

Praise for *Brentwood's Ward*

“Danger, intrigue, and romance in Regency England between a wonderfully appealing London lawman and the beautiful, spoiled heiress he is hired to protect. All served up with Michelle Griep’s signature wry humor. Don’t miss it!”

—Julie Klassen, bestselling, award-winning author

“Place an unpolished lawman as guardian over a spoiled, pompous beauty and what do you get? Clever dialogue, intrigue, and enough sparks to warm you on a cold night. Add to that a murder mystery, smugglers, and kidnappings and you have a story that keeps you riveted to each page, desperate to know the outcome, and enchanted by every word this author exquisitely pens. One of the few books I’ve truly enjoyed this year!”

—MaryLu Tyndall, award-winning historical author

“Michelle Griep brings Regency Era London to life as she skillfully weaves together drama, mystery, and romance in her new novel, *Brentwood's Ward*. A dashing hero, intent on helping his ailing sister, must protect a strong-willed young heroine, but who will protect their hearts? Readers who enjoyed *A Heart Deceived* will be delighted when they read this new story from this talented author.”

—Carrie Turansky, author of *The Edwardian Brides* series

“Michelle Griep’s latest offering, *Brentwood's Ward*, is a fast-paced, edge-of-your-seat type suspense, with a healthy splash of romance thrown in for good measure. Griep’s writing style had me holding my breath through the cleverly twisted tale—until the end, when I let it all out with a long, satisfied sigh.”

—Elizabeth Ludwig, author of *The Edge of Freedom* series

“Pitch perfect! Sherlock Holmes meets Charles Dickens in a story so engaging that you won’t put it down until the last page.”

—Siri Mitchell, author of *Like a Flower in Bloom*

“In *Brentwood’s Ward*, Michelle Griep spins a story of danger and intrigue that lurks at every turn of the page. With her witty play on words and masterful shaping of phrases, the book moves beyond ordinary to delightful. A tightly woven story that will keep readers riveted until the very end.”

—Jody Hedlund, bestselling author of *The Preacher’s Bride*

“If your idea of a top-notch story is fun characters, sparkling prose, witty dialogue, and a suspenseful, romantic plot, then you’ll love Michelle Griep’s *Brentwood’s Ward*. This engrossing tale is truly a treasure and one for the keeper shelf.”

—Margaret Brownley, bestselling author of *Gunpowder Tea* and *Petticoat Detective*

“Deliciously witty and fast paced, *Brentwood’s Ward* is a lively yet thoughtful romp with a delightful cast of characters, a unique London setting, and enough romantic twists and turns to keep you on the edge of your Regency chair! Encore, Michelle Griep!”

—Laura Frantz, author of *Love’s Fortune*

“*Brentwood’s Ward* unfolds like the best British costume drama, full of rich detail, wit, and intrigue. Readers will fall in love with Nicholas Brentwood from the first chapter. This Bow Street Runner has all the qualities a hero needs: integrity, intelligence, and independence; and heroine Emily Payne leads him on a merry chase sure to delight Austen and Conan Doyle fans alike.”

—Erica Vetsch, author of *The Cactus Creek Challenge* (July 2015)

BRENTWOOD'S
WARD

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This book dedicated to:

my sweet daughter,
Mariah Joy,
thank you for your unvarnished opinions

my sweet friend,
Stephanie Gustafson,
thank you for your encouragement in so many arenas

and as always for my sweet, sweet Savior,
Jesus Christ
thank You for saving my soul

Chapter 1

London, 1807

You, sir, are a rogue!” Emily Payne scowled into the black marble gaze fixed on hers, determined to win the deadlock of stares. Horrid beast. Must he always triumph?

Without so much as a blink, the pug angled his head. Sunlight from the front door’s transom window streamed over her shoulder, highlighting each of his fuzzy wrinkles. The pup’s face squinched into a doggy smile, coaxing a sigh from Emily. Who could remain cross with that scrunched-up muzzle?

“I should’ve named you Scamp instead of Alf, eh boy?” She smiled then laughed outright when he snuck in a quick kiss on her neck.

Beside her, Mary, her maid, joined in—until Mrs. Hunt, equal parts housekeeper and sergeant major, huffed into the entry hall. Emily glanced at the matron over the pup’s head. If the Admiralty were smart, they’d press her into service, and the Royal Navy would learn a new meaning for *shipsshape* in no time.

“Sorry, miss. The little beastie got clean away from me.” Mrs. Hunt reached for the fugitive, the smell of linseed oil and hard work wafting with the billow of her sleeve. “Hand him over, if you please. It won’t happen again.”

“Hmm. Don’t be so sure.” Emily nuzzled his furry head with the top of her chin, well aware he ought not be encouraged, yet completely unable to stop herself.

Mary tsked. “He just can’t bear to be parted from you, miss, that’s all.”

“Which is more than I can say for the males of my own species,” she mumbled into the pup’s fur. Alf nestled against her shoulder. If only Charles Henley might become so attached, the empty void in

her heart would be filled at last. After a last snuggle, she held the pug out to Mrs. Hunt.

But Alf wriggled during the transfer. His back paw caught the lace on her glove, tearing the sheer fabric. Frowning, she inspected the damage. “Oh, bother. Mary, would you—”

“I shall.” Her maid turned, but a rap on the front door spun her back around. “Right after I answer the—”

Emily shook her head. “I’ll do it. You see to the gloves.”

She opened the door to the height of fashion. By faith, the only thing Reginald Sedgewick prized more than his garments was his looking glass. “Uncle Reggie!” She smiled. “A bit early in the day for you, is it not?”

He nodded. Nothing more. Perhaps it was indeed too early for his usual cheerful banter. “Is your father home?” His voice crackled at the edges.

“I’ve not seen him, though that’s not unusual. Come in.” She stepped aside, and the scent of bay rum entered with him—or was it? One more sniff and her nose wrinkled. There was nothing bay about it. The man reeked of rum.

He doffed his hat, and she called to her maid, who by now was halfway up the stairs. “Oh Mary, would you be a dear and summon my father before you see to my gloves?”

“Aye, miss.” Retracing her steps, Mary scurried past them and disappeared down the same corridor Mrs. Hunt had taken earlier.

Emily turned back to Reggie and swept her hand toward the open sitting-room door. “Please have a—”

The words clogged in her throat as she studied him up close. His cravat knot hung loose. Buttons on his waistcoat did not match the proper holes, and no red carnation adorned his lapel. She shifted her eyes to his. “Is something wrong?”

His jaw clenched, and she suspected his fists might have, too. Then strangely enough, the angry wave subsided. “Nothing a good

row with your father won't solve, my dear." A ghost of a smile softened the threat, or was that a grimace?

"How very strange. Usually it is I who am at odds with him." She reached for the bellpull on the wall. "Shall I ring for tea?"

"No need. This shan't take long." He paused, turning the hat in his hands around and around. "Hopefully."

A shiver crept across her shoulders. He was not only disheveled but anxious as well? That didn't bode well, not coming from the jolliest fellow she knew.

Behind her, Mary's footsteps clipped onto the marble flooring. "Mr. Payne is unavailable, sir."

Red crept up Reggie's neck and blossomed onto his cheeks. "Unavailable?"

Mary bypassed them both then halted near the balustrade at the base of the stairs. Did she keep such distance from conservation of steps. . .or fear? She studied the floor as she answered, making it impossible to read her face. "Yes, sir. Detained for the rest of the day. I suggest you call back tomorrow, Mr. Sedgewick."

Reggie breathed out an oath then jammed his hat on top of his head so forcefully his valet would need a shoehorn to pry it off come evening. With a curt nod to them both and a ground-out "Good day," he swooped out the front door. A firm thud accentuated his departure.

Emily slid her gaze to Mary, who returned her wide-eyed stare. "That was. . .interesting. I wonder what Father's done to vex Reggie so?" Would it be business related or something to do with the recently widowed Mrs. Nevens? She suspected the latter, for they'd each been vying for the woman's attention.

Mary merely bobbed her head. "I'll see about those gloves, then."

The girl disappeared up the stairs, and a fresh wave of mourning washed over Emily. Instead of tucking tail and running away in the name of duty, her former maid and confidant, Wren, would have listened to her conspiracy theories. Or likely more than that. . .Wren

would have added a few of her own ideas to the mix. Emily sighed, frustrated that even a hundred Wren-would-haves wouldn't bring her favorite maid back. Nothing would—except, perhaps, for a miracle.

“Is Reggie gone?” Her father's bass voice rumbled from the corridor. His head peeked out the study door, fuzzy as a downy-haired tot whose nightgown had just been pulled off.

Emily pursed her lips, shedding one glove after the other. “I thought you were unavailable, Father.”

“I am.” His big belly and stubby legs appeared. “Leastwise as far as Reginald's concerned.”

She set the ripped lace onto the calling card salver then looked up at her father's approach, narrowing her eyes. Something was off kilter. He often avoided her, but never his business partner. “Uncle Reggie was quite put out, you know.”

“I do know, but it can't be helped.”

She opened her mouth to argue with the absurdity of his statement, but before she could speak, Mary descended the last step and held out a set of white gloves. “Here you are, miss.”

“Thank you.” She reached for the fresh pair, and a keen scowl slashed across her father's face. “What are you frowning at?”

“You are not going out, I hope. In fact, I quite forbid it.”

“Don't be silly.” She wiggled her fingers into the cool fabric. “Did I not tell you I've an appointment at the milliner's?”

“You own enough bonnets to cover all the heads of Mayfair proper. No, no, I insist you stay home.”

“You do?” Her gaze shot to his. For one glorious moment, she imagined playing the part of papa's little girl—finally—even if she was three and twenty. Regardless of the years, her heart leaped in her chest.

Then stilled when he spoke. “I am expecting someone I require you to meet.”

Inside her gloves, perspiration dotted the palms of her hands. The

last man he'd brought home for her to meet had nearly been her ruination. Never again. She set her jaw. "Father, you can't be serious. This appointment was confirmed ages ago. Besides which, I need one last fitting for my gown, and if I do not attend to it today, it shan't be ready for the Garveys' ball."

"No more about it, Emily. I will be obeyed in this matter. You are not to leave the house this morning." He lifted his chin and peered down his nose. "Am I understood?"

She took the time to straighten each ruffled hem of her sleeves before returning her gaze to his—a stalling tactic she'd learned from the best. Him. "Quite," she answered.

"Good." He wheeled about and disappeared down the hallway.

Disappointment burned at the back of her throat. Would that he might want to spend a day with her instead of foisting her off on one of his business associates. Swallowing the sour taste, she reached for the doorknob. Her entire future depended upon the upcoming ball—a future that did not include one moment more of pining for her father's love.

Mary's eyes widened. "Miss Emily! Your father said—"

"My father said not to leave the house this morning. But, Mary dearest"—she opened the door and winked over her shoulder—"did you know that right now it's afternoon in India?"



Short of breath and lean on time, Nicholas Brentwood sprinted down Bow Street, dodging hawkers and pedestrians. Though patience was one of his assets, it did not make the top ten of the magistrate's virtues. Nearing the station, he splashed through a pool of waste that leaked into the hole of his right boot, but it was not to be helped. He was late.

Darting through the front door of the magistrate's court, he shoved past milling gawkers waiting to be let into the sentencing

chamber. With a “Pardon me,” he veered right and bounded up the stairway, two treads at a time. Fatigue stung his eyes, anguish his heart. Though he inhaled deeply the smell of oil lamps, ink, and lives hanging in the balance, the stench of disease yet clung to his nostrils.

He bounded down a narrow corridor, shoulders brushing one wall then another in his haste. Through a crack in the magistrate’s door, he slid in sideways and breathless.

Sir Richard Ford stood near the window, regarding the streets of London. Weak sunlight filtered through the soot-dusted glass, highlighting the man’s shorn head—a head that did not turn when Nicholas entered. Good. Reining in his heaving chest, Nicholas breathed out a thankful prayer that his less-than-decorous arrival had not been noted. Then he straightened the lapel on his dress coat, covering the rip on his vest beneath. “I’m here, sir. Please excuse—”

The man waved his hand in the air, batting away his gnat of an apology.

Galled that he was the offending insect, Nicholas advanced. “If you would allow me to explain—”

“Permission denied.” Ford turned from the window. A frown etched lines on either side of his mouth, deep enough to sink any thoughts of rebuttal.

Nicholas widened his stance and squared his shoulders, taut as a sail in the wind. “Yes, sir.”

The man’s frown deepened. “Sweet peacock, Brentwood, sit down.” Ford strode to the overstuffed chair behind a massive cherry-wood desk and lowered his frame. “You make me nervous.”

He made the magistrate nervous? The same man who in mere minutes would don a wig as tall as a small child and sentence countless men to their deaths? Nicholas bit back a smirk and sank into the worn leather seat opposite the desk, grateful to set aside running for the moment. “I can only assume, sir, this is about my recent absences. By your leave, I should like to explain.”

The old fellow skewered him with a hard stare, one that might divide flesh from bone by sheer will. "I will have no explanations."

Nicholas clenched his jaw. So, this was to be it, then? His career ended now when he needed money most? Not that he didn't deserve it. God knew he warranted much worse than to be dismissed.

But Jenny surely didn't.

Slowly, feeling every year of hard living and lack of sleep, he nodded and rose. "Very well. I understand. It's been my honor to have served—"

"Reseat your back end, Brentwood. You don't understand a thing."

The chair held his weight, his mind a thousand questions. "Sir?"

Ford leaned forward, the desk becoming one with the man. "You think I don't know about your sister? This is an investigative agency I run, with none but the best in my employ. Every officer knows how you care for her, and none fault you for it." He sat back and lifted his chin. "Neither do I."

The tightness in Nicholas's shoulders eased for the first time in months. Though he hated that all knew his business, it was a relief to be able to stop hiding the burden—a trail he'd done everything in his power to conceal. But apparently not enough. He pierced Ford with one of his own pointed looks. "Did you have me followed?"

"Didn't have to. A certain doctor came here, inquiring after you. Seems the fellow doesn't trust you'll be good for his wages." One of the magistrate's brows rose, a perfect arc on such an austere canvas. "Imagine that."

A smile begged for release, but Nicholas refused the vagrant urge. Not yet. The magistrate didn't often keep a courtroom full of brigands waiting. Something else was brewing. "If this doesn't concern my sister, then why the summons? I don't suppose you're holding up court for tea and crumpets with me."

"I've a task in mind for you, Brentwood." Ford propped his elbows on each arm of the chair, angling his head to the right. One of his

favorite bargaining positions. The man eyed him as he might a piece of horseflesh to be bought. “A task that must be tended to immediately, and I’m certain you’re the perfect officer for the job. In fact, I will consider no one else.”

Unease tickled the nape of his neck, and Nicholas rubbed at the offending sensation. Ford was generally spare with his praise. Why now?

“I appreciate your confidence,” he said.

“Bah.” The magistrate sniffed. “I’m certain you’re the man because you’re the one with the greatest need for funding. Am I correct?”

Nicholas shifted in his seat. Exactly how much did his superior know? “Go on.”

Ford laced his fingers and placed them on the desktop. “A gentleman of some means approached me with the business of procuring a guardian for his daughter. He’s willing to pay a tidy sum to see her well cared for.”

Scrubbing a hand over his chin, Nicholas chewed on that information as he might a gummy bit of porridge. Either the man was a reprobate too intent on pleasure to see to his own offspring, or the girl was a hellish handful. A frown pulled at his lips. “Why does he not look after her himself?”

“He sails for the continent on the morrow.”

Nicholas snorted. “Seems he ought to have obtained a guardian long before this.”

“Yes. . .well. . .” Ford cleared his throat and averted his gaze. “The point is the man is willing to pay a large sum to safeguard his only child, and it’s my understanding you could use that money. Yes?”

He tugged at his collar. A marmot in a snare couldn’t have felt more trapped. “I think that’s already been established.”

“Very well.” Sliding open a top drawer, Ford produced a folded bit of parchment. “The gentleman, Mr. Alistair Payne, will fill you in on the particulars of the agreement. Officer Moore’s got the streets

covered and Captain Thatcher the roads, so I shall excuse you from your regular duties until this assignment is complete.”

Stabbing the paper with his finger, Ford skimmed it across the desktop toward him. “Here’s the address and the agreed upon amount.”

Nicholas unfolded the crisp paper. He blinked, then blinked again. Granted, the ink watered into gray at the edges, but even so, a figure stood out sharply against the creamy background. Two hundred fifty pounds—enough to send Jenny to the blessed moon should a cure be available there. He locked stares with Ford. “This is no jest?”

“Really, Brentwood, how often do you see me smile?” His lips didn’t so much as twitch. The only movement in the entire room was the pendulum ticking away in the corner clock—that and the rush of blood pulsing in Nicholas’s ears.

“Well?” Ford broke the silence. “What do you say?”

The only thing he could. “Yes.” He folded the parchment and tucked it into his breast pocket.

“Excellent.” Ford pushed back from his desk and stood. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve a few cases to hear.”

As the magistrate stalked out the door, Nicholas ignored decorum and sat frozen, too stunned to follow. Amazing, that’s what. Did God seriously delight in dropping the jaw of a man such as himself? He rose and glanced at the cracked plaster ceiling, whispering a prayer. “Thank You, Lord. Your bounty never ceases to amaze me.”

He crossed the room and stepped into the hallway, hope speeding his steps—and landing him square into the path of a steel-bodied man.

“You’re in an awful hurry, Brentwood.” A dark gaze bore into his. Though clear of anger, a fearsome enough stare.

“Sorry, Thatcher.” Nicholas sidestepped one way, Thatcher the other, an odd sort of dance in the narrow corridor. “On my way to a new assignment. Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Surprise to me as well.” Samuel Thatcher straightened his riding cloak and planted himself in front of the magistrate’s door. “I was summoned for an early meeting with Ford. So early, I neglected to bring up my own inquiries. He still in there?”

Nicholas shook his head. “Not anymore.”

“Right.” Thatcher blew out a long breath. “Suppose I’ll head out, then.”

The big man turned the opposite direction, but two steps later, pivoted. “Hold on, Brentwood. New assignment, you say?”

Nicholas nodded. “Guardian position. Ought not be. . .what? Why the grin?”

A smile the size of Parliament slid across Thatcher’s face. He backed away, hands up. “Good luck with that one. You’ll need it.”

Nicholas growled. “What did Ford not tell me?”

Thatcher’s grin morphed into a low-throated laugh. He turned and stomped off. “You’re just the fellow for the job, Brentwood.”

“As are you to haunt the hollows on a horse. That’s it, run off like the coward you are.” His words didn’t stop the man from retreating nor douse the remains of his laughter.

Nicholas wheeled about and strode the other direction. Thatcher was batty, that’s what, likely from too much time spent on the byways wrestling with highwaymen. The man probably envied the soft position he’d just landed, holing up in a fine town house, watching over some proper little heiress. For all he knew, she might have a nurse or a governess, and all he’d have to do was recline in the man’s study, smoke cheroots, and read the *Times*.

Descending the stairs, he grinned in full at his fortune and entered the foyer. His footsteps echoed in the wide lobby, empty now that court was in session. He reached for the doorknob then jerked back when it opened of its own accord.

“Ahh, Brentwood.” A barrel-chested man entered, not as large as Thatcher but every bit as powerful. All Ford’s chosen men were built like bulwarks.

Nicholas nodded a greeting. "Moore. How goes it?"

"Not bad. On my way to testify." Alexander Moore swept past him, shedding his hat and brushing back his wild mane of blond hair. Nearing the courtroom, he called over his shoulder: "And by the smile on your face, I assume you escaped that horrendous assignment ol' Ford was trying to pawn off."

The door slapped shut behind Moore, as soundly as the jaws of Ford's trap snapped down on Nicholas. Replaying the entire interview in his head, the magistrate's throat clearing and his darting gaze stood out as the single tip-off. Apparently the gentleman, Mr. Alistair Payne, had tried to arrange for a guardian long before he set sail, a position both Moore and Thatcher had declined. Nicholas frowned. Ford hadn't chosen him for any special reason other than he was the last resort.

Stepping out into the rank offense of Bow Street, Nicholas flipped up his collar against the chill and cast off any misgivings. After tracking down murderers, gamblers, and whoremongers, how hard could guarding an heiress be?

Chapter 2

Before entering 22 Portman Square, Nicholas stood dangerously close to the carriage ruts in the road and glanced up, studying the place. So many windows would be a problem, as would the servants' entrance below street level to the left of the front door. The roof, three stories up, sat below the neighboring town house—an easy leap down for an intruder bent on topside access. No wonder Mr. Payne felt ill at ease leaving a young daughter home alone in such a burglar's playground.

In four strides, he reached the door, lifted the brass knocker, and rapped. Moments later, the door opened to a flint-faced housekeeper who he might've served next to in the Sixth Regiment of the Black Dragoons. Odd that for such a fancy house, neither butler nor footman answered his call.

Nicholas offered his card. "I'm here to see Mr. Payne."

She didn't just take the thing—she held it up to within inches of her eyes and read the sparse bit of letters as if he'd petitioned to view the crown jewels. "So you're Mr. Brentwood, are ye? What business do you have with Mr. Payne?"

With a doorkeeper such as this, mayhap guarding the place wouldn't be as difficult as he first imagined. "I believe, madam, that if you don't already know, then maybe you ought not."

Her eyes shot to his, gunmetal gray and sparking. "A simple 'imports or exports' would have sufficed. Come in."

She stepped aside, allowing him to pass, then cut him off before he could advance any farther. "Wait here, if you please."

Removing his hat, he studied the grand foyer. Flocked paper lined the walls, graced with enough wall lamps and an overhanging chandelier that the light would likely give him a headache come evening. To his right, a carpeted stairway led upward. At its base,

three paces past and to the left, a single door. Closed. Opposite, french doors opened to a sitting room before the rest of the home disappeared down a corridor. It smelled of wealth and lemon wax—

And a faint scent of linseed oil as the housekeeper reappeared from the hallway. “This way, Mr. Brentwood.”

He followed her swishing skirt as she retreated once more down the corridor. Stopping in front of the next closed door, she knocked, and a “Just let the man in, Mrs. Hunt,” bellowed from behind.

Twisting the knob, she nodded at him. “If you please.”

Out of habit, Nicholas scanned the room. Two floor-to-ceiling windows and a large hearth, besides the threshold he'd just crossed, presented four possible points of access. Four. In one room. This could prove a very tedious assignment.

“Mr. Brentwood.”

The first thing he noticed at Mr. Payne's approach was the fellow's round belly. Apparently Portman House employed a good cook. At least the eating part of this assignment would be agreeable. His gaze traveled upward then stopped, fixated on Payne's amazingly horrible teeth—chompers any beaver would give a hind leg to own. Nicholas squinted. Were the front two really that big or the rest abnormally small? A man of his standing surely could afford to have them pulled and replaced with porcelain replicas. Or at the very least, could he not have the rascals sanded down and even them out a bit?

Before he breached protocol any further, Nicholas forced his gaze higher and held out his hand. “Mr. Payne.”

The fellow clasped his fingers in a firm grip followed by a squeeze. Confident and over so. Quite the contradiction to the man's appearance, for the structure of the rest of his face made him look perpetually surprised. Fuzzy hair, thankfully short and sparse, stood on end, as if he'd just taken a great fright. Dark eyes, brown as dried tobacco, sat below wiry white eyebrows, high set and arched—apparently their normal repose. This man surely made children laugh,

perhaps even his daughter.

“Have a seat. I understand you’re one of Ford’s men, eh?” The freakish teeth punctuated his words.

“I am.” Nicholas eyed the furniture to keep from staring. Anchored on an overlarge Persian rug, two library chairs faced a glossy desk. Interesting, though, that no inkwells or papers, ledgers or registers favored the topside. It was bare. Completely. What kind of businessman was this Mr. Payne?

The man sank into a seat behind the desk, cushions whooshing a complaint beneath his weight. “Please excuse the somewhat unconventional greeting at the door. I’ve given my butler a temporary leave. I hope you weren’t too put out by Mrs. Hunt. She can be a bit brash at times.”

Nicholas met the fellow’s even gaze. “Perhaps you ought to offer her the guardian position.”

“I said she’s brash, sir, not wily.”

After his short encounter with the woman, Nicholas was not convinced. That mobcap hid more than aggression. He tipped his head. “I was not aware that cunning was one of the qualities you desired.”

“Yet you are, Brentwood. Cunning, that is. Or you would not be employed as one of Bow Street’s finest.” Mr. Payne sat back and lifted his chin. “Am I not right?”

Nicholas said nothing.

“Very well, man. I can see you’d like to get down to business. My daughter, Miss Emily, is. . .” His eyes followed his brows upward, and he studied the ceiling as if a description of the girl might be found near the rafters. Silence stretched, revealing more than a score of words could accomplish.

A father speechless about his daughter did not bode well.

After excessive throat clearing, Mr. Payne finally spoke: “Let’s just say Emily knows her own mind, or at least she thinks she does.

Because of this, I charge you with the oversight of her at all times until I return.”

“Which will be?” The thought of safekeeping a prideful girl for days on end—one who may have a beaver bite like her father—sounded as diverting as the time he’d lugged ol’ Nat Waggins, escape artist extraordinaire, from York down to Tyburn.

“I expect to be gone a month, give or take and naturally weather permitting, at which point I shall award you 250 pounds. It’s very straightforward, Mr. Brentwood. Keep my daughter safe, and the money is yours.” Payne leaned sideways and slid open a drawer, procuring a carved wooden box with brass hinges. From his waistcoat pocket, he fished out a tiny key. “Though I suppose you should like an advance, eh?”

“May I ask a few questions?” Not that he’d turn down the payment. Jenny’s life hung in the balance without it—and perhaps even with it.

Mr. Payne set the key in the box’s lock. A click later, he lifted the lid. “Of course.”

Nicholas drew in a breath, girding up for a salvo technique he’d mastered long ago. “I gather you are a merchant, hence the travel, and the import/export mentioned by your housekeeper.”

“I am.”

“Should the need arise, how do I reach you?”

“You don’t.”

“Then are there other relations I may contact?”

“None.”

“Yet you fear for Miss Payne’s safety.”

“I do.”

“Why?”

That stopped the man but only for the briefest of moments. A pause easily missed, one Nicholas had learned to listen for in the voices of swindlers and cons.

Payne scowled, the effect lightened by the ridiculous teeth

peeking through his lips. “You can imagine, Brentwood, that a man in my position garners many enemies. Blood-sucking enemies, no less. Emily is my only heir, hence my one vulnerability.”

“What exactly is your position, Mr. Payne?”

The man slammed the box’s lid shut with one hand and held out a banknote with the other. “Commerce, Brentwood. The world’s wheels turn on the hub of commerce, of which I am the center, leastwise in the shipping industry. Now then, here is your advance.”

Nicholas leaned forward and pinched the paper between thumb and forefinger, expecting the man’s grip to lessen.

It tightened. “One more thing. There’s been a slight change of plans. I expect you to set up quarters here. Now. My ship sails by day’s end.”

A nerve on the side of his neck jumped. He’d have no time to dash over to the Crown and Horn to let Jenny know of his whereabouts. If she should need him, no one would know where to find him. . . unless he paid a courier to deliver a message. He lifted his gaze to meet Payne’s. “Then a change in remuneration should be in order as well, I think.”

The man frowned, yet the banknote loosened. He pocketed the sum as Payne withdrew another note.

“Very shrewd, Brentwood. I see why Ford’s runners have earned such a reputation.”

Runner? Heat burned a trail up Nicholas’s spine and lodged at the base of his skull. The man might as well have questioned his parentage. He snatched the added check from the man’s pudgy fingers then rose and skewered him with a glance. “I shall give you the benefit of the doubt this time, Mr. Payne, for perhaps you are not aware that *runner* is a derogatory term. One I don’t take kindly to being associated with. I am, in your own words, one of Bow Street’s finest, not an errand boy or Ford’s lackey; I am a detective, sir, an investigator. A sleuth. The kind of man who will stop at nothing to

hunt down a criminal and bring him to justice at the end of a rope. Now you are educated. See that it doesn't happen again."

"Well. . .I. . ." Payne's Adam's apple bobbed up and down, his brows ending where his white hairline began. "Of course." He busied himself by tucking away the box then stepped to a velvet cord on the wall and tugged it.

Pocketing the rest of the payment, Nicholas allowed his blood to cool. It'd been a hard battle to become a man of integrity, a fight he'd not see belittled by donning a pejorative title.

"Aye, sir?" The housekeeper's head peeked through the door.

"Summon Miss Emily straightaway, Mrs. Hunt." Payne resumed his seat behind the desk.

Nicholas preferred to remain standing and meet the little heiress with the advantage of height.

"I am sorry, but she is gone out with Miss Mary. Will that be all, sir?"

Color started rising slowly, like mercury up a thermometer, slipping over Payne's ears, diffusing across his cheeks, then inching up his nose. Judging by the rapid spread, his head might pop at any moment—and those teeth would be deadly projectiles. Nicholas retreated a step.

"The devil you say! I specifically forbade her!" Payne sputtered an oath. "Never mind, Mrs. Hunt. That will be all."

As soon as the door shut, Payne retrieved his safe box yet again. He removed a fistful of assorted notes and held them out. "Take it, Brentwood."

Nicholas narrowed his eyes. "You've provided a sufficient advance. What is this for?"

A muscle jumped near the hinge of Payne's jaw before he ground out, "Hazard pay, for indeed, Emily is hazardous on more levels than one."