

A TASTE OF TEMPTATION

GAYLE EDEN

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Chapter 1

“He may well have left the London scene for three years, but certainly he has not reformed his rakehell ways.”

Mrs. Flora Toft pursed her lips and lay aside the scandal sheet she and Lady Newton had been reading. In particular they’d been reading the list of eligible bachelors, and one Viscount Simon Berrenger, who’d recently become earl of Collingworth upon his father William’s death.

An intense and somewhat eccentric elder woman, Flora Toft had found herself the guardian to her sister’s daughter some ten years earlier, and seeing that she was a bit on the distracted side, she had at times forgotten that Abigail’s father had been a titled gent, and that put Abby on a higher social scale than the locals they lived amid.

The chit had been left to her because she was the only surviving family, and the Baron had no one on his side, either. Though the Toft’s pedigree included Knights only, they had cast Flora off when her odd ways began to manifest itself in young adulthood. Therefore, she surmised, that when it came to Abigail Forsythe, there was none else to keep the child from an orphanage.

However, that *child* was now twenty-three and somehow the years had gotten by Flora... Until Lady Newton drew it to her attention.

The Newtons were the loftiest gentry around, and she and Rose had a close friendship, evolving from their mutual interest in transcendental meditation and their participation in the investigations into local lore, namely the tales of dragons of East Horndon churchyard, here in Essex. They were a part of the group excavating around the site for the beast’s remains.

Lore and spirits weren’t on Lady Newton’s mind as she’d reminded her dear friend that Abigail was not only

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climbing higher on the shelf, she was swiftly passing the age where any titled gent would have her for a wife. More extreme than those dire statistics was the fact that Abby Forsythe had not only never been exposed to the ton, she had spend her prime years gaining herself an unusual education as well as developing a personality that would be the extreme opposite of the typical London deb.

“Perhaps Abby does not wish to wed,” Flora shrugged. “I did not, and have been more content than my sister ever was.”

“One can hardly presume such a thing, Flora, when the gel hasn’t had the opportunity to mix with any males besides a brawny farmer or old professor or the village tavern keeper.”

“Having a well rounded view of the male species and their varied characteristics has likely served her better than that superficial ritual the ton calls a season.”

“But she has not had that, Flora. Excluding the type of gentleman her father would have likely insisted she wed makes any decision she’s made of her future biased. For certain, Abby is too unlike the normal deb to pluck from the top, but denying her this experience before it is too late is entirely unacceptable...and unlike your typically open minded experimentations.”

Flora’s thin nose twitched. Her wiry frame slid back in the chair, her body draped in the royal blue she had taken to wearing since finding her spirit guide, a blue sphere she sensed of late. Tugging on the matching cape with the embroidered dragon club emblem, she expressed, “I did not veto the suggestion, nor does the reality escape me, it is simply that I refuse to return to some maternal domination over Abby. She has reached an age to know her own mind and make her decisions...besides, I do not wish to go to London.”

Lady Newton smiled slightly, knowing her friend well and having that *Ah, at last, we get to the root of it*, thought. “My nephew Damien and his sister will sponsor her, I’ve already inquired.”

Flora blinked. “Damien?”

“Yes. He is *the* earl of Blackstone, Damien Sauvage. He and my niece Alexia have been on the scene many years, and though Damien is a rake and rogue...” Lady Newton laughed. “He has the sort of inside knowledge of the London set and their ways that would only do Abby good. Besides, he is not likely to be the least bit put off by her unique character. He has no affection for the endless crop of witless debs that seem to appear year after year. And he has friends in lofty places.”

Flora seemed to ponder that and looked down into her teacup as if reading the answer there. After awhile she murmured. “Very well, I shall put it to Abigail and let her decide.”

They parted and ended their tea. Lady Newton watched Flora walk briskly to her horse and mount up as if she had jumped from the ground on springs.

She sighed. Their mutual interest and friendship aside—she sometimes wondered if Abigail Forsythe may not have done better in a structured orphanage than the imaginative, impulsive, and wildly eccentric influence of Flora Toft.

~

“I’d heard you were back in town, Simon.” Damien Sauvage grinned slightly, eyeing his friend’s disheveled appearance and Simon’s deceptively lazy pose, leaning against the tobacco shop’s outer wall. “Also heard you have reformed, or rather *conformed* from our standpoint. Becoming a regular farmer on your estates and that of the past earl. Sorry about that, by the way, always did have a liking for old Willy.”

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Simon regarded Blackstone. "My thanks, Damien; m'father had fond memories of you too. He passed on a contented man. "

Simon's tawny eyes, a green with golden flecks, were half veiled for a moment by his lids while he supplied in bored tones, "Since you were well aware that a lost wager to m'cousin, Lady Joan, that stipulated I stay sober an entire season, and I left London for that very reason three years ago, you can cut the thinly veiled witticisms. "

Damien flashed him a white smile. "Couldn't resist, ole man. I know you stayed on when your father became ill, and though we do pride ourselves on our jaded and misanthropic wit, I'm sure it made the earl happy to have you at Collingworth Manor so long, and so abstinent."

Simon's brow rose. "Reduced to listening to country gossip, are you, Blackstone?"

The earl laughed. "No, our mutual friend and your cousin by marriage, Lord Wythe had bets at White's. A kin to one of his servants is working at the estate to report your doings."

"The hell he did!" Simon suddenly straightened. When Damien nodded, laughing more, Simon muttered, "I just breakfasted with the bastard this morning, actually let him talk me into playing jacks on the nursery floor with his little beasties." Damien was chuckling more at such a picture when Simon clipped, "I thought m'cousin Joan would be good for Roger. Now I suspect her twisted humor has had the opposite effect."

"Simon, you know the only reason Rog would do such a thing is because he knew it would get back to you. He may be wed and out of circulation, but he still knows how to get his jibs in, and not just at the gym. "

Damien slapped his shoulder. "What are your plans today, aside from holding up walls? I've yet to toast

your elevation into earldom. Welcome to the race of hunted men.”

“Meaning...”

“The usual.” Damien led him to his carriage and they climbed in. “Look around the streets here, Simon. All these crested coaches and deb-filled carriages, every matchmaking mama and title-lusting father will be decking their females out to catch your eye. Say *adieu* to the old days, Viscount Berrenger.” The earl smiled cynically, “As the Earl of Collingworth, rakehell or not, you’ve just become one of the most desirable catches in London.”

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“Why am I here again?” Kendyl Reid glanced at her friend and present riding companion.

“Because if I must suffer these stupid society rules, I would rather do so with a friend I trust,” Abigail Forsythe supplied. She grimaced and sighed. “For all that I like Lord Sauvage well enough, his sister Lady Alexia is a different story.”

“Oh, now, she is quite nice to us, considering she must be appalled by our country manners and lack of polish. You’re only holding her in aversion because she’s making you read all that tripe on manners and lady-like decorum, and because she insists you take those boring dancing lessons and—”

“Just so.”

Kendyl laughed. “All right, so she is a bit extreme, but she’s a London sophisticate, a woman who knows these titled and rich families and their ways. I for one am glad she approved me as your companion. She actually did not have to accept my presence in the household.”

“She positively will,” Abby insisted strongly. “I’m not some nit-wit deb who will blindly follow anyone’s dictates. I am a grown woman, and I have only accepted this invitation because I am...curious. And I don’t like

the fact you're reduced to the role of servant when we've practically grown up together."

They reined in under some shade trees, aware of the earl and his sister some paces back talking to a group of riders. Kendyl said, "I'm a horse breeder's daughter, Abby. There are Scottish earldoms in our family true, but we don't move in society outside of selling them horse flesh."

She eyed Abigail as the woman undid another button under the jabot of her buff riding habit and laughably whispered, "Tell me that you put that corset and camisole on that Lady Alexia purchased?"

Abby smiled back. "Of course I did not. Who the devil wears flannel this time of year anyway?" She reached up then to tuck a strand of strawberry hair that was blowing in her face. "The whole idea of city fashion and proper wear is absurd, these stiff habits and starched drawers and laced up torture devices, no wonder every woman we've met has tight lips and bulging eyes. It's a marvel they're not all laying about the park half dead."

Kendyl chuckled.

Abby laughed with her, saying then dryly, "Blast it, Ken, we need our humor back. I swear these past two weeks have been bloody hell. I do like Lady Alexia, even if she cannot comprehend I'm well read, probably more versed on sexuality than she is, and find those so-called proper books for young ladies not only deficient in detail. However, offensive in their insistence that females do not need to... Well, you know... And aside from being handsome, Damien is delightfully *not* the stuffy old bore I'd feared him to be."

"Quite the opposite." The woman's hazel eyes met hers. "Good God, Abby... He's dark and dangerous looking, he fair makes my knees weak when he turns those silver eyes on me. That wavy black hair, those winged brows, and wicked, wicked smile. I dare say,

I've succumbed to every silly affliction we laughed at in those books when he's around."

"You've a fancy for him, then?"

"Now you are being obtuse." Kendyl snorted. "One does not get a mere fancy for a man like Damien Sauvage, one struggles to... Oh, there he is."

"Who, Lord Sauvage? We—"

"No silly, not him. His friend, the rakehell the servants were speaking of. Do attend my gossip, Abby." She sighed and chuckled. "You asked me to keep an ear to the ground, remember, to..."

"Never mind. I see him." Abigail Forsythe stared from the peaceful shade at the man now riding between Lord Damien and his sister. Both Blackstone and the female were jet haired and somewhat warm skinned from some mixed ancestry. The earl of Blackstone had collar length waves that fit his startlingly handsome looks and tall, well-built frame. And Alexia, with all the sultry, stately beauty, having all the poise one would expect from a highly placed family. Her hair was piled atop her head with several long spirals bouncing against her straight back and an impressive full bosom.

Yet—Abby's gaze stayed on the newly titled Earl of Collingworth, having no trouble recalling Kendyl's gossip now...*a jaded man who before leaving the scene for a space had not only the rep of rakehell but delivered both stinging wit and bored indifference with equal measure.* He was reputed to have tumbled every female of ripe age in London from the time he was twenty-five, and not limited himself to titles but kept a string of revolving mistresses that seem to run the gambit in looks and mature age.

Lord Simon, even as a viscount, had wealth and appearance and an endless thirst for drink, which some said attributed to his lack of respect or toad eating amongst his peers. Described as a man who always

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appeared disheveled and bored. One who openly expressed that, other than sex, females were useless, he was just the sort of man that Abigail Forsythe *would* find challenging.

She eyed him as a soft breeze ruffled that over long mane of sable and sun streaked hair. It blew it back from a face that was both bronzed and sensually stamped with every attribute found in a woman's forbidden dreams. Even on horseback, he had a languid grace and indolent style, like a tiger on the prowl. Or rather a well-fed and spoiled one, who was perfectly aware every female in the jungle wanted to mate with him. The man dressed himself in burgundy when every other gent in the park wore black and buff. He did not have on a neck cloth but a shirt that looked suspiciously undone at the sinew of his throat.

Pah, Abby mused mentally, he had run wild too long, grown too used to his usual pack of females. Someone should have shaken his smug egotism a long time ago and showed him a thing or two about supposedly compliant, gullible women.

Oh, yes, there was a man who needed a taste of his own medicine. And she was just the woman to deliver it.

"I recognize that set to your jaw."

Abby glanced at her friend, seeing a dry expression on her face. "Do you recall when Aunt Flora and Mr. Weeks were debating whether or not a positive spirit could tempt a person to explore something affirmative as well as an evil spirit could entice one to do the forbidden?"

"For God sakes, Abby," Kendyl laughed on a snort. "You know we never paid the least heed to some of the old dear's wild theories."

"I know that in general her character is...peculiar. But there are times when I think my aunt's eccentric nature borders on brilliance."

Since she said this with an enigmatic smirk, her friend finally caught on. "I see. And how, or rather should I say, on whom, do you intend to lead into temptation?"

"Not just temptation, Kendyl." Abby turned back, realizing the group was awaiting them now. "I believe we are going to find this season a challenge after all. I have a rather interesting theory of my own to prove out."

"God save Lord Simon, then," Kendyl muttered, amused, as they headed for the path. "And count me in."

~

Simon had reined in to await the ladies with Blackstone and his sister. In spite of his normal boredom and aversion to London and its long sampled offerings, the complete lack of any interest in the usual season and its crop of debs.

When Damien told him over drinks that he and Alexia were sponsoring some chit for the season, not a deb but a fully grown stranger, he'd first choked on his brandy, then laughed his arse off, though Damien further said the young woman's aunt was some eccentric character who communicated with ghosts, dug in the woods for dragon's bones and belonged to a mostly all male group of intellectuals who were considered the extremists of the scientific world.

Aside from the fact that the Damien Sauvage he knew slummed and gambled and raked with him, Rog, and a few others, and could care less for attending ton functions, or the seasons usual amusements. His friend's description of the aunt had also made him curious as hell.

At first introduction, Simon figured the dark redhead with freckles and a rather fey looking face was the one. Kendyl Reid, a slip of a woman with tilted almond eyes, no more than five foot tall, dimples and a slight burr to

voice, wearing a plaid habit that stuck out like a sore thumb amid the gray and black.

"How do you do, M'lord." She nodded.

"Fine, thank you," he murmured, aware that Lady Alexia was hailed away by some dowager, and that Damien was introducing the other. But then he heard...

"The Honorable Abigail Forsythe..."

She did not nod as her companion had but rather met his eyes with ones of an unusual lime green; Simon felt something prickle at his nape at their almost translucent hue with a thin darker rim. He had that absent sort of recognition that her strawberry hair was straight with uneven strands blowing across her brow and cheek, one catching on her pale pink mouth, which he was looking at next.

"Lord Collingworth." She leaned in the saddle to shake his hand.

Simon's brow raised and he ignored Damien's chuckle when he did shake that hand, rather surprised that she had a firm grip, and then completely thrown when she held on a bit more and murmured, "We're going to see each other quite a bit this season, I imagine."

When she had let go, in the pretense of joining his sister, Damien turned his mount and leaned to say to Simon, "I'll leave them in your able company for a bit, my lord, so that you may apprise them of the dangerous predators and vile seducers to steer clear of here in town..."

"Go to hell," Simon whispered through a grit toothed smile that only the females could see and in a tone that only Damien heard.

But then he was nudged by Miss Reid's rather impressive roan gelding and found himself plodding the row alongside Abigail Forsythe while her companion indiscreetly fell back.

Having carried on his celebration, or rather Damien's welcome back to town on his own after leaving Blackstone at the club, Simon was suffering a few effects of sleep deprivation and too much drink after long months of limiting himself to a brandy after dinner. He hadn't planned to do more than get a look at the female so he could torture his friend for taking on such an unlike Damien task.

Therefore he yawned and lazily eyed her again, noting that her frame was tall, around five feet six, and that she had her habit jacket undone. He could almost swear no corset or camisole contained the softly rounded breasts that pushed against her lace blouse. There was that unfettered sway with each step the horse took.

That habit, a dark green and black, was embroidered in a Celtic design. The cut was plain, almost severe next to the delicate lace of her blouse. He eyed her hair again—where her friend wore a bonnet, very Scottish and bearing some distinct crest, Abigail Forsythe was one of the handful of women in the park without a hat. Her silken mix of red and white hair was slipping its pins and managing to look wholly unladylike.

Simon lifted his gaze upward and felt a stir of attraction in spite of his initial disinterest. Her lips were flush pink and, while not full, there was a hint of promised sensuality in that shape. Of course, her nose, and the arch of that brow, the set of her jaw warned of a proud streak, something he could do without in lovers, since they normally made for bitchy and demanding types.

Though brunettes made up his last string of mistresses, beauties all of them, he would not consider Abigail Forsythe so much attractive as...somewhat tempting...for the very fact she was opposite them. In addition, perhaps not exactly being a deb played into that, making her less a strings attached sort of female.

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But then again, Simon reminded himself, his circumstances had altered and every unwed female in London considered him open for the claiming.

He snorted. *Not bloody likely.*

Yet Simon's gaze stayed on the woman until she turned her head and caught him looking, with an expression of her own that made him think she had been aware of his gaze the whole time. Unlike the *savoir-faire* rake he was, he came damn near close to flushing.

However, she said evenly enough, "You have been on the London scene for many years, have you not, milord?"

"Yes. Unfortunately."

"Thus you would be an expert on those vile seducers and predators that Lord Blackstone spoke of."

Simon drawled, "You're here to find a husband, madam. I surmise you will care little what sort of male creature you encounter, as long as he has wealth and title."

"Mmm. That seems to be the normal goal, according to Lady Alexia. I, however, have decided that such an undertaking is not only uninteresting, but would make my one and only season a dead bore." She smiled, showing straight, white teeth and a glint in her eye.

His brow rose. "Then you are not husband hunting as your sponsors assume?"

"Lady Alexia assumes any female not wed is here for that reason. Your friend Lord Blackstone I think has invited me for the simple fact that he enjoys thumbing his nose at the ton, or else he would have created a more desirable, fictional background for me, one which would impress potential husbands and high sticklers. But we consulted and I assured him that I had no intention of disowning my aunt by affecting a lie."

"Another mark against you in the marriage mart."

She shrugged. "As I was saying. I am not averse all together to finding a husband, and I came here because I was curious about a society and class I have read about for many years. My father was a baron, though I hardly saw him or my mother. I suppose you could say I am here for the normal reasons, but intend to go about them in my own way."

Simon's brow lowered, but he had no idea what she was talking about. "You've lost me," he admitted matter-of-factly.

She let those lime eyes hold his for several long moments. No smile this time but an intense expression. "I think...I do not have to look further...I have found what I should be looking for."

Simon halted his mount.

She did likewise.

He murmured, "Miss Forsythe, while I may not turn down an hour in your bed, the gossips can and are misleading. I have not returned to find myself a countess." He drawled, "There is naught a wife can provide that I cannot get elsewhere, with less trouble and no shackles."

After looking him over from boot to head while Simon shifted in the saddle, Abigail Forsythe murmured, "Call me Abby, Simon. I do so dislike formality."

Simon could not decide if she was a coy witch or a cold bitch out for his title and wealth. Again he felt that tingle up his spine and it settled on the back of his neck. "On second thought, I withdraw the offer. I never had much of a taste for country bred old maids." He turned his horse. "I'll escort you back to Lord Blackstone."

"First you suggest that I would *let* you in my bed, and then you get your back up because I too have an interest in you." She laughed and rode close to him. "I vow, Lord Simon, you are a conceited beast and totally

off the mark. I did not mean to imply at all that I would have you as you are.”

“What the bloody hell does that mean?” He jerked his gaze to her face.

Her tone softened to an almost purr, “You’d have to suit me first...and you do not. You must reform your ways, and you have not, and you must know me first, and you will not, and you must believe in love, and you cannot.”

Simon was sitting there still staring at her when Abigail Forsythe made to ride off and added in parting, “You’re going to want me, Simon, as much as I want you...and before you can have me...you’re going to have to deserve me.”

Chapter 2

“She really did say that!” Simon’s cousin, Lady Joan exclaimed that evening as they were lazing in the study of Lord Wythe’s townhouse.

“Yes,” Simon muttered, ignoring her amused smile and casting a glance at Rog, Lord Wythe who was standing by the French doors smoking. That dark and enigmatic figure the earl cut was legendary amid the ton, a rakehell to the core before he had wed the plain but passionate Lady Joan Lecrox.

In the presence of his friends, Rog was very opposite the scowling and scarred lord the ton walked a wide berth around, though admittedly they had warmed up to him since he’d wed Joan and they had started a family. Around Simon most of all, Rog was a good friend, an intelligent and multilayered man who loved his wife and adored his children.

Hell, playing jacks on the floor was nothing. Over the years, Simon found himself reading Joan’s letters to his father, describing how they all traipsed around the

countryside and when they were at Black Cross, the restored old gothic church Rog preferred to live in rather than his richer, more modern estates. It was reported by Joan that they cooked and worked and did things together, hardly ever leaving their children out of their adventures.

Even a pessimist like Simon had admitted that Joan and Roger shared something unique: passion, friendship, a partnership unheard of amid their set. The chemistry between the two was a palpable thing. One had only to be in the room with them, observe them a moment to catch the hum of it whenever their eyes met.

Roger's almost black eyes at this moment were not exactly suppressing his amusement either. He flicked an ash and said in his deep tones, "You were quite vocal in your opinions of the female sex, my friend. Whilst I seduced my share..." he gave his wife a wink, "I did not hold some inferior opinion of them as mere objects of lust."

Joan picked up, "I'm well aware, Cuz, that you asked my husband what on earth our use was beyond sex..."

Simon winced. "I was in my cups."

"Oh, so now you admit that my winning our bet served you well." She chuckled and strolled over to sit on the arm of his chair. Her sable hair curled wildly down to her shoulders, though she wore a very attractive and fashionable gold velvet dinner gown. She laid her hand on his arm and teased, "You did say there weren't enough females like me to go around."

"I was also in my cups."

She snorted. "I'm not going to let you use that excuse for your ignorance and appalling views of women, Simon."

"Call her off, Rog." He shot his friend a look. "She's warming up for a lecture, I can tell."

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Roger laughed and strode to refill his brandy glass. Sitting on the edge of the desk, he crushed the cheroot out in a tray and considered them. "I also know the two of you enjoy this sort of thing." Rog sipped and added dryly. "I am a mere spectator."

"Don't worry, Cuz; I was merely going to say that she sounds like someone very much like me. A woman who knows her own mind and who has no patience with the silly ton."

"Abigail Forsythe is nothing like you," Simon grit.

"I think I should like to meet her." Joan ignored him. "In fact, I'll invite her to lunch."

"You will not." Simon sat up and then got completely up from the chair, turning to look down where Joan had slid into his vacated seat and wore a smug smile. "Joan... You will not encourage this woman. Even Damien says that her family is a bit more than odd. For all I know she's daft—"

"Nonsense," Joan cut him off. "Any female who can peg you on the first meeting—read exactly what sort of rake you are—not only has above the intelligence of a ton deb and your bloody harem of mistresses, she's exactly the sort of female you need. "

"I do not need any woman, for any reason above the basic interaction, and I don't want Abigail Forsythe, that is for damn sure."

"Pish. Tell him, Roger. Remind him that he promised Uncle Willie he would wed, and remind him how very long the season is...how many milk and water debts he's going to—"

"I do not need Roger's reminder." Simon stared at her. "What I said to m'father I said because he was dying. And If I should ever decide to fulfill that promise, it will not be with this woman."

Joan stared back. "She sounds like a friend I'd like. I don't have any amid the ton."

“Dammit, Joan.”

“How refreshing it will be, to endure the season with someone who was not spoon fed all the rigid rules and nonsensical attitudes that ladies here are.”

Simon went over and set his brandy glass down. He picked up his jacket and walked to the door. “I don’t want her, Joan. And I would really hate to avoid you both and miss seeing those creatures you two spawned, just because you refused to believe me.” The door closed behind him.

~

“That was harsh, love.” Roger pushed away from the desk and strode the distance between them to lean over her, lightly brushing his fingers through her hair.

She reached up, resting her palms on his neck, and murmured, “M’dear, do you really think he’d have come here and relayed that conversation if he did not feel a bit off balance by this woman?”

Roger slid his hands down her arms, raised and lifted her up, then resettled in the chair with her draped across his hard body. He ran his hand over her silk clad thigh and smiled. “Not every rake wants reforming, love. Nor will every man be as lucky as I, and find everything he thinks he doesn’t need, in one woman.”

Her eyes shone. “Nor will every woman be as fortunate as myself.” She drew in her breath when he slid his palm to the center of her thighs. “But I only torture and tease Simon because I care for him so very much. He’s my only kin now.”

“I know.” Roger leaned down and kissed her, saying against her lips, “This is why I’m going to allow you to have your way.”

“Allow me!” She held his bottom lip with her teeth, laughing.

He took her hand and slid it to his hard sex pressing against snug black trousers. “Be my guest.”

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“Rog...” She moaned and licked that spot she’d bitten. And all discussion was over as the kiss turned hotter and their hands sought and found latches and openings.

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Simon had left the Wythes in a fine temper and directed his driver back to the townhouse. However, after pacing and downing two more brandies, he ordered another bath, a change of clothing, and departed again for the theater. His aim, to prove his own point to himself and find a few willing women to bed. He had not exactly been celibate in the country, but the associations he had indulged in had grown as mundane as his London entanglements before he had left.

In the coach on the way to Covent Gardens, he propped his booted feet in the opposite seat and undid the neck cloth that Yates had so carefully tied. He removed the starched collar and tossed it in the floor, reflecting on the blur of his life before he’d lost that bet to Joan and absented the season because he could not have tolerated the usual sameness and endless pretences sober.

At Collingworth he had been hell to live with those first months, knew bloody well had his father been any other sort of man, he’d have run him off. Nevertheless, Simon was fortunate that his father was not only sentimentally affectionate, he had depths that Simon had forgotten in his quest to drink and whore himself into numbness.

Once the toxins have sweated out of his body through manual labor, his father had gone with him to tour the other holdings. They had spent more time together in that forced closeness than they had since before Simon served in the Royal Navy.

It was sometime in the easy and completely accepting company of his sire that Simon listened to his

father's view of where his life had been, where it was headed. He had no idea his father genuinely worried about his slumming and dockside gambling. The old earl acknowledged Simon was skilled with weapons and possessed very good instincts from his military background. However, the fact was, William did worry, and he had a theory as to why Simon viewed women as he did, as to why he would not commit to a relationship.

"Your mother died when you were very young, m'boy. I loved her more than life itself, and were it not for promising her I would look after you, I would have recklessly joined her rather than live these empty years without her. That is how strong love can be. How closely it can bind us. I recall that interest you had in the Duchess of Summerton..."

Simon had said abruptly, "That was a long time ago, Father."

"Yes. Nevertheless, she was your first affair and did entangle you a mess. I do not discount the impact it had simply because you were young. That your first love was an older woman who..."

"It wasn't love."

"If you insist. But nonetheless, you cared enough for her to lose your head, and everything that came out of the situation changed you."

Now Simon allowed the memory to surface with the image of Andrea's face. He had been completely taken with the woman, separated from her husband and living on the neighboring estates. The duchess threw all the grand parties and summer outings, and it was at those that he had caught her eye and in short order became her lover, or rather, one in a list of lovers.

His youth and lusts converged in the ages of eighteen to twenty, and his life and time were consumed by a blind devotion and uncontrolled desire for a woman who thrived on it, needed it.

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He had been tormented when he discovered there were others, ripped by jealousy when he had seen them at gatherings or in the village. And in the end lay the reason he had joined the Navy and became a man like Lord Wythe and Damien and scores of other jaded rakehells. He'd fought several duels, nearly killed Andrea's husband—the duke, who had merely thought to open his eyes to what his wife was and how her charms weren't worth dying and destroying his rep over.

Yes, Simon thought rather coldly, he had become the object of stares and whispers amid the ton, and in his neighborhood, from his wild and insane connection to the duchess of Summerton. Moreover, the ultimate had come, as his father had then warned, as the duke had then tried to ward off.

He had been an hour out of her bed when she had told him her husband was divorcing her. She was traveling to Italy with her latest lover, a rich count who would eventually wed her.

When he became enraged, she had laughed at him, scorned him and raked him with cold eyes, telling him that his devotion had become tiresome. And then she'd torn the clothing from her young maid's back and shoved her at him, telling him that all women were the same in bed and it was a blind fool who knew not the difference...that her power over him lay in her ability to seduce and manipulate and totally control him through sex.

He had not taken the maid, no. He had slapped the duchess, however. An act of violence that appalled and sickened him. And the reality of what he was, of what he had become in those years since meeting her, suddenly hit him with such force he'd felt ice in his belly. Moreover, when he saw himself clearly, he saw Andrea, too.

He had left that part of him behind in that room and walked the nearly eight miles to Collingworth, forgetting his horse in his need to leave. And Simon supposed that it was his father's sad face and worried eyes that haunted him more when he'd gone off to war. However, the hard lessons he'd learned then and upon returning helped to remind him to never let his emotions rule him.

He lusted and he satisfied it, and he knew what it felt like to be in Andrea's shoes and have women fill that capacity. When one had looks and money, titles and sexual skill, they were everywhere one looked.

No woman would ever again tempt him beyond the place he'd designated them fifteen years ago. He'd had enough of them to know that truth.

~

Abby stood in the theater lobby, watching Lady Alexia greet a score of ton members who apparently would make or break many of the white-clad young debs curtsying and wringing their hands, apparently getting the once over for the first time before the season's opening balls began. Abby had already done the pretty and received the expected raised brows and twitching noses and downright cuts from some of them. Abigail could care less, but she was aware that Alexia was soothing a few ruffled feathers, trying to lessen the impact of her bluntness when they had questioned her on her background.

My aunt Flora excavates for dragon's bones. I have read widely, yes, I studied with several professors. No, I do not care to wear white at all. I don't recall my father much; it seems he was here in London most of the time. Yes, my mother was The Baroness Forsythe...they died in the same coach wreck as their lovers, apparently intoxicated. I am not as excited about the season as I am curious; it is more a glimpse into another sort of life,

rather than a desire to partake in the rituals of the marriage mart.

She was speculating on Blackstone's sister and half watching the entryway. It intrigued her a bit that Alexia was twenty-six and unwed. So poised, so beautiful, so apparently connected in all the right ways...so bloody obsessed with finding *her* a husband, yet not attached herself. There had been a time or two she had caught the earl's sister watching a man she discovered was a duke Andrew something or other, apparently a recluse who for mysterious reasons never came to London except to fulfill his political duties.

The mystery totally fled Abby's mind, however, when Simon came through the entry. He was carrying his cape and hat, his streaked hair, too long and flowing over his shoulders, giving him a savagely untamed look when added to that darkly tanned skin.

The chatter around her increased as heads turned and whispers arose. Quite a few titters and remarks about his sexual prowess from the males, muttered bets on how many of the actresses he would have under him in their dressing rooms between acts.

"Here is your champagne." Kendyl showed up at her elbow, breathless. "I swear, for the cream of society, these people are downright rude. I think my toes are black from being stepped on. This new gown is ruined."

Abby took the drink and downed half, watching her friend sip her own and dab at a spot on the sleeve of her black gown. Of course, Kendyl had her brooch on, a replica of her father's clan emblem she wore with honor when she could not wear the plaid itself. Ken was ardent about her ancestry.

"Simon is here."

Kendyl stopped dabbing and stood on her tiptoes. "I see. And looks as if he's been tumbled already in the coach."

“From the whispers, one gathers that and drinking is all he does.” Abby sighed. “I really cannot let him do what he’s got on his mind tonight...just look at that face, those half hooded eyes... That is the look of a stalking lion...no doubt already smelling the scent of his prey.”

Kendyl laughed and after shooting a look at a matron who poked her with cane to nudge her out of the way, she muttered, “And what is the plan to avert such a goal?”

“I’m thinking.”

Abby saw Simon talking to a group of rakish men, which included Lord Blackstone. A flask was passed around and she noted he drank long of it before handing it back to Damien. She looked around at the clusters, too, noting how the richly gowned matrons and florid gents were nudging those debs closer to the group of unclaimed males.

No wonder their egos were so inflated, she thought. The whole scenario was a scene her aunt would find much to theorize about. Abby only had to pay attention to Collingworth, however, to discover how he was taking the attention...

And Simon did look over, after one of the men nudged him and said something that had the gentlemen laughing. His eyes seemed to take in the obvious before he nodded to a few of the men, ignored the guardians of those unmarrieds trying to wrangle an introduction to him—and turned his back on the group. Bringing his gaze of course to her own.

For a moment, she struggled to ignore her inward reaction to him. It was not just his eyes but the face itself, so strong boned with arrogant nose and sensual lips, the wave to his hair, the complete contrast to the neat, windswept or collar length styles of other gents. The dangling neck cloth and missing collar that exposed a sinewy throat. Yes, everything in her was tingling,

melting, getting warm as blood went rushing through her veins. However, Abigail knew she could not let him see it, until she was ready to let him see it.

First, she had to prove her parting words to him today. She had to make him want her just as much, for as many reasons. Because she knew with an instinct old as time that Simon actually believed his jaded theory—and no wonder, thanks to the females he normally encountered.

She deduced while their gaze held that he was utterly jaded, bored, a rakehell who had seen and done almost too much and had everything he desired too easily. Abby realized he didn't believe in much of anything, not romance, not love, not real desire, not longing, or any kind of male and female relationship beyond lust.

And there too, she wondered if he sought his loins' ease for that alone, or simply because he wanted to reinforce that rumored belief that females were only necessary for sex?

She had her work cut out for her, Abby mused; *I have bitten off quite a chunk here, haven't I? In the park, I would have thought it was simply the challenge. But now I know. Looking into those eyes...I know that it is much, much more.*

"Damien is signaling us. It looks as if he and Lady Alexia are headed for their box."

Abby glanced at Kendyl. "Go ahead of me. I'm going to get tangled in the crowd a bit."

Kendyl grinned and winked. "Will do. And good luck on the hunt."

Abby smiled slightly, waiting for Kendyl to go ahead before she turned aside and worked through the lines, very much aware that Simon was letting the crowd go ahead of him.

She made her way to him, just as he started moving too, and she let the gold shawl slide off her shoulders.

He had noticed her, and his gaze went from where the shawl hooked on her elbows to the top of the gown she wore, a light amber and cream with off the shoulder sleeves and snug bodice.

"I've seen more impressive views, Miss Forsythe."

She grinned, walking still alongside him and glancing up. "Big breasts are vastly over rated. They tend to sag in old age, you know?"

His lips twitched only slightly but he muttered. "And small ones deflate, one hears."

"Not necessarily. My aunt discovered that rubbing cream used for bovine udders keeps breasts supple longer."

He shot her a startled look and blinked. "Your aunt, s—"

"Does many interesting experiments." She slid her hand to his arm. "Do escort me to His Lordship's box. I fear I've no idea where it is."

He appeared confused a moment, then tucked her arm through his and turned toward the balcony stairs. "Men are often repelled by forwardness, you know."

"Um, yes. I saw your face when those debts were crowding around." Abby tsked, trying to remain calm though his scent was singularly enticing. Really, it was a mix of animal in heat and crisp linen; put all sorts of wicked images in her head too.

"They should know the group of rakes you were with would head in the opposite direction when such a risk is present. I understand from Lord Blackstone that merely looking or touching a virginal debt can get you betrothed before the gossip settles?"

"True. More than two dances, holding one's hand longer than acceptable, a whole list of ridiculous rules,

designed to keep daughters pure and men panting over them...”

“How very impractical.” Abby turned as they reached the box and added, “I certainly don’t intend to put such strictures on you.”

He had stopped and glanced at the box. The music struck up when he finally looked at her. “Don’t you? Well, perhaps I shall take back my parting remark in the park today, and give you what you so innocently are begging for.”

He reached out and caught a strand of her hair that lay against her bare shoulder and fingered it. “I came here tonight to ease myself between some willing thighs. That is all. If you’re offering...”

“You’re trying to shock me, aren’t you?” She saw it, heard it in his seductive tone. “Trying to scare me off and—”

“Either I step into that box and tell your sponsors some passable lie that gets you in my coach outside. Give me what you’re teasing for. Or shut up while you have some virtue left.”

Bloody hell, he was rather fierce and good at being a rake.

She bit her lip, and then whispered, “I can’t do that. Not because of virtue, but because you just want to mark me off your usual list of conquests, or rather reinforce your own skewed view of the female population.”

She reached up and took his hand, covered it and let their fingers twine a moment. “You should get to know me, Simon. Really. I have had a rather adventurous life in the country. I was even arrested once.”

“You are daft.” He shook his head.

“Because I’m not batting my eyes or blushing?” she laughed softly. “Do you know what I like...what I do on sultry nights when the storms start to build, those nights

that it grows very still and tempests poise in the distance...”

She rubbed her thumb over his. “I walk out into the dark so that I can be there for the moment that the wind gusts in, to smell the first teasing hint. I close my eyes, feel the thunder rumbling, absorbing the power and force...and the moment the rain falls, my skin is so hungry and my senses craving, I feel a glorious kind of ecstasy and tears merging. Such pleasure as it washes over me.”

He swallowed, wet his lips, but his nostrils flared and he told her, “That’s a good way to be struck by lightning.”

She laughed and held his gaze. “That’s the way we’d be together, Simon. Like rain and storms and lightning.” She dropped his hand. “You don’t want them.” She nodded toward the stage in general. “Not another night, another season of lust that is spent fast and soon forgotten. You are coin to them, just as you are a title to that crop of debts that are going to haunt your movements this season. To your mistresses and lovers, it does not really matter who you are, or what you are. You can’t laugh with them or even feel...”

“Shut up...”

“...or be yourself, because you’ve played this game so long, you don’t know who you really are.”

He looked cut from stone. “Take your analogies and go to hell, Miss Forsythe. You’re nothing more yourself than an on the shelf intruder, with a lack of manners and a daft aunt who gave you some idea your opinions or your looks matter.”

He raked her with a gaze that was mocking. “The ton will eat you alive, and you will find yourself scandalized and ostracized before the season is half over. Good evening.” He turned to leave.

A Taste of Temptation

Abby caught his arm. "You did not let me finish. I was going to say... But not to me...I would see you, every shade and hue and hollow and I would feel you, taste you, and know your scent. That is why I know the difference. However, I want more than just that. I want to know you, to hear the sound of your laughter, real laughter, see the guarded things of your heart."

"Completely cracked," he muttered tightly.

Abby said, though he had stayed turned away from her, "If you are going to be utterly stubborn and take some whore tonight you can indulge me, daft or not, and give me a mere kiss."

His head turned then, and he glanced from her hand on his arm to her face.

Abby gazed back with pale green eyes full of silken heat. Her heart actually jumped as he turned with an expression meant to frighten, to intimidate her and switched their holds, jerking her toward him with little finesse, but the intent to punish and to teach her a lesson.

When his head dipped and she felt that first hard crash of their mouths, she reached up, grabbing a hold on his long hair, forcing his head up an inch.

Then, golden and light eyes locked with intensity, she breathed against his lips, and slowly, slowly, brought her tongue out to trace the bottom one.

She panted harshly, as stridently as Simon in the dark curtained space. But she raked her teeth against that lower lip and then let them touch, just barely, while she husked, "You are wasted on them, my lord. They have no idea how to take pleasure in this..." And with that, she slid her tongue inside his warm mouth, flavored with brandy and anger and lust. She spread her taste across his tongue, under it, and pulled back with a firm suckle in parting.

Abby dropped her hand from his hair and stepped back, trembling from his own flavor sliding down her throat.

“Bitch.” He stared at her, wiping the moistness from his bottom lip. “Teasing bitch.”

She shook her head slowly, sadly, and then turned, proceeding into the box.

~

Much later, Kendyl leaned over and whispered, “What the blazes happened? It seemed as if you two were going to tear each other up. It was all Damien and I could do to keep Lady Alexia from looking over.”

Having calmed herself, Abby shot a peek at that dark lord and found him slumped in the chair, looking bored. However, his head turned suddenly and he let his eyes drift over her face before settling on her mouth. When they rose again, they held an expression of warning, and she knew the kiss showed.

Abby grunted when he turned around and said in low tones. “I’ll have to tell you at home.”

~

It was not until they were departing that Damien detained her by the box and whispered, “You are playing with fire, you know?”

“I know.”

He dropped his hold and they walked to catch up with Alexia and Kendyl. “I can’t save you from scandal, Abigail. Neither will Alexia step in if you go beyond the bounds.”

“I probably will.”

He snorted on a soft laugh. “Yes. Many do with Simon. I simply thought you were smarter than that.”

“I’m not of the many, my lord. I’m the one and only.” She let out a slow breath and added, “There will be no others after me.”

A Taste of Temptation

"I see." He sighed too. "Well, I wish you luck for the sake of it. However, knowing a bit more about Simon than you do, it is going to take more than seduction to change his views. Bedding is not a problem for Simon. Females are drawn to his sort..."

"And yours."

As they stepped out onto the dark street and the crowd getting in their coaches, he chuckled low. "Fortunately for me. However, I do not have Simon's aversion to females outside of bed. I even number a few as friends."

"How progressive of you, Blackstone."

In the coach, when he stopped laughing, he said, "And to think I was going to add you to that list."

Abby smiled at him. "You will. I have such a winning way about me."

As Kendyl snorted, Blackstone murmured, "Then you won't mind if I place a few bets on your...uh... mission?"

"Not at all. You would anyway."

Chapter 3

"There are wagers on it at the clubs," Lord Roger told Joan as they left for the opening ball a week later.

Seated next to him in the coach, she grinned. "I really must meet her tonight."

He slid his arm around her, saying with his lips against her hair, "I wagered fifty pounds she would be his mistress before Christmas."

Joan elbowed him and pulled back. "Roger!"

He was laughing. "What, love? For all my own luck changed, I do not think for a moment that any women can bring your cousin to heel. You forget, Joan, that I served with him, and I have known him many, many years. "

She eyed his swarthy face, and then met those ebony eyes. “What do you know, Roger?”

“Enough.” He lost his smirk. “And no, I can’t tell you.”

“Of course you can,” she insisted cheerfully. “You tell me everything now. You love and adore me. You worship me. You hold nothing back w—”

He touched his finger to her lips. “Even if I tell you the root of it, it does not alter the fact that females have helped to foster Simon’s cynical views. You are a mature woman, love. You know that there are women who—”

“Of course, I know that. Nevertheless, I want to help him. I want him happy, really happy, and not playing at his life.” She kissed his fingers and settled against his shoulder. “For all we laughed about it, he drank entirely too much. He was rarely sober through his late twenties. I vow, Roger. He could not keep the women straight or even recall where or with whom he had been. This time from London did him good, and Lord knows it pleased Uncle Willy and helped him to pass a happy man. Yet, I know the grind and the brittleness of the season will get to him. This whole thing with becoming earl and all...”

“It’s the way of things, Joan. You cannot think that you and I finding each other happens every day.”

“I don’t. But—”

“And the woman may very well be daft. Bloody hell, Joan. She could be dangerous.”

Joan snorted. “I’ll discover that tonight. But just for the sake of getting the last word, I do not believe that Simon knows what a relationship or courtship is. He’s walked around in a sotted haze most of his adult life.”

“Just don’t push her at him, love. I know from experience, it doesn’t work.”

“I won’t. But I will wager you fifty pounds myself she isn’t crazy.”

A Taste of Temptation

He laughed and hugged her to him. "To humor you, I'll take it."

~

Abby rolled her eyes at Kendyl who was standing on the sidelines of the ballroom, making faces at her. Kendyl looked nice considering Alexia insisted she dress subdued. She had on a lovely dark cream satin gown and long gloves, her red hair back in a twist and a small clan brooch worn on a choker. She was making faces because Lord Blackstone led Abby out on the floor, a sacrifice he said, necessary to show his support before he hied it to card room and some brandy.

"Will you dance with Kendyl?" Abby glanced up at him while they waltzed across the floor.

"No."

She shot him a chiding look. "Aren't you just the snob, though?"

His white teeth flashed. "It's not her station, or ancestors, or anything of the sort, Abigail. Her family has a fine pedigree and plenty of blunt."

"So?"

"So I am a blackguard, a rakehell to be sure. However, your friend has a tendre for me, and cad I am not. I won't encourage the youngun."

Abby spurted with laughter and met his silver gaze. "Kendyl Reid is twenty-five years old, Damien."

He shrugged one shoulder and whirled her around. "She's not my type. Comes with attachments..."

"Meaning a father and two brothers who would kill you for seducing her?"

"Let's be blunt then, shall we? There would be no seduction. My ego aside, I know she wants me. However, I limit my affairs to those who know the score and understand the boundaries. I'm bloody well not going to be trapped into marriage because of lust."

The waltz ended and Abby said, disgusted, "Men. The lot of you are too spoiled by everything and everyone. I certainly hope someday that you want a woman half as much and the tables are turned. It would do you good to be denied something you desire."

He touched his finger to her nose playfully before leaving her side, saying, amused, "You should be applauding me for drawing the line, Abigail. It proves that even rakes have their principals."

When he had gone and Kendyl joined her, Abigail told her what he'd said.

Kendyl's lips twisted sourly. "It serves me right for wanting such a horse's arse. I tell you, Abby. When we had all of those talks over the years, it never occurred to me we would fall for men like this. I certainly thought that our adventurous tryst with the Beaumont twins gave us a certain edge."

Abby chuckled in her punch glass. Their eyes met, recalling the two handsome and strapping twin males who had been the object of their experiments and girlish yearnings for many years. Healthy, attractive and intelligent, the Beaumonts, in the months they were down from school, provided some interesting life lessons. The foursome had done everything from slip into taverns and gamble to spend the night in graveyards and go swimming in the buff at midnight. The pubescent years and beyond were rather more interesting and enticing. Yes, the friends had thought themselves somewhat worldly when they compared notes and confided their adventures.

"Miss Forsythe?"

Abby turned and found herself facing a woman she had not seen upon arriving. The lady was around five foot five and had curly sable hair that floated rather softly into a back sweep. Her face, while not beautiful, was interesting, but her eyes were both intelligent and

sparkling green. Abby thought, too, she looked a bit like Simon...

"Yes?"

"I am Joan, Lady Wythe."

"Oh." Abby shoved her drink at Kendyl and did her curtsy.

However, the countess took her hand and shook it, laughingly saying, "Please, I'm not one of the dragons of society. I'm the Earl of Collingworth's cousin, by the way."

"I thought you two favored." Abby released her hand after shaking it. "This is my best friend Kendyl Reid. Her father—"

"—he's a horse breeder," Kendyl said, shaking that gloved hand with a dimpled grin. "My grandfather lost the family fortune and his sons went into trade. My da has been the most successful."

"How admirable." Lady Joan nodded. "I must get his name. Roger, my husband," she waved toward a tall man who looked rather like a pirate to Abby. "He's looking for prime stock for our holdings in Bristol."

"It's Douglas," Kendyl supplied and stared at Abby in surprise, obviously not expecting such open friendliness nor acceptance.

Abby was attending but watching lord Roger walk toward his wife and thinking that perhaps he was the most unique looking earl she'd ever met. Very tall, built obviously strong and possessing darker skin than Simon. The scar on his cheek and that silken black hair gave him a sinister appearance at a distance. But once he was beside his wife, his arm unashamedly going around her, Abby saw past the scar and felt a bit flushed to view such a compelling face. Eyes nearly black and holding a similar sensual promise as Simon and Damien possessed. Really, it was disconcerting, wickedly handsome, her friend would say.

His tone was deep when he murmured, "Good evening, ladies."

"My lord."

Lady Joan introduced them, and Roger waved off their curtsy. She was telling about the horses and he was nodding and agreeing, asking Kendyl a few questions before he told her he would most certainly look her father up and make an appointment to meet.

Lady Joan said after that, "I imagine you are wondering why I introduced myself?"

Abby met that frank gaze. "I was, but I assume you've either heard talk of my aunt, or Simon has said something..."

Joan smiled and looked up at her husband. "She calls him Simon already."

Lord Roger was looking at Abby. "Simon and Joan are the last of their blood kin."

"And she's feeling me out; to make sure I'm not daft as a duck, or some obsessed loon?"

The countess turned to her again, smiling. "Yes. I am."

Abby sighed and shrugged. "I may well be, considering. He is no prize as he is. But there's some interesting potential under the surface."

"Oh, Roger. I do like this woman." Joan looked at her husband laughing and then slipped her arm through Abby's and Kendyl's. "We're going off for a chat, darling. Do let us know when my cousin arrives."

The earl snorted dryly as they walked off together.

~

Almost two hours later, Lady Joan, Abby and Kendyl were ensconced in the Duke of Rhinshire's library, shoes off, their feet up, and drinking freely from his bar. They had talked and talked, laughed like old friends and exchanged interesting theories on everything from the ton to men to communing with ghosts.

A Taste of Temptation

Abby and Kendyl had an open invite to Black Cross and accepted the countess's welcome to come to the townhouse and meet her son and daughter.

Abby was surprised, positively amazed, at meeting such a woman after her initial society introductions. She found Joan down to earth, very witty, intelligent, and, well, entirely unexpected.

"I don't think he will give in," Kendyl hiccupped in her brandy glass and nearly slid off the winged chair. "Damien will wed one of those..." she gestured toward the ballroom and sloshed brandy over her glove, "...rich and titled heiresses."

"Rakes and rogues are the best sort of lovers." Lady Joan nodded. "As much as we hate the thoughts of those other women, we do benefit from their experience. However, every one of them seem to have their own reasons for pursuing a dissolute and reckless life."

She sipped her port and sat up, feeling for her shoes and slipping them on. "I will tell you this, Ken. If he wants you bad enough, titles or anything else will not matter. Moreover, you really do not want him any other way. Dear, you have to prove yourself their equal in some ways. Be yourself, but also guard your heart. There's no use giving him that much power when he doesn't deserve it."

"You're very wise," Kendyl said seriously.

Lady Joan laughed. "Not really. I just know that one can make mistakes at any age. You are old enough, have enough experience to realize what the risk is with a man like Blackstone. Whatever happens, you do not want to be like them and trap him into a situation that will make him resent you."

Abby had sat up too and murmured, "Is that aimed at me, also?"

Lady Joan grinned at her. "You, my new friend, have an open field. Take any shot you want at

m'cousin." She laughed. "And I want to see you win, Abby. I really do."

Abby squeezed her hand and sighed. "I know I have my work cut out for me. But what's to do, when you know instinctively that you've just met your destiny?"

"Just so." Their hands parted and Joan stood, walking over to open the French doors, and looking back as Abby arose to take her glass—and Kendyl's to the sideboard. "I don't know why, but Simon has robbed himself of too many years existing in this cynic's world of boredom. Like all rakes, he has sought the seedier and dark places, and indulged, sometimes overly, every vice there is. I don't know that one can undo that frame of mind..."

"But you did, with Lord Roger?"

"Roger is very much the man I met and fell in love with." Joan shook her head. "He has his dark places, as we all do. But yes, we laugh and love, in ways that he would not have..."

"And how did you do that?" Abby leaned her hips against the desk.

Joan told her the blunt truth of how she had begun her affair with her husband, and then she said, "And I wanted to be what he needed. I wanted to see him laugh, to lighten his life with love, and to explore all the things another woman, a real society wife, would not. I do not know, Abby. You just sense it. You just know what to do."

Abby looked at her, holding those frank green eyes a long time before saying, "That is my plan."

The countess nodded, then glanced at Kendyl and burst out laughing. "She's sotted."

Abby went to her friend who was draped in the chair. "My God, she's foxed."

They laughed and got the woman stretched out on the sofa.

A Taste of Temptation

"I'll get Lord Blackstone to slip her out and take her home," Lady Joan whispered.

And she did, returning with the earl who looked at the three of them and then eyed the half-full decanters. He scooped Kendyl in his arms, headed for the French doors and said, "This is the only one of you I intend to haul out of here tonight."

"Thanks," Abby muttered, smiling at his dry look.

"Let's rejoin the ball." Lady Joan waved her toward the door. "He'll put her in good hands."

"She's going to be in a lather when she realizes she was in his arms, and too sotted to know it."

The lady laughed. "Likely so. And no doubt he will make the most of this little incident."

"No doubt."

~

"Simon is there, by the stairs with Roger." Joan took her arm and guided her that way.

"He has seen me, at least, and appears to be about to make an exit."

"Roger will detain him," Joan assured, and Abby saw that indeed the earl said something that had Simon turning around again with a set jaw and eyes blazing.

They made their way over and after a polite greeting, Lord Roger leaned down so his wife could whisper in his ear, then doing something similar to rolling his eyes, before leading her to the floor and leaving Abby to stand by Simon.

Abby could smell a fair amount of brandy on him, mingled with that alluring scent she'd come to recognize. She let her gaze slide up his open claret jacket and silk shirt with undone neck cloth, up past the hair laying at his shoulders to that handsome visage.

His own eyes apparently went over her deep green silk gown, which was sleeveless and encrusted with

minute silver stars. He finally met her gaze with one carrying several kinds of heat.

“Ask me to dance,” Abby murmured.

“Have your hearing examined, will you? I made myself clear before. Unless you wish to supply what I want, stay the bloody hell away from me.” He looked away from her, his gaze going over the crowd. “Excuse me. I think I see someone I know.”

Abby fumed silently, watching him rudely make his way through the dancers and end up by a column talking to a tall, brown-haired woman in pink silk. She wafted her fan and tapped her toe, but her eyes saw everyone in a blur of frustration. When Simon’s hand touched the woman’s spine in the guise of leaning down to hear something she said, Abby’s stomach cinched so tight she felt queasy.

For the next hour, through standing with Lady Joan and then waving them off as they had another gathering to attend, Abby watched Simon play his game of seduction...and drink and drink. Though the brunette danced with others, it became apparent from the signals and not so discreet smiles that she and Simon had some sort of plan.

~

The emotions, the heat and noise were getting to her, and Abby had worked her way around the floor, torturing herself, she thought sourly, with a closer view of Lord Collingworth and the object of his lust.

Ready to gnaw the edge of her fan, she was standing there when the woman came back to Simon and he straightened from leaning against the pillar, leaning again to speak with her before looking around. The woman did too, and then said something, before heading out of the ballroom and toward the hallway.

Abby’s nostrils flared when Simon did the same a few moments later.

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Trying to gather her scattered wits and calm her nauseated fury, Abby took off in the same direction. She muttered at every lord or lady who stepped in her way, impeding her progress...thus giving Simon more time with the woman. Finally leaving the crowd behind, she made it to the study and opened the door, her eyes immediately finding the couple on the sofa.

The woman under Simon yelped and sat up at the noise. Pushing at him, she began yanking her bodice upwards.

"Oh, excuse me," Abby made herself say. "I was looking for my friend."

"Get the hell out of here!" Simon was standing, ready to come toward her. He cursed when the object of his seduction pushed him aside and scrambled around Abby, patting her hair and looking mortified.

"You don't really want her."

He was in the process of picking up his discarded jacket and neck cloth; however, he straightened and threw the items on the leather sofa. He snarled at Abby. "Come here."

Abby eyed that mussed hair, half-unbuttoned shirt that showed a firmly cut and tanned chest. However, his eyes were hotly glowing. She walked very slowly those few feet between them, hopefully giving him time to calm down.

However, he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard enough to loosen her pins and send her straight hair sliding to her shoulder blades. Glaring at her, he grit, "Stay the hell away from me. Do you understand? I do not want you. Can you get that through your daft skull?"

After the first wave of fear, Abby got hold of herself. She grasped his upper arms, digging her fingers into the hard muscle under the silk shirtsleeves. "Did she taste as good as me? Did she want you as much, for all the re..."

“Shut up. Shut up.”

“You’re drunk, Simon. What did you do, spend all day in the bottle?”

“Get away from me.” He let go and turned, walking unsteadily toward the sofa.

Nevertheless, Abby walked up behind him, touching his back, feeling the moist heat through his silk shirt and the solid muscle between his wide shoulder blades. She rested her forehead against his back and murmured, “Let’s walk outside in the garden, Simon. We will sit on the benches, in the cooler air, and talk. Your head will clear and you will...”

“For Christ sakes.” He had leaned his head back, closing his eyes. “If you do not cease this I will leave London.”

Abby raised her head, reaching up to run her fingers through that wavy hair. “All you have to do is talk to me. Get...”

“Alright.” He pulled away, smoothing his hair back and walking toward the French doors, leaving his jacket and cravat where it fell.

Abby followed him, trembling with anxiety but relishing the cooler air, aware that he was walking a bit fast and with a set jaw. Aware that he was in a foul mood.

He walked toward the darkened side and sat on a bench, not waiting for her. Legs splayed, elbows on his knees, and long hair falling forward, he rubbed his face with his hands roughly and then scraped that mane back with his fingers, tucking it behind his ears, sitting up then and glancing over at her as his hands fell to his thighs. He said, “I’m here.”

She ignored that flat tone and sat beside him, slightly facing. Tucking her own loose hair behind her ears and felt a slight breeze. “You’re very handsome, Simon.”

He merely stared at her.

“But then you know that, don’t you? I expect that’s an asset to a rakehell way of life.” She looked around a moment and then back. “I don’t suppose you’ve ever courted a woman. No, I can see you haven’t.” She smiled slightly. “I haven’t been courted exactly. I think I should like it, though, candy and flowers and poems.”

He really was looking at her as if she were crazy.

Abby bit her lip and then said softly. “Do you really want to wake up an old man, alone, having wasted your prime years on drink and the wrong kinds of women? You aren’t so very old. What do you do for fun, for adventure? Your cousin tells me you race horses?”

“Occasionally,” he grudgingly supplied.

Encouraged she asked, “In your cups. It seems like you’ve existed that way a long time.”

“This is pointless,” He stated that in a mutter.

“I’ve had wonderful adventures, stored hundreds of memories away for my golden years. I robbed a coach once.”

“The arrest you mentioned?”

She laughed, though she was thrilled he recalled anything she had said. “No. That was for accidentally setting a fire in the squire’s field. Ken and I were trying to smoke a pipe and lost hold of it...” She shook her head. “No, we held up a coach when were fifteen. Dressed like bandits and everything.”

He shook his head slowly.

“It wasn’t to rob them per se. It was a bet we had made with some chaps we had grown up with. The Beaumont brothers, great guns, and the object of our youthful passions.”

His gaze raked her up and down. “Youthful passions?”

“Um, yes. Females are as curious as males, you know? I think we were very lucky to find two such

willing chaps. Good looking and discreet. If you know what I mean.”

“You’re not a virgin?” he asked bluntly.

“In many ways, yes.” Her smile was enigmatic. However, Abby went on. “Oh, we’ve done lots of things. Gambled in taverns and slept in spooky graveyards. Gotten seriously in our cups after Kendyl’s da left his whiskey in the stable...” she tilted her head. “I’ve been lucky to have lots of freedom growing up.”

“It sounds to me as if your aunt neither supervised nor disciplined you. Whilst you consider that an admirable thing, in this society, any whisper of those adventures would get you ostracized.”

“I’m aware of that. But then, I am only here, at least now, because you are.”

“Don’t...” he shook his head and looked away from her, reaching up to absently rub his temple.

Abby stood before she went round the bench, ignoring his flinch when she stepped behind him. She removed his hand and began rubbing those temples herself. “One of the downsides of drink, milord. You do have a head; I can feel your pulse pounding.”

He sat stiff at first and then sighed, closed his eyes and relaxed, though saying in a murmur, “You would drive a priest to drink.”

She laughed softly, spread her hands so that they lay against his face from ear to temple and gently massaged. “Do you like my perfume?”

“I can’t smell it.”

“Liar.”

He grunted. “Honeysuckle...and something.”

“Um, yes.” She stepped closer so that his hair touched the bare skin of her bodice but kept up her soothing touch. “What is the last enjoyable thing you did?”

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He frowned, she felt it, and then he said, "I don't recall."

"Pity. Did you take an actress home the other night?"

"No. I took her against the wall off stage."

She had stopped and now sifted her hands through his hair, tilted his head back so that she was looking down at him. "You did not."

"Let go." He reached up to move her hands.

Abby leaned down and lightly kissed his brow delicately, then the bone of his cheek. She raised enough to wait for his eyes to open again. "I'm only going to indulge you for so long, my lord. Then you will be hard pressed to catch me. I am willing to make a fool of myself, be the aggressor if you will. But I, too, have a limit."

"Daft..."

She let him go and sat down facing opposite, so that their shoulders and hips touched and Abby leaned back a bit, to watch him smooth that wild mane. Her gaze slid down his open shirtfront, noting sleek and muscled flesh. "Your hands aren't the hands of an idle lord, nor your body. You really did work your estates whilst gone, and your father's."

Her eyes raised to his. "So you are not a total scoundrel." She reached over and played with a button on his shirt. "If you do not enjoy the ton's doings, we could do other things...slip away from these balls and what not. That is, if you stop being so bloody difficult and thinking with your groin."

"No, thanks."

"Simon," she moaned and rested her forehead against his upper arm. "You really do try my patience."

"Your patience."

“Yes.” She lifted her head, shook her hair back and eyed him. “You must want this kind of existence or else you would not be so resistant.”

“Woman, a man would have to be more than drunk to have anything to do with you. Do you not realize how strange you are?”

Abby chuckled. “Of course I do.” She reached up and placed her fingertips on his inflexible jaw. “But you would like it, really you would.”

His gaze held hers. “I don’t want to play your childish games. The only thing I’d want from you is sex.”

Abby knew that. “You would get that...eventually, and I promise you, it will not be like the others.”

He smirked cynically.

Her thumb moved to brush his full mouth. “Don’t mock it, Simon. I would give you everything you desire, and more than you can imagine. I want to do that. I want to see you to f—”

“Shut up.” He lifted his other hand and grabbed an easy handhold of her hair at the nape.

Head held back by his half angry, half aroused grasp, she husked, “Kiss me, Simon.”

He did. When she thought he would be swift and angry, he instead moved his head down by inches, bringing her toward him at the same time. A breath away from her mouth, their gaze locked and bodies tense and hot. He simply held there, inhaling every short breath that scuttled between her lips.

When he wet his lips, the underside of his tongue touched hers and Abby jerked. Then he was melding their mouths smoothly and sliding his tongue in deep and intimate, curling it slowly over, then under hers, repeatedly with hot, erotic sluggishness that melted her bones.

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Abby's hands shifted, one in his hair and the other on his back. Their opposite position, his hold, brought her against his front, nearly lying across him. As his kiss deepened, his other hand slid across her waist, fingers flexing.

The kiss went on and on, breath blatant and warm, pushing out their nostrils, and hands tightened, bodies strained and aroused, while their tongues laved and stroked and slid sensually against each other.

Simon lifted his head; their breathing was discordant and short, eyes burning feverish, with lids half closed.

"You're trembling," he whispered almost absently.

"Inside and out." She licked her lips and tried to catch her breath. "You're very good at kissing."

"So are you," he returned resentfully.

She swallowed. "Christian Beaumont." Her smile was tight.

"Umm. And what else did he teach you?" Simon's hand was sliding toward her thigh.

She stopped its progress and held it in place while she said, "Quite a few things."

Her gaze read the lust in his. "I won't do anything with you, Simon, so long as you are sleeping with other women. I do not mind that you have...well, that is not true, it of course bothers me. However, whatever you did before we met, I can accept. Just as you understand that whatever I experimented with is behind me now. Look at me, you feel this tremble, you can see my pulse racing and no doubt, my eyes are fogged because I am quite aroused by you. I want you. However, I want more than the sex you have with ever other woman. I won't be one more on the list."

His gaze scanned her face before he eased his hold, and nudged her upright, sitting separately again. He called her the worst sort of tease.

Hearing that disgust, she countered, "There is pleasure in savoring and doing other things. I am not teasing you, Simon. I'm simply not going to toss up my skirts and give you what you yourself admit you can get anywhere."

She stood up and walked around to look at him. "We could make each other feel very good, experience pleasure. But I want more of you than that."

"I'm not here to get married, Abigail."

"I know that." She considered him a moment more. "Give me two weeks of courting, Simon, that's all I ask. Two weeks doing something with a woman you have not done before. If it makes it any more appealing, look at it this way, you'll get what you want in the end, because of my desire for you." She turned to go inside. "You know where I am staying."

~

Simon sat there a long time after Abigail Forsythe left, his eyes absently moving over the mansion, the guests on the open balconies and the lighted windows showing the outline of more. Brandy churned in his gut, his temple pounded with a headache. He hadn't been foxed in so long, his system was so pure it had not taken long; he'd been drunk before he knew it.

He licked his lips and felt the breeze ruffle through his hair. He could not taste the long kisses he had gotten from Lucinda Overton. All he could taste was the hungry fire of Abigail's flavor.

Standing, he walked toward the study to fetch his jacket. A short while later, he was again leaning against a pillar on the edges of the ballroom. Simon watched Abigail while she talked with Lady Alexia and then Damien, who looked ready to leave. Her hair was again up, though not as neat as before. Simon got a clear view of the woman and eyed her lithe frame in that green silk gown, noting her smooth shoulders and graceful neck.

She only stood out because of the lack of attention to her hair and the unusual design of her dress; at least that's what he told himself

Yet he knew when she looked at someone head on, those light green eyes were compelling. He recalled the feel of her cool, silken hair, the scent that was subtle and warm. His nostrils flared. He had lied about the actress. He had gone home right after leaving her at the box.

Chapter 4

"Are those for me?" Damien teased, snickering at Simon who stood in his parlor, a bouquet of flowers in hand, waiting for Abigail.

"Bugger off," Simon muttered and dropped the flowers onto the low table.

"Tsk. Don't you know you must hand them to the lady on bended knee, ole boy?"

"Why don't you bend yours and kiss my ass."

"Hullo, Simon." Abigail came through the doors wearing a bright smile and buff silk gown that was form fitting and looked more like an under slip. "I cannot believe you are here."

"Men will go to great lengths fo—"

"Thank you, Lord Blackstone," she cut him off. "For keeping Simon company." Her eyes widened meaningfully. "You may go."

"Not at all." Damien was still grinning. "It wouldn't be proper."

"Here is Kendyl," Abby said when her friend came in, wearing a plaid skirt and white blouse. "Now we have a chaperone."

Damien went but could not resist saying to Simon, "I simply must tell this one. No one is going to believe that you..."

Simon cut him off. "You do and I will make you heartily sorry."

Laughing loudly, Damien closed the door behind him.

"Hello." Kendyl shook Simon's hand.

"Miss Reid."

She waved to the next room. "I'll be in there reading," and then shot Abby a wide eyed look before leaving. It was apparent she was shocked and pleased at her friend's success in having the rake actually court her.

"Are these for me?" Abby picked up the roses and breathed in their scent.

"Yes." Simon looked ill at ease and disgruntled. "My valet picked them out."

She laughed and rang for a vase and water. After they were seen to and the housekeeper left, Abby murmured, "Give me his name, and I will thank him." She sat down. "Do sit."

He did, stiffly on the edge of the settee.

She suppressed her surprise upon getting his calling card, now she suppressed her amusement at his formal attire and white gloves, the complicated arrangement of his cravat and the way his hair was tied back. He appeared completely unlike himself, and if his frown was anything to judge by, he knew it.

"Tea?"

"I detest tea."

"Coffee, then?"

He nodded.

She rang for it and sat back, merely watching him as it was poured. When the maid left and they were sipping, Abby was aware of the street sounds and a beautiful morning outside the parlor window. Inside the clock ticked, a few subtle sounds came from the back where Lady Alexia was playing piano. And between herself

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and Simon who drank, sighed, and looked around with boredom, everything was completely wrong.

"I can't believe you're here."

"Me, either," he muttered and finished the coffee. Setting the cup on the tray, he arose and prowled around the room, absently looking at a piece of art or photograph.

"My aunt's house looks nothing like this."

He glanced at her. "Cauldrons and wolf's bane, I imagine."

"For shame," she laughed and set her own cup aside.

"No. It is a stone and timber farmhouse. Quite roomy and large. She converted the cellar as her laboratory."

He rolled his eyes.

"Yes, well, there are bones and the like down there, but the rest of the house is wonderfully cozy."

He grunted.

She stood and walked toward him, watching his eyes move from a painting to herself.

"Did you forget the rest of your gown?" His tone was mocking.

"No. Do you like it?" She glanced down at the thin silk. "Lady Alexia was scandalized when I bought it. I've been waiting for the right occasion to show it off."

He eyed the low bodice. "It shows something off."

"Good." Her eyes met his. Then Abby laughed. "Would you like to walk out in the gardens?"

He shrugged.

Abby took his hand and led him over, opening the door and speaking to Kendyl, who was curled in a chair reading. "We're going to the side garden."

"Umm." Kendyl did not look up but her lips were twitching.

Outside they walked a good distance on the brick path before she turned and stepped in front of him. "Here..." Abby began undoing his neck cloth and then

unbuttoned the collar. She met his gaze. "You look uncomfortable."

He took the collar and tucked it in his pocket, then stilled as she slid the tie out of his hair. "Feel free to keep undoing."

"Be nice." She laughed and ruffled his hair, before they made it to the back of the house, and that small courtyard near the carriage house.

"That gown is nearly see-through," he muttered when they had sat down on cane chairs under a flowering canopy.

Watching the blossoms that were falling softly in the airy tunnel-like space, Abby murmured, "Who was she?"

"Whom?"

She glanced over, letting her eyes scan him now that he had also taken off the jacket. In that white shirt, under the blossom shaded canopy and with that more relaxed pose, it really was havoc on her senses to be nice herself. "The woman who turned you against all others."

His tawny gaze shifted away, then back to hers. He slid more comfortable in the chair and crossed his booted feet at the ankles, elbows on the chair arms; he said flatly, "Why do you assume my views have anything to do with some past entanglements? Since you claim to be somewhat knowing yourself, I gather you know that many men live quite content, having nothing but sex with a woman."

"But you aren't content. You drink too much." She amended, "Or rather you did." Abby absently reached out to pluck a bud and roll it in her fingers. "You use women."

"And they don't me?"

"Yes. But I'm guessing that for all you do it, you feel restless and bitter and you self destruct because you..."

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"You are wrong, Abigail," he cut her off. "And I did not come here for you to analyze and pick me apart."

She knew when to pull back. Besides, she had her answer. There had been a woman, she would bet on it. "You came calling, to court me..." she grinned and considered him. "Did you write me a poem?"

"No. Nor will I."

She sighed. "This will not work, if you are only doing it to get in my bed."

"That is why most men court, Miss Forsythe."

"I'll wager you call me Abby in your mind," she teased with a smile.

"I call you daft," he returned lightly.

Chuckling, she got up and walked around, touching the lattice work and fingering a vine, strolling close to him and feeling his eyes all over her as she looked over the flowery plants.

"How old were you when your mama died?"

"I was four."

She glanced at him. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged.

"I was nine. I recall mine quite clearly because she was such a bitter and unhappy woman." She lowered her glance to his lips. "She and my father drank heavily and though I did not see them often, they openly brought their lovers along with them when they came home." She shrugged. "My Aunt Toft may be odd, somewhat unconventional, but she's a warm and loving person, and she respects me, always has, since I became old enough to know my own mind."

"I got on well with m'father."

"Yes. Lady Joan told me about him. I should have liked him." She raised her gaze again and saw shadows in his eyes. "She said you made him very happy those last years."

He did not say anything, but there was a flash of something on his face.

Abby said softer, "He understood you. I suppose, that was a surprise to you, eh? Considering you had wasted so much of your life."

"I suggest a change of subject."

"Very well." She looked away. "But I'm glad for you...that you had that time with him, and he you. I don't know that mine even remembered me most of the time."

"You don't appear to have suffered overmuch from that."

Abby nodded. "No. One learns to be self reliant, and to find things that interest and occupy them. It keeps one from brooding. There was not a nanny hired for me, so the servants saw to my needs. I would go to market with cook, or Joe would take me to the stables with him, when I got old enough. I would help with chores there, mucking stalls. Mrs. Amesworth, our housekeeper, she took me to the parish church and we would go on long walks. So when I came to Aunt Flora, I was able to find things of interest when she became preoccupied."

"I reverse my previous opinion. That is an appalling way to raise a child, or not raise one. Your parents were selfish..."

"Yes. However, Aunt Flora gave me a fine education. More so than most girls get. And Kendyl's da had moved nearby, so we became fast friends. Her mother had died the previous year of lung fever. Her father allowed her to be taught with me, and really, the world was open to us, we had freedom to explore and to learn things."

"With the Beaumont twins," he muttered dryly.

She looked at him, laughing. "Um, yes. There was that. Nevertheless, long before we had any kissing lessons, the males treated us well. We did things they would do with their chums. Moreover, after meeting

some debts and reading that tripe Lady Alexia considers proper female training, I thank God that I did have such a life.”

She walked over near his chair and nudged the side of his boot, saying, “Whomever I choose will have to pass Aunt Flora’s inspection.”

“Good God, one shudders at the thought.”

Abby ignored that. “She has a theory about everything, you know. Therefore, she views males as a species, sort of from a scientific point of view. I once asked her if she had ever been made love to. She said that she had a bit in her early years, kept scores of notes on it.” Abby grinned. “I read them. Fascinating...what men will say when—”

“Are you circling again to my sex life?” His brow raised.

“Not at all. I don’t think lust by itself needs any great discussion.” Her tone was flat. “We’ve deduced that is all you’ve had.”

He dug in his waist pocket for his watch. “I think the courting hour has ended.”

When he stood, Abby told him, “I meant what I said. I am surprised you are actually here. Thrilled, though.”

“How thrilled?” He reached out and fingered her neckline.

Even with the birds singing and the early hour Abby felt that hum of intimacy. “Thrilled enough to reward you.”

His brow arched and his lips curved sensually.

“Tonight at the theater...”

“I dine at my club tonight, with Lord Roger and Damien.”

“Too bad.” She pursed her lips. “I heard from Lady Joan that there are footpaths...well, if you must keep your appointment.” She shrugged.

"I must." He came close to smiling, though. "And you are much, much too new at this game." His lashes dipped and he traced the top swell of her breast. "I know all about seduction. This gown, outlining your curves, showing how little you have on under it, the scent you wear. The way you've piled your hair in that half down manner." He glided his finger tips up, up her throat and all the way to her bottom lip. "Do you think it something new that I haven't been treated to before?"

"Not at all." She moved his hand but held it against her chest. "I told you that I would not deny you. However, until you want something more with me, only me, I am not going to let it go where we'd both like. I am not a modest woman, in the sense that it would disturb me to remove this gown in the light of day for you. I am simply a discriminating one, and far from a fool."

"A tease..."

"No more than you tease me, Simon." She stepped back and dropped his hand. "You tempt me every time I'm around you. You tempt me to throw caution to the wind and take whatever you will give..." She shook her head. "But just a night or two of lust..."

He glanced at her before sliding on his jacket and giving her a view of his taut backside in snug breeches and a tapered waist as he straightened his clothing. When he had that neck cloth dangling, she walked with him to the foyer and they said a formal adieu in front of the servants.

~

"His head is up his arse," Roger said as Damien tried for the third time to get Simon to bid.

No. It was actually on Abigail Forsythe standing nude in the daylight. Thanks to that gown, Simon could picture it fairly well. He tossed his cards in, downed the brandy and sat back.

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His friends threw theirs in with disgust.

Damien said, "You may as well go, Simon. She is at the theater."

"I've no idea whom you mean."

When Damien snorted, Roger said, "He's already told most of the gents here about the flowers..." Roger's lips twitched and he lit a cheroot. "Never tried that myself...but then I did not have to."

"Go to hell. Both of you," Simon said mildly and sat up, his green gaze going over both their faces. "One assumes that one's friends are loyal, not given to placing wagers publicly or starting rumors."

"Ha! You had five on your cousin and me," Roger cut him off. "And a half a dozen when my daughter was born."

"Besides," Damien's eyes twinkled, "you do know how very dull and boring the season can be. Lord Simon playing the admirer, flowers and everything..."

"Bugger you, Damien. Don't you have some half blind whore to tumble?"

Roger laughed. "Here now, you two are reducing good sport to school boy insults."

"Sport. It's my bloody business, is what it is," Simon growled and stood. "And just because Blackstone thinks I do not know he is hiding out from a slip of a woman does not mean he's free to take those amusing little jibs at me."

When Simon departed, Roger murmured, "He has it bad."

"Um, yes."

Roger glanced at him. "How is Miss Reid, by the way?"

"Go to hell," Damien muttered and downed his drink and then left.

Sitting there, his white teeth grinning past his cigar, Roger crossed his arms and relaxed.

An elder duke at the next table called over, “Rather like watching your children deny they’ve slipped into the cookie tin, isn’t it, my lord?”

Roger laughed and looked at him. “Yes.”

The old man waved him over. “Come on then, play a hand with us. We’re too bloody old to keep you up late, but we’re a veritable font of gossip.”

Chapter 5

“He’s here.” Abby nudged Kendyl who sat beside her.

“So is Damien.” The woman’s head turned toward the entrance.

“What is going on in that direction?” Abby could not take her eyes off Simon. He appeared so sexily rumpled and so very rakish. Bloody man. He had several pairs of lusting female eyes on him, and knew it.

“Nothing. The night I got knackered, he gave me a lecture that would have done my da or brothers justice. Since then he watches every glass of wine I drink, but he does not watch me, as in look at me. At least, I don’t think so.”

“And you still want him?”

Kendyl sighed. “Yes. More every bloody day. I know it is completely useless.”

“Well, at least you don’t have to resort to the tactics I do.” Abby stood. “Excuse me while I go Simon hunting. I think Lord Blackstone is coming to join you.”

“Good luck.”

Abby pulled up the hood of her gold satin cape and made her way toward Simon. He was standing casually, looking as if he were bored as usual.

“Dare I hope you are looking for me?” she said by way of greeting.

His gaze ran lazily down the cape and where it parted to reveal a matching gown with faux pearls sewn

in. He reached up to slide back her hood, taking in the intricate style Lady Alexia's maid had done it, high with gold ribbon and pearl pins. Finally his eyes met hers. "Do you wish to sit and watch the play?"

"Do you?" She was thrilled he had asked.

"No." He fingered a tie on her cape.

She slid her arm though his. "Let's find those shadowed paths, then."

It did not require a great deal of looking. Simon knew them like the back of his hand. And while Abby registered this, she realized depressingly that there was nothing new about this tryst to him.

"You've done this many times?"

"Yes."

"And likely in your coach."

He stopped in a shadowy spot. "Yes."

Abby sighed. "Well, that doesn't please me, Simon. I suppose there isn't anything or anywhere I could na—"

He had cupped her face and now tilted it up toward the arc of lantern light. "I'm not a man to play games with, Abby."

She swallowed. "You should play, Simon."

"Don't." He was lowering his head, ready to kiss her, "You have teased enough."

Before she could argue that, their mouths were melding and their tongues sliding in to taste. Abby's arms slipped around him and she raised on her tip toes, feeling that devouring kind of emotion coming from him, tasting a burning sexual need in every stroke and roll of his tongue.

Heart thudding and blood melting in her veins, she slanted her head opposite and took what she wanted too. It was passion, desire, a desperate kind of hunger that fed with every second that passed. Oh, God, why must this man have the ability to move her on too many levels?

When Simon did part, it was only to adjust his hold, easing his hands under the cloak to caress and feel her shape while he nibbled her lips, laved them and then suckled her tongue.

Weak-kneed, Abby clung to his jacket sleeves, arching her neck when he moved his mouth lower, hissing in a breath when the bite of his teeth, the suckle of his lips lingered just under her ear. He was so very good at this.

“Simon...”

He had made his way to her bodice and muttered huskily, “Don’t you dare stop me now.” And expertly he eased his hand back to unlatch two hooks at the top so that material loosed. When he had a gap, he cupped the underside of her breasts and pushed them up, moaning at the first sight of her dusky, rigid nipples.

“Oh, God.” She looked down, watching him latch on, suckle each with those beautiful lips and then rake his teeth over them. Hungrily he took one, then the other. The fire kept shooting through her with each variation, each return of his lips or flick across the tip.

“I can hardly stand up...” She buried her hands in his hair, moaning, “Simon, please.”

He raised his head, mouth damp and eyes smoldering. His hands were softly molding and his thumbs brushing over the quivering peaks while he watched the reaction and the arousal on her face.

“I...my knees are mush,” she whispered, panting.

He looked around and then back to her before removing his hands, using the cape to cover her before he led her to the line of vehicles and his coach.

Abby was a bit mortified when he ordered the driver to tool around. That is how quickly she had lost her head.

A Taste of Temptation

“He could care less what we are doing.” Simon was removing his jacket and tossing the neck cloth. He reached to untie her cape and slide it off her shoulders.

As he was laying her down in the seat, Abby held a palm to his chest. “We’re not goi—”

“Hush.” He was on one knee by the seat, leaning over her. He kissed her softly, worked the latches, and slid the bodice down below her breasts while he planted little kisses over her face. “I know the bloody rules.” He kissed her throat and worked his way down until once more he was laving her breasts.

Hands full of his hair, Abby heard her groans when he fit nearly half in his mouth, then he employed his hands, his fingers, and he teased her nipples with lips and tongue to the point the pleasure stung.

“Oh, Simon.” She arched and pulled at his hair, her head moving restless. “Please...I cannot...”

He raised his head, his breathing labored and gaze heavy. He removed her hands and began undoing his shirt, finally pulling it wide.

Blinking, she looked at that carved, tanned chest, those dark male nipples like discs of peach, the wide expanse of shoulder. His skin was velvet, golden, and his build so very masculine, much bigger than she’d assumed and much more taut. “You are built like a statue.”

Simon grunted. “Some parts of me feel just that at the moment.” He helped her sit up, only to ease into the seat opposite, and pulled her hem up past her stockings. “Sit on me, Abigail.”

Flushed and trembling, she knew what he wanted, and she sat astride his thighs, burying her face against his sinewy neck.

He was pressing her breasts against his chest, running his hands up her back, and one under the hem. Simon traced each leg on either side of his hips, and his

harsh breathing was as fiery in the closed coach as her own.

Hands under the skirt of the gown, he held her silk clad buttocks, arching and moving subtly he whispered, "You're wet and hot. You want me."

Indeed hot, and feeling his swelled sex abrading through the material, she raised her head and stared into his tense face. "I said I did."

His gaze search hers. "Let me in. You said you were not a virgin. You want it and I can give it to you."

Heart pounding and blood rushing, she struggled, because she would like nothing more. Here in this space, looking into that feral hunger and aroused by everything from his breathing to his touch, Abby wanted to give in.

She cupped his cheeks and kissed him, her trembling breaths bathing his skin. Abby let her mouth slide over his jaw and down his throat. She touched him, skimming her palms down his arms, up as she slid back, and took her laving around his corded neck, tasting his flesh with an aroused greed. Biting soft only to sooth the spot again, she could devour this man, could inhale him into her and drink him with her body.

Simon's hands came up, pulling pins from her hair, releasing it, before his fingers burrowed into it, holding her head while she laved and kissed his throat, down his collarbone. It was extremely sensual for them both.

Abby eased off his lap and pushed his muscled legs wide so that she could lean in between them and treat his nipples to the tongue bathing he had given hers. She reveled in his groans, in the husk of his breathing, and she privately relished the quaver in his ridged stomach, revealing how her mouth was pleasuring him.

When she had tasted him to the waistband of those snug trousers, she tilted her face up, letting him sooth the mussed strands out of her eyes. Completely lost, caught up in instinct and desire, in wanting, her hand slid down,

covering the long ridge of his sex. She began unlatching his trousers.

Simon stared at her almost blindly, and then one of his hands was falling to cover and stop her progress. "This is not about servicing my needs, Abby."

Abby stilled, the sound of his voice cutting through the fog. She whispered shakily. "I don't know what to do now. This got out of hand faster than I imagined. I really did not mean to tease you."

He nodded and pulled her up to sit beside him, turning toward her. Simon cupped her breast and eased his other palm under the gown where it rode high. He smoothed up the inside of her thigh until his hand was wedged between the trembling flesh. "We're either going to exit this coach mutually satisfied, or tied in knots. It is your decision."

She sucked in her breath feeling the heat of his hand, the teasing press against her swollen flesh. "I do not imagine that one climax is going to dampen this fire, Simon." She touched his lips, her eyes vulnerable for once. "But something is better than nothing."

"Christ." He leaned his forehead on her shoulder a moment. "You really aren't a virgin, are you?"

"Does it matter?"

"No." He raised his head.

She bit her lip. "I haven't had a man inside me...but I have..."

"I don't want to know." He shook his head and removed his hands. Sitting straight again, he scraped his hair back and closed his eyes, resting his head on the squabs. "I can't do this, Abigail. I cannot play these games."

She fixed her gown and smoothed her hair back, fully aware she had nearly gone too far, too soon. Abby eyed the cords and veins standing out in his neck and shoulders; the tension rode him and his sexual scent was

as strong as it was palatable. She sat, just looking at him, trying to make her decision while he ordered the coach back to Covent Gardens.

Abby feared the loss of control had gone past some unseen point, conscious that her wanting him still flowed like a fever in her body and realized he felt that, too.

They stepped out of the coach. Simon had his shirt and jacket on, but when he would have led her to the entry, she diverted and walked around to the shadows again. She was still too flushed and shaken to face a crowd of people.

He pulled his hand free and walked to a low wall, feeling in his jacket and extracting a cheroot. He lit it and stood with his back to her, smoking while the soft breeze wafted the white smoke clouds back and ruffled through his finger combed hair.

When he was standing at the low wall, she walked close to him, close and touching his back, skimming her palms over his hips and around.

“Abby...Christ...” He covered her right hand with his, his head going back.

She lay her head against his back, her hands easing toward his groin. “Turn around, Simon.”

He shuddered and did not turn, but he did press her hand over that ridge and slid it suggestively. The cheroot was tossed aside and he widened his stance a bit before undoing the latches, guiding her soft hand on his full, flushed, sex.

Abby bit at the thin jacket and moaned at the silken heat. He was smoother than silk, hotter than fire, more sexual than sex. Turning her head and rubbing her cheek again on that jacket, she whispered, “I want to...”

His legs were trembling. “Next time.” Simon moved her hand away and redid his latches. Turning finally, he regarded her with a face so taunt his cheek muscle flexed. “I’ll take you back inside.”

A Taste of Temptation

“No. I’ll go.” She shook her head and pulled up her hood. Looking at him from the shadows, she murmured. “Until next time...”

He merely appeared as stone, save for his eyes, which were twin burning lights.

~

When she had gone, Simon went straight for his coach. He intended to drive his flesh into the first willing woman who offered.

He went home instead, and for the first time in many long years, he eased his own loins, lying nude in his shadowed bed. He tasted her kisses, her breasts, and heard her soft moans, and felt her hand fisting him, sliding up and down the rigid length. At the point of climax, he imagined himself buried deep, deep inside Abigail Forsythe.

Chapter 6

Simon came to call three times that week, and twice into the next. They did not sit in the parlor and pretend to be polite strangers. The strain plagued Abby and much of his own sexual hunger still made him restless. It was always like bringing two combustible substances too close. They walked in the garden and sat talking, conversations that neither of them could recall at the end of the visit, words that filled in the drawn out and heavy silence that was too thick with sexual tension.

He fought anything more. It was both subtle and obvious. It was like a war between bodies and minds and if he caught himself slipping into any other sort of intimacy, if Abby pushed back her own want of him long enough to draw something out, he immediately left.

It was during the second week after Abby had spent the morning visiting Lady Joan and enjoying an hour in the nursery with the countess’s children that she attended

a formal supper and found herself nauseated with a pounding headache.

"You are white as a sheet." Kendyl said later while their host played on the harp, every trill of it going through Abby's head like a pistol shot. "Why don't we leave?"

Abby nodded and whispered, "Could you tell Lady Alexia? And I will await you outside."

After Kendyl nodded, Abby discreetly left and hurried to the exit doors. She shook her head when the butler would have helped her with the cloak. She was clammy and did not want a covering.

Outside she ignored the row of livered servants and pulled off her long white gloves. She felt the nausea roll over her and braced her hand on the coach door.

"Abigail?"

Having been sucking in cool air, she glanced up to see Simon in a carriage. "Hullo, Simon."

"Has something happened?" He signaled his driver and opened the door, stepping out to come toward her.

"No. I am simply not feeling well. A headache. I am healthy as a horse most times. It is just that this has been a...tense week."

He tilted her chin. "You look green."

"Thanks," she grimaced.

He winked. "Where is Lady Alexia?"

"Still inside. I do not want to bother her. I told Ken to let her know I was leaving." She looked toward the doorway, rubbed her temple and murmured, "There is Kendyl."

Her friend made it to the coach, and was tying her cape ties as she greeted Simon. "Are you ready, Abby?"

"Yes." Abby glanced at Simon before getting in. "I'm sorry. I don't mean t—"

He scowled. "Nonsense. Go, and take care of yourself."

A Taste of Temptation

She nodded and got in behind Kendyl. Leaning out to see Simon still stood there, she enquired, "Where are you headed?"

He seemed distracted. "To meet some friends at a new hell."

She laughed and then winced. "I won't wish you luck."

He smiled slightly and walked to the door before heading to his carriage. His eyes met hers. "I'll see you sooner than later."

~

Abby rested for two days and laughed at Kendyl who used the excuse to get out of attending things herself. Her friend came in to lounge on the chaise by an open window, and more often than not, they ended up talking about the very men who plagued them both to death.

"Damien has a new mistress."

Abby moved the cold cloth off her eyes and rolled her head in Kendyl's direction, she lay atop the satin coverlet in her camisole and silk drawers. "Does he?"

Kendyl grimaced. "Yes. A beauty, too. Piles of blond hair and tall as an Amazon."

"The fool."

"I don't know." Kendyl rolled onto her back, hands over her head to rest on the rolled back. "The whole thing is getting tiresome for me. I cannot catch his attention in the way I want to, and since he will probably wed one of those more suitable debs, I think rather than make a fool of myself, I may just return to Essex."

"And leave me?"

"You are fine." Kendyl looked at her dryly. "You don't need me as much as you think."

Abby's brow arched. "Do you think that is what I am doing...fooling myself?"

"No—at least, I believe the earl is attracted. He has been calling on you, and I don't believe for a moment he would do that just for eventual sex."

"I don't know."

"Well, I do." Kendyl sat up. "He don't care a fig for society and rituals of courtship, and if he wanted you, he could likely seduce you."

"So true."

Kendyl laughed. "So he may not admit it to himself, but I think he knows you are different."

"I came awfully close to giving in."

"Abby, it's not the sex, and that wasn't the plan to start with. You just got thrown off track, and you need to get back on it...and if the lovemaking happens, well, I don't think you'll be like all the others even if it does."

"Gad, I hope not. Because I really want him, Ken."

"I think that's obvious. I've never seen you this torn up for someone."

Abby pressed the cloth over her face and sighed. "I've never been in love before. It really feels awful."

Kendyl gasped. "In love?"

Her only answer was for Abby to groan in disgust and curl on her side.

~

None of Abby's inner turmoil showed at the end of the week. She was sorry to help her friend pack, and interested by the fact that Lord Blackstone was more than sorry—in fact, he got into a shouting match with Kendyl at breakfast that morning, until Kendyl had thrown down her napkin and asked him right out if he wanted her.

Over Lady Alexia's gasp of outrage, Damien had struggled with the word no. However, it had not been said and Kendyl had left in a hired coach, only letting Abby see how seething mad and hurt she was with Damien's indifference.

A Taste of Temptation

“He feels something, Ken, I swear he does.”

Kendyl had sat back and muttered, “Well it’s too bloody bad. I am not hanging about mooning over him. I hope he does wed one of those spineless twits.”

“I don’t. I think he is just choosing to be blind. Give aunt my love and your family, too.”

“I will.” Kendyl had laughed then. “Good luck with Simon.”

~

Now, days later, Abby needed that luck. She was in the park, having shared a morning picnic with Lady Joan and her children, laughing over the children’s antics and watching the two nurses try and keep them out of the polluted serpentine and falling to the ground with hysterics when Joan went trying to rescue little Anna from an angry duck, and slid nearly into the water. The lady had laughed too, laying in the mud and howling.

The Wythe party had left, but Abby lingered, hoping a day of something different from the ton amusements would help her get her normal balance. She did not care about the ton or society, she did not really care about anything but Simon.

She was not a fool either, and knew that Lady Alexia was breathing down her neck. Honestly, she could not understand Blackstone’s sister, and she really wished the woman would find her own husband and leave her to her own plans.

But what plans? Now that she had nearly slept with the man. She had found out something vital though; she had little self-control with Simon and the attraction was far more intense than she had imagined.

~

And of course, there he was, leading his high stepper toward the grassy spot where she sat. Simon, wearing a ruffled shirt and snug buff trousers, burgundy boots and no jacket. The early morning breeze fluttered the shirt

against his warm skin and mussed that already mussed hair.

Good God, he looked wonderful she thought, mentally groaning, with the sun warming all of the ochroid hues of him, the ease and grace he innately possessed. It really was a shame that he had such strong thighs, long legs, broad shoulders...

He stood still a few feet away, holding the reins and looking over her beige skirt and sleeveless blouse, her jacket lying beside her hip with a sketchpad. She had simply tied her hair back at the nape and uneven strands blew loose. Not her best-dressed day to Abby's mind; she was sure there were grass stains and some mud on her from romping with the children.

"You look better."

"I am perfectly fine." She smiled and crossed her ankles, sighing when she saw the scuffs on her white kid boots. Lady Alexia would have a cow. "I wouldn't think you are normally up this early?"

He looked around at the mostly common folk in the park. "I met with Rog. He told me you'd been invited to share Joan's morning with the children."

Abby tilted her head. "So you've come to see me?"

He shrugged and led his mount over to tie the reins so it could graze. Coming back to her, he eased down, leaning slightly back on his elbow so that she had to turn to converse with him when she did, trying not to gaze down the length of him so wonderfully displayed.

Abby put a foot between them and sat more facing him. "Well, did you?"

"Yes." His eyes went over her before meeting her gaze; the sun slanting down brought out flecks of gold in the green. "I heard your friend returned to Essex."

"Yes. "

"Because of Blackstone?"

Her brow rose. "What do you know?"

A Taste of Temptation

He grinned lazily. "I know Damien."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning he is distracted by the little Scot."

"He has missed his chance. Kendyl will not chase him; she has already been as openly forward as she dare be with his sort. He is going to miss out on a wonderful woman. She is not only intelligent and loyal, but she can ride and shoot and has much more spirit and life than he'll get with any woman here."

"Damien would choose a wife for her breeding. To have the next earl of Blackstone. To carry his heirs. The sort of things you describe hardly makes her a prime candidate."

Abby sniffed. "How ridiculous. Lady Joan is not weak and insipid, and she does as she pleases, and makes a damn fine countess."

"I agree."

"But you still understand if Damien chose a different sort?"

"Yes."

Abby stared at him. "But you wouldn't?"

"No." He stared back.

"You will have to produce heirs. You are the last of your line."

"Maybe."

"There is no maybe. I am not Lady Alexia, but I know how it goes, and Joan said so herself." She shrugged. "It shouldn't be so difficult given your...prowess. And I have heard many lords stick their wives in the country and return to London to live as if they weren't married men."

"What is that, an offer?"

She ignored his laugh. "No. I wouldn't leave you anything to give to another woman." Her tone was soft.

Something flashed in his eyes and he sat up. "No bitch will own me, Abby. I won't be manipulated, tricked or controlled by sex."

Shocked at the venom in his tone, she calmed the beat of her heart before telling him evenly, "I wasn't speaking of that, Simon. Whatever tangled those meanings up in your head, or whoever did so, makes you think that all sex is a weapon, or worse, a way of gaining or losing power. I spoke of intimacy, of something more than using bodies and lust."

He looked away and sighed almost tiredly.

Abby eyed his profile. "It must be tiresome, draining, to hold so much of yourself back. To keep playing by the same rules."

"Don't, Abby." He did not turn and look at her, just stared out at the water.

She stared at his profile while birds sang and wind ruffled the branches and leaves around them. "Do you take females back to your house...? Women you sleep with?"

"No."

"Good. You can invite me to breakfast. I'm starved."

"It's not done." He glanced at her then.

"Do you care?"

"No, in general I do not."

"Neither do I."

"But, on the other hand, gossip that like would land us in a forced betrothal...to save your reputation."

"So sneak me in."

He smiled slightly. "I'm sure the earl has an excellent cook."

"Very. But then, I want to have breakfast with you."

He grunted. "Where is your horse?"

"Didn't ride one. I hired a hack."

He got up and fetched his mount, calling out his address before mounting and riding off.

A Taste of Temptation

Stubborn man, Abby thought, heading for the park exit. He would be waiting for her though, she would bet on it.

~

Abby had dashed by the townhouse and changed, avoiding Lady Alexia's eagle eye, putting on a mint walking dress with short jacket and letting the maid do a quick but simple upsweep of her hair.

She had just stepped out of the hack when Simon's butler opened the door. Leaning out to peer left and right, he waved her inside, looking indignant.

"His lordship is through there." He took her gloves, parasol and jacket.

"Thank you." She went through the double doors in time to see the maid leaving after having poured coffee.

Simon was standing by the table; hair wet and slicked back and wearing a casual white linen shirt and snug trousers and boots. "I really didn't think you'd do it."

"Why not?" She glanced over the steaming platters. "And you can relax, no one spied me. Your nervous butler nearly dragged me off the street before I had the coach door closed."

Simon laughed. "I ordered him to. Sit down. Anywhere."

She did and cocked her brow as he began to fill her plate. "I can do that."

"So can I." He walked down the side and handed her an overflowing plate.

"I'm not that hungry."

He filled his own and sat down. "Eat. "

She did, looking around the stately room, admiring the unstated elegance and rich colors. Like Blackstone, it was near the street and sounds carried, but there was a dignified stateliness to it without being stuffy.

Making inroads into the pile of eggs and ham, she glanced at Simon and eyed the fresh shaven jaw, the hair tucked back that was starting to wave as it dried.

He was taking a sip of coffee and caught her looking.

She returned to her meal, once more feeling the sexual awareness and tension flair between them.

Having eaten all she could hold sometime later, Abby sat back with her coffee and grinned at the nervous looking maid who cleared the table.

"May I look around?"

"Be my guest." Simon stood as she did, watching her walk closer to the watercolors hanging on the walls.

"My mother did them."

"They're lovely." She looked over her shoulder. They were light and airy yet romantic, saying much about a woman with a warm spirit and humor and a heart for love.

"Come on, I'll give you a tour."

She smiled and followed him out, walking beside him to the foyer, then up the stairs to the second floor, an open parlor flanked by a music room and smaller study, he said, than the one below. The ceilings were high and paintings hung in ornate frames, furnishings were heavy and richly upholstered. She did note there were books everywhere, not just on shelves but also on side tables, and half read ones opened by a chair. The fireplace mantels held interesting pieces, an old clock, a pipe stand and tobacco, a group of silver birds.

"I can feel your father in here."

He turned from looking down at the street, obviously surprised. "It was his home, when in London. I kept another residence which I now let out."

She nodded. "Where is your room?"

He stared at her. "Upstairs."

"Can I see it?"

A Taste of Temptation

“Yes.” He led the way up and slid open the doors to a suite that took up most of the upper story. A gold and burgundy sitting room with a bathing chamber to the left and opened doorway to the main bedchamber.

She walked through the sitting area, noting books there too and detecting his scent, seeing a volume on horses lying by a chaise and a discarded neck cloth lying across a chair back.

His bedchamber was burgundy and black, yet the sun arched in through sheer panels and warmed the deep colors. The bed was a massive one, and wardrobes, dressers against the walls and ornate mirrors were on a large scale.

She strolled over and gaped at the painting that caught her eye on the long side shelf. “You were in the navy?”

“Yes.”

She studied the painting of him in uniform, seeing a serious face and ghosts in his eyes that told her he had not been a happy man then. Her fingers trailed over a silver box and she flipped the lid, looking at an array of medals. Abby closed the lid and turned to find him leaning against the facing, arms crossed and face impassive.

“So you met her before you joined...that was a long time ago?”

He bit the inside of his jaw then supplied. “She was an older woman, and it was an affair. I don’t intend to discuss it with you.”

“All right.” Abby was secretly glad that he had finally admitted that much, though the knowledge that such a ghost was powerful enough to shape him... She strolled over and half sat on the thick footboard, her eyes going down him and thinking that the man could wear anything and look rakish.

“Is that an invite?” He caught her looking.

"The invitation has already been verbalized. The conditions..." she shrugged.

"You wouldn't have another headache if you'd forget your foolish limitations."

"They're not foolish. You know your rep, Simon. I'd be just another woman."

"I doubt that." He let his gaze move over her slowly. "You'd look enticing lying on that bed clad in nothing but your stockings."

"I'll do that. Someday."

His smile was lazy. "You still think you know the game, don't you, Abby." He walked over to her and looked down, running his finger down her cheek and husking, "I could have you out of that gown and under me. Very, very easily."

"Yes, you could." She held that sultry gaze. "Are you ready to try a serious relationship, Simon? A faithful one in which you are open and honest, and willing to open your heart?"

His hand dropped and his smile twisted. "You set a high price on sex, Abigail. It isn't necessary, I assure you, and you would be just as satisfied without it."

"I'm not her, Simon, nor any of the women who made you jaded and cynical." She stood and walked around him. "When you realize that, we will have a beginning of something."

At the doorway, she turned and told him. "I'll see myself out. Thanks for breakfast. And I will be leaving in two weeks, to attend my aunt's birthday celebration. It is sort of a fair atmosphere with the locals. I'll send you an invitation, in case you are bored and need a diversion."

His brow rose.

She laughed, turning and saying, "She won't make you tend the bonfire and do chants."

Chapter 7

Simon did not go calling again, though he did not avoid Abby at amusements. He even ran into her at the Wythes' townhouse and instead of exiting, he lingered to watch her play chess with Joan and then sat at the table next to her during lunch.

He did ignore his cousin's probing looks and less than discreet attempts to draw him out about Abigail Forsythe. Nevertheless, at balls and routs, he was as aware of Abby as she was of him, and it never escaped his notice what she wore or whom she talked to or danced with.

Those two weeks were going by fast, yet he had a million pictures of her in his mind. Simon tried not to notice how she smiled so often and how different she was from everyone else. She gave herself up to dancing, and everyone she talked with, she really talked to. He even noticed she got one of those old dragons laughing in spite of the fact they were obviously not pleased with her open nature.

Not at all blind and having been a connoisseur of women, he watched her one day in Joan's parlor arching her neck up to the sun and basking in it; behind his coffee cup he'd been spell bound for longer than he'd cared to admit. There was something feline in Abby, in the color of those light eyes and the grace of her body.

Another time, after playing at tea with little Anna, she'd helped the maid clean up the crumbs and mess and he'd been leaning against the nursery door frame, seen the sheath-like gown of mint molding her lithe curves, watched the material gape away at the bodice and felt himself grow so aroused he'd left the house.

Simon told himself a thousand times where those available women were. Many more times the invites by society wives and underlings and actresses were right

there for the taking. He was not a man to be celibate, and not a man to torture his body or deny himself. And somewhere in the mental war that was Abby Forsythe, his anger and lusts were converging with the denial that he cared about anything at all concerning that daft woman.

~

“Are you going to Essex?” Damien asked Simon that Friday while they were at White’s.

“Are you?” Simon shot back, sipping his coffee. “And don’t pretend you don’t care that Miss Reid is no longer in London. I have been in your disagreeable company for most of the evenings since she left.”

Damien frowned. “She’s...”

“Maddening?”

“Yes.”

“Spirited and mouthy.”

“Yes.”

Simon smiled. “Utterly distracting.”

“Yes.” Damien sat back and glanced around the club at the stuffy gents and cloud of cigar smoke. “Dammit, I’m not ready to be them...some boring old goat only allowed out on a leash.”

“I don’t think Roger would agree...”

“He’s the exception.”

“Miss Reid is not the typical deb, Damien. But I think you know that, too.”

“Don’t I.” He looked at Simon. “She didn’t have the sophistication not to eat me up with those fey eyes whenever we were together. It was damned hard not to seduce the chit, and I deserve a blasted medal for being so noble about it.”

Simon burst out laughing.

“Laugh. But I tell you, a woman who does not know how to be coy or have the experience to hide what she is thinking, it plays hell with your sense of honor.”

A Taste of Temptation

“Since when do you turn down an invitation, any invitation?”

“I draw the line, Simon, we all do. You know that. It is one thing to glut ourselves on willing bodies, but there is nothing game about seducing some green chit who does not know the score. Besides, a chap can find himself wed for such stupidity.”

“Right. So why did you expect me to be going to Essex?”

“Because... You want her.” Damien held his gaze. “You want her enough to have stayed away from other women.”

Simon looked away.

After a few moments, Damien sighed and muttered, “Oh, bloody hell. I will go with you then. However, I will stay at my aunt’s. I’m not in any mood to handle a daft duck like Flora Toft.”

~

Abigail had been home for two days, comforted and soothed by the familiar scent of country air inside the roomy house, breathing in the scent of dried herbs and flowers, the sun warmed beams and plaster walls, hearing nothing but the normal country sounds that were so different from London.

She had spent that afternoon on a stool in her aunt’s laboratory, watching Aunt Flora carefully examine bones laid out on the table. The wiry woman wore a pair of trousers and dyed wool shirt with the sleeves rolled up, her silver hair twisted atop her head and springing out all over, a pair of magnifying spectacles on her nose.

Abby had told her about the season, but mostly about Simon—all of it, every detail and fear and doubt and thrilling hope.

After writing in her tablet Flora glanced at her, saying, “It’s probably love.”

Abby laughed. “You sound awfully calm about it.”

"No need to get all upset. It is a common emotion for a woman your age." She removed the glasses and went to her tubes and vials, mixing something and wiping her hands. "Now his Lordship, I do recall Rose talking of him. Given what you have added, I cannot assure you the desired outcome."

"I didn't expect so."

"But," Flora looked over her shoulder, "if he shows up on the doorstep, I'll be more able to observe and study his reactions and if I detect any of the usual signs, you should likely go ahead with you plans..."

"That is just it, Aunt. I may have gotten ahead of myself. Now we are so attracted by this...chemistry, I don't want to hold him at arms length most of the time."

"Perfectly normal, perfectly normal, my dear," Flora murmured. "But don't discount the usefulness of attraction." She turned and leaned her hips against the long dusty table, tucking her hands in the trouser pockets. Her thin face pensive, Flora added, "I wonder what color his orb is."

Suppressing a laugh, her niece said, "I think of him as golden, all lion like. But he often wears claret or black, and his room is that hue."

"Not good, that. It implies anger and secrets, shadows, avoiding intimacy."

"No bloody joking."

Her aunt smiled dryly. "It fits him? Well, if 'tis the reflection of his character, it is not entirely irredeemable. I do believe a good influence can reshape a person's thinking and alter whatever negative spirit caused such..

As Flora warmed to her subject and rattled on and on, Abby thought of Simon and found herself hoping he did come down. Not that her being in London prevented him from indulging in vices. She would simply like to remind him that something better was in the offering.

Chapter 8

On the day of the celebration, half the county was spread out over Flora Toft's lands; indeed, there were makeshift stages and puppet shows, a dozen other entertainers, and thanks to Kendyl's assistance, Abby had strung swags and banners and set up long tables.

She had affectionately greeted Kendyl's father and brothers, who marked off the track for racing; all big and brawny Scots, they were in high spirits and contributing not only the horseflesh, but also the beer and a roast pig.

Many of the locals used Flora's birthday gathering to barter and trade like a fair, and Flora being as she was enjoyed that aspect, too. There would be plenty to eat, however, as each guest had contributed something and the tables filled up. Birds were plucked, fish fried in the open, and rabbits roasting on spits.

Flora was at her best for the festivities, dressed in her favorite blue and going from guest to guest, being her usual spry self. She may be eccentric but she was also generous, non-judgmental, and something of an expert on everything. Daft or not, the people loved Flora and many a woman benefited from her midwife or fertility skills or healing herbs. So many of the children could wander in and stop by and be treated to a meal and a fascinating education depending on what Flora was working on. She also gave them books and taught many to read. Be it the village doctor and smith or the gypsies in the area or gentry, Flora Toft brought people together and earned their warm regard.

It was nearly evening before Abby bathed and dressed, having prepared for a week long celebration and intending to ignore the fact Simon had not showed up. She pulled on riding trousers and boots, braided her hair, and headed out to enjoy some of the competition.

She and Kendyl were decent at archery and knife throwing, Kendyl being garbed nearly the same as herself, except for the plaid sash tied at her waist.

The clearing rang with flutes and beaded drums; children laughed, played tag and snuck sweets from the platters. It echoed birthday celebrations Flora had put on for them, though there were a few they could recall that were a bit bizarre.

Abby was finishing her last shot with a pistol, laughing at the groans from the men and normal teasing when she missed her target by a wide margin. Her mind was distracted. She turned and handed off the pistol, joking with the tanner's wife, and absently aware that Kendyl was watching her brothers in the wrestling matches a ways off.

Abby glanced up, and saw Simon leaning against one of the gnarled oaks. She did not know how long he had been there but her whole body reacted, heat flushing her skin and heart pounding too loud. Everything she felt in London and more came rushing back in hard waves.

She wiped her hands down her hips and walked toward him. It was an hour before dark, and the low position of the sun gave him a surreal glow, glinting off his hair and casting his handsome face in light and shadow.

"Hullo. Welcome."

He nodded looking over her garb with a raised brow.

"Did someone greet you at the house?"

"Yes. Damien came down but is at his aunt's. Lady Newton."

"That is interesting." She waited for his eyes to lift from her breasts. "Would you like meet my aunt?"

His smile said no, not really, but he nodded and followed her to where Flora sat in a branch weaved chair, spinning her elaborate dragon tales for a group of children and teens.

“Aunt?”

Flora’s gaze flickered up to Abby, then her piecing eyes moved to Lord Collingworth and she stood, offering him her hand. “You must be Simon.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He shook it.

Flora dropped his hand, looking at him in a narrow eyed way for several drawn out moments before she sat back down and muttered, “You are right, Abigail, it is gold.” And went on with her tale.

Abby caught Simon rolling his eyes and laughed, then invited, “Walk around, participate if you feel like it. The brawny men over there in plaid are Kendyl’s family. There is beer, wine, anything you want.”

“Where are you off to?”

“Just to wash off some dust,” she grinned. “They’re just normal people, Simon.”

“I am on good terms with my tenants.”

“These folk aren’t any different. Enjoy yourself, I’ll be back shortly.” Abby hurried off, smiling all the way to the house.

Once there, after wiping off the dust, she saw that Simon’s bags were put in his rooms and figured since he had not brought a valet, he could do without one. It made her respect military separate from those of the ton who needed a dozen body servants. Something about that pampered attitude was off putting to her. She made it back out to the clearing just as day closed and the evening fires glowed.

Abby saw him from the orange glow, too; having taken off his jacket, he was sipping beer and speaking with Douglas Reid while they watched the end of the wrestling match.

Abby gazed around and spied Kendyl, somehow not surprised when her friend hurriedly waved her over.

“He came.”

“Yes. So did Damien, apparently.”

Kendyl wiped her hands on her thighs where she had been eating pie. "I wonder why."

Abby snorted. "I don't."

Kendyl stood and shrugged. "If Blackstone's come to watch me moon over him, he's going to be disappointed. I'm not feeding his over blown ego any more."

"Good for you." Abby looked toward Simon.

"Go on, I'll keep a check on everything."

"Thanks." Abby walked toward Simon. Silently while the conversation of horse breeding was still flowing, she stood beside him, noting with no surprise that Kendyl's brother won the last match.

Douglas excused himself and laughingly joined his sons, drifting next toward the tables and food. Abby glanced at Simon and found him waiting, looking at her, too.

"He asked me to race his black in the morning."

"You should."

Simon nodded. Then he offered her a sip from his cup and Abby drank and handed it back. They looked around at the campsites and the music and laughter faded in the background, as tension sprang between them.

"Are they here?"

"Who?"

"The Beaumont twins."

Abby chuckled. "No. They live too far away now."

"Um."

She glanced at him. "Do you want me to fix you a plate?"

"No, thank you. I had dinner with the Newtons."

She nodded, looked around and said, "Let's walk."

They did, slowly, nodding and speaking to people, making a circle around the site and Abby occasionally explained some instrument someone played, or pointed out crafts and cookware. Night had descended when they

A Taste of Temptation

reached the edge and a full moon hung bright enough to light the path to the lake.

Abby led the way to the weathered dock, cast in bluish light and turning the still waters into ink with only an occasional ripple on the surface. She sat down on the boards, and Simon beside her, heads against the brace poles and ears detecting the mingling of the festivities with the night creatures around them.

“Your aunt fits the image.”

“Does she?”

He smiled. “Yes, wiry, intense, eccentric.”

“She’s a wonderful lady.”

“No doubt.” He stretched out his booted feet and arched his neck to look at the moon before gazing at her again.

Abby relished it and held it for long moments in silence, before murmuring, “I swam in the buff here.”

“Did you?”

“Many times.”

His lashes dipped. “At night.”

“Yes.” She breathed shallow. “Do you want to?”

He sat up and stared at the water. “How cold is it?”

“Not too awfully.”

“If you’re...”

“I am...”

He stood up and began taking off his boots.

She did the same. “Turn your back.”

“That takes all the fun out of it.” He did it anyway.

She stripped down and lay her clothing aside. Going to the edge of the dock, she eased in, sucked in her breath and cursed.

“You lied. It is cold.” He turned around.

She looked up, opened her mouth to reply...and was dumbstruck. With the full moon as backdrop, Simon stood nude at the edge of the wooden structure, his mane

wafting back in the breeze and every inch of golden skin and every hollow and slope open to view.

"Simon..." she was looking at him all over and taking her time.

He sprang off and dived in, nearly going overhead and making a huge splash before he disappeared under the water.

"Bloody hell." She wiped the water off her face.

He sprang up, smoothing his hair back and finding her gaze. "It's damned cold." He swam toward her, close enough to touch which he did by pushing her head under.

She surfaced laughing, gasping and cursing. "It wasn't the last time I swam."

"Right." He swam off into the distance.

Abby discovered that when he swam, like everything else, he was graceful, sleek and fast, and her whole body reacted every time those carved shoulders could be seen, sparkling with wet drops and flexing in the moon light. She eventually swam and was near the dock again when he returned breathing heavy.

"You swim well."

"So do you." His eyes met hers, his hands moving under the surface and finding her breasts.

Chilled to tightness and more aroused by his light touch, Abby covered his hands. "Let's get out, I'm freezing."

They heaved out and onto the deck; Abby had only slid her shirt on before he was there, down where she sat, and laying her back on the weathered boards.

Water dripped and ran like liquid diamonds off his hair and face.

He only gazed at her silently, hotly, before his head lowered, and after weeks, days of tension, their moans echoed at flavor, texture and taste. Her arms went round him, feeling the slick droplets on warm bare skin. Her

head grew light from the seductive lave of his tongue in her mouth, and when he slid his palm from under her arm, down her side and hip, she felt tingles of fire race after it.

He raised his head, breathing warm and unsteady, eyes glowing and mouth damp. Looking deep in her eyes, Simon stroked that side, that hip and down as far as he could, watching the slight arch of her neck, the dip of her lashes, and hearing the pants that pushed from her lungs.

Simon dipped his head again, sipping, nibbling her mouth while he eased his hand between her thighs.

Abby gasped and turned her head aside a moment. When she looked back, he was raised higher and openly gazing down her lithe body, looking her over and then watching his fingers tease through the curls between her thighs.

“Say something.” She sucked in her breath, feeling the warm tip of his finger brush her moist and swollen flesh.

“You’re exquisite, Abby. Sleek and taut but rounded in the most enticing way...moonlight suites you.” He held her gaze while he spread her moist heat.

“And you, Simon, you’re incredibly beautiful.” She rolled more toward him and slid her hand down, finding him hot, swelled, pulsing. Meeting his erotic kiss that was nothing more than tongues and breath, she eased back enough to whisper, “Have you don...”

“No, Abby. I never swam nude with a female, and no, I do not play these sort of games.” His words were hurried, tense. They were stroking each other, rubbing and coiling that tension hotter and higher. His finger slid inside the tight channel while his thumb circled the sensitive nerves bathed in her wetness.

Her fist tightened, her movements sped, firm and silken, until they could no longer hear anything but the

hard sounds of their breathing and inner heartbeats. Gazes were locked, faces close. She whispered his name, a desperate kind of helplessness on her face.

Simon kissed her then, plunging and explicit, and his own body shuddered and jerked before they were gasping into each other's mouths, shuddering, shivering, convulsing against each other in the ultimate satisfaction.

He lay half over her. Abby caressed his back, smelling their mingled scent and feeling the sticky evidence of their climax on them both. "We'd better wash up."

He lifted his head and eased off her, sliding into the water, and Abby soon followed. A while later they were walking back, clothing wrinkled and hair wet. Abby saw Kendyl turn from sitting by the fire, look down and up her and chuckle before turning around again. Her aunt was still spinning her wild tales so they proceeded to the house.

"I'll show you to your room." She led him up the stairs to the back room that had a large window facing the lake. Lamps were glowing and the floorboards were still warm from the sun.

He tossed his jacket and cravat on a chair and when she would have passed through the doorway, Simon pulled her back inside, led her to the quilted bed and lay her down under him. His bigger body pinning her, he kissed her hard, deep, with enough passion to have her arching and touching him restlessly.

However, this time it was he who called a halt and rolled away from her, laying on his back and looking up at that beamed ceiling.

"Aunt Flora sleeps late. I'll have your breakfast ready before the race." Abby arose shakily and stood a moment, looking at him laying there, recalling the lake, recalling his body, the feel of his sex, the look in his

eyes and the shudders of his frame. She sighed and went to her room to bathe and change.

~

Simon never arose early. Not since the military. He could not believe he did the next morning, considering his sleep had been disturbed playing those images of Abby at the lake over in his mind.

He bathed and shaved, then dressed in comfortable buff trousers, his boots and a linen shirt. His hair was drying when he left the room, feeling the hush of the quiet house yet following the scent of coffee down the stairs and toward the back of the house.

He stopped at the kitchen doorway, an old kitchen with brick floors and drying herbs and copper pots. Abby was by a long table, sliding steaming food unto plates and then pouring coffee into earthen mugs. Her saffron shirt was boyish and collarless, and when she went to the open back door to toss something, he noted her snug riding trousers and scuffed boots.

The light of dawn struck her hair those moments by the door, hair that was damp in its braid with pieces fluttering over her forehead and against her cheek, lavender lights and orange glows bouncing off the strawberry color.

She looked up and over at him, and again those lime eyes sent a prickle of awareness over his skin. "Come in." She set the plates at a hand-hewn table and matching chairs.

He met her there, taking a seat and watching her do likewise, drinking several sips of coffee before she began to eat. Simon ate; he drank his coffee, and wondered that he'd never eaten in a kitchen before. And aside from his hunting box, there were no nights spent on goose down mattresses with hand made covers and never had he paid much attention to the more simplistic

and basic things like the colors of dawn, and how a woman's hand looked holding a fork or cup.

Abby wiped her mouth on a napkin and sat back, cradling her mug and glanced at him. "Did you sleep well?"

He wiped his mouth and sat back, too. "Yes. When I slept." His eyes went up and down her slowly. "Are you racing, too?"

"Yes."

He stared at her a moment then got up, going to the back door. He leaned against it, smelling acrid smoke mixed with fresh morning, watching the day dawn even as he could see the Reids clustered amid a string of horses by the distant track.

He finished his coffee, looking over when the chair scraped, watching her clear the table, somehow not surprised when she began washing their dishes and drying them. She finished and came to take the cup he extended.

However, when her fingers covered his, they stood for silent moments, frozen in motion with nothing but their gazes revealing they both recalled every detail of the night before.

A deep shout from outside, Kendyl's father broke the spell. Abby looked away, the cup passed to her hand, and he left while she was still cleaning it.

~

Hours later, with a full sun beaming cheerfully down and crowds of people conversing and laughing, Abby sat astride a young horse, having positioned herself beside Kendyl and able to see Simon on a black beast a bit over from her. Kendyl had already spotted Damien who stood amid the spectators, dressed in tweed riding jacket and usual, comfortable riding garb.

"Maybe he will cheer you on," Abby teased, seeing the flush to Kendyl's face.

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“And maybe he can go to Hades.” Kendyl tried to affect an indifferent pose.

Snorting, Abby murmured, “I can’t wait to see your da and brothers’ reaction to him.”

Before Kendyl could answer, the start of the race was announced. Abby could not resist a look at Simon and had to admire both his seat and his focus on the finish line. She did not doubt for a moment he rode to win.

The pistol fired, horses shot past the lines, and dust nearly obscured the riders while people whistled, yelled and clapped. Abby knew her young horse’s limit before she was halfway there; it broke stride several times and showed its greenness. She muttered a few words but gave it pats for effort.

There was a tie between Simon and a young lad of fourteen at the finish line. She made it there amid the congratulations, and simply sat enjoying Simon’s full smile. A rare sight. He shook hands and spoke to people. He actually laughed full out. Abby sensed his thrill for the sport and his natural competitive streak. At that moment, he was just a man who had enjoyed a bracing race and good challenge.

The riders turned, cooling the horses and riding them back for the next race. Abby dismounted and handed hers to the young lads serving as grooms. She was turning and bumped into Simon.

“Oh... Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” He looked down at her.

“I saw Lord Blackstone.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “I think he’s talking with Reid about buying that black.”

She snorted, thinking he should be talking to Kendyl. “Well, enjoy yourself.”

“Where are you going?” He caught her arm as she would have passed.

“No where in particular.”

He turned with her. “I’ll join you. You can point out all the trees you climbed and those scandalous trysting spots with the Beaumonts.”

“I will.” She laughed and they began walking, a relaxed stride and unhurried so that he could look around. Once beyond the grounds and house, Simon rolled up his sleeves and plucked a stem of wild wheat to chew on.

Abby talked and did point out the rock stiles and a cottage that she and Kendyl had explored. There were arbors and brooks that held some memories, too, and she painted a fair picture of a childhood with much freedom and not a little mischief.

By a stream at the edge of land where sheep dotted the green pasture, they cupped their hands and drank. Abby sat down, watching Simon lay back on the emerald grass, his hands behind his head and eyes on the clouds that shaded the sun.

She eyed the bones at his temple, the strong cheek and jaw, and lingered on the sensual curve of his mouth. He turned as if sensing it, and amber flecks sparkled amid the green of his eyes.

Abby leaned over then, carefully brushing her fingers through his wavy hair, thinking how much the word mane suited it since he did very little but comb it, and the sable and gold streaks along with the thickness was so unusual. After visually following her movements her gaze met his again, and that tense, hot wave washed over her.

He took that hand from his hair and closed his eyes, dragging it over his face, the palm over his lips, and stopped at his upper chest.

Abby needed no encouragement. She rose to her knees and undid those buttons on his shirt, staring a moment at the sleek warm skin, before she was running

her palms over him, shaping muscle and tracing his ribs and loving the freedom of touching him, as much as the feel of the skin stroking her hands.

A ridge of hair sparkled below his navel, and drew attention to a taut abdomen, and thanks to the swim, the touching, she knew what lay below. She leaned over and placed fluttery kisses across and around his navel, breathing in his male scent, feeling the light twitch of pleasure to her attentions.

When she sat up, his eyes were closed, his face in repose. Though she could tell his heart was thudding, his breathing was deeper, he apparently was simply enjoying himself.

However, when she began her exploring again, in a flash, he sat up and tumbled her to her back.

Abby gasped, clutching his strong arms and staring up at the face framed by his hair that slid forward.

“Did you put your mouth on Christian Beaumont like that?”

She blinked at his growl. “No...”

Simon was undoing the buttons of her shirt. “Did he put his mouth on you?”

“Simon, I...”

“Did he?”

She did not trust that glint in his eye. “You’ve had scores of women. I do not want to think about that when I am with you. And I do not recall a single thing about Christian Beaumont when you are kissing and touching me.”

He spread the shirt wide and stared at her breasts in the bright daylight, the skin tight and tips deepest peach, flushed from arousal. He slid down, and at the first wet touch of his mouth, she was burying her hands in his hair and moaning.

He took his time, kissed, laved, and moved his head sensually, whilst his soft lips captured each peak, and

then his strong teeth scrapped sensually over the most sensitive edge.

Panting, arching, Abby cried softly, "Simon. My God..."

But he slid down below and across her ribs, running his tongue to the hollow of her belly, his movements firmer, hungrier and his suckling of her tender skin often followed by a male sound of pleasure.

Simon undid the latches of her trousers and skimmed his hot mouth from her navel to that nest of hair. He kissed, supple, moist, and erotic, and blew warm sensual breaths over the trail of wetness.

He leaned up on his elbow, shaking his hair back, looking at her while his hand slid in the pocket of room. His lean fingers found her aroused and slick as he breached the shield of hair, he found the tender skin of her inner lips. He stroked purposefully.

She bowed slightly before a shiver went over her.

"You're a passionate and hungry woman."

Abby wet her lips. "You make me that way."

His white teeth flashed and there was a hint of sexual knowing in his eyes. Simon slid his fingers down and into her, and then began a cadence, a slow and deep, in and out one, that set her thighs to trembling.

Holding his gaze through her half closed lids, she could not help but give into the pleasure. Abby arched and used her hips to meet that pace; her teeth sank into her bottom lip.

Simon's face grew tense watching her, feeling her, and he muttered something explicit before he moved his hand, and shoved down her trousers.

"Simon, what..."

He had her trousers at her ankles when he rolled and spread her knees. Then he was sliding up until his face was at her groin, and parting her with his thumbs.

"Oh, my God... You're..."

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He glanced at her, and rubbed the flat of his tongue over the more sensitive flesh his fingers exposed.

Abby nearly came off the ground. She gasped, torn between stopping him and the intense pleasure of it, and watching him as he did it repeatedly, like a great cat laving long strokes of something delicious. When his teeth scraped the swollen, nub, she fell back and lost herself in the most erotic and intense sensual feeling she had ever thought possible. Over and over he did it, long licks and firm velvet strokes, oddly abrading in the most erotic way.

There was a point her stomach quivered and her breathing turned to sobs. Simon's hands were on her buttocks, his mouth suckling now, until she thought her heart would burst. And at the edge of falling under, she felt him stop, felt the cooler wind waft over her exposed flesh—and thought she would scream in desperation and frustration.

Atremble and half blind with sexual fog, Abby raised up to look at him. He was scraping his teeth over his lip and licking her scent off them, his glowing eyes and sensual face savoring the action.

She closed her eyes a moment and shuddered.

He waited for those lashes to lift, then slid his finger deep inside the contracting channel. "Squeeze tight."

She already was, and not because she had tried to, the inner walls were milking every ounce of that length. "Simon...you're killing me."

He murmured sexily, "It will be more intense, stronger. Tighten in, love."

She did while he moved it in and out, and the moment his thumb touched her, she cried out, arched her neck and climaxed so hard and long that tears squeezed from her closed eyes.

Simon was not done. He drank her again, laved and licked until she had come to the point of screaming, and likely scared off the farmer's sheep.

When she lay there, limp and drained, Abby heard him at the stream, splashing water. She made herself sit up and lift her hips to cover her arse at least.

He walked toward her and stood a moment, simply looking over the bare torso, shirt flapping in the gentle wind, and the still unlatched trousers, no doubt her mussed braid and sleepy eyes.

"Did Christian Beaumont do that?"

"No," she rasped and recognized the flair to his nostrils—and knew—that had been a challenge in his eyes before. She let her gaze drop to the firm thrust of his sex against his trousers. Being aware that doing that to her had aroused him sent a shot of fire through her blood. It made an already incredible erotic experience a million times more sexual.

Abby met his gaze again, knew he had watched her visual perusal.

"Are you ready to return?"

"What about..."

"I'll live." He began repairing his clothing.

Abby did likewise, and rose to her feet, not at all sure that leaving a man in a high state of arousal was a good thing, particularly not a man who had pleased her so exquisitely.

And she finally was hit with the truth, after a few steps, right between the legs so to speak.

Simon, thanks to that forbidden display of sexual skill, like her or not—was trying to wipe out every sensual memory she might have, and leave his mark, his scent, his expert brand on her. No matter who came after him, in his mind, they would fall short.

She felt a knot twist in both her belly and constrict her heart, hoping that he did not do that with every other

woman. She simply could not bear it. Damn him anyway, and that trait in him that had to prove things to himself, to her. It was the most incredibly intimate thing, and he had better not have done it simply for those reasons.

~

Upon returning, Simon went to speak with Damien. Before long, the men were part of Reid's male circle of company.

Abby crept inside to wash up and then don a plain skirt and sleeveless blouse, her more comfortable slippers, before brushing her hair, tying it back, and going out to find Kendyl.

Her friend had also changed, wearing a clean set of boy's clothing and a look of defiance.

"You want him, Kendyl, why fight it since he came all this way?"

"Because he won't marry me. I know it. He thinks to dally with me and leave me here and go back to his..."

"You don't know that. And you won't, ever, if you keep walking in the opposite direction every time he comes your way."

Kendyl sighed and tossed the chicken leg back into her plate. She sat back after wiping her mouth and said, "All right. I won't run away. But I'm not chasing him anymore."

Abby nodded and sometime later did in fact see Damien glance around and spy her friend. Kendyl was looking at him, and she did not run off when he headed her way. Abby sighed then, too. She could not help Kendyl when she had no bloody idea what she was doing herself. Abby wanted Simon, and now, a lot of that want was lust on her part, too. She wanted him, all of him, everything of him, and he was not coming after her really, not saying things she wanted him to or letting

her know how he was feeling, what he was thinking outside of sex.

Oh God, she thought, suddenly standing still. He was seducing her. He was seducing her right out of her plan. She was completely falling under his spell, just like all the others, and she was going to end up just where they were, nothings, no one, another reason for him to think all women were alike.

Chapter 9

Abby saw Simon when she fixed him a plate at lunch and then just past nightfall. Nevertheless, they had gone their way and moved amid the groups, taking part or watching the celebration, but only looking at each other then turning around, not avoiding each other exactly, but trying not to light embers that were simmering between them.

Night had fallen and guests were settled down to talking and telling stories. Aunt Flora, dressed in her mystic cloak, had a larger crowd around her campfire. She was in her element, waving her hands animatedly and puffing a pipe, which the locals were used to seeing.

Abby seated herself by the oak, slightly back, where she could watch everyone. She was some distance in shadows—but did not mistake Simon as he joined her.

He had gone in and washed up, too, at some point. She detected his scent when he settled, his back next to hers, against the ancient tree. Somehow, she knew that he could see, and was watching too, the shadow and Damien and Kendyl separated from the clearing. They had some discussion and their stances were of defiance. Then Kendyl kicked Damien in the leg and he was laughing.

Abby's lips held a small smile as Damien, at the edge of the house, picked Kendyl up in his arms and

headed toward some private spot. Whatever his intent, Kendyl had not resisted, one shout would have brought her da and brothers down like the wrath of God on Blackstone. But the woman's arms were around his neck, and it was obvious she was kissing his face.

A heavy hush seemed to hang between Simon and Abby. She recognized it as all those hungers and feelings, all the want, and what her aunt would call the natural urge to mate, to join, to unleash with flesh in flesh. Every look and every touch seemed to build and layer and multiply the attraction.

Simon finally spoke, quietly in the lull, "Her name was Andrea. She was a duchess, and separated from her husband. I was eighteen the first time I met her, and slept with her. She was thirty..."

"I did not know for that first year that she had others, because I was completely enthralled. Not by beauty, but her earthiness, her sophistication, and her sexual freedom. Being instructed on the same rigid rules gentleman are given, knowing the limits of sexual liaisons, being of the family I was, my father being a moral man. She was insatiable... She was...she had no taboos. It was only later I realized that everything was a tool, a means to feed her vanity, her need to manipulate and control."

Abby was afraid to interrupt, to ask her million questions. Her skin prickled, however, realizing that he was finally exposing the root of his long held bitterness.

Simon went on. "I rarely left her house and was stupid enough to run her petty errands, so that she could entertain the others. She was the talk of the neighborhood, and I defended her...duels, fistfights, completely blind to any side of her outside of the lover I thought she was.

"Her husband came to my father's house when I was there, and tried to talk to me. I nearly killed him for his

trouble. And when his truths rang in my ears...I was insane. I went after every man he named. I fought a dozen duels. In my twisted reasoning, they had encroached on what was mine...my life and my breath and my thoughts.”

Simon sighed, long though tight. “In the end, I was the object of talk, and my father says the reason for many lost nights of sleep for fear of what I’d do next. However, at the beginning of the third year, she told me the duke was divorcing her, that she was leaving with another lover, a rich count who would wed her.”

Abby did murmur then, “And you would have, and said so, and she scorned you and mocked your feelings.”

“Yes,” he said tensely. “She stripped me to the bone emotionally and physically, in the coldest and most cruel terms. I struck her...” he said lower, “and the sound of it, the feel of it, the violence of it...was as if I’d ripped a blindfold off my eyes and my life...a kind of sick and cold feeling came over me, realizing that she set out to have me, to use me, to manipulate and blind me, through the physical. She played on every part of me, mind and body and soul, and had made me what I was. I saw us both and knew...”

“Did your father love your mother?”

He seemed to have to switch his mind before he said, “Yes. Very much so. He never had another after her.”

“And likely you put love and your mother on some pedestal, maybe you’d forgotten she was flesh and blood.” Abby breathed carefully, knowing that saying the wrong thing could damage the fragile thread of trust between them. “At an age where young men will crave both the ideal sort of romance and their body’s lust. Perhaps you had your own needs for a mother, for a woman to nurture you, tangle that up, sex and the rest, if you revered females and put them on a pedestal. It does

not seem so surprising that a shrewd and selfish woman could see that. Likely Simon, she was that way her whole life, and knew what sorts of young men to choose.”

He was lighting a cheroot but she was aware that he was hearing her.

“I don’t know that males talk to their sons any more than mothers do their daughters with frankness. I suppose one fortunate thing about Aunt Flora’s eccentric nature is that she never deflected a question I had, and has the ability to be objective. I know ton debs are fed tripe, and I realized in short order that they are trapped...somehow being kept pure, and then wed to the first title, old or young, who suits their parents, entering the reality of belonging to a stranger—one who may be deviant or hold you to some ideal standard.

“Well, I feel for them. One can almost understand the games society plays, the affairs and intrigue and the shallowness. It is made up of people who have very little control over some parts of their lives.”

“What occurred in my life cannot be laid at my father’s door.”

She watched his shaded profile as the breeze whipped his hair against his tightly held cheek. “I’m not blaming him. I am simply saying that it could happen to any of us. That emotions and needs ignored or unmet, for any reason, leaves any of us vulnerable to mistake lust for love, or attention and the rest, for whatever we need it to be. Hate her. I understand that. However, forgive yourself, Simon. Because men, are not exempt, and we are all flesh and blood and apt to make mistakes.”

Abby stood up and dusted the seat of her skirt. “You were little more than a green lad, raised by a kind father, and you were tangled into the web deeply enough to lose yourself for a time. You should forgive yourself that,

and realize that using women's bodies to spend yourself whilst devaluing the entire sex in general—is a decision you make, every time you do that too.”

She began walking toward the house, then paused and turned, to see he had stood and was smoking; staring at her in spite of the fact his face was taut with bitter emotions.

She sighed, fighting past a lump in her throat, because it was a very serious ghost indeed to expect him to bury. “Come to my room when you are ready to retire.”

Abby turned and strode to the house, her mind racing and emotions mocking her. She had really underestimated the man Simon was. Affecting that bored pose or playing the rakehell, drinking and slumming. She should have known because of his war experience and his jaded views, that he was much more layered under that surface. She should have known that he was a flesh and blood man. Otherwise, she would have never been so drawn to him.

Chapter 10

Simon did not go at first. After stripping to his trousers, he lay in the moon lit bedchamber atop the covers, hands under his head while he watched shadows on the plaster ceiling.

The distraction did not work. He knew she was down the hall, and he could not stop the vivid and detailed pictures of her body that floated through his mind. He could taste her, smell her, and he could hear the echo of her sensual moans. He saw her eyes, light and clear, fogged and rolling back in ecstasy at the point of climax. He remembered the feel of her as he laved his tongue over that swollen and firm spot between the lips,

and teased it with the tip until he had plunged his tongue inside her.

Simon felt the skin inside his thighs tighten, felt his scrotum drawing up as his sex distended and flushed to a throbbing fullness.

His nostrils quivered. He closed his eyes, breathing unsteadily in and out, feeling that dew of sexual mist spread over his expanded skin. He could not recall, since that young mistake, ever feeling, remembering or wanting a woman so much. With willing women and mistresses, he paid no attention to their expression or breathing or their faked moans. He was easing an appetite with no emotions connected.

However, with Abigail Forsythe he did. Though he pushed aside thoughts that she had been kissed and touched, and knew how to pleasure herself, he could not forget that no man had buried himself in that part of her. No man had been given the privilege of being her first. Of summing her fullest passions. He recalled the silken feel when his fingers had been in it, the sizzling heat and ultra softness. He remembered the rippling contractions and squeeze against his fingers.

Simon cursed and opened his eyes, sitting quickly up and laying his palm over his now throbbing flesh. He knew, he knew in his gut, that he could not take her. She wanted things from him that he was not ready to give. Not sure that he could again. He did not trust women beyond sex. He did not want or need one beyond that.

Simon arose and walked to the big windows, smelling night scents from the open shutters, and bracing his hands above it. He stared out at the shapes, and all he could see was the two of them on the dock, and the two of them, in that meadow by the stream...

He leaned his head back, feeling the damp edges of his hair touch his shoulder blades. He could ease his own loins again, but would he ever be able to empty his

mind? Why the bloody hell had he come here? Why did he have to give into her challenge and open himself up to this?

When Simon found himself padding down the hall, he did not have the mind to mock himself just yet. He simply had no choice.

~

Her door was cracked and he pushed it back softly, seeing instantly that she had a deep amber glow spread over the far end. The bed was large and headed by a wide and high window, shutters back and night landscape hung like a painting between them.

Propped up on several pillows, her hair down and silken and her light eyes on him. He walked toward the bed leisurely, his gaze going down her nude body, completely exposed and warmed to a mellow cream in the flattering light.

The lithe form and shapely limbs he had glimpsed today was reaffirmed, her breasts round and peaked, stomach taut and strawberry curls shimmering enticingly between her thighs.

“More games, Abby?” He heard his soft husk, applauded himself mentally for the lack of inflection.

She smiled and wrinkled her nose and rose up to her knees. She turned her back and pulled aside her hair. “Do you see it?”

He saw a symbol tattooed on her shoulder. It was a lioness in a circle. “Yes.”

“A gypsy did that for me. An old man who had come to stay with Aunt Flora. He said it was my mark of destiny.” She peeked over her shoulder. “He believed that people are connected to their animal spirits. He told me that I had a feline soul.”

He did not want to think of that. He did not want to remind himself he had used that same analogy. His eyes were going down her slim back and dimpled spine, the

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heart shaped buttocks, taunt and firm. "You've a sweet arse, Abby."

She turned and considered him. "You remind me of a lion, a sleek and golden one, and with that mane, that deceptive lazy way you have."

"Daft."

She chuckled softly. "Yes. I likely am, compared to other women." She let her gaze drift down again. "I can read some things about you, in spite of your need to hide them. You are always in control during sex...you don't trust women."

"And the point?"

She raised those light eyes again. "I want you to trust me."

His smile was cynical. "Of course."

"I want to bathe you."

"Bathe me?" He was at the brink of mocking.

"With my tongue..."

He stared at her.

"I want to lave that wonderful body and taste all your scents, to rake my teeth over the mounds and hollows...and to rub my face against the tender places."

He reached out at the same time he fell to the bed, cradling her head in his hands he grit, "Bloody tease." He crushed his mouth down on hers and gave her a lust filled and punishing kiss.

But her hands were soothing over his skin, and though she trembled when she drug her mouth free, she husked in his ear, "Simon...Simon. I would never hurt you, I would never take without giving. I love you."

He was instantly off her, laying face down on the mattress and uttering an explicit string of curses, calling her names that were meant to pierce like arrows. Either her or the ghosts neither would know.

However, he felt her ease over him. Like cool silk, she covered him, before his hair was brushed aside and

the silken feel of her tongue was dragging over his skin. Simon did not stop muttering as he closed his eyes and grabbed fists full of covers beyond his head, and she bathed his nape and shoulders, down his spine with supple and sweet kisses and long laves, before peeling off his trousers.

He groaned deep and shuddered while her hair brushed across his buttocks and her hands smoothed his upper thighs, she licked and kissed and laved long strokes across and under each mound, down the back of his thighs.

Simon was afire, completely drowning in erotic lust. He struggled for a long time to make himself stop her, to comprehend what she said, that word love...but nothing mattered after her mouth, breath, and kisses rained over him. Nothing mattered, but that she *not* stop.

Everything was on him, her face, her breasts; she touched him with slow, burning greed. He did not feel the bed, know the room, or anything outside of Abigail Forsythe. When she turned him over, sitting astride his upper thighs, he did not need to open his eyes; he felt her and heard her breathing, and he stopped fighting it.

Having bathed him from neck to foot, Simon felt her part his thighs. He felt the unfamiliar and forbidden sensation of her fingertips beyond his scrotum, touching the untouchable, and moaned with grit teeth when her silken hair brushed deep and her face stroked across his groin, her tongue raking against unexplored flesh.

It was some other power that opened his eyes to slits, amid his heavy, strident breaths. Head above his body and mind trapped in a haze, Simon watched her raise to her knees, close between his spread thighs, her hands drifting out, down the bunched muscle of his limbs, and for a split second her lime gaze glittered at him through a curtain of mussed hair. Her pink lips

parted another second before they touched the crown of his sex.

Simon convulsed, head back. "Christ. He fisted more of the quilt in his spread hands trying to connect with anything inanimate, something beyond the engulfing pull of raw and mindless lust. However, the downslide of her lips, the trapping of his flesh in a moist, silken, hellishly sweet mouth, won out. He heard his deep voiced cries as if from a distance, and felt his seed gather and pump out with a searing pleasure/pain so intense, there was nothing but light and fire that spread and divided muscle bone and skin.

~

Abby arose and rinsed her mouth before returning to the bed, sitting against the pillows, looking at the sprawled and deep breathing man. Even lax, his body was finely carved, and after pleasure, his face was compelling.

She was watching when he stirred and sat up on the edge of the bed, shoving his hair back and wiping his hands over his eyes. For long moments he sat that way, elbows on his muscled thighs and head downward, profile shielded and staring at nothing.

When he turned his head to look at her, his eyes were more gold than green and very piercing. "You do that better than most whores."

She flinched and said tightly. "All right, Simon."

"In fact you do it as if you've had a lot of practice."

Her eyes burned but she returned strained, "I haven't done that before."

His lips turned in a mockery of a smile. "You should charge for it."

Abby felt a tear betray her and slide from the corner of her eye. "You had a second chance after her, and you have not taken it. You have a chance with me. Just one,

Simon. To know what giving and sharing and loving is, to have a partner who is passionate, loyal an..."

"You weave your own kind of web; Abby. You have your own brand of manipulation."

"I can live without you. You only exist, but I live. I care about people and I make my life matter."

He whispered with eyes burning. "I could hate you as easily as I want to drive myself into you so deep, so fast, that you—" He got up and began pulling on his trousers. "Sex, Abby. Now we have tasted each other. Now do you realize that it is just sex and just lust, and it is not some other, deeper experience? You are good, better than good, but it was just sex."

Her voice sounded raw. "I was giving to you, selflessly, as you gave to me. No second chance, Simon, I meant that. I won't waste my heart and my body on a man who is going to punish me for his own mistakes, for another woman's sins."

He was dressed and turned to face her, snarling softly, "I told you that you wouldn't win these games. You are no different, no less manipulative. And no less the fool for calling lust anything but what it is." He stared at her. "I did not take anything you didn't offer and I did not bloody lie to you about what it was."

She held his gaze past the blur of hot tears, making her lips not tremble and keeping her fisted hands hidden in her lap.

He muttered, "Yes, hate me, Abby. You are facing reality—limitations that I was honest about from the beginning."

"I could hate you right now," she grit. Hurting inside as if she'd swallowed glass. "You want me to..."

His gaze grew hard and cold. "And I could have told you that you would...before you pursued a relationship with me. But you wouldn't hear it. You heard nothing I said to you."

When he looked away and left, Abby slid down in the bed and stared at the wall while the storm of emotions poured out her eyes. She felt herself splinter with hurt inside and slowly fell to pieces. All hope broken with the evidence of what he thought of her and the sweetness of her giving. All illusions were finally shattered. She was still awake when he departed at dawn.

Chapter 11

“My God, you are a fool.” Lady Joan glared at Simon.

“Don’t start.” He poured himself a brandy and knocked it back, glancing at Roger who sat behind the desk, feet propped up, and looking between Simon and Joan.

“Start? Start, Simon? I cannot believe the person you have become. When you were a sot, a drunk, I could overlook much, but sober you are a complete bastard!”

Simon whirled round, his eyes hot. “Let it go, by God! I did not come here to let you rip at me with your insults.”

Her mouth tightened. “No. You came here for me to tell you that what you did was right. You want me to agree with your twisted notion that all women are poison and females like Abigail Forsythe are sly and manipulative.”

She laughed and shook her head. “My God, Cuz. She did not want your money, your title. She wanted you. And you are not so great a prize, so unique in your sexual prowess—that any woman in her right mind should risk her heart for just you. Just to love you.” Joan looked at her husband in anger. “This is it for me. You reassure him. I’m too bloody angry to stand here one more moment.”

The doors slammed loudly together behind Joan, leaving an echo hanging in the room.

Roger eyed Simon, who had walked to the french doors and was scraping his hair back. He drawled finally, "I hope you did not think that Joan would see your point of view? There was nothing, frankly, in your long tale of woe but a list of mixed signals you gave Abigail Forsythe and a taking advantage of feelings you were well aware she had—until it suited you to end it."

"I did not..."

Roger's voice throbbed with anger. "Godammit! Simon, we are not cads! You crossed the line."

Simon turned glaring. "I did nothing of the kind! The woman...chased me, and I scratched an itch we both had. She may be a virgin, but she was no bloody innocent, and I did not force anything on her. Everything was at her invitation and I told you—I left after her confession."

Roger laughed harshly and lowered his feet. Standing, he lit a cheroot then blew the smoke tensely and muttered, "You left all right, with parting words meant to rip the woman down. I don't know why I'm going to bother but..." He glanced over and met Simon's gaze. "You fool. You blind bastard. You poor bloody—You were in love with her."

"No." Simon turned pale.

Roger shook his head, somewhat amused despite his anger, at the helpless, stunned look on the face of his friend. "You fell in love with her that first day at the park."

"No. No...I..."

Roger husked. "Don't you think I know the feeling, the thoughts of lust and fear and confusion and...don't you think I know *you*, Simon? Am I not the man who held you together when you found out that that bitch of a duchess tried to get you back, that she wrote your father those letters threatening blackmail."

"Don't, Rog..."

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However, Simon's emotional state affected him so deeply, that Roger went on. "None of us can save you from yourself anymore, Simon. You do not need an excuse. You are your own worst enemy. You always have been. Listen to me, you hard headed bastard. You sabotage your own life and happiness."

~

Simon had stilled, gone pale. He watched Roger turn with a curse and walk to the mantle, resting his hand on it and looking into the fire.

He heard himself say. "She is gone...left, with her aunt for America."

"I know. She sent a note round to Joan and the children." Roger sighed long.

Simon looked down in his drink, his hand unsteady, and then glanced toward the night. He turned, set the glass on a table, feeling his guts twisting into a terrible knot. He could not breathe properly, could not rid himself of the pressure in his chest.

He said before leaving, "I'll make it right with m'cousin.. We've both got impulsive tempers." However, he sounded so very much confused...and he knew it, he bloody well felt strange all over.

Roger glanced over as Simon was leaving. "Where are you going?"

"Home, to Collingworth. I'll..." He shook his head, simply knowing he had to flee because he was shaking all over. He turned and left.

~

That night with his wife lying in his arms, Lord Roger murmured, "I was not that blind."

Joan turned toward him, reaching up to trace the scar on his face and look into his dark eyes. "No, thank God you were not. However, I, too, having the same blood as Simon, having made a mistake before I met you, in that vulnerable time between woman and girl...admit it

colored my life so long. It was not easy for me to accept what I felt for you. Like him, it had to hit me between the eyes.”

Roger turned his head, capturing her finger for a moment before he rolled, putting her under him and looking down into those green eyes. “You came to me...in Bristol.”

“You would have come to me eventually.”

He smiled tenderly. “Would I have?”

She smiled back. “Yes, darling. You would have. Because we belong together.”

He kissed her deep and soft, and then murmured in her ear. “I belong to you, love, that I know. And there is no other emotion stronger than that need to join our bodies into one.”

“God...” she arched her neck and tangled her hands in his hair. “You always say the perfect thing to arouse me.”

He laughed low and slid his hand down her nude body, sliding fingers through her dampness as he growled softly, “You have only to say that, and I am more than ready to... Ah love. I cannot wait a moment more.”

“Then don’t.” She arched, rolled him to his back, her sable curls wild around her passion flushed face while she sank downward to take him inside.

Joan bit her lip, and then ran her tongue over the spot, looking into his dark eyes. “You’d best hold on, my love. I can already tell that I’m going to get a bit carried away...”

“Carry us both away, Joan.” He palmed her hips, arching his up. “I’m all too willing.”

~

At the end of the season Lady Alexia disappeared from the London scene; her brother made a discreet search. She surfaced a month later, wed to Duke Andrew

and living on his isolated estate. It was ran in the papers as if the two had been secretly engaged, and indeed, it was later revealed to the earl that his sister had been the Duke's lover since her own debut several years before—apparently some overblown misunderstanding had kept the two from marrying all these years

Kendyl was set to wed Damien, Lord Blackstone in four months... He had not left her side since visiting her in Essex. He spent his time working on her brothers and father, trying to undo the general rakehell image he had worked so hard to perfect. They did not make it easy for him. But in the end, he gained their consent.

Abigail Forsythe would be returning from her trip abroad to stand up for the bride

Simon, the Earl of Collingworth, would be arriving from his estate and standing up with the groom.

~

"Do you have everything you need then?" Abby stood at the bottom of the cellar stairs.

"Yes, yes, I am fine. You'd best hurry or you'll miss the mail coach."

Abby looked over the dusty cellar and smiled at the vibrating excitement in Aunt Flora. They had sailed home with a crate of bones that she was anxious to explore.

"Lady Newton should be by for tea. Do not forget. And I shall likely return with the Reids."

"Very well."

Seeing that her aunt was already absorbed in the dusty treasure, Abby went back up to gather her things for the journey.

She was thrilled for Kendyl, not really surprised, however, and had missed her dreadfully. And she was honored to be standing up with her. It was going to be one of those surreal moments after all the tears and confidences they had shared, all of Kendyl's efforts to

pretend she had not fallen deep and fast for the rake. And for Blackstone, no doubt it was an enviable but sweet surrender, for they were well matched in passion and in humor.

She did not allow herself to think about running into Simon.

Chapter 12

Blackstone Manor, Surry

“Everything is set, Ken. I think your da is wearing a rut in the hall, however.”

Kendyl, looking more like the fairy bride in frothy silver than some elegant future countess, chuckled. “Do send him in, and keep Damien out.”

Abby snorted and shook her head. “I don’t see why the pretense, the two of you have been sharing a bed for months.”

“Shhh. Don’t tell Da.” Ken grimaced. “He thinks I am as pure as the driven snow.”

“As if I would.” Abby hugged her, careful of the gossamer gown and veil. “You are glowing, so at least we know that part met your expectation. I’m off to do my role.”

Before she departed Kendyl said, “It did...it does...and I giggle to think that I imagined any young experimentation with the Beaumonts held a candle to the real thing.”

“Good.” Abby hurried to close the subject.

Outside in the hallway, Abby waved in the tall Scot dressed in his white ruffled shirt, plaid and bonnet. “She’s waiting for you.”

Douglas nodded, downed a whiskey he was holding, and headed for the chamber as if bracing for some fierce act of heroism. Abby knew that all the men in her friend’s family were feeling like that; she was the apple

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of their eye, and letting her go, become a ton wife, was difficult for such protective men.

However, Abby was sure that each of them realized their future son-in-law was not just some foppish lord. He would treat his wife like a queen, and cut anyone who dared treat her with less than the utmost respect. In fact, Damien was downright comical in his suddenly protective attitude toward his love. He amused Abby thoroughly by insisting he had never not intended to wed her eventually. She chuckled at the fact he pretended he had never ran from falling in love with her.

~

A crush of guests filled the manor house, overflowing, spilling all the way to the chapel; Abby had been told that the vine covered structure that had been a part of the estate before it was modernized, and had been standing for a hundred years. The colors of Ken's family plaid swaged over the doorway, right along with the bows and flowers and Blackstone's crest, another amusing compromise between the unique couple.

Abby smiled and walked toward it, aware of how fiercely proud Kendyl was of her heritage. From Kendyl's letters, she knew that Blackstone would have hung the moon itself to have his Scottish lass. Kendyl put him through his paces, as it were, making him convince her that he would love her forever, and that he knew his rakehell life was behind him for good. Apparently, he reveled in showing her how reformed he was.

It was wonderful to see them so much in love.

Careful of the train on her cream silk gown, and conscious that the wind was going to muss her hair, which had been curled and piled up, she smoothed her long gloves, nodding to people while she entered the cool interior. There was a slight misstep, a split second of hesitation when she saw Simon standing at the altar

with Damien, but she pressed on and managed to take her place in spite of her racing heart and weak knees. Oh bloody hell, she had half hoped that distance and time had cured her; at least while she was hurt and angry she had thought so.

Facing the crowd, waiting for the bride, Abby peeked out the corner of her eye and saw Simon's claret coat. Everything else he wore was white, snug trousers, of course, and he had his hair back, but a strand worked loose near his temple. The bloody stuff was tawny and rippling, as beautiful as ever and had not fallen out as she had hoped.

Her palms sweat, even when the bride showed up and her heart grew full for Kendyl who looked wonderful. Abby was there and not there, aware of everything and everyone yet thinking of the past months and the difficult days of struggling through memories.

She had liked New York and Boston, had enjoyed things beyond the society, thanks to Aunt Flora. In addition, she had stayed busy; toured women's academies, and supped with brewers and bakers and common fishermen. She had crammed her time, her days with doing and not feeling.

Abigail had basked a little in the open way American men had flirted with her. Needing that, she supposed, the soothing balm of it, because her confidence was shaken. She had met men who should have been perfect for her, who would have given her the moon, too, and sun, and loved her...and she could not feel anything back but friendship. Damn Simon, he had certainly left his mark, one way or the other.

Somewhere far off in her mind, she watched Simon hand the ring over. There followed the rest of the beautiful ceremony. Then they were walking back to the main house for the wedding feast.

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Abby had talked herself up to being all right with this. She would not have missed her friend's wedding. She had spent the trip gathering courage and clearing her mind... Really she had been proud of herself for making it this far.

~

She had not thought for one moment that she would be seated with Simon at the supper.

Damn Kendyl!

The long tables held some three hundred guests, but Abby was aware only of the man who brushed her arm lifting his glass, and whose voice made an eloquent and heart felt toast. She did not know how she would get through the next long hours.

"You look very beautiful, Abigail."

The first courses were over and the noise level was high, music wafted in from the orchestra, yet she still heard Simon say that, that was how bloody attuned she was to his presence.

Abby set her glass down and glanced at him. "Thank you." She did not meet his eyes but went back to her food, which had no taste because she had no idea what she ate.

"Did you enjoy your trip abroad?"

"Yes." She focused anywhere but on him, proud of the level tone of her voice. I can do this. I can get through this...

He said next, "I returned home for the season and worked on my lands."

"Did you?" She watched the peacock feathers on some woman's head waft back and forth. What a horrid hat to be wearing to a wedding.

"Yes. Had Joan and the younguns down for a month, too. Little scamps got in plenty of mischief and kept the staff on its toes."

"How is she?"

“Very well. She will be glad to know you are in town. Do stop by and see her.”

“I might.” Abby was poker stiff now, wondering at his almost normal conversation. What was the point? What was his game, to torture her? She resisted a sigh as servants came with coffee and desert. Again, she ate and again she did not know what.

“The sun on your skin is very becoming.” Simon had leaned close and murmured that in a whisper that put chills on her spine...

That did it! “Excuse me.” She wiped her mouth, and slid her chair back. As many of the guests were up and headed for the parlor, she did not miss the chance to escape. Every step was a curse of his name. Hell would freeze over before she had some friendly chitchat with the Earl of Collingworth. He had hurt her, dammit!

~

Out in the marble hall, up the stairs, and to her rooms, she walked with a kind of trembling focus, putting one foot in front of the other. However, in those rooms she closed the door, fell back against it, holding a hand to her churning stomach.

Closing her eyes, breathing in shaky and deep, Abby pushed away and headed for the vanity. She sat down, staring at her face and eyes in the mirror, seeing the flush and the tension...

Whatever made her think that she could do this? Where the bloody hell had she gotten the notion that she could be around him and remain unaffected? Oh! It angered her, it made her feel many things, and most of them she had convinced herself she would not—could not after their parting.

Abby pulled off her gloves, and fixed a few wayward curls. She smoothed the low bodice and expected that the warmer glow of her skin likely

scandalized most of the woman at the table. And he had noticed it, her skin..

Oh, bloody hell.

For a moment, she rested her forehead in her palms, struggling between memories of what they had done together, of his taste and of those eyes shimmering with heat...of the way her body had caught fire and exploded under his skilled loving. Would she ever get over that man?

She arose eventually, carrying her gloves, and walked out the door. In the hallway, Abby stopped dead in her tracks. Her eyes zoned in on Simon, who lounged against the wall at the top of the stairs.

His jacket was gone and that silk shirt undone at the top, the collar no doubt in the pocket of wherever that jacket ended up. His hair was down, and she noticed this time his skin was darker from working his estates, making his eyes a lighter green, making them shine with intensity where they didn't need a whit more to make her feel them burning through to her bones.

She was going to keep walking. She was going to pass by him and make it down those bloody stairs...

When she was even with him, his gaze went up and down her with a slowness meant for her to notice.

Abby almost made it. She was just a step past, when Simon's hand came out and caught hers. The first shock was palm to palm contact, the second was mouth to mouth because he pulled her against him hard, and kissed her full and explicit.

Her hands had automatically come to his upper arms when he had let go. Now looking up when his head lifted, leaving her mouth damp and tingling, she was torn between anger, lust, and shock.

"Are you quite finished?" She arched her brow, pretended that her face was not flushed and bosom heaving, pretended she sounded and felt cold.

Simon eyed her in a sensually lazy way while sliding his hand down her arm, taking hers. "No." He turned, walking fast, pulling her with him back to a set of rooms he was using.

"No, dammit." She was trying to jerk her hold free, but he was aggressive, intent, and as soon as she was over the threshold, the door slammed and his taut, lean, body plastered hers against it.

Staring down into her face, his eyes glittered while their breathing mingled, heavy and uneven. He leaned his head, kissed her almost roughly. Definitely it was hungry and openly sexual.

Sounds tried to work themselves out her throat. She struggled to save herself from the consuming hunger of his kiss. His taste, his tongue, his hard body against her, it made all the time apart from him seem as nothing, as only a moment, a second, since the last.

Trembling, her hands went to his hair. He growled and slid his down, down to her hips, dragging up the silken layers of gown until his strong hands hooked under her thighs and he slid her up.

Gasping, with mouth swollen, body aflame, Abby refused to open her eyes as he'd slid her high enough to part her legs, to press himself between them and to scrape his teeth across the exposed tops of her breasts.

After explicitly mimicking his intent, sensually moving himself against her, he pulled back enough to free their weight from the door and carried her with her silken limbs around his hips those few feet to the bed.

They were falling to the silk covered surface, his hands already stripping away the flimsy gown.

"No. Simon..." Abby made an effort, a last grab at sanity, trying to mentally push her head above the sea of hunger and need. He rolled off her, but peeled the clothing away, down to the skin, skin that was famished to feel him.

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Face taut and expression as famished, more intense than she had ever seen it, Simon removed his shirt, his boots and trousers, and stood before her.

That long mane was unbound, rippling, and his golden musculature bathed in suffused sun from the windows. Standing at the edge of the bed, Simon looked her over, too, long, lingering, tracing every line it seemed every curve of exposed womanly flesh. Then he raised his gaze to her flushed face and murmured roughly, "Reach for me, Abby..."

Breath trembling out, she glanced from his eyes down that honed, graceful form, to the full thrust of his sex, beautifully virile, sexually carnal. Her gaze lifted. She wet her lips. "I won't."

He was on the bed, over her before she could finish and holding her face in his splayed hands, his voice still husky. "Abby. You are trembling... Wet from my kisses...you want me...you want me inside you."

Oh not fair! How was she supposed to resist this?

"And if I do? It proves nothing. Lust, remember that? We are done, Simon. Over. I was not playing games the first time. Not as you accused. I will not let you in again. I won't let you..."

He smoothed her skin with his thumbs, his hot skin between her thighs, over her. "You'll let me in." He leaned down then, and opposite the other kiss, this was soft, moist and slow, a feathering string of kisses that started at her lips went over her chin, down the side of her throat.

"Let me in, Abby." He breathed hot against the skin, and went back to her mouth, seductive, slow, and erotic in the play of his tongue, under the line of her lower lip, then each side and the corner. "Open up and give yourself to me." He laved and nipped, and rubbed his lips across hers. He kissed sweetly sensual, then smoldering and sluggish.

She tried to move her head away, but instead of deterring him, he kissed her ear, behind it, and continued down the side of her throat; biting soft, laving, and spreading more flashes of heat through her blood.

Simon moved his hands then, caressing her, skimming them everywhere, over her, while his searing mouth rained silken kisses behind, scorching breath fanning her, opening her pores to his taste and touch, summoning a higher awareness of what he was doing.

Abby's eyes burned, watered, with the struggle. And somewhere accepting the futility of fighting her feelings, she began to weaken and dissolve.

She was wrapped in a haze of knowledge, that this was Simon, Simon, who wanted her, who touched, kissed, and stroked her. The more he pulled her under his skillful spell, the more she let herself fall into the fire of it. The more she needed to. Dear God...she needed him.

His finesse, his sensual and sexual knowing, gave him all the advantage he needed. And she knew it as well as Simon did. Her feelings for him aside, he was the very essence of a lover, and nowhere did he stroke or kiss that he did not stir and awaken her own passion and desire. He made her believe, feel, that he wanted her.

Somewhere in the golden haze of being made love to for the first time in her life, in the real, fully mature reality of sex, the room faded, sound faded, and Abby watched him, the tawny lion, the consummate lover, the sensual man; kiss up her body, then reach and take her hair down, raking his fingers through it in a sexual way that was half feeling, half tugging.

Somewhere her sense of taste and touch, her lust sharpened and magnified to such a fine point, that made her feel as aggressive as he.

Abby began to touch him back, to return his kisses, to slide her legs up his, to rub her inner thighs against

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those male hips and sides, and to arch, move, and reach, to give that beautiful mouth of his the attention it deserved.

This was Simon, and nothing mattered as much as what was happening right now in the moment.

Lover's sounds, moans, sighs, the catch of breath, wafted between, floating in that intoxicated aura around them. Sultry and hot, the air breathed with them. They rolled sensually, fluidly, tangled limbs and lost seconds, moments, while hands skimmed, fingers splayed, dug in and mouths stroked over flesh.

Burning, sticky, humid, scent and taste began intensifying. Womanly cream and muscular bronzed limbs tangled, slid against and between. Arms, silken and sinewy, sliding, touching, rubbing. Abby's moist heat aching to be filled, Simon's rigid sex burning with hunger to fill it, to join the two hungry bodies into one.

At the instinctive and primitive summit neither could have defined, her hand moved his from the sweet play between her thighs. Abby did reach for him; looking up through that wavy mane of his hair to hold his gaze while his sex poised only for a second at the mouth of hers.

Completely attuned, equally having reached that too painful height of need, where their bodies could separate no longer. Simon leaned in, bathed the crown of his sex in the scalding heat of hers. Then with an unfathomable fire in his gaze, he surged forward in a resolute, focused thrust, meant to reach as deep as their bodies could fit.

Her cry of surprise was muffled, cut short by sinking her teeth into her lip. Abby shuddered and closed her eyes a second, waiting for the contractions of those newly felt muscles to ease up. It burned a bit, and she was aware that he was motionless and taut. That his breathing was heavy and strained.

Her shaky hands skimmed his back, feeling the moist heat dew of his body while he obviously waited for her to look at him again.

She lifted her lashes in a flutter, releasing her bruised lip and swallowing. He was inside of her, fully, deeply. Simon was inside of her...

His voice sounded rough, smoky, and distant "I'm sorry, love...I..."

"It's getting...better." Her tone not much more than a whisper, she slid her hands up his firm sides. "Don't stop."

~

Simon watched her face as he began to move, his endurance tested by the snug heat holding every inch of his sex captive, with those rippling squeezes he could feel milking him. He could have groaned in sheer relief when he finally read the signs that she was letting go again; the fluttered lashes, parted lips, and slight arching of her neck.

When her breath once more came scorching and sharp, her kiss-swollen lips parting and wet, he sped his cadence, thrusting with a measured rhythm that nearly stopped his heart, but feeling pleasure rushing upon him like lava lapping in waves. So intense that his head was getting lighter and lighter. *Simon was losing control, and could not hold back any longer.*

He did not recall what he said in warning, but he had muttered something, hoping like bloody hell it was apology enough for this surprising betrayal of his prowess. As the climax exploded like shafts of white heat through him, he could see nothing behind his eyes but brilliant stars. He could never remember feeling a climax that he was positive, come from the soles of his feet.

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He had the mind to roll them to their sides, as his weight went lax. Abigail, he whispered somewhere in his mind, what have you done to me?

~

Abby had waited until Simon dozed before she arose and made use of the water container in the corner. She dressed, brushed her hair, and pinned it back in a simple twist with weak hands that still suffered aftershocks. She could still feel him in her, still feel his weight surging, his sex stroking, still taste his aroused kisses.

Before leaving the room, she stood by the bed, letting her gaze roam over the man who lay partly on his side, one leg slightly bent. Though muscles were relaxed, they were no less defined under that tanned skin. A beautiful man, whose golden colors and warm tones fit the passion and erotic fires in him. Simon's grace, his movements during sex, the way he made love, had her envying every woman who had ever mated with him. Bloody rake. No wonder he had been so self-assured. There was no part of her not marked with him now, not carrying his scent or feeling him.

Her body tingled, skin heated. He was worth every moment, every forbidden thought, even the pain of the past...and yes, the current risk she had just taken. Simon was a beautiful lover. She could not be sorry for that. Fool she may be, now she knew.

Chapter 13

"I'm so glad you came by." Lady Joan handed Abby a glass of wine as they relaxed in the library of the Wythe townhouse.

"I missed you, and the children. They've grown so much." Abby smiled, hearing the muffled thump as the two were still up there playing tag in the nursery.

Joan sat in the opposite winged chair and snorted. "I can barely keep them in clothing and shoes. My son will have large feet, and likely be built like his papa. He's growing out of everything fast."

"But Anne, she will be even more petite than you."

"Um, like my mother." Joan nodded grinning. "Her name suits her. She has my mother's smile. How was your trip, then, to America?"

"Very nice. Enlightening."

They sipped their wine while Abby discussed her trip to America, and then the wedding, which Lord Roger had attended, but only the ceremony, as Joan had been fretting over her son's sudden fever. It turned out to be nothing, and he was fully recovered; obviously up to speed from the energy and charming grins he had displayed while they had visited. *He was going to be a rogue, that one.* She and Wythe were going to holiday with the Blackstones in the off-season, to sail and generally enjoy life outside the strictures of society.

The wine finished, Abby's voice fell silent. Joan gazed at her in a probing way and murmured gently, "You have become lovers, you and Simon?"

"No. I mean...well... No." Abby laughed on a sigh, shook her head, and then stood up. Strolling over to gaze out the french doors and hugging her arms, she murmured, "We have done it. I am no longer a virgin. However, it was something bound to happen, considering what we had done before. The chemistry, you know. It was there from the start."

"Abby..."

Abigail looked over her shoulder, smiling slightly. "It's all right, really. In an odd way it seems...destined, too, I suppose. Perhaps, that is what it all means anyway? If I believed in fate and destiny, and all of that. Maybe it was just that I would meet Simon, want him, and he would be the man who showed me what passion

and desire and all of that means. I am not sure what I believed before it actually happened. It was enlightening, at least.”

She glanced away, laughed strained and tucked a strand of hair back that did not stay. “I knew it would be wonderful. Nevertheless, all my flirting with it, all my so-called knowledge. Nothing in those moments really came to my mind but him. A bit like drowning in the sun...and melting. I don’t regret it.”

Lady Joan had arisen too, and came to stand slightly behind her. She put her arm around Abby, though they both looked outside. “He struck out at you in fear, misguided self preservation. I think he loves you.”

“No, I am not dreaming this time, Joan. I’m okay with what it is.”

“I’m bloody well not,” Joan muttered dryly. “This is like a game of hide and seek, and if you would both start over, talk again, I’m sure that you’ll find you’re wrong. That Simon was scared before. However, he would not. He doesn’t sleep with virgins, and for all I give him hell, he really isn’t a cad.”

“I’m sure he isn’t. However, I consented in every way. I did that before, from the time I met him. So it’s not as if it required a good amount of seduction on his part anyway.”

“Oh, Abby. He should have handled it differently, but Simon is stubborn and he is so used to what he expects from life. I know he does not deserve forgiveness for hurting you—I’m not lessening what he did. But you must know that men aren’t perfect, that they don’t communicate like we do, that even maddening fools like Simon can’t always say and do the right thing.”

“I’m very much aware of that.”

Joan waited a string of silent moments. “Are you going home, then?”

"I was intending to return with the Reids, but I sent my aunt a note." Abby shrugged. "I don't know what to do, what I'm doing now. " She patted Joan's hand and turned to look at her, smiling before collecting her things. "I feel like I am too grown to go back to my life before. I suppose I need time to decide things, to come to terms with whatever I've done, or will do."

"But you must stay here then, with us."

"No. I have taken rooms. I will be fine. I was invited to stay at Blackstones until they returned from their honeymoon, but, it is not as if I am on the marriage mart anymore, there is no virtue to protect. Frankly, I think I shall enjoy the city more with some freedom. I was never suited to that debutante role, and never really intended to try to be. I'm not a city woman, but I may as well get to see more of it."

"Don't be a stranger. We're friends, too." Lady Joan did not look at all satisfied with the end of the subject. "Aren't we?"

Abby hugged her tight. "We are. And I won't." She laughed. "Joan. I am so glad that I met you." She stepped back, and before her emotions from Simon spilled over at the wrong moment. "Kendyl feels the same. You have been a very bright spot in this foray into society and I suppose in our losing some of that country naivety. I value your friendship."

~

Simon was not in the best of moods when he exited his townhouse. He had not been in a good one since he woke up alone in that bedroom and found out that Abby had left the estate.

Now he slipped into the coach and headed to his club, wondering if she had gone back home, or was here in London? Either way, he would find her.

He was not thrilled that his seduction had been only that, and not the way he had laid it out in his head.

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Understandable, however, given that he'd never had a virgin. Not to mention the fact that Abby was...gloriously passionate. Hell, she was more than that, she was everything she alluded to from the start, and more.

Her unconventional life, so disdained by him before, was no longer a negative thing. He found her refreshing, yes, all those words he hated and used in a derogatory manner in the past. He found her blunt, honest, exciting, even exotic in a certain way. He could not bloody believe his sexual skills had suddenly flown out the window when he needed them most.

All right, so he had lost control. He just wished like hell that he had not fallen asleep like some green schoolboy. That he could not live with.

Whilst she had been gone, he had worked on his properties and saw his tenants, the villagers, and ordinary people differently. He had done that because of her. Because she was not the typical woman, the ton deb, and she did not seem to see his wealth or his title... He had seen himself more as his father had been trying to get him to for so many years, as part of them, part of the lands, and as responsible for keeping it and everyone who depended upon it together, stable. Yes, united. For the first time in awhile he had ridden and walked his lands, recalling doing so with his father and recalling his father shaking hands, stopping to talk to tenants, sharing a meal. He remembered so many times his father telling him that his name and the title was more than society would make it, that he was more.

He had laid at night, restless, wanting Abby, replaying her touches, the look in her eyes. Moreover, he had ached, not just in his loins, but had that tightness in his chest, looking around the big room, the empty bed, realizing that he was fighting himself, not ghosts, not anything real, but simply himself.

He'd run out of reasons, as Rog had pointed out, to resent her, or lump her into his cynical list. She was not the woman in his past.

Even if he had not done that mental checklist, Simon was not forgetting her. She was there. Her teasing voice, her smile, and that damned tempting and erotic first kiss. That last night...

Simon's gut cinched when he heard the echo of what he'd said to her. He had been cruel, ruthless. Though he had casual sex with women, he did not hurt them, or normally take his bitterness out on them. It had been a reflex reaction to how deep she was getting under his skin...how fast. It had been something inside that warned him to protect himself.

Even standing in Rog's house that day, he'd felt the impact of what he had done, of hurting someone like that.

Christ, he had thought, *is that what I've become? A replica of Andrea?* Yes... Because he had done to Abby what Andrea had done to him. He had chosen a vulnerable moment to strike. He was appalled at himself.

Moreover, he had told himself all these years that Andrea had no power over him, and in one moment, he had proven that a lie. He had done it for different reasons. Because he had not wanted to admit what he felt for Abby, that she could make him feel what she had when she touched him...still, the motive hardly mattered, did it? He, more than most, knew how deep something like that could shake someone.

That she had made love with him now was the only thing that gave him any hope. He had planned for it to happen, but he half expected she would hold onto the hurt, with good reason. Her giving, her passion, it made everything even more clear to him. She was honest in his arms, had been from the first. Moreover, he was a fool. He had been blind to everything before, because of a

woman, the duchess—a ghost who did not even matter, nor come to his mind anymore. He had hated her a very long time, but used her, used his mistakes, to protect himself. To avoid starting over, opening up to life. It was the fact that a woman could influence his thoughts and actions, his opinions...

Shoving a hand through his hair, Simon stared out at the blur of buildings. Abby was right, what she had said under that tree, it was himself he had not forgiven. And he needed to. He had to forgive that green lad and let the humiliation go. He felt he had done that, sealed it away the moment his body had sunk into the sweet, honest hunger of Abby's body.

He was not distant and he did not go down his sexual list. He had simply been there in the moment, lost, body, mind, soul. In some way, he'd felt that veil was his, too... Felt everything, every sense had been open, alive, for the first time, since his own first time. It was making love, and he was not too stupid to admit there was a difference.

But, damn the woman. She had taken off while he slept. And for all he found her independence and openness an asset now, it put an abrupt end to the second part of his plan.

Chapter 14

"You're a damned hard woman to find."

"Am I?" Abby arched her brow at Simon who stood over her in the park, glowering almost, as he held the reins of his horse.

It had been two weeks since she had seen him, yet all the emotions came rushing to the surface. Feelings she tried to mask.

"Were you looking for me, then? I was right here in London."

His jaw flexed as he muttered, "I went to Essex. Spent an abominable three days trying to get answers from your aunt, whom, I might add, is dafter than I first thought."

Abby could not help but laugh. "What did she do? Have you digging up bones for her?"

"Hell, no." He turned and saw to the mount, then sat down on her blanket beside her. "I woke up in the middle of the night, stayed, mind you, because my horse mysteriously ran off, and I had spent hours afoot catching it." He ignored her snort and went on. "She was standing over me, hair sticking out like a wiry bush, and waving this gourd looking thing..."

Abby was nearly falling back, howling with laughter.

However, Simon was not through. "It rattled while she waved some kind of incense that stank like tree rot."

"Oh, God." Abby was chuckling, holding her stomach. "I can imagine."

"I sprang up out of bed, convinced I was having those delusions I'd had sweating years of drinking out of me. Nude, mind you, Abby, because it's damned hot and stuffy in that house."

"Oh, no..."

"She stopped waving and stared right at my...well, the..." He muttered again and shoved his hand through his hair. "She got a good look, and finally raises those owl like eyes and starts rattling about my orb. And spirit guides and... It bloody well wasn't that funny."

Too late, Abby was laying all the way down, drawing eyes of people in the park with her full out laughter. It was some time before she wiped them, sniffed and murmured, "And what was her prediction?"

"Gold. A golden orb, and spirit guide named Oscar."

After another round of laughter, Abby sat up, looking at him, wiping her eyes.

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He at last had a half grin on his face, even if his eyes were still showing how affronted he had been.

"I never said she wasn't daft."

"Yes, well. She didn't tell me where you were until I'd assured her our orbs would be joined."

Abby snorted. "That's been done already."

"That I was going to marry you."

She stilled, her smile completely gone. "No, Simon." She shook her head though her stomach was tense.

He looked over her mussed hair and neat walking suit, the lace blouse with jabot. Finally, to her face. "If you had hung about long enough at Blackstones, I would have asked then. I had every intention of it, Abby, before I took you to bed."

"My virginity did not come with a price," she all but snapped. "However you misjudged me, you should know that much, Simon. I may have said differently, but it was bound to happen either way. It would have, right away, had I not carried some foolish illusions in my head. You do not owe me anything. I do not regret it."

"I'm glad of that, at least," he murmured and searched her face. "You once said that you loved me."

"I *did* fall in love with you." Abby emphasized *did*, and returned his look. "I was sick with it, actually. It was not roses, sunshine, and floating on clouds. It was tense and difficult. And I used up many wasted hours longing and dreaming. I didn't much like it, particularly near the end..."

Abby looked away. "It hurt as much as you meant it to, Simon." She drew in a breath on a shudder. "I know my faults, how stubborn I can be. I was determined to be the one to shatter your cynical ideas about women. I wasn't in love with you then—and I had no idea, silly me, how a few words, at just the right moment, can rip your illusions away at once."

"I did. I knew...and know."

"I suppose you do."

"I was deliberately trying to hurt you, Abby." His tone was soft. "Because I didn't want to admit I felt anything for you beyond the physical."

She stared at him, wishing he were not so compelling, so attractive, so bloody sensual. "You don't. If anything, it is guilt or something equally stupid, and useless. I do not want to hear the words now, Simon. I really don't."

He stared at her set face, the clearness of her lime eyes. "I offered myself up to you, too, you know. In that bedroom. It was the first honest experience I'd had since my first time. It's not the way I play at seduction, Abigail, it was just me and you."

Shaken in spite of her still sore heart, Abby felt her throat lock. "I'm glad of that. And...you made it perfect for me. As perfect as a first time can be. I thought that I knew, imagined what it would be like. However, one is so distant, ignorant when one does that. You cannot know, until you are in it, feeling it. That is why I don't regret it."

Their gazes held while the shade trees dappled sunlight over them and sounds drifted to the background. The chemistry never broken, it had not died or lessened. In fact, with that memory between them, it was stronger than ever.

Simon had a set expression of his own showing. "I'm not going back to what I had before, Abigail. As you said when we met, I have found what I want."

A shiver went down her spine at that seductive confession. After some time she told him, "All right, Simon. I will be your lover. But I won't marry you."

His nostrils flared. He looked as if he wanted to curse, but asked, contained, "Why?"

She swallowed, looking away to break the tension. "Because I don't trust you not to hurt me. Your anger,

your pride, whatever it is. You are a jaded rakehell. Yes, harsh when you mean to be. You picked a completely vulnerable moment to show me just how harsh.”

“Abby, my God...” He reached out, grabbing her chin, forcing her to turn and look at him. “I lashed out, yes. However, I have told you why. I have admitted it. I know it does not excuse it, or make it less. But you are not a coward. You are more than a match for anything I do in stupidity...”

He searched her face again. “What is this? Tell me, Abby... This is not the woman who challenged me at the start of the season.”

“No. I am not her. Thank God.” She tried to smile, but could not. She’d given him every drop of her love that night, poured it out in kisses, in doing such an intimate thing for his pleasure, she had completely let down her guard and inhibitions. That scared her now, because she did not trust her own judgment.

After staring at her a while longer, his expression changed, seemed to become controlled. He murmured, “Very well. I will take what you have decided we can have.” Then his thumb brushed her lip. He murmured roughly, “Just remember...” His eyes held a deeper emotion than his face. “As lovers...exclusively...I’ll confess to having an insatiable and varied appetite.”

Abby closed her eyes for a moment. Christ, what did he expect? Her emotions were in turmoil. Of course she loved him, wanted him. She wanted him right now. Right on the grass in a public park. However, before she could gather herself, Simon leaned in, kissed her just lightly, and then stood.

“I’ll collect you tonight.”

Abby lifted her lashes, watched him mount up before shooting her a glance with a half smile and a wink that could mean anything.

Well bloody hell. Hadn't she just handled that fine though? She had never planned on being his mistress.

~

Abby had dressed in a beautiful cream gown and matching cape, when Simon collected her. Her hair back in a twist, she was glad that she had dressed formally, and surprised, when the coach stopped at the Earl of Wythe's townhouse. They were apparently having supper there.

After a greeting and a quick visit with the children, Abby tried to ignore Joan's raised brow grin. She sipped her wine while they waited for dinner. Conversation was varied and light, and once at that dining table, she sat back, watching Simon's more teasing and relaxed attitude with Joan, and his obvious close friendship with Lord Roger. Gone was the cynic, and there was a charming and very witty man keeping them laughing with dry comments and droll stories. Mentally she shook her head, wondering that he could be so many different men to so many people.

Though she participated, talking about her recent travels, Abby could hardly keep her eyes off Simon's handsome face and smiling mouth. He had a warm and affectionate way of calling Joan 'Cuz', and saying m'father, in reference to the past earl that showed his obvious love for the man. This side of him, she deduced, was the person he had been before that woman had crushed his young pride and made him afraid to trust. It showed her just how much he actually did hide from the ton, and how much he trusted his cousin and friend. It also caused another internal war as she had worked so long and hard at forgetting any good qualities in him.

After dinner, the gentlemen had brandy and cigars, the women coffee in the salon. Though Joan made more small talk, Abby could tell she was itching to know what the blazes was going on. She only wished she knew

herself, since she had expected Simon to take her somewhere with a bed.

When the men joined them, Abby had observed Lord Roger and his wife in so intimate a setting and it occurred to her that though different, he and Simon were both of that illusive rakehell set. Lord Roger was the more intimidating in a dark way... But not here. Like Simon, he was completely relaxed.

He sat on the arm of Joan's chair, talking to Simon, but absently touching his wife's hair, rubbing her arm. And Lady Joan? She touched him too, on the thigh. The hand. And for all it seemed a normal after dinner setting, they were obviously connecting on an intimate level, very much aware of each other.

Likely before her intimacy with Simon, Abby would have never noticed such passionate chemistry and subtle by play between lovers. It was a palpable thing between the earl and countess. As much as it was between herself and Simon when their gazes clashed.

In a distracted muse when they left, Abby hugged Joan and grinned crookedly at Lord Roger's wink, for he seemed to be in a hurry to get his wife alone and was already pulling her back from the doorway.

Abby found herself staring out at the dark night once they were in the coach and headed to the hotel, then looking at Simon by turns. He appeared relaxed, collar in his pocket, neck cloth undone, and that mane down and hand ruffled.

His strong legs were slightly splayed across from her. Though she knew he, too, was eyeing her closely in the muted light. She wondered why instead of taking her somewhere for a tryst, he had taken her for an ordinary evening with Lady Joan and her husband? It was not a thing a man did with his mistress, and eventually everyone would know she was.

Simon murmured, "Would you like to attend one of the balls in progress?"

"No." She had accepted the role of lover, and it was better if he realized it, too.

He made a sound, but said nothing more, until they were at the hotel, and he had walked her to her room.

Aware of the deal she had made, weakened by her own yearning, Abby unlocked the door and let him into the rooms.

Discarding her long formal coat and gloves, she tossed them aside. Since there was only a sitting room and bedchamber, she paused at the doorway of the latter, standing there with her hand on the facing, and her eyes going over him where he'd stepped in, closed the door, leaned back against it casually.

His watchful gaze and apparent calm expression did not hide all of the chemistry he was apparently feeling too, though not revealing his every thought, either.

"I'll just change," she murmured, sensing the thick tension coil by the second, awkward, yet the heat of his gaze, putting chills on her sensitized skin.

"I'll be here," he murmured and smiled slowly.

~

Teeth set tightly, to try and separate her hungry body from her starving yet scared heart, Abby undressed to the skin, and then pulled on a white silk wrapper, brushing her hair and looking in the lamp lit mirror trying to calm herself.

At least enough to stop trembling.

She was feeling horribly torn between tears, need, wanting to be held and kissed and touched by him, and yes, that desire to be with him always as the wife he had offered. Still not trusting herself anymore to make a rational decision...because of the blasted attraction and the simple fact that she was vulnerable when it came to him.

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Her mama, she recalled, was such a woman, weak, not steady, not faithful, and neither was her father. Perhaps she had lied to herself all these years and she was not so different? Maybe neither she nor Simon were steady enough for a relationship outside the physical. Maybe passion was something they would share that would burn high, then eventually burn itself out.

People had affairs, sexual affairs, all classes did it.

A small sound brought Abby back to earth. Simon stood at the doorway in his shirtsleeves, boots and trousers, that sable hair glowing from the brighter backlight of the sitting area with the fireplace.

She set the brush down and turned. Her husky tone revealing her emotional state. "Come in."

He did, walking toward her before she could move, staring down at her in a long and silent manner, before... "Do you want me, Abby?"

She wet her lips and nodded. "Yes." ...yes!

Simon's hand came up; his long fingers rested at the side of her face, and thumb brushing across her lips. "For how long, do you want me? A night, a year... forever?"

"Simon, don't." She tried to turn her face away.

However, he held her steady, his eyes probing hers. "I can feel that tremble in you. Such hunger, Abby. Such passion and fire...it burns in your eyes, through your skin..."

He was going to kill her with those words, that husky tone. She whispered, "I didn't lie about that. I'm practically unclothed, and not hiding anything from you." She never had, really, even when she told herself differently.

His gaze scanned her face before returning to capture hers again. "Hiding nothing...but your heart?"

He began leaning toward her, lower and further, until his warm mouth was on hers. The kiss, so easy,

soft, and supple, moved into pressing, and then a series of circles, erotic, too scorching, until he at last opened and sought, gained entry to her inner mouth.

After a slide of tongues and more erotic play inside, Simon pulled back enough to mutter against her lips, "I can taste it...taste the want...the desire...the passion in you."

"Simon..." Her arms around him, Abby was melting and trembling and wanting him with an ache so deep, she did not know or care if it was skin, heart, or mind.

He moved his hand from her face before he embraced her low on the hips, sliding his palms against the silk, while he planted soft kisses over her brow and nose, down her jaw and just at her ear. "Take me then. Take me, Abby."

Shuddering from that rough husk, that plea of passion, she closed her eyes, and with trembling fingers had the shirt undone and out of his trousers. He allowed her to strip it off, but his mouth was busy again at her neck and upper chest.

When Abby ran her hands over him, he seemed to forget that request. A rough masculine sound came from him before he lifted her, carried her, to the bed, and pulled the belt on the robe, discarding it in a flash.

Simon came down, half over her, already breathlessly kissing her, explicit enough to have her bucking under him. Feeling that war with wanting, and getting enough taste and feel, and fire.

However, somewhere in the burst of passion swiftly taking over them both, removing his trousers, Simon shuddered, and then regained his composure, simply holding her against him, skin to skin, while their hearts beat wildly, and their breathing filled the chamber sounding as if they had both ran for miles.

After a while, Simon slid down enough to suckle her breasts, to lave and suck with a slowness that began to

twist that fervor in her into a merciless need. His lips were smooth, his tongue magic, and he raked his teeth over the tip, before he would soothe them, doing it repeatedly, pulling fire from her bones.

Hands in his hair, Abby became consumed by the flashes of pleasure coming from his kisses on her breasts, they chased through in an unbroken chain. His lips closed over them, fastening tight and his hands were holding each globe, fingers flexing, milking. Everything he did, every way he did it relayed his pleasure and his intent to give her the same.

Her teeth clamped to try hold back sobs. They escaped anyway.

Simon moved down, over her ribs and stomach, her hips, keeping that slow yet erotic teasing and touch coming.

Everything dissolved but Simon and the pleasure he gave her. Once more, the world did not exist outside of him. When he parted her legs and spread her for his tongue, her cry was cut off on a deep moan.

"I thought...I was taking you," she barely found the breath to say.

He said against her skin, "You are. You will," and burying his mouth against her once more, he used his tongue and lips to draw her hunger to its peak, and he suckled then too—hard and firm, drinking her as her body bowed and trembled, moving his head in erotic ways that drove her farther over the edge, until the moments strung and coiled and exploded in a silken climax.

Abby eventually opened her eyes as the liquid waves were stilling to a ripple, when he covered her again, feeling his too warm skin and strength between her trembling legs. She began sliding her palms up his strong back. He kissed her with damp, swollen lips that had pleased her so fully.

Her knees rose, slid higher, until his sex was against that still sensitive place.

She wanted him in that still contracting part of her. She wanted him deep and close. Abby wanted him so close that nothing else would matter. She wanted them forged and joined and touching deep.

Simon raised his torso. He sank unhurried into her, his lashes dipping, his white teeth clamped tighter, until he was fully embedded. And his voice was as rough as he managed, "And so...you have taken me, Abby."

She wanted to weep, and to love him so passionately that their bodies would fuse forever into one. Feeling the solid fullness of him from being joined, and shaken by that look in his scorching eyes, she wanted them to both burn, forge through skin and muscle and bone into one, so that she could never not feel him.

She whispered, afraid of her intense emotions, "Don't talk, not now." She was simply too overwhelmed.

He began to move steady and intense, stealing her breath and her words. He slid out leisurely, sinking back in fast. Her body arched to meet each thrust, and friction and pleasure merged, each plunge stirring that blaze inside until she cried out and tried to get more and more of him.

He husked, "You still love me, Abby." and fit his hands under hips, speeding his pace, firming his thrusts harder and unrelenting. "You still do...I feel it."

To Abby, it was beyond pleasure, somewhere skin, bone, and soul and heart, feeling it all. And nothing on earth compared to it. His touch, his scent, and the way he stroked her inside. It was Simon, and it was that lust-love, need and hunger.

Her cries were given freedom, because Abby had no control, she wanted none; she wanted only to feel and absorb him into every part of her flesh and heart.

A Taste of Temptation

It went on and on, over and over, and more intense with each moment until time lost significance.

His muscles tight with restraint, his body dewed, Simon slowed and rolled them to their sides, adjusting so that her legs were across his, yet he was still inside her.

Clearly catching his breath, reaching to push damp strands from his face, then hers, before he spoke softly. "I'm not going anywhere tonight, Abby. Not more than inches from your body..."

She eyed his unwavering visage, her heart aching even as her body thrilled to that promise.

"Stubborn woman." He half smiled, though his words sounded strained. "You're going to marry me eventually, so you may as well do it sooner."

"Yes. I am—stubborn." She confessed meeting his gaze. "I am likely a fool. And, yes, selfish. However, what you feel for me. It likely won't last."

He said then, perfectly clear and serious. "I love you, Abigail."

She felt her eyes sting, her nose burn. "Don't say that, Simon..."

"I love you." He reached out, fisting a handful of her hair and staring deeply. "It's not that foolish kind of youthful love, Abby. Not a blind sort of infatuation. It is real and it is strong, and it is lasting. You know me well enough to know that I wouldn't say it, unless I meant it."

Tears rolled out the corners of her eyes. "Damn you, Simon."

He moved then, keeping her on her side, sliding her leg higher for access. He was over her, inside her, he moved slow while whispering, "I said many things before I met you, after too. I said once, that I would not be tamed... However, this love isn't that, is it, sweet? It's not tame at all, but hot and burning and wild."

“No—yes...” she grunted, absorbing his thrusts that felt completely different in that position, and tasting the salt of tears on her lips.

“You can’t resist it. Neither can I, we are falling, even now, Abby. We are burning up. Stoking even hotter fires.”

“Simon.” Abby reached and stayed him, then turned so that she was under him, her legs at his sides. She cupped his face.

Having held himself still a moment. He slowly took her hands down, held them pinned above her head by a hold on her wrists. “Do you know what I think, Abby?”

“Simon...”

His smile was dark, “I think you want to hurt me, to punish me...”

She moaned. “I don’t, how can you think that wh...”

“Shhhh.” He lowered so that his face was close to hers, weight on his forearms though still holding her captive. “I had years to be angry and hurt. You are angry I hurt you. Angry at yourself for showing me what you felt.”

Abby swallowed. “So you’re trying to strip me emotionally now, too? Dammit, Simon!”

“No. I am trying to break through your pride, Abigail. I’m going to get behind that wall, so that you can stop feeling like you have to lie to me.”

He raised up, swiftly turned her so that she was on her stomach. Laying over her, he nudged her legs apart, surged deep and growled softly, “Come on, Abby...fight me...” He held her wrists as he thrust in deep time and again. He bit soft at her nape, “Give it to me, Abby. All the anger and hurt...all the pride and passion.”

Fire racing up her spine, Abby cried out and at first simply absorbed the sensation of his entry. However, as each stroke built she pushed back against him, taking him back, more than meeting him, his words, his tone

bringing everything in her to the surface, indeed all of those feelings and more.

“More, darling...give the pain back to me,” he growled softly, “let it go, my little tigress.”

Abby panted, cried as her smaller frame surged against his strength. She did not know the moment he freed her hands, but she was on her knees, and he was slamming hard into her. Dewed from the inner burn, the emotional battle, she cried out when he reached around, stroking, touching, bringing her to a climax and not stopping his thrusts. Whispering hot in her ear. For every rough sound of anger she uttered, he increased her pleasure and whispered praise, regret, and explicitly honest emotions...he took it apart, everything between them, brick by emotional brick.

“Simon...Simon...you broke my heart.”

It was primal, something Abby would never dream she would do or feel. Nevertheless, Simon was older, stronger, a male animal who somehow knew instinct much better than she herself did. It was there, that anger and hurt, and in that need to take him, too—to somehow mark him for life, to give the hurt back. And she unleashed it, both physically and verbally, somehow sobbing out everything she had felt from loving him to hating him, to loving him again.

“Abigail.” He seemed to love her harder, wilder, to replace each crumbling defense with his own strength.

Not until her muscles trembled and she was crying openly did he decelerate and lay over her, holding his weight but blanketing her so that the dew mingled skin to skin, their breathing labored and hot, echoing off the walls.

He brushed her hair back from her wet and flushed cheek. Kissing her, he murmured in her ear, “I’m so sorry. Abby.”

"I know." She sniffed deeply and smiled in a way that showed how weak she was.

He kissed her again, just a brush of lips. "I don't think it will be all flowers and sunshine for us, my love. We set off too many sparks in each other. We're two bloody stubborn people with far too much pride and not enough trust."

She laughed, weak, helpless, and closed her eyes. "You are right."

He began to move again...deliberate and measured, and reached his peak with a shudder and warm growl against her hair. "I trust you, love. You know, deep in your heart, that you can now trust me."

Abigail shuddered and sighed. "I know you can overwhelm me, Simon. In different ways, but yes... You have broken down the walls."

He eased out of her body but only rose to brush her hair back from her damp and flushed face. "Though it appeared differently, you have been behind my defenses for a very long time too. I am also exposed, right now, stripped bare, but not fighting it anymore."

~

After they had washed themselves, Abby sat against the headboard watching him pour coffee that he had fetched and then light a cheroot. When he had handed her a cup, Simon sat opposite, at the foot of the bed, an ashtray beside him, and sipped from his own brew.

"Your aunt told me about your parents."

She arched her brow, watching him tuck his hair behind his ears and rebalance the cup on a saucer. "I told you about them."

His gaze flickered to her. "Not really. Not how you felt about them."

She shrugged. "I told you what mattered. They were shallow, selfish, and neither one of them faithful."

“You were right. M’father loved my mother.” He said thoughtfully. “He didn’t take a mistress after she died.” Simon shrugged. “I suppose that his feelings for her gave me some rosy ideas about sex and love that kept me a bit blind. Putting women on some sort of pedestal, at least until I had done the worst. Made that mistake that matured me.”

“Was she very beautiful?”

Simon obviously thought on it, “I don’t think she was. I believe her charisma lay in her carnal lure, in that ability she had to make a young man believe it was more than the sex. I was ripe, in any event, being at that age where lust rules a young man, and having enough chivalry bred in me to skew it all.”

“You’ve obviously had enough women since, to have defined it better for you.”

“Mmmm.” His brow rose, his smile dry. “I certainly know what sex is.”

With a snort of disgust, she took a sip from her cup and rolled her eyes.

“Abigail?” He nudged her leg.

She leaned and set the cup on the side table before looking at him.

“I know what love is, too.”

Abby held that gaze for a long, silent moment. She wet her lips, and then told him quietly, “It wouldn’t matter where I met you, Simon. Or who you were. I realized that when I was gone from England. Perhaps I, too, needed to mature. To know how to have a relationship on a mature level. However, I am not confused about my feelings. I don’t have any illusions about who you are or the way you were.”

“You love me, Abby.” He put the cup and the cheroot and tray beside hers on the stand, and rolled so that he was on his back, his head near her shoulder. He had donned only his trousers and bent his knees,

glancing away as he rested his hands on his taut stomach. "You have to love me back."

When he glanced up at her, again he said softly, "I'm waiting..."

Abby swallowed the lump in her throat. "Yes. I love you."

He smiled, a slow one that shone in his eyes. Then he rolled over and scooped her half under him, so that he was peering downward at her, "A big wedding?"

"No."

"At your aunt's?"

"No."

His brow rose. "A quick one?"

"Ummm." She finally smiled back.

He leaned down, kissed her, and then murmured. "We'll do it at Collingworth. In the chapel. As soon as we can leave and pack."

"I'll write to Aunt."

"You don't have to. I think she knows."

"Likely she does."

Simon lifted his head. He cupped her face, serious now as his fingers splayed and his eyes held hers. "You don't care about the bloody ton, my titles..."

"No. Other than Lady Joan and her family. Kendyl of course...I don't."

He grinned and kissed her again then rolled away from her.

"Where are you going?" She raised on her elbow, watching him don his shirt, hop around putting on his boots.

"To get a special license. Talk to Joan. Alert my staff, put a notice in the *Times*, and..." He stopped talking when her robe slid apart, revealing her thigh and one pert breast. Simon dropped the boot and slowly pulled off the other. He started toward the bed.

"You're shirt is buttoned wrong anyway." She muttered as he came down atop her.

He slid her robe off, yanked the shirt back off and told her to help him with his trousers. Not until he was deep inside of her warmth did he say, "Let's do this honeymoon thing first..."

"Let's." She arched and took him in deep.

Simon held her still and tight, his forehead near hers. "I'm making love to you, Abigail."

Her heart melted and she shifted so she could see his face. "I know, Simon." Her thumbs brushed his lips.

He bit one then grinned at her. "Of course you do. Your whole body, your eyes, they refuse anything less."

"Oh, Simon." She buried her hands in his hair, this time holding him close.

"Abigail..." He proceeded to make achingly sweet love to her.

Chapter 15

"I'm not surprised," Lady Joan told her husband as they sat in back a garden watching their children romp.

"I don't think anyone is, except those few who thought to snare Simon's title for their own daughters."

Joan snorted. "There isn't another Abigail Forsythe out there, or he would have fallen in love much sooner."

Roger propped his booted feet on a plaster planter. "Simon, in love, is an amusing sight."

Joan chuckled. They were both recalling the trip to Collingswood to see the newlyweds, and both having observed Simon's almost absent minded state whenever he looked at his wife of two months. It seemed that the longer he was wed to Abby, the more he came to know her, and the deeper he fell.

Of course, Abby could do all of those wonderfully unlady like things like riding as well as Simon, shooting

almost as good, and—yes, beating him at billiards. She also swam nude with him in the lake, traipsed about in trousers, and apparently, from what she had told Joan, quite liked to make love with him anytime, anywhere he wished.

“I wonder if Simon will ever get used to her aunt though,” Roger went on.

“I doubt it. Flora wishes to maintain her life and household, however. I think he feared from her one visit, that she would start digging up the estate after the servants relayed some of the local lore and legends. She’s an eccentric woman, but there is some intelligence, near brilliance actually lurking in that wiry head.”

“Umm.” Her husband said before calling out to scold his son for not helping his little sister, who was trying and failing to get her ball from under a hedge.

Soon both parents were out on the grass, Roger with his daughter on his broad shoulders, running with her whilst she giggled delightfully as Joan and their son chased them round the fountains.

Collingworth

“I’m going to have a baby.” Abby, still dripping wet from their swim, lay down on the blanket beside Simon.

Hair slicked back, he sat up, completely forgetting the brandy balanced on his stomach until it fell to the side. “You’re going to have a baby!”

Abby laughed, sat up and grabbed a cloth to dab at his nude thigh.

“Forget that.” He grabbed her hands, and stared into her eyes. “You’re going to have my child, Abigail.”

“Yes.” She grinned softly.

He pulled her to him, tightly held her close. “When?”

“Six months.”

He jerked back. “Six months. Good God, woman. Are you as daft as Flora Toft! You have been riding and swimming and we have...bloody hell, Abby! We made love five times last night.”

“Yes.” She laughed. “Calm down, Simon. I am perfectly fine. Your baby is fine. And we can make love as often as we wish...”

He looked doubtful but stared at her before suddenly saying, “I’m not going through with a son what I put my father through, and bloody sure ain’t having m’d daughter preyed upon by fortune hunters and...”

“Rakehells?” Abby chuckled and freed herself, standing up to dress.

Muttering, he dressed too and they collected the decanter and put it in the basket with the blanket, hand in hand walking toward the estate house.

Simon finally sighed. “I suppose we’ll have to do the social thing. At least as much as Rog and Joan do.”

“Yes.”

He pulled her close, putting his free arm around her as they walked. “Let’s wait to tell Flora, shall we? I don’t think a nursery filled with her sort of gifts would make a very soothing sight for an infant.”

“Recalling your wedding gift, were you?” Abby teased and squeezed his side.

“I bloody never forget it.” He grunted. “It’s not every man who receives a plaster replica of his manhood as a marriage gift.”

“It’s a fertility token. Apparently worked, too.”

He snorted and dropped the basket, turning her to face him. “Are you sure that’s what did it?”

“Terrible man.” She smirked at that wicked glint in his eye.

His smile got wider. “I’m not the one who insisted on making a more detailed model.”

She slid her arms around him. "I still haven't got it exactly right. I think it was the oil I put on it first, that kept distracting me from shaping the plaster."

Simon groaned and left the basket sitting as he picked her up and headed for the lake again. "It's going to rain soon."

She bit his neck. "Do I look like I care?"

Simon laughed, walking faster, until they fell on the sweet grass by the lake. When the sprinkles did start, they were oblivious, kissing, loving, and reaching with their bodies for the fire to warm them.

Just as the thunder rumbled, Abby felt that inner explosion match it for power. She looked up at Simon whose shudders were fading too. This was it. That feeling she'd longed for racing out to meet the storm. This was the power of love and passion, and each time they shared it, it awed her anew that she had found the man who moved both the heavens and the earth when he touched her.

"I love you, Simon," she whispered on the rain-scented wind.

"I love you, Abigail." He smiled, his eyes clear, calm, the window of his soul completely open.

He was thinking, of those words, "*I would see you, every shade and hue and hollow and I would feel you, taste you, and know your scent. That is why I know the difference. However, I want more than just that. I want to know you, to hear the sound of your laughter, real laughter, see the guarded things of your heart.*"

And of course, that is exactly what she did. At last, he understood what his father had felt; there would never be anything in his life that compared to Abby and waking up with her, sharing his day, watching her, listening, talking, exploring, playing and loving with her.

Simon could compare nothing in his past with the wonder of his present, the way he viewed their future;

A Taste of Temptation

there would never be enough hours, days, years, to give back to her the love she brought to him every second of every day.

The End

About the Author:

Gayle Eden and Eve Asbury are the pen names for Dian Addair, an author whose dreams of writing were put on hold in her twenties while she raised a son and daughter and worked several jobs. Romance novels kept her sane during those busy years during which she moved from the mountains of West Virginia to a suburb of Washington DC where she lived for fifteen years. Finally, she settled in East Tennessee (USA) on three acres surrounded by the North Holston river, where she now writes to her heart's content.

Already a grandmother at 45, she calls her life controlled chaos, but it's actually quite normal for a woman who was born 9th in line and was an aunt by the age of five. She sets aside Saturdays for family, cooking and romping with the granddaughters. The rest of the week, when not stealing an hour with her busy husband, she spends at the computer immersing herself in another good plot.

She's an author who believes very strongly in writing stories that speak from the heart. She tries not to limit her characters by outline, but starts with a vague idea that generally they will run away with—and sometimes give her fits by defying her attempts to keep them in check. It's not unheard of for her to sit down at the computer and realize ten hours later she's written 200 pages—prolific, yes! She's found it's better to indulge her muse than try to control it. Just like real life, the stories happen, and there's always something new and surprising that makes the experience rewarding.

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Other works by Gayle Eden:

Whispers in the Dark

The Earl of Wythe is a notorious rake who has every intention of getting Lady Joan Lecrox into his bed.

Joan is only doing the London scene to please her uncle. Having played the fool once in her life, she knows what Roger wants from her and she's determined to refuse. Roger is nothing if not persistent in his campaign to break down Lady Joan's resistance. Catching her alone in the darkness, he entices her with whispers that promise to introduce her to sensuality and passion. Joan finds herself swept away, quickly giving in to temptation and embarking on a journey of self-discovery.

What started as a game rapidly turns into a full-blown affair, and once the season ends neither can get the other out of their head and heart. Will they have the courage to end the game and embrace what could be the chance of a life-time?

Whispers in the Dark is an incredibly sensual story, rich in both imagery and eroticism. It's a story of discovery, about living out a fantasy and then finding love along the way. This romantic tale of Gayle Eden's is guaranteed to be one you'll remember!

Rock my World

Raelyn Kendell, a washed-up singer, is summoned home when her brother is injured in a bull riding accident. Raelyn is tough as nails on the outside and has had to face more than her share of sorrow and failure. She knows she'll have to face her father, who's predictions of her failure have come true. What she doesn't know is that she's going to come face-to-face with Hud McKabe.

The attraction between Raelyn and Hud is immediate and fiery. They want one another. They can't

stand one another. Sparks turn to passion and then somewhere along the way, as Raelyn works through the splintered relationships of her past and Hud breathes life back into her dreams, passion becomes love.

This fabulous story by Gayle Eden is about finding your way home, finding yourself, and finding that guy—the one you were meant to be with forever. All he has to do is look and you know... He's gonna *Rock My World*.

The Fox

The Industrial Revolution is underway and England has never been so modern or progressive. Blaire Mitchell, a good woman in a desperate situation, is faced with an age-old dilemma. With no skills, no money, and no power she's the only one left who can save her family farm and her brother. In order to succeed she must clear the enormous debts left behind by her parents. Determined to do whatever it takes and to make any sacrifice, Blaire strikes a deal that will change her life forever.

Gabriel Wynters is the notorious Fox, a gambling hall owner who is as ruthless as he is clever. Gabriel strikes a deal with the lovely and innocent Blaire, her virtue and one night in his bed in exchange for the money she so badly needs. But Blaire offers more than her body. With her, he experiences a closeness and intimacy unlike ever before. Although he thought one taste would be enough for him, Blaire gets under his skin and manages to tug on his heart.

The Fox is a story about a love that is boundless, a love that is consuming. Gabriel and Blaire start out as partners and lovers in a unique arrangement. But they soon grow to realize that what they truly desire is to belong to one another utterly, completely, and in every way.

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