

An Erotique Novella

Undeniable

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By Jess Michaels

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Chapter One

1898

Cecilia Warden had been without a man's touch for too long. That was why the stranger standing on her terrace, apparently oblivious to the frigid night and anything else, seemed to have been cut from her most erotic dreams.

She should have been afraid. After all, he hadn't been invited to her home. He shouldn't have even been out in the light snow that promised to turn into a blizzard at any moment. He could be any kind of villain. A thief. A murderer. A rapist.

A part of her *was* afraid, but not for any of those very good reasons. Instead, it was her body's reaction that fed her terror. Her very blood ached as she watched him look over her gardens far below. Beneath her thin night rail, her nipples puckered and her breasts grew hot and heavy with need. The heat spread lower, through her quivering belly and finally settling between her thighs.

This man hadn't even looked at her yet, let alone touched her, but the broad expanse of his shoulders and the way his large hands flexed on the stone barrier made her sex grow wet with want. Her clit tingled as cold air stirred around her legs. Instinctively she knew with just one touch he could make her shatter with powerful pleasure.

Never before had a stranger given her such a strong and immediate reaction, yet she couldn't look away. Couldn't make herself call out to him and demand an explanation for his appearance in her home. All she could do was stare.

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When her hand stole up to stroke one pebble-hard nipple, he finally stirred, almost as if in response, though his back was turned. As she watched in shock, he braced his arms on her terrace wall and hoisted himself up on the slippery stone surface. While he struggled to gain equilibrium, he looked up into the snowy sky.

"Alana!" he howled into the darkness.

Cecilia momentarily forgot her own scandalous wants at the harsh sound of his broken cry. Spurred into action, she stepped forward. Her slippered feet crunched in the snow that soaked through the fabric, but she hardly felt the cold. "Sir?"

He staggered around to face her. Cecilia gasped once as he nearly fell to his death, then a second time when she looked up into his face.

She'd been right. This man *had* been taken from her darkest and most sensual dreams. From his dark hair, which was just a touch too long for modern sensibilities, to his sparkling green eyes, to his cut, harsh jaw line, he was perfection.

He was also very obviously drunk and didn't care if he hurt himself. In fact, when she stared into the depths of his eyes, she realized he wanted that very thing. He was standing on her terrace wall because he intended to throw himself to a crushing death far below.

His stare searched her face, then deeply into her eyes until she feared he could actually see her soul. And the desires that still flared despite his out-of-control nature. Or perhaps because of it.

"Please, sir, don't be alarmed," she said in a quiet, soothing voice as she stepped just an inch closer to him. "I only want to help you."

His harsh bark of laughter cut through her like a knife, for

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it was laced with pain, not humor.

"Help me?" he slurred. "You can't help me, no one can help me. Dead. She's dead. And I should be dead, as well."

"No!" Cecilia cried out as she took another step closer. "Wait. Tell me your name."

The man's shoulders slumped in defeat. "What does it matter?"

"It matters," she whispered even as she edged all the closer. She could almost touch him now. "It matters to me. Please, tell me your name."

"Julian Blake, my lady," he murmured.

She drew back with a gasp. Julian Blake, the Duke of Lyndon. Even in the country, his name was known. A former rake who had met and fallen deeply in love with a lady well below his rank. But he had only been married to his new bride for a few months when she'd died of a sudden illness. He had vanished from society, turning away even his best friends. Now, six months after his wife's untimely death, the gossip was that the Duke had gone mad with grief. His cousins were fighting a public battle to have him declared unfit and stripped of his title and holdings.

Cecilia forced herself to move closer so she could examine his handsome face again, but this time she looked beyond the chiseled perfection. Into his eyes. As deep as she could go before he turned away from her scrutiny.

No, this man wasn't mad. He was merely drunk and devastated. Her heart lurched at his hollow eyes and sunken cheeks. How long had it been since he'd slept? Or had a decent meal?

"Please, Your Grace," she whispered as she offered him a trembling hand. "Please, come down."

"No." He shook his head once and by the way he set his

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jaw, she knew he wasn't used to being told what to do. "Leave me be. Just let me do what I've come here to do."

He began to turn toward her garden again in preparation to leap. Without taking the consequences of her actions into account, Cecilia grabbed for his hand and clutched it as tightly as she could in both her fists.

"Your Grace—"

He growled in response as green eyes snapped emerald fire in her direction. "Not Your Grace. I have no grace. I have nothing left at all."

"That isn't true, Your Gr—Julian." She pulled back with all her might and prayed he wouldn't take them both over the precipice. "You have your life, and as long as there is that, there is hope."

"Hope?" He laughed that bitter, empty laugh which cut through her chilled skin to her very heart. "There is no hope. No love. No laughter. Nothing without...without..."

He trailed off as Cecilia became acutely aware that he was staring at her. His gaze, which had been so empty, suddenly burned with emotion and what was clearly a hot spark of desire. The change was so sudden that she almost let him go in shock. Only the knowledge that he would surely leap to his death forced her to keep her ground as he devoured her with his eyes.

"Alana." His lower lip trembled slightly. "Alana. Is it you?"

Cecilia recoiled in horror even as she kept a firm grip on Julian's hand. His emotions and his drunken state had overcome him and now he saw his dead wife in her face. A sharp burst of familiar pain shot through her at the realization. She shoved aside the irrational reaction.

"No, Julian," she began.

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The despair returned to his expression, more powerful than ever. "No, she left. *You* left me. Why would you do that? Why wouldn't you try? Why wouldn't you let me...let me..." He leaned back and Cecilia had to dig in her heels to keep from flipping over the terrace wall with his weight. She bit her lip as she stared up at this broken Adonis. She had no choice. No matter how deeply it broke her, she knew what she had to do.

"Don't leave me, Julian," she whispered. Her voice caught. "Please come down from the ledge and stay with me. We can't leave each other."

She hated herself for feeding his drunken delusion that she was the woman he mourned, but when his eyes softened and his hand began to tremble in hers, she knew it was the only way to save his life.

"Alana?"

"Come down," she coaxed, refusing to answer to the name that wasn't hers. "Please come down and come back inside with me."

Julian's knees seemed to give out as he stumbled forward off the terrace wall. His heavy body hit her and they both fell backward into the snow. His large, male form landed partly on top of her, crushing her down against the cold stone landing and soaking her night rail with icy water.

Cecilia winced even as relief flooded her. The snow was coming all the heavier now and she thanked God she had convinced him to come to her before the situation was made even worse by the impending storm.

"Oh God, Alana," he murmured against her neck.

Cecilia's eyes widened as she felt the stroke of Julian's rough tongue against her throat. She opened her mouth to protest the intimate gesture, but when he wrapped his arms around her waist to tuck her against him, her words fell away

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unspoken.

"Alana, Alana," he moaned as he suckled his way down her throat to where her flimsy nightgown edging kept him from going further. "I need you."

While Cecilia's mind raced to stop this, her body went in the opposite direction. As Julian nuzzled her neck, she melted. Her hips arched up as if of their own accord and her sensitive nerves fired pleasure from her head to her curling toes.

"Oh God," she mumbled as one large hand cupped her rear end to pull her up against him. There was no doubt he wanted her. The thick ridge of his erection was hard as granite against her thigh and rocking an intoxicating rhythm against her skin.

She wanted to be touched, filled. And she wanted it from this man, tonight. The only problem was he couldn't see her face. He was too overcome by grief and wine to know what he was doing. To take advantage of that state would be wrong and he would hate her for it later.

"Julian," she moaned as she struggled to slide out from under him. Every jerk of her hips only made things worse as their lower bodies collided again and again. Her thighs were soaked with need by the time she got even halfway out from under his hard, heavy form. "It's cold. Let's go inside."

He shook his head as if waking from a dream and for a moment she thought he would truly see her for who she was. Only he didn't. Instead, he scrambled to his feet and swept her up in one smooth motion. When she was tucked against his chest, her damp nightgown curling around her thighs, he said, "I'm sorry, my dear. I don't know what came over me. Of course I'll take you to bed."

Before she could protest, his lips came down on hers. Her objections turned to moans and those moans were lost in the heat of his kiss. Julian plunged his tongue between her lips and

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slowly glided it in and out, perfectly mimicking a slow, steady motion that would bring her to release over and over again if he were inside of her. She hardly noticed when he pushed the terrace door shut behind them and carried her to her bed. Only when he set her down on the soft coverlet did her rational mind return, though much cloudier than it had been before.

"Julian," she murmured even as his hands slipped under her wet nightgown. His fingertips stroked a light path up her sides and she couldn't stop her shiver of response. "No, wait."

He ignored her objection as he pulled the nightgown over her head and tossed it across the room where it landed in a wet pile. She was completely naked, but she felt no shame with this stranger. Only that tugging, insistent desire that worked at her core and eroded her drive to do what was right.

"I don't want you to get a chill." His voice was harsh, but it wasn't with grief this time. It was with desire. A desire so strong she couldn't seem to fight it. It went directly through her, melting her body and entering her heart with enough strength to silence her refusals. All she wanted was to give him this moment's peace in her bed. And give herself a peace of her own.

Tomorrow she would confront the consequences.

He urged her back across the pillows with a gentle hand on the soft curve of her naked belly. She followed his order and watched as he rolled his fingertips along every swell and valley of her skin. It was as if he were memorizing each hollow in case he lost her. The bittersweet gentleness of the touch had tears leaping to her eyes.

But when his dark head bent to take one nipple into his mouth, her tears were of a different kind and flowed freely down her cheeks. Relief. It was a relief to feel a man's mouth on her skin again. A relief to know she would be filled with

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more than just her own fingers and find release with a lover's touch instead.

She would have thought Julian's delusional mind would force a quick, heated coupling, but instead he seemed to savor every moment he touched her. It was clear he was going to make the night last as long as he could. And since she knew it would likely be their only one together, she didn't stop him. He suckled one nipple gently and she moaned. But when he nipped the sensitive flesh the sharp pleasure made her wail out a long sound of delight and arch helplessly.

He smiled against her skin and moved to her other breast in a series of wet, hot kisses. He repeated the treatment there, running his tongue in a slow circle around her areola, then blowing hot air across her skin. The sensation was a decadent surge of powerful pleasure that almost had her experiencing an orgasm right there.

Her urge to touch him went from insistent to overpowering. She longed to taste his skin, to feel his body pressed naked against her own.

"You're wet," she whispered as she struggled to sit up. "Let me."

He didn't resist as she unbuttoned his damp coat and shirt and tossed them over the side of the bed in a heap. She locked eyes with him as she ran exploring fingers over the ridges of muscles that had been hidden beneath the cloth. His crisp chest hair moved through her fingers like silk as she smoothed soft circles into his skin.

"Are you wet?" he murmured as he leaned her back on the pillows with a wicked smile. "I want to see."

She gasped as he returned his mouth to her skin. This time he trailed a hot path down her stomach, inching ever closer to her heated sex. Her pussy pulsed as he sucked gently

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on her hip, then slithered between her legs. Pushing them wide open with a nudge of his broad shoulders, he examined her most intimate place carefully.

"Oh, yes," he whispered. His hot breath caressed her most sensitive areas. "Very wet. But I think I can make you even wetter."

A strangled moan was all the answer she could muster as he spread her open wide and dipped his head for a long, languid lick. It was a teasing kiss, meant to torture, not release. She bit her lip to keep from begging him to go on as she waited. He didn't disappoint.

"You taste wonderful." He didn't wait a moment before he went in for another sample. "Like sugar." Lick. "Like honey." Lick. "Like wine."

Her hips arched toward his slow, skilled tongue, but with a laugh he used one hand to hold her steady. This time when his mouth came down on her, he let just the tip of his tongue play along her clit. Cecilia didn't even try to hold back her cries anymore. She knew they would only spur him on and she needed this release like she needed her next breath.

His eyes came up to lock with hers as he continued to play his tongue along her pussy. He sucked her clit until she almost came, but didn't let her as he stroked along her slit to the tight little hole of her bottom. She shivered at the intimate, foreign touch and the way it made her nerves fire in intense, shocking pleasure.

The torture went on, building the waves of ecstasy up higher and higher, but never letting her go entirely. She'd never experienced such a thing before. Never been aroused to the extent that she would do anything for release. Anything he asked.

Finally, when she thought she'd die from waiting, he

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glided one long, thick finger into her sheath. She pulsed around him on the edge of the most powerful orgasm of her life, the one he had been denying her for what seemed like hours. The one he finally gifted her with when he suckled her clit.

Her hips bucked even as he held her steady and her pleasure peaked. There didn't seem to be an end to it as he continued to pump his fingers in and out of her, continued to lap at her clit even as she convulsed out her release.

Finally, when her thrusts turned to mere tremors, he withdrew his fingers and stood up. Shedding his trousers, he took a place on the pillows beside her. For a moment, she only looked at him. Julian was a powerful specimen when dressed, but when he was naked, he was nothing short of a god.

His broad shoulders tapered down to a muscular chest with a soft sprinkling of chest hair that lead to the hard cock that now thrust toward her. It was big, thicker at the base, and long. It had been beautifully formed, like perfect silk covering powerful steel. Her womb contracted at just the thought that he would fill her with that powerful instrument.

She tilted her head to take a greedy kiss, one that opened her to him and him to her. She tasted his desperation mingled with his desire and the remnants of her own strong flavors, and though her mind screamed at her to stop, she silenced it.

Propping herself up on one elbow, she drank deeply from his mouth, tangling her tongue with his. As much as he seemed to want to memorize her body, she *needed* to memorize his. She knew this would be the only time they came together, and it had been so very long since she'd been with a man. She wanted to savor it, to remember each detail when she was alone again.

He returned her passion in kind. When she tried to take

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over, he pushed her back, holding her shoulders down against the bed as he thrust his tongue into her over and over.

"Please," she whimpered while she skimmed her hands over his back. She cupped his firm backside, digging her fingertips into the powerful muscle and tilting him up against her. The hard cock she'd admired so much bumped against her abdomen, unyielding against her delicate flesh.

"Touch me," he said softly, almost timidly, like he wasn't sure how she would react to his order.

"With pleasure," she murmured as she kissed him once more. Her hand snaked between their tightly pressed bodies until she found his cock. She wrapped her hand around him with a sigh of pleasure and stroked him from base to head.

He let out a groan that seemed to fill every sensitive part of her. It called to her body, hardening her nipples to a near painful degree, forcing her hips to thrust and causing a flow of wet desire to slick her thighs.

His reaction spurred her on. Never taking her eyes from his, she pulled her hand away to lick her palm. When she'd wet it, she grasped him again. She glided her lubricated hand up his shaft, massaging with little squeezes as she went.

Julian's head tipped back over his shoulders. "Oh my God," he moaned.

His hips flexed up to force a new rhythm, but she ignored his silent request and continued in her slow, tortuous slide. Up and down, memorizing each hot inch of his cock. And memorizing each reaction to learn how he liked to be touched.

She was surprised that though he was rock hard, every stroke of her hand seemed to make him even harder. And he grew longer as she stroked him. Her pussy wept with longing to have him fill her. Anywhere. Everywhere.

It seemed his mind was heading in the same direction as

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her body when he caught her wrist with a growl. "Enough, I want to be inside you."

Without waiting for her response, he flipped over on top of her. Her legs spread, opening to welcome him as he positioned the mushroom head of his cock at her wet pussy. He shut his eyes as he filled her inch by slow inch. It seemed like forever that he pressed forward, an eternity she prayed would never end. She rolled her hips up, pulsing around him in welcome. Finally, he was fully inside and lay still for a moment, his eyes half closed as if he wanted to simply savor the feel of her sheath wrapped tightly around him.

She pressed a kiss against his neck and sucked gently. When she did, it roused him and he pulled back until he almost exited her body, then thrust forward again. There was no gentleness or finesse to his rhythm, but she didn't care. She didn't want that. She wanted what he gave her. Animal possession. Out of control desire.

She met him at every stroke, crying out as he rubbed across her clit and brought her to the edge with blinding speed. For the second time in less than an hour, her body stiffened and flexed as pleasure shot to every part of her. As her cries filled the room, he opened his eyes, looking down at her as she came.

When her eyes cleared, she gasped. He was looking at her, but this time it was clear he truly saw her.

"You—you aren't Alana," he whispered.

Her body continued to tremble in release even as terror shot through her. What would he do now?

"No."

He lay perfectly still, staring down with unreadable eyes. Then he dipped his head and kissed her, drove his tongue into her mouth as he did the same with his cock. She screamed with pleasure as his hands came down to pin her steady and he

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rocked into her with growing speed and fading control. Finally, with a shout so primal that it shattered her into release a third time, he spent inside her. She felt him pump into her, clung to his tense muscles as he clutched her close.

He relaxed, pressing her into the soft mattress in a most pleasing way. She smoothed her hands along his spine in a gentle rhythm, even as she wondered what he would say now that he'd come to his senses.

As if in response to her silent query, he gently pushed away from her and moved beside her on the bed. Still, he said nothing, but wrapped his arms around her and curled her against his sweaty chest.

The room was silent for a long while. Finally, Cecilia got up her nerve. "Julian?" she whispered into the dimness. "Julian?"

There was no answer except for the soft rasp of his breath. Carefully, she leaned up to look at him. His eyes were shut and his face was relaxed and peaceful in the fading firelight. With a smile, she realized he was fast asleep.

Slowly, she laid back into his arms and held him closer. Tomorrow would dawn early and bring many explanations and probably pains. But she'd had the night. And that was enough for her.

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Chapter Two

Julian struggled to sit up, but his pounding head had him collapsing back onto the fragrant pillows with a moan.

"Damn the drink," he muttered even as he longed for another. If he stayed drunk, the pain never fully caught up with him. Not the pain that throbbed in his head and not the anguish that shattered his heart.

With effort, he managed to lift his aching neck from the pillow and look around. Slowly, he eased to sitting position. Something was wrong. This wasn't his home in London or the countryside. And it wasn't an inn, either. This was a private home and judging from the decorations, it was the private room of a lady.

And he was stark naked between her soft sheets.

He looked around for his clothing, but it was nowhere to be found. Instead another set of men's clothing was draped over a dressing chair waiting for him.

Through his foggy brain, a series of heated images brought back some of the previous night. There had been a woman, he could have sworn she was Alana... they had kissed, fallen into the bed. They'd both been wet and he remembered being cold. But then the cold had faded, replaced by heat so potent he might have been on fire. The woman's skin had slid like silk beneath his hands and tasted like heaven beneath his tongue. She had risen up to his caresses and even returned his touch with more fervor than any woman he'd ever known.

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And just when she'd found her release, he had looked into her eyes and seen... seen the truth. That she wasn't his late wife. In fact, she looked nothing like the fragile Alana. But instead of pushing her away, he had continued fucking her and taken his pleasure like an animal in rut.

What had he done? In the months since Alana's death he had entered into forced celibacy. He hadn't looked at another woman since the day of his wife's burial, let alone touched one. But in one, heated night, he had rutted with a stranger like a stallion. At least he believed her to be a stranger. Her face was still too foggy for that determination to be proven.

He waited for shame to flood his body, the grief that always accompanied any thoughts he dared have of women who weren't his late wife. For the first time in months, the regrets and self-recriminations didn't come. Instead, he felt more rested than he had in ages. Worse, the memory of taking that mysterious woman roused desires he'd long put away. Already his cock was throbbing with the memories of the previous night and the woman.

"Damn it," he muttered as he threw the coverlet aside and staggered to his feet. His head howled in protest, but he beat back the pain and stalked across the room to stand naked before the crackling fire. He had to figure out where he was and who his mystery lover had been. Only then could he determine what to do next.

On the mantel were a collection of framed miniatures, but none of the faces looked familiar. However, judging from the room's accoutrements and the gilded frames, the woman was of an upper class. So she wasn't just some whore he'd picked up on the streets.

That knowledge only made matters worse. If he'd managed to seduce a lady of rank, she would expect certain

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things from him now that the passion had faded to the cold, morning light. A marriage proposal would surely be at the top of that list. That was something he would not—could not give.

His head pounded all the harder as he turned away from the fireplace and went to the veranda doors. He pushed the heavy, velvet curtains aside to look through the frosted glass. Snow swirled outside, a blinding storm that kept him from seeing more than a few feet before his face. He could only just make out the outline of a high gray wall, then stark white. Still, the sight of that wall sent a shiver through Julian's body. He didn't like looking at it for long.

"Excuse me... *sir*."

Julian spun around to face the intruder he hadn't heard. He was relieved when a butler stood at the door, not his bed partner. Especially when he remembered he was naked as the day he'd been born. He had a powerful urge to cover himself, but instead, threw back his shoulders as if he had every right to be in this room and in his current exposed state.

"What is it?" he asked in his most haughty, aristocratic voice. It was obvious by the way the butler looked him up and down that he didn't approve and that had to be dealt with as quickly as possible.

Not that Julian blamed the man.

"Her ladyship has asked that you join her for luncheon, if you are able."

Julian's eyes fluttered shut. The room began to spin. "Her ladyship?"

"Yes." The other man's voice was as cold as the storm that raged outside. "Lady Lexington is in the parlor downstairs."

"And you said luncheon?" Julian shook his head. "What time is it?"

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The butler frowned. "It is nearly one in the afternoon, sir. I suggest you dress in the clothing that has been left for you."

With that, the other man turned on his heel and shut the door none too gently. Julian stared at the barrier with a shake of his head.

"Cheeky butlers," he muttered as he grabbed the clothing from the dressing table.

As he dressed, he pondered what he now knew. The woman wasn't simply of the upper class, but she was titled. So why had she spent a night of passion with a man she didn't know? He certainly couldn't put a face to the name Lexington.

More importantly, what did the lady want now that the night was over?

Once he had dressed in the clothing that was too small for him by at least a size, Julian made his way downstairs. He went slowly, partly to keep his throbbing head from falling from his shoulders and partly because he dreaded what he was about to encounter. He didn't relish the idea of facing a woman he had loved and would now leave unceremoniously. He assumed there would be sobbing at the very least and a calling out to duel at the worst.

But perhaps a fight to the death wasn't such a bad idea, after all.

Finally, he found a room with a small dining table set with plates. Assuming this was the parlor where he was to meet Lady Lexington, he entered. As soon as he did so, he heard someone clear her throat from the corner.

"Julian."

He turned to the voice and nearly fell over. Standing in the corner was the most beautiful woman he had ever encountered. How he had ever mistaken her for Alana was a mystery. Where his late wife had pale skin and blonde hair,

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this woman's hair was dark brown, with just a few coppery hints when she moved into the light. Her eyes were a sparkling, vibrant blue, nothing like the sickly, watery aquamarine Alana had possessed.

Most different was the fact that this woman was smiling. A large, genuine smile that seemed to light the room with its inner glow. And light a fire low in Julian's belly that he tried desperately to put out. He didn't want to connect with her. He couldn't.

The woman's smile faded a fraction when he didn't return her greeting, but she motioned to the table with a graceful sweep of her arm. "You must be famished. Please, sit down and we shall eat."

Julian nodded dumbly. He could think of nothing to say to this goddess who had allowed him into her home, her bed and her body. Nothing that wouldn't make the situation more awkward than it already promised to be.

He took a place at the table. As soon as he had, a maid entered the room with a tea service, but Lady Lexington held up her hand. "Mariah, I believe our guest would do better with a strong pot of coffee. Would you arrange for that and bring us our luncheon right away? Don't worry about formalities or courses. I think his lordship needs sustenance more than he needs manners."

"Yes, ma'am." The girl bobbed out a curtsey and sent a quick, curious glance Julian's way before she scurried into the hallway and shut the door behind her. He flinched. Obviously Lady Lexington's servants knew about his night in her room. He could only hope the gossip wouldn't become unbearable for her.

Lady Lexington sat in her place, but didn't say a word. She simply looked at Julian. It wasn't as if she expected him to

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say anything and it wasn't a look of censure. She just watched him.

He squirmed under the close scrutiny. "Lady Lexington—" he began.

"Cecilia," she said softly. "Forgive me for not properly introducing myself. My name is Cecilia Warden."

"You are not her ladyship, then?" he asked in confusion and a twinge of disappointment. The images of the woman he had taken the night before were blurred, yes, but he had been sure this was she. Especially since his traitorous body continued to throb for her every time she did so much as shift her weight.

"Not exactly. I *was* Lady Lexington, but after my husband died the title went to another lady. The servants still refer to me as Lady Lexington." She smiled. "And since we are not often visited by anyone outside of my own family and close friends, I normally don't correct them."

He nodded. A surprising relief filled him to know this was indeed the woman he had kissed, stroked, and filled for hours the night before. Surprising because it should have only made things more difficult. Instead, he felt lighter than he had in a long while.

"Lady Cecilia, then—" he began again.

Again she stopped him. "Cecilia is fine. I think we have long passed the point where formalities are required." There wasn't a hint of embarrassment to her face as she paused with a cock of her head. "Unless you'd prefer I call you Your Grace?"

He frowned. She knew his title, then. And probably his reputation. Thanks to his cousins, most of England believed him mad. Until that moment, he hadn't cared enough to correct the impression. Now he hoped Cecilia didn't believe it, too.

"No. Julian is fine."

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Before he could begin again, the door behind him opened and the maid returned with a tray holding coffee and a sumptuous feast of cold beef, steaming potatoes with fragrant gravy, crusty bread and a heaping mound of fresh butter. The scents of the food hit his nostrils and it was as if he'd never smelled such simple delicacies before. His stomach growled in anticipation and his need to explain himself to his beautiful companion faded away, replaced by his need to fill his empty stomach. When was the last time he'd eaten? It seemed like an age.

The maid left them in privacy again once she'd served them their lunches. Julian tried to ignore the tempting plate before him as he clung to the last vestiges of his manners.

"Cecilia—"

"Why don't you eat before we talk? I can hear your hunger all the way over here," she said with a light laugh that made his ears tingle in pure pleasure. "We'll have plenty of time to discuss anything you desire when you've had your fill."

Julian nodded and took a grateful bite of food. Within moments he had cleared his plate and filled it a second time. He knew he was being unconscionably rude, but he couldn't help it. He was famished beyond reason, for the first time since his wife's death.

From time to time he would look up to see Cecilia watching him. She ate, as well, but it was always with her blue eyes pinning him. The intensity of her stare made him even more aware of the intimacies they had shared, and of intimacies his body longed to share again. When she licked an errant drip of tea from her lip, his cock swelled and lengthened.

Shifting uncomfortably, he set his fork on the edge of his empty plate. "I beg your pardon. It was very rude of me to eat that way."

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Cecilia smiled. "I like to see a man eat. It proves he's alive. And that he wishes to stay that way."

Julian frowned. Her statement evoked new images, memories of the night before. The cold...he had felt it on her terrace. He vaguely remembered looking down over her snowy garden, but it seemed to be so far below. Then he had decided he would...he would...

With a gasp, Julian surged to his feet. "You stopped me."

"From jumping to your death." She nodded as she, too, stood. "I couldn't let you do that."

Julian's confusion turned to anger. How dare she intervene? "And why not? Why wouldn't you let me take what is only mine? *My* life."

Her face twisted. "Because whether or not it is yours, you have no right to throw it away. Your wife wouldn't have wanted that."

A sharp stab of pain wrenched through Julian as if Cecilia had stabbed him. In three steps, he crossed the room to her and grasped her by her upper arms. Her body was so lush, so soft, and sweet. He fought for control as he pulled her flush against him and growled, "You know nothing about my wife."

She didn't struggle, only looked up at him with sad eyes. Eyes that also held unhidden desire. His body answered her call and swelled even harder. He was sure she could feel his erection pressed against her belly, even through her heavy skirts, but if she did, she made no indication.

"No, I don't know anything about your wife. But if she loved you with even half the intensity as you obviously loved her, she wouldn't want you to torture yourself. And she certainly wouldn't want you to take away the precious life you were given."

Even though they were talking about Alana, Julian

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realized with horror that he wanted to kiss Cecilia. More than kiss her. He wanted nothing more than to press her back against the table, push up her stylish skirts, and plunge into her heat. There was one thing he remembered quite clearly from the previous night. During the hours he had spent pleasuring this woman, the pain that had been his constant companion for months had gone away. He wanted it to go away again. He wanted to stop the words that came from her lips and replace them with moans.

Instead, he released her and stalked to the fireplace where he rubbed a hand through his hair.

"I am already dead," he murmured even as his body continued to belie that statement.

She let out a cry of outrage before she crossed the room toward him. He expected her to argue with him, or even slap him. Instead, she locked eyes with him for a long moment, then shocked him by dropping to her knees. When she was eyelevel with his thighs, she reached out to rub her hand against his cock. It stood at full attention the moment she touched it.

"What—" he gasped in surprise as his knees nearly went out from under him.

"Shh," she whispered as she unbuttoned the fly and carefully pulled the trousers down around his ankles. "Shh."

His eyes fluttered shut and his protestations died on his lips when she took him into her hand and stroked from the base of his erection to the tip. He gripped the mantle with all his might and held on as Cecilia put out just the tip of her pink tongue and rolled it around the head of his penis.

Few women had ever given him this pleasure, and most had expected payment in return. Certainly no noble woman had taken him into her mouth, had sucked him gently, had

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stroked her tongue around the length of him. But this woman was doing just that. And she never stopped watching him while she did it.

Instinct took over and Julian plunged one hand into her dark hair. He ran his fingers through her simple chignon until pearl-tipped pins scattered across the floor with a clatter and her hair tangled around her shoulders and his hand like a chestnut cloud.

Her back arched as she alternated between sucking up and down his length and using her hand to massage his cock. Her other hand snaked up his body to rest beneath his ill fitted shirt on his bare stomach. Julian stopped fighting the pleasure that washed over his body in waves and gave in.

As she glided her mouth over him in slow, purposeful sweeps, he let his mind wander. Sensual images bombarded him. It felt so good to be inside of her, inside any part of her. To be so close to a woman that he could let himself be entirely vulnerable.

It felt so good, in fact, that the tension in his erection edged toward completion.

"Cecilia," he groaned out as he massaged her scalp. "I'm going to...you'll need to stop..."

She shook her head just before she took him as far into her mouth as she could. With one last, wet suck, the room blurred until sensation was all that existed and he came. He heard his cries of pleasure fill the room as his hips bucked against her. She gripped his thighs and rode out the thrusts with a moan that vibrated through his entire body.

Julian wasn't sure how long he leaned limp against the mantle, with Cecilia's forehead resting against his hip, but it seemed like a blissful eternity. His world was weightless and pain free.

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Until he looked down at Cecilia. Her hair was a tangle on knots from where he had wound his fingers into it. Her mouth was red from his hard thrusts and her cheeks were pink.

The full knowledge of what he'd just done rushed through him and he yanked his pants up and fastened them in a blur.

"I'm sorry," he said as he grasped her upper arms and pulled her to her feet. She stared at him with unreadable eyes that he turned away from. "I cannot believe I allowed myself to lose control like that. I know you'll want me out of your house, and I'm sure your brothers and father will wish to see me for pistols."

To his surprise, she laughed as she grabbed his arm and forced him to look at her. "Do you not remember what happened? Have I addled your brain so much? *I* started what turned into a most pleasurable encounter."

His cheeks filled with blood at her choice of words.

She continued without letting him interrupt. "As for my father and brothers, none of them live close by. Even if they did, I would remind them that what I choose to do in my parlor is really none of their affair. It's no one's but my own."

"I took advantage—" he began even as he watched, mesmerized, while she combed her fingers through her hair and managed to find a few pins on the floor to put it up again. Though it was now slightly lopsided, she still looked gorgeous. In fact, the teasing light in her eyes made her even more beautiful than ever.

"Took advantage?" She shook her head. "Believe me when I say, I don't feel taken advantage of. In fact, far from it." She leaned closer, close enough that he could smell the honeysuckle sweetness of her skin and feel the warmth that seemed to radiate from every part of her. "Since last night when you asked me to take your cock in my hand, I wanted to

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touch you. To bring you between my lips. For two reasons."

Julian swallowed hard. His cock was twitching with desire again. Being with this woman certainly turned him into a beast. All he could think of was plunging into her heat and finding his release over and over again. He wanted to watch her face, this time with a clear mind, as he pleased her. He wanted to force that quiet control away and make her rise up beneath him as she begged for more.

"And what are your reasons?" he whispered past a dry throat.

"First, since the moment I saw you on my terrace, my body craved yours." She smiled sadly. "I know that shocks you and it probably reduces your regard for me, as a lady is not meant to have such lustful feelings. But I did and I still do. It is a matter of fact and I do not apologize for it."

"I don't think less of you," he murmured.

Her smile was his reward. "My second reason is that I wanted to prove a point."

Julian's guard rose at those words. "A point?"

"Yes." She reached up to cup his cheek. Her palm was so soft against his lightly stubbled face that he nearly let his eyes shut and a sigh leave his lips. It had been so long since he'd felt such a gentle caress that he was like a thirsty man at a pool in the desert.

"And what point did you want to make?"

Her hand dropped back to her side. "A man who was already dead wouldn't have reacted as you did. And a man who wanted to die wouldn't have been able to find his pleasure either last night or today. Julian, you don't want to die. Making love to me last night and letting me pleasure you today proves that."

Julian winced as he turned to the fireplace. He stared into

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the flames as immense guilt flooded him. Cecilia didn't know the truth. She didn't know that he had seen his wife when he made love to her, or at least part of the time she had been in his arms. What she held as proof of his lust for life had really been a drunken delusion.

"Cecilia, you don't know." He forced himself to look at her and his heart broke. She was so beautiful and so giving. What he was about to say would surely break her heart. It was something he didn't relish doing, especially after what had just transpired between them. "Last night when I made love to you, I didn't see your face."

Instead of looking hurt or even confused, Cecilia nodded. "I know that, Julian. When you began making love to me, you saw your wife somewhere in my face. And I let you believe that because you needed to believe. I lied to you in order to keep you alive."

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Chapter Three

Julian stared at Cecilia. His green eyes flashed betrayal and fury, but he hadn't moved, not even an inch in the long moments since she admitted her deception. Cecilia quivered inside as she waited for his reaction, but tried to maintain a cool exterior. She had made her bed and lain in it to her highest pleasure. Now she would suffer the consequences. Whatever they were, she refused to look back or wish to change one moment of the previous night.

"And here I was apologizing for taking advantage of you," he finally murmured. His voice had such an edge that it almost cut. She winced in response.

"It was never my intention to take advantage," she whispered because he was so close that she knew he could hear her very breath. The words sounded like a weak lie.

"It wasn't your intention," he repeated as his gaze pierced her. "Then how did you end up with my cock inside you?"

The harsh description felt like a slap and she turned away on instinct. He wouldn't allow it. In one step, he caught her shoulders to hold her steady. Yet even this touch of anger set her blood boiling with desire. Julian Blake was like a drug in her system. Even when it was dangerous, she couldn't fight her cravings.

"Don't you dare run," his hot breath stirred the curls around her face. "You didn't blush when you milked me with your mouth a moment ago, so don't pretend to blush now. Just

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tell me the truth."

She shivered at his nearness and the legitimacy of his blunt words. "Yes, you deserve the truth. But please, let me go. You don't know what your... what your touch does to me."

He locked gazes with her and his surprise was evident. Slowly, he released her arms and backed away from her. But his eyes never left her face.

"Speak."

On shaky legs, she sat down at the dining table and took a bracing sip of her forgotten tea. It momentarily washed the taste of him away from her lips and let her focus. She had no choice but to tell him the truth and let him respond as he would.

"I was about to retire to bed when I found you on my terrace last night," she said softly. "You were standing with your back to my bedroom door. I had no idea how you got there. It was only this morning that my groom told me he found your horse. He had taken shelter from the storm in my stables."

Julian breathed a sigh of relief and the tension around his eyes faded slightly. But the censure remained, still focused entirely on her. "Go on."

"From the first moment I saw you, my body reacted to your presence. You were a stranger, I should have been afraid. But I wasn't. I don't know why, I can't explain it. But I felt a longing for you, a *need* to touch you and to feel your hands on me in return."

He stirred a little, but said nothing.

"It wasn't something commonplace. I've certainly never felt a drive to take a strange man to my bed like that before," she explained. "But I needed you. It was only when you climbed onto my terrace wall that it became clear you needed

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me even more. You needed me to save your life."

"And your solution to my suicidal tendencies was to pretend to be my wife? To take advantage of my desire to feel her touch just one last time?" The words were bitter, but his tone had softened, as had his face.

"No." She shook her head as she prayed he would see her sincerity. "You refused to come down from the ledge. I had taken your hand by then, and I feared you would jump and take me with you. So when you called me by your wife's name, I responded. I only wanted to save your life. But when you fell onto the terrace on top of me and began to kiss me, my body's wants took over."

He shivered. "I kissed you?"

"Yes." Her own body gave a tremor at the memory. "You kissed my neck and began to touch me in such sweet, intimate ways. I tried to explain the truth to you, but you wouldn't hear it. The next thing I knew, you had carried me to my bed and we began to make love."

Slowly, she stood and crossed the room to him. He didn't pull away when she took his hand and lifted it to her heart. He only stared at her, with an unreadable expression she prayed meant he could forgive her. Or at least understand what had driven her to such deception.

"I have been alone for three long years, Julian. Since my own husband died. In that time, I haven't been with another man. I've hardly even been out in local society beyond some charitable work. I've had needs, and have been forced to fulfill them by myself."

His eyes went wide and she knew he understood she found pleasure by her own hand. It was something a lady wouldn't admit, perhaps even to her own husband, but somehow she trusted him to share this truth.

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"I wasn't proud that I took what you offered." She sighed. "Not because I thought it was wrong to share my bed with you, but because I didn't want to harm you. If I have, I apologize. But I will never apologize for finding such intense pleasure in your touch. Or for giving you pleasure and release in return."

His lips parted in surprise, but behind the surprise, Cecilia knew she saw desire. Julian wanted her still, despite his protestations to the contrary. Now that his mind was clear, she knew his desire was truly for her. Not some apparition of a dead woman, but her. Flesh and blood. The knowledge stirred her heart and set her body into motion. Her blood heated and surged through her veins, tightening her nipples and sending humid need to ready her for his cock.

He pulled her an inch closer until her thighs collided with his own. Green eyes held her captive as he bent his head closer and closer. Finally, his breath caressed her lips and she felt his erratic heartbeat just beneath his skin. But before he relieved her torture and took her lips, he released her and stumbled away.

"No, I cannot do this. I must go."

Disappointment wracked her, but she fought to keep it away from her face. She had known he might react this way.

"The storm is still very bad." She stepped to the window and pulled back the curtain to prove her point. "You wouldn't survive. Please, at least stay until the snow stops and the roads can be cleared."

He shook his head. "I can't stay. You don't understand."

"Is this your way of trying to take your own life again?" she asked. Disappointment turned to anger as she let the curtain drop. "By riding out into a storm? Because I won't allow you to go if that is your intention."

He barked out a laugh as he turned on her. A haughty,

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angry aristocrat replaced the man whose vulnerabilities were just below the surface. A man not used to being ordered about by anyone. "You won't allow me? And just how will you stop me, my lady?"

She arched an eyebrow. "If I have to have all my footmen, my groom and my butler tie you to a bed to wait out the snow, I will."

The sudden image her words produced was startling. Julian tied to her bed, but entirely naked. Unable to escape the pleasure she so longed to share with him while the storm went on and on. In her mind, she saw herself walk across the floor and slip her satin robe into a pool at her feet. Julian's eyes grew wide as he took in her nudity. He strained against the restraints in a need to touch her, take her. Except she would be the one to take him. First to seduce him and then to ride him until they were both spent and satiated.

With a shiver, she shook the picture away. "You're a large man, Julian Blake, and strong, but I don't think you've eaten well these past few months and I don't believe you could best all my men."

He frowned. "You wouldn't do that."

"Test me."

"Damn it!" He slammed a hand down on the mantle and sent a few of her trinkets scattering across the floor. "You would hold me prisoner in your home?"

"No, I would have you as my guest, but you refuse me."

He stared at her for a long moment. To her surprise, he began to laugh. The sound was forced and a bit rusty, but it touched her nonetheless. It was deep and rich and she knew it would be wonderful when he had used it a few more times.

"You are difficult to deny, do you know that, Cecilia?" he asked as he sank into a chair and rubbed his eyes.

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She smiled in relief. "If nothing else, think of your mount. He's exhausted and will be well cared for here. Stay out the storm and then you can go. If you choose to carry out your intentions when you arrived..." She shivered at the thought. "Well, there will be little I can do to stop you once you've left my home. Until then, perhaps I can help you remember that life is worth living."

He slowly lifted his eyes to spear her with a heated glance. "And how do you intend to do that?"

Her whole body began to shake. It was as if his one question had awakened every desire, every need she had felt since she was old enough to know that sex could bring pleasure.

"Any way I can. Any way you wish me to," she whispered as she took a slow step toward him. "Whether that means sharing my library, or long conversations over port or...or taking you to my bed whenever you want to slake your body's needs, I shall do that."

His eyes widened even though his expression revealed nothing of his reaction to her scandalous proposition. "You're offering me free access to your body?"

A little moan escaped her lips at the thought before she could keep it back. "Yes."

He shifted and in his tight clothing she could clearly see the outline of his erection thrusting toward her. She couldn't help a surge of triumph.

"To save my life you would do that." He frowned. "Out of pity? Or charity, perhaps?"

She stopped moving toward him and her hand came up to her breast in surprise. "No. I don't want you to die, and I hope that time spent with me will keep you from doing what you stopped at my home to do. But my reasons for offering you my

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bed are far more selfish."

He stood to tower over her, but he didn't reach for her. "What are these selfish reasons?"

"I told you," her voice quivered. "I've been alone for far too long. Until last night, I feared I'd never feel a man's touch again. I would never experience anything like you gave me with your hands and mouth and body. I want more. I want more with you, even though I know it will only be a short time, a fantasy."

His mouth twitched as he reached out a hand to touch her face. With a sigh, she leaned into his palm. It was shocking how much she wanted him to stay. For her sake as much as his. Her family had been pressuring her to marry again and she knew at her age any new husband probably wouldn't be a lover to curl her toes. She wanted that. Just one last time.

"I have no choice but to stay since my alternative is being tied to a bed." His smile was soft. "Although if it were your bed, I think it might be quite entertaining."

She returned his smile even as her heart skittered wildly. "I'll have a hot bath drawn for you and your clothing brought once it has been washed and pressed." She took a deep breath. "Will you require a room of your own, Your Grace?"

His smile faded as his hand slid from her cheek into her hair. He pulled her close and tilted her head upward, but this time he didn't stop when he leaned in for her. The kiss was gentle, warm, and pleasurable as he barely traced her lips with his tongue. But once she opened to him, it took on a whole new meaning. He plunged into her, tasting and taking as his free hand clamped around her waist and dragged her against him with enough force that the air was knocked from her lungs. But she didn't care. She only wanted to taste him, to feel his breath merged with her own.

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For as long as she could have it.

When he broke away, he was panting and his desire was even more evident than it had been before. Without letting her go, he leaned in close to her ear and whispered, "I think we both know the answer to that."

She swallowed hard as he gently let her go and took a step away. The wicked gleam in his eye gave her hope, both that he would find a way out of his sorrow, and that the next few days would be more amazing than any she had ever experienced.

Smoothing her skirts, she found her way back to the table and rang for the maid. When Mariah returned, her eyes widened at Cecilia's disheveled appearance, but she knew enough not to say anything.

"Have a bath drawn in my room for His Grace," she said without looking away from Julian. He leaned back on a chair arm as if he owned the room and all its contents, including her. And she didn't mind a bit. "And be sure his clothing is ready for him in a few hours. He will be staying with us until the storm has passed."

Mariah bobbed out a curtsy and left the room. This time she kept the door open a fraction. Cecilia couldn't help a smile at her dear servants and their attempts to protect her. The problem was that she didn't desire protection. Not this time.

"Go upstairs," she said.

"Won't you join me?" he asked her as he pushed off of the chair arm and headed toward her in long, sure steps. Her heart nearly stopped at the sight.

"I will, but I must speak to the servants and give them instructions for your stay." She shut her eyes as he dropped a kiss on the spot where her neck and shoulder met. "I'll hurry," she choked out.

"Do," he whispered in her ear before he gently nipped the

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lobe. "I'll be waiting."

With that, he left the room and left Cecilia sagging against the table because her legs no longer kept her upright.

"I don't approve of this, my lady."

"I understand that perfectly, Mrs. Baker. You've mentioned it at least ten times since I told you." Cecilia placed two wine glasses on the tray resting on the kitchen cutting board. "But I didn't ask for your approval, or anyone else's. This is my decision."

The housekeeper shook her graying head with a sad frown. Cecilia's heart was pricked by it. After so many years in her employ, her servants were almost like family now.

"I simply wish for more for you, my dear." Mrs. Baker raised the edge of a dishrag to dab at the tears that sparkled in the corners of her eyes. "After your marriage ended, I hoped you would find someone to truly love you, but this man is just like your husband."

Cecilia's lips thinned. "Julian is nothing like Charles." The words didn't ring true even as she said them. "And it doesn't matter, at any rate. I am not marrying him."

"You know nothing about him," Mrs. Baker insisted, even as she put an open bottle of red wine onto the tray Cecilia was preparing.

"I know his name," she said with a laugh. "I know he's a gentleman of rank and stature. He certainly didn't come through a storm to murder me in my bed and steal my silver."

"No gentleman would strike such a scandalous bargain with a lady," Mrs. Baker huffed.

"You're right." Cecilia headed for the door with her tray. Now that the servants had been told not to disturb her room unless called for, she could go to more pleasurable pursuits.

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And no housekeeper was going to stop her with worries and reminders of the past. "No gentleman would. *I* struck our bargain."

"My lady!"

She rolled her eyes at her housekeeper's high-pitched squeal of horror. "Think of it as our Christian duty. We're saving this man's soul from suicide."

With that, she pushed open the door and headed for the stairs. As she mounted each one, her heart rate doubled. In just a few more steps she would be in her room and then with Julian. Despite the intimacies they had already shared, she somehow felt shy as she paused outside her door to steady her nerves. What would happen between them? She had offered him whatever he desired and now she wondered what that would entail.

Her hands trembled as she pushed her door open. In the dim light from the fire and a few candles, she saw Julian in her tub. His head was dipped back and a damp cloth rested over his eyes. He hadn't noticed her entry as he relaxed in the bathwater.

She took advantage of his distraction by setting the wine on a table and shutting the door with as little sound as possible. Even in the dim glow, she was awed by the sight of his half-naked body. His sleek and muscular torso almost spoke more of a laborer than a Duke. Water droplets cruised down his chest in slow rivulets as they crested the peaks and valleys of muscle and sinew. It was a body made for touching, exploring and Cecilia intended to do both as often as she could until Julian left her home.

Slowly, she unbuttoned her gown and eased out of her tightly bound corset. She let out a quiet breath of relief that Julian didn't appear to hear. When she was only in her thin

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chemise and stockings, she stepped forward. Her heart raced as she took each step.

Dropping to her knees, she took the soap from the tub ledge and began to lather her hands. He stirred at the sound of sloshing water and pushed the washcloth aside. At the sight of her, his eyes grew wide, but his smile grew with it.

"I was beginning to fear you wouldn't come. That you wished to rescind your offer."

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she began to massage the soap into his chest in slow circles. She reveled in the way his muscles contracted beneath her fingertips and his eyes fluttered partly shut with pleasure. "I had a few things to do before I could join you."

"Hmm." In a swift motion, he caught her wrist and kept her from continuing to wash his body. "I want something from you."

Heat flamed her cheeks, but Cecilia managed to nod. "I told you, nothing is taboo for the time you're my guest. What is it?"

"Earlier you mentioned that you found pleasure at your own hand." He arched an eyebrow as he guided her wet hand to her breast. "I want to see you do that. For me."

Cecilia sucked in her breath. "You want me to...to pleasure myself in front of you?"

Julian nodded as he watched her through heavy-lidded eyes. "Yes. I want to see how you bring yourself pleasure, so that I can bring you even more."

Even though her whole body seemed to flutter with nervousness at his shocking request, Cecilia couldn't help but smile. "You were drunk beyond reason last night, but you were still able to bring me more satisfaction than I've ever experienced. I don't think you need to worry about making me

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happy."

"Trust me." Hot breath caressed her neck as he urged her fingers to caress her breast through her chemise. "I can do much, much better. But only if you show me how."

He let go of her hand, but Cecilia found that she was still massaging her breast. It seemed to have increased in weight as her nipple swelled and hardened beneath her wet palm. But it was more than just touching herself that brought that insistent, hot tugging between her thighs. It was that Julian was watching her with unbridled desire and a promise of more passion to come.

Suddenly, the idea of touching herself so intimately while he watched seemed less scandalous. In fact, she wanted to do so more than ever.

She rose on shaky legs. "I—I've never done this in front of anyone before."

His smile widened. "Good. Just do as you normally would. Be comfortable. Forget I'm here at all."

Cecilia took a few unsteady steps toward her bed. "As if that's possible," she muttered.

Once there, she threw a glance over her shoulder at Julian. He was staring at her, naked need glimmering in his green eyes. The sight of his desire emboldened her, empowered her. In this game, she had all the power. She could hold off her climax and torture him, or show him how quickly and powerfully she could give herself pleasure. Either way, he would be forced to watch, unable to control her body.

With a wicked smile, she made a show of climbing up on the bed. She even let her chemise shimmy up so that he caught a glimpse of her naked backside before she rolled over on her back and settled onto her pillows.

"Can you see?" she murmured as she slowly spread her

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legs to reveal herself to him.

"Oh God, perfectly," he groaned.

She smiled.

Drawing a deep breath, she opened the drawer on the small bedside table to her left. Her hands shook as she reached inside. No one knew what she kept in the dark hiding place. Not her servants. Not her friends. But now she would reveal something infinitely intimate to a man she hardly knew.

Clenching her fist tightly, she drew out the long, white dildo she had used to pleasure herself over the last few lonely years.

Julian drew in a sharp breath that forced her gaze to him. His mouth was parted in surprise, but she saw no censure in his stare, only curiosity and a hot flash of desire.

"Now you know one of my secrets, my lord," she whispered in what she hoped was a sensual tone, not a shaking voice like she feared it was. "When my husband died, I longed for a man's touch. My fingers were not enough to bring me the kind of pleasure I desired. That was when I heard of this."

She held up the sex toy and turned it back and forth with a pendulum's motion. She was amused when Julian's eyes followed it like an interested child.

"It's made of ivory," she murmured as her breath became shorter and shorter. Having him watch her, silent as he waited for her to touch herself, was arousing her in more ways than she had imagined. Already, she felt the slick heat of desire warming her pussy and readying her for the dildo in her hand. And later, the impressive cock hidden beneath the bathwater.

"Show me what you do with it, Cecilia," he ordered in a low, choked voice. The only other noise in the room was the soft slosh of bathwater as he shifted. She had no doubt that his own hard member was thrusting up, seeking her heat. But he

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held back. He wanted to watch her come by her own hand before he gave her an even more powerful release.

"Are you ready?" she whispered as she brought the ivory dildo to her lips.

He nodded wordlessly.

"Good."

Because she was going to make sure this was something Julian would never forget.

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Chapter Four

Julian's body thrummed with anticipation, but beneath it was a strong, insistent guilt. Doing this, being with this stunning woman he hardly knew, was wrong. It took advantage of Cecilia's needs. Some of which he might never be able to fulfill.

But despite the guilt, he couldn't stop himself. When Cecilia offered him a few days of respite from the storm, he hadn't been able to say no. Going out into the cold both in reality and in his mind wasn't an appealing notion. But staying here with her, losing himself in the temptations of her body and company, it was something he couldn't turn away from. He didn't want to. Especially since the urge to be with her was so strong.

He watched in awe as she darted out her hot, wet tongue, the same one that had taken him to such heights of pleasure a short time ago, and glided it up and down the shaft of her sex toy. He'd heard of these things before, of course, but he had never known a woman who actually had one. And he'd certainly never had the pleasure of watching any woman draw it in and out of her pink lips like it was a cock she desperately wanted to ride.

He swallowed hard as Cecilia dragged the ivory tip down the apex of her body. Her head tilted back to rest on the pillows as she dragged the hard tip against one pert nipple, then crossed over to rub the other in small circles.

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Her slow torture was for show, but the way she touched herself with the toy was for her pleasure alone. Her lips trembled as she let out a moan that rocked his body and made his cock twitch larger beneath the warm water.

She slid the sex toy ever lower, playfully darting it against her bellybutton before she finally spread her legs wide and slipped the ivory shaft across her slit. Even across the room, Julian saw the glitter of aroused moisture in the glowing firelight. If he hadn't, the way her hips jolted from the bed when the toy brushed across her pussy would have told him she was already close to release before she'd even begun to play. A surge of arrogant triumph moved through him at that realization.

She teased just the outer folds of flesh and Julian was mesmerized by the way the stark white rod tangled in the coppery curls between her thighs. Her outer lips flexed to capture the hard thrust the same way they would if it were his cock rubbing back and forth along her sensitive entrance.

Her eyes drifted shut as she finally smoothed aside the silky folds of skin and brushed her clit with just the tip of the dildo. Her little moan went straight to Julian's cock and it juttied harder in response. The way her skin flushed as she rolled around and around the hard bud was maddening. He wanted to make her blush like that. He wanted to feel her skin heat beneath his lips and hands. He wanted to tug at her clit with gentle nips and sucks. Then he wanted to fill her until she screamed for release.

He wanted to do it all while he was fully cognizant this time.

She let out a cry as she bore down on her swollen clit with the head of the toy cock. She arched on the bed and her breath came sharp and fast, her gasps louder and more pronounced.

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This was no longer a show for his benefit. She had forgotten everything but her own pleasure.

Julian devoured every bit of information she gave him. He was learning so much about her. How she liked to be touched. How her body reacted. He ached to put that information to good use, but he had to wait. He had to let her finish what she'd begun. If not for her, then for himself. He was far too mesmerized to do anything else.

Her body quivered. Her heels dug into the mattress as she arched off the bed. It seemed like she couldn't take such pleasure anymore, but just as she began to thrash out an orgasm, she plunged the sex toy deep into her pussy, thrusting it wildly as she fingered her clit with her free hand until her screams echoed in the room around him.

Cecilia collapsed back against her pillows with a sigh. Her breath came in pants as she shuddered a few last times and finally went limp with pleasure. Her hand dropped away from the ivory toy, leaving it imbedded in her twitching pussy.

Slowly, her eyes came open and the blue went from foggy with desire to clear with trepidation. "I-I almost forgot you were watching me," she whispered. "Did I give you what you wanted?"

Julian swallowed hard, but couldn't find words to answer. Not when her skin was still slick with perspiration and her hands trembled with the power of her release.

"Julian?" she asked softly as she struggled to a sitting position.

Without a word, he rose from the tub in one smooth motion. Her eyes widened as he stalked, dripping wet, to the bed. He had her by the shoulders before she could ask any more questions and drug her to a standing position to crush her to his chest. Her heart pounded wildly and she surged up to

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meet his kiss.

He thrust his tongue between her lips, drinking in her flavor like a man starved. And he was, though he hadn't realized what he had been missing before. He had never wanted a woman like this before. Not even Alana. That drive to pleasure, to suck, to claim had never overpowered him like it was at this moment.

But one touch from Cecilia left him trembling with desire and unable to control the way his cock knocked against her stomach in a hard, harsh rhythm.

She moaned in response as her hands slid down his sides. Bathwater dripped around him from her fingertips, but she didn't seem to care that he was soaking her bed, soaking her chemise. She responded to his every kiss with a caress just as hungry, just as needful.

Julian pulled back and found himself staring down into the midnight blue of her eyes. They were glazed with passion and emotion. A combination he refused to deny himself any longer.

He clutched the neckline of her sopping chemise in each fist and pulled. The thin fabric ripped in two with just one yank, shredding away from her body and fluttering to the floor when he shoved it aside.

"Julian!" she cried, but there was anything but anger in her voice.

"I'll buy you another," he murmured as he bent to take one pink nipple between his lips. "I'll buy you ten. Better yet, I'll keep you like this. Naked and waiting for my touch."

She arched against his mouth with a wild cry as her hips jolted to collide against his own. He smiled. She liked it when he talked to her. Liked it when he told her what he wanted to do to her or how he wanted her to be. He'd seen that earlier

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when he'd told her to masturbate for him and it was here again.

He put his mouth close to her ear to blow a soft burst of hot air against the sensitive shell. She hissed out her pleasure in response and her fingernails dug into his skin as she pulled him closer.

"I'm going to fuck you," he whispered low and hot. Normally he wouldn't have used such a harsh word with a lady, but by the way she moaned he knew the blunt description conjured images in her head that left her wet and wanting. "How would you like me to do it?"

Her lip quivered as he looked into her eyes. There was a wild quality there now, as well as hesitation. He realized despite her foray into sex toys, her experiences with actual sex had probably only involved one or two positions and his question made her vivid imagination run mad.

"I could lay you back on this bed and take you like a gentle lover should, like your husband probably once did." He smiled wickedly. "Or I could claim you by letting you ride me. We could sit face to face with my cock buried deep inside you while I watch every moment of pleasure play across your beautiful face. Or I could roll you over right here, right now on this bed and take you as a stallion does when his mate is in heat."

She swallowed at the last suggestion and her response gave him his answer. He pressed one last, hot kiss against her lips before he placed one hand on each hip and flipped her over on her stomach.

Immediately, she lifted her backside to him, offering him every access he had ever wanted. He looked down and smiled to see her sex toy was still delved deep within her quivering pussy. He grasped the ivory handle and slowly, gently pulled.

She hissed out pleasure and pain at once as the dildo left

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her body empty and clenching. He held it up, examining the wet sheen of come that glittered on the ivory shaft. Her pussy was definitely ready for his own member, but instead of driving his aching cock inside her, he forced self-control and began an exploration.

"Your skin is so soft," he murmured as he leaned forward to kiss one globe of her backside. She let out a cry and dug her fingers into the coverlet. "I woke thinking that this morning when I remembered taking you. I'm glad it wasn't part of a dream. That you weren't part of a fantasy."

He stroked a finger across her cunt. The wetness from her orgasm was still present, hot against his fingertips. His smile widened. How he longed to introduce her to pleasures she'd never imagined. And with her toy still in his hand, he had the perfect chance.

He stroked the phallus across her sex and her gasps grew louder and more intense. Then he glided the ivory head up her slit until he rubbed it across the tight little hole of her bottom. Her moans increased yet again.

"Did you like the way I felt inside you last night?" he asked softly as he got to his knees behind her. His cock surged toward her like a divining rod, but he ignored the intense need to fuck her as he continued to tease.

"Yes," she sobbed as she thrust back against him.

He dodged her with a low laugh. "Do you want to feel me buried inside of you again? Now?"

"Please." She glanced over her shoulder at him. "I need to feel you. More than I need water. More than I need breath. I need you."

"I want to give you so much pleasure. Things you never thought possible," he murmured as he continued to rub the dildo against her ass. "Will you let me?"

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Her eyes widened as they drifted away from his face to the toy in his hand. "You mean to—?" she broke off.

"If you'll allow me," he said with a nod. When she didn't protest, he took her silence as a yes. "Does this feel good?"

He pushed the head of her toy against her tight hole. Slowly, just the tip nudged inside.

"Yes," she groaned as her eyes rolled back. "My God, I never imagined...yes!"

He continued to move forward, taking his time, never forcing. When she sucked in her breath, he paused to allow the twinge of pain to pass. Once she let out a moan, he crept forward again, repeating the process until the toy was imbedded deep inside her untried bottom.

"Have you ever dreamed of two men inside you?" he whispered. He let the toy go, leaving it lodged inside her. For now, he wanted her to simply feel the fullness of it. Later, he would give her more. "In your darkest fantasies. In your most erotic moments?"

She shivered and pushed back against him until the wet heat of her body caressed the swollen head of his cock.

"Yes."

His smile wavered as desire finally overtook him. "This is what it would feel like."

He grasped her hips with both hands and thrust into her to the hilt. She cried out as her hands clutched fistfuls of the coverlet and she pressed back against him to bury him even deeper into her womb. She clenched around him, pulsating in a wild rhythm around his already aching cock.

Leaning forward, Julian kissed Cecilia's back. He lapped at her shoulders, but he didn't thrust. She made a soft sound of protest in the back of her throat and tried to tip her hips forward, but he anticipated her action and wrapped an arm

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around her stomach to keep her steady. He didn't want her to be out of control. He didn't want a mere flurry of sensation and then a blinding release. He wanted to memorize each moment. Each reaction. Each touch.

"Don't struggle," he said softly against her skin. "Just feel. Feel yourself being filled in every way."

At his words, she relaxed and he inched his free hand up to her breasts. Slowly, he strummed his thumb over her nipple. The little bud swelled and hardened as he stroked and pulled. Her body squeezed his erection in time, pulsing each time he rubbed his hands against her breasts.

She straightened up off her hands and leaned back against Julian's chest until her head was cradled beneath his chin. Her breath was harsh and ragged in the quiet room as he let go of her hips and moved his other hand up to cup her opposite breast.

He squeezed them gently, massaging the firm skin and toying with the tight nipples until her breaths were more like sobs of pleasure and her pussy and ass were twitching in reaction. Then and only then did he tip his hips and begin to slowly thrust into her. She pressed back against him with her whole body, rolling her hips as he ground against her in tiny circles that sent pleasure shooting to every part of his body. He'd never felt so alive before or wanted to give another woman so much pleasure. He wanted her to weep with bliss, to be weak with desire.

"How does it feel?" he asked against her ear.

"Full," she gasped out. Her fingers trailed up to tangle with his. "But so good. Nothing has ever felt so good before."

He smiled. Nothing had ever felt so good. It was like a challenge to take her farther, higher. With one hand, he grabbed the sex toy and began to thrust it ever so gently in and

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out of her ass. She panted with pleasure as she pushed back against his hand, driving the toy with her own rhythm.

With his other hand, he stroked his fingertips down the soft curve of her stomach and to the mound between her legs. Coaxing aside her curls and the heated folds, he found the hardened nub of her clitoris. The moment he brushed his thumb against her, her spine stiffened and she let out a cry as she came. Her body jerked against his and she gripped at him so tightly that he nearly lost control right along with her.

Crushing his arms around her, he held her to his chest, letting her spasm out her pleasure with long cries. But it was when it was over, when she had slumped against his arms, that she truly unmanned him.

"Julian."

He squeezed his eyes shut as emotion swelled in him. The way she said his name, just those three syllables. She didn't murmur his name with lust alone. It was an endearment. A prayer. A confession of her deepest heart.

His body trembled with the power of her voice and the heat of her pressed against and around him. He had to look at her. He had to see her eyes. He had to feel her arms around him. Only then would he find his own release.

Loosening his grip on her, he slipped his erection from her tight sheath. She moaned in protest, but his gentle kiss on her shoulder soothed her. He cupped her hip with one hand as he carefully withdrew her sex toy with the other. She groaned, but it was weak and quiet from exhaustion and satisfaction.

She was still limp with pleasure as he rolled her over on her back and pressed her into her pillows. He smoothed her dark curls away from her cloudy blue eyes. They locked with his, filled with questions and needs, but beneath were the emotions he had felt in her release. Emotions that called to him

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even though he knew they were a dangerous prospect in an affair such as this.

But he pushed his doubts aside as he eased her legs apart and sank back down into the welcoming heat of her body. Her pussy massaged his cock, holding him tightly as he inched all the way in to the very hilt. She arched against him with a soft moan before her eyes fluttered open to meet his again. Her fingers threaded through his hair, gliding along his scalp lightly before she coaxed his head down for a kiss.

She opened to him in every way as he slid his tongue between her lips. She opened her mouth, her body...perhaps even her heart as he thrust into her with slow intent. Her embrace was warm and wrapped around him like a blanket on a cold winter's night. And as his control wavered and he felt himself on the edge of a powerful release, he realized he never wanted to leave that embrace.

With a cry, he poured into her as he held her close to him, panting against her skin as he wished he'd met her years before. Before her husband. Before Alana. Before his life and matters of his heart had been complicated.

Just before.

Only a thread of light pierced around the edge of Cecilia's curtains, but she could see evening was falling. The storm's blinding white was fading to gray and eventually utter darkness would engulf her estate.

She sighed as she held Julian even closer and rained soft kisses along the muscled column of his neck. While they made love, time stood still, but now it felt like it was rushing by. Surely the storm would soon lessen or...she shivered...end. Once there was nothing to force him to stay, Julian would be on his way back to London. Away from her forever.

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The ache around her heart swelled even though she knew it was unwise to involve her emotions in a few days of pure passion.

He let out a sigh, but didn't move. She was happy for that. His weight and the feel of him still buried deep inside her let her live in her fantasy world for a bit longer. The world where she had felt him give her a piece of his heart while he made love to her. A world where she could fantasize they could be together even though she knew it wasn't true. The lives they lived were very separate. And he still mourned and loved his late wife.

Cecilia couldn't bear being second choice. Not again.

"I'm hurting you," he mumbled against her pillow.

Her painful thoughts scattered. "No," she whispered as she combed her fingers lightly through his hair. "I like your weight. I like the feel of you inside me."

He lifted his head to meet her eyes and his grin sent reaction through every part of her.

"You were...that was..." He struggled for words and she found herself almost leaning into him, waiting for him to confess something important, something real. "Amazing. I've never made love like we make it before."

She sank back in disappointment. Of course. Sex was what held them together. Her rush of emotion and her belief she'd felt the same from him was only part of her fantasy. And a part she'd best forget if she didn't want to end up crushed when he left her.

"I'm glad you were satisfied," she said as she allowed him to shift away from her. Her body ached with the movement and after being filled in every way, she felt empty. She shook her head. Every moment had been worth the little bit of pain and loneliness. Having him fill her like he had, it had been

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worth everything.

"Satisfied?" A low laugh rumbled from his chest. "No. Satiated for a moment, but never satisfied. In an hour, I'll crave you again. Like opium in my blood."

She was glad for the gathering dark in the room so Julian wouldn't see her disappointment. Though his words heated her body, they left a chill on her heart. Opium. She was an addiction, a need. Not healthy. A habit he would soon have to break and perhaps even look back on with unhappiness and regret. The thought of that...

"Cecilia?"

"Hmm?" She shook her head. She couldn't let him see that she wanted more than just drugging sex. That hadn't been part of the bargain she'd struck with him that afternoon. It was unfair to change the deal they'd made.

"You're quiet." He tilted her face toward him so he could see her in the fading firelight. His eyes searched hers, filled with concern. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No," she lied. He meant wounds to the body and she wasn't about to confess wounds to the soul. "I'm simply enjoying your company."

His smile was clear even in the dim light. "As I am enjoying yours. But it's growing late and I'm hungry."

"Supper will be served in an hour," she said as she pulled away from his arms to sit up on her pillows. "But you're free to explore my home if you're feeling restless." She knew how flat her voice sounded.

He tilted his head. "Won't you come with me?"

She shook her head. "I'd like a bath to sooth my aching muscles and to dress. I'll join you before our supper is served, though. Your clothing should be on the small table outside the door. My housekeeper assured me your things would be

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washed and pressed before nightfall."

He hesitated, but then swung his long, muscular legs over the bedside. "Very well."

With a skipping heart, she watched him walk naked to her door. By God, he was a beautiful man. Made of pure muscle and sinew. It wasn't the body she'd normally associate with a Duke, but he obviously enjoyed riding and outdoor activities that kept him from turning flabby and soft. From his strong legs to his muscled rear end and back, he was carved like stone. And when he turned to face her as he dressed himself, well, the perfection continued. Even when it wasn't at attention, his magnificent cock spoke of a man born to pleasure women. How many there had been before he had married? Had there been any since, aside from her?

Thinking of his wracked face on her terrace the night before and his wish for death, she doubted he had been indulging in the pleasures of the flesh.

But he was a different man now. With smiles and laughter, and with a lust for more than just her body. She could only hope those changes would remain after he left her, even if it meant he would share his vigorous desires with another woman. Perhaps a long string of lucky women.

Once he had buttoned the last button on his freshly laundered shirt, he crossed the dim room back to her bed. Leaning up, he cupped her cheeks and tilted her head closer. Her heart leapt with the touch that was both gentle and possessive at once. His lips brushed over hers with soft pressure that built until he owned her mouth and had tasted every inch of it. With the bright glitter of desire in his stare, he pulled back.

"Don't be long," he whispered as he let the tendrils of her hair wrap around his fingers.

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She shivered. "Wh-why?"

He frowned. "Because I'll miss you."

She drew in a short breath as he released her and left her room, closing the door behind him and leaving her alone with only his scent and troubling thoughts of him to keep her company in the darkness.

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Chapter Five

Julian paced Cecilia's library. He'd seen several books he wanted to read, but when he sat down in a chair by the warm fire, he was always lead to distraction until he tossed the volume aside to look for another.

It wasn't his choice of reading material that kept him from concentrating. It was the woman he'd left in the bed upstairs. It was Cecilia's face and responsive body that kept dancing before his eyes. And it was the way she made him feel that had him pacing the boards like an animal in a cage.

When Alana died, he had sworn he would never let another woman close to his heart. He had even gone so far as to keep any from his body, though he'd had plenty of tempting offers. But Cecilia was different. Having her had started as a way to block out the pain, but she was quickly becoming a balm on his heart. And with each gentle touch, he was healing. Feeling. Forgetting.

He jerked at that thought. He couldn't forget. He owed Alana never to forget.

The library door opened quietly and he raised his eager eyes in the hopes that Cecilia had readied herself early. Instead, a short, round woman with graying hair stood in the doorway, watching him with sharp, disapproving brown eyes.

"Will you require anything before supper, Your Grace?" she asked when he set his book aside.

"No."

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Instead of bowing away, the woman stayed in her spot and continued to size him up with her stare. It surprised Julian. Servants weren't often so bold. Or so filled with mistrust, as this woman obviously was.

"Is there something *you* need?" he asked as he quirked an eyebrow.

None of the servants in Cecilia's home had welcomed him with anything more than the barest civility. This woman and the butler had both stopped just short of outward hostility. They obviously cared for their mistress and he had to respect their misgivings. Certainly he was not behaving in a gentlemanly fashion by rutting with Cecilia every chance he got.

The woman slipped inside the room and shut the door. Julian's eyes widened. Here was a massive breach of etiquette that raised his interest beyond reason.

"I am Mrs. Baker. Lady Lexington's housekeeper. The butler's wife."

Julian nodded. Well, that explained the hostility. As went the gander, the goose shall follow. "I see."

"We have worked for her ladyship for many years, Your Grace." The woman rung the dishtowel in her hands. "We've seen her through all manner of pain and heartache. I would not like to see her through those things again."

Julian rose to his full height with a frown. The haughty, aristocratic side of him wanted to dismiss this cheeky woman with a speech that would burn her ears. But the other part...the part that craved Cecilia, wanted to hear her.

It occurred to him that though Cecilia knew very much about his life, he knew very little about hers. She had been married and her husband had passed away. He had no idea how long before. Or what their relationship had been like. Or

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what Cecilia was like outside of her bed.

And he wanted to know.

"And you think I will cause her such pain again?" he asked softly.

"I know you will." The housekeeper straightened her spine, but he saw her hands shake beneath the mangled dishtowel. "You are like her husband in so many ways."

"How?" Julian asked with a tilt of his head. "What did he do to her?"

"Mrs. Baker!"

They had been so caught up in their cautious conversation that neither Julian nor the housekeeper had noticed Cecilia open the library door. Now both turned to look at her. Her face was pale except for two spots of high color on her cheeks. They put Julian to mind of the way she looked when she climaxed, except that her eyes were dark with anger and upset rather than passion.

The housekeeper's face went as pale as the snow blowing around the windows outside. "I'm sorry, my lady."

"Please see to supper," Cecilia said in a low, choked voice. When the older woman slipped past her, Cecilia flinched a little and didn't look in her direction.

After they were alone again, Julian watched her without speaking. Cecilia refused to meet his eyes as she stood behind a chair, gripping its back with enough force that her knuckles were white. Even her breathing was short and sharp, like she couldn't get enough air through her emotional state.

Finally, she dared to raise her eyes to his and he felt her search his face, looking to see how much her housekeeper had revealed to him. Her smile was weak and false.

"Did you find a book to read?" she asked in a wavering voice.

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Julian folded his arms. This was the first time he felt her hide a part of herself from him. While it shouldn't have bothered him, it did. He wanted to know her in every way, even if their time together was destined to be short.

"Your selection is magnificent, but I'm afraid your housekeeper interrupted me before I had a chance to read much of anything."

Her lower lip trembled slightly before she stiffened it along with her shoulders. His frown deepened. She was putting up a barrier between them. One he wanted to strip away with as much passion as he wanted to strip away her clothing.

"I see." Her voice was low and even cold in the warm room. "Well, I shall speak to her about that at once. She has been under my employ long enough to know better than to disturb a guest with silly matters. Excuse me."

She turned to leave, but Julian stopped her. "I didn't mind. In fact, I wish I could have spoken to her longer. She seemed to have something interesting to share."

Cecilia didn't turn away from the door, but her shoulders trembled and her head dipped. "What could a housekeeper have to say that would interest a Duke? Was she telling you the history of the silver?"

Julian winced at the flat, monotone of her voice. It was so different from the laughter that brought such light into the darkest parts of his soul, or the throaty moans that took his desire to a fevered pitch. This was a tone filled with pain and heartache. Emotions he didn't want to associate with Cecilia. Emotions he wanted to erase from her heart with his touch, with his kiss.

Only he knew it was more complicated than that.

"Mrs. Baker was about to tell me the history of *you*."

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She gasped and spun around to face him.

"The history of you and your husband, to be more specific. Though I think you're already aware of that. It's why you're suddenly so afraid."

Her hands trembled at her sides and she shoved them behind her back as she struggled to maintain a cool exterior. But the façade was chipping away, leaving glimpses of her spirit that Julian wanted to explore.

"Afraid?" She managed a brittle laugh. "I'm not afraid."

"Then tell me what he did to you." He took a cautious step toward her. He wanted to be closer. To touch her, comfort her. "Did he beat you? Abandon you?"

She flinched. "This subject is not open for discussion. I don't know you well enough to share such personal secrets."

Now it was Julian's turn to flinch. Her words were like swords through his heart. "Don't know me well enough?" he repeated in shock. "Well, I know you. I have pressed my mouth against every inch of your skin. I have watched your face flush with passion. I wager I know you more intimately than any other person in the world."

Her face darkened with a blush and he knew she was thinking about the moments they had shared in her bed. He thought of them, too and a wash of lust rolled through his body. He wanted to ease her aches by making love to her. But not before he knew the truth and why she was so afraid to share it with him.

Her blue eyes came up to his face. They were filled with desire, but behind that was something else. Something steely and cool. A different woman than the one he had touched so intimately.

"You may know my body, but that does not mean you know me or that I know you," she whispered. "And this

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subject is not open to conversation."

He caught her arm and inched her closer. Close enough that he knew she felt his body heat and smelled his skin. He certainly felt her and inhaled the soft lavender of her freshly washed hair.

"You told me nothing was taboo to me during the storm," he whispered as he moved his mouth closer to her neck. "You said nothing would be closed if I desire it."

Her lip trembled even harder now, but it was as much from need as anything else. Still, she shook her head and carefully extracted her arm from his grip. "This subject is."

They stared at each other for a long moment, her shaking like a leaf and him stunned by how much her rejection hurt. When had his heart become involved in this affair? Why couldn't he just accept her reticence and continue to enjoy her body until the snow faded away and the roads cleared?

The door behind her opened and the butler entered. He jolted back when he saw how close the couple was to the doorway, but he recovered with a cool bow.

"My lady, supper is served."

Cecilia shook away whatever emotions spun in her head and gave the servant a genuine smile. "Thank you, Baker. Your Grace?"

Julian sighed as he offered an arm to her. She took it, but he felt her hold herself away, never letting her body touch his as they made their way to her dining room and their supper.

Cecilia watched Julian take a last sip of wine before he folded his napkin on the tabletop with a satisfied sigh. Supper had been quiet, to say the least. Julian now held her at a distance that broke her heart. And she had to force herself to do the same. She didn't want to reveal the embarrassing truth

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about her husband, especially not to this man. She didn't want the light in his eyes to fade, replaced by guilt or worse, pity.

But she didn't want this either. Not this cool civility that she would share with any guest in her home. At this rate, he would be in one of her guestrooms tonight and she would be alone again. The thought of that was unbearable. She needed him. They only had a short time left; she didn't want to squander a moment of it.

She shifted in her chair. If her years alone had taught her anything, it was that there weren't many chances at happiness. She refused to let this one go. All she had to do was take charge. Julian would forget his questions if she handled him correctly.

Luckily, she knew exactly how he liked to be handled.

With a shaky smile, she rose from her seat at the head of the long table and made her way to the opposite side where Julian sat staring into his empty wine glass with a faraway look that reminded her too much of his face on the terrace. With hesitation, she rested her hand upon his shoulder in an awkward gesture of comfort.

He looked up at her with a start. Their eyes locked and his grew sharper with both desire and questions. She vowed to focus on the desire, no matter what he asked.

"Did you get enough to eat?" she whispered as she let her fingers play along the finely stitched seam of his jacket. He shuddered beneath her touch, and a surge of warm heat and triumph coursed through her veins and settled at the tips of her breasts and the junction of her thighs. Both places ached for his touch.

"Nearly," he murmured in return as he glided a hand around to cup her rear end. She gasped as his hand probed through the satin of her gown and played along the swell of her

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bottom.

"N–Nearly?" she stammered as his fingertips pushed deeper, molding between the firm globes of her backside to play along the tight space in between. "Should I call for more food?"

"No," he murmured as he released her rear end to begin unbuttoning the back of her gown. "I'll make do with what is in front of me."

She shivered as her dress gaped in the back. Without rising, Julian hooked his hands around the edging and glided the satin off her shoulders. Once her dress was in a forgotten pile around her slippered feet, he pushed the plates in front of him away and eased his chair back from the table. Gripping her hips, he slid her into the space he'd created.

With a shiver, she perched on the edge of the table, standing between his legs in only her corset, chemise and underskirts. Julian looked up at her as he pulled the first tie of her corset. He never broke eye contact as he made short work of the crisscrossing binds. When he set her free from the contraption of bone and fabric, she let out a sigh, relieved to be free from the confines and also anticipating what he would do next.

She had intended to seduce him into forgetting what he had demanded of her, but instead he had surrendered his pursuit of her past, at least for the moment, and was seducing her. Right here in her dining room. On her table. Where anyone could walk in and see them, though she doubted her servants would be so foolish. Still, the idea that he was making love to her in a public room of the house with the full light of the chandeliers, candles and fire glaring down on them was erotic beyond her wildest dreams.

He glided his hands beneath her chemise hem and up past

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where her underskirt waist skimmed her flat stomach. His fingers were hot on her bare ribcage and like fire when he finally slid the tips over her breasts. Her nipples hardened to a nearly painful degree and she let out a low moan as he rolled one of them between his thumb and forefinger in a lazy rhythm.

"Yes, I'm still hungry," he said low in his throat as he pulled the chemise over her head in one smooth motion and bared her. She scrambled for a hold on the table edge as he leaned forward to swipe a drip of chocolate sauce off one of his empty plates. His hot breath caressed her skin before he leaned away.

She watched almost in a trance, as his chocolaty finger trailed up and up toward her skin. Finally he covered her nipple with the digit and swirled a sinful pattern against the hardened nub. The sauce was still warm and she arched reflexively into his touch, thrusting her breast toward him in what could only be described as a wanton display.

He smiled at her before he painted the opposite nipple in the decadent sauce, then lifted his finger to her lips. Eagerly, she darted her tongue out and licked away the remainder of the dessert away. She sucked at his finger like it was his cock, gliding her tongue up and down the length of it until he moaned. He shook his head as he fought to regain control, then pulled away and grasped her hips to steady her.

As she watched in awe, he leaned up and laved her nipple, cleaning away the sauce with a few swipes of his rough tongue, then sucking hard for good measure. The tugging sensation went from her swollen nipple down through her body and finally settled between her legs, causing a similar reaction at her clit. Her hips bucked up, but Julian's hands steadied her as he smiled against her breast.

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He let her nipple slide out of his lips slowly, but before she could feel the full weight of disappointment, his mouth clasped the opposite nipple and repeated his actions. But this time he let his teeth graze her nipple, nipping the sensitive flesh and pulling back a fraction. It was a sharp taste of punishment for teasing him, but also an erotic invitation she couldn't refuse. She dipped her head back with a moan and clawed at the tabletop for support as her knees began to tremble.

"Here." Pressing her back, he stood to lift her slightly until she was actually sitting on the very end of the table. Her feet dangled over the edge as she looked up at him. With a quiet curse, he cupped her chin and pressed his mouth down against hers.

She tasted chocolate on his lips, as well as desire so potent that it nearly overpowered every other thing in the room. There was only him, and she knew she could and would lose herself to him. In fact, she looked forward to that moment of surrender.

He pulled back with effort, gasping for breath as he stroked his fingers along her cheeks. "I'm still not satisfied," he growled before he let his fingers drift down the length of her body to her underskirt waist. "I'm still hungry."

She gasped as he tore at the tapes that bound her skirt together. The fabric fell apart in his skillful hands and with a small lift, he had freed her from her last protection from total nudity. The shiny table was cool against her now bare backside, a sharp contrast to Julian's hot fingers as they traced their way back up her inner thigh.

"Lay back," he whispered as he shoved more plates out of the way to clear a spot for her to rest.

"You can't mean to—" she protested even as she let him guide her against the wooden surface.

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"I mean to exactly," he said as he took his seat again and cupped her hips. With a short yank, he pulled her bottom to the very edge of the table, then glided his hands beneath her. His fingers pressed into her backside, clenching at the soft skin as he lifted her up and tilted her until she was at his utter mercy. Her pussy was fully exposed and with her hips lifted high in his strong hands, there was no escaping what he did. That utter lack of control both thrilled and terrified her.

Before she could process what he planned to do, let alone protest it, his head dipped and his hot breath burned the sensitive folds of flesh that protected her sex. He used his thumbs to peel her open and she arched as his fingers brushed her throbbing clit. A sob burst from her lips as he slowly circled the bud with the firm pressure of those thumbs, rolling it in ever harder circles and causing the tingle of pleasure to ignite into a raging inferno of desire.

Still, it wasn't enough. She wanted his kiss against her. His skilled tongue on her, then in her. She wanted him to suck, to probe until she screamed out his name. Until she could no longer control the gush of her juices and she came.

He obliged even though she hadn't voiced her desires. His tongue slid across her opening. The rough lick made her gasp and writhe helplessly on the table. He chuckled low in his throat before he went in for another taste.

"I don't need chocolate this time," he said against her flesh. The words vibrated through her clit and her pussy, making her shudder. "Your flavor is perfect without any additions."

With that, he settled his nose between her thighs and began licking her in earnest. His tongue sought out every fold of her flesh, lapping her to the highest peaks of sensitivity before he tugged at her with little, sharp nips. Tears flowed

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down her face as he circled her clit for the briefest of moments, then dragged his mouth away to drill his tongue into her slit, fucking her with his mouth, as she knew he would do with his cock.

Her eyes fluttered shut as his fingers opened her wider and wider, revealing more and more of her tingling body to his tortuous tongue. She bucked against each touch, trying to force his tongue to focus on her clit, but never succeeding as he brushed it briefly, but always moved away to place his attentions against the weeping slit or her clenching ass.

Finally, she could bear no more of the sensual torture. With a cry, she clawed at his hands. "Please, oh please, Julian. It's too much. Too much."

His eyes came up, sparkling with desires of his own and triumph that he'd made her beg. "It's never too much," he said softly.

Then he bent his head and took her clit between his lips. He swirled his tongue around it, lapping at the bud until her whole body began to shake. And finally, finally, he tugged her with enough suction that her whole body arched. The lights of the chandelier over her head seemed to explode as her world tilted and vibrated around her release.

She cried out, unable to control the sounds of pleasure that escaped her lips even though she knew the servants would hear. She didn't care. If the entire staff had traipsed into the room, she couldn't have stopped coming. Her release went on and on, powerful and completing and finally, as her cries subsided and her tremors dissipated, satisfying.

Julian gathered her into his arms as he sank back in his chair and gasped for breath. She clung to him, reveling in his heat and what he gave her each time he touched her. She'd meant his stay in her home to give him back his life, but

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instead it was giving her back her own.

"I want," she whispered as he cradled her against his chest. "I want to give you that much pleasure."

"You do," he said as he stroked a hand along her hair. "In so many ways."

She shook her head as she pulled away from his comforting arms. Shifting her weight, she straddled him in the large captain's chair until she felt the heat of his erection through his wool trousers. The scratchy fabric pressed against her sensitive flesh deliciously.

"No, I want to give you that pleasure now." She cupped his cheeks and kissed him. His flavor was different now. The hint of chocolate still lingered, as did her own earthy flavors and beneath it all, the taste of him. Smoke, whisky, need...whatever it was, she would never forget it.

She rocked against him as she kissed him. She pressed her tongue into his mouth while she rubbed her breasts back and forth against the smooth cotton of his shirt.

"I haven't even loosened my cravat," he protested weakly between kisses.

She nuzzled his neck and kissed his ear. "I like it. I like being at your mercy. I only want to free your cock. Leave the rest of your clothes on."

He shivered, but managed to slide his hands between them to open the four buttons on his trousers. His cock sprung free at full attention and popped through the opening to rub against her inner thigh. Cecilia clenched her legs with a groan at his steel heat. She needed him inside her, and she needed it now.

Using her knees as leverage, she lifted herself up and positioned herself above him. With a twist, she felt him at the wet entrance of her aching sheath. Slowly, almost painfully slowly, she eased herself down inch by hard inch until he filled

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her completely. She leaned her forehead against his as she reveled in the feel of him inside her. It was perfect.

"My God, you fit me like a glove," he whispered. "I could stay inside you forever."

She moaned her approval as she began to rock against him. Her thrusts were slow at first as she savored the feel of him, but as her excitement and need mounted, her pace quickened. She rushed forward, rolling her hips toward utter completion and loving the fact that she was in control of it all. The tight chair made it nearly impossible for Julian to guide their lovemaking, so it was all up to her.

Her eyes fluttered shut as the front edge of her orgasm hit her. She rode through it hard, clinging to Julian's shoulders as she wailed out release in a low keening cry that echoed in the room around them. Julian's harsh growls followed close behind and the feel of him pulsing into her only prolonged her pleasure even further.

Cecilia didn't know how much time passed as they sat that way, their foreheads pressed together as they both panted to catch their breath. After a time, they began to take air as one and her heart rate calmed. Julian's arms were still firmly around her and his cock was still half hard buried deeply inside her.

"We should get up and I should get dressed before we scandalize my poor servants even further," she murmured as she pressed a kiss against his smoothly shaven cheek.

He nodded, but groaned as she disconnected their bodies and put her unsteady feet back on the ground. As she searched around for her chemise, he watched her.

"I want to go back to your room," he said, his voice low and rough.

She arched an eyebrow at him as she glided her underskirt

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up and fastened it loosely around her waist. "I believe you are insatiable, Your Grace."

He returned her smile, but it was tired and even a little sad. "I want to make love to you again, Cecilia. I've never denied that you drive me mad, but that isn't why I want to take you upstairs to your room."

She stepped into her gown and put her arms back through the sleeves. "Why?"

He stood and turned her back to him while he deftly buttoned her gown. "Because I want us to have our privacy when we talk about the past. And the future."

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Chapter Six

Julian threw another log on the fire as Cecilia took a knitted blanket from the back of the settee in her room and arranged it on her lap. When he took a seat beside her, she tucked the rest of it around his legs, then settled back against his chest.

He breathed in her scent as he tried to calm his racing heart. What the hell was he doing? Cecilia was a woman he was having an affair with. A few days of pleasure. Yet her touch made him want more. Made him long for a future that would sparkle as much as her eyes.

But before they would even think about that, he had to know a few things. He had to know about her husband. And he might even have to tell her about Alana.

The thought made him cringe.

Cecilia slipped her fingers between his and held up their intertwined hands to examine them in the firelight. She smiled softly before she lifted his hand to her lips and kissed his knuckles with a gentleness that reflected all her best qualities.

Fire erupted low in Julian's belly, but he tamed it, at least for a time. For this one moment, the truth was more important. Later he could lose himself in her touch again, use her body as a balm for his wounds.

"I want to talk to you," he said softly.

Her smile remained on her face, but her eyes lost their luster. "Yes, you mentioned that. About the past. About the

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future. But Julian, why must we talk about either one?"

His brow knitted. "What do you mean? I thought most women longed to talk about a future with a man."

"I am not most women," she said, her voice taut and filled with so many emotions that it pained him. Hurt. Anger. Defensive fear.

"No, my dear, that is very evident." He laughed to lighten the suddenly somber mood of the room. "And that's why I'm so drawn to you. I want to know about you."

"I'm not very interesting." She turned her face away and her body stiffened in preparation to get up and move away from him.

Julian caught her arm to keep her at his side. This was too important to let her run away from him. "That isn't true."

"Please let me go," she whispered and pulled ineffectively against his grip.

"No." He held her fast. "Not until we come to some understanding. Not until I have a chance to know you better."

She looked up at him for the first time since he'd begun testing her boundaries and her eyes were filled with the bright sparkle of tears. "This wasn't part of our bargain."

"I know." He loosened his hold on her arm and was relieved when she didn't move away. "But I want more than just a few days now."

"Why?" Her voice broke and a tear trickled down her cheek in a slow trail. "Why not just take what we've been given and leave it at that? Dredging up the past can only bring pain to us both. I don't want more pain, Julian. I want to look back on our time together with only pleasure. Without regret."

He hesitated. Perhaps she was right. The past could only bring them more pain. If they simply let their attachment remain one that lived and died with the storm, nothing could

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take the memory away.

Only...Julian had been living on memory for a long time. He didn't want that anymore. Not with this woman. Not if he had a chance to make the moment last even just a little while longer.

"Not every part of the past is painful," he murmured as he cupped her chin to tilt her face up. Her skin was so soft. Her eyes were so beautiful. He could lose himself in those things. Perhaps forever.

"You said you have brothers," he began as he trailed his thumb back and forth across the line of her jaw. "How many?"

His benign question seemed to relax her and when she smiled this time it was with genuine affection. "Three. Two older, one younger. My father and mother are still living, but they are far away in Lincolnshire. I rarely see them. Perhaps once a year when they come to call for a few weeks after the Season is over and sometimes during the Christmas holidays."

He sighed with relief. Despite her reticence in the library, there was some information she gave freely. And it was only fair to return her gift. "My parents are both dead. My mother when I was a boy. My father over four years ago. I have a younger sister, Rachel who married a few months before I did. She lives in London most of the year."

Cecilia's fingers came up to caress his face as she let out a little gasp. "You've been...so alone. For so long."

He leaned into her touch and the comfort she gave him. "Yes, I suppose I have been alone in some way most of my life. But as you know, being alone has its advantages. You must like it or you wouldn't sequester yourself away on this estate the way you do. You would come to London. You must have friends there. And I'm sure your family misses you."

"Yes," her voice caught. "They want me to come to

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London during the Season again. To participate in the activities there."

He drew in a deep breath. Pushing harder could very well go terribly wrong and damage the fragile trust they'd established. Yet he had no choice. The storm would end soon and if he didn't try to hold on to Cecilia now, he might not have another chance. The idea of leaving without ever knowing anything about this woman other than the way she looked at the height of passion drove him to desperate measures.

"If you went to London, a woman such as yourself would never find herself without suitors. I know you could easily find a new husband."

Her body stiffened a second time and she jerked her fingers away from his face. "I am too old for such nonsense. No man would look twice at me with a group of young, fresh debutantes in the room."

He frowned. How little she remembered. Or perhaps she was blind to her own charms after so many years of self-exile. "You are a beautiful, captivating woman. I know many a man who would rush to your side. Rush to take you as his wife."

With a snap of the blanket, Cecilia shot off the couch like a bullet leaving a pistol. She flew to the fireplace and leaned on the mantle, looking at the flames as her shoulders trembled. Julian had never seen emotions so raw and wild. Despite his frustration at the walls she erected around her heart, and the need he felt to know her more intimately, seeing her like this...so free and emotional when she was usually so calm, made his cock swell.

He shoved his baser needs down. If he wanted more, he had to wait until the time was right. And keep pressing her no matter how she resisted. Eventually she would surrender the information he sought: the truth about her relationship with her

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husband.

"I had a husband," she said in a low, choked tone that wrenched his heart. "I have no need of another. Certainly not of the ilk I would find in London ballrooms. No, I'm happy to stay here."

"Why?" he asked as he rose to his full height and tossed the blanket aside on the floor. "Why do you run, Cecilia? Why do you hide yourself away? Why do you keep *me* at arm's length?"

Her face lit up with inner fire and his body reacted of its own accord. "At arm's length?" she snapped. "Is that what you call tonight on the dining room table when you were fucking me until I screamed? Is that what you call my spreading my legs every time you come near? You may say a lot of things about me, Julian, but I have never been able to keep you at arm's length! Not since the very first night I saw you on my terrace, an utter stranger who aroused my most wanton instincts."

"You have kept me away from your heart and your soul," he returned as he caught her arm before she could spin away. He pushed her back until she was pressed against the wall beside the great, stone fireplace. Her breath came in angry gasps, but her eyes glittered with uncontrolled desire. Like him, the heat and passion of the argument they were having was obviously spilling over into her body and its need for him.

But damn, that wasn't enough anymore. Not for him! Not with this woman.

"Tell me what happened, Cecilia. Tell me about your husband," he insisted and he felt his control beginning to slip as her inexplicable resistance continued. He wasn't accustomed to having what he wanted withheld from him. But Cecilia was unlike anyone else in his life.

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It was why he desired her so desperately.

She gritted her teeth. "I said no. I don't want to talk about Charles. Not to you, not to anyone."

"Why?"

She shook her head. Fierce emotions played over her face as she struggled against his unyielding hands. "It is my private past, my private pain. I do not choose to share it with you."

"But you will share your body?" he snapped as he pressed against her even harder. His world seemed to be spinning between the betrayed disappointment in his heart and the raging desires of his body. The two opposing forces set him on his head and he was unsure of where he would go next.

Certainly, he hadn't expected to be pinning Cecilia against a wall, his erection pressing into her stomach and her hips arching against him even as they fought each other with every word.

"My body was our bargain, Julian. My body for the duration of the storm. Nothing more, nothing less." She pressed her hands against his chest and pushed back. "Don't ask me for more than what I will give."

Julian stumbled away as her words sank in. She hadn't said *can* give. She'd said *will* give. It wasn't that she couldn't tell him the truth. It was that she chose to keep him from her heart. For her, this attraction was purely physical. She wanted nothing more from him than a few days with his cock buried deep within her.

"I want more," he said with hatred for the lilt of desperation in his voice. "I want you. In London with me."

Though he had given her the space she'd demanded, Cecilia didn't move away from her position against the wall. She didn't seem able to slip away. Her face was filled with shock and her eyes widened by his confession. "I—I don't

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understand."

"I want to come back here," he said in a rush. "And I want you to come to London. I will pay for you to have a home there if you don't have one already. We can spend every evening together. I'll take you everywhere. So long as we can be together."

The open expression on her face changed as she covered whatever her reaction was to his question, his plea.

"Are you asking me to become your mistress?" she asked in what was a strangely calm voice.

He flinched. "It sounds terrible when you call it a mistress. More than that. I want to be with you. I want to talk to you. I want to make love to you like we've done here. Please, Cecilia. Please."

He was begging. *Him*, the Duke of Lyndon. A man other men feared. A man women threw themselves at, even at his wife's funeral. Yet he was begging. Begging for a chance at an uncertain future.

It was exhilarating. To want something so much that he was willing to prostrate himself for it. For her.

Cecilia's eyes never left his face as the silence between them went from seconds to moments. Moments that felt like an eternity. Finally, she licked her dry lips and whispered, "No."

And Julian's world shattered.

"No?" Julian repeated blankly.

The shock and hurt in that one word cut her as deeply as a knife through her heart. In fact, only one thing could hurt her more. Telling him the truth about her husband. She didn't want to relive her embarrassing memories. Especially not with this man.

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She looked at him with a longing that filled her no matter how passionately they argued. He had made her feel so alive. Helped her forget the ache in her heart.

Only now that ache returned. Julian wanted her as a mistress. In his bed without really being a part of his life. It wasn't enough. And she couldn't ask for more, no matter how much she longed to beg for it.

"This was just a—" Her breath caught as he pushed closer and his hard cock drove against her tingling abdomen. "It was only a stolen moment in time. A passion to pass the storm."

The words were so empty.

He scowled. It was clear he was hurt, but she knew that would fade. For this moment, he was clinging to what had brought him out of the fog of despair, but once he returned to his life, his real life, he would forget. Forget her.

"And what about your drive to save me?" he asked. Each word was an accusation.

"You won't hurt yourself," she said softly. Her smile was small, but genuine as she searched his face. The face that had been so hard and broken when she first found him on her terrace was now changed. "You have life in your eyes. And when you aren't angry as you are now, there is laughter. Even hope. You won't lose those things when you leave me behind. No matter how hard you try."

With a trembling hand, she reached up to cup the harsh line of his jaw. As she traced the curve, she memorized each hollow and line in his face, to hold as a portrait in her mind.

His eyes darkened with desire so potent that it made her body weep with answering need. He pushed his fingers through her hair and tilted her head back until their lips were a mere breath apart.

"Tell me you don't want me."

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She shivered as her nipples turned to aching beads and pressed against the silken bodice of her gown. "I can't."

Triumph lit in his face. "Then tell me you don't want to be with me. Share in my life."

She faltered. She couldn't tell him that either, because she wanted it more than she'd wanted anything in as long as she could remember. But those were things she couldn't give. Not without his heart and soul in return. And that was something he could never share. Not fully.

His fingers pressed harder into her flesh as his lips trembled toward hers. "*Tell me*, damn it."

Tears leapt into her eyes and stung as she blinked them back. "I cannot give you what you're asking for, Julian. I won't."

His eyes flashed something dark and dangerous before his mouth finished its descent and he kissed her, hard and punishing. His body crushed her against the wall, pushing the air from her lungs as he dragged his fingers down her sides to dig the tips into her sides and hips, clawing to get closer.

Cecilia didn't resist, but let him pour his anger into her body. With his rough kisses and embrace, she knew he was trying to steal what she couldn't give. But it was impossible.

Still, the storm raged on outside her window. And if he needed to purge his rage into her body the way he had purged his grief, she wouldn't resist.

She didn't want to. Even his hard, seeking fingers made her weak as he ripped her dress open with jerky movements. When he caught her breast with a punishing squeeze, her back arched and a deep, low moan burst from her lips.

His mouth came down on her bare breast as he continued to rock his hips against hers. His tongue stroked the flesh with a few gentle laps before he grazed the sensitive peak with his

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teeth. Her moan turned to a cry as he rolled his tongue around and around her breast until it ached with his touch and the throbbing rhythm of his tongue was mimicked in the wet pulsing in her pussy.

He yanked the remainder of dress and undergarments away as he shoved his muscular thigh between her legs. Her thighs parted until she straddled him and then, to her utter surprise, he pushed up until her feet no longer touched the ground and her naked pussy was pressed down against his thigh.

"Ride," he ordered in a husky voice as his hands came around to cup her rear end. With fingertips digging into her backside, he rocked her against him in a hard, rhythm until she had no choice but do as he had ordered.

She clung to his shoulders as she ground down against his still-clothed leg, pressing her clit hard against the rough fabric and thrusting her hips with wild abandon as she lifted her mouth for his kiss.

He sucked her tongue as she rocked against him, harder and harder until the tingle of pleasure shooting through her body to focus on her clit was almost too much to bear. Her head dipped back over her shoulders, her nails dug into the fabric of his coat and her inner muscles exploded with powerful tremors.

"That's right," he murmured against her ear as she thrashed out an orgasm so intense that she feared she might actually lose consciousness. "I did that for you. Without putting my cock in you. No one else will ever do that, Cecilia."

She sobbed as the pulsing quivers of her inner muscles slowed and finally tapered away. He was right. No one else would ever do this or any of the other things he did to her body and her heart.

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But before she could say anything else, his hands clutched her naked waist and he lifted her off his leg to set her on the floor. Her knees trembled and she feared they wouldn't hold her. She didn't have to worry about that for long, because Julian only paused to tear the buttons of his trousers free and yank the fabric around his ankles.

His cock sprung free, large and hard as granite as he lifted her again. In a few smooth motions, he glided her dripping wet slit onto his hard erection. She let out a wail of pleasure at the stretching of her body, the way he fit her sheath so perfectly. She arched closer, but instead of thrusting, he lifted one of her legs up and over the crook of his elbow, then the other.

She looked into his eyes with what she knew was a wild expression. She was utterly open to him and unable to move or guide their encounter at all. In this position, she was utterly at his mercy. For a brief moment, she feared what he might do in his present, angry mood.

"Close your eyes," he whispered in a harsh, ragged tone.

With a whimper, she did as she'd been told.

"Now feel. Just feel," he groaned before he pressed his hands against the wall behind her and began to thrust. His strokes were hard and fast, slapping their skin together in the quiet of the room.

If Julian was trying to punish her by withholding pleasure, he failed. The rough slide of his rigid cock in and out of her body, back and forth across the swollen, aching nub of her clit, had her back on the edge of madness with a blinding speed. Each hard, heavenly stroke sent her nearer and nearer to completion until she could hold back her pleasure no more.

"Yes!" she screamed and gripped at his lower arms with all her might.

Her pussy throbbed around him and she was filled with

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triumph when he let out a cry of his own and she felt the hot cream of his come fill her gripping sheath.

Julian let out a final groan before he leaned forward to rest his forehead against the cool, smooth surface of the wall behind her. Pinned between the unyielding wall and his equally hard chest, Cecilia sighed with pleasure and surrender.

As he had said, no one would ever again make her feel the way Julian did. And when he was gone, she would be more alone than ever before.

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Chapter Seven

The horrible patter of rain echoed in Julian's head, pounding out a tattoo of regret that filled him in every part of his soul. He continued staring up at the canopy above Cecilia's bed. He didn't have to look at her to know she was still staring outside, watching the droplets cruise down the pane like tears.

She let the heavy curtain drop with a sigh that told him everything he needed to know, but dreaded facing.

Tomorrow everything would change.

"Is it raining?" he asked softly. He had to force his voice to pass his lips, but he couldn't make himself look at her. Not after the way he'd talked to her, touched her. In his anger, he had taken her, rough and forceful. He wouldn't blame her if she hated him for it.

Cecilia's voice was overly bright, as if she were compensating for his dreary demeanor. "Yes. The snow is already melting. The roads should be clear by tomorrow morning."

Slowly, he turned his head until he stared at her. She was so beautiful. And she had been his. For a few short days, she had been everything. Except she didn't want more. So he had to let her go.

"Then tomorrow I depart."

She gave a slight nod, but her expression was hooded. "Yes."

Julian sat up in the bed and pivoted until his bare feet hit

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the ground. With everything in his being, he wanted to cross the room to her. He wanted to slip the robe off her shoulders and show her how much he wanted her.

But he couldn't.

"I—I don't want our last night together to be so harsh." He shook his head as he broke eye contact with her. "I wouldn't want you to remember me as cruel."

No, he couldn't bear that. Even if she didn't want more, he knew their time together had meant something to her. The last thing he wanted was for her memories to be of something ugly.

Cecilia straightened from the window with a little gasp. Shaking her head, she glided across the room toward him. He was mesmerized by her every step, drawn in by the sway of her hips and the way her long hair curled around her shoulders. She moved him beyond reason.

"Is that what you believe? That I think you're cruel because of the way we last made love?"

"That wasn't making love, Cecilia," he murmured as he scrubbed a hand over his stubbly face. "That was fucking. And I wouldn't have stopped even if you had said no."

She didn't wince at the harsh word, or turn away from his blunt description. Instead, her hands trailed up to the silken tie of her robe and she slipped the knot free. Slowly, she glided her fingers up and let the robe fall in a pool around her feet.

"Perhaps you don't remember, but I didn't say no. I *liked* fucking," she whispered. "And I'd like for you to make love to me, too. Now."

The words *for the last time* hung in the room between them, unspoken. But Julian knew what she meant. This was the last night they would be together. Now that he'd purged his anger and disappointment, he wanted to sear a memory that would last. In her. And in himself.

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He reached for her, trailing the back of his hand along her naked side before he cupped her hip and brought her closer.

"In the past few days, I have taken," he breathed against her hip. Her eyes fluttered shut with a sigh. "I have allowed you to give me respite. To give me pleasure. To give me hope. Tonight, I want to give something to you. Give everything to you."

Her eyes opened and her smile was touched with the sadness that they both felt, but couldn't be avoided. Not without a risk neither wanted to take.

He leaned closer and slowly traced the curve of her hip with the tip of his tongue. Her smile fell as she let out a soft moan and her fingers dropped down to tangle in his hair. She trailed a soft pattern against his scalp. He'd never realized there were so many pleasure points there, but each time she traced her fingers there, his body reacted.

A reaction he couldn't hide, even if he wanted to. In his naked state, the rapid hardening of his cock was as plain as the firelight that danced across the wall. Her gaze drifted down and the lazy smile of satisfaction that drifted across her lips was enough to finish his transformation to rock hard in a moment.

With a smile of his own, he cupped the back of her neck, tangling his fingers in her hair as he guided her lips down to his own. She rested her fingers on his shoulders as her eyes fluttered shut and she pressed her soft lips against his own.

The way his body reacted and his heart raced, it was like this was their first kiss. Julian wrapped his arms around her waist, molding her body against his as he carefully probed her lips with his tongue, nibbling and tasting. Her body sagged against his and he lay back across the bed, bringing her down on top of him to continue kissing her.

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"I want to give you so much pleasure," he murmured as he slowly rolled until his body pinned hers to the bed.

"You already have," she whispered in return and he thought he caught the faint sparkle of unshed tears in her vibrant eyes.

"No. More. More so you never forget how it felt to be in my arms. To have me inside you." He pushed tangled locks of ruddy hair back from her face. "Will you let me?"

She drew in a short breath, but couldn't seem to manage words as she nodded in a jerky fashion. Julian smiled as he dipped his lips back to hers. This time, this last time, would be for Cecilia. Her pleasure would be his only focus, just as his had been her focus so many times before.

And when the night was over, he would insure that no matter how far she pushed him away, he would always have a place in her memory. A place in her soul.

Cecilia shut her eyes as Julian rubbed the tip of his heavy erection back and forth across her wet slit. Each pass of the head was long and lazy, starting at the hard nub of her clit and gliding all the way down until he just brushed the little rosebud of her ass. Her body leapt under the touch, readying yet again for the storm of passion about to come.

Only this time, Julian didn't seem to be in a hurry for that passion to sweep them both away. He held her stare evenly, his breathing as calm as if he were sipping tea in her parlor, even as hers hitched and rolled from her lungs as she struggled to maintain control.

"Don't fight me," he whispered as he brushed along her cleft again without entering, without taking. "Don't try to control what is happening."

Her nod was jerky and stiff. Her eyes fluttered shut and

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when she wasn't looking all around, the sensations at all her pleasure points seemed to rise. Her nipples ached as Julian brushed his stubbly chin across them and her clit twitched with each too-brief moment that his cock rubbed it.

Finally, he eased the head inside her, just a tiny fraction. Before she could enjoy the invasion, he withdrew, leaving her empty. She let out a little groan and was rewarded with a second thrust, this time the entire head entered her. But just as before, he withdrew with a wet sound.

Her eyes opened and she met his gaze. He frowned. "Eyes shut, Cecilia. Don't anticipate."

She opened her mouth to speak, but forgot all words when he entered again, a little farther than before. Her eyes squeezed shut of their own accord and she uttered a tiny groan. A low chuckle vibrated through her body before he drew out of her again. He repeated the action over and over, sliding in, each stroke a little deeper, then pulling all the way out of her gripping body.

Each thrust built up a tension the likes of which she had never known before. Her pussy trembled, reaching for the next entry and gripping to pull him all the way inside. Instead, he ignored her demanding sheath and what must have been a powerful erotic torture for his own body and went on, in and out, tease and withdraw.

Then, just as she thought she'd explode from the tension, he thrust forward and this time he filled her to her very core. He gripped her hips and continued to thrust, shallow and gentle, but always buried to his hilt.

Pleasure spiraled in and circled through her, growing ever more focused and tightly wound until her orgasm took her by surprise. Unlike before, the release rippled as gently as his thrusts, rolling on and on like a rocking train and making her

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body arch and flex for what seemed like a blissful eternity.

Finally, the tremors in her pussy eased, slowed, and finally trailed off. Only when she let out a final sigh of pleasure did Julian tangle his fingers through hers and drive his cock into her a few hard times. She opened her eyes in time to see his face constrict and he came.

He fell beside her on the bed, panting as he drew her close. In the darkness they lay quiet. Cecilia knew that was how things had to be. After all, tomorrow he would leave. It was the way it had to be. The way it would be.

The way it was.

Cecilia watched Julian as he took his last few bites of breakfast. Hers sat untouched and cold on the plate before her. She couldn't eat. In a few moments, the man with whom she had shared the most passionate, intimate moments of her life would be gone. And she would be alone again. That state had never bothered her before, but now the thought of it burned like fire in her heart.

Julian set his napkin aside and looked at her with a sad smile. She reached across the table to slide her hand into his.

"I hope you won't catch cold in the rain," she whispered with a wince. Were *those* to be her last words to him? A silly comment about the weather?

He looked at their intertwined hands. "Are you asking me to stay?"

She paused as the thrill of hope and longing shot through her body. It would be so easy to say yes, to clasp him into her arms, and pretend for a while longer. But that's all it would be. A fantasy. Eventually, he would have to go and she didn't think she could bear the hellish preparations for that departure one more time.

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"I think it would be better...easier if you went."

"Yes, I suppose last night will have to be enough."

He squeezed her hand before he let her go and rose from the table. The blank expression in his eyes pained her, but she understood it. She'd hurt him by refusing to be his mistress. But she needed more. More than he could give her. So she would savor their few days together and try not to regret a future she would have never really had.

She stood up and wrapped her arms around his waist. His warm and solid masculinity comforted and aroused her in equal degrees. "Do you promise you won't hurt yourself?"

He tilted her chin up with one finger and had her looking into the mossy green of his eyes. "I promise you." His smile faltered. "No, I'll go back to London. I have some upstart cousins to tend to first."

"And then?"

His face clouded. "I haven't thought about the future for so long, I'm not sure I know how to do it. But I *will* have a future, Cecilia. Thanks to you."

He bent to kiss her. She longed to wrap her arms around his neck and return that kiss until she couldn't breathe or think or say no to any offer he made, but it would do no good. With reluctance, she pulled away.

He looked at her for a long moment. She sensed the struggle in him. The same as the one in her own soul. He wanted to stay. He wanted to take her with him, but they both knew that would only prolong the inevitable.

"Excuse me, Your Grace. Your horse is waiting outside."

Cecilia's heart leapt as she turned to see Baker standing beside the breakfast room door. Her butler couldn't hide his relief that their uninvited houseguest would be going. And she couldn't hide her grief.

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"Thank you, Baker," she choked out. "Please leave us."

The butler complied silently, but he didn't close the door behind them. Cecilia sighed. Her first moments with Julian had been utterly private. Her last would be open for the household to hear.

Perhaps it was better that way. With the servants listening, there would be no begging, no tears. Cecilia forced a wavering smile as she motioned to the door leading into the foyer.

"Your Grace."

He flinched, but took a few steps toward the foyer. Before he reached the door, he spun back and caught her hands with his. "Not Your Grace. Say my name."

She blinked back tears as she reached up to cup his cheek. Her fingers trembled against his skin. "Julian. Goodbye, Julian."

He shut his eyes, but when they came back open, he had cleared them of all his pain. He gave her a smart bow before he opened the front door.

"Goodbye, Cecilia," he said softly as he backed out and closed the door behind him.

Cecilia pressed her fist against the door before she let her forehead slip down to lean against it. He was gone. Gone from her life forever. She didn't need to see him ride away. She heard the thundering hoof beats against the wet drive as he rode toward her gate and then toward London. Tonight he would lament their parting alone, as would she. But she knew that once he reached the city and reclaimed his life, his memories of her would fade. He would explain away the intense emotions that had flared between them.

But Cecilia would always remember. She walked back into her morning room and looked around. Every room in her

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home held a memory of him. Whether it was making love with abandon, or merely talking together into the night.

Her eyes stung as she crossed to the fire. Then they burned and suddenly she could hold back her tears no longer. Fat droplets slipped down her cheeks, gathering around her lips as she sank to her knees and sobbed.

Mrs. Baker bustled in to clear away the plates, but stopped when she saw Cecilia on her knees before the fire. The older woman clucked her tongue. "Oh, my lady."

"No." Cecilia raised her hand and waved it toward the door. "Please, I just want to be alone. Close the door and let me be for a while."

She heard her housekeeper hesitate and knew the woman was contemplating whether or not to ignore Cecilia's order. Finally she heard the door close and she was alone again.

Alone. Just as she would probably be for the rest of her life. Even if she did marry again, it would be to some fat, older squire who needed a mother for his children. She would never feel another connection of spirit like she had with Julian. She would never feel a driving desire and need like she had with him.

Her tears came harder now and she gave up trying to brush them aside. She let them fall. Later she would pull herself back together. For now she wanted to feel her grief. It showed her that her love had been real.

She lifted her face with a start. Her love. Had she truly fallen in love in such a short period of time?

The answer came as swiftly and as strongly as her desire had come just a few nights before. Yes. She had loved Julian, she still loved Julian. And despite the fact that he had left her life, never to return, accepting the knowledge that she loved him helped in some way.

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Julian was gone, but the love she felt would stay with her,
no matter what happened.

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Chapter Eight

One month later

The bustling streets and crowded shops of London held little interest as Cecilia stared out the carriage window. There could have been a circus outside and she wouldn't have cared. Her thoughts were elsewhere. Just as they had been for the four long weeks Julian had been gone.

"I'm so glad I could convince you to visit Thomas and me. We've been bothering you to do so for so long, I feared we'd never see you in London again."

Cecilia shook away her thoughts and gave one of her oldest, dearest friends, Lady Emmaline Greenley, a smile. "You were much more forceful about your invitations than usual," she laughed. "I don't think you've ever shown up on my doorstep with a carriage and a demand that I return with you upon threat of bodily injury!"

Emma shook her head and didn't join in her laughter. "Everyone has been worried about you. When you didn't answer my latest few letters and your family informed me of the same, I knew I had to come see you. Being alone in that house, with only your memories to keep you warm...it isn't healthy."

Cecilia's face fell and she turned away so Emma wouldn't see the truth. "I wasn't alone for a while," she whispered to the glass.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. I admit, I am glad to be out and about."

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Cecilia sighed. She had lived by herself in her home for three years after her husband's death and the place had never haunted her. She'd never paced her floors with emptiness or found the silence deafening. But in the past month, she had done and felt all those things. Without Julian, the estate seemed massive and cold. And every room held an image of him.

It was unbearable.

"How long has it been since you were in London?" Emma asked and shook her from her reverie a second time.

She cocked her head. "A long time. Before Charles died, certainly." Cecilia paused and wrung her hands in her lap before she spoke again. "I made what I know you thought was an odd request before we departed my estate. I saw that you had a message from Thomas at the inn this morning and I wondered if he had answered my question."

Emma cocked her head. "It is a strange request, but he did answer. The Duke of Lyndon is definitely out of the city for the next few weeks."

Equal measures of powerful relief and intense disappointment made Cecilia sag back against the cushioned seat with a sigh. Her only doubt about coming to London was the possibility that she'd come face to face with the man she loved. She didn't think she could bear it if he were with another woman. Or worse, simply didn't recognize her at all. By now, he might have already forgotten her.

"I didn't know you were acquainted with Julian Blake." Emma sounded curious, just as she had before they left for her estate.

Cecilia thinned her lips. She wasn't going to tell Emma anything about Julian. What had happened between them was her private joy and pain. "I am not," she lied.

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One of Emma's blonde eyebrows arched up slowly and she opened her mouth as if to speak before she snapped her lips shut. For a moment, only strained silence filled the carriage, then her friend seemed to regroup.

"If you did know him, you would be happy to hear that His Grace has been faring very well since his return to London and society a few weeks ago," Emma said gently and was careful to avoid Cecilia's eyes.

She clenched her gloved hands into fists in her lap as she feigned disinterest. Obviously Emma had guessed she had some relationship with Julian based on her strange question about his whereabouts, but she wouldn't confirm or deny it. Still, knowing he was doing well was a gift.

Emma continued, "For a while, the rumors were that he'd gone mad with grief over his young wife's death."

Cecilia shifted. "We don't hear many rumors in the countryside."

Her friend nodded. "He exiled himself for a time, but reappeared quite suddenly, stronger and more ruthless than ever. Even his greedy cousins have realized he isn't to be trifled with and dropped their case to have him declared unfit."

With a smile, Cecilia looked out the window. Joy swelled in her like a child's balloon, but she didn't dare show how pleased she was. Julian had survived the despair that had driven him to her arms. That he was not only well, but also out of danger from his prying family and society gave her nearly as much pleasure as his touch.

But not quite.

The carriage rocked as it pulled through the gate at Emma and Thomas's lavish London estate. Cecilia looked at the beautiful home with interest as they pulled to a smooth stop. It had been so very long since she'd been here. She had forgotten

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how much she had once liked the city and being able to see her friends whenever she wished.

Emma began to put on her gloves and gather up her reticule in preparation to leave the coach. "We'll be going to a ball tonight. A masquerade. They're all the rage at present and I thought it would be a perfect way for you to come back into society. You can see the aristocracy in all their finery and not be forced to remember their names."

Cecilia laughed as the carriage door opened and she moved toward the footman's outstretched hand. Before she could exit, Emma placed a hand on her forearm.

"Cecilia?" The pressure of Emma's fingers increased. "You know Thomas and I would never...we would never do anything to bring you harm."

"Of course, I know that."

Cecilia looked at her old friend in utter confusion. Do her harm? She had no idea what would make Emma say such a thing, unless she thought Cecilia was nervous about coming back into society. Now that she knew Julian was safely out of town, she could relax and simply enjoy her time with her friends. Time where she would work to forget the haunting memories of Julian's touch.

Julian stood on the wide balcony overlooking his quickly filling ballroom and smiled. Below, hundreds of society's most influential members were sipping champagne and trying to determine who was who beneath the extravagant masks. It was good to be home. It was good to be in control.

And once Cecilia arrived, it would be good to be alive.

He turned to the formally dressed man behind him with a nod. "Higgins, is everything arranged?"

His batman smiled, but Julian saw his eyes roll behind his

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plain mask. He couldn't blame his old servant. He'd only asked the same question twenty times that day.

"Yes, sir. I assure you, all is exactly as you wish it to be."

"And her friends will make sure she's here?"

Higgins nodded. "I spoke to their man today and he assures me that Lord and Lady Greenley have matters well in hand. Lady Cecilia arrived in London this afternoon. She believes you are out of residence at present, and she has no idea that the masquerade she is attending tonight is at your home. She will be caught completely unawares, as you intended."

Julian's hands flexed on the balcony as he looked over the crowd again. "Good. Very good. Let me know when she arrives."

"Yes, sir." His servant began to back away, but paused at the hallway. "Sir?"

"Yes, Higgins?" Julian didn't bother to turn around.

"It's good to have you back."

He tossed a grin over his shoulder. "I always get what I want. Always."

As his batman bowed and made his exit, Julian looked down at his own mask that sat on a table beside the balcony. His fingers twitched with nervousness. He had always gotten what he wanted, but despite his sure attitude with his servant, tonight he worried.

Over the past month, he had reclaimed his life. He'd realigned himself with his powerful friends and put off the advances of his cousins with their claims of his insanity. He had come out in public and made it utterly clear that he was not to be trifled with. Still, all the inroads he'd made weren't enough. He wanted more.

He wanted Cecilia. He had since the day he'd left her home. He tried to put off those feelings, but they had

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intensified, not lessened. No manner of flirting debutante or forward widow could make him forget her touch. Even a trip to one of his former mistresses had ended with him leaving, untouched and unsatisfied. One moment with the other woman had been long enough to know he didn't want anyone but the woman he'd left behind in the countryside.

But did she want him? She had sent him away, refusing his request to continue their relationship. In any other circumstance, he would believe she felt nothing for him but desire that had probably faded since his departure. But with her...he knew she had wept. He had felt emotions much deeper than lust when they last made love.

Tonight, he would remind her of all they had shared, and show her what they could share again. And he wouldn't stop this time, no matter how far she tried to push him away. Not until she was his.

With a smile, Julian slipped his simple black mask over his face and turned toward the stairs and his guests.

Cecilia stared at the mask in her hand with a frown. She had no complaints regarding its beauty. On the contrary, she had never seen anything so lovely. The half-mask was white with a sparkling arrangement of real sapphires that decorated the eyepiece. The ribbon that would bind it behind her head was the finest silk and the peacock feather that decorated on side was as soft as any she'd ever felt.

Which was why she was confused. She looked at Emma and her husband Thomas. Both stared back at her with strangely pale faces and false smiles. Since her arrival, both had been behaving in a manner Cecilia couldn't explain or understand. No manner of inquiries gave her an answer, as both her hosts were masters at evasion.

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"Are you certain you want me to wear this?" she asked as she held up the mask in Emma's direction. "It's so fine. We could trade."

She looked at her friend's mask, which was a pretty crimson with matching feathers, but not nearly as elegant or extravagant as her own. To her surprise, Emma clutched it to her breast with a firm shake of her head.

"No!" She softened her face and tone. "I only mean, Thomas and I have matching masks. You shall wear that one."

Cecilia wrinkled her brow in confusion. It was almost as if Emma *needed* her to wear the elaborate mask. But before she could ask about her friend's strange comment, the carriage pulled to a stop.

"We're here," Thomas said with what sounded like a sigh of relief as he pushed the carriage door open and stepped out to help Emma. "Put your masks on ladies."

Emma secured Cecilia's mask with a bit more flourish than was necessary and allowed Thomas to help her from the rig.

"In we go," he said as he took his wife's arm and led them toward the doors.

Cecilia took in a long breath as they entered the gorgeous London estate. The home was overwhelming, from its enormous vaulted ceilings in the foyer to the tasteful tapestries that lined the hallway. But when they finally reached the overflowing ballroom, her heart truly began to race.

The room was a marvel. Each pillar had been carved from the finest marble, with images of sprites, fairies and scantily clad maidens climbing up their posts like a grown-up fairy tale come to life. The chandeliers above hosted thousands of sparkling candles that set an ethereal glow over the dance floor and seemed to transport the masked guests into a magical

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world where politics and other mundane topics mattered not.

Even the music was exactly as she would have wished. A massive orchestra was hidden behind a series of hand painted screens depicting more fairy tale scenes of a decidedly adult fashion. She turned around in a slow circle and was still unable to take in all the loveliness.

"Whose home is this, Emma?" she asked as she looked up and around her. "It's magnificent."

When she received no answer, Cecilia stopped turning and looked around. But to her surprise, she found her friends were nowhere in sight. Somehow they had been separated, whether by design or an accident of the crowded ballroom.

She pursed her lips. Something very odd was afoot. Emma and Thomas had never acted so strangely in all the years she had been acquainted with them. But it mattered not. She intended to enjoy herself, as well as find out whose home this was and compliment her host or hostess accordingly.

She turned to enter the teeming crowd, but instead found herself face to face with a tall stranger. Unlike the other guests, his mask covered not half his face, but its entirety. It was black as pure onyx and was free from the decorations of jewels and feathers and other silliness some of the men wore like stags on display.

The only real glimpse of him behind the darkness was the sparkle of his eyes. Green. For a brief moment, she mused about how much those eyes looked like Julian's, but then she dismissed the thought. Julian was far away, out of London. There were likely a hundred men with green eyes in this very ballroom. No reason to assume they were each the man she loved, or she would spend the evening very unhappy indeed.

With a smile and small curtsey, she stepped aside to let the unknown gentleman pass. "Pardon me, sir, I was busy looking

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at our host's lovely home and I didn't see you."

To her surprise, the man didn't move or answer, simply stared at her with an intensity in those green eyes that made her whole body tense, though she wasn't sure if it was from fear or something else entirely unexpected. Perhaps a little of both.

"Excuse me," she whispered and this time it was she who made a movement to depart.

Instead of allowing her to pass, the man held out a hand. He wore black evening attire and black gloves, and the gloved hand hovered toward her in invitation.

She swallowed. Her first night in London and she was being accosted by a silent stranger who made her stomach do flips. The kind of flips she'd felt when Julian touched her weeks before.

Shock made her mouth drop open. It was *desire* that made her body clench. That realization surprised her more than his wordless patience.

She stepped to one side in a second attempt to evade him and the feelings he evoked in her, but he met her move with one of his own. Her eyes widened as she realized he was keeping her here on purpose. Trapping her.

"Please let me by, I must find my friends," she said, but her voice was weak.

He didn't answer, simply continued to hold out his blasted hand, never trembling, never moving, never speaking. Just demanding she take it and let him lead her...who knew where?

She glanced around for a savior. She found only a gaggle of aristocrats more interested in chatting with each other than noticing the drama playing out not feet away. Because of their masks and the long time she had spent in the country, she didn't recognize any of these people enough to call on an old friendship. If she cried out, she'd only make a fool of herself

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and her friends when it turned out her captor was only a playful Viscount or Earl who, in her mask, had mistaken Cecilia for his own wife.

With a swallow, she murmured, "You will not let me pass?"

The stranger slowly shook his head in the negative. She stared at his hand, tempting and frightening at the same time. "No gentleman would treat a lady in this fashion," she said, just so he could hear.

She thought she sensed a smile beneath his mask and again he slowly shook his head in the negative. Though the situation was completely outrageous, she felt an answering smile curl her own lips.

"Very well, so you are not a gentleman."

Suddenly she was feeling much less like a lady, as well. But she shook away the growing desire. How could she feel that draw to a man when thoughts of Julian still haunted her? Had she become such a wanton in her time alone that any man made her wet and weak?

He took a small step forward and leaned his hand closer. Cecilia sighed. What harm could a dance with this stranger cause? It was the purpose of the masquerade, after all. Once he had spun her around the floor, he would fade back into the crowd and forget her entirely. Then she could find Emma and Thomas and pretend she hadn't reacted so strongly to a man whose face she didn't know.

"Oh, very well," she said. "Thank you for your offer, my wordless non-gentleman."

This time she was sure he smiled at she slipped her gloved hand into his. Immediately, Cecilia knew she'd made a calculated mistake. The desire she had felt when she parried with the silent intruder was nothing compared to the heat that

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shot through her at his touch. Even through the gloves, his fingers made her knees go weak and her thighs moist with hot desire.

Still, he spoke not as he guided her to the dance floor just in time for the first notes of the waltz. Ignoring propriety, the gentleman pulled her up against him, letting his body mold to hers for the briefest of moments before he moved them in time to the music.

But in that brief time, Cecilia knew everything she needed to know. Her stranger wanted her with as much heat as she wanted him. She had felt the press of his hard cock against her belly in that fraction of a breath when she'd touched him. He had wanted her to know his desire.

And by the sparkle in his eyes, it was clear he enjoyed her stunned reaction to the truth.

Despite her leaden feet, her partner moved her in time to the music with surprising grace and dexterity, dodging her feet as she stumbled in shock. Somehow he managed to make them look like a pair of graceful swans, one dark, one light.

Cecilia struggled to maintain a precarious grip on both decorum and control. "I have heard of men like you," she said in what she hoped was a light tone. She felt anything but light. In fact, she was weighed down by confusion and insistent, throbbing need.

He cocked his head in answer.

"You are one of those rakes. Ones who take pride in seducing women." She forced a look of disdain to her face even though her heart was beating a different reaction.

He slowed the pace of their steps and tilted his face so that she was forced to look into the emerald depths of his eyes. Surrounded by the midnight mask, they were captivating and she was drawn in. She nearly stopped moving entirely as she

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lost herself in them...in him.

Then he slowly shook his head in the negative. And she believed him. Whoever this man was, and for whatever reason he had chosen her for the object of his desire, he was no rake. This wasn't a game he was playing. His stare spoke of something deeper, something more powerful.

Something irresistible.

And she didn't resist. Not as he danced her to the corner of the dance floor. Not as he effortlessly guided her away from the crowd and out the terrace door. She moved in a hazy cloud as he danced her, carefully, down the stone steps of the terrace and into the shadowy gardens.

"I—" she began, but he lifted his gloved fingertips to her lips to silence her. She caught her breath. Her emotions were ragged. Her body stirred with need while her heart clenched with guilt and confusion. She felt like she was being unfaithful, even though she and Julian had made no promises to each other.

At the very least, she was being reckless. Her first night in London and she was allowing a strange man to take her through a dark garden to a side door beneath the stone terrace. They slipped inside and he shut it behind him as if he had done this a hundred times before.

Her heart skipped with a thought. Was this man the master of this house?

No. That couldn't be true. A man of such wealth and position and taste as the man who owned this estate would surely have a wife, and be too busy with his party to seduce a wanton 'lady' such as herself.

Which meant he might be a servant. The scandal only compounded itself with each passing moment. She was taking a servant's hand and letting him take her up a side staircase and

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down a hallway. Finally, he opened one door in the never-ending hallway of doors and they were inside a private room in the massive house. From the looks of the carpeting and décor, it was a room in the family wing, not the servants' quarters.

Cecilia swallowed past the lump that closed her throat. "I don't think I am who you think I am." Her voice was husky and low.

The man stepped toward her with a slow, sensual nod.

"Why—why won't you speak to me?" she croaked out as his large, gloved hands came around her waist.

He lifted one finger to his lips, then turned, taking her with him until her back was leaning against his muscular chest and she was facing a large mirror.

An erotic blast of heat slammed through her body and she nearly bucked back against him with the power of it. Watching herself in the mirror, dressed in her ballroom finery, a white mask over her face and a dark, shadowy figure behind her...unknown, dangerous, made her body weak.

And weaker still when his gloved hands glided up from her waist. He cupped each breast from behind and gently pulled her back until her backside cradled the massive erection that ballooned his trouser front, and the top of her head settled beneath his chin.

She opened her mouth to protest, but when he massaged his fingers against her aching breasts, the protest turned to a moan. This stranger, he had magic in his touch, for he seemed to know exactly how much pressure to use to make her knees tremble and her pussy gush with cream.

He made a low noise in the back of his throat and she felt hot breath caress her neck as the pressure of his hands increased. Massaging and massaging, she watched as his fingers encircled the round globes, plucking at her nipples until

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they stood at attention against the soft silk of her gown.

He rocked his hips against her backside in time. Each thrust sent an ache of pleasure through the sensitive little hole of her bottom and around to the hard nub of her clit. He had hardly touched her, yet she was panting with desire so potent she nearly fell over.

"I shouldn't do this," she murmured.

He didn't answer her. Instead, he continued stroking her right breast, while with the left he slipped his fingers beneath the edge of her mask and lifted it away from her face.

For a brief moment, Cecilia panicked. Now he knew who she was, yet she knew nothing of him. It put her at a distinct disadvantage. One this stranger could exploit if he wanted to.

But the only thing the mysterious man seemed intent on doing at present was gliding his hands around her back in a tingling trail and slowly working open the buttons that held her gown. She watched in mute awe as her gown gradually sagged and finally fell forward.

Emma had helped her pick the pale blue gown, cut in an old-fashioned Napoleon style. Her friend had insisted that wearing layers of corset and underskirt would ruin the Regency lines of the gown, so without the dress, she was nearly naked in a scandalously sheer chemise and stockings. Yet she felt no urge to cover herself, in fact she found herself thrusting her breasts forward in a wanton display.

A low chuckle vibrated across her secret lover's chest as he slid the gown down her hips and let it pool around her feet. Immediately, his hands returned to her breasts, but without the heavier gown to impede them, her nipples were clear through her chemise, swelling with pleasure as he rolled each one between his forefinger and thumb.

Cecilia's eyes fluttered shut of their own accord as she

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leaned her full weight against the man behind her and surrendered to whatever he wanted to do. Her body hummed with a desire too powerful to deny as she lifted her arms above her head and cupped the back of his neck. Her back arched with the motion and allowed him full access to her body.

Access he took hungrily. One hand glided down her body and caught the lacy edge of her chemise. He yanked it up with jerky pulls until the curly, ruddy hair on her mons was revealed. She opened her eyes and watched as he let one gloved finger gently part the folds of flesh and dip between them.

She gasped as powerful pleasure shot from her clit through every nerve in her being.

"Take off the gloves," she whispered and hardly recognized her hungry voice. "Please. I want to feel your skin against mine."

In the mirror, she watched as he shook his head to indicate no. She let out a little whimper of displeasure. The silky glove felt heavenly against her skin, but she wanted more. More than disconnected pleasure. She wanted this man's flesh pressed to her own. His sweat mingling with hers as they arched together in a tangle of arms and legs. She wanted his hard cock inside her yielding sheath.

She wanted to see his face.

But when she attempted to loosen his mask, his hands left her pussy and caught her wrists in a vice-like grip. He shook his head no with more fervor, and instead guided her hands to her own breasts. Then his fingers crept back down her body to spread open her pussy. In the mirror, she saw the slick reflection of moisture and the hardened nub of her clit as he flicked a fingertip across it. She couldn't control her sigh of pleasure as he let his thumb press down even harder while his

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fingers spread her slit wide. With the rich satin of his black gloves, he spread her cream around the pouting outer lips, awakening shots of intense pleasure in every part of her cunt.

She arched back helplessly as his touch teased and tormented. Her orgasm was just around the next corner, but he took his time, teasing her clit, then backing away so she wouldn't rush to her pleasure before he was ready for her release. Her breath came in broken pants, her body shook and would have collapsed without his support and finally, with a last nudge against her clit, she came.

"Julian," she breathed as she watched her face contort in the reflection.

Immediately, she tensed. She had just said another man's name. Struggling from her masked lover's arms, she pivoted to face him and the wrath and betrayal he would surely feel knowing the Duke's name had escaped her lips in the height of passion.

Instead, he only stood staring at her. He didn't flinch. He didn't question. He only looked at her, those green eyes holding her own with unwavering emotion.

Her lips parted. This couldn't be. It couldn't be. She stumbled forward, her body still quivering; she stood mere inches in front of him. He was the same height as Julian. His shoulders seemed to be as broad.

Her fingers shook as she lifted them to catch the edge of his black mask. The stranger didn't flinch or try to stop her this time. The world slowed as she carefully lifted the mask away.

She stumbled back. His hair was mussed, his cheeks flushed and his eyes flashing fire and passion and more. But it was him.

Her voice caught on confused and joyful tears. "Julian."

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Chapter Nine

Cecilia's face was so pale that Julian feared she would swoon at any moment. It was only her guarded expression that kept him from stepping forward to assist her. That and the fact that if he touched her again, he knew he wouldn't be able to stop until he had filled her with both pleasure and his seed.

"Cecilia," he murmured as she stumbled backward across the room.

"You aren't supposed to be in London," she stammered. "I was told you were out in the country during my trip."

He pursed his lips. This wasn't the scenario he'd imagined. Somehow he'd hoped that when he revealed his face, she would fall into his arms and they'd end up on the floor, bodies entangled in passion. Instead, her face was pinched and strained.

"Hello to you, too," he said with a dry smile before he took a seat beside the fireplace. Cecilia didn't respond with a smile of her own and continued to back away until her perfect rear end hit the cool glass of the window. She started, but didn't break eye contact with him.

"Julian—" she said. Her voice broke.

He faked another smile. "It wouldn't do for me to host a party and not be in attendance, would it? What would the guests say?"

Her eyes widened even further and the blue snapped with emotions and unanswered questions. But beneath it all, he saw

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the lingering effects of desire and release. And she couldn't stop her gaze from drifting lower, catching on the swollen girth of his cock before she snapped it back up to his eyes. Her flushed cheeks told him everything he needed to know.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He motioned around him. "This is *my* home."

Her breath hitched. "No, that's impossible."

He ignored her interruption. "The mask you wore tonight was designed by me so I would know who you were in the throng." He arched an eyebrow. "It turned out I didn't need it. I felt your presence long before I saw you."

A shiver worked through her and Julian's body reacted of its own accord. His body craved her touch, but he struggled to hold back those animal needs. Right now she required the truth. Only the truth would give him what he wanted. For his body. For his soul.

She wet her dry lips with the tip of her pink tongue and he barely held back a groan. "My friends...they told me you were not in London. They never mentioned this was your home—"

"Yes." He cleared his throat, unsure of how she would react to his next confession. "Lord Greenley owed me a very large favor. I came to collect and he agreed to assist me."

Cecilia's face twisted. "You *blackmailed* my friends in order to deceive me?"

Her hands lurched up at her chest and for the first time she seemed to realize she was only clad in her deliciously thin chemise and silk stockings. Her face darkened a shade, but she lifted her chin with dignity and glared at him. Julian smiled. There was her spirit. He had missed that.

"I knew you wouldn't come any other way," he admitted with a shrug.

She barked out a harsh laugh. "You gave me no chance to

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decide, did you?"

He shook his head. "Are you saying I'm wrong? Had I sent you a missive asking you to come to London to meet with me, are you implying that you would have packed up your carriage and done as I asked?"

Her lips thinned, but she didn't answer.

"No, I think I would have received a very properly written reply telling me you appreciated my invitation, but that your social calendar was quite full at present." He leaned back in the chair and folded his arms. "I never would have had a chance to speak to you. To hold you. To taste you."

Her glare darkened as she stormed back across the room and snatched her forgotten gown up from the floor. She stepped in and yanked the fabric up over her shoulders, then reached around her back to struggle with the buttons. Julian watched without making an offer to help her dress. Dressed was the last way he wanted her.

Cecilia's lower lip shook with rage. He'd never seen her so emotional, even on their last night together when they'd argued over the past. Over the future. Like it had then, the hot emotions aroused him to a painful state.

"Well, you've had your taste of me again, haven't you?" she snapped as she managed to get a few buttons closed.

"Not nearly enough," he murmured as he slowly got to his feet. "Not nearly enough."

She turned on him with a gasp of outrage, but her nipples hardened against the wrinkled gown bodice, standing out in sharp contrast against the fine silk. "More than I would have given you had I known—"

He frowned. "If you'd known who I was? You would have preferred to give yourself to a stranger then? Or did you really know it was me all along?"

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Her eyes widened. "I—I never knew it was you until I removed your mask!"

"So you wanted a stranger to have his way with you?" he asked, circling her and breathing in her scent, lavender and sex, an intoxicating combination he had been too long without. "I could put the mask back on if you'd like. You could continue to pretend I was a stranger. But we'd both know that isn't true. Our anonymous encounter weeks ago is still affecting us both. It would be no different if we made our encounter anonymous tonight."

"No!" She folded her arms, but there was no denying the flush of arousal that slowly crept up her neck. "I was carried away, I wouldn't give myself to a stranger."

"You already did. Not just tonight, but that night when you found me on your terrace."

She covered her head with her hands. "You're twisting my words. You're making things more complicated than they truly are."

"I'm stating the truth." He leaned in close to her ear. "You're just too frightened to face it. Now, it's time for a confession. Somewhere in your body, your heart...did you know it was me touching you tonight? Or you were truly willing to let a stranger make you scream out my name?"

For a moment, Cecilia only stood staring at him. Her mouth worked as she tried to come up with a proper response. Finally, she scowled. "I need not explain myself to you, Julian Blake. Good evening."

He caught her arm and spun her back against his chest in one swift motion. Her body collided against his length and he let out a low moan of frustration. If he didn't have her soon, he could quite possibly die. And that would not do after all he'd gone through to get her back.

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"You aren't going anywhere, Cecilia."

She pulled ineffectually against his arm. "You are being a fool!"

He laughed. "No, I was a fool when I left your home weeks ago. I never should have done so. I should have fought to stay by your side. Fought to keep you by mine."

Cecilia's efforts to escape his hold melted away as she looked up into his eyes. Her eyes were as blue as the far away Mediterranean, and they captured him in a web he never wanted to escape.

"I must leave," she whispered.

"Do you remember what you said to me the morning after we first made love?" he asked, as quietly as she herself had spoken.

She shook her head, but she dropped her eyes and he knew she was lying. Like him, she remembered each and every moment they were together. Every word was as seared on her brain as it was on his own.

"You are strong, Cecilia Warden, but if you force me, I will tie you to my bed and force you to stay." He leaned in closer and loved the tiny shiver of response she tried to hide. "And I doubt you could best me."

Her lower lip trembled as she locked eyes with him. "You wouldn't dare."

With a smile, he did what he'd wanted to do for weeks. He swept her into his arms, flipped her over his shoulder, and headed for the bedchamber down the hall that he had prepared for this very moment.

"Wouldn't I?" he asked over her squeals of protest. "Unlike you, my lady, I intend to live up to that threat."

She slapped her fists across his back as he strode down the hall toward the bedroom he had prepared specially for her. The

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room he hadn't been able to make it to when he'd been so filled with desire. Now it was purpose that filled him.

Her slaps against his coat were ineffectual and he had a suspicion that they were for show more than to actually hurt him. By the way her breathing rasped against his neck and her body shimmied in his arms, he could feel her excitement as much as her fear or her anger.

And it drove him absolutely mad.

He threw open the door to the chamber and carried her inside. Closing it, he set her down and readied himself for the storm that flashed in her eyes.

"You cannot do this!" she cried. "I won't allow it. Just because you have power and privilege doesn't give you any right to—to..." she trailed off as she finally looked around her. Julian smiled as her eyes went wide. "What is this?"

He looked around. Her shock wasn't surprising after all the work he'd put into the chamber. It was a sensual feast, meant for sex and sin. The furniture was black velvet, the sheets on the massive bed, red satin. Candles sparkled in every corner of the room.

Then there were the toys. Remembering Cecilia's ivory dildo, he had ordered several items to be made for her pleasure. She stared at the table beside the bed at the black dildo, the collection of spicy oils meant to arouse and ready her for any kind of game he wanted to play, to the nipple and clit clamps he had made especially for her.

"Julian?" she whispered, her voice low and husky as she turned to stare at him.

"This is what I've been planning for you since I realized I didn't want to live without you." He took a step toward her and her shiver rocked him. "And since I realized you would resist even harder than you did in the storm. You're afraid, but I

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won't let you leave until you give me a chance."

He cupped her chin, tilting her face up until he saw the tears sparkling in her eyes. Her fingers came up to wrap around his hand and she sighed. "Oh Julian, we had a moment. It was only a stolen moment."

He shrugged. "I don't believe that. And I intend to prove it to you."

Her eyes darted around the room again. "Through sex?"

He smiled. "Oh my dear, that is just the beginning."

Her lips parted as he dipped his head and claimed them. The pleasure of tasting her mouth was so pure it was nearly pain and he reveled in the feel of her body arching toward his. He speared his tongue between her lips, probing, licking, gliding as he gently urged her back toward the big bed. She made a muffled moan as he laid her back against the satin sheets.

"No," she whispered, even as she slipped her fingers into his hair and thrust her tongue against his.

"Yes," he answered as he caught her wrists in each of his hands. Continuing to kiss her, he pushed her arms over her head, pressing her into the bed with rhythmic thrusts of his hips. Then, when she arched helplessly beneath him, he slipped her wrists through the leather ties he'd attached to the ornate headboard and he had her trapped.

Cecilia yanked against the supple leather ties that now bound her arms to the bed as she stared up at Julian. He smiled down at her, wolfish and possessive and her traitorous body arched beneath his.

"Don't be afraid," he murmured as his mouth came down to brush her neck. Hot threads of pleasure slid through her veins with every teasing brush of his hot, rough tongue.

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She fought the drugging sensation. Julian kept saying she was afraid. Afraid to face him, afraid to surrender to what he offered now.

He was right.

She would never tell him so, but it was fear that forced her to say no. Julian's desire was more than evident, but Cecilia needed more than that. She needed his heart and that belonged to a dead woman. He had been so devastated by Alana's death that he'd wished for an end to his own life. It was clear he loved his wife. Cecilia couldn't compete with that. And considering her own marriage, she didn't *want* to.

But now she was trapped, unable to escape the sinful pleasure of Julian's touch and his offer of a future she knew was impossible. And what she was afraid of most was that the longer she was alone with him, the more likely she was to spill the contents of her heart. To tell him she loved him. To beg him to love her in return.

Julian stroked her hair aside and the tenderness in his eyes nearly had her making that confession immediately.

"I won't hurt you, Cecilia," he whispered. "Please trust me."

Her eyes fluttered shut. Trust him. How she wanted to do just that. But what he offered was an illusion. A way to fill the hole in his heart with the pleasures of her body. By surrendering, she would doom herself to heartache.

Still...she opened her eyes and their gazes met. His was so green, so heated. She could almost pretend there was a deeper emotion than lust in his heart.

Surrender was the only option. She was too weak to deny herself.

"Yes," she whispered, broken and needy for more than release at his fingers. She wanted his body rocking against her,

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in her. She wanted to feel his heat.

His mouth came down on hers and she felt his smile in his kiss.

"Yes, yes, yes," she mumbled. Yes was the only word she could remember when his hands were gliding up her sides, freeing her from her clumsily buttoned gown. She didn't remember how he got it off her bound arms, but suddenly it was being pulled away. Her chemise was pulled away, her stockings were gone. In the blink of an eye, she was fully exposed, body and heart.

He drew back to look down at her. Standing at his full height, with the fire glowing behind him, he looked like a fallen angel, sent to tempt her, to test her resolve.

She was failing. Not that she cared. Her only remaining thought was that she would get a chance at a few more moments with him. For now that was enough.

He unbuttoned his shirtwaist, shrugging it off with grace and ease. It fell to the ground behind him and Cecilia sucked in her breath through her teeth. In just a few short weeks, she'd convinced herself that this man's perfection was all in her head. It wasn't. He was chiseled steel and molten heat.

He smiled as he let that hard body cover her. His chest hair tickled her bare breasts, rasping against her sensitive nipples and sending flashes of ungodly pleasure through every nerve of her body.

"If I'm tied," she whispered as he brushed a soft kiss against her jaw line. "I can't—can't touch you."

He sucked on the sensitive spot behind her ear and stars floated in front of her vision.

She struggled to continue. "I can't give you any pleasure."

"Watching your eyes while I make you come is going to give me so much pleasure," he reassured her. "I don't want you

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to be able to touch me. I want you to surrender."

She sighed as he glided down her body with soft kisses and nips. Why not surrender her body? Her heart, her soul already belonged to him. This one last thing was really secondary.

He caught one of her nipples between his teeth and all rational thought fled her mind. He tugged the tender flesh and she let out a harsh moan of pain and pleasure combined. He let go and laved the tingling bud with a few languid strokes of his tongue.

Cecilia pulled against the binds reflexively as Julian moved to her opposite breast. This time he circled her breast with the tip of his tongue, closing the swirls tighter and tighter with each lick until finally his lips closed on the aching nipple and he sucked. The pulling sensation rolled through her body and hit her clit with such force that she nearly came right then and there.

"I think you like being tied down," he laughed as he moved back up to cup her face between his hands.

"I like it when you touch me," she admitted on broken breath. "I don't like it when you stop."

He bowed his head with a mocking smile. "Forgive me, my lady. I shall return to my duties."

He pressed a hard, hot kiss against her lips before he trailed one hand down her body. Her legs fell open with just a nudge and she didn't resist when he helped her crook her knees and open herself to him. He traced the rim of her pussy, teasing just his fingertips along the aching, wet slit, the same way he had in the other room before he had revealed his true identity. And like she had before she knew the truth, her body reacted to his touch by growing wetter and wetter. So wet that she was sure his fingers would slip away from her heat.

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"Yes, you definitely like being tied," he groaned before he leaned down and licked across the weeping slit.

She let out a long, low sigh as a quiver of pleasure wracked her body. She was so close to release, in just a few licks, she knew she would explode. But it didn't seem fair. She had found her pleasure once this night, but Julian had not. By the way his cock thrust against the front of his trousers, she knew he ached for her the same way she ached for him.

"I want," she stammered as he stroked across her pussy with a powerful, pleasing rhythm. "I want you in my mouth."

His eyes jerked up and his tongue stilled. "Tonight is about your pleasure."

She arched toward him without meaning to. "It would give me great pleasure to take you into my mouth even as you please me with your tongue."

Now his eyes widened. "It would?"

"Please," she begged and didn't even care. "I want to taste you, Julian. I want to feel you."

He didn't answer, but glided back up her body and caught her lips for a kiss. She tasted her own heat on his tongue and the sharp tang of her desire made her body even weaker. Now she wanted to taste his need.

Reluctantly, he pulled away to swing his feet over the bed to the floor. In one smooth motion, he slipped out of his trousers and stood naked before her. His hard cock thrust out strong and hard from the granite muscles on his thighs. The head was dark with desire and a drip of moisture was poised there, ready to fall.

"I'll set your hands free," he said. "For now."

She nodded as he slipped the leather thongs free and rubbed her wrists gently.

"Now," he said as he settled back on the pillows beside

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her. "The best way to do this is for you to lie on top of me."

He started to say more, but she rolled over onto her stomach on top of him before he could, straddling his chest as she positioned her lips between his legs.

"You're a quick study, my—"

His comment was interrupted by a harsh groan when she darted her tongue out to swipe away that errant drop of moisture at the head of his cock.

"Cecilia," he moaned.

She ignored him. She took the thick base of his cock firmly in one hand as she rolled her tongue around the head. She stroked the mushroom tip, biting gently as he'd done on her nipple. His fingers dug into her hips as she suckled and his cry was a reward of its own.

"You are very naughty," he moaned. "But two can play at that game."

She drew the long, hard length of him into her mouth at the same moment that he speared his tongue into her pussy. She moaned against his cock and the vibrations of the sound made his hips thrust. She worked her mouth up and down his cock, licking and sucking with each dip of her head.

It was hard to maintain a steady rhythm when Julian was torturing her with his mouth. His tongue slid up and down her pussy, alternating between fucking her slit and suckling her clit with the same focused intensity he had used to pluck her nipples. She moaned again against his cock and felt his balls tighten with pleasure in her hand.

Julian slipped one hand off her hip as he continued to lick her over and over. She felt one thick finger at her entrance, then two. As he suckled her, he slipped the digits inside her slit and slowly began to glide them in and out. She heard the wet popping sounds with each thrust and the slippery slurps of his

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tongue as he speared her clit over and over.

She felt the burn of pleasure low in her stomach as he increased his pace. It grew and grew, edging toward out-of-control as he stroked his fingers deep inside her and drummed the tip of his tongue over her clit again and again.

Finally, she could take no more. His cock popped out of her mouth as the bursts of pleasure met in one explosion. Her hips rocked against his mouth and her cries filled the room as tremors rocked her for what seemed like an exhausting eternity.

When her vision was no longer blurred by intense sensation, Cecilia glided her tongue over the head of Julian's cock once more, determined to give him the same intensity of release she had just experienced.

"No," he groaned as he slipped from her grasp. "Not like this. I want to be inside you."

She didn't have time to argue. Julian was behind her before she could say a word of protest. She peeked over her bare shoulder in time to see him position his cock at her entrance and then he was inside her, stretching her and filling her in a way she'd never thought she'd feel again.

It was pure heaven as he eased his entire length inside her slippery, gripping pussy. When he was fully seated inside her, he leaned forward to rest his forehead on her back.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

His gaze lifted and it seemed like green was the only color in the world. "I'm just savoring how you feel around me."

She let out a little moan as her body reacted to his compliment with a jerk of pleasure. The little tremor seemed to effect Julian, too, for he withdrew until he was almost out of her body entirely, then thrust forward again with force and purpose.

Cecilia gripped the footboard as he repeated the thrust.

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Feeling the entire length of him spreading and stretching her body, withdrawing and attacking, brought her back to the brink of release yet again. Julian seemed to sense the change in her body without words because he leaned forward, wrapped his arms around her and slid a hand between her legs. As he ground his cock into her, he flicked at her clit with his thumb and forefinger.

With a scream that seemed to rock the room, Cecilia grasped at his forearms, clinging to him as a second orgasm shattered her world. Julian's thrusts grew more erratic and as her body collapsed onto the bed, he filled her with his seed and fell on top of her, pinning her to the bed in a sweating, panting pile of arms and legs.

Cecilia let out a long sigh as Julian rolled from on top of her to lie on his side facing her. She could hardly lift her head as she mumbled, "What about your guests?"

He smiled, pushing hair away from her face. "They'll manage on their own. I have more important matters to tend to."

Her heart swelled despite her attempts to keep her emotions out of the passionate encounter they'd just shared. "That was incredible."

He gathered her closer. "And it will only get better. Tomorrow will only be better."

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Chapter Ten

Julian slipped into the bedroom and leaned back against the door with a satisfied smile as he watched Cecilia gently towel herself dry in front of the full-length mirror. The stroke of her hands over her skin made him swell with desire, but he managed to rein in that need. Today was too important to give in to what he so desperately wanted so soon. Delayed gratification was key. And so was true connection. Cecilia kept trying to imply that all there was between them was sex. He intended to prove her wrong.

"Good morning."

She turned with a start, but her expression softened. "Good morning."

The maid he had assigned to her gave a short curtsy and hurried from the room as she had been instructed to do earlier. Once they were alone, Cecilia let her towel slip down a few inches, revealing a tantalizing swell of cleavage.

"I wondered where you were when I woke alone."

He smiled. "I had a few things to attend to."

She dropped the towel entirely. "Are they attended to now?"

Julian swallowed as he looked her up and down. Her lush curves tempted him beyond reason, and the tiny love marks he'd left on her pale skin the night before only aroused him further. She'd been branded by his touch, but he wanted even more. He wanted to leave a brand on her heart.

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"Yes," he managed to growl out. "At least some of them. I'm here to take care of the rest."

Her smile turned wicked. "I'm something on your list of things to do today? How touching."

"Sit down." He motioned to one of the straight-backed chairs in front of her dressing table.

With a demure bow of her head, Cecilia did as she'd been told. Julian stepped forward, spreading her legs wide open before he dropped down on his knees before her. Her head tipped back and her teeth sunk into her lower lip as he pulled her backside to the edge of the chair and opened her pussy lips with his fingers.

He retrieved two small balls from his pocket. Spreading her wide, he slowly nudged them inside. Cecilia let out a gasp of surprise and pleasure and her eyes snapped open with caution.

"What-?" she began.

"These are part of an ancient sexual tradition," he explained as he gently closed her legs and got back to his feet. "Women hold them inside their bodies, using their inner muscles to keep the balls in place. It strengthens them for sex and can even bring intense erotic pleasure just by squeezing."

"Julian..."

"Trust me," he whispered. "Try it."

She stared at him for a moment before her face changed. Her lips parted slightly and she expelled her breath in a long sigh. Julian's cock jolted.

"Oh my," she whispered.

"Now, get up and I'll help you dress." He motioned to the armoire. "Your clothing was delivered this morning while you bathed. We have many things to do today."

Her eyes widened. "Wait, you've put these things inside

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me and now you want me to dress? But I want...I need..."

Wrapping his hands around her bare shoulders, he guided her to her feet. "And you shall have everything you need tonight when we return home."

She shook her head in confusion.

Gently, he brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. "You believe that my drive to possess you is based solely on sex. And I do want you. If you don't believe that, touch my cock right now and I will prove you wrong. But I want you to know that I can wait to have you. That I can spend a day in your company without once touching you. Without being inside you."

Her face softened. "You simply want to spend the day with me?"

He nodded.

"Then why the balls?" She laughed shakily.

He leaned forward to press a kiss along the slope of her collarbone. "I never said I didn't want you to ache. Every time you squeeze your pussy, you'll think about me. You will think about tonight. And by the time we do come together, you'll be so ready that the simplest touch will drive you over the edge." He stepped back, unsure that he wouldn't break his promise not to take her if he didn't put some distance between them. "Now, pick out a gown. We have a visit to make and we don't want to be late."

She stepped to the armoire and looked inside.

"A visit?" she asked as she looked through the gowns. "Who are we to visit?"

Julian smiled. "My sister. I want you to meet the only family I have left."

Cecilia shifted in her seat, but squirming only made the

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focused pleasure worse. Every shift of the carriage, every motion of her body made the shivering tremors inside her even more pronounced. Julian had been right. Having the balls inside her was erotic torture and she could hardly wait until the day was over and he would ease the persistent ache.

With effort, she forced herself to concentrate. The pleasure was hard enough to bear. Added to her anticipation, her whole body seemed to hum. Julian wanted her to meet his family. The sister he obviously loved and probably the most important person in his life. That was what she needed to concentrate on right now. Pleasure and passion were sure to come later.

The rig pulled to a stop in front of a stylish estate. Even as Julian stepped from the rig and turned to help her come down, the doors flew open and a slender woman came rushing down the stairs with a wide grin and open arms.

"There you are!" she gushed as she hugged Julian fiercely. "I have been waiting for what seems like hours."

Julian arched an eyebrow as he checked his pocket watch. "My darling Rachel, we are only a few moments late at best. You have no patience."

"I never have," the young woman admitted with a laugh.

Cecilia studied her as the brother and sister teased. Rachel shared Julian's coloring, his dark hair and green eyes. Any stranger would guess the two were related. But there was something different. Her gaze didn't hold the glitter of pain that Julian's often did. The pain that came from losing the love of one's life. The thought was sobering.

"Now, stop being an ass and introduce me to your friend," Rachel said with a nudge for Julian in Cecilia's direction.

"Ah yes, Lady Cecilia Warden, this is my sister, Lady Ashford."

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"Rachel," his sister corrected with a roll of her eyes. "Rachel is fine amongst friends." She stepped forward and took both Cecilia's hands in her own. "My, you are lovely. No wonder..." She trailed off with a shake of her head. "Come along inside. I have a luncheon ready that is fit for Victoria and all her court."

Cecilia smiled as Rachel took her arm and guided her into the house. She cast one backward glance to Julian, who was beaming like a child on Christmas morning. But when their eyes locked, the expression changed. His arched eyebrow sent pleasure coursing through her and her body clenched around the balls in her pussy. She hardly held back a moan as Rachel chatted on about London life and art.

Cecilia smiled as Rachel poured her a cup of tea. The two women sat in the unseasonable warmth of the spring day, looking out over Rachel's magnificent terrace and the lawns below.

"I'm so glad my husband could be here today." Rachel sighed. "Unlike many men of his rank, he is very serious about social issues. He's been fighting in Parliament for new laws and it keeps him away."

"You must miss him."

Rachel shrugged. "I do, but his work is important. Still, he rarely sees Julian, and he so wanted to talk to him about that mare. I hope you don't mind that he stole my brother away for a bit."

Cecilia shook her head. Truth be told, she was relieved for the small respite. Julian's smoldering looks and occasional 'accidental' grazes with his body had her melting with anticipation and desire she couldn't relieve until they were safely back at his estate.

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"Good." Rachel set her teacup down and leaned forward. "I admit, I'm happy to have some time alone with you. Now we can become properly acquainted."

Something in her tone made Cecilia's heart begin to race with nervousness. "I would like that," she said slowly as she set her own teacup to the side and prepared for an unknown gauntlet.

"Though Julian has waxed poetic about your virtues," Rachel said with a laugh. "He has been most discreet about how you met. Somehow I don't think I want to know the details. All I know is that since he met you, he has been changed."

"Changed?"

Rachel nodded. "I don't know how much gossip you heard in the country, Cecilia, but a few months ago my brother was at the lowest point in his life. I feared for his safety."

She turned her head, but not before Cecilia saw her tears. There was nothing to be gained by telling the young woman that her fears had been well placed. Especially if Julian was better. That secret could stay between the two of them for all time. No one need know he had nearly irrevocably harmed himself.

"I know his wife died tragically," Cecilia said slowly.

Rachel sighed. "Alana *lived* tragically."

Cecilia cocked her head, unsure what Rachel meant. "Either way, it's difficult to lose a spouse."

Getting to her feet, the other woman paced to the terrace and looked out in the direction of the stables where Julian and her husband had gone. "He blamed himself. He believed if he could have done more, been better—" She stopped and turned to Cecilia with a guilty smile. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk about such things when I don't know what my brother has shared

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with you. All I wanted to say was that you brought the life back into my brother's eyes. A light I haven't seen in...in years."

Years? Cecilia rose to her own feet, still lost. But Alana had only been dead a few months. "I am sure Julian would have recovered from his grief without my help, but if you feel I aided him in some way, I am grateful for that chance."

Her mind briefly flashed to a powerful image of Julian on their first night together. His grief and his passion as he made love to her. Again, her pussy clenched around his gift and she had to grip at the chair to keep from going to her knees.

"You did." Rachel touched her hand. "And for that I will always be in your debt. My brother cares for you deeply, Cecilia. I've never seen such a look in his eyes. It gives me hope that with you he will finally find the happiness he has deserved all these years."

Cecilia opened her mouth in shock, unable to find words to reply. Before she could, the terrace doors opened and Julian and Rachel's husband, Lord Ashford, came out, talking about horses and parliament. Rachel grinned as she broke away from Cecilia and crossed to take her husband's arm.

"What perfect timing," she said with a light laugh. "Cecilia and I have finished our tea. Perhaps the four of us could play a hand of cards?"

Julian kissed his sister's forehead before he made his way to Cecilia. The look he gave her nearly made her weep with desire, but now that passion was laced with something else. There was much she didn't know about Julian. Now that she'd spent more time with him in the world he lived in, she wanted to know more.

"I'm afraid Cecilia and I have other plans this afternoon."

Rachel frowned, but then her face lightened. "Very well."

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Another time, then."

As they walked to the door, Rachel embraced Cecilia. The feel of the young woman's warm arms around her made her heart lighter. She liked Julian's sister with her open kindness and powerful love for her brother.

"I am so glad you came today. I do hope we'll see much more of each other in the future."

The future. As Julian helped her into the carriage, Cecilia contemplated that future. What had once seemed murky and staid now seemed to be opening up with possibility. Only the past stood in the way. And she could change that.

All she had to do was ask. Ask about Alana. And be willing to tell her own secrets. To be with Julian, she had to take that risk.

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Chapter Eleven

Julian watched Cecilia pace around the bedroom. She hardly looked at him while she went from one end of the chamber and back again, fidgeting her hands with each step. Her expression wasn't that of a woman ready to purge her animal hungers. It was more like someone readying for the guillotine.

"Did my sister say something to upset you?" he asked as he perched on the edge of the bed.

She stopped and looked at him in surprise. "N-No. I liked Rachel very much."

"She talks too much," he said with a loving smile. "And sometimes speaks too freely on subjects that she should remain quiet about."

He could only hope she hadn't gone too far into the subject of Alana or grilled Cecilia too mercilessly on the fragile bond they shared. He adored his younger sister and wanted her to meet Cecilia, but he knew what an overwhelming force Rachel could be, especially on topics she was passionate about.

"She is honest. I like that about her." She smiled.

"I only ask because before you spent time alone with her, I could see you wanted me as much as I want you. Every time you moved, every time your body shifted in the chair, I could tell your body was rocked with pleasure. But in the carriage you were distracted and now..." He motioned to the bed. "You seem anxious, and not to feel my body inside you."

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Cecilia's face softened as she crossed the room to take his hands. The thrill of her touch was instant and potent.

"Oh, Julian, I *do* want you. All afternoon, my body ached for you. I nearly came several times because you looked at me a certain way. It was only a control I didn't know I possessed that kept me from launching myself across the table and having you right at luncheon."

He smiled as hot blood flooded his aching cock. "Hmm, I would have enjoyed that."

She let one hand trail down his cheek. "So would I."

He saw the flicker of deeper emotions in her eyes before it was lost in a haze of desire. She tilted her face down and brushed her lips against his. "Don't think my distraction meant I don't want you. I want the promise your gift implied." She drew back. "Please?"

Julian didn't wait to be asked twice. Rising to his feet, he rested his palms on her trembling shoulders, reveling in her warmth for an all too brief moment before he carefully turned her back to him and began to work on her gown buttons. One by one, he slid each pearl away, revealing another inch of tantalizing skin cloaked in the thin, yet frustrating layers of chemise and corset.

He dipped his head to press a kiss against the place where her neck and back met. The bare skin warmed beneath his tongue and Cecilia let out a relieved sigh. He slid his lips lower, blowing gusts of hot breath against her skin until he reached the lacy edging of her chemise.

She shivered as he freed the last button and slipped the gown forward. It fell from her shoulders and she pushed it down around her ankles, then stepped away to kick it aside. He went to work on her corset next. It had been so hard to lace her into the sexy contraption of lace and satin that morning. Now

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he had the pleasure of slowly untying the binds and easing them loose.

Her breath hissed out in a sigh as he shimmed it away from her body and tossed it to the side. She turned to face him and Julian enjoyed a moment of simply looking at her. Her nipples thrust forward against her chemise, outlined in rosy perfection beneath the thin fabric. He placed a hand on the small of her back and inched her forward as he bent his head and took the needy bud between his lips.

Her fingers came down to thread through his hair, urging his mouth even closer as she arched back with a moan. Her breath came in harsher and harsher gasps as he suckled through the fabric, drawing the thrusting peak against his teeth as he laved it with his tongue.

With a low, harsh cry, Cecilia's body trembled. Her hips thrust wildly and her face flushed. As he sucked even harder, she let out a wild gasp of, "Yes!" then fell against his body, limp with exhaustion.

She had come! Without Julian ever touching her intimately, her body had exploded with pleasure just as intense and powerful as any release she'd felt before. She leaned against him with all her weight, unable to stand for her knees wouldn't support her.

"Breathe," he crooned into her ear. "Just breathe."

"I've never—I couldn't—" she stammered, trying to explain the powerful thrill that still made her muscles shake.

"It's the gift I gave you this morning," Julian explained as he turned around to help her sit on the edge of the bed. "The balls are known to sometimes cause orgasms in women without the help of touch."

"Is that why you gave them to me?" She was vaguely

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aware that Julian was inching her chemise up over her head and unhooking her stockings.

He smiled as he dropped to his knees to roll the silk off each of her ankles. "I admit, I wanted you to be focused on the sensuality of being filled by my gift." He leaned forward to press a wet kiss against her inner ankle. "I wanted you to be aware of your pussy all day, to ache for me to fill you as you went about mundane activities." His mouth drifted higher. His teeth nipped the back of her knee and pleasure zinged from the point of contact. "I wanted you to share your wicked little secret only with me. To look like the perfect lady from all appearances, but in reality be a wanton on the inside."

She shivered. All his desires had certainly come true. And the erotic teasing had driven her over the edge. Only now that he was finally touching her, her desire peaked again.

He cupped her hips, sliding her to the edge of the bed gently. When he placed a palm on each inner thigh, she gasped. And when he pushed, her legs fell open of their own accord.

"Relax," he urged. His hot breath caressed her outer lips. "Just relax."

She nodded as he urged her back on the bed. As she let her body relax under the warm massage of his hands against her thighs, she felt the little balls slide free. Without them inside her, her inner muscles flexed deliciously, reaching to be filled again.

He lifted his palm up until she could see the little balls glistening in his hand, coated with the wet evidence of her desire and orgasm. She arched up with a groan as he set them on the table beside the bed.

"Please, I am aching for you," she murmured with tears of want stinging her eyes. "I need more than what your gift can

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give. I need you. Inside me. Now."

His gaze caught hers, emerald fire that was raging out of control with each passing moment. He shrugged out of his trousers in one smooth motion and his cock sprung forth hard and ready. She let out a sigh as he wrapped her long legs around his waist and positioned himself at the slippery entrance of her pussy.

He inched forward, pushing only the head of his cock into her pulsing sheath, but it was enough that she let out a little cry of relief. Julian cupped her rear end and she struggled to a partly sitting position to grip fistfuls of his shirt in her hands. The motion tipped him into her even farther, but he was hardly half seated in her body. She needed more. She had to have more.

She bucked her hips forward as she yanked back on his shirt and Julian stumbled against the bed as his cock slammed into her body. She arched with a moan of pleasure. Already her body was quivering, dancing on the edge of release.

"Can't wait, can we?" he panted. "This time you get your way. I can't wait either."

He brought his mouth down on hers as he started to slam into her. His hips rolled against hers, his pelvis stroking her clit with each powerful thrust. With her body in its ultra-sensitive state already, the way he kissed her, the way his fingertips pressed into her hips, the way his cock filled her...it was all to much. Raking her nails across his shoulders, she screamed out a release that shook her to her very core. She milked him with her body, the sucking sound of their joining filling the room along with her cries.

Julian's face contracted as he waged a war to maintain control, but it was a war he lost. He grasped her against him and she felt the creamy, hot gush of his come fill her.

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They collapsed against the bed. Julian's arms shivered as she snuggled against his chest, and her pussy twitched gently around his cock. Moments stretched by as they simply held each other in the slowly dimming lights of the early evening, but the silence was a comforting one. One that Cecilia knew she could stay in forever.

But only if she knew that Julian's heart belonged to her in the same way hers belonged to him. Being happy, truly happy, would require her to take a risk.

She glanced up at him. His eyes were half-closed in satisfied relaxation. In the dimness, she could hardly see the little smile that turned up his lips. But she could feel the emotions between them. Ones that went frighteningly beyond mere passion.

"You look very serious," he said softly as his arms tightened around her. "Very serious for a well-pleasured lady."

She laughed. "Being well-pleasured makes me think."

He arched an eyebrow. "It turns my brains to pure mush. Women are superior in this way, I suppose. So what does it make you think about?"

Cecilia took a deep, shuddering breath. "It—it makes me think of the future. And how you were correct back on my estate when you told me to move toward the future, we must first face the past."

Though his expression didn't change, Cecilia felt Julian's body stiffen in response. His hands tightened around her waist just a fraction and the lazy strength in his body turned to wary steel.

"You are thinking deep thoughts, indeed," he whispered. "Much deeper than I imagined."

"Since you revealed yourself to me at the ball last night, you have asked me to trust you several times." She smiled as

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she stroked her fingers along his forearm. "And I have, sometimes reluctantly. But you have always proven that trust was earned in the end. Now I want you to do the same for me. I want you to trust me as you asked me to trust you."

He nodded slowly, but the wariness of his body language still remained. "I will trust you, Cecilia."

"Then I want to ask you a question." She shivered. "I want to know the truth about Alana."

Julian flinched and a harsh sting rushed through him like a wildfire in dry brush. Despite his vow to trust her, his first reaction to Cecilia's request was to fly out of the bed and run. Run away from her questions, run away from his memories, run and never look back, even if it meant losing the woman he had gone to such lengths to win.

Instead, he tilted his head to look into her eyes. Her expression pleaded with him for honesty and it promised the same in return. She gave, not just took, and she seemed to know just how difficult her request was for him to fulfill.

"Do you know anything about my life with Alana?" he asked as he slowly untangled himself from her arms.

Somehow it seemed wrong to talk about his late wife while wrapped in the arms of the new woman in his bed, in his life. Cecilia let him go without any judgment or betrayal on his face. She only watched as he found a dressing gown and bound it, then walked to the fire where he stoked the flames and lit a lamp. When light blazed forth in the room, she finally responded.

"Even in the country, we hear rumors of events in London." She spoke slowly, as if she were choosing each and every word very carefully. "I know she was significantly below your rank. I know you loved her desperately. And I

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know you were only married a few short months when she died from an illness."

He shut his eyes. "Some of those things are true. Alana did not come from a family of rank or title. Her father was a merchant and the scandal created by our courtship made ripples in society that still haven't died down. But the instant I saw her, I knew I had to have her. To protect her. She was so fragile." He smiled sadly as he looked down at the waves of Cecilia's tangled auburn hair across his pillows. "I don't know how I ever mistook you for her. Not only do you look nothing like her, but you have a strength that comes from within you, an inner force."

Her expression fell just a little. "I see."

She misunderstood. Julian shook his head. "I'm not saying that as anything but the deepest compliment. I admire your grace and strength enormously. I'm drawn to them beyond reason."

"You were obviously drawn to Alana, as well, to thwart societal expectations," she said. It was clear this was her way of gently guiding him back to the subject.

Julian turned to look into the flames. "Yes. Many of my friends recommended I take Alana as a mistress. It was more fitting to her place in life. But when I looked into her eyes, I knew she was not a mistress. She was a wife. So I made her mine."

"It's very romantic," Cecilia said with a small sigh. He couldn't tell if the sigh was from the womanly support of his supposed romanticism or because this subject hurt her.

"It could have been, but Alana was not very happy. She didn't know anything about running an estate or a large, bustling household. The servants sensed that and ran her over. Her old friends didn't feel comfortable in our home. She had

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difficulty making new friends because society refused to accept her."

"The biddies can be unbearable." Cecilia's voice was free of any pain except empathy. "It's unfortunate they were so closed-minded."

"I'm afraid I didn't help her much." Julian's head began to throb as he thought of it. "I should have made more introductions or gotten her tutors in some of the things she didn't know, but I assumed she would learn. My God, I know nothing about how a little girl learns how to be a lady, let alone how to train a shy young woman. And Alana didn't even try. She slipped into a deep unhappiness. She hardly slept, she barely ate. I believe she resented me and within weeks of our marriage, she closed me out of her room."

Cecilia wrapped the sheet around her bare breasts as she sat up. "She—she refused you?"

He couldn't help a heated smile at her utterly shocked tone. "You must understand that my relationship with Alana didn't have the intensity of passion that ours does. She shied away from sex, no matter how gentle or loving I tried to be. She considered it a duty, not a pleasure. And eventually, I think she considered it something ugly and unpleasant."

"I—I'm sorry. How painful that must have been."

He dipped his head. "I didn't handle it properly. I was selfish. I kept a mistress and continued to see her regularly to ease my urges. Alana found out and it hurt her deeply. That only pushed her into herself more and more. She took ill soon after and I believe her unhappiness simply allowed her to give up."

His eyes stung and his throat constricted as he turned his face away from Cecilia's wide-eyed stare. He knew she saw deeper into his soul than anyone else he'd ever known, and he

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didn't want her to see so deeply into him and recoil away.

Instead she climbed out of the bed, sheet trailing behind her and gently laid a hand on his shoulder. "It was a terrible loss. But some women have a disposition to be unhappy no matter what they are given. You loved her, I'm sure she knew it."

He barked out a laugh. If only that were true. If he were truly the grieving husband, things would be easier. He wouldn't be wracked with such overwhelming guilt. But how could he tell Cecilia that? She would be horrified by his callousness. Certainly he horrified himself on a regular basis.

He looked down at her, her eyes sparkling with tears of empathy for him. Tears he most certainly didn't deserve. "Cecilia?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes?"

"What did your husband do to you?"

She drew in a harsh breath, but couldn't seem to find the words.

Julian frowned. "It's my turn to ask for your trust again. Can you give it to me now that I've given you some of mine?"

Her eyes dropped and so did her hand. She took a shallow breath. "Is that why you told me your story? To earn some kind of *quid pro quo*?"

He shook his head. They were treading in dangerous, sensitive waters. With issues that had torn them apart once already. He knew he had to be careful, to move slowly.

"No. I told you because I wanted you to understand me. To understand why I nearly drank myself into oblivion. Why I rode out into a storm in order to throw myself off the tallest terrace I could find! Now I want to understand you. I want to understand why a woman filled with such light and beauty and charm would lock herself away from the world. I want to

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understand why you would open yourself up to passion with a stranger, but not anything deeper. Why you would tell me to leave you alone rather than fight for something more meaningful between us."

She swallowed hard and he could tell she was wavering, dancing along the edge of telling him the truth.

He caught both her hands in his and looked into her eyes. He looked as deeply as he could, trying to show her with just his stare that he could be trusted with her heart in the same way she'd trusted him with her body. That he would never judge her on the past and it would never change what had blossomed between them.

"Please, Cecilia," he murmured as he stroked a lock of hair away from her face.

Her eyes fluttered shut at the gentle gesture and he knew in that moment that he had her surrender. When they opened, they were rimmed with tears.

"My husband didn't beat me and he never abandoned me physically. He did something much worse." Her voice trembled as she drew in a harsh breath. "He took my heart from my chest and destroyed it. He abandoned me in every way that meant something."

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Chapter Twelve

Cecilia shivered. She had never said those words out loud before. Never to her family, to her friends. Even to herself in the lonely confines of her room. She had kept her pains and shames private, so hearing the words echo around her was like a slap in her face. One she wanted to run from, but she couldn't. Not if she wanted any kind of future.

"I don't understand," he said as he continued to stroke her hair. There was no censure in his stare, no pity. At least, not yet. She could only pray that would remain unchanged.

"I loved my husband," she whispered. "I wanted him, perhaps not with the same drive I desire you, but I enjoyed his arms around me at night. I loved him since I was a child so when I was told we were to marry, I was overjoyed. And the first year of our marriage was happy." Her eyes dropped to the floor. "Or so I thought."

She shook her head as the old pains came back, but for the first time in many years, they weren't overwhelming. Thinking of Charles no longer made her chest ache and her eyes sting.

She glanced at the man before her. Because of Julian, her pain was fading. Because of her love for him.

"Why weren't you happy?" he asked and she saw the memory in his eyes. He was thinking of Alana. Sad Alana who had locked herself away from love.

"I was happy." She sighed. "Charles was not. He pretended well enough. We went to parties, hosted dinners.

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We were the toast of our little local society and when we went to London, we had a large circle of friends who often commented on how much they envied our love match. But after a time, I noticed my husband avoided me at home. When we dined alone, we rarely talked about anything important. And when he wanted me, he came into my bedroom..."

Her thoughts shifted as she closed her eyes. She could see him standing in silhouette in the adjoining door between their rooms. How she would ache when she saw him there and knew he wanted her. He would come inside and close the door. They always made love in utter darkness, but she had liked it. She'd liked that she could only feel his solid, warm body as he moved on top of her, that she felt his kisses rather than saw him move to bestow them.

He was always a quick lover, but she had experienced pleasure with him. Not the wracking, overwhelming orgasms that had her trembling at Julian's mercy, of course, but enough that she was satisfied.

But afterward, he would always kiss her on her forehead and leave.

Julian's voice was strangled. "He never stayed with you through the night?"

"No. Finally one night, after he'd made love to me and started to rise, I caught his arm. I asked him to stay. I begged him to stay." She shivered. "He didn't seem to understand and so I poured my heart out to him. I told him how much I loved him, how much he meant to me and how I wanted to live the love match we were showing to the world. And that was when he told me the truth."

"The truth?"

She swallowed hard past the bitterness that had collected in her throat. "Before we married, Charles had loved someone

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else. Like your Alana, she was below him in rank, but my husband didn't have the strength of character that you did. He could not or would not fight societal expectations. She bore him a son, but his parents refused to allow him to marry her. Instead, they arranged the marriage with me. He told me he liked me well enough and knew I was the right wife for him, but his heart belonged to someone else. He told me when he took my body, he pictured her face. And he always would."

Julian recoiled with a harsh sound of outrage and anger. He curled his fingers around her shoulders. "How could he say that to you?"

She shrugged. "I demanded his honesty and he gave it to me. Of course I was brokenhearted by those harsh words. But what could I do? To leave would have caused a terrible scandal and it wouldn't have changed the way things were, so we remained as we had been for so long. Only now when he came to my room, excitement no longer filled me. I knew he saw her face and that was why he left the lights off. To remain in his fantasy world."

Julian released her with a wince. "Just as I did the first night we made love."

Slowly, she nodded. "That is part of why I didn't want you to know the truth about Charles. I didn't want you to feel the guilt that's in your eyes now. I didn't want to be the cause of your pain."

"The cause of *my* pain?" he asked with a gape-mouthed stare. "What about your pain?"

She smiled softly. How like this man to take responsibility for what had happened so very long ago. "How could you cause me pain? You loved your wife who died after a tragic life. I wouldn't begrudge you that. But that's why my servants wanted so much to protect me from you when you

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were forced to stay on my estate. They believed I would..."

She hesitated at saying the words out loud. All the terrible possibilities of a confession of her heart flashed through her head. She shoved them aside. Now was the time for bravery. "They thought I would fall in love with you, but that you loved another, just as my husband did. They didn't want to see me go through that heartbreak again."

Julian stared at her with an unreadable expression. Then he let her go. He paced around the room in silence for a long moment. When he finally did speak, his voice was low and choked.

"Everyone speaks of my great love for Alana. My undying devotion. But often I actually feel—feel—" With a shake of his head, he broke off.

"Feel what, Julian?" she asked softly with anticipation gnawing at her.

"I sometimes feel relieved she's gone," he admitted on just a whisper. "She was so unhappy. That is why I didn't touch another woman until—well, until you found me that night on the terrace. It's why I drank away my emotions, turned away my friends. I didn't want to face that relief and I never wanted anyone I cared for to see it. To see what a bastard I truly was."

Cecilia drew in a sharp, harsh breath. Julian wasn't still in love with his wife? The words brought a rush of powerful emotions through her that took her off guard. Part mourning for the torture Julian had put himself through and part giddy joy that Alana didn't stand in the way of a new love.

"I—I'm not sure I understand." She shook her head. "You seemed so wracked with grief the night I found you outside my room. You called out to Alana in such torment and wanted to hold her and make love to her so desperately."

"Guilt, my lady," he said without turning toward her, but

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the way he held his shoulders reflected his defeat. "Often I've thought if only I gave her more passion, if only I tried to love her more, I could have saved her. I could have changed things. That night on your estate was like a dream to me. I was so drunk and filled with guilt that when I saw you...saw what I thought was my wife, I grasped at the idea of making her love me and making *myself* love her again."

"But only out of guilt." Her heart pounded wildly as she forced the words past her lips. "Not true love."

"Far from it." Julian's dark head dipped and her heart swelled with empathy for him. He'd been tormenting himself for months, perhaps even years. "I was sorry she died, of course. I never would have wanted her to fall ill or fade away as she did. But by the time she died my passion and my love had changed and fallen away like leaves in the fall. I did not miss her. Probably because she was hardly in my life even when we were married. I failed her."

Cecilia's lips parted in shock as she hurried across the room to his side. "This wasn't your fault. You loved Alana in the beginning and you offered her a wonderful life. That the life you offered didn't fit her disposition was no one's fault. From what you describe, your wife was not of strong constitution either in her body or her mind. You cannot blame yourself for that!"

He stared down at her, eyes flashing with so many emotions that the green was almost black. Pain. Guilt. And desire. Desire for her.

He cupped her chin and tilted her face up closer to his. "I don't know."

She shook him. "I know. Believe me. Please stop persecuting yourself."

His lips came down closer to hers. Closer. Close enough

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that she could taste his breath. "When you speak I can do nothing but believe you," he murmured. "You've cast too much of a spell on me to deny you."

Before she could answer or even sigh out her relief, his mouth was on hers and she forgot everything else in the world. Her own pain vanished, melting away in a sea of desire and love for this man. Now she knew the truth. There was no one standing between them, alive or dead. No other woman to try to live up to or emulate to keep him satisfied.

There was only them. And the love she felt for him. Now that she knew it, she needed to tell him. To tell the world if he would let her.

Pulling back, she caught her breath. "Wait. Wait, Julian."

"No!" he cried and his face pinched with frustration and pain. "I don't want to hear more reasons why we shouldn't be together. No more confessions to explain why you want to run away from what we share."

"Julian," she attempted to interrupt again, but he held up a trembling hand.

His dark gaze held hers. "I have moved heaven and earth to bring you back to me. I refuse to let you leave again. You are mine and you shall be mine for the rest of my life. Not as my mistress, but as my wife. And if you don't say yes, I shall be forced to drag you into Hyde Park and make love to you in plain view of everyone. Then you will have to accept my proposal in order to save your reputation." His face softened. "I love you, Cecilia."

Cecilia drew in a breath of shock at Julian's unexpected confession and the powerful emotions in his eyes. Her heart filled, then overflowed with love and joy, but she couldn't find the words to express them, only stare at him.

His face fell when she was silent for more than a breath.

Jess Michaels

"Cecilia?" he whispered.

She opened her mouth but no words came out. Only laughter. She laughed and laughed, holding his hands in hers as tears streamed down her face.

"I've threatened you into hysteria," he muttered as he brushed the tears away with the back of his hand. "Cecilia..."

"No!" she managed to say between sobbing giggles. "No, you don't understand. When I told you to wait, I wasn't going to refuse you or make excuses. I was going to confess that I love you." She smiled as his eyes went wide. "I love you. I have loved you since I first looked out my window and saw you standing on my terrace in the snow. I was afraid of those feelings because of my husband and because I believed you loved your wife so much still. Because I didn't believe I could find such love again. But those things don't matter now. All that matters is that I love you, Julian."

He stared at her, this time he was the one who had been shocked into silence. Then he swept her into his arms and crushed her against his chest. "Say it again."

"I love you," she laughed against his shoulder.

"Again," he whispered as he brushed a kiss against her throat.

"I love you." Her voice went down a notch as her sheet dropped and her body molded to his.

"Never stop saying it," he murmured before his mouth came down to claim hers again. "Never."

"I love you," she mumbled between kisses. "I love you," she repeated as he swept her onto the bed. And she continued to say it until pleasure had taken her breath.

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Meet the Author:



Jess Michaels' dreams of becoming a writer began when she won a Young Authors contest waaaaay back in the fifth grade. The voices in her head started muttering then and have muttered ever since, even when she tried to ignore them.

While she ignored the voices, she graduated with a degree in Psychology from University of Washington in 1998 and went on to a string of careers. She was a sales clerk, a private autism therapist, and a volunteer grief counselor.

Eventually, her husband encouraged her to listen to those characters who kept harassing her in her sleep and she has been writing ever since.

Jess currently lives in Central Illinois with the most supportive husband on the planet and two cats, Harley and Quinn, who often provide cat hair fluffs on the keyboard as their version of inspiration.

Jess also writes historical romance for Avon under the pen name Jenna Petersen.

**You can visit her at
www.jessmichales.com**