

A Touch of Mercy

Chapter 2

“Certainly not what I had thought my life would bring,” Mercy told herself in wry amusement, but it was honest work and not beyond her abilities. She had managed to convince the owners of a small inn in Derbyshire to hire her to replace their regular maid for the week the girl would be tending to a death in her family.

The Pawleys had provided her two meals each day, along with bread and tea to break her fast. It had been so long since Mercy had eaten more than an overripe apple or a handful of berries for a meal that it was a real struggle not to wolf down the simple stew Mrs. Pawley had placed before her. Her hand trembled as the spoon approached her mouth. Mercy closed her eyes and savored each potato and pea and stringy chunk of lamb as if the finest French chef made it. Not that Mercy had ever eaten such delicious offerings. *Better than escargot*, she thought with wry amusement. The thought of eating snails turned her stomach on its head. Yet, she had heard of the practice, and she knew the dish was reportedly a delicacy most cherished. “Ye’ve been doin’ without?” Mrs. Pawley had said perceptively. Mercy had dropped her eyes and nodded. Thankfully, the inn mistress had said no more.

The work had been backbreaking, but certainly no more tiring than walking from sun up to sun down. At least, it held a familiarity. At Foresthill Hall, Mercy had often assisted the few maids her brother had employed with the household duties. True, she had never washed the laundry, but Mercy had assisted her brother’s servants with changing the bed linens and airing the rugs. In return, the Foresthill maids had agreed to sleep in her room. It was how she and the girls had avoided Geoffrey’s gaming friends when the men were deep in their cups.

“Another penny,” she exclaimed in delight as she swept the floor under the bed of the recently vacated room. It was the third one in as many days. As Mercy fished it from between the slats of wood, she thanked her lucky stars for delivering her to the Pawleys’ doorstep. She would not become rich, but when she set out on the road again, Mercy would do so with renewed determination.

“I shall reach London,” she had told her image in the cut class mirror setting on the small table. When Mercy had arrived in Derbyshire, she had reached her lowest point. Nearly of the persuasion of lying down in the road and allowing God to decide her fate. “Odd how a meal and a warm, dry bed can change a person’s stars.”

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For three days Aidan had stood attendance upon the Linworth household. He had escorted the ladies into the village several times, and he had dutifully spent time with Kerrington’s son Daniel. Soon the boy would be leaving for school, and the child was full of questions on what to expect and how best to survive. Aidan had enjoyed his time with the boy, but it had highlighted all things missing in his life.

With Susan’s death, Aidan had permitted her parents to raise the child. Legally, he could have kept the boy, but he had made a commitment to Shepherd and the Realm; and, in truth, he could not love the child as his son. Every time, Aidan had looked upon the boy, especially after Susan’s death and the demise of his hopes for contentment in his marriage, he had seen his brother’s betrayal in the child’s face. The boy had favored

Andrew rather than the Rhodes family. "Perhaps..." he whispered to the empty room. He closed his eyes to erase the images demanding his heart.

Perhaps, if he and Susan could have put their disaccord aside, he might have felt different about the child. Perhaps he might have called the babe "Son." But any warmth he and Susan had once shared had dissipated while he was away on the Continent.

Mr. Haley had reported Susan's "episodes" to him upon Aidan's return. His once vivacious friend and youthful lover walked the halls of Lexington Arms in a depressed state. Her grief was so great Aidan had thought not to marry her, but it was his father's dying wish to know the future heir to the title would remain under Aidan's protection. And the child was Lexington Arms' future. Aaron Kimbolt was Aidan's heir unless Aidan married and produced an heir of his own. He was ashamed to say he wished to hear the word "father" rather than "uncle" when he thought of his title's future.

On Wednesday, Worthing and Godown had unexpectedly returned. They had come across a bit of luck in their search for a special license. Instead of having to ride to London and Doctors' Commons, they had learned the Archbishop had remained at Durham longer than expected, and they had returned after only three days. Meanwhile, Godown's three aunts and the Realm leader, Aristotle Pennington, had arrived on Linton Park's doorstep.

With the extra company, after supper, the ladies retired to the drawing room, and the men enjoyed their cigars and French brandy. Despite their close acquaintance, Aidan had felt disconnected from his friends. Each of the other three had an air of completeness, which he had yet to discover. His stomach clutched tightly from loneliness.

"I was not aware of your long standing relationship with Godown's aunts," Aidan had ventured when the marquis slipped from the room to have a word with his valet.

The man they had all known as "Shepherd" until only recently scowled. Aristotle Pennington traced his finger up and down the glass's stem. Finally he said, "I am from the same neighborhood as the former Crowden sisters. Our relationship has seen the test of time."

Evidently, Kerrington's curiosity had also been piqued by Pennington's sudden appearance as escort to Godown's aunts. "I have often wondered how Crowden came to us, especially as the marquis possessed no experience in service to the King prior to joining the Realm."

Pennington remained staunchly stone faced, but he said, "It was a break in regulations," he confessed. "Yet, the boy served well, as I assured you he would."

Kerrington nodded his agreement. "Crowden's skills with languages, the sword, and cunning proved most valuable, and I meant no disparagement, Pennington."

"Perhaps, the truth," Aidan encouraged. "None of us would speak unkindly of whatever you disclose. On the contrary, we would celebrate your happiness. You have never led us astray, and we wish you well."

Pennington shot Kerrington a knowing look, which appeared to contradict Aidan's words, but the man smiled wryly. "I held no title, and a man with no title cannot aspire to marry a marquis's daughter. Yet, as I reflect upon those dark days, they drove me to earn my position in the British government." Pennington chuckled ironically. "In many ways, I wield more power than any duke of the Realm."

“Have you renewed your plea to the Dowager Duchess?” Kerrington asked curiously. Aidan looked on as the Realm leader squirmed in his seat. He had never witnessed Shepherd so nervous. It seemed even a man of advanced years had found love. *Everyone but me*, he thought with regret. Bitterness rushed in to fill his chest.

“Bel wishes things settled with Godown before we consider joining, but be known I have begun a search for an estate appropriate for the widow of a duke. Bel will relinquish her identity with an exchange of our vows. I wish her role as Mrs. Pennington to give her peace.”

Kerrington ventured, “I imagine the Duchess holds no worries in that manner.

Aidan asked, “And what of your position?” Aidan could not imagine the Realm without Aristotle Pennington as its head. The man was a walking history of British military and covert intelligence. “Who has the knowledge to replace you? You cannot be both a country gentleman and the Realm’s leader.”

Pennington smiled that secret smile, which always drove Aidan crazy. “I have chosen my successor. That is all I will say on the subject at this time.”

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Mercy’s newfound optimism floundered when the cold rain had begun. She had set her sights upon London once again. The Pawleys’ regular maid had returned yesterday, and Mercy had regretfully gathered her meager belongings. Mary Purefoy, the maid, had graciously permitted Mercy to share her small room for one last evening; otherwise Mercy would have been forced to be on the road some twelve hours earlier.

Mrs. Pawley had fed her a hearty breakfast and had given Mercy a small loaf of dark bread to see her on her way. “If’n ye are ever in the neighborhood agin’,” the woman offered. “Ye must come to us. Mr. Pawley and me be thankful to welcome you.”

Mercy had been sorry to leave the woman, not only because of the nourishing food and the dry bed, but because the Pawleys had shown her a great consideration. It had been so long since Mercy had known true human kindness that she thought she would miss the couple’s empathy more so than she would miss the Pawley’s warm kitchen.

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“Congratulations, Your Lordship,” Aidan had waited for Lucifer to speak his peace to the marquis. Aidan had asked Godown to join him and Lucifer in a private drawing room. It was a bit unusual, but Lucifer Hill had served beside the members of the Realm as their eighth man. Hill had saved each of their lives at one time or another, and they had rushed to save his more often than Aidan could recall. Men who shared such moments held a bond beyond class or station. “It pleases me you have found a worthy mate, my Lord.”

The marquis smiled that silly grin, which had not departed Gabriel Crowden’s countenance since Grace Nelson’s appearance in the Linton Park chapel. “Lady Godown will bring a sense of order to Gossling Hill. I thank you for your well wishes.” Godown had accepted Lucifer’s hand in parting. “Now, if you will excuse me, I must return to the wedding breakfast before the Three Roses think me displeased with my choice of brides.”

“A man must only look upon your countenance, my Lord, to see your true regard for the lady,” Hill asserted.

Surprisingly, the marquis did not contradict the statement. *So Hill sees what I do*, Aidan thought. It was a moment of triumph and regret.

“Be safe, Hill,” Godown said graciously. “And keep the viscount from harm.”

“I will do my best, Sir.” Hill bowed as the marquis exited.

Aidan watched Godown go before he said, “I will remain at Linton Park until Godown’s aunts follow the marquis to Staffordshire. Pennington has asked for my escort as far as Cheshire.”

Hill nodded his understanding. “Your delay will provide me time to make certain everything at Lexington Arms is set aright before your arrival.”

Aidan smiled easily. “Do not go berating everyone again. I have no desire to listen to a litany of complaints upon my return.”

“You know I have no patience for those who waste my time,” Hill defended himself.

Aidan grasped the man’s shoulder. “And I am a better man for your allegiance, my Friend. You will hold to the marquis’s warning to take care.” He shook Hill’s hand. “Have you said your farewells to Hannah?”

“Aye, Sir.” Hill nervously reached into his pocket. “Before you leave Linton Park, would you ask Lady Worthing to present this small gift to Hannah on Christmas? It is a token of my devotion.” His friend’s voice had taken on an emotional tone, like sand rubbing against a stone, and Aidan felt the same twinge of jealousy, which had plagued him of late.

Aidan accepted the brown paper wrapped package. It grieved him he would not know the pleasure of giving a simple gift to a beloved one. “Why did you not give it to Hannah yourself?”

“The woman has shed enough tears with my leaving,” Hill confessed. “Plus, I wish Hannah to realize she is in my thoughts when we are separated. It is important for a woman to have something upon which to hang her hopes. Viscount Worthing was saying just the same the other day.”

Aidan thought of poor Susan. Had his young wife not had something upon which to pen her dreams? Had such a thought been the source of Susan’s bedlam? Had there been a means by which he could have saved her? Had Susan wished to be saved? “I will see to it personally.”

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The rain came down in miserable sheets of icy stiffness; yet, Henry Hill barely noticed the elements. His mind remained on the heart-shaped face of Hannah Tolliver. Despite his protests to the contrary, he had been sore to leave Lady Worthing’s maid behind. “Nothing to be done but to serve His Lordship,” Hill grumbled as he adjusted the reins to keep the open wagon safely in the muddy grooves of the country road. Hill recognized better than most how much the viscount had suffered of late, but that particular fact did little to lessen the heartbreak of leaving Hannah behind. “Ah, my Girl,” he said to the open countryside. “Think of me often, my Hannah, for I will be thinking of you.”

As each water-filled rut in the road wore a sore along his backside, Hill reflected on the past couple of months. In the midst of a misguided kidnapping, Lachlan Charters had delivered a mighty blow to the back of Viscount Lexford’s head. Not only had His Lordship lost the woman he courted during the chaos, which followed, but also Lord Lexford had suffered a worse fate than the loss of a potential love. “The viscount’s memory plagues him, but, in truth, Lexford lost his heart and his dreams long before Charters’s attack.”

Hill sighed heavily. The weight of so many troubles rested upon his shoulders for he meant to see Lord Lexford happy before Lucifer claimed Hannah as his wife. "Damn fool," Hill grumbled. "His Lordship should never have pursued Miss Aldridge. The girl was never of a nature to appreciate Lord Lexford's gentleman's code. The lady will fare better with Wellston. The earl possesses a wild streak not found in Lord Lexford. And as for the other one: Miss Satiné." Hill spat the Aldridge girl's name as if it were poison. "She lacks a spine. Too much like the former Viscountess Lexford. Run away at the first sign of strife."

From an interested distance, Lucifer had observed the viscount's pursuit of one female after another, but none could absolve Lord Lexford from his guilt. Lucifer had served the viscount since their time together on the Continent, and he suspected he knew more of Aidan Kimbolt than had the viscount's late father.

Lord Lexford had saved Henry Hill from a torturous end. Hill and a dozen other British soldiers had found themselves prisoners behind enemy lines. He always thought he could have escaped upon his own, but Lucifer could not have left his fellow Englishmen behind. When the day of their deaths arrived, he had made his peace with God and with his decision to stay. But much to his relief, Lord Lexford had come charging into the camp, followed by James Kerrington and Marcus Wellston. Three Englishmen who could fight like twenty good men, and despite his complete exhaustion, Lucifer had taken up the cause. Within minutes, the four of them had stood triumphant. It was a proud moment: One to be savored by a man, who had not known such exquisite glory before then.

The incident had given Lucifer a 'hunger' to be a better person. To return to his letters and to learn from these heroes. At the time, he had pledged his allegiance to Viscount Lexford. He had given his word he would serve Lord Lexford for a period of ten years. He had done so out of gratitude, but his were not all altruistic reasons. Lucifer had wanted to associate with men of the caliber of those who had served as his rescuers. To hitch his stars with such greatness. That choice had been made some seven years prior, and although he knew His Lordship would release him from his vow, as easily as had the British government, Lucifer refused to break his promise. However, the thought of the happiness he could know if he could make Hannah his wife certainly tempted him to beg for his independence.

"Cannot leave His Lordship's service until I see the man well settled. Especially now that his missus's memory haunts him," Lucifer reasoned aloud. "The problem lies in the means by which His Lordship seeks a replacement for the former viscountess. In his misplaced guilt, the viscount looks only upon women, who favor the late Lady Lexford. In my opinion, His Lordship requires a miss who is Lady Lexford's opposite. Lord Lexford should not wallow in his memories. He should place Lady Lexford firmly in the past. The lady was never a true wife to the man."

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The rain had soaked through her cloak and all the layers of clothing, but Mercy continued her slow steady walk to freedom. She must find a place to spend the night. December weather in Derbyshire could be quite harsh, and open fields would be no place for a girl alone

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Hill flicked the reins across the horses' backs. The rain had greatly delayed his return to Lexington Arms, and irritation hunched his shoulders in the manner, which only Hannah's soft touch could cure. "It will be a long time before I will see my sweet gel again," he warned his wayward heart. As they had done for the last few hours, his musings might have continued along the same lines, but a bizarre sight caught Hill's attention. "What in Heavens' name?" he exclaimed as he pulled up on the reins.

Sitting on a stile was a gargoyle-like figure. Some four feet in height, whatever it was, it did not move. Having experienced more than one ambush during his years with Lord Lexford and the Realm, Hill proceeded slowly. He reached for his gun before crawling down carefully from the bench seat. Cautiously, he edged closer to the figure for a better look. "Easy, Boy," he cooed as his hand caressed the horse's rump. Stepping heavily into the thick mud, he steadied his stance by tugging on the harness.

Finally, he stood before the gray-clad apparition. Despite the icy rain now dripping from his hat and down his back, Hill smiled. "Are you not an intriguing sight?" he said with fascination. "I thought you were a witch or a medieval bear come to life."

"Neither," the girl said through chattering teeth.

"I can see you are a wood sprite instead," he said with a chuckle.

The girl pulled her wet cloak closer. "I require no pretty words from the likes of you," she boldly declared. She stepped from the stile to stand in a mud-filled puddle. Lucifer noted the wear of her boots. They had many miles on them. "If you will excuse me..." She picked up a small bag and took several steps in the opposite direction of his.

"Where are you traveling, gel?" Hill called to her retreating form.

"It is none of your concerns, Sir," she said smartly.

Lucifer enjoyed her sass. "I thought perhaps you might require a ride." He waited until the count of three to determine if she would accept. The viscount was always telling him not to rush a woman's decision. *The fairer sex prefers to weigh all their options before deciding what is best. We men are the impulsive ones*, Lord Lexford had said on more than one occasion.

She paused, but did not turn around. "What is your destination?"

Hill remained where she had left him. "I mean to finish my journey to Lexington Arms in Cheshire. I am to prepare the manor for the master's return."

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Mercy caught her breath. She knew of Lexington Arms. It was the seat of Viscount Lexford. Upon Grace's return to Foresthill Hall, Mercy and her sister had spent a delightful afternoon discussing Grace's brief encounter with the viscount, his associates, and even the Prince Regent. Afterwards, Mercy had searched *Debrett's* for each of the men Grace had mentioned.

"The Prince Regent actually came to the table and spoke to everyone?" Mercy's mouth had stood agape in amazement. At first, she could not believe her sister's tale.

Grace chuckled in that self-deprecating manner her sister wielded to defend off the least bit of praise. "Obviously, our monarch held no interest in me," Grace had asserted. "There were several very beautiful women at the table and more nobility than should be permitted in one place. Ignoring the Dowager Duchess of Norfield, who is a beauty even in her advanced years, and Viscountess Averette, Prince George's eye fell heavy on Miss Aldridge. The lady resembles her younger sister, Miss Cashémere, who outshone many of higher titles. They are both very dark of color and strikingly elegant.

And there was Lady Eleanor Kerrington, who had won the praise of the Queen during Lady Eleanor's Presentation. She and Lord Worthing have only recently married. Lady Worthing is the Duke of Thornhill's sister. She is tall and majestic. I can assure you I faded into the tapestry; yet, it was a moment only few can claim."

Mercy had sat spellbound. Living at Foresthill, she had held no hopes of having the acquaintance of any of the nobility. "And what of the men?" she had asked in curious delight. "Were they exceedingly handsome?"

Her sister's eyes had glazed over in quiet contemplation. Finally, Grace continued, "The men in our party, other than Viscount Averette, who has grown a good-sized paunch since last you saw him, included several from the aristocracy, who served together during the war and beyond." Her sister had taken great satisfaction in ticking off the names upon her fingers. "Lord Worthing, who is the heir to the Linworth title, led the group when they served abroad. He is magnificently tall and lean. He possesses the most mesmerizing steel gray eyes I have ever encountered and a strong jaw, which speaks of his ancestral lines. The Duke of Thornhill is shorter than Lord Worthing, but he is equally muscular in build. He has light brown hair, which he wears a bit too long to be fashionable and dark brown eyes. It is my understanding from my time with the Averettes that the Duke has recently married his cousin Miss Aldridge. The bachelors included Sir Carter Lowery, a newly minted baronet and a very affable young man; Lord Yardley, an earl from Northumberland, who is stoical and serious minded, but who I suspect holds very deep emotions; the Marquis of Godown, who is sinfully handsome, and Viscount Lexford from Cheshire, who is sandy blond of head and boyishly handsome."

Mercy smiled knowingly. If she traveled to Lexington Arms with this stranger, she would have the acquaintance of the viscount, and, perhaps, several of his associates. It could be a means to honor her sister's memory. Grace had been a governess, but she had dined with the Prince. Could not Mercy assume a position under the viscount's roof and come to know those of the peerage? She turned slowly to best judge the man who offered her an adventure.

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Lucifer had remained perfectly still so as not to frighten the girl. To allow the truth of his words to take root. "His Lordship and I served together during the war. Now, I am his man of all means." The girl nodded her understanding. Hill's instincts told him she was a runaway. She was miserably cold, but the girl refused to acknowledge her desolation. Lucifer could not resist admiring the woman's defiance. It spoke well of her character. "If you require employment, I imagine there is a place on His Lordship's staff. That is if you are willing to put in a fair day's work. I am not offering you charity."

Lucifer noted the pleased smile, which graced the girl's lips. Her hood had slipped from her head, and with the icy crystals mixing with the red gold of her hair, the woman reminded him of a snow princess he had once seen in a painting in a Viennese art museum.

"Why would you offer a complete stranger a position in your master's household?" Her cultured tongue told Lucifer the girl was no country miss. The woman before him was a genteel lady. That particular fact only solidified Hill's resolve to escort her to Cheshire. He would not leave any woman to suffer as he suspected this one had. He would do the correct thing, the *only* thing.

“Years prior, the viscount saved me from Death’s claws. He is a good man, and he would expect me to extend his benevolence to you.” He smiled easily. “If you pardon my saying so, Miss, you appear to have come upon hard times.”

“Be there children at His Lordship’s home?” she asked tentatively. “My sister was a governess. I had thought to find a similar position.”

Lucifer gave a slight shake of his head. He thought of the child Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes had whisked away from a distraught Lord Lexford. Lucifer had always thought if His Lordship had poured his love onto the babe that the viscount would have found peace by now. He took a half step in the girl’s direction. “I fear not, but we can find you some other form of employment. At least, come with me to Cheshire. Spend several days with us. Recover your strength. Fortify your will to travel on.” The girl swayed in place, but Lucifer did not reach for her. She might think he meant her harm.

“I worked at an inn recently,” she protested weakly.

“For how long?” he coaxed.

Her eyes closed as if she was silently counting. “Five days.” She paused awkwardly. “The Pawleys fed me and gave me a warm place to sleep.”

Lucifer wondered if he might have to resort to kidnapping the girl. She possessed no skills to survive a winter on the road, and Lucifer meant to see her well. “Five days of charity proves the Pawleys worth knowing, but five days after how many weeks?”

The girl snarled her nose in remembrance. “Perhaps six.”

Lucifer edged closer in anticipation of seizing the girl. “Would you not wish for more days of warmth and nourishment? I can promise you Mrs. Osborne makes the finest lemon tarts in all England.”

The girl looked over her shoulder to the road behind her. “But Cheshire is the way I came. I cannot retrace my steps.”

Lucifer dug into his pocket to retrieve his purse. Fishing several coins from the leather pouch, he extended them toward the girl. “Come to work at Lexington Arms. Stay, at least, through Twelfth Night, and if you do not care for the place, use these coins to purchase your passage to London or wherever else you wish to go.”

“Why?” she asked skeptically. “Why do you insist on offering your assistance?” She looked off across the empty fields. “The last people I trusted stole all my money, as well as my mother’s locket. I have nothing of value remaining.”

“I want nothing from you, girl. I have me a beautiful angel, who claims to love the likes of me. And I have a comfortable home and a generous employer. For a man who has not always walked on Heaven’s path, I hold many blessings. I think it is time I become the Good Samaritan.” He extended his hand to her. “Come, Girl,” he encouraged. “You require what I offer.”

Although the rain had lessened, moisture dripped across her cheeks from her eyes’ corners. “Are you certain the viscount will not object?”

Lucifer breathed easier: He would win this battle. With an ironic chuckle, he said, “His Lordship will likely not realize you were not always part of his staff.” Thoughts of the injury, which had robbed Lord Lexford of his memory, were never far from Hill’s mind. He meant to see the viscount well again.

He caught her elbow and directed the girl toward the flat bed wagon he drove. Lucifer knew better than to give her time to change her mind. The girl had required a bit of encouragement and a good dose of coercion. “It might be best if you sit in the back,”

he suggested. "You can place the blankets about you. It won't be much drier, but perhaps a bit warmer. I will set your bag under the seat." He pressed the coins into her gloved hand as he lifted the girl to the wagon. "Sit back," he ordered as he gathered the damp blankets he had stashed in a wooden crate beneath the bench and tucked them about her. "We still have a piece to go so stay as dry as possible."

The girl nodded her gratitude. "May I...may I know the name of my benefactor?" She openly shivered from the cold.

"Name is Mr. Hill. Henry Hill, but most people call me *Lucifer*."

She smiled at him, a smile that uncurled from her heart, and Hill thought she might be one of the prettiest girls of his acquaintance. The smile changed her face completely. "Lucifer? As in the Devil?"

"My mother once remarked that I be devilishly large for my age," he said with a shrug. "The description stuck. I have been Lucifer ever since."

Through lips trembling from the cold, she said, "I am Mer...I am Mary," she stammered. Lucifer heard untruths in her tone. "Mary...Mary Purefoy."

Obviously, she wanted no one to know her true identity, a fact which confirmed Lucifer's assumption of her being a runaway. "You should rest, Miss. We will be in Cheshire soon. When we reach Lexington Arms, we will test your skills in making a proper bed for yourself." Leaving her to snuggle deeper into the blankets, Lucifer climbed onto the bench seat. With a cluck of his tongue and a flick of his wrist, he set the team in motion.

Purposely, he did turn his head again to look at her. He suspected the girl would watch him warily until she recognized he meant her no harm. Instead, Lucifer concentrated on maneuvering the wagon along the rough road and the problem of what to do with the girl he had just rescued. After some twenty minutes of pure silence, he secreted a glance in the girl's direction. Finding her curled in a tight ball and fast asleep, he chuckled. The girl's countenance spoke of her exhaustion. He knew what it meant to be hungry. Knew also of the hopelessness of those who traversed English roads in the wake of what some were calling the "year without summer." As an innocent, less scrupulous travelers had robbed the girl of her few belongings, but she had not high tailed it to where she had come. The girl had spirit. Her actions spoke of both her desperation and her determination. Those qualities had increased Hill's respect for his passenger.

Yet, he worried for her safety. Despite her earlier encounter with disaster, Miss Purefoy had accepted his tale after only minor encouragement. Her bravado aside, the girl had not learned her lesson; and his leaving her to her own devices would have been a mistake. She had trusted him not to defile her. Although not born to the role, Lucifer considered himself a gentleman, but most traveling English roads these days would not come close to that description. Before she reached London, some man would have the girl's virginity by seduction or by force. Even now, she slept soundly in a steady rain in a rocking wagon. If not for his honor, he could claim the girl before she could put up a fight.

"The aristocracy," he murmured in amusement. "The so-called ruling class." Until he had met the members of the Realm, Hill had always disparaged the ignorance he had found among those of rank, but he quickly discovered Lord Lexford's acquaintances were the exceptions to the rule. He turned his head to study the girl more closely. She was nothing like the women His Lordship usually chose; yet, even on such a short

acquaintance, Lucifer had hatched a plan of sorts. "Lord Lexford has always preferred his women dark of hair and soft of nature. Exactly like Miss Satiné and Lady Susan," he thought aloud. "However, I think Lord Lexford requires a snow princess. A fiery blonde wood sprite instead of a dark fairy. One full of innocence and a bit of sauciness." Lucifer smiled with the possibilities. "If Lord Lexford could discover happiness, then I would have no worries for my honor, and mayhap the viscount would hold no objections to my claiming my own contentment."

Lucifer reached under the seat to retrieve the girl's small bag. "Let me view what you think to be important in your life, Miss Purefoy." He glanced again to where the girl's head rested on a half-full seed sack. Removing his glove to lift the bag's latch, Lucifer dug his right hand into the bag's contents. His fingers traced their way through layers of silk and wool. Finally, he touched upon a stack of papers, and he closed his fist about the pages. Using his coat to shield the paper from the peppering rain, Lucifer lifted them high enough to where he might read them without removing his eyes from the road. "Letters," he said under his breath. "With the directions to Mercy Nelson of Foresthill Hall in Lancashire."

Before the girl could discover his deviousness, Lucifer returned the pages to her bag and replaced the satchel under the seat. "Mercy Nelson," he whispered, rolling the name about his tongue. "Mercy. A much better name for a genteel lady than Mary Purefoy." He chuckled with his next thoughts. "And exactly what His Lordship requires," Hill said with assurance. "A touch of mercy."