

# A SEASON FOR JOY

By Carolyn R. Scheidies

# C<sub>R</sub> Publications

Carolyn R. Scheidies

415 E 15<sup>th</sup>

Kearney, NE 68847-6959

(308) 234-3849

[crscheidies@mail2faith.com](mailto:crscheidies@mail2faith.com) Subject Line: Hope

I DEAL IN HOPE

<http://IDealinHope.com/author>

AUTHOR'S CHOICE REVIEWS

<http://IDealinHope.com/bookreviews>

Blog: <http://IDealinHope.com/blog>

© 2005, 2007 by Carolyn R. Scheidies

ISBN 978-1-4116-4232-4

*Carolyn R. Scheidies'* credits include over two-dozen books—several of which have garnered awards and contributions to several non-fiction books. A graduate of the University of Nebraska (UNK) with a degree in journalism, she's written for a variety of publications, and has a regular column in the Kearney Hub. Scheidies also speaks to different groups on a variety of topics, leads workshops on writing, and guest lectures at UNK.

## Dedication

To Jeff and Gloria Geiselman

For your friendship, encouragement and prayers,

Thank you.

## FORGIVENESS

As we let God's forgiveness  
Ever live within,  
Whatever we encounter  
Along the paths of life,  
Will, in the Father's hand,  
Become A never ending source  
Of joy and strength and love.

*...for the joy of the Lord is your strength.*

*Nehemiah 8:10c*

## PROLOGUE

About ready to leave her room, Lady Christmas Joy DeVries slowly opened the door. She stepped back when faced with the man leaning against the doorframe. "Lord Bleim." Her hands shook as she wiped them on her dress. How could she ever have been taken in by his sardonic good looks and charming manners, taken in until he showed his true colors. "I am sorry, but I have to go now."

The menacing expression on his face frightened her, and she gulped as he pushed his way into the well-appointed room. She started when he closed it behind him. His eyes narrowed. "I am giving you one last chance, my dear. I want you to agree to give me your hand in marriage."

"Are you mazed!" she cried. "After you tried to seduce me in my own home? I wouldn't marry you, if you were the last man on earth."

His lips twisted into a cruel grin. Grabbing her around the waist, he growled, "You'll soon sing a different tune when we're through here." She followed his gaze to her bed.

"No. You *are* fit for Bedlam." Unsuccessfully, she struggled, as he forced her step by painful step back toward the bed. "Lord, Jesus," she screamed. "Help me!"

Bleim's hands assaulted her body. His lips ravaged her mouth, leaving her lips swollen and sore.

"Chris. Chris, dear." Her aunt visiting from Edinburgh, Lady Margaret, called to her from outside her chamber door. "I have something I need ask you. Now. May I enter?"

Relief flooded Chris. "Yes, Aunt Margaret. Yes, I'll be glad to help. I'll be right there."

Furious, Bleim released her. "You'll regret this," he hissed, striding from the chamber through the sitting room door, which Chris locked behind him before opening the door for Margaret.

In that moment, Chris lost the security of innocence as her sense of peace, and her joy of life deserted her.

In the following days, Bleim's dreadful response to her refusal made Chris wary of men who charmed then abused. Both she and her sister suffered dreadful nightmares, though Jennifer's seemed far worse than her own.

Though she tried to hide it, never again did Chris feel safe even in her own chambers, and each night after the maid departed, she carefully locked the doors, at least she usually did. Always she associated that time of betrayal and mourning with Viscount Judas Bleim. Anger, worse, hatred simmered against him for what his actions precipitated, an anger she tried to hide even from herself.

But that was two years ago, and now her parents talked of taking her to London for the season. The thought made her shiver. Was it from anticipation...or fear? Under her covers, Chris closed her eyes and prayed.

## CHAPTER ONE

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside still waters. Psalm 23:1 & 2*

**I**n the light from the bright winter sun streaming in the tall window of the parlour, Chris delicately stitched a design on the material before her. Like her mother Rebecca, the Marchioness of Denneroc, Chris loved creating with needle and thread.

Holding up the material, caught in a hoop, she critically examined the minute stitches against the light until she found the irregular stitch. Picking it out, she continued the pattern of lush burgundy roses with deep green leaves entwining a heart on a velvety black background. In the foreground, she stitched an elegant white horse sticking his velvety nose through the foliage. The animal's luminous eyes seemed to follow her. Yes, she had gotten him right.

Why shouldn't she? From the time she toddled, she rode with her father on his huge stallion. At least, the

whacking beast seemed huge to a tiny girl in leading strings who could scarcely walk. Later on, she had her own fat, lazy dun pony. She began jumping horses at an early age and could not help but note the pride in her father's gaze at her accomplishment.

Her father, the Marquess of Denneroc, showed her how to hold the reins, not too loose to give the horse control and not too tight to make him fight. He taught her how to walk a horse after a hard ride, to cool him down and to rub him down when she was finished.

True, the stable hands usually did such chores, but her father made sure she knew more than the basics of riding. He helped her read an animal's body language, learn the differences of each animal, and--most of all--he taught her to care, not just about riding, which she did, but also about the animal as well.

He showed her how to mount and dismount with grace, and, when she was very young, he allowed her the security of riding astride, something she would not dare do now.

Nonetheless, his lessons had born fruit, and she spent as much time as possible out of doors on a horse. Her brother Joshua, the Earl of Hadwicke, insisted she was a "bruising" rider. High praise from the next marquess.

Setting down her sewing, she sighed as she stared around her at the large room with its light delicate

arabesques of geometrical forms carved on the Adam styled ceiling and carved on the elegant furniture. The dusky rose tones of the furnishings echoed from the brocade-covered couch to the velvet curtains at the large French windows that opened onto a patio leading to an herb garden.

Only now, powdery white snow covered the bare branches giving the garden below a forlorn, forsaken look that tugged at Chris's heart.

Why had she decided on a heart pattern? Inside she knew. She longed for a knight in shining glory to sweep her away from her dreary existence. *Chris Joy*, she scolded herself silently, *how can you be unhappy? How can I be unhappy with loving parents and a caring family?*

It wasn't simply unhappiness, she decided, but a lack, something missing. Her name haunted her. Joy! Twas long indeed since she truly felt joy, that bubbling up wonderful effervescent feeling. She stopped. Oh she still laughed now and again, but she was not the same person she'd been before *he* entered her life. No, what was missing was more than a feeling. Something deep inside felt empty. Joy?

She grimaced as something surfaced, a longing, a need to be cared for, a need to be loved for herself alone, and not, as Bleim wanted, for her wealth and family connections. His despicable actions changed everything, and she hated him for it.

Setting down her sewing, Chris moved gracefully toward the window and let the sunshine wash over her. The light haloed her hair to silvery-gold and kissed her soft complexion with warmth. Her blue eyes darkened to a becoming shade of aquamarine.

"Lord, are you there. Do you care?" She spoke aloud as though that alone would make the request more real, or was it God she wanted to be more real to her? Leaning her head against the window pane, she let the warmth of the sun's rays steal through her.

For a moment, peace lurked ever so near, but only for a moment. At the sound of the door, she jerked around, her heartbeat quickening with dread. Why, after two years, did she still expect to see *him* stride through the door?

Instead, her younger sister Jennifer sidled into the room. The twelve-year-old's blond hair hung in a long braid over her shoulder. Tall and reed slender, Jennifer started as her sister spoke harshly, too harshly. "What is it?"

Immediately contrite, she said all in a rush, "It's all right, Sis. I'm sorry. It's just that you startled me. Did you need something?"

A flush spotted the younger girl's high cheekbones. "Mother wishes to speak with you straightway. She's in her sitting room."

"What is it? Do you know what she wants?" Chris asked, smoothing down the long skirt of her blue gown.

Jennifer's lips jerked into a smile, then faded. Chris wanted to hug away the hurt her sister still felt over that dreadful incident concerning their eldest brother, but neither she nor any other member of the family had been able to reach past Jennifer's fear and pain to the trusting vivacious young girl who used to be....before.

*But then, Chris thought, none of us is the same. Is this why I feel so unsettled? Like...like I no longer belong here. Yet Therrenville is my home.*

Again, her middle name taunted. Joy? Would she ever feel it again, deep down where it didn't dissipate with the fears that still haunted her nights?

She thought of her ancient manor home--the tall square keep with the rectangular "wings" added on either side by succeeding generations. Therrenville had been the home of her family for generations. When she was a little girl, nothing seemed more safe and secure than the solid DeVries principal seat and her father's arms.

Everything changed, two years past. Everything. Therrenville was no longer a haven for her. As for her father, since the decision to keep back the full truth of what transpired, he no longer provided the needed security either. Or was it just that she'd grown up, passed the stage where she could jump on his lap and be held in his strong arms?

As her sister eyed her hesitantly, Chris smiled at her own foolishness. High time she put away her childish fears. She well knew not all men were like the despicable Bleim. Besides, she'd not seen him since that night. If she had anything to do with it, she never would.

Linking her arm with that of her younger sister, she said, "Come on, let's go see what mother's about."

At the doorway of their mother's sitting room with its blue and white decor, Chris studied her petite mother reading by the hearth. Firelight danced in the grate, flickering light over the unlined face of the deceptively fragile marchioness. Her brunette hair had only the faintest traces of gray. When she glanced up and saw the two girls in the doorway, her wide blue-green eyes sparkled, and a mischievous smile touched her lips.

"Come on in, girls. I have good news, at least for you Chris, but you can hear this, too, Jennifer dear." She held up a letter.

Glancing at each other, the two girls entered the room, their slippered feet not making a sound on the deep Aubusson carpet. Chris sat down beside her sister on the settle opposite her mother. The halls of Therrenville were drafty, especially in the winter, and the warmth of the fire felt good against the chill.

Stretching out her hands to the marble fireplace, Chris inquired, "So what's this big news, Mother? Are we expecting company?"

Rebecca smiled. "No, no visitors. Just a letter from Edinburgh."

"From Aunt Margaret?" Chris asked. She sensed a shudder go through Jennifer and knew the girl was remembering back to Lady Margaret's last visit. Did everything harken back to that time? "Is she coming for another visit?"

"In the spring." Rebecca tucked a stray lock back into the soft chignon at the back of her slender neck. "And she's planning to take in the season in London."

"I'm glad she's coming and all," Chris said, her eyes darkening, "but what has this to do with me?"

"Don't you see?" As the marchioness raised a hand to explain, the diamond ring on her finger caught the firelight and sparkled into the dimness of the room. Even in the short time the girls had been with their mother, the winter sun had lost its brilliance as the afternoon waned, leaving long shadows in the room.

"What better time to bring you out. It's past time you had the bronze of a London season, dear."

Chris protested, "Why can't Aunt Margaret come to Therrenville like she did two years past? Can't I wait another year or so before going to London?"

Rebecca glanced from the letter to her daughter.

"Dearest, I will not have the ton say my daughter is already on the shelf. Besides, you'll enjoy the clothes and balls and musicals." She waved a delicate hand. "There are so many things to do in London. The lending libraries for instance."

This caught Chris's attention. "We can visit London without all the hassle of showing me off like some mare up for sale to the highest bidder."

Rebecca let that pass. "If we go, Chris, you will have your season."

Jennifer wrinkled her nose. "Well, I'm not going. And no one can make me."

Rebecca's eyes darkened with concern for her younger daughter. "No, dear, you don't have to go with us. Aunt Anne said you can stay with them for the season."

Chris wished *she* could stay at Medfern Manner with her cousins, but from the look on her mother's face, she knew it would do no good to make *that* suggestion.

The younger girl's face relaxed. "That's all right then. I love staying at Medfern Manner with my cousins. And I'll get to spend time with my cousins. I don't want to go to London. I don't want..." She didn't need to finish her statement. Chris knew.

Chris winced at the memories her sister's unfinished statement evoked. Two years ago, a whole

lifetime ago, before her brother Jeremiah saved Jennifer's life at the cost of his own, before Bleim....

*No, she thought, I won't think of him now. I won't. I won't.*

Chris got up, paced. "Oh, Mother, do we have to make it *this* season?"

"Yes, *this* season. Chris dear? You're 18 and we've already let it go one year. There are no more excuses. A bronze of a town season is just what you need to get over you're shyness."

Chris grimaced. She well knew it was more than shyness, but wasn't about to dispute her mother. Instead, she exchanged a knowing look with her sister who turned away. "I really don't have to go to London do I?" asked the younger girl, as though afraid her mother might change her mind.

Rebecca shook her head. "No Jennifer dear, you do not have to go to London with us," she assured her daughter, "but that's something we can discuss later. This is your sister's season and that is of primary concern right now."

Beside her, Chris heard her sister heave a sigh of relief. Though Jennifer had no desire to see the sights of London or grace the drawing rooms frequented by the *ton*, that most elite of London society, something within Chris, for all her uncertainty, drew her. A flicker of excitement

grew within her at the thought of meeting the ladies and gentlemen she read about in the London Gazette, of making her bow to the aging King William and his much younger bride.

"Mayhap, it is time I go, Mother," she said, ignoring her sister's look of surprise and the doubt fluttering her insides. "Yes, to own the truth, I want to go. I do. I truly believe I do."

Later that evening, she descended the wide main staircase with its burnished banister. The warmth of the smooth worn surface reminded her of the generations of DeVries women who had descended the elegant stairway just as she did. Even in what seemed to her a rather girlish evening gown, she felt every inch the lady of the manor. She also had a sense of aloneness.

For a moment, she wished her sister were old enough to join them at table. Despite Jennifer's withdrawn nature these days, there was a quiet compassion and innate kindness about her. Jennifer was the nearest she had to a close friend these days. Mayhap, on her thirteenth birthday, the marchioness would allow the younger girl to join them. With that pleasant thought, Chris smiled as she hurried down the stairs.

The long skirts of her soft pink evening gown swished delicately around her ankles to her silver slippers feet. The fitted bodice with its wide lace collar was

embellished by a single red rose in the center front as the modest neckline dipped slightly. Two more roses adored the ringlets in her hair.

As she entered the anteroom to the formal dining hall, her brother Joshua, the Earl of Hadwicke, rose to his feet and bowed so smartly, Chris giggled. "The Celestial has come to us mortal man," he intoned, hand over his heart. "I am overcome with your loveliness fair maiden."

Flinging back her head, Chris waved an imaginary fan in front of her face. "Sir, what fulsome compliments you ply to poor little me. You quite put me to blush." She tripped lightly toward her brother and pretended to rap his knuckles with her fan. "There Sir, is your punishment for leading this miss astray with your flummery."

Joshua winced. "Really, Sis. I never realized you had it in you to act like one of those silly misses paraded each season at the famed marriage mart. With that approach, you'll make a fine match in no time at all."

Dropping her pose, Chris shook a finger in his face. "Are you saying, brother dear," she said dangerously low, "that unless I act like some milk and water miss, like some silly wet-goose, no man will have me?"

"Well, I..." He stepped back at her vehemence.

"Well, what," she demanded. "You're not one of those gentlemen who think women haven't anything but stuffing between their ears, are you?"

He raised a hand in defense. "I never said that."

Hands to her hips, Chris challenged. "Tell me brother. Who was quicker at math, and who learned to read quicker, you or me? And who...."

"Really Chris dear," calmed her mother from where she sat on the high-backed, deep-cushioned sofa, a sewing project, as always, in her hands. "Those are hardly lady-like pursuits."

"Oh, Mother, you're not going try to tell me at this late date that I have to prance around London like some ninny. If I have to act like that, I might as well stay home, for I will not marry anyone who can't respect me for who I am and not for how I look."

Joshua chortled. "So speaks the terror of London, the bluestocking."

"I am not a bluestocking," Chris declared. "I just believe a woman should use all her abilities and talents, including her mind."

Entering on the heels of her declaration, the tall, stately Marquess of Denneroc, her father Charles, gave her a hug. "I would not want my daughter to pretend to be anything she wasn't," he said firmly. "Being truthful is part of who we are as individuals, as a family and as Christians. Besides," he smiled tenderly toward Chris's mother, "I married the smartest of women...your mother."

Rebecca colored delicately, before protesting. "Get on with you." Her gaze met those of Charles and Chris knew her parents were once more in their own world where they communicated without words, a world that made her feel strangely alone. There was a peace in their lives she craved, but had no idea how to appropriate.

Anger burned. She knew where to lay blame for the loss. If she ever had the chance, somehow she'd have her revenge on that man. She shivered, not that she ever wanted to see Bleim again.

"Chris are you cold?" her father asked as concern brought a frown to his lips. "I could have a maid run up for a wrap."

"Thank you, no, Father. I'm fine, really."

Before her father could inquire further, the stern butler announced dinner. Taking Joshua's arm, she followed her father and mother into the enormous dining hall.

After the marquess seated the marchioness at the far end of the long table, he took his usual place at the other end. On the marquess's right, a stiff-backed footman held the study rosewood chair with its cabriole legs for Chris while Joshua sat by his mother.

As her mother signaled for the servants to start serving, Chris surveyed the vaulted ceiling of the ancient chamber, down to the monstrous fireplaces on the left, over

which hung battle-axes, swords and other Medieval implements of war used by DeVries ancestors. At the other end, over another huge fireplace, hung the family coat of arms with its many quarterings linking the DeVries family to many other aristocratic families not only of England, but also of Russia and Scandanavia.

The carefully preserved tapestries on the cold stone walls pictured the family history in tiny realistic stitches. Her mother, she knew, had not only mended several of the older tapestries, but added two of her own. With satisfaction, Chris could see the place where her mother, in the last couple of years, had allowed her to work a small design of her own.

Her thoughts far away, Chris ate with utensils engraved with the Denneroc crest and off Wedgwood gold edged plate dinnerware. She straightened, blinked in the golden candlelight. What was her father saying?

"I understand the Queen banned Lord Bleim from state dinners and such."

"I never could see much in the man," Rebecca commented. "Too heavy handed." In the candlelight, Chris watched her mother's lips tighten. "Can you believe he asked for Chris's hand, at the tender age of only ten and six years? She wasn't even out of the schoolroom. The nerve of the man."

Her father answered, "It's not unheard of for girls to marry then."

A tear glinted in Rebecca's eye. "Still, I feel things would have been different with Jeremy had he not fallen in with that dreadful man."

The marquess's face showed his own grief over the loss of his son. "Rebecca, it's in the past. We must leave the past where it belongs, in the past. Be thankful Jeremiah found the Lord before he..."

Chris glanced surreptitiously at her brother to find him staring back. She could see the secret was as fresh for him as it was for her. Mayhap, it was time to own the truth. But, as she opened her mouth, her father's next comment stopped her.

"Thank the Lord, there was no hint of scandal during Bleim's visit." Charles frowned.

"His only visit, praise the Lord," added Rebecca. "I've heard dreadful things about the man since. I shudder we welcomed him into our home even if he was Jeremiah's friend. I'd hate to think what the London tabbies would do with scandal regarding a marquess's daughter."

As reading the intention in Chris's face Joshua said, "After all this time, wouldn't they let something like that go?"

His father interrupted. "Time makes no matter to the ton. A scandal uncovered years after it happened has been

known to destroy more than one young woman's chances for a good match."

Chris protested, "What if what happened wasn't the fault of the young woman? Wouldn't they sympathize instead of ostracize?"

"You would think so wouldn't you," her mother said. "I remember the brangle when your father discovered I was being escorted by another." A smile touched her lips. "He called the suitor out. He didn't want to admit his behavior was less than stellar in the matter. It caused a bit of stir."

"How did you stand it, Mother," Chris asked, her gaze seeing her mother, not as a matron, but as a blushing bride.

"You going to tell your daughter?" His gaze alight with love, her father chuckled.

Rebecca actually blushed. "I fear, my dear, we were so much in love that we scarcely noticed. Things might have been different then." She paused, before continuing, "By the time we returned to London, the rumor-mongers had moved on to a more timely subject."

"Then one can live down a scandal?"

"My behavior wasn't at issue, and a young man has much more leeway. A young woman who is disgraced and not married finds a very different reception."

"I see." Chris picked at her custard. "It doesn't seem fair."

Her father patted her hand. "It isn't fair, Chris, but life often is not fair. Only God is just, and we must put our lives in His hands."

Chris jerked away. "I don't know, Father. God doesn't seem to care about females much."

\*\*\*

In her mind, Chris replayed the shocked look on the faces of her parents at her declaration. Yet, she could not take back what she said. Society pandered to the dandies who sported their mistresses like so many trophies both before and after marriage. Yet a young miss, accosted by the likes of a scoundrel like Bleim, could be ostracized for life and have to live in seclusion or be forced to marry someone just to regain her respectability.

Clenching her hands, Chris muttered, "It isn't fair. It isn't! Where are you God? Why can't I hear you? And if you're real, why do you allow men like Bleim to hurt others?"

"Mother and Father trust you implicitly, but they don't know what happened to Jeremy...not really. They don't know what happened to me. After what Mother said, I can't tell them. I can't."

Tears gathered in her eyes. "Maybe they wouldn't love me any more if they knew what happened. Mayhap, they would think I am damaged goods.

"And to think," she muttered, "I was flattered by his attentions, at first. What a fool I was. Well, if I wanted to get out of going to London all I'd have to do was...tell the truth. But I want to go, I think."

For a time she considered the possibilities of not only running into Bleim, but also other men like him. Shuddering, she closed her mind against the turmoil inside. Somewhere in the world, wasn't there a man who would love her not because she was the daughter of an English peer, not because of the large dowry her father would settle on her, not because of her, admittedly more than passable looks, but because he loved her for who she was inside and out?

She started. Would any man love her if he knew the truth, that Bleim had tried to ravish her? True, she managed to escape, thanks to Aunt Margaret, but he had been in her room and his hands had been on her person. Even now, she felt unclean at the thought of his roaming hands, fetid breath, and lust-filled gaze.

If only, she hadn't let him into her room, though she still had no notion how she might have stopped him. There must have been a way. It *was* her fault, and now even God seemed far away. In the intervening time, she began to

think maybe He really wasn't so caring as her parents believed. At least, He didn't care about her. Did He?

Out of long habit, Chris picked up her Bible. Sitting down in her window seat, she absently flipped the pages. She was tired of the stories of Bible heroes like Daniel and Samson. Not that she'd grown beyond them, but, for the first time, she wondered if the Bible held real answers to the deep longings she felt within her, the restlessness, the insecurity, the need for love beyond the love of her earthly family. She longed for the restoration of the peace and joy that had been torn from her two years past.

Did the large black book really have the answers? "God," she whispered, "if you're there, if you care. Please show me yourself. Help me know you care, if you do? Lord Jesus, I want to feel peace in my life again."

Silently she waited, feeling rather foolish at her outburst. No lightning struck. She heard no voice. But then, she hadn't truly expected anything had she?

Blinking back tears, she fingered the gold edged pages of the Bible her parents had presented to her on her tenth birthday. They asked her to promise to read it faithfully and regularly, and she had. Once it seemed exciting, then familiarity dulled the excitement as she read over and over again the heroic stories of the Old Testament, leaving the rest of the Bible unread, except for the Psalms.

They'd become her mainstay in the last years, for they calmed her troubled spirit. They spoke to her own hurt. Even so, she found it difficult to trust the way the Psalmist trusted, completely, whole-heartedly and without reserve. Was there more?

Inside, excitement stirred, then grew. "That's it, isn't it God. It's time to read the rest."

Slowly she read the index until she came to the book of John. Turning to it, she found herself reading the 14th chapter.

*Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God believe also in me....Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me...*

But it was the 27th verse that jumped out at her. *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*

*But I am afraid*, she thought, *very much afraid*. Thoughtfully, she closed the Bible and stared out the window. Below her, the lawns stretched out to the woods. A light snow fell to the ground, clothing the stark trees with a blanket of white. Under the silvery moonlight, it looked like a fairyland of wonder. The setting beckoned her.

Without considering her actions, Chris threw a cape over her gown, slipped on half boots, wrapped a scarf

around her head and headed down the hall to a little used staircase. Skirting any members of the household still astir, she hurried out a side door and stopped in wonder at the beauty abounding for her eyes alone.

Tall trees stood like benevolent sentinels while, overhead, the moon smiled down at her, bathing her in its silvery glow. Stars winked at her and danced in delight against the black velvet sky. Snow crunched beneath her boots and settled softly on her face. Laughing, she opened her mouth, like she often had as a child, to catch them in her mouth.

Flinging out her arms, she danced in the snow, her arms embracing the magic of the moment. Forgotten momentarily, were her questions, her anger, her hurt. For the time, she forgot she was no longer a child.

Suddenly, swoosh! Splat! A solid cold object smashed into the side of her head. She caught another snowball square in the mouth. Swinging around, she caught sight of her brother Joshua ducking into the shadow of the trees. "Josh! Stop it! What are you doing out here?"

Joshua grinned at her, an impish grin that warned Chris. "I saw you from my window and thought I'd join you. Remember the snowball fights we used to have when we were mere striplings."

"Speak for yourself," Chris shot back. "You and Jeremy ganged up on me, and I ended up crying to Father."

"We weren't too fair about it all, were we?" He chuckled. "But, you're not a child any longer, Sis, so how about it?"

Chris sniffed. "Oh, dear, but aren't I supposed to be dignified and all that?"

A snowball destroyed the dignity. "That's it," she shouted. "I'll get you now."

Ducking behind a bush, she managed to pack a couple of solid balls before Joshua landed another. As he leaned over to grab more snow, she aimed and waited. As he straightened, she let fly. Then giggled at his look of surprise. She caught him again before he collected his wits about him. And so it went, snow balls flying back and forth until both collapsed in exhaustion on the marble bench by the flagged walkway covered with a thin layer of icy snow.

"I'm totally done up. How about you, Sis?"

"Afraid you wiped me out. I'm cold and tired, and it's all your fault. I came out for some peace and quiet and look what I get?" The laughter running through the words softened them. "I'm wet clear through."

Leaning back, Joshua surveyed his sister. "It was good seeing you let go, Sis. If only, Jennifer could do that too."

"Leave it be, Josh. She was hurt much more severely, you know that. It will take time; you know that

too. Time, for all of us. I was going to tell them tonight at dinner."

"I know."

"You wouldn't mind?"

Joshua shrugged. "We kept the secret because of you and Jennifer mostly. I'm not sure what good it would do to bring it all out now. Nothing will change the past, or bring back Jeremiah."

This time Chris said, "I know. I wish it were as easy to forget. I mean, it has been two years. Why can't we forget?"

Joshua lunged to his feet. "Forget my brother! I don't want to forget. If I ever get my hands on that bounder, I'll wring his neck."

"I feel the same," said Chris with surprise, then added wryly, "course you'd have more of a fighting chance against him."

This brought a rueful smile to the face of her brother. "Mayhap, we should team up as highwaymen and waylay him on the road."

"Right. Now, that's a good way to handle the situation. Truly Joshua, we're well shot of the man. I have no mind to meet up with him again. Not unless I can be sure of having the upper hand. I'd like to cut him in public."

At her serious tone, he sat back down. "Are you worried about it, meeting up with him again? I mean, what with going to London and all?"

"Mayhap, a bit. There are others like him, aren't there?"

"Trust me, Sis. You'll not be exposed to the likes of them. Even rakes are on their best behavior in the London drawing rooms, especially where innocent misses are concerned. Too many of them have been leg-shackled by an encroaching mamma out to snare a title for her unfledged daughter. Thankfully, Mother wouldn't lower herself to such tactics."

"For that I can be grateful. But, they will expect me to make a brilliant match, and I'm not certain I'm ready."

"For London or for marriage?"

"Mayhap, either one. The whole both excites and frightens me."

Joshua gave her an awkward hug. "Sis, you're top of the trees. You'll have the beau's falling all over themselves offering for you. Trust me, you'll have your pick of eligible gentlemen."

"But what if I don't find anyone I care for, or who cares for me as me? How do I tell whether or not a gentleman pays his addresses because he actually likes me, or because I'm," she sniffed, "Lady Chris, daughter of the

exceedingly deep in the pockets and very influential Marquess and Marchioness of Denneroc?"

"Been reading those novels again, haven't you? The ones about the white knight coming for his maiden fair, and carrying away his one and only true love." He placed a hand over his heart and sighed.

Chris punched his arm. "What's wrong with wanting to be in love with the man I marry, or He with me?"

Joshua grew serious again. "Sis, a man would be caper-witted not to love you. Even I, well, I care about you."

Blinking back tears, Chris gave him a hug that made him grumble and scramble to his feet. "Stuff and nonsense, Chris, I just told you the truth." Pulling her to her feet, he cried, "Come on, race you to the house. Last one back has to go fix hot chocolate for both of us."

Fortunately for them, the cook shooed them out of the kitchen. Not long thereafter they sipped the warming drink in the library. They talked until the clock chimed eleven, and Chris yawned. Excusing herself, she made her way to her chambers.

Glancing out the window once more, she smiled. In the scene, she found a small measure of peace, small, but it was a start.

"Thank you, Lord," she whispered and found her breath fogging the window. Like a child, she wrote her

name in the mist only to rub it out. How many times she recalled being scolded for doing similar things when she was in leading strings and tried to keep up with her older brothers.

Getting up, she placed her Bible on the stand and crawled beneath the covers. Finding the wrapped, heated brick under the covers toward the bottom of the bed, she curled her toes around it and sighed as delicious warmth spread through her frame.

About the time she closed her eyes that tiny peace fled as Chris heard the surreptitious opening of her door. Up in a bound, Chris hit the floor running.