

PRINCE of the NIGHT



by

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Prologue

*The Duchy of Modena,
November 1836*

He had chosen her weeks earlier, at the time of the grape harvest. She was sturdy of limb and solid of body, and went about her tasks with the slow-moving grace typical of her peasant ancestry. Last week he had learned that she was called Maria, the most common of all the names given to female infants born in the duchy.

Dakon studied her from afar, always from the protection of the shadows, trying to decide if her character was as phlegmatic as her appearance. The last thing he needed was a woman possessed of too much imagination, and he was vastly relieved when he detected no hint of undue sensitivity in her makeup. He wasn't sure how much longer he would be able to control his impulse to mate. Even so, despite the cresting urgency of his need, he was unwilling to slake his thirst for sexual release at the risk of almost certain death for his partner.

Once the decision was made that Maria would be the one, he found himself praying to a deity he believed in only intermittently. The words poured from him unbidden as he prepared for sleep. Please God, he whispered in the cruel, blinding light of dawn. Let her survive the mating. Let her accept me and live.

If he had dared, he would have prayed for her to survive the birth that would inevitably follow, but Dakon's deity—if he existed—was a harsh one, not given to granting extravagant wishes. Dakon resigned himself to accepting the limits of possibility, and contented himself with praying for Maria's temporary survival. He would not think of the day, eleven months from the mating, when his son would be born, and Maria would die.

Her parents accepted his offer and surrendered their daughter willingly enough to his charge, declaring themselves honored by the prospect of service to their lord. Their questions about the precise role Maria would play in his household were stilled by the pathetically few silver coins Dakon had paid. He would willingly have tendered more, except that his generosity would have caused comment, and his father had warned him to avoid arousing anyone's interest or suspicions at the time of his cresting. For Maria's sake, he felt a moment of anger that she should have been abandoned so readily by those whose role it was to protect her, but the anger soon passed, drowned in the increasing urgency of his need to mate.

He had no cause to feel surprise at the behavior of Maria's parents. Dakon had learned early in life that dire poverty and strict morality could rarely coexist. Hunger quieted even the most active conscience, and his education had trained him to take advantage of this human weakness. The Vam-pyr survived in large part because of human frailty.

He salved his own conscience with a week of further close observation after Maria took up residence in the villa. To his unutterable relief, she adapted to

her surroundings with the unflappable calm of those who entirely lack imagination, performing her new domestic chores with the same animal grace she had previously shown when working in the fields. In short, he concluded, she was an ideal candidate for a successful mating. He chose the night of their joining with care, waiting for the moon to wane, and a spate of thunderstorms to pass. For some reason, it seemed that the electricity generated by a gathering storm increased the violence inherent in the act of penetration, and Dakon was determined to take every possible precaution. He looked forward to the moment when he could notify the Council Elders that he had mated again—and that the human female had survived. He knew such an experience was rare, and he anticipated boasting of his achievement at the next regional gathering of the Vam-pyr.

The night appointed for their joining arrived with agonizing slowness. Maria came to him shortly before the midnight hour, bathed and clothed by his housekeeper in a traditional green silk robe, dyed the color of the Vam-pyr sun.

She had protested the scrubbing with soap and the submersion in hot water far more than the prospect of losing her virginity to a master she scarcely knew. Dakon's sensitive ears, made more sensitive by the hormones flowing in preparation for the mating, had heard her screams as the water was poured over her head, washing lice and a year's worth of olive oil from her hair. Horrifyingly, her screams excited him, and he felt the tingle of desire explode in the sensitive sacs already beginning to bulge in the roof of his mouth.

Dakon willed himself to calm. He reminded himself that he was disciplined, caring, honorable. He had spent the past year training himself for this moment, expiating for the death of the last female he had mounted. There would be no mishaps tonight, he had sworn it to himself on numerous occasions. He would prove that humans who mated with the Vam-pyr could survive.

The candles flickered in a draft of air blowing in through a crack in the casement window of his bedroom. Maria shifted nervously from foot to foot as she stared at Dakon. Even after bathing, her skin was still dark from years of exposure to the powerful sun of Earth. Dakon visualized her darkness against his pallor and again he felt the powerful--delicious—promise of impending ecstasy.

"Do not be frightened," he said, trying to speak softly, and not sure if he succeeded. He moistened his dry lips, wondering if she could hear his heart banging against his ribs. "Come closer, my dear. I promise that I will be very gentle with you." Even to his own ears, the promise sounded false, although he made it in total sincerity.

Obediently she edged toward him, her bare feet silent on the tile floor. He realized as she approached that she was shivering, her teeth chattering, her body convulsing. He hoped it was from the cold. God, how he hoped it was from the cold and not from fear. Surely she was too stolid, too ignorant, to be so fearful? Had he not spent weeks determining that of all the young females within a hundred-league radius, she was the one least likely to be overcome by irrational fears?

He drew her to him, running his hands over her face, pressing his erection against the softness of her belly. Desire seeped into every pore of his skin and

every cell of his body. The saliva gathered in his mouth, bathing the buds that shielded his fangs in the fluid of sexuality. He felt the sacs swell with an exquisite premonition of urgency. He swallowed, forcing himself back under control.

He realized that he was trembling, just like Maria. The knowledge soothed him. Perhaps, like him, she was shivering with the onset of desire. Human females were capable of feeling desire, a study conducted by Hakylm last century had proven it conclusively, showing that they had a particular attraction for the Vam-pyr. It was another human trait that Dakon had been trained to take advantage of.

But Dakon didn't want to take advantage of Maria. He wanted to mate with her, that was all. "Why are you shivering?" he asked. "Are you cold?"

"No, lord." Her voice cracked with fear, and Dakon felt a surge of rage. What was she frightened of? Why did she tremble? He hadn't done anything to her yet. Nothing, that is, save stroke her cheek with gentle fingers.

If she was determined to wallow in irrational fears, there was little point in delaying further. Better to proceed and permit her to see that those fears were without foundation. He carried her over to the bed and laid her against the pillows, stroking her hair from her dark eyes with tender fingers. He was proud of his self-control, proud of the fact that he was able to resist the growing urge to lie down on top of her and sink his fangs deep into the gloriously tempting column of her throat. Reining in his rampant desire, he ran his hands across her breasts, parting the pale green mating robe, baring the sturdy outline of her body to his heated gaze.

"Lord, I am a virgin," Maria whispered. "You will not hurt me?"

"Of course not," he snapped, irritated that she had spoken, annoyed that she had interrupted the exquisite fantasy building in his mind. He had known she was a virgin, of course, otherwise he would not have chosen her. Centuries of trial and error had proven that matings only resulted in offspring if the human females were virgin.

The moment of irritation broke the hold he had maintained over his state of arousal. In a single surge of overwhelming force, his fangs expanded and broke through the sacs containing them, just as he felt the pressure of his erection build to a level that demanded immediate release.

Maria saw his fangs at the same moment she felt him press against the barrier of her virginity. She screamed in terror, a mindless cry that echoed and reechoed throughout his bedchamber. He felt her fear, absorbed it into himself through every one of his senses, vaguely aware that he no longer resented her fright, but actually welcomed it. The smell of her terror was the most potent aphrodisiac he had ever known, beyond anything he could have dreamed of in his most erotic youthful fantasy. He was swamped with the need to possess, to penetrate, to procreate.

Dakon thrust himself deep into Maria's body, holding her hands high above her head and falling upon her neck with a hunger that could not have been equaled by a lifetime of fasting. His fangs pierced the skin of her throat and slipped into the smooth cartilage of her jugular. Ahh, what ecstasy! What blissful release from years of arid, tormented waiting! Her blood flowed warm, sweet, and

ambrosial over his tongue. He swallowed the exquisite nectar, drinking in her fragile essence as he thrust into her body, filling her with his seed. How wonderful it was that such delight should also produce the happiness of a son, an heir, a Vam-pyr child that Dakon would love and cherish, the grandson ZAr ymp had craved for so many years.

The spasms of ecstasy slowly ended, the ripples of his release convulsing him over and over again. The joining complete, he collapsed panting onto the limp body of his mate. Although she was no more than an uneducated peasant, he felt a great tenderness toward her, a deep gratitude that she had allowed him to slake his desire at the same time she became the receptacle for the seed of his son. Mindful of his weight, he rolled away from her, drawing in great lungfuls of refreshing air.

Still spent from the force of his mating, he made her a silent promise. During the next eleven months, he would see that she was afforded every possible kindness and luxury. He would tend to her needs, humor her slightest whim, shower her family with money. He owed her at least that much. As for the birth, he would not think of it.

"Maria," he said softly, staring into the comforting darkness. "Maria, I am indebted to you for the gift of your body. Ask for what reward you wish, and I will try to give it to you . . ."

She didn't reply. Overwhelmed by a sudden dreadful premonition, he rolled over and gazed down at the woman who had been his mate.

As soon as he turned, he saw the hideous wounds in her neck, the gaping slashes around which blood was already congealing in pathetic patches of sticky red. The euphoria of his mating dissipated into an icy sensation of dread.

"Maria!" Her name rasped in his throat as he worked frantically to repair the damage wrought equally by his fangs and his mindless lust. He willed her to wake up, to survive the depredations he had wrought upon her reluctant and terrified body. He tried to release his fangs again so that he could pour the life-restoring fluid of sexual mating into her body, in exchange for the blood that he had sucked from her with such reckless abandon. But his fangs had shriveled and retracted inside their protective sacs, and he knew it would be days, perhaps weeks, before they regenerated.

Still, he could not bring himself to acknowledge the fatal finality of what he had done. He worked on her lifeless body for hours, striving with every art known to humankind and to the Vam-pyr to return life to her lifeless body. In the end, as the sun rose and infiltrated the sanctuary of his bedchamber, he was forced to admit the truth. He had murdered Maria. Worse yet, in his heart of hearts, he had always known that the inevitable result of his mating would be precisely this: a human female, offered no meaningful choice, surrendering her life to assuage the sexual needs of an arrogant Vam-pyr.

He had been a crass, conceited fool, Dakon decided. He was still young, barely a century old, and it usually took three or four hundred matings before a Vam-pyr could control his lust sufficiently to mate successfully. Even then, accidents were frequent, and the rate of impregnation unreliable. Still, Dakon could not forgive himself. His youth and sexual inexperience might partly explain,

but could never excuse, the willful arrogance of his behavior. Maria had not deserved to die, even in the noble cause of creating a new generation of Vam-pyr. Her life had a worth and value he was not at liberty to ignore.

In his efforts to revive Maria, he had sewn up the jagged wounds in her throat, bathing the ripped flesh in his own blood to speed the creation of new tissue. He had not been able to bring her back to life, but so great was the regenerative power of Vam-pyr blood, that the raveled edges of her skin had knit together, hiding the evidence of the death he had caused. It would be quite easy to explain away her death, which meant that he wouldn't have to leave the Duchy. For that, he was glad. He had grown fond of the villa, and proud of his accomplishments in turning neglected land into profitable vineyards. In the future, there would be no need for him to move, no need to cut the roots he had begun to put down, because no more humans would meet their deaths at his hands.

Touching the almost invisible scars on Maria's neck, Dakon vowed that he would never again subject a human female to the dangers of his Vam-pyr lust. Tonight, he had mated for the last time. He had murdered his last human female. Placing his hand on Maria's silent heart, Dakon swore it.

Chapter One

***Duchy of Modena,
March 1859***

Miss Cordelia Hope prided herself on possessing more than her fair share of British fortitude, and a sanguine disposition that inclined her always to look upon the brighter side of life. But this afternoon, finally, both fortitude and good cheer had deserted her.

The rain had been falling without letup for the past sixteen hours, and the donkey tracks that the locals laughably insisted upon calling roads had long since degenerated into quagmires of oozing mud. From experience, she knew that the sullen gray light would soon give way to impenetrable darkness, making travel hazardous to the point of folly.

Worst of all, a few minutes ago, the driver hired to take them to the Villa of the Three Fountains had suddenly stopped the carriage in the filthy courtyard of a wayside inn, and refused to drive any further. Cordelia tried to protest, but the driver simply unhitched the horses and disappeared into the fetid darkness of a ramshackle hut behind the inn. Despite all her pleas, he refused to come out, and the three exhausted travelers had been forced to seek refuge in the tavern.

Shepherding her companions ahead of her, Cordelia looked around the squalid taproom, met the hostile gaze of the innkeeper, and tried her best not to feel terrified. She would not surrender to hysterics just because she and her party were hopelessly lost, stranded in a hovel that barely deserved the name of inn, abandoned in a remote region of Italy hovering on the brink of war.

She knew she could look for no help from her traveling companions, the Lady Mary May Stanwyck, only daughter of the Sixth Earl of Stanwyck, and Ellen Harding, her ladyship's elderly maid. Ellen had been a bundle of nerves ever since they boarded the ferry to cross the English Channel, and she'd spent the past week in imminent expectation of being murdered by brigands. Hunched on a stool in the corner of the tavern, she alternately emitted little moans of despair and sobbed into her sodden handkerchief.

As for Lady Mary, she at least refrained from tears, although not out of any desire to be obliging. Lady Mary knew from years of careful observation that she was unable to cry without making the tip of her exquisite nose quite red, so she cried only in situations where absolutely no other method of achieving her goals existed. Seating herself on the room's only chair, nostrils pinched in disapproval of her squalid surroundings, she occupied herself by complaining of Cordelia's inadequacy as a travel guide.

"My constitution is too refined to endure the rigors of any more of your muddles," she said, glowering at Cordelia. "I am faint with fatigue."

"Then rest while you have the chance," Cordelia said, clinging to her fast-vanishing supply of patience.

Her calm response infuriated Lady Mary, who liked her social inferiors to show a proper degree of fear. "The earl gave me into your charge, Cordelia, and

if you fail to return me safely to his care, you may be sure that he will seek *dire* retribution."

"I do not doubt it," Cordelia said wearily, well aware that the Earl of Stanwyck was not a man to accept failure from his minions, even if those minions happened to be cousins of the family, like Cordelia.

"I don't understand why you insisted on setting out from Piacenza this morning," Lady Mary said, her voice cracking with a hint of genuine fear. "You should never have left the safety of the town without my father's man of business to escort us. You may rest assured, Cordelia, that the earl will hear from me how recklessly you behaved."

"We waited in Piacenza for more than a week," Cordelia pointed out, stung into an attempt at self-defense. "*Signor Pesante* never arrived at our appointed meeting place, and nobody could tell us how to get a message to him. For a lawyer who has supposedly worked all his life in this region, *Signor Pesante* seems mysteriously unknown."

"The people you asked were all ignorant dolts," Lady Mary said. "All Italians are ignorant dolts."

"In which case, it hardly matters that we have left Piacenza, does it?" Cordelia murmured. "We are merely exchanging one set of dolts for another."

Lady Mary tossed her curls, which were drying in a golden halo around the exquisite oval of her face. "I'm sure Mr. Peasant has arrived in Piacenza by now, and it's your fault that we have left. I begged you to show a little forbearance and follow my father's instructions to the letter."

In fact, Lady Mary had sworn that she would throw herself from the balcony of her bedroom if they did not leave Piacenza at once, but Cordelia didn't bother to remind her of this fact. She knew when to save her breath. Lady Mary's threats and complaints had long since become tedious from daily repetition, but this afternoon she looked so pale and fine-drawn that Cordelia was afraid that the stresses of the journey might result in serious consequences for her cousin's health.

The innkeeper had been watching them in calculating silence as they shook the worst of the rain from their cloaks and hoods and settled in the taproom. He now inched out from behind the counter and bowed low, his manner a strange mixture of hostility and obsequious courtesy.

"Most gracious ladies, how may I be of service?" he asked in thick dialect.

"We need to hire a new carriage driver for a short journey," Cordelia answered in standard Italian, hoping he would understand.

The innkeeper's eyes gleamed. He rubbed his hands. "Most honored and excellent *signora*, I am at your service" His voice tailed away and he looked pointedly at her purse.

Cordelia sighed. They had very little money left now that *Signor Pesante* had failed to arrive with fresh funds, but she was becoming desperate. She pulled a crown from the tiny travel pouch hidden at her waist, and held it up.

The innkeeper snatched at the coin, and she moved it just out of his reach, aware that she'd taken a grave risk by letting him see that she carried money on her person. The poverty they had witnessed during the past week had

been so appalling that she had lived in daily expectation of being murdered for a few coins.

She was shaking inside, but she forced herself to show no fear. "To earn this crown you must tell me how to reach the Villa of the Three Fountains. You must also provide me with a driver who can take us there."

If she had not been watching so closely to make sure that he understood her Italian, she might not have noticed the tiny shudder, and the flicker of his eyelids at the mention of the villa. Then his expression shuttered, and he bowed, shaking his head regretfully.

"Most excellent *signora*, it is my wish to be of service to you. Alas, I do not know how to drive a carriage myself, and there is nobody else here, save my son, who ..." He broke off abruptly. "We cannot take you to the villa, *signora*."

She was surprised by his response, but not as surprised as she would have been if she hadn't already met the same sort of evasion many times this week from the townsfolk in Piacenza. Her staunch British soul rebelled at the prospect of outright bribery, but she could see no alternative. With extreme reluctance, she reached into her pouch and extracted a golden guinea.

The innkeeper's eyes bulged at the sight of the shiny coin. His hands clenched at his sides, and he licked his lips. "Is that really gold, *signora*?"

"Yes, it's a British golden guinea, and it can be yours. To earn it, you have simply to drive me and my two companions to the Villa of the Three Fountains."

A bead of sweat popped on the innkeeper's forehead. Then he turned away, closing his eyes, as if he could scarcely bear to look at the gleaming gold. "I cannot drive," he repeated. "I am sorry, *signora*. I cannot help you."

His words were simple, but Cordelia could hardly believe she'd understood the Italian correctly. For a golden guinea—probably the equivalent of at least three months' income—she had expected the innkeeper to vault into the driver's seat before she could finish speaking.

"What!" she exclaimed. "Of course you can take us there!"

He didn't turn around. "No, *signora*. I cannot drive. I cannot take you to the Villa of the Three Fountains." Almost to himself he muttered, "I must protect my sons."

Cordelia felt her self-control begin to fray around the edges. "If you are not willing to drive, then find us someone in the village who can," she insisted.

"Alas, again I cannot help you, *signora*. There is nobody in the village who will drive your carriage."

Cordelia bit her lip, ready to scream in frustration. Ever since they had arrived in Piacenza, they had been met with a conspiracy of evasion and silence. Quite apart from the failure of the earl's man of business to keep his appointment, what was it about the Villa of the Three Fountains that had all the locals shifting uneasily in their shoes?

"What does the tavern keeper say?" Lady Mary demanded. "Lud, I swear, if we do not get to this wretched villa soon, there will be no need to continue your search, for I shall be dead of neglect and fatigue."

It was quite typical of Lady Mary to consider that once she was dead, the two remaining members of her party would no longer have any need for shelter.

Cordelia accepted the implication without any particular rancor, having grown accustomed to her cousin's selfishness.

"Would it help you to feel better if I asked the innkeeper for a glass of cordial?" she suggested.

Lady Mary did not deign to reply. Her silent shudder at the prospect of touching her lips to any drinking vessel in this establishment was answer enough.

Cordelia knew from experience that there was no point in attempting to persuade Lady Mary to change her mind, so she turned her attention back to the problem of finding an escort to the villa. Determined not to accept defeat, she spread the Earl of Stanwyck's ancient map on the counter and pointed to the intersection of two small roads.

"That crossroads lies no more than half a mile to the north of this tavern," she informed the innkeeper. "And here, no more than six miles to the south, is an estate named the Villa of the Three Fountains. It must be very close to us. Why is no one willing to drive us there?"

The innkeeper barely glanced at her faded map. "Most excellent *signora*, I believe that you would be wiser to spend the night here. We have a bedroom in the loft. I could make it comfortable for you."

"What is he saying now?" Lady Mary demanded. "Goodness, gracious me, Cordelia, I cannot believe that we are still hanging about in this filthy taproom. Why are you taking so long to make such simple arrangements?"

Cordelia translated the innkeeper's offer of a bed in his loft, and Lady Mary let out a shriek of pure, unadulterated horror. "Lud, Cordelia, have you taken leave of your mind? You surely do not expect me to share an attic with you and Ellen? *Three of us* in one bed?" She flapped her kid-gloved hand in front of her face. "Heavens, I shall faint, I know it."

"Please don't," Cordelia said, reaching for her smelling salts and wafting them under Lady Mary's quivering nose. "I realize now that I was foolish even to suggest spending the night here."

Lady Mary decided not to faint. "Thank God," she said, pushing the smelling salts away. She opened her eyes just in time to see two horsemen ride into the muddy courtyard in front of the inn. "Oh look!" she said. "Soldiers. Thank heaven for their arrival! They will be able to help us."

An ominous rumble of thunder was followed by a flash of lightning and a momentary lull in the lashing downpour of rain. The two soldiers dismounted quickly, their full cloaks dragging with the weight of accumulated rainwater.

Austrians, Cordelia thought. For once she was in complete agreement with her cousin. Thank God for their arrival! They, of all people, would know how to find the Villa of the Three Fountains, and they might even be willing to provide an escort. Thank God, she thought again, recognizing now that help was at hand just how close she'd come to real panic.

The Austrian soldiers strode into the dingy tavern, pulling water-logged scarlet shakos from their heads and dripping streams of water from their riding capes. "Bring us wine!" one of them shouted.

The innkeeper complied in silence and the taller of the two soldiers tossed a couple of copper coins toward him before striding into the taproom. Suddenly

realizing that they were in the presence of three women, they stopped abruptly in the middle of the room, setting their mugs onto the rickety wooden mantel and tugging at their jackets. Cordelia noted with rueful resignation that the younger officer needed only one glance at Lady Mary before he started preening.

The older officer, a tall man with weathered features, was made of sterner stuff than his junior. After a single awestruck glance at Lady Mary, he was able to recover his wits sufficiently to incline his head in a polite nod of acknowledgment to all three women.

"If I may make so bold, ladies, I beg leave to introduce myself and my colleague. I am Captain Hesse of His Imperial Majesty's Fourth Hussars and this is Lieutenant Waldheim." He spoke in French, the language of diplomacy and international affairs, although his native tongue was presumably German.

Neither Ellen nor Lady Mary understood what had been said, so Cordelia stepped forward. "How do you do?" she replied, also in French. She said nothing more, since etiquette taught that ladies did not impart their names and business to perfect strangers.

Captain Hesse clicked his heels, setting his spurs jangling. "I beg to know if there is some way in which we could be of assistance." He hesitated for a moment, then added, "It is unconventional, I know, but would you honor my colleague and me with your names? If I may be so bold, this is no place for three ladies to find themselves unescorted by a gentleman."

Cordelia was so entirely in agreement that she debated for no more than a few seconds before deciding to trust the soldiers with an introduction. "My name is Miss Cordelia Hope, and I am traveling as a companion to Mrs. Frederick Ford, who is my cousin."

Mrs. Ford was the name under which it had been agreed that Lady Mary would spend the next several months. The mythical Mr. Ford was supposedly a member of the British government in India, posted to a station where it was too unhealthy for his wife to accompany him.

Cordelia completed her introductions. "We also have with us Ellen Harding, who is Mrs. Ford's maid, and as you may have guessed, we are visitors from England."

The two officers acknowledged the introductions with elaborate bows and the welcome information that they both spoke English. Lady Mary and Ellen were deeply impressed. Cheered by the sight of two English-speaking gentlemen with such splendid sets of whiskers, Ellen finally stopped sniveling. She stood up and bobbed a curtsy.

Lady Mary, equally partial to mustaches, and similarly revived by the mere presence of two handsome males, bestirred herself enough to twist in her chair, allowing the officers a glimpse of her ravishing profile and glowing violet eyes.

"How fortunate that you should chance to be in this benighted region just when we need you," she said.

The lieutenant's uniform buttons almost popped, he stood up so straight and threw out his chest so far. "Officers of ze Emperor are always eager to be of service to fair ladies," he said.

"But why are Austrian soldiers stationed in Italy?" Lady Mary asked, wrinkling her brow in a charming admission of puzzlement. Her lack of knowledge about the history and politics of the Italian peninsula was spectacular in its totality, and until now, she had expressed not the slightest interest in learning who held ultimate power in the Duchy of Modena, despite the fact that they had been watching Austrian troops muster and drill for most of the week.

Both the officers were stunned into momentary silence, but Lady Mary's infallible effect on all human males had taken hold, and the lieutenant instantly forgave her ignorance. "We serve his Majesty ze Emperor Franz Josef of ze House of Hapsburg," he said, his tone of voice reverent. "Zis area of the Italian peninsula forms an important part of our empire."

"How splendid," Lady Mary said, and probably meant it. Ideals of democracy and national independence were of no importance to her. She smiled sweetly at the soldiers, an innocent child apologizing for not quite having learned her lessons. "There are so many emperors in Europe these days that I simply can't keep them all straight. They come and go with such speed, don't they?"

The captain looked stupefied, as well he might, and even the lieutenant swallowed hard. The House of Hapsburg had ruled in central Europe for over five hundred years, and Austrian pride in their heritage was matched only by their stubborn refusal to see that the era of imperial domination was ending.

Before the officers succumbed to apoplexy, Cordelia decided that it would be wise to change the subject. "We would be very grateful if you could help us hire a driver for our carriage," she said. "We have experienced so much trouble finding someone reliable to take us to our destination. The driver who abandoned us here didn't even wait to be paid he was so anxious to be off about his own pursuits."

"Now that is certainly an extraordinary tale!" the captain said, chuckling. "In my experience, these Italians are a grasping set of knaves, always out to snatch a coin or two."

"They do seem to live very close to starvation," Cordelia said.

"And whose fault is that?" Lady Mary demanded. "If they worked harder, they wouldn't be so poor." She spoke with the fervent conviction of a woman who had never performed even five seconds of gainful labor.

"Very true." The captain smiled benevolently. "We have, over the years, found it impossible to instill any sense of loyalty or discipline into the local peasants. However, that is neither here nor there. Do, please, tell me how we can be of help to you lovely ladies. Where is it precisely that you wish to go? Tell us, and we shall personally drive you to your destination."

"How kind." Lady Mary rewarded the hussar with one of the ravishing smiles she normally reserved for dukes and princes of the blood royal. "We wish to find a place called the Villa of the Three Fountains. I do hope it isn't too far away, since I am most desperately fatigued."

The two soldiers exchanged a startled look. "The Villa of the Three Fountains?" Captain Hesse repeated. "What an odd coincidence, Mrs. Ford. That is the very place to which my lieutenant and I are headed."

"You are? How simply splendid! Then you can take us there." No one had ever accused Mary of being needle-witted, and she found nothing strange in the fact that two officers in the Austrian Imperial Army had business to conduct in a villa that belonged to the Earl of Stanwyck and was occupied—as far as Cordelia knew—only by one elderly manservant and his equally ancient wife.

The captain's expression became wary. He coughed, cleared his throat several times, and fiddled nervously with the shiny gold braid on his jacket. "Is the Count of Albion expecting you?" he asked finally. "The count is not ... that is to say, I have not found him to be a man who receives many visitors."

Cordelia blinked and Lady Mary looked puzzled. "The Count of Who?" she asked.

"Ze Count of Albion," Lieutenant Waldheim repeated. "Did you not say that you wish to be escorted to the Villa of the Three Fountains?"

"Well, yes, but the villa belongs to my fa—"

"I'm sorry, but we are not acquainted with the Count of Albion," Cordelia cut in ruthlessly, not allowing Lady Mary to finish her sentence. Given the circumstances of their journey, the fewer mentions they made of the earl's name, the better. "Who is he, may I inquire?"

The atmosphere in the taproom cooled noticeably. "He is the Italian nobleman who owns the Villa of the Three Fountains," Captain Hesse said, his friendly smile turning to a hard, assessing stare.

"Of course he doesn't own the villa!" Lady Mary protested. "My fath—"

"There must be some mistake," Cordelia said, giving her cousin's arm a warning squeeze. "Our destination is the Villa of the Three Fountains, but we are not familiar with anyone called the Count of Albion."

"But I can assure you ze Count of Albion owns ze villa," Lieutenant Waldheim said. "He owns all ze land for miles around. You might say zat he is ze grand seigneur of the region."

Cordelia's stomach lurched with a premonition of disaster. "Then we must be seeking a different villa with the same name," she said. "The villa we seek is a modest establishment, with very little surrounding land, and it was deeded to ... er ... to Mrs. Ford's ancestors over a hundred and fifty years ago."

Captain Hesse shook his head. "You may take my word for it, Miss Hope. There is only one Villa of the Three Fountains in this area, and the estate is quite definitely owned by the Count of Albion."

"The villa we seek has been in the hands of caretakers for over a hundred years," Cordelia said. "Perhaps the Count of Albion has rented the villa along with the farmland ..."

The two officers stared at her in silent incredulity. "Ze Count of Albion is not a caretaker," Lieutenant Waldheim assured her. "Ze villa belonged to ze count's father and his grandfather before zat. It is a place of most great prosperity, or so I haf been told."

Cordelia unfolded her faded map, spreading it out for the Austrians to see. "I would have sworn that the villa we're searching for is no more than six or seven miles from this tavern."

Captain Hesse bent over the map. "The place you have marked is beyond question the Count of Albion's villa," he said, straightening. "Am I to understand that you have reason to believe the estate belongs to your family?"

"I have documents to prove it," Cordelia said. "The villa once belonged to the Ossoli family—" She broke off abruptly. In light of Lady Mary's circumstances, it was imperative that no whisper should ever leak out of her true identity.

"I am astonished to hear of this." The captain frowned, lost in thought. Then he bowed, heels clicking. "Clearly, this is a puzzle that cannot be solved without the assistance of the count himself. The lieutenant and I will escort you to the villa." His voice faded into uncertainty. "I am sure that, in the circumstances, the Count of Albion will be willing to receive you."

Lieutenant Waldheim cast an adoring glance in Lady Mary's direction. "No man could refuse shelter to a lady as luffly as you."

The captain looked more cheerful at this thought and, in truth, the lieutenant's logic was impeccable. If the count was like every other male member of the human race, as soon as he clapped eyes on Lady Mary, an invitation to stay was guaranteed.

"I am loath to impose on a stranger's hospitality," Cordelia said to the captain. "But I believe we have no choice at the moment."

"Then let us be on our way," Captain Hesse said. "If you are ready, ladies, we will depart at once. If the rain gets no worse, we should be at the home of the Count of Albion within the hour, two hours at most."

Lady Mary rose, energy renewed. She shook out her skirts and twirled toward the officers in a rainbow of ruffles and a midnight blue cloak. "Tell me, this Count of Albion, does he have a wife by any chance?"

"No," the captain said, walking her toward the inn door. "The Count of Albion is considered a confirmed bachelor."

"I haf never met him," the lieutenant confided to Cordelia. "He has a reputation as something of a recluse." The lieutenant lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "It is rumored zat ze count is not entirely—normal—in his habits."

"What does that mean?" Cordelia asked.

The lieutenant cast her a speaking glance. "Alas, he has no interest in the ladies. His servants, you understand, are all young boys, except for one elderly housekeeper."

Cordelia couldn't imagine why anyone would choose such an odd way to staff their household. "All boys, you say? How very strange."

"Yes, indeed. He has dozens of young boys serving him. And very good-looking, all of them."

Captain Hesse spoke sharply. "That's quite enough gossip, Lieutenant. You had better make haste to get the horses."

"Yes, sir." The lieutenant saluted. "Certainly, sir. At once."

Captain Hesse ushered Lady Mary to the rickety shelter of the tavern porch, and Ellen followed her mistress outside, waiting for the lieutenant to drive the horses out from their rough, lean-to shelter. When Cordelia attempted to join them, the innkeeper stepped out from behind his counter and intercepted her.

"*Signora*, I could not understand what was agreed between you and the Austrians. Are the soldiers taking you to the Count of Albion's villa?"

"Yes, they are."

"Have a care," the innkeeper whispered. "The villa, it is not a good place for honest people."

Cordelia felt an unexpected shiver of fear. "Why not?" she asked.

Captain Hesse turned around at that moment, and the innkeeper ran behind his counter, polishing busily with a filthy rag.

"No reason," he said. "I meant nothing of importance, *signora*."

The captain went outside again and Cordelia turned back to the innkeeper. "We shall have the protection of Captain Hesse and his lieutenant," she pointed out.

The innkeeper spat. "Bah!" he said. "Austrians."

He obviously believed those two words said it all.

Cordelia hoped—fervently—that he was wrong.