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An Excerpt From: LOVE'S STRATEGY

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"Leah, there are two gentlemen here to see you."

Leah's blood ran cold at her mother's announcement. More? Were they never to leave her alone? She slowly straightened from where she was bent over tending the roses. February had been decidedly warm this year. She put a hand to the small of her back, realizing even as she did it that it wasn't her back that was really bothering her. She was just so tired. Tired of the incessant demands of creditors, and tired of trying to make ends meet as those same creditors relieved them of everything of value.

"Mama?" Her son Sebastian also stood up where he'd been playing soldiers with his younger sister Esme. Leah's heart contracted at the concern on his face. Ten was too young to carry such worry. She made a deliberate effort to lighten her features as she smiled at him.

"It's nothing, Bastian, just my poor old back aching," she told him lightly, making a face. "You wait here with Esme while I go see what these gentlemen want."

Her mother walked across the garden to join her. At Leah's comment she put a comforting hand on her daughter's arm. "They are not here about one of Thomas's debts, Leah," she said gently, and Leah's eyes inexplicably filled with tears.

"How do you know?" Leah was alarmed at the tremor in her voice. She had held herself together this long, now was not the time to fall apart. Although really, she thought irreverently, when was a good time to fall apart?

Her mother got a very self-righteous look on her face, almost militant. "I asked."

Leah gasped in horror. "You what?"

"I asked them," her mother repeated, her expression mulish. "I'll not have you bothered anymore by those rude upstarts strutting through here demanding their ill-gotten gains."

Leah closed her eyes in despair. "Mother, they have every right. All those debts were legitimately incurred by Thomas before his death."

"Gambling is hardly legitimate—" her mother began, but Leah cut her off.

"They are legally binding debts according to the laws of England, Mother, and as his widow I am legally bound to make restitution."

Marjorie must have recognized the soul-deep exhaustion in Leah's voice, because for once she let the subject of Leah's late husband drop. "My dear, let me get rid of these gentlemen. You go upstairs and rest and I'll watch the children for a while."

Leah smiled at her mother. She could be a trial, but under it all Leah knew she loved her unconditionally. "No, Mother, its best I find out what they want. You stay here with the children, and I shall return as soon as possible." She started to walk away backwards, wagging a finger playfully at her mother. "And no more asking strange gentlemen if they are here to collect money, understood?"

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Valentine stood next to the empty hearth, trying not to brood. He'd never even seen the widow, for God's sake, and here he was about to ask for her hand in marriage. It was insane, and it was demoralizing that he and Kurt had to resort to taking advantage of a woman in desperate straits in order to have the life they wished for.

He looked over at Kurt. Kurt glanced up and quirked an eyebrow curved one corner of his lips in an amused smile. "Try not to brood, Valentine," he admonished, his German accent subtly lending a continental flavor to his upper class British tones. He unfurled his long, lean frame from the small parlor chair in which he had been resting. "You'll scare away the poor Widow Marleybone with that expression."

"I am not brooding. And it's Marlestone," Valentine corrected with exasperation, "Widow Marlestone. For God's sake, if you're going to make me marry her, at least get her name right."

Kurt shrugged. "She won't have it for long, so it's a moot point."

Valentine growled in frustration. "You don't know she'll say yes."

Kurt looked at Valentine incredulously. "Surely you jest? Based on what her mother said, she's in sore need of a hero right now."

"I do not in any way resemble anyone's hero." Valentine rolled his eyes at Kurt's exaggeration. "To the widow I'll more likely resemble a villain, here to take advantage

of her straitened circumstances.”

Kurt let his gaze wander slowly up and down Valentine’s tall, muscular frame, and Valentine felt his cheeks heat at the other man’s perusal. He looked guiltily at the door, hoping the Widow Marleston didn’t appear while Kurt was devouring him with his eyes.

Kurt laughed at Valentine’s look. “Sooner, rather than later, the sweet widow will figure out we’re lovers, Valentine. I think it’s best done right away, considering I want to be her lover as well.” Before Valentine could answer Kurt continued. “As for what you look like,” he paused, his eyes moving over Valentine again, “you are very desirable, hero or villain.”

“Kurt,” was all he said, in an admonishing tone. Kurt merely shrugged expansively, in that purely continental way.

Valentine sat in one of the damned uncomfortable chairs that filled the parlor. He slumped forward and ran his hand through his hair. “I don’t know whether I feel like the villain or the victim, Kurt.”

“Darling Valentine, even Stephen agrees. She is English, and you have a much more respectable English background than I. She will feel more comfortable marrying you. It is a simple thing really, and meaningless in the long run. She will be wife to us both.”

Valentine looked up at Kurt. “And if she says no?”

Kurt shrugged expansively again. “Then there are surely other poor widows in England who are desperate.”

Valentine laughed. “Desperate enough to take on the two of us? I’m not so sure.”

Kurt smiled wickedly. “Ah, liebchen, you underestimate my powers of persuasion.”