

Lessons in
French

Praise for
Lessons in French

“Laura Kinsale creates magic. Her characters live, breathe, charm, and seduce, and her writing is as delicious and perfectly served as wine in a crystal glass. When you’re reading Kinsale, as with all great indulgences, it feels too good to stop. If there is one thing I wish for every romance reader, it is to experience the singular and extraordinary pleasures of a Laura Kinsale novel.”

—Lisa Kleypas, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Laura Kinsale is the gold standard in historical romance! Funny, sad, witty, and deeply sensual, *Lessons in French* is an exquisite romance and an instant classic. Laura Kinsale’s writing is such a pleasure, I know that I’ll be rereading *Lessons in French* for years to come.”

—Elizabeth Hoyt, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Laura Kinsale is one of the very best writers that the romance genre has ever seen. I am in awe of her talent, and I savor every word of her books.”

—Madeline Hunter, *New York Times* bestselling author

“I loved it! *Lessons in French* is a delicious new Kinsale that couples the charm of *Midsummer Moon* with the intensity of *Seize the Fire* or *The Shadow and the Star*. Intrigue, drama, secrets, passion, and a grand romance make this a wonderful addition to Laura Kinsale’s already excellent repertoire.”

—Jennifer Ashley, *USA Today* bestselling author

“One of the most beloved writers of romance is back...She’s better than ever, and she’s worth the wait! Her wit is laugh-out-loud funny, and her poignant moments are so heartwarming. I’m glad she is back, and I do believe she is better than before, and I know, like me, all her fans will be saying her new book was worth the long wait!”

—Amelia Grey, author of *A Duke to Die For*,
The Rogues’ Dynasty

“Kinsale is a master storyteller. The sheer beauty of her writing never fails to inspire me.”

—Laura Lee Guhrke, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Laura Kinsale is a master! I love her books! *Lessons in French* is one of those rare books that should be savored. Each word is a gem... I loved it!”

—Jade Lee, *USA Today* bestselling author

“Laura Kinsale is, without question, the best romance writer working today. Each book she writes has been a rare gift, and *Lessons in French* is no different. At times touching, sexy, heart-breaking, and laugh-out-loud funny, the story of Callie and Trev makes this world a better place. No one, but no one, does it better.”

—Anne Stuart, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Silver Falls

“What a delightful romp. Callista is witty, whimsical and determined. I LOVE her. Trev may be the best Kinsale hero yet, a smoldering, complex bear of a man. *Lessons in French* is a sensual, funny book with the patented Kinsale charm. When I’m not laughing I’m hanging onto the edge of the chair, enjoying the wild ride. Remember why you read Romance? This is it.”

—Joanna Bourne, national bestselling author of *My Lord and Spymaster*

“Insightful. Uplifting. Laura Kinsale reveals the beauty and vulnerability of the human heart with clean, page-turning prose. Don’t miss this long-awaited classic from the master storyteller who redefined romantic fiction.”

—Jillian Hunter, *USA Today* bestselling author of *A Wicked Lord at the Wedding*

“*Lessons in French* will be welcomed by anyone who knows the subtle humor, powerful emotions, and witty charm of Laura Kinsale’s work. If you’re new to Kinsale’s writing, this is a perfect book to start with. Regardless, if you pick up this book, be sure to reserve several hours for complete indulgence.”

—Smart Bitches, Trashy Books

“As great as ever, Laura Kinsale captures our hearts all over again with her newest, sure to be bestseller, *Lessons in French*.”

—Sue Grimshaw, Bookseller

“A truly gifted writer, Laura Kinsale is one of the romance genre’s brightest stars.”

—Loretta Chase, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Don’t Tempt Me

“*Lessons in French* is *très magnifique!* A passionate and enchanting story of a second chance at first love.”

—Dear Author

“Kinsale’s delightful characters and delicious wit enliven this poignant tale of childhood loves reunited. It will charm your heart!”

—Sabrina Jeffries, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Wed Him Before You Bed Him

“Laura Kinsale has done it again! Callie and Trevelyan are an engaging couple, one readers are sure to want to see together. But they’re not the only ones who will make readers enjoy reading the book. The cast of secondary characters is rich and lively, and the plot was intriguing. I found myself longing for bad weather so I had an excuse to read.”

—Sherry Lewis, award-winning author of *Her Secret Family*

“Historical romance fans rejoice! Laura Kinsale is back and guaranteed to win your heart with *Lessons in French!*”

—Catherine Mann, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Hotshot*

“A Laura Kinsale book is a force of nature. *Lessons in French* is one of the best historical romances I have read in years. Now I regret terribly that I finished it so fast, because I need me another Laura Kinsale book.”

—Sherry Thomas, award-winning author of *Not Quite a Husband*

“*Lessons in French* is wonderful romp, presented with wit, style, and Laura Kinsale’s trademark heart-stealing characters. I smiled my way through it, loving every word.”

—Jennifer Blake, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Gallant Match*

“A rich and rewarding romance from the legendary Laura Kinsale!”

—Mary Jo Putney, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Loving a Lost Lord*

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LAURA KINSALE



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Published by Sourcebooks Casablanca, an imprint of Sourcebooks, Inc.
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410
(630) 961-3900
FAX: (630) 961-2168
www.sourcebooks.com

*To Ventoux, the Peter Pan of Great Pyrenees dogs,
Who reminds me that
Life is scary and fun, and if you don't know what to do,
do something odd,
Play even if you don't have someone to play with,
And be sure to dance for joy.*

Printed and bound in the United States of America
QW 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Downloadable Excerpt
Compliments of Laura
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One

LADY CALLISTA TAILLEFAIRE WAS A GIFTED WALLFLOWER. By the age of seven and twenty, she had perfected the art of blending into the wallpaper and woodwork so well that she never had to dance and only her most intimate friends greeted her. She could sit against the pink damask in the ballroom or sit against the green silk in the refreshment chamber. She didn't even have to match to be overlooked.

"Did you hear that a carriage came to Madame de Monceaux's!" The scarlet plume on Mrs. Adam's headband swayed alarmingly as she leaned near Callie's ear. "I believe it is—" But she suddenly broke off her confidence and took Callie's hand. "Oh, do look down! He is starting this way again."

Callie obeyed, instantly developing a profound interest in the catch on her bracelet. She had not quite succeeded in becoming completely invisible at these affairs. There were always the gentlemen of a certain category who solicited her hand, just in case she might be clutching her eighty thousand pounds in it, Callie supposed, which would save them the trouble of a stop at the bank as they carried her off.

“There, you are safe!” Mrs. Adam said gustily, as if Callie had barely scraped through with her life. “Let him pour the butter-boat over Miss Harper, if she is so foolish a girl as to listen to it.”

Callie let go of her bracelet. She had found that looking down and discovering a flounce had come loose from her hem, or a stone had worked its way into her slipper, was evasion enough to discourage the hopeful abductors. Even for eighty thousand pounds they were not very persistent. She was, after all, Lady Callista Taillefaire, who had been jilted three times. Even a gentleman with dishonest designs would have to ask himself what, precisely, could be wrong with her.

She had wrestled with this question herself. Indeed, she and her father and her sister and their acquaintance and all the local gossips and probably two or three of the wiser village goats had spent a good deal of time dissecting the matter. No satisfactory answer had been agreed upon. Her father had attributed it to the general decline of British manhood into riot and villainy. Her sister, Hermione, felt that Callie showed a deplorable lack of respect for the fashion in caps. The gossips largely blamed it upon Napoleon. During the French wars, they had blamed everything on Napoleon, and even five years after Waterloo he had not outlived his usefulness in that regard. The goats, being commoners, very properly kept their opinions to themselves.

It was Callie’s own conclusion that she was quite plain and had red hair, and she was very stiff and shy with gentlemen, even after she became engaged to them. Perhaps more so after she became engaged to them. Her eyes were neither brown nor blue, but some grayish green middling color, her nose could

politely be described as Grecian, having barely escaped the threat of Roman, and her fair skin flamed with unbecoming splotches of pink in the slightest touch of wind.

It was also true that she had a habit of lugging newborn calves into the kitchen from time to time, which might be considered eccentric in the daughter of an earl. But since her family had taken care that no rumors of this peculiarity should escape beyond Shelford, Callie felt that she was not held to be actually dangerous.

Mrs. Adam eased her ample figure from her chair, giving Callie’s hand a squeeze and a pat. “Bless me, there is Mr. Hartman going in to tea. I must speak to him about the altar-cloth, but I will be back directly. You’ll be quite all right now that the sets are forming.”

Callie nodded. Having escaped the looming threat of being dragged off by her hair and ravished, or at least required to dance, she dared a glance at Miss Harper as the young lady took her place. The girl seemed to be enjoying her swim in the butter. Callie gazed at the couple, imagining herself—suitably embellished with golden hair and flower blue eyes and eyelashes that were the toast of England—dancing gracefully through the figures. She made light and witty conversation. Her smile pierced the fortune-hunting gentleman to his heart. He was so taken with her that he forgot all about her fortune and fell desperately in love for the first time in his cynical and dissolute life. He vowed to give up gambling and drink on her behalf, and fought several duels with men of vague but wicked demeanor in defense of her honor.

Finally, when she refused him, having selected from among her large following a gentleman of steadier nature, he threw himself from a sea cliff, leaving a poem of unrequited love in which Callie was thinly disguised as a mythological heroine with a name at least eight syllables long, which she would look up later. The poem was published in all the papers and made the ladies weep over it in their boudoirs.

She blinked, realizing the music had paused. The gentleman who had thrown himself from the cliff in despair was conversing with Miss Harper on the topic of how many sunny days the town of Shelford had enjoyed so far in the autumn.

Callie could never think of what to say to gentlemen. She could feel her cheeks turning splotchy if she tried. There had been one, once, who had been so easy to talk to that she had quite lost her head over him, but that had not turned out well. It was quite settled by now. She was born to be a spinster. The gentlemen would have to declare their undying devotion to other ladies. Callie would be too much occupied with developing a delicate constitution and a dependable recipe for tapioca jelly.

Her father, of course, had understood none of this, because he loved her. He had thought her pretty and stubbornly refused to be convinced otherwise by the abundance of evidence. As long as he lived he had persevered in escorting Callie to each London season, arranging betrothals, signing settlement papers, and raging almost to tears each time the gentlemen broke it off. By the third time, Callie had really been more distressed on her father's behalf than on her own. She was not by nature a violent person, but she had

given serious consideration to sewing a teasel-burr into her former fiancé's unmentionables, or even perhaps recruiting a live black beetle for this mission, but decided in the end that it would be a disservice to the bug.

In any case, she had found no occasion to tamper with his personal linen, although the lawyers had been pleased to make his bank account smart by the removal of ten thousand pounds to avoid a breach-of-promise suit. He had departed on a ship for Italy with his beautiful, penniless new wife, while Callie sat with her crestfallen father in the study and held his hand.

The thought of it made her wrinkle her nose, blinking back the sting. She missed her father painfully, but it would not do to let her eyes fill with tears in the midst of a country dance. She turned her face down, brushing her nose with the feathers of her fan, concentrating on the swish and thud of the dancers' feet on the wooden floor and the off-key note on the pianoforte, waiting for the moment to pass.

It was only a local assembly, nothing so glittering as a London affair, but still Callie would not care to make a scene. For a year after the Earl of Shelford's death, she had at least been spared the agony of any social occasions, but now that they were out of mourning it was her duty to accompany Hermione.

Callie kept a careful eye on her sister's partners. It was up to her to make certain no fortune hunter stole Hermey. Their cousin Jasper wasn't precisely the sharpest needle in the pincushion, and since his elevation to the earldom, his lady wife was most anxious to see Callista and Hermione packed up and departed from Shelford Hall. An early wedding for Hermey would be just what Lady Shelford liked, and she would not

be particular as to the groom. Any person would do as long as he wore trousers and promised to take Callie along with her sister.

So Callie put on her gray gloves, hid her red hair as well as she could under a lavender turban, and sat herself at her guard post on the row of satin chairs along the wall, watching her sister dance with a most suitable baronet. He had taken leave from his promising position as an undersecretary in the Home Office and traveled up from London particularly to pay his compliments to Lady Hermione. Along with his addresses, it was to be hoped, though that had not yet transpired.

Her favored position in the Shelford assembly rooms overlooked the dance floor and the entry. She had only to lift her lashes to see each newcomer, without any noticeable turn of her head. It was late now. The crush of people in the arched doorway had long since cleared, and so she merely glanced when a single figure appeared there.

For an instant she looked away again calmly, seeing only another smartly dressed gentleman who paused to watch the dancers. It was as if recognition struck her heart a moment late—a sudden rush of heat to her face, a squeezing of her throat. She found she could not catch her breath.

It was him.

She threw a panicked look toward him, knew it certainly, and then had nowhere at all to look or to run. She was alone on the wall of chairs. Mrs. Adam was vanished to the refreshment room, and everyone else danced. She stared down at her toes with desperate concentration, hoping and hoping and hoping that he would not recognize her.

He might not know her. She had not instantly recognized him. He was older. Of course he was older—one could hardly suppose that she herself had reached the advanced age of twenty-seven without him doing the same. In the first blink of a look, she had seen a dark-haired, handsome gentleman; it was only with her second panicked glance that she knew his face: sun-darkened and harder, all the smiling promise of youth matured to a striking man.

He stood with a quiet confidence, as if it did not concern him to arrive late and alone, or to receive no welcome. Any number of people here knew him, but no one had seen him yet, save Callie—none who acknowledged him, at least. He had been gone from the vicinity for nine years.

Callie fanned herself, staring at her lap. This was Mrs. Adam's news, of course. The carriage arrived for Madame de Monceaux. Her prodigal son had come home.

It was glad tidings. Callie was pleased for his mother. The poor duchesse had so longed for this, failing as she had been over the past year. She had clung to those infrequent letters from France, read them aloud over and over to Callie, and made them both laugh until Madame's cough overcame her and Callie took her leave.

For herself, Callie was terrified. Laugh she might over his written words—but she could hardly even breathe for the strange and sick feeling that she felt at the sight of him.

He might not even remember her. He had never mentioned her in his letters to his mother. Never asked after her, though he demanded to know how

everyone else in Shelford fared in a long list of names and reminiscences, which showed that he had not forgot their small country lives while he consorted with kings and great people in Paris.

A pair of black evening shoes appeared in the limited range of her vision. She kept her face hidden down in her feathery fan and worked frantically with the catch on her bracelet, but the black shoes did not take the hint and move on. Closely fitted white trousers, the tail of a fine blue coat—she was so dizzy that she feared she might faint.

“Lady Callista?” he asked in a voice of low surprise.

She thought desperately of pretending she had not heard him over the music. But she remembered his voice. It was the same timbre, full of warmth. Evidently it still had the same dire effect on her senses.

“Come, I know it’s you,” he said gently. He sat down beside her. “I can see a stray lock peeking out from under that prodigious lovely turban.”

She drew a deep breath. “No, can you? And I was so hoping to be taken for a Saracen.” She tucked at the nape of her neck without looking at him.

“You’ve mislaid your camel, it would appear. How do you do, Callie? I must say, I didn’t expect to find you here in Shelford, of anyone.”

She found enough courage to lift her head. “You’ve come to see your mother,” she said. “I am so glad.”

He returned a sober man’s look, a stranger, no longer the wild boy who had been careless of any burden. His dark eyes did not smile at her. She saw in a short look that he had a scar on his left cheekbone, and a little crooked bump to his nose that she did not

remember. The marks only served to make him appear more an untamed gypsy than ever, even severe and stiff in his formal clothes.

“I’ve come to her, yes,” he said. He paused, tilting his head a fraction. “But you—I thought you must have left Shelford long ago.”

“Oh no, I have clung here like a limpet.” She opened her fan and closed it again.

There was a little silence between them, filled with the violins and the dancers’ noise and prattle.

“You have not married?” he asked quietly.

Somehow, Callie had supposed the news that she had been jilted three times must have reached the farthest corners of the earth. It was certainly common knowledge everywhere she had ever set foot. But it seemed that France had been spared the intelligence.

“Indeed no,” she said, looking up at him fully for the first time. “I don’t propose to marry.”

He would find out the truth soon enough. She could not bring herself to mention it. But at the way his eyebrows lifted, she suddenly feared he might think it was because she still bore some strong feeling for him—and that was worse.

“I’ve become quite celebrated, you see,” she said, fluttering her fan. “I have driven no less than three terrified gentlemen from the altar, not counting yourself. I don’t tally you in my record keeping, but if you would like to do me the honor and then break it off, it would add immeasurably to my eminence. Four would be a nice round number.”

He seemed slow to comprehend her. “Four?” he asked blankly.

“That is the sum of one and three,” Callie said, beating her fan with a nervous velocity. “Unless there has been some recent alteration in events.”

“Are you saying that you’ve been betrothed three times since I left?”

“It is a wonderful accomplishment, is it not?”

“And they all—”

“Yes.” She snapped her fan closed. “That is what I’ve been doing, you see—becoming engaged and being jilted. And how do you account for your time these past years, my lord duc? Have you indeed recovered your ancestral properties and fortune? I sincerely hope for it; it would give your mother so much happiness.”

He stared at her a moment, as if he did not quite understand the language that she spoke. Then he recovered himself. “I’ve had success, yes,” he said. He did not elaborate on it. “I think it has given her strength.”

“And will you return with her to France?” Callie asked.

“That would be impossible. She’s not well enough.”

“I hope you won’t leave her again soon.”

“No. I don’t plan to leave until—” He hesitated. “I’ve no intentions to leave.”

“She will be delighted to know it. Please reassure her directly. She will be anxious.”

“I will. I have. I’ll speak of it again, so that she is sure.”

She dared another glance at him. He was turned toward her, looking directly at her. He gave her a quirk of a smile, so familiar that she could hardly recall to breathe.

“Have you ripped me up enough yet?” he asked. “I was not one of your jilts, Callie.”

She knew the splotches were burning on her cheeks. “I beg your pardon! I’ve no notion what made me speak so!” He was the only gentleman outside her own family she had ever been able to talk to at all.

“The tip of your nose is turning pink.”

She hid it quickly in her fan.

“A charming portrayal of an ostrich,” he said, “but I’m afraid you’ll suffocate in those feathers. We’d better dance, so that you can thrash me about the head with them instead.”

Callie realized with alarm that the music had paused and the sets were reforming into couples. “Oh no, it is a waltz—”

But he was standing, holding out his gloved hand to her. Callie found herself lifted by the strong clasp of his fingers, in spite of her intentions, drawn irresistibly as always into whatever adventure that Trevelyan Davis d’Augustin, duc de Monceaux, comte de Montjoie, and seigneur of any number of exotic-sounding *villes* somewhere in France, might propose.

He led her to the floor and bowed. Callie curtsied and turned her face aside, terrified to look at him as he rested his hand on her waist. She had only waltzed in public three times, once for each of her betrothals. People were already staring at them. Mrs. Adam had just come from the refreshments—she stood stock-still in the doorway with a look of horror on her face. Callie saw her start forward in determination, as if she would tear Callie bodily from his indecent embrace, but the music began and his firm guidance swung her into motion.

Callie held herself as far from him as she could, barely allowing her fingertips to rest on his shoulder, trying with little success to make her fan lie down instead of fly in his face. She could scarcely recall where to put her feet, but he directed her with simple assurance, looking down at her as they spun around, smiling that intimate half smile.

"I never hoped I'd be so fortunate as to discover you here," he said warmly. The room seemed to whirl past with the music, everything a blur but him.

Callie could hardly comprehend that she was dancing with him. She glanced up and then away again, feeling oddly weightless, as if he carried her on air just by the light touch of his gloved palm.

"I must beg of you a favor," he added, squeezing her hand a little.

Callie nodded, gazing at his shoulder. It was handsomely clad in a tailored coat, a broader and taller shoulder than she recalled. He was familiar and yet unknown—far more intimidating than the grinning and unruly youth of her memory. Her heart and breath felt as if they had deserted her, declaring they were off to join the navy and might come back to visit in a few years if she were lucky.

"Can you recommend to me a decent cook?" he asked.

The prosaic question pulled her from a momentary dream of... of something. She missed a step and caught herself, flushing deeply as he lifted his chin to prevent the feathers of her fan from obscuring his face entirely. "Oh," she said, gaining control of the wayward fan. "Don't say that Mrs. Easley has taken to drinking again?"

"I fear so. I came in hopes of stealing a seedcake or two to save us from starvation."

"That woman!" Callie exclaimed, dropping her hand. She almost stood still on the dance floor, but he lifted her glove and kept her moving. "She's beyond saving," she said severely. "But has your mother not had nourishment? I sent a whole haunch of beef to her two days ago!"

"Thank you." He smiled. "But I don't know what's become of it, bumbling fellow that I am in these domestic matters. There was some broth, which is all that it seems she'll take, in any case."

"She must have more than broth!" Callie did stop then, causing a brief flurry as the other dancers found a path around them. "I'll go to her directly."

"No, do not trouble—"

"It's no trouble," Callie said, drawing away from him. "Only let me speak to Mrs. Adam. She'll see my sister home in the carriage. It's too late for the cookshop, but I'm sure I can find something of substance in your kitchen if Mrs. Easley hasn't sold it all to that wicked butcher's boy."

He shook his head. "You need not. I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to interrupt your entertainment."

Callie waved her fan in dismissal. "That's hardly an affliction to me. I'm happy to go to your mother."

He hesitated, frowning down at her. For a moment she thought he would refuse again, but then a wry look came into his dark eyes. "In truth, it would be a blessing. I found the place in disarray, and I hardly know how to set things right."

"I do," Callie said. "Pray go and tell your mother I'll be with her directly."



Something brushed Trev's face in the darkness as he fumbled at the door. He cursed under his breath and pushed a trailing ivy out of the way, finding the latch with some difficulty. He didn't bother with the bell—there was no maid to answer it. The place was overgrown, the garden gate falling to pieces. He let himself inside and pulled off his gloves, stuffing them into his pocket instead of laying them on a table he already knew to be grimy with dust.

If it had been a roulette wheel to balance, or a boxer's bloodied head to stanch, Trev could have managed well enough, but the mysteries of a hearth and home were baffling to him. His sisters and mother had always seen to all of that: supervising the linen and directing the servants. They would have been aghast if he or his majestic grandfather had interfered or inquired about the smooth running of the household. Not that Trev had ever been inclined to do so. But even he could see that the rambling old house at the edge of Shelford was falling deep into disorder, and his mother's deteriorated condition appalled him.

She had hidden it well. Not once in her letters had she begged or even hinted for him to come, even after H el ene had died. He saw now that he should have come then; he had wanted to, but he had hidden certain things himself, and it had not seemed possible at the time.

The considerable amount of money he'd been sending to Shelford for the past few years had obviously gone astray. Surprising, but not inconceivable, considering the circuitous route he had arranged

for the funds to take. Trev narrowed his eyes. He hoped that somewhere in France, a certain banking correspondent was enjoying his remaining interlude of good health.

He felt his way to the stairs. There were no candles or spills, not even a rushlight. But he remembered the low ceiling and heavy railing well enough. He made his way up to his mother's chamber. The lamp he had left with her still burned low.

She was sleeping. He stood for a moment, watching her labored breath. His mischievous, sweet-faced *maman*—he had hardly known her for herself when he saw her. She was drawn, her cheeks sunken, her lips parted, thinned by the effort to take in air. But she had a trace of a smile, as if she dreamed a pleasant dream.

Trev scowled. He hardly cared to admit the vast feeling of relief that he had felt when Lady Callie offered to come. It was not something he would have asked of her. They were all but strangers now. But still, the moment he had recognized her, it was as if no time had passed; he had wanted to sit down and confide everything in her, his shock and fear at his mother's illness, his consternation at the state of the house, his amazement to find Lady Callista Taillefaire here in Shelford yet.

Unmarried.

He put that thought away, not yet ready for the surge of anger, the wound that lay behind it. Even that surprised him—he had supposed himself long ago over that juvenile affair. But they could still be friends, it seemed, for which he was glad. He liked Callie. Admired her. What other lady of her position would stop dead in the midst of a waltz and insist upon

coming instantly to the aid of a Frenchwoman who had no earthly claims upon her?

He smiled a little. A lavender turban, with that hair. Only Callie: oblivious to every fashion, as sweet and shy as a wild doe. He shook his head and sat down on the edge of the bed, lightly touching his mother's hand.

"May I have the honor of this dance, Mademoiselle?" he murmured in French.

Her long lashes fluttered, dark against her pallor. She lifted them. "Trevelyan," she whispered, curling her hand about his. "*Mon amour.*"

He raised her hand and kissed her cool fingers. "I cannot permit these indolent airs," he said. "You wish to encourage my rivals, I know it. I will have to shoot them all."

She smiled and spoke to him in English. "You enjoyed the assembly?"

"Of course! I engaged myself to two beautiful young ladies and had to leave by the back window. I've fled to you for aid. Will you conceal me in your wardrobe?"

She gave a faint husky laugh. "Let the girls meet... on the field of honor," she said in a weak voice. "Nothing to trouble about."

"But their mothers might pursue me!"

"*Alors*, I'll dispatch their mothers myself, by poison."

He squeezed her hand. "I see now where I come by my unsteady nature."

She returned the pressure, gripping his fingers. "Trevelyan," she said suddenly and hoarsely. "I am so proud of you."

He maintained his smile down at her, finding nothing to say.

"You have succeeded where even... your grandfather failed. I wish only that he and your father were alive to see it."

Trev gave a slight shrug. "I was fortunate."

"To regain the whole! Even Monceaux!" She struggled to sit up and began to cough.

"Do not be carried away by raptures, I beg you," he said. He stood and propped pillows about her. "Save that for when I take you back to Monceaux in a gilded coach, with half a dozen outriders and three footmen up behind."

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back. She smiled, breathing with difficulty. Her fingers trembled as she put her hand on his arm. "You know that's not to be."

"Only two outriders, then. Elegant economy!"

"Trevelyan—"

"Come, do not quarrel with me. I cross the sea to your side, and you refuse to accompany me to dance, you will not eat—I've been forced to apply for reinforcements. Lady Callista desired me to say that she will be here presently."

"Ah, she is too good."

"Indeed, she is an angel. If she can produce a supper, I shall marry her out of hand."

"I'm certain that she can." His mother breathed deeply. "But... three engagements in one evening, my love?"

"No, do you think it excessive?" he asked in surprise.

"Trevelyan." She smiled up at him. "I am so happy." She held tight to his hand as her chuckle turned into a gasping cough.