

Chapter One

Cripplegate, London, 1863

The dense, evil-smelling London particular had all but drowned the city in a greenish yellow morass of fog and smoke. Each breath she took was difficult and painful as the woman walked on, clutching the warm bundle of life in her arms. The baby whimpered but did not cry. She hugged the child closer to her breast as a drunken man lurched out of the gloom, almost knocking her down as he barged past. 'Excuse me, mister. I'm looking for Three Herring Court.'

'Bah.' The man staggered crabwise but was enveloped by the pea-souper before he had gone more than a few feet. The woman, a maidservant more used to the heat and dust of India than the cold and damp of an English winter, shivered and wrapped her shawl more closely around the babe in her arms. The clock in the tower of St Giles, Cripplegate, struck six sonorous chimes, making her turn with a start. The carriage belonging to her mistress had dropped her close to this spot a good half an hour ago, and she realised with a groan that she must have been walking in circles ever since. The coachman had made it clear that he considered it beneath him to visit this impoverished part of the city. He had told her in no uncertain terms that Three Herring Court was inaccessible except by

foot, and even then it was approached down a flight of steps.

Holding out her hand she sighed with relief as her fingers came in contact with a low stone wall. She paused for a moment, making a vain attempt to get her bearings. She had been heading north, past the debtors' prison, but the compass points meant nothing to her now and the high prison walls were hidden behind a curtain of fog. She cocked her head on one side, listening for sounds of life, but there were none. She and the baby might as well have been the last living souls on earth for all the company they had on this bleak night. The baby began to whimper in earnest. It was well past the time when at home she would have been fed on bread soaked in warm milk and sweetened with a dusting of sugar.

'Hush, little one, Mahdu will look after you.' Hitching the baby over her shoulder, she continued on her way, her slim fingers feeling the cold slimy stones until they came to a pillar and then there was nothing but a void. Walking like a blind woman with her free hand outstretched, she almost fell over a small body slumped on the pavement. A startled cry was wrenched from her lips as she stopped, thinking she had come across a corpse, which was not unusual in this part of London on a bitterly cold winter's night, but the bundle of rags moved and unfolded its skinny limbs. When the child stood up he reached no higher than her waist.

'Look out, you,' he grumbled. 'You nearly trod on me, you stupid cow.'

'I'm sorry,' Mahdu said, breathlessly. 'I couldn't

see you in this fog. Anyway you should be at home with your family, not lying about on the pavement for anyone to fall over.'

'Foreign ain't yer?' The boy peered up into her face. 'Is that your nipper?'

'I'm trying to find Three Herring Court,' Mahdu said, ignoring his impudent question. 'There's a penny for you if you can lead me there.'

The boy eyed her curiously. She wasn't from round these parts, it was clear. It was too dark to make out her features or the colour of her skin, but her voice was soft and gentle. 'Let's see the colour of yer money then, missis.' He held out his hand, but the woman was obviously wise to the ways of street urchins and she took a penny from her purse, holding it high above his head. He decided against snatching it from her as there was a copper on the beat somewhere in the vicinity and a scream from the old girl would bring him running. 'All right then, missis. Follow me. I can find me way easy as pie.'

'What's your name, boy?' Mahdu had to quicken her pace in order to keep up with him. She did not particularly care for the little creature, and the smell emanating from his scrawny body made her want to retch, but she was curious as to why a boy of seven or eight might be out alone on such a terrible night.

'Nosey bugger ain't yer? Me name's Bailey and I was just resting me body when you come along and trod on me.'

She followed him in silence and to her relief, the baby had stopped crying and had fallen asleep on her

shoulder. She would miss the little girl more than she was prepared to admit even to herself. From the moment of her birth, the infant had clasped Mahdu's heart in her tiny hands. Each stage in the baby's development had seemed like a miracle from her first smile to the time when she murmured her first word. It might have been mama, but it could easily have been an attempt to say Mahdu. Now they were to be parted, possibly forever. Mahdu's throat constricted as she faced the fact that she had been trying to ignore ever since they left India. Born out of wedlock with the added stigma of mixed race parentage, there had never been a future for baby Cassandra Phillips. Mahdu knew that she would always feel guilty for aiding and abetting her young mistress in her love affair with the handsome Anglo-Indian officer in her father's regiment. Colonel Phillips would have sent his daughter home on the first ship bound for England had he discovered their liaison earlier, but by the end of that summer which the white women spent in Simla in order to escape the heat in Delhi, it was already too late. Mahdu paused to catch her breath. 'Stop a minute, boy. I can't go as fast as you. I need to rest for a moment.'

'It'll cost yer then,' Bailey muttered. 'Another farthing or I'm on me way.'

Mahdu leaned against the damp brick wall of the debtors' prison. 'All right, just give me a minute or two.' She closed her eyes and tears trickled unbidden down her lined cheeks as she thought of her homeland, and the months spent in the hills where the pine-scented air was touched with a chill from

the snow-capped Himalayas, and the sun shone down on the baked red earth scattered with the blossoms of bougainvillea and golden marigolds. She could hear her mistress's musical, soft-toned voice calling to her on the day after their arrival in Simla.

'Mahdu, come quickly, I need my white muslin gown and my satin slippers for the ball at the Residency. Have you unpacked my things, yet? Oh, Mahdu, I can't wait until this evening. I think I will die of excitement.' Belinda lifted her arms and twirled around on her toes. The thin silk of her peignoir floated around her slender figure like the petals of a lotus blossom and her long, corn-gold hair swung around her head and shoulders to form a shimmering halo as it caught the light.

Mahdu had been in the dressing room that led off Belinda's bedchamber in the bungalow high on the hill above the town. She had been shaking the creases out of the muslin ball gown, knowing instinctively which one her young mistress would choose for tonight's entertainment at the Residency. They had arrived last evening on the train from Delhi after a long and hot journey, but Belinda had never once complained. She had been in a fever of anticipation and they both shared the secret knowledge that it was all down to the handsome Captain George Lawson, who had been assigned to escort the ladies to Simla. Colonel Phillips had taken the young officer under his wing, oblivious to the raised eyebrows from those who considered that an officer of mixed blood had no place in the British army. Colonel Phillips was a fair man with few prejudices, preferring to judge an officer by his deeds and actions in battle

than to look down on him for something over which he had no control. The Colonel had valued George's father both as a friend and a fellow officer, and although he had counselled Major Edward Lawson against marrying the beautiful high-born Indian lady, he had understood how a man could be entranced by her wit and beauty. Despite his misgivings he had been best man at their wedding, but less than a year later the young bride had died giving birth to her son. Edward Lawson, broken-hearted, had never recovered from his loss and was killed in battle several years later, leaving George to be educated at Harrow and then Sandhurst. Colonel Phillips had been pleased to have the young officer in his battalion even though there were some who voiced their disapproval of such an appointment. Mahdu feared that history was about to repeat itself, but she had raised the motherless Belinda since she was six years old and could deny her nothing.

'I have your gown here, baba. I will hang it outside on the veranda where it will be caressed by the breeze and the creases will have dropped out by this evening.'

Belinda did a pirouette of sheer joy and she hugged Mahdu, ignoring her protests. 'I love you, Mahdu. What would I do without you, larla?'

Mahdu smiled despite her worries for the girl she thought of more as a daughter than a mistress. The term of endearment had slipped so easily from Belinda's lips and it was sincerely meant. Mahdu returned the embrace but drew away quickly in case any of the other servants should happen to pass the window and see them. There was an unwritten code of conduct,

and no matter how close the relationship between mistress and servant, Mahdu was only too well aware that there was a line that must never be crossed. 'You would manage, baba. One day soon you will marry and have no need of your ayah.'

Belinda touched Mahdu's cheek with a gentle brush of her fingers. 'I will always need you with me, larla. When I am married you will come with me, of course, and when I have children you will be their ayah as you have been mine. We will never be parted, I swear it on my mother's grave.'

Mahdu felt a shiver run down her spine, as she looked into Belinda's bright eyes. 'You will not do anything rash? The handsome officer is not for you.'

Belinda felt the blood rush to her cheeks and she snatched up her fan, waving it energetically to and fro in front of her face. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'I've seen the way he looks at you, and I think you like him too much for your own good.'

'We like each other. That's not a crime. Papa thinks highly of George.'

'But marriage is another matter entirely.' Mahdu picked up the ball gown and went out onto the veranda to hang it from one of the cast-iron brackets that supported the sloping tin roof.

Belinda slumped down on a chaise longue placed strategically near the window so that she could rest in the heat of the day and enjoy the view of the pine-forested hills. She adored Mahdu, and she knew that what she said was true, but she had fallen in love with George at first sight and he with her. It seemed like a

miracle that two people should connect so deeply on such a short acquaintance, but she knew instinctively that he was her soul mate, her other half; the one man in the world who made her feel complete. They had met at a ball in Delhi just three months ago but it seemed from the start as though she had known him all her life. When Papa had announced that she was to leave for Simla in the company of Mrs Arbuthnot and Miss Minchin and a group of officers' wives, she had been devastated at the thought of parting from George. But it seemed as though the heavens had smiled on them. It was only five years since the uprising that had seen so much carnage on both sides and the scars were still in evidence. In view of this, Colonel Phillips had decided at the last moment to allow George to command the small party of soldiers who were to provide security for the ladies on their journey.

Belinda sighed and closed her eyes, shutting out the view of the sloping garden filled with roses and the feathery green leaves of cosmos that grew wild amongst the deodar and rhododendron that clambered up the foothills to merge with the dark jagged pine trees. She allowed herself to dream of being held in George's arms as they danced the night away at the Peterhof, the official residence of the Viceroy.

She was awakened by a soft rustling of the chik, the split cane sunblind that Mahdu must have lowered to keep the room cool before she left to carry out her household duties. Belinda opened her eyes and her heart leapt in her breast as she saw the shadow of a man standing outside on the veranda. She knew instantly that it was

George and she rose to her feet, quite forgetting that she was naked beneath her silk peignoir. She glided over the polished wooden floorboards, her feet barely touching the ground, and the sunshine flooded in as she opened the half-glassed door. George crossed the threshold in two strides and took her in his arms, claiming her mouth in a kiss that made her weak with desire. When he drew away to look deep into her eyes she clung to him dazed and deliriously happy. She could still taste him and her body seemed to melt into his, fitting each curve of his finely honed physique as if they had been created to form a single entity. 'George,' she whispered, savouring his name with delight. 'Are you mad? You shouldn't be here.'

His hazel eyes glowed with flecks of gold like dust motes in the sunshine, and his lips brushed hers with small, tantalising kisses that made her long for more. 'I think I must be out of my head with love for you, my darling,' he murmured, resting his cheek against her tumbled hair. 'I couldn't wait until this evening at the Peterhof. I wanted to hold you in my arms and have you all to myself, even if it was only for a few moments.'

She uttered a sigh of ecstasy as the scent of him made her dizzy with longing. 'I wish this moment would never end, George.'

His eyes darkened with desire as his hand slid down her neck, stroking her flesh until she shivered with delight. He had not planned this clandestine meeting and he was here on official business, but when he had seen her through the window he had forgotten

everything but his love for her. The small voice in his head advocating restraint and insisting on retreat was ignored as he drank in her beauty like a man dying of thirst. Her peignoir had slipped off one shoulder and he cupped her breast in his hand, uttering a low moan of pleasure. He bent his head to kiss the nipple that had hardened with desire, but he drew away almost instantly, covering her nakedness with a swift movement. Conscience had won over animal instinct and he was bitterly ashamed of his behaviour. 'I'm sorry, my love. I shouldn't have done that. It was unforgivable.'

Belinda's breath hitched in her throat. Sensations that she could never have imagined raked through her body and she slid her arms around his neck. 'Don't stop, George. I love you so much.'

His kiss was passionate, but George had himself well under control despite the lapse that had just occurred. He had come to the bungalow with a message for the Colonel's wife but he had allowed his love for Belinda to override everything. He knew he was behaving like the worst possible bounder, but his feelings for her were genuine and overpowering. She was like a beautiful and delicate flower that had been plucked from its homeland to struggle for existence in a hot and sometimes alien environment. All his instincts were to love and cherish her, and to have her for his own, even though that seemed an impossible goal for a man of his lineage. Colonel Phillips might treat him like a son, but George was no fool. He was only too well aware that this would change in an instant the moment he

asked for Belinda's hand in marriage. He stroked the golden curls back from her forehead. She was smiling at him as trusting as a child and almost as helpless. He could take her here and now as his body demanded and she would gladly give herself to him, but he loved her too much to take advantage of her innocence. He held her at arm's length, fighting the need to comfort her and wipe the stricken look from her eyes. 'I must go now, sweetheart. I have business with the Colonel but I couldn't resist the temptation to spend a few precious moments with you.' The words came out pat, and to his surprise George realised that he meant them. Before he met Belinda he had conquered many fluttering hearts, but she was different.

She smiled but her eyes were bright with unshed tears. 'I understand, George.'

If she had railed at him it would have hurt less. He felt guilty and ashamed to have taken advantage of her, exciting her desire and then leaving her unsatisfied and wondering what she had done to deserve such cavalier treatment. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. 'Until tonight, my love.' He strode out of the room before he had a chance to weaken in his resolve. He had come close to dishonouring the girl he adored and he was shaken to the core by the intensity of his passion for her. As he made his way round to the front door of the bungalow, George Lawson knew that his heart was lost forever.

That evening they met again in the formal atmosphere of the Residency. George had intended to keep a cool

head on his shoulders and behave like an officer and a gentleman, paying attention to all the unattached young ladies so that he did not give fuel to the matrons who sat around watching the dancers like hawks, ready to exercise their gossiping tongues. But when Belinda walked into the ballroom on her father's arm, all George's good intentions flew out of the window. One look at his beloved and he was like a man in a trance. He crossed the floor, pushing past other young hopefuls who wished to have their name written on Belinda's dance card. He snapped his heels together and bowed from the waist, requesting the first waltz. After that he would have gladly floored any man who dared to claim her as a partner. They whirled around the floor to the strains of a Viennese waltz, a gavotte and a lively polka.

Belinda did not care that they were flouting the unwritten rules of the ballroom. She was happier than she had thought possible. The floor might have been empty of other couples for all she knew or cared. There were only two people in the whole world, herself and the handsome young officer who held her in his arms. The scent of his pomade and the faint musky smell of his body filled her nostrils, and the touch of his hand on her waist kindled a fire in her blood. Belinda could have cried when her father tapped George on the shoulder and claimed her for the schottische, but she made a brave attempt at a smile as he somewhat awkwardly steered her round the room.

'You're making a show of yourself, Belle,' he said gruffly. 'I'll have words with young Lawson in the

morning. Not that I blame him for wanting to monopolise the most beautiful girl in Simla, but it won't do, my pet. It just won't do.'

For the rest of the evening Belinda tried not to catch George's eyes, and when a young subaltern shyly asked permission to lead her in to supper she wanted to tell him to go to hell, but a stern glance from her father warned her not to do anything so rash. She allowed him to lead her into the dining room ablaze with candles, and the table set with all manner of tempting delicacies, but she had no appetite. She was constantly aware that George was glaring at her escort with a jealous frown, and although it thrilled and excited her, she was anxious for his sake. She managed to move close enough to talk to him having sent her escort to get her a glass of wine. 'We must be careful, George,' she whispered. 'Papa is suspicious.'

'I can't bear to see you with that young puppy.' George covered her hand with his. 'Every time he looks at you I want to kill him.'

Unfurling her fan, Belinda covered the lower part of her face so that she could answer without being observed. 'I think that might make Papa very cross, dearest.'

A reluctant smile curved his lips, and his heart swelled with love for her. He wanted to take her in his arms there and then, but he managed to restrain himself. 'Tomorrow, my darling. I'll see you at the club. I'm playing in the polo match.'

'Miss Phillips, I've brought you a glass of bubbly.'

Flashing George a brilliant smile behind her fan,

Belinda snapped it shut as she turned to the subaltern. 'Thank you, Bertie. That's very kind of you.' She could feel George's eyes willing her to look round, but she accepted the glass of champagne and took a sip. Bertie was watching her with the eagerness of a young puppy waiting for his master to throw him a ball, and she felt dizzy with power and also slightly ashamed of herself for enjoying the sensation.

Next day at the polo match, Belinda sat between Mrs Arbuthnot, wife of General Sir William Arbuthnot, and her companion Miss Minchin, a scrawny spinster schoolteacher whose father had been an army padre, but was long since deceased. The two ladies were chatting across her but Belinda's attention was devoted to watching George as he manoeuvred his spirited mount with superb control. It was hot, even though they were fanned by a cool breeze from the mountains, and despite the shade of her parasol Belinda could feel her chemise sticking to her flesh beneath the tight confines of her stays. She wished that she had not urged Mahdu to pull them in quite so tightly, even though her waist was reduced to a minute eighteen inches. There was a shout of approval from someone in the ranks as George scored, and the game ended with his team having triumphed. Until now Belinda had had little interest in polo and she was hazy as to the rules, but she understood winning and she could barely contain her delight when he leapt off his horse and came striding over to them. He doffed his topee to the two older ladies, his teeth flashing white against his dark

skin. 'I hope you enjoyed the game, Mrs Arbuthnot, Miss Minchin.'

Mrs Arbuthnot inclined her head with a tight little smile. 'Well played, Captain Lawson.'

'Well done, sir,' Miss Minchin echoed, eyeing George with distaste. He really was a forward young man, but then what would one expect from a person of mixed blood? She turned to her friend, pursing her lips and raising an eyebrow to show that she was being magnanimous and behaving like a true Christian, as her papa would have urged, even though she disapproved strongly of miscegenation.

Mrs Arbuthnot received the glance with the barest of nods, but she knew what Eulalie Minchin was thinking; it was written all too plainly on her extremely plain face. Mrs Arbuthnot twisted her lips into what she hoped was a convincing smile; after all Captain Lawson was an officer under her husband's command and despite the shortcomings of his birth, she was well aware of her duty to the regiment.

George had seen that look many times before and whereas once it would have cut him to the quick, it now simply amused him. Having done his duty by the ladies, he turned to Belinda. 'Will I see you in the club, Miss Phillips?'

She had risen from her seat and she twirled the parasol so that her face was hidden from the two older women. 'Yes, I think so, Captain. I would dearly love a glass of iced lemonade.' She pursed her lips to mime a kiss, putting her heart into a smile which was for him alone.

The urge to take her in his arms there and then and part her cherry lips with his tongue, kissing her until she swooned with delight, was almost overwhelming, but George merely inclined his head, tucked his topee beneath his arm and strode off to the changing rooms in the clubhouse.

‘My dear, you ought to be wary of that young man,’ Mrs Arbuthnot said sharply. ‘You know that your papa would disapprove strongly if you were to allow any intimacy to develop between you.’

The bubble of happiness that welled up in Belinda’s breast was burst in an instant. Last night she had been oblivious to everything and everyone while George held her in his arms, but Mrs Arbuthnot’s caustic remark brought her abruptly down to earth. She flinched, staring at the florid face of the Colonel’s wife. Perspiration trickled down the woman’s forehead, running into her pale grey eyes, watery like a sheep’s, Belinda thought angrily. She took a deep breath and forced her lips into a smile. ‘I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, ma’am. Captain Lawson is nothing to me, I assure you.’

Miss Minchin sniffed derisively. ‘That’s not what I heard, young lady. You and he made quite a show of yourselves at the Residency last evening. I was quite embarrassed for you.’

Mrs Arbuthnot heaved herself from her chair, fanning herself energetically. ‘What Eulalie says is quite true, Belinda. You are very young and impressionable, and he’s a handsome devil, but he’s not for you. Your poor mother would turn in her grave if her only child became involved with a half-caste.’

Belinda wanted to slap them both, but she had been well schooled in manners and she knew they were voicing the views held by many people, including her own father. She drew herself up to her full height. 'I may only be seventeen, ma'am, but I am quite well aware of my duty to my father and to the regiment. Now, if you'll excuse me, I would really like to go into the clubhouse where I am to meet Papa for tiffin.'

Without waiting for a response, Belinda picked up her skirts and made her way across the grass to the clubhouse. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure she was not being watched she changed course, avoiding the main entrance as she hurried to the rear of the building where the changing rooms were situated. It was, of course, out of bounds to ladies but she was desperate to spend a few moments alone with George, and she needed to tell him that Mrs Arbuthnot was suspicious and that they must be extra careful. She hid in the shadows, praying that he would be one of the first to emerge; it would be dreadfully embarrassing if she were to be spotted by his fellow officers. Two of the opposing team strolled out first but they were too busy chatting about the match to notice Belinda, and she heaved a sigh of relief as they walked off towards the main entrance. To her intense relief it was George who appeared next and she called his name softly. He stopped, turning to her in surprise. 'Belinda?'

She rushed towards him, throwing herself into his arms. 'I couldn't wait another second, George. They know about us. The old tabbies warned me against you.'

He held her briefly, and then gently pushed her away, glancing over his shoulder to make certain they had not been observed. 'We need to talk, my love,' he said urgently. 'I have something to tell you.'

'What? What is it, George? Oh, you must tell me now; I can't go in there and behave normally if you won't tell me what's wrong.'

He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. 'Will you come with me now, or are you supposed to meet Mrs Arbuthnot in the clubhouse?'

'No, I said I was having tiffin with Papa, but that was a ruse to get away from them.'

'Do you dare come to my quarters, Belle? The chaps are out on manoeuvres and we'll be quite alone. Would you risk your reputation just this once, my love?'

'Of course I will, George. I'd do anything for you.'

He brushed her lips with a kiss. 'Come on then. It's quiet at this time of day and we should be able to get there without being seen.'

Inside the wooden bungalow that George shared with two other officers, Belinda looked round the untidy room with a critical eye. 'It's not exactly luxurious, George. I thought you would be housed a little better than this.'

'They don't pander to us bachelors,' George said, grinning. 'Married quarters are much better.'

She turned to him, hands clasped over her breasts as her heartbeats quickened to an alarming rate. 'Are you proposing to me, Captain Lawson?'

He took her in his arms. 'Of course I am, my darling. I want to hold you and keep you safe from harm for the rest of my life. Will you marry me, Belle?'

'I will.' She raised her face, closing her eyes ready to receive the kiss that would seal their pledge, but although she could feel his breath on her cheek and the scent of him made her go weak at the knees, nothing happened. She opened her eyes, and found him looking at her with an expression of deep concern. 'What's the matter, George? What haven't you told me?'

'I only found out this morning, sweetheart. I'm to leave tomorrow for the North-West Frontier, and I don't know how long I'll be gone. It's just possible that I might never . . .'

She covered his mouth with hers, kissing him until he responded with equal fervour. Her bonnet fell to the floor as he raked his hand through her hair, releasing her curls so that the pins flew in all directions. There was desperation in their embrace and unbridled passion that would not be denied. He picked her up in his arms and carried her across the living room. Kicking open the door to his bedchamber, he laid her on the unmade bed. He leaned over her without touching her trembling body as he looked deeply into her eyes. 'I want you, my darling. We may never have this chance again, but if you tell me no, then I respect your wishes. We can be engaged in secret and I'll carry the memory of you in my heart.'

Belinda knew little of physical love but she was unafraid and ready to sacrifice her virginity and her reputation for the man who already owned her heart and soul. She reached up to touch his cheek, tracing the outline of his jaw with her finger. All the pent-up emotion of the past months, the denial and desire, had

come to a peak and she knew now that there was no turning back. She knotted her hands behind his head, pulling him down so that their lips almost touched. 'I will marry you in spirit and with my body, my dearest George. I love you and I'll always be yours.'

The news that Captain George Lawson had been killed in a skirmish with the Afghans on the Khyber Pass came three months later. Prostrate with grief Belinda lay on the chaise longue in her bedchamber, but her eyes were blind to the striking beauty of the magnificent vista outside. Her heart was shattered into tiny shards and she knew she would never love again, but her eyes were dry and there were no more tears to shed. She had sobbed for two days, refusing food and only taking sips of tea.

She heard footsteps but she did not look round.

Mahdu knelt beside her, placing a tray of food on the brass-topped table at Belinda's side. 'You must eat something, baba. If not for yourself then for his sake. The Captain would not want to see you suffering so.'

Belinda barely heard the words as the strangest of sensations inside her belly made her snap upright. 'I felt it move, Mahdu. My baby, his baby, it moved. My darling George isn't completely dead. Now I know for certain that I have his child to live for and love.'

Mahdu attempted to smile but she was afraid. She took Belinda's hand in hers, holding it as she had when her baba was a little girl and terrified of the dark. 'You will have to tell the Colonel. He has to know

soon, before you begin to show and the gossips begin to talk.'

Belinda closed her eyes, sinking back against the cushions. 'I daren't tell Papa. I'm afraid it will be the end of his career in the army. I can't do that to him, Mahdu. What shall I do? Help me, larla. I'm scared.'

Chapter Two

Cripplegate, London, December 1872

The undertaker's parlour was dark even at midday. The pale winter sun reflected off the snow outside, but the feeble rays barely managed to penetrate the grime-encrusted windowpanes. Cassy stood in the doorway clutching the tiny bundle wrapped in a tattered piece of old sheeting. She had made the short walk from Three Herring Court to Elias Crabbe's funeral parlour on many occasions in the past but the onerous task of bringing the dead babies to their last resting place never grew any easier. She swallowed hard, biting back the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes as she cradled the infant's body in her arms.

'Not another one so soon?' Elias eyed her with a sardonic curl of his thin lips. 'What does the old soak do to them poor little mites?' Despite his caustic words, he stepped forward to relieve Cassy of her burden. 'That's the third one this month and it ain't Christmas yet.'

'He was sick when he come,' Cassy said, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. 'Biddy said he was an eight-month baby and never stood a chance.'

Elias shook his head as he laid the pathetic corpse on the top of a gleaming mahogany coffin. 'How old are you, Cassy?'

'It's me tenth birthday today,' Cassy said proudly,

although she knew it would be no cause for celebration in Three Herring Court; Biddy didn't hold with birthdays and such.

Elias shook his head, tut-tutting. 'It ain't right that she sends you to do her dirty work.'

'I tried to look after him,' Cassy said, feeling that she was in some way to blame for the baby's demise. 'I sat up nights with him, mister. Honest I did, but he just seemed to fade away like he had no wish to live. Poor little chap never even cried, not like some of 'em that come to us; they never stop bawling for their mas, especially the older ones. It's enough to break a person's heart.'

Elias peeled back the none-too-clean sheet and his harsh features softened just a little as he stared down at the tiny child, who looked perfect in death like one of the marble cherubs Cassy had seen in the graveyard. 'Any known parents for this 'un, Cassy?'

She shook her head. 'Biddy never said there was. No parents and no money for the funeral. She said do the usual, Mr Crabbe.'

'As it happens there's a young woman died in childbed, her infant too, so this little fellow needn't be on his own.' He held out his hand. 'Money in advance, as usual.'

Cassy put her hand in her pocket and took out a silver shilling. 'There might be another before the day's out, guv. Little Freddie has the whooping cough something awful. I tried blowing flowers of sulphur down his throat but it made him sick. I dunno what else to do for him and that's the truth.'

'It ain't right. Old Biddy Henchard should be strung

up by the thumbs for the way she treats the nippers in her care and that includes you, young Cassy.’ Elias lifted the small body, holding it in the crook of his arm. ‘I’ll just settle this young fellah in with his new ma and sister. I don’t doubt he’ll be better off underground with them than raised in that rat-infested hovel. You should get away from there, girl. Take my advice and grab the first opportunity to escape from that old besom’s clutches.’

Cassy shrugged her thin shoulders. ‘You may be right, Mr Crabbe, but I got nowhere else to go, and if I left who would look after them poor children?’

‘You’re a good girl, Cassy. It’s a crying shame you ain’t got no one to look out for you.’

‘Oh, but I have, Mr Crabbe. There’s Bailey, he’s like the best brother a girl could have, and I ain’t no orphan. I got a ma but she’s an Indian lady, so Biddy says. I think she’s in service somewhere in London, and she comes once a year on me birthday to give Biddy the money for me keep. She comes in the dead of night so I ain’t seen her yet.’

Elias slammed his hand down on the coffin lid. ‘You earn your keep and more. It’s a disgrace that’s what it is, and if I ever sees your ma I’ll give her a piece of me mind.’

‘She can’t help it,’ Cassy cried passionately. ‘I’m sure she loves me but she has to earn her living and she can’t keep me, but one day I know she’ll come for me and take me home to India where it’s hot and sunny all the time.’

‘It would explain your looks,’ Elias said, squinting at her as if seeing her clearly for the first time. ‘It’s

obvious you don't come from round here, and with that black hair and them big dark eyes you'll either end up on the stage or on the streets. It's a crying shame but there's not much chance for anyone raised round here.' He opened a plain pine coffin and laid the tiny body carefully inside.

Cassy backed towards the door. The smell from inside the box was worse than the combined stench of the sewers and the horse muck, which was almost knee-deep on the streets beneath a frosting of snow. 'Got to go, Mr Crabbe.' She opened the door and stepped outside into the bitter cold. She shivered as she felt shards of ice piercing the thin soles of her boots, and snow melt seeped through the gaps in the worn leather uppers. She wrapped her shawl tightly around her head and shoulders as she started towards Three Herring Court and the only home she had ever known.

'Ho, wait for me, Cassy.'

She stopped, turning her head with a ready smile. 'Bailey. I thought you was sent on an errand.'

He caught up with her in long strides, his muffler flying out behind him like a pennant and his cap askew on his head. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes sparkled like chips of sapphire in his tanned face. Despite the fact that his jacket was a size too small, frayed at the cuffs and clumsily patched at the elbows, and his trousers barely came to the tops of his boots, he exuded warmth and vitality. 'I had to put some money on a fight for Biddy, and I went to the market and got something for you. It ain't your birthday every day of the week and you're into double numbers now.'

Cassy puffed out her chest. 'I'm almost a woman, ain't I, Bailey?'

Hooking his arm around her shoulders, he leaned down to plant a kiss on the tip of her nose. 'You're still my little sister, Cassy. Don't grow up too soon.'

She smiled up at him but she could not quite shake off the sadness that had enveloped her since the unnamed baby boy had died in her arms. 'I wouldn't be here at all if it wasn't for you,' she murmured. 'If it had been left to Biddy I'd have been dead long ago, just like them other poor little mites.'

He gave her a hug. 'Don't talk like that. We look out for each other and that's the truth.' He thrust his hand in his pocket and pulled out a bulging paper poke. 'Your favourite,' he said, grinning. 'Peppermint creams.'

Cassy tried not to snatch but her mouth was already watering as she anticipated the sweet minty taste. She popped one in her mouth, closing her eyes in ecstasy. 'Mmm,' she breathed. 'That's so lovely. I could eat peppermint creams all day.'

Her shawl had slipped off her head and Bailey ruffled her hair. 'Don't make yourself sick, little 'un.'

Stuffing another sweet in her mouth, Cassy grinned as she offered him the bag. 'Go on, take one. It's no fun enjoying meself all alone and you did buy them with your own money.' She hesitated, eyes widening as she watched him take one. 'You didn't use hers, did you?'

Bailey tapped the side of his nose, winking. 'Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies, young 'un.'

Cassy reached up to cuff him gently round the ear.

Her hand was too small to inflict pain and she did not intend to cause him harm, but she faced him like a small tiger. 'Call me that again and you'll get what for, Bailey Moon.'

He responded by lifting her off the ground and setting her on his shoulders. 'Let's get you home afore you catch a chill and end up in old Crabbe's parlour.'

She wrapped her arms around his neck as he jogged along the slippery pavement. His hands were warm on the bare skin of her calves as he held her in a firm grasp, but she felt safe with Bailey. He had been there for her as long as she could remember. He had protected her from Biddy's volatile tempers and drunken rages. It was Bailey who had looked after her when she almost died of measles, the dreaded childhood disease that had taken the lives of three of Biddy's youngest charges. He had wiped her nose when she cried and bathed her knees when she took a tumble. Bailey might not be her blood brother but he was something more to her; he was her whole family and she loved him dearly.

He set her down at the top of the steps leading into Three Herring Court. 'Best not look too happy when we go inside,' he said, setting his cap straight. 'Hide them sweets too, or she'll have 'em off you quicker than you can blink.'

'I'm ten, I ain't daft,' Cassy said, tucking what was left of her treat inside her ragged blouse. 'Let's hope she's dead drunk by now and we'll get a bit of peace.'

Bailey took her by the hand as they negotiated the slippery stone steps that were treacherous even in summer, worn down in the middle by the passage of

feet over two hundred years or more. Three Herring Court was a narrow street lined with run-down buildings that had had many uses over the centuries but now housed small businesses: a printer of religious tracts, a walking stick maker, a milliner who eked out a meagre living by taking in gentlemen lodgers, a pie maker of dubious repute, a candle maker whose small shop filled the street with the smell of hot wax and tallow, and an oriental gentleman who professed to practise Chinese herbal medicine but everyone knew he ran an illicit opium den. The rest of the dilapidated buildings were crammed with tenants, twenty to a room in some cases, and at the very end was Bidly Henchard's tall and narrow house which she advertised as a nursery and board school, but Cassy knew that the locals referred to it as a baby farm.

The front door groaned on rusty hinges as Bailey thrust it open. The stench outside was as nothing compared to the smell that assailed Cassy's nostrils as she followed him into the narrow hallway. Festoons of cobwebs hung from the ceiling and the walls had shed flakes of limewash to cover the bare boards like a powdering of snow. The mixed odours of dry rot, baby sick and the rancid stench of cheap tallow candles were almost overpowered by the fumes of jigger gin and tobacco smoke, which made the whole house reek like the taproom of a dockyard pub. Echoing throughout the building the wailing of infants came to a sudden halt, drowned out by a roar from Bidly's gin-soaked throat. 'Shut up you little buggers or I'll beat your brains out.'

Not for the first time, Cassy wanted to turn and run away from this nightmare place, but the sound of a child coughing and whooping put all thoughts of flight from her head. She hurried along the narrow passage that led into the one large room which served as a kitchen, living room and nursery for some of the youngest children. The bare floorboards were littered with scraps of half-eaten crusts, potato peelings and balls of fluff which might have been dead mice or simply an accumulation of dust and fibres. The furthest part of the room was in semi-darkness with a tattered curtain drawn across the window which overlooked the court, and it was here that the children were stacked in boxes and crates like goods in a warehouse. The smell of ammonia from urine-soaked bedding was enough to floor an ox, let alone a ten-year-old child. Cassy covered her nose and mouth with her hand, shocked by the noxious fumes even though she was used to living in such conditions. The air outside had seemed sweet in comparison to the rank odour in the nursery. She made a move to snatch Freddie from the wooden crate where he spent most of his time but Biddy, who had obviously been asleep in a high-backed Windsor chair by the range, rose to her feet clutching a gin bottle in her hand and she advanced on him with a ferocious snarl.

Cassy snatched the infant up in her arms as a paroxysm of coughing racked his tiny body. 'Leave him alone, missis.'

Biddy squinted at her through half-closed eyes. 'Where've you been?' She took a swipe at Cassy's head

but her aim fell far short. She staggered drunkenly and would have fallen if Bailey had not caught her. He pushed her unceremoniously back onto her seat.

'I think you've had plenty, missis. The drink will be the death of you if you ain't careful.'

With the bottle still clutched in her hand, Bidy pulled the cork out with her teeth and took a swig. 'I ain't drunk enough. When I can't see or hear them horrible brats, that's when I stop.' She closed her eyes, holding the bottle to her lips and tipping its contents down her throat as if it were water.

Cassy hitched baby Freddie over her shoulder, patting his back in a vain effort to help him breathe. 'He ought to see the doctor,' she whispered. 'I dunno what else to do, Bailey.'

He angled his head, glancing from the suffering infant to the shapeless form of Bidy slumped in her chair. 'He don't look too good. I think it's the hospital for young Freddie, if we ain't too late already.'

'Don't say that,' Cassy cried, hugging Freddie closer to her thin chest. 'I won't let him die. I won't.'

'Well, she's dead to the world,' Bailey remarked, jerking his head in Bidy's direction. 'C'mon, we'll take him to Bart's. They'll see him for free, only it might be a long wait.'

Cassy bit her lip. She knew that Bailey was right, but it would mean leaving the other young children to Bidy's tender care, and that was worse than nothing. She was torn between love and duty. She had formed a bond with little Freddie and he was clinging to her now as if his life depended upon it, which of

course it did. 'I'll take him if you'll stay here and look after the others.'

Bailey shook his head. 'I ain't no nursemaid, Cassy.'

'Oh, please, Bailey.' Her bottom lip trembled as she fought to hold back tears. 'He needs me to hold him. He'll be scared stiff of them men in white coats.'

'Then I'm the best one to take him,' Bailey said, gently prising Freddie from her arms. 'I won't stand no nonsense from them doctors and nurses. You stay here and tend to the babes; they need you more than he does just now.'

Cassy knew that he was talking sense but the sight of Freddie's stricken face and the way he held his arms out to her almost broke her heart. 'Take him then, and hurry.'

'I'll be quick as I can.' Holding Freddie as tenderly as any woman, Bailey strode out of the room.

Tending to the remaining infants kept Cassy fully occupied, but her thoughts were with Freddie. She knew that doctors were clever coves who had spent years at school studying books, and that made them able to cure even the sickest person. Bailey had told her all manner of interesting things that he had learned at the ragged school. Biddy had sent him there, he said, because she could neither read nor write and she needed someone to answer letters from anxious mothers who had put their children in her care. Then there was the matter of sending out bills to those tardy in paying the cost of care for their offspring, although Cassy was painfully aware that Biddy accepted payment for infants long dead, and only admitted their demise if threatened with

a visit from the parent or if they were in a position to reclaim their fostered child.

Cassy sat on a low stool with baby Anna in her arms, feeding her cow's milk from a spoon. Head lice crawled through the infant's thin blonde hair and Cassy's scalp itched at the sight of them. They were all infested with parasites, including fleas and roundworms, but so were all the other children who lived in Three Herring Court. Cleanliness came a poor third to having enough to eat and keeping warm in winter. There was a pump on the corner of the court but the water was often contaminated with sewage, causing outbreaks of cholera and dysentery, and in summer Bidy forbade them to drink it. She provided small beer for the older children and milk for the infants, but both were in short supply and Cassy had to ration out their meagre allowance each day.

Milk dribbled out of the corners of Anna's mouth and she closed her eyes with the barest breath of a sigh. Cassy laid the baby in the wooden orange box that served as her crib. Anna was probably six months old, although like the others she had not come with a birth certificate and her exact age was a matter of conjecture. She had been frail and puny right from the start and she would, Cassy thought sadly, be unlikely to see her first birthday whenever that might be. She changed the baby's soiled rags and put her down in her box on a bed of straw covered by a thin piece of blanket. Anna looked like a wax doll, and it seemed to Cassy as though she was already laid out in her coffin. A cold shiver ran down her spine, and she turned her attention to Samuel who was bawling his head off.

At nine months old he was already displaying the qualities of a fighter. She knew instinctively that he would survive against all odds, and she gave him a cuddle as she lifted him from the tea chest where Bidly insisted that he must be kept since he was trying to crawl and might otherwise come to harm.

Samuel stopped crying and tugged at her hair with surprising strength. She set him on her knee and fed him on tiny morsels of stale bread soaked in the milk that Anna had not managed to drink. When he had eaten his fill, Cassy changed his rags for clean ones and allowed him to crawl around the flagstone floor for a while, although when he tried to put a dead cockroach in his mouth she decided it was time to put him back in the tea chest. He protested loudly, but with his belly full he soon fell asleep. There were two more tiny tots, twin girls who had been brought to the house a few months ago by a young woman with a painted face and tragic eyes. She had sobbed brokenheartedly, begging Bidly to be kind to her newborn babies and promising to return once a month with money for their keep. Bidly had nodded and made the appropriate noises but as soon as the door closed on the unhappy mother, she had thrust the infants into Bailey's arms. 'That's the last we'll see of her,' she had said grimly. 'Stow them in a box and give them enough just enough to keep the little buggers quiet. If they should take sick and pass away, no one will be the wiser.'

This callous remark had upset Cassy more than she had words to express, and Bailey protested loudly but was silenced by a clout round the head from Bidly

that sent him reeling backwards against the kitchen wall. He had clenched his fists and threatened to retaliate but on seeing Cassy's stricken face he had seemingly changed his mind, and had put the twin girls to bed in a herring box filled with fresh straw. He had waited until late that night when Bidy staggered back from the pub and had fallen into a drunken stupor, and Cassy had helped him feed the infants with warm milk. They continued to succour them in secret and the twins clung stubbornly to life, much to the delight of their mother who confounded Bidy's fears by turning up regularly once a month with money for their keep. Cassy watched the young prostitute cradle her babies in her arms, crooning to them and kissing their tiny wrinkled faces as if they were the most precious things in the world.

'They ain't got no names,' Cassy said shyly. 'What shall you call 'em, missis?'

The light dimmed in the young woman's eyes. 'I doubt if I'll be here to see my babies grow up, but they should have good names. Heaven knows I'm a sinner, but what choice did I have?' She fixed Cassy with a questioning stare as if expecting her to offer a benediction.

'I dunno, missis,' Cassy murmured, shuffling her bare feet on the cold flagstones.

'None, I tells you, little girl. I was sold to an evil man when I were not much older than you. Now I makes me living the only way I knows how, and it ain't what I wants for me girls.'

Cassy looked up into the raddled face of the woman,

who might have been any age from sixteen to thirty. Tears had made runnels in the paint on her face and her eyes were red-rimmed. Cassy said nothing and the woman clutched her babies to her breast.

‘Charity and Mercy,’ she murmured, closing her eyes. ‘I ain’t seen much of either, so I hope they fare better than their ma.’ She kissed each one on the forehead and laid them back in their box. ‘Goodbye, my little dears.’

The words sounded final even to Cassy’s ears and she was alarmed. ‘But you’ll be back to see them soon, won’t you?’

‘I’m sick, dearie. Something you wouldn’t know nothing about. I’ll come if and when I can, but I want you to promise to look after me babes.’ She reached out to grasp Cassy’s hand. ‘Promise.’

‘I’ll do me best.’

The mother had returned one more time, and Cassy could see a startling change in her appearance. Without the paint, her face was white as the snow outside except for livid bruises around both eyes and a split lip that could not disguise the gap where two of her front teeth were missing. She was even thinner than before and her eyes were sunken. She looked old, Cassy thought; older even than Biddy. The poor creature had wept when she said goodbye to her babies and her sobs had echoed round the court as she limped away.

‘We won’t see her again,’ Biddy said, pocketing the handful of coins. ‘Half measures for them little bastards from now on. I ain’t a bloody charity.’

Brought painfully back to the present by the mewling

of the twins, and with concern for Freddie pressing down on her like a black cloud, Cassy made a pot of tea using tea leaves that had already been brewed several times and left out to dry. The resultant liquid was pale, straw-coloured and tasted more like hot water than a refreshing beverage, but it warmed her stomach and made it easier to swallow the stale bread which was all she had to eat. When all the babies finally slept, she set about tidying the room although it would have been a daunting task for someone twice her size. She swept the floor and emptied the dustpan out of the window into the yard, sending a shower of dead cockroaches to feed the crows and sparrows. A gust of ice-cold air filled the room and Bidy stirred, snorted loudly and then fell back into a drunken stupor.

Cassy went outside to the pump but found it frozen solid. She filled a bucket with snow and took it indoors to melt on the range. The fire was burning low and there was very little coal left in the sack. She could do nothing about it until Bailey returned and she sat down to wait. The infants might be asleep but the house was filled with sound of movement and people talking, shouting and the occasional slamming of doors. In the room directly above her she could hear the deep rumble of a man's voice followed by shrieks of female laughter. There was a brief silence followed by the rhythmic creak of the bedsprings, suggesting that Wall-eyed Betty was at it again with one of her gentlemen. Well, a girl had to live as Betty often said with a wink of her pale blue eye; the other was brown, hence her nickname. She shared the room with Edna, a fresh-faced girl from the country

who had come to London to seek her fortune and in less than a year had changed into a shrill she-cat with a voice that could shatter glass, and a vocabulary of swear words that even made Bailey blush.

Thinking of Bailey, Cassy went to the front door to peer out into the snow, hoping to see him coming down the steps with Freddie in his arms, all well and smiling, but there were only the birds scavenging for food. A door opened and the crippled boot maker limped out with a pair of shiny new boots tied together by the laces and hung about his neck like the decoration on a Christmas tree. He acknowledged Cassy with a nod of his head, and leaning heavily on his crutches he moved across the snow like a bluebottle skating on a bowl of melted fat.

She was about to close the door when she noticed a stranger standing at the top of the steps. It was more than curiosity that made Cassy stare at the woman who had stopped to speak to the boot maker. Her breath hitched in her throat and she started forward, breaking into a run. 'Mama,' she screamed. 'Mama, you've come for me.' Slipping and sliding, oblivious to the cold that gnawed at her bones, Cassy hurled herself into the dark-skinned woman's arms.

Mahdu was almost bowled over by the force of the small child who clung to her and gazed up into her face with an expression of sheer delight. 'Cassandra?' she whispered. 'Is it really you?'

'I'm Cassy and you are my ma. I knew you'd come for me on my birthday. Are we going back to India now?'

'Best take her indoors,' the boot maker said as he

negotiated the steps, swinging himself up on his wooden crutches. 'But be careful of the old cow. She'll have that fine cloak off you, missis. It'll be sold at the Rag Fair in Rosemary Lane afore you can blink.'

Mahdu took Cassy by the hand. 'Let's go indoors, larla. It is too cold out here for you.'

Cassy could hardly bear to take her eyes from the dark-skinned lady's face. She wanted to drink in every detail of the fine eyes, almond-shaped and the deepest darkest brown so that they appeared black, and the silky hair shining like coal in the bright light with just a touch of silver at the temples. She felt the material of the woman's cloak, fingering it in wonder that anyone could wear anything so fine. There was not a moth hole or a patch in sight and the lady smelt nice, like a bunch of exotic flowers. 'You are my ma, aren't you?' Cassy whispered eagerly, and yet she was afraid to hear the truth.

Mahdu nodded her head. 'We will agree on that, little one. But now I must see your guardian.'

'Me what?' Cassy stopped in her tracks. 'What's a guardian?'

'Biddy Henchard, the woman who takes care of you.' Mahdu angled her head, staring at Cassy's ragged blouse and skirt. 'Although looking at you, I don't think she does her job very well.'

'You're right there, Ma. Biddy only takes care of herself, but you should know that. You come every year when I'm asleep, she told me so.'

'Yes,' Mahdu said with a sigh. 'I should have insisted on seeing you in the daylight, but I had my reasons.'

‘Never mind that,’ Cassy said, taking her by the hand. ‘Come inside, Ma. You’ll freeze to death out here and I can see that you’re a lady and used to fine things.’ She led Mahdu through the snow that was rapidly turning to slush, its pristine whiteness violated and sullied by footprints turning black as the filth below was brought to the light.

Mahdu gave an involuntary gasp of dismay as Cassy showed her into the house. ‘I’ve only been here in the dark,’ she murmured. ‘It was different then.’

‘It could be worse,’ Cassy said cheerfully. ‘Come into the kitchen. I cleaned it up so it ain’t looking too bad.’ She thrust the door open with a grand gesture. ‘See how well I done, Ma. I earns me keep. She can’t deny that.’

‘My poor child. I don’t know what to say.’ Mahdu looked about her in horror. ‘This is even worse than I remembered.’

Cassy held her finger to her lips. ‘Shush, Ma. Don’t wake Bidy yet. There’s so much I want to ask you.’ She pulled up a chair, dusting the seat with the hem of her skirt. ‘Sit down, and I’ll make you a cup of tea.’

Mahdu sank down onto the hard wooden seat. She picked up her skirts as a rat scuttled across the floor to disappear into a hole in the skirting board, and she shuddered. ‘This is wrong, Cassandra. We cannot allow this to go on.’

Cassy had been draining the tea leaves and was about to refresh them with water from the kettle but she paused, staring at Mahdu and hardly daring to hope. ‘You’re going to take me with you?’

‘Not today, larla. You must understand that it is not up to me. I must speak to my mistress and then perhaps we can come to some arrangement.’

‘I don’t understand.’ Cassy swallowed hard. She must not cry. Only babies cried.

‘I work for a kind lady,’ Mahdu said gently. ‘She is very concerned about you but there are difficulties which you would not understand.’

‘If she’s so kind then why won’t she let you take me home with you?’

‘There are reasons, larla.’

Cassy sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. ‘Me name’s Cassy, not larla.’

‘You must trust me, Cassy.’ Mahdu produced a reticule from beneath her cloak and from it she took a small silk purse, placing it on the table.

The clink of the coins brought an instant reaction from Bidy, who opened one eye and then the other. She snatched the purse, weighing it in her hand. ‘What d’you mean coming here in the daytime? Ain’t I told you to come after dark?’

‘You did, but I’m here now and I’m not happy with what I see.’ Mahdu rose to her feet, towering over Bidy with an air of superiority that impressed Cassy and seemed to make Bidy shrink in size.

‘Let’s see the colour of your money afore I throw you out on the street,’ Bidy said, tipping the coins from the purse. Golden sovereigns gleamed in the fire-light and she picked one up to bite it between her remaining two teeth. ‘You’ve paid your dues, now get out.’

'No,' Cassy cried, rushing across the floor to fling her arms around Mahdu. 'Don't leave me, Ma.'

Biddy heaved her bulk from the chair, her mobcap awry. 'Very touching. I won't say a word if you get out of that door this minute.'

Cassy felt Mahdu stiffen and she was frightened. 'Don't take no notice of her, Ma. Take me with you now.'

'I cannot, little one. But I will return, I promise you.' Mahdu extricated herself from Cassy's frantic grasp. 'Be brave, larla. This cannot go on.' She made for the door but Cassy ran after her, clinging to her skirts.

'No, don't leave me again, Ma. Not now you've found me. I'll work for your lady. I'll do anything if you'll take me with you.'

Biddy's hand shot out and she grabbed Cassy by the hair, jerking her roughly away from Mahdu. She glared at her, twisting Cassy's long dark hair until she cried out in pain. 'Keep your trap shut, woman,' Biddy hissed. 'I could set the paving stones on fire if I told what I know, so be warned.'

Mahdu hesitated in the doorway, her expression bleak. 'We shall see.' She left the room and at the sound of the front door opening and then closing again, Biddy released Cassy, throwing her across the room.

'One word from you and I'll slit your throat, you little bastard. We'll see who has the upper hand.'

Chapter Three

Belinda sat in front of her dressing table, staring at her reflection in the mirror. The eyes that looked back at her were the same as they had always been, large and blue, fringed with long corn-coloured lashes, but the expression in them was not that of the young girl desperately in love. These were the eyes of a woman ten years older and wiser in the ways of the world but far from happy. In the room behind her she could see the reflected trappings of wealth and luxury that marriage to Sir Geoffrey Davenport had brought her. The elegant Louis Quinze furniture had been imported especially from France in order to please a young bride. The luxurious Chinese carpet in pastel shades of pink and blue complemented the swags and curtains at the tall Georgian windows of their town house in South Audley Street, and exactly matched the hangings on the four-poster bed. The cut-glass jars and perfume bottles and the silver-backed hairbrushes and mirror set neatly on the table in front of her went unnoticed and were taken for granted. The diamond rings on her fingers and the earrings that sparkled with each movement of her head meant nothing when compared to the hollow where once her heart had beaten for joy at the sound of a man's voice and the touch of his hand.

Belinda studied the looking-glass and Lady Davenport stared back at her, still young and beautiful at the age of twenty-seven, but a pale shadow of her former self. She sighed and her lips curved into a wry smile. She might be known as an accomplished and charming hostess and the wife of an eminent diplomat, but only she and Mahdu knew that the woman who moved about London society with such grace and apparent ease was a living ghost, a polished gem with no feelings or desires other than to sparkle and be admired. Belinda's heart was buried with the love of her life in a far distant grave, and the child whom she adored had been wrested from her arms the moment their ship had docked in London. Tears welled in her eyes as she remembered that foggy day in February when her three-month-old baby had been taken from her. She could still feel the tug of that tiny but insistent mouth on her nipples as she had given Cassandra her last feed, and the pain of her breasts engorged with milk that continued to flow for days after the baby was spirited away. Only Mahdu knew of her suffering, and it was she who had found a woman to care for the innocent love-child, whose only crime was to be born out of wedlock. Belinda dashed away the tears that trickled down her cheeks. Today was her daughter's tenth birthday, but there was little likelihood that she would ever see her child again.

She rested her forehead on her hand, trying hard to suppress the bitterness she still felt for her father, who had died not in battle but from an attack of cholera three years previously in the military hospital in Delhi.

He had been the one who engineered her marriage to Sir Geoffrey, who at the time was a widowed district officer who had elected to return to London, having accepted a prestigious position in the Foreign Office. Their courtship had of necessity been brief, fitted in between Sir Geoffrey's return to Delhi from Peshawar and his passage back to England. There had been the formal introduction, followed by well-chaperoned meetings that culminated in a rather stilted proposal of marriage in the grounds of the Red Fort. Schooled by her father and caring little what happened to her, she had accepted politely but with little enthusiasm. If Sir Geoffrey had been disappointed by her lukewarm response he did not show it; in fact he seemed relieved to have brought the matter to a satisfactory conclusion. It was, as Belinda told Mahdu later, as if he had negotiated a truce between warring factions and could retire from the battlefield with honours. He had kissed her hand and then, strangest of all, had blurted out the fact that he had a five-year-old son living in England and did not want to go through all that wretched business of having another child. He must, he had said gruffly, make that plain from the start so that she understood the situation and accepted the fact that there would be no issue from their union. He might have expanded on this further, but Colonel Phillips and the rest of the party emerged from the Red Fort ready it seemed to offer their congratulations even before the engagement had been announced. Belinda was to discover later that Sir Geoffrey's first wife, again a much younger woman, had died in childbirth, for