Mary began to pace, and Summerton resumed his lean to watch her. Caught up in some inner agitation, the glide was forgotten. Brisk impatient steps carried her slim body to and fro in a dizzying momentum. Her arms swung at her sides, fingers flexing in rhythm with her footsteps and her face wore a stony mien of fierce concentration. Summerton felt heat kindle in his groin. If she showed half as much passion in a man’s bed… *Forget it, you oaf. Getting her into your bed is the last thing you should be thinking about. And if you are reading the signs correctly, it is not likely that Mary has any interest in that direction.*

She came to an abrupt stop and whirled around to face him. “You claim you want to aid me.”

Summerton bent his elbows to lounge against the railing and arched his brows. “Yes.”

Mary’s forehead furrowed and she looked suspiciously at him. “That’s it? Just like that? You don’t want to hear my proposal first?”

He snapped upright and took a step forward. “The offer doesn’t come with caveats. Since I do not believe you plan to ask me to commit murder or seriously break the law, I stand ready to give you what assistance I can.”

Mary’s hands flew up, palms out, and she sniffed. “You needn’t take offense, sir, or to worry about the law.” She smiled grimly. “Should any murder become necessary, I will take care of it myself.” He started and her smile widened into genuine amusement. “Trust me to be quite capable, but as I have no wish to hang, assassination is not currently on my agenda.”

“I’m relieved to hear it,” Summerton said evenly, regretting the tiny lapse of control that allowed her to guess his thoughts. She had a way of getting under his skin that no one had in many years. “What then did you have in mind?”

She raised her chin with a decided challenge. “Establish me in London as your current mistress for the next month.”

Stunned into silence, Summerton stared at her, sure that he misheard. Or had his erotic dreams somehow invaded his waking hours?

“Well, sir?”

The sharp words intruded and he shook his head to clear it. “Have you maggots in your head of a sudden? You must, to suggest such a thing!” He made a chopping gesture in the air with his hand. “Don’t say another word, Mary. It was an irrational notion and one I am going to forget I ever heard.”

She glowered at him. “So much for all your vaunted desire to help. I should have known that meant you would only do what suited *you*,” she said bitterly. “Well, I can do perfectly well without your assistance. I never wished for it in the first place.”

She walked away, the glide back in place, and without a backward glance, closed the terrace door behind her.