

Chapter 1

Giddings opened the door to find his lordship standing upon the step, his face set in such rigid lines a shiver went down his spine. He sighed with relief when the young Earl of Walton looked straight through him as he handed over his hat and coat, turning immediately towards the door to the salon. Thank God young Conningsby had taken it into his head to pass out on one of the sofas in there instead of staggering back to his own lodgings the previous night. It was far better that it should be a man who could answer back, than one of his hapless members of staff, who became the butt of his lordship's present mood.

But Charles Algernon Fawley, the ninth Earl of Walton, paid Conningsby no heed. Striding across the room to the sideboard, he merely unstopped a crystal decanter, pouring its entire contents into the last clean tumbler upon the tray.

Conningsby opened one eye warily, and rolled it in the Earl's direction. "Breakfast at Tortoni's?" he grated hoarsely.

Charles tossed the glass of brandy back in one go, and reached for the decanter again.

"Don't look as though you enjoyed it much," Conningsby observed, wincing as he struggled to sit up.

"No." As the Earl realized the decanter was empty, his fingers curled round its neck as though he wished he could strangle it. "And if you dare say, I told you so..."

"Wouldn't dream of it, my lord. But what I will say, is..."

"No. I listened to all you had to say last night, and while I am grateful for your concern, my decision remains the same. I am not going to slink out of Paris with my tail between my legs like some whipped cur. I will not have it said that some false, painted jilt has made the slightest impact on my heart. I am staying until the lease on this apartment expires, not one hour sooner. Do you hear me?"

Conningsby raised a feeble hand to his brow. "Only too clearly." He eyed the empty decanter ruefully. "And while you're proving to the whole world that you don't care a rap about your fiancée running off with some penniless artist, I don't suppose you could get your man to rustle up some coffee, could you?"

"Engraver," snapped the Earl as he tugged viciously on the bell pull.

Conningsby sank back into the sofa cushions, waving a languid hand to dismiss the profession of the Earl's fiancée's lover as the irrelevance it was. "Judging by the expression on your face, the gossip mongers have already been at work. It's not going to get any easier for you..."

"My mood now has nothing whatever to do with the fickle Mademoiselle Bergeron," he snarled. "It is her countrymen's actions which could almost induce me to leave this vile charnel house that calls itself a civilized city, and return to London where the most violent emotion I am likely to suffer from is acute boredom."

"But it was boredom you came to Paris to escape from!"

He let the inaccuracy of that remark pass... but was prevented in any case from saying anything further when the butler opened the door. "There is a visitor for you, my lord."

"I am not receiving," Charles growled.

Giddings cleared his throat and eyed Conningsby warily, before saying diffidently, "The young person insists you would wish to see her." He stepped forward, and in a voice intended only for his master, said, "She says her name is Mademoiselle Bergeron."

Charles felt as though he had been punched in the stomach.

While he struggled to draw breath, Conningsby, who had remarkably acute hearing, rose gingerly to his feet. Diffidently, he ventured, "She has in all probability come to beg your forgiveness..."

"She shall not have it!" He turned to clutch the mantelpiece with both hands, his shoulders hunched. "I shall not take her back. If she prefers some artist to me, then she may go to him and welcome!"

"But there may have been some dreadful mistake. Let's face it, my lord, the Bergeron household last night was in such a state of turmoil, who knows what may have been going on?"

They had gone to escort Felice to a ball, where the engagement was to have been announced. They had found Monsieur Bergeron slumped in his chair as though all the stuffing had been knocked out of him, and Madame Bergeron suffering from a noisy bout of hysterics upon the sofa. The only clear piece of information either of them had been able to glean, was that she had turned off the wicked maid servant who had aided and abetted her ungrateful daughter to elope with a nobody, when she could have married an English Earl.

The Earl was breathing rather rapidly. "I am not safe to see her." He turned back to face the room, his entire face leached of colour. "I may well attempt to strangle her."

"Not you," Conningsby assured him.

"No," the Earl agreed, after a momentary struggle. "Not I." Grim faced, he strode across to a fireside chair, and sat down. The only indication of his tension remaining was in the way he tapped one long forefinger rapidly upon the arm of the chair.

"Show Mademoiselle Bergeron in, then," he drawled.

Even though Conningsby had the peculiar impression he had just become invisible, he had no intention of becoming a witness at the upcoming confrontation. It was one thing helping a man to drown his sorrows in a companionable way. Well, what man hadn't been in a similar predicament at one time or another? But becoming embroiled with another hysterical Frenchwoman, with his head in its present delicate state was asking too much! He looked wildly round the room for some other means of escape than the door through which Mademoiselle Bergeron would shortly appear. The only other exit appeared to be through the windows.

It took but a second to vault over the sofa on which he'd spent the night, and dive through the heavy velvet curtains.

"Mademoiselle Bergeron," he heard Giddings intone, as he fumbled open the shutter bolts.

Charles experienced a spurt of satisfaction when she paused on the threshold, her gloved hand fluttering to the heavy veil draped from her bonnet. She feared his reaction. As well she might!

Instead of rising to his feet, he deliberately crossed one elegantly hosed leg over the other, regarding her with unremitting coldness. She squared her shoulders, taking one faltering step forward. Then, to his complete astonishment, she broke into a run, flying across the room and landing upon her knees at his feet. Seizing his hand, she pressed it to her face, kissing it through the veil.

Impatiently, he snatched it back. Whatever she had been up to last night, he was not prepared to unbend towards her without a really good explanation. And probably not even then. To feel such strong emotions that they could reduce you to the state of mind where not even copious quantities of alcohol could anesthetize them,

was something he did not care to experience again. He was just about to tell her so, when she knelt back, lifting the veil from her face.

“Oh, thank you, milord! Thank you for letting me in. I was so afraid! You have no idea how unpleasant it is to walk the streets unescorted with feelings running so high...”

Charles reeled back in his seat. “You are not...not...”

“Felice, no.” The young woman who knelt before him returned his look rather defiantly. “I regret the deception, but I did not think you would agree to see anyone but her, today. And so I led your butler to believe I was she. And indeed, the deception was not so very great. You were expecting Mademoiselle Bergeron, and indeed I am Mademoiselle Bergeron...”

“You are entirely the wrong Mademoiselle Bergeron,” he snapped. How could he have mistaken the much shorter, and utterly plain Heloise for her beautiful, glamorous, and entirely captivating younger sister? He couldn’t blame the bonnet, though the peak of it did protrude from her face by over a foot, nor the heavy veil that was suspended from it, though it had concealed her features. He had wanted to see Felice, he acknowledged painfully. He had clung to the faint hope that there had been some dreadful mistake, and that she had come to tell him that she wanted no other man but him. And so he had seen what he wanted to see. What kind of fool did that make him?

Heloise swallowed nervously. She had been expecting a little antagonism, but the reality of facing a man whose heart had been broken was altogether more daunting than she had supposed it would be.

“No,” she persisted, “I do not think you will find that I am when you hear what I have to propose...”

“I cannot imagine what you hope to accomplish by coming here and prostrating yourself in this manner,” he began angrily.

“Oh, no, how could you, when I have not yet explained? But you only need to listen for a very few minutes, and I will tell you!” Suddenly very conscious that she was still kneeling like a suppliant at his feet, she glanced about the room.

“May I sit upon one of these so comfortable looking chairs, my lord? This floor, it is most hard, and really, I do not see that you can take me at all seriously if I do not make some effort to look more rational. Only I did not know what was to become of me if you did not let me in. I was followed all the way from the Tuileries gardens by a contingent of the National Guard of the most vile manners. They refused to believe at all that I am a respectable female, visiting merely a friend of the family who also happens to be an English milord, and that they would be entirely sorry for accusing me of the things they did, for why should I not be entirely innocent? Just because you are English, that does not make me a bad person, or unpatriotic at all, even if I am not wearing either the white lily or the violet. If they are going to arrest anyone, it should have been the crowd who were brawling in the gardens, not someone who does not care at all whether Napoleon should return, or that a Bourbon sits on the throne. Not but that they got the chance, because your so kind butler permitted me to enter the hall the moment he saw how things were, and that even if you would not see me, he said there was a door to the back through the kitchens from which I could return home, after I had drunk a little something to restore my nerves...”

The Earl found he had no defence against the torrent of words that washed over him. She didn’t even seem to pause for breath, until Giddings returned bearing a tray upon which was a bottle of Madeira, and two glasses.

She'd risen to her feet, removed her bonnet and gloves, and perched on the edge of the chair facing him, twittering all the while like some little brown bird hopping about and fluffing its plumage before finally roosting for the night.

She smiled and thanked Giddings as she took the proffered drink, but her hand shook so much that she spilled several drops down the front of her coat.

"I am sorry that you have been offered insults," he heard himself saying as she dabbed ineffectually at the droplets soaking into the cloth. "But you really should not have come to my house alone." Far from being the haven for tourists that he had been led to believe, many Parisians were showing a marked hostility to the English. It had started, so he had been reliably informed, when trade embargoes had been lifted, and cheap English goods came on sale again. But tensions were rising between die-hard Bonapartists, and supporters of the new Bourbon regime as well. If factions were now brawling in the Tuileries gardens, then Mademoiselle Bergeron may well not be safe to venture out alone. "I will have you escorted home..."

"Oh, not yet!" she exclaimed, a look of dismay on her face. "For you have not heard what I came to say!"

"I am waiting to hear it," he replied dryly. "I have been waiting since you walked through the door."

Heloise drained the contents of her glass and set it down smartly upon the table that Giddings had placed thoughtfully at her elbow.

"Forgive me. I am so nervous, you see. I tend to babble when I am nervous. Well, I was only nervous, when I set out. But then, after the incident in the Tuileries, I became quite scared, and then..."

"Mademoiselle Bergeron!" he slapped the arm of his chair with decided irritation. "Will you please come to the point?"

"Oh," she gulped, her face growing hot. It was not at all easy to come to the point with a man as icily furious as the Earl of Walton. In fact, if she wasn't quite so desperate, she would wish she hadn't come here at all. Looking into those chips of ice that he had for eyes, and feeling their contempt for her chilling her to the marrow, Heloise felt what little courage she had left ebb away. Sitting on a chair, instead of staying prostrate at his feet had not redressed their positions at all. She still had to look up to meet his forbidding features, for the Earl was quite a tall man. And she had nothing with which to combat his hostility but strength of will. Not beauty, or grace, or cleverness. She had the misfortune to have taken after her mother in looks. While Felice had inherited her father's even features and long limbed grace, she had got the Corbiere nose, diminutive size, and nondescript colouring. Her only weapon was an idea. But what an idea! If he would only hear her out, it would solve all their difficulties at a stroke!

"It is quite simple, after all," she declared. "It is that I think you should marry me, instead of Felice."