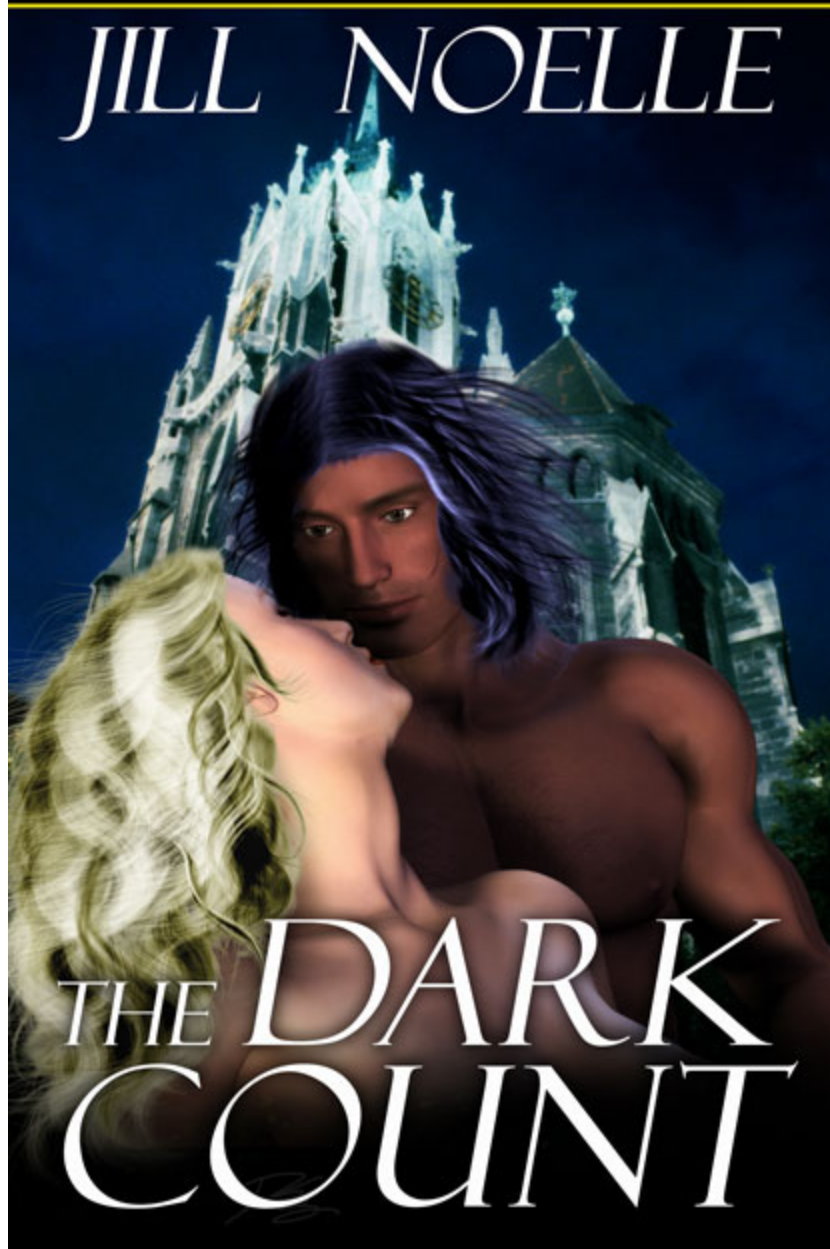


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

JILL NOELLE



THE DARK  
COUNT

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# **THE DARK COUNT**

**Jill Noelle**

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*Dedication:*

*For always seeing the best in me, this one's for you, Mom!  
And In Loving Memory of Christopher Dean Noble - my friend, my champion, my brother. I'm  
still working at it, every day. Miss you...*

## Chapter One

"Oh, no ye don't. Yer no takin' all me money an' walkin' away. I can meet yer bet with somethin' more precious than gold."

Vincent Renault scraped his winnings into a pile on the scarred plank table, ignoring the drunken ramblings of the man across from him. *More precious than gold, indeed.* Of course the old man would say so, after losing every last guinea he'd brought to the game.

A filthy, callused hand fell on his arm. Vincent looked up, checking the impulse to fling it off.

Harold Morton leaned across the table, his alcohol-laden breath fouling the air. "More dear than all England's treasures is me Bridgett."

Vincent raised a brow and sat back in his chair, his silence an invitation for the man to continue.

"'Er hair's the color o' spun gold, 'n 'er eyes is the color o' a summer sky. She's a true beauty, is me Bridgett."

"And who, pray tell, is 'me Bridgett'?"

"A young chit whose beauty is beyon' compare."

"So you've said, but who is she that you feel free to wager her on a hand of cards?" Vincent watched the man closely, his stomach clenched in anger. In his mind, he pictured another young girl, another golden child, whose innocence had been stripped from her by a depraved adult. He blinked, clearing his thoughts. "Perhaps Bridgett would have something to say about the matter?"

"Bridgett's a good girl. She'll do as I tell 'er."

"Because?"

"'Cause a good daughter always obeys her Papa, that's why!"

His suspicions confirmed, Vincent struggled to keep his anger in check. "She's your daughter?"

"Aye, 'n a virgin, to be sure."

Vincent took the man's measure. Was it liquor talking, or did this gluttonous fool actually mean to risk his child to Lady Luck?

"Well, be ye acceptin' me bet, or should I seek another taker?"

A murmur rippled through the crowd of onlookers surrounding their table, and several men stepped forward, jostling their companions for room.

"I'll take yer bet, Morton, if the dandy here don't," came a response from behind Vincent's chair.

Vincent tightened his grip on his cards and made an instant decision. "My wager has been met. What are you holding?"

The inebriated man grinned, showing a mouth full of rotten teeth, and placed his cards on the table. "Straight flush. Let's see ye beat that!"

The sounds of drunken revelry that surrounded them in the smoke-filled tavern seemed to recede. Vincent held the old man's gaze as he showed his cards, revealing them one at a time until they lay fanned out before him. "Royal flush."

His opponent paled and stumbled up from his chair. "Ye got the Devil's own luck, ye do."

Morton shuffled backwards, his gaze darting about the room. "I'll jus' be goin' now."

"I think not." Vincent stood and quickly blocked the man's escape. "You haven't turned over all of my winnings."

"Ah, but surely ye won't hold me to it. Me Bridgett's all I got left 'o any worth."

Ignoring the half-hearted plea, Vincent stepped aside, leaving a clear path to the exit.

"I'll follow you home," he murmured, "to collect my debt."

Morton spread his hands in an entreating gesture. "At least let me go 'n tell 'er meself. Break the news real gentle like."

Vincent frowned. He had no desire to spend another minute in this hellhole that attempted to pass for a tavern. Only a powerful thirst and a desire for diversion had caused him to stop in the first place.

"You wagered your daughter on a hand of cards. It's a bit late to start worrying about her feelings."

"Still 'n all, it's me right as 'er Papa to tell 'er what's what."

The man puffed out his chest and inserted a wad of chewing tobacco. He spit a stream of black juice on the floor near Vincent's feet, a cock-sure look upon his face.

Vincent glanced at the puddle of spittle and grimaced. If the *fair* Bridgett were anything like her father, he might do well to leave her to her fate. He shook his head. No, an innocent little girl did not deserve such a future, no matter how uncouth she may be. He could only hope that she wouldn't be too horrible to tolerate. Perhaps he could put her to work in his stables, tending the horses. At least she would be safe there.

He sat back in his chair and signaled for the barkeep to send over another mug. "You have one hour, but I'm warning you, don't try anything stupid. If you do, I promise you'll regret it."

Morton swallowed hard and nodded. "If ye follow this road, you'll come up on me land. There's a lane jus' at the point where the fence ends."

Vincent inclined his head, and then turned his attention to his ale. For the next hour, he would concentrate on reining in his anger.

*God fashioned Hell for the inquisitive.*

Bridgett Morton suffered a pang of guilty conscience as the childhood admonition ran through her head. She could almost hear her mother's voice, picture the expression on her lovely face as she issued the warning. The bittersweet memory gave Bridgett pause, and she started to pull away from her stepsister's room, but a low moan from within made her freeze. She bent forward, peeking through the partially open door, careful to keep her breathing shallow so as not to make a sound. She knew it was wrong, spying like this, but she simply couldn't resist the opportunity to satisfy her curiosity. Edward Remy had come to call on Melanie as soon as Papa had left that evening and Bridgett, tired of being chased from the house every time Edward popped by for a visit, had slipped back inside once she was sure they were otherwise occupied.

This was the second day in a row she had watched them, fascinated and a little ashamed at the exciting feelings their actions evoked within her. The limited view from her spot on the floor in the hallway only allowed her to see half of what occurred, but her imagination filled in the rest. She'd grown up on a farm, and had a vague notion of the mechanics of such things. It was the emotions, the sounds that were a strange mixture of pain and pleasure, which intrigued her. The way her stepsister would cry out Edward's name. The way he would speak roughly to her, and yet she would respond to him in such a way that indicated she enjoyed his attentions. What drove them to do such things? What was it about their actions that brought a blush to Melanie's cheeks and had her simpering like a young girl each time Edward came to call. So far, from what Bridgett had observed, her stepsister's reactions were inexplicable.

A soft, feminine giggle drew her attention, and she squinted into the dim interior of the room. If only they'd left the door open a little wider! She gave a light push, holding her breath, praying it would not squeak. It swung silently on its hinges, opening nearly a full foot. A ray of light from the hallway brightened the shadows within, though neither of the room's occupants appeared to notice. Bridgett crept forward, hands clenching the doorjamb, eyes widening with wonder at the scene being played out before her.

Her stepsister leaned over the back of a chair, her skirts flung up over her back. Behind her, his pale buttocks in plain view, stood Edward. His breeches around his ankles, and his hands at Melanie's waist, he moved steadily back and forth, back and forth. From her vantage point, it was difficult for Bridgett to see exactly what was happening, but she had a pretty good idea. She'd seen their stud, Moses, approach a mare in just such a fashion. Was *this* what sent Melanie to simpering and swooning each time she spied Edward strolling up the lane?

She watched, fascinated, as Melanie began to moan and utter words of encouragement, begging Edward to move "faster", and "harder".

A strong arm wrapped about Bridgett's waist, lifting her to her feet, and a large hand clamped across her mouth, stifling the scream that nearly erupted from her throat.

"Yer big sister's always hungerin' fer a man's cock a'tween 'er legs."

Bridgett recognized her stepfather's voice and relaxed, but then stiffened again when she realized they'd all been discovered. Panicked, she struggled for release, but he held her fast.

"Look it 'er, Bridgett. She sure knows how ta take a man." He whispered against her neck and his moist breath stank of ale and tobacco. Stunned by the bizarre nature of his words, she could only stare at her stepsister's contorted features as her stepfather continued his monologue.

"I taught 'er everythin', ya know. She come to me a year ago, askin' all kinds 'o questions 'bout men 'n women 'n such. What's a man ta do, 'er bein' so hot 'n ready for it." His arm at her waist drifted upwards, until it brushed the bottom of her breasts. "How 'bout you, me girl? You here spyin' on 'em whiles they's fuckin'. You hot 'n ready, too?"

Bridgett tried to speak, to deny his allegations and his lurid suggestions, but his beefy hand still covered her mouth. Bile rose in her throat and she nearly gagged.

Before her, Edward continued to pound against Melanie's backside, his guttural moans filling the air. The whole scene took on a surreal feeling, as if Bridgett were disconnected from it all in some way.

"C'mon, me girl, our time's runnin' short." Her father pulled her down the hallway to his room, dragging her inside and kicking the door shut with his foot.

Bridgett trembled, a tumult of thoughts and emotions running through her mind and body. Melanie and Edward. Melanie and Papa. Her stepfather's obscene confession and suggestions.

"You'll be leavin' me soon, but first I think I'll be samplin' some o' your charms."

He released her suddenly, and she stumbled away from him.

"What...what do you mean?"

Her stepfather took a step toward her and chuckled. "Come now, girly, you know yer curious 'bout what goes on 'atween a man and a woman, else you wouldn't be spyin' at the door."

Bridgett's cheeks burned with embarrassment. She *had* been curious, but this... this was wrong. What Melanie and Edward did was one thing, but what her father was suggesting was purely evil.

His hands moved to the hook at the top of his breeches and Bridgett spoke quickly in an effort to distract him. "You said I would be leaving you soon. What did you mean?"

*"You said I would be leaving you soon. What did you mean?"*

Bridgett cringed at his attempt to mimic her speech. He'd always hated it. Her mother had taught her the proper way for a lady to speak, and even though that had been many years ago, Bridgett still tried not to fall in to the uncouth language spoken by both her stepsister and stepfather.



"Yer as uppity as he is." A look of intense rage crossed his face and he uttered a string of curses. "Blasted Count, thinkin' he's better 'n everyone else. Thinks he's won hisself a real prize, he does. Too bad he'll be receivin' soiled goods."

"Prize?" Bridgett retreated further into the room as he began to advance upon her.

"Ye belong to 'im now, me girl. He won ye fair 'n square. Who would 'a thought he'd be holdin' a royal flush."

Realization crashed down upon her like a load of stones. "You wagered me in a card game?"

He was within a foot of her now, and he reached to caress her bare arm with a grimy hand. "'Fraid so, me girl. I always hoped 'ta keep ye fer meself. I was lookin' forward ta teachin' ye so many things."

Anger and revulsion bubbled up, constricting her throat. She struggled for breath, and watched, as if from a distance, as he placed his sweaty palm on her breast. At his touch, something within her snapped and she jerked away, dashing toward the door. She heard him call her name, but did not stop, did not look back. As she flew down the staircase, she nearly collided with Edward, but pushed her way past him and headed for the door. Flinging it open, she ran, straight into the arms of a tall, dark stranger who immediately pushed her behind him.

Vincent had reacted on instinct, putting himself between the girl and whatever had caused her to flee. He looked into the dark interior of the house, body tense, waiting for the threat to reveal itself.

""Scuse me."

A blonde, giant of a man ambled into view. Vincent took his measure, wondering if he could take him in a fight if it became necessary to do so.

"That's Edward," came a whisper at his back. "Let him pass."

Slightly amused, yet sensing something nefarious underfoot, Vincent stepped aside, shadowed by the girl behind him, to clear the exit. The big man slipped past and trotted down the lane without a backward glance.

"Bridgett! Where ye be hidin' girlie?"

He heard the girl's sudden intake of breath, and immediately realized whom she feared. He waited for her father to appear at the door.

"Oh, it be ye already. Couldna' been an hour since I left ye at the tavern."

Vincent took in Harold Morton's disheveled appearance, his open shirt and partially opened breeches, and clenched his fists against the fury that burned low in his gut.

"I gave you an extra few minutes," he replied, gritting his teeth in an attempt to maintain a civilized tone. "Apparently, that was a mistake."

"Is that me girl hidin' behin' yer back there?" Morton took a step forward, but Vincent held up a hand in warning.

"Stay where you are," he told him. "We're leaving. I suggest you go back inside."

For a moment, Vincent thought her father would press the issue. The man's face turned a molten shade of red, and he tightened his jaw, his anger apparent in the way he glared from across the threshold.

Vincent waited in silence, unwilling to turn his back until there was a door between them.

"Ye won yerself nothin' but a whore. Good riddance to 'er, I say."

He slammed the door, the sound reverberating through the still night air. Behind him, Vincent heard the girl release her breath, and he finally turned to face her.

What he saw nearly knocked him off his feet.

"*You* are Bridgett?" He looked her up and down, trying to reconcile this gorgeous young woman with the child he'd pictured in his mind.

"Yes." She spoke softly, staring at her feet. Her long hair fell forward, masking her face from his view.

Vincent had a moment of awkward uncertainty, damning the impulse that had made him stop at the tavern, and that had made him accept Harold Morton's obscene wager. Vincent had stayed in the game, intent on saving the man's child from a fate of debauchery.

But this was no child.

He studied her intently, fighting the urge to brush back the veil of wavy blonde tresses that shielded her angelic face from his view. Should he take her with him, as he'd planned, or leave her here? Judging from the scene he'd walked into, he doubted she'd go willingly back inside. But would she feel any differently about coming with him?

An owl hooted in the distance, and he suddenly felt very foolish, standing with her on the doorstep like a man turned to stone. There'd be time enough to figure out what to do with her once they were on the road.

She stood quietly, her pale hair glowing in the moonlight, her lithe form barely concealed by her threadbare gown. Nothing more than a rag, really, but it did not detract from her essential beauty. Her father had been correct, damn his soul to hell. His Bridgett was fair, indeed.

She looked up. A small frown creased her forehead, and she bit her lower lip with small, white teeth.

"Do you know why I'm here, *bella mia*?" He did not take his eyes from that full, wide mouth. No child, indeed. The fact complicated matters in ways that he hadn't yet fully explored. In ways that made him question his control, and that fueled his fury.

She averted her gaze and nodded. "Yes, milord. My...father...explained it to me in great detail."

"Then you know that you belong to me? That he wagered you, and lost you, in a game of cards?"

She looked up at him, and even in the darkness her hostility was evident. "Must you repeat it? Don't you think I've suffered enough for one day?"

Vincent muttered an oath of frustration.

"Come." He turned on his heels and started down the steps, expecting she would follow. Instead, she streaked past him and took off across the yard toward a copse of woods near the lane.

"Bloody hell!"

Vincent gave chase, catching her easily and lifting her into his arms. She pounded his chest with her fists and kicked at his shins, but he tightened his hold and headed back toward his horse.

Tempest tossed his head and pranced about at their approach. Vincent grabbed the reins, murmuring softly to ease the animal's fears.

"I'm going to set you up on this horse." He addressed Bridgett as if she were a recalcitrant child. "Were I you, I would sit very still and not make a sound. Should he break free of my hold with you on his back, I doubt you would survive the ride."

He lifted her up onto the stallion's broad back, holding her steady while she adjusted her skirt about her slender legs. When she'd finished, he tossed the reins onto the horse's neck and then mounted in front of her.

"Put your arms around my waist and hold tight," he told her. When she didn't immediately comply, he turned, glaring at her over his shoulder.

"Listen to me Bridgett, and listen well. You are mine. I won you, and I own you. When I tell you to do something you will do it. If you disobey me, or fight me in any way, you will regret it. Do you understand?"

Heat spread through his loins at the sight of her tongue as she wet her lips, but he held fast to his anger. They had a long journey ahead of them, and he did not intend to spend it arguing with her over every little thing, or chasing her down.

"Do you understand?" he repeated when she didn't answer.

"I understand." She nodded, her voice thick with emotion. "You leave me no choice."

Her arms snaked around his waist, and his stomach muscles tightened at her touch. With great effort, he turned his attention back to Tempest and pressed his knees into the horse's sides. The animal responded immediately, lunging forward to carry them out of the courtyard, leaving behind a cloud of dust.

Vincent, his anger still simmering beneath the surface, gripped the reins tightly. Tempest tossed his head, and Vincent relaxed his hold. "I'm sorry, my friend, I know I shouldn't take it out on you."

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing. Are you all right?" The girl hadn't spoken in the hours since they'd left her home, and he'd begun to wonder if she'd suffered some sort of lasting shock.

"I'm fine."

She didn't sound fine. She sounded weary, but with a steely edge to her voice that told him she was angry, as well.

"We'll be stopping soon," he told her. "There's an inn not too far from here, perhaps another hour's ride. If you're tired, you can rest your head on my back."

"I'm fine."

Vincent scowled. The ungrateful little chit. If that was the way she wanted it, then he was not going to coax her to speak to him. She wasn't the only one whose life had been turned upside down by the evening's events. What did a man do with a woman he'd won in a hand of cards? He sighed, briefly giving in to the weariness that had entered his soul. Perhaps his original plan, to give her a home and work on his estate, might still be an option. After all, she was not a lady, and as such, she might be perfectly suited to housekeeping. The stables, he decided, were out of the question. But what a waste, he thought, his mind drifting to the soft warmth of her hands pressed against his stomach.

She shifted behind him, and he felt the lightest of touches as her head drooped against his back. Her faint breath heated the nape of his neck, and he suppressed a shudder of desire. *What a waste.*

Loosening his grip on the reins to give Tempest his head, Vincent pressed his knees into the stallion's sides and urged him forward, looking forward to the comfort of a warm bed for the night.

## Chapter Two

Bridgett clung to her captor's waist, desperately fighting the fatigue that threatened to overwhelm her. She struggled to keep her eyes from drifting closed, terrified of falling asleep for fear of losing her grip and finding herself on the ground, trampled beneath the hooves of her companion's demonic steed. Her entire body ached from being astride a horse for what seemed like hours. They'd only stopped once, at a run-down tavern where the Count replenished their water supply. He'd left her alone, sitting atop Tempest's back while he'd gone inside, but not before issuing her a stern warning not to move from the spot. "You'll be safe here for a few minutes," he'd told her. "If anyone should approach you, tell them you belong to the Count."

*Tell them you belong to the Count.* She closed her eyes and her head fell forward to rest against his hard back. *You belong to the Count. You belong to the Count.*

Bridgett awoke with a start and sat up quickly, brushing her hair from her face. Her mind clouded with sleep, she found herself momentarily disoriented, but then she remembered. The inn. They'd finally stopped for the night, and Bridgett, numb and cold, had followed the Count to this room where some kind soul had built up a fire. Lulled by the warmth and glow of the flames, she'd fallen asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. The fire had burned low in the hearth, but gave off enough light for her to make out her surroundings. Nothing but a chair, a washstand, and the bed upon which she lay. Sparse, but heavenly after such a grueling ride, after such an emotionally exhausting night.

She sighed and lifted her arms above her head, rolling her shoulders to ease her aching muscles. The blanket fell to her waist and she gasped. Where was her dress? Heat rose in her cheeks as she realized the Count must have undressed her as she slept. The thought of him viewing her body mingled with the memory of her encounter with her stepfather the night before, and she shuddered. Had he touched her? Heart pounding, she glanced down, certain there would be some outward sign if he had molested her while she slept, but other than her aching shoulders and thigh muscles, she felt no different.

The door latch clicked and she looked up.

"I see you're awake. That's good." The Count entered the room, moving into the circle of light near the fireplace. "It's nearly dawn. We'll be leaving soon."

"I've only just awakened." She eyed him warily, truly studying him for the first time. He seemed all darkness, with black eyes, finely arched brows and raven-colored hair that fell to his shoulders. His features, even cast in shadows, could not be mistaken for anything but those of an aristocrat. Aristocratic, and vaguely familiar. A distant

memory tickled her subconscious, but she shrugged it aside, disconcerted by the intensity of his gaze.

What had brought such a man together with her father, a man not known for his dealings with members of Society?

"You know, when I was a little girl, I always dreamed that a handsome white knight would come and carry me away to his castle." She bit her lip, appalled that she'd uttered such a silly sentiment, unsure of why she'd shared something so personal with this intimidating stranger.

"I am no white knight, *bella mia*." His voice held an edge that she did not understand.

Looking into those dark eyes, she shook her head. "No, you most certainly are not."  
*But you are very handsome.*

"While I admit you make a most enticing picture, with your hair in disarray and the soft flesh of your full breasts glowing in the firelight, I'm afraid I must ask you to dress. We've a long day ahead of us."

Bridgett let out an indignant squeal. She'd forgotten her state of undress. Pulling the sheet up to her chin, she gave him a level look. "I will dress, if you will leave."

He stared at her for a full minute before crossing purposefully toward the bed. Before she could react, he ripped the cover from her hand and jerked it completely off the bed.

Frozen with fear, she lay perfectly still as he placed one knee on the mattress and leaned over her.

"Another rule, my fair one," he whispered, "you will never hide yourself from me."

He studied her, his gaze traveling the length of her body, and she tried not to flinch under his perusal. She held her breath, nearly frightened out of her wits.

"I wasn't sure what I would do with you, but I think I have determined your fate." He trailed one long finger across the soft flesh of her belly and Bridgett licked her lips nervously, unsure of how to answer or if an answer was even required.

His touch was gentle, and his eyes had turned from black to smoky-gray. She relaxed a little, sensing he did not intend to hurt her.

He'd left his hand on her stomach, palm flat, and the heat of his touch made her grow warm. Terribly intimate, and yet her fear had dissipated, turning into something more akin to intrigue. A curious excitement made her heart race. He waited, staring at her, brow raised in a questioning gesture.

"I...I assume I am to be your servant, milord." She blinked, realizing she hadn't given any thought to her future whatsoever. The encounter with her father had left her shocked and numb, her entire world suddenly turned upside down.

He smiled, but it held no humor, no warmth. "Oh, you will serve me well, my little one, but not in the capacity you imagine."

"I don't understand." She squirmed beneath the intensity of his gaze. How could she serve him, if not as a servant? He made no sense.

The Count stood abruptly. "I know you don't, but you will. Get dressed."

Bridgett didn't need to be told twice. She scrambled from the bed and snatched her dress from the back of the chair. She had no underclothing, hadn't had any since she was a small child. She pulled the simple, homespun gown over her head and tried to smooth the wrinkles from the skirt. She felt him watching her, and his steady gaze made her heart beat madly in her chest. He seemed to be judging her, taking her measure, and she suddenly became conscious of her shabby state of dress.

"There is a town just before we reach my estate that is a bit larger than this one," he told her. "I'll see if I can locate more suitable attire for you."

She looked at him sharply. Was he mocking her? His face was an impassive mask, showing no emotion.

"That would be nice." She murmured her thanks, hating the embarrassing warmth that rose in her cheeks.

He nodded and opened the door, standing back to allow her to precede him into the hall. "Come. We need to be on our way."

\* \* \* \* \*

The stables were dark and deserted at this early hour; no groom met them when they pulled back the large double doors and entered the cold, dim interior.

The Count whistled softly. Immediately, a loud nicker sounded from a nearby stall.

"He answered you." Bridgett laughed, enchanted by the exchange between man and beast. "How did you teach him to do that?"

"I raised Tempest from a colt," he told her. "He responds to my whistle. Were he not boxed up, he would have come to me immediately."

"You sound as if you're very fond of him." She observed.

He didn't answer immediately, but went to open the stall door and lead the great horse out into the open. Tempest nudged the Count's hand, snorting lightly and pawing at the ground. Bridgett giggled at the powerful animal's playful antics.

"I'm fond of all the living things under my care." The Count gave her a pointed look. "Assuming they obey me."

Bridgett chose not to become offended at his obviously baiting comment, and cocked her head, taking in the sight of man and horse. "I'd say he does more than obey you, milord. It appears that he adores you."

The Count snorted, sounding remarkably like his horse, and Bridgett tried to hide a smile of amusement.

"Tempest does not adore anyone or anything, unless it be carrots." He led the animal to a hitching post and hooked him to a lead. Bridgett watched as he adjusted the

saddle, and then slipped the bridle over Tempest's head, placing the bit in his mouth. The great beast stood quietly while his master worked.

His master. The Count was *her* master, too. She pondered the implications, marveling that the idea did not disturb her as much as she felt it should. Her life, up until last night, while reasonably tolerable, had held little promise. The most she could have hoped for was marriage to one of the local farmers. Respectable, but far from the dreams she'd secretly held onto from her childhood. Dreams of marriage to a chivalrous gentleman of means; dreams of becoming a Lady. None of which was likely to happen, not then, and not now.

She shook her head and shivered in the pre-dawn air. Whatever the Count had planned for her, it had to be infinitely better than what awaited her should she return home. She'd spent nearly her whole life making the best of a bad situation; perhaps she could approach this turn of events in the same manner. Being a servant, even one who held the status of bondwoman, to a man of such obvious means could not be so terrible. She could cook and sew, and perform nearly every chore one could think of – had been doing so from a very early age. Perhaps he would allow her to earn back her freedom. But first she must make herself useful.

As she watched him lead his horse out into the courtyard of the inn, she made a promise to herself. He had said she would serve him well. She would not make him rethink his words.

"Stop daydreaming and come here."

The Count stood outside, waiting to help her mount, and she rushed to join him. He wrapped his hands about her waist and lifted her. Their eyes met, and she grinned at him, feeling a little foolish, and yet anxious to share her newfound resolve.

"I will serve you well, milord," she whispered. "I promise that you will be very happy with me."

Vincent drove Tempest hard in his haste to make the next village before sunset. It would not do to be caught in the woods through which they traveled after nightfall. There were miles of forest between here and his estate, growing thicker by the hour, with only two more towns to break its seclusion. Thieves and poachers roamed this area in relative safety, and even Vincent would not tempt fate by traveling these paths alone after dark.

Bridgett held tight to his waist, never uttering a sound, though he knew she must be uncomfortable. Even the most experienced horseman would find their pace nearly intolerable.

They'd traveled all morning, only stopping briefly for water and a quick meal of biscuits and dried beef. Bridgett had questioned him about his home, and he'd told her about his family's castle on the cliffs near the sea. She'd hung on his every word, gasping with excitement when he'd told her that, yes, there was a tower in the castle.



He frowned. She'd begun to treat this whole experience like an adventure. No tears or complaints, no recriminations or accusations. She hadn't even mentioned missing her father. Not that he blamed her; life with that drunken imbecile could not have been pleasant. Still, one would think she'd be angry, or at least upset, at suddenly finding herself on the path to an uncertain future with a man she'd just met. Her confident acceptance of the situation, an attitude she'd seemed to adopt that morning, bewildered him.

He felt her slump against him, apparently giving in to her fatigue, and her breasts brushed his back in a most erotic manner. He reached to cover one of her hands, where she clung to his waist, and stroked it lightly. Heat spread through his loins and his cock grew hard. He wanted to stop the horse and take her. Right here, right now, on the rock-strewn path. He imagined plunging into her, gazing into those sky-blue eyes as he buried himself within her wetness. The feeling was not foreign. Not to the Dark Count, who'd spent the last year finding his pleasure wherever, and with whomever, he pleased.

He shook his head in self-recrimination. It was not what he'd planned when he'd gone to claim Bridgett. No. At the time, he had intended to save her from just such a fate. To rescue her from a father who would gamble his virgin daughter to a stranger in a game of chance. But that was before he'd seen her, before he'd realized that his prize was not a child at all, but a lovely young woman.

Eager to please.

*I will serve you well, milord. I promise that you will be very happy with me.*

Young, innocent, voluptuous, pleasing to look upon.

*More precious than gold.*

He continued to caress her hand, deep in thought. Memories, dark and forbidding, yet still holding the power to arouse, flooded his mind. Years of careful training at the hands of his father's friends had turned him into a creature that would sell his soul to appease his burning lust. Hating himself for wanting it, yet unable to resist. Willing to follow any command, no matter how demeaning, for just a taste of the satisfaction they'd been willing to give him.

He shook his head, trying to deny what he already knew, but the painful hardness between his legs and the rush of excitement that shot through his veins told him he would go forward.

Finally, he would be the one in control, the one who would dictate every movement, every sensation.

She belonged to him. A possession with which he could do as he pleased. If he desired, he could take her now, and again and again, until he'd had his fill. There would be nothing she could do to stop him.

But that would be a waste. Instead, he would take her through the same lessons he'd learned so many years ago. Introduce her, one tiny, agonizing step at a time, to the pleasures of the flesh. He would do it in such a way that her baser needs and desires

would grow until they could not be ignored, until they controlled her, until she would do anything, *be* anything he asked in order to satisfy her hunger.

And she would. If there was one lesson he'd learned, it was that even the most highborn lady had within her the soul of a whore.

She sighed, her breath hot against his neck. He squeezed her hand and she snuggled against him, like a trusting child.

He smiled. Her naiveté would aid him in the implementation of his plan. No doubt she would be flustered by his attentions, easy prey to his charms.

Vincent shifted in the saddle to ease his discomfort. A heady excitement coursed through his veins. Like a concubine in the tent of a sheik, Bridgett would exist solely for his pleasure.

He pressed his knees into Tempest's sides, urging him to increase his speed. They were approaching the edge of the village; he could see it in the distance, and was eager to begin his instruction. Tonight, she would have her first lesson.

## Chapter Three

Vincent carried his sleeping charge up the back stairs of a roadside inn. She nestled in his arms, all softness and warmth, with luscious curves that made his blood run hot. He eased open the door to the room he'd purchased for the night, then carried her to the bed.

She moaned softly when he put her down, but did not awaken, and he turned away to light the lamp that sat on the bedside table.

A breathy sigh caught his attention, and he stared at her face, innocent in repose. How could anyone sleep so deeply? She hadn't even stirred when he'd pulled her from his horse, had merely snuggled against him in a most trusting manner. He pushed back the guilt that tried to worm its way into his thoughts, and turned away to close and bolt the door. His hands shook as he considered his options. Where to start, how to proceed. It would be different for a woman, especially one so young and inexperienced. He must tread carefully. How to awaken the heretofore-dormant desires of a virgin?

He frowned. His plan would require a delicate mixture of both self-discipline and charm. Gentle coaxing, blended with an unrelenting assault on her senses.

"Milord?" She sounded groggy.

He crossed to the bed. "I was just about to wake you. Are you hungry? I could have something sent up?"

Bridgett shook her head and stretched. "I would rather bathe. Do you think I might get some water?"

Vincent watched her feline-like movements, admiring the way the muscles in her shoulders flexed as she raised her arms above her head. Did she know how seductive she looked, the way her body writhed on the bed, her hair fanned out on the pillows? His mouth went dry, and he had to lick his lips before he could speak. "I'm afraid it's too late for a proper bath, but there is a pitcher there on the washstand if you would like to rinse off."

She glanced down at her filthy dress and sighed. "I suppose that will do."

Vincent nodded. He needed to put some distance between them, for his sake as well as her own. "I will wait outside."

He went into the hallway, but left the door open a crack in order to watch her. She slipped from the bed and went to the washstand. After a brief hesitation, she grabbed the hem of her skirt and pulled her dress up and over her head.

Vincent drank in the sight of her supple beauty. Greater perfection he had never seen. High, firm breasts, crested with large pink-brown nipples, swayed ever so slightly when she moved. She turned, presenting him with her back, and he let his gaze drift

down, following the line of her spine. Twin dimples graced the top of her buttocks. Vincent narrowed his eyes as he imagined exploring the tiny indentations with the tip of his tongue. He squeezed his eyes shut tight and drew a shuddering breath. He should have gone for a walk, instead of spying at the door. His penis pressed painfully against the front of his trousers, and he knew he needed to regain control or his plans would be destroyed by his own impatience.

Drawing on every ounce of self-restraint, he forced down the lust that coursed through his veins and opened his eyes. She had propped one leg up on a chair, and was running a wet cloth along the length of her thigh. The sight was an excellent test for his resolve to remain aloof. Satisfied he'd regained control, he pushed open the door. It was time.

"Milord!" She looked about frantically, as if searching for a place to hide.

"I grew tired of waiting." He stepped close. She trembled, but did not move away.

"You are very beautiful, *bella mia*. Quite possibly the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

She blushed prettily and averted her gaze, and Vincent felt a rush of triumph. Already, she responded to his advances just as he'd hoped.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. She watched, wide-eyed, as he took each fingertip into his mouth and suckled gently. She tasted clean, of soap and salt.

"Milord, you should not." She was panting, now, her voice a mere whisper, and he wondered if she might swoon.

He cocked his head. "I should not? Why is that, fair Bridgett?"

He ran the back of his hand down the side of her throat in a lingering caress. Her skin was as soft as a rose petal, delicate as fine china.

"You are mine. But even more, your splendid body enjoys my touch. Your nipples are hard, and I dare say if I were to put my hand between your luscious thighs, I would find you very wet." He meant to shock, but also to draw her attention to her body's response to his closeness, to his touch.

She took a step back, only to collide with the washstand. "You confuse me, milord. I am not...you can not..."

"Oh, but you are. And I can."

He took her face between his hands and lowered his head, gently brushing her lips in the lightest of kisses. Her warm breath mingled with his own, a soft sigh of yearning.

"It is natural, this desire you feel, the way your body responds to my touch. Do not be frightened, little one." He nibbled the corners of her mouth and trailed his tongue along the high ridge of her cheekbone.

"It is wrong." She placed her hands against his chest and pushed, but he held his ground.

"Why is it wrong, *bella mia*? You are mine, and there is nothing you can do about it." He kept his voice low and whispered against her ear. Again, to shock, to titillate.

"I can fight you." Her voice wavered.

Vincent chuckled and brushed a finger over her nipple. She whimpered, and he laughed.

"You can fight me? Fight what? My desire to touch you? Your desire to be touched? I think not. Your mind may be telling you it is wrong, but the rest of you is begging for me."

He nibbled on the soft flesh at the base of her throat and she groaned. The sound was nearly his undoing; his control slipped.

"Ignore what your mind is telling you, *bella mia*. Close your eyes and listen to your body."

He cupped her breast, lifting it, testing its weight. It fit perfectly in the palm of his hand, a succulent fruit waiting to be sampled. "Sooner or later, your body will win the struggle."

"Please."

Vincent's heart pounded at her whispered plea. With her eyes closed and her head thrown back, there was little chance that she begged for him to release her. No, the fair Bridgett had crossed the line from clueless virgin to a woman aware.

Hiding his elation, he stepped back. "Get dressed and come to bed. We've another long day ahead of us tomorrow."

He turned his back on her and began to undress, not needing to see her face to know what she felt. He'd been in her position too many times to count. The embarrassment and the humiliation at having relented, the frustration at having been denied.

Nude, he stalked to the fireplace and stoked the logs until they fell apart into glowing embers licked with tiny flames. He felt her watching him, sensed the moment when she regained her composure enough to dress. He waited until he was sure she'd had enough time to climb under the quilts, and then turned to face her. He stood still, allowing her to get a glimpse of his arousal, before crossing to the bed and climbing in beside her.

She immediately slid to the far side, putting as much distance between them as possible, and Vincent smiled into the darkness. He could imagine her thoughts, her confusion. Before long, she would ache to be close to him, but for now, he would allow her to cling to her maidenly modesty.

Bridgett slid from Tempest's back then moved to the far side of the clearing, putting as much distance between she and the Count as possible. Riding behind him, forced to cling to his waist, had been sheer torture. All morning she'd done nothing but replay their previous night's encounter, trying to come to terms with the warring emotions of shame and desire. The way she had responded to his words and touch confused and

dismayed her, and yet a part of her, a part she'd never known existed, secretly wished for more.

She stretched her arms above her head and groaned. Anxiety, coupled with hours on horseback, had caused her joints to grow stiff.

"Are you sore?"

Warm, firm hands fell on her shoulders and she jumped. She could not respond to his question as he began massaging her burning muscles, drawing out the tension. His hands worked their magic and she leaned back against him with a sigh of pleasure, giving in to his ministrations.

"It is difficult to resist, *bella mia*, is it not?" He whispered near her ear and she trembled as his hot breath scorched her neck.

"I don't know what you mean." A lie. She had been fighting it all morning. The image of him, naked in the firelight, haunted her, taunted her.

"I think you do." He ran his tongue down the side of her throat. "Don't fight it, fair Bridgett. Close your eyes. Stop thinking."

She shuddered. She'd nearly done that last night.

He wrapped his arms about her and cupped her breasts. She did as he'd suggested and closed her eyes. Not to give herself over, but in an attempt to regain control of her scattered senses.

He caressed her nipples and she whimpered softly as an intense jolt of pleasure shot through her body.

"You see, it is not so terrible to be touched by a man." He continued to pinch her nipples and caress her breasts. "If it eases your conscience, you can tell yourself I'm forcing you, would force you if you tried to resist."

Bridgett sucked in her breath. It had not crossed her mind that he would do any such thing. In truth, after her initial resistance of the prior night, she had not thought to refuse him. Something told her that a gentleman did not behave thusly, and that a lady...a lady would rather die than partake of such activities. But perhaps the Count was no gentleman. And she, of course, was no lady.

Her legs grew weak and she wondered how much longer she could remain standing of her own accord.

"Why are you doing this?" She fought her desire, attempted to lay the responsibility at his feet. "What do you want from me?"

"Why? Because you are a beautiful, desirable woman. Because you want me to. Because I can." He paused and dropped a light kiss on her shoulder. "As for what I want from you, *bella mia*, only your complete submission."

Bridgett squeezed her eyes closed against the hot tears that threatened to spill over and shivered. Her submission. Only that. Didn't he realize that he'd already gained so much more? A longing to be touched. A yearning to be needed. In such a short period

of time he'd managed to bring her body to awareness, made her.... ache. In doing so, he had brought her face-to-face with her own weaknesses.

The cool chill of morning air suddenly replaced the warmth of his body. Bridgett clenched her fists. Once again, he had toyed with her, awakened her passions with his touch, and then left her to deal with her raging emotions.

She stumbled forward a short distance into the forest, seeking a moments solitude to regain her senses. She grabbed a tree to steady herself, digging her nails into the rough bark, and let the tears she'd been holding back flow free.

How different she felt now, compared to the cheerful optimism of the other morning. Had that only been yesterday? She sighed. It seemed like a lifetime ago. She'd been so sure of herself, so confident that she knew what lay ahead. But that was before he'd touched her. Before he'd confused her with his words, with his attentions.

She swiped at her eyes and sniffed. It would do no good to hide away, sniveling like a child. It was time to put childish behavior and dreams behind her. She may not be able to completely control her own destiny, but she could face it as an adult, attempt to find some happiness.

Her breasts still tingled and the tightness in the pit of her stomach had not eased. Nothing he'd done to her had been physically unpleasant. Her emotional state was another matter, entirely.

Perhaps the Count was right, and she should stop thinking so much. She uttered a strangled laugh. It would be easier to stop breathing. Simply being in his presence caused her head to spin with foreign thoughts and emotions. He wanted something from her, that much was clear. And, if truth be known, she enjoyed being

the object of his affections. But at what cost? She had no way of knowing the price she might pay for her compliance. She could only follow her instincts and hope for the best.

Squaring her shoulders, she trampled back toward the clearing, determined to make the best of an uncertain future.

Vincent, busy with his horse, covertly watched Bridgett's return from the woods. When he saw the expression on her face, he smiled. She no longer had the aura of an uncertain girl; even her eyes had taken on a new light of purpose. They sparkled, showing the joy of decision of which she was probably not consciously aware.

He waited silently for her to join him, and then helped her onto the horse. When he mounted in front of her, she wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned her head against his shoulder.

Vincent wanted to laugh aloud. The heady sense of power and anticipation caused him to grow instantly hard.

He turned Tempest and they headed down the path. Tonight would be their last evening alone together before they reached his estate.

## Chapter Four

Bridgett wished that, like the previous night, she'd been asleep when the time came to stop for the evening. That way, she would be spared the uncertainty of how to act or what to say. He'd barely spoken to her since that morning, and it disconcerted her. In light of her earlier resolve, she'd expected him to become more attentive to her. She shook her head. How could he know what she'd decided? And it was not as if she could tell him. Still, she'd expected him to sense it, somehow, to know that she'd stopped resisting. Instead, he seemed distant, and he hadn't tried to touch her since they'd stopped on the trail.

The Count had instructed her to wait while he secured their room, then motioned for her to follow him up the stairs at the back of the inn. A strange tension filled the air between them; he seemed anxious or distracted, and she wondered what disturbed him.

"Wait here," he instructed her, after opening the door to their room. "I am going to see if I can purchase a few articles of clothing for you."

She nodded and attempted a smile, a little worried at the notion of being alone. "As you wish, milord."

"I'll order that a bath be sent up to you. Be sure to lock the door once it has been delivered."

Bridgett smiled in earnest. "A bath! How delightful! I had hoped to have one." She sniffed the air in an exaggerated manner. "I fear I'm beginning to smell of your horse."

The Count did not return her good humor, and it struck her that she'd hardly seen him smile, and rarely heard him laugh. The man was too serious, by far. Or, perhaps he simply did not share her delight in the simpler pleasures life could bring.

He walked out the door without a backward glance, and she sighed. A man who lived in a castle would most likely take such luxuries as a bath for granted, but for her it was a treat. Usually, the most she could hope for was a quick wash in the freezing waters of a nearby creek. She hadn't had a *real* bath, in a tub of warmed water, in a very long time. Not since before her mother had died, since before they'd had to dismiss their few remaining servants.

She glanced around. The room could be the same one she'd stayed in the previous night, if not for the fact that it was a bit larger and the bed looked a sight more comfortable.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Yes?" She tried to sound confident and in charge, but her voice still wavered.

"It's Jonesy, Ma'am. They sent me up to stoke the fire."



Bridgett let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and unbolted the door. A small, hunch-backed man scurried into the room, his arms full of wood.

"I won't be a minute, Ma'am, and you'll have a nice blazin' fire ta warm ye." He piled the wood on the hearth. "Yer mister paid me extra to make sure ye was warm 'n comfortable."

*Your mister.* Bridgett opened her mouth to correct him, then snapped it shut. What would she tell him? The strangeness of her circumstances suddenly struck her, and she experiences a small twinge of discomfiture. The Count owned her. Like livestock, or a slave. He was not her husband, her guardian, or even her employer. He was her master, and she, his chattel. She frowned, trying to summon up the outrage she supposed she should feel, but failed. In truth, the idea of belonging to such a man brought about feelings she couldn't quite name. A giddy excitement, a strange attraction. Feelings that, if she examined them too closely, might cause her to question her own good judgment. He claimed her as his own, and it made her feel wanted. It had been a very long time since anyone had made her feel wanted. She'd pondered these things, and more, during their silent ride that day, coming to the realization that life with the Count might be quite pleasant.

"There ye be, Ma'am. Nice 'n bright." He hurried to the door and gave her a nod. "They'll be up with yer water momentarily. Ye jus' holler if ye be needin' anythin' else."

"Thank you." Bridgett closed the door, remembering to bolt it as the Count had instructed.

The fire glowed brightly, casting shadows on the walls and bringing the temperature of the room to a more tolerable level. The mornings and evenings were quite chilly and, although she hadn't complained, she'd spent many hours these past two days shivering. Her slight shift was not suited for the weather, nor fit for travel. She smiled slightly, wondering what treasures the Count would find for her in the town. Whatever they were, she hoped they would be warm.

Another knock came at the door, and she admitted two men lugging a large, metal tub between them. Three other burly fellows, carrying buckets of water in each hand, followed. The last man to enter bumped into her, and water sloshed over the side of the bucket and down the front of her skirt.

"Sorry, ma'am." He ducked his head and joined the others.

Too excited over the prospect of the bath to be angry, Bridgett watched in amusement as they placed the tub before the fire and filled it nearly to the rim, each criticizing the other for their sloppy work. She tapped her foot impatiently and, when they were finished, hurried them out the door.

Steam rose from the tub, and she went to stick her finger in the water to test its temperature. Smiling with pleasure, she hurriedly slipped out of her sodden gown. She tossed it over a nearby chair to dry, then climbed into the bath.

"This must be what heaven is like," she murmured, and closed her eyes.

She sank low, too low, and the water went up her nose. She sat up, sputtering and pushing her hair from her face, then laughed with delight. On a low stool near the tub sat a small lump of soap and a cloth. She lathered the rag until the bubbles foamed high in her hand. Starting with her hair, she scrubbed every inch of herself, and then sank back beneath the surface to rinse. The water had begun to cool, and she looked around for something with which to dry. A towel hung on a peg near the fireplace and she leaned out to grab it.

"I thought I told you to lock the door!"

Bridgett screamed and sank back into the water, but a strong hand wrapped around her arm and pulled her up.

She gasped and tried to jerk away from the steely grip. Damp locks of hair fell over her face and in her eyes and she brushed them away with her free hand.

"Oh, milord, it's you! You nearly frightened me to death!"

She stopped struggling, only to have her foot hit a slippery spot on the bottom of the tub. She pitched forward and he caught and lifted her, dripping wet, into his arms.

"Milord! Your coat!" Bridgett looked in horror at the growing watermark on the fine-cut cloth.

The Count ignored her cry of dismay and skirted the tub to set her on her feet before the fire.

"Anyone could have entered this room while you bathed."

Bridgett cringed at the anger she heard in his voice.

"Forgive me, milord. It's just that I was so anxious to try the bath." She gestured helplessly to the tub, then wrapped her arms about her waist and shivered. It suddenly occurred to her that she was totally nude. The heat of his gaze told her that he had noticed it, too. Her skin tingled in anticipation of his touch.

"You're cold."

It was a statement, not a question, but Bridgett nodded. "I'm naked and wet."

Her words earned her a scowl, but he reached for the drying cloth and draped it across her shoulders.

"Dry off," he told her, and then turned away, stalking toward the bed.

Bridgett stared at the broad expanse of his back for a moment, experiencing an odd sense of disappointment. Why had he walked away?

Another fit of shivers shook her and she hurriedly began wiping the water from her icy flesh. When she finished, she glanced at her old, dirty dress and sighed.

"You can burn that."

She glanced at the Count. He seemed to make a habit of reading her thoughts.

"Did you manage to find me another dress then?"

"Yes." He turned from her and began to unwrap a parcel that lay on the foot of the bed.

Bridgett came to stand behind him, peering around to see what treasures he'd disclose. Her eyes widened as he pulled a long, silky looking garment from the package. It billowed in the air to drift down and caress her arm as he shook it and held it out to her.

"It's...it's lovely, milord." She carefully took the frothy garment from his hands and stared at it, trying not to let him see her disappointment. She'd freeze to death in this! Although it was black, it was nearly see-through, with the tiniest of straps to hold it on her shoulders. She would be better off in her old shift, even in its torn and dirty state.

The Count still bent over the parcel, and she directed her attention to the remainder of items he'd spread out over the mattress, hoping to see a cloak of some sort.

She gasped. "Oh, milord, they're beautiful!"

Two dresses made of thick and shimmering velvet, and an assortment of accessories covered the bed.

She reached to brush her fingertips over the soft material, heaving a sigh of satisfaction. She would not freeze, after all.

The Count took her old dress from the back of the chair and tossed it into the fire. She watched it burst into flames, the room becoming momentarily brighter, and shook her head. Now what would she wear when the time came for her to take her place as his servant? She surely could not work in her new attire.

"Put on your nightdress. I'll be back shortly."

*Her nightdress.* She glanced down at the bit of nothing she still held in her hands. Of course! She slipped the garment over her head, thankful she hadn't voiced her dismay when he'd handed it to her, lest he think her a complete simpleton. The silk slid across her breasts and down over her hips like a soft caress, reminding her of his touch. She adjusted the straps on her shoulders, then looked up to find him staring at her. The expression on his face made her shiver, and she glanced away.

The door clicked shut and she looked back in dismay. Once again, she'd managed to displease him. She sighed and went to curl up in the over-stuffed chair before the fire. She wished he hadn't left, and she hoped he'd return soon. She'd grown to enjoy being in his presence. She'd grown to enjoy even more than that. She simply needed to find a way to show him.

Vincent opened his mouth to issue another strong reprimand, then realized she was asleep. He closed the door—the door she had again failed to lock—and quietly moved across the room to the bed. The gowns he had purchased still lay where he'd left them, and he gathered them up to deposit them in a heap on the floor. He pulled back the quilts, his hands trembling with excitement, despite the amount of alcohol he'd managed to consume in the last hour.

He'd needed a drink ever since he'd pulled her from that tub, naked and wet and incredibly soft. It was either drink, to dull his desires, or take her with haste and with force, if necessary.

A soft moan caught his attention. She shifted in the chair and her peignoir rode up, exposing long, lovely legs. He stared at that creamy expanse of flesh as he hastily removed his shirt, then crossed to scoop her up in his arms.

"What? Oh, milord, I'm sorry." She yawned in his face and wrapped her arms about his neck in a most unselfconscious manner. "I must have fallen asleep."

"You did." He deposited her on the bed. "You did not lock the door, either."

Bridgett frowned and shook her head. "I'm a terrible trial to you, I know, but I promise to try harder to please you."

"Move over so that I can lie down." Vincent tried to ignore the way her breasts pressed enticingly against the neckline of her gown.

"Here? You mean to sleep with me?"

"You wish to please me?" He waited for her nod. "Then move over. Now."

She scooted across the bed until she lay at the far edge. Vincent crawled beneath the blankets, then reached for her, pulling her close. She did not fight him, but she felt stiff as a board within the circle of his arms.

"Bridgett, have you ever lain with a man?" He watched her closely, knowing the answer from the way she blanched and averted her eyes. Still, when she didn't reply, he pressed her. "Have you ever taken a man's cock between your legs? Had him sink into your liquid depths and impale you on his hard shaft?"

He could feel her heart beating fast where their bodies met. From fear, or from excitement? She shifted and he turned her to face him, so he could see the expression in her eyes.

"Answer me, Bridgett. Have you ever had a man?"

"I...No, milord," she whispered.

He smiled. "Good. Very good. It is time to begin your training in earnest, *bellamia*."

"My training?" Her brow wrinkled in a frown.

"A man has needs, Bridgett, that only a woman can fulfill." He stroked her arm with feather-light caresses as he spoke. "I will teach you how to fulfill my needs."

"How do you know I will be able to do so, milord?"

The innocence of the question nearly disrupted him from his carefully planned course of seduction, but he hardened his resolve. If he had not taken her, if he did *not* take her, someone else would.

"No more talking. You are here to serve me, not plague me with your silly questions. You must be perfectly obedient, and follow each of my commands. Do you understand?"

She nodded, and he offered her a smile to ease the sting of his words.

"Good." He raised himself up on one arm and moved her until she lay on her back beneath him. "I'm going to remove your gown. Lie still. I won't hurt you, but I must touch you."

He slid the straps of the nightdress down over her shoulders and pushed the silk past her breasts until it pooled about her hips. Her breathing grew heavy, but she did not move as he gazed at her large, firm breasts. His cock strained against the front of his breeches and he pressed against her thigh.

"Your breasts are made for a man's touch," he whispered. He brushed her nipple with his finger and it hardened at his touch. She whimpered softly and his pulse quickened at the sound of her response. He lowered his head and drew the tight nub into his mouth, sucking it deeply, flicking the tip with his tongue.

Bridgett moved beneath him, arching her back, entwining her fingers in his hair, and pulling him close. He moved from one breast to the other, moaning against the softness of her flesh.

"Do you like that?" he asked. "Tell me what you feel."

She tightened her hold on his hair and rolled her head on the pillow. "I feel...I want...I don't know!"

He chuckled and pushed her gown further, down over her hips and legs. "I know you don't, bella mia, but I do. I know everything you want, everything you need, every deep, dark secret that's buried in your soul."

He pulled back and got to his knees.

"Would you like me to show you what it is you desire, Bridgett?" His hands moved to the buttons of his breeches and he unhooked them in one quick motion. "Do you want me to tell you what you need?"

Her eyes grew wide, but she remained silent, watching him with a curious look on her face.

He pulled his erect penis from his trousers and held it in his fist. "This is what you need, bella mia. This will ease the ache that is building within you."

Her eyes narrowed. "How? Tell me why women seem to desire these things."

"What do you know of a woman's desires?" He watched her expression in the firelight. Her brow creased into a frown, and she seemed to ponder his question.

"Very little, milord, only what you have managed to show me in the last two days, but I am curious to learn."

"You are not frightened?"

"You have given me no cause to fear you. Nothing I have experienced so far has been unpleasant." She paused. "May I ask you one more question?"

Vincent ran a hand through his hair in frustration. He didn't want to talk, but he knew that he'd fired her curiosity, had done it on purpose, and must continue with this charade of gentle seduction.

"What is it?" It came out harsher than he intended.

"You say I am to serve you, but I will not be a servant. You tell me I will take care of your needs, but you have not told me how. If I am to please you, I must know what you expect of me."

Vincent muttered a curse beneath his breath. Apparently his little virgin had come much further along the path to sexual awareness than he'd thought. Could she handle the truth of what her future held? He'd simply intended to lead her to it, without benefit of explanation, but perhaps things would progress smoother if she knew her position.

He stretched out beside her and pulled her against his chest, molding her body to fit his own.

"How will you serve me, bella mia?" He ran his tongue along her jaw and she shivered in his arms.

"You will give me free access to your glorious body." He nibbled at her earlobe.

"You will take my cock inside you. Inside your vagina, your mouth, wherever and whenever it pleases me." He pressed his hardness against her thigh for emphasis.

"In short, little one, you will serve my every sexual whim." He pulled back to see her reaction to his words.

She gazed at him steadily. "You will teach me these things?"

Vincent nodded. "I will teach you everything you need to know."

"And you will not hurt me?" She pinned him with her eyes.

"I will not lie to you, Bridgett. It will hurt the first time I take you, but after that there will be no more pain."

She seemed to consider this for a moment, then nodded. "I understand. I wish to learn to please you, milord."

He did not tell her that it would not have mattered.

He lowered his head and kissed her lightly, nibbling at the corners of her mouth and teasing the seam of her lips with his tongue.

"Open for me," he whispered.

Bridgett sighed, her breath scorching his face, and he dipped his tongue into the source of that heat. He felt her move against him, and he deepened the kiss, groaning at her first tentative response.

He ran his hands down her back and cupped her buttocks, pulling her closer. She met his movements by pressing her hips forward, and his engorged penis throbbed painfully. It reminded him of his purpose. Of his need.

Breaking the kiss that had stolen his breath and dulled his senses, he pulled away to lie on his back, drawing her to lie against him.

"It is time for your first lesson." His voice was thick. "You must learn to pleasure me."

"Yes milord." She sounded uncertain.

Vincent took her hand and slid it down. "Take my cock in your fist."

His penis jumped as she brushed its length.

"Take it in your hand."

She wrapped her fingers around the shaft, and he placed his hand over her own.

"Now move," he could barely speak, "like this."

She followed his lead, and he squeezed her hand, silently indicating for her to hold him tighter.

"That's it." He bucked his hips.

"This pleases you?" Bridgett's breath came hot against his chest.

"Yes, bella mia, it pleases me." He reached for her breast and gently pinched a nipple. "Move your hand faster."

He groaned against the softness of her hair and lifted his body to meet each downward stroke. He was half-aware of the increase in her breathing, of her shifting to lean over his chest, her breasts caressing his flesh. When her mouth touched his tight nipple, he gasped and pulled her close, giving a guttural cry as his orgasm shook him.

Awareness returned slowly. The warmth of her skin as she lay in his arms. The softness of her breasts against his side. The lightness of her breath against his chest.

"It didn't hurt."

Vincent sighed and wrapped his arm about her shoulder to pull her up to face him. Her hair hung about them like a curtain of gold, and he brushed it back so he could see her eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

"It did not hurt. You said it would...the first time." A blush rose in her cheeks.

"I did not take you, bella mia," he told her. "The first time I put my cock inside you, you will feel pain because you are virgin."

His penis twitched at his words.

"Will you take me tonight?"

Vincent caught his breath. His blood fired anew with lust, but he forced it back. "No, little one, I will not take you tonight. This was only your first lesson. We have many more before we reach the stage where I will take your virginity."

She frowned, and he nearly laughed when he read the disappointment on her face. In only two days, he'd managed to awaken her to a lust that would drive her to fulfill his intent. He pulled her down to lie beside him.

"Go to sleep," he told her, and smiled when she heaved a sigh of what could only be interpreted as frustration.

By the time he was through with her training, she would be a slave to her own passion.

## Chapter Five

"Have we much further to travel?" Bridgett tugged at the low neckline of her gown for what seemed like the hundredth time that morning, and glanced about the small clearing.

The Count finished chewing a bit of biscuit, then tossed the remainder into the bushes. "Only another few hours. Are you tired?"

"No, though my backside feels as if I've been whipped with a cane." She stood and rubbed the offending area through the thickness of her skirts. "I'm not used to sitting a horse for so long."

He stared at her for a moment, and she noticed he dropped his gaze to watch the motion of her hands. Her heartbeat quickened and her stomach muscles contracted. The way he looked at her caused her legs to grow weak.

"Will you tell me about my next lesson, milord?" She blanched and quickly looked away. What was she thinking? But that was just it, all morning she'd done nothing but think. Something had happened to her last night, something profound and inexplicable. Every time she looked at him she felt...*hungry*.

The Count stood and crossed the clearing to pick up Tempest's reins.

"No. I will not."

He did not turn around to answer her, and she bit her lip in consternation. She'd irritated him again, though she certainly hadn't meant to do so.

"Thank you for the beautiful gowns, milord." She made an effort to appease him. "They are the loveliest I've ever owned."

This earned her a slight smile, and she brushed at the skirt self-consciously as he swept her with his gaze.

"Red suits you, *bella mia*," he said, "and the dress is an excellent fit."

Bridgett glanced down at the bright red velvet and nodded her agreement. "I fear it's a bit low in the bodice, but other than that, it is perfect."

She was surprised to see him flush and turn away.

"The cut is in style," he told her. "Shall we go?"

"Yes, milord." She crossed to join him beside the horse. "I am anxious to get home."

"There it is." Vincent nudged her to gain her attention, and nodded in the direction of a large stone castle in the distance. For some reason, he was anxious to get her reaction, and he held his breath, awaiting her reply.



"Oh, milord, it's huge!" She shifted to look over his shoulder, and he released his breath, only to catch it again when her thighs pressed against the back of his legs. Why did her slightest touch cause him to quiver like a green boy?

"My father came here in exile before I was born. The castle belonged to my mother's family."

"Where is your mother?" Bridgett laid her chin on his shoulder and her voice came softly in his ear.

"She died when I was a boy." He kept his answer purposely short. This was not something he wished to discuss in any detail. "My father died just this past year."

"You live here alone?" She sounded incredulous.

"If you don't include the twenty members of my staff and my sister, then yes, I live alone."

"Twenty servants? You must be as rich as a king!" She tightened her hold about his waist. "I am curious, milord. What will be my position within your household?"

"You are my personal servant, Bridgett. That is all anyone needs to know."

Tempest whinnied and Vincent loosened his hold on the reins, allowing the horse to break into a canter. For once, Vincent was as anxious to be home as his mount.

Bridgett eyed the tall butler, intimidated by both his size and his bearing. He looked down at her and scowled, his eyes narrowing as he studied her. The Count had left her here, in the entry hall, and disappeared into a side room with an elderly woman, whom Bridgett assumed was the housekeeper.

She squared her shoulders and stared him down. She would not be cowed by such a rude man, giant or no. "I would like to lie down, if you please. Could you call someone to show me to my room?"

The butler frowned at her. "Your room, miss? You'll be staying, then?"

"Of course I'll be staying." She tossed her head with impatience. "I am to be the Count's personal servant."

He sneered at her and she took a step back.

"My Lord Renault already has a valet."

Bridgett's cheeks grew warm as she realized her mistake. For the first time, she grew truly angry with the Count. He'd left her to fend for herself before this colossal oaf, forced to explain the unexplainable.

"Thomas, who's there?"

Bridgett looked up to see a young woman staring down at them from an upper balcony.

"Someone who claims to be Lord Renault's personal servant, miss." The butler's tone suddenly grew subservient, almost worshipful. Whoever the lady was, she commanded his respect.

"My brother is home then?"

Bridgett watched the girl run down an upper walkway towards the stairs. Within moments, she had joined them in the entry, panting from exertion.

"Where is he, Thomas? Where is Vincent?" She looked about, as if she expected her brother to materialize from thin air.

"The Count is in there." Bridgett pointed toward a closed door at the far end of the hall. "With a woman."

"A woman?"

"My Lord is consulting with Helen, Miss." Thomas shot Bridgett a look of irritation.

"Oh." The Count's sister suddenly turned her full attention to Bridgett. "And who might you be?"

Bridgett curtsied. "Bridgett Celeste Alexandria Morton, ma'am."

The other girl extended her hand, her expression solemn. "Such a big name for such a tiny lady. I am Lady Maria Renault, but you may call me Marie."

Thomas snorted, earning a slight frown from his mistress.

"You are to be our guest?" Marie sounded pleased at the notion.

"I...yes, in a manner of speaking." She shifted uneasily beneath Lady Renault's steady gaze.

"Bridgett is a servant, Marie. She will be directly under my supervision." The Count joined them, followed by a squat, silver-haired woman.

"Vincent! I'm so happy you're home!" Marie launched herself into his arms and he hugged her tight.

"You act as if I've been gone for months." The Count chuckled and set her on her feet, but held onto her hand to keep her by his side.

"Twenty-three days, but who's counting."

Bridgett watched the interaction between brother and sister with a sense of sadness. Had she ever loved, or been loved, to such a degree? A shadowy memory of her mother's face flashed through her mind, but that had been so long ago, she was no longer sure what was real and what was imagined.

"Helen, I imagine that Bridgett is tired. We've had a long journey. Please take her up to the suite that adjoins my room."

Marie gasped. "Vincent!"

"This doesn't concern you, my dear." He smiled down at his sister. "It's nothing for you to worry about, believe me."

Lady Renault's brows drew together in a frown, and she glanced between Bridgett and her brother. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I do." The Count turned to address the housekeeper. "Helen, take Bridgett to her room now."

The old woman nodded and motioned for Bridgett to follow her. Bridgett hesitated, taking in Lady Renault's look of uncertainty, but at a nod from the Count she turned and rushed off to catch up with the housekeeper.

The room to which she was shown was nearly decadent in its luxury. Silks, satins, velvets and gold adorned the walls, the furniture, the bed. A fireplace large enough to step into, framed by a black marble mantel, took up nearly an entire wall. Bridgett spent the first five minutes of solitude roaming about, running her hands over each beautiful item, marveling at what it must have cost to decorate such a room. Eventually, she was drawn to the bed, both by its inviting softness and her undeniable weariness. She stripped off her gown and placed it carefully on a nearby chair, then crawled beneath the plush quilts with a sigh.

She did not know how long she slept, but when she awoke it was full dark and she was not alone. The Count sat in a chair beside the bed; apparently he'd been watching her while she slept. She eyed him cautiously, her heart beating frantically. Merely looking at him made her tremble and stumble over her thoughts.

"Are you hungry?"

She sat up to lean against the headboard. "I wasn't, until you mentioned it."

Her stomach growled and she gave an embarrassed laugh. "I suppose I'm famished."

"There is a tray there." He motioned toward a table near the fire. "I believe the food is still warm."

"I'm not..." She shook her head, knowing that he would scoff if she told him she wore only her shift. He had seen much more of her the prior night. There was no place for modesty when it came to her Count.

*Her Count.* She smiled at the thought, sliding from the bed to pad across the thick rug, crinkling her nose with delight at the savory smells coming from the table.

She sank into a chair and placed a napkin on her lap. "Will you join me?"

He shook his head. "I've already eaten."

Bridgett shrugged and lifted the lids from the silver plates of food, her mouth watering. After two days of eating nothing but biscuits and jerky, this was a veritable feast.

She lifted a bite of pork to her mouth and chewed slowly, aware that he still stared at her. Nerves made her throat constrict when she tried to swallow. Choking, she grabbed for the glass and took a long drink. Too long. The wine was strong and bitter, burning its way down, making her cough even more.

"There is water in the other."

He sounded amused, and Bridgett glared at him over the rim of the mug. The cool liquid soothed her fiery throat, but her arms and legs felt warm and tingly and she grew a bit light-headed.

She pushed back her tray, no longer interested in the food, and stood on shaky legs.

"I believe I should lie down."

She started for the bed, but when she passed his chair, the Count reached out and pulled her onto his lap. She fell against him, uttering a startled cry.

"You did not like the wine?"

"It's only that I am not used to it, milord," Bridgett lied. In truth, it was the most awful thing she'd ever tasted.

"Here, try some of mine." He retrieved a cup from a table near the chair and handed it to her. "It is not as strong, and is sweeter."

Bridgett wanted to refuse, but her desire to please him won out. She took the cup and brought it slowly to her lips. Closing her eyes, she held her breath and took a small sip.

"It is delicious!" She smiled with relief and took another drink. "It tastes of honey."

"Hmm...let me taste."

Before she knew what he was about, he pulled her down and kissed her, gently at first, then becoming more demanding as his tongue slipped past her lips. Bridgett sighed and he stole her breath, sucking gently on her tongue. Her wine-hazed mind vaguely registered the touch of his hand at her breast, and her nipple tingled and tightened in response to his caress.

He lifted his head, breaking the kiss, and she groaned her frustration.

"Are you ready for your next lesson, little one?"

Ready? She turned away, afraid he would see her excitement. Ready did not describe her emotions. Want? Need? Neither seemed to accurately depict how she felt when she was near him like this.

He untied the laces at the top of her chemise and slipped the light material down over her breasts.

"Look at me." He fingered her nipple, and she trembled in his arms.

She met his eyes, trying to still her quaking limbs. "Yes, milord?"

"Give me the cup." He took it from her numb fingers and placed it back on the table. "Now, lift up a moment."

She raised her hips and her breathing became ragged when he reached to unhook his breeches. She stared, fascinated by his masculine beauty. Her fingers itched to touch him, to stroke him as he stroked himself, his hand sliding from base to tip, his thumb caressing the bulbous cap.

He pulled her back to sit on his lap, lifting her breast to capture her nipple between his teeth, biting gently, before drawing it into his mouth and sucking it deep, torturing her with his tongue.

Bridgett tossed her head back and cried out, an animalistic sound of ecstasy that mere words could not convey. When he pulled away, she thought she would die of the loss.

"Tonight, I will teach you to pleasure me with your mouth." He whispered against her neck. "With your tongue, your lips, your teeth."

Bridgett, thinking he meant to kiss her again, sighed with anticipation.

"Yes, milord."

"Stand up."

The order came so abruptly, she could only stare at him in surprise.

"I want you on your knees, here, between my legs."

Unsure of his intentions, but unwilling to question his purpose, Bridgett slipped to the floor and moved to kneel between his thighs. He lifted his hips and slid his breeches down, exposing tanned, muscular legs covered with a fine sprinkling of coarse dark hair.

Her gaze was drawn to the space between, to his erection. Heat spread throughout her body and made her dizzy. *Want. Need.*

The Count sat back in the chair. "Touch me, *bella mia*. Take my cock in your hand."

Bridgett's heart began to pound and her mouth grew dry. She reached to take him in her fist, closing her eyes against his smoldering stare and concentrating only on her sense of touch. Silky smooth, yet hard as stone. Hot and pulsing. She moved her hand up and down its length as he'd taught her to do, and heard him groan. The sound gave her a new sense of power, that she could elicit such a response from such a strong man.

"Take it into your mouth, as you did my tongue when we kissed."

Bridgett's eyes grew wide. This was not a tongue. He was long, longer than the width of two of her hands, and quite thick.

"It is not necessary for you to take in the entire length, merely a few inches. It is the head of a man's cock that is the most sensitive."

When she continued to hesitate, he grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips. "Like this."

He took one of her fingers into his mouth and sucked it lingeringly, swirling his tongue down its length. Bridgett caught her breath and a tight ache grew in the pit of her stomach.

The Count released her hand. "Do it. Now."

She lowered her head until her lips met the soft, purple-red tip. Tentatively, she licked the tiny slit, drawing a drop of pearly-white liquid into her mouth. She felt his sharp intake of breath, sensed that her actions gave him pleasure, and grew bolder.

She dipped lower, drawing him in, caressing him with her tongue as he'd done to her finger.

"Ah, yes, amore mia, like that." He grabbed her head, pushing her lower and raising his hips from the chair. "Now move as you did when you used your hand."

She raised up, sucking him tight, then sank back down, the pressure of his hands in her hair forcing her lower and lower, still.

"That's it, suck me hard, little one. Milk my cock with your hot mouth."

He bucked against her and she moved with him, matching his rhythm, thrust for thrust. She felt him tense and started to pull away, but he held her tight.

Bridgett burned. Her entire body felt aflame, and the hottest embers seemed to be centered between her legs. She moaned against him, sucking him faster and deeper in a vain attempt to cool the fire of her desire.

"Oh, God!" He gave one final thrust, burying himself deep, nearly choking her. Bridgett felt his release, tasted it, a warm saltiness that she swallowed hungrily, using her tongue to draw in every drop.

His hands fell away, leaving her with an empty feeling, a sense of abandonment after what they'd just shared, and she released him to sit back on her heels.

The Count opened his mouth to speak, but then shook his head and began rearranging his clothing. Bridgett raised the bodice of her chemise and tied the laces, all the while watching him from the corner of her eye.

He did not speak to her until he reached the door that led to his adjoining chamber.

"That was very good, bella mia." He sounded as if she'd just served him a particularly tasty meal. "Tomorrow night we will try something completely different."

The click of the door behind him seemed to echo throughout the chamber. Bridgett stared at the dark expanse of wood for several moments, fighting tears of anger, frustration, and humiliation. Her entire body vibrated, and she covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a sob.

Vincent placed his forehead against the wall and took a ragged breath, resisting the desire that raged through his body and tormented his soul. It had nearly been impossible for him to leave her that way. He pictured how she'd looked, flushed from exertion, her hair flowing about her shoulders in wild abandon, her full lips red and glistening. He'd longed to pull her into his arms and kiss her, to hold and caress her and tell her how beautiful she was. And he'd wanted to make love to her, to give her what he knew she desired, what he'd meant for her to desire, what she must even now be struggling to understand.

He punched the wall, then shook his fist as pain sliced up his arm. He could not give her that kind of control. He would not. He had been a slave to women's lascivious needs for too many years, and he refused to go back.

## Chapter Six

"What are you doing?"

Bridgett jerked her hand from the door latch and uttered a small cry of surprise. She turned and faced the Count, feeling a little like an errant child. "Pardon me, milord. I grew tired of sitting alone in my chamber all morning."

Her nerves still raw from the night before, she did not try to hide her irritation. "Surely you do not mean to keep me confined during the day?"

His dark eyes narrowed and he studied her in silence.

Bridgett's heart began the rapid thump that his gaze never failed to evoke.

"I do not mean to keep you confined at all, *bella mia*." He ran his index finger over the swell of flesh that her low-cut gown did not cover.

She closed her eyes. Lost. That's how she felt each time he touched her like this. Each time he spoke to her in that husky, intimate way that made her forget to breathe.

"Do you know, Bridgett, that every time I am near you I grow instantly hard?"

He dipped his finger beneath her neckline and brushed her nipple. "You pleased me quite well last night. I believe we'll have to attempt a repeat performance."

He continued to stroke and tease her, and she could not reply. Her breast seemed to swell at his touch and she leaned into him.

"You would like that, would you not? To take me in your mouth? To taste my essence?"

Bridgett shook her head, wanting to deny it, wanting to tell him that she had no desire to repeat the experience of heartbreak and emptiness she'd felt when he'd left her last night. But a part of her, a part that would not be denied, wanted to take what he offered.

"Tell me, *bella mia*," he whispered. "Say it."

She would not open her eyes and allow him to see the longing, but she gave him his answer. "Yes."

He pressed against her, forcing her back to the wall. "Yes, what? Tell me what you want."

"I want..."

"Look at me."

She did. She could feel the hard length of him through her dress, pressing against the sensitive flesh of her stomach.

"Now tell me."

"I cannot." She looked away.

He moved against her, rhythmically, making her tremble. "You can. You will. Say it, *bella mia*. I want to hear the words."

She struggled for air, struggled for control, but could not fight him. Turning to face him, staring into his eyes that were dark as the night sky, yet burned her as the sun's warmest rays, she spoke.

"I want you," she whispered. "I want to take you in my mouth. I want to taste you."

He moved away so suddenly that she nearly fell to her knees.

"You may explore at will, with one exception." He nodded toward the locked door that he had caught her trying to enter. "You are never to go into that area of the castle."

Bridgett blinked rapidly and tried to adjust to the sudden change in conversation, the sudden shift in mood. He'd done it to her again.

Anger made her lash out. "Why do you lock off a part of your home, milord? Is that where you've hidden the body?"

The Count had already started to walk away, but he turned at her words. "The body?"

She scowled. "Of the last woman you managed to ensnare, and then kill with these cruel games of yours."

His face became remote, blank of expression, and he shook his head. "One does not die of the things you are experiencing, *bella mia*, though I had often wished it were so."

"You wish me dead?" Fear sliced up her spine.

He nearly smiled. "No, fair Bridgett, I was speaking of myself."

He walked away, and she stared at his retreating back, pondering his cryptic words.

Bridgett took one tentative step into the morning room, not sure if Lady Marie would welcome the interruption. The Count's sister reclined on a velvet-covered bench in front of a window, apparently deeply engrossed in a book that rested on her drawn-up knees.

As if sensing she was no longer alone, Marie looked up, her face brightening into a smile of greeting.

"Bridgett, come in, come in." She closed the book, placed it on a nearby table, and then sat up. "Sit here and let us become better acquainted."

She patted the space beside her on the bench.

Bridgett had no doubt that the invitation was sincere.

"Thank you," she murmured as she sat primly on the edge of the cushion. She arranged her crimson skirts about her to keep them from becoming wrinkled, suddenly at a loss for words.

Lady Marie took her hand. "So, tell me where my brother found you."



"He...The Count...I..." Flustered, Bridgett looked away. How could she explain to this lady, who could most likely not even begin to imagine the type of life, the world, from which she'd come?

"It makes no difference." Lady Marie squeezed her hand. "You do not need to discuss it if you do not want to."

Bridgett wanted to cry at the kindness she heard in the other woman's voice.

"Let me tell you a secret, Bridgett. Sometimes things, and people, are not what they seem. Nothing is ever as simple as it may look on the surface. When you are ready to share your thoughts with me, I will be here to listen." She paused and smiled. "Perhaps, when the time comes, I will share a few intimacies of my own."

Her throat thick with emotion, Bridgett could only nod. She was thankful that she hadn't been pressed for an explanation, but she was nearly overwhelmed by Lady Renault's obvious offer of friendship.

"Come. We are expecting guests this evening and I must consult with Cook. You can help me plan the dinner menu."

Bridgett smiled at the notion. Having never had a cook, at least not one she could remember, and having never planned a meal beyond scraping together whatever she could find to feed their small family each day, she doubted she could be much help.

She took Lady Marie's outstretched hand and allowed herself to be led from the room, caught up in her new friend's enthusiasm for what should have been the most mundane of tasks.

Vincent looked in every other area of the castle before heading toward the kitchen in search of either Bridgett or his sister. He'd not seen either of them, having been closeted in his library for most of the day, and he'd become concerned when neither one could be easily located.

He heard the peels of uninhibited laughter before he got within ten feet of the kitchens. The sound brought him to a standstill.

The giggling continued for several moments, then a shrill squeal filled the air.

Vincent rushed forward, expecting to find someone maimed or dying. What he saw made his mouth drop open in shocked surprise.

Bridgett stood in the middle of the kitchen, covered from head to toe with flour. On the floor at her feet sat Marie, equally coated with the powdery white substance. Both women were clutching their sides and laughing hysterically.

"What the bloody hell."

Marie glanced up, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Vincent," her voice bubbled with joy, "what are you doing here?"

"I might ask you the same thing." Now that he was sure they were safe, he relaxed a bit, amused by the scene before him.

"Bridgett was teaching me to make biscuits." Marie glanced at the woman in question and let loose another peel of laughter. "I fear I'm not a very good student."

"And where is Cook?" He addressed his sister, but shifted his gaze to Bridgett, who'd neither looked at him nor spoken since he'd entered the room. He smiled as he took in her disheveled appearance.

"Oh, the poor woman left as soon as she saw what we were about. Said she refused to share her kitchen with anyone." Marie extended her hand. "Help me up, would you, brother dear? My skirts are so tangled, I fear I would take another tumble if I attempted to rise on my own."

"I won't even ask how you managed to get on the floor in the first place."

Vincent grinned and took her hand, pulling her swiftly to her feet. A cloud of dust billowed around them and he sneezed twice in succession.

"I hate to spoil your fun," he sniffed, "but our guests are due to arrive any moment."

"Oh goodness, oh my!" Marie brushed at her skirts, which only served to put more flour into the air around them. "I must bathe. I must change."

"Don't panic, Marie. I'm sure I can manage to entertain them while you, um, repair your appearance."

Marie shot him a grateful look, then turned to Bridgett. "Thank you, dear friend. I truly can't remember the last time I had such fun. Next time, perhaps we can attempt a cherry cobbler!"

Bridgett smiled and nodded. "I look forward to it."

She spoke so softly, so seriously, and Vincent found himself wishing to hear her laugh again.

"If you'll both excuse me?" Marie did not wait for an answer, but rushed from the room, muttering under her breath.

Bridgett giggled, and Vincent raised a brow and looked at her sharply.

"Your sister." She gestured nervously in the direction of the door. "Did you not hear what she said?"

He shook his head, silent, waiting.

"She said she wore so much flour that the bath water would likely turn to dough."

Vincent chuckled and reached to brush some of the white powder from the tip of her nose. "You're wearing quite a bit, yourself."

She ducked her head and pulled away from his touch, yet he was not offended. It was not his desires that he wished her to know of at this moment, but his gratitude.

"Thank you, Bridgett." He echoed his sister's words.

She turned away and began to wipe the top of the huge butcher's block with a damp rag. "Whatever do you mean?"

"It has been many, many years since I have heard Marie laugh with such abandon." He paused and cleared his throat, suddenly uncomfortable with his emotions. "I just...thank you."

"Your sister is a lovely person," she whispered. "I like her."

He could sense her nervousness and decided to release her from her misery.

"Yes, well, you should run along and dress for dinner, also. I'll have someone else clean up the, um, biscuits."

Her head shot up and she looked him in the eye for the first time since he'd started to speak to her. "I am to attend your dinner party?"

"Of course. Why would you not?"

"Because I am merely a..." Her voice drifted off and she looked away.

"Merely what, *bella mia*? You are here to please me." He paused. "It pleases me that you should attend. I have assigned a maid to assist you with your toilette."

She nodded and, without another word, ran from the room.

Bridgett paused near the dining room and took a deep breath, trying to regain her composure. She felt like a princess, about to attend her first ball.

When she'd gone to her room to change, she'd discovered several new gowns lying on the bed. A note on her dressing table had read simply, *Wear the black*.

She glanced down at the dress, still very much in awe of its loveliness. A high-waisted velvet underskirt, covered by a layer of delicate lace, swept the floor. The tight-fitting bodice shimmered with hundreds of tiny, glimmering jewels, and the wrist-length sleeves were made of the same fine lace that covered the skirt. How the Count had managed to procure such a delicious gown was a mystery. Especially one that fit her perfectly, and on such short notice.

"His Lordship instructed you to attend, not stand about and eavesdrop."

Bridgett spun around. "I wasn't eavesdropping, I was merely...gathering my courage."

Was it her imagination, or did some of the disdain slip from the butler's expression? He studied her a moment, as if taking her measure.

"Cook tells me that you and Lady Marie were in the kitchens this morning."

Bridgett couldn't stop the giggle that rose in her throat. "We were. Was Cook very angry?"

"No." He paused, and Bridgett sensed that he struggled to make some sort of decision. She grew uncomfortable under his stare, but stood her ground.

Instinctively, she knew that this was an important moment. She held her breath, waiting.

"If you are through 'gathering your courage', Miss, I will announce you now."

Announce her? Bridgett let loose her breath and inclined her head. Although you could never tell from his stiff, outward appearance, there had been a definite softening of his tone.

He stepped forward, throwing the doors wide.

"The Lady Bridgett Alexandria Celeste Morton," he intoned, then moved aside to allow her to enter.

Conversation ceased and all heads turned toward the door. Bridgett didn't know whether to hug Thomas for his obvious show of support and kindness – Lady Bridgett? – or to kick him for drawing so much unwanted attention down upon her.

Lady. A lady did not skulk into a room; she made an Entrance. Bridgett straightened her spine and swept forward, a bright smile plastered on her face.

"Bridgett, there you are." Marie called out from the far end of a ridiculously long table centered beneath the largest, most ornate iron chandelier imaginable. "Come and meet our guests."

The gentlemen in the room stood as she approached, and the Count pulled out the chair to his right and helped her to be seated.

"You look lovely, Lady Bridgett."

She heard the teasing sarcasm in his voice, but chose to ignore it in favor of the compliment.

"Why thank you, My Lord, you look quite dashing, yourself." Although she kept her tone light, she couldn't help but noticing that he did, indeed, look very handsome this evening in his dark, formal attire. He'd tied his hair back with a black silk ribbon. The effect was startling, drawing attention to the fine line of his jaw and his chiseled features.

She was rewarded with a slight smile, one that actually reached his eyes, which sparkled mischievously.

Marie giggled and Bridgett coughed into her napkin to keep from laughing outright.

"Vincent, old boy, I believe the polite thing to do would be to introduce us to this vision of beauty."

Bridgett looked across the table, the heat of a blush rising in her cheeks.

The Count cleared his throat. "Bridgett, these are our friends, Lady Camilla Secrest, Sir Walter Andrews and Sir Jonathan Wilder."

Bridgett smiled and murmured words of greeting, all the while trying not to stare. Jonathan Wilder, the man who had called her a 'vision of beauty', was himself one of the most beautiful men she'd ever seen. A blonde Adonis, all golden and light, with stunning silver-blue eyes that shone with kindness and something she'd come to recognize as interest.

"Yes, well, Walter was just telling us about his latest trip to Paris, Bridgett." Marie sounded nervous, and Bridgett cast her a curious look.

Sir Walter Andrews, a rather ordinary looking man who'd begun to bald slightly at the temples, gave her a warm smile.

"Have you ever been to Paris, Lady Bridgett?"

"I...well, no." Bridgett reached for her wineglass and tried to hide her discomfiture.

"Bridgett's parents kept her fairly confined in their country house," the Count said smoothly. "They were not ones for travel or socializing."

"And how did you come to be staying with Vincent?" Jonathan asked. He continued to stare at her in a way that made her grow warm and uncomfortable.

Bridgett wished that the floor would open up and swallow her. Suddenly, all she could think about was escaping this room and these people. This, thinking she could pass herself off as something other than what she was, had been a mistake. She started to rise, panic guiding her actions, but a firm hand fell on her shoulder.

"The lady is my betrothed."

Bridgett choked and she heard Marie catch her breath, but the Count continued as if he didn't notice.

"Her mother is deceased and her father is...sick." His tone held a note of irony. "I brought her here to stay until we can be married."

"Vincent, you sly devil, shame on you for not telling us sooner!" Lady Camilla scolded good-naturedly. "Congratulations. Both of you."

Bridgett realized that a response was expected. "Thank you."

She took another hasty sip of her wine, grateful for its fortifying affects.

The Count's hand still rested on her shoulder, though he had draped his arm over the back of the chair in a more relaxed manner. The heat of his touch both comforted and aroused her, making it difficult to think.

"When is the wedding?" Jonathan watched her, a curious smile on his face.

This time, Bridgett found her voice and came up with a suitable answer.

"We haven't really decided. We were waiting to see if my father would recover enough to attend." There, that had sounded reasonable enough, and her voice hadn't shaken a bit.

She returned his smile, congratulating herself that she'd finally managed to organize her thoughts.

Sir Jonathan nodded, but his strange little smile remained in place. Almost as if he didn't believe her, didn't believe any of it.

The Count massaged her shoulder, moving his fingers slowly in tiny little circles, and Bridgett began to relax. It didn't really matter what this man thought, what any of them believed. As long as they stuck to their story, everything would be fine.

An army of servants dressed in spotless white livery served dinner. They moved in and out of the room silently, carrying trays and removing empty dishes.

Bridgett sampled a tiny bit of each course, amazed by the array of sumptuous delicacies. One of the servants placed a large shell in the middle of the table and, after making sure the others were occupied with conversation, Bridgett turned to the Count.

"What is that?" She kept her voice low. No sense in drawing more suspicion down on her head.

"That is a turtle shell," he told her, "it contains turtle soup."

He seemed amused, but his tone was kind. "Would you like to try some?"

Bridgett wrinkled her nose. "I believe I will stick to less exotic fair."

"You are an interesting creature, *bella mia*." He took her hand and drew it onto his lap.

"Whatever do you mean?" She tried to concentrate on his words, but the warmth of his thigh through his light linen trousers made it difficult.

"You take such great pleasure in the simplest things. I would have thought you anxious to experience some of life's luxuries."

"I think your confusion lies in our differing definitions of luxury." She moved the food on her plate about with her fork. "The things I consider luxurious, you take for granted."

"Such as?"

He seemed genuinely perplexed, and Bridgett shook her head at his lack of understanding.

"Such as a seven-course dinner," she told him. "Such as never having to wonder where your next meal will come from..."

"Such as a warm bath." He interrupted her with a smile. "I think I understand."

"Yes, like a warm bath." Her cheeks grew hot at the knowing intimacy in his tone.

"So, Vincent, tell us about your latest travels. Marie informs me that you have only just returned."

At Camilla's question, Bridgett jerked her hand from the Count's leg and concentrated on her plate.

As the conversation drifted into other topics, Bridgett relaxed and sipped her wine, content to simply listen. By the time the last dish had been cleared away, it had grown quite late. The abundance of food and spirits had left Bridgett feeling drowsy, and she longed for her bed.

The Count placed his hand on her arm and leaned close. "You look tired."

She smiled wearily and nodded. "I am, but in a good way."

He turned to his guests.

"Walter, you and Camilla have your usual quarters," the Count said. "Jon, I've had Helen prepare a room for you at the other end of the hall. Do you need someone to escort you?"

Bridgett didn't like the way the young man's eyes darted to her at the question, and she averted her gaze. She felt the Count stiffen beside her, and knew he had noticed, as well.

"We can show him, Vincent." Lady Camilla rose and stifled a yawn with her hand. "Lord knows we've spent enough time in your home to know our way around."

Marie, too, rose from her chair and Bridgett followed her lead. "Lady Bridgett, would you mind staying a moment? I'd like to have a word with you."

Bridgett glanced at the Count, wondering what he had to say that couldn't wait until they'd gone upstairs, but she nodded and remained until the others had said their goodnights.

"I won't be coming to your room tonight."

She sighed, amazed at the disappointment brought on by his words. After his earlier attentiveness, she'd expected something very different. "As you wish, milord."

He stood and took her hand, bringing it to his lips for a lingering kiss.

"Tonight, you will come to me. Change into your peignoir and meet me in the hallway outside your room."

"Why?" The question slipped out, but she felt it a legitimate one.

"Because I promised you something different." He led her to the door. "Go now, and don't be long or we'll miss it."

Sensing an adventure, her weariness forgotten and her curiosity piqued, Bridgett hastened to do his bidding.

## **Chapter Seven**

Bridgett slipped quietly into the corridor, wishing for a candle to ease the darkness, but knowing he wouldn't approve. Whatever the Count had planned for this evening, it appeared to involve the utmost secrecy.

She strained her eyes and ears, struggling to orient herself in the pitch-blackness. A hand gripped her elbow and she would have screamed if another hadn't covered her mouth.

"Shhh...it's only me."

She relaxed at his familiar voice and nodded to let him know she understood the need for silence.

The Count removed his hand from her mouth, but held on to her arm. "Come with me, and don't speak until I tell you it's safe."

She followed him down the hall and around a corner. They came to a stop, and she heard the sound of a key slipping into a lock. He pulled her inside the room and quietly closed the door behind him.

"You can talk, now, but nothing above a whisper."

Bridgett nodded, then realized he couldn't see her. "Yes, milord."

She felt him leave her side and heard him shuffling around, and then suddenly the glow from a small candle illuminated the room. She looked around.

The room was completely empty, except for a long, low sofa that faced one wall. Cobwebs draped the corners, and thick draperies that looked older than time, itself, covered the only window.

"What is this place?" She moved to stand beside him, near the wall.

"Sit down. I'll need to blow out the candle, and I want you safely situated before I do."

Bridgett sat, curling her legs up beneath her to warm her toes. Bare-footed and half-dressed was not the most intelligent of ways to be traipsing around a stone castle.

"Remember, nothing above a whisper."

She nodded and watched as he blew out the candle, plunging them both back into darkness.

Her sense of hearing seemed to grow more acute, and she listened as he moved about, directly in front of her.

Suddenly, a tiny bit of light filtered into the room, and she gasped. As if by magic, a window appeared in the wall. A huge bed sat not three feet away, obviously in the



adjoining chamber, and atop that bed were two of their guests, Camilla Secrest and Walter Andrews. Bridgett stared, transfixed.

The Count sat beside her, pulling her back into his arms.

"They cannot see us?" she asked.

"No, nor hear us, as long as we whisper. The glass is tinted." He nibbled at her neck, and she shivered but did not look away from the spectacle before her.

"Surely they know we are here!"

"Probably. When the paneling is in place, it looks like a painting behind glass. Now that the paneling is removed, if they looked in this direction, they would know someone watches."

"We shouldn't be doing this." Surely they would object to having their privacy invaded in such a voyeuristic manner?

"They know about this room, and they know that someone could be watching. They don't mind, believe me. Look."

Beyond the glass, Camilla lay with her legs spread wide, Walter between them. He lowered his head to the juncture of her thighs and began to kiss and lap at her. Camilla grabbed his head and bucked her hips frantically, the look on her face one of pure ecstasy.

"What is he doing to her?" Bridgett squirmed and tried to stay focused on the action in front of her, but the Count had pushed up her nightdress to caress her thigh.

"He is tasting her, *bella mia*, the way you tasted me."

His hand moved upward and she shifted, wanting him to touch her. Needing what she knew only he could provide.

"Do men like that? The taste of a woman?" Bridgett could not imagine it.

"Some do, some do not."

*Do you?* She wanted to ask, but did not have the courage.

"For some, it is sweeter than the finest pastry, more intoxicating than the finest wine."

*He did.* His words, his tone of voice, told her he described his own feelings.

A gentle brush of his hand against her inner thigh caused her to catch her breath. She held still, perfectly still, as his swirling fingers moved further and further, closer and closer. She was afraid. *Afraid that he would stop.* That he would back away as he'd done before and leave her aching.

In front of her, the scene had shifted. Camilla had turned over, on her knees now, with her full breasts swaying heavily as Walter covered her from behind. An image of her stepsister and Edward flashed through Bridgett's mind, but she mentally shrugged it away. That time, that place, was not something she wished to remember.

The two lovers began to move slowly, each of them rocking back and forth. Bridgett watched their faces. Walter's furrowed brow and tightly closed eyes. Camilla's mouth,

slightly open and glistening with moisture as she licked her lips. Their expressions said more than any words could convey.

"Does it excite you to watch them?" The Count ran his tongue across her earlobe, his voice husky with promise.

Bridgett moved in order to face him, but when she did, his seeking fingers slid upwards and she would have screamed had he not chosen that moment to kiss her. She moaned against his mouth while he lightly caressed her pussy, sliding through her wetness with just a whisper of pressure. Jolts of pleasure, one after the other, shot through her body.

He broke the kiss. "You are so hot and wet, *bella mia*. Your lovely body responds so sweetly to my words, to my touch."

A desperate ache formed in her lower stomach, a tightness that begged for release, and she moved against his hand, lifting her hips from the sofa. He pressed the heel of his hand onto her mound, allowing her to thrust against it, and her toes began to tingle.

He removed his hand, and she grabbed for it blindly, unwilling to let him stop again, to leave her hanging unfulfilled.

"Stand up."

Bridgett shook her head. "I cannot."

"Let me help you." He stood and took her hand, and she struggled to her feet.

"Can you stand?"

Her shaky legs barely supported her, but she nodded. "I think so."

The Count sat back on the sofa, stretching his long legs out, one on either side of her.

"Now turn around. Face them, and undress."

Bridgett slowly turned until she could see the other room's occupants. They had changed positions again. This time, Walter lay on his back, while Camilla sat astride him. They were so close; Bridgett felt that they must surely be aware of her presence.

"Slip the straps of your gown down over your shoulders and let it fall by itself."

She wanted to turn around, to see his eyes, but the scene before her held her enthralled. She could see the thick length of Walter's penis sliding in and out as Camilla raised and lowered herself, her head tossed back, the tip of her pink tongue barely visible between full, red lips.

"Bridgett."

The softly spoken word was a command, reminding her that he'd asked her to do something.

She reached up, slipping first one strap, then the other, from her shoulders. The light silk slid down, across her breasts, and came to a rest on the swell of her hips.

"Are you certain they can't see?"

"Yes."

She heard him move, and knew he would touch her even before his fingers traced a line down her spine, causing her to shiver and sway slightly on her feet.

The heat of his tongue replaced the touch of his hand, and her knees shook. Only his hands at her hips kept her steady. He kissed her waist, just above the line of silk, and she closed her eyes. He nibbled at the flesh beneath her arm, and she moaned. He tugged at her nightdress and it slid past her hips to the floor, and she thought she would faint.

His hot breath against her back sent shivers of pleasure up her arms. He cupped her buttocks and explored them with his mouth, with his tongue. She swayed backwards, wordlessly asking for more.

When he stood up and pulled her against him, she could feel his hardness, his need.  
"Watch them, bella mia."

Camilla had moved from her position atop Walter, and now sat on her knees between his thighs. When she leaned forward and took him in her mouth, Bridgett felt pressure on her shoulders.

"Get down on your knees, Bridgett. Pleasure me as Camilla pleasures her lover."

Her knees gave way and she sank to the floor. He moved to stand just to the front and side of her and released his breeches, pushing them down over his hips. His erect penis sprung free, and he took it in his hand, stroking it lightly while pulling her near.

"Take me in your mouth," his voice was strained, urgent, "caress me with your tongue."

She leaned close, breathing in his scent, a warm, musty odor that was not unpleasant. She took him in her fist and ran her tongue from base to tip, before opening her mouth and drawing him in. Swiftly. Deep.

He gasped and buried his fingers in her hair, holding her close.

Bridgett glanced beyond him. Camilla no longer moved with languid strokes. Her head bobbed up and down furiously, her nostrils flared. Walter held her hair back from her face and every detail could be plainly seen.

The Count held her hair back. She did not need to look to know that he was watching her, watching them.

Holding the base in her fist to keep him from going too far, she began to move, mimicking Camilla, sucking him in and stroking him with her tongue.

"Yes, bella mia," he thrust forward, "yes."

She felt him stiffen and knew, from the night before, what to expect. She took him a little deeper, sensing it would add to his pleasure.

He moaned, a low, agonizing sound that echoed in her ears and then she tasted him as he bucked against her with short, jerky thrusts.

He eased his grip on her hair, but did not release her. She caressed him with her tongue, gently, sensing he needed soothing. He stroked her cheek, then sank back on the sofa, dragging her up with him and pulling her into his arms.

"You are beautiful," he whispered against her hair, his breath coming in shallow gasps. "Perfect."

Bridgett snuggled close, enjoying the way he stroked her hair, content to hear his words of praise. Her body still tingled, and she longed for something that she could not name, but was thankful that tonight he did not seem inclined to leave her side.

He stroked her back until his breathing became slow and steady. When he stopped caressing her and breathed a heavy sigh, she knew he slept. Slowly, so as not to awaken him, she turned her head.

Someone had drawn what appeared to be a curtain over the opposite side of the glass. So it was true. They had known, and they had not cared. And if they knew someone could be watching, then they could probably guess who it was. The thought made her wonder how she would face them the next morning.

Thinking of the dusty cobwebs that decorated the room, Bridgett shuddered, thankful for the warm arms that held her tight. She moved closer, snuggling against him, and closed her eyes. Comforted by his scent, lulled by his steady breathing, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Searing heat spread through his loins. Soft, moist flesh pressed against his lips. He turned his head, gasping for breath, but she moved with him. A whispered command, and he used his tongue the way he'd been taught. Flabby thighs quivered against his cheeks, at his groin.*

*He could feel her, the one who rode him, begin to tremble, her vaginal muscles pulling at him, tightening, and he prayed she would hurry for he was not far behind. If he achieved release before her, he would be punished. Severely.*

*He closed his eyes and lapped at the woman who straddled his face.*

*The hum of voices – how many were there tonight? – buzzed in his ears. Soft murmurs, low moans. And then he heard her.*

*"I don't want to. Please don't make me."*

*Fear clawed at his stomach, tore at his heart. He turned his head again, but could not see her.*

*"It's all right, Marie, I won't hurt you."*

*He struggled to rise, but thighs tightened against him, holding him down. He returned his attention to his task, wanting it to be over, trying to force the climax.*

*"Yesssss..."*

*Fiery liquid engulfed his cock and he bucked his hips, instinctively, obsessively. Unable to resist, his entire being suddenly focused on gaining his own satisfaction.*

*Closer.*

*The body over his face began to shudder. Musky juices bathed his face, dribbled down his chin. He hungrily drank them in.*

*They rolled off of him and he cried out. "No!"*

*So close.*

*His engorged penis jerked and spasmed and he rolled over, humping the mattress, desperate, driven.*

*"No!"*

*Marie.*

*He had to get up. Go to her. Make them stop. But he could not. He was too far gone, and the years of careful conditioning could not be overcome.*

*Tears flowed down his cheeks as he spilled his seed onto the soiled bedding, his sister's screams of pain and terror mingling with his own savage cry of release.*

*"I'm sorry, Marie. I'm sorry. Oh, God, I'm so sorry."*

Vincent tossed his head, trying to block out the screams that seemed to go on and on, then bolted upright.

Sunlight streamed through the tall, narrow windows, bathing the room in a soft, golden glow.

A dream. But so real. His cheeks were damp. From the tears. He refused to look at the mattress as he tossed aside the quilts and slid from the bed.

He stalked across the room, naked, his fists clenched in anger. In frustration. He drew in a breath, forcing himself to calm down, drawing his carefully constructed cloak of indifference about him like a protective shield.

It worked. Almost. A bitter taste remained in his mouth.

*Do men like that? The taste of a woman?*

He shuddered and sank into a chair near the window, dropping his head in his hands.

*More intoxicating than the finest wine.*

*More irresistible, for some, than Opium.*

His hands shook as he reached to pull the chord to summon a servant. His entire body trembled, like an addict who'd gone far too long without.

\* \* \* \* \*

Something tickled her nose.

She swiped at it, then snuggled down deeper beneath the quilts.

*"Oh, sleepyhead, wake up."*

The singsong voice was soft, and this time something stroked her eyelids. She batted the air near her face. Someone giggled.

Opening her eyes, she squinted into the blinding sunlight that spilled into the room.

*"Marie, what on earth are you doing?"*

"I'm trying to get you to wake up." Lady Marie waved a large ostrich plume in the air. "I thought you'd like to accompany me on a ride this morning."

Bridgett sat up, pulling the covers with her to hide her state of undress, and glanced around. For a moment, she struggled to remember how she'd come to be in her own bed. She had a vague recollection of being carried in strong arms, of whispered reassurances and a gentle touch.

Her Count. He must have returned her to her chamber sometime during the night.

"What of your guests?"

"They left with the dawn, I'm afraid." Marie swirled the feather in the air. "Now, are you going to stay in bed all day, or will you join me? It's a gorgeous day."

Bridgett wrinkled her nose at the idea of climbing onto a horse so soon after practically living on one for three straight days, but a quick glance out the window told her Marie was right. Brilliant sunlight sparkled in an azure sky dotted with clouds that looked like cotton.

"I don't have a riding dress."

"Yes, you do." Marie crossed to the large armoire and threw open the doors. "It's probably chartreuse or pitch black, but I'm sure Vincent ordered one made for you the day you arrived... Yes. Here it is."

Eyeing the deep red habit that Marie held up for her inspection, Bridgett shook her head. "How did he acquire so many new things in such a short period of time? We've only been here two days."

"This castle is a great distance from, well, from everywhere. We've learned to become self-sufficient, and there are several excellent seamstresses within our employ." Marie placed the outfit on the foot of the bed. "I'll wait for you downstairs. Do hurry. I want to leave before Vincent discovers what we're about and assigns five grooms to attend us."

"I'll hurry." Bridgett agreed with a laugh.

She waited just until the door clicked shut behind Marie, then jumped from the bed. She would dress herself this morning.

Using water from the pitcher, she washed quickly, suddenly as anxious as Marie to be out of doors.

After slipping into a light, linen chemise and silk stockings secured with intricately embroidered garters, she put on the riding habit. Thankfully, the Count apparently held no preference for corsets. She could not imagine lacing herself into such a contraption, especially without assistance.

A pair of leather half boots completed her ensemble, and she paused to look in the enormous gilt mirror near the bed.

Her hair. Without someone to aid her, she could do little with it. The Count had thought of everything...except a bonnet.

She picked up a brush and attempted to untangle some of the knots, but she only succeeded in getting the bristles caught in the disheveled tresses. She yanked it through, her eyes tearing with both pain and frustration.

"Here. Let me."

Bridgett jumped and spun around. "What are you doing here?"

The Count took the brush from her hand and turned her back to face the mirror. "In light of your anger towards me yesterday morn, I felt I should pay you a visit before I conducted my business today."

She watched his reflection as he began to ease the bristles through her hair, gently working out the tangles.

"Are you going somewhere?"

The question was posed casually enough, but Bridgett sensed some underlying emotion. Concern? Irritation?

"Your sister invited me to ride with her," she told him, trying to keep her tone light.

The Count gathered up her hair and began to twist it, until it formed a tight knot at the base of her neck. "I believe this will do. If you'll hold on to it for a moment, I will get some pins to secure it."

She did as he instructed, and waited while he gathered several jeweled pins from the dressing table.

"Where did you learn to style a woman's hair?" It was difficult to keep the laughter from her voice. This was a side of him she could never have imagined.

His reflection reappeared in the mirror, and he began to anchor her hair with deft fingers.

"When Marie was younger, there was a period of time when she would allow only me to touch her."

Bridgett frowned. "Why?"

He put the last pin in place, and then stepped back. "I was the only person she could trust."

Turning her head from side to side, pretending to examine his handiwork, she studied his face. He looked tired, and very sad.

"Would you care to join us?" Bridgett turned to him and smiled. "Perhaps it would do you good to be out-of-doors for a bit."

He shook his head. "I have other responsibilities today. You go on. I'm sure my impatient sister is wondering what's keeping you."

She nodded, a bit disappointed that he'd declined her offer, then started for the door.

"And Bridgett?"

She paused and turned back.

"Tell her to take a groom."

She smiled sheepishly, knowing that Marie would not be happy. "Yes, milord, I'll tell her."

He returned her smile, as if he'd read her thoughts, and she ducked out of the room before he could say another word.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I fear he will be very angry with us." Bridgett tried to concentrate on guiding the gentle mare along the trail, but her thoughts kept drifting to the Count, and what he would say when he discovered they'd left unattended.

Ahead of her, riding a handsome chestnut gelding, Marie heaved a sigh. "My brother is entirely too stiff. We're perfectly safe. Sometimes I feel as if he would like to wrap me in tissue and put me in a box. I'm not as helpless, or fragile, as he believes."

Bridgett shook her head. She'd tried her best to convince Marie to take at least one groom with them, but her argument had gone unheeded. She sensed that there was more to this show of defiance than met the eye. As if Marie had something she wished to prove.

"Where are we going?"

"There's a trail that runs along the cliffs above the sea. The view is spectacular from there." Marie urged her horse into a trot. "Come on. You'll also be able to see the home of our nearest neighbors, the St. Claires."

The tiny mare tossed her head, obviously unwilling to be left behind, and Bridgett loosened the reins and allowed her to catch up. The jolting gait brought back painful memories of her journey two days past, and she cringed. Her backside would never forgive her the insult.

They rode through the dense woods until they reached what appeared to be the end of the path. As Bridgett pulled her horse to a stop beside Marie's, she gasped with delight.

"How beautiful!"

Marie grinned. "I told you. You should see it at sunset. The water turns blood red, and the sky is a lovely mixture of reds, pinks and blues."

From their vantage point, Bridgett could not see where the water met the shoreline. The drop off was too steep. Miles and miles of open water stretched before her, clear to the horizon. The sea looked calm, like a sheet of glass, broken only by the occasional tiny white-capped wave.

"I've never seen anything like it."

Marie laughed. "My guess is that there are many things you have never seen. If Vincent told the truth about your upbringing, you've led a more sheltered life than even I have. Come on, let's ride down this way a bit and I'll show you where the St. Claires live."



They turned their horses to follow a narrow, rock-strewn path, and Bridgett glanced warily towards the steep cliff nearby. It seemed very close. Dangerously close. She averted her gaze and concentrated on keeping her horse as far to the side as the path would allow.

They rounded a bend and Marie stopped in front of her.

"There. Isn't it lovely?"

Sitting atop the highest point of land was a large, stone manor house with dozens of peaked roofs, outlined in dark, heavy beams of timber. Although not as old as the Renault castle, and, in Bridgett's opinion, not as grand, the home seemed warm and inviting. Even in this forbidding terrain, someone had managed to fashion a front lawn, of sorts, with flowerbeds and trees lining a winding pathway.

"It's charming," Bridgett admitted. "Do you know the owner very well?"

"The house sat empty for many years, I'm afraid, and was terribly neglected. Fortunately, a young cousin to the former owners took residence a couple of years ago and brought it back to life. The gardens are new, and he's made some much-needed repairs."

"He?"

"Christopher St. Claire, the new owner."

"Have you met him?" Bridgett sensed that, as with Marie's refusal to take a groom on their ride, there was more to this situation than was first apparent.

Marie looked at her, studied her for a moment, before taking her hand. "Bridgett, can you keep a secret?"

Taken aback by the sudden seriousness of her friend's tone, Bridgett could only nod, but she squeezed her hand for emphasis.

"Christopher and I have become friends. Very close friends. You'll meet him, I'm sure, the next time my brother takes it in his head to ride off chasing his demons, but you mustn't mention it."

"Why?" It was the only response she could think to make. Chasing his demons? What did that mean? And why should Marie feel it necessary to keep her friendship with Christopher a secret from her brother?

The pounding of hooves on hard-packed earth echoed from behind them, and they both turned to see who approached. Bridgett flinched when she recognized the rider, but noticed that Marie seemed to sit straighter and taller in her saddle, as if preparing for battle.

As she watched his approach, taking in his angry glare and Tempest's fierce, flaring nostrils, something tickled her recollection. Her stomach tightened and a light throb started behind her temples. Her vision blurred, and the scene took on a surreal quality as a sense of déjà vu washed over her. The memory returned full-force, bringing with it a sudden and complete understanding, but she was not afforded the luxury to analyze it further.

The Count jerked his mount to a stop just inches away from them, throwing stones and dirt into the air. She shook her head and blinked, hard, to clear her vision. Tempest pawed at the ground, as if voicing the irritation that was clearly visible upon his master's face.

"I thought I told you to take a groom!" He addressed Bridgett, and she winced at his anger.

"She told me, Vincent. I chose not to do so." Marie maneuvered her horse between the other two, and faced her brother head-on. "If you're angry, you must take it up with me. Bridgett had nothing to do with it, and I'll not allow you to speak to her in such a fashion. Look at her. You're frightening her half to death!"

Bridgett took strength from Marie's take-charge attitude, and sat up taller in her saddle. The Count glanced at her, but returned the full force of his anger to his sister.

"Anything could happen to you out here. As your guardian, I insist that you obey my instructions. If you can not do so, I will confine you to the castle."

Marie's face turned scarlet, and when she spoke, her voice held a note of barely controlled rage.

"How dare you? For the last year you have left me alone, for months at a time, while you disappeared to Lord knows where. I have not had a *guardian* since our mother was alive, and I'll not tolerate your over-protective, overbearing posturing any longer."

Marie shook her head, and Bridgett could almost see the anger draining away.

"I know you love me, Vincent, and you only want to protect me, but you must understand that I'm a grown woman. If I'm a bit unconventional, I presume you know why." She paused and placed a gloved hand on his. "Protecting me is one thing, and you have done so for years, but controlling me is another. I'll not allow any man to control me. Not even you."

Throughout his sister's entire speech, the Count had remained silent, but Bridgett hadn't failed to notice his clenched jaw and blazing eyes.

Brother and sister stared at one another for the space of several seconds before Marie backed away and shook her head.

"Never mind. I can see by the look on your face that nothing I say will make a difference." She turned her horse. "I'm going home."

The Count stared after her, and Bridgett waited silently, loath to draw attention to herself.

Her mare shifted uneasily, and he glanced in her direction. His mouth was a tight line, and there were dark circles beneath his eyes. In truth, he looked awful. Haunted. Weary.

"Shall we return to the castle, milord?"

"I fear for her safety, that is all."

The sadness in his voice, the deep despair, made Bridgett forget how much she'd admired Marie for standing up to him. Suddenly, all she wanted to do was comfort him.

"She knows that, milord, and I'm sure she'll take a groom with her the next time she rides."

He smiled. "I seriously doubt that is true, but I thank you for saying so. Come along. I still have papers to look over today."

He backed up Tempest, and indicated for her to precede him down the path. Bridgett kneed her mount and started forward, every fiber of her being aware of his presence behind her.

Sweat began to trickle down her spine, causing her to itch. Now that he seemed his old self, her awareness of him as a man returned full-force. She had to fight the urge to look back, to see if he watched her, to gauge his thoughts and mood by the expression on his face.

Was he as aware of her as she was of him? Or had his thoughts drifted back to the confrontation with his sister?

"Wear your hair up for dinner tonight."

Bridgett glanced over her shoulder and her stomach fluttered. It seemed impossible that a man could caress a woman with his eyes, but that was precisely how she felt beneath the heat of his stare. She bit her lip and returned her attention to the trail before her.

"I will take pleasure in releasing it, in allowing it to slip through my fingers to fall about your bare shoulders."

She refused to look back.

"As you wish, milord."

They entered the inner courtyard and two grooms rushed forward. One of them helped Bridgett to dismount, and then led her horse toward the stables. The other man took Tempest's reins and followed, leaving Bridgett alone with the Count.

She looked up at him, studying his dark countenance in the late afternoon sunlight. Lord help her, he was handsome. Especially when he smiled and looked at her with eyes that had turned a smoky, smoldering gray... As he did now.

They stood near one another, and she took a tentative step closer and placed her hand on his chest.

Suddenly, she was in his arms, and he lowered his head to kiss her.

She opened her mouth to accept the soft caress of his tongue, whimpering with the force of her pent up emotions.

*Please, please, please.* The same word, the same thought, ran through her mind, a silent, desperate plea. She thought she would weep, so intense was her desire, and yet she could not put a name to it, could not tell him exactly for what she yearned.

She trembled, and he pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. Her breasts brushed his chest and she moved against him, wishing that she could feel his naked flesh against her hardened nipples.

He pulled back, just enough to nibble at her lips and run his tongue along her jaw.

"You are a fiery little minx," he whispered at her ear, "and I have half a mind to take you upstairs this moment."

"Why don't you?" She squeezed her eyes shut, embarrassed by the wanton words that had simply slipped out of their own accord.

He chuckled and gently set her away from him. "I'm afraid I cannot, as much as you tempt me, but I will count the hours until nightfall, bella mia."

The heat of a blush rose in her cheeks, and she looked away from his knowing gaze. Determined not to allow him to see how his words affected her, she struggled for a tone of nonchalance.

"I will leave you to your work, then, milord."

He cupped her chin in his palm and turned her to face him.

"There is no shame in desire, little one. I love your passion. Do not hide it from me."

She swallowed hard and nodded, unable to voice a reply.

He brushed her lips with his own, briefly, lightly, and then turned and strode away. She stood alone in the courtyard until she was sure her legs would carry her, then made her own way into the castle.

## Chapter Eight

The heavy silk of her skirts swished around her ankles as Bridgett made her way down the staircase into the great hall. She dragged her feet, dreading the thought of being together with Marie and the Count after their squabble earlier that day.

The doors to the dining room stood open, and she paused in surprise as laughter filled the air.

Curious, she stepped inside. The Count sprawled in a chair at the head of the table, laughing so hard that tears ran down his cheeks. Beside him, looking slightly less amused, sat Marie.

"I'll never forget the look on your face," he said. "There you were, covered in mud from head to toe, while Valdez stood nearby, innocently munching on a patch of clover."

"No one told me he'd been trained as a jumper." Marie's smile turned into a laugh. "I suppose it is funny, now, but it certainly wasn't at the time."

Bridgett, relieved that the two seemed to have made peace, moved further into the room.

Marie looked up. "Ah, you're just in time. Vincent is in a reminiscing mood this evening, although his humor appears to be at my expense."

"So I heard. Who is Valdez, and why were you covered in mud?" Bridgett waited as the Count pulled out her chair. He brushed against her and placed his hand at the small of her back in a gesture of intimacy. Instantly, her body responded to his touch. Light tremors of excitement raced up her spine. With effort, she focused her attention on Marie and sat.

"Valdez was my horse."

"A very large horse, and Marie, at the tender age of eight, insisted on proving to everyone that she could control him." This information was followed by another deep chuckle, which earned him a scowl from his sister.

"And I was handling him perfectly well, if you remember. Until we reached that puddle and the insane beast decided to jump over it instead of running through it."

"They were at a full canter when he took the leap, and Marie fell off when they were half way across."

Bridgett gasped. "You could have been killed!"

"Or seriously injured, at any rate. As it turned out, the only wound I suffered was the one to my pride."

"You were ever headstrong." The Count gave her a warm smile. "All a person had to do was tell you that you couldn't do something, and you would go right out and attempt it."

Bridgett caught his underlying meaning and held her breath, waiting for Marie to respond.

"I suppose that some things never change, brother dear. Now, would you mind ringing the bell? I'm famished!"

Throughout the meal, the siblings kept Bridgett entertained with amusing stories from their youth. She could well imagine them as children, and the tales of their squabbles did not surprise her. If a person did not know them well, he would never guess that the two were related, so different were their personalities and appearance. Marie, with her fair complexion, blonde hair and penchant for fun, seemed so different, on the surface, from her dark and brooding brother. But in just a few short days, Bridgett had learned that they had a few things in common, as well. They were both passionate and stubborn and loyal to one another.

Although they talked for hours, they never once referred to their father or mother. It was as if the two had grown up alone, in a world all their own, which of course was not true. Why no mention of their father? Hadn't he only passed away last year? As with so many things these past few days, Bridgett sensed that there was something important, lying just beneath the surface, that had gone unsaid.

"So tell us a tale from your childhood, Bridgett," Marie said. "We've bored you long enough with stories of our own."

Instantly, Bridgett recalled her reaction to the Count's approach earlier that day. She frowned, debating if she should share something that had affected her so profoundly, wondering how the Count would react. Marie smiled encouragingly, and Bridgett shrugged.

"There is something, I thought of just today. I was very young, perhaps seven or eight," she began, losing herself in the memory. "There was a fair of some kind, with games and tournaments, and musicians. I attended with my sister. Melanie was supposed to watch over me, but of course, as soon as we arrived she disappeared into the crowd."

Bridgett smiled softly, remembering her lack of fear and intense excitement at being free to explore without enduring her sister's biting tongue. "I roamed the marketplace for hours. I'd never seen such luxuries. Exotic fabrics and brilliant gems from all over the world. And the people! If I'd had any sense, I would have realized a young girl all alone in such a crowd was bound to find herself in trouble."

Bridgett paused, frowning as she remembered how quickly her excitement had turned to sheer terror. "I lost all track of time, and before I knew it, the sun had begun to set and the atmosphere had changed. The revelers had become bolder, more boisterous, which undoubtedly had something to do with the amount of spirits they'd imbibed during the festivities. I became concerned, and wandered down each aisle

between the merchants' stalls, hoping to catch a glimpse of Melanie. I found myself alone, behind an enormous tent they'd set up for those participating in the tournaments."

Bridgett closed her eyes, momentarily lost in the past. "But I wasn't alone for long. Two young men stumbled around the corner. They were obviously drunk, and I jumped back into the shadows, hoping they'd continue on without noticing my presence. Unfortunately, they weren't so drunk as to miss me, cowering there in the darkness."

"My goodness. You poor dear," Marie said. "You must have been scared out of your whits!"

Bridgett smiled grimly. "I must have, for if I'd had any sense, I would have ran. The rest happened so quickly; I could barely think, let alone react. One of them grabbed me around the waist, while the other began tearing at my dress. They were saying all sorts of horrible things, things I didn't fully understand, but I recognized I was in grave danger. I had just opened my mouth to scream, when he rode round the corner."

Again, Bridgett paused and looked up, fixing her gaze on the Count, wondering if he remembered, as well.

He held her gaze for the space of an instant, then looked away.

"Who? What happened next?" Marie interrupted Bridgett's musing.

"What happened next, is that a young knight, dressed in shining armor, rode up on his proud charger and saved me from certain ruin."

"A knight?"

"Oh, I'm certain he was just a young man, probably no more than a youth, really. Obviously he'd taken part in the tournaments, which would explain his manner of dress, but to me, he was a hero."

"Your white knight."

Bridgett looked up, taking in the Count's soft smile, his knowing, yet slightly uncomfortable gaze.

"Yes, milord," she replied, the heat of a blush rising in her face, "my white knight. Though that day, you did not look like one. More like an avenging god come to wreak havoc and destruction."

Marie gasped. "You? Vincent, *you* saved her?"

The Count nodded, his embarrassment written in the red blotches that stained his cheeks. "I didn't know, didn't realize, until just now. But yes, it was I.

"I admit, the event didn't leave as great an impression on me as it obviously did Bridgett," he said, picking up the tale. "I'd just returned from the tournament field, when I came upon the scene she's just described. I did what any decent man would have done, and frightened them off."

"And then he pulled me up in front of him on that enormous horse of his, and helped me find my sister," Bridgett said, smiling as she remembered the thrill of riding

in front of her savior. How, even in the aftermath of such a fearful experience, she'd fantasized she was a princess, come to ride among her subjects. A lady, safe in the arms of her adoring beau.

She shook her head, throwing off such fanciful notions. "And that's it," she said, giving a shaky laugh, "a tale from my childhood."

"Well, I think it's incredibly romantic," Marie said, "like something from a storybook. It must have left quite an impression on you."

Bridgett chewed her lip, uncomfortable with Marie's perceptiveness and with her own mixed up emotions.

"Yes, I suppose it did," she said. Probably more than it should have, if truth be known. She stretched, feigning a yawn. "I don't mean to be rude, but I believe I'll retire. It's been a very long day."

She rose swiftly and hastily withdrew from the dining room, calling out a goodnight as she dashed up the stairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I thought, perhaps, that you had decided not to come to me tonight."

"How did you know I was here?"

Bridgett continued to stare at the fire. How did she know? How could she not? She did not need eyes or ears to know when he entered a room. Every nerve ending tingled with awareness when he came near.

"I heard you."

He slipped his arms about her waist. "I did not make a sound."

She leaned back against his chest. A sense of peace washed over her and she sighed with contentment.

"Milord?"

He nuzzled her neck and cupped her breasts. "Hmm?"

Her nipples grew hard and she nearly lost her train of thought.

"Were you very close to your mother, when you were a child?"

He stilled and she felt his deep intake of breath.

"Yes, we were close. Why do you ask?"

Bridgett wished she hadn't voiced the question. The very air vibrated with tension.

"I...I wondered what she was like, that's all. I'm sorry if the subject upsets you. Never mind."

He did not respond, but resumed his sensuous assault on her senses, stroking and teasing her as he nibbled her earlobe.

He slipped the straps of her peignoir down and kissed her naked shoulder, and her legs grew weak.



"Milord?"

"Yes, bella mia."

"Might we lie down?"

With a light chuckle, he scooped her in his arms and carried her to the bed, where he deposited her on top of the quilts.

She stared up at him while he removed his shirt and trousers. The sight of his naked beauty, his skin bathed in the fire's glow, made her heart pound with anticipation. She wanted to touch him, to run her hands along the sinewy muscles of his chest and arms.

He knelt beside her on the bed and she placed her hand on his thigh.

"Lift up, so that I can remove your gown." The words were spoken in a husky whisper, and she reveled in the passion she heard in his voice.

In seconds, he had stripped her naked and she gasped as he leaned over to capture her nipple between his teeth. Tiny tremors of pleasure raced from her breast to her belly.

He stroked and caressed her heated flesh, coaxing her legs apart to explore between her thighs.

She lifted her hips to meet his touch and whimpered.

"You are so hot, so wet." He slipped a finger inside her. "And so very tight."

Bridgett gripped his shoulders and moved against his hand. His finger slid deeper.

"I must have you, bella mia."

He shifted until he knelt between her outstretched legs. "Lie still."

The look on his face was one of intense concentration, as if he were performing some intricate

task that required all of his attention. She closed her eyes, and tried to fight back the feeling that he had dismissed her. Her, Bridgett, the human being who was more than a body for him to use as he pleased.

She felt his hands, opening her, and then the tip of something hard and unyielding pressed into her.

Her eyes flew open and she tried to scoot backwards, away from the sudden, slicing pain. "Milord!"

He did not answer. Instead, he grabbed her hips and thrust forward, swift and deep.

She cried out in shock, but he covered her body with his own and continued his torturous thrusts.

"So good. Oh, God, it's so tight."

His movements became more frantic and she tried to lie still in the hopes that it would lessen the discomfort, but it did not. She clutched his shoulders, piercing his skin with her nails, and prayed that he would finish.

He slipped his hands beneath her and lifted her to meet him, plunging deeper and grinding against her.

Bridgett lay motionless, staring at the ceiling above his shoulder, silently willing for it to end.

Vincent groaned, then suddenly stiffened, his body rigid and trembling. He pushed into her once, twice, and then collapsed on top of her, his breath coming in harsh gasps.

Bridgett closed her eyes, but the tears escaped, slipping silently down her cheeks. She held her breath, afraid to move, frightened and sore and terribly disappointed. Was this what her sister had craved? This painful, humiliating, animalistic act of coupling? Why on earth would anyone willingly submit to such abuse?

The Count rolled to his side and pulled her against him. She could feel him, soft and damp against her thigh, and shivered with revulsion. Never again would she look upon that part of a man as anything other than a weapon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent leaned up on one elbow in order to see her face and sighed. The sight of her tears pulled at his heart. He lowered his head and captured one glistening drop with his tongue and her eyes fluttered open.

"I'm sorry, little one. I know that I hurt you."

She averted her pain-filled gaze.

"It won't hurt the next time, I promise you." He stroked her shoulder, wishing to comfort her, but his words seemed to bring on a fresh torrent of tears.

Frustrated that he could not soothe her, he searched his mind for something that would distract her.

"Come here." He pulled her close, fitting her against him with her back to his stomach, her head tucked tight beneath his chin. "She was an unusual beauty. Petite, like you, but with raven hair and dark eyes."

She did not answer, but he could tell he'd gained her attention by the way she relaxed in his embrace.

"Her parents arranged her marriage to my father. His title, in exchange for her fortune. The union was doomed from the beginning, for my father was a tyrant and she was too timid to stand up to him. She died when I was eight and Marie, only six."

"I barely remember my own mother," came her whispered reply. "It's the strangest thing. I know that she taught me to read and write, and many other things, but when I try to picture her face, or remember specific things that we did together, everything becomes cloudy. I was ten when she died. Surely I should be able to recall these things."

Vincent ran his fingers through her hair. It shone like highly polished gold in the firelight. "How did she die?"

She squirmed within his arms, and he sensed the question disturbed her.

"I don't recall. One day she was there, and the next day my stepfather announced that she had died."

"That sounds...odd." Vincent became immediately suspicious. "Was there a funeral?"

She remained silent for so long, he thought she would not answer.

"You are asking me about things that I haven't thought about in years. In truth, I don't know if there was a funeral. It's as if... I don't know...As if someone erased those memories from my mind."

"Perhaps you were so shocked by her death that you blocked out the events from that time?" It seemed likely. He had heard of such things. Almost like amnesia, but with only selected incidents being forgotten.

"Perhaps."

She did not sound certain, and he decided it would do no good to pursue the subject. Her past was probably as best forgotten as his own.

"Bridgett?"

"Hmm?"

"I am sorry." He held his breath, waiting for her to reply.

"I did not think it would be like that."

There was a catch in her voice that made him wish he had gone slower, been more gentle, but Lord help him, he wasn't sure if he would have known how.

"I meant what I told you. You won't feel pain the next time."

"Must there be a next time, milord? Could you not take your...pleasure...in other ways?"

Vincent frowned and hugged her tighter. "We'll see, bella mia."

She yawned and snuggled closer. He tried to think of something, anything else but the soft flesh of her buttocks pressing against him.

"Go to sleep," he told her. "Perhaps tomorrow we will have a picnic by the sea."

"Mmm...that sounds nice. Will Marie be able to join us?"

"I'm sure she will insist. Buona notte, bella mia."

"Good-night, milord."

Vincent smiled. Apparently, her mother had taught her to speak Italian, as well.

\* \* \* \* \*

The horses wound their way down the path, with Bridgett's bringing up the rear. A light breeze, carrying the scent of salt, ruffled their manes and tails, and blew wispy clouds across the sky.

The narrowness of the passage made it necessary for them to travel single-file, and made conversation nearly impossible. Bridgett tipped her face to the sky, content to ride in silence.

After last night, she had plenty to think about. Simply sorting through her confusion of feelings was enough to keep her quietly occupied.

The path to the beach led downhill, but the incline was slight and easily traversed. Her surefooted horse picked her way daintily around jagged rocks and thorny bushes that grew over the path. Bridgett held the reins loosely. The little mare seemed to know her way, and Bridgett found herself relaxing in the warmth of the early afternoon sun. The steady clip-clop of hooves lulled her into a state of dreamy tranquility. If not for the soreness between her thighs, she could almost distance herself from what had happened. Almost.

The path dipped suddenly, and they rounded a large out-cropping of boulders.

The others stopped in front of her. Bridgett, stunned into action, pulled back hard on the reins to keep from bumping into Marie's horse.

Ahead of them lay a wide expanse of sand, broken only by a few rocks, thorny bushes and tufts of wild grasses. The sea beyond lapped gently at the shore and, further out, the waves rumbled rhythmically toward them.

"I must say, Vincent, that this was a wonderful idea." Marie started forward, skirting Tempest and heading out onto the beach. "I'm surprised you thought of it."

The Count scowled. "And why is that, Marie? Am I not capable of coming up with a 'wonderful idea' now and then?"

His sister turned and flashed him a smile. "Let's just say it's been quite a while."

Bridgett couldn't help herself; she laughed at the look of consternation that crossed the Count's face.

"I'm glad you find her amusing, *bella mia*. I'm sure it will only make her wish to abuse me all the more, if only for your entertainment."

"Your portrayal of the aggrieved brother does not suit." She shook her head, refusing to be drawn in to his ploy for sympathy, and changed the subject. "Come on, I'm dying to try some of Cook's treats. The smell from that basket has been making my stomach rumble something terrible."

He scowled, but nodded in agreement, and they moved forward to join Marie, who had dismounted and tethered her horse to a bush.

"This looks like a good spot, don't you think?"

Bridgett glanced around. The sand seemed smoother in the area Marie had chosen, and they were far enough away from the sea that they would not be in danger from the incoming waves.

"It's perfect." She did not wait for assistance, but slid from her horse and tied her next to Marie's. "Can I help you with the blanket?"

The two women opened the thick quilt and spread it on the sand, securing each corner with small stones that they gathered from nearby. The Count untied the picnic basket from the back of his saddle and placed it in the middle of their makeshift table.

Bridgett knelt on the blanket and gazed out at the turquoise water. High above them, gray and white birds glided in swirling circles.

"Those are seagulls," the Count informed her. "Wait until they realize we've brought food. They'll try to steal it right from your fingers, the greedy devils."

"They aren't quite that bad," Marie said, "but they can be a nuisance."

"This is an enchanting place. Do you come here often?" Bridgett did not believe that even pesky birds could dampen the joy she felt in being here. It was as if she belonged here, as if she'd come home.

Marie and the Count glanced at one another, and once again Bridgett felt as if she'd crossed some invisible line into unwelcome territory.

"We used to, quite often, when we were very small. Our mother loved it here."

Marie smiled, but her tone spoke of sadness. "She used to gaze out at the water and say she wished she could sail away."

The Count cleared his throat and opened the basket. "I'm hungry. You two can yammer like a couple of old women, but I intend to eat."

Bridgett laughed, a bit too enthusiastically, glad that he'd changed the subject. She had no desire to cause her new friend sorrow, and apparently the topic of their mother did just that.

The basket contained more than the three of them could eat in a week. They feasted on roasted chicken, meat pies, cheese and an assortment of sweets. Cook had even thought to include a bottle of wine and three crystal goblets. The Count poured, then raised his glass in the air.

"A toast," he said. "To a beautiful day, and beautiful women."

He grinned rakishly, and Bridgett once again found herself drawn to his charm.

Gazing out at the ocean, she sipped her wine. It was light and sweet -like the wine she'd had at dinner last night, and nothing like the bitter drink she'd been served her first evening at the castle. It occurred to her that someone had given her that nasty brew on purpose, and she immediately thought of Thomas. The butler had not made it a secret that he was displeased with her presence. Thank goodness they'd made peace.

She glanced at the Count. If only she could discern his intentions... If only she were more experienced in dealing with the contradictory behavior of the opposite sex.

The seagulls did indeed swoop down to inspect their spread, but the Count waved his arms and yelled at them and they climbed back up in the sky, cawing out their displeasure.

"I don't think I could eat another bite." Marie lay back, her hands on her stomach, and feigned a groan of discomfort.

Bridgett stood, laughing down at her companions. "I think I'll walk along the water's edge."

"I will join you." The Count extended his hand, and she took it to help him rise. "Perhaps you should take off your shoes?"

"I hadn't thought of that, but it's probably a good idea. No sense in ruining them, if they should get wet."

The two of them removed their shoes, but Bridgett found herself with a new problem.

"What of my stockings?" She looked down at her feet uncertainly.

"Take them off."

"Here?" Removing her shoes was one thing, but taking off her stockings seemed indecent.

He looked at her and laughed. "Go ahead. There's only the three of us here, and I promise not to tell that you were traipsing about half-dressed."

"Go ahead, Bridgett. It only makes sense." Marie addressed her with eyes closed, then yawned hugely. "I think I'll take a nap."

It was awkward, but Bridgett managed to slip out of her hose without baring too much in the process. She placed them neatly on top of her boots, then stood for a moment, marveling at the sensation of warm sand between her toes.

"Shall we go, madam?" The Count made an elaborate show of offering her his arm.

"Why, yes, Milord, I would be pleased to stroll with you."

She took his arm and they started down the shoreline. "It's so peaceful here, and so beautiful. I never could have imagined such a place."

"There are beaches in other parts of the world that would take your breath away. Wide expanses of white sand that sparkle in the sun like brilliant diamonds. And oceans so clear and blue you can see the fish swimming beneath the waves."

Bridgett sighed longingly. How little she had experienced in her lifetime.

Still, she could be thankful for this day, and the chance to see the ocean at all. They were memories she would treasure forever.

"You have traveled a great deal?"

"I have been gone more than I have been at home this past year, I'm afraid."

"The mound of paperwork and tasks to be completed attest to the fact that I've neglected my duties here."

"Then why did you stay away?"

He gazed out at the ocean. "I suppose I inherited my mother's wish to escape."

"Escape?" She could understand a woman's wish to leave an oppressive husband, but the Count had no such excuse. She remembered what Marie had told her, about his chasing demons. What evils plagued a man who obviously had so much to be thankful for?

He shook his head. "It's not important."

They had walked a good distance from the where they'd eaten, and he turned to look back.

"Perhaps we should return and wake my sister. If she lies in the sun like that for much longer, she'll end up with freckles all over her face."

"That would be terrible." Bridgett feigned distaste.

"Only for me. Likely she would find some way to lay the blame for her 'disfigurement' at my feet." He laughed. "She had tons of freckles when she was a little girl, and was actually quite adorable."

"She is still adorable."

"Yes, she is." He suddenly pulled her into his arms. "And so are you."

Bridgett stared up at him, shocked by the kind words and the warmth she heard in his voice. Why couldn't he treat her thus when they were alone at night?

She was beginning to feel as if he were two men. One who looked at her and spoke to her with gentleness and charm, and another who treated her feelings like they were irrelevant.

"I...thank you, milord. No one has ever called me 'adorable' before."

"I find that hard to believe, for you are quite beautiful. I've never seen eyes quite the color of yours. They change into a deep, dusty blue when you are aroused. Did you know that?"

He held her chin and forced her to look into his eyes.

"And yours turn the color of smoke. A dark and smoldering gray." She tilted her head further back and licked her lips, hoping he would recognize the invitation. "Like they are now."

He chuckled and bent his head to brush a light kiss across her lips. "You are very transparent, cara mia. Why not just ask for a kiss?"

Bridgett shook her head at his smug tone.

"All right, milord. If I must ask, then I shall." She tried to keep her tone playful, but the subject matter caused her voice to turn husky. "Will you kiss me, milord?"

No sooner had the words left her mouth than his lips were upon her, teasing, insisting she open. She returned the kiss, drawing his tongue into her mouth and sucking it gently.

He groaned and she swallowed the sound, reaching up to entwine her fingers in his hair.

She grew dizzy with the emotion he managed to transmit with just a simple kiss. It spoke of a great need, a hunger that caused her heart to race. She clung to him, giving herself over to his passion, trembling with her own.

When he broke the kiss, she would have fallen had he not had his hands about her waist.

"Remind me to ask you for things more often, milord. It would appear that you take joy in the giving."

"I have never overly-enjoyed kissing, bella mia, until quite recently." He took her arm and began to lead her back towards the picnic area.

She barely caught his next words; they were spoken so softly.

"But I believe it's becoming one of my favorite pastimes."

Bridgett smiled and remained silent, content to ponder his behavior of the last few moments. Perhaps he was changing toward her. Surely he could not continue his double-sided treatment of her for very much longer. She was anxious for nightfall. Anxious to test her newfound theory that he'd come to care for her in ways that made her spirit soar and which heightened her desire. Tonight, perhaps, he would show her the same affection that he did during the light of day.

She glanced up, drinking in the sight of his strong, dark profile. A tremor of uncertainty ruffled her confidence. What if he insisted on repeating their activities of the prior night? Could she tolerate such abuse, even for him?

She frowned. Based on her limited knowledge, she'd expected to find pleasure and joy in such conduct. She couldn't imagine it.

When they were within a few feet of Marie, Vincent pulled back on Bridgett's arm and placed a finger against his lips.

"Wait here," he whispered.

She watched as he bent to scoop something from the sand at his feet. It appeared to be a plant of some sort, with long, brown, slimy-looking tendrils.

He crept over to his sleeping sister and dangled the plant above her face, just inches away.

Bridgett had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing aloud when Marie wrinkled her nose. Obviously, the nasty thing smelled as bad as it looked.

"Marie, I brought you dessert." Vincent wiggled his treasure in the air and bits of sand drifted down to land on her face.

"What? Oh, you cad! Vincent, I'm going to throttle you!" Marie bolted upright and slapped at her brother's hand. The plant flew through the air, landing in a heap on the blanket.

Vincent pretended to be hurt, but his eyes sparkled with laughter. "Why Marie, I thought you would appreciate my small gift."

"Of course you did." She got to her feet and brushed at the sand on her dress. "Be careful, brother dear, or you may find it on your plate come dinner!"

"As long as you don't attempt to cook it, for I'm sure you'd end up wearing it, instead!"

"Oh, you!" Marie started forward, but Vincent ducked out of her reach. He turned to run down the beach, his sister close on his heels.



Bridgett smiled at their antics, and bent to fold the picnic blanket. The sun had begun to sink on the horizon; they would have to return soon.

She had everything neatly packed up and ready to go by the time they returned.

They strolled up, arm in arm, but their voices were raised in a heated debate over Marie's abilities, or lack thereof, in womanly arts.

"You cannot cook, you cannot sew, and I don't believe you have ever lifted a hand to clean in your entire life," Vincent goaded.

Marie looked thoughtful for a moment, then grinned. "You are correct. But I'm very good at telling others how to do things, and to be honest, I like it that way!"

Vincent nodded, obviously pleased that he'd won the argument. "And that is as it should be, for a woman of your station."

Bridgett turned away and untied her horse's reins. Cooking, sewing, cleaning – she could do all of those things. *And that is as it should be, for a woman of your station.*

She brushed the thought aside. Things were different now. She lived in a beautiful home, with servants to tend her every need.

"Let me help you."

She turned to find the Count standing behind her. He picked her up and placed her carefully atop the mare.

Bridgett smiled her thanks and watched through lowered lashes as he went to assist his sister.

The muscles in his arms and back rippled beneath his shirt when he lifted Marie onto her horse. Bridgett's mouth grew dry at the sight, and she turned her head. If only she could discern his intentions toward her, if only he would admit to having grown to care for her, even a little, life would be perfect.

"We should hurry. The path up the cliff can be treacherous in the dark." The Count leapt onto Tempest's back.

Bridgett guided her horse in line, bringing up the rear. They began to climb up the steep section of the passage, had only gone a few feet, when, without warning, Bridgett slid backwards.

"Help!" she screamed as she flew off, over the horse's rump. The ground rushed to greet her, the impact forcing the air from her lungs in a rush. She lay still, eyes closed, trying to assess the damage to her body.

"Oh my Lord, Bridgett!"

Marie's voices seemed to come from far away. Bridgett opened her eyes and tried to rise, but could not catch her breath. She was vaguely aware of a commotion, and then the Count's face appeared above her.

"Don't move," he said. "Let me see if anything is broken."

He slid his hands down each of her limbs. Bridgett remained motionless and concentrated on regulating her breathing.

"Do you hurt anywhere?"

Her whole backside ached, but she didn't think she'd suffered any serious injuries. "I think I'm all right. Would you help me up?"

He stood and took her outstretched hand, and gently pulled her to her feet.

"You'll ride with me." He did not release her. "Marie, can you lead her horse back to the stables?"

"Of course."

"And send someone back to fetch the saddle."

Bridgett frowned at his tone. He sounded angry, but she could not imagine why.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The strap was cut."

Bridgett snapped her head up to gape at the Count. Her hands shook, rattling her cup and saucer.

"Cut?" she repeated, and placed her tea on the tray.

Marie shook her head. "You must be mistaken."

The Count dropped into a chair next to the fire, his brow creased with worry.

"I examined the saddle myself. It's a clean slice; there is no sign of wear."

"Do you know what you're implying?" Marie asked. "That someone deliberately set out to harm Bridgett."

Why would someone do such a thing?"

"Who would do such a thing?" Bridgett looked from Marie to the Count.

"I don't know." He seemed genuinely perplexed. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Then it must be a mistake. Perhaps the strap caught on something in the stable?"

"Perhaps." He conceded. "I trust my servants implicitly. I'm sure there is a reasonable explanation. However, from now on, you are to have someone check your tack before you ride. Understood?"

Bridgett nodded and stood, happy to dismiss such a disturbing idea. "As you wish, milord."

She gave him a searching look. "I believe I shall retire. It's been a very long day."

He did not respond, but continued staring into the fire, apparently deep in thought. Marie cleared her throat and stood up.

"I think that's an excellent idea," she said, and crossed to the door. "Come along, Bridgett. I'll walk you to your room."

"Good-night, milord." She whispered, then turned away, following Marie from the library.

## Chapter Nine

Bridgett spent more time than usual preparing for bed. She lit all of the numerous candles throughout the room, bathed, and brushed her hair before the fire until it floated about her shoulders in silky waves. After slipping into the peignoir that the Count had bought her their second evening together, she curled up in a chair to await his arrival.

She must have fallen asleep, for when she next opened her eyes most of the candles had burned low and the fire had become nothing more than glowing embers.

Blinking to clear her sleep-clouded vision, she gazed into the darkness and tried to recall what had awakened her. She'd thought she had heard a noise, but everything was quiet and still.

Then, from the connecting door to the Count's suite, came a faint rattle. It sounded like someone jiggling a key in a lock, or fumbling with the latch.

Curious, she rose from the chair and crept silently across the room, only to be knocked backwards as the door swung open.

"Ah, Bridgett, you waited up for me."

His voice was thick and slurred. She took one look at his flushed face and knew he'd been drinking. From the way he shuffled forward, bumping into the doorjamb, he must have consumed a great deal.

She backed away. This was something she'd grown up with, but it surprised her to find that her Count had such a disgusting and wasteful habit.

Any thoughts she'd had about enjoying his presence this evening vanished as she watched him stumble toward her bed.

"C'mere, *bella mia*. I have a need for your services." He collapsed upon the mattress with a grunt.

Bridgett cringed at his crass words. *A need for her services?* Gone was his concern for her well-being of earlier that evening. He had not even bothered to ask how she felt.

When she hesitated, he rolled onto his side and glared at her. "I said get over here, and I mean this instant!"

Bridgett notched her chin up higher, refusing to submit to his brutish behavior. "I do not wish for your company tonight, milord. You are inebriated, and I have no desire to share my bed with a drunk."

"You don't *wish*?" His laugh sounded more like a growl. "Think you it matters what you *wish*? You forget your place, girl."

"You would force me?" She took a step back, though he made no move to come toward her.

He stared at her, his face a mask of fury, then rolled onto his back. "I had thought the transformation to be complete. It appears I was wrong."

She barely heard him, and watched as his eyes slipped closed. Experience told her he would soon fall into a deep sleep, but she had to ask.

"The transformation?"

"Didn't work...like me...your hunger...doesn't burn."

Bridgett struggled to follow his disjointed ramblings.

"By now...should crave..." His words suddenly dissolved into a loud snore.

She crumpled into a chair, filled with both relief and painful disappointment. She was not sorry that he'd passed out, given his condition, yet she'd had such high hopes for this evening.

He snorted in his sleep and she glanced toward the bed in disgust. What had caused him to imbibe so heavily? Surely it was not something he did on a regular basis.

She frowned. Having only been in his presence a few short days, she could not be so sure. After all, he'd met her stepfather in a tavern. She made a mental note to ask a few discreet questions of Marie sometime soon.

Her thoughts turned to his senseless words. What did he mean by her 'transformation'? What an odd choice of words... Especially when combined with the rest.

She shook her head and got up. All of a sudden, she wanted nothing more than to be away from him. His abusive and lewd suggestions were like razors cutting at her heart. Nothing between them had changed.

After donning a robe, she slipped out the door and into the dark hallway. A faint glow of light emanated up the stairwell from the bottom floor. Curious as to who might be awake at such an hour, she crept forward and tiptoed down the stairs.

The door to the library stood open and she stepped inside.

"Marie. Why aren't you asleep?"

Marie lowered her book and smiled wearily. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I tossed and turned for several hours before finally giving up. Why are *you* still awake?"

Bridgett took the opposite chair before the fire. "I...um...Marie, does your brother drink?"

She flushed. So much for discreet.

Her friend did not seem offended by the abrupt question, but rather surprised. "Vincent? I think I have seen him over-indulge perhaps twice in my life. Why do you ask?"

"He, ah, came to my room just a little bit ago."

"Drunk?" Marie's disbelief was evident.

"I'm afraid so. He passed out in my bed." She felt guilty in saying as much, but it couldn't be helped. It was high time she learned a bit more about the man whose life had become entangled with her own.

"My brother is asleep in your bed? Can you not rouse him?"

Bridgett looked away. Waking him was the last thing she wanted to do. "I would rather not."

Marie seemed to sense her discomfort. "If you'd like, I can awaken his valet and have him do it."

"No, really. Just let him sleep."

"And what of you?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I will take the master's suite." She shrugged. "Or curl up on a sofa in here. It makes no difference."

The two women were silent for a bit. Bridgett gathered her courage, then cleared her throat.

"Marie, can I ask you something else?"

"You may. Let me guess... This, too, concerns my beloved brother."

"He said some things tonight. Things that made no sense to me. I thought, perhaps, you could shed some light on his meaning."

"I can try."

"He spoke of my 'transformation', and hunger and several other bits and pieces that seemed unconnected."

Marie's eyes grew wide and she paled. "Can you remember his exact words?"

Bridgett shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Except... Something about 'by now your transformation should be complete'."

Marie stared at the fire, and Bridgett waited patiently for her to respond.

"I have an idea, but I can not be sure."

"Can you share it with me?"

"I would rather be certain before I speak of it." Marie stood and tossed her book on the chair. "I will get to the bottom of this in the morning, I assure you."

Bridgett wondered at the other girl's agitation. "I didn't mean to upset you, really. Perhaps we should simply forget the whole thing."

"It is not *you* who upsets me. *You* could never upset anyone. You are too kind and honest and good-natured." She paused and closed her eyes, as if pained by some private thought. "But I'm afraid those are exactly the qualities that will land you in trouble. If I don't do something about it."

Bridgett didn't know what to say. She'd searched for answers, only to come away more confused than ever.

"I'm going to bed. Will you be all right? Would you like me to escort you to an empty suite?"

An image of the room with the faux painting flashed in her mind and Bridgett shook her head. "No. I'll be fine, really. I think I will read for a bit and then I will sleep in milord's chamber. It will serve him right, for invading my own."

Marie laughed. "Perhaps there is hope for you, after all. Goodnight, my friend, and do not worry. Tomorrow I will find us some answers."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent put his fingers to his throbbing temples. He'd awakened with a rolling stomach that had kept him leaning over the chamber pot half the morning, wishing he were dead.

Now, to make matters worse, his sister had waylaid him when he'd gone for coffee, and insisted that she speak with him immediately.

She paced before him, her face set, her eyes sparkling with anger. She whirled to face him, hands on hips.

"I know what you are up to, Vincent, and I demand that you stop this instant."

He closed his eyes against the pain in his head. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Bridgett. What you're doing to her is unconscionable."

"Bridgett?" His lovely houseguest was the last topic he wished to discuss. He'd done enough thinking about her last night. It had driven him to lose himself in a bottle. "I told you, it doesn't concern you."

"Oh, but you're wrong." Marie's tone turned venomous. "I have grown to care for her a great deal, and I'll not tolerate the abuse you have planned for her."

He searched her face. "Abuse? What 'plan'?"

"You really shouldn't drink, brother dear. It seems you become quite talkative when you're drunk. I believe you spoke of her 'transformation'."

He winced, the pain in his head suddenly doubling. So, he'd done more than make a fool out of himself by passing out in Bridgett's bed last night.

"It's none of your business, and I don't want to talk about it." He stood and headed for the door.

"Vincent, don't you dare walk out on me."

He kept going.

"I'll tell her. I swear, I'll tell her everything."

She'd raised her voice to gain his attention, but she needn't have bothered. Her words made him stop in his tracks.

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Bridgett awoke to the sound of Marie's voice, raised in anger in the next room. She carefully lowered her legs to the floor, wrinkling her brow at the stiffness of her joints.

She'd fallen asleep in the wing chair by the fire, book in hand, and every muscle in her body screamed in displeasure as she got up and stretched.

Wondering what, or who, Marie could be yelling at this early in the morning, she went out into the hall to investigate. The dining room doors were only half-closed.

"All right. I will listen to what you have to say."

The Count spoke softly, but Bridgett, standing just outside the room, heard him quite clearly. So Marie had confronted him already. She'd certainly wasted no time.

"My demand is simple," came Marie's reply. "Whatever 'transformation' you had planned for her, I want you to forget about it."

"I can't be responsible for anything I might have said while intoxicated, Marie. I don't even remember saying anything about a 'plan' or 'transformation'." He sounded irritated, and Bridgett could imagine him running his hand through his hair in an impatient gesture.

"Besides, she's perfectly content with her position here."

"Her position? What position?" Marie asked, her tone laced with sarcasm. "Oh! You must mean the one where she's flat on her back, beneath you!"

Bridgett felt the heat rise in her cheeks. Mortified, she held her breath and listened for the Count's reply.

"Might I remind you that women of your stature do not *think* of such things, let alone speak of them?"

"You hypocrite! Don't you *dare* lecture me, Vincent. In light of our upbringing, it took me only a moment to realize why you'd installed her in our home. You put her in the room next to yours! You dress her like a prostitute. Do you think I'm a half-wit? No. Don't answer that. You obviously do, else you wouldn't think you could get away with this behavior under my very nose."

"She's been here four days. Why did you wait until now to say something?"

"Because I didn't mind, truly. I thought her to be someone you cared about, even if only a little, but when she came to me last night..."

Bridgett waited out the silence that followed. Every fiber of her being told her Marie's next statement would prove important.

"Transformation, Vincent. That's what papa called it, you know? Did you think I'd forgotten?"

"I told you, I can't be responsible for the rants of a drunk. Bridgett is perfectly safe in my care."

"Oh, but you *are* responsible. I'm holding you responsible. A mistress is one thing... I'll not pretend to morals I don't hold. But you will not break her or treat her like a whore; you will not destroy her as you were destroyed."

"I'm not hurting her."

Bridgett barely heard him. Had he walked away, or merely lowered his voice?

"Do you care for her?"

"Of course I care for her."

He didn't sound very convincing, and Marie's next statement verified the fact.

"Like you care for your horse. Or the servants. Oh, Vincent, why don't you let her go? She's too sweet and naïve to even realize what you're about. The poor girl probably believes that you love her, by now. She's no match for your charm."

Bridgett put her hands to her face. Only then did she notice her tears. Tears of shame. How could she have been such a fool?

"I told you I won't hurt her, but she belongs to me, Marie. I'll not let her go."

His voice grew louder, as if he walked near the door, and Bridgett backed away. She could not face either one of them this moment.

"I'll be watching you, Vincent. If you hurt her, you will answer to me."

"I am the master here, dear sister. I will not hurt her – not in the manner you imagine – but I will not stand for your interference in my dealings with the girl."

Bridgett turned and fled. Before she was discovered. Before she lost complete control and could no longer stifle her sobs.

She eased closed the door to her chamber, then leaned against it, trying to catch her breath. Marie's statements echoed in her mind. A prostitute. A mistress. Why had it taken hearing the words to open her eyes? Was she really as naïve as that? She'd gone blithely along with the Count's instructions thinking...what? It came to her in a rush, and she closed her eyes in an attempt to hide from her own childishness. Her white knight. Her dreams of becoming a 'lady'. With sudden clarity, she knew exactly why she'd allowed herself to become the plaything of an aristocrat. She'd not managed to let go of her dreams, after all. They were still there, buried deep, but alive enough to fool her into thinking they could become a reality.

A whore.

She glanced down at her gown, seeing it for the first time with eyes wide open. The flashy color, the indecently tight and low neckline, the gaudy trim.

Rage, unlike anything she'd ever experienced, forced her into action and she snatched the paring knife from the plate of fruit on the table. She stalked to the armoire, flung open the doors, gathered an armful of gowns and tossed them on the bed.

She slashed at them, slicing the long skirts to ribbons, ripping the bodices clear to the waist. She vented all of her anger, all of her humiliation, all of her pain on her wardrobe until nothing remained but tattered strips of silk, satin and velvet.

The sun broke through the curtains and glinted off the blade of the knife. The brilliant flash penetrated the haze of her anger and she blinked rapidly, taking in the destruction before her.

With a sob, she flung the knife away from her and spun around.

There was no one there to stop her as she ran from the castle.



## Chapter Ten

"Marie?"

His sister looked up and placed her writing quill on the desk before her.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "And what on earth is that?"

"Have you seen Bridgett?" Vincent tried to keep his voice calm.

"No, not since last night. What happened?" She looked from the object he held in his hands, to his face, and paled.

"Oh Lord," she whispered, "you don't think..."

"I'm afraid so. I've searched the castle and she's gone." He tossed the torn gown onto a nearby chair and spun on his heels. "I'm going to look for her. You stay here, in case she comes back."

"Vincent! Wait!"

He stopped and turned back abruptly, impatient to be gone. "What is it?"

"If you find her... When you find her, be gentle. If she overheard our conversation this morning, she's undoubtedly hurt."

"If she overheard, she's probably feeling more than just hurt," he muttered.

"Be that as it may, I will brook no interference from you, Marie. The girl is mine. I must handle her as I see fit."

"You will not hurt her."

"I will not harm a hair on her pretty head, but nor will I permit her to leave. She belongs to me." He slammed the door behind him, unwilling to listen to any more of her demands.

Marie stared into space for several moments, then grinned. Perhaps he cared for the girl a bit more than his horse, after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent drew Tempest to a stop and cocked his head, listening for any sound that might betray her whereabouts. There was only one logical direction in which Bridgett could have gone. She surely would not care to follow any of the other smaller, more overgrown passages, and he didn't believe she would head toward the sea. He'd taken the main path into the forest, had gone perhaps a mile, before he'd discovered a strip of lace, caught on the limb of a low-hanging bush. With shaking hands, he had paused to untangle it. He'd held it to his face, breathing in her scent. After saying a quick prayer for her safety, he'd continued on.

A full hour had passed since then, and anxiety gnawed at his gut. The sun was on its downward slide; even now, daylight barely penetrated the dense foliage of tall trees that surrounded him. If he did not find her soon, she would be alone in the dark.

A soft cry came from his right, somewhere off the path. He dismounted and tethered Tempest to a tree before venturing into the thick underbrush.

"Who's there?" Her attempt at bravery was only marred by the slight tremor in her voice.

Vincent didn't answer, but proceeded toward the spot where he guessed her to be. Let her worry, the little fool. It was the least she deserved for running off alone. What could she possibly have been thinking? That she would walk all the way home on foot?

"I have a weapon."

This time, her panic was clearly evident, and he softened. Deciding to ease her distress, he called out. "It's only me, Bridgett. Stay where you are and keep talking so I can find you."

"Oh!" Her cry of outrage came from the other direction, and he adjusted his course appropriately, smiling at her obvious dismay at being discovered. Peeling back the feathery limb of a tall fir tree, he eased his way into a clearing.

"What on earth are you doing in here?" He swept her with his gaze, taking in her torn and dirty appearance.

She looked as if she'd been traveling for days, instead of mere hours, but seemed unharmed.

"I had to...never mind. Why don't you go away?"

Catching her meaning, he smiled at her modesty and moved closer, intending to take her hand and lead her back to his horse.

"Ouch!" She cried out and pulled away.

"What's the matter? Are you hurt?" He looked at her closely.

"My hair. It's stuck on this dratted bush!"

He breathed a sigh of relief and edged in behind her. "Hold still and I'll untangle you."

"As if I could move."

Vincent chuckled softly. "Sometimes I forget you can have such a biting tongue, mistress. You usually keep it well-hidden."

"There are a lot of things about me which you do not know, milord." Her words conveyed both anger and pain.

He unraveled a long strand of her hair that had somehow gotten twisted several times around a large thorn. Wrinkling his brow in concentration on the task before him, he chose to ignore her baiting until they were in a more appropriate place for conversation.

"Almost done." With a final wrench, he freed her head, leaving behind several long, golden strands. He shook his head. So much for his promise to Marie.

"Ouch!" She broke away and turned to give him a light slap on his arm. "What are you trying to do, rip all of my hair from my head?"

"It couldn't be helped. How in the world did you manage to get it so raveled up?"

"I wasn't paying attention to where I put my head. I had other, more pressing issues to worry about at the time."

She notched her chin up, as if daring him to question her on what, exactly, those more pressing issues had been.

"If looks could kill..." He reached for her hand.

"How did you get around me without my knowing it?"

He looked down at her, beginning to lose his patience. "What the bloody hell are you talking about?"

"I heard you," she gestured behind them, "over there. How did you circle around so quickly?"

"I came directly from the path, which is in the other direction. Come along," he tugged at her hand, "I'll get us out of here."

Again, she pulled back. "I am not going anywhere with you."

He clenched his fists and returned her determined stare. The little wench wasn't going to allow him to put off the confrontation; she was going to force him to deal with her now.

"I know you were listening this morning, and I'm sorry you were hurt by what you heard," he told her, "but nothing has changed between us. You are mine, and I am taking you home."

"Everything has changed between us."

Her voice trembled, and he hoped she would not start to cry.

"I was a fool. A stupid, naïve, awestruck fool." She glanced away, but turned back, her eyes glittering with anger and unshed tears. "But you, milord, you were much worse. You knew exactly what you were about, and used my innocence against me."

Vincent found it difficult to look her in the eye. He'd planned worse, but she could not know it. Guilt, unfamiliar and unwelcome, caused him to lash out defensively.

"None of that makes any difference. The fact still remains that I won you, I own you. I had every right to do with you as I pleased." He kept his voice cool and detached. "Now, you will either come with me willingly, or I will carry you. The choice is yours, but I will not stand here and debate this with you further. It will be full dark soon."

She remained silent for a moment. He watched her face in the shadows, and knew the minute she decided to acquiesce. Amazing, how well he'd come to know her moods in such a short time.

"Very well, milord, I will go with you. But I give you fair warning; I will not be any man's mistress, or whore, or prostitute. Not willingly, at any rate."

Vincent's laugh came harsh and abrupt. "Believe me, bella mia, when I tell you I would never force you. I won't have to; you have come that far, at least. As I said, nothing has changed between us. Now, will you come willingly, or shall I toss you over my shoulder and carry you out of here?"

With an outraged oath, she turned and began to fight her way through the underbrush toward the path.

Vincent frowned at her use of such language, but imagined he'd pushed her far enough for it to be warranted.

He followed after her. A sense of unease washed over him, as if the situation were spiraling out of his control. It made him feel panicked, and he despised feeling helpless. Somehow, he would regain the advantage.

Darkness, soft and dazzling in its starlit brilliance, greeted them as they left the treed canopy of the forest. Bridgett gazed upward and made a wish on the first shining orb that caught her eye. For strength to face the coming days. For the ability to resist him.

She sighed and looked over the Count's shoulder. They were approaching the castle, would be within its walls in moments. Panic made her stomach tighten.

She'd battled a turmoil of emotions ever since he'd come upon her. Anger at having been found, followed instantly by an irrational rush of joy at hearing his voice. Pain at his cavalier attitude when he'd spoken of their situation; rage when he threatened to force her to return with him.

In truth, returning to the castle was the only reasonable choice. She'd left in high emotion, with no thought or plan, and would not have survived more than a few days in the forest.

But that did not mean she had to like it, and it did not mean she would stay.

She had suffered a rude awakening this morning, and a loss. No longer blinded by ignorance, she'd become instantly jaded. Never again could she look at life with the eyes of an innocent.

"Marie will be happy you are safe."

She did not answer, but suffered a twinge of guilt. The Count's sister was her first true friend, and she did not like being the cause of her distress.

Somehow, she would make Marie understand. For her own sanity, she would need to leave.

They entered the courtyard and the Count brought Tempest to a halt.

He dismounted, then reached to assist her. A stable boy trotted up and took the horses reins.

"Rub him down good, Eddie, and give him two scoops of oats tonight."

"I'll take extra care with 'im, milord."

The boy grinned up at his tall lord, loyalty and admiration evident in the proud tone of his voice.

"I know you will, lad. There'll be a sweet reward for you, too, come the morning. Tell Cook I said you've earned an extra pastry." The Count ruffled the boy's hair, then turned to Bridgett.

"Shall we go inside?"

She ignored the offer of his arm and the irritating softening she'd felt while watching him interact with the child, and turned to precede him up the stone steps.

She'd barely touched the latch when the door flew open and Marie pulled her inside and into her embrace.

"Bridgett! I've been so worried about you! Vincent left me here to wait, and I've been pacing the floor for hours. Where have you been? Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Bridgett pulled back, embarrassed and a little bit overwhelmed by such an outpouring of affectionate emotion. The twinge of guilt she'd felt earlier blossomed into a full-blown ache.

"I'm sorry that I caused you to worry..." She stopped. What else could she say? That she was sorry she left? Sorry she'd been such a fool?

Marie squeezed her hand. "I understand. There is no need to explain. I'm just glad you're unhurt, and that Vincent managed to find you."

Bridgett glanced at the Count, who stood silently beside her, and suddenly felt drained. Now that she was safe, she realized how frightened she'd been, alone in the forest. She'd had the distinct impression that she'd been followed. The feeling had grown to certainty when she'd heard someone coming through the brush behind her. "I would like to go to my room and lie down."

"Of course! You must be exhausted." Marie led her toward the staircase. "Go ahead up, and I'll have a cup of tea and something to eat sent to your room. Would you like a bath?"

She would love one, but she lacked the energy. Tonight, she would have to make do with a quick sponging. "Perhaps in the morning. Goodnight."

It seemed to take forever to traverse the steps and long hallways to her suite. Her legs, after sitting astride a horse, had stiffened unbearably, and ached with every stride. When she finally reached her room, she went immediately to the bed and collapsed upon it. Only the thought of soiling the freshly laundered bedding stopped her from curling up into a ball and succumbing to fatigue. She smelled of dirt, sweat and horse.

Moaning with effort, she rolled to her side and let her legs dangle off the edge of the mattress. She would get up. Momentarily.

"Would you like some help?"

She squeezed her eyes shut tight, wishing to block out his voice, his presence. "I am fine."

"You do not look fine," his voice held a thread of humor, "you look...ghastly."

The tears came unexpectedly, savagely, her entire body convulsing with the strength of her sobs. Something within her splintered, and she began to tremble; shattered, and she lost all control.

"Get out!" Her shout echoed off the walls. She leapt from the bed, ignoring her screaming muscles. "Get out, get out, get out!"

She lashed out blindly, only to find herself pulled within the confines of a strong pair of arms.

"Hush, bella mia, you are overwrought." He patted her back. "You will feel better in the morning, after you have slept."

His condescending tone only served to fuel the fire of her wrath. She searched her mind for something, anything to say that would make him release her. That would cause him pain; that would erase that smug male look from his face. Did he honestly believe they would go back to the way it had been between them before? That she would forget everything she'd heard and close her eyes to his despicable behavior?

"I will not feel better until I am away from you. You, who are less than a man." She felt him stiffen, but continued her verbal attack. "Even as young and inexperienced as I am, I still know that a woman should find pleasure in the arms of a man. You have never given me pleasure, milord. I doubt you know how."

His hand at her back stilled. She looked up and saw the anger in his eyes, but she would not, could not, turn back.

"Perhaps, when I am rid of you, I will find a real man," she bit out. "One who knows how to give, as well as receive. I am sure he will be most delighted with my newly acquired skills."

She watched his eyes, and reveled in what she saw there. Although his face showed no emotion, his eyes betrayed the damage she'd managed to inflict.

He released her and she stepped back, but did not cower. Let him suffer, as she suffered.

He smiled, but it was devoid of humor. "You're very clever, aren't you, bella mia? Do you think your words will drive me away? Or, perhaps make me so angry that I will allow you to leave?"

He turned and went to stand before the fire, giving her his back. "Maybe you wish to return to your father, hmm? Do you think he is more of a man? Could he give you pleasure, do you think?"

"You swine. That is beneath even you." She clenched her fists and stood her ground. "I would be set free, to do as I please."

"Impossible. You are mine, and you will do as I please."

"Have I not earned my freedom, milord? Surely the use of my body these many nights has been worth what you wagered. You can not keep me here against my will."

"Can't I?" He turned to face her, and she saw that he'd regained his control. "We shall see. I bid you goodnight."

She frowned when he left her room into the corridor, wondering why he did not simply enter his own suite through the connecting door. The sound of metal scraping against metal gave her the answer, and she rushed over to pull at the latch.

"You can't keep me locked up!" She beat at the heavy oak panel in vain. "Oh!"

Turning away, she paced the room in anger. How dare he? After all he'd done to her, this was the ultimate humiliation, to be locked up like an animal. Or a prisoner.

There had to be a way out. Marie had said she would send up some tea. Bridgett smiled. As soon as the door opened, she would be ready.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Vincent dropped the key in his pocket and started down the corridor. His hands shook and sweat coated his brow.

"Pardon me, milord!"

He looked up in time to narrowly miss a collision with a maid. She carried a tray, laden with tea and a small plate of scones.

"I will take that." He relieved her of her burden. "Thank you, Doris. You may retire for the night."

"As you wish, milord." The plump servant bobbed a curtsey and scurried back down the stairs.

Vincent retraced his steps. At the door, he was forced to set the tray on the floor in order to release the lock.

He pushed it open. "What the bloody hell!"

She hit him at a full run, nearly knocking him off his feet. He stumbled back, but managed to catch her arm when she attempted to dart past him.

"Let me go!"

"Where?" he asked quietly, and pulled her into his arms.

She stilled. "Don't lock me in."

He closed his eyes and stroked her back. "You will stay, if I do not?"

"I can not promise you that." She spoke against his chest, her words whisper soft.

He admired her honesty, but not enough to give her what she requested. He simply could not take the chance.

"Then the door must remain locked."

She broke free of his arms. "You can't keep me locked up forever!"

"No, only at night. During the day, you shall have your freedom."

She put her hands on her hips and glared up at him, a furious she-cat, her claws bared. "Freedom? How kind of you, milord. And will you have all of your servants watching my every move, or only a select few?"

Vincent sighed, suddenly weary of the verbal sparring. "Go into your room, Bridgett. Go now, or I will carry you in and tie you to the bed if I have to."

An image, a half-formed memory, teased at the edges of his mind, and his cock stirred.

"You wouldn't dare."



He reached to caress her cheek, gazing into icy blue eyes. "Be careful, bella mia, for I would dare that and much more. I want you, even now."

Her eyes grew wide with understanding and she stepped back, into her room.

"Then I will go willingly, milord, for I do not wish to be the recipient of your attentions. I fear I would die of boredom, should I be forced to suffer them further."

He stepped forward, but the door slammed in his face.

"You can lock it, milord. I am going to bed."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent downed his drink in one swift motion, then reached for the bottle to pour another. He lifted the glass and stared at the amber liquid; swirled it, contemplated it.

He could feel himself sinking deeper and deeper into the black hole where his memories lurked. Memories that both aroused and horrified him in a way that drove him mad.

The liquor dulled his emotions; unfortunately, it also dulled his wits.

He set the glass down and turned his back on it, unwilling to give in yet again to its siren song promise of forgetfulness.

The fire crackled and hissed, casting dancing shadows on the library walls.

Upstairs, Bridget would be asleep, undoubtedly plotting his demise in her dreams.

He cocked his head and listened. To the snapping of the fire, to the silence beyond. He hated it. The quiet hours in the dead of night became a playground for the ghosts and memories of his past.

He reached for the glass of sherry, picked it up, brought it to his lips.

"No." He turned abruptly and tossed the contents into the flames.

His hands shook and his skin crawled with tense anxiety. Release. He looked up, as if he could see her in the room above. Pleasure.

*I doubt you know how.*

His cock grew hard, straining at the front of his breeches, and he smiled in anticipation.

"We shall see, bella mia." He started toward the door. "We shall see."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bridgett opened her eyes and stared hard into the inky darkness. A soft thud came from the other side of the room and she sat up.

"Who's there?"

No answer, just a shuffling sound as the intruder drew closer to the bed.

She opened her mouth to scream, only to shut it with a painful snap as a large, naked body landed on top of her. Her arms and legs were pinned beneath his weight, and she could barely breathe, let alone draw in a deep breath to call for help.

"You wish to experience pleasure?"

She tensed and lay still, fighting the panic and instant arousal brought on by his words. She squinted into the darkness. His face, above her, was nothing more than a shadow, a dream-like specter with vague form.

"Pleasure is a strange sensation, *bella mia*." He moved his upper body to lie beside her, but kept her trapped beneath the weight of a leg that draped across her thighs. "The line between pleasure and pain is fine, indeed."

"Let me go." Bridgett pushed at his chest.

He gave a harsh laugh and grabbed her arms, pulling her up to crush her against the hard planes of his chest, their faces just inches apart.

"If you understand nothing else, understand this. I will not let you go, *bella mia*. I will never let you go."

She shuddered at the intense possessiveness in his voice, but did not back down. "You said you would never force me."

He lowered his head and feathered kisses across her cheek, her lips, her eyelids and she caught her breath.

"I will not force you, *amore mia*. There will be no need."

As if to prove his point, he placed his palm on her breast. Her nipple grew hard at his touch. Without thought, she arched her back and moved against him.

"You see? Your passion will not be denied." He nibbled his way up her neck to suckle at the soft flesh of her earlobe. "It was not your hatred for me that caused you to question my abilities, but your hunger."

Bridgett shook her head in denial. "I never said that I hated you, *milord*."

She might wish she did, but lying to herself, and to him, would be useless.

"Perhaps it might be better if you did."

His hands went to the neck of her shift and he untied the laces. The heat of his fingertips against her cool flesh caused chills to race along her arms.

"I fear you will not like the lesson I have planned for you this night." He brushed the loose material of her gown down over her shoulders, freeing her breasts to his touch. "I had thought to spare you, but I'm afraid that will no longer be possible."

The inability to see his expression and gauge his intent made Bridgett dizzy and off-balance. Anxiety, brought on by his ominous words, warred with her body's anticipation of his next touch.

When he captured her nipple with his mouth, she nearly came up off the mattress. A coiled bundle of nerves, she reacted by grasping his head and pressing him close.

He held her breasts together and moved from one to the other, sucking her hard until she cried out.

He raised his head and she could feel the moist warmth of his breath on her face.

"That was a mixture of both pleasure and pain, was it not, bella mia?"

She refused to give him the satisfaction of an answer.

His hands moved to the open neckline of her gown. There was a sharp tug, then the fabric ripped in two. The sound of its rending echoed in her ears and she cringed.

Cool air caressed her bared skin, and she lay perfectly still, feeling vulnerable, afraid she'd pushed him too far.

"But there is more to pleasure." He spoke harshly. "Let me show you."

She felt him shift and pull away from her, taking the heat of his body with him. She waited, tense and expectant.

"Spread your legs for me."

She could barely make out his shadowy image, kneeling on the bed near her feet.

Frightened by his intent, she tightened her muscles, resisting the pull of his hands on her thighs.

"Please," she whispered, and cursed herself for begging. But the thought of reliving the pain of taking him inside her made her nearly frantic.

"I promised you pleasure," he reminded her.

He caressed the soft flesh of her upper thighs and she calmed beneath his gentle touch.

Boneless, her legs drifted apart of their own accord.

"There are several different levels of pleasure." He sounded distant and detached, and she shivered.

Long fingers slid upward to stroke the swollen folds of petal-soft flesh between her legs.

"There is the kind you receive when you sip a fine wine, or that brings a sigh to your lips following a passionate kiss."

Bridgett, lulled by the hypnotic tone of his voice, closed her eyes and concentrated on the delicious sensations between her thighs.

His seeking fingers, slick with her arousal, hit upon a particularly sensitive spot, and she gasped.

"Your clitoris," he told her, and circled the hard little bud with his fingertip. "A 'pleasure point', if you will. Which brings us to the next level."

He began to apply rhythmic pressure, and a frightening tightness formed in the pit of her stomach.

"There is pleasure, sweeter than a kiss, more intoxicating than wine. The kind that over-powers and overwhelms with its intensity."

His finger moved faster and Bridgett moaned. Her toes began to tingle and she lifted her knees, wanting... She closed her eyes in denial against the thought – the image – that flitted through her mind. The image of him straddling her, mounting her, filling her.

“The kind of pleasure,” he continued, as if reading her thoughts, “that fills the emptiness.”

“Oh, God!” Bridgett cried out as he plunged his finger into her.

He moved it slowly, in and out, while he continued to manipulate her clitoris with the pad of his thumb.

“If only for a little while,” he whispered.

Bridgett panted, unable to draw a full breath, and a light sheen of sweat coated her skin. The tension that had begun in her belly spread, and she met each of his inward movements with a thrust of her own.

“And finally, *bella mia*, there is the pleasure you seek now.”

His movements slowed, his finger withdrew, and she whimpered in protest.

“It’s a pleasure so intense that it is nearly painful. A pleasure for which some men, and women, have willingly sold their souls.”

He pulled away and she felt the mattress spring back as he stood.

“For the giver, this pleasure is awesome and fearsome in its selfishness. For the receiver, once having tasted of its fruit, it means certain slavery. Those addicted to it become driven to feed a voracious appetite that is never appeased.”

Bridgett struggled to understand his meaning. “How can someone who gives be selfish?”

“It depends on one’s reason for giving, does it not? I have just given you pleasure. Do you believe I did it for your sake, or my own?”

She frowned. “But could it not be for both of our sakes?”

He sighed, a sound filled with sadness and pain. “In another life, perhaps.”

“Why?” She poured all her confusion and unhappiness into a single word.

The next time he spoke, his voice came from across the room, near the door to his chamber. “Go to sleep, Bridgett. It’s very late.”

She could tell that he’d withdrawn from her again, that the conversation was over.

“And how will you sleep, milord?” Anger, and the illusion of safety provided by the darkness, gave her the courage to lash out. “You have received no pleasure this night. In your selfishness, can you cope with that?”

“Is that an offer?”

Bridgett bit her lip, belatedly regretting her words, and shuddered at the underlying tone of menace in his question.

“I thought not.”

The door to his chamber opened and for a brief moment he was outlined in the light from the other room.

Bridgett caught her breath, transfixed by the sight of his naked magnificence.

He stalked through the doorway, the muscles in his legs and buttocks rippling with each stride.

Even after he closed the door, she did not look away. She wanted him. Needed him. So much so that she was tempted to get up and go to him, to beg him to show her that final pleasure. The kind that enslaved.

"How dare you?" she whispered, fighting tears of frustration. "How dare you continue to trifle with me like this?"

She rolled on her side and curled into a ball, squeezing her eyes shut. "I refuse to cry."

She forced herself to concentrate on her anger, focusing on it, feeding it, until it overpowered every bit of tenderness and desire.

Somehow, she would find a way to make him regret his treatment of her. She would make it her mission and, in doing so, find the strength to survive.

\* \* \* \* \*

An insistent knocking woke her from a sound sleep. She lifted her head, groggily taking in the fact that light poured through the draperies. Morning already. Late morning, by the looks of it. She yawned and rubbed at her eyes, wishing that whoever was pounding on her door would go away.

"Bridgett, unlock your door."

Jumping from the bed, Bridgett quickly wrapped a quilt about her torso. The tattered remains of her nightgown lay on the floor at her feet, and she picked it up and shoved it under a pillow.

"Bridgett?" Marie sounded worried, and Bridgett hastened to the door. Only after she'd pulled on the latch did she remember.

"I can't open it." Her cheeks grew warm with embarrassment, and she silently cursed the Count for his actions.

"What do you mean, you can't open it? Is it stuck?" Bridgett sighed. There was no way to hide the reality of her circumstances, and suddenly she didn't want to.

"No, it's not stuck, it's locked. Your brother has decided I must be imprisoned during the night." She stated matter-of-factly.

"Vincent locked you in your room?"

Bridgett smiled at the anger and disbelief in the other girl's voice. "Yes. Do you have a key?"

"Of course. I'll be right back," Marie told her. "And just you wait until I get my hands on that brutish brother of mine. Imagine! Locking you up in your room like a convicted killer..."

Heaving a satisfied sigh, Bridgett crossed to her armoire and took out a robe.

She let the quilt fall to the floor, then slipped into the gauzy garment, cinching it tightly about her waist.

A few minutes later, Marie strode into the room, her fury evident in her scowling face.

"Now tell me what this is all about," she insisted. "Why would Vincent lock you up?"

"He is afraid I will try to leave." Bridgett shrugged, and attempted to appear nonchalant. "After yesterday, he says I can no longer be trusted alone."

"We'll just see about that." Marie paced the room. "He left very early this morning, but he has to be back before midday. I'll take care of this situation, don't you worry."

Bridgett turned her head in order to hide the grin of satisfaction on her face.

Already she had managed to find a way to thwart the Count's plans. Not only that, but he would face his sister's wrath.

She turned back to Marie. "Why must he return before lunchtime?"

"I suppose he didn't bother to tell you. We're having guests again."

Bridgett stared at her for a moment, then smiled brightly. "Guests? How wonderful!"

The seed of an idea formed in her mind and she bit her lip, contemplating its plausibility. Vengefulness was foreign to her nature, but the opportunity to punish the Count for the abuse she'd suffered could not be passed up.

"Are you all right?" Marie stopped her pacing and placed a hand on Bridgett's shoulder.

"I'm fine." She smiled and turned away, afraid her friend would somehow read her thoughts. "When did you say they would arrive? I'll need a bath sent up. And hopefully I have a dress or two still intact that will suit the occasion."

"Well, you're handling this much better than I would. If it were me, I would be anxious to get my hands about Vincent's thick neck!"

Bridgett nodded. "I was angry, but it's over now, so what is the point?"

She pushed back the guilt she felt at lying, and began to lay out her clothes.

"If you're sure you're all right, I'll go order a bath for you." Marie sounded a bit uncertain. "Will you be needing a maid?"

"Please." Bridgett gave her a reassuring smile. "And thank you."

As soon as the door closed behind Marie, Bridgett gave a low whoop of joy.

Revenge, as they say, would be sweet.

## Chapter Twelve

Bridgett stared at her reflection in the cheval mirror. She pursed her lips and turned from side to side. The skirt of her dark sapphire gown swung lightly about her legs. Covered in a rose design made of black sequins, it glistened in the light.

"You look lovely, miss."

Arching her brows, Bridgett turned to face the young maid. "Do you think so?"

"Why yes, miss, of course. The blue brings out the color of your eyes."

Bridgett smiled politely and pulled on her gloves. Two days ago, she would have agreed with the girl. After all, the dress was made of the finest silk, and the beadwork was exquisite. It was truly a work of art, but obviously not designed with a lady in mind. The décolletage scooped daringly low and her breasts, pushed together by the tightly sewn bodice, nearly over-flowed the neckline. The gown's design did not allow for petticoats and the skirt clung to her thighs and body. She'd found it in the back of her armoire, and knew the moment she pulled it out that it was perfect. It left nothing to the imagination.

"That will be all. Please ask that I be informed when the guests have arrived." Bridgett turned back to the mirror and pulled on one of the long curls that framed her face. Her plan relied, in part, on her timing. If she went below before the others were there, the Count might force her to change.

The door clicked shut behind the maid, and Bridgett breathed a sigh. There was nothing left to do but wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I didn't expect to see you again so soon." Vincent studied his companion's face for any sign of deceit.

"Yes, well, change of plans and all that." Jonathan Wilder took a hasty sip of his drink. "Andrews decided at the last minute to take Camilla on to his estate. I have business in London in less than ten days, so we parted ways."

"You didn't know you had this business when you left here three days ago?" There was no doubt the man was lying, but the question was, why? Vincent had a feeling he knew. Jonathan was a rogue - a charming, wealthy rogue, who seemed to make it his mission in life to conquer as many beautiful women as possible. Vincent knew this, because they ran in the same circles, courted the favors of the same women. Often, they found themselves in direct competition.

"I suppose it slipped my mind." Jonathan shrugged.

"Now, if you don't mind, I believe I will go say hello to that lovely sister of yours."

Vincent allowed him to walk away without objection, but he kept him in his sight. Unless he missed his guess, Jonathan was not interested in Marie.

He surveyed his guests. They had a full house tonight. Twenty-one people - ten couples and Sir Wilder - all of them friends or acquaintances from London. People who lived on the fringes of Society, whether by force or by design. Having never been accepted by the Ton, Vincent had cultivated his own group of peers. They served him well, alleviated the loneliness and provided a sense of community that would otherwise be missing from his remote seaside home. None of them could truly be called "friend", for they all had one thing in common. A strong sense of self-preservation. Some might call it selfishness, but Vincent understood it well enough. After all, he had lived that way himself for as long as he could remember.

A murmur of hushed, excited whispers drew him out of his thoughts and he looked up. And smiled. He couldn't help it. No doubt, he was in for a world of trouble, but by God she was breathtaking. An erotic, sensual, delightful creature that made his blood run fast and hot so that he lost all common sense.

But she was on her own. He would not go to her. He wanted to wait. To see if she dared walk into the room wearing that dress.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bridgett hesitated at the door, aware that she'd become the object of much interest. There were more people here than she had expected, and suddenly her confidence waned. She was about to back out, to return to her room in defeat, when someone called her name.

"There you are. I feared I would not get a chance to see you this evening."

Jonathan Wilder approached and she automatically held out her hand. He took it and raised it to his lips, turning it at the last minute to place a lingering kiss on her gloved palm. He smiled, and she was again struck by his golden good looks. A slight tremor of awareness crept up her spine. There was no mistaking the interest that glowed in his eyes.

"Why, Sir Jonathan, I did not expect you to be here tonight. Where are your companions?" She craned her neck to look beyond him, into the library, but did not see Camilla or Walter among the other guests.

"They aren't here. I am on my way back to London, and decided to stop here for the night." He dropped his eyes, swept her up and down. "I am very happy I decided to change my plans."

Bridgett stood perfectly still, and even managed a slight smile. This was, after all, exactly the reaction for which she'd hoped. In fact, Jonathan's reappearance was a blessing. Now, she wouldn't have to search for a likely prospect among the others.



She batted her eyelashes and squeezed his hand, which still held her own. "It seems we will both benefit from your change of plans."

His brows rose, and she thought she might laugh at his comical expression. The man appeared shocked, but quickly recovered his composure.

"How so, My Lady?"

She lowered her gaze, pretending a sudden shyness. "I'm afraid I'm unused to social gatherings. I've led a rather sheltered life. With you by my side, I will feel so much more confident."

"And what of your betrothed?"

She heard the doubt in his voice, and quickly sought to appease it. "The Count and I had a slight tiff. I'm sure we shall patch up our differences, but he is still a bit sore with me tonight."

"I see." He tucked her arm in his. "Do not fear, My Lady, I shall not leave your side for an instant."

From the corner of her eye, Bridgett caught sight of the Count. He stood on the far side of the room, leaning casually against the mantel, but Bridgett was not fooled. She wondered if anyone else noticed the menacing look in his eyes, or the way his mouth turned down at the corners into a frown. He was staring at her, obviously unhappy about something.

The gown? Or her interaction with Sir Jonathan? Not that it mattered. Either way, she'd caught his attention.

She offered her companion what she hoped was a dazzling smile and allowed him to lead her farther into the room.

The double doors between the library and dining room were open, allowing plenty of room for the guests to mingle. She cast a furtive glance around the room, and was suddenly truly grateful for Jonathan's attentiveness.

The ladies were dressed in rich costumes of elaborate design.

Diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and sapphires twinkled gaudily in the lamplight, from ears and throats and hands. The men were all young and handsome, and equally well dressed.

Bridgett felt out of place, like a lump of coal in a bed of precious gems. These were the beautiful people. She could see by the looks on their faces that they were confident, successful, and sure of their station in life.

"Would you like something to drink?" Jonathan released her arm and signaled for a servant before she had a chance to reply. "A glass of wine for the lady, please."

She accepted the drink, remembering to smile and lower her lashes in a false show of feminine meekness.

"Thank you, My Lord. You are most kind."

She could feel the curious stares from the other guests, hear their unspoken questions, but she focused her attention entirely on Jonathan Wilder. Moving closer, she tilted her head back to stare into his fathomless blue eyes.

He returned her smile, but only held her gaze for an instant before looking downward. Bridgett grew warm under his steady perusal of her breasts, but she held her ground.

Let him look. She'd set out to capture a man's interest, and this man was as good as any. She cast a quick, surreptitious glance at the Count. Judging from his glowering countenance, perhaps this man was better than most.

She placed her hand on Jonathan's arm and gave a soft laugh. "You are embarrassing me, My Lord."

He did not apologize for his behavior. Instead, he placed his palm over her hand and grinned. "You are one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. I can see why Vincent chose you for his bride."

Ignoring the sharp pain that wrenched at her heart, Bridgett batted her lashes and smiled what she hoped was an invitation for him to continue with his attentions.

"Do you truly find me beautiful?"

He stroked her hand. "Very."

She turned her head and pretended uncertainty. "But surely I am not as sophisticated as the other women with whom you...associate."

He threw his head back and laughed. "And what do you know of my habits when it comes to women?"

She turned back quickly. "Oh, I didn't mean to insult you! It's just. You are so very handsome and..."

She left the sentence hang, purposely allowing him to draw his own conclusions.

"Sophistication is highly over-rated. I find your innocence quite refreshing."

Innocence. What was it about men that caused them to only see that which they desired to believe? She gave herself a mental shake. Let him think whatever suited his purpose. Whatever he needed to tell himself, so long as it took him in the direction she desired him to go.

Lowering her voice, she took another step closer, until their bodies nearly touched. "Can I speak truthfully, My Lord?"

Once again he had to raise his head to meet her gaze. The man seemed thoroughly enthralled by her bosom, and she would have laughed if not for the seriousness of the circumstances.

"Of course, my dear. What is it?"

"Although I am engaged to My Lord Renault, I can't help but find myself..." She turned her head away, completely immersing herself in the role of a woman struggling with some awkward truth.

"Yes? What is it, darling? Whatever is bothering you, I promise your secret is safe with me."

She swallowed deeply and met his eyes. "I find myself attracted to you, My Lord, and it is quite disconcerting."

For a moment, he merely returned her stare. She could see his mind working, searching for some reasonable response. Pray, let him not be chivalrous and brush aside her confession. If he did, her plan would fall apart.

He nodded. "I see. Bridgett, will you walk with me? I'd like to make a confession of my own, but I'd like to do so in private."

"Walk with you?"

"Yes. Just out on the terrace." He gestured toward the French doors behind them. "I need some air, and there will be fewer people to overhear our conversation."

Or interrupt your attempt at seduction. She thought quickly, comparing the risks associated with allowing him to take her to a more secluded place, with the satisfaction she would win when the Count watched them make their exit.

She'd noticed several couples stroll in and out the door.

Surely she would be safe, for they would not be entirely alone.

"I know I should refuse, but I suppose it won't hurt to step outside for a moment."

The minute she finished speaking, he took her arm, nearly propelling her toward the door. Bridgett sensed his sudden urgency and barely controlled excitement, and felt a tremor of apprehension. Still, this was the moment she'd worked for, and she cast a look back over her shoulder to take in the Count's reaction.

His place near the fire was empty. She craned her neck and searched the room, hoping to see his familiar, towering form. Disappointment crashed down. The Count was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent sprawled in a chair before the fire, a bottle of sherry on the table nearby. He lifted the glass and took a large swig, barely tasting the expensive liquor as it burned its way down. Closing his eyes, he cursed himself silently for being so weak, for being unable to cope with the storm of emotions brought on by the exquisite little minx below.

Watching her with Jonathan had caused his blood to boil. The two of them had behaved like they were the only people in the room. It didn't take a great deal of intelligence to see what was going on. The last time Jonathan had ogled her breasts, Vincent had started toward them, intent on putting a stop to their blatantly sensual games. But at the last minute, he'd switched directions and left the room, seeking the solace of his own quarters.

It had been the smartest course of action. Instead of beating Jonathan to a bloody pulp, he'd chosen to drown his rage and frustration in a bottle of spirits.

His bedroom door swung open, and Thomas stepped inside. "My Lord, I beg your pardon for intruding like this, but My Lady requests your presence below."

The man looked terribly uncomfortable. "She said to tell you it's urgent."

Vincent stood and placed his empty glass on the table.

"Did she tell you what was wrong?"

Thomas shook his head. "No, My Lord, but she is very upset."

"Bloody hell." What could be so important? Most likely, one of their guests had overindulged and needed to be removed to a warm bed where they could sleep off the affects of their excess. "Can't someone else take care of it?"

Thomas seemed to grow impatient, for he lost his subservient demeanor and turned without asking for leave, speaking over his shoulder as he left the room.

"Apparently not, My Lord."

The door clicked shut, and Vincent ran his hands over his face. The last thing he needed tonight was an encounter with an inebriated imbecile. He had several muscular servants on duty specifically to handle such matters. Marie knew that as well as anyone. So why was she bothering him?

He strode from the room, his fists clenched at his sides. With a still-rational portion of his mind, he could almost pity the poor sot who'd chosen tonight to over-imbibe. Vincent had found a target for his wrath.

When he reached the door of the library, he scanned the crowd, looking for any obvious signs of disturbance. To his surprise, all seemed normal. Had his sister come to her senses and sought help from more obvious quarters? He turned to go, when he noticed her out of the corner of his eye. She stood near the doors to the terrace, gesturing wildly in his direction. Her face was pale, and she appeared to be very agitated. Incredibly, no one else seemed to notice her odd behavior, and he started toward her, hoping to handle whatever plagued her before his guests realized something was amiss.

The minute he got within arm's length, she grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him outside.

"What the... Marie, what has come over you?"

"Shush! They'll hear you!" Her whisper held a note of panic.

"Who will hear me?" What in God's name was this about? He looked around, but the terrace appeared empty.

"Bridgett and Jonathan."

At the mention of her name, Vincent turned away. "I'm not interested, Marie."

His sister grabbed his arm and jerked it hard, causing him to stumble backwards. "I think she's in trouble, Vincent, and it's all your fault!"

Regaining his footing, he shot Marie a contemptuous glare. "She looked perfectly content not an hour ago, my dear. What makes you think she's in trouble, and how in God's name is it my fault?"

"I saw them go out here, and followed them. He took her around there, Vincent, and she did not appear to go willingly." Marie pointed toward the far end of the terrace, where the wide, stone walkway seemed to end. In actuality, it turned the corner and ran for several hundred yards in the other direction.

"Judging from their behavior earlier, I would say she is getting exactly what she wanted." He didn't want to deal with the way those words, that thought, made his hands shake with rage.

"Are you truly that feeble-witted, or merely blinded by jealousy?"

He bristled at her tone. "Jealousy implies feelings I do not hold, Marie. She can do as she pleases."

"I thought she belonged to you?" His sister gave him a knowing look. "I've had just about enough of your male ego, Vincent. Whether you care for her or not, you are still responsible for her. You brought her into this; it's up to you to keep her safe from those of your ilk. She isn't prepared to deal with the likes of Jonathan Wilder."

He stared at her for a moment, contemplating her words. She had a point. Despite the difficulties between them, Bridgett was still his responsibility. Like it or not, he would have to see to her safety.

"I will check on her," he agreed. "But God help them both if I find what I believe I will find when I round that corner."

Bridgett took several steps backwards, which only served to put her deeper in the shadows. "Sir Jonathan, please. Remember where we are."

He stalked her, his smile both seductive and predatory. "We're perfectly secluded here, my love. Very few people realize that the terrace extends beyond the corner of the castle."

"But... What of Lord Renault? I thought he was your friend!" She spoke in a rush, suddenly panicked by his aggressive behavior.

"And I thought he was your betrothed, but that did not stop you from declaring your interest in me. Come, my dear, let us stop playing these silly games. We both know what it is we desire." He moved closer, backing her against the wall and placing his hands on each side of her face, effectively caging her in.

"I spoke without thinking, My Lord." She put her hands on his chest and tried to push him back. "Please. Let me go."

"Not until I've had a sample of what you've been offering me all evening."

He lowered his head, and she turned away at the last minute so that his lips brushed her cheek. He ran his tongue down her neck, and she closed her eyes against the tingling chill that raced up her spine.

*Whore.*

"Kiss me," he whispered, and she turned to face him.

She saw his smile of triumph just before he captured her mouth in a searing kiss. Closing her eyes, she gave herself up to his expertise, and waited.

He teased her with his tongue, nudging her lips apart and pulling her into his arms. His hands were everywhere - at her back, in her hair, at her hips, then lower - cupping her buttocks to bring her up against his hardness.

She did not attempt to stop him when he dragged at the neckline of her gown, exposing her breasts to the cool night air. She stood submissively while he fingered her nipple. His deep groan of desire left her empty.

Empty.

She snapped her eyes open and broke their kiss. The extraordinarily handsome man before her drew a ragged breath and bent his head, capturing her nipple between his teeth and drawing it in to suckle it deeply.

Bridgett stared at the top of his golden head and felt...nothing. Nothing at all. No passion, no desire, not even the slightest hint of excitement.

"Have you found that for which you search, bella mia?"

The steely voice penetrated her wall of detached observation.

She sucked in her breath and looked up, straight into the gleaming dark eyes of the Count.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Bridgett pushed frantically at Jonathan's chest. He looked up, and she caught a glimpse of the fear in his eyes just before he was dragged backwards and flung against the wall.

"You couldn't resist, could you?" Vincent had Jonathan by his coat, their faces only inches apart.

"Let him go!" Bridgett tried to make her voice firm, but her words came out in a ridiculous squeak.

"I will take great pleasure in ripping your head from your neck." Vincent shifted his hold, wrapping his fingers about Jonathan's neck. His victim gave a strangled gasp of surprise and began to struggle in earnest.

Bridgett rushed forward. "My Lord! You'll kill him!"

She pulled at his arm in vain. The Count behaved like a man possessed. Jonathan's face turned from bright red to a deep, ugly blue and his mouth worked frantically but no sound came forth.

"Vincent! Stop this instant!"

Bridgett breathed a sigh of relief as Marie came running around the corner, followed by two burly servants. Each man took one of the Count's arms, and after a brief struggle, managed to pull him back.

Marie glanced at Bridgett, her eyes glittering with anger. "Adjust your gown, madam, and go inside."

Bridgett tugged at her bodice. In that instant, she realized the gravity of the situation. If Marie hadn't interrupted, the Count would have committed murder. "Oh, God. I'm sorry. I didn't think... I didn't want..."

Finally free of the Count's vice-like grip, Jonathan took several steps backwards, gasping for breath. "Shut up, you whore. You wanted everything I was giving you."

The Count uttered a curse and lunged forward, but the servants held him back.

"Jonathan, I want you to leave here right now, and I don't ever want you to come back." Marie stepped between the two men. "Go now, before I order my brother's release and let him beat some sense into you."

Bridgett saw the glaze of hatred in the man's ice-blue eyes and feared he might argue, but he merely brushed past them and disappeared around the corner.

She looked at the Count, and saw that he was staring in her direction, his mouth twisted in contempt. She took a step back.

"Release me this minute." He wrenched his arms loose, but his eyes never left her face. "Leave us."

"Vincent, I don't think..." Marie placed her hand on his shoulder, but he didn't even glance at her.

"I said, leave us!"

"But..."

The Count whirled around. "Go, Marie. I'll tolerate no more of your interference. I've tried it your way, and look where it got me."

Bridgett watched the play of emotions that crossed her friend's face, and silently prayed for a reprieve.

Marie cast a questioning look in her direction, but Bridgett dared not speak.

"I'll wait for you inside." Marie turned, indicating for the servants to follow, and Bridgett bit her tongue to keep from calling her back.

The minute they were alone, the Count grasped her arm and pressed her back against the wall, effectively cutting off any route of escape.

Without warning, he grabbed the front of her gown and ripped it from neck to waist. He buried one hand in her hair and kissed her savagely, while brutally fondling her breast with the other.

She tried to twist away, but there was nowhere to go.

He broke their kiss, but kept his hand wrapped in her hair, holding her still while he lifted her skirts. She felt him release the front of his breeches, and a bubble of terror rose in her throat. She could hear herself babbling, begging him to stop, the words rushing out in broken sentences punctuated by sobs of fear.

She felt herself being lifted from the ground, the stone wall cutting into her back, and then she was slipping down as he drew her legs about his hips.

He grabbed her face and forced her to look into his eyes. "You are mine, bella mia, and mine alone." He pressed

upwards and she stiffened against the impending pain. "No other man will ever touch you again."

With a wild thrust, he filled her. She uttered a strangled cry and dug her nails into his shoulders. Closing her eyes, she held on as he battered her body against the castle wall. Tears trickled through her lashes, burning hot trails down her cheeks.

The Count lowered his head and flicked her nipple with his tongue. Fiery threads of pleasure spiraled downward from breast to belly.

*There is a fine line between pleasure and pain.*

She clutched at his head and he suckled her harder. He bucked his hips, plunging deeper with each upward thrust. The hard length of him slid across the sensitive nub of her clitoris and she gasped.



The Count raised his head. "Were you hot for him, bella mia? Did he make you wet, with his kisses and sweet words?"

He'd slowed his pace, punctuating each sentence with a long, slow thrust. He pulled her close, shielding her back from the sharp hardness of the wall, his hands cupping her buttocks.

Bridgett tried to concentrate, tried to answer, but the tight heat in the pit of her stomach seemed to demand her attention. She shook her head and bit her lip, losing herself in the passion she read in his smoke-gray eyes.

"Answer me, Bridgett. Did you find your answer?"

With sudden clarity, she understood what he was asking her. It was the same thing she'd been thinking, just seconds before he'd appeared on the terrace.

"Yes, milord," she whispered, "I found my answer."

He studied her face, but continued his languid strokes. "Tell me."

"I am doomed."

He raised a brow and cocked his head. "Doomed?"

"I felt nothing. Nothing at all."

He remained silent for a minute, then nodded, seemingly satisfied. "And now? Do you still feel nothing?"

"Now?" Bridgett gave a harsh, strangled laugh. "My breasts seem to reach for you of their own accord. The juices of my desire are even now dribbling down my thighs. My heart thumps within my chest so rapidly, I fear it might burst." She paused for breath, and closed her eyes against his piercing stare. "Oh, I feel, milord. I feel a great deal."

His deep growl of pleasure echoed in the darkness. He bucked his hips, and she sucked in her breath. He gripped her hips, digging into the soft flesh to force her hard against him.

Bridgett panted and her legs began to tremble. The tightness in her loins seemed to send her entire body to quivering and she whimpered against his neck. Something was happening. Something both wondrous and frightening, something she both sought and tried to deny.

"No!" The Count gave a final thrust, holding her close and grinding against her with his groin, then went completely still.

Realizing what he'd done, Bridgett pummeled his chest with her fists. "I hate you!"

She sobbed her frustration. "Damn you! Damn you to hell..."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "There is no need to damn me to hell, bella mia. For that

is certain to be my final destination."

His soft voice at her ear, his tone so full of self-recrimination, had a sobering effect. Bridgett drew a deep, shaky breath and pulled back.

"Put me down." She wondered at the empty detachment that had replaced the passion of moments before, but did not pause to consider its implication.

He lifted her away from him, and she suddenly found herself on her feet. Her legs gave way, and she would have fallen if he hadn't reached out to steady her.

Reluctantly, she allowed him to help her regain her footing, but pulled away as soon as she could stand of her own accord.

She turned away, unwilling to look at him any longer. "I would like to go to my room."

"I'm afraid that's impossible."

She swung back, ready to do battle. "What do you mean?"

"Our situation has changed. I can no longer trust you with your freedom." The Count did not even have the good grace to look at her when he spoke, choosing to adjust his clothing, instead.

Bridgett didn't hesitate. Pulling the tattered remains of her bodice together, she fled around the corner and down the length of the terrace. She heard him shout her name, but did not pause. She ran past the doors to the library and continued past several other entrances before she reached the far end of the castle. There, just before the walkway ended, was a final set of doors.

She could hear him, somewhere behind her, his footfalls echoing in the still night air as he raced toward her. She lifted the latch, praying it would not be locked, and pressed forward. The door swung open and she slipped inside, slamming it closed and fumbling in the darkness for a lock.

Her fingers slid across the smooth surface, and she choked on a sob when they failed to encounter any sort of catch. She waited, certain the Count would burst in at any moment. The seconds stretched into minutes, and still she stood with her back against the door.

Before her, the darkness was complete. Not even shadows pierced the inky blackness, and she shuddered as her imagination began to conjure up all sorts of horrid images. Her skin crawled at the thought of the spiders and other creeping creatures that likely lurked in the corners of the room.

When something scurried across the floor near her feet, she knew she would never have the courage to go forward.

Where was the Count? Surely he'd seen which door she had entered. Or had he? She tried to think where he'd been – how far behind her – when she'd dodged inside. Was it possible he'd made a mistake? That even now, he was searching for her in some other area of the castle?

As the minutes ticked by, she grew more certain that she'd somehow managed to elude him. Finally, she gathered the nerve to turn, intending to peek out and make her escape, should it be safe to do so.

"Oh, no." She pulled at the door, but it did not budge. "Oh, God, please no."

Gripped by an almost insane fear, she pounded on the solid panels until the skin of her knuckles grew raw.

"Let me out!" She screamed over and over, until her voice grew hoarse with the effort.

Finally, exhausted and sore, she sank to her knees, resting her head against the wall. Around her, the darkness seemed alive, reaching out to enfold her in its evil embrace.

Bridgett buried her face in her hands and cried silently, paralyzed by her fear.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent slipped past the library doors, intent on reaching his destination without attracting the attention of his guests. He needed to be sure that Jonathan Wilder had been escorted from the premises before he focused on other, more pressing problems.

He quickened his pace. A stroke of luck had led Bridgett to choose that particular entrance, but he dared not leave her alone there too long.

It had been a year since anyone had entered that area of the castle, a year since he'd locked it off and forbidden his servants from venturing beyond the heavy oak doors that led to his father's chambers. He'd completely forgotten about the small door that led to the terrace. From the inside, it was hidden beyond a silk screen and not easily noticed. Like all the entrances to that particular wing, the outside door locked from both sides with sliding bolts situated near the top of the frame. When Bridgett had entered, he'd automatically thrown the lock, effectively cutting off her escape. She would be safe there for a few minutes, at least.

"Vincent!"

He turned and stopped.

"Where are you going?" Marie panted, out of breath from her headlong dash down the corridor.

"To ascertain whether you made sure our friend actually left the property."

His sister bristled, throwing her shoulders back and glaring up at him. "I watched him leave, myself."

"Very good." He turned to walk away, but she grabbed his arm.

"Where is she, Vincent? What have you done to her?"

He whirled around. "No less than she deserves, I assure you. I meant what I said, Marie; I'll tolerate no more interference from you. The girl is mine."

"Yours?" Her voice turned icy. "She is a human being, Vincent. A flesh and blood woman, not some object for you to use as you please."

Guilt tickled the edges of his conscience, but he pushed it back. "Marie, I..."

"Ah, there you are. What luck, finding you here, unarmed and essentially walled in."

Vincent instinctively propelled his sister behind him.

"You watched him leave yourself, hmm?" He muttered under his breath before calmly turning to address the intruder. "You were instructed to leave. You should have kept going."

Jonathan laughed, a wild sound that matched the insane gleam in his eyes. "You're hardly in a position to make threats, old boy. As you can see, I *do* have the upper hand."

He waved the pistol in the air and took a step forward.

"What do you want?"

"Why, to finish what I started. I've never left a woman unsatisfied, Renault. You, of all people, should know that's not good form."

Vincent wanted to laugh at the irony of such a statement. Bad form to leave a woman unsatisfied? Bridgett would most likely agree whole-heartedly.

Common sense told him to let it go, but he couldn't resist a bit of goading. "I'm afraid you are too late."

"What do you mean?"

"I've already finished what you started, Wilder. Your...services...are no longer needed." Behind him, Marie gasped and poked him in the ribs, but he ignored her.

Jonathan paled, and Vincent experienced a rush of satisfaction that his jibe had hit its mark.

"You son of a bitch." Jonathan took another step forward and took aim. His lips curled in the semblance of a smile. "You think you've won again, but this time you've pushed me too far. Take me to her. Now."

Vincent glanced past his opponent and his heart skipped a beat. At the far end of the corridor, someone had slipped into the shadows of a doorway. Vincent struggled to stay focused on the conversation at hand, hoping to hold Jonathan's attention long enough for whomever it was to creep closer.

"Why? I told you, she doesn't need you."

"Oh, she'll need me, all right. After a few nights in my keeping, she'll forget all about you, Renault. It will be my cock she craves, my name she screams in ecstasy, have no doubt."

Vincent clenched his fists and started forward, but Marie had hold of his coattails and she pulled him back.

"Enough talk! Let's go." Jonathan brandished the gun in the air, indicating for them to move.

At that instant, Thomas rushed forward, a long metal poker held in both fists. He raised the weapon over his head, wielding it like a club.

Jonathan started to whirl about, but it was too late. Thomas brought the poker down hard. Seconds later, it was over.

Vincent stooped to retrieve the pistol, which had flown through the air to land at his feet.

"Is he alive?"

Thomas looked up from where he knelt beside Jonathan's prone body. "He is, My Lord. What shall I do with him?"

"Take him outside and tie him to his horse. I want two guards assigned as escort. This time, I want it seen to that he makes it all the way to London." He paused.

"When he comes to, give him this warning. Tell him if I ever see him again, I will slit his throat."

Marie stepped forward. "Are you not going to summon the magistrate?"

"What on earth is going on here?"

The shrill question rang from the end of the corridor. Vincent sighed and moved around Jonathan to approach his guest.

"Madam White, everything is fine, I assure you." He turned back to Thomas. "Take care of it. Now."

"I heard shouting, and thought something might be amiss." The gray-haired woman glanced at the still body on the floor. "Is he dead?"

Vincent took her hands and tried to turn her, to head her back toward the library before she could cause more of a stir, but already other guests were coming out to investigate. He continued on, hoping that Thomas would listen and remove Jonathan before anyone else caught sight of him.

"No, of course he's not dead! He just had too much to drink, that's all. Thomas will take him upstairs to sleep it off." He spoke solicitously, patting the old woman's hand and giving her his most innocently charming smile.

They'd reached the crowd of onlookers, and the explanation was as much for their benefit as Madam White's. Vincent spread his arms and ushered them back into the library, closing the doors behind him to block off the scene in the corridor.

"Everything is fine, ladies and gentlemen. He'll suffer from a headache come morning, but he'll survive."

Several people chuckled at that, and Vincent joined in before adding, "Enjoy yourselves, everyone. The night is young."

The curious dispersed, leaving him alone near the door. He breathed a sigh and made his way along the wall to the entrance of the dining room. Several people looked at him oddly, but he ignored them and headed toward a table laden with refreshments.

He needed a stiff drink. His hands shook and the decanter clattered against the side of the glass as he poured himself a hefty portion of sherry.

He downed it in one gulp, refilled, and then drained the glass a second time.

"What will that solve?"

"I don't need a keeper, Marie."

He felt her move up behind him and stiffened when she placed a hand on his shoulder. She was quiet for a moment, then sighed. "I suppose you deserve it. It's not every day one looks in the face of death and lives to tell about it."

Her words made him feel guilty, and he turned to face her. "I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

"Fine," she murmured, but her eyes were troubled. "It is I who should apologize. I thought he'd gone, Vincent, truly I did."

"It's not your fault. If I hadn't allowed myself to become, distracted, earlier, this wouldn't have happened." He paused, a sick feeling clenching his gut.

Marie cocked her head. "What wrong? You look positively ill."

"Bloody hell, I forgot all about her." He thrust his glass into Marie's hand and ran from the room.

## Chapter Fourteen

Bridgett sniffled and raised her head, peering into the room. Gathering her courage, she sat up. "I'm going to kill you for this."

She spoke aloud, comforted by the sound of her own voice. The darkness, so complete, seemed less threatening somehow when she did not have the silence to deal with as well.

Her legs tingled and she shifted, moaning as needles of pain prickled her skin.

"I can't sit here all night," she muttered, struggling to her feet.

She focused on the inky blackness before her, taking a step forward. A shuffling sound came from somewhere in front of her and she stopped dead. She waited, straining her ears and holding her breath. Her over-active imagination conjured up the image of a threatening specter, angered by her invasion of its abode.

"Get a hold of yourself," she whispered, and gripped the torn of edges of her bodice, as much to hold it together as to keep her hands from shaking. "Just take tiny steps. There has to be another door here somewhere."

She inched forward, one foot, two, then ran headlong into what felt like a stiff curtain. Reaching out tentatively, she ran her fingers along its surface until she found an edge. Her brow wrinkled in concentration as she examined the obstruction with her hands. A screen of some kind?

Adjusting her course, she continued on, praying she'd make it to the far wall without tripping over something and breaking a leg. She'd gone perhaps fifteen feet, when off to her left a door suddenly banged shut.

Panicked, she lifted her skirts and ran. Her knee struck something solid and she pitched forward. She landed with a thud, the air rushing from her lungs on impact.

Rolling onto her back, she lay still. She gasped for breath and stared up into the darkness as the unmistakable sound of footsteps drew near.

Suddenly, light filled the room. She blinked rapidly, temporarily blinded, and waited for her vision to clear.

"Are you all right?"

She closed her eyes, briefly. "No."

He came to stand above her. "Where are you hurt?"

Bridgett ignored him, staring at the shocking images above her head. A mural covered the entire ceiling. Voluptuous women and well-endowed men frolicked across the surface, engaged in every conceivable - and some not-so-conceivable - sexual activity.

Her skin heated with embarrassment, but she could not tear her eyes away from the morbidly fascinating scenes. Her gaze fell on one, in particular, that made her heart race and her mouth go dry. A man and a woman, positioned with their mouths to each other's groins, their lips and tongues seeking, tasting. A peculiar sense of excitement rushed through her veins.

"The one above the bed is my favorite." He'd dropped to one knee, his expression amused.

Bridgett looked without thinking, then jerked her gaze back to his face, both appalled and humiliatingly intrigued. She'd only caught a glimpse, but what she'd seen made her shiver. She closed her eyes, but the image seemed burned in her mind. One man. Two women. Their bodies entwined, their rapturous expressions captured forever by the stroke of the artist's brush.

"Would you like me to help you rise?" The Count interrupted her musings, his words a soft caress.

Struck anew by the anger that had sustained her for the last hour, Bridgett frowned. "Don't you dare touch me, you cur. Don't you ever touch me again."

She sat up and he rose, standing above her. She drew her legs beneath her and tried to gain her footing, only to fall back with a surprised cry as pain sliced up her leg.

The next instant, she found herself lifted by strong arms as the Count cradled her against his chest and carried her to the bed.

"Don't put me there." She struggled furtively in his embrace.

He dropped her unceremoniously on the mattress, and dust billowed into the air. Bridgett sneezed and her eyes teared.

"I apologize for the sorry state of your bedding," he brushed his hand over the quilt, "but no one has been in here during the past year."

Bridgett scooted back against the headboard, carefully keeping her gaze away from the ceiling. Belatedly, she remembered the condition of her gown, and crossed her arms over her chest. "What is this place?"

"The locked wing."

She sighed. Did he truly think her simple? "I assumed as much, milord, but what is it?"

"These rooms belonged to my father. He spent most of his time in here, up until the day of his death."

She looked around. Tapestries covered the walls. Like the mural on the ceiling, each one depicted an explicit erotic scene. These pictures, however, were different. The expressions on the faces of the participants looked pained; several had their mouths open, as if they were screaming or crying out.

*There is a fine line...*

Bridgett shivered and returned her gaze to the Count. "I don't want to stay here."



"I'm afraid you have no choice." His eyes held a strange, far off gaze, and his lips were set in a thin, stubborn line. "You went too far tonight, bella mia. You can no longer be trusted."

Why, she wondered. Why must you always put this wall between us? She stared at him for a moment, then sighed.

"Why not just release me? You can't keep me locked up forever." It seemed they talked in circles, never achieving any level of understanding, and the effort made her weary.

"Impossible," he told her. "You are mine."

This last was said with such feeling, a passionate declaration of truth, and Bridgett caught her breath.

"You may as well accustom yourself to the fact," he continued, "for I have no intentions of letting you go."

He stalked to the door, and Bridgett bit her lip, fighting the urge to hurl insults at his stiff, unyielding back. She couldn't stay here. Couldn't remain under his control, a victim of her own traitorous reactions to his touch. She'd never be able to resist him; even now, she didn't want him to leave her alone. If she remained within his reach, she'd never regain whatever dignity, whatever self-respect she'd once had.

"I'll send for some water and fresh clothing," he told her. "Right now, I must see to my guests."

He turned, his lips curling into the semblance of a smile. "But do not fear, bella mia, I'll be back. Meanwhile, please, make yourself at home."

He slammed the door in his wake, the sharp click of the lock sliding home echoing through the cavernous chamber.

Bridgett leapt from the bed, gasping as white-hot pain sliced from her knee up through her thigh.

She adjusted her stance, tentatively placing weight on her injured leg, testing its limits. Carefully, she limped about the chamber. There had to be another way out. If the Count thought she'd sit quietly, awaiting his pleasure, he had another thing coming.

But as she inspected the confines of her cell, her anger subsided, only to be replaced by an intense curiosity. Though obviously untended for many months, the room had an opulent, hedonistic beauty. Rich velvet curtains, the color of blood, covered the floor-to-ceiling windows and puddled on the floor. A large, intricately carved table stood in the center of the room, surrounded by eight tapestry-covered high backed chairs. An enormous armoire graced the far wall. As tall as a man, and twice as wide, it dominated the room.

Bridgett rounded the table. She pulled at the latch on the cabinet, and the large door swung open on silent hinges. The heavy odor of cedar filled the air, tickling her nose.

"What in the world?" She scanned the shelves in confusion. Unlike the room itself, the interior of the cupboard was immaculately clean. Each shelf held half a dozen or

more red silk pillows. And each pillow held a different . . . what? She stuck her head in for a better look, then jumped back.

"Good God," she whispered. "They look like . . ."

Blushing, but unable to resist another peek, she took a tentative step closer. Curiously, she examined the cabinet's contents, her eyes wide. Lying on each pillow, like precious gems on display, were what appeared to be replicas of a man's penis. All different shapes and sizes, some more intriguing than others, many of them frightening in their size.

She raised on tiptoe, examining the items on the top most shelves, her anxiety rising. There were small whips and other leather items, and a rope with tiny knots tied every few inches. Bridgett stepped back, slamming the cabinet door.

She turned, scanning the tapestry-covered walls with new understanding. Each heavy cloth panel depicted a different sexual scenario, and in each, at least one of the items from the cupboard was being...used.

"My God," she whispered, crossing her arms to ward off a chill. She tried to imagine her Count as a young boy, growing up in a home where such items – such behavior – existed, but the thought made her stomach churn. She shook her head. Surely the room had always been off-limits, even back then. No parent would subject a child to such...such depravity.

She turned away, forcing her thoughts back to her original intent, scanning the room for a means of escape. Crossing to the outside wall, she pulled back the draperies, then let them fall back when she realized the windows were solid glass panels. Other than the two doors, the one leading to the terrace and the other to the hall, there appeared to be no other way into – or out of – the room.

Her injured knee throbbing, she limped back to the bed. As she crawled onto the thick mattress, her gaze went to the headboard. Two iron rings hung from each solid post, a length of chain slung between them. Heart hammering, she curled into a ball in the middle of the bed, closing her eyes against the sights and images surrounding her. Concentrating on the steady beat of her heart, she prayed for a means to escape, if not in earnest, then at least into sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent shifted the bundle of bedding into one arm and paused outside the door, holding up a hand to the servants behind him, indicating they should wait. He cocked his head, intent on catching any sound that might indicate she waited for him, just inside, ready to make her escape. He listened to the silence for a few minutes, then slowly lifted the latch, pushing open the door a few inches at a time.

She lay on the bed, curled up like a child, one fist tucked beneath her chin.

He drank in the sight of her, a rush of warmth spreading through his chest at her innocence, her exquisite features so lovely in repose. All night he'd battled with his

demons, fought the urge to leave his bed and go to her. At first light, he'd given in, no longer able to resist her siren-like pull.

Turning to the servants, he waved them inside before placing his bundle on a nearby chair. "Set the bath up over there, near the hearth," he whispered. "And be quick about it."

While his men did his bidding, Vincent occupied himself with laying a fire, coaxing the tiny sparks, fanning them into a bright orange flame.

"Where would you like me to put these, milord?"

Vincent looked up from his task into the wide-eyed stare of a young serving wench. She held a tray of food in shaking hands. Draped over her arm were the gowns he had ordered made the day after Bridgett had unleashed her fury on her wardrobe.

"Put the tray on the table," he ordered her, "and the gowns on a chair."

He turned to the other servants, who had finished setting up the bath and stood staring about the room, their mouths hanging open.

"Get out of here, all of you!" Vincent stood, pointing toward the door.

The servants moved en masse, quickly making their exit. Vincent followed, bolting the door behind them.

He turned, leaning against the solid oak panel, and surveyed the room. And like a dog trained to the hunt, his body reacted instinctively. His cock stirred, growing painfully stiff within the confines of his breeches. Memories, swift and clear, flooded his mind. How old had he been? Eight? Ten? The first time he'd seen his father's private chamber, he'd reacted much as his servants had. Stunned. Frightened. And the fear had turned to terror, then later – much later – to an obsession he could not control.

His gaze drifted back to the bed, where Bridgett slept on, blissfully unaware of her surroundings. Her torn dress hung open, exposing her breasts to his view. Vincent licked his lips, a sheen of sweat coating his brow, and stepped away from the door.

He stood over her, never taking his eyes off her face, as he disrobed. She had the longest eyelashes. His gaze drifted lower. And the fullest, most delectable lips. As he watched, those lips parted and she sighed in her sleep.

"Bridgett," he whispered, and her eyes fluttered in response. Gently, he shook her shoulder, but she only moaned and rolled onto her back. "Good God, woman, you could sleep through a war."

She frowned in her sleep, grunting some unintelligible response. Vincent grinned, his lust temporarily replaced with amusement.

Crossing to the table, he chose a cup from the tray of food, then used it to scoop some warm water from the tub.

"Bridgett," he whispered, standing over her once again. "It's time to wake up."

He lifted the cup and tilted it slightly. A few drops of water dribbled over the rim, splattering her neck and breasts.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What? Who?" Bridgett sputtered and brushed at her face, her eyes flying open. She sat up and fixed him with an angry glare. "You . . .you imbecile! What on earth were you thinking?"

"I was thinking you sleep like the dead," Vincent told her, amusement threading his voice. "The castle could fall around your ears and you'd merely yawn and roll over."

Her chin notched up. "I was tired."

"Hmm... Too much...stimulation last evening, my dear?"

She crossed her arms over her chest, her gaze dropping toward his midsection, then flying back to meet his eyes. "Apparently," she muttered, "I'm not the only one who's been...stimulated."

Vincent raised a brow. "Touché. Would you like to bathe?"

Glad for the distraction, Bridgett slipped from the bed. Belatedly, she remembered her injured knee, and her leg crumpled beneath her weight. She fell forward, but the Count caught her easily, scooping her into his arms.

"Put me down, you big oaf." She struggled half-heartedly in his embrace, her mind registering the smoothness of his skin, the heat emanating from his body as he held her close.

He crossed to the tub. "Hold still, you silly woman, before I drop you in."

He set her carefully on her feet. "Take my hand to steady yourself while you undress," he ordered.

She limped back, eyeing him warily. "I think I can manage, thank you."

He stared at her for a moment, then shrugged. "Have it your way. But you have ten seconds to get in that tub before I put you in, clothed or no."

Bridgett stifled the angry retort that rose to her lips and turned her back, facing away from his unnerving presence. Balancing with one hand on the back of a nearby chair, she managed to pull her tattered gown over her head. She tossed it aside unceremoniously then, without looking in the Count's direction, carefully slipped into the tub.

She sank into the warm depths, closing her eyes at the pure pleasure of it.

"Move forward."

Bridgett ignored him, hoping he'd take the hint and leave her in peace to enjoy her bath. Silence reigned for several moments, and she sighed, the tension draining from her tired limbs.

Warm lips brushed her own, a feather-like touch, whisper soft. The kiss soothed more than it aroused, leaving a contented peacefulness in its wake. She lay back in the bath, resting her head against the rim. For a moment, she imagined herself in another

room, in another time and place. The lady of the castle, basking beneath the appreciative attention of an adoring husband.

"You look positively ravishing". His voice came close to her ear, his breath warm against her skin. Little hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention, and a prickle of heat raced along her arms.

He nibbled on her earlobe and she shivered, shifting in the bath as little shocks of pleasure assaulted her senses.

She kept her eyes closed, concentrating her entire being on the way her body reacted to his touch. She gave herself over, allowing her fear and anger to slip away beneath the seductive lure of fantasy. Of the carnal desires that blossomed into an ache in the pit of her stomach.

His lips continued their torturous journey, nipping at a sensitive spot on her shoulder, then drifting lower, until he captured one of her nipples between his teeth. Bridgett sucked in her breath, her pulse hammering in her ears. Reaching out, she threaded her fingers through his hair, holding his head to her breast. She arched her back, and he slipped his arm beneath her. In one swift movement he managed to lift her, holding her against his chest as he climbed into the tub.

Bridgett blinked, suddenly finding herself sprawled on his lap, staring into his smoldering eyes.

*I love you.* The thought came in an instant, so loud and clear she wondered if she'd spoken the words aloud. And quick on its heels came a pain so great, so overwhelming, she placed her hand over her mouth to stifle a sob. Eyes filling with tears, she averted her gaze, gasping for breath as her chest tightened with despair. How could she love a man who did not, could not, love her in return?

"What is it, bella mia?" The Count took her chin in his hand and turned her face, his gaze filled with concern. "Why do you cry? Is your knee causing you pain?"

Bridgett took a deep breath, gathering her fractured emotions, and swiped at her eyes. "'Tis a bit uncomfortable, my lord, sitting atop you like this."

In answer, he shifted her weight, spreading his long legs inasmuch as the tub would allow.

"Turn around," he instructed.

She took his hand and twisted around, until she sat chest-deep in the water between his thighs.

Holding herself stiff, she tried not to think about the way he pressed, long and hard, against her backside.

Strong hands fell on her shoulders, gently kneading her knotted muscles. He used his thumbs, applying swirling pressure at the base of her neck. Bit by bit, she relaxed beneath his skillful touch, until she drifted back to snuggle against his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close, her head nestled beneath his chin.

"I wish . . ." he said, and his tone held a rare note of wistfulness.

Bridgett held her breath and waited, but the silence stretched like an ocean between them. She tipped her head back, taking in his far away expression. "Yes, milord? What do you wish?"

He blinked and glanced down, his lips curving in a tiny smile. Lifting his hand, he brushed his finger down her cheek. "Never mind, mi amore, it matters not."

Bridgett lowered her gaze, disappointment squeezing her heart. For a moment, she had thought – had hoped . . . She gave herself a mental shake, berating herself for a fool. No more fantasies, no more illusions.

"The water grows cool," he said, rising to his feet.

Bridgett shivered as cold air met her exposed back. She looked up, staring at the hand he held out to assist her.

"Come, cara mia," he urged her, his voice husky and deep.

She took his hand and he lifted her swiftly to her feet, pulling her tight against his chest.

"I wish . . ." His voice caught and he cleared his throat. "I wish to take you to bed."

## Chapter Fifteen

"Ah, bella mia, you're trembling." He ran his fingertips down her side, delighting in the softness of her skin. He raised his gaze to her face, taking in her wide-eyed stare and slightly parted lips. "Is it fear that makes you quiver, mi amore, or desire?"

Her tongue darted out, sliding across her full upper lip, but she remained mute, staring into his eyes.

"How does it feel to be completely at another's mercy, unable to resist?"

As if in response to his question, she moved her outstretched arms, the chains rattling as they swayed back and forth.

He smiled. "Testing their strength? I assure you, they'll hold fast."

He watched the expression on her face, the sparkle of anger warring with desire in the depths of her eyes.

"I could do anything to you," he continued, "anything at all. I could lick my way down the entire length of your body. Would you like that, bella mia? Would you like to feel my tongue on your neck, your breasts, your thighs?"

A deep flush rose in her cheeks and she turned her head, biting her lower lip. Vincent laughed, delighting in her response. Despite her pleas to the contrary, her passion ran deep. He touched his cheek where she'd left her mark, clawing at him when she'd realized he meant to shackle her to the bed. Anger. Passion. Pleasure. Fear. They all came into play here in this room. They always had.

He rose to his knees, leaning over to rain kisses down her neck, across her breasts. He captured her nipple in his mouth, sucking it deeply, and she groaned. The chains above their heads clattered and swayed.

Carefully, he teased her, using his mouth and hands, working his way down across the smooth expanse of her stomach to the warm, lightly scented space between her legs. Vincent breathed deep, drawing in the smell of her excitement, lapping languidly at the soft flesh of her inner thighs. *More intoxicating than the rarest of perfumes.* He nibbled his way upward, seeking the source of her essence, his head spinning as vicious memories clouded his brain, as past and present converged. He ran his tongue up and down her slit, swirling it across her clitoris. As if from across a great expanse, he heard her moan, her whispered pleas of excitement, felt her strain upward to meet his seeking mouth. Plunging his tongue into her liquid depths, he feasted upon her body like a man half-starved. She bucked her hips and he slipped his hands beneath her ass to hold her close, working her into a frenzy.

"Please!" She strained against him. "I can't . . . Oh, God . . . I want."

Her cries rose into a crescendo, shocking him into awareness and he drew back. His entire body trembling, he knelt between her parted thighs, struggling to regain his control. He glanced away, marshalling his emotions.

"Milord?"

Her husky voice sent a chill up his spine. Running a shaky hand through his hair, he drew a shuddering breath and met her gaze.

"I can't," he told her, watching the warmth fade from her eyes at his words. For a brief moment, a part of him wished things were different, wished *he* were different. That he could give her what she wanted, anything to bring the soft, passionate glow back to her eyes. He shook his head, chasing those thoughts away. He could not allow her, allow *any* woman, such power.

"You can't? Disbelief and anger warred in her tone. "You can't, or you won't?"

Vincent bent forward, bracing himself with his hands on either side of her luscious body. God, she was beautiful. Her hair spread out across the pillows like a halo of gold, framing her near perfect face. He wanted her. Needed her. Mindlessly.

"Ah, bella mia," he whispered, "I'm sorry."

He slid forward, bringing his lower body up until he straddled her. The sight of her, shackled beneath him, even the anger blazing in her eyes, drove him mad.

Vincent rubbed his aching erection across the silky expanse of her stomach. "God, you're so hot."

Inching forward, he took her breasts in his hands and brought them together, sliding his cock between them. Catching her gaze, he stared into her eyes as he moved slowly, back and forth.

He gently pinched her nipples and she bit her lip, a low moan rumbling in her chest. Her pupils were dilated, and her breath came in short, shallow gasps.

Moving upward, he placed his knees on either side of her neck. Taking his hard shaft in his hands, he brushed it against her lips. "Open for me," he whispered, exerting the slightest pressure.

She moaned, deep in her throat, but complied. Placing his hands on the headboard, he eased forward, sliding into the moist heat. He closed his eyes, his mind a blank to everything but the exquisite pleasure that spiraled through his groin. Slowly, carefully, he pressed deeper, until the tip of his cock touched the back of her throat and she squirmed beneath him. Sweat peppered his brow as he fought for control, unwilling to hurt her, but driven by a need so fierce it could not be denied.

"Tip your head back," he managed to instruct her through the haze of lust clouding his brain. He reached between them, raising her chin, then pushed forward. Another inch, and he'd buried himself fully.

Slowly, he withdrew, then slid back, setting up a gentle rhythm, sinking deeper with each inward thrust. Beneath him, Bridgett arched her back, pressing her breasts against his ass.



"Ah, God," he ground out, gripping the headboard until his fingers ached. "That's it, bella mia, take me deep."

She moaned, and his cock vibrated with the sound. His control slipped and he increased the pace of his thrusts, gasping when she met his movements by tightening her lips against his shaft. Each time he withdrew, she ran her tongue up its length. Vincent tipped his head back, eyes screwed shut, and gave himself up to his need. His muscles twitched and grew taught, the tension building, frightening in its intensity.

"Oh, God. Oh, yes." He pistoned his hips, once, twice, his body jerking, blood rushing to his head. For a moment, his vision grew black, then bright lights exploded like stars behind his eyelids. The force of his orgasm shook him to the core and he cried out, spilling his seed in one final thrust.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bridgett lay motionless, body tingling, completely attuned to the Count's ragged breathing. Tentatively, she ran her tongue across the tip of his softening member. He jerked, then pressed deeper, and she closed her eyes, sighing against him. He held perfectly still, his breath coming in harsh gasps. An ache built in the back of her neck and she shifted, seeking a more comfortable position.

"Don't move," he whispered. "God, please don't move."

She stilled, waiting for him to recover. When he pulled away, she turned her head into the pillow. Hot tears scalded her cheeks and she bit back a sob.

"Why do you cry?" He turned her face, but she jerked away from his grasp.

"Leave me alone," she whispered, her voice catching, "just go away and leave me alone."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," he told her, stroking the underside of her arm. "I made a promise, and I intend to keep it."

Against her will, her body responded and she shifted restlessly beneath his touch.

"Even now, in your anger, you still want to know what awaits you on the other side," he said, propping himself up on one arm, his steady gaze never leaving her face.

He cupped her breast, brushing her taut nipple with the pad of his thumb. Bridgett caught her breath as fiery heat spread through her limbs.

He abruptly moved away. Slipping from the bed, he padded across the room. Through half-closed eyes, she watched him, captivated by the rippling muscles in his buttocks and legs.

He opened the armoire and, reaching in, withdrew one of the smooth wooden phalluses.

As he approached the bed, she tugged at her chains. "You're not," she began, and her voice cracked, "you can't mean to . . ."

He flashed a grin, holding the artificial penis up for her inspection. "Should I choose a larger one?"

Bridgett eyed him warily, shifting her lower body as far away as possible as he joined her on the bed.

"If you think I'll lie here and allow you to use that thing on me, you've got another thing coming," she told him.

He smiled, dropping to lie beside her. Propping his head on his hand, he lightly stroked her thigh with the tip of the phallus.

Bridgett shivered as the cold, impersonal object slid along her skin. Judging his earnest intent, her anger bubbled back to the surface. How dare he! He couldn't bring himself to pleasure her with his body; did he honestly believe she'd accept such a poor substitution?

Jerking her leg away, she tugged at the chains binding her wrist.

"Get away from me," she said, "and take your disgusting toy with you."

He sat up, staring at her in silence for a moment, then reached above them to unhook her wrists. Free of her shackles, she rolled off the bed and limped across the room. Grabbing a gown, she slipped it over her head, her anger growing as she realized the gossamer dress did little to cover her nakedness. She whirled to face him.

He lay on the bed, his arrogant confidence evident in his smile. The sight of his magnificent body sent a wave of heat rushing through her limbs, but she pushed it back, concentrating on her anger.

"You've humiliated me, *used* me, for the last time," she told him, hands on hips.

He sighed and sat up, propping himself against the headboard, arms folded across his chest. "We've been over this before."

"Only because you don't listen," she told him,

fighting for control. Somehow, she had to make him see

reason. They couldn't go on this way. "You're so used to controlling everything and everyone around you, but you can't control me."

"I own you."

Bridgett opened her mouth to respond, then snapped it shut. What was the use? She whirled around, refusing to let him see her frustration. Talking to him was like talking to a door. He remained hard, unyielding. And each time they came together, her anger and resentment notched higher. She needed to end the endless torture of their relationship, before he drove her mad.

"Milord, I would have you release me," she said, holding herself stiff with resolve, "but I can not force you to comply with my wishes."

She turned, facing him, and rushed on before he had a chance to respond. "However, know this. You will not touch me again."

He rolled off the bed and stalked toward her, like a huge cat approaching its prey. She watched him warily, ready to bolt should he get too close, but he stopped a few steps away. His eyes flashed, but she did not break his gaze.

"And how will you stop me, cara mia?"

"You said you would not force me," she answered, hiding her shaking hands in the folds of her gown. "I assume you are a man of your word."

He looked ready to speak, but then a smile slowly split his features and he nodded. He turned away, reaching to gather his clothes from where he'd dropped them near the tub. Bridgett watched him dress, breathing a sigh of relief that he had chosen not to argue, but suspicious of his motives. Surely she hadn't won so easily.

She stood like a statue in the middle of the room, waiting for the anger, expecting him to fly into a rage, but he ignored her and crossed to the door.

"I have business to attend," he told her without turning. "I'll be back when you've come to your senses."

As soon as the door closed behind him, Bridgett limped forward and threw the lock. Two could play his game, she thought, smiling with satisfaction. He may be able to keep her locked up, like an animal in a cage, but she would no longer be forced to suffer his presence.

Releasing a weary sigh, she shuffled over to the table. She eased herself into a chair and chose a bit of cheese from the tray. Chewing mechanically, she barely tasted the pungent morsel. Her gaze fell on the rumpled bed, and a wave of sadness brought a lump to her throat. How could such passion breed so much pain? How could she want him, love him, when he thought so little of her?

Despite her anger, even knowing he did not care for her, her traitorous body still yearned for his touch. Her foolish heart still longed for his presence. Her gaze went to the door, and she sighed. He had a key, and he would be back. Sooner or later, he would come to her, and when he did, she must hold fast to her resolve.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

"We have guests."

Vincent didn't look up from the papers strewn across his desk. He'd been working on the estate's finances all afternoon. The task had taken him twice as long as it should have, his concentration constantly broken by thoughts of Bridgett. Beautiful, mesmerizing, angry Bridgett.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Who?"

"Boswell and Carrington and...two others," Marie told him, stepping fully into the room.

Vincent raised his head, slowly absorbing his sister's words. His gut clenched, echoing the distress in Marie's expression. "What are they doing here?"

Shooting a worried glance over her shoulder, Marie pushed the door closed. "Boswell said they were in the area and got caught in the storm."

"What storm?" Vincent glanced at the drapery-covered window.

"The one that's brewing outside to the west." Marie inched closer to the desk, hands twisting and untwisting the folds of her skirt. "Vincent, they're asking to spend the night."

Vincent stood and rounded his desk. He draped an arm around his sister's shoulders. "Impossible. You told them to leave?"

"I...I couldn't," she said, her voice cracking.

"Well, I can," he told her. "You may wait here, if you like."

"Vincent, wait." Marie tugged at his sleeve. "You can't just send them out into the storm."

He paused, raising a brow. "I can't? 'Tis less than they deserve. Perhaps, if there is justice in this world, they will be struck by lightning - or the hand of God."

"One of their companions is a woman."

"A woman?" Vincent frowned. "Do you know her?"

Marie shook her head. "I've never seen her before, but she doesn't look...well. I - I had Thomas show her upstairs."

"Marie!"

"She was swaying on her feet. What was I to do? Let her drop into a faint in our entry?" Marie returned his glare.

Vincent shook his head in defeat. "I suppose you're right. Where did you put the others?"

"In the front parlor. I've already notified Cook there will be seven of us for dinner."

Vincent smiled grimly. "It appears you have everything under control."

"Dammit, Vincent, stop acting like a horse's ass," Marie said, batting at his arm.

Sensing the fear beneath her anger, Vincent relented. "I'm sorry. Chalk my poor behavior up to shock. I never expected to see them again."

"I prayed we never would," she answered, biting her lower lip. "But it's only one night. We'll send them on their way at first light."

Vincent nodded. He'd see to it, personally. Taking her hand, he tucked it in the crook of his arm. "Come along, then. Let's go greet our guests."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good evening, gentlemen," Vincent greeted the men gathered in his parlor. He deposited Marie in a chair near the fireplace, then turned, forcing a smile.

Boswell stood and extended his hand. "Vincent, my boy, good to see you."

Vincent inclined his head, unable to return the nicety. He shook hands, breaking contact as quickly as he could without being obvious. "What brings you here?"

Boswell grinned, his loose jowls flapping as he laughed. "Oh, you know," he said, winking at Carrington, who sat on the sofa next to another man whom Vincent had never seen before, "in for a bit of sport, and all that."

"I'm afraid you'll find none here," Vincent said, his voice tight. "All that ended when my father died."

"Ah yes, I heard about poor Remington's demise. A shame, my boy. A damn shame." Boswell tipped his head, his expression taking on a look of remorse. Vincent didn't buy it. Not for a minute.

He let the statement hang, refusing to be a party to such hypocrisy. Boswell and Carrington had known his father for years, but Vincent had no illusions they were friends. Allies, perhaps, in their pursuit of illicit pleasures, but not friends. People like his father, and these men, didn't have friends.

The silence grew into an uncomfortable chasm, and Boswell cleared his throat. "Yes, well. Good of you to take us in like this."

Vincent looked at the man seated beside Carrington. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your companion?"

Boswell nodded. "Ah, yes. James Worth, meet our host, Vincent Renault. And the lovely lady there is his sister, Marie."

"Lady Marie," Vincent corrected him. "Mr. Worth, is it? Have we met?"

"No, I'm certain you haven't," Carrington spoke up before the other man had a chance to answer. "We only became acquainted with the good fellow ourselves two days ago."

Vincent raised a brow, his curiosity piqued. "Is that so?" Carrington licked his lips, his gaze skating between the stranger and Vincent. "Ah, yes. We met over a game of cards."

Vincent turned away, busying himself pouring drinks for his guests as he analyzed the situation. They were lying. But why? And what could he do about it, short of calling them out? Behind him, the conversation turned to the weather and the impending storm. Their nervous chatter sent a tremor up Vincent's spine.

A gentle hand touched his arm, and Vincent looked down into Marie's upturned face. Her eyes were wide, her face pasty white.

"I'm going to check with Cook," she whispered.

Vincent inclined his head. "Go. You need not return. I will see you at dinner."

A look of relief flashed across her face and she released her breath. "Thank you."

Vincent waited until she'd slipped out the door, then turned.

"What about the woman?" Vincent asked. He handed fresh drinks to Boswell and Carrington. Mr. Worth, he noticed, still had a full glass, resting on his knee.

"Meg? A fine piece, that. Courtesy of our friend Worth, here," Carrington told him. "I'd offer you a taste of her talents, but I'm afraid she's rather...exhausted...at the moment."

Vincent sipped his drink, hiding his rage behind his glass.

"There are just the two of you here?" James Worth asked, breaking the silence.

"Why do you ask?" Vincent pinned the man with his gaze.

Mr. Worth shrugged. "Curiosity, I suppose."

"Dinner is served, Milord," the maid announced from the door.

Vincent released his breath. "Thank you, Suzette. Gentlemen? Shall we?"

His guests rose, and Vincent preceded them into the dining room.

Throughout the meal, Vincent kept the conversation turned toward everyday topics, hoping to ease Marie's distress. He listened carefully, all the while searching his mind for some plausible explanation for this unexpected visit. As the night wore on, he noticed several surreptitious glances pass between Boswell and Carrington. The two men would look toward Worth expectantly. They seemed nervous, and excitedly distracted. Worth, on the other hand, appeared oblivious to his companions' odd behavior, and concentrated on his meal, commenting appropriately when addressed, but adding nothing of substance to the conversation. Vincent sipped his wine, watching and listening for any clue that might explain their actions. Finally, Worth pushed back his plate and leaned back in his chair.

"My compliments to the cook," he said, splaying his hands across his expanding girth. He stretched, letting out an enormous belch. "I don't know about you men, but I could use a good night's sleep."

As if on cue, Boswell and Carrington nodded in unison, stifling yawns behind their hands.

"Yes," Carrington said, "feeling a bit horse-whipped, myself."

Boswell bobbed his head. "Exhausted. Vincent, old boy, you won't mind if we bid you good-night?" We've a long ride ahead of us tomorrow."

Vincent inclined his head. "By all means, don't let me keep you."

He stood, nodding to a nearby servant. "Bell, please show these gentlemen to their quarters."

His guests rose, issuing a series of goodnights. Vincent watched them file out, waiting until they were beyond hearing before he looked to Marie.

"There's something afoot," he told her, "but I don't know what. Boswell and Carrington couldn't wait to leave the table."

Marie pushed back her chair. "Why question good fortune? I don't think I could have stood another minute in their presence. Did you see that man's eyes? I could barely look at him."

"They were rather odd, but not something I haven't seen before. He's an albino, I believe. They lack pigmentation in their skin, hair and eyes." Taking in his sister's pale features and the dark circles that rimmed her eyes, Vincent cursed beneath his breath. "Why don't you go to bed, Marie? I'll take care of things here."

She raised her head, searching his face. "As if I could sleep with those...creatures...under my roof."

Vincent didn't argue. He shared her concerns. "Then read a book, relax, do something to take your mind off them being here."

Marie made no move to rise. "Vincent, we need to discuss our other guest."

Vincent looked at her quizzically, thinking she referred to the woman Boswell and Carrington had brought with them. "I dare say she's sleeping and will be quite well by morning."

"Not that guest, darling," she cast him a mildly reproving glance. "I was speaking of Bridgett."

Vincent glanced at the clock on the mantel. Ten o'clock. "I daresay she's sleeping, as well."

Immediately, an image of Bridgett, curled up on the bed as he'd found her earlier, sprang into his mind. He'd been sufficiently distracted the past few hours, but thoughts of Bridgett, the feelings she stirred within him, returned full-force.

"You can't keep her locked up indefinitely, Vincent," Marie told him. "I won't have it."

"I'm not letting her go!" Vincent raised his voice, then clenched his jaw, fighting for control. Marie raised one delicately arched brow, tilting her head and gazing up into his face. Vincent turned away from her too-knowing stare. Dammit. He sounded like a panicked boy. But that was just it. All day, he'd run over her parting words, his mood

growing blacker by the moment. She wanted her freedom. If he released her, she would leave. He couldn't let her go.

Marie stood, tossing her napkin on her plate. "Perhaps tonight isn't the right time to discuss this. But you must realize you can't keep her prisoner."

She stepped closer, placing a hand on his arm. Vincent stiffened, but did not pull away. "Sooner or later, you'll have to face the truth," she told him. "Hers, and yours."

She gave a light squeeze, then stood on tiptoe, placing a kiss on his cheek. "Good night, brother dear. Sleep well."

Vincent nodded, not trusting his voice. He waited until she'd gone, then poured himself another drink from the sideboard. Sipping the fiery liquid, he sat quiet and still, staring at the far wall. A half hour later, he'd made up his mind. He could not let her go. She belonged to him, and sooner or later, she would see the truth of it. Her truth. His. Marie was right, he couldn't keep Bridgett prisoner forever, but for the time being, until he'd managed to convince her to stay, she'd remain where she was.

He drained his glass, then set it on the table with a resounding thump, punctuating his decision. Tomorrow, he'd set about changing her mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bridgett moaned, tossing her head on the pillow, fighting the hands that held her down in her dream. Voices whispered in the darkness, hushed and excited.

She opened her eyes, shaking off the fog of sleep, and terror made her blood run cold. Two naked men knelt over her, one on each side of the bed. They held her, arms spread wide, their fingers biting into the flesh of her wrists. Something moved in the shadows, and she squinted into the darkness. Yellowish eyes glittered against pasty white skin, and she shivered in revulsion, certain the gates to hell had opened, releasing a demon onto the earth.

"Well hello there, lovely," the demon said, "I was hoping you'd wake up and join us. You should be dead by now, but perhaps this is even better. Maybe, between the three of us, we can fuck you to death."

Bridgett opened her mouth to scream, but his companion quickly covered her face with one beefy hand. "None of that, sweetheart. We can't have you waking up the whole household."

She stared at him, wide-eyed, as he chuckled good-naturedly. "You just keep quiet and lie still, and we're going to have a bit of fun."

His expression suddenly changed, his eyes narrowing. "I'm going to take my hand away. If you scream, I promise it's the last noise you'll ever make. You understand?"

Bridgett nodded. She understood all too well. There was no doubting their intent, and her throat constricted with fear.

"Hold both her hands," the man on her left said.



The two men shifted positions, one kneeling next to her face, holding her wrists in a vice-like grip above her head, the other turning his attention to the laces at the neck of her peignoir. He fumbled with them for a moment, pulling at the knots, then uttered an impatient curse. Grabbing a handful of the flimsy material, he jerked. The sheer gown ripped from bodice to hem.

"My God," the one who held her down said, "just look at them titties."

He squirmed on the bed, his engorged penis twitching near her cheek. Bridgett swallowed the bile that rose in her throat and turned her head, squeezing her eyes shut at the horror unfolding around her.

"Hurry up an' fuck her, Worth," he said, "so I can take my turn."

The demon wasted no time. He came at her from the end of the bed, yanking her thighs apart and crawling between them. His jutting erection brushing against her mound and Bridgett choked on her fear.

She struggled in earnest, twisting her legs and arms, trying to break her captor's grip.

"Hold her tight," the demon said, taking his cock in his hand and guiding it toward her. "This is going to be one hell of a ride."

He plunged forward. Bridgett twisted to the side, bringing her knee up into his groin as she finally found her voice and screamed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent bolted upright, kicking at the sheets twisted about his legs. Heart pounding, he stared wide-eyed into the darkness. He waited, holding his breath, for whatever noise that had brought him awake to repeat. And then he heard it. Loud and piercing, the scream echoed through the house. His blood turned to ice water, and the hair on his arms stood at attention.

*Bridgett.*

He sprang up, grabbing his pants from the chair and struggling into them as he hopped on one leg, then the other. He reached the door, then doubled back, whipping open the desk drawer and withdrawing his revolver. Checking it quickly to make sure it was ready to fire, he strode into the hallway, passing a stunned Marie who had just stepped from her room. "Stay here," he ordered, and flew down the stairs.

The door to his father's chamber stood ajar, and he swung it open, heedless of whatever danger might wait for him inside.

The sight that greeted him brought him up short,  
momentarily confused. He blinked, and understanding and a blinding rage, unlike anything he'd ever experienced,  
filled his mind. A heartbeat later, he rushed forward,  
dragging James Worth from the bed.

"What the..." Worth, hampered by his trousers that puddle around his ankles, staggered across the floor, arms flailing.

Boswell and Carrington jumped up, reaching for their clothes as they fled across the room.

"You sons of a bitches," Vincent growled. "I'll kill you."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Bridgett scramble up, backing against the headboard. Judging her unharmed, he turned his full attention on his guest.

He leapt forward, wrapping his hands around Worth's scrawny neck, digging his fingers into the soft, pasty flesh. Worth's eyes bulged and his mouth moved frantically, like a fish washed up on the beach.

"My Lord!" Vincent heard Bridgett's shout, but ignored her.

"Please, Vincent. Please stop."

A hand fell on his arm; her soft voice drew him back from the brink of insanity.

Vincent looked down into her pale, upturned face. He met her beseeching gaze, watched as her lips curled into a trembling smile, and knew. With every fiber of his

being, with every beat of his heart, he loved her. The shock of it, the utter impossibility, was like a physical blow. As if punched, he released his victim and fell back.

Worth immediately dropped to his knees. Head low, he gasped for breath. Vincent turned away, tugging a blanket from the bed to wrap around Bridgett's naked shoulders.

Carrington and Boswell suddenly bolted toward the door, but Vincent swung on them, gun raised. "Stop right there, or I'll blow your bloody heads off."

The two men froze.

Pistol still at the ready, Vincent pulled Bridgett close. She trembled in his arms, and he cursed.

"Vincent, what . . .?" Marie flew into the room, Thomas hot on her heels. She skidded to stop. "Oh, my God."

Vincent ignored her, and handed Thomas the gun. "Lock them in the cellars, and send someone for the constable. At Thomas' grim-faced nod, Vincent turned his attention back to Bridgett, lifting her in his arms.

"Tell the constable I'll be by first thing tomorrow morning," he said, striding to the door, "but Bridgett is not to be disturbed."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent tossed another shirt into his bag, then secured its buckled strap. Tossing it over his shoulder, he strode into the hallway. He paused at his sister's door and tapped lightly before he entered.

Marie sat near her bed. She looked up, raising a finger to her lips. Vincent nodded and motioned for her to join him in the hall.

"She's sleeping?" he asked, as Marie pulled the door closed behind her.

"Yes, finally, poor lamb." She looked up, smiling sadly. She shook her head. "How did they ever find her?"

"They bribed the maid. Carrington found her sneaking out the servants' entry, carrying a bag."

"Susan? But why would she do such a thing?"

Vincent grimaced. "They lied to her, said they were old friends. Of course, the money they gave her helped ease any pangs of disloyalty."

"I'll see she's dismissed immediately." Marie started to move away, but then her gaze fell on his bag and she frowned.

"You're leaving." A statement, not a question. She didn't even sound surprised.

Vincent nodded. "You'll take care of her?"

"Of course I'll take care of her," Marie scathingly said, "but why are you leaving?"

Vincent couldn't meet her eyes. He looked beyond her shoulder.

"He raped her." He nearly choked on the words. "He used her, and it's my fault."

Marie gripped his arm, giving it a good shake. "It's not your fault! How could you have known?"

"I knew they were up to something," he said, gritting

his teeth against his rising anger. "I should have thrown them out the minute I knew they were here!"

"If you feel this way, then why are you leaving? Stay here. Apologize for whatever it is you think you did wrong, and help her heal." Marie's voice rose in a furious whisper.

Vincent shook his head. "You were right."

"Of course," Marie quipped, then smiled. "What was I right about?"

"I brought her here. It fell to me to protect her."

"From Worth? Or from yourself?"

Vincent sighed, searching his sister's face, then nodded. "You understand why I must leave."

She shook her head. "No, I only understand what drives you. And I know you'll go, no matter what I say. But at least stay until she wakes up. Say good-bye. She'll be devastated if you go without telling her."

Vincent shook his head, sensing her motives. "It won't make any difference, Marie. I'm still going to leave."

Marie turned away with an angry shake of her head.

Hand on the doorknob, she threw a scathing glance over her shoulder. "Then go. Run away. We'll survive without you. We always do."

She strode down the hall. Vincent stared at her stiff back until she disappeared down the stairs then, mind made up, walked away.

## Chapter Seventeen

Vincent started up the tavern steps, stomping the snow from his boots onto the risers. He pushed open the door and a blast of warm air hit him in the face. Several heads turned in his direction, but he ignored them and headed straight for the bar.

"What'll you have?" The barkeep asked.

Vincent settled on a low stool and nodded toward the row of bottles on a shelf against the wall. "Give me a whiskey."

While the barkeep turned to pour his drink, Vincent glanced at the man sitting next to him, his head bent over a mug. The man, obviously a gentleman judging by the cut of his coat, chose that moment to look up.

"What's a fine dandy like yourself doing in a place like this?"

Vincent shrugged. He'd asked himself that same question a half-dozen times since he'd turned into the tavern's wide front drive. He took a long swig of whiskey, shuddering as it burned down his throat.

"I know a few people hereabouts," he said, keeping his answer deliberately vague.

The man perked up. "Oh? Who?"

Vincent cringed, recognizing his mistake. "I misspoke," he said, "I should have said I knew someone from here. Man named Morton."

"Well, isn't that somethin'? I'd say that's quite a coincidence. Just so happens that's who I came to see." The man extended his hand. "Name's Pickering. Lawrence Pickering, Esquire, at your service."

Vincent took Pickering's hand, keeping a straight face to hide his surprise. What business did Bridgett's father have with a solicitor? "Vincent Renault."

"He just left."

Vincent frowned. "Who just left?"

"Morton. Didn't you say that's who you'd come to see?" Pickering's tone echoed Vincent's confusion.

"Oh, yes. I mean, no. I didn't come to see him. I was just passing through," Vincent told him. "But you say he just left?"

"Yep. Went to fetch his daughter."

A slice of unease raced up Vincent's spine. "His daughter?"

Pickering's gaze turned wary. "Thought you said you knew him."

"I meant, which daughter?" Vincent said, hurrying to put the man at ease. He hid his growing anxiety behind a friendly smile, and took a fortifying sip of whiskey before adding, "I know he has more than one."

Pickering seemed to relax. "Ah, that he does. Perhaps I should have said *stepdaughter*. Bridgett's the youngest."

Vincent gripped his glass in his fist, struggling to remain calm. Bridgett's father had gone to get her. When? For what purpose. The man beside him held the answers. Vincent plastered a friendly smile on his face and signaled the barkeep. "Another round," he said, "and bring one for my friend, here."

Pickering grinned, raising his mug and draining it in one long gulp. Tiny rivulets of ale dribbled down the corners of his mouth and he wiped them away with his sleeve. "Mighty kind of you, stranger. Mighty kind."

Vincent waited until their drinks were replenished, then raised his shot glass in a salute. "To new friends," he toasted.

As he'd hoped, Pickering drained more than half his glass. Counting on the ale to loose his companion's tongue, Vincent nodded his encouragement. "Nothing like a fine ale on a cold winter's day."

"Aye, that's for certain," Pickering said, and took another swig.

Vincent noted the way his speech had turned a bit sluggish, and the slight slur of his words.

"So, why did old Harry go for Bridgett?" he asked. "Last I heard, he couldn't wait to be rid of her."

"Is that so?" Pickering's brows raised and his mouth turned down at the corners. "Didn't know nothing about that. Morton said she'd left a while back. He seemed real concerned for her safety."

Vincent nearly choked on his whiskey. Coughing lightly, he shrugged, hoping for an air of nonchalance. "I see. Well, what made him decide it's time to bring her home?"

Pickering smiled. "Now, you know I can't tell you that. That's privileged information."

Vincent pushed back his anger and gritted his teeth against the growing sense of urgency. Switching tactics, he asked, "How long ago did he leave? I'd like to see him before I move on."

"Should be any day now. He told me he'd be back in a week, maybe less, and it's nigh on that now."

"You've been waiting on him all that time?"

"Actually, I only just arrived. He'd been looking for her for the last several months. Sent me a post last week saying he'd finally found her, and would be bringing her home. I'd have stayed in London until he got back, but I'm anxious to get this settled."

Vincent nodded his understanding, though he had no idea what the man was talking about. "I imagine you are, since it's been dragging on for months."

"These things are always delicate, even under the best of circumstances. I don't feel right about it. Should have had the will read by now," Pickering said, then ducked his head, his face reddening.

Vincent smiled his most reassuring smile and signaled for another round. "A will? How intriguing. Who died?"

"Well, guess it can't hurt to tell you that much. After all, deaths are a matter of public records. 'T were the girl's maternal grandparents that passed, nearly five months ago."

"Her grandparents. Were they from around here?" Vincent asked.

"No, from London, actually. Old Alex Roth was a cloth merchant. Dealt in silks and satins, mostly. The way I understand it, Ashlyn Roth, Bridgett's mother, got herself mixed up with some peer of the realm." Pickering lowered his voice and leaned close, and Vincent struggled to hear him over the crowd. "Got herself in trouble, if you know what I mean. The family disowned her and when her lover wouldn't have anything to do with her, she ended up here, married to Harold Morton. I guess her father had a change of heart before he died, though. Must've been pretty successful, judging by what he left his granddaughter."

Vincent sipped his whiskey, his mind racing. Bridgett's maternal grandparents were merchants. Why hadn't she ever mentioned them? That thought was followed swiftly by another. *His Bridgett was an heiress*. And that would explain her stepfather's hasty journey to bring her home. If he had control of Bridgett, he'd have control of her money.

Morton had been gone almost a week. If he knew where to look for her now, chances were he'd already reached her. Fear for Bridgett's safety brought him to his feet. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Pickering, but I must be going."

Vincent ignored the man's surprised stare and threw a handful of notes on the bar. "Have a few more on me," he said, hoping to ease the sting of his abrupt retreat.

He turned away before Pickering could speak, and headed toward the door. It was time to go home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bridgett stood at the window, blinking at the sunshine sparkling off the new-fallen snow. With one hand resting lightly on her slightly hardened abdomen, she studied the horizon. *Where are you*, she wondered, and closed her eyes as a wave of loneliness washed through her. Was he safe? Did he think of her as much as she thought of him, every day these past three months?

"Bridgett, Christopher and I are just about to go into supper. Why don't you join us?"

Bridgett turned, forcing a smile. "I'll be along in a moment, dear."

Marie stepped fully into the room, her brow creased in a frown. "It's not good for you or the baby to stand by that window for so long every day. What would happen if you caught a chill?"

Bridgett stifled a sigh. Ever since she'd discovered her condition and shared her secret with Marie, her friend had turned into a mother hen. While Bridgett appreciated her concern, sometimes – like now – she wished she'd kept her pregnancy a secret a little while longer. With a heavy heart, she let the draperies fall back into place. Marie extended her hand, and Bridgett grudgingly took it.

"You're going to make yourself sick if you keep this up," Marie chided. "He'll be back, darling. I know he will."

Bridgett sighed. "What makes you so sure? Even you said he'd never been gone this long before."

Marie patted her hand. "I shouldn't have told you that. I didn't mean for you to worry. You mustn't let yourself get upset like this."

Bridgett forced a smile. "I'm fine, Marie, really," she said, pulling her friend toward the door. "Now I'm starving. Didn't you say something about supper?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Bridgett retreated from the dining room as early as she could without drawing undue attention. She loved Marie desperately, but watching her with Christopher – their playful interaction and the smoldering looks that passed between them – only heightened Bridgett's sense of loneliness. Christopher had been nearly a constant presence these past two months, appearing on the doorstep each morning and spending his days entertaining both Bridgett and Marie. Lord knew, with the coming of winter, they needed the distraction. Marie and Christopher were ever careful to include her in their daily activities, but Bridgett, at times, craved solitude. Times like now, when the flutter of a newly formed life quivered below her heart, reminding her of her untenable position. Unmarried, pregnant, uncertain of her future.

Unable to bear the thought of going to her room to spend another endless night alone, Bridgett headed toward the kitchen. Perhaps a glass of warm milk would soothe her tattered nerves. Her path took her past the door to the locked wing and, on impulse she stopped. Twisting the handle, she gave a small gasp when it turned. Why wasn't it locked? Cautiously, she pushed open the door. Throwing a look over her shoulder to be sure she wasn't being observed, she slipped inside.

A low light burned on a table near the bed. Bridgett frowned. How odd. Had someone been in here? The metal tub still sat in its place before the fire, and a tray of half-eaten food still sat on the table. Wrinkling her nose, Bridgett took a wide path around the bits of moldy bread and cheese until she stood in the center of the room.

Turning slowly, she studied the décor with new eyes, trying to imagine the tortures the Count must have endured here. The day Vincent had left, Marie had finally shared the story of she and Vincent's past. Of the abuse she and her brother had been subject to here in this room, under the careful schooling of their depraved father. Bridgett could barely comprehend the horrors they'd been subjected to, and her heart ached for the childhood that had been snatched away from them in such a ghastly, evil manner.



The memories so obviously pained Marie, Bridgett had tried to stop her from explaining, knowing that recalling the repeated molestation in such vivid detail must have been like repeating the torture.

But Marie had insisted, and in the end, Bridgett had been thankful for the telling of it, for the tale went a long way toward explaining the Count's behavior.

Bridgett now viewed their relationship with new understanding. If only he'd return home, perhaps they could work through his fears together.

She wondered around the room, examining the different furnishings, trying to place her Count, as a boy, in this room. Low slung couches lined the walls, and large piles of pillows sat, dusty and long unused, in the corners.

Her gaze went to the tapestries covering the walls. Lamplight flickered, casting dancing shadows across their macabre, erotic scenes. Inexplicably drawn by one particular depiction, Bridgett stepped closer, tilting her head back and standing on her toes for a better look. Two young children, a boy and a girl, sprawled on a bed, their arms and legs wrapped around the body of a man. The children were naked, their expressions blank.

Bridgett shuddered and stepped back, repulsed by the images that rose in her mind.

A rustling sound came from behind her. Bridgett spun around, heart thumping wildly. "Who's there?"

For a moment, she half-expected to see James Worth, stepping out from the shadows. An image of his leering grin rose in her mind like an evil specter. "He's in prison," she whispered, fiercely tamping down her rising terror.

The curtains billowed out, as if blown by a breeze. Bridgett wrinkled her brow, hairs on the back of her neck standing at attention. Those windows didn't open. Lord knows she'd tried them all in the days she'd spent locked up, waiting for the Count to come to his senses.

Keeping her gaze pinned on the area where she'd seen movement, she backed toward the door.

The curtains moved again, this time sliding away as a man stepped from behind them.

"Where you think you're goin', girlie?"

Bridgett's mouth dropped open. "Father?"

"Yessiree, it's your papa, here in the flesh."

"But, but what are you doing here?" Bridgett struggled to make sense of his presence. Not only here, at the castle, but in this room. "How did you get in?"

Her father took a few steps forward. "Now what kind of greeting is that for your dear old dad? Didn't you miss me, girl?"

His question didn't merit an answer, so she merely stared at him, waiting for him to state his intentions. Instinct told her to tread carefully, and she sidled back a few more steps, decreasing the distance between her and the door.

"Ye got more lives 'n a cat, I tell ya," he said, wagging a finger at her as if she were an errant child. "I should a known you'd manage to slither your way outta trouble. You always was a sneaky little brat."

Bridgett struggled to make sense of his words. More lives than a cat? Her thoughts skated back to her encounter with Worth. What had he said? *You should be dead by now.*

Her father took another step, and Bridgett retreated until her back met the door. "What are you talking about? Why are you here."

"What are you talking about?" He mocked her. "I'll tell you what I'm talking about, girlie. I'm talking about twenty thousand pounds. And it's mine. I took her in when they threw her out, married her, 'n her carryin' another man's bastard. An' what did it git me? Nothin'. Yer momma was an ungrateful bitch, always lookin' down her nose at me. An' she raised you up to be just alike." He took a step forward, eyes blazing. "But I showed her, I did. Just like I'm gonna show you. Shoulda done it myself, 'stead of sending that Worth feller."

Bridgett searched his familiar face, sensing the maniacal rage hidden behind his twisted smile. A nagging memory rose in her mind, ugly and vicious, pushing the breath from her lungs. Herself, as a child, hiding under her mother's huge bed, hand pressed to her mouth to stifle her screams as she watched her mother's brutal murder.

"You want to kill me," she whispered, "just like you killed her."

Her father cocked his head, narrowing his gaze. "My, aren't you the smart one."

He took a step forward, hands balled into fists at his side.

Bridgett pushed the newly discovered memories from her mind and reached behind her, frantically seeking the doorknob. Her hand fell on the knob and she twisted it, just as he lunged forward.

Her scream ended on a shriek, the impact of his body driving the air from her lungs, and for a moment she froze as his hands wrapped around her neck. His fingers bit into her flesh. She gasped, unable to draw a full breath. Choking, she beat at his chest, staring up into his dark, soulless eyes.

"Bridgett?!"

A pounding on the door followed Marie's shout. Bridgett fought through the growing blackness and, releasing her grip on her father's wrists, she reached back. Grabbing the knob, she twisted it, throwing herself forward as the door flew open.

Her father's cry of rage echoed through the chamber as he lost his balance and stumbled back. He righted himself and turned, fleeing out the door onto the terrace.

Bridgett doubled over, clutching her neck, struggling to draw a complete breath.

"My Lord, Bridgett, what happened? Who was that?" Marie asked, pulling Bridgett into her arms.

"My father," she managed to choke out past the burning in her throat. "He...he wanted to kill me."

Christopher pushed past them, striding to the still open door and disappearing onto the terrace. A moment later, he returned. "He's gone."

Bridgett pulled from Marie's arms, suddenly shivering as the shock of what had occurred set in. "He'll be back."

Christopher glanced at Marie, then placed a calming hand on Bridgett's shoulder. "I'll have a servant fetch some of my things," he said. "I'll stay here. You'll be safe."

Bridgett nodded, barely able to stand. "I think I'd better . . ."

Her legs buckled and she slipped toward the floor. Christopher caught her up in his arms, just as the world turned black.

## Chapter Eighteen

Vincent coaxed Tempest into a trot and entered the castle courtyard. Low, dark clouds covered the sun, and a brisk wind blew in from the sea. Vincent shivered, his nerves tingling. Bringing Tempest to a halt, he dismounted.

"Milord! You're home!"

Vincent forced a smile and handed Tempest's reins over to the stable boy. "Yes. Finally."

"And a good thing, too," the boy said. "We had an intruder."

Vincent didn't stay to ask questions. Gripped by an unspeakable fear, he took off at a run, heart pounding.

"Bridgett! Marie!" He shouted, pushing through the front door, then skidding to a halt in the entry. His words echoed throughout the silent chamber. "Marie!"

The parlor door opened and Marie stepped out.

"Vincent. You're home. But what's the matter? Why are you shouting?"

Vincent bit back an impatient retort. "Bridgett. Where is she?"

Marie frowned "Come in and sit down, Vincent. We have much to talk about."

"Dammit, Marie, I don't want to sit down!" He ran his hands through his hair. "Just tell me where she is."

"She's upstairs, sleeping," Marie said, taking his hand. "She's fine, Vincent. You'll not do her any good by rushing upstairs and waking her from her nap. Come along. I will fill you in on what you've missed."

Vincent glanced past Marie into the parlor. Their neighbor, Christopher Saint Claire, stood near the fireplace, watching them intently.

With a muttered oath, Vincent nodded his agreement and followed Marie into the parlor. She quietly closed the door behind them.

"Saint Claire," Vincent extended his hand in greeting. Christopher stepped forward, accepting the handshake.

"Renault." He smiled. "Good to see you home at last."

Christopher released his grip and turned toward Marie. "I'll leave you two alone to catch up."

Vincent raised a brow, studying his neighbor's expression, sensing an undercurrent of emotion he could not name. Taking in his sister's warm smile and the slight blush that graced her cheeks, he bristled. What was going on here?

Marie took Christopher's hand, walking him to the door. She paused in the entry. "You'll be back?"

Christopher nodded, placing a hand on Marie's cheek. "Perhaps tomorrow. You two have a lot to discuss."

Vincent couldn't miss Marie's crestfallen expression, and he gritted his teeth. Damn if his sister hadn't fallen for the young pup. Once again, he cursed his delay in returning home.

"I'm happy you're home, Vincent," Marie said, once they were alone. "We've missed you."

"You'll forgive me if I ask you to skip the niceties and tell me about Bridgett?" Vincent fought to keep his tone level. "The stable boy told me you had an intruder. I take it Bridgett's father made an appearance."

Marie gasped. "How did you know?"

"Never mind that," Vincent said, his frustration at Marie's delay in filling him in growing with each passing moment, "tell me what happened."

As Marie described the events that had taken place the previous evening, Vincent's anger grew until he could no longer contain it. He lashed out, swiping a tall, antique vase from a nearby table. The priceless piece toppled to the floor, shattering into tiny, glistening shards.

"Vincent!"

He closed his eyes and drew in a ragged breath, drawn back from the brink of a disastrous rage by Marie's voice.

"I'm sorry. I'll go to her now."

He turned, but Marie stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Vincent, there's more you must know."

"He didn't... She's not..." Imagining the worst, Vincent couldn't bring himself to voice his thoughts.

"No," Marie said, vehemently, then softer, "No, I told you she's fine. Please, Vincent, won't you sit down for a moment?"

"Marie, my patience wears thin," he warned her. "Tell me. Now."

"She's expecting."

It took him a moment to grasp her meaning, and when he did, he wished he'd taken her advice and sat down. His knees turned to jelly, and a sick feeling rose in the pit of his stomach. She'd been raped, and now she had to suffer the humiliation of carrying her attacker's child. Vincent lowered his head into his hands. He'd failed her. On so many levels, so many times. How could she ever forgive him?

"Vincent?"

He dropped his hands, meeting Marie's curious gaze.

"I'll help her through this, Marie, I promise. Perhaps we can find a family who will raise the child as their own."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Marie fairly shouted. "You'll do no such thing!"

Taken aback by her anger, Vincent wrinkled his brow in confusion. "Surely you don't think she'll want to raise the child. Not after . . . not a child conceived in violence."

Marie stared at him, then smiled. "Unless I miss my guess, this child wasn't conceived in anything but love."

Vincent narrowed his eyes. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's yours, you ninny!" Marie chuckled, tapping him playfully on his arm.

"Mine? Bridgett carries my child? But how?"

"Oh, I'd say in the most usual way, brother dear."

"Are you certain? I mean, how can you know? What about...?"

Marie shook her head. "Bridgett shared the details of that night with me, Vincent. She managed to deter her attackers from... consummating their heinous intentions."

Vincent shook his head, awash with relief and dazed by the revelation. "A father. I'm going to be a father."

"The only question that remains, in my mind, is when do you plan on making an honest woman of her?"

Her words were like a splash of cold water. Marriage. Of course, that was next logical step. He loved her, she carried his child. But she deserved better than marriage to someone who couldn't let go of the past, who was haunted by memories too sick to endure. Just look at what she'd been forced to bear since he'd entered her life.

He turned away, shuttering his emotions behind a carefully erected air of nonchalance. "There will be no wedding, Marie," he said. "I'll not drag her into my hell."

"A hell of your own making, I'd say, and it's high time you put the past where it belongs. In the past."

Vincent dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "I'm not marrying her. And I'll thank you to mind your own business."

He left her, sputtering heatedly under her breath.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bridgett stirred in her sleep. A rush of warmth suffused her limbs, bringing sudden awareness. *He's here.* She sat up swiftly, fully awake. He stood near the window, his back to the room, and she took a moment to simply study him. He wore his hair pulled back, tied in a black silk ribbon, and judging by his coat and boots, he'd only just arrived. Her heart filled with happiness as she drank in his presence, her nerves

vibrating, her fingers itching to touch him. Suddenly, she wanted to see his face, needed to hear his voice. She cleared her throat. "Milord. It's good to have you home."

He turned from the window, sweeping her with his gaze. "Bridgett, you're awake."

She started to rise, but he raised a hand. "No, please, lie back."

He came to her, sitting gingerly on the edge of the bed. Taking her hand, he rubbed it gently. "How are you feeling?"

Bridgett's face grew warm and she ducked her head. He knew. Drat, Marie! She'd hoped to tell him herself, when the time was right, when they'd settled some things between them. She lifted her head, studying his expression for some clue to his feelings. Finding nothing more than his usual, slightly aloof gaze, she licked her lips. "I'm fine. Just a little sore."

"Marie told me everything. I'm sorry, cara mia." He squeezed her hand.

Bridgett looked in his eyes, hope filling her heart. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to protect you," he went on, "but I'm going to make up for that."

She remained silent, waiting for him to finish. Judging by his intense mood, he obviously had more to say.

"There's a solicitor in London who will be interested in knowing your whereabouts," he said, then went on to explain about her mother's family and her inheritance. Bridgett listened, too stunned to respond. As his words sank in, she grappled to come to terms with her newfound status. An heiress. Oh, not wealthy, not by any means, but twenty thousand pounds wasn't anything to sneeze at.

"My grandparents were merchants? That explains so much," she told him. "My mother's refined nature, her obvious education."

Bridgett stared off into space. She had money of her own. Money meant freedom, status, the ability to live on one's own terms. Acceptance into certain areas of society that had heretofore been closed to her. She became so preoccupied, she barely heard his next words, but something about his tone, a subtle change, caught her attention.

"I know I can't force you to stay," he began.

Bridgett raised a brow, intrigued by such a statement coming from her Count.

He had the good graces to smile sheepishly. "I know now that I can't force you to stay. But I'm asking you to."

Bridgett's heart soared at his words. She grinned, opening her mouth to tell him how much she loved him, how she'd longed for him these past few months, but before she had a chance to speak he went on.

"For the baby. I'd like to help you, be with you when you bring my child into the world. You'll be safe here, now, I promise."

For the baby. Of course. Bridgett pulled her hand from his and sank back against the pillows, eyes filling with tears. She turned her head, unwilling to let him see her pain.

"You're tired," he said, and stood up. "You should get some rest. I'll see you at dinner."

Bridgett nodded. "Yes. At dinner."

As the door closed softly behind him, Bridgett curled on her side, punching a pillow in a fit of fury. Once again, she'd played the fool, allowing herself to believe he'd grown to care for her. She'd even imagined he would accept her, now that she'd come into some money, now that her pedigree consisted of something more than a farmer's daughter. She should have known better, she thought, flipping onto her back to study the ceiling. A mere merchant could not compare to the title of a Count. Vincent would never ask for her hand in marriage, and how could she blame him? They came from two different worlds, and she wouldn't suit. Society would expect him to marry a true lady, not some mere peasant.

Bridgett tried to hold on to her anger, but it seeped away, replaced by a sense of fatalistic acceptance. Her Count had gallantly offered to help with the child; she could expect nothing more. Would ask for nothing more. Somehow, she would make it be enough.

Three weeks later, Bridgett paced the front parlor, scowling at the carpet beneath her feet. She couldn't stand it. Not another minute. The Count's polite detachment was wearing on her nerves, making her skittish and angry. He treated her like a porcelain doll, ever solicitous, attentive to her needs, but from a distance. He hadn't touched her, hadn't come closer than a few feet, since the day he'd returned home.

"You're going to wear a hole in the carpet," Marie said brightly, "come sit here with me a moment, and tell me what's bothering you."

Bridgett frowned, biting her tongue to keep from saying something hurtful. "I'm fine. Nothing's bothering me."

"Oh, yes. You're fine. And my brother is fine, too, holed up in his office for days on end, barely eating, never smiling, except when he's looking at you and your back is turned."

Bridgett stopped, mid-stride. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's obvious he cares for you, and you care for him. What I don't understand is why the two of you don't do something about it."

Hands on her hips, Bridgett scoffed. "And what would you have me do, pray tell? Seduce him?"

Marie placed her sewing in her basket and looked up, grinning. Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "That's an excellent idea, love! Why didn't I think of that?"

"Oh, yes, a wonderful plan. Look at me," Bridgett said, indicating her expanding waistline with a wave of her hand, "does this look seductive to you?"

Marie made a great show of considering the question, tilting her head and studying her intently. "I think you're beautiful," she replied, "and I'm quite certain Vincent does,



as well. Your complexion is creamy, and when you're in high dudgeon, like now, your cheeks take on a most appealing glow."

Bridgett shook her head at such ridiculous sentiments, but couldn't stifle a giggle. "You're insane."

"No, but you're going to be if you don't do something to tear down that wall he's built between you."

Bridgett sobered. "And you think seducing him will do that? I'll remind you he's had a wall between us since we met."

"But things are different, now. He's different. I can feel it, even if he's not admitting it."

"How do you mean?" Bridgett asked, careful not to read too much into Marie's words.

"I can't put my finger on it, exactly, but I've never known Vincent to hesitate when it comes to taking what he wants. The fact that he's managed to keep his distance from you is strange, in itself."

"I'm pregnant with his child," Bridgett said, "perhaps that is what deters him. Which brings us back to your plan. I don't think seducing him is the answer, Marie. We'll still have issues between us. I can't fool myself into believing we have a future together."

"You will have a future together," Marie insisted, standing and extending her hand. "But the way of it remains to be seen. Come along."

Bridgett hesitated. "Where are we going?"

Marie grasped her hand, tugging her toward the door. "To my room. I've a surprise for you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bridgett studied her reflection with a critical eye, ignoring Marie's grinning countenance, visible over her shoulder in the mirror. "I look like an elephant."

"Hardly. You look...voluptuous. Ripe, I daresay."

Bridgett raised a brow. "Ripe? How lovely."

Her gaze dropped to her protruding middle, barely hidden by the thin folds of her gossamer gown. She spun from the mirror. "I can't do this."

"Yes, you can," Marie insisted. "There comes a time when a woman must reach for happiness. With both hands."

Plucking at the folds of her gown, Bridgett shook her head. "But what if it doesn't work."

Or worse. What if it worked, and she managed to seduce him, only to have him continue to treat her the same way, day after day? Could she stand being the object of his lust, but never the recipient of his love?

"It's going to work. Trust me."

Bridgett sighed. "Famous last words."

She glanced back at the mirror. "The gown is truly beautiful. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome," Marie said, flashing a grin. "Even pregnant women deserve to look and feel attractive. No sense in dressing in sackcloth for the next five months."

"I don't feel attractive," Bridgett said. "I feel...large."

Marie laughed. "If you feel large now, just wait. Now, quit stalling. Go to his room. If he's not there, make yourself comfortable in that sinfully enormous bed of his and wait for him."

Bridgett's cheeks grew hot. "Marie, you're incorrigible."

"I know, darling. I love you, too." Marie placed a hand on the small of Bridgett's back, pushing her toward the door. "Now go."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent dropped the book onto the floor and stared into the fire. It was no use. He couldn't stop thinking about her. She haunted him, day and night, no matter what he did. He'd thought if he kept his distance, the hold she had on his senses might lessen. But instead, it just grew stronger each day.

A light tap came on the door and he released a sigh. The last thing he needed tonight was more verbal sparring with Marie. Since his return, she'd seemed to make it her mission in life to harass him regarding his relationship with Bridgett. Like a dog with a bone, she'd taken hold of the idea they should marry, and would not let up.

"Come in," he called out, his tone more rough than he'd intended.

"Milord? May I speak with you a moment?"

"Bridgett. Of course, come in. Are you all right?"

She stepped into the room, and his breath caught in his throat. She looked like an angel, dressed in a sheer, white gown. It hugged every curve, and shimmered in the firelight as she crossed to stand before his chair.

"I am fine, Milord," she said, offering him a small smile. "But... I miss you."

Her voice held a sultry, seductive tone, and she lowered her gaze, as if suffering a bout of shyness. Vincent's body reacted swiftly, and he shifted in his chair. "You've missed me? We see each other every day."

She tilted her head, eyeing him beneath lowered lashes. "I know that, Milord, but we've not been alone since you returned."

Vincent noted the slight emphasis she placed on the word alone, and his palms grew moist. There was no mistaking her intentions in coming to him like this.

She reached out, trailing a finger along his jaw. Vincent gritted his teeth, capturing her hand and pulling her down onto his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck and snuggled against him.

Burying his face in her hair, Vincent breathed in her scent. She smelled like...sunshine. Fresh and warm, a natural, earthy aroma that filled his senses and stirred his blood.

She shifted in his lap, positioning herself atop his erection. Vincent groaned and captured her face in his hands. "You little minx. What are you about?"

"Me?" she asked, rubbing her breasts against his chest in a way that belied her wide-eyed, innocent expression. "Nothing."

"Nothing, hmm?" He kissed her lightly, and she sighed against his mouth. "Well, nothing is going to get you into some serious trouble."

He deepened the kiss and she parted her lips, her tongue seeking his. Cupping her breast, he stroked her hardened nipple. Her whimper of pleasure sent a chill racing down his spine. He wanted, desperately, to hear it again. To hear her moan with passion, scream his name as she found her release.

Vincent blinked and drew back. Good God, what was he thinking?

"Milord, is something wrong?"

He looked away from her inquiring gaze, unable to meet her eyes. Everything had changed between them. He had no right to take any more from her than he already had, despite her wanton enthusiasm.

With a shaking hand, he adjusted her bodice, hiding her too-tempting flesh from his view. "Yes, bella mia, something is wrong. This is wrong."

She shook her head, grasping his hand and pressing his palm against her breast. Holding it there, she arched against him. "How can this be wrong, Milord, when it feels so right?"

Vincent sighed. His plan had worked too well. She was everything he desired in a woman, passionate, submissive, shameless in her desire. But somewhere along the way, his plan had gone awry, for it hadn't included his growing desire to fulfill her needs. And he certainly hadn't counted on the intense, emotional connection that had grown between them.

Gently, he pulled his hand away. "Come along, cara mia. I'll walk you to your room."

He rose, setting her on her feet. She stared up at him, frowning her displeasure. "You're sending me away?"

Taking in her disheveled appearance, her lips slightly swollen from their kiss, the way the firelight played on her hair, Vincent couldn't find his voice to answer. With super-human determination, he managed a nod. He reached for her arm, thinking to escort her, but she spun out of reach.

"Don't touch me," she said, her voice cool and detached. "I can find my own way, thank you."

"Bridgett, I'm sorry." Despite her composure, Vincent sensed the depth of her pain. "I didn't mean..."

"No need to apologize, Milord," she said. "It was I who intruded upon your privacy this evening."

She walked to the door. "I assure you, it won't happen again."

## Chapter Nineteen

Bridgett lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling, a pastime that had become somewhat of a habit, as of late. Between her pregnancy, and the situation with her Count, she had much to think about. But the hours she spent in solitude, deep in thought, had provided few answers.

A light quiver beneath her ribs brought a smile to her face. She placed her hand on her stomach, hoping to feel it again. She couldn't exactly call it movement, more a rippling sensation, like the flutter of butterfly wings.

"I know, Alex," she said, stroking her abdomen, "I'm restless, too."

She'd started calling her baby Alex shortly after she'd learned of his existence. In her heart, she knew it was a boy, but if she were wrong, she'd simply change the name to Alexandria. Alex, for short.

She sighed and rolled off the bed. Padding to the windows, she lifted the curtain and peered outside. The sun sat low on the horizon, but if she hurried, she could take a quick stroll across the grounds. Perhaps the fresh air would make her tired enough to sleep. Lord knows, it couldn't do any harm.

She dressed quickly, donning a new gown made of rich, chocolate brown velvet. She smiled sadly as she adjusted the folds of material, admiring how the dress covered her increased girth, but still managed to look stylish. She could only imagine the hours Marie had spent with the seamstress, developing the patterns for her new wardrobe. Several dozen dresses, in various styles and sizes, now filled her armoire, each one specifically designed for both comfort and style.

Bridgett tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear, and then drew on her gloves and hurried out the door.

Dashing into the hall, she raced heedlessly toward the stairs. Then, remembering her condition, slowed down, grasping the banister in a firm grip.

Encountering no one below stairs, she let herself out the front door. The courtyard, too, was deserted. Bridgett traversed the cobblestones carefully, mindful of her footing. The sunlight she'd glimpsed earlier from her window was deceptive. A stiff wind bent the tree branches and swirled around her ankles, bringing a chill that set her teeth to chattering.

"Damn," she muttered, rubbing her hands together, "it's freezing out here."

She turned, thinking to go back inside, when she caught a glimpse of the stable door. It hung ajar, swaying slowly in the breeze.

Curious, she took a few steps closer, craning her neck to look inside.

"Milord?" She squinted into the dim interior, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

From a nearby stall, a horse whinnied in answer. Bridgett grinned, recognizing Tempest's greeting. As she approached his stall, he stuck his head over the rail, butting her with his nose.

"Hey, boy." Bridgett laughed and stroked his forehead. "I've missed you, too.

"Where's your master, hmm boy?"

Tempest jerked away, tossing his head in the air. His eyes rolled back, whites flashing, and he snorted.

"Easy, boy." Bridgett took a step back. "What's wro--. Ah!"

She screamed as someone grabbed her from behind, dragging her back into the empty shadows of a nearby stall.

"Die, you bitch. Die, damn you!"

Her stepfather wrapped his hands around her neck. Bridgett clutched at his fingers, gasping for breath.

Spots of color danced before her eyes, and her vision blurred. Suddenly, he gave a strangled cry and released her. She stumbled forward, falling to her knees in the hay.

Daring a glance over her shoulder, she watched as the Count hoisted her father by his coat and tossed him backwards, out into the main area of the stable. Bridgett crawled, on hands and knees, to the entrance of the stall.

"Stop right there."

Bridgett pressed her fist to her mouth to keep from crying out, as her father drew a pistol, aiming it at the Count's chest.

"You move a muscle and I'll put a bullet through your heart," her father said, backing toward Tempest's stall.

"It's over, Morton," the Count said. "You couldn't run far enough, or fast enough, to escape me this time."

"I managed to stay one step ahead of you this long," her father said, reaching behind his back to raise the latch on Tempest's stall door. "I'm thinkin' you're not as smart as you think you are."

"I'm smart enough to know you killed your own wife," Vincent said. "And smart to know it was you who hired Worth to kill Bridgett."

"Bah, Worth was a no-good wastrel. Couldn't keep his cock in his pants long enough to get the job done. Botched it up more 'n once, too." His gaze flickered in Bridgett's direction and his lips curled into a sneer. "You should a been dead weeks ago."

Bridgett caught a glimpse of the burning hatred in his eyes and froze in fear, expecting him to turn the gun in her direction at any moment.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Vincent shifted, placing himself between Bridgett and her father.

Morton laughed, high and maniacal. "I'll be taking this fine horse of yours, milord. He's too much animal for a dandy like you."

Bridgett craned her neck, trying to see past the Count. She started to crawl forward, but a high-pierced shriek sent her scurrying back, like a crab racing across the beach. Suddenly, Tempest appeared, rearing high, his enormous head and shoulders visible as he pawed the air.

A sickening thud, followed by a sharp crack, brought Bridgett to a halt. She slumped down in the hay, knowing with certainty what had just occurred.

"Don't come out here," the Count told her, then, "easy. Here. Back up, now."

Eyes closed tight, Bridgett listened as the Count led Tempest back into his stall. The latch slid shut with a metallic click, and then she heard a soft grunt.

"Is he dead?" she asked, the question coming out in a croaking whisper.

"Don't move. I'll be right back."

Bridgett swallowed back the bile that rose in her throat. She lay still, silently counting to one hundred, and waited.

He returned within seconds, scooping her up in his arms. She clung to his neck, burying her face in his coat, her body shaking uncontrollably.

"Easy, now," he told her. "You're safe. I'll take you inside."

She nodded against his chest, unable to speak, as he carried her into the castle and up the stairs to her room.

He placed her gently on the bed, then pulled the quilts up, covering her to her chin.

"I have to..." He shook his head, his expression grim, and then spun on his heels. "I'll send Marie to you immediately."

Bridgett turned on her side, rolling into a ball, wishing she had the good sense to faint.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent prowled the castle, seeking a distraction, any distraction, from the woman who plagued his every thought. She hadn't left her room since he'd carried her up there, nearly a week earlier, and he hadn't gone to see her. Instead, he'd relied on twice-daily reports from Marie, most of which were delivered in such an icy, uncivil tone, he half-dreaded asking her anything.

But he had to ask, craved every detail, lived each day counting the minutes until he could pin Marie down and force her to tell him of Bridgett.

Force her, because Marie fought him at every turn, calling him stubborn and advising him to visit Bridgett himself if he wanted to know so badly.

Head down, he wandered the hall toward the parlor, lost in thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I've missed you, darling," Marie snuggled against Christopher's chest, running a hand up and down his thigh. She swirled her fingers higher and higher, until she lightly brushed against his crotch.

Christopher groaned and shifted out of her reach, grasping her hand and bringing it to his lips. Placing a quick kiss on her palm, he met her gaze. "Don't start something we can't finish, my love."

Marie giggled, pushing her breasts against his arm. "Who says we can't finish?"

"That brother of yours, who's been prowling around like an angry, wounded tiger these past few days."

"Vincent?" Marie snorted. "He's so lost in a hell of his own making, I doubt he even realizes we're here."

She gently pulled her hand from his, then reached to cup his face. "Make love to me, Christopher. I need to feel you inside me. Now."

"You're insatiable," he told her, "but how can I say no to you?" He pushed her hands aside and finished with her laces, then brushed back the fabric of her gown. Bending, he ran his tongue down the cleft of her cleavage.

Marie sucked in her breath and grasped his head, twining her fingers through his hair. Her nipples tightened, and she arched her back, offering herself up to his warm, seeking mouth. As his lips closed around one hardened nipple, she sighed.

"Ah, yes, my love, just like that," she whispered, holding him close as he suckled her deeply. A flash of tingling pleasure coursed from breast to belly and she squirmed, reaching blindly to cup his hardened cock through his breeches.

As her fingers closed around the shaft, Christopher groaned, raising his head to meet her gaze.

"You're going to get us both killed," he murmured, but did not move from her grasp as she loosened his breeches and slipped her hand inside.

His face took on an almost pained expression as he pushed against her seeking fingers, his breath growing harsher by the moment.

Suddenly, he pushed her back, raising her skirts and spreading her legs. He entered her swiftly, sliding deep. Marie gasped, but her shock quickly changed into pleasure. He filled her completely, and she tightened her vaginal muscles, wrapping her legs around his hips. Clinging to his shoulders, she met each frantic thrust with one of her own.

"Ah, Christopher, yes, my love." She whispered her encouragement. "Take me. Make me yours."

"You *are* mine," he growled, then captured her lips in a searing kiss, stealing her breath.



Marie turned her head, gasping, as her body tightened. Every fiber of her being tingled, an explosion of lights danced behind her eyes. Marie cried out, burying her face in his shoulder to stifle the noise.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Christopher, my God!"

The words were followed by a high-pitched cry, and Vincent froze. His head came up, and fiery rage made his blood run hot.

Blinded by fury, he threw open the parlor doors and stormed inside.

The two lovers jerked apart, Marie tugging at the laces of her bodice with one hand, covering her breasts, while she pushed at her skirts with the other.

Christopher jumped up, quickly fastening his breeches. "Vincent, I...that is, we..."

Vincent leapt forward, grabbing his neighbor by his shirt and lifting him several inches off the floor. "I'm going to wring your bloody neck," he growled.

"Vincent, stop it this instant!" Marie shouted, rising to tug on his sleeve. "Get your hands off him, and stop behaving like an ass."

"Shut up, Marie," he said, turning to cast her a disdainful glare. "You've behaved like a slut, right under my nose."

The next instant, his face exploded in fiery pain and he released Christopher, falling back, cupping his face as blood poured like a fountain from his nose.

He looked at his hands, then up into Christopher's calm face in disbelief.

"Nobody, but nobody, calls the woman I love a slut."

Vincent grimaced. "Then how do you explain the little scene I just walked in on? I suppose all ladies of quality spend time frolicking with the neighbor boy on the sofa."

Christopher raised his fist, but Marie quickly stepped between them.

"Vincent, I love you to distraction, but you're a fool. A blind, egotistical, arrogant fool," she told him. "What do I call it? I call it being in love. I call it caring about another person so much, you can't bear to be away from them. Just because you have a mixed up, completely unhealthy view of sex, doesn't mean the rest of the world has to prescribe to your notions."

She stepped forward, eyes flashing, and poked him in the chest. "And I'll tell you something else, brother dear. If you don't shape up and pull yourself together, you're going to lose the one woman who could possibly bring you happiness. Real happiness. Not the fleeting forgetfulness found between the sheets, but the kind that brings light and joy to your every waking moment."

Vincent focused on her words, digesting their meaning. "She plans to leave?"

Marie nodded, her mouth turned down into a grim line. "She told me this morning. She's unhappy, Vincent, and it's all your fault."

"Mine?" He shook his head, throwing off the absurdity of such a statement. "I've done everything I can to keep her safe, to stay away from her so I don't cause her any more pain."

"And in doing so, you've deprived her of the one thing that could make her happy."

Frowning, Vincent pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his nose. He suddenly felt very tired, weary to his bones. The impossibility of the situation was like a dark cloud hanging over his head. "I don't know what else I can do. What does she want? What will make her happy."

Marie sighed. "You really are dense. She wants *you*, Vincent. She wants *you*."

She reached for Christopher's hand. "Come along, darling. I feel a strong need to get some fresh air."

Vincent stepped aside, allowing them to pass, but just before they reached the door, he turned. "Saint Claire."

The couple stopped, and Christopher spun around, his expression wary.

"I apologize." Vincent's gaze went from one to the other. "To both of you."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Marie, I need your help." Vincent strode into the dining room the next morning, barely able to contain his excitement.

His sister looked up from her breakfast and smiled. "I thought you might."

Vincent slid into a chair. His stomach rumbled as the smell of sausage and gravy tickled his nostrils, but he ignored it. He had more pressing matters to address this morning; there'd be plenty of time to eat after he'd managed to resolve the issue of his future.

"Well?" Marie raised her brow. "What is it?"

"I have a plan, but I'll need your assistance. You must get Bridgett outside."

"Oh, Vincent, I'm not sure that's possible," Marie told him. "She insists she's unwell, and perhaps she is. Depression must be just as painful as many other ailments."

"Marie, you *have* to get her outside. Today." Vincent insisted. "Don't take no for an answer. Lie, if you have to. She loves you, and will do anything for you. Tell her that beau of yours is sick and you need her help nursing him back to health."

"You want me to lie? Vincent, I don't know."

"Trust me on this, Marie. I know what I'm doing."

His sister studied him for a moment, then slowly nodded. "Yes, I believe you finally do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bridgett sat in a chair next to the window, staring out across the sea. The baby moved, sticking one of its tiny limbs between her ribs, and Bridgett shifted, but the pressure did not lessen. With a sigh, she stood up.

The walls were beginning to close in on her, and a growing agitation filled her soul. She found no peace, despite having made a decision to leave once the babe was born. It was as if life had no meaning, beyond the day-to-day activities that she performed by rote.

Each day, she rose from her bed, bathed, dressed and ate a few bites of breakfast. Marie would visit, bringing books or other objects of interest, chatting like a magpie about this and that. Bridgett tolerated her presence, pretended an interest, but it was all a lie. She felt dead inside. Alive, but not living.

And yet, her conscience plagued her. Especially these last few days, when her baby seemed to sense her despair and echo her restlessness. If only for Alex, she should make more of an effort. How healthy could it be for an unborn child to grow within a woman who spent her days deep in a black hole of despair?

"Bridgett, I need your help."

Marie barged in, her expression grim.

"What is it?" Concern for her friend brought Bridgett out of her self-centered musings.

"It's Christopher. He was thrown from his horse."

"Oh, my! Is he all right? He's not..." Bridgett couldn't bring herself to finish the thought.

"No, no. Nothing like that. But I'm afraid he may have broken a leg," Marie said. She seemed highly agitated, wringing her hands in a way very unlike her usually calm, take-charge manner. "The doctor is there now. Will you come with me? For moral support?"

Bridgett didn't hesitate. "Of course. Just let me grab a cloak."

Minutes later, they made their way across the courtyard.

"We'll take the trap," Marie told her as they approached the stables.

Bridgett stopped in her tracks. "Marie, would you mind if I wait out here? I really don't... I don't think I can go in there right now."

"Of course. I'll be right back."

Bridgett wrapped her arms about her waist, stamping her feet to keep them warm, as she waited for Marie. Despite the cold, the sky was a brilliant blue and the air fresh with the bite of the promise of snow. She raised her face to the sun, closing her eyes and breathing deeply.

Behind her, a horse nickered softly. She turned, shielding her eyes against the sun's glare. Squinting, she could barely make out the profile of a rider approaching from the road. She frowned, certain the light played tricks on her. It looked like... Shaking her head at such a fanciful notion, she blinked to clear her vision. The horse and rider

entered the courtyard, just as the sun slipped behind a cloud. Bridgett gasped, and her heart swelled as tears filled her eyes. She let them flow, unchecked, as her Count drew closer, the light glancing off his armor.

He pulled Tempest to a halt a few feet away and dismounted, the chain mail covering his broad chest tinkling like chimes in the breeze.

Bridgett's opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't force any words past the lump in her throat. She waited, breathless, as he approached her, then sobbed in earnest when he dropped to one knee.

Pulling off his helmet, he placed it on the ground near her feet, then reached for her hand.

"My Lady," he said, gazing up at her, his expression solemn. "I know I'm unworthy. I know I have failed in my duties to protect you and cherish you in the manner you deserve."

He glanced away, and Bridgett watched in amazement as a single tear slid down his cheek. She started to speak, meaning to deny his claims and ease his distress, but he squeezed her hand.

"No. Let me finish. I've been remiss, My Lady, and I'm only half a man. But I'm hopeful, if you'll do me the honor of becoming my wife, I can become whole."

Bridgett gazed into his eyes, seeing the truth, and her heart burst with joy.

"Please rise, gallant knight, and kiss me," she whispered, "to seal the oath. I accept your pledge."

Her Count stood, then bent to place a chaste kiss on her cheek.

"What kind of a way is that to kiss your future wife?" Marie asked, stepping from the stables. "Pull her in your arms and kiss her properly, Vincent, then take her upstairs and truly seal the deal like only a real man can."

Bridgett's mouth dropped open, but then she giggled. "Yes, Milord. What are you waiting for?"

Vincent grinned, scooping her into his arms. "I thought you'd never ask. You have one more lesson, beloved, before you'll make me an adequate wife."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Milord?"

"Hmmm?"

"We don't... I mean, if you're not comfortable..." Bridgett had trouble putting together a coherent thought.

Her Count lifted his head from her breast. "Bridgett?"

"Hmmm?"

"Shut up." He lowered his head again, drawing her nipple between his teeth and biting it gently. He drew the tightened bud into his mouth, sucking it deeply.

Bridgett squirmed beneath him, unable to hold still against the swiftly rising fire of her desire.

He shifted his attention lower, trailing his tongue along her swollen abdomen, then lower still, until he reached the juncture of her thighs. They drifted apart of their own accord, and she gasped at the first touch of his tongue on her swollen clitoris.

"Milord!" She reached out blindly, entwining her fingers in his hair.

Vincent stopped and raised his head, "Yes, my love?"

Bridgett smiled at his teasing expression. Raising a brow, she whispered, "don't stop."

With a low moan, Vincent lowered his head, plunging his tongue into her fiery heat, lapping at her sweetness. Bridgett draped her legs over his shoulders. Rolling her hips, she met each thrust of his tongue.

He teased her mercilessly, varying his technique, never using the same rhythm for more than a few seconds, until she thought she might die.

"Please," she finally whispered, tugging at his shoulders, "please, milord, I can not."

He raised his head, his smoky-gray eyes warm with passion, his lips wet from her juices. "My name is Vincent. If I'm going to make love to you for the rest of your life, I believe you can use my Christian name."

"Vincent," she murmured, "my knight. Please stop this endless torment."

He shifted, raising up on his knees and lifting her legs to rest on his shoulders. Bridgett watched him through lowered lashes, feeling vulnerable, but incredibly loved.

"Open your eyes," he said, as he took his cock in his fist and guided himself within her, sinking deep.

Her eyes flew open and she caught her breath.

"I want to watch you," he told her, setting up a gentle rhythm that had her head spinning. "I want to look in your eyes, and watch you come."

His words made her hotter, and she clutched at his shoulders. Vincent cupped her buttocks, lifting her hard against him, holding her close.

Bridgett bit her lip as the tension built, growing more intense, more frightening, with each languid stroke.

"Milord... Vincent!" she cried out. Their gazes locked, she stared into his eyes. "Oh, God. I can't..."

"It's okay," he whispered, "I'm here. Hold me."

He reached between them to massage her clitoris and she whimpered, unable to draw a complete breath.

He drove her, higher and higher, and she bucked her hips, seeking something so profound, so incredible, she could only guess at how it might end.

The tightly wound spring within her suddenly snapped and she cried out, but did not look away from his smoldering gaze. Wave after wave of luscious feelings swept through her, and her vaginal muscles spasmed, gripping him tight.

"My God," he growled, grinding his hips against her as she found her release, following her over the precipice, just moments behind. "I never knew."

He collapsed atop her, burying his face in her neck, their bodies slick with sweat. A moment later, he jerked back, rolling to his side. "I'm sorry. The baby. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Bridgett rolled onto her side, cupping his face in her hands. "No, my love, you didn't hurt the baby, but you damn near killed me."

He smiled. "One doesn't die of the things you experienced, *bella mia*."

"Though sometimes, you wished it were so," she finished for him. "What didn't you know?"

His smile grew soft and he ran his finger over her bottom lip in a gentle caress. "I never knew that giving pleasure could be so...rewarding."

"Milord," she said, "a wise man once told me, it depends on one's reason for giving." She smiled at his surprised expression. "Does it not?"

He pulled her close, resting his chin on her head. "Yes, fair Bridgett. A lesson well-learned."

*THE END*

### **About the author:**

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