and the Greenway brothers did not appear to begin the repairs.

Summer had come early to the hills and the cerulean sky played host to scudding clouds that sent shadows skittering across the grassy slopes. Knowing James was away, Mary made no effort and simply pulled on a faded Indian muslin day dress and tucked her heavy hair into a sloppily wound chignon then snatched up her sketchpad and headed for the knoll above the house, the scent of the grass sweet beneath her slippered feet.

She threw herself down, her back against the gnarled oak tree, and opened her sketchpad. Mr Greenway's corrections had thrown her design into a completely different light, changed not only the perspective of her drawing but also her vision. With the addition of four columns the symmetry was restored. She squinted into the distance, holding her pencil up to the gauge the proportions. A bubble of happiness swelled in her breast as she imagined the reality of her design. How she wished she could share it with Mr Greenway.

‘It seems my suggestions appealed.’

As if conjured from her imagination, Mr Greenway stood before her once again. Cheeks burning, she shot to her feet. ‘Good morning, Mr Greenway.’ She made a fumbled attempt at a curtsy and managed to tangle her foot in her hem and lurched away, leaning heavily against the tree to restore her balance.

‘I had no intention of taking you by surprise. I called out but you were engrossed in your drawing.’ He bent and picked up her sketchpad, and his long finger traced her redrawn lines of the columns. ‘A masterful move. The contract I have agreed with Captain Fripp is for a new reception room but the repairs to the structural damage and undermining of the foundations could well be combined with some new features. A portico such as this would give the building a greater presence.’

Dragging her gaze from his hand, she looked up at the flecks of gold dancing in his eyes. The creases at the corners deepened as a slow smile lifted his lips. He really was a most attractive man.

‘I was on my way to the house in search of you.’

She brought her hands together in anticipation. She couldn’t wait to see what he had in mind for Manali.

He lifted his satchel from his shoulder and knelt to unbuckle the straps. ‘I wanted to show you this.’ He sank down, legs stretched in front of him, and patted the grass. ‘I thought you might be interested.’ He unrolled a large piece of paper and laid it down on the grass, his workworn hand splayed across one corner, holding it flat.

Not a plan for Manali but something even more interesting.

A great baronial castle. Its castellated battlements, carved brick chimneys and casement windows spoke of safety, security, power and luxury—she’d never seen anything so beautiful. The legends and myths Papa had read to her as a child filled her mind—a high-born medieval knight carrying his lady’s favour into battle,

the great Mughal empire, bejewelled maharajahs astride painted elephants ruling unchallenged, their every wish a command. She let out a long breath and sneaked a look at Mr Greenway from under her lashes.

He'd put a blade of grass between his teeth and turned his eyes to the sky. 'The plans for Manali are not yet prepared. These are for the restoration of Thornbury Castle. They were displayed at the Royal Academy and were well received.' He threw back his shoulders and smiled, pride lighting his handsome face.

'What a great honour.'

'I must admit to a familial connection on my mother's side. Charles Howard, the eleventh Duke of Norfolk, is the present incumbent. He is most interested in my ideas.' He smoothed his hand over the paper then turned his head, his chin tilted and a smile curling his full lips.

Charles Howard, the Duke of Norfolk ... so that was perhaps why he had placed such emphasis on his middle name when they'd first met—a familial connection. All so very complicated and not dreadfully important unless it perhaps oiled the wheels of commerce.

'It may be a little presumptuous, but would you like to visit?'

His question drew her attention from her musing.

'I am certain it could be arranged. The castle nestles on the northern edge of Thornbury village not twelve miles north. It was originally built during the reign of Henry VIII in the Tudor style and was one of the most magnificent buildings of its time.' He let out an audible breath. 'The home of kings, queens and dukes over the centuries, one of the last medieval castles to be built in England. Let me make some enquiries.' A strange challenge flickered in the depths of his flecked eyes. 'And in the meantime, I shall arrange a loan of a copy of Chambers's work. Would that be to your liking?'

Two

Mary waited in vain for Mr Greenway to fulfil his promise of an invitation to Thornbury Castle or the loan of Chambers's book. When James reappeared after his latest visit to London, she regaled him with her plans for the house and told him of Mr Greenway's visits. The whole idea of the portico and the addition to the stables filled her with excitement. 'We have decided that a portico would ...'

'We have decided ...' James spluttered, his already florid face turning an alarming damson colour, suggesting that by expressing her opinion she'd reached beyond his understanding. 'I think you have forgotten your role, madam—your one and only role—which you should concentrate on fulfilling.'

She batted away a rising flush of heat and inhaled, determined not to rise to the bait. She could hardly fulfil her *role* if James wasn't at home. Better to ignore his comment. 'Mr Greenway was acting on your instructions and, in your absence, spoke with me. He believes the house requires certain structural improvements before any additions can be made. He has been commissioned to undertake the restoration of Thornbury Castle.' James would have

to be impressed. 'His plans were exhibited at the Royal Academy in London.'

James's fist slammed down on the table, making the plates jump. His glass jumped too, spilling a red stain across Mrs Rudge's pristine white tablecloth. 'You, madam, have surpassed your position. I have already communicated my intentions to Mr Greenway but after this outrageous liberty he has taken I am tempted to terminate our agreement.'

Mary swallowed her reply, knowing from experience James was well past rational discussion. The man Papa had entrusted her to, the man she had willingly married, had hoodwinked them both. He was interested in nothing more than the bounty Papa had handed him on a plate.

'Go and prepare yourself.'

A stone lodged in her stomach. She knew full well the way the evening would progress. Another painful, unfruitful grope beneath her nightgown—she'd shut her eyes and wait for him to finish, consoling herself with the thought that it was her role, as his wife, a role women had fulfilled since time immemorial.



One morning when the leaves had begun to turn and the garden became a riot of glorious autumn colour, James left, citing a business appointment and his intention to spend an extended period in Bath.

Mary dutifully waited at the front door until James heaved himself into the saddle, dug in his heels and disappeared in a cloud of dust. The prospect of the peace and quiet that always descended on the house when he left calmed her soul. She had no idea when he would return but she planned to make the most of every moment.

She fastened her bonnet and set off for a morning walk with a bounce in her step, intending to follow the carriageway and take the path into the woods where the oak trees would be turning. Maybe there'd be mushrooms. Mrs Rudge made a beautiful creamy mushroom fricassee which went particularly well with a roasted chicken.

When she rounded the bend a stocky, tousle-headed young man with a ruddy complexion came into view, wrangling a large package wrapped in oilskin. Hand-delivered packages were a rarity, as James insisted Mudd should pick up the mail when he went to town to collect the supplies Mrs Rudge required for the house. It was just one other matter that Mary apparently hadn't the wit to manage despite the fact that she'd handled the task quite successfully prior to Papa's passing. 'Can I help you?'

The youth's face split into a wide grin. 'You Miss Fripp?' He eased the package down and doffed his cloth cap. 'This is for you; the gaffer asked me to drop it by.'

'Gaffer?'

'Greenway. He said I was to make sure I handed it directly to you but it's a bit heavy so maybe I should carry it up to the house.'

'That would be perfect, but how do you know I am Mrs Fripp?'

'Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, Mr Greenway said Miss Fripp. Said I'd know you straight off because of your shiny chestnut hair and lovely smile.' A hint of colour stained the top of his ears.

'Did he indeed? That's very kind of him. Come this way.' Masking a smile, she led the way to the front door. 'Follow me.' She hovered for a moment in the hallway, unsure where to ask him to leave the package. If James returned unexpectedly and came across something from Mr Greenway, he would no doubt be more than unimpressed. Only a few days before he left for Bath, he'd complained that he had received a letter demanding payment

for the plans Mr Greenway had drawn up. In a fit of rage James had threatened to cancel their arrangement. Unless she was very much mistaken, the package contained the book Mr Greenway had promised to lend her.

‘In here.’ She threw open the door to the library, a place she loved, her favourite place and one of the few rooms in the house James rarely entered, preferring the isolation of his study. A room smelling of leather and antiquity, the walls lined with shelves sagging under the weight of Papa’s vast collection. Religious tracts, atlases, and books on natural history, archaeology and architecture filled every space, and between the two sash windows sat the magnificent inlaid table Papa had brought home from India.

Papa’s books, his most treasured possessions, were now hers. They were a link, an almost living, breathing connection, to happier times when he had been the centre of her universe and she his—his precious gift, he’d liked to call her. Pushing aside her sketches and pencils, she made space for the package. ‘Would you put it here, please.’

The boy thumped it down, dusted off his hands then reached for the leather thong securing the oilcloth.

‘I can manage, thank you.’ She didn’t want to share the pleasure of this unusual occurrence. She clasped her damp hands to her chest then gestured to the door. He didn’t move, but just raised his eyebrows, a look of expectation on his face.

He wanted a token of thanks. She pulled open the central table drawer and ran her hand around the inside hoping to find a farthing or even a halfpenny. She usually had no need of money because she rarely left the estate. If she took the young man down to the kitchen Mrs Rudge’s insatiable curiosity would be aroused and before she knew it James would be questioning her about the book and ranting about outrageous liberties.

‘Stay here a moment.’ She slipped through the door, down the hallway and into the cloying darkness of James’s study. The reek of brandy and cigars hung, turning her stomach, and she swallowed, resisting the temptation to throw back the heavy curtains and clear the air. This was no longer her domain, no longer the room where she and Papa had spent so many happy hours.

As luck would have it, a pile of coins sat on top of the desk. She snatched up a shilling and slipped out, closing the door firmly behind her, then took several deep breaths to settle her roiling stomach.

When she returned to the library she found the young man, cap in hand and saucer-eyed, studying the ceiling-high shelves. ‘You read all those?’

‘No, not even half of them. They belonged to my father. He was a great collector.’

She held out the shilling. ‘Thank you for your trouble.’

His eyes bulged. ‘That’s a bit much, ma’am.’

‘Not at all, the package was heavy.’ Besides, she hadn’t anything smaller and she doubted James would miss it. He had a cavalier approach to money, and with Papa’s wealth in his control, no need to wonder where the next shilling would come from. He spent far more betting at the racetrack. She wanted the boy to leave, and could hardly resist ripping the package open. ‘Take it and off you go. You can find your own way out, can’t you?’

The cheeky devil winked, pocketed the shilling, rammed his cloth cap back on his head and took off without closing the door, no doubt worried she’d change her mind.

A series of firmly tied knots held the oilcloth in place. She pulled at the thong, working until it came free, releasing a slight odour of linseed, reminiscent of oil paint. The cloth fell open, revealing a large, reddish-brown leather-bound volume with gold embossing.

She opened the cover, glanced at the marbled end pages then, with damp fingers, turned to the frontispiece.

TO THE
 RIGHT HONOURABLE
 JOHN EARL OF BUTE
 GROOM OF THE STOLE
 TO
 THE PRINCE
 This Book is humbly Dedicated
 BY
 His Lordship's
 Most Obedient Servant
 WILLIAM CHAMBERS

Good heavens! Her heart began to thump beneath her rib cage. It seemed Mr Greenway's connections with the nobility were as he described. How else would he have acquired such a tome?

The second page contained illustrations ranging from two primitive buildings—a tent, resembling those used by the native people in the Americas, and what appeared to be a shepherd's hut—to a more complex dwelling with a pitched roof and elaborately detailed columns. The first chapter, on the facing page, was titled *Of the Origins of Buildings*. As her gaze raced across the print, she lifted the corner of the page to turn it and a small square of folded paper fell out. Inscribed across the front, in a script as bold as the writer himself, was her name: just Mary, nothing else. A personal letter from a man to a married woman such as herself was beyond scandalous. With shaking hands, she broke open the seal holding the piece of thick cartridge paper, torn undoubtedly from a sketchpad, and sank down in the chair.

*7 Limekiln Street,
Mangotsfield*

Dear Mary (May I call you by your own name, which I have to admit I learnt from another, rather than that of your husband with whom I am somewhat aggrieved?)

I had hoped to deliver this personally but unfortunately, I have been denied permission to enter the estate. As I expect you know your husband has reneged on our contract and no longer wishes to engage my services. Since I relied on a handshake and have nothing in writing I am unable to hold him to his promise.

Mary pursed her lips and inhaled. How could James do such a thing? He couldn't back out of a gentleman's agreement. She ought to try and bring up the subject, though she doubted he'd pay any heed. Her gaze danced back to the letter.

However, the two occasions on which we met have remained uppermost in my mind and I wanted to honour my commitment to you.

I trust you will enjoy your perusal of Chambers's treatise and when you have had your fill, I would appreciate it if you would arrange its return to my business premises in Limekiln Street.

Your servant,

Francis Howard Greenway

(Who hopes to be known henceforth as your friend).

Through her palm the pitter-patter of her heart vibrated, and a wave of euphoria stirred her blood. Thank heavens the package had arrived in James's absence. The thought of James's dismissive comments and his tirade when she'd mentioned Mr Greenway's name still made her shudder. She tucked the letter in her sleeve, against her skin, and then folded the oilskin and wound the

leather thong into a small ball. With a glance over her shoulder to ensure Mrs Rudge was otherwise engaged she hefted the book and darted up the stairs to her bedchamber.



Time passed in a blur. Mary spent every available hour propped up in bed, claiming a headache but in fact absorbed in Chambers's theories, and in dreams of the conversations she might have with Mr Greenway—Francis. The mere thought of his name made her chest tighten as though an invisible thread connected them.

Mrs Rudge fussed around, bringing interminable pots of tea or chicken broth and slices of buttered, toasted bread, and insisted on keeping the fire alight, convinced Mary had caught a chill on one of her morning walks in the woods.

Every time Mrs Rudge's steps sounded on the landing Mary pulled the counterpane over the book and lay back with a pained expression on her face. James returned from Bath but stayed well away, no doubt fearing he might contract her unaccustomed sickness.

On the fifth morning Mrs Rudge puffed up her pillows and placed the breakfast tray on the nightstand then hovered, arms folded and a quizzical expression on her face.

'Thank you, Mrs Rudge. I am feeling a little better this morning.' She so badly wanted to return to the book, or better still discuss with Francis the decorative aspects of Corinthian columns.

'Hmm! The captain will be disappointed.'

He knew nothing of her interest in Corinthian columns, or the book. 'Disappointed?'

'He's hopeful ...' Colour stained Mrs Rudge's plump cheeks, and she wiped her face on the corner of her pinny and heaved a

sigh. 'We thought perhaps your delicate condition might signal a happy event.'

'Oh!' The air whistled out between Mary's lips. It was the furthest thing from her mind. She couldn't possibly be with child; James had been away for weeks. She tried for a rapid calculation, resorted to her fingers, gave up and tossed her hands in the air.

Mrs Rudge smiled, revealing the familiar array of crooked teeth and yawning gaps. 'A month and two weeks over, and counting.'

And how would she know? 'I'm sure you must be mistaken.'

'Who do you think supervises your bed linen and laundry?'

Mary's mouth opened and closed like a trout on the end of a line. She ought to be happy, having finally achieved the one action expected of her. She snapped her mouth closed and tried for a smile, but instead tears sprang to her eyes.

'Enough of that.' Mrs Rudge peered down at her through narrowed eyes. 'The captain's at home. Shall I send him up? You'll be wanting to tell him yourself.'

Mary slipped her hand under the bedclothes, her fingers groping for the cover of Chambers's treatise. 'Let me finish my tea and get dressed. I'll come downstairs and tell him.' She lifted the porcelain cup to her lips. Mrs Rudge didn't move, just hovered over her like some sort of avenging angel. If she got out of bed the woman would want to straighten the covers and her secret would be revealed. 'Thank you, Mrs Rudge. I can manage perfectly well. I'm sure you are busy.'

'Not too busy to help the new mother. You've been in bed for nigh on five days, you'll be light-headed the minute your feet touch the ground.'

'I assure you I am perfectly fine. Please leave.' Harsh, too harsh, and truth be told she had felt a little dizzy the last time she left her bed.

‘I’m only trying to help.’ Mrs Rudge’s mouth turned down at the corners. ‘We’ve all been waiting far too long for this. The captain will want the doctor to call.’

‘I assure you, I am perfectly well.’

With a disgruntled harrumph Mrs Rudge turned on her heel, then paused, her hand on the doorknob. ‘You leave the tray and your bed. I’ll come and tidy up while you’re talking to the captain.’

Once the door closed, Mary drew in a deep breath, pulled the book from under the covers and swung her legs out of bed. Her heart thundered and dark spots clouded her vision. The room wavered. Refusing to succumb to Mrs Rudge’s predictions, she bent double and drew in a deep breath, sank onto her knees, and slipped the book under her bed, pushing it into the shadows against the wall.

Mary paused at the top of the stairs, hair brushed and her favourite Indian shawl draped around her shoulders to cover her nightgown. The prospect of making any further effort was more than she could manage—and for the first time in her life she had the perfect excuse.

She tiptoed down the stairs. A stillness filled the house, a heavy, suffocating closeness, as though at any moment a clap of thunder would rent the air. James’s study door was firmly closed. She clenched her fist and rapped: to enter uninvited always incurred his wrath. It was the last thing she wanted to do. As she raised her hand again the door swung open, bringing with it the inevitable waft of cigars and brandy, and James’s florid, beaming face. She took a step back, her breath caught and her stomach churned. Hand clasped to her mouth, she spun around and raced outside just in time to deposit the tea and toasted bread in the urn on the front steps. Wiping her mouth, she sank down and inhaled the sharp air, hoping it might clear her head.

When a hand came down on her shoulder she flinched and buried her head in her hands, the thought of facing anyone, most especially James, more than she could bear.

'I've called for Mrs Rudge. Stay still.' James remained behind her so she couldn't see his face, but his words sounded almost solicitous. He gave her back a clumsy pat. Had she the energy she would have shot to her feet in surprise. She had no recollection of him ever touching her unless it was to pin her to the mattress.

'I'm sorry,' she murmured.

'No apologies necessary. In fact, something to celebrate. A glass of brandy perhaps?'

The mere mention made her stomach heave again and she shook her head, forcing down the surge of bile.

'Ah! Mrs Rudge. Could you help Mary upstairs? She's feeling unwell. It seems our celebration will have to be put on hold for a day or two.'

Mary! What had happened to his usual 'madam'?

Mrs Rudge tucked an arm around her waist and eased her upright. 'I hate to say I told you so but perhaps you might take notice next time. I dare say I've had a lot more experience than you.'

The comment didn't merit an answer. Feeling addle-headed and pathetic, Mary meekly allowed Mrs Rudge to lead her back into the house as she tutted and harrumphed about chills, cold air and delicate conditions. James stood at the bottom of the stairs, one hand resting on the carved newel post, his chest puffed like a crowing cockerel and a satisfied smile emblazoned on his face. Which under the circumstances was understandable—he'd blamed her for her inability to provide him with an heir, but surely he must have wondered if the responsibility lay with him.

Once Mrs Rudge had deposited her in the chair in front of the fire, she bustled around straightening the bedding and foraging in the cupboard for a clean nightgown. Mary closed her eyes and prayed to whatever god might be listening that her secret wouldn't be revealed. She hadn't the strength, nor the inclination, to explain the book hidden under the bed. The thought of James's cynical expression if she tried to justify her interest in architecture, and his displeasure if he discovered Mr Greenway's letter, was enough to unsettle her fragile stomach.

'I'll put this on your desk, shall I?'

She flashed her eyes open. Mrs Rudge stood in the middle of the room, Francis's letter clasped in her pudgy fingers. Mary's stomach churned again, and she clapped her hand over her mouth. The letter must have fallen out of the book when she'd slipped it under the bed, or had she left it on the counterpane? 'Yes, please.' Her voice wavered. 'I think I'm going to be sick again.'

Mrs Rudge tossed the letter onto the nightstand and grabbed the thankfully empty chamber-pot. The cold porcelain lip butted against her chin, her stomach griped, and she dredged up some very impressive vomiting sounds that failed to produce anything.

'False alarm.' Mrs Rudge wiped the perspiration from her forehead and replaced the chamber-pot beneath the bed. 'Let's get you back under the covers. This won't last forever. I'll bring you a nice cup of tea and some dry biscuits to settle your stomach, then you can have a rest.'

The moment Mrs Rudge left the room Mary shot out of bed, her shift drenched with sweat and the sour taste of bile coating her mouth. She retrieved Chambers's treatise then tucked the letter into her sleeve; it would do until she thought of a safer hiding place. She couldn't believe she'd got away with it. It would be safest to return the book but the thought of sending it back before she'd finished left a hollowness in her gut which had nothing to

do with her condition. She slipped the book under her pillow and waited patiently for Mrs Rudge's return.

An assertive knock on the door took her by surprise. 'Come in.' The door opened to reveal James, a tray in his hands, looking for all the world like the attentive husband.

'Are you feeling somewhat recovered? I've brought your tea.'

Her mouth fell open when he placed the tray on the nightstand beside the bed and proceeded to fill the cup. What a difference a bout of sickness could make!

'Mrs Rudge suggested you drink it without milk but that you should have sugar to keep your spirits up.' He ladled a disgusting amount of sugar into the cup and held it out.

The sooner she drank it, the sooner he would leave. She lifted the cup to her lips and sipped and then, to her horror, James sat down on the edge of the bed and offered the plate of dry biscuits. 'I cannot tell you how happy I am. An heir! Mrs Rudge tells me he'll be with us in the middle of summer—late June, early July.'

Mary bit her lips. She still couldn't believe, after all this time, that she was with child. Her courses were often erratic. What if this was all a mistake? The closed, cloying atmosphere of James's study always turned her stomach, and her weakness could well have been due to the fact that she'd spent five days abed, her nose buried in Chambers's treatise. On the other occasions when she'd thought she might be carrying she'd never suffered a moment's sickness, just the painful indignity of another failure.

James reached out and patted the counterpane. 'We'll have to think of a name. I favour George, after my late father, George James Fripp. It has a certain ring to it, don't you think?'

'And if it's a girl?' She couldn't help herself.

James drew back his hand as though stung, and his face clouded. 'An heir and a spare. That was the arrangement.' He pulled his waistcoat down over his ample stomach. 'I shall leave you to rest.'

I'll contact Dr Lewis and ask him to call next time he is in the area. We can't take any chances.'



Dr Lewis appeared a few days later. After much prodding and poking he pronounced her healthy and informed her the sickness would pass in a matter of weeks. He appeared to have received all the necessary intimate information from Mrs Rudge and echoed her sentiments about George's summertime arrival. Mary hadn't the strength to discuss her previous failures: time would tell and there was nothing she could do about it.

As the weeks passed and the debilitating sickness waned, she finally admitted that she was indeed carrying James's heir, although she found it difficult to summon any maternal feelings.

'Don't you fuss yourself.' Mrs Rudge straightened the bed coverings and fluffed up her pillows. 'It always takes a while for the truth to sink in. Why don't I bring you up a book or two to pass the time—one of those novels you favour?'

She was about to decline, but then Mary nodded. 'Thank you. There are some books of Papa's on the table in the library, about the Mughal palaces. I don't think I can concentrate sufficiently to read. I'll look at the pictures.' And then if Mrs Rudge came across Chambers's book, she might not pay any attention to it.

'I don't want you getting maudlin. Just because your mother ...'

'Nothing like that, Mrs Rudge, I promise.' She gave a frail smile. It hadn't even crossed her mind to wonder if she might be in any danger. Mother's demise had occurred aboard ship, in the middle of the Indian Ocean with no one to help but her maid and the ship's surgeon, whose expertise revolved around broken limbs and seasickness and hadn't extended to childbirth.

‘You stay abed for another few weeks and gather your strength. We don’t want any slip-ups like before. I’ll bring those books up with your lunch.’

As a diversion Mary busied herself imbibing every snippet of information from Chambers’s treatise, making notes, and then trying her hand at reproducing some of the illustrations. She began with a Roman Doric portico, similar to her original idea for Manali, dredging up her long-forgotten mathematic skills. Although she’d never been one for arithmetic and measurements, the more drawings she reproduced the more the plans and elevations made sense.

After James’s initial flurry of concern, he reverted to his old habits and spent more and more time away, maybe in London, maybe in Bath, courting Lady Luck more than like, but she relished the solitude, and at the same time, also enjoyed the company of the lady’s maid he’d insisted she needed.

Leah was a gentle young woman, the daughter of one of the local families, with plump cheeks, irrepressible curly hair and honey-brown eyes. She saw to it that Mary had everything she needed, and was also a dab hand with a needle and thread; although Mary’s condition was barely visible some strategic adjustments to her wardrobe had become necessary. Leah also delighted in braiding her long, and more recently abundant, hair.

By the time the new year arrived Mrs Rudge had declared Mary no longer needed to be confined to the house. Suitably rugged up, she and Leah would tramp the garden and, as Mary’s stamina returned, they ventured further afield.