

Timeless



Jasmine Cresswell

**The illustrious House of Hanover and Protestant Succession
By these I lustily will swear—while they can keep possession.
And in that faith and loyaltie I never more will falter.
Great George my King shall ever be—unless the times do alter.**

—Eighteenth-Century Folk Rhyme

Prologue

Dorset, England, August 1746

FOR days, William had been waiting to hear that troops had arrived in the village. When he saw the gatekeeper's son running toward him, shirttails flapping in the early morning breeze, he braced himself to receive the news.

"Me lord, soldiers!" The boy was so out of breath, he could barely speak. "A score or more, and they be riding this way. Heading straight for the house, they be."

So, they were come.

After days of tense anticipation, William almost welcomed their arrival. His brother's hotheaded and oft-proclaimed devotion to the Stuart cause rendered the entire family suspect, and spies had no doubt reported seeing Zachary in the thick of Charles Stuart's ragtag rebel army. With the Duke of Cumberland's troops determined to chase down every last, pitiful survivor of the Culloden massacre, William knew his estates were seriously at risk. Damn Zachary for the reckless, romantic fool that he was!

William conquered the urge to lash out, to fight back against fate, to cry out his rage and frustration. He reined in his horse and swung around to face the gatekeeper's son.

"Thank you for carrying the message, Tom." The baron spoke mildly, as always, and Tom was rather disappointed by his master's languid response to the great news. It wasn't every day that a backwater village like Starke played host to a troop of redcoats, and Tom would have enjoyed the importance of provoking his lordship to some greater display of emotion. But then, William Bowleigh, third Baron of Starke, was known throughout the county for his placid manners and lack of interest in politics.

All he cared about was farming, and new ways to grow turnips, Tom thought with a touch of disdain.

Still, he felt obliged to offer a final warning. "They soldiers bain't far off, me lord. They'll be here right soon."

"I understand." The austere lines of the baron's mouth relaxed into a fleeting smile. "If you go to the kitchen, you may tell Mrs. Moffet that she is to give you a slice of pippin pie. You may have cream, too, if you wish. You did well to let me know of the soldiers' arrival."

"Thankee, me lord, thankee kindly." Tom tugged the scrag of hair hanging over his forehead and forgave his lordship for being a milksop. Pippin pie with cream was almost as exciting as seeing a troop of redcoats. Feet flying over the long grass of the park, he ran to the house in search of his promised treat.

William returned to the stables at a leisurely canter, chatted with his groom and his farrier, then strolled back to the house without any appearance of undue haste. His heart sank when he saw Arabella waiting for him at the door. She greeted him with a perfunctory curtsy, her cheeks white, her beautiful face ravaged by weeks of anxiety and fear.

"Have you heard the news?" she demanded. "Cumberland has sent his butchering monsters into the village. They are riding straight toward this house!"

William stripped off his gloves and handed them to the footman, together with his hat. "I had heard something of the sort, but I confess I do not understand your alarm, my dear—"

"Are you mad?" she demanded, not allowing him to finish his sentence. "They will search the house! They will demand that we turn Zachary over to their mercy—"

William raised an inquiring eyebrow. "I fail to understand your concern, my lady. We have neither of us seen my brother in many months, so we can provide no information likely to lead to his capture."

"And what has that to say to anything? My nerves are in shreds simply thinking about talking to these monsters! Dear God, I swear your heart is carved out of marble! How can you remain so unmoved? Does it not concern you that your own brother may at any moment be captured and hanged as a traitor?"

"What concerns me," he said coldly, "is that the rest of my family should not march to the scaffold alongside Zachary. He chose to throw in his lot with the traitorous Stuart princeling, and now he must pay the consequences."

"How can you speak thus indifferently of your brother's fate?"

He shrugged. "Calm yourself, my lady, I beg. Your tears do nothing to improve your beauty and they surely are of little help to my brother."

"You could at least show grief for the desperate straits in which he finds himself."

"Believe me, my lady, nobody could regret the enormity of my brother's folly more than I." William gestured toward the door of the withdrawing room, and the footman immediately flung it open. Arabella stalked into the pleasantly sunny room, her slender body shaking with the force of her agitation.

"Bring tea for her ladyship," William directed the footman, who bowed in silent acknowledgment and left.

"How can you order tea!" Arabella exclaimed. "At a moment of crisis like this!"

She seemed to have no inkling of how indiscreet her conversation had been, no idea that she put not only herself but also innocent servants at risk when she rattled on about Zachary. William did not attempt to explain. "I ordered tea in the hope that you would find it refreshing. This hysteria must soon cease, my lady, or the servants will come to believe that you have my brother hidden in your dressing closet."

"Would to God that I did!"

"Thank God that you do not."

"At moments like this, I feel that I will go mad. I cannot imagine why I married a man so totally lacking in sensibility!" Arabella exclaimed.

He gave a wintry smile. "I believe the size of my fortune seemed extremely attractive at the time you accepted my proposals."

She swung around in a whirl of satin skirts and imported French lace. Without any trace of emotion, or sexual response, he thought how beautiful she was. She clasped her hands to her bosom. "Dear God, if your brother could hear how you treat me, he would run you through with his sword!"

"Then I am doubly grateful that he is not here to observe the wretched state of my behavior toward you."

"Can you never give me a serious answer?" she asked, her voice thick with bitterness. "Must you respond to everything I say with your same odious sarcasm?"

"Yes," William said after the slightest of pauses. "I fear that perhaps I must."

The banging of the great iron door knocker silenced whatever fresh accusation Arabella had intended to hurl at him. She sank onto a chair, her cheeks whiter than before. "The soldiers," she breathed. "They are come!"

"I hear them," William said, sounding bored. "It is most fortunate, is it not, that we have nothing to hide?"

"I cannot bear the cruelty of your indifference to Zachary's plight!"

"My dear, you have passion enough for both of us. However, next time you take a lover, I beg that you will choose a good, solid Hanoverian. These Jacobites, you know, are a totally lost cause."

She cast him a look of such utter loathing that for a moment, the armor of his indifference was pierced. He recovered himself almost immediately, and went to stand in front of the empty fireplace, resting his spurred and booted foot on the hearth guard with every appearance of casual unconcern.

A lackey flung open the door. "My lord, Captain Bretton, of the Fourth Dragoons, wishes to speak with you."

"Captain Bretton!" Arabella looked ready to faint.

It was no more than a second or two before William recovered. "Show him in," he said, his voice as remote and cool as ever. "We have no reason to keep him waiting."

Chapter 1

New York City, the present

AFTER twenty-nine years of prudent hard work and sober living, Robyn Delaney met Zach Bowleigh and fell instantly and recklessly in love. Zach was interviewing her for a job at the time and gave not the slightest hint of reciprocating her feelings. Robyn surrendered her heart anyway.

If Zach gave no hint of being bowled over by her cute Irish looks and bubbling personality, he did at least seem impressed by her professional qualifications, which included a master's degree in fine arts from Columbia and a year's internship at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Fifteen minutes into the interview, he offered her a job as junior buyer in the English furniture department of the Bowleigh Gallery, his family-owned firm. Robyn, with reckless disregard for her emotional health, accepted.

Now, six months later and still hopelessly in love, Robyn wondered how in the world she had ever been so foolhardy. Her infatuation hadn't faded with daily exposure to Zach; if anything it had grown worse. She had learned during the past few months that unrequited love was not only ridiculous, it was physically painful. When she looked at Zach, her entire body ached with longing. If it weren't for the fact that she loved her job almost as much as she loved Zach, she would have quit and crawled home to Virginia weeks ago.

But she hadn't quit, and here she was, watching Zach and his current arm decoration—otherwise known as Miss Cosmos 2003—work the crowd. Tickets for tonight's reception had cost a thousand dollars a pop, a hefty price even though the proceeds were going to benefit New York's homeless. Zach was obviously determined to see that his guests got their money's worth and he was turning on the charm full blast. Even buried in her obscure corner, Robyn felt scorched.

She speared a chilled shrimp from the tray of a passing waiter and ate it morosely. The Gallery's main showroom had been turned into an approximation of the reception rooms in an eighteenth-century French chateau. Against a backdrop of silk-covered walls, gilt-framed mirrors, and unlimited supplies of champagne, five hundred of Manhattan's most glittering glitterati were admiring the Louis Sixteenth chairs, the rococo cabinets, the exquisite collection of snuffboxes, and the even more valuable collection of *singeries*, those intriguing tapestries depicting monkeys in human dress, pursuing human activities.

Guests who tired of viewing antique furniture could retreat into one of the smaller salons, where musicians performed Mozart on authentic period instruments, and dancers in powdered wigs and panniered satin gowns performed lively minuets and gavottes.

The concept of the gala exhibit was chiefly Zach's, and as usual, it was a huge success. Male guests were impressed by Zach's impeccable taste and subtle showmanship. The women split their admiration equally between the museum-quality trinkets and Zach's spectacular body.

Watching his female guests strut and preen, Robyn cheered up a little. Whenever she felt too humiliated by her wayward hormones, she could comfort herself with the knowledge that she wasn't the only intelligent woman to succumb to Zach's blond good looks and smoldering sexuality. Sophisticated New Yorkers, some of them dedicated feminists, tumbled over themselves in order to bask in the blaze of Zach's high-voltage smiles. Gossip about his sensitive, powerful performance in bed circulated in the same tones of hushed awe as gossip about his skill in discovering fabulous antiques in the most unlikely places.

A cultured British voice murmured into her ear. "Darling, don't pant, it's terminally vulgar."

Robyn dragged her gaze away from Zach and turned to smile at the head of her department, Gerry Taunton. "Hi, boss, I didn't realize you were still here."

Gerry rolled his eyes. "Now isn't that a surprise? Why would you notice me, or trivial people like our clients for that matter, when you haven't taken your eyes off Zach and his popsicle since the moment you arrived."

Robyn had given up trying to hide her unrequited passion from Gerry, whose nose for office romance was infallible, but she refused to dignify her obsession by gossiping about Zach.]

"I did speak to a couple of customers," she protested. "But most of my clients aren't here tonight."

Gerry sniffed. "They have better taste."

She chuckled. "I guess that's a polite way of saying they're too poor."

"Darling, your clients aren't poor, they simply recognize value. Did you see that hideous baroque armoire Simon Brescht bought for his penthouse? Twenty thousand dollars' worth of gold leaf, and two hundred bucks—maybe—of craftsmanship. If he'd ever looked at a piece of Hepplewhite or Adam he'd know better."

"You don't think you're just the tiniest bit prejudiced? You are English, after all."

Gerry pretended to consider. "No," he said, with absolute conviction. "Eighteenth-century English furniture is the most elegant that was ever produced anywhere."

Robyn laughed at his fervor, but they both knew she agreed with him. From the corner of her eye, she noticed that Zach had cleared his arm of Miss Cosmos, and was heading straight for the alcove where she and Gerry stood talking. He arrived in front of them before she could escape. He nodded to her, then grinned at Gerry.

"Take that supercilious sneer off your face, my friend. We all know what you think of French furniture but there's no need to frighten away the customers. Besides, some of it's quite handsome. I chose it myself."

"All of us make mistakes," Gerry said.

Zach laughed. "I can see I need to do major penance. Any suggestions as to how I can get myself back into your good graces?"

"Give the English department an exhibition," Gerry said promptly. "With a couple of months lead time, Kevin and I could mount a really fine show of English country house furniture. We already have at least a dozen splendid Regency and early Victorian pieces in house, and we've just acquired some 1920 Chippendale reproductions that are works of art in themselves. Best of all, we're inventorying a shipment of early Wedgwood pottery that would make the perfect focal point for a show."

Zach swung around to look at Robyn. "You discovered that cache of Wedgwood, didn't you? How did you hear of it?"

As always, the full blast of his attention reduced Robyn's brain to jelly. "It's ... um . . ." She cleared her throat. "The pieces belonged to the Wade family in Virginia. Mr. Wade is a great-uncle to my sister-in-law, which is how I got involved."

"They offered it to you for sale?"

"No, at first they simply wanted a rough valuation. They hadn't a clue as to how much it was worth, so they asked me to take a look."

"Why did they change their minds and decide to sell?"

"They're childless, in their eighties, and they want to move into a retirement community. I told them they could get a lot more money if they found private buyers for individual pieces, but they just wanted fast cash, and no hassle. They had several unmatched bowls and platters, and some wonderful decorative pieces. The best is a jasper-ware vase designed by John Flaxman that dates from 1785."

She ground to an unsteady halt, aware that she sounded breathless and overeager. Suddenly furious with her idiotic infatuation, she frowned and turned away.

"What did you pay them?" Zach asked.

"Thirty thousand. The Gallery paid for packaging and freight, which came to another couple of thousand, with the insurance."

"What does Stella say about it?"

Stella Bartolomeo was the Gallery's pricing expert, and made Scrooge look generous. "She thinks we'll be able to sell the pieces for at least sixty thousand. I believe we can get more if we approach the right buyers." She lifted her chin slightly. "Because of my personal involvement with the Wade family, I checked with Gerry and Kevin before I made an offer. I didn't want to cheat anyone, the Wades or the Gallery."

"There's no need to sound apologetic," Zach said mildly. "If it weren't for your personal connection, we would never have heard of the collection in the first place. And early Wedgwood doesn't often come on the market, certainly not John Flaxman jasper ware. Well done."

Despite her best efforts, she felt her face turn pink with pleasure. "It was an exciting discovery for me."

"Gerry and I have been talking about you," Zach said. "We're both impressed with how fast you've learned the ropes."

"Th-thank you. Everyone here has been very helpful."

"Glad to hear it." He pulled out a slim leather pocket diary and consulted it briefly. "Could you have dinner with me tomorrow night? I know it's Friday, the start of the weekend, and so on, but I'm tied up all day in meetings, and I'd like to take some time to outline a special project I have in mind for you. It's something Gerry and I both think you're ready to tackle."

Her regular Friday night routine consisted of a session at the health club, followed by a late-night stint in front of her DVD player, watching a rented movie.

"I believe I can juggle my schedule around and make that," she said, trying to sound like a woman sacrificing her busy social life for the sake of her career. "What time, and where would you like us to meet?"

Zach scribbled a note in his diary. "Seven-thirty sound okay? My secretary will fill you in on the details. She has a system for keeping all the maitre d's around town bullied into giving her the best table, so I go wherever she sends me."

"Fine. I'll expect Shirley's call tomorrow morning."

"Great." He gave Gerry a hearty clap on the shoulder, nodded his head briskly toward Robyn, and left to reclaim Miss Cosmos, who was wiggling her silicone-enhanced assets at a small group of fascinated reporters.

Watching Zach weave his way through the crowds, Robyn realized her mouth was hanging open and hurriedly snapped it shut.

Gerry patted her on the arm, his gaze annoyingly sympathetic. "Darling, don't pant," he said. "It's terminally vulgar."

Robyn woke up on Friday morning, determined that this day would mark a change in her attitude toward Zach. Six months was long enough to spend in a state of sophomoric sexual obsession. At their dinner tonight she would behave with brisk, professional courtesy. She would not allow herself to explode into bursts of nervous chatter. She would not spill the salt, or drop her napkin, or get distracted by the twinkle in Zach's dark blue eyes. She would not wonder if he'd noticed her freckles. She would absolutely and definitely not wonder if he by any chance happened to find freckles cute. By the end of the evening, if she stuck to her plan, she would have taken a giant step toward transforming six months of unproductive sexual fantasy into an efficient business relationship.

Her optimistic mood survived a typically frantic Friday at the office and a frustrating half hour in front of the ladies' room mirror during which she confirmed the sad truth that a woman who is five feet three inches tall and has red curly hair cannot make herself look aloof and businesslike even when she is wearing an austere forest-green suit and no jewelry. Having spent most of her adult life convincing fusty professors and sexist museum curators that a woman with curls and dimples could also have brains, Robyn knew she ought to appreciate the strict professionalism of Zach's attitude. Unfortunately, love was not a very rational emotion and she wished—just once—that he would look at her as if he registered the fact that she was a functioning, anatomically correct female.

Quelling an absurd impulse to try the effect of the suit with no blouse under the jacket, and a dangling pair of rhinestone earrings, she dusted another layer of powder over her freckles, wiped off most of her lipstick, and left the ladies' room satisfied there was nothing more she could do to increase the businesslike severity of her appearance.

The afternoon's drizzling rain had turned into a full-blown downpour by the time Robyn left the office for La Grenouille on Fifty-second Street, but by some marvel she got a taxi without much difficulty and was paying the cabbie outside the restaurant at precisely seven-thirty. She considered this punctuality a good omen. From now on, even the traffic jams of Manhattan would give way to her supercompetent handling of life. She was a dedicated career woman, with no time for the inefficiency of a one-sided love affair. Confident in the power of her new and improved self, she strode into the restaurant's pink-lit interior—and stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of Zach chatting amiably with the maitre d'.

He glanced up and saw her, his smile faintly quizzical, his blond hair a slash of brightness against the sober dark gray of his suit. Even at a distance of fifteen feet, he radiated a lethal combination of wealth, power, and sexuality. By the time they were two feet apart, Robyn was shaking. She drew in a deep, calming breath, reminding herself that she was now a woman with a Plan. Resisting the cowardly urge to replace her new and improved self with the old infatuated and wimpish model, she gave Zach her best imitation of a cool and dignified smile.

"Good evening, Zach. I hope I didn't keep you waiting?"

His answering smile was warm, friendly, and open. But then, Robyn thought gloomily, he had no adolescent infatuation to hide. "Your timing's great," he said, taking her coat and handing it to the attendant. "I was a couple of minutes early. It's getting cold out there, isn't it?"

She had no idea what the temperature was, had been much too flushed with bravado and excitement to notice, but the new Robyn was not going to be thrown off track by a simple remark about the weather. She treated him to another of her brisk, professional smiles. "Yes, it's really cold. Maybe it's going to snow."

"That would make a change. It's years since we had a proper winter in New York." Zach guided her through the tables in the wake of the maitre d'.

"Have you eaten here before? It's one of my favorite places, partly because it's close to my apartment, but mostly because the food is great."

"No, I've never been here before." She kept her answers clipped and short, because that seemed better than the alternative. It was either monosyllables, or gushers of verbiage when she was around Zach.

A waiter materialized at their table. "Would you care to order a drink before dinner?"

"We'll need a few minutes to choose our meals," Zach said, taking the menus from the waiter. "Robyn, what would you like to drink?"

She ordered a diet Coke, since the last thing she needed at this point was a muzzy head. He nodded to the waiter. "Make that two, please."

As soon as the waiter left, Zach turned back to Robyn. "Thanks for agreeing to meet with me on a Friday night when I know you must have a hundred more exciting things to do. You've put in a lot of overtime these last few weeks, and I want you to know your hard work's been noticed and appreciated."

"I enjoy my work," she said. "I've always wanted to make a career in the antique trade, so my job at the Bowleigh Gallery is a dream come true for me."

"It's good to hear you say that. To be honest, I wasn't sure we should take you on. Gerry's had two assistants in the past four years who simply weren't up to the job even though their qualifications looked terrific on paper. When I interviewed you, I was almost to the point of deciding we needed someone with hands-on, practical experience and no fine arts background. But Gerry said you were the right person for the job and I'm certainly glad that I took his advice."

Robyn flushed with pleasure. "Thank you. It's great to put all my academic training to practical use at last."

"And that brings me to the reason for this meeting," Zach said. "It's time for you to expand your scope, Robyn. You need to get out in the field and do some actual buying. Some distant relatives of mine in England are planning to offer part of their family collection of porcelain and silverware for sale and they've offered me the chance to make a first bid. English bone china is your major area of expertise, and I want you to come with me. My opinion may be tainted by the family connection, so I'd like you to share the responsibility for deciding whether the Gallery should bid for the collection."

She was astonished and thrilled by his offer. "I'm delighted by your confidence in my judgment," she said. "But has Gerry told you that I've never placed a bid on behalf of the Gallery without his prior approval?"

"Gerry agrees with me that it's time for you to put your theoretical knowledge to the test. On paper, you have more qualifications than any other buyer. In reality, you've had almost no experience of handling buys under pressure. On the other hand, I have plenty of buying experience, but I know next to nothing about the output of the English potteries. I hope we can improve each other's skills."

The possibility of her being able to teach Zach Bowleigh anything about antiques was absurd enough to make Robyn chuckle. "What's so amusing?" Zach asked.

"I'd love to go to England with you, it would be a fabulous learning experience for me. But the idea of giving you lessons on this business is laughable. You've forgotten more than I could learn in the next ten years."

He frowned. "You're wrong," he said quietly. "My expertise and my success tend to be exaggerated. In more ways than one."

"I've seen no evidence of that. Your reputation seems well deserved, in every way."

"Superficially, maybe, but you don't know me very well, do you?"

She wondered exactly what it was they were talking about, and she was determined not to leap to foolish conclusions. "You're my boss, the president of the most successful antiques company in the country. I know you're an excellent employer."

He sighed. "Yes, I'm very much aware of the fact that I'm your boss." He paused for a moment, then shrugged, almost visibly deciding to change the subject. "Let's order dinner, then we can talk about the trip to England without being interrupted."

Robyn indulged herself browsing through the menu before choosing a safe grilled fish. Zach ordered something in swift, colloquial French, which she had a horrible suspicion might be stewed frogs' legs. Despite a year in London and two brief visits to Europe, Robyn's choice of food remained strictly American heartland.

When their meals arrived, Zach's plate was covered in a creamy sauce. Robyn breathed a sigh of relief. If he was tucking into a reptile of the type she had dismembered in biology class, at least she didn't know for sure.

When their waiter left with a final flourish of his napkin, Zach inquired politely if the meal was to her satisfaction, and they discussed cuisines of the world in a desultory fashion for a few minutes before Zach returned to business.

"The Bowleigh family is anxious to complete the sale as soon as possible," he said. "I'm leaving for Paris on Tuesday night, and I plan to fly from there to London sometime on Friday afternoon. I realize this is short notice, but could you meet me in Starke on Saturday morning? That would be a week from tomorrow. The family is quite willing for us to view the collection over the weekend."

Robyn's work schedule for the next couple of weeks was already tight, but the chance to accompany Zach on a buying trip was much too exciting to turn down. "I'll have to juggle a few appointments," she said. "But I can work things out."

"Great. I'll ask Shirley to make a reservation for you at the Starke Manor Hotel, which was once the family home of the Bowleights. They turned it into a hotel twenty years ago, when the inheritance taxes got too steep for them. Rental car is the easiest way to get from the airport to Starke. How do you feel about driving on the left-hand side of the road?"

"I drove around quite a lot when I was working in England, so it shouldn't be a problem. Is Starke far from Heathrow Airport?"

"Seventy miles or so. It's in Dorset, a very picturesque little village, about ten miles from the coast."

She pulled a face. "If I don't turn up for breakfast on Saturday, you'd better send out a posse. I'm a world champion at getting lost on English country roads."

He laughed. "The village pub is called the Dog and Kettle, and it's been going strong for three hundred years. After spending a year in England, you should know that if you need directions, pubs are the only sure landmarks."

She grinned. "I'll keep that in mind. Do you have any written material describing the Bowleights' porcelain collection?"

"Not as much as I'd like. I can give you some excellent photos and a few notes made for the insurance company. I have the file with me, so perhaps you could glance at it over the weekend. I'd like your impression of the overall quality of the collection."

"I'll do my best, but to make an accurate assessment, I need to see the actual pieces."

He smiled. "I know. That's why I asked you to come with me. I'm not asking for an official valuation, just an initial impression."

Neither of them ordered dessert, but they lingered over coffee and chocolate truffles, talking about the differences between early European and English porcelain, and the recent upsurge in prices for nineteenth-century Japanese Imari ware. Robyn found the conversation so interesting that she was able to ignore the current of sexual awareness that never went away when she was near Zach. She wondered if perhaps her infatuation had flourished during the past few months because, until tonight, she had never had the chance to get to know Zach the Man, instead of Zach the Sexual Fantasy. With an upsurge of hope, Robyn decided that the trip to Starke, and two or three solid days of Zach's company, might be all she needed to complete the cure.

Zach took a final sip of his coffee and leaned back in his chair. "You look mighty pleased with yourself," he said. "Was your meal that good?"

"I was thinking about the trip to England," she replied, glad that she could tell at least a partial truth. "I'm looking forward to working with you."

"I'm looking forward to that, too." Zach was silent for a moment or two, staring at his steepled fingers. "Tell me something, Robyn, if you were a dealer who wanted to palm off an expensive fake on one of the Gallery buyers, how would you set about doing it?"

"I wouldn't bother to try." Robyn answered without needing to stop and consider. The question of fakes and fraud was always fascinating to insiders in the antique business, in part because so many more fakes were offered for sale than genuine articles.

"Why wouldn't you try?" he asked.

"For the obvious reasons. It would be much too risky, with the high standard of documentation we require, and all the in-house experts we have available. We're tougher to deceive than most museums."

"But let's suppose this mythical dealer wants to sell a museum-quality piece, something that's going to fetch thousands of dollars if it's accepted as genuine. Where can he go if not to us? There aren't that many commercial outlets operating in his price range."

"True, but let's be realistic about our industry, Zach. There are dozens of ways for a crooked dealer to make money on fakes without trying to outwit the Bowleigh Gallery. There's a huge demand for nineteenth-century Americana, for example, and we both know there are dozens of factories in Taiwan turning out instant antiques to meet that demand. Why risk jail trying to sell one elaborate piece for a few hundred thousand bucks, when you can make a million selling 'hundred-year-old' desks for a thousand dollars each?"

"But what if you could come up with a scheme for circumventing the experts and the documentation at the Gallery?" Zach asked. "Then you might be able to rake in mega-bucks on a consistent basis. Wouldn't that be worth taking a few risks for? Wouldn't it be worth trying to crack our systems?"

He sat slouched in his chair, the picture of a man engaged in idle chitchat with a fellow professional. And yet something about his manner set Robyn's antennae twitching. She leaned across the table, meeting his gaze head-on. "What are we talking about, Zach? Are we indulging in idle speculation at the end of a pleasant meal, or are we having a serious conversation about fakes reaching the floor of the Bowleigh Gallery?"

For a moment she thought he wasn't going to answer. "I'm not sure," he said finally. "You know as well as I do that this trade is riddled with fraud and dubious deals. You're a relative newcomer to the company, so you look at our authentication systems with a more open mind than the rest of us. Can you see any way somebody knowledgeable—and clever—could consistently manipulate a crack in our system?"

She shook her head. "I'd say it's impossible. We use the latest technology to run sophisticated tests on all the important pieces, and we have trained experts exercising their professional judgment to assess authenticity. It's tough to deceive machines *and* human experts."

"Well, I'm relieved to hear you say that. It's always good to be reassured that our systems work."

"Why were you worried, Zach? There must have been a specific incident to trigger your concerns."

"An insurance company approached me about a seventeenth-century *pietra-dura* cabinet that had been bought from our Gallery five years ago. The owner recently died, and the heirs were trying to sell. A routine X ray of the joints revealed that the piece was a fake."

"But the original cabinet had been out of our hands for years," Robyn protested. "You can't assume we were negligent in our original authentication. There are dozens of reasons why the owner might have substituted a modern replica for the genuine piece he bought from us."

"That's what I told the insurance company," Zach said, getting to his feet. "The man in question had been losing money, but needed to keep up appearances to prevent a run on his business, so it wouldn't be surprising if he quietly sold the genuine article and bought himself a nice little replica from a factory in the Far East."

"This is a fascinating business, isn't it?" Robyn said as they walked back toward the lobby. "I love the unique combination of creative genius, ancient splendor, and high tech that keeps the whole industry afloat."

Zach smiled. "And the best part is, some of the creative genius is even legal."

She laughed, happy with the success of the evening, happy with the new sense of relaxation she felt around Zach. All in all, she felt confident that she had taken a giant step toward overcoming her infatuation. The entire evening, in fact, had followed the outline of her new Master Plan with gratifying precision. And their trip to London would complete her transformation into a new woman, she was sure of it.

When they reclaimed their coats, Zach handed Robyn a slim portfolio containing about a hundred pages of photographs. "As soon as you've had a chance to look these over, tell me what you think about the Starke inventory," he said, walking her toward the door. "I'm going to be in the office all day on Monday and Tuesday until early afternoon."

"I'll call Shirley first thing and fix a meeting time."

"Do that."

The maitre d' hurried up to them. "I 'ope everything was to your satisfaction, Mr. Bowleigh?"

"Wonderful as always, Jean-Pierre. Now all we need to make the evening perfect is a cab."

"I can call for one if you wish. But it is no longer raining, and probably you will 'ave more success if you just walk up to Fifth Avenue."

"That's what we'll do," Zach said. "Unless you're still cold, Robyn?"

"No, I'm fine."

Once outside, they found that the gutters ran with dirty rainwater, but the sidewalks had dried off except for the occasional puddle. The skies had cleared, revealing an ethereally beautiful moon and a brilliant scattering of stars. Pausing on the corner of Fifty-second, Zach scanned Fifth Avenue in search of an empty cab.

The traffic roared past, including dozens of yellow cabs, all occupied. Zach sighed. "At moments like this I wonder why the hell I don't buy a house in the suburbs so that I could own a car and drive myself where I want to go like a normal American."

She burrowed her chin into her upturned collar. "It's the challenge," she said. "The feeling that if you can make life bearable in New York City, you could do it anywhere."

He laughed. "You're probably right, although I always kid myself I stay in the city because of the fascinating people and the great cultural—"

He suddenly lunged toward her, pulling her close against his chest and throwing her bodily to the pavement. Only the fact that he kept his arm around her neck prevented her from cracking the back of her skull against the concrete. Vaguely, in the distance, she was aware of the sound of a car backfiring.

They landed in a doorway, a tangle of legs and arms, with her face squashed against the buttons of Zach's shirt, her nose tickled by the smell of Fendi cologne, her vision obscured by the hanging flaps of his overcoat. For thirty seconds, he lay on top of her, panting, his body rigid with tension. When he lifted his head slightly, she was able to move just enough to see his face.

He was staring toward Fifth Avenue, his expression tight with fury. He looked pale and mud-splattered, but otherwise sane enough. On the other hand, she hadn't met too many crazy people and was no expert at identifying them. She tried to wriggle out of Zach's grasp, wincing as her bruised haunches scraped over the cement.

"Get down," he commanded, straddling her with his knee and thrusting her—none too gently—back into the recesses of the doorway where they had landed. "Don't move until I'm sure they're gone."

"Until who has gone? Zach, what happened? What frightened you?"

He ignored her, but she obeyed him anyway, largely because she had no choice. Zach remained spread-eagled on top of her, effectively blocking her view of the street, and he was a foot taller and sixty pounds heavier than she was.

She moved her legs, which were getting pins and needles. Cold, gritty rainwater sloshed against her calves and the back of her knees. A couple walked by, averting their gaze, and she realized just what a spectacle she and Zach were making of themselves. A surge of irritation replaced her bewilderment, propelling her into action.

"Zach, get off me. This is ridiculous."

He stood up, pulling her with him. He'd thrown her into a puddle, she realized, as icy rivulets of dirty water trickled off her hair and into her face, but she didn't feel the cold because her fury was keeping her warm. She picked up her purse and the portfolio with the catalogs. Fortunately nothing had spilled, although the photos were wet.

"What was that all about?" she demanded, using the sodden sleeve of her coat in an effort to stop the water dripping from her hair into her mouth.

"I ... thought someone was shooting at us."

"*Shooting at us?*" Robyn looked around the peaceful street scene and swallowed hard. Zach's nerves must be shredded, she thought sadly. She could imagine her mother or her sister-in-law finding the blank-faced, scurrying New Yorkers somewhat menacing, but for a city-dweller there was nothing threatening about the brightly lit street, or the people in it. "Zach, we're fine, honestly."

He kept her pinned close to his side and scanned the sidewalks as if he expected an assassin to leap out from behind a lamppost at any minute. He finally seemed satisfied that they weren't in imminent danger, and he dragged his gaze around to hers with visible effort. "I'm sorry. Are you all right?" he asked.

"No, of course I'm not all right! I'm freezing cold, my clothes are ruined, and your attitude is making me very nervous. But you didn't manage to break any of my bones, if that's what you mean."

"I'm sorry," he said again. He sounded remote, impersonal. "I thought you were in danger and I reacted without thinking."

"Yeah, well those he-man reflexes could get you into a lot of trouble. Miss Cosmos probably likes hitting wet cement even less than I do."

He didn't crack even the ghost of a smile. Instead, he took her arm and started hustling her uptown. "Come on, we need to get out of here. I'll take you back to my apartment. Walk as fast as you can, please. It's not safe — You'll catch cold if you don't get out of those wet clothes."

Robyn didn't relish the prospect of a wet and muddy cab ride back to Queens, but the prospect of going to Zach's apartment was even less appealing. She didn't think she had ever seen a man who looked closer to the brink of a major explosion, and she had no desire to be around when the explosion occurred.

"It's late, so I'd prefer to go straight home," she said.

He hesitated. "You're soaking wet."

"My coat's wet. The rest of me is pretty dry."

Her shoes were discernibly ruined and her hair still dripped mud, but he accepted her lie without protest. She had the sudden feeling that his mood had changed and he was now as anxious to be rid of her as she was to be home in the safety of her own apartment.

"You must send me the dry-cleaning bill," Zach said. "That way, I might feel a bit less stupid about the way I---overreacted."

The pause before his final word was almost imperceptible, but Robyn had spent too many months obsessing about Zach not to notice it. He didn't really believe he'd overreacted, she was sure of it. In fact, she realized with a flash of insight, he was determined to send her home so that she'd be out of what he considered the danger zone. She looked up at him, worried by the carefully expressionless lines of his face, and the tight-drawn grimness of his mouth.

"Zach, what is it? What's bothering you?" she asked.

"Good heavens, do you need to ask? I behaved like an idiot." He gave a chuckle that sounded charmingly embarrassed and apologetic. She noticed that his eyes were still scanning the sidewalks and wasn't deceived.

"Look, there's a cab," he said, stepping out into the street to hail it. "Are you quite sure you don't want to stop off at my place to clean up?"

"I'm sure. Do you need a ride home?"

"No thanks. My place is only five blocks from here and I prefer to walk."

Surprisingly, the taxi stopped, despite their bedraggled appearance. The cabbie stuck his head out of the window. "Where d'ya wanna go?"

"Queens," Robyn said, giving her address.

"You've gotta be kidding." The cabbie rolled his eyes with as much exasperation as if she'd asked to be driven across the Atlantic Ocean. He launched into a storm of protest, which Zach silenced by the surefire method of stuffing several large-denomination bills into his hand.

"Make sure you wait to see the lady safely inside her building."

"Yeah, yeah." The cabbie took a hearty drag on his cigarette, indifferent to the sign that proclaimed smoking in city cabs to be illegal.

Zach wasn't so far gone in craziness that he risked commenting on the cigarette. He leaned down to say good-bye to Robyn. "I'll see you in the office on Monday. Look, I'm really sorry about the way this evening ended."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Zach. In this city, we all get jumpy at times."

"I guess we do. But I'd have preferred not to make a total ass of myself in front of a woman I admire as much as you."

"Time to go, folks!" The cabbie put the car in gear. Zach just had time to slam the passenger door before the cabbie drove off in an impatient squeal of tires. Robyn looked back and saw that Zach was already striding purposefully downtown, coat collar turned up, hands shoved into his pockets. She was so disoriented by Zach's strange behavior that she was back home, standing under a hot shower, before she realized a final oddity: Zach's purposeful strides had been carrying him in precisely the opposite direction from his apartment.

Robyn wondered where he'd been going. And why.

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