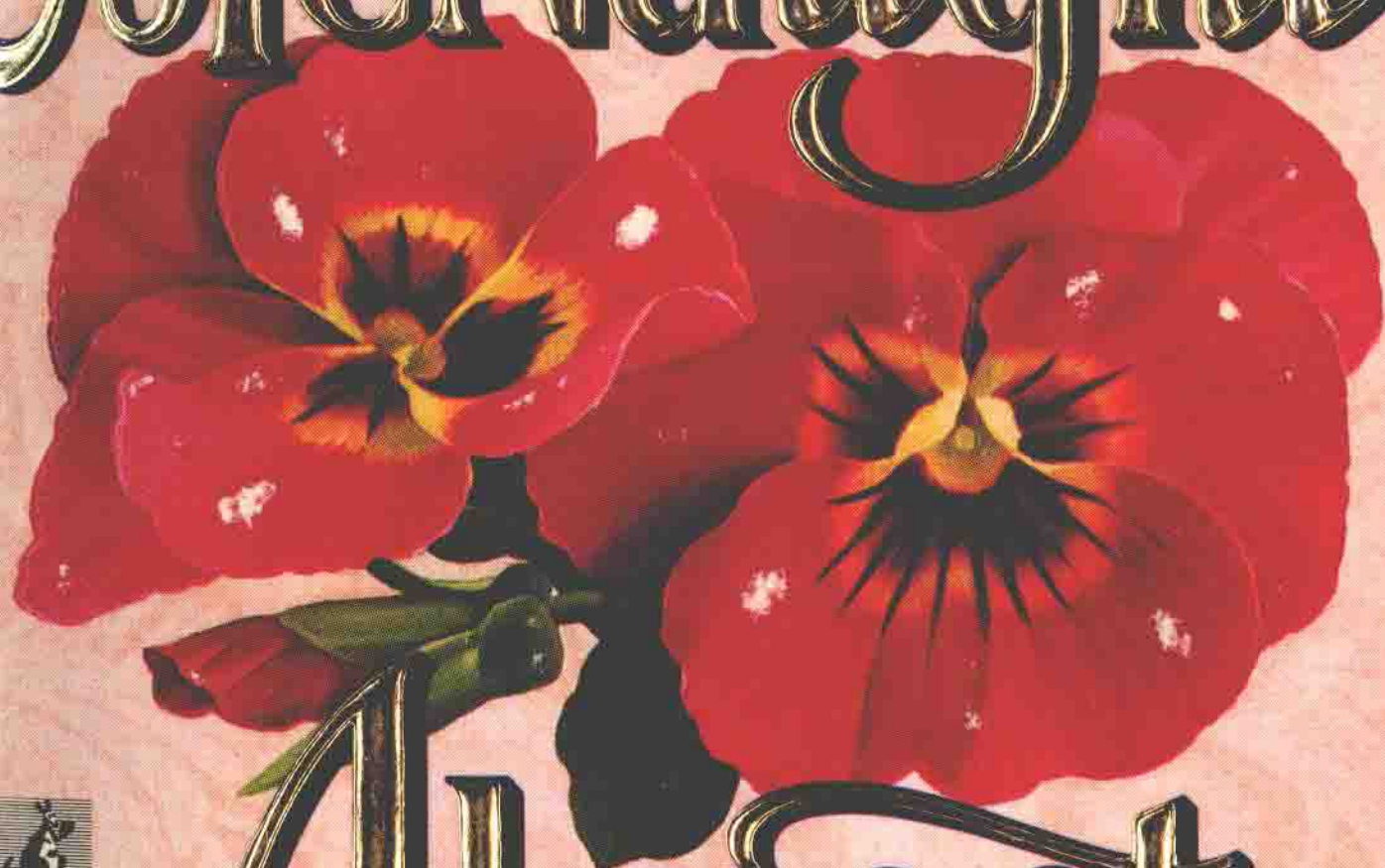


#1

New York Times
Bestselling
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Remember
When

Judith
McNaught




POCKET
BOOKS

Almost
Heaven

1

Fifteen servants wearing the traditional blue and silver livery of the Earl of Cameron left Havenhurst at dawn on the same day. All of them carried identical, urgent messages that Lady Elizabeth's uncle, Mr. Julius Cameron, had directed them to deliver at fifteen homes throughout England.

The recipients of these messages all had only one thing in common: They had once offered for Lady Elizabeth's hand in marriage.

All fifteen of these gentlemen, upon reading the message, exhibited shock at its contents. Some of them were incredulous, others derisive, and still others cruelly satisfied. Twelve of them promptly wrote out replies declining Julius Cameron's outrageous suggestion, then they hurried off in search of friends with whom they could share this unsurpassed, delicious piece of incredible gossip.

Three of the recipients reacted differently.

Lord John Marchman had just returned from his favorite daily pastime of hunting when the Havenhurst servant arrived at his home, and a footman brought him the message. "I'll be damned," he breathed as he read. The message stated that Mr. Julius Cameron was desirous of

seeing his niece, Lady Elizabeth Cameron, suitably and immediately wed. To that end, Mr. Cameron said he would now be willing to reconsider John's previously rejected offer for Lady Elizabeth's hand. Cognizant of the year and a half that had passed since they had been in each other's company, Julius Cameron volunteered to send his niece, properly chaperoned, to spend a sennight with John so that they might "renew their acquaintance."

Unable to believe what he was reading, Lord Marchman paced the floor and read the entire message twice more. "I'll be damned," he said again. Raking a hand through his sandy hair, he glanced distractedly at the wall beside him, which was completely covered with his most prized possessions—the heads of the animals he'd hunted in Europe and abroad. A moose stared back at him through glazed eyes; beside it a wild boar snarled. Reaching up, he scratched the moose behind its antlers in an affectionate, if ludicrous, gesture that expressed his gratitude for the splendid day of hunting that particular prize had afforded him.

A vision of Elizabeth Cameron danced enchantingly before his eyes—an incredibly lovely face with green eyes, cameo skin, and soft, smiling lips. A year and a half ago, when he'd met her, he'd thought her the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. After meeting her only twice he'd been so taken with the charming, unaffected seventeen-year-old girl that he'd dashed off to her brother and offered for her, only to be coldly rejected.

Evidently Elizabeth's uncle, who was now her guardian, judged John by different standards.

Perhaps the lovely Lady Elizabeth herself had been behind this decision; perhaps their two meetings in the park had meant as much to her as they had to him.

Getting up, John wandered over to the third wall, which held a variety of fishing poles, and thoughtfully selected one. The trout would be biting this afternoon, he decided as he remembered Elizabeth's magnificent honey-colored hair. Her hair had glistened in the sunlight, reminding him of the shimmering scales of a beautiful trout as it breaks the water. The analogy seemed so perfect and so poetic that Lord

Marchman stopped, spellbound by his own phrasing, and put the fishing pole down. He would compliment Elizabeth's hair in exactly those words, he decided, when he accepted her uncle's offer and she came to his home next month.

Sir Francis Belhaven, the fourteenth recipient of Julius Cameron's message, read it while sitting in his bedchamber wrapped in a satin dressing gown, his mistress naked and waiting for him in his bed across the room.

"Francis, darling," she purred, raking her long fingernails down the satin sheets, "what's important enough about that message to keep you over there instead of here?"

He looked up and frowned at the sound her nails were making. "Don't scratch the sheets, love," he said. "They cost £30 apiece."

"If you cared about me," she countered, careful not to sound as if she was whining, "you wouldn't give a thought to the cost." Francis Belhaven was so tightfisted that there were times Eloise wondered if marrying him would gain her more than a gown or two a year.

"If you cared about me," he countered smoothly, "you'd be more careful with my coin."

At five and forty Francis Belhaven had never been married, but he'd never lacked for feminine companionship. He enjoyed women immensely—their bodies, their faces, their bodies . . .

Now, however, he needed a legitimate heir, and for that he needed a wife. During the last year he'd been giving a good deal of thought to his rather stringent requirements for the lucky young lady he would eventually choose. He wanted a young wife as well as a beautiful wife with money of her own so she wouldn't squander his.

Glancing up from Julius's message, he gazed hungrily at Eloise's breasts and mentally added a new requirement for his future wife: She must be understanding about his sensual appetite and his need for variety on his sexual menu. It would not do for her to pucker up like a prune merely because he was involved in one trivial little affair or another. At the age of forty-five, he had no intention of being

ruled by some chit with pious notions of morality and fidelity.

A vision of Elizabeth Cameron was superimposed against his naked mistress. What a lush little beauty she'd been when he'd offered for her nearly two years ago. Her breasts had been ripe, her waist tiny, her face . . . unforgettable. Her fortune . . . adequate. Since then gossip had it that she was practically destitute after her brother's mysterious disappearance, but her uncle had indicated that she would bring a sizable dowry, which meant the gossip was as wrong as always.

"Francis!"

Arising, he walked over to the bed and sat down beside Eloise. Caressingly he laid a hand on her hip, but he reached for the bell pull with his other hand. "A moment, my darling," he said as a servant rushed into the bedchamber. He handed over the note and said, "Instruct my secretary to send an affirmative reply."

The last invitation was forwarded from Ian Thornton's London town house to Montmayne, his country estate, where it appeared on his desk among a mountain of business and social correspondence awaiting his attention. Ian opened Julius Cameron's missive while he was in the midst of rapid-fire dictation to his new secretary, and he did not take nearly so long to make a decision as Lord John Marchman or Sir Francis Belhaven.

He stared at it in utter disbelief while his secretary, Peters, who'd only been with him for a fortnight, muttered a silent prayer of gratitude for the break and continued scribbling as fast as he could, trying futilely to catch up with his employer's dictation.

"This," said Ian curtly, "was sent to me either by mistake or as a joke. In either case, it's in excruciatingly bad taste." A memory of Elizabeth Cameron flickered across Ian's mind—a mercenary, shallow little flirt with a face and body that had drugged his mind. She'd been betrothed to a viscount when he'd met her. Obviously she hadn't married her viscount—no doubt she'd jilted him in favor of someone with even better prospects. The English nobility, as he

well knew, married only for prestige and money, then looked elsewhere for sexual fulfillment. Evidently Elizabeth Cameron's relatives were putting her back on the marriage block. If so, they must be damned eager to unload her if they were willing to forsake a title for Ian's money. . . . That line of conjecture seemed so unlikely that Ian dismissed it. This note was obviously a stupid prank, perpetrated, no doubt, by someone who remembered the gossip that had exploded over that weekend house party—someone who thought he'd find the note amusing.

Completely dismissing the prankster and Elizabeth Cameron from his mind, Ian glanced at his harassed secretary who was frantically scribbling away. "No reply is necessary," he said. As he spoke he flipped the message across his desk toward his secretary, but the white parchment slid across the polished oak and floated to the floor. Peters made an awkward dive to catch it, but as he lurched sideways all the other correspondence that went with his dictation slid off his lap onto the floor. "I—I'm sorry, sir," he stammered, leaping up and trying to collect the dozens of pieces of paper he'd scattered on the carpet. "Extremely sorry, Mr. Thornton," he added, frantically snatching up contracts, invitations and letters and shoving them into a disorderly pile.

His employer appeared not to hear him. He was already rapping out more instructions and passing the corresponding invitations and letters across the desk. "Decline the first three, accept the fourth, decline the fifth. Send my condolences on this one. On this one, explain that I'm going to be in Scotland, and send an invitation to join me there, along with directions to the cottage."

Clutching the papers to his chest, Peters poked his face up on the opposite side of the desk. "Yes, Mr. Thornton!" he said, trying to sound confident. But it was hard to be confident when one was on one's knees. Harder still when one wasn't entirely certain which instructions of the morning went with which invitation or piece of correspondence.

Ian Thornton spent the rest of the afternoon closeted with Peters, heaping more dictation on the inundated clerk.

He spent the evening with the Earl of Melbourne, his future father-in-law, discussing the betrothal contract being drawn up between the earl's daughter and himself.

Peters spent part of his evening trying to learn from the butler which invitations his employer was likely to accept or reject.

2

With the help of her footman, who did double duty as a groom when the occasion required (which it usually did), Lady Elizabeth Cameron, Countess of Havenhurst, hopped down from her aging mare. "Thank you, Charles," she said, grinning affectionately at the old retainer.

At the moment the young countess did not remotely resemble the conventional image of a noblewoman, nor even a lady of fashion: Her hair was covered with a blue kerchief that was tied at the nape; her gown was simple, unadorned, and somewhat outdated; and over her arm was the woven basket she used to do her marketing in the village. But not even her drab clothing, her ancient horse, or the market basket over her arm could make Elizabeth Cameron look "common." Beneath her kerchief her shining gold hair fell in a luxurious tumble over her shoulders and back; left unbound, as it normally was, it framed a face of striking, flawless beauty. Her finely molded cheekbones were slightly high, her skin creamy and glowing with health, her lips generous and soft. But her eyes were her most striking feature; beneath delicately winged eyebrows long, curly lashes fringed eyes that were a vivid, startling green. Not hazel or aqua, but green; wonderfully expressive eyes that

sparkled like emeralds when she was happy or darkened when she was pensive.

The footman peered hopefully at the contents of the basket, which were wrapped in paper, but Elizabeth shook her head with a rueful grin. "There are no tarts in there, Charles. They were much too expensive, and Mr. Jenkins would not be reasonable. I told him I would buy a whole dozen, but he would not reduce the price by so much as a penny, so I refused to buy even one—on principle. Do you know," she confided with a chuckle, "last week when he saw me coming into his shop he hid behind the flour sacks?"

"He's a coward!" Charles said, grinning, for it was a known fact among tradesmen and shopkeepers that Elizabeth Cameron pinched a shilling until it squeaked, and that when it came to bargaining for price—which it always did with her—they rarely came out the winner. Her intellect, not her beauty, was her greatest asset in these transactions, for she could not only add and multiply in her head, but she was so sweetly reasonable, and so inventive when she listed her reasons for expecting a better price, that she either wore out her opponents or confused them into agreeing with her.

Her concern with money didn't stop with tradesmen; at Havenhurst there was scarcely an economy she didn't practice, but her methods were successful. At nineteen years old, with the burden of her small ancestral estate and eighteen of its original ninety servants on her youthful shoulders, she was managing with limited financial help from her grudging uncle to do the nearly impossible: She was keeping Havenhurst off the auctioneer's block, as well as feeding and clothing the servants who had remained there. The only "luxury" Elizabeth permitted herself was Miss Lucinda Throckmorton-Jones, who had been Elizabeth's duenna and was now her paid companion at severely reduced wages. Although Elizabeth felt perfectly capable of living alone at Havenhurst, she knew that, were she to do it, what little was left of her reputation would have been blackened beyond redemption.

Elizabeth handed her basket to her footman and said cheerfully, "Instead of tarts I bought strawberries. Mr.

Thergood is more reasonable than Mr. Jenkins. *He* agrees that when a person buys multiples of something, it is only reasonable that she should pay less per each."

Charles scratched his head at these complicated notions, but he tried to look as if he understood. "O' course," he agreed as he led her horse away. "Any fool could understand that."

"My feelings *exactly*," she said, then she turned and ran lightly up the front steps, her mind set on going over the account books. Bentner swung open the front door, the stout, elderly butler's features tense with excitement. In the tone of one who is bursting with delight but is too dignified to show it, he announced, "You have a *visitor*, Miss Elizabeth!"

For a year and a half there had been no visitors at Havenhurst, and so it was little wonder that Elizabeth felt an absurd burst of pleasure followed by confusion. It couldn't be another creditor; Elizabeth had paid them off by stripping Havenhurst of all its valuables and most of its furniture. "Who is it?" she asked, stepping into the hall and reaching up to pull off her kerchief.

A beaming grin broke across Bentner's entire face. "It is Alexandra Lawrence! Er—Townsende," he corrected himself, recalling that their visitor was married now.

Joyous disbelief held Elizabeth immobilized for a split second, then she turned and burst into an unladylike run, pulling off her kerchief as she dashed toward the drawing room. In the doorway she came to an abrupt halt, the kerchief dangling from her fingertips, her eyes riveted to the lovely young brunette who was standing in the middle of the room, clad in an elegant red traveling suit. The brunette turned, and the two girls looked at each other while slow smiles dawned across their faces and glowed in their eyes. Elizabeth's voice was a whisper, filled with admiration, disbelief, and pure delight. "*Alex*? Is it really you?"

The brunette nodded, her smile widening.

They stood still, uncertain, each one noting the dramatic changes in the other in the past year and a half, each one wondering a little apprehensively if the changes went too deep. In the silent room the ties of childhood friendship and

long-standing affection began to tighten around them, pulling them forward a hesitant step, then another, and suddenly they were running toward each other, flinging their arms around one another in fierce hugs, laughing and crying with joy.

"Oh, Alex, you look wonderful! I've missed you so!" Elizabeth laughed, hugging her again. To society "Alex" was Alexandra, Duchess of Hawthorne, but to Elizabeth she was "Alex," her oldest friend in the world—the friend who'd been on a prolonged honeymoon trip and so was unlikely to have heard yet of the awful mess Elizabeth was in.

Pulling her down onto the sofa, Elizabeth launched into a torrent of questions. "When did you return from your honeymoon trip? Are you happy? What brings you here? How long can you stay?"

"I've missed you, too," Alex replied, chuckling, and she began answering Elizabeth's questions in the order they'd been asked. "We returned three weeks ago. I'm *ecstatically* happy. I'm here to see you, of course, and I can stay for a few days, if you wish me to."

"Of course I wish it!" Elizabeth said gaily. "I have absolutely nothing planned, except for today. My uncle is coming to see me." Actually, Elizabeth's social schedule was perfectly blank for the next twelve months, and her uncle's occasional visits were *worse* than having nothing to do. But none of that mattered anymore. Elizabeth was so absurdly happy to see her friend that she couldn't stop smiling.

As they had done when they were youngsters, both girls kicked off their slippers, curled their legs beneath them, and talked for hours with the easy camaraderie of kindred spirits separated for years, yet eternally united by girlhood memories, happy, tender, and sad. "Will you ever forget," Elizabeth laughingly asked two hours later, "those wonderful mock tournaments we used to have whenever Mary Ellen's family had a birthday?"

"Never," Alex said feelingly, smiling with the memories.

"You unseated me every time we had a joust," Elizabeth said.

"Yes, but you won every single shooting contest. At least, you did until your parents found out and decided you were

too old—and too refined—to join us.” Alex sobered. “We missed you after that.”

“Not as much as I missed you. I always knew exactly which days those jousts were taking place, and I would mope around here in complete gloom, imagining what fun you were having. Then Robert and I decided to start our own tournaments, and we made all the servants participate,” she added, laughing as she thought of her half-brother and herself in those bygone days.

After a moment Alex’s smile faded. “Where *is* Robert? You haven’t mentioned him at all.”

“He . . .” She hesitated, knowing that she couldn’t talk of her half-brother’s disappearance without revealing everything that had preceded it. On the other hand, there was something in Alexandra’s sympathetic eyes that made Elizabeth wonder uneasily if her friend had already heard the whole awful story. In a matter-of-fact voice she said, “Robert disappeared a year and a half ago. I think it may have had something to do with—well, debts. Let’s not talk of it,” she said hastily.

“Very well,” Alex agreed with an artificially bright smile. “What shall we talk about?”

“You,” Elizabeth said promptly.

Alex was older than Elizabeth, and time flew past as Alexandra talked of the husband she had wed, whom she obviously adored. Elizabeth listened attentively to the descriptions of the wondrous places all over the world that he had taken her to see on their honeymoon trip.

“Tell me about London,” Elizabeth said when Alex ran out of conversation about foreign cities.

“What do you want to know?” she asked, sobering.

Elizabeth leaned forward in her chair and opened her mouth to ask the questions that mattered most to her, but pride prevented her from voicing them. “Oh—nothing in particular,” she lied. *I want to know if my friends ridicule me or condemn me—or worse, if they pity me*, she thought. *I want to know if it’s common gossip that I’m penniless now. Most of all, I want to know why none of them has bothered to visit me or even to send me a message.*

A year and a half ago, when she’d made her debut, she had

been an instant success, and offers for her hand were made in record numbers. Now, at nineteen, she was an outcast from the same society that had once imitated, praised, and petted her. Elizabeth had broken their rules, and in doing so she had become the focus of a scandal that raged through the *ton* like wildfire.

As Elizabeth looked uneasily at Alexandra she wondered if society knew the whole story or only the scandal; she wondered if they still talked about it or if it had finally been laid to rest. Alex had left on her prolonged trip just before it all happened, and she wondered if Alex had heard about it since her return.

The questions tumbled in her mind, desperate to be voiced, but she could not risk asking for two reasons: In the first place, the answers, when they came, might make her cry, and she would *not* give in to tears. In the second, in order to ask Alex the questions she longed to ask she would have to first inform her friend of all that had happened. And the simple truth was that Elizabeth was too lonely and bereft to risk the possibility that Alex might also abandon her if she knew.

"What sorts of things do you want to know?" Alex asked with a determinedly blank, cheerful smile pinned to her face—a smile designed to conceal her pity and sorrow from her proud friend.

"Anything!" Elizabeth immediately replied.

"Well, then," Alex said, eager to banish the pall of Elizabeth's painful, unspoken questions from the room, "Lord Dusenberry just became betrothed to Cecelia Lacroix!"

"How nice," Elizabeth replied with a soft, winsome smile, her voice filled with genuine happiness. "He's very wealthy and from one of the finest families."

"He's an inveterate philanderer, and he'll take a mistress within a month of their vows," Alex countered with the directness that had always shocked and rather delighted Elizabeth.

"I hope you're mistaken."

"I'm not. But if you think I am, would you care to place a wager on it?" Alex continued, so happy to see the laughter

rekindle in her friend's eyes that she spoke without thinking. "Say £30?"

Suddenly Elizabeth couldn't bear the uncertainty any longer. She needed to know whether loyalty had brought Alex to her—or whether she was here because she mistakenly believed Elizabeth was still the most sought-after female in London. Lifting her eyes to Alex's blue ones, Elizabeth said with quiet dignity, "I do not have £30, Alex."

Alex returned her somber gaze, trying to blink back tears of sympathy. "I know."

Elizabeth had learned to deal with relentless adversity, to hide her fear and hold her head high. Now, faced with kindness and loyalty, she nearly gave in to the hated tears that tragedy had not wrung from her. Scarcely able to drag the words past the tears clogging her throat, Elizabeth said humbly, "Thank you."

"There's nothing for which to thank me. I've heard the whole sordid story, and I don't believe a word of it! Furthermore, I want you to come to London for the Season and stay with us." Leaning forward, Alex took her hand. "For the sake of your own pride, you have to face them all down. I'll help you. Better yet, I'll convince my husband's grandmother to lend *her* consequence to you. Believe me," Alex finished feelingly, but with a fond smile, "no one will *dare* to cut you if the Dowager Duchess of Hawthorne stands behind you."

"Please, Alex, stop. You don't know what you're saying. Even if I were willing, which I'm not, she would never agree. I don't know her, but she'll surely know *all* about me. About what people say about me, I mean."

Alex held her gaze steadily. "You're right on one account—she had heard the gossip while I was away. I've talked the matter over with her, however, and she is willing to meet you and then make her own decision. She'll love you, just as I do. And when that happens she'll move heaven and earth to make society accept you."

Elizabeth shook her head, swallowing back a constricting lump of emotion that was part gratitude, part humiliation. "I appreciate it, really I do, but I couldn't endure it."

"I've quite made up my mind," Alex warned gently. "My

husband respects my judgment, and he'll agree, I have no doubt. As to gowns for a Season, I have many I've not yet worn. I'll lend—"

"Absolutely not!" Elizabeth burst out. "Please, Alex," she implored, realizing how ungrateful she must sound. "At least leave me some pride. Besides," she added with a gentle smile, "I am not quite so unlucky as you seem to think. I have you. And I have Havenhurst."

"I know that," Alex said. "But I also know that you cannot stay here all your life. You don't have to go out in company when you're in London, if you don't wish to do so. But we'll spend time together. I've missed you."

"You'll be too busy to do it," Elizabeth said, recalling the frenetic whirlwind of social activities that marked the Season.

"I won't be that busy," Alexandra said with a mysterious smile glowing in her eyes. "I'm with child."

Elizabeth caught her in a fierce hug. "I'll come!" she agreed before she could think better of it. "But I can stay at my uncle's town house if he isn't there."

"Ours," Alexandra said stubbornly.

"We'll see," Elizabeth countered just as stubbornly. And then she said rapturously, "A baby!"

"Excuse me, Miss Alex," Bentner interrupted, then he turned to Elizabeth, looking uneasy. "Your uncle has just arrived," he said. "He wishes to see you *at once* in the study."

Alex looked quizzically from the butler to Elizabeth. "Havenhurst seemed rather deserted when I arrived. How many servants are here?"

"Eighteen," Elizabeth said. "Before Robert left we were down to forty-five of the original ninety, but my uncle turned them all away. He said we didn't need them, and after examining the estate books he showed me that we couldn't possibly afford to give them anything but a roof and food. Eighteen of them remained anyway, though," she added, smiling up at Bentner as she continued, "They've lived at Havenhurst all their lives. It's their home, too."

Standing up, Elizabeth stifled the spurt of dread that was

nothing more than an automatic reflex at the prospect of confronting her uncle. "This shouldn't take long. Uncle Julius never likes to remain here any longer than he absolutely must."

Bentner hung back, ostensibly gathering up the tea things, watching Elizabeth leave. When she was out of earshot he turned to the Duchess of Hawthorne, whom he'd known when she was a dab of a girl running wild in boys' breeches. "Begging your pardon, Your Grace," he said formally, his kindly old face filled with concern, "but may I say how glad I am that you're here, especially now with Mr. Cameron just arriving?"

"Why, thank you, Bentner. It's lovely to see you again, too. Is anything particularly amiss with Mr. Cameron?"

"It looks like there might be." He paused to walk over to the doorway and steal a furtive glance down the hall, then he returned to her and confided, "Aaron—our coachman, that is—and I both don't like the look of Mr. Cameron today. And there's one thing more," he stated, picking up the tea tray. "None of us who've stayed on here remained because of affection for Havenhurst." An embarrassed flush stole up his white cheeks, and his voice turned gruff with emotion. "We stayed for our young mistress. We are all she has left, you see."

His gruffly spoken avowal of loyalty made Alex's eyes sting with tears even before he added, "We must not let her uncle send her into the gloom, which is what he always does."

"Is there a means to stop him?" Alex asked, smiling.

Bentner straightened, nodded, and said with dignified force, "I, for one, am in favor of shoving him off London Bridge. Aaron favors poison."

There was anger and frustration in his words, but no real menace, and Alex responded with a conspiratorial smile. "I think I prefer your method, Bentner—it's tidier."

Alexandra's remark had been teasing, and Bentner's reply was a formal bow, but as they looked at each other for a moment they both acknowledged the unspoken communication they'd just exchanged. The butler had informed her

that, should the staff's help be needed in any way in future, the duchess could depend upon their complete, unquestioning loyalty. The duchess's answer had assured him that, far from resenting his intrusion, she appreciated the information and would keep it in mind should such an occasion occur.